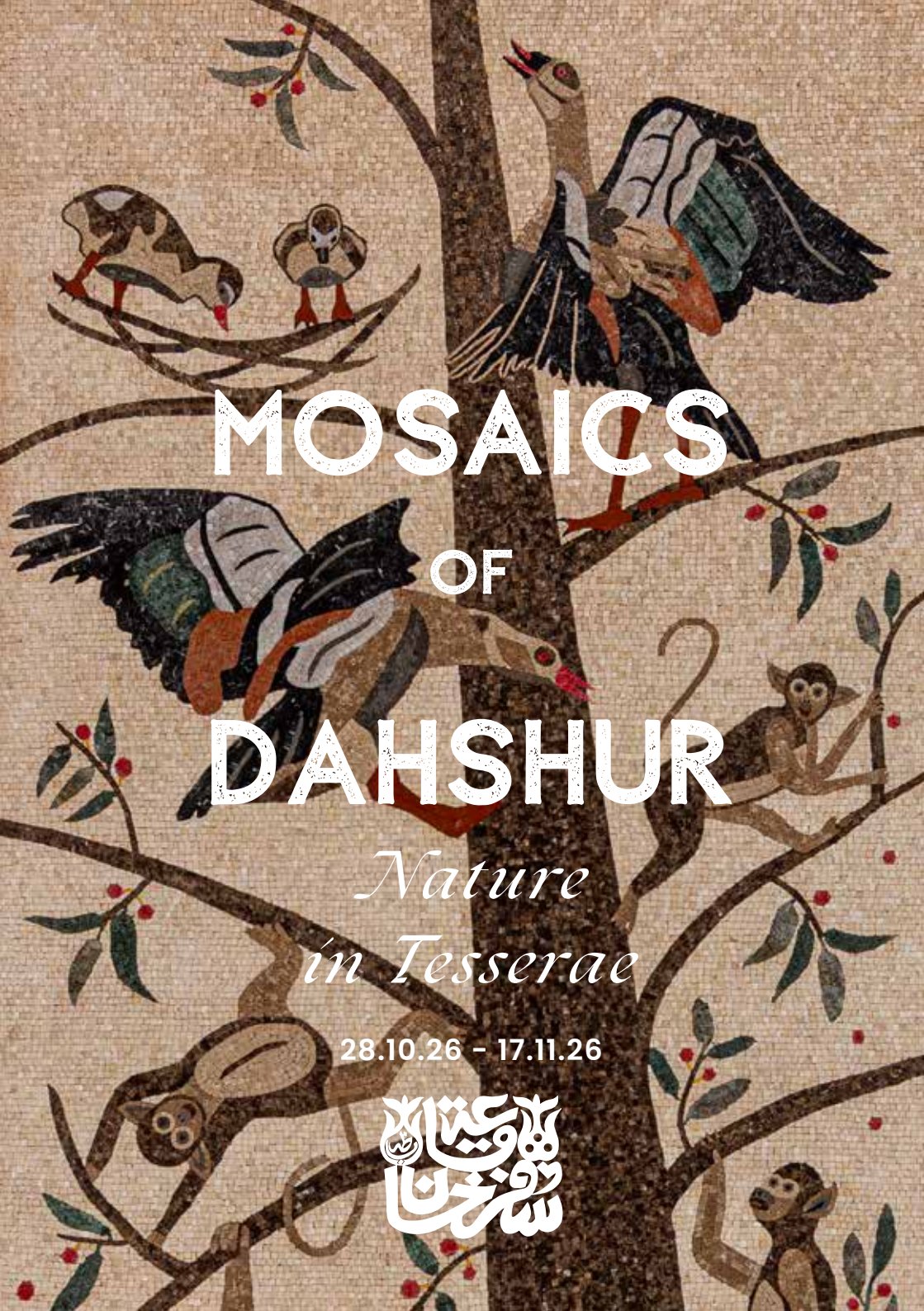


MOSAICS OF DAHSHUR

Nature in Tesserae

28.10.26 – 17.11.26

SAFARKHAN
ART GALLERY



The ancient Egyptians believed that at the dawn of creation a mound emerged from the primordial chaos and from there the sun god Ra created the world. Over the course of centuries this belief was given symbolic form. The mound became pyramidal in shape, and a great bird, embodying the spirit of the Sun, perched on its apex. Called the Bennu Bird, he was at times depicted as a Gray Heron atop his Benben Stone. This image, which embodies not only the notion of creation but also rebirth with the daily rising of the sun, serves as a symbol for the revival of the lost art of marble mosaics at Dahshur.

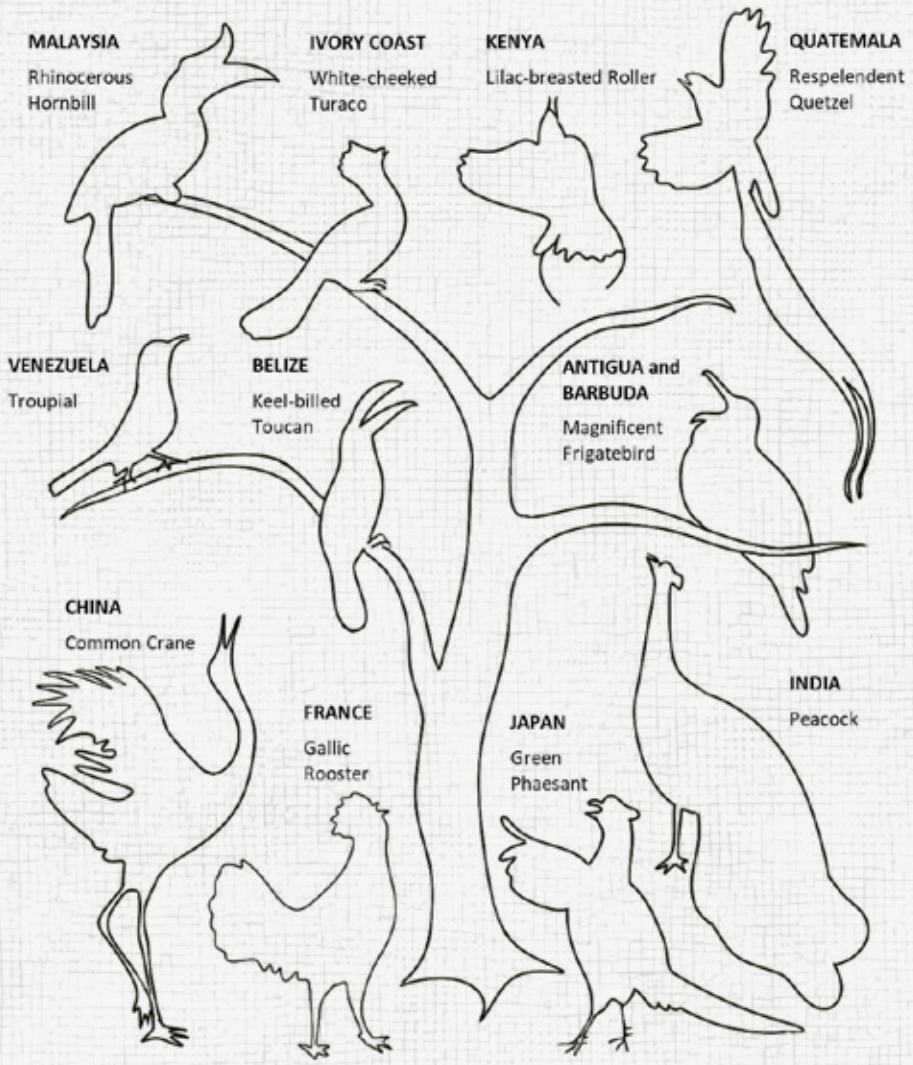
This is a charitable endeavor on behalf of Safarkhan Art Gallery and the Mosaics of Dahshur atelier, with 100% of the net profit from the sale of any artwork going to the mosaicists.

Cover: ***Basil Metwalli & Mohamed Metwalli,*** *Monkeys & Egyptian Geese, 2026, marble mosaic, 180 x 90cm.*

From Wednesday 28 October to Tuesday 17 November, Safarkhan is delighted to welcome back the Mosaics of Dahshur atelier for its second exhibition, *Nature In Tesserae*, with us. Their debut in April 2025, *King's Lake*, introduced these villagers turned mosaicists and their faithful portraits of Egypt's native avifauna, and it remains one of the most cherished exhibitions in our recent history.



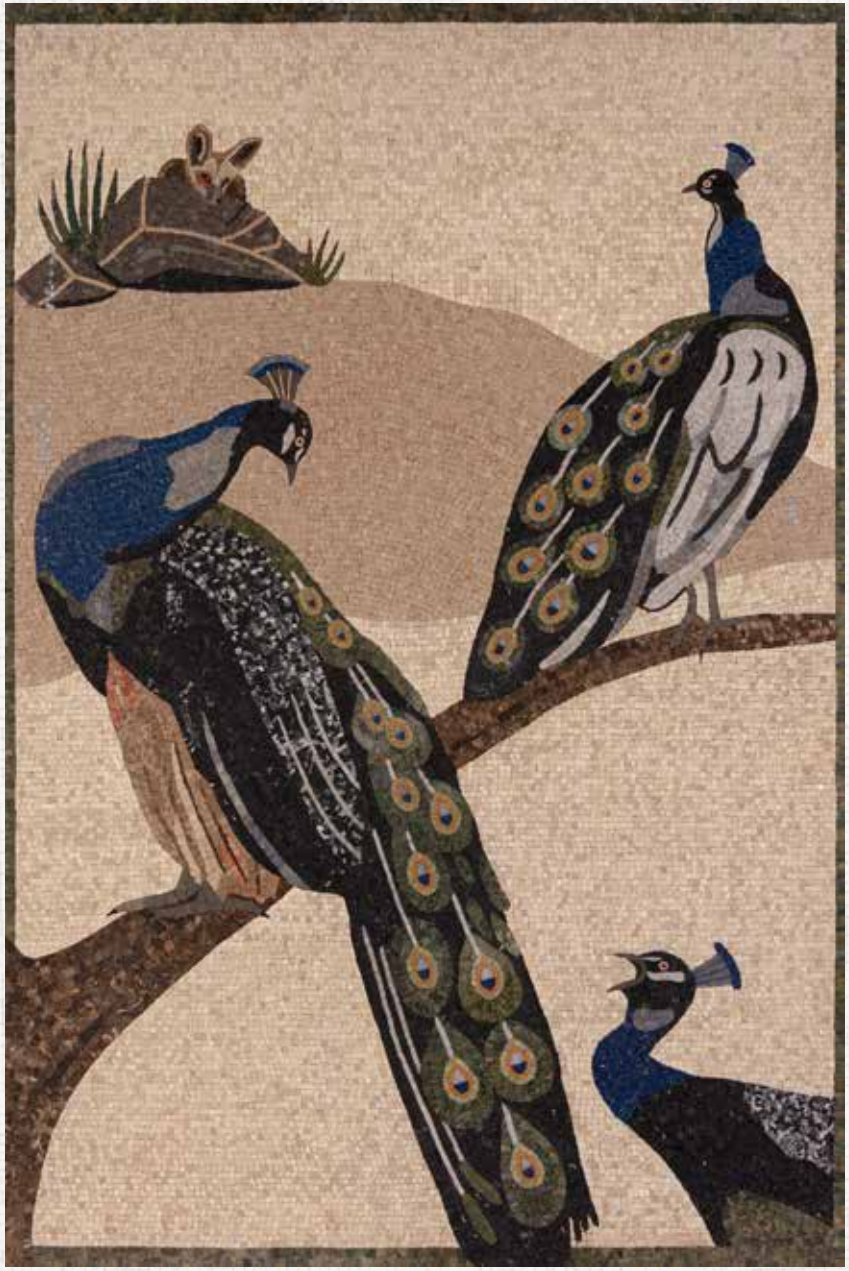
The Mosaics of Dahshur atelier, minus the indispensable Rehab Abou Gheit, stands flanking one of the largest works in the collection. From left to right; Ashraf Aboul Gheit, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Fatma Aboul Gheit, Charlotte Sullivan, Basil Metwalli, Mohamed Metwalli and Ayman Hussein.



National birds represent the people (not the government) of a country. Here a random selection of beautiful national birds, symbolizing the people of the world, call out from the branches of an olive tree to the doves of peace flying overhead.

Basil Metwalli & Mohamed Metwalli, *Chorus of Nations, 2026*
marble mosaic, 174 x 120cm.





Mohamed Metwalli, *Peacocks and Fox, 2026, marble mosaic, 120 x 80cm.*

A Pied Peacock has just caught sight of a fox hiding behind a large rock, as one of his companions below signals the present danger.

A giraffe bows its head to drink. A hoopoe swoops in with a worm in its beak. Beneath a full moon, a night heron steps into still water. Every one of these scenes has been painstakingly cut by hand from marble, piece by tiny piece, in a village at the foot of the lesser-known Dahshur trio, the Black, Red, and Bent pyramids. A year and a half on, the atelier, comprised of its five devoted artisans who share familial bonds; Mohamed 'Abou Basil' Metwalli, Basil Metwalli, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Fatma Aboul Gheit and Rehab Aboul Gheit, returns having widened its gaze well beyond the sky.



Basil Metwalli, *Drinking Giraffes, 2026, marble mosaic, 60 x 120cm.*

With front legs somewhat awkwardly splayed, a drinking giraffe is a memorable sight.

The art of marble mosaics was introduced in Dahshur almost a decade ago by Charlotte Sullivan, a retired art historian, who spends the winter months within sight of the Bent Pyramid.

Based primarily in Italy, where she taught art history for an American university, Charlotte learned the classical method of making mosaics at the Studio Cassio in Rome, one of the few remaining workshops still practicing the venerable art. When her teacher told her that this labor-intensive method of hand crafted mosaics would probably soon disappear, she thought of her neighbors in Dahshur who longed for gainful employment.

Recognizing how historically appropriate it was to revive this art form in Egypt, the land where marble mosaics were first made 2,300 years ago, she set up a studio in Dahshur and has directed the project for nearly a decade.

Mohamed Abou Basil Metwalli

The 46 year old affectionately known as 'Abou Basil' has been the star of the Mosaics of Dahshur atelier from the outset; charming, flamboyant and extroverted, his experience as a tiler transposed well into his newfound acumen for mosaic-making.

Mohamed transitioned within the course of weeks from a manual laborer at a construction site and bathroom tiler into a master mosaicist. Eagerly learning the complex steps involved in mounting a mosaic, he was soon adding refinements to the process. Over the past few years, having devoted himself full-time to this practice, 'Abou Basil' has been able to produce examples of mosaic art that even the most seasoned of professionals would be envious of.

But more important than his technical skill is the independence of spirit and artistic feeling that animates his work. In his own words, Mohamed enjoys a "large canvas" and favors compositions overflowing with drama and action. It is this abundance of creative energy that explains his once again outsized contribution to the present exhibition.

Mohamed demonstrates considerable autonomy regarding how to adapt the subtleties of color and shading created in the fluid medium of paint to his palette of marbles. Not unlike a musician, who reads notes off a page, a mosaicist must interpret a design on paper and bring it to life through the obdurate medium of stone. Metwalli's trained hands and eyes are always up to the task, despite becoming more and more demanding in their scale and composition.





Basil Metwalli

The youngest member of the workshop has developed an abounding love and skill for mosaic-making.

Basil, the 20-year-old, eldest of six to the prolific Mohamed Metwalli, has taken inspiration from his father's skill for mosaic-making, and has been a diligent student of the process since the inception of the workshop. He started making mosaics after school hours when he was a boy. By now he is a skilled mosaicist, but understandably his studies in administrative services at Helwan University left him little time for mosaic making, which explains his modest contribution to the atelier's debut exhibition in 2025.

Basil, following firmly in the footsteps of his father, is the youngest mosaicist to have worked on these designs, with a level of patience and concentration, according to project founder Sullivan; '*unusual for a person of his age*.' He has been assisting his father to such a degree of proficiency whereby '*it was difficult for me to determine where the work of one left off and the other began*,' according to Charlotte. After his impressive foray into mosaic-making during the *King's Lake* exhibition, Basil has developed in leaps and bounds and has contributed to a vast number of works in this latest collection. It is apparent that the young graduate turned mosaicist may have found his calling.



Fatma Aboul Gheit

Fatma is a inspirational representation of the promise of young Egyptian women living in the country's rural regions.

Fatma, the younger daughter of the night watchman at the Bent Pyramid, has been a key member of the atelier since its inception. Like many in the village, Fatma married as a teenager and soon became a mother. Her husband who was studying to become a tour guide was tragically killed in a road accident shortly thereafter, and Fatma became a widow at 18. She chose not to remarry in order to retain legal guardianship of her son.

For her, a young woman living harmoniously at home with her parents, mosaics provide an undreamt-of creative outlet. Thanks to help from her mother, she has time to devote herself to a real professional life. Now when she meets friends around town, she talks proudly not only about her son but about her work. Mosaic-making has enlarged her world.

Fatma critically has the time on her hands, thanks to her mother, to devote herself to a profession, whereby she is a shining example of a woman retaining a skill or profession in the midst of familial burdens that fall almost exclusively upon them. The workshop is hopeful that it will not lose the competence and imagination of both sisters to marriage and its incumbent duties in the near future.

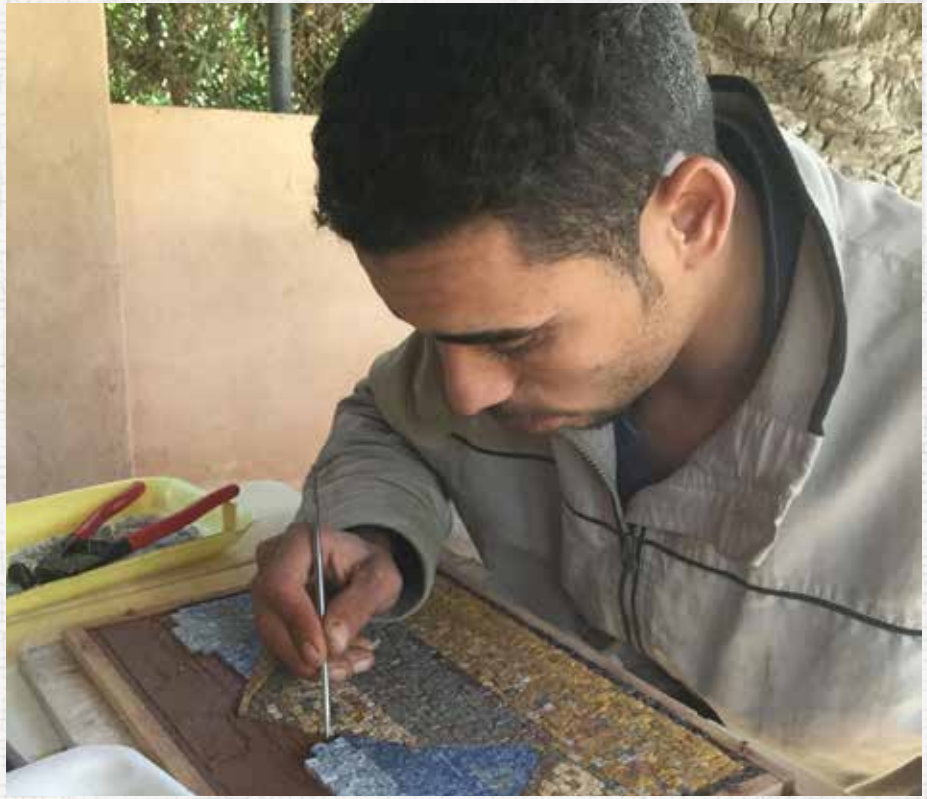


Rehab Aboul Gheit

Rehab, like her sister, has demonstrated an acumen for mosaic-making that is only surpassed by her passion for it.

Rehab, the older sister of Fatma, has shown an aptitude for mosaic-making from the start. Given her penchant for detailed work it was surprising to hear from her recently that before participating in this project she had no idea that she had any special ability to work with her hands. Now, somewhat encumbered by increasing family responsibilities, she prefers to work on small plaques, hence her modest yet significant contribution to the present exhibition.

Rehab has outdone herself in the virtuosity of her small mosaic plaques. The tiny pieces of marble she delicately manipulates are cut and placed with a precision that allies her figural work with the Hellenistic tradition of opus vermiculatum (tesserae under a half centimeter), once a specialty of the Alexandrian school of mosaics.



Ahmed Aboul Gheit

After a hiatus from mosaic-making, Ahmed has left his previous occupation to pursue this practice which he loves full-time, and has now become a highly competent committed member of the five-person group.

The newest member of the group was introduced to the art of mosaics back since the inception of the Mosaics of Dahshur atelier around 8 years prior. The younger brother of Ashraf Aboul Gheit was absent for a long period, having had to answer to other commitments, and therefore he did not contribute to the exploits of the inaugural exhibition in 2025. However, he returned to the practice late last year with a passion and skill for the craft that belies his tender age, and his impressive work can be seen across a variety of the panels in *Nature in Tesserae*'s diverse collection of works.

Black-crowned Night Herons, whose feathers turn blue during the breeding season, stalk the waterways of Egypt after dusk. Their light-sensitive red eyes aid them in their nocturnal search for food.



Ahmed Aboul Gheit, *Night Triptych - Night Herons, 2026, marble mosaic, 160 x 80cm.*

Nature in Tesserae is a journey through the flora and fauna of this land, from antiquity to the present day. The birds are still here. Hoopoes quarrel on an olive branch, bee-eaters chatter among the blossoms, and the northern bald ibis, the very bird that gave the ancient scribes their hieroglyph for the spirit, gather among the reeds.



Basil Metwalli, *Snefru Eternal Future Soul Birds, 2026, marble mosaic, 60 x 90cm.*

The soul bird of an ancient Egyptian took the form of a Bald Ibis upon arrival in the Eternal Future. Here the Pharaoh Snefru and his consort, backed by the pyramid at Dahshur, look proudly towards their son Pharaoh Khufu, seen to the right with his Great Pyramid at Giza.



Rehab Aboul Gheit, *Blue-cheeked Bee Eater and Bombax, 2026, marble mosaic, 45 x 90cm.*

The pretty little Blue-cheeked Bee-eater flits noisily about as it searches for insects in the shrubbery along the desert edge in Dahshur.



Mohamed Metwalli, *Savannah Triptych - Giraffes, Addaxes and Oryxes, 2026, marble mosaic, 120 x 240cm.*

The addax, an antelope native to the Sahara, disappeared from Egypt in the mid 20th century, when hunters finished off the few remaining small herds. In the Pharaonic period these handsome animals were tethered and kept for display as status symbols. Wild giraffes lived in Egypt up until the drying climate drove them southwards into the sub-Saharan regions. The Arabian Oryx once lived wild in Egypt and survived in the Sinai peninsula until the 1970s. These medium-sized antelopes have since been successfully reintroduced in Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

But now they share the stage with ibex resting in the desert shade, hares darting between doum palms, genets prowling a tree in search of a nest, and gazelle and oryx grazing beneath the acacia. Many of these creatures once roamed Egypt freely and survive today only on the rock faces of the Eastern Desert and the tomb walls of Saqqara, a few kilometres north of the atelier. Others still keep company with the villagers in the fields and canals of Dahshur. Taken together, they form a living archive of everything this land has nurtured, lost and held on to.

Tesserae are the small hand cut pieces from which every mosaic is built, and the Dahshur artisans shape them with the same rudimentary tools and materials as their forebears, following a method first established in Alexandria in the third century BC. Long before the Romans made mosaics their own, with visible gaps between each piece, the Egyptians of antiquity fitted their marble tightly together.



Basil Metwalli & Mohamed Metwalli, *Ospreys & Swamp Cats, 2026, marble mosaic, 105 x 140cm.*

Here a highly stylized mangrove tree creates a stage for the participants in the impending drama: a hapless chick takes flight, the mother turns angrily about, the father, catch in claw, spies the intruders. Fur and feathers will fly!

Genets, catlike members of the civet family, can have up to five kits. Here the uppermost kit pounces on the bright blue eggs in the nest of a Myna bird seen flying away in the lower right corner.



Ahmed Aboul Gheit, *Genet Family, 2026, marble mosaic, 180 x 90cm.*



Basil Metwalli, Fatma Aboul Gheit & Mohamed Metwalli, *Savannah Triptych - Hartebeests, Gerenuks and Zebras, 2026, marble mosaic, 100 x 240cm.*

Herds of hartebeests, a medium-sized antelope, roamed the savannah regions of Egypt during the Stone Age and later, in Pharaonic times, were kept as livestock. The animal became extinct in Egypt in the early 20th century, but several subspecies survive in other African countries. During the Stone Age, gerenuks, also known as giraffe gazelles, grazed in the savannah regions of Egypt. Now wild populations still survive in several East African countries. Their distinctive long necks enable them to reach high vegetation and survive for long periods without water. Zebras lived in Egypt up until the Neolithic period when the grasslands and savannah regions of the Sahara dried up and became desert.



The gracefully contorted poses of these sleeping egrets are all based on photos of sleeping birds, even the one standing wide-eyed at the base. Like most birds, egrets have the ability to maintain one hemisphere of the brain alert while the other half is engaged in sleep.

Ahmed Aboul Gheit, *Night Triptych - Cattle Egrets, 2026, marble mosaic, 160 x 80cm.*



A troop of white Barn Owls set out to watch over the city of Cairo during the night.

Ahmed Aboul Gheit, *Night Triptych - Barn Owls, 2026, marble mosaic, 160 x 80cm.*

The atelier's founder, American art historian Charlotte Sullivan, saw in this a quiet advantage: "*The seeming defect of snugly fitted marble pieces was an immense plus. We were in an admittedly fortuitous fashion, attempting not just a revival of the art of marble mosaics but a revival of the distinctive method of making mosaics that was developed on home ground.*"



Ahmed Aboul Gheit, *Goliath Herons, 2026, marble mosaic, 80 x 80cm.*

The largest of the heron species, the Goliath Heron, is occasionally sighted in Upper Egypt.

The Ba or soul bird that incorporated the distinct personality of individuals during their lifetime was associated with the Saddle-billed Stork. Here the soul bird of the Pharaoh Snefru greets his consort while their son, the future Pharaoh Khufu, catches a frog in the Ahramat branch of the Nile, which passed near the Bent Pyramid of Dahshur in antiquity.

Basil Metwalli, *Snefru Soul Birds, 2026, marble mosaic, 120 x 80cm.* ▶



Ahmed Aboul Gheit, *Striated Herons in Mangrove, 2026, marble mosaic, 80 x 120cm.*

The Striated Heron, also called the Mangrove Heron, frequents the Nile valley as far north as Cairo.



Fatma Aboul Gheit & Mohamed Metwalli, *Glossy Ibis Triptych, 2026, marble mosaic, 100 x 220cm.*

The center bird twists round to nudge the oil-secreting uropygial gland located at the base of its back. Then it applies touches of oil to bring out the colors in its dark iridescent feathers. Glossy ibises touch bills and make soft cooing sounds as they build trust during their courtship ritual. Once the female has deposited her bright blue eggs, she and her mate continue to work together refurbishing the nest.

For almost five decades, Charlotte has spent the autumn to spring months in her beloved second home of Dahshur, and the artisans she trained remain faithful to her founding vision, *"executing original designs that reflect both their cultural heritage and the rural setting in which they live*." That setting is changing, with the seasonal waters of the *King's Lake* (*Birket el Malik*), which once stretched from the farmlands across the desert sands to the base of the Bent, Black and Red Pyramids, happening last returned in 2015.

At home in all but the desert regions of Egypt, the Hoopoe spends much of its time stitching away at the ground with its slender beak in search of grubs and worms, but when an appetizing insect passes overhead, it takes flight, often arching its crown and fully revealing the splendid pattern of its wings.

An interesting feature of this species is that the females are identical in appearance to the males. Typically, female birds have relatively drab plumage in order not to attract the attention of predators during the relatively long periods when they must remain at the nest. The hoopoe, an especially eye catching bird, avoids this danger by nesting safely within the hollow of a tree trunk or whatever suitable cavity it finds.



Mohamed Metwalli, *Hoopoes and Olive Branches, 2026, marble mosaic, 45 x 90cm.*

The zebra-striped wings of this modest-sized bird make it one of the most striking members of the avian community in Dahshur.

Most female birds have dull plumage so they are camouflaged while they sit for long periods on the nest. The female Hoopoe, indistinguishable in her bold markings and color from the male, chooses a protected area, such as a tree hole to incubate her chicks. Typically the male stays close by and helps with the nurturing of the young.

Fatma Aboul Gheit, *Hoopoe Family, 2026, marble mosaic, 90 x 60cm.* ▶



Since then, as Sullivan observes, "*with the disappearance of the lake, our area ceased to attract the quantity and variety of birds that had frequented the region over the course of centuries*." Seen in that light, this collection is more than a celebration. It is a quiet inventory of what Egypt stands to lose. Sullivan once remarked that "*it was inevitable that I would come to see the theme of fauna as a link between the remote past and the present*."



Fatma Aboul Gheit, *Serval Cats & Butterfly Bush, 2026, marble mosaic, 70 x 140cm.*

Serval cats, wearing a red collar, were kept on a leash tied to the throne of the Pharaoh. Here the cats flank a Buddleia Davidii, a plant which attracts butterflies through its scent and nectar and hence is colloquially referred to as the Butterfly Bush.

◀ ***Basil Metwalli,*** *Mau Cats and Alexandrine Parakeets, 2026, marble mosaic, 120 x 60cm.*

Egyptian Maus, one of the oldest domesticated cats has ties going back to the pharaonic period, when the word "mau" signified cat. The Alexandrine Parakeets, actually medium-sized parrots, were first brought to Egypt from India by Alexander the Great. Hence their name. Many were released at the opening of the Giza Zoo in the late 19th century and now well established in Egypt, have moved on to Europe.



A Purple Heron puffs up with pride as she watches one of her chicks spring up like a jack-in-the-box from the nest.

Mohamed Metwalli, *Purple Heron with Offspring, 2026, marble mosaic, 90 x 60cm.*

With *Nature in Tesserae*, that link has grown to embrace the whole living world of the Nile valley. As with *King's Lake*, Safarkhan presents this exhibition entirely in support of the atelier and its artisans, an initiative that revives an ancient craft, sustains livelihoods, and makes a heartfelt case for protecting Egypt's natural heritage. In that, it speaks directly to Safarkhan's own ethos: a continual dialogue between the old and the new.



Fatma Aboul Gheit, *Little Bitterns with Toad, 2026, marble mosaic, 50 x 100cm.*

Three Little Bitterns confront a toad. These shy birds scuttle stealthily through thick reed beds along the waterways of Egypt.



Basil Metwalli, *Nubian Ibexes, 2026, marble mosaic, 75 x 120cm.*

Nubian Ibexes are still found in the Sinai Peninsula. A Tristram's Starling, another resident of the region has just alighted on the back of the seated ibex, with which it enjoys a symbiotic relationship. The bird makes a meal of the ticks and fleas inhabiting the animal's fur.

SAFARKHAN
ART GALLERY

The Original Home of Modern Egyptian Art

Safarkhan derives from 'safar', the Arabic for journey, and 'khan', meaning abode. Like the traveller abodes of old, we have long been a proud home in the illuminating journey of Egyptian art.

Since 1968, Safarkhan Art Gallery has been the foremost patron, purveyor, educator and custodian of Egyptian fine art. For over five decades our legacy of innovative curating and collecting has been defined by our peerless ethos, embodying the constant dialogue between the old and the new. At Safarkhan we believe in art as the world's unifying language, and through our time-honoured role, we have dedicated ourselves to the journey of discovering, reviving and exhibiting a caliber of Egyptian art that has universal appeal for its inherent quality and message. We aspire to cultivate an appreciation of Egyptian art that is reflective of our individual and collective identities.

Our raison d'etre has always been curatorial before commercial. Whilst our historic connection to the pioneers of the Modernist period will always be at the heart of Safarkhan and our defining trademark, it is our ceaseless commitment to unearthing Egypt's most inspiring contemporary talents that allows us to uphold this privileged heritage. We pride ourselves on our role as an educator and repository of knowledge on the historical significance of Egyptian art in all its forms. Becoming a discerning collector is an art in itself, and we are there every step of the way, from igniting that initial inspiration to cultivating the seasoned eye.



Ingenious father and son duo, Mohamed and Basil Metwalli engaged in an effort to secure the backing of one of their recently completed creations as Ashraf Aboul Gheit, the ever-present administrator of the atelier, stands by as he supervises the task at hand.

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