

# غرافيتي عربية

"Arabic Graffiti" brings together artists, graffiti writers and typographers from the Middle East and around the world who merge Arabic calligraphy with the art of graffiti writing, street art and urban culture. In addition to a rich assortment of photos featuring Arabic graffiti and street art styles, it includes essays by distinguished authors and scene experts, in which they explore the traditional elements, modern approaches, and the socio-political and cultural backgrounds which have shaped Arabic graffiti movements in the Middle East.

Curated and authored by Lebanese typographer Pascal Zoghbi and graffiti writer and publisher Stone aka Don Karl, "Arabic Graffiti" is an extensive and valuable reference on contemporary graffiti, urban calligraphy and type design in the realm of Arabic letters.



FROM HERE TO FAME  
PUBLISHING

www.fromheretofame.com

ISBN 978-3-937946-45-0



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ياسكال زغبى  
دون كارل - ستون



# Arabic Graffiti

ياسكال زغبى  
دون كارل - ستون



My Graffiti is Elastik...

مكتبة  
التحقيق  
بل فيل علو



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## 1.2

### Brief History of the Arabic Script

#### تاريخ مختصر للكتابة عند العرب

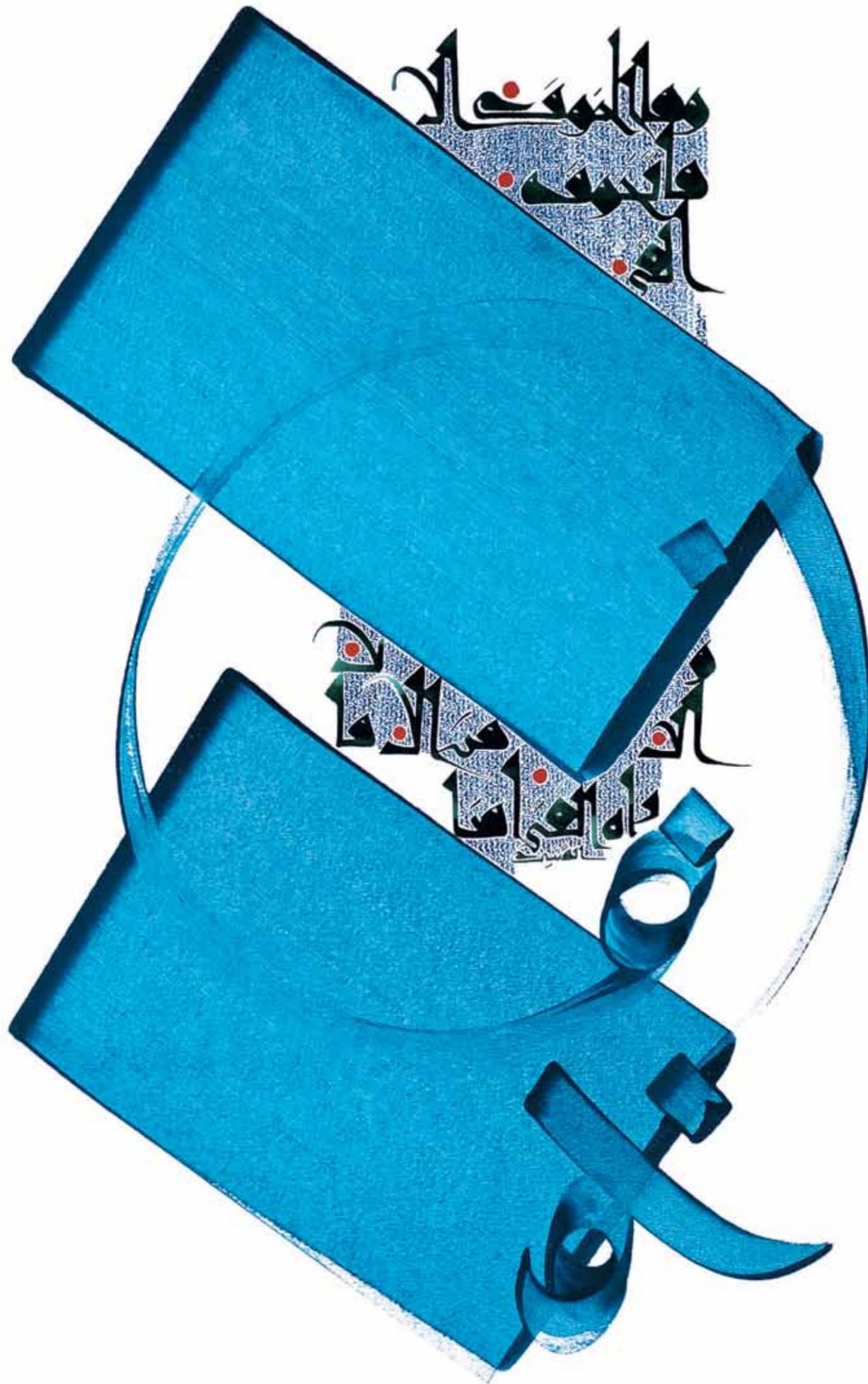
by Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès

The rich Arabic calligraphic tradition has had a long and influential history in shaping and regulating the visual aspect of the Arabic script. Originally conceived to represent the holy scriptures of the Koran, the Arabic script became an emblem of the Islamic religion, and therefore, its perceived beauty and reproduction became a matter of religious piety. Not only used for representing religious text, its use in profane texts and its function as ornamentation on everyday objects and architecture testifies to its special status within the Arab/Islamic cultures. It is a part of a holistic life philosophy in which artistic expression plays a vital role.

The Arabic alphabet evolved by first borrowing from neighboring civilizations and then developing in its own right as an independent script. With the collective contribution of many talented individuals and the influences of various cultures, calligraphy developed into a form of communication that balanced clarity with beauty in an art form that embodied disciplined freedom. The Arabic alphabet, like most alphabetic writing systems in use today, has its roots in the first developed alphabetic writing system invented around 1300 BCE by the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians developed a simple and limited set of phonetic characters that were easy to learn and adapt to various languages. As traders, the Phoenicians managed to spread the alphabet across their trade routes and port cities. The invention of the alphabet spread westward via the Greeks and eastward via the Aramaeans as far as India, and was adopted as a writing system by various Semitic, Indo-European and other languages. The Arabic alphabet, born in Arabia, is the last of the Semitic scripts (c. 500 CE). From its origin on the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabic language spread via the Islamic conquests to neighboring nations, into what constitutes the Arab/Islamic nations of today. As a language, it has replaced a number of native languages and was adopted by non-Arabic languages as a visible cultural allegiance to the Islamic faith. The Arabic language became a unifying cultural force, and its visual representation through calligraphy became the supreme artistic achievement of Islamic art.



1. Prayer inscribed on tiles in a mosque. Title written in Farsi script, prayer in Thuluth script. Iran



# 1.4

## Two Daughters of the Same Parents

### ابنتان للوالدين نفسيهما

Hassan Massoudy

وما الخوف إلا ما تخوَّفُهُ الفتى،  
ولا الأمن إلا ما رآه الفتى أمنا. (المتنبي)

1. "Fear is what is imagined by man, and security is what is deemed secure by him." Quote from al-Moutanabbi, HASSAN MASSOUDY, calligraphy on paper

The Arabic calligraphy I do literally comes directly from the heart, the movement of my arm and the heartbeat work together. When I direct the brush, I stop breathing. This also limits the size of the calligraphy: a brushstroke cannot last longer than it takes my heart to beat. So most Arabic calligraphy is limited to a diameter of maybe one, two meters. If the writing becomes any bigger, it has to be constructed and thus it is not calligraphy anymore, but a design. Other limitations are the size of the paper and the tools. When I painted a mural with the French graffiti writer Marko 93 — the only time I did try to do actual graffiti — I discovered the fluidity of the spray can, which suddenly allowed me to do a continuous gesture of five meters before stopping a stroke.

Arabic calligraphy and graffiti are two daughters of the same parents. They live their separate, independent lives, but they are related in many ways. Obviously both are about the use of letters and their alphabets, and their center of gravity is the beauty of writing. For both, a letter is more than just a letter and they fill them with emotions. The use of empty space and composition within this space is something else they have in common. The resemblance of Arabic calligraphy and graffiti is most obvious in tags, because here the tools — ink and pen — are quite the same. Gestures are also done with the whole body and are in sync with breathing. The movement of writing graffiti leaves the restrictions of the paper — it is like a dance in front of a wall.

Arabic calligraphy is the more conservative sister, bound to thousands of years of tradition and knowledge. When I started to do my contemporary calligraphy, there were some who did not like what I did, because I also bent the rules, starting with the colors and freeing myself from the strict forms of the letters. Over the years my art became more and more accepted, also by conservative calligraphers. Graffiti has more freedom from traditions, even if it is not without rules.

Calligraphy plays a social and political role in society, but graffiti does this in a more forceful way. Calligraphers are accepted and integrated in society, whereby graffiti writers act against the law; they impose and take over the streets, thus becoming more powerful. This power can be good for our society, with accomplished artists who offer their art for free and creative kids expressing themselves in a society where artistic education plays a far too little role.



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## 2.1 Bahrain's Calligraphic Messages

رسائل التخطيط  
البحرينية

Rana Jarbou

In this small desert kingdom in the Persian Gulf, stories from the present and past can be found on the walls of its hidden village communities which highlight an obvious territorial divide in its urban space. On the main roads, only signs and advertisements can be found on the clean, white walls. At times, angry cries are written on these walls, though they are instantly painted over. These expressions have found a temporary medium for venting social outrage, which is in constant flux. This medium then becomes a silenced narrative of a vital and much-needed discourse. Ultimately these expressions cannot be subdued as they are driven back to their sources, only to be uttered time and again.

In the closed off village communities, the expressions on the walls are left uncensored, reaching their different audiences despite the intention of some to address the authorities. The letters take on human characteristics, as graffiti shapes and fonts are conceptualized according to their different motives. Religious scriptures, aphorisms and historic references are written in colorful calligraphy. Influences range from the resistance in Lebanon, to stories from Karbala, to idols in Iran. A sense of belonging is manifested in these calligraphic writings, as graffiti writers reveal their identities and mark their existence through them. There is an abundance of glorifications of Hussain, the 'martyr of martyrs' and symbol of resistance, and commemorations of the battle of Karbala in the villages. These emphasize the Shiite identity and its affiliations, which continue to inspire their present day resistance and struggles. Their ultimate sacrifice for the ultimate cause, human dignity, is beautifully painted in different decorative forms.

على الدنيا بعدك العفاء  
1. "After you, let dust cover this world";  
unknown artist, Abu Saiba, Sar,  
Bahrain, 2008

كربلاء لازلت كربا و بلاء  
2. "Karbala, you are still an agony and  
scourge"; unknown artist, Abu Saiba,  
Bahrain, 2008

لا يوم كيومك يا أبا عبد الله  
3. "There is no day like your day, O Aba  
Abdullah"; unknown artist, Abu Saiba,  
Bahrain, 2008

يا حسين  
4. "O Hussain"; unknown artist, Abu  
Saiba, Bahrain, 2008



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Gaza has witnessed strong political and religious local graffiti painted by Palestinian fighters and residents. No Western graffiti art is present, since it is practically impossible for a foreign artist to enter Gaza. Before the withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza Strip, graffiti artists were either fighters themselves or often accompanied by Palestinian fighters, who guarded them from the Israeli soldiers.

The popularity of this medium of communication, which transformed walls into a channel no less important than newspapers, was due to the trust and confidence that people put in graffiti. Certain factors contributed to the popularity of some locations among graffiti artists. Typically, the safest regions gave them more freedom to work. However, other less secure locations were also explored; depending on the occasion, artists would paint on occupier's headquarters, army posts or even their vehicles. Sometimes certain shops were painted to warn their owners against violating directives. Another preferred location for artists are the populated areas, as these guarantee a wider reach. Most artists are excited when groups gather around them to see the work evolving into a beautiful artistic piece, and they can instantly grasp the reception of their work. An additional appeal of graffiti to artists is the fact that it is a collective work, which opens up more possibilities for creative expression to them.

Artists are able to express the population's concerns, worries and even joys, while transforming blocks of concrete into works of art. Since Palestinian graffiti is intended to be seen



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by all layers of society, its language, design and content must be clear, simple and legible, which naturally guarantees its increasing popularity.

The Israeli occupiers as well as the Palestinian factions themselves attempted to take control of graffiti many times and for many different reasons. The Oslo Peace Process went along with municipal clean up attempts by Fatah, and martyr portraits were banned by Hamas out of fear of idolization.<sup>2</sup> But whitewashed walls were usually quickly replaced by newly painted graffiti. After Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, however, Fatah could only keep their presence on the walls with non-political messages.

Graffiti in the West Bank reflects both the local and the international graffiti scene. Palestinian residents and renowned graffiti artists from around the globe intervene on the barrier wall and in the alleys. However, there is widespread opposition from the Palestinian art community as well as the general Palestinian public to painting the wall. For Palestinians, the graffiti by international artists beautifies the barrier and renders it acceptable. They argue that the wall should instead be left untouched as an eyesore.<sup>3</sup> Artists are only able to write on the Palestinian side of the barrier. On the Israeli side this is impossible, as it is heavily barricaded by barbed wire and is under constant patrol. Israeli soldiers do patrols along the Palestinian side as well, but only occasionally stop graffiti artists.

Several graffiti workshops and mural projects are regularly organized for children and young artists in refugee camps with the help of UNERWA and other organizations. International and local graffiti artists organize the events with a school or institution in the refugee camp and collaborate with UNERWA to carry out the workshops. They are aimed to help the children express their pain and feelings through drawings and express their national Palestinian identity.

1. & 2. "Gaza Graffiti", Mia Gröndahl, The American University in Cairo Press  
3. "The Aesthetics of Space: West Bank Graffiti and Global Artists", Hugh Lovatt

لن ننسى

1. "We will never forget" written on a wall, part of a long text, Askar refugee camp, Nablus, Palestine, 2007

الشهيد محمد الأصفر

2. "The martyr Mouhamad al-Asfar", a teenager standing in front of a stencil of his dead brother, Askar refugee camp, Nablus, Palestine, 2007

فلسطين / حنظلة

3. Hanzala figure sprayed looking at the word "Palestine", Askar refugee camp, Nablus, Palestine, 2007

ريم الرياشي، هنيئاً لك الجنة

4. "Reem Al Riyasheh", name of a female suicide bomber painted by a pro-Hamas militant group, Gaza City, Palestine, 2004



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1. Paste up by SWOON, opposite Aida refugee camp, 2007. The image of a woman contains a quote about how, by matching the resonant frequency of any structure, it is possible to bring it down without using so much force. The spot was stained by a protest fire because it was there that a 17 year old boy climbed the wall to hang a Palestinian flag. He was imprisoned for 8 years for this simple act.

2. BANKSY, West Bank, 2007

3. BANKSY, Bethlehem, 2007

• **WILLIAM PARRY**

is a London-based freelance journalist and photographer who has published in The Guardian, The Independent and elsewhere. He recently published the book "Against the Wall: the art of resistance in Palestine" about the protest art on the West Bank Barrier. He has worked and traveled extensively in the Middle East.

"Against the Wall: the art of resistance in Palestine", published by PlutoPress ISBN 978-0-7453-2917-8



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## 2.7 Beirut's Graffiti Writing & Street Art فنون الشارع ورسوم الجرافيتي البيروتية

Pascal Zoghbi

Due to the poor political, economic and social situation in Lebanon, graffiti is spreading and voicing the pain of the people. The pierced city walls which resisted all the bombardments of the civil war are now mostly covered with urban writings and drawings. During the last thirty years, most of the urban graffiti interventions were political and sectarian. The voices of the Lebanese people were not manifested on the streets; instead, the slogans of the political leaders covered the walls. Lebanese, Palestinian fighters and Syrian soldiers used graffiti as the main medium to spread their slogans and propaganda. Party members and supporters sprayed the political party's words and sentences as well. Each party had its own logo or icon as stencils, which they used to mark territories in Beirut. The icons created an encoded map of Beirut and towns all over Lebanon.

By the end of the 90s and the start of the new millennium, around ten years after the end of the Lebanese civil war, people started ignoring the political writings on the roads and they went unnoticed. In conjunction to that, artistic paintings were starting to emerge on the streets and gaining the curiosity and attention of the Lebanese people. The political battles in the streets transformed into a war throughout the media: in newspapers, on televisions and billboards. The fighters liberated the walls from their political slogans and parallel to that, the Lebanese graffiti and Hip Hop underground movement started to develop. Since then, Lebanese Arabic rap and Hip Hop culture has been growing and artistic graffiti is becoming increasingly present on the streets of Beirut.

When Lebanese graffiti crews started painting in Beirut, they first chose hidden walls and surfaces in old, neglected houses or factories and empty parking lots. These places were their practice grounds for experimentation and development of their skills and styles. As they became more confident of their writings and remained unrestricted by the police, they took over the walls of the main highways in Beirut. In Lebanon graffiti is not yet seen as vandalism or as a felony. Even though it is not a legal act, as long as the message of the graffiti does not imply any direct political meaning, graffiti artists are usually not bothered when spraying on walls, even in broad daylight.

The graffiti scene in Beirut is still in its preliminary phase. As with most Lebanese design styles and trends, the first Lebanese graffiti was heavily influenced by Western graffiti. The tags and drawings were done in English and French instead of Arabic, and the letters had no link to Arabic calligraphy whatsoever. Among others, European graffiti artists like Prime and Fabu from France and Sens from Germany visited Beirut and influenced the

تحذير: وزارة الصحة تحذر التفكير يؤدي الى امراض خطيرة ومميتة

1. "Warning: the Ministry of Health warns that thinking leads to dangerous & fatal diseases", unknown artist, Hamra, Beirut, Lebanon

2. View of downtown Beirut from the sea bay promenade



2



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بلدي

1. "My country", EL SEED, table, acrylic paint, 80 x 80 cm, 2009

اجلس

2. "Have a seat", EL SEED, chair, acrylic on canvas, 2009

ثقافة

3. "Crossed culture", EL SEED, spray paint on canvas, 3 pieces 120 x 30 cm, 2010

أنا عربي

4. "I am Arab", EL SEED, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 70 cm, 2010

هويتي

5. "My identity", EL SEED, spray paint and acrylic on canvas, 160 x 100 cm, 2010

أحتاج تاريخي

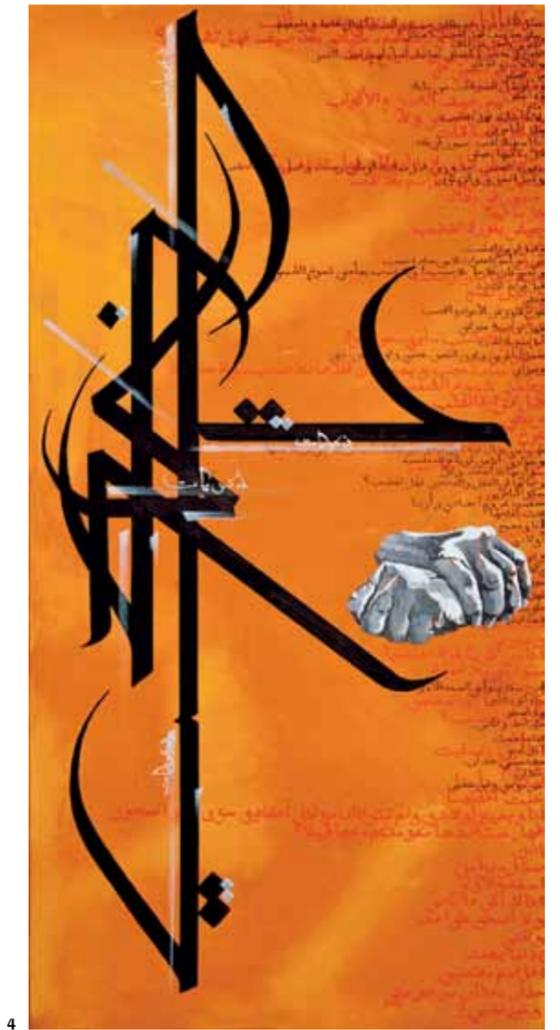
6. "I need my history" (Pieces of Identity), EL SEED, spray paint and acrylic on wood, 100 x 70 cm, 2010

otherwise diverse world, it has effectively shut up and shut down expressions of difference. Because of this, it has been my conscious choice to paint solely in classical Arabic, although I do drop an occasional phrase in English or French. This is a statement against the particularly hegemonic role of language and the part it inevitably plays in spreading the globalized monoculture. Furthermore, Arabic graffiti serves to carry the traditions of Arabic and Islamic art whilst stepping outside the box of traditionalism. Much like a young adolescent searching for an authentic voice in order to step out from under the shadow of his or her parents, Arabic graffiti is struggling to affirm a new generation of identities which are amalgams of modern and traditional paradigms. Extrapolating the difference between tradition and traditionalism, I personally try to nurture the religious and cultural traditions of my heritage while composing them alongside my modern realities. As an artist, I believe it is my duty to be culture creative and find methods through which to keep my heritage alive.

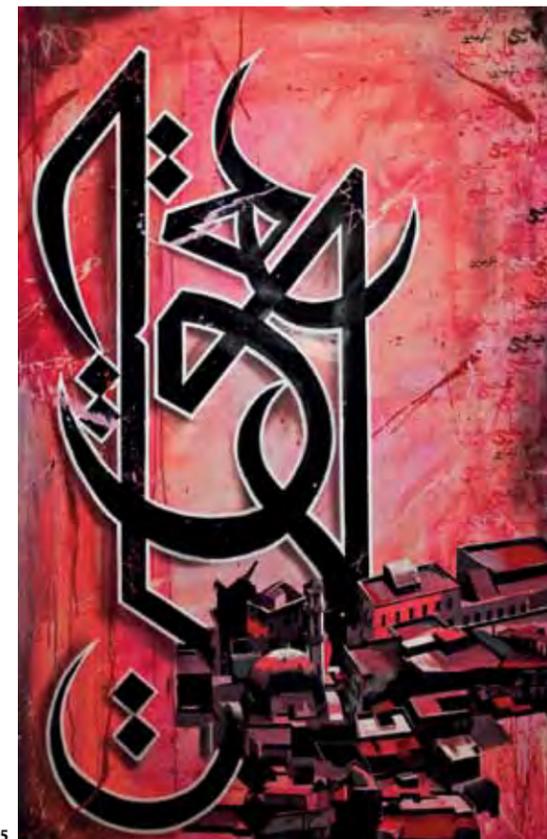
The proverbial traditions which inspire and shape Arabic graffiti stem from the fundamental principles of Islam. This becomes all the more important when the message aims to raise awareness about sensitive issues and bring about a higher level of consciousness. In my view, artists have a social responsibility to push boundaries, question the status quo and encourage critical reflection. Furthermore, the artist has a responsibility to live the message he or she is transmitting, as it is an Islamic principle in and of itself. Communitarian art, in which one does not tag a name but rather a shared message, means a certain denial of ownership. I do not write my name, and therefore I do not claim territory when I paint, but rather I offer something back. The wall becomes the primary medium through which one communicates with others and the dimension of community is thus brought to the fore because the mural is offered freely to the public. Due to this, the piece no longer belongs to me, but to the community in which it was conceived. Nourished by Islamic values, art emanating from Islamic communities must therefore carry some notion of brotherhood and sisterhood, free of the negative competition which so often defines our lives today.



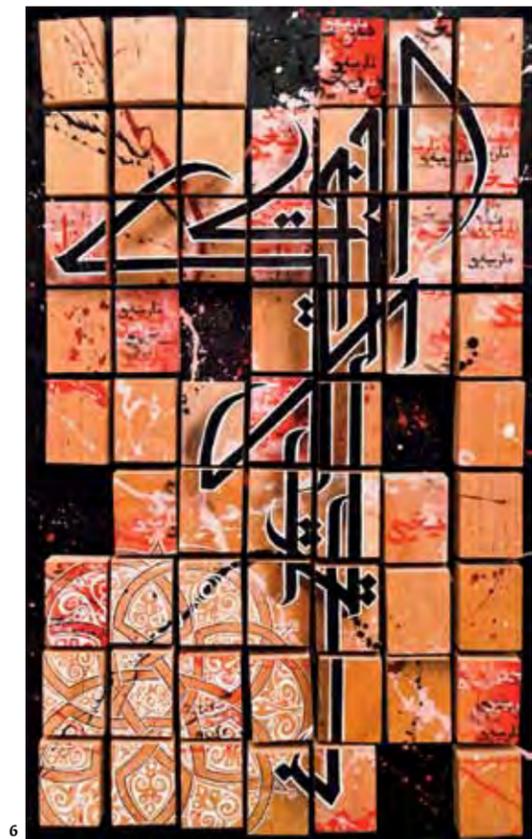
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- إحترام  
1. "Respect", Arabic 3-D calligraphy, JULIEN BRETON, 2010
- الفن  
2. "Art", Arabic 3-D calligraphy, model by Craffiti Technica, JULIEN BRETON, 2010
3. Kaalam vs Craffiti Technica, 3-D model by Craffiti Technica, graffititechnica.com, JULIEN BRETON, 2010
4. "Y sincerely believes", JULIEN BRETON, abstract light calligraphy without digital manipulation, Le Cellier, 2009



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1. L'ATLAS, paste up on advertising billboard, Blvd. de la villette, Paris 2004

2. L'ATLAS, painting on wall, Butte aux cailles, Paris 2006

3. L'ATLAS in action, Rue st Maur, Paris, 2005

Following pages 128 & 129:

1 L'ATLAS, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2005



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## 3·12 Blouzaat بلوزات

Blouzaat is a cross-cultural, cross-media project, started by a group of artists from Jordan and Germany. Their frustration with the utter lack of an urban art scene in Amman provoked them to contemplate an alternative artistic culture through which artists can experiment freely and share experiences, exploring urban art and design through canvas, walls, silk-screen, clothing, and books. Their aim is not only to explore the artistic scene in the area, but also to introduce urban art by tapping into culture, music, and any other form of self-expression, building a new kind of creative community.

**Ahmad Sabbagh**, born 1980 in Amman, Jordan.

Ahmad Sabbagh studied graphic design at the Applied Science University and graduated in 2002. After training for five years with the artists Ahmad Shawish and Husni Abu Krayyem, Sabbagh created Blouzaat. Experimenting with Arabic typography, Sabbagh aims to introduce a new visual language as well as facilitate the positioning of Arabic typography in an art form, working on “a style that is different than the common practices of calligraphy and Arabic type”.

**Typism aka Michael Schinköthe**, born in 1978 in Germany.

Typsim started experimenting with street art in 2004 after he met Akut. To merge different techniques such as conventional graphic design, silk-screen printing and urban techniques is his passion. He studied visual communication at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany. Attracted by the experimental promise of the urban scene and identity of Amman, Typsim moved to Jordan in 2005 and became art director of Blouzaat.

**Akut aka Falk Lehmann**, born in 1977 in Germany.

In 1999 Akut, Case, Tasso and Rusk formed the graffiti crew Maclaim. In 2004 Akut and Hera merged to become Herakut and the duo developed a unique and world renowned style. Akut studied visual communication at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany. It is there that Typism and Akut joined to work out different ideas. In 2007 Typism and Akut went to Jordan to start up Blouzaat.

1. **Typism & Akut**, Arabic calligraphy by Hussein Al-Azaat, mixed media on canvas, 160×90 cm, Khuraif exhibition, Weimar, Germany, 2008

حُرُيف

2. **“Storytelling”**, TYPISM, mixed media on canvas, 60×60 cm, Khuraif exhibition, Weimar, Germany, 2008



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1. "Shaeed", ZAKARIA AHMED EL AKKAF, Morroco

2. "Stilbaz", KRYS2LOOPER, Turkey

3. "Art Reoriente", PASCAL ZOCHBI, Beirut

4. MOHAMED ABDEL AZIZ, Egypt

5. "Sabr", QASIM ARIF, Pakistan & Holland

6. "Salam", MELIH KESMEN, Styleislam, Germany

7. "Keep it Halal", QASIM ARIF, Pakistan & Holland

8. "Interruptions", Hadi Alaeddin, Jordan

9. "Elwarshe", MOTHANNA HUSSEIN, Jordan

10. "Lahore", QASIM ARIF, Pakistan / Holland

11. "Ambient Mosque", MELIH KESMEN, Styleislam, Germany

12. "29letters", PASCAL ZOCHBI, Lebanon

13. "styleislam", MELIH KESMEN, Styleislam, Germany

14. "Mustaqbali", PASCAL ZOCHBI, Lebanon

15. MOHAMED ABDEL AZIZ, Egypt

16. "Wajda", 3-D graffiti style, ZAKARIA AHMED EL AKKAF, Oujda, Morocco