

The duke in his domain

After seven years of construction and preparation, the Adam Henein Museum was officially inaugurated: Nevine El-Aref roamed around its galleries



On Saturday a winter breeze blew into the otherwise sunny village of Al-Haraneya, on the outskirts of Giza governorate. A quiet scene, of farmers ploughing some fields and harvesting cauliflowers and cabbages in others, or transporting goods on donkey back, was disturbed by the roar of approaching cars and their drivers' footsteps. Among those present were Mohamed Abul-Ghar, the head of the Egyptian Democratic Party, Mohamed Abu Seada, the head of the Culture Development Fund, Bahrain Ambassador Rashid Al-Khalifa, novelist Youssef Al-Qaid, artist George Bahgory and others.

Filing alongside a small canal you come to an impressive three-storey building in humble rural style, past an iron gate decorated with floral motifs, and the Adam Henein Museum — built over the last seven years in the garden of Henein's residence and housing 4,000 pieces, the fruit of over 65 years of creativity — welcomes you in.

Sculptures in bronze, stone, wood, clay and granite as well as paintings and drawings on paper and canvas, in acrylic, aquarelle, ink and charcoal testify to the artist's power. Henein transforms solid materials into ethereal presences through the use of simple lines, capturing the essentials in modernist form. He interweaves universal themes such as motherhood, birds, boats and prayer with references to ancient Egyptian icons such as pyramids, obelisks and hieroglyphs. His paintings, many of which are on papyrus, are similarly eloquent, sharing with his sculptures a poetic simplicity of visual form.

The interior design of the museum follows the latest exhibition trends where a niche for each piece is provided within a given gallery, with all the galleries interconnected.

An open-air space displays a collection of larger granite sculptures carved during successive rounds of the Aswan International Sculpture Symposium (AISS), of which Henein is the commissar. An ancient Egyptian boat holds on its deck a number of sculptures: Fatma, a slim girl in red granite that, as Henein says, symbolises Egypt in its beauty, kindness, tenderness and poverty. Fatma was Henein's first piece, completed when he was in his last year at the College of Fine Arts. On the side of the boat is the name of Henein's late wife Afaf, with the implication that, as per ancient Egyptian beliefs, it conveyed her west — to the afterlife. The open-air exhibition also includes donkeys, birds, doors and windows.

"For a long time the idea of setting up a museum for my works preoccupied me but I did not know how or where," Henein explained, openly confessing his love for all his works and his concern that his legacy would be lost or sold. "I don't want more money, I want to leave these pieces of art for future generations," he asserted. In 2007, the idea of the museum took form when Henein established a foundation in his name and placed all his art in it.

The foundation is affiliated with the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs and among its members are the Ministry of Culture and the Friends of the Ahmed Bahaaeddin Association as well as a number of prominent figures and businessmen. Henein built the museum at his own expense but it was the foundation that took on the work of turning it into a state-of-the-art museum.

"It is a very good guarantee of the continuation of the museum," Henein said of the foundation, explaining that it will always have the budget required for the museum's maintenance; the government represented in the Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs will ensure the museum's survival after Henein's own death. "This museum is a treasure generously available to all of us," wrote artist Mustafa Al-Razzaz in the preface of the museum's catalogue adding that: "It is a place of pilgrimage and contemplation. With each visit, the viewer will want to sit in front of a particular piece and slowly, calmly crack its code."

The surprise of the opening was the presence of former minister of culture Farouk Hosni, Henein's lifelong friend, who travelled to Cairo specifically to attend. Hosni was warmly welcomed by all present, including the present Minister of Culture Saber Arab who insisted on cutting the ribbon hand in hand with Hosni. For his part the abstract painter was very enthusiastic, and

described the opening as a historic event. He said that opening such a museum is a great benefit to the Egyptian arts and will teach young Egyptian artists a very distinguished style in sculpture and painting. He asserted that Henein is the imam of sculptors in Egypt and now there are two museums of two pioneer artists displaying different schools of sculpture in the country: the late Mahmoud Mokhtar's and Henein's. "I am so happy to witness Henein's dream finally come true," he said.

During the opening ceremony, Arab said this was the first cultural event after the constitutional referendum, vowing that the Ministry of Culture will secure and protect the museum as well as putting it on the Egyptian museums' list to encourage more visits. "Henein is a uniquely talented Egyptian artist the different sides of whose personality are reflected in every piece of his work," he said.

Sheikha Maie Al-Khalifa of Al-Bahrain, who came specially to attend the opening, said the museum was a glowing picture of Egypt with its art heritage. She discussed with Saber Egypt's contribution to the Bahrain Book Fair. For his part Ali Abdel-Rahman, the Giza governor, asserted that a development project to facilitate the museum visitor's journey would soon be underway. The road would be paved and lit with a number of signboards installed.

From a child's passion for art to a major artist is a story to tell. Henein's first piece was completed in 1938 when he was only eight, a schoolboy at the Tawfik Primary School in Faggala. Henein recounts that his first sense of art developed during a school trip with his history teacher to the Egyptian museum in Tahrir Square. There he was totally captivated by the artifacts on display as he discovered a new magic world away from the textbooks, physics and chemistry classes as well as family life. He totally forgot about his history field class, his soul lost among those monumental colossi, the statues, reliefs and obelisks. "It was a world that you could live in and be totally happy," he realised.

Afterwards he took a piece of clay from his art class home and carved his first ever sculpture in imitation of a Pharaonic face he saw at the Egyptian museum. His father took Henein's piece and put it on display alongside his own work in a showcase in his shop in the goldsmiths' market. Henein was thrilled to see that his work could attract an audience. "From this moment my career was formed in the world of art," Henein concluded. "Art is like education," he went on: no nation or democracy can be formed without education. Just as education can change the mind of a child, so art changes people's way of thinking as well as building up their vision of everything in life; hence the importance of the museum in a developing nation.

In order to encourage all types of art, he suggests that the government should allocate a place within a vast garden like Hyde Park to graffiti. There, he said, people who have the talent for painting can go and draw on these walls. "It would be a struggle of painting or a struggle through painting."

After receiving a degree in Sculpture from the College of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1953, Henein moved onto Luxor, Nubia, Munich and Paris. On the west bank of

the Nile in Luxor he found his soul, he says. In Munich he was exposed to the latest trends in art but it did not reduce his passion for ancient Egyptian art. In Paris, his own distinctive style formed as he carved birds, donkeys and human beings. When he returned to Egypt in 1996 he contributed greatly to the country's cultural landscape in Aswan, where he founded the annual AISS. Henein has received numerous awards and his work has been acquired all across the world, notably by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.