

Gallery Alef: A Hidden Gem in Cairo

by Susan Watters

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A display at Gallery Alef.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

CAIRO, Egypt — On a quiet, tree-lined residential street in Zamalek, the fashionable, SoHo-like island enclave of downtown Cairo, lies a hidden treasure trove of sumptuous designs. Inspired by the splendor of Nefertiti, Napoleon and Suleyman the Magnificent, Gallery Alef is the brainchild of Naguiba Meyassar and her Paris museum-trained daughter, Louila Damerji.

In seven dazzling showrooms fashioned over 3,700 square feet of glittering floor space, the two women have created a destination design center for anyone with an eye for high culture, regal luxury and the history of sumptuous consumption.

“My mother wanted to make and perpetuate all the craftsmanship in Egypt using local materials with local craftsmanship so the heritage would not be forgotten. Everything you see is made in Egypt in our workshops,” said Damerji, who studied 18th-century French furniture at L’Ecole du Louvre and IESA, the Institut d’Etudes Supérieures des Arts. “We print over 350 designs, all exclusively ours, all inspired by the many civilizations that came to Egypt and the Mediterranean basin — Pharaonic, Coptic, Fatimid, Ottoman, the French revival and the English Colonial period.”

Meyassar, who in February will celebrate Gallery Alef’s 20th year in business, remembers back to 1991, when she took 860 square feet in the Paris Maison & Objects trade show. When the organizers saw what she was up to, they doubled her exhibition space.

“She saw the potential in this country at a time when everyone here wanted to buy from abroad. She loved all the old designs,” said Damerji, who helps oversee design details using the skills she learned restoring old paintings and visiting museums in Versailles and Fontainebleau to learn how gold leaf is applied.

These days, Gallery Alef’s client list includes footwear designer Christian Louboutin; prominent members of the Saudi royal family such as Princess Haifa; Egypt’s first lady, Suzanne Mubarak, and Xavier Hermes. “We designed fabrics for his dream house in Marrakech,” said Meyassar, whose fabrication team of 15 artisans includes glass blowers, carpenters, and eight textile workers who custom-make fabrics based on Meyassar’s designs and color palette.

Part of Meyassar’s allure comes from her personal story of how she came to live in Cairo.

“I met her after her husband was killed in Lebanon,” said Mona Makram-Ebeid, a political science professor at American University of Cairo and a former member of Egypt’s parliament.

Meyassar was vacationing in a resort town near Alexandria with her children when she got the news that her husband, a successful businessman who left Iraq when the country’s businesses were nationalized, had been killed in a random shooting, one of the first casualties in Lebanon’s devastating civil war. The daughter of a part-Egyptian mother, she decided to stay in Cairo.

“My mother used to say, ‘There is nothing whatever in the world that is not in Egypt,’” remembered Meyassar, who started her shop 16 years later, naming it Gallery Alef after the Arab word for “alpha,” “the first letter of knowledge.”

“Before 1952 [when Egyptian President Gamal Nasser kicked all the foreigners out of Cairo], the city was filled with the best shops in the world. Now there is a nostalgia for that period,” said Makram-Ebeid, who turned to Gallery Alef when she finally decided to replace the needlepoint tapestry on her Louis XV armchair. For that, Meyassar designed a bold, brightly colored Ottoman-inspired fabric called Bodrum after the Turkish resort town.

Designer Shahira Mehrez, a teacher of Islamic art who studied at Oxford and owns Oasis, a well-known handicraft shop here, explained, “We are all working to help delay the disappearance of the traditions of the countryside.”

The magic of Gallery Alef begins just a stone’s throw from the Nile, with a huge Pharaonic-style terra-cotta pot at the foot of a wide, welcoming staircase that leads to a fabulous entrance room. Flanking either side of an eight-foot long, oval glass table with a cornucopia base, two marble urns evoke an age of priceless oils, spices and fragrances. The room is filled with shimmering light pouring out of giant orbs of luminous handblown glass, twisted into spirals, blown into bubbles, engraved and gilded, alongside matching candle holders, goblets, hurricane lamps and vases, all specially designed to replicate, in three sizes, the patterns of the fabrics hanging in the cutting room next door.

Sheers and linens, cotton velvets, cotton satins and handwoven moiré, in rich shades of blue, red, gray, green, black and gold, all made from the best Egyptian cottons, fill every corner of the cutting room. Next door in Meyassar’s office hangs a beautiful pastel-colored chandelier decorated with the delicate whimsy of old Murano glass.

In the nearby Ottoman room, the inviting brocade of a down-stuffed sofa, a copy of an original in the Dolman Palace in Istanbul, promises potentate-status to anyone who dares to sit in it.

Whether it’s the light, the color of the rooms or the luxury of the Egyptian cotton fabrics, Gallery Alef has the ability to transform whatever is within its walls into a seemingly effortless blending of cultures. No matter how tired or dust-covered a visitor feels after a day spent battling the Cairo heat, grit and traffic, in these rooms everyone radiates a glow.

The point, Meyassar said, is always to keep in mind what is important. “The politicians want to make a confrontation between East and West,” she explained. “This gallery, and the culture it represents, is what must not be forgotten — the love story between East and West.”

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