

Excerpted from the article “Art Education and the Emergence of Radical Art Movements in Egypt: The Surrealists and the Contemporary Arts Group, 1938-1951” by Patrick Kane

“In December 1938, thirty-one writers, artists, and lawyers signed Georges Henein’s manifesto, “The Degenerate Art Is Alive.” Henein’s manifesto launched a polemic against the elitist and autocratic nature of Egyptian cultural institutions and civil society at large. Henein was responding to the banning of what was judged as the repulsive arts and poets, *al-shu’ur alishmi’zaz*, and specifically to the Nazi *entarte kunst* exhibitions at Munich in 1937, in the campaign against the so-called degenerate art. Soon after the manifesto on degenerate art was proclaimed, the Surrealists emerged as followers of Henein’s initiatives.

“The Henein family was prominent and owned a textile company. Georges Henein (1914–1973), the son of Sadiq Henein, a Coptic minister in the government of King Fuad I, and an Italian mother, was educated in Spain, where his father was assigned as ambassador in 1924, and later in Italy, where his father was transferred. Soon after his return to Egypt in 1934, he was a published poet in French and had befriended André Breton and other Surrealists in Paris. “George Henein’s initiatives and the beginnings of Egyptian Surrealism in 1937 drew upon the legacy and importance of journalism in Egyptian discourse. The roots of this radical movement stemmed from a critical line of social inquiry and critique of elite domination and influence. From the late 1930s to the late 1940s, the Surrealists Ramsis Yunan, Georges Henein, Al-Tilmisani, Anwar Kamil, and Fu’ad Kamil compared their reading of Freud and Marxist criticism with other contemporary crises—the Spanish Civil War and the Mexican Revolution—as external models of struggle. The Egyptian labor movement was an archetype for the internal experience and application of this experience. The surrealist interjection in the arts was also in part a response from an increasing rise in the ranks of artists from wider social strata, particularly from the emergence of art teachers in public education, who applied their art education to spur the arts into social advocacy against the intended role of this pedagogy’s founders.

The Surrealists formed a subculture in the arts, in which artists from both genders and various social classes and religious and national backgrounds organized exhibits on the Surrealist discourse of the psychological torment of the individual and collective body. Yunan's drawings of contorted minotaurs were emblematic of a critique of state torture. Surrealism provided a useful counter discourse in the arts that appealed to a rising generation of artists and art teachers in postwar Egypt, and while the most prominent of the Surrealists remained aloof and distant from the subject of the masses, their critique of the bourgeois, liberal direction of the art academies and institutions dominated by the aristocratic landholding class was a major contribution and remained a continuing counterdiscourse as a new language in the arts well into the 1960s."