

**The New York Times**

February 27, 2013

# An Injection of Modernity Revives Arabic Calligraphy

By RANA F. SWEIS

AMMAN — Etched on ceramic plates or carved into glass cups, Arabic calligraphy designs, using a centuries-old art form that plays with the curves and horizontal lines of Arabic script, are gaining popularity across the Middle East.

Scripts can decorate objects made from a range of materials, including acrylic glass, wood, clay, stone and copper. The availability of diverse materials, and the use of new color schemes and modern styles are reviving this tradition and in the process helping to create a sense of cultural identity.

"There is a lot of interest in Arabic calligraphy, particularly when it comes to the more edgy and modern interpretations," said Samar Habayeb, the chief executive of Silsal, an upscale design house in Amman that has incorporated Arabic calligraphy in most of its collections.

"We are moving along with the times and incorporating Arabic calligraphy on a variety of products in modern ways," she said.

One of Silsal's more popular collections is named Tarateesh, Arabic for "splash," and inspired, Ms. Habayeb said, by the drip paintings of the American artist Jackson Pollock.

The collection is designed with bold Arabic letters, standing alone or elegantly joined, surrounded by splashes of bright color.

In the Arabic language, the way letters are written changes according to whether they stand alone or occur in the middle or at the end of a word. Short vowels, represented by a set of marks above or below letters, are sometimes used in calligraphy for design purposes.

An emphasis on geometric patterns and calligraphy was born of Islam's denunciation of figurative images. Figurative depictions, especially those of prophets, are still shunned, particularly by followers of Sunni Islam.

Poems and proverbs are popular subjects for calligraphic designs: Most Arab poetry, written in classical Arabic, is understood by all literate Arabs, transcending dialects and regionalisms.

Naqsh Design House, also in Amman, known for its contemporary minimalist style, has

incorporated Arabic calligraphy in its paintings, handbags and accessories. Some include the words of Arab poets like Mahmood Darwish or Gibran Khalil Gibran.

Verses by the Lebanese-American poet Elia Abu Madi spread across 10 paintings that cover Naqsh's walls. The verses speak of how well one should live, rather than how long. The polychromatic letters are painted vertically, horizontally and even upside down. An emphasized word in the poem is enlarged using a bright color.

"It has become a modern art form that attracts people from all over the region and at the same time emphasizes an Arab identity," said Shireen Abu Dail, 34, who founded Naqsh with other members of her family nearly two years ago.

A decade of rapid changes in the Middle East has raised the interest of international curators in the region, with attention to Islamic art and calligraphy. Calligraphic work has emerged dealing with religious, political, social, and even cultural issues.

There is a visible struggle to create a contemporary Arab cultural identity through artwork, including calligraphy, said Saleh Barakat, the founder of Agial Art Gallery in Beirut and an expert in modern Arab art.

"The Middle Eastern artist is fighting internally to convince his or her own people of the importance of art and externally by trying to get the West to acknowledge and validate his or her work," Mr. Barakat said in a lecture this month in Amman.

Silsal's ceramics have been featured at the British Museum in London in an exhibit on the Muslim pilgrimage of Hajj. A high-quality handmade ceramic bowl or plate, with a calligraphic design, can take several weeks to make.

Considered luxury items because of relatively high prices, collections from some local design houses have found a market outside Jordan. Other producers of simple, crisp designs in more colloquial Arabic that are less expensive have also found an export market.

Lara Kawash, 40, does not own a gallery or a design house but her sentimental word choices, use of bright colors and affordable prices have built her a following as far afield as Egypt.

Items that Ms. Kawash and her partners have designed and produced at her small workshop in Amman include a set of tea glasses in striking colors, engraved with the Arabic words tea and mint, as mint tea is a popular drink across the Middle East.

"We try to relate to the customers and use simple colloquial Arabic," said Ms. Kawash, who sells through various outlets and on the Internet. "Most importantly, I try to make the words relevant to the product, words that also have universal meanings."

Some items include popular song lyrics. A large flower vase, for example, reads: "I will only buy these flowers for my love."

The rising popularity of calligraphy carries the risk that it may become too fashionable — and eventually go out of style.

"There is a lot of competition with other designers since now everyone is doing this type of art," Ms. Kawash said. "To advance, you have to always have your own style, but to survive you also need to do something very unique."