

The “Negress” of Alexandria

African Womanhood in Modern Egyptian Art

Lara Ayad

In the Fall of 2015, Christie’s Dubai sold a large painting (Fig. 1) to a private American bidder. The work, entitled *La Négresse aux Bracelets* (Negress with Bracelets) (1926), was created by the late Egyptian modernist Mahmoud Said and features a nearly life-size female figure seated beside a window that looks out onto the streets of Alexandria. Said remains famous in Egypt and the wider Arabic-speaking world for his nudes and cityscapes, many of which depict women in olive and brown hues walking along Alexandria’s corniche and reclining against silken blue sofas. A number of art critics and historians have praised him for his ability to resist European-style art and, instead, capture the essence of Egyptian national identity in his sumptuous oils. This essence emerges from Said’s purported ability to express an authentic, native female sexuality, as well as the light, color, and cultural fabric of his home city. *La Négresse* was not the first of Said’s paintings to fetch a high price at auction houses in recent years, yet the subject’s black skin sets her portrait apart from those of his other women subjects.¹ More specifically, his “Negress” indicates a crucial facet of Egyptian identity in the modern period that many arts researchers and writers have rarely discussed—Africa and Egypt’s position in it.

This essay examines *La Négresse* within a wider corpus of fine artworks depicting “Black” and “Egyptian” people and created in Egypt between the World Wars. It demonstrates that Egyptians went to great lengths to define their cultural and racial identity vis-à-vis Africa, as well as Europe. Much like other scholars and

critics, I use Alexandrian settings seen in Said’s paintings as a critical site for understanding Egyptian artistic expressions of identity. However, my study examines the relationship between place and race in modern Egyptian art by going beyond the binary of Western and Eastern ontologies, as well as modes of artistic production. Images of black-skinned people in interwar period Egyptian art were often formed from earlier, colonialist discourses of the Sudan, which became Egypt’s territory in the nineteenth century, until Great Britain claimed dominion over both countries. I contextualize *La Négresse* in Said’s other depictions of women, as well as local fine art, popular culture, and scientific studies of the Sudanese, all of which served to construct a Black African race as the foil to an equally fabricated Egyptian one.² Blending feminist, sociohistorical, and visual studies approaches ultimately shows that many Egyptian artists formulated a vision of the Sudan as Egypt’s primitive and African frontier.

EGYPT, IN AND OUT OF AFRICA

The interwar period marks the apex of European colonialism’s end in Africa, and examining artistic definitions of Africans seen in Egyptian art of this time forces us to confront a series of overlapping epistemological gaps in the scholarship on Africa and the Middle East. The terms “Egypt” and “Africa” have had tremendous currency in global debates about race, heritage, and power since the nineteenth century. Despite Egypt’s physical location in Africa, art historical scholarship and popular culture in the West have drawn a seemingly impenetrable distinction between the two, based on categories of race and culture that are as manufactured as those of geography. Predominantly White scholars in western Europe and the United States have often defined “African art” as that which comes from “sub-Saharan” Africa, particularly west and central Africa; “North Africa,” on the other hand, is typically woven into anthropologies and art histories of the Middle East and Islam (Bassani 2005; Blier 1998; Cutler 2009; Ettinghausen, Grabar, and Jenkins-Madina 2001; Flood and Necipoğlu 2017; Kasfir 2020). These binaries are rooted in the racialist paradigms of Orientalist

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I Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
La Nègresse aux Bracelets (Negress with
Bracelets) (1926)
Oil on canvas; 110.4 cm x 81 cm
Private collection of Hussein Bek Said
Photo: courtesy of Christie's



scholarship carried out by the British and French during the early colonial period.³ Popular museums and media outlets today have also revived colonialist framings of Egypt as a cultural and racial precursor to Western civilization. National Geographic's controversial traveling exhibition about King Tutankhamun drew enormous crowds between 2005 and 2008 and paired artworks from the boy king's tomb with a three-dimensional rendering of him as a light-skinned "Caucasoid" (as the wall text termed him).

Black scholars and artists have attempted to counter the white-washing of Egypt's identity and weave it into African studies in the United States as early as the 1920s. Such efforts exemplify the Black roots of African Studies, which have only recently been acknowledged as critical and valuable responses to systemic racism in the academy, particularly in anthropology and art history.⁴ Figures such as W.E.B. DuBois (1915) were among the first to propose that ancient Egyptian civilization was Black, partly because of its location in Africa (see also Bernal 1987). While such

efforts originally served to weave ancient Egyptian civilization into a pan-African history, they also overwrote the cultural and political realities of Nilotic cultures with essentialist narratives of a singular "Black" experience rooted solely in either the Atlantic world or in sub-Saharan west (and central) Africa.⁵ Many of these researchers relied heavily on racial binaries of Black and White that exclude the perspectives of modern Egyptians and, as I will show, do not map neatly onto the Egyptian context at any point in history. Subsuming the cultural, religious, and political dynamics of northeast Africa with American frameworks of critical race theory also inadvertently perpetuates the West's dominance of epistemologies of identity that many contemporary Africanists are trying to dismantle.⁶

This essay reframes the question of Egypt in Africa through indigenous constructions of race, class, and sex and is part of an emerging scholarship that globalizes the field of Black studies. The book *The Image of the Black in African and Asian Art*



2 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Bather (1937)
Oil on canvas; dimensions unknown
Mahmoud Said Museum
Photo: courtesy of Alex Dika Seggerman

(Bindman, Blier, and Gates 2017) incorporates studies of Black subjects seen in nineteenth-century west African sculpture and early twentieth-century Japanese comics, thus shedding new light on African subjectivity on the continent, as well as south-to-south colonialism, respectively. Cynthia Becker's (2020) art historical analysis of Moroccan *gnawa* examines how Blackness has been defined in Morocco through visual and musical performance. In a similar spirit, I decenter European and American perspectives on African art and explore how artists in Africa defined the region and its people. Artists in Egypt used frameworks of slavery, race, and sexuality found in locally developed social sciences and popular culture in order to distinguish their Egyptian subjects from their African counterparts, the latter defined through

Egypt's imperialist endeavors in the Sudan and east Africa. Tracing the formation of African racial and cultural categories in modern Egyptian art also reveals that artists of color in the postcolony were just as instrumental, and responsible, as their White counterparts for promoting racist representations of Black people.⁷

Examining the construction of Africa in early twentieth-century Egyptian art expands critical inquiries into racial identity, political power, and representation among specialists of Egyptian artistic modernism. Nadia Radwan's art historical studies of Nubian and Black African subjects in modern Egyptian art have broken ground by examining the meaning of Black artistic subjects in Arabic-speaking countries during the modern period.⁸ Nevertheless, they stem primarily from the disciplinary perspective of Middle East studies, which has historically used binaries of an Arab North Africa and a Black sub-Saharan Africa as an analytical framework.⁹ My essay traces the process through which Said and his contemporaries in the fine arts constructed Black womanhood. It demon-

strates that Egyptian artists used a series of racial and sexual stereotypes about Sudanese, Nubian, and east African women seen in fine art and ethnographic literature in order to marginalize them from a supposedly Mediterranean Egypt.

Egyptian artists were not alone on the African continent in reworking a local construct of Africa in order to define their country's racial and cultural identity during European occupation. Understood alongside their counterparts in west Africa, it becomes clear that Egyptians were part of larger, critical discourses found in many major African cities. Painters and sculptors living in these urban centers were trying to redefine Africanness—and Blackness—at a time when political independence from European colonialism and national consciousness gained traction. According

3 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Madame Riad (1938)
Oil on canvas; dimensions unknown
Mahmoud Said Museum
Photo: courtesy of Esmat Dawastashy

to art historian Sylvester Ogbechie, Nigerian modernists active during the 1960s harnessed Pan-African philosophies of postcolonial identity in order to craft a Nigerian modern art. Earlier concepts of Negritude became a primary framework for west African artists such as Ben Enwonwu, who employed local symbols of Nigerian cultural identity in order to promote the idea of a liberated “Black Africa” with a shared heritage and legacy.¹⁰ Like their Nigerian counterparts, artists in Egypt went to great lengths to define an indigenous modern identity vis-à-vis Africa, albeit vigilant to surpass their geographical position on the continent. This essay thus reveals that artistic visions of a supposedly primitive Africa were formulated not only in the West, but also in Africa itself.

ALEXANDRIA: EGYPT AS A MEDITERRANEAN METROPOLIS

Contextualizing Said’s paintings of black-skinned women in his aristocratic upbringing sheds light on the role of class hierarchies in Egyptian artistic visions of Africa and Black womanhood. Said was born into a wealthy family in 1897 and had royal connections, as his niece, Safinaz Zulficar, married King Farouk I in 1938 and thereafter became popularly known as Queen Farida. By contrast, most Egyptian artists of Said’s generation were middle- and working-class and obtained their degrees at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo (SFA), which was established in 1908 by the royal family and served to educate Egyptian boys in painting, drawing, architecture, and calligraphy. While students at the SFA completed apprenticeships with European instructors, Said fed his love for painting by privately studying oils under the Italian painters Amelia Daforno Casonato and Arturo Zanieri, as well as drawing under Tewfik Pasha (Al-Jabakhanji 1986). He developed his own painting style by the 1920s, even after obtaining a degree in law and serving as a



lawyer in Alexandria’s courts (Hess 2017). During this period, Said created bold compositions and rich colors for his portraits and landscapes. These paintings (Figs. 2–3) captured the various socio-economic classes of Alexandria, particularly the Ottoman-Turkish elite and the indigenous Egyptian working classes, the latter of whom were usually of peasant background.¹¹

The artist matured in a world marked by political, as well as class, divisions that would inform how he distinguished between Egyptian and Sudanese subjects in his portrait paintings. Popular uprisings in Egyptian cities and villages against British occupation and the Turkish-Ottoman royal family in 1919 set a series of legislative and cultural shifts in motion. Leaders of the nationalist Wafd (Delegation) Party dominated the new parliamentary system and formed a deal with Great Britain to grant Egypt nominal independence in 1923 (Goldschmidt 2004). Despite ministers’ claims to



4 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Les Nageuses (The Swimmers) (1934)
 Oil on canvas; 90.7 cm x 76.5 cm
 Mahmoud Said Museum
 Photo: courtesy of 'Esmat Dawastashy

promote equality among all Egyptians during the 1920s and 1930s, many were part of large landowning families of mixed Egyptian and Turkish-Ottoman lineages, and their policies often reflected personal interests in maintaining control over the indigenous peasants that worked on their ranches (Kane 2013). Said's family was no exception, as his father, Muhammad Said Pasha, served as prime minister between 1910 and 1914 (and again in 1919) and was heir to large farm estates.

Alexandrian settings pervade Mahmoud Said's oeuvre and they were crucial in his efforts to express what Egypt was and who truly belonged there. *La Nègresse aux Bracelets* features a view of Alexandria, seen through the window at upper left (Fig. 1). The artist's hometown appears in many of his other paintings, such as *Les Nageuses (The Swimmers)* (1934) (Fig. 4), which comes to life through applications of saturated colors, as well as intense shadow and light. Blue coastlines signaled Alexandria's seaside character, which Said distinguished from the brown village architecture and delta environments of his Nilotic scenes.¹²

Although the sea does not appear in *La Nègresse*, other symbols of Alexandrian life served to weave the Black woman into one Alexandrian universe. Women wearing blue frilled skirts and

black shawls appear through the window, and they reemerge in later works portraying characters that were distinctive to Alexandria's working-class districts. *Banat Bahari (Coastal Girls)* (1935) (Fig. 5) remains one of Said's most famous works from the interwar period and features prostitutes who solicited male customers in the Anfushi district of Alexandria (Karnouk 2015). Their clothes resemble those worn by the passersby in the streets of *La Nègresse*. A brass container also sits at the window sill near the Black woman, appearing again at a window in the upper right background of *Banat Bahari*. Said thus used each painting as a cyclical entry point to the setting seen in the other, so that the Black woman and the Anfushi prostitutes play roles on a larger Alexandrian stage.

Explicit references to Alexandria in *La Nègresse* were partly imaginative, and Said transformed his hometown into a site for embellishing class, race, and sexual hierarchies that operated throughout Egypt during this time. Human subjects symbolized roughly three social strata found in many Egyptian cities: a small elite class of primarily Turkish and European descent who were often identified as White; indigenous Egyptians that constituted the majority of Egypt's population and were often of working-class or peasant backgrounds; and a less sizeable underclass of menial laborers and domestic servants of Nubian, Sudanese, and east African origins. His commissioned portrait of *Madame Riad* (1938) (Fig. 3) contrasts with *La Nègresse* because she appears in an opulent home interior with all the markings of established wealth. Paintings of anonymous nudes were often modeled by native prostitutes, on the other hand, and their brown skin and bare breasts appear on full display for the male viewer. Said placed such nudes against a background of fabric sheets and linens, or a vivid country village backdrop, as can be seen in *Nude on Blue Cushion* (1926) (Fig. 6) and *Bather* (Fig. 2), respectively.¹³

Said's "Negress" is an outlier in this world of cosmopolitan ladies and indigenous nudes. Instead, she fits into a smaller body of works by Said that portrayed black-skinned women. The similarly titled

5 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Banat Bahari (Coastal Girls) (1935)
Oil on canvas; dimensions unknown
Muhammad Mahmoud Khalil Museum
Photo: courtesy of Esmat Dawastashy

Negress (1936) (Fig. 7), for instance, displays what Alex Dika Seggerman refers to as a “sub-Saharan African” woman (2019: 123) lying nude against a patterned fabric. Although the artist gave some of his Black subjects backdrops similar to those seen in his portraits of Egyptian nudes, *La Nègresse aux Bracelets* is remarkable for combining indoor and outdoor settings. Said drew a parallel between the Black woman’s body and household objects that occupy a liminal space between outside and inside. The conical lid and tapered body of the vessel seen at the window sill mimics the woman’s rounded belly and full, pointed breasts, thus placing the woman’s figure at the threshold between visibility and invisibility in this coastal metropolis. Said also created a rhythm of harmony and discord between woman and city through color and composition, where the window onto Alexandria’s streets punctuates the dim room with light and color. Golds and blues in the subject’s slip and head wrap appear again in the sky and sunlit buildings seen outside, forming a parallel between Alexandria’s streets and the clothed portions of her body. Her dark skin is executed in muted, matte tones, however, and the dingy walls that surround her nearly swallow her figure whole. The Black woman is thus neither at home in the villas of the wealthy, nor on the streets that many poor indigenous women navigated in Alexandria.

Symbols of class status seen in *La Nègresse* were one of multiple methods that Said used to exclude black-skinned women from Alexandria’s cultural and political fabric. The settings that he chose for peasant women figures allude to Italian Renaissance art and shed light on the Mediterranean character that Said associated with Egypt, in contrast with Africa. In early modern Europe, the relationship between sitter and setting was a key feature of portrait painting, and *Naima* (1925) (Fig. 8) exemplifies Said’s attempts to



liken the Egyptian peasant woman to a Renaissance art patron. The format and composition reflect Western conventions of portraiture in the late fifteenth through early sixteenth centuries (Christiansen and Weppelman 2011). Naima is posed like a Florentine lady, with her body dominating the foreground and seated at an angle, her head turned towards the viewer. Her black shawl and tunic mark her Egyptian peasant status and set her figure apart from the village setting that appears in the background. Nevertheless, the tunic’s rich red color is reminiscent of elite women’s dress in Renaissance



6 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Nude on Blue Cushion (1926)
 Oil on canvas; 100 cm x 73.5 cm
 Private collection of Mohammed Said Farsi
 Photo: courtesy of Christie's

where irregular rows of adobe homes lend depth to the composition. A similar architectural background appears in *L'Apôtre* (The Apostle, also known as *Self-Portrait*; 1924) (Fig. 10), in which Said set his likeness against a backdrop of multistory buildings seen in irregular rows. A faint light also glows at the horizon line in both works, not only echoing the methods that Vittore Carpaccio used to paint skies, but also lending the figures a subtle halo reminiscent of saintly portraits from early modern Italy. The visual harmony that Said expressed between portrait sitter and Egyptian setting, and the parallel that he drew between himself and his peasant women subjects, was something he denied the Black woman in *La Nègresse*. Instead, the Black subject of *La Nègresse* is tied to the low socioeconomic status of Alexandria's

“streetwalkers” while being trapped inside a dark room.

Binaries of “African” and “Mediterranean” identities seen in Said's Alexandrian subjects engaged directly with discourses of racial identity and cultural heritage often found in local ethnographies of race. Social scientist and intellectual Salama Musa crafted a taxonomy of the human race in which Egyptians were of a “Mediterranean” stock that included southern Europeans, North Africans, and even the Welsh.¹⁵ Musa's arguments on race were meant to connect the future of contemporary Egyptians fighting for national independence with the wealth and political ambitions of the pharaohs. Nevertheless, his writings also placed Egypt and the Sudan on opposite ends of the human hierarchy and credited the ancient Egyptians with spreading their civilization south to what Musa referred to as the “savages” (*mutawahishun*) of sub-Saharan Africa. Mahmoud Said was not attempting to portray his Black subject as a savage in *La Nègresse*, yet his choice to exclude her from the Italianate settings seen in his Egyptian peasant portraits

Italy, and the pines dotting the scenery behind her make the village look more Tuscan than Egyptian. Said's choice of color palette, with the background in warm tan and sepia and a cyan-tinted sky, also evokes that of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–1506) and a *Portrait of a Woman* (Fig. 9) by Antonio Pollaiuolo from ca.1475.

By excluding Black female subjects from his European-inspired vision of Egypt, Said attempted to weave Egyptian peasant women and elite (White) men into the same Mediterranean world. Said's experiences studying Renaissance art in Europe likely served as the inspiration for the distinct architectural landscape framing Egyptian peasant subjects, such as Naima. Around the early- to mid-1920s, Said toured art museums in major European countries, including Italy. Renaissance Venetian painting displayed at Italian museums had a profound impact on the artist, who claimed that the natural and architectural landscapes of the period possessed “unforgettable charm” and “vibrant rhythm.”¹⁴ These rhythms form the layout of the village scape behind the subject in *Naima*,

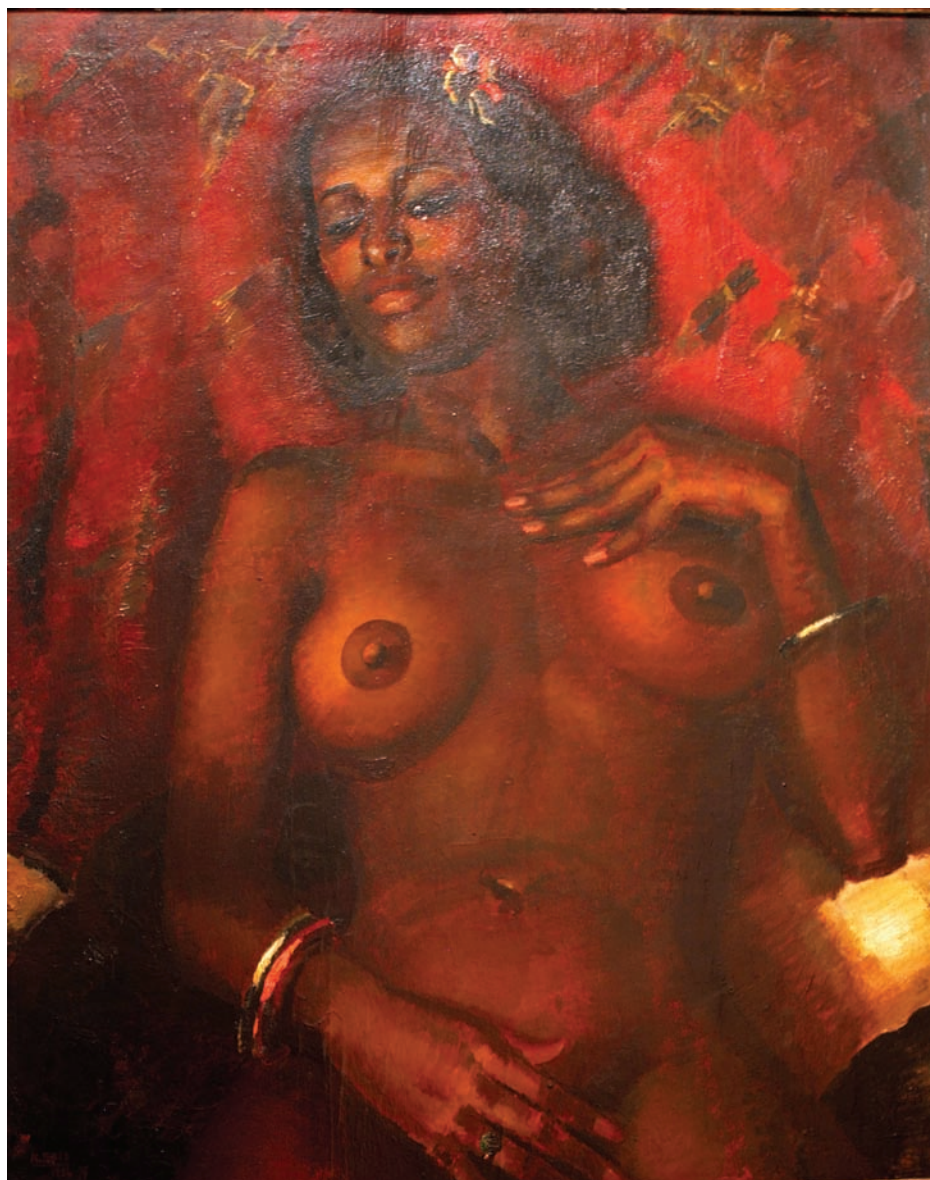
7 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Negress (1936)
Oil on canvas; dimensions unknown
Mahmoud Said Museum
Photo: courtesy of Esmat Dawastashy

reflects hierarchal dichotomies of Egypt and Africa that operated in social scientific texts of the time. Both Said and Musa thus envisioned Egyptian people's racial and cultural superiority through their purported membership in a Mediterranean race and, by extension, their superiority over so-called primitive Africans.

DEFINING THE SUDAN, DEFINING AFRICA

If Egypt became part of the Mediterranean realm in Said's imagination, then it was also separate from the Africa that black-skinned women came to represent in the fine art world of inter-war period Egypt. The Black woman in *La Nègresse* became a key site for artists such as Said to characterize the Sudan as an African frontier on racial, class, and sexual levels. Said placed her in a local tradition of representation in which the Black woman was servile and morally corrupt. His sexualized vision of the Sudanese maid—a familiar figure in Egyptian cities—engaged with artistic, scientific, and literary discourses about more exotic characters, including east African and Nubian women. Many Egyptian men understood these latter groups as colonial subjects from a primitive land and portrayed them in their sketches and sculptures as living proof of Egypt's imperial position in Africa.

Modern art criticism in early twentieth-century Egypt indicates that many Egyptians hypersexualized Sudanese women and conflated them with the Black female subjects seen in Said's painting. Prominent Egyptian art critic Ahmad Rasim (n.d.) penned an Arabic-language review of a 1936 fine art exhibition held in Cairo. The show included *La Nègresse aux Bracelets*, which the critic renamed *La Fleure Soudanaise* (Sudanese Flower) in his review. Rasim's decision to rename the painting reflected Said's francophone education and his tendency to give French titles to



his works. More importantly, however, an excerpt from his review of the painting exemplified the connections that many Egyptians made during this period between blackness and Africa (implied in the French term “Nègresse”) and a person's Sudanese origins:

I remember the image of that “Negress,” surrounded by the walls of lust and temptation. I remember her as she looks at us and I listen to her groan like the scent of a flower that slowly wilts in the air of a room swimming with the silence of loneliness, and we can see that she feels as if her life is going nowhere, like waves vanishing upon a beach, this beach being the place where the painter goes to wash the memory of bygone eras (Rasim n.d.: n.p.).

Rasim's strange and introspective review of *La Nègresse* reveals the profound effect that the subject had on him. She is simultaneously a site of sexual tension and a woman trapped by “lust and temptation”—whether her own, that of the viewer, or of the painter. References to history and permanence layer those of the erotic because the text characterizes the woman as an ephemeral relic of the distant past. Although Rasim does not explicitly discuss a national history, he gives Said an active role in shaping a memory of “bygone eras” understood by both painter and beholder. His references



8 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
Naima (1925)
 Oil on canvas; 108 cm x 85 cm
 Sherwet Shafei Collection
 Photo: courtesy of Safarkhan Gallery, Cairo

9 Antonio Pollaiuolo (Italy, 1431/32–1496)
Portrait of a Woman (c.1475)
 Tempera on wood; 55 cm x 34 cm
 Uffizi Gallery, Florence
 Photo: courtesy of Photos.com/Jupiterimages

to “vanishing” memory are thus marked by a collective sense of loss, and placing *La Nègresse* in local discourses of the Sudan and Africa during the interwar period reveals a nostalgia among many Egyptians for Egyptian political hegemony in northeast Africa.

So, how did Rasim come to associate the Black woman seen in *La Nègresse* with the Sudan? Black women subjects seen in Said’s oeuvre became part of a growing tradition among more affluent Egyptian artists to model Black women figures from domestic servants of Sudanese origin. Many elite families in early twentieth-century Egypt had household servants from the Sudan, and the woman seen in *La Nègresse* may have worked for Said’s family. Her headwrap was a sign of her class status and is similar to that seen in other fine art and popular media depictions of black-skinned domestic workers. Advertisements printed in Egyptian newspapers during this period sold soap and other household products to middle- and upper-class Egyptian readers by using drawings of Black female house maids wearing such head coverings. Said also drew an affinity between the subject’s body and symbols of domestic servitude. The brass container that sits upon the window sill was called a *qulla* in Arabic, and was used by maids to serve water or drink to members of the household.

Just beneath the class and ethnic hierarchies that Rasim saw in *La Nègresse* is a deep history of slavery along the Nile. The Black woman may have been the daughter or descendant of slaves brought from southern Sudan to Egyptian cities, such as Alexandria, Cairo, and Port Said. Historian Eve Troutt Powell (2003: 20) states that Sudanese slave traders and Egyptian religious leaders alike used Arabic words to designate who was enslavable and who was not, often based on interchangeable definitions of religion and race. Terms such as *bilad al-sudan* (“land of the Blacks”) were found in medieval Arabic geographical texts and served to describe all of Africa south of the Sahara. This label characterized eastern and southern Sudan as a land of pagan infidels who could be bought and sold as slaves in Khartoum and in Egypt’s cities. Northern Sudan and Egypt, on the other hand, were commonly understood as *bilad al-‘arab* (“land of the Arabs”) because the majority of the population was Muslim and, therefore, protected from slave status. Although the British managed to slowly abolish slavery along the Nile in the 1870s, such categories of identity endured into the interwar period and shaped how Egyptian artists expressed the cultural and racial makeup of the Sudanese in the early twentieth century. *Bilad al-sudan* and *bilad al-‘arab* were especially controversial terms among Sudanese and

10 Mahmoud Said (Egypt, 1897–1964)
L'Apôtre (The Apostle) (1924)
Oil on canvas; 76.4 cm x 58.5 cm
Mahmoud Said Museum
Photo: courtesy of Esmat Dawastashy

Egyptians because, by the early twentieth century, they served to draw parallels between black skin, barbarity, and pagan religious practices—and, conversely, between proper Islamic beliefs, civility, and lighter skin. Rasim's description of the subject in *La Nègresse* as a "Sudanese flower" reveals the direct connections that Egyptians made between black skin and an individual's origins in *bilad al-sudan*.

The appearance of the anonymous subject in *La Nègresse* in an urban home evokes a narrative similar to the one that lies behind sculptures of Black women created by formally trained Egyptian artists.¹⁶ Precedents for fine art representations of Black subjects include sartorial references to female maids familiar to many Egyptians. The famed sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar created a bronze bust called *Ra's Zanjiya* (Head of a Negress) (Fig. 11) in 1910 and included the subject's distinctive headwrap, tied in the front above her forehead. He also captured the weight of the subject's aging skin around the eyes and the corners of her mouth as she appears to turn her head and look out to the right.¹⁷ Yet, the tension between the subject's recognizable features and her anonymity—rendered through Mokhtar's choice of Arabic title for the work—betrays the complicated relationship between sitter and artist. Marsilam Abdallah worked as a house servant for Mokhtar and his family, and her official identity papers state that she was "a cook" who was "born in the Sudan."¹⁸ But who, exactly, were the "Sudanese" in the Egyptian collective imagination? And why were Sudanese cultural subjects so important for Egyptian artists in their visual constructions of Africa more widely?

Fine art representations of Black women, including Said's painting and Mokhtar's bronze bust, formed a collective portrait of Egypt's colonial history in the Sudan. Developments in modern Egypt-Sudan relations began with the expansionist endeavors of Muhammad Ali (r. 1805–1848), Ottoman viceroy of Egypt. In 1820, Ali sent researchers and explorers up the Nile in order to record the land and peoples south of Egypt, find gold and the Nile's source, and slaves to populate his growing military. From 1821 to



1884, his descendants ruled this region as an Egyptian-Ottoman colony, which it called the Sudan. By the late 1880s, however, Ali's grandson, Ismail (r. 1863–1879), drove Egypt into immense debt, which the British used as a pretext to occupy Egypt and expand their power into Egypt's southern colony. An anticolonial revolt led by Muhammad Ahmad (an Islamic religious leader known as the "Mahdi") against both British and Egyptian presence in the Sudan marked the end of Egyptian colonialism there. The British Occupation remained limited to Egypt until 1898, when British armies seized regions ruled by the Mahdi's forces and annexed them to Egypt, so that the Sudan became known thereafter as the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan until independence in 1955 (Daly and Holt 1988).

Political cartoons and publications from the 1930s called for Egypt to reclaim the Sudan, and they reveal larger Egyptian discourses of colonial loss and parochialism seen in fine art representations of the Sudanese. In February of 1936 the widely circulated Arabic-language newspaper *al-Musawwar* printed a cartoon (Fig. 12) in which the Sudan pens a letter to Egypt stating his commitment to the nation. The figure is seated in profile against a map



II Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891–1934)
Ra's Zanjiya (Head of a Negress) (1910)
Bronze; 26 cm x 26 cm x 45 cm
Mahmoud Mokhtar Museum, Cairo
Photo: Lara Ayad

The sculptor used bronze to capture the weight of his family servant Marsilam Abdullah's aging skin.

of northern Egypt and specifies in writing that Egypt has rightful ownership of the Sudan, as well as its cities and inhabitants, south of Khartoum.¹⁹ His clothing resembles that of an Egyptian schoolboy and, together with his downcast gaze and slouched position at a desk, visually manifests the overwhelming submission demanded of the Sudan by Egypt. This infantilizing image of the Sudanese also manifested in written reports concerning Egypt-Sudan relations and dismissed Sudanese liberation movements of the period. For instance, a 1935 report, entitled *dahaya misr fi al-sudan* (Egypt's Victims in the Sudan), attributed anticolonial revolts in the Sudan either to the "tyranny" of the Mahdi in the late nineteenth century or to the inspiration that the 1919 Egyptian uprisings brought to the Sudanese.²⁰

Such newspaper illustrations and written reports formed the milieu in which Rasim understood Upper Nile subjects, and, like many other Egyptians, he likely limited the meaning of *La Nègresse* to the colonialist narrative of the Egyptian state.²¹ Although Rasim's written reflections on Said's painting do not explicitly refer to colonial history, his decision to rename the Black woman "Sudanese Flower" suggests an imperialist perspective on the subject and the bygone eras that she symbolized. Color and setting in *La Nègresse* may have also encouraged Egyptian critics and viewers to understand the female subject as both compatriot and colonial subject.

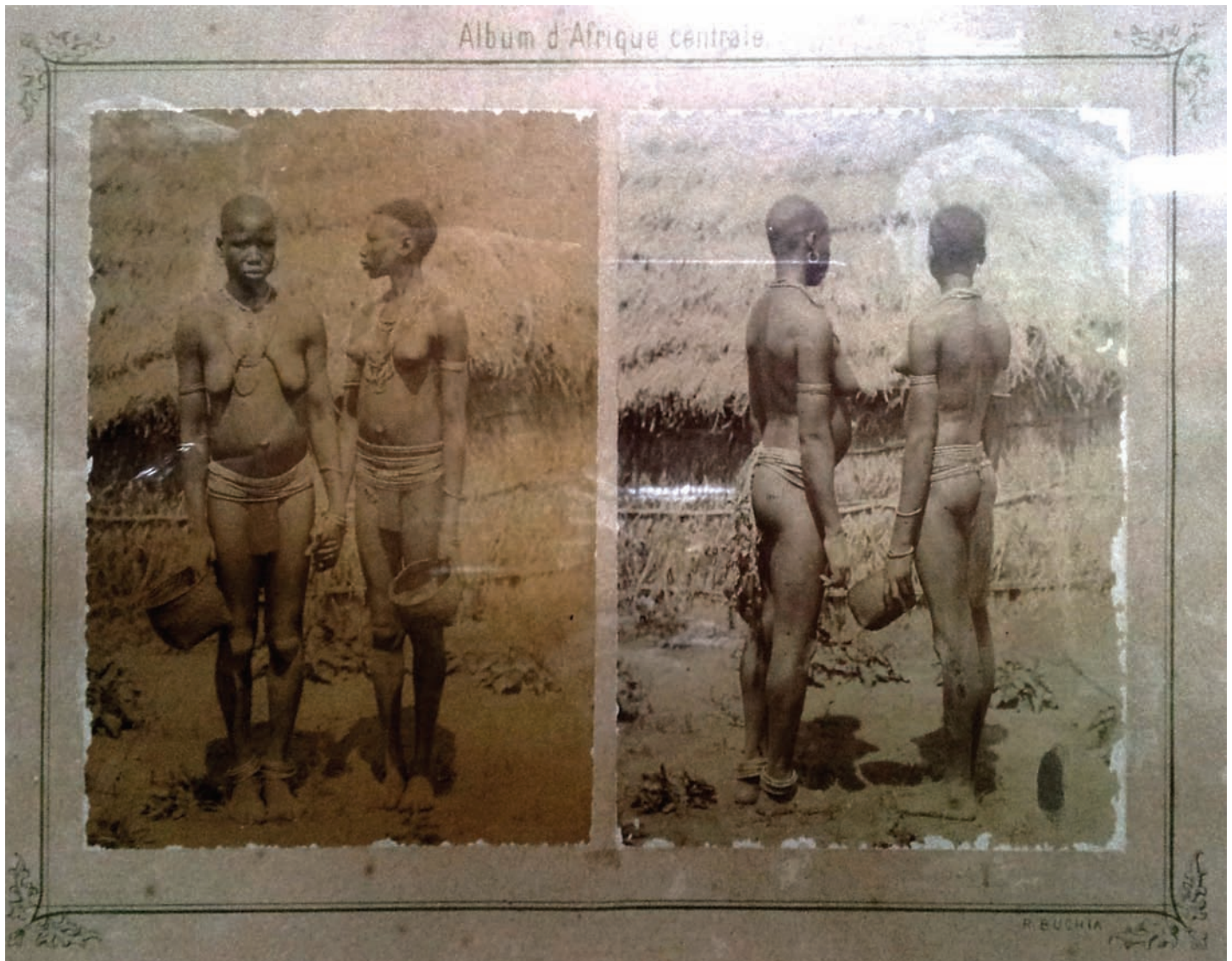
The interplay between exterior and interior in the painting renders the Black woman alien to Alexandria's dynamic cultural realms—whether elite or working class—while imprisoning her in the visual and conceptual order of the city. Just as Egyptian newspapers portrayed Sudanese men as harmless schoolboys willing to give up their land and community for Egypt's sake, the Black woman in *La Nègresse* is transformed into a colonial subject trapped as a servant—literally and metaphorically—within Egypt's urban fabric.

The development of social science museums in Egypt can also explain why Rasim and his contemporaries identified Said's "Negress" as a Sudanese colonial subject. State-sponsored exhibitions played an important role in solidifying the connection that local visitors would have made between *La Nègresse* and the Sudan. As part of their goal to compensate for the collective sense of political loss found among literate Egyptians, national museums of ethnography, heritage, and culture attempted to symbolically revive Egypt's hegemony in the Upper Nile and offered Egyptians a rare glimpse into the Sudan and east Africa. In the years prior to the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, the British administration in Sudan restricted a majority of Egyptians from traveling into the southern protectorate, for fear that nationalist, anti-British sentiment growing in Egypt would spread up the Nile (Holt 1963). Establishing the Khedivial Geographic Society (KGS) in Cairo in



1875 became an important part of Khedive Ismail's modernizing program because it served to distance Egypt from Africa and bring it closer to Europe on political and cultural levels, thereby enabling it to become a modern nation. The KGS contained an Ethnographic Museum with the first Sudan-themed exhibitions in Egypt. Staff there included European geographers and scientists, who gave viewers a tactile vignette of the Sudan's people and places by pairing weaponry and river boats from the Sudan with photographic panels displaying various male and female "types" from "Album d'Afrique Centrale" in frontal and profile poses (Fig. 13). Such displays not only portrayed Sudanese material culture and sub-Saharan Africans alike as primitive specimens, but they also symbolically overwrote the diverse tribes, kingdoms, and sultanates of the Upper Nile with the imperial logic of Egyptian nation-building.²² The Ethnographic Museum's displays of east Africa thus served to represent Egypt as both the modern portal to a stateless Africa—reduced to the stereotype of *bilad al-sudan*—and a powerful player in the formation and dissemination of colonial knowledge.

While it is unclear whether Said ever visited the Ethnographic Museum in Cairo, his portrait of the Black woman was part of a larger body of artworks inspired by scientific exhibitions of the Sudan. Other artists working during the interwar period painted Upper Nile subjects by drawing from Sudan-themed exhibitions held in Cairo. A "Sudan section" was created for the Fuad I Agricultural Museum in Cairo in 1938 and included representations of people from the Sudan similar to photographs found at the Ethnographic Museum. An oil painting created by an unknown artist features a boy at the lower right whose body, pose, and arm bands closely resemble that of two women featured in the "Album d'Afrique Centrale" photographic panel (Fig. 13).²³ Said's contemporaries were thus forming a symbiosis between fine art and scientific epistemologies of Upper Nile Africans in their paintings of the "Sudanese," the latter of whom were largely known to urban Egyptians as house servants and menial laborers from *bilad al-sudan*.



DEFINING AFRICAN FEMALE SEXUALITY

La Nègresse embodied a hypersexualized stereotype of the Sudanese maid, whose erotic energy stemmed from her supposedly primitive, immoral condition. Said and his contemporaries used concepts of the primitive Other to characterize the bodies of Sudanese, east African, and Nubian women alike. By weaving these female subjects from diverse parts of Nilotic Africa into a sexually charged language of representation, many Egyptian artists portrayed vast swathes of the Upper Nile as a monolithic “African” territory, ripe for Egypt’s moral and political intervention.

In *La Nègresse* Said left little to the viewer’s imagination and reduced the Black woman’s clothing to a short slip, which reveals her legs and clings to her voluptuous form like a wet cloth. Hardly any house servants living during the early twentieth century would have worn such scant clothing while carrying out their domestic work. Instead, the artist transformed Sudanese domestic workers into a sexual fantasy for the male, Egyptian viewer (his aesthetic choices certainly won over the critic Ahmad Rasim, who, in his written review of *La Nègresse*, likened the silent Black woman to a flower who “groans” with erotic desperation).

La Nègresse’s exposed body served to personify the Sudan and what many Egyptians saw as the region’s so-called African characteristics: barbarity and promiscuity. In much of Egyptian society,

13 These two photographs are displayed in a panel entitled “Album d’Afrique centrale” at the Ethnographic Museum in Cairo. The two women appear in frontal and three-quarter angle rear poses intended to invite scientific and physiognomic analysis of their faces and bodies. Created ca. 1875.

Photo: Lara Ayad

such traits were seen as antithetical to modern womanhood and its basis in chastity. Many male nationalists situated modern womanhood at the meeting point between sexual purity and national honor, so that the sexual behavior of a country’s female inhabitants came to represent its moral evolution in the global pecking order.²⁴ Personifications of the Sudan as a dishonorable woman peppered Egyptian political cartoons of the interwar period and resemble the woman’s form seen in *La Nègresse*. An unknown cartoonist for a 1926 issue of the weekly *al-Kashkul* (The Scrapbook) (Fig. 14) juxtaposed the civility of Egypt, who appears white-skinned and covered in modest bourgeois dress, with the wanton character of

14 Unknown illustrator
sakhra al-ghurur al-inkilizi [British Delusions of Grandeur],
 Front cover illustration, *al-Kashkul*, January 1926.
 Photo: courtesy of Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, (2003), p. 216

Frontpage illustration for the weekly magazine *al-Kashkul* (The Scrapbook), January 1926. The caricature features Lord Lloyd, a British official, flanked by female personifications of the Sudan (Lloyd's right) and Egypt (left).

the Sudan. The latter has black skin and exaggerated, pendulous breasts, which seem to swing forward as she sways her naked torso towards a caricature of Lord Lloyd—a British official—at center.²⁵ Allegories of Egypt and the Sudan seen in print media echo the distinctions that Mahmoud Said made between different socioeconomic and racial classes of women in his painted portraits. While the subject of *La Négresse* lacks the caricature-like qualities of the Sudan allegory seen in print magazines of the period, her bare black skin and curvaceous form contrast with Madame Riad, whose white skin and sumptuously clothed body (Fig. 3) signaled her status as an honorable and upper-class woman.

Politically charged stereotypes of Black women animated Egyptian sculptures and drawings portraying other Upper Nile women, including Nubian and Sudanese subjects, within scientific and cultural exhibitions. Artworks depicting both groups of women at the Agricultural Museum expressed their exteriority to Egyptian culture, whether urban or rural. Nubians are an ethnic group indigenous to southern Egypt and northern Sudan, and, like their Sudanese counterparts, they were largely familiar to Egyptians as house servants and menial laborers in cities such as Alexandria and Cairo. Many Nubians living during the early twentieth century did not identify as “African” or “Black,” yet their appearance in sculpture resembles those of Sudanese and east African women in the fine arts world of interwar period Egypt (Smith 2009). Mustafa Naguib (1913–1990) created many sculptural works of exotic subjects for the Agricultural Museum between 1934 and 1939, including his life-size sculpture of *al-nubia that al-jarra* (Nubian Woman with Jar; undated) (Fig. 15). Her features include tightly plaited hair and a series of heavy, long necklaces that hang above her



bodice wrap. Art historian Yasser Mongy (2014: 85–96) highlights the ethnological approach that Naguib took to such Upper Nile figures and attributes their realistic detail to Naguib’s education under the Swedish sculptor Boris Frödman-Cluzel (1878–1969). Naguib trained under Cluzel ca. 1929 when he was pursuing a diploma at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, and both artists would move on to create portraits of dancers and athletes with lifelike detail.

Naguib shared with Cluzel an interest in African themes, more than an attempt to master a realist technique, however. In 1911, Cluzel created a bronze sculpture, entitled *Dancer with Drum*, which depicts a woman kicking her foot in the air as she prepares to strike her drum. The piece emphasizes exotic African costume and explosive movement by including beaded adornment around the dancer’s bare chest, a nose ring, and her flying hair and skirt.



15 Mustafa Naguib (Egypt, 1930–1990)
al-nubiah that al-jarrah (The Nubian Woman with the Jar) (undated)
 Bronze, dimensions unknown (roughly life-sized)
 Agricultural Museum, Cairo
 Photo: Lara Ayad

16 Giuseppe Sebasti (Egypt, 1900–1961)
 Untitled drawing of two women (1933)
 Charcoal and crayon; dimensions unknown
 Ethnographic Museum, Cairo
 Photo: Lara Ayad

Note the similarity between the left-hand figure's body shape, clothing, and pose to that of the woman who appears in the right-hand photograph from "Album d'Afrique centrale" (Figure 13).

Naguib diverged from Cluzel's emphasis on motion and merged images of Nubian women with tropes of the lascivious Sudanese woman already familiar to many Egyptians. In *al-nubia*, Naguib used the subject's sexual and racial attributes as signposts of her barbaric origins and promiscuity. The woman's unnatural pose ultimately brings attention to her massive breasts and pubic area, the latter represented by the open-mouthed jar.

Such artistic visualizations of Upper Nile women in fine art and the contemporary press had literary precedents. Nineteenth-century accounts written by male Egyptian travelers signaled the barbarity of the Sudan with the supposed licentiousness of its female inhabitants. These authors highlighted the pressing need for cultural and religious reform there by describing the freedom of Sudanese women to walk about bare-breasted and mingle with male strangers. The clay jar in *al-nubia* served to twist written criticisms of Sudanese women into male sexual fantasies about Nubia because rural women there often used these containers to gather water from the village well or the banks of the Nile. By capturing the Nubian woman going about her daily chores in such scant clothing, Naguib characterized the women of her ethnic group as sexually shameless and similar to Sudanese national allegories seen in Egyptian magazines (Fig. 14).

Similar approaches to the female form can be seen in the drawings of Giuseppe Sebasti (1900–1961), an Egyptian artist of Italian background. Sebasti was unique among his peers in Egypt for traveling to the Sudan during the 1920s, and his drawings of "Sudanese" village women in profile engaged his aesthetic concerns and the "anthropological studies" of Upper Nile subjects created by other Egyptian artists (Sebasti 1999). Although his charcoal and crayon works (Fig. 16) steered away from the anatomical exaggeration of Naguib's Upper Nile subjects, they translated the erotic currency of sculpture into two-dimensional form. His



highly realist style captures the sheen of the woman's bare torso and gives her the appearance of a bronze figure, thus inviting the male viewer to "touch" her exposed body with his eyes. The palpable quality of Sebasti's African figures resembles the modeling techniques that Mahmoud Said used to paint *La Nègresse*, in which her breasts and belly appear more plastic than they do naturalistic. Although Said was more interested in expressing the role of Black women in Egyptian urban life, the visual affinity between his Alexandrian "Negress" and Sebasti's ethnographic subjects shows that many Egyptian artists understood Black female physiognomy as a document of the Upper Nile and its uncivilized sexuality.

CONCLUSION

This essay has shown that Mahmoud Said and his contemporaries in Egypt used Black female subjects to situate Egypt outside of Africa. Said's erotic nudes and commissioned portraits from the interwar period engaged with popular culture, scientific, nationalist, and fine art narratives about one's sense of belonging to the Egyptian metropolis or countryside based on shifting categories of racial identity. Contextualizing his works in Egyptian sculpture and photography seen in local museums demonstrated that many Egyptian artists transformed Sudanese women into sexualized symbols of Black degeneracy rooted in Africa and its supposedly primitive condition. Such artistic depictions contrasted with Said's portraits of working-class Egyptian and elite Ottoman women, who, in his view, represented Egypt's cultural and racial ties to a metropolitan—and largely White—Mediterranean world.

The question of Egypt in Africa as seen in modern Egyptian art has major cultural and political implications. Examining Black racial identity and its construction in ethnographic drawings and fine art portraits of the interwar period can help us understand pressing current issues around the globe, particularly the status of Sudanese refugees in Egypt and the Black Lives Matter movement. Conflicts in Darfur, located in western Sudan, and the violent unrest in South Sudan have driven many Sudanese nationals to seek refuge in other countries over the past twenty years. Many of these refugees have settled in Egyptian cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, and Damietta, only to face racial discrimination, violence, and institutional negligence upon arrival. Abuses against Sudanese nationals in Egypt range from racially inflected harassment on the streets, to government barriers to employment, to murder (Eltahawy, Comer, and Alshimi 2010). Fine art stereotypes

of Black women not only sustained Egyptian imperialist attitudes towards the Sudan, but they also lie just beneath the surface of the immense challenges that many Sudanese migrants face in Egypt today. Shedding light on the artistic roots of anti-Black racism in Egypt can help develop the international focus of the Black Lives Matter movement. While BLM has traditionally focused on fighting anti-Black racism in the United States, it has recently gained traction in parts of the Arabic-speaking world, where Palestinian and Syrian activists have shown explicit support for BLM in their protests against violent and dictatorial government regimes at home (Lebron 2017). Many of these Arab activists decry longstanding anti-Black racism in the Middle East while shedding light on the parallels between the oppression of Black men and women in the United States and that of people living under Israeli occupation in former Palestine and the Syrian civil war, respectively (Al-Sharif 2020). Ongoing studies of Black subjects and their meaning in modern Egyptian art can thus stimulate positive and critical dialogue about race in the Arabic-speaking world and help build a global racial justice movement.

Finally, this essay opens critical questions about Egyptian artistic engagement with Pan-Africanist discourses, as well as the reformulation of Black identity in the mid-twentieth century—the latter often referred to as the Independence Period of Africa. The Egyptian women painters Inji Efflatoun and Gazbia Sirry were unique for creating portraits of African American life and political activism in the 1960s. This period was marked by an upsurge in civil rights movements in the United States, as well as the rise of Pan-Arab and Pan-Africanist activities in a newly independent Egypt.²⁶ Furthermore, Egyptian intellectuals, such as Ramses Younan, wrote for local Arabic-language newspapers at this time about the importance of masks, sculpture, and other examples of "African artistic heritage" in the context of the Third African Youth Conference held in Cairo in 1961 (Younan 1969: 134–35). This cultural turn in postcolonial Egypt towards global Black and African narratives of identity, freedom, and art raise important questions that would expand the key concerns of this essay on temporal and geographical levels: Did the African Diaspora play a role in the formation of a global Arab identity? Did Egyptian artists see a connection between the status of Sudanese and east African migrants in Egypt, on the one hand, and the wave of anti-racist movements developed across the Atlantic, on the other? And, finally, were Egyptians beginning to reconceptualize their own racial identities in the face of such tumult?

Notes

1 It sold for US\$665,000. <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-mahmoud-said-egyptian-1897-1964-la-nègresse-5935114/>

2 I define "local" in this essay as having been created in Egypt's national boundaries. More often than not, evidence of cultural and scientific production from the interwar period comes from Egypt's major northern cities, particularly Cairo and Alexandria. Other studies of modern Egypt concerned with art, institutions, politics, and culture also revolve around urban life, in part because most fine art and print media come from Egyptian metropolises, where there have been higher concentrations of people with formal education and access to resources. The scholarship on modern Egypt, including this essay, has thus inadvertently privileged the perspectives of urban, middle- and upper-class Egyptians over those of the rural and poor. A more robust practice of documentation, art historical study, and oral history from rural regions of Egypt among researchers would

help define "local" in more holistic ways.

3 Art historian Prita Meier (2010: 24–29) argues that dichotomies of a "White" North Africa and a "Black" sub-Saharan Africa in recent scholarship have obscured the tremendous influence of African Muslims in transcultural networks across the Sahel and the Swahili coast, as well as in the building of Islamic states.

4 Political scientist Pearl Robinson (2004) provides a rich account of the history of African studies, primarily in the United States and, in the process, highlights the roles of American research universities, Pan-Africanist scholars, and African universities and research networks. Historian Paul Zeleza (2011) also provides a history of the respective studies of African and African American studies, but ultimately traces this history in order to examine the emergence of Africana (and diaspora) studies in the United States.

5 One of the most vocal, and controversial, scholars to argue for ancient Egypt's connections with a "Black Africa" was the late scholar Cheikh Anta Diop. Diop

based his claim that the ancient Egyptians were Black on primarily American conceptions of race and skin color. By using anachronistic and culturally inappropriate data, Diop inadvertently perpetuated the myth of a racially, ethnically, and culturally homogenous Black Africa—a concept that stems directly from colonialist White literature on African people, culture, and history. Furthermore, there is evidence that Diop and his supporters did not engage in sustained or critical ways with the tension between their claims and the popular belief among most modern Egyptians that they are not Black. A summary report of a conference held in Cairo in 1974, regarding "The peopling of Ancient Egypt and the deciphering of the Meroitic script," includes a description of the Egyptian participants and their responses to Diop. They disagreed with Diop's claim that the ancient Egyptians were Black and, instead, believed that civilization spread from north to south in the Nile Valley. See Mokhtar 1990: 50–51.

6 Overwriting Egypt with cultural and political

histories specific to west and central Africa perpetuates the misconception, often found in the canon of African art history, that west and central Africa are inherently more African, and more Black, than peoples and cultures found in southern, eastern, and northern regions of the continent. Anthropologist Jessica Winegar and art historian Katarzyna Pieprzak (2009) critically respond to the ways that scholarship on Africa has divided the continent into “North” and “Sub-Saharan.” They urge scholars to blur such conceptual binaries and, instead, examine the robust cultural exchange of ideas, art, and people between the two so-called regions. Curatorial projects, such as *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, by Kathleen Bickford Berzock (2019), have begun shifting the field of African art history in new directions and highlight the very porous boundaries of artistic, political, and cultural exchanges between Saharan and western Africa, as well as Africa and Asia more widely.

7 For more information on constructions of Blackness and Black African subjects in popular culture in Egypt and Sudan throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Smith (2006: 401) and Trout Powell (2003).

8 Art historian Nadia Radwan (2017: 234–35) analyzes representations of Black African, Nubian, and Sudanese subjects created by the first generation of Egyptian modern artists who, she claims, were part of a wider “colonial culture.” These artists understood their Upper Nile subjects as antithetical to idealized sculptures and paintings of Egyptian peasant women exhibited at fine art salons in Cairo.

9 Zachary Lockman (2016) highlights how these racially inflected binaries found in Middle East and Oriental Studies in the United States stem from the disciplinary inheritance of historically White institutions. The Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative on Race (2020), however, is helping spearhead major shifts in the field and its approach to studies of race in the MENA regions. Their publication *Race & the Middle East in the United States* is a collection of peer-reviewed articles dealing with the topic of race as discussed in the Middle East Studies scholarship between 1979 and 2019. While it focuses on the role of race in politics and activism between the Middle East, North Africa, and the United States, the bulk of the articles treat the United States as the center of knowledge production about race in MENA countries, such as Palestine. This trend, highlighted through the efforts of MESPI, only demonstrates the need for scholars to focus more on constructions of race *within* Middle Eastern and Arabic-speaking countries.

10 Ogbechie (2008: 5–6, 77–78) argues that drawings of southern Nigerian sculpture, music, and female figures seen in Ben Enwonwu’s gouaches fit into wider debates about the ideology of Negritude in the years following Nigerian independence from the British. Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor first developed Negritude while living in Paris in 1934 and sought to create an African modernism through what late art curator and historian Okwui Enwezor calls “an act of internal reflexivity on the status and value of African culture” (2001: 12).

11 Mahmoud Said was unusual among his peers in the fine arts world of early twentieth-century Egypt because of his class background and art education, which have led scholars to interpret the prevalence of Egyptian subjects in his paintings in controversial ways. Many Arabic-language scholars, such as ‘Esmat Dawastashy (1997: 52) and the late Badr al-Din Abu Ghazi (1975: 95–105), claim that these subjects reveal Said’s affinity towards working-class Egyptian subjects and his role as a “national artist” (*fannan watani*), respectively. Anglophone art historians Alex Dika Seggerman (2019: 103–104) and Elizabeth Miller (2012: 210, 224) have challenged such nationalist interpretations of Said’s work. Instead, they show that his Alexandria was a largely White, foreign-born world dominated by the Turkish-Ottoman aristocracy and European expatriates. Such studies have enriched the history of modern Egyptian art by moving beyond deterministic questions of whether or not Said was a “truly Egyptian” artist. This essay shows that Said’s female portraits and Alexandrian settings engaged directly with discourses of racial identity and cultural heritage often found in state museums and social science literature created in interwar period Egypt, even if he did not intend to form an explicitly nationalist art.

12 For instance, *Bather* (1937) (Fig. 2) features single-sail boats (known in colloquial Arabic as

felukat), women gathering water at the Nile River, and mud brick buildings dotting the horizon line above. Said was also known for creating hybrid settings of various Egyptian cities. Seggerman (2019: 103) describes Said’s famous and monumentally sized *La Ville* (1937) as a “pastiche” of various Egyptian urban centers such as Cairo and Alexandria, respectively marked by the Muhammad Ali Mosque and the electric blue water seen in the background.

13 Seggerman also identifies class and ethnic differences among women seen in Said’s oil portraits. Her comparison of Riad’s clothed figure and the peasant woman’s swelling thighs in *Bather* shows that Said’s portraits of elite women lacked the sexual force of their working-class counterparts and, by extension, the “latent power ... of the Egypt [that the latter] represents” (2019: 122).

14 These descriptive terms are based on Elizabeth Miller’s translation, from French to English, of Said’s personal correspondence with the French painter Pierre Beppi-Martin in 1927. Said penned glowing descriptions of the works of Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, as well as Carpaccio, whose natural and architectural landscapes possessed “unforgettable charm” and “vibrant rhythm” Miller 2012: 214, fn382.

15 Musa did not understand North Africans as “Arabs.” As Omnia El Shakry, historian of Egyptian social sciences, explains, Musa developed his Arabic texts on human evolution from the writings of the British paleoanthropologist Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, who came up with the theory of cultural diffusionism (El Shakry 2007: 55–60).

16 While details about those who worked in Said’s household are unavailable, Eve Trout Powell’s historical study indicates that his generation was one of the last to have Sudanese maids, cooks, and guards who were brought to Egypt as slaves (2003: 180–88). She draws excerpts from the diaries of the aristocratic nationalist and feminist Huda Shaarawi in order to outline the emotional and cultural impact of Sudanese domestic servants on this generation of affluent Egyptians. Shaarawi reminisced about her family’s Sudanese guard with a warm tenderness at the same time that she advocated Egyptian reclamation of the Sudan from the British. Said and Shaarawi shared the same socioeconomic background, and it is likely that he, too, transitioned to manhood under the watchful eyes of Sudanese servants at home.

17 According to art historian Nadia Radwan (2017: 234–35), this sculptural work was unusual for portraying a woman without the idealized features typically given to female subjects in the Egyptian art world of the early twentieth century.

18 ‘Edara ‘ummum al-aman al-‘am, “shahada tahdid al-hawiya, Marsilam ‘Abdallah” [identity card, Marsilam ‘Abdallah] (Cairo: General Security Administration, 1917), scan of certificate courtesy of Emad Abu Ghazi.

19 Unknown illustrator, “min al-sudan ila misr” [To Egypt, from the Sudan], cartoon, *al-Musawwar*, February 7, 1936, 10.

20 The report’s author, who refers to himself as Mahzun (“Dejected” in Arabic), describes at length the “devastation” that the Mahdi’s forces wreaked upon the Sudan’s towns and rural regions and claims that years of cruelty and persecution in the years following 1884 “exterminated entire tribes, such as the Shukriya and the Kababish ...” Just as Mahzun frames the Sudanese as victims of the Mahdi’s men, he also positions Egypt as their savior and the driving force behind anti-British revolts among the Sudanese in 1924. More specifically, he describes how British control in the Sudan eventually rendered its people powerless, and that the Sudanese “had hoped that Egypt would rescue them from the Khalifa’s [the Mahdi’s] oppression, and bring them back to [Egypt’s] arena of justice and compassion...” (Mahzun 1935: 69).

21 Eve Trout Powell’s (2003) concept of the “colonized colonizer” is fruitful for understanding Rasim’s review of *La Négresse* and contemporary political cartoons, particularly their melancholic references to Egyptian colonial history in the Sudan. A dualistic nationalism developed in Egypt in response to dramatic shifts in the last decade of Muhammad Ali’s reign. Leaders of nationalist parties who were active around the turn of the century attempted to claim unity with the Sudan while also labeling it as Egypt’s colony. Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid founded of the Party of the Nation (*hizb al-umma*) and delivered an impassioned speech in 1910 supporting the unity of the Nile Valley against British

occupation. Like many of his nationalist colleagues, al-Sayyid used this term to describe both Egypt and the Sudan, and to stir up feelings of brotherly love among Egyptians for the Sudanese. But any potential bonds between the two groups were undercut by the parochial edge of this nationalist endeavor. Leader of the National Party (*al-hizb al-wataniyya*) Mustafa Kamel fomented the public’s sense of belonging to a wider Egyptian national community by describing the Sudan as the rightful property of Egypt, unfairly stripped away by the Western menace.

22 Historian Timothy Mitchell’s analysis (1988: 6–8) of European world’s fairs is particularly helpful for understanding the colonial logic of the museum institution and its representation of the “world-as-spectacle.”

23 Other Egyptian artists who portrayed Sudanese and Nubian subjects may have had their own social scientific aims. Art historian Mostafa al-Razzaz (2007: 31) argues that the painters Hamed Nada and Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar painted scenes of Nubians participating in the *zar* (an exorcism ceremony) as “anthropological studies” of life in southern Egypt.

24 Historian Beth Baron (2005: 41–53; see also Badran 1995) explains that Egyptian nationalists active at the turn of the century used women as national symbols by formulating the concept of national honor from the traditional framework of familial honor in Egypt. The sexual objectification of women in Egypt served primarily to uphold patriarchal family structures, in which the honor (*ird*) of the family was rooted in the woman’s body. It was from this sexually specific notion of honor that the importance of chastity for women in Egypt emerged. In an effort to make the national liberation movement relevant to both Egyptians of all classes, Mustafa Kamel introduced the idea of Egypt as a “national family” and implored his fellow citizens (Egyptian men) to defend the “honor” of the Egyptian nation.

25 Eve Trout Powell’s (2003: 217) analysis of this same cartoon affirms the illustrator’s attempt to connect the exposed bodies of black-skinned women with sexual deviance. She explains that the Sudan’s behavior around the male British official would have been understood by Egyptian readers as “brazen,” and as “beyond the structures of either British or Egyptian morality.”

26 The seeds for Egyptian identification with Africa could be found in the political platform and activities of Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser. Nasser was the second leader of Egypt after the end of British colonialism (he stepped into the presidency after his colleague Muhammad Naguib, served for a short period) and he began pairing his vision of a Pan-Arab politics with that of Pan-Africanism during the 1950s and 1960s. He played a key role in the so-called Bandung Conference of 1955 (officially known as the first Asian-African Conference), when leaders of African and Asian nations gathered in Bandung, Indonesia to develop economic and cultural collaboration among postcolonial nations on these two continents. Nasser was also close friends with Kwame Nkrumah, the first leader of an independent Ghana. Nkrumah married an Egyptian woman, Fathia, in 1957 in order to show his solidarity with Egypt. This positive trend in Egyptian engagement with African identity existed alongside cultural racism, however. Blackface portrayals of Nubian men were not uncommon in Egyptian films of the 1960s, and this tension between political discourse and cultural production of African and Upper Nile subjects in Cold War Egypt raises questions about the receptivity of the Egyptian public to Nasser’s Pan-African alliances. See Gordon 2006: 56–58; Burke 2010: 13–16.

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