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## A Study of Form and Content in Contemporary Egyptian Graffiti (2005-2015) with a Focus on the Works of AlaaAwad

By

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**Abstract:** Among Islamic countries, Egypt, with its ancient and rich cultural heritage and its strategic and significant position in the geography and history of the post-Islamic era, is considered one of the most important Islamic civilizations. Beyond its illustrious history spanning centuries and millennia, which merits detailed and insightful study by scholars and researchers, the art of this country during the recent decade of transformations (2005-2015) has been the focus of attention. Considering the socio-political changes that occurred in Egypt during this decade, the content and thematic influences, as well as the stylistic and visual aesthetics in the field of visual arts, have been studied and researched. Among contemporary technical and artistic fields, the primary focus is on protest mural art or graffiti, as graffiti is a spontaneous art form that emerges from the heart of social and popular contexts and is inherently devoid of state-sponsored propaganda. Therefore, it provides a transparent reflection of the intellectual developments and values of society. This research will explain the meanings and origins of mural art and its historical background, focusing on contemporary protest graffiti in Egypt. By examining the works of one of the influential artists in this field, named "AlaaAwad," the historical and ideological roots embedded in these works and their impact on the revolutionary and protest culture of Egyptians will be explored.

**Keywords:** Form, Content, Graffiti, Contemporary Art, Egyptian Art, AlaaAwad

### INTRODUCTION

The nature and function of art have always been fundamental issues in human history, manifesting in various forms across different eras. The magical and symbolic characteristics of art among cave-dwelling humans and the sacred and devotional art among human communities from the Stone Age to the present confirm this. This functional aspect of art, however, faced significant challenges and critiques with the emergence of the theory of "art for art's sake," rooted in German transcendental idealism and the Romanticism movement, followed by the growth and development of

modern art. Nevertheless, certain forms of art continued to serve ideological and propaganda purposes, appearing in various societies and periods in multiple formats. Among these, "religious art," or more precisely, "art in the service of religion," is a notable form of applied art that has been used to promote the lofty goals of various religions, generally aimed at propagating, disseminating, and expressing the principles and beliefs of religions to humanity through various artistic methods. In a sense, religious art is the expression of the sacred, considering the

contextual and ideological conditions outlined in sacred texts, designed within an aesthetic framework compatible with those themes. A noteworthy point is that religious art is not solely based on religious principles; the artistic and cultural achievements of the societies and civilizations that embraced these religions undoubtedly played a significant role in formulating their aesthetic systems. This has led to the diversity and multiplicity of styles and methods related to a single religion. In some areas, the regional and indigenous characteristics of a land's art may overshadow its ideological and religious features. A prominent example of this is "Islamic art," or more accurately, "the art of Islamic lands," which, while adhering to many shared principles and beliefs related to Islam, exhibits significant structural and aesthetic differences among these lands. However, important commonalities and similarities can also be observed, likely stemming from shared ideological frameworks, intertextual connections, cultural exchanges, or interethnic migrations and amalgamations.

The art and civilization of Egypt, as one of the oldest Islamic lands, have witnessed the arrival of various governmental systems and religious structures over the centuries since the advent of Islam, leading to diverse artistic styles and methods. Rulers such as the Umayyads, Mamluks, Tulunids, Fatimids, and Mamluks, up to the contemporary colonial era, which cast the heavy shadow of global political powers, particularly Britain, over this country, have fundamentally altered the intellectual and cultural structures and artistic tastes of its people over several centuries. Among these, one of the pivotal moments in Egypt's history, which gained global dimensions, is the revolutionary movement of this country from 2011 onwards, referred to as the "Arab Spring" or the "Islamic Awakening." The revolutionary and protest art of the Egyptian people, rooted in anti-colonial movements of the early 20th century, has taken on a fresh hue in recent years, adopting one of the most innovative forms of contemporary world art: protest mural art or graffiti. This research aims to familiarize readers with the concepts and functions of graffiti, study the formal and content characteristics of this art in Egypt over the past decade, and explore the

ideological, religious, historical, and mythological roots of Egyptians in this contemporary art form. The text is structured to address the following questions:

1. What direction has the content structure of Egyptian graffiti taken during the socio-political transformations of the past decade, and what is the corresponding formal visual system?
2. To what extent is Egyptian graffiti indebted to its ancient and historical aesthetic heritage?

Among the numerous graffiti artists in Egypt, some renowned and others anonymous, the works of the young Egyptian artist "AlaaAwad" will be analyzed as a case study for a more concrete examination.

### **Research methodology**

The research methodology is descriptive and analytical, with a historical approach. Data collection has been conducted through library and internet research.

### **Form**

The term "form" or "shape" is one of the most fundamental concepts in art, particularly in visual arts, with various meanings and applications. The Oxford Dictionary defines "form" as "the visible shape or configuration of something" and elsewhere provides similar and synonymous meanings: "style, design, and arrangement in a work of art, regardless of its content" and "the way in which something is made or appears." ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com))

Ruyin Pakbaz, in the Encyclopedia of Art, introduces the term "form" across all arts: "In visual art, it refers to two-dimensional or three-dimensional shapes, solid or hollow. Generally, it is used in two different senses in the arts: 1. The accepted format for expression (e.g., ghazal in Persian poetry; sonata in European music) 2. The structural qualities present in a work of art (e.g., the harmonious proportion of different parts and their arrangement to create tension and climax)" (Pakbaz, 2002: 343).

Etymologically, the word "form" is derived from the Latin "forma" and is used similarly in European languages. "In Italian, Spanish, Polish, and Russian, it is used in the same form, with slight variations in other languages. In French, it is 'forme,' in English 'form,' in German 'Form.'" (Abdi, 2011: 37) An important point is that this

term, in all provided definitions, has both external and internal aspects. The external aspect refers to the shape and visual organization of objects, while the internal aspect pertains to the internal and reciprocal relationships of all components and the overall encompassing structure, of which shapes are only one aspect. In fact, the inherent qualities in the internal organization of shapes represent the internal aspect of form. "The Latin word 'forma' initially replaced two Greek words: 'morphe' and 'eidos.' 'Morphe' was more commonly used for visible forms, while 'eidos' was used for conceptual (mental) forms. This dual heritage has significantly influenced the diverse meanings of form." (Ibid.) Noel Carroll, in his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art\**, defines form: "Although the importance of form (shape) particularly emerged with the tendency of modern art towards abstraction, it is said that having form (shape) is a characteristic of all artworks, past, present, and future. Form (shape) refers to the arrangement of lines, colors, shapes, volumes, vectors, and space (two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and their interactions)." (Carroll, 2007: 173) Additionally, Rudolf Arnheim, in his book *Art and Visual Perception\**, while referring to the visual characteristics of form such as curvature and sharpness, strength and weakness, harmony and disharmony of tangible objects, symbolically considers these characteristics beyond practical visual functions, interpreting them as a reading of human life conditions.

Finally, to achieve a coherent perspective on the definition of form in the realm of visual arts, we consider the multiple definitions provided by Charles Jansen: "1. Form, in its most precise sense, is synonymous with the word shape; that is, one of the visual elements... 2. Form also refers to a specific type or shape of something. The term 'a form of painting' conveys this meaning... 3. Form, in its most general sense, refers to the visual elements that constitute a work and the relationships between these elements, giving the work its distinctive appearance." (Jansen, 2014: 20)

### **Content**

The term "content" is always mentioned alongside "form" in the critique of literary and artistic works, and the dual term "form and content" is one of the most famous and popular terms in art

criticism. This linguistic and formal proximity sufficiently indicates a semantic connection between these two terms, suggesting that understanding one leads to the comprehension of the other. In the Oxford Dictionary, the word "content" (as the English equivalent of "content") is defined as: "The things that are contained within something else -- the material related to a speech, literary or artistic work, etc., regardless of its form or style." ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)).

The root of the word "content" is derived from the Latin "contentum," meaning "to contain," synonymous with "conten." (Ibid.) Based on the above definition, content refers to the essence of an artwork, while form (as previously discussed) denotes its external and formal appearance. In a sense, content can be considered the conceptual factor and the intended meaning or goal of the artist, conveyed to the audience through the medium of form as a visual message. In other words, "the emotional or intellectual message of an artwork is its content. Content is the statement, expression, or mood that the viewer discerns in the work, hoping it aligns with the artist's intent." (Stinson and Keaton, 2011: 29)

The content of an artwork can refer to familiar forms and simple concepts or, through abstract forms, evoke abstract and metaphysical ideas. In the latter case, the artist's mental structure in creating a connection between concept and abstract form leads to an internal content in the work, and this connection is conveyed to the audience indirectly, based on sensory, mythological, symbolic, or logical frameworks. "In completing an artwork, content follows a certain evolutionary path. The artist is inspired by their feelings about a subject (what we call the 'what'). The subject may or may not have a representational resemblance. Then, the artist uses artistic elements (line, shape, etc.) to create a form (the 'how') that will lead to the intended content (the 'why'). Content expresses the artist's emotions." (Ibid.: 30) A noteworthy point is that the content of a work, considering spatial or temporal conditions, may undergo changes and evolutions, and in some cases, may take on a completely different meaning from what the artist intended, interpreted differently. Therefore, hermeneutics, or the interpretation of artworks, in every era and geographical condition, is one of the



available methods for critically and aesthetically engaging with an artwork. "Content may also refer to ideas that arise during interpretation in connection with other contemporary works or works from later periods in the viewer's mind." (Jansen, 2014: 29) This approach, due to the intertextual connections between artworks, seems unavoidable.

To summarize the concept and semantic functions of "content" in an artwork, we outline the aspects of content in artworks:

1. Internal or psychological influences: including the artist's specific tendencies, values, beliefs, as well as motivations and goals.
2. External influences from the environment: including geographical and climatic features, as well as social, political, and economic structures, and cultural needs and interests that become goals and activities, related to religious commitments and philosophical views; enduring traditions and influences from the past are also included in this section.
3. Interpretation of the artwork based on influences and perspectives that will affect it in the future." (Ibid).

### **Graffiti**

The terms "graffiti" (Graffiti) and its singular form "graffito" (Graffito) are derived from the word "graffiato," meaning "scratched." "Graffiti" in art history refers to artworks created by scratching a design onto a surface. The related term "sgraffito" (Sgraffito) involves scratching a colored surface to reveal the underlying layer. This technique was initially used by potters who first coated their work and then scratched designs onto it. In ancient times, graffiti was carved onto walls using sharp objects, and chalk and charcoal were also used. The word originates from the Greek "graphein," meaning "to write." (Grant, 1983: 1-2)

The Oxford Dictionary defines graffiti as: "Writing or drawings scribbled, scratched, or sprayed illicitly on a wall or other surface in a public place." John Stall, in his book *\*Street Art\**, writes: "Graffiti is derived from the Italian word 'sgraffire.' 'Sgraffire' is a technique for decorating exterior facades where contrasting layers of plaster are applied, and then lines and patterns are drawn in the wet upper layer. This creates an

extremely durable facade that can still be seen in many places." (Stall, 2015: 6)

What emerges in the study of the meaning of graffiti is a wide range of historical, etymological, and even contemporary functional information, which has entered dictionaries and encyclopedias, providing a classical structure for its definition. Masoud Kowsari defines graffiti as: "Images or letters applied in public places on surfaces such as walls or bridges that are visible to the public." (Kowsari, 2010: 66) Additionally, considering that the Persian equivalent for graffiti, in its general sense, is "mural art," we explore the etymology of this term. The word "mural art" consists of three parts: "wall," "art," and "i," where "wall" means "a fence around a house or any other building" (Horn and Hubschmann, 2015: 233), and "art" means "image," derived from the infinitive "to draw," meaning "to paint and to look at a face and to gaze," and its literal meaning is "to make appear." (Ibid.: 404) The letter "i" functions as a verbalizer, and collectively, "mural art" means drawing or painting an image on a wall or fence around a house or other buildings.

However, in the definitions provided for graffiti, in addition to painted images, symbols, letters, patterns, and words also occupy part of the wall space, generally serving a social function in public spaces and urban streets, containing information, protests, concerns, and messages from specific groups who wish to be seen and communicate directly with the public. Therefore, graffiti is introduced as street art, completely distinct from gallery spaces and official exhibitions, where only specific segments of society are present. This direct communication with the audience is one of the fundamental characteristics of graffiti art. Due to this and the inherently protest nature of graffiti, which in most cases not only lacks official government support (propaganda) but also takes on an illegal form, and in the eyes of its opponents, vandalism, the term "protest art" is used to define and describe it.

### **A Brief History of Mural Art**

In the study of the origins and nature of graffiti, a brief review of the history of mural art throughout historical periods is inevitable. Therefore, we will attempt to summarize this matter. A glance at the available texts and sources on the history of

human life reveals that the dawn of human existence, based on archaeological evidence, is reflected in the remains of their works on cave walls. Thus, mural art, not necessarily as an art form but as an inseparable part of human life from the earliest days to later periods and historical eras, has accompanied humanity. Although it has undergone transformations in definition, nature, and function, it has maintained its identity as a means of self-expression and conveying thoughts, fears, and hopes. Numerous examples of paintings and carvings from the Paleolithic era in caves in France, Spain, and Iran attest to this. (Image 1) Additionally, murals and reliefs in ancient civilizations, aimed at conveying mythological concepts and visual historiography along with the use of inscriptions to explain and elaborate on the depicted images, reveal another aspect of the importance and status of mural art (Images 2).



Image 1. Part of the paintings in the Altamira Cave, Spain (Source: The Motivation of Creativity).

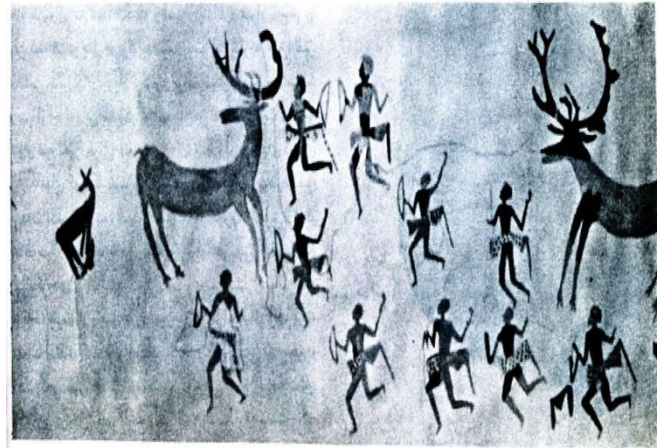


Image 2. Part of the murals related to Çatalhöyük in northwestern present-day Iraq (Source: Encyclopedia of Art).

Among the notable and significant examples of the use of mural art in expressing thoughts and spreading religious beliefs are the murals in the Christian catacombs of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, known as "catacombs," which, in the early years of secret conversion to Christianity, were used to propagate the principles of this faith in underground tombs, symbolically painting motifs related to this emerging religion on the walls and ceilings without using realistic depictions of Jesus (AS) and Mary (AS). Another brilliant highlight in the history of mural art is the Renaissance period in Italy in the 16th century, prominently featuring the ceiling murals of the **Sistine Chapel in Rome**, painted by the renowned painter, poet, and sculptor of that era, Michelangelo (Image 3).

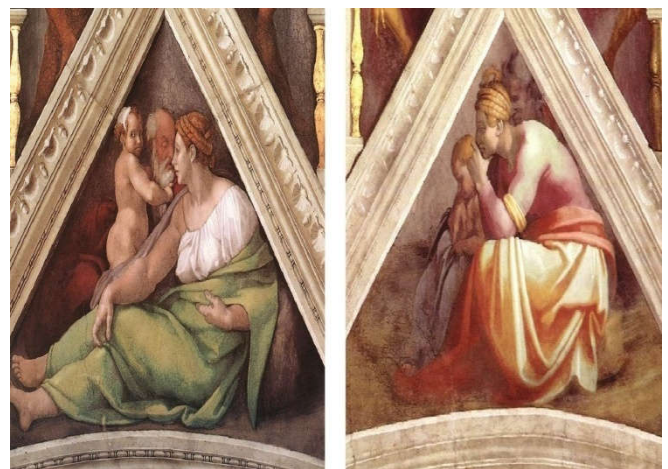


Image 3. Part of the ceiling murals of the Sistine Chapel in Rome by Michelangelo (Source: Official Vatican Museum Website)



Regarding Egypt, the focus of this study, the history of mural art spans the length of this civilization's history, from the earliest examples of pyramids from the Old Kingdom, dating back to the third millennium BC, and the paintings and carvings on the interior walls of these pyramids' tombs to the present day, which bear numerous instances of this art. In these examples, content features such as beliefs in the afterlife, the divine status of the king, and formal characteristics such as the avoidance of linear perspective and volumetric shading, the use of outline lines, and the incorporation of symbolic motifs like the cobra, falcon, wolf, and others, as well as the practice of selecting and combining the most expressive angles of body parts for depicting human figures, are evident. Ernst Gombrich, in his book *\*The Story of Art\**, describes Egyptian paintings: "For them, beauty was not as important as clarity and completeness. The task of the artists was to keep everything as clear and permanent as possible. Therefore, they were alien to any kind of sketching from nature as seen from a fleeting and accidental angle." (Gombrich, 2000: 49) (Image 4).



Image 4. Part of the murals from the Old Kingdom of Egypt, circa 2800 BC (Source: The Motivation of Creativity)

In the periods following the Muslim conquest of Egypt, the aesthetic characteristics of art, like other civilizations, underwent changes. This was due to the content of Islamic jurisprudence and the religious restrictions on iconography and the avoidance of idolatrous images from the pharaonic era. However, plant and animal motifs gradually blended with calligraphic inscriptions, presenting

a new aspect of Islamic Egyptian art. In the 3rd and 4th centuries AH, the northern parts of Africa and Egypt were divided among the powerful dynasties emerging from the Abbasid Caliphate, each ruling a portion of these lands. One of these local dynasties, the "Aghlabids," achieved political success by conquering Sicily in southern Italy in 245 AH. This conquest led to new cultural and artistic exchanges between Egyptian artists and the spread of the Abbasid art style in southern Europe. These traditions continued over many centuries, though they underwent changes due to shifts in governmental systems and the cultural and religious approaches of subsequent rulers, which are beyond the scope of this discussion. Therefore, we will focus on the social, political, and cultural origins of contemporary Egyptian mural art in the form of graffiti.

### The Context of the Islamic Awakening in Egypt

Egypt, due to its strategic and sensitive geographical position, bordering the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and located between North African and Middle Eastern countries with connections to southern Europe, plays a significant role in the region's political geography. Additionally, this land, both in ancient times and in the post-Islamic era, has had a religious structure and is considered the birthplace of many religions. Thus, it has been one of the most important cultural and religious centers of the Islamic world, playing a crucial role in the growth and development of religious institutions and scholars. The modern history of Egypt coincides with the British colonial period starting in 1886. "From 1918 to 1922, influenced by the changes resulting from World War I, Egyptian efforts to free themselves from British colonial rule intensified, and in February 1922, Britain ended the protectorate status of this country, declaring a constitutional monarchy. Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, with the help of General Naguib and the cooperation of the Muslim Brotherhood, seized power on July 23, 1952, declaring Egypt a republic and adopting Arab nationalism as the state ideology" (Velayati, 2013: 31).

Following this anti-colonial wave, which ultimately led to the victory of Egyptian nationalist republicanism, and after the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's government fell

to Hosni Mubarak. Regardless of political inclinations and international relations, Mubarak's presidency in its early periods was seen as a continuation of Nasser's policies. However, in the first two decades of the 21st century, with gradual changes in political and social approaches and pressure on the middle class, sporadic protests against the ruling regime began. The first spark of the Islamic Awakening was ignited on January 15, 2011, following the protests of the Egyptian people in front of the Tunisian embassy in support of the revolution in that country. Finally, on January 28, 2011, after the pressure from protesters with widespread demonstrations in Egypt, Mubarak was forced to declare martial law in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez to counter the wave of protests. After several days of conflict and bloodshed, on February 1, 2011, the army officially declared neutrality and recognized the people's demands against the government as legitimate. Ultimately, Mubarak and the Interior Minister, Habib al-Adly, were sentenced to life imprisonment for failing to stop the killings in the early days of 2011, and Mohamed Morsi, as the first president elected through democratic elections in Egypt, took the oath before the judges of the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt.

Amidst the clashes and conflicts among various segments of the population fighting for social justice, freedom, and equal rights with the government, the connection between cultural and religious symbols and artistic outputs took various forms, such as protest rap music and protest mural art "graffiti" in the streets of Egypt, alongside the widespread social consequences of these events on social media and the internet, creating a global wave of visual and auditory information and multimedia, which in turn influenced other protest movements worldwide, including the "Occupy Wall Street" movement in the United States and the protests in Bahrain and Yemen, injecting a unique dynamism and motivation into the political, religious, and social movements of the region.

In 2013, a new wave of protests against Mohamed Morsi, the then-president, provided a pretext for a military coup by the Egyptian army, and some analysts considered it a move against the revolution by the former elites of the Mubarak era. It seems pertinent to ask what the outcome of the

Egyptian revolution in 2011 was for this country and the region? Perhaps the answer is: "Street art."

## **Revolutionary Graffiti in Egypt**

### **A. Initial Motivations**

One of the memorable and unpredictable symbols in the cultural and social transformations of the 2011 Egyptian revolution was the birth of an art movement that manifested itself in a street near the main protest sites. From the walls of the "Sheikh Rehan" and "Mohamed Mahmoud" barracks near Tahrir Square to the Suez Canal and the port of Alexandria, everywhere was suddenly flooded with a wave of political graffiti, and young artists, many of whom were directly involved in the uprisings, expressed their anger, hopes, and grievances through them. "Mia Grondahl" in the introduction to the photo collection *\*Revolutionary Graffiti: The Street Art of New Egypt\** writes: "The people of Egypt demand freedom, bread, and social justice, demands that the new graffiti artists have translated into stencils and paintings, spreading like fire through the streets of Egypt." (Hoff, 2013: 253) Indeed, the street became the chosen venue for a young generation disillusioned with the traditional political structures of Egypt, and the regime's refusal to reform or modernize conditions to meet the needs of society in the 21st century further fueled this. Thus, young artists used graffiti to express their views and engage with a new generation of political activists, ultimately playing a pivotal role in the country's revolution.

### **B. Graffiti as an Expression of Freedom of Thought**

The limitations faced by young Egyptian citizens and protesting artists led them to utilize graffiti for two main reasons. On one hand, the lack of support from academic institutions and reputable galleries for displaying socially inspired artistic ideas, and on the other hand, the lack of support from the ruling regime, and in many cases, suppression by it, narrowed the field for this group in official and academic art, providing sufficient motivation to turn to street art. In street art, none of the bureaucratic preliminaries and initial taste-based selections for choosing works, whether from a form-focused approach or a content and

value-based perspective, are placed before the artist, allowing them to freely display their thoughts and ideas on the city walls. They use painting as a tool to fight against the oppressive regime, thus standing up to the imposed limitations. A poem written on a graffiti in Cairo reads: "O regime that fears the pencil and pen, you were tyrannical and trampled those who suffered from your injustice. If you were honest, you would not fear the painter. All you can do is wage war on the walls to show your dominance over the images. Inside, you are full of fear and unable to recreate what you have destroyed".

This passionate artistic expression indicates political activism in art as an effective tool for achieving self-determined goals and uncovering the broad emotional social subject in the prevailing political conditions of society.

### C. Utilization of Religious Elements

A significant portion of the content of revolutionary murals in Egypt consists of religious symbols. This is not surprising in a land with a religious and ideological heritage like Egypt. However, the notable point is the approach to religious examples and symbolism to create national unity among the protesters. It seems that the use of religious content is not to promote the rituals of a specific religion but to display unity among different sects, religions, and denominations in protest against the current situation in the country and to empower that message. "Hannah Rube Lann," a professor of Eastern languages and Islamic studies at the University of Erlangen, writes: "The brotherhood of Muslims and Copts is one of the common themes in Egyptian street art. The aim is to overcome discord between religions and sects. Sometimes the cross is shown embracing the crescent moon, and at times even using the symbol of a heart or the title 'Brothers.' In a very beautiful mural, the words 'Take Care' (T in the form of a cross and C in the form of a crescent moon) are shown holding hands, reminiscent of Michelangelo's famous mural of the Creation of Adam. In this image, a tattooed cross (as a symbol of Christianity) is on one wrist, while a rosary (as a symbol of Islam) is placed on the other. This image suggests closeness and reconciliation,

showing that religious symbols are used for revolutionary purposes" (Rube Lann, 2013: 100).

Among other examples of the religious approach in Egyptian graffiti is the use of the title "martyr" to describe the images of those who died in the revolution's events, widely depicted on walls, often using the stencil technique (printing images in monochrome using prepared stencils). Among these are the images of those killed in the revolution on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, which has become a sacred religious site for people during the struggles. Perhaps the definition of "martyr" here, as used by the revolutionaries to describe the fallen, differs somewhat from the traditional meaning in Islam; however, in any case, their struggle for the freedom of their homeland from the yoke of the ruling regime, the title "martyr," and the use of its spiritual concept and application have significantly influenced the motivation to fight (Image 5).



Image 5. Part of the graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, 2012 (Source: Internet)

Another significant point is the direct use of Quranic verses within the murals, where verses that can support and affirm the revolutionary message of the protesting people are employed. For example, verse 42 from Surah Ibrahim is cited: "And never think that Allah is unaware of what the wrongdoers do." Also, in another mural, verses 67 and 68 from Surah Al-Ahzab are seen: "And they will say, 'Our Lord, indeed we obeyed our masters and our dignitaries, and they led us astray from the [right] way. Our Lord, give them



double the punishment and curse them with a great curse."

As evident from the mentioned examples, the ideological layers and religious fabric of Egyptian thought are manifested in a modern art form like graffiti, significantly influencing the revolutionary and protest content of this art form. This demonstrates the enduring importance of religion in shaping Egyptian identity.

### Graffiti as a Tool for Information Dissemination

Another general function of graffiti, particularly evident in the Egyptian revolution, is its role in information dissemination. "Graffiti, alongside conveying the ideas of protesters, also played a practical role in informing the people and demonstrators. For example, in the days leading up to January 25, 2011, one of the most important days of the revolution, graffiti throughout the city urged people to participate in the protests" (Farrell, 2015: 46). This type of information dissemination, despite the complete lack of access to mass media, was conducted locally; however, with the use of social media and the spread of images of graffiti with informational content and announcements, it quickly became a tool for organizing and coordinating protest movements and a model for reporting revolutionary events in Cairo and other cities where the wave of protests had spread, prompting global reactions to the transmission of this local information.

### The Use of Calligraphy in Graffiti

Graffiti gradually became a medium for incorporating various art forms, and among these, the intelligent use of calligraphy became one of the most dynamic expressions of meaning, thought, and content in these works. "For example, a group of street artists collaborated with traditional Arab calligraphers and painted slogans across the city. One of these works was the phrase 'I love my country,' shaped like a heart, and some of those who participated in the protests painted it on their shirts." (Ibid.: 47) This approach to calligraphy, alongside the use of Quranic verses, has manifested in slogan writing within visual forms and shapes. Sometimes, social slogans were written in a way that evoked Quranic text. Additionally, the use of writing alongside images

on murals can be seen as a nod to the ancient Egyptian mural tradition during the pharaonic era, where images were accompanied by related descriptions in Egyptian hieroglyphs on the walls of tombs and temples of the pharaohs (Image 6).

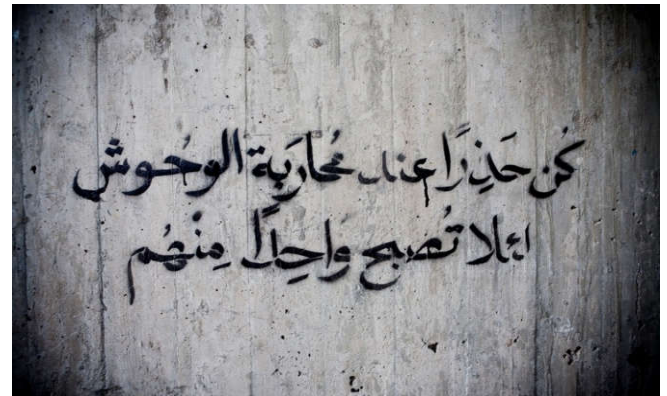


Image 6. The use of calligraphy in graffiti on a wall in Tahrir Square, Cairo.

### Formal Classification of Revolutionary Graffiti in Egypt

Alongside the content analysis of revolutionary graffiti in Egypt, as discussed, by observing the visual forms used and to provide a brief aesthetic analysis of concrete examples, we will classify the mentioned works from a formalistic and visual perspective.

**1. Portrait Graffiti:** These works, specifically created as portraits of individuals, are divided into two categories:

**1-1 Realistic Portraiture:** In these murals, the faces of individuals are depicted realistically to be identifiable by everyone. The faces of the fallen and martyrs of the revolution, as well as the faces of the then-rulers and leaders of the regime who were despised by the people, fall into this category. The execution techniques of these graffiti vary, but for painting the faces of martyrs, the stencil printing technique is predominantly used. Other realistic faces are also depicted as symbols of civil freedom using this technique (Image 7).



Image 7. Part of the graffiti in Cairo, 2012

**1-2 Caricature Portraiture:** In these works, the faces of regime leaders are depicted in a distorted and humorous manner or combined with real or mythological animals like snakes. In another category, symbolic and satirical references to ancient and historical myths are combined with social and political motifs in a surreal or sometimes chaotic composition. In these compositions, single portraits of the fallen are used to complement the space and fill the wall surface, or abstract colors and lines are employed. (Image 8)



Image 8. Part of the graffiti in Cairo, 2012

**2. Multi-figure Graffiti:** The dominant feature of these graffiti is the depiction of groups of human figures and gatherings of citizens, mostly engaged in struggle. However, in a few cases, themes such as Egyptian mythological figures, in a protest and distorted form (like the works of AlaaAwad), or scenes of happy and free people, as a symbol of the utopia of protesting Egyptians, are seen. The execution techniques used in these works are diverse, but most are monochrome black and white, silhouette, stencil printing, and in some cases, painted in multicolor with oil or acrylic paint. In some of the mentioned works, classical linear perspective is used, while in others, hierarchical perspective is combined with

calligraphy. Additionally, in terms of style, some multi-figure graffiti are realistic, some in a surrealistic space, and a few are caricatured (Image 9).



Image 9. Part of the graffiti in Cairo, 2012

**3. Textual Graffiti:** The distinctive feature of this type of mural art is the exclusive use of letters, words, writings, and calligraphy. Among these works, some are in a chaotic and visually disordered space, sometimes with inconsistent techniques and colors, containing scattered slogans. In another category, visual symbols resembling letters and somewhat completing the words are used. In some of these works, Quranic verses or slogans in the style of the Naskh script commonly used in Quranic calligraphy are written or stenciled. Additionally, in some works of this category, Arabic or Latin letters are used to form specific visual shapes like faces or human figures or pictorial pictograms, becoming carriers of dual textual and visual messages (Image 10).



Image 10. Part of the graffiti in Cairo, 2012

**4. Mythological Graffiti:** This category of graffiti is distinguished by the use of mythological motifs, primarily belonging to ancient Egypt and the pharaonic era. The mentioned examples are themselves divisible into various types based on execution methods and motif selection. In some, the composition entirely utilizes ancient and



mythological motifs. In others, single motifs are used as symbols of pharaonic dictatorship, combined with faces of individuals and alongside sanctifying symbols like the falcon's wings for martyrs (Images 11).



Image 11. Part of the graffiti in Cairo, 2012.

**5. Composite Graffiti:** These occupy a significant percentage of murals and utilize all the mentioned visual elements as needed by the content and theme. The execution techniques used in them are also diverse, corresponding to the variety of themes and motifs used. Thus, on a single wall, one can simultaneously see traces of oil paint, bas-relief, spray paint, stencil, or other methods. The motifs can also include realistic and caricatured faces, group figures, pictograms, calligraphy, surreal or mythological motifs in a single composition (Image 12).



Image 12. Part of the graffiti in Cairo, 2012.

### **AlaaAwad**

AlaaAwad is a painter and active graffiti artist in Egypt. Born in 1982 in Luxor, Egypt, he has become a well-known figure due to his graffiti works in Cairo and Luxor. He is the most famous artist of the murals on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo. His graffiti gained recognition in 2012 after he moved to Cairo following the Port Said Stadium massacre, and his works increasingly

focused on expanding protests against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt.

AlaaAwad studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at South Valley University in Luxor, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 2004. Since then, he has been a member of the faculty at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the mural painting department. His graffiti gained prominence in late 2011 and early 2012 after he left teaching and moved to Cairo following the Port Said Stadium incident, beginning to paint memorial murals.

What happened in Cairo in a short period led to a long and prolific period of activity for AlaaAwad, during which he painted many works on the walls of Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo. Unlike other graffiti artists, instead of using stencils and spray paint, he used brushes and acrylic paint. His complex paintings and intricate compositions sometimes took weeks to complete, not only due to the tools he used but also because of the complexity of his designs. Awad's painting style helps protesters preserve their heritage and, subsequently, maintain their Egyptian identity. His murals are often multifaceted and multilayered, each telling a different story ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaa\\_Awad](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaa_Awad)).

His concern for reviving Egypt's identity in his works is evident in his "Neo-Pharaonic" style of figure painting. By using Egyptian heritage, he places current political issues in the country within the trajectory of its history. The ruler and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed, and concepts like these are more apparent and challenged in his works than in those of his peers. His most famous work, "The Funeral Scene" on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, depicts a group of ancient Egyptian women reaching out to a coffin from which the spirits of the dead rise and submit to the goddess of art. This scene symbolizes mourning for the young men who died in the massacre at the Port Said Stadium in Cairo in early 2012 (Image 13). A tragic event that is referred to in Egyptian political discussions as a counter-revolutionary act by the former regime. This work not only imitates the painting style of ancient Egypt but also shows elements of pharaonic mourning rituals, which are still practiced in northern Egypt. Awad uses symbols of ancient Egypt to express superiority and wisdom, thereby subtly and intelligently



discrediting the politics of the ruling regime. Many important visual symbols of ancient Egyptian art have emerged from museums and are displayed in AlaaAwad's murals. The return to the enduring pharaonic era of Egypt is largely motivated by the desire to rebuild national pride through reflection on the past. An event reminiscent of the Neoclassical movement in 18th-century France, where artists, thinkers, and intellectuals, by creating an approach to the golden age of Greece and Rome, fostered a sense of national pride and classical European authenticity in the people of their time, significantly influencing the social movements of that era.



Image 13. Graffiti "The Funeral Scene" by AlaaAwad, Cairo, 2012 (Source: [www.alaa-awad.com](http://www.alaa-awad.com))

### Stylistic Characteristics of AlaaAwad's Works

Apart from the themes and conceptual content of AlaaAwad's works, from a formalistic perspective, several characteristics can be highlighted:

1. Exaggeration and distortion of human figures to achieve complex compositions and expressive, emotional, critical, and protest-oriented statements (Image 14).



Image 14. Part of a graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, by AlaaAwad, 2012.

2. Simultaneous use of ancient types alongside modern-dressed individuals (such as men with long beards and shaved heads or women in Islamic hijab) alongside ancient and mythological motifs from the pharaonic era (Image 15).



Image 15. Part of a graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, by AlaaAwad, 2012.

3. Use of similar and group figures to convey an image of gatherings and masses of people in the form of indirect visual symbols, closely resembling ancient Egyptian murals but presented in a modern context in terms of theme and spatial arrangement (Image 16).



Image 16. Part of a graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, by AlaaAwad, 2012.

4. Creation of complex compositions rich in various visual elements (following the tradition of ancient Egypt) and the use of upward-facing layouts, as well as creating a sense of suspension and a kind of placelessness and timelessness resulting from his avoidance of linear perspective and the arrangement of different visual layers above and below each other (Image 17).

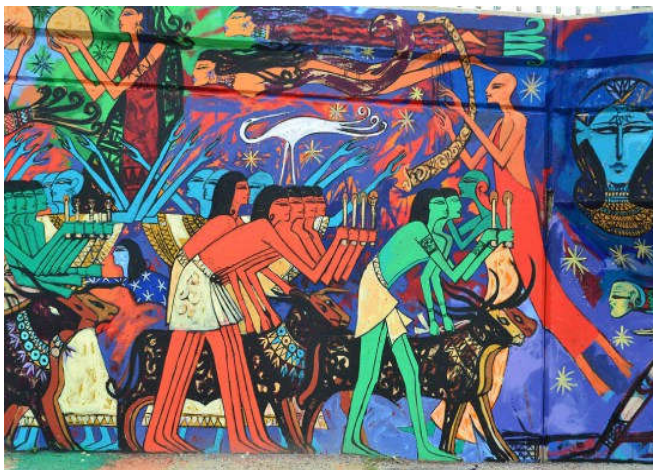


Image 17. Part of a graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, by AlaaAwad, 2012.

5. A dual approach to creating color compositions in various works; in some works with a mournful or angry protest nature, softer colors such as light blue, white, black, and beige (colors common in many ancient Egyptian murals) are used, while in others, extensive use of warm and

energetic colors or even contrasting and complementary colors is made.

Overall, it seems that AlaaAwad's graffiti works, in a blend of expressionist tendencies, contemporary visual art knowledge, and up-to-date painting tools, along with a comprehensive understanding of his homeland's identity, and on the other hand, a political and social understanding of Egypt's current conditions and harmony with the voice of the revolutionary society in which he lives, have become a collection of thematic, content, and formal characteristics that, while aligned with other graffiti artists and prevalent thoughts in the social, political, and cultural structure of this country, move in a distinct and unique path in terms of aesthetic values and artistic tone and expression.

### Conclusion

Considering what has been discussed and the questions raised in the introduction of this research, the following can be highlighted as the obtained results:

1. The content and themes of all graffiti works created on the walls of Egypt, especially in Cairo, are protest-oriented, and despite emerging from different and diverse cultural, social, and even religious contexts, they have aligned and converged in advancing revolutionary and protest slogans against the existing conditions, achieving a kind of content unity.
2. Religious and ideological themes are not the ultimate goals of graffiti works, but they play a significant role in creating national unity and, on the other hand, legitimizing the revolutionary protest movement. The direct use of Quranic verses, which conceptually support the revolutionary fervor and the dynamics of people's struggles, and the use of the title "martyr" in naming the fallen of the revolution, whose images are depicted on the walls of Cairo, along with the use of symbolic images related to the rituals of Islam and Christianity side by side, are prominent examples of the use of religious content to empower the passionate protest expression of Egyptian graffiti.
3. The choice of artistic language and expression and the execution method of graffiti by young artists from a land rich in mural art heritage



indicates the intertwining of the historical and cultural background of the Egyptian people's ancestors with the contemporary and young generation, who, despite being miles apart in lifestyle and prevailing conditions of perspective and thought, have not abandoned their ritual, historical, and artistic heritage and use it to express their protest and positively influence the content of their revolutionary message.

4. In Egyptian graffiti, and especially in the works of AlaaAwad, the selection and use of ancient and mythological symbols alongside religious symbols and visual religious icons have not created conflict or tension but have been intelligently arranged to enhance each other's effectiveness. It seems that sometimes religious content is displayed in mythological forms, and at other times, historical and mythological content is displayed in religious and ritual iconography. However, the common aspect of all these works is their protest nature and the expression of anger, disgust, and the quest for justice by artists emerging from the heart of society.

5. From the perspective of artistic methods and visual forms, Egyptian graffiti has utilized a wide range of artistic techniques. From wall writing in the form of exclusive use of letters and words to Quranic calligraphy, realistic portraiture to caricatured faces, and the use of stencil pictograms to the creation of surreal and mythological compositions, they span a broad spectrum of execution methods arising from different tastes and intellectual schools.

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