The Traditional Crafts of Egypt

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Introduction:  
The Labor of Invention

From the earliest dynasties in ancient Egypt, Egyptians assiduously recorded scenes from their daily life and labors on the walls of temples, touching on agriculture and industry, religious rituals, and the arts. Handicrafts were an important part of these murals, which depicted the making of pottery, glass, papyrus, jewelry, and fabric as well as artisans working stone, metals, wood, and leather.

This book was inspired by these panoramas of the manual arts. Across its eleven chapters, we lay bare the traditional crafts in a documentary mural that explores the inner workings of each craft and the spirit of its practitioners, illuminating the beauty and details of the individual craft items they produce. Throughout the volume we have tried to trace the evolution of this civilization through its handicrafts, examining how tools and methods developed and how raw materials are transformed into a piece of art that transcends mere craft.

In choosing the narrative style of the Egyptian mural as the book’s organizing principle and attempting to tell the story of each craft down through the ages, we have rejected a dry academic style, while still striving for accuracy and precision. We believed it was more important to link each craft to the lives of Egyptians, both the creators and the people they create for. We wanted to tell the living story of
the craft, its life among skilled artisans, and the fusion of artisan and craft into an organic whole that endows the handmade piece with brilliance and meaning.

In each chapter, the authors offer a brief history of the craft to ground it in time and place and show how it is linked to the needs of its users and the architectural and artistic modes prevalent in certain periods. We also look at periods of transition and outside influences to better understand the evolution of the craft and the development of the product. We follow the history of each craft to the modern age, tracking down artists who have been inspired by these inherited forms but have still managed to leave their own idiosyncratic mark on them.

We also look at how the daily life and needs of Egyptians have shaped the function, form, and decorative elements of handmade products. We were especially concerned with highlighting the link between traditional crafts and popular or folk tradition expressed in stories, anecdotes, songs, poetry, and proverbs, thus setting these traditional crafts into a more three-dimensional portrait of everyday life. In this way, we hope the reader will hear the rustle of cloth on a loom or the ting of forged metal, feel the bend of the leather or the smoothness of amber or glass, or catch a whiff of rosewood. We may even grasp some significance in the curvature of Arabic calligraphy.

While forgoing a purely academic style, we have strived to place the process of creation and innovation in the historical and social context of artisanal techniques, tools, and methods. We have relied on documentary research from various historical, geographical, technical, literary, and scientific sources as well as on fieldwork and the testimonies and experience of those working in the fields covered by this book. The photographs provide important visual documentation for what we hope is a lively textual exploration.

From the outset, we thought it vital to highlight the context in which these crafts emerged and evolved, adapting to changing times with new forms, even up to contemporary innovations in the twenty-first century that draw on traditional
forms, or at least on their spirit. Yet, it is also important to view this book—a repository of memories and contingent circumstances—in the context of its own time. We faced considerable difficulties in practical terms: many workshops have closed down due to the decline in tourism and a shrinking market. Some of these chapters are a sort of lamentation for the craft and the artisans, who unceasingly and eloquently voiced their plaints. But it is in honor of their passion for their art and their unstinting labor and perseverance that this book was realized. Let us, then, take it as a celebration of these fighters and artists and their creativity. It is thanks to them that Egyptian civilization continues to produce and flourish.

We hope this book will restore the stature of the Egyptian artisan, standing against the tide of mechanized industrial products, synthetic fibers, and plastics. These modern materials are not used to innovate new forms but merely mimic the creations of traditional artisans. The result is a mongrelized product lacking all spirit and claiming authenticity while possessing none. The work of the traditional artisans is more human. They themselves begin by seeking out their raw materials, preparing them, making their tools, and finding solutions to obstacles in execution. The repeated performance of all these steps imbues their very hands with an unconscious practical knowledge and awareness, thus allowing them to spontaneously visualize and pursue different artistic possibilities and create new forms. This deep understanding of the craft, acquired through years of practice, spurs traditional artisans to innovate, alter standard forms, and explore the unknown potential latent in their tools.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to note that this volume is the brainchild of Dr. Heba Handoussa, the president of the Egypt Network for Integrated Development, a UNDP project, which sponsors numerous activities in Qena, including in the traditional crafts for which Upper Egypt is renowned.
Long ago, ancient Egyptians discovered the magic of the mud that the River Nile brings from afar and deposits on its fertile banks. They shaped it and fired it, and the clay, once treated in this way, acquired a distinctive tint, making it a shade darker than the pottery made elsewhere around the region. The pottery they made survived for centuries, bearing the tales of ancient times, transmitting the marks of divine symbols, the anecdotes of a distant past.

Examples of ancient Egyptian pottery abound in museums, in Egypt and elsewhere. The exquisite forms produced long ago in Nagada near Qena, in Dayr Tasa and al-Badari near Asyut, in Marmadat Bani Salama in north Cairo, or in al-‘Amri in Helwan are still alive with beauty and fraught with mystery.

Scientists often use pottery shards to date civilizations. And the ancients often used those shards to write on or to do their calculations. The ostraca, as these shards are called, impart on pottery an intrinsic value, turning these objects of daily life into messages across time, bearing a bounty of information about ancient societies, exquisite details of a distant past which would have been lost otherwise.

Pottery was central to ancient life. It was used in temples and tombs, journeying with its owners into the eternity that lies beyond the grave. Enshrined in the ancient psyche, pottery acquired a mythical power, tales of which survive to this day. One such mesmerizing tale is told by a community of potters living in Misr al-Qadima, also known as Fustat, in Cairo.

“Once upon a time, a man lived happily with his wife. Then the wife was struck down with an illness that rendered her infertile. From then on, she lived in fear that her husband might abandon her for another, so as to have children. Her husband, who loved her so, castrated himself, so as to put her mind at ease.

Days passed, and the wife made a full recovery and then told her husband that she was ready to have babies. Now it was his turn to fret. He paced through the streets, in utter misery, until he found himself near the humble residence of a wise...
man by the name of Sidi Abu al-Abariq al-Garhi in Fustat. The wise man asked him what was wrong, and the man told him everything. The sheikh then asked him to go down with him into the cellar of his residence. There, the two remained for three days, according to one version of the story, or for three weeks, according to another. During that time, the sheikh fashioned a penis from the same clay he used to make drinking pots. He then rubbed that inanimate object with his hand, and the clay came to life in flesh and blood. The man, having his manhood restored, went back to his wife, and the two made love, living happily ever after.

To this day, women who want to have children come every Tuesday to visit the mausoleum of Sidi Abu al-Abariq al-Garhi in Fustat, where much of Cairo’s pottery is still produced.
Sidi Abu al-Abariq al-Garhi is believed to have been a real sixteenth-century figure. He was a pottery master who trained apprentices in the trade and divulged to them the secrets of his profession. He is also said to have banned women from working in this particular field. But he gave women something else: fertility amulets that ensured plentiful offspring. There are many stories about Sidi al-Garhi, and those stories have an uncanny resemblance to tales ascribed to Khnum, the ancient Egyptian fertility god.

Khnum, a deity possessing the head of a ram, derives his name from the verb *kh-n-m* which, in ancient Egyptian, means to create. In ancient depictions, Khnum is usually shown sitting at a pottery wheel, fashioning embryos he would later deposit in women’s wombs. His tale is the possible reason pottery is so associated with fertility in the residual memory of potters to this day. One can easily see how biblical religions endorse the notion that humanity was fashioned out of mud, of pottery being the progenitor of life.

‘Amm Ramadan Sawwan, an accomplished potter and the scion of a long line of potters, believes in the powers of Sidi al-Garhi. He says that the ancient masters used to form pottery by clay mixed with oil, not water. One day, Sidi Abu al-Abariq al-Garhi was sitting at the pottery wheel, ready to work, when he ran out of oil. Feeling at a loss, he cried, and his tears ran down onto the mud. So he started shaping the clay with his tears. From then on, pottery was made from clay and water, rather than clay and oil.

**FUSTAT: ANCIENT CITY BY THE RIVER**

Fustat, also known as Misr al-Qadima, is situated close to the Babylon Fortress, a Byzantine fortification built on the eastern bank of the Nile. This location made it easy for potters to receive all the clay they needed. It was in this ancient location in
1958 that the late artist and master ceramics maker Sa‘id al-Sadr started a center for traditional crafts, including ceramics making.

The potters’ village, also known as Fakharin, in Fustat, has 135 workshops, including 30 with modern, diesel-operated kilns. The families working in this profession have passed down the secrets of the craft from parent to child for generations. Artists too have converged on this district for decades. One of the best-known potters in the village is ‘Amm Ramadan Sawwan, whose specialty is the drinking jar known as *qulla* (pl. *qalal*) and a particularly decorative type of drinking jar known as *abriq* (pl. *abariq*). He says that he is interested in “original styles.”

Around his shop, there is no shortage of pieces fashioned in heritage forms, including piggy banks and various shapes of *qulal* and *abariq*. Among the drinking