

## George Bahgoury: Painting Egypt from Exile

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### Al-Akhbar Management



*Bahgoury is a painter, sculptor, cartoonist, and novelist. (Al-Akhbar)*

By: [Radwan Adam](#) (/author/radwan-adam)

Published Wednesday, November 30, 2011

**Renowned painter, sculpture, cartoonist, and novelist, George Bahgoury looks back on a life of exile and accomplishment in light of the Egyptian revolution.**

His given name was "Faltas," but it did not sit well with one of Egypt's great modern artists. "It gives me the impression that I am broke (*"mefalles"* which sounds like Faltas in Arabic); it is a very strange name," he says flippantly. That is why he chose another name – George Bahgoury.

Often referred to as Egypt's Picasso, Bahgoury is a painter, sculptor, cartoonist, and novelist.

Though is currently in Egypt he anticipates that he will return to France, where he spent more than 40 years. Despite the changes taking place in Egypt, he is yet to be convinced of moving back to his home country permanently.

"I am not happy with what's happening; I can't be happy when I can hear the cries of the Egyptian people in Tahrir Square. I would have said that these events signal the end of darkness, but actually Egypt is only moving backward. I am worried about the future of Egypt, particularly from the religious extremists and the traditions of the Bedouins...our future lies in self-emancipation, a secular government, and openness to the world."

Bahgoury says he doesn't like drawing the former President Hosni Mubarak, who he describes as having "no presence, no charisma." But he continued drawing him, "as he climbs the People's Assembly podium – all the members are standing, eagerly applauding, while the ousted president disdainfully says: 'Stand up ... sit down!'"

When Bahgoury gets nostalgic about his adolescent days, he remembers the letter his cousin Samaan sent him, congratulating him on his acceptance to the Faculty of Fine Arts, Helwan University, in 1950. Samaan wrote, "don't forget that I told you that you're a talented artist, and I left you to draw in my room the entire day. Faltas, you were 6 years old when you drew a beautiful piece of art. I remember it still today...women, flowers, and birds."

Bahgoury also recalls his brother Gamil quite frequently, who emigrated to the US long ago. He still keeps a copy of a letter Gamil sent him from Pennsylvania in 1970. "I hope that you received the wool coat. I was pleased with your amazing work. The loss of our mother and our limited financial resources, led us to become extremely sensitive and romantic. I urge you to please draw in colorful palettes. There is already enough sadness in the faces of the Egyptian people. Draw flowers, my brother," the letter reads.

Bahgoury loves both France and Egypt equally. He went to France after the June 1967 War, despite having established himself as a cartoonist in Egypt's popular *Sabah Al-Khier* magazine, leaving all he had built in Egypt, including many admirers and friends in the fields of art, literature, politics, and journalism.



In remembering his friends from that time, he recalls one of them, the late cartoonist, Hijazi. "We lost a wonderful and popular painter. He was my colleague at the magazine, along with Salah Jahin, Zuhdi, Salah al-Liethy, among others. And of course, the great artist, Hussein Bikar, was among the people working at the magazine, and he became my mentor."

The general atmosphere at *Rose El Youssef* magazine, where Bahgoury also worked, was not conducive to writing critical pieces against the regime. "I used to love Gamal Abdel Nasser. I resorted to implicit and symbolic messages. However, the smart reader could decipher those symbols."

During the years of Sadat, Bahgoury was in Paris. When Sadat signed the Camp David Accord with Israel, Bahgoury depicted Sadat as marooned on an island after his ship had sunk. He did not return to Egypt until after Sadat's death. In one piece, Sadat is drawn saying "if I go back to Egypt, they will detain me."

His principled positions throughout the Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak eras denied him numerous state awards, despite the fact that he had been recognized internationally on many occasions. His paintings made it to the Louvre in 1990, and his name was added to the hall of famous and celebrated artists.

"I draw the people and the people love me for that. And this is my most treasured award," he says.

He was successful in Paris, "contrary to what people anticipated." He learned simple line drawing and the manipulation of color from the experiences of established artists, like Ingres, Holbein, and Picasso.

After a few years, Bahgoury departed from his obsession with cubism to favor more simple lines, inspired by Pharaonic art. He also studied sculpture under a Romanian instructor who escaped Ceausescu's rule. "He taught me how to sculpt portraits from a tree branch," he says.

Christiane Noblecourt, the French artist who specializes in ancient Egyptian drawings, helped him with his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne, Paris. His doctoral dissertation was on "Egyptian lines in Picasso's paintings," but he did not complete his research because he was captured by France and his love for Pablo Picasso. "The lines in his drawings are graceful; this artist forces you to see the world through his eyes," says Bahgoury.