

Becoming Robert Colescott: Notes on the Artist in Egypt

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1. Robert Colescott's time in Egypt in the 1960s had a significant impact on his development as an artist. He had two sojourns in that country: the first from September 1964 to May 1965, which he spent on a research fellowship at the American Research Center in Egypt; and the second beginning in September 1966, when he returned to teach as a visiting professor at the American University in Cairo. The latter, initially planned as a two-year teaching stint, lasted only until the following June, when Colescott and his family left the country abruptly upon the outbreak of the Six-Day War.¹

2. The paintings assembled in this Galerie Buchholz exhibition shed light on Colescott's early work while underscoring the particular impact his first trip to Egypt had on his artistic trajectory. They also illuminate a period when Colescott's sense of himself in the world, particularly in terms of his racial identity, appears to have been undergoing a significant shift as well—one that paved the way for his signature paintings, starting in the 1970s, that addressed the perennially unhealed wounds of American race relations through biting satire and caricature.²

3. In his application for a fellowship at the American Research Center, Colescott proposed to spend his time there engaged in an extended study that would relate contemporary Egyptian art to its earlier (Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic) precursors, culminating in a written text. He laid out his plans like so: "In general, the following questions would be dealt with in the paper: 1. What is the nature and scope of contemporary Egyptian art? 2. How does it relate to the Egyptian tradition? 3. How has Europe influenced styles and trends in Egypt? 4. Who are the Egyptian artists [of today]?"³

4. Colescott's application included a collage of images, something like an artist's mood board (see plates I-II). Building on the project laid out in his application, the pictorial assemblage intersperses examples of work by modern and contemporary Egyptian artists (Mahmoud Mokhtar, Gazbia Sirry) with art from the country's ancient past, including tomb sculptures and wall paintings. It also includes a couple of European examples: a figure study by French painter Bernard Buffet, and an abstract composition by De Stijl artist Theo van Doesburg—the latter an interesting inclusion given that Colescott was a committed figurative painter, one who doesn't seem to have been particularly engaged with geometric abstraction. As would become a major touchstone of his later work, he showed himself inclined to shuttle back and forth between old and new, ancient and modern, past and present.

5. The aforementioned collection of images shows that Colescott appears to have been musing on these matters—and Egypt as a potential destination—for quite some time. Many if not most of the assembled pictures came from a single source: *Egypt Travel Magazine*, an official government publication focused on attracting Western tourists to Egypt (see plates III-IV).⁴ Moreover, the images are culled from separate issues spanning more than a year, further suggesting an extended interest in the magazine and its contents.⁵ Colescott looks to have been drawn to Egypt's art and culture well before he was finally able to visit there in person.

6. Colescott's interests situate him within a long-lasting engagement with Egypt, as both destination and cultural touchstone, amongst African-American artists. A recent exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art tracked this tendency across several generations, from earlier figures such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, Meta Warrick Fuller, and Malvin Gray Johnson to contemporaries of Colescott's like Irene Clark and Betye Saar.⁶ One video clip included in that show highlighted the distinct political resonance of Egypt at the time of Colescott's visit, as it showed Malcolm X on a trip there—one that took place less than two months before Colescott's arrival.

7. Shortly before he left to return to the U.S. in the spring of 1965, Colescott wrote to a correspondent: "Living in Egypt, even for these few short months, is an experience that none of us will ever forget. As a matter of fact I think that all subsequent experiences will certainly be tempered by it. Things that I have been most impressed by have been the complexities of life..., the symphony of the streets, the strangeness of the landscape, and the

wonderful Theban wall paintings—a world of color deep in a colorless hillside. I am overwhelmed by the poetic idea of reincarnation, the real monument of Egyptian civilization and the sum total of all the artistic endeavor.”⁷

8. Colescott consistently made clear that there was one theme—indeed, a specific locale—that informed the work he made during his first trip to Egypt: the Valley of the Queens, an area along the Nile where the tombs of numerous ancient queens and other royal family members are located. Working within that general thematic framework, he continued his exploration of the human figure—most often but not exclusively female—that had largely characterized his work to that point, but with somewhat less of an emphasis on naturalistic spatial representation.

9. In many of the paintings Colescott made during his first Cairo stay, figures float, fly, and hover, suggesting ghostly or unearthly presences. As such, they correlate with his own description of his Valley of the Queens works as conveying “the poetic mystery of a necropolis for females.”⁸ While it would be tempting to view this loosening of the strictures of gravity as something inspired solely by his residence in Egypt, the works assembled in the current show indicate he was already heading in that direction prior to his move. Two works that were apparently painted before, but explicitly make reference to, his upcoming sojourn—*Imagine! Going to Egypt* and *Imagine the Valley of the Queens*—include figures that don’t conform to conventional spatial orientation, with one even hanging upside down. What then to make of this exploration of apparent weightlessness? One could take it as according with the titular references to the imagination, a state untethered by the demands of physical reality. Or it could be interpreted as a reflection of the relative freedom Colescott hoped his trip would bring him, a potential respite from his teaching responsibilities at the time (he was then employed as an associate professor of art at Portland State College).

10. Colescott’s pre-Egypt figural works, like *Untitled*, c. 1963, and *Masked Lady* of 1964, often make use of a reduced painterly palette. But in Egypt, he was reportedly faced with restrictions that were even more limiting. As scholar Matthew Weseley recounts, Colescott was surprised to learn after his arrival that artist’s materials—paint, canvas—were hard to come by. In one redolent anecdote, he is said to have stolen a large block of ochre pigment, meant for use covering the exterior walls of houses, from a nearby work site just to have something to paint with.⁹ As if in response, his subsequent return to the US brought forth an explosion of high-keyed color in works like *Untitled* of 1965, with its vivid hues—red, orange, yellow, blue, and green among them. That inclination to vibrant color would find its way into his later, signature works of the 1970s and after, in which he used intense hues as the vehicles for equally strong sociopolitical statements.

11. Several months after returning to Portland in the spring of 1965, Colescott was asked by a curator for some commentary on the work he produced in Egypt. He initially vacillated a bit, explaining: “As to the statement about the work, I don’t know what to say. I have made some pretty good statements in the past, but I don’t know how they would apply to this year.” But he clearly had more in mind, and so then concluded his typewritten letter with the following extended reflection:

12. “I think there is one constant factor running like a thread through the whole fabric of the work.... That is if the work has any meaning beyond my own involvement, it is about [the] human condition. Spiritual condition is the one I mean, the kind of split second rapid fire experiences that make up any day as we collide with unrecognizable selves at every uncharted turn. Piece all of these together in any order, and you still have an odd-shaped fragment. In Egypt, I strolled through great stone heaps of temples and crawled through bone dry darkness following a flickering oil flame to see a painted tomb chamber. A piece of work not completed. The brush was put down yesterday, the scribe comes back tomorrow, since today is his day off. Reincarnation, the most poetic basis for a civilization yet got to me bit by bit and hangs as another awkward fragment, but that is a long story.”¹⁰

¹ For more on this period in Colescott’s career, see Terri Ginsberg, Duncan MacDonald, and Matthew Weseley, *Robert Colescott: The Cairo Years* (The American University in Cairo, 2021).

² “While Colescott has a reputation as an influential black artist, it is not widely known that he passed for white until a fateful sojourn in Cairo, Egypt, in the mid-1960s, and his return to the United States several years later. It was only then, in 1970, when he was forty-five years old, that he began creating the satirical paintings addressing black identity with which he made a name for himself.” Matthew Weseley, “Robert Colescott: The Untold Story,” in *Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott*, ed. Raphaela Platow and Lowery Stokes Sims (New York: Rizzoli Electa; and Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019), p. 13.

³ From Colescott’s fellowship application to the American Research Center in Egypt, dated February 10, 1964.

⁴ See Guilherme Borges Pires, “Scanning the Past: Travel Magazines in the EES Special Collections,” *Egyptian Archaeology* no. 62 (Spring 2023), pp. 32-36.

⁵ A tracking of the images accompanying Colescott's application indicates that they were culled from issues of the magazine dating from as early as September 1962 through at least November of the following year.

⁶ "Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now," Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, November 17, 2024–February 17, 2025.

⁷ Robert Colescott letter to Colin Graham, Director, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, March 9, 1965.

⁸ Robert Colescott letter to Colin Graham, Director, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, August 27, 1965.

⁹ Matthew Weseley, "Colescott in Egypt: An Excerpt from a Work in Progress," in *Robert Colescott: The Cairo Years*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Robert Colescott letter to Colin Graham, Director, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, August 7, 1965.

I.



Collaged image material from Robert ColeScott's application to the American Research Center in Egypt, ca. 1963.
© American Research Center in Egypt

II.



H. el-Agati
20th Century Egypt



Bernard Buffet
French 20th Century



Fresco Tomb of Nakht
Thebes XVIII Dynasty
(detail)



Detail Tomb of Ipy
Old Kingdom (Fresco)



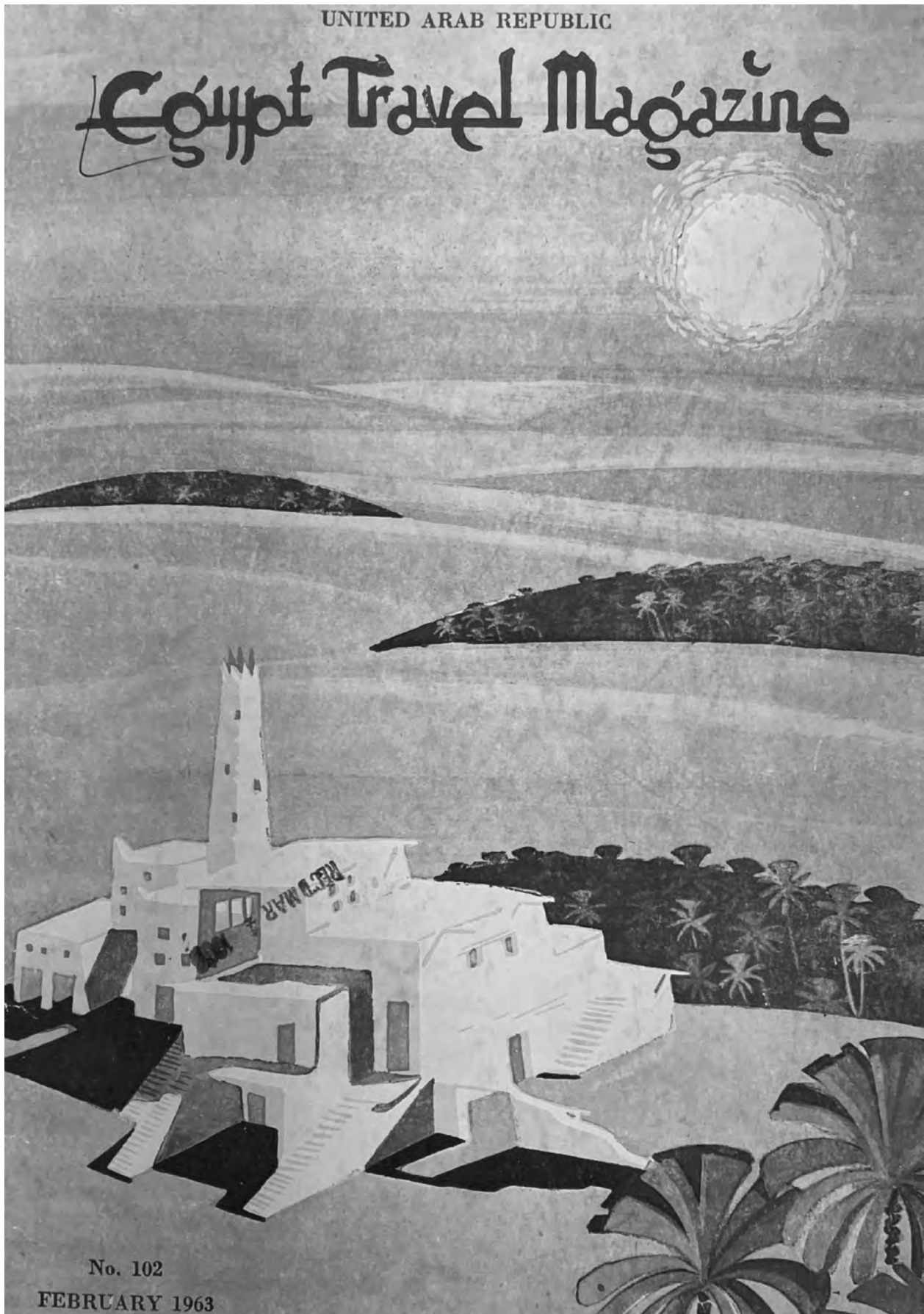
Gazbiya Sirry
Egypt 20th Century



Theo Van Doesburg
Dutch 20th Century
(De Stijl)

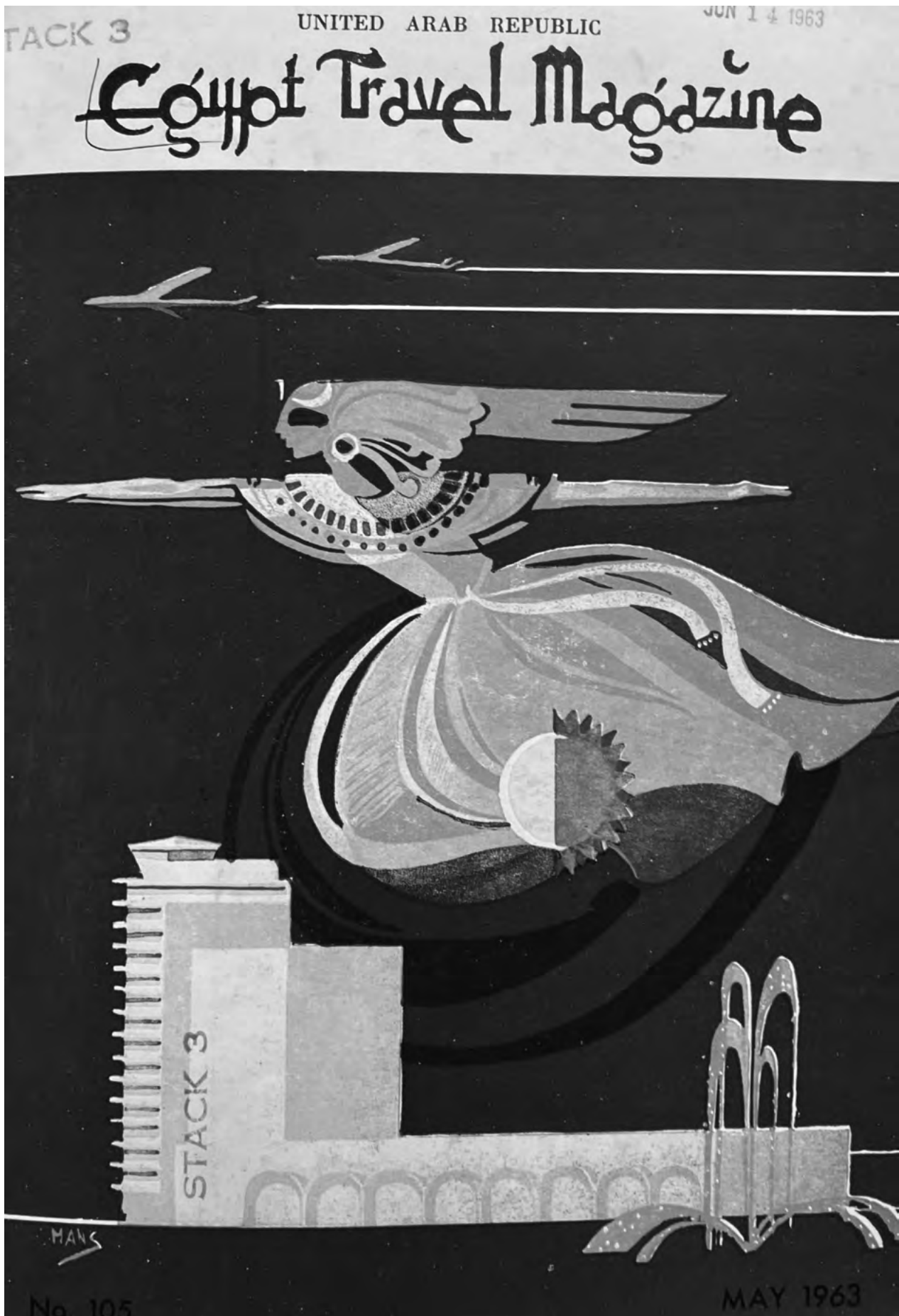
ROBERT COLESCOTT

III.



Egypt Travel Magazine, Ministry of Tourism Egypt, February, 1963

IV.



Egypt Travel Magazine, Ministry of Tourism Egypt, May, 1963