Word Into Art presents highlights of the contemporary art and culture emerging from the Middle East and North Africa today. The works illustrated, many published here for the first time, reflect issues of identity and politics, and the richly diverse artistic heritage of the region.

A powerful theme running through all the works is how artists engage and experiment with the Arabic script. For some this resonates with the sacred tradition of Islam and the Qur'an. For other artists the Arabic script is an undeniable part of their cultural inheritance that influences their creativity; they may use the script to illustrate poetry, to reinforce an Arab or Muslim identity, or to make political points. As a result these contemporary artists are inventing exciting new genres that are still unmistakably informed by their own artistic traditions.

Word Into Art not only testifies to the strong calligraphic tradition of the Middle East, but also demonstrates the powerful and imaginative ways in which artists are using writing today.

With 204 illustrations £11.99
Word into Art
Artists of the Modern Middle East
Venetia Porter
with contributions by Isabelle Caussé

Foreword by Saeb Eigner

Word into Art
Artists of the Modern Middle East

THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS
In memory of my mother, Thea Porter, who introduced me to the contemporary art of the Middle East

For Charles, Emily and Rhiannon

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Venetta Porter has asserted the right to be identified as the author of this work

First published in 2006 by The British Museum Press
A division of The British Museum Company Ltd
38 Russell Square, London WC1B 3QQ

Cased and paperback editions reprinted 2006

www.britishmuseum.co.uk

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Cased edition:

Paperback edition:

Designed by Harry Green
Printed in Spain by Graños SA, Barcelona

Dubai Holding is proud to support the exhibition Word into Art, which represents the first time that such a wide range of art, by over seventy-five artists from the Middle East, has been exhibited in one location. It shows the strong influence that Arabic, one of the most beautiful calligraphic languages in the world, continues to exert over artists of the modern generation and how it has inspired modern art in the region in so many different ways.

This exhibition provides a singular opportunity to experience the impact of the rich literary traditions of Arabic on art today. Therefore, I am delighted that such a rich repository of art as the British Museum is putting on this exhibition. I certainly hope you enjoy it.

H.E. Mohammad Al Gergawi
Executive Chairman, Dubai Holding
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The Middle East is not normally associated with modern art. However, I’m glad to say that times are changing. With the benefits of improved education and economic prosperity, there is now a greater understanding and appreciation of art. In the United Arab Emirates, we have been working to boost this trend. We hope that our efforts, even if relatively small in global terms, will help artists to further develop as well as encourage other patrons to support them.

The government of the United Arab Emirates is now sustainably assisting both institutions and individuals to develop and create the right environment for this movement to prosper. This momentum is not confined to the public sector alone. There are, for example, thriving art galleries and exhibitions in Dubai, fuelled by a strong interest in Middle Eastern art from a vastly multicultural population.

With this exposure to the rest of the world, contemporary art in the Middle East has encouraged a global audience to become enchanted by the artistic qualities of Islamic calligraphy. Modern art has found its place in our growing and developing environment because artists from the region have tapped the potential of Arabic as an art form. As this exhibition demonstrates, its potential has yet to find its limits.

The primary value of Arabic to art is, most importantly, as a form of identity to the region. Arabic has transcended borders to become the international symbol of its people. As such, it is a potent tool for artists looking to transmit their messages about the issues, themes and trends that pervade the modern Arab world today.

Obviously, Arabic text is not only an identifying symbol; it has been actively used across the Middle East to communicate and teach. As well as being the language of the Holy Qur’an and poetry, it has been used to tabulate mathematical advances and scientific research. From its inception as a structured method of written communication over 1,300 years ago, Arabic script has recorded history. Since then, it has evolved as one of the most beautiful scripts in the world to inspire art through the many calligraphic styles and forms found in use today throughout Arab intellectualism.

This is why the Arabic language is such a powerful concept in our modern-day understanding of art in the Middle East. Where pictographic and abstract art forms are still very much in evidence, the qualities of the text evoke far more in the minds of the many people who live in this region. Within Middle Eastern art, the concept of a picture telling a thousand words is turned on its head. It begs a new question: how many images can a single word reveal?

I hope this excellent exhibition by the British Museum helps you to find the answer.

H.E. MOHAMMAD AL Gergawi
EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN
DUBAI HOLDING
Preface

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Preface

As a follower of Middle Eastern art in its many forms, contemporary and calligraphic, I am pleased to be involved in the British Museum’s Middle East Season and its exhibition, Word into Art. I am particularly thrilled that this event will be coming to Dubai, which is slowly emerging as an Arab art arena.

The exhibition brings together Middle Eastern artists from all corners of the globe, commonly united by the written word, its sublime beauty portrayed in various and creative ways, whether in the traditional format of calligraphy or contemporary media such as photography and installation. The number of artists involved and the variety of their works, all unified by a common, unobtrusive theme, make this a very interesting exhibition. It is also a celebration of the art and the artists of our region, and an important step in showing the new Middle East and its art.

The art world is moving forward at a rather interesting pace, and the direction is perhaps more universal than ever. Our region, sadly, is not an active participant in this development. However, recent trends, including greater openness and deeper awareness, coupled with a newfound sense of self-confidence, appear to be bringing about positive change. Dubai in many ways is at the forefront of this modernizing trend in the Arab world; and that it should play an important part in this exhibition is in itself proof that art needs patrons and supporters. I am particularly proud that we have chosen to play that role.

This is an important exhibition brought together by passion, determination and foresight: positive values that are well known to us in the United Arab Emirates. We look forward to welcoming this exhibition to Dubai, and are confident that it will bring greater awareness and recognition of the energy and creativity of Middle Eastern art.

H.E. DR ANWAR GARGASH
DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
Dia al-Azzawi
Blessed Tigris

COMPUTER-GRADEIVED IMAGE OF THE DESIGN
FOR THE SCULPTURE
H 6.8 m, W 1.2 m (approx.)
PRIVATE COLLECTION

Specially created for the exhibition Word into Art, the sculpture, made from fibre glass, has inscribed upon it a poem by the celebrated Iraqi poet, journalist and political activist Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawhari (d. 1997). This poem, written in 1962, is 'O Blessed Tigris'.

I greet you from afar, O greet me back,
O blessed Tigris, river of gardens green,
I greet your banks, seeking to quench my thirst,
Like dews between water and day after rain.
O blessed Tigris, often have I been forced to leave
To drink from springs which didn't my thirst relieve.
O blessed Tigris, what inflames your heart
Inflames me and what grieves you makes me grieve.
O wanderer, play with a gentle touch
Cannot the lady softly and sing again.
That you may soothe a volcano yearning with rage
And quench a heart burning with pain.'

[Translated: Hussein Haidar]
When Parliament set up the British Museum in 1753 it had one overarching purpose in view: to enable citizens to think about the world they live in. This exhibition addresses one part of the world we now inhabit, and about which citizens are currently doing a great deal of thinking – the Middle East.

Word into Art puts on show for the first time the British Museum’s collection of contemporary art from the Middle East, built up over the last twenty-five years. It focuses, like much of the Museum’s earlier collections from the same area, on the transformation of the written word into expressive free-flowing form. But this modern calligraphy also embraces graffiti, and the well-words of street politics now take their place alongside verses from holy scripture and quotations from the great poets and philosophers. Word into Art includes work by artists from virtually all countries from Morocco to Iran, some of them now working in Europe or America, but all addressing through the word issues of profound importance for the region – questions of belief and tradition, social order and personal integrity, and conflict of all sorts, cultural, religious and political.

This is not a new departure for the British Museum. Among the objects in our founding collection were amulets and seals delicately inscribed with Qur’anic and other religious verses, narratives of Jewish history as well as pious souvenirs of Christian Jerusalem. Enlightenment Europe was fascinated by the Levant. It studied its antiquities; it admired and envied its prodigious commercial success. But above all, the politicians and philosophers of eighteenth-century Europe wondered at the exemplary religious tolerance of the Middle East under the Sultan. Nowhere in Europe could Christian, Muslim and Jew live together in harmony as they could in Constantinople, Cairo or Baghdad, and the political thinkers of Germany, Britain and France could see that this was the model for the future.

If anything has distinguished the monumental and artistic cultures of the Middle East from the third millennium BC onwards, it is the significance accorded to words. As visitors to the Assyrian galleries in the British Museum can readily observe, the cuneiform inscriptions on ancient Mesopotamia march straight across carved reliefs of men and of gods, as if proclaiming the superiority of word over image. From thence, through the Islamic collections’ wealth of calligraphy to the remarkable sculpture by Dia al-Azzawi (opposite), there is in the Museum’s collection enduring evidence of a sustained meditation by the peoples of the Middle East on the mighty power of the carved, written, and painted word to prolong memory, effect change, and communicate truth.

The truths that need communicating to the world about the Middle East now are not one but many, and would require much more than one art show. I believe, however, that this exhibition can make a contribution. It is the first of its kind, certainly in Europe. It could not have been achieved without the help and support of Dubai Holding, our sponsor, and Saeb Eignger, special adviser for the Modern Middle East Season 2006. To them the Museum owes its warmest thanks.

NEIL MACGREGOR
DIRECTOR, BRITISH MUSEUM
Acknowledgements

The exhibition Word into Art and this book are the result of a wonderful collaboration between a number of enthusiasts of contemporary Middle Eastern art, and the energy and engagement of my colleagues at the British Museum. First and foremost I would like to thank Saeb Eigner, the British Museum’s special adviser on the Middle East Season 2006, without whom this would not have happened at all and who has been a constant source of advice and practical assistance on many levels. Furthermore I would like to thank him for introducing us to our generous sponsors Dubai Holding, whose executive chairman is H.E. Mohammad Al Gergawi, and to H.E. Dr Anwar Gargash, patron and supporter of the arts.

The book could not have been written without Isabelle Caussé, who with unfailing good humour and initiative took on the enormous task of the artists’ biographies and has helped with much else besides. Laura Lappin, our editor at British Museum Press, worked with us consistently and with seemingly limitless patience. I am profoundly grateful to them both.

For their constant kindness, encouragement and guidance throughout the process of creating the exhibition I would like particularly to thank Dia al-Azzawi, Rose Issa, Samir Damuli and Frances Carey. For the Arabic alphabet I would like to thank Mustafa Ja’far and for the table of Arabic scripts Nassar Mansour. For assistance with the biographies of artists and much else I am extremely grateful to Marie-Geneviève Guesdon, Maysaleoun Faraj, Nada Shabout who kindly let me study her thesis, as well as Mona Atassi, Saleh Barakat and Stephen Stapleton. In addition, I would like to thank Manijeh Mir-Emadi; Hala Kittani; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran; Farhad Hakimzade, Michael Baumgartner, Ali Ansari, Peter Saunders; Brähim Alaaoui and Eric Delpon from the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; Elizabeth Lalloucheck and Chilli HOWES OF THE October Gallery; Claude Lemand of the Claude Lemand Gallery; Haldun Dostoglu of Galeri Nev; Paola Potena of LIA Runma Gallery; the Zamalek Gallery; the Lisson Gallery; the Anthony Reynolds Gallery; Sunny Rahbar of Third Line gallery; the Keshya Hildebrandt Gallery; Carolyn R samo at the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery; Seji Books and Mal Ghoussoub; Isabel Carlisle; Lisa Ellis and Katie Brook from Lorworld UK; and Malek Inja and Jonathan Howell-Jones from Dubai Holding. For help with some of the translations of the Arabic and Persian texts I would like to thank Julia Bray, Rana Kabbani, Shahrokh Razmjou and Vesta Curtis. For reading various drafts I am grateful to Charles Tripp, Shelia Blair, Jonathan Williams and Dineke Huizinga.

The majority of the works included in the book and exhibition are from the British Museum’s collection, largely bought with the help of the Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund. Acquiring these works has been a fascinating journey and the result of an enjoyable process of discovery and learning over a number of years. I have shared this task with Robert Knox, Keeper of the department of Asia, who has supported and encouraged the development of the collection. The exhibition has been enhanced by a number of loans and I am extremely grateful to the lenders Dr Anwar Gargash, Abdul
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Among my colleagues at the British Museum my wholehearted thanks go to Kevin Lovelock and John Williams for beautifully photographing so many of the works and for their good humour throughout the process. For the design of the book I thank Harry Green, who sadly passed away before the book was completed, Peter Ward who subsequently took it on, and for the editing Jenny Knight at British Museum Press thanks to Susan Walby and Sara Jackson for the production, and Andrew Thacher and Rosemary Bradley for their enthusiasm and encouragement of the project from the beginning. Other colleagues have been supportive in many different ways. My thanks go to Julie Hudson, Chris Spring, Helen Wang, Sheila Canby, Richard Illworth, Sona Datta, John Curtis, Antony Griffiths, Mark McDonald, Stephen Coppel, and to the following who were involved particularly with the exhibition and the Middle East Season: Yemina Mazra, Jonathan Ould, Rebecca Richards, Jonathan Williams, Joanna Maddle, Margaret O’Brien and Anneke Rifkin, amongst others. Finally, I am extremely grateful to the Director Neil MacGregor and Deputy Director Andrew Burnett, who have both been a constant source of support and kindness throughout.

It is to the artists, however, that I owe the largest debt of gratitude, for it is their work – rich, varied and thought-provoking – that has provided the inspiration for Word into Art.

VENETIA PORTER