Foreword

I am fortunate to be living in an age in which art, in all its forms and from all periods, is the subject of impassioned discussion and debate. Artistic expression has, of course, always been central to the cultures of the Middle East although the rest of the world may have overlooked it at times. But this book is clear evidence that things are changing. There is currently a remarkable renaissance underway among artists, galleries, and collectors of contemporary Middle Eastern art within the region itself. Together they are creating a movement whose effects are beginning to be recognized throughout the world.

This new wave of interest began in 1977, with the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran where some of the world’s best-known artists have been displayed. Iran is indeed today producing some of the region’s greatest contemporary artists, many of whom are featured in this book. Most recently, the Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum opened in 1998.

Cultural activity does not always take place where the money is, and this is also the case in the Middle East. There is an interesting interplay developing between artists from economically less developed parts of the region, and governments and individuals from more prosperous countries. Art and artists have always needed benefactors and supporters and it is encouraging to see the beginnings of this in the Middle East, as collectors and governments seek ways to promote artists by acquiring their works and other kinds of public support. Galleries are emerging in some of the newest and most cosmopolitan centres of the region, and cities such as Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, and Istanbul are starting to examine how best to support their artistic communities. In some cases this is driven by individuals but in others it is led and inspired by open-minded and visionary governments.

Some of the greatest living Middle Eastern artists are from Iran, such as Shirin Neshat who now lives in New York. Others still live in Tehran, including the sculptor Parsia Tanavoli, the painter Khosrow Hassanzadeh, the film producer and photographer Abbas Kiarostami and the photographer Behman Jalali. There is also a new generation of modern artists emerging, such as Farhad Moshtari and Shadi Chadirian.

Lebanon has a long cultural history, producing some important artists as Guiragossian, a truly modernist movement painter who would have felt at home painting with Picasso or Matisse, or more traditional artists, namely Farouk andouns. Fortunately the Lebanon, notwithstanding its tragic civil wars and political woes, continues to produce talented forward-thinking artists.

Turning to North Africa, there is clearly competition between Egypt and its westernly neighbours, notably Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Some of the greatest North African artists come from Egypt, the bastion of the 1950s’ Arab nationalist movement and recognized by many as the region’s cultural hub. Much of their work is reproduced here, including Chant Awedessian’s stencils, Ahmed Moustaafa’s calligraphic works, Sabah Naim’s works featuring photos of everyday life in Cairo, which include the country’s
Foreword

I am fortunate to be living in an age in which art, in all its forms and from all periods, is the subject of impassioned discussion and debate. Artistic expression has, of course, always been central to the cultures of the Middle East although the rest of the world may have overlooked it at times. But this book is clear evidence that things are changing. There is currently a remarkable renaissance underway among artists, galleries, and collectors of contemporary Middle Eastern art within the region itself. Together they are creating a movement whose effects are beginning to be recognized throughout the world.

This new wave of interest began in 1977, with the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran where some of the world’s best-known artists have been displayed. Iran is indeed today producing some of the region’s greatest contemporary artists, many of whom are featured in this book. Most recently, the Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum opened in 1998.

Cultural activity does not always take place where the money is, and this is also the case in the Middle East. There is an interesting interplay developing between artists from economically less developed parts of the region, and governments and individuals from more prosperous countries. Art and artists have always needed benefactors and supporters and it is encouraging to see the beginnings of this in the Middle East, as collectors and governments seek ways to promote artists by acquiring their works and other kinds of public support. Galleries are emerging in some of the newest and most cosmopolitan centres of the region, and cities such as Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, and Istanbul are starting to examine how best to support their artistic communities. In some cases this is driven by individuals but in others it is led and inspired by open-minded and visionary governments.

Some of the greatest living Middle Eastern artists are from Iran, such as Shirin Neshat who now lives in New York. Others still live in Tehran, including the sculptor Parviz Tanavoli, the painter Kosrow Hassanzadeh, the film producer and photographer Abbas Kiarostami and the photographer Reza Jalali. There is also a new generation of modern artists emerging, such as Farhad Moshtari and Shadi Ghadirian.

Lebanon has a long cultural history, producing some important artists as Guiragossian, a truly modernist movement painter who would have felt at home painting with Picasso or Matisse, or more traditional artists, namely Faroukh and Ouirsi. Fortunately the Lebanese, notwithstanding its tragic civil wars and political woes, continues to produce talented forward-thinking artists.

Turning to North Africa, there is clearly competition between Egypt and its westerly neighbours, notably Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Some of the greatest North African artists come from Egypt, the bastion of the 1950s’ Arab nationalist movement and recognized by many as the region’s cultural hub. Much of their work is reproduced here, including Chant Avedissian’s stencils, Ahmed Moustafa’s calligraphic works, Sabah Naim’s works featuring photos of everyday life in Cairo, which include the country’s well-known daily newspapers. Also shown are the hand-painted photographs of Youssouf Nabil who now joins Shirin Neshat and Ghada Amer in New York, possibly the ultimate destination for many of this generation of young Middle Eastern artists whose impact will carry the influence of Middle Eastern artistic endeavour worldwide.

The culturally rich country of Iraq has, naturally, produced some of the area’s best-known artists, such as Dia al-Azzawi and Ismail Fattah. The best known Libyan artist, now resident in London, is Ali Omar Ennis with his simple flowing Arabic letters that also feature extracts from some of the region’s greatest poets. Many more countries in the Middle East, including Jordan and Syria, have produced some exceptionally talented artists.

This book is a tribute to the many artists of the region, who have kept alive an avant-garde culture in the arts. In many cases this has sadly required personal sacrifices, including emigration and persecution, but it is these artists’ perseverance that has allowed a greater level of understanding of the cultural achievements of the contemporary Middle East at a time when such understanding is needed more than ever.

Middle Eastern art has in recent years not been high on the world’s cultural agenda. But with some new enthusiasm and nurturing by the generosity and dedication of patrons and supporters, this will change. This is a region that in the past was a cultural centre of excellence; hopefully it will not be long before it regains such a reputation.

Until then many, like me, will remain passionate followers of the region’s art, encouraged by the support, understanding and generosity of its people. I am privileged to have the trust, support and understanding of many of the region’s business and government leaders, without whom this book and indeed the exhibition with which it coincides may not have been possible. I hope that they will continue to allow themselves to follow their instinct in a time increasingly dominated by bureaucracy and politics, neither of which have any place in supporting the arts.

A nation’s art is after all its soul.
Contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum

In the mid-1980s the British Museum began acquiring contemporary Middle Eastern art (the Middle East in this context also includes North Africa). This was part of a broader initiative across the Museum to return to the guiding principles of its eighteen-century founders and actively collect contemporary artefacts from around the world (Carey 1993: 6–10). The primary aim for the Middle Eastern collection was to acquire works on paper. This collection, mainly housed in the Department of Asia, now comprises the work of some hundred artists from across the region, from Iran to North Africa. An early decision was to choose work which somehow ‘spoke’ of the region and showed continuity with ‘Islamic’ art. Thus works which contained modern examples and interpretations of Arabic calligraphy were initially favoured over more global, generic forms of contemporary art. The emphasis today continues to be on work on paper, although there are also a few works in other media. The collection is constantly growing, the ultimate objective being to create a body of work that is representative, as far as possible, of the whole region. It is significant that a number of the artists whose work is included here no longer reside in their countries of origin, having left the region either temporarily or permanently. It is also striking that, whether inside or outside their homeland, the art they produce shows strong links with their own artistic heritage and history, powerfully demonstrating their reactions to conflict or exile.

Why Word into Art?

In trying to choose a suitable framework within which to exhibit some of the British Museum’s collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art, the obvious focus was on works that use script in the broadest sense. This was not simply because the writing takes so many different and interesting forms, but because grouping the works together thematically, and looking at what is written within them, allows us to gain some insight into different aspects of the rich literary and artistic cultures of this region, as well as into the ways in which artists are affected by history and by the politics of the world of today.

In the exhibition the focus has been on Arabic script which, like Hebrew, is powerfully connected to the religions of the region. In addition to works from the British Museum’s collection, the exhibition includes a number of objects that have been kindly lent for this purpose. The works are divided into four sections. ‘Sacred Script’ can be regarded as the starting point. It explains the relationship between the Arabic script and the religion of Islam (fig. 1), showing the enduring vitality of the Arabic calligraphic tradition today. It focuses on artists and calligraphers who use established styles of script (see pp. 20–21) but in contemporary formats, inspired by a belief in God and the holy texts. The powerful literary tradition of the Middle East, the enduring appeal of ancient and modern Arabic and Persian poetry, and the appeal of the work of Sufi writers is evoked in the second section, ‘Literature and Art’. It shows how artists seek to find ever more inventive ways of writing these texts. The third section, ‘Deconstructing the Word’, focuses on the use of script in Middle Eastern abstract art from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. Here the
Contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum

In the mid-1980s the British Museum began acquiring contemporary Middle Eastern art (the Middle East in this context also includes North Africa). This was part of a broader initiative across the Museum to return to the guiding principles of its eighteenth-century founders and actively collect contemporary artworks from around the world (Cayley 1991: 6–10). The primary aim for the Middle Eastern collection was to acquire works on paper. This collection, mainly housed in the Department of Asia, now comprises the works of some hundred artists from across the region, from Iran to North Africa. An early decision was to choose work which somehow ‘spoke’ of the region and showed continuity with ‘Islamic’ art. Thus works which contained modern examples and interpretations of Arabic calligraphy were initially favoured over more global, generic forms of contemporary art. The emphasis today continues to be on work on paper, although there are also a few works in other media.

The collection is constantly growing, the ultimate objective being to create a body of work that is representative, as far as possible, of the whole region. It is significant that a number of the artists whose work is included here no longer reside in their countries of origin, having left the region either temporarily or permanently. It is also striking that, whether inside or outside their homeland, the art they produce shows strong links with their own artistic heritage and history, powerfully demonstrating their reactions to conflict or exile.

Why Word into Art?

In trying to choose a suitable framework within which to exhibit some of the British Museum’s collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art, the obvious focus was on works that use script in the broadest sense. This was not simply because the writing takes so many different and interesting forms, but because grouping the works together thematically, and looking at what is written within them, allows us to gain some insight into different aspects of the rich literary and artistic cultures of this region, as well as into the ways in which artists are affected by history and by the politics of the world of today.

In the exhibition the focus has been on Arabic script which, like Hebrew, is powerfully connected to the religions of the region. In addition to works from the British Museum’s collection, the exhibition includes a number of objects that have been kindly lent for this purpose. The works are divided into four sections, ‘Sacred Script’ can be regarded as the starting point. It explains the relationship between the Arabic script and the religion of Islam (fig. 1), showing the enduring vitality of the Arabic calligraphic tradition today. It focuses on artists and calligraphers who use established styles of script (see pp. 20–21) but in contemporary formats, inspired by a belief in God and the holy texts. The powerful literary tradition of the Middle East, the enduring appeal of ancient and modern Arabic and Persian poetry, and the appeal of the work of Sufi writers is evoked in the second section, ‘Literature and Art’. It shows how artists seek to find ever more inventive ways of writing these texts. The third section, ‘Decomposing the Word’, focuses on the use of script in Middle Eastern abstract art from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. Here the messages are more ambivalent and link with past or present identities in subtle ways, unlike those of the works in other sections where texts tell specific stories. Letters and words are sometimes legible, but more often they are not, having been turned into beautiful abstract patterns or sometimes hinting at poetry or the magical tradition. The last section, ‘Identity, History and Politics’, looks at the ways in which the words embedded in these works, when combined with an image, or even books themselves, can provide us with real snapshots of history as well as revealing reactions to the region’s devastating conflicts during the past few decades.

The modern art of the Middle East

Placing the work of artists now in a broader context, the end of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a profound divergence of approach and style in the art of the Middle East. On the one hand, throughout much of the region there were the continuing traditions of so-called ‘Islamic’ art: calligraphers, miniaturists, potters and metalworkers carried on using age-old techniques, sometimes deliberately harking back to former styles — as in Egypt with the nineteenth-century ‘Mamluk revival’. On the other hand, a distinctive ‘modern’ art was emerging in the region. Its creators sometimes used elements of the stylistic vocabulary of ‘Islamic’ art, but they differed from its traditions in terms of materials, techniques and formats, using lithography or photography, for example. These are specifically associated with Western art traditions and were introduced into the region only from the mid-nineteenth century. As members of emerging national communities, these artists and intellectuals had a clear view of their own identities and increasingly sought to express subjective and political truths through a medium that they themselves had transformed. They created new genres that owed much to international artistic schools of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but were unmistakably informed by views of their own artistic traditions and heritage. They established schools and movements with clear manifestos and they responded powerfully to the politics of their own countries in particular and the region as a whole. This strongly evoked sense of identity, which continues to be evident in the work of many Middle Eastern artists today — as in, for example, the work of Yemeni artist Fu‘ad al-Futtah (fig. 2) — is arguably the single most important theme of the art highlighted here and what lends it its extraordinary richness.

Harufiya: the development of an artistic movement

The focus of this exhibition on the use of script in Middle Eastern art is not simply an accident of the British Museum’s collection. It captures a powerful thread in the art of the region as a whole, encompassing beautiful calligraphy with its ancient roots, and the random graffiti of other artists. So important is this trend that a special term has been coined for it: harufiya, after the Arabic word harf, meaning ‘letter’, and alluding to the medieval Islamic scientific study of the occult properties of letters. The Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata (cats. 10, 23, 37) describes how he was haunted by the Word and developed a ‘talmimic relationship with it’, like so many other artists of the region (Boullata 1983).

Words, of course, appear in Western visual art and distinct parallels may be made with Western manifestations. A number of the early generation of Arab artists who studied in Paris would certainly have been exposed to these art forms. At the forefront was the Cubist painter Georges Braque, who placed painted letters within his well-known work.
Le Portugais, painted in 1911. Many others, including Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, Juan Miró, Antoni Tàpies – who was a powerful influence on Shahir Hassan al-Said – and contemporary American artist Bruce Nauman (fig. 3), continued to incorporate letters and words in one form or another into their work (Butoor 1969, Legrand 1962, Adler and Ernst 1987). Another example is Paul Klee, who painted poems in Latin capital letters within coloured squares in 1917–18. In an interesting reversal, Klee, who visited Tunisia in 1914, was influenced by Arabic script in his work as well. This can be seen, for example, in his Insula uncamara, painted in 1938, in the collection of the Zentrum Paul Klee, Berne.

Haurufiya is a term that denotes works of art 'which deal with the Arabic language, letter or text, as a visual element of composing' (Daghir 1990: 11, Shabout 1999: 164).

Some of the earliest uses of Arabic letter forms in Middle Eastern abstract art – arguably the true beginnings of haurufiya – were deployed by Iraqi artists such as Madhiya Omar (d. 2005), who was perhaps the first artist fully to incorporate Arabic letters in his abstract work (cat. 40). Shahir Hassan al-Said (d. 2004) did the same (cat. 41). In his case, this was his practical articulation of a specific philosophy: a brilliant artist and art theorist, and profoundly influenced by the Sufism of Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858–922), he was one of the towering figures of the modern Iraqi art scene. Drawing on a synthesis of Sufism and Western existentialist philosophy, his increasingly abstract works focused on the inclusion of letters and reflected his view that artistic expression is achieved by stages, similar to the stages that bring you closer to God, as articulated by the Sufi mystics. He believed that 'the Arabic script, in its different forms and schools, reflects and is a reflection of the history of the Arab individual and social reality, which remained stored in the intellectual unconsciousness of culture and society'. He also found that it contained 'the mythological consciousness of Mesopotamian societies and all others that followed'. Thus, language and its written form are the means of revealing the hidden' (Shabout 1999: 244).

Like other key Iraqi artists of this generation, such as Jawad Selim (d. 1961), his aim was to find ways to create a fusion with their heritage, or turath. Although not associated with
using script in his work, Selim – in his iconic monument that still stands in Baghdad today, Nash al-‘urjaa [the Freedom Monument, al-Khalif 1993: 81-93] – conceived his series of bronze figurals as a story that had to be read like the Arabic script, from right to left.

Another Iraqi artist, Issam el-Saïd (d. 1988), who trained at Cambridge as an architect and lived in self-imposed exile from Iraq, was the first artist to explore ‘Islamic’ design fully and within it the structural forms of the Arabic script (fig. 4; el-Saïd 1989). The Egyptian artist Ahmed Moustafa also took his inspiration from the structure of the script, going back to the tenth-century work of the calligrapher Ibn Mkhla, who is said to have developed the system of proportion of the Arabic script (cats 7, 8). One of the first artists to turn the script into, in essence, word pictures was Moroccan artist Mebdi Qosbi (fig. 5; Guédon and Nouri 2001: 184). Going beyond the word, Dia al-Azzawi stated, ‘I believe in using visual elements in a painting as primary material: Arabic script could be part of it. I do not find that a painting becomes Arabic through the use of the Arabic script. The painting’s identity comes from a group of elements, not script or ornaments alone’ (Rotterdam 2002).

But can this new ubiquitous use of script be described as a movement? Are the reasons for including script always the same? To what extent does it still consciously connect with Arab/Islamic/Muslim identities, or in some cases with a rejection of Western representational art? A series of studies by Sylvia Nief (1992), Wijdan Ali (1997), Nada Shabout (1999) and others has looked in depth at this subject and only some of these broad questions can be touched upon here. It is interesting to look at the case of Turkey, for example, where the Arabic script was abandoned in favour of the Latin alphabet as part of a raft of modernising reforms during the Atatürk era. Apart from a few traditional calligraphers continuing the age-old tradition of teaching the script, it rarely appears in abstract or other forms of modern art, reflecting perhaps the secular influences in the artistic life of modern

S Mebdi Qosbi (b. 1951), Entrée, gouache on paper, 1979
H 29 cm, W 51 cm
Ministère de la culture, FNAC, Inv. 33569
Moroccan artist Mebdi Qosbi has been living in Paris since the 1970s. He was one of the earliest artists to create abstract pictures out of words which have become devoid of meaning. He works with writers and poets creating letters of artists as well as paintings.
6 Erol Akyavaş (1932–99), The glory of the kings, oil on canvas, 1959
H 122 cm, W 214 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. L.M. Angeleski
Trained in Turkey and then Paris with Utro, he came to the United States in the 1950s. Akyavaş espoused European modernism, later studying in America with architect Mies Van Der Rohe. This painting, in which he deconstructed Arabic words, was exhibited in 1961 at the Angeloski Gallery in New York where his work was widely acclaimed. The painting was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1961.

Turkey. One of the few Turkish artists to include Arabic script in his work is Erol Akyavaş (6, 1999) (fig. 6, Akyavaş 2000: 39–45), whose early works included Arabic letters in abstract compositions, but who was increasingly inspired by different aspects of the Islamic tradition. This is evident from his Mī‘rajname (the night journey of the Prophet Muhammad).

There is a clear intention to form a bridge with the past, a theme that recurs in works of other artists from the Middle East.

Certain Arab artists also use script to help express their engagement with current political issues; in particular, the growth of anti-colonial nationalist movements and a series of cataclysmic events that have affected the region in significant ways. In Egypt, for example, the regime of King Farouk was overthrown in 1952 by Jamal Abd al-Nasir, whose Philosophy of the Revolution (1959) stressed the ethnicity of the Egyptians, their role as Muslims and as Arabs, and the position of Egypt within Africa. This was to affect the course of modern Egyptian art; figurative representation was abandoned in the art schools and nodes could no longer be exhibited; there was instead much concentration on geometry and on Arabic calligraphy — in effect, a self-conscious return to ‘Islamic’ themes.

An event that deeply affected the Middle East as a whole was the defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the June war of 1967. This caused a major re-evaluation of the direction that the Arab world should take, in which artists and intellectuals participated. Poet and critic Buland al-Haidari, writing on the theme of ‘Arabness’, described artists after 1967 as ‘trying with each other in trying to blaze a new trail which would give concrete expression to the longing for Arab unity, and end by giving the Arab world an art of its own’ (al-Haidari 1981: 21–2). As a consequence, Arab artists, many of whom had trained in the West or had been exposed to Western art traditions, began to seek inspiration from aspects of their own indigenous culture. The increased use of script by some artists can certainly be seen in the light of this. Wijdan Ali, for example, describes her abandonment of figurative representation and the focus on script in her Kerbala series as a direct result of the Gulf war of 1991 (Ali 1997: 163) (cat. 56).

In Iran, as perhaps elsewhere, the use of script in modern art was a response to the increasingly ferocious criticism of the abstract tendency among Western-trained artists. Writing in the journal Sohāfā about the third Tehran Biennial in 1962, the critic Cyrus Zoka called for ‘a visual language that would speak specifically to Iranians’ (Daftari 2002: 67).
Sappakhaneh was the result and is the term coined for the artistic movement that began in Iran in the 1960s which not only sought to integrate popular symbols of Shi'a culture in art, but also found new ways of using calligraphy and script – particularly the traditional Iranian styles of nastaliq and shekaste. Literally meaning ‘water fountain’, Sappakhaneh specifically refers to public fountains offering drinking water constructed in honour of Shi’a martyrs who were denied water at Kerbala and in this way alludes to the powerful traditions of Shi’a Islam. Among the key artists in this movement were Parviz Tanavoli (cat. 52) and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (cat. 2).

It is not only Arabic script that has been adopted as a medium of expression and turned into art in this region. Israeli artist Michal Rozner has become fascinated by ‘notions of text, signal signs, the visual appearance of language; marks that people make, or leave behind’ (Rozner 2005: 332). Some of her video installations take the form of books, in which the scripts, which could be Hebrew or Aramaic, are in fact lines of constantly moving people (cat. 61). El Hanani as a Moroccan Jew is inspired by his complex cultural background and is particularly drawn to the minute script used by medieval and later Muslim and Hebrew scribes to write their holy texts (cat. 57). Another interesting phenomenon is the use of Latin script by Middle Eastern artists such as Youssef Nabil occasionally in his photographs (cat. 89) and Ghada Amer in her complex embroidered works (fig. 7), powerfully fusing Eastern and Western traditions.

The works presented here all have many stories to tell. One can detect a deep love for Arabic calligraphy and the art of the book itself, which has a long tradition in the region and is now being dramatically transformed. Obvious too is the fascination with the structure of letters across the region; and the words themselves, which invite us to dig deep into the culture of the region. And finally, it is the potent messages contained in these works that cry out and haunt us.

7 Ghada Amer (b. 1963), Fals, embroidery and gel medium on canvas, (2003)
H 66 cm, W 45.7 cm
Gagosian Gallery
Egyptian-born Ghada Amer lives and works in New York. Her work is characterized by an examination of stereotypical notions of femininity. Embroidery, stitching, and sewing, traditionally identified as ‘female’ techniques, are the hallmarks of her work. This work is part of a recent series in which Amer has embroidered definitions of ‘desire’, ‘pain’, ‘torment’, ‘longing’ and ‘absence’ from a variety of sources, with one word presented on each canvas. Using a commercial machine and sterilized thread, Amer embroiders the text directly onto canvas. The loose threads hang from individual words and create an abstract quality to the work.
The Arabic Script

The Origin and Development of the Arabic Script

Before the coming of Islam, Arabic was a spoken language only. Its script was based on a form of Aramaic used by the Nabateans (100 BCE to 100 CE), now best known for the remains of their remarkable city of Petra in Jordan. These early writings are rare and found on a handful of examples in the deserts of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. It was the revelation of Islam to the prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century in Arabia that was to dramatically change the role of the Arabic script. For there was now a pressing need to write down the holy text of the Qur’an which had been revealed by God through the Archangel Gabriel in the Arabic language. The establishment of Arabic as the language and script of the administration of the Muslim empire coincided with the belief that in order to copy the Qur’an the writing must be as beautiful as possible. Over the centuries, a series of remarkable scripts were developed by master calligraphers, principally used to copy the holy text, but which were soon employed in all manner of other contexts, including official documents, coins, gravestones, and the facades of religious and secular buildings. The script became therefore not simply a vehicle for communication but—in a culture in which figurative representation was discouraged—a major outlet of creativity and a characteristic feature of the art of the Islamic lands.

Arabic Script Styles

Written by Nasser Mansour

A verse from the Qur’an (6:1), ‘By the pen and what they inscribe’, is written to the right in a selection of Arabic scripts that will be recognized in the works presented in this catalogue.
The Arabic Script

The Origin and Development of the Arabic Script

Before the coming of Islam, Arabic was a spoken language only. Its script was based on a form of Aramaic used by the Nabataeans (300 BCE – 100 CE), now best known for the remains of their remarkable city at Petra in Jordan. These early writings are rare and found on a handful of examples in the desert of Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. It was the resolution of Islam to the prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century in Arabia that was to dramatically change the role of the Arabic script. For there was now a pressing need to write down the holy text of the Quran which had been revealed by God through the Archangel Gabriel in the Arabic language. The establishment of Arabic as the language and script of the administration of the Muslim empire coincided with the belief that in order to copy the Quran, the writing must be as beautiful as possible. Over the centuries, a series of remarkable scripts were developed by master calligraphers, principally used to copy the holy text, but which were soon employed in all manner of other contexts, including official documents, coins, gravestones, and the façades of religious and secular buildings. The script became therefore not simply a vehicle for communication but – in a culture in which figural representation was discouraged – a major outlet of creativity and a characteristic feature of the art of the Islamic lands.

Arabic Script Styles

Written by Nasser Mansour

A verse from the Quran (68:1): 'By the pen and what they inscribe', is written to the right in a selection of Arabic scripts that will be recognized in the works presented in this catalogue.

The Arabic Alphabet in Nasigh Script

Written by Mostafa Jafar

The Arabic alphabet is written from right to left (shown vertically here with Latin equivalents) and consists of twenty-eight letters created from seventeen different letter shapes. In modern Arabic, the letters are distinguished by their shape and context. In early Arabic, these letters were frequently omitted. Many of the letters change their form depending on where they are situated in a word. These variations are shown here alongside the individual letters. The letters that are underlined are pronounced emphatically. The Arabic alphabet has been employed and developed to write a variety of other languages. One of these is Persian which has thirty-two letters. To accommodate the extra sounds four Arabic letters have been adapted as follows:

a
b
t
h
kh
d
dh
r
z
s
sh
d

gh
f
q
l
m
n
h
w
y

gh
f
q
l
m
n
h
w
y
Arabic as the language and script of the Qur’an has a strongly sacred aspect. Arab calligraphers began in the late seventh century to transform what had been until this time disparate writings on stone into a structured script with complex sets of rules. It was to become one of the most beautiful scripts in the world and continues to inspire artists today. Traditionally calligraphers would have copied out whole sections of the Qur’an in the form of books. Now those inspired by sacred texts and the art of Arabic calligraphy in the Middle East and beyond, wherever the religion of Islam has spread, write single words or complete verses from the Qur’an or the Bible in all manner of forms and on a variety of materials, from paper to ceramics. They sometimes use and extend the boundaries of the canonical scripts – kufic, thuluth and others – developed by the great masters, or go beyond them entirely, creating their own inspired compositions.

A Sacred Script
The Shahada is the Islamic profession of faith and consists of the words: 'There is no God but God, Muhammad is the Prophet of God.' It is carved here into the surface of the dish, inscribed twice, facing in different directions.

1. Wasna’a Chorbachi
   Untitled
   PORCELAIN DISH, 1991
   D 23.8 cm
   IRAQ
   1993.421

2. Charles-Hossein Zendroudi
   Untitled
   SIGNED IN PERSIAN (1420), FROM AN EDITION WITH COLOUR ILLUSTRATIONS, 1991
   B 36.0 cm, W 50.5 cm
   BANFF, CANADA
   1991.4.3.01

'Phoebe belongs to God, the Lord of all being, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate, the Master of the Day of Days.

'The only we serve, so Thine alone we pray for succour.

'Guide us in the straight path,

'the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,

'not of those against whom Thou art wroth, nor those who are astray.'

(Quran, Sura 14, verse 14)

The text from the Fatha, the opening of the Quran, is written in the highly decorative nastaliq script particularly favoured by Persian calligraphers. There is also a biomass in dawood script. Zendroudi, as one of the prime exponents of the Sappakhmaneh school of art in Iran (see Introduction, p. 19), frequently turned to the traditional script for inspiration.