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Modernism in Arab Sculpture. The Works of Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934)

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Abstract: This article considers the work of Egyptian sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934) in a wider context than that of figurative art in the Arab world. Often, comparison between works of Egyptian artists and those of their European counterparts has been avoided under the assumption that Arab artists were behind the times. This paper places Mukhtar within a broader artistic movement known as the “return to classical order”, a reaction against the *avant-garde* that was widespread during the interwar period. The “return to classical order” was not limited to Europe but involved other countries of the Mediterranean. In this context, we can say that Mukhtar belonged to a generation of international artists who wanted to recover the foundations of academic training. His reinterpretations of other statues and models always have an Egyptian touch, however. His works speak of a quest for national identity even as they deeply engage with the European Modernism of the interwar period.

Keywords: Mahmud Mukhtar, Modernism, Arab sculpture, interwar period, avant-gardes, figurative art

Academic art was introduced in Egypt with the foundation of the Fine Arts School of Cairo, an institution that was called into life by Prince Yusuf Kamal (1882–1969) and a French sculptor named Guillaume Laplagne (1874–1927). Accordingly, the purpose of the School was to form Egyptian sculptors and painters. To achieve this goal, an introduction to figurative art was imperative, as Islamic art had been traditionally reluctant from the representation of living beings. This presented a challenge, specifically for the way in which academic art should be taught. First of all, students had to become familiar with paradigmatic artworks. Thus, Laplagne proposed teaching students art history through slides. He also suggested the acquisition of sculpture castings from French museums. Concerning the teaching of anatomy, Laplagne recommended buying a skeleton. Importantly, students should learn to draw from real figures rather than to copy drawings or sketches as had been performed in Egyptian schools.

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All these details of how art should be taught were at the core of all discussions about the Fine Arts School of Cairo. Finally, the school managed to overcome technical difficulties and produced important figurative artists such as Ragheb 'Ayyad (1892–1980), Muhammad Hassan (1892–1961), Yussuf Kamil (1891–1971) or Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934).

Furthermore, the main debate about the purpose of this school was the fact that academic art did not belong to Egyptian artistic tradition.¹ As a result a question was raised: What was Egyptian art? The founders of the school, Kamal and Laplagne, limited themselves to affirm that in Egypt there was a lack of professionalization in the artistic domain; but never really asked themselves what sort of art should be taught at the school. On one hand, Yusuf Kamal wanted to create an institution devoted to the conservation of national arts, and to achieve this purpose thought it necessary to awake an interest for figurative art in Egypt. On the other hand, he didn't have a clear idea whether national art should be oriented towards traditional Islamic art or towards an innovative figurative art.

Laplagne was more consistent in his posture. He thought that if Egypt was seeking a revival in its arts it should look back to the Pharaonic era. In 1911, when Laplagne wrote a report about the Fine Arts School of Cairo, for the University Committee he stated that a crucial element in the formation of every academic sculptor should be to visit museums. He recommended for his students:

We have no other statues for them to see, except those at the Egyptian Museum and it is them, under their apparent simplicity that are the wisest and the most difficult to understand.²

This affirmation came from someone who was familiar in certain ways with the notion of Modernism in art, and with the idea that simplicity and abstraction were difficult notions to understand. That statement by Laplagne makes us believe that he might have been acquainted with archaism in sculpture, a trend which would later have an enormous influence in Mukhtar's work. Inspiration from Antiquity can be seen in a bust called *Head of Egyptian Girl* (1910). In this way, in Egypt emerged a new kind of figurative art, inspired by the Pharaonic past. During the interwar period, these figurative artists would be acclaimed, although in later years they would be ignored and sometimes forgotten.

¹ Egyptian intellectual Ahmad Zaki insisted that European teachers should only be kept at the Fine Arts School for the general direction and to teach the rules of composition. Naef 2003: 200.

² Our translation : « *Nous n'avons pas d'autres statues à leur faire voir que les statues du Musée Égyptien et c'est précisément celles qui, sous leur apparente simplicité tout les plus savantes et les plus difficiles à comprendre* » DW 1911: Rapport rédigé par Guillaume Laplagne sur l'École égyptienne des Beaux-arts à Son Altesse le prince Ahmed Pacha Fouad, président du Comité de l'Université égyptienne.

1 Mukhtar's Influences at the Fine Arts School of Cairo

Mahmud Mukhtar was to become the most celebrated Egyptian artist, whose impeccable legend answered the needs of the national discourse.³ He was born in 1891 at Tanbarah, a village in the Nile Delta. At a very early age he moved to Cairo and, just 17 years old, he was admitted to the Fine Arts School. In 1912, after he graduated, Yusuf Kamal sent him to Paris. Here, he was a witness to the First World War, a conflict that would interrupt his studies. Nevertheless, he managed to continue working and in Egypt he became a celebrity, especially in 1928, after the inauguration of his public statue *Egypt's Awakening*. His success acquired an international dimension after the exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris in 1929. He died prematurely at the age of 43 in 1934 (Illustration 1).



Illustration 1: Mahmud Mukhtar © Private Archives of Emad Abu Ghazi.

³ Bardaouil 2013: 36.

An important part of the artistic education for sculptors everywhere was to make copies, often from classical pieces, but sometimes also from contemporaries. While studying at the Fine Arts School of Cairo, the most important influences for Mukhtar were satirical cartoons as a genre, works of important artists such as Henri Joseph Charles Cordier (1827–1905) and his ethnographic portraits, and Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). We assume this, because the statues Mukhtar realized in this period have similarities with those of these renowned artists.

Rodin had reinvented antiquity by sculpting pieces that were seemingly incomplete. This “fragmentary sculpture” was major a breakthrough in art. It makes us think of archaeological remains, but with a touch of modernity. By making these fragments it was no longer necessary to represent a full figure to impart to the spectator the notion of completeness. Sometimes Rodin sculpted just a torso or other parts of a body and this was enough to give the notion of movement.⁴

If we examine works made by Mukhtar such as *The Beggar and His Son* (1910) and *Faunus the Deity of the Fields* (1911–1915), we can deduce that Mukhtar was familiar with Rodin’s masterpieces. Neither are fragmentary sculptures. Moreover, we can tell the influence of Rodin because in *The Beggar and His Son*, Mukhtar portrays a very realistic, tired, old body instead of an ideal one, in the same way Rodin did for a statue made in 1886 called *Celle qui fut la belle Heaulmière*. Also, even though we don’t know if *Faunus the Deity of the Fields* was executed while he was still in Cairo or in Paris, it shows the impact of Rodin’s artworks, because of how he treats the rough surface of the piece. This feature gives the statue an impression of dramatic movement, which is often present in the French sculptor’s repertory (Illustration 2).

Some works that Mukhtar made after his arrival in France, especially during the war years, have been lost so we don’t know if he continued to sculpt statues inspired by Rodin. It was only several years later, when the exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery was held, that we see again Rodin’s influence on Mukhtar’s repertory. Possibly the reason for this is that the show had been organized by George Grappe, curator of the *Musée Rodin* and a friend of the Egyptian sculptor. Mukhtar presented *Three Blind Men* (1930), a group of three men standing as in *Les Bourgeois de Calais* (1895) Illustrations 3 and 4, as homage to Rodin. He sculpted another piece called *When Meeting the Men* (1929), inspired by Rodin’s *Balzac*. Nevertheless, Rodin was not a main reference in Mukhtar’s work.

⁴ Le Normand-Romain 1997: 83.



Illustration 2: Mahmud Mukhtar, *The Beggar and His Son*, 1910 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

2 Mahmud Mukhtar at the Fine Arts School of Paris

Shortly after his arrival in France, Mahmud Mukhtar took the admission test for the Fine Arts School of Paris. The contest was very difficult and consisted in two series of tests.⁵ Even though Mukhtar succeeded brilliantly in the sculpture test

⁵ Those who aspired to be students of the school had to draw an anatomic study and a perspective, each of two hours. Once they passed this test, candidates had to make a drawing from nature (in the case of painting) or a mold from the Antique (in the case of sculpture). All candidates had to make an elementary study of architecture within six hours. This last test was useful to classify candidates for “definitive”, “temporary” or “supplementary” admission.



Illustration 3: Mahmud Mukhtar, *When Meeting the Men*, 1929 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

and managed to be first in the drawing test,⁶ he failed the architecture test.⁷ Consequently, he became a temporary student. This conditional admission could be changed a “definitive” one if he succeeded in winning three medals or honorific mentions in contests of which he already had won one. Nevertheless, historical events would impinge on Mukhtar’s future. On June 28th, 1914, Gavrilo Princip, a Serb nationalist, killed the Archduke of Austria and heir to the Hapsburg throne, Franz Ferdinand. Mukhtar was in Paris when on August 3rd, 1914 Germany declared war on France. Mobilizations to the front started and the School of Fine Arts was deserted. In the midst of great indecision, Mukhtar was sent back to Egypt⁸ but shortly returned to France.

6 DW 1914: Lettre de la Mission scolaire égyptienne en France.

7 DW 1914: Lettre de la part de Monsieur F. Legrand pour le Ministre de l’Instruction publique.

8 DW 1914: Lettre de la Banque Imperiale Ottomane signée par C. de Cerjat et G. de Klapka et adressée au Monsieur F. Legrand, directeur de la Mission scolaire égyptienne en France.



Illustration 4: Auguste Rodin, *Balzac*, 1891–1897 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

On October 15th, 1914, as the institution reopened its doors, there were some modifications. One important change concerned oral courses or lectures because only the anatomy course of Paul Richer (1849–1933) would remain open.⁹ The number of workshops for sculpture was reduced; instead of three, there would be only one, which was the workshop of Mukhtar’s teacher, Jules-Felix Coutan (1848–1939). Coutan was one of the last representatives of academic tradition in sculpture. He had studied with Pierre Jules Cavelier (1814–1894), winning the *Prix de Rome* in 1872 and was attached to what was called “official” art.¹⁰ Therefore, it was not strange that many of his students executed official monuments at a time in which the state had the right to impose certain aesthetic parameters. During the interwar period, we see the genesis of a new kind of public statue: the Monument to the Dead. Many of these public monuments were sculpted by the winners of the *Prix de Rome* and most proceeded from the workshops of Coutan and Jean-Antoine

⁹ Segré 1993: 93.

¹⁰ Breuille 1992: 142.

Injalbert (1845-1933). This is the emergency of a new generation of artists, including Mukhtar that would soon leave behind Rodin's paradigms for modernity in sculpture. They would return to academic and classical models.

3 The First World War and the avant-gardes

The years before the First World War had been a period of experimentation in art, particularly in painting. Apollinaire used the expression "avant-garde", a word issued from the military domain, for the first time in 1913 when he made the review of the exhibition of Futurist painters. From now on, this would be the expression used to qualify all artistic trends that were precursors in one way or another.¹¹ When they first appeared, the *avant-gardes* were not very popular because they related to an elitist concept of art that was difficult to understand. Modern art consisted in depicting subjective or abstract ideas, rather than real objects. It didn't seek to produce "real" or realistic representations of nature. It was an art in which aesthetic pleasure was intellectual and sought to eliminate "human" elements, which had prevailed for centuries. For one of its critics, the Spanish writer Ortega y Gasset, it lacked historical references and avoided the representation of living beings.¹²

Beyond the artistic field, many felt that modernity dehumanized people, placed them under impersonal forces making urban life more distressing and suffocating. It was "fascinating, terrifying and corrupted"¹³ all at the same time. Some young *avant-garde* artists saw the new civilization as decadent and materialistic. In this way the intellectual climate of the first years of the twentieth century oscillated between the faith in progress and disenchantment towards modernity. The event in which this disappointment materialized would be the First World War. When war was declared in France, many of the students of the Fine Arts School, as well as *avant-garde* artists were mobilized and sent to the front. Very few stayed in Paris, for the most part these were foreigners. Among them there were some Spanish artists like Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Juan Gris, or the Italian Gino Severini (1883–1966).

After the beginning of the First World War, Dionysian art of the *avant-gardes* was quickly replaced by Apollonian art. Friedrich Nietzsche used these terms in 1872 when he published *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he exposed his theory about

¹¹ Porebski 1984: 147–148.

¹² Ortega y Gasset 2007: 15.

¹³ Gentile 2011: 244.

Greek art. For him, art before the classical period was characterized by a Dionysian mentality with impulses towards irrationality and excesses. Once that Greek culture declined, Apollonian elements, oriented towards harmony and reason, emerged. Apollonian art had finally prevailed through history. Only modernity and the *avant-garde* gave Dionysian art a place in history.

When Egyptian students arrived in Paris, before First World War or Rome, during the inter-war period, *avant-garde* artists in Paris, began to produce figurative works with a patriotic orientation. Magazines and journals such as *Le Mot*, under the direction of Jean Cocteau (1889–1963), defined the cultural laws that would affirm that one of the priorities was to save creative imagination and Modernism from Germanic affinities.¹⁴ This marked the death of Analytical Cubism and Futurism. Immediately, a new figurative art emerged, that although appealing for a return to a classical order was already impregnated with some features of the *avant-garde*: thus Modernism was born.

4 Rodin reconsidered

While in painting Futurism or Analytical Cubism had taken abstraction to the limits, in sculpture these experiments were less common. With the explosion of the *avant-garde*, it seemed that the parameters that prevailed in sculpture were “subordinated” to those of painting. In 1904, one of the main principles of a German art critic, Julius-Meier Græfe¹⁵ criticized features present in Rodin’s works such as “the interest in the play of light across animated surfaces” had contaminated statuary with an impressionist pictorial vision.¹⁶

All the features mentioned above were present in innumerable statues that were made during the last years of the nineteenth century. Statuary had sought to be an art in itself, detached from architecture. It had not achieved complete abstraction, and up to 1945 the nude still had remained the main paradigm.¹⁷ For Græfe, the main objective of statuary should be the quest for stable and well-delimited forms and to seek the reaffirmation of decorative values in art. To achieve this, statuary had to return to its origin and re-establish its ties with architecture, instead of searching for its links with painting. Alfred Janniot, a French sculptor that was well known during the interwar period, stated:

¹⁴ Silver/Collins 1991: 43.

¹⁵ Meier-Græfe 1920.

¹⁶ Tarbell 1978: 2.

¹⁷ Fouilloux 1987: 94.

The awful 1900 style had falsified the sense of our art. With Rodin, sculpture found all its qualities, but distanced itself from architecture, of which it had always been an integral part. We limited ourselves more and more to what the so-called sculpture in “pieces” [or maybe: in parts]. There was an incredible proliferation of busts, torsos, heads and studies of arms or hands.¹⁸

At the end of the nineteenth century and during the first years of the twentieth century, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) defended Rodin’s art,¹⁹ but, with the approach of the First World War, he had a more ambiguous position regarding the sculptor’s work and admired the statues of his “rebel pupils” such as Charles Despiau (1874–1946), Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929) or Aristide Maillol (1861–1944). Along with Joseph Bernard (1886–1931),²⁰ they represented a new tendency in sculpture that didn’t adhere completely to the *avant-garde*, but had incorporated some of its features. Some authors, especially French, have called this tendency Modernism, while Spanish or Catalan experts referred to it as *Noucentisme*.

Modernism conciliated Classicism with innovation and allowed sculptors to remain within the field of figuration. Modernism gave a new sense to Classicism, where classic and contemporary were concepts that didn’t exclude each other.²¹ It was a movement to which academic sculptors, whose main subject was still the nude, could easily relate to. The works of these artists were unmistakably modern; they were distinguished by their simplicity and tendency towards abstraction and the strong influence of Antique statuary, especially that of the Minoan or Mycenaean period. A few years later, Egyptian or Babylonian antiquities would also influence them.

Rather than creating a dichotomy between Europe and non-Western cultures, modern Classicism involved all the Mediterranean. France was not Greece, but classical culture was so universal that France felt entitled to appropriate it. In Egypt, these ideas found resonance in the writings of Taha Hussein (1889–1973), an important modernist writer and Egypt’s Culture minister for some time. He defended the thesis according to which Egypt was inseparable from classical Mediterranean culture.²² In visual arts, Mukhtar’s covered *fellahas* were the

18 Our translation : « *Le style 1900, l’affreux style 1900, avait faussé le sens de notre art. Avec Rodin, la sculpture retrouva toute sa qualité, mais s’éloigna définitivement de l’architecture dont elle était jadis partie intégrante. On se cantonna de plus en plus dans la sculpture dite « de morceaux ». Ce fut une invraisemblable floraison de bustes, de troncs, de têtes, d’études de bras ou de mains.* » Jarrassé/Luneau 2011: 260.

19 Read 1995: 409.

20 Chevillot 2009: 163.

21 Rodríguez Samaniego 2010: 6.

22 Barbulesco 2002: 303.

incarnation of Egyptian Modernism. The smooth surfaces, the constant evocation of the life in the countryside and the Nile, provide a notion of peacefulness, but most of all, they suggest an Egyptian civilization deeply linked with the Mediterranean.

5 Artists in Marseilles

After the end of the war, Mukhtar's French colleagues came back from the front. They had been direct witnesses of war horrors and transmitted the atmosphere of deception towards triumphant modernity, progress and the *avant-garde*. All of these values were reflected in the teaching at the Fine Arts School, where, from now on, one of the priorities would be the exaltation of nationalism. It was precisely Coutan's students that would represent this mentality through their monuments to the dead: several of them were awarded with the *Prix de Rome*.²³ Among Mukhtar's contemporaries were three sculptors that worked in Marseilles during the interwar period: Louis Botinelly (1883–1962), Jean-Elie Vezian (1890–1982) and Antoine Sartorio (1885–1988).

In Marseilles, return to Classicism became an important artistic project during the interwar period. This was not only reflected in statuary and decoration, but also included an architectural and urban vision. A project for an "Acropole" was conceived for the Fort Saint Nicolas, but never implemented. The placement of this site made it ideal for the plan that architect Gaston Castel (1886–1971) had in mind. It was an idea that would reflect Mediterranean Philhellenism perfectly:

From the marvellous gardens of anemone and coral, we pass by the lawn of the Pharo, ready, as it seems, for dances from the Odyssey, where one day, chandeliers of nocturne feasts will flourish [...].²⁴

Castel was a student at the Fine Arts School in Paris, when he was mobilized. During the conflict he was disfigured as happened to many men in the same situation.²⁵ Once the war was over, he opened an architectural agency in Paris called *Trois arts* together with an architect, Paul Tournon, the painter François

²³ Schwartz 2003: 209–219.

²⁴ Our translation : « *Des jardins merveilleux de l'anémone et du corail, nous passons sur la pelouse du Pharo toute prête, semble-t-il, pour les danses de l'Odyssée et où s'épanouiront un jour de girandoles de fêtes nocturnes..* », Musée d'Histoire de Marseille 1988: 65.

²⁵ Laugier 2014: 74–75.

Carrera and the sculptor Antoine Sartorio. With Sartorio, Castel made several projects, among them the Opera house of Marseilles, which had been destroyed by fire in 1919. This project had the participation of two other architects, Henri Ebrard and Georges Raymond.

The Opera house was built between 1919 and 1924. Its façade had been conceived as a Greek temple with six columns supporting an entablature in which even though decoration recalled classical friezes, it was still very modern. It has been said that it is the most important architectural Art Deco building existing in France.²⁶ Sartorio and Bourdelle personally,²⁷ were in charge of the decorations. Both sculptors probably knew each other because Sartorio's wife, Augusta Boery, was a close friend of Bourdelle's wife, Cleopatre Sevasto. Therefore, Sartorio had the opportunity to frequently visit Bourdelle's workshop "without ever being his collaborator or his student".²⁸

Another monument in which Castel and Sartorio were associated is the *Monument aux héros de l'armée d'Orient et des terres lointaines (Monument for the Heroes of the Army of Orient and Faraway Lands)*, built in 1927.²⁹ Victory raising both arms was a subject that had been in the repertory of several sculptors of the interwar period, for whom an important source of inspiration was the *Marseillaise* of François Rude (1784–1855). There is a photograph of one of the studies that Mukhtar made before he arrived to the definitive design of *Egypt's Awakening*, in which we can see a female that could be an allegory of Victory that reminds us of some models made by Sartorio for their Marseilles monument.

Probably Mukhtar was familiar with some of the designs made by his colleagues, because they also took part at the Salon des Artistes Français. It is possible that a statue made by Mukhtar in 1928 for the exhibition at the Bernheim Jeune Gallery called *Return From the Market* was inspired by *Porteuse de fruits (Fruit carrier)* a statuette made in 1924, by another sculptor from Marseilles, Jean-Elie Vezian. Although, Mukhtar's statue holds the same posture than *Fruit carrier*, the woman is clearly Egyptian because she wears a long veil covering her body (Illustration 5).

These works by Mukhtar are adaptations of existing models to a new context. They are examples of transculturalism, which can be defined as a gradual process in which a culture adopts features of another one. The result is the reinvention of a new common culture, based on the meeting and the

²⁶ Gondard/Site officiel de l'Opéra de Marseille 2015.

²⁷ Musée d'Histoire de Marseille 1988: 100.

²⁸ Blanchet et al. 2009: 62.

²⁹ Roy/Drac Paca 2000.

intermingling of the different peoples and cultures,³⁰ where identity is no longer singular but becomes multiple. In Mukhtar's case, not only the Pharaonic past is recalled, but also Egypt is linked with a broader Mediterranean identity that shares symbols, history and a way of life.



Illustration 5: Mahmud Mukhtar, *Return From the Market*, 1928 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

6 Bourdelle as a paradigm

Probably the most important influence in Mukhtar's *Egypt's Awakening* came from Emile-Antoine Bourdelle. In 1919 the Municipal Council of the city of Montauban, near Toulouse, decided on the creation of a monument to the

³⁰ Cuccioletta 2001–2002: 8.

dead of the First World War. The name of the statue was *La France* and would ornate a one hundred meter tower called *La Grave* that celebrated the entry of the United States into the conflict. After some difficulties, the project was assigned to Bourdelle. In complete harmony with the ideal of the return to the classical order, the sculptor conceived a statue for the celebration of peace. Bourdelle was the “man of the moment”, because his artworks would help rebuild French culture whose main values had been questioned during the war. His statues incarnated positive values such as liberty or victory and placed the state as the Guardian of Peace (Illustration 6).³¹



Illustration 6: Mahmud Mukhtar, *Egypt's Awakening*, 1928 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

Bourdelle decided to execute an allegory of Pallas Atena, where the goddess was shown in a hieratical position wearing a peplum; she raised her left arm in a military posture, and looked into the horizon. The posture of this statue, as well as the expression on her face, reminds us of *Egypt's Awakening*. Nevertheless, the woman

³¹ Mitchell 1990: 110.

portrayed in *Egypt's Awakening* is a peasant, standing beside a sphinx that, as suggested by Thierry Dufrière, could have the influence of Auguste Bartholdi's *Lion de Belfort*. Similarities between both statues are remarkable, especially when noticing they were conceived at almost the same time, although in the case of Bourdelle, by 1922, he had already made some studies of the head. It is natural to speculate whether Mukhtar knew Bourdelle, especially if we take into consideration that both sculptors had been employed by an important impresario of those days: Gabriel Thomas. Bourdelle had been hired in 1910 for the decoration at the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* and Mukhtar in 1918 for the *Musée Grévin* (Illustration 7).



Illustration 7: Emile-Antoine Bourdelle, *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, 1911–1913 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

Between 1911 and 1913, Bourdelle decorated the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*. He was inspired by the Greek architectural order (frontispiece, pilasters, frieze and metopes) and in this way re-established the link that had always existed in classical art between statuary and architecture. Bourdelle made five panels in which he represented Music, Dance, Tragedy, Architecture and Sculpture.³² The

³² Lavrillier/Dufet 1992: 48.

Dance was inspired by two crucial figures that were his contemporaries: Isadora Duncan and Vaslav Nijinski.³³ Even though these figures could not be considered as completely academic, the whole sculptural program for the theatre could be looked at as “classic”. It was conceived in a linear style that perfectly suited the project elaborated by architect Auguste Perret (1874–1954) made in concrete, which in those days was an innovative material. The panels sculpted by Bourdelle were executed in marble, but fixed onto the concrete. In this way, the idea of re-linking sculpture and architecture is tangible. The sculptor stated:

I had to sculpt twenty-one figures in hard marble for the façade of the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*. I come from a time of shame where every sculpted work is not coherent with its supports, walls or pedestals; thus my work for creating the unity of the figures for the walls was not easy. We must break with a whole period in sculptural art [...].³⁴

Even if in Mukhtar’s repertory there is no evidence of sculpture attached to architecture, he is likely to have been familiar with Bourdelle’s ideas and with his work at the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, as we can see in a bas-relief made in 1922 called *Solomon’s Visit to the Queen of Sheeba* (Illustration 8).

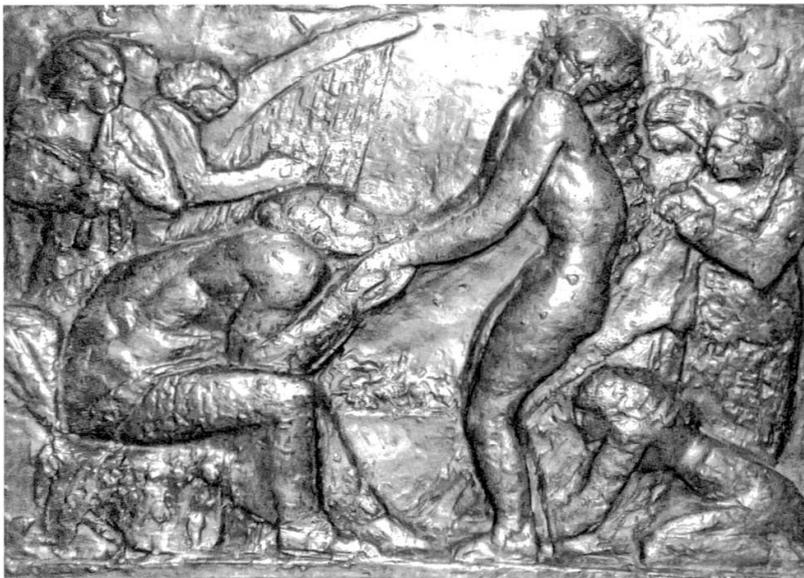


Illustration 8: Mahmud Mukhtar, *Solomon’s Visit to the Queen of Sheeba*, 1922 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

³³ Duncan, a Philhellenist, gave birth to contemporary dance by taking elements from what she considered had been an ancient Greek dance.

³⁴ Our translation : « J’ai vingt et une figures à sculpter dans un marbre dur pour la façade du *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*. Je pars d’une époque d’honte où toute œuvre sculptée n’est pas

7 Noucentisme

While Bourdelle worked on the exteriors of the Champs-Élysées Theater, Perret commissioned the interior decoration to Maurice Denis (1870–1934), a painter that was close to the *nabis*. More important, he was a friend and main critic of Maillol.³⁵ Under the supervision of Denis, there was a painter called Roger Bréval, who had been working on the interior decorations of the theater.³⁶ Bréval was also a close friend of Mukhtar. He even went to live in Cairo in 1929, and three years later, alongside with the Egyptian sculptor he would found *La Chimère*, a group whose aim was to organize artistic exhibitions in Egypt. Thus, it is possible that through Bréval, Mukhtar became acquainted with *Noucentisme* and the works of Aristide Maillol.

As in Marseilles, where Mediterranean classicism was in vogue during the interwar years, a similar movement developed in Barcelona. While in France, this tendency had been called Modernism, in Catalonia, it was called *Noucentisme*, to detach it from the Modernist movement that in Spain had a different connotation. Here, Modernism had been associated to the Spanish presence in Paris, that reached its height during the 1890's, and that produced artworks related to Art Nouveau, especially in architecture.³⁷ Furthermore, *Noucentisme* defined a current that combined the concepts of tradition and modernity. The interest for tradition, and at the same time the adoption of certain *avant-garde* values, were the two factors that gave origin to this movement conciliating their apparent dichotomy.³⁸ According to Cristina Samaniego, *Noucentisme* can be compared to Neoclassicism, in the sense that both movements emerged as a reaction to Dionysian art,³⁹ understood as capricious and impulsive.

Maillol was perhaps one of the best representatives of Catalan *Noucentisme*. The resurrection of the classical ideal and of Mediterranean myths can be found in artists such as Bourdelle, with whom Maillol shared the taste for Greek archaism.⁴⁰ For Denis, Maillol's sculptures perfectly embodied this return to the Mediterranean calm of the interwar period, as did Giorgio de Chirico's

cohérente avec ses supports murs ou piédestaux, aussi mon travail pour créer l'unité des figures dans le tout des murs est malaisé. « Dalon 2006: 17.

³⁵ Bouillon 1996: 130.

³⁶ Radwan 2013: 185.

³⁷ Rodríguez Samaniego 2009.

³⁸ Rodríguez Samaniego 2008: 58.

³⁹ Rodríguez Samaniego 2010: 2.

⁴⁰ Kjellberg 1987: 448.

paintings, characterized by their Apollonian equilibrium and stability. His works show nostalgia for Antiquity, silence and calm, which were the main characteristics of metaphysical painting,⁴¹ opposing violence, drama and speed exalted by the Futurists.⁴² All of these Apollonian qualities can be found in Maillol's statues. As well as De Chirico, Maillol shared the idea of mystery that surrounded ruins from Antiquity. He said regarding the *Venus of Milo*:

There is a mystery: the arms must have had an explanatory or anecdotal gesture, whereas in her present state it is absolute beauty.⁴³

At the same time, Maillol's artworks present some characteristics that are close to *avant-garde* precursors such as Cézanne or Gauguin. In his quest for Modernism, Maillol turned towards essential forms, a quest also shared with Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957). This is why Maillol is considered a modern sculptor. His statues have simplified contours and have limited figurative details, yet figuration is still crucial for him. He retracts from primitivism, stays close to Mediterranean classicism and does not withdraw from nature. In this sense, Mukhtar's work is close to Maillol's and the idea of Mediterranean calm. The Philhellenist Egyptian writer Taha Hussein was studying in France at the same time as Mukhtar. His statues are an echo of Hussein's ideas and his art is the Egyptian reflection of an epoch in which French philhellenism acquired a worldwide resonance; a time in which buildings, such as the Villa Kerylos in Nice, reflected a longing for classical Antiquity (Illustration 9).

As well as Maillol, Mukhtar puts emphasis on smooth surfaces and the treatment of drapery. In this way, we can see that there are some similarities between Mukhtar's peasants and a piece made in 1921 by Maillol named *Pomone drapée* (*Pomone Dressed*). Also, there are reminiscences between Maillol's *Femme assise sur les talons* (*Woman sitting on her heels*) made in 1900 and a study that Mukhtar had made for *The Bride of the Nile*. There are some other elements in the Egyptian sculptor's repertory, in which we see Maillol's influence, such as the expression on the faces they both portray. All of the girls represented have indistinct features and are a sort of generic female. However, Mukhtar's women are more slender and have sweeter traits than those of Maillol. Mukhtar's statues are somehow linked to a timeless way of living and at the same time they are related to their present, to Modernism.

⁴¹ Far 1968: 7.

⁴² Rodríguez Prampolini 1990: 13.

⁴³ Our translation : « Il y a un mystère : les bras devaient avoir un geste explicatif, anecdotique, tandis que dans l'état où elle est, c'est la beauté pure ». Cahn 1996: 26.



Illustration 9: Aristide Maillol, *Monument à Cézanne*, 1912–1925 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

8 Art Deco

In 1925, the International Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts was held in Paris.⁴⁴ Its main objective exposition was to conciliate two concepts that apparently were opposed: industrial production and luxury craftsmanship.⁴⁵ This exhibition was a direct heir to universal exhibitions of the previous century and could be compared to the one that took place in 1900 marking the peak of Art Nouveau. Therefore, the purpose of the 1925 exhibition was to show a modern decorative art, liberated from excessive decoration.

The society of the interwar period was no longer that of the *Belle Époque*. During the interwar period, a more accessible figurative style became popular.⁴⁶ At the beginning Art Deco was a historicist style, but as time went by, it took

⁴⁴ Silver/Collins 1991: 313.

⁴⁵ Gagneux 2012: 13.

⁴⁶ Marwick 2003: 29.

inspiration from the *avant-gardes*. This style reflected the anguish and atmosphere of the interwar period. It was a style that was easy to appreciate and could be associated with Modernism. It left its imprint in all domains of the visual arts from Fine Arts to architecture, from decoration to fashion and even cinema, even though Art Deco was mostly oriented towards decoration, crafts and industrial design. It also touched on what we call major arts. In order to demonstrate this new trend in sculpture, one of the main pieces shown was a version of *La France* by Bourdelle, which had been conceived for the staircase of the Grand Palais.

Art Deco did not limit itself to an atmosphere or a fashion of the 1920s and 1930s: it was a major, long lasting trend that emerged in Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century,⁴⁷ consolidated in Paris during the 1920s and blossomed in the United States during the 1930s. Art Deco was for the most part decorative, did not have excessive ornaments and played mostly with surface effects. Thus, without being radical or revolutionary, Art Deco was innovative.

After the 1925 exhibition, Mukhtar's works acquired unmistakably Art Deco features that would be present in his sculptures until his death. From this date on, he affirms a personal style that is present in statues such as *Egypt's Awakening* or *The Nile's Bride*. During the interwar period, a series of other large exhibitions took place. For example, in 1931, the Colonial Exhibition was held in Paris, and architect Albert Laprade (1883–1978) designed La Porte Dorée where the bas-reliefs were made by Janniot, a colleague of Mukhtar at the Paris Fine Arts School. Some years later, in 1937, Janniot would also make the decorations for the Palais de Tokyo, one of the main buildings of the International Exhibition of Arts and Techniques. Here, at the Egyptian pavilion, a piece was exhibited that had been bought by the French State in 1930⁴⁸: *The Bride of the Nile*.

This statue had been kept at the Jeu de Paume and was shown at the 1937 exhibition as a fine example of Art Deco. It has some similarities to the posture of the head of *Mlle Pogany* by Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957), although Mukhtar's statue is closer to the return of classical order, while Brancusi's piece is marked by Primitivism. During the twentieth century the works made by the Rumanian artist, would be related to sculpture,⁴⁹ a modern expression of

47 Bouillon 1988: 22.

48 AN F, 1930: Lettre adressée à Monsieur André Dezarrois, Conservateur du Musée national du Jeu de Paume de la part du Directeur General des Beaux-arts.

49 Tucker 1977–1978: 153. While in the modern industrial world every object has a purpose, sculpture doesn't have any other purpose than to represent an abstract idea in space.

statuary. Sculpture can be understood as a tri-dimensional idea, rather than an accurate representation of a being (Illustration 10).



Illustration 10: Mahmud Mukhtar, *The Bride of the Nile*, 1929 © Elka M. Correa Calleja.

9 Conclusion

Comparison between works of Egyptian artists and those made by Europeans often has been avoided under the premise that Egyptians were behind the times because they did not understand the avant-garde. Rather than assuming that Mukhtar was an isolated, exotic artist, we prefer to think that Mukhtar was part of a wider artistic movement that contested *avant-garde*, and that was not limited to France. By relating Mukhtar's works with those of his

French contemporaries, we can place him in a global movement that included Egypt although in a rather marginal way. We can locate him amongst a generation of international sculptors.

The most important issue for artists adhering to the return to Classicism was to recover the academic foundations for the anatomical study of the human body. A crucial part of the training of an academic sculptor, such as Mukhtar, was to copy classical statuary. For every sculptor reproduction was inherent to his education. However, this does not mean that artworks produced by these means resulted in mere imitations. It meant that the sculptor was able to understand the model to the point that they could appropriate it and make their reinterpretation.

Foreign artists studying in France, no matter how innovative they appeared to be, often succumbed to the pressure of making “autochthonous” subjects. One example is Constantin Brancusi’s *Infinity Column* at Targu Jiu, inspired by funerary pillars of the South of Rumania. This compulsion always raised the issue of identity, which became an obsession for Modernist Egyptian artists and it is precisely here where their creativeness lays. For Mukhtar, Egypt, and the Nile are the themes he explores through his sculptures constantly.

Amongst Egyptian artists, Mukhtar is the one that succeeded best at realizing national oriented subjects. However, this is not only where his uniqueness lays. We can unmistakably identify any piece made by the Egyptian artist because he gives a personal touch to the way in which drapery had always been portrayed in academic sculpture. In classical pieces clothing was described wet and adhered to the body and wrinkled, Mukhtar portrays it as always very smooth, with no folds at all. This reinterpretation of drapery is unprecedented; we can say it is a form of modern mannerism. Formally, this feature makes of Mukhtar an original artist and we have to remember that originality is the trademark of the modern artist. While, on the other hand, his sculptures emanate the peacefulness inherent to the return to smooth classical movement.

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