

Remembering the Wanly brothers

The brothers Seif and Adham Wanly are a unique case in the history of modern Egyptian art. The two brothers, born in 1906 and 1908, respectively, to a wealthy family in Alexandria, brought vitality to the country's art scene with their blend of European-influenced, yet distinctly Egyptian, styles in the 1930s and later.

In order to commemorate their contribution to the history of modern Egyptian art, various retrospective events are being held in Alexandria that include a documentary written and narrated by painter Ismat Dawstashi and directed by Osama Al-Shafei at the city's Mahmoud Said Centre and an exhibition of little-known works by the two brothers.

A further exhibition entitled "Thank You, Master" featuring paintings and graphic works as well as sculpture is also being held at the Centre. Maher Girgis, Alexandria's former director of culture, also spoke about the artistic legacy of the brothers. At the same time, the Modern Egyptian Museum is staging "Memory," another exhibition featuring work by the artists.

Growing up in the Moharram Bek district of Alexandria, Seif and Adham Wanly were encouraged by their parents to appreciate art, but were also advised not to take it up as a career. Needless to say, neither of the brothers followed this advice.

In 1925, and without their parents' knowledge, the two brothers enrolled in art classes with an Italian painter, Otorino Bechi. By the end of their four-year course, Seif's mastery of a wide range of academic skills had become extraordinary, as is testified in his early work in which he copied the styles of ancient and modern European painters such as Rembrandt, Gauguin and Picasso.

Intent on pushing the boundaries of his artistic repertoire, Seif experimented with various styles, including impressionism, expressionism, realism, and cubism, while infusing his work with metaphysical elements. His renditions of circus artists, opera and ballet scenes, and the Egyptian landscape illustrate life in Egypt in the mid-20th century.

Adham, who shared his brother's interest in circus and theatre scenes, had a natural talent for humour, a quality that kept his art, especially the cartoons published in the Cairo magazine *Rose El-Youssef*, soft and light-hearted. His work was first shown to the public in a collective exhibition curated by Mohamed Nagi in 1938, and he continued to exhibit

during and after the Second World War with help from the writer and art critic Hussein Fawzi.

His work was first shown in Cairo in 1950, and in 1956 he took part in various exhibitions abroad, including the Venice Biennale.

In 1959, the two brothers were granted life-time awards to help support their careers, although Adham, then a professor at the Alexandria College of Fine Arts, did not live long enough to benefit from the award, dying only a few months later at the age of 51. Seif was active on the country's art scene until his death at the age of 73 in 1979.

In 1961, the Alexandria Museum of Fine Arts held a retrospective exhibition of Adham's work, and two years later a museum dedicated to the work of the two brothers was set up in Alexandria. However, the museum later closed when the building housing it was demolished, and the work that it contained was acquired by various art institutions and collectors, including the Cairo Museum of Modern Art, the Alexandria Museum of Modern Art, the Foreign Ministry, and several Egyptian embassies abroad.

Seif and Adham both visited Nubia in the 1950s, and their work, inspired by the natural beauty of the region, was used in the campaign to save the monuments of Nubia from the rising waters of Lake Nasser a few years later during the building of the Aswan High Dam.

The life and work of the Wanly brothers has been the subject of several books, including those by Egyptian critics Sobhi Al-Sharoni, Kamal Al-Mallakh, and Rushdi Iskandar.