

The Development of Painting from Primitive to Post-Modern: A Case Study of Egypt

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Abstract

In this study, the development of painting art over long period of time from prehistory to present day was investigated. This study is limited to Egyptian painting. It goes through a sequence of art periods including: Primitive, Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, modern and postmodern (contemporary) arts. This study highlights the most important constant and variable features of Egyptian painting artworks (subject- artistic formulation- technique) in each period studied. Examples showing Egyptian painting artworks of these periods were presented. The characteristics of each time period and their impact on painting features were explained. The study concluded that there is a clear effect for the nature of each stage on painting artworks and their features.

Key words: Painting, Egyptian, Aesthetical, Art Period, Era, Subject, Formulation, Technique, Primitive, Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, Modern, Postmodern (Contemporary).

1. Introduction

Painting is the art or act of making pictures by applying colour, pigment, paint or other medium on a solid surface (Webster, 2006). It is an approach of creation having different forms and styles which could be made of various materials, media, aesthetical values and artistic formulations. Since, painting artwork is a reflection of the time period in which it is produced. Era's technological, social, political and religious circumstances have a great impact on it. Therefore, forms of painting have been developed since primitive era to present day. In art history, we could see obvious and significant changes in painting artworks' subject, artistic formulation and technique used. This study aimed at investigating and inferring the nature of constant and variable artistic characteristics of painting over different spans of time. The extent to which an artwork could be affected by era's characteristics is presented. The history of Egypt has been long and rich. It witnessed the beginning of human civilization followed by several successive civilizations variant in technology and believes.

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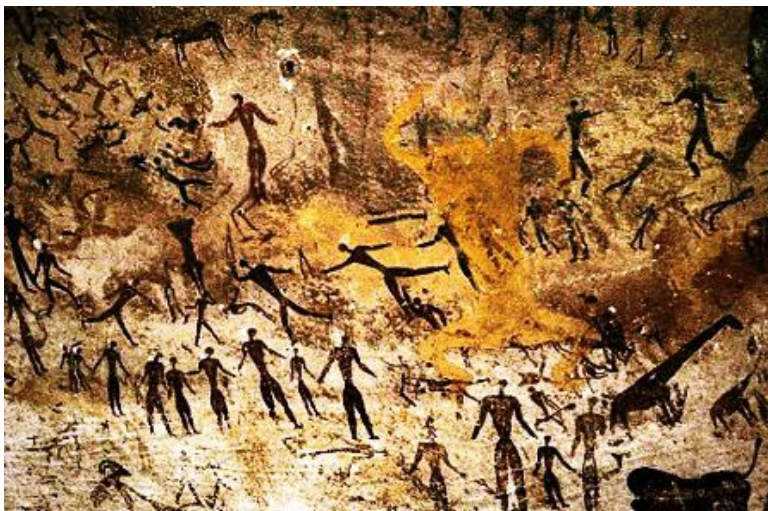
Herbert Read recorded his opinion regarding Egyptian art (Primitive then Pharaonic) in his book "The meaning of art"(Read, 1961). He mentioned that Egypt is one of three areas at which static civilization emerged and therefore art. However, Egyptian art was described as national because of its long duration and wide influence. It is evident that Egypt has been subjected to different social, economic, ideological, political and cultural impacts which affected Egyptian art generally and painting especially. Therefore, it was decided to study the most important constant and variable artistic features of Egyptian painting and factors affecting them including era characteristics. This study is focused on Egyptian painting ages from prehistory to contemporary as a model through which the study objective could be achieved. The author shed the light on some examples of Egyptian painting from successive stages. These examples are ordered chronologically from prehistory to contemporary ages. Features and characteristics of era for which these paintings belong to and the degree of their impact on painting subject, artistic formulation and technique are discussed. In this study, the author studied six successive periods of Egyptian painting. Each stage has significant and different intellectual, ideological, scientific and social features. The first period is prehistory (Primitive art) followed by ancient Egyptian civilization (Ancient Egyptian art) then Christian period (Coptic art), then Islamic civilization period (Islamic art), then Egyptian Modern period (Modern art) ending by contemporary period (Post-modern art).

2. Prehistoric stage

GilfKebir Mountains in the remote south-western corner of Egypt is considered one of the most important international historic areas. There were monuments found in this area representing Prehistoric cave art. Examples of remnants paintings found on walls of caves show subject, artistic style and technique used at this period (see Figure1). With regards to subject, these paintings reflect daily human activities such as hunting animals, nature of community, human beliefs, myths and legends(Gombrich & Gombrich, 1995).The artistic formulation shows freedom and innocence of primitive man in expressing subjects. This indicates that prehistoric painting overweighs truthfulness and spontaneity of all following art periods. This is because prehistoric painting was not seeking financial reward or fame. Moreover, there was not any art style preceding this kind of art would have affect it. Prehistoric art is the oldest art created by human using line, colour and shape. The principle and main motive for creation and artistic production was human intrinsic creative energy charged by surrounding impacts. These were his vision towards life, death, and ambiguity of surrounding world. Limited knowledge of primitive man regarding these factors motivated and pushed him to carry out disambiguation and explanation for several phenomena surrounding him. Therefore, this led him to myth and legend in order to interpret these phenomena using line, shape, colours and symbols.Regarding technique used, simple technique was used in implementing these paintings on cave walls.

Colourants were made from ground coloured rocks and extracted from different plants and animals' blood. Colour palette used was limited to white, black, yellow and different tones of brown and red. These colourants were used without mixing because they were brought straight forward from natural life to cave walls. With no doubt, simplicity of life style and available techniques for painting in this age produced paintings characterised by simplicity, truthfulness and spontaneity.

Figure 1 Cave wall painting found in a cave at GilfKebir Mountains in the remote south-western corner of Egypt



3. Pharaonic stage

Ancient Egyptian civilization is one of the oldest and most unique human civilizations in the history of mankind. Over thousands of years, people have settled near river valleys such as Nile Valley. Ancient Egyptians gathered by river Nile banks establishing a civilization lasted for thousands of years. Egyptian civilization was based and established on constant beliefs affecting style of life, science and art characteristics. The ancient Egyptian doctrine of the immortality made Egyptians attentive to the process of preserving dead bodies- especially those of the ruling classes (kings and princes) which made mummification their most important issue. This led to constructing tombs, temples and pyramids and decorating their walls with murals depicting daily activities and doctrinal aspects of the dead person. This contributed to producing significant artistic style applied by artists in ancient Egypt for thousands of years (the age of ancient Egyptian civilization). Researchers carried out research studies concerned with Ancient Egyptian art. It was found based on majesty and greatness rather than beauty.

However, painting in ancient Egypt is ideological and dogmatic embodying greatness of work and place, it had limited creativity. This is because it was carried out and implemented by applying an artistic style predefined and pre-identified by priests and previous artists. This artistic style was considered as an ideal model fulfilling ancient Egyptian doctrine and beliefs. This special artistic formulation is based on depicting human and animal bodies using strict certain ratios and side postures employing different perspective points abandoning perspective rules. Development of ancient Egyptian painting -in terms of technique used- was larger and more advanced than that of primitive age(Watts & Girsh, 1998). Murals were implemented on tomb walls using various fresco techniques and colour palettes symbolizing elements painted. Human bodies painted were different in colour i.e. reddish-brown and pinkish-red were used for men and ladies respectively. Layers of goldish sheets were used in order to express richness of precious objects. Layers of transparent paint were used to preserve and keep mural paintings from deterioration. Figure 2 shows the tomb of the young King Tutankhamun. He is an Egyptian Pharaoh of the eighteenth Dynasty. Paintings on wall and coffin are presented.

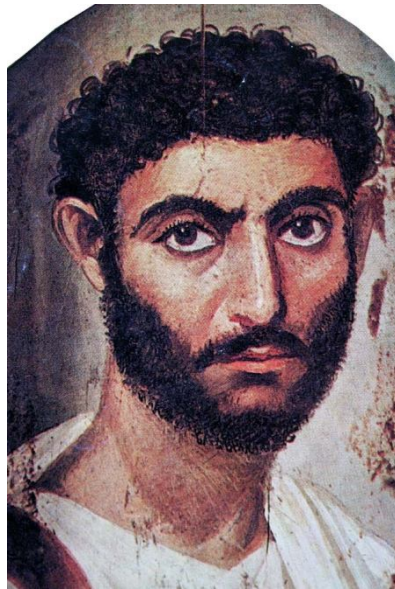
Figure 2 Part of King Tutankhamun's tomb exhibiting the burial chamber of the king



Scientific and technological progress witnessed by ancient Egyptian civilization contributed to the emergence of new techniques and colour palette. For example, papyrus sheet was made from Papyrus. It was used to make manuscripts containing inscriptions and illustrations of Egyptians' life activities and beliefs. These sheets were painted using tempera technique, which is based on using crushed coloured stones mixed with egg whites as binder. In the late ancient Egyptian civilization, Roman occupied Egypt. This stage was significant by "Fayum mummy portraits". These portraits were used to cover faces of buried mummies.

In making these portraits, Egyptians were influenced by Roman artistic style and technique. This new art style combined Egyptian doctrine and Roman art style. In this technique, a wood surface was coated by plaster ground and then painted by a mixture of colourant -made from crushed coloured rocks- and egg white. This layer of painting is finally coated by a layer of transparent paint preserving it from deterioration. Fayum portraits and previous ancient Egyptian painting are obviously different in terms of artistic style used. On the one hand ancient Egyptian artists painted and represented similar faces from side view without light or shadows, but on the other hand Fayum portraits painted realistically different facial features dependent on characters using light and shadows (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 An Example of Fayum portraits (Period of Roman occupation for Egypt)



Strong and stable ancient Egyptian civilization produced creative paintings of significant and unique identity. It established its own artistic style of formulation, special subjects, techniques and colour palette. These paintings' splendour appearance and colours are still preserved to these days.

4. Coptic stage

The emergence of Christianity in Egypt (during the Roman rule) was accompanied by a new art style called "Coptic or Christian" art.

This art style was affected and inspired by Christian doctrine. It mainly illustrated the life of Jesus, his mother (virgin Mary), the apostles and Bible verses. Roman emperors were intolerant of Christianity in Egypt. This caused political violence and persecution of Copts. Churches were razed to ground and murals presenting Christian beliefs were destroyed. This pushed and inspired Coptic artists to use "iconic" technique inspired by Fayum portraits made in the last period of ancient Egyptian art. At this stage of Roman oppression of Egyptian Coptic, "Icon" featuring Christian themes and beliefs was the most popular form of art. This is because it could be easily transferred and prevented from destruction. This artistic style and technique had been produced until Roman emperor converted to Christianity and it was declared to be one of the official religions throughout the empire. After that, Egyptian Christians were allowed to practice their religion. They built new churches and monasteries of unique aesthetical structures and ornamentation. Murals of different techniques i.e. fresco, tempera and mosaic in addition to Icons were used to decorate interior architecture. In terms of artistic formulation, Christian art is based on illustrating realistic expressive paintings (similar to Fayum portraits) for saints, Jesus and Virgin Mary (see Figure 4). Colour palette and technique of mixing colourants employed in Fayum portraits were used for making these Icons. However, there was excessive usage of gold colour around saints' faces expressing their religious majesty and greatness (Farag, 2013). It is evident that Pharaonic art inspired Coptic artists in terms of elements, motifs and techniques used. However, the difference between ancient and Coptic Egyptian doctrines differently influenced their artistic style, subjects presented and symbolic usage of colour.

Figure 4 Jesus and Menas in a sixth-century icon from Bawit in Middle Egypt, currently at the Louvre.



5. Islamic stage

After Muslim conquest of Egypt, many Egyptians converted to Islam. Over long period of time, Islamic caliphs successively ruled Egypt. These were Umayyad caliphs followed by Abbasid then Fatimid then Mamluks ended by Ottoman rulers. This was accompanied by the emergence of new art style called "Islamic art". Its subjects and ideas were inspired by Islamic doctrine based on Monotheism. This doctrine forbids illustrating and/or sculpturing human and animal figures. This is in order to avoid idolatry and polytheism believed by Egyptians before Muslim conquest of Egypt. Muslim painter inspired his subjects by Quran's verses. Development of Islamic art was based on using various Arabic fonts and patterns. Islam was spread throughout the world. Islamic empire stretched from the borders of India and China eastwards to Spain and Morocco westwards, and from southern Europe northwards to middle of Africa southwards. This expansion highly affected Islamic art. So as Muslim artists interacted with different arts and cultures and reproduced these arts in new forms and formulations based on Monotheism. This interaction contributed to richness and diversity of colour palette and decorative pattern used in various applications produced in order to fulfil Muslim needs and demands. Islamic decorative pattern was either inspired by plants or created by geometrical shapes. Islamic painting was rarely presenting human and animal subjects using creative decorative style. Muslim artist employed Arabic font in decorating interior architecture of mosques, Islamic schools and palaces of governance. The variety of artistic formulation, techniques used and colour palette indicates diversity and richness of Islamic art. Muslim artist used a variety of materials as well including glazed tiles in addition to various techniques of engraving wood, rocks or metal (Nasr, 1990). Islamic art generally and Egyptian Islamic art especially are linked to Muslim life elements including clothing, habitat and house of worship (mosque). This art aims to beautifying the environment surrounding Muslims. Its point is to express and present Quran's text and verses using pleasant visual formulations. Figure 5 shows the sanctuary of Sultan Hassan Mosque. This mosque was built by an-Nasir Hasan ibn Qalawun (757-764 AH) during Mamluk Islamic era in Egypt. It is evident that Muslim artist in this period created decorations implemented using various techniques i.e. carving wood and metal and inlaid marble.

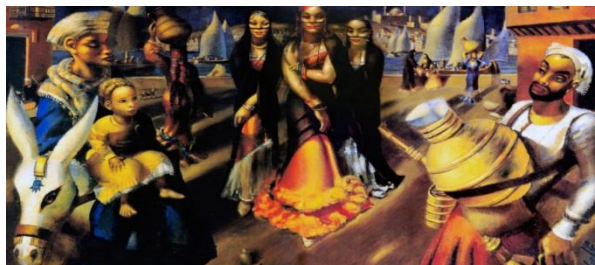
Figure:5 Sanctuary of Sultan Hassan Mosque



6. Modern stage

The emergence of Modern art in Egypt was influenced by the most important European modern art movements from early 19th to mid-20th centuries. These movements were: new classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Abstraction and Surrealism. This impact was due to British occupation of Egypt in late nineteenth century and visiting first modern Egyptian artists to Europe, such as Mohamed Nagi, Mahmoud Saeed, Ahmed Sabri, Yousef Kamel. Egyptian modern artists were inspired by modern art movements in terms of artistic formulation, painting techniques and colour palettes (Karnouk, 1988). However, they deliberately focused on presenting and expressing Egyptian identity in terms of subjects, environment and personality. Figure 6 shows one of Mahmoud Saeed's paintings "Bahari girls". It is an example of his special artistic formulation expressing Egyptian society and environment. This painting evidently shows his truthfulness, awareness and professionalism in presenting the Egyptian society.

Figure 6 "Bahari girls" Mahmoud Saeed- oil on canvas 250*220 cm



Mahmoud Saeed was not the only artist inspired his paintings by Egyptian environment. There were other artists than him expressed Egyptian identity through selecting subjects presenting Egyptian environment such as Ragheb Aayad, Yousef kamel and Engy Aflaton. The first generation of modern art in Egypt produced paintings of interesting visual aesthetics inspired the second generation followed them such as Hamed Nada, Omar Al-Nagdi, Abdelhadi Al-Jazzar and Hassan Soliman who indicated the Egyptian national aspects in their paintings. These artists adopted the issue of presenting Egyptian heritage, environment and identity to the world through their modern paintings. Regarding painting technique, the usage of various paints and colours starting by oil paint, water colour and soft pastel and then acrylic produced diverse colour palettes and artistic visual formulations which were highly dependent on artist vision. In the preparation process of a surface for painting, a fabric is stretched across a wooden frame to be coated with white colourant blocking its porous surface. After that, artists employed brush and/or palette knife in the painting process. The selection of technique and media used are determined according to artist vision, experience and painting capabilities. Since the emergence of modern Egyptian painting, it has been prospered and progressed. Expressing Egyptian society and environment using modern art style produced unique and significant paintings. These paintings embodied Egyptian life details in rural and urban areas and popular and aristocratic districts. In early 20th century, Egyptian artists aimed to communicate with society via modern painting language. As they believed that taking the details of Egyptian national identity into consideration will convert these paintings to internationally famous paintings. They believed that truthfulness is embodying their own real environment and not others. However, the beginnings of Egyptian modern art were affected by European modern art; it soon became purely Egyptian because of paintings' truthful expression and unique artistic formulation.

7. Contemporary (Post-modern) stage

Since the middle of the twentieth century, we have been witnessing steady development in science and technology. This development has removed barriers between countries and mixed cultures producing a culturally integrated world. In the field of art, artistic language became global and subjects presented have gone beyond space and time limits. In art styles prior to contemporary art, painting artworks were affiliated and referenced to certain civilization because of its association to specific place, time, environment or culture. However, contemporary painting would lose (previously known) affiliation to specific civilization. Artists, intellectuals and critics -in the light of removed barriers and distances among nations- have been expressing freely human issues, ambitions and fears producing mixed concepts. This is obvious and witnessed in contemporary (postmodern) art. Post-modern art have changed common concepts regarding the nature of artworks in terms of subject, structure and technique used.

Compared to previous art styles, Contemporary art has adopted new unusual approaches regarding the relationship between artwork and audience. Interactive art is an example of this art style and trend. It depends on the interaction between audience and a piece of art to complete the artwork idea. This interaction is designed by the artist taking into consideration artwork conceptual and aesthetical dimensions according to audience action and response. All available knowledge, science and technology have been used in interactive art. Conceptual or idea art is another art trend belongs to post-modern period. It is one of the artistic trends inquiring creative artwork specifications. This art style and trend has its special aim and vision. Conceptual artist aims at presenting his ideas and concepts regardless aesthetical values of artwork produced. Conceptual art is based on presenting an idea employing appropriate media beyond conventional principles and rules of art. Artists have got rid of conventional artistic skills in favour of meaning which became the main aim of this art style instead of its artistic features. In Egypt, there have been supporters (intellectuals, critics and artists) for post-modern art styles. In these days, private and public art galleries encourage artists to show case different forms of digital, video, installation arts using different new techniques (Bentkowska-Kafel, Cashen, & Gardiner, 2005). Contemporary artists gave themselves the right to select the method of expression including mixing different art styles and forms such as sculpture, painting and photography. Figure 7 presents a contemporary artwork for artist Ramzi Moustafa. He is one of the first Egyptian contemporary artists used installation art. His artworks were inspired by Egyptian environment and especially popular and rural districts.

Figure 7 Installation artwork - Ramzi Moustafa



Current cultural circumstances and conditions in Egypt points to conflict between two different concepts. On one hand, supporters of conventional art style consider paintings and statues as the forms of art showing artist's artistic and creative skills. Therefore, it is the formal form of art which should be used. On the other hand, supporters of contemporary art indicate that the main aim of art is to present an idea to audience regardless means used. They also believe that the creation process is dependent on the aim of artist to present his ideas and concepts to audience rather than formulation skills. Moreover, contemporary artists believe that establishing limitations in the field of art limiting artist's creative capabilities to produce new expressive forms and artistic formulations. It is important to notify that this conflict has been affecting positively the field of art nationally (in Egypt) and internationally. This has produced a competitive art environment motivating each side to make artworks showing their creative capabilities and presentation skills. The future will judge past and current artworks presented by each side.

8. Results and discussion

From the above review of painting artworks in Egypt from prehistory to current days, it is evident that there has been significant development of subject, artistic formulation and techniques used.

8.1. Development of Subject

It is evident that doctrines believed by Egyptian people over long period of time have had a great impact on subjects depicted in Egyptian painting. Moreover, modern and contemporary painting arts have been affected by media of communication between people which have removed barriers among nations and countries. This is summarized as follows: Primitive painting: Illustrated daily life activities especially hunting animals. Pharaonic painting: depicted Ancient Egyptian daily life, Egyptian gods, and afterlife. Coptic painting: was derived from the Bible portraying the life of Christ, Mary, and saints. Islamic painting: was inspired by Quran's verses, floral and geometric motifs and compositions. Modern painting: depicted daily human activities, landscape and still life subjects. Contemporary (Post-modern) painting: has presented contemporary people's life, hopes, and fears.

8.2. Development of artistic formulation

In this study, it was found that the most important factors affecting artistic formulation style in Egypt from one period to another is doctrine and the desire of artists to present it in the light of standard art style of its time period.

Cultural interaction between societies (especially in modern art) has had a great role as well. All these aspects were identified as follows: Primitive painting: has a spontaneous expressive style using limited colour palette i.e. brown, red, yellow, and black and white which was derived from natural resources. Pharaonic painting: is a structured artistic style of significant formula presenting its abstract elements (human, animal or plant) from the side view. Colour palette used consists of more varied colour tones, in which colour has a symbolic role. Coptic painting: has an expressive symbolic style using previous colour palettes. However, gold colour was used expressing the importance and value of object depicted. Islamic painting: is an abstractive decorative style using Arabic fonts, floral and geometric compositions. The colour palette used consists of blue, green and red. Modern painting: style was affected by European modern art movements producing artworks of similar features to that produced in Europe. Contemporary (Post-modern) painting: The effect of European art has extended to reach this period. Unusual artworks (such as interactive and conceptual arts) have been produced.

8.3. Development of techniques

From this study, it is obvious that the most important factors affecting the nature of techniques used from era to another are scientific and technological advances and communication between communities. Primitive painting: was employed direct painting on wall using natural colourants. Pharaonic painting: used wet and dry fresco techniques. Coptic painting: was applied painting on wood employing tempera technique (icon technique). Islamic painting: was employed using mosaic techniques, decorative tiles and relief and engraved wood. Modern painting: was produced by painting canvas using various media such as oil paint, acrylic and pastel. Contemporary (Post-modern) painting: was developed using various classic and digital techniques including photography, digital, and video arts.

9. Conclusions

This study found that there is a clear impact of era features on painting artworks. This was carried out by studying different stages of Egyptian painting as a model. Painting artworks of each stage were found of significant features including subject, artistic formulation and technique used. The most important factors affecting subjects expressed were: doctrine and interaction between cultures and communities. Advances in Science and Technology highly influenced the diversity of colour palettes and artistic techniques used in producing painting artworks. A painting artwork is a reflection of a society conveying its cultural and technological characteristics.

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