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Nahdat Misr

Let the curtain be raised on your sublime statue. O Nahda, you embody the hopes of generations!—AHMAD ZAKI ABU SHADI, from “Timthal al-Nahda”

—Did your alarm clock wake you up in time to see the unveiling of the statue, “Egypt’s Awakening” [Nahdat Misr]?—I had a headache. The only “getting up” [nahda] I saw was commotion and bickering.—Cartoon from al-Kashkul

The career of the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891–1934) illustrates the close identification between the Wafd-led nationalists and Pharaonist aesthetic style. Mukhtar was the first student to enroll in the Egyptian School of Fine Art when it opened in 1908. The school’s patron, Prince Yusuf Kamal, sent Mukhtar to Paris in 1911. Before leaving Egypt, the artist had worked on busts of national heroes, sculptures of heroes from Islamic history, and rustic themes from the Egyptian countryside.1 In Paris, Mukhtar turned toward ancient Egyptian themes, producing a statue of Aïda in 1912, the first sculpture by an Arab artist to exhibit internationally. Indeed, Pharaonism was literally thrust upon him almost as soon as he arrived in Paris: “I had to go through the experience of being a new student at the Beaux Arts. I was stripped stark naked and tied to a chair. I was crowned with a pharaoh’s crown made of paper and given the title of Rameses II. I was then carried all around the streets of Paris until we reached the Café Bonaparte while the passers-by just looked at us and smiled. They deposited me on a sofa, still naked as ever, and called for food and drink.”2 After producing wax models of the heroes of World War I and the Peace Conference, Mukhtar turned to commemorate the Revolution
of 1919, eventually sculpting a work entitled *Nahdat Misr: Le Réveil de L’Égypte* (Egypt’s Renaissance), which instantly became an icon not just of Pharaonist aesthetic style, but of the Egyptian national liberation movement and Nahda-era culture more generally. *Nahdat Misr* won the annual exhibition in the Grand Palais, another first for an Arab artist. It also attracted the attention of Egyptian elites visiting Paris in 1920. Wisa Wasif, a prominent Copt leader in the Wafdist movement, was one of those who saw it: “[*Nahdat Misr*] is an Egyptian woman. A peasant woman standing, her head raised, the marks of pride and hope clear on her face. At her feet, the Sphinx. This peasant woman stands with her right hand on the Sphinx’s head, calling him to arise from his prostration. He has heard her beckon and raises his head toward her, bringing his chest off the sand, his ears toward the call of the one who awakens him.” Wasif’s report was part of a larger campaign to raise funds for erecting a larger version of *Nahdat Misr* in a public square in the Egyptian capital. Within months, the committee overseeing the project had raised sixty-five hundred Egyptian pounds. In 1921, the Egyptian Cabinet granted permission for the statue to be erected in the square directly facing Cairo’s rail station. The place chosen by the committee was highly symbolic and designed to be the first thing a passenger getting off the train would see. Though one intended audience of the statue was the Egyptian public, supporters of the plan admitted it was above all meant for foreign consumption, since it would “convince the world that Egypt still cared about the fine arts and that it was attempting to bring back its ancient glory in this field,” and “advertise the Egyptian cause in a way that would attract the most attention.”

In granting permission for the statue to be placed in a public square, Prime Minister ‘Adli Yakan noted that the project was privately funded, though that was to change. Because of the cost of building special lines to connect the railways to the Aswan granite quarry, the project’s costs began to expand precipitously. By 1924, over twelve thousand Egyptian pounds of public funds were tied up in *Nahdat Misr*; and the project had become part of the Department of Public Works. At this point, the history of the statue became bound up in ministerial politics, and its fate decided in no small part at the level of struggles between competing parties and factions within the new Egyptian parliamentary government. Work was stopped and plans put under bureaucratic scrutiny that was partisan. At one point, Salah ‘Anan, public works commissioner, suggested that
Figure 14. *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 1928: “*The Renaissance of Egypt* as it should be.” Caption below image reads: “Egyptian Peasant Woman: Stop the fuss and headaches! We’ve been standing on our feet for seven years—where were you? My feet hurt from standing so long! As long as Mr. Mukhtar is sitting, you should sit down too, Sphinx. Egypt won’t be getting up [*nahida*] until we see the light of day!”
the sculpture would be better placed in front of the zoo. He also recom-
mended the “formation of a committee composed of people with aesthetic
taste to look into the statue’s appropriateness.” In 1926, Mukhtar’s salary
was stopped while he was traveling abroad.

When the statue was completed in 1928, its unveiling became a state
occasion of the highest order. Most of the major political players were
present, including King Fu’ad, the British high commissioner, Prime
Minister Mustafa al-Nahhas, the Wafd Party leadership, and many mem-
bers of Parliament. Shawqi recited a poem he had composed for the oc-
casion, while others—Khalil Mutran and Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi most
notably—also panegyrized the statue. What is remarkable in the press
accounts of the event is the shared perception of the statue as an object
that brought together abstract concepts and expansive historical perspec-
tive. Moreover, Nahdat Misr did not just join these themes, it made them
into something concrete and tangible. This allegorical reading is one that
has remained virtually unchallenged to this day. Speaking of the statue as
an object linking past, present, and future, Prime Minister al-Nahhas as-
serted, “It represents the glory of the past, the earnestness of the present,
and the hope of the future. It represents a picture of young Egypt preoccu-
pied with the Sphinx so that it may revive through her and she through it,
directing its glance towards its old power and copying the glorious prec-
edent of its reawakening. . . . If there is a single nation whose ancient past
vindicates its current rebirth, that nation is Egypt.”

As a public event, the unveiling of Nahdat Misr in 1928 was without
precedent. While poetry had long had a prominent place in state func-
tions, the plastic arts, particularly sculpture, did not; there were a handful
of other statues in modern Cairo’s public squares, but they all depicted
specific royal figures and national heroes, not symbolic themes or abstract
concepts. Reports of the unveiling suggest that the crowd’s response was
overwhelming and spontaneous:

Last Sunday at 6:30 PM, thousands upon thousands gathered in Cairo
Station Square. Thousands had been invited by the Department of Public
Works. Thousands of others came from all over Egypt to witness collec-
tively the unveiling of the sculpture Nahdat Misr. The hour arrived and
the order to unveil the statue was given. The soldier began to lift it off
slowly for the spectators. No sooner did the head of the Egyptian woman
appear . . . when a shiver went through the souls and bodies of those present. Instantly, thousands of hands clapped and a cry split the heavens, “Long live Egypt’s Renaissance!” No Egyptian who was gathered there in the square could help himself from being overwhelmed by this powerful, wondrous feeling . . . joining thousands of years of a past long gone to a future composed of thousands of years still to be revealed. Individuals were not individuals at that spot. They were spirits joined together in one spirit, the timeless, eternal spirit of Egypt. These thousands of hearts became one heart, the heart of Egypt beating with pride in the glory of its past, and with faith in the greatness of its future.7

In the pages of the Wafdist press, the significance of the event, like the significance of the statue itself, was presented as unambiguous and universal. Many leading public intellectuals were effusive in their praise of the statue. Yet, on closer inspection, traces of controversy and conflict can be seen. Of course, there was the issue of public financing: once the project of the statue had fallen under the control of the Department of Public Works, bureaucrats had used the issue of public funds to delay the project or redesign its content. It may be tempting to dismiss these maneuvers as personal or bureaucratic politics, but there is reason to think there was some degree of principle at stake. In this vein, the opening paragraphs of Mahmud ‘Abbas al-‘Aqqad’s essay on Nahdat Misr are telling in that they give indications of some dispute about whether the government was in a position to afford paying so much for the completion of Mukhtar’s statue. Al-‘Aqqad dismisses “those who do not want to see a single statue or hear a single [national] anthem in Egypt until it is has sewer systems, hospitals, factories and quarries.”8 While al-‘Aqqad insists that art is no less necessary than economic and social development, he is defensive and forced into conceding the point that if public funds are used for the construction of public art there could be no escape from public debate. Yet, as the history of the project’s funding suggests, after the initial public appeal to donors in 1920, there was insufficient public debate on the statue. Proponents of Pharaonism assumed the naturalness of the undertaking (even though it was the first of its kind in Egypt). Furthermore, they assumed that the statue’s appeal would be unquestionably universal.

While the press was uniformly enthusiastic about the work of art, the mouthpiece of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, al-Siyasa al-Ulsbu’iyya,
chose to downplay the Wafdist elements of the unveiling even as it praised the work’s Pharaonist style. One prominent critic, Ibrahim ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini, dared to critique the statue. Mazini’s critique is significant not because it represents a majority opinion, but because as a minority critique it exposes some of the assumptions underlying Pharaonism. What is wrong with Mukhtar’s statue, in Mazini’s reading, is not its content. Mazini’s is a formalist critique of the statue as a composition, a topic for the most part ignored by other critics, poets, politicians, and journalists who weighed in on the subject.

Mazini’s attack on Nahdat Misr is composed of two parts, the first satirical and presented as a fictional dialogue between himself and a street urchin. In the conversation, Mazini plays dumb and lets the boy explain Mukhtar’s art in his own words:

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al-Mazini: Do you know this lady? . . . Is this the first time she’s been standing around here?
Boy: That’s not a lady. She’s stone. A statue. Understand?
M: Yes, I get it. But how long is she going to stand here like this? Won’t she get tired?
B: Look, didn’t I tell you that the name of the sculpture is Egypt’s Renaissance? This is the Sphinx getting up. Do you understand now?
M: I wish I did. . . . But where’s “Egypt” here?
B: It’s the Sphinx.
M: Then what about this lady standing next to him?
B: That’s Egypt.
M: You mean there are two Egypts? . . . No offence, but you told me that the Sphinx was Egypt and then that the lady was Egypt. And so I understood that to mean that one plus one equals two.
B: No, no! This isn’t math. This one is Egypt waking up the Sphinx.
M: You mean, an Egypt wakes up an Egypt?
B: Yes, that’s the meaning.
M: Sorry, but I still don’t understand. . . . Where are the pyramids? Did Mukhtar move them?
B: Move them how? Why bring the Pyramids into this?
M: It’s just that I read in books the Pyramids are located next to the Sphinx. Looks like someone must have moved them.
Mukhtar’s fans could not have failed to hear their own words in the mouth of the young boy. The critique that Mazini levels in this deceptively simple dialogue strikes at the core of the work’s allegorical impulse. The street boy becomes, in al-Mazini’s hands, the voice of the commonsensical nationalist interpretation of the work. The dialogue thus serves to deconstruct the allegorical interpretation that was entertained by Egypt’s most prominent cultural critics.

The second half of Mazini’s critique recapitulates these same ideas in a more earnest tone. Mazini’s chief critique here is directed at the sculpture’s lack of realism. He points out that when animals rise from their crouch, they lift their back legs first. He observes that since the woman’s hand is not resting for support on the head of the Sphinx, her gesture is rigid and ambiguous. Finally, he asks whether Mukhtar should have represented Egypt in two separate figures, and he concludes that *Nahdat Misr* would have been clearer had Mukhtar not included the mythical animal. Together, Mazini’s satirical dialogue and his more conventional critique show that one could dispute the nationalist interpretation on which there was a general consensus in the Egyptian press. Mazini shows that when one reads the figures closely and with an eye to their literal denotations, the statue’s allegorical connotations become muddled. Underneath Mazini makes another point, namely, that the medium of the work, sculpture, was quite novel if not wholly foreign to Egyptian public spaces and that it was unrealistic to think the public would know how to read *Nahdat Misr* as an allegory. The fact that the sculpture and its creator were lampooned as boring and pretentious in the popular press suggests that Mazini’s skepticism was shared to some extent. Taken together, the critical and satirical commentaries on *Nahdat Misr* should give one pause about making larger claims about the public reception of Pharaonist art. If this, the most visible, iconic example of the Pharaonist allegorical style, could be so easily disputed within the circumscribed culture of elite arts and letters, what resonance did such allegories have for the wider Egyptian public?