100 Years of Egyptian Sculpture: On Mahmoud Mokhtar, Adam Henein, Armen Agop meeting in Dubai

Sculptor Armen Agop talks about the ancient Egyptian inspiration behind his work on display in an exhibition which also features Mahmoud Mokhtar and Adam Henein

Reham El-Adawi , Tuesday 22 Sep 2020

Ancient Egyptian sculpture stood out for its simple shapes, strong lines and coherent formations, which gave it its special character. Stylised human, animal and hybrid forms decorated the tombs of the Pharaonic elite, and monumental structures paid homage to numerous gods and kings. Considering that much of this remarkable heritage has survived, it is no wonder that modern Egyptian sculpture draws so heavily on it.

Closing this week at Meem Gallery in Dubai, “100 Years of Egyptian Sculpture: Mokhtar-Henein-Agop” (1 July-26 September) – dedicated to the late Adam Henein (1929- 2020), who passed away in May – features a work each by Henein, Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891-1934), and Armen Agop (b. 1969): two of Egypt’s greatest artists and one of their worthiest heirs.

The acknowledged Father of Modern Egyptian Sculpture, Mokhtar’s revolutionary work combined ancient Egyptian formalism with a European sensibility. An example of the fellaha figure symbolising Egypt, his bronze Au Bord Du Nil (On the Bank of the Nile, 1923- 1932) shows the young woman performing the life-giving task of carrying river water back to the village.

Typical of Henein’s dynamic human and animal figures featuring minimal lines that recall ancient funerary art, the 1969 bronze piece Marie Nilus – so called after Potamoi – represents the Nile, one of Greek river gods Oceanus and Tethys’s 3000 children.

Based in Pietrasanta, a small town near some of Italy’s marble quarries that houses a cosmopolitan community of rock sculptors, the Armenian-Egyptian Armen Agop contributes an untitled piece in black granite from his “Mantra” series.

Here as elsewhere Agop’s abstract work, at least as different from either Mokhtar or Henein as the two great figures are from each other, reflects the linear form and elegant minimalism that runs through both their work and the ancients’. Expertly and painstakingly shaped into ultra-smooth, organic shapes, Agop’s rock is an attempt to manifest spiritual concepts in physical form.

Charles Pocock, Meem’s managing director, says these three works spanning three generations demonstrate the continuity of and power of modern Egyptian sculpture over a whole century:

“I am proud to be holding the exhibition finally. It has long been my ambition to showcase the evolution of modern and contemporary Egyptian sculpture over the past century by focusing on the seminal works of Mahmoud Mokhtar, Adam Henein and Armen Agop. Adam was my teacher and guide in all things Egyptian sculpture and he ignited a passion in me. He was undoubtedly one of the greatest sculptors in the Arab world and leaves behind an incredible legacy, so I dedicate this show to his memory. I remember one sculpture in particular that made a lasting impact on me, a bronze figure titled Owl which like all of Henein’s work combines an honest simplicity of execution with a beautifully balanced and tactile form.

“In January 2009 I flew to Aswan to meet with the artist who was the founder of the Aswan International Sculpture Symposium. We met at the symposium and then Henein took me to the Open-air Museum. Aswan which, along with the quarries of pink granite, has been a hub of sculptural production for over four-thousand years. Seeing the work being produced there by artisans under the direction of the symposium’s artists and visiting the sculpture park gave me the unique opportunity to view a variety of sculptures, both ancient and modern, in their natural surroundings.

“It was there that I first encountered the remarkable work of Armen Agop. Needless to say, I was completely captivated by its peaceful beauty. Agop’s sculpture was poignantly positioned between two rough, protruding rocks with the sun reflecting off of its perfectly smooth surface. What struck me then, and what still strikes me to this day, is the sublime simplicity of Agop’s form: his clear and uncompromising quest for aesthetic perfection was instantly apparent.

“Henein clearly shared my opinion, remarking that Agop was the one artist, in his opinion, who had truly taken on the tradition of modern Egyptian sculpture, refining and taking it to another level. Through the years Henein continued to position Agop’s work in this long tradition of Egyptian sculpture. More recently I was delighted to finally work with Agop on the exhibition, ‘Mantra’, which opened at Meem in November 2019. “I continued to speak to Henein at great length about the continuity of Egyptian sculpture. He had always felt strongly that all significant sculpture from the country invariably drew its inspiration from Pharaonic roots.

"Indeed, Henein himself led the design team who worked on the restoration of the Great Sphinx at Giza in 1989- 1998. It was by combining Pharaonic statuary with the European artistic sensibility that Mokhtar created a brand-new national aesthetic. He is best known for his statuesque figures, as can be seen in Au Bord Du Nil, a statue that I acquired for the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah in 2017.” Agop, for his part, says the idea behind the exhibition had existed for several years when Pocock spoke to him about the present concept:

“He explained the thread he observed that extends from the ancient Egyptian sculpture to modern and contemporary Egyptian sculpture. Some common elements among the three sculptors represented in the show are strongly present. We can see the compact form, strong contours, simplicity and sobreity in both past and present. The idea of the show is to underline and illuminate that invisible thread. Mokhtar followed the simple form of the ancient Egyptians and Adam simplified his figures in a modern way, while renouncing representational figuration I deal with the concept of simplicity in itself, and I always say, ‘Simplicity is very complicated’.

“I believe that the three artists represented in the show are one way or another influenced by ancient Egyptian art, each in his own way. Although in my case, I believe am influenced primarily by the desert: it was in the desert where there seems to be nothing that I learned to see. I believe the desert had a huge great influence on ancient Egyptian art, the endlessness of the horizon, the spacious emptiness, the still landscape. In the desert, you might feel the resistance of the wind, you might hear it loudly, you might have difficulty opening your eyes because of the sunlight reflected in the sand, but the image is still. Stillness is one of the main characteristics of ancient Egyptian sculpture, I believe it is a natural consequence of the nature of the desert.

“I met Henein for the first time in Aswan at the sculpture symposium. I was invited together with many other young sculptors to a small workshop. Our relationship developed very slowly. I was working in isolation in my studio outside Cairo in the desert of 6 October City and he was busy between his work and organising the symposium in Aswan. Through the years, we came to know each other better. We had mutual respect but we often disagreed and we used to joke about it, he was against my going to Italy and had advised me to stay in Egypt and be part of the symposium’s organisational team but I obviously had other dreams.”

Asked about emerging female sculptors such as Shaimaa Darwish, Therese Antoine, Eman Barakat, Reem Osama and Esraa Hatem proving themselves in the field, Agop exclaims, “Finally! I am very pleased by this fact. It is very belated step but very important. Egyptian woman artists, painters, writers and intellectuals were strongly present in the beginning of the last century, and throughout history, Egyptian women played an extremely important role in the development of civilisation. Egypt had female Pharaohs and goddesses so it’s only natural that Egyptian woman should be strongly present in every field. Sculpture,” he said, “is just one.”

\*A version of this article appears in print in the 24 September, 2020 edition of Al-Ahram Weekly