

FROM SOURCE TO SHEET: FINDING CAIRO'S PAPERMAKERS

Laila Hammoud, Dima Tannir and Katherine Van Uytrecht

INTRODUCTION

One of the oldest traditions in Egypt is paper making, which dates back more than 5,000 years. The Ancient Egyptians produced paper out of papyrus plant piths to use as a writing instrument. This research investigates contemporary alternative papermaking practices. It centres on papermaking as we know it today, in which paper is pulped and pressed out of cellulose fibers; of cotton, bagasse, rice, wheat, or hemp straw. Our particular focus is on finding high-quality archival fine art papers produced in Cairo.

As educators at the German University in Cairo, we aimed to investigate this practice in Egypt today, as our students are consistently searching for paper in an economy of impasse on imported goods and with a true decline of supply in paper sourcing markets. This led us to a series of research questions: Does papermaking and fine art papermaking exist in Egypt? What initiatives have risen to answer the paper demand in Egypt?

HISTORY OF PAPERMAKING IN EGYPT

According to Dr. Eman Abdallah Tohami, in her paper on the history and evolution of papermaking and printing in Egypt, the use of papyrus for Ancient Egyptians was by virtue of its prolific growth on the banks of the Nile River as stated by Al Tohami (2021, p.3171). She continues to explain that the word paper in the English language owes itself to the papyrus plant. Albeit, it was the Chinese who were first to mechanically pulp, press and produce what we call paper today.

Egypt was a key location in the introduction of paper to Europe from the East. After the development of paper in China it spread West through the Islamic world. According to Jonathan Bloom (2001, p.90), papermaking from the East was introduced to Egypt from Syria in the ninth century with it being manufactured there in the tenth. A shift from papyrus making to papermaking began,

with papyrus making replaced by the new method by the thirteenth century. This paper was almost entirely made of linen rag and had been made in moulds, sized with starch to make them suitable for writing.

Bloom (2001, p.92) mentions that most paper mills were confined to the Fustat area of Old Cairo during the 1240s. This was due to the ample water supply from the banks of the Nile neighbouring the Fustat area and not the rest of Cairo. Still, Bloom suggests that until the 1800s, paper in Egypt was treated as a luxury, was scarce, and



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure Titles and Information

Fig 1. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) Ataba Supplier One Exterior [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Fig 2. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) Ataba Paper Supplier Two Interior [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

correspondence occurred on the insides of envelopes or torn blank areas on written papers.

The issue with importing paper to Egypt is no new plight. In fact, the difficulty with importing began in 1863 in the time of Khedive Isma'il Pasha who ordered the establishment of the first papermaking mill to supply an increasing demand for the Bulaq Printing press (National printing press) and the governmental needs for paper, Al Tohami (2021, p.3176). This state-of-the-art mill equipped with British machinery swiftly became a resource for a variety of paper types for the government and non-governmental presses. As a consequence, Egypt witnessed a literary and publishing renaissance with the capacity for paper and printing expanding exponentially.

This burgeoning industry continued to prosper into the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1929, the Greek family of Lagoudakis inaugurated their Lagoudakis & Co. papermaking mill in Alexandria, Egypt, Al Tohami (2021, p.3186). The papermaking industry continued to prosper in Egypt and the official governmental census of mills was twenty-five establishments by 1954, according to the Annual Handbook of Egyptian Industries (1953-1954), Al Tohami (2021, p.3188-3190). It is notable that the majority of the owners of these mills were of Greek, French, Armenian origins with little information to Egyptian-owned establishments.

The paper produced in these establishments was mainly pulped from rice straw mixed with mechanical pulp (wood pulp), as well as 100% sulfate paper, and cardboard paper. The rice and mechanical pulp mixture produced a type of paper that is smoother on one side. Other paper types that were primarily being produced are cigarette rolling paper, newsprint, cellophane paper for packaging, cardboard, craft, manilla paper and photographic paper.

The historical research was concluded with negligible, if no traces of recent fine art papermaking production found in Egypt. This necessitated a series of field research visits and interviews which we recount in this article. What attempts are there in supplying Egypt with fine art paper? Who took the initiative to fill the gap in the papermaking market with the collapsing market of paper supply in Egypt? What are the consequences of relying on imported paper for students and artists in the fine arts industry in Egypt?

CAIRENE PAPER MARKET TODAY

Our search for Cairo Papermakers began in Ataba, Cairo's largest Market, which has a known 'Paper Market' within it. The Paper Market, also known as *sūq al-warrāqīn*, dates back to the Mamluk and Ottoman Era and is situated in Ataba Cairo neighbouring major religious institutions that harbored scholars and Islamic teachings, as stated by Quickel (2017, p.306-307). This scholarly ecosystem required scribes and bookmakers as well as paper-makers to supply the educational institutions around them. The market continued to become



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Fig 3. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) Dima and Laila at El Nafeza [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.
 Fig 4. Tannir, D. (2025) El Nafeza Warehouse [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.
 Fig 5. Hammoud, L. (2025) Soliman Artwork One [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

a prominent location for paper merchants to meet the needs of the neighbouring institutions until today.

On immediate arrival to the market, we noticed deliveries of paper. Most of these were coated commercial printing papers, imported from Europe and China. Of the various paper merchants we interviewed, all the owners and staff gave a similar response to our question about Egyptian handmade or fine art cotton papers. 'It does not exist in Egypt', said Respondent A (2025). They reported that the big commercial paper mills in Egypt all produce recycled paper for the newspaper and packaging industry. The only mills producing local paper are those based in the Delta region using sugar cane and rice agricultural waste to produce paper for school books. The only shop in Ataba that we could find supplying fine art paper was a wedding invitation supplier, who imported heavyweight watercolour and cotton paper from the Fabriano mill.

When asked about why Egypt, one of the most famous cotton producers in the world, does not produce cotton rag paper, the answers varied from political anecdotes of 'we produce to export and then pay high prices to import the product back' to simple answers of supply and demand, and high costs of production (Respondent B, 2025). Investigating a little further, it seems that changing import laws and trade agreements in recent years have made it cheaper to import papers from Europe rather than producing locally (European Commission for Trade and Economic Security 2025).

Most of the papers sold at the Ataba Paper Market are imported by a few main import agencies who control the market. They tend to supply publishing houses and individuals, such as design students, so there is no demand for high-quality archival fine art papers. Decreased demand for paper in general and specifically high-quality paper have increased with a changing economy and with the COVID crisis, causing many smaller publishing houses to shut down.

We began to question: If the Ataba Paper Market does not supply local fine art paper or know who produces it, then who does? Does it even exist?

AL NAFEZA FOUNDATION

Guided by various Egyptian artists, designers and bookbinders, we heard about the El Nafeza Foundation, a papermaking art centre in Old Cairo. El Nafeza was formally established in 2007 by papermakers Dr. Enas Khamis and Dr. Mohamed Abouelnaga. They were both self-taught and began making paper using their kitchen blender to experiment with making different pulps. As their interest and skill grew they journeyed to Japan to learn papermaking and how to set up a workshop (Khamis 2025).

Following the Japanese workshop model they set up their workshop in Old Cairo where they began training 10 local people to make paper.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Fig 6. Hammoud, L. (2025) Soliman Artwork Two [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.
 Fig 7. Hammoud, L. (2025) Dr Soliman in His Studio [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.
 Fig 8. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) IFAO Workshop One [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Their intention was to support the local community as well as train and educate artisans, 'and make the best paper-makers in the area, for them to go on and start their own workshops later on to teach others and for there to be other workshops and paper-makers in the market like the Nafeza foundation' said Khamis (2025). At its height, El Nafeza had 35 local employees, collaborating with the deaf and mute community with over 50% of the workforce from that community.

Another aim was to tackle environmental pollution, using agricultural waste rice straw that would otherwise be burned for pulp. The foundation garnered success and national publicity as they were invited to attend COP14 and COP27 by The Ministry of the Environment to showcase Egyptian paper-makers. In 2011, they reached international publicity when they became one of twelve finalists out of 650 applicants for the acclaimed BBC World Challenge award (BBC 2011).

We made a trip to the warehouse of Al Nafeza Foundation, where we met with Youssef Abouelnaga who showed us around the warehouse and the various paper products that Al Nafeza had stocked from its now stopped production. The tour of the warehouse allowed us to observe the paper produced first-hand, and it varied in size from A5 up to sheets of 1 meter by 2 meters. The paper consisted mostly of rice straw paper and a little stock of cotton paper. It had a rough texture on the recto and a smooth texture on the verso. Referring back to our interview with Khamis, she had mentioned that they experimented with rice straw, the Flower of the Nile, cotton, straw, sugar cane, banana and papyrus (Khamis 2025).

The papermaking practice at Al Nafeza came to a halt in 2022 due to equipment getting stolen, rising prices for raw material and transport, with an economy suffering a dramatic inflation in Egypt. For all its remarkable success, as a small, non-funded industry, the organisation was vulnerable, and in 2020 they had to discontinue operations after a robbery of all their equipment. They initially received public funding, but this only lasted for a few years. Currently, the sons of Khamis hope to continue with Abouelnaga to restart the papermaking workshop next year (Khamis 2025).

ARTIST PAPERMAKERS IN CAIRO

With our search to find fine art paper mills and makers issuing no results, we decided to search for Egyptian artists that use papermaking in their practice. We met Dr. Ahmed Soliman, artist, paper-maker and professor at Helwan University's Art Education Department. Soliman has a long history of papermaking, gaining a PhD from Helwan University and Buffalo State University, New York, in the US, and exhibiting his work nationally and internationally (Fine Art Sector, n.d.). He has been involved in initiating still-operating papermaking social enterprises in and outside of Cairo, and continues to teach papermaking to students at Helwan University.

Arriving at his studio in Shrouk, Soliman is quick to acknowledge that



Figure 9



Figure 10

Fig 9. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) IFAO Letterpress Workshop[Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Fig 10. Hammoud, L. (2025) Lilian Amin [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

a huge amount of his success is due to the open teachers and artists who encouraged him to experiment and supported him with the skills and equipment to hone his art. Artists such as Kenneth Noland, Liliane Karnouk and Mounir Canaan have all contributed to Soliman's development as a paper-maker, artist and educator (Soliman, 2025).

Soliman began his interest in papermaking as a school boy, pressing flowers and curious about how the material could be flattened but became brittle and inflexible. After starting his studies at college, he shared this interest with Dr Hassan Ragab, the founder of the Papyrus Institute in Giza (Giza Governorate, n.d.). Together, they worked to re-create the idea of pressed plants into paper. Ragab, the foremost expert in papyrus making and bringing the artform back to Egypt, was very generous in sharing his knowledge, lab and library and collaborated with Soliman in this research. They began experimenting using direct fibres like pulp and laminating and transferring fibres like papyrus papermaking. They developed a unique papermaking technique and style that combines Western and Asian pulp papers with ancient Egyptian papyrus techniques (Pharaonic Village 2023).

During his PhD in the USA, under the tutelage of Paul D. Martin, Soliman met artist Kenneth Noland, a leader in Colour Field painting in the 1960's, who gave him a Hollander beater and paper moulds to take back to Egypt (Soliman 2025). On his return to Cairo, Soliman wished to transfer his knowledge to a social enterprise.

He volunteered for three years with APE, the Association for the Protection of the Environment, teaching papermaking and donated a paper beater to the programme. APE, is an NGO dedicated to the sustainable development of the environment. In 1994, they established the Paper Recycling and Handicrafts Unit, working with refuse collectors and underprivileged people to improve their social, economic, health, educational and cultural status in the Moqattam area in Cairo (Association for the Protection of the Environment from Pollution, n.d.). A main aim of the unit is to create job opportunities for women and girls. The unit is successful, still operating today, exporting goods to France, England, Germany and Canada (Association for the Protection of the Environment from Pollution, n.d.).

He later taught papermaking to women in the Fayoum area outside of Cairo. Here, he developed a papermaking programme with a focus on art appreciation, skill-building and economic empowerment, targeting women with little time outside family life to learn new skills. He educated them in the value of art and making, highlighting that the better the quality, the more potential earnings they could make. Like El Nafeza, there is an environmental aspect to the project, reducing agricultural waste burning and reusing otherwise waste materials. According to Soliman, the unit currently makes fine paper, wrapping paper and packaging for the Grand Egyptian Museum and the Egyptian Museum of Civilisation (Soliman, 2025).

Soliman believes in passing on the generosity, kindness and support

given to him to encourage a new generation of artist paper-makers. At the core of his philosophy is the belief in the power and role of education in keeping papermaking in Egypt alive and growing. When we asked what future he sees for papermaking in Egypt, he is positive, a refreshing approach different from most of the other interviewees we have spoken to. He believes that the key to change, all starts from education, and by educating the people and making them appreciate art, they can strengthen the economy to be able to support the future of paper in Egypt. Soliman also proposed that education can build the next generation of artist paper-makers as well as master artisans like the makers in Moqattam and Fayoum (Soliman 2025).

PUBLISHING HOUSES

We interviewed Lilian Amin, the director of the printing house at the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology (IFAO) in Mounira, Cairo, to get a Publisher's perspective on papermaking and supply in Cairo. IFAO is known to be the leading printing house for small editions and artists' books in Cairo and serves GUC students. They are known for consistent quality printing, paper, ink, leather and bookbinding material. The printing house dates back to 1898 as a house of edition for research in Egyptology, archaeology, Coptic studies and Arabic studies. It boasts centering traditional techniques while keeping up with technological advances in the printing industry.

Amin spoke (2025) of the challenges the printing house had gone through over the past five years, with a series of political and economical difficulties and the recent recession, COVID-19, as well as the current crisis of inflation of the local currency.

Her main observation on fluctuating paper availability and quality is an issue of supply and demand. The combination of the COVID lockdown, war in Ukraine, and natural disasters in Greece, Turkey and Syria have all affected supplies, which have been exhausted. Europe and the USA prioritised supporting their own demands with little export to the rest of the world, and in particular to Africa (Amin 2025).

Additionally, the government over the past five years has economically prioritised supporting medicine, food and gas. In order to support educational needs, only the cheapest paper was imported to supplement local production and availability. This paper is of low quality according to Amin (2025). Amin also explained (2025) that further difficulties with import procedures currently mean that foreign suppliers face extra difficulties with exporting to Egypt.

Yet, the printing house continues to work towards sustaining itself with flexible and hands-on approaches while maintaining the quality in printing. Without international support from France, Amin admits that IFAO may not have been able to continue operations through this series of challenges. IFAO has always imported high-quality paper through import agencies such as Khattab (Amin 2025).

CONCLUSION

This research paper relied heavily on primary sources, visits and interviews to answer our questions on fine art papermaking practices in Cairo today. Our initial investigations show that papermaking in Egypt exists, mainly by large commercial factories producing recycled paper and low-quality packaging. In Cairo, smaller organisations producing handmade paper and paper products have risen in an attempt to cover the fine art paper sector, as initiatives have developed for economic empowerment and social upliftment of small communities. The papers produced by these initiatives are sometimes inconsistent and mainly made of rice straw. Cotton, flax and linen papers are harder to find. The economic situation in Egypt and the lack of governmental support to such initiatives result in organisations that are economically vulnerable, creating an unstable local paper market.

Fine art papermaking seems to be extremely limited, being produced on a very small scale by individual artists with a practice based in papermaking.

We observed a long and rich history of papermaking practices in general in Cairo that has diminished with time and further economic lockdown. With import and trade agreements making it cheaper to import fine art papers rather than produce them locally. Shifts in supply and demand, unstable currency and rising costs put further strain on the sector. In addition to the mounting challenges, we have also found hope in a group of resilient individuals with a love of papermaking who still believe there is a future for papermaking in Egypt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Al Tohami, E.A. (2021) The History and Development of Paper Industry and Printing in Egypt (1805-1955). *Journal of Faculty of Literature, Fayoum University*. 13:2

Amin L. (2025) Director of IFAO Printing House, interviewed by Dima Tannir, Katherine Van Uytrecht and Laila Hammoud, December 16, 2025, Physical Interview.

Association for the Protection of the Environment from Pollution, Show service (nd). <https://www.ape-eg.org/sub-services/show/5>

BBC Media Centre (2011) BBC World News announces the 2011 World Challenge finalists, BBC Media Centre, 12/18/2011. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/worldnews/110811world> (Accessed: 8 November 2025).

Bloom, J.M. (2001) *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*. 1st ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Environmental Protection Association Home (no date). <https://www.ape-eg.org/>

European Commission for Trade and Economic Security (2025) EU trade relations with Egypt. Facts, figures and latest developments. Available at: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/egypt_en#:~:text=The%20main%20import%20categories%20are,amounting%20to%20%E2%82%AC34.8%20billion (Accessed: 09/12/2025)

Fine Art Sector - Biographies - Ahmed Refaat Soliman Mohamed (no date). <https://www.fineart.gov.eg/eng/cv/cv.asp?IDS=399>

Home - Research Institute Papyrus, Cultural Attractions (nd). <http://www.giza.gov.eg/English/Tourism/Landmarks/ElInstitute%20papyrus.aspx>

Interviewee A. (2025) Bookseller. Interviewer Katherine Van Uytrecht and Laila Hammoud, October 30, 2025, physical interview.

Khamis E. (2025) Al Nafeza founder, interviewed by Dima Tannir, Katherine Van Uytrecht and Laila Hammoud, November 11, 2025, Physical Interview.

Pharaonic Village (2023) Hassan Ragab - The Pharaonic Village. https://pharaonicvillage.com/hassan_ragab/.

Quickel, A.T. (2017) Making Tools for Transmission: Mamluk and Ottoman Cairo's Papermakers, Copyists and Booksellers. *Eurasian Studies* 15, 2.

Soliman A. (2025) Paper Artist, Interviewed by Dima Tannir, Katherine Van Uytrecht and Laila Hammoud, December 16, 2025, Physical Interview

AUTHORS

Laila Hammoud, Dima Tannir and Katherine Van Uytrecht
German University in Cairo
Contact: katherine.van@guc.edu.eg

The authors are affiliated with the German University in Cairo. They advocate for culturally informed creative approaches that enrich the university environment through diverse perspectives and shared learning.

Laila Hammoud is an Egyptian designer, bookbinder, and educator based in the Bookbinding Workshop. Dima Tannir is a Lebanese graphic designer and educator in the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts. Katherine Van Uytrecht is a South African artist and educator working in the Printmaking Workshop.

IMAGE GALLERY



Figure 1. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) Ataba Supplier One Exterior [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Figure 2. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) Ataba Paper Supplier Two Interior [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Figure 3. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) Dima and Laila at El Nafeza [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.



Figure 4. Tannir, D. (2025) El Nafeza Warehouse [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Figure 5. Hammoud, L. (2025) Soliman Artwork One [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Figure 6. Hammoud, L. (2025) Soliman Artwork Two [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.

Figure 7. Hammoud, L. (2025) Dr Soliman in His Studio [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.



Figure 8. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) IFAO Workshop One [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.
Figure 9. Van Uytrecht, K. (2025) IFAO Letterpress Workshop [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.



Figure 10. Hammoud, L. (2025) Lilian Amin [Photograph]. At: Home: Private Collection.