

## A Strategy to Preserve and Promote the Egyptian Traditional Handicrafts

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### **Abstract:**

The Egyptian traditional handicrafts are the result of the cumulative experiences of the community which reflects the cultural heritage of the individuals and their relationships with one another, with the available resources and also with the surrounded environment. These traditional handicrafts are varied according to many issues, but in general the result is always artistic and fascinating.

In fact, there are many studies about the types of the Egyptian traditional handicrafts. In one hand, there are many studies about the classification and analysis of these handicrafts. In the other hand, there are less studies about how to develop and improve these handicrafts, but the majority of these studies are considering these handicrafts as (art works) ...Yes, It is acceptable to consider these traditional handicrafts as art works or artistic artifacts, but this way of thinking is limited and would not be able to promote these handicrafts which wrestle so as not to disappear.

This point is the main core of this paper which is presenting and discussing a strategy to preserve and promote the Egyptian traditional handicrafts. The idea here is to think about these handicrafts – not only as art works/artistic artifacts – but also as industrial products. This overarching consideration leads to build specific actions (methods and plans) to achieve goals. The suggested strategy will not be a theoretical proposal, but it depends on realistic discussions, examples, interviews and an actual experience of challenges and alternatives.

### **Keywords:**

Egyptian handicrafts – design strategy – design methods – small industries.

### **ملخص البحث:**

تعتبر الحرف اليدوية التقليدية المصرية نتيجة للتجارب التراكمية للمجتمع الذي يعكس التراث الثقافي للأفراد وعلاقتهم مع بعضهم البعض ومع الموارد المتاحة وأيضاً مع البيئة المحيطة. وتختلف هذه الحرف اليدوية التقليدية وفقاً لكثير من المتغيرات، ولكن بشكل عام تكون ذات قيمة فنية رائعة.

في الواقع، هناك العديد من الدراسات عن أنماط الحرف اليدوية التقليدية المصرية. من ناحية هناك العديد من الدراسات حول تصنيف وتحليل هذه الحرف، ومن ناحية أخرى هناك دراسات أقل عن كيفية تطوير وتحسين هذه الحرف اليدوية، ولكن غالبية هذه الدراسات تتناول هذه الحرف اليدوية كأعمال فنية ... نعم، من المقبول أن تعتبر هذه الحرف اليدوية التقليدية كأعمال فنية، ولكن هذه الطريقة في التفكير تعتبر قاصرة ولن تكون قادرة على تعزيز وتطوير هذه الحرف اليدوية التي تصارع حتى لا تختفي.

هذه النقطة هي جوهر هذه الورقة البحثية والتي تعرض وتناقش استراتيجيات للحفاظ على الحرف اليدوية التقليدية المصرية وتطويرها. الفكرة هنا هي تقديم ودراسة هذه الحرف اليدوية - ليس فقط كأعمال او تحف فنية - ولكن أيضا كمنتجات صناعية. هذا الاعتبار الشامل يؤدي إلى بناء إجراءات محددة (أساليب وخطط) لتحقيق الهدف. هذه الاستراتيجية المقترحة ليست مجرد مقترحا نظريا، ولكنها تعتمد على مناقشات واقعية وأمثلة حقيقية ومقابلات شخصية وتجربة فعلية لدراسة التحديات والبدائل.

#### الكلمات المفتاحية:

الحرف اليدوية المصرية - استراتيجية التصميم - أساليب التصميم - الصناعات الصغيرة.

## Introduction:

Traditional arts and crafts are the important form and part of our traditional culture (Wang, 2017). Indeed, handicraft is more than the marketing of traditional cultural goods. It is a social structure, a means of producing art works or used simple goods. In fact, the traditional handicrafts are the representative object/s for specific social group/s and material framework for symbolism.

Egypt is a well known with its heritage which embodied in many variable traditional handicrafts; such as handmade textile, weaving, ceramics, woodworking ... and so on. As mentioned in the abstract, there are many studies about these creative handicrafts; the majority are about its history and classification, others about the improvements of these handicrafts which sometimes under a supervision of national or international institutions. Recently, there is increasing of the artists and researchers interest and these are great efforts ... which sure this will promote to maintain and to develop the Egyptian traditional Handicrafts.

The idea of this paper is working with the same direction, but in a different methodology. The beginning was after a personal visit to Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center <sup>(1)</sup>. The visit was in January 2018 with a group of artists and many of the cultured people. In fact, the visit was very useful; with professional guiding and explanations. The unexpected bad point which considered as the motivation to search and write this paper is that the center is on the way to close or stop working ... all weavers are the second generation ageing around 50-60 years old and there are no any new young weavers ...

Few weeks ago, exactly in March 2018 I decided to search in depth about the how to preserve and represent the Egyptian traditional handicrafts. The visit was to the Fostat Traditional Crafts Center <sup>(2)</sup> which consider as one of the main governmental craft centers in Cairo. The visit was great; creative handmade crafts are everywhere, many artists, but with indirect discussions I almost reached to the same result as in Wissa Wassef Art Center. Although the center is well known where there are many workshops and creative activities, but generally the real artists are old with an exception of few numbers of students ... indeed, there are no young generations.

After reviewing many literatures, in addition to the personal experience of the two visits and many other worldwide, experiences I reached many facts which I will discuss through this paper. The goal here is to highlight an applicable strategy to preserve, to promote and to represent the Egyptian traditional handicrafts in harmony with the local content, but in a global real way.

<sup>(1)</sup> Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center, established in 1951, located in the Harrania, near the Giza pyramids.

<sup>(2)</sup> Fostat Traditional Crafts Center, the building was completed and opened in 2001, in Al-Fostat area.

### Handicrafts meaning ...

There are many variable definitions of the traditional handicrafts, for Rusu (2011) traditional crafts are labeled as: “folk art”, “indigenous art”, or “native art”. Richard (2007) and I agreed with the simple definition of the UNESCO-UNCTAD/WTO (ITC) at Manila: 6-8 October 1997 during a symposium on crafts which explained that handicrafts are the products which made by artisans either completely by hand, or with the help of hand tools or simple machines ... as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan remains the most essential component of the finished product. Usually the nature of handicrafts products derives from their special features, which can be utilitarian, aesthetic, artistic, culturally attached, decorative, functional, traditional, religiously or socially symbolic.

Simply, Sarkar (2008) clarified that the traditional knowledge is the result of cumulative experience of a community about the relationship of living one with one another, also with their environment and the available resources...

In fact, the handicrafts are the physical seen part of the culture of any nation or any ethnic group which representing traditional component/activity of socio-economic life, even if these handicraft activities are not fully included in national income. Traditional handicrafts use existing skills and locally available raw materials. Sometimes presents no/or little skills at using materials, but mostly expresses something really deep and real. Equally, some that we define as craft expresses nothing in particular, but presents great skill. However, some great art presents both; great skills at using the materials chosen, and expressing something profound. Often traditional arts or handicrafts do not get the enough attention. Today's media does not cover the importance of these traditional activates and Crafts become the mission of “slow media”, of programs that address a small group of people.

Indeed, there are plenty of national and international programs and projects to preserve and promote the worldwide traditional handicrafts, but the main problem is that the majority of these programs/projects are limited which working for short period/s of time. For example, and in an attempt to improve the Bangladesh society there were a funded project (For more details, see the project summaries, 2014) where they selected around 20 talented students from local schools. They trained them in making innovative products inspired by their cultural heritage. During the program, the students attended classes about the various aspects of setting up a successful business, including designing, production, marketing and financial management, as they will become the collective owners of businesses.

As clarified the idea is great which applied many times (in different details) at many countries, but we have to ask ... what happened after the end of the project? ... Is it enough to improve the abilities of only 20 talented students? ... Or **we have to think about another endless durable applicable strategy to preserve and promote the handicrafts with no restrictions and no surprises.**

### **Handicrafts and worldwide economy ...**

For Richard (2007) *“The world has never been as wealthy as it is today, yet it is also increasingly unequal ...”*

The handicrafts sector is a home-based industry, which requires minimum expenditure and limited infrastructure to establish. Therefore it can create jobs at a minimal cost (see Richard, 2007, p.5). A significant lack of data and literature on the craft sectors worldwide is generally noted (especially in developing countries); many countries face difficulties in collecting accurate data about this sector, but some industrialized countries grant significant importance to handicrafts. For example, in Italy, 24% of national enterprises belong to the crafts sector, which also employs 1/5 of the private sector workers. Italian crafts exports represent 17% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

As mentioned, the situation in many developing countries is not the same, but with efforts and governmental projects, the handicrafts sector is growing and often given a high level of importance. For example, in Colombia, the total handicrafts production represents a yearly income of approximately US\$ 400 million and brings to the crafts workers a monthly income of US\$ 140 to 510.

In Thailand, a study by the Thailand Development Research Institute Foundation (March 2000) estimates that total employment is around 30 million people, out of which 20 million are employed in the "informal sector". Numbers estimated that the population involved in the crafts sector represented around 10% of the aforementioned figures. This includes full time as well as part time workers, which effectively puts the number of craftspeople around 2 million, of which approximately 1 million could be considered as full-time workers.

Tunisia is an example of a middle-sized country in terms of crafts production. It counts 300,000 craftspeople (11% of the active population) of which 2/3 work on a part-time basis (4 working hours a day). Their production accounts for an average of 3.8% of the Gross Domestic Income and ensures an annual income of US\$ 2,400 per household (an average of 5 members). Almost the same situation in Morocco, the volume of handicrafts production is measured by the Ministry of Tourism at 19% of GDP. The exports of handicrafts from Morocco are estimated at US\$ 63 million (For more details, see Richard, 2007, pp.3-4).

In a recent study about the handicrafts in India, Suthersanen (2015) concludes that more than 2.18 million people are engaged in full-time craft employment. The contribution to foreign-exchange earnings was significant revenue from exports of artisan-produced handicrafts represent 16 percent of India's total trade and 13 percent of Nepal's ...

Generally and away of the real previous numbers, Suthersanen (2015) believed that the traditional heritage has commercial value in the local and wider economy, and can improve lives of communities. Actually I agree with Suthersanen, but the question is how??

In a case such as Egypt we have the think not only about the preservation of the traditional handicrafts as types of art works, but also to present these traditional handicrafts in up-to-date forms as industrial products and here comes the role of DESIGN ...

### **Handicrafts and design ...**

The stasis of traditional crafts which changed very little over time (slow and unremarkable changes) does not encourage young craftsmen, who feel limited in established patterns. That is why the solution might come from the close co-operation between designers and craftsmen (For more details, see Rusu, 2011). Craftsmen will collaborate with designers to create new products (still handmade products) which are suitable for everyday life and meet the up-to-date needs.

In many developing countries (such as Egypt), the loss of the creative craftsmen, the migration of new generation to urban areas, the production of competitive mass-goods and the ignorance of material and immaterial culture are some of the problems with which traditional art/s are confronted.

In many other communities there are a limited number of craftsmen that supply local needs. As modernization and globalization has its effect on younger people in many ethnic groups they transformed to update their traditional art works with the support and the ideas of designers and professionals.

This idea will discuss in details with the coming points as a result of the personal visits of the researcher to Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center and the Fostat Traditional Crafts Center.

### **Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center:**

The Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre is the home of a unique experiment in tapestry weaving that has produced extraordinary works admired and collected by museums and galleries worldwide. The life work of its founder Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911-1974) was set up to releasing the innate creativity of young Egyptian villagers freed from the bonds of a the formal education. Ramses was a creative architect; he established his home/art center derived from Hassan Fathi designs (see figures 1 & 2) (For more details, see the Wikipedia, Ramses Wissa Wassef) (see also images 1-4).



**Fig 1 & 2: Sketches of the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center (internet)**

Ramses Wissa Wassef explained his philosophy when he wrote "I had this vague conviction that every human being was born an artist, but that his or her gifts could be brought out only if artistic activity was encouraged from early childhood by way of practising a craft... The creative energy of the average person is being sapped by a conformist system of education and the extension of industrial technology to every sphere of modern life."

Also he said “Human freedom never has as much meaning and value as when it allows the creative power of the child to come into action. All children are endowed with a creative power which includes an astonishing variety of potentialities. This power is necessary for the child to build up his own existence.” (For more details, see the official website of Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center).



**Images 1 & 2: The outdoor of the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center  
(Photographed by the researcher)**

Since 1952 two generations of weavers have developed in the Art Centre at Harrania, near Giza. Nine of the original group of children who began working around the age of twelve (now many of them are grandparents)( see, images 3,4 &5), they are still weaving under the guidance of Sophie Wissa Wassef (the wife of Ramses). Second generations of weavers guided by the Wissa Wassef’s daughters, and continue to produce wool and cotton tapestries that are remarkable and unique works of art.



**Images 3, 4 & 5: Creative Weavers in Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center  
(Photographed by the researcher)**

As mentioned in the introduction, the visit to this unique art center was great where the creator weavers work without any patterns or given designs (see images 6, 7 & 8). The idea which clarified from the manager of the center is that there is no young generations who want to learn and work in handmade weaving. When asking about the reason, he said they are not like their parents or grandparents they are not interested in sitting for hours in weaving!?

The manager said they tried many times with those targetable young students and they offered money and many motivations ... but they refused. Actually I feel honesty about what he explained, but when discussing him about the cooperation with the departments of textile and weaving in the faculties of art, he said they are completely different and they will be not interested in improving the handmade traditional weaving. Here I completely disagree with his point of view.



**Images 6, 7 & 8: Creative weavings of Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center  
(Photographed by the researcher)**

I believe that one of the main role of the professionals and the faculties/institutions of art and design is to preserve, maintain and promote this type of handcrafts. For long time ago Egypt was famous of its weaving and textile. So, with all the respect of the manager or the center owner/s a place such as this traditional art center needs the support of academics, professionals, needs a real study to improve their products with keeping their value as handmade art pieces, but with a contemporary view and with a futuristically vision. What if there is cooperation (workshops or training courses) between those old creative weavers and the students of the departments of textile and weaving? What if they create small easy handle products? Using the same handmade techniques, especially that the produced weavings are usually in a big sizes which need long times of work and really expensive (which limited the marketing progress). The idea is to work with a applicable new strategy; using the same materials, the same handmade techniques but presenting up-to-date contemporary products (designs).

### **Foustat Traditional Crafts:**

The next incredible visit was to the Foustat Traditional Crafts, the center has a long history beginning with the famous Egyptian artist Said al-Sadr who established a pottery center in Fakhranieh area in 1958. The Center continued to play its role and works in the service of ceramics and craftsmen in Al-Foustat area until the Ministry of Culture decided in 1995 to develop it by re-establishing and supplying with modern equipment, appliances and ovens. The construction of this project began in 1996 with an area of up to 2400 square meters (For more details, see the official website of the Foustat Traditional Crafts).

As the idea of the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre, the architectural design of the Foustat Traditional Crafts was inspired by the designs of Hassan Fathi (see images 9 & 10). The building was completed and opened in 2001 and recently there is extension is under construction.



**Images 9 & 10: The outdoor design of the Foustat Traditional Crafts  
(Photographed by the researcher)**

In fact there are many activities inside this center; ceramics, woodworking, carving, leather, and many other traditional handicrafts (see images 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 & 16). In addition there is a gallery which presents the handmade products, but after the discussing with the center manager and few of workers it is become clear that the center is well known only for limited visitors or for few organizations/institutions which interested in these types of products.

The situation here is a little bit different than the previous art center; this one is well known for professionals and designers. There are many workshops and events where the students attend and involved in working side by side with the employs (craftsmen). This is great, but the missed point that there is no actual developing of the presented products, there is no clear role of the contemporary design. Workshops participants always working as craftsmen. It is ok ... in the using of materials or techniques, but the real developing has to be in creating and designing up-to-date used products not only classical traditional handicrafts.





**Images 11, 12: Samples of the traditional handicrafts, Fostat Traditional Crafts (Photographed by the researcher)**



**Images 13, 14, 15 &16: More samples of the traditional handicrafts, Fostat Traditional Crafts (Photographed by the researcher)**

## Conclusion:

As a result of all viewed literatures and in addition to the discussion results, it argued that the traditional handicrafts need many applicable strategies which able to transform into real improvements: such as ...

- Shared workshops with designers, academics and professionals.
- Create new industrial up-to-date products with using materials and the traditional methods of production, but in global vision.
- Handicraft communities need resources and quality raw materials.
- Access to markets (local and global).
- Developing infrastructure to link the handicrafts centers with reality.
- Investments supply (usually governmental) to support and develop the handicrafts.
- Craftsmen encouragement and offering training courses.
- Workshops, museums, summer schools, training classes ...
- Branding cultural products can increase the country's presence in worldwide context.
- Copyright law is the way to protect traditional handicrafts (or any other types of creations) which preserve the idea of producing and identifies who is in charge; Individual community or the governmental associations.

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