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# “Understood and Counted”: A Conversation with Ibrahim El-Salahi

By Sarah Dwider

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi curatorial team has been granted a rare opportunity to build a collection from the ground up. Assembling the collection for the future Guggenheim Abu Dhabi has allowed us to expand our curatorial thinking and consider modern arts movements and practices in all parts of the world as we endeavor to create a museum collection that, from its beginnings, honors the work of modern artists working across nations and contexts.

A masterpiece from the personal collection of renowned Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi — *Untitled* (1964) — is a cornerstone work for Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Born in Sudan in 1930, El-Salahi has long been regarded as one of the forefathers of modern art in Sudan and a key contributor to African modernism. He was a founding member of the Khartoum School in 1960, along with Kamala Ibrahim Ishag and Ahmed Shibrain, who is also represented in the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi collection. Together, the artists of the Khartoum school sought to foster an arts practice that responded to the specific cultural heritage of Sudan, a particularly important charge as the country emerged from decades of colonial control, gaining independence in 1956.

El-Salahi began his arts training at a young age, learning calligraphic techniques at the *khalwah* (religious school) in his home of Omdurman. This was followed by degrees in painting from the School of Design, Gordon Memorial College, Khartoum; Khartoum Technical College; and The Slade School, University College, London. Through periods of experimentation and change, El-Salahi shaped a practice that integrates sharp geometries, Islamic motifs, calligraphic forms, and imagery drawn from African art in his paintings.

In November, I had the opportunity to ask El-Salahi about the development of his practice, his education and travels, and the background of *Untitled*. His answers reveal an artistic career filled with rich experience, and a commitment to transnational exchange.

**When did you first begin creating art?**

When I was at secondary school, [in] the mid-1940s.

**What impact did your training at the Gordon Memorial College School of Design in Sudan have on your early practice?**

A great impact, as it gave me the basic discipline needed for an art student. It also made me aware of the fact that I am a picture maker.

**Were there any instructors there who were an influence on your development?**

There were three teachers who influenced my development as a young artist: Jean Pierre Greenlaw, the school director; Shafiq Shawgi; and Osman Wagiallah, the calligrapher. I owe them a great deal.

**Can you describe the atmosphere in London in the 1950s? What was your experience there as an artist coming from abroad, and how did your work change during this period?**

It was like stepping into a new world—quite exciting. I loved the rain and the fog. I loved the gray-green color of [the] trees, the red-tiled roofs of houses, the dimness and silence that enclosed everything in autumn—the total difference to what I knew at home.

My visual perception and absorption capacity, of course, had to change accordingly, including the new experiences I began to deal with at the Slade, with museums and galleries, with new friends, with people I met in the street, in shops, etc. Such enriching experiences.

**Who were your peers at Slade? Were there any interactions with your professors or fellow students that you recall as being particularly significant?**

Some of my peers there were Roger Hallett and Dianne Webbe from England; Harry Wich from Holland; Gazbia Sirry from Egypt; and Abdullahi Al-Guneid from Sudan.

I don't think at that period I exchanged ideas with other art students. I was there to learn and absorb. Maybe the only exchanges I had with a professor were with my tutor and teacher of perspective, Sam Carter, as I was quite interested then in the law of vision [on] both its levels, visual and theoretical.

**You've spoken before about returning to Sudan after your studies in London and finding that the arts audience there had little interest in your new style. How did that affect you?**

I was deeply disappointed. But it taught me a valuable lesson. To address others there has to be something in common. There has to be a bridge of mutual respect and understanding of what the other has and practices.

**Much has been written about the Khartoum School. Can you share your personal insights into this chapter in art history? What common goals did you and your colleagues pursue with respect to the role of the arts in Sudan?**

Initially we were trained, at home or abroad, to be art teachers in secondary schools and to lay the foundations for future artistic functions and activities. The common goal we pursued was to create a place for the artist in the society, and to refresh and activate the visual and aesthetic memory of the Sudanese people, and from there approach the world at large, and the human being wherever he or she might be.





Guggenheim Abu Dhabi curatorial team and conservators inspect El-Salahi's work *Untitled* (1964).

**Early in your career, you traveled to Nigeria, Mexico, and the United States. What impact did these trips have on your art and practice?**

My short visit to Nigeria in the early 1960s gave me the chance to connect artistically with a dynamic part of the African continent, opening myself to influence and be influenced.

Mexico was for the sheer pleasure of seeing the works of the great four artists. Tamayo, with whom I spent a day in his studio in Mexico City, impressed me enormously with his exciting works [and his] rich and vibrant colors.

The United States with its rich museums, art schools, galleries and institutions, and up-to-date thinking was and is a must. Once you visit, you are with it.

**Can you share the circumstances of the Rockefeller Foundation grant you received in 1961?**

As I so much enjoyed and benefited artistically and socially from my first visit, I felt I needed to spend more time in America. I applied through the American Embassy in Khartoum and was pleased to receive a favorable reply. The Rockefeller Foundation sponsored my scholarship for this second trip. A program was formulated on my arrival in accordance with my initial request. The Harmon Foundation then was of great help, making all sorts of arrangements for me to meet artists [and] various bodies and organizations.<sup>1</sup> They made sure that I met everyone I needed to and went to every place I wanted to visit.

**Which artistic, literary, and social circles did you interact with while in New York?**

My main concern was to get some knowledge about the creative powers and the artistic and educational facilities in America. As a result I managed to meet so many people, directors and heads of most museums and art colleges in the cities and states that I visited. In New York I met Alfred Barr Jr., Director of MoMA; Betty Parsons of the Betty Parsons Gallery; artist Jacob Lawrence; sculptor Richard Hunt in Chicago; Bob Blackburn, in whose studio I did some etchings; Romare Bearden and all the members of the Spiral group, not to forget artist Palmer Hayden, who introduced me to the group and in whose house I lived for a year while he and his wife Miriam went to Paris;