From June 29 ‘til August 4 the Willis-Smith Gallery is hosting an exhibition of photographs of Egypt in the 1950’s. Two thirds of the exhibition of 90 photographs will be artfully displayed on the five walls of the gallery. Unfortunately there is no room for some of the wonderful stories that help bring meaning and understanding to these images.

I would like to post on the website some of the stories that will help illuminate the subjects chosen by Mr. Jonathan and researched by the book’s author, Sheelagh Hope.

For those inspired to read more of these stories the book will be available at the opening and book signing Thursday, June 29, 2017, or it may purchase from RainyDayBooks.com, Amazon.com or from Jack@jonathanassociates.com.

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Seeing Into The Heart of Things

What a colorful, cosmopolitan chaos Cairo was in the 1920’s and ‘30’s when I was a boy. On the weekends we might walk to the market with our father. How delicious it was to smell peanuts roasting, to buy sweet potatoes, to taste the tamarind juice. How fascinated we were to watch the shoemaker mending sandals or watch a man and his son working a lathe. How proud we were to walk home, single file, each with a watermelon of the perfect size atop our heads.

Early in the 1930’s we moved to a farming community east of Cairo called Ezbet el Nakhl (Village of the Date Palms). We played along the canal and in the sugar cane fields. There was plenty of work on a dairy farm for us children. One memory I cherish was getting up at sunrise to help Bayoumi, our stalwart Nubian farmhand, milk our water buffalo herd before we boarded the train to an Italian school in Cairo. During school vacation I was often assigned to sit on a little cart, sleepy in the sun, occasionally cracking a whip to urge my water buffalo to go round and round to winnow the wheat.

Later, as a young man, I loved to ride in the desert before sunrise, reveling in the sound of the horse’s hooves breaking the crust off the dew-laden sand. Sometimes, on those rides I enjoyed the hospitality of the Bedouins and endured the scrutiny of their grumpy camels.

I have always looked into the heart of things. When I bought my first camera, my desire was to reveal the inner beauty of a person or scene. My photographs recorded unrehearsed moments in the lives of ordinary people living in the wonderful land of my birth. I did not want my photographs to dwell on the poverty and hardships that were obvious. I wanted to capture the dignity and quiet joy with which these hard-working people faced their daily challenges.
A Wish for a Long Life

The United States Ambassador to Cairo, Jefferson Caffery, enjoyed mountain climbing. Having been in France for four years, he missed his favorite sport. Often on the weekends he would drive to the pyramids of Giza where he would challenge the local guide in a race to the top.

My friend, Robert Simpson, the Ambassador’s personal secretary, would invite me to tag along. While the Ambassador was busy climbing, the director of the archeological digs in the area would invite us to view the latest discovery.

On one trip, I brought my camera and had the good fortune to be there as the newly uncovered temple doorways were brought out of the sand after over 3,000 years. I was able to capture this unique image through the doorways of the temple showing the well-preserved bas-relief on the right side of the doorframe.

The following morning, when the Ambassador saw the prints, he immediately called the Director of Egyptian Antiquities at the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities in Cairo, a French Abbot named Abbé Drioton, (since the time of Napoleon’s ill-fated conquest of Egypt in 1798 this post was traditionally administered by a French archeologist.

With my photograph in hand, I was sent to talk to Abbé Drioton and discover the meaning of the bas-relief. As I explained the circumstances of how I took the photograph, Abbé Drioton, without consulting any texts, quickly typed the meaning of the greeting in French.

The Goddess Mout, wife of Amon Re, greets the King Amenophis the II, at the entrance of the Temple by extending to him the symbol of life. (Ankh).

For a Long Life Christmas 1951

Ambassador Caffery, amazed by the 3,000 year old symbolic gesture to celebrate life, asked me to adapt the bas-relief photograph to create a Christmas card with the following wish: “For a Long Life.”

Perhaps, this was a sign of things to come, as only a few years later, I would begin a thirty-year career with Hallmark Cards.
A mosque was the legacy of many of the rulers of Cairo. However, one of the most important mosques in Cairo, Al-Hakim Mosque was named in honor of an Imam. It was built in 990 CE using a similar design to the mosque attached to the Al-Azhar University built 20 years earlier.

Although the Citadel area of Cairo is so crowded that one mosque may cast a shadow on the wall of another, the star of the show is the overpowering Muhammad Ali Mosque, inaugurated in 1848. Slender and elegant when viewed from a distance, it looms high and massive close up and has a unique feature – two minarets. Designed by Yusuf Bushnak of Istanbul in the style of the Ottomans, it is paradoxically a symbol of strength and delicacy as seen in its window details.

The tomb of Muhammad Ali is housed in the sheltered courtyard, whose porticoes isolate the worshippers from the distractions of city life. The beauty of the mosque inspires peace, contemplation, and a focus on the divine. Today, it is an oasis of peace in the middle of the chaos that is Cairo.

The inspiration of Islamic art, is the geometric line which, with its myriads of Arabesques, makes possible the living realization of the theory of “Art for Art’s sake” - that which allows the form to emerge from its matter and to almost touch the Absolute, the Pure Mind.

(Translated from the French)

From the editorial by Doria Shafik, editor in chief of *La Femme Nouvelle*, for the edition *Art Arabe*, December 1951
Growing up in Egypt, I encountered people of vastly different cultures, yet they were alike in their spirit of warmth, hospitality, and humor. Preparing for my Scenes of Egypt exhibition in 1952, I wanted to reconnect with the people and experiences of my childhood so I focused on life in and around Cairo. I was particularly drawn to the country folk whose lives unfolded in the slow rhythms of tradition; people who relied on the river, or the rich land of the Delta for their livelihood. My love of horses and the desert had given me a feeling of empathy with the Bedouin.

Looking at these people with 21st century American eyes, you may think that they lived in poverty. However, they had enough food, a place to live, adequate clothing, and above all a supportive community. I felt a deep connection to these people whose simple lives were lived with a sense of self-confident richness, contentment, and hope for the future. Enough is as good as a feast when you do not compare yourself with others as this bit of Arabian wisdom suggests:

“الغني: قلة谭ئيك، و الرضا بما يكفيك”

Wealth: wishing for little and contentment with what is sufficient.

Collected from KnightsofArabia.com by Aisha Bilal
Egyptian culture has always valued education as the bridge to the future. As far back as the Old Kingdom, the life of a scribe was considered an ideal life according to the “Instructions of Ptah-hotep”.

Nearly 2000 years later, in 288 BCE, Egyptian influence in worldwide scholarship was greatly enhanced with the founding of the great Library of Alexandria, the “Lighthouse to the World.” Continuing with the tradition of scholarship, the great university of Cairo, Al-Azhar, was founded as a madrassa in 972 CE. It is now one of the oldest degree granting universities in the world.

During my time in Egypt, there was a nationalistic fervor to create a rebirth in the country by educating all children. The many public primary schools tried to catch up with the ever-increasing demand. There were many excellent private schools established for the multicultural population: English, French, Italian, and Greek were some of them.
Egypt – The Gift of the Nile

What is the secret of Egypt? Why is it one of the oldest continuous civilizations in the world? For over 5000 years foreigners who coveted the wealth of the country invaded it. However, the spirit of Egypt is so pervasive that to live in that great nation is to become a part of it.

Egypt was the envy of the civilized ancient world because of the great river that flowed along its length, endowing the region with wealth that in turn created unity and constancy. The great annual floods of this watery gift were the most important natural cycles of the calendar, cycles that were embedded in the Egyptian psyche. August 15th marked the beginning of the ancient Egyptian calendar – the season of Akhet, the inundation. A ritual was held to honor the god of the Nile, Hapi, to invoke him to bring fertility to the land. A maiden used to be sacrificed to this Nile god. When I was a boy, a sugar maiden was thrown into the river. In my time this was not a religious rite; it was a celebration of life.

One of Jack’s favorite stories of his time living on his family’s farm is:

**Catching Catfish**

*Every year the irrigation canal that bordered our farm was drained and dredged. When the water was only one-foot deep, the catfish could be caught by hand. All the neighborhood kids would come out to harvest the fish. It was a great celebration.*
Knowledge is Power

So critical were the floods to the people’s survival that the Pharaohs allied themselves with the High Priests to control the wealth that accrued from this phenomenon.

Jack’s eyes light up when he relates the unfairness illustrated in this story of the Nilometer.

In ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh ruled with absolute power tempered only by the high priests. Together, they used the science of the day to predict and control the outcome of crucial events. One of the primary bases of their power was their ability to accurately predict the annual flooding of the Nile.

The fertile banks and delta of the Nile depended on the annual inundation and its deposit of silt. Nilometers, descending staircases leading down into the river, were used to measure the depth of the rising water over the last 1000 miles upstream. These measurements, recorded over decades, enabled the priests to predict the amount of floodwater that could be expected. A good flood would mean bountiful silt and good crops; in those years, the Pharaoh could increase taxes. A prediction of a dry year would prompt the priests to consider the amount of offerings they needed to “pacify” the Nile god Hapi. So the elite had it both ways, whether there was a drought or a flood, the offerings or taxes would fill the coffers of the Pharaoh and the high priests.
The Rural Life

Everything the fellaheen needed was found in the village – many people never went beyond the village walls or fields. Here they worked, married, raised children, played games, grew their food, and worshipped. Rural parents were very attentive to their children who were an integral part of the village and its future. From an early age they were expected to take responsibilities at home and in the community. They fed and cared for the geese and other small animals; the girls carried water from the well or the river and the older children looked after the younger ones.

In a time before television, and even radio, there was still plenty of time for school and recreation. But the rhythm of village life circled around religious obligations and celebrations. A man or woman who had fulfilled the holy duty of all good Muslims and gone on a pilgrimage to Meccah would be treated with great respect in the village.

The life of the fellaheen followed the slow natural rhythms of the sun. They rose at dawn and worked until the sun set. The center of their lives was faith, family, and the community. Contentment rested in this simplicity, for usually, what they had was enough and life was good.

Trail of Flour

“One of my jobs on the farm was to take the wheat to the mill. I rode out on a lumpy sack of grain thrown over the back of the burro. Coming home was a pleasure as the milled flour was like a cushion. One day, the ride home seemed like floating on a cloud. When I looked back I saw a trail of flour along the road – the sack had sprung a leak!”

Chasing Runaway Ducks
These trees were a wonderful part of my childhood on the farm. Between September and December when the dates were ready to harvest, my Dad would cut a bunch and hang it on the breezeway between our house and one of the outbuildings.

When we left the house, we would carefully choose a perfectly ripe date to munch. Grasping the stem, we would gently squeeze the date until the soft inner flesh squirted into our mouths leaving the skin between our fingers. Our tongue would move the fruit around until the pit was in front and then we could spit it out onto the sand.

Dates palms hold a treasure, but they don’t provide a lot of fun; but, mango trees do. Our farm was edged with towering mango trees. One of our great adventures was to climb those trees with an indelible pencil firmly clenched in our teeth. We would select a few choice green mangoes, wet the tip of the pencil, and carefully write our initials on the fruit. While they were ripening, we would run out to the trees to check on our mangoes. What fun it was to watch our initials slowly stretch across the growing fruit. Woe to the sibling who plucked a coveted mango not his own!

“... the fruit of the date is ‘three skies above luxury.’ and as indispensable as water and air…”

from Date Palm Trinity, by Khaled Mattawa
A Glimpse of Bedouin Life

The desert has a strange hold on its people. The magical solitude, the scorching heat of day, and the cold eroding winds of the night have bred a unique individual. The Bedouin are proud of their ability to survive in an environment that others see as hostile. For the Bedouin the desert is a place of community, a vast community without fixed boundaries. What is fixed for the Bedouin is their family - the center of their lives. Their sprawling tents house all the generations of one family. A collection of related families will form tribes that have elected tribal leaders (Sheikhs) who take responsibility for the well being of their people.

Although the men and women of the family have very distinct roles, they are equal partners. The women are in charge of the tent, the children, and the tribe's generous hospitality that requires the accommodating of guests for up to three days. The Bedouin men are herders of goats, sheep, or camels. Some are breeders of the Arabian horses that are revered by the culture.

“When I saw this lovely mother and child happy inside the family tent, I could not help but draw a parallel between this image and that of Fra Filippo Lippi’s renaissance painting, Madonna and Child With Two Angels. How exquisite the delicate fingers of this baby resting on her mother’s hand. How soft and secure the mother’s embrace.”

Jack Jonathan
Borg El Arab

Bedouin don’t build. But if they did they would build a village like this one.

E.M. Forster

Halfway between El Alamein and Alexandria, a unique place was designed and built by an English army officer, W.J. Bramley. He loved the Bedouins and wanted to live among them, so in the early 1900’s, with the encouragement of the father of King Farouk, King Fouad, he built a little walled village, Borg el Arab. The walls of the Borg were made from white limestone quarried from the area of the old Roman aqueduct. At the time of Cleopatra, this area of Egypt was called Il Granaio d’Europa – the bread-basket of Europe.

Because they do not like to be boxed-in, the Bedouin set up their tents outside the walls, and brought their animals into the courtyard to trade for staples like food and clothing. There were no roads to the village and it seemed lonely and isolated. Yet, people from all over the world were drawn to it. Some stayed on, some were guests, put up in the apartments in the Borg.

The Flight of the Doves is one of my favorites because you can really feel the doves flying. The doves are long gone, and they are still alive – it is a continuity of life.

And that really symbolizes the whole exhibition – even if there are no real people, the spirit is there.

Gamal Hosni, Director of the Exhibitions and Art Collections at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina