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Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni looks at his artwork at his home in the town of Hammam-Lif.—AFP photos



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni displays a design reading in Arabic “thus we defy corona” alongside other work at his home.

Tunisia rediscovers traditional art of calligraphy

Tunisia’s president has become a surprise champion of Arabic calligraphy in his country, shining a light on the artistic tradition as Arab states lobby for its recognition by UNESCO. President Kais Saied sparked both admiration and mockery on social media when images emerged of hand-written presidential letters on official paper not long after he took office in October last year. An academic with a keen interest in the art form, Saied had studied with well-known Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni.

To prove that Saied had penned the documents himself, the presidency released a video showing him writing in a guest book. The president “writes official correspondence in maghrebi script and private letters in diwani”, Jomni said, referring to two forms of Arabic calligraphy. Maghrebi script is a form of the older, angular style of Kufic calligraphy, while diwani is a more ornamental Ottoman style popular for poetry. The president’s “recognition” of calligraphy has warmed artists’ hearts, Jomni said, giving them hope for a brighter future for an art form that was like “a closed book”.

Not just a ‘technical skill’

Calligraphy in Tunisia lacks the prominence it enjoys in some other Arab countries—such as in the Gulf—and its National Centre of Calligraphic Arts, created in 1994, risks closing its doors. With a lack of instructors, courses will likely have to end this year, according to the institute’s head, Abdel Jaoued Lotfi. “There are not enough professional calligraphers in Tunisia,” said calligraphy master Jomni, who is in his sixties. “You can count them on one hand and they are working in precarious conditions.”

Sixteen Arab countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, have prepared a proposal to have Arabic calligraphy inscribed on the UNESCO list of humanity’s intangible cultural heritage. It’s a chance to consider calligraphy “as a whole culture and living heritage... and not just as a simple technical skill”, said Imed Soula, a researcher overseeing Tunisia’s submission to the UN cul-

tural body. He said Tunisia’s fading calligraphy practice, which traditionally saw artists tackle surfaces like copper or stone, was also linked to the growing use of new technologies, some of which have moved it away from its performing-art dimension. But Jomni said calligraphy in Tunisia suffered from “the brutal and chaotic marginalisation of Islamic culture during the ‘60s, whose repercussions we still feel today”.

Updating tradition

The country’s first president, Habib Bourguiba (1957-1987), dismantled and divided up the Islamic University of Ez-Zitouna after a power struggle with its clerical leadership. Books and manuscripts from the institute, then Tunisia’s main Arab-language university and one of the most important in the Muslim world, were seized. Tunisian calligrapher Mohamed Salah Khamasi studied there at the start of the 20th century and laid down the foundations for calligraphy in the country, passing his knowledge on to several generations. Following the 2011 revolution that set Tunisia on the road to democracy, a young generation of calligraphers is now calling for a reinvention of the art form to reflect the spirit of the times—“so that it doesn’t get rusty and outdated”, Karim Jabbari told AFP. The artist in his thirties is known internationally for his large-scale calligraphy works, often created with light using long-exposure photography, or in mural form.

In 2011, in his marginalised hometown of Kasserine, which saw deadly clashes before the fall of longtime autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Jabbari used light to write the names of protesters in the places where they were killed. “Through this form of calligraphy, I want to highlight the beauty of the Arabic language and bring it closer to people,” Jabbari said—and “keep our heritage firmly anchored in our memory”.—AFP



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni stands next to his artwork.



Tunisian calligrapher Omar Jomni displays his work at his home.

Flying bubble makers could save world from starvation

Flying robots equipped with bubble guns could one day help save our planet. That’s according to a study published in *iScience* on Wednesday by a Japanese scientist who successfully demonstrated that soap bubbles can be used to pollinate fruit-bearing plants—seen as vital to keeping the world fed in the coming decades in the face of vanishing bee populations. Eijiro Miyako, an associate professor at the Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology in Nomi, told AFP he had been working on robotic pollinators for years, but was disheartened when the toy drones he used smashed into flowers, destroying them. “It was too sad,” he said.



This handout photo shows a chemically functionalized soap bubble on a campanula flower (*Campanula persicifolia*).—AFP

The whimsical idea of trying bubbles came to Miyako when he was playing with his son in a park close to their home. The scientist was inspired when one of the bubbles harmlessly burst on his three-year-old’s face. Miyako and co-author Xi Yang first used microscopes to confirm that soap bubbles could carry pollen grains. Next, they tested five solutions available in shops, finding one called lauramidopropyl betaine—used in cosmetic products to boost foam formation—resulted in better growth of the tube that develops from pollen grains after they are deposited on flowers. They also added calcium to support the germination process and found the optimum pH balance.

Drones target flowers

The pair loaded their solution into a bubble gun and released pollen-bearing bubbles into a pear orchard—at a rate of about 2,000 grains per bubble—finding that 95 percent of the targeted flowers bore fruit. “It sounds somewhat like fantasy, but the... soap bubble allows effective pollination and assures that the quality of fruits is the same as with conventional hand pollination,” said Miyako. Hand pollination is a much more labor intensive process. Finally, the researchers took their experiment to the skies—loading a bubble gun onto a small drone programmed to fly on a predetermined route. —AFP