CALLIGRAPHY IN ISLAM

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Arabic calligraphy is supreme among the arts of Islam. It emerges very easily in the Islamic period, in the writing of the first leaves of the Holy Qur'an and in monumental inscriptions, both sacred and secular. The overwhelming speed of the spread of the Arabic language that accompanies the emergence of Islam also spread the speed of Arabic script, in the form of fine calligraphy and in more manuscript scripts, including graffiti, graffiti manuscripts remained the old scripts of Arabic—Epigraphic: South Arabian, Minaean and its cognates—were utilized although some could read Minaean as late as the 10th century CE.

Meanwhile, the Arabic language, expressed in a bildhauerische until the North Arabic script, came to dominate throughout Arabia and far beyond. The use of North Arabic script among the phalanx of Makkanites, Makkanites and Makkans at Mina, the same as the language script used by Makkanites and Makkanites at Mina, Muhammad's language appears in the form of those who burned to a white-hot state on their fronts, and those who bear names in their hair, forming a codex. This codex form of book was already familiar in parts of pre-Islamic Arabia and it maintains the basic format of the Holy Qur'an to this day. This writing of the Holy Book would have lost, perhaps, because the desire of the choice of form used in the very earliest dated Islamic inscriptions, the Arabic calligraphic script, that was written in 34 AD. 444 AD from the Hijri, and the earliest Hijri Qur'an.

By the Caliphate of the Ummayyad, there was growing concern to spread the Hijri that written records of the Holy Book were diminishing, the decline of the integrity of the holy text. "Umayyad decided to have a definitive version of the Holy Qur'an written down of which authorities copies were made and sent to the major Islamic cities to preserve the sacred text intact. This is the version which is used today.

There is no doubt that the first seven decades of Islam were a period of intense innovation in the evolution and application of Arabic script in the service of Islam. This willingness to experiment is reflected in the great shift from the old Hijri scripts to the cursive forms of Kufic.

By 72 AH/691 AD a monumental, well-practiced Kufic script was used to declare key ideological statements of Islamic belief in the Dome of the Rock in al-Quds (Jerusalem), and in all of the holiest sites of Islam, the Haram al-Sharif. This great inscription is a major example of the sharp stylistic shift away from the various scripts used by Hijazi scribes who had inscribed the first Qur'ans with the pen or parchment.

The use of Kufic in the Dome of the Rock reflects the Muslims' willingness to explore and accept innovative script types at this very early date in Islamic history. Experimentation remains a characteristic of Arabic calligraphy down to the present as the current exhibition demonstrates. One is repeatedly struck by the degree to which Islamic calligraphy, seen in its historical totality, is the ambivalence of conservatism.

Yet in this period, the works of al-Muqaddasi, Mawardi, Muhammad/Mawardi, and other formal scripts served as a reminder of the spirituality that is at the heart of Islam.

Dr. Goodfellow King
Reader in Islamic Art and Architecture
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
"I have always thought of the strokes of Arabic calligraphy as living beings. Even in a single stroke of one letter there is a life. At first, a thin hair-like stroke is born from the tip of the pen and then slowly narrowing down again, finally ending in a width of no more than one-tenth of a millimetre. A variety of vertical and horizontal lines and arcs compose letters, all following this basic stream. The length of the stroke makes no difference. Short strokes, like the tips of fingernails, and long ones, like Japanese swords, all follow the same flow. It is my firm belief that this is the stream of life itself."

In his new series of works Global Newspaper and Front Page inspired by newspapers and current affairs, Kamran Diba is responding to the impact of modernity and globalisation, most importantly addressing issues of communication at an international level. He is attempting to address and go beyond the limitations of language, a medium which is perceived by the artist as a potentially divisive instrument that encourages segregation.

The printed sources of news and images are lifted from a host of multi-lingual daily newspapers, being actual copies of pictures and articles in the international press. Diba painstakingly recreates the news in a collage of visuals and colours, that transcend the barriers of language and race. By abstracting and reducing the information to colours symbolising each news topic, the newspaper which normally has a short life-span, is given a visual permanence.

Resorting the black and white illustrations from newspapers, Diba creates compositions with hard edged abstraction and photo realism which endeavour to contrast the figurative with non-figurative imagery.

Informed by the Japanese artist On Kawara, Diba is inspired by Kawara's use of archiving global events in a succinct and abstract manner. Diba embraces his skill of using colour to further enhance the coding of the various topics.

This work departs from the rest of the series in that it is not so much a commentary on the divisiveness of language and cultural barriers but more a homage to the al-Thani family, whose vision for culture, education and society is deeply admired by the artist. Visually organizing his canvas into the form of a broadsheet, Doha Edition depicts symbols of the city and the legacy of the ruling family in a stimulating graphic narrative that portrays his respect for their vision.
Iraq's most famous contemporary calligrapher and an internationally acclaimed artist, these three works epitomize Hassan Massoudy’s virtuoso partnership and remarkable use of colour.

Born and raised in the profoundly religious town of Najaf, Hassan Massoudy's practice was dominated by a strict code of artistic conduct that prohibited figurative representation. Massoudy therefore invested his time in creating drawings and calligraphies driven by his transcendental cultural context.

In 1963, Massoudy chose to leave Najaf and relocated to Baghdad where he was appointed to a number of calligraphies. Immersion in Baghdad's burgeoning art scene encouraged the artist to dedicate himself to his calling. But the political events that followed forced Massoudy to leave his native Iraq for Paris, and in 1969 he began his studies at l'École des Beaux-Arts where he experimented with figurative painting. But the Massoudy is an inability to abandon his love of calligraphy and the Arabic language, while studying he would design the headbands for Arabic magazines, and in time it became his sole focus. Massoudy had come full circle.

His passion was calligraphy and his muse was philosophy. His words and letters are intellectually driven manifestations of philosophy and emotion. Massoudy is a master of partnership producing works of controlled energy in exquisitely balanced compositions, departing from tradition in his output to the innate talents, the dynamism of his sweeping brushstrokes and his representation with light and performance.

In these three works, Massoudy presents lines from three very different writers: the eighteenth-century French moral philosopher Joseph Joubert, the colloquial author of Le Petit Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and the eleventh-century Malaki poet Ibn Zaydun who is renowned for mastering Arabic poetry. By combining such a broad spectrum of European literary references, Massoudy's brush strokes bring fresh resonance to the Arabic word, allowing this distinctly Islamic art with European literature and philosophy to many, in a way of East and West do finely coexist here in Massoudy's work.
4 SAMIR SAYEGH  B. 1945

Baraka

Signed, titled and dated 2001 twice on the reverse
Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas
99.3 x 96.3 cm / 39 x 38 in

Provenance: Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner

Inscription:
The word Baraka (Blessing)

US$ 10,000–15,000
€ 8,400–12,600
Dhs 30,000–45,000

5 NASROLLAH AFJEE  B. 1933

Untitled

Oil on canvas
70 x 50 cm / 28 x 20 in

Provenance: Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner

Inscription:
Customised script

US$ 40,000–60,000
€ 34,000–51,000
Dhs 148,000–213,000
OMAR EL NAGDI b. 1961
Al Kaaba (The Ka'ba)
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS IN TWO PARTS
OVERALL: 170 X 170 CM, 57 7/8 X 57 7/8 IN
EXECUTED IN 1999
PROVENANCE: Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner.
INSCRIPTION: Repetition of the number 1 to symbolize Al Waheed (The Only One), and the letter 'alif' for Allah
US$ 20,000–30,000
£ 15,700–23,000; DAR 70,000–110,000

“Most surely the first house appointed for me is the one at Bokka [Mecca], blessed and a guidance for the nations. In it are clear signs: the standing-place of Abraham, and whoever enters it shall be secure, and pilgrimage to the House is incumbent upon men for the sake of Allah, (upon) every one who is able to undertake the journey to it; and whoever disbelieves, then surely Allah is Self-sufficient, above any need of the worlds.”
QURAN: SURAH AL-BAQARA (2), VERSES 61-62

KAMAL BOULLATA b. 1942
Al Lam Mim (A.L.M.)
SIGNED ON THE REVERSE
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS IN THREE PARTS
EACH: 100 X 100 CM, 39 3/8 X 39 3/8 IN
OVERALL: 100 X 550 CM, 39 3/8 X 216 1/2 IN
EXECUTED IN 2009
PROVENANCE: ArtSpace Gallery, Dubai
INSCRIPTION: Repetition of the letters al lam mim, and the opening verse of surah al-baqara (2)
US$ 18,000–22,000
£ 14,100–16,000; DAR 65,000–80,000
MOHAMMAD EHSAI 8.109
Untitled
OIL ON CANVAS
93 BY 78 INCHES. 35 BY 200CM.
PROVENANCE: Seyhoun Gallery, Tehran
Acquired directly from the above by the present owner in 1992
INSCRIPTION: None
US$ 216.000–300.000
€ 156.000–225.000 £ 95.000–120.000

"I have always been struck by the discrepancy between text and subtext. The word, created as it is by a specific arrangement of letters in order to convey a given meaning, has always been abused and misunderstood. 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."
MOHAMMAD EHSAI IN CONVERSATION WITH ROWAY, 2008
9 HUSSEIN MADI b. 1938
The Arabic Alphabet

Signed twice, titled, dated 1975 and inscribed K.B. and signed twice on the reverse. Acrylic on canvas.
Signed: K.B.

Provenance: Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner.

Inscription: Codification of the Arabic alphabet.

US$: 40,000–45,000
€: 25,000–30,000 OMR 140,000–210,000

Hussein Madi is widely considered to be one of Lebanon's most important artists, and his experiments with letter forms and colour have established him as a master of the Hadilyah movement.

Long fascinated with the Arabic script, Madi began work on his Alphabet series in 1975. In much of his work the artist marries a calligraphic line with a more European figurative subject matter, but in this series Madi pushed the boundaries of calligraphy by exploring each letter form, transforming the Arabic alphabet into an inventive calligraphic code.

In 50 medallions, Madi has reimagined the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet as well as the combined letter forms (tajaddud), painted onto a mastic background. In the first roundel, the word Allah presides over the remainder of the alphabet and is surrounded by the first few experiments with each letter, multiplying them and creating differing compositions in each sphere.

Inspired by Egyptian hieroglyphs that were largely based both on nature and meaning, Madi creates letter forms that are simultaneously symbolic and naturalistic. The artist places each of his heavily stylized letters in a cartouche, evoking the Pharaonic custom of encasing their names in a medallion. This dedication ties neatly in to the spirituality of the Arabic script, especially with regard to the word Allah, and is a clever technique that highlights and strengthens the impact of the symbol, conveying its importance to language, to faith and to art.

This is arguably one of Hussein Madi's highest achievements, and is a fascinating homage to calligraphy and the Arabic alphabet.
SIGNED
INK AND GOLD PAINT ON PAPER
155 BY 135CM., 53IN. BY 53IN.
EXECUTED IN 2008

PROVENANCE: Acquired directly from the artist by the present owner

INSCRIPTION
Stylised script

US$ 60,000–70,000
£ 31,700–41,300
CHF 683,000–855,000
11 MEHDI SAEEDI  b. 1970

Untitled

SIGNED AND DATED 1979, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
111.7 X 91.5 CM.  44 X 36 IN.

PROVENANCE: Xeres Art, London

INSCRIPTION: Stylistic script

US$ 18,000–22,000
R 1,140–1,400  GBR 68,000–90,000

12 YOUSEF AHMAD  b. 1955

Movement of Letter

SIGNED AND DATED 1995, TITLED AND DATED 2006 TWICE ON THE REVERSE
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS
174 X 132 CM.  68 X 52 IN.

PROVENANCE: Ampace Gallery, Dubai
Acquired directly from the above by the present owner in 2008

INSCRIPTION: Stylistic script

US$ 30,000–40,000
E 18,000–24,000  GBR 100,000–140,000