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LUNAR TRADITION

Art of making crescents dwindling in Old Cairo.

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THE POWER OF ALEF

This little shop of treasures is passion at work.

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BOLD FUSION

Local band musical int

A cultural symphony where East meets West



By Aida Nassar
The Daily Star Egypt staff

Crossing the gallery threshold is escaping into a unique realm of rich colors infused with intricate designs, luring you in as the displayed items all call out for attention.

Though you're immediately struck by the confident sense of style, there is so much to discover among the furniture, lamps, tables, and knick-knacks that it's almost overwhelming. The Alef Gallery is aptly named. Yes, it's a showroom for textiles, furniture and home accessories, but it's also a gallery to showcase the owners' artistic talents.

And if you have the cash, you can walk out with the item that captures your fancy.

Alef is the brainchild of Egyptian-Syrian Naguiba Meyassar — a self-proclaimed dreamer, who, with her daughter Loulia Damerji, sets the creative tone for the gallery's decorative art.

Since Alef's inception 15 years ago, Meyassar has transformed passion into a thriving business.

At first, with the children fleeing the nest, the project was conceived as a distraction with an Egyptian friend, "just for fun."

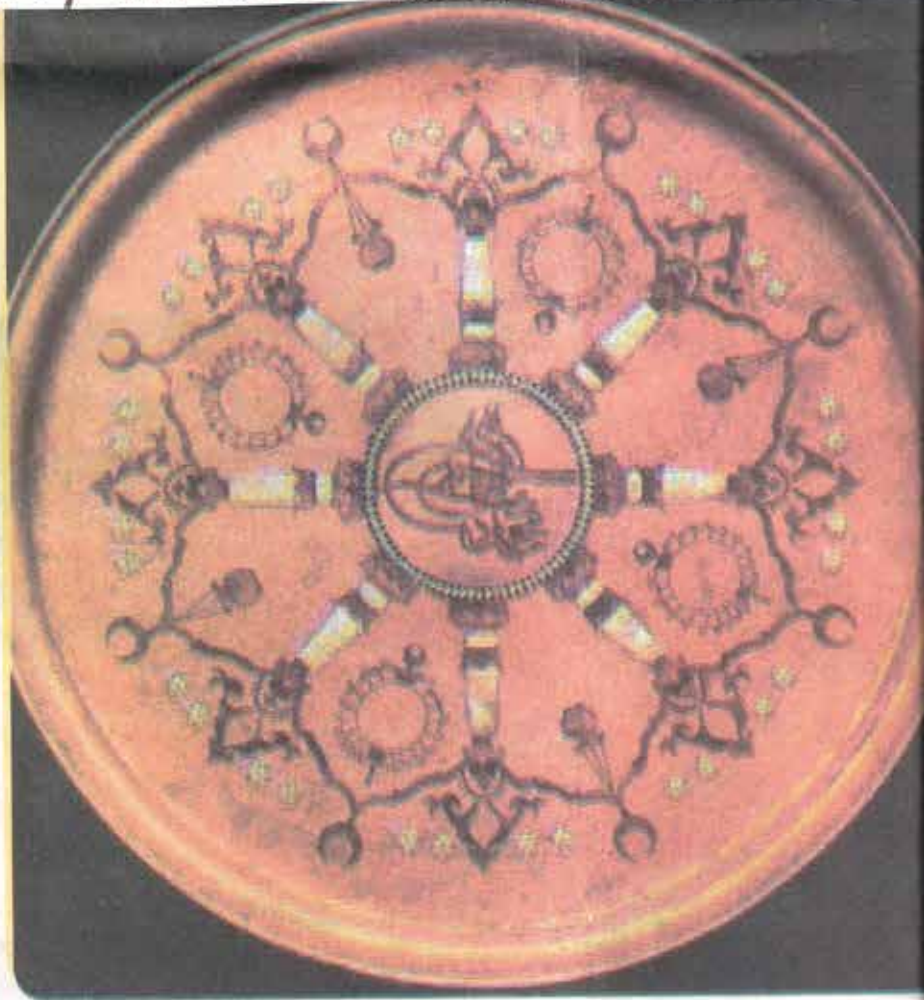
"I had to have an escape, and the most usual escape is an escape into the world of art," Meyassar recalls.

Her presence is as alluring as her gallery. She speaks with confidence and conviction of someone who has been successful in realizing a dream.

Alef does feel like a sanctuary. Inspired by the roots of the origins Arab culture — hence the name "alef" — it's a haven for traditional arts. Everywhere you turn there is something that captures the mystique of Egypt's cultural heritage. Luxurious, decadent, romantic, nostalgic and traditional mixed with modernity all describe this unique gallery.

The objects live up to your expectations: "We are dreamers and want others to be inspired," says Meyassar.

Rich hand-woven Egyptian cotton and linen textiles printed with exclusive designs are inspired by Arab and Islamic art. Lazy Susans and tablayas [round metal trays that rest on wooden legs] feature typical rural floral designs in bold colors. A magnificent four-poster day bed stands in one room, draped with sheets of linens, all of which are made in Egypt enveloped a Jasmine



fragrance that permeates the air.

But it soon became too serious for her friend and Meyassar found herself heading a business on her own, with some 30 employees — the majority of which were craftsmen she was promoting — under the gallery's wings.

"We didn't want to lose our cultural craftspeople," Meyassar said of the artisans she has employed in her workshops and the next generation of craftsmen she encourages not to abandon their family legacy.

She's definitely passionate, and though she may be a dreamer she has her feet firmly set on the ground. "Egypt has got this beautiful multi-cultural, pot pourri heritage and I couldn't leave all these people dying because they had nobody to support or encourage them. I just had to go on."

Fortunately, Damerji joined her mother's business. Pinning a nationality on her is a challenge. Best described as a "citizen of the world", Damerji had completed her studies at L'Ecole de Louvre in Paris and after working with a prestigious auction house, she was more than qualified to unleash her own creative talents.

While Meyassar is driven by her passion, immersing herself in the dream world she has created, Damerji is more pragmatic. "She's my softener," the mother described her daughter's influence. "Every time this pas-

her mother gently to interpret her words into layman's terms — it's evident that they compliment and admire each other. Damerji is more understated but her mother's passion bubbles under the surface. Whereas Damerji has the formal artistic training, her self-taught mother has the experience. The eclectic collection of the gallery, too, allows each to explore and experiment with her individual style.

But can you build a busi-

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ness on passion?

"We try to make the balance with our manager who is a fantastic realist." They say. The manager controls the brakes, making sure Meyassar and Damerji don't get carried away on a creative whim.

But be forewarned, if an object does capture your imagination, it won't come cheap. The price includes costs of labor, quality, good taste, and exclusivity. "There's something for every budget though," Damerji adds. After all, it only takes

seem difficult to incorporate the Alef touch of romanticism. Meyassar, however, insists that a coffee table or signature pillow can find place within a modern home. As she describes it, "Alef, the anti-label," it will break the monotony.

But you don't always have to make a choice. "They always speak of a confrontation between East and West but Alef is protesting that," says Meyassar with a strong sense of conviction. "On the contrary there will always be a love story between East and West."

Meyassar and Damerji, living examples. West education and life abroad merge seamlessly with their cultural roots. Their inspiration comes from their heritage as well as their travels. Damerji's latest collection, for instance, of traditional blown glass feature a modern twist with blue polka dots. Alef is a melting pot, and works.

As globalization crochets upon every aspect of our lives, we want to hold on to "the sweet memories whatever is surrounding us," as Meyassar so eloquently puts it. "We want to live with our culture."

To her, Alef is a "cultural symphony."

"Every note is an instrument coming from a culture we all had, or passed by absorbed."

Alef Gallery
14 Mohamed Anis St.

