The ‘Revolution’, as Egyptians perceived it, saw the mixing of all classes and women’s emancipation. These two factors had a profound effect on the work of the Egyptian pioneers, the ‘First Generation’, as they were known: Mahmud Mokhtar (1891–1935) and Mahmoud Saïd, the main proponents of this artistic movement, saw women and the present class as the future of the Egyptian Republic, perhaps best expressed by the following words:

Sphinx, you were the mystery of silence.
But when the woman was added by your side
You became the mystery of astonishment.


The female form is not always associated with power and politics. Mahmoud Saïd painted many society portraits, street scenes and nudes; paintings that do not at first glance seem to be symbolic of anything but simply celebrations of Egyptian life. However, it should be noted that in itself the nude was a forceful political statement. Until Saïd’s time the female form was taboo, but the nude form. It was only thanks to his relationship with the queen that Mahmoud Saïd was able to push the boundaries of artistic practice in his country. Never questioned by the political police he was able to celebrate the naked body of a woman without disciplinary action. Despite this, it is in itself a symbol of the emancipation of Egyptian woman, something closely tied to political events at the time.

This painting of a nude figure is typical of Mahmoud Saïd’s languid beauties, with full breasts and wide hips, she does not challenge the viewer in the manner of his streetwalkers. Here the artist blends every curve of her body, covering her nudity. While the may be more closely associated with the Chiaroscuro of the Orientalism movement, there is no sense of desolation, instead there is a celebration. It lacks the covetous, lustful avarice of Ingres and Delacroix’s Eastern beauties. Saïd’s other works Bather and Girl with the Golden Chain (see Liliane Kamar, Modern Egyptian Art 1910–2005, Cairo 2005, pp. 32–33). Here is a celebration of women’s sensuality, often featuring the local aristocracy who were willing to pose nude for him. Saïd’s nude symbolizes the zeitgeist of the period, the liberation of women and the shift in social structure.

There is a touch of Ranci in these works. the same regard for the female form, the same desire to honour and observe a woman’s body. Mahmoud Saïd studied at The Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris in 1919, the year of Ranci’s death, where he was no doubt influenced by the Impressionists and Ranci himself. Yet this painting is not derivative. It is inspired by an Egyptian woman and is steeped in the essence of contemporary Egypt.
Mahmoud Said 1907-1964
The Circus

signed, titled and dated 1948 on the reverse
oil on board
28.5 by 36.7cm; 11¼ by 14¼in.
PROVENANCE
Private Collection, Switzerland (acquired directly from the artist)

£3,000-12,000
€3,900/4,900—US$4,000-21,200

Mahmoud Said 1907-1964
The Fellah

signed and dated 1958
oil on board
28.4 by 49.5cm; 11¼ by 19¼in.
PROVENANCE
Private Collection, Switzerland (acquired directly from the artist)

In The Fellah Said depicts two of his favourite symbols: the peasant woman, and the donkey. The donkey recurs in Said’s paintings as a reference to the hard working fellahin, the farmers and labourers who simultaneously drive and support Egypt. They came to symbolise the nationalist movement in Egypt, and the artist was at pains not to underestimate them despite their status in society. Much like the peasant, the donkey is a strong and industrious creature and to taken on by Said and his contemporaries as a metaphor for Egypt and revolution.

The donkey too is celebrated in a religious context, as the animal that carried the prophet Isa to Egypt as a baby and back to Jerusalem in his adulthood. Here the creature dominates the image with a mother and child on its back. There is arguably a religious element to this image in that the donkey, mother and child could be interpreted as a representation of the rebirth of a country, in the same way that Isa brought about fundamental change to the predominantly pagan religion of his time.

In addition, this image would have been ingrained in the mind of this young artist by his Italian tutors Emilio Casorati and Fausto Zonaro for two years in 1912, and Arturo Zanzere for a further two years in 1916. Later his classical training in Paris would no doubt have highlighted European, and particularly Renaissance iconography that was fundamental to his artistic training.

The peasant woman as the future of Egypt and her female child as the next generation of the new republic carries on the back of a donkey is a powerful symbol of the future of Egypt and the re-birth of a nation. A discussion of which is featured in lot 219 of this sale.

£20,000-50,000
€24,000/37,000—US$35,200-53,000
Aly Ben Salem

Le Jardin d'Eden (The Garden of Eden)

AWARDS

The first prize for painting by the Tunisian government in 1950, Aly Ben Salem was also nominated for the "Officer of the Tunisian pavilion at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1951. He is proud of his country's culture and his strength of character is evidenced by his active participation in the liberation of his country. Feted for his role in the deliverance of Tunisia, he was awarded the title of Officer of Independence in 1990.

Much like the iconic Tunisian painter Abdellatif Giorgi, (Lot 202 in this sale) Aly Ben Salem is another bastion of the North African artistic movement. Inspired by the blue skies and artistic legacy of his homeland, Ben Salem's work is a unique homage to the cultural traditions of his country, and his Nordic wife, Kirstin. "This is what I think. I am a profoundly Mediterranean. I love living outside the walls, whilst cultivating, jealously, my interior garden."

As remarked previously, Aly Ben Salem's work is a unique combination of local North African ethnography, and the influence of Nordic culture through his wife. He celebrates the customs and traditions of his country by painting scenes of daily life, cataloguing the rituals of his people with a warmth and regard that is hard not to find enchanting. In this early example, Le Jardin d'Eden, a woman is raised on a pedestal, her honour and nudity protected by plants and enriched by the traditional jewellery of her rank and culture - the white pearls, and coral at her wrists and ankles.

His debt to the tradition of Islamic miniature painting exhibited in the treatment of his figures, their stiffness, and perspective, however the attention to decorative detail and the typical light wash of his paint suggests a touch of Art Nouveau. From the 1950s his colour palette became increasingly alluring, blue with red and the appearance of mauve, yellow with blue and a particular soft green highlighting both sky and flesh, blending and blurring to become the "interior garden" of his Mediterranean. At this time, motifs such as the dove, the white horse and the grotto came to find in his work. Small flowers without stems float on the canvas, forming allegorical scenes that recall the works of Marie Laurencin.

Later, the influence of his wife and the love he held for her came to bear, in the age change of his female figures from typically Arab to Nordic. statuesque, with light eyes (as in his painting The Bewitched Rosary) they were garbed in oriental dress, becoming a microcosm of his culture and influences, a harmonious combination of the occident and the orient.
Jellal Ben Abdallah 1927
Complicité (The Bond)

signed
crayon and gouache on paper
65 by 95cm, 25½ by 37¾in.
Executed in 1970.

PROVENANCE
Private Collection, Tunis (acquired directly from the artist in 1972)
Acquired directly from the above by the present owner

£12,000-18,000
€14,900-22,300  US$21,200-31,700