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Dissertation

**PICTURESQUE PEASANTS: PAINTING EGYPTIAN IDENTITY AT THE  
FUAD I AGRICULTURAL MUSEUM IN CAIRO, 1934-1938**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the meaning of the peasant subject in modern Egyptian art, concentrating on the period between the World Wars (1918-1939). It uses the fine art collection of the Fuad I Agricultural Museum in Cairo as a critical lens for understanding how formally trained Egyptian artists redefined modernity and national identity in Egypt through the peasant figure. The exhibition halls were created when the British occupied Egypt and the nation's economy was devastated by its reliance on a globally depressed market. Displayed among ethnographic dioramas and industrial displays, paintings and sculptures depicting peasants were thus intended to promote local goods to an Egyptian public and celebrate indigenous agricultural heritage. Each of this dissertation's three chapters serves as a case study that shows how and why peasant subjects slowly began to replace their urban, upper-class counterparts as models of what Egypt could be if it gained sovereignty from Western powers. It pairs the theory of modern subject formation with an intersectional feminist analysis and demonstrates that formally trained Egyptian artists expressed the

peasant figure's capacity to modernize Egypt through the prism of masculinity, womanhood, and race. By transforming the peasant into a modern subject, artists working around the time of the museum's inauguration in 1938 thus engaged in current debates concerning the place of women in nation-building, embraced the role of peasant men in creating national folk arts, and romanticized Egypt's colonial history in Nubia and the Sudan. This project contextualizes artworks created by formally trained Egyptian artists in the surrounding scientific and industrial displays, as well as magazine illustration, novels, and cinema produced in Egypt at this time. My socio-historical approach shows that artists in Egypt referred to local practices of landscape painting and ethnography in order to define Egyptian modernity vis-à-vis Africa, as well as the West. Finally, it illustrates the crucial role that the fine arts played in industrial exhibitions, the social sciences, and popular culture in the late colonial period.