

## Contemporary Problems to Contemporary Egyptian Art and the Way Forward

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### Abstract

Egypt is located in a strategic part of Africa, and it has a significant influence in the religious, cultural, artistic, and political development of North Africa. However, this paper dwells on the contemporary problems of Egyptian art, which range from religious extremism to political imbroglio. It chronicles the development of contemporary problems of Egyptian art, and it also fine-tunes solution to the problems identified.

**Key Words:** Art, Contemporary, Development Graffiti.

### Introduction

The history of Egypt has been long and rich, due to the flow of the Nile River, with its fertile bank and delta. Its rich history also comes from its native inhabitants and Greece. Much of Egypt's ancient history was a mystery until the secrets of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs were deciphered with the discovery and help of the Rosetta stone (Kamil, 1976). Human settlement in Egypt dated back to about 40,000 BC. However, recent Egyptian history has been dominated by events of nearly thirty years of rule by former President Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 deposed Mubarak and brought in the first democratically elected president in Egyptian history, President Mohammed Morsi. There was civil unrest after the 2011 revolution and related disputes, which culminated into the 2013 Egyptian coup d'état, and it also aggravated the plights of masses in Egypt.

However, Egypt is well known for its magnificent traditional art forms which are distinctively and uniquely aligned with the cultural and religious beliefs of the Egyptians. Egyptian art is huge and diversified, so also the problems associated with it. The problems of Egyptian art is what this paper is fine-tuning solution to, which started in 2011 during the Egyptian revolution, that ousted former President Hosni Mubarak. This has contributed to the contemporary problems of Egyptian art, although terrorists had been attacking Egypt before 2014. The Washington Post (2015) observes that in 1980s and 1990s, terrorist attacks in Egypt became numerous and severe, that they were targeting Coptic and foreign tourists as well as government officials.

Not only this, Egyptians practiced mural in the ancient time and it was practiced based on their religious belief. In 2011, wall paintings and graffiti were resuscitated for revolutionary purpose. The wall painters and graffiti artists used their artworks to express their political demands; criticise Hosni Mubarak's regime; congratulate the people on the revolution; remember the revolution's martyrs; name and shame oppressors; express solidarity with other Arab revolutions; and comment on current affairs (Khatib, 2013). Bradford (2014) identifies three roles played by graffiti in Egyptian revolution of 2011, which are; the graffiti reinforced the revolutionary ideals of the unrest in response to political corruption. Secondly, graffiti were used to defame corrupt government figures and pieces of propaganda aimed to defame protesters. Thirdly, graffiti were executed to communicate the issues, attitudes, ideas, and messages surrounding the Egyptian revolution. From this, one can see that graffiti was a method adopted by Egyptian artists to support protesters in their continuing conflict against Hosni Mubarak, his regime, the corruption perpetrated by his government. Also, graffiti in Egyptian revolution served as an inflammatory, anti-regime communication between protesters, the public and global audiences. However, the artists involved were documenting the daily activities of their leaders, but in 2014, the present Egyptian government promulgated a law prohibiting the practice of graffiti, which was termed as "political or abusive graffiti". This has restricted the practice of wall painting in Egypt, which constitutes part of the problems that this paper aims to proffer solutions.

It is pertinent to note that art scholars such as James (2013) and Khatib (2013) have suggested that the success of Tunisian revolution and colour revolutions in Eastern Europe were parts of factors responsible for Egyptian revolution. In Tunisia, street arts were used in inspiring the protesters. Also, in Libya, street arts were parts of plot used in dislodging Muammar Gaddafi. One of the Gaddafi's pictures depicts him holding fuel pump, while there is another one, which portrays Gaddafi as a monkey. All these were attempts to show that they were tired of his regime. However, colour revolution (Graffiti and mural) is a term that was widely used by worldwide media to describe various

related movements that developed in several societies in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans during the early 2000s (Gorenburg, 2014). The term has also been applied to a number of revolutions elsewhere, including the Middle East. The participants in the colour revolutions mostly use nonviolent resistance, which is also called civil resistance. They usually adopt methods such as demonstrations, strikes and interventions to protest against government seen as corrupt or authoritarian. Also, the participants do advocate for democracy. These movements generally adopted a specific colour or flower as their symbol.

Renowned scholars have proffered numerous solutions to the problems of art in countries, and many have already been adopted by the countries concerned. Amongst recent efforts in tackling prominent issues affecting African art, are contributions from Suleiman (2003), UNESCO (2003) and Yahaya (2015). This study will proffer solutions to the following contemporary problems of Egyptian art; the bombing of Museum of Islamic art, and the harassment and intimidation of Graffiti artists in Egypt. All these actions are threats to Egyptian art, which may send Egyptian art into extinction, and also, harassment and intimidation of street artists in Egypt may prevent vibrant and robust art practice.

#### **A Brief History of the Museum of Islamic Art**

According to Kamil (1976) and CBC News (2010) Museum of Islamic art, Cairo, was proposed in 1880 while Julius Franz, the Head of the Technical Department at the Awqaf, suggested in 1881 that the ruined Mosque of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim, which was adjacent to the Bab Al-Futuh, to be a provisional seat for the Museum, and a Gallery was accordingly furnished there in the eastern arcade, consisting initially of 111 architectural pieces taken from other monuments. The Committee of Arab Antiquities was set up by Khedive Tawfiq (Khedive means Viceroy in Arab countries) in the same year, which its duties included running the Arab Museum, and providing it with objects as well as preserving the monuments. In 1884, a two-storey structure was built in the courtyard to house the collection of 900 objects, although its staff consisted of only one curator and a door keeper (CBC News, 2010).



**Plate 1. Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, Egypt.**<http://www.islamicmuseum.gov.eg>

In 1887, Max Hertz, who replaced Julius Franz, suggested the name of the museum back then as the gallery of Arab Antiquities (Dar Al-Athar Al-Arabiya). By 1895, the collection numbered 1,641, and the new building became too crowded, so he requested the Awqaf to build a larger Museum, and the foundations were laid for the present larger building in the Bab Al-Khalqarea of Cairo in 1899 (Kamil, 1976).

It should however be noted, that the new and current building was designed by Alfonso Manescalo, and was completed in 1902 in neo-Mamluk style, with its upper storey housing the National Library, and the old museum in al Hakim was demolished in the 1970s (CBC News, 2010). The new Museum is a two-storey building; the lower floor contains the exhibition halls and the upper floor contains the general stores. The basement contains a store connected with the restoration section. The entrance on Port Said Street has a very luxurious facade, rich with decorations inspired by Islamic architecture in Egypt from various periods.

This new museum is one of the greatest in the world, with its exceptional collection of rare woodwork and plaster artefacts, as well as metal, ceramics, glass, crystal, and textile objects of all periods, from all over the Islamic world. Also, in recent years, the museum has exhibited about 2,500 artefacts in 25 galleries, and it houses more than 102,000 objects (The UK Guardian, 2014). The collection includes rare manuscripts of the Qur'an, with some calligraphy written in silver ink, on pages with elaborate borders. It has also conducted archaeological excavations in the Fustat area and has organized a number of national and international exhibitions. The museum was renovated between 2003 and 2010.

On January 24, 2014 a car bomb caused a serious damage to the museum and destroyed many artifacts. The bomb also severely damaged the building's facade, erasing intricate designs in the Islamic style. The Egyptian National Library and Archives in the same building was also affected.

### Street Art in Egypt

Murals are traditional Egyptian paintings, which were done on the walls of tombs. They were executed based on the Egyptians' belief about life after death. Recently, Egyptians resuscitated their wall paintings by adapting and adopting styles and themes from their traditional art in order to fight their leaders whom they perceived as being corrupt. It should be noted that mural and Graffiti are both expressed on wall and may be motivated by different reasons, for example, political or decorative. However, in this paper, they will be used interchangeably.

Graffiti was a rare sight in Egypt before 2011, when artists began to document the crimes of contemporary regimes (Waleed, 2013; Alastair, 2013). Wall painting is considered in Egypt nowadays as a potential instrument of revolution. As a result of this, Egyptians adopt it to document the criminal activities of their leaders, although some of the artists act on their own, while others consider it as part of record documentation so as to remind those who take political stands against the masses that, nothing escapes the eyes and ears of their people. The artists cover the walls with portraits of activists, who died in their course of demonstrations, and they also render other scenes, which depict the misrules being given to them by their leaders.

The graffiti can be seen as the creativity of people to develop new tools for protest and dialogue that are stronger and more permanent than the tyranny of their rulers (Soraya, 2013). The artists transformed the city's walls into a political rally that would never end as long as their leaders refuse to give them befitting governance. It is worthy of note that, since President Mohamed Morsi was elected in 2012, street artists were criticising his government, either by protesting against his regime or painting their protest via epic murals in the city. These artists fought Mohammed Morsi because of their conviction that, Morsi was promoting members of Muslim Brotherhood over others by appointing them to the Ministries, and coupled with the fact that many have lost their friends in violent clashes between Egyptian protesters and police forces. Also, they were convinced that Morsi's government was corrupt, coupled with the prevailing economic hardships on the Egyptians. As a result, they believed that President Mohamed Morsi should be fought through art, and they continued to chronicle the passages of events in Egypt as they unfolded.



Plate 2. Mural and the Brutal Reality of the Martyrs' Deaths, Gloss on the wall, Mohamed Mahmoud, 2012, <https://suzeeinthecity.com.wordpress/2012/12/29>

In Plate 2, Mohammed Mahmoud depicts the reality of martyrs' death. The two dominating figures have sustained injury, which is conspicuously obvious, the man at the middle has his mouth battered by the police's bullets, while the man at right hand side is foaming as if he had been dealt with by the security agents. There is a man at the left hand side, who is laughing to the horrendous activities, being perpetrated by Morsi's government, and that man may likely be Morsi.



Plate 3. Funeral Procession, Gloss on the wall, El-Moshir, Year: Unknown, <http://qz.com/104014/cairo-street-art>.

The mural in Plate 3 is a mural of a funeral procession, which was painted by El Moshir on the wall of the Armenian Church in Downtown Cairo. It contains the somber faces of mourners, who carry a casket of their departed relative. Soraya (2013) informs that, the funeral being depicted is that of Gika, a young revolutionary who voted for President Morsi, and was one of the first martyrs to fall during Morsi's term. The street artist made this mural in the weeks before the anti-Morsi protests on June 30, perhaps to remind Egyptians of the heroic performance of many who died while fighting for a better Egypt and their democratic rights.



**Plate 4. Pharaonic women in battle, Gloss on the wall, Alaa Awad, 2013**  
<https://suzeinthecity.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/>

In Plate 4, Alaa Awad depicts women with their weapons, who are going to a battle, and women are not allowed to fight in an Arab country, but perhaps the dire conditions makes them to fight. What Awad did is to show the effect of war, which has liberated Egyptian women to the extent of defending themselves on the battle field.

It is important to note that, in November 2013, the interim government proposed a bill that would reinstate prison sentences and fines on artists whose works were deemed to be “political or abusive graffiti” (a vague concept left open to interpretation by the ruling government) (Waleed, 2013). In May 2014, the bill was passed into law. This development has restricted the practice of murals thereby, constituting a problem to art practice in modern Egypt. Solutions to the problems identified above are suggested below.

#### **Solution to the Contemporary Problems of Egyptian Art**

Two problems, which have been identified in Egyptian art include; bombing of Museum of Islamic art by religious extremists, and harassment and intimidation of Egyptian street artists. The immediate and long term effects of this trend, if allowed to degenerate further, will be; an obliteration of Egyptian past historical records, and a drastic drop in art practice and art activism in Egypt. The present trend where the Museum of Islamic art is bombed and street artists are harassed and molested, mean a bleak future for art practice in Egypt and Africa at large. As a result of this, the following solutions are suggested to afore stated contemporary problems of Egyptian art.

There should be enlightenment campaign for political office holders in Egypt on the importance of art. This will enable them to appreciate art and develop good attitude towards art, and this in turn will make them come up with good legislation that will promote art practice.

Government must live up to its billing by equipping security agents with modern security gargets so as to forestall future recurrence of bombing Museum of Islamic art and other cultural heritage in Egypt. If security agents are adequately equipped, they will be able to checkmate the activities of terrorists.

There should be conferences, seminars, and workshops for religious leaders, followers, and politicians on the importance of art to human race. If this is done, it will make them to appreciate art. It will also eliminate possible attacks on Egyptian cultural heritage.

Fundamental human right of expression by artists should be enshrined and enforced in the Egyptian constitution. This will make street artists in Egypt to execute their works without fear of being molested or arrested by government security agents. It will also guarantee the artists' rights, which will make the artists to discharge their duties as advocate of the masses.

There should be rule of law in Egypt, which will culminate into constitutional democracy, and this will safeguard the right of the artists and eliminate all barriers in art practice. If restriction in art practice in Egypt is removed, this will metamorphose into vibrant and robust art practice.

## Conclusion

Egypt has been variously referred to as centre of African civilization, and this is probably because of its well documented historical and cultural heritage. This heritage should not be allowed to be destroyed by religious fanatics either deliberately or not deliberately. The government must put necessary measures in place to protect Egyptian cultural heritage so as to preserve history.

Vicious, hilarious and uncensored, Cairo's street art represents a community of resilient, articulate and indignant artists voicing their condemnation of the regime and its injustices to the streets. They are a vital thread in the fabric of the Egyptian revolutionary identity. It is against this backdrop that this paper has discussed the present problems of Egyptian art and proffered necessary solutions to the problems identified. On this note, this paper will be considered as a contribution to the study of African visual arts.

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