

The art of an unusual guru

The work of veteran Egyptian artist Taha Hussein, on show at a new exhibition in Zamalek, provides a visual answer to east-west relations, writes **Nagwa El-Ashri**



On 14 February, the sculptor and painter Taha Hussein celebrated his 83rd birthday at a small gathering of family and friends. He was getting ready for yet another adventure: an exhibition in Gallery Al-Masar in Zamalek, which opened on 4 March.

The exhibition, entitled "East and West", is Hussein's visual answer to Goethe's mesmerising work *The West-Eastern Diwan*. Hussein, who spent years of his early life in Germany, is an avid reader of German authors and has spent much of his career exploring east-west relations.

Having graduated from the Royal College for Applied Arts in 1951, Hussein went to Germany where he studied art history and earned a doctoral degree in 1963 with a thesis on Mamluke silk and its influence on European art.

The Mamluke perspective comes naturally to Hussein, who grew up in the Al-Azhar neighbourhood of Cairo, which is full of monuments dating to the Mamluke period, before his family moved to Manyal, a more modern part of town.

Since the 1960s, Hussein's work has been shown to critical acclaim both at home and abroad, and he has exhibited at the Goethe Institute in Cairo, the Egyptian Cultural Centre in Paris, and the French Cultural Centre. Hussein's work also featured in a ceramics exhibition in West Germany in 1960, the *Five Thousand Years of Pottery* exhibition held in East Germany in 1964, the *International Exhibition of Art and Industry* in Munich in 1966, and the *Contemporary Egyptian Art* exhibition in Brussels in 1968.

By the early 1970s, Hussein was a familiar figure on Egypt's art scene, acquiring a reputation for refinement and intellectual gravitas. Since then, his work has also been displayed in Japan, the UAE, India, Iraq, the USA, France, and Italy.

He has spent a significant part of his career pondering the influence of Islamic art on the Renaissance in Europe. Intrigued by the complex rapport among various cultures and artistic manifestations, he is now examining the impact of globalisation on contemporary art.

Though hard to pin down, there are traces of expressionism in Hussein's style, along with a move towards abstraction in his later work. He has worked in various media, including painting, engraving, ceramics, photography, sculpture, printing, and weaving. There is also a Sufi component in Hussein's work -- a certain asceticism that delights in the simplicity of nature and yet is willing to recognise the complexity of humanity.

In his work as a whole, Hussein offers a poetic counterpoint to the dialogue of civilisations, as seen in a wider context through the assimilation of ancient Egyptian, Islamic and European art. Himself a tireless student of mediaeval art, he often resorts to metaphor in his iconography, producing a personal vocabulary that challenges conventional thinking but embraces an all-encompassing humanism.

In one painting after another in his current exhibition, Hussein shows his audience how East and West can stand as equals, conversing and converging, and yet remaining distinct. For him, contemporary globalisation is an opportunity for cultural equality and the chance to prove that a sense of belonging does not need to negate the richness of different lives.

While he has been active on the Egyptian art scene for nearly half a century, Hussein continues to explore new forms of expression with the mastery of taste and style that has always marked his work. His extensive knowledge of history imparts depth to his art as well as broad cultural views. In 1959, for example, Hussein wrote one of the earliest introductions to art in Arabic with co-author Maher Raef, and in 1964 he introduced the coloured gravure technique to Egypt.

Hussein offers unusual glimpses into the symbiosis of nature and art in his work, never failing to introduce an element of surprise into his compositions. There is always a new angle, new shores waiting to be visited, the promise of a journey yet to come.

He does not think of himself as creating art, however. Rather, he thinks of himself as creating ideas, since for him the secret of art lies in its use as a vehicle for the understanding. "Thinking through art," is his motto. Hussein believes that the world can be better understood through the process of selection that artists offer.

What imagery should we look for in his work? Perhaps the blend of perception and intuition that he seems to be able to offer almost without thinking, or perhaps the scholarship that comes across without a hint of didacticism. Perhaps one should stress the perspective of a man who stands on the edge and sees life through the filter of compassion.

Hussein has created a world that should be approached deliberately and with a sense of adventure. What is seen in the foreground of his work may not be what truly matters. The viewer should not miss the subtle hints and mercurial allegories that lie packed underneath.

The craftsmanship, of course, is superb. A man who is a master in such disparate fields of art, from painting to fabric design, is not easily compartmentalised. There is magic in his work, myth in constant motion, gateways to forgotten history and the depths of the human soul.

Yet, while Hussein's work points towards the transcendental, its message wrapped in fresh manifestations of tone and texture, there are few easily identifiable references to mythology. History is distilled with unusual insight to reveal the psyche of the region, the blend of visions it contains, and the universalism that lies underneath the surface.

Visitors to the current exhibition of Hussein's work will notice riotous lines reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy. However, they should look again. These lines, which at first seem like simple calligraphy, turn into something like geological formations, with nature becoming culture and revealing itself as something deeper, something shared and private, something universal and personal.

Such is the enigmatic power of this most unusual guru.

Caption: Hussein thinks of himself as creating ideas, since for him the secret of art lies in its use as a vehicle for the understanding. "Thinking through art," is his motto. Hussein believes that the world can be better understood through the process of selection that artists offer

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