

## Fine Arts in Egypt: 100 Years of Creativity

The “Fine Arts in Egypt: 100 Years of Creativity” conference, which took place on 19-22 October 2008 at Helwan University, Cairo, celebrated the centennial of the establishment of one of the leading fine arts educational institutions in Egypt and the Arab world. It was convened on the premises of Cairo’s Opera House.

Held under the auspices of Egypt’s first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, the opening ceremony featured welcome speeches by Farouk Hosni (minister of culture), Abdulla Barakat (president, Helwan University), Mohamed Mekawwy (dean, Fine Arts), and Aleya Abdel-Hadi (conference organizer). Following these speeches, Benedetto Todar (dean of architecture, Sapienza, Rome) and Hazem El Kowedi (governor, Helwan) gave keynote addresses on architecture.

The central venue of the conference was significant; not only are the grounds of the Opera House close to the premises of the fine arts faculty, but the Opera House is also considered the heart of Cairo’s artistic activity and is referred to as Egypt’s national cultural center. On the premises are several performance theaters, conference halls, the National Institute of Music and the Music Library, art galleries (including the Modern Art Gallery of Egypt), and the Opera Museum. The diverse spirit of the premises perfectly suited the event’s transdisciplinary nature.

The themes revolved around “Trends, Education and Society and the Environment.” In the panels dealing with trends, many facets were investigated via papers on “Fine Arts and Heritage,” “New Trends in Fine Arts,” and “Fine Arts and Technological Advancement.” In the sessions on education, the presenters analyzed “Curriculum Development and Teaching Method in Fine Arts,” “Fine Arts Education and the Preservation of Cultural and Local Heritage,” “Fine Arts and Issues of the Environment,” and “The Development of Fine Arts Education and Information Technology.”

The final part, which focused on society and the environment, included three presentations on “Fine Arts’ Impact on the Society and the Environment,” “Fine Arts’ Role in Urban Upgrading,” and “Urban Design and Sustainability.” The papers covered the disciplines of urban design, architecture, interior design, painting, graphics, sculpture, cinema, and television. Academics, professionals, and students from almost all of Egypt’s major universities attended, as did a number of people from Australia, Asia, Europe, North America, and the Middle East.

Throughout the following three days, parallel presentation sessions, held in both Arabic and English, allowed for in-depth discussions of the ideas presented. The daily program of the conference included simultaneous paper sessions, numerous keynote speeches, and symposia.

The keynote speakers focused on architecture, sculpture, interior design, graphic design, and painting; conveners and participants came from various backgrounds. Throughout the conference, several symposia were held to analyze a wide array of topics. The keynote symposium was about transdisciplinarity, which encapsulated the vision of the entire conference. Within this symposium, several presentations highlighted the relationship of the built environment and psychology, the production knowledge and the potential of transdisciplinarity, architectural theory and cultural theory, and art therapy as an interdisciplinary approach. Other symposia included "Fine Arts and the World," "Islamic Architecture and the Contemporary World," "Society and Architecture," "Global Criticism in Art and Architecture," "Environmental Architecture," "Allegory of Design and the Cave," and "Architectural Education."

The integration of the different specializations associated with the arts meant that a true spirit of interdisciplinarity was created and that members from each discipline gained from the layered context.

Many of the papers, keynote discussions, and symposia revolved around the central theme of the development of fine arts in Egypt and the region over the past century. A few papers discussed the connection of fine arts in Egypt to other cultures, including the identity relationship of Mediterranean architecture between Egypt and Italy, Egypt's impact on the creation of oriental imagery in Chile, and the symbol-making similarity between Istanbul and Cairo. Many researchers brought their own cultural experiences in regards to the fine arts and also other topics reviewed during this conference, thereby highlighting practices from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The rich variety of disciplines, paper topics, research approaches, and participants ensured that the conference celebrated not only the presence of the fine arts faculty as an institution in Egypt, but as an instigator of creative thought and criticism within the country and the region.

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