



WISSAM SHAWKAT

By Elinor Holland · Wissam Shawkat is an Iraqi artist who lives in Dubai. Wissam has many talents, but we know him as a calligrapher of Arabic script as well as a designer. His first New York show, *Letters of Love*, was on exhibit at Reed Space on the Lower East Side of Manhattan from February until April 2011.

I had the good fortune to meet Wissam on his first trip to the United States. We met first in Washington DC and then several times in New York City. I interviewed him and we discussed his views on his work, the state of the art of calligraphy in both Latin and Arabic scripts and his own personal history as an artist. He was truly a pleasure to hang out with! Not only is he easygoing, he likes to look at any and all sorts of art and discuss all aspects of his experience as a calligrapher. We met at the Frick Collection one day, the New York Public Library's "Three Faiths" exhibit another day, and NY Central Art Supply on yet another occasion. Our discussion about techniques was as far-reaching as it could be given the limited time we had together. Wissam believes that we need to be able to use the materials that we find around us in the 21st century in addition to the tools that have been used for millennia. I bought a Chinese brush with a bamboo handle and watched Wissam cut

it with a lightweight NT Cutter knife as I sipped my latte in a coffee shop on Second Avenue. The reeds and pen knives needed to cut them into pens, available at supply shops in the Middle East, are just not available in the US, even in Manhattan. So we have to be more resourceful here. Wissam even suggested the long handled ice scraper in my car be used as a pen nib!

Left: World of Love



Logos by Wissam Shawkat are interspersed throughout the text of this article.

Many modern day calligraphers of Arabic script find themselves between two worlds. These worlds need not oppose each other, and in fact they enhance our options and opportunities. We calligraphers have Photoshop and bamboo and everything in between at our fingertips. The field of options is quite wide at this point in history.

While we in "The West" may know little of the tradition of calligraphy in the Middle East, and