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"Art and Liberty: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)"

CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS

Mara Hoberman



Inji Efflatoun, *Untitled*, 1942, oil on canvas, 23 5/8 × 31 5/8".

THE PROLIFIC EGYPTIAN SURREALIST COLLECTIVE Art and Liberty has been directly inserted into the center of its European counterpart this winter. In Paris, the Pompidou's "Art and Liberty: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)" demonstrates the vibrant contemporary interest in Egyptian modernism, paralleling a similarly themed exhibition this past fall at the Palace of Arts in Cairo. Framed in the city of Breton et al., the work drove home the relationship between anticolonialism and antifascism, East and West. (Indeed, the group's manifesto, with which the show opens, makes a pointed reference to the Nazis' infamous "Degenerate Art" exhibition.) Railing against state-sponsored art abroad and at home, the group's political fervor courses through this erudite exhibition, organized by independent curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. Its global ideological critique is expressed in film and audio clips, letters, photos, and manuscripts, providing a rich context for some 130 thematically arranged paintings, photographs, and works on paper by thirty-six artists.

Cairo was not a battleground, but World War II loomed large for the cosmopolitan Art and Liberty group. Fighting came within 150 miles of the Egyptian capital and more than a hundred thousand soldiers were stationed there by 1941 under British colonial rule. A section of the exhibition titled "The Voice of Canons" includes harrowing scenes like Inji Efflatoun's nightmarish *Jeune fille et monstre* (Young Girl and Monster), 1942, and Samir Rafi's apocalyptic 1945 landscapes of men and women fleeing an air raid on Alexandria. Efflatoun's powerful war-as-rape visualization was inspired by a poem by one of the group's founders, Georges Henein. Indicative of Art and Liberty's characteristic fluidity between art and literature, numerous artists associated with the group pictorialized Henein's poems, while the author, in turn, evoked artworks—including paintings by Kamel El-Telmissany, Amy Nimr, and Mayo—in his influential texts. Stylistically and thematically epitomizing Art and Liberty's disdain for the bourgeoisie (and the conservative art it supported), Egyptian-Greek painter Mayo's *Coups de bâtons* (Baton Blows), 1937, depicts the civil unrest that plagued Egypt even before the war (and the Fascist Italian invasion of the country in 1940). This frenzied battle between grossly distorted cartoonish figures armed with sticks and chairs evokes the regular demonstrations against economic inequality that erupted during this tumultuous period in Egyptian history.

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Feminist politics (undoubtedly a reflection of Art and Liberty's relatively large number of female affiliates) reverberate in numerous scenes reflecting the plight of women during the war. In addition to Efflatoun and Nimr, American model turned photographer Lee Miller joined the group, having settled in Cairo in 1934, post-Man Ray, pre-Roland Penrose. Efflatoun was one of the first women to attend Cairo's Faculty of Arts and was just eighteen years old when she first exhibited with Art and Liberty. Born into wealthy intellectual families—Nimr's father was media magnate and prosecularist Faris Nimr; Efflatoun, an aristocrat, was raised by her divorced mother and would later be imprisoned during Nasser's anticommunist roundup in 1959—these well-connected and politically active women drew attention to prostitution, unwanted pregnancy, and drug addiction at salons they hosted in Cairo. This tension between the influence and privilege of women members of the group and the splintering reality of the conditions for women in Cairo at the time is emphasized by a section titled "The Woman of the City." A particularly haunting example, Rateb Seddik's sickly Madonna and child, *Liliane Brook et son orchestre aveugle* (Liliane Brook and Her Blind Orchestra), ca. 1940, depicts a baby clutching his mother's breast ("Liliane Brook" was the alleged pseudonym of a cabaret dancer in Cairo during World War II) with one hand and an opium pipe in the other, while a crowd of desperate uniformed souls forms behind them. In other works, a similar desperation is articulated by variously fragmented, bloodied, and lifeless female bodies.

Revealing photography as a particularly fertile ground for Art and Liberty's unique experimentations, works by Ida Kar, Idabel, Étienne Sved, and Khalil Abduh recast traditional images of Egyptian prowess—majestic sand dunes, grand pyramids, monumental sculptures—as critiques of nationalist propaganda. In a playful untitled photo from 1949, Abduh frames a distant pyramid so that it forms a perfect footrest for a female model lounging in the foreground. Sved, meanwhile, juxtaposes human body parts with those of monumental Pharaonic sculptures in photos that imply that Egypt's history and mythology overshadow the average contemporary citizen.

While the exhibition recognizes Art and Liberty's important dialogue with European Surrealists (in particular the close relationship between Henein and André Breton), the curators take pains to emphasize how Art and Liberty artists set themselves apart: by neither sacrificing imagination to premeditation (a fault they found with Dalí and Magritte) nor privileging self-interest over collective empowerment (as they found with the automatic drawing championed by André Masson). This independence is further developed in the section "Subjective Realism," which highlights a distinct visual language in which hieroglyphics, characters from traditional fables, and references to local current events are incorporated into dreamy explorations of the unconscious and the revolutionary responsibility of the artist. Perhaps the best example of "subjective realism" is an untitled 1939 painting by Ramsès Younan, the artist and theorist who coined the expression to define a revisionist extension of European Surrealist ideas. Describing crisis in terms that are both universal and specifically Egyptian, Younan paints the sky goddess, Nut, naked and arched over a bleak desert terrain marked by a de Chirico-esque palette and elongated shadows—ancient mythology merged with metaphysical painting.

"Art and Liberty: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)" is on view through Jan. 16; travels to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Feb. 14–May 28; K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, July 15–Oct. 15; Tate Liverpool, Nov. 17, 2017–Mar. 18, 2018.

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