



# Guardian of Culture

Amman-based contemporary artist Hussein Alazaat has worked with the likes of Diesel and Givenchy – but he’s most inspired by stories closer to home

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY YULIA DENISYUK

A visit to Hussein Alazaat’s quiet, sun-lit studio in Amman’s leafy Jabal al-Weibdeh neighbourhood can easily stretch into several hours of fascinating storytelling. Sometimes you’ll catch the artist expounding on the origins of the world’s first scripts; on other occasions, he might ruminate on the visual impact of Jordanian architecture on the 2021 Hollywood blockbuster *Dune*. On this afternoon, Alazaat is narrating an anecdote about Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ordering olive oil from the Nabateans, the mysterious civilisation responsible for the rock-hewn architecture of Petra and AiUla. “He was one of their best customers,” Alazaat says as he examines a book of comics about the Prophet’s life.

In his design studio – aptly named Elharf, the Arabic word for “letter” – rare collections of 20th-century Egyptian poetry share shelf space with marvels like *Habibi*, a graphic novel by Craig Thompson that weaves epic storytelling with explorations on religion, trauma and love. But it is letters – Arabic letters – that enthral Alazaat the most. “For me, Arabic is an exquisite language because every letter is an art form,” he says. “There’s a whole universe inside. And I want to capture and preserve that universe for generations to come.”

This is evident throughout his multidisciplinary oeuvre, where a clear thread emerges. “What are the origins, the stories behind these letters?” Alazaat muses, looking over his 2019 painting *Love*. “Arab people are storytellers; we’ve created stories that spread throughout the world. We should be the ones narrating those stories.”

Alazaat traces his fascination with visual Arabic culture to his early days spent lost in 1970’s children’s books and magazines illustrated by the iconic Egyptian artist and publisher Mohieddin el-Labbad. “I decided to follow in el-Labbad’s footsteps, to bring forth the visual history that exists in our region, all of that collective memory, in my work,” he says.

Like el-Labbad before him, Alazaat wants to ensure new generations have a reference point to their heritage that they can make their own. At Elharf, he amassed a personal archive of books,



From left: Alazaat’s tools of the trade; in his studio, Elharf; a work in progress

atlases, prints and posters that carry the memories of the region’s art, design and identity – then put it all online at [khazanet.org](http://khazanet.org), so anyone could access it. He also hosts calligraphy workshops, and visitors can pore over his collections by appointment. “The worst thing, in my opinion, is to have history exist only in the museums. With my work, I want this history to come alive.”

Beyond the studio, Alazaat’s art carries the same message. His installation *Of Letters & Coins*, recently exhibited in Saudi Arabia, explores Jordan’s ancient crossroads through coins that Nabatean, Safaitic and other civilisations used throughout centuries. In the UAE, guests of the new Address Beach Resort Fujairah pass by *Spring of The Eyes*, a calligraphic installation inspired by a 12th-century poem by Ibn Tufail, at the hotel’s entrance. He’s run calligraphy and design workshops in Istanbul, Jeddah and Sharjah, and collaborated with creatives like the Oscar-nominated Jordanian director Naji Abu Nowar. Jordan’s Queen Rania commissioned Alazaat to create several contemporary calligraphy artworks.

The past, present and future commingle in Alazaat’s studio, where his rare books and ancient manuscripts sit next to his iPad Pro. “My art is contemporary art,” he says. “But in my contemporary art, I stand on that ancient ground, the deep understanding of our culture.” [alazaat.com](http://alazaat.com) **en**

