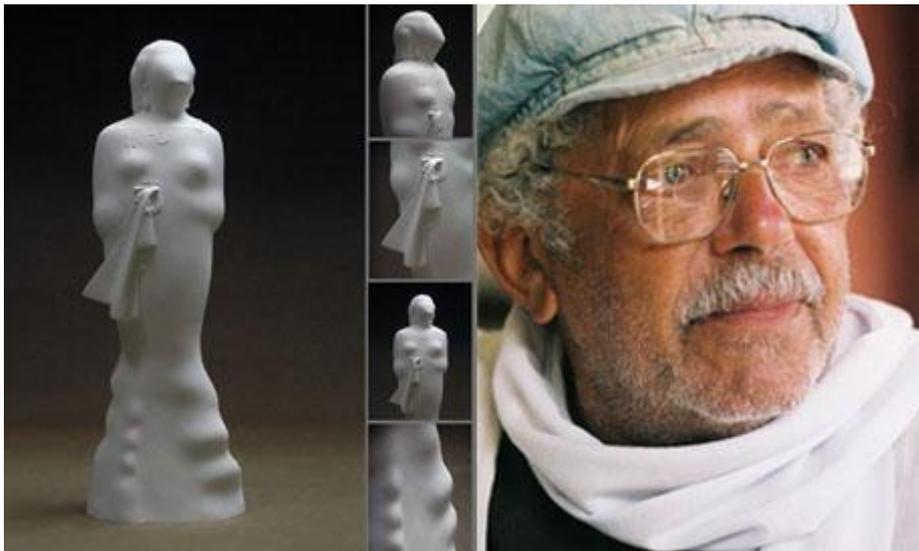


'A Creative Life': Adam Henein Museum - the artist's gift to Egypt

Soha Elsirgany, Sunday 19 Jan 2014

The Adam Henein Museum, funded by the artist in a first for the Egypt art scene, opened Saturday 18 January in Cairo to showcase paintings and sculptures spanning his five decades of creativity



Umm Kulthoum sculpture currently displayed at the Adam Henein Museum

The Adam Henein Museum, which opened Saturday 18 January in Cairo's Al-Harraniya district, is a priceless gift from the artist himself to the country. It includes the largest, and ever-growing, collection of Henein's sculptures as well as featuring some of his paintings.

A common occurrence in the international art scene but a first for Egypt, the Adam Henein Museum was initiated and funded by the artist himself. In so doing, Henein essentially gifts his life's work to the people, instead of selling them.

Sculpture pioneer Adam Henein, who emerged in the 1950s to influence numerous younger Egyptian artists as well as international audiences, has generated a prolific oeuvre which has left an indelible mark on Egypt's cultural landscape.

At the heart of a family of artists, Adam Henein – born 1929 – modelled his first sculpture at the age of eight. After obtaining a BA in Sculpture from Cairo's school of Fine Arts, Henein pursued training in Munich and Paris, where he lived until 1996.

Residing in Paris for 25 years, Henein significantly grew as an artist. But with nostalgia for his homeland and knowledge of his predecessors, his art was infused with a fidelity to his Egyptian roots. Henein eventually founded the Aswan International Sculpture Symposium, which he currently heads.

Henein's work has been exhibited in Egypt, the Arab world, Europe, and the US. With his works displayed in the world's finest museums, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Louvre in Paris, his exhibitions catapulted him to international recognition – and awards.

Henein's career can be defined by continuous work infused with incessant passion. The artist is a keen observer, with a meditative approach to life and art – “a tendency for abstraction and a feeling for the environment and life itself,” as artist Mustafa El-Razzaz describes it. This is what visitors can expect to witness walking through “A Creative Life” displayed at the Adam Henein Museum.

Henein coveted authenticity. It is comfortable to fall into shortcuts when approaching art; it would have been too easy to become heavily influenced by such prominent predecessors as Mahmoud Mokhtar.

An extended stay in Aswan allowed the original artist within Henein to mature, carving itself out, shaping up like one of his masterworks.

“He was like a hermit there, finding himself in silence, contemplation, and the rich environment around him,” describes his student of four years, sculptor Maged Mikhail.

It was in Aswan that Henein organised his thoughts, drew inspiration from heritage as well as everyday life, moulding its fleeting and delicate banality into resilient sculptures, simultaneously confining them in solid form and celebrating their ethereality.

Young artist Mikhail watched Henein work, granting each project its due time, yet not wasting any.

“One centimetre drawn in his sketchbook presented an entire world of creative opportunity,” Mikhail said, reflecting on Henein’s sketching process.

Mikhail’s work was greatly developed and influenced under Henein's wing, after they met by coincidence in the 2005 Youth Salon. The experience was so enriching that it overwhelmed him and, like Henein, Mikhail was concerned for his own artistic voice, lest he echoes his teacher’s.

Also treading in Henein’s footsteps is Mahmoud El-Dewihi, as reflected in both his techniques and subject matter -- birds are often reflected in his sculptures, as Henein has done since the 1960s.

Adam Henein’s work is not about unlocking truths or debunking mysteries. In fact, he celebrates the mystery of his subjects, as viewers circle his three-dimensional pieces to decipher meanings hidden behind their beauty.

In his quest for his own voice, Henein immersed himself in the ways of his ancestors. He created plaster surfaces and used coloured oxides as they would, to work as they worked, to feel the material through their hands.

Henein skilfully handles various materials, including bronze, wood, clay, granite, stone, iron and slate. He has also worked with Aswan clay, and used papyrus for a series of paintings he produced in his Parisian years.

Henein’s paintings are abstract, featuring an earthy palette of reds, pinks, ochres and warm greys, placed to contrast the heavenly hues of chromes, greens, cobalts, azures and turquoises. What they share with his sculptures is a secret, simple, poetic language.

Like a malleable actor who takes on disparate roles, Henein’s variety with materials enriched his art. He remained faithful to the roots, his culture, yet his work is highly modern in form.

In the simplest terms, Faten Mostafa Kanafani, founder of Art Talks Gallery, describes Henein’s work as Egyptian, Pharaonic, and Coptic.

“The Pharaonic influence can be seen for example in his piece of Umm Kulthoum, as Henein portrays her with a stance reminiscent of Egyptian queens,” adds Kanafani.

With the use of simple lines, Henein strips his subjects to their core, capturing the essentials. It is the richness of mingled themes from which he draws inspiration, translated into a bold precision of form, that renders Henein the prominent sculptor that he is.

Speaking of the artist's initiative for the museum, Kanafani explains that “With the weak governmental support to the arts, [as they must] deal with greater issues politically and economically, the budget for museums is limited.”

She commends the museum effort as admirably noble of Henein, and hopes that other artists, if they have the means, would take similar measures to enrich Egypt's cultural scene.

Adam Henein Museum "A Life of Creativity" is located in Al-Labeini St, Al-Harraniya, Cairo.