

The Weavings of the Children of Harrania

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*Wissa Wassef enseigne le tissage à un groupe de trente enfants et adolescents à Harrania, un village au sud du Caire, construit de terre séchée couleur ocre. Les enfants habitent chez eux avec leurs parents, leurs animaux et leurs plantes, mais ils viennent quand ils veulent à une maison de deux étages carrée et couronnée de dômes où ils révèlent leurs secrets en images spontanées créées sur les tapisseries. Les enfants tissent même sur les tapisseries assez grandes sans dessins préalables. Les thèmes qui reviennent toujours sont: les poissons, les arbres, le canal qui traverse Harrania. La chronique des événements locaux figure sur les tapisseries: la vie des rues, les carrioles, la foule, l'histoire de l'épreuve d'Abraham qui doit traverser un feu sans être touché. Mais partout c'est surtout l'imagination des enfants qui s'exprime.*

# The Weavings of the Children of Harrania

ETEL ADNAN

Harrania is a village south of Cairo. It is made of dried mud, an ochre color; the gamoussa shares the house with the family, the children are everywhere, the goats live among them and I have seen the saddest dogs on earth.

It is a place both animated and solemn. The land is flat, the Pyramids in the background. The road doubles a canal made heavy by reeds and ducks.

There is there a two-storied structure, square and capped with domes, the chalk on the walls invaded by dry mud, and one can enter. Right into a vertigo. When you go in you receive in full face, with animal smells, a sense of Time itself being compressed: it is as if Pre-history, Byzantium and Baghdad, by the power of electronics, passed in front of you in a matter of seconds.

There are children inside and they are working: two little girls near the door weave. There is no design in front of them. A heap of wool on the floor. They look studious. Slowly, they make images.

There are larger looms, young men with Africa's indigo on their shirts work on them. One of them has already in front of him a large piece of work accomplished, where boats and fish move in the midst of the wools they have dyed right there, with the plants of the garden: reseda for yellow, garance for red brick, coccinelle for pink. In a bucket two little girls are preparing a color: all the smells are strong.

It is like a beehive: you see white teeth, the marvelous Egyptian smile, fast hands, wrists full of sharp elegance, hair as dark and as coarse as the sheepskins. Rugs absorb the shadows which move about them.

About twenty years ago, in Old Cairo, near the Church of the Moallaka, Ramses Wissa Wassef, who is an architect, gathered a few girls of the neighborhood and taught

them to weave without suggesting to them any design. He was stunned by the results. Since, he moved to Harrania where he directs a group of thirty children and adolescents.

The children come as they can, in their pyjamas, their galabias . . . and on their own time. They go home, to their parents, their animals, their plants, and come back to reveal their secrets in spontaneous images that they weave.

When one of them works on a big tapestry which takes months to be completed and he does it with no previous design, we should think that his inner vision is not fugitive but lasts and guides his hands. The freshness of lines that we admire in the works of masters I also found in the works of the children.

The themes that recur: fish, trees, the canal. Children know only archetypes. When I asked them why they do not make pyramids in their designs they answered that these were only for tourists: the little fellaheen feel the indiscretion that invades the funerary monuments of the great Kings and they resent it. Sometimes in a simple image something mysterious occurs like in that small rug made by Samiha where above goats and grass a bird like an Inca bird seems to try by its own powers to pull the earth out of its orbit.

There are all kinds of events in the tapestries: street-life, baskets balanced off on the women's heads, carts, crowds gathered here and there making black circles. Some of the works show the inner illuminations lit by feast days. Ramadan shows all its magic. There are city fires rendered by red flames which rise, burn, similar to the mystic fires of the Nubian frescoes of the Christian era. The children who owe their life to the same sun that feeds the plants of the Nile seem to be moving in some burning



TREE OF LIFE



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liquid. The tapestries have some volcanic heritage: they come out directly from the Coptic experience of life, from the Islamic heritage, both worlds having nowadays more roots than branches. I saw in the great Coptic cathedral that Wissa Wassef had designed two tapestries, each fifty feet long, hanging on each side of the main altar: at left, the Tree of Life, at right, the Vine. At Harrania, Ali showed me a thing he made: a wall rug figuring the cousin of the Prophet, whose name he bears, conversing with his two sons: Hassan and Hussein. Zaynab also showed me her work: a huge tapestry telling the story of Abraham's ordeal—the sage had to cross the fire, untouched, and the whole village is standing, stunned; in the middle of this event a tree manifests itself, the lightest of the trees produced at Harrania, a tree almost metallic, almost mineral, possessed by the dance of the whole scene . . . up in the

left corner Zaynab, whose eyes shine like a slit on water, built a divine city which is her village as she sees it, with amazement, with love. In the process these youngsters are creating a new Islamic iconography.

On a Friday afternoon Ramses took his own family and all the children in a bus to the dam which is north of Cairo. The purpose of the trip was of course to be a short vacation but also a chance given the children to refresh their visual perception. They played all day, ate, watched the feloukas. Ramses was looking desperately at banana groves hoping they will appear in the rugs some day. But the children were looking at everything but the banana trees. I remember Zaynab saying in the bus on the way back: "Tomorrow I shall make a big sun"; the sun was setting.

The next day I was at Harrania before leaving Egypt. I looked slowly at all the weavings which were covering the walls of the upper house, with their lines of goats, donkeys, cattle . . . it was like being in a sanctuary where the hard edges of a religious world had been softly erased, so that only the happiness which gave birth to the figures had remained. It was like being back in the painted tombs of Pharaonic Egypt and bringing them back to the present, and understanding the people who made them who must have been like the "children." Yes, these children still seem to know that plants speak and suffer, that animals draw flowers on sand. They know that life is a weaving.

Ramses' wife, Sophie, opened a chest and brought out a long tapestry: there was on it a red sun. On the edges trees were entering the scene. In the middle, a bird which had flown too high had come too near the sun and burned the edges of its wings; its head, like Van Gogh's ear, was cut, and was dropping back, annihilated. Ramses' wife said that the tapestry had been done by Nicholas, the nineteen year old boy whom they found one day drowned in the Nile. I thought: like Egypt. ■

