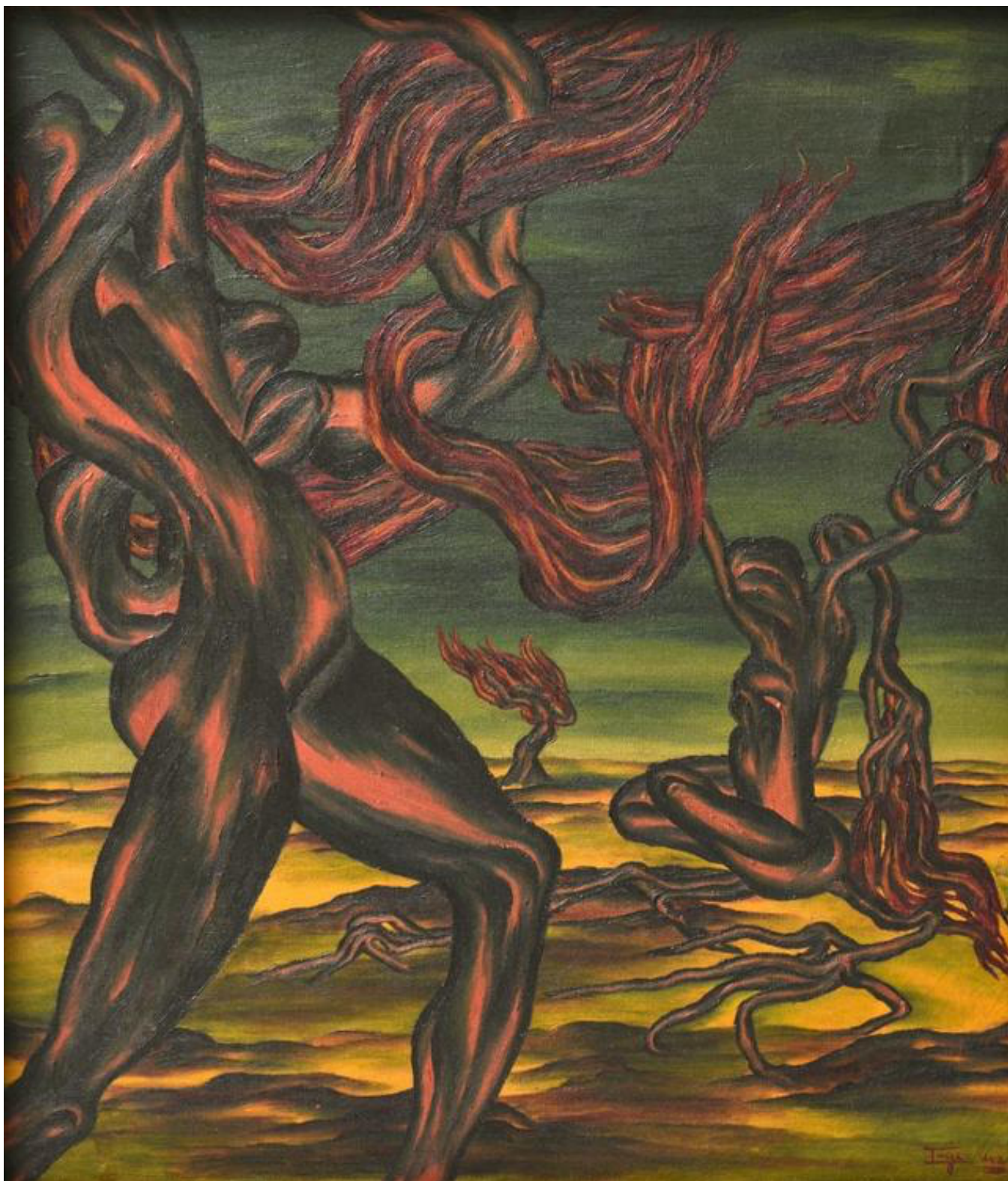


# On Art And Liberty



In order to review [\*Art and Liberty: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt \(1938-1948\)\*](#), a must-see exhibition devoted to what is commonly known as the Egyptian surrealist movement at the [Centre Pompidou](#), we

must move eastwards, to the shores of the Arabian Gulf. It was in the Gulf region, and most specifically in Dubai that I first heard of Georges Henein (1914-1973), a poet of mixed Arab Coptic and Italian Catholic descendant as well as the key figure of the Egyptian Surrealist movement. It was in April 2011, during a conversation with Hassan Sharif (1951-2016), the late Emirati conceptual artist whose importance was revealed to the globalised art milieu in 2009 in Venice by Catherine David now the host of *Art and Liberty* at the Centre Pompidou, that I learned of how the surrealist movement developed around Henein. It was a golden age for art in the Arab world subsequently put to rest by Pan-Arabism, the dominant ideology of Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The greatest and most lasting impact of the Egyptian surrealists' projects was the creation of the collective Art and Liberty. Their rejection of nearly all modern ideologies, from Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism to Arab nationalism, is clearly dealt with by the two guest curators of the exhibition, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, whose curatorial work focuses largely on modern and contemporary Arab art through exhibitions such as *Italia Arabia* (2008-2009) and *Iran Inside Out* (2009) in New York and the travelling exhibition *Tea with Nefertiti* (2012-2014). Showcasing more than 110 paintings, works on paper, and photographs from the late 1920s until the early 1950s, the perspective they have chosen at the Centre Pompidou is well and scientifically informed by Bardaouil's doctoral thesis on the subject. The visitor is able to read captivating documents and view a selection of works that are to a large extent sourced from private collections

Not to be missed is a letter from Henein to another theoretician of the movement, the painter Ramses Younan (1913-1966). Written in Cairo in French, the lingua franca of this group of artists composed of mixed confessional and ethnical backgrounds, it is dated *le 10 Décembre 1953*. Five years after the dislocation of the movement in 1948, and a few months after the fall of the Egyptian cosmopolitan monarchy in June 1953, Henein



expresses here his “nausea” in front of the rising vision of art infused with nationalism under the brushes of former members of his art collective. He mentions Gazzar, one of the leaders of the Contemporary Art Group founded around 1946 to which the exhibition devotes an entire room.



*Rateb Seddik. Untitled. Circa 1940. Oil on wood panel. 120 x 220 cm. Courtesy of Rateb Seddik Museum, Cairo*

Despite Henein’s criticisms, Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar (1925-1966) is the most fascinating painters presented at Centre Pompidou. Alongside Rateb Seddik (1917-1994), one of the artistic revelations of the show, his and Al-Gazzar’s work is more attractive because of what they do with forms and colours than what they think and write with words or achieve through political activism. One of the most poignant works is Al-Gazzar’s *The Green Madman* (1951). Here the viewer is prompted to question the use of the green colour, if it this strange creature is indeed a man or a woman as well as the Pharaonic symbols intertwined with Islamic patterns. The meaning is uncertain and the image goes beyond words.

When Henein went into exile in 1966, Al-Gazzar embraced the ideology of

the new republican and authoritarian nationalist regime. His name means “the butcher” and he was indeed from a much more modest social background than that of Georges Henein, Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989) or Mahmoud Saïd (1897-1964), to name other prominent artists presented in the show. But Ramses Younan too was from outside this “aristocratic” elite. However, Al-Gazzar’s father did not belong to the working class. He had access to higher education and became a teacher at the prestigious Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo.

*Art and Liberty* reveals not only the movement’s specific place within modern Egyptian Art History, but also its direct *rapport* as well as communication with the international Surrealist movement. “The exhibition is not concerned with the grafting of artists or narratives from the so-called periphery into what has been perceived as the canonical centre,” says Bardaouil. “Rather we are interested in revising the notion of centrality all together. The example of Art and Liberty, if anything, proves that centres were never fixed and were always shifting. Cairo was arguably more central to a new vision of surrealism during the second world war period in Paris, for that matter.” Through the works on show the viewer can appreciate a 1930s world that was more connected than we might think.

What one learns stems as much from the mass of documents and texts on the subject as from the artworks themselves. These were accumulated by Fellrath and Bardouil from over 50 lenders from 13 countries, including Sheikh Hassan Al-Thani, Yasser Zaki Hashem; the Institut Francais du Caire; the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Mr. Waleed Abdulkhalek and the Rateb Seddik Museum in Cairo. “The last five years have taken us across more than 20 countries starting from Cairo, where it all began, to places as far flung as Tokyo and Mexico City. To reconstruct the untold or, to be more accurate, the mistold story of Art et Liberté has been a rigorously rewarding journey. 200 filed interviews later, 50 lenders and a total of 300 artworks and artworks is only a curated selection of the

wealth of dispersed material that we have come across.” Here is an exhibition that opens up through art a crucial period in history. Art here tells a tale that many have yet to hear.

*Art and Liberty: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt runs until 9 January 2017. [centrepomidou.fr](http://centrepomidou.fr)*

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