

disdaining the humble daily spectacle that offers itself to us in the spontaneity of its moods or folkloric truth.²⁷

By John Berger's definition, Said is a realist because his selectivity strives toward the typical: "Yet what is typical in a situation is only revealed by its development in relation to other developing situations. Thus realism selects in order to construct a reality." As opposed to naturalism, realism makes "a distinction between a submissive worship of events just because they occur, and the confident inclusion of them within a personally constructed but objectively truthful world view."²⁸ Unlike the naturalistic 'Orientalist' painters who preceded him and who selected from events whatever increased their exotic impact, Said simplifies. Every figure is transformed into an archetype, regional in its existence but universal in its significance. Said works toward each transformation patiently, willfully, lovingly. Thus, as Ahmad Rasim points out, "his painting is Egyptian in the most precise meaning one can give to the word. Said is not like those poets who think they can create oriental work by putting the pyramids and the Bedouin into their verses."²⁹

Said's power lies in the rational control of feelings through the organization of his pictorial space in relationship to the sculptural forms of his figures. Every canvas is conceived as a stage, every figure as a performer. One might compare him to a master puppeteer modestly hiding behind his over-expressive characters, or define him as an inverted expressionist. Ramsis Younan, the painter, observed that the painting entitled *Girl with Golden Curls* attracts more by the strangeness of the subject matter than by the technique. "At first glance one feels that the creature painted is not a woman but a satanic being borrowing a human mask, expressing a confused thought, an enigmatic idea embodied by necessity in this material world. It is such images which reside in the subconscious and meet in our dreams."³⁰ This same level of imagery is to be found in his *Invitation to the Voyage*, in his hyper-aware donkeys, his erotic cats, the suspended quality of the woman's *melaya*, the eeriness of the seashores, the frozen movement of the figures, and the high saturation of the colors.

Ultimately, Said is considered a painter's painter because he relishes difficult formal situations. This fine line between expression and analysis, where Said the painter meets Said the lawyer, results in the stylistic harmony of seemingly unreconcilable plastic elements: the roundness of the human figures and the recurrence of the diagonal axis clashing like swords in the center of the canvas, the play of linear parallels leading the eye through the



Mahmoud Said, *Girl with Golden Curls*. Oil, 1933

Chapter Two

The Cosmopolitans

The Second Generation

The art bequeathed by the First Generation was the flower of a movement led by a single unified party that included the most progressive forces in the country. It was the artistic expression of a resurgence of positive national awareness and it was art that 'made history.' The situation changed noticeably between 1935 and 1945 when artists found themselves caught between the confusion of wars in Europe and the resulting political breakdown at home. The cultural and political insecurity of this second generation resulted in the expression of ideas in art forms which were essentially a reaction to history.

In response to the dogmatization of art in both Nazi Germany and the USSR, this second generation launched the slogan "Long Live Low Art." They dealt with the less-than-reassuring partisan situation at home by withdrawing into Marxist ideology, an ideology strongly diluted in their case by liberal cosmopolitanism:

They loathed the bourgeoisie which was free from the struggle of the poor and the golden fetters of the rich. . . . They found the solution in communism. It was not, however, working-class communism but ruler's communsim: communism of thought, not reality.³⁸

Politically, two separate forces affected the independence of this artistic movement, forces that had started as minor organizations in the 1920s and eventually grew as the result of widespread disillusionment with the government, mainly among the youth. With the outbreak of World War II and the emergence of the Palestinian question in 1936, the ideological opposition developed into organized parties with strong cultural repercussions. The first, Young Egypt (1933), was a nationalist martial organization vaguely modeled on Fascist Youth. Known as the Green Shirts, it promoted the values of morality and heroism, and aimed at reviving a glorified version of the Arab-pharaonic past.

The second was the internationalist pro-Bolshevik left. Many of its members were European residents in Egypt. They rallied around the Socialist Party (1920) and the Communist Party (1922). Their main objectives were the organization of labor unions, opposition to the British protectorate, and programs for economic and social reforms. Besides offering a challenge to the ruling Wafd Party, their form of new radicalism attracted the sympathy of such prominent intellectuals as the novelist Naguib Mahfouz, Luwis Awad the cultural historian, Roushdi Saleh the folklorist, Albert Cosseri the writer, and many artists.

Aimé Azar describes Cairo in the late 1930s as an intellectual crossroads comparable to Paris or London, where international artists with or without uniforms (Lawrence Durrell, John Fleming, Cyril des Baux, etc.) interacted with young Egyptian painters and writers within an active cosmopolitan scene:

In Egypt, the clash of ideas external to art, the dramatic creative experimentation taking place, the contradictions raised by a multiplicity of enthusiastic voices, all triggered in the artist of that period of transition a sense of commitment which tied him to his people and led him to realize the necessity of stability and cohesion in what he was and in what he was trying to do.³⁹

In fact, regionalist preoccupations and the search for a distinctive local art were at the core of what seemed like a total adherence to international ideas about art. In 1937, Kamil el-Tilmissani wrote: "If I can only find the first traces of a new local art, then I will consider myself an artist."⁴⁰

The new artistic language to which these men aspired had to extend its stylistic formal boundaries to allow more creative freedom; to find it, artists were willing to literally try anything. Everything led them away from the society of the Friends of Art who patronized the official salon. The avant-garde viewed this salon as the epitome of sterile academicism: its exhibits promoted an art that did not account for the reality of artistic expression in relation to its formulation. The avant-garde believed that images ought to be extensions of the cognitive process, carried to the canvas by the power of the imagination. This intellectual approach to the creative arts was expressed in such forms as group exhibitions of the society known as *Les Essayistes* (1934-35) and in such art journals as *Un Effort*, edited by poet and polemicist Georges Henein. Henein also organized the group Art and Freedom in 1938. Begun as a rejection of Fascist art, following a debate honoring the poet Marinetti, the group turned into an alliance with André Breton and Diego Rivera who, in Mexico, launched a manifesto entitled "For a Revolutionary Independent Art." Henein's December 1938 manifesto, "Long Live Low Art," was signed by thirty-seven members including Ramsis Younan, Kamel el-Tilmissani, and Kamal al-Mallakh. It opposed the oppressive measures of Fascism (such as the censorship of Klee, Ernst, and Kandinski by the Nazis) and stressed the individual imagination as the greatest revolutionary force, the artist's political asset which he ought to express freely and creatively.

Concern for international affairs and the wish to actively participate in the collective international resistance against cultural oppression emerged again in the bulletin introducing the 1940 exhibition of Art and Freedom which included Mahmoud Said, Ramsis Younan, Fuad Kamil, and Aida Shihata: "While people around the world are attuned to nothing but the sound of cannons, we find it our responsibility to shelter and promote artistic trends which vitally express the idea of freedom."⁴¹

After his return to Egypt from France, as a sign of his opposition to the Suez invasion in 1956, Ramsis Younan (1914–66), spokesman for the Art and Freedom movement, wrote an essay defending the aims of the group and the necessity of linking local art with the international artistic heritage:



Ramsis Younan,
Composition. Oil, 1962

Although it was essentially a Surrealist movement, "Art and Freedom" welcomed other different artistic trends. It also helped relate the Egyptian artist to the contemporary world, and relate the concept of art with the concept of freedom.

Thanks to the Surrealist movement, more attention was given to our folklore heritage which, as a result, became the inspiration of some Egyptian artists long before Tawfiq al-Hakim wrote his play *The Tree Climber*.

"Art and Freedom," unlike other propaganda, did not call for confinement within the limits of tradition, without any true understanding of our heritage or the international heritage.

It is often said that modern art became international as a result of colonialism, which culturally as well as militarily invades the colonized countries, thus destroying their traditions and their arts. However, we should realize that modern European art had been influenced by Eastern and African arts before any Eastern or African artist was influenced by European art. Therefore, cultural invasion is not the issue, it is rather cultural response, expressed in breaking out of the boundaries of national tradition into the international heritage.

True Egyptian art will not exist unless our past heritage is allowed to react with the international heritage: only that will lead us to establish the foundations of our modern art. Therefore, we should not fear any innovation, no matter how extreme it may be, for those who fight innovation under the pretext of protecting our national identity reveal the weakness of their faith in its potential for growth.⁴²

Younan's writings throughout the 1940s helped transfer the aesthetic debate from the level of content-interpretation within the accepted norms of formalism, to a mediation between content and form with styles developing from psycho-social realities seeking expression in art as content. His painting, as well as that of Fuad Kamil, gradually evolved from surrealism to abstraction. The transformation was slow because of the resistance they faced in the mid-1930s from a public unwilling to abandon a figurative tradition that had so recently been established in Egypt. Figurative art was now rooted in the public taste; anything else was perceived as counter-cultural. This attitude was encouraged by a ruling class which identified with its conservative bourgeois counterparts in Europe, and was institutionalized in the Academy of Fine Arts which acknowledged only works of art from Da Vinci to Monet. Private collections owned by connoisseurs and wealthy families included classical oil paintings which were considered mainly as beautiful *objets d'art*. They included the works of Orientalist painters and academic artists like the sculptors Antun Hajjar, Uthman Disuqi, Muhammad Hasan, and the painters George Sabbagh, Ahmad Sabri, Youssef Kamel, and others. (Most of these large collections were scattered after the revolution. The one owned by Muhammad Mahmud Khalil, however, survived by being willed to the government in 1952 and is preserved as a museum in Giza. The collection was assembled largely by French experts and includes masterpieces of Rodin, Delacroix, Ingres, Renior, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and hundreds of other well-known European artists.)

The Muslim establishment's dislike of abstract art was ironic because Islamic art (calligraphy, miniatures, and design) was a major source of inspiration to the great creators of the European movement away from representational art. As Michel Hoog remarks in an essay entitled "Autour de 1900": "Matisse, Klee, and Kandinski, to name a few, searched in Islamic art for another artistic world: that is to say, a world not constrained by the conventions of Western art, defined by the Italian Renaissance and degenerated after four centuries of use."⁴³

of correcting them. Today such mistakes are not as inevitable as they were in the early 1960s.

The first problem is that, at that time, the more mystifying art became by developing away from the representational and familiar, the more the artist's 'persona' and ideological position or social rank became the criteria by which the 'quality' of art was assessed.

Ramsis Younan witnessed the deterioration at its beginning and accused those in charge of being incapable of differentiating between excellent and mediocre artists. However, he blamed that state of affairs on the indifference of the intelligentsia, who acted as if the visual arts had nothing to do with culture. He noted that one of the repercussions of this neglect was that artists and exhibitions were reviewed in the press by a handful of writers with a mediocre understanding of art criticism and that no one was interested or knowledgeable enough to supervise or object to what they wrote in their columns. He believed that the only remedy to the monopoly on art criticism held by pretenders and the ignorant was to strive toward a specialization in visual-arts criticism as a branch of literary writing. Without that, personal motivations would perpetuate the existing distortions of cultural values, the brainwashing, and the failure to distinguish between valid and mediocre art.¹⁰⁹

It was precisely that perpetuation of the situation that allowed some of the most mediocre artists to settle into the influential positions in cultural institutions. Although some have reached a mature age today, they are still well-anchored in the administrative hierarchy, or in the higher educational establishments, blocking the natural flow of more progressive energies.

As members of the various art juries or of executive and policy-making committees, they misled and are still misleading the critical evaluation of art by interchanging the notion of artistic and cultural competence with the one of bureaucratic seniority. Their legendary ignorance is illustrated by a joke: Leading a tour in the Museum of Modern Art, an official was asked by a foreign woman if there were identifiable art trends in Egypt. "Of course," was his reply, "we have the oil-painting trend, the sculpture trend, the printmaking trend."

Worst of all, the artistic approach of these authorities and the attitudes they set were promoted with such flattery that the artistic merit of some was inflated beyond belief. This eventually affected the taste and credibility of several generations of a misinformed body of students and general public.

By assuming the burden of becoming the major art sponsor, the Ministry of Culture quickly became a deficit operation, and eventually ceased to allocate resources to the general artistic development of all Egyptians, focusing, rather, on its own survival by primarily servicing its own employees.

In time, the financial deficits of the Ministry of Culture became a justification for merging it with the Ministry of Information. On that issue, in an article entitled "Cultural Warnings," which was written for but never published in *Al-Ahram*, Luwis Awad raised questions about the function of the Ministry of Culture. He said that it should not be a service ministry like

Education or Health, nor a production or investment institution. The ministry's role was not to 'produce' culture, as in totalitarian states, but to 'protect' and support it, by creating a fertile ground and atmosphere in which cultural activities could evolve. Artists and intellectuals were not competent to handle the business aspect of investments in the arts. The ministry's deficits could be relieved if it would let go of its large body of employees, artists as well as administrators, while it could also encourage and support them in becoming creative, with better cultural services through privately subsidized initiatives.

Even now, thirty years after Awad's warnings, the situation has not changed. Projects like the construction of the Museum of Modern Art are a proof. Seven million pounds was spent in the transformation of an existing exhibition hall into a modern museum for Egyptian art. As if the preexisting ornamental features of the art deco building were not enough, mashrabiya woodwork was added at an extravagant cost, but no funds were budgeted to provide the conference room with such bare-minimum requirements as a slide projector. The ineffectiveness of that splendid building's transformation into a modern art museum created another joke—that the designers had never been inside a museum of modern art, and so they mistook the commission as one for a Middle Eastern-style restaurant. The *al-Ahram Weekly* headline raised the question once again: "State of the Art or Vice Versa?"¹¹⁰

Ironically, the commission for the acquisition of works of art for this same museum is still debating whether they should acquire for the national collection any works that Egyptian artists have exhibited in a private gallery. The issue in contention apparently is the gallery's percentage of profit or the use of government funds for an undeserving, private-enterprise gallery. As a consequence, not one painting by Margo Veillon, or by the independent artists of the 1980s like Adel al-Siwi, Hisham al-Zeini, Youssef Limoud, Chant Avedissian, Noha Tobia, and Fathi Hassan can be seen in the Museum of Modern Art, while dozens of paintings acquired from state-employed artists and their relatives are crowding the warehouses of the same museum.

The wave of individualist experimentation in art in the 1960s was part of a whole cultural challenge, formulated from the top in President Nasser's *Philosophy of the Revolution*. In his book, he appealed for a commitment to neutrality in political affiliations, and advocated the resolutions of the Bandung Conference in 1955 as an acceptable cultural framework. He also defined the cultural direction of Egyptians as being Arab and Islamic, and therefore related to the African and Asian continents in its affinities.

The stand became a cultural policy line promoted everywhere by the officials in all matters of art, from exhibition catalogues to art theory. "We must become aware of our Arabicity, and at the same time acknowledge our existence in the African continent, which has been colonized for so long. Our Egyptian art, being the art of a nation that plays a role of 'leadership,' should also point out the characteristics that make it belong to both identities," explained Mahmoud al-Bassiouni.¹¹¹ Intention before evidence, this is a classic example of directed art. In this case, intentions were laid down before



Gazbia Sirry, *American Black*.
Oil on canvas, 1965

any visible trace of creative expression became evident. That new internationalism, which may have genuinely existed in some artists' hearts, had problems being implemented in art forms.

The main problem with this directed orientation was the lack of relevant resources. For example, during the meeting of the Preparatory Committee of African and Asian Writers preceding the Third All African People's Conference, held in 1958, the committee realized how ignorant they were about the two continents' art. Even when occasional shows were held, they featured contemporary works, never the ancient treasures. Ramsis Younan, the former chairman of that committee, wrote, "We have not seen one single exhibition of this African art form [sculpture] which is so closely related to our own ancient sculpture." In this article, published in *al-Ahram*, he urged the Ministry of Culture to organize an African art exhibition including a fully illustrated catalogue because "it is a shame that hundreds of books about African Art can be found in the West, while we, who carry African blood in our veins, did not care to study our own continent's great heritage."¹¹²

The secondary problem was that of adjustment to rapid changes. As Cairo's political influence kept increasing in the Third World, so did the artists' response to intercultural exposure. The pace of change, sped by modernist idealism that was barely adapting to the idea of the 'global village,' was also accelerated by the introduction of a new public television network. Information overload and fast-revolving political situations contributed to allowing headlines to overshadow art. So, assuming that the effect of political propaganda could have such force, some of the blame could be put on the art world that allowed culture to become subordinated to events. That subordination became evident in 1967 when artists suddenly realized that they were as unaware and unprepared for a defeat as any of the lay public.

Painter Hassan Soliman, speaking of the general mood of his generation, said,

The majority of us were predestined to a disorientation, caused by the penetration in our area of artistic and intellectual currents developing from a situation we did not experience, and by political and social upheavals which bled us drop by drop. We were unable to cope with it all, for we lacked a cultural framework by which we could shape and convey our art in a relevant manner.¹¹³

It is important to remember that in the 1960s there were few private enterprises able to afford art. Works of art went permanently out of the artists' studios only as part of the government's acquisitions or foreign residents' collections. Those were fairly difficult times. Good art supplies became scarce; innumerable artworks were lost because they were executed with poor materials. (The evidence can be seen in the warehouses of the Cairo Museum of Modern Art.)

As for exit visas for the purpose of independent traveling, after 1960 they were interrupted and opportunities for artists to leave the country were very

scarce, limited to those selected by the official authorities. For artists, permits to travel were rewards accompanying postgraduate scholarships, participation in art exhibitions, and specialized training abroad.

So in the 1960s, the winning card was in the hand of the freedom-starved artist who could get to the biennials of Venice or Sao Paulo, curated by the Ministry of Culture. Evidently abstract paintings and sculptures and modernized folklore were regarded as making a good show of the new national assets, a show to match those displayed by Cuba, Yugoslavia, or other non-aligned nations that were also demonstrating a nonparochial disposition.

In art, there are no words admitting to competitiveness as there are in the Olympic Games. But when artworks are shown through the channels of international cultural exchange, they do take on a new meaning. They also begin to relate more immediately to national pride abroad than to the pleasure of viewing at home. Furthermore, art and sports, because they are effectively mute, can arouse responses that cross the barriers of foreign languages.

Art exhibitions offered immediate access to participation in the culture of the world's political capitals at fairly cheap cost. Abstract art in this case was a winner, as it was felt to be an antiacademic international trend and therefore the expression of a postcolonial world culture. It thus became a very tempting proposition to artists and politicians alike. Locally, the *al-Ahram* newspaper publishing house led the way by acquiring a large collection of paintings by Salah Taher, and the daily *Akhbar al-Yom* held, in its foyer, the first and most controversial exhibition of the artist Mounir Canaan.

In art, the 1960s experimentation led to a decisive shift away from academic art. The trend toward abstraction was represented not only by the work of Taher and Canaan but also by work by Khadiga Riad, Ramsis Younan, Salah Reda, Mohsen Sharara, Fuad Kamel, Abou Khalil Loutfi, Moustafa al-Arnaouti, Mohamed Taha Hussein, Ahmad Fouad Selim, and others.

Salah Taher (b. 1911)

Salah Taher is an artist who was literally converted to abstract art during a trip to the United States in the late 1950s. Since then, he attempted to condense his emotional response to the visible, through a purely gestural and chromatic interpretation. Yet it seems that this painter, whose background was firmly rooted in academic painting, has never given up his need to consciously interpret content. His paintings remained linked to an essential idea: the acoustic interpretation of a classical symphony, the perception of the flow of veiled figures or feluccas (sailboats) in the landscape, or the rhythmic perpendicularity of the cityscape.

The distinctive feature of Taher's art remains his painterly mastery of his tools, especially the hard ones like knives, which he uses to spread transparent coats of highly diluted paint. The strength and assurance of his gestures agitate the liquefied paint and imprint it with the best and worst of his experiences. This is a case of an artist's personality imposing itself on the medium, perhaps explaining why the artist is famous but has few followers.



Salah Taher. Oil on canvas, 1965