'Massoudy's calligraphies are arranged to loosely follow the seasons, beginning and ending with autumn: sombre, wintry hues at one end, brilliant tones full of vibrant reds at the other.'

VENETIA PORTER, THE BRITISH MUSEUM
Even the white lilac has a shadow.
HUNGARIAN PROVERB

Hassan Massoudy’s elegant calligraphy depicts the four seasons of the garden. From the icy palettes of winter, to delicate spring growth; from the dazzling sunshine and blooms of summer through the fading hues of autumn, he captures in calligraphy what countless poets have wrought with words.

Massoudy draws his seasonal inspirations from writers, artists and luminaries such as Kahlil Gibran, Henri Matisse and Lao Tzu, as well as from Hungarian, Spanish, Turkish and Japanese proverbs.

The Calligrapher’s Garden
Hassan Massoudy

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Introduction by
Venetia Porter

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For Hassan Massoudy, gardens have special significance. The author was born and brought up in Najaf, in southern Iraq; this city, the burial place of Ali ibn Abi Talib – one of the four Rightly Guided caliphs of Islam and first of the Shi'i imams – lies at the edge of the great desert that continues into Saudi Arabia. Hot, dry and arid, its harsh climate, the overwhelming bleakness of the landscape and the shortage of water in the region were indelibly etched onto Massoudy’s young mind. Colour was only to be found in the souq – in particular, the fabric souq, which he would visit with his mother and which was full of imported Indian cloth:

In our city, where the colour ochre prevailed, this souq was like a multi-coloured garden, an extraordinary place different from other souqs.

The idea of a book of calligraphies centred on a garden connects, therefore, directly to his childhood; it is a way, he says, of compensating for what he missed as a boy. The calligraphies are arranged to loosely follow the seasons, beginning and ending with autumn: sombre, wintry hues at one end, brilliant tones full of vibrant reds at the other. Massoudy describes this book as ‘an album in which to wander, as in a garden’. Each calligraphy consists of a short extract of a poem or a proverb; the text is written in a classical style in black ink, juxtaposed with his ‘modern’ pieces in the style he has made his own: broad strokes made with the flat of the wooden implement he uses, combined with the qalam (the traditional reed pen of calligraphers) playing and highlighting single words in fresh, raw, pure pigments reminiscent of those brilliant, bold colours of the Indian textiles he saw as a child.

Massoudy is one of eleven children, whose father’s family had been involved in Gulf trade. Based in Basra and then Kufa, they moved to Najaf at the beginning of the twentieth century. His mother was from a family of sayyids (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) who were also involved in commerce. She was educated in the kuttah, the Qur’aanic school, and knew prodigious numbers of literary quotations and proverbs – which explains why these form the subject of so many of Massoudy’s
calligraphies. His uncle Ali had a profound influence on him; he was a cleric whose house was full of books, but he was also a proficient calligrapher.

When we visited, we would find him in his library seated cross-legged on carpets, a notebook on his knees, propped up by pillows. His turban, made of a long black cloth, gave him a majestic and striking look to the eyes of the child I was at the time. A Persian qalam in his hand, he would write silently. I could not yet read then, but his calligraphy fascinated me. The fluidity of the shiny black ink on satiny, yellowish paper captivated me.\(^2\)

As a boy, Massoudy was also impressed by the grandeur and beauty of the calligraphic tile panels in the mosque of Imam Ali, where he would go regularly with his family; his grandfather was buried there, and later his father would be as well.

Engulfed by the crowd, we walked through the huge mosque of Ali. My eyes were fixed on the ceramic walls decorated with pale monuments of calligraphy. I discovered a network of white and yellow letters interlaced on a blue and green surface. As I was small and the calligraphy already large, in my memory it had reached gigantic proportions.\(^3\)

At school a newly appointed art teacher who had studied at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, and who also liked calligraphy along with the Western-style painting he introduced to his pupils, noticed Massoudy’s fine writing hand and encouraged him.

It was at that moment that for the first time I knew the pleasure of making the black and liquid ink flow onto the paper, like a ribbon that turns round and round to create a calligraphy.\(^4\)

As Massoudy grew more confident, his father allowed him to write the labels for the packages of goods he sent to Baghdad; later, there were special calligraphies for Shi'i festivals, and orders for large calligraphic banners used in demonstrations. With his brother Rassoul, Massoudy set up a business making pictures and calligraphies on pieces of glass set into Najaf buses. As he finished school, he began to dream of studying art in Baghdad. As a Shi'i from Najaf, however, he was unable to obtain the correct ‘nationality’ papers to get in. This was spring 1961, and Iraq was in a growing state of turmoil. The monarchy had been overthrown in 1958 and a republic established, led by Abd al-Karim Qasim. During this period Massoudy, already becoming known for his calligraphy on banners, was falsely accused of designing political banners for peace rallies during the Kurdish revolts of the early 1960s. This accusation led to intermittent prison terms, and was to plague Massoudy until he was finally acquitted eight years later.

Although unable to study at the Academy of Arts, in Baghdad Massoudy began to live off his calligraphy, working in advertising but also learning different script styles – *shubhat, ta'liq* and others – from the masters he encountered. The paramount calligrapher at this time was Hashem al-Khurat al-Baghdadli (d. 1973), who, surrounded by a few students, continued to work in the classical style that had survived from the Ottoman period. But Massoudy was beginning to feel torn between art and calligraphy. Baghdad at that time was the centre of a long-established and vibrant art scene.\(^5\) His work brought him in close proximity with the Iraqi Artists’ Association, of which he would later become a member. There he met many of the great figures of Iraqi art; Jawad Selim, Kazim Haydar, Hafiz al-Dorounbi and others. The Museum of Modern Art was opened at this time, with successive, inspiring exhibitions by leading contemporary artists. Massoudy began to seriously dream of going to Paris to study art, his intermittent difficulties with the authorities making such a departure feel like a necessity.

Massoudy left Iraq in 1969, at the age of twenty-four. Financing himself by doing commercial calligraphy, he was accepted at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts to study figurative art and painting. He now felt his true calling was art. But calligraphy kept re-emerging; Massoudy found that he was incorporating it into his figurative paintings in the manner of the *hurufis* artists, and also began to study the works of Japanese calligraphers. Finally abandoning figurative art, but knowing that the strictures of the tradition of Arabic calligraphy were not for him, he set out on a different journey. An important moment came when he met actor Guy Jaquet, who worked with the esteemed actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault. Passionate about the Arabic language and Arabische poetry, Jaquet proposed that they create a performance around the Arabic verb.

By his side, I had to do calligraphy which would be projected onto a big screen. I couldn’t see how something created in the intimacy of a workshop could work on a large sheet of plastic. On the other hand, through our discussions as students at the Beaux-Arts, we were keen to reintroduce art into the city away from commercial considerations. We sought art which would touch the hearts of the spectators.\(^6\)
The success of this venture, as well as later collaborations with the oud player Fawzy al-Aidy and the celebrated Sufi musician Kudsi Erguner, led to further innovative performance projects. Keen to make Arabic calligraphy popular in France, Massoudy, working with his wife Isabelle, began to produce books that ranged in subject from the didactic (e.g., the structure of Arabic script and how to write it – *Calligraphie arabe vivante, Calligraphie pour débutants* and *L'ABCédiaire de la calligraphie arabe*) to smaller works focusing on his favourite writers and poets, including poets of the pre-Islamic era such as Ansar (*Le poète du désert*); the poetry of Sufi mystics Ibn Arabi and Jalal al-Din Rumi; and the stories of Sinbad the Sailor.

The Iraq war of 2003 and its violent aftermath had as much a cataclysmic effect on Massoudy as on so many people, and he felt a profound need to reconnect with the country of his birth, from which he had been separated for so long. Calligraphies inspired by the 4,000-year-old Epic of Gilgamesh ensued. The epic was originally written down on cuneiform tablets and only translated into Arabic from the Akkadian in the early 60s. Massoudy had heard the stories recited and re-enacted in Baghdad. In 2004 he published an autobiography, *S le long de l'Éuphrate*, a vivid evocation of his early life in Najaf and Baghdad.

*The Calligrapher's Garden* includes fragments of poems and proverbs from across time, by a wide range of writers – Middle Eastern, Asian and European. "These sentences intentionally refer to gardens," Massoudy writes, "but in fact they speak of us, human beings." Among these authors he has clear favourites, such as Kahlil Gibran, the remarkable fifteenth-century Indian mystic poet who encouraged the inner life so as to be close to the divine, with verses such as: 'O friend, do not go to the flower garden, the flower garden is within you' and 'Take your seat on the thousand petals of the lotus, and there gaze on the Infinite Beauty.' Kahil Gibran (d. 1931), the Lebanese poet best known for his lyrical essays collected as *The Prophet*, is another favourite. Massoudy's composition in blue highlighting the word 'bee' is rendered from the verse "To both bee and flower, the giving and the receiving of pleasure is a need and an estasy", from Gibran's writings on pleasure in *The Prophet*. A haiku by the Japanese poet Saito Sōkyō linking painting with writing so evocatively – 'The willow paints the wind without a brush' – is turned into a composition centred around the word rib (wind). The great Andalusian poet Ibn Zaydoun (d. 1071), famed as a poet and for his love affair with the rebellious Umayyad princess Wallada, is also represented here; perhaps Massoudy empathises with him, as both men were forced into exile. Ibn Zaydoun's poetry is full of nostalgia and allusions to his native city, Córdoba, such as: 'The flower of our life is like the blooming of flowers.'

As to how Massoudy has created these beautiful compositions, the last word must go to him:

I use calligraphy as a means of personal expression, reflecting sensations. To take it further, however, I must seek a deep experience. To do so, I went into the desert to create works that were warm and weightless. I worked with dancers, for calligraphy that floats away. For garden calligraphies I've tried to sense the seasons and to evoke them in my gestures and colours.

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The British Museum

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**Notes**

2. Ibid., pp. 23–4.
3. Ibid., p. 17.
4. Ibid., p. 42.
I've known it since childhood but now I can no longer question it: trees speak.

Jacques Lacarrière (1925–2005)

The Tree

I was born of a dream of the earth dreaming that it was united with the sky

Jacques Lacarrière (1925–2005)
Sow a seed,  
the earth will give you a flower.  
*Kahlil Gibran* (1883–1931)
The grain is worth the soil into which it falls, the best seed can’t grow on stone.
 Henri Matisse (1869–1954)

Let nature be your only study.
 Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711)
The tree is wholly for the seed
and the seed is wholly for the tree.
Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931)
The seed carries the tree within.
Johann Gottfried Von Herder (1744–1803)

البذرة تحمل سماتها المشجرة - جوهان غوتفرید فون هردر
I no longer want to be a cloud
I want to be a tree and to cling to my soil.

Eugène Guillevic (1907–1997)
To fade in order to bloom again.

Lao Tzu (ca 6th century BCE)

یذبنی من أجل أن يغصّر - لاو تسو
To both, bee and the flower, the giving and the receiving of pleasure is a need and an ecstasy.

Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931)

النحلة والوردة
في العطاء والأخلاص لل 위하여
بهما حاجات ملكية وطريق
جواب
My heart swelled beyond reason
beneath the flowering lilacs.
Catulle Mendès (1841–1909)

القلب ينفتح بفزع
تحت الشجرة الوردي الناعم

The trees bring forth sweet ecstasy
to all who in the desert roam.
William Blake (1757–1827)

مسيعي ضعاف الأشجار ينفرون نعمة من هضاب الصحراء
ويليام بليك
Without roots, a tree cannot stand.

* African proverb

بدون حذاء لا يمكن المشي، إن تقلي ووقفة... منظور شرقي
Leave a place in your garden for weeds.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226)
The flower is always within the almond.

*Henri Bocq (1888–1976)*

زهرة تنتمي دائماً إلى الورد – هنري بوستوك