

The art of commemoration

George Bahgory has documented recent historical events on canvas in his very own way to coincide with the first anniversary of the revolution, says [Reham El-Adawi](#)

George Bahgory's studio a few miles from Tahrir Square was his haven from the violent and bloody scenes that dominated the square and world headlines in the early days of the revolution that began on 25 January 2011. So perhaps it was inevitable that he should experience anger, fear and the willingness to die for the sake of freedom and justice -- without feeling the need to express it in an art form.

His new exhibition, Bahgory on Revolution, is dedicated to the first anniversary of the Egyptian white revolution and is currently showing at the AlMasar Gallery, in Zamalek (see [Listings](#) p.31). Bahgory is showcasing all his post-revolution artworks to date. The artworks on display present bits and pieces of the rundown of events in 2011. Some paintings depict scenes from events that took place during the early days of the revolution, such as The Battle of the Camel I and II, Tahrir Square, Brave Egypt and At the Caf  .

In the paintings referred to as The Battle of the Camel I and II, Bahgory has documented on canvas the struggle between the forces of the Interior Ministry and the protesters. He has, quite amazingly, managed to reflect the scene when that mass of humanity ran across the Qasr Al-Nil Bridge, with the lions on either side of the bridge looking as if taken completely by surprise at what is going on around them, witnessing, metaphorically speaking, the struggle between good and evil.

"It is the first time I have painted a battle scene where injured people, casualties, fire and bullets are overwhelming," Bahgory told Al-Ahram Weekly.

As he endeavoured to express the voice of the people and their struggle to attain freedom, people were his main source of inspiration in all the works on display.

In At The Caf  , a mother and father are with their small child, who is happily waving an Egyptian flag, and are brilliantly depicted in Bahgory's very own caricatural style. They are sitting in a caf   after celebrating the news of Mubarak's fall from power in Tahrir Square on 11 February.



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Bahgory exclusively sketches images from the revolution to Al-Ahram Weekly; bottom: Bahgory's Tahrir Square painting (Oil on Canvas - 200 x 300 cm) currently on show at AlMasar gallery

While creating his Tahrir Square painting, Bahgory recalls Pablo Picasso, with whom he has much in common and who was the subject of his PhD. He was inspired by Picasso's masterpiece Guernica, his most powerful political statement and painted as an immediate reaction to the Nazis' devastating bombing of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War. "In Guernica the horse symbolises victory, while in the Egyptian revolution, for the first time, the horse stands for aggression and represents the counter-revolution as it runs into the square to quash the revolutionaries; so the representation of the horse is changed from victory to defeat," Bahgory says.

This is his first exhibition since the revolution. He believes that all artworks created during or immediately after the revolution are quick sketches that do not reflect the deep reality and the essence of this life-changing revolution.

"The revolution can't be immediately painted or documented because it first has to be assimilated by the artist, then he has to react to it so as to digest it and enjoy it; otherwise he will become an artisan, not an artist," he explains.

"That is why I believe that the first anniversary of the revolution is the perfect time to showcase my very first collection of paintings on this noble revolution," he says. He offers the example of the Russian revolution, when Russian artists produced a huge number of statues, sculptures and paintings that appeared as advertising posters or slogans for the revolution but did not express its deep significance.

Is he now working on a new collection of art on the revolution to be shown in the near future? "I used to go to Tahrir Square every day at the beginning of the revolution, and like all the other protesters and revolutionaries I was overwhelmed by rage. This period helped to inspire me to create the paintings now on show, but the incidents that followed the revolution, including the violence in Maspero and Mohamed Mahmoud Street and the burning of the Egypt Science Institute, filled me with a great depression and the brush fell out of my hand," he says. "I lost all sense of security and I was scared, and the artist can't create in an atmosphere of fear and danger."

Yet nothing can prevent versatile artist Bahgory, who masters different art mediums, from reacting to the prevailing political unrest in Egypt. "These days I publish my caricatures in newspapers, which I believe is a very fast way of delivering a crucial message. For instance, I sometimes criticise the young revolutionaries when they use stones, which is a very primitive way of achieving democracy, and through my caricature I criticise the persecution of minorities in Egypt by some fanatical Salafis."

He added that producing a painting or carving a statue took longer time than drawing a caricature, and for him caricature was distinguished as an art genre that vehemently influences public opinion.

Bahgory graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Helwan University in 1955 and finished his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris in 1970. His 30-year stay in Paris refined his talent in drawing, engraving, painting, sculpture, marionette art, novel writing, cinema and criticism.

By special invitation from the Society of Art Lovers in Paris, his works were selected to represent the Egyptian Pavilion at the Louvre Museum in 1999. His masterpiece A Face From Egypt was awarded the Silver Medal and his name was added to the list of great masters of art. His wood and bronze engravings have been on display in many galleries in France and Canada. He was voted the No. 1 portrait artist in France, Italy and Spain.

Bahgory was also a prominent cartoonist of the two weekly magazines of Sabah Al-Khair and Rose El-Youssef. His PhD was on the ancient Egyptian thread in the works of Picasso. Some of his works have been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in Amman and the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo.