

# Burullus. The Boats of Hope

**Islam Abdel Wahab.** Vice-President of the Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen Foundation

Visual creation in contemporary Egypt, which in some way still bears the omnipresent mark of its millenary history, has a collective asset of visual artists who lead a militant life in favour of art and expression, where art is not only a personal vocation but also a window of hope that they offer to all who wish to look and share. Artists from all over the world come together annually in the meetings organised throughout Egypt under the auspices of the universities and the Ministry of Culture and Sports and with the collaboration of UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration and various public and private bodies. Cairo, Luxor, Alexandria, Minia and Aswan, among other locations, from the Mediterranean coast to the border with Sudan, are transformed every year into an agora of work and exchange between creators from the four corners of the world in order to promote sustainable local development through art and culture.

For several years, Burullus, a small coastal fishing town, has been, thanks to the endeavours of the renowned Egyptian painter and engraver Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen (Belkas-Dakahliya, 1951) and the Foundation<sup>1</sup> he presides, one of those happy points of convergence, thanks to a wholly original proposal and where creativity reaches surprisingly beautiful levels year after year. His son Islam AbdelWahab, art director and in charge of public communication at the Foundation, tells us about the International Burullus Symposium for Painting on Walls and Boats and what it means for artists and the people.

## In Memory, the Nile Valley

Throughout the history of humanity, wherever civilisations settled, they left traces of the human capacity to establish a profound interaction between people and nature. This relationship, based on the need for protection and survival, brought with it the impulse for life to continue beyond primal needs.

The Nile Valley was one of those civilisations that established a great symbiosis and meant the highest level of interaction between

people and the environment. The development of agriculture, a fundamental axis for stability, contributed greatly to humanity's attachment to the place, a situation conducive to the formation of society, the development of beliefs and philosophy and, ultimately, to the formation of the soul and the human personality, unique in this valley: a generous and cordial humanity that defines itself insofar as it accepts the Other and their differences.

All these issues today invite us to rethink our relationship with the place and, therefore,

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1. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen Foundation (@AWAMfoundation).

our perception of the Other as a possible partner in a space and moment when our mutual relationship is shaped to form transitory units in which we both sense the time of the Other.

Moreover, this perception also enables us to become aware of those who come from far away, from another culture, and this moment of contact produces not only sympathy but also the discovery of the needs of those who live in that place different from ours. Thus, we can extrapolate their ambitions and dreams, as well as their sufferings, thoughts, feelings, ideas and intelligence.

### **The Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen Foundation and the People of Burullus**

The Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen Foundation, attached to the Ministry of Social Solidarity, began its general activity in 2014 based on an interest in nurturing local talent, holding artistic festivals and workshops to foster the skills of children and women, and encouraging intercultural exchange between artists of different countries, using art to indirectly develop the concept of awareness of and belonging to one's country, in the sense of community.

This is how the Burullus meeting began.

After a five-hour drive north of Cairo, we reach the city of Burullus, on the shores of a huge lake of the same name, connected to the Mediterranean Sea. This magical place is full of charm and positive energy and inspired the Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen Foundation to invite artists from different countries of the world to discover this wonderful place and participate in the development of the crafts of the inhabitants themselves. Abdel Wahab's personal creative experience has also been inspired by this place since 2000.

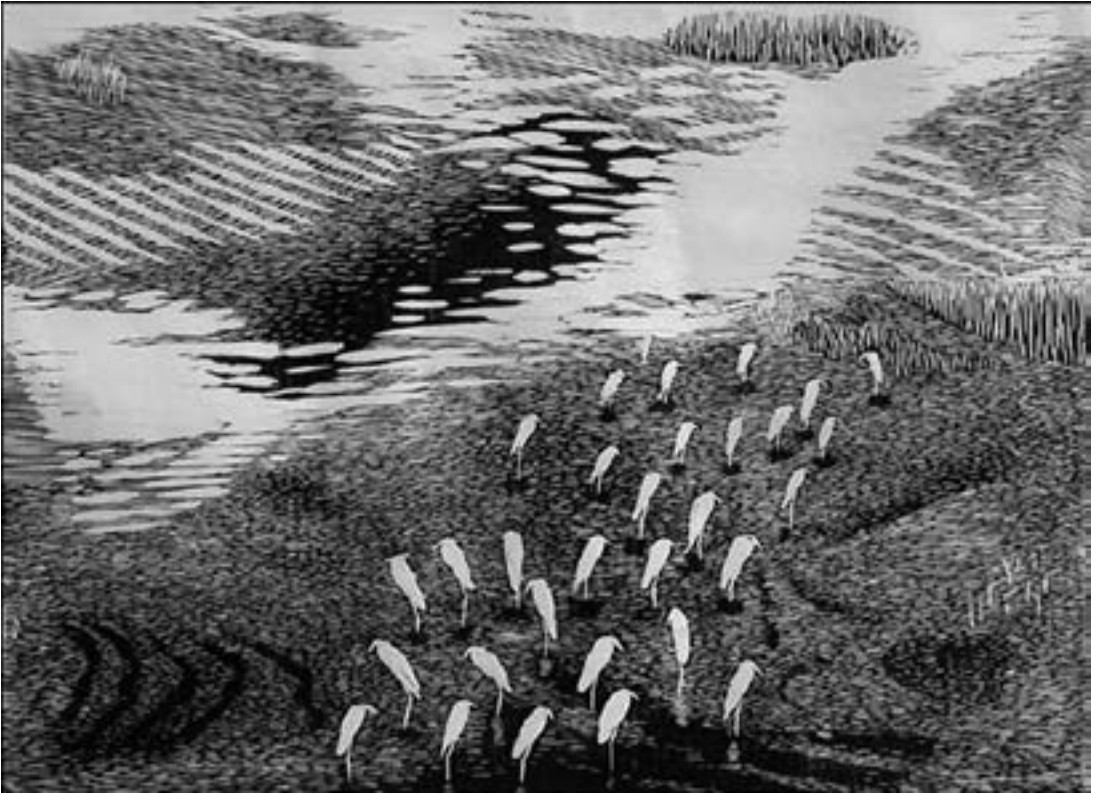
The lands were green orchards, mixed with a sea of palm trees under a magical blue and

white carpet in the autumn season. To this small simple city come artists from many parts of the world to paint the walls of simple, often dilapidated, houses whose walls become places of ceremony that celebrate the presence of that different foreigner, that artist who is also a model of another kind of life.

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In front, the children, women and men, that life between poverty, satisfaction and pure hearts... Children celebrate it every year by turning the coloured walls into a dialogue between that sublime and special energy that they radiate and those artists who are in the midst of a dialogue imposed by the place, the intelligence of the young ones and the love of good mothers. In Burullus everyone celebrates one another with a spirit that undoubtedly emanates from the place, a place that becomes that living relationship between attraction and the extension of the aesthetic space, which is not really limited to coloured walls but to the hearts of the people, which extend like a broad thread of union between the owners of the place and these others. In a few moments you enter that dynamic, that emotional shock of interaction with the children, and you see the spark of intelligence in their eyes, in their desire for dialogue... "What is the question?", they ask.

Given what was said in the previous paragraph, we will admit that the main thing is the value of knowledge. Recognising the difference implied by the existence of others is an important moment that can become a cognitive foundation. In Burullus the focus is art, in which we can define the term "knowledge" based on the relationship between those who



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come from another culture and the local people, especially children, the most interested and the most insightful, who try to enter into that world that is like a dream that will end soon and so try to feed on it intensely.

### Shared Stories on the City Walls

The exchange of that vitality between the one who arrives, formed in a different reality, and these children is, in fact, an entrance into an epistemic dialectic, not through a language that most of them do not master based on verbal communication but through other ways, which are visual aesthetics... That joy of

colour and shapes is what imposes a moment of unexpected exchange. Children experience it through their finely-tuned senses, going through a change that is not bodily but rather one that deposits that subtle knowledge in their souls through the emotional effect that the visitor leaves on the wall of an old house, as well as the traditional friendly welcome that most give to them.

Year after year, the people and children of Burullus begin to interact with the artists, draw with them, help them and welcome them into their homes. As the days go by, the distances between the artists and people of Burullus disappear, as does the artists' feeling of being a stranger.

Despite the little time available, everyone comes to an implicit understanding that has many nuances in that confluence between the child with a thirst for knowledge and the visitors who want to know about the different forms of reality they glimpse. The artists also learn other things in that space as they leave their private studio to paint for others, and in their presence they are surrounded by a circle of thirsty eyes. At that time, they partially renounce the usual conditions of their creativity, while the place imposes its own rules.

Many funny stories occur in those real, not virtual, interviews and conversations with those children who are aware of and deal with online media all the time, so the physical presence of others is a cognitive step for real proximity and observation. All these intersections of communication overcome the language barrier, as we mentioned earlier, and create another space of their own. A broad space of exchange full of languages, signs and stories, in which everyone is enriched by unique experiences and knowledge perceived with the body and the heart.

As one artist from a distant country said: "We paint for them and not for ourselves." Artists confront this concession of their creative condition in a pact that also favours that joy left to others through their work.

## And the Magic Reaches the Boats

It is worth mentioning here the incredible experience of painting on boats that are similar to the fishing boats in the area, where the artists approach a new medium: a three-dimensional body with the details that form its particularity as a special and independent element.

At that moment, artists face the challenge of turning that wooden body into a fully integrated visual and aesthetic composition, which contains a coherent story. Both the form of the medium and the aesthetic intervention of the artist become partners that do not impose themselves on each other. This association is, in reality, a dialogue in which the creative work is based on a structure that in itself contains the tradition and history of the place.

*In Burullus there is a common light that connects the artists with all their inhabitants and changes the lives of the children, fishermen and locals forever*

However, the journey of these wonderful boats does not end with the exhibition held after the symposium. Some of them are sold and the proceeds are used for workshops or donated to charity in hospitals and schools. Some are also offered as gifts to the institutions that support us.

In short, in Burullus there is a common light that connects the artists with all their inhabitants and changes the lives of the children, fishermen and locals forever.

However, 2020 was different. Under the motto "safe distance", the event was held online. The Foundation sent invitations to artists around the world via social media to join us by introducing the boat's design in their own country and paint it in their studio, and then send us a video of the process. The participants came from India, China, Bangladesh, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Tunisia, Serbia and, of course, Egypt. The people of Burullus miss the artists and the artists miss them, but we hope that 2021 will be a little better. We do hope so.