



A steady hand

Calligrapher transforms words into art

BY KRIS CORONADO

Mohamed Zakariya has a pretty good idea of how he would like a person to react after seeing his work. “I want to make a piece that when someone sees it, they’re going to want to eat it,” says the 70-year-old Arlington resident with a chuckle.

Calligraphy has been part of Zakariya’s life for more than 40 years. Growing up in Southern California, Zakariya converted to Islam at age 19 and soon became entranced by Arabic calligraphy after seeing a piece hanging in a Los Angeles rug shop.

His fascination turned into a passion and eventually a profession: By the mid-1960s, the self-taught calligrapher was receiving steady work.

In 1984, Zakariya traveled to Istanbul, where he studied with renowned Arabic calligrapher Hasan Celebi. Since then, Zakariya has designed a U.S. postage stamp and was commissioned to create a piece for President Obama to give as a gift to Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz.

And Zakariya continues to push himself, creating between 10 and 30 works a year (ranging from \$5,000 to \$30,000). “As I get older, I get better,” he says. “I’m really hitting my stride now.”

Zakariya estimates that he uses more than 150 pens, mostly made from reeds, from such places as Turkey and Iraq. “They used to come from Egypt; the real great ones come from Egypt. I got mine in the early ‘60s.” Now, most of his pens come from Iran.



The pens don’t come with a ready-made tip, Zakariya says. Instead, calligraphers carve the tips to the desired size and shape. A small crack that is carved into each tip “has to be just right for the ink to flow,” he says.



To keep the ink that he made nine years ago from drying out, he places **raw Chinese silk** in the ink jar. “It’s basically a sponge,” he says. The silk also allows him to control how much ink he gets in his pens.



Zakariya created this piece between 2008 and 2009. It’s a collection of **Hadith Qudsi**, the word of God spoken through Muhammad, written in Arabic script. The center quote reads: “Truly My mercy conquers My anger.”



Zakariya’s ink comes from places such as Iran and Japan. It must be water-soluble, otherwise he can’t make corrections. He also makes his own ink from the soot of burnt linseed oil and kerosene, which takes six to eight weeks.



Once the ink dries, Zakariya polishes it with an **agate stone burnisher** to give it a semigloss appearance. If the ink “weren’t a simple soot ink,” he says, “[the burnisher] would snatch it and scratch it all over the place. It would tear it up.”



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