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## Hassan Soliman: the outsider

**Mona Anis** mourns the death of Hassan Soliman, an independent Egyptian painter who boycotted the cultural establishment for the last 30 years of his life



This summer has been one of the cruellest in recent decades, claiming three masters of Arab art in fewer than three weeks: Youssef Chahine at the end of July, Mahmoud Darwish on 9 August and then Hassan Soliman one week later. Much has been written, and will continue to be written, about both Chahine and Darwish, but true to Soliman's reclusive character over the past three decades, very little has appeared in the Arabic press on this master painter and nothing has appeared in English.

Born in 1928, Soliman graduated from Cairo's School of Fine Arts in 1951. However, even before his graduation, Soliman's skill as a draughtsman had drawn the attention of art critics and dealers, to the extent that one dealer offered him generous patronage in return for exclusive rights over what he produced.

In the Cairo art circles of the late 1940s and 50s there was a rumour that this patron dealt in fakes, and that Soliman had been asked to imitate the works of minor French impressionists on his behalf. When I asked Soliman about this ten years ago, he said he had only produced one fake Pissarro, though he also told me and colleague Fayza Hassan, who was interviewing him for the *Weekly* in 1998, that he had been barely 20 years old when a rich Jewish businessman in Cairo provided him with a generous stipend, an atelier in Qasr El-Nil St., and an Italian housekeeper in return for his services.



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**Hassan Soliman**

Indeed, as Fayza Hassan wrote in her 1998 interview, "It is perhaps one of Soliman's minor eccentricities to insist upon his debt to Cairo's foreign communities, the Jews in particular, who, according to him, guided his first steps towards eminence. Without their attentive patronage, says Soliman, he would never have become a known painter overnight when he was barely in his twenties."

Yet, this period was a short one when compared to the length of Soliman's career. This spanned almost 60 years, and beside painting unceasingly Soliman also wrote profusely on art and literature, founded and worked as a graphic designer on many avant-garde publications, taught at the Open University and the Cinema Institute, and contributed to Egypt's cultural life in the 60s and 70s through his polemics on the role of art and the artist in society.

Upon graduating from the School of Fine Arts, Soliman moved to Luxor in 1952-53, where he worked as painter in residence at the Luxor Atelier, a year which left an indelible mark on the composition of his work. In a recent obituary of Soliman, Mustafa El-Razaz, former Dean of the School of Fine Arts, commented that "rarely did Hassan Soliman draw a [specifically] Egyptian scene, but his work was very much Egyptian in its equanimity, like the ancient Egyptian reliefs carved on the walls of temples."

In the early 1960s Soliman went to Italy to study at the *Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera* in Milan. Before returning to Egypt, he toured Europe, visiting museums and art galleries, something he did annually for the rest of his life until ailing health prevented him from travelling.

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While in Paris during his first visit to Europe, Soliman received an offer to stay, and for a while he seriously contemplated the idea, before eventually deciding against it. A friend from Cairo, the francophone Egyptian novelist Albert Cossery, had taken up residence in Paris a few years earlier, and something about what Soliman perceived as Cossery's existential loneliness in the French capital made him go home.

Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s Soliman was instrumental in almost every innovation introduced into the visual arts in Egypt. He joined Yehia Haqqi in producing the monthly cultural review *al-Majalah*, where he worked as layout editor and art critic, and he was graphic designer for numerous other avant-garde publications of the time, including *al-Katib* and *Gallery 68*.

During the same period Soliman also painted some of his most memorable works, including *Work in the Field*, *The Seamstress* and *Geese* (reproductions of which can be seen on this page). However, by the mid-1970s, with the face of the country swiftly changing under the rule of Sadat, many of the cultural institutions that Soliman had immersed himself in so passionately were closing down, seen by the establishment as being run by potentially subversive leftists.

I first met Soliman in the early 1970s, when he was to be found in every cultural gathering of the time. When I left Egypt in 1975 he was still a fixture of intellectual life, but upon my return five years later he had disappeared from the scene, and I was told that one needed an appointment to see him. Whether or not he would decide to receive visitors depended on his mood.

It was only many years later that I saw Soliman by chance outside his apartment in Abdel-Khaliq Sarwat Street. He was friendly enough to invite me in for a cup of tea in order to meet his young daughter Laila and his wife Dorriya. A different Hassan had emerged, and he was adamant that he now wanted to have nothing to do with the corrupt cultural and art establishment. He spoke of what he called the "treason" of the intellectuals and even of the "disloyalty" of his former students.

Over the past 20 years, I was fortunate enough to enjoy the warmth of Soliman's friendship and the privilege of being allowed to drop in at his atelier without appointment. An easel surrounded by paints and brushes stood in one corner, and there were overflowing bookshelves and antique items from his rare collection displayed around every corner. A vast and superbly carved Mamluke bed covered with Persian rugs was also crammed into the small space, all combining to give the atelier the atmosphere of an Ali Baba's cave.

Soliman's ailing health over the past two years prevented him from going to his atelier as much as he would have liked, and I often found myself passing in front of the building and thinking that he would soon be back in that magical shelter he had created for himself away from the banalities of everyday life. Alas, he died on 15 August 2008, having left instructions that he wanted neither a funeral nor traditional mourning practices, and definitely no official tributes.

Though he is now gone, Hassan Soliman will continue to live through his work, as he will through the work of his gifted daughter, artist Laila Soliman, who has now inherited the task of making the great legacy of her father available to wider audiences.

Hassan Soliman at his atelier while being interviewed by the *Weekly* in 1991 (above); and Soliman on his 70th birthday in 1998 (top left)


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