

## A portrait of Jehan Sadat as an artist



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By **Mariam Hamdy** / Special to Daily News Egypt **March 4, 2010, 2:00 am**

Jehan Sadat is a woman whose name is synonymous with a vital part of Egypt's modern history. As the first lady of Egypt for 11 years that shaped the country as we know it now, she has been portrayed in different lights: from a loving mother, a pioneer in women's rights movements, a philanthropist and a lecturer to the loved and misunderstood widow of an unforgettable leader.

Of the many she assumed over the past four decades, the last one the general public would expect the former first lady to take up is that of an artist.

Already a published writer and established teacher, Jehan Sadat is about to inaugurate her first exhibition, titled "Landscapes of the Heart 1986-2009, at the Margo Veillon Gallery at AUC's Tahrir campus this Sunday, March 7.

The nature of the event automatically raises a number of questions, the most obvious being: Why painting? There's an element of curiosity that the artworks of a woman so heavily involved in society and politics incite: What would they portray and how would they be perceived. All of these queries were eloquently tackled and answered by the former first lady herself in an interview with Daily News Egypt last Tuesday.

When I asked her about her personal artistic history, Sadat laughed, stating that her first painting was made long before I was born.

"I painted for the first time about 55 years ago. I had just gotten married and without children or much else to do, I had an Italian art teacher give my sister and I painting classes. I was always interested in painting so I gave it a try, Sadat said.

However, with responsibilities of being a mother and the first lady of a country in turmoil, the luxury of having free time to paint was soon over. Sadat was to go through some of the most difficult episodes of her lifetime, both as an Egyptian citizen as well as a wife and mother of four.

With the consequent assassination of president Anwar Sadat and his country and family's strife to move forward, Mrs Sadat was determined not to stay idle.

"I hate not having anything to do; I always need to be busy. At first, I was always busy with my home and children. But as they grew and had their own children, I started to teach, write; make myself busy.

It was 10 years ago when Mrs Sadat found herself facing a long weekend during a semester of teaching at the University of South Carolina in the US without much to do.

"I had five whole days of no teaching, no going to campus or seeing students. So I went out to an art supply store and bought paint and canvas. Since then, she has been painting regularly whenever she has the time.

Her artwork is not what you'd expect from such a political icon. The paintings are calm, innocent and untainted landscapes; some depict Egyptian sceneries, others from the US. They're surprisingly uncomplicated; with neat and controlled brushstrokes that closely mimic Sadat's tranquil mannerisms. The words that best describe the paintings are sensible and temperate.

"I'm generally a calm person, explains Sadat. "I deal with things in a matter of fact way and that includes my paintings. I

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"I'm generally a calm person, explains Sadat, I deal with things in a matter of fact [way] and that includes my paintings. I paint what I miss: In the US I long for Egypt so I paint her landscapes, and while I'm in Egypt I miss the views I saw in the US so I paint those. It's really very simple.

It is that simplicity that catches the viewer off-guard. It becomes apparent that these paintings are the personal and intimate self-expressions of Jehan Safwat Raouf, a woman who has a myriad of titles and stigmas attached to her but who is ultimately a woman with an interest in art she desired to express.

The intriguing element about the work is that it negates expectations of what it would look like; it is an exact mirror of Jehan Sadat the woman, not the icon. The colors are childlike in their optimism, both bright and clear. No muddied waters appear in these landscapes, not even those of our muddied Nile.

"I'm a morning person, she states with a sure smile, "I like to face the day, and I'm optimistic. I always felt that there's something to look forward to no matter what one goes through. Perhaps that affects my choice of color.

The most refreshing aspect of the paintings is how frank the former first lady seems to be of their conception. She refuses to add any deeper or complex attributes to her productions; asserting that they are simply personal self-expressions of nostalgia. She speaks of her decision to exhibit her work with the transparency of a fleeting thought.

"I showed my paintings to my neighbors and friends in the US and they liked them very much and were terribly excited. They said I should hold an exhibit to show my work. I thought it was a great idea, but I had to do it in Egypt first.

On Egypt's approach to the arts, Jehan Sadat is once again optimistic. "There are endless amounts of talented artists in our country, and many are still in the making. I believe that we have a lot of potential in getting ourselves international acclaim because we have the skill and creativity to do so.

She proposes more gallery spaces for artists, and the inclusion of these gallery spaces in guided tours of Cairo and Egypt in general. "Just as we show the ancient Egyptian art, we should also show modern Egyptian art. It's very important to people around the world to know about our talents today.

She may not know it, but Jehan Sadat's first artistic efforts might as well bring that objective into fruition: "Landscapes of the Heart's next display will naturally be in the US. However, and while it's still in Cairo, it would be a shame not to go and view a side rarely revealed of the woman and icon whose public life and image has concealed so much of her own personal and intimate expression.

"Landscapes of the Heart 1986-2009 opens on Sunday, March 7, at the American University in Cairo's Margo Veillon Gallery of Modern Egyptian Art, Downtown. The gallery is open daily from 4-8 pm.



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