You always see advertising posters, billboards, book covers and even illustrations. But did you even care to take a look at the name of the artist who created them? Probably yes, but mostly no. (Giggle)

Let me tell you, I was one of those people who didn’t care too, until the beginning of this semester.

One of my friends was talking about a graphic designer who was going to hold an exhibition at AUC.

I was like ok let me go and see why graphic design students are so excited and I was shocked and amazed by both his work and the stories the guests and professors said about him.

Ladies and gentlemen this is the story of Helmi Al-Touni

But first who is Helmi Al-Touni …..

(0:38) Helmi Al-Touni “I’m an artist, designer and painter and children’s book author and illustrator.”

Oh you left out that you are a singer too but what’s the relationship between singing and the fact that you are a graphic designer…
Helmi Al-Touni “There is something called in music ecstasy ha.. and there is in visual arts also that’s why when you hear good song or a good music you say Allah “Oh God” hmm. It happens when you see something beautiful, when you see a beautiful flower a beautiful tree a beautiful woman or a beautiful painting you say Allah also so there is some sort of this ecstasy or in both arts.”

So you are saying that singing is very close to painting but why is that

Helmi Al-Touni “I don’t know why may be because there is a subject and there is a way of putting music together and then it doesn’t become only lyrics it becomes a song. So a painting is a song made of idea and visual and statics.”

Al-Touni discovered his passion for art when he was seven years old.

The first thing I remember I did was a small drawing on a blackboard that we used at the time maybe 40’s ehhh…of a cow and that cow was so well done I believe that my father was astonished when he saw it and he told my uncle who was called Abd Al-Aziz ya Abd Al-Aziz I don’t believe that you can draw something like that I believe that Helmi that’s me is much better in drawing cows than you are.”

Someone who is passionate about art, must have been a very successful student at least that’s what I thought

Helmi Al–Touni “I was a very bad student in the secondary school, I was a dabbler. I believe, I doubled for three years. But strange enough these three years are blank in my memory.”
Although Al-Touni is a success the stories behind being what he is today are not so pleasant.

(02:56) Helmi Al–Touni “I lost my father when I was 16 years old. After that I got my high school degree certificate when I was 21.”

Although Al-Touni’s family were all engineers he rebelled until they agreed to admit him in the faculty of fine arts.

(03:15) Helmi Al–Touni “I was an orphan and members of the family had to take care of me and decide for me. I wanted to go to study in the faculty of fine arts they resisted all of them they said you cannot make a living out of art that was the idea at the time.”

(03:34)“So then one of my relatives the husband of my aunt from my father’s side told he was the only one who said that let him do what he wants so they said ok if you want to join this faculty you have to join this section this section of interior decoration.”

After joining the interior decoration section Al-Touni’s life changed upside down. He enjoyed his studies and turned from a dabbler student to a devoted student who achieves in his studies.

Nat sound Part of Gamal Abd El Nasser speech

He was talking about the poor and their right to have a way to earn money

After the revolution of 1952, almost all rich families who had lands got taken away by the government and Al-Touni’s family was one of them.
(04:38) Helmi Al–Touni “One Friday, I discovered that we are poor, that my mother was selling her jewelry, so I decided to work I decided to take care of myself.”

(04:50) Helmi Al–Touni “I started working, I believe, in 1954, it was one year after joining the faculty of fine arts and that’s how I was introduced to the art of graphic art. I worked as an illustrator and a layout man, designer, in Dar Al Helal “publishing house” for a magazine called “Al Kawakeb”.”

Al-Touni excelled in a way that drew the attention of many people in the press and this is how he started his career. He became the first photo editor and art director in the history of Egyptian journalism and publishing.

But this didn’t last for long…

(05:39) Nagla Samir “After the death of Abd el Nasser and beginning of Saddat’s governance in Egypt he was banned officially banned out of Egypt.”

This was Nagla Samir Associate Professor for Graphic Design in the visual cultures program in the Departments of the Arts at AUC.

(06:11) Helmi Al–Touni “I was denied, I was forbidden from work during the 70’s in the year 1971. So I received many invitations to go to Lebanon to Beirut to work in the field that I was known and famous in.”

He participated in a book fair in Beirut for three times, and he won first place in each time. That’s when the organizers decided to let him be one of the juries.

He worked in Lebanon for 14 years.

(06:45) SFX: Printing machine
This is the Arabic foundation of Publishing and Studies.

And after a while he started working at Dar Al-Shourok publishing house until the siege of Beirut in 1982. That’s when Al-Touni decided to move back to Egypt.

As an artist Al-Touni has his own style in expressing his thoughts.

Al-Touni drove to this conclusion after holding his first painting exhibition when he returned back to Egypt in 1985.
(07:42) Helmi Al–Touni “I was painting in the way the academic way that we have studied in the faculty of fine arts very academic so I looked like any foreign or western artist, my work, foggy greyish and things like that.”

And that’s when Al-Touni decided to find his own path.

(08:04) Helmi Al–Touni “I’d considered like the landscapist consider a landscape is his origin, I have decided that the folk art itself is my origin. And I deal with it as if it is an origin, it is a person to be portrayed or a landscape to be painted.”

Al-Touni has his own symbols when it comes to illustrating his ideas, for example a lion means courage, and a fish means wisdom and most importantly women which symbolize luxury and mother-hood.

And I wondered why did he use women in most of his work and not men?

(08:41) Amgad Salem: “All artists treat women as very sensual to their pieces of work because they are a synonym of beauty and softness and everything so he appreciates this, he of course, he has his views over the role of a woman in the society and how it is underrated and how woman should be like in more important posts or whatever and he thinks it’s important, he thinks it’s essential, he thinks that the sensibility of art is equal to the sensibility of a woman in a way.”

This was Amgad Salem one of Al-Touni’s fans. He is also a Communication and Media arts and Graphic Design student.

MUSIC: FADE IN: Josh Wood I’m Letting Go (0:37 from the beginning of the song)
Yes graphic design but why simply because Salem decided to follow his passion and become a graphic designer.

Each person has their own passion right? But life doesn’t always give us the chance to follow it in this regard I will leave you with a final word from Helmi Al-Touni

(09:37) Helmi Al–Touni: “Encouraging the young is very important and before encouraging... recognizing the talent of the young. When you recognize it don’t just dismiss it or just look at with admiration but please express your admiration because expressing admiration of a work of art done by a child leaves a very positive mark on his personality as it did with me.”

This documentary was produced by Nourhan ElBery. Special thanks to Mr. Helmi Al-Touni, Professor Nagla Samir and Amgad Salem for their interviews. Audio effects are from YouTube, Music collected from Jamendo.com is: I’m Letting Go by Josh Wood and Natural Sounds were collected by me.

MUSIC: FADE OUT: Josh Wood I’m Letting Go (0:58 from the beginning of the song)

Interviews:

Helmi Al-Touni – Graphic Designer

Nagla Samir- Associate Professor for Graphic Design in the visual cultures program in the Departments of the Arts at AUC.

Amgad Salem: A Communication and Media arts and Graphic Design student.
Music:

I’m letting go by Josh Wood.