

MADE IN EGYPT: TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS AS TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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The composition of cultural landscapes

The ICOM 24th General Conference 2017, 'Museums and Cultural Landscapes', discussed widely the relationship between museums and their collections, and the culture contained in surrounding landscapes. In relation to this theme, cultural landscapes surrounding the antiquities museums in Egypt come into sharp relief. For example, the Egyptian Textile Museum is located among several monuments of urban Islamic heritage in the heart of El-Moez Street in historic Cairo; the Coptic Museum, lies at the Religious Complex in Old Cairo, an area that embraces ancient architecture of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths. Museological thoughts about cultural landscapes lead to various questions: what do cultural landscapes represent? Are they about urban heritage? Do they represent traditional handicrafts from the surrounding area or the traditional costumes of the people living in such landscapes? What about the daily traditions of those people? Do they include aspects of intangible heritage? Do they embrace local artistic practices?

One word can lead to a possible answer for the above-mentioned questions: people. The people living in such landscapes are the creators of its culture. They construct the architectural structures; fabricate handicrafts and practice art and aspects of intangible heritage. The culture of the people forms the cultural landscapes and even adds value to its existing aspects.

Between security and accessibility

Public museums and their collections are logically a public possession.¹ However, for many years, museums of Egypt were considered touristic attractions devoted to tourists and foreign travellers. Few Egyptians were to be seen among museums' visitors, and even then, such visitors were generally from the higher classes of the Egyptian society. Ordinary people were rarely seen inside museums. After the 25 January Revolution and the massive drop in the numbers of tourists visiting Egypt, museums appeared as sad empty places. Since the core of museum work is communication², the gap between museums and the local visitors has been clearly highlighted during this time.

Factors leading up to such a situation have its roots back in the colonial and post-colonial periods,³ to the extent that the outlines of the Egyptian Museum illustrated by Mariette, Maspero, Quibell and Engelbach are still familiar today.⁴ Some might see museums to be unattractive for groups of ordinary people. Yet old photographs of the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square show some degree of accessibility for local people: they could simply walk around the museum and enter its garden, even with their animals. Today, the situation has changed. Although the intensive security requirements for safeguarding the museum and its collections are a necessity, it may be a negative factor in the relationship between the museum and local people.

During the Revolution, the location of the museum at the heart of the main centre of protests articulated an intensified need for security presence. The idea was supported by the fact that the antiquities museums of Egypt are normally safeguarded by police, rather than 'civilian' security personnel. Inspection procedures have become more rigid, meaning that it may be uncomfortable for the local visitors to spend their leisure time in direct contact with security forces. Media and social media have also made exaggerated statements that could mislead potential visitors to consider museums as dangerous places. Yet the changes take place in society should be reflected on culture and heritage so as to meet the latterly needs of the society members⁵.

Rethinking the idea of museums

On 18 May 2015, an interview was published on YouTube by ElWatan News.⁶ The reporter Lubna Abdelaziz was investigating the relationship between local Egyptian populations and museums. The interview was held in front of the Egyptian Museum, which was then open for free for International Museum Day. It was fundamentally based on one question; if I told you that the museum is free, would you visit it?

The report showed that large numbers of the interviewees openly stated that they would not visit the museum even if admission was free. Moreover, their answers indicated that tickets for visiting are not an issue. Reasons why they would not visit the museum included political circumstances, the lack of understanding of the importance of the museum, and their need to make a living. The following are some of the interviewees' comments:

Interviewee No. 1: "No, even if it was free. I'm sorry, I will not!"

Interviewee No. 2: "Of course not! Our country has serious problems, what's the importance of museums anyway that makes me even think about visiting it?!"

Interviewee No. 3: "My only concern is how to make enough money to live, I can't visit museums."

The above statements address some key points that shed light on factors affecting the shortfall in local visitors to museums. But identifying the problem is the first step in resolving it. The Ministry of Antiquities has thus started to think about new strategies for targeting local communities and addressing their issues. For example, a transformation of subjects treated in regional museums has occurred. In November 2016, the Kom Aushim Museum was re-opened after a renovation of the building, and a new exhibition concept aiming at engaging the people of Fayoum in their museum. Thus, displays cover a variety of topics, in particular traditions of daily life inherited from ancient times, with their ancient origins illustrated through the museum's collections. The displays accordingly included basic daily life practices, some of which still popular in Fayoum today, such as handmade jewellery and basketry. The objects were selected to match the new exhibition themes. The exhibition team realized that the necklaces made of shell are more important for Kom Aushim Museum than gold; the people in Fayoum are still making these necklaces and sell them alongside Lake Qarun. Understanding that it is an obligation not to restrict the voice of the exhibition to that of the museum staff⁷ directed the aim of permanent and temporary exhibitions to be more community-orientated.

Made in Egypt

A strategy that has proved its effectiveness is the use of traditional handicrafts as a tool for community engagement. A series of workshops have been held at various museums to serve the basis for further work. 'Made in Egypt' emerged as an action plan to be initiated in all the museums under the supervision of the Museums Sector, Ministry of Antiquities. Each museum is to carry out the whole action plan in relation to one aspect of its collection and its surrounding cultural landscape. Since museums are required to support their local communities, developing such a set of action plans is essential to help society overcome its problems and planning for a better way of life for the future generations.

Ancient Egyptian works of art attest to thousands of years' progress in Egypt's civilization and artistic development. The variety of techniques and materials used to produce such works were complex, Egyptian craftsmen showing a high level of professionalism during ancient times. What we currently call 'handicrafts' were then part of an advanced industry, embracing many activities, with high levels of proficiency and skills. Jewellery, clothing and furniture are thus among vital crafts to be addressed in museums. Accordingly, the three of them were at the heart of the project.

For thousands of years, ancient Egyptians showed great expertise in jewellery design and production. The quantity of jewellery found in tombs demonstrates skilled use of semi-precious stones and glass in producing inlaid items. Additionally, ancient Egyptian clothing exhibited high quality, and taste in design and manufacture. Furniture was among essential ancient Egyptian crafts, both for daily life and for the afterlife. It was made with much care for technique, design and decoration, and inlaid with semi-precious materials and even gilded. Such ancient Egyptian works of art have inspired many well-known international designers all around the world.

The project focuses on inspiring new ideas out of cultural heritage. It supports the use of the artistic and decorative elements of museum collections in improving the quality of modern Egyptian products, as well as developing new ideas for new lines which can compete in the local market. On one hand it serves to build strong links between museums and their collections, and the local community and cultural landscapes on the other. It also helps raise the awareness of Egyptian society regarding the importance of its traditional handicrafts. The aim is accordingly to create innovative ideas inspired by museum collections through carefully organized programmes to revive traditional handicrafts as well as have participants in these programmes engage with museums. The promotion of such approaches enhances strategies for preserving cultural heritage of future generations. Furthermore, it assists in decreasing unemployment by teaching the participants new crafts and helps them widening the market of their products by offering wide-range marketing inside their regions.

A series of activities was set to be performed: familiarization activities; workshops; competitions; and exhibitions. Familiarization activities sit at the beginning to connect participants with the museum collection, to lead them to recognize the hidden stories behind the artistic details. The workshops then cover one or more topics with the help of professionals with appropriate experience with the proposed topics. The workshops include classes and sessions for teaching the participants some techniques to produce traditional handicrafts with modern touches. They will also help them to start their own projects after the end of the program. The competitions serve as a motivator to support the participants' learning experience. From the beginning of the project, the participants are to be notified that their products will be entered in the final competition to select the best works and products among

all groups covering a given topic. At the end of the project, a temporary exhibition will be organized to display the new products created by the participants in the workshop. Whenever possible, museums will try to help organizing a marketplace to be opened to the public to help the participants generate income.

Saba' Sanayea'

The first museum to undertake the action plan was the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo in February 2017. The version of the project at the Museum of Islamic Art was called "Saba' Sanayea'" in Arabic "سبع صنایع" or Seven Handicrafts; an expression from Egyptian heritage which refers to the importance of the knowledge of handicrafts and talent development. The project included 60 participants of lower and middle-class ladies, of different ages and backgrounds, divided into three teams. Each team was devoted to target a traditional handicraft: *khayamiyah*,⁸ *etamin*, and stained glass. Bespoke tours into the museum galleries were carried out with the help of the museum curators to familiarize the participants with the collection and lead them to discover details to help them in the workshops. The participants showed great interest in the museum collection, in particular as many of them had never visited the museum before.

The workshops were carried out in cooperation with the Industrial Training Council (ITC) of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Each workshop lasted for two to three weeks, and participants were trained in the implementation of models of traditional products. The representatives of the ITC provided the museum with all the material needed for the workshops, in addition to trainers to instruct the participants. They were also provided with some models of similar products to what they were to learn about and printed templates, as well as some essays concerning traditional handicrafts. It is worth mentioning that none of the participants have ever attended similar courses, which highlights the success of the project compared to the quality of the objects they produced.

The commitment of the participants reflected their understanding of the project's concept and their willingness to achieve best results. The connections between the participants enhanced the effective learning and created a positive atmosphere. Children who came to accompany their mothers also received knowledge during their time at the museum becoming engaged with heritage and art at an early age. New products ranged from shawls decorated in *etamin*, *khayamiyah* cushions, and stained-glass lanterns with internal electric lighting. The decorative motifs included calligraphy, flora and fauna, and geometric motifs, implemented in a variety of vivid colours. Some decorations resembled modern or ancient Egyptian motifs implemented using Islamic techniques, which demonstrated the participants' creativity in integrating different artistic styles and techniques. They also used some techniques for connecting the object with a traditional heritage practice; such as calligraphy of proverbs related to specific occasions.

The objects made by the participants were displayed at the museum from 19 March to 23 March 2017. The exhibition was appreciated by both museum visitors and museum professionals and experts. It was also praised by the media and news outlets that covered the workshops and the exhibition, an additional factor which boosted the participants' pride and self-confidence.

The participants were so proud of the results that they sought further cooperation with the museum and with other museums as well. Stories collected during the duration of the project included some emotional touches. For example, one of the participants had lost her young son few days before

the beginning of the project. At the start of the workshop, she was very introverted and barely spoke to anyone. Her participation in the project was a way to get over her grief. By the end of the project she had become able to socialize with her colleagues, discuss new ideas and show happiness with the results.

The winning object in the competition was a magnificent lantern of stained glass, containing the logo of the Museum of Islamic Art consisting of Islamic motifs that proved the deep connections growing up between the participant and the museum.

Conclusion

The success of the project gives material to draw upon for the way ahead. A number of programmes are now being run by the Ministry of Antiquities in the service of local communities, aiming to achieve more communication with potential local visitors, as well as introducing outreach activities. Looking back to the interviews noted above, the answers of the interviewees might have been changed if they had participated in similar projects related to their work, studies, and talents or even aspirations.

Today more than ever, the scene inside Egyptian museums is experiencing a clear transformation. The number of Egyptian visitors is increasing following the variety of the programmes and events developed specifically to address the local community. While tourists are starting to return, the numbers of tourists in Egypt cannot yet be compared with their numbers before the 25 January Revolution. However, no one can predict how many years will pass until similar numbers can be reached again. The main concern at the present is to grow the baseline of local visitors. This way, in few years and when the number of tourists could increase again, the old image of Egyptian museums would become a memory, with visitors coming to combine both categories.

Photos⁹



Fig. 1: Some of the workshops at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo.



Fig. 2: Some of the workshops at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo.



Fig. 3: An example of *khayamiyah* made by a participant.



Fig. 4: Modern illustrations implemented using the techniques of khayamiyah as an integration of different artistic styles.



Fig. 5: The participants happily taking photos with their own products.



Fig. 6: Examples of stained glass lanterns made by the participants.



Fig. 7: Two of the participants with their own stained-glass lanterns.

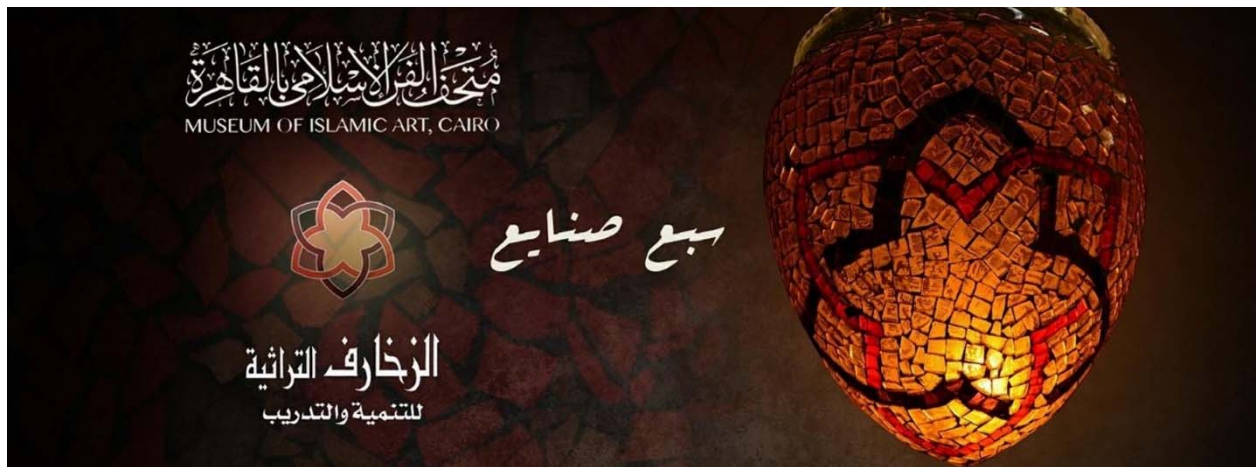


Fig. 8: Poster of the exhibition at the Museum of Islamic Art, featuring the winning object made by one of the participants, which includes the logo of the museum.

¹ A. Desvallées and F. Mairesse (eds), *Key Concepts of Museology* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).

² G. Horjan, 'Towards the Education We Really Need in Regional Museums' in J. Legget (ed), 'Staff and Training in Regional Museums', *ICOM / The International Committee for Regional Museums (ICR) and the International Committee for the Training of Personnel (ICTOP) in cooperation with Regional Museum Murska Sobota* (Paris 2011), 13-15.

³ M.G. Rashed, 'The Museums of Egypt after the 2011 Revolution', *Museum International* 67 (Paris, ICOM 2015), 125–131.

⁴ W. Doyon, 'The Poetics of Egyptian Museum Practice', *BMSAES* 10 (London 2008), 1–37.

⁵ O. A. W. Abdel Meguid, 'The Nubia Museum's Role in the Community', *Museum International* 57 (Paris, UNESCO 2015), 225-226.

⁶ YouTube, ElWatan News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxLzUsgxtWs> accessed 29.06.2017

⁷ C. Lang (ed.), 'Disability directory for museums and galleries', *The Council of Museums, Archives and Libraries* (London 2001).

⁸ The word *khayamiyah* comes from *khemah*, which means “tent” in Arabic. It describes the art of decorating tents when the Arab came to Egypt.

⁹ All photos were taken by the author during the workshops.