

FEATURE

By Hassan Hassam

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GEORGE BAHGORY

OUTSIDE THE LINES

His caricatures have become a staple of Egyptian irony, his paintings a staple of Egyptian fine art and his one line drawings have revolutionised the way abstract art is viewed and made in the region. Enigma's Hassan Hassam talks Paris, politics and panache with Egypt's leading artistic visionary...



I've always been relatively good at dealing with eccentric artists. Fits of pretention, bouts of creativity in the middle of sentences and a little bit of condescension are par for the course, but nothing prepared me for George Bahgory. The setting of his studio is the first indication of exactly what we're dealing with; and I was pleasantly surprised and very pleased to get to spend a day and not just a few hours in his presence.

Nestled in the heart of Downtown – and I don't mean the scenic part, we're talking *balady* coffee shops, mechanics and a slew of not-so-posh stores – is Bahgory's lair. And it is a lair, a two story little house covered from top to bottom in art. The entrance features two things, a huge easel with papers for people to sign and makeshift white stairs. Paintings cover the walls and the walls themselves are covered with sketches, doodles and those random fits of inspiration. Upstairs is a small little enclave with tiny rooms and a massive terrace. Nothing is spared from a spot of colour and his trademark Bahgory drawings, paintings and sketches. Everything from the chairs to the phones have been Bahgory-fied.

We're taken outside to the terrace, the sun is shining, the birds are singing and I could very well be in a Naguib Mahfouz novel. Bahgory is standing by his workstation, completely in his element, haphazardly throwing blue and yellow onto a canvas. He looks up, falls in love with our art director and asks me to prepare my most difficult questions. "I want to draw you," he says to our art director. He looks over and gives me a little grimace, and adds, "Oh and you too."

In fact, Bahgory is more than willing to share his art. The clerks in the store Alwan in Zamalek all have an original Bahgory hanging up behind the counter. I have one framed in my sister's room (it would kill my confidence to have it in my own, he took my flaws just a little bit too far) and three people all told me he met them in the Gezira Club and forced them to model for him. This is his attitude, spreading little bits of himself and his art around Cairo.

Born to a modest background in Luxor, he claims he was making fun of people from a young age; observing nuances, embellishing features, exaggerating stories and parlaying them into his art. Bahgory does it all; he paints, sculpts, weaves and writes. Although he only lived in Luxor for three years, it has never left him and his work is definitively Egyptian with its voluptuous women, men carrying bread trays on their head, dogs and everything in between. As a student at the University of Fine Arts in Cairo, Bahgory began working at the weekly *Rosal Youssef*; the Egyptian answer to *People* magazine, creating caricatures that were satirical, social and political comments. It was there that he developed the style he is now famous for; drawing everything in one line, without removing pen from paper once.

"I chose caricature, because I love sarcasm," he says simply. "I used to make fun of everyone starting from my relatives who used to visit from Upper Egypt with their dress code and big noses. Caricature summarizes things around you; it is about being as sarcastic as possible with one line. I enjoyed a lot of success but at the end of the day, I am an artist, I want to paint. Caricature was a means to express my political opinion and objection. All my colleagues were considered lefties and I was allegedly one of them. I was lucky that I wasn't arrested, although some of my friends were. I was only 20 years-old then and had it happened to me I would have been damaged mentally, physically and psychologically. I would have lost all hope in life."

So the moment he graduated Bahgory moved to Paris, where he says he was born again. "Caricature was the language I used to express myself and I was good at it. I held 10 exhibitions in Egypt, but I had bigger dreams. I wanted to see all the works of the big artists, so I went to Paris and Rome; because you can't appreciate paintings in a book, you have to see them in reality. I worked as a reporter there and then just stopped to enroll in the Sorbonne for a PhD in art. I specialised in Picasso because I think he was the artist of the century." It wasn't smooth sailing, and he spent a lot of his time being a true struggling artist. "I could barely afford living there and I wasn't selling anything at the time. But slowly I started getting recognised and selling some paintings."

He soon started exhibiting his works across the world, from London to Paris, Venice to Baghdad and of course in his hometown Cairo. Today he is a staple of the Egyptian art-scene, with his paintings selling out at exhibitions and his works instantly recognisable. Yet he is still irrevocably modest, claiming that



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even if he sold out in London and Paris, Egyptians still don't know who he is. He remains at heart – although not financially – a struggling artist.

Nothing is out of his frame of reference or deemed impossible. The house is overflowing with different styles, sketches of all shapes and sizes, varying colours and a variety of styles, moods and attitudes. On one wall is a woman sitting in a salon, complete with big hips, rosy cheeks and teacups. Juxtaposing her is a tapestry featuring an ironing man and right in front of that are shelves of sculptures and his books. "I just paint, I don't think. I leave it to my heart and emotions, because this is what art is all about. Art is emotions. You judge a painting by asking yourself whether you feel something or not, whether you are able to read the painting or not. My caricatures are like a three minute song; my paintings are like a symphony."

But don't ask him what any of his paintings mean. He looks at me disgruntled, the first grimace of the day, claiming you should feel whatever you want to feel. And nothing is off limits in terms of inspiration. "As an artist I have to watch everything, politics, football... everything. Once I did a caricature of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, saying that he has nothing to do with the trash problem, because he is Nazif (clean). This is the caricaturist's job. The inspiration for paintings can be more complicated to understand, so we need to start educating people."

To that end Bahgory conducts workshops across the world and his objective – at age 68 he isn't slowing down – is to enlighten. "The media needs to pay attention and shed light on artists. Egyptian youth have sold themselves for money. They dress the same, act the same and want the same things. We are starting to lose our identity." Armed with a paintbrush, a wicked sense of humour and a legion of experience, Bahgory is not just an artist, he's a man on a mission. He may be selling crazy, but we're very willing to buy it. ■