

CLICK HERE TO DEFINE YOUR GENERATION

GENERATION Arabic WHAT?

SECTIONS

TOPICS 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

العربية

CULTURE / VISUAL ART

The permanent revolution: From Cairo to Paris with the Egyptian surrealists

Two independent exhibitions commemorate an important chapter of Egyptian Modernism.



Mayo, Coups de bâtons, 1937

Less than a month apart, two independent exhibitions recently opened to commemorate an important chapter of Egyptian Modernism and the achievements of a Cairo-based group

AD

YOU MIGHT HAVE MISSED

From prison: Color synesthesia

By
 Fatenn
 Mostafa
 Kanafani

November 11,
 2016

of young rebels calling themselves Art and Liberty.

The first, *When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)*, held at Cairo's Palace of Arts in October and organized by Sharjah Art Foundation, focused on "the evolution of the Egyptian Surrealist group," and documented "modernism in Egypt from the late 1930s to the early 1960s." The second, *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)*, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris until January 9 and conceived by guest curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, founders of curatorial platform Art Reoriented, is "the first comprehensive museum exhibition that charts an all-encompassing presentation of the Group."

The exhibitions, later traveling separately on different international museum tours from Seoul to Liverpool, are the first substantial surveys on the Egyptian surrealists since 1987 and aim to position avant-garde Egyptian art as part of the narrative of global modernity. As they unveil to the international public thrilling connections with notions of Western surrealism, the breadth of the Cairo exhibition and the depth of the Paris exhibition should help change the paradigm of looking at non-Western surrealist contributors as mere splinters or derivatives.

Art and Liberty held their fifth and last collective exhibition of "independent art" in

Unhappiness and
 Mohamed Salah's Egypt

Industrial colonialism:
 Egypt, Germany and the
 maintenance of the
 modern world

'Treachery isn't a
 perspective': Boycotting
 Israel in Lebanon

1945, and a few members attempted a last bid to break through “the unknown”^[1] – though by then dismantled and no longer embracing surrealism – in 1959. They are now reunited on two different continents, once in the city where it began and a second time in the city where surrealism emerged. Both exhibitions also shed light on the Contemporary Art Group, a spectacular Egyptian art movement that deserves further attention.

Let us begin at the beginning...^[2], in Cairo

Stepping into the Palace of Arts at Cairo’s Opera House grounds during *When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists*, a world of possibilities emerged. With more than 150 works providing a six-decade synopsis of modern Egyptian art, the exhibition was defiant proof that it is possible to produce, in one of Egypt’s public institutions and in the shortest possible time, a show of high standards, with well-placed, well-lit and carefully lined up works of art, sourced from multiple public and private collections. It entailed maneuvering complex legislative bureaucracy and gaining the trust of both Egyptian government figures and private collectors. Even more importantly, some of Egypt’s priceless modern paintings, in public storage for decades, were at last salvaged from dust, humidity, poor lighting and handling, restored and displayed in defiance against oblivion and negligence.

Announced at *The Egyptian Surrealists in Global Perspective* conference held at the American University in Cairo between 26 and 28 November 2015, the show was produced in less than a year. Headed by Sharjah Art Foundation director Hoor Al Qasimi as co-curator with Salah Hassan (Goldwin Smith Professor and director of the Institute for Comparative Modernities, Cornell University), Ehab Ellaban (Ofok Gallery, Cairo) and Nagla Samir (AUC, Cairo) under the auspices of two organizing entities – Sharjah Art Foundation and the American University in Cairo – the team succeeded where others have too often failed: For years, other entities – private and public, Egyptian and foreign – had approached the Ministry of Culture and the Fine Arts Sector to collaborate on a variety of shows, but requests fell on deaf ears.



Inji Efflatoun, *Girl and Beast*, 1941

Frequent changes at the helm of both the Ministry of Culture – half a dozen ministers

have been appointed in the past five years – and the Fine Arts Sector – at least three heads have been appointed during the same period – had created a bottleneck in turning exhibition proposals into actual shows. While no details have been publicly provided on what the deal was between Egypt and the UAE, it is clear that it entailed elements that triggered the push button. And as long as outgoing loans adhere to common international museum practice and the ministry has the required systems in place to trace their whereabouts, we should acknowledge the importance of allowing our dormant patrimony to be seen in new contexts by diverse audiences. At least three Cairo-based museums (the Egyptian Museum for Modern Art, the Rateb Seddik Museum and the Injy Efflatoun Museum) and three Alexandria-based museums (the Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Modern Arts and the Mahmoud Saïd Museum) have agreed to loan and allow the works to travel outside of Egypt. The other two institutional loaners are the UAE-based Sharjah Art Foundation and the Barjeel Art Foundation, in addition to private collections in Egypt and the Gulf.

Although the invitation to the show mentioned the collaboration of Egypt's Ministry of Culture – Sector of Fine Arts, it is probably safe to say that their role was limited to loaning and facilitating. The English version of [the sector's website](#) is still not properly functioning and hardly any publicity informed the Egyptian

public of the show. Obsolete policies for granting access were still in place: visitors were asked for their personal identification cards, which the employee had to copy down by hand, women were asked to leave their bags, and the space closed daily from 2 to 5pm and on Fridays, the day when families are off. The immense effort put into *When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists* went largely unnoticed by the public at large — no doubt partly because the show only lasted one month.

When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists provided a wide-ranging chronological survey that extended well beyond the Art and Liberty group and surrealism. That broad scope diluted the presence of the core group, yet succeeded in providing sequential snapshots of the persistent influence the avant-garde movement had on following generations.



Ramses Younan, *La Famille*, 1937

The lack of a published catalogue and unusual limitations set on taking pictures meant that comprehensive information was hard to come by, but it seems that the earliest works in the exhibition were *Nativité* (1925) by Amy Nimr (1902-1962) and *La Famille* (1937) by Ramses Younan (1913-1966) – two pre-surrealist paintings by two key protagonists of Art and Liberty. The most recent work seemed to be *Shapes*, a 1993 painting by Mohamed Ismail (1936-1993), who spent his life roaming the world and adhered to no particular art school. In between, surrealist works by members of Art and Liberty provided a brief commentary on the aesthetic rupture the group provoked during the 1940s, shaking Egypt's nascent

academic art scene. In fact, since the curators prioritized scope over depth, an overview of works by first-generation artists who embraced academicism could have been added to enable a better grasp of the magnitude of that rupture.

Only one painting by Alexandria-born artist Mahmoud Saïd (1897-1964) was part of the show, though his relationship with the Art and Liberty group is most intriguing and worth investigating. The name of the painting as stated on the frame is *Amam al-Dawar* (In Front of the Mud-house), but on the wall it was mistranslated as *Facing Vertigo*. The curators may have chosen a painting Mahmoud Saïd produced in 1938 for two reasons.

First, on December 22, 1938, more than 35 intellectuals headed by Egyptian-born, quadri-lingual, Sorbonne-educated Georges Henein published and distributed a [bi-lingual manifesto in French and Arabic entitled *Vive l'Art Dégénéré!*](#) (Long Live Degenerate Art). Initially meant as a joint global protest against the atrocities of the Nazi regime, the manifesto-turned-birth-certificate of the Art and Liberty group invited young Egyptians to revolt against all given principles and advocated absolute artistic freedom that knows neither nation nor religion. Second, Art and Liberty considered Saïd the greatest of all painters,[\[3\]](#) one who succeeded to some degree in creating a poetic atmosphere through images of hope and longing.[\[4\]](#) They twice invited Saïd to take part in their exhibitions of

“Free Art” (Maarad al Fann el Hor) between 1940 and 1945, and illustrated the cover of the first invitation^[5] with his *La Femme aux Boucles d’or* (1933). Since *La Femme aux Boucles d’or* is hanging in the Centre Pompidou, other choices for the Cairo show could have been *Femme à la Fenêtre* (1940) or *Pêcheurs à Silsileh* (1942), since both were exhibited with Art and Liberty in 1942.

More than a dozen surrealist works by the core protagonists were on display, primarily sourced from Egyptian museums, with the exception of one from a private collection. They included *A la surface du sable* (1939), *La nature adore le vide* (1944-45) and *L’Acrobate* (1959) by Ramses Younan; *Nu* (1941), *Tragic Poem for Georges Henein* (1939) and *Portrait of Albert Cossery* – the latter two referred to as *Untitled* in the show, by Kamel El-Telmisany; ink on paper works including *Rêve accablant* (1939) by Fouad Kamel; *Wagon* (1939) and *Motherhood* (1942) by Ezechiel Baroukh; *The Red Child* by Aristide Papageorge; *Cain and Abel* by Rateb Seddik and *The Girl and The Beast* (1941) by then 17-year-old Injy Eflatoun.

One area was dedicated to photography – a pioneering medium at the time – with works by Armenian-Egyptian Van Leo (1921-2002) during his brief attempt at surrealist portraiture.



A few important artists appeared to be missing or not as visible as they should have been, chief among them Egyptian-born Abu Khalil Lotfy (1920-1993), Hassan El-Telmisani (1923-1987), Kamel's young brother, and instrumental foreign artists exiled in Egypt such as Italian-born anarchist Angelo de Riz and Hungarian-born Eric de Némès. Yet arguably too much weight was given to Mounir Canaan (1919-1999) and Kamal Youssef (1923), who are not commonly known for affiliation with the group, although they partook in one or two of their exhibitions.

The survey proceeds with a breathtaking segment dedicated to the subsequent Third Generation and demonstrates how the Contemporary Art Group appropriated and then progressed from surrealism to create a school of Egyptian folk realism (later joined Ramses Younan and Fouad Kamel in the abstraction movement). The careful selection reinforced the view that early works by Abdel Hady el-Gazzar (1925-1966), Hamed Nada (1924-1990) and Samir Rafi (1926-2004) are

difficult to differentiate, mirroring the influence of their remarkable mentor Hussein Youssef Amin (1904-1984) on his students during their initiation period. Works from private collections, at last accessible to the public, dominated the section of the group's early works. From Naguib Sawiris, known to have the largest collection of works by El-Gazzar, were *Farah Zeleikha* (Zeleikha's Wedding, 1948) and *Popular Chorus* or *Theater of Life* (1951), titled *Al-Goao* (Hunger) in the show — towering examples of El-Gazzar's genius. The show settles that *Popular Chorus* exists in two versions, as it displayed both side by side, with the second version belonging to EMMA. Produced under the British-ruled monarchy, the original version caused El-Gazzar and Hussein Youssef Amin to be briefly imprisoned, as it critiqued inhumane conditions prevailing at the time. With the help of Mohamed Nagy and Mahmoud Saïd, El-Gazzar was released, but the painting was sequestered. According to my recent discussion with Laila Effat, his widow, El-Gazzar then painted the second version as an act of rebellion, though he later succeeded in recovering the original with the help of a janitor working in the police station. With the exception of *Popular Chorus*, Effat confirms that El-Gazzar never reproduced his paintings.



Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, Popular Chorus, 1951

Samir Rafi, historically overlooked and undervalued, was at last given the tribute he deserves. The secluded artist, who led a lonely life and painted the poor without pretense, shines with various paintings from 1943 to 1977. For example, *The Nest* (1946), an emblematic surrealist work, was painted when he was a barely 20-year-old student at Cairo's Fine Arts School. *Life's Tragedy* (1949) and *La Famille* (two 1956 paintings) illustrate his recurring themes, alongside the persistent theme of women with animals, as depicted in a 1975 work where a nude woman stands beside a cow, her head resting on its back.

The rest of the exhibition displayed artists from various generations and schools, in an effort to highlight continuous links to the Art and Liberty group. Mohamed Riad Saied (1937-2008), born the year Henein formally introduced Surrealism in Egypt, was instantly recognizable as being one of their offspring – albeit with further influence by Salvador Dali

and Giorgio de Chirico, as seen in *Dreams at Al Aqsa Mosque* (1973). Another two examples were Salah Taher (1911-2007), whose *Metaphysics* (1977) was shown, and Abdel Hady al-Wechahi (1936-2013), with various polyester sculptures.



Mohamed Riad Saied, *Dreams at Al-Aqsa Mosque* (1973)

The archive of original or photocopied literary contributions, newspaper reviews and periodicals, photographs and exhibition catalogues, displayed in the upper floor, was a fascinating representation of how far beyond visual arts Art and Liberty sought to interfere in the state of affairs in Egypt.



Salah Taher, Metaphysics, 1977

Though beneficial, the immense timeline, displayed on Plexiglas across several walls, seemed to have been produced in a hasty way, as it contained several errors. For example, the establishment of the Art and Liberty group is generally accepted as having happened in January 1939, not 1937, as stated in the Arabic lines. On February 4, 1937, however, Henein presented *Bilan du mouvement surréaliste*^[6] (Appraisal of the Surrealist Movement) during a heated conference of Les Essayistes, an avant-garde collective of thinkers and

intellectuals, at 10 Magrabi Street in Cairo. The young Henein presented the roots of the Surrealist movement (through Rimbaud, Lautréamont and the Dadaists) and the link between Freudian theory and the unconscious through examples of paintings by Angelo de Riz, exhibited then in Cairo.^[7] The talk, broadcast over Egyptian Radio, became known as the inaugural moment of Surrealism in Egypt. To further consolidate his efforts and formalize his thoughts, Henein and friends Edmond Jabès (1912-1991), Émile Simon, de Riz, Younan and the Kamel brothers (Fouad and Anwar) set up *Art et Liberté* (Gamaat al-Fann wal Hurriya) on January 9, 1939.

A second error found in the timeline was the date when Al-Tatawwur ceased to exist. The seven-issue periodical launched by Art and Liberty survived from January to September 1940, when it was censored — not 1944.

Told/Untold/Retold^[8] – the stories of the Egyptian Surrealists

Five thousand kilometers west at the Centre Pompidou, *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)* begins with two blown-up black-and-white photographs that symbolize the national rupture. On the right, King Fouad is seen during the grandiose inauguration of the Salon du Caire organized by la Société des amis de l'art in 1927, and on the left is the iconic photograph of the most influential and non-conformist members of the

Art and Liberty Group in 1941. The right side shows “the elder” (Les Aînés[9]) of the aristocracy and the art establishment, while the left stands for “the restless youth” (Les Inquiets). Facing the viewer, a video of King Farouk on his way to the opening of the 1938 Exposition française and the unveiling of Mahmoud Mokhtar’s Saad Zaghloul sculpture in Alexandria plays continuously while the impressive Arabic of Anwar Kamel, a fervent communist and a founder of Art and Liberty, greets you through a recorded interview.

The resulting mood captures Egypt during World War II, a time when the kingdom, under persistent British control, contained extremes of social and economic inequality and the aristocracy remained indifferent to the miserable conditions of most Egyptians.

With a rigid selection of 125 artworks and 150 rare archival documents, this survey creates a sequence of revelations that bring to life modern-minded left-wing Egyptian and foreign artist-activists who joined the call to defend absolute freethinking in concert with radical political action. Although the exhibition could be seen as undermining the importance of the group’s core members as it puts them on a par with less influential participants, it is a solid and fascinating portrayal of the essence of the Egyptian Surrealist group: not merely an instigator of a local aesthetic revolution but a transnational, radical and libertarian thought-movement in tune with Paris,[10] New York,

London and Mexico.[11]

Instead of pure chronology, the curators present works produced between 1928 and 1952 as a series of juxtapositions and conversations among 35 transmigrating artists who defined or were engaged with the movement. The extensive reach, the culturally superior caliber and the vanguard shock-wave instigated by the multi-disciplinary *enfants terribles*: Henein and his longtime allies Younan, Kamel El-Telmisany, Fouad Kamel and painter and illustrator Eric de Némès stirred paradoxical pride and loss. To them, Surrealism was a mindset, ideology and milestone that not only “dealt a death blow to academism”[12] but also fought authoritarianism, social injustice and growing conservative thinking. By fighting the “superficial and insincere” artistic establishment, Surrealism mandated the dismissal of neo-classical image making at a time when Egyptian fine arts were still in a nascent phase.

To these 20th-century youth of Tahrir, art could no longer exist merely as “for art’s sake” to “decorate walls and palaces,” be at the command of the religious institution or the academy, or confine itself to an era or geographical space. It should be used as a universal weapon of resistance to salvage “a society that is at this moment sick and failing.”[13] The spirit of provocation becomes visible through the Pompidou’s maze-like space as the defining experiment that ruptured

established perceptions and was literally foreign to most Egyptians – most but certainly not all. The concentration of so much outstanding, progressive, revolutionary and disturbing art, produced by men and women, Muslims, Jews, Christians and atheists, Egyptians and foreigners, from diverse social backgrounds, condensed all in one place, immortalize a lost Egypt and longed-for humanity.



Assembled over a five-year period since 2012 from across continents, the artworks form a narrative that shows how, under the intellectual patronage of Henein, the “usual suspects,” each with their individual story, became guardians of a cohesive group set on liberating the Egyptian youth and women.

A staunch advocate of women’s rights to “freedom and life” and one of the most far-sighted figures of that time, Ramses Younan did not hesitate to accuse society, the rich in particular, of turning a blind eye on the reasons behind prostitution and the importance of sexual education in Egypt. He wrote that

prostitution could only be eradicated if poverty was eliminated,[14] and painted a series of works depicting women in agony. Two untitled paintings (dated 1939 and 1943), on loan from Arab institutions, and *Contre le Mur* (Against the Wall, 1944), on loan from the Younan Estate, display distorted female figures, limbless or headless, in vast void spaces – a provocative metaphor for women’s seeping, hidden wounds.

From private collections, two nudes by Kamel El-Telmisany, who used his plastic and later cinematographic art at the service of the society, and Fouad Kamel contribute to a sense of bodily estrangement. In Telmisany’s case, the woman is ready to harm herself out of despair and to escape social oppression and patriarchy. The display of pain stands in stark contrast with the adjacent *La Fille aux boucles d’or* (1933), an androgynous surreal masterpiece by Mahmoud Saïd exhibited during the first exhibition of Art and Liberty in 1940 and a stepping stone in modern Egyptian art. Other artists, in their late teens or early 20s, followed Younan’s call for women’s liberation. Injy Efflatoun (1924-1989), a student of Telmisany, painted *Girl and Monster* (1941 and 1942) between the ages of 17 and 18. Hassan El-Telmisani (1923-1987), Kamel’s younger brother, produced a unique double-sided painting when he was about 18 – a work unearthed from the Telmisany estate in a Cairo suburb. Samir Rafi (1926-2004) was only 19

when he painted *Nudes* (1945), one of the largest works on display, with an overwhelming spirit of revolt. Cairo-born, London-educated Amy Nimr (1907-1974) produced *Girl with Fishnet* in 1928 when she was 21.



Hassan El-Telmisani, Untitled (recto-verso), ca. 1940

Samir Rafi and Rateb Seddik (1917-1994) will be revelations for those not so acquainted with Art and Liberty and modern Egyptian art in general. They too spoke of the disenfranchised and the prevailing oppression. Whereas Seddik renders a monochrome picture of apocalyptic genre scenes, Rafi's works are colorful symbols of misery and magic.



Rateb Seddik, Liliane Brook et son orchestre aveugle, ca. 1940

The conversation proceeds with other

surrealists, including unfamiliar names, either forgotten or lost, who were momentarily linked with Art and Liberty or just came through Cairo at a certain moment of their lives. Located through the curators' mammoth efforts, these painters or photographers form untold stories of surrealism in Egypt.

For example, Eric de Némès, at times described as Hungarian and other times as Romanian, settled in Cairo 1940 and became a fervent advocate of the group. A series of 14 illustrations for his unpublished book *The Lovely and the Dead* are on display. Antoine Malliarakis (1905-1990), known as Mayo, was born in Port Said to Greco-French parents and studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the mid 1920s. Three paintings produced in 1937 show that Mayo embraced Surrealism well before Art and Liberty was founded. The large-scale *Coups de Bâton* (Blows with a Stick) is a possible reference to the English expression "the carrot or the stick." The erotic *Dessin Cruel* and *Portrait* are two of the most compelling works in the show. Laurent Marcel Salinas (1913-2010), born in Alexandria to Franco-Italian parents, was a signatory of the Art and Liberty *Manifesto for Degenerate Art* in 1938 and exhibited surrealist paintings with the group, such as *Naissance* (1944), now on show in Paris.



Samir Rafi, Nu, 1945

Artists came to Egypt for various reasons. It had a magnetic exile value in terms of international profile and cross-cultural internationalism. Italian-born de Riz, a refugee who escaped the war and growing Fascism in Italy, was instrumental in the foundation of Art and Liberty and highly regarded as an artist by Henein. A forerunner of Surrealism in Egypt, de Riz co-organized Henein's inaugural conference in 1937 and was one of the first signatories of the 1938 manifesto. Rare works on cardboard from a private collection are on display. British Surrealist painter, historian and poet Roland Penrose (1900-1984), on a visit to his lover American photographer Lee Miller, who was residing in Cairo at the time, headed the first general assembly of Art and Liberty on

March 8, 1939. Several examples of his work are exhibited, including *Lee as Nut* (1938) and *Egypt* (1939). Robert Medley (1905-1994), an active member of the British surrealist scene and a former teacher of Seddik at London's Chelsea School of Art, was sent to Cairo as a war artist. *Cairo at Night* (1946) is an exhibited example of his work during this time. The Armenian family of Russian-born Ida Kar (1908-1974) moved to Alexandria for its economic opportunities. She was introduced to surrealist photography while studying in France, and once back in Cairo she founded photography studio Idabel and partook in three of the five collective exhibitions of Free Art.

An entire section is in fact dedicated to surrealist photography, including self-portraits by Van Leo, a photomontage of ancient Egyptian monuments by Étienne Sved (1914-1996), another European who found refuge in Egypt, and desert landscapes by Miller, who had relocated to Cairo following her marriage to an Egyptian businessman in 1934.



Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, *Mahassib al-Sayyida*, 1950

The survey touches on the substantial influence the Surrealists had on the following generation of Egyptian artists – namely the young members of a newly formed Contemporary Art Group. In tune with Art and Liberty in the fight for social justice and against academicism, this predominantly male group, mentored by pioneering art educator Hussein Youssef Amin and consisting of El-Gazzar (1925-1966), Hamed Nada (1924-1990), Samir Rafi, Maher Ra'ef (1926-1999) and Ibrahim Massouda (1925-unknown), felt the need to develop a more Egyptian art based not on Pharaonic imagery but on popular culture, folklore and the metaphysical. Perhaps one of the most violent takes on social agony is El-Gazzar's *Mahassib el Sayyida* (1950), on loan from a private Egyptian collection. A year later, El-Gazzar painted one of the most important works of 20th-century Egyptian art – *The Green Man*, commonly known as the *Green Fool*. This enigmatic painting is on public display for the first time since its private acquisition in the early 2000s.

Two vibrant works by Maher Raaef, an artist passionate about research and studying, reveal an unsung hero. *The Fisherwoman and the Net* and *Untitled* (Tahtib Dance), both produced in 1948, use Surrealism to depict daily life rich in colors and symbols.

Then comes the written archive – both the published and the censored, often bi-lingual,

with French the lingua franca (as first language at the palace). The culturally unexpected and unaccepted ideas it contains quickly placed Art and Liberty as a threat to national security in the eyes of the monarchy and the British imperialist authority. An important sense of confrontation emerges in these 125 archival documents. A reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) illustrates the group's militant *Manifesto of Degenerate Art*; anti-Fascist headlines make up the covers of *Al-Majilla al-Jadida* (The New Review); bleak drawings by Younan, Kamel El-Telmisany and Fouad Kamel accompany the pages of Albert Cossery's controversial books *The Men God Forgot* and *Le Coiffeur a tué sa femme* (The Barber has Killed his Wife), both published in 1941; a drawing by Eric de Némès of a headless male torso emerging from the ruins of a ghost city appears on the cover of *La Séance Continue* (1945).



The radical short-lived Arabic monthly *Al-Tatawwur* (The Evolution), edited by Anwar Kamel, and leftist cultural weekly *Don Quichotte* addressed imperialism, women's rights, education and sexual freedom. Beside the group's extravagant exhibitions and art, its key protagonists translated Rimbaud, Camus and Kafka into Arabic and restlessly worked on spreading the emancipatory message of Surrealism by any means possible. These documents are displayed together for the first time as a chronology of a promising past. Dispersed and visibly fragile, they retell the story of a movement that was disseminated as

much through art as through publications. Through both, simple story of what could have been is beautifully retold in *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt*, whose accompanying catalogue is published in English and French, and will soon be released in Arabic.

Please open: risk of life[\[15\]](#)

Although its initial aim was to unite and mobilize the masses, Art and Liberty antagonized when it called for art to become a means of political and social resistance. Striving to liberate Egypt from anti-modern obscurantism, they lambasted everything and everybody representing established values. Long after its demise, the group's literary, artistic and social achievements continues to provoke controversy – the least of which is the authenticity of a few of the exhibited paintings. The very fact that the organizers of the Cairo and the Paris exhibitions did not manage or want to join forces is an ironic reflection on the divisive legacy of a group that advocated for the liberation of artists from the confines of geographical boundaries and political propaganda. That division, together with the fact that the works produced during that infamous decade are sparse and widespread across the world, resulted in a competition to tap into the limited sources available.

But we need to recognize both endeavors as complementary approaches that are helping

provide a comprehensive picture of the Egyptian surrealist movement. Each stands, in its own way, as an overdue homage to some of Egypt's best thought leaders and confers institutional validation on the artworks and artists selected.

More importantly perhaps, there is a far more significant message for us, Egyptians and Arabs. While both surveys investigate the past – one excelling in breadth, the other in depth – they call for an urgent pause and force us to ponder on what possibly could have gone wrong in Egypt and with Egypt in a span of six decades. At a time when we mourn the death of over 200 young Egyptians who perished on their way to Europe on an unsafe boat that symbolized a chance at a better life, we may refer to one of the lesser-known artists in the Paris exhibition, Salim al-Habschi, with his painting *Naufrages* (1948), or to Henein with his book *Prestige of Terror* (1945). Both exhibitions remind of what Egypt was and needs to be again – a safe haven where the revolution is indeed permanent.

[1] *Vers l'Inconnu* (Towards the Unknown) and *Encore l'Inconnu* (The Unknown Again) were the titles of the last collective exhibitions, in 1958 and 1959, under the leadership of Georges Henein, Ramses Younan and Fouad Kamel. By then, Kamel El-Telmisany had moved on to cinema.

[2] Georges Henein, *Al-Maarad al-Awel lel Fann*

al-Horr (The First Exhibition of Free Art) catalogue, Cairo, 1940.

[3] Kamel El-Telmissany, *Hawla al-Fann al-Manhut* (Towards Degenerate Art), Al-Risala, August 28, 1939.

[4] Kamel El-Telmisany: *Nahw Fann Horr* (Towards Free Art), Al-Tatawwur, first issue, January 1940, p. 34.

[5] Première exposition de l'Art Indépendant (First Exhibition of Independent Art), 8-24 February 1940 at the Nile Club, Suleiman Pasha Square.

[6] Georges Henein, *Bilan du mouvement surréaliste*, Revue des conférences françaises en Orient, No. 8, October 1937.

[7] Marc Kober, *The magic powers of Ancient Egypt: Georges Henein, André Breton, and Horus Schenouda*. *Dada/Surrealism* 19, 2013, p. 1, citing Henein's *Bilan du mouvement surréaliste*.

[8] A pun on the title of a show curated by Bardaouil and Felrath for the inauguration of Mathaf Museum in Doha, Qatar in December 2010.

[9] Reference to Aimé Azar book *Les Aînés*.

[10] Kamel El-Telmisany in Al-Risala, 28 August 1939 as quoted by Jean Jacques Luthi, *Introduction à la littérature d'expression française en Égypte* (1798-1945) Paris,

November 1980, p. 30.

[11] Catalogue de la II^o Exposition de l'Art Indépendant, Le Caire, du 10 au 25 mars 1941. Ramsès Younan archives.

[12] Louis Awad, *Kan Ragel Shoogae* (He was a Fearless Pioneer), Al-Ahram, December 30, 1966.

[13] Anwar Kamel, Al-Tatawwur magazine, first issue, January 1940.

[14] Ramses Younan, Al-Tatawwur, second issue, February 1940.

[15] Georges Henein, *Bilan du mouvement surréaliste*, conférence at the Essayistes, Cairo, February 4, 1937.

Fatenn Mostafa Kanafani loaned some artworks to the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. All images from Centre Pompidou courtesy Sam Bardaouil.

Fatenn Mostafa Kanafani

[5 articles on Mada](#)

TOPICS

[Albert Cossery](#)

[American University in Cairo](#)

[Barjeel Art Foundation](#)

[exhibition reviews](#)

Palace of the Arts Sharjah Art Foundation visual art

RELATED

VISUAL ART

Whose surrealism? On When Art Becomes Liberty

Ismail Fayed | There is no liberty in revolutionary art existing according to the whims of the art market and a security

21 November 2016



ALIA MOSSALLAM

The ambivalent hybridity of pre-independence Arab societies

Ismail Fayed | On wrestling ambivalently with the collaborations between Egyptian and European modernists that have

23 January 2016



ABDEL HADI AL-GAZZAR

Avant-garde art between Egypt and the Soviet Union: Visual comparisons

Sarah Fayed | On the Soviet avant-garde that attempted to put forward new ideas through art before and during Stalin's

15 October 2015



ABDEL HADI AL-GAZZAR

Buyer beware, part 1: The rise of art fraud in Egypt

Fatenn Mostafa Kanafani | The legal case recently launched by the family of late Egyptian modernist artist Abdel Hadi al-

25 May 2015



