

Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989): A Life in Struggle

Safarkhan is proud to introduce to you the works of the remarkable artist Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989) who has left a great impact on the Egyptian art scene.

Inji Efflatoun spent her life portraying and expressing in a unique style of her own the life and misery of the people who worked hard to build Egypt, recording the martyrs of the war, the builders and laborers of the high dam and the joy in the life of the peasants and their daily endeavor.

Born in Cairo 16th of April 1924, Inji Efflatoun came from an intellectual background within the high aristocracy of Egyptian society. Her mother Salha Efflatoun was a creative and very determinant lady, who had divorced from her husband who was her cousin, soon after the birth of Gulberie and Inji, and decided to be on her own. She opened a shop in Antikikhana Street and upon doing so in the years after became the first Egyptian woman designer. Talaat Harb Pacha encouraged her and she began designing her dresses using the finest Egyptian cotton. She became very famous for her creations and as a result became the stylist for the royal family and other high-profile members of Egypt's aristocracy. Inji studied at the boarding school of Sacred Heart Convent where she endured a tough time because her free spirit did not fit well with the strict and reserved nature of the nuns there. So, naturally, she rebelled at an early age and managed to convince her mother to take her away from the Sacred Heart Convent, after which she went to the Lycee Francais where she obtained her secondary school certificate.

The life of Inji Efflatoun at the age of 15 was shaped by a very strange but fateful coincidence. The great artist Mahmoud Said came to visit the family and Inji's mother showed him Inji's early drawings, which at that time were illustrations of her sister Gulberie's poems. After looking thoroughly at her work, Said told the mother that the young girl had painting in her

blood, a natural talent, and consequently he urged that this talent must be nurtured and honed with the help of a good artist. This turned out to be the critical turning point in her life. Kamel El Telmessany the well-known and respected Egyptian painter who was part of the “Art and Liberty movement” founded by George Henin, Ramsis Younan and Fouad Kamel assumed the role of Inji’s teacher in art, a partnership that bore great success and maturity in Inji’s painting ability. Immediately she proved her talent with the paintbrush and he encouraged her to develop this artistic creativity further. By 1942 she had participated with the esteemed “Art and Liberty” group in a number of avant-garde exhibitions with the elder contemporaries Ramsis Younan, Telmessany, Fouad Kamel and the distinguished Mahmoud Said. In retrospect we now regard this period of Inji’s in the 40s as her surrealistic period. Following this from 1942 to 1952 she worked and studied with Margot Veillon, Hamed Abdallah and the free section of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo under the tutorship of one of the greats in Egyptian and Arab art, Ragheb Ayad.

The year of 1952 marked another turning point in Inji’s career as a professional artist as she held her first one-woman show, beginning a trend that would see her exhibit her creations on more than 26 other occasions, both in Egypt and abroad. It was at this stage in which Inji proved herself as an artist, as she began developing a very strong interest in social and political problems of her country, a mental preoccupation that would not only be the inspiration and force behind many of her greatest and most respected works, but also affect dramatic changes in her life as a woman living in Nasser’s Egypt at the time. Inji went on to write three books, the first entitled “80 Million Women With Us” which was given a preface by Dr. Taha Hussein in 1948, the second “We the Egyptian Women” with a preface by Abdel Rahman El Rafe, and the third “Peace and Evacuation” whose preface was written by Dr. Aziz Fahmy. Amid the urging and constant persuasion of her family to move to Paris and finish her studies in art, Inji stood firm in her belief that she would not sever her ties with Egypt and her heritage, with the consideration that she wanted a kind of self-affirmation in ensuring her Egyptian identity having grown up speaking French and most of the time living amongst foreigners and the

aristocratic background. Of this period in which Inji was still discovering herself as an artist, not least a person she said; “eighteen years have slipped from my life in this secluded society, even my native language I could not talk it to the extent that when I began really frequenting the people of my country I couldn’t communicate with them in their language. What a misery I felt to be unrooted.”

It was from this point onwards when Inji began mixing with Egypt’s left-wing intelligentsias, and broke from her bonds with her privileged society to fully immerse herself in the clamour of real Egyptian society. It remains hard to say who exerted the strongest influence on her political ideas, nevertheless in any case Inji’s two burning passions became painting and the “Others”, an expression she used to refer to the poor, weak, disadvantaged and the women within Egyptian society, and everyone which she felt was suffering the injustices of a cruel system, and paralyzed by its effects. At that time the communist party was outlawed from existing in Egypt and Inji knew very well that she was risking a jail sentence in operating on the fringes of what was acceptable politically at the time. Inji married a fellow compatriot whom she loved very much and who in stark contrast to herself came from a humble background. Those were the beginnings of what she remembered as her happiest days, but alas she lost her beloved husband only three years after her marriage, when he died from a brain hemorrhage. After this immensely saddening incident, Inji’s intrigue and desire to participate in her country’s political movement lead her to another defining moment in her life, as she was arrested for her stance against the establishment in 1959 and imprisoned for four years in a collection of several women’s prisons. This period for Inji was crucial to her development as a painter and greatly influenced the direction she took as an artists in the years following. Critics consider this period as having produced most of Inji’s finest and most emotionally challenging works, her choice of color, manipulation of light and shadow, the vivid expressions on carefully sketched faces all served to show her true ingenuity and special character which her paintings of this period embodied. The ever-present bars of the jail cells add to the depth of these paintings and serve as an overwhelming reminder to us about the pain and torment that she

intended us to feel for the masses of Egyptian society.

Whilst this part of her life remained one of the most experiences in her eventful life, her art took a new direction as she emerged from prison with a different approach, reinventing her creative abilities once again and entering a new stage in her career. In 1957 Inji was the recipient of the “Salon du Caire” prize, and shortly after in 1959 she exhibited an individual show in which Jose Alfero Siqueros penned the catalogues preface, a tribute to the admiration she had gained from not just art-appreciators in her home but abroad too. More accolades and recognition came Inji’s way, as the same year she received the first-place prize from the Ministry of Culture. From 1953 to 1954 Inji Efflatoun exhibited two of her paintings at the Biennale of Sao Paolo next to works by Mahmoud Said. One of her paintings, named “The Descendant of Hatshepsut” is a stunning portrait of a Nubian peasant and the other a portrait of a Nubian girl. In 1964 Inji exhibited another individual show at Akhnatoun gallery which was given a preface by Jean Lurcat.

The following few years Inji had gained enough reputation within the art world in Europe to merit her an exhibition in Rome and then one in Belrin in 1970, that was a private show of her works to that date. In 1971 she was chosen as Art Commissary of the exhibition “Contemporary Art in Egypt” in the Galleria Museum in Paris. Shortly afterwards in 1974 she was also chosen as Art commissary for the exhibition “Contemporary Art in Egypt” in Belgrade, further increasing her already wide reach and prominence of her works in the eyes of European collectors. In 1975 Inji held a big exhibition in Moscow followed by several exhibitions in Paris, Dresden, East Berlin, Varsovia, Kuwait, Prague, Sofia and twice at the Biennale of Venezia.

In 1976 she was made Art Commissary for the third time to the Pavillon of “Contemporary Art in Egypt” at the 87th Salon of the Independents that was held at the Grand Palais in Paris. In 1979, in response to the still growing interest in her artistic style she took her paintings to New Delhi, exhibiting in the Asian continent for the first time, and one of very few

Egyptian artists even till this day have done.

The culmination of Inji's illustrious artistic journey and the varied acknowledgement and appreciation it attained, came in 1984 when she received from Jack Lang, the French minister of Culture, a letter notifying her to be nominated as "Chevalier dans L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres". Staying true to her character of taking her works to her many admirers around the world Inji participated with several other Egyptian painters in an exhibition in the state of Alabama in the US in 1988. A year after in 1989 Inji Efflatoun died, marking the end of one of the most memorable and special artists to emerge from Egypt in its' and in the entire regions' modern art history.