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Engraved Ostrich Egg

Ottoman Cairo, ca. 1900

Signed Hasan Fahmi

Ostrich egg engraved with black, red, and blue

18 cm high, 14 cm diameter

Stock no.: A6127

An ostrich egg engraved with architectural illustrations in black ink, with highlights in red and blue. An inscription comprising the Basmala followed by part of verse 143 of Sura II (*al-baqarah*) of the Qur'an runs around the widest point of the egg. The top of the egg is divided into eighths, representing the eight thumn or administrative districts of the city devised by the French in the beginning of the 19th century. The most recognisable is Giza, represented by the Sphinx and two pyramids.

At the centre of the egg is a harbour containing three galleons and five smaller ships. From this body of water emerge several waterways, which divide up the egg. On the base of the egg is an anthropomorphised sun motif. There are four gates around this, possibly representing major Egyptian ports.

Though this egg was made for a Muslim, it features several churches with crucifixes and Coptic crosses.

The egg is signed Hasan Fahmi, who is associated with several examples of engraved ostrich eggs. The signature is somewhat difficult to read, as the name 'Hasan' is written horizontally and the name 'Fahmi' written vertically, with the final letters of both words merged together. There is an identical signature on an egg in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo (no. 393/2).¹ That egg was discovered in the Sufi Ahmad Al-Badawi Mosque in Tanta, Egypt, where it hung on an iron chain.² The lower portion of the egg is decorated with an illustration of the mosque in question, confirming that the egg was commissioned for that building.

A second egg in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo (no. 393/1) is also signed by Hasan Fahmi.³ It is mounted with an iron framework, indicating that it was intended to be hung. An egg in the Gayer Anderson Museum, Cairo (no. 1518/1), is signed 'engraved by Hasan Fahmi in Egypt'.⁴ This egg is most similar to ours, with densely packed cityscapes divided by waterways. It has similar inscriptions, including the same verse of the second Sura.⁵ There are also ports represented on the base of this egg, this time labelled Alexandria, Rashid, Damietta, and Suez, so our egg probably features the same ports.

Another engraved ostrich egg, wrongly attributed to Iran, is held in the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg (no. [МАЭ № 4256-1](#)). It is densely engraved with cityscapes and signed in a harbour by Hasan Fahmi.

Such eggs have sometimes been associated with Coptic Christianity. An egg in the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford (accession no. [1958.8.4](#)) is also signed Hasan Fahmi and has been associated with the Copts.⁶ Though our egg features Qur'anic inscriptions and Sufi imagery, it does feature churches topped with Coptic crosses.

An engraved ostrich egg which sold in Christie's in October 2000, signed by Hasan Fahmi, is dated AH 1211 (1796–7 CE).⁷ However, this date is likely at least 100 years too early. Much of the architecture depicted on all eggs by Hasan Fahmi is neo-Gothic, a style which reached its apex in Egypt in the late 19th century. The aforementioned example held in the Gayer Anderson Museum is engraved with a verse written by Sheikh bin Qwaider Al-Azhari Al-Khalili, who was born in 1204 (1789–90 CE), meaning this egg could only have been made in the 19th century or later. The egg found in the Ahmad al-Badawi mosque, now in the Museum of Islamic Arts Cairo, was likely installed during the renovation which was completed in 1320 AH/ 1902 CE.

Little is known of Hasan Fahmi. However, Ahmed Al-Shaqi discovered a Hasan Fahmi Ismail who worked as a teacher at the School of Arts and Crafts in Bulaq.⁸ This information was gleaned from Fahmi's own book, authored in 1915 CE.

Decorating ostrich eggs is an ancient art, with examples dating to the 7th century BCE excavated in Italy.⁹ The ostrich egg has had symbolic value across much of Asia and Africa related to fertility. All the Abrahamic religions associate some sort of symbolism with Ostrich eggs. In Judaism, in ancient times the egg was hung in synagogues to encourage attentive prayer.¹⁰ Mediterranean Christians, reflecting the decoration of earlier Greek and Roman temples, hung ostrich eggs from the ceilings of churches during late antiquity.¹¹ In the Islamic world, the ostrich egg was adopted as a symbol of life after death. A 15th-century Mamluk ostrich egg was found during the excavations of Quseir al-Qadim, painted with

Arabic inscriptions relating to death.¹² In the Ottoman period, ostrich eggs were hung in tombs, such as that of Suleiman the Magnificent (d. 1566).¹³

[1] See in Al-Shaqi, Ahmed. 'Ostrich eggs: masterpieces from Islamic Egypt', *Annales islamogiques* 53 (2019), pp. 347–390: figs. 2–11.

[2] *Ibid.*, paragraph 26.

[3] *Ibid.*, figs 12–18.

[4] *Ibid.*, figs 19–25.

[5] *Ibid.*, paragraph 40.

[6] Described in Atiya, Aziz S. *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. VI. New York: Macmillan, 1991, p. 1710.

[7] Christie's London, Islamic Art and Manuscripts, 10 October 2000, lot 202.

[8] Al-Shaqi. *Op. Cit.*, paragraph 81.

[9] See, for example, the eggs excavated in the Isis Tomb, Vulci, in the British Museum (accession nos. 1850,0227.5–1850,0227.9).

[10] Feodorov, Ioana. 'Soul Inspiration from Wadi el Natrun: Ostrich Eggs as Reminders of Vigilance in Praying', in Anthony J. Frendo and Kurstin Gatt (eds), *Arabic in Context: Essays on Language, Dialects, and Culture in Honour of Martin R. Zammit*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2025, pp. 381–414: p. 390.

[11] Green, Nile. 'Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam. *Al-Masaq* 18.1 (2006), pp. 27–66: p. 35.

[12] Agius, D. A. "Leave your homeland in search of prosperity": the ostrich egg in a burial site at Quseir al-Qadim in the Mamluk period', in U. Vermeulen and J. Van Steenbergen (eds.) *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras. Proceedings of the 9th and 10th international colloquium organised by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 2000 and May 2001*, Leuven: 2005, pp. 255–381.

[13] Galvaris, George. 'Some Aspects of Symbolic Use of Lights in the Eastern Church Candles, Lamps, and Ostrich Eggs', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 4.1 (1978), pp. 69–78: p. 70.