



Colors of Cairo

BY JULIE NORMAN
LEWIS HINE DOCUMENTARY FELLOW, 2002-2003

INTRODUCTION BY JULIE NORMAN

From September 2002 through June 2003, I served as a Lewis Hine Documentary Fellow with Children of the Nile, a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cairo, Egypt. As a Hine Fellow, my primary responsibility was to work as a documentary assistant with the NGO, helping them use photography, writing, video, and other mediums to document their work with children.

Children of the Nile focuses on early childhood development in needy communities in Egypt. The organization works with local communities to set up preschools, kindergartens, and childcare facilities for poor, working families. Children of the Nile also develops lesson plans for the schools, publishes a newsletter, and provides trainings and workshops for teachers, childcare providers, and community leaders.

As part of my work for Children of the Nile, I prepared and taught a lesson each day for the students in one of the kindergartens in Imbaba, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Cairo. In February 2003, I developed a two-week drawing unit with the children. Each day I brought crayons and fresh paper, and I asked the children to draw on a different topic for ten consecutive days. We started with person-focused topics like “Myself,” “My Friends,” and “My Family”; then expanded to larger setting-focused topics including “My Kindergarten,” “My Neighborhood,” and “My Country”; and concluded with more abstract subjects like “My Traditions,” “My Future,” “My Wishes,” and “My Dreams.”

I approached the project with two main goals. Primarily, I wanted to engage the children in the creative process of artistic expression. They were seldom encouraged to use their imaginations and draw freely, and I wanted them to experience that process. To be sure, the following drawings illustrate how the children’s work developed from the first day to the last, as they gradually embraced the creative process and became increasingly free and expressive.

My second goal was to engage the children in documenting them-

selves and their surroundings. While my photographs and writings provided documentation from my point of view, I wanted to capture Imbaba through the children's eyes and allow them to share their unique perspectives. Indeed, the ways in which the children portrayed their school, neighborhood, and environment differed significantly from the images that I created. In this way, the drawing project evokes the perspectives and voices of the Children of the Nile.

DAY 1: MYSELF

“I want you to draw a picture of yourself.” The children look at their sheets of clean, white paper, then look back at me with questioning faces. The brand-new crayons lie untouched in the bowls I have placed in the center of each table. I turn to the teacher for help. Perhaps my Arabic is incorrect?

“You want them to draw what?” she asks.

“I want them to draw pictures of themselves,” I repeat, trying to stay patient.

“How do you want them to do it?”

“However they want,” I reply. “However they see themselves.”

The teacher and students look at me quizzically. I decide to try a new approach. Taking Ala by the hand, I lead her to the child-sized mirror leaning against the wall in the corner. The mirror is cracked and soiled, but Ala’s reflection is still visible in the glass. “See,” I say, pointing at the mirror, “that’s you. I want you to draw a picture of you.” “Why do we have to draw Ala?” Khaled asks, as Ala runs back to her seat.

I can’t help laughing. “Draw yourself,” I repeat. “Ala draws Ala, Khaled draws Khaled. . . . Okay?”

And so we begin. Some of the children are hesitant, as if they don’t want to make any marks on the spotless paper. Usually, paper in the kindergarten has been used before, with text or pictures on one side, the corners often folded or the edges bent. Likewise, the crayons are usually limited to a single bowl of inch-long nubs, mostly dark, sullen colors. The bright reds, yellows, and greens have been lost or used up years ago. Today is clearly something special. The paper is crisp and white, the crayons sharp and plentiful. One by one, the children start reaching for the crayons. Some hold the crayons like delicate crystals, making a soft initial mark on their paper and looking to me

for approval. Others smile as they realize that the new pointy crayons are indeed for their use, and they hold the colors tightly as they create bold lines and shapes.

Within minutes, all the children are drawing, talking, laughing, reaching for new colors. Some of the younger children are scribbling happily, while images resembling faces, bodies, and clothes start to appear on the papers of the older students. I get my camera from my bag and start taking pictures of the activity. However, the loud “click” and the unfamiliar lens distract the kids, and I put the camera away. Instead, I walk slowly around the tables, pointing to the children’s drawings. “Meen da? (Who’s this?)” “Ana! (Me!)”

Their representations of themselves are all different, some drawing one-color stick people, others adding details such as facial features, fingers, clothes, even hairstyles. I feel proud of the students, and they seem proud of themselves as, with big smiles, they hold up their papers for approval. For most of them, this was not only their first self-portrait, but their first experience with creative drawing.



Myself, Ala, 4

DAY 2: MY FRIENDS

The children clap and smile as I take the boxes of crayons out of my bag, but I decide to wait a moment before passing out the supplies. Instead, I have the students sit in a circle, and I explain that today we are going to talk about friends. I ask a few of the older students to name some of their friends. At first they are shy, but then they start calling out names of other students in the class, then the teacher, then myself, all considered “friends.” “Now that we’ve talked about some of our friends, can we draw ourselves with our friends?” I ask.

The children hurry to the table and start reaching eagerly for the sheets of paper I am distributing. Some are already choosing their favorite color crayon before they even have their paper. I tell them to be patient, but inside I am thrilled by the students’ overall excitement and enthusiasm. Some of the children still seem unsure of themselves, but after a few minutes everyone is drawing.

As I walk around the table, I am struck by how much the children collaborate with one another, asking questions about their drawings and giving suggestions. Sometimes they go so far as to draw on each other’s papers, an activity I attempt to discourage. They tell me they are just helping each other, and while I understand, I really want each child to do their own drawing. It is especially hard for me to explain this to the teacher, who often tries to “assist” the children by drawing parts of their pictures. I try to clarify that the actual appearance of the children’s drawings is not as important as giving the children the opportunity to express themselves creatively and independently. She agrees to give the children more freedom, but I know that my reasoning is unfamiliar to her. From my experience in Egypt, it does not appear that creative expression is regularly emphasized or encouraged with preschool children. And yet, as I watch these young children, I can’t help being amazed at how readily they accept the invitation to be artists.



Me and My Friends, Khaled, 7.
"I am the one in black."

DAY 3: MY FAMILY

Encouraged by the children's enthusiasm, I arrive the next day eager to continue the project with the topic of family. Before passing out the paper and crayons, I go around the circle and ask the children to name the people in their family. Some of the younger students reply with a simple "Mama wa Baba," but others are excited to list all their brothers and sisters.

As they begin drawing, I am interested in the different ways they choose to portray their families. Some choose one family member to draw, such as their mother, while others fill their paper with various figures. Some just draw the actual people in their family, while others draw their family in their house.

Regardless of their approach, the children seem to be concentrating more today, and they spend a long time on their drawings. The teacher, worried that the students are taking too long, tries to hurry them with a brusque "Yalla! (Hurry up!)", but I ask her to give the kids as much time as they need. Indeed, I am glad to see the children carefully select their colors and think about what they want to draw before making marks on the paper. I wonder if their increased attention today is due to the topic, as I sense that family is especially important to many of them. I often see the children's parents or older siblings when they come to pick them up from school, and the children invariably drop what they are doing and run into the arms of their mother or father, brother or sister. From my experiences, this type of response is natural for young children in most cultures when they feel a strong bond and attachment to their families. My time in Cairo however has suggested that these family bonds are particularly strong in Egypt, where there is a keen emphasis on family name and honor, and where family duties are a priority in all social classes. The children of the kindergarten are still too young to have many family responsibilities, yet most are already experiencing the importance of family. As I walk around the table, I am excited to see that family closeness emerging in the children's drawings as they naturally document this element of their culture.



My Family, Isara, 5.

“This is me and my dad (in black) and my mom (in yellow) with my brothers and sisters in our house.”

DAY 4: MY KINDERGARTEN

For the past few days the topics have focused primarily on people, but today I challenge the children by asking them to draw a place: the school. Many of the kids begin by drawing the people in the kindergarten, including the teacher, their friends, and even me, but I encourage them also to think about drawing their classroom or the playground or the school building. Like yesterday, they take more time with their drawings and add more details. It appears that, in addition to relating to the subject matter, the children are becoming more comfortable with drawing creatively and using their imaginations. They are focusing more on their own drawings, and they seem proud of their work. I'm still not sure if the teacher and classroom aides understand the children's enthusiasm, but they are doing their best to assist with the project. One of the aides admonishes me when I fill up the crayon bowls, telling me to put only four or five in each bowl, equal to one for each student. I suppose that the use of so many crayons appears wasteful to some of the Egyptian women, but to me the variety is necessary both for the beauty of the children's pictures as well as the opportunity for them to use their creativity.

Indeed, as I watch the children draw their kindergarten, I am amazed at how they use so many bright colors and fill up the entire sheet of paper. The school in their pictures looks alive and inviting, full of activity. I can't help but look around at what I see as a bare classroom, with its faded walls, mismatched furniture, and few old or broken toys. I glance outside the window at the rusty monkey bars and sagging swings, then back at the children's papers. The smiling faces, the mix of colors, the scribbles of activity all ignore the age and poverty of the facility. I wonder if they are simply blind to the things I notice . . . or perhaps I am somehow failing to see beyond the surface of reality. Perhaps I also need to develop my creative imagination.



My Kindergarten, Nooran, 5.
"This is me and the teachers and my friend in our classroom."

DAY 5: MY NEIGHBORHOOD

Today I ask the children to draw their neighborhood, Imbaba, an area on the outskirts of Cairo. I am curious to observe how the children will illustrate Imbaba. The area is known for its slums and high levels of poverty and population density, but after seeing yesterday's idealistic portrayals of the school, I wonder if the children will overlook those aspects of their neighborhood.

I notice that most of the children are still focusing on people, especially themselves and their families. "It's wonderful to draw yourself or your family in your neighborhood," I encourage them, "but what other things can you draw to show us where you are?" Some of the kids still appear confused, and I realize that it might be hard for them to draw something that they cannot immediately observe. I recognize the challenge, but I'm excited to encourage them to think and use their creativity.

"What are some things you see in Imbaba?"

After a moment, Isara calls out, "Houses!"

"Shops!" adds Yousef.

"Restaurants!"

"Cars!"

"Bikes!"

"The train!"

They busy themselves with drawing these different attributes of Imbaba while I walk around and ask individual students about their drawings. They show me bicycles, stores, streets, coffeehouses, and buildings, but no one shows me the dirt, trash, or destitution that Imbaba is known for, and that I see every time I come here. Rather, Imbaba is portrayed with a sense of bustle and colorful activity that

seems, like the children's visions of their classroom to improve on the surface of reality. As most of the children have never been outside of Imbaba, it is only natural they would overlook the poverty that is so obvious to my American eyes. When I walk through the streets, I see what appears to be a depressed society. Most women stay inside; the many jobless men sit in the coffeehouses for hours, attempting to kill time; the older school children stare out the paneless windows of an imposing cement building, wearing dirty uniforms that don't fit. These are scenes from the Imbaba that I see, this is the "reality" that emerges in my own documentary pictures. It is thus invaluable to have the children participate in the documentary process, because they capture another reality that I would otherwise miss. If this is what they see, is it not just as much a portrayal of reality as my own view of Imbaba?

In many of the children's drawings today there is something I do not recognize: small colored dots sprinkled over the page. "What's this?" I ask Isara. "Matar (Rain)," she says pointing out the window. Indeed, Cairo is getting an extremely rare drizzle today, and almost all the children want to include the rain as a feature of Imbaba. I can't help thinking of my own childhood drawings, in which every picture included a blue sky and bright sun, regardless of the actual weather. I am beginning to realize that it is not only these Egyptian children of Imbaba who tend to create ideal realities in their drawings.



My Neighborhood, Marihan, 5.
"I am in a building. It is raining outside."

DAY 6: MY COUNTRY

I start today by having the kids review the topics we have drawn before, to try to help them understand the progression from ideas like “myself” to bigger concepts like family, school, neighborhood, and today’s topic, “My Country.”

“What country do you live in?” I ask.

Only several reply. “Masr! (Egypt!)”

“Right,” I say, asking the other kids to repeat “Masr.” “And what are some things that you find in Egypt?”

“Our school?” Yousef suggests.

“Roads?” Mohammad offers.

“That’s true,” I said, sensing that this might be harder than I thought, “but what other things do you think about that are only in Egypt?”

They are silent for a minute until the teacher points to a picture on the wall.

“Al ahram! (The pyramids!)”

Some of them start to understand now and mention the Nile and the desert, and as I pass out paper they start drawing rivers and deserts and pyramids. Isara even draws the Egyptian president waving an Egyptian flag. Yet other students seem unsure of what to draw, particularly the younger children, who are not more than two or three years old. Ala draws a sheet of purple marks that she says are “teeth,” while Nada draws ants, and Khaled draws random people. The concept of country is more challenging for them than I thought it might be. I realize that some of my ideas for topics, like the world, peace, and religion, might also be too abstract, and I might need to revisit my plan.

I wonder how the project would be different if done with preschool children in the United States. Do most American five-year-olds know the name of their country? What symbols or ideas would a group of American children living in a poor urban neighborhood use to portray America? Would certain abstract concepts be difficult for them? There are some aspects of these Egyptian children's drawings that immediately stand out as different from the drawings of American children that I remember from my childhood and from children I have worked with in the States. Most striking perhaps is the fact that Egyptian children rarely draw people smiling. The pictures themselves have happy themes, but the faces are usually drawn with a simple line or circle for a mouth, rather than the smile that I am used to seeing. I have also noticed that Egyptian children don't always draw hair on their figures, perhaps because the majority of women wear a *hijab* (headscarf). The differences are subtle yet interesting to consider.



My Country, Isara, 5.

“This is Egypt. You can see a lot of pyramids and boats in the Nile and fish in the Nile. I am standing in the picture with Hosni Mubarak, who is holding the Egyptian flag.”

DAY 7: MY HOLIDAY TRADITIONS

I had originally planned to ask the children to draw about traditions, but I decide to reframe the topic as holiday traditions to make the concept less abstract. I am especially excited to see what the children draw since this is one area that I cannot document or directly observe on my own. First, all the children are Muslim so they have special insight into the traditions associated with Ramadan, Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-al-Adha, and other Islamic holidays that I cannot fully experience. Moreover, regardless of religious differences, the children's drawings are windows into special customs and festivities that my eyes wouldn't otherwise see.

The children's drawings show scenes that remind me of my own family traditions. All the children draw their families, indicating how holidays in Egypt are days of gathering just as they are in America. Isara points out that all the people in her picture are wearing fancy holiday dresses, and Nooran identifies one of the shapes on her page as *lahma*, a kind of food that is a special treat at her home on holidays. Marihan draws her family watching a popular Ramadan television series, which makes me think of the Christmas television specials that we watch in America. Yomna draws a scene of her mother serving a birthday cake to her and her friends, an image that brings back memories of my own childhood birthday parties.

The similarities shouldn't be surprising, and I can't help finding them somewhat comforting. There seems to be so much suspicion and mistrust between the West and the Muslim world, with people in both places assuming that the two cultures are too different to understand one another and respect one another. And yet, while we may differ in some aspects, the children's drawings indicate that we are almost identical in other ways, perhaps in the things that matter most: the ways we feel about our families and traditions, and the simple ways in which we seek happiness.



My Holiday Traditions, Yomna, 4.
“This is a picture of my mom serving a birthday cake to me and my brothers and sisters on my birthday.”

DAY 8: MY FUTURE

I ask the children to think about what they want to be when they grow up. While this is a common topic in America, I am unsure how the Egyptian children will respond. It is not as common for women to work in Egypt as it is in the United States, so I wonder if the girls have ever thought of themselves as having a profession. In addition, I wonder how often any of the children, male or female, have encountered people in professional careers. Most of the kids are from poor families, and their parents are laborers who don't usually have the luxury of "choosing" their jobs.

Once again, the children surprise me, portraying themselves as doctors, engineers, army generals, and police officers. It appears that, like American children, they believe they can be anything. They do not yet think about poor living conditions, humble schools, or even gender expectations. At this young age, the future holds endless possibilities.

Like the portrayals of their school and neighborhood, the children's drawings of their futures convey idealistic hope and optimism, and I can't be quite as optimistic for all of them. From what I have observed in Cairo, when young people reach their teens, they begin to understand the lack of jobs and economic depression that permeates Egypt, and this harsh reality can breed a sense of futility and a culture of despair. This is evident in the sullen faces of the older boys I pass everyday on the streets, evident in my conversations with vendors and neighbors, evident in the throngs of men registering to fight in Iraq in hope of martyrdom. I fear that it will soon be evident in the lives of the Children of the Nile; yet their drawings indicate that, at least for now, they still have hope. And that gives me some hope too.



My Future, Mohammad, 4.

“When I grow up I want to be an engineer.

This is a picture of me near some of the roads and buildings that I constructed.”

DAY 9: MY WISHES

There is a new girl in the kindergarten today. Her face and hands are streaked with dirt, and her soiled boy-style clothes are too big for her thin body. She seems unable to form words, and instead points or uses quiet grunts to communicate. I get the other students started on drawing their wishes, then I go to where the new girl stands in the corner, watching the other children. She seems surprised as I take her hand and lead her to an empty seat and give her a sheet of paper and a crayon. She smiles as she looks at the paper and crayon, then looks back at me, seemingly unsure how to use them. "You can draw anything you want," I encourage her, but she still looks confused. I kneel beside her and place the crayon gently in her hand, then use my own hand to guide her in making a soft red mark on the paper. Her face lights up as she sees the line appear, and she looks up at me beaming. I help her again, this time to make a circle. "Now you try it all by yourself," I tell her. I start checking on the other kids, but less than a moment passes before I feel a soft tug on my shirt. The new girl shows me her paper where she has made a faint mark in the corner, her eyes shining with pride. I tell her what a good job she's doing and encourage her to keep going. For the rest of the time, she labors over the simple red lines, calling me over again and again to look at her accomplishments.

As I look at the other children's colorful, detailed drawings, I realize how far they have come, in both their artistic abilities and creative thinking. Their drawings now seem so developed when I compare them with the work of the new girl who has probably never used a crayon before today. It encourages me to think that the project might be helping all the children learn, regardless of where they might be in the creative process.



My Wishes, Marihan, 5.

“This is a picture of me with my mom. In the picture I have pretty long hair. My mom always cuts my hair short. I wish I had long hair.”

DAY 10: MY DREAMS

I have chosen dreams as the final topic for the last day of the drawing project, yet the teacher is doubtful. “That will be too hard for them,” she says. I know the concept of dreams is challenging, but I disagree with the teacher’s assessment of the children’s abilities.

“They’ve been doing so well though,” I point out. “Look how far they’ve come since we first started a couple of weeks ago.”

She nods but remains unconvinced.

“How about we start with dreams,” I suggest, “and if it’s too hard for them, I can just have them start over with something else.”

This appears to be an acceptable compromise, so I have the children sit in a circle as we’ve done before and share a dream they’ve had. I am surprised at how eager they are to tell about their dreams, and how vividly they seem to remember them. Their drawings tell their stories in even more detail: Isara draws herself in a garden with her mom, Magdy draws his estranged father returning home, Yousef draws himself hiding under a table, Khaled draws himself and his family floating in a river. I don’t know if the children actually had these dreams, but even if the scenes are from the children’s imaginations, the pictures indicate how much they have grown in their abilities to engage their creative imaginations and to communicate on paper some of what they are thinking and feeling about their lives.



My Dreams, Magdy, 5.

“I had a dream that my dad, the one in black, came home to our family.
He went away a long time ago.”