



MOSTAFA EL RAZZAZ

THE ART OF LOVING LIFE

Photographs courtesy of Dr. Mostafa El Razzaz
Text: Nile El Wardani



Dr. Mostafa El Razzaz approaches his work with delight, passion, enchantment and discipline. He is one of the rarest of birds. As an artist he began to spread his wings at the age of 19 when he sailed down the Nile from Cairo following a sense of adventure and a desire to know and understand Nubia. It was 1962 when he lived amongst the Nubians, that he began his artistic endeavors sketching and drawing the uniquely Nubian architecture and people. These became his first “elements” which have remained essential features of his canvas for more than six decades.

As a young man, he presented a few of his Nubian paintings to the Cairo Salon, a very prestigious venue which exhibited Mahmoud Said and others. He was astonished when he won a prize and thus began his career as a bonafide artist.

What makes El Razzaz so very rare is his fundamentally positive sunny outlook on life which has never wavered nor failed him. He is deeply grateful for his calling as an artist. For him it is truly a calling. He feels blessed beyond measure and says that being an artist has been an honor that he does not take for-granted. While the lives of many artists are often difficult, filled with unknowns and recurrent instability, El Razzaz

claims that there was never a day that being an artist was a burden to him.

His phenomenal joyful ebullient attitude is indeed infectious and certainly plain to see in each and every piece of his oeuvre. Although he is senior in age he still paints every single day. He says that when he is painting he feels the same happiness he felt as a young man. He feels that time has not passed and he is still young and vibrant as long as he is painting.

While one can identify several different artistic stages throughout his more than 50 years of professional life, there is one common thread that is obvious to the eye and the heart. El Razzaz sees and paints happiness, light and love. Always.

El Razzaz has contributed in many ways to Egypt’s cultural heritage. He has served as a teacher of art education for decades and continues to this moment. He held the position



Dr. El Razzaz with one of his sculptures.





take their bones with us?" El Razzaz felt the deep concern and emotion among the Nubians. "It stopped in my heart. It helped me see their houses and their lives as dramatic and a heavy burden." These feelings changed the way he saw and painted the Nubians. His paintings reveal the Nubian feelings, and not just an outside look at their architecture from an artistic stand point, but a dramatic life inside.

El Razzaz often found himself lonely in Nubia. Totally lonely. "I was left alone after the Nubians slept. I was an outsider and a city man, so I stayed awake and I sat watching the stars in total silence, looking at how everything vanished with the darkness. This nourished my imagination into the metaphysical world." These two factors (the drama of human feelings and the silence of the metaphysical world) continue to live with him until today and have played a major role in shaping his ideology and art.

El Razzaz was in Nubia when they began to build the Aswan High Dam. He was smitten by the gargantuan machines that arrived in Nubia. They were like prehistoric monsters, fast and huge. The contrast with Nubia was startling where there is no time and nothing is so immense and powerful. The dichotomy was riveting. El Razzaz ventured to capture the speed, technology and massiveness in juxtaposition to ancient



of Director of Cultural Palaces in Egypt overseeing 35,000 employees in numerous art domains. Among them were centers for making carpets. As he observed, he interrupted the weavers and asked them to stop without letting them complete the carpet. "I let them leave the carpets unfinished with empty spaces. Then I bought them just like that. As an artist, sometimes you need to stop. You get immersed in the painting or carpet. Sometimes you must let the empty spaces live."

During his first trip to Nubia he learned about the drama of human feelings which greatly affected his art. He lived amongst the Nubian women, elderly and children during the winter months, when the men were away for work. This was the time when the High Dam was being planned. The Nubians accepted their fate, they said "If our houses have to be immersed for the sake of the country we will do it. But we have only one problem, what will we do with our dead? Shall we leave them to be immersed or shall we



slow peaceful Nubia. He worked on massive canvases painting the enormous machinery as hybrid creatures and the High Dam in monochromatic colors of olive, black and metal hues. He emphasized action, movement, form and unrelenting power. These accumulative elements meld together; machines, environment and people into El Razzaz's New Nubia. Hybrid bird-like creatures peer from behind a wall as if they are spying on you. People, animals and ancestral bones are embedded in the High Dam. A Nubian house with a flock of homing pigeons circle while a woman moves with a donkey. Each and every element is integrated into the High Dam paintings. Razzaz reminds us that "The High Dam is made by humans but not fused by humans."

In his following stage, El Razzaz delved into Islamic art. Curious to see how the calligrapher masters the spaces between the letters, he enlarged their works onto massive papers and observed only the spaces between the letters. Within these empty spaces he found magnificent raw materials; a curled-up cat, a braying donkey, a birds nest, and Arabian horses all lived between the letters and words. Yet again, this "happy mistake," filled him with gratitude.



He had learned once more to look between the spaces of light, movement, patterns, music and nature; for the spaces will tell you yet another story.

El Razzaz was highly influenced by Mamluki and Fatimid ceramics he studied in the Islamic Museum in Cairo. Within the glorious vases and vessels were ceramic filters that had been made to fit into the neck of the vase. Each filter contained unique and wonderful designs of birds, peacocks, fish, cats, plants and insects. Made in Al Fostat centuries ago, the workmanship was extremely fine. El Razzaz was working as an assistant researcher for his professor who was an art connoisseur. Together they visited many museums and antique dealers in search of art and knowledge. At an antique dealer in Alexandria, they were shown an enormous collection of Mamluki and Fatimid ceramic filters, which El Razzaz photographed. There was enormous diversity in the collection. El Razzaz was enchanted. Although his salary was only 14 LE per month, he spent it all and borrowed more. He selected from over 1000 pieces 84 which he bought. He studied them, drew each and began to paint. He was enchanted by the tiny negative spaces within each. He concluded that the work was indeed metaphysical and came from mystic thought and manners. From these elusive ancient ceramic filters new elements were birthed into the El Razzaz lexicon.

After his marriage to Saria Sidky the couple traveled to the United States of America to study at the University of New York in Buffalo to complete their doctorates. El Razzaz completed his PhD with a focus on Egyptian Folkloric Art while Saria focused on Islamic Art and Sufi Art. It has always been clear that being an Egyptian and an artist made them unique. Had they been born into another culture, each would have manifested their art quite differently. El Razzaz speaks of two streams in his river of life. One is the Egyptian tradition, the local environment and the social interaction of the people. The other stream is his interaction with other cultures, particularly Norway where he studied at Oslo University as well as Denmark and Sweden where he exhibited his art frequently. El Razzaz feels a great deal of affection for these countries although they are very different from his own. He admits that during his time in Scandinavia he made an error. His art became very minimalistic like them. "My lines became entirely different. For five years I followed this genre. It is good to be open to every input and this enriched me but in the end it was not me nor my heritage."

For decades El Razzaz has committed himself fully to painting and sculpture in bronze. As he makes a reservation with a certain gallery each year to exhibit, he is driven to work every day in his atelier. This is what pushes him. His unwavering dedication to making art gives him great satisfaction and keeps him young and focused.

As a new voyage begins each year, he spreads dozens of empty canvases around his studio and begins to shepherd in his "elements" which he likens to actors and actresses. He sees each canvas as a stage wherein his "elements" interact, creating a conversation together. And so the story begins. "I work on all my paintings at once. I give myself total liberty. No color schemes. No theme. No pre-factors. I work as if there is no plan and I let it give birth, as if I am dreaming. I let the work surround me."

Over fifty years have passed, El Razzaz's artistic "elements" have expanded beyond the original Nubian architecture and people to include trees, flowers, all manner of tropical plants, people of all ages and many animals each with a specific meaning. As he speaks of his "elements" one gets the distinct feeling that indeed they are actors in a play and that there is profound meaning in each character's existence upon the canvas.





It is a very dynamic process. El Razzaz speaks with passion: “My elements and motifs can move from one painting to another. They are like a herd and I just need to capture them and paint them on the canvas and let them live freely.”

Indeed El Razzaz has many influences, he speaks of the Sufi books that taught him about alchemy, chemistry and metaphysics. He has become something of a philosopher, with this in mind, El Razzaz thought to elect ambassadors from all the kingdoms to be represented in his paintings. “So I chose the horse, the bird, a

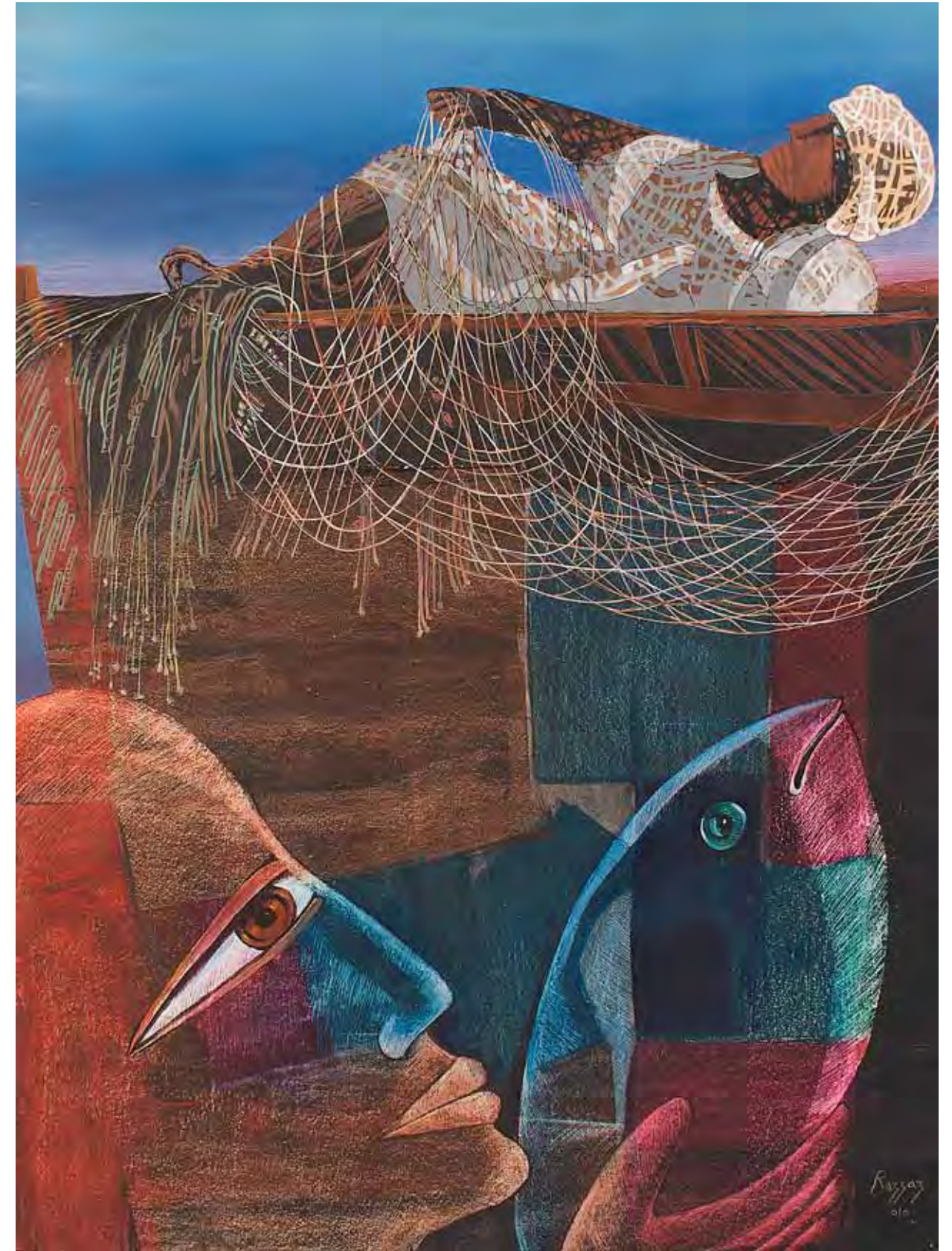
girl and a plant. For example, I chose the artichoke because it has secrets hidden in its many layers.”

Indeed his troops have grown and followed him decade after decade. He calculates that he has drawn thousands of horses, birds and girls and each one is different. “This is my pride.” The horse signifies gallantry and nobility in Egyptian mythology. These myths have been passed down since pre-historic times in Egypt. They are injected into the consciousness of the people and it has been assimilated into Christianity and Islam and it has remained with the people. In rural Egyptian society birds are historically very important for the female. Because females traditionally cannot speak openly about intimate feelings, they speak to birds, ducks and pigeons. Birds are keepers of secrets and lovely companions because when you give your secrets you give your intimacy also. They also signify and bring peace. “Birds are magical. They can fly above the horse and make the movement of the horse even greater.”

Lastly, the eye, is a very important vehicle for El Razzaz. “It shows us the focal point of each painting. By following the eyes and where they lead you will see the focal point of the oeuvre.”

He admits that it is a challenge to exhibit every year and make something different. As he prepares for the coming spring exhibition, he has incorporated a bit of a radical change. His elements are more geometric, fewer curved lines, more straight lines, even in the horses and people and his palette has become muted pastel colors. The birds are the color of ice cream.

In the wee hours of the night El Razzaz sometimes falls asleep on his painting. He likes to paint at night in silence. He often wakes up with oil paint on his face. He awakens himself and removes the paint with turpentine. “And when I look in the mirror I see an old man and I say, Who is that? I am not old yet”, not when I am painting.”



This year El Razzaz won The Nile Prize for Creative Arts, celebrating his life’s work. El Razzaz’s oeuvre is multi-layered and has documented the heritage of Egypt for over fifty years. El Razzaz has built his legacy on his phenomenal paintings and sculptures that adorn many museums, galleries and private collections. Indeed he has given Egypt and the world something to love and admire for generations to come. Ω