

Cultural Daily

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Artistic Consequences of Uprisings in the Muslim World

Adam Leipzig · Saturday, February 26th, 2011

Above, Gustave Courbet's A Wounded Man (1854), a landmark Realist painting. Below, a wounded demonstrator from the uprisings in Yemen (2011).



The revolutions sweeping North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula will mark 2011 as important a year as 1848. The long-term political implications are uncertain. But what will be the consequences for artists and the arts?

1848, the year Marx and Engels published the *Communist Manifesto*, is known as Europe's "Spring of Nations." Protestors marched through France and Germany, Ireland and Russia, Italy and Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, and Belgium. While the protests were loud and virulent, they did not all bring about political reform. In fact, most European governments reverted to the status quo, and did not have genuine political reform until decades later.

But even when revolutions don't unseat governments, they change the creative culture and the way artists produce work.

The revolutions of 1848 toppled Romanticism.

In the decade that followed, Realism was born. The extraordinary works of 1849-1859 are a thrilling parade of landmark creativity that stands the test of time: The art of the Pre-Raphaelites; some of Verdi's greatest operas; Wagner's beginnings; Gounod, Offenbach, Liszt and Schumann; dramas by Ibsen and Turgenev; the paintings of Courbet, Delacroix, Millais, Goya; novels by Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Flaubert, and Trollope; poetry by Tennyson, Browning, Baudelaire. These artists were the strongest outcome of the Spring of Nations.

Today's demonstrators marching through Mideast streets also have artists in their midst. Certainly these artists will face obstacles to their work, because some of the regimes to come – even those democratically elected – will censor artistic expression. Next year's novelists in Cairo may take solace in the fact that Flaubert was prosecuted for writing *Madame Bovary*.

We should expect that 2011 will follow the same pattern as 1848. While many governments may effectively revert to status quo, the next decade will see a cultural flowering in the Muslim world from seeds planted this year. What will it look like? In the mid-nineteenth century, Realism, the revolutions' artistic child, was a reaction against Romanticism. Realism has at its core a

conviction that knowledge is power and democracy is good. Tomorrow's New Muslim Realist artists will show us something similar, and they have already begun with the artistic tools of cell-phone videos and writing on the walls.

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