Robert Colescott
The Cairo Years

curated by

Terri Ginsberg
Duncan MacDonald
Matthew Weseley

February 9 – March 31, 2021
Margo Veillon Gallery
Tahrir Cultural Center
The American University in Cairo

https://robertcolescottthecairoyears.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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by Jonathan R. Cohen, U.S. Ambassador

The U.S. Embassy in Cairo is delighted to partner with the American University in Cairo's Department of the Arts and the Tahrir Cultural Center to support a unique exhibit of the work of American artist Robert Colescott. The four paintings featured in "Robert Colescott: The Cairo Years" were inspired by his life changing experiences in Cairo: first during a brief visit under the auspices of the American Research Center in Egypt, and subsequently while teaching at The American University in Cairo in 1966.

Colescott's rich professional and personal history—as a teacher, a soldier in World War II, and as an artist impacted by the Mexican Muralists, the European Avant-Garde, Jazz music, and Egyptian history and culture—influenced his artistic style and his personal convictions. However, he considered his discovery of Egypt and its monuments and the continent of Africa as a pivotal moment that shaped his life and artistic vision.

Colescott struggled to confront and overcome the inequities and discrimination he perceived in American society. But in Cairo, Colescott experienced equality and belonging as he lived among Egypt's historic monuments and in its vibrant artistic community. His work from that period, such as Nubian Queen, reflect that. Colescott left Egypt with a sense of the monumental importance of African and Egyptian contributions to our shared culture and repeatedly used this in his work and life to confront racial injustice and challenge the status quo.

Robert Colescott's work remains as relevant as ever and reflects the deep and abiding impact of Egypt on our country's cultural narrative. We are pleased to help continue the conversation that Colescott began and to celebrate the profound links between Egypt and the United States.

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ROBERT COLESCOTT:
THE CAIRO YEARS - AN INTRODUCTION

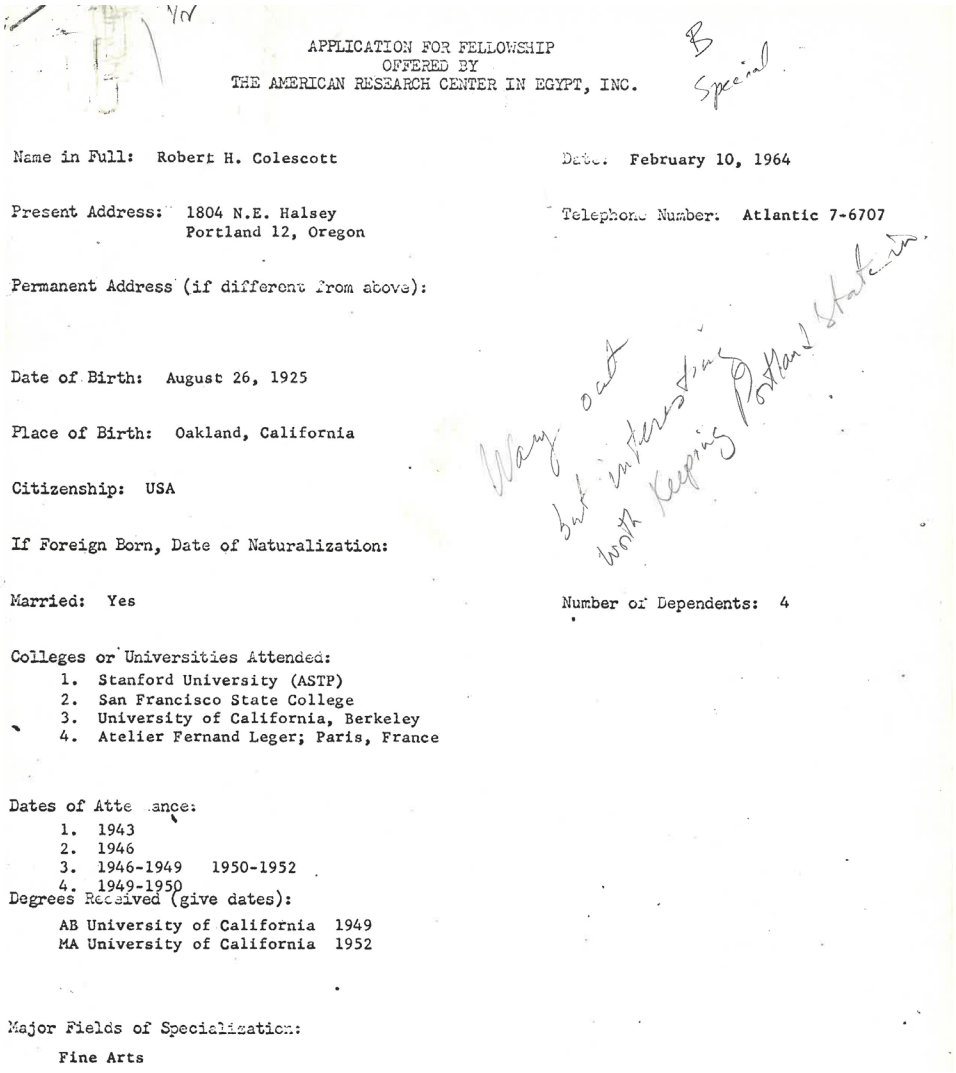
by Terri Ginsberg and Duncan MacDonald

The late African American artist Robert Colescott (1925-2009) is one of the most important of the American modernists. His paintings hang on display in numerous museums throughout the United States, among the most illustrious of which are the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, both in Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all in New York City, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Seattle Art Museum, the Hammer Museum of the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Albright-Knox Museum in Buffalo, New York. In 1997, Colescott became the first African American to display his works in a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale. The *largest and most comprehensive* retrospective of Colescott's paintings was launched in 2019, beginning with an exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati and continuing to date at the Portland Art Museum and the Sarasota Art Museum. (Exhibitions scheduled to take place at the Chicago Cultural Center and the Akron Art Museum were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Robert Colescott's paintings are known in particular for the transgressive and often provocative perspective they bring to the ever-timely issue—particularly relevant today—of race in America. Colescott's relationship to the issue of race was fraught throughout his early career, when he worked as an art professor at Portland State College from the mid-1950s through the late 1960s, a period in which very few African Americans were visibly active in the field of modern art or within academia. In 1964 Colescott took a sabbatical in Cairo with a Research Fellowship from the American Research Center in Egypt **(Fig. 1)**. Two years later, he returned to Egypt to take up a two-year position as the first Visiting Professor of Art in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at The American University in Cairo (AUC), where he was also most probably the first African American faculty member, and where he would initiate the formal study, encouragement, and exhibition of Egyptian modern art in Cairo. In February 1967, he launched the opening of the Corridor Gallery—the very first art gallery at AUC—by curating a month-long exhibit, "Eleven Artists," that featured works by eleven Egyptian painters, several of them little known, who would become some of the most important in Egypt and internationally **(Fig. 2)**. In May of the same year, he helped organize an exhibition, also in the Corridor Gallery, featuring one of these artists, Fouad Kamel **(Fig. 3)**. During the two years in total which he spent in Cairo (his visitorship was cut short one year by the Six Day War), Colescott underwent a personal transformation by which he came to embrace his Blackness in profound ways—a change which first became manifest in the works now referred to as his *Cairo paintings*.

"Robert Colescott: The Cairo Years" revisits publicly, for the first time, four exemplary paintings from this crucial period, accompanied by relevant archival documents, images, and video projections as well as more recent, audio interviews with art and cultural critics and historians. The exhibition is housed in

the Tahrir Cultural Center's Margo Veillon Gallery, an uncannily appropriate space in which to display Colescott's Cairo paintings, insofar as Colescott, much like Veillon, was as heavily influenced by his experience in Egypt as was the Cairo art world—its knowledgeability and direction—influenced by him. He says as much in a lecture he gave at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University in 1998 and at a gallery talk he gave at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 1988, partial video recordings of which are on display at the current exhibition.



APPLICATION FOR FELLOWSHIP
OFFERED BY
THE AMERICAN RESEARCH CENTER IN EGYPT, INC.

B
Special

Name in Full: Robert H. Colescott

Date: February 10, 1964

Present Address: 1804 N.E. Halsey
Portland 12, Oregon

Telephone Number: Atlantic 7-6707

Permanent Address (if different from above):

Way out
but interesting
work keeping
Portland Statement

Date of Birth: August 26, 1925

Place of Birth: Oakland, California

Citizenship: USA

If Foreign Born, Date of Naturalization:

Married: Yes

Number of Dependents: 4

Colleges or Universities Attended:
1. Stanford University (ASTP)
2. San Francisco State College
3. University of California, Berkeley
4. Atelier Fernand Leger; Paris, France

Dates of Attendance:
1. 1943
2. 1946
3. 1946-1949 1950-1952
4. 1949-1950

Degrees Received (give dates):
AB University of California 1949
MA University of California 1952

Major Fields of Specialization:
Fine Arts

Figure 1 - Reproduced by permission of the American Research Center in Egypt, Inc. (ARCE).

ELEVEN ARTISTS

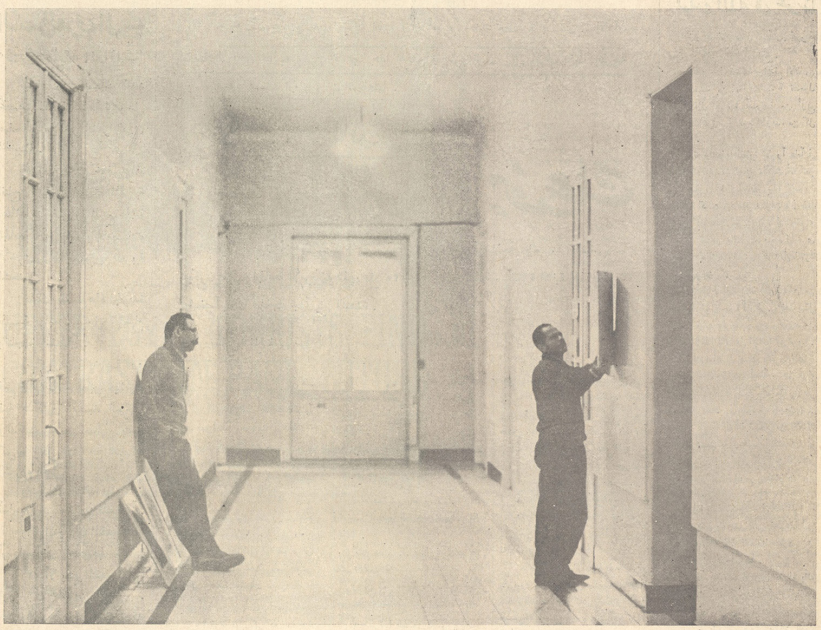


Photo by Kincheloe

FEBRUARY 20 - MARCH 13

The Department of English Language and Literature
of the American University in Cairo
opens a new gallery with an exhibition of the works
of eleven Cairo artists :

ADAM HENEIN
MOUNIR CANAAN
ABDEL MONEM KARRAR
RAMSES YOUNAN
GEORGE EL BAHAGOURIS
KHADIGA RIAZ
RAMZI MOUSTAFA
HAMDI KHAMIS
FOUAD KAMEL
HASSAN SOLIMAN
KAMAL KHALIFA

CORRIDOR GALLERY

RECEPTION AND TEA
February 20, 6 to 8 p.m.

GALLERY HOURS
9 to 5 daily except
Friday and Sunday

American University in Cairo
113, Sharia Kasr El Aini

Printed by COSTA TSOUMAS & Co.

Figure 2 - Courtesy AUC University Archives, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo.

Both artists reflected upon and engaged Egyptian cultural iconography and aesthetic tendencies in differing, albeit likewise transformative, ways. According to the memoirs of former AUC Professor John Rodenbeck, one of Colescott's colleagues at AUC, Colescott and Veillon moved in many of the same Cairo circles and shared an interest in discovering and promoting Egyptian modernism. Colescott's artistic journey began with mid-20th-century abstraction, later shifted to figural abstraction, and ended with a potent and controversial pop-art play on depictions of African Americans in U.S. media and consumer culture.

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CORRIDOR GALLERY: EXPRESSIONISM

By BILL KINCHELOE

Exciting and exacting, clean and deliberate organizations of blues, blacks, whites and greys mark the paintings of Fouad Kamel, whose show closed this week in the Corridor Gallery.

In the realm of Abstract Expressionism, his carefully manicured canvasses stand apart from the glob, dribble and splatter which has characterized most of this movement since the time of Jackson Pollock. While his paintings have a commanding boldness and vigor, at times letting loose an uproar of ideas in flux, they remain visually coherent.

"Spaces—voids—light," he says, "are words or concepts I work with, as I paint. The work moves and changes all the time until it comes to a certain stage of development which is satisfactory. Often the painting will miss something—it won't be complete—or one aspect of it cannot be resolved; this stimulates me to go on to another canvas, to seek to solve that problem as it could not be done in the canvas which gave birth to it. And as every canvas for me has at least one problem which can't be resolved (other than by starting a new one) most of my works occur in a series."

ARTISTIC PURPOSE

We asked Mr. Kamel whether his paintings had any definable "purpose". In so doing we discovered that his evident painterly skill is complemented by a searching intellect focused upon contemporary existence. The intellectual purpose of Fouad Kamel's paintings, we learned, is an attempt to represent a contemporary mythology, equivalent to the mythological art of earlier civilizations. "Where is our mythos as the one to create images for them. And while for the first time man is exploring outer space, we are still and will always be faced with the problem of exploring our 'inner space' of our souls."

MYTHOLOGY

Traditionally, mythology has served to interpret nature by personification, combining a religious purpose with an explanatory one. And while myths have been widely used in literature, they have mostly been borrowed from old religions (notably in the works of James Joyce, W. B. Yeats and T. S Eliot). However Fouad Kamel seemed to be concentrating on purely contemporary ideas. We asked what he thought were the particular contemporary situations which might be treated by contemporary mythmakers.

"As man discovers, conquers, gains more and more through the advancement of science and knowledge, he also begins to feel less in control of his destiny, less of a hero. He feels the importance of his being diminished by the importance of what he knows. And he is even being placed in his level of society by scientific methods—aptitude tests, etc. rather than what he considers a natural course of events."

"A second situation," he continued, "is that the most potent forces affecting contemporary man are illusionary and abstract, like liberty, freedom, unity, ideology, in contrast to the forces that once were most potent and were

Photo by Kinchelce

Representing the United Arab Republic's Ministry of Culture, Dr. Hassan Abdel Moneim (right) opens a one-man show of paintings by Fouad Kamel (left) in AUC's Corridor Gallery. Dr. Moneim expressed interest in the idea of the Gallery itself, in addition to the paintings, as having possible application elsewhere to increase the exhibition space available for Egypt's artists.

Othello: Moment of Madness in Beirut

Will Shakespeare's "Othello," a dark and bloody tragedy presented in Beirut by the American University in Cairo Theatre was a study in dynamic cross-currents, with a gulled gentleman thrown in for measure. We shall not be critical here, as it was an out-of-town opening. A proper review will follow on the opening in the New Theatre of the American University in Cairo.

Figure 3 - Courtesy AUC University Archives, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo.

His departure from abstraction to figurative painting, encouraged initially by his Parisian mentor Fernand Léger, proved a pivotal moment in his artistic practice—and can be traced to the period in which he lived and worked in Cairo. There a transfiguration occurred in Colescott's painting that not only resonated across his own subsequent artwork but changed the very history of art and art history.

It is now well-known that abstract art became a trophy of the World War II victors—and, indeed, as the U.S. government strenuously promoted Abstract Expressionism as a Cold War political tool, the figurative art associated with the 19th century became less and less visible internationally and in many respects underwent a legitimation crisis. Following the war, wealthy American art collector and gallerist Peggy Guggenheim turned her back on Surrealism, until then one of the leading modern art movements of the era, just as art critic

Clement Greenberg returned from Europe and quickly became elevated as supreme doyen of High Modernism. New color field abstract paintings, apolitical in nature, communicated one thing very well: a new *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake). Formalist aesthetics replaced the critical study of the human psyche engaged in by the Surrealists, and Abstract Expressionism, rendered void of its earlier, more socially grounded incarnations within German, Latin American, and African American artistic milieux, came to emblematize an era of increased economic prosperity and concomitant cultural escapism in the United States.

During his time in Cairo, Colescott began to rethink the global re-entrenchment of racialized, Eurocentric understandings of art and culture ensuing from this aesthetic shift. He set up shop in Maadi and began to create meaningful dialogues with, and eventually helped promote, many local artists to whom we now refer as the Egyptian Modernists. In turn he came to question historical tendencies in artistic creation and thus to recognize important distinctions between Western-focused High Modernism and marginalized—while nonetheless undeniably modernist—movements which had emerged within the non-Western art world. Colescott appreciated the fact that contemporary Egyptian art had evolved under unique conditions that enabled its particular retention of cultural perspectives not easily translatable into foreign narratives.

This critical standpoint—one of healthy skepticism which he shared with the Egyptian Modernists—led Colescott, upon his return to the United States several years later, to start integrating such concerns into his artwork, henceforth becoming renowned for bringing the problematics of U.S. race relations and racial (mis)understandings to an unprecedented cultural fore. Further complexifying his practice, he chose to forge intertextual links to the Western Masters in what he would described as a tongue-in-cheek "mulatto" culture-jamming. Picasso's cubist sensation, *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), is rethought within an African American context in Colescott's *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas* (1985), a move historically recontextualized with his *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1974–1975), a "blackface" parody of Emmanuel Leutze's patriotic American classic, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), and vis-à-vis Willem De Kooning's much later, abstract expressionist grotesque, *Woman 1* (1950–1952), in Colescott's *I Gets a Thrill Too When I Sees De Koo* (1978). In most instances African American stereotypes are sardonically, often shockingly repurposed, leading to controversy not only within white but, more significantly, Black communities. An aging, reactionary Greenberg would ultimately reject the sort of challenging, re-politicized, pop- and avant-garde art represented by these appropriations and related works, although by that time he—a perceived dinosaur—had lost much of his credibility within the art world, and as far as Colescott and his contemporaries were concerned, there was no going back.

The significance of a retrospective on Robert Colescott's Cairo paintings, not least during Black History Month, cannot be overestimated. At the present historical moment, to revisit Colescott's discoveries and innovations while in Egypt at AUC is to celebrate the history and legacy of African American art and the progress made possible for it by an important U.S. educational institution abroad. Colescott was forever changed by his foray in Egypt, where he began the difficult process of releasing himself from Eurocentric modes of Modernism, coming in turn to tell profound stories through his paintings about the pain and contradictions of the white supremacist imagination. By the same token, the dialectic of U.S. cultural diplomacy which played out during the Cold War, exposing rock 'n roll and jazz, among other distinctly (African-) American inventions, to a not always receptive, gradually decolonizing world, and which enabled the very possibility of Colescott's presence in Cairo, was never entirely able to contain what it served to unleash: a platform for the expression of aspiration—both local and international—above and beyond the imperial dialectic, for visions and expressions of freedom and liberation not normally perceived or promoted by the architects of the Marshall Plan but nonetheless fostered within its interstices by non-Western audiences and creators who were living and working under very different assumptions and conditions. In this allegorical context one must acknowledge AUC's contribution to a small but vibrant Cairo art scene, for having welcomed the unconventional Colescott onto its faculty and having supported his endeavors to interact with and promote Egyptian Modernism, not least during what then-AUC President Thomas A. Bartlett has referred to as one of the most precarious periods in the university's history.

COLESCOTT IN EGYPT:
AN EXCERPT FROM A WORK IN PROGRESS

by Mathew Weseley

Colescott described his decision to apply for a Research Fellowship from the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE), as almost a coincidence: he came across a copy of one of their publications, which included a solicitation for proposals, and decided to apply, even though they didn't generally receive applications from artists.[1] Since the experience would prove so crucial for him, one can't help but wonder if his decision to travel to Cairo was really so casual. In the early 1970s, Colescott recommended to his friend, Jack Stone, Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*, originally published in 1960. The book is a chronicle of the European missions of exploration into Africa during the middle and late 19th century. For many of the explorers, the immediate goal was to discover the source of the Nile, but these initial forays were usually precursors to military intervention and colonization. One portion of the book describes the struggle of the Egyptians and their British backers against the Mahdi, the messianic leader of an Islamist movement that rose up in rebellion and fought for control of the Sudan in the 1880s. Colescott would eventually create several paintings referring to the Mahdi and his most prominent British adversary, General George Gordon **(Fig. 4)**. If Colescott read the book when it was first published—or a version of Gordon's story when he was young—it might have raised questions for him about how history is recorded in the West and with which side his sympathies lay. Colescott would deal with such questions in his paintings of a later period. It is possible that Moorehead's book either provoked or rekindled Colescott's interest in Egypt.

[1]Colescott described his decision to apply for the fellowship to Constance Lewallen, a curator at the Berkeley Art Museum, in an interview she conducted with him in Tucson on October 22, 1998.

Figure 4 – **Robert Colescott**, *al-Mahdi*, 1968–1970, Acrylic on Egyptian linen, 79 x 58 3/4 x 1 5/8 inches (200.7 x 149.2 x 4.1 centimeters), (Filename for internal reference: RCO 21).

In his application to ARCE, Colescott presented himself as "an artist with a scholarly background,"[2] who had already made an effort to learn about contemporary Egyptian art in the library at Portland State College, where he had been teaching since 1957, and by making inquiries with institutions around the country. He included in his application images of works by such contemporary Egyptian artists as Yussef Rafaat, Gazbiya Sirry, Abdul-Salam Ahmed and Abdul-Qader Mukhtar—obtained, apparently, from a friend or colleague recently returned from Egypt—which he pasted in to his application juxtaposed with images of ancient Egyptian and modern European works. He proposed to consider more fully the connections between these artists working in different places and at different times. He mused about the correspondences he recognized between the works of Egyptian and European artists of different eras, including their shared emphasis on geometry: "can we say that analytic cubism was a Pharonic [sic] invention in the first place?"[3] He proposed to engage Egyptian artists and to photograph their works, and he took classes in Arabic to prepare himself for these encounters. Whatever he discovered would prove useful to him as both a teacher and a painter, he wrote. Although Colescott's interest in these issues was undoubtedly sincere, he likely exaggerated his scholarly goals in his application, since he knew that a fellowship application from an artist who simply wished to visit Egypt was unlikely to be approved. Ultimately, he never completed any research paper on contemporary Egyptian art which he claimed to have been planning. One reader of Colescott's application was apparently skeptical of it and penciled in a response: "Way out but interesting. Worth keeping Portland State in." When Colescott's departure for Cairo was announced in The Oregonian, a local Portland newspaper, it was reported that "Portland State is one of seven trustee institutions of the center,"[4] so perhaps it was his good fortune that his institutional affiliation may have influenced the positive outcome of his application.

Colescott and his family—his wife Sally, his infant son, Dennett, and his teenage stepson, Brandon—arrived in Cairo on September 12th, 1964. After a week and one-half in a hotel, the family moved into an apartment in Maadi, a municipality which he described in a letter to Portland art patron Arlene Schnitzer as "a very nice tree filled suburb of Cairo,"[5] located twelve minutes by train from the city itself. The apartment was large, with high ceilings, balconies, and a well-kept garden, and since it was on the top floor, the roof—including a structure on it that would serve

[2] Robert Colescott, "Application for Fellowship Offered by the American Research Center in Egypt, Inc.," February 10, 1964.
[3] Colescott was probably not the first to suggest such an influence. According to legend, Henri Rousseau characterized Picasso's style as Egyptian in 1908.
[4] "PSC Professor to Go to Cairo," *The Oregonian*, April 14, 1964, p. 14.
[5] Robert Colescott, letter to Arlene Schnitzer, September 28, 1964.

as Colescott's studio—was entirely theirs.[6] They joined the country club, which had a pool. Brandon attended a nearby preparatory school, Victory College, which had a large campus and excellent facilities, according to Colescott. There was a great deal of interest in Colescott's research project within the community of expatriate Americans, including the U.S. ambassador, who had a serious interest in modern art. During the course of the year, the family would travel to various nearby countries, including Israel/Palestine and Lebanon. Colescott would soon become aware that Egypt was a very poor country, yet he and his family seemed to have lived there comfortably—at least that is the impression he gave Arlene Schnitzer.

But Colescott's new setting was far from the pleasant suburb his description suggests. Cairo was a bustling metropolis whose sights and sounds were a major departure from what he had previously known. "Egypt represented a complete break in environment," Colescott recalled. "The raw energy of Cairo is not like anywhere else."[7] Egypt was perhaps the oldest nation in the world, with a history going back almost ten millennia, and among the newest, having been reborn in 1952, when a group of young army officers, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, forced King Farouk into exile, ushering in a new era of Egyptian nationalism. It was still an outpost of the British Empire during World War I, and the struggle for independence since then had been arduous, fitful and slow. It was a vibrant study in contrasts, in which the remnants of ancient grandeur coexisted with the poverty and squalor of a modern city in a country still trying to recover from colonial exploitation. It was a richer and more complex environment than Colescott had previously known, and his experience there would have profound personal consequences for him. Colescott had traveled from a stable, affluent society to an emerging, impoverished one, and—because of his physical resemblance to the locals—the change of scenery put his sense of his own identity to the test.

The art world in Cairo was also very different from what Colescott had known previously. He continued to maintain his connection to the art world of the Pacific Northwest, where he would exhibit his paintings on several occasions during the late 1960s. According to art historian Liliane Karnouk, whose *Modern Egyptian Art: 1910–2003*, published by the The American University in Cairo Press, contains the most comprehensive account of Egyptian art of the period available in English, Nasser centralized control of the visual arts in the Ministry of Culture, which provided support for officially recognized artists, who created works celebrating Egyptian national identity and the new era in Egyptian history. The artists whom Colescott would come to know during his time in Egypt were not among the favored few who relied on government largesse. They were marginal

[6] According to her obituary, Sally—who died in 2003—opened a daycare center in Maadi, but it's unclear whether this was during their first or second year in Cairo, or both, and whether the day care facility was actually located in their home.
[7] Weiss, *The Eye of the Beholder,* p. 4.

characters in relation to the establishment, who managed somehow to eke out a precarious living, producing works that grew out of a dialogue with European and American Modernism. Colescott's affiliation with American institutions in Cairo would give him some standing among these Egyptian artists, who may have perceived him as a potential sponsor, which—in a modest way—he would become.

The arrival of the family car made exploration of nearby locales possible. Before long, Colescott discovered the Valley of the Queens, an ancient burial ground near Luxor, about an eight-hour drive south—to Upper Egypt—from Cairo. In ancient times, Luxor was the site of Thebes—a great dynastic capital, known in ancient Egyptian as Waset—and the architectural and sculptural remains of the earlier civilization are among the most spectacular in Egypt. There are two ancient necropolises near Luxor, dating to the period known as the New Kingdom, from 1500–1000 B.C.: the Valley of the Kings, on the west side of the Nile, and the Valley of the Queens, on the east side of the river. Unlike the Pyramids, the tombs of the royal families of the New Kingdom were hidden, buried in the rock, perhaps to stymie grave robbers. The interior walls of the tombs were decorated with paintings describing the journey into the next world, and the Valley of the Queens is noteworthy for the excellent condition of the paintings which have survived, with their bright pigments still mostly intact, relatively speaking. The paintings convey, in visual form, the ancient Egyptian beliefs regarding the afterlife, and they suggested to Colescott a new direction for his art.

But Colescott soon discovered that he had made an erroneous assumption prior to his arrival in Egypt. He had expected to find art supply stores in Cairo, so he brought with him only his brushes, but he found no art supply stores there and had to scrounge around for materials. Although Egypt was a major producer of cotton, quality canvas was hard to come by, since so much of it was exported. He met several artists who gave him tubes of paint that were mostly used up, but he managed to squeeze out some of the remaining pigment. There happened to be a work site across the street from where he lived, and one day he noticed that the workers were using a large block of ochre pigment to paint the exterior walls of houses. Observing the workers from his window, he saw them take a break for lunch, at which point he descended and absconded with the block of pigment! He then obtained some linseed oil, with which he cooked up some paint, and some hide glue to prepare the canvas. Because of the difficulty of obtaining proper materials, the paintings Colescott made during his initial year in Cairo were executed in a narrow range of colors, yet such colors might have seemed appropriate, since their earth tones matched the colors of the local environment.

The paintings created after his arrival in Egypt represented a breakthrough for Colescott, since he was finally able to move beyond the works of his Portland period, with their basis in direct visual experience. Colescott envisioned the contours of

Figure 5 – **Robert Colescott** (American, 1925-2009), *We Await Thee,* 1964, oil on canvas, 76 11/16 in. x 58 1/4 in., Gift of the Artist. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, 66.60.

the red rock that contained the tombs taking on human shapes, so several of the paintings seem to represent female bodies emerging from or identified with the terrain. *We Await Thee* **(Fig. 5)**, now in the collection of the Portland Art Museum, was the first painting in a series which Colescott named for the Valley of the Queens. Underneath a blue sky, a doorway in the earth reveals a partial view of a female nude floating upside down, with several other spectral figures nearby. As the paintings in this series represent the spirit world, Colescott felt liberated from the laws of nature, so figures fly in the air or hang upside down in many of the pictures. *Like the Burned Out Day* includes a whitish, female figure at the right who seems to emerge from either a landscape or architectural form. The other figures in the painting flicker like flames in the midst of a somber landscape. While Colescott had dispensed with any effort to naturalistically portray space or atmosphere—important elements in much of much of his Portland work—the paintings of his Egyptian period are consistent with his previous works in the sense that these later paintings combine the sweeping gestures associated with Abstract Expressionism with the representation of the figure.

Although Colescott returned to Portland with his family in June 1965—in time to teach summer school—he seems to have felt that he had left unfinished business in Cairo. He resumed his role as an associate professor at Portland State, having been promoted from assistant professor in 1963. The paintings that he made during the year back in Portland were similar to his Egyptian paintings, except that the colors brightened considerably. His return was heralded with two museum shows featuring his latest works, one at the Portland Art Museum and one at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, British Columbia. The Portland Art Museum produced a brochure that featured a brief essay by the poet, David Wagoner, who described the Valley of the Queens paintings as conveying a sense of "the disjointed torment and ecstasy of those ancient women."[8] During this period, Colescott's mind was still absorbed by his memories of Egypt, so when he heard that The American University in Cairo (AUC) was expanding its art offerings, he wrote to ask about possible openings. The AUC was immediately interested and offered Colescott a two-year position as a visiting professor, which he initially rejected, asking for a higher salary. Having lived "very modestly and somewhat uncomfortably"[9] during his previous sojourn in Cairo, Colescott felt that AUC's offer was inadequate. After a brief exchange, AUC revised its offer and Colescott agreed to come.[10] On a form that Colescott submitted along with his application to AUC, in response

[8] "*Valley of the Queens," Paintings by Robert Colescott, Inspired by a Year in Egypt,* pamphlet for an exhibition at the Portland Art Museum, February 2–27, 1966.
[9] Robert Colescott, letter to Dr. M. L. Shane, April 1, 1966, in the AUC University Archives.
[10] According to a letter from Dr. M. L. Shane, Dean of Faculties, dated April 10, 1966, the AUC matched what Colescott's yearly salary would have been had he remained at Portland State, which was $9,600, or about $75,000 in 2021 currency. Since I don't have documentation of the exact terms of AUC's initial offer, I am not certain how substantially AUC upgraded the offer, but I suspect that it was not much improved.

to a question about why he would consider leaving his position at Portland State, he wrote that he wished "to seek new horizons."[11] In preparation for his return to Egypt, Colescott switched from oils to acrylics, because acrylic dries faster and it is easier to roll up and ship paintings executed in acrylic. He also purchased and arranged to have shipped to Cairo enough art supplies to last for two years. Portland State granted Colescott a leave of absence and he and his family again set out for Egypt, arriving there on September 9, 1966.[12]

In addition to teaching painting at the AUC, Colescott also agreed to teach an art history course, which—judging from Colescott's communications with the school which describe his planning for the course—was the kind of general survey that has since become so common at American colleges and universities. The course was entitled, "Introduction to the Fine Arts," and its scope was vast—"the course will begin with the Paleolithic period and proceed to the contemporary arts,"[13] Colescott wrote. It was built around slide lectures in which representative works of key periods were discussed and was intended for students who might have little or no previous knowledge of visual art. Presenting the course entailed a significant investment on the part of the university, including purchasing the slides Colescott would show to the students. Colescott selected as the textbook for the course Erwin O. Christensen's *A Pictorial History of Western Art,* which was available as a small-format paperback, and he also requested two copies of H.W. Janson's *History of Art* for the school library. Both books included sections on ancient Egyptian Art, and the school's proximity to so many works of the period would allow students to experience them firsthand. The class proved to be popular: seventy-four students were enrolled in two sections during the first term, and one hundred and eight during the second.[14] Preparing and teaching the course must have been time-consuming for Colescott, and the fact that he would have undertaken such an endeavor is an indication of just how knowledgeable he was. It's hard to imagine many of his contemporaries taking on such a task. "Bob knows about art history,"[15] his friend from a later decade, Carlos Villa, remarked drily.

[11] Robert Colescott, personnel form dated March 2, 1966, in the AUC University Archives.
[12] Colescott sent a copy of his travel itinerary to AUC. He and his family flew across the United States, then traveled by ship to Naples, then on to Alexandria on a second vessel.
[13] Colescott's course description was typed on Portland State stationery and sent to Mrs. Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri, Chairman of the English Department, who supervised Colescott's teaching (since there was no Department of the Arts at the time), along with a letter dated April 24, 1966, now in the AUC University Archives.
[14] Colescott's studio classes were also popular: during his first semester, he had six students in a single section; during his second term, he had twenty-two students in two sections. Overall, it was a heavier teaching load than he had experienced previously, requiring him to be on campus three days per week, instead of just two, according to his correspondence with Doris Shoukri.
[15] Carlos Villa, in a conversation with the author, January 30, 2012.

Colescott's research on contemporary Egyptian art achieved its culmination in an exhibition at the university's "Corridor Gallery," for which he was given responsibility. The show was announced in a full-page notice in the February 22, 1967 issue of *The Caravan*, the university's main student publication, accompanied by a photograph of Colescott, leaning against a wall, overseeing the installation of a painting. The show, entitled "Eleven Artists," was on display from February 20 to March 13. The artists included in the show might be characterized as experimentalists in the Western tradition, oriented towards the avant-garde movements—including Surrealism and abstraction—that had risen to dominance in the art worlds of Europe and the United States. "A striking feature of the show as a whole was its drabness: in each case painters had produced works that were uncharacteristically coarse and muddy," Colescott's friend and AUC colleague, John Rodenbeck, recalled. "Then Bob explained: in a country where there were shortages of rice and soap, it was unlikely that there would not also be shortages of artists' materials. Painters had been forced to improvise out of whatever they could lay their hands on."[16] Nonetheless, the show seems to have been a hit. Three hundred people attended the opening, two-hundred and fifty of whom signed the guest book, and it received favorable notices in the local press, according to Colescott.[17] Colescott recalled that the artists he met in Egypt were "so cut off and poor,"[18] yet those he selected for his exhibition would ultimately be remembered as among the more notable artists of their time. Remembering Colescott, Rodenbeck commented that "he knew more about contemporary Egyptian art than anyone else, including all but very few Egyptians."[19]

The most prominent artist in the show was probably Ramsès Younan, who had died the previous year, although several others are also included in Liliane Karnouk's account of the art of the period. While Younan's earlier paintings reveal an obvious debt to Surrealism, in particular, his writing demonstrates his brilliance as a thinker and writer. Younan was conversant with the latest advances of modern science—including Freudian psychoanalysis—which might have contributed to his rejection of the notion that the purpose of art is merely to record objective reality. While the artist must be engaged with the actual world—Younan was known for his radical political convictions—he must also cultivate a unique, subjective vison. A work of art is the product of a psychic struggle provoked by living in the world, Younan seemed to assert. "[W]e can now define the function of the artist as revealing lines and colors—which symbolize conflicting psychological desires and

[16] John Rodenbeck, in *Margo Veillon: Witness to a Century*, edited by Bruno Ronfard, AUC Press, 2007, p. 36.
[17] This information is included in a memo to Dean of Faculties Richard Crabbs, dated March 10, 1967, in the AUC University Archives.
[18] Robert Colescott, interview with Constance Lewallen, October 22, 1998.
[19] John Rodenbeck, e-mail to the author, April 21, 2007.

meanings—and creating a harmonious, coherent, formal unity out of them,"[20] he wrote. Colescott had listed Younan as a reference on his application to AUC, and after Younan's untimely death, Colescott participated in two events memorializing him, including one that was broadcast on the radio.[21]

In Cairo, for the first time in his life, Colescott's racial identity didn't make him feel like an outsider, since almost everyone looked like him:

> "There were experiences there that I thought were fundamental to my art and identity. Some very positive things happened to me. Walking down the street in Cairo was to be walking among people like myself. Everybody—the president of the country and on down—was a person of color."[22]

A few years later, he shared with his friend, Jack Stone, the story of an experience he had in Cairo. Driving his car, Colescott passed through a military checkpoint, and the Egyptian soldiers manning the post saluted him.[23] Incidents such as this were forceful reminders of his racial identity—that he was not white. The process initiated in Cairo would work itself out over the next several years, manifesting itself only after Colescott's return to the United States, in paintings executed in yet another new style.

These experiences found expression in his art. A 1966 painting entitled *Nubian Queen* might be a personal allegory of his new feelings regarding his own black identity, as it depicts a white woman looking in apparent astonishment at a black woman **(Fig. 6)**. The white woman's face is painted a pure white, rather than a pink flesh tone, and the black woman's face is painted a pure black, so the two figures might be said to represent whiteness and blackness. The two female figures meet against a background that suggests surging waves of liquefied colors, including red, green, orange and pink, which infuse the moment with excitement and energy. In a profile published in *The Oregonian* in 1969, Colescott described his symbolic use of color in a way that seems pertinent to this painting: "Color is

[20] Ramsès Younan, "The Objective of the Contemporary Artist," (1938), in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, edited by Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018, p. 92.
[21] On his "Annual Personnel Record Form for Professional Staff," dated February 26, 1967, in the AUC University Archive, Colescott listed his participation in two events honoring Younan in January of 1967: a lecture, entitled "Ramsès Younan: Stylistic Resemblances," at Atelier du Caire, and a panel discussion on Radio Cairo, entitled, "Hommage à Ramsès Younan."
[22] Fitzgerald, "Robert Colescott Rocks the Boat," p. 18.
[23] This anecdote was shared with me during a conversation with Jack Stone and Barbara Foster on November 29, 2017. Around this time, Colescott grew a thick moustache that struck his American friends as typically Egyptian. Colescott's appearance might have reminded the soldiers of their president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who also wore a thick moustache.
[24] Beth Fagan, "New Colescott Exhibition Called Allegory of Contemporary Life," *The Oregonian*, March 9, 1969.

Figure 6 – **Robert Colescott**, *Nubian Queen,* 1966, Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 59 inches.
© 2020 Estate of Robert Colescott / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Private Collection; New York City, NY. Photo credit: Adam Reich.

only valid if it has to do with the idea . . . clashing color reinforces clashing ideas, clashing presences on the canvas . . . ."[24] He also made a number of paintings that seem to refer to his mother, Lydia, who died in Oakland in 1966. Indeed, another painting from 1966, entitled *Lydia, Life, Death and Transfiguration*, included in the current exhibition, depicts several multicolored female figures in a swirling space. The title of *False Step from East to West*—executed in 1965, before the return to Cairo or his mother's death—might refer to his parents' move from New Orleans to Oakland in 1919, and its central figure might be a symbolic representation of his mother with whitened skin, which might be a metaphor for her decision to pass as white.[25] While this interpretation might sound far-fetched, Colescott testified that he sometimes included figures in his paintings intended to represent black people painted white.[26]

Just prior to the outbreak of the Six Day War in June 1967, Colescott and his family fled Egypt. It was a frightening experience, although Colescott saw the danger earlier than most of his fellow expatriates and succeeded in shipping out the family's most valuable possessions.[27] They made their way to Rome, where Colescott's brother, Warrington Jr., had lived and worked the previous year; before leaving, Warrington Jr. arranged lodging for Robert and his family. Eventually Colescott, Sally and Dennett settled in Paris, though they were hoping to return to Egypt.[28] In Paris, Colescott taught at several institutions geared for American students studying abroad, while the paintings he made in Paris continued in the same vein as the Cairo paintings, except that he began to employ more of what he called "cartoonists' tricks"[29] in the delineation of the figures. He exhibited his works in several group shows, including a three-person exhibition at the American Cultural Center in Paris, in 1969. The couple purchased a farm in Auvergne, where they began a summer program for American pre-college students, but this program

[25] This interpretation of False Step from East to West grew out of a lengthy discussion, conducted over a period of months and perhaps even years, with Lowery Stokes Sims, and it was Sims who first suggested that the central figure might represent Lydia.

[26] In a lecture at the Portland Art Museum in 1980, Colescott described a painting from the late 1960s entitled '*Nam Boogie* as including an image of "a black soldier painted white. . . ." And in an article entitled "Artist Colescott sets his own standards," published in the *Houston Chronicle* on December 7, 1988, Section D, page 1, Colescott described a figure in his painting, *Temptation of St. Anthony* (1983), as "a black girl painted white."

[27] In a letter to Arlene Schnitzer, Colescott described being at the beach one day and seeing military equipment being deployed, which led him to make the decision to depart, several days before the U.S. Embassy directed Americans to leave Egypt. He arranged for travel by ship to Naples, and the family brought with them their car and Colescott's latest paintings, but they were forced to leave a few things behind, including Sally's pottery wheel. Letters between Colescott and the administration of the AUC reveal the administration's displeasure at his premature departure, after which he attempted to sell Sally's pottery wheel to the school and obtain reimbursement for his travel expenses (a letter regarding the latter issue is included in the current exhibition).

[28] Brandon returned to the United States to live with his father.

[29] Colescott described this element of his late-1960s paintings in his lecture at the Portland Art Museum in 1980.

ran for only a single session, during the summer of 1969. Soon after, the teaching positions on which Colescott had relied during the previous two years, in Paris, unexpectedly fell through, so he and Sally accepted jobs at the North Country School in Lake Placid, New York, where Sally had been a student. Colescott soon quit, however, and spent several months in New York City before joining the faculty at Stanislaus State College, in Turlock, beginning in the Fall of 1970. Colescott's and Sally's lives seemed at this time to be moving in different directions, and they began divorce proceedings in 1971.

ABOUT THE CURATORS

Terri Ginsberg is Assistant Professor of Film, and former Director of the Film Program, at The American University in Cairo. Her areas of expertise include Arab cinema, German cinema, gender and sexuality studies, critical theory, and postcolonial studies. Among her numerous scholarly publications is a forthcoming edited collection that will offer a critical genealogy of the governmentality of international arts and media education, lending particular attention to the SWANA region.

Duncan MacDonald is a Canadian contemporary artist based in Cairo, Egypt. He is Associate Professor of Practice in Visual Arts at The American University in Cairo, where he is also Director of the Visual Arts Program. His artworks and projects take form in diverse modes such as audio art, curatorial projects, performance, community arts, installation, sculpture, and drawing—often exploring the corporeal sensorium and its commodification. Recent projects have included curating, producing, and documenting the work of Egyptian contemporary artists at AUC in an exhibition series entitled MASR: Research in Modern and Contemporary Egyptian Art.

Matthew Weseley is an independent art historian based in New York City. He holds a B.A. in art history from Stanford University, an M.A. in education from Smith College, and an M.A. in art history from the University of California, Davis. He is co-curator of the first full-scale retrospective of Robert Colescott's work, "Art and Race Matters," organized by the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in 2019. He is currently at work on a monograph on the art of Robert Colescott.