World Art

Mahmoud Mukhtar: 'The first sculptor from the land of sculpture'

Alexandra Dika Seggerman[a]

[a] History of Art, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA
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Mahmoud Mukhtar: 'The first sculptor from the land of sculpture'

Alexandra Dika Seggerman[*]

History of Art, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

Considered Egypt's most prominent modern sculptor, Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891–1934) moved between Cairo and Paris throughout his career, blending a modern European sculptural aesthetic with ancient Egyptian imagery. The resulting oeuvre of work, and especially his masterpiece, *Egypt's Reawakening* (1920–28), provided the populace with a way to visually imagine the new Egyptian nation-state. Mukhtar's artwork reveals the transnational nature of the early twentieth-century art world and the consequential importance of the nation within that world.

Keywords: Mahmoud Mukhtar; Egypt; modernism; nationalism; public art; Pharaonism; École des Beaux-Arts; sculpture

In a 1912 photograph, the young Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891–1934)[1] relaxes in his Paris studio, surrounded by French-style academic sculptures and calligraphic wall-hangings in Arabic (Figure 1). On the right stands a verisimilar sculpture of a nude man in *contrapposto* pose, and in the upper left appears the creed of the Muslim faith – 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet' – sewn in white wobbly script on a dark background. Mukhtar sits and sketches tranquilly amid these seemingly contradictory visual traditions. This is not a casual snapshot: the artist consciously positioned himself and his studio to represent his grounding in both Arabo-Islamic culture and European fine arts. In this paper, I investigate how and why Mukhtar made the transition from Islamic references early in his career to a style known as Pharaonism, which instead looked to ancient Egyptian imagery. I argue that this shift resulted from Mukhtar's participation in imagining the modern nation-state of Egypt, both at home and abroad. Moreover, I contend that Mukhtar's artwork reveals the transnational nature of the early twentieth-century art world and the consequential importance of visualizing nation-states within that context.

*Email: alex.seggerman@gmail.com

Figure 1. Mukhtar in his studio, Paris, c. 1912. Mahmoud Mukhtar Archive, Collection of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi, Cairo, Egypt.

Below, I introduce the historical framework in which Mukhtar rose to prominence as well as analyze a selection of his artworks. In doing so, I exhibit the centrality of the nation in Mukhtar's sculpture – as subject, as patron, and as identity. Nation, in Mukhtar's work, is not simply the country of Egypt as a political entity, but an imagined and constructed idea that unites its members around a shared set of characteristics and histories (Anderson 1991). During the modern period in the Middle East, as elsewhere in the world, nation-states formed, particularly in response to colonialism. Whereas kingdoms, religions, or empires would have defined art and artists of previous eras, the modern nation of Egypt defined Mukhtar. Moreover, I argue that Mukhtar's sculptures played an active role in imagining the nation of Egypt by contributing to the shared set of characteristics that came to define it. In this way, Mukhtar's oeuvre presents a model for problematizing the role of nation in early twentieth-century modern art around the world.

In order to bring Mukhtar's oeuvre into conversation with other 'local modernisms', my argument will have two main points. First, I contend that Mukhtar's modern sculpture contributed to engendering the nation of Egypt. He did this through a body of artworks that were seeped in the discursive framework of modern Egypt, conversant in public visual culture, and linked to avant-garde European techniques. These images gave the public a rich oeuvre with which to imagine their new country.

Central to this was Mukhtar's modern authorial voice: he created a signature style and propagated an origin myth about himself. Similarly to other political and cultural leaders of his time, such as Sa'ad Zaghlul, Hudá Sha'arāwī, or Umm Kulthum, his personal narratives became intertwined with the national narrative. In this article, I will analyze four artworks that exhibit his shift from Islamic references to Pharaonic references, thereby expressing his involvement in imagining the modern nation-state. Secondly, I argue that Mukhtar's oeuvre can act as a model for examining other modern artists of the early twentieth century, especially those outside the traditional centers of modernism. The way in which Mukhtar fashioned a national image parallels the practices of other contemporaneous artists. In this way, I intend for this study to be useful for an investigation of 'local modernisms' in general.

Mukhtar's representation of the modern nation of Egypt has roots in regional history. From the sixteenth until the early nineteenth century, Egypt was a province of the Ottoman Empire. The urban center of Cairo and the surrounding area defined the territory, rather than the contemporary geographic borders (Mitchell 2002: 180–1). This geographical area was by no means unified as a singular country, ethnicity, or nation: inhabitants were subjects of a larger Ottoman Empire, but also closely tied to their urban centers or agricultural regions (180). During the nineteenth century, an Albanian-Ottoman dynasty codified the geographic region of Egypt as it exists today: from Sinai in the East to the Western Desert near Libya in the West, and from Aswan in the South to the Mediterranean coast in the North. The British occupation from 1882 to 1952 further reinforced these borders. Throughout this period of codification, royalty and elites gradually turned their political, intellectual, and cultural gaze from Istanbul towards Paris. To celebrate the Suez Canal's opening in 1869, the ruler of Egypt, Khedive Isma'il, commissioned a new downtown Cairo neighborhood based on French models, overseen by 'Ali Mubarak, the Minister of Public Works. The new modern city, designed with wide boulevards and squares like Baron Haussmann's Paris, rose beside the medieval Islamic city.[2] Before Mubarak 'took over, Cairo only had three squares, or *maydans*; by the time he was done, it had sixteen' (AlSayyad 2005: 56–7). The modern urban center alongside the technological developments of the Suez Canal symbolized the technological prowess of the modern nation of Egypt. Additionally, the new squares called for public sculpture. At the turn of the century, a need arose for a national art movement to fill these squares.

Thus, shifting elite aesthetic preferences along with the need for locally produced art led to a modern art movement. However, this movement did not follow the European path towards formal abstraction. Rather, three main characteristics defined the movement. First, the return of the figure to art, as figural representation was scant in Egypt from the Arab conquest

in the seventh century due to Islamic art's aniconism, i.e. its avoidance of depictions of living beings. The second characteristic is the central role of the nation in arts education, circulation, and style. As Mukhtar's works show, this concept of nation continually changed in tandem with cultural and political discourse. Thirdly, Egyptian modern artists selectively appropriated and participated in modern European movements such as Abstraction, Classicism, and Surrealism. This appropriation was not a simple 'copying', but an active, calculated choice made for varying purposes. One catalyst for this borrowing in the early twentieth century was the active formation of the nation of Egypt, to which Mukhtar and other artists contributed. The majority of these early national artists graduated from the new Cairo School of Fine Arts.

The establishment of this national art school laid the groundwork for the Egyptian modern art movement. In the eighteenth century, formal arts education did not exist in Egypt; rather, artisans and architects trained within a guild system (Hanna 2011: 154). Notably, prior to the nineteenth century, there was very little painting and almost no sculpture produced in Egypt. A notable exception was the painted icons of the Coptic Christian community (Jirjis 2008: 17). 'Fine Arts' in the western European sense was not a part of the traditional Egyptian art practice. In the nineteenth century, the Albanian-Ottoman dynasty instituted European-style educational reforms, which slowly altered the systems of arts training (Heyworth-Dunne 1939). A crucial figure in this shift was the legal scholar Sheikh Muhammad 'Abduh. Later in the century, he argued that a modern nation was comprised of more than just bureaucrats and professionals; rather, Egypt required critical thinkers, including artists (de Guerville 1906: 160). To this end, he issued a *fatwa*[3] in 1904, entitled 'A Ruling on the Benefits of Painting and Sculpture'. Most scholars point to his argument that painting and sculpture are ultimately acceptable because idol worship no longer threatens society (Karnouk 2005: 11–12; Shabout 2007: 16–17). Yet, 'Abduh also argues for the fine arts by equating them to the Arab history of poetry. He writes: 'a picture is like a poem that is seen but not heard, and a poem is like a picture that is heard but not seen' ('Abduh [1904] 2003: 499). Here, 'Abduh quotes the famous proverb of Simonides of Ceos and contends that images function like poetry. Through this association, he highlights how cultural objects can open the mind for critical thought, an essential aspect of a modern society. It is not simply that fine arts no longer threaten society, but that the modern nation should value art. Moreover, the quote reveals 'Abduh's idea that art establishes continuity with the history of Arab and Egyptian culture, thereby building a shared history by which to unite the nation. 'Abduh recognized the power of images, and this *fatwa* moved to officially authorize and subsequently institutionalize the production of artists and artworks for political and social ends.

After the *fatwa*, in 1908, the Egyptian Prince Youssef Kamal founded the École Égyptienne des Beaux-Arts in Cairo. A French wax sculptor, Guillaume Laplagne, directed the school and an Italian draftsman, a Swiss architect, and an Egyptian calligrapher taught its courses (see *École Égyptienne*). The school's name and curriculum mirrored its French cousin, the Parisian École des Beaux-Arts. Courses covered the 'four arts' – painting, sculpture, architecture, and design. The methods, especially for painting and sculpture, were directed towards the study of the human body, both live nude models and classical precedents. Notably, the prince chose not to adopt the arts education system of the English, who had occupied Egypt since 1882. Unlike a colony such as India, which implemented the fine arts training program of the British colonizers (Dadi 2010: 49), this young Egyptian prince chose the French system. This choice perhaps exhibits one way in which Egyptian nationalists attempted to resist their colonizers, here by adopting an opposing method of arts education. Yet, the choice of the French system also reflects Egyptian elite tastes of the time, which were thoroughly Francophile. Additionally, the school advocated a nationalist purpose from its inception. The small pamphlet commemorating the opening of the school states: 'the professors strive, after having taught students artistic techniques, to develop in them, thanks to the surviving venerable examples of ancient Egyptian art and the pinnacles of Arab art, a taste of a national art to express the modern Egyptian civilization' (*École Égyptienne*: 5). Thus, funded by the royal family, this school trained local artists to work in the service of the nation along the lines of Francophile elite tastes. The École's first graduating class included Mukhtar.

Mukhtar's self-fashioned biography reinforces his role in imagining the Egyptian nation-state. He crafted a persona through his artistic style as well as through a descriptive story of his childhood. Though based in fact, Mukhtar and his biographers codified this narrative, emphasizing the aspects that supported the myth of a national hero. The story begins with his birth to a local village leader in the town of Tanbara in the Nile Delta in 1891. Along the riverbanks, he sculpted figurines from the mud (Abu Ghazi and Boctor 1949: 29). This 'origin myth' of a young boy precociously forming sculptures from the same fertile clay that nurtured Egyptian civilization echoes the legend of Giotto, discovered by Cimabue in the countryside, painting sheep on rocks (Vasari [1550] 1987: 16). Like Giotto, Mukhtar moved from the countryside as a young boy: his mother brought him and his sisters to Cairo around 1900. Upon hearing about the new art school in 1908, Mukhtar rushed to the front gates and begged the director, Laplagne, to accept him. From this simple tale, Mukhtar shaped his public persona as a national artist – born on the fertile riverbanks and one of the first students at the nationally funded fine art school. He fashioned himself simultaneously as a perfect son of the nation and as a

Figure 2. *Khawla Bint Al-Azwar*, 1910 [sculpture now lost]. Photograph from Mahmoud Mukhtar Archive, Collection of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi, Cairo, Egypt.

quintessential representative of the new, modern Egypt. His origins defined his authorial voice and acted as a metonym for the country itself.

During his time at the École Égyptienne, Mukhtar sculpted *Khawla Bint Al-Azwar* (Figure 2). The work depicts a legendary early Muslim woman warrior who fought in masculine disguise in the conquests against the Byzantine armies in Syria. Al-Azwar was also a subject in a handful of contemporary women's magazines, as well as history textbooks in government girls' schools (Booth 1997: 843, 853). In Mukhtar's sculpture, a rearing horse, rendered expertly with hooves aloft, carries its female spear-wielding protagonist. Though this sculpture is now lost, the silhouette in the photograph shows a dynamic and skillful composition for a 19-year-old student. One detail stands out: the flowing cloak behind her elbow that conveys the movement with which she charges her opponent. This early work reveals a few hallmarks of Mukhtar's style. First is his choice of a historical female figure as a metonymic

representation of the nation. Second, the fluttering cloak draws attention to the materiality of sculptural representations of fabric, a technique he would later use to explore formal abstraction.

In *Khawla*, Mukhtar selects a female figure from Arab-Islamic history to represent the nation. The symbolic woman-as-nation proliferated in Egyptian visual culture, literature, and politics of the time. In the press, Egypt was routinely depicted as a woman, usually under the oppression of the masculine French, Turkish, and British forces (Baron 2005). At this moment for Mukhtar, Egyptian history centered on an Arab-Islamic past, a model from which he later departed. This choice also resonates with the architectural neo-Mamluk style that predominated in Egypt at the time (Sanders 2008: 56). After the 1919 Revolution and especially after the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922, national cultural references shifted from Arab-Islamic to ancient Egyptian. With *Khawla*, Mukhtar participated in the imagining of the modern nation through his selection of a particular type of historical reference. By portraying this Arab-Islamic heroine, he made an argument for a shared Arab-Islamic past for the nation of Egypt. This historical choice shifted dramatically after his training and early career in Paris.

In the autumn of 1912, Prince Youssef Kamal sent Mukhtar to Paris, where he enrolled in the studio of sculptor Jules-Felix Coutan at the École des Beaux Arts. Alongside his name in the register on 21 October 1912, the names of students from Japan, Italy, Turkey, and Austria also appear, though the majority of students were French (Coutan 1912). His 'hazing' (initiation) during these first few weeks also plays an important role in his origin myth. The story goes that his classmates stripped him naked, painted his body, hoisted him on a chair, declared him 'Ramses', after the famous Pharaoh, and then paraded down the street to their favorite bar on Rue Bonaparte (Abu Ghazi and Boctor 1949: 45). This was not a unique experience; rather, the senior classmates hazed all new students, called 'les nouveaux'. During these events, most foreigners were associated with national stereotypes: two Americans 'sang and danced a jig' while naked (Morrow 1900: 46). In a photograph from Mukhtar's archive, students and models[4] stand outside the École in costume for the annual 'Festival of Four Arts', where each studio competed for the most outlandish garb (Figure 3). The students are dressed in ancient Greek and Roman clothing, in various states of nudity, mimicking the classical statuary that they studied in the standard curriculum. The young man in the upper left wears a loincloth and strikes a *contrapposto* pose, echoing the statue on the right. Mukhtar's hazing differs not in the nudity; rather, his nickname sets him apart from the others: Ramses. These French students associated Egypt not with the Arab or Islamic history, to which Khawla belonged, but with ancient Egypt. This is a logical outcome, as their education was based on ancient Greek and Roman precedents – they

Figure 3. *Festival of the Four Arts*, École des Beaux-Arts, Paris, c. 1912. Mahmoud Mukhtar Archive, Collection of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi, Cairo, Egypt.

simply grafted this equation onto Mukhtar. Hence, once in France, Mukhtar's artistic identity became enmeshed with Pharaonic history.

The Egyptian and French educational institutions within which Mukhtar trained reinforced the centrality of national identity in his work. Since state governments funded arts education in both contexts, the nation necessarily became a central aspect of both institutions. In Paris, as in Cairo, the schools produced national artists who would go on to produce artwork for the state, not necessarily as propaganda, but as public art. Mukhtar constructed a personal narrative embedded in nationalist symbols, such as the Nile riverbanks and ancient Egyptian precedents. He incorporated these personal details into his artworks, bonding him with the imagining of the modern nation. Even though his presence in both Paris and Cairo defines him as an international artist, he chose clearly to represent his nationality through Pharaonic imagery. As one of many foreigners in Paris, these references distinguished his artwork, and in turn he mobilized these references for Egypt to define itself.

Mukhtar spent the rest of the 1910s in Paris, eking out a meager existence on a government scholarship (Mukhtar 1917). Meanwhile, in 1919, Egypt erupted into revolution against the British, fueled by popular protests. During World War I, the British augmented their occupation of Egypt by instituting a formal protectorate, forcing the abdication of

Le "Réveil de l'Egypte."

هضـــــــة مصـــــــر

التمثال الرمزى الذى صنعه نابغة مصر الحقار
مختار افندى وعرضه فى معرض الفنون الجميلة
بباريس فكان موضع الاعجاب .

Figure 4. First model of *Egypt's Reawakening*, subscription card, c. 1920. Mahmoud Mukhtar Archive, Collection of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi, Cairo, Egypt.

Khedive Abbas Hilmi II in favor of his uncle, Sultan Hussein Kamel. This act formally dissolved Egypt's ties with the Ottoman Empire. After the war's end, the public became increasingly frustrated with British control and voiced their demands in the streets. Even groups of women protested, marching in 'ladies' demonstrations' that persisted in national memory as representative of the wide-reaching impact of the unrest (Baron 2005: 107). These events, covered in the international press, prompted Mukhtar to sculpt a commemorative piece. He first made a small statue in Paris for the 1920 Salon of French Artists and titled it *Naḥḍat Miṣr* [Egypt's Reawakening][5] (Figure 4). '*Naḥḍa*' means awakening, rising up, and Renaissance, and also refers to the Arab intellectual movement of the late

nineteenth century of the same name (Kassab 2010: 17). A group of Egyptian students visited Mukhtar and his new sculpture in Paris and immediately grasped its potent nationalist symbolism. They wrote furiously in the Egyptian press in support of the work and launched a national campaign to construct a monumental public version of the sculpture, ultimately deciding to install it facing Cairo's main railway station (Abu Ghazi and Boctor 1949: 53). The students recognized that the image embodied the set of shared characteristics that defined the modern nation-state. By publicly mounting the sculpture in a location that symbolized modernization and progress, the site itself framed the sculpture to express a nationalist message.

In 1920, Mukhtar returned to Cairo a national hero. Images of his sculpture appeared in the press, along with caricatures of him, with his large nose and receding hairline accentuated. Within this public context, he altered his original plans to cast the statue in bronze, instead deciding to execute it in pink granite, quarried from Aswan, just like the ancient monumental sculptures of Ramses. To fund the sculpture, the Egyptian people, from poor peasants to wealthy dowagers, donated money to the subscription campaign (Figure 4) (Abu Ghazi 1964: 75). Eight years later, in 1928, the work was unveiled outside the train station in a public event attended by Egyptian society and reported widely in the press (Colla 2007: 230). Though Mukhtar designed the work and oversaw its execution, the nation acted as patron through popularly sourced funding and the public discourse surrounding its unveiling.

Before *Nahḍat Miṣr*, public sculptures in Cairo had generally depicted royals or military officers in bronze. Khedive Isma'il commissioned these from French sculptors while he oversaw the building of Haussmann-like boulevards of the new downtown Cairo (Lababidi 2008: 53). Unlike these academic memorial statues, Mukhtar's sculpture *Nahḍat Miṣr* is allegorical rather than iconic (Figure 5): he uses symbols to convey a socio-political message rather than a purely memorial one. The first symbol – the peasant – had long represented the Egyptian people, her body an emblem of the fertile Nile valley. The sphinx unmistakably references ancient Egypt, a symbolism often employed to unite the country around a shared historical past (Gershoni and Jankowski 1987: 164). With this work, Mukhtar publicly reinforces these symbols' references to the agricultural and sculptural histories of Egypt as defining aspects of the modern nation of Egypt. He has discarded his original references to an Arab-Islamic past in favor of these Pharaonic and peasant images.

Mukhtar's peasant is a monumental, powerful woman. She stands perfectly erect, her cloak creating strong vertical lines as it falls along her body. The V-shaped edge of the garment at her neck exposes a strong, muscular collar. Her face stoically expresses cool confidence, and Mukhtar

Figure 5. *Egypt's Reawakening [Naḥḍat Miṣr]*, 1920–28. Photograph by the author, April 2012.

outlines her features to increase their visibility from afar. Thick contours surround her eyes, evoking the ancient Egyptian Eye of Horus. Her hair curls in a classical wave, with a thick braid barely visible from underneath the granite veil, and is tied with a headband adorned with an ancient Egyptian symbol of the scarab. Even though this peasant is not necessarily derived from an ancient Egyptian image, Mukhtar emphasizes her time- lessness through certain gestures and attributes. Her steady arm holds her *tarha*[6] veil out firmly, creating a trapezoidal space. With this gesture, she forms a concave area adjacent to her ear, providing a repository for the protests of the people in the streets. She listens to the people, and passes along the message to the sphinx. While the work itself conveys a public
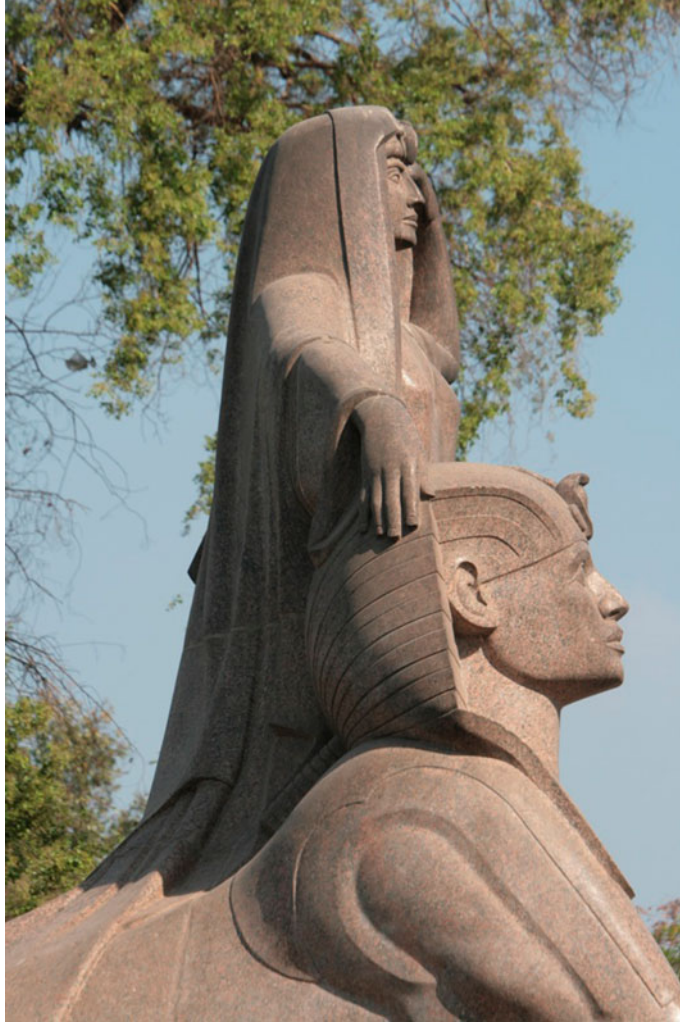
Figure 6. *Egypt's Reawakening [Nahḍat Miṣr]*, 1920–28. Photograph by the author, April 2012.

message, in this gesture, the sculpture also depicts the transfer of messages between the cultural object and the people. In addition to a symbolic representation of Egypt, it also illustrates the public discourse of the modern nation.

The peasant lays her hand gently on the sphinx, for balance, but also in a gentle urging (Figure 6). The sphinx reacts, its front legs extended as if about to rise, rather than bent as in the traditional iconographic position. His features mirror the peasant's in their monumental sternness. Unlike the Sphinx at the Giza Pyramids, whose face is a portrait of a pharaoh, this sphinx is a generic man rather than a famous leader.[7] His bicep is particularly modernized, even mechanical, in its stark differentiation of

musculature, evoking the dynamic bodies of Futurist painting and sculpture. Stylistically, Mukhtar updates ancient Egyptian imagery for the modern era and brings popular visual culture into conversation with European trends. The peasant (symbol of the people) and the sphinx (symbol of history) work together to move the nation forward. The gentle but firm cooperation between the figures represents the symbiosis of a great civilization and her modern people. This public work presents a straightforward symbolism – one that espouses a nationalist ideology, but also instructs the public in how to imagine their new country as both a unified territory around the Nile Valley and a shared history stretching back to ancient Egypt. Moreover, the work acts as a model for the use of Pharaonism as public symbol of Egypt, thereby aiding in public imagining of the modern nation of Egypt.

The peasant's gesture, removing her veil, is a powerful image and requires analysis. Today, the *hijab* is a potent, contested, and divisive symbol of religion, exemplified by the French 2004 headscarf ban controversy or the prevalence of the *hijab* alongside the growth of religious political parties in Turkey. Thus, the peasant's gesture of veil-lifting in *Nahḍat Miṣr* could appear as a statement for women's liberation. However, the context of Egyptian discourse as well as European sculptural trends leads to a different conclusion. As a member of the intellectual *Nahḍa* movement, Qasim Amin called for the liberation of women in a controversial 1899 essay. In it, he argued that women should shed the face veil but not the headscarf (Amīn [1899] 2000: 42–3). The prominent feminist nationalist Hudá Sha'arāwī, who would later help establish the Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, was the first Egyptian woman to publicly shed her face veil in 1924 (Sha'arāwī 1987). These contemporary examples suggest that the peasant's gesture does not literally instruct Egyptian women to remove their headscarves. Additionally, the art-historical context of this gesture also reveals a nuanced meaning. *France of the Renaissance*, on the Alexander III Bridge in Paris (Figure 7), designed by Mukhtar's teacher, Jules-Felix Coutan, portrays an allegorical woman lifting a veil to represent enlightenment. Another contemporary piece, *Ethiopia Awakening* (mid-1920s) by Harlem Renaissance sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller, depicts a Pharaonic mummy figure unraveling her shrouds, again symbolizing awakening (Ater 2003). Both works use the sculptural depiction of falling fabric to connote the same meaning. The gesture of the peasant in *Nahḍat Miṣr* thus does not directly call for Egyptian women to de-veil, but instead imagines the emergent nation.

Alternating between his studios in Paris and Cairo throughout the 1920s, Mukhtar was also in conversation with the 'Return to Order' movement that followed World War I. His divergence from heroic historical sculpture, such as *Khawla*, to a more formally focused sculpture of ancient allegorical figures aligns with this movement. Often seen as a

Figure 7. Jules Felix Coutan, *La France de la Renaissance*, Alexander III Bridge, Paris, 1900. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_france_de_la_renaissance_jules_felix_coutan.jpg.

reaction to the destabilizing forces of WWI, the Return to Order movement drew on classical sources and nationalism, inflected with abstraction. Artists rejected the avant-garde Cubism of the pre-war era in favor of Classicism (Silver 1989: 228). Pablo Picasso's move from his pre-war Cubist techniques to the heavy, classical forms of the early 1920s exemplifies this shift. In particular, there was 'a re-emergence of historical reference' (236).

Isis, a life-size marble statue from 1929, illustrates Mukhtar's conversation with the Return to Order movement (Figure 8). The half-nude figure sits cross-legged, her hands behind her head, braiding her hair. Her pose evokes the ancient Egyptian statue of a seated scribe, and her name, inscribed on the base of the sculpture, references the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis. Her torso and face, however, more strongly resemble a contemporary nude from the 1920s, such as those of Aristide Maillol, than the iconographic goddess of ancient Egypt. The unevenness of her raised arms breaks the ancient Egyptian symmetry of the seated scribe, endowing the figure with life and sensuality. Mukhtar was enacting a similar process to the artists of the Return to Order movement through merging historical referents with modern techniques to espouse a new image of nation in the post-WWI era. As in *Nahḍat Miṣr*, he conveyed an
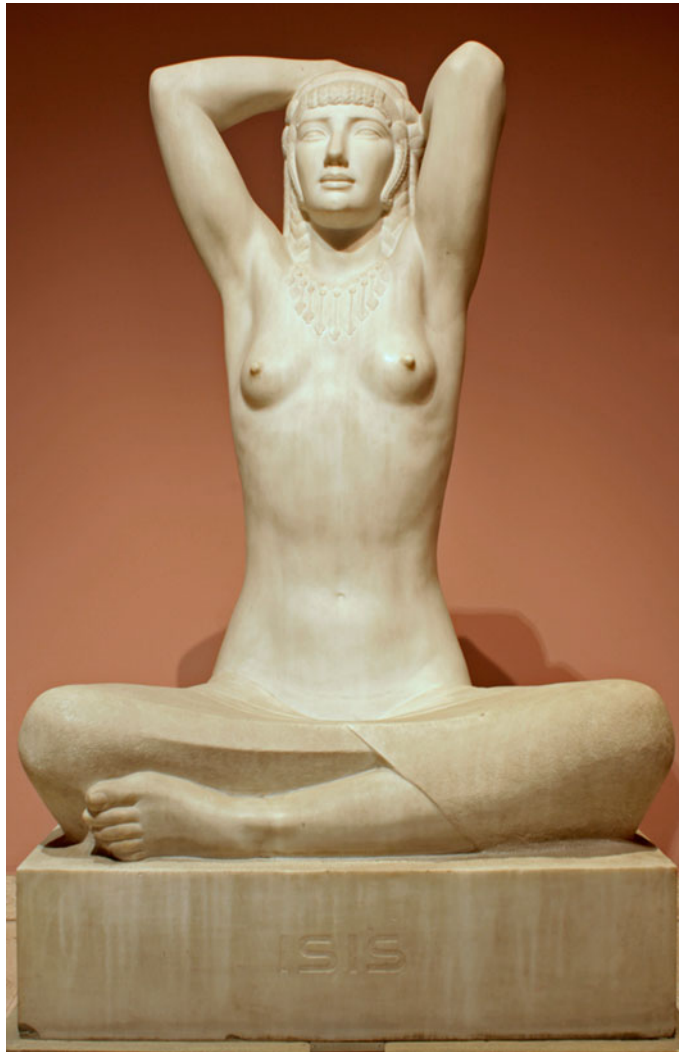
Figure 8. *Isis*, 1929, Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo. Photograph by the author, May 2012.

image of Egypt through a modern female body and a reference to Egypt's shared ancient history, but here through a single figure rather than two.

Isis exudes contemporary sensuality and historicism, with which Mukhtar built a national aesthetic. She is composed and confident, perfectly at ease as both modern and Egyptian. In this work, Mukhtar expressed the balance, beauty, and power achievable through an Egyptian modernism, synthesizing ancient Egyptian referents with a modern style. He continued to establish ancient Egyptian themes as crucial to the national image, but also created a unique aesthetic style that emphasized the 'modern' aspect of modern Egypt. Instead of portraying Isis according

Figure 9. *Khamasin*, 1929, Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo. Photograph from Mahmoud Mukhtar Archive, Collection of Dr. Emad Abu Ghazi, Cairo, Egypt.

to ancient iconographic conventions, with headdress and stiff body, this twentieth-century Isis has the sensual body of a modern woman. Through the medium of sculpture, he imagined the modernity of the new nation-state.

Mukhtar continued to elaborate on this national aesthetic in his smaller works, where the ancient Egyptian references decrease in intensity. The most famous of these works, *Khamasin*, portrays a woman battling the sand storms (Figure 9). The word '*khamasin*' refers to the 50-day period of sandstorms during the Egyptian spring. Mukhtar depicts the figure's cloak blown back by the harsh winds, revealing the contours of her form. The fabric simultaneously covers and accentuates her body, a choice that allowed Mukhtar to explore the medium of sculpture through the image of the peasant (Figure 10). In this work, Mukhtar focused on the peasant, widespread both in literary and visual
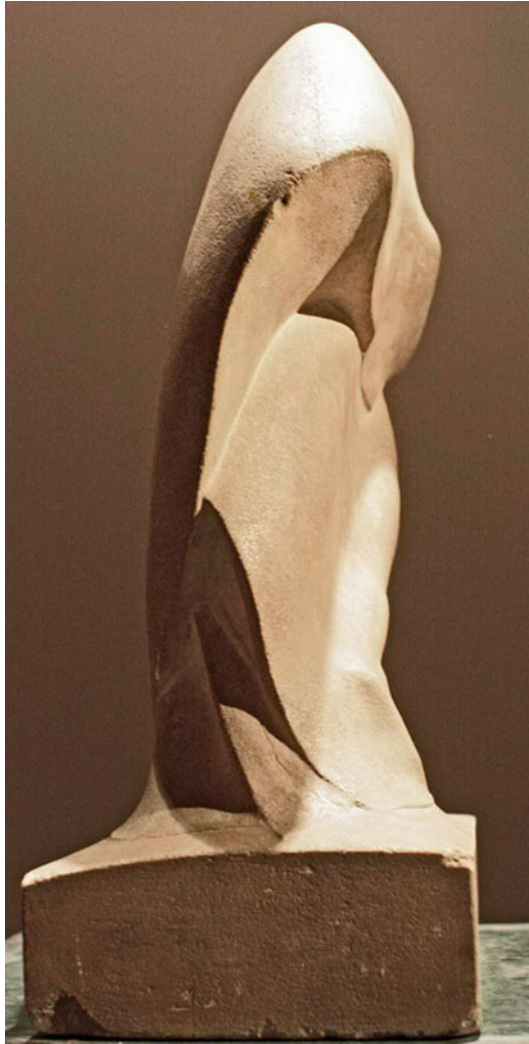
Figure 10. *Khamasin*, 1929, Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum, Cairo. Photograph by the author, May 2012.

culture as a metonym for the nation. Egyptian nationalists and colonial orientalists idealized the peasant as a symbol of the fertility and permanence of the Nile Valley, while also focusing on the peasant as an object for progress and reform (Gasper 2009; Selim 2004). Rather than purely constructing a symbol of Egypt, Mukhtar employed the form of the work to further develop a modern aesthetic.

Mukhtar's career exhibits the centrality of nation in early twentieth-century art in Egypt, and his oeuvre contributed to the imaging of the new nation of modern Egypt. As many other nations were forming under similar circumstances during this era, Mukhtar's methods can serve as a model for investigating other 'local modernisms'. By questioning the role

of authorship, we may see how other movements employed artists in modern public life. Additionally, comparing the specificities of how artists and movements appropriated European techniques could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the impact and purpose of these techniques outside their sites of formation. As many current studies of 'local modernisms' rely on the nation as an organizational structure for analyzing the art, these larger themes can assist in differentiating the ways in which nation and nationalism formed modern art, and vice versa.

Mainstream modernist art history largely lacks the framework of nation within its discourse. A quick search of the quintessential modernist art journal, *October*, reveals only one article that deals directly with nationalism, which focuses primarily on textual sources rather than visual (Huyssen 1992). This lacuna suggests that new analyses may result from investigating the role of nation in both canonical and non-canonical forms of modernism. Given the deep impact of the world wars on Europe and America, as well as the aftermath of colonial empires and, later, the Cold War, nation remains a central subject to these regions' histories, and it is imperative that we acknowledge its role in twentieth-century art, from Cairo to Paris and beyond.

Notes

1. Arabic: محمود مختار, His name has also been transliterated as Moukhtar, Mokhtar, and Mouktar.
2. Georges-Eugène Haussmann, known as Baron Haussmann, redesigned the urban center of Paris, destroying much of the medieval city in favor of wide boulevards, designed to prevent the barricades associated with social unrest.
3. A *fatwa* is a legal opinion or decree handed down by a Muslim religious leader.
4. The women in the photographs are not students – they are the models, hence their ease in being nude in the photographs.
5. Arabic: نهضة مصر.
6. A *tarha* is a veil similar to a Spanish mantilla and is traditionally worn by peasant women in the Egyptian Delta.
7. The actual identity and builder of the Sphinx of Giza is still debated, though it is often said to be the visage of Khafre, the builder of the Pyramid directly behind it.

Notes on contributor

Alexandra Dika Seggerman completed her doctorate at Yale University, 'Revolution and Renaissance in Modern Egyptian Art, 1880–1960.' She conducted fieldwork in Cairo and Alexandria during 2011–12 as a US

Department of State ECA Pre-doctoral Fellow at the American Research Center in Egypt.

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