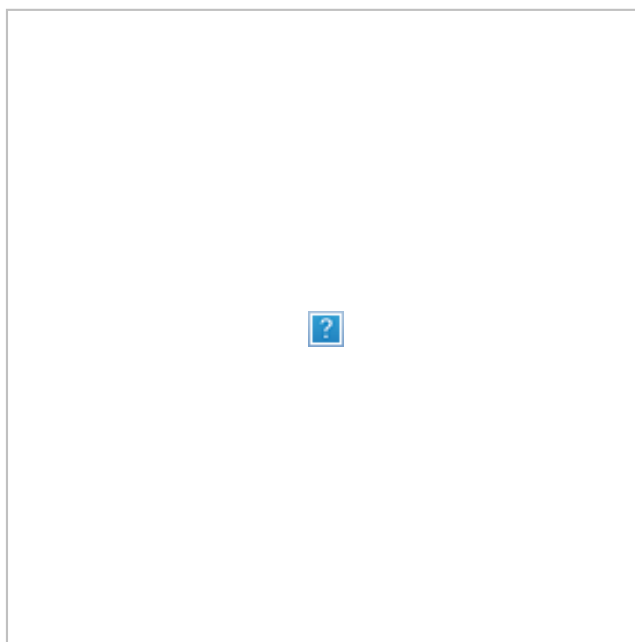


"There is Egyptian genuineness in this talented painter" Pablo Picasso (In a letter to Gino Severini). By Omar Al Busaidy

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Omar Al Busaidy writes about Samir Rafi's piece in Barjeel Art Foundation

Hailing from the Sakakini district of Cairo, Egypt; Samir Rafi (1926-2004) was born a few years earlier than Sakakini's other famous son Yasser Arafat.

Unlike Mr. Arafat, Samir chose a life of artistic expression over politics (isn't all art political to an extent?) and with the moral support of his family and schoolteachers, he devoted himself to the constant criticisms and subtle nuances of dissatisfaction that a young man endures on his path to self-awareness and greatness. Upon graduating from the school of fine arts in Cairo; Samir found both his signature style and his sense of self awareness in a very tumultuous Arab world at the time. He was a member of the *"Contemporary Art Group,"* an art collective founded in 1946 that was instrumental in the promotion of techniques and styles that reflected the precursor to the modern art movement at the time. Samir's work through the 1950's and 60's reflected that. Perhaps his artwork spoke of his dissatisfaction with his surroundings, his anxiety at the changes that tugged at the underbelly of Egyptian society as a whole. Arabia being a hotbed of change was conversely also a hotbed of disappointment to millions of Arab people. Perhaps it is these formative events that led to his introvert behavior of

retrospective analysis in his quiet Parisian home until his passing.

I was particularly struck by the work entitled Seated Musician (oil and mixed media, 50 x 68.2 cm, 1963)

In this piece, we see a seated dark – skinned musician, his long elegant fingers drooping over the Oud (or perhaps it is an African *Quud* or *Kaban*,) whilst a jealous looking Dog (perhaps a Saluki) peers from behind him and a small Bird of Paradise sits to his left.

Painted in a style not unlike typical African folkloric art, the image portrays an effeminate man, sensitive to his surroundings and playing a lighthearted role in society. In Samir's time, artists were respected and admired and there was a place in society for them as there have been in centuries that preceded his époque. However we must acknowledge that there were large periods of uncertainty and change in his adult years. We thus see a musician that is more sensitive and effeminate than most, (not necessarily in major contrast to the majority of Samir's other works that feature bare breasted women, possibly a sign of symbolic sympathy for female oppression) this musician is indicative of the peaceful spirit of the musician (a reflection of Samir himself), who believes that wherever he rests his head is home, living off of scraps of food provided by the aforementioned women who he gladly pays a tune for as they lull their babies to sleep on hot, dusty Egyptian nights. The bird of paradise on his left hand side (and not his right) suggests that the bird represents the love or distant admiration of a beautiful young woman. This is also a reflection on Islamic teachings and tribal traditions which would have prevented a non-mahram (related) woman to sit with an unmarried young man and thus a love bird would have been more appropriate, the artist would hope that the bird would fly to his lover and sing sweet songs in her ear.

The dog represents an authoritative, disapproving figure. Upon examination of the artists' life, we know that it is not necessarily indicative of his father, mother or indeed any authoritative figure (such as a schoolteacher, Imam or Headmaster.) Those people were mostly supportive throughout his life. Instead it possibly reflects the sector of society that does not spare a thought, or lend a curious ear to music or art of any platform or media. It is the system, establishment, ruler and government who would rather focus on more industrialized and less community based forms of work in order to promote the "new Egypt" or "new Africa." The dog reflects overbearing change.

Egypt was both changing too fast and not enough. This duality was Samir's pain and

his hope for his future profession and personal life and love was to be devoured as easily as a dog may devour a bird.