

ROBIN OSTLE

Alexandrian Iconography

Muhammad Nagi



Self portrait.

Muhammad Nagi (1888-1956)

was a typical member of the cosmopolitan high society of Alexandria in the first half of the 20th century. He was a representative and a representor of the good life lived by the grande bourgeoisie, and fully integrated into the "levantine" society which so aroused the suspicions of Lord Cromer. In the eyes of the colonial administrator, people like Nagi and his peers tended to blur demarcation lines of identity, raising questions as to whether they were "semi-European" or "semi-Egyptian"? A privileged member of the Turko-Egyptian elite of Pashas and Beys in Egypt's second city, he attended the Swiss School and knew both Ungaretti and Marinetti. His intellectual formation conformed to what was becoming a pattern amongst the new elites of cultural and political life in Egypt, the completion of higher education in European institutions. After law studies at the University of Lyon from 1906-1910 and until 1914, he indulged his true passion and talent for painting at the Fine Arts Academy in Florence.

There is much in common between Nagi's cultural and artistic formation and that experienced by many of the writers, artists and intellectuals who were prominent in Egypt from Independence until the Revolution of 1952. Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888-1956), Taha Husayn (1889-1973), Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi (1892-1955), Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987), and 'Ali Mahmud Taha (1902-1949), the sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar (1891-1934), and the painter Mahmud Sa'id (1897-1964) are only some of the more obvious names in this context. In common with most of them, Nagi was deeply involved in the national

enthusiasms which gripped Egypt between the Revolution of 1919 and the proclamation of the constitutional monarchy in 1923, and through his painting he contributed much to the new national iconography of the period. His mural in the hall of the National Assembly was completed in 1922 and bears the same title as Mukhtar's famous statue, "The Renaissance of Egypt." The pharaonic motifs shared by this mural and Mukhtar's statue were dominant in the art and literature of the early years of Egyptian independence: the theme of resurrection symbolised the revival of the new nation state which could look forward to a renewal of the power and the glory of Pharaonic Egypt.

By far the most Mediterranean version of national iconography produced by Nagi was his enormous mural "School of Alexandria": he began preliminary work on this at around the same time as Taha Husayn published *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938), a book which asserts in the strongest terms Egypt's debt to Mediterranean culture. This painting was to occupy at least ten years of Nagi's life, and he produced numerous preliminary sketches and some preliminary studies in oil. Today the finished mural, approximately 8 metres by 3, hangs in the main meeting hall of the Governorate of Alexandria. It is a monumental celebration of the rich amalgam of religious and cultural traditions to which modern Egypt is heir; it is also an obvious reference on Nagi's part to one of the frescoes by Raphael, "School of Athens," which decorates the Stanza delia Segnatura in the Vatican. In "School of Alexandria," the background is dominated by the statue of Alexander the Great, while the central foreground is occupied by the figure of St. Catherine. She is flanked on one side by Archimedes who is shown handing on the heritage of Greek civilisation to Ibn Rushd on the other. The figures surrounding this central group are a carefully chosen mixture of Egyptian and European artists, writers and intellectuals, whose identities vary in the preliminary studies. In the completed mural, both Ungaretti and Cavafy are amongst those depicted on the European side, while Muhammad 'Abduh, Mahmud Mukhtar, Lutfi al-Sayyid and Taha Husayn appear amongst the Egyptians. The architectural details are also a mixture of the ancient and the contemporary: the top right-hand corner shows Ptolemy's Pharos, while the line of the horizon is formed by the waterfront of the eastern port. The mural as a

whole is the ultimate statement in art of the essentially Mediterranean nature of Egyptian civilisation as seen by Nagi, the modern Alexandrian.

Today the city familiar to Muhammad Nagi, Mahmud Sa'id, Constantine Cavafy and E.M. Forster belongs more and more to the historical imagination. Yet the broad-ranging cosmopolitan vision of the artistic endeavour of Muhammad Nagi continues to inspire the respect of his successors in the fine arts and literature.

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