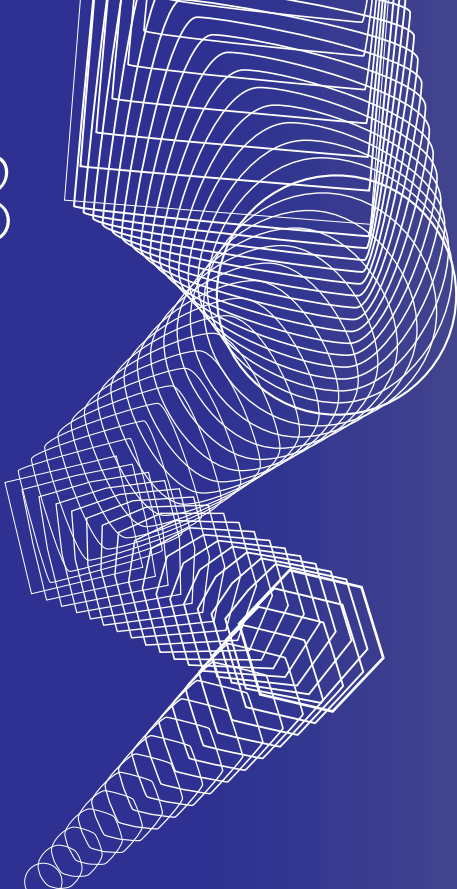


08



Daša Tepina

YUGOSLAV-EGYPTIAN CULTURAL
YUGOSLAV-EGYPTIAN CULTURAL
YUGOSLAV-EGYPTIAN CULTURAL
RELATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF ART
INTERSECTIONS IN LJUBLJANA
AND ALEXANDRIA IN THE
1960s AND 1970s*
1960S AND 1970S
1960S AND 1970S

The paper explores how the Non-Aligned Movement influenced the cultural relations between Yugoslavia and Egypt¹ in the 1960s and 1970s and examines the reception of fine art originating from the non-aligned countries in the former Yugoslavia (FPRY/SFRY). It starts by looking into the activities of two artistic intersections—the International Biennial of Graphics Arts in Ljubljana (MGB) and the Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean Countries (both founded in 1955). They served as central art intersections that brought together works from both sides of the Iron Curtain, as well as those from the so-called Third World, which was in the process of establishing itself as a counterpoint to the bipolar relations of the Cold War.

The International Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana was organised into individual presentations by the participating countries (modelled on the Venice Biennale) and featured prints from all the

* The article is a result of the research project J7-2606, *Models and Practices of International Cultural Exchange of the Non-Aligned Movement: Research in the Spatio-Temporal Cultural Dynamics*, which is financed by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS).

1 Throughout its turbulent history, Egypt had often been part of Arab states of various forms. Between 1958 and 1961, it existed as the United Arab Republic, a name it continued to use at MGB as late as in 1971, despite merging with Libya and Syria in 1972–1977.

participating countries. From its very founding, the Biennial began extending invitations to the non-aligned countries. Yugoslavia was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and a prominent player in this field; its cultural politics were accordingly oriented towards integration and cultural exchange with the non-aligned countries, a fact that was also reflected at the art venues. According to semi-structured interviews,² as well as archival material, artistic styles other than Western modernism aroused little interest. The analyses corroborate that, showing that the prints by authors from the NAM at the MGB were largely overlooked (the rest of the authors had a similar experience, as attested to by the works by Cuban³ or Indian authors that were also examined). The paper thus offers an overview of the political background of the biennials, which we examine mainly through an analysis of archival materials from the Archive of Yugoslavia and the archives of the International Centre of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana. Our findings are based primarily on the material from the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries fund, the analysis of the established cultural programmes, and the cultural agreements and conventions on cooperation established between Yugoslavia and Egypt. We also draw on the aforementioned semi-structured interviews with people who were active participants at the time, as well as the existing literature on the topic.

In the international sphere, the mid-1950s saw the newly established countries of the Global South begin to establish links among each other. The stand-out example of such international integration was the Non-Aligned Movement, which was founded in 1961 in Belgrade. As one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement, the country known at the time as FPRY was gaining increasing importance and prestige in the international political arena through its international policies. In the paper we seek to understand how the fundamental principles of the Non-Aligned Movement were expressed in the area of artistic practices in individual artistic intersections, namely Ljubljana and Alexandria.

Our central focus will be the 1960s and early 1970s, which is when the founding and the bulk of the activities of the Non-Aligned Movement took place. We will be examining the case of two central art venues that served as important intersections of cultural, as well as political international relations between Egypt and Yugoslavia. We will be taking a deeper look into the impact of cultural policies, since we are interested in how the principles of non-align-

2 Testimony by Ž. Š. V.

3 See Grafenauer, *Umetnost, gibanje neuvrščениh in mednarodni grafični bienale v Ljubljani*, pp. 91–104.

ment resonated with individual artists and curators, as well as in the organisational processes themselves. In addition to examining the individual premises of non-alignment through the examples of Egypt's cultural policies, we will also be taking an in-depth look at a specific example, namely the trajectory of the artist Menhat Allah Helmy, the most frequently featured Egyptian artist at the MGB, and the only participant at the Biennial from a non-aligned country to receive a special mention from the organising committee. We are starting with the thesis that art venues like the MGB in its early period (1955–1970), which attracted artists from the Global South, were strongly influenced by Western criteria of quality.⁴ This is also apparent in the case of the Egyptian artist who, while trained in Egypt, was introduced to high modernism during her specialisations in the UK. Her art is not especially typical of her place of origin, and is instead strongly influenced by Western modernism. Our assumption is that she got in contact with the MGB through studios and artists from Western Europe, and that this was perhaps the reason she received an honorary award, since her artistic expression was based on high modernism that was seen at the time as the pinnacle of quality graphics.

Cultural Policies and Exchanges between Yugoslavia and Egypt

201

We trace cultural policies by examining three premises that characterise both the politics of Yugoslavia and the politics of the Non-Aligned Movement. These are anti-colonialism, anti-imperialist struggles and decolonisation; the politics of non-involvement and peaceful coexistence, and finally the Yugoslav self-management. In light of these principles, we observe how cultural exchanges and interactions were being established at policy level at the biennials in the form of artistic practices.

Anti-colonialism, Anti-imperialist Struggle and the Questions of Decolonisation

We try to examine anti-colonialism, anti-imperial struggles and issues of decolonisation through the thesis that, in the context of culture, these were reflected in struggles over the idea of what constituted the art of the period. In the cultural sphere, a parallel race was going on regarding which direction would flourish in the world of art, and here, the biennial exhibitions played an important role in shaping global trends. Analysing the MGB, for example, shows that, while following Western modernist trends, it also included graphic

prints from all round the world. Even so, they did not receive the same level of acknowledgement and appreciation as the art by well-known European graphic artists.⁵ Modernism coincided with the general trend of pursuing modernity, which is fundamentally about “the imperial regulation of land, the discipline of the soul, and the creation of the truth”.⁶ This discourse, Ashcroft asserts,⁷ made possible the large-scale regulation of human identity within the boundaries of Europe and its colonies. The emergence of modernism in art spread from Europe at a time of colonial collapse, establishing itself as a new attempt at hegemonic cultural unity in the world and manifesting as a new form of colonialism. We want to explore this paradigm by looking at cultural intersections and by performing a comparative analysis to give us an idea of the role played by the periphery in these processes.

202

The archival material shows that the cooperation between the UAR and Yugoslavia from the mid-1950s onwards was very diverse in nature. Egypt was a cultural centre of great interest to the West, which saw it as an important starting point for the spread of modern art in the Arab world and more widely in Africa. In addition, the country had a keen interest in ancient Egyptian art and its manifestations in Europe.⁸ Despite the strong Western presence dating back centuries, the period under study also brought rich and quality cooperation in the field of cultural exchanges with Yugoslavia, which was considered one of Egypt’s closest friends. The questions we wish to raise here are how these contacts were reflected in the cultural exchanges between the two countries in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement, how the relations between the UAR and Yugoslavia influenced the West and the East, and whether the beginnings of a different cultural policy, one based on an anti-colonial perspective, could have been established.

The UAR, and Egypt in particular, with its rich and long historical and cultural tradition, made use of its prominent cultural role to expand its international affiliations. Success in the area of cultural policies was very important for the country, as it often represented the starting point for better political and economic international relations. The state strongly encouraged the spread of culture from the narrow circles of the initiated to the broader classes of the people, from intellectuals, workers and youth to agrarian workers. Using this approach, the UAR was able to create a climate in which

5 Testimony by Ž. Š. V. (s. a.) or Stepančič, *Zgrešene klofute*, p. 39.

6 Turner, *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*, p. 4.

7 Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, p. 211.

8 Tatomir, “Egyptomania in antiquity and in modern world literature. imaginary, inter-cultural context and mentality”, pp. 556–581.

it was easier to secure funds—credit, guarantees, foreign exchange inflow through tourism, film co-productions, commercial use of radio, and so on.⁹

The cooperation with Yugoslavia was based on a different relationship—one that was based on friendship and a political alliance, which were important for both countries at the time, as evidenced by archival material. The focal points for cultural exchanges were the two biennials. Yugoslavia had participated in the Alexandria Biennial continuously since its inception. Starting with 1961, with the exceptions of 1965 and 1973, UAR artists also participated at the MGB in Ljubljana.

In 1955, arrangements began for the ratification of a convention on cultural cooperation between the FPRY and the UAR. Cultural cooperation began intensively as early as 1956. In 1957, the first agreement on cultural cooperation was signed in Cairo, and on 22 December 1958, a cultural cooperation plan was signed. The signatories were Krste Crvenkovski, Minister of Culture of the FPRY, who represented Yugoslavia, and the Minister of Education of the UAR. The plan entered into force on 9 February 1959.¹⁰ Crvenkovski played a key role in forging cultural links on the Yugoslav side, being more than just a signatory. He visited Cairo several times during that time (a 10-day stay in 1959 and then at least two more times in the following years). Each time, the visits were reciprocal in 1960, for example, the Yugoslav visit was followed by a visit by a delegation of Egyptian cultural workers, whose tour, in addition to Belgrade and other cities, included Ljubljana.¹¹ In addition to politicians' trips, this period was thus also characterised by frequent and fruitful exchanges of cultural manifestations and guest appearances by cultural workers.

The archival materials show that by 1964, the modest results began to be acknowledged.¹² As in other countries, the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (CCRFC), as the central body for cultural exchanges of the SFRY, showed interest in Egyptology. The Western European and other, richer countries, however, had more success in this respect. On the other hand, the modest results were also, in part, a consequence of the acrimony between Egypt and Israel. Despite the complications in the previous editions, the programme of artistic cooperation for 1964 and 1965

- 9 AJ 559_511_Obči poverljiv material 1964, Kulturni odnosi UAR sa inostranstvom.
- 10 AJ 559_55_122-123 Egipat (UAR) 1956–1966, *Plan izvršitve kulturega in znanstvenega sodelovanja med FNRJ in ZAR*.
- 11 AJ 559_55_122-123 Egipat (UAR) 1956–1966, Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 21 October 1960.
- 12 AJ 559_55_122-123_Magreb i Levant, Egipat (UAR) 1967–1970.

(in the latter year, the UAR did not participate in the MGB) was still rich. Visual arts presentations were subsequently scaled down in accordance with the financial capacity of both countries, and were fewer in 1966 than in previous years. In 1967, the SFRY waited for the UAR's response to the draft agreement.¹³ That same year, the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in the SFRY noted that cultural exchanges were no longer going smoothly and that many of the planned cultural activities had not been carried out. Even so, the participation in both biennials, the MGB in Ljubljana and the Alexandria Biennial, was carried through.¹⁴ Trouble was mounting, however. Despite its previous intent, Egypt did not send an exhibition entitled *5000 Years of Egyptian Ceramics* to the SFRY, replacing it with an exhibition of contemporary works. Commenting on this development, the Commission wrote that Egyptian art had "already approached Western art to such a degree that this is a sensible decision."¹⁵ This confirms the thesis that the Commission itself saw Western modernism as the benchmark of quality, and shows a degree of acceptance of the given situation.

204

In 1968, the Yugoslav Embassy in Cairo was visited by Hasan Boulbola, the Egyptian Undersecretary for Cultural Exchange. He acknowledged that, while the SFRY had implemented 90 per cent of the programme, Egypt had only managed 50 per cent. The reasons, he argued, were of purely financial nature—especially after the so-called Six-Day War with Israel—and not a lack of desire to cooperate with the SFRY. In the same year, the SFRY again sent an invitation to the UAR to participate in the MGB, as Yugoslavs had also been invited to the Biennial in Alexandria.¹⁶ The new programme was announced by Boulbola at the end of February 1969 and signed in Yugoslavia by the Egyptian delegation in April.¹⁷ In comparison to the previous years, there were few agreements on cultural exchanges of artefacts during that time, with cultural policy focusing more on scholarships for exchange students and education in general. There had also been fewer trips by officials and delegates to Egypt, as well as a general decline in cultural cooperation.¹⁸ In the cultural programme for 1975 and 1976, the Commission's analysis of relations until that time noted that in 1973, the scope of cultural relations with the Arab Republic of Egypt had been limited due to the events that took place in the Middle East in October of that year. In October 1973, the Arab-Israeli War took place between Israel, Egypt and Syria

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 AJ 559_55_122-123_Magreb i Levant, Egipat (UAR) 1956–1966.

16 Ibid.

17 AJ 559_69_153–156 Dispatches, Dispatch No 214, 19 February 1968.

18 AJ 559_55_122-123_Magreb i Levant, Egipat (UAR) 1967–1970.

as a consequence of the 1967 Six-Day War, a conflict between Israel, Egypt, Syria and Jordan that had resulted in the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Sinai and the Golan Heights. The announced visit of the Minister of Culture Yusuf Sibai to Belgrade was cancelled that year, for example. In the art sphere, however, the cooperation was still quite robust (SFRY artists participated in the Alexandria Biennial, and while Egypt did not attend MGB that year, there were other small exhibitions on tour).¹⁹

In its cooperation with Egypt, Yugoslavia took on a different role than the imperial powers; Egypt's cooperation with the latter in the field of culture was mainly due to the financial and political benefits. This part of the cooperation with the West ran in parallel with the cooperation with the SFRY and the ideas of the Non-Aligned Movement. Despite the UAR's position as the focus of cultural interest for the countries of the Western bloc, it saw cooperation with the SFRY as very important and thus laid the groundwork for the exploration of different cultural policies. It was, evident, however, that the attitude of both Egypt and Yugoslavia towards the valuation of works of art in this period was heavily influenced by the criteria of Western modernism. According to Gardner and Green, most of the works on display were comfortably figurative, and their creators in many cases trained in Western European art schools, often with links to the Ecole de Paris—an institution that also had a significant impact on the MGB. With this argument, Gardner and Green rightly try to draw attention to the pitfalls of judging aesthetics through a Western or North-Atlantic lens.²⁰ In a broader sense, modernism was one of the major challenges at the time, but also one to which insufficient attention was paid at the level of the cultural policies of the so-called Third Way. Modernity, Maha Samman cautions, does not by itself construct culture; rather, it transforms indigenous culture through the processes and forces of globalisation. This process leaves commerce as the sole driving force, with the consequence that the same characteristics begin emerging in different parts of the world. Samman thus finds that, by all accounts, modernisation is not concerned with the impacts of the colonial perspective, but rather with ignoring the specificities of a place, its characteristics and its needs, and helping to make sure that the world is unifying under the same cultural model.

19 AJ 465_608_Kulturna suradnja s Egiptom_1975-76, Review of realisation in the cultural programme for educational and cultural cooperation with the Arab Republic of Egypt for 1973 and 1974 and evaluation of past cooperation, with proposals for further cooperation and the drafting of a Yugoslav proposal for a programme for educational and cultural cooperation with the ARE for 1975 and 1976, 4 December 1974, pp. 1-2.

20 Gardner and Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta*, p. 90.

The Politics of Non-involvement and Peaceful Coexistence

206 Within the Middle-East, the UAR was an area of great interest, where Israeli, French, British and American interests clashed with the interests of Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia). The nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Egypt on 26 July 1956 set in motion a series of events that culminated in a joint invasion on Egypt by Israel, France and Great Britain, which ended in the occupation of Gaza and Sharm El-Sheikh. This was not supported by the US at the UN, leading France and the UK to withdraw. Eventually, after lengthy negotiations and US mediation, Israel withdrew from the occupation as well, on the condition that the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) take control of the area. In 1957, the US froze Egypt's assets under their control, leading Nasser to turn towards Moscow. On 1 February 1958, the United Arab Republic was proclaimed—a Syrian-Egyptian union lasting three and a half years until September 1961, when Syria left due to Egypt's dominant influence. The Syrian-Egyptian split had many repercussions and led to mistrust and resistance, all of which contributed to the outbreak of war in 1967.²¹ A number of other conflicts were taking place in parallel, with alliances in the Arab League changing rapidly. In 1958, North Yemen joined the UAR. It remained part of it until 1961. Relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon were unstable, fluctuating between escalating conflicts and the building of short-lived alliances. Nasser sought to maintain his primacy within the Arab League throughout that time. Syrian support for Palestinian Fatah established a pattern of Arab-Israeli and inter-Arab relations that played a crucial role in the outbreak of war in 1967.²² In the 1960s, US support for Israel continued to grow, while the Soviet Union increasingly supported the Arab states, which it saw as part of the "anti-imperialist camp". Egypt occupied the UNEF-controlled areas of Sinai and imposed a blockade on the Straits of Tiran to prevent the passage of Israeli shipping. In response, Israel occupied Sinai, then the Old City of Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. Unstable alliances doubtlessly contributed to the outcome of the so-called Six-Day War in June.²³ The situation strengthened role of the Soviet Union in the region. Yugoslavia, which took a strongly pro-Arab stance in the war, likewise increased its influence. This was demonstrated by the visit of Tito and the leaders of the Warsaw Pact states to Moscow and the severing of diplomatic relations with Israel with the aim of

21 Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 178–180.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 195–201.

strengthening relations in the Middle East and counterbalancing the alliances with the two superpowers.²⁴

The policies of non-interference and peaceful co-existence, despite being one of the cornerstones of the NAM, often proved ineffective or remained unrealised in practice, as can be seen in the case of NAM members in the Middle East. But how were these policies manifested through artistic intersections and were they able to develop a space for multiple, plural and diverse subjectivities?

In terms of culture, the political and economic level in the 1960s and early 1970s were distinctly pragmatic. Interest was expressed frequently and eagerly, and the importance of cooperation between Yugoslavia and the UAR was emphasised often. The biggest obstacle was the lack of financial resources, which was felt especially strongly during the conflicts with Israel in which the UAR was involved. Egypt was the centre not only of the Arab world, but also of Africa (both culturally and in terms of education, with more than 30,000 students from African countries studying there), and the UAR sought to maintain this primacy. For financial reasons, its cultural affiliations at that time were with the USA and the UN, which mostly financially covered all cultural manifestations. They were also developing links with the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France and Italy, as well as the DDR and Czechoslovakia, because Egypt had a very important cultural value and these countries had the means to ensure its representation, which UAR accepted. The UAR also worked with a number of Asian countries (India, Pakistan, China, Indonesia and Japan).

Yugoslavia, fully aware that its lack of financial resources would make it difficult for it to compete, was among the less interesting countries in terms of cultural links. Despite the scarcity of resources, however, the friendship between Nasser and Tito, along with Nasser's recognition of Yugoslavia as one of his closest friends and supporters, ensured that cultural cooperation between the two countries remained prioritised and was oriented towards long-term cooperation.²⁵ The political alliance between the two countries was an extremely important link that the two leaders shared in their similar vision of the Near East and of building an alliance that would succeed in transcending the alliances with the two superpowers.

In the cultural sense, both Yugoslavia and the UAR were open to the entire world. The conflicts in the Middle East, despite going against the policy of peaceful coexistence, had brought the two countries together. The international cultural policies between

24 Bielicki, *The Middle East in Yugoslavia's Foreign Policy Strategy in the 1970s*, p. 398.

25 AJ 559_69_153–156 Dispatches, Dispatch No 346, 25 March 1968.

Yugoslavia and the UAR were also reflected in their agreements. We can see that, while the conflict had a considerable impact on the relations—mainly from a financial point of view, according to the Commission—it had not shaken the ideological foundation. We could, in part, perceive it reflected in the cultural venues themselves. The fact that Israel did not participate in any of the Biennials in Alexandria is likewise conspicuous. By contrast, it had continuously participated at the MGB (alongside UAR, even) since its 3rd edition, sending several artists at a time.

Introduction of Self-Management in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

208

In the study of cultural links between Egypt and the SFRY, the principles of Yugoslav self-management are especially important from the perspective of the exploration of different models of cultural-political action and even innovations that had, among other things, significantly shaped art in the post-war period. This was most obviously manifested at the tail end of the 1960s with the complete transformation of the political system, which began moving towards decentralisation and democratisation. At the level of cultural organisation and policies, this was reflected in changes to how international cooperation took place at the institutional level. With the introduction of self-management, the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which was based in Belgrade and was responsible for the execution of all cultural conventions, agreements and programmes, began to be disbanded as an umbrella body, with its work being delegated to the republican commissions. These, in turn, delegated the realisation of cultural exchanges to professional organisations, associations and other cultural institutions, which became responsible for the implementation of intergovernmental agreements in the field of culture. In 1969, the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries was finally dissolved and re-established as a Federal Commission that merely coordinated the international cultural cooperation, with implementation delegated to the Republics and, by extension, the cultural organisations. The contacts were thus passed on directly to the commissions of the individual Republics, which, through the relevant cultural organisations or associations of artists, made direct contact with, for example, the Embassy in Cairo and the Egyptian organisations responsible for the implementation of cultural activities under the cultural cooperation programme between Yugoslavia and the UAR. Representing an example of such transfer is the message of 12 July 1969 from the CCRFC to the Union of Fine Artists of Yugoslavia, which included as an attachment a copy of the invitation for the Alexandria

Biennial, which had been received from the Governor of Alexandria. They were told that the best option was contacting the organisers of the Biennial—the Museum of Modern Art in Alexandria—directly. They were also advised that it would be a good idea to send copies of correspondence to the Embassy in Cairo, which would intervene if necessity arose.²⁶

At the same time as the process of decentralisation of cultural contacts with foreign countries was taking place in the SFRY, the UAR was also undergoing many changes in its organisations and committees. This was in addition to the international tensions with Israel, which made the work even more difficult. The environment in 1967 was thus not favourable to the implementation of the programme, and in the end it was because of the conflict with Israel that a large part of the programme remained unrealised.²⁷

Alongside the changes in the system towards decentralisation—representing a new form of social action—the cultural policies were also changing, with cultural institutions becoming the main drivers of cultural exchanges. In this transfer of mandates, the biennials were in fact highlighted as examples of good practice, since even previously, the exchanges had taken place largely via cultural institutions. Critically speaking, examples of their work also served as an entry point for Western modernist values.

209

The Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean Countries and Yugoslav Participation

The Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean Countries served as the central intersection for cultural cooperation between Egypt (UAR) and the FPRY/SFRY. It was founded in 1955 to celebrate Revolution Day on 26 July. It was inaugurated by Hanna Simaika, the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, who was also one of the initiators and organisers of the Biennial. On 10 May 1955, the Embassy of the FPRY in Cairo informed the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries that they had been notified by the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Simaika, that a Biennial for Mediterranean Countries was being organised in Alexandria, and that Yugoslavia was invited to participate.²⁸ This was confirmed by Yugoslavia through the Commission and the Embassy of the FPRY in Cairo. A commission headed by the then Secretary Ivo Frol chose the art critic Radoslav Putar to be the Commissioner for the organisation

26 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Notice from the CCRFC to the Union of Fine Artists of Yugoslavia, 12 July 1969.

27 AJ 559_55_122-123_Magreb i Levant, Egipat (UAR) 1967–1970.

28 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Notice by the Mission of the FPRY in Egypt to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 10 May 1955.

of the Alexandria Biennial. He, in turn, selected painters and sculptors from all over Yugoslavia, who would participate in the Biennial with 25 paintings and 22 sculptures. The Biennial took place between 26 July and 28 September 1955, with the opening attended by the Commissioner, who was responsible for the the exhibition layout planning, promotion, and setting the prices of the works, as well as all matters directly related to the organisation of the Yugoslav pavilion. The transport of the works was arranged by the Fine Arts Gallery of Rijeka, Croatia. In Cairo, Yugoslavia achieved outstanding success, winning three prizes (1st prize for sculpture went to Drago Tršar with his sculpture *"The Bull"*, 3rd prize for sculpture to Vojin Bakić, and 2nd prize for painting to Ljubo Ivančić).²⁹

The Second Alexandria Biennial took place between 28 December 1957 and 15 March 1958. Nine countries participated (Albania, Egypt, FPRY, Greece, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Spain and Tunisia, with Italy represented through the works of Italian artists living in Egypt). The Commissioner of the FPRY was Zoran Kržišnik, Director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana and, most importantly, a key figure and Secretary of the MGB. We will therefore devote some more attention to the visit. Kržišnik selected 27 canvases, 10 sculptures and 14 prints for the exhibition. He noted in his report that Yugoslavia had been given the nicest exhibition spaces.³⁰

210

The Yugoslav Information Centre in Cairo, which operated as part of the Embassy of the FPRY, reported on the occasion of the 2nd Biennial that the jury of the 2nd Mediterranean Biennial had again awarded three prizes to Yugoslav artists (1st prize for painting to France Slana, 2nd prize for sculpture to Karel Putrih, and 2nd prize for prints/graphic designs to Živka Pajić). They wrote that the Yugoslav pavilion was one of the most varied and interesting, and that the first prizes for sculpture and graphic design, which went to Spain and Greece, were likely intended more as a compromise.³¹ The Yugoslav pavilion was also reported to be highly popular and well attended. The first prize for paintings and statues was 200 Egyptian pounds, the second prize 100 Egyptian pounds and the third prize 50 Egyptian pounds. The prizes for prints were more modest: 100, 50 and 25 Egyptian pounds.³²

29 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Letter by the Embassy of the FPRY in Egypt to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 2 October 1955.

30 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Report by the Yugoslav Information Centre in Cairo to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries about the 2nd Biennial in Alexandria, 9 February 1958.

31 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Notice by the Yugoslav Information Centre in Cairo to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 11 March 1958.

32 Ibid.

Yugoslavia continued to win top prizes in subsequent Biennials in Alexandria. The rest of the text covers the Biennials that took place up to the dissolution of the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in 1969. At the Third Biennial in 1959, the Yugoslav pavilion was organised by the Commissioner Boris Vižintin, president of the Fine Arts Gallery in Rijeka. Prizes were awarded to Miodrag Miša Popović (2nd prize for sculpture) and Vladimir Makuc (1st prize for prints/graphic designs). At the 4th Biennial in 1961, the Acting Commissioner was Dragan Djordjević, and Yugoslavia ended up winning the 2nd prize for painting (Mladen Srbinović) and two prizes for sculpture, which were awarded to Olga Jančić and Jovan Kratochvil. The Head Commissioner for the 5th Biennial in 1963 was Željko Grum (art critic and director of the Museum of Modern Art in Zagreb). Once again, Yugoslavia was awarded some of the highest prizes (1st prize for graphics went to Janez Boljka, 2nd prize for painting to Ljubo Ivančić, 3rd prize for sculpture to Slavko Tihec, and the Purchase Award to Dimitar Kondovski). In 1965, at the 6th Biennial, the Yugoslav pavilion was organised by the curator of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, Boris Kelemen, and the prizes were awarded to Bogdan Meško (1st prize for graphics) and Krs-to Hegedušić (2nd prize for painting). At the 7th Biennial (1968), the SFRY Commissioner was Nikola Kusovac, curator of the National Museum in Belgrade, and Yugoslav artists received two prizes (1st prize for graphics went to Mersad Berber and 3rd prize for sculpture to Peter Černe).³³ In reviewing these fifteen years of participation at the Alexandria Biennials, it becomes clear that Yugoslavia had been particularly successful in the field of graphics, winning four consecutive first prizes for graphics.

The costs of participation at the Mediterranean Biennial were shared, with Yugoslavia covering transport, packing and securing of the works, as well as other costs related to the organisation of the Yugoslav selection, and Alexandria covering the transport to the gallery and the costs of the exhibition and promotion, as well as insurance and all the other expenses connected with the exhibition itself. The biggest problems encountered were damage to the works and frequent delays in returning the works to Yugoslavia. In addition, especially at the first few Biennials, the payment of prizes was a major problem due to the different currencies. This was coordinated by the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Embassy in Cairo, and the process was most often very protracted, which heavily delayed the authors' receipt of the prizes. Exchanges of cultural workers—likewise an integral

33 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Biennials in Alexandria – list appended to the report.

part of the programmes—were often coordinated with the Commissioners' trips to Alexandria. The latter stayed in Alexandria and Cairo longer, providing additional training, building networks of acquaintances, visiting artists' associations and studios, and making contacts of all kinds.

As Gardner and Green note, bringing together artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain, as well as from countries oppressed by post-fascist dictatorships and subjected to isolationism and despair, was a major achievement. They highlight Hussein Sobhi, the Head Commissioner of the Alexandria Biennial, for whom regionalism meant a way of transcending geopolitical divisions and ensuring that "the Biennial re-establishes friendly relations among the Mediterranean countries".³⁴

Zoran Kržišnik and the Alexandria Biennial

212 The participation of Egyptian artists at the MGB—led by Zoran Kržišnik, art historian and director of the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana between 1948 and 1986—was reciprocated by sending works by Yugoslav artists to the Biennial in Alexandria. Here, too, the Director of the Museum of Modern Art and the MGB played an important role. In his report on the visit to Egypt on 12 January 1958, which he submitted to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries as the Commissioner of the exhibition, he describes travelling to Cairo on 21 December 1957 and reporting to the Embassy's Information Office, where he met with the office director Ljubo Drndić and his assistant. The following day at the office, they met with selected Egyptian newspapers and art critics. The office director informed Kržišnik that the exhibits had arrived in Egypt, with the exception of Putrih's work. The director and his assistant also informed Kržišnik that the Secretariat of the Alexandria Biennial, where he represented the FPRY as an exhibition commissioner, had lost his introductory text and asked him if he could provide a new one.³⁵

When Kržišnik arrived in Alexandria from Cairo, he immediately met with the museum's director, Hanna Simaika, and they sorted out the problems with the text and the missing work by Putrih. Kržišnik wrote in his report that other countries had also sent prints, but that Yugoslavia's were far superior. Simaika told him, as he had done at the embassy before, that he wished to award the first prize to one of Yugoslavia's most prominent printmakers. That year, the

34 Gardner and Green, *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta*, pp. 84–85.

35 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Report by the Yugoslav Information Centre in Cairo to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries about Yugoslavia's participation in the 2nd Biennial in Alexandria, 9 February 1958, p. 1.

organisers bought the statue of Drago Tršar and placed it in front of the town hall. The jury selected some of the works from the portfolio, which Kržišnik changed at the last minute, so that the portfolio ended up featuring 14 works by Božidar Jakac, Riko Debenjak, Ankica Oprešnik, Josip Restek, Frano Bača, Maksim Sedej, Boško Karanović, Živka Pajić, France Mihelič and Oton Gliha. Kržišnik felt that this line-up represented a high-quality presentation that did full justice to FPRY's painting and sculpture. In addition, Yugoslavia was assigned what was in his view the nicest exhibition hall, which allowed them to make the Yugoslav presentation aesthetically complete. He also wrote that even the authorities had told him that "the Yugoslav pavilion is by far the most consistent and homogeneous and at the highest level of quality in general",³⁶ and that he was expecting prizes in all three areas.

That the response to the Yugoslav pavilion by critics and authorities alike was indeed tremendous was already apparent at the reception held by the Yugoslav Ambassador on the day after the opening to celebrate the Biennial. A desire was expressed there to bring the works from the Yugoslav pavilion to Cairo, and the Embassy was tasked with seeking exhibition opportunities and funding, to be reported on at a later date.

Kržišnik's report to the Commission continues with a description of the other participants at the Biennial, noting that France, for obvious political reasons, did not participate, and that while Italy did, it was only through Italian artists living in Egypt. He found Spain's response particularly disappointing; while prolific, it was in his estimate very low in quality. He also highlighted his conversation with Tunisia's Commissioner, who had expressed the desire to have Yugoslavia exhibit and lecture in Tunisia. The same wish was also expressed by the Moroccan representative, as well as the Spanish representative Maria Revenga. According to a conversation with the latter, Spanish artists were keen to establish close contact with the Yugoslav cultural sphere. He passed these contacts on and expressed his interest in following up.

The Syrian Ambassador, who was also hosted in Alexandria, asked Kržišnik to inform the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries that he was interested in a touring exhibition (preferably easily transportable) that could be realised in Damascus. At the Academy in Egypt, Kržišnik received a request for guest lectures by art teachers from the SFRY, especially in the field of sculpture and printmaking. The Egyptian art circles and their organisations wished for direct exchanges of exhibitions with the

36 AJ 559_93_208_Bienale u Aleksandriji 1955–1969, Report by Zoran Kržišnik to the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, 12 January 1958, p. 3.

galleries of the FPRY, wanting to highlight their paintings in particular, which they said had increased in quality in recent years. Kržišnik was also a member of the jury for the Egyptian pavilion, of which role he wrote the following: "the principle I followed in awarding prizes to Egyptian artists quite clearly overlaps with the principles that have been employed in setting up of our most representative exhibitions to date".³⁷ We can see here that the criteria for quality Kržišnik was referring to aligned with those of the hegemonic Western modernism.

The Biennial of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana and Egypt's participation: the case of Menhat Helmy

214 Zoran Kržišnik, as a representative of the post-war generation of art historians, suspected that the key question they were facing was "how do we escape the grip of socialist realism?"³⁸ Thus, the MGB, of which he was one of the main founders, adopted a positive attitude towards contemporary modern art, creating socialist aestheticism that drew on Western modernism. Alongside MGB, a variant of high modernism in graphic art was developing that later came to be known as the Ljubljana School of Graphic Art, which emphasised the criteria of exceptionalism and formal perfection of the graphic sheet. In terms of juries, installations and prizes MGB also largely followed the tradition of Western modernism, with Riva Castleman writing in 1993:

*Inevitably, it was the artists of the capitalist countries whose artistic expression was honoured by the Biennial jury. This was, of course, due to the fact that art represented state policy, and the method of selection (by country) perpetuated this situation.*³⁹

Egypt's first appearance at the MGB in Ljubljana was at its 4th edition in 1961, where it participated as the UAR with three artists (Mandooh Ammar, Amin Awad Kamal and Menhat Allah Helmy). All of them initially studied in Cairo and then continued their studies in Europe (Awad in Urbino and Helmy at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London). Helmy also received an honourable mention from the Organising Committee at the MGB that year, which represented an unusual and unique recognition for a representative from a Non-Aligned country. The jury at the time was chaired by Jacques Lassaigne (France) and its members were: Fjodor Davidov (USSR), Gustave von Groschwitz (USA), Gunnar Jungmarker (Sweden), Zoran

37 Ibid., pp. 1–4.

38 Žerovc, Kržišnik, Zoran, p. 24.

39 Castleman, p. 236.

Kržišnik (SFRY), Jean Leymarie (France), Giuseppe Marchiori (Italy) and Miodrag B. Protić (SFRY).⁴⁰ Whether the jury was attracted by the Western modernist visual code in which she worked, the significance of the cultural and political links with the UAR, or something else is not known.

Only Helmy participated in the 5th Biennial (1963), and there were no Egyptian representatives at the 6th Biennial (1965), as the UAR was already experiencing strong social and political unrest. At the 7th Biennial, Helmy was again the only exhibitor. The representation at the 8th MGB (1969) was stronger (Hussein Al Gebali, educated and based in Cairo, Mariam M. Abdel Alim, who also participated at the 32nd Venice Biennale, Mohsein Charrara, an archaeologist based in Cairo, and Farouk Chehat and Ahmed Maher Raif, who had both studied in Cairo, with Raif having also exhibited at the biennials in Sao Paulo and Venice). According to records from the Yugoslav archives, the Egyptian Ministry of Culture sent five graphic artists to the MGB in Ljubljana that year, at its own expense, who arrived in Belgrade by airplane on 20 August 1969. They stayed there for two days, socialising with local graphic designers, before continuing their journey to Ljubljana. The Slovenian Artists' Association was responsible for their visit and hosted their presentation at the MGB.⁴¹

At the 9th MGB (1971), Egypt was still exhibiting under the acronym UAR (United Arab Republic), again represented by the archaeologist Charrara Mohsein. The 10th MGB (1973), however, again lacked Egyptian representatives. This coincided with the conflicts in the Middle East, which also shook up cultural policies. It was not until the 11th edition (1975) that the country, this time as Egypt, again participated in the MGB. It was again represented by Menhat Helmy, this time joined by Farouk Shehata. Helmy went on to exhibit at the 12th (1977) and 16th (1985) editions of the MGB, making her the most frequently exhibited Egyptian artist at the Biennial. This is also the reason we delve deeper into her participation at the MGB in terms of her career trajectory, collaborations and reception.

Menhat Helmy (1925–2004) was a pioneer of Egyptian print-making. She was born in Helwan, Egypt, into a family of nine children. As the daughter of a legal advisor at the Ministry of Education, her exposure to fine arts was minimal, yet despite this, she managed to stand out with her artistic expression.⁴² In 1949, she graduated from the High Institute of Pedagogic Studies for Art in

40 SI MGLC, šk. 1963/F1, Work Records of the International Jury from 7 to 9 June 1961, p. 3.

41 AJ 559_69_153–156 Dispatches, Dispatch No 1224, 25 August 1968.

42 Zidan, A grandson's quest to preserve his grandmother's artistic legacy.

Cairo. Her remarkable talent earned her a state scholarship, allowing her to continue education at the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1953—one year after the July 1952 military coup that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy—where she studied from 1953–1955 with a focus on drawing, painting and etching.⁴³ During her three years at university, she studied under sculptor Henry Moore and others, such as Graham Sutherland and William Coldstream. Helmy's focus was on painting and printmaking, and she eventually settled on etchings. She started experimenting with different plates, using copper, zinc and wood to make black and white prints. And, as Karim Zidan writes:

She journeyed across England during her three years at Slade, exploring London's parks, churches, and rivers, and traveling to places like the Isle of Wight and to small towns along the countryside. She carried a small sketchbook, which she used to lay the foundations for her later prints. Her dedication to the craft of printmaking did not go unnoticed, as the Egyptian artist—one of the first to attend the prestigious school—went on to win the Slade Prize for Etching in 1955.⁴⁴

216

Helmy returned to Egypt in 1956, when the country was engulfed in social and economic turmoil, geopolitical tensions and revolutionary fervour. Armed with the newly acquired skill of etching, she documented the social changes taking place around her, including the Suez crisis, the historic parliamentary elections of 1957 and the construction of the Aswan Dam. In her works, she captured the country's invisible majority: the fishermen on the Nile, the workers in the brick factories and animal markets, and the peasants who tilled the fields. She was one of the first artists to capture the rapidly changing Egyptian state through female eyes—whether campaigning in elections, breastfeeding in newly built clinics, or living as prominent members of society who worked just as their male counterparts. Her work from this period cemented her reputation as a pioneer of Egyptian printmaking. Her black-and-white etchings were critically acclaimed for their complexity, but also for their challenging execution. She was one of the first Egyptian artists to include entire scenes in her work, reproducing the effects of sketches and intricate drawings on zinc plates before transforming them into prints.

Having participated in most of the local exhibitions since 1956, she won a prize at the Cairo Production Exhibition in 1957 and the Salon du Caire prize in 1959 and 1960. Internationally,

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

Helmy's pioneering work had not gone unnoticed, either. After the Slade Prize, she took part in numerous international exhibitions and, starting in 1956, in most of the exhibitions in Egypt. In 1966, she held her first private exhibition of etchings. She participated in numerous international etching biennials in West Germany, Poland, Italy, Japan and India. In 1959 and 1960 she was awarded the Salon du Caire prize, in 1957 the Cairo Production Exhibition prize and in 1961 a honorary prize at the 4th MGB in Ljubljana (honorary prize bestowed by the Organising Committee). The work she exhibited at the MGB later earned her the title of professor emeritus at the prestigious Accademia delle Arti del Disegno in Florence. In Egypt, she became a lecturer at the Cairo College of Fine Arts, a Professor of Fine Arts at Helwan University in Cairo and a member of the UK Printmakers Council. She also participated in the Venice Biennale in Italy.

In the late 1960s, Helmy thus established herself as an award-winning printmaker acclaimed both internationally and at home, and decided to abandon the black-and-white etchings that had characterised her work in favour of powerful political paintings and abstract prints that were ahead of their time on the Egyptian art scene. In 1972, she returned to London and completed her turn to abstraction, producing several pieces that had since become some of her signature works. Her black and white prints became a thing of the past, replaced by conceptual prints with complex geometric structures and bright colours, inspired by her fascination with space, space exploration, technological advances and modern machines. She also studied at Morley College in London from 1973 to 1979:

217

While Helmy's earlier works were influenced by European masters such as Spain's Francisco Goya and Germany's Albrecht Dürer, her later work was uncompromisingly architectural in its use of geometrical abstraction, something she was likely predisposed to through her exposure to Islamic art. She experimented with techniques that required both craftsmanship and artistry, adding depth of space and texture to her work that did not previously exist.⁴⁵

Unfortunately, Helmy's second tour to the UK, which ended in 1979, would eventually be seen as the twilight of the artist's career. In 1978, she held a critically acclaimed solo exhibition of her abstract works in London, returning to Cairo for another solo exhibition the following year. Being only 54 at the time, Helmy bought a printing

press and studio space in Cairo, where she planned to continue creating more works. Her career then came to an unexpected end. Helmy's lungs began to suffer the consequences of the many years she had spent inhaling fumes from the printing process. Her last print dates from twenty-one years before her death in 2004.

Her involvement in the MGB in the 1960s and 1970s reveals several facts. The first is that she almost certainly did not come to the MGB via embassies, or perhaps merely used them to administer the participation in an internationally renowned exhibition. At the same time, other Egyptian graphic artists came to the MGB through official channels, via the Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Yugoslav Embassy in Cairo. Unfortunately, there is no record in the MGLC archives of why Helmy's work convinced the jury, which consisted of distinguished critics mainly from Western Europe and the USA. The fact that she was awarded a special honorary award by the Organising Committee, could be seen as political on different levels—good relations with the UAR; a response to the political and cultural process of awarding the prizes in Alexandria and a gesture of gratitude for the awards received by Yugoslavia there; or a matter of an aesthetic preference for a modernist work. Certainly, in the case of the Yugoslav-Egyptian connections, there was a positive attitude on both sides towards the contemporary modernist canon, which at the time was not yet seen as a part of Western cultural colonialism.

218

Reflections on Cultural Policies and the Culture's Broader Social and Political Role

In conclusion, the cultural and political relations between Yugoslavia and Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s were very intertwined and the internal political situations were complex. Internationally, the two countries, as political allies, cooperated well in all areas and invested heavily in cultural exchanges and links between them. Under the auspices of the Non-Aligned Movement, of which both were founding members, they sought their own expression and pragmatic political paths beyond the bloc divisions, but it was precisely in the field of culture that they were the two centres and at the same time the two areas of the periphery where cultural colonialism, through the modernist criteria of the West, was able to develop and also to spread further. Both Nasser's Egypt until 1970 and Tito's Yugoslavia (until 1980) sought different policies of international integration, based on the principles that were part of the manifest of non-alignment—anti-imperialism and decolonisation, a policy of non-interference and peaceful co-existence, and a search for different approaches to social organisation, such as the

Yugoslav self-management. Economic dependence, however, often prevented the development of such policies, and thus, on many levels, including artistic language, both often submitted themselves to Western criteria, even in the field of culture and fine arts, and found themselves at the centre of Western cultural imperialism. Under the modernist criteria of quality, new forms of colonialism were concealed, primarily in the cultural sphere.

SOURCES AND LITERATURE

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

AJ – Archive of Yugoslavia:

AJ 559 – Savezna komisija za kulturne veze sa inostranstvom.

AJ 4–5 – Savezni zavod za međunarodnu naučno, prosvetno-kulturnu i tehničku saradnju

SI MGLC – International Centre of Graphic Arts:

SI MGLC – Archives of the Biennial of Graphic Arts.

LITERATURE

Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-Colonial Transformation*, London: Routledge, 2001.

Castleman, Riva. In: *20th International Biennial of Graphic Art*. Ljubljana: MGLC, 1993, p. 236.

Bielicki, Paweł. The Middle East in Yugoslavia's Foreign Policy Strategy in the 1970s, *Istorija 20. veka 2*, No 39 (2021), pp. 397–414.

Gardner, Anthony and Charles Green. *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2016.

220

Grafenauer, Petja. Umetnost, gibanje nevrščenih in mednarodni grafični bienale v Ljubljani. Primer kubanske grafike Félix Beltrána [Art, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts. Example of Cuban Graphics by Félix Beltrán]. In: Predan, Barbara (ed.). *Robovi, stičišča in utopije prijateljstva: spregledane kulturne izmenjave v senci politike* [Margins, junctures and utopias of friendship: the overlooked cultural exchanges in the shadow of politics]. Ljubljana: Institute of Contemporary History, Academy of Fine Arts and Design (Collection: Vpogledi), 2022. DOI: 10.51938/vpogledi.2022.25.7

Samman, Maha. *Trans-Colonial Urban Space in Palestine: Politics and Development*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

Smith, D. Charles. *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

Štepančič, Liljana. Zgrešene klofute: sodobna umetnost Sovjetske zveze in držav tretjega sveta na ljubljanskih grafičnih bienalih [Slaps that Missed: Modern Art of the Soviet Union and Third World Countries at the International Biennales of Graphic Arts in Ljubljana]. *Likovne besede: glasilo Zveze društev slovenskih likovnih umetnikov 22*, No 81/82, (2007), pp. 32–45.

Tatomir, Renata. "Egyptomania in antiquity and in modern world literature. imaginary, intercultural context and mentality", *Discourse as a Form of Multiculturalism in Literature and Communication, Arhipelag press XXI* (2015), pp. 556–581.

Turner, S. Bryan. *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*, London: Sage, 1990.

Žerovc, Beti. Zoran Kržišnik: O kombinacijah [On Combinations], *Likovne besede: glasilo Zveze društev slovenskih likovnih umetnikov 22*, Nos 81/82 (2007), pp. 24–31.

DIGITAL SOURCES

Zidan, Karim. A grandson's quest to preserve his grandmother's artistic legacy offers an insightful and instructive look at how to manage the estate of an artist, *Art & Object*. Available at: <https://www.artandobject.com/articles/menhat-helmy-reclaiming-legacy-egyptian-modernist> (accessed on 20 May 2022).

Zidan, Karim. Menhat Helmy. Uncovering the Legacy of the Egyptian Pioneer, *RAWI Egypt's Heritage Review*. Available at: <https://rawi-magazine.com/articles/menhat-helmy/> (accessed on 20 May 2022).

ORAL SOURCES

Testimony by Ž. Š. V., Ljubljana, 15 August 2021 (correspondence held by the author).