

Youssef Kamel's art vanishes in Egypt's security vacuum

Rowan El Shimi, Monday 17 Sep 2012

Artist's family finds home after 40-year absence ransacked and occupied by thugs who have dug up foundations looking for artefacts, ignoring value of paintings belonging to Egypt's father of impressionism



Piles of rubble with priceless works of art scattered around, a two-storey house empty of its antique furniture and thugs with guns and knives is all late artist Youssef Kamel's family found in his home in Matariya, northern Cairo.

On 20 July (coincidentally, the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan) Kamel's family set out in the early hours to visit his home in the countryside-turned-slum area of Matariya. They hadn't been there for forty years, and when they arrived they were greeted by Ismail, whom they had hired to guard the home. Only he claimed, backed by a mob of armed men that threatened the family, that this was his house.

"After arguments, and giving the thugs money, they escorted us into the house. Among the things we saw in the two storey house was that the ground to the bottom floor was dug up and under all this rubble we found 20-30 of my grandfather's paintings that were just strewn about," Dr Youssef Kamel Mostafa, an economist, who was named after his grandfather, told Ahram Online.

"It was obvious that they were not aware of the value of these paintings and that they were probably just searching for gold or artefacts," he added.

Mostafa believes that these thugs convinced the guard over the past two years, given the security

vacuum Egypt has experienced since the revolution, that they would find artefacts under the foundation. The family also found out the thugs had planned to tear down the home completely and illegally build two towers.

"They even sold all the furniture. A neighbour said he saw donkeys pulling carts carrying the furniture and paintings away," Mostafa sighed dismayed at the thought of the national heritage of his grandfather ...gone.

And a major contributor to Egypt's heritage he was! He was dubbed the father of impressionism.

Youssef Kamel was among the first class to graduate from Egypt's first Fine Arts School, established in 1908 by Prince Youssef Kamal. His colleagues were the father of Egyptian modern sculpture Mahmoud Mokhtar and Egyptian modern art icons Ahmed Sabry, Mohamed Hassan and Ragheb Ayad.

"Youssef Kamel was to art what Taha Hussein was to literature," his grandson stated.

Kamel and Ayad, upon finishing their education, became teachers themselves, due to a lack of other option for artists at the time. They both wanted to pursue their studies further in Rome so they agreed on a system where one would go to Rome to study, and the other would take over his work and send him his salary each month, then the year after they would switch.

This was so successful that parliament decided to allocate a budget to send art students abroad and they sponsored Kamel, Ayad and Hassan to travel to Rome and Sabry to Paris.

Upon his return to Egypt he held posts as a professor in the Fine Arts School and the director of the Museum of Modern Art.

Kamel was also a nationalist, part of the group of artists and thinkers advocating the 1919 revolution and was one of the people who established the National Bank of Egypt. He was very proud of everything that is Egyptian made and would only wear locally-made clothes.

To give a further sense of his personality, Kamel painted in silence. Although he had various exhibitions and sold pieces during his lifetime, he was never keen on selling his art. Besides his studio space in the Citadel where he painted Egyptian typical markets, he would spend time in his countryside home in Matariya, where all his works ended up locked away for decades.

Mostafa accepts his and his family's blame for abandoning the house with this entire heritage for forty years but justifies it by saying that the family had agreed they would only go to the house all together, which never happened since many of them lived abroad at different intervals.

"We thought maybe the Ministry of Culture would make a museum for his work or a showroom in the Modern Museum of Art and the family would sell the rest to private collectors. So we all agreed that we had to all be around," Mostafa explained.

"Unfortunately, we were only aware too late that we should have taken care of this earlier."

Around 2,000 paintings had been in that house, Mostafa estimates.

Kamel spent much of his time there during his long life. At the time, Matariya was not the urban area it

is today, it was a Cairo suburb; part of the countryside. Kamel was fascinated by the Egyptian countryside and spent time with the farmers observing, painting and getting to know them.

The family filed numerous complaints with local police and filed a case with the Prosecutor General, but with little luck in their favour.

"We are talking to the media as one method to pressure the security forces to act on this. Unfortunately, they have piles of cases due to the lack of security," Mostafa explained.

Kamel's family has also approached the Ministry of Culture. "Last week I met Dr Salah El-Meleigy, the head of the Fine Arts section in the Ministry of Culture and he assured me that they would make an announcement to art collectors, dealers and media that there was a robbery and people should cooperate - but so far nothing has happened."

"We are looking for the paintings and now we have 17 paintings that we know were stolen, and we ask people's help to find them," Mostafa said. "So far the police have not interrogated the house's guard Ismail, which is the most effective way to find out who he sold these paintings to, so we have nothing to go on," he added.

The family hopes that once they manage to retrieve these paintings to have a permanent exhibition, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, and to publish a book on Youssef Kamel, his life and his art.

"As a nation, as a government and as a family, we did not play our role to celebrate and commemorate this man and his art, so it is about time we remind people and educate the new generations of who Youssef Kamel is," Mostafa said full of hope to retrieve his grandfather's lost art.

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