

## Fresh perspectives on the Egyptian Surrealists of the 1930s and 1940s



The Art and Freedom Group in 1941. Front, from left: Jean Moscatelli, Kamel El Telmissany, Angelo de Riz, Ramses Younan and Fouad Kamel. Back, from left: Albert Cossery, Maurice Fahmy, Georges Henein, unidentified and Raoul Curiel. Courtesy Younan family archives.

In May 2010 the London-based, South African artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin staged what they described as an exhumation in a former industrial space in downtown Cairo's car repair district.

The event, which was held at the Townhouse Gallery, was dedicated to a moment when, in Broomberg & Chanarin's words, Surrealism joined in an odd alliance with Marxism and met the Orient and aimed to rediscover and resurrect the work of a group of painters, poets, journalists, teachers and lawyers from the late 1930s and 1940s who called themselves the Art & Freedom group.

The members of this society, which only produced five brief exhibitions, two published editions of a magazine, *La Part du Sable*, and a series of pamphlets and essays included the Cairene Georges Henein, a European-educated intellectual and son of a diplomat who had met the great French Surrealist Andre Breton in Paris, the teacher Ramses Yunan, Anwar Kāmel and Kamel Telmisany, all of whom were talented writers as well as painters.

As was typical for revolutionary art movements of the time, the group announced its foundation and aims in a manifesto, *Vivre l'Art Degenere* [Long Live Degenerate Art], which was published on 22 December 1938 as a response to the Entartete Kunst [Degenerate Art] exhibition that had been mounted by the Nazis in Munich in July 1937.

"We believe that it is mere idiocy and folly to reduce modern art, as some desire, to a fanaticism for any particular religion, race or nation," the group declared.

"O men of art, men of letters! Let us take up the challenge together! We stand absolutely as one with this degenerate art. In it resides all the hopes of the future. Let us work for its victory over the new Middle Ages that are rising in the heart of Europe."

As part of their show in keeping with the beliefs of the Art & Freedom Group, Broomberg & Chanarin reproduced quotes from the artists as limited edition prints on paper that was said to date from the 1930s, published a third issue of *La Part du Sable*, and even planned to conduct a seance with the deceased founding members of the society that would have included questions written by leading contemporary historians of Surrealism such as Harvard University's Hal Foster and Tate Modern's Simon Baker.

The seance never happened - sorcery is illegal in Egypt - and the attempted resurrection appeared to result in little more than a page on [Broomberg & Chanarin's website](#) and [Egyptian Surrealism](#), a website dedicated to collecting more information about the founders of a seemingly overlooked and largely forgotten episode in art history.

As an international conference that was held last weekend at the Tahrir campus of the American University in Cairo (AUC) proved however, nothing could be further from the truth.

Over three days [The Egyptian Surrealists in Global Perspective](#) attracted an international audience of independent researchers, academics, critics, poets and filmmakers from as far afield as Egypt the USA, UK, France and the UAE, all of whom are working towards a new history and appreciation of the movement.

Hosted by the Visual Cultures program at the American University in Cairo, the conference was the product of a collaboration between the [Sharjah Art Foundation](#) (SAF) and Cornell University's [Institute for Comparative Modernities](#) (ICM). "The university told us it was the biggest attendance that they've ever had for a conference which was really great," explains Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, the president of the Sharjah

Art Foundation and sponsor of the conference.

“We had speakers from different backgrounds from all over the world but there were also lots of researchers from Egypt who were looking at lots of different areas – at literature and film – and that was really important to put that in the context of Egypt today.”

Voted as the 48th most powerful person in the international art firmament by the London-based magazine [ArtReview](#) Sheikha Hoor, 35, not only curated 1980-Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates, this year’s UAE’s pavilion at the Venice Biennale, but has also heads the Sharjah Biennial.

The youngest daughter of Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi, the 76-year-old ruler of Sharjah, Sheikha Hoor moved to London in her late teens where she studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Art before moving on to the Royal Academy Schools and the Royal College of Art where she gained an MA(RCA) in curating contemporary art.

The Egyptian Surrealists in Global Perspective was the second collaboration between the SAF and ICM this year. In April the Foundation sponsored, hosted and organised [Modernity and the Making of Identity in Sudan: Remembering the Sixties and Seventies](#) which followed an earlier collaboration between the SAF and the ICM, the 2012 exhibition Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist which highlighted the work of the UK-based Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi.

All three events are the product of a close working relationship between Sheikha Hoor and the art historian Salah M. Hassan, head of the ICM and Goldwin Smith Professor of African and African Diaspora Art History and Visual Culture at Cornell University.

“Over many years I’ve realised is that there is a lack of information and exhibitions about certain artists and certain periods in art history,” said Sheikha Hoor, who recently delivered a lecture at her alma mater, the University College London’s Slade School of Fine Art entitled Perhaps the Past is Still Largely Undiscovered: Researching Art Histories.

“The [Cairo] conference was an opportunity to bring people together who have done research or are knowledgeable to enrich everyone’s perception of what Egyptian Surrealism was about [because] there are lots of views but there are still very few publications and I also think its important to give people credit, people who have been working without credit for a very long time.”

Alongside presentations by historians such as the University of London's Michael Richardson, who investigated the Surrealist response to ancient Egypt in the light of Andre Breton's enigmatic phrase 'Osiris is a black God', Sharjah Higher Colleges of Technology's Patrick Kane, author of [The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology, and Nation-Building](#), discussed the work of Ramses Younan not just as a response to the glaring inequalities the artist witnessed in rural upper Egypt but also in the context of the aftermath of the worldwide economic depression and its impact on Egypt's society and economy.

Many speakers, such as the Cairo-based artist, art critic and translator Adel Elsiwi, chose to emphasise the ongoing influence of the Egyptian Surrealists on contemporary art by looking at the work of Ammar Abo Bakr, a graffiti artist working in Berlin who used a quote from George Henein, "A revolution without despair nor hope", in a work dedicated to the memory of an activist, Shaimaa Al Sabagh, who was killed in January 2015.

For the Cairo-based archivist and independent researcher Jean Colombain, the continued relevance and resonance of works by artists such as [Ramses Younan](#) stems, in part, from the persistence of the issues that the Egyptian Surrealists were trying to address.

"Their main goals were to promote and value the individual inside a mass society and that is still the situation. If you have a strong personality, it is difficult to be the person that you want to be," Colombain tells me.

"The problems of human dignity, the condition of women, political progress are still questions in Egypt."

Colombain first experienced the work of Henein and Younan thanks to Broomberg & Chanarin's 2010 Townhouse Gallery show and now, as well as editing the Egyptian Surrealism website he is also editing a catalogue raisonne of Ramsis Younan's work that will feature essays by the Cairo-born French journalist, historian and novelist Gerald Messadié, Clare Davies, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the French poet and George Henein scholar Marc Kober.

The book, which will be published in October 2016, will coincide with a major exhibition, Surrealism in Egypt, which is currently being planned and curated for the Centre Pompidou by Art Reoriented's Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath and this will be followed in 2017 by the Sharjah Art Foundation's own exhibition, When Arts Become

Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965) that will open in Sharjah before travelling to Cairo.

Al Qasimi is currently planning a two volume publication on Egyptian Surrealism, the first volume of which will reflect the outcomes of the recent conference and the second volume of which will act as the catalogue for the 2017 show.

"I think the role of the Foundation in doing this is really important because there are a variety of things that we are able to do. We can publish, we are able to bring people together in discussion and we can exhibit works but there's a responsibility that comes with that because there aren't that many places in the region who are able to focus on these things," she says. "We're reprinting some of the old publications and journals and we'd like these to be bi-lingual and to be better distributed because this is a record of art history that is still to be written."

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