



View across the lake basin
at the Vernal Equinox



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The King's Lake

Dahshur Mosaics



Safarkhan Gallery

April 8th - 28th, 2025

6 Brazil Street, Zamalek, Cairo

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The King's Lake (Birket el Malik) with the Bent Pyramid of Dahshur in the background. The lake was flooded annually up until 2017.
Photo by Barry Iverson.

Safarkhan is honored to showcase from Tuesday 8 to Tuesday 29 April the work of an unprecedented undertaking reviving the lost art of marble mosaics in Egypt.

Among the palm groves and lush farmlands bordering Dahshur lies an area known as the King's Lake (Birket el Malik). There a small atelier of village people is making pictorial mosaics, using the same tools and materials as those employed in antiquity.



Left to right: Ashraf Abul Gheit (workshop manager), Rehab and Fatma Mosaad, Charlotte, Abeer Abul Gheit, Mohammed Abu Basil (his son Basil absent), Ayman Ismael (production manager).

Dahshur Mosaics

The art of marble mosaics was introduced in Dahshur by Charlotte Sullivan, a retired art historian, who spends the winter months within sight of the Bent Pyramid.

Based primarily in Italy, where she taught art history for an American university, Charlotte learned the classical method of making mosaics at the Studio Cassio in Rome, one of the few remaining workshops still practicing the venerable art. When her teacher told her that this labor-intensive method of hand-

crafted mosaics would probably soon disappear, she thought of her neighbors in Dahshur who longed for gainful employment.

Recognizing how historically appropriate it was to revive this art form in Egypt, the land where marble mosaics were first made 2300 years ago, she set up a studio in Dahshur and has directed the project for nearly a decade.

For her, the greatest challenge was finding an artistic direction suitable to the timeless rural setting of the King's Lake. Wanting to avoid the clichés of Pharaonic art, she worked closely with the mosaicists and soon realized that birds were the subject which appealed to them most. Colorful and expressive in pose, birds are a familiar yet fascinating part of their everyday lives. In fact, the area, named after King Farouk who came regularly for duck hunting, was, up until recently, annually flooded in order to attract large flocks of varied species during the migration period. Home to hawks and herons, wagtails and hoopoes, and even the flashy White-throated Kingfisher, the area of the King's Lake provides the mosaicists with a kaleidoscope of beautiful subjects. Over time they have expanded their repertoire to include birds of the hieroglyphs and, more generally, birds of Egypt.



Financed by Charlotte, the project has now become a business owned by the mosaicists so that the profits may go directly to them. For her, this latter-life adventure has been a rich learning experience with many unexpected pleasures, not the least of which has been the privilege of designing the compositions for this exhibition.



**Mohammed
Abou Basil**

Mohammed has been a star from the outset. Charming and flamboyant in his manner, he transitioned within the course of weeks from a manual laborer at a construction site and bathroom tiler into a master mosaicist. Eagerly learning the complex steps involved in mounting a mosaic, he was soon adding refinements to the process.

But more important than his technical skill is the independence of spirit and artistic feeling that animates his work. Mohammed enjoys a 'large canvas' and favors compositions overflowing with drama and action. It is this abundance of creative energy that explains his outsized contribution to the present exhibition.

Audubon at Abusir (2023), marble mosaic, 75 x 120 cm

The dramatic pose of John James Audubon's Great Blue Heron (found only in the Americas) is here adapted to the Grey Heron, an inhabitant of the Nile Valley and an occasional visitor to the King's Lake.

This piece provides an excellent example of the collaborative process that often exists between designer and

mosaicist. Certainly in antiquity, and often today, a mosaicist works from a pre-established design. For example, the Alexander mosaic, found at Pompeii and in all probability executed by a team of mosaicists from Alexandria, is based on a famous Hellenistic painting of the Battle of Alexander the Great and the Persian king, Darius. Indisputably the finest mosaic surviving from the ancient world, it is the quality of its workmanship that has transformed a staggeringly complex design into a spectacular work of art in its own right.

In the course of executing the Grey Heron, Mohammed made many decisions about how to adapt the subtleties of color and shading created in the fluid medium of paint to his palette of marbles. Not unlike a musician, who reads notes off



a page, a mosaicist must interpret a design on paper and bring it to life through the obdurate medium of stone. Mohammed, rising to the challenge, has caught the latent energy of the heron, poised before its prey, and, in his way, brought Audubon to Abusir (symbolized by its three signature pyramids floating on the horizon line).



**Basil Ibn
Mohammed**

Basil at the start of his career.

Basil, the 20-year-old son of Mohammed, started making mosaics after school hours when he was a boy. By now he is a skilled mosaicist, but understandably his studies in administrative services at Helwan University leave him little time at the moment for mosaic making. The two large pieces by Basil on display show that artistic feeling runs in the family.

Karawans (2023) marble mosaic, 120 x 80 cm

The distinctive song of the Karawan echoes regularly through the neighborhood of the King's Lake at dusk, when the birds leave their rooftop perch in search of food. Spreading their wings in flight their subdued plumage reveals bold, contrasting patterns of dark and light.

The formal name of this bird, Senegal Thick-knee, is misleading since its backward bending leg joint is actually its ankle. (As with most birds, the knee joint itself is high up the leg, hidden by feathers.)

Basil has picked a subject familiar to him and rendered it with skill and precision. He is following firmly in the footsteps of his father.





**Fatma
Mosaad**

Fatma working with 'hammer and hardy,' the tools used by classical mosaicists since antiquity to this day.

Fatma Mosaad, the younger daughter of the night watchmen at the Bent Pyramid, has been a key member of the atelier since its inception. Like many in the village, Fatma married as a teenager and soon became a mother. Her husband who was studying to become a tour guide was tragically killed in a road accident shortly thereafter, and Fatma became a widow at 18. She chose not to remarry in order to retain legal guardianship of her son.

For her, a young woman living harmoniously at home with her parents, mosaics provide an undreamt-of creative outlet. Thanks to help from her mother, she has time to devote herself to a real professional life. Now when she meets friends around town, she talks proudly not only about her son but about her work. Mosaic-making has enlarged her world.

Painted Snipes (2023) marble mosaic. 120 x 80 cm

A resident breeder at the King's Lake, these sizable wading birds present an interesting example of role reversal. The female, larger and more colorful than the male, takes the lead in courtship and, once her eggs are deposited, leaves the male to incubate them and raise the chicks while she flies off to find a new companion.

In Fatma's mosaic two handsome females occupy the foreground while a third heads off leaving the father to attend to the chicks.

This mosaic is a fine example of the closely fitted marble pieces, called tesserae (singular, tessera), that define the style of the Dahshur mosaicists and ally them with the early mosaics produced in Alexandria. Unlike the loose and hurried workmanship of many of the floor mosaics produced in the later Roman period, Fatma has fitted the tesserae together with great care so that the figures are clearly delineated and the coloristic effects are extremely vivid for a work produced in natural stone. She is, in fact, following conventions for the laying of tesserae that were first introduced c. 300 BC at Alexandria and form the basis of classical mosaic until this day.





Rehab Mosaad

Rehab displaying an early piece.

Rehab Mosaad, the older sister of Fatma, has shown an aptitude for mosaic-making from the start. Given her penchant for detailed work it was surprising to hear from her recently that before participating in this project she had no idea that she had any special ability to work with her hands. Now, somewhat encumbered by increasing family responsibilities, she prefers to work on small plaques, hence her modest yet significant contribution to the present exhibition.

Hoopoes (2023) marble mosaic, 60 x 90 cm

At home in all but the desert regions of Egypt, the Hoopoe spends much of its time stitching away at the ground with its slender beak in search of grubs and worms, but when an appetizing insect passes overhead, it takes flight, often arching its crown and fully revealing the splendid pattern of its

wings.

An interesting feature of this species is that the females are identical in appearance to the males. Typically, female birds have relatively drab plumage in order not to attract the attention of predators during the relatively long periods when they must remain at the nest. The hoopoe, an especially eye-catching bird, avoids this danger by nesting safely within the hollow of a tree trunk or whatever suitable cavity it finds.

Rehab has outdone herself in the virtuosity of this mosaic. The small pieces of marble radiating out to form the birds' crowns are cut and placed with a precision that allies her figural work with the Hellenistic tradition of *opus vermiculatum* (tesserae under a half centimeter), once a specialty of the workshops at Alexandria.



Collaborative work



The Dahshur Mosaicists are happiest when they are working on a group project. Together they have executed murals up to 20 feet long and also floor mosaics.

Giraffes Flanking a Palm Tree (2023)

marble mosaic, 80 x 185 cm

By Mohammed Abou Basil and Basil

Fatma and Rehab Mosaad

Abeer Abul Ghait

Predynastic slate palettes, dating back over 5000 years ago, give us a precious glimpse into the avifauna of ancient Egypt. Among them is one, now preserved in the Louvre, that pictures two giraffes flanking a palm tree.

It served as the inspiration for this large-scale panel that was done by five Dahshur mosaicists. Fatma and Abeer each did a bird before joining Rehab in the demanding job of laying the small pieces that create the pattern of bark and palm leaves. Mohammed Abou Basil and his son did the giraffes. Once the figural work was completed and the parts assembled, they worked together on the background.

