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BEIRUT: The history of Arabic calligraphy as written by Western scholars, says Mouneer Al Shaarani, is incomplete. Over the centuries, the libraries in which many of the finest examples of calligraphy were stored were sacked and looted, their contents burned or thrown into rivers to disintegrate. Each successive wave of attackers, however, spared the Quran, a single text revered by all. As a result of this, Shaarani says, histories of the art form are often focused on religious texts, but calligraphy was never the exclusive domain of Islam.

Shaarani is a Syrian artist, book designer, writer and calligrapher. An eponymously titled exhibition of his work is currently on show at Gemmayzeh Art on 56th. Born in 1952, Shaarani studied with well-known Syrian calligrapher Badawi Al Dirany as a child, learning to write traditional calligraphic scripts including Kufic, Naskh, Thuluth, Nasta'liq, Riq'a and Diwani.

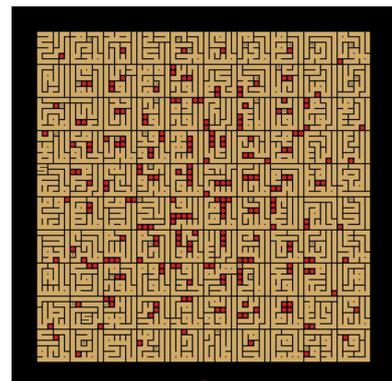
I am coming from the traditional roots of calligraphy, but I am a modern artist

It was while he was studying at the faculty of fine arts in Damascus that he began to question the emphasis among traditional calligraphers on remaining true to these ancient scripts, which had been fixed in one form for centuries.

Over the years, Shaarani went beyond the established histories surrounding these scripts to uncover their versatility, researching the evolution of Arabic calligraphy from 600 years before the dawn of Islam to its status under Ottoman rule, when the scripts were divided up, some designated for use in religious texts, other for government texts, still others for day-to-day life.

Then, Shaarani went off script. Today, the calligrapher is known as one of a small number of modern and contemporary Arab artists whose work revisits, adapts and reinvents the traditional art of calligraphy for today's world.

Shaarani works mostly in ink and gouache, producing painstakingly precise works on paper. His scripts, he says, have their roots in traditional scripts but the artist gives them a contemporary twist, sometimes adapting one letter, other times working from a fragment of a lost script to imagine or reinvent the rest.

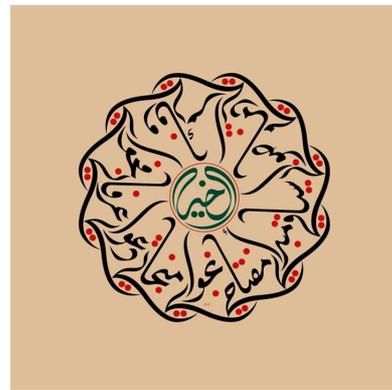


“I always say I am coming from the traditional roots of calligraphy,” he acknowledges, “but I am a modern artist.”

Unlike Samir Sayegh, Lebanon’s foremost contemporary calligrapher, Shaarani does not abandon the rigidity of traditional calligraphy, with its precise ratios, angles measurements, for a more informal, instinctive interpretation. Perhaps a product of his background in design, his pieces are marked by a studied perfection, of composition and of finish.

“Traditional calligraphers always used to create symmetrical work,” the artist notes, “but I say that you can make balance without symmetry.”

He gestures to a piece in which the swooping curves and sharp angles of his script, the stems of the alifs and lams inclined from right to left, hang suspended against a creamy expanse of blank paper. The ratio of text to empty space is precisely judged, the composition off-center yet perfectly balanced.



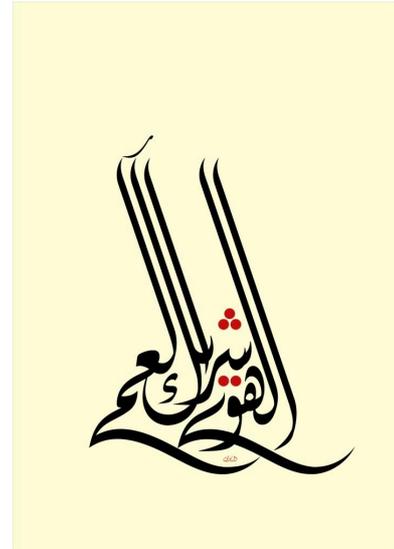
“It’s not empty,” the artist says, rejecting this description of the unmarked paper. “It’s like when you look at the sky or at the sea. There are huge distances involved but we feel that it’s not nothing. It’s something.”

Having left Syrian decades ago due to political problems, Shaarani has lived a nomadic life, settling in Lebanon, Cyprus, Algeria and Egypt before returning to live near Damascus 10 years ago. In the back left room of the gallery hang a series of works related to the artist’s homeland.



“There in al-Sham a beauty spot, had it not been for my wounds,” reads the text of one piece, a beautiful combination of deep red, purple and green with fiery orange nuqta. Sharp points contrast with perfect circles in the body of the text, while the stems of the letters bloom at the top into bells like tulip flowers.

A second work, “There in al-Sham dwells the mirror of my soul,” pairs the bold, contemporary lines of Shaarani’s own script with a sea of delicate Diwani, ornate, curling script developed in the 16th century. Shaarani has repeated the phrase dozens of times in black ink, highlighting the word “al-Sham” in deep red to form a repetitive, swooping pattern.



Exhibition tags provide the text of each work in Arabic and in English translation. Although Shaarani says that his work appeals to non-Arabic speakers on an aesthetic level, regardless of their engagement with the meaning, he admits that the words he chooses are important.

“I make art first of all,” he stresses, “but in this abstract art I say something ... I try to choose phrases that I believe in. I don’t like to make calligraphy just to make calligraphy. I want to make calligraphy with a good meaning. I feel that Arabic calligraphy is abstract, but a kind of abstract where we can put meanings on it, and I try to use this, because I believe that the artist must be with the people, must have a message to share.”

Mouneer Al Shaarani’s eponymous exhibition is on show at Art on 56th until Nov. 13. For more information, please call 01-570-331.