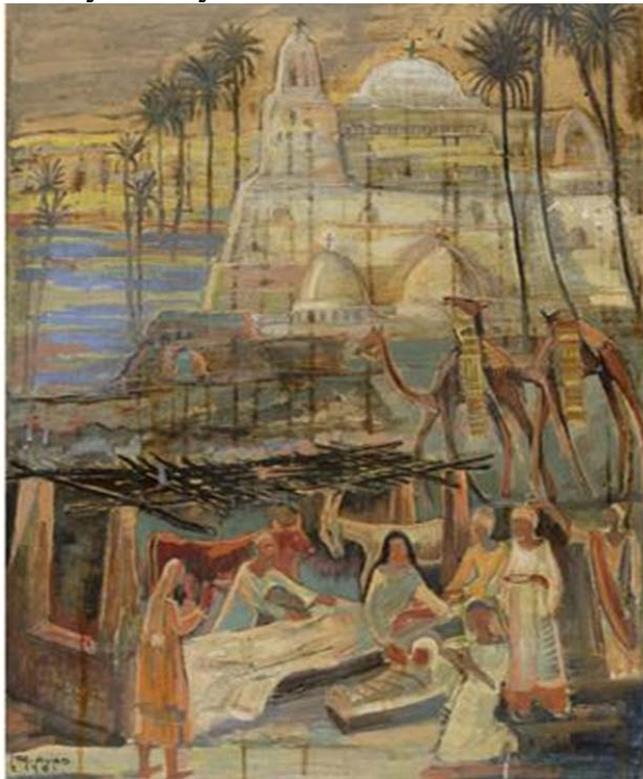


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Enduring odyssey

Gamal Nkrumah relishes the exuberance of Eternal Egypt from the vintage point of Ragheb Ayad's visual imagery of the Holy Family in his native land



“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you... This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’”

The Gospel according to Matthew, Biblical New Testament.

The very Biblical words are a lyrical artwork in themselves. And, the very visual extravaganza are an intoxicating odyssey replete with nuances and a particular nature of image-making that is unmistakably Egyptian. Ragheb Ayad's laconic juxtaposition of shrill colours is arresting. The late artist was playing with textures, hallowed mythological figures to some and living saints to others. His hallmark is stunning textures, iconic scenes which yield vista after vista of Eternal Egypt. His rural panoramas give visual form to a religious theme with enchanting detail within

carefully considered compositions.

Ayad (1892-1982) explores the distant past from an oblique, provocative angle. Yet this exhilarating exhibition is an integral part of the present. He was a pioneering Egyptian artist who schooled at the Prince Youssef Kamel Art School, founded in 1908. Ayad's motifs have profound meanings.

He had honed his passion on works as varied as his 1933 masterpiece "Cafe in Aswan"; "The Zar Dance", 1940; "Musicians and Dancers", 1956; and "Monk Drinking Water", 1977. However, this particular exhibition entitled "Celebration of the Journey of the Sacred Family to Egypt" focuses on a specific Christian theme.

Yet, Ayad had a whole other repertoire of references, from the perspective of the owner of SafarKhan Gallery, Zamalek, Sherwet Shafei. She specifically chose, ironically being a Muslim herself, to stage the exhibition at this particular moment as a reminder of the Coptic Christian "Feast of the Entry of the Lord into Egypt", a sacred day in the Coptic Christian calendar.

Shafei dares viewers, Muslims and Christians, to celebrate this much underrated festival of significant symbolic connotations to Egyptian national unity. For the virgin Mary and Jesus Christ are both venerated in Islam. Indeed, what many Christians and Muslims alike do not necessarily understand is that the Virgin Mary, Maryam or Miriam in the Quran, is mentioned far more many times in the Islamic Holy Book than in the entire New Testament. Indeed, she is mentioned 34 times in the Quran and an entire Sura (or chapter) is devoted entirely to Mary in the Quran.

Ayad's works merge the literal time-honoured traditions concerning the sojourn of the Holy Family in Egypt with the metaphorical in a tour de force of a uniquely Egyptian subtext. Shafei instinctively understood how Ayad transformed typical contemporary rural scenes into a purely para-religious one. She knew the artist personally and felt passionately about his work, and the symbolic value, not just at the time, but for eternity.

Ayad's Egypt is weirdly adorable, both in a mystical sense and in a metaphorical one. He was a Coptic Christian and was understandably influenced by his Church's iconography. Since time immemorial, victimised individuals have taken refuge in Egypt. They include the Biblical Abraham, Joseph, as well as Mary and Jesus. The tradition has become a badge of honour for the country.

Another unique aspect of this exhibition is that Shafie picked six paintings by Ragheb Ayad from her own private collection that were never viewed by the public. Nativite, (The Nativity) is spellbinding. Oil on wood, 75x70. 1961 is especially enthralling in the sense that the vibrant colours are reminiscent of a contemporary Egyptian village.

The manger in which the baby Jesus rests draws on the mortifying imagery of a cross between an ancient Egyptian brightly painted coffin and an austere stone sepulchral sculpture. Joseph is depicted as a typical Egyptian peasant, or fellah. The typical Coptic Christian church that towers over the verdant landscape peppered with date palms is a million miles from Bethlehem.

Mary reclines like an ancient Egyptian queen, the royal consort of some powerful pharaoh. Figures reminiscent of ancient Egyptian priests hover around in the background as if performing the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony. But, then was it not written in the New Testament that: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”?

Ayad was considered an expressionist painter, nevertheless, his works reveal that he was perhaps the first Egyptian painter to free himself from Western artistic influences and traditions. He was an accomplished artist who miraculously retained the workings of collective Coptic Christian memory. Be that as it may, Ayad cannot be pigeon-holed as a Coptic Christian artist. Yes, this particular exhibition currently showing at SafarKhan Gallery has an essentially Christian theme, yet as aforementioned his vivid village scenes are punctiliously Egyptian.

Ayad’s Egyptian archetype is as much Muslim as it is Christian, radiating a magical charm unique to Egypt. Admittedly, subtlety is an odd characterization of matters Egyptian. And, the late artist’s works were anything but perspicacious. Curiously, however, they were simultaneously percipient and penetrating. They exuded power and the viewer peers into a timeless Egypt of amaranthine authenticity.

The exhibition of Ragheb Ayad’s works at SafarKhan Gallery, Zamalek runs through Friday 20 June 2014.