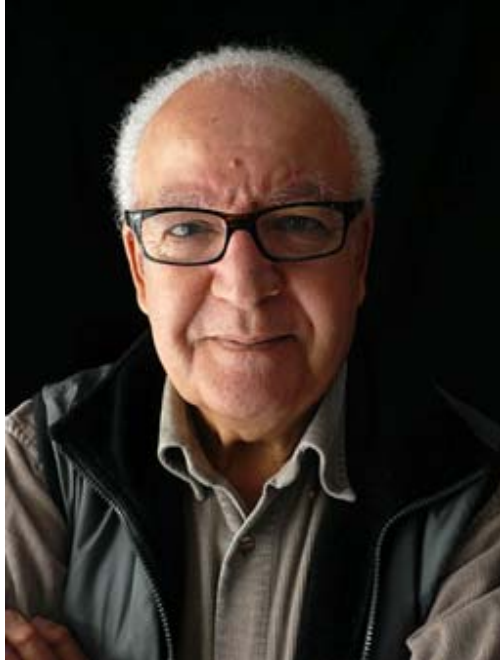


NJA MAHDAOUI

Tunisian, born 1937



Nja Mahdaoui is one of the most celebrated living contemporary artists and calligraphers in Tunisia. His work is internationally renowned, especially since winning the international competition for the external design of some of Gulf Air's fleet to mark its 50th Anniversary.

Mahdaoui considers himself 'an explorer of signs' and has been described as a 'choreographer of letters'. His work is based on the shapes associated with Kufic script and Arabic letter forms, but he does not set out to write meaningful texts. Famous for his meticulous work in ink on parchment, Mahdaoui stresses the visual impact of his compositions, which he refers to as 'calligrams' ('beautiful writing'). His beautifully stylised Arabic letters fall amidst row after row of minute inscriptions and intricate patterns, like a visual melody. He works across a variety of other materials using wood, aluminium, brass and melamine. Tunisian cultural traditions, such as textile arts, are a rich source of inspiration.

The works we feature in *Routes II* have been carefully chosen as representative of the variety of his work. His most classic and refined work is created on parchment, for which he is rightfully celebrated. But more recently Mahdaoui has been working with bronze to achieve fine Kufic sculptures, which offer a unique interpretation of pictorial calligraphy. He has found the process liberating, being free from the confines of two-dimensional space. This is reflected in the energy and dynamism of his Beya sculpture, and emphasised by the polishing on the tips.

Brief Biography

Mahdaoui is an artist of international repute, living and working in Tunisia. He graduated from the Academy Santa Andrea, Rome from where he joined the Ecole du Louvre in Paris.

In 2005, Mahdaoui won a UNESCO Crafts Prize for the Arab States. His works can be found in museum collections across the Middle East, Europe, North America and Asia as well as two airports, the Islamic Bank in Saudi Arabia and at the Kaust University of Riyadh. The Royal Museum of Contemporary Art, Amman, the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, The British Museum, London and The Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. are just some of the museums which hold major works by Mahdaoui in their collections. Mahdaoui has received many international awards including the Grand prix et des Lettres (Tunisia).

His work was featured in the British Museum's *Word into Art* exhibitions in London (2006) and Dubai (2008). He has organized performances entitled *Total Art*, being interactive communication between Arab, European, North America and Asian artists these have taken place in Tunisia, France, Italy, Denmark, Japan, Cuba, Canada, Germany and Jordan.

He is a highly respected writer and illustrator, and has produced 6 books.