Egypt Awakened: Mahmoud Mokhtar and Egyptian Modern Art

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Introduction

Mahmoud Mokhtar was an Egyptian sculptor, who existed between 1891 and March 28, 1934. The artist attended the school of Fine Arts in Cairo, where he left an indelible mark as one of the pioneers of the Egyptian Art Movement. Mahmoud grew professionally to become one of the finest sculptors in the country, hence known as the father of modern art in Egypt. In his early childhood, he made clay statues, which marked the beginning of a successful career for the young boy then. In 1908, he was molded by a great French artist Laplagne, an individual he derived inspiration from in his years as an artist, and even became his successor at the Grevin Wax Museum in Paris. The artist is well known for his art, the Awakening of Egypt, which he completed in 1928. His artistic works were resolute from the struggles that Egypt had faced in the past and the interceptive measures that people took towards gaining independence from the British Colonial Rule. Undoubtedly, Mahmoud Mokhtar made a momentous contribution towards development of modern art in Egypt, particularly on the sculpture *'Egypt Awakened*

Contribution to Art

Mahmoud was born in 1891 in a family of peasants in Tunbrah near the Central Delta town in Egypt. According to Miller (2016), the artist would recall molding figurines out of clay he collected near the Nile riverbanks at his childhood ages. Having been the first to enroll as a student of fine art in the Egyptian School of Fine Art in 1908, Mahmoud skills in developing sculptures and related artwork was vastly improved (Elshahed, 2015). In 1910, the scholar had temporarily replaced Guillaume Laplange as an interim artist of the wax museum. In this time, Mokhtar sculptured statues of political leaders inclusive of Woodrow Wilson and George Clemenceau. His other works at this time were on celebrities such as the Egyptian singer Oum

Kalthoum and Anna Pavlova, among others. The scholar continued his studies in Paris in 1911, where he studied fine art and met the nationalist leaders, Saad Zaghloul in 1919. The 1919 Revolution in Egypt that was developed by people against the British Occupation was one of the instigators of his artwork, where he developed the Nahdat Misr. Mahmoud Mokhtar contributed immensely to art in Egypt by being a role model to many upcoming artists during his time and in later years, as well as through his famous sculptors. The artists' derived inspiration from Mokhtar in their work; one of them being Tossoon.

Nahdat Misr, Egypt Awakened

The most significant works of Mahmoud was the *Egypt Awakened* piece of Art, which was unveiled in 1928 at a public occasion graced by foreign dignitaries and Egyptians. According to Radwan (2017), Egypt Awakened, also referred to as Egypt's Renaissance or the Nahdat Misr, was a representation of the country's past and present times, with the focus being achievement of independence for the nation in 1923, forty years after the British had occupied within the country. The sculpture was considered a landmark in Egypt's history that was successful in expressing dreams of the nation, the struggles they had undergone in the national revolution, resilient nature of the country and the need to be confident and aggressive in the future. The artwork is a representation of a woman rising up her veil next to a colossal sphinx, which represents antiquity with the woman being a symbol of awakened Egypt standing on a green base as depicted in Figure one below. According to Kraetzschmar (2017), the woman figure was used by Mahmoud as a reference to the Egyptian Women's movement led by Huda Sha'arawi in 1922 as an approach to demonstrate against the British rule in the nation. Huda launched the feminist movement by publicly removing her veil to show her intentions of fighting for her country, the determination to forego the British Colonial rule and the need to fight for

independence in the nation. According to Reid (2015), the feminist element that was a clear instigation of Nahdat Misr's development helped show that the nation would secure its own independence if people stood together to revolt against the British. The rise of feminism quest was evident with the nation gaining independence soon after such movements, and hence motivating Mukhtar to form the Nahdat Misr.

The significance of the artwork presented by Mahmoud helped Egypt to understand its overall awakening. The Nahdat Misr represents a peasant woman unveiling her face, which is a representation of Egypt's revival. Notably, this is because the nation was under suppression power of the British rule, thus creating the need for people to revolt against the colonial power. Furthermore, this was in response to Huda's removal of her veil in public as a symbol of the need to revive their fighting spirit and combat the colonial power of the British. The stretching of her right arm to reach over the Sphinx, on the other hand, shows the greatness of Egypt history in the developing world (Radwan, 2017). Egypt's history is based on the Sphinx that shows the past struggles which the nation had to endure until they obtained independence from the British Colonials. The sculpture subscribes to a pyramidal shape, which is a significant representation for confidence in the future of the nation. According to Reid (2015), its front paws of the Sphinx raises to denote strength and enthusiasm to push forth into the future for better lifestyles in the nation. Therefore, all the elements that Mohamed integrated into the Nahdat Misr had a symbolic meaning to the nation, hence making the art piece become renowned globally.

Figure 1: Nahtad Misr

In his endeavors, Mokhtar was mandated with a leadership position in the Nationalists Art Movement, which was integral as a distinction from other pioneer painters inclusive of Ahmed Sabry, Youssef Kamel, Mohamed Naghi and Regheb Ayad, among others. His participation in demonstrations for independence was expressed in his preparations of statues that would express a national identity for the country thus calling for political and social reform

in the nation. His development of the Nahdat Misr led to his national prominence thereby giving him the platform to maintain art studies both in Cairo and Paris. In these studies, he developed and exhibited the marble, bronze and stone pieces at the renowned Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in France; artworks that he had blend Pharaonic imagery with modern aesthetics to create a pleasing and attractive piece of art.

Mahmoud changed Egyptian art by introducing the idea of mixing different cultures in sculpting, and general artwork, for perfect pieces of work. Mokhtar found a framework that encompassed both European sculpture methods and Egyptian sculpturing. This was one of the motivating factors that helped other pioneering artists develop their prevailing artistic works. Furthermore, his artistic endeavors occurred in the period when the Second World War had halted. Egyptians were thus on the verge of breaking loose from the Britain's Colonialism, which meant that he instigated various movements to rebelling against colonial powers. Mukhtar's artistic works have been linked with motivation to other scholastic artists in the European regions and within Egypt itself. The Mostafa Kamal is one piece of art that was inspired by this style. The artist together with Mostafa Kamal was motivated by the artistic works of Mahmud Mukhtar which serves as enough is evidence to show his contribution towards art in Egypt.

Conclusion

The essay has provided a succinct description of Mahmoud Mokhtar's overall contribution to the modern art practiced in Egypt with particular considerations placed on the Nahdat Misr, which was his most significant art in history. Egypt's history was based on the colonial rule by the British, and soon after the First World War, Mahmoud was mandated by his observations on how his country had suffered in the colonial rule, to develop artistic artifacts to represent the history of the country and preserve the same. His characteristic sculptures of

political leaders, musicians, and pioneering personnel in Egypt have been held in great awe by citizens in the nation, hence showing his contribution to modern art. Summarily, Mahmoud is regarded as the father of modernistic art within the country.

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