Al-Waqfa

Whenever the vision is broadened, the words become narrowed. These words, written on the back of the book, are from the rawafid of Muhammad bin Abd al-Jabbar al-Nifani, a mystic living in the tenth century who is associated with the town of Nifan in ancient Nisibis. He writes in a passionate way about his meetings with the divine. His text al-Ma'awik consists of seventy-seven individual stations (sahih), each in the form of a brief divine revelation addressed to the seeker whom God has held in that station. Al-Ma'awik is therefore the man who has attained the highest rank of Sufi knowledge of the Creator and can now stand before his Creator. The page illustrated here is called al-Ma'awik [the man of knowledge].

'Knowledge is concerned in gnosis, and gnosis is concerned in styling. Everyone has equiment, save the stayer, and everyone has equiment is rooted. Staying is an eternal specification, in which is no opinion. The gnostic doubles of the stayer, the stayer doubles not of the gnostic. In staying there is no stayer, else it is not staying; in gnosis there is no gnostic, else it is not gnosis. The gnosis of him that stays not attains not the knowledge of him that has no gnosis profits not. The knower sees his knowledge, but does not see gnosis; the gnostic sees gnosis, but does not see Me; the stayer sees Me and does not see other than Me.'

(Translated by Nifani, Arminia 1955: 36, lines 70-4)
36 Mustafa Ja'far

To Julia Kroll

One or Two, 2005
H. 45.5 cm, W. 32.5 cm
Brooke Stowell Permanent Fund

"O You who are the whole of my entire being, be with me; for if You are not with me, then who can be?"
[Translated Mustafa Ja'far]

In elegant divani script, Ja'far has created a vertical rendition of this text, one of a number of verses attributed to the celebrated Sufi mystic Husayn b. Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858–922) [al-Hallaj 1955: 125]. Spreading his doctrine through his preaching as well as his mystical poetry, he was charged with heresy and crucified in Baghdad.

In answer to the question "Why al-Hallaj?" Mustafa Ja'far replied as follows:

"I am fascinated by his miraculous choice of words, rhythm and the use of repetition to emphasize his innermost emotions. I strive to capture the spiritual enchantment of his verses whenever I choose to work on one."
[Personal communication]
36 Mustafa Ja'far
Yb Aulia kall
INK ON PAPER, 2015
H: 175 cm; W: 35.5 cm
IRAQ
2006-13.11.1
BROOKS FENTON PERMANENT FUND
"O! You who are the unseen beings, be with me; for if you are not with me, then who can be?"
(Translator: Mustafa Ja'far)

In elegant diwân script, Ja'far has created a vertical rendition of this text, one of a number of verses attributed to the celebrated Sufi mystic Hassan ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858–922) (al-Hallaj 1955: 125). Spreading his doctrine through his preaching as well as his mystical poetry, he was charged with heresy and crucified in Baghdad.

In answer to the question "Why al-Hallaj?" Mustafa Ja'far replied as follows:

"I am fascinated by his meticulous choice of words, rhythms and his use of repetition to emphasize his fervent emotions. I strive to capture the visual enchantment of his verses whenever I choose to work on one."
(Personal communication)

37 Karad Boullaht
Ana al-haqq
INK ON PAPER (TURKISH), 1880
H: 76 cm; W: 36 cm (paper)
PALESTINE/FRANCE
1997-7-16.93
BROOKS FENTON PERMANENT FUND
The phrase Ana al-haqq ("I am the truth") was famously uttered by the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj (c. 858–922), and was one of a series of extravagant mystical statements that angred the religious establishment and led to his crucifixion — as Hallaj was thereby presuming to speak in the voice of God and identifying himself with God as the sole truth. Truth is also one of God's 99 Names (asma' al-husna), on which mystics may meditate. Deliberately echoing the incantations of mystics, Boullaht frequently focuses on single words or short phrases such as this. His characteristic compositions use lettering based on the traditional Arabic script, creating powerful geometric patterns of words.
This illustration comes from the story of the island of Animals, a tenth-century text set in Babia which expresses, in the form of a fable, the teachings of Islam concerning man's responsibilities towards animals. It focuses on a central question by what authority does man consider himself superior to animals? In this tale, the messenger of the king of the jinn asks the birds to choose one of their number to represent them at his court, to which the dispute between man and the animals is being heard. Here the king of the birds, the simurgh (the Arabic for his name appears on his neck), is asking the parrot for his advice. The simurgh eventually chooses the nightingale because of the sweetness of his voice


The text is translated from Arabic into French by the Algerian writer and scholar of Arabic literature Jamel Errihine Bensalah (1930-2008), from a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This story from the tales of The Thousand and One Nights is told by Sheherazade over a period of thirteen nights and is set during the caliphate of Harun al-Rashid (766-809), and concerns the fatal love between a Persian youth known as 'Ali bin Bakkar' and the caliph's favourite concubine Shams al-Nahar. The tragic story works the atmosphere, tension and luxury of the court, while Mahdoua's illustrations based on Arabic letter forms (see cat. 6-4) are a remarkably innovative approach to the relationship between text and image. The pages shown here consist of the opening of the story (195a), a single calligraphic design (195b) and a passage from about halfway through (195c).
The illustration comes from the story of the island of Animals, a tenth-century text set in Java which expresses, in the form of a fable, the teachings of Islam concerning man's responsibilities towards animals. It focuses on a central question by what authority does man consider himself superior to animals? In this tale, the messenger of the king of the jinn asks the birds to choose one of their number to represent them at his court, in which the dispute between man and the animals is being heard. Here the king of the birds, the shmyug (the Arabic for his name appears on his neck), is asking the peacock for his advice. The shmyug eventually chooses the nightingale because of the sweetness of his voice (Johnson-Davies 1994: 28–32).

La volubilité d'en mourir: conte d'Ali ibn Bakkar et de Shams Al-Nahar

La voleuse d'en mourir: conte d'Ali ibn Bakkar et de Shams Al-Nahar is a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. This story from the tales of The Thousand and One Nights is told by Sheherzade over a period of thirteen nights is set during the caliphate of Harun Al-Rashid (786–809), and concerns the fatal love between a Persian youth known as 'Ali ibn Bakkar and the caliph's favourite concubine Shams Al-Nahar. The tragic story evokes the atmosphere, tension and luxury of the court, while Mehdiou's illustrations based on Arabic letter forms (see cat. 6d) are a remarkably innovative approach to the relationship between text and image. The pages shown here consist of the opening of the story (740), a single 'calligraphic' design (758) and a passage from about halfway through (756).