

Historical themes in Modern Egyptian Art

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1. Introduction

Egypt has been under strong western influence for more than two centuries, but it also belongs to an Arab and Islamic cultural and religious sphere. This entails that the western ideas and phenomena that occur are getting different shapes in Egypt than in the West. One example is the *religious* ban on pictorial art, enforced in the mosques and the Qur'an. This is giving the pictorial art different terms and history than in the West. The modern Egyptian pictorial art is a phenomenon of the 20th century. It has been created in the encounter with Europe and European culture. There are consequently many different, and partly antagonistic tendencies that form the basis of modern pictorial art in Egypt, as well as in other Islamic societies.

The dichotomy between modernism and traditional values has always been present, but it has been of different importance in different periods. Egyptian artists find themselves between many more or less contradictory sources of influence. All of them have been engaged in different ideas of building the modern Egyptian nation.

The object of this presentation is to show how the Egyptian history and cultural traditions is present in contemporary art. One important factor is that Egyptian national feelings are a far more important point of reference for Egyptian artists in comparison to western art at the present moment.

Egyptian artists often work within one of three directions:

1. historic and national themes.
2. political themes mainly related to the West's and Israel's attitudes towards different Arab states.
3. emotionally, expressive motifs.

In this presentation I will deal mainly with the first direction, the historical themes. It involves rather great difficulties in systematising modern Egyptian art in common western terms. It could have been adequate to use the term *postmodernism*, as a model of thinking and not as a style, on tendencies in Egyptian art. It can be claimed that many Egyptian artists have rather *eclectic* relations to western art; they deliberately choose very different expressions or styles in different works. This makes it difficult and unsuitable to describe them within the '*isms*' of western art. The western '*isms*' are more used as concepts of style than as ideological movements.

I will also make some comments on the following three points:

1. The establishing of a national pictorial art.
2. The eventual existence of a specific common Arab – Islamic pictorial aesthetic, which Egyptian pictorial art can or should be seen in relation to.
3. Which topics of the pictorial art are specifically Egyptian, and which ones are parts of international movements.

Tendencies in the Pioneer generation 1920 – 1980

During this period Egyptian art was in a kind of '*establishing stage*'. This led to the fact that the predominating tendency is the national aspect, rooted in the Egyptian heritage. This gives different effects, both on the formal level and by the choice of motif. This Egyptian frame of reference that was established for modern art has never completely vanished, but has had different significance through the decades.

Both the sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar and the painter Mohammed Nagi got inspiration from the Pharaonic art, at the same time as they were rooted in a European tradition, and they used freely both these sources in their work. The figurative art is clearly dominant in this period. This is quite natural, all aspects of art and literature played important parts expressing national identity.

During the decades the artists use different sources of inspiration, the national romantic or folkloristic aspects become increasingly more important. The artists got their inspiration amongst peasants in the countryside and in the rich popular narrative tradition and in popular religiousness. Islam as such is not explicitly theme in this period, neither is calligraphic art. It is evidently that the predominant elements of this period are the '*pure Egyptian aspects*', which can unify all groups in society. Nagi, Mahmoud Saïd and Hameed Nada can in different ways be found within this movement.

Farouk Bassiouni¹ points out that there has been a rich diversity in Egyptian art since Ragheb Ayad in the thirties. He means that there was then a shift from a superficial '*impressionistic*' attitude towards a more participating '*expressive*' style. This shift did make way for other tendencies in modern Egyptian painting. Bassiouni claims that Egyptian artists from that time have used elements of the western directions, but combined them with Egyptian reality in a very personal manner.

The most important of the other tendencies in this period is the international tendency, often connected to the political left side and the surrealists. Before 1952 all Egyptian intellectuals had got their education and training at foreign schools and colleges either in Egypt or in Europe. It is therefore natural that many of these were more inclined to follow the tendencies in Europe, than the growing national movement in Egypt. In other words we can clearly see several groups with different interests at that time. Egyptian surrealism also developed different from contemporary European surrealism. Egypt was however the point of reference also for these internationally inclined artists, but the Egyptian elements play another part than within the classical or national romantic aspects. This led to a living diversity, but also to great discord within Egyptian art and culture in the years before 1952.

In the years after the Second World War, and specifically after the 52-revolution, political art became predominant, with for instance different Pan-Arab ideas. The attitudes of the West towards the Middle East after the establishing of Israel led to many intellectuals' dissociation from the West and

western ideas, and led them to work with different means for Arab unity. The solidarity with the Palestinian people and aggression against Israel was therefore strong in these years. The painters Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar and Inji Efflatoun have partly worked within this Pan-Arab political orientation. Within political art there is also a strong national tendency.

In the seventies there was a shift within the political art, gradually the Islamic aspects emerged, and attained a stronger position in pictorial art than the clearly political and social realistic aspects.

The national aspect is the common denominator for the Egyptian pictorial art in this period. Looking at the whole period as an entity reveals that Egypt and Egyptian culture have been a convergence point for *all* different tendencies of pictorial art. Another important feature of this period is also how artists change style or expressions according to what they want to express, to their message, they are not being *caught* by a specific style or trend. This is very clearly seen throughout this period from Nagi to Efflatoun.

Tendencies in the Contemporary art 1980 – 2000

The strong *national* tendency that was evident in the former generation continues also into contemporary art. This tendency is so deeply rooted that it has been determining for the categorization of the material. It has therefore been productive to study also the contemporary art after a thematic and not stylistic division.

The national attachment is more or less necessary to exhibit; it therefore becomes a self-reinforcing tendency. The tendency of seeking inspiration from the Pharaonic heritage or the popular culture continues. These are both aspects with a simple and clear national attachment and appeal.

In addition to the national aspect, the regional aspect, represented by the Islamic aspect, also plays an increasingly important part. This has both a national and an international aspect. The focus of international orientation has shifted from Europe to the common Arab culture and Islam. The Islamic aspects appear in two different forms, either as calligraphy and calligraphic inspired works, or as religious, cultural or historic themes being treated in a figurative manner. This tendency to enforce the Islamic aspect, replaces partly the political art from the Nasser era. The political art, rooted in western social realism disappears as a tendency of *vital* importance. The same is happening to other western movements as for instance the surrealism. There are still a small number of artists keeping a clear international, western attachment, related to new movements within both abstract and figurative painting. These artists have usually lived and worked in Europe for several years.

Traditional painting on canvas plays indisputably the prominent part, installations and other experimental techniques are of secondary importance for contemporary Egyptian artists. An important tendency is the great variety of artistic expressions within all the different aspects of contemporary art. This diversity of expressions, which all in different ways get inspiration from *ancient* sources, leads to an impression of a *post-modern* tendency in pictorial art. Architectural

elements, different symbols and calligraphy are taken out of their respective connections and brought together in new ways to create new *Egyptian* pictures.

It is very questionable to use a concept as *postmodernism* in a description of Egyptian pictorial art, because Egyptian art has not passed all the stages of western *modernism*. There are similar eclectic tendencies in earlier stages of Egyptian art. This implies that postmodernism is *not* a significant description. The problem of using such a description is also elucidated by the difficulties of using the other common western terms in the description of modern Egyptian art.

2. Different aspects of Modern Egyptian Art

2.1. Pharaonic aspects

The classical pharaonic art and architecture are visible and ubiquitous in Egypt. Great temples, sphinxes, statues and pyramids dominate their surroundings and reflect a highly developed culture, where pictorial art, sculpture and architecture played an important role. This has inspired most of the Egyptian artists, and it is being expressed in several ways. Some artists are inspired by the principles of composition in classical paintings and sculptures, others by the use of colour, some by the architecture, and others by the religious, cultural and mythological contents. The Nile has always played an important role, both physical and metaphysical. The Nile is the prerequisite for permanent settling in Egypt, this has led to the connection of fertility-deities with the Nile. The Nile's important role has always been reflected in culture and religion through different deities.

2.1.1. The Nile and Osiris



In 'Osiris' from 1929 Taha Hussein goes into one of the central stories in classical Egyptian mythology, the Isis-legend. The central theme here is the fights between good and evil forces, represented by Isis' fights for Osiris and the story about Osiris' death and resurrection as the god of the underworld². Isis had to search for Osiris for years after he had been killed and dismembered by his enemies. After finding all the bodily parts, Isis embalmed and mummified the corpse; she blew life into it, enough to get pregnant with Horus. Osiris was then resurrected as god of the underworld. After growing up Horus spent lots of effort on revenging the murder of his father. The picture's

motif is the Nile, in the upper part there is a coffin, the reflection of the coffin delimits the lower part of the picture. Above the coffin there is a row of papyrus, other water-plants and birds. Between the coffin and its reflection some animals drinking water from the Nile can be seen, and some people fishing or searching for parts of Osiris' dismembered body. This is the central story about the fights

between good and evil forces in classical Egypt. The good forces gained victory with the resurrection of Osiris. The colours are limited, but well balanced; they are kept in blue and gold to achieve the proper sacred impression towards such central motif. A special technique that he often uses, inspired by calligraphy, can be seen. To substitute different shades of colour, he covers the background with small with dots, strokes or hooks. This gives an association of script; that something has been written on the background. These small signs cover almost the entire surface. His style is moreover rather expressive with the use of clear, strong colours and forms.

The Nile has always been of the greatest importance for Egypt, it is the source of life for the people. This is naturally an important theme amongst many artists. The Nile gives food in the form of fish, and supplies the fields with water; the Nile is also the only source of potable water. The Nile as an artistic motif has also an ecological aspect. The Nile is on one hand important and enriching, but on the other hand this does not hinder that the Nile is also an enormous garbage receiver. The river has a great pollution problem.

2.1.2. The Pyramid

The Pyramid is a frequently occurring motif in Egyptian art, it is also a motif in some western 'New Age' inspired art, but there it has a totally different connotation than in Egyptian art.



Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen's b. 1951 '*Pyramid-construction*' from 1991 is a good example of the emphasis he is putting on Egyptian cultural roots and national identity as themes in his art. The motif is a big pyramid-form covering almost the entire surface of the picture. The predominant colour is sand-yellow as in the desert. Mohsen puts in another dimension by using several colours to emphasise shadows and reflections, blue, grey and brown on the shady side, whilst he is using white, pink and yellow to create light.

The form of the pyramid is made up of big parallel colour fields that are broken by a circulatory movement around the top. The background is a repetition of the pyramid's colours, but he has used complementing colours and bigger colour fields.

The pyramid is also a running theme of *Mostafa Abdel Moity* b. 1938. He works with a mainly strong geometrical, almost abstract design. He is using few, clear and sharp colours without shades or nuances, his design are clearly influenced by minimalism. He habitually works with repetitive, similar elements that he uses to create pattern like motifs. He frequently uses specific Egyptian symbols as pyramids and hieroglyphs and combines these with other geometrical forms such as cubes and spheres. He is engaged with investigating the relationship and movements between different forces, both political and metaphysical. He puts Egypt into his relations with the surrounding world. His art is clearly influenced by international contemporary art. He has lived for several years in both

Spain and Italy, but he does not wish his art to lose its national character. His choice of motif secures a particular Egyptian character in all of his works.



'*Pyramids and hieroglyphs*' from 1991 is in fact even more Egyptian than the title indicates. The main motif is three pyramids, when three pyramids are placed together on a row it symbolises the pyramids in Giza, the three best known pyramids, and almost a national symbol of Egypt. Three pyramids are used as decoration and as a trademark on numerous products. The name of the leading newspaper *Al-Ahram* means pyramid, and it has the three pyramids in its heading. The picture has a broad blue frame; in the middle on the top there are three small lighter blue pyramids. Then there is a broader frame, deeper blue on the horizontal edges and burgundy on the

vertical ones. Then we approach the most important part of the picture. The lower part consists of broader horizontal brown and green alternating strokes, firmly scattered with hieroglyph like signs. The upper part is black with three pyramids sketched in white and grey, between the pyramids the background is kept to different shades of green. Above the left pyramid there is a snail shell, a symbol of infinity.



Hussein El-Gebaly's b. 1934 '*Brown calligraphy*' from 1992. is another example of the pyramid motif. This is one of many examples of the rich and multifarious abundance of inspiration that lay the foundations for different tendencies in Egyptian art. The composition is very rigid. The pyramid's base covers the entire bottom of the picture and its peak ends just below the upper edge of the picture. The colours are limited and well balanced, without use of shades or nuances. Some vividness appears on the surface by the use of many narrow parallel lines, almost as if they were growth rings. Against a pale rust-brown background there is a grey sharp-pointed pyramid. Diagonally from the top

right there are some solid calligraphic forms in a dark terracotta colour. The lower part of the pyramid, below the calligraphy has changed colour from grey to an indeterminable golden nuance.

El-Gebaly's design is often abstracted to two-dimensional figures, with different elements laid upon each other in layers. His design is closely connected with the fact that he mainly works with graphics, and is using the different techniques in graphic arts to communicate his message and motif without disturbing details.

2.2. Islamic aspects

Arab or Islamic pictorial aesthetics

One can *not* talk about a *common* Islamic or Arab pictorial aesthetic. There are some similarities in the pictorial art in different Arab countries, but there are also just as big dissimilarities. The national heritage, either ancient or recent, like Egyptian, Babylonian, Palestinian and others plays a more important part in the development of pictorial art. Islam is however only *one* of several aspects of the society that pictorial art relates to. Similarities in the early years of modern art are mostly related to the fact that all Arab countries more or less were under European rule until the mid 20th century. The systems of education are therefore built upon European models.

There has been enforced a *de facto* ban of pictures³ within Islam, no humans can compare themselves with Allah, and artists could not compete with Allah through depiction of living creatures. The ban on pictures is not explicitly stated in the Qur'an, but it is a part of the *Hadiths*. Scholars disagree upon when and how this ban first was enforced. The ban has its rational in the fear that pictures could be used as idols, and thereby mislead the believers from the true faith. This ban of idols is clearly mentioned several places in the Qur'an, amongst others in Surah 6-74. This ban is mostly related to the tradition from Abraham and Moses, but in several Hadiths the prophet is quoted to have expressed an explicit ban on pictures and on artists as well. This is a long and broad scholarly discussion that falls out of the scope of this presentation. It is interesting to observe that despite this iconoclastic tradition there has emerged a modern western style pictorial art in all the Muslim countries. There are even artists that describe themselves as devout Muslims working with clearly figurative art.

The ban of pictures has not been strongly enforced in other places than the mosques. It has nevertheless led to the development of an art-tradition that is distinctly different to the West. Depictions of humans and animals are banned in the mosques, but they can occur in secular buildings. David Rice⁴ points out one exception from Mosul in Iraq, where there are 11th century mihrabs with figural decorations. According to him, this is due to the strong Armenian influence in the area.

There has also been some figurative decoration, in form of mural paintings and ceiling decorations in the palaces, or in miniature paintings in manuscripts. It is this tradition of miniature painting that is most commonly known when talking about Islamic pictorial art. Islamic art has two important sources of inspiration, the Byzantine and the Sassanide. Rice⁵ points out the Byzantine influence in two murals from the 12th century, one from Palermo, and the other from Fustat, Cairo. He continues by referring to many mosaics in for instance Syria. Depictions of humans occur, often isolated from their natural environment in different ways. Even in secular buildings the figurative decoration are almost extinct.

Because of this displeasure towards figurative art, *applied* art, calligraphy and abstract geometrical decoration have dominated and been admired. Even so there have always been confined pictorial art, but of limited availability, in miniatures, manuscripts and portraits, but there have not under any circumstances appeared pictures of humans or other living creatures in the Qur'an. The miniatures in

illuminated manuscripts were mostly in scientific works, some poetry or heroic tales. But even pictures of the prophets exist, but no one dares to portrait Mohammed, his face has been left empty. The Iraqi and Syrian manuscripts up to the 14th century show influences from Christian manuscripts. From the 14th century the Persian illumination was revitalised, these and later Turkish ones reveal greater inspiration from Central-Asian art.

In contemporary art, inspiration from earlier epochs of Islamic art, architecture and applied art is obvious amongst many artists. It is first of all the rich calligraphic tradition that is the source of inspiration. The miniature paintings appear to a lesser degree to be an important source of inspiration, but in some works where there are combinations of calligraphy and figurative expressions the inspiration is also drawn from this source. Stylistic there are moreover great differences. Important events from the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet also give inspiration to contemporary artists. Egypt has a unique position within the Islamic world, with its long and rich history stretching from Pharaonic and Coptic periods. The different cultures are continuously influencing contemporary artists, and many works contain evident references to this complex past in a way that makes it impossible to point out *one* single culture or religion as inspiration for the works of art. Egyptian culture *is* composed of several elements and this is necessarily reflected in the art.

Speaking of Islamic aspects of pictorial art, it is important to notice substantial differences related to religious motifs in Christian art. There have never been important patrons of art in the Islamic world, as there were in the West. The church, the nobility and the rich citizens provided an important market for both religious and secular art in the West. Since there has been a ban of pictures in religious connections, there has never been established a tradition of pictorial representations of important events in for instance the Prophet's life. Pictorial art has never been used in missionary work, which was very important within Christianity. Representations of persons are seldom put into a definite textual connection, but remain isolated and symbolic. Representations of Mecca with 'Al-Ka'bah' as the centre of the world are found from the earliest until the present time. The specific religious content is exclusively found in calligraphic works.

Many contemporary artists are inspired by classical calligraphy, and even more by the artistic use of calligraphy in manuscripts and other forms of applied art through the centuries.



Taha Hussein's calligraphic works have seldom a specific significance; they are more like studies of the decorative aspects in calligraphy.

In the application '*Allah*' from 1985 these decorative aspects are apparent, at the same time as this picture also has a clear message. In the top middle is, *Allah* - God appliquéed clearly with white and green letters in a square field, with a green border. Green is the holy colour of Islam. The background of the picture is totally white overlaid with a thin diagonally net. In the lower

part, the background is partly brown and black with appliquéd calligraphy in two to three rows in white and brown letters. According to Hussein, the intention is not to read what is written, there are random letters and fragments of letters, and they are partly written upon each other. This application work shows an amalgamation of inspiration from different sources. Application has long tradition in Egypt. Large canopies and tents were made to be used on occasions when larger localities were needed. The craft of tent making is also centuries old in Egypt. Traditionally coarse white canvas is used onto which geometrical borders and medallions are appliquéd. The application is made with thinner cotton in strong colours like red, blue, green, yellow and black. Inspirations from classical calligraphy from the walls of the mosques as well as from manuscripts are also evident in Hussein's pictures. Finally it is common in all pious homes to have a picture where Allah's name is written in



beautiful calligraphy. He works in a more modern, expressionistic manner in the painting *'Black Calligraphy'* from 1986. The only colours of this picture are black and white. The calligraphy follows the edges of the picture and moves in a spiral into the picture's centre that is shining brightly. On the edges the letters are large, becoming smaller towards the centre of the picture. There is no intention here to express a written message, the picture must be perceived as an abstract composition. The letters are often written upon each other in a way that makes it impossible to see more than parts of the words.

Atteya Mostafa has worked a lot with calligraphy in her paintings; Egyptian critics consider her art as Islamic art. She is using calligraphy not as a decorative element only, even if the decorative aspect is also important. Islam is very important to her, and she therefore wishes, through her art, to contribute to the spread of Islam, and to give people pictures for reflections. The Ka'bah of Mecca has for long time been a holy place, also before Islam, it has been a destination for pilgrimage for long time. According to Islamic tradition it was Abraham, the father of all Muslims, and his son Ismail, that rebuilt the Ka'bah and the Temple after the Deluge.



Her picture *'Al-Ka'bah'* from 1984 depicts a different history connected to this holy place. The story is about how Abraha, the infidel ruler over Al-Yaman, in his fights against Mecca had tried to destroy and remove the Ka'bah by elephants. This is a story vividly rendered in Surah 105, Al-Fil. Allah then became angry and sent a flock of giant birds that killed the elephants and stopped the attempt to destroy this holy place. The giant eagle is dominating the entire picture, whilst five elephants

looking like mice in comparison run away deadly scared. Below the eagle there are parts of the Temple and the Ka'bah. In other pictures she uses calligraphy as a way of drawing, she has made a series of pictures of cities, totally dominated by domes of mosques and minarets. Both on and between the buildings, the 99 known names of Allah and quotations from the holy Qur'an are written in beautiful calligraphy. She is at the same time using the calligraphy to emphasise the architectural forms. The colours are in different light nuances with green, blue and red for effects.

2.3. Cultural diversity

Egyptian culture is, as I have mentioned earlier, very complex and rich with recollections from different religions, dynasties and rulers. This cultural conglomerate is important to many artists whether Christian or Muslim, this gives them their characteristics towards the West and other Arab societies. Contemporary western art, is in addition to old Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic art an important source of inspiration for Egyptian artists.

Salah Enani is working figuratively with rather realistic expressions. His style is often satiric and caricaturing, but not rude or compromising. He pinpoints the situation and pronounces the essence of the different situations. He uses the satiric and caricaturing style from his cartoonist work also within his paintings. His themes are always people in different situations. To clarify this he is limited working with recognisable figurative expressions. He is very engaged in modern Egyptian cultural life, and has in addition to painting worked a lot with music and theatre.



In his almost monumental panorama of Egyptian intelligentsia *'Artists and Authors from the years of Enlightenment'* from 1990 he pays tribute to the important artists and intellectuals of the modern Egypt. There are portraits of all of the 30 most important cultural figures in the last hundred years. There are amongst others the sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar, the painter Mahmoud Saïd, the author Naguib Mahfouz and the singer Umm Kalthoum. In the

background Moukhtar sits with his Egyptian Awakening, which is a symbol for, and at the same time more or less surveys the development of this period. The sculpture is here somewhat caricatured, the sphinx has some of Enani's own traits and the woman has become older and is very interested in watching what is going on around her. In the centre of the picture, on a small platform, Umm Kalthoum is standing in her classical pose for singing. Mahfouz can be seen sitting by a café-table at

the bottom to the right, and to the left Saïd is standing by his easel. All of these have in different ways played important parts in modern Egyptian cultural life. They are liberal Muslims that claim and defend their rights of artistic expressions, even if this should contradict the opinions of Islamists or conservative Muslims.

Abdel Wahab Morsi, who belongs to the pioneers among today's active painters, emphasises Pharaonic pictorial art, whilst he also shows clearly inspiration from culture of the present. He was for many years employed by 'Antiquities Documentation Centre'. His lifelong work there with reconstruction and restorations of Pharaonic art has left its imprint on his own art. He works in a particularly personal style, which is a combination of figurative and abstract art. His work is mainly two-dimensional; this is an obvious influence from the Pharaonic art. Further he uses simple clear colours without shades or nuances, in some cases he is also using gold leaf. His compositions are thoroughly prepared and strictly geometrical designed. The motifs are picked from both ancient Egyptian history and mythology as well as from present village life.



In Morsi's *'The mask'* from 1989 it is both the Coptic and Islamic cultural background that are being dealt with. Against a red background there is a almost rectangular geometrical composition, the design fills almost the entire picture. In this composition the most important part is the face of a woman. On her head she carry two fish topped by a small white crescent, on her forehead she is wearing a big piece of silver jewellery, below the face there is again another crescent, this time it is considerably greater and golden. The colouring is vivid and rich of nuances, but red and brown are predominant. The fish is a Christian-Coptic symbol with ancient tradition back to the primitive church. The crescent is one of the most widespread Islamic symbols. By having symbols from both religions in this picture he emphasises the uniqueness of the compound Egyptian culture.



In *'The Cultural heritage'* from 1974 it is the heritage from the different religions and cultures of Egypt that is the theme. Over a dark area in the lower part of the picture hovers a spherical cloud-like composition against a yellow background. The dark area at the bottom is decorated in red and black with primitive geometric signs and figures. The spherical form has a nucleus with Arabic inspired calligraphy in brown and black, hurling around this nucleus are brown ribbons with geometrical decoration and Coptic, Jewish, Pharaonic and Islamic religious

symbols. All of these symbols represent different important stages in Egypt and therefore in Egyptian culture. The cultural and religious diversity in Egypt is the main subject in Morsi's entire production.

Gameel Shafik b. 1938 uses quite different expressions, but also motifs that reflect the cultural and religious diversity of Egypt. He works mainly with water-colours and pen-and-ink drawings. His pictures have often a simple design with only a few figures or elements centrally placed in the picture and hardly any surroundings details. The pictures are thoroughly worked over. He often uses fish, cats or horses in his pictures, in addition to humans. In some cases he also uses transition forms such as mermaid-like creatures. The fish is a particularly important symbol for Shafik. He emphasises its long tradition in Egyptian culture. From antiquity it was a dream symbol for prosperity, in addition it is an old Coptic and Christian symbol from the primitive church and the time of persecutions, and last but not least it symbolises Isis and the Nile fertilising Egypt. The struggle between good and evil is conspicuous in his pictures, the fish is always symbolising the good forces. The cat as symbol of the evil forces also has ancient traditions. Since Shafik is Copt it is also interesting to look into the Christian symbol-codex. In Christian tradition the cat has been regarded as a symbol of the devil, or his followers. During the witch-processes it was supposed that Satan could transform himself into the guise of a cat. From Egyptian mythology there is the uncontrollable lioness Sekhmet that was sent out to kill the enemies of Ra in Upper Egypt. Once she first tasted blood she was impossible to stop.⁶ Sekhmet can also be seen as an aspect of the goddess Hathor, who represented the worldly aspects, fertility and happiness. On the other hand Sekhmet was, in the aspect of Bastet an ordinary cat, worshipped and regarded as a protection against evil.⁷ In this connection it is important to remark that different gods and goddesses in Egyptian mythology change their importance and positions many times through history. A reference to Egyptian gods and mythology can for contemporary artists therefore cover much more than one single situation.

The horse is for Shafik symbolising the man, it is big, strong and sexual. There are no other evident mythological references to the horse in Shafik's pictures, but it is a generally positive and forceful symbol. Fish and lovers in the Nile refer to the old myth about Isis and Osiris.⁸ Osiris' resurrection also connects him to fertility.



In the water-colour '*Adam and Eve with cat*' from 1993 something rather sinister appears, there is no active movement in this picture. A naked man and woman are sitting close against each other in the bow of a boat, behind them sits a cat that has captured the fish. In front of them, out in the river a dream-like woman is approaching hovering, lightly surrounded by white drapery. This picture must be interpreted as a story about how external forces affect and paralyse a relationship.

The cat represents the uncontrollable reality outside the family. The cat has captured the fish, the symbol of fertility and welfare. The only thing these people have left is the dream about a better

future. Most people of today's Egypt are struggling with a difficult private economy, whilst they can be witness to a growing corruption amongst the elite in power.



Farghali Abdel Hafiz b. 1941 represents a modern form of orientalist style. He is very concerned about the particular light of the desert and has been working with this subject for many years. His palette is dominated by pastel colours such as yellow, beige and pink, with smaller amounts of brown and blue for effects and contrasts. His design is easy and sketchy. He works mainly with acrylic, oil and sand; in some cases he also uses a relief as a background before starting painting. In

later years he has concentrated his production around the use of sand and clay in combination with other materials. This can be a way of accentuating the fact that he is an Egyptian artist, using a technique in contrast with modern technology that many western artists use at present. His works are dominated by more or less romantic motifs from the countryside and with a preference for young women as models. *'Girl with a Donkey cart'* from 1991 shows a scene from a small village where a girl is driving a donkey cart through the village fields. The background and dominant colour is a warm pink nuance, whilst the details are painted in blue and white. The brush strokes are rapid and sketchy and the motif somewhat sweetish and romantic

Adel El-Siwi works in a rather imaginative manner. His background as an artist is somewhat unusual. He started by attending some classes at the academy of art while he studied medicine, after finishing his medical degree he started on his career as an artist. He then lived for ten years in Italy. He is obviously influenced by his years there, and the close contact with different new European art movements and directions. He has a strong and mature design, with dark, but clear colours. In the eighties he often painted 'invisible' figures, that's to say figures that are only seen after looking at the pictures for a long time. The figures were hidden against a decomposed background. It is often difficult to separate between background and foreground; the different levels flow into each other in a transparent manner. In later years he has started to paint more distinct figures, he paints big faces or torsos looking straight at the observer through big open eyes and with well-rounded, sensual mouths. He is engaged with the room as a specific subject, not only as empty space. He is also strongly involved with, and influenced by, *'The London School'* with Sutherland and Bacon. The influence from Bacon is evident in his representations of both figures and space, and also in his mode of expression in general. Siwi lays emphasis on depicting the life as it is, or as he experiences it, and he tries to avoid what he calls 'the utopian happiness' at Matisse's works⁹.



'Blue face' from 1993 is a good opportunity to study his transparent dissolved style and his use of vertical composition. This is from a period where Siwi were working a lot with faces as motifs. The face is cut off by the forehead, the nose long and coarsely painted, the verticality is broken by the big mouth in the lower part of the picture. The use of colour is also in this picture very restrained, with nuances of grey and blue. The blue colour creates shadows and obscurity in the one part of the face, the eyes are looking forward, but not focusing. In Siwi's faces with big and long noses and wide mouths the influence from both al-Gazzar and Bacon become evident.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Through this presentation I have tried to present a number of different Egyptian contemporary artists, for whom elements of Egyptian history play important parts in their works. I have also tried to explain why historical references in contemporary art are far more common in Egypt than in the west.

The almost total absence of abstract art is one noticeable feature, both in relation to western art of this period, and in relation to old Islamic art. This is probably connected to the overall importance of the national aspect of this period in Egyptian art.

The national and historical aspect still plays a more important part in Egypt than in the West. This aspect can be divided into two subgroups, the purely Egyptian aspect and the Islamic aspect. Artists sometimes get inspiration from specific parts of Egyptian history or present time, on other occasions they get inspiration from Islamic culture.

The Islamic aspect has *two* important dimensions. In relation to western art it acts *national*, delimiting or independent. In an Islamic context it acts in a greater relation, it acts *internationally* and inclusively. Egyptian intellectuals, filmmakers, actors, authors, musicians and other artists, relate to and address usually the entire *Arab* world, not only Egypt. Specific Egyptian elements are none the less more important than common Arab ones for contemporary pictorial art.

Notes:

- 1 Farouk Bassiouni: *Gazbia Sirry*, p. 11.
- 2 Robert Armour: *Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt*, p. 72-88 The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1992.
- 3 Karin Ådahl: *Den islamska konsten*, in *Islam*, p. 130-142, Stockholm 1985.
- 4 David Talbot Rice: *Islamic Art*, p. 98-99.
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 84-85.
- 6 Robert Armour: *Op.cit.*, p. 112 - 114 & p. 128 - 130.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 130 & p. 191.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 72-88.
- 9 Ingrid Wassmann: *Inside out*, Cairo Today Feb. 1992.