

CHILD'S PLAY

The Egyptian children's tapestries

In 1952 Harrania, a small Coptic village on the road between Cairo and the great pyramids was indistinguishable from any other rural village along the Nile. That was before a remarkable man established a small tapestry studio in the village and taught a group of young children to weave.

No one but Ramses Wissa Wassef, the free-thinking architect and educator who set the simple social experiment in motion, imagined where the first group of students would take the ancient tradition – and art – of weaving. But today the result of his vision is clear: a unique collection of tapestries, exhibited and collected worldwide, that expresses the richness of Egyptian village life.

Wissa Wassef opened the Harrania studio on the premise that all of us are born with innate creative instinct that is suppressed by conformist and abstract educational systems. He believed that 'every human being was born an artist but that their gift could be brought out only if artistic creation was encouraged by the practicing of a craft from early childhood.'

In his book, *Woven by Hand*, Wissa Wassef wrote, 'It would be very hard to neutralise the various influences—not just the gadgets, magazines, films and so on, that encroach on so much of a child's emotional life, but above all the educational system of today, which is caught up in a set of all-powerful

routines...It pushes children towards a mindless universal conformism.'

Wissa Wassef knew very little about weaving tapestries when the experiment began but believed the craft provided the right balance of manual work & artistic creation. 'I saw it as a way of starting the children off on an activity that involved a union of body and soul. Drawing, painting and modelling are not craftsman's trades, while mosaic work, ceramics, wood, stone and metalwork do not present the same balance between art and craft. I felt that tapestry making would provide the happy medium for the experiment I was planning.' ▶







The first group of children – ranging from six to eleven years old – had little experience of the world outside the village. They were introduced to weaving, given thread and wool to work with and left to develop their own ideas and skills. Wissa Wassef had just three rules, but they are exactly what set his school apart and created the environment in which each student's unique artistic sensibilities could develop: no sketches or imitation; no external aesthetic influences; no criticism or interference from adults.

There were no patterns or designs to work from. No preparatory drawings were allowed. Wissa Wassef was convinced that 'only the risk involved

in creating directly in the material itself can provoke and channel the creative effort.'

Neither were art books or similar materials permitted – inspiration came from the children's own experiences. Harrania had been chosen as the location for the studio because it was isolated from the city and what Wissa Wassef considered its harmful influences. He also rejected teaching by way of comparison to a standard or to someone else's work. He believed this only dampened the free expression of the child's own creativity, and too often led to doubts and feelings of inferiority. He later wrote, 'I wanted to shield my children from the slightest tendency to share in the general

plagiarising that goes on.' As it turned out, the children proved far too inventive for it to be necessary to show them anything.

The children worked on high-warp looms, similar to the traditional looms of the area and a style that allowed the greatest flexibility for freehand design. Using cotton thread, and later linen, for the warp and naturally dyed local wool for weaving, they learned to work slowly, allowing their ideas to grow as their designs developed on the loom. Vegetable dyes, traditional in Egyptian textiles, came from plants grown in the studio's garden. There was indigo for blue, weld for yellow, and madder and cochineal for the reds. Using indigo

David Williams collection, J.L. Chandler

Previous Page Left: Two Water Buffalo, Samiya Ayoub, wool and linen, 48 x100cm, 1970s
 Previous page Right: Under the Fruit Trees, Samiha Ahmed, wool and linen, 86 x 78cm, 1970s
 Left: Cat and Mouse in the Garden, Myriam Hermina, and linen, 83 x 182cm, 1970s
 Right: White birds in trees, Eshary, wool and linen, 1970s

and weld in turn produced green. Blacks and browns came from successive dyeings with indigo, madder and weld. Eucalyptus leaves produced light yellow and olive green shades and pecan leaves yielded beige.

Weaving became their creative process. The first tapestries were simple and rather plain, but as the children's skills developed, their confidence grew. The ideas they expressed through their weaving became more elaborate and their imagery and use of colour changed. The children took to the idea of composing on the loom and from these beginnings grew a series of distinctive freehand tapestries, notable for their freshness, vitality and vivid images of village life. Many who began weaving in that seminal year of 1952 remained with the studio and within a short time their tapestries were being exhibited at prominent museums. Over the years the work of the original weavers has been featured at exhibitions throughout Europe and America, and a number of museums and collectors have purchased Harrania tapestries. Prized examples from the Wissa Wassef family's private collection have been declared Egyptian National Treasures.

The success of Wissa Wassef's experiment inspired weaving workshops to spring up across Egypt, and, of course, the original studio in Harrania continues. Tourists in Giza to see the pyramids often make a trip to visit the renowned studio and perhaps take home one of its tapestries.

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