



Above
Magie Relph with
Hany el-Sayed
Amed

Inset
The Tent Maker
Street



Robert Irwin and Magie Relph
explore this changing craft

Artists In Appliqué: The Tent Makers of Cairo

Hany's needle moves rhythmically through tiny pieces of fine Egyptian cotton. His miniscule stitches are meticulously even and precise. Quickly, with a deft snip of his shears, he trims a small scrap of pink fabric, ready to sew into the detailed symmetry of his appliqué. Following a faint charcoal outline, he places it onto a brown background, right next to another small shape of orange. For a Western stitcher, this is shocking. Pink, brown and orange? Together? Has he no colour

wheel? No colour sense? But step back. Instead of focussing on the detail, take in the whole. Draped over Hany's crossed legs and shoeless feet, a complex floral design is taking shape. Flowers, stems and leaves spray from the centre into the quadrants of the piece. More colours join the mix: ivory; grey and green; a bit of blue. It's all about ratio and balance. Suddenly, surprisingly, it works. Just as Hany knew it would.

In the UK, we would probably call Hany el-Sayed Amed a "textile artist". But in Cairo's Sharia El

Khayamia, the Street of The Tent Makers, he is just that – a "tent maker". "Why a tent maker?" you wonder. "Where does this textile tradition come from? And in a world where textiles and tourism have gone global, what lies ahead for the tent makers of Cairo?"

Historically, tents are important in Egyptian culture. For Islamic festivals and family celebrations, Cairians erect large white pavilions called suradiqs. These tents are lined with large, elaborate hangings, traditionally the work of the tent

makers. It was skilled and time consuming work and the tent makers were valued and respected. Their profession had a structure, as young apprentices learned from their fathers and uncles. Though never wealthy, the tent makers fed their families and survived. Once, a thousand men worked their appliqué magic in the sewing lofts above their eponymous street near the 10th Century Gate of Bab Zuwayla. Today, most tents are lined with printed cloth, garish facsimiles of the real thing. It's cheap and it's everywhere – tents, canopies, banners, even construction hoardings.

"Where does that leave Hany and the handful of remaining tent makers?"

There is still some work. The farresh, middlemen who hire out tents, still commission some new designs. Buyers also come from other Islamic countries, like Saudi Arabia.

However, as appliqué work on the grand scale of the traditional suradiqs dries up, the tent makers must adapt their skills and designs to new markets. Enter their world and see how.

The Street of The Tent Makers hosts very few tourists. Most, shepherded by commission-hungry tour guides, flock to the throbbing souk of Khan el-Khalili. Those who do venture here find the oldest covered street in Cairo, dating back 350 years. Shafts of sunlight angle through the ancient overhead beams, barely illuminating the alleyway below. Intermittently, the alley is crowded with pedestrians, donkey carts and putt-putting Suzuki vans. Then, it is peaceful, almost empty, but for a delivery boy carrying a tea tray and a sheesha pipe. Here is a tiny

shop stocked with bolts of Egyptian cotton. Near by, a shoe shop. And here, a cubby-hole of a space, just wide enough for a bench and a tent maker to sit and work. "Welcome," Hany beckons. Inside it is cramped, but the walls stretch up 20 feet and are covered with appliqué hangings. Before long, you are admiring Hany's work and sharing tea with him.

"Where do these designs come from?" you ask, and the story begins.

The tent makers draw on three main design inspirations. From Islam come the symmetrical, repetitive arabesques, based on the geometric

marble inlays found in the floors of the ancient mosques. From Pharaonic history, come elaborate floral images, like the lotus. Finally, there is Islam's highest art form, calligraphy, which inspires tent maker Ashraf Hashem's swirling appliqué renditions of Koranic verse. Most tent makers, like Hany and his neighbours Tariq Fattoh, Yahiea Mohamed and Hossam el-Farouk, are equally adept stitching either Islamic or Pharaonic patterns. For each new piece, they choose motifs they think will appeal to buyers, whether Egyptian or foreign. Like artists everywhere, they

Above
An appliqué Magie and Robert brought back with them

Below
Hany tracing pattern with chalk (left) and stitching (right)





Above
An appliqué Magie
and Robert brought
back with them

Below
Goah The Wise
Fool book (right)
and appliqué (left)

constantly adapt traditional elements to create unique new designs they can call their own.

Some tent makers portray people in their work. Though strictly forbidden in religious art, the human form has been depicted in secular Islamic art for centuries. Combining appliqué and embroidery, Ashraf captures

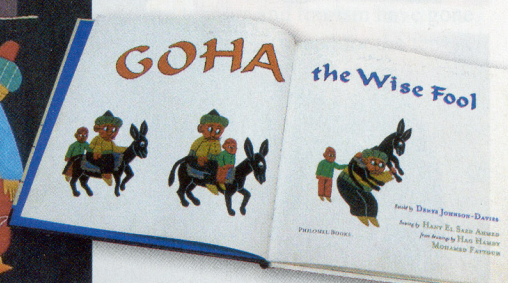
the hypnotic frenzy of traditional Sufi dancers, the famous Whirling Dervishes. However, the most important character for the tent maker is Goha – “The Wise Fool”. Goha exists in various forms in folk tales around the world, including Egypt. In 2004, when New York publisher, Philomel, sought illustrations for a children’s version of Goha, they came to Sharia El Khayamia. Here, the tent

makers had been interpreting Goha in appliqué for years. As with Father Christmas, everyone depicted Goha differently: fat or skinny; bearded or clean-shaven. The publisher chose a squat little Goha with cat’s whiskers and twinkling eyes. He was stitched by Hany, based on sketches by his uncle, Hag Hamdy Mohamed Fattoh.

“What about the stitching?” you wonder. “How do these wonderful designs get from the tent maker’s imagination into the finished hanging?”

Between cups of tea, Hany explains and demonstrates. His methods are similar to our own, with subtle differences. First, Hany pencils his design onto thick brown paper. A large, complex drawing can take a year to finish, as he experiments, searching for something new and exciting. When the drawing is complete, an apprentice pricks the lines with a needle to create a perforated pattern. For symmetrical patterns, he folds the paper into quarters or eighths. Meanwhile, the primary background fabric is stitched to a heavy canvas backing. Then, in a process similar to ‘pouncing’, the apprentice lays the paper pattern onto the background fabric and brushes fine carbon or chalk dust through the perforations, creating a dotted pattern to follow.

Now, Hany begins his laborious task: selecting colours, cutting tiny scraps of fabric and stitching them, layer upon layer, to create his appliqué. He has no quilting frame, but sits cross-legged on his bench with his work on his lap. Because he handles it so much, he sometimes refreshes his stencilled pattern with chalk. Larger pieces he bastes first, just as we would; very small pieces he simply holds in place. Now comes the tricky bit. In either case, Hany *doesn’t* cut the appliqué piece to its exact shape before stitching. Instead, he deftly trims each piece, however delicate, snipping, tucking and stitching as he goes. There are no fancy embroidery scissors here.





Left
Hany el-Sayed
Amed with
apprentices in shop

Inset
Appliqué
and pattern

Below
Tent makers'
appliqué

He uses bulky, though razor sharp, tailoring shears.

For a quilter, it's fascinating to see the design take shape. Like a whole cloth quilter, the tent maker sees his appliqué as a whole. The patchworker may see familiar patterns and think: "Oh, that's a Baltimore." Or: "There's a medallion." But when you step back to a whole cloth perspective, pattern and colour flow through the work, creating a movement that comes from working on the design as a whole, not in pieces.

"How long does it take to create one of these masterpieces? And, how much will it cost?"

Even with sixteen years experience, sewing eight hours a day, Hany will labour three months to finish a two metre appliqué. The price depends on size, complexity and overall quality. Bargaining is minimal; for work of comparable size and quality, prices vary little from maker to maker. Complexity and quality depend on the size of the appliqué pieces and the fineness of the stitching. For huge tent hangings, pieces were larger and fine stitching was not important. Now, as hangings get smaller, both piecing and stitching are finer, up to five stitches per centimetre. Finally, there is colour, which is where the tent makers really excel. To begin with, their colour palette is truly amazing.

The quality Egyptian cotton fabrics they buy from small shops in their street come in a wide range of solid colours. Ultimately, it's down to pure imagination. More subtle hangings contain a more modest range of colour, tone and value. In others, as Hany has shown, anything goes, even pink, brown and orange!

"What about the future?" you wonder.

Yes, the tent lofts are gone, converted to housing in this, the vibrant heart of Islamic Cairo. With them have gone the tent makers' stock in trade, the large tent hangings. But, these are

resilient, creative people. Hany and his fellow tent makers continue to stitch. As times change, they have expanded their repertoire of designs and colours; creating smaller pieces means they can do finer work, really demonstrating their stitching skills to the world. They are using their designs in new ways, adding appliqués to clothing like the traditional Egyptian jalabaya. And slowly, tourists and collectors are discovering and buying their creations.

So, while the tent makers survive, for any stitcher visiting Cairo, a trip to Sharia El Khayamia is a must. Sit with them, sip tea and chat. You will be truly inspired. ♦

