

The Art Centre Wool Tapestry

by Ikram Nosshi

Early Days

The idea - Cairo craftsmen

Since 1952 two generations of weavers have developed in the Art Centre Ramses Wissa Wassef established with his wife Sophie at Harrania, near Giza. Nine of the original group of children who began working around the age of twelve, many of them now grandparents, are still weaving under the guidance of Sophie Wissa Wassef. A second generation of weavers guided by the Wissa Wassef's daughters Suzanne and Yoanna, continue to produce wool and cotton tapestries that are remarkable and unique works of art., a work of art had to be conceived and executed directly in its material. To depend on a design was an indirect method which dissociated and weakened the process of artistic creation.

1970 - 1980

Second generation wool weavers

In 1972 Suzanne Wissa Wassef started her own group of weavers. At first, her natural choice was to invite the children of the first generation weavers . Many of these children had spent their earliest years sitting beside their mothers at the loom.

Soon, Suzanne discovered that they imitated the adults' designs knowing that these had already pleased the Wissa Wassefs. She often told the children, "I want you to bring out what you feel, not what your parents are doing." The lack of spontaneity in their work moved Suzanne to disband her newly formed group and replace them with a whole new group of children whom had not been exposed to weaving at all.

Their challenge, and that of their teacher, was to become free from the natural impulse to imitate by using the technical skills of weaving and to find fresh interpretations of the work.

Suzanne made an extra effort to free the children from a desire to merely imitate nature. Unlike the first generation, the second generation from the start were made aware of the characteristic details which they wanted to represent. Here she describes her aspirations for the weavers;

"I wove from the age of eight to sixteen and discovered that the technique had many possibilities. The more I wove, the more I discovered how freely one can express oneself on the loom. It was my aim since then to initiate in the weavers this sense of free expression and unfolding magic."

Working with this in mind, the results were indeed surprising. Suzanne found that once the children had learned to think for themselves, they were able to create in the round, whole scenes and broad landscapes, something that had taken their predecessors much longer to achieve.

It is essential to realise that, the entire development of the 2nd generation, took place with out the presence of Ramses, since he passed away in 1974.

While her guide ness to the children from the start was based on her father's beliefs, she made some modification to meet the huge social changes in the Egyptian society as a whole.

The success of the 2nd group is a further proof of Ramses Wissa Wassef's belief in innate artistic ability and the circumstances in which this can best be fostered. Suzanne continues her effort with 18 weavers ranging from the ages of thirty to forty five.