

COVER STORY

## Poetic Calligrams

January 4 - 10 1720 views



Designer Karima Adnan Sharabis' creative calligrams that have been captivating art lovers across the kingdom are now providing spa-goers with a sense of Zen.

The artist has unveiled 12 canvas prints of unique Arabic writing and a metal wall-piece located behind the reception desk at the newly revamped Gulf Hotel spa to add to the relaxing vibe.

The talented jewellery and tattoo designer uses a calligram Arabic writing technique to express her thoughts with the aim of creating meaningful works of art. A calligram is a poem, phrase, or word in which the typeface, calligraphy or handwriting is arranged in a way that creates a visual image.

The image created by the words expresses visually what the word, or words, say. Karima, who has an American mum and a Bahraini dad of Palestinian origins, said: "I take Arabic words and form them into shapes but I can't call myself a calligrapher because I don't follow traditional calligraphic rules and letter proportions.

"The technical word for the designs I create is a 'calligram' but I just call my art-form 'mystical Arabic writing'." The Gulf Spa director Lisa Mascoll became alerted to Karima's talent when she spotted an image on Instagram posted by one of their mutual friends.

Lisa had wanted to display artwork at the new-look spa and was hoping to find a local artist who could deliver something both modern and spiritual. "The pieces at the Gulf Spa each have different quotes and meanings but they all allude to the idea of collective consciousness, divine love and the beauty of humanity," explained Karima. "I believe words have energy and that the intention of the words in the artwork can set the feeling one has when they enter into a calm space."

Most of the paintings measure approximately 120cm X 150cm. An original, commissioned painting, hand-painted on canvas of a similar size are snapped up for around BD1,000. Karima does have small prints for sale at Words bookstore Café and she receives commissions for people's homes too.

She is aiming to experiment further with different materials in the future and see her work produced in wood and metal carvings. She often paints with ink on canvas or on paper and she has finished a few pieces on Bahraini handmade palm paper.

Karima studied IB Art in Bahrain School and spent a semester at Parsons School of Design in New York. However, while art was her passion, she feared that going to an art school could be limiting and transferred to McGill University in Montreal, Canada, to study Political Science and Humanities. It was during these studies that she learned a lot about symbols in art history, philosophy and spiritual thought.

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She then started putting her artistic skills to work designing expressive jewellery and tattoos. The popularity of her work flourished after she created a calligram for her friend in Peru who asked her to design a tattoo for him with his daughter's name in Arabic.

She said: "My Arabic is not fluent but I can read and write the letters at a first grade level! However, I love the flow of Arabic lettering. "My friend is a musician and his daughter's name is Azul which means blue in Spanish so I shaped the letters of her name into objects like a guitar and a sailboat. "I casually posted the designs on my Instagram account and got an immense response. People from all around the world started asking me to create designs for them too!"

Karima shaped Arabic lettering, which is traditionally associated with Islamic design, into yogic philosophy poses, an Aztec turtle, a Greek owl, and many Native American animal totems. These calligrams, in which she always use words or quotes that are positive, uplifting or inspiring, became totems in themselves and have been used to honour a loved one that has passed, a struggle one has overcome or an achievement reached.

"Many people, even non-Arabic speakers, were interested in the beauty and versatility of Arabic lettering. Arabic words have an organic flow and movement that complements the living organism of the body in my opinion. "That, combined with the cross-cultural feeling of my work makes it appealing to people from all over."

Her friend Noora Al Zain from the well-respected local family of jewellers approached her with an idea of turning some of her intricate tattoo designs into jewellery pieces.

Karima said: "Noora has experience in the industry. She and I think about life and spirituality in a similar way so we decided to form our own company. "Although we are separate from Al Zain we owe so much to them because their factory and office have given us so much help and support throughout the whole process."

Karima and Noora have formed The Generous Light Co and Chamkana is the company's first collaborative brand. Their base is located in Yateem Centre close to the Al Zain offices.

She explained: "The name comes from our names combined in Arabic. Karima means generous and Noora means light. TGLC collaborates with different artists and designers to create products that aim to empower through knowledge, connect diverse cultures and inspire positive thought. As well as being one of the founders of TGLC I am also the artist behind our first collaboration, Chamkana - products based on my mystical Arabic designs. "We have also collaborated with Coralnacre to create some beautiful clothing and shoes. We are currently in the process of creating products with other artists, which will be launched in the near future."

Through TGLC, the dynamic ladies also sell gift items with mugs, T-shirts and makeup pouches. The jewellery, fetching between BD18 and BD120, is mostly silver and gold-plated although solid gold designs are available if requested.

The 12 Golden Totem collection, which includes necklaces, bracelets and rings in different Arabic words that appear as animals, people or objects, has been displayed at Jewellery Arabia too. The word 'knowledge', for example, is shaped like an owl pendant and a guitar is Amen.

Karima gets her inspiration from Eastern spiritualists and poets like Hafiz, Rumi and Khalil Gibran, as well as Native American leaders who were in close connection to nature and their surroundings.

She added: "My biggest inspiration comes from my clients and their stories of struggle and success. The fact that we all have similar stories of struggle and strength and we are all so much more connected than we really know is extremely beautiful and humbling."

Karima and Noora have joined forces with Sadalsuud Foundation and have created a gold coin and silver coin bracelet for them. It is a nonprofit organisation providing educational opportunities for Lebanese and Syrian children in Lebanon.

The proceeds from the sale of the coin bracelet will go towards supporting the education of Syrian refugees in Lebanon as well as underprivileged Lebanese children. In the meantime, they also have just launched a new jewellery collection called Birds of Rumi.

Karima said: "As the name suggests, it is all inspired by Rumi's poetry and the quotes are shaped like birds. It's all about love, freedom and spreading your wings!

"We would like to expand regionally and have more of a presence in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Dubai. "We would also like to get the jewellery and artwork into more hotels and perhaps into duty free shops as they make great gifts for people to take with them to loved ones when they travel abroad from the Middle East. "Also, I couldn't do all this without our amazing team.

We are a team of five young Bahraini women and one photographer and they are all inspirational. We all understand one another and think about life in the same way. Being in the office with them is such a pleasure that I feel so blessed to call what I do work!"

The jewellery is being sold online [www.thegenerouslightco.com](http://www.thegenerouslightco.com) and at many different stores across the island including Mimosa boutique and Meemo space in Al Aali Shopping Complex, Cult 8 in Art Rotana Hotel in Amwaj Islands, Artisana +973 shop, Words Bookstore Café in Budaiya, the Bahrain Museum, and MILK in Riyadat Mall.

They also sell their work at a Yoga studio in Riyadh called Sukoun and have participated in markets in Bahrain and Dubai including The Nest, The Aisha Yateem Charity Bazaar and Hazawi in Al Aali Shopping Complex.

**Follow them on Instagram @thegenerouslightco or @ karimasart.**

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