

On a Caravan

LOCAL ART MAKING WORLD NEWS

On a Caravan: East and West Journeying Together through the Arts is a Cairo-based art exhibition that boasts big name artists and lofty ideals. Enigma's Travis Randall takes a sneak peak at a local initiative that's attracting global attention.



Church of St. John the Baptist by Isolde Kadry

Many of them were strangers, but on their first meeting they stood face to face; separated by a transparent plastic sheet with paints and brushes. Each of them was tasked with painting a life-size replica of the person opposite them directly onto the plastic. Quickly, surprisingly accurate depictions began to emerge at the hands of first-time painters and respected artists alike. For the novices, their ability to get those tricky proportions right was surprising. But when you're really looking at someone right in front of you, it's hard to distort their image. The plastic portrait experiment is perhaps a useful metaphor. Because when you stand face to face and attempt to portray a person without distortion or pretence, you begin to, as lead artist Roland Prime puts it, really recognize each other. This enlightening exercise, led by one of Egypt's internationally-acclaimed artists, Mohamed Abla, was part of a programme where 18 renowned artists from around the world gathered with friends and family to finalise preparations for *On A Caravan: East and West Journeying Together through the Arts*. This is an exhibition seeking to use art as a bridge for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

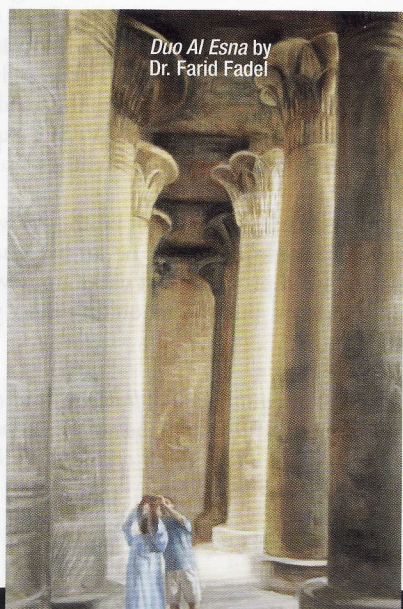
The groundbreaking artistic initiative, running from January 29th — February 5th at St. John's

Church in Cairo, is a response to the increasing chasm of misunderstanding and discord between the Middle East and West, says the Church's Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler (who is the curator of *On A Caravan*). Today, we need a new kind of movement; one that builds on what things the East and West have in common. And art, a wellspring of the spiritual journey, serves to build this much-needed bridge.

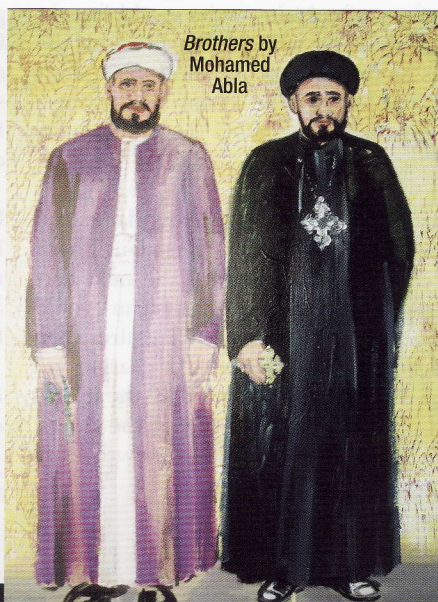
On a Caravan is timely, given resurgent conflicts in the region and the stereotypes that seem to create deep misunderstandings between cultures. Yet the exhibition is more than an artsy peace protest; it's seriously good art. Amongst the 18 renowned artists are the aforementioned Mohamed Abla, Hisham El Zeiny, Omar El Fayoum and Dr. Farid Fadel as well as western artists Roland Prime, Kimberley Odekirk, Isolde Kadry and many more.

“As a wellspring of the spiritual journey, art serves to build a much-needed bridge between the East and West”

Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler



Duo Al Esna by Dr. Farid Fadel



Brothers by Mohamed Abla

London's Christie's and Sotheby's have shown a keen interest in the exhibition, as have ambassadors, international religious figures and celebrities from across the region and beyond. And the artists, who have created some of the most impressive works in the region, sold the initiative with their own enthusiasm and its noble theme. Through his work, Egyptian artist, ophthalmologist and musician Dr. Farid Fadel, sought to

demonstrate that we often see the same thing but through different eyes and orientations. German-Egyptian artist Isolde Kadry used collage to interpret the theme of east and west journeying together. I used bright colours to create a world that is more friendly than our own. And I used collage to show the fragmented picture of humanity. Even though you don't see the connection at first, it becomes clear upon further reflection, she explains.

Hisham El Zeiny, an Egyptian painter, describes the exhibition as an opportunity for artists, who are often very connected spiritually but isolated by individual experience, to engage in the collective story. Despite headlines dominated by discord, he suggests, Artists with open minds are best suited to shed new light on commonalities.

Australian artist Connie Fiorelli feels she was stretched to think beyond her typical portrayal of local scenes of Cairo and Bedouin life to create something with deeper meaning. Perhaps Fiorelli's feelings best describe the exhibition, as asking viewers and artists to really examine what they're comfortable with and challenge their preconceptions.

So while you swoon and spend on romance this Valentine's Day, take a moment to focus on a project that aims to extend the greater love through understanding. In the profound words of the 1965 flower power anthem made popular by Jackie DeShannon, What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing



The Journey by Maher Ali

that there's just too little of. So if you're feeling the love and have a hankering for fine art, don't miss the chance to see a local exhibition the whole world is talking about. ■

On A Caravan: East and West Journeying Together through the Arts is being held from January 29 to February 5 at St. John's Church in Maadi on the corner of Port Said and Road 17, www.oncaravan.org