

Challenges for heritage entrepreneurs

Young entrepreneurs seeking to transform traditional motifs into modern designs are having a hard time carving out a niche for themselves, writes Niveen Wahish

In one of the alleyways off Al-Muizz Street in Islamic Cairo is a cluster of workshops for coppersmiths. Amidst them is a small room that Rania Hilal, a young designer, rents to assemble her leather and copper accessories, such as watches, bracelets, belts and handbags, and readies them for sale.

She has only been renting the room for the past couple of months, paying half price because she has been sharing it with a local NGO. Previously, for the eight years after she became a designer, she had been working from home.

Hilal, did not become a designer overnight. A graduate of the Faculty of Applied Arts at Helwan University, she started her working life in the Communications Department at the Ministry of Trade.

While at the ministry, her hobby was to make accessories out of copper wire. When she left her government job in 2010 she decided to focus on making something of her hobby. Hilal dedicated herself to designing and producing traditionally themed copper jewelry and taking part in exhibitions.

One day a German admirer of her work wanted to order hundreds of one of her designs. She could not accommodate him, and did not know how to make things happen. "I only knew how to produce a prototype. I did not know how to scale up that prototype into production," she said. "At university we were never taught how to set up a mass-production project."

Students did not learn how to set up a supply chain, how to source their materials, how to write a business plan, or any of the other skills they would need to become entrepreneurs, she explained.

As a result, Hilal had to do it on her own through trial and error. She scouted around for copper and leather workshops where she could learn how to make her designs come to life, as well as for the artisans who could help her produce quantities of them. She got to meet copper and leather artisans who were almost losing touch with their skills because of the lack of demand for their products.

"Many workshops have closed down over the past five years, and many skilled workers are out of a job because of the economic slowdown," she said.

Hilal works with natural leather and copper, materials that are less and less widely used. This was one of the challenges she faced, as many leather factories work with artificial leather because it is cheaper, and using genuine leather means more expensive products that many consumers cannot afford.

"The few factories that continue to work with natural leather don't want to work with young designers. They produce outdated designs that nobody wants to buy and eventually they go out of business," she said.

Hilal wanted her work to include a developmental element and to help create jobs for artisans in Cairo and elsewhere, in such spots as Siwa. This is something that her development work taught her, as she has worked with various NGOs on developing and modernising traditional local handicrafts.

With these NGOs, Hilal travelled to Siwa where she taught local women famous for their silver jewellery to work with copper, which is cheaper and more readily available. She also helped design packaging for them that would tell their stories.

For Hilal, helping these communities sustain themselves is crucial as they do not have other means of making a livelihood, especially because of the slowdown in tourism. "These communities need to have a constant supply of raw materials, and they need somebody to market their goods for them," she explained.

However, like the women in Siwa, micro-businesses like Hilal's receive little help from the government. The government has for years talked about empowering micro and small enterprises but, as Hilal said, "We do not figure on any government plans." In fact, she was once told by a government representative that they do not know what such businesses' contribution to GDP is, and so they do not know if they are worth helping or not.

But Hilal believes that businesses like hers are very much worth helping. For starters, instead of waiting for a government job, she is actually opening a business, she said. And though her business may not yet have its own headquarters, she is still able to employ at least four individuals through outsourcing. Moreover, she is delivering work that preserves the country's heritage, whether through the designs she uses or the craftsmanship and techniques she employs.

"Too much support is going to businesses that employ ten people or more, whereas what is needed is more help for micro-industry," she said.

Hilal depends on exhibitions to keep her business going. But manufacturing in large quantities is not easy. Most available leather is either black or brown in colour, and she uses coloured leather. "The minimum number of sheets I can order from a tanner is 20, so if I want just one I have to wait for someone to come along who wants sheets of the same colour I am seeking," she said. Sometimes she risks seeing her designs become outdated while waiting for the leather.

Another problem is that the artisans who sew handbags for her only accept orders of a minimum 12 handbags, in order to cover their costs. She also suffers from other people copying her designs. She tries to overcome it by always being ahead with new designs.

NOT ALONE: Hilal is not alone in her attempts to find a foothold in the market. Reem Shaheen, a clothes designer, has also confronted similar challenges.

A 1997 graduate of the Faculty of Home Economics at Helwan University, Shaheen's passion is making ethnic clothes. But that is not how she started out. In fact, she said that during her years at university she did not study traditional costumes and had to later gain knowledge of them on her own. She started her career working from home, learning to sew regular clothes for neighbourhood women and children and mastering various sewing patterns to be able to develop her work.

She then decided to open a small atelier making evening clothes. She did not feel there was necessarily much value-added in what she was doing, but she did it, nonetheless. "It was a chance to become financially independent from my family," she said. She also took a morning job designing clothes for a clothing manufacturer, and in the evening she worked at the El-Sawy Culture Wheel arts centre in Zamalek, where she was in charge of the traditional costumes sewing workshop, making costumes for puppets.

At one point she bought some traditional *abayas* and reproduced them as modern trousers and blouses and displayed them at a local bazaar. The clothes were met with great demand, and seeing this she decided to transform her business into making ethnic clothes and selling them at tourist bazaars.

During that time she met Egypt Crafts, known today as Fair Trade Egypt, which aims to empower local communities by offering disadvantaged Egyptian artisans marketing, support and development services. The organisation was looking for a consultant to work with them on an EU-funded project to provide training to women in Siwa producing ethnic clothes.

Her task was to help the women with the designs, the choice of new models, finding quality raw materials and marketing. Working with the Siwan women was the job she wanted, as it meant being able to create jobs for the marginalised, especially women, in remote areas of Egypt.

For five or six years after the completion of the project she continued to work with groups of women from Siwa, sending them clothing items she had produced to be embroidered. But, as she regrets, while foreign-funded projects are a good thing, they are often not sustainable.

"Once these projects are over, there is no further help available in raw materials, designs and supervision of production and marketing," she said. To assist local communities, the government should help entrepreneurs like Hilal who incorporate these local communities into their value chains.

"We are helping create jobs, while preserving ethnic handicrafts," she said. She believes that a ministry like the Ministry of Culture could play a much bigger role in assisting young designers. "At the very least, they could allow us to hold exhibitions and events such as fashion shows at the ministry's affiliate bodies," she said. "That would boost our presence in the market as well as create new business for the ministry."

But such things have not happened thus far. Hilal recounts that she recently teamed up with Shaheen to do a fashion show where the models were wearing Shaheen's clothing and Hilal's accessories. When they went to one of the Ministry of Culture's affiliate bodies to request that they hold it there, they were turned down on the spot. In the end, the event was held at a private events venue.

Hilal suggests that the ministry make money by renting places to designers for a symbolic sum, or by taking commissions on sales. She would also like to see designers like herself offer workshops to other young people through the ministry's channels. The problem is that the ministry "lacks the will to do it," she said.



clockwise from top: Hilal working on leather and copper and showing designs to Siwan women; Shaheen working with Siwan women; fashion model donning Shaheen's and Hilal's products