

Oum Kalsoum

The Fourth Pyramid

By Miranda Sharp

She was a passionate Egyptian patriot, who used her fame and music to unite the Arab consciousness. Thirty-three years after her death, Oum Kalsoum is still heralded as one of the greatest divas that has ever lived.



Youssef Nabil, Star, 2007
Hand-coloured gelatin silver prints
Private collection, London
Courtesy of Shaikh Ebrahim Center/Institut du Monde Arabe



Exhibition View, Courtesy of Shaikh Ebrahim Center / Institut du Monde Arabe

The exhibition “Oum Kalsoum The Fourth Pyramid”, curated by the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA), pays tribute to the extraordinary life and legacy of one of the prolific singers from the Arab world. After its inauguration in Paris the show then travelled to The Kingdom of Bahrain, thanks to The Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa Center for Culture and Research, in collaboration with the IMA, and was showcased at the Moda Mall in the World Trade Center from 10th January until 31st March 2009.

Although loved by some westerners, many are not familiar with Oum Kalsoum’s distinctive virtuoso voice. Musicologist, Virginia Danielson, attempted to unearth a possible western equivalent, only to conclude that she was incomparable to a single being. She said “...if you take a person with the musical skills of Ella Fitzgerald, and combine that person with the public persona of Eleanor Roosevelt and then give that person the audience of Elvis – you’ve got it!”

Born at the turn of the twentieth-century, a peasant girl from a small village in the Nile delta, it is amazing to imagine The Star of the East’s extraordinary journey to stardom. Impoverished, her family scrapped together to send her to school. It was during her schooling days when she learnt to recite the Koran which not only attributed to her perfect diction, but also inspired her improvisational singing technique witnessed later in her career.

Oum’s father, an imam at the local mosque, often performed at religious and celebratory gatherings. From an early age it was evident that Oum Kalsoum had a remarkable voice so she became a vocal accompaniment to her father, alongside her brother. In order to deter scandal, her father dressed her as a Bedouin boy. She soon outshone her brother and father, becoming renowned throughout the region and attracting the attention of both fine musicians and the affluent.

Cairo beckoned and in 1923 Oum Kalsoum migrated, taking her family with her. It was in the capital that she began collaborating with some of Egypt’s top artistry such as the poet Ahmad Rami, who wrote over half of her repertoire as well as the famous ‘oudist and composers, Mohammad Al-Qassabgui and Abu Al-Ila Muhammad.

Oum Kalsoum quickly rose to fame. With a head for business, she began cutting records, composing, holding concerts as well as starring in six musical films. Often Arabic music is considered an audience interactive art form, with musicians feeding off their the listeners’ involvement. Perhaps this may explain why she quickly abandoned her film career, as she

craved the audience’s participation.

One of her most highly regarded skills was that she was able to evoke *tarab*, a state of ecstasy, with her audience. She achieved this by building up a “tension” from repeating a stanza, often lingering on a single syllable, each time altering the melody in some way, with a subtle emotive emphasis. These improvisations, inspired by her Koranic training, could potentially triple the length of each song, resulting in concerts lasting anywhere from three to six hours.

Initially the press ridiculed her simple country-like manner, so Oum Kalsoum tried to stay off public scrutiny by limiting her non-staged appearances as well as carefully guarding her image. Unlike many of her counterparts, she always dressed in conservative and elegant attire, modelling herself on the aristocratic women whom she began to socialize with. She stood stock-still during her performances in an attempt to disassociate herself as a dancer. Her only prop during concerts was her *mandil*, the famous silk handkerchief that she used as an aid for her astonishing improvisations.

In 1952, Egypt saw major constitutional changes. The revolution forced the abdication of King Farouk, however it wasn’t until two years later that Gamal Abdel Nasser became President. Some of Oum Kalsoum’s adversaries demanded that she must be removed from the concert halls and airwaves as she had once performed for the King and thus she symbolised a time they wished to forget. However on hearing this Nasser revoked her dismissal famously saying “are you crazy? do you want the whole of Egypt to turn against us?”

During the fifties and sixties Oum Kalsoum further developed her public persona. Nasser frequented her concerts giving her every possible accolade and this was reciprocated by showing her support of the revolution. From the mid-thirties until a couple of years prior to her death in 1975, she held a concert on the first Thursday of every month. These performances were transmitted on the radio bringing the Arab world to a standstill. In honor of these famous broadcasts, her songs are still aired at 10 pm on the first Thursday of every month.

A natural ambassador, she united the Arab nations, surpassing any politician’s efforts. Added to which she was a source of inspiration for Muslim women world over encouraging them to remove their veils, gain an education and find employment whilst still a strong advocate of the Islamic faith. She also never denounced her peasant roots, in fact she often identified with her country-folk, perhaps this is one of the reasons why she was celebrated by all strata of Arab society.

The shock of the Six Day War defeat in 1967 threw Egypt into a deep depression. After grieving for two weeks and Oum Kalsoum immersed herself in an intense concert tour of the Arab world, she made her first and only musical appearance outside the Arab borders at the Olympia in Paris. The proceeds from the concerts were donated to the Egyptian government and to the families of the people that had died. These nation building acts “...solidified her persona as a representative of Arab culture of the 20th century”.

After an ongoing battle with nephritis, inflammation of the kidneys, Oum Kalsoum died on February 3rd 1975. Four million fans attended her state funeral. The grief stricken public seized the casket from the bearers mid-precession, taking it to where they considered to be her favourite mosques before returning it for burial.

The exhibition “Oum Kalsoum: The Fourth Pyramid” chronicles the life and achievements of this extraordinary woman through showcasing an array of multimedia sequences as well as some of her personal items plus artworks made in her honour.

The space was divided into four themed sections. “Icon” explores the persona of the diva and her path to stardom. “Talent” demonstrates her phenomenal skill and professional accolades. “Activism” examines Oum Kalsoum in the political arena, as both a feminist and catalyst for Arab unity. A lastly “Heritage” illustrates the legacy she left behind.

The walls were blackened throughout the exhibit, and combined with the subdued lighting, the environment was similar to that of a staged performance. An avenue of her magnificent performances dresses were spot lit, enticing the audience across the two-tiered space.

Extracts of her most celebrated performances were played through retro radios, televisions and cinema screens. Testimonials and interviews with the star, were displayed throughout the exhibit, as well as excerpts from her short film repertoire. The sound bytes from the multimedia sequences did carry and could be rather cacophonous at times.

The artworks, which depict the diva herself, were produced mainly by Middle Eastern artists. Much work came across as more of an added afterthought to a tribute exhibit. The more prominent works came from Egyptian artist, Chant Avedissian, who displayed some of his iconic mixed-media imagery. Avedissian’s renowned exploring politics and pop, often combined, he integrates Islamic geometry, Ottoman motifs,

Egyptian hieroglyphics and Arabic text with animated “pop art” stencil portraits. Buxom Oum with her signature dark glasses and pendulous earrings is easily caricatured and identifiable. She is depicted here both alone, and also with Nasser, highlighting their professional admiration for one another.

Inspired by the Golden Age of Egyptian cinema, photographer Youssef Nabil has taken screen-grab photographs of the star during a televised concert. Displayed as a vertical film strip he has hand tinted them evoking a dated, almost ghostly feel. The words “I die, I live forever, don’t forget me, Amen” subtitle each of the four screen-grabs.

Jihan Ammar’s photographs depict a woman impersonating the diva, shot in the cities of where Oum Kalsoum had taken her charitable concert tour after the Six Day War defeat. She is depicted performing, almost busking, in various locations to audiences in sheisha cafés and to passing pedestrians.

More fascinating was to witness how Oum Kalsoum’s image and style had been reintroduced into popular culture. Fashion designer, Khaled El Masry’s “Oum Kalsoum” collection was a clear example of this. Masry’s designs embrace femininity without breaking tradition, elegant couture combining authentic Arabic fabrics with modern designs. Many of the clothes in the collection resembled a more modern (and slightly more risqué) adaptation of the star’s performance dresses in the adjacent room.

Continuing with the “pop art” feel, the ever popular Sarah’s Bag, utilizes Oum Kalsoum’s iconic self-image on handcrafted clutch bags, available for sale at retail outlets. Famous for “retro glamour” styled accessories, Sarah’s bags are the brainchild of Lebanese designer, Sarah Beydoun. The assembling and decoration of these accessories are done by women struggling to be reintegrated into society as part of a rehabilitation programme.

Frustratingly the exhibition captions were mainly in French and Arabic, so some of the audience may miss out, although the catalogue is comprehensive and trilingual, including English.

Even today, Oum Kalsoum has retained a near-mythical status among young Arabs. Actor Omar Sharif said of her “... (with) every rising son, Um Kalthoum comes back to life in the hearts of millions of Arabs, and without her voice the days would fade in the Orient and colours would lose their brightness.” Her allegiance to the country, region, and religion, were paramount during a time when the importance of these values

were being challenged. “The Fourth Pyramid” appeals to both loyal longstanding fans and to those who are merely curious to learn about the extraordinary fifty year career span of this captivating performer.

The exhibition shall travel onto Kuwait to coincide with the opening of Mall 306 from July 1st until October 15th 2009.

Bibliography

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Other superlatives that are used in connection with Oum Kalsoum The Forth Pyramid, The Lady, The Star of the East, The Voice of Egypt, the People's Daughter, the Mother of the Arabs, The Star of the Orient, The Lady of the Arabic Song and The Nightingale of the Nile- taken from multiple sources

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