

ARTS & CULTURE
By Perihan Kharma
Photographed by M.Joudi



SHERWET SHAFEI
& MONA SAEID
ART AFICIONADOS

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At the beautiful Safarkhan gallery in Zamalek, high society meets high art. Graceful, gorgeous and glamorous, this mother and daughter team provide a unique platform for Egyptian painters, pioneers, artistic mavericks and creative stars alike. Enigma's Perihan Kharma finds out what it takes to paint the town red...

ake a wander through the winding streets of Zamalek and you're bound to come across the Islamic-designed, triple-arched wooden window on Brazil Street. Above it, the word Safarkhan is painted in sensual Arabic across 38 tiles. It's a hint of the delights to come. A peak through the glass reveals beautiful pieces of fine art, subtly brightening up the crowded Cairo streetscape. And amongst the paintings, you'll often find a distinguished woman sitting behind an antique wooden desk. Her name is Sherwet Shafei.

The Safarkhan Gallery, a landmark fine art gallery showcasing modern and contemporary Egyptian fine art, is now owned and operated by lifelong art lover, Shafei, and her achingly elegant daughter Mona Saied. As one of the first private galleries to emerge in the 1980s, the gallery has introduced new Egyptian artists and highlighted prominent ones to Cairo's art scene, with

tredis obtain paintings by several well-known Egyptian artists. When Shafei retired from TV in 1990, she decided to partner Roxane at the gallery. "My motto was to propagate art and make Safarkhan a place to educate people about art and encourage them to invest in it," she says.

Many years on, her passion for art remains undiminished. "We need to live with art and its beauty. If art doesn't exist, people will be miserable." She is so determined about procuring her favourite artists that she tells me: "It once took me three years of negotiation to get one painting that I admired by the great artist, Mahmoud Saeid, but I got it in the end."

It's a passion and determination obviously passed on to her daughter, Mona, who started working with her mother nine years ago, after returning from Canada. Mona had spent 17 years there, working for global conglomerate, Proctor & Gamble, but the call of the art world she had grown up in proved too hard to resist. So she decided to return to Cairo to partner



Untitled by Tahia Halim (1961)



Untitled by Raghieb Ayyad (1961)



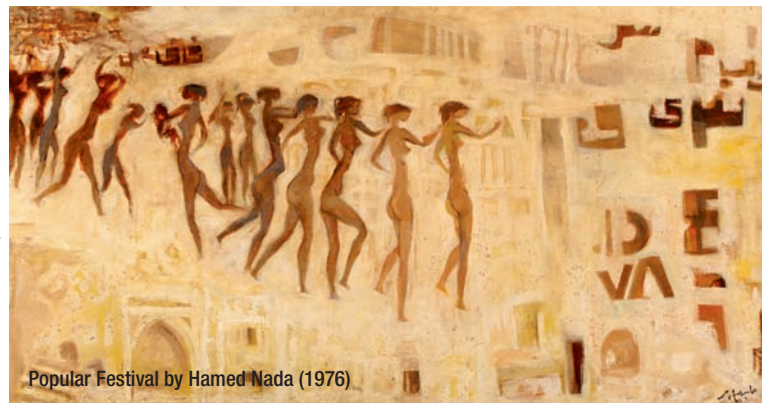
Donkey by Mahmoud Saeid (1927)



Fillette Du Mariout by Mahmoud Saeid (1948)

exhibitions by the likes of Raghieb Ayyad, Hamed Nada, Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar and Mahmoud Saeid.

Yet Shafei's involvement with the art world was partly circumstantial. Having graduated from Cairo University with a degree in English literature, she worked for a while at the State Information Department. In 1960, she joined the Egyptian Broadcasting Corporation, where she was chosen to direct a weekly show called *Gawlet Al Fonoun* – the first television programme about art in Egypt. There she was exposed to many of the great pioneers of Egyptian art, from Tahia Halim to Hamed Nada. The show ran for 30 years, during which Shafei also became the general director of all cultural programmes on Egyptian television.



Popular Festival by Hamed Nada (1976)

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In the meantime, she was also friends with Roxane Petredis, the owner of Safarkhan, which, at the time, was focused on Islamic antiques. Shafei's extensive knowledge of the contemporary art scene meant she could help Pe-

her mother in the gallery. "My mother is my role model. It's very exciting to be in this business, looking for forgotten and rare pieces of art," says Mona.

With Mona's marketing savvy and Shafei's art experience, the pair has now taken Safarkhan to a whole new level. As well as launching two other galleries, one more in Zamalek and one in El Gouna, they have worked closely with Christie's for three years – the longest period a private gallery has worked with the famed auction house. They were also the first to promote Egyptian art in the Gulf.

With their huge love for what they do, these two art aficionados have contributed significantly to cultural development in the Arab world and beyond; with clients in Europe, the Far East and the U.S.A. As Mona

explains, "Art at the Safarkhan gallery is art we believe in – we are very selective." And art pieces at the Safarkhan are sold only to people who appreciate art. This is the kind of gallery that refuses blank cheques; a gallery in which art is showcased and highlighted for art's sake. ■