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100 Years of Egyptian Sculpture Come to Dubai

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Featuring sculptors Mahmoud Mokhtar, Adam Henein and Armen Agop, Meem Gallery's Summer exhibition looks at the last century of Egyptian sculpture, through three outstanding works. Here, the gallery's managing director Charles Pocock explains his quest to make it happen.

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BY CHARLES POCOCK

I am proud to be finally holding the exhibition, Mokhtar-Henein-Agop (100 Years of Egyptian Sculpture) at Meem Gallery. 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. I dedicate this exhibition to the memory of Adam Henein who sadly passed away on the 22nd of May this year.

Adam was my teacher and guide in all things to do with 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.

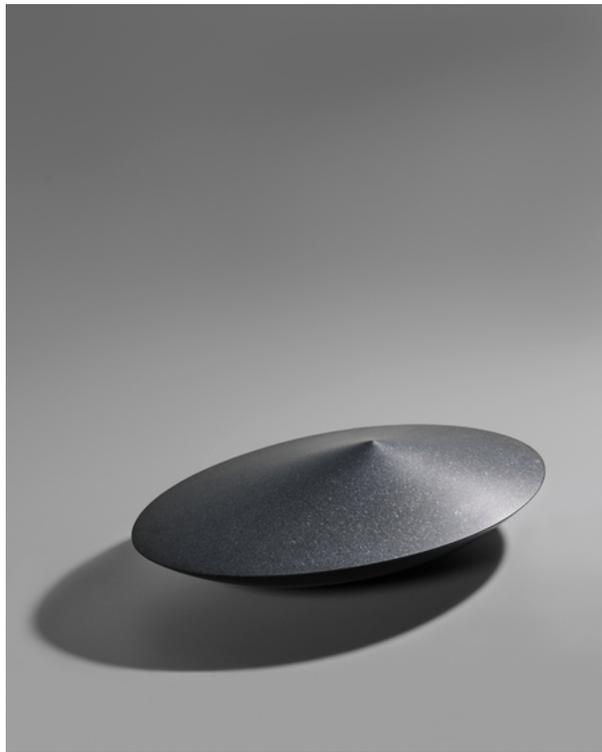


Mahmoud Mokhtar (Egypt, 1891–1934). *Au Bord Du Nil*,
between 1923 and 1932, bronze, 119 cm height



I moved to Dubai in 2005 where I co-founded Meem Gallery with Sultan bin Sooud Al Qasimi and Mishal Hamed Kanoo. In 2008 I was brought on as the Visual Arts Advisor to the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation for the Abu Dhabi Festival. I was tasked by the foundation's founder, Her Excellency Huda Alkhamis-Kanoo with producing an exhibition for the 2009 festival.

The idea of bringing Adam Henein's sculptures to Abu Dhabi came to me when I was first introduced to the artist's work by my dear friend and longtime Meem represented artist, Dia Azzawi. At that time Adam was creating his seminal work, The Sun Boat for Mathaf, in Doha. I was completely blown away. I remember that there was one sculpture in particular that left a lasting impact on me, a bronze figure titled, Owl, which, like all of the artist's work, combined the honest simplicity of its execution with a beautifully balanced and tactile form. I immediately resolved to bring together works by Adam Henein of Egypt and Parviz Tanavoli of Iran, the two artists that I still consider to be the living titans of modern sculpture in the region, in order to present them at the 2009 Abu Dhabi Festival.



Armen Agop Untitled 147

I travelled to Egypt to visit Adam in January 2009. After meeting with Karim Francis Adam's long-term manager, at the artist's museum in Harraneya, just outside of Cairo, I flew to Aswan to meet with the artist who is the founder of the International Sculpture Symposium. We met at the symposium and then Adam took me to the open-air Museum. Aswan, with its 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.

This was a truly compelling experience as it is not often that one is able to view works of art within the original context of their production and it was there that I first encountered the remarkable work of Armen Agop for the first time. Needless to say, I was completely captivated by its peaceful beauty. Armen'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 Armen's forms – his clear and uncompromising quest for aesthetic perfection was instantly apparent.

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Adam clearly shared my opinion, remarking that Armen was the one artist, in his opinion, that had truly taken on the tradition of modern Egyptian sculpture, refining it and taking it to another level. Throughout the years, Adam continued to position Armen's work in this long tradition of Egyptian sculpture. For me, the artist's mysterious, abstract works, although clearly very different in nature to the mostly figurative works of his predecessors, demonstrate the same appreciation for linear form and elegant minimalism. I was delighted to finally work with Armen on the exhibition, Mantra which opened at Meem in November 2019.

I continued to speak to Adam at great length about the continuum of Egyptian sculpture, he has always felt strongly that all significant sculpture from the country invariably drew its inspiration from pharaonic roots. Indeed, Adam himself, led the design team who worked on the restoration of the Great Sphinx at Giza in 1989 – 1998.

You can see this stylistic legacy in Adam Henein's own work and in the work of the 'Father of modern Egyptian sculpture', Mahmoud Mokhtar. Henein's dynamic animal and human figures clearly recall elements of the highly stylised sculpture of the proto-dynastic and dynastic periods with their clean, minimal lines and features, often capturing the essence of tomb funerary statuary, created to accompany the dead into the afterlife.



Adam Henein. Marie Nilus, 1969, bronze

When we look at Mokhtar's revolutionary work, we can see that he seamlessly combined aspects of pharaonic statuary with a modern European artistic sensibility in order to create a brand-new national aesthetic. He is best known for his statuesque figures which are simultaneously robust and elegant, as can be seen in *Au Bord Du Nil*, a work that I acquired for the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, in 2017.

I have spent the last decade endeavoring to bring the extraordinary works of these three generations of Egyptian sculptors together in order to demonstrate the unique continuum of Egyptian sculpture over the past century.

Mokhtar-Henein-Agop (100 Years of Egyptian Sculpture) runs until 26th September

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