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# Golden Flies: Egypt's Pharaonic Past in Multiple Mirrors

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# Golden Flies: Egypt's Pharaonic Past in Multiple Mirrors

Elizabeth Bishop

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- 1 General secretary of the USSR's Communist Party N. S. Khrushchev paid an official visit to Egypt to celebrate the completion of the first stage of the Aswan High Dam in May 1964;<sup>1</sup> Egypt's president Gamal Abdul Nasser served as tour guide, escorting the nation's guest on an excursion to the Egyptian Museum.<sup>2</sup> Following numerous chains of signification for these two men's tour enable us to address Egypt's Pharaonic past in multiple mirrors.
- 2 While touring the Egyptian Museum, Nasser drew his guest's attention to objects on display: three gold representations of flies, joined by a chain (CG 52671), dating from the second intermediate period's 17th Dynasty. The current catalog description characterizes these as "stylized flies formed of plaques of gold with two bulging eyes and an open work body." These had been excavated from the tomb of Queen Ahhotep I (ca. 1560-1530 BC), consort to King Skenenra Taa II; both King Kamose and King Ahmose I were her children. When Kamose died during a struggle against the Hyksos, his brother Ahmose ascended to the throne, and Queen Ahhotep served as regent until he came of age. A stele in the temple of Amun-Re at Karnak identified Queen Ahhotep as, "Princess, king's mother, noblewoman who knows things and takes care of Egypt";<sup>3</sup> the stele further commemorated her role in the war against the Hyksos, stating, "she is the one who has accomplished the rites and taken care of Egypt; she has looked after Egypt's troops and she has guarded them, she brought back the fugitives and collected together the deserters, pacified Upper Egypt and expelled her rebels."<sup>4</sup>
- 3 When Ahhotep died, she was buried with extraordinary funerary jewelry, including three gold pendants in the form of flies.<sup>5</sup> About the size of an outstretched human hand, they are "flat and simple, with only the head and wings delineated."<sup>6</sup> Semantically, flies are connected with vanquished enemies. Found on battlefields where blood has been shed, the hieroglyphic determinative sign for the noun "fly" (𓂏), the verb "to fly" (𓂏), and the phoneme "aff" (𓂏) signifying both "rejection" and "bother," are all connected with the idea of shooing away enemies.<sup>7</sup> At the same time,

flies represent a martial idea; like them, soldiers should be numerous, persistent, and impossible to ward off.<sup>8</sup> Biting insects represented military valor and tenacity; both the fly and the exemplary general returned to torment their victims.<sup>9</sup>

- 4 To find such a military award in the jewelry collection of a queen is exceptional,<sup>10</sup> although these pendants are not entirely unique. On display in the same museum are also smaller gold and silver *Dipterae*. A necklace with thirty-three small pendants was found in the tomb of Thutmose III's three wives.<sup>11</sup> During the New Kingdom, Egypt's military was in the process of becoming a privileged, prosperous class, representing one of the few paths to status and wealth for a young man born in poverty.<sup>12</sup> Similar pendants were awards presented to commanders of victorious armies. In his autobiography, General Ahmose-pen-Nekhet recorded, "King Thutmose I gave to me of gold: four bracelets, four necklaces, one amulet, six flies, three lions, two golden axes."<sup>13</sup> Royal Butler Suemniwet also received a golden fly; his tomb (Theban, no. 92) depicted war materiel, including Syrian-style helmets, armor, chariots, and weapons.<sup>14</sup> Royal messenger Dedi wore a golden fly with striding lions (Theban, no. 200), an award that (according to the Annals of Thutmose III) he had received during Syrian campaigns.<sup>15</sup>
- 5 In his discussion of ancient Egyptian art's reception according to the critical standards of Hellenic antiquity, Michael Podro points to a key issue for art history: can the art of one culture be understood by another as "art"? "Appreciation of the artistry of artwork, enjoyment of the way it transformed its ritual or symbolic material, does not enable us to overcome the problem of cultural difference."<sup>16</sup> Acknowledging that Frances Stonor Saunders identified institutional bases for cultural politics of the Cold War,<sup>17</sup> this essay places Queen Ahhotep's golden flies at the center of the problem of militarization and cultural difference during World War II and the following two decades.
- 6 In the postcolonial era, the global circulation of Pharaonic antiquities reflected that of advanced weapons systems, as the servants of Egypt's state exported antiquities from the postcolonial Nile Valley at a rate that rivaled nineteenth-century imperialism's treasure hunt. As state gifts, a striding male figure from 2400 BC went to US First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy;<sup>18</sup> her husband received a hand-carved ivory model of an ancient barge.<sup>19</sup> A vase excavated at Sakkara went to the chair of the USSR Communist Party N. S. Khrushchev, who (it was said) set it on the table in the middle of a Supreme Soviet meeting.<sup>20</sup>
- 7 Khrushchev's 1964 Cairo visit represented the culmination of improvement in the relationship between the two countries.<sup>21</sup> Closer scrutiny reveals that this museum visit performs important contextual work for art history and criticism. This essay identifies multiple "mirrors" for Egypt's Pharaonic artifacts. Noting that both the (temporary) museum docent and his (civilian) guest had extensive wartime experience, this discussion will interweave the multiple (and even contradictory) significations of Queen Ahhotep's golden flies with those of the two men's military careers.
- 8 A generation older than his host, Khrushchev had been promoted in 1928 to the organization department of the Communist Party's district committee in Kiev, at the beginning of what subsequently came to be known as the *Holodomor*, the "Ukrainian famine." While Soviet authorities had procured 7.2 million tons of wheat from the 1931 harvest, the following year yielded only 4.3 million tons. In towns, the authorities cut citizens' access to rations, while popular propaganda portrayed peasants as

counterrevolutionaries who hid grain and potatoes from the workers. By February 1933, the Dnipropetrovsk, Kiev (where Khrushchev was a young Party employee), and Odessa districts were most affected, reporting starvation, typhus, and malaria; in April, Kharkhiv reported mass deaths from starvation.

- 9 Gold, and the militarization of its transfer, can be held responsible for the famine. Refusing to accept specie payments after 1925, the USSR's Ministry of Foreign Trade was left bartering oil, timber, and grain for imports. When the UK prohibited imports of Soviet butter, petroleum, and timber in April 1933, the Ministry was left paying for the nation's imports in grain—until London banned barley and wheat, too, in July 1933. At the same time, the instigation of collective agriculture in the Ukrainian SSR imposed new crops, such as cotton and sugar beets. Many agricultural managers (like Khrushchev) were inexperienced; as a result, many farms' grain was left standing in the fields, or was lost in processing, transportation, and storage. By the end of 1933, millions of people had starved to death in the Ukraine and surrounding areas. In addition to the toll on human lives, perhaps two million horses, four million head of cattle, six million sheep, and five million swine were slaughtered, died of disease, or starved. By the end of that terrible year, Khrushchev was promoted to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).
- 10 The Party also bears responsibility. CPSU chair Iosif Vissarionovich Jugashvili, "Stalin," sent Khrushchev (as chair of the Council of People's Commissars), along with Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov and Nikolai Ivanovich Yezhov (who, at the time, was head of the party's department of special affairs, department of personnel, and department of industry) to the Ukraine. Their orders were to liquidate both the local parliament and the local party leadership. In both tasks they failed, at least initially. The republic's central committee plenum rejected Khrushchev's bid to serve as their general secretary. In response, all seventeen members of Premier Lubchenko's government were taken into custody; of sixty members of the republic's party's central committee and its candidate members, only three survived. Khrushchev was appointed "general secretary" of a central committee of the Ukrainian party that had ceased to exist. He and his associates were prepared to use such tactics to extend the USSR's western border.
- 11 Shortly afterwards, Soviet troops entered Polish territory in accordance with the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.<sup>22</sup> There, the Red Army set up "provisional administrations" in urban areas and "peasant communities" in the countryside to organize elections.<sup>23</sup> Khrushchev continued to serve as general secretary of the Ukraine's Communist Party.<sup>24</sup> Through a combination of propaganda, single-candidate ballots, and fraud, they formed a "People's Assembly of Western Ukraine."<sup>25</sup> Khrushchev and other representatives of the Ukrainian SSR addressed this assembly, which then voted unanimously to thank Stalin for liberation, requesting formal inclusion in the Ukrainian SSR.<sup>26</sup> On June 22, 1941, nearly three-quarters of a million Axis soldiers and their allies exploded across the western border,<sup>27</sup> entering the country both north and south of the Pripet Marshes simultaneously.<sup>28</sup> Weakened by famine, towns and villages welcomed German troops as liberators.<sup>29</sup> Marshal Semyon Mikhailovich Budyonny (Commander-in-Chief of Soviet armed forces of the Southwestern Direction), and General Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko (recently transferred from Smolensk) supported Khrushchev. In his memoirs, he recalled: "several times Timoshenko and I went out to visit the troops... as I recall, we went out

into the area west of Poltava. There we had a mechanized group commanded by General Feklenko. When Feklenko saw us his eyes literally popped, out of surprise or fear. We asked him to report on the situation. He reported briefly and immediately said: 'you've got to get away from here, and hurry!' The situation was so difficult that he could not be sure of our safety."<sup>30</sup>

- 12 Stalin refused to recognize that the military units in and around Kiev were in danger of being encircled. When the NKVD informed him that Khrushchev was about to surrender the city, Stalin phoned to cajole and threaten the subordinate: "you should be ashamed of yourself!... what's the matter with you? [you have] given up half the Ukraine. You're ready to give up the other half too... Do whatever it takes—if not, we'll make short work of you!" Stalin transferred military command from Budyonny to Timoshenko; two days later, Panzer Groups One and Two linked up a hundred miles east of Kiev. The Germans surrounded Kiev on September 14; five Soviet armies were sealed in the encirclement.<sup>31</sup> Stalin authorized withdrawal, too late. Khrushchev was left with the responsibility of evacuating industrial plant, "working livestock, grain, tractors, and combines,"<sup>32</sup> from the besieged city.<sup>33</sup> As the Soviet Southwestern Front armies collapsed and 452,720 men were taken prisoner, Kiev was abandoned to the enemy.<sup>34</sup> Some 15,000 troops nonetheless managed to slip the cordon around Kiev,<sup>35</sup> while Khrushchev, Budyonny, and Timoshenko were evacuated by air.<sup>36</sup>
- 13 During the 1964 state visit, as Nasser guided Khrushchev through the Egyptian Museum,<sup>37</sup> the guest expressed his pleasure with a brief sentence: "Visiting these antiquities and knowing their history should take no less than ten years."<sup>38</sup> Host and guest lingered over the display of three golden flies from the 17th Dynasty. Both had seen active military service; Khrushchev on the Ukrainian front, and Nasser sixteen years previously.
- 14 Seeking to explain his experiences of the Palestine campaign for a popular audience, Nasser described a Hollywood film he had seen in a Cairo cinema. "The story had a villain, who had succumbed to the evil machinations of the devil," he began his narrative; "this villain commits murder but plans his crime in such a way that suspicion is thrown on an innocent man."<sup>39</sup> Egypt's offensive began on May 14, 1948, the day Israel declared its independence.<sup>40</sup> King Farouk entered the war against the advice of military leaders, Prime Minister Mahmud Nuqrashi, and all the leading political parties.<sup>41</sup>
- 15 At that time, Egypt's army was made up of nine battalions; three were on the border, with a fourth on its way. All students in their senior year at the Staff College, Zakariya Mohieddin was ordered to join the 1st battalion, Nasser the 6th, and Abdul Hakim Amer the 9th. Immediately after their graduation ceremonies, the three men received "orders were that we should leave Cairo on 16 May." Sharing a taxicab to the train station, having boarded civilian transport, they "spread out a large map between us and began to discuss the situation; at first glance there loomed before our eyes the 'gaps' in our position through which our lines could be threatened."<sup>42</sup>
- 16 Arriving at the Sinai town of al-Arish, they found the military headquarters "like an abandoned house in the middle of uninhabited territory; when we finally found the officer on duty, he was looking for a dinner for himself." Since the three officers' respective battalions were located in Gaza and Rafah, the three men parted. Rafah, to which Nasser was assigned, was backed by a troop of armored cars, twenty Bren gun carriers,<sup>43</sup> batteries of twenty-five pounders, and twenty Locust tanks.<sup>44</sup> Arriving at

Rafah, he heard about events that had taken place at Kibbutz Narim (Dangour), a town halfway to Gaza.

- 17 There, forty-odd defenders had managed to contain sustained Egyptian assaults,<sup>45</sup> as the Egyptians conducted slow-moving frontal attacks in line abreast.<sup>46</sup> As Nasser recalled, “the men were given no time to rest and ordered to attack the wire perimeter at once. No one really knew how to set about it, although the defenders of Dangour were quite clear about their job. The [Egyptian] battalion suffered unexpected losses, and about noon the commanding officer ordered it to retire from the settlement.”<sup>47</sup> After a short battle, the Egyptians withdrew, leaving thirty soldiers dead.<sup>48</sup> Although the Egyptian infantry enjoyed air support, in addition to artillery support,<sup>49</sup> the resistance they encountered nonetheless surprised them.
- 18 Rather than recognizing that they possessed the technological advantage, the Egyptians were under the impression that they were technologically disadvantaged. The young colonel recounted that he listened to an officer “relate how electrically-operated towers rose above the surface of the ground to fire at our men in all directions, after which the towers disappeared (still electrically) into the ground again.” With such reports ringing in his ears, his battalion returned to Rafah where they found an official communiqué announcing that the “clean-up” of Dangour had been successful.<sup>50</sup>
- 19 Nasser asked, “What kind of war was this? Our infantry was being expended in a terrible way in exposed, broad daylight attacks. Bare bodies unprotected by armor were being pitted against strongly fortified positions and guns manned by competent, well-trained defenders.” While Egyptian infantrymen had shown courage, they were ill-equipped, and their central command lacked proper planning. “Was this a battle into which we were leading our troops, or a massacre?”<sup>51</sup>
- 20 Egyptians, civilians, and military were touched by that year’s military events.<sup>52</sup> The country’s performance in the 1948 war bruised national pride; a munitions scandal (the Palace had purchased defective military equipment, left over from World War II) alienated the population from the political leadership.<sup>53</sup> To the Muslim Brotherhood’s young members, events in Egypt revealed the Arab regimes’ total bankruptcy.<sup>54</sup> Either an Egyptian revolution had been going on since 1946 (in which case the Palestine War was an unsuccessful attempt to abort it that had only succeeded in delaying it, shaping its early course and objectives and giving it renewed impetus),<sup>55</sup> or it was in Palestine that a conspiracy to overthrow the monarchy was born.<sup>56</sup> Either way, the “free officers” of Egypt, led by Mohammed Naguib, took control of the government in July 1952, replacing King Farouk.<sup>57</sup>
- 21 For Egypt’s new government, advanced military systems would enable them to overcome soldiers’ impression that the enemy had “electrically-operated towers.” The question was, how could the “free officers” government break the monarchy’s reliance on British military assistance? While the terms of a 1936 treaty with Britain had restricted the Egyptian government to British-provided supplies, the agreement had expired the year before the Palestine campaign.<sup>58</sup>
- 22 Records from Great Britain’s embassy in Cairo reflect diplomats’ self-congratulation on (what they thought was) a renewal of the 1936 treaty’s military provisions. The British ambassador’s annual report for 1954 began that the year “was remarkable both for the efforts displayed by the men of the régime and for the results achieved.”<sup>59</sup> Even though

British diplomats and their counterparts among the “free officers” had failed to agree on the emergency circumstances by which foreign troops would be permitted to return to the Suez base,<sup>60</sup> Britain simply kept “her powerful armed forces at full strength in the Suez Canal zone.”<sup>61</sup> Britain offered, however, to evacuate all 80,000 troops from the Suez bases if Egypt would permit them to return in the event of a war.<sup>62</sup> Constrained by declining military budgets,<sup>63</sup> and acknowledging that nuclear weapons had altered strategic considerations around the world,<sup>64</sup> Britain’s diplomats had succeeded in transferring the nation’s military responsibility elsewhere in the region (Iraq) over to the United States, and may have considered doing so in Egypt as well.<sup>65</sup> By October, diplomats finally arrived at an agreement governing the Suez bases, establishing terms for a phased withdrawal—to begin in a year’s time.<sup>66</sup>

- 23 In the final phases of talks, Egypt’s deputy premier Gamal Salem suggested that Egypt was open to a new offer for weapons; “If European countries would not fulfill their promises and contracts for arms, Egypt had no alternative but to accept” any new offer.<sup>67</sup> Those who listened to Cairo Radio and read the *al-Jumhuriyahh* (“*The Republic*”) newspaper already knew Egypt’s head of state considered “a visit to the Soviet Union [to] significantly demonstrate that Egyptian policy and actions are not inspired by any foreign influence or pressure and that Egypt can freely make any decision at any time she wishes to do so.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, editors at the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* (“*News*”) praised Egypt’s “opposition to the policy of military alliances with the Western powers.”<sup>69</sup>
- 24 Nasser announced on September 27, 1955, that his country had signed an arms agreement with “Czechoslovakia” for Soviet-manufactured weapons.<sup>70</sup> This shocking new direction had been developing in secret for six months, after Nasser attended an international meeting in Indonesia.<sup>71</sup> The organizers of the Bandung Afro-Asian solidarity conference were prepared to elevate Nasser’s stature among the conference attendees; Egypt’s premier “went to Bandung an Egyptian, and returned a world figure and a revolutionary.”<sup>72</sup>
- 25 It is commonly accepted that, during the meeting, Zhou Enlai pledged China’s support for the Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian peoples in their struggle for national liberation, an important issue for Nasser’s policy of Arab unification;<sup>73</sup> and that it was Zhou Enlai who advised the African leader to approach the Soviet bloc for weapons.<sup>74</sup> It has also been argued that the so-called Czech-Egyptian arms deal (announced officially in September 1955) was a combination of two separate contracts: a first one concluded between Egypt and Czechoslovakia during the first quarter of the year, followed by a second, larger contract drawn up between Egypt and the Soviet Union after Nasser’s return from Bandung. Czechoslovakia adhered to this second agreement (a direct continuation of the first) in September 1955.<sup>75</sup>
- 26 Within a month, six Eastern-bloc freighters arrived at Egypt’s two Mediterranean ports. “Despite elaborate Egyptian security precautions, it has been definitely established that at least one of the Port Said arrivals carried jet plane wings on deck,” totaling two hundred jets, among them MIG-15 fighters and IL-28 bombers, as well as tanks, torpedo boats, “and two submarines.”<sup>76</sup> While precise data on the value of those weapons shipments has proven elusive, and while the conditions of payment were never published,<sup>77</sup> the agreement reportedly provided for repayment in cotton shipments over an extended period.<sup>78</sup>



- 27 Nearly a quarter of a million British soldiers and their allies burst across Egypt's Sinai border on October 29, 1956. After the "tripartite invasion," Egyptian and Soviet diplomats urgently negotiated deliveries for aircraft, tanks, and other equipment. The first half of 1957 saw a first shipment of supersonic aircraft, TU-104 transport planes, six ships built in Poland, and three W-class submarines.<sup>79</sup> While Khrushchev later reported to the CPSU XXI congress that the country "had not interfered and does not intend to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries,"<sup>80</sup> the military capability of Egypt had doubled.<sup>81</sup>
- 28 By the time Khrushchev entered the Egyptian Museum six years later, the Soviet Union had provided Egypt with \$600 million in materiel.<sup>82</sup> When Nasser guided Khrushchev past the display of Queen Ahhotep's golden flies, Egypt had succeeded in replacing Great Britain with the Soviet Union as its leading weapons dealer.
- 29 Face to face with Queen Ahhotep's golden flies, Khrushchev responded with a casual, yet polite, remark that such ancient objects were very much in keeping with contemporary artistic tastes.<sup>83</sup> Understood as a compliment by his Egyptian interlocutors, his comment cut to the heart of the Cold War's cultural politics.
- 30 Since the 1940s, a shift had been occurring in global art, from regionalism's accessible themes to the non objective art of "abstract expressionism."<sup>84</sup> Among the member-states of the emerging North Atlantic Treaty Organization, various cultural and political entities deployed this second style of painting as a "weapon against totalitarianism,"<sup>85</sup> in that it coincided fairly closely with an ideology that came to dominate American public life after the 1948 presidential election.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, nonrepresentational paintings by US artists described in terms of "abstract expressionism"—such as those of Mark Rothko, among others—were described as celebrations of a sense of individual freedom which characterized the Cold War West.<sup>87</sup>
- 31 Through a series of connections—including combatants' embodied experience of war and artists' relationships to a variety of government organizations—Khrushchev seemed to have identified Queen Ahhotep's golden flies as a distant "mirror" for the artwork of Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, and Jackson Pollock.<sup>88</sup> De Kooning's paintings, such as his *Pink Angels* (1945), contain inter-textual allusions to earlier paintings; in Newman's "zip" paintings, including *Onement I* (1948), the zip divides the smooth, dominant, single-colored surface of the canvas in a manner suggesting rupture; Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30* (1950) "does not 'look' like things."<sup>89</sup>
- 32 The Soviet Union's Academy of Arts employed sculptors and painters. In addition to offering "official" artists commissions, prizes, and conferences to discuss their work, and shipping supplies to their rent-free studios,<sup>90</sup> it was less supportive of discussion of new developments around the art world. The artists' union had suspended publication of its official journals—*Iskusstvo* ("Art"), *Khudozhnik* ("Artist"), and *Tvorchestvo* ("Creativity")—for the duration of World War II. After the war, when the three journals resumed publication, the official portrait painter A. M. Gerasimov allied with the chief of the artists' union Vladimir Serov to resist the rising tide of a general preoccupation with the subconscious.<sup>91</sup>
- 33 Not all shared Gerasimov, Khrushchev, and Serov's opinions. After the war, Moscow artist E. L. Kropivnitsky obtained reproductions of Salvador Dalí, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró.<sup>92</sup> By the mid-1950s, a varied group of creative people had gathered around Kropivnitsky, among them his sons Leo and Valentine, painter O. Rabin, and poets



I. Holin, E. Limonov, and G. Sapgir.<sup>93</sup> Sculptor E. Neizvestny received his medical discharge from the Red Army when an exploding bullet pierced his chest, shattered his spine and ribs, and left a crater in his back; after the war ended, a military medical commission examined him, finding him a “class II invalid.” Following a period of recuperation, Neizvestny went to work at a factory in Sverdlovsk, then taught art classes at the Suvorov Military Institute.<sup>94</sup> Moving to Moscow without official *kontraktsiia*, he sold pieces to nuclear physicists L.D. Landau and P.L. Kapitsa,<sup>95</sup> as well as working anonymously for the studios of established architects.<sup>96</sup>

- 34 A series of exhibits were planned to introduce this kind of artistic “formalism”—as abstract expressionism was called in Moscow—to the Soviet capital’s public, as an attempt to bridge the growing rift between official and unofficial art worlds. Khrushchev’s antipathy toward modern art had already been noticed—he resented its “radical novelty,” its “impulse to extreme individualism,” its “valorization of inaccessibility.”<sup>97</sup> Public celebrities such as Olympic weightlifter F. Bogdanovsky, cosmonaut Yu. Gagarin, brigade leader on a construction site G. Lamochkin, and textile worker V. Petrishcheva characterized abstract expressionism as the “pursuit of cheap sensations, masked in some cases by empty declarations, [which] drag to exhibitions or load the airwaves with nonsensical combinations of colors or sounds, and more over attempt to palm off their wares as innovations.”<sup>98</sup> The “radical novelty,” the “extreme individualism,” and “inaccessibility” of artistic formalism contrasted with the accessible, collective establishment of athleticism, scientific heroism, and an aristocracy of labor.
- 35 The first of these shows celebrated the 75th birthday of communist artist Pablo Picasso (1956);<sup>99</sup> followed by the “World Festival of Youth and Students” (1957), with its separate pavilions for painting and sculpture;<sup>100</sup> then an “Art of Socialist Countries” exhibit (1958).<sup>101</sup> These, together with an “Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture,” marked an *otpetel* (“thaw”) in the visual arts.<sup>102</sup> By the early 1960s, as part of this “thaw,” Neizvestny started work on a series of small-scale bronze casts, described as cyborg-hulks; “quasi-human creatures beset by contortions... uncanny, deformed objects.”<sup>103</sup> A show of avant-garde art by Kropivnitsky and others was scheduled to open in the Hotel *Yunost* (“Youth”) on Moscow’s downtown Gorky Street during November 1962. The *Yunost* artists hung their work for a private preview in the apartment of sculptor E. Belyutin; when the authorities closed this unsanctioned gathering after only a few hours,<sup>104</sup> the artists were invited to join the official “30 Years of Moscow Art” exhibition scheduled in the *Manezh*—a much larger and more significant venue than either the hotel or the apartment.<sup>105</sup> Only a few short steps from the Kremlin, this 170-meter-long hall served the Soviet empire and its predecessor as their epicenter.<sup>106</sup> Construction of this building—whose name is a distant mirror for the French *manège*, or “riding arena”—was a high point of the city’s revitalization after Napoleon’s defeat, serving Russia’s Imperial Cavalry regiments, then retaining their name after the October Revolution witnessed conversion of the space to civilian uses.<sup>107</sup>
- 36 In this way, a number of artists were added at the last moment to the “30 Years of Moscow Art” exhibition scheduled to open in December 1962. Several were World War II veterans; one of these was Neizvestny.<sup>108</sup> Following the *Manezh* opening, four cabinet members and several members of the CPSU secretariat accompanied Khrushchev to view the works.<sup>109</sup> The sculptor recalled that an entourage of about seventy public figures entered the building,<sup>110</sup> among them Serov and Gerasimov.<sup>111</sup>

Khrushchev toured the ground-floor halls quietly; only when he reached the top of the stairs did he begin to shout: “Disgrace! Dog shit! Filth! Pederasts! Who is responsible for this? Who is the leader?” The sculptor Belyutin stepped forward; somebody among the official delegation said: “He’s not the real leader, we don’t want him,” and, pointing at Neizvestny, “That’s the real leader!”<sup>112</sup>

- 37 Acknowledging that accounts of what followed have become part of Cold War mythology, the sculptor recalled that he answered back: “you may be premier and chairman but not here in front of my works. Here I am premier and we shall discuss as equals.”<sup>113</sup>
- 38 From among the official entourage, KGB chief A.N. Shelepin barked something like, “If you continue to behave that way, we’ll let you rot in the uranium mines.”<sup>114</sup> The war veteran related that he no longer feared death, which “let me feel completely free inside,” at which point he saw the “attentive, interested, and even sympathetic gaze” of the man who had evacuated from Kiev by air twenty years earlier. To the Premier, the Soviet sculptor is said to have replied, “you are insulting me; such outstanding Communists as [Italian expressionist] Renato Guttuso, Picasso, and [Mexican muralist David Alfaro] Siqueiros support me and love me.” Khrushchev then answered, “Aha, I’ve got you. Here you are in front of the number one Communist in the world—that’s me—and I don’t like your works at all.”<sup>115</sup>
- 39 In his exchanges with the authorities, many considered the sculptor to exemplify the kind of individual freedom associated with art by de Kooning, Newman, and Pollock.<sup>116</sup> After the 1962 confrontation with Khrushchev and his entourage, Neizvestny failed to find work as a professional artist for almost a decade. Since he was unable to sell art under his own name, rivals stole and executed designs he had submitted for large projects, while he found work loading salt at a railroad switchyard.<sup>117</sup>
- 40 Seven years later, the sculptor learned of Egypt’s international competition for a monument at the Aswan high dam; a competition that was to be adjudicated by an international jury with no affiliation to the USSR’s artistic academy.<sup>118</sup> For his entry, he developed an enormous lotus flower design of “leaf formations rising upwards in a gothic style to a height of two hundred and seventy feet... [with] a giant relief with motifs from the ‘tree of life.’”<sup>119</sup> He managed to smuggle his entry out of the country and into Egypt before the submission deadline. As international journalists were invited to be present in Cairo when the envelopes containing the jury votes were opened, news of his winning design was made public around the world.<sup>120</sup>
- 41 This success gained Neizvestny entry into the official Soviet art world; it was not, however, his greatest accomplishment. After Khrushchev’s death in 1971, his son S. N. Khrushchev asked the sculptor for a memorial. Intertwined white and black marble blocks (alluding to the contrasts and paradoxes of his public service) frame a head cast in bronze.<sup>121</sup> The cemetery belonging to the historic Novodevichy Convent on the Moscow River had been selected as Khrushchev’s final resting place.<sup>122</sup> After a four-year delay,<sup>123</sup> this tombstone uniting “formalist” and “realist” elements was finally installed to mark the leader’s grave.<sup>124</sup>

## Conclusion

- 42 This essay has explored the nature of the relationship between Pharaonic art and Egyptian society, and “formalist” art and Soviet society, through a series of martial themes. Queen Ahhotep I’s “golden flies,” which attracted Nasser’s attention and Khrushchev’s response, were New Kingdom military decorations found in a woman’s tomb. In the Egyptian Museum, the “golden flies” evoked a military history stretching from the New Kingdom to the Cold War. Khrushchev’s wartime experience on the Soviet Union’s western front reflects the overlap between administrative power and military conquest; similarly, what Nasser saw and heard during the 1948 Palestine campaign underscored the value of advanced weapons systems. By the time Khrushchev visited the Egyptian Museum during 1964, the Soviet Union had replaced Great Britain as Egypt’s leading weapons supplier.
- 43 As Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk point out, “what is at stake for Marxism and social art history is not the embeddedness of art in society, but the nature of this relationship and its consequences.”<sup>125</sup> This contribution considers the imbrication of ancient and modern art, with the mid-twentieth century’s changing tides of war and peace. Both the Soviet Communist Party leader and the Egyptian president had experience of military defeat; both found their experiences contrasted with (and informed by) those of veterans who had seen active service.
- 44 Khrushchev’s measured remarks before the “golden flies” in the Egyptian Museum distantly echo his response to works exhibited at the *Manezh*. For Khrushchev, Queen Ahhotep’s gold reflected his conflict with war veteran Ernest Neizvestny and those “uncanny, deformed” sculptures from two years earlier. In the cultural politics of the Cold War, Khrushchev found the New Kingdom golden flies to also reflect the artwork of de Kooning, Newman, and Pollock. In turn, the “Thirty Years of Moscow Art” exhibition found its own distant mirrors, first in Neizvestny’s design for a monument at the Aswan High Dam and later in Khrushchev’s Novodevichy monument.

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