Ali Omar Ermes
In Context
Merrill Lynch is pleased to sponsor ‘Ali Omar Ermes in Context’, an exhibition that celebrates the work of Ali Omar Ermes, an internationally renowned artist who combines the original thought of Islamic art in a unique interpretation between the culture of yesterday and today. This project gives us the opportunity to join with Ali Omar Ermes and Art Advisory Associates and to demonstrate our support for the vibrant Middle Eastern culture that is celebrated each year during London’s Islamic Arts Week.

The work of Ali Omar Ermes is known for its rich expression of Arabic poetry and letters. His art carries a deeper cultural meaning to a global audience, from the Royal Collection of the Sultanate of Oman to the Smithsonian in Washington DC and the British Museum in London. As a global financial services firm, we recognize the value of celebrating innovation and artistic currency that stems from the world’s esteemed cultures.

We congratulate Ali Omar Ermes on this engaging and dynamic exhibition, and we are proud to showcase the art of the Middle East, an exceptional region fostering some of the world’s leading art, business and thought communities.

Aazăl Abbas  
Managing Director, Global Private Client Group  
Merrill Lynch
Reflections on the Art of Ali Omar Ermes
by Dr Riad Nourallah

Seeing Ali Omar Ermes in his studio with brush flowing on paper, one cannot but recall the uncanny ease and confidence with which the great painters move their brushes on canvases or accomplished dancers move their bodies on stage, a deceptive ease about which education and training can offer only a partial explanation, and a confidence that seems to mock our daily doubts and countless stumbles and hesitations. And though one has to acknowledge every artist’s, and Ermes’s own, indebtedness to a long and rich tradition, one will inevitably be reminded of T.S. Eliot’s image of a museum (as a metaphor for a nation’s – and by extension the world’s – cultural heritage) being reorganized, enhanced and updated by every new talent and contribution.

The deeply felt sense of the sacred with which Muslim calligraphers (even ordinary scribes) in the classical age of Islam, and throughout the Islamic world, traditionally approached their work is well known. They, for a start, would perform ritualistic purification—(wudu) as though in preparation for the prescribed prayers (salat) before they could pen, draw, or engrave the letters of the Arabic alphabet, already sanctified as the building blocks of the Holy Text, which could be touched or recited only by the pure and the unfilmed. Albeit a somewhat elaborate prelude, this was but a mere point of entry into a world full of possibilities and pitfalls, and whose promises and perils, only the brave and the adept, but also the reverent and courteous, could negotiate. And, on top of, and above, all that, there was always God, the Ever-Wakeful Witness and Arbiter, whose recompense was far greater than that of the wealthy patron or the avuncular guild master, since that reward would encompass both this world and the one to come. And though All-Compassionate and All-Forgiving, He will expect the artist to perform at his or her best, since the pursuit of ifgar (excellence or faultlessness) is the duty of every worker and conscientious human being—a duty rewarded, as attested in a hadith, by Allah’s special love and grace. Perfection belongs to God alone, of course, and though an artist, an engraver, or a carpet weaver, might scale the very summit of their art, they would, out of humility to the Godhead, introduce into their physically earthbound product a blemish or a flaw, which, while loudly acknowledging, to the divine perception, the supremacy of the One, who is the embodiment and source of all perfection, would not be easily detected except by the keenest and most expert of human eyes.

That passion and reverence for excellence, which informed Arab civilisation in its heyday and gave it the drive, intellectual curiosity and tolerance, as well as humility, to interact with other civilisations and construct, in partnership with them, the wonderful cultural mosaic which for several centuries shaped and permeated the various art forms from Spain to Indonesia, was to lose its vigour and lapse into a protracted period of intellectual stagnation and stupor, in which the fear of innovation and “contamination” cast its shadow on varied spheres of civilisational pursuit. Nonetheless, art, though equally affected, continued to imbibe the gentri loci of the many localities in which Muslims lived, adding to the diversity of that wide-ranging presence, at times arriving at such unexpected places as a chapel in Palermo and a cathedral in Apu. But it was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of the Christian era, when Arab and Muslim lands came into contact with an ascendant West, that Arabs and Muslims were galvanised into a response. Though cataclysmic and, to the Arab and Muslim peoples, detrimental in certain ways, that encounter was to lead to an awakening to the new realities in the world, which, ironically, the Arab and Muslim civilisation had helped to bring about in the late Middle Ages but had chosen to ignore and shun so complacently just as Europe, having benefited from the advanced sciences and arts of the Arabs, went on to create its Renaissance and Enlightenment, which in turn led to the industrial revolution and modernity with all their marvels and upheavals.

Now, like Tennyson’s Ulysses and indeed like other plucky but receptive explorers of landscapes, mindscapes, and soulscapes, Ali Omar Ermes has “become part of all that [he has] met” be it in his studies, travels, or imagination. His engagement in the Arab-Islamic tradition of calligraphy and design, where, as in Byzantine art, the marriage ceremony of heaven and earth is perpetually enacted, is obvious. But, no cage-dweller, he carries the past moulds to hold encounters with new unprecedented patterns, genres, combinations and colour schemes, which could have come about or reached their fullness only in the cross-fertilisation of his adopted home in the West. The Oxford historian and celebrated humanist and sage Theodore Zeldin, in his remarkable book An Intimate History of Humanity (1994), cites the case of El Greco, who, at the age of 36, decided to move to Toledo, still reverberating with “excitement” since “Christians, Muslims and Jews had once lived in it side by side, and [and] one of its kings had been proud to call himself Emperor of the Three Religions and another to have his epitaph inscribed on his tombstone in Castillian, Arabic and Hebrew.” It was this that Zeldin, cogently argues, which launched El Greco on his groundbreaking career, one that could have dwindled to that of a mediocre portrait painter had he not been so comprehensively challenged by the animation and toleration of that city’s legacy.

President John Kennedy had spoken about the need for society to “set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him” if art is to fulfil its all-important role in “nourishing the roots of our culture.” Somehow, it matters little whether Kennedy or Elliot (in the previous reference and of the Individual Talent) was alluding exclusively or primarily to Western culture. Albert Einstein, who habitually went beyond the expectations of his scientific peers as brilliantly and provocatively as beyond the precints of his physicist’s function to play a variety of seemingly incomparable but equally inspiring, mind-liberating, and humanizing roles, set no such priorities or distinctions. Rather, he stated that a human being was “part of a whole,” with his “separateness” being “a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness” and his devotion to a narrow group of kith and kin being “a kind of prison.” The task of humanity, he affirmed, “must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living
creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty — a statement that is an unconscious echo of, and in a mystical affinity with, expressions and attitudes by such Sufis as the thirteenth-century Ibn al-Arabi of Seville and Damascus who declared, in R.A. Nicholson’s translation,

My heart is capable of every form; A chisler for the monk, a face for idols, A purifier for gazelles, the savior’s Ka’ba, The tables of the Torah, the Koran, Love is the faith I hold; wherever turn His camels, still the one true faith is mine.

A sentiment that also had intellectual roots in the rich cultural ferment and pluralism of tenth-century Baghdad, which had offered, among other things, a vision of what seemed at the time a perfect human and cultural synthesis, expressed here by Ikwun al-Safa, and admiringly quoted by Zehdin:

"The ideal and perfect person should be of East Persian origin, Arab in faith, of Babylonian education, Hebrew in asceticism, a disciple of Christ in conduct, as pious as a Syrian monk, a Greek in individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and especially a Sufi in his whole spiritual life.”

Once again, Ali Omar Ernes is at the heart of this deathless tradition. With all the obvious commitment to, and incessant acknowledgement of, their artist’s Arab roots, the galaxy of his calligraphic abstract paintings also seem to vibrate at times with the energies, brainwaves, brush-strokes, and colours, of such stars as Braque, Gris, Monet, Ernst, Kandinsky, and Miro, together with those of the master illuminists and miniaturists of Persia, India, Japan, and China. And yet, he is so different from everyone else, with a genre that is completely his own, though he shares with the above luminaries the ability to create hitherto-unseen and unforeseen connections and possibilities, not only in art but also in life since, with the liberation of our vision and imagination, the latter faculty deemed by Einstein as more important than knowledge, we can go beyond Apollinaire’s dichotomy of the conceived and the perceived, to perhaps effect a dialogue and harmony between the two (or multiple) realities.

A true diplomat and a bridge-builder is the artist — a mediator, synthesiser, liberator, and, above all, a peacemaker. Our postmodernist world promises to offer almost everyone with intelligence and resource untold and unprecedented opportunities. But it is also an age of inequalities and conflicts, deprivation and desperation. The eminent Jewish scholar Abraham J. Heschel has already underlined the fact that Auschwitz was not built with walls but with words; and though art should know better than to lend its wings to any political system, bound to exploit it in a “golden” or “brainless” cage, it may still have to be conscious of the need to embrace certain causes, like those of peace and human welfare and dignity along with the cause of our collective nest and canvas, Planet Earth.

Ermes’s epic painting “Narrative Stream” (1993) pays homage to the continuity (and inevitable interdependence) of all traditions, though, as he invariably does, being a poet himself and admirer of fine poetry, choosing to exemplify this through interwoven quotes from Arabic poets ranging in the time of their composition from the pre-Islamic to the contemporary periods. In his caption he further explains the theme by stating: “The ‘narrative stream’ refers to the practice of passing ideas and traditions down the line,” with the “abstract imagery of the artwork” being “complemented” by the poetic extracts. The “stream” itself, which carries these barge or arks or winged seeds of poetry, is composed of a galaxy of shapes and colours that merge into one another yet stand out individually unique and mysterious within the general flow. Other “liquid” paintings like “Visual Sounds in Arabic Script” (1991), “A Pattern of Colours” (1991), “Al Qaf” (1979), “Al Ain in Motion” (1972) and “A Composition of Letters, Signs and Expressions” (1991) suggest, through no figurative representation, schools of fish and water creatures (be they exotic ones in a tropical river or whales on the high seas) swimming or glittering or frolicking to their hearts’ content in the surrounding medium. Their dynamism and promise, perhaps also their danger, are inexpressible— as are the artist’s own. Elsewhere, in “A Blue Tribute” (1992), the Arabic Tah letter is standing up like a minaret, slender and evocative, but as tall as a man and perilous as a king cobra in a temple dedicated to its adoration.

At a personal level, Ernes is a man of great serenity and composure, yet a highly charged “subversive” strain seems to run through much of his work. In part he seems to be drawing on the spirit and attitude of the pre-Islamic Arab sa’aliq poets, who lived beyond their tribes’ pale and loudly and proudly sang their individualism and freedom even while expressing in astonishing metaphors their kinship with the rest of humanity and creation. Ernes, distinctly aware of that tradition which had filtered through to later periods of Arabic literature (and politics), embeds and interlaces his restless abstractions with excerpts from male and female representatives of that tradition, poets like Tarafah, Sukainah, al-Mutanabbi and al-Mar’ari, as he highlights such issues of concern to modern Arab masses (and intellectuals) as political freedom and freedom of expression, social justice, dignity, mutual consultation, and participation of women in public life.

In the process, Ernes takes his calligraphy through and beyond the classical Islamic tradition of Qur’anic and religious inscriptions. Though the art of manuscript and miniature illustrations in Persia, Turkey, and Mogul India has also drawn on the “prophetic” texts, particularly those of love and epic poetry, while elegant, even artistic, penmanship was the norm in diplomatic correspondences and some sciences, medical and other compositions, in addition to dedicatory enamelled or inlaid decorations on glass, pottery, and copper, Ernes, in using mainly secular inscriptions, harks back to the pre-Islamic tradition of revering or paying homage to eloquence — the beauty, power, and mystery of human speech at its best. It was that tradition, which we are told, placed the famous Golden Odes (for which Ernes himself has dedicated a series of seven astounding paintings) on the walls of the Ka’bah as pinnacles of poetic expression. But even here an affinity with the supernatural was present, both in the identification with the Ka’bah and in the pre-Islamic Arab belief that the lips (the desert “Muses”) had a role to play in poetic inspiration. Moreover, despite its existentialist, hedonistic and dissident overtones, which were at times however counterbalanced by an engagement with such ideals and practices as chivalry, courage, generosity, fellowship, and harmony with nature, which are of central concern to Ernes himself, the poetry of pagan Arabia remained a model of excellence for later Muslim Arabs.
influencing poetic traditions throughout the Arab-Islamic Empire, evan forging intriguing links with other literary traditions beyond it. Poetry itself survived, and indeed was “officially” acknowledged, as the register and chronicle (diwan) par excellence of the Arab psyche, and has remained so for more than a thousand and four hundred years. It may be significant that Paul Albar of nineteenth-century Cordoba, fearing the effect of what some people today might call a “cultural invasion” wrote (in R. Dozy’s [1932] and R.W. Southern’s [1962] translation):

The Christians love to read the poems and romances of the Arabs; they study the Arab theologians and philosophers, not to refute them but to form a correct and elegant Arabic. Where is the layman who now reads the Latin commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, or who studies the Gospels, prophets or apocrypha? Alas! All talented young Christians read and study with enthusiasm the Arab books; they gather immense libraries at great expense; they despise the Christian literature as unworthy of attention. They have forgotten their language. For every one who can write a letter in Latin to a friend, there are a thousand who can express themselves in Arabic with elegance, and write better poems in this language than the Arabs themselves.

Moreover, the proximity in time between the full flowering of the poetry of pagan Arabia and the advent of Islam in the seventh century, with the Qur’an offering a new higher expression of spirituality and a spur to civilization-building on a scale unknown in the earlier tradition, further helped reinforce rather than dislodge the secular precedence. Both traditions were destined to go hand in hand in shaping and building up the Arab spirit, though assisting in creating or documenting recurrent tensions and contradictions within that spirit.

Emmes has recently stated: ‘As an Arab and a Muslim, I feel (and rightly so) that I’m a world citizen; after all, this is the Islamic approach to society and mankind. Since I started my first steps in my art, I meant it to be enjoyed and understood by all people, to break the barriers of communication between people and languages. That’s why I have combined more than one language to my art [as in, e.g., “AAAA” and “Slab” of 1992 and 1993]. Arabic is an ideal visual form, and the musical entity in its movement of the letterform “as in poetry” not only in its literary expression but also in its silent music expressions, combines the use of space, colour and the power of shifting places in their quiet and noisy effects.’

Those “shifts” and “noises,” like the tensions and contradictions hinted at above are also refreshingly present in the art of Emmes. His few direct echoes of the Qur’an, as in the partially charred but striking “Iqra” (Read) of 1991, have a peculiar restiveness and edginess in them as they seem to shout at a semi-consonant nation to wake up to the expanding frontiers of the universe it had long chosen to close its eyes to. Even the contour of the Arabic name of the deity, Allah, when it occurs in his paintings, is never the same, ever-changing and transforming, perhaps in tandem with that enigmatic verse in Surat al-Na’im (the Star) which describes the Godhead, whom we presume to be far removed from the world of mutability and flux, as a force ever-interlocked with the affairs of a perpetually altering and evolving cosmos. The paradoxical nature of life is more generally expressed in his painting “Contradictions of Joy” (1993), now housed in the Smithsonian museum in Washington. In “The Sixth Ode” (1993), the flaming crimson letters seem to drip with blood, perhaps conveying, in addition to the epic and strife-ridden interludes in Antara’s poem, the violence and the blood-letting so tragically synonymous with the life on earth of a species about the wisdom of whose creation the angels in a Qur’anic story boldly question the Creator. Be that as it may, the stripes on the central bloodstained letters also evoke a hint of the beauty and terror of a tiger, tempting us to wonder, with the angels as with the persona in William Blake’s poem,

Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thus?

In “Akhil” or “Aahbil!” (1993), a diptych dedicated to the United Nations, the sense of anguish expressed by the glowing sound of the word, itself crawling in tiny script a moving poem by the artist/poet, seems to accentuate, beyond its immediate historical context and collection, the artist’s own anxiety as he labours to transmute pain into creativity and senselessness into meaning. Nonetheless, as the double-faced picture moves sideways and the funereal black of the aleph, with its roots fanning out into some heart’s core, assumes more density and pointlessness, its maddahs (sign over the aleph) seem to release a fat drop of black blood and its roots break free, while the kh on the left takes on darker smudges as it comes into contact with the open spaces. Here the cry of anguish is itself transformed beyond an individual’s sense of distress to a wider, universal articulation of grief and desperation, perhaps in parallel with Munch’s “The Scream,” that very emblem and herald of our modern anxiety, alienation, and despondency.

Whether painting a starkly bare tableau like “All Ba in Purple” (1986) or an extremely elaborate and complex one like “Crossfire” (1993), Emmes infuses a palpable sense of movement and interaction in his works. Aside from the dynamic multiplicity of forms and shapes, backgrounds and foregrounds, the traffics and dances of the letterforms themselves are often dazzling. Many of them have about them the quality of a serious, enigmatic (yet strangely controlled) abandon in the way they stretch and curl, submerge and rise, scintillate and dim, melt and diffuse, interwoven and intertwave, and ever so rarely sit still. Longing for freedom and release, they nonetheless link hands and souls with the troupes of colours and shades quivering and surging around them or, in some cases, lie back brooding and seemingly inert. Like whirling dervishes, with one hand looking up to heaven and the other facing down to the earth, “where all the ladders start,” they perhaps convey something of their author’s creative restlessness, in his confessedly “constant search and ceaseless questioning” to “broaden the means of [his] artistic expression and stretch the frontiers of [his] art.” In the process, the letters and shapes metamorphose as if by alchemy or “plain” physics, poetically and trenchantly explained by Rumi in the famous “Elements” poem. An “end” however, as Rumi elsewhere explains, in a tribute to Schimmel’s translation, is always a beginning:

What can I do when Love appears and puts its claws round my neck?
I grasp it, take to my breast and drag it into the whirling!
And when the bloom of the roses is filled with the glow of the sun,
They enter all the dance, the dance and do not complain in the whirling!
Such transformations and transports could not have been accomplished in the paintings at hand without Ernes’s own love for God, for his fellow human beings, for the beauty and potential of the world, and for COLOUR! The extraordinary and ceaselessly surprising combinations of his colour schemes are simply staggering: his purples and golds, yellows, blacks, blues and oranges, greens and azures, browns and violets, and so on and so forth – an inexhaustible supply of inventions and juxtapositions, at times as bright as Chagall’s “Les Amoureux aux Marguerites” and, at other, perhaps rarer, times, as sombre and bleak as Kossoff’s “Kilburn Underground Station.”

The Qur’an describes the human being as a khala’if, a guardian or custodian of God’s world. The artist, being an outstanding and finely tuned guardian/gardener, has far more than the ordinary man’s or ordinary woman’s share of responsibility for the preservation and enhancement of that world. A mixed blessing as this might be for artists, they have no option but to persist with their “sullen art” – to use Dylan Thomas’s phraseology – or bittersweet “lascivious with what is difficult” – to use W. B. Yeats’s own. And, though, like the ardent, bewildered, mystics of all faiths or the painted seeing lover in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” they, in their “ever-painting” pursuit, “cannot fade.” “Teasing us out of thought like eternity,” they will remain on the cold canvas, paper or marble, “for ever warm and still to be enjoyed.” In a perpetual state of loving and longing they shall endure, with the object of their quest ever remaining fair and unreachable.

Keats’s exhortation to the painter lover on the urn, “yet, do not grieve,” may revive to us Ernes’s own “Do not Despair,” addressed, in 1993, to the suffering people of Bosnia and all sufferers of genocide, prejudice, persecution, injustice, ignorance and indifference, ancient and modern. Ernes, himself, fusing so magically and inimitably poetry and painting on his breathless paper, may be included in W. H. Auden’s 1939 magnificent tribute to the work of the Irish poet WB. Yeats and his final stirring exhortation to all poets/artists:

Fellow, poet, fellow right To the bottom of the night, With your unconstraining voice Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the forming of a verse Make a viniary of the curse, Sing of human unsuccess In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart Let the healing fountain start, In the prison of his days Teach the free man (and the free woman) how to praise.

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Ali Omar Ernes is one of the foremost contemporary artists from the Middle East, living and working in London. Originally from Libya, where he was born in 1945, he studied Design at the Plymouth School of Architecture and Design and later at Central St Martins. He returned to work in Libya but came to England with his family in 1981 where he has been ever since.

Ernes is a painter first and foremost who uses the Arabic script as the subject of his compositions focusing on dramatic single letterforms painted with huge brushes. He often loosely bases his style on the Mughal script of his native North Africa developed in the 10th century and still used today. Although he does not follow the formal classical tradition, his use of the script is very significant. Arabic is the language that the Qur’an was revealed in and the Arabic script was used to write it down. There is therefore a symbiotic connection between writing and the word of God. Ernes is himself a devout Muslim, who spends part of his time in charitable voluntary works. The use of the Arabic script, with its strongly religious connotations, is therefore extremely meaningful for him.

He is also a poet and poetry plays a crucial role in his work. The beautiful and simple forms of letters, which are at the heart of his work, are given an additional layer of meaning by the tiny poetic inscriptions above and below the boldly written letters. This use of poetry is a recurrent theme in Ernes’s work and the verses are deliberately chosen. He paints the single letter first and then finds texts from the body of Arabic literature that express the mood or idea he wishes to convey. Most often these have a bearing on the events of today, on the behaviour of those in power, on social inequality and injustice. This is most clearly exemplified by the works in this exhibition such as the Musical Alifs and elsewhere as in the letter Kaif, a work which is in the collection of The British Museum.

The Musical Alifs are a sequence of four paintings in which the Arabic letter Alif (a) is shown with symbols that represent short vowels placed in conjunction with a letter known as the hamza. They affect the sound of the letter (i, a, u and the circle sukun, meaning silence). Each of the paintings contains part of a poem by the early Arab poet and community leader Ma’an ibn Aws. His message has a moral tone: the poet has avoided wrongdoing by virtue of his dignity and responsibility and must set an example.

These wonderful paintings have many stories to tell and the stark beauty of the single letter at the heart of the composition transcends all boundaries. Although they are obviously rooted in and find their inspiration from the rich Arab and Islamic traditions, they speak for universal human aspirations. Their striking impact allows Ernes to communicate directly with people from other traditions and faiths, suggesting to them how much they have in common with the Arab and Islamic lands.

30th September 2003
Ali Omar Ermes

by Dale Egge

In Arab art circles, Ali Omar Ermes needs no introduction. Indeed, in wider circles, from Asia to the USA, he is known for his accomplishments and international exhibitions. I shall concentrate on an art consultant’s point of view.

Ali Omar Ermes was one of the half dozen finest artists I have had the pleasure of working with during the twenty-five years I worked with Egge Art Consultancy.

Like all great artists, he was totally uncompromising about his work. There have always been three essential ingredients: the first is the extra large format, second the finest quality paper as the base with a range of water-soluble paints as the medium, third the subject matter, Arabic letters. I tried to get him to try smaller sizes, other media - canvas, boards, and oil paints - all to no avail. The size was especially irksome for an Art Consultant; many clients can’t accommodate huge paintings. The medium also, it is really difficult and costly to frame huge pieces of paper. I remember one forty-foot long Arabic alphabet for a hotel in Dubai had to be transported on a special once-a-week airline flight, it just wouldn’t fit into an ordinary airplane!

The other uncompromising stand had to do with the calligraphic theme. I asked him for a painting of a certain Sura from the Qur’an for a client. He turned it down, explaining that he never used Qur’anic Sura’s since he couldn’t be sure where the paintings would be hung and who might walk past, perhaps profaning them. The longer I traveled and worked in the world, the more I came to understand and respect all Ali Omar’s views on this. The only exception he made was for a commission for the Reit Al Qur’an Museum in Bahrain. The placement – amidst a collection of the finest historical Qur’ans – allowed for a whole collection of Suras, all Quranic references to the holy book.

Ali Omar Ermes once said to me: “I am not a calligrapher – I am an artist.” He has a high regard for trained calligraphers and for the elegance and beauty of the Arabic script. However, his background and training has been as a graphic designer and as an artist. This means he takes his Arabic calligraphy to a separate category. He celebrates its design and linear grace. He makes it look easy, which it isn’t! He brings to non-Arabic viewers as well as those for whom it is their native script, a visceral delight. We love the paintings as artworks. We also love the calligraphy just as we would any beautiful painted object.

As Ermes grew up in Libya, he is heir to the Maghribi School of calligraphy and gives it his own style. Maghribi script is, - I have always thought, - the easiest form for contemporary non-Arabs to appreciate. It moves away from the more vertical, stately Arabic of Turkey and the Near East, or the backward-leaning, vernacular-looking script of Persian-dominated areas. Instead, it is compact, more uniform in thickness. It just looks more ‘modern’ somehow. It isn’t, of course. Some of the finest twelfth-century Maghribi style Arabic is found in Cordoba and Granada in Spain. This is Ali Omar’s heritage, lucky man!

How does he paint these enormous pieces, one may ask: he must have an enormous studio. Not at all! He starts indoors in a smallish space with a series of huge commercial house painter’s brushes. He paints a large single letter in one go, and then he builds up a series of background textures using different paints. All sorts of interesting things take place. The whole sheet may be taken outdoors and hosed down to soften the effect, or it may be left pristine with only a small bit of text added. The text may be classic Arabic poetry or Ermes’ own commentary. This exquisit painter must be satisfied before he pronounces it finished. Even then, he has been known to change or add things later.

Ali Omar leaves a legacy, he has brought the beauty of Arabic calligraphy to all of us in the non-Arab world, and we are the richer for that.

Dale Egge, 2003
Fetal Fityan (2003)
1.23m x 1.12m
Acrylic on paper
Collection of Artist

The letter Lam, solid and dominant against the element (though they look attractive) but the situation is full of challenges in various areas in different conditions.

The poem is from the well-known reference source Bahjat Al Majalis by the eminent jurisprudent and literature scientist Ebni Abdel Birr Al Qortibo.

"The man (or woman) of Dignity is not the one who wastes their time worrying about what happened to them, worrying about satisfying their whims (greed in all matters). But the one who is always worrying about how to be useful and beneficial to humanity, either to help the needy, save the endangered or combating the aggressor and the unjust."

The Sixth Ode (1993)
2.5m x 2.25m
Acrylic on paper
Collection of Artist

With the full 85 (hajr) poetry lines by the pre-Islamic warrior poet Anter Ibn Shaddad, who was famous for both his romantic story with Abalah and his fairness and strict war ethics. Such as not to start aggression, neither to fight who is less capable, neither to go for the one who is already down or loot him after his death.
2.5m x 1.5m, acrylic on paper, collection of Artist

Al Motannabbi is one of the few poets in Arabic Literature where people recall poetry in its absolute meaning when they hear his name. Even though Arabic literature is rich with thousands of highly important poets who affected the human spirits with their power of beauty in their poetic expression throughout history. So Al Motannabbi is synonymous with poetry and as he said a long time ago (during the Abbasid times, 1,200 years or so), that he releases his breath of poetry in a casual unintentional way and people engage in the fiercest of debates and arguments about them for the rest of their lives. Here I gathered a few of these for the viewer’s benefit.

Reference: the Dayman and other sources.

Muthaqafat Abi Tammam (2003)
2.5m x 1.5m, acrylic on paper, collection of Artist

Abu Tammam is one of the most excellent of Arab poets, he lived during the Abbasid time and he was known for his innovation in Arabic poetry and literature as he brought rich colour and added new tones of musical expression in it. In this piece is a variety of these under the name muthaqafat which means that pieces of poetry are carefully expressed in a way as though they were engraved from diamond rocks.

Reference: the Dayman and other sources.
Lammatul Lamm (2003)
1.5m x 1.2m
Acrylic on paper
Collection of Artist

The grabbing of the expression Lamm, the letter L in Arabic.

In mono colour of black on white, very subtle.

Powerful and dominant blows of brush strokes in single colours softened by sensitive swipes in middle tones of pigment making this complicated piece very simple and vice versa. The poems are by the well-known Abdullah Ibn AlMubarak, the general meaning of it says:

Doing good to humanity is always fundamentally right and good, never mind who appreciates it from who do not.

1.5m x 1.2m
Acrylic on paper
Collection of Artist

This is a piece where I say in it the manifestations of the expression was faster to exist than the elements of execution, so it is a hold up between these two opposing sides, in mono colour full, half and sensitive degrees of impressions. The poems are from the very rich and well-known reference in Arabic literature – Badujet Al Majahid by Iba Abdil Birr Al Qortobi. The general meaning of the poems is as follows:

If the status quo under what are supposed to be the judge, the advocate, the patrons of the unjust state of the world today, then it is only bad news for all these perpetrators from the absolute owner, judge and patron of all.