

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

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A guttural male voice greets you, evoking the Cairo of 1938, a heaving, roiling city on the brink of the social upheaval that World War II would bring. Egypt then was a country tugging at the leash of its colonial masters, fascism was on the rise, as was talk of a possible new form of self-government. But for many local and foreign artists, writers, leftists, atheists and communists, this caused concern.

The voice is that of the late Egyptian poet, writer and activist Anwar Kamel. Entering the gallery via an atrium featuring wall-size black and white photographs and 80-year-old documents, his voice provides the frame. Sick of the impediments created by a politicized view of the arts, Kamel and his brother Fouad, along with fellow artists and writers Georges Henein and Kamel El-Telmisany, created a schism with their creation of the Art and Liberty group and its manifesto, *Vive L'Art Degenere* (long live degenerate art).



Fouad Kamel,

*Untitled*, 1940, acrylic on cardboard, 71 x 50 cm. Courtesy: private collection

Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath and five years in the making, ‘Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)’ captured the era’s zeitgeist through the work of 37 artists and around 130 paintings, works on paper, photographs, film footage and archival documents. Organized thematically, the section ‘Subjective Realism’ focused on the Group’s search for a middle ground between artistic liberation and social responsibility. The result was a unique language that was locally concerned yet internationally relevant.

The painting *Coups de Bâtons* (Blows of Batons, 1937), by the Greek-Egyptian artist Mayo, adroitly illustrates this. Depicting police brutality amidst student demonstrations, bodies are deconstructed into violent, geometric, abstract shapes that reflect the clash of increasingly alienated social classes. But perhaps most revealing of Cairo’s spirit is Mahmoud Said’s leonine painting *La Femme aux Boucles d’or* (The Woman with Golden Locks, 1933). While the subject is sexuality incarnate, more revealing is Said’s alternative title: *The Mediterranean*. For the artist, his sitter’s mixture of African, Eastern and European features represented the essence of Egypt. Over her left shoulder, we see Venice (the West) and over her right, a minaret (the East). *La Femme* expresses much of the complex cultural synthesizing the Group so championed.





Mayo, *Coups de bâtons (Sticks)*, 1937, oil on canvas, 1.7 x 2.4 m. Courtesy: Collection Sergio and Renata Grossetti, Milan © Adagp, Paris 2016

This amber-eyed woman also embodies one of the Group's central themes: women. It had several female members, including Marie Cavadia, Lee Miller and Amy Nimr, who forged international links between the group and its contemporaries. However, an influx of 200,000 soldiers into Egypt resulted in widespread prostitution and poverty and paintings such as Kamel El-Telmisany's *Untitled (Wounds)* (1940) lament this, showing women literally crucified by circumstance. Ramses Younane's untitled 1939 painting depicts a beaten Goddess, a broken Egypt, in which Pharaonic ideals ring hollow.

Pharaonic imagery was used as government propaganda, so members of the Group often challenged it, as is evident in the photographic section of the exhibition. Ida Kar's *L'Étreinte (The Embrace)* (1940) substitutes ribs for temple columns and Etienne Sved deconstructs reality through photomontage. War also seeps through in images of fragmented bodies.



The writhing figures in Inji Efflatoun's *Girl and Monster* (1942) and the drowned skeletons in Amy Nimr are haunting.



Inji Efflatoun,  
*Untitled*, 1942, oil on canvas, 71 x 61 cm. Courtesy: private collection

The exhibition cleverly zooms between the micro and the macro, Cairo and the world. The effect is of an immersion in another time, absorption of history through some form of osmosis. This is not a political show, yet these artists were politically engaged. They are not Egyptian surrealists so much as surrealists *in* Egypt, and, through their eyes, we get an unprecedented glimpse into what, hitherto, has been one of the movement's overlooked chapters.

*Lead image: Rateb Seddik, Untitled, c.1940, oil on canvas, 1.2 x 2.2 m. Courtesy: Musée Rateb Seddik, Le Caire*

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