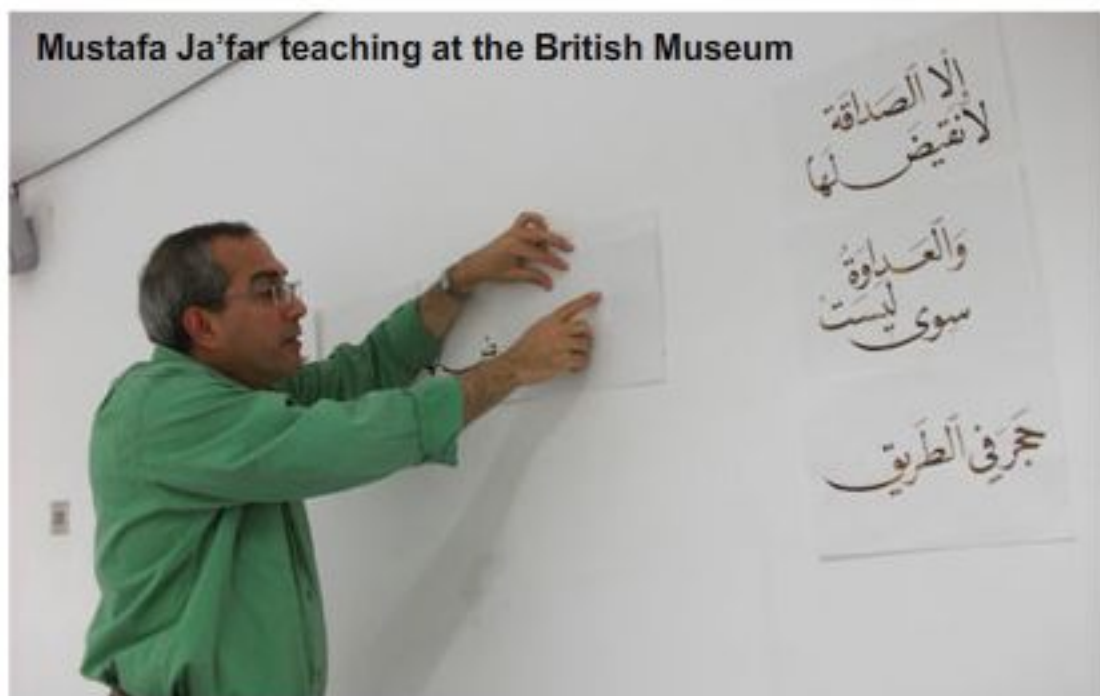


## Magic of Arab calligraphy attracts students from four continents

By: Karen Dabrowska

The students look on spellbound as Mustafa Ja'far transforms Mother Teresa's saying: "Helping hands are holier than praying hands", into a work of art in Arabic calligraphy.

Mustafa Ja'far teaching at the British Museum



The calligraphy classes run by popular practical courses at the London University's Birbeck university, attended not only by College in conjunction with the hijab-clad women but also British Museum under the students from Japan, Argentina, Worlds Art and Artefacts France, Germany and many programme are among the most other non-Arab countries.

Iraqi-born calligrapher Mustafa Ja'far, author of the British Museum's Arabic Calligraphy: Naskh Script for Beginners, started the courses in 2001 and has never looked back. There is a class limit of 12 for the 11 week programme.

"This term the university enrolled 15 but we can only accommodate 12", Ja'far told The Middle East. "Every week people come asking whether I am teaching elsewhere or if new

courses are starting up. The inquiries are not only from Muslims but from people from all walks of life and ethnic backgrounds".

Ja'far explained that calligraphy can be looked at from the point of view of Islamic culture or it can be seen from an artistic point of view as an art form in its own right. He teaches two modules one dealing with Kufic script the other with Naskh script.

**Rieko: "Arabic calligraphy is different from Japanese calligraphy which is all done in one go".**



## Catherine and Ahmed: combining the study of calligraphy with other art forms



Kufic is the oldest calligraphic form of the various Arabic scripts and consists of a modified form of the old Nabataean script. Its name comes from the city of Kufa in Iraq although it was known in Mesopotamia at least a 100 years before the foundation of Kufa. At the time of the emergence of Islam this type of script was already in use in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula. The first copies of the Qur'an were written in Kufic,

consisting of straight lines and angles, often with elongated verticals and horizontals.

Naskh is a style of writing Arabic that goes back to the 8th century which was improved by Abu Ali Mohammed Ibn Muqlah (d 940AD). His knowledge of geometric science helped him lay the basis for Arabic calligraphy upon defined proportional rules and geometric principles.



"We have only 11 weeks and we cannot take our time", Ja'far emphasised. There are three stages of learning: writing single letters, then joined letters and finally words/sentences. Students have to submit a piece of work for assessment at the end of the course. It is important they take something tangible back home. Letters have to be written in a certain proportion using the traditional reed pen or

bamboo sticks. Presentation – colour combinations, mounts, frames and borders - are also very important".

In the Middle East, interest in calligraphy is witnessing a revival. Lots of people are practising calligraphy now and there are many competitions in the Middle East which attract a lot of entries. The future is promising.

**Fawziya: Became interested in calligraphy during her travels throughout the Middle East**



# يد العون اقدس من بد الصلاة

"Helping hands are holier than praying hands"

In Britain the Islamic Gallery at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum have helped shed light on Islamic art in general and calligraphy in particular. Ja'far emphasised that just as studying art does not make you an artist, studying calligraphy does not make you a calligrapher. "It is a matter of research, endeavours, personality. It depends on talent and how passionate you are about the subject".

The backgrounds of the students who attend the Arabic Calligraphy classes at the British Museum are as varied as their work. For example, Cecilia, a writer of educational books for children and teenagers is from Argentina where her family migrated from Syria and Lebanon. British born Fawziya of

Pakistani origin has a degree in product design and engineering.

Catherine from France lectures in French and German and also makes etchings and lino cuts.

Sandra from Germany studied Arabic in Syria. Ahmed of Pakistani origin born in the UK is an IT specialist who is fascinated by Islamic art and has also done a course in Islamic pattern making. Finally Rieko from Japan was exposed to Islamic culture during a childhood spent in Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

"Arabic calligraphy is different from Japanese calligraphy which is all done in one go. It is more of a spontaneous beauty." Rieko explained "Arabic calligraphy was more difficult than I expected. I was hoping to reach a certain level in this time but I



don't think its possible. It is a meditative process, I feel totally absorb in it".

Catherine is eager to combine her calligraphy skills with her lino cuts and use calligraphy on the borders. "I have no connection with Islamic culture apart from an artistic interest". She commented that "symmetry matters more than composition. You can fill the page in different ways"

Fawziya became interested in calligraphy during her travels throughout the Middle East. "I saw so many Arabic designs and patterns, you don't realise how much of it there is".

Ahmed always really enjoyed looking at calligraphy. He reads the Quran which is written in a

very beautiful style "Calligraphy is a very good way of introducing the positive aspects of Islam, especially in this time", he said.

Since 2001 the calligraphy classes have been building bridges of understanding between Eastern and Western cultures and Ja'far is confidence they will continue for at least another decade.

