The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of an intricate Egyptian architectural detail. It features a complex, multi-layered structure of gold-colored metal or woodwork. The design is highly symmetrical and geometric, with a central star-like or floral motif. The gold is set against a vibrant blue background, which is further accented with red and green. The overall effect is one of rich, traditional craftsmanship.

NOTHING  
VANISHES  
EVERYTHING  
TRANSFORMS

ART D'ÉGYPTE

# THE POWER OF ART IN PEACEBUILDING

Rev. Paul-Gordon  
Chandler

*Art [is a] means for destroying our way of thinking and behaving*  
Ramsès Younan  
*Twentieth-century Egyptian surrealist painter*

The Manial Palace in Cairo on the Nile's al-Rhoda Island, built by Prince Mohamed Ali Tewfik during the first third of the twentieth century, illustrates the beauty and power of the arts to serve as a bridge between the Middle East and the West. Designed in a style that integrated European art nouveau and rococo with more traditional Islamic architecture, such as Ottoman, Moorish and Persian, the palace is a most inspiring artistic mosaic reflecting East and West. Even its surrounding grounds reflect the East-West nature of the place with both a Persian garden and an extensive English landscape garden bordering the Nile. Knowing how uniquely symbolic this palace was may perhaps be an underlying reason that the prince put in his will his wish for the palace to be transformed into a museum after his death.

It all serves to remind us that during a time of escalating misunderstanding, stereotypes and sometimes even violence between the Middle East and the West, the arts can be one of the most effective ways to build the all-too-necessary bridges needed by enhancing understanding, bringing about respect, enabling sharing, and facilitating new friendships between those of different cultures and creeds. Certainly, in the midst of widening divides of discord and misapprehension, our time calls for a whole new kind of movement; one that builds on what we hold in common. Hence now more than ever, 'creative demonstrations' of dialogue and peacebuilding are called for.

Art is a universal language that has the ability to dissolve the differences that divide us, changing negative perceptions and creating lasting change in the quest for justice and peace. As the late Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz said, 'Art is language of the entire human personality'. The arts can profoundly embody a fundamental message of East-West harmony, seeking to serve as a common starting point on which to build towards seeing

the development of societies that inherently respect and honour diversity, living and working peacefully together.

In today's context, it is the artists that can lead the way. With their embrace of greater tolerance, artists provide new pathways of understanding that transcend borders and how we see the 'other'. The power of creativity counteracts the demonization of the 'other'. For as long as conflict has torn apart the human family, art has allowed us to see similarity within difference, offering a mode of reconciliation.

This has been clearly demonstrated for us around the Middle East, where time and time again artistic expression spontaneously surfaces following periods of conflict or political turmoil. One thinks of the public street art that has flourished since the so-called 'Arab Spring', and the music groups that have been formed, the films produced, the plays created, and the novels written. As the dynamic former minister of culture in Tunisia, Latifa Lakhdar, says, 'Creativity is the greatest way to [approach] our battle against those people who would destroy even the most elementary principles of life'.

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Perhaps more than any other field, the arts offer strategic resources for non-violently reducing conflicts, transforming relationships in the aftermath of violence and building the capacities required for peace. Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist wrote, 'The task of art is enormous [...] Art should cause violence to be set aside. And it is only art that can accomplish this'.

But one may ask, why art? There is something transcendent about art. Art creates a new pathway of understanding that transcends differences and has the power to speak to us on a deep, subconscious level. As Kahlil Gibran, the early twentieth-century Lebanese-born poet-artist, so powerfully wrote, 'The mission of art is to bring out the unfamiliar from the most familiar; from nature to the infinite'. Gibran goes on to say, 'Art is one step from the visibly known toward the unknown'. The words of Paul Tillich, the great German theologian, echo this unique power of the arts, 'All arts create symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in

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any other way'. Art takes us into that deeper dimension, which is how Anish Kapoor, the renowned British-Indian sculptor describes his work when he says, 'I am attempting to dig away at [...] the great mystery of being'. Kapoor continues, 'We live in a fractured world. I've always seen it as my role as an artist to attempt to make wholeness'.

Art invites us to re-imagine ourselves, our situations, our internal narratives. Art is not a cure, but it is a focal point. Art can offer a pause, a moment of reflection. Art can motivate and inspire. Art can remind us of what makes us most human. The arts lead us to realize, as Elif Shafak, the bestselling Turkish novelist and public intellectual, has written, 'The distance between "us" and "them" has less to do with the world outside than with the world inside our minds'.

Another reason for the transformative power of the arts in peacebuilding is that art is 'indirect' in its approach to addressing very difficult and challenging issues. As a result, the all too often defensive walls are not raised. As an indirect catalyst, art creates a safe and equalizing space in which to begin real dialogue and sensitively addresses negative stereotypes of the 'other', as well as even healing old rifts within communities.

Repeatedly, we have seen the words of the fourteenth-century Persian poet and mystic Hafiz to be true, 'Art is the conversation ... Art offers an opening for the heart ... Art is, at least, the knowledge of where we are standing ... In this wonderland ... We are partners straddling the universe'.

Therefore, the arts aren't only about encouraging intercultural dialogue, but should be about something much deeper. They naturally lead to intercultural friendships, establishing sincere human relationships with those of different cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds that cannot be broken by the words or actions of others. The aim of art is always higher than art, for the arts can help us see someone different than us for whom they really are, that they are a reflection of ourselves. As Kahlil Gibran so powerfully wrote, 'Your neighbour

is your other self, dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down'.

Her Majesty Queen Rania al-Abdullah of Jordan, in her foreword to one of our CARAVAN exhibition catalogues writes, 'For isn't that the joy of art—its ability to speak to us all about what is both familiar and unfamiliar? To be a language that transcends borders and barriers. To be the consummate diplomat, travelling the world overcoming race, religion and rancour, building bridges of respect and understanding between us all, North, South, East and West.

As a result, because of the transformative power of art, artistic initiatives become encounter points, bringing people together that would normally never come together, to gain insights into the 'other' and to alleviate fears that exist. It could not be timelier for the arts to play a central role in promoting peacebuilding and a sectarian-free world.

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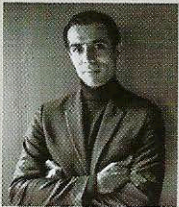
Some words from two artists serve as wise counsel for us all at this moment in time. Leonard Bernstein, the renowned late composer and conductor, clearly described the unique transformational role of the arts when he wrote, 'The point is, art never stopped a war [...] That was never its function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people. It can affect people so that they are changed—they then act in a way that may affect the course of events [...] by the way they behave, the way they think'. And perhaps no words resonate better with the spirit of the arts furthering peacebuilding than the words of that profound Dutch artist, Vincent van Gogh, 'The more I think it over, the more I feel that there is nothing more truly artistic than to love people'.

*Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler is the founding president of CARAVAN Arts ([www.oncaravan.org](http://www.oncaravan.org)).*



**Paul-Gordon Chandler** is an author, art curator, Episcopal priest, interfaith advocate, and social entrepreneur who has lived and worked in the Middle East and North Africa for many years in leadership positions in the arenas of the arts, publishing and the Episcopal/Anglican Church. He is the Founding President of CARAVAN, an international peacebuilding NGO that uses the arts to build bridges between the creeds and cultures of the

Middle East and the West. An authority on the Middle East and on Muslim-Christian relations, he was the rector of the international Episcopal church in Cairo, Egypt from 2003–2013. The author of four books, his most recent publication is on the all-embracing nature of the Lebanese-born poet-artist Kahlil Gibran, titled *In Search of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Kahlil Gibran* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017). For more information, see [www.paulgordonchandler.com](http://www.paulgordonchandler.com)



**Ridha Mourni** read art history and archaeology at the Sorbonne University in Paris where he earned his PhD. He researches classical, modern and contemporary art from a global and transnational perspective, with emphasis on questions of collecting practice and intellectual history. Winner of several prizes, he was the first Tunisian Fellow at the French Academy in Rome (Villa Medici). He has curated numerous exhibitions of

photography and modern art, including *The Awakening of a Nation: Art at the Dawn of Modern Tunisia (1837–1881)* in 2016 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of national independence. Mourni is currently working on a project on modernism in Tunisia.



**Rose Issa** is a curator, writer and producer who has championed visual art and film from the Middle East for more than 30 years. She has lived in London since the 1980s, showcasing upcoming and established artists, producing exhibitions and film festivals worldwide and running a publishing programme. As well as holding exhibitions at Rose Issa Projects in London, she frequently co-curates exhibitions with international private

and public institutions, including the Beirut Art Fair, Lebanon (2017); Crawford Art Gallery, Cork (2014); Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar, Doha (2014); and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2013, 2006); among many others. Founder of the publishing units Rose Issa Projects and Beyond Art Production, she has published almost 30 catalogues and monographs, including the most recent *Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti* (Merrell Publishing, 2016) and *Ourouba, The Eye of Lebanon* (Beirut Art Fair, 2017). *Photo by Alex Atack, courtesy of Canvas magazine*



**Valérie Didier-Hess** has spent the last nine years working in the art world in the cultural hub of the Middle East, Dubai, and has recently moved back to Paris. During her time in Dubai, she developed an academic passion for modern Egyptian art. Following the success of the *Mahmoud Said Catalogue Raisonné* (Skira, 2016), co-edited with Dr Hussam Rashwan, the first book of its kind for a Middle Eastern artist, Didier-Hess

and Rashwan are dedicated to continuing to preserve modern Egyptian art's rich cultural heritage and are currently working on the Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar catalogue raisonné with the artist's family, as well as on the English translation of Aimé Azar's seminal book, *La Peinture moderne en Égypte* (1961). Didier-Hess graduated from Cambridge University with a BA in art history (2004), and from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London with a master's degree in art history (2005).



**Walaa El-Din Badawy** is the museum director at the Manial Palace Museum. A graduate of Cairo University's Islamic and Coptic Department at the Faculty of Archaeology (2000), he later obtained diplomas in art history (2005) and Egyptology (2010) from the same university. He completed his MSc in Museum Studies at Helwan University's Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management in 2016 where his thesis addressed the collection management policies of historical museums with a focus on the Manial Palace Museum. He is currently a PhD candidate at the same university and is researching the role of museums in preserving Egypt's cultural heritage, taking the Abdin Palace and Museum as a particular case study.



**Zahi Hawass** is a world-renowned archaeologist whose dynamic personality and extensive knowledge have sparked global interest in Ancient Egypt. He received his MA and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied as a Fulbright fellow, and has received 7 honorary doctorates from various foreign universities. He began as an inspector of antiquities and rose to become the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, as well as the first Minister of State for Antiquities. In 2017, he was named Ambassador for Peace and Cultural Heritage by the International Federation of Peace and Sustainable Development, an affiliate organization to the United Nations. He has written more than 40 popular and academic books and over 150 scholarly articles on his endeavors including the Egyptian Mummy Project. Currently, he is directing an Egyptian team excavating at the Valley of the Monkeys on the West Bank of Luxor.