

Exhibition Summary

Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938 – 1948)

Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath

1. Exhibition Summary

Main Focus

Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938 – 1948) is the first comprehensive museum exhibition about the Art and Liberty Group (*Art et Liberté – jama'at al-fann wal hurriyyah*), a surrealist collective of artists and writers, working in Cairo between the late 1930s and late 1940s. Founded on December 22, 1938 upon the publication of its manifesto *Long Live Degenerate Art*, the Group provided a restless generation of young artists, intellectuals and political activists, with a heterogeneous platform for cultural and political reform. At the dawn of the Second World War and during Egypt's colonial rule by the British Empire, *Art et Liberté* was globally engaged in its defiance of Fascism, Nationalism and Colonialism. The Group played an active role within an international network of surrealist writers and artists, achieving a contemporary literary and pictorial language that was as much globally engaged as it was rooted in local artistic and political concerns. The Group included Egyptians and non-Egyptians, political activities and refugees, Muslims, Jews, Christians, secularists, Greek- and Italian-Egyptians of different social classes reflecting the highly cosmopolitan nature of Egyptian urban society at the time. In addition, the Group adopted an acute feminist stance advocating equality between the sexes and fighting against the oppression of their female counterparts. The women within the Group, unlike many other surrealist movements elsewhere, were not relegated to the role of muses, but were equally contributing as artists, writers, political activists and patrons.

Exhibition Scope

The artworks and archival documents in the exhibition were drawn from over 50 public and private collections coming from Egypt and 13 other countries. The exhibition comprises 130 paintings, works on paper, and photographs dating from the 1920s until the early 1950s along with more than 200 archival documents and primary manuscripts, historical photographs and film footage were carefully selected. It features artworks by the following 37 artists who were active members or affiliates of the Group: Mohammad Abdel Latif, Khalil Abduh, Salim Al-Habschi, Hussein Youssef Amin, Anonymous, Eric de Nemes, Angelo de Riz, Inji Efflatoun, Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar, Hassan El-Telmisani, Kamel El-Telmisany, Mamdouh Muhamad Fathallah, Thierry Formintelli, Georges Henein, Idabel, Ida Kar, Fouad Kamel, Abduh Khalil, Mahmoud Khalil, Ibrahim Massouda, Mayo, Robert Medley, Lee Miller, Hamed Nada, Amy Nimr, Roland Penrose, Maher Raef, Samir Rafi,

Mahmoud Saïd, Laurent-Marcel Salinas, Saroukhan, Ahmed Sawwan, Rateb Seddik, Etienne Sved, Van Leo, Ramsès Younane, and Ramzi Zolqomah. In also includes writings by another 22 group members and affiliates such as Yves Bonnefoy, Marie Cavadia, Albert Cossery, Jean Grenier, Mounir Hafez, Édmond Jabès, Gherasim Luca, Arthur Lundkvist, Joyce Mansour, Jean Moscatelli, Ahmed Rassem, and Philippe Soupault among many others.

2. Exhibition Research and Preparation

Field Interviews

The pioneering reconstruction of the long-lost story of the Art and Liberty Group and the legacy of Surrealism in Egypt took six years of rigorous research. Many *Art et Liberté* artists and their respective families had settled abroad during the 1950s and 1960s due to the constraining political climate in Egypt post the 1952 Revolution. This led to the worldwide dispersal of their artworks and archives. Between 2010 and 2016, more than 200 field interviews were conducted with family descendants and surviving contemporaries, in Cairo and Alexandria, along with many other cities as far-flung as Paris, London, Athens, Beirut, Dubai, Doha, New York, Mexico City and Tokyo.

Archival Research

In total, 39 archival collections in museum, university and public libraries spread across 21 cities were consulted. Thousands of pages in hundreds of primary sources and unpublished manuscripts, personal letters and official documents in Arabic, French, English, German, Greek and Italian were studied.

Restoration

The six-year extensive research period revealed for the first time since the Group's dispersal in 1948 the whereabouts of hundreds of artworks comprising paintings, photographs, and works on paper, as well as hundreds of archival documents and primary sources. Most of them were in need for conservation, and in many cases major restoration. All the artworks and documents were brought to the renowned Arcanes laboratories in Paris where they underwent a meticulous reparation process, restoring the works to their original state and preparing them for their presentation in the exhibition.

3. Exhibition Design

Sections

The exhibition is divided into nine distinct sections highlighting the core concerns and practices of *Art et Liberté*. Instead of following a chronological order, this thematic approach demonstrates the Group members' overlapping ideas, motifs, and socio-political and aesthetic concerns in their literary and visual artistic production. The titles for each of the nine sections are directly quoted from different texts of *Art et Liberté* members, giving full reign to the artists' own voice in describing their artistic and political beliefs:

1. *The Permanent Revolution* introduces *Art et Liberté's* position in contradiction to the established Cairene art scene at the time
2. *The Voice of Canons* illustrates the direct impact of the Second World War on the group members' artistic language and political beliefs
3. *Fragmented Bodies* showcases the artists' depiction of the deformed human body to protest human suffering and social injustice
4. *Subjective Realism* brings to the foreground *Art et Liberté's* intellectual proposition of a new definition of Surrealism
5. *The Woman of the City* demonstrates the Group's feminist stance and activism against the suffering of women during the Second World War
6. *The Contemporary Art Group: An Egyptian Art* clarifies the distinct rift between the core beliefs of *Art et Liberté* and the *The Contemporary Art Group* in the 1940s
7. *The Surrealist Photo* presents the Group's avant-garde use of photography as a classic Surrealist medium in 1930s and 1940s Egypt
8. *Georges Henein*, highlights the role of this central *Art et Liberté* founder within a global network of Surrealists
9. *Writing with Pictures*, illustrates the intricate and symbiotic link between *Art et Liberté's* visual and literary practices

Archival Documents

The archival documents are given an equal weight amongst the presentation of the artworks. More than 200 original publications, photographs, newspapers, and film clips from the 1920s until the early 1950s are showcased in conjunction with the artworks in each of the sections. They illustrate on the one hand the socio-political context of Egypt at the time, and on the other, they are a reflection of the Group's diverse artistic activities, ranging from the visual arts, theatre, literature, political activism, and filmmaking. Many of the documents are displayed in vitrines connecting directly to the artworks next to them, highlighting, for example, the

direct dialogue between one artist's painting, and another one's poems, or the intellectual critique of an artwork in one of their activist publications.

A central role is given to the Group's founding 1938 Manifesto entitled "Long Live Degenerate Art", which displays their core theses on one side, and a reproduction of Picasso's seminal painting *Guernica*. Presented both as an original document, as well as in a translated version reproduced as a large-scale wallpaper, the Manifesto serves as a visual entry point into the Group's activist political stance.

The original voice recording of one of the group's members, Anwar Kamel, is included in the exhibition, providing an original eyewitness account. The looped segment has the artist reflecting back on *Art et Liberté* activities in the 1940s, exemplifying the Group's intellectual Surrealist engagement within their society.

Film Materials

To further introduce the visitor to the political and social context of WWII Egypt, the exhibition design features four film montages that were created by putting together archival footage from a wide variety of original newsreels and documentary reportages from the period. In total, more than 280 original archival reels were examined from a number of sources such as British Pathé, Movietone, Huntley Film Archives just to name a few.

1. The Cairo Art Scene in 1938 (Presented in the *Permanent Revolution* section)

A 2-minute compilation showing various exhibition openings from the annual *Salon du Caire* and other art events organized by *Art et Liberté's* opposing rival, the bourgeois, State affiliated *Société des amis de l'art* and inauguration of public monuments by the Egyptian Monarch King Farouk.

2. World War II Egypt (Presented in the *Voice of Canons* section)

A 3.5-minute compilation of the Commonwealth and Egyptian army military parades in Cairo, air raids over Alexandria and the Battle of Al-Alamein on the Egyptian – Libyan border. The compilation is set against a soundtrack of original recordings of battle and military operations and parades from the time.

3. Cairo WWII leisure and nightlife (Presented in the *Woman of the City* section)

A 3-minute compilation of scenes from Cairo's buzzing bazaars and cafés showing British soldiers going about town, frequenting the souks and finishing their days in some of the city's night spots. Also featured are some of the female entertainers from the period. The compilation was set to the original 1935 version of the jazz number *Saint Louis Blues* that George Henein used as the title of one his poems in which he introduced the expression "Woman of the City."

4. The inhabitants of Cairo (Presented in the *Writing with Pictures* section)

A 3-minute compilation of documentary clips showing the diversity of Cairo's neighborhoods ranging from the very rich to the devastatingly poor. The scenes reveal the enormous disparity between the upper and lower classes and confront the viewer with various individuals that the camera catches with great candidness. The compilation enhances the literary and artistic engagement of the Group members with themes of social inequity and economic injustice.

4. Exhibition Publications

Academic Monograph

The academic research as the foundation for this exhibition, was published as part of the academic monograph *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group*, authored by Sam Bardaouil, one of the exhibition's two curators. The monograph provided the academic content necessary to put together this historical exhibition. Published by I.B Tauris in London in 2016, this in-depth study provides the first-ever comprehensive examination of the Group's legacy, charting Art and Liberty's significant contribution towards a new definition of Surrealism. Moving beyond the polarizing dichotomies of Saidian Orientalism, this book rewrites the history of Surrealism itself, advocating for a new definition of the movement that reflects an inclusive vision of art history.

The academic monograph and its accompanying anthology of Surrealist writings from Egypt won the prestigious **2017 MSA Book Prize Award**. The book was awarded from a list of finalists from Cambridge, Columbia, Edinburgh and Oxford University, winning one of the most prestigious accolades in the field of modernist studies.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, edited by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, and published in 5 separate language editions (English, Arabic, French, German, and Spanish). A comprehensive curatorial essay, as well as visual documentation of each section of the exhibition plunge the reader into the turbulent artistic scene of Egypt of the 1930s and 1940s offering a comprehensive take on one of Surrealism's most exciting, yet little-known chapters. This is the first catalogue dedicated to the Surrealist movement in Egypt, providing an immersive incursion into its visual universe and artistic legacy through more than 250 full-color illustrations of artworks and archival documents. Almost all of them are published for the first time, making the catalogue a seminal reference well beyond the scope of the exhibition for the study of Surrealism and modernity in Egypt worldwide.

5. Impact of the Exhibition

Exhibition Tour

The exhibition was first presented at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (19 October, 2016 – 16 January, 2017). This was followed by the Reina Sofia in Madrid (14 February – 28 May, 2017), and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen K20 in Düsseldorf (15 July – 15 October, 2017). The exhibition will be next on view at the Tate Liverpool (17 November, 2017 – 18 March, 2018), followed by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (28 April – 12 August, 2018).

In each of its presentations, the exhibition is adapted to respond to the context in which it is viewed.

In Paris, the exhibition was planned to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the death of André Breton, highlighting the connection between the Surrealists in Paris and Cairo. The exhibition was presented within the permanent collection floors, enabling a direct dialogue with other Surrealist artworks that have become relatively well known over the years.

In Madrid, the Group's seminal manifesto "Long Live Degenerate Art" featuring Picasso's *Guernica*, was united under the same roof with the iconic painting. The Spanish public was able to discover the close proximity between the Group's stand against Fascism and the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and the eminent rise of Franco. In addition, the Spanish edition of the catalogue includes the first-ever translation from French into Spanish of several poems by *Art et Liberté* founder Georges Henein that he had written during the late 1930s and early 1940s in solidarity with the plight of the Spanish people in the face of the rising oppression.

In Düsseldorf, the exhibition design was adjusted to bring to the fore the stand of *Art et Liberté* against the Nazi party's oppression of avant-garde artists and writers. The manifesto "Long Live Degenerate Art" was placed in a prominent central position, next to a wall-sized picture of the Group at the entrance of the exhibition. A very large German and English translation of the manifesto's text was laid out on an adjacent wall highlighting the solidarity of the Surrealists in Egypt with the artists that were being labeled as "degenerate" by Nazi Germany. A large wallpaper showing fascist-inspired Para-military parades in Cairo was also prominently displayed alerting the visitors to the fact that Fascism was also on the rise in Egypt.

In Liverpool, the exciting connection between Egyptian and British Surrealism will be highlighted. This is done though emphasizing the leading role that photographer Lee Miller played in introducing the Group to leading British Surrealist Roland Penrose with whom she was having an affair while living in Cairo with her Egyptian husband. British War artists who were leading Surrealist figures such as Robert Medley and Victor Musgrave were stationed in Cairo during WWII took part in some of *Art et Liberté's* exhibitions, thus playing a role in strengthening the connection with their Egyptian counterparts.

In Stockholm, the exhibition will highlight the relationship that the Group had with some of Sweden's leading Surrealist figures of the time such as Arthur Lundkvist and Gunnar Ekelöf among others. The connection to Marcel Duchamps, who had a long standing friendship with the Moderna Museet will be highlighted, especially the 1947 Surrealism exhibition that Duchamps curated, which included two of the Egyptian Surrealists Ramses Younane and Fouad Kamel.

Highlighting these specific connections and overlaps in each of the exhibition's five presentations allows for a challenging of the local public's understanding of canonical surrealism, a new engagement with each of the respective museum's collections, and an expansion of their globalizing projects.

Press

Since its inception at the Centre Pompidou, the exhibition has enjoyed worldwide critical acclaim. Some 50 features and reviews in six languages and 10 different countries have already appeared in leading publications such as The New York Times, Frieze Magazine, ARTFORUM, Art in America, Le Monde, Le Figaro, Art das Kunstmagazin, Süddeutsche Zeitung, El-Pais, le Quotidien de l'Art, Canvas Magazine, Al-Ahram, and the Financial Times among many others.

Academia

The in-depth academic and field research that underpin this historic exhibition, are proposing a new approach to the study of Surrealism, and to the study of Modernity at large. Moving beyond the polarizing dichotomies of Saïdian Orientalism, the exhibition presents the artists and artworks within their own historical context, and advocates for an inclusive vision of art history where dichotomies between center and periphery become obsolete. Both the academic monograph *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group in Egypt*, as well as the exhibition catalogues are already in library holdings around the world, and have made it into the global curricula of academic courses within different fields of modernist studies. As curators of the exhibition, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath are frequently being asked to lecture on the project and to present their work to audiences worldwide.