RAMSES WISSA WASSEF
The Architect & The Artist
An Exhibition of his Architectural and Artistic Legacy

THE ARTIST

Rames Wissa Wassef’s skill with pen and pencil is clearly apparent in his architectural drawings, especially his rendering of details such as stained-glass windows, carvings and other features in the churches he designed. He also sketched from daily life. A master of many arts, he was a gifted ceramicist, weaver, sculptor and stained-glass artist. In addition to his own work, Rames Wissa Wassef dedicated significant time and effort throughout his lifetime to developing and promoting the arts in Egypt.

Realizing that his early exposure to the arts was crucial to his own creative development, he strove to develop artistic education in Egypt. He was a great believer in the innate talent of children. He felt that every human being is born an artist, but that talent diminishes over the years if not encouraged.

His association with the prevailing, contemporary educational methods played a formative role in shaping his life’s work, his approach as an educator, as well as his philosophy in establishing and guiding the artistic community at Harraiyah village in Giza. Founded with his wife Sophie in 1953, the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre emphasized freedom, spontaneity, independence and simplicity.

Rames Wissa Wassef’s passion for beauty in different shapes and forms was later reflected in his teaching the center’s first generation of weavers and potter. Emphasizing the applied arts, he tirelessly promoted the idea that “one cannot separate beauty from utility, form from material, work from function, and man from his creative art.” The creative works of the center, including pottery, ceramics and books received international recognition during and after Wassef’s lifetime, through awards, publications and exhibitions around the globe.

THE ARCHITECT

Influenced by the beauty and splendor of the medieval neighborhoods of Cairo, Ramses Wissa Wassef understood, early on in his career, that the skills and expertise of traditional Egyptian craftsmen and artisans were relevant to contemporary architecture. Throughout his career, he put his heart, mind and hands to work in order to revive the traditional building crafts and architecture of Egypt.

His interest in the arts was reflected in his design of exhibits for prominent artists, including the Millennium Architect Museum (1990) and Habib Gergis Museum in Cairo (1967). Church represented another major area of work. Among the most well-known churches he designed were the Al-Ba’ir Gergis (St. George) Coptic Church in Helikoplos (1954) and the Virgin Mary (Maryam) Church in Zamalek (1957). In addition, he designed and constructed a number of private residences around Cairo, including the villa of Fikr Bournou (1947) and Princess Noura Ibrahim (1948).

Although professionally active throughout his lifetime, the 1940s and 1950s were Wassef’s most productive years as an architect. In the early 1970s, he began to focus more of his attention on the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre in Harraiyah, Giza, which received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1983. Wassef was also awarded the Egyptian National Prize for the stained-glass windows he designed in 1964 for the Egyptian National Assembly.

Many of Wassef’s projects reveal his emphasis on incorporating domes and other traditional elements of Egyptian architecture into contemporary buildings. These, as well as half-timbered vaults, domes, pierced domes and beams, and the use of mud brick, also became part of his standard architectural repertoire. Such features, which promote natural heating and cooling, exemplify the aspects of sustainable architecture inherent to Ramses Wissa Wassef’s inspiring architectural designs.

Rames Wissa Wassef was born in Cairo on November 11, 1911 into a Coptic family. His father, Wissamine Wassef, was a prominent lawyer and politician who served as an active member of the Wafd Party, which played an important role in the Egyptian struggle to gain independence in the early 20th century.

The family’s interest in painting, sculpture, music, crafts and architecture influenced Ramses Wissa Wassef, encouraging an appreciation of beauty and harmony. Many feel that this considerable aesthetic emphasis during his childhood was a major reason that he subsequently became an architect and a patron for the arts himself. Later on, his love of sculpture developed through the influence of Habib Gergis, the father of his wife Sophie, whom he married in 1948.

In 1926, Ramses Wissa Wassef went to Paris to study architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts. His father died unexpectedly while he was there, and this affected him greatly. Nevertheless, he pursued his studies with passion. In 1935, he received his degree, considered an architect and ranked first among his class for his graduation project, “A Potter’s House in Old Cairo.” This project reflected his lifelong interest in reviving ancient Egyptian arts and crafts. Years later, that dream became a reality when he established an art center in Harraiyah, Giza.

After returning to Egypt in 1938, he took up a faculty position, teaching architecture at the College of Fine Arts. Later on, he was named head of the Architecture Department, a post he held until 1968 when he retired from the institution.

While an innovator, Ramses Wissa Wassef was a quiet and thoughtful man. Indeed, sometimes others misunderstood his behavior and found his silence intimidating. This actually reflected his respect for the individuality of those surrounding him, one of his most notable personal traits, which grew stronger over time.

Rames Wissa Wassef died in 1974 at a relatively young age. In the years since his death, his wife, two daughters and their families have perpetuated his legacy. His ideas and work continue to have a significant influence on the Egyptian art and architecture of the 20th and 21st centuries.