

ART ET LIBERTÉ

RUPTURE, WAR AND
SURREALISM IN EGYPT (1938-1948)

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SKIRA

TATE



VAN LEO

(1921–2002)

Van Leo was an Armenian-Egyptian photographer who gained fame for his glamorous and striking portraits of celebrities. Born Levon Alexander Boyadjian in 1921 to an Armenian family that had moved to Cairo in the 1880s, Van Leo showed an interest in photography from an early age. He enrolled at the American University in Cairo in 1940 but halted his studies in order to focus on photography since he was a failing student, and apprenticed himself at Venus studio, which was owned by a fellow Armenian named Artinian. At the time, studio portraiture was a field largely dominated by Armenians. From 1941 onwards, Van Leo produced photographs with his brother, which together they signed Studio Metro, and then Studio Angelo.

Van Leo made surrealist self-portraits in the early 1940s, earning him a place in the *Art and Liberty's* Expositions d'Art Indépendant of 1944 and 1945. He collaborated with *Art and Liberty* member and painter Angelo de Riz to create surrealist photomontages and frequented the latter's home in Dar Al-Labbanah near the Citadel on Sunday mornings to discuss aesthetic concepts. His Surrealist period was brief, however, and in 1947, he opened his own studio in Fouad Street in Downtown Cairo, now called 26th July Street, rebranded himself as Van Leo, and went on to produce works from there for more than 50 years. He is thus better remembered for his glamorous society portraits, capturing the likenesses of Egypt's famous cinema stars and other figures such as Taha Hussein. Van Leo bequeathed his archive to the American University in Cairo prior to his death in 2002.



RAMSES YOUNANE

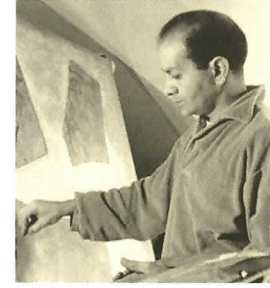
(1913–1966)

Ramses Younane was an Egyptian painter, writer, and translator central to the surrealist movement in Egypt. He was born to a modest family in Minyah and graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1933 and taught art at a number of public schools around the country after having obtained his teaching certificate in 1934.

The following year, Younane joined *Jamaa'at al-di'aya al-fan-niyya* (The Society for the Promotion of Art), a collective established by artist Habib Gorgui calling for the importance of art in education. The collective published Younane's book *Ghayat al-rassaam al-'asri* ("The Aim of the Contemporary Artist") in 1938. In January 1939, Younane joined Georges Henein in the newly established anti-Fascist *Art and Liberty* Group, who had voiced, only a few weeks earlier, in their Manifesto for Degenerate Art their condemnation of the persecution of artists in Europe by the Nazis. The manifesto was published in *Al-Majallah Al-Jadidah* and signed by 37 Egyptian and foreign artists, writers, and intellectuals. Thus began the period of the avant-garde and surrealist series of *Expositions de l'Art Indépendant* organized by the group in the early 1940s, showcasing a range of Surrealist and experimental painting, drawing, sculpture, and photography—highly unusual for the time—by artists mostly shunned by mainstream and state-backed art collectives of the time such as the *Société des amis de l'art*. Throughout this time, Younane exhibited his work regularly and published many articles outlining the ideas behind surrealism and calling for social justice. He also translated Arthur Rimbaud's *Une saison en enfer*, Franz Kafka's *Un médecin de campagne*, and Albert Camus' *Caligula*.

In 1942, Younane became the editor-in-chief of *Al-Majallah Al-Jadida*, a review of Trotskyist leanings and a platform for many *Art and Liberty* members, and remained at its helm until it was banned by the Egyptian government in 1944.

He relocated to Paris in 1947 after a short time spent in prison, upon which *Art and Liberty* disbanded, and worked for the French National Radio and then briefly at the press office of the Egyptian Embassy. He returned to Cairo in 1956 after having been exiled by France for political reasons. In 1960, Younane received a grant from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture that allowed him to devote his full time to painting. His work assumed a predominantly abstract style until his death in 1966.



KAMAL YOUSSEF

(B. 1923. Lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

Kamal Youssef is an Egyptian painter and civil engineer. Born in 1923 to a well-to-do family, Youssef studied engineering at Cairo University, while cultivating a solid artistic practice at the same time. At sixteen, he joined the *Art and Liberty* Group and partook in their Expositions d'Art Indépendant on several occasions. Like his colleague Inji Efflatoun, Youssef was particularly influenced by the writings of *Art and Liberty* member Albert Cosseray and his portrayal of a neglected and underprivileged part of Egyptian society. His paintings often dealt with the struggles of Egyptian peasants, which he was able to witness having spent time in his father's native village of Masjid Al-Khadr.

Later on, Kamal Youssef would also join the Contemporary Art Group, whose main interests lay in a type of surrealism dealing with specifically Egyptian life and native themes of folklore. He also studied under Ratab Seddik, represented Egypt in a number of international biennales, and was given a solo exhibition with the Egyptian Museum of Modern Art.

In the aftermath of the 1952 revolution, Youssef moved to Paris, where he stayed for two years before relocating to the United States, where he has retired and continues to paint. His oeuvre spans six decades, and has been heavily influenced by his love of land, his acute awareness of socio-economic disparities, and his work with computers as a civil engineer.