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Stuff

# An Artist Is Trying to Make Arabic Tattoos More Stylish

The new trend of getting random words in Arabic inked on your body has led to some boring tattoos, but Bahraini artist Karima Sharabi is here to help.

**AF** By [Angelina Fanous](#)

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Photo via Selena Gomez

Remember when getting random "inspirational" words in Chinese permanently inked on your body was a thing? Well, faster than you can say "Orientalism," today's thrilling, original trendsetters have moved on to Arabic tattoos. Selena Gomez has one that translates to "Love yourself first," and Angelina Jolie has two, one of which says "Determination."

Most of the time, I cringe when I see an Arabic tattoo, because most leave out one very important element of the language—calligraphy. What Jolie and Gomez and countless other men and women with Arabic words permanently etched into their skin don't understand is that they've essentially tattooed themselves in the Arabic equivalent of Helvetica.

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As with everything else, there's a right way and a wrong way to get an Arabic tattoo. Just like you wouldn't get English text scrawled on your skin in a homogenized, one-size-fits-all, computer-generated font, you shouldn't get a tattoo in boring-looking Arabic either. Traditionally, calligraphers study rules for sizes of letters for years and often feel bound to traditional ways of drawing letters—that's changing, however, as the artist Karima Sharabi could tell you.



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🕒 2w



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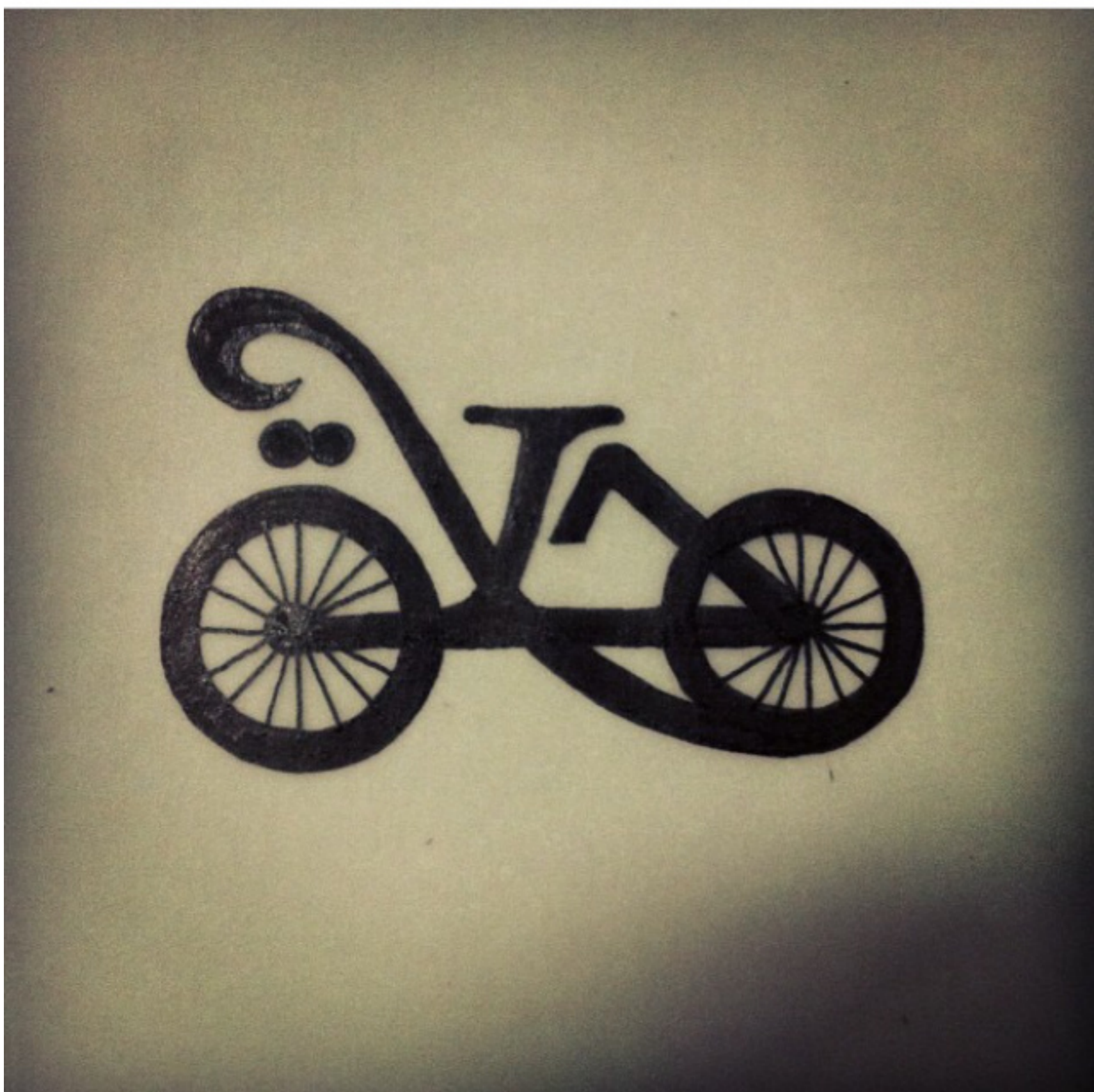
"This one couple came to me and told me to put their names into a heart for a wedding, and they had gone to plenty of other calligraphers—really great calligraphers, too, but they couldn't fit [their names] into the shape of a heart because the letters had to be a certain way," Sharabi told me over video chat from Bahrain.

Calligraphy is having a renaissance in the Middle East, with artists breaking from the boundaries of traditional Islamic script. From 3-D designs to graffiti, calligraphy is no longer an art limited to Islamic scripture from the Qu'ran like it has been in the past, but many artists still follow the rules. *Al aleph*—the Arabic equivalent of the letter A—has to be drawn in certain proportions, or technically it's not calligraphy. *Al fatha*, an accented vowel, could change the entire meaning of the word. Sharabi's work, however, follows zero rules, mostly because she doesn't know them but also because she doesn't care.



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"Because I don't know any of the rules, I could kind of make shapes and fit them into things," Sharabi said. "I don't think art should be limited by anything. Sometimes I think, *Oh my God, I'm doing everything wrong*, but the language already has rules, certain letter shapes and certain ways of letters joining and stuff. You should be allowed to play around with it."

Sharabi's mother is white, and her father is Palestinian. She learned to read and write Arabic when she was younger, but only started experimenting in June 2013 when a friend asked her to draw his daughter's name in Arabic. Her name is Azul, so he imagined her name in the shape of a boat. She uploaded the final product to her [Instagram account](#), and soon enough requests for designs poured in.



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"I really feel that the designs really are a protective emblem or totem or reminder of some good in the world," Sharabi said.

At the end of our conversation, I could see Sharabi's eyes widen on the computer screen as she told me about her plans to turn her designs into jewelry. But that excitement turned into hesitance when I call her work

calligraphy: "I'd rather think of it as mystical Arabic writing," she said.



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🕒 26w



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devastation she witnessed. "I sat down to write my memories of Iraq," she says. "It always came back to food."

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