

Fundamentalism & Art Oppression

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This paper touches upon the subject of freedom of expression from two different perspectives. First, the tendency of destructing art works for their inherent undesirable significance. The paper covers glimpses of the antagonistic movements against works of art throughout Egyptian and World history; analyzing the pseudo justification for destruction, degrading or intentional neglect of works of art based on which religious, political or provoked masses were the major driving forces behind the suppression of Art. The second perspective emphasizes the Artist's freedom of expression in Egypt throughout the 20th Century, with emphasis on the nude paintings of the Artist “Mahmoud Said”.

Destructive Tendencies of Works of Art:

“The First Perspective”

To start, let us examine historical events epitomizing the destruction of artifacts due to religious, political or ideological rage:

Firstly, during early stages of introduction of the Christian Faith in Egypt, when the Romans tortured the Copts, they flooded to Upper Egypt and Nubia and sought refuge in the abandoned ancient temples. Threatened by the Pharaonic idols on the Isis Temple walls on the Philae Island (Aswan), they defaced the reliefs in the temples, which symbolized a repression of the Isis Cult, since the popularity of the Isis Cult had represented a profound influence on the masses at the time.

Other similar events took place in Luxor and Aswan Temples and Shrines, where the symbol of the “Cross” replaced the symbol of the “Key of Life” and Pharaonic “Khartoush”.

The above cases represent only a few of many throughout the Ancient Egyptian history in which different monuments and artworks were subjected to various forms of destruction due to religious fundamentalism, political animosity or change of ideological standards.

In the Islamic Era, with the influence of some fundamentalist preachers, certain books were burned and cursed and the representational miniature illustrations were scrubbed and in other cases a red line was introduced, crossing the neck area of the living creatures in the illustrations, symbolizing the termination of the soul. This was done to

avoid their beliefs that people could retreat to atheism and worship such painted creatures.

In some cases books were burned which did not even contain any illustrations, such as “El-Hallag” and “Ibn Roshd”. Under this oppressive censorship regime some eminent authors voluntarily terminated their own radical manuscripts, fearing the possibility of others misinterpreting their ideas and thoughts.

These cases widely manifested across Europe in the medieval era as well, in a rather severe manner. The paintings along with books and even persons with radical ideas were tortured, burned to death based on pseudo-accusations of practicing witchcraft or daring to challenge the established sciences and theories. Works of Art by Rembrandt and other eminent painters, for example, were burned under this oppressive regime.

Such destructive phenomena remains dormant from time to time and suddenly erupt; manifesting itself in other forms or objectives such as extremist ideological and political drives.

We can all recall the destruction of patriotic national symbols upon collapsing of their respective political regimes. Destruction of works of Art commemorating national figures such as Lenin in Russia and Eastern Europe. In Egypt, in the heat of the 1952 Revolution, politically charged rebels in Port Said tore down the statue of Ferdinand Deliceps (the Designer of the Suez Canal). Similarly, Egyptians in other cities demolished artworks commemorating the ex-anarchy with very few exceptions. These are only a few examples of such acts.

A few years ago, despite international resistance and appeal, the “Taliban” of Afghanistan destroyed the historically significant “Bhuda” statues. More recently, the tragic loss of Iraqi heritage of universal significance as represented in the Baghdad Museum of Antiquities and the National Library of Rare Manuscripts, which was subjected to acts of looting and irresponsible destruction.

The cases stated above, are examples of the described phenomena in this paper.

Case Study: The Egyptian Case of Artistic Freedom of Expression in the 20th Century.

“The Second Perspective”

The first school of Fine Arts was established in Egypt in 1908 under the patronage of the Royal Prince Youssef Kamal, supported by enlightened

religious, political, economic figures and eminent writers. This was an important milestone in the evolution of Egyptian Modern Art. Yet, the start was entirely academic, following the deteriorated era of European Art, with mediocre and limited vision. The European teachers concentrated on teaching the technical principles of Art, neglecting the cultural and creative aspects. Such aspects are normally responsible for building the unique personality of an artist and charging his sense of freedom of expression. When the distinguished graduates were sent on Scholarships to art academies in France and Italy, they found themselves practicing the same conservative curricula, deprived of interaction with the vivid modernistic movement prevalent in Europe at the time, as they feared they might deviate from the mainstream.

“Mahmoud Mokhtar”, the pioneer Egyptian sculptor, coincidentally met the leader of the People’s Revolution of 1919, “Saad Zaghloul”, interacting with his revolutionary objectives crystallized in rejecting the British Colony and the Royal government loyal to it. “Mokhtar” designed a model of a statue named “Nahdet Masr (“Egyptian Uprising”)", which won a golden medal in the Salon of Paris. “Saad Zaghloul” and his fellow nationalistic politicians encouraged Mokhtar to erect a full scale of the same statue in downtown Cairo, despite resistance from the British and the Royal Palace. A portion of the funds for this statue was raised by an appeal to the Egyptian masses countrywide as a symbol of defiance of the British Colonial Rule.

Other Artists of the same generation such as “Ragheb Ayyad”, “Mohamed Nagi”, “Youusef Kamel”, and “Mahmoud Said” supported the revolutionary tendencies in a symbolic manner. They have changed their subject matters from aristocratic salon subjects to express the life of the working class and the rural areas.

The generation to follow lost these dynamic tendencies, involved in bureaucratic and technical issues, preventing any sort of confrontation with the authorities, leading to an era of cool conservatism, away from practicing freedom of expression, due to the oppression of the democratic tendencies and the lack of a critics’ movement that could have supported the radical tendencies.

In this era, the freedom of expression in all domains of Art was fairly minimal, where artists’ yielded their role of radical resistance and call for change. At the same time, the different forms of censorship gained greater influence.

In the late 1930’s, a revolutionary art movement led by Poets and Artists established a group called “Art and Freedom”. Their first manifesto was to support European Artists oppressed by the Nazi and Fascist regimes

in Europe since these European Artists' works were destroyed and considered as dismal. Therefore, the "Art and Freedom" group manifesto, published on the 12th of December 1938, was titled "Praise the Dismal Art". This particular group, led by the Poet "George Heneen", and the Artists "Ramses Younan", "Fuoad Kamel", and "Kamel El-Telemessani" among others, declared in a very powerful statement: "The necessity of unbound release of the imprisoned freedom of expression for the Artists". They believed that practicing art is the essence of freedom, stating that artists create the world and its order, and it is therefore ridiculous for a creator to be considered a follower of any sort of regime. The movement was strongly activated in the art and the cultural arena in Egypt using painting, poetry and articles and speeches. They connected themselves to the radical movement against the artistic conservatism and political oppression. "Ramses Younan" was jailed among 200 writers and journalists on the 11th July 1946. After his release, he decided to quit politics and flee to Paris to settle there. So many artists and writers have been repeatedly imprisoned based on accusations of political nature such as provocation of the masses as a means to overthrow the ruling government. During the same era, caricature artists performed very daring and radical statements in their sarcastic drawings about the governmental corruption.

- **Freedom of Expression and 1952 Revolution:**

With the advent of the 1952 Revolution in Egypt, artists found their dream of liberty and freedom coming to reality and warmly supported the revolution's objectives, expressing themes commemorating its achievements. Gradually, such enthusiasm turned into conventional propaganda of "social realism" style; artists became tamed followers of the military rulers digressing from any critical stance towards the new forms of corruption and defeat.

In the late 1970's fundamental movements grew simultaneously with the Open Market Capitalist System, which had replaced the Social System. Artists, writers, and thinkers suffered from the outrageous growth of pseudo-consumption capitalism and nouveaux-riche atmosphere, radical movements were suppressed through the early 1980's, until the emergence of radical artist group "Al-Mehwar" ("The Axis") who disseminated the seeds of a new era of freedom of expression with ambitious social context of the art works through their successive monumental installations. This was followed by the establishment of the annual "Youth Salon in Cairo", which performed a social liberal accent in the young artists' work.

- **Mahmoud Said & Standards of Social Tolerance for Artworks:**

Mahmoud Said who was born in the late 19th Century, became a member of the first generation of pioneers of modern Egyptian painting. He was a self-taught artist, attending European Artists' Ateliers in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early years of the 20th Century, traveling throughout Europe to visit museums and art galleries and artists' ateliers. He was the son of the prime minister of Egypt at the time, Mohamed Pasha Said who was related to the Royal Family. Mahmoud Said was educated and groomed to become a judge. Yet art was his enchantment, expressing the life of the ordinary people in their spiritual as well as sensual life.

Art was for him the liberating catalyst amidst his rigid, conservative social surroundings, and bureaucratic rules of his profession. In the art movement, he was active in supporting the radical groups such as the "Art and Freedom" group, bailing artists such as "Abdel-Hadi El-Gazzar" and his teacher "Hussein Youssef Amin" from prison. They were jailed because of a painting by "El-Gazzar" named "The Banquet" representing a group of poor people standing in front of vacant dishes, symbolizing hunger and misery of the struggling lower class at the time. The painting provoked King Farouk during the inauguration ceremony of the "Cairo Salon" in 1950.

Said was a wonderful painter with incredible energy of expression, including his daring nude images with startling sensual warmth. Such works were accepted in the 1920's conservative society and throughout the following decades until the 1960's. However, with the rise of fundamentalism in the 1970's and 1980's, a series of successive events took place prohibiting the freedom of exhibiting such themes followed by banning of nude models from art schools and rigid censorship of art books containing nude images.

In Mahmoud Said's museum in Alexandria the officials collected his nude paintings in a dark room to avoid "embarrassment". In other events, these particular paintings were withheld from display in a retrospective exhibition of his works held on the occasion of the inauguration of the new Cairo Opera House in the 1980's. Such examples reflect the regression in artistic freedom of expression and its impact on the deterioration in the audience's tolerance towards such works of art. To date the art movement still suffers from the effects of such fundamental oppression.

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Illustrations to accompany
Presentation of the Paper