

by hand

AFRICAN ARTISANS

Photographs & text courtesy of:
Henrik Dahlfelt



Economist/graphic designer Henrik Dahlfelt and fashion designer Ellen Simonia Rasmussen met in Copenhagen 2003.

During the pregnancy with their first born in 2005, they visited Dahab in South Sinai not knowing that this visit would come to shape their life many years from then.

There is this thing about Egypt, almost like magnetism. Some people, this small family among them, just feel instantly drawn to it. The colors, the people, the air, the sun, the energy.

Six months later the family was back in Egypt, this time to stay.

Although Sinai will always hold a special place in their hearts, it was when they first came to Siwa oasis as part of a documentary film crew in 2006, they found home. In a swift decision they packed their belongings on the back of a pick up and moved from Sinai to Siwa.

Ellen immediately started working with a group of women in their area of Siwa village, seeing the beautiful potential in the handmade embroidery, while Henrik engaged in eco house building. He started building their family home in the traditional Siwan way, with clay, salt and palm tree technique.

In the following years, while Henrik worked on the house, Ellen was engaged in building up her own fashion house of tailormade and hand embroidered womenswear.

One day Ellen was sitting with a group of women overseeing a small production of hand crocheted cotton shawls, when one of the women asked her to go to the village of Kerdasa outside Cairo to buy her a traditional handmade textile, the 'tarfottet' that was made at a particular factory, only in that village. On her next journey to Cairo, Ellen went

shoot from Kenya (lol daiga)



to the small factory and upon discovering the extraordinary handmade materials available, decided to try to make a bed spread adorned with the traditional Siwan embroidery.

This bedspread was to become the first Byhand African Artisans product and it is still featured in our Byhand collection to this day.

Slowly, year after year the product portfolio grew both in different textile designs, but also into other craftsmanships.

One of these craftsmanships is traditional brass work.

Upon one of their countless trips to Al Azhar and El Ghoureya picking cotton and silk for the bedspreads, Henrik and Ellen spotted the beautiful traditional oriental brass lamps decorating Al Moez street and they decided to find the makers. They walked around the area of Al Moez and Al Gamaliya for hours asking for the brass work in broken Arabic, until finally they met the deaf mute son of one of the local butchers. He quickly recognised what others couldn't, the drawings and hand gestures they used to try to explain what they were looking for, and he took them to the workshop of the brass brothers, in a small tucked away alley in Al Gamaliya.

The meeting with the amazing brass brothers has led to a long and fruitful collaboration of Scandinavian design ideas meeting the ancient craftsmanship in ever so challenging ways. Ideas and solutions, perfectionism and frustration, but in the end many innovative designs have come out of this collaboration.

Today Byhand African Artisans work with groups spread all over Egypt from South to North and West with many different materials such as stone, kelim, salt, basketry and of course brass and textile.

Behind the enthusiasm and the never ending inspiration is the dialogue which connects the artisans. Their eyes and hands interpreted by the Scandinavian design roots is what has become the trademark of Byhand African Artisans.

Their products are being sold worldwide through a Danish distributor and are now finally available in Egypt.

The Danish family, now with two children, had to leave Siwa as their permanent residence in 2015 due to school issues for the children. They moved to a village in Kenya, where they ever since have been expanding the artisan network to Kenyan artisans. From Kenya they bring wood work made from sustainable harvested wood, traditional raffia palm basketry, heavy wool rugs, handmade and tribal textiles.

The company continues to be based in Egypt.



Selection of vases and candlesticks.



bottle string.



string nahla.



Henrik Dahlfelt and Ellen Simonia Rasmussen.