

# HENNA AND CALLIGRAPHY AS ART FORMS

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Calligraphy written in henna appears in all of Lalla Essaydi's works in this exhibition. Henna adorns the female face and body as a cover for the skin in the way that clothing would usually conceal the body for protection and for modesty. Not only does Essaydi use calligraphy for body adornment, but it also serves as a backdrop for her scenes. Large cream sheets of cloth covered with calligraphy are draped across many of her compositions with very little bare space left unadorned by Arabic writing. With calligraphy in henna on the body, clothing and background, subject and scenery blend seamlessly together in Essaydi's work. The process is long and labor intensive, but the results are stunning photos which engage and challenge the viewer.

## **Ideal Growing Conditions for the Henna Plant**

Henna plants are indigenous to desert locations around the world. They can live without water for a very long time just as they would in the desert with monsoon cycles.

Growing henna at home requires that the plant be kept in a sunny spot where the temperature will not drop below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. When you first pot the plant, you should saturate it in water and then only do so occasionally when the soil becomes dry. Just as the desert has drought periods, a henna plant is able to live without being watered everyday. Henna plants can also be temperamental meaning that they will drop all their leaves at once for no reason at all. Sometimes they will do this because they are in too cold of conditions or a fungus attacks the plant, but sometimes the henna plant will just do it for no reason. These plants are easy to grow and manage in a household where sun is plentiful and watering occurs occasionally.

## **How is Henna Applied to the Body?**

Mixing oils with powdered henna plant leaves creates a paste-like substance that we know as henna. The leaves are not hard to obtain. Today these raw materials can be bought at local markets in North Africa and throughout the Arab world. In America, they can be ordered online and mailed to your home. The paste is applied directly to the skin using a paintbrush or a cone to squeeze it onto the skin like toothpaste onto a toothbrush. Henna is easy to manipulate and can be applied into a number of different designs. The henna then has to dry on the skin to transfer the color before washing it off. How dark the color left on the skin depends on the region where the henna is placed and the ratio of oil to henna leaves. Hands and palms tend to be the best place for henna to last the longest. On average, the design remains on the skin for a week before the color starts to fade away.

**Henna as an Art Form**

Henna is most commonly associated with weddings in the Muslim and Arab worlds. Women would have their hands and feet decorated in intricate floral designs the day before their wedding so that the designs would be most distinct on the following day. The process could take many hours, creating a detailed and elaborate design on the bride's arms and legs.

### Cited Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

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