

"Egypt has potential to be one of the greatest nations, as it once was, if only we would let the arts flourish again." — May Koura

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Envision yourself in a gray dull world where all your purpose is to biologically exist through eating and sleeping. You spend your days waiting for people to come to your restaurant. All you see throughout the day is the asphalt of your lot and metal fences surrounding you. Everyone else is in the same situation but nobody expresses how they feel. You wish tourists would find interest in coming to your restaurant. You go home and feel suffocated and vent your anger at your loved ones. You don't want to be like this. You open the window to take in a deep breath of smog filled air and stare at blocks of concrete.

This is a life without art. What is art? More importantly, how and why does it affect every aspect of our existence? Despite the fact that there has never been a society that has not featured art, a solid definition for it has never been produced. To Picasso art is "the lie that reveals the truth" and for Goethe, "Art is the magic of the soul" (Ramachandran). Although neither fully explains what is considered art, this does not undermine the effect art and creative thinking have on people's lives. It has become apparent that over time, Egypt has lost appreciation for the arts and is suffering from the consequences. The effects of this lack of appreciation are apparent in every sense whether it be economical, political, biological, or sociological.

Economically, growth is obtained by utilizing all available resources. "Artists are significantly and vastly underestimated contributors and generators of local economic growth" (Farrell). For example, when there is a concert in a city, it is safe to assume that hotels would be booked for the event and visitors would spend money on souvenirs and food and transportation to arrive at the event. Without using artists and creative thinkers there is a segment of the nation's resources left idle. All of these services attending to this event would generate income, boosting the local economy. It is unfortunate however, that the arts "are often perceived as luxuries, worth supporting in good times but hard to justify when the economy is struggling, cultural institutions are among the first to be considered for tax cuts" (Cohen).

In the past, manufacturing and mass production were the way to boost an economy. However, the needs of the industrial revolution are different from the needs of the world today. Times are changing and it is not shocking that the arts have been heralded as the engines of economic growth and development. According to John Howkins, author of *How People Make Money from Ideas*, people who own ideas are in many cases, more powerful than those who own machines. Recent studies show that the British, American and Japanese spend more on entertaining themselves than on clothing or healthcare, making "the most important resources of all companies ... the ideas and creative capacities of the workforce" (Tepper). The world has become aware of the incredible effects branding and forming an image for products has on the sale of commodities. This art form of creating advertising campaigns and a system of attractive packaging has become increasingly important to companies today.

There are predictions that "the creative economy will be the dominant economic form in the twenty-first century" (Howkins qtd. in Tepper). However, with Egypt losing its appreciation for the arts, the country's economy is inevitably stunted. It also reduces the number of tourists — who want to visit

beautiful places — to visit Egypt. Egypt will not be able to compete with other tourist destinations as long as natural beauty is continuously destroyed and dysfunctional infrastructure is laid out unmindful of any aesthetics. Monuments and museums, if not appreciated, will be left to fall apart. What will Egypt, a country economically dependent on its tourism, do when it has nothing left to offer tourists?

Due to the intertwining relationship linking politics with economics, if the economic situation is left to deteriorate politics will as well. On the political level, art acts as a language — a means of communication. Art can affect politics in various ways; it may reflect, record or trigger movements or may even act as a witness to political changes. In times of crisis governments often opt to produce songs of hope and nationalism to strengthen the morale of a society. In times of oppression artists may produce plays or poetry that expresses their struggles often when there is no other way to speak up.

To neglect art would be to erase history. Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy is a clear example of how changes in politics and their effects on society can be recorded in art. In *The Trilogy* we are told of the effects of post-colonialism and the rise of fundamentalism and other social movements. "Naguib Mahfouz finished writing the Cairo trilogy in 1952...the Cairo trilogy's completion coincided with the Officer's Revolution of 1952." (Irwin). The themes discussed throughout the novel vary from Gender roles, the ways families in this socio-economic class operate, Egyptian Nationalism, Muslim Brotherhood, and women's rights.

To allow art to flourish is to allow democracy. Democracy arises from freedom for the individual to be represented. Art is about allowing the individual to express him/herself. "Directly and indirectly, art may bolster the morale of groups and help create a sense of unity; of social solidarity...it may create awareness of social issues and provide rallying cries for action and social change" (Albrecht).

When the former regime in Iraq was removed, millions viewed images of the statue of Saddam Hussein being knocked down. Whether the aims were similar to those of sympathetic magic or of breaking the morale of resistance the destruction of the statue had crucial symbolism and meaning. Initially, the statue's presence was an expression of power, strength, and permanence, and its consequent destruction marked a tangible end to the regime. Through art "definition of the legitimate and illegitimate is established and imposed", (Beech). In essence, lack of understanding the power of art blocks off lines of communication and keeps idle a political instrument that may be used to the people's benefit.

Art not only opens lines of communication it also opens the senses to aesthetic experiences. If you are able to appreciate art it is safe to assume that you will appreciate naturally occurring aesthetic experiences. With the absence of aesthetic values, incentive to preserve nature is weak. Preserving nature is important since it is a system to which we belong. "English researchers in London noted the emotional importance of the blooming of even a single cherry tree in the daily life of residents" (Pinceti). Realizing that people are a part of nature gives a sense of belonging — a sense of being part of a greater

entity. In response people feel a sense of purpose and have something to believe in and appreciate. By not appreciating nature, we are in effect, not appreciating ourselves. To do so would lead to nothing but self-destruction.

We cannot afford to let our lack of appreciation for art affect us biologically as is happening in Egypt and Cairo in particular. Our lack of respect for communal gardens and mindless littering are evidence that, as a society, Egyptians have lost appreciation for beauty. The main concern has become to build densely, regardless of the wealth of natural beauty being destroyed along the way. This overbuilding has had adverse effects on our environment causing pollution to reach shocking levels. There is a lack of understanding of aesthetics, like urban planning, and Cairo has become a bustling mess.

Understanding how comforting art and aesthetic experiences can be (placing anti aesthetic movements of the day to the side) can augment quality of life. "Social institutions are usually conceived as essential structures of society, serving "basic needs" which are often interpreted in terms of biological survival"... Art doesn't have the same physiological base as sex and hunger but to live any quality of life beyond survival people need inquisition [i.e. art] (Albrecht). The soul needs to be pleased or soothed occasionally; to capitalize on a wealth of aesthetically pleasing experiences can help balance out the displeasures of life. "Mass culture, sports, and popular entertainment are primary means of diverting aggression from original sources of conflict by providing vicarious, "safe" release of hostile impulses" (Albrecht). Understanding for such a stress relieving mechanism is of utmost importance for social order.

Art acts the same way as religion. It not only provides comfort and hope, it opens up the soul. When you know how to take in art and think with your imagination it allows you to take in religion a lot easier. Perhaps then, it is not so surprising, that the church funded most of the art produced in Europe during the renaissance. Generally there is emphasis on making places of worship beautiful. The intricate detailing of the frontice piece of the Koran adds to the sense of holiness of the book. It forces you to respect it, not only for its content, but it is also beaming with tangible and spiritual beauty. Religion and art have the function of lessening the pain and making the harshness of life tolerable..."Both [art and religion] strike us as awesome in their manner of confronting us, blissful in the momentary happiness they produce, tantalizing in demanding our recognition, assent, or belief" (Pruyser). Perhaps it is then not surprising why art adds to the quality of life.

Now indulge yourself in the world vibrating with creativity and art. In the morning, you wake up to the chirping of birds. You open the window to take in a breath of fresh air since pollution levels have dramatically dropped. The restaurant has been prospering since its redecoration attracts the eye of passers by and tourists who visit nearby art exhibition and galleries. On your walk home, the mellifluous prayer call fills the air and soothes the heart. With plenty of money in your pocket you can afford an enjoyable family meal. Later today, the family goes for a stroll in the park stopping to enjoy ponds sparkling with colored fish. This is possible because the community decided to keep communal green

space instead of turning that plot of land into yet another concrete edifice. You overhear a passer-by humming a song telling his pride in belonging to this unique nation whose distinction contributes to its magnificence.

Egypt has potential to be one of the greatest nations, as it once was, if only we would let the arts flourish again.

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