



Tahia Halim's Legacy and the Bittersweet Nostalgia of Nubian Culture

by Yasmina Achlim | Jan 1, 2022

Tahia Halim (1919-2003) was a Sudanese-Egyptian artist who personified and celebrated the intangible Nubian and Egyptian cultures with heart-felt and unapologetic expressionist works.



Tahia Halim (1919-2003) Farhat Al Nuba (The Happiness of Nubia) - Painting from a corporate Swedish collection.

Women and art have not always gone hand in hand. While most of us can think of countless iconic male artists throughout the centuries, naming their female counterparts proves more difficult.

Tahia Halim was born in Donkola, Sudan in 1919 to a prominent family. At the time, both Sudan and Egypt were under British rule. Halim was not just a hobbyist who enjoyed

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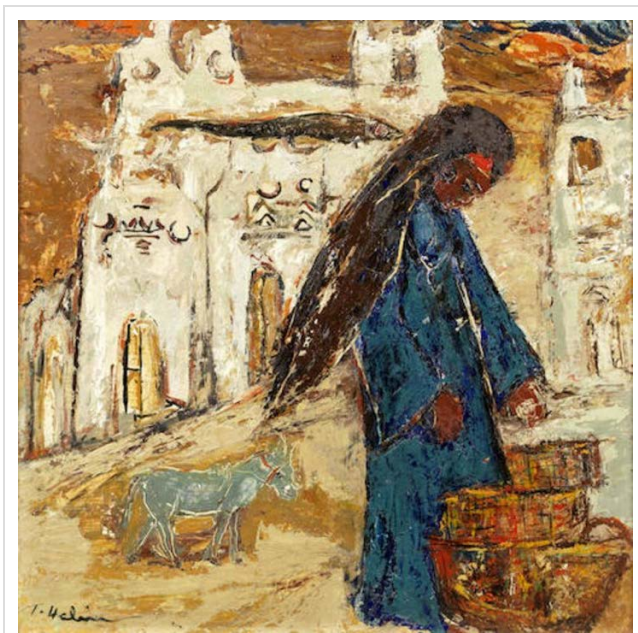


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depicting the world outside her window. As a young girl, she discovered the world of art and decided to make painting her life's purpose. Later, as an internationally recognized artist, she was able to spend her forty-year career traveling the world, exploring her Sudanese and Egyptian roots, and being a pioneer for the Egyptian expressive movement and folk impressionism.

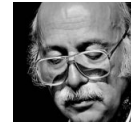
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Halim grew up in Egypt and received a respectable education in the Royal Palace of Cairo. Her father, Mohammed Halim, was the military laureate of King Fouad I, which allowed Tahia to learn painting with master painters. Her privileged early introduction to art influenced her greatly. She went on to study under [the guidance](#) of multiple prolific artists—one of whom, Hamed Abdallah she married, before moving to Paris with him in 1945 where she attended the Académie Julian.



In The Old Nubian Town by Tahia Halim (c. 1960s)

Folk impressionism is an artistic movement that depicts everyday life. The movement's small brushstrokes suggest motion with folkloric undernotes. Expressionism, on the other hand, focuses on the [emotions](#) and subjective perspective of the painter, rather than what's actually right in front of them. While Halim's paintings aren't photorealistic,



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they are full of the raw and timeless emotion of one's pride for their culture and country. Women are the primary subjects of her paintings. Their eyes are portals into a different time, showing perseverance, strength, and a touch of melancholy.

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The sixties were a particularly important part of Halim's life. In 1960, Halim was one of several artists who received a government stipend to work on their art full-time. This national recognition propelled her already-blossoming career forward. Two years later, Halim was invited to travel to Northern Sudan and paint the fading life and culture of Nubian society.

Halim dedicated the rest of her professional life to painting the Nubian people

The trip — meant to document the building of the Aswan High Dam, which flooded much of the Nuba region and forced some 100,000 Nubians off their land — changed her life forever. [Halim dedicated](#) the rest of her professional life to painting the Nubian people, and those works compose some of her best known, even though she also focused on Ancient Egyptian cultural heritage, honoring the origins of the palace she was raised in.

While there is certainly a great deal of sadness in many of Halim's Nubian paintings, there is also joy and celebration. She depicts a strong and authentic sense of community and togetherness, especially in the paintings of small groups of Nubian women huddled together, staring back at the observer.

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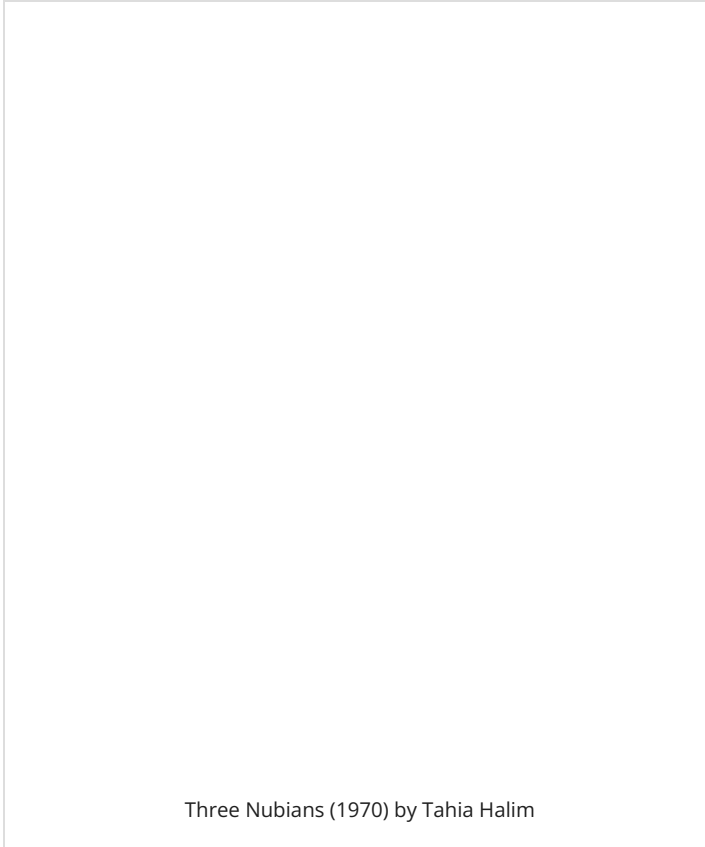
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Three Nubians (1970) by Tahia Halim

Whereas many male artists enjoyed incorporating elements of the male gaze into their pieces, Halim gives the power and gaze to her subjects. In many paintings, the large, dark eyes of the Nubian women are the first thing viewers are drawn to. One becomes immediately aware that this is not a one-sided interaction, the women portrayed are staring right back.

Though Halim often incorporates vibrant colors into her pieces, they are typically used conservatively. The muted overtones of her work give the subjects and background an "old-world" feel. There is a sense of nostalgia within her paintings, even for those who aren't familiar with Nubian culture. In many of her paintings, the beautiful hilly, beige landscapes serve as a stage for Nubian men and women. You might catch a glimpse of a traditional Nubian architecture or a sliver of the Nile River, but the faces and emotions of the Nubian people are consistently front and center.

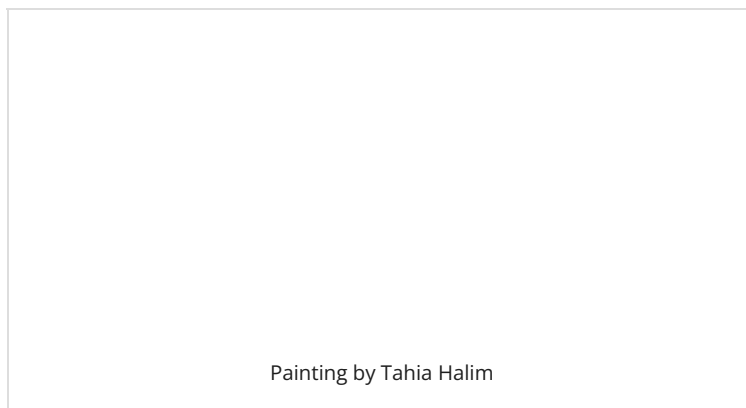
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Despite Halim's formal training in Paris, her work has little

Western influence. This is no coincidence. In 1956, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, Israel invaded Egypt followed by the United Kingdom and France in what is known as the Tripartite Aggression. This violation of cultural and physical boundaries was more than enough for Halim to abandon all Western nuances in her work. She refused to replicate the styles and subjects of the invaders who had violated her homeland. Whereas some of her earlier works were clearly influenced by her time in France, all works done after the Suez Crisis are unapologetically rich in Egyptian and Nubian heritage.

[The Glorious Bygone History of Sudan]

However, while Halim focused her work solely on Nuba, she still managed to cater to a larger audience. In 1958, she was awarded the Guggenheim International Award (GIA). The winner of the award is typically chosen by an international jury, which exemplifies how magnificent and unique her work was, especially for its time. She was the first woman to receive the GIA — a major accomplishment for any period, but especially during a time that was not kind to women, particularly women of color.



Halim was also the recipient of several Egyptian art awards, including the Salon du Caire Gold Medal in 1960 and the 1995 Arts Award from the Higher Institute of Culture. Through her paintings, the flowing Nile in southern Egypt and northern Sudan is diligently and lovingly portrayed as the Nubian region's backbone and lifeline, providing sustenance and allowing people, goods, and cultural traditions to flow through the land. It is difficult to miss the poetic nature of her

rendition of the majestic river.

Nubian rural life was soon washed away by the Nasser Lake, making Halim instrumental in preserving its history.

Sadly, Nubian rural life was soon washed away by the [Nasser Lake](#), making Halim instrumental in preserving its history in her brush strokes. The pain of the community's removal from the land is movingly depicted in her piece "In the Old Nubian Town (c. 1960s)." A woman, depicted with baskets and a donkey, is seen walking away from her town. The tall white structures will soon be no more. While it is assumed that the woman is unaware of the devastation ahead, she looks as if she is grieving, with her head hung low and her back turned to her home — presumably the only one she's ever known.

In another Halim masterpiece, "Three Nubians (1970)," one woman rests her hand on the middle woman's arm, while the third woman stares at her endearingly. The women sit tall and proud and their gentleness does not imply weakness but resolve. The background is mystical and mountainous yet welcoming. It is a testament to why Halim was a pioneer of the Modern Expressive movement.

While Halim's upbringing certainly gave her an educational advantage, her perseverance and commitment to the Nubian people of Egypt and Sudan set her apart from other artists who have dedicated themselves to painting. Going through her works, it is easy to develop an appreciation, even an attachment, to the lost Nubian ways. The affection, celebration, and soulful tenderness expressed in the subjects' facial expressions and body language make the observer feel warm and emotional.

Halim passed away at the age of 83, in 2003, but her legacy lives on. Her work is on permanent display at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art in Cairo. While the communities lining the Nile look remarkably different today, her paintings are a timeless and soulful representation of the compassion, vigor, and energy of the people.

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Yasmina Achlim is an Amazigh-Moroccan-American writer and editor. She is a graduate of St Mary's University in London and has lived in the United States, Morocco, and England. Before joining the Inside Arabia team, Yasmina focused on writing environmental and cultural pieces that explored society's relationship with the planet and the wealth of communities in it. She is passionate about MENA issues and combating cultural stigmas.

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