



Spring
LINES

Contemporary Calligraphy from East and West

Arabic Calligraphy Today

SORAYA SYED

Throughout the ages the art of the pen has been the primary artistic expression of the Arab-Islamic peoples. The development of Islamic calligraphy resulted from the Muslim response to the heavenly injunction: 'Recite! In the Name of thy Lord... who taught by the pen...' (Surah al-Alaq, 96:1-5). These were the very first verses revealed to the Prophet Muhammad² through the archangel Gabriel, therefore sanctifying the use of the pen from the birth of Islam in the 7th century AD. There are a number of direct references to the pen, ink and the act of writing in the Quran, which was revealed in Arabic and written down subsequently.³ The rudimentary scripts that were initially used to record the Quran, developed into a sophisticated written expression that became the principal basis of ornament for Muslim artisans. It is believed that the Prophet⁴ said: 'He who writes the basmallah well, will enter paradise without difficulty.'⁴ It is such encouragement from the 'unlettered' Prophet⁴ that drove his civilisation to excel in the art of lettering. Today it continues to be a source of inspiration for modern artists and calligraphers and has been instrumental in the development of contemporary Islamic art where it has taken on new forms and meanings.

THE CALLIGRAPHIC SCHOOL OF ART

The last few decades have seen an emergence of a trend on the part of Arab-Islamic artists living in the Muslim world and in the West of using Arabic lettering in their work. Recognition of this trend has begun only recently and scholarship concerning contemporary Islamic calligraphy is still in its infancy. One of the most significant works written on the subject is by Wijdan Ali whose thesis, completed in 1993, is the first comprehensive survey on the development of modern painting in the Islamic world and includes an in-depth study of what she calls the Calligraphic School of Art.⁵

The Calligraphic School of Art evolved out of a need felt by Arab-Islamic artists to establish an original modern Islamic art. The search for an Islamic artistic identity coincides with the retreat of Western colonialism from Muslim lands after the Second World War. Up until this point Islamic artists produced work that reflected the taste and styles introduced by the European colonialists. As the Islamic world succumbed increasingly to Western artforms, these artists found themselves cut off from their artistic heritage, a process that led to the demise of traditional arts and crafts.

In the post-colonial era, Muslim artists have begun to turn back to their roots and explore their own culture; they now take pride in their nationalism and newly-found political independence. The challenge has been to find a way of reconciling their western art training with a distinct, indigenous visual vocabulary. This task has led Muslim artists to return to the Arabic alphabet in search of an artistic identity.

PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY

The term 'school' usually implies a group of artists working under the influence of a single master, or possessing a similarity because they come from the same region or practice the same local style. The art that Wijdan Ali discusses in her study and that we shall consider emerges as a result of efforts on the part of individual artists working in isolation from each other in different parts of the world.

In addition, it is certainly debatable whether the term 'calligraphy' is adequate in discussing works that contain Arabic lettering in a way that is far removed from its traditional usage. A distinction needs to be made between the work of artists who employ Arabic lettering without any formal training and those who do. Therefore, at times the term 'penmanship' will be used to refer to traditional Islamic calligraphy, which is an exact discipline requiring skill.

COMMON SUBJECTS AND STYLES IN ARAB-ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHIC ART

Despite the diversity of Arab-Islamic calligraphic art certain common themes can be identified. Even though the artists differ from one another in approach, they share certain ideological and intellectual concerns, which they have sought to express through consistent related visual devices and vocabularies. Wijdan Ali defines three main styles that have developed since the 1950s – these she terms Abstract Calligraphy, when the work is devoid of visual representation and commands its own autonomous terms of reference; Pure Calligraphy, including works composed only of letterforms, and finally Calligraphic Combinations; where the work is comprised of other components as well as calligraphy.⁶ We shall consider an example from each of these main categories, and one hybrid.

The most popular treatment of Arabic letters is to treat them as calligraphic elements within an essentially abstract schema. One of the first Arab artists to bring together Arabic characters and abstract art was Iraqi painter Madiha Omar (b. 1908). In 1949 Omar exhibited her calligraphic paintings in Washington, in what was the first-ever exhibition of modern calligraphic works of art. By the mid-1950s an increasing number of Arab-Islamic artists were displaying an inclination towards Arabic letterforms in their paintings. In the 1960s the calligraphic movement gained momentum and reached its peak in the 1980s, a time when the Arab oil states enjoyed a financial boom and there was a high demand for modern Islamic artwork. This provided an incentive to pursue the calligraphic trend, which, to an

extent, symbolised a new, progressive Islamic civilisation. Many discovered in calligraphy a means to express their Islamic identity in a style that was individual and personal to them.

Calligraphic works of art tend to be either religious or secular in content. The religious works are concerned with a spiritual or moral message based on verses from the Quran, Traditions of the Prophet* or from proverbs. The secular calligraphy employs Arabic lettering as a vehicle for social criticism and as a means of reflecting the political as well as social conditions of a nation. However, not all calligraphic works of art intend to impart a message. For example, Tunisian artist Nja Mahdaoui (b. 1937) is well-known for his striking calligraphic creations built up of Arabic letters; even though legible at times, they convey no particular meaning. Mahdaoui employs letters as motifs in his work, transforming them into abstract configurations. In a manner comparable to that of a traditional calligrapher, he arranges the letters meticulously to build up his compositions. He employs a variety of media ranging from ink on parchment to the creation of silk-screen prints. Mahdaoui's work is an example of the style defined by Wijdan Ali as Abstract Calligraphy.

The use of letters as graphic shapes, where their value lies purely in their arrangement and colour, reflects a westernisation of the artform, a position far removed from the traditional Islamic one. The work of

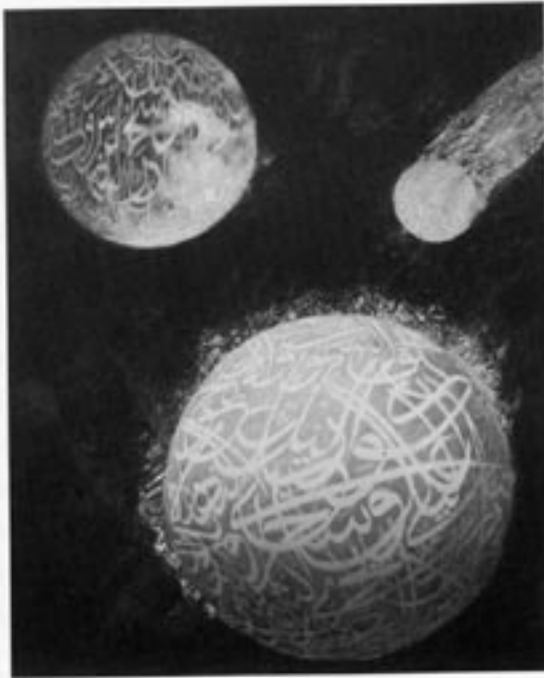


NJA MAHDAOUI Black denim cloth written on with bleach. 153x1000cm.

the well-known Iraqi calligrapher-painter Hassan Massoudy (b. 1944) highlights this point. Massoudy was trained as a traditional calligrapher in Baghdad before moving to Paris in 1969 where he now lives. He has written several books in French on the development, aesthetics and techniques of Arabic calligraphy and is at the forefront of an effort to raise an awareness of its relevance today. Massoudy believes in striking a balance between the use of methods and teachings from the past and recent ones. He has set new trends within the discipline. He employs brushwork typical of Chinese calligraphy, as well as the traditional qalam or reed pen. Massoudy asserts that the invention of new styles cannot take place without the assimilation of the past and the evolution of society. The texts he uses are always non-Quranic. His calligraphy illustrates proverbs from around the world. A sense of the meaning of the proverb can be understood from the gestures of his brushstrokes. In most of his paintings, he writes part of the proverb in the ancient Kufic script at the base of his central composition. Hassan Massoudy manages to disassociate this primarily pious art from its religious connections.



HASSAM MASSOUDY 'Il n'y a pas de vent favorable à celui qui ne sait où il va'. (Seneca 48C).

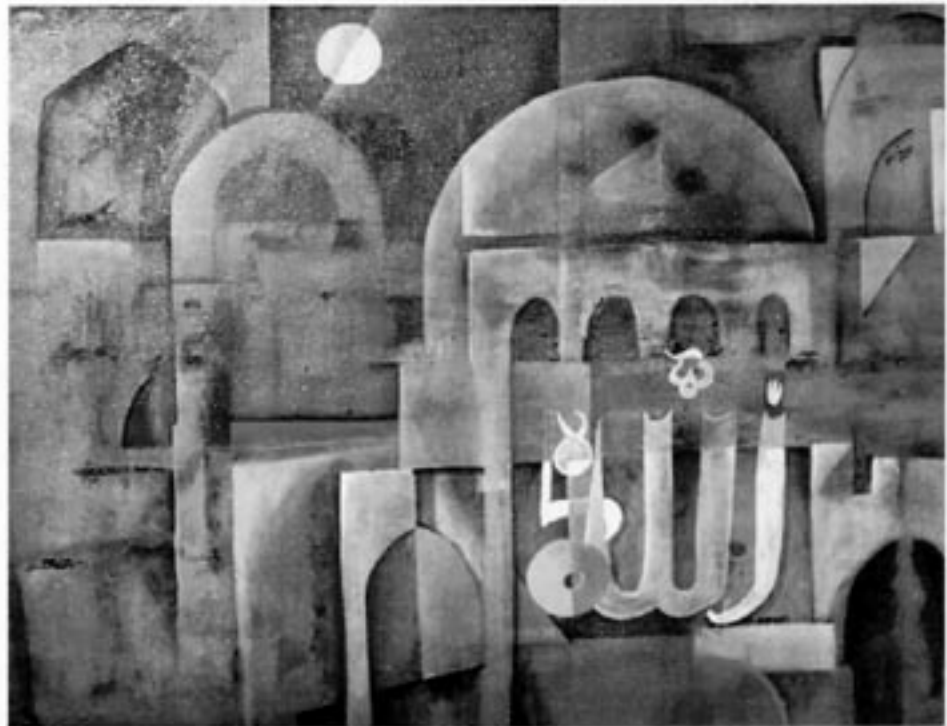


AHMED MOUSTAFA 'The Colling of Day and Night'. Silk screen print in 20 colours, 2000. 72.5x90cm.

Furthermore, the fusion of artistic influences in his pieces calls into question the relationship between national and international art.⁷ Massoudy's work can be included in both the classifications of Pure and Abstract Calligraphy.

One of the most notable artists whose work is entirely made up of calligraphy is Ahmed Moustafa. His work represents an effective combination of classical European painting techniques and traditional Islamic penmanship. The fusion of the two result in powerful Quranic landscapes and still-lives. His silksscreen prints can be appreciated on many levels and have universal appeal. Whether the literal meaning of the text is understood or not, the viewer is taken in by the colour, rhythm and intensity of his work. One senses that this energy is driven by the conviction of his faith. He is distinguished from many artists of the so-called Calligraphic School because he combines the skill of a craftsman with the creativity and innovation of a modern artist. While adhering to the principles of 'proportional script', *al-khatt al-mansub* as defined by the Abbasid geometrician Ibn Muqlah (AD 886–940), he utilises the long-established traditions of classical Islamic calligraphy in developing his own style. His work can be interpreted as a modern-day prayer or bridge that leads him closer to his Creator.

So far, we have considered works by artists where the content is mostly based on Arabic letterforms. However, there are Arab-Islamic artists who combine calligraphy with other visual elements. Islamic calligraphy plays a significant but not always a central role in the work of London-based painter Vaseem Mohammed. Of Pakistani origin, he imitates compositions by old masters and paints them onto heavily textured canvases alongside architectural features such as minarets and domes. Vaseem's work is characterised by an amalgamation of various influences. Islamic calligraphy from past eras and scenes of archaic eastern architecture combine with contemporary urban settings in London, reflecting his multi-cultural upbringing. Moroccan blues are juxtaposed with oranges and reds typical of the art and architecture of the Indian subcontinent. This illustrates his belief that in Islam nationalism has no place. Vaseem Mohammed is not a calligrapher, and his ability to read and write Arabic is limited. The calligraphy is symbolic. He reproduces calligraphy from past generations as it represents for him the permanence of the Quran and its resilient message. His paintings are a response to the unstable and fast-changing world we live in. The calligraphy represents the static and permanent truth. Furthermore, it is the universal language of all Muslims regardless of their origin. He believes that it is through this art that his Islamic identity can be asserted and maintained.

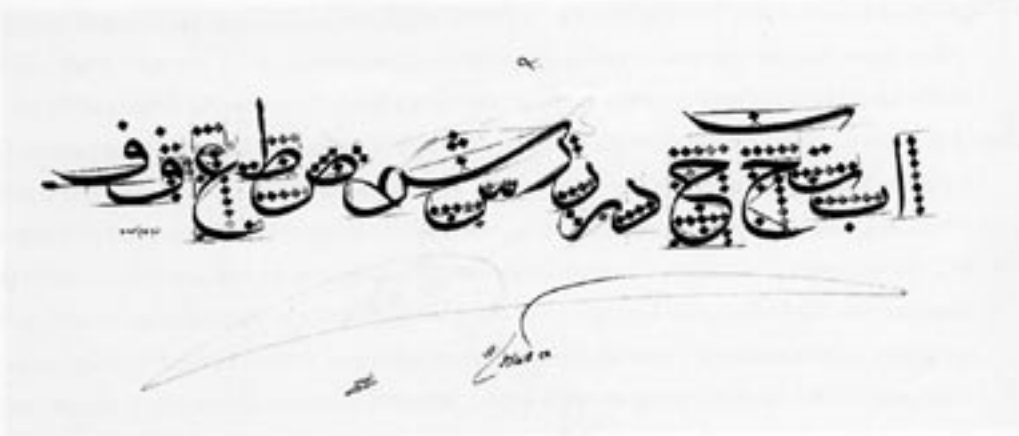


VASEEM MOHAMMED 'City with Many Entrances.'

THE TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

The teaching and practice of traditional Islamic calligraphy still exist in parts of the Muslim world. In fact, even though they had suffered a demise, they have seen a revival in recent years. There is a growing awareness that they form part of an Islamic heritage worth rescuing from degeneration. In Istanbul, there are now yearly international competitions in calligraphy; a similar competition was held in Pakistan in 1998, the first of its kind to be held in the country. Such competitions bring publicity to the artform and the prizes bring prestige, together with literal and symbolic value. While there are colleges of Fine Art in Pakistan, there is no such thing as a school or institution of calligraphy. It largely depends on the efforts of individuals for its continuation there. However, today's technology which is always being blamed for the 'death' of local arts and crafts, has been responsible for spreading the art of Islamic penmanship. Self-taught Pakistani calligrapher Rashid Butt is probably the first person to teach calligraphy through television. He has been giving a weekly programme for the past three years. As a result, he has students in millions and they send him their work for correction. But there is perhaps nowhere in the Muslim world where the *silsila*, or chain of transmission from master to apprentice, remains unbroken, apart from Turkey.

Turkey is home to the Ottoman school of calligraphy that is still practised today. Training to become a calligrapher is a lengthy and arduous process. It starts when the master gives his pupil letters of the alphabet to imitate in a particular style of script. After practising single letters, the pupil is then instructed to imitate a combination of two letters again going through the entire alphabet. A more advanced stage in instruction involves the intense study and imitation of works by a past master.



Single letters practice sheet. Written by calligraphy master Efdalüddin Kılıç for his pupil, 2000.

The pupil is expected to achieve a level of perfection in his or her letters through the extremely subtle moves of the pen. Training culminates in the pupil receiving the *ijaza*, in Turkish *icazet*, a certificate acknowledging the pupil has reached the level of mastership and is now permitted to sign his own works. According to Turkish sources, this convention was initiated in the first half of the 15th century.⁸ This process is intended to improve the pupil's character as well as his calligraphy. It is a form of worship where the pen is considered an extension of one's own hand. There is always the trace of the master's hand in that of his pupil and that recurs generation after generation. People from all over the world go to Istanbul to learn from the masters there. It is possible to find in places as far and wide as Morocco, America, and Japan, calligraphy masters all of whom have got their *ijaza* from Istanbul and have returned to their countries where they teach and continue the *silsila*. However, new methods of communication now allow students to learn from abroad and keep in contact via e-mail.

CONCLUSION

The continuity and revival of calligraphy in all its forms has been crucial to the development of a modern Islamic artistic identity. Today it has assumed the role of a 'link' connecting Arab-Islamic artists to their cultural roots and providing them with an unlimited source for their artistic expression.

Islamic artists, even those whose work is religious in content, are presenting their calligraphy in a manner that can be appreciated by all. They are doing this by employing up-to-date media and techniques in their work and by using styles that come from across the globe. It is important to mention that calligraphic art has also found its way into sculpture and ceramics. Pakistani sculptor and jewellery-maker Ameen Gulgee is renowned for his calligraphic sculptures made out of computer chips insisting on the necessity of employing current forms of communication in the successful delivery of his art.

There are marked differences between the traditional schools of calligraphy and the contemporary Calligraphic School which exist today side by side. The traditional school is not subject to passing trends. Regardless of time, people and places, the main tools will always be the reed pen and ink. As a consequence, it will always be associated with the sacred. The perceptible individualism that characterises the Calligraphic School has no place in the practice of traditional penmanship. It is supposed to be a selfless art with no room for the modern ego. It is not about the calligrapher so much as the destination and purpose of the writing. Whether traditional calligraphy or contemporary calligraphic art, both may be seen as different branches of the same tree.

Soraya Syed, 2001

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sometimes translated as Reedi
- 2* Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him
- 3 Quran literally means 'recitation'.
- 4 The basmallah is the invocation – *bismillahir-rahmanir-rahim* – 'in the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Muslims are encouraged to say this at the start of any activity.
- 5 See W.A. Ali, *Survey of Modern Painting in the Islamic World and the Development of the Contemporary Calligraphic School*, Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1993.
- 6 The work of many artists would fall under a combination of these categories at the same time. There are also sub-headings for each of these main styles. See Ali, W. *op.cit.*, p.294
- 7 Massoudy feels just as French as he does Iraqi. His combined identity has been instrumental to the development of his work. Furthermore, the influence of Chinese calligraphy on his own is tremendous.
- 8 It is possible to ask any calligrapher who has obtained the *Ijaza* in the Ottoman school about his 'lineage' and he or she will be able to trace it back beyond the Ottoman sultans to Ali Ibn Abi Talib (598–561), the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law who is believed to be the first Muslim calligrapher.

FURTHER READING

- Henzell-Thomas, Jeremy, *Where the Two Oceans Meet. The Art of Ahmed Moustafa*. Fe-noon Ahmed Moustafa 1998.
Lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogue of an exhibition at the Gregorian University, Rome. Text in Arabic, Italian and English.
- Schimmel, Annemarie, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*. Tauris 1990.
Sets calligraphy within the context of the poetry, history and mysticism of Islam, Note 5 on page 161 gives a useful survey of literature on Islamic calligraphy.
- Safadi YH, *Islamic Calligraphy*. Thames & Hudson, London, 1978.
Broad survey of Islamic calligraphy in a variety of media.

Spring Lines

Contemporary Calligraphy from East and West

'Write with the idea existing before the brush'
Wang Hsi-chi (Chinese, 4th cent AD)

In China, Japan and the Arab world calligraphy has long been the most respected of all art forms. Yet in different ways each of these traditions has had to adjust to vast cultural changes in the twentieth century. In what ways have calligraphers in these parts of the world responded? How is their new work affecting western calligraphers who are themselves travelling east or discovering more about other traditions through our increasingly global culture?

SPRING LINES brings a global perspective to issues facing calligraphers today. With contributions from an international team of writers, it surveys the recent history of the world's great traditions and provides an exciting cross-section of current work. It cannot fail to fascinate, and to challenge, anyone with an interest in fine lettering.

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