

Manazir  
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# Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

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## Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,  
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

2021

## Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

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Published with the support of the  
“Inspirierte Lehre” (Inspired Teaching) grant  
of the University of Bern

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UNIVERSITÄT  
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## Impressum

How to cite this essay: Emilie Magnin, "Neo-Pharaonism and National Revival: The Controversy Surrounding the Saad Zaghloul Mausoleum", in Laura Hindelang & Nadia Radwan (eds.), "Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region. A Collection of Essays", Manazir: Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region, 18 October 2021, <https://manazir.art/blog/nostalgia-and-belonging-art-and-architecture-mena-region/neo-pharaonism-and-national-revival-magnin>

Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

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Production, Design & Layout: Joan Grandjean  
Copy editing: Markus Fiebig  
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Cover image: Céline Burnand, *Retour à Helwan – La Maison des vivants*, 2021.  
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## Neo-Pharaonism and National Revival

### The Controversy Surrounding the Saad Zaghloul Mausoleum

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Figure 2: Saad Zaghloul Mausoleum. Mustafa Fahmy, 1927-31. Cairo, Egypt. Photograph by Nadia Radwan.

Constructed in 1931 in Cairo near Tahrir Square, the mausoleum of the nationalist leader Saad Zaghloul (1859–1927) is a building emblematic of the neo-pharaonic style that spread across Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, referred to as the “Egyptian Renaissance”, a generation of Egyptian modernist artists incorporated the Western traditions acquired during their studies in

Europe to reinvent and modernize the aesthetic elements of Ancient Egypt and develop a new national style (Radwan 36). This artistic movement coincided with the emergence of nationalist and revolutionary movements, but also with archaeological discoveries, such as the tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter in 1922, which also contributed to a renewed interest in ancient Egyptian civilization, not only in Egypt but also in Europe and the United States (Radwan 37).

The choice of the neo-pharaonic style to commemorate Saad Zaghloul is significant, as he was a significant figure in the quest for Egyptian independence. Zaghloul was the founding leader of the nationalist Wafd Party that led the 1919 revolution against the British occupation, which ultimately resulted in the United Kingdom's recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922. Following the revolution, Zaghloul became prime minister in 1924, after the Wafd Party won the majority at the elections. After his death in 1927, the Wafdist government commissioned a public monument for his mausoleum. Amongst several preliminary designs prepared by the Department of Civil Construction, the neo-pharaonic design by the Egyptian architect Mustafa Fahmy was chosen (Volait, "Architectures" 174). But the neo-pharaonic aesthetic of the building has led to many controversies, and the project was even stopped for several years. The monument was only finished in 1931, after the return of the Wafd party to power, and the remains of Saad Zaghloul were finally transferred into the mausoleum in 1936.

Underlying the arguments that arose in the controversy caused by the choice of Mustafa Fahmy's building are different visions of how to pay homage to a national leader and what is considered constitutive of the Egyptian's national identity. For some, the paganism associated with the pharaonic reference was too offensive to serve as a funeral building for a Muslim. Counterproposals were made for the building to be constructed in an Arab or Islamic style to better represent Zaghloul's religious beliefs (Coury 191). For others, the neo-pharaonic style had the advantage of providing a uniting Egyptian symbolism by overcoming religious references, prioritizing the idea of Zaghloul as a political and nationalist leader for all Egyptians, including Muslim, Coptic, and Jewish communities (Volait, "Une lignée d'architectes" 258). In this view, the neo-pharaonic style referred to a common glorious past and was less connoted with other regional or religious influences, making it the only true Egyptian style—a symbol of unity and national awakening. But the idea of an "Egyptian specificity" (Coury 194) expressed through references to ancient history has also been criticized for being representative only of intellectual and middle-class parts of society, far away from the social habits and preoccupations of the lower classes of Egyptian society. Historian Ralph M. Coury thus points out that Pharaonism "often bears the marks of a virulent form of Orientalism that conceived of Arab/Islamic civilization as universally inferior and impoverished" (194) and that its use can be interpreted as a consequence of Egyptian elites' feelings of inferiority towards their European counterparts.

Interestingly, the mausoleum itself is not a mere copy of an antique pharaonic monument. On the contrary, its style is a syncretism of various architectural elements and inspirations that incorporate not only ancient Egyptian references but also classical European influences and modern Art Deco elements. As noted by French architectural historian Mercedes Volait, the mausoleum presents a synthesis of diverse elements: "la massivité des temples égyptiens, une modénature Art déco, le classicisme moderne d'Auguste Perret, des souvenirs d'Andalousie, l'architecture islamique des monuments du Caire, etc." ("Une lignée d'architectes" 258). This process is typical of the artists of the "Egyptian Renaissance", who pursued a modern reinvention of the historical past. This reinvention included traditional patterns, materials, and crafts, but also many external influences. It sought to create a new Egyptian style that could be both national and universal (Radwan 50). In this respect, the academic training of Mustafa Fahmy is exemplary of this Western-educated intellectual class. Fahmy spent seven years of his architectural and artistic studies in Paris before

returning to Cairo to work as an architect. He became the first Egyptian professor to teach architecture at the Cairo Polytechnic School, a position that until then had only been held by Europeans (Volait, "Une lignée d'architectes" 257). While the colossal aspect of the mausoleum, with its large stones and lotus-shaped columns, shows similarities with ancient Egyptian temples, the overall symmetry and proportions as well as the interior ceiling resemble much more European neo-classicist architecture (Gabr). The central plan of the mausoleum, consisting of a square room, is reminiscent of the great tombs of the Mamluk sultans (Volait, "Architectures" 175). Finally, the decorative elements—such as the engraved friezes on the facade or the brass door handles—replicate Egyptian motifs but do so in stylized patterns and materials typical of Art Deco. Treated in a purely decorative manner, the ancient Egyptian motifs (like the lotus, deities, and winged cobras) have lost the particular symbolic and religious meanings they once carried (Gabr). The different inspirations identifiable in the mausoleum illustrate the complexity of the transfer processes and reciprocal influences between Egypt and Europe underlying the development of the neo-pharaonic style.

The controversy surrounding the choice of the neo-pharaonic style for the Saad Zaghloul mausoleum reveals the political tendencies at play at a particular moment in Egypt's history and the different aspects of national identity various actors wished to convey. Even though both pharaonic and Islamic styles can be considered representative of a particular conceptualization of Egyptian identity and culture, they each imply a different narrative and will resonate differently amongst different groups of people. Evoking the remote pharaonic past can indicate a longing for continuity and stability in politically troubled times by referring to a common past and identity that transcends more recent political and cultural divides. Furthermore, as Volait has observed, Pharaonism should not be reduced to its possible political instrumentality, for it also denotes a form of nostalgic romanticism with a strong emotional aura ("Architectures" 171). In this sense, honoring a contemporary political leader like a Pharaoh instead of erecting a building in the Islamic tradition can also be understood as a desire to establish a symbolic link between the dynasties of Ancient Egypt and contemporary Egyptian politics (Radwan 37). This desire for continuity was also demonstrated in the spectacular Pharaohs' Golden Parade, which saw twenty-two royal mummies of Ancient Egypt departing from the Egyptian Museum on April 3, 2021, to join their new home in the recently built National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (Hussein). The pharaonic abundance and the scenery of the procession far surpassed the national funerals of many politicians. Like the tomb of Zaghloul, this parade can be interpreted as a nationalist attempt to reconnect with Egypt's prestigious past and to revive this past in the heart of modern Egypt, creating a continuity between the greatness of past rulers and the present.

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