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Modern Egyptian Art—a need to educate both public and government

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Soha El Ramly

Sherwet Shafie showed us around Safar Khan art gallery in Zamalek, told us the stories behind each exhibit she holds and during our visit, she gave us extraordinary insights into the marketing of modern Egyptian art.

The Egyptian fine arts market has changed enormously from what it was 40 and 50 years ago. New elements have entered the market; whether new fine arts artists or art dealers. How would you describe the reality of Egyptian fine art now?

Back in the old days, there was a very good market for fine arts. That held until ten years ago. Unfortunately now it is very limited. The reason behind this is that the public are looking for works of artists from the beginning of the era - so-called 'documentors of the modern age' - like Mahmoud Said, Ragheb Ayad Youssef Kamel. Great artists! But they died 50 or 60 years ago and their artworks have become rare. So there was a large market abroad for their collections through global auctions like Christy's and Sotheby's in London, Dubai and Qatar. Sales of the paintings of Mahmoud Said started at \$ 500,000 and then prices reached \$ 2.5 million. This highlighted modern Egyptian fine arts.

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Now, unfortunately, this has all disappeared, simply because the artists are gone and so has their work. Now art collectors are, unfortunately, getting less and less for works of art. Our current population of 80 or 90 million and the lack of education has had an influence on this. In the past collecting was easier. When we were 40 or 50 million, collecting works of art was a fashion. People used to buy and collect works of art. They used to imitate each other.

When a woman bought a particular artist's work, the other ladies would imitate her, even if they weren't convinced that that particular artist's work was really what they wanted. After all, when a devoted art collector is aware and knowledgeable, he or she chooses the pieces carefully.

Finally, collecting artworks is the best investment. I for instance, used to sell the paintings of Ragheb Ayad for four thousand pounds. Now the market value has gone up to LE 120 000.

Is it possible to say that new elements enter the Egyptian fine arts world every day? Or are we still living on the great old names of the 20th century, like Mahmoud Said, Hamed Nada, El Gazzar, El Razaz, and others?

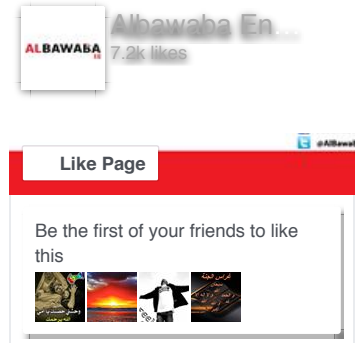
Yes there are new artists and some of them are very good, but unfortunately the majority has not left any impact. There is no longer a market for contemporary Egyptian art.

Who in the new generation attracts your attention?

A great many do, actually, but unfortunately there is no continuity in their output of work. I remember I asked Hamed Nada how many hours he worked in a day. He said about eight hours a day, and if he did not like what he had done he got rid of it immediately. I also met Mahmoud Said when I was working as a television broadcaster. He also said that he worked eight hours at least a day.

What do you advise the new generation to do?

The most important thing is to have a message or a story to tell. A painting is like a book, or a poem or any work of art. It must contain a message the painter wants to deliver to the public and not just for financial reasons, or just to use colors. There should be an idea behind the technical work.



With regard to the current audience for fine art, do you think the audience is the same as that of 50 years ago? Is the art collector of today the same—one who already owns works of art and has the ability to acquire more?

Of course there's change, the audience's taste is in line with current style. If, for example, you take a walk now in the Zamalek or Garden City streets, you will find that the general taste is different from what it was. Art, unfortunately, has changed from beauty to ugliness with the population explosion and lack of education. There must be school trips to the Islamic, Coptic and Pharaonic museums to study the difference between civilizations.

How do you see the impact of global auction companies, like Christies and Sotheby's, on the Egyptian Fine Art market, for example on the painting, 'Dervish' by Mahmoud Said that sold for \$ 2.5 million ?

That painting was mine. I sold it in the late eighties to Sheikh Said Farsi for \$ 45 thousand dollars. Then his son collected all the valuables of his father and sent them to Christy's and Sotheby's. It then sold for \$ 2.5 million.

How did that happen?

One day my husband asked me to meet a lady who was already in the gallery. The lady said that she had paintings by Mahmoud Said that she wanted to sell and asked me if I would buy them. I didn't hesitate. I took the money from my husband and bought them immediately even before seeing them.

How did you know the value of Mahmoud Said's painting before he was famous and had acquired a name and so much value for his works?

I am fond of his work. I also have a large collection of manuscripts, books and references from the twenties about both foreign and local artists.

So you like to collect manuscripts as well paintings?

Yes, but they have to be associated with the documentation of works of art. The French word, 'Provenance' relates to the history of any painting. Mahmoud Said's painting, 'Dervish,' for example, went from Alexandria to France and then to Lebanon, where I bought it. I then sold it to Sheikh Fares whom sold it in France.

Why is it that the majority of Egyptians are oblivious to Egyptian artists so that knowledge of them has become limited to the cultured elite and some of the business community?

Businessmen acquire works of art because they have the financial capacity to do so, but very few of them have a taste for the arts. The majority know that collecting art works is a sound investment and that it also has social cudos. But not many really savor art for its own sake.

Are there large numbers of paintings by Egyptian artists that are out of Egypt and/or are owned by international collectors?

Many are abroad as they are becoming more popular, I asked one of the officials at Christy's about the extent of the foreign appetite for Mahmoud Said's paintings. He said the demand from the United States of America and England was unusual. Collectors in those countries are ready to buy Mahmoud Said artworks at any cost , especially the popular ones.

What percentage do Christie's and Sotheby's take to sell the paintings?

They take 25 per cent of the value of a painting. It's a large amount, but they roam the whole world to view paintings.

How many years have you been in this industry?

Since 1960, I was working as a TV broadcaster and fortunately Saad Labib asked me to make a program about fine arts to be presented by Salah Taher. Before that I didn't know anything about art.

How can we spread appreciation of fine art? Is it possible through the Egyptian education system?