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Humble Museum Aims for Rebirth

By ALANA CHLOE ESPOSITO
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CAIRO — A diamond in the rough, the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art houses works by more than 1,500 Egyptian artists, mostly from the middle and late 20th century, including the internationally renowned painters Mahmoud Said and Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar and the sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar.

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Also known as the Gezira Art Center, the museum, occupying an early-1990s building in the neo-Islamic style, forms part of the cultural complex centered around the Cairo Opera House on Gezira Island, west of central Cairo.

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The international curator Till Fellrath, speaking in a telephone interview last month, called it “the most comprehensive public collection of Egyptian — or Arab, for that matter — modern art in the world.”

For a museum aiming to showcase [Egypt's](#) contribution to 20th- and 21st-century art, this highlights a problem.

Among the 15,000 works in the collection, many are mediocre. Others are in desperate need of restoration and the lack of adequate resources to manage so large a collection shows through in poor lighting, inconsistent labeling, haphazard organization and general neglect.

Overshadowed by Egypt's pharaonic and medieval Islamic heritage, and the more recent upsurge in interest in contemporary Arab art, the country's modernist artists elicit scant respect. In part this is because successive authoritarian leaders, from President Gamal Abdel Nasser onward, dictated the rules of artistic practice, resulting in often propagandistic work, akin to Soviet social realism or the Chinese art of the Cultural Revolution.

Yet, ignoring Egyptian art from this period is a huge mistake, say Mr. Fellrath and Sam Bardaouil, founders of Art Reoriented, an independent curator based in Munich and New York, which specializes in organizing exhibitions of Middle Eastern contemporary art.

“Even if one is not impressed by the social-realist propagandistic painting from the Nasser era, it is important to be aware of the entire spectrum of artistic production,” Mr. Fellrath said. “This collection serves as an unparalleled record and archive of that, despite variances in the quality of works.”

The Art Reoriented curators were in Cairo in October and November to look for works to include in an exhibition, due to open in October at Bo Zar, the Brussels Palais de Beaux Arts, exploring, among other themes, the encounters between Egyptian and European artists in the modernist period.

Several Egyptian artists, including Georges Sabbagh and Mr. Moukhtar, lived and worked in Europe alongside [Gustav Klimt](#), Paul Klee, Alberto Giacometti and Amadeo [Modigliani](#). Inspired by archaeological discoveries, all referenced pharaonic and other Egyptian art and artifacts. Yet, while the Europeans won acclaim as trailblazers, their Egyptian

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contemporaries were belittled for creating ethnic art.

“Thus cut out of the conversation, their contributions to modern art have been largely ignored,” Mr. Fellrath said.

The result of this neglect has been to diminish their standing even in terms of Arab art.

“In the West, discussion of contemporary art inevitably goes back to modernist artists such as Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky, or movements such as Cubism,” Mr. Bardaouil noted. “But no Arab artist is equally regarded as the precursor to contemporary art from this region.”

“If we want to create a narrative of multiple modernities, which allows us to break out of viewing modern art through the lens of a center — Europe — and peripheries, bringing this artwork into the main picture is so important,” Mr. Bardaouil said.

For the construction of that narrative, the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art’s collection is a “resource lying dormant that needs to be activated,” he said.

Since taking charge of the collection in 2009, the museum’s director, Salwa Hamdi, has been trying to do just that.

“The artists in our collection are on par with international artists who pioneered Modernist art around the world and deserve more recognition,” she said in an interview at the museum in November, describing it as “one of the most important museums not only in Egypt, but throughout the Arab world.”

A version of this article appeared in print on February 2, 2012, in The International Herald Tribune.

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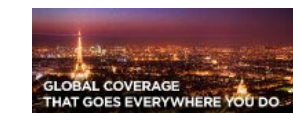
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