

# Frequent Asked Questions

## Q1: What is the “experiment in creativity”?

A: In the early 40s, Ramses Wissa Wassef set out to test his conviction that “every human being is born an artist, but his gifts can be brought out only if artistic activity is encouraged from early childhood by way of practicing a craft.” He did so by teaching the craft technique of high-warp weaving to a small group of children at a school in Cairo, who he encouraged to depict whatever they wished.

The results of the experiment in Cairo were so promising that in the early 1950s Ramses Wissa Wassef built a workshop in the rural village of Harrania and invited local children to come and learn to weave.

Both in Cairo and in Harrania Ramses Wissa Wassef was astonished by “the continuous sense of rebirth, the inexhaustible flood of invention and ideas, and the unlimited sense of poetry” revealed in the tapestries woven by the children.

## Q2: What are the “three rules”?

A: Ramses Wissa Wassef believed that inspiration should spring entirely from within, fuelled by contact with one’s own environment. He therefore laid down three rules for the experiment:

1. No preliminary sketches or cartoons, and no copying from other works of art
2. No external aesthetic influences
3. No critical interference from adults.

From the outset, the children depicted only what they had personally encountered and observed, or learned from stories. Everyone at the Art Centre continues to observe the three rules.

## Q3: What is “improvised” weaving?

A: The term “improvised” is used to describe weaving done without recourse to any previously executed design or even sketch. The weaver transfers images direct from her or his imagination to the loom. It could also be described as “spontaneous”. The absence of a cartoon however does not mean that the weaver embarks on a tapestry without any notion of what he or she intends to depict.

## Q4: Do the weavers plan their work?

A: Before starting a piece, the weaver will decide the basic subject she or he wishes to depict – for example birds, the Nile, a market, palm trees – and discuss this with Sophie, Suzanne or Yoanna. Amongst the decisions that have to be taken in advance are the approximate size of the tapestry and its format: “portrait”, when images are in vertical relationship to the warp, or “landscape”, when images are in horizontal relationship to the warp.

The weaver will then choose a palette of colours and assemble the wool. He may talk to colleagues or the Wissa Wassefs about the overall design and aspects of its execution, both in advance and as work proceeds.

The Wissa Wassefs never direct a weaver to take a particular approach, and always try to ensure that every decision is taken as a result of discussion, observation and exchange of ideas, not top-down influence. See also Q21.

#### **Q5: What are the “first” and “second” generations?**

A: When Ramses' two daughters formed their own groups of children in the 1970s, the Wissa Wassefs decided to distinguish between those who started weaving with Ramses Wissa Wassef in the 1950s and those who were working with Suzanne and Yoanna. They called the older group “the first generation” and the younger groups “the second generation”.

The first generation is most renowned for the high-warp weaving, Ramses also has experimented with knotted rugs and fine cotton weaving with great results

Six members of that group – which originally numbered up to about 20 - are still weaving. The second generation includes Suzanne's group of high-warp weavers in wool and Yoanna's groups of cotton weavers and batik painters...

#### **Q6: How many weavers are there?**

A: About 50 individuals work at the Art Centre today. Six are members of the first generation of high-warp weavers in wool, all of whom are now in their early 60s.

The second generation includes 17 weavers in wool, 20 weavers in fine cotton and six batik painters, ranging in age from 18 to 43. See also Q5.

#### **Q7: Are there any children at the Art Centre today?**

A: No. The Wissa Wassefs have not been able to invite a new group to learn to weave for about 10 years. The youngest weavers are now age 18. Many village children are keen to join the Centre and are disappointed that there is at present no place. It is hoped that the Brunei Gallery exhibition will further promote the experiment and help to ensure that a new generation of children can benefit.

Yes, there are 3 children at the centre. Two boys 13 & 16 years old, weave with Suzanne knotted rugs and a 15 year's old girl weave fine cotton with Yoanna.

Both Suzanne and Yoanna had to well establish their group of weavers and to get to know them well, facing all the difficulties which were associated with the immense social changes that occurred to the Egyptian society and the Egyptian village in particular. They also had their own families to take care of which they started in the 1970's.

Now Suzanne and Yoanna have more time, plus some of their children are interested in the project. Thus the beginning of a 3rd generation is eminent.

Suzanne is thinking more of the knotted rugs because of its unique abstract interpretation of the weaving technique. This shall give the 3rd generation its own specialty and problems to solve.

**Q8: Why did Ramses Wissa Wassef choose tapestry weaving for the experiment?**

A: Ramses Wissa Wassef chose tapestry weaving as the medium in which to test his theories about creativity because he considered it likely to provide the right balance between artistic creation and manual work. He attached importance to the fact that it took some time to produce an image: this allowed ideas to ripen in the mind and to guide the fingers, without loss of spontaneity. He was also confident that experience, gained gradually day by day, would continually give birth to new images.

**Q9: Did Ramses consciously revive an ancient Egyptian craft?**

A: Although high-warp tapestry weaving was practiced in ancient Egypt, Ramses Wissa Wassef neither set out to revive an earlier tradition nor claimed any connection between the tapestry weaving skills for which Dynastic, Coptic and early Islamic Egypt were renowned and the weavers he taught. Direct reviving or reviving for the sake of reviving was not his intention.

For Ramses, hand-weaving was at one time a highly expressive and pure art which was quickly losing ground to machine production. It was his hope to revive the fine sensibility of the craft in a different way, by making a fresh start with a group of children and simple looms, proceeding, as he put it, "as slowly as may be, so as to give wide scope for the play of deep, natural impulses."

Reintroducing vegetable dyes and planting them in his garden to colour the wool was part of his strategy partly to secure all the needed materials for the craft and to insure sustainability and because of their natural beauty.

**Q10: How are the weavers paid?**

A: Ramses Wissa Wassef believed that financial pressure was inimical to creativity, and also recognized that every weaver must be able to earn a living from her or his work. To encourage parents to allow their children to learn to weave, he offered payment from the outset, in accordance with time spent weaving and the size and quality of the completed piece. Every weaver is therefore paid, whether or not a piece is earmarked for the permanent collection, sold, or remains available for sale. See also Q21.

**Q11: What materials are used (including dyes)?**

A: The Art Centre uses only natural materials:

For the wool and cotton tapestries:

- Pure cotton for the warps, while wool and cotton yarns for the wefts of the
- Cotton cloth dyed with the Chemical colours for the batik painting.

\* Linen was used for warp till 1971.

All the dyeing is done at the Art Centre and most of the dye- plants are grown in the garden that surrounds the workshops. Ramses and Sophie Wissa Wassef planted Reseda (weld), an annual flower that gives different shades of yellow;

Madder, whose root yields an orange red; and pecan trees, whose leaves give olive green and beige.

Other colours, such as indigo for the shades of blue (a plant that requires a huge amount of water) and cochineal (derived from the skin of an insect), are bought in.

**Q12: Where is Harrania?**

A: Harrania is 10 miles from the centre of Cairo, at the edge of the western desert between the Pyramids of Giza and the Old Kingdom necropolis of Saqqara. When Ramses Wissa Wassef bought land in Harrania in the early 1950s, the village was entirely rural, wholly separate from the metropolis of Cairo. It had no electricity and extremely rudimentary services. Most of the villagers were illiterate and their health was very poor. Today, Harrania is almost a suburb of Cairo and services are very greatly improved.

**Q13: Are the weavers Muslims or Christians?**

A: Harrania is a Muslim village, so all the present-day weavers are Muslims. The Wissa Wassefs are Coptic Christians, and it was at a Coptic Christian school in Cairo that Ramses Wissa Wassef initiated the experiment in creativity (see Q1). Three of those who had learned to weave in Cairo later, as young adults, helped Ramses teach the first group of children at Harrania.

Religion has never been an issue for the experiment or at the Art Centre. Islam does not proscribe representational art – except in mosques and any other religious context. One of the most remarkable tapestries in the permanent collection at Harrania is a triptych entitled Creation of the World by Ashour Messelhi, a first generation weaver. When he was planning this piece in 1983, Sophie Wissa Wassef invited a Muslim sheikh and a Coptic priest to participate in a discussion of the proposed subject-matter. The only element of the Book of Genesis story that Ashour did not depict in the completed triptych was the creation of Adam and Eve.

**Q14: Are the tapestries widely known?**

A: The tapestries have an international reputation. They have frequently been exhibited in Europe and elsewhere, and pieces have been bought by prestigious museums and large corporations, as well as by many individuals.

The first exhibition took place in Cairo in 1956, a few years after weaving began at the workshop in Harrania. In 1958 a Swiss resident in Egypt was so struck by the children's work that she helped organize exhibitions in Basle and Zurich in 1959. Almost every year thereafter there was an exhibition in a European country or the USA. The UK touring exhibition (1985-86), organized by the predecessor of the Ramses Wissa Wassef Exhibition Trust, was at the time the largest ever mounted outside the Art Centre. More recently, there have been major exhibitions in several countries, including at the Institute du Monde Arabe in Paris, in Geneva, and in Dubai.

Museums, institutions and corporations that have acquired tapestries from the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre include:

- 1- Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh- Scotland. 1987
- 2- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1975
- 3- The Art Institute, Chicago. 1970
- 4- Musée Jean Lurçat, Angers- France. 1993 collection of 4 tapestries
- 5- Modern Art Museum, Stockholm- Sweden
- 6- Town hall museum, Lunds. Sweden. 1967
- 7- Natural history museum, New York. 1976

- 8- Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- 9- Textile Museum, Washington. 1978
- 10- Roemer Pelizaeus Museum, Hildesheim- Germany. 1980
- 11- The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology- London. 2007
- 12- Children Museum- Indianapolis USA. 2008- collection of 3 tapestries.
- 13- Victoria & Albert Museum, Middle East section London- 2008.

The following corporations have purchased tapestries for their buildings.

- 1- Al Ahram news paper. 1970
- 2-The United Nations building- Geneva. 1978
- 3- Ann Arbor university- Michigan USA. 1979.
- 4- Cairo new Opera house. 1988. Collection 2 tapestries
- 5- KPMG. South Africa- head quarters. 1998
- 6- American university Cairo. 1977/2001. Collection of 4 tapestries.
- 7- Cairo Sheraton Hotel. 1980.
- 8- Cairo Intercontinental Hotel. 1991. Collection of 4 tapestries.
- 9- Cairo Meridian Hotel. 1995
- 10- The Egyptian presidential banquet hall. 1996
  
- 11- USA Cairo embassy. 1995/97. Collection of 3 tapestries.
- 12- Tokara winery head office. South Africa. 2002.

#### **Q15: What impact has the experiment had?**

A: The Art Centre has transformed the lives of those who work there. The artists are the pride of the community. The project and its nurturing environment have brought prosperity, education, better health, self-respect and satisfaction to individuals who were previously poor, illiterate villagers. It has particularly benefited the women, improving their status and providing them with opportunities for personal achievement.

Within Egypt, the most visible evidence of the project's impact is the numerous outlets advertising "Harrania tapestries" and announcing themselves as "weaving schools". The weavings produced at these commercial establishments vary greatly in quality and are not comparable with pieces made at the Art Centre, but they are often pleasing and colourful and have become popular with tourists. The entrepreneurs responsible for the proliferation of hand-woven products have doubtless made money for themselves, but they have also created skilled job opportunities and given employment to many hundreds of young men and women in the Nile Valley.

Beyond Egypt, the experiment has inspired artists, teachers and others not simply to weave, but also to tap into latent creativity through "improvisation" at the loom and in other media. The Brunei Gallery exhibition includes some work done in Britain that was inspired by the Wissa Wassef tapestries.

#### **Q16: Who was Ramses Wissa Wassef?**

A: **The architect:**

Ramses Wissa Wassef- an Egyptian architect. He was born and educated in Cairo and completed his architectural training in Paris. Ramses returned to Egypt in 1936, he was asked with others in 1938 to start the architectural department at the College of Fine Arts- Cairo. Ramses taught both history of art and architecture. In 1969 he was elected the head of the department till his death in 1974.

Ramses also practiced as an architect, his first love was designing buildings in vernacular style, using traditional materials. The art centre at Harrania and the private houses in the area are a good example of this. He also designed several Coptic churches and the Moktar National sculpture museum. Ramses Wissa Wassef received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, posthumously, in 1983.

#### **The stain glass designer:**

He was renowned for the design of stain glass windows which he personally constructed for many of the buildings that he designed or renovated such as the churches, many private houses, the shouting club in Cairo, the Palestine hotel in Alexandria and the national assembly building in Cairo. Ramses won the Egyptian National prize for art and science in 1960.

#### **The potter:**

Ramses passion was pottery, he experimented with many local types of clay to produce "Stoneware ceramic" for every day house hold use. The kiln too, is his own design and patterned in his name. Suzanne his daughter is still using these clay mixes and firing in kilns built in the same design principals.

#### **Q17: When did Ramses Wissa Wassef die?**

A: Ramses Wissa Wassef died in 1974. He was born in 1911.

#### **Q18: Who took over the Art Centre after Ramses Wissa Wassef died?**

A: When Ramses died in 1974, his widow Sophie and her two daughters Suzanne and Yoanna shared the overall management of the Centre.

Sophie supervised the "first generation" wool weavers – those who learned at Harrania in the early 1950s.

In 1972, Suzanne has started her second generation group whom she taught High-warp wool weaving, while her father was still alive.

Yoanna, started her "second generation" Fine cotton weaving, and batik painting in 1975.

Suzanne's husband, Ikram Nosshi, is now the Art center's business manager.

#### **Q19: What were Ramses Wissa Wassef's views about art and craft?**

A: Ramses Wissa Wassef believed that the distinction between an artist as someone who creates and a craftsman as someone who merely reproduces was artificial and highly prejudicial to creativity. He similarly condemned classifications into major and minor, fine, decorative, and applied arts.

Ramses Wissa Wassef's views are best conveyed in his own words, as quoted in *Woven by hand* (page references to English edition published by Hamlyn, 1972):

I had this vague conviction that every human being was born an artist, but his gifts could be brought out only if artistic creation were encouraged by the practicing of a craft, from early childhood. (p.5)

I was extremely interested in the periods when craftsmen were prosperous members of society, and an astonishing profusion of expressive shapes and objects was created in every sector of life. ... I wanted to examine the relationship between technique and art, and re-examine the usual definitions

of “artist” and “craftsman”. ... If the word “artist” is used for someone who creates, and “craftsman” for someone who merely reproduces, how is one to explain the many artists who are mere imitators but who are not called craftsmen, or the whole populations of craftsmen in the past, who were real creators but whom it seems paradoxical to call artists? Does the distinction lie in the fact that the artist manages to win personal fame, while the craftsman remains anonymous? All these definitions involve all sorts of prejudices that must be eliminated. Similarly, classifications into major and minor, fine, decorative and applied arts are unacceptable. (p.8)

By defining one as a creator, and the other as a manual worker, our civilization, with its conventional classifications, routines and ill-considered generalizations, has sundered art and craftsmanship and is threatening to strangle both of them. (p.10)

One only has to mention “craft industries” for many people to think automatically of an under-developed country. (p.11)

The activity which I consider worthwhile cannot be called anything else but the practicing of a “craft”, in other words the individual working of materials to produce a useful and beautiful object. This is a serious occupation. (p.11)

Unless “traditional” craftsmanship can find the energy and resources to renew its outworn routines, it will be forced to give way. An economic renewal would be sufficient, since the competition is mainly economic. Once broken, a tradition cannot be renewed. Craftsmen used to hand down their skills from generation to generation. The educational system today cannot form craftsmen. (p.11)

Uniform modern taste has spread everywhere. And yet many people are aware of the lack of originality and expressiveness in mechanically made products, and they show their appreciation of the craftsman’s work by collecting old objects. However, if a modern craftsman offers them something he has made, they feel the disillusionment that comes from handling a copy. (p.11)

**Q20: What were Ramses beliefs about creativity, and why did he choose tapestry weaving for his experiment?**

A: Ramses Wissa Wassef’s beliefs are best expressed in his own words, taken from *Woven by hand* (page references to English edition published by Hamlyn- 1972):

The creative energy of the average person is being sapped by an abstract, conformist system of education, and by the extension of industrial techniques to every field. But while the machine threatens to reduce human beings to passivity, it also frees them to develop a potential that will wither away if it does not find real fields for action. (p.11-12)

The capacity for artistic creation exists in every child, but it needs fostering and protecting against superficiality. (p.12)

I chose tapestry-making because I saw it as a way of getting the children to produce images by

means of a craft technique, of starting them off on an activity that involved a union of body and soul, a balanced combination of manual work and artistic creation. (p.12)

To produce an image in tapestry is a very slow task, I attached great importance to this slowness, and the child's ideas ripening in his mind and guiding his fingers as they materialized. I also counted on experience, gained gradually day by day, giving birth continually to new images. (p.12)

As soon as a child has managed to produce his first image, a figure, a tree, or a bird, his sense of triumph is obvious. It is this first burst of enthusiasm that one must learn to

protect and maintain throughout his whole life. In fact, this first act, which I considered the creative act, has been the starting-point for an uninterrupted flow of inventiveness, original ideas, and new forms of expression, which at every step brought a more complete mastery of the technique of weaving, as a vehicle for original and exciting work. (p.13)

The only explanation for this amazing creativity is that the sense of colour and rhythm, the instinctive feeling for the play of shapes and composition, are innate gifts in a child, which atrophy and die if they are not brought into action.

#### **Q.21: How did Ramses Wissa Wassef conduct the experiment?**

A: See Qs 1-4. This is how Ramses described what he did (quotations taken from *Woven by hand*, published by Hamlyn in 1972):

Many educationalists now recognize the value of free expression for young children. Unfortunately, they believe that it disappears of its own accord at puberty, or that it is out of place for adolescents who should be thinking about examinations. (p.14)

We had no exams at Harrania. In fact, it is even misleading to talk about teaching. I merely acted as a screen between the army of external influences and the children's own rich resources. By means of direct creative activities, I aroused and protected the free play of spontaneous impulses. (p.14)

The result was a whole new language, an unlimited source of poetry that came to light early and has remained abundant for twenty-five years. Far from weakening, the miracle of its incredible vitality has been continually renewed, in spite of outside disturbances. It went on through the age of puberty, which we had been led to fear, and even through marriage and motherhood. A new generation is now using the tapestry workshop as a nursery and playroom! (p.14)

I paid the children for their work, as soon as their very first tapestry was completed. ... [This] was significant in a number of ways.

First, it was a tangible sign that the apprenticeship was over. Paying him for his work is a way of recognizing that it is valuable.

Second, the children immediately grasped the fact that the occupation they were training for was a serious matter, both then and for the future. This helped to provide a stable basis for relations between the children, their families, and myself.



Another of the practical aims of the system was to encourage the children's work, by the method of payment adopted: the finished tapestry was measured, and the child responsible for it received a sum corresponding to the area, multiplied by a coefficient which depended on the amount of care taken and the attractiveness of the work.

Finally, this system frees me completely from the task of checking the hours of work, which is unpleasant for me and humiliating for any human being at any age. These young people can use their time as they wish, and I can reward genuine effort, sincerity and progress ... (pp.14-15)

I never hesitated to intervene if it were necessary, and even to co-operate in helping the child to plan the main lines of a tapestry in his mind. They asked many questions, and I had to be able to answer them. Sometimes I had to find some way of arousing them to fresh efforts, by suggesting new combinations of shapes and colours, or by stimulating their minds with new situations. I frequently took them for walks. I showed them the banks of the Nile, the palm groves, the city, the zoo, the sea and the desert. (p.16)

These young artists have only their own conception of their work, drawn from their own experience ... They know nothing of the hesitations of sophisticated artists, who have seen so many beautiful things that they can no longer distinguish between their own and other people's feelings. (Pp.16-17)

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