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THE EGYPTIAN ACADEMY OF ART IN ROME

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Donia Wagdy



"It is good for an artist to open up to other societies and step out of his or her own culture. This in turn refreshes the cultural mood of fine art in general, apart from benefiting the artist in the first place," says Hani Mustafa.

Mr Mustafa should know. He is the son of the late artist Mohamed Mustafa, who with his brother Kamel had the opportunity to study at the Egyptian Academy of Art in Rome (EAAR) in the early 1940s.

The EAAR is the only Arab academy of art among 17 international institutions in the Italian capital. On the occasion of this year's 80th anniversary of its establishment, the Ministry of Culture will be holding an event there, especially to inaugurate the newly-renovated academy buildings. The renovation cost the Egyptian government some EGP20 million and has taken close to five years to complete. With a façade of reflective glass and marble tiles ornamented with relief hieroglyphs, Ashraf Reda, the current president of the academy, has described it as a quantum leap in architecture.

The renovation project, Dr Reda says, involves establishing the first museum for Egyptian monuments in Rome; galleries with the latest lighting; a cinema theatre and a theatre to seat 200; and renovating the Academy's guest studios.

Reciprocal scholarship

The idea of establishing the Egyptian academy dates back to 1924 when the Egyptian painter Ragheb Ayyad (1892 – 1982), during his stay in Rome, wrote with the support of his colleague Youssef Kamel (1891 – 1971) to the then plenipotentiary minister of the Egyptian embassy, Ahmed Zul-Fuqqar suggesting the establishment of an Egyptian art academy in Rome.

Ayyad and Kamel have an unforgettable story which is to this day circulated among Egyptian artists.

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They worked out an arrangement which began by persuading the headmasters of the schools at which they taught art to allow them to share jobs. The deal allowed them to support each others' personally-financed year-long study of art in Rome. Kamel first left Cairo to Rome while Ayyad stayed at home, working as an art teacher on his behalf, sending him remittances from Egypt, and supporting his family at home. Once Kamel's year was over he came home and reciprocated the arrangement; Ayyad went to Rome while Kamel supported him abroad and his family at home.

News of the two artists' determination to study abroad quickly spread. The effect on public opinion was such that parliament decided it wise to allocate a sum of some 12,000 pounds for the financing of scholarships abroad. In 1925 the Ministry of Education financed scholarships for Kamel, Ayyad and Mohamed Hassan in Rome, and sent Ahmed Sabri (1895 – 1955) to Paris.

The petition

Ayyad began his petition to Zul-Fuqqar with an introductory statement in which he lauded Egypt's magnificent historical and cultural heritage. He wrote: "There are academies in Rome that welcome Fine Art students to support their studies. These academies are housed in grand buildings with studios for each art form, where each artist has his own quarters and there are large common areas for daily activities. All expenses to support the institution are fully subsidised by the government which also pays each artist a fair stipend. Finally, at the end of the year, an exhibition is held for the artists of each academy to show their work. This exhibition is opened by the King of Italy and his ministers. I am therefore asking you to intercede with our government to found a similar institution in Rome to house Egyptian artists who, after completing their studies at home, wish to further their knowledge of Arts in Rome."

The document was submitted to the Minister of Culture, who in turn forwarded it to the Cabinet, which issued the decree instituting an Egyptian Academy in Rome modelled after the foreign academies already present in the city.

In exchange

In 1929, the Egyptian Academy was founded, an Arab institute unique in the world, which had its first home in the midst of the Villa Borghese gardens. In 1930 the headquarters were temporarily transferred to the Casina at Colle Oppio, near the Domus Aurea and the Coliseum. The artist Sahab Almaz was the first functionary in charge of the academy by appointment of King Fouad I, who paid all his expenses.

In 1929 the Italian diplomatic mission in Cairo submitted a memo to the Egyptian government announcing: "the Government of His Majesty the King of Italy has arranged to contribute an area in the vicinity of Valle Giulia in Rome, where the buildings of the most important foreign academies are located, in order to build the Egyptian Academy. In exchange, it requests the Government of His Majesty the King of Egypt to grant an area to build the headquarters of the Italian Institute for Archaeological Research in Cairo."

The Egyptian Academy was known as a governmental institution under the authority of the Royal Ministry for Cultural Affairs. It allowed Egyptian artists, selected through competitions, to come in contact with colleagues from various nationalities to study history and classical art in Rome as a postgraduate specialisation. The artists spent a period of at least two years in Italy, during which period they created works of art that were subsequently shown in exhibitions organised by the Egyptian ministry.

Notable leap

"Every artist who studied there," Hani Mustafa told Watani, "was invariably exposed to broader horizons and wider, novel experiences in the world of art. All this inevitably resulted in bounds of creativity;" Mr Mustafa recalls that his father was remarkably influenced by studying in Rome, especially by the impressionist school. Rome was an open museum of statues, squares and fountains, where everyone could gain from the culture and beauty, most of all artists. "Everyone who saw my father's work before and after Rome noticed a marked difference in technique," Mr Mustafa says.



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“Before WWII there was not enough freedom because of the dictatorship of Mussolini, which suffocated Rome economically. But following the war Rome managed to refresh itself culturally.” Mustafa says. With the School of Fine Arts in Cairo since 1908, did artists still need to go to Rome? Nagwa al-Ashri, art director at the Cairo daily Al-Ahram, says even more so than ever. The School of Fine Arts produced many gifted graduates who earned the right to go to Rome. Ms Ashri told Watani that among them were some of the pillars of the Egyptian contemporary art movement; the painters Mahmoud Saïd (1897 – 1964), Ramses Younan (1913 – 1966) and Salah Abdel-Karim (1925 – 1988). Among the acquisitions of the Egyptian Academy in Rome are works by its graduates, including mosaic murals by Mohieddin Hussein.

Academic programme

The academic programme for the guest artists, which included language and history, was open to painters, sculptors and architects. All scholarship holders spent two years in Rome studying and visiting Italian art centres, and could later move to Paris for two more years before returning home. A sizable portion of the expenses necessary to support these artists was donated by Prince Youssef Kamal, who founded the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908 and supported it until 1925.

In the early 1990s the Egyptian Academy extended its activities to host musicians, opera singers and film makers as well as folk troupes.

Follow the footsteps

As a person who lived the experiment with his father, Mr Mustafa has called for ‘opening up’ to the world artistically, culturally and even literately, just as in Rome. However, this begs the question of whether the fanatic and conservative climate in Egypt today would allow such an opening? “Any opening up is bound to create an enlightenment movement which would in turn fight retardation in all its aspects,” Mr Mustafa says. But this chiefly requires an enlightened political leadership, as in the age of Mohamed Ali whose time was marked by a comprehensive renaissance.

“Just look at what the Egyptian Academy has done for the artists and intellectuals who came back home and led the movement of artistic revival. And on the other side, the academy has represented an honourable image of Egyptian culture. What with the festivals, exhibitions, and seminars it holds, it can spearhead cultural dialogue with the Western world.

“Now, we—as Egyptians—should found other centres to follow in the same footsteps.”

BOX

Since World War II

- The General Administration for Fine Arts in Cairo did not appoint any official director for its academy until the end of World War II. The first director and cultural adviser for the academy was the avant-garde artist Mohamed Nagi, former director of the Cairo Museum of Modern Art, who was appointed by ministerial decree in 1947. In 1950 the sculptor Abdel-Qader Rizq was appointed, and in 1956 he was succeeded by Salah Youssef Kamel, former Professor at the Graduate Institute of Fine Arts and superintendent of the organisation of Egyptian exhibitions in Europe. As for the agreements for the exchange of plots of land between Italy and Egypt, this finally neared a conclusion in 1937 after Italy’s war in Abyssinia, but was again suspended until 1950.

- Rizq spared no effort in this direction, exercising pressure on the then Minister of Culture, Taha Hussein, who approved the resumption of negotiations and allocated EGP20,000 towards the construction of the academy.

- When the Egyptian Academy was first founded it came under the authority of the Ministry of Culture, Education and Teaching, and later under the Ministry for Higher Education. Finally in 1970 it was transferred to the Ministry of Culture, and since 1986 has been under the authority of the General Administration of the Foreign Office of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture.

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