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A WAY WITH WORDS

Welcome to the evocative world of pictorial calligraphy that creates art with alphabets

SALONI MADAN

AT first glance it looks like a watercolour in strokes of green, blue and aqua depicting the sky above, the sea below and a mass of undulating waves. Look closely, and you realise the waves are actually words. The lettering on top is a combination of Urdu and Hindi scripts, which says *Ganga*, while below is the word, *Jamuna*.

That's pictorial calligraphy for you, a modern avatar of the traditional art of calligraphy that only used script — mainly Arabic and Persian — for its elaborate imagery. This "art of giving form to signs in an

alphabets. She feels that this helps a common man look at her work as a piece of art and construe his own meaning from it. "I feel that there should be food for thought in all my pieces. So that even if someone doesn't know either of the two languages, they should at least try and figure out their own interpretation about the designs," says Dagar, who believes that one does not need to understand a script to enjoy calligraphy either. For instance, one of her pieces, *Anjaam*, which means culmination, has been depicted as a flower which grows in various stages and terminates just like life. Similarly, *Al-wasto*, which is also a name for Allah, means all-embracing, for which Dagar has aptly used a



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That's pictorial calligraphy for you, a modern avatar of the traditional art of calligraphy that only used script — mainly Arabic and Persian — for its elaborate imagery. This "art of giving form to signs in an expressive, harmonious and skillful manner" has been around for centuries, and examples of it are visible in art and architecture across the world. Over time, however, there has been an emergence of a new style that has evolved from pure script to incorporate pictorial forms, resulting in an equally expressive and skillful format.

Spearheading this new style is Qamar Dagar, who has been producing pictorial calligraphs for over two decades now. Dagar believes that though letters are complete designs in their own right, pictorial elements add that extra punch. "In pictorial calligraphy, we use alphabets as raw materials to express ourselves...it's a unique connection of the qalam with the language that translates into beautiful imagery, be it human figures, animals, flowers or birds."

Another unique connection in Dagar's work is that she combines Urdu and Hindi scripts to form various motifs. The natural coming together of the two scripts, which are written from opposite directions, really fascinates her. The use of symbolic details in both languages, such as the *nuqtas* or dots in Urdu and the *matras* in Hindi are important in terms of the meaning they provide and therefore become the focal point of most of her works. At times, she picks a letter from a word and elaborates on its lines and curves, inspired by cultural and religious influences.

Dagar's works are filled with such instances where she plays with the silhouettes of

not know either of the two languages, they should at least try and figure out their own interpretation about the designs," says Dagar, who believes that one does not need to understand a script to enjoy calligraphy either. For instance, one of her pieces, *Anjaam*, which means culmination, has been depicted as a flower which grows in various stages and terminates just like life. Similarly, *Al-wasio*, which is also a name for Allah, means all-embracing, for which Dagar has aptly used a butterfly with its wide-ranging colour spectrum. In *Buzurg*, meaning elderly, she has painted a tree that is now frail and weak.

Dagar, whose works are predominantly kept in private collections in India, France and the US, where she has also had solo exhibitions, is the founder of the Delhi-based Qalamkaar Calligraphy Trust that organised an international calligraphy exhibition for the first time in Delhi in 2012. Incidentally, she belongs to the famous Dagar family of *dhruwad* exponents, which could perhaps explain the lyrical quality of her art.

Dagar's fine strokes are made on smooth-surfaced paper with different kinds of ink, including black Chinese ink, as well as acrylic and watercolour, using a bamboo or wooden *qalam*. But there are many who are excelling in materials such as stone, wood and fabric. Like Irshad Hussain Farooqi, for instance, a national award winner for calligraphy in wood. Farooqi uses Quranic verses in his works, a valued art during Mughul rule. The process of intricately carving out wood is very time consuming and different from traditional calligraphy, he says. "Since measurements are extremely crucial in this medium and the nature of the wood has to be understood to inscribe the desired script, the process can take from 5 hours to a year to make a single piece, depending on the type and size of work," says Farooqi, who has exhibited in India, Muscat, Dhaka and Bangkok.

Like Farhana and her cousin, Adeeba, who come from the slums of Okhla. Greatly inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's strong and independent heroines, the girls label their art as "a way of getting back at a society that always restricts girls from pursuing their dreams." The duo plans to exhibit their work in the national capital on the death anniversary of Tagore later this year.

Farhana, whose parents were initially reluctant to send her to learn art, but have supported her after seeing her work, has used Tagore's Damini from *Chaturanga* as a message to stop the social evil of child marriage in her illustrative representation. In the upper part of her calligraph, she shows *daal* and *atlf* in Urdu which makes *Da* and in the



The text is first laid down on paper with a pen or double pencil, which is then photostated and used multiple times to be rested on the wood and copied on to its surface. Each letter is then carefully carved and chiseled and finally accentuated with a natural polish. His most notable works include the Quran's verses such as *Surah Al-Faatihah*, the opening chapter and the *Surah At-Tin*, the 95th chapter written in *Thulth* script of Islamic calligraphy — both of which took more than a year each for completion — he also uses other styles such as *Kufic* which focuses on geometrical shapes and lines, while *Diwani* is floral and delicate and has "nazaakat", as Farooqi puts it. He has also come up with a piece that has the religious symbols of the four main faiths in the country and is currently working on a piece onto which he is inscribing the *gayatri* mantra.

However, given the diversity in languages and scripts in our country, these experts feel that calligraphy has failed to tap the potential of those languages and been limited to Arabic or Urdu. "In terms of pictorial calligraphy, India has so much untapped potential since we have a number of scripts from Malayalam to Bengali and others, which can be used extensively for giving a whole new dimension and much needed boost to this irreplaceable art form," says a concerned Dagar.

It is to fill this gap that people like Aseem Asha Usman are imparting calligraphy training to children from impoverished communities through his Delhi-based initiative, Flying Birds of India. Among various other art forms such as music, painting and pottery, pictorial calligraphy has caught the interest of many youth who are deeply involved in learning the art at workshops and producing their own little masterpieces," says Usman.

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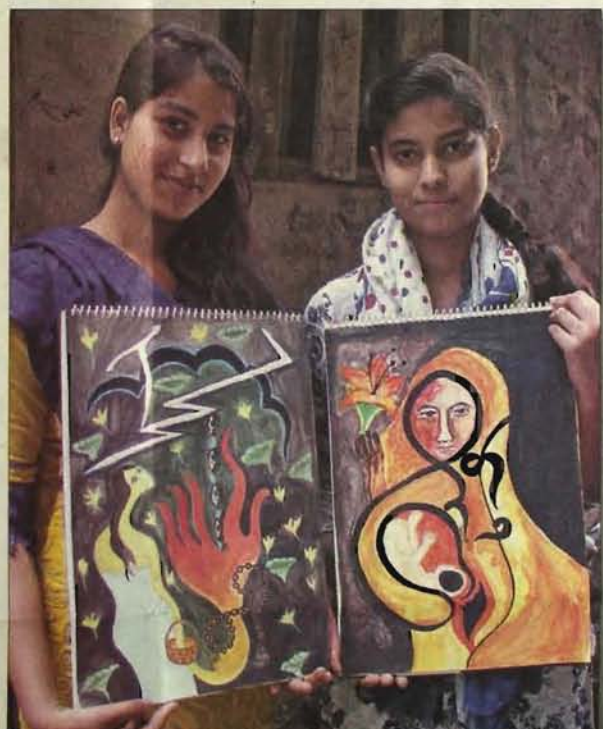


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Dagar's *Al-wasio*, *Ganga Jamuna* and *Anjaam*; Farhana and Adeeba with their works; Mohd Yasin's *Allah*

lower part she writes *Mi* and *Ni* in Devnagri. For Adeeba, who feels that "Gurudev's philosophy teaches us freedom and individuality," has painted his heroine, Kumudini, from *Joga Jog*, which she, too, has combined with pictorial calligraphy using Urdu and Hindi scripts." Another young calligrapher, Akbar, has used Bengali and Urdu scripts to make a pictorial calligraph on Tagore's lyrical *Paakht Aamar Nirher Paakht* as embroidery on fabric.

Such enthusiasm in the youth makes 85-year-old veteran artist Mohanmed Yasin, a Lalit Kala Academy awardee, hopeful of reviving the dying art of calligraphy through the rejuvenating force of pictorial imagery. Known for his series of calligraphy works as combining Allah and Om, he says passionately: "Even though there is a long way to go, I'm happy that so many youngsters are showing keen interest in the art form today."

Though the unfortunate erosion of the pristine art form of calligraphy is rather pitiful, thanks to technological advancements that gave us digital typography, one can only hope that the fine strokes of calligraphy and its evocative rendition remain inked on to our hearts and do not go out of sight anytime soon.



TOUCH WOOD: Hussain Farooqi's *Surah Al-Faatihah* carved on wood