



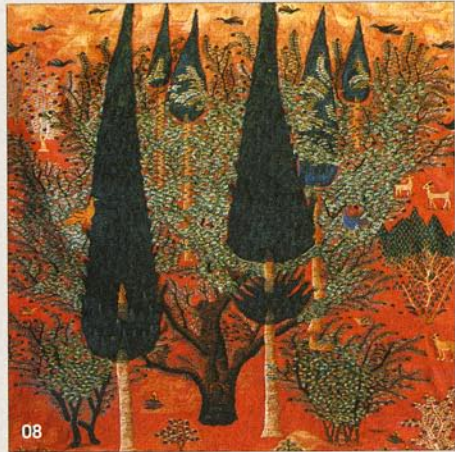
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### Egyptian Landscapes: 50 Years of Tapestry Weaving at the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre, Cairo

The Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London, WC1  
www.wissa-wassef-arts.com 19 January – 17 March 2006

A visionary Egyptian architect, Ramses Wissa Wassef believed "Every human being is born an artist but that his gifts could be brought out only if artistic activity was encouraged from early childhood by way of practicing a craft". To test this theory, in the 1940s he established a weaving centre in Cairo to encourage children to engage in the craft. To ensure creativity three rules were imposed: no preliminary sketches, no copying, and no critical interference from adults. It's a fantastic notion that the slow, laborious craft of weaving could be a conduit for a child's spontaneous imagination. One glance at these extraordinary tapestries confirms they are, indeed, completely momentary in subject matter. Sayed Mahmoud at the age of 13 completed a tapestry titled 'The Wedding' 1982, an impressively sophisticated depiction of a family gathering complete with birds, goats and architecture. Everyday subjects such as 'Fruit Vendors Fighting' make way for the stylized tapestries of elegant plant forms and landscapes that appear as the weavers mature.

By 1952 a new centre was built in Harrania, 10 miles from the centre of Cairo enabling more weavers to participate in this creative experiment. The primary technique used is High-warp weaving, white warp threads strung on a vertical loom completely covered by dense, intricate, horizontal coloured threads woven through by hand and pressed tight. This means the images appear slowly from the bottom up. Wissa Wassef firmly believed that this gradual process allowed ideas to grow and invited imagery to be revealed through the weavers' fingers.



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The architecture of the Centre itself became reflective of the philosophy employed there. Domed workshops, lush gardens with plants needed to create the dyes used; madder root, Reseda – an annual flower that gives a yellow dye – and pecan trees – from which olive green and beige is made from the nut. Maryam Awad's monumental tapestry evokes 'Dyeing Day at the Art centre' 1995 with exquisite detail. The Art Centre developed over the years and Wissa Wassef along with his wife and daughters established an environment where creativity flourished. By the 1970s techniques expanded to include low-warp weaving and Batik and a second generation of weavers emerged. It became more difficult to maintain Wissa Wassef's original rules as the children's awareness of their parents work meant they were less naïve in their initial approach. However, a protective place where a fee was paid to the artist from the very first tapestry woven, meant creativity could continue to blossom. Suzanne Wissa Wassef encouraged the second generation to weave their own unique interpretations of natural landscapes. The most magnificent of the tapestries on display at the Brunei Gallery are such. 'Sunflowers' 2003 and 'Cactus in the Moonlight' 1993 by Sayed Mahmoud which draw the viewer into a seductive close-up exploring the density of plant forms reminiscent of Henri Rousseau. In contrast, 'Sunset on the Nile' 1983 by Ashour Messelhi traverses sea, land and sky in scope, juxtaposing opposing colours with surprising force.

This exhibition is breathtaking. Not only do these tapestries successfully illustrate Wissa Wassef's ambition; it is undeniable that these weavers have established themselves as highly skilled, monumental artists in their own right. ●●● **Ptolemy Mann**

07 Sayed Mahmoud Arcadia Tree 175 x 100 cm

08 Fawzy Moussa Cypress & Olive Trees 280 x 255 cm