

It seeks to assert a local truth at the expense of the universal!

Fascism itself is not as absolute: the supporters of the art intuition, as Benedetto Croce likes to call it, make claims to individualism that are specific to the Latins.

No centralized government, however much it wants to benefit the masses, can question art's origin.

Three theses eloquently illustrate the Russian, German, and Italian conceptions of art, and these three clashed at the Volta Conference [on theater], held in 1934.

It's a matter of theater.

For the Russian delegate, Alexander Tairov, economic life, like a lever, controls the birth of art.

[Walter] Gropius, the German delegate, asserts that politics is the motive for all artistic activities. But the Italian delegate, when faced with the issue, boldly declares that art comes first.

In the light of these different conceptions, the three races are characterized by their varying degrees of propensity to the sources of art.

Slavs and Saxons consider the problem with respect to a utilitarian purpose. Despite these two major currents that now divide Europe between them, the Latins remain true to their motto of art for art's sake.

What is our attitude toward this problem? Has the Egyptian state assumed its share of responsibility in the choice? We believe we can discern a vague and timidly formulated desire to "Egyptianize," confusing the issue with the nature of the work. But the danger of a priori formulas is only daunting when it comes to dictatorship. Now public education has not thought it necessary to sacrifice the complex realities directly affecting art to a political façade. Its task is all the simpler: it consists of creating a climate conducive to the products of the mind.

Without being "totalitarian" or diving into metaphysical research, we can trust the art intuition. I have just indicated its immediate corollary: it is this "conducive climate" that the state, in the absence of an enlightened bourgeoisie, has the duty and the resources to promote widely.

—M[ohamed] Naghi, "Art et dictature," *La Revue du Caire* 3, no. 25 (December 1940): 163–67. Translated from French by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

SHAPING THE FATE OF THE NATION

Lebanese artist César Gemayel wrote this text for the Beirut cultural journal *al-Adib*, where it appeared as part of a series called "My Profession and Its Impact on Building the Nation." The series appeared in the midst of the country's active preparation for the end of the French Mandate; civilian elections would be held in August, and the Republic of Lebanon declared in November. Gemayel, too, was involved in national initiatives, helping to found the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut that same year.

The Painter (1943)

César Gemayel

My profession is thought, lines, and colors: thought that leads humanity to glories, lines that support the edifice of civilizations, and colors, which are a revolution and a tempest, a quietude and reassurance.

My profession is introducing the gods to humanity and elevating humanity to the level of the gods. My profession is a light that illuminates the darkness of ignorance and opens portholes in people's minds through which they may gaze at beauty. My profession is a white hope and a colored dream, a kiss from the lips of the gods on humanity's brow, a flower in the field of life, and a melody in the ear of fate. My profession is a link between earth and sky. My profession is light and shadow.

With color I wrote the history of humanity, introduced generations to generations, transmitted civilizations from country to country, and dispensed thought and taste, distributing them to the world.

Art was created the day the human being was created—the first masterpiece. It lived with him in the caves, among the beasts and predators. He adorned the rocks of his caves with paintings of the hunt and struggle. He covered his nakedness with the flowers of the field and the hides of beasts, and created for himself, in his refuge between the rocks and the jungles, the first art museum.

On this soft, green, radiant coast, he invented the alphabet, opening up broad horizons and blazing the path to thought, ambition, and law. He created gods and lived with them in cities, in forests, on the hunt, in the fields. He gathered daisies, violets, and broom, and plaited garlands from their sweet blooms. The springs of my country wept blood with Astarte as she cried over her lover Adonis, and the girls of Byblos wailed and danced the dance of death around his bier until their soft feet bled and the earth was quenched, turning the anemone red.

Art immortalized the works of man, cultivated his soul and refined his senses, and opened his eyes to the world, to the rays of dawn chasing away the darkness behind [Mount] Sannine. The incandescence of the blood-red sunset astonished him and he imagined it to be a fire blazing in the heavens. He opened his eyes and saw the tremors of the light on the hilltops and the fog creeping over the heights. He opened his ears and heard the whispers of the breeze carrying hearts' secrets to other hearts. The melody thrilled him, so he danced and played and made a paradise of earth, where he could carouse and be joyful.

Art immortalized the pharaohs, created their civilization, and taught them the life of splendor and glory. It extracted colors from grass, from stone, from insects, and from the soil, and colored their world. It dove into the sea and plucked a purple hue from its heart to adorn the pharaohs.

And art rested, so barbarism swept over civilizations, killing and destroying. The cyclone moved on, taking into its breast everything that stood in its path, and the artist's works were obliterated, and slept shattered and smashed under the rubble. When the storm abated and the universe calmed, and tranquility returned to people's souls, the artist again turned to completing his work, resurrecting the dead from their tombs, spreading civilizations erased by time and people submerged in the depths of oblivion. Ancient Egypt shook the dust off itself and returned to life; the pharaohs live

on through the hands of painters: their skin dark brown, the pharaohs hunt exotic birds on the banks of the Nile and among its lakes. The gods, too, have arisen from the sands, and Isis and the divine serpents have returned to their thrones. The “Sheikh El Balad”¹ strides through the Egyptian Museum of today just as he strode through his town thousands of years ago, and salaried working men now link arms with their women, as modern people do.

Art was elevated in Greece more than in any other country, and this flame still, to this very day, illuminates the world. Whenever the artist strays far in his travels, he returns to Phidias, Praxiteles, and Lysippos to inquire about the fundamentals of the profession and the secrets of beauty. [. . .]

As for contemporary art, its manifold tendencies, various types, and innumerable paths, it was born in Paris, the product of experiments by long generations. The first to shatter the Academy was Eugène Delacroix, the leader of the Romantics. The conflict between Delacroix and the academic school, represented in the person of [Jean-Auguste-Dominique] Ingres, was a tempestuous one, and it ended with the victory of Romanticism and the liberation of painting from the bonds of the school. The artist had grown bored with the studio walls and stepped out into the open country, into the light of the sun in the open air. The school of Impressionism shook the ancient schools and upended artists’ principles, dragging society’s taste along with it. Delacroix was the first to attempt to depart from the familiar. The critics stood up to him without being able to influence his views, and [Claude] Monet, [Alfred] Sisley, [Camille] Pissarro, [Edgar] Degas, and lastly [Paul] Cézanne all rallied around him. The Impressionist school tried to catch the tremors of light on things. As for Cézanne, he wanted to make Impressionism a strong art, so he took its pure colors and used them to construct a tightly composed, classical image—this was a new tendency, or a reaction against the Impressionists.

This is a brief glimpse of the procession of art through the ages. I did not intend it to be a history lesson, but rather to show you that the impact of art on the nation is present in all aspects of its intellectual and practical life, and that art is the measure of a nation’s advancement. If it is elevated, the nation is elevated, and if it is degraded, the nation is degraded along with it. China, for example, was the most advanced country on earth when the emperor was the dean of the academy of arts and its leading painter. As for us, it is time to wake up and for the state to open its eyes to this class of people who work in silence and thought in order to direct the youth of this country to beauty and the elevation of their spiritual level, and who work to fight ignorance and blindness in a country whose inhabitants flock to the merely material and swear their allegiance to it, thereby becoming dangers to the future of thought and the fate of the nation.

Note

1. Eds.: “Sheikh El Balad” is the nickname given to the ancient wood statue of Ka-aper (Egyptian fifth dynasty) that was found in Saqqara in 1860 by a team working for French archaeologist Auguste Mariette.

—Qayşar al-Jumayyil, “al-Rassām” (excerpt), *al-Adīb*, no. 2 (February 1, 1943): 3–5. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.