

# lilia ben salah

## Inji Efflatoun (1924 – 1989)

Inji Efflatoun was born on 16 April 1924 in a small secluded palace in Cairo to an aristocratic family of Turkish origins. Even though she was brought up speaking French, she truly represented the spirit of the Egyptian culture at that time. She learned Arabic at a young age and spoke it with a pure Egyptian accent. Her father, Hassan Efflatoun (Dean of the Faculty of Sciences and the famous entomologist) had to take her out of boarding school - the French *Collège du Sacré-Coeur* - and enrolled her in the Lycée Français instead, where he could oversee better her education and have more control over her rebellious attitude. At the Lycée, she proved her artistic talent at a very early stage when she spontaneously illustrated stories, poems and fairytales written by her big sister, Gulpérie (born in 1923), which her uncle then published in a French magazine that he was issuing at the time in the 1930s.



Inji's mother, Salha Efflatoun, was an artistic, independent and intelligent woman with a strong personality. She had married Inji's father at the age of fourteen years old and divorced him when she was eighteen. She was a pioneer fashion designer in the Arab world, and was the first woman to open her own boutique in Cairo in 1936, *Maison Salha*, later managing a garment factory that employed hundreds of workers. In the early 1940s, Inji became one of the first women to enroll in the Faculty of Fine Arts of Cairo, where she studied drawing and oil painting in the early 1940s, with the great Egyptian, Marxist-driven artist Kamal El-Telmissany, who was spearheading the revolutionary Egyptian Surrealist movement at the time. After her graduation from the School of Fine Arts, Inji worked as a drawing teacher at the *Lycée Français* until 1948 and as a journalist until 1952. She also worked at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in the free section, from 1942 to 1952.

Inji Efflatoun's 1940s paintings were characterized by the Surreal atmosphere that prevailed at the time. She transcribed her dreams and thoughts on a dark background in a narrative way. Works from that period include *Monster and Bird* (1941), *Black Garden* (1942) and *The Bulging of the Tree* (1943). With El-Telmissany's support, Inji was very much involved in the activities of the Art and Freedom Group (1939-1945), alongside fellow artists Fouad Kamel, Ramsès Younan, Georges Henein, Albert Cossery, and other members. She took part in the two first Art and Freedom Group exhibitions of 1942 and that of 1943. In addition, Inji was at the heart of a human-rights activist movement, when she joined a group of communist

# lilia b e n s a l a h

intellectuals in 1942, many of whom were Jewish (known as *Iskra*)<sup>1</sup>. One of her fellow members was the novelist Latifa Al-Zayyat (1923-1996), who published a seminal book, *The Open Door* (1960), that explores a young Egyptian woman's political and sexual awakening in the context of British occupation. In 1945, Al-Zayyat and Efflatoun founded the League of University and Institute's Young Women, which tackled issues of class struggles, gender politics, and like many leftist organizations of that time, it advocated the ousting of the British from Egypt. Yet it was a period of social, political and cultural complexity and uncertainty which had a considerable impact on Inji's artistic creativity and personality. This stage in her life is defined by anxiety, tension, and the search for her true self and identity, given the paradox of her French background versus her militancy for Egyptian nationalism. When her mother and close friends had encouraged her to go study art abroad, she recorded her reaction to this pressure in her memoirs, writing that 'it was neither acceptable nor rational that I leave Egypt to go in the 'khawagât' countries for several years, when I was thinking with all my heart to the tedious and painful process of Egyptianization for myself, for my personality, I, who spoke French and who had lived in a society wrapped up with cellophane. Until I was seventeen years old, my language was French and when I started being in contact with people, I couldn't undo the knot that tied my tongue! How could I be cut off from the tree?'<sup>2</sup>. She even resented art, and stopped painting for almost three years, losing sense of its purpose and being destabilized by the gap between her elite upbringing and the Egyptian people's daily lives. Instead, she was passionate about her organization's activities, especially between 1946 and 1948: she was a voice for women's rights, she wrote pamphlets and travelled to some of the poorest areas of Egypt. In 1953, she travelled alongside fellow woman artist Micaela Burchard-Simaika in Upper Egypt, where they recorded landscapes and scenes from the ancient sites in Luxor and from the tapestry workshops in Nagada – Efflatoun painted *Weavers of Nagada* in 1953 which was exhibited later that year at the Sao Paulo Biennial<sup>3</sup>. It seems that these travels across her country paved the way for her to reconnect with Egypt's cultural heritage and history, as well as with the Arabic language, and ultimately with her art.

Following her relationship with the prosecutor Muhammad Mahmoud Abu Al-Ela (known as 'Hamdi'), who resigned from his position to marry Inji in 1950, she started finding what she was looking for: stability, calmness, creative maturity and the integrity of the artistic vision. She began a series of heavily textured compositions with a social human meaning, portraying peasants, workers, protestors and the dispossessed, that shaped her artistic career thereafter. Like her peer, Kamel El-Telmissany, Inji became more and more radical in her faithful renderings of the Egyptian people's actual living conditions and depicting real events for the purpose of social criticism. Her striking black and white ink drawings of the 1950s representing the tragic 1906 Dinshaway massacre precisely incarnate this stylistic shift from Surrealism to Socio-Realism. She held her first solo exhibition in 1952, showcasing some of her paintings, such as *Husband of the Four*, *I Divorce You*, and *We Will Not Forget*, that tackled the subject of the Egyptian armed struggle against the British troops at the Suez Canal. Having worked alongside her mentor Kamel

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Inji Efflatoun's political engagements and activities: Monciaud, Didier. 'Les engagements d'Inji Aflatun dans l'Égypte des années quarante', in *Cahiers d'histoire: Revue d'histoire critique*, no. 126, 2015, pp. 73-95.

<sup>2</sup> Sac ĩd Khayāl (ed.). *Inji Efflatoun' Memoirs*, Kuwait: Dar Sucād al-Sabāh, 1993, p. 34 (translated from French by Valérie Didier).

<sup>3</sup> Atallah, Nadine. 'La participation de l'Égypte à la 11ème Biennale de Sao Paulo (1953-1954). Une initiative individuelle, des enjeux nationaux', in *Manazir Journal*, vol. I, Bern University, 2019, pp. 36-55.

# lilia ben salah

El-Telmissany, Inji also painted alongside Saad El-Khadem and later was in Swiss painter Margo Veillon's studio, as well as attending workshops in Egyptian artist Hamed Abdallah's studio.

The year 1956 marked a turning-point, both on a personal and professional level, given that both her father and her husband died, the latter being a victim of a fatal brain hemorrhage shortly after coming out of prison, having been jailed for his nationalist activism. These tragic events induced her to focus on the political and national nature of her art. That same year, she became acquainted with Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), sparking her move towards socio-realism. Becoming more and more vocal about her political stance yet at the same time hiding and disguising as a peasant, Inji was arrested in 1959 by the Nasserite regime who accused her of adhering to the Communist Party. Consequently, she missed out on the announcement made the day preceding her arrest, that she had been awarded the First Prize for a landscape-painting competition held at the Museum of Modern Art, Cairo. She was sent to a jail located in the town of Al-Qanatir Al-Khairiya (literally translated as 'the beneficent aqueducts') in the Nile Delta, which was actually a popular destination for Cairo residents who sought its lush gardens. Inji managed to convince the prison guards to bring her paper, colours and brushes, as she found inspiration in the vast bright world outside, the light of which pierced through her room's small window. Her fellow female inmates behind bars were also a constant source of inspiration for her highly expressive works of that period, paradoxically enabling her to value freedom at the same time as representing the suffering of people. Besides close-up portraits of prisoners, capturing their facial expressions of worry, sorrow or anger with such intensity, Inji's subjects ranged from the world inside prison – inmates, sleep wards, food queues, washhouses, rehabilitation workshops – to the outside world she observed from her small barred window such as the picturesque Nile landscape, trees, the sails of boats passing through, the fields and the peasants. As pointed out by Nadine Atallah, Inji also turned towards more picturesque subjects because her paintings needed to be marketable given that the prison administration benefitted from the sale of her paintings, the subject of which had to be 'pretty, slender, easy on the eyes'<sup>4</sup>. Although many of her 1959-1963 'prison' works have consequently been dispersed, Inji was able to buy back some of her paintings – Atallah identified just over fifty dating from that period<sup>5</sup>.

There is no doubt that her four years of incarceration from June 1959 until July 1963 marked another turning-point in Inji Efflatoun's career. Tried on 23 December 1960, she was sentenced to two years of prison yet as a political prisoner, she was only released on 26 July 1963 with several other detainees, following a hunger strike<sup>6</sup>. Her release was also prompted by the official visit of Nikita Khrushchev, president of the Council of Soviet Ministers, to Egypt in 1963, who had requested that Communist prisoners be released<sup>7</sup>. Inji wrote to her sister Gulpérie during her last year in jail, that 'I still paint a lot, with determination and inspiration; the subjects are always the same but with a new vision, a purer and more sober vision; for me, it's about constantly renewing myself in this world of the *unrenewable* and the

---

<sup>4</sup> Efflatoun to Efflatoun-Abdalla, October 24, 1959, IFAO; quoted in Atallah, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Atallah, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Efflatoun, *Mudhakirat Inji Aflatun*, 200–203; Gulpérie Efflatoun-Abdalla, *Récits. La ballade des geôles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002): 219–222; quoted in Atallah, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> The purpose of his visit was to celebrate the first stage of the construction of the Soviet-financed Aswan High Dam, consequently symbolizing the strategic alliance between Egypt and USSR.

# lilia ben salah

complete banality in which we find ourselves'<sup>8</sup>. This pivotal part of her life translates itself in her stylistic shift from pre-jail dark, moody and unstable compositions full of rage and movement, to lighter, colourful and calmer landscapes and pastoral scenes depicting farmers tending to their crops. Following all the misery and horror witnessed in jail, Inji sought to represent her utopian dream-world in which societies work peacefully and are in full harmony with nature. She wrote herself that 'after a while, I didn't want to paint the prison, or the prisoners, anymore. I was disgusted by prison'<sup>9</sup>, and declared instead, referring to her move to landscape painting, that "[t]his view is the easiest calming agent for our captive souls, and the constant source of hope for the future'<sup>10</sup>. She further admitted after her release that 'the experience of prison revealed the importance of nature to me. Before 1959, I concentrated on expressing the personality, the human being. It was rare for me to paint a painting of nature alone, for itself. But when I was deprived of it, I felt how precious it was. It became a symbol of freedom in my eyes'<sup>11</sup>.

In effect, freedom was what Inji celebrated from the 1960s onwards, through her works depicting workers in fields, landscapes, and other elements of a lush nature that she had longed for so much during more than four years. During the last chapter of her life that covers more than twenty-five years of artistic career during which she had twenty-six solo exhibitions, Inji travelled throughout Egypt, fervently capturing the life and essence of its countryside, sunsets, deserts, rural villages, oases and valleys through her many paintings. By then, she often worked directly on the raw canvas instead of preparing it like she used to, and she got rid of the foreboding shadows in order to leave more light to emanate from her canvas, symbolizing the light of freedom. A couple of years after coming out of prison, the Egyptian government awarded her with a fellowship to support her painting full-time, and she was able to travel abroad for her numerous exhibitions. Yet she remained very faithful to her initial political stance, as revealed in an article published in the popular *Iskusstvo* journal reviewing her solo exhibition in Moscow in 1970 and quoting the artist, 'The theme of struggle became the leading theme in our work. We are ordinary soldiers in this struggle to the best of our abilities and talent to ensure that the victory came as soon as possible[...]. Our aim is to enlist the entire Arab population and cultural figures in the fight against the aggressors, to bring peace to our homeland'<sup>12</sup>. Twenty-six years after her release from prison, Inji Efflatoun passed away from cancer the day after celebrating her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday on 17 April 1989.

Today Inji is remembered not only as one of the leading female Arab artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also as an Egyptian feminist and Marxist, and one of Egypt's first female prisoners, who incarnated one of the many intellectual and cultural activists repressed by Nasserism. Unsurprisingly, Inji Efflatoun is one of the three hundred or so female artists referenced in the seminal survey of *Great Women Painters* published in 2022<sup>13</sup>. After having her first solo show in Cairo in 1952, Inji participated to the Sao Paulo Biennial of

---

<sup>8</sup> Inji Efflatoun to Gulpérie Efflatoun-Abdalla, May 22, 1963, Inji Efflatoun archives, French Institute for Oriental Archaeology, Cairo (hereafter abbreviated as IFAO), quoted in Atallah, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Efflatoun, *Mudhakirat Inji Aflatun*, 196, quoted in in Atallah, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Efflatoun to Efflatoun-Abdalla, November 20, 1959, IFAO. The letter is also reproduced in Efflatoun, *Mudhakirat Inji Aflatun*, 239–40; quoted in Atallah, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Mohamed Shaaban, *Injy* (Al-markaz al-qawmi lil sinema, 1988), documentary film ; quoted in Atallah, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Mileeva, 2023, p. 985.

<sup>13</sup> Phaidon Eds., *Great Women Painters* (with an introduction by Alison M. Gingeras), London: Phaidon Press, 2022.

# lilia ben salah

1953, and then exhibited back in her home country's own international art fair, the Alexandria Biennial, at the 1961 and 1965 editions. She then sent ten paintings to the Venice Biennial of 1968, and became the first Arab woman artist for whom the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics hosted a solo exhibition, comprising of forty-six paintings, in June 1970. The USSR state acquired four paintings on that occasion, three of which were *Tattoo* (1963), *Corn* (1966) and *Banana Tree* (1969), today all part of the collection of Moscow's State Museum of Oriental Art. Inji was one of the curators for the ground-breaking exhibition on Contemporary Egyptian Art that was held at the Musée Galliéra in Paris in 1971. A major group show entitled *Ten Egyptian Artists in Half a Century* was held in the hall of the Central Committee of the Arab Socialist Union on the occasion of the celebration of International Women's Day in Cairo in 1975 for which Inji Efflatoun played a critical role in its organization. Twice she participated to the *Salon des Artistes Indépendants* held at the Grand Palais in Paris, in 1966 and in 1976, and she was one of the Egyptian artists whose works were exhibited at the Alabama Gallery in America in 1988. After she passed away, her paintings continued to be regularly showcased, in Cairo, Rome, Vienna, Berlin, South Korea, Paris, Madrid, and most recently in London, in the largest curated exhibition dedicated to Modern and Contemporary Arab Art held in Britain, *Kawkaba: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, hosted by Christie's London in their premises on King Street, St James, in July-August 2023.

Inji Efflatoun did not only have her art to voice out her concerns over contemporary Egyptian society and to denounce the government's failures, as she also published three separate pamphlets tackling women's issues and anticolonialism: the first one, entitled *80 million Women with Us* (1948) includes an introduction written by the dean of Arabic literature at the time, the highly renowned Dr. Taha Hussein. The title of her second pamphlet, *We Egyptian Women* (1949), features an introduction by the famous historian Abdel Rahman Al-Rifai. A third booklet entitled *Peace and Evacuation* (1950) was published with an introduction by Professor Aziz Fahmy. In addition to her writings, a documentary film, *Inji*, produced by the National Center for Cinema, directed by Mohamed Shaaban was released. Finally, she also contributed to a book published by the State Information Service in 1986, part of *A Series Describing Contemporary Egypt through Visual Arts*, the introduction of which was written by Dr. Naim Attia. In addition, conscious of her achievements and the importance of her archives, Inji documented her life by herself. All her precious archives, complemented by documents from her sister Gulpérie Abdallah-Efflatoun, entered the collections of the *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* (IFAO) in Cairo in 2018. Just before Efflatoun passed away in 1989, she donated her paintings to the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. Since June 2022, the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art in Cairo has dedicated a space in its premises to exhibit sixty works bequeathed by the artist, which had previously been housed at the Prince Taz Palace in Cairo<sup>14</sup>.

Valérie Didier & Dr. Hussam Rashwan (eds.), *Modern Art in Egypt by Aimé Azar*, Volume II, Paris : Editions Norma, 2024.

---

<sup>14</sup> Nour el Din, Nadine. 'Major collection of Works by late Modernist painter and feminist activist Inji Efflatoun finds new home in Cairo', in *The Art Newspaper*, 1 July 2022 (online).

**lilia b e n s a l a h**