



“Love understands all languages.” Mediterranean Proverb. Copyright Hassan Massoudy

Love understands all languages: An interview with Hassan Massoudy

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By Hande Eagle

Valentine’s Day, or Feast of Saint Valentine – some dote on it because it gives them a reason to show their real feelings; some shy from it because they associate it with an exaggerated and unnecessary show of emotions and some despise it because they view it as a sales con. But if there is one reason to be partial to Valentine’s Day this year it’s Hassan Massoudy’s hot-off-the-press book, *Calligraphies of Love*.

Massoudy is a celebrated Iraqi-born artist based in Paris. Classically trained in calligraphy, Massoudy inscribes oversized letters in vibrant colour to create visually striking works which usher traditional Arabic script into a contemporary context.

Published by **Saqi Books**, Massoudy’s visually romantic edition *Calligraphies of Love* offers an incredible voyage of love across time by bringing together over 100 original black and white and colour calligraphies from the master’s brush with over 100 proverbs and love poems he chose from around the world over the years.

Literature Programme Manager Hande Eagle interviews Massoudy to find out about his practices, his new book and his views on love, life and art.

Hande Eagle: Can you tell us a bit about your early beginnings? Which words and images express your strong bond with the desert?

Hassan Massoudy: I was born in Najaf, a city in southern Iraq surrounded by the desert and bathed in sunlight eleven months of the year. I spent all my childhood in light, silence and heat, in a space where the view is infinite, solely punctuated by a few dunes or a dry solitary tree. All of this, of course, has influenced my work. When my footsteps led me

on several trips into the Sahara Desert, there I found my childhood again. In my works I draw a word, large, and I imagine it standing, gigantic, in a desert plain embodied by the calligraphic sentence at the root of this word – the horizon line.

H.E: You left Iraq for France at the age of 25 and started studying figurative painting at the École des Beaux-Arts. Looking back on those early years of your life as an artist, how would you say this period of cultural transition influenced your artistic sensibilities and development into the unique artist you are today?

H.M: After studying in Baghdad and practising all the different styles of calligraphy, I came to France in 1969 and I studied five years at l'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. I learned techniques that I knew little about or not well: fresco, stained glass, mosaic and especially oil painting on canvas. All this enriched my sensitivity. On the other hand, the theoretical lectures offered by the school gave me a universal overview of art. And then of course there were all the great Parisian museums that I paced up and down. This encounter between western culture and my own opened up a new path for me.



H.E: How was your branch of art perceived in 1970s France? Did you encounter resistance? How did you manage to preserve your own heritage in your work while exploring western and Japanese styles?

H.M: At the end of my studies in 1975, there was a cultural dynamic in Paris calling for a new direction in art and novelty was received favourably. At that time, I combined figurative painting and calligraphic signs. I took advantage of western artistic techniques, however I was aware that I had to keep my cultural heritage and make my calligraphy evolve. I was very influenced by Japanese calligraphy; it allowed me to increase the speed of my calligraphic stroke without sacrificing its elegance. Progressively figurative traces gave way to abstraction; a stripped and coloured calligraphy as opposed to the traditional black calligraphy that I had learned.

H.E: You wrote, "To imitate the aesthetic values of the old masters is only copying. The codes and techniques must be changed." How and when did it dawn on you to transform the art of calligraphy – a form of artistic production that is historically quite restraining – into a freer, more contemporary visual expression of rhythm, poetry and motion?

H.M: In Iraq I learned and practised calligraphy with a qalam (a carved reed) and black ink. Arabic calligraphy is codified, each letter obeys strict rules and this is true in each calligraphic style. It has to be practised slowly. The works of the classical calligraphers have nourished me and I think I could not have developed a new calligraphy if I had not learned the tradition; like a musician who can only free himself from constraints, after having mastered solfeggio and his instrument. In Paris, I had the opportunity to perform calligraphy live on stage with different artists: actors, musicians and dancers. There, a faster pace had to be embraced in order to follow the other artists; codes had to be reinvented. I discovered a kind of trance-like state that guided my calligraphy and was the expression of my body.



"Can I say you are honey? Honey is less sweet than you." Nezami (12th century). Image copyright Hassan Massoudy

H.E: Speaking of your collaborations with different artists – to what extent would you say your collaborations with other artists and musicians such as Guy Jacquet, Kutsi Ergüner and Carolyn Carson gave direction to your current works?

H.M: Collaborating with other artists threw an intense light on my own work. To approach a performance, one needs to reach a great state of concentration and calm. Then in the performance space a meeting happens between your own emotions and the positive energies sent out by the public. I used to write on a device that projected the calligraphy directly onto a big screen in front of the audience. My written words had to be in harmony with and echoing the different expressions of the other artists. It was an internal struggle to materialise my vision using my qalam, ink and paper. The actor Guy Jacquet helped me to enter the theatrical space which is far from the small space of my studio. Working with the musician Kutsi Ergüner made me aware of the breath, and the rhythm between sound and silence. Carolyn Carlson and her dancers were like living calligraphy in front of me.

H.E: How do you achieve this distinctive aesthetic balance between the technicalities (colour, light and form) and the sense of controlled yet free-flowing, floating imagery that carries the viewer to both the past and the future whilst living in the present? Is it a combination of patience, trial and error? Or, do you visualise the work before you start preparing your inks and choosing your paper?

H.M: Every day when I set to work, a quote or a proverb imposes itself upon me from all of those I have collected in notebooks. Like an architect, I construct the key word of the sentence; it must stand in perfect balance on the paper. I make a few quick sketches before starting. When I feel ready, I prepare my inks made out of pigments, water and a binder. Then, before tracing my word in a single stroke, I focus. Breathing is very important in my work; it will direct my arm, my hand, towards a right gesture. In Arabic calligraphy we have a wide range of writing styles; I can, therefore, interpret the same sentence in different ways. Often I work again with a quote I like, or which is in harmony with my state of mind, and magnify it in another colour, constructing the word with more fluidity or rigidity, according to whether I am happy or concerned while listening to the news.



"To be rare is to be loved." Turkish proverb.
Image copyright Hassan Massoudy

H.E: Can you tell us a bit more about the processes you went through when you were choosing proverbs and poems to work on for *Calligraphies of Love*?

H.M: Since adolescence I have always liked to write down poetic quotations, especially those that create images in me such as "I wish to be a moth flitting around the candle of your beauty" by the Uzbek poet Machrab. I have several notebooks of sentences and I continuously add to them. I choose one that reflects best my state of mind in light of what is happening in the world. With *Calligraphies of Love*, I wanted to modestly respond to the daily negative news with sentences which draw human beings together. Love is this bond.

H.E: "Love understands all languages" but languages change over time and our words come to embody different meanings. Do you think that the word "love" has come to gain a different meaning in today's world? Would you say that this change/transformation is positive?

H.M: For me, every human being can nurture, within oneself, hatred or love. I understand love as a positive constructive energy. In this book [*Calligraphies of Love*] there are writers from the East and the West, from the past and the present; they come together in a 'Hymn to Love'.



"In your love, eternally, I delight. To
your love, I submit." Ibn Zaydoun
(11th century). Image copyright
Hassan Massoudy

H.E: What is love according to you?

H.M: Love is an impetus, a surge towards the other. Saint Augustine says: "The measure of love is to love without measure."

H.E: Women's equality is a subject that has rightfully claimed its place in the global agenda. In your book you gave place to a quote from Rumi, "A woman is a ray of divine light". Where do you think women's equality lies? How do you think this can be achieved globally?

H.M: Rumi said this phrase in the 13th century to valorise women; unfortunately, in many countries equality between men and women still does not exist. The efforts of artists and writers are required to change mentalities, as Scheherazade did in *One Thousand and One Nights*. With her beautiful voice and the truthfulness of her tales she built a rampart against the violence of a tyrant. The *One Thousand and One Nights* are far off now, we need other Scheherazades.



"In your love, eternally, I delight. To your love, I submit." Ibn Zaydoun (11th century). Image copyright Hassan Massoudy

H.E: Last but not least, would you say that what is universal is beautiful and vice versa? And, do you agree that from order springs harmony?

H.M: In my calligraphy, beauty and harmony must renew themselves every day. One has to persevere to meet them. Despite the fact that the codes of beauty differ from one civilisation to another, everyone can take something from them and enrich their soul or their art. I like the Zen gardens of Kyoto, the ordered ceramics of Isfahan, a painting by Holbein, but also Picasso's broken lines.



"The curve of your eyes goes around my heart." Paul Eluard (1895-1952). Image copyright Hassan Massoudy

Enter discount code **Love1402** at the checkout on the **Al Saji bookshop website** and get 10 per cent off *Calligraphies of Love* until 14 March 2017.

Hassan Massoudy will be exhibiting his works at the **Sundaram Tagore Gallery** in New York from 23 February to 25 March 2017.

With our heartfelt thanks to Doria Tichit, Head of Arts and Culture at the **Bagri Foundation**, for translating this interview from French.