

The Use of Stainless Steel to Create Contemporary Artistic Arabic Calligraphy Sculptures

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the use of stainless steel in creating contemporary Arabic calligraphy sculptures. It discusses artworks' unique, innovative, and non-imitation stainless steel Arabic calligraphy. This study sheds light on this new field of modern Arabic calligraphy. The artworks of four famous artists were analysed in terms of how these works were created, the scripts or letters and alphabets used, and the type of calligraphy used. The type of contemporary art of Arabic calligraphy used includes verses from the Qur'an, poetry, famous sayings, and non-Arabic poems translated into Arabic letters. The interaction between sculptural Arabic calligraphy, stainless steel, and the environment or surrounding factors led to a contradictory three-way interaction, which increased the sculptural artistic act and creativity. The data were analysed using the descriptive analysis method and observation method. The samples analysed consist of fifteen sculptures. The finding revealed that these stainless steel carvings include intertwined Arabic scripts and letters. Arabic calligraphy employed varied between leafy Kufic, Moroccan Kufic, Diwani, thuluth, Naskh, and even contemporary Arabic calligraphy. The sculptures' contents or phrases also varied between Quranic verses, poetry, novel, sayings, words, and sentences from the artist himself. As for the style, there is free Arabic calligraphy, new modern classic Arabic calligraphy, and modern classic Arabic calligraphy.

Keywords: *Contemporary, Arabic, Calligraphy, Sculpture, Stainless steel*

INTRODUCTION

Since the discovery of the aesthetic value of Arabic calligraphy and its use in Islamic decoration of many materials and shapes, it became one of the three main elements of Islamic art, along with floral and geometric motifs. Arabic calligraphy is an art in its own right. It can be used without the need for other Islamic art elements. Therefore, Muslim artists developed Arabic calligraphy and associated arts by using it in many things such as tiles, carpets, walls, and others. The artists may use wood, plaster, porcelain, and various metals. They employed appropriate letters, words, and sentences from verses, hadiths, words of

wisdom, and poems. Several techniques have been developed for using Arabic calligraphy in Islamic art, including pouring it into previously prepared models, whether letters or words, to form the intended results.

Arabic calligraphy is one of the main features of Islamic art. It has been applied in many materials such as tiles, carpets, and murals, in addition to the use of metals in creating various Arabic calligraphy works. Therefore, Arabic calligraphy is an endless source of creativity, inspiration, and innovation (Al-Qahtani & Megahed 2015).

In modern art, Arabic calligraphy has been incorporated into all kinds of plastic art, including paintings and sculptural works. It is nearly impossible to include all Arabic fonts in plastic art. However, the artist or calligrapher can turn it to fruition with their experience, skill, foresight, and passion for their craft. He can also combine several lines and form a new linear composition. Furthermore, several materials are used to create unique and innovative Arabic calligraphy sculptures, including stainless steel, which is the focus of the study. The calligrapher and artist's ability to install Arabic letters carved from stainless steel, to form the required words and sentences takes advantage of the characteristics of Arabic calligraphy.

The most crucial issue is the selection of sentences or verses that accept composition in their letters and carving (Arabic calligraphy, 2020). The artist translates non-Arabic poems in Arabic language to compose the sculptural work. Why did the artist use steel to create his Arabic calligraphy sculptures? Were the carved sentences polished after they were complete, or were the letters polished before being formed and installed? What is the artistic value of this type of art?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although many writers wrote about Arabic calligraphy, its aesthetics, and philosophy. Emphasis was placed on the fine oil paintings that artists drew and created, but the issue of research in aspects and other creations of artists in the field of sculpture remained very few. They were just references in books, research, and articles. Therefore, the focus here is on showing this type of art for Arabic calligraphy and showing the creativity of artists in creating sculptures of Arabic calligraphy from stainless steel.

Traditional Steel Work

This paper focuses on the use of stainless steel in the creation of Arabic calligraphy sculptures. The use of this material in creating Arabic calligraphic sculptures is not considered a product of the modern era, preceded by works of Arab art and calligraphy made of other metals such as gold, copper, and steel. The methods of engraving, hammering, pressing, punching, unloading, and piercing were used to create artworks, as well as the process of casting metal into prepared models (Ettinghausen, et al., 2017).

Since the Iranian Safavid era, steel artworks have been very precise and ingenious as a continuation of the metal artworks of the previous Islamic periods. During that time, calligraphic steel artworks, also known as increase panels, were employed as war flags, tombstones, and on the doors of Iranian sanctuaries (Ettinghausen, et al., 2017).

Stainless steel has long been employed in creative works because of its long-term strength and durability, ease of manufacture, resilience to various weather elements, and dazzling look, which reflects movement, and lighting. Moreover, it can be colored and dyed in any colour, making it easy to clean.

Contemporary Arabic Calligraphy

It is impossible to form all traditional fonts and use them in plastic art, whether paintings or sculptures, because of their strict rules and laws. However, with the calligraphers' experience, artistic imagination, and passion for their work, they can choose the font type in their art or combine several lines to create new linear sculptures. Several Arabic fonts appeared in addition to traditional ones, such as free Arabic calligraphy and expressive Arabic calligraphy among others. Arabic calligraphy is a living art that constantly evolves, innovates, and creates new shapes, patterns, and designs to make it more appealing and relevant, whether on paintings, sculptures, or other works of art (Arabic Calligraphy, 2020).

The artist employed both traditional and modern techniques to create Arabic calligraphy sculptures such as collage, laser, steel casting, and shaping the desired figure. In the art of Arabic calligraphic steel sculpture, the letters are carved individually and then gathered, or carved with the appropriate phrases and then collected, to eventually form the required words and sentences by interlacing or stretching them along the needed area.

Sculptural Arabic calligraphy works appeared in three-dimensional shapes, which gives the artwork an additional benefit of being able to see it with limitless formations as the point of view varies. All calligraphers and plastic artists (oil and applied paintings) agreed to consider Arabic calligraphy as one of the most beautiful, attractive, and realistic arts in the modern world. This is because it keeps pace with all technical developments, techniques, and contemporary updates, and it uses them on all kinds of different materials and raw materials. Arabic calligraphy is an art subject to renewal, development, adaptation, creativity, and innovation (The most significant aspect of Islamic art is calligraphy and this art has developed into a traditional and a contemporary form. Also, Arabic calligraphy is considered the finest of all kinds of Islamic art. Calligraphy is the art of elegant handwriting. Islamic calligraphers have displayed many styles of Arabic calligraphy that contain intricate lines and rich colours, calligraphers have been using the form of letters and words as a visual pictorial and it focuses on the spiritual aspect and it has a certain aesthetic value (Alashari et al., 2019. p2). It used traditional calligraphy, neoclassical, modern, free form, rudimentary, abstract, legible script, call graffiti, magical, and gestural calligraphy (Nor Azlin, 2012) and created new artistic fonts such as free and expressive fonts. Artists adapted traditional and innovative calligraphy, using ancient and modern techniques to create three-dimensional Arabic calligraphy sculptures.

This study aims to explain the new addition to the Arabic calligraphy art in applied plastic art or engraving with steel. These sculptures are decorated inside and outside the buildings. Four artists became famous for these creative works, and their works were shown in many local and international museums and exhibitions. A new feature has been introduced to the use of non-Arabic poems translated into Arabic to produce Arabic calligraphy sculptures, in addition to the usage of Quranic verses and Arabic poetry.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed the descriptive-analytical method, observation method, and Nor Azlin's theory on Islamic calligraphy artworks contemporary. This study seeks to define some of the characteristics and values of visual Arabic calligraphy in order for it to survive, grow, and evolve in parallel with the techniques of applied plastic art or sculpture. Arabic calligraphy is executed using stainless steel in three-dimensional sculptural work for artists such as Naja Al-Mahdoui, El Seed, Sabah Arbilli, and Mattar Bin Lahij.

ANALYSIS

The plates have been stainless steel carvings including intertwined Arabic scripts and letters. Arabic calligraphy varied between leafy Kufic, Moroccan Kufic, Diwani, thuluth, Naskh, and even modern Arabic calligraphy. The sculptures' contents also varied between the Holy Qur'an, poetry, novel, and

sayings, as well as words and sentences from the artist himself. As for the style, it is also numerous. There is free Arabic calligraphy, new modern classic Arabic calligraphy, and modern classic Arabic calligraphy. The aspects of sculpture are analysed in order to understand its underlying meaning.

Analysis of Nja Al-Mahdaoui's Works

Nja Al-Mahdaoui is a famous Tunisian calligrapher and plastic artist who used Arabic calligraphy in exquisite plastic works in a new innovative way. He also used several materials, including stainless steel, to carve Arabic letters. With his unique style, the Arabic letters have gained a new aesthetic dimension, art, and beauty inspired by the Arabic letter.



Figure 1. *Noor* (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d.)

(Source: <http://www.nja-mahdaoui.com/artwork-category/sculpture/>)

Figure 1 shows an artwork entitled *Noor* (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d.) which is a stainless steel sculpture in Arabic calligraphy. The artwork appears in its bright colour with simple gold colours. It is clear that the type of Kufic calligraphy is leafy, and the text is not clear whether it is poetry or other. The steel is melted and then moulded in this form.



Figure 2. *Beya* (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d.)

(Source: <http://www.nja-mahdaoui.com/artwork-category/sculpture/>)

Figure 2 shows a sculptural artwork in Arabic calligraphy entitled *Beya* (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d.) which is made from stainless steel, with steel colouring. It is a Kufic type of calligraphy. It is not clear whether the text is poetry or something else. The steel is melted and then moulded in this form.

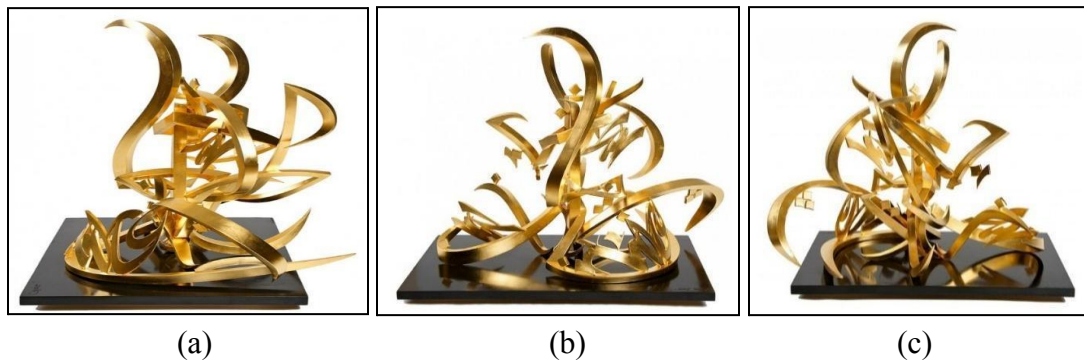


Figure 3 (a,b & c). *Maqam Essafa* (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d.)
(Source: <http://www.nja-mahdaoui.com/artwork-category/sculpture/>)

Figure 3 shows the three curves of the same artwork entitled *Maqam Essafa* (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d.) that consist of stainless steel plated with gold. It appears that the type of font is Diwani. Watching this 3D artwork from three angles, the artwork appears endlessly. The meaning of the text is unclear, with separate letters formed, installed, and interwoven to make the desired phrase.

Analysis of El Seed's Work

El Seed is a Tunisian-French artist. At the age of 18, he learned the Arabic language and calligraphy without the traditional rules. He invented the art of 'calligraffiti,' which combines Arabic calligraphy and street art. Elseed does not depend on a specific type of Arabic font but rather on a free Arabic font. The advantage of the art of Arabic calligraphy sculpture is the establishment of steel Arabic calligraphic sculptural designs with non-Arabic poems and poetry translated into Arabic.



Figure 4 (a-b). *The Bridge* (El Seed, 2017)
(Source: <https://elseed-art.com/projects/the-bridge-korea/>)

The plate of the sculpture entitled *The Bridge* (El Seed, 2017) includes several parts. In November 2017, the South Korean government placed this laser-cut steel artwork on the inter-Korean border in the demilitarised zone attached to the fence on the border between the two countries. The goal is to advocate peace, unity, and mutual respect. The statue, which is more than 20 metres horizontally, represents the words of the North Korean poet Kim Saul, who died before the two countries were divided. The artwork will remain unfinished until the rest of the statue is installed in the North Korean part. The words are in the non-Arabic language, and the text has been translated into Arabic script in order to create the Arabic stainless steel calligraphy sculpture. The surrounding weather affected the sculpture, increasing its beauty and splendours. The carved words of *The Bridge* are:

“You may remember, unable to forget: yet live a lifetime, remember or forget, for you will have a day whereon will come to forget. You may remember, unable to forget: Let your years flow by, remember or forget, For once in a while, you will forget. On the other hand, it may be:’ How could you forget What you can never forget”

In contrast to the weather variables and the surrounding environment, the steel retained its original colour, which fit the setting surrounding the artwork and added another artistic dimension to it.



Figure 5 (a-b). Myrelingues-la-Brumeuse (El Seed, 2018).
(Source: <https://elseed-art.com/myrelingues-la-brumeuse-lyon/>)

Figure 5 shows the *Myrelingues La Brumeuse* (El Seed, 2017) sculptures inspired from a novel by Claude Le Marguet. The carved French novel in Arabic calligraphy was translated into Arabic. Artist El Seed used a laser to cut the 120-metre long sculpture and suspended it between two bridges along the banks of the La Saone River in Lyon city, France. The artwork consists of 81 panels. The river, the steel, and the line created a mutual interaction between them. The fate of Lyon is no simpler than that of the river. Any city, undoubtedly, is a complicated being, Lyon more than another, which strikes the historian by its richness, its abrupt transformations, its originalities, and even its oddities. It is not the same from one century to the next century and is more constrained than going of its own accord. It goes endlessly from one originality to another).

Arabic calligraphy with its beauty and creativity, stainless steel with its lustre and reflection of movement light, the river with the flow of water and its reflection on the sculpture created a tripartite interaction between the line, the steel, and the river in the 3D sculpture. His works generate contrast and interaction with the surrounding environment.



(a)



(b)

Figure 6 (a-b). Declaration (El Seed, 2018)
(Source: <https://elseed-art.com/opera-dubai/>)

The three-dimensional steel Arabic calligraphy sculpture (Figure 6), entitled *Declaration* (El Seed, 2018) covered in bright pink, was placed on the Dubai Opera front, measuring 30 metres long and weighing three and a half tons of stainless steel. The words of the sculpture were said by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum:

“Art in all its colours and types reflects the culture, history, and civilization of nations.”

It is noticed that the artwork has made its letters by casting and then forming the letters. Put the letters together to be the required saying. Interlacing, overlapping, and fitting are ways to collect Arabic letters to create an artistic sculpture.

Analysis of Sabah Arbilla's Work

Sabah Arbilla is a British Iraqi artist. He has been an artist and passionate about calligraphy and arts since his childhood. He obtained a Master's Degree in Visual Arts from the Visual Institute of Traditional Arts in London. He has many works of art displayed in many international museums. His works included carving Arabic letters and re-forming them into fine paintings and beautiful sculptures, adding Arabic calligraphy to another aesthetic dimension. Sabah Arbilla employs Naskh script in his paintings and sculptures in an innovative and unconventional aesthetic.



Figure 7. Calligraphic sculpture (Sabah Arbilli, 2016)
(Source: http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/the_calligraphy_sculpture_by_sabah_arbilli_unveiled_in_qatar/)

This *Calligraphic sculpture* (Sabah Arbilli, 2016) is in the form of individual letters and then assembled to be the poem of Sheikh Jassim Bin Muhammad Al Thani (Ruler of Qatar). The Naskh line is 7.5 metres high and 7.62 metres long. The carved words are:

“And amongst the sultans stood out, As a lanneret floating over mountain peaks.”

The sculpture was made for the National Day of the State of Qatar and was placed on the Doha Corniche.



Figure 8 (a-b). Decision makers (Sabah Arbilli, 2016)
(Source: http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/calligraphic_exhibition_decisions_by_sabah_arbilli/)

This sculpture was created by Sabah and was named the *Decision Makers* (Sabah Arbilli, 2016), made for the Dar Al Funoon Art House, Kuwait. It is clear that the artist used the method of pushing, punching, and laser cutting to implement the artwork. The artist added colours to stainless steel to look more beautiful, wonderful, and new in the sculptural artistic medium.

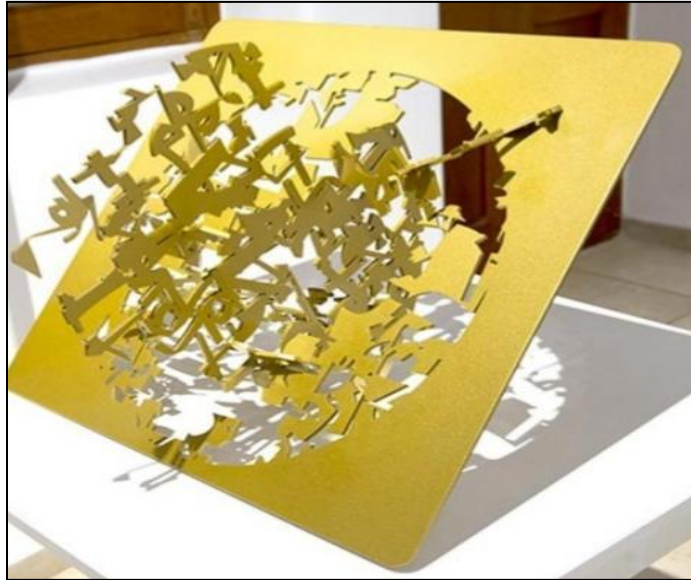


Figure 9. Migration (Sabah Arbilli, 2016)

(Source: http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/calligraphic_exhibition_decisions_by_sabah_arbilli/)

This sculpture is named *Migration* (Sabah Arbilli, 2016) and was exhibited at the Kuwait Exhibition for Arabic Calligraphy 2016. It seems that the artist used a laser to cut, shape and install the Arabic letters for the sculpture.

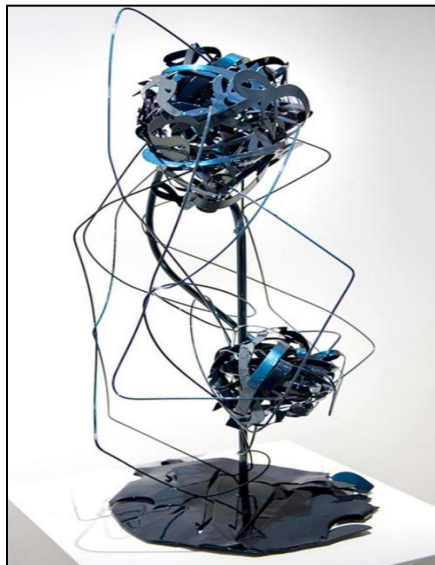


Figure 10. Inner Control (Sabah Arbilli, 2016)

(Source: http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/calligraphic_exhibition_decisions_by_sabah_arbilli/)

This sculpture is named *Inner Control* (Sabah Arbilli, 2016) or decision between the brain and heart. The interweaving of the Arabic letters, their overlapping, and their installation in stainless steel

improved the sculpture's beauty with the change of the colour of the steel to this beautiful colour, adding another feature to the three-dimensional Arabic calligraphy sculpture. Sabah's works are unique, innovative, and original in terms of design and creativity. He has new ideas in expressing his art using stainless steel.

Analysis of Mattar bin Lahej's Work

Mattar bin Lahej is a young Emirati artist who adopts the Thuluth script in his oil and stainless steel artworks. He has many works consisting of Arabic calligraphy using steel. He was also called "the Man of Steel." He made small and giant steel sculptures with his passion for calligraphy and steel.

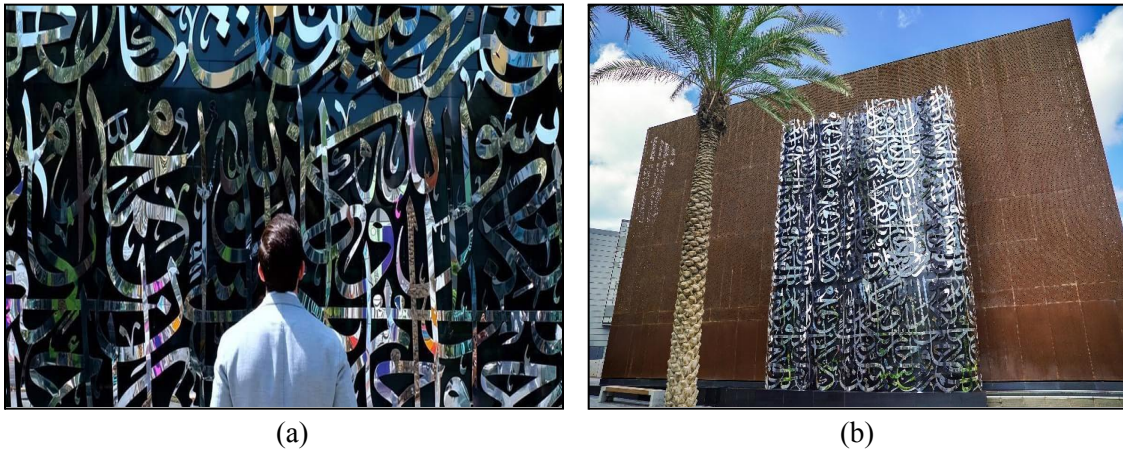


Figure 11 (a-b). *Aya* (Mattar bin Lahej, 2018)

(Source: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/eight-metre-tall-mattar-bin-lahej-sculpture-unveiled-at-city-walk-1.778740>)

This is a sculpted verse entitled *Aya* (Mattar bin Lahej, 2018). It is a sculpture by the artist Mattar Lahej in 2018. It is a verse from Surah Muhammad. It was placed in front of City Walk in Dubai, near the mosque. It weighs four tons of stainless steel. It is sculpted in the traditional hollowed-out thuluth script, made of gilded stainless steel on a 3D black background. The sculpture improved creativity and beauty by utilising current Arabic calligraphy and stainless steel methods. In the Arabic calligraphy sculpture, the artist corrugated its letters, placed them in a pool of water, and added movement to it. Its unique shape created a state of balance between the eye of the beholder and its surroundings, in addition to the influence of weather factors on it.

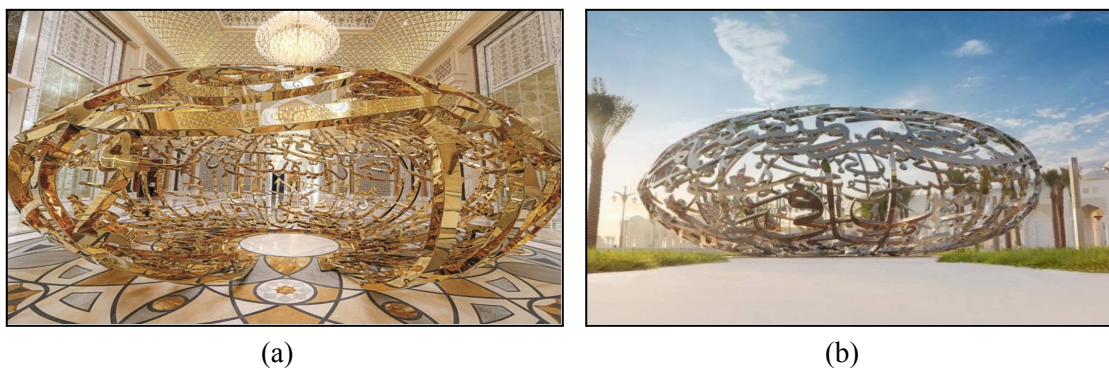


Figure 12 (a-b). *Speech Energy* (Mattar bin Lahej, 2018)

(Source: <https://www.emaratyouth.com/life/culture/2020-02-27-1.1312896>)

Pictured above is a gold-plated stainless steel sculpture depicting *Speech Energy* (Mattar bin Lahej, 2013) at Castle Al Watan in Abu Dhabi. Mattar had made three large sculptures. The carvings reflect the aesthetics of Arabic thuluth calligraphy, with its beautiful letters and large curves. The carved letters are hollowed out from the inside, very precise and balanced. The sculpture is hollow inside, allowing the audience to enter and explore its artistic dimensions from a different perspective. These sculptures represent sayings from Sheikh Zayed bin Al Nahyan. The main sculpture phrase:

“Real wealth is the wealth of men, not money and oil, and money is of no use if it is not harnessed to serve the people.”

Other sculptures:

“Science and history go hand in hand. With knowledge, anyone can write their history and preserve it for generations. So that they can look at it and know what grandparents and fathers did? Education and culturing people in it is a great wealth that we cherish. Science is wealth. We are building the future on a scientific”.



Figure 13. *Moons of Forgiveness* (Mattar bin Lahej, 2018)
(Source: <http://www.danderma.co/?p=29112>)

Moons of Forgiveness (Mattar bin Lahej, 2013) is a steel sculpture representing the flow and aesthetics of Arabic letters. It is located next to a waterfall, measuring 12 square metres with a height of two metres. Circular rings linked together with Arabic letters, seem to flow out of the water stream in a continuous dynamic. In addition, the reflection of water movement on the stainless steel generates additional movement. Each episode is a part of Surat Al-Ikhlās. The crescent is formed to become a full moon. The lustre of steel and the reflection of light and water added additional beauty to the sculpture.

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis summary

No	Artworks and their Artist	Scripts or letters	Type of calligraphy	Style
1	<i>Noor</i> (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d).	ن، ح، ف، ت	Leafy Kufic	Free calligraphy
2	<i>Beya</i> (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d).	م، ث، ب	Moroccan Kufic	Free calligraphy
3	<i>Maqam Esafa</i> (Nja Al-Mahdaoui, n.d).	ع، ث، خ، ح	Diwani	Free calligraphy
4	<i>The Bridge</i> (El Seed, 2017)	A poem by a Korean poet, Kim Saul. The poem was in the Korean language and translated into Arabic by the artist.	Free calligraphy	Free calligraphy
5	<i>Myrelingues La Brumeuse</i> (El Seed, 2017)	The text of a historical novel about the city of Lyon. Translated from the original French language to the Arabic language.	Free calligraphy	Free calligraphy
6	<i>Declaration</i> (El Seed, 2018)	A saying by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of the United Arab Emirates.	Free calligraphy	Free calligraphy
7	<i>Calligraphic sculpture</i> (Sabah Arbilli, 2016.)	A poem by H. E. Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani	Free calligraphy	Free calligraphy
8	<i>Inner Control</i> (Sabah Arbilli, 2016.)	A saying by Sheikh Jassim Al Thani, ruler of the State of Qatar.	Naskh	Modern Classical Calligraphy
9	<i>Migration</i> (Sabah Arbilli, 2016)	هجرة, hijrah, migration, reputation	Naskh	Modern classical
10	<i>Decision makers</i> (Sabah Arbilli, n.d.)	العقل والقلب, Mind and Heart	Naskh	Modern classical
11	<i>Aya</i> (Mattar Bin Lahej, 2018)	The Aya 40 of the Surah Al Ahzab, the Holy Qur'an.	Thuluth	Neo-modern classical
12	<i>Speech Energy</i> (Mattar Bin Lahej, 2013)	The three sculptures are sayings of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Al Nahyan.	Thuluth	Free calligraphy
13	<i>Moons of Forgiveness</i> (Mattar Bin Lahej, 2013)	Surah Al-Ikhlās, the Holy Qur'an.	Thuluth	Free calligraphy

CONCLUSION

Arabic calligraphy is a source of inspiration for many calligraphers to create their own unique art. Arabic calligraphy continues to be compatible with both classical and modern ideas. The current study combines traditional and contemporary Arabic calligraphy using stainless steel in creating artistic and stunning sculptures using modern technologies. The Arabic steel calligraphy carvings appeared very accurate and beautiful in endless forms whenever the angle of view changed. Non-Arabic poetry and narration were added, which were subsequently translated into Arabic. Stainless steel was a prominent element in the sculptures, which increased the beauty of the sculpture as well as reflected the weather and its

surrounding factors. These factors gave the sculptures a sense of movement, dynamism, and life. Furthermore, the addition of colours to stainless steel was another aesthetic element that increased the beauty of the Arabic calligraphy sculpture. Finally, Arabic calligraphy of its various types requires the calligrapher and the Arabic calligraphists to be creative and innovative, rather than just copying other artists' artworks. These samples are the works by four artists who used stainless steel to create Arabic calligraphy sculptures. Further research could include an analysis of other artists' works that have used the same material to create new creative sculptures in their own styles to get a broader and more comprehensive view of this type of art.

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