Part VI: The Many Faces of
Islamic Calligraphy in
Modern Times
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

From Traditional Styles to Graphic Design and Calligraphic Art

Islamic calligraphy is alive and well in modern times, not only in the Islamic lands but also in Europe and the United States. Many calligraphers are copying traditional styles, many schools and organizations are teaching traditional methods, and many scholars are studying traditional scripts, particularly in conservative circles where figurative art, like music, is considered to skirt the fringes of propriety.\(^1\) Calligraphy, by contrast, is seen as normative.

Partly as a reaction to the conservatism associated with traditional Arabic calligraphy, calligraphers are also branching out in new directions. Some are tackling the question of the aesthetic qualities of Arabic type. Printing was slow in coming to the Islamic world,\(^2\) but the situation is changing rapidly with new digital software and computer graphics. In the dissemination of written information through print, the semantic element of writing is basic, but graphic designers are also confronting the problem of its formal and aesthetic qualities, using new technologies to expand traditional styles.

Other artists are branching out in new novel directions, replacing pen and ink on parchment or paper with different media. Some are transforming calligraphy into three-dimensional forms, making calligraphic sculptures (known in Arabic as naḥīt khāṭṭī) of new materials like bronze and wood. Many more are replacing the pen with the brush, painting calligraphic compositions (taswīr khāṭṭī or lawḥa khāṭṭīyya) in oils, acrylics, and watercolors, assembling them in collages, or working them in other media such as silk screen and etching. Calligraphy is often one element incorporated into multimedia compositions that can be either representational or abstract. In these works the balance has generally shifted from readability to visibility, as the calligraphy is meant to be appreciated more for its formal than for its semantic qualities.

Writers and critics are still searching to define this new calligraphic art. Even the name is problematic. For some, the traditional art of classical Arabic calligraphy [fann al-khāṭṭī al-ʿarabī] has been supplemented by al-madrasa al-ḥurūfīyya [literally, the school of letters]. The Jordanian artist and critic Wijdan Aln prefers the rubric ‘calligraphic school of art’ [al-madrasa al-khāṭṭīyya fī l-fannī].\(^3\) All these terms imply, however, a unity and concerted purpose in what
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might better be seen as single artists or occasionally groups seeking
their own paths of individual expression.

The role of calligraphy also seems to have broadened in modern
times. In addition to its semantic and aesthetic goals of conveying
meaning and form, artists are using calligraphy for socio-political
ends. In some cases, calligraphy has also become a football in the
World Cup of art. As part of the nationalist movements that devel-
oped throughout the region in the twentieth century, some scholars
are questioning the very idea of an ‘Arabic’ or an ‘Islamic’ calligraphy.
Many champion nationalist causes. Iranians, for example, speak of
‘Persian’ calligraphy and Turks of ‘Turkish’ calligraphy. In other cases,
artists are using calligraphic paintings to convey a political message
on subjects ranging from the Palestinian problem, the Iran-Iraq war,
and the devastation in Afghanistan to the oppression of women.

We know this because of a new and crucial source of information
that sets the study of modern calligraphy apart from that of earlier
periods: the writings of the authors themselves. Contemporary cal-
ligraphers frequently expound on their own work, what it means,
and why they executed it in a particular way. Earlier calligraphers occa-
sionally left writings about their work, as, for example, Sultan ‘Ali’s
poem on writing incorporated in Qadi Ahmad’s treatise on calligra-
phy, but these are rare and often difficult to contextualize.
Modern calligraphers, by contrast, revel in describing their work and
explaining what their works of art, especially the often-loaded titles,
mean to them.

A case in point is the series of paintings entitled Karbala (Figure
13.1) by Wijdan Ali, also called simply Wijdan.6 The title refers to the
eighth-century battle in southern Iraq in which the Prophet’s grand-
son Husayn was martyred. It is a subject of particular fervor for
Shi’ites, who re-enact the tragic story every year on the tenth of
Muharram, the day known as ‘ashura.7 In her survey of modern
Islamic art, the artist explains that at the onset of the first Gulf War
in 1991, she abandoned figurative representation, using couples, prose,
diacritical marks, conflicting brushstrokes, and colors to evoke a
calamity that became the epitome of tragedy, betrayal, and injustice
committed against humanity.8 She chose Karbala as a subject
because, in her words, she saw a hundred past Karbalas and feared a
thousand more to come.

Her paintings typically contain a single letter, here ‘ha’, the first letter
of the name Husayn. The giant black stroke, with its blurry edges and
fraying tail, and the surrounding black slashes set against a red and
yellow ground evoke the horrors of fire and war. The poem scraped
along the bottom and left side recalls the terrible tragedy of Karbala. Its
size and informal script provide a stark contrast to the enormous rounded ‘ha’. Word and image work together to invoke calamity and
destruction, but the word is subservient to the artistic message.

Modern calligraphy is also distinguished from earlier examples not
only by the extraordinary variety of its media and materials, but also

by the range of the practitioners’ skills and talents and the sheer
quantity of the work. Everyone agrees on the merits of Ibn al-
Bawwab, Yaqut, and Shaykh Hamdallah, who over time have become
singled out as masters of their ages, but there is as yet no consensus
on the talents of many contemporary calligraphers. No canon has yet
evolved. Given the enormous number of calligraphers and the wide
range of styles, media, materials, and approaches, one is apt to end up
by assembling a laundry list of names or by pushing personal
favorites.

In view of this plethora of information about modern Islamic calli-
graphy, I have taken a different tack in discussing the subject here,
namely to point out some of the different directions in which callig-
raphers are working today. To do so, I have divided the subject under
three broad rubrics. The first covers the teaching and continuation of
traditional calligraphic styles in modern times. A second rubric treats
the use of Arabic script in printing, typography, and computer graphs.
Since these new methods make it possible to reproduce text
quickly and cheaply, if not always elegantly, they reduce calligra-
phers’ need to convey information and allow them to concentrate on
the aesthetic impact. Hence, a third rubric treats new directions in cal-
ligraphic art, beginning with those works that incorporate traditional

Figure 13.1 Wijdan ‘Ali:
Wijdan used a single letter, ‘ha’,
combined with verses, brushstrokes, and color to
convey the calamity and
injustice evoked by the eight-
century tragedy at Karbala
when the nascent Islamic
community was split. The
giant letter ‘ha’ evokes the
name of Husayn, the Prophet’s
grandson, who was martyred at
the battle.

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calligraphic styles, moving to new forms and media, and ending with abstract pseudo-calligraphy. In all cases I have tried to choose a few representative practitioners, including their biographies as illustrative of the different career patterns that modern calligraphers, as well as students and scholars of calligraphy, have followed. Ibn al-Bawwab began as a house painter and then turned to calligraphy. Many modern calligraphers earn their living in other ways as well. My aim here is not to be exhaustive but selective, and I have purposely drawn my examples from across the Islamic and non-Islamic lands to illustrate the vibrant role that Islamic calligraphy plays around the world today.

Traditional styles

The study of traditional Islamic calligraphy flourishes in many places. In Iran many scholars, students, and aficionados are at work, especially under the auspices of the Anjuman-i Khushnivision-i Iran (Society of Iranian Calligraphers), which maintains branches in all the main cities of the country. The major scholar of the early twentieth century was Mehdi Bayani (1906–68), a pioneer in the field of Persian calligraphy, manuscripts, and librarianship. In addition to catalogues of the major collections in Iran, he compiled a huge biographical dictionary of calligraphers, Abwal va athar-i khushnivisan. It contains an alphabetical listing of 1,526 masters of nasta’liq, with sketches of their lives and lists of their surviving works, mainly in Iranian and Turkish collections. The second edition, published in 1363/1984, includes one appendix with 759 masters of naskh, thuluth, and lig, and another compiled by his students from his notes with 67 masters of ta’liq and 88 masters of shikasta and nasta’liq. This book is the essential starting point for the study of calligraphy and calligraphers from Iran. Compiled by hand in the pre-computer days, it is an astonishing achievement based on personal examination of the major collections in Tehran and Istanbul, although some of the information needs to be confirmed and updated, particularly that from Western collections.

The most important contemporary writer on Iranian calligraphy is Habiballah Faza’ili. His two major works, Atlas-i khatt (Atlas of Writing), first published in Isfahan in 1350/1971, and Talim-i khatt (Teaching Writing), whose seventh edition was published in Tehran in 1376/1997, are chock full of illustrations. The former reproduces many specimens by famous calligraphers. The latter contains many charts showing how the individual letters are shaped in the various scripts such as naskh (Figure 13.2), the one most commonly used in Iran today, and the accompanying descriptions exemplify the Iranian approach to studying the subject. In naskh, for example, the most important feature is respect for proportions, with letters written in consistent size and shape. It is a balanced script, with half of the strokes round and half straight. It is also a clear script, which, when written with diacriticals, cannot be misread. The modern variety called khatt-i miyana (middle script) has been adapted to meet the needs of modern typography and typing. This script is used not only in Iran, but also in Afghanistan and the Arab world to print copies of the Koran and all kinds of books, newspapers, and periodicals. Not surprisingly, Iranian scholars have paid special attention to the hanging styles developed for writing Persian, particularly nasta’liq. In the eyes of modern Iranian writers such as Faza’ili and Ghulam-Husayn Yusufi, nasta’liq epitomizes the quintessential qualities of a calligraphic hand. Like naskh, it is legible and can be written

Figure 13.2 Chart of the letter shapes in naskh used to transcribe Koran manuscripts in Iran today. Habiballah Faza’ili is the foremost historian of calligraphy in Iran today. His manual, Talim-i khatt, contains many charts showing how the letters in the various scripts are composed of rhomboidal dots made by pressing the nib of the pen on the paper. This chart shows the balanced letters in the type of naskh used to transcribe manuscripts of the Koran.
letters. When writing *nastaliq*, the calligrapher starts by using the right edge of the nib to make, for example, the teeth (*dandang*) of *sin*, the top of *ra*, the hook or beak (*minqar*) of *jeem*, the top of an inverted final *ya*; or the beginning of a word such as *bia*. In contrast, when writing other scripts, the calligrapher starts these letters with the full width of the nib. *Nastaliq* is also pointed differently than other scripts. In *nastaliq* letters and words are written so compactly that there is little room for pointing, and short vowel signs (Pers. *hataka*, pl. *hurakat*) and other diacritical marks are often omitted unless necessary to avoid ambiguity. In contrast, *thuluth* and other large scripts are more spacious, leaving room for large and bold pointing. Furthermore, in *nastaliq* words are usually written separately and not joined, except in inscriptions and calligraphic specimens.

The grace and beauty of *nastaliq* lie in its balanced distribution of thick and thin, open and closed, short and tall, in the artful shaping of letters and combinations of letters, and in the symmetry and consistency with which letters and words are juxtaposed. Several letters share the same semi-circular ending. For example, the flourishes of final *sin*, *sad*, and *nun* are identical, as are those final *la*/*jeem*, *ayn*, and *qaf* and those of final *la*/*jeem* and *ya*. The repetition of these round shapes across the line and over the page creates an internal rhythm.

Modern writers often describe the letter shapes used in *nastaliq* metaphorically, comparing features of the script to elements drawn from nature and music. The vertical strokes in *nastaliq*, for example, are said to have been inspired by trees and flowers, the round strokes by the undulating hills and meadows or by the treble and bass strings, the elongations by fields and plains or by musical pauses; the curves of letters and words by the bodies of animals, birds, and particularly humans; and the sentence arrangement by flights of birds or clusters of flowers. Letters and words are said to dance, sometimes holding hands, sometimes embracing. This imagery, notably the anthropomorphic elements, derives from Persian poetry, in which the beautiful features of the beloved are often likened to letters of the alphabet. Such imagery was already made visible in medieval times in the animated script used on metalwares such as the Bobrinky Bucket or the Wade Cup. The musical analogies are engendered by the internal rhythm of the script.

In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the relative isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially from the United States, the work of Iranian calligraphers and scholars of calligraphy is not widely known today. It is difficult, for example, to obtain *nastaliq* inscriptions in the United States. Iranian scholars, in turn, have not had access to this work of outsiders, and the field has become somewhat introspective. This situation is now changing: in October 2002 Iran hosted an international conference on the calligraphy of the Islamic world.

Quite a different scenario pertains in Turkey. The Turkish Republic’s adoption of Roman script in 1928 broke the centuries-long tradition of using Arabic script for everyday affairs. Arabic language and script
left by his teacher Najm al-Din (Necmeddin Okay), who notes that he himself was the pupil of Sami, in this way confirming Derman's lineage back to Ottoman times. Gülür Duran's border decoration around the quatrain echoes Derman's Ottoman heritage: the saw-toothed saz leaves, peonies, and cloud bands belong to the classical Ottoman style, although the color scheme of bright blue and red does not. Derman has written extensively on the history of calligraphy,\textsuperscript{17} and in honor of his achievements, in 1996 he was made an honorary professor at Mimar Sinan University in Istanbul, formerly the Academy of Fine Arts, where formal instruction in calligraphy was re instituted in 1936.

Derman's status as the dean of calligraphic studies in Turkey is shown by the fine festsschrift presented to him in 2002 on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday.\textsuperscript{19} It contains not only articles dedicated to him, but also an interview in which he sets forth his views on the field of calligraphy.\textsuperscript{20} In it, he echoes the well-known adage, often attributed to Yaqut al-Musta' simi, that the art of calligraphy is a spiritual geometry created with material tools.\textsuperscript{20} Derman represents the Turk's eye view, arguing that the best calligraphy produced in the Islamic lands over the past five centuries was done in Istanbul. Despite the abandonment of Arabic script and an ensuing period of stagnation, he feels that the system has been able to endure thanks to the master-apprentice system, of which he himself is the preeminent product. Such a system has insured that the new generation in Turkey is interested in the aesthetic merits of calligraphy. The most popular script there today is \textit{thuluth}, which Derman compares poetically to the sounds of the plectrum on the strings of a drum (\textit{tambur}). Although he cites legibility as the prime goal of the art of calligraphy, he notes that its beauty resides in its strokes, quoting a line of the nineteenth-century musician and calligrapher Qadi 'askar Mustafa 'Izzet Efendi: 'To read beautiful calligraphy is like smelling the aroma of a tulip.'

This master-apprentice system used today to teach calligraphy in Turkey is well described by Mohamed Zakariya, an American convert to Islam who went to Istanbul in 1984 to improve his mastery of the script.\textsuperscript{21} There he studied \textit{thuluth} and \textit{naskh} with the master Hasan Chelebi, imam of the Selam-i Ali Camii, student of Hamid Aytaç, and one of the last calligraphers in the Ottoman line. Zakariya received his diploma in \textit{thuluth/naskh} script in 1988, perhaps the only American to do so, and continued his studies in \textit{ta'lliqa/nasta'liq} with Ali Alparslan, receiving a second diploma in 1997. Zakariya's training shows that the classical Turkish system of copying \textit{ta'lliqa}, followed by Derman under the calligrapher Necmeddin Okay, continues today. Following this method, the seated master pens an exemplar \textit{(naskh)}. The attendant student observes the master's movements and then practices by rewriting the master's work, which the master in turn corrects in red. This copying is repeated until the master is satisfied and allows the student to progress to the next lesson.
The modern course of study followed in Turkey and elsewhere comprises two stages. In the first, the student practices alphabetic exercises (Turk. miftarat), in which the letters of the Arabic alphabet are written in sequence as an exemplar, like the one penned by Darvish Muhammed [Figure 11.9]. These alphabetic exercises comprise some fifteen to twenty lessons. The first begins with a famous prayer for success: ‘Lord, make it easy and not difficult,’ also penned by Faza’il at the top of his calligraphic examples showing the proportional system of dots in the various scripts [Figures 13.2 and 13.3]. The student moves through the classic scripts known as the Six Pens (nasab, thuluth, muhaqqaq, rayhun, tawqi, and riqa), learning to write the individual letters in their various positions (independent, initial, medial, and final) and in combination with other letters. The letters are measured in terms of dots, and their position is indicated by diagonal lines. In the smaller scripts, both consonants and vowels are written with the same pen, while in the larger scripts a smaller pen is used for vocalization. These forms are the basic building blocks of calligraphy. Practice is essential, and the repetition of these simple alphabetic exercises can take years.

In the second part of the course, the student learns the composition of words and phrases by studying and writing the compounds known in Turkish as mürrekabet [Arab. murakkabat], the implication being that there is only one proper way to do so. In these lessons, the forms learned in the first half of the course are put to use in sentences, including poems, odes, and sayings of the Prophet. The typical example contains two lines of thuluth sandwiching two lines of nasab, the two scripts most prominent in the Ottomans [see Chapter 11]. The student may also copy a calligraphic specimen ( qi‘a) penned by a famous master [Figure 11.10]. This specimen was often used for the student’s diploma, such as the one by Mir ‘Imad [Figure 11.18] that Derman copied for his teaching certificate [Figure 13.4] or the one that his teacher Nصمددين penned in 1323/1923 for his certificate from Sam‘.

Once the student has successfully competed both stages, the teacher issues a certificate of completion (içat), giving the student permission to sign his work with the verb katabatu [so-and-so wrote it]. The aim is to achieve consistency in size and shape of letters and phrases. As Zakariya remarked, such transcription is a slow and even laborious process, although it looks fluid on the page. The total training can take from three to ten years and is based on personal interaction and affinity. The teacher is not paid for teaching and does not give grades, but is responsible for introducing his student to other calligraphers and initiating the student into the calligraphic tradition. Such a system, based on copying, does not encourage innovation, favoring stasis over change.

In the past few decades, Istanbul has become a major center for the study of Islamic calligraphy under the auspices of the Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA). Founded in 1980 and now the Executive Secretariat of the International Commission for the Preservation of Islamic Cultural Heritage [ICPICH], the center has generated renewed interest in Arabic calligraphy, both within Turkey and across the Islamic lands. Under its director, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, IRCICA has promoted the study of traditional Arabic calligraphy. One method is through publications. In addition to an exercise book on thuluth and naskh by the Ottoman calligrapher Mehmed Selvi Efendi (1839–87), IRCICA has published Derman’s monograph on Islamic calligraphy, which has been issued in Arabic, Turkish, Japanese, and Malay as well as an English translation by Zakariya. This folio-sized volume contains a brief survey of the history of Islamic calligraphy by Nihad M. Çetin and another short one by Derman on Ottoman calligraphy, but its glory is the nearly two hundred color plates accompanied by Derman’s comments on the individual examples, drawn mainly from the extensive collections in Istanbul. It is particularly useful for Ottoman scripts and the process of making copies through stencils, and the commentaries combine a practitioner’s knowledge and a keen eye with a grasp of the mainstream tradition in the central Islamic lands.

It is, however, hard to find and expensive.

More visibly, IRCICA has also sponsored international competitions on Islamic calligraphy [1987, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2002, and 2004], followed by catalogues of the winning entries. In order to encourage young calligraphers to follow the example of classical masters, each competition was dedicated to the memory of a famous calligrapher – Hamid Ayaş al-‘Amili [d. 1982, one of the last calligraphers in the Ottoman line and the teacher of Hasan Chelebi, who in turn taught Mohammad Zakariya], Yaqut al-Musta‘simn, Ibn al-Bawwab, Shaykh Hamdalallah, Sayyid Ibrahim, and Mir ‘Imad. More than five hundred calligraphers working in thirty-five countries have submitted entries for the various competitions in fourteen scripts: jali [large] thuluth, thuluth, naskh, jali ta‘liq, ta‘liq [the Persian nasta‘liq], jali divani, divani, kufi, muhaqqaq, rayhun, kaza, riqa, maghrabi, and khura ta‘liq [the Persian shikasta]. Each competition awards tens of thousands of dollars in prizes as well as incentives to encourage the training of younger calligraphers. Like the training in Turkey, the competitions organized by IRCICA emphasize the important role of copying, where repetition is favored over innovation.

Zakariya, who studied in Turkey under the auspices of IRCICA, has become the leading exponent of Islamic calligraphy in America today. A master woodworker, engraver, and machinist, Zakariya also designs and constructs functioning examples of antique-style clocks and scientific instruments. In addition to translating many of Derman’s works, Zakariya himself has written brief overviews of the state of the art of calligraphy and its history that are notable in including samples penned by him of the various scripts based on historical examples. He often gives demonstrations, workshops, lectures, and courses on calligraphy and has been commissioned to
Music for the Eyes
An Introduction to Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy

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Mohamed Zakariya: Music for the Eyes.
Mohamed Zakariya is the foremost proponent of traditional Arabic calligraphy in America today. Trained in the Turkish system, he designed the labels and visual material to accompany the traveling exhibition of Ottoman calligraphy for the Sabanci Collection. He penned this phrase in thuluth for the cover of the accompanying brochure, Music for the Eyes: An Introduction to Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy.

design the labels and signage for exhibitions in the United States and abroad. Given his training, it is no surprise that he favors the Turkish/Ottoman style. For him ‘calligraphy is music for the eyes,’ a phrase that he penned in 1314/1998 for the cover of a brochure designed to accompany the traveling exhibition of Ottoman calligraphy from the Sabanci Collection (Figure 13.5).

Zakariya’s steady and balanced hand reflects his training. He penned the main phrase in a sober thuluth fi`li of the type used since the eighteenth century for panels or signboards (Turk. levhalar). Like the one designed by Mustafa Raqim some two centuries earlier (Figure 11.11), Zakariya’s is executed in gold. The composition is balanced around the central upright of lam in lil ‘yuan. In the baseline the curving tails of two wawes frame the large tail of final ya’ that encircles the central lam. The letters, including the vertical stroke for lam and the teeth in the other letters, are pitched slightly to the left, and the repeating curves in the baseline enhance the flowing movement. Spaces around the letters are sprinkled with diacritical marks and dots, also slanted to add a sense of motion. The stroke for damma is folded, with the short hook over the long downstroke, giving the impression that the letter was written from bottom to top, the opposite way that it is normally done. Most of these features are also found in Mustafa Raqim’s composition.

Mohamed Zakariya’s signature is similar to his predecessor’s as well. Tucked into the bottom left, between the large bowls of waw and nun, it too is compiled in a triangle, as in a tughra, and contains the same formula, katabahu muhammad zakariya (Mohamed Zakariya wrote it). The first word is similar in both signatures, but compared to the fluid tawqit with extra flourishes used by Mustafa Raqim for his name Raqim, Mohamed Zakariya uses a more upright

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thuluth. The letters are ingeniously fitted together around the upstream of the dal in muhammad, the same axis and organizing principle used for the main composition. This is the smooth and polished performance of a master craftsman.

Along with general concern for Islamic civilization, interest in writing Arabic script has also developed in Europe, particularly in London, home of many emigres from the Islamic lands and center of the Islamic art market since the 1960s. The British Museum has become a hub for the study of modern calligraphy. In 1986 as part of a policy to stop its collections from sultifying in the nineteenth century and to represent and present the material cultures of the modern world, the museum began collecting contemporary art. To date, it has amassed the works of some sixty artists from the Islamic lands. It also mounted a small loan exhibition on writing Arabic that circulated within the United Kingdom as well as a more comprehensive exhibition, ‘Mightier than the Sword: Arabic script; beauty and meaning,’ that circulated internationally.36

As part of its new mandate for community outreach, the British Museum has also underwritten materials to teach Arabic calligraphy. In 2002, for example, it commissioned Mustafa Ja’far to write a small handbook teaching beginners to write naskh.37 An artist and graphic designer, he studied calligraphy in Baghdad from 1969 to 1971 with the Iraqi master Hashim Muhammad and painting and design in Baghdad and Rome. Like Zakariya, Ja’far has conducted a number of calligraphy workshops and demonstrations. His handbook is devoted to naskh, the most traditional of the scripts and the one used most often to copy the Koranic text. He breaks down the course into three stages of single letters, joined letters, and words. The pages illustrating stage two, the joined letters (Figure 13.6), are inspired by the practice sheets known as muqakkabat, with small notes added in the margins to elucidate his points. The course is simple and straightforward, with clear graphics designed and produced by the author’s company MJ Graphics.

In addition, at the end of the handbook, Ja’far tried to break tradition and show how naskh, like thuluth and divani, can be expanded into individual compositions, using naskh to pen pithy quotations from classical scholars. As he himself states, the four pieces he illustrates are intended primarily as visual compositions, meaning that the formal aspects outweigh the semantic ones. These pages contrast with the final double page of his manual that contains samples of naskh past and present. They range from a page of Ibn Babawayh’s Kitab al-anbal that Muhammad ibn Asawir (d. 1309), the teacher of Ibn al-Bawwab, transcribed at Baghdad in broken naskh (called warraghi or naskh ‘Iraqi in the caption) to an Arabic desktop publishing font based on naskh. They show the script’s versatility and its prime role as conveyer of information.

Another recent book by Gabriel Mandel Khan, Arabic Script: Styles, Variants and Calligraphic Adaptations, takes a different tack.
and covers a broader range of scripts. For each letter the alphabet, the author gives the independent form in thirty-three scripts arranged alphabetically from aile to thuluth, although the sources of both the scripts’ names and the individual specimens are not given. The second half of the book contains specimens of many styles and variants drawn from a wide swathe of historical examples, ranging from early Koran manuscripts and inscriptions on Abbasid and Samanid ceramics to zoomorphic compositions or calligraphies designed by contemporary artists. Like Zakariya and Ja’far, Khan himself is a calligrapher as well as an engraver and ceramicist, and his work shows the
and techniques to create modern works of art, albeit with calligraphy of a somewhat old-fashioned and rigid aspect.

**Printing, typography, and computer graphics**

Another subject that continues to preoccupy both calligraphers and designers today is the problem of how to make Arabic-script type more aesthetically pleasing, or, to put it another way, how to reconcile the freedom and individuality of handwritten calligraphy with the strictures of mechanical typography, which itself has shifted rapidly in the last century from cold-metal type through linotype and monotype to computer-generated laser printing. As distinct from calligraphy, in which expression and effect are central, for typography, readability is primary and essential. But for many the quest for readability and ease of printing has meant the sacrifice of beauty, and designers today are confronting the question of how to use new media such as computer graphics to generate beautiful writing.

After sporadic earlier attempts [see Chapter 11], printing was introduced to the Islamic lands on a wide scale in the nineteenth century as part of the movement toward modernization and the renewal of literary and intellectual culture there. The prime movers were *fitrātāt* who came from the old literary and scribal elite, but who evolved into the vanguard of the new culture. A good example is Faris al-Shidyaq, better known as Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, founder of the Jawaib press in Istanbul. Throughout his work Faris strove for high standards. As a scribe and collector, he was interested in establishing accurate texts, determined by collation and comparison of various manuscripts. For example, he included errata lists in his publications. Like his predecessor Ibrahim Muteferrika [Figure 1.15], Faris was also interested in physical presentation and tried to have his typeface reflect the best scribal norms of the day. In the 1830s, while working at the Malta Arabic Press, he had helped to design a new typeface, and the types used at the Jawaib press in Istanbul followed Ottoman scripts rather than the *maghrabi* font used to print his autobiography in Paris, which had become a major center of Arabic printing by this time.

Faris, unlike other printers whose layouts and styles were modeled on traditional manuscripts, tried to incorporate and regularize typographical features. He abandoned, for example, marginal commentaries and glosses, introducing running heads, tables of contents, and title pages that included not only the title of the work but also the names of the author and press, the place and date of publication, and the number of the edition. His interest in readability is clear from his page layouts, whose wide margins and spacing make them easier on the eye. He also attempted to introduce Western-style punctuation, using paragraphs, commas, dashes, colons, exclamation marks, question marks, quotation marks, and periods, but this last innovation was a failure, for punctuation, which enhances quick readability and mental scanning, was adopted only in the twentieth century. He also standardized bindings: many were cloth or roan with the title embossed in gilt on the front and the insignia of the press on the back. His books were, in short, harbingers of a new commodity culture.

Despite the attempts of people like Faris to adapt Arabic script to printing, many problems remained in composing Arabic script using metal type. It was time-consuming, for example, to insert the ligatures required between letters. There were also visual problems. When using cold metal type, the individual sorts are set side by side. It is impossible to overlap letters, a process known in typesetting as kerning, and the system creates small but noticeable gaps between letters that would be filled by the flow of ink in handwriting. Furthermore, line justification is possible not by extending the letter bodies themselves, but only by stretching a baseline stroke between letters.

Some, though not all, of the problems of printing were alleviated with the introduction of the linotype machine. Introduced in 1884 and trademarked in 1900, it combined typesetting and typesetting. Rather than lifting and positioning the individual sorts by hand, the compositor operates a keyboard which translates letters into metal types that appear as a bar. The linotype machine made typesetting not only more efficient but also cheaper as the bar or slug could be melted down and reused.

But the linotype machine creates its own set of problems. It is impossible, for example, to make corrections after a line has been cast. The smallest change, such as the addition of a vowel, requires resetting and recasting the line. The addition of three or four words means resetting the whole page. The limited space for matrices is also a major obstacle in view of the large number of type sorts needed for the different graphemes in Arabic script. The first Arabic linecasting machine produced for linotype in 1911 had an unwieldy 180 keys. The number was subsequently reduced to 134 and then 90 keys, but with concomitant loss of elegance.

In the twentieth century various attempts were made to overcome the problems associated with setting Arabic script on a linotype or monotype machine. Some people advocated abandoning the Arabic alphabet. This happened not only in Turkey under Atatürk, but elsewhere as well. Wilhelm Spitta, the German Orientalist who served as director of the Khedivial Library in Cairo, for example, attempted to create an Arabic alphabet based on Roman letters.

Others tried to develop new typefaces with a limited number of letters that could be handled by linotype and monotype machines. In the 1930s, for example, the British Government Printing Office in Jerusalem commissioned the British artist Eric Gill [1882–1940] to design an Arabic font. Gill, who trained as a sculptor and artist, already developed an interest in stone lettering in the last years of the nineteenth century while a student at Chichester Technical and Art School. Influenced by William Morris, Gill founded an artistic
A sculptor and type designer, Eric Gill was commissioned to develop an Arabic typeface with a limited number of letters that could be used on linotype and monotype machines. In the design he submitted to Sir Arthur Wauchop, Gill adapted the individual letter forms and pasted them together in words and pseudo-words to show how the letters could be combined. Although well suited for type, his design met with resistance from calligraphers, and it was the only one of his many designs that was never cut into type.

community at Ditchling in Sussex, where he encouraged craftsmen to pursue their skills in engraving, calligraphy, weaving, stonemasonry, building, printing, and other crafts. He himself was a prolific artist, producing over a thousand engravings as well as highly original typefaces like his 1937 Gill Sans that had a lasting influence on twentieth-century printing.

In the 1930s Gill was brought to Jerusalem to carve the sculptures for local buildings, including the Rockefeller Museum and St John’s Hospital. While there, he became interested in the inherent typographic complexities posed by Arabic, and encouraged by Sir Arthur Wauchop, British High Commissioner, he developed a project to design a new typeface. Gill began by sketching the individual letter forms and then reworking their shapes to fit the exigencies of type. For example, he extended the tails on some letters, shortened the descenders on others, reduced the size of alif, and adapted hanging calligraphic flourishes to serifs. He then penned the individual letter forms on a page, from which he carefully cut-out pieces which he rearranged into words to show how the letters could be combined. His final sheet (Figure 13.7), with words and pseudo-words in Arabic all carefully and evenly blackened in ink, is dated 1 October 1937 and signed GE, the initials reading from right to left, mimicking the direction of Arabic script. In his own words, Gill’s intent was to create not ‘imitations of Arabic handwriting,’ but ‘to reconcile the written forms of Arabic letters with the exigencies of printing type.’ He took inspiration from the local milieu. His most important source was the alphabet used in the mosaic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock (Figure 3.7), a building that was the most beautiful, civilized, cultured, and spiritually pervaded place he had ever seen.

Despite his efforts, Gill’s Arabic typeface is the only one of his many designs that was never cut into type. There are several reasons for this lacuna, notably its appearance. It is frankly ugly, with awkward angles adapted from the squareness of epigraphic designs and ungainly proportions. The designer himself anticipated that some would object to ‘the ancient and beautiful Arabic writing being thus coerced into what will seem to them a wickedly mechanical mould.’ Indeed, traditionalists such as Moustapha Ghazlan Bey, private calligrapher to the King of Egypt, despised the new typeface.

Adapting what was to them the sacred art of handwritten calligraphy to the requirements of mechanization seemed virtually immoral. Enmeshed in the calligraphic tradition, some traditionalists refused to face the requirements of casting type. Political events intervened as well. In the spring of 1938, Wauchop left office and the new commissioner had to address more pressing problems in Europe. Gill died in 1940, but in his studio he left a typewriter converted to Arabic, a legacy of his interest in Arabic type.

Still others tried to reform the Arabic alphabet itself. Between the early 1930s and the late 1960s, the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo invited proposals to make reforms such as reducing the number of individual forms of a particular letter, eliminating diacritical marks, including short vowels as extra letters, normalizing letter forms, and augmenting the central height (the equivalent of the x-height in Roman fonts). The most radical proposal was that put forward in 1947 by the Lebanese graphic designer Nasi Khattar, who had studied art at the Yale School of Art and Design in Switzerland.

He advocated creating a type system called Unified Arabic based on the one-form-per-letter principle, with independent letter forms, reduced ascender and descender heights, and enlarged x-height (Figure 13.8). His system was in line with the sans-serif fonts popular at that time to enhance visibility in small sizes (8-point and less). Such fonts, it was argued, would not only speed up typesetting, but make it easier to learn and write Arabic. His system too was never accepted. Though legible, it is awkward, additive, and flat, altogether a striking reminder of the pre-eminent role of flexible ligatures in the appearance of Arabic script.

Less radical was the proposal put forward by Roberto Hamm, a professor of typography and visual communication at the École des Beaux Arts in Algeria. He advocated a gradual modification of Arabic
fonts by reducing all Arabic letters to two shapes, one for the initial and medial forms and a second for final and independent forms. His new designs were based on the geometric structure of kufic in combination with the commonly used fonts for naskh. Like Khatlar, Hamm decreased the size of ascenders and descenders and created a strong baseline with minimum variation in proportions, thereby reducing the irregular and airy quality often found in Arabic calligraphy. His approach was transitional from calligraphy to typographyp in that it maintained the calligraphic connection between letters. It is still used as the common standard in contemporary digital designs for Arabic type. Given its modernist tone of a universal design, his approach was never accepted, but as AbiFares points out, it was nevertheless important in analyzing the problems of converting Arabic letter forms to type, developing strategies to adapt Arabic type to modernized industrialized technologies, and calling for a demarcation between calligraphy and typography.44

Many of these modernist attempts at systems of printing Arabic script were rendered moot by the advent of digital technologies, as computers and desktop publishing solved some of the traditional dilemmas of Arabic typesetting.45 Gaps between connecting letters can be filled, ligatures and extenders can be inserted automatically, and letters can overlap without the physical block of metal type. Yet the capably implementation of Arabic script on computers met with limited success, because it was often added onto a system that operated primarily with Roman character coding. The situation changed in 1986 with the introduction of the Arabic Macintosh. A milestone in Arabic computing, it took the approach of layering Arabic language support over the pre-existing Mac operating system using a new operating feature called Worldscript. Unlike previous attempts, there was a thorough interface with Arabic, compatible with all Mac software. Since then, there has been a virtual revolution in the software for designing, displaying, and printing fonts that cater to complex tasks using a variety of writing systems and scripts. These technologies are far more flexible and adaptable to various cultural needs. Some fonts attempt to re-create traditional Arabic calligraphy. In 1996, for example, DecoType, Designers of Computer-Aide Typography, introduced a font design and software that allowed for the use of traditional calligraphic effects such as variable and alternate letter shapes, control of elongation (known today as kashida or naskh), swooping strokes, and extension of endings under the following word or phrases.46 This font, trademarked as DecoType Professional naskh, was based on the design of an elegant naskh font for movable type in 1866 by Qadi ‘askar Mustafa ‘Izet, the renowned Ottoman calligrapher who had created the magnificent roundels in thuluth jali hung in the converted mosque of Hagia Sophia (Figure 11.12).

Yet Arabic typography has not boomed in the way that it once did. It does not have the same impact as in many, Arabic font design has stagnated. Typography in the West has steadily adapted to new media: scripts with thinner serifs were developed for finer machine-made papers, better designs were produced for display on computer monitors, and other changes were introduced to adjust to the change from photocomposition to laser printing. Many Arabic typefaces, by contrast, are digitalized versions of old metal typefaces reduced to a range of sizes that the computer can accommodate easily. For many people like the Israeli graphic designer Habih Khoury, computers simply perpetuate stylistic issues unresolved since the beginning of printing.47 Huda Smizhuzhen AbiFares, professor of graphic design at the American University of Beirut, has drawn attention to some of the aesthetic and practical problems that still remain in the design of Arabic type.48 In general, designs lack variety. Many typefaces do not distinguish between text and display scripts, using the same font, typically based on naskh, for a variety of functions, with titles or captions merely in a larger or smaller scale of the same type. However, the original Arabic type, designed for at least a 13-point font, often loses detail and clarity when reduced to a small scale. Furthermore, the point size in Arabic type is often based on the letter alif, which is taken to correspond to the x-height in Roman fonts rather than the capital height. As a result, the Arabic text looks smaller and lighter than its equivalent size in Roman font, especially when the two types are used simultaneously. Numerals and punctuation marks are often treated as after-thoughts, not always in line with the rest of the design.

In many ways, the energy expended in trying to create an automated calligrapher might better be spent in developing better-quality Arabic typefaces that address the varying needs of modern printing, and in promoting standards that allow the Arabic alphabet to survive as a viable character set for the exchange of information in new electronic media. Most Arabic fonts, AbiFares and others argue, do not have a distinct visual character that can accommodate specific types of design applications. However, in a few cases, particularly designs for special large-scale projects or private clients, context and legibility are given high priority. One example is the font al-Futtaim (Figure 13.9) designed by Mamoun Sakakal.49 Raised in Aleppo, he studied
with the master calligrapher Ibrahim Rif'at, but his interest in the study of Islamic arts in general, and calligraphy in particular, blossomed after he emigrated to the United States in 1978. He now works as a graphic designer, providing graphic and architectural design services, including calligraphic panels for mosques and other Islamic buildings in the US and abroad. His website lists other design possibilities that he offers, ranging from personal names and tattoos to fonts, computers, and publications.

Sakkal designed the font al-Futtaim to meet the needs of signage and environmental graphics as well as digital reproduction. Like designers before him, he shortened long ascenders and descenders. He also opened up the forms within letters. The result is a clear, sturdy, and highly legible script that still maintains something of a calligraphic feel. Its fluid line continues the calligraphic tradition, but it also has a modernist note, striking a balance between pragmatic visual restrictions, aesthetic concerns, and creativity in design solution.

Designers have also used computer graphics to revamp traditional styles of calligraphy and epigraphy, especially the script known as square kufic (Pers. batnati or muqattal). Designed for brick architectural inscriptions in Iran at the turn of the eleventh to twelfth century, it was also adapted for paper, as in the right side of the double frontispiece penned by Ahmad Karabisari c. 1530 (Figure 11.8) and its grid basis makes it of interest to those involved in computer and computer graphics. Sakkal used it to transcribe Sura 2:144, the verse that instructs Muslims to face Mecca when praying, in the shape of the Ka'ba. He discarded that design, however, as the text was too short, and redesigned it in bordered kufic by dividing the text into two equal sections and extending the vertical letters to form a balanced pattern of braided lines and stylized arabesque floral shapes. The resulting design Turn Your Face won the first place award for kufic in the Third International Calligraphy Competition sponsored by IRCICA in 1993. The symmetry of the general composition is embellished by the variations that result from relating the different letters to the overall pattern, although the composition remains somewhat static.

Sakkal's interest in square kufic continues. He designed the graphics for Stephen Wolfram's recent book, A New Kind of Science, in which the physicist tried to replace the traditional method using mathematical equations to describe the natural world with a new way of looking at the universe based on general rules embodied in simple computer programs. Wolfram used his approach to tackle an array of fundamental problems in science, from the origins of apparent randomness in physical systems to the development of complexity in biology, the ultimate scope and limitations of mathematics, the possibility of a fundamental theory of physics, the interplay between free will and determinism, and the character of intelligence in the universe. To show how these simple rules can produce behavior of great complexity, Wolfram illustrated sixteen examples of ornament.

Calligraphic art

In addition to refining traditional styles, artists are moving in new directions to stretch the aesthetic boundaries of Islamic calligraphy, seeking to expand the media and materials used to write calligraphy and the ways that it is integrated into artistic compositions. In general these works differ from traditional calligraphy in that the message is subservient to the formal qualities of the work of art. Writing can be the sole component, but artists often incorporate writing as part of a broader composition. Some artists are also transforming written forms into pseudo-scripts, intended to evoke the talismanic rather than the semantic properties of writing.

A good example of how calligraphers have transformed traditional Islamic calligraphy into art can be seen in the works of Osman Waqialla. Born in 1925 in Rifa't in the Sudan, he studied art there and in Britain. He trained as a calligrapher in Egypt with Professor Sayyid Ibrahim, from whom he obtained his license (ijaza). On his return to Khartoum, Waqialla taught and founded his own studio. Along with Ibrahim al-Sayyid, Waqialla was an active member of the Sudanese art movement until 1967, when he emigrated to Britain. Renowned there as a calligrapher and artist, he was consultant calligrapher for the firm of banknote makers De La Rue and, like Zakariya in the US, has designed alphabets and visual materials for exhibitors. Like Derman, Waqialla is concerned with the calligraphic tradition of Arabic script and its history. He collects traditional materials and implements used in the Sudan. For example, he loaned the traveling exhibition on writing Arabic organized by the British Museum a writing board (jawh) that had belonged to his grandfather.

As well as a collector, Waqialla is an artist who uses calligraphic designs in his works of art that combine the traditional with the modern. In Kaf Ha Ya 'Ayn Saf pennied in 1960 (Figure 13.10), he used the traditional materials of ink on parchment, though many of his other works are on paper. The small (17 × 13 cm) composition comprises five of the letters that follow the basmala at the beginning of twenty-nine of the 114 chapters in the Koran. Known in Arabic as fawwath or awa'il al-sawwar (openers or beginnings of the chapters) or
Sudanese-born, Egyptian-trained, and now London-based, Osman Waqialla combines traditional techniques in modern forms. In this stunning composition with the mysterious letters from the beginning of Chapter 19 (Surat Maryam) of the Koran, he adapted the traditional tughra in thuluth script.

Zakariya, father of Yahya (John the Baptist) and uncle of Maryam (the Virgin Mary). To increase readability and help the viewer grasp the content of the text, Waqialla has written the letters in a line as they would be transcribed at the beginning of the chapter in a manuscript or printed copy of the Koran. These letters run horizontally across the composition in two sizes of thuluth inside the bowls of kaf and sad. Arched diacritical marks flutter like birds above the lines of text.

The main part of the composition consists of the same letters, written in their independent forms in a magnificent thuluth jali. In composition, Waqialla is playing with the traditional pyramidal arrangement of the tughra (Figure 11.16), which is based on the thuluth script used since the eighteenth century for the signboards and pointed with the same rhomboidal dots (Figure 11.11). Here, however, the letters in the pyramidal pile read downwards from the top right, unlike the traditional tughra, which reads upwards from the bottom right. Similarly, the curved stroke at the top of ‘ayn at the upper left reverses the S-shaped strokes found at the top of the tughra and known in Turkish as zâlîfe (lock or tress).

Waqialla surrounded the large calligram with the verses from the beginning of the chapter, written in a smaller naskh. The text begins at the top right, with the basmala descending along the curved stroke connecting at the top of the large ‘ayn. He stretched out the basmala so that the mysterious letters kaf-ha-ya’-‘ayn-sad fall vertically in the center of the composition just above the thick elongated bar formed by the returning tail of ya’. They are thus perpendicular to the same words twice written horizontally below. The opening words of Chapter 19 continue horizontally below the bar and follow around the other letters. The circles used since earliest times to mark the ends of individual verses immediately identify this text as Koranic to any viewer familiar with the holy word. The serpentine movement of the text enhances the curvilinear shape of the large thuluth letters and creates an impression of shadow. Whereas calligraphy is traditionally meant to be immutable and hence often static, this composition is dynamic and evokes the magical and mysterious power of God. Waqialla calls upon traditional values of symmetry, balance, and modulation, but heightens the tension between thick and thin. For example, he plays on the formal qualities of line by stretching out the bowl of the lam in qala to a hairlike stroke that stretches all the way across the body of kaf in the larger example of the mysterious letters written in the bottom center of the composition. There is a play between meaning and form, between the rebus of puzzling out the letters and their mysterious overtones.

With its readable text of several sentences, Waqialla’s Kaf Ha Ya ‘Ayn Sad uses a traditional text—verses from the Koran. Other artists, such as the Egyptian-born Ahmad Moustafa (b. 1943), take a similar approach, using verses from the Koran and other traditional texts to create works of art in other media. Moustafa’s interest in tradition
results in part from his background as both artist and art historian. Trained as a painter and printmaker, he earned a Ph.D. in 1989 from St Martin's College of Art and Design in collaboration with the British Museum. His doctoral dissertation dealt with the proportional script of Ibn Muqla, and his reconstructions have been reproduced in articles on the history of calligraphy.

Many of Mousta'a's works involve well-known Koranic passages about God's omnipotence and power. Whereas pre-modern calligraphers had transcribed the entire text of the Koran or major parts of it, he concentrates on single verses or passages. At first, he transcribed these directly across the flat surface using various scripts skilfully screened in different colors. His 1976 Scriptural Fugue, for example, renders the letters of the word allah [God] in overlapping thumb-like letters of green, yellow, black, and gold. Many of his designs make reference to historical examples. In his 1977-8 Perspective of the Bismillah, for example, he inscribed the opening chapter of the Koran, the Fatihah, in square kufic letters set in a large rectangular panel that recalls the stucco examples from the fourteenth-century shrine of Pir-i Bakran that inspired graphic designers. His 1977 The Heart of Sincerity takes the letters from Chapter 112 and rearranges them to form a composition of two tomes leaning against one another. The mirror arrangement recalls the mirror writing script used in Ottoman times, with the knotted waws echoing the calligraphic faces beloved by Bektashis.

In the 1980s Mousta'a moved in a new direction, depicting three-dimensional geometric forms on a flat surface. Some show geometric solids. Still Life of Quranic Solids, an oil and watercolor on handmade paper done in 1987, for example, displays pyramids and spheres inscribed with Koran 54:29 set on a floor composed of repeated triangles with Koran 3:2 in square kufic. Others represent the inner view of the same geometric forms. God is the Light of Heaven and Earth, done in the same media and year, has the Light Verse [Koran 24:35] inscribed on the walls of a rectangular box open at the top to reveal the sky above. The three-dimensional shapes and the spaces they enclose are intended to reinforce the meaning inherent in the Koranic texts: God's solidarity and power in the first case, His power of divine revelation (or, more precisely, illumination) in the second.

Other works by Mousta'a like The Attributes of Divine Perfection combine inscribed ground and solid and a variety of texts written in different scripts. In addition to the Throne Verse [225:55] written in square kufic in the background, it is inspired by Koran 17:110, a verse that mentions God's most beautiful names [al-asma' al-husna]. These names were quickly said to number ninety-nine. One of Muhammad's companions, Abu Hurayra, already transmitted a hadith saying that God had ninety-nine names, a hundred less one, for He, the odd number (the Unique) likes [to be designated by these enumerated names] one by one and whoever knows the ninety-nine names will enter paradise. The repetition of these ninety-nine
1965, plaster hands grasping a copper grille were surmounted by a plastic circle enclosing the word *hich* (nothing), shaped in Persian script. In later representations, the subsidiary elements were adapted or even dropped.

In his most popular version (Figure 13.11), the word *hich* is set on a chair like a crouching cat. The cat's head comprises the initial letter *ha*’, known in Persian as *ha-ye du chashm* [the *ha*’ of two eyes] to distinguish it from other letters with an ‘h’ sound. The form of the sculpture is thus a visual pun on the name of the letter. The cat’s body is composed of the initial stroke of the final letter *cha*’, whose downstroke in the flowing *nasta’liq* script becomes the cat’s long curving tail. As with Waqili's work (Figure 13.10), there is a play between form and meaning, but Tanavoli's work (and text) is directed toward a distinctly secular audience. In contrast to the power of God invoked by Mousafar, for Tanavoli *hich* became the voice of protest, the nothingness of hope and friendship... nothing which brimmed with life itself.77

Working words or phrases into a larger composition is a method used not only by Aqiqkhana artists such as Zenderoudi, but by many other contemporary artists as well. The works of art that play most closely on the idea of writing and the book are those by the Lebanese-born artist and poet Etel Adnan [b. 1935].78 Raised in Beirut, she is both a poet and a painter who now divides her time between California and Paris. Since 1964 she has been making 'artist's books' by folding rolls of Japanese paper like an accordion and decorating the pages with words and poems in Arabic script combined with watercolor paintings (Figure 13.12).79 Typically, the word or verse is scribbled in black on top of various colored blocks in a combination of literature and visual art that recalls the Japanese tradition of the accordion book but with Arabic script. In this version done in 1987, she has repeated the word *allah* (God), written in a distinctly casual hand that varies from example to example. The roughness of the script is enhanced by the almost childlike scribble of the colored ground.
Whereas Ottoman calligraphers tried to repeat the same form without variation [Figure 11.19], Adnan reveals in the differences, underscoring the distinctly modern notion of individual creativity and expression.

In explaining her philosophy and method, Adnan noted she was trying to figure out the visual possibilities of manipulating words and letters given the elasticity of Arabic script. Her script was, in her own words, extremely imperfect. It was purposely not calligraphic, ignoring the classical heritage based on the codification of scripts and the perfection of codified brushstrokes. Rather, she wanted the fluidity implied by both the writing and the experience of turning the pages in a book to transform ‘those visual, written words and the paintings of which they are a part, into a kind of musical score that each person, including their maker, translated into his/her inner language, or languages, into that which we call understanding.’ Wijdan Ali calls this calligraffiti, a term she coined for script that is written without the rules of proportion, with rough shapes that are close to graffiti scribbling. But just as graffiti has become art on the New York subway system, so here too casual Arabic writing has been transformed into a medium that captures the kinesthetic motion inherent in writing like Chinese calligraphy does.

Though intended to evoke movement and creativity, Adnan’s words are still meant to be read. Other artists have moved a further step toward abstraction, producing works of art with pseudo-script that resembles writing but is not readable. The Tunisian Nja Mahdouzi [b. 1937], for example, often produces compositions with forms that resemble angular or rounded script. Trained at Carthage, Tunis, and Rome, he works in a variety of media and materials, ranging from the traditional combination of ink on parchment to silk screen on fabric, oil on canvas, and tapestries of polyester and wool. He even decorated the fuselage of airplanes to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Gulf Air. His silk-screened Calligraphic Composition shows yellow swooping curves set against a red rectangular block, itself jammed with tiny lines of small curving strokes. This is a firmam run amok.

Mahdouzi’s Calligrams (Figure 13.13) is a vertical composition of ink on paper with another large rectangular block divided into stripes densely packed with strokes like writing. The inspiration here is surely tiraz, the inscribed textiles traditional in the Islamic lands, but again transformed almost beyond recognition, certainly beyond legibility. The reference to writing is again invoked by bold black strokes, both curves and straight lines, that peck out behind the striped panel at the sides of the composition. The reference to writing is driven home by the rhomboidal dots and the script at the top of the long vertical stroke. The combination of strokes at the left echoes the familiar shape of the word allah, but the group is missing one ascender and is therefore illegible. The curved tails at the right evoke the pincer-like projections extending to the right of the Ottoman tughrta.