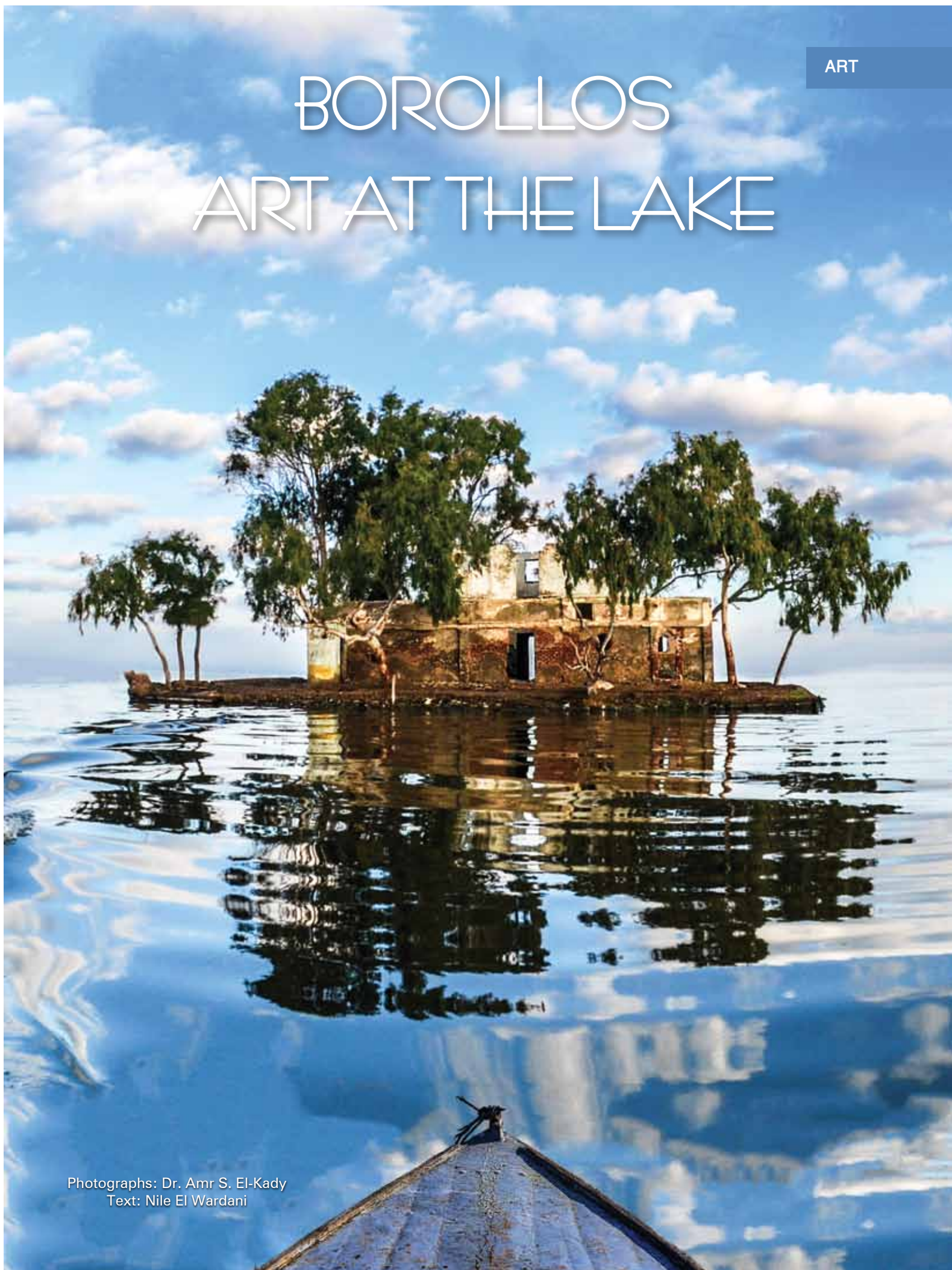


ART

BOROLLOS ART AT THE LAKE

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Borg El Borollos a tiny fishing village with a big history is fast becoming known globally for its distinctive artistic endeavors. Situated near the Mediterranean Sea half-way between Damietta in the East and Alexandria in the West, the village rests on a small peninsula tucked between the sea and Lake Borollos. For centuries a small community of fishermen and their families have made it their home. The village has now grown to 100,000 inhabitants. Once hailed as “the Bride of North Delta,” it is located in the governorate of Kafr El Sheikh.

Over time much of the bride’s charm was washed away with the mist of the lake and sea. Yet in the past four years the bride has felt a reawakening. Thanks to Egyptian artist Dr. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen who refuses to forget or abandon his place of birth Borollos.

In 2014 he created the Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen Foundation for Culture, Arts and Development, a non-profit organization with the goal of developing the region’s art and creativity. A romantic Abdel Mohsen believes that through art and creativity societies will be inspired, reborn and will change for the better. For the past four years Borollos has hosted a unique arts festival that has caught the attention of the world through the artistry of mural painting.

This being the fourth year of the festival, more than 500 artists from inside and outside Egypt participated as volunteers. The Abdel Mohsen Foundation selected 50 Egyptian and international artists to lead the festival and community in the painting of more murals throughout the village. Artists came from China, Bangladesh, Georgia, Italy, Algeria, Oman, Jordan, Iraq, North Korea, India, Macedonia, Tunisia, Iran, Sudan and Bahrain as well as known Egyptian artists, students and professors of art from all over Egypt. The people of Borollos have embraced the artists and the festival fully. It takes place each spring and is much loved by the locals who also participate. Most of the 500 artist participants are indeed the youth of Borollos and the surrounding region.



The Egyptian artist Dr. Abdel Wahab Abdel Mohsen.

This festival has filled a void for the community, where there was not much in the way of theaters, arts entertainment or culture. The first year, youth watched with amazement as artists began to paint murals on the walls of their village. They soon asked to join in. Picking up a paint brush for the first time and applying bold beautiful colors to the façade of their own home was revolutionary. They became eternally inspired by the act of making art and discovering their own creativity. Abdel-Mohsen believes that with time the art will be the catalyst for bigger changes that will bring development, employment and better infrastructure to the impoverished area. Ultimately, he believes, the community can become enriched.

The entire project began with a discussion between Abdel Mohsen and his art students in Cairo. They wanted to create some kind of social project through art. They visited Borollos and saw that it was a beautiful place, its beauty hidden under the random buildings, neglect and trash. They brought their ideas to Ahmed Ezzat Agwa, a member of the local city council. They proposed to paint murals on the old houses and buildings to beautify the area, bring color and fantasy, art and culture to the people. They wanted to make the people happy and filled with joy. Ahmed Ezzat supported the students and Abdel Mohsen and they began firstly by cleaning the village a bit. The Corniche was covered entirely by gar-

bage and no one walked there or swam in the sea. The sea had come to symbolize alienation or a stranger. As they cleaned, little by little the sea regained its allure and value and the people returned to her.

There exists a very important attachment between El Beheira also on the sea, in the adjoining governorate of Damanhur, and the citizens of Borollos often visit. In the future Abdel Mohsen and his students hope to create a cultural communication between the two communities. Their idea is to create a special festival for fishing villages of the Mediterranean Basin. They see a common denominator that can potentially bring together Lebanon, Syria, Tunis, Morocco, Gaza, Spain, Italy, France, and all countries that share this common sea, the Mediterranean. Abdel Mohsen has travelled and knows deep in his heart that there exists a common connection that needs to be opened to all. They have started with art and folklore, but hope to expand the festival to also include fashion, literature, environment, fisheries, traditional cuisine and more. Their dreams soar high like birds. The exchange of such experiences they believe can bring unity, peace and collaboration to preserve their environment and build bridges between the people of the Mediterranean Basin.

They began small and could never have foreseen the future developments. The first year they had to convince the people of Borollos that allowing them to draw on their houses would bring them happiness and attention. It was not easy in the beginning, but when the community saw the team cleaning, they put trust in them. As the murals emerged and people came to take photos which were shared on social media, the local government also started to pave the roads and organize facilities. The citizens soon saw that there is a direct relationship between the improvement of the city and the artistic work of the Abdel Mohsen Foundation.

In the beginning the artists painted on small fishing boats and feluccas. They worked only with Egyptian artists but so many people liked the idea and it evolved into an international event with invited artists from eight countries during the second year. The community greatly welcomed the idea. Curious young children flocked around the artists watching them closely. So they started an arts education program conducting workshops in the local schools.

Soon adults in the village became interested. The artists left the colors at the homes as they worked on each







mural. They instructed the people to leave the paintbrushes in water so they would not dry out. Many housewives and young girls were shy to participate openly outside. But soon the artists noticed that the women and girls had started drawing their houses from inside. This was a fantastic development and they were encouraged to contribute more.

The third year, the Foundation invited university professors and social workers that provided services and resources such as toys, marionettes, and backpacks for the children, blankets and even needed medications. The community felt cared for and their spirits were raised considerably.

Miraculously in their 4th year, UNICEF asked to join and wanted to give sponsorship on the condition that it is used for mother and child health and education. UNICEF had seen the numerous photographs that had been posted on social media of the glorious murals that adorned the homes and buildings of Borollos. More importantly they had seen pictures of throngs of children watching and surrounding the artists in awe. They were a captured target audience.

The United Nation Population Fund (UNPF) has also joined as a sponsor having seen how art and culture opened the doors to so much. They launched programs addressing early childhood marriage, female circumcision, and family planning. While Abdel Mohsen's Foundation does not work on these programs, it is the artwork that makes this all possible by opening the hearts and minds of the residents. The Foundation has launched theatre workshops and productions, community cleanup programs to collect garbage making the environment more beautiful and planting gardens. The Foundation has conducted workshops with children on cleanliness and there seems to be no end to their ideas and creativity.

Dr. Abdel Mohsen welcomes any educational ideas but he is clear to state that the unique murals of Borollos are never political or religious in nature. "We are not making graffiti, we are making Street Art. It is art to fulfill our creative yearnings. It is art to support moral attitudes, happiness and beauty in our lives. This is our aim, plain and simple," states Abdel Mohsen. "We have a message to share, which is that color and

art bring happiness and makes people accept each other. It makes you love your country and your home and it makes it easier to accept and work and live with one another."

The foreign artists that come from all over the world walk freely in the streets of Borollos during the festival which lasts 15 days each year. They feel safe and superbly welcomed among the locals. Some of the international artists have similar social issues at home. They have certainly learned great lessons from the little village of Borollos that they will take to their own communities.

Dr. Abdel Mohsen tells me that, "the European artists are sometimes shocked by such kind people still existing in the world. The idea that someone is patiently waiting for you in the morning with a cup of tea and sweets is a bit shocking because they are not used to it." As a result the artists return to their countries with very nice impressions of Egyptians and are at ease because of the relaxing fun creative environment that exists between us. As we continue the festival each year we hope to make new programs that will further the cultural exchange via food, fashion, theater, music and more.

While they are all volunteers we give them as much as we can serving them daily delicious home-cooked fishmeals, and seasonal fruits and vegetables. They all learn an important lesson that these poor simple people are very kind and their respectful hospitable grateful behavior comes from a 7000-year-old culture that has made them the people they are. They are not terrorists as the international press often depicts them to be. On the contrary, they are full of love, smiles and emotions to the extent that they cry when the artists leave at the end of the festival. These are the things that make Dr. Abdel Mohsen and his team certain that indeed they have changed the world a little bit. "I believe one can see the psychology of the people and how much happiness the colors and motifs depicted on the walls of their homes has given them great happiness."

Indeed this little Egyptian fishing village has become a big global arts destination for all the right reasons.Ω



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