

Scenes of Egypt, a Photographic Exhibition by Isaac Jonathan
Cairo, 1952

A Review by Will Masters, Fulbright Scholar

“In Egypt, the art of reproducing Mother Nature on reasonably flat surfaces is at least as old as those sanguine Badarian or Tasian huntsmen who roughed out sketches of themselves whisking off javelin-shots at entrecote on the hoof...

“Photography, the merchandisers of the wherewithal would have us believe, is sheer kindergarten play ...” Yet, when we approach the subject in greater detail, “the suspicion grows in one’s mind that the successful photographer traffics in black magic, has an understanding with the Little People, and a written agreement with the Prince of Darkness.

“The figure behind the current manifestation, Isaac Jonathan, instead of appearing in a star-embroidered cassock with a raven brooding on one shoulder, is a human-sized gnome of benign appearance...Not long ago, I visited Fra Jonathan’s place of work, fully expecting bubbling alembics and retorts, grinning skulls, a stuffed crocodile hanging from the ceiling and a copy of Solomon’s Key on the shelf. Instead, I found a coldly-illuminated and uninteresting Chamber of Horrors jammed with machines, gadgets, and oddments, all neatly labeled and smelling strongly of ink, microdol and insecticide.

“If the technology is lacking in romance, the resultant photographs go in exactly the opposite direction. They may be treated as falling into two classes, landscape and portraiture, both of which complement each other in a selective but comprehensive coverage of contemporary Egypt. The first group shows a consummate master, not only in the selection of subjects but in their treatment: the ageless grandeur of the pockmarked and disfigured Sphinx, the minarets of Old Cairo standing starkly white against a deep-hued sky, the sweeping contours of the architecture of the Citadel, the soft quiet of a simple courtyard...Jonathan’s several studies do much to restore the poor bust (of the Sphinx) to its childhood stature, particularly one through a ruined portal.

“The thousands of faces which flicker past one in Egypt seem to resolve themselves into a number of classes...Jonathan has captured a number of these with beauty and restraint: the seamed countenance of a peasant, the kohl-rimmed eyes of the poor girl, the intense preoccupation of the street vendor, the happy grin of the shop-keeper.

“There are those who stare down the proboscis at photography, excluding it from “art” and regarding its company with the splashes, daubs and trickles of our modern painters as on a par with lumping together Michelangelo and the kewpie-doll or mispronouncing the name of Beethoven. They might do well to revise the words of

Odilon Redon, "...Black is the most essential of all colours. It finds its glorification, its life, shall I say, in the direct and deeper springs in Nature...Black should be respected. Nothing can prostitute it...It is an agent of the mind far more than the beautiful colours of the palette or prisms..." Black is the photographer's medium and the skill, the patience and the artistic sense necessary to exploit it are in the extreme. Jonathan's exhibit lends much weight to the French writer's words."

Sixty-one years later, I have converted my archival negatives into digital and proceeded to re-edit and print some of the images which were originally shown at the Fulbright Office in Cairo in April, 1952. The exhibit was a tremendous success. The local Egyptian press, as well as the Greek, French and English newspapers reviewed and praised the exhibits quality and content. Below are excerpts from the local presses of Cairo and Alexandria.

JIJ 2013

Reviews of the 1952 Exhibition *Faces of Egypt*

In 1952 there were more than 10 newspapers in Egypt in Arabic, English, French, Italian, and Greek. Here is a sample of excerpts about Mr. Jonathan's *Scenes of Egypt* exhibition of 1952.



...The artist expresses, through these pictures, his appreciation for Egypt, her beauty and nature....Some of them (the pictures) portray Islamic history of Egypt, others represent Egyptian country life in a very dramatic manner.

Al Ahrām, an Arabic daily newspaper

Mr. Jonathan, in his scenes of Egypt, has "*endeavored, by light and shadow, to reach a sublime climax for Egypt's scenes and glory.*"

Al Mussawar, an Arabic weekly journal

Mr. Jonathan who has lived in Egypt, feels “*a great sympathy for the country and her peoples.*” He “*translates his feelings for his country into light and shadows.*”

La Bourse Egyptienne, a French language daily newspaper

These photographs *escape the banality of palm trees, sand, and camels...* “*The technique is impeccable and that is a compliment ...since most of the images were taken in bright sunlight.*”

Tachydromos, a Greek language daily newspaper

The title is very appropriate. It gives credit to the amount of effort spent to reveal, through the lens of a camera, the pulse of the happy Egyptian life that provides new surprises every day.

Professor Abdel Rahman Fawzi, in a letter of appreciation to Jack

Really you have proved that the Jews and the Arabs are cousins, and I assure you that 100 wise Jews as yourself can make peace between the two Semitic cousins.