



PAPER TRAIL

MUHAMMAD YUSUF WRITES
ON QUILLING AND A QUILLER DETERMINED TO POPULARISE IT IN THE UAE



Farah Al Fardh

Farah Al Fardh is the perfect antidote to those who think artists are HNW (High Net Worth) individuals and crafts people are of little worth. One of the pioneers of quilling in the UAE, according to her, quilling bridges this perception, since it is both an art and a craft. She adds it is also an absolutely inexpensive way to indulge oneself.

Quilling or paper filigree is a craft – or an art – form that involves the use of strips of paper rolled, shaped, and glued together to create decorative designs like flowers, leaves, and ornamental patterns. It is also used to decorate wedding invitations, birth

announcements, greeting cards, scrapbook pages and boxes.

Al Fardh recalls she had a natural talent for being good with her hands. “I was interested in arts and crafts since I was a child,” she said during an interview, which took place at one of the restaurants at the World Trade Centre. Amidst scoopfuls of chocolate cake, which she put away daintily, she continued: “At school also, I used to cut anything and draw on everything. Seems I was attracted to paper-craft since the beginning!”

Her instinct was encouraged by her mother, an Indian from Hyderabad (her father is an Emirati). After college, when she started working and searched the

Net for books, she found one for little children on quilling. That set her on the paper trail and she became a quiller in right earnest from 2004.

She began making things and giving them away to friends and colleagues. She also put her material on the web at www.farooha.net, when fortune favoured her. She remembers what happened clearly. It was January 13. “A lucky day!” said Al Fardh. “Someone saw my site from Mawarid establishment. They invited me to participate in the Tamaiaz Awards event where I won in the Entrepreneurship category.” Then on, she also started making “paper money” by turning professional.

She is one-woman school of quilling, determined to promote her art. A translator of many books from English to Arabic on quilling, she has appeared umpteen times on TV, where she has taught viewers the finer points of quilling. She is so focused on her art she says it prevents the butterflies in her stomach from escaping and flying around a room when she addresses big gatherings.

Her portfolio is full of plans to promote quilling. “I have not yet taken part in any exhibitions,” she said. “But I did participate in a doll exhibition in a Festival in July, 2009.” Her website, which is both in Arabic and English, is yet another tool for her to popularise quilling. It could be the first website in Arabic that deals with the subject. Right now, she is writing a book in Arabic on quilling.

She has nothing but praise for her art. According to her, it is a calling where fantasy meets reality. “It leaves you with no limits as to what you can create,” she says. All it takes is a few pieces of equipment, a fertile imagination, a little time and sharp focus to create magical worlds of colourful alleys, beautiful gardens and mystical creatures.

“When I first discovered the art of paper quilling,” she says, “I was astonished by the amount of things I could produce using this

method. There is also a plus in quilling which other types art cannot offer. Painters can only see their paintings and musicians can only hear their music. But quillers can actually hold the shape of their thoughts in their hands.”

One of her favourite pastimes is to hold the Eid sheep she makes. “I once created these for Eid Al Adha and sold more than 300 sheep!” she said with wolfish glee. She has also created an Egg Garden, using more than 100 paper strips. Which means, quilling can be done in both vegetarian and non-vegetarian ways!

A self-taught craftsperson, Al Fardh has collected more than thirty books on quilling since 1973. She finds quilling is still in its infancy in the UAE. “Since 2004–10, I have worked hard to promote quilling,” she said. “I have held free workshops, been on TV, addressed meetings and have met and spoken to whoever would listen.”

She has been to Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Quwain, Dubai and Al Ain, among other places, on her mission. She has currently more than 150 students whom she teaches, in addition to many more on the Internet. She has also some pupils in Oman and has plans to spread the quilling culture to other Gulf countries.

She climbed a steep hill of prejudice against quilling when she started. “When I started,” she said, “I heard comments like ‘this is cheap; you are selling for too much,’ ‘of what use is this paper,’ etc.” But when the going got tough, she got tough and weathered the storm.

“I don’t think this art will be sidelined,” she said. “Four years ago, there was no bookshop with books on quilling. But now the major ones stock them.” As long as one improves his techniques and has new ideas, more people will be attracted to quilling, she said.

“Wouldn’t it be a pity if the world doesn’t realise that such an incredible art exists?” she asked. From all indications, Al Fardh’s rhetorical question and her intense activity to promote her art will make sure paper will never be the same again.