

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



RAMSES YOUNAN
Sin título, 1939
Óleo sobre lienzo
46,5 x 36,5 cm
Colección H.E. Sh Hassan M. A. Al-Thani

DATES:	February 14, 2017 – May 28, 2017
PLACE:	Museo Reina Sofía. Sabatini building, 4º floor
ORGANIZATION:	Art reoriented
CURATORSHIP	Till Fellrath y Sam Bardaouil
COORDINATION:	Natalia Jiménez
RELATED ACTIVITIES:	Encounter <i>Art et Liberté</i> . Sam Bardaouil February 14, 2017 - 7:00 p.m. / Nouvel Building, Auditorium 200
EXHIBITION TOUR:	Centro George Pompidou, París (October 19, 2016 – January 16, 2017) Museo Reina Sofía (February 14, 2017 – May 28, 2017) The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, (July 15, 2017 – October 15, 2017). Tate Liverpool (November 17,2017 – March 18, 2018)

Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938 – 1948) is the first comprehensive museum exhibition about the Art and Liberty Group, a collective of surrealist artists and writers working in Cairo. Founded on December 22, 1938, with 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.



Miembros y simpatizantes de Art et Liberté en la Maison des Artistes, Darb el-Labbana, Citadel, ca. 1945
Fotógrafo desconocido. Copia de época
Gelatina de plata
Colección Christophe Bouleau, Ginebra

The Group played an active role within an international network of surrealist writers and artists. Through their own definition of Surrealism, they achieved a contemporary literary and pictorial language that was as much globally engaged as it was rooted in local artistic and political concerns. The connections between *Art et Liberté* and Spain are multifaceted. Georges Henein, one of the main founders of *Art et Liberté* spent his adolescent years in Madrid when his father was appointed ambassador there from 1924 until 1926. His years in Spain would leave a strong imprint on his

memory. Between 1936 and 1940, Henein would write a series of poems denouncing Franco’s rise to power. Moreover, when the Group’s manifesto “Long Live Degenerate Art” was published in December of 1938, Picasso’s *Guernica* was chosen to illustrate its cover as an antifascist stand. 79 years later, the iconic painting and the Group’s manifesto are both under the same roof, in the context of Museo Reina Sofía Collection. Conceived by guest curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, this exhibition charts an all encompassing presentation of the Group shedding new light on our understanding of Egyptian modernism through Art et Liberté’s artistic contributions and their negotiation of Surrealism.

By the late 1930s, when Art et Liberté emerged onto the Cairene arts scene, a state-endorsed culture of exhibition practices was firmly in place. This was best exemplified through the annual “Salon du Caire” that was organized by the highly conservative “Société des amis de l’art”. Underlined by nationalism, these exhibitions enforced the classification of artists according to nationality. Through their surrealist exhibitions and writings, Art et Liberté rejected the conflation of art with national sentiment, and the notion of art for art’s sake. Some of Art et Liberté’s most polemically charged writing was directed against the artists who belonged to this camp, and who had become fundamental to a local canon that Art et Liberté would seek to reshuffle, and even eliminate altogether.

Art et Liberté’s sense of freedom was augmented by the growth of Fascist ideologies which, beyond their firm grip over Europe, had been on the rise in Egypt since the early 1930s. While Cairo was not on the frontlines of war, Egypt was nonetheless de facto at war by virtue of being under British Colonial rule. By 1941, an overwhelming 140,000 soldiers were

stationed in Cairo alone, and troops and tanks swarmed the city streets. A profound engagement with the war, the anxiety that it fueled, and the destruction that it caused, were leitmotive across the whole spectrum of Art et Liberté's artistic and literary production.

During the time of Art et Liberté, Cairo was a city marked by extreme economic inequality. Art et Liberté believed that this unfair distribution of resources was largely due to the bourgeoisie who obstructed the evolution of the lower classes. In fragmenting the human figure, Art et Liberté harnessed Surrealism's revolt against the bourgeoisie's championing of Symbolism and Naturalism. In these traditional styles, the bodies of even the most wretched of characters were portrayed in an idealized fashion. In contrast, Art et Liberté painted deformed, dismembered or distorted figures in order to poignantly illustrate the harrowing economic injustice that plagued their society. The motif of the fragmented, or emaciated body, as Art et Liberté called it, became a site of social as well as artistic protest.



FOUAD KAMEL
Sin título, s.f.
Óleo sobre cartón
70,5 x 50 cm
Colección particular
© Colección Mai El-Dib, Alejandría

Several Art et Liberté leading patrons and artists were powerful women such as Amy Nimr, Marie Cavadia, and Lee Miller. Through vigorous salons hosted in their homes, they connected Art et Liberté artists to other surrealist figures both locally and internationally. The active role that these pioneering women played in shaping the Group contributed to Art et Liberté's strong feminist stand that was evident in many of their publications such as *al-Tatawwur* and *Don Quichotte*. In the visual arts, this concern took on a specific manifestation during the war years when the subject of prostitution became the main theme in many of the group members art works. The suffering prostitute, or the "woman of the city" as Henein wrote in his poem "Saint Louis Blues", is a theme that is explored in a large number of Art et Liberté paintings whereby, the female body is depicted broken and deformed.

Art et Liberté believed that Surrealism is at its core a calling for a social and moral revolution as well as an art movement. Writing in 1938, leading Art et Liberté theorist and painter Ramses Younane depicted Surrealism as a movement in crisis, and differentiated two types of Surrealism. The first, best exemplified by Dalí and Magritte's absurd juxtapositions, was considered excessively pre-meditated, leaving no space for the uncontrolled imagination. The second, consisting of automatic writing and drawing, was deemed too self-centered and not geared enough towards collective empowerment. Younane identified the need for a new type of Surrealism, which he called "Subjective Realism", by which artists deliberately incorporated recognizable symbols into works that were initially driven by the subconscious impulse.

One of the defining traits of Art et Liberté is the close correlation between their visual art and literature. Several of Georges Henein's texts, for instance, evoked works by some of the Group painters such as Kamel El- Telmisany, Amy Nimr and Mayo. Equally so, Albert

Cossery's short stories provided several Group painters such as Fouad Kamel, Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and Robert Medley with haunting subject matter. Between 1939 and 1940, the Group produced three innovative journals: *Don Quichotte* in French, *al-Tatawwur* in Arabic and the bilingual bulletin *Art et Liberté*. From the early 1940s and into the mid 1950s they also ran two publishing houses, "Les Éditions Masses" and "La Part du Sable".



LEE MILLER
Portrait of Space Al Bulwayeb (Retrato del espacio, Al Bulwayeb), circa de Siwa, Egipto), 1937 (copia moderna a partir de copia antigua)
Gelatina de plata
30,5 x 27,5 cm
© Lee Miller Archives, Inglaterra

From the mid-1930s, many Art et Liberté photographers such as Ida Kar, Hassia, Ramzi Zolqomah, Khorchid, and Van Leo made use of various techniques such as solarization and photomontage, which had become central to surrealist photography. Art et Liberté created absurd images in which they further explored the deconstruction of the human form, and the alienation of the familiar within diverse types of surrealist settings. Similar to how other surrealist photographers employed primitive masks and objects in order to criticize the euro-centric colonial vision of the world, Art et Liberté employed playful compositions and absurd juxtapositions to criticize the nationalist exploitation of Pharaonic Egypt.

In 1946, some Art et Liberté affiliates co-founded the Contemporary Art Group, which remained active until the mid 1950s. A few of the Group members, such as Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, Hamed Nada and Samir Rafi', would become some of Egypt's leading modern artists. The Contemporary Art Group did not identify as surrealist. They diverted from the movement, developing what they saw a truly authentic Egyptian art. They used a local vernacular consisting of a symbolic iconography borrowed from popular arts and crafts. From the late 1940s until the early 1960s, the question of how art can be made authentically Egyptian became a core concern for artists and intellectuals alike. The Contemporary Art Group succeeded in being perceived by the public as a movement that invented the first truly Egyptian Art. However, Art et Liberté artists, who had disbanded in 1948, considered the Contemporary Art Group as a mouthpiece for a new form of nationalism.

This exhibition has been made possible thanks to

Principal support from
H.E. Sh.Hassan M.A. Al Thani



Generous support from
The Montblanc Cultural Foundation

The collaboration of



**For further information:
PRESS OFFICE**

MUSEO REINA SOFÍA

prensa1@museoreinasofia.es

prensa3@museoreinasofia.es

(+34) 91 774 10 05 / 06

www.museoreinasofia.es/prensa

