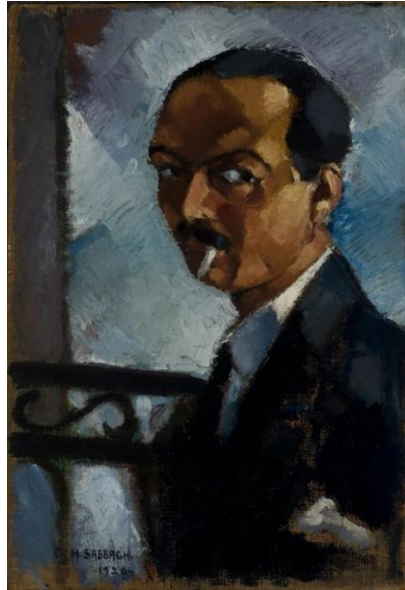


Georges Sabbagh and the development of the independent personality in Egyptian Art.

By Dr. Yasser Mongy



Georges Sabbagh, Self Portrait, oil on canvas, 1920, 60cm x 40 cm, Georges Sabbagh Museum.

Outside from the circle of the School of Fine Art Alumni and the care that was given to the distinguished ones among them, we can discern the personal effort of an independent artist who reflected in his paintings the various aspects of the Egyptian heritage and environment. This artist is Georges Sabbagh (1877-1951)¹, who travelled to Europe six years before the establishment of the School of Fine Art in Cairo and was a pioneer in learning modern art at such an early stage, but without ever forgetting his home country. Egypt, with its civilization and landscapes, was a source of inspiration for him. Even his classical French paintings,

¹ Sabbagh pursued his education in a French School in Cairo. He traveled to Paris in 1906 when he was eighteen, carrying a rich French culture. That is why he was not considered as foreigner. After spending some time in Lévy-Ghurmer Atelier, he joined in 1910 Ranson Academy, which was a meeting place for The Nabis art group, where he acquired a free and informative education under Maurice Denis, first his teacher then his friend. The choice of this academy was a source of inspiration for him. That is why George Sabbagh, the Egyptian artist who obtained French citizenship in 1930, does not belong to the School of Fine Art in Cairo but directly to Parisian School of Art in the interwar period.

in terms of their decorative effects and composition reflected his Oriental Background. That is why Aimé Azar named him “Son of the Orient”².

Sabbagh assimilated new art experiences at the beginning of the century³, inspired a new mentality for the realistic experience, evoked controversy about the love of one’s country⁴, showed concern regarding nature⁶ and aspired for a spiritual life.



Georges Sabbagh, *The Artist studio*, oil on canvas, 1918-20, 196cm x 130cm,
Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha.

² Aimé Azar, *Modern Painting in Egypt*, Translated by Naim Attieh and Edward Kharrat (Cairo, Supreme Council of Culture, 2005), p. 38.

³ He assimilated the experiences of the Nabis, the Fauves and the Cubists.

⁴ George Sabbagh was ambitious and constantly independent. He refused compromised solutions namely in terms of his freedom and acquired a lot of admiration at an early stage. He believed that fine art plays a role in the cultural radiation. Towards the end of his life, in his lectures in Cairo, He told the audience that “Being an artist is a curse”, referring to the great responsibilities of the artist towards his country. See Aimé Azar, *Modern painting in Egypt*, p. 36.

Through his solemn brush, high education and distinguished presence, Sabbagh left his fingerprint in a preserved spirit characterized by the rhythm of the Orient as he acknowledged drawing his colors from the Orient, and Lebanon in particular where he used to spend his vacations as adolescent, saying “I discovered my colors under the sun”.

Around 1930s, Georges Sabbagh became more interested in the important natural phenomena, such as sand storms and whirlwinds in Egypt, as much as he was interested in the Egyptian archeological buildings. With a widely diversified palette of colors, his art featured simplicity and spontaneity. Sentimental feelings brought out solemnity to affirm his independence and his constant refusal of coexistence inside any group as he attaches importance to his freedom rather than anything else⁵. Therefore, his art was considered part of the French humanism traditions. At the same time, he remained true to his Oriental spirit in the decorative effects and composition of his works. Thus, Sabbagh belonged to two different worlds and was able to reap the fruits of both, assuring for himself a leading position in the art of his era⁶.

Georges Hanna Sabbagh was born to a wealthy catholic family of Syrio-Lebanese origin established in Alexandria. He was educated at the Collège des Pères Jésuites in Cairo before his father, Hanna Sabbagh Bey, sent him to Paris in 1906 to study law. During that period, Georges Sabbagh showed little interest in his studies and instead started to take painting lesson at the Académie Ranson in 1910. There, he was trained by the painters Paul Sérusier (1864-1927), Félix Vallotton (1865-1925) and Maurice Denis (1870-1943). From that time on, he dedicated himself entirely to art.

⁵ Sabbagh was a mysterious man who was keen to hide his emotions. He was severe to the extent that he became controlling. Thus, this living artist created from inert materials a human being, even his paintings of dead nature and landscapes gave us the impression of a human creature present in simple but important details, which give us key to work.

⁶ See Jean and Pierre Sabbagh, *George Sabbagh*, Paris, 1918, p.30-31, in his correspondences with critic Rony John between 1922-1946

During the First World War, between 1914 and 1915, Sabbagh enrolled in the British army. On his return to France, in 1916, he married the art historian and political activist Agnès Humbert (1894 -1 963).

In the summer of 1916, Sabbagh began experimenting new painting⁷ trends, in which he did not use colors to describe the external visual reality, but to translate the inner invisible reality, as the advantage for him did not only reside in representing the external physical world, but in going deeper to reveal the inner life of the spirit and the heart. Thus his works became a reflection of the inner self as much as a reflection of the nature of the oriental human being in his spiritualities. Sabbagh,s independent trends strengthened dialogue with the Egyptian culture and introduced its decorative aspects to modern art. In the early twenties, Sabbagh paintings celebrated Egypt⁸, to which he constantly went back.

In 1917, Sabbagh held his first individual exhibition in Paris, which was a success. From then on, he became a renowned painter in Paris and was in touch with many of the artists working during the interwar period in the French capital.

⁷ Sabbagh made huge steps in his search for a new method that can reflect his personality and independence, thus becoming the composer of a new tune. The years he spent in Britain and Paris, from 1918 until 1920, witnessed the emergence of his new think.

⁸ Sabbagh owed Egypt some of his complete works such as “The Sycamore Tree”, which is known to be the Virgin Mary Tree.



Georges Sabbagh, *The Family*, Oil on canvas, 1920-21, 196cm x 139cm, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha.

In 1920, on the death of his mother, he returned to Egypt for the first time after more than ten years in Paris. While in Egypt, he produced several paintings addressing the themes of motherhood and family.

He returned to Paris in 1922. In 1928 he built a house in Brittany that inspired several of his paintings. Sabbagh became a French Citizen in 1930. He left Paris and returned to Egypt in 1936 where he lived until 1945. During that period, he produced many landscapes, townscapes as well as still life paintings. In 1951, he traveled to Switzerland where he held two exhibitions, in Geneva and Lausanne, and died in the same year in Paris.



Georges Sabbagh, *The Karnack*, oil on canvas. 100.5cm x 151cm, Museum of Modern Arab Art, Doha.

Sabbagh doubted the rationalist Cubism, as no mental act or theory can generate a work of art, because the work of art is generated by the beautiful love of life. However, Love alone is not enough, as it must be accompanied by loyalty, humility and the ability to translate emotions on the canvas. Therefore, we see him in art exhibitions held in Cairo between 1945-1946 emphasizing on the fact that "art is a wonderful lesson for loyalty," noting that he "took a major step in revering and submitting to the great beautiful nature and the dominant, attractive and fascinating splendor." Finally, he says: "I, m right when I said that art only begins from the inner life. Reality cannot become a work of art unless it drew and inspired from imagination"⁹.

Georges Sabbagh spent most of his life in Paris, where he built his career. Although he was very attached to his Egyptian origins, he

⁹ Aimé Azar, *Modern Painting in Egypt*, p. 38.

considered himself a painter of the École de Paris. He was a prolific artist, who produced over a thousand oil paintings as well as many engravings. His early paintings were characterized by emotional symbolic colors and symbolism. He also assimilated the experiences of the Cubists and the Fauves while searching for a new form of Realism.

Overall, Sabbagh remained independent and original in his pictorial style, by continuously following modern trends while expressing the powerful light and colors of his homeland. He painted many portraits of his contemporaries, friends, and family, as well as marines and landscapes of the Egyptian, French and Swiss countryside. During his lifetime, Sabbagh held twenty-eight individual exhibitions and participated in more than 130 collective exhibits.

His works can be seen in many collections around the world, including the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art in Cairo, the Mohammed Mahmoud Khalil Museum in Cairo and the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha.