

Egyptian comics: A history with a revolutionary flavor

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[Caption reads: I know what's good for you].

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Recently, the first Egypt Comix Week event was held in Cairo, at the initiative of a number of NGOs. The art of cartoons and comics arguably has its roots in the time of the pharaohs, though it acquired

Tags

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its prominence and legitimacy only several years ago, thanks to individual efforts led by people like Hussein Bicar, who was one of the architects that established a strong presence for this art form in the visual scene.

Tags: [January 25 revolution \(/tags/january-25-revolution/\)](#), [Egyptian comics \(/tags/egyptian-comics/\)](#), [Egypt Comix Week \(/tags/egypt-comix-week/\)](#), [Egypt \(/tags/egypt/\)](#), [Cairo \(/tags/cairo/\)](#)

Cairo – While up and about in Cairo, mingling with its crowds, you will see many random things: speeding cars; carts selling potatoes; and newspaper sellers laying out all kinds of books and magazines on the pavement. The contradictions of the Egyptian street and its political and economic woes have paved the way for a number of young people, who are aware of the sensitivity and importance of the revolutionary moment, to come forward and express themselves. It is perhaps this that has served as a backdrop for comic magazines – or simply comics – in Egypt as an alternative medium for self-expression and to protest against mainstream thinking.

This art has been closely linked to satire against the status quo, through a combination of text and pictures. Comics are thus no longer targeted to children and younger people, and now serve as a space open to other age groups.



Clips from different Egyptian comics.

The January 25 Revolution opened the door wide to new forms of expression using images and textual devices. Perhaps the beginnings of this art form in Egypt are linked to ancient Egyptian history. In those times, Egyptians documented their daily lives and affairs in a serialized narrative style that tended to be light hearted and that had a special reverence for colors. However, the actual beginning of the modern-day comics medium in Egypt was with the *Rawdat al-Madaris* magazine, which was published by the Minister of Education Ali Mubarak in 1870, and edited by Rifaa Tahtawi.

The magazine ran vividly illustrated stories aimed at school children in an attractive style. The magazine's guiding function dominated its tone. It was issued for eight years before it stopped, having failed to attract a large audience.

The name Samir was linked after that to the collective memory of Egyptian children. But unlike *Samir* magazine that was published later, *Al-Samir Al-Saghir* of 1877 had educational and social goals.

After that we have *Al-Madrassa* [The School] magazine, a prestigious publication published by Mustafa Kamel in 1893. An editorial introducing the magazine stated, "Since most newspapers of different background do not benefit [anyone but] parents, I decided to devote a...newspaper to the young of my town given the benefit, purposefulness, and guidance to righteousness this achieves."



[Dialogue reads: - Wake up, Mister Atty!
 - Who am I...Where am I?
 - You are in good hands Mister Atty...You are with the CIA
 - What do you want from me you bastards?
 - Oh no, no, no Mister Atty. We thought you would be much too smarter than this! We want nothing from you except the secret AIDS cure you invented...
 - If you think Atty will expose his country's scientific secrets this easily...YOU WOULD BE CRAZY!]

Emulating *Al-Madrassa's* style, the magazine *Al-Tilmeeth* [The Student] started publishing in 1893, emphasizing the guiding role of those publications in the educational process. This genre focusing on comics and illustrated stories continued for more than 30 years.

Egyptian society then entered a new era. Commercial comics began to appear, such as *Al-Awlad* [The Kids], *Al-Nounou*, *Al-Atfal* [The Children], and *Baba Sadek*. The Egyptian publisher Dar al-Maaref played a leading role in promoting comics in Egypt, with Egyptian works emulating the Tintin series, and then with *Al-Katkut Al-Saghir* [Little Chick] published by Doria Shafik.

After World War II, the world found itself having crossed a new threshold

of ideas and attitudes, far from established stereotypes and clichés. The great artist Hussein Bicar (1913-2002) was one of the heroes who played an active role in the spread of comics as an art form in Egypt. Bicar oversaw *Sinbad Magazine*, which was first published on January 3, 1952, edited by writer Mohammed Saeed al-Arian.

But the most important milestone perhaps was *Samir* magazine, published by Dar al-Hilal in 1956. The magazine's stated target audience was the age group "8 to 88 years olds," presenting its content in a satirical literary style often featuring juvenile-yet-bold skits.

The magazine *Al-Fata Al-Arabi* [The Arab Boy] also had a pivotal role in promoting the art of comics in Egypt. The group of artists consisting of Muhyiddin al-Labbad, Bahgat Osman, and other writers and artists engaged in a modernist attempt to disseminate comics and colored magazine covers specifically aimed at children. Muhyiddin al-Labbad was one of the most important artists who gave comics and graphics a special color and flavor.

The Kashkoul [Patchwork] project spearheaded by Muhyiddin al-Labbad was nothing short of an exhibition of visual documentation and innovative design, inspired by folklore and heritage, using Arabic symbols and bright colors that could shorten a vast number of words.

There were many Egyptian pioneers of the comics art form across different eras, including Maalouf and Fawaz (see below).



[Caption reads: I love you].

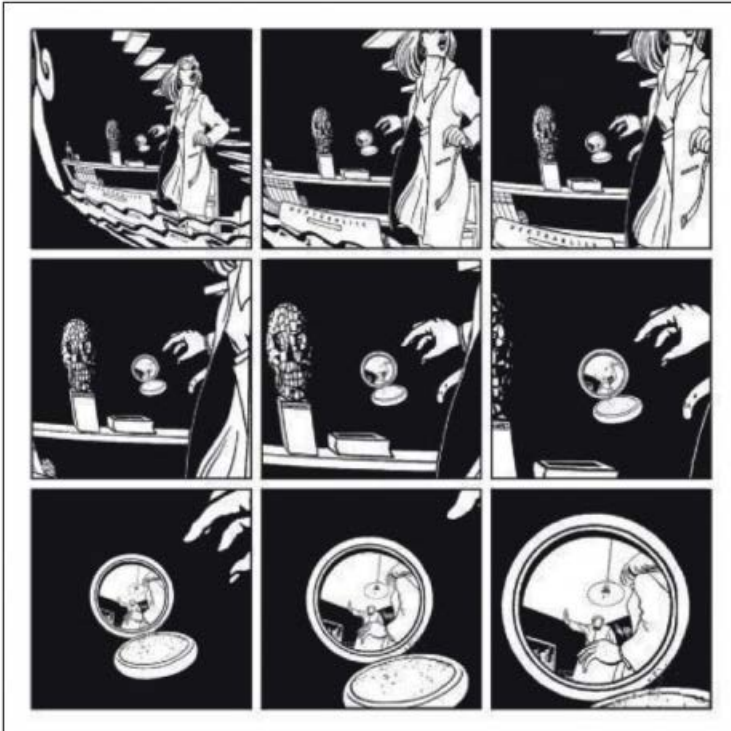
But Magdy Shafei engineered the biggest tour de force in the genre, earning himself the title of "the godfather of the Egyptian graphic novel." He caused a ripple in stagnant water with the first Egyptian graphic novel titled *Metro* (2009). *Metro* tells the story of a young computer engineer who is frustrated with his future prospects, and so decides to rob a bank. The young man soon finds himself involved with a group of thieves and criminals.

The story unfolds in what is an enthralling adventure in Cairo's crowded

streets. Shafei succeeds in conveying an intense visual image of Cairo's streets, squares, and subway tunnels. The novel is an autopsy of a fragmented society waiting for a revolutionary moment to shake off the endemic corruption infesting its parts.

Despite the success of that experience, the novel was confiscated and banned, though it was translated into a number of European languages. Shafei midwived that moment. Later on, he tried to publish *Al-Deshma* [Sand Barrier], in collaboration with the Hisham Mubarak Center for Law.

By now, comics had proven themselves on the Egyptian scene, creating different spaces that challenged the entrenched ideas in the mainstream.

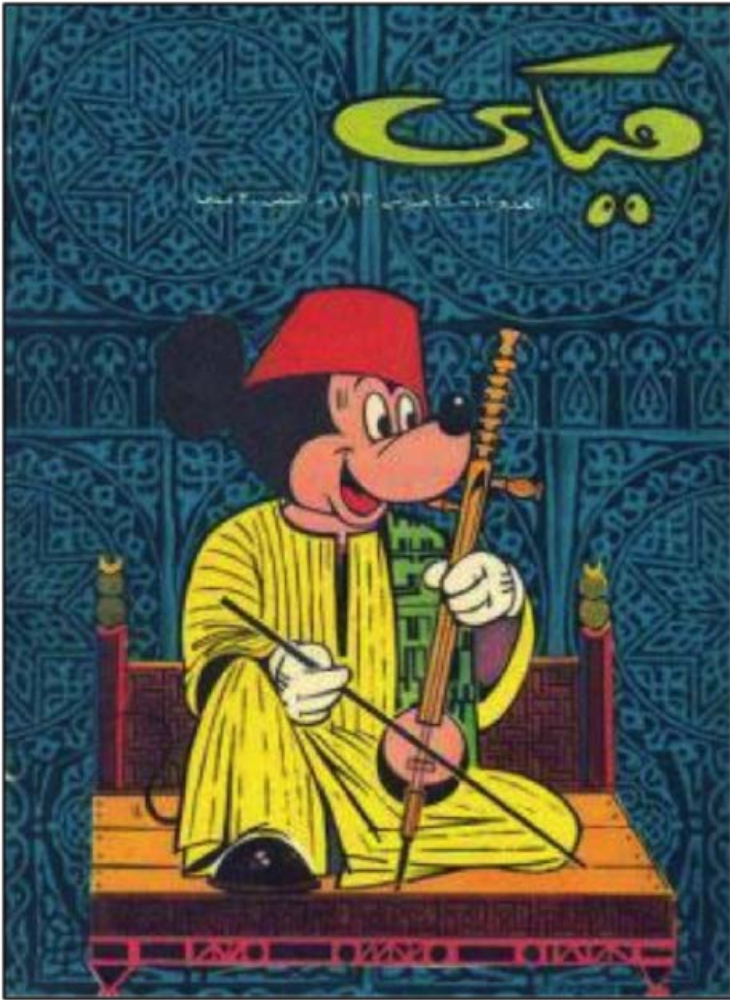


A snapshot from popular Egyptian comic, Metro

In 2011, a new comics magazine called *Tuk Tuk* emerged. It was the result of efforts by a number of ambitious young people, who were skilled and talented enough to produce a world-class publication. The magazine opened its pages to young people to publish their works freely, and was based on individual efforts.

Tuk Tuk also received broad attention and support from European cultural institutes. The magazine was a window for a group of artists who soon became stars in their field in Egypt, including artists like Andeel, Makhlof, Tawfiq, Shennawi, Hadjersi, and others.

Those independent projects had a special humorous take on affairs in Egypt. Sharif Adel, a dentist originally, published an electronic comics magazine called *Al-Ragol al-Barbatoze* [The Barbatoze Man], which ran serialized episodes addressing the general situation in Egypt and interacted with daily intrigues through drawing.



(Mickey in Arabic)

The popularity of combining images and texts prompted publishing houses to give special attention to similar projects and graphic novels in general. Among the projects that stood out were *Kharij al-Saytara* [Out of Control] (2011), which was published by Dar al-Ayn. The book was the work of more than 19 artists. Similar books include *Al-Fann al-Tasei* [The Ninth Art], *Autostrade* [highway], and *Taathir Garada* [A Locust's Effect], by Ahmed Khaled Tawfiq and Hanan al-Karargi.

The art of comics dominated the scene, and now had a huge following in the street with dedicated exhibitions. But comics also created their own society, which simulated reality in satirical and agile style away from stereotypes and clichés, stressing the liberalism of criticism and artistic production.

Fawaz and Maalouf honored in Cairo



A few days ago, a unique event in the Cairo art scene concluded – the first Egypt Comix Week, which was held in different venues in the Egyptian capital, sponsored by a number of independent and official bodies.

The event's activities began with an exhibition titled Between Cadres (BECA), which featured a number of diverse art exhibitions and workshops, attended by artists and publishers, in addition to seminars and panel discussions, focusing on the art of comics and its impact on the public space and expression mediums.

The organizers honored the artists Fawaz and Maalouf as pioneers of the comics genre locally and in the Arab world.

Fawaz's career spans over 30 years of cartoons and comics. His works have been featured by some of the most popular publications in the Arab region, such as *Sabah al-Khair*, the Emirati comics magazine *Majed*, and Saudi magazine *Bassem*.

Maalouf is of Lebanese descent. He graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts with honors in 1985. Since then, Maalouf's creativity has manifested itself in different ways, from painting, to designing graphics and illustrating children's books. His works were published in *Al-Shabab* [Youth] Magazine in 1980, and *Bassem*, which published special issues for the characters he created from 1987 to 1997. He also designed and created the character Bulbul in the magazine bearing the same name.

A number of distinguished comics artists from around the world were invited as well, to benefit from their experience and expand discussions about the cultural effect of various art forms. The final day featured a small exhibition of Arab comics and signing sessions by a number of artists, as well as a panel discussion held at the Goethe Institute in Cairo.

Artists in protest: Take satire seriously

The first edition of the Egypt Comix Week drew to a conclusion recently. It was held between 22 and 27 September, sponsored by the Goethe Institute, the French Cultural Institute in Cairo, and Safsafa Publishing

House, in addition to the Arab Comics Gate. The event was titled *Between Cadres (BECA)*, and follows the breathtaking evolution of comics in Egypt in recent years.

The evolution in question affected both form and essence, and perhaps the graphic novel *Metro* (2008) by Magdy Shafei is the best example of this. The novel was confiscated from the markets. Afterwards, Magdy worked on an alternative project titled *Al-Deshma*, publishing its first issue after the January Revolution. Then came the magazine *Tuk Tuk*, which received wide attention from readers and critics, with its critical approach and playful spirit.

Mohammed Tawfiq, one of the artists working for *Tuk Tuk*, said that the Comix Week was an important step toward promoting and activating the role of this art form, and introducing it to Egyptian society. But he also said that comics faced many challenges and constraints inhibiting it, broken down into two parts.

The first is material, related to funding, because comics, he said, was an industry that required financial support to grow and become more effective, yet without this affecting the freedom of expression, which he stressed was one of the most important strengths of the comics medium. The second part, Tawfiq continued, is moral, and has to do with the interaction between comics and society, arguing that this art form is a mirror of society, and must therefore receive support and attention from it.

"The comics art form features satire and addresses reality," Tawfiq said. "It is a mirror of society and the positive and negative things that go on in it, and its aim is to change things for the better or even create a shock to warn society of the need to pay attention to changes taking place in order to act accordingly," he added.

For his part, Ahmed Abdo, one of the founders of the Arab Comics Gate, said that comics still face many challenges hindering their penetration among all segments of people, especially in the absence of support whether from cultural arms of the government or private entities. In addition, he said, some still see comics as being aimed at children only.

Abdo continued, "Comics rely essentially on beautifully crafted graphics, colors, ideas, and successive frames, which in turn rely on closely examining the fine details to get to the meaning. The continuity of the frames also allow readers to return to some scenes more than once, creating a special bond with the fictional characters in the work."

Regarding Egyptian comics, Abdo said they are influenced by the culture and civilization of the country, with comics often showing Egyptian streets and atmospheres, as well as colors, fashions, features, and the characteristics of Egyptian people. Regarding their impact on society, Abdo said, "Comics are an art medium through which any idea no matter how complex or detailed can be conveyed, just like the film medium."

The owner of the Safsafa Publishing House and one of the organizers of the Comix Week Mohammed al-Baali said that comics were now "extremely influential." He explained, "The ability of images to convey ideas and emotions is sometimes greater than the ability of words, especially since we live in world where images dominate culture." Concerning the obstacles he is aware of, he said, "The most important

challenge impeding the spread of comics in Egypt is the scarcity of good local works. The majority of comics artists in Egypt go towards cartoons, which dominate most magazines featuring this art.”

Baali then moves to talking about the role of official institutions, which is still “meager” as he said. In his view, the comics magazine published by the Egyptian General Authority for Books in January “was sub par at the level of production and content.” But this of course should be seen in the context of the government’s inadequate efforts in this area.

Still, comics remain one of the fastest growing visual art forms in Egypt over the last period, with the unprecedented popularity gained by independent comics works. Comics artists have become stars, as their snappy sound bites with the inspiring colors combined with sharp satire can often replace long paragraphs of direct dry criticism.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.

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