

## Nubian Visual Culture for Contemporary Artistic & Printed Textile Designs

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### Abstract:

Identity is a complex of roads and turns. It remains difficult to be defined. Identity can be fixed or changing but definitely problematic in its meanings and manifestations. *Depicting* Nubian visual culture before 60<sup>th</sup> can be a means to artistic experimentation and a material for inspiration for myself as a Nubian textile designer. It can somehow bridge the gap between form and content; between the visual and essence of Nubian symbolic meaning and heritage . This paper will present how the researcher can use different design / drawing techniques to convey the aesthetic and the realistic. It also outlines the practice-based method as a constructive approach to develop the researcher's skills by focusing on her Nubian cultural identity to encourage different societies to learn about Nubian heritage.

The focus of this paper is to show how the linkage between using different artistic media, digital printing and image collecting of old Nubians houses and representative symbols before the 60's is used as an experimental strategy through digital technology and other techniques in order to create contemporary designs inspired by Nubian visual culture.

This paper will discuss my experiential learning and the practice of the artistic approach by novel use of symbols/ patterns inspired by Nubian visual culture, using digital printing, drawing and dyeing techniques. It will discuss how different dyeing and printing methods can be used to create unique artwork wall hanging designs to express Nubian visual culture. The results of some experimental and artwork were presented in different exhibitions to express the author's viewpoint of Nubian heritage and her cultural identities through practice and her journey to express the Nubian heritage before resettlement in the 60's.

**Keywords:** Nubian heritage, Visual culture, Textile Designs,

### المخلص:

الهوية هي تشابك معقد من الطرق والمنعطفات، ولا يزال من الصعب تحديدها أو إدراكها بدقة. والهوية قد تكون ثابتة أو متغيرة، كما أن معانيها وأنماطها معقدة. من ثم يمكن أن للهوية النوبية أن تكون أداة للتجريب الفني ومادة إلهام. كما يمكنها أن تكون وسيلة لسد الفجوة بين الشكل والمعنى، بين الشكل البصري وهيبته.

ستعرض هذه الورقة أسلوب الباحثة في اختيار الأساليب التشكيلية المختلفة من أجل تحقيق القيم الجمالية والواقعية. كما سيتم عرض الأسلوب التطبيقي التجريبي بوصفه منهج بناء وتطوير مهارات الباحثة من خلال التركيز على هويتها الثقافية النوبية، وكذلك بغية تحفيز المجتمع للتعرف على التراث النوبي.

يركز هذا البحث على كيفية الربط بين استخدام الوسائط الفنية المختلفة والطباعة الرقمية، وجمع الصور والرموز النوبية القديمة للنوبي القديم قبل الستينيات (التهجير)، وكيفية استخدامها باعتبارها استراتيجية تجريبية باستخدام التكنولوجيا الرقمية وغيرها من التقنيات من أجل ابتكار تصميمات معاصرة مستوحاة من الثقافة البصرية النوبية.

كما تناقش هذه الورقة الأسلوب التجريبي وممارسة المنهج الفني التطبيقي من خلال الاستخدام الإبداعي للرموز/ والوحدات الزخرفية المستوحاة من الثقافة البصرية النوبية مستخدمة الطباعة الرقمية والرسم وتقنيات الصباغة، وسوف تناقش أيضًا كيفية استخدام أساليب الصباغة والطباعة المختلفة بهدف إنتاج تصاميم معاصرة للتعبير عن الثقافة البصرية النوبية.

وقد تم عرض نتائج بعض من هذه التجارب والأعمال الفنية في معارض مختلفة للتعبير عن رؤية الباحثة للهوية والتراث الثقافي النوبي من خلال التجريب الفني، ورحلتها لتسجيل التراث النوبي وحفظه قبل التهجير في الستينات.

الكلمات الرئيسية: التراث النوبي، الثقافة البصرية، تصميم المنسوجات

## 1. Introduction: Visual Culture

Williams classifies the term culture in three ways: firstly – “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”; secondly “a particular way of life, whether of an individual, an era or a group”; and thirdly “the works and practices of intellectual and particularly artistic activity” (1976: 80). A particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values, will be used as a definition for culture in this paper that is related to Williams’ last definition “the work and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity”.

The way of life of a nation and its representative meanings can be presented in its artistic activities and, more broadly, in its visual culture. Rose (2002) & Walker and Chaplin (1997) considered that visual culture can be described as those material objects, buildings and images and performances, manufactured by human work and imagination, which provide aesthetic, symbolic or ceremonial and/ or practical functions.

Barnard argues that a visual culture has also to be defined and conceptualised. He, therefore, stipulates that visual culture can be depicted as follows:

...how one sees, what one sees and why what one sees appears as it does. Visual culture will be developed in terms of what Raymond Williams calls the ‘signifying system’

(the...., objects, practices, values and beliefs) by means of which society is visually produced, reproduced and contested (1998: 7).

Nubian visual culture can be implicitly revealed in material products such as woven baskets, mats, bead ornaments, building motifs/ patterns, or singing or dancing which can carry a traditional meaning that related to their symbols/ pattern in their house decoration and woven basket. It can also have a diverse ritual function that is connected to major life events such as birth and marriage, or religious rites (moulids) that comprise the most important ceremonies of the Nubian culture. I agree with Barnard when he discusses that each cultural and social group has a different concept of its cultural expression in visual arts, that at the same time assists significantly in the distinction of each group from others (Baba, 2013:41 ).

I believe that each culture has its own vision and its way of reflecting it, which is woven into its social context. Groups and societies have their own aesthetic values and they have their own ways of assessment, including rules to distinguish between high standards work and lower ones. For the Nubian people, before resettlement in 60s, some of their crafts and drawings fulfill, to some extent, a purpose aside from pleasure. Their aesthetic value is achieved by signifying cultural background, social uses and traditions. Consequently, I would claim that Nubian art, like any other folk art, has a powerful position in a people's life because visual objects signify a way of life. Those objects, which are embedded in everyday life are creating pleasure in everyday interactions.

## **2. The Location of the Nubian People**

The region known as Nubia, which no longer exists, is the area starting from the First Cataract of the Nile in Egypt to the north, to the great angle in the river between the Third and Fourth Cataracts in Sudan to the south (Fahim, 1983). A large part of this area was totally flooded by the building of the Aswan High Dam and the construction of Lake Nasser. In 1963, Egyptian Nubians were compelled to relocate in new communities and land in KomOmbo, an area 40 kilometers north of Aswan. 'Waters of the Nile, backed up by the High Dam, have covered the houses and flooded the area where these people lived for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years' (Fernea and Gerster, 1973: 3).

Fernea writes that the relocation of Egyptian Nubians which took place in 1963, to an area at KomOmbo, 40 kilometres north of Aswan, added further complexities, since their relocation was from isolated communities into a multicultural situation in Upper Egypt. Today the

Egyptian Nubians are in a more heavily occupied area, and are more closely connected with other people within the partly growing industrial region of Aswan.

Fahim noted in 1983 that Nubian people have always had a clear sense of their history and origins<sup>1</sup>. They always refer to the remaining antiques in their land, to emphasize their early civilization and their role to Egypt's ancient culture, Fahim adds:

Nubians also say that the word *Nubia*, which means 'the land of gold,' reflects the richness of their land and the role it played in the formation of an ancient lavish civilization. Nubians are pleased with the continuity of traditional life as they put it (1983: 22-3).

Fernea argues that, today, the segregation necessary for such creativity is largely gone, and distinctive small communities themselves are vanishing, if not under the floodwaters of the Nile, then at least in the homogeneous mixture we have called modern society.

Little record remains of the achievements of many of the cultures that have already disappeared: achievements in terms of values; patterns of social relation; techniques for wresting subsistence from varying environments; approaches to expression and communication in pictorial art in the building of houses, and in the fashioning of the objects of everyday life. These unique manifestations of human capabilities will not appear again, and we are all poorer from their loss (1973: 3).

Nowadays, however, new generations of Nubians lose their identity and also tend to disappear. Also, the ways in which the Nubians' life has changed, is a dramatic deterioration in their evaluation of their culture. Although some of the younger Nubian generations live in the relocation areas with their elders, the majority of them have lost the sense of their heritage (Baba, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Nubian has a clear sense of their history and origin, as myself a Nubian artist who born in Cairo. the Nubian older generation use to tell stories about their ancestor land that "goes back very far in prehistoric time (4th millenium BC)", as Khalil and Miller defines. "Nubia was independent and developed powerful kingdoms (cf. Kerma 2500-1560 BC, Napata 9th-4th centuries BC and Meroe 4<sup>th</sup> century BC- 4th century AD); Nubian kings even ruled Egypt (XXV dynasty).....Nubia consisted of three main Kingdoms (Nobatia, Makouria and Alodia)" (Khalil& Miller, 1996).

### 3. Nubian Visual Culture

Nubian visual culture includes many crafts such as the house decoration, which was admired, not only by the Nubian communities themselves, but also by many Egyptians and foreign architects who visited Nubia before resettlement.

Fernea and Gerster have noted that art has a limited place in Nubia but is used for ritual purposes:

The arts have little place in Nubian society, except where they have a traditional purpose- decorating the houses, for example, or providing singing and dancing at weddings or *moulids*.....Otherwise, playing instruments and singing was strictly a peer-group activity (1973: 42).

I agree with Wenzel (1972) that the wedding ceremony is considered the key to much of the decoration in a life of the Nubian villager because of its position as the most central ritual. Wenzel maintains, “relief decoration replaced these hanging objects. Some walls were painted as well” (1972: 25). The style of the decoration differs in each tribe. Also, Wenzel has argued that the objects have a functional purpose rather than being purely decorative. She suggests five possible functions:

- (1) They were used in the wedding ceremony, and arranged afterwards on the inner walls to remain throughout the married life of the individuals involved.
- (2) They were hung up to keep termites from eating them.
- (3) They were hung up to keep out devils, or to deflect the evil eye.
- (4) They were a special decoration for the men’s sitting/room.
- (5) They were special decorations for doors (1972: 25).

Although Wenzel has discussed the decorations/ornaments as being mainly functional, some pieces were made for purely decorative purposes. This view is supported by the dissimilarity of the decorative styles in different houses, which gave the women feelings of joy and challenge.

The Nubian visual culture focuses on artistic activity that expresses certain meanings and values –connected to Williams definition of culture - the one attached to their way of life. It is evident in their house decoration where the women paint the façades, for example, by using occasionally white or vivid, bold, coloured motifs such as palm trees, birds, zigzag , stars , scorpions, or even boats, flowers and objects that express their personal style. Fahim adds

‘Other drawings representing the means of transportation used by a hagg (pilgrim) in travelling to Mecca; pilgrimage was highly valued among Nubians’ (1983: 21). Some of these drawing could be decorative and others have a particular function, as Fahim has described:

These drawings and decorations had magical significance. For example, drawings of scorpions ..... were believed to have the power of stopping these creatures from entering the house. Other drawings, such as the sun and a big eye were painted to neutralize the harmful effects of the evil eye, belief in which constituted one of the important, common supernatural beliefs among Nubians (1983: 21).

Finally, as Räsänen comments “to understand other individuals and cultures, we have to have skills to interpret the art they make. ...The artist’s and the viewer’s identities consist of personal and social dimensions which cannot be separated (Räsänen, 2012)". As a Nubian researcher in my experiential and practice approach I attempt to interpret the essences of Nubian visual culture through my journey to understand my own cultural identity using artistic activity to portray my forefather land before the resentment in 60’s.

#### **4. The practice: Nubian patterns, landscape and contemporary designs and arts**

The researcher undertakes the study of Nubian visual culture to understand her cultural identity through her journey to trace the images of the old land before the resettlement in 60’s that began in 1986 for the graduation project in Textile Printing from the Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University. Since then, she has become more and more involved in investigating the meanings of the symbols and the methods of making traditional crafts by visiting Nubian villages and families in their current locations in Southern Egypt and Cairo. The purpose of the visits is usually to collect stories and visual data in order to trace images of the Nubian land before the relocation in the 1960s due to the building of the Aswan Dam.

The aim of using different artistic media, digital printing and images, using practice based methods to explore the relationship of traditional Nubian visual culture to artistic art work and contemporary textile design, is to look for a new aesthetic. Some of my artworks - were presented in different exhibitions in Egypt, UAE and UK<sup>2</sup> to express the

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<sup>2</sup> Example of participation (group & solo exhibitions) where some of these work presented: “ A Tale of Two Rivers: the Lower Wye and the Nubian Nile at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies in Exeter University , February 2017 , UK & “Zoom In”, A Glimpse into the creativity of the CFAD Faculty, Faculty and Staff

researcher's perspective of Nubian cultural identities to revive Nubian cultural heritage before resettlement in the 60's.

One of the methods that the researcher uses in her practice is to emphasise the role played by drawing in imitating the realistic look of the traditional Nubian houses which can give a special dimension to her art work in expressing the culture (fig 1). In figures 2 and 3 the researcher uses disperse dyes to draw Nubian house decorations to be transferred on fabric but she found that the stroke of the brushes and the colors of the dyes on paper have a better effect; they are more expressive than their effect if transferred on chiffon fabrics. In this method of using dyes, she tried another method called the itajime shibori technique with disperse dyes. This technique is implemented by using several metal pieces like circle shapes to present the woven basket on fabric as is shown in fig. 4. This gives the feeling of layering and transparency to present the disappearing culture.



**Fig.1: drawing on satin using disperse dyes, pigments**

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Exhibition, Rewaq Gallery, UAE. Solo exhibition: "Nubia's Echo", Gezira Art Centre, Cairo, Fine art sector, Ministry of culture, 2013 & "Nubian Signs" El Ateliaa, Cairo, Egypt, 2011.



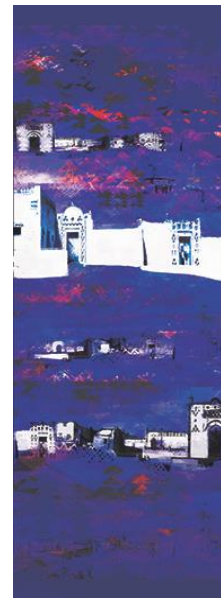
**Fig. 2,3: using pastel oil and disperse dyes on paper**

**Fig. 4: Nubian symbols & itajime shibori technique**

The second method is using Computer Aided Design (CAD) to develop designs and combine the work with painting and printing techniques to add a new texture and depth to the artwork.

Figures 5 and 6 express the Nubian lands before the flood using CAD based on the same digital image that was developed in different drawing techniques.

In fig 5 the printed image was produced using Photoshop and it was retouched and reworked using a white colour to highlight some part of the facet of the houses. Figure 6 shows the developing of a scanned drawn image (as in fig 5) using water colour effect. The background was filled by Nubian motifs such as zigzag, palm trees and textures of woven basket to express the landscape of old Nubia.







**Fig. 5 and 6: Nubian houses before the flood using CAD**

**Fig. 7 and 8: Nubian houses and zigzag using CAD**

**Fig. 9: Nubian houses and symbols using CAD, block printing and hand drawing using pigments**

Figures 8 and 9 are a transformation stage of the artwork in fig 7. It is generated by using CAD. The designer did not adopt the prospective rules in repeating the houses. The figure 9<sup>3</sup> shows the use of painting, wooden block printing (zigzag pattern) and stamps over the top of the printed canvas to develop the textures and repeating zigzag pattern on top of the houses and the background to express the Nile in order to portray the period before diminishing the Nubian land beyond the Aswan High Dam.



**Fig. 10 and 11 Nubian house under the flood**

**Fig. 12 Nubian panorama**

Fig. 10 is visualizing Nubian house under the Nile using CAD to show how the researcher interprets her view of her lost culture. The same image was taken and altered using CAD and

<sup>3</sup> This piece exhibited in General exhibition "39" at the Palace of Arts Opera House, 2017.

pigment oil, silver and others as in fig. 11, to try out the impact of using other media and changing the colors of the same image, which adds another angle to the print. Fig. 12 is another alteration of an artwork presented in “Nubian panorama” exhibition after resizing the design, printed on canvas, and using painting/ drawing techniques and stamps to create an interesting surface and different dimensions.

Finally, the aim of developing the designs and images of old Nubia is to portray and to revive some of the Nubian essences. The target of the researcher in her journey was to look at different techniques and aesthetics not only to develop her skills but also to better formulate her feeling of her Nubian identity. Tactile surfaces with drawing, painting or adding different textures or using block printing or stamps to some of the old work helped the researcher to revisit few of her old work (especially the ones where created by computer aided design software) to add more artistic value and to help her to be more expressive and to add an energetic element to the printed designs.

## 5. Conclusion

Nubian Heritage is rich and has its own allure. It opens an endless resource for artists and designers. Using different media or techniques to create artwork and designs as close as possible to that of the Nubian craftspeople – especially before 60s - who believe in the quality of their work and the pleasure they take in by creating and developing the diverse patterns that adorn either free standing objects of their daily life or the walls of their houses. Additionally, using different techniques gives the powerful conceptualization of Nubian culture as well as creating endless designs which not only express the feeling towards old Nubia but also reserve Nubian heritage before the resettlement in the 60’s with the purpose of encouraging people from different cultures to learn about the Nubian heritage.

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