

New York Design Week Showcases One of Egypt's Ancient Crafts

Last month, at New York Design Week's "Wanted Design" exhibition, 13 Egyptian designers set about showcasing the country's talents in product design.

For Noha El Taher and Ibrahim Shams, founders of Kiliim, an online store specializing in producing handmade cushions and rugs, it was a chance to raise awareness of one of Egypt's oldest crafts and make some vital contacts.

"We strive to evoke interest in kilim weaving, so that future generations of weavers can continue to preserve our cultural heritage," said El Taher from the show's sidelines.

From its three workshops in the district of Fowa in Egypt's Kafr El Sheikh Governorate, Kiliim's team of 14 local weavers currently produce around 500-600 pieces per quarter. While 80% of their production is dedicated to local demand, the remaining 20% often goes to export, with particular demand coming from India and Turkey.

Last year, Kiliim was granted fair trade membership by the World Fair Trade Organization. It is more than an e-commerce venture— El Taher and Shams are committed to creating a social enterprise that can sustain the heritage of handwoven kilim by redefining them through modern motifs and colors. While doing this, they reportedly also offer their often-marginalized workers good conditions and fair rights.

This journey for the two entrepreneurs began when they became parents to a baby girl in 2016. While shopping for pieces for their dream nursery, and having found the perfect crib, lighting units and everything in between, El Taher and Shams found themselves facing a dead end when looking for rugs. Nothing on the market inspired them.

Wanting something different they decided to hunt out a local handmade alternative. After weeks of research, they found themselves on route to the home of kilim: Fowa—a small village that sits on the western banks of the Nile Delta. "We were welcomed by the beautiful Nile lined with lush palm trees and small fishing boats floating in the water," El Taher remembers. "But once we arrived in the main center, we found dusty streets and a great number of closed workshops."

Two decades earlier, Fowa had been home to over 2,000 kilim workshops, but the sudden decline in the tourism industry, the fast spread of cheaper machine-made rugs, and the lack of design and innovation in traditional kilims stigmatized the industry as an outdated specialty. Today there are less than 200 workshops remaining.

"We couldn't find a brand that offered a range of contemporary kilim because artisans designed, marketed and sold the kilims with no formal training in any of these fields," says El Taher. "So, the motifs they created became obsolete and less marketable to a younger, design-conscious clientele." El Taher and Shams decided it was time for a reboot.

The two finally stumbled upon one workshop that was willing to create something for them—it was the beginning of a three-year journey. They persuaded the weaver to embrace a modern design and upgrade his craftsmanship to save a precious craft from dying out. Within two months, El Taher and Shams launched their own brand, with the help of their collective background in design, sales and marketing—jobs they had already quit upon the arrival of their daughter.

Their biggest challenge to date is finding and training new craftsmen. "As a result of the industry decline, craftsmen stopped passing on the craft to the younger generation, leaving very few young candidates willing to learn and practice weaving," El Taher explains.

"The younger grew up watching their ancestors struggle with financial compensation and poor working conditions, so they're not keen on pursuing the same path."

To counter this, El Taher and Sham began offering specialized training, good working conditions and a sustainable income. In December 2018 they extended their educational support to include one-day weaving workshops.

Today Egypt remains Kiliim's top market, and the team is determined to maintain a strong rapport with the local clientele. "We are proud of creating a complete supply chain of materials, workers, and designers that is strictly local," says El Taher. The founders now plan to launch a program that will increase the interest in kilim weaving among Fowa's youth, including a specialized weaving school.

If plans take off, next year's international fashion shows could have an even bigger presence from Egypt.

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