

# RESEARCH IMPACT

## History of the Tentmakers of Cairo

*Khayamiya*: Egyptian Tentmaker Applique



### Challenge

The art of the Egyptian tentmakers was threatened with extinction by modernisation and marginalisation. This Charles Sturt University project reassembled the history of this textile art for museum curators, artists, historians, teachers and the tentmaker community.

### Discovery

This research structured the unpublished history of *khayamiya* through exhibitions, films and books that engaged diverse new audiences around the world.

### Impact

- *Khayamiya* now appears in surveys of Islamic, African, Egyptian and textile art history, and the term *khayamiya* is used by museums, auctioneers, artists and journalists
- The Egyptian tentmakers now receive active patronage across international networks and earn respect for the profession within Egypt
- Development of new business models such as online sales via Etsy and teaching hand-applique skills in workshops to quilters
- Creation of new applique designs and research into the history of the art form, documentation of endangered knowledge, key genres identified towards a chronology of *khayamiya* design.



Charles Sturt  
University

### Background

In 2012, Dr Sam Bowker observed that Henri Matisse's painting 'Interior with Egyptian Curtain' (1948) depicts a historic form of *khayamiya* applique, leading to the observation that the art history of the Egyptian tentmakers had never been surveyed or published.

Historically, *khayamiya* were isolated by mistaken identities, absent contexts and the tentmakers' limited agency to situate their history through scholarly discourse. Disparate, inaccurate and inconsistent descriptions prevented linking of examples across collections.

As a result, the unique art of *khayamiya* was almost excluded from the history of Islamic and Egyptian art.

### Outcomes

Dr Bowker's research has led to the development of a new history of *khayamiya*, and the subsequent publication of *The Tentmakers of Cairo* by Bowker and Seif El Rashidi (University of London), which includes oral histories commissioned, collected and translated from Arabic by Durham University and the Australian National University.



Above: Studying Khedival *Khayamiya* from the British Museum's collection in Blythe House, London.

Image credit: Sam Bowker

This research standardised the English spelling of the Arabic term *khayamiya*, facilitated access to unpublished collections and promoted use of this knowledge to new audiences (e.g. artists, educators, and tentmakers).

## Highlights

### Book

- El Rashidi, Seif, Bowker, Sam (2019). *The Tentmakers of Cairo: Egypt's medieval and modern applique craft*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

### Exhibitions

- *Khayamiya: Khedival to Contemporary- The Egyptian Tentmakers from 1890 to 2010*, HR Gallop Gallery, Wagga Wagga, Australia
- *Khayamiya: The Egyptian Tentmakers, 2015*, Albury LibraryMuseum, Australia
- *Khayamiya: Khedival to Contemporary, 2015-2016*, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. This international exhibition attracted over 8000 visitors and extensive media coverage.

### Documentary

- *The Tentmakers of Cairo (2015)* by filmmaker Kim Beamish was informed by Charles Sturt University research and shown in film festivals, museums and art galleries worldwide.

Following the study, museums reassessed historic *khayamiya*. Institutions now actively acquire, display and request written assessments as case studies, including major institutions like the British Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as private and other public collections.

Artists and graphic designers in Egypt have adapted *khayamiya* for contemporary purposes, and master tentmakers like Ahmed Naguib revisited patterns from the Khedival period (1867-1914) as new designs. The Victoria & Albert Museum and the Oriental Museum in Durham have acquired important *khayamiya* by Hany Abdel Khader based on the 2011 Revolution that deposed President Mubarak, documenting social change in Egyptian politics.

As a result of this research, *khayamiya* is now present within Islamic, Egyptian, African and textile art history. It is cited in popular media, museum collections and auction catalogues. The global number of tentmakers increased from approximately 80 to 100 since 2007, and new apprentices are taking up the profession, participating in international networks through the competitive skills and cultural heritage of this unique craft.

The Egyptian tentmakers now possess a substantial social media following (more than 15,000 followers on Facebook) that promotes online sales (via an Etsy store managed by the Tentmakers) that improves the economic viability and social esteem for *khayamiya* as both craft and heritage in Egypt. Since 2007 the Egyptian Tentmakers have toured to numerous international quilt exhibitions with private philanthropic and NGO support.



Above: Anonymous Tentmakers, *The Egyptian Tent of the IAMM (circa 1910-1920s)*, Collection of the Islamic Art Museum Malaysia.  
Image credit: Sam Bowker.

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### Further information

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### Funding and Collaborators

- Arts and Humanities Research Council Grant (UK) funded oral histories commissioned by Durham University.
- Charles Sturt University supported regional exhibitions in Wagga Wagga (2013) and Albury (2015).
- Timothy Crutchett of Charles Sturt University created ultra-high resolution photographs of large and fragile *khayamiya* textiles for online access. For more information see *The Gigapixel Project*: <http://scci.csu.edu.au/gigapixelproject/>.