Agia Mohammed Ehsa is one of Iran’s most prominent artists whose calligraphic works and paintings are the culmination of five hundred years of experimentation, codification and meditation by Muslim calligraphers. His paintings are informed by the complex metaphysical and mystical concepts inherent to Islam, and balanced by a stress on form and functionality brought to bare through the influence of the Bahauddin, this combined with his previous employment as a graphic designer has inspired the production of supremely spiritual works of art tempered with a spare and powerful aesthetic.

In order to appreciate Ehsa’s, or indeed any Muslim calligrapher’s work, it is crucial to understand the importance of calligraphy and the word to Islam. Quraan is the raison d’etre of the art of Islamic calligraphy, a manuscript central to the lives of more than 1.5 billion people in the Islamic world. The impact of this book cannot be overestimated, throughout the centuries it has prompted the integration of societies as disparate as Spain and parts of China, and inspired an art form centred around the written word.

Islam was born in Arabia in the early seventh century. In the preceding century the Arabs were a society of warring tribes, little known to the world. It was to a member of one of these tribes that the Divine Revelation was first imparted in 610 AD. One of the great qualities of the pre-Islamic Arabs was the esteem in which they held the spoken word, centred around the oral tradition of their classical poetry. Ironically, at this time they seemed to have looked down upon the written word, but in later years a seismic shift occurred, where the most basic concept of the sacred art became the Word. Since we have no choice but to write down the Revelation, then the written record be as powerful an experience for the eye as the mentalised record is for the ear when the Verses are spoken or chanted.” (Martin Lings cited in Splendours of Qur’anic Calligraphy and Illumination, London 2005, p.15).

Thanks to the profound importance of the written word to Islam, great styles of calligraphy developed. In the ninth century the Abbasid Prime Minister, Ibn Ma’jid, an expert calligrapher himself, developed precise, geometric rules for calligraphy, codified in his famous treatise, Al-Khat al-Manasi. These rules governed the writing of the six main curvilinear scripts utilised predominantly for inscribing Qur’anic text. Later, during the eleventh century a further script, nastaliq, was introduced, becoming the most popular style of writing in Persia.

In considering Mohammad Ehsa’s oeuvre it is clear that he has mastered nastaliq, thuluth, naskh, and in particular the nastaliq script that has remained the dominant calligraphic style in Iran ever since its invention.
Mohammad Ehsai in conversation with Roxane Zand
for Sotheby's, London, September 2, 2008

How do you describe the nature of your expression through calligraphic art?

I have always been struck by the discrepancy between text and substance. The word, created as it is by a specific arrangement of letters in order to convey a given meaning, has always been abused and misused. The same vehicle that was meant to communicate truthful meaning, is also the very instrument we use to lie and distort. I wanted to turn my back on this, and deliberately began to strip letters of their context and meaning until they evolved into visual images rather than words. I invite the viewer to find his or her own meaning.

In this sense, my discourse is a visual, not a literary one. The image is meant to provoke the viewer according to their own mood and imagination. Some see my work as related to traditional calligraphic traditions; others see it as meditation and prayer; yet others see elements of Escher - an artist I admire - in the way I defy dimensions and visual logic.

How do you envision your own artistic path?

I increasingly explore relationships, not just between letters, but within the space of the background. These inter-spaces need to read in a certain way, while the letters themselves must be read in a different manner. A letter defines the space against which it stands, by means of its thrust and shape. I experiment more and more with deriving a personal abstract from a commercial one by re-arranging the order and layout of words according to my own ideographic vision. The movement of letters is for me a transcendental vision, leading to words that are sometimes displaced or transformed.

The letter "ye" (💼) might begin a journey on the canvas. The trajectory leaves a footprint, and this footprint evolves into a fantastic and unexpected dance. It is essentially a poetic movement, where simple letters might be coaxed in fresh colours or pursue a new rhythm.

I am keen to leave the viewer into fresh encounters with letters. The simplicity of minimalism and reductionism attracts me now because it allows the space to be filled on one letter and follow its journey as it dominates the whole canvas. Perhaps this can be described as a new direction for me, a departure from my previous works. But I must emphasise that this new direction must not be confused with the style of graphic artists. Mine is a spiritual journey springing from the inner power and energy of letters, and their inherent philosophic vision.

What is the role of colour in your works?

As a child I lived in a traditional house that used to be my grandfather's. Sunlight pouring through the painted-glass windows would re-arrange into a kaleidoscope of colours over the rich, colourful patterns of our Persian carpets. The dazzling and intensity of these colours had such an effect on me that in my early years I actually sought to remind and simplify of black pen and ink on white paper. I had actually felt deprived of black and white and sought it in my work! Monochrome seemed the ideal mode of expression. Later, however, I captured a love of colour and brought its richness to inform my calligraphic paintings.

Today many artists separate the conception and execution of their paintings, assigning the process to assistants. Do you believe the artist should be the sole source of his art?

I work by myself. Each painting is my work, and my work alone. I even used to stretch my own canvases until one of my arms began to give me pain. To me, every brushstroke is imbued with the memory of the artist's emotional and visual intention. This cannot be carried out by anyone else but the artist.
Mohammad Ehsai & 1999
Untitled

each: signed
don canvas, in four parts
each: 72.2 by 72.2cm, 28 by 28in.
overall: 144.4 by 144.4cm, 57 by 57in.
Executed in 2001

£40,000-60,000
€41,500-75,000
$50,000-100,000

Text can be manipulated to form unusual compositions for which Ehsai is a master, excelling in fragmentation and repetition and formulating his own inimitable style. This is encapsulated in this work. The style of the script is free-flowing, inspired as it seems, from the work of the Japanese Zen masters in its brush strokes in contrast to the Islamic calligraphers who used reed pens. It is also within the Iranian context as the fluid script has elements of Hindustani naskh particularly in the curvature of the lower letter forms. There are clear elements of the Persian nasta'liq tradition in the composition of the shadās (triplicate dot marks) which appear above the word Allāh. The letters in the composition flow giving more power despite the fluidity of the brush, usually a weaker tool than the reed pen. This indicates that the artist is a master calligrapher. The variations of letters, some small and some large, at times filling out half the space of the canvas disperse the need of fliers and calligraphic marks used traditionally in monumental Islamic calligraphy. Here again the composition is simplified and pared down, primary colours on a black background create a direct visual punch, and the clean lines are sinuous yet bold.

In the quadruplet the name Allāh can be read directly from several directions, in one part of the composition it is twice repeated. Writing the same word over and over again is a form of visual and ritual incantation known as dhikr. In so doing the mystic seeks union with the Creator by constantly repeating the Divine Name. The last letter of the word Allāh is in the shape of a bird, often a symbol of the soul in Persian mysticism: inspired both by Ghaznavi’s Mishary al-Dawr (the Bird’s treatise), and by Allāt’s famous mystical poem the Masūr of the ‘Language of the Birds’ where the right wing of the bird with the tail of a fish soaring for eternal union with God.

This concept is taken to another level in another section of the quadruplet, where the word Allāh is written in four directions, perhaps inspired by the famous Qur’anic verse: “We have never yet seen the Face of God” (The Qur’an, Chapter 11 verse 150). In the third quarter, the word Allāh is written across the upper half of the painting, while at the base the Shahada, the basic principle of Islam, the proclamation that there is No God but Allāh, is inscribed and displayed in the shape of birds - perhaps a palliace for awakened soul. In the final quarter the word Allāh is etched three times in conjunction with the Shahada.

This apparent random repetition of words and phrases must be understood in terms of the Islamic faith. “The repetition of the word Allah or the rhetorical formula of the Shahada could easily induce a state of trance. Often the mystics would join a circle formed around the priest or Dhahab. Anyone who has attended this rhetorical dance with its increasing tempo knows even a non-committed listener is easily carried away by the strength of the experience.” (Anna Marie Schimmel cited in Mystical Dimensions of Islam, USA 1975, p.176).

The four paintings together create a powerful visual rotation, perhaps a reflection of the six month rotation of the Ka’ba at Mecca, an integral part of the Muslim’s pilgramage whilst simultaneously referencing the Qur’an’s many allusions to the passages of the earth, moon, the sun and the stars in awe of their Creator.

Even the colour-palette has a spiritual reference, with shades of gold and blue against a dramatic jet ground are singluarly graphic, yet simultaneously reference the Allām, gold is the colour of the heavens, the ‘colour of the infinite, which is identical with Mercy, for My Mercy embraced all things.’ (The Qur’an, chapter 25, verse 19). Whilst gold is the ‘symbol of the Spirit and therefore virtually transcends the whole world of forms’ (Martin Lings cited in: Splendours of Qur’ān Calligraphy and Illumination, London 2005, p. 27). These two colours are the primary colours of the sacred art of Islamic manuscript illumination.

These works then are part of a tradition of sacred art: “It is the function of Sacred Art in general to be a vehicle for the Divine Presence and it follows that the artist will conceive this function not as a capturing of the Presence but rather as liberation of its mysterious totality from the deceptive prison of appearances. Thus each soul is destined to receive a ‘taste’ according to its capacity of the infinite and the Eternal. The use here of the term ‘taste’ in Arabic dhawq - may be taken as a reminder of the close connection between the sacred art and mysticism.” (Martin Lings cited in: Splendours of Qur’ān Calligraphy and Illumination, London 2005, p. 22).
"Listen to the reed and the tale it tells, how it sings of separation. Ever since they cut me from the reed bed, my wind has caused men and women to weep. I want a heart torn open with longing to share the pain of this love. Whoever has been parted from his source longs to return to that state of union... This flute is played with fire, not with wind, and without this fire you would not exist. It is the fire of love that inspires the flute. It is the ferment of love that completes the wine. The reed is a comfort to all estranged lovers... Our days grow more unreasonable, these days which mix with grief and pain... but if the days that remain are few, let them go: it does not matter. But you, you remain, for nothing is so Pure as you are."

The Song of the Reed by Mehdi Khorasani
translated by Raha Helmandi

Mehdi Ehsai 8, 1999
Seayesh-e Mahtab (Homage to the Moon)

signed
oil and silver leaf on canvas
195.5 by 296cm; 77 by 116 1/2in.
£ 150,000-250,000
€ 186,000-309,000
US$ 241,000-440,000

In his painting Seayesh-e Mahtab (Homage to the Moon), the construction of the chuval script, with its elongated horizontal ending in sharp points - particularly the upper part which is awkwardly knotted and entangled, appears to be inspired by a well-known composition of the sixteenth century caligrapher Zayn al-Din Mahmud. In this famous composition of interlaced chuval, the letters baa and alif are left free whilst the other letter-forms are compressed in a complex intertwined design at the bottom of the page. Here Mehdi Ehsai takes Zayn al-Din Mahmud's composition as a departure point, separating the alifs from the main body of the composition, allowing them to float in space beside the whirling currents of entangled text.

Again his use of colour and composition are powerfully symbolic, silver is traditionally associated with the moon as a backdrop for acts of devotion. Whilst the curvilinear chuval, reminiscent of a knotted rope, echoes the words "hold fast to the rope of God and let it not swerve", the alifs at the bottom of the painting, some angular and some bent, reference the needs that recur in Persian mystical poetry and the plaintive sound of the wind as it blows amongst them.

One cannot perceive Mehdi Ehsai's work through the postmodern prism of twenty-first century eyes, his works are powerful in terms of their visual and graphic content but more importantly, are profound in the deeper truth of a spiritual journey.
Golnaz Fathi b. 1972

Untitled

each: signed and dated 2005
each: oil on canvas
each: 192.5 x 122cm; 47 1/4 x 47 7/8in.

The calligraphic works of Golnaz Fathi are true expressions of emotion to Golnaz each colour represents a sentiment, each stroke a shout of joy or a groan of pain. Although the artist was trained as a calligrapher her work seems to break the traditional boundaries of the discipline. Her letters are vessels for sensation rather than meaning, with colour and alphabet she seeks to create a primal response in the viewer.

Whilst a Farsi or Arabic speaker may strive to make sense of the letters on her canvas, Fathi has deliberately calligraphed these works so that the words are nonsensical. She actively seeks an emotional rather than cerebral response from her viewer, for the viewer to absorb the energy of her canvas. In these works Golnaz Fathi celebrates our physical form through her brush. Fathi is inspired by the movement of the human body and fascinated by the continuos whirling of the dervish and the miracle of the human body in dance joyfully interpreted on her canvas through flowing lines of text.

€ 8,000-12,000
€ 9,900-14,900  US$ 14,100-21,200

226
Sadeq Tabrizi 1895-1976

**Untitled**

Signed and dated 1970

Ink and varnished paper on board

58 by 60.5cm; 22½ by 23½in.

PROVENANCE

Seymour Gallery, Tehran

Acquired directly from the above by the present owner in 1974

* £7,000-10,000
  €8,700-12,400  US$12,400-17,600

Mahmoud Hammod 1923-1988

**Ya Allah (Oh Allah)**

Signed, titled and dated 81

Oil on canvas

74 by 57cm; 29½ by 22½in.

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Kuwait

* £8,000-12,000
  €9,900-14,900  US$14,100-21,200
Reza Mafi  1942-1982

Untitled

signed and dated 1979
oil on canvas
75 by 200 cm; 29 1/4 by 78 3/4 in.

PROVENANCE
Private Collection, Tehran

£ 30,000-30,000
€ 37,000-37,000
US$ 55,000-55,000