

## Culture



Uplifting messages. Iraqi master calligrapher Hassan Massoudy at work.

(October Gallery)

# Iraqi calligrapher conveys universal messages through Arabic script

Karen Dabrowska

London

Iraqi master calligrapher Hassan Massoudy uses Arabic calligraphy to convey universal messages and wisdom from both East and West.

His latest solo exhibition – “Breath, Gesture and Light” at London’s October Gallery – is a fantastic explosion of colours – blue, red, green, gold, etc. – and their different shades used to create a large letter. The quotes are from a diverse range of writers, including poet Charles Baudelaire, philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Virgil and Ibn Arabi.

From Joseph Fort Newton (1876-1950), Massoudy chose: “Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.” From Rumi he chose: “Towards another land, a country where only light reigns.” More than 40 works on a white background with a white frame have been created using water-based pigments on paper.

Massoudy translates ancient proverbs and poems into Arabic. He uses colour and brush strokes. Bold swoops elevate the written word and bring movement to the letters and words, which seem to have wings. Gazing at the works and reading the quotations is like reading philosophy that has uplifting messages.

“I would like to transmit the noble ideas of the human being and his dignity,” Massoudy said. “That is the message of my art. Since the age of 15, I have written notes in my notebooks and copied quotations, poems, sayings and proverbs that touch me. The quotes are short but they evoke abstract images that I try to portray in my works.”

“When I work I choose from my notebooks the phrase that appeals to me, either according to my state of mind or following the news. I take a word from the sentence, the key word and I magnify it by reconstructing the word with a new, large geometric structure,” Massoudy explained. “Then I write the whole sentence in the Kufic style of Kairouan. The keyword is written in a style that is personal to me and the phrase in an old style, so

I feel connected to the tradition.”

Even though he uses Arabic script, Massoudy said his message is universal.

“I have often noticed that people from all walks of life appreciate my work, even if they do not read Arabic,” he said. “In my work I try to enter into a dialogue with all. The quotations were written by men and women from the East and West, from antiquity to the present day. These are always phrases imbued with humanism, wisdom and poetry.”

He showed that affinity with a sentence by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941): “The East and West are ever in search of each other, and must eventually meet.”

“I hope that my work gives a positive image of the Arab-Islamic world. This is my greatest wish,” Massoudy said.

In a statement on Massoudy’s website, French writer Michel Tournier said: “What can be admired in Hassan Massoudy is the masterful use he makes of colours in his compositions. He has opalescent washes, flows of emerald, monochromes of beiges enriched with deep wood tones and sandalwood fragrances. This is a new era, which is then open to calligraphy.”

“Indeed, lovers of exoticism and antique may be disappointed. Hassan Massoudy is not the living fossil of the old Arabic calligraphy. He is an artist of our time. His art belongs to that very end of the twentieth century, despite the ancestral roots that he immerses in the tradition of the Orient,” Tournier added.

## Massoudy’s latest solo exhibition is a fantastic explosion of colours and their different shades used to create a large letter.

Massoudy’s new English-language book of works inspired by love poems from the Arab and Islamic world, “Calligraphies of Love” released in April 2017, is being sold in conjunction with the exhibition along with other books that describe the calligrapher’s creations.

His work is found in numerous public collections, including the British Museum; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts; the Sharjah Art Museum in the United Arab Emirates; the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan; the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore; and the Musée du quai Branly in Paris.

Peace and tolerance, central themes of his work, led him to work with Amnesty International, UNICEF and other related organisations. Massoudy’s work was used as the primary promotional image for the British Museum’s 2006 exhibition “Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East.”

Born in 1944 in Najaf, Iraq, Massoudy studied graphic design and fine arts in Baghdad. He enrolled at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he was influenced by Fernand Leger, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, in addition to Arabic masters.

After receiving his degree in 1975, he returned to calligraphy, employing classical styles in a newer and freer manner. Beginning in 1972, he toured Europe for 13 years with his “Arabesque” performance combining music, poetry and calligraphy.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.



Uplifting art. “Towards another land, a country where only light reigns” by Hassan Massoudy.

(October Gallery)

# Beirut private museum to showcase treasure trove of Arab artworks

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Beirut

Lebanese-Palestinian art patron Ramzi Dalloul has criss-crossed the Arab region over 40 years, accumulating a treasure trove of artworks that is one of the largest private collections of modern and contemporary Arab art. Dalloul hopes to share his collection in an art museum.

The Dalloul family collection is currently managed by Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF), which Ramzi’s son, Basel, established a year ago to organise and classify the collection of more than 4,000 artworks.

“Basel Dalloul wanted to achieve his father’s dream so he opened this foundation to do the inventory of the collection. The aim is to archive, document, preserve and authenticate each and every artwork purchased by Ramzi over the past four decades,” said DAF director Fadia Antar. “The creation of the foundation constituted the necessary (preliminary) step towards establishing the aspired museum of Arab art.”

The Dalloul collection probably rivals most other private collections in the region. It consists of paintings, photographs, sculptures and art installations by Arab artists such as Lebanon’s Paul Guiragossian, Nabil Nahas, Alfred Basbous and Ayman Baalbaki; Syrian artists Nazih Nabaa and Elias al-Zayyat; Palestinian artists Amer Shomali and Abdel Rahman Katanani; Iraq’s Faig Hassan and Mahmood Shubbar and Tunisia’s Mohamed Arejald among others.

Artwork lines the walls of four apartment floors of 450 sq. metres each, which were converted into art galleries. There are sections for the different genres: Egyptian art, Iraqi art, Palestinian, Sudanese, Algerian, Lebanese and so forth.

“Here we are in the storage area somehow, not in a gallery. Many of the works are hung for the sake of not stacking them but we still have some stacked because we have no space. What we have hanged may constitute some 20% of the whole collection,” Antar explained.

“You would be surprised that there are lots of art from Arab countries that Lebanese viewers were not aware of and this is what makes this collection special. We have works by some 320 Arab artists coming from across the Arab world without exception. Almost, since only art from the Comoros Islands is not represented,” she said.

Besides being an art aficionado, Ramzi Dalloul’s passion for Arab art is closely linked to his sense of Arab belonging and nationalist principles. “Because he is an Arab nationalist, when he saw that the dream of having a unified Arab nation was hard to achieve, he thought that unity can be achieved through culture, where great affinity exists between different artists in various parts of the Arab nation. We share the same language and the artworks talk to each other from one Arab country to another,” Antar said.

Dalloul had said art should be used to enlighten and raise awareness about political and economic matters in

addition to the rights of the citizen, Antar said. “In his quest for the artworks, he always looked for expressions of freedom, be it cultural, political or corporal. The paintings of his collection carried political and social statements. There is always a message behind.”

Many of the artworks are illustrative of the historical and cultural moments in each artist’s life. Shubbar’s series of twisted sign posts with bullet holes inscribed with name of places such as “Iraq Antiquities Museum” refer to the various wars in Iraq. Katanani depicts the harsh realities of Palestinian refugees living in camps in his multifaceted and creative works of art, created only from materials found at the camp. Sliman Mansour, another Palestinian artist, has his iconic painting of a peasant carrying the weight of Jerusalem on his back.

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Antar said plans were under way for a Beirut Arab Art Museum to house the collection but no location or date for construction has been set.

“The museum will be designed to provide a platform for Arab art and not something for the glory of one collector. It would be for the glory of Beirut and for the artists themselves. We want other organisations or art foundations to be part of the museum. What you see here is a project that is not pretentious at all,” she said.

Once built, with a planned size of 10,000- to 15,000-sq.-metres, the museum will be Beirut’s largest art space. Along with exhibition areas to display the foundation’s substantial collection, the museum is also planning to have temporary exhibitions and create education, research and conservation programming on Arab art.

In the meantime, DAF has been lending artworks to museums, galleries and exhibitions, including Mathaf Qatar, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Madrid’s Reina Sofia and London’s Tate Modern.

It is also publishing digitised versions of its collections online and building a library on Arab art for art professionals and artists to conduct research.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.



Enlightening art. A painting by Moroccan artist Mohammed Kacimi.

(Dalloul Art Foundation)