

## Still them and us

Drawings of the Time: Impressions from Edfu Temple is an exhibition that displays colourful and engaging portraits of high priests of ancient Egyptian Temples. [Gamal Nkrumah](#) discovers they tend to be at odds with contemporary art in many respects. These striking images are definitely not the stuff of daily life in the closing years of the Pharaonic era. They have a broader and more aspiring canvas

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The exquisite works of Andalusian artists Asuncion Jodar Minarro and Ricardo Marin Viadel ornament the Egyptian Museum and offer a timely lesson in Mediterranean camaraderie. The exhibition focuses on the miscellaneous aspects of the high priests of the Ptolemaic Period. The focus of this show is art rather than history. And yet the images have quite a tale to tell

What a difference a couple of millennia make. Two thousand years ago, these images were adored as the very likeness of the living gods. Or those destined to serve the gods. Today they are admired as imaginative and ingenious interpretations of an art of an age bygone. They were worshipped then, and they are viewed with wonder now.

No image is more expressive of the approach to art of a particular era than the choice of subject by either the artist or those who commissioned the work of art. Museum pieces are not necessarily works of art and need not be. However, they are often revered as such. Be that as it may, exhibitions, art collections and museum pieces are very different objects. Or at least, must be understood as such. And, if every museum has its own life story, then the Egyptian Museum is no exception. For many tourists, the museum in the heart of Cairo is an address with heady connotations. And, this is precisely what a Spanish artist attempted with his portraits of engaging heads. It proved a savvy inspiration to many visitors to the Egyptian Museum this month. The idea of creating a contemporary art counterpart to historical relics and to the curious matching of busts of Pharaohs with portraits of high priests proved winning beyond the ancients wildest dreams.

Their gaze was zooming even closer into their priestly subjects. The artists are searching for something. It may appear intangible, intelligible. Whatever it is they are searching for is impossibly difficult to pinpoint. They understand the way the ancients thought. That much is clear. However, they augment the ancients' thinking with wilder ideas of their own.

It is as if the artists are reacting strongly against the very essence of Egyptian stylistic imagery, the recurrent cliché that the eye is the window into a person's soul. The eyes of the high priests depicted by at least one of the two Spanish artists are empty, unadorned and undistinguished.

Ricardo Marin Viadel, the artist in question, sketches coarsely, almost aggressively, without fear of offending the gods and high priests of yesteryear. They in turn, look down at us impassively, lackadaisically.

His images resemble sculptures. Yet these roughly hewn imprints of high priests retain a degree of spiritual authority. Their ugly, elongated heads draw crowds of onlookers. The passing of two hundred centuries has not finished the job. But it has opened the way for outsiders to peer into the weird world of priestly appurtenances. Egyptian gods and goddesses were always much appreciated by outsiders. But the artist does not even try to

convey their provenance. They are, after all, pointers to Egypt's interaction with other civilisations. Were not the Ptolemies partially Greek or Macedonian? Are not the Spaniards, at least the Andalusians, in part Arab or Moorish? These works of contemporary art are the result of contact between the northern and southern, eastern and western shores of the Mediterranean, a sea of spiritual energy.

These images now hanging on the walls of the Egyptian Museum provide a wealth of information on the world of the temple in which their originals were found. Yet these impressive images are but imitations. The central riddle of the sacredness of the scenes etched on the walls of the Temple of Horus, Edfu, is barely broached.

We do not revere the reproductions. The ancients venerated the originals. More change is on the way for the Egyptian Museum. The question is who, or what, will drive it?

"This exhibition coincided with the Spanish presidency of the European Union," Director of the Cervantes Institute in Cairo Javier Ruiz Sierra told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "Egypt was an inspiration for the peoples of the Mediterranean in Ptolemaic times and Egypt remains an inspiration for artists from the Mediterranean Basin, including Spain, today."

The contemporary artists play Devil's advocate. Their artistic trajectory is that they are neither pieces of the past nor representative of the present. But that is the secret of their beauty and their allure: their utter estrangement with both the worlds of the past and the present.

It is never too late to pursue a dream. A web of intrigue and disputation engulfs the world of the Ptolemies: were they Egyptian, African, Greek, European? Were they an amalgam of cultures? Theirs was the world of the Mediterranean -- a meeting of minds and civilisations.

There are no props other than the faintest of colours, delicate hues of earthy tones and pastels. Brushstrokes so brusque as to conjure up images of the sublime.

There is an innate Egyptianness in these Andalusian works. They are as fierce as Serapis except that they exude the dignity of the Egyptian. I walk briskly along a narrow path, past walls covered in paintings and drawings of high priests as they make their way to the gods of ancient Egypt.

It is a mild winter day, the musky pungency of long- embalmed mummies wafts through the parched air entombed inside the Egyptian Museum. I cannot tell if they are European or mixed race African. This is a pertinent question that intrigued Martin Bernal in his trilogy *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation* ( 1987, 1991, 2006). Bernal's hypothesis that ancient Greece, and hence Western civilisation, derived much of its cultural roots from Afro-Asiatic heritage -- ancient Egyptian (African) and Phoenician (Asian).

Egyptology had long been associated with other European powers: the French, the British, Germans, and even the Italians. But, the Spanish? Hardly ever. It is against this historical background that the paintings by the two Spanish artists astound the onlooker. Ironically, it was Europe under the Spanish presidency that could not part with the memory of what once was Egypt.

Character studies by contemporary Spanish artists adorn the walls of the Egyptian Museum for the first time. The intentional blending of contemporary art and ancient

relics has become a preferred ploy of international museums in order to woo visitors. Museums try to boost their attendance by providing something for everyone -- apples and pears, so to speak. Picasso, after all, derived his inspiration from so-called African primitivism.

The construction of the imposing Ptolemaic Temple of Horus, Edfu, began in 237 BC by Ptolemy III Euergetes and was completed during the reign of Ptolemy XII Neo Dionysos 57 BC. Of all Egypt's myriad relics, these two Spanish artists chose this particular temple as their inspiration. Why they chose Edfu we do not know.

What we do know is that the images on the west staircase of the Ptolemaic Temple of Horus, Edfu, are replete with imposing figures that, even though highly stylised in the Egyptian fashion, shun oblique stereotypes. Compositional discourse aside, these works of art conjure up images of an elite, self-assured and self-composed. They stand tall, but their heads are full of ideas. They believe; therefore they are.

Formal aspects aside, I wonder how much Orientalism and Eurocentrism creeps into their art. After all, it was Bernal who observed that Orientalism implied "the Western appropriation of ancient Near Eastern Culture for the sake of its own development". The problem is that the Ptolemaic period itself was one in which "Westerners" (Greeks and Macedonians) ingratiated themselves with Egyptians purporting to salvage Egyptian civilisation from ruin.

But do we need to rack our brains with the philosophy behind the works of two Spanish artists brought over courtesy of the Cervantes Institute in Cairo and the University of Granada, Spain? The 31 figures of priests are presented in the stylistic and aesthetic decorum of the Egyptians. But are they ethnically Egyptians, and does it matter?

Realism but no magic. Mystery and controversy surround these imposing displays at the Egyptian Museum. "Fresh start for the priests of Horus," *El-Pais* applauded the exhibition. The 400 drawings and sketches were done between 2005 and 2010.

The two Spanish artists are Asuncion Jodar Minarro and Ricardo Marin Viadel. The latter is professor of Arts and Education at the University of Granada and an associate member of the Euro-Arab Foundation of Higher Studies, Granada. His 2010 analytical drawing of the head of number 10 in the east wall of the Edfu Temple is unnerving. Lithography, the scribbling, the large elephantine ears, pointed nose and protruding lips are accentuated by the distinct shape of the head, slightly underscored by what appears to be a lock of hair Native American-style.

Asuncion Jodar Minarro, PhD Fine Arts from the University of Granada, is a woman artist with an eye for detail. Director of the Drawing of the University of Granada, she is also the principal investigator of the Research Group Composition and Narrative in Contemporary Drawing of the Andalusian Plan for Research Development and Innovation. Her works also grace the National Engraving of Spain. Perhaps one of the most impressive of her exhibitions was the 1999 "Night on Mirrors" at the Palace Dar Al-Horra, Granada. In 1994 she created an exhibition "The Lost Paradise, Paintings and Drawings", at the *Palacio de la Diputacion* de Jaen.

We meet this motley duo in the Egyptian Museum. The *New York Times* recently published an article concerning museums entitled "The Art of Collecting Art: Guarding the past while making the most of the present". The main thrust was that the lasting interest or value of an object "is wide open to interpretation".

So how do we interpret the works of Asuncion Jodar Minarro and Ricardo Marin Viadel? Orientalist or Eurocentrist? Or are they works of Egyptophilia?

My one caveat upon reflection is that they neglected to evince the society of ancient Egypt as a whole, focussing solely on the priestly class and images of state functionaries. Where are the many other strata, the workers, artisans, women and children?

With that in mind, these evocations are nonetheless intriguing manifestations of the Andalusian collective unconscious yearning to reimagine its ancient roots.

[Caption: photos: Sherif Sonbol](#)

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