

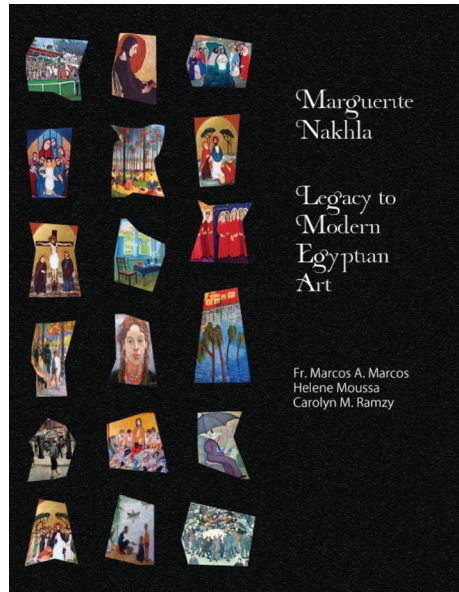


Journeying with Marguerite Nakhla

The title of this article is also the title of the last chapter in the book *Marguerite Nakhla: Legacy to Modern Egyptian Art*, which was published by St. Mark's Museum and written by Fr. Marcos Marcos, Dr. Helene Moussa and Carolyn Ramzy. The book was launched at the Ninth Annual St. Mark's Church Coptic Festival on Saturday, September 3, 2009. In this issue of the Museum's Newsletter we want to share with our readers some highlights of our journey.

The journey began when Fr. Marcos started building the collection of the "future" Museum in the early 1970s. He was encouraged by members of the congregation to obtain one of the paintings of the famous Egyptian artist Marguerite Nakhla. It so happened that Marguerite's brother, Antoun Nakhla, lived in Montreal. To get a more objective view of his sister's accomplishments, Antoun Nakhla recommended that Fr. Marcos meet with Fr. Pierre du Bourguet, Director of the Egyptian Antiquities Department at the Louvre Museum in Paris. Fr. du Bourguet not only reiterated the achievements of this accomplished artist but also informed Fr. Marcos of the series of biblical scenes she had painted in which she reinvented early Coptic art in modern form — an art form that had died in the twelfth century. Fr. du Bourget said that if the future St. Mark's Coptic Museum could just have one of these paintings, it would be a truly unique Museum!

In 1974, on one of his trips to Egypt, Fr. Marcos met Ms. Nakhla in her modest home in Alexandria on the first floor of 66 Ismalia Street. Fr. Marcos found Marguerite Nakhla to be a very modest and spiritual person



Front cover of book:

The cover and book design were created by Lillian Hanna. We chose the metaphor of a "mosaic" for the cover to express the unique characteristic of Marguerite Nakhla's diversity of styles and subject matter. The "empty" spaces symbolize the paintings we have not yet seen and the black background brings out her use of colours. Lillian describes how she gave great thought to this design: "Working on the cover and book design involved harmonizing graphic design skills with the text so that the images and the text could 'speak' to each other. But most importantly it required getting in touch with Marguerite Nakhla's works at the feeling and spiritual level."

— an observation that was repeated time and time again by all the people who met and knew her. Fr. Marcos offered to purchase one of her paintings and explained that payments could only be in installments as the Toronto congregation was still very small. He also suggested that if her work were displayed in the Museum, her particular style of Coptic folkloric art would be appreciated and taught to the community. After she reflected on this proposal, and much to Fr. Marcos' great surprise, Ms. Nakhla offered all SIX biblical scenes as a gift, in addition to an icon of the Virgin Mary and the Divine Child, a replica of the Bawit fresco of the Coptic Museum in Cairo. As we write in the last chapter of our book: The research into Marguerite Nakhla's life and artistic works has taken us on a journey of uncovering the multiple layers of meaning published in the prophetic headline of *Le Courier des Arts* when it announced her passing. As the newspaper proclaimed, she left a profound legacy to modern Egyptian painting.

Portrait of Marguerite Nakhla

by Dr.
Daoud
Antoun
Daoud in
china ink
offered to
St. Mark's
Museum.



What earned her the title of "distinguished artist"? What is the legacy she left to Egyptian painting? Why did she call her art "folkloric" and not "high art"? In English and in French, "folkloric art" refers to "arts and crafts," which do not have the same elevated status of "high art." Why, in 1975, was she named the leading Egyptian woman artist of the first half of the twentieth century? Why was she so highly regarded both in Egypt and internationally?

Our research journey began in 2004. Initially, there was no intention of writing a book! The only “clue” of where to begin was that St. Mary’s Coptic Orthodox Church in Zamalek had in its collection Ms. Nakhla’s painted icons. When I met with Fr. Dr. Youssef Abdou Youssef in Zamalek, he kindly offered me free access to the icons so I could take photographs of them in the Church. He explained that he had been commissioned to the Church after construction was completed and that he had not met Ms. Nakhla personally. He had, however, arranged for me to meet one of her former colleagues and close friends, Dr. Kawkab Youssef, an art professor at Helwan University and a well-known Egyptian painter.



Book Launch Coptic Festival, Sept.5, 2009

Left to right: The Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton, Executive Director of the Canadian Council of Churches, Fr. Marcos Marcos, Dr. Helene Moussa, Carolyn Ramzy and Lillian Hanna.

Dr. Kawkab Youssef welcomed me with enthusiasm. At that time she was 95 years old and four feet tall, but nonetheless a grand lady with a dynamic personality that captured the respect and affection of all who had the privilege of knowing her. Within a few minutes of our meeting, she had me on the phone with two of Marguerite Nakhla’s former students! When I met her again a week later, I was surprised when she handed me six handwritten pages of her recollections of Marguerite Nakhla. She also had arranged for me to view Marguerite Nakhla’s collection at the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, even though the Museum was closed to the public for renovations.

On each of my four following trips to Egypt, she would give me something for the research project or for our Museum: a poster of an art exhibition with a painting by Marguerite Nakhla; a hand-painted Christmas card she had received from Marguerite Nakhla; one of her own paintings titled *Nubian Girl*; a recent catalogue of her own works published by the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art; and her hand-embroidered cloths. She regularly wrote letters at Easter and Christmas asking about the progress of the research. While it filled me with deep sadness to hear of her passing last year, a few months before her 100th birthday and before she could see our book, I know she is in good Hands.

Because of Dr. Kawkab Youssef, many doors were opened for me into the Egyptian cultural and art world. Over the past four years, I was invited into 16 homes and welcomed to view and photograph Marguerite Nakhla’s art — these were total strangers to me but were relatives, friends, former students and colleagues of Marguerite Nakhla. They shared with me recollections of her legacy as a person and an artist. Listening to them helped me “meet” Marguerite Nakhla. I not only made new friends but I was also able to experience a very different Egypt, where the bonds of artistic visions and creativity can break many of the existing social barriers and biases. What stood out in all these encounters was how her art and her personality were so integrated. Dr. Kamel Moustapha, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, in 1975 at Cairo University, described this quality poetically when he said that “her brush enchants ... she offers the best of her soul.” I certainly felt this during those many weeks when my dining-room table was covered with photographs of her paintings as I put my pen to paper and began writing my chapters for the book.

It was not until a couple of years ago that I finally discovered the meaning of “folkloric art” from Marguerite Nakhla’s perspective. It was when I was writing chapter 1, in which I explore the historical background of the Modern Egyptian Art Movement of the twentieth century. These artists used

Marguerite Nakhla: Legacy to Modern Egyptian Art

is on sale for \$35.00 at St. Mark’s Church Bookstore and St. Mark’s Coptic Museum. Order forms are available on the Museum’s website.



Mr. Nick Mattas offering a certificate of congratulations to Fr. Marcos Marcos on behalf of The Honourable Jim Karygiannis, MPP, Scarborough-Agincourt.

the term “folkloric” to describe an emerging national art that was rooted in Egyptian history and culture in opposition to the societal value given to “high” Western art. In chapter 2, I discuss how Marguerite Nakhla, in her quiet and unassuming way, was part of this generation of pioneers of modern Egyptian art. This is why Carolyn Ramzy, a researcher of non-liturgical folk songs of the Coptic community, was invited to write chapter 5, “Colours that Sing: Marguerite Nakhla’s Folk Paintings and Coptic Non-Liturgical Folk Songs.” Carolyn’s experience of studying Ms. Nakhla’s artwork struck a personal chord: “As I spent time with Marguerite Nakhla’s works, it was as if the colours and images that she used began to sing to me, much the same soft and nostalgic way my own grandmother would sing *taratil* to me when she was telling me about her life in Egypt. Nakhla’s paintings challenge us to think about the past and our spirituality in a way that is different from how we look at traditional art and hear traditional music.”

In the conclusion of our book, we extend an invitation to art historians, art critics and the general audience “to continue the journey we have begun with this distinguished artist Marguerite Nakhla.”

St. Mark’s museum is truly privileged to have on display her series of biblical scenes painted in Coptic Folkloric Style.

Helene Moussa with Carolyn Ramzy and Lillian Hanna