

# Egyptian Modern Art

## The Quest for National Identity

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Egyptians, burdened with centuries of foreign occupation, were united in their aspiration for a modern nation. Thus modern art was an essential visual expression of their national identity and freedom from foreign oppression. It was a manifestation of the contemporaneous intellectual discourse led by secular liberals, among them writers, poets, and artists, male and female. The acceptance of figuration and the introduction of art education in schools were sanctioned by religious scholars. This tolerant attitude toward figurative art was also the outcome of new developments in publishing and photography, as well as the revolutionary establishment of a local film industry. Egypt led the Arab world in these fields, although it took a full century before photography was officially recognized as an art form ().

The first generation of modern Egyptian artists was driven by a renewed appreciation of their national patrimony and the return to ancient pharaonic art detached from any African, Arab, or religious cultural references. In architecture and sculpture, the Neo-Pharaonic style, based on a revival of Egyptian classical art, used modern techniques and influences; in painting, it was apparent in the symbolic references derived from

[ancient Egypt or rural life](#)

. The first graduates of the School of Fine Arts initiated a long tradition of art education that influenced not only Egyptian artists but also other Arab artists (

Mahmud Mukhtar, *Egypt Awakening*  
; ).

The Neo-Pharaonic phase was soon supplanted by new trends that challenged popular figurative traditions and promoted innovations in style

and technique. Artists experimented with new forms of art such as

[Surrealism](#)

,

[Cubism](#)

, Dadaism, and

[abstraction](#)

. They published the first art journals and established the foundations of art criticism and pedagogy. In 1939, members of this generation founded the Art and Freedom group, which identified with the European antifascist resistance and rallied for freedom of expression. They opposed the prevalent view that European art threatened national identity, and called for a modern Egyptian art that melded global concerns and local heritage, encouraging individual rather than traditional collective expression ().

The controversy over regionalism versus internationalism was resolved under the leadership of the preeminent art teacher Husayn Yusuf Amin, who proclaimed that art, unfettered by the politics of culture, could shape national identity. In the mid-1940s, Amin's students formed several groups known collectively as the "Rejectionists." They challenged previous romanticized imagery and Western academic styles by exploring the daily realities of poverty and oppression. Artists of the Contemporary Art Group, founded in 1946, were dedicated to the quest for the Egyptian *soul*. Inspired by folk symbolism, popular traditions, and notions of the collective unconscious, their work is steeped in social realism (

'Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar, *The Strangers*

). The Contemporary Art Group promoted modernization, social reform, and collective freedom through art (Gazbia Sirry, *The Kite*,

[2009.166](#)

). This freedom was fully assumed by artists who, by the late fifties, were involved in the exploration of

[Abstract Expressionism](#)

in painting, collage, assemblage, and various experimentations in metal

sculpture (Munir Canaan, *N° 13 et une Flèche* ; Salah 'Abd al-Karim, *The Horse* ).

## Designing Tradition

At the other extreme stood the Art and Life Group, whose followers strived for the preservation of

[arts and crafts traditions](#)

and urged artists to explore and advance the crafts in new and innovative ways (

Hassan Fathi, *New Gournia Project in Upper Egypt*

). After the 1952 revolution, artists lost substantial government stipends, as well as elite patronage; artists' groups were disbanded along with all political parties. In the second half of the century, there was a conspicuous absence of venues for the open public debate that had characterized the pre-revolutionary period. In the wake of the Arabs' crushing defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, artists searched for an aesthetic language drawn from

[Islamic traditions](#)

. They used

[calligraphy](#)

and

[geometric design](#)

to convey spiritual and political messages in decorative or abstract styles, a trend that is known in Arab and some Islamic countries as the

[Calligraphic School of Art](#)

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## Youth Generation

Artists working outside the mainstream, exploring controversial subjects or using unconventional techniques, found themselves isolated, and

many emigrated to the West, returning to Egypt almost annually to participate in exhibitions. These artists continue to have a significant impact on local trends (

Fathi Hassan, *Santa Moderna*

; ). In an effort to revitalize the visual arts, long burdened by government bureaucracy, the Youth Salon was established in the late 1980s to support emerging artists whose work in installation, video, and photography could not survive without institutional support. Three artists from this generation won Egypt's first Venice Biennale award in 1995 ( Medhat Shafik, *The Silk Road*

). Still, this support was insufficient and many artists sought international patronage that led to an unprecedented number of exhibitions for Egyptian artists internationally and particularly in Europe. Artists of the 1990s were less concerned with cultural themes or national/regional ideology. The focus of their art, situated as it is in their immediate political and social environment, is more specific and at the same time global in its humanity (

Moataz Nasr, *An Ear of Mud, Another of Dough*

;

Mona Marzouk, *Reconfigured Monuments*

). The work of this generation challenges the audience to interact with themes drawn from daily life; it both empowers the viewer and demands a response.

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