



Inji Efflatoun

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Inji Efflatoun's life, which began in the spring of 1924, was marked with phases of colour, agony and rebellion that contributed to her groundbreaking artwork. Passing from a privileged upbringing to socialist activism, to fighting for women's rights, and to surrealist artwork that relayed her dreams and fears, to compelling expressionist masterpieces painted in prison, to colourful depictions of workers, Efflatoun's life and art were all about change — all about revolution.

Melancholy first entered Efflatoun's life when she was enrolled at the strict Sacred Heart boarding school, a place that starkly contrasted with her free spirit and budding individuality. Raised in a world adorned with colour by a strong single mother who designed lavish dresses for ladies of the royal family and Egypt's aristocracy, Efflatoun spoke French yet her heart yearned for a connection to her Egyptian heritage.

The feeling of alienation from her roots troubled Efflatoun, and made her refuse with ardour to move to France when her mother suggested it. She explains in her memoirs that to travel would have contradicted the plan she had for a new life — one where she deepened her roots in Egyptian society.

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A visit paid to Efflatoun's home by Egyptian painter Mahmoud Said was a fateful occurrence in her life. At once, the master spotted talent and potential in the 15-year-old's paintings, and recommended that she seek tutoring from an established artist.

And indeed, an initially reluctant Kamel El-Telmessani, who feared her art would suffer for her lack of exposure and her sheltered upbringing, mentored Efflatoun. The young artist went on to stun El-Telmessani with bold colours and vigorous expression.

El-Telmessani was a founding member of the Egyptian Art and Freedom Group movement, launched in 1939 with the intention of using art to liberate mind and nation. Revolutionary artists and intellectuals George Henein, Ramses Younan, Fouad Kamel, Anwar Kamel and El-Telmessani drew many vital cultural figures to their movement, including Mahmoud Said, and Inji Efflatoun.

As a fundamentally surrealist art movement, the Egyptian Art and Freedom Group was rebellious. Surrealism in the 20th century was considered a subversive form of expression; artists could rebel against harsh realities — which in Egypt were poverty, ignorance and disease, the seeds of the 1952 revolution — through tapping into their imagination and painting in the language of dreams.

Both Efflatoun's political stance and painting style was therefore affected by surrealism. Most notably, she produced works entitled "Girl and Monster" during this period, in which naked women crouched in a field of raging trees — seemingly about to be consumed within a forest. Such pensive artworks convey a bold sense of imagination, unleashed by Efflatoun after a life in the shadows of a sheltered upbringing.



'Girl and Monster' by Inji Efflatoun, 1941

As the artist progressed in age and experience her artwork increasingly echoed the woes of the working class. In 1952, Efflatoun held her first solo show, with paintings that reflected mass protests that took place in November 1951. Even the works were named with a touch of revolution; such as "Roohy enty Taleka" (Leave, you are free) and "Lan Nansa" (We won't forget) — used by revolutionary students as posters in demonstrations.

"Egypt needs a revolutionary artist that tells us life's struggle does not belong solely to the male. Inji confirms this saying by illustrating the women working equally to men, marching side by side in the martyr's funeral, raising their arms in the sky as if saying: 'We will not forget,'" wrote journalist Salah Hafez in 1952.

Efflatoun became a proponent of women's causes. She can firmly be placed within the feminist movement in Egyptian history. Alongside such rebellious figures as Soraya Adham and Latifa Zayyad who, in parallel to feminism, took on communist ideologies, Efflatoun invested her artwork and activism towards class struggle, national independence as well as women's liberation. She also co-founded the Lagnat Al-Shabaat (Committee of Young Women) with Ceza Nabarawi to revive the waning Egyptian Feminist Union (associated with feminist icon Hoda Sharawi) that appealed to pro-communist women in search of association.

Yet her rebellion led her to prison, and she soon fell victim to Gamal Abdel Nasser's crackdown on communist activists. After a brief escape to Suez, and living undercover as a peasant with an elderly couple in Shubra, Efflatoun was arrested in 1959, becoming one of the earliest female political prisoners.

Behind bars, her style and subject matter were transformed. Efflatoun was able to capture a more raw and candid representation of the plight of women. Expressionism was born on her canvases. The artist masterfully captured the agony of Egyptian society in compelling paintings, the most gripping of which is a series of portraits of prisoners where she manipulated colour and light to echo the anguish of a life in confinement. Other remarkable works she produced during her imprisonment are landscapes of trees from behind bars — works she called 'Trees Behind the Bars,' 'Freedom Tree' and 'Tree of Life,' reflecting her longing for life, nature and freedom.



'Portrait of a Prisoner' by Inji Efflatoun, 1963

From the second half of the 1960s, Efflatoun's work transitioned to more pastoral subject matter, depicting the daily lives of women among fields of orange trees, for example. As she left the wretched and gloomy confines of prison behind and experienced freedom anew, Efflatoun's palette changed. She started using less murky colours, and left open spaces in her paintings.

Efflatoun garnered considerable attention in Egypt and abroad in her lifetime. Her artwork was exhibited twice at the prestigious Venice Biennale, and in shows across Europe, including Rome, Berlin, Paris, Prague, among other cities. She also exhibited in other corners of the world, such as New Delhi in 1979. Since her death her art has not traveled as much, however. In 1992, her paintings were exhibited in the Egyptian Art Academy in Rome, and more recently, in 2009, her work was featured in a show entitled "Creative Egyptian Painters" held in Berlin and Vienna.

The artist, rebel, and woman, who searched for her roots at a young age, rebelling against a life in bourgeoisie isolation, acquired and solidified her Egyptian identity through the years. Efflatoun's love for her heritage and a desire to belong to this culture drove her art and activism, and in retrospect Inji Efflatoun epitomises everything Egyptian.

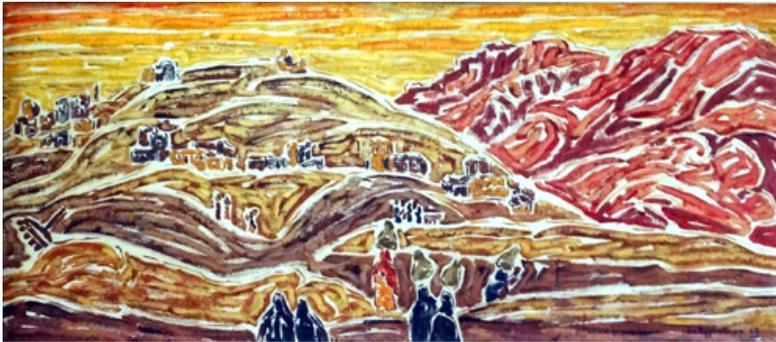
In 1964, French artist Jean Lucrat described the drive behind Efflatoun's work as follows: "She does not listen except to the Egyptian voice which is her profound heritage. That sound is that of the desert, the Nile, and the wide horizon of her burning soul."

Standing at the ground level floor at Safarkhan surrounded by works from across Efflatoun's varied career, you catch from the stairs a glimpse of the paintings from behind bars, and you feel compelled to ascend to the next floor eager to see more work by this artist whose soul transpires on canvas.

For the duration of this exhibition, Safarkhan becomes a miniscule museum, presenting a glimpse into the life of Inji Efflatoun, and by proxy, presenting a vital time in the history of modern Egyptian art.

Because Inji Efflatoun's art lived and changed with Egypt's 1952 revolution, a spotlight on her life and work is germane to the contemporary art movement. One is reminded of artists such as Mohamed Abla and Huda Lutfi who spend days on end in protests across the past two years. Or Hany Rashed, who was once sternly questioned by State Security for painting policemen, and who was spotted in a photograph taken during the Mohamed Mahmoud Street clashes being beaten by police. Or Ahmed Basiony, who lost his life on 28 January 2011 in Tahrir Square where he was protesting and working on an art project simultaneously.

Alas, history repeats itself. But however troubling that may be, there is a flicker of hope across generations. Egypt is brimming with artists who are willing to go to great lengths for their art and for their country.



'Afternoon at the Village' by Inji Efflatoun, 1967

Programme:

The exhibition runs until 2 February.

Safarkhan Gallery, 6 Brazil Street, Zamalek, Cairo

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