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# 'This is one of my greatest achievements': George Bahgory, Egypt's renowned artist on his own museum

Rania Khallaf

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Painter, sculptor and cartoonist George Bahgory's museum is open on Saturdays from 1pm to 6pm presenting a large body of the artist' work

When I heard the news that the legendary artist George Bahgory was opening a private museum I was thrilled though, having kept up with Bahgory's work through the years, I expected nothing new.

I should've anticipated the pleasure it would give me to locate the artist at Andalusia Café, which occupies the ground floor of the huge colonial building on 26 July Street where the six-room apartment housing the museum is located. The museum itself provides not only a journey in time but also a showcase of painting genres, not to mention experimental sculptures.

"This," Bahgory said, having charmingly complained of growing old, "is one of my greatest achievements. And the last one, it seems," he said in a practical manner.

"It's on the first floor," he protested when I suggested we should take the lift, "just a few more steps." In the calm, tidy space full of huge paintings where we soon arrived I felt I had entered a different world.

"This museum means a lot to me. It is like a huge closet where I'm storing almost everything I have painted throughout my career." A corridor connects all six rooms, with antique stools scattered around on the wood

flooring and an enormous visitors book featuring the artist's own sketches near the entrance.

“The Ministry of Culture ignored me, so I decided to establish my own museum. I encourage all artists to act similarly. It is a common enough tendency in Europe. This collection includes more than one hundred paintings. Some date back to the 1950s and 1960s. They were produced and stored in my atelier in Paris. But I thought it wise to transport them to Cairo, my home. I chose this place because it is at the heart of Downtown, where people whom I used to make portraits of have all lived. It is also very close to my own flat.”



(Photo: Al Ahram Weekly)

Bahgory, now 85 years, started his career as a cartoonist at the popular Sabah Al-Kheir magazine in the late 50s, and even though his work was to move on he would never lost his humorous spirit. This is evident in such works as a small portrait of the late president Gamal Abdel-Nasser sticking his tongue out and waving provocatively. It belongs in a mosaic-like group

of small portraits at the end of the corridor.

“I like to spend time in this room, because it has portraits of my friends and people I loved.”

They include such figures as vernacular poet Sayed Hegab, cartoonist and poet Salah Jahin and indeed Bahgory’s own self-portrait. However funny the work, however, no caricatures are on display.

“It was just as start,” says Bahgory, who hasn’t made cartoons since 1975 although he continues to sketch from life compulsively.

The museum includes plenty of these, and also volumes of autobiography he has published, sincere and open confessions in which he records a painful childhood rather out of character with his general demeanor.

“My mother died when I was three, and my father married another woman. She was so cruel. She used to insult and kick us out of our home.”

He was compensated by a funny aunt, a simple woman who cared for him: “She’d take me out of our gloomy home to visit our relatives in Shubra and other popular places. It was only then that I learned to love people and places,” he said, pointing to a huge portrait of said aunt.

She looks very kind, in a black gown, with a light black tarha over her head, and a faint smile on her face.

“I painted it when I was in Paris. At that time, I wanted to bring all my Cairo memories to life.” There are also two portraits of Bahgory’s father.

“My father was a teacher. He taught English at private schools. I painted him several times. I still remember when he used to spend hours sitting in silence, checking and correcting sheets. He had poor eyesight and this is what prevented him from teaching in the amiri or government schools, which was much better at the time. I lived in Paris for 30 years. I enjoyed

being in France, it's my second country. But I was always truly alone there.”

Women are the common subject of his paintings and portraiture.

“As I lost my mother at a very young age, I was trying to find her in the faces of all the women I'd ever met. I loved portraying women because of her,” he explained.



(Photo: Al Ahram Weekly)

In addition to paintings depicting women in different positions and shapes, two portraits of Neitokres, his lifetime partner and wife and his nude muse are juxtaposed on one wall.

One beguiling still life features wine bottles and glasses in different shapes and sizes. They look as if they are different people gathering in a public space. Some are happy, others sad, angry or drunk. The oil-on-canvas and wood collection was produced in Paris.

The nudes are but infrequent. A huge painting depicts parents having fun with their children, all in the nude. “I spent days at a nude beach south of Paris, and enjoyed sketching nudity,” he smiled.

A whole collection was published as a picture book a few years ago. Before I left Bahgory showed me one of the first copies of a beautifully printed picture book called *The Jordanian Bahgory*, published by Al-Rowaq Gallery in Jordan, which includes sketches by Bahgory produced during his journeys to Amman.

The museum also features images of working-class people, exhibited at Al-Massar Gallery in 2014 as “Nostalgic Dreams”.

“I still love to sit in the cafés and enjoy the rhythm.”

Nasr Café, a place in Maarouf, near these offices and the museum both, looms large. Bahgory paints the café and its clientele with compassion. The Islamic neighbourhood of Al-Hussein and Khan Al-Khalili, too, is present.

But, though Bahgory is Christian, there are no churches at all in the museum. Bahgory graduated from Cairo’s art college in 1955 and also earned a degree from the Paris Academy of Fine Arts in 1970. His work is influenced by Youssef Kamel, Bikar and Picasso, who appears in one portrait.

Two still lifes mimic Picasso’s apple paintings. Kamel and Bikar were mentors of Bahgory’s, but Picasso remained outside his life.

“I never meant to imitate Picasso, but I was greatly influenced by his art. I never met him, though. He used to live outside Paris, and I never planned a meeting as I should have. It was a mistake.” He gives me another wan smile.

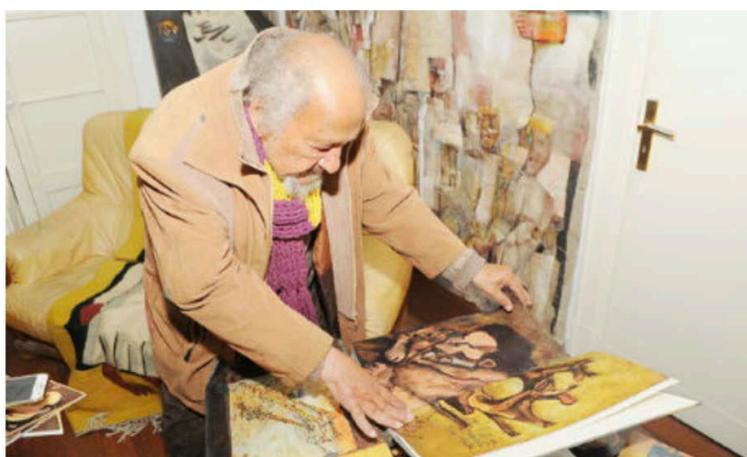
George Bahgory's museum is open on Saturdays from 1pm to 6pm.



(Photo: Al Ahram Weekly)

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George Bahgory (Photo: Al Ahram Weekly)

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