

ART



ABAZA'S SOUL IS IN PLAIN VIEW

Photographs: George Fakhry Text: Nile El Wardani

Three steps underground you will enter the euphoric world of Abaza, adults and children alike are inspired by the wealth of colors and imagination. Fish fly from the stars and spaceships circle lovers. You might even find the ancient lock to your lover's heart. It is more than a three-ring-circus. It is pure joy.







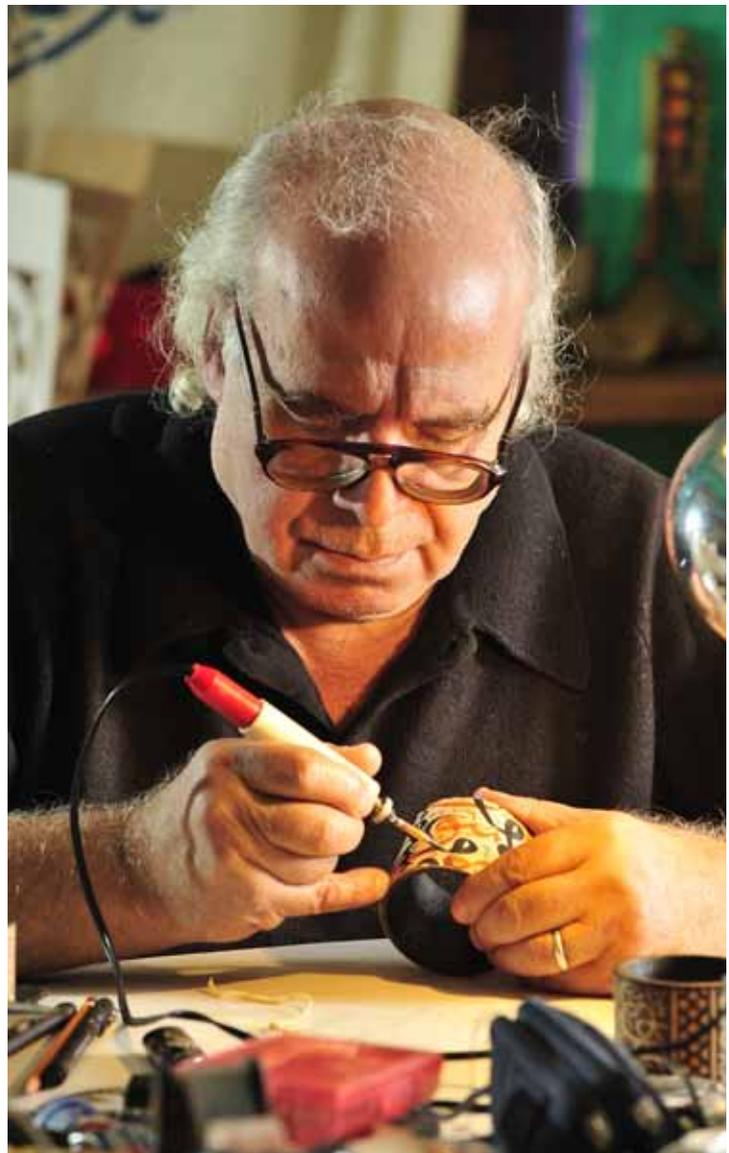


Hidden three steps below ground level on a small street in Maadi, Degla is a treasure chest filled with euphoria. It is a jubilant place filled with laughing fish hanging from the ceiling, rocket ships spinning around the moon, 1940s Alexandria tram tickets made into stationary, Ferris wheels ridden by small colorful birds, walls colored turquoise blue and stenciled with old Egyptian newspaper articles and plenty of old “stuff” like door knobs and photos and ancient locks and cigar boxes and gourds etched with Arabic calligraphy ready to wear around your wrist or neck.

Like the song from *The Sound of Music*, “Rain drops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, brown paper packages tied up in string”.....the atelier of Abaza is filled with my favorite things. And most likely some of your favorite things too! If you like nostalgia and recycled everything turned into frivolous folkloric fun then this is the place for you.

Mohamed Mohamed Mohamed Mohamed Abaza, likes to be called simply *Abaza*. But the name he prefers most is *Mamdouh* because this was the name often given to the play boy in the old Egyptian cinemas of the 30s and 40s. Abaza is a romantic old soul who has found great joy in life and art and old treasures.

Born in Gamaleya in the heart of the Nile Delta, Abaza grew up in a cream colored house, with not much color. There were no artists in the family until





Abaza at the age of nine missed his mid-year school exam because he was so absorbed in painting a mural on the school yard wall that he forgot to go. In the end his teacher gave him full credit on the exam after seeing Abaza's distraction. It was beautiful and whimsical and creative and his teacher was impressed. From that day forward Abaza was known as the school artist and was allowed to paint the entire school.

Abaza followed his passion to the Theater Academy where he joined the decoration section. There he spent time at Dar El Kotob discovering Picasso, Dali, Matisse, Pollack and especially Paul Klee. He never felt affected by Pharonic Art yet



was drawn to the ornamental folkloric colors of Egyptian village life.

Abaza has always been affected by nature and the aging process of metal, paint, paper and leather. His favorite materials are rough and worn. He prefers to work with old cartons and newspaper print because it is a “friend of



nature.” He takes pieces of these friends and turns them into sculptures adding the bright colors of the sun, made from powdered paint that can be manipulated, another favorite medium.

He is smitten by the affect of H2O on walls, because “time never leaves a boring result, it always tells a story.” He loves to see an old building where the staircase has been eaten away and the bricks of the walls are partially exposed, because this is a sign that this building has lived well. Found amongst his works of art are classic old tools, fossils from the Gilf el Kebir dating back 100 Million years, old stamps, boxes, doors and mirrors. Just about anything that is authentically ancient and useful has been transformed into art in the eyes of Abaza.

Abaza believes in keeping things simple. He wants his art to be spontaneous and alive, no molds, never two of a kind and yet he can be very methodical and precise in his work.

Drawn by the elegance of Egypt’s past, Abaza has found and resurrected old Egyptian stamps, train and cinema tickets, receipts, and newspaper articles and recreated them in hand printed stationary and envelopes that are exceptionally unique and beautiful. These make great gifts for those who want to find something handmade and truly unique. In fact, Abaza’s atelier is filled with tremendous gift ideas and lovely decorations for your home that won’t cost you much. I have hung three of Abaza’s scrolled calligraphic wedding announcements (salmon, ochre and teal blue) on my wall. Even better, if you are getting married anytime soon, I highly recommend you commission Abaza to make your announcements. Your guests will be mesmerized by their elegance and rarity.

He likes wood too. He discovered several wooden horses which once belonged to a Ferris wheel and now hang from his ceiling. He always has his eye out for the wooden side arms and pieces of the old Alexandrian Caritas or horse-drawn buggies and donkey carts. They hang on his walls or are embedded in the furniture he makes from wood, mirrors and nails. He finds the wooden treasures on his weekly trip to Alexandria where he teaches art classes to children at the Alexandria Library. In fact, Abaza has been teaching children art for decades, something that he enjoys very much.

As an artist, he admits that sometimes he has had to compromise his art, to make a living. His wooden furniture and doors are very popular and is adorned with



folkloric symbols pounded into the wood with tiny nails. Much of it is symmetrical, something he personally does not like, because the spontaneity is lost. "But people like it. If I hate it and the people like it, I am sad. I go to a cafe and relax and forget." He reminds me that no one will go beyond their unhappiness and that is where he stops when it comes to making art that is not really in his soul.

While this may not speak to Abaza's soul it may very well speak to yours. Many Egyptians and foreigners alike have commissioned entire furniture sets and doors. You have the opportunity to choose your family name or a favorite poem or folkloric design that fits your own life and personality. The tiny nails will be hammered one by one into beachwood to create a splendid and unique piece of art. Imagine installing your custom-made front door (with your children's names in Arabic) in Seoul or Los Angeles or Paris - created in Abaza's atelier three steps underground - Road 231 Bldg 27 Maadi Degla, Tel. 0100-377-9569. There is no end to the imaginative designs that can adorn your custom-made Abaza furniture. Add to it a couple of his mobiles and everyone will be asking you where you got such inspiration.



Abaza's soul is in plain view on every table top, hanging from every finely tune mobile and standing on every pedestal. Abaza's art is what the Chinese call "Mingei" or Art of the People. Abaza's warm smile, generous heart, and deep satisfaction for all that he holds to be art makes this treasure chest a place not to be missed in Egypt. Ω



Nile El Wardani, PhD is a professor at the American University in Cairo whose professional experience includes, cultural diplomacy, journalism, public health and governance.

