In this section words and writing take on another role. Their inclusion in the work of abstract artists from the late 1940s has a theoretical base. The first two works, for example, are by the Iraqi artists Madiha Omar and Shakir Hassan al-Said, who are key and pioneer figures of the movement sometimes described as hurufiyah (after harf, meaning letter; see Introduction, pp. 15–19). Omar was fascinated by the structure of Arabic letter forms, which she rediscovered: ‘each letter as an abstract image fulfills a specific meaning’, she wrote in her declaration on Arabic calligraphy (Omar 1946). Shakir Hassan al-Said believed that the Arabic script represented ‘the history of the Arab individual and social reality which remained stored in the intellectual consciousness of culture and society’ (Said 1981; Shabout 1999: 244). Even figurative Syrian artist Fateh al-Moudarres suddenly started to insert scratched words into his paintings. The messages are subliminal. In some works the words are clear but the meaning is abstract—Tanavoli’s Heech in a cage, for example. In other pieces, although words and phrases can be discerned, it is the shape of the letter and how it combines with others that is important; legibility becomes secondary. The Tunisian artist Lassaad Metoui describes himself as an architect of words, Siah Armajani re-creates the rhythms of Persian poetry, and Jacob El Hanani metamorphoses the repetition of prayers in his orthodox Jewish childhood into intense grids resembling ancient microscript. Khaled Ben Slimane’s repetition of words is an echo of Sufi incantations, and Farhad Mosshiri is inspired by the calligraphic practice sheets known as mashq. Other artists focus on the magical properties of letters and numbers.

3

Deconstructing the Word
Madiha Omar is reputed to be the first artist to have begun to incorporate Arabic calligraphy into her abstract art. The inspiration did not come from her native Iraq, but in Washington in the mid-1940s, where she studied. She encountered there the work of Nadia Abbott, the scholar of the early Arabic script, which immediately fascinated her. Writing in 1949 about the properties of specific letters, she says the letter جا "J" has a vigorous personality that expresses many meanings; the letter ا "A" has no equivalent in English, is a powerful vital letter that signifies in Arabic two different meanings; it is a spring of water as well as the eye with which people see; the letter لان "L" awakens delicate musical movements.

[Omar 1946, Shoubat 1999: 163].
Madiha Omar is reputed to be the first artist to have begun to incorporate Arabic calligraphy into modern abstract art. The inspiration did not come in her native Iraq but in Washington in the mid-1940s, where she studied. She encountered there the work of Nadia Abboud, the scholar of the early Arabic script, which immediately fascinated her. Writing in 1949 about the properties of specific letters, she says: “the letter wa ‘w’ has a vigorous personality that expresses many meanings; the letter ya‘, which has no equivalent in English, is a powerful vital letter that signifies in Arabic two different meanings; it is a spring of water as well as the eye with which people see; the letter lam ‘l’ awards delicate neural movements’ [Omar 1946, Shabot 1999: 161].

Shabir Hassan al Said
Al-Hassad li jumud
(The envious shall not prevail)
ACRYLIC ON WOOD, 1979
H 84 cm, W 179 cm
Lent by Salma Samir Damieli

Al Said was a key figure in the Iraqi artistic movement and one of the earliest to use isolated Arabic letters or phrases in abstract art. Strongly influenced by Sufism, particularly by the work of al-Hallaj, his paintings became a search for abstraction in which the Arabic letter played an increasingly key part: “the letter is not just a linguistic symbol. It is the only limus to penetrate from the world of existence to the world of thought” (Shabot 1999: 245). Characteristics of a phase of his work are studies of walls which allowed him to consider the effects of the passage of time and people. Of these works he wrote, ‘I prefer to write the letter in my paintings in the manner of children, school students and semi-intellectuals, rather than in the manner of machines and calligraphers’ (Shabot 1999: 246). The painting depicts a street wall segment. The same type of graffiti was often found on city streets in Baghdad and the Middle East. The phrase ‘the envious shall not prevail’ is a favourite Arab proverb, used to guard against the force of envy that is often repeated and is common in popular culture and tradition.
As with the work of Shakir Hassan al-Sakil, Muhiddin's abstract composition suggests a wall covered in graffiti: a cut-out door is in the centre with the shadowy face of a man wearing dark glasses. The Arabic letters and numbers include '5' and '9'.

4.3 Dia al-Azzawi

Oriental scene
MARKING, ACRYLIC AND FOAM BOARD, 1986
H-51 cm, W-48 cm
RAQIQ
1986-4-19-07

This is one of a series of works that al-Azzawi dedicated to the abstract manipulation of Arabic letters. Here the letters lose any meaning and take on simply an aesthetic value, becoming, in his own words, 'the Baghdad streets and narrow alleys' (Shabout 1999: 293). One of the hallmarks of al-Azzawi's work is the extraordinary richness of colour manifested therein. Colour for him has a psychological aspect: he considers black, for example, used here for the background, to be 'one of the basic colours of Iraqi culture, in which tragic tradition occupies a large portion' (Shabout 1999: 272).
An abstract composition, at the center of which is a large Arabic letter resembling the letter ayn lies against a hummock of ground. Below is a roundel containing letters and words. In Naeem’s graphic work, a constant source of inspiration has been the sun-scorched desert of his native Iraq, which is evoked here.

Rashad Selim
Ayn and cun, zonelines, March Eye series
SKETCHBOOK OF LETTERS, 1986
H: 36 cm W: 31.5 cm (56x33)
IN КуK
1988-7-15-01-05
BRICKS, SEDIL PERMANENT FUND

This work is focused on a study of the Arabic letter ayn, which Selim deliberately juxtaposes with the Sandali om and the Greek epsilon, which it resembles. It was conceived during the height of the destruction of the Iraqi marshlands during the 1980s to 1990s, and Selim uses ayn, which also means ‘eye’ in Arabic, intending to draw attention to that disaster. The forms of these works – long narrow strips – deliberately echo the imprinting of a Mesopotamian cylinder seal.
An abstract composition, at the centre of which a large Arabic letter resembling the letter ayn lies against a burnished ground. Below it is a roundel containing letters and words. In Naisri’s graphic work, a constant source of inspiration has been the sun-scorched desert of his native Iraq, which is evoked here.

This work is focused on a study of the Arabic letter ayn, which Selim deliberately juxtaposes with the Sanskrit om and the Greek epsilon, which it resembles. It was conceived during the height of the destruction of the Iraqi marshlands during the 1980s to 1990s, and Selim uses ayn, which also means ‘eye’ in Arabic, intending to draw attention to that disaster. The forms of these works—long narrow strips—deliberately echo the unrolling of a Mesopotamian cylinder seal.
Hammoud was a pioneer of the Syrian artistic movement from the 1960s and the first Syrian artist to include Arabic letters in abstract compositions. In this work, the phrase al-sharik Allāh ("glory belongs to God") is inscribed. The letter forms interact with plain geometric shapes and animate an overall abstract composition.
47a, b. Fateh al-Moudarres
Untitled
Oil on canvas, 1966
199 x 107 cm (each)
SYRIA
2005.7.66.01-02
BROOKE SOWELL PERMANENT FUND

Moudarres is principally a figurative painter whose work was greatly influenced by icon painting. He rarely used writing in his works, but when he did it took a form resembling graffiti — often scratched through the surface colour, as here. In the panel above the face in black on 47a are the first words from Qur’an Chapter 106 (al-Kauthar, ‘Abundance’): “Surely we have given thee abundance.”

46. Mahmoud Hammad
Untitled
Oil on canvas, 1982
180 x 120 cm
SYRIA
2005.7.25.01
BROOKE SOWELL PERMANENT FUND

Hammad was a pioneer of the Syrian artistic movement from the 1960s and the first Syrian artist to include Arabic letters in abstract compositions. In this work the phrase al-shahid-innabilah (‘glory belongs to God’) is inscribed. The letter forms interact with plain geometric shapes and animate an overall abstract composition.