QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU SEE IT

Unspoken Dreams

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"The Silent Ride: Three Children behind a Bike." Photograph from *Samir al-Atfal*, 1922–24.

During the period from 1900 to 1950, the production and deployment of photographic images of the Egyptian child by Egyptian adults played a role in nationalism, a role as yet unstudied by historians of Egypt or of photography. The studio portrait selected here represents the commonly produced genre of

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photographs that showed Egyptian children as technologically capable and possessing Western symbols of progress.[1] This picture of two girls and one boy surrounding an adult man's bike—whose wheels are larger than the smallest child and on whose seat seems to be placed the decorative vase of flowers in the backdrop—suggests that the children are present in the living room not to ride the bike but rather to show off their possession of a modern means of transportation (and perhaps to learn about it from the books resting on the bike's rear rack).

Photographs of children appeared regularly in the children's press, which included magazines such as *Samir al-Atfal*, where this image appeared. Begun in 1870 by the Egyptian intellectual Rifaʿa al-Tahtawy, publications for children aimed to mold a future citizenry that embodied the nationalist goal of both reclaiming traditional Egyptian identity and asserting a modern Western identity. Egyptian children's magazines of the first half of the 20th century were mostly educational and included songs, articles, poems, discussions, interviews, news, and features that sought to teach children reading skills, love of knowledge, correct behavior, and creativity. Unlike the Egyptian schoolbook, produced officially by the government, the children's press fell outside institutional control until it was nationalized in 1962. Most magazines were published monthly for a few years and stopped due to financial constraints, lack of readership, and limited distribution.

To correctly read photographs of Egyptian children from the first half of the 20th century, the viewer must recall that Egypt at this time was redefining itself after four centuries of Ottoman rule and years of British occupation. Through photographic images that portrayed children as both modern and a part of their own social fabric, Egyptians idealized a new identity for their nation—a representation that transgressed the backward portrait painted by Westerners. Photographs of children that glorified an authentic Egyptian identity often included staged fellahin scenes, fathers in ʿ*imāma* (turbans) and galabiya, or antiquities or geographical symbols of the nation. Photographs that sought to emulate European bourgeois class identity pictured children in Western-style clothing and portrait poses, often owning technology (like typewriters, cameras, and "pocket clocks"). Such photographs also placed girls in roles new for the era, as students at desks, for instance, or as owners of bikes.

The production of these photographic images of children carried with it an aspect of class, because the *effendiyya* had ultimate control over the technology and circulation of this sort of cultural production. These photos also emerged in a social hierarchy in which upper-class children had little autonomy: every image of them was staged and manipulated by adults. Although nationalist photography of adults is often studied to expose the desires and wishes of its subjects and its producers, that is, the citizens of the country, nationalist photography that uses children as its subjects leaves their desires and wishes almost invisible.

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NOTE

[1]The children's magazine from which this photograph comes, *Samir al-Atfal,* ran six issues in 1922, each including the poetry of acclaimed Egyptian children's poet Mohammed al-Harawy accompanied by photographs depicting the poems' topics. On the page facing this photograph is a poem by al-Harawy, "Description of the Bike." It talks about the bell, the seat, the way the bike is powered by legs, and so forth. Reprints of the magazine continued to be published throughout the 20th century. Three magazines in the series targeted girls; the others, including the one in which "The Silent Ride" appears, were for boys.

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