



Love Letters

Wissam Shawkat is giving Arabic calligraphy a contemporary twist, breathing new life into an old art. From large scale environmental projects to logos and branding work, Shawkat's innovative blend of art and corporate design is unique.

The intricate swirls of black are interspersed with diamonds, contrasting in red. The lines hang down the canvas, almost as if they are sliding, capturing the geometry in their wake. Beyond the beautiful shapes is a meaning. The lines are drawn out Arabic calligraphy. The work is by calligraphy artist Wissam Shawkat, part of a collection called *Letters of Love*. Each work contains a quotation translated into Arabic and hand-painted onto the canvas. The words are poetic, including "Love is the only freedom in the world," by the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran and "A loving heart can handle the world," by Beethoven.

Shawkat was born and raised in Iraq during trying times. In 1984 at the tender age of ten years old, his art teacher did some calligraphy on the blackboard in chalk. "From that moment, I mean wow; Arabic letters can take such a beautiful form. Something moved inside me," reminisces Shawkat. He started practicing calligraphy in his free time, using a famous calligrapher's book his father bought him, and his in-built natural talent. At times he would take his work to the art teacher for feedback.

"By 1985 the war between Iraq and Iran was really going. Basra was bombarded by missiles from Iran



and we had to run into shelters," explains Shawkat matter-of-factly. "I remember I spent a month in a shelter with only candlelight. There was nothing to do, so the only thing was to spend my time on calligraphy. All the time I was just practicing, practicing, practicing."

In 1986 the family was forced from Basra when a bomb hit their home. They fled to his father's home town, Mosul in the north of the country. Mosul at that time was peaceful, giving Shawkat the chance to finish



his schooling uninterrupted, and to complete a short calligraphy course. This course fed into his passion for the art. When the war finally drew to a close in 1998 the family returned to Basra, and Shawkat continued to teach himself the art of penmanship. "I didn't do any formal training under a Master in the traditional way. I am all self taught," Shawkat claims.

"The thing is, my dream was to do architecture," Shawkat confesses "...but in my city, Basra, in the south, there was no architecture school so I had to go to Baghdad. In that time it depended on the grades you got in high school. Although I had a 90, at that time even a 90 could not get you in. Because of the Saddam regime - they introduced something where only the sons of the martyrs or people who participated in the Iraq/Iran war could go and do architecture." His dream unfulfilled, Shawkat instead studied engineering and did well, but by the time he made it into a full time engineering job, his artistic ambitions were coming to the fore. He quickly realised engineering was not for

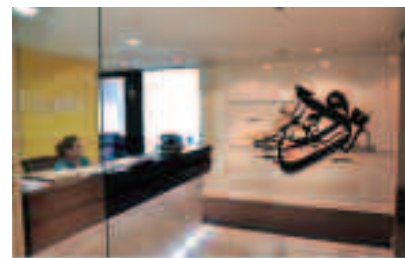
him and after only a month in an engineering role he left to follow his passion.

By this time his calligraphy work was becoming known, both within Iraq, and across the Arab world. In 1998 Shawkat participated in an international exhibition in Baghdad and won an award, giving him media attention across the region. The chief of a newspaper in Doha was so taken with his collection that he not only published a feature in the

paper, but also bought every work in the exhibition. "That for me was the biggest success," says Shawkat proudly. "He continued to buy more of my work and my name started being known in the Arab world and amongst fellow calligraphers."

Barriers still existed due to the sanctions against Iraq in the form of the nearly complete financial and trade embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council, but Shawkat's work





was making a name for itself. "In 1999 I participated in an exhibition in a city in Italy and the artworks went there, but I couldn't go. It was really difficult. Unless you finished your army service you were not even allowed to have a passport. The country was going into chaos," remembers Shawkat.

In 2001 he was invited to participate in a calligraphy exhibition in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. "It was really hard to send the artwork," Shawkat recalls. "It had to travel to Baghdad. There was no courier, no FedEx, nothing, because Iraq was still under sanctions. So they had to send it to Jordan, and from Jordan they could send it by FedEx. I spent lots of money doing that but there was something telling me to just do it." His instincts were right. The exhibition was successful and the Sharjah Art Museum bought one of his pieces.

Receiving a repeat invitation the following year, Shawkat again let his instincts dictate his fate. "I worked very hard on six pieces, then I went on a visit visa with the intention not to go back," says Shawkat. Leaving his wife and daughter behind was no easy decision, but it paid off. He landed his first job as a calligrapher in Dubai after three months, just as

his visa was about to expire. This role within an advertising agency led to his work being used in both an artistic and a corporate setting. "Lettering, design, logos. It's all to do with letters," Shawkat says. "It's all visual arts."

He worked for agencies for some time, his success allowing him to bring his family to join him. At the same time his artistic works were winning awards. Finally, he reached a point where he was ready to strike out on his own. Knowing it was a risk to give up his high paid agency role, he ignored the advice of friends, listened to his heart and took the plunge. He has now worked independently for six years and not looked back once.

Not content to restrict himself to traditional paper and canvas work, Shawkat's art continues to stretch the boundaries of contemporary calligraphy. "My work is now in books about logos and in books about art," he says. His accomplishments are significant. He has exhibited in New York,

and his work is represented in a number of galleries and public spaces.

Shawkat has also worked on a number of large scale environmental works, recently completing a project at the new international airport in Doha. "It's a bridge actually, a 300 metre bridge," Shawkat explains. Inspired by the Doha skyline, the work is abstract, combining lettering into the shapes of the surrounding city. The designs grace the side glass panels of the bridge, sanded in and highlighted by LED lighting at night. Unfortunately it won't be seen by the general public as it is in the VIP area of the airport. "I cannot even go there," laughs Shawkat.

One of his projects holds a special place in his heart – a mural-style work at the Dubai International Finance Center (DIFC). The graphics are stunning, turning the heads of passers-by. This was Shawkat's first large-scale project of this kind, pushing him to prominence. It was also the first major commission of his freelance career, signalling the success to follow.

To see more of Wissam Shawkat's work see: wissamshawkat.com.
Letters of Love can be seen at: www.g-l.com.