

## IN SEARCH OF A FACE:

SALIH ABDOU MASHAMOUN--THE SUN AND THE ECLIPSE

by

Sondra Hale and Mohamed Omer Bushara

On June 25th, 1975, an art exhibition opened in Omdurman, Sudan. It was entitled "Inspiration from our Nubian Heritage" and "Human Agonies in Death and Life". The oils by Mashamoun were frigid and immobile; the ink on wood was hurried, frantic, brilliant and elusive, reflecting personal, intimate events.

In the late 1960's he showed us he could be one of the best of that rare character among Sudanese artists of that decade: the social critic and revolutionary. Modest, unassuming, pessimistic, defeatist, nearly fatalistic, he now has the tone of one who would prefer that his past as a social critic be forgotten. He wants to shed such pretensions--and turn inward or escape into the romantic past.

Sudan has produced some of Africa's finest artists: Ibrahim el-Salahi, Ahmed Shibrain, Hussein Shariffe, to name only a few. Out of a dozen well-trained, accomplished, internationally recognized painters, only a couple have slipped away from the bureaucratic forces that eventually swallow most of the geniuses in the fine arts there.<sup>1</sup> Poet-or-painter-turned diplomat is a deadly potion. It is deadly to the dynamic work of the committed artist, deadly to the dreams of the dispossessed in spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Mashamoun is encased in his environment, his past, and in his profession. The changes in his art reflect this imprisonment, although he, himself does not express it verbally.<sup>3</sup> There have been many changes in his life since his student days in Alexandria and his work takes on all the movements of his mind and situation. There is the student-turned diplomat; private person-turned-public; blatant protest turned to subtle expression; and an artist of the people turned toward the self. These changes in his being brought about changes in his art, not just changes in the themes, as one might expect, but in the form, technique, and materials. He once painted in bold moving oils. Then he switched to waterwash and delicate inks, a more personal, intricate genre, but with less movement: the immobile face of the public man.

Perhaps one would not care so much if it were not for the fact that Mashamoun (whose Nubian names mean "Sun-Sun") is one of the most sensitive, introspective, and sincere among Sudanese artists, not to mention his ability. But a worker alienated from his work becomes alienated from himself. In a bureaucratic, capitalist society such as Sudan's, the artist usually serves the government (i.e. not the people) in a civil service position either teaching in a government school, administrating, or in some other profession such as Mashamoun's foreign service job.<sup>4</sup>

Salahi (still in prison as of the writing of this paper), Sudan's premiere painter and international awards winner, had been Deputy Minister of Culture and Information for a couple of years when he was arrested in September, 1975, implicated in one of Sudan's countless coups, abortive coups, and counter-coups since 1956. Shibrain, now head of the College of Fine Arts, Khartoum Technical Institute (K.T.I.) and generally recognized as the second most famous painter, was detained once himself. Salahi is a socially progressive thinker with centrist political views: Shibrain is generally considered conservative. Hussein Shariffe, perhaps the most brilliant of the established painters working in an experimental, abstract genre, is basically apolitical<sup>5</sup> which tends to dampen any very progressive political views he might have developed. They all three have had "desk jobs"—empty titles and meaningless paper-pushing. These jobs do stabilize their lives but stagnate their art. Shariffe has escaped from time to time, in various ways; he is now in film, for example. But when he returns from these excursions into other forms of art and from his studies in Europe, he faces his meaningless desk just as before, only perhaps, with the occasional challenge of side-projects.

Mashamoun escaped off and on too—the extensive travels and periods of foreign residence of a diplomat. But, although these travels enriched his art in a number of ways—giving him entirely different traditions to interpret and exposing him to new techniques—he encountered a homelessness and existential confusion, an identity crisis, to use the cliché. Such an artist as Mashamoun is alienated at two levels; in the classic Marxist sense and in the existential sense. This strangeness was further exacerbated by the inundation of his original homeland, the village of Debeira in Nubia.<sup>6</sup> When he returned to Sudan for a visit in 1974, he was intent on recollecting and reassembling his heritage with a vengeance. He reproduced the displaced frescoes of Christian Nubia with oil and enamel, making his own walls, only to burst out of them with a series of ink on wood—an escape from the Nubian past into the highly intimate present.<sup>7</sup>

In September, 1974 the two of us had long interview sessions with Mashamoun. He began with a short biographical sketch, telling us how he was basically self-taught in painting:

Mashamoun (M): I was born in the village of Debeira in Wadi Halfa (Nubia), Northern Sudan. When I was young we lived near a small outlet of the Nile where there was a lot of mud and a great expanse of desert...as far as my eyes could see. I began to make small mud statues, and lived as one with my surroundings. But when I was around ten years old the social conditions of my family forced our emigration to Alexandria, Egypt, where my father was working. There in elementary school I began to draw and paint. But when I went to secondary school I stopped drawing because I was captivated instead by theatre and poetry, wanting to become an actor or director, or poet. During the whole secondary school period I did no art work at all; I had no idea about oils or any other graphic medium. When I entered the University of Alexandria in 1964, I was still obsessed with theatre.

But a strange event occurred: I went to a student-play gathering one day, but the director did not come. I wandered through that part of the college, passing a room with paintings. I went in and started painting, leaving my pieces in the room when I left. The next day some people told me someone was looking for me. It turned out to be one of the most important painters in Egypt, Seif Wanley. He told me I could be a very good painter, and said he would help me.

I forgot all about theatre, poetry, everything--and started painting. He coached me for only three months, but during these months he taught me so much about oil painting. After that, from time to time I would go to his studio to show him my paintings, and he would give me his opinions. In 1965, after one year, I won first prize, a gold medal, at the Alexandria University exhibition, the first time I had participated in a competition. It was for all the students--of course, including the art students themselves. The following year I won first prize again. In 1967 I received about six prizes out of ten: oil painting, free-drawing in charcoal, and for woodcuts and printing.

But my formal studies had been in political science. I graduated from the Faculty of Commerce, and returned to Sudan, eventually joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Let me tell you a bit about the mood of those paintings when

I won those prizes. As I told you, I was intrigued with theatre and poetry in my early years. That reading not only exposed me to new cultural experiences, but also sensitized me to the outside world--later reflected in my painting. At that time I was influenced by the morbid poetry and stories by such writers as Poe.

In theatre I was impressed by Eugene O'Neill; then I began reading in the Theatre of the Absurd. Their pessimism filled my paintings at that time--showing up in my choice of colour, and also in theme. For example, one of my first prize paintings was entitled "End All"--the same idea as the absurdists. It depicts a very minute man. There are two nude figures--very small figures in a vacuum...they are dwarfed by the vacuum. There is a third person--dead--and the sun--in this wide space. People are dying while the sun always rises--indifferent to death and suffering. I painted with vivid, striking colours in the mode of the expressionists--and, of course, the themes were philosophical. The next year my winning painting was "Tragedy", the title again influenced by theatre. It is the same idea as "End All", but in another form. It depicts some people who are forming a wall; a nude person is on the floor in front of this wall of people. The theme is the same as "End All", i.e. nobody cares or will do anything while people are dying in the streets. In these paintings I was also influenced by some of the poems by the Egyptians Ahmed Mouti Higazi and Salah Abdel Sabbour.

In those two paintings and during those two years, generally, I was talking about the individual, i.e. man facing his fate alone. Later on in 1967 I became aware of some of the social problems around me. At that time I put behind me the ideas of the absurdists--the individual and his fate, people alienated from society, and I began to communicate with the poor of society, the people I was seeing everyday. I began to make a connection with the people: farmers, labourers, and their social problems, the social problems in Egypt. Then I began to expand, make wall paintings, murals, big pieces for street people--like some of the Mexican muralists, Rivera and Orozco. I wanted to produce these for hospitals, universities, and other public places. Then I started painting directly about farmers and labourers. One piece I made was about forced migrant labour--those people in Egypt who dig ditches, make dams, etc., but who, after the working season, are just left to die. No one cares--like the uncaring sun. Yousif Idris, the Egyptian, wrote about them. Suddenly my emphasis had shifted from personal tragedy to social protest.

- Q.= Could one say, then, that you shifted in your philosophy from the self-indulgence of personal tragedy, grief or personal philosophy to a much more social-oriented form of thinking? But did this, then, change the form or style of your work to socialist-realist? We thought of this when you mentioned José Orozco and Diego Rivera, the revolutionary muralists--and we thought your style might also have changed over this transitional period.
- M.= In the idea only came the shift--the personal to social tragedy--but not in the form.<sup>8</sup> What I didn't like in the socialist-realist painting was its direct and blatant approach. It is not subtle because these painters thought the people to be ignorant and thought that they needed to be politically educated. I tried to be more subtle and symbolistic instead, to provoke. For example, sometimes I paint a work which is very sad and I put on it a title which is a contradiction--a portrait of a very old woman entitled "Childhood". Childhood is innocent, of course. And some people made her very old while she is really a child. You see, it is not direct. I wanted people to face who is responsible and to ask what can be done to change these problems. I want them to ask themselves these questions. This was my approach at that time: symbolistic form and technique, but ideas about social problems and the necessity for change.
- Q.= Not including the playwrights and poets who influenced you, was there any particular painter--other than the Mexican modernists that we have mentioned--who influenced your ideas about social reform? In Egypt or anywhere?
- M.= Yes, at that time I turned towards the expressionists--namely the German expressionists such as Kokoschka and Max Beckmann. These people I liked in the sense that I respected how they treated social problems. But I am not sure you can say my painting is similar to any of them; I tried to be me.
- Q.= You said Seif Wanley taught you the secrets of how to paint. Do you think that he influenced you in any way in your style of painting or, particularly, in the ideas behind your paintings?
- M.= He influenced me in technique, for example, in teaching me how to exclude the details and concentrate on basic form. But he also taught me the "sweetness" in my painting. I don't know how to express it in English. Sometimes my painting may be harsh, or heavy, or sad in theme--but the "sweetness" of colours comes through. I feel this influence but it is hard

to express it. His influence on me is hard to see, therefore. He is an abstract painter and believes that painting has its own language, its own ideas and--like music--it is not to be explained. It is art for the sake of art. For him, art has its own existence, its own medium, its own language.

Q.= And you rejected this?

M.= Yes, we took two entirely different directions. In a way I am a Dionysian and he is an Apollonian.

Q.= It could not have been easy to escape the influence of Seif Wanley.

M.= It was easy for me to escape much of his influence because my guiding ideas were so different. If the ideas had been similar, then our art might have been similar. But from the very start I was filled with the ideas of progressive theatre and poetry, and it was very clear that I was going in a different direction.

Q.= You have now led up to one of the questions we were going to ask relating to the messages in your works and how you see the role of the artist in society. But since you are Sudanese, how do you see the role of the artist in Sudanese society. This we would like to relate to your earlier points about your wanting to reach the people, the various themes in your work, etc. You did comment on the message in your work. Would you comment on whether or not you think the message is still the same and, if not, how it has changed, and then what you see as your role in Sudanese society now?

M.= If you look at the whole perspective of my work, you will see that I never painted landscapes nor still-lives, for example--Only faces, human beings suffering, either for personal or for social reasons. I was obsessed with these ideas and until now I am trying to express them with different styles or media--on goatskin, hardboard, paper, canvas. When I returned to Sudan, I was struck also by the people, the faces, and the same tragedy, whether social or personal. My first one-man show in Khartoum was divided into two parts--the first being social: "The Tragedy of Human Existence." These were the same basic themes, but what was different from the earlier period was that I was searching for some things which I found in the social conditions of Sudan and in the Sudanese way of thinking.

In my village of Debeira, they believed in legends and in ancestors. For example, I believed that my dead sister was coming back as a bird--reincarnated. So, when I saw a particular bird, I would not hurt it in any way; it could be the soul of

my sister. I should feed the pigeon--talk to it, and tell it that it is the soul of my sister. These aspects of my village heritage were within me. I was also possessed by Pharaonic images--sculpture and the like--the shapes or forms of Pharaonic and Arabic calligraphy.

The effects of my heritage began to come out, and this caused a change in my style, from expressionism to a kind of surrealism--with a metaphysical vision of the world. For example, I tried to combine two elements--the Pharaonic paintings and the women of my own culture with their long black garments ("jarjar") worn in Wadi Halfa. It is quite common to see them walking in their "jarjars" in open space. Much of my traditional environment seems very tragic to me, yet very bright and beautiful. When I began painting the walls, I began to paint these cloaked figures in front of the walls--women with their black "jarjars". Then I tried through surrealism to mix these things with the wall. What exists? I try to mix reality with non-reality. There can be a wall with a woman in front of the wall. The wall may be decorated by Pharaonic symbols--with the girl integrated like a Pharaonic statue in front of the wall. Is she a part of the wall or not? Is she real at all?

Q.= You are trying to draw your dreams and visions?

M.= Yes, but the dreams are mixed with reality; I can't separate them.

Q.= An existential reality--the contrast between existential reality and so-called reality?

M.= A mixture of them. To perplex and provoke the viewer. I respect the people--the viewers. I want to make them think.

Q.= The Austrian painter Klimt tried to draw in two different ways without feeling a contradiction.

M.= There can be two moons--one can be a reflection of the other. The one which is a reflection is not real--one is real and one is false. I am trying to catch both--the reflection exists--and yet it doesn't.

Q.= In this Sudanese society do you believe you can reach people by confusing them? Your concern for reaching the people and your highly intellectual and symbolistic art would seem to present problems for you in terms of appreciation by the masses. Do you feel, at this stage of your art, that you

are reaching only the intelligentsia? Would you like to try to find some other forms of communication, i.e. a broader base for communication?

M.= When I paint, I paint because I feel something. I am trying to avoid being very direct. If I become very direct, to reach the masses, I might miss some of the subtleties of technique. I may end up making it so simple that it will mean nothing--like doves. It is very clear to the masses that doves mean peace or red means fire, blue means sky or water, etc. Such a simplistic approach doesn't make any sense. When I accumulate knowledge and the understanding of the history of art by going to art exhibits and reading, etc., I can express myself more easily, even if you will call it an intellectual approach to art.

As for the viewer of my art, whether they are the masses, the intelligentsia, or the individual, they simply have to see my paintings for themselves. Through time their eyes will become trained and they will understand what is going on just as we train our ears to appreciate very difficult symphonies. Eventually, people will understand what is good, bad, right or wrong--whether it is directed right at them or not. In that sense, my art is for the masses. But the problem, of course, is how to train people to see certain things in their environment and be able to relate them to what they see in paintings. They can appreciate my art if they are sensitized to look around them.

Q.= To go back to one of our other points, if one followed the titles of your exhibitions from the first one in Khartoum at the Grand Hotel (1970) to this 1974 one at the National Council of the Arts--that is, from human and social tragedy to "Sad Memories of Cities of Endless Pleasures"--we think you are moving from the masses to a period of expressing your inner feelings only, your own problems. It seems too personal to be related to the masses.

M.= Yes, that is somewhat true. When I started to face local (Sudanese) problems as related to my art, I saw people as very pessimistic or, rather, fatalistic, in the sense that, even if they had nothing to eat, they would say, "Ensha'alla" ["God Willing"], it will come." This was an obstacle I faced, a contradiction. I haven't resolved it.

The other thing is that I saw my Sudanese people wearing amulets or charms. I asked myself the reason. They are using

them to face some unknown power. They are trying to reach some equilibrium between this unknown power and the weapons they have—the amulets and other ornaments of superstition. I began to draw them, and that brought me back to the personal level, back to personal fate again: people facing an unknown, mysterious fate with personal weapons. Then I tried to mix all this lore with Arabic calligraphy; the charms, Pharaonic and Coptic influences—all our complex heritage. This heritage had always fascinated me, and I was interested in mixing them all together within the frame of the tableau—the painting.

These are some of the reasons for the shift. Also, the verbal/literary side of me was coming out again—the poetry. In 1973 I exhibited in Damascus. The title of the exhibition was "Sad Memories of the Railroad Station of Wadi Halfa". The themes were memories of my childhood, my early travels, the railways. This exhibition was also very personal, very private, just like this 1974 one, "Sad Memories of the Cities of Endless Pleasures". This one is about my failure.

- Q.= Do you feel that being removed, alienated from your own culture: first Nubia, then Egypt, where you went to school, then Sudan—because, as a diplomat, you are away more than you are at home—that this has caused a personal retreat, a retreat into yourself once again as contrasted to the response to your environment that you were expressing earlier? We are simply commenting on the fact that you have been removed from your own culture and society for a very long time.
- M.= Yes, it is something to think about, but I am not conscious of this alienation.
- Q.= Do you agree with El-Tayib Salih<sup>9</sup> that art is the outcome of loss, i.e. when we feel we are losing something, we try to express it through painting, music, poetry, etc.? Maybe a feeling of loss is something coming through in your work that you are not aware of. Maybe in two years from now, perhaps ten, you will be talking about this "period" as one in which you were "alienated", in a certain way, from your own society, even though you were expressing themes from your society much of the time. Still a kind of strangeness, an alienation may be seeping through.
- M.= Maybe the loss is not a material or a physical one (i.e. directly connected to the environment), but a personal or "spiritual" one—not alienation of the body, but alienation of the soul. One can have this feeling of loss here in Khartoum or away—because it is a feeling of the absurdity of life.
- Q.= Alienation at all levels, anywhere—even in Debeira—even in your own neighborhood.

M.= But not so much because of social problems or not necessarily. The absurdity is because sometimes one feels that everything is nothing. One is going to die anyway; everything is nothingness. But it is not only a feeling of loss which propels my work, but a search.

That is why I paint only faces and portraits now. I am searching for a face. I have seen it--maybe in internal images, maybe in dreams, maybe in reality. I feel that a group of people came, stopped, and just looked at me. They looked at me sadly for just a second--then they disappeared. Maybe they are a dream, maybe a reality, maybe a memory from my childhood. They simply passed by me on the street. I called to them to come back, to try to tell me what they wanted, but I could not find them. I am trying to find them through my paintings. That is why you will always see a lot of people in one painting--but I haven't found the right one--I tried many times--but I am still searching.

Q.= About those faces, we can see that you are repeating the same faces in the paintings.

M.= I failed to realize in my paintings the face which is making me suffer. If I find it, I'll stop...stop the painting... the search.

Q.= Sometimes it seems you are painting self-portraits in different styles. When we look at the faces in the paintings and look at your face now, we are seeing the same face.

M.= I don't know how to explain that...maybe I see my own face in the mirror and reflect that image.

Q.= Or, does it mean that you are searching for yourself?

M.= Maybe. Maybe.

Q.= Let us go back to some of the early influences in your art. How much do you think your Nubian background influenced you? You left Debeira at a fairly young age, but you had mentioned that your art started with the creation of mud-sculpture along the banks of the Nile, how you were influenced by the geographical setting, etc. Later you mentioned a type of ancestor worship or revering the spirits of the ancestors within Nubian culture. We know also that there are other early influences which could have come into your work--such as very early and deeply embedded Christian influences. Perhaps it is simply the influence of Ethiopian Coptic art, since you have spent some time in Ethiopia, but maybe it is the deeply internalized influence of the remnants of Christian culture in Nubia.

M.= Maybe all of this goes back to my Nubian village of Debeira. Nubians decorate everything in the house and this was deeply embedded in my soul—even if subconscious. The decorative Nubian art in my house, on the utensils, etc., influenced my childhood. The drawings or paintings on the houses were often stories or symbols, crocodiles, birds, etc., and some other items to drive away the evil spirits—eyes and such. So, unconsciously I took these into my art. When I went to Egypt and started drawing, I didn't realize all this at first. My village was a very rich place for me to grow to love painting and art—and poetry.

Q.= You mentioned to us that Nubian legends were engraved in your mind very early. Can you give us an example of such a legend? You talked about your grandmother's influence on you—how she used to scare you with stories about djinns and other spirits to make you go to bed or to discipline you—and how these stories stayed in your mind and how you attempted to paint them. You were going to tell us a story about your grandmother walking home one day and what she saw.

M.= She said she was walking from our home to hers and she met her father who had died a long time before. Her father spoke to her. When she became frightened, he began to disappear. While he was disappearing she saw his leg; it was the leg of a horse. She returned very frightened—and I was frightened as a young child to hear such a tale about humans with legs of a horse. These sorts of tales are in my soul.

Q.= You implied earlier that part of Nubian folklore is a suggestion of reincarnation. Does this come through in your art?

M.= When I was young, I was very impressed with this particular lore. My parents told me not to hurt a pigeon, which they said contained the soul and spirit of my dead sister. I had loved my sister very much, so I used to feed a pigeon and call it my sister's name. Sometimes when there was a flock of birds flying overhead, I took some food and threw it to them and told them to say hello to my sister. These elements in my background may explain all the birds in my paintings rather than some other influence. Those birds came from childhood legends and from Pharaonic art. I depict people crying or screaming, but instead of cries coming from their mouths, there are birds—my sister, other dead relatives—all mixed.

Q.= We would like to go back to your statement that in 1967 you were seeking out your heritage--not just your Nubian heritage, but your heritage in general. But we would like to focus on the Nubian heritage, because the date that you mentioned coincides with the inundation of Debeira, that is, by that date, your home village must have been nearly under water from the High Dam. When last did you see Debeira? And could you comment on your lingering feelings about the homeland--and about Khashm el-Girba where your Nubian people were resettled?

M.= I last saw Debeira in 1951...I never saw it again.

Q.= Do you think that, because you were so conscious of your cultural background around 1967, it may have been related to an overall consciousness on the part of Nubians to revive the traditional culture, rather than to let it die with the flooding of the homeland?

M.= No, it was not because of the feeling of a flooded homeland or a dying culture, but because I felt that I can take this heritage and comprehend the spirit behind it. I am not going to make a copy of that ancient time with the ancient legends because I didn't live during that time. But I can still capture the spirit, using my own style--not just because I want to preserve anything. This is not my role--to copy our heritage--like rubbings on cloth from the old temples, etc.<sup>10</sup> No, I want to add to our heritage.

Q.= A newspaper critic in Beirut has said that you are taking the past and mixing the past with the present--not taking the past exactly as it is, but to make use of it--not a copy of the past, but a mixture of the past and present.

M.= Yes, to make a mixture of the heritage, the present, and the future. I want to paint a picture which causes people to see the past, yet when they look closely, they get a spirit of the 20th century.

Q.= Let's move to some of the more technical aspects of your work. Then we will return again to the mystical, thematic aspects--following up on some of these ideas we have raised. We are interested, for one thing, in your choice of colour--sombre choices to express a nostalgic or a sad, pessimistic mood. Another technical aspect we would like to discuss is the lack of perspective. This is a comment made so often about Sudanese artists that it has nearly reached cliché status. We hear it asked of Musa Khalifa, Salahi, Shibrain, etc.

It is a very interesting tendency because it could relate, perhaps, to a Nubian concept of space which might be very different to the Western world. It is a hypothesis I have been considering for some time, i.e. why all of you paint without perspective. It's not a matter of training. Anyone can be trained to paint with perspective; it is a one or two-day lesson.

The third technical aspect upon which we would like you to comment is your non-use of space. When you do have space, you fill it in with calligraphy or you suggest calligraphy by design, i.e. not actually Arabic writing, but something that suggests it. You also sometimes "fill in" with people. These human figures dominate your works. They are very figurative, that is, objective features with surreal elements.

Later we will ask why you chose the surfaces you work on. We are interested in your painting on hide (goat-skin), a tar (drum or tambourine) surface, like the Nubian tar.

- M.= Let me first discuss colour. The colour is dictated by legends, stories, poems, etc. I am trying to make some poetry on canvas, but I can't because of my medium. But still I am literary on canvas, so you can see romantic, sad, etc., moods with colour. Maybe my use of colour is related to the past, the dark and mysterious past.
- Q.= The colour of earth, the brownness of Sudan, and of Nubia might be a factor. You so often paint on dark surfaces.
- M. Yes, it could be a factor.
- Q.= We know it is hard to describe why you choose a particular colour; it relates to your mood at the time. But we noticed a great amount of blue in this 1974 exhibit. Is this a colour shift from earlier periods? Are you using more blue than before?
- M.= No, I always used blue--in each period--sometimes it disappears--goes to a corner; sometimes it dominates the whole painting.
- Q.= Will you discuss perspective now, and, in particular, its absence in Sudanese art--or the fact that it might have been used differently from the way it is used in Western art. It has been suggested that this could mean a contrast in the cultural perception of space and spatial relationships between one culture and another. Earlier you were talking to us about another aspect of perspective.

- M.= In the beginning I followed the traditional rules of perspective, but, in time, I eliminated this approach, unconsciously. In my 1965-66 works you can see how much I observed perspective. But eventually I eliminated background; that gives me the dramatic effect I want. When I began to paint a nude, for example, I left off the bottom part and the background because it carried no meaning for me. I can express better with eyes only sometimes. I can, subconsciously, suggest an attitude I want by eliminating such things as background perspective. At first people, their moods, etc. were complete in my paintings--then I halved the figures. Eventually there came my mood when I painted figures superimposed on each other. By then perspective was completely destroyed. At least in the conventional sense.
- Q.= You have said that there are many ways to use perspective--not just background and landscape--that you use perspective in the shadows under people's eyes, in the hollows of their cheeks--shadows to suggest the gaunt and hungry look of the unfed.
- M.= If you look closely at this 1974 exhibition, you will see that I am suffering through a transitional period--from those shadows even on the faces. Some of the faces have shadows--others not. I am trying to eliminate even the shadows on the faces. There is now a mixture in my paintings--a confusion. I don't know if I will return to those shadows or eliminate them completely. In one painting you can even see two different styles side by side.
- Q.= Space can be a very important way of making a statement. You do not use space; your work is very detailed. Sometimes, in your earlier works you used space for effect, but not so in this last exhibit.
- M.= As I described to you, in my earlier work I used space and vacuum with small figures. Maybe the elimination of the vacuum has been unconscious. Maybe it is the influence of Islamic art, especially since my stay in Damascus: Islamic decorations, mosques, etc. One never sees spaces in Arabic or Islamic art because it is highly decorative art. So it can be the subconscious Islamic spirit. As you know, I did not study art, so I am very sensitive to the artistic influences around me. I go to a lot of exhibitions in many different places. My eyes steal the spirit of what I see. I never consciously copied anything; I just photograph it and store it in my mind--sometimes for two or three years.

Q.= Maybe there is a contradiction in your art. Islamic art is very flat and decorative, with little perspective and little use of space—which you claim influenced you. On the other hand, there is your Nubian background, which you claim also affected you. In Nubia space was extraordinarily important. Even though the decorative art on the houses was important, still the environment was one of stark space—space even within the houses—big rooms, courtyards. Why did this use of stark space not creep into your work, as a statement of beauty in and of itself?

M.= I feel I use a lot of space now—especially in this last exhibit. But once again, perhaps we have different notions of what is meant by space.

Q.= In these 1974 paintings we noticed in the figures a kind of architectural style, a construction upward, even of people. When you mentioned the Damascus influence just now we were reminded of the structure of the city itself—Beirut, too, where you were. These cities that are built up, built high, built on hills, one building after another, so that there is an impression of one building practically on top of another—as you portray figures sometimes—nearly on top of one another. Is that a possible influence—the visual filling in of space from the visions of crowded cities?

M.= Maybe. But it was not conscious.

Q.= Also we mentioned to you earlier that there is a similarity between your building up of figures and that of the Austrian Klimt's—not that you have imitated him—but you might be interested in noting the similarities. Klimt did not try to build up the figures, but he is highly decorative, almost architectural at times. Most of his pieces are decorated with something—a face, two faces, etc.—a kind of construction again.

M.= You have now stimulated me to study these similarities.

Q.= We can relate this next question to what you have already discussed about what you took from your background of Nubian decorative art—the fact that all surfaces were decorated around you—somewhat to relieve the monotony of the brownness, the greyness of a very beautiful, but very dry, flat Nubia. As we said, we were fascinated with the fact that in this 1974 exhibition you painted on goat-hide, like a Nubian tar, an unusual surface for us to see a painter use. Usually we see such surfaces used by handicraftsmen, for example, in Sudan

the musical instruments like drums that are decorated with *henna* etc. Did you simply decide to use a different surface or is it a reflection of your environmental background?

- M.= As for the surface, I like to mix my ideas with my surface--to integrate them. This hide surface gave me the kind of texture I wanted. From the very beginning I did not like to paint "soft" paintings; I want texture. This is related to my obsession about old walls and the scratching and weathering of these old walls through dust and wind. Also, there is the sculptural heritage, giving me this textural approach in oil painting. Even when I use paper, I scratch it to make some rough texture. This is the tone and texture of my environment.
- Q.= What else do you use to make wall textures?
- M.= I use very thick zinc before painting in oils--like old Nubian walls, in a sense. I might scratch with the end of the brush or any hard object--just a scratch--maybe calligraphy, maybe some poems--and then I paint over it. Even on paper I use a razor-blade to make some texture before I paint. Sometimes I wash the surface. I am willing to use anything to catch the spirit of old walls--related, as we said, to my Nubian environment, to Pharaonic sculpture, etc. As for the hide, I liked the music of the tar very much when I was young. In fact, I was influenced by a number of the crafts of my village. But for a long time I did not consciously follow up on this influence. I did not realize that I was searching for the texture and design of some of the handicrafts and applied arts of my background. When I went to Ethiopia as a diplomat, I found what I wanted in this respect, and "returned" to working with such things.
- Q.= Are you referring to the highly decorative, textured scrolls they have in Ethiopia, for example?
- M.= Yes, they transcribe quotations from the Bible, etc. on various objects. I tried it, too. Some modern Ethiopian painters use the texture of skin or hide, but with oil. I added to this influence India ink--added it to the oil--because I wanted people to see and feel that it is skin, not canvas or paper. I want people to taste the spirit of that skin. I wash it with ink sometimes--trying for a new technique. I am still working on my technique in this area. You can say that painting on skin or hide was something from my background which I rediscovered by travelling.

- Q.= Quite a bit has been written in Arabic about the so-called "Khartoum School" of art. Both of us have written about the "school" [e.g. UFAHAMU, Vol. I, No. 1, 1970]. Since you are one of the handful of prominent Sudanese artists who is not a product of the Khartoum College of Fine and Applied Art [K.T.I.], we would like you to comment on how you see the differences between you and these others. But, also, in what ways do you see the similarities or in what ways have the similarities been called to your attention? You have said that critics have noticed resemblances among all of you. Because you have had little or no contact with these "Khartoum School" leaders (e.g. Salahi and Shibrain), perhaps we can account for these "similarities" in other ways.
- M.= The people who say that there is some similarity between my work and Salahi's or Shibrain's, etc. are those who do not look deeply into the real meaning behind the works--neither theirs nor mine. It means they don't understand. For sure I can say that we are all drinking from the same water and expressing the same society, but each of us is doing it in a very different way. People point to Salahi and Shibrain's use of Arabic calligraphy. I use it; others, like Ahmed Abdel Al use it too--and, you, Bushara, and many others. To point to Arabic calligraphy as grounds for artistic similarities is too superficial. We find calligraphy in Pharaonic art--in modern-day Damascus, in Iraq--not only calligraphy, but symbols like the crescent, etc. We can find these symbols in a number of places. Does it mean they are all from the "Khartoum School"? But although I may be rejecting being put under their stylistic/thematic umbrella, I appreciate what they have done for Sudanese art. We owe a lot to them, and I don't appreciate the criticism levelled at them by many artists of Sudan who have, as yet, done nothing comparable.
- Q.= Just now you mainly referred to Arab cultures. Are you suggesting these similarities are products of a culture more than a "school"? There is Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Sudan influencing you. Would you make the broad statement that these similarities are deeply-rooted cultural manifestations--a very Arab style, technique, inner mysticism that comes out in the art as contrasted to the West--or do you think you can also find these images in the West?11
- M.= Perhaps in Iraq and Syria. These images help them with their Islamic identity: calligraphy and certain scenes and images which suggest their history and culture. We can find the Islamic spirit and culture all over Sudan, too.

Q.= So these similarities among you artists would come out as a natural response to the environment, the heritage, to the mythology, and are not necessarily a result of the influence of one artist upon another? But you seem to consider that, although your techniques may sometimes be the same, such as water-wash calligraphy, your themes are different from the other Sudanese or Arab painters.

M.= Very different. For example, in 1967 I saw some of the waterwash and ink drawings of Salahi in which he uses calligraphy—but with clearly written words and clear meaning.

Q.= What is the difference in meaning between your calligraphy and the calligraphy of Salahi?

M.= He uses calligraphy to carry a literal meaning to go with the painting. Shibrain also. Most of Shibrain's calligraphy is from the Koran, a very clear statement of meaning. There are different styles in both cases, but the words still carry a specific meaning. In my case, because I was fond of, and influenced by, Nubia, I was intrigued by very old walls. Children would often write on these walls—anything—very innocent things most of the time—and with dust and sand storms, these writings [graffiti] began to disappear, leaving an impression only—of very old, dusty writings on walls.

Q.= Now we understand how we got the idea from your paintings that it is often just a suggestion of calligraphy—so it is the remnants of writing—once again suggesting the past being washed away, being blown away by the dust, sand, and wind. It is impressionistic in the sense that it is a blurred image of reality—a suggestion—very romantic.

M.= Yes, in that sense. Also I like doors—ones which were old and yellow and are gradually washed away. When I use calligraphy, I often write the words, then wash them slightly, and then turn them upside down on the painting so that the meaning does not possess one, nor dominate the painting. The meaning of the words is irrelevant—just as irrelevant as the writings on old walls in the streets. It is just to catch the spirit.

Q.= Then do you consider it a part of the work?

M.= Yes, my "calligraphy" is part of the work--but the meaning of the calligraphy is not.

Q.= We were reminded of the washing away of the walls of Wadi Halfa--the decorations, the writings--the flooding of the past. But there is another aspect connected with your environment which we would like to discuss.

We see very little movement in your current work. You may want to reject this idea. It seems connected to how you build your paintings--their composition. If you accept this idea that there is a kind of static composition in your work, would you accept the suggestion that this could also go back to your past in that there was little movement in Nubia--the sparseness of the environment--the very vast space which seems to diminish the impression of movement. It was sparsely populated; people are not crowded together and hurrying around as they are in Cairo, for example, or Damascus or Beirut. Also there is very little wind and almost no rain. People seem to float in this big space. The waterwheel moves slowly; the Nile is a still river--even around the cataracts. Do you think this would have any influence on the lack of movement in your paintings? Or is it something else?

M.= I can accept the critical comment that there is not much movement in my work. But to comment on movement and Nubians--don't forget about all of the labour migration, i.e. moving constantly to and from the cities to the homeland. This is a type of movement, on one level. Still, the people, even when they were away, always thought of their home and loved their home. In this way, they never moved. That is, in their minds they were in one place. But I think the static aspect of my work comes from the solid, steady sculpture and statues of the Pharaohs--and the temples.

Q.= So you would attribute your static style to a kind of sculptural, architectural influence--in addition, of course, to Nubian house decoration being static?

M.= Yes, when you said that perhaps Damascus, Beirut, etc. being built on hills and my painting carrying with them an impression of architectural building up, I agreed--and it ties in with what we just said. But I would definitely add to this the heritage of the solid, steady, unmoving sculpture and architecture of our Pharaonic past.

- Q.= When we mentioned all of the space of Nubia, it reminded us of a discussion with some Sudanese artists about the decorative, detailed style of Arab art. A hypothesis was offered that this was unconsciously fulfilling a need to fill in all that space of the natural environment (i.e. the desert and semi-desert)--including the house decorations. And this whole idea of space and non-movement brings us back to this contradiction that you pointed out about Nubia--that it did not move and yet Nubians are among the most migratory populations in all the world with something like a figure of 85% of the male working force absent from the homeland at any one time, and constant moving back and forth--not to mention the movement, in toto, of most of Nubia after the High Dam. So there is a kind of dialectic, i.e. although there is movement, still there was this "spirit of place" or persistence of place--one place in the minds--unmoving, unchanging in the minds of the people.
- M.= Yes, it was not movement to escape, nor movement to change-- but to preserve.
- Q.= Let us go to this 1974 show in Khartoum. You chose one title to fit twenty-seven works, which is an unusual thing to do: "Sad Memories in the Cities of Endless Pleasures". Certainly you have been in many cities, but what can this title suggest to many people? How do you see the themes subsumed under one title?
- M.= When I started painting these works last year, I was dominated by some memories--agitated and provoked by them, by my own failure. It is a very intimate thing. Maybe each work does not fit under a unified theme, but the mood is what is important. The mood dominated all those works. I was moved by those memories. That is why, perhaps, you do not necessarily see sad memories in one painting, but the mood when I painted all of these was living in my blood.
- Q.= It seems that, to you, Debeira is a "city of endless pleasure" which you failed to capture in reality, so you want to return it to life in the form of colour and lines.
- M.= It could be.
- Q.= Let us move again to the subject matter in your work--the fact that people, i.e. recognizable human forms, seem to dominate. We talked about this in terms of your social and human concerns in earlier periods. Still this dominates your

work in the sense that you portray people rather than animals or buildings, etc.--people and design.

- M.= I mentioned that I started painting people in general and then began to search for a particular face. I failed. Now--maybe in one painting I can paint or suggest thousands of people--maybe all in an attempt to capture one. I am suffering in my attempt. When I finish a painting, I realize, once again, that I have failed. I try again in another work. This may take different forms, styles, techniques or media, but it is the same search--whether personal or social tragedy--it's all one theme to me--all one search.
- Q.= But you depict solitary people very rarely. For someone who is concerned with individual alienation, you do not present the human alone very often--but usually in groups. You may want to say that this is a multiplication or amplification of the solitary figure, but one does not have the impression that the person, the figure, is alone. Loneliness does not thrust itself upon us; it is group agony in these 1974 works. So, in a sense, there is a philosophical contradiction. Now, when we say contradiction, we are not using it in a negative sense--because it makes the work provocative, i.e. that you have a personal alienation combined with a presentation of people in groups, of mass agony.
- M.= This shift in emphasis, which you keep pointing out to me is a result of my own failure. Maybe I did not find the solution--neither for their life, nor mine. It does not matter anyway, we will all die soon. So, I returned to the individual/personal human condition.
- Q.= This can explain, somewhat, the sadness of your colour. The blue colour, you implied, carries with it this sadness.
- M.= This feeling of loss, a philosophical loss. A failure.
- Q.= You seem to be implying that there is no solution for any individual or social problem. Let us relate this, then, to your view about the role of the artist in the society. You could suggest something in your work as a solution for human problems.
- M.= It is not the role of the artist to dictate this direction or that, or even to make suggestions.

Q.= You have moved from the presentation of the idea that you are dealing with the past, only as a suggestion for the future, that the past is in the future, to the idea that the present is meaningless and, therefore, logically, the past is meaningless, i.e. the past is in the present and the future is hopeless.

M.= It seems logical.

Q.= One Beirut critic, Joseph Tarable, has said of you: "Mashamoun is rejecting the present; he is relating to the past--so the future is unclear. He is directed in his work by the present and future. His suggestions are confused and confusion is breathing all over. His works are confused in his suffering and scattered heart--representing the problems of the Arabic world."

We all know that painters go through particular periods that they like or do not like, feeling fulfilled or unfulfilled. We would like to know your emotional response to your 1974 exhibition here in Khartoum. Do you like these twenty-seven works better, say, than some of your earlier works--either emotionally or intellectually? Are you able to make an evaluation at this point, or do you feel that you are still working these things out in your mind? That is, perhaps you cannot yet see these new works in perspective.

M.= I like them all. This 1974 show I enjoyed because I had a kind of dialogue with the people who attended, including other Sudanese artists, and I had been cut off from that for some time. It was a good opportunity to see how people responded to my work.

But in my mind, things are not confirmed. I am still trying to find out if I am going to fly with my paintings and get rid of all the disturbing things in my work so I can do something new or do the same things with different shapes. Of course all of this depends on the places where I will go, the people, the degradation. I will have to see. But I have plenty of ideas and I think I can do better.

Q.= Do you see any end or goal--personally--in terms of your art? What do you want to accomplish? What do you want--in any sense?

M.= Everything and nothing.

Q.= Do you have a greater sense of fulfillment from your art than from the other things you are doing in your life?

M.= For sure...for sure...

\* \* \* \*

He left for his diplomatic post in Addis Ababa shortly after we interviewed him, leaving behind a new set of paintings to be exhibited in Omdurman. We knew he was unsettled when he left--still searching for the face, destined to experience the constant, uncaring rising of the sun--and destined for the occasional eclipse.

FOOTNOTES

1. It is not to be understood by the reader that this paper is in any way suggesting that Sudan's historical, cultural, and social environment militates against producing outstanding artists. The point of the paper is that, in fact, the milieu has produced these people, but that the nature of the political regime and the system of civil service stifles their growth. Sudan is only one such case, of course.
2. After leftists took power in 1969 there was a flurry of artistic activity, e.g. the forming of writers and artists societies, etc. Writers who had been suppressed for a long time could be heard again--and a whole new crop of young revolutionary painters emerged--only to be stifled time and again as Nimieri whittled away at the left.
3. The interpretations of Mashamoun, the activist revolutionary versus Mashamoun, the introverted romantic, are our own, gleaned from between the lines of the interviews and after viewing his work in perspective. He never directly made the connection between the professional/societal/political pressures on him and the eclipse of his revolutionary style.
4. At the time this manuscript was being written, Mashamoun was Second Secretary in the Sudan Embassy, Addis Ababa.
5. However, he has highly developed universalistic aesthetic values.
6. When the Aswan High Dam was built, much of the area of Halfawi/Mahasi Nubia was flooded, including Debeira. The government relocated thousands of Sudanese Nubians to an area far away from the Nile at Khashm el-Girba.
7. For the oils shown at the 1975 exhibition, "Inspiration from our Nubian Heritage", he told us he spent days sitting in the National Museum, studying the frescoes and reliefs of excavated Nubian churches, fortresses, and castles. He tried to capture the Coptic, Greek, and Byzantine superimposition upon Nubia.
8. In fact, his work of the late 1960's and early 1970's did change in style and form--much resembling the best of the so-called socialist-realist art, such as the Mexican muralists--bold figures crying out en masse--larger canvases, bold colours.

This period is strikingly different from his earliest works. What it lacks in subtlety, it gains in dramatic effect.

9. El-Tayib Salih is Sudan's best-known novelist, short-story writer, and literary critic, who has been living in England for over a decade.
10. In reference to Hassan el-Hadi, who has commercialized impressions from ancient ruins--rubblings on cloth.
11. In this interview he does not mention "African" influences--although much of Nubian history and culture is very African and much of Sudan is African--before Arab--in culture.

---

SONDRA HALE, one of the founding editors of this journal, lived six years in Sudan, and has published extensively on Sudanese arts and on Nubians. One volume of her poetry on Sudan was published in 1964; another two volumes (both in conjunction with Bushara) have just been completed. She has lectured, off and on, at California State University, Northridge, and is finishing her Ph.D. in anthropology at UCLA.

MOHAMED OMER BUSHARA is at the Slade School of Art in London. In 1974 he won AFRICAN ARTS First Prize for graphic arts. Although he earned an Honours Degree in Geography at the University of Khartoum, he followed up his painting instead, exhibiting off and on, and having a one-man show in Khartoum in 1974. He was an active art, cinema and literature journalist in Sudan, and has published extensively in periodicals there.