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Think you know Surrealism? Meet Egypt's radical dreamers

By **Anna Wallace-Thompson**

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Salvador Dalí may have made Surrealism famous, but an overlooked group of artists, writers and activists in 1940s Cairo made the movement their own. Here we look at their pioneering work, currently on show at Tate Liverpool.

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In 1938, Cairo was a like a pressure cooker about to blow. The yoke of colonialism was chafing and for many the idea of self-government was becoming increasingly appealing. Poverty was rife and people were even discussing the benefits of Fascism. Then with the outbreak of the Second World War the city, as a British Protectorate, had welcomed – and was struggling to accommodate – 200,000 Commonwealth soldiers who arrived during 1939-41. The seeds of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 were being sown.

For members of the liberal intelligentsia, these were troubling times. Art was expected to be nationalistic, with idealised visions of Egypt, and anything outside these bounds, such as more abstract works, was considered morally corrupt. As 1938 drew to a close, brothers Anwar Kamel (a writer and activist) and Fouad Kamel (an artist), alongside author George Henein and artist Kamel El-Telmisany, could no longer hold back, and so published their revolutionary manifesto *Vive L'Art Degenerate (Long Live Degenerate Art)*, signed by 37 artists, writers and lawyers. It was this cry in the dark against the smothering of self-expression that catalysed the creation of the surrealist Art and Liberty Group, a diverse conglomerate of writers, artists, filmmakers, activists and intellectuals.

The Art and Liberty Group sought to create a new cultural vernacular to address local issues, but using an international artistic language. Regarding themselves as Surrealists in Egypt rather than “Egyptian Surrealists” (ergo, copycats of the school of Dalí and Magritte), they exchanged ideas with the global network of Surrealist movements of the time. From Paris to Bulgaria and beyond, few today realise just how far the Surrealist network spread in the 1920s and '30s, and the intellectual exchange between the Art and Liberty Group and the world was extensive.



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Ramses Younan,
Untitled, 1939. [More](#)

As such, members of the group tackled the issues of their time such as police brutality, dramatically captured by Greek-Egyptian artist Mayo in his 1937 painting

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Fouad Kamel,
Nude, 1950.



Amy Nimr,
Untitled (Underwater skeleton), 1940.



Inji Efflatoun,
Untitled, 1942.



Mayo,
Coups de Bâtons, 1937.

Anna Wallace-Thompson is a writer specialising in Middle Eastern art and culture

Surrealism in Egypt: Art et Liberté 1938–1948 is at Tate Liverpool until 18 March 2018.

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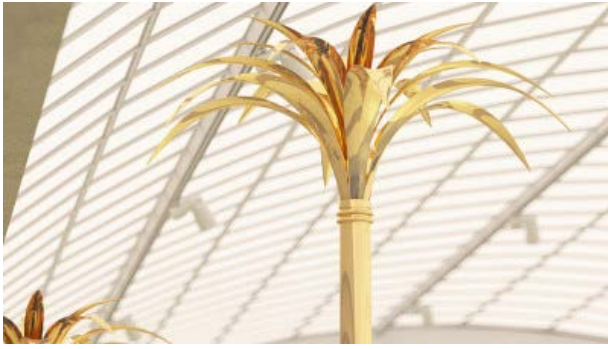
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