

UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

FACULTAD DE BELLAS ARTES



TESIS DOCTORAL

Investigación sobre las potencialidades de la imagen caligráfica islámica para la
pintura iraní contemporánea

An Investigation of the Potentialities of the Islamic Calligraphic Image for
Contemporary Iranian Painting

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR

PRESENTADA POR

Saeid Zakeri

Directoras

Ana Eva Iribas Rudín
Mahnaz Shayestehfar

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RESUMEN

TÍTULO Y AUTOR

Investigación sobre las potencialidades de la imagen caligráfica islámica para la pintura iraní contemporánea

Autor: Saeid Zakeri

INTRODUCCIÓN

En la cultura iraní, la palabra escrita ha ido más allá de sus funciones de documentación y comunicación y se ha transformado en una forma de arte. Los artistas iraníes han empleado su talento para producir estilos y patrones de escritura que se han aplicado, más allá de las páginas escritas, en diferentes formas de arte. En las últimas décadas, los artistas han enriquecido las escrituras islámica e iraní, dotándolas de variedad y belleza, y han producido muchas obras maestras, especialmente cuando se combina la caligrafía con la pintura.

OBJETIVOS

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo estudiar las potencialidades y aplicaciones visuales de la caligrafía islámica para la pintura iraní contemporánea.

Mi estudio se desarrolla a lo largo de dos ejes temáticos. Uno es la rica tradición artística de la caligrafía islámica. Sigue siendo un poderoso símbolo religioso y cultural en el universo islámico contemporáneo y los historiadores del arte mencionan a menudo la

importancia de la escritura caligráfica en el arte y los textos islámicos, que ha dado lugar a una variedad de análisis estéticos, visuales y culturales. El segundo eje es el enfoque pictórico, que relaciona la pintura iraní contemporánea con el movimiento modernista y la caligrafía iraníes, que ha sido examinado desde una perspectiva sociopolítica, así como una comparación crítica con la modernización europea.

RESULTADOS

El primer capítulo examina las raíces, el proceso de desarrollo innovador y las potencialidades visuales y semánticas de la caligrafía islámica e iraní.

El segundo capítulo explora el arte iraní contemporáneo rastreando la historia de las evoluciones políticas, socioculturales y artísticas del país en el período 1940-1960.

El tercer capítulo se centra en el movimiento *Saqqa-khaneh*, que fue el grupo organizado más importante de la pintura iraní contemporánea de los años 1960. También analiza a los artistas del *Saqqa-khaneh*, su interpretación de la cultura iraní contemporánea y su interés crítico compartido en las normas estéticas y sociales de Irán.

El cuarto capítulo estudia las manifestaciones de la caligrafía islámica en el período contemporáneo, trazando tres partes genéricas. La primera considera la permanencia de la caligrafía tradicional en la época contemporánea. La segunda parte trata la utilización de la escritura árabe en tipografía, impresión e infografía. La tercera parte analiza las últimas tendencias en el arte caligráfico islámico.

CONCLUSIÓN

El arte caligráfico contemporáneo iraní, en convivencia con su práctica según los estilos tradicionales, ha encontrado sus propios ámbitos de aplicación y posibilidades de comunicación alfabética. Las obras de caligrafía contemporánea iraní reflejan las exploraciones de los practicantes, que emplean prácticas y técnicas de la estética occidental para presentar nuevas formas de significado y logros plásticos. En la época contemporánea, además de modificar las técnicas y estilos tradicionales, los artistas están probando los límites estéticos de la caligrafía islámica, esforzándose por ampliar los materiales y medios utilizados para escribir caligrafía e integrarlos en sus composiciones visuales. Además, la caligrafía moderna se diferencia de ejemplos anteriores no sólo por la notable diversidad de sus medios sino también por la variedad de talentos y habilidades de sus practicantes y el volumen de trabajo producido.

ABSTRACT

TITLE AND AUTHOR

Title: *An Investigation of the Potentialities of the Islamic Calligraphic Image for Contemporary Iranian Painting*

Author: Saeid Zakeri

INTRODUCTION

In Iranian culture, the written word has been carried beyond its functions of documentation and communication and has been transformed into a form of art. Iranian artists have employed their talents to produce styles and patterns of writing that have been applied, beyond the written pages, in different forms of art. In recent decades, artists have enriched Islamic and Iranian scripts endowing them with variety and beauty and have produced many masterpieces, particularly when calligraphy is combined with painting.

OBJECTIVES

This research aims to study the potentialities and visual applications of Islamic calligraphy for contemporary Iranian painting.

My study is developed along two thematic axes. One is the rich artistic tradition of Islamic calligraphy. It remains a powerful religious and cultural symbol in the contemporary Islamic universe, and art historians often mention the significance of calligraphic writing in Islamic art and texts, which has given rise to a variety of aesthetic,

visual, and cultural analyses. The second axis is the pictorial approach, relating contemporary Iranian painting to the Iranian modernist movement and calligraphy, which has been examined with a socio-political perspective, as well as a critical comparison with European modernisation.

RESULTS

The first chapter examines the roots, the process of innovative developments, and the visual and semantic potentialities of Islamic and Iranian Calligraphy.

The second chapter explores contemporary Iranian art by tracing the history of the country's political, socio-cultural, and artistic evolutions in the period 1940-1960.

The third chapter focuses on the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, which was the most significant organised group in contemporary Iranian painting in the 1960s. It also analyses the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists and their interpretation of contemporary Iranian culture and their shared critical interest in Iran's aesthetic and social norms.

The fourth chapter studies the manifestations of Islamic calligraphy in the contemporary period, dividing them into three general parts. The first considers the continuance of traditional calligraphy in contemporary times. The second part treats the utilisation of Arabic script in typography, printing, and computer graphics, and the third part analyses the latest trends in Islamic calligraphic art.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Iranian calligraphic art, which runs parallel to its practise along traditional styles, has found its own spheres of application and its possibilities of alphabetical communication. Contemporary Iranian calligraphic works indicate the explorations of practitioners, who employ practises and techniques of Western aesthetics to present new shapes of meaning and plastic achievement. In the contemporary period, besides reforming traditional techniques and styles, artists are probing the aesthetic boundaries of Islamic calligraphy and endeavouring to extend the materials and media utilised to write calligraphy and to integrate them into their visual compositions. In addition, contemporary calligraphy is differentiated from previous examples not only by the notable diversity of its media but also by the range of the artists' talents and skills and the volume of the work produced.

Introduction

Humans produced and developed writing to communicate and thus based the practise on utilitarian requirements that preserve valuable knowledge and information. Historically, in the Islamic lands, writing was particularly valued as the medium of the Koran (AbiFarés, 2001), more exactly, the Arabic alphabetical characters in their calligraphic form. Calligraphy, signifying beautiful (hand) writing taken from the Greek *kallos* (beauty) and *graphe* (writing), is especially considerable in this context, seen as uniquely meaningful in Eastern cultures, allowing readers to comprehend the words' visual meaning even before reading them. Calligraphy in Islamic culture is specifically comprehended to have sacred connotations. The Arabic word for calligraphy, *khatt* (خط), derives from line, design, and construction (Puerta Vílchez, 2007), and the practise of *khatt* in Islamic culture includes both the art of the pen and an expression of the sacred. Therefore, Arabic calligraphy is always inspired and formed by religious reverence and contemplation.

Arabic writing came to be formalised and adorned because of the need to copy the Koran, which, until a short time after the demise of the Prophet Mohammad, had been conveyed orally amongst Muslims. While written transcriptions must be accurate, they must also be worthy of the holy verses. Thus, scribes focussed on balance, harmony, and elegance in their scripts, devoting their skills and often their whole lives to writing. Islam is a religion that makes the distinction between those who hold a revealed holy Book, the Koran, and those who do not have written revelation. Therefore, the importance of

retaining the revealed Koran, in the best feasible shape, was pivotal from both the aesthetic and religious points of view (Schimmel, 1992). Moreover, the Islamic aversion to the figural representation of living beings, which was not explicitly banned in the holy Koran, caused Muslims to progress in calligraphy and other styles of Islamic art¹.

Since Arabic was the language through which the Prophet of Islam claimed to receive divine revelations, the script employed for writing the holy word was taken for

¹ The Koran directly says nothing about the proscription of images in Islam. Some *ahadith* (احاديث) are critical of images, especially images that can be regarded as frivolous, not necessarily all images. Images that certainly can be taken to be facets of idolatry or shirk, the idea of praying to images or via images is absolutely forbidden. Islam was a new product that sought to stress its links with previous religions and its role as the zenith of those religions. It could have utilised art forms similar to those religions, and it did in many ways. Also, On the other hand, it had differently to represent itself, to institute a new label, as it were, and this indicates the requirement for something that would aid users of the product both to recognise it and incline them to admit it. For instance, the coins appeared instead of the emperor's head with writing on them, but they could have had the caliph's head on them, which would also have been another symbol of strength. There are coins from both the Umayyad and the Abbasid times that indicate the caliph on them, sometimes on a horse and sometimes wielding a sword (Leaman, 2004, pp. 17-21). Religion has played a huge part in determining the creation of art objects and criteria for beauty. And ideas about aesthetics, particularly what is proper as an art object, are not irrelevant to religion. Although Islam opposed the representation of animal and human figures in religious architecture and art, in the nonreligious area, such portrayals prospered in almost all Islamic cultures. As in other shapes of Islamic decoration, artists adapted and changed living beings' forms, generating an extensive variety of figural patterns. Figural motifs are seen in the ornamentation of architecture and objects, the textiles patterns, but seldom in a three-dimensional configuration. In some cases, ornamental images are linked to the tradition of narrative painting, where textual portrayals supply sources for decorative motifs and themes. As for the illustration of the manuscripts, miniature paintings were inseparable parts of this artwork as pictorial helps to the text, thus no confines were imposed. There was also another category of imaginary images from which decorative designs were produced, which also existed. Numerous extraordinary motifs, such as griffins and harpies, were sketched from pre-Islamic mythical sources, while others were generated through the manipulation of figures by artists. Painting in Islam completely differs from painting in other civilisations, the Arabic language, in the Islamic tradition is adequate for physical and spiritual expression and entirely substitutes imagery with its illustrative vocabulary. Islamic aesthetics aim to represent a subject's intangible and spiritual qualities; to release art from the confines of its time; and to render it eternal by leaving aside natural mimicry. The Muslims utilised *arabesque* designs to ornament a void space by filling it in a repetitive and continuous manner that has an evident aesthetic worth, as well as a spiritual connotation indicating the infinity of Allah.

the writing of many other languages spoken in the nations under Islamic hegemony (Blair, 2006). After Latin, Arabic is the most widely utilised script in the universe. Calligraphy has become the noteworthiest form of the visual arts in Islamic cultures to the extent that it encompasses the visual sphere in various forms from writing manuscripts to architectural façades and interiors carved on ornamental stone or hung and framed like paintings. Regardless of its decorative aspect, the main purpose of most of the calligraphy is to communicate a message of a religious and linguistic order. As a procedure of reproducing manuscripts, calligraphic writing generally aims to communicate meaning in a readable form (Grabar, 1978). Even employed as mere architectural ornamentation, calligraphic texts are still instructive inscriptions that thoroughly accomplish their semantic and linguistic function of conveying a message, frequently a religious one. Nevertheless, calligraphic epigraphics are able to also transcend this global function of writing and almost forfeit their purpose of objective linguistic signaled by transfiguring themselves into unreadable shapes, in some cases even into a pointless inscription type entitled pseudo-Arabic (Gonzales, 2001) where sophistication and beauty gain prominence. On this basis, some decorative works of Islamic calligraphy, whether written on paper or textile or on a building, tend to subordinate normal semantic and linguistic rules to a visual function that results in the aesthetics of the script as well as the viewing pleasure. In such written work, the overmuch ornamentation, the overstated rhythm, and the exaggerated figural demonstration of the letters and words dominate the content of the intended text. This alteration from the linguistic to the visual disrupts the interaction between the signifier

and the signified at the holy book level, resulting in an iconographic reading generated by the featured visuality of the writing that becomes the text unreadable, but visually instigating. When the script is so detailed, manipulated, or distorted as to be barely readable, it limits itself to presenting to the devout Muslim a prominent religious phrase or literary work, letting the reader's memory and visualisation produce the rest. Based on this, the reader's comprehension of the calligraphic artworks is beyond the easy task of reading.

Many modern and contemporary artists who use Arabic letters in their artworks employ the term 'Islamic calligraphy', emphasising the importance of the form for the shaping of cultural and national identities. It is interesting to note that, while Islamic calligraphy is purely demonstrated in Arabic letters and words, its most outstanding developers were from non-Arab lands, especially Iran and Turkey. Actually, the widespread cultural and international diffusion of Islamic calligraphy continues to the present. Under the current flourishing of visual culture at a global scale, we now witness many uses of Arabic letters, especially in visual arts and design.

Research Hypothesis

The impact of the visual potentialities of Islamic calligraphy in Middle Eastern contemporary painting has different dimensions:

- A separation of painting from the meaning of the text and its literary qualities, achieving a visual expression independent of content.
- A tendency toward abstraction.

- A critical reference to tradition, revisiting it not for the purpose of repetition, but to re-create it.
- A growing importance of the expression of the personal identity of the painter.
- A separation of painting from representation, realism, and the imperatives of reason.
- An intention to promote this painting to the global art world.

Some Iranian and Western artists and critics assume that calligraphic painting deserves full consideration as art and that it is only after learning the visual literacy of writing and having completed a period of artistic development that the artist's work reaches original creativity in the field. In accordance with this position, the main hypothesis of this research is that in-depth knowledge of the principles and rules of Islamic calligraphy enables contemporary Iranian artists to put the visual potentialities of this tradition to use in various fields of visual communication, especially in calligraphic painting.

Research Questions

The questions that lead this research belong to two categories: the potentialities of Islamic visual calligraphy and calligraphic painting. Their definitions, functions, and commonalities will be examined.

- What are the roots of Islamic Iranian calligraphy?
- What are the origin and the main reason for the creation of Iranian calligraphic painting?

- What factors have led to the combination of painting and Islamic calligraphy, leading them to the configuration of calligraphic painting?
- What are the common roots and roles of Iranian pioneer artists of the last decades who practise calligraphic painting?
- Are calligraphic painting artworks based on individual identities or collective, historical identities, or both?
- Is it possible to be true to Iranian identity and culture when fusing traditional text elements and abstract art forms?

General Objectives

The following study weaves together two branches of scholarship, which are often examined in isolation. One branch examines the roots and potentialities of the Islamic calligraphic image. The other branch investigates contemporary Iranian painting and its relationship with the modernist movement in Iran and with calligraphy. This research explores the perceptions of Iranian artists at a time of cultural and social change. It pays special consideration to the influence of Orientalism and modernity² and how these

² Western scholars generally employ modernity as a phrase that refers to the 18th-century Enlightenment time, along with its related historical, cultural, political, and economic conditions, particularly pointing to the notions of rationalism, technology, and controlling nature through science (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Furthermore, modernity has always been regarded as related to the West, particularly Europe, and hence, the term modern is commonly utilised synonymously with the West. In a sense, Europe is the origin of modernity and has been transmitted from there to the rest of the universe, the non-West. Thus, modernity is frequently accompanied by Eurocentrism—the concept that the intellectual life in Europe formulates a social and cultural force as an extraordinary universal power in the world. Hence, to be modern is to follow or imitate the West. Modern Iranian artists have faced the West in numerous ways, chiefly via colonialism, education in Western universities, and sociocultural changes in the region. Such

concepts helped the emergence of new modalities of plastic expression. These objectives are pursued through conventional academic research and also through the author's personal practise of pictorial research, producing fruitful mutual enrichment.

Specific Objectives

Chapter 1: Study of the roots and potentialities of the Islamic and Iranian calligraphic image.

Chapter 2: Investigation of Western political and artistic influences on contemporary Iranian painting.

Chapter 3: Research on the origin and the main reason for the creation of contemporary Iranian calligraphic painting.

- Identification of Islamic calligraphy as a decisive component of Iranian-Islamic identity in contemporary painting.

Chapter 4: Study of the roots and common roles of the pioneering Iranian and Islamic world artists of the last decades who practised calligraphic painting.

Research Methodology

The methodology that is imposed for this research is qualitative, specifically, the case study. The richness of this type of research lies in its adequacy to understand in depth and detail the object of study, with all its complexity, its processes, and its relationship with the context. Its character is holistic because it considers the totality of the phenomenon in question and tries to approach it from different perspectives. Another

encounters with the West have been characterized by ambivalence. In consequence, the West turned into a symbol of advancement and power, and thus, it also became a model for acquiring modernity.

appropriate research methodology for my thesis is semiotics, due to its methods of analysis. Semiotics is the recognition and analysis of signs, a sphere that is extensive and results from many approaches, where its background returns to the ancient. Semiotic studies refer both to the '*general science of signs*' and the '*specificity of human semiosis*.' Semiotics results in various perceptions and can encompass the entire world up to a point that signs pervade (Peirce, 1955). The borders of semiotics come to be defined by the character of signs as subjects of study and through the relationship of this field to other sciences. Under the second meaning, semiotics pertains to the specific human potentiality for '*meta-semiosis*.' In the world that embraces semiosis, '*human semiosis*' is identified as *meta-semiosis* – i.e., the feasibility of thinking on signs (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005).

The semiotics principles were compiled in the late 19th century and the early 20th century by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Both proffered significant linguistic approaches that were applied in the middle of the 20th century for utilisation in picture analysis. However, Saussure's writings have had the greatest impact on the structuralism theories that characterise visual culture analysis methods. As maintained by Saussure, language is similar to a chess game. It relies on codes and conventions for its purposes. However, he stated the connection between things and words in the universe is relative and arbitrary (Saussure, 1938). Essential to the science of Saussure is that meanings change simultaneously with the context and rules of language. The sign consists of two components, the signifier and the signified, which together form the meaning. A signifier is an entity that exists, and the signified

alludes to what it means. Therefore, in the method of Saussure, an image or word may have several signs, meanings, and constructs.

Peirce presented the theory of the science of signs before Saussure. Peirce supposed that thought and language are sign-interpreting processes. For him, meaning is not in our preliminary understanding of a representation or sign but in our explanation of the perception and next-up act based upon that perception. French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) employs *denotative* and *connotative* words to characterise various kinds of meaning generated in an image (Barthes, as cited in Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). The image's denotative meaning indicates its straightforward and literal meaning. Connotative meanings are characterised by the image's historical and cultural contexts and the lived and felt understanding of its viewers of those situations. The parting line between denotes and connotes meanings of an image can be obscure, and over time, connotative meanings may alter with changes in social and cultural contexts. Entirety messages and meanings become culturally notified, and no such thing exists as a merely denotative image. However, two principles, denotation and connotation, are useful, because they aid us in thinking about how images function to imply explicit, denoted meanings and extensively connote social and contextual specific meanings. Many changes have occurred to semiotics, but it continues to be the essential method to analyse visual arts works.

Barthes's semiotic model presents a direct and obvious way to comprehend the connection between depictions and meaning. In his approach, besides denotative and

connotative concepts, there exists the sign that includes the *signifier* — the written word, image, or sound — and the *signified*, the concept that is evoked through that image or word. The signifier, for Saussure, is the entity that indicates, and the sign is the compound of the signifier and its meaning. Many theorists have employed Saussure's science of signs, concentrating on language, chiefly to interpret and explain visual representational systems.

Peirce's model is somewhat dissimilar in that the sign is differentiated from the meaning as well as the object itself. His work has continued to be significant for examining the discernments between various types of signs and their connection to the actual. Peirce shows three forms of representations or signs: iconic³, indexical⁴, and symbolic⁵ (Peirce, 1994). In semiotics, the main idea is that all things are a sign (Silverman & Rader, 2012). Basically, semiotics simply is reading and interpreting non-traditional objects. We constantly perform semiotics and develop our understanding and capacity for it over the years. The moments of semiotic interpretation are named semiotic situations, which indicate our attempt to comprehend our surroundings and interpret facets of them based on the signs of our situation. In such a manner, we are invariably reading and making sense of our universe. Some signs are facile to read because we, at

³ In Peirce's description, iconic signs are somehow similar to their object. Many drawings and paintings are iconic, as are many photographs, films, television images, and comics.

⁴ Indexical signs carry an existential connection to their objects. That is, they have coexisted in an identical place for some time.

⁵ Dissimilar to iconic signs that usually bear resemblance to their objects, as believed by Peirce, symbolic signs convey no apparent relation to their object. Symbols are shaped by the arbitrary or unnatural union of object and meaning. Symbolic signs are unavoidably more limited in conveying meaning because they deal with learned systems.

some point in our lives, grasped their meanings and ideas and took these signs for granted. For example, green means go, yellow means slow down or caution, and red means stop. Some signs are complicated, and not facile to read because they do not reveal themselves easily. Therefore, our culture has come to a general comprehension of a number of signs and symbolised certain notions. The word symbol has been utilised as an alternative word for sign and, in both every day and philosophical contexts, has many meanings, inclusive of semiotic discussion. Surely, there are various conceptions of the sign in which the sign is an element in a process formed either dually by signifier and signified or triply through representamen, object and interpretant. In semiotics, Certainly, we use the reading language system and its representations, not just the physical signs. Many semioticians regard everything as a sign, even written words—texts are signs, as well as the manners we read them (Silverman & Rader, 2012). Alphabetical characters, words, and sentences are the elements of writing that are not limited only to transcription, display, and following orality. In reality, writing is a particular human modeling device; by its means, we systematise our experience of the universe and temporal and spatial surrounding facts (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005). With only a confined set of elements that are the alphabet letters, we can create various views of the universe and unlimited new senses. In this regard, writing is the practise that models the universe and opens it to an endless splendor of creativity, invention, and otherness. Thus, writing is essentially associated with reading and thinking, forming a triad of expression shapes that are intimately tied. To be a good reader, we need to comprehend rhetoric. The Greek meaning of rhetoric is speaking/speech, and Aristotle considered rhetoric as the art that

finds feasible means of persuasion in any situation. On a scientific level, Burke characterizes rhetoric as a symbolic means of utilizing language that induces cooperation in beings who respond to symbols naturally (Golden, Berquist, Coleman, & Sproule, 2003). In Burke's definition, this stress on symbols indicates the advantageousness of visual language, which most of the communications in our universe depend on. This indicates how rhetoric is combined with the visual realm and unified within the scope of culture.

Rhetorical principles and approaches mostly applied in visual and cultural texts also can work in writing. Assuredly, the employment of rhetoric permits us to comprehend the world through movies, buildings, graffiti, clothing, video games, and almost anything. Any text formed to have meaning or effect involves some facet of rhetoric, and hence, rhetoric revolves around civil participation. Undoubtedly, texts have an important place within semiotics and linguistics systems. Comprehension of how to read the meaning of a text will aid us in understanding how to read the meanings of visual images with specific care because images have many signs and values, but we interpret them subconsciously and simply. Writing as a human modelling device gives a range of superior manifestation that fosters new expressive approaches. Shapes of writing include not only letters, words, or texts, but also encompass design, photography, film, and music. Hence, we must rethink all shapes of writing and appreciate them as the mediums of a high level of originality and creativity. Thus, visual representations are shapes of writing and can be analysed by semiotics. So, semiotics is a valuable lens for

understanding and interpreting visual culture. In such a comprehension of semiotics, an alphabetic letter as a sign carries a denotation (its literal meaning for communication goals), while having a series of connotations through its metaphysical and sacredness presence as a living being. The denotation and connotation of the letters relate to their signifier and signified relationship. The Arabic letters' connotative meaning gives the reader a comprehension particularly of the holy text, the Koran, for contemplation.

Indeed, Semiotics is a powerful strategy that helps to understand a broad range of textual and visual language systems found within the letters. The letter certainly is both text and image; it is comprehended as a symbol that has multiple interpretations and translations.

The universe we live in is full of objects, images, and screens that all invite us to see them (Mirzoeff, 2009). As stated by Mirzoeff, visual culture is the link between all approaches of visibility in contemporary culture (Mirzoeff 1998). Any observing experience can contain varied kinds of infrastructure, meaning, intertextual meanings, and media (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Most essentially, it is the spectators themselves who generate cultural associations that affect the image interpretations of individuals. It is a dynamic and interactive process wherein on one side meaning and value are exchanged between people and on the other the technologies and articles. In such a view, visual culture is comprehended as the combined and shared practises of a certain group of people in a society or community, through which the aural, textual, and visual representations aid in constructing meanings of the universe. Visual culture involves us through symbolic and communicative activities. Thus, we better comprehend our world

via visual culture. We utilise our perceptions and interpretations to interact and communicate with the world. Hence, visual culture shows many learning experiences for art practise, in which, the applications of semiotics present an explicit approach to analysing and understanding visual representations and their meanings, particularly, Arabic-Farsi letter forms in our visual universe. Such a combination will formulate more obvious comprehensions of calligraphy and eventually help to improve pedagogy, practise, and research.

Since semiotic approaches overlap with each other and contribute to our universe understanding by mapping out signs' networks, they provide a platform to comprehend the entire semiotic world. Such a task is most significant in the face of universal communication that has altered our time, distance, space, and feelings. Consequently, artists must acquire knowledge to read and interpret visual culture semiotically to comprehend the universal communication system and its messages to form a better sense of critique and reasoning and thus help in their practise. Today, we live in an era of universal communication, witnessing a striking spread of the efficiency and productivity of ideology via visual culture. Reading our visual universe is an act of opening feelings, reactions, and ideas to comprehend these ideologies. Learning how to read cultural and visual texts semiotically results in better utilisation of rhetoric within our practise of art. Furthermore, using semiotics to analyse our visual universe will enable us to live engaged, questioning, and informed. The semiotics enable us to understand visual culture regarding it. Such an approach can aid artists in comprehending the letters, interacting

with them, and identifying their textual and visual expressions. Visual analysis of texts and images, along with textual and visual formation in composing or designing, helps in the procedure of knowledge formation.

We deal with visual culture nearly continually because of the process of looking. Hence, semiotics is one of the noteworthy lenses to interpret images in distinctive ways. The calligraphic writing's semiotic interpretation indicates its dual essence as informative and symbolic, denotative and connotative. Thus, the visuality and receptivity of alphabetical characters are essential to their interpretation and perceptivity. Likewise, the calligraphic manuscripts' complexity degree and comprehensibility must be engaged in order to achieve full elucidation. Hence, many skilled practitioners are able to both read and understand calligraphic texts and appreciate artistic merit while arranging and analysing their components. Since they can recreate and design letters, they are cognisant of the aesthetic values of calligraphy such as complexity, clarity, and beauty.

Accordingly, it is essential for artists to broaden their capacity to acknowledge and produce artworks with complicated inscriptions of calligraphy. In such a manner, artists should utilise visual culture at the side of semiotics for better understanding and employ the alphabet's anatomy and mechanisms to juxtapose and merge letters and images, producing bodies of work that are active for representing the cultural, national and global significance of contemporary letterforms.

Chapter 1. Islamic Calligraphy

The first chapter focuses on Arabic and Iranian scripts, and therefore, I have investigated the ways that calligraphy has been credited historically, culturally, and artistically. Such a viewpoint shows us the aesthetic, educational, and cultural importance of this written art, and emphasises the reasons that define it as an influential constituent in diverse arenas of visual communication, particularly in Islamic nations. The first part of the chapter indicates the connection between the written Koran and Islamic calligraphy. The process of writing the Koran led to the expansion of Arabic script in the early Islamic era. Even though calligraphy has developed in many forms and has included functions and spheres not directly associated with the Koranic text, the spiritual essence of the Koran has remained within all facets of traditional Islamic calligraphy. It has occupied a status of particular privilege in Islam to such a degree that it could be termed the instigator of traditional Islamic visual artworks and the most characteristic of the observable facet of Islamic culture and civilisation. It has become incorporated into the culture over the centuries, fine handwriting being taken as an indication of a cultured human and a trained mind, spirit, and hand. The second part studies the origins of Arabic scripts, as well as historical endeavours to perfect and systematise these scripts and generate new forms, and then outlines the variety of scripts employed by the Iranian calligraphic tradition. I strive to comprehend and identify the Arabic and Iranian writing systems and follow sensitivities related to letter forms. Thus, this chapter brings a space

to explore the nature of the letters, their writing system, and their capacity as both a communication network and an identity indicator.

1.1. The Relation between the Written Koran and Islamic Calligraphy

In Islamic lands, calligraphy is employed beyond the religious texts, and its utilisation in contexts such as the ornamentation of objects and architectural buildings attests to its ubiquitousness within Muslim states. According to the definition, Arabic writing is the most Arabic art among the Islamic pictorial arts. It belongs to the whole of Islamic lands and is regarded to be the most original of the arts since it begets observable shape to the word of the Koran (Burckhardt, 2009, p.52). For centuries Muslims have practised calligraphy to cultivate nice handwriting and discipline the spirit. They have also pondered the appearance of calligraphic shapes because they emanate directly from the origin of all elegance and beauty (Nasr, 1987, p. 34). In the faith of Islam, the sacred book functions as a documentary issue of the Godhead. Its importance and structure are shared and displayed as much as possible on many sites. The form and wording of the Koran facilitate the presence of a holy mystery in the Islamic community (Graham, 1987, p. 111). The sound and words of the Koran are auditory expressions of the divine soul. Koranic characteristics of rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, and pitch supply indications of its Godhead outside of the semantic essence of the letters and words (Nelson, 1985, pp. 90-99). The Koran is the basis of Islam's book heritage and culture. Islamic art reflects the language of the Muslim holy book with repeat and multiplicity, symmetry and balance,

regularity and diversity, and the finely equilibrated composition that sustains it from degeneration and deterioration (Ali, 1996, p. 23).

Islamic writing spread as a visual medium for recitation. At the beginning of Islam, most penned texts were kept as scrolls, whereas the Koranic pages were bound. This structural difference characterises the appearance of the Koran from other written works, just as text divinity differentiates it ontologically (Al-Baghdadi, 2005, p. 92). Writing became a mark of origin, content, and authority in its visual form and material composition. Over time, interactivities that connected the material shape with the spiritual content of penned text led to the emergence of other Mussulman's writing styles. Expanding Arabic script responded to the challenge of the holy book, which remarks upon the significance of writing due to continuity and maintenance of knowledge. The Koran denotes the *qalam* (Pen) in the same starting verses in the *Sura al-Alaq* (العلق) and orders the Prophet Mohammad to read:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ . خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ . اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ . الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ . عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ .

Recite in the name of your Lord who created,
Created humanity from a clot of blood,
Recite: your Lord is most bountiful,
Who taught by the Pen,
Taught humanity what it did not know (Sura 96: 1-5).

While the *Sura* entitled *al-qalam* (القلم) begins with the letter *nūn* (ن) and comes after with the verse, 'By the pen and that which they write.' In Arabic, the letter form *nūn*

looks like an inkwell that contains the ink by which the archetypes of all creatures are inscribed upon the guarded tablet. Also, this letter looks like a ship carrying the possibilities of a special cycle of manifestation on the ocean of unexistence (Nasr, 1987, p. 25). According to Muslim artists, the Koran is the foundation of any art form. They acknowledge that sacred calligraphy's origin and basis is the visualisation of the Holy Word. Koran itself emphasises and testifies to the writing material ink and pen — it is mentioned in *Sura Luqman* (لقمان), verse 27, that if all the sea were ink, and the whole trees were pens, Allah's Words could not be penned out unto their end. As stated by other hadith, the *qalam* (قلم) symbolises and signifies the tongue, and *nūn* (ن) the mouth. In accordance with Kamal al-Din Hossein Kashifi, an Iranian scholar of the 15th century, the Supreme *qalam* is bright light whose spread is the interval between earth and heaven. Also, he states that the *nūn* (ن) is an innuendo to the exhaustive Divine Knowledge and awareness included in the inherent unity and the *qalam* alludes to the comprehensive Divine Knowledge held in the heavenly unicity (Ibid, p. 26).

Islamic calligraphy emerges at once from the Koranic revelation and indicates the response of the Islamic people's souls to the holy word. The Koranic words are everywhere throughout Islamic countries and followers of Islam give the greatest value to calligraphy, the art of writing Allah's word (Blair & Bloom, 2003, p. 168); the whole life of a Muslim is laden with prayers and invocations, the details of which are taken from the Koran; numerous texts and epigraphs bear attestant to this. We can say that this pervasiveness of the Koran works similarly to vibration, and this spiritual vibration

essentially determines the measures and modes of Muslim art; thus, Islam's plastic art is somehow the reflection of the Koran's word (Burkhardt, 2009, p. 50). Islamic calligraphy is the image embodiment of the formation of the spiritual facts held in the Koranic messages. This calligraphy supplies the outward clothing for the expression of Allah in the visible universe (Nasr, 1987, pp. 18-19).

1.2. The Origins and Formation of Arabic Script

The more aged, and more quoted reasoning is that the script employed for Arabic documentation derived from the kind of Aramaic script utilised by the Nabataeans. From the 2nd century B.C. to the 4th A.D., Nabatean Arabs travelled the pathways from Yemen to Petra and used written Aramaic to keep their records. As Naveh states, "the language of the Nabatean epigraphs and documents is official Aramaic, but it absorbed Arabic words and forms. Most of the people mentioned have Arabic names. In the course of time, the Arabic elements in the language of the Nabatean inscriptions gradually increased⁶. Nabatean text is written in what amounts to a mixed language, containing many Arab words and forms (Naveh, 1997, p. 158)." The Nabatean inscriptions'

⁶ Rene Dussaud, in 1901, along with Frederic Macler, made a quest into the Leja and Jabal al-Duruz regions of Syria, with the goal of copying epitaphs and investigating archeological remains. The team arrived at al-Namarah, the place of a Roman fort, and explored the district. They encountered a tomb completely in ruins in the Wadi l-Sawt, in the rubble of which they found the now renowned inscription carved on a grand block of basalt that had initially been used as the lintel of the entry to the mausoleum. The inscription indicated that this was the mausoleum of Imru 'u I-Qays, son of 'Amr, monarch of the Arabs, mentioned his deeds as ruler, and gave his demise date as 7 *Kaslul* (December) of the year 223 (Bellamy, 1985, p. 31). Other epigraphs more recently discovered and dating to the early centuries of the Common Era are similarly Arabic texts written in Nabatean letters.

epigraphic study traces a gradual transformation from Aramaic alphabetical characters of distinct shapes into cursive writing of ligatured letters (Anderson, 1992, p. 292). Also, written Nabatean, over time, incorporates all kinds of Arabic words and names. The earliest reference to a specific Arabic script appears in the 6th century with the label *Jazm*. It originated from the Nabataean writing system and became the primal reference from which ensuing Arabic scripts formed. *Jazm* is an unrefined script, characterised by letters of a stiff angular appearance and equal proportion (AbiFares, 2001, p. 28). Bishr ibn Abd al-Malik and Harb ibn Umayyah are credited with transmitting a similar script to the Hijaz and Mecca (Safadi, 1979, p. 8).

1.2.1. The Development of Arabic Script

The Holy Koran, during the 7th century, was revealed to the Prophet Mohammad. Though many fragments of the Koran were documented in writing within the Prophet's duration of life, because of the historical possibility of new revelations and additions, the verses were not formally collected in their entirety. When the Prophet died in 632 C.E., the Koran's revelation ended. The Koran was memorised orally by a faithful group of *huffaz*. Nevertheless, in the military campaigns that followed the Prophet's death, a number of loyal and trustworthy *huffazes* were killed in war. Concerned about the consequences of this loss, Umar ibn Khattab suggested that Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, collect and collate the Koran as a written text (Ibid, p. 9). Abu Bakr requested the Prophet's personal secretary, Zayd ibn Thabit, to oversee the gathering of an organised and written Koran. He accepts the assignment and commences collecting fragments

inscribed (on the materials including cloth, parchment, palm stalks, and the camel's shoulder bones). Each written piece is carefully confirmed and verified against two witnesses from dependable *huffaz* (Al-Sa'id, 1975, pp. 19-27). When Zayd had assembled a complete version, the Caliph Uthman (r. 644-56) permitted the formal written text to be authorised for distribution. Muslims refer to these texts as *mushaf* to differentiate them from the Koran's orally recited. Initial *mushaf*⁷ are transcribed in a number of styles, commonly called after the place wherein they were written. These consist of the *Makki* and *Madini*, which are called after Islam's holy cities, and the *Kufic* script (Fig. 1) from the city of Kufa, which obtains popularity for its grandeur, refinement, and aesthetic balance.

There were two main writing styles that led to the formation of all other ensuing script styles, each with distinct attributes; one was curved and rounded, called *Muqawwar va Mudawwar* (مقور و مدور), and the other, called *Mabsut va Mustaqim* (مبسوط و مستقيم) was elongated and straight angled. These two major characteristics governed the growth and development of the primary Makki and Madini styles and resulted in the shaping of a few scripts, the most significant of them were *Ma'il* (Fig. 2), *Mashq*, and *Naskh*. When the *Kufic* was being developed in Kufa, these styles were common in Hijaz, and endured

⁷ *Mushaf* is a gathering of sheets upon which the Koranic verses are written. The term means a codex, the collecting of multiple material sheets (Al-Bagdadi, 2005, pp. 95-96; Madigan, 2001, pp.36-37). *Mushaf* specifically signified the Koranic text's material copies. The term originated from the Abyssinian word for book and relates to the Koran through the Ethiopian Bible (Al-Bagdadi, 2005, p. 96). Its codex forms further strengthened this relation. The codex's material form symbolised its affinity with books of Jewish and Christian tradition, which had previously commenced to be bound as codices.

until after the Arabic scripts' major reform which was formed in that city. The *Naskh* and *Mashq* continued to be utilised after striking advancements, while the *Ma'il* was stopped, and the *Kufic* replaced it (Safavid, 1978, p. 9).



Figure 1. Koran Leaf, central Islamic lands, 9th century, penned in *Kufic*, *Sura 47: 36*. Ink, colour and gold on parchment. 23.8 x 33.3 cm. Retrieved from (Schimmel & Rivolta, 1992, p. 3).



Figure 2. Koran Leaf, late 8th-first half 9th century, penned in *Ma'īl*, *Sura 45: end of verse 30-verse 37*. Ink, colours on parchment. 24.1 x 28.3 cm. Retrieved from (Ibid, p. 5).

In the time of the Umayyads and Abbasids, a series of reform movements addressed the Arabic script's visual conventions and appearance. The Umayyad capital, Damascus, became a center of Arabic writing with the advent of *Tumar* and *Jali* scripts. Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) mandated the official utilisation of Arabic for all government documents (Welch, 1979, p. 23; AbiFarès, 2001, p. 34). Umayyad coins show Arabic script instead of images as an indication of visual dominance (Bierman,

1998, pp. 33-34). The *Tumar*'s grand *naskh* script turned into the official script of the Umayyad state, and numerous styles based their relations and measurements on the height of the *alif* (الف) in the *Tumar*. The Abbasids later employed the *Tawqi* as the official autograph script of commands and administrative declarations. This selection visually differentiated the new dynasty from the Umayyads' *Tumar* texts, stressing the territorial role of writing as a sign of religious and political unity.

Abul Aswad al-Du 'ali (d. 688), an Umayyad scholar, in the 7th century, notices that spoken Arabic's linguistic habits are changing and commences an examination of Arabic grammar. Ad-Du 'ali, to address the matter, offers the *tashkīl* (diacritisation or vocalisation) system, wherein coloured marks indicate the vowel sounds as diacritics that do not exist as independent Arabic letters. In primal Arabic writing, however, certain letter forms could also have more than one consonant. So, Yahya ibn Ya 'mar and Nasr ibn Asim, innovate a system wherein diacritical *nokte* (dots) are placed below and above basic letter forms to differentiate consonants. Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 786), an Abbasid scribe, facilitated the earlier diacritical marking system for general utilisation. He keeps *nokte* for distinguishing consonants but substitutes the *tashkīl*'s coloured marks with 8 new diacritical signs. The changes were encountered with resistance and at first confined to secular writings (these changes may have been assumed as modifying the Koran's text) (Safadi, 1979, pp. 13-14). However, opposition decreases over time, and vocalisation marks become functional and helpful, especially for instructing the right

Koranic recitation. These marks are still applied to the transcription of religious documents and books.

1.2.2. The Adoption of Round Scripts

By the 10th century, a series of *naskh* styles known as *al-aqlam al-sittah* (the sextet hands or six pens) (اقلام ستة يا خطوط ششگانه) were commonly utilised across the East of the Islamic universe. Ibn Muqlah (866-940)⁸ for administrative objectives, pursued systematising the appearance of these scripts, and his subsequent reforms drastically reorganised the universe of Arabic writing.

The six pens became formalised as three pairs of scripts: *Thuluth* and *Naskh*, *Muhaqqaq* and *Rayhani*, and *Tawqi* and *Riqa*. Every pair included a larger ornamental variety and a smaller script with finer lines. The appearance differences differentiating the styles are slight and subtle but readily recognisable to a trained eye. He applied an accurate system of geometrical reform in the writing and, specifically, the gathered canon of the six pens (Abbott 1939a; Abbott 1939b; Welch, 1979, p. 28). The system came to be recognised as *al-khatt al-mansub* (الخط المنسوب) (proportioned script). *Al-khatt al-mansub* presented the Arabic script with an official constancy of written design and gradually became the basis of the Arabic calligraphic tradition. The new system

⁸ Abu-Ali Muhammad ibn-Ali ibn-Muqla was several times vizier to Abbasid caliphs under al-Muqtadir, al-Qahir, and al-Radi (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 56; Khatibi & Sijelmassi, 1976, p. 26). With the financial and economic crisis at the time of the al-Radi (r. 934-40), Ibn Muqla was ousted, his hand amputated, and his assets confiscated. He died neglected, in prison.

proportioned the shapes and sizes of letters based on three parameters: *nokte* (dot) (نقطه), *alif* (الف), and the circle⁹ (Fig. 3):

Starting with the point—a rhombus made by the pen when pressed heavily on the paper, the length of its sides depending on the width of the nib—the scribe placed several vertex to vertex to arrive at the desired length of a given *alif*, which varied in the different pens. Having decided to start with an *alif* the length of which is a given number of points, Ibn Muqlah related (*nasaba*) all other letters to this basic measure. With this simple and ingenious device of straight lines and arcs, both based on the length of the *alif*, Ibn Muqlah placed the art of penmanship on a scientific, mathematical basis (Abbott, 1939a, p. 35).

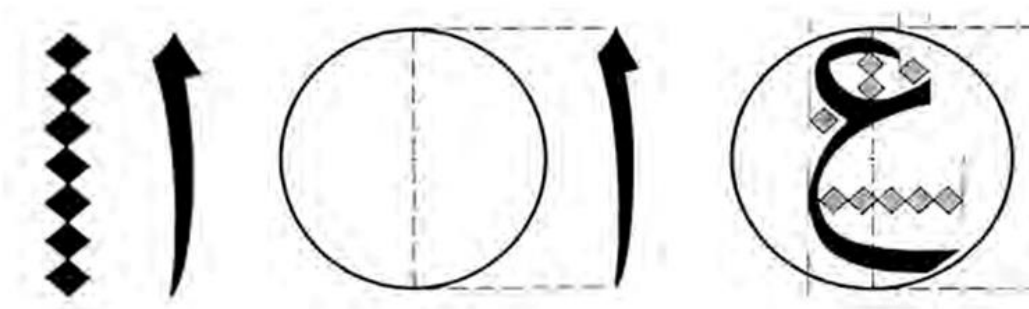


Figure 3. *Al-Khatt al-Mansub*, as it measures every letter in relation to the *nokte* (نقطه), the height of the *alif* (الف), and the circle (دایره). Retrieved from (Safadi, 1979, p. 17).

⁹ The visual integrity of a script is controlled by repeating identical forms amongst letters. Consequently, the script's distinct styles came to be recognisable regarding their employed proportions and the base *nokte* (dot) measurement of the *alif*. Therefore, the *alif* in *thuluth* script measured 7 *nokte* tall; the *alif* in *naskh* measured 5, and the *alif* in *muhaqqaq* measured 9. Ibn Muqlah, proposing these standards, wanted to ease the interchange of written communication amongst a rapidly extending scribal community.

1.2.3. Six Pens

The name of the *thuluth* (ثلث) script is characterised by delicate fluidity and relatively thin and precise strokes. Executed compositions keep proportions of approximately 4 straight segments to 2 curved segments. *Thuluth*, rarely employed for writing the text's body, was chiefly a decorative script in inscriptions and manuscripts. The close association of script with Koranic headings and religious inscriptions gives it with the aura of a hieratic script. Also, it was the preferred style for inscriptions on altars, portals, public monuments, domes, framed ornamental pieces, and tombstones (Ali, 1996, p. 44). *Naskh* (نسخ) (cancelled), which is a label for the whole rounded scripts, may originate from its popularity, which cancelled the other styles. Accompanied by *thuluth*, it shaped many texts' bodies in which the larger script was utilised for textual headings. Its proportions resemble those of the *thuluth* script but are distinguished by straighter verticals and shorter and more compact horizontal strokes. Also, the legibility of the *naskh* heightened its application throughout a diversity of spheres, including religious books, general knowledge, histories, and scientific texts (Ali, 1996, p. 44; Ülker, 1987, p. 57). Following the acquisition of printing, *naskh* came to be the standard pattern for typefaces. The name *muhaqqaq* (محقق) means fully realised, and meticulously produced. This script with proportions of 4/5 straight to 1/5 curved segments is the most angular of the six pens (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 56). These proportions are highlighted with pointed letters, extended up-strokes, and very few sublinear strokes (Safadi, 1979, p. 20). Because of its compressed structure and legibility, it was preferred for grand Korans

and seldom, if ever, employed as an administrative script (Mahir, 1999, p. 12; Schimmel, 1984, p. 23). The pointedness of *muhaqqaq* in decorative pieces frequently contrasts with the *thuluth*'s fluidity. Though *Rayhani* (ريحان) is called after its creator, often the name of this style is interpreted as an apparent similarity with the leaves of raihan (basil) (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 56). As a companion to *muhaqqaq*, it has similar proportions and pointed letters, but the *rayhani*'s size is smaller, and its down strokes are more overstated (AbiFarès, 2001, p. 36). Also, *rayhani* is discerned by the marking of its diacritics, which were outlined with a finer pen than that utilised for the script. The name *tawqi* (توقيع) (confirmation or signature) indicates its early function as the Abbasid caliphs' formal signature script. With proportions, 0/5 straight segments and 0/5 curved segments, is the most rounded of the sextet hands (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 56). *Tawqi* is also ascertained by fine ligatures that connect the last letters of one word to the beginning letter of the subsequent word. Often, it was used on important occasions or official documents, including imperial orders, permissions, letters of reference, and textual signatures (Ülker, 1987, p. 66). *Riqa* script (رقاع), or *ruqah* (small sheet), was characterised by short strokes and round fluidity curves, and its proportions are similar to those of *tawqi* script. *Riqa* was originally employed primarily for individual written communication but later appeared as an essential script for writing Ottoman diplomas. To gain an *ijaza* (diplomas) in the *naskh* or *thuluth*'s calligraphic writing, trainees would copy the master's work. If the trainee's instructor approved the copy as almost the same as the original version, he would inscribe approval beneath the piece in *riqa*. After

attaining an *ijaza*, a calligrapher could employ his signature in future works (Acar, 1999, p. 206; Mahir, 1999, p. 17).

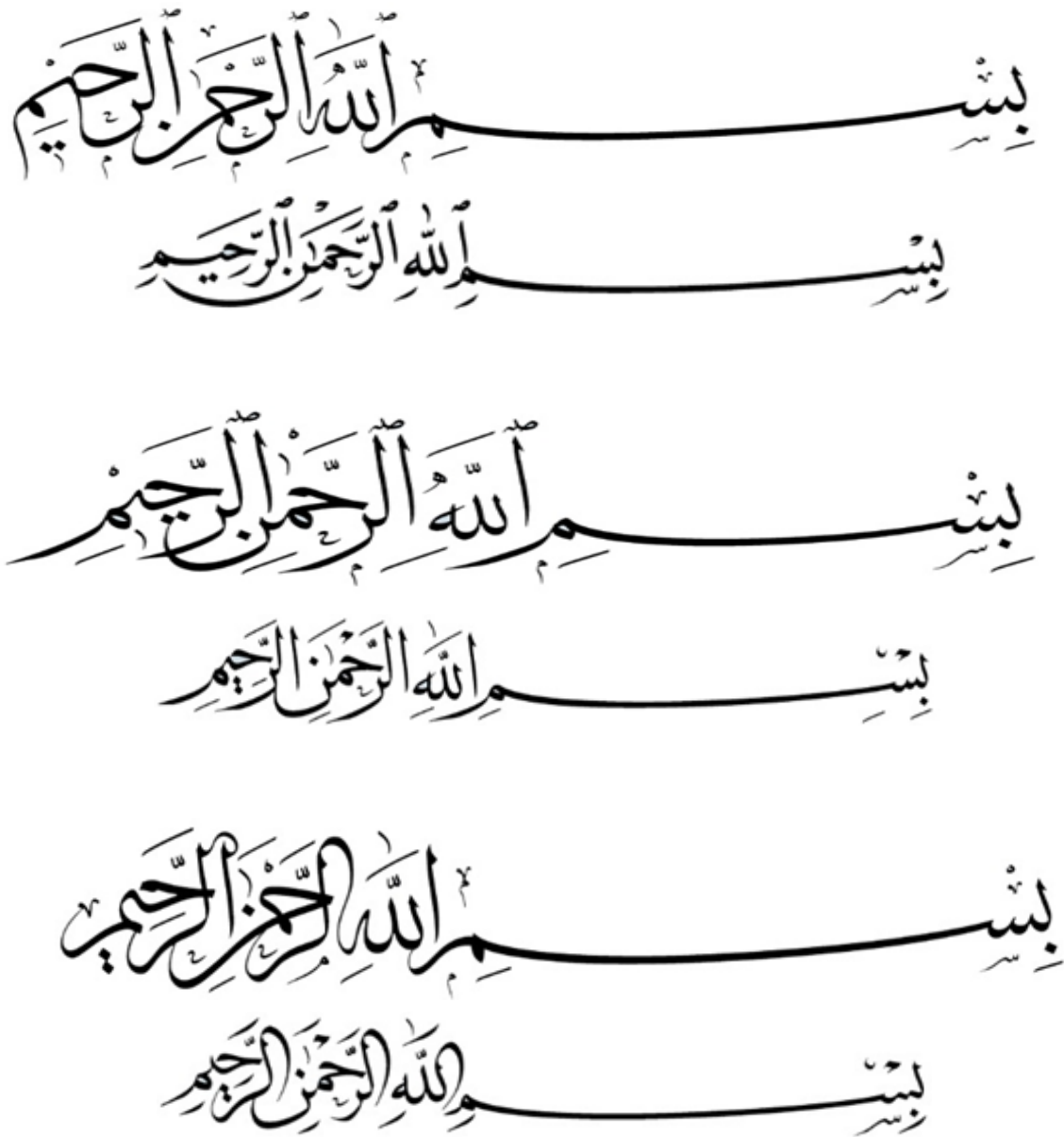


Figure 4. *Thuluth* and *Naskh*, *Muhaqqaq* and *Rayhani*, and *Tawqi* and *Riqa*. Differences can be seen in the sharpness of points and the proportions of straight-to-curved segments.

Ali ibn Hilal ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022) was a scribe with an artistic look at the movement and rhythm that found expression in the graceful curves and flowing lines. Ibn al-Bawwab's writings meticulously reproduce the *al-khatt al-mansub*'s strict proportions. After centuries, the continuing readability of his manuscripts attests to both the scribe's skill and the Ibn Muqlah's geometric innovation. He, who was famous for the elegance, harmony, and consistency of the script, perfected and beautified the calligraphic system of Ibn Muqlah and raised the *naskh* script to the position of a visual and aesthetic art worthy of the Koran by relying on the *al-khatt al-mansub* (Abbot, 1939b, p. 77).

Although Ibn al-Bawwab was not the first scribe to transcribe the Koran in the *naskh* script, he wrote a graceful *mushaf* in the well proportioned script, and after his specimen, the number of *naskh* Korans increased strikingly (Grabar, 1992, pp. 77-78) (Fig. 5). The visual design of his Koranic manuscript indeed comprises numerous writing styles, including *naskh* and *Kufic*. Ibn al-Bawwab effectively navigates several styles and uses differences in the script to visually differentiate the text's body from section titles, paratextual markers, and indexical tables (Rice, 1955, p. 12). As a result of these changes, the Arabic style variants' semiotic system was rearranged. Since scripts of *naskh* became geometrically standardised and easily readable for administrative and religious texts, the *Kufic* came to be increasingly ornamental. *Kufic* variants, alongside *al-khatt al-mansub*, were revitalised as a symbolic and decorative pattern. New *Kufic* scripts stressed visual and aesthetic shape rather than readability, including intricate woven, floriated, zoomorphic, and geometric designs (Schimmel, 1970). This experimentation was particularly common for architecture, metal, fabric, and other types of materials in which

the writing's communicative role was primarily symbolic or aesthetic rather than informational. Stylised *Kufic* might display Koranic verses, religious phrases, or religious figures' names as a running epigraph or it might shape religious content in the form of complicated visual puzzles. Since the legible scripts of *naskh* turned into markers of balance, moral standing, and textual content, *Kufic* design's resurgence rediscovered the plasticity of Arabic writing and reminded spectators of the divine secret.

After the beautification of scripts by Ibn al-Bawwab, the third master was Abul-Majd Jamal al-Din Yaqut. About his life, few details are definite, and many stuff are legends. As a youth, he was taken to Baghdad as a slave, where he served al-Mustasim Billah (r. 1242-58), the last caliph Abbasid, hence getting the nickname al-Mustasimi. Yaqut practised calligraphy in Baghdad under master Safi al-Din Abd al-Mumin al-Urmawi (d.1294), and like Ibn Muqla, became the Abbasid chancery's secretary. After Hulagu (r. 1256-1265), in 1258, took Baghdad, Yaqut stayed in the city, where his art flourished under new state support (Bloom, 2001, p. 109). Like his predecessor, Ibn al-Bawwab, he was the librarian and worked in Baghdad's *Madrasa al-Mustansiriyya* under Ibn al-Fuwati (d. 1323). Yaqut became well-known for his script, exemplary teaching, prodigious output, and way of trimming the pen.

The manuscripts of his work, unlike the reproduction of Ibn Muqlah's Koran by Ibn al-Bawwab, rarely endeavoured to rightly age their paper or reiterate the master's illumination (Roxburgh, 2003, pp. 42-43) (Fig. 6). Yaqut educated many scribes on the suitable utilisation of *al-aqlam al-sittah*. Six of his trainees perfected his technique and

style to the degree that they could sign works in their master's name (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 60). Specifically, Yaqut is recognised for inventing a new way of trimming the reed pen. He was able to slow the flow of ink by cutting the reed at a slightly curved angle (Welch, 1979, p. 30). This new pen gave greater elegance and variation in tracing the line's width.

Yaqut trimmed the *qalam* at a slightly curved angle. Thus, he changed the writing rule, since writing is dependent on the pen. Accordingly, his script is preferable to that of Ibn Bawwab for its delicacy and gracefulness, and not for the cause of the primary and fundamental rules; the writing's essence is identical to that Ibn Muqla invented from the dot, *alif*, and the circle (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 58).

Ascertaining Yaqut's works from extant specimens is difficult. His reputation means many individual examples and manuscripts in diverse scripts carry his signature, original and otherwise. Nearly every museum or major collection apparently has a piece on hand. The system of proportioned script, after Yaqut, came to be established as the Arabic calligraphic tradition's centerpiece. Yaqut's apprentices conveyed his scribal innovations and technical to subsequent generations and his style was extensively copied.

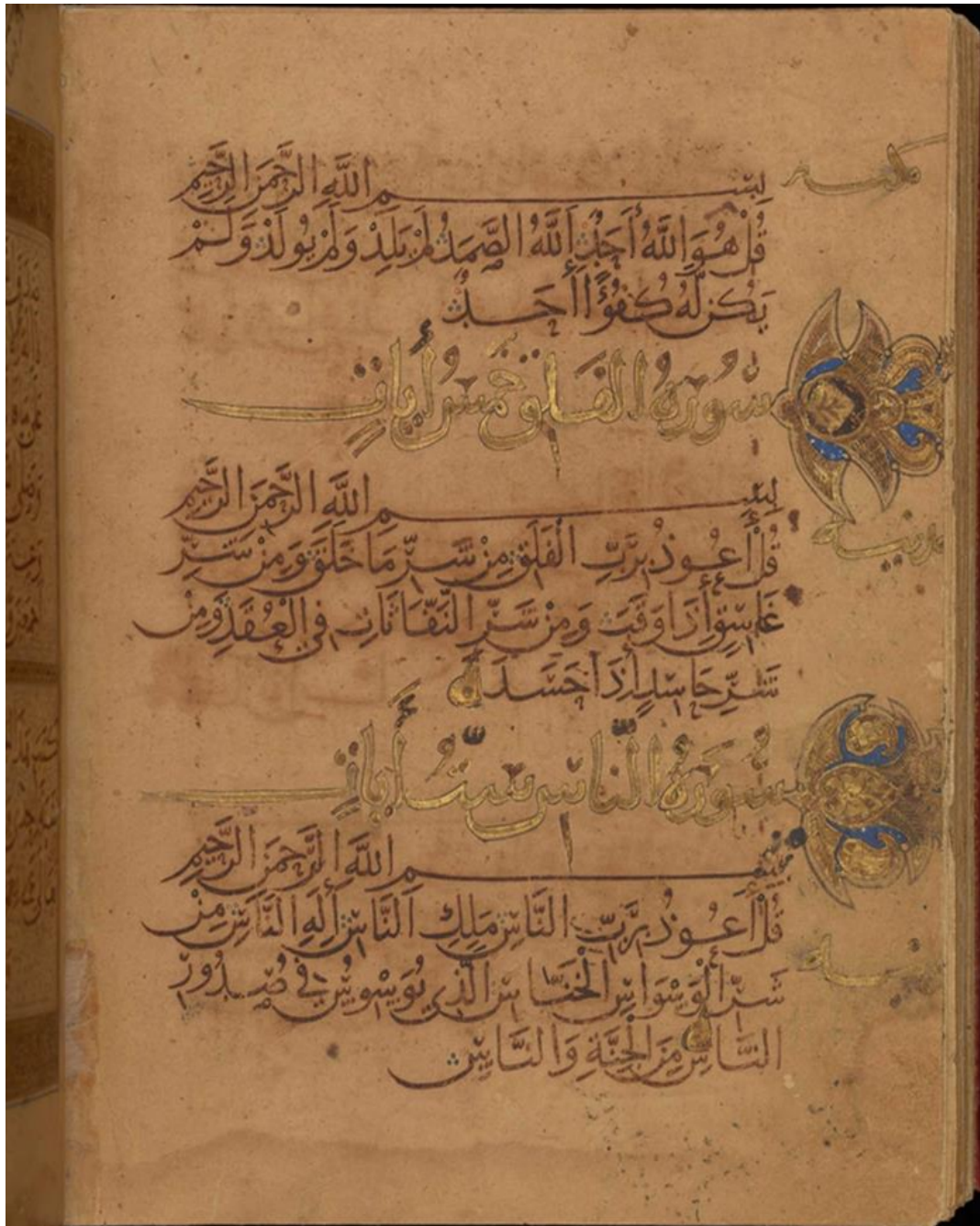


Figure 5. Ibn al-Bawwab, 1000-1001, *Sura 112* (الإخلاص), 113 (الفلق) and 114 (الناس) from a Koran, written in *Naskh* and *Rayhan*, Ink, colours and gold on paper, Baghdad. Retrieved from Chester Beatty Library.



Figure 6. Yaqut, 1286, *Sura 23* (المؤمنون):1-17 from a single-volume Koran manuscript, written in *rayhan*, Baghdad.

1.3. The Iranian System of Scripts

The tradition of Arabic calligraphy formalised the visual conventions of writing in the direction of religious, communicative, and artistic purposes. Scribal changes were political and the ongoing negotiation's result. On the one hand, sudden reforms in writing were interpreted as a threat to the right preservation of the Koranic text. On the other hand, the calligraphic beauty and aesthetic writing offered a visual technique for the Koranic celebration. With the formalisation of calligraphic tradition, the Iranian calligraphers explored calligraphy's symbolic role for religious and artistic goals. Their complicated designs turned into markers of wonder and authority in grand Korans, artistic display panels, and mosques. The development of calligraphy in Iran was energetic, such that every new generation perfected and mastered the older traditions and practises and periodically revitalised and revolutionised the established styles. Calligraphic artists continued to outrun their predecessors and achieve new heights until the 19th century.

1.3.1. Calligraphy under the Mongol and Turkoman Dynasties

In the early 13th century, the Mongol invasions disturbed the eastern Islamic lands' political and economic infrastructure, and the year that the caliphate was overthrown by the Mongols is often taken as a landmark. Nevertheless, in spite of the devastations wrought, many cultural and social norms persisted, and after these heathen warriors' conversion, Islam again appeared as the official religion across west Asia. This

was the era of Persianate culture and Mongol prestige (Morgan, 2004, pp. 131-6), and the Persian speaking lands, under the domination of Mongol¹⁰ and Turkoman¹¹ dynasties, set the basis and standards in calligraphic tradition like other arts. The Six Pens (round styles) continued to be the main scripts for writing, and the Korans produced during this period are some of the best recognised. One of the important innovations of the time was the expansion of calligraphy to other areas and media, including stucco and tile. The increasing dominance of the Persian language and literature also caused the development of hanging scripts, *ta'liq* (تعليق), and *nasta'liq* (نستعلیق).

The seat of the caliphate Abbasids, Baghdad, remained the main centre of calligraphy, particularly for manuscripts, commonly written utilising *thuluth*, *naskh*, *muhaqqaq* and *rayhani* and frequently elaborated with illustration and illumination. The round scripts canonised by Yaqut stayed the principal styles in Iraq as well as Iran, and Haydar's work, the counterpart of Ahmad al-Suhrawardi, indicates how calligraphic

¹⁰ Perhaps it was during the reign of IlKhans that books' illuminated pages were for the first time ornamented with abstract decorative motifs. This may have been because of Chinese influence on painting, and forasmuch as handwriting was considered to be a part of painting, it was certain to be affected thereby. During this period, the illuminated manuscripts indicate geometrical compositions of striking charm and beauty, the favourite colours being blue and gold. The employ of gold dust was a special attribute of the book illuminations produced by followers of Mani. There is unquestionably that the Iranian artists never obliterated their national legacy and utilised the background colours chiefly blue and gold, in sharp contrast to other colours in the foreground with sensibility and proficiency (Sharif, 1966, p. 1181).

¹¹ In the early 15th century, under the backing of the Timurid sovereign, the revival of Ilkhanid traditions expanded to the arts, including calligraphy, and the calligraphic masters adopted the scripts canonised by Yaqut. The Timurid princes were very creative, celebrated devotees and skillful administrators of Fine Arts. It was during the Timurid rule that calligraphic art found its full development, and this art underwent a revolutionary transformation, and the *nasta'liq* script was invented.

artists adapted these scripts to architecture (fig. 7). Qadi Ahmad, the Safavid chronicler, included a brief biography of Seyed Haydar amongst the Yaqut's six followers. Haydar was a Sufi and a well-known instructor of calligraphy, who educated the viziers Taj al-Din Ali Shah (d. 1324) and Rashid al-Din's son Ghiyath al-Din Mohammad (d. 1336). He was famous as *gunda nivis*, described as the writer in large characters or the majuscule writer, an apt epithet as the two surviving works autographed by Haydar are striking inscriptions engraved in the stucco overlay of buildings in central Iran. (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 61).

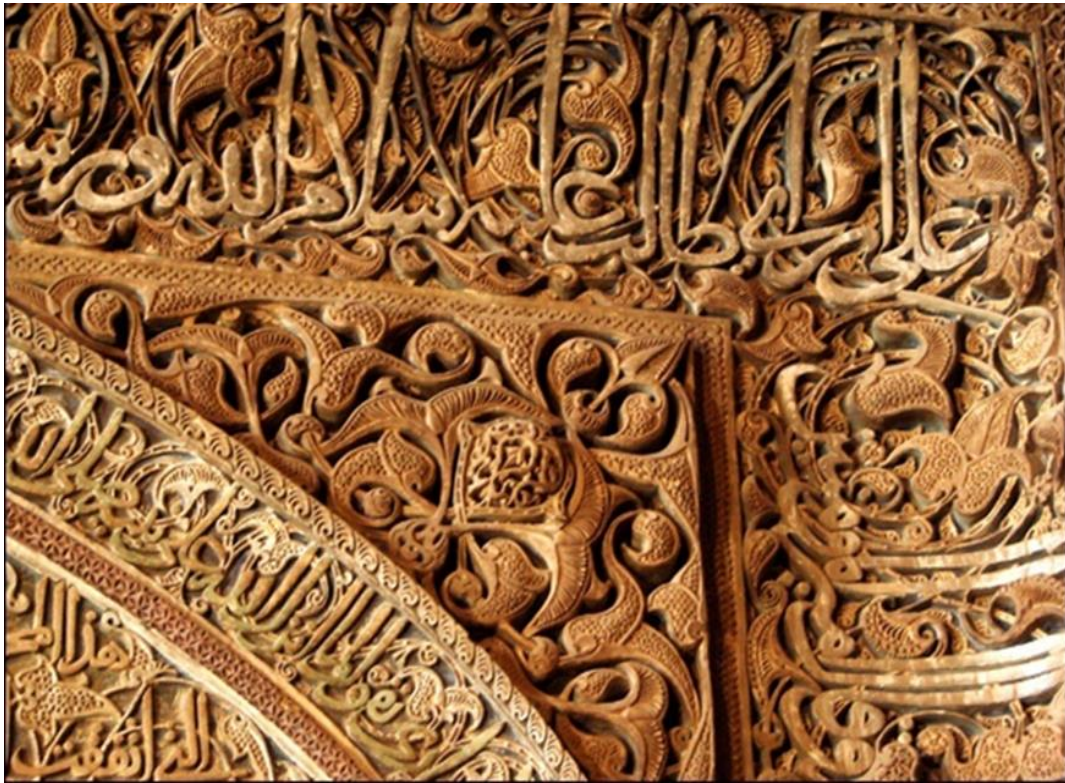


Figure 7. Haydar, 1310, details of the inscriptions on the stucco mihrab in the Jāmeḥ Mosque of Isfahan. The texts contain several hadith, including one on the authority of the Prophet's son-in-law Imam Ali about the 8 blessings that accrue to the Prophet's descendants. The inscriptions carved on 3 levels in different sizes of *thuluth* script on a ground of foliage arabesque exemplify the epigraphic style. They indicate how the calligraphers' complicated designs were performed on several levels and concave surfaces by artist stucco carvers.

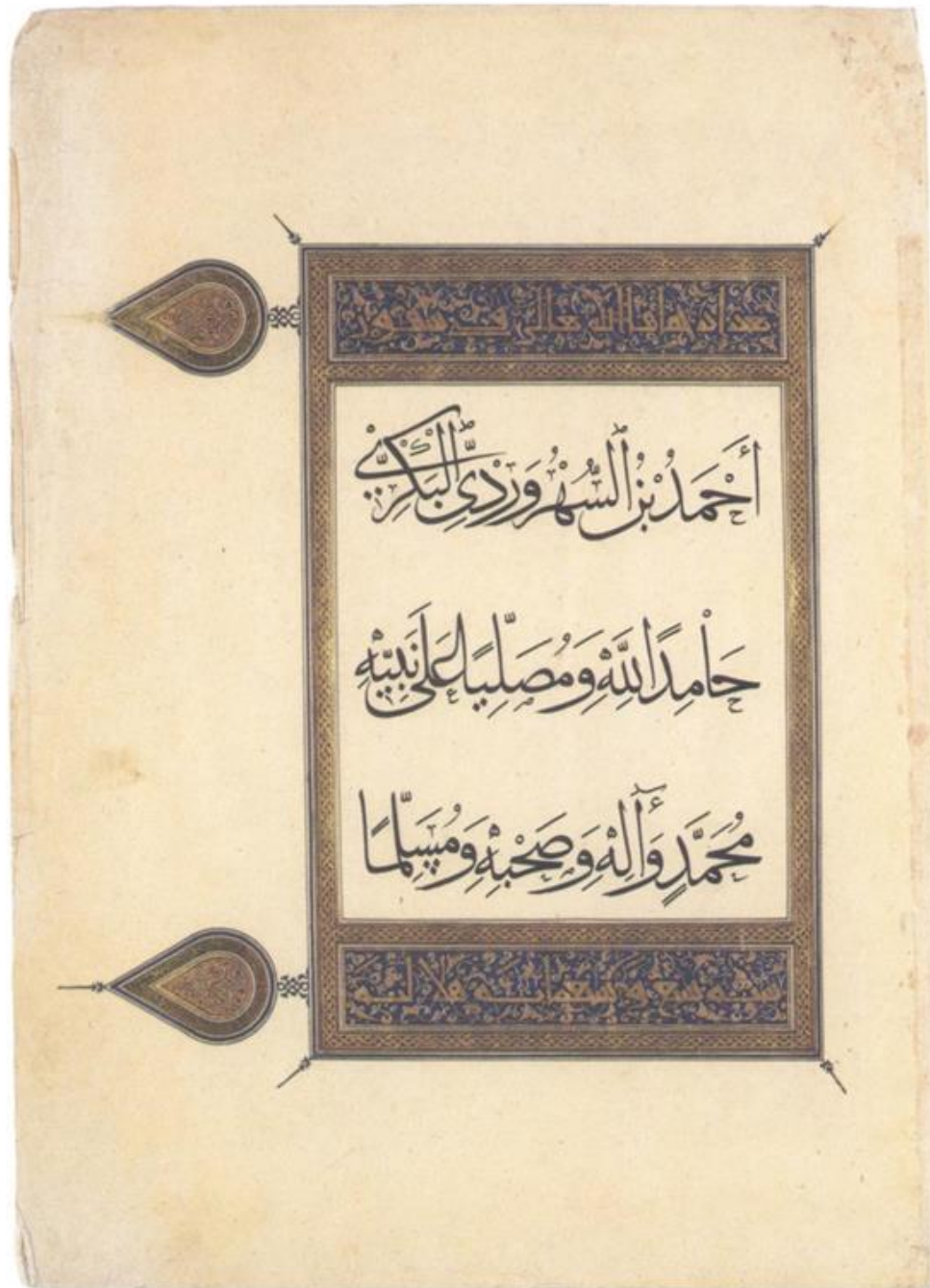


Figure 8. Ahmad al-Suhrawardi, 1307-8, *colophon page of a Koran*, penned in *Muhaqqaq* and *Kufic*, Ink, colours, and gold on paper, 51.3 x 36.83 cm, Baghdad, Retrieved from (Schimmel & Rivolta, 1992, p. 16).

While Yaqut and his followers in Iran and Iraq were refining the Six Pens (round scripts), calligraphers in the same area were also developing *ta'liq* and *nasta'liq*. Almost all art historians credit Khwaja Taj al-Din Salmani, who worked in the court atelier under the Sultan Abu Sa'īd Gurkan (r. 1451-69), with the invention of *ta'liq*, and Mir Ali Tabrizi, his contemporary, with the invention of *nasta'liq* (Faza'īlī, 1983, p. 453; Ahmad Munshi Qummi, 1974; Sharif, 1966. pp. 1182). However, the extant examples show that these styles had been formed much sooner and that these prominent scribes, just like their predecessors, strived only to refine and standardise scripts that had developed over a long period (Faza'īlī, 1983, p. 445). In Iran, both hanging styles evolved and then expanded to Turkey and India. They were seldom employed for writing Arabic and came to be never prevalent in the Arabian lands. *Ta'liq*, which literally means 'suspended' or 'hanging' script, was the conventional chancery handwriting employed at this time. A highly stylised style, it is typically said to be shaped from the scripts *naskh*, *tawqi*, and *riqa* (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 84). *Ta'liq*, with these scripts, shares many traits but is more stylised. It carries extreme contrasts between expansion and compression, connected letters, curvilinear elements, and extraneous loops, all peculiarities that make it intricate and hard for the beginner to decipher (Fig. 9). This script was employed seldom for manuscripts, occasionally for calligraphic specimens and poetry, and commonly for official documents.

By the late 13th century, *ta'liq* script had attained a definitive style, often named *ta'liq -i Qadim* (تعليق قديم) or *ta'liq -i asl* (تعليق اصل) (Fazā'īlī, 1983, p. 403), probably

resulted to some extent from the burgeoning need of Ilkhanid bureaucracy to standardise written Iranian. To write faster, secretaries simplified the script by increasing the unconventional ligatures and removing the pointing of many letters, traits that made it arduous to read the script as well as to change the text. The size of some letters was reduced, whilst others were penned in new forms or with thinner strokes. This new script recognised as *shikasta ta'liq* (شکسته تعلیق) (broken *ta'liq*) to distinguish it from the older script, was systematically used from the late 14th century (Ibid, p. 398).

After the invention of the *ta'liq* by Khwaja Taj al-Din Salmani, this script was perfected by the chief secretary under Abu Sa'īd, Khwaja Abd al-Hayy Astarabadi (Ahmad Munshi Qummi, 1974, pp. 42-43). In his writing, there exist two *ravish* (varieties), the first variety (a more flowing script) is identified by extreme elegance and movement. In this model, orders and charters of the Abu Sa'īd were penned. Thus, too, wrote the calligraphers of Khorasan, including Maulana Darwish, Mir-Mansur, and Khwaja Jan Jibra'īl. The second is ascertained by firmness, taste, maturity, and solidity, and it was utilised in the orders of Aqqoyunlu Sultans such as Hasan-bek, Sultan Yaqub, and others. The Azarbayjan and Iraq's secretaries, and especially Maulana Idris and Mohammad Tamimi followed that *ravish* (Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, 1959, p. 84). *Ta'liq*, from the 15th century, became the main chancery script utilised in Iran and the eastern Islamic lands. Calligraphers in the Ottoman chancery attempted to convert *ta'liq* into a literary writing style, but this endeavour was short-run, and *ta'liq* stayed mainly the script for inscribing documents, whilst *nasta'liq*, appeared as the literary script for writing

Persian, especially poems. The name *nasta'liq* is a contraction of the *naskh-i ta'liq* (نسخ (تعليق), meaning a suspended or hanging *naskh*.

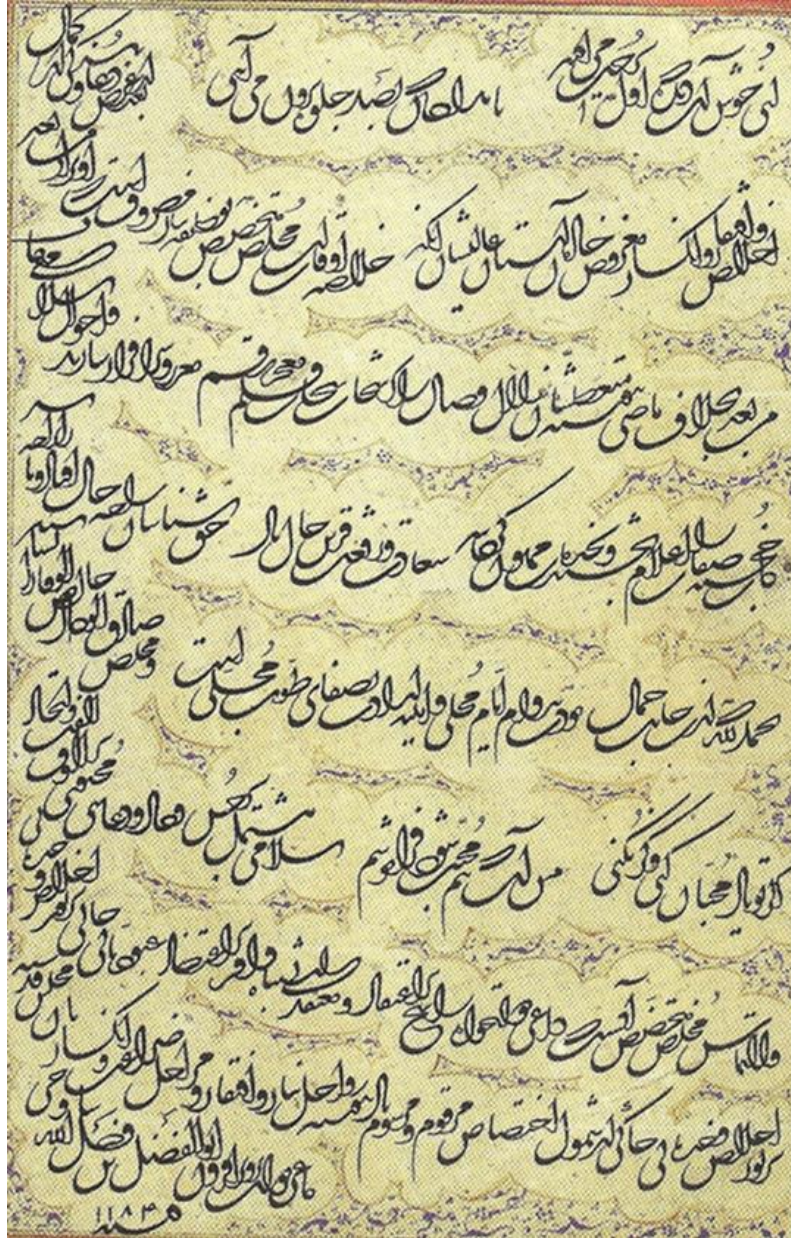


Figure 9. Abulfazl Sawji, 1184 A.H., written in *ta'liq*. Retrieved from (Aghdashloo, 2011).

Nasta'liq is especially appropriate for inscribing mystical epics or love lyrics. It is, like *naskh*, readable and can be penned compactly and rapidly, but it is more beautiful and graceful. This script slopes from the upper right to the lower left, and in it, most strokes are round, with just one-third ($\frac{1}{3}$) to one-sixth ($\frac{1}{6}$) of the strokes straight. Therefore, the calligrapher's pen moves more easily and freely than in *naskh*. Letters and words penned in *nasta'liq*, like *naskh*, have determined dimensions that are ascertained with the *nokte* formed by pressing the pen's nib on the paper. In this script, letters and words are inscribed so compactly that there is slight space for pointing and other diacritical signs are often overlooked unless required to avoid obscurity. Moreover, in *nasta'liq* script words are often penned separately and without joined, except in calligraphic specimens and epigraphs. The *nasta'liq*'s beauty and grace lie in its balanced distribution of short and tall, open and closed, thick and thin, in the combinations and the artful forming of letters, and in the consistency and symmetry with which letters and words are placed alongside.

1.3.2. Calligraphy under the Safavid

The Safavids were a religious sovereignty based upon Shiism that continued for almost two centuries. With the imposition of Shiism as the state-enforced dogma on the whole of society, a new dimension of socio-cultural identity began to take root. Notwithstanding the expansive ethnical and linguistic variety within the Safavid realm, the state-supported Shiite credo with a Persian interpretation and the Arabic theological semblance demonstrated to be significantly enduring. This alter influenced the election of

texts penned, as new poems and devotions to the Shiite imams came to be introduced into the traditional index of the Koran and hadiths.

The rhythmic and fluid eastern script of *nasta'liq* canonised by calligraphic master Sultan Ali Mashhadi¹² became the dominant style in the west of Iran, as artists tended to work in the Safavid monarchical *kitabkhaneh* (scriptorium). Shah Mahmud Nishapuri (d. 1564) (He is the third of the trio, along with Mir-Ali and Sultan-Ali) was the most renowned scribe employed there. The influence of master Mir Imad al-Hassani Qazvini (assassinated 1615), who was recognised for his crisp and unique writing style, in later centuries extended to Ottoman Turkey, where *nasta'liq*'s practitioners still follow his specimens precisely. He became the most noteworthy calligrapher at Shah Abbas's court and the chief competitor of Ali Riza Abbasi, a designer of epigraphs. His creative compositions were immensely known and popular both the duration of his lifetime and after his demise, and his calligraphic specimens, as those of his predecessor, master Mir Ali Haravi, were gathered diligently. He is most celebrated for his quatrains inscribed in diagonal structure canonised by Mir Ali Haravi (1476-1544), but with a heavier, bolder line and an excessive contrast between thin and thick strokes (Fazā'ilī, 1983, pp. 522-532) (Fig. 10). In Iran from the mid-15th century, the *nasta'liq* script was preferred for

¹² *Nasta'liq* found its classical shape under Sultan Ali Mashhadi, a pupil of Azhar. He spent most of his career in Herat working in the Timurid court (Isfahani, 1990, p. 127). After retirement in 1514, he wrote a verse treatise about calligraphy. It comprises both autobiographical and practical information and shows the close association between the practice and religious discipline of calligraphy. He penned some of the best manuscripts of the late 15th century (Faza'ilī, 1983, pp. 462-467), including a copy of Attar Nishabouri's *Manteq al-Tayr* (Conference of the Birds).

fine transcribes of literary productions, and for calligraphic exemplars, which were often gathered in albums. Practitioners refined the presentation of these calligraphic compositions, utilising finer paper, often brightly coloured, and highly polished, as well as coloured inks, and often placing their planned compositions into ornamented margins¹³.

Calligraphic artists also streamlined the style of *nasta 'liq*, and developed a script entitled *shikasta nasta 'liq* (شکسته نستعلیق) (broken *nasta 'liq*), commonly shortened to *shikasta* (Ibid, p. 451). In this new script, calligraphers are permitted to make more unauthorised connections than in *nasta 'liq*, and these connections distinguish *shikasta nasta 'liq* from all other scripts. In other styles, a non-connecting letter causes the calligrapher to end his pen stroke before the word's end. Hence, the calligrapher may require more pen strokes to add diacritics or write a single word. But calligrapher, in *shikasta*, may even inscribe more than one word in a single pen stroke, for unauthorised

¹³ In addition to developing the traditional scripts (both hanging and round styles), calligraphers in Iran also elaborated other techniques of coalescing pictures with these scripts in what can be known as pictorial writing, and the outcomes often blur the differentiation between painting and calligraphy. Besides their instant visual impact, these works often contain puns and riddles, both visual and verbal, and occasionally even an amalgamation of the two. One form was zoomorphic calligraphy. In Iran, Zoomorphic compositions, known since at least the 15th century, gained particular popularity, as calligraphers dexterously shaped letters, words, and phrases into the form of human faces, animals, and birds. Micrography was a second form of pictorial writing, the technique of employing words penned in a small script to shape an image. Since medieval times, it has been utilised in both Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts. The first specimens form geometric figures and objects, also calligraphers in this period went one step further and arranged the letters and words penned in the *ghubar* (dust) (غبار) script to spell out a larger phrase. In a third technique known as *gulzar* (full of flowers) (گلزار), artists substituted the tiny words utilised in micrography to embellish a large word or phrase with flowers. In Iran, the technique has been employed since at least the early 16th century.

connections are allowed both within a word and between words. These unauthorised connections signify that calligraphers can inscribe *shikasta* quicker than other styles. In this script, vertical letters come to be shrunken, and the combination of short verticals and extra ligatures forms an uncommonly dense script. To increase rapidity, calligraphers, when writing smooth out the curves, bumps, and teeth. *Shikasta nasta'liq* script is the latest accomplishment of the creative and innovative Iranian calligraphers that were formed over the time of the Safavid rule and acquired a definitive style during the period 17th and 18th centuries. One of the first trailblazers was Mohammad Shafi Haravi Husayni (d. 1670-1), and another was Murtadaquli Khan Shamlu (d. 1688-9) (Isfahani, 1990, p. 179). But with the emergence of Abdul Majid Taliqani (d. 1773), this style reached the height of perfection and beauty and there was a change in calligraphy. In spite of various 19th-century endeavours to streamline it, alongside contemporary prose, it stayed the script of decrees and documents, whilst *nasta'liq* kept its superiority as the principal calligraphic style. *Shikasta nasta'liq* is still a favourite by Iranians, and a fine page of *Shikasta* script, when performed by a classical master or by a contemporary practitioner, often brings to mind one of modern graphic art, just as a page of glorious initial *Kufic* has an iconic quality to it (Schimmel & Rivolta, 1992, pp. 47-50) (Fig. 11).



Figure 10. Mir Imad, 1608, Leaf from a poem by Amir Khusrou Dehlavi, penned in *nasta'liq*, 25.57 x 19.05 cm. Ink, colours and gold on paper. Iran, Isfahan. Retrieved from (Schimmel & Rivolta, 1992, p. 42).

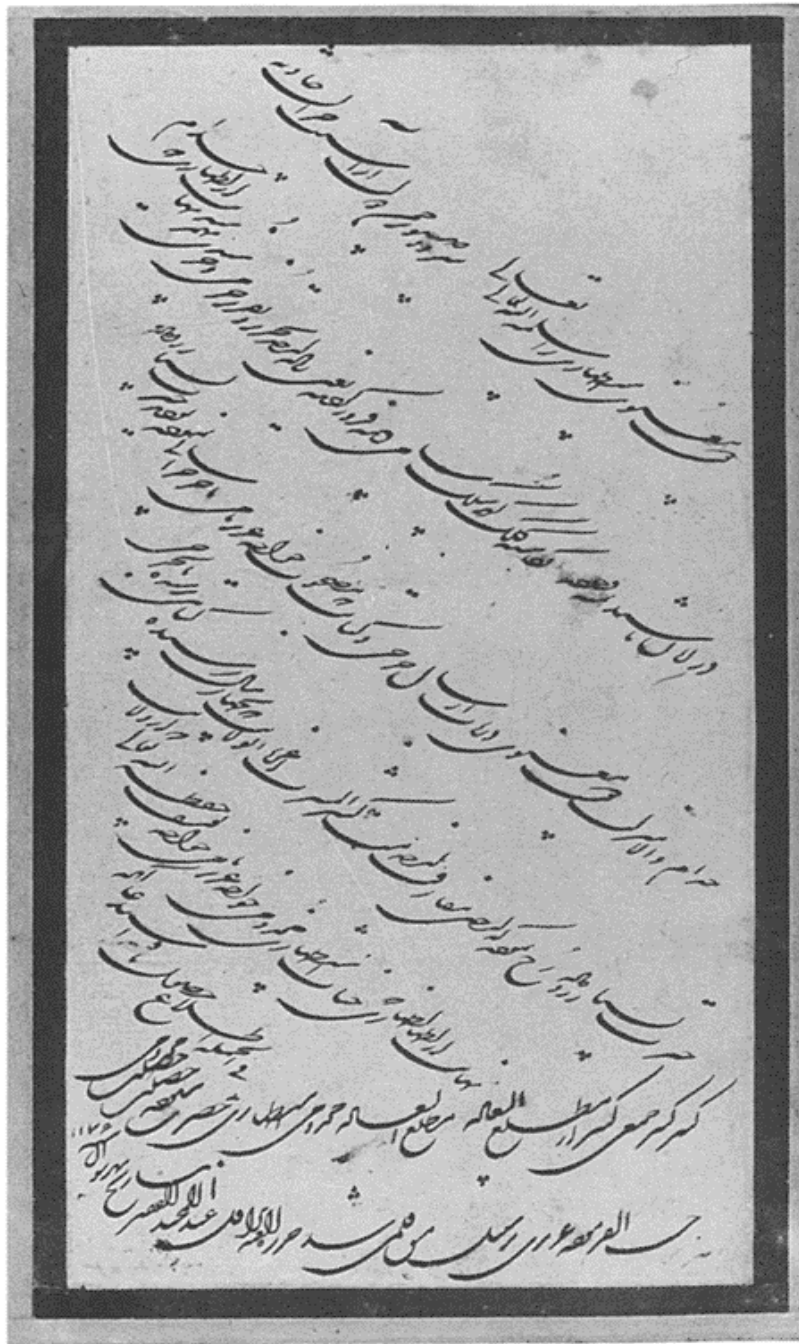


Figure 11. Abdul Majid Taliqani, 1760-61, written in *shikasta nasta'liq*, Ink on paper, 24.13 x 11.43 cm. Iran. Retrieved from (Ibid, p. 50).

1.3.3. Calligraphy under the Qajar

The Qajar sovereigns were well-informed in the traditional Persian arts and literature, and during their rule, many beautiful books were produced, usually penned in a compact and elegant *nasta'liq* sumptuously decorated. However, few specimens have been published, especially in the West, because traditionally this period has been taken as one of downturn and decline. Now even as the arts of this period are being reexamined, most Western studies focus on architecture, figural painting, or other arts. Today, this situation is being rectified to some extent in Iran, and various centres of Islamic and calligraphy are producing comprehensive investigations on 19th-century calligraphic masters, including Mirza Mohammad Riza Kalhur (1829-92). Kalhur was the most significant calligrapher of the 19th century, credited for revitalising the *nasta'liq* style perfected by Mir Imad al-Hassani. Mir Imad's heirs in the 17th and early 18th centuries had developed a more elongated *nasta'liq* style with greater spaces between the words, while Kalhur revived the more compacted tradition, inscribing words on a smaller measure in a single movement, making shorter connections and strokes, and piling letters and words together to get a thicker structure (Fig. 12). The most renowned of his trainees was Mirza Zayn al-Abidin Sharifi Qazvini, famous as the *Malik al-Khattatin* (the king of calligraphers) (ملك الخطاطين). In terms of spreading Kalhur's calligraphic art and style, his most significant pupil was Seyed Morteza Barghani, who taught his master's style to his two sons, Hassan and Hossein Mirkhani. These calligraphers, who are regarded as Kalhur's apprentices by an intermediary, endeavoured to teach contemporary

calligraphers by founding the *Anjuman-i Khushnivisan-i Iran* (Society of Iranian Calligraphers).

In the 19th century, *nasta'liq* was also adopted for lithographed books. At this time, Iranian society was taking the first steps toward modernisation, and calligraphy was included in applied arts and was accompanied by these evolutions, pursuing new tendencies vis-à-vis the requirements of contemporary society in the previous century. Kalhur was fully aware of the changes he had begun. He understood his time well, and because he wrote as a calligrapher for lithographic newspapers, he recognised the definite replacement of printing overwriting. Kalhur was a practical thinker and was aware of his path and purpose and tried to combine writing and calligraphy with printing to prevent its decline. He is the last great calligrapher of the Qajar era and the indirect initiator of the next age. The period, after a relatively long introduction of forty years, entered the age of modernity. After Kalhur, a new era began with Imad al-Kitab (1861-1936) that continues up to this time (today, our traditional calligraphy has been influenced more by Imad al-Kitab than by Kalhur). This calligrapher is mentioned as the perfecter of the Kalhur style. Without being Kalhur's direct pupil, he practised from his printed books, learned his manner with great loyalty and obsession, and passed it on to others without interfering too much with this method (Fig. 13). Imad al-Kitab experienced the troubled and critical period of the Constitutional Revolution, and not only calligraphers but also painters, writers, and intellectuals contributed to this experience. He is one of the artists who encountered problems when confronted with tradition and modernity that had not

previously - and not so severely - disturbed their minds and work processes. Generally, our contemporary calligraphy begins with Imad al-Kitab, and he is the last link in the chain of old masters of calligraphy who connected this art to contemporary calligraphers.



Figure 12. Page of *mashq* by Mohammad Riza Kalhur, undated, 13.5 x 21 cm. Retrieved from Ali Jamasb Collection, Tehran.

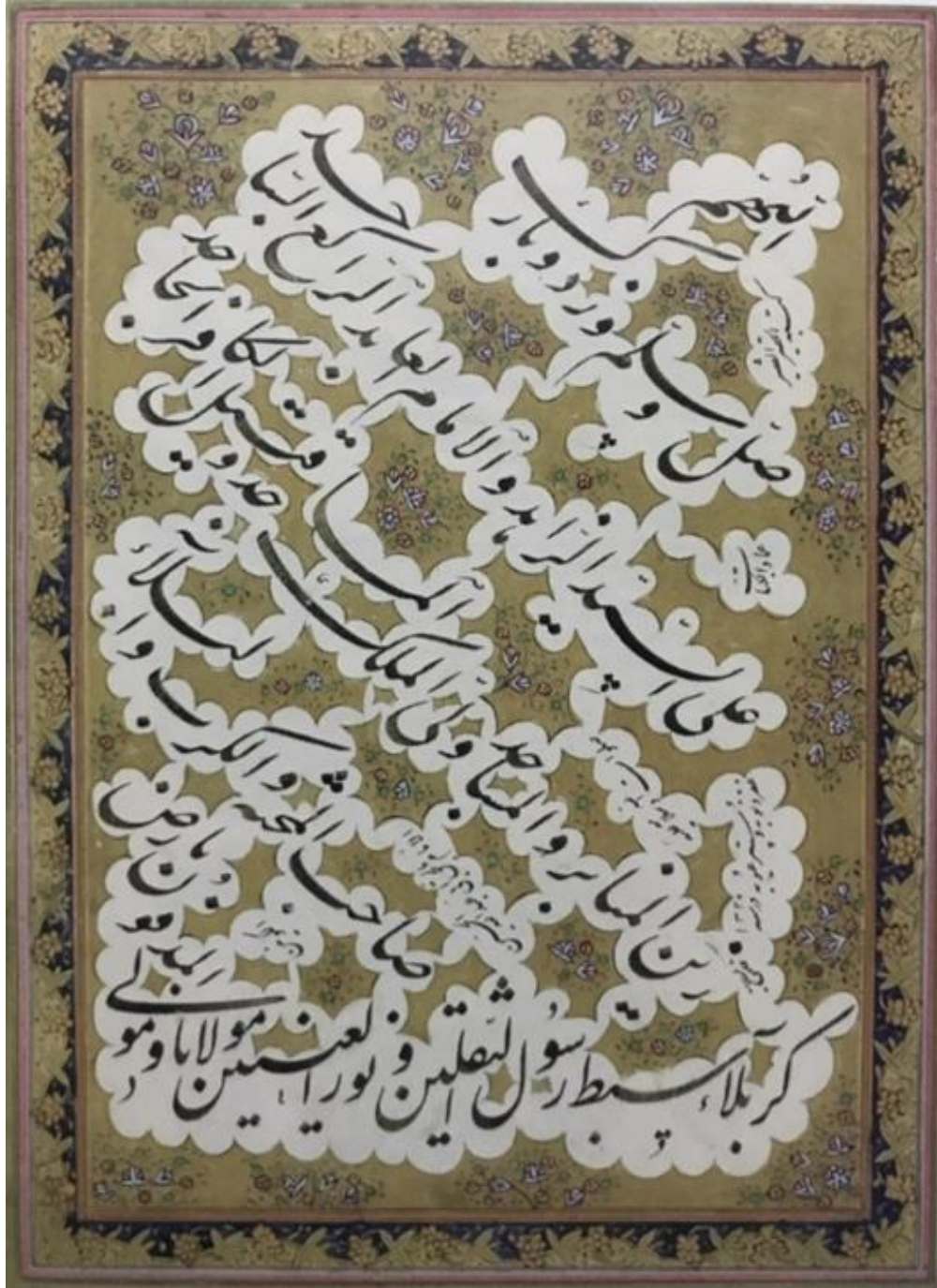


Figure 13. Imad al-Kitab, undated, written in *nasta'liq*, Retrieved from (Aghdashloo, 2011).

1. 4. The Art of Calligraphy: *Siyah Mashq*

Siyah mashq (black writing), refers to the calligraphic introductory practise sheets performed by traditional scribes and calligraphers. An inseparable part of the system whereby calligraphers moved from internship to master status, the repeating, copying, and combinations of letters and words were intended to reinforce the hand and instill the discipline and concentration required to transform into a master calligrapher. The practise permitted the calligrapher to ascertain the measure of the script to be utilised, to try out the reed pen, to consider whether the ink was of the proper consistency, and to plan the overall visual influence of the composition. Also, it enabled him to improve the forms of the letters and control any stiffness and unsteadiness in the hand. The typical outcome was a dark, hard-worked sheet with little ground becoming visible through. This process is similar to a painter who executes sketches before beginning on a painting's final version. These practise sheets were not restricted to the Persianate territory but also are found in the West of the Islamic universe and Ottoman Turkey. In Arabic, they are referred to as *musawwada* (مُسَوِّدَة) (blackened), and in Turkish they are called *karalama* (قره لامه), a verbal noun from the Ottoman Turkish (*kara*, "black"). *Siyah mashq*, furthermore, were not confined to one specific script but are found in a broad range of them. In Iran, *nasta'liq* and *shikasta* scripts are in more numbers found partly due to the prevalence of these two styles at the time *siyah mashq* appeared as an art form and also to their distinctive visual characteristics that perfectly matched the compositional requisites of *siyah mashq*. Such characteristics included the unique balance between the individual

letters' thinness and thickness and the flexibility of these styles for moving freely over and beyond the baseline. Of course, *Mashq* is an integral part of training calligraphy. Usually, teaching was done in very small groups, one-on-one, or teacher-to-student. The master or teacher would inscribe the *sarmashq* (model) while the pupil watched. The pupil would practise the *mashq* and take it to the master for correction. He would cover page after page, or *lawha* (wooden slate) after *lawha* with practises, which either had to be thrown away once both sides of the paper were completely covered or again and again washed off from the *lawha*¹⁴. Then, the pupil would move on to learn how to shape letters and words by writing and studying compound exercises. After these were completed successfully, the teacher issued the pupil an *ijaza* (diploma) authorising him/her to work as a professional master or scribe. This process took between three and ten years. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, Iran had no tradition of getting *ijazas* as finished artworks with fine calligraphy and elaborate illumination. *Mufradat*, which were the first group of beginner calligraphy lessons, included single letters and then letters in pairs that were considered for teaching shape, proportion, and control and are characterised by their linear and simple horizontal formats. In a page from the *Mufradat* album by Yaqut al-Mustasimi, the top panel includes a single line displaying the letter *sin* (س) in *muhaqqaq* script in combination with other letters in alphabetic order. The panel beneath shows the letter *jim* (ج) in combination with other alphabetical letters. The handwriting is surrounded by golden cloud forms on a red background and is framed with a decorative margin, which

¹⁴ Calligraphers usually practised on paper or on wooden slates. When completely covered, the slates were washed and reutilised, since the ink used was soluble in water.

was possibly added later. *Mufradat* albums like this one indicate the physical shape of a chain of transfer from master to pupil, which stretches from past times to today (Safwat, 1996, p. 13) (fig. 14). Such pages were typically illuminated and incorporated into albums. These were assembled by masters who were at the height of their professions and imply that calligraphic artists, no matter how well-known or advanced, saw themselves to be continually learning. Thus, these albums demonstrate both the master's skill and his continual seeking of perfection (Ibid, p. 40).



Figure 14. Yaqut Mustasimi, 13th century, *page from a mufradat album*, Baghdad. Upper part 16.8 x 24.9 cm., lower part 27.8 x 36.7 cm. Retrieved from Nasser D Khalili Collection.

The symbiotic relationship between calligraphy and mysticism has been extensively studied by scholars, especially Annemarie Schimmel. Also, many calligraphers and scribes were faithful Sufis for whom accomplishing *mashq* was equivalent to meditating on divine glory and beauty. As the late 16th-century poet and master calligrapher Baba Shah Isfahani stated, *mashq* is a contemplative practise and a vehicle by which the luminous sparks of the actual beloved's beauty emerge in the scribe's vision (Baba Shah, as cited in Ernst, 1992, p. 284). True mystical focus is at the heart of executing *mashq*. This undivided concentration is akin to the Sufi mystics' mesmerising meditation as they reiterate the name of Allah in the *dhikr* or remembrance ritual, and the rhythmic reiteration of the letters on the page is a visual similar to the mystics' metrical repetition of the name of Allah. In the calligraphy and painting treatises of the 16th and 17th centuries and in the prefaces of the album, we gain a wealth of information and awareness about *siyah mashq*. These sources help us to better understand such works and set them within their historical and cultural contexts. Baba Shah discusses in his treatise *Adab al-Mashq* (آداب المشق) at length the discipline, rigor required and spiritual commitment in doing *mashq*. He says there are 3 levels of competence in the practise of calligraphy. All steps are equally essential, and each needs to be mastered in order. The first is *mashq-i nazari* (visual *mashq*), in which the pupil studies the master's handwriting and watches its spiritual features. The second is *mashq-i qalami* (pen practise), which requires transcribing from a master's handwriting. The apprentice commences by copying *mufradat* (isolated letters) in the master's pen so that he comprehends and learns the

shape of every letter or word in the style wherein it was inscribed. After that, he may be given short compositions. In pen practise, it is of utmost significance that the pupil pays no attention to inscribing that conflicts with the specimen to be copied. The student must consider the elements of the master's pattern and seek help in *hemmat* (concentration) from the calligraphic masters' departed spirits. This will take at least a year. Eventually, it is possible to endeavour the third step, *mashq-i khayali* (imaginative practise).

Imaginative practise goes beyond copying and entails that the calligrapher utilises his imagination as the background against which the shapes of beauty emerge. In imaginative practise, the calligrapher exclusively uses his own nature's power to write every structure that seems to him. The benefit of this kind of practise is that it makes the calligrapher a master of *tasarruf* (spontaneity). The first extant artistic pages of *siyah mashq* were formed by Mir Imad in the late 16th century (fig. 15).

Siyah mashq was introduced as an art form in Iran just after Mir Imad Hassani made a trip in 1594-95 to the Ottoman Empire and encountered the *karalama* (black scribbles) in the provincial cities of Aleppo, Baghdad, and Damascus. *Siyah mashq* had served just a practical goal in Iran before this. Turkish *Karalama* has a characteristic musical quality. The alphabetical characters can be interpreted as the musical notes' visual manifestations flowing into infinity, with superimposed and interlaced lines. Ottoman calligraphic artists saved, signed, and illuminated their *karalama*, recognising them as independent works of art long before their Iranian counterparts gave the same status to *siyah mashq* (fig. 16). Besides Mir Imad's journey to the Ottoman Empire, what

seems to have acted as a stimulus for the transformation of the function and meaning of *siyah mashq* in late 16th and 17th centuries Iran was a more general change in taste amongst supporters of art and a widening of the patronage base (Babaie et al., 2004). Artists increasingly became independent from royal support, and the change in economic conditions accompanied by the emigration of artists to the Ottoman Empire and India caused the decline of manuscripts and the prosperity of single-page calligraphy, drawings, and paintings (Welch, 1976, pp. 1-16 and 196-200). Moreover, in 1587 when Abbas I came to the throne, the Kizilbash nobility, who had established their own bibliothecas in the provinces, dominated the support of the arts of the book that traditionally had been centred at the royal court. Though some artists stayed in Qazvin, many moved to the provinces, where they gained ready patronage among the Kizilbash. For instance, Farhad Khan Karamanlu, the ruler of Azerbaijan and later of Fars, was an outstanding Kizilbash patron whose library and workshop included the renowned calligraphers Ali Reza Abbasi and Mir Emad (Babaie et al., 2004, p. 114-16). The advent of a new class of supporters who were able to purchase individual pages caused artists to adjust to the requirements and needs of these clients. It is possible that the emergence and expansion of single-page artworks have an incentive for the presentation of *siyah mashq* in the area of the commodity. In the 18th century, a group of *siyah mashq* pages by Mir Imad was included in a renowned album, now in St. Petersburg's Academy of Sciences, that contains Persian and Indian calligraphic pages, drawings, and paintings dating from the 16th to the 18th century. In style and colour, the *siyah mashq* folios' illuminated margins visually complement those of the other pages in the album. The elegance and

beauty of the *mashq* folios in this album lie in the letters' purity and balance and the compositions' clarity. The repetition and arrangement of letters and words create a sense of rhythm on the page. Characters appear upside down or overlap, and many of these pages from any direction can be observed and do not pursue a linear sequence. In these pages, the *siyah mashq*'s form and technique triumph over text, the content having negligible meaning. These works of art have a remarkable abstract attribute; the bold shapes of the individual calligraphic characters, and their arrangement on the page are what prepare the medium of connection between the calligrapher and audience. In many cases, the *nokte* above or below letters are removed, so as not to distract from the forms of the letters. These specimens of *siyah mashq* are the most personal and candid artistic expression of the calligrapher and indicate his direct imprint or presence on the page as he struggles with perfecting the letters' shapes and experiments with novel compositional characters. They represent an alliance between the artist and his work and can be seen as the expression of his very moral essence (fig. 17).



Figure 15. Mir Imad, datable before 1600, *practise sheet with the bismillah, the Fatiha, and a Persian quatrain, Qazvin.*

This one contains the *bismillah* (invocation to Allah) (بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ), in the top centre, followed by the *Fatiha*, the Koran's opening sura. Penned across this and upside-down is an Iranian quatrain about love, followed by the autograph of the calligrapher Imad al-Hasani at the *dar al-saltanat* (دار السلطنة) capital Qazvin. In this practise sheet, Mir Emad worked on repeating forms of *nasta'liq* script. For example, in the *bismillah*, he extended the sin (س) in *bism* (بِسْمِ) and the connector between ha (ح) and ya (ي) in *al-rahim* (الرَّحِيمِ) to create a balanced pattern. Also, this calligrapher worked on the form of *nun* (ن), repeating the letter several times with minor differences in the word *alladhina* (الَّذِينَ) in the penultimate line until he gained a perfect shape. Likewise, he repeated the initial penstroke *qaz* (قَز) and the final penstroke in (بِن) in qazvin (قَزْوِينَ) at the end of his signature like a coda around the medial *waw* (و). Such repetitive strokes shaped the backbone for calligraphic works, wherein an artist like Mir Emad could repeat the same form seemingly effortlessly.

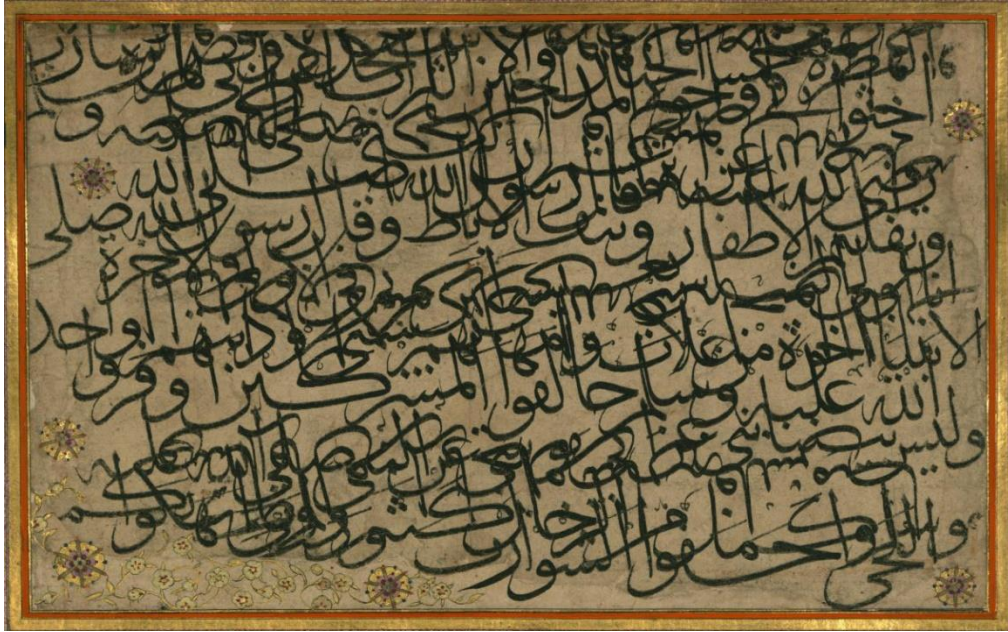


Figure 16. Page of pen exercises (*karalama*) by Shayk Hamdullah, Turkey. Retrieved from The Walters Art Museum.

After a long hiatus, in the early 1800s, the art of *siyah mashq* reappeared in Iran. The second ruler of the Qajar dynasty, Fath Ali Shah (r. 1789-1834) was one of its most enthusiastic practitioners. Like many princes and rulers, he learned calligraphy at a young age and later became a practitioner of remarkable ability, electing Mir Imad as his model. The mid and late 19th century witnessed an increase further in the popularity of *siyah mashq*. Finished this art form pages were worked in unprecedented numbers and were exchanged both in courtly circles and in society's lower echelons. These artworks were so valuable that the fourth Qajar ruler, Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-96) prepared *mashq* pages for his ministers and court officials as gifts of *pishkash* (gratitude) for services rendered (Lambton, 1994). The Shah is also renowned for sending illuminated pages of calligraphy to foreign rulers as diplomatic gifts. However, during this period, Mirza

Ghulam Riza Isfahani (1829-86), known as *Khushnivis* was the artist most responsible for revitalising artistic *mashq*, and popularising it beyond court circles (fig. 18). He was a master of *nasta'liq* in the Mir Imad's style and dedicated most of his life to training members of the royal family and young calligraphers. Due to increased demand, many outstanding calligraphic artists produced single-page calligraphies and *mashq* pages during the late Qajar period. The large number of existing examples is an indication of this proliferation. *Mashq* pages, like other single-page handwritings, were often written for commemorative goals and given as gifts at official occasions, major holidays, diplomatic meetings, and after military victories. Numerous extant pages of the art form by prominent calligraphers including the Mirza Ghulam Riza, the Vesal family's members of Shiraz (fig. 19), Darwish Abdul Majid Taliqani (d. 1773), Mirza Kuchak Khan (d. 1813), Asadollah Shirazi (d. 1889), Mohammad Riza Kalhur (d. 92), Ali Akbar Gulistaneh (d. 1901), Mohammad Kazim (d. 1916), Imad al-Kitab (d. 1936), etc., attest to the popularity of *siyah mashq* in this period. However, it is not certain, whether these works were ordered directly or produced as luxury objects for forthcoming sale to enthusiastic and interested individuals; both forms of making were probably prevalent. Most *siyah mashq* indicate a lineage back to great calligraphic masters such as Mir Ali Haravi, Mir Imad al-Hassani, Abdul Majid Taliqani, and Ahmad Nayrizi. In fact, in the second half of the 19th century, Mir Imad's *mashq* pages were so valued that professionally they were photographed and utilised as *sar mashq* (models) for training. The originals' mechanical duplication via photography made them accessible to a greater number of interested calligraphers. In the 19th century, the increase in popularity of *siyah*

mashq was in part because of the active role of the court Qajar as the arbiter of taste. Kings and courtiers not only collected the pages of *siyah mashq* but also as official gifts distributed them; others followed suit. These works were perceived as valued collectibles and gifts of the most intimate and personal nature. Inscriptions on them indicate that their exchange was intended as a gesture of deepest loyalty and friendship. The request for these pages was not restricted to the ruling elite of the late 19th century but also extended to those who were more casually in contact with the Qajar court. These works were no longer merely a courtly prerogative, but were now available in the bazaar and looked for by enthusiasts. Jakob Polak, Naser al-Din Shah's court physician, stated that pages by renowned calligraphers were in great request and that collectors who were able to recognise the hand of prominent masters were willing to pay exorbitant fees to buy such works of art (Polak, 1976, p. 266). He adds that foreigners also collected and admired these works. Though Polak does not specifically mention *siyah mashq*, his observation in general is an indication of the popularity of single-page scripts. The study of *siyah mashq*'s history reveals its change from a practical means for master and aspiring artists to an artistic tool of representing the spiritual commitment and sure hand of a recognised calligrapher such as Mir Imad, and, eventually, to a commodity treasured as a potential gift or collectible object. Other explanations for the increase in *siyah mashq* pages' proliferation and production in this period may be connected with the process of modernisation. Iran, in the 19th century, became a pawn in the hands of the two superpowers, Russia and Western Europe. Threatened by alien intervention and constant encroachment on its boundaries, the country was compelled to experiment with concepts

of modernity to protect itself. The broad array of Western innovations and ideas introduced to Iran during this time included lithography and photography, both technologies of reproduction that had a lasting impression on the arts. In fact, the art of *siyah mashq* left a lasting mark on subsequent Iranian calligraphy by strengthening the idea of irregularity as a valued characteristic. Regularity was traditionally one of the calligraphic artist's prime aims. Generally, Calligraphic examples followed linear formats (horizontal, vertical, or diagonal); compositions were very systematic, structured, and occasionally compartmentalised; and letters seldom overlapped or appeared at different angles or upside-down.

The art of *siyah mashq* affected the compositional quality of the later scripts, especially that of the *shikasta* style, which was developed in the 17th century in Iran and reached its peak in the 18th and 19th. Although *siyah mashq* may not have influenced the forms of the letters in this calligraphic style, it certainly affected the compositional qualities of the script, and letters and words fluidly rise and fall, emphasising artistic whim, delicate grace, and movement. Also, *siyah mashq* may have inspired the popularisation of conventions of irregularity, such as *varuneh-nivisi* (reverse writing) (fig. 20); two-sided writing, wherein one needs to rotate the work to read the text; the utilisation of an unprecedented range of papers and coloured inks; and the calligraphic representations of animals and humans__ all of which indicate the reality that forward-looking Iranian calligraphic artists enjoyed extraordinary freedoms and constantly exceeded the bounds of traditional canons. Today, most traditional calligraphers reside in

Iran and regularly create artistic *mashq* pages alongside other types of finished calligraphy. Contemporary calligraphic artists who work in the traditional mode, including Ali Akbar Kaveh (b. 1894), Ghulam Hossein Amirkhani (b. 1939), Mohammad Ehsaei (b. 1939), Jalil Rasouli (b. 1941), Kaykhosraw Khoroush (b. 1942), and all graduates of the Society of Iranian Calligraphers, have tried for years to keep alive the art of calligraphy in Iran, instructing numerous apprentices in the traditional canon.

Parallels to this art form also exist in modern and contemporary Iranian art. Artists have constantly drawn inspiration from Iran's rich artistic heritage, especially calligraphy. As pioneers of modernist art in the 1960s and '70s, artists such as Parviz Tanavoli, Hossein Zenderoudi, and Mohammad Ehsaei celebrate the letters's versatile shapes of the Arabic alphabet. In their works, often called *naqqashi khatt* (calligraphic painting), the letters and words are transformed beyond recognition and are reduced to sheer shapes. As in the pages of *siyah mashq*, the calligraphy in these artworks is also abstract and mostly without literal meaning. The structures are rhythmic and show in kaleidoscopic colours in a diversity of techniques, such as oil on canvas or wood, a medium not traditionally utilised for calligraphy. In *Ayn + Ayn* by Zenderoudi (fig. 21), the artist, in horizontal rows, reiterates ad infinitum the wide loop of the form of the *ayn* (ع). The painting captures the method scribes manipulate the reed pen as they endeavour to produce the desired thickness and shape of the letter. The outcome is a rhythmic structure with sharp contrast between the brown and black ink and the exposed canvas. Mohammad Ehsaei's work, active since the 1970s, also investigates the pure forms of alphabetical characters.

He is a calligrapher instructed in the traditional method; his calligraphic paintings create compositions that look to past tradition, as well as to the future. In his *Mijmar-i Gulvazheha* (مجمر گلوآزه ها), the forms of the letters like the carpet's warp and weft are closely intertwined, shaping a circle that has an undefined outer boundary and culminates at the centre (fig. 22). In the same way, Pouran Jinchi also hints at *siyah mashq* in her utilisation of letters in *nasta'liq* as her means of expression. With the accuracy and discipline of a traditional calligrapher, Jinchi renders these calligraphic elements on a ground of heavily incised scribbles and creates compositions with rich textures. The painter transforms the letters to the point where they are unrecognisable through an ingenious way of layering and juxtaposing shapes and colours. Her complete immersion is evident in the artistic process in the way she layers, writes, inscribes, and etches the markings and letters on the surface of the canvas and deconstructs the words and verses she employs: reducing them, breaking them down, and afterward representing them in a significantly innovative way (fig. 23). Studying the trajectory of *siyah mashq* and its transformation throughout history, we witness a new art form arise and grow, an art form increasingly valued for its compositional and aesthetic qualities. *Siyah mashq* reflects the desire and need of the calligrapher to supersede the canon by *guriz* (improvising) and permitting his spirit to roam on the page more freely. These works, both traditional and contemporary, are testimony to the creativity and ingenuity of Iranian artists, and to the Arabic alphabetical characters' visual appeal and versatility and the limitless possibilities they present.

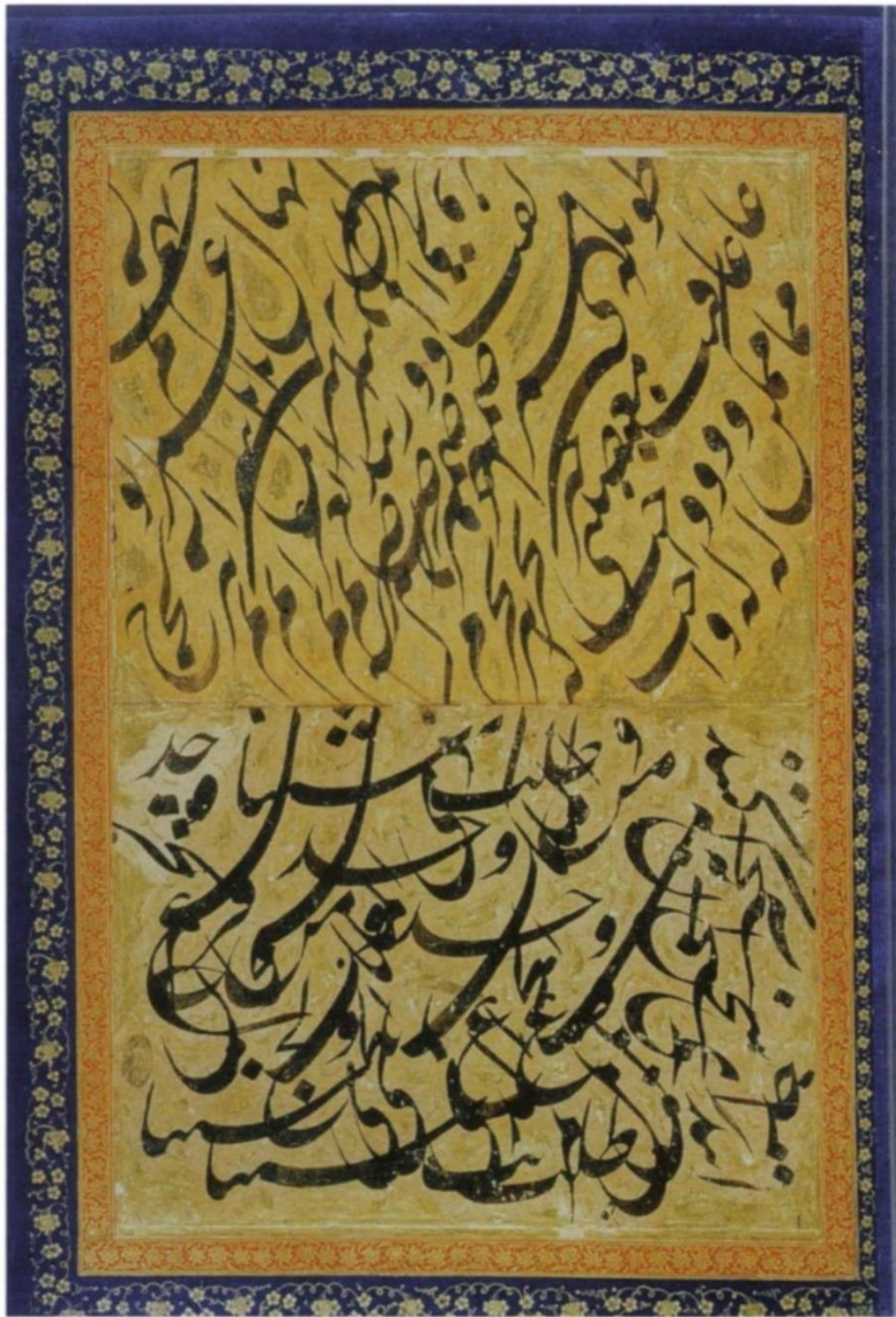


Figure 17. *Siyah mashq* page by Mir Imad, 23.4 x 36.3 cm. From the St. Petersburg *muraqqa*. Retrieved from (the Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg).



Figure 18. Ghulam Riza Isfahani, 1870-71, page of *siyah mashq*, penned in *nasta'liq* script, 38 x 24.6 cm. Retrieved from the Nasser D Khalili Collection.



Figure 19. Page of *mashq* by Mohammad Shafi Vesal, 1842, Shiraz. Private collection, Tehran.

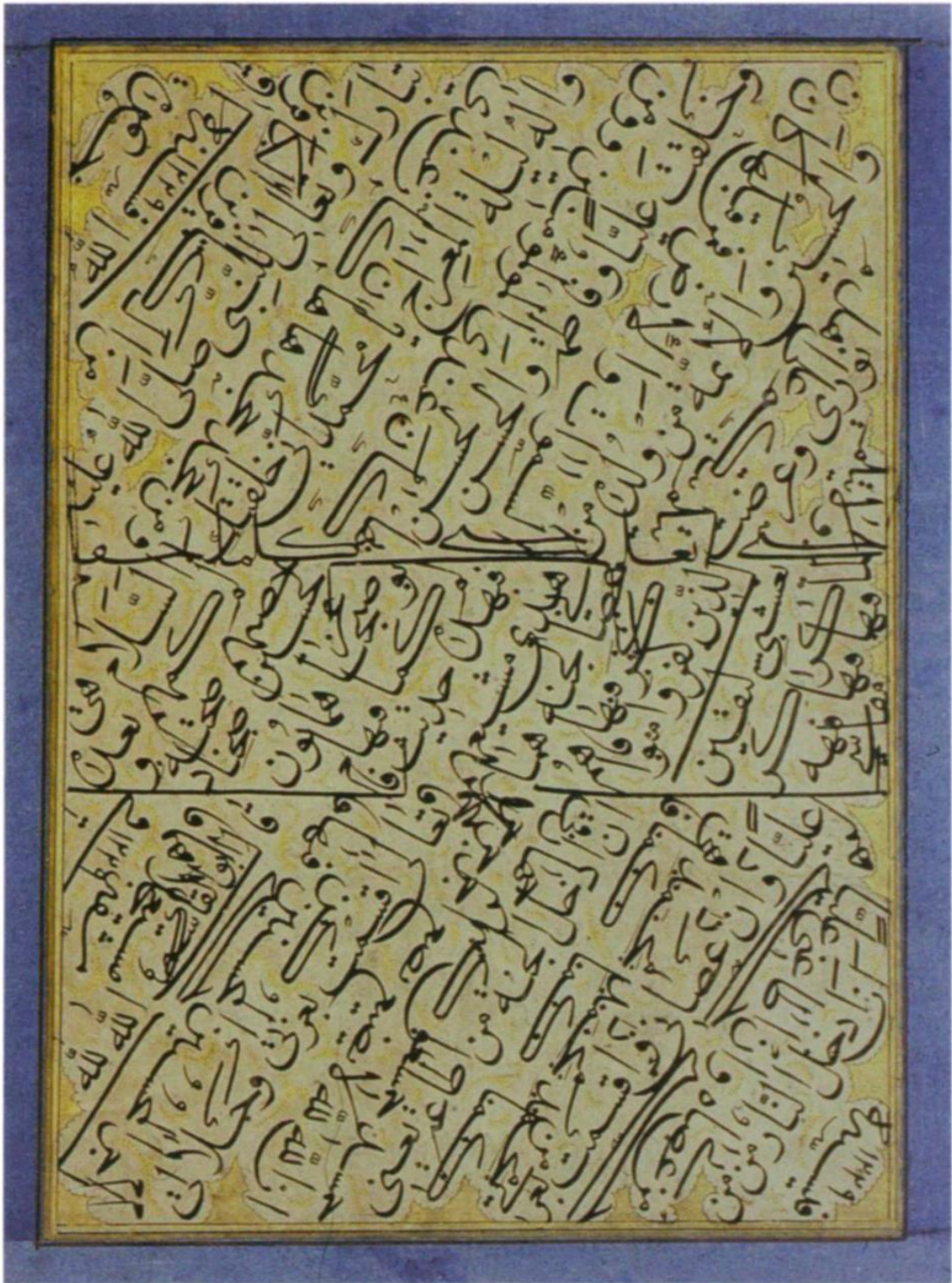


Figure. 20. Composition in *naskh* by Abu al-Qasim Shirazi, 1229 (1813-14), 30.3 x 20.7 cm. Retrieved from the Nasser D Khalili Collection.



Figure 21. Hossein Zenderoudi, 1970, *Ayn + Ayn*, 195 x 130 cm, gouache on paper. Retrieved from collection of Fereydoun Ave, Tehran.

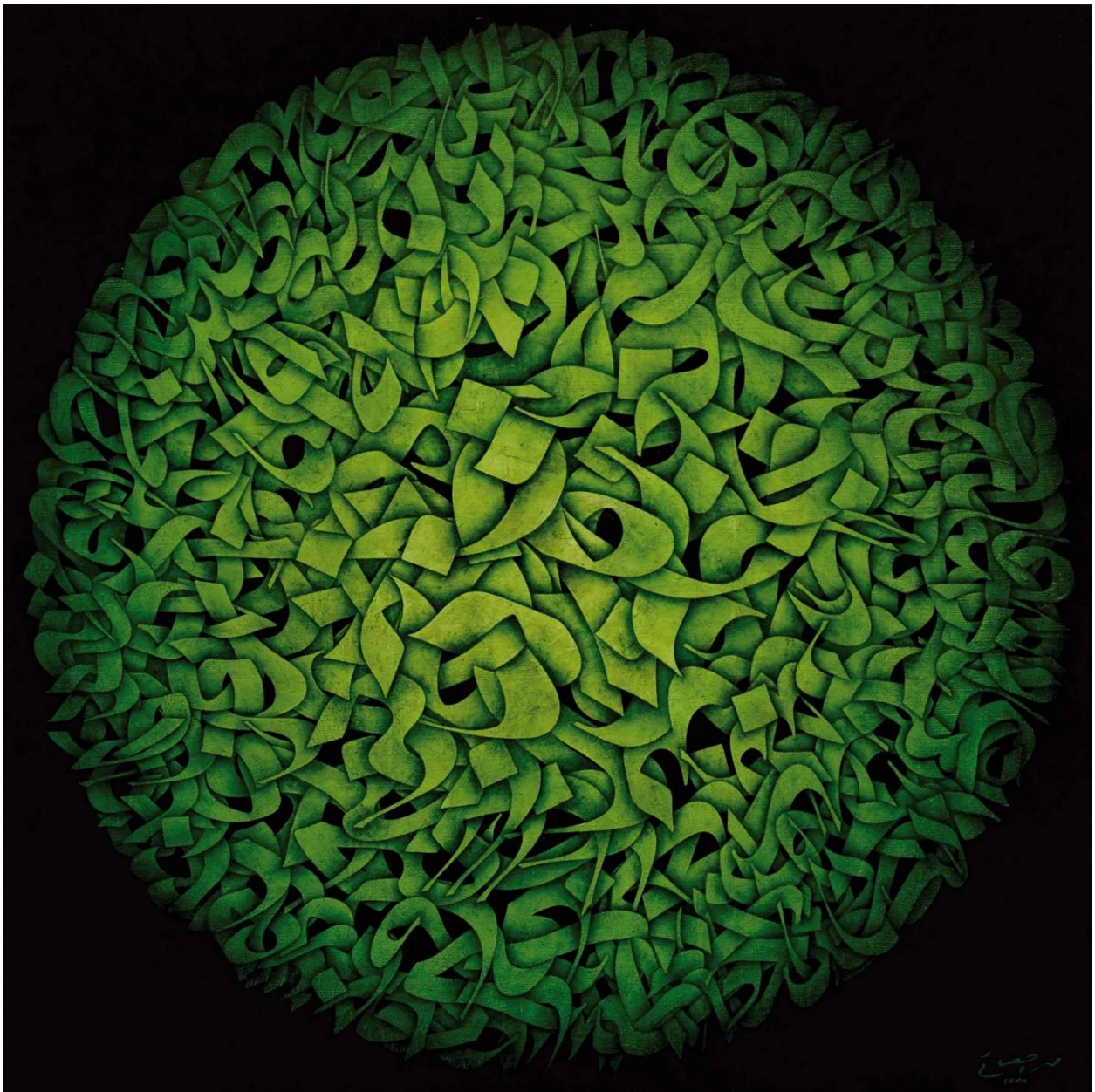


Figure 22. Mohammad Ehsaei, 1999, *Mijmar-i Gulvazheha*. 80 x 80 cm, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm. Personal photography.

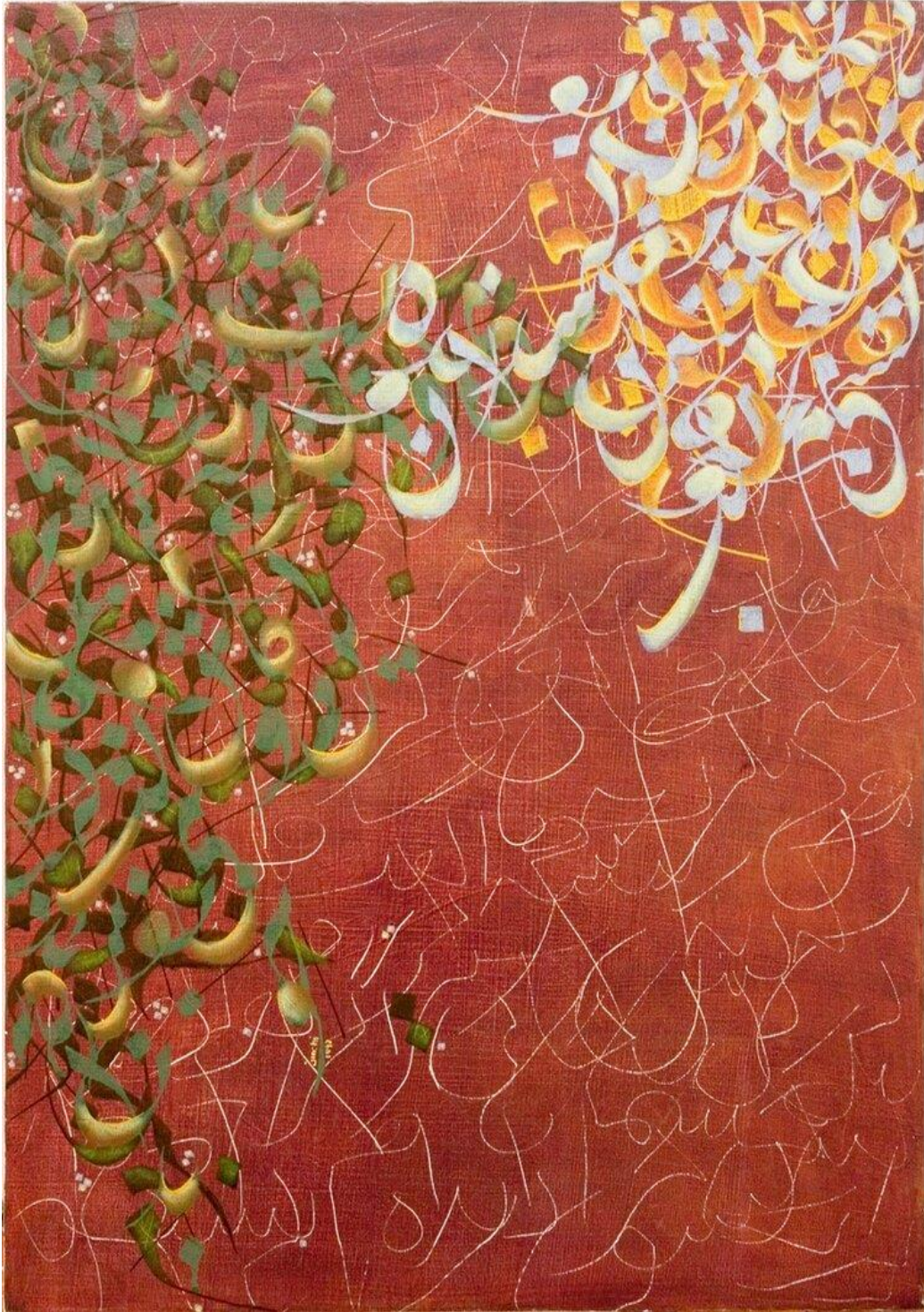


Figure 23. Pouran Jinchi, *Untitled*, 1997, ink, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 22 in. Retrieved from <https://www.pouranjinchi.com/>

1.5. Summary

Writing developed alongside Islam as a medium for imparting and sharing the holy Koranic words, and also examined an immense area of visual traditions regarding the usages of form, colour, and situation. Some of these creativities and innovations visually praise the gracefulness and godhead of the sacred Koranic text. Other evolutions of scribal responded to the administrative requisites. Iranian scribal system organised the implementation of Arabic script styles. The six pens and the Iranian chancellery scripts shaped a semiotic system wherein visual form helped the applicative and communicative capacity of writing. Scripts ascertain national, local, and linguistic boundaries, both geographical boundaries with other Islamic nations and broader cultural boundaries disassociating the Islamic world from the writing styles of foreign languages. Besides the continuity of symbolism in the Islamic tradition, letters and words have gained a new symbolism of identity and nationality. The transmogrification and emendation of calligraphic forms keep going in contemporary times. Alongside traditional practises, contemporary and modern calligraphic art has found its fields of application and alphabetical communication conditions. Modern calligraphic compositions are exhibited in museums and art galleries, and elect pieces have achieved the standing of style masterworks. Creative calligraphic productions respond to the requirements of international art bazaars and spread among aesthetic spheres. The letters of modern and contemporary Islamic calligraphic art display the examination of artists, who employ methods of Western aesthetics to gain new semantic and display forms. The letters

suggest an assortment of symbols, and by including these pictorial symbols in a composition, artists place scripts in connection with new structures of aesthetic and symbolic interpretation. The creative presentation of letters and words reflects the continuous changeability of written meaning and the visual potentialities of newly penned shapes.

Chapter 2. A Historical Overview: Iranian Modernism

The second chapter aims to investigate contemporary Iranian art by pursuing the history of the country's socio-cultural, political, and artistic evolutions during the previous decades. This chapter will study subject matters such as modernity, nationalism, and religious-Islamic identity in the socio-political and artistic context of Iranian society. At the beginning of the 20th century, many Iranian avant-garde artists and intellectuals endeavoured to construct their new identity by emphasising their national and ancient history versus the modern history of the West. Undoubtedly the genesis of a new identity was correlated to the evolution of the modern and contemporary nation-state. Even though modernisation started in the Safavid era, it is relatively belated in analogy to the West. While renovation in Iran was a late commencement, it accelerated and had widespread effects due to Iran's geographical as a continental crossroad spot. Iranian society has long been pliable in taking new opinions and ideas but has preserved rich and characteristic traditions. Along with cultural and industrial influences, the ancient history and civilisation of Iran were regarded via the lens of Western scholars and historians. Thus, Iranian society commenced perceiving the West as the embodiment of modernity, whereas the West knew Iran as a land of genuine culture and natural resources, deserving of investigation, a land carrying a very diverse history and culture with a highly complex ideology. Nevertheless, it is not feasible to perceive these evolutions without examining the historical and political past that have made them possible.

2.1. The West Influence: Iranian Art and Artists

Two principal factors that led to the West's and East's distinctive influences on Iranian artists and arts in the late Safavid era are very noteworthy. First, during the Shah Abbas I period (r. 1588-1629), political and economic communications with Europe and India were increased, and foreign representatives and traders were welcomed in Iran (Canby, 1999, p. 96). Second, in the Shah Abbas II time (r. 1642-1666), artists were dispatched to the West to get to know about European painting (Falk, 1972, p. 19). Thus, the base of modern and contemporary arts in Iran was formed under the influence of 18th and 19th-century European schools. For instance, European techniques and styles of painting, oil painting on canvas, and lacquerware were introduced to Iranian artists at the end of the Safavid period (Canby, 1999, p. 176). At the same time, besides decorating and illustrating palaces and mansions walls, artists did easel paintings and drawings in the European style that were not considered for producing a book.

2.2. Iranian Society Encounters Modernist Values

The first contact with modernity goes to the Qajar period, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Western influence weakened the brittle connection between the Qajar state¹⁵ and Iranian society in two ways. First, economic influence gradually

¹⁵ The Qajars were able to reunify Iran, ending the economic turmoils and civil wars of the 18th century (Keddie, 2003, p. 37). Nevertheless, the sense of tranquillity during the Qajar's rule was weak at best. Most of their strength was focussed on the capital Tehran, whilst landholders and aristocrats wielded considerable control and showed to be a powerful force. In addition, Shiite clergy became self-reliant without state patronage. The instability and insecurity provided a new level of independence for the

made the dispersed regional mercantile interests merge into one cross-regional traditional middle class. The second is ideological penetration via introducing new concepts and ideas, and new occupations to form the new middle class identified as the intelligentsia (Abrahamian, 1982, p. 50). Simultaneously, the first broad acceptance of Western worldviews and artistic methods was prevalent amongst artists (Keshmirshekan, 2009, p. 10). The photographic camera was also brought from abroad into Iran in 1842, and since then, photography appeared as a political means for recording facts and events. These images afterward became a pictorial source for artists to explore their legacy.

The texts that describe the lifestyle and times of the Qajar period show us Iranian society in the late 19th century in change, adapting to foreign views and modern technology. In the time of Naser al-Din Shah (1831–96), the importation of European examples, such as clothes, prints, and paintings accelerated – a process previously commenced by his father Mohammad Shah (1808–48) and his great grandfather Abbas Mirza (1789–1833)¹⁶. His reign coincided with the continuous relationship with

clerics who enjoyed autonomy. The Qajars, despite these difficulties, attempted to modernise projects and alterations that aided the focus on their state and power. However, the late 18th and early 19th centuries carried new challenges that preceding dynasties had not confronted. The colonialism's rising tide occurred in the new universe order because European powers became increasingly forceful and world bazaars became even more interconnected by capitalist endeavours. Furthermore, enlightenment ideas reduced religious influence and led to a gradual shift towards a discourse of sovereignty and citizenship. Though never formally colonised, Iran was doubtless not detached from these massive global changes.

¹⁶ After the war between Iran and Russia and the defeats of the Iranians, Abbas Mirza made changes in the innovation process by summarizing the causes of the failures. The outcome has been the renovation of the army - the entry of some factories, the arrival of the printing industry, the foundation of schools' new styles, and the sending of students out of the country to get science and art. However, a considerable part of this innovation resulted in the emergence of journals and newspapers such as *Kagaz Akhbar* under the editorship of Mirza Saleh Shirazi, *Vaqai-i Etefaqiyyeh* under the editorship of Amir Kabir and *Qanun* under the editorship of Mirza Malkum Khan Nazim al- Dowlah.

European authorities and a large crowd of foreign commuters visiting what Westerns had presumed as the outlandish Orient (stein, 2013, p. 23). The modernisation was hastened with the premiership of Mirza Mohammad Taqi Khan Farahani (1807-1852), famed as Amir Kabir. During this time, many students were dispatched abroad and, after returning, were employed. The founding of the *Dar al-funun* (Tehran Polytechnic School), the earliest modern academy of its kind by Amir Kabir in 1851, was a noticeable movement in Iran's educative system. European educators (chiefly French, Italian, and Austrian) instructed students in the spheres of engineering, medicine, music, foreign languages, and military sciences (Keddie, 1991, p. 182). Also, the school held classes inclusive of lithographic printing and photography.

2.3. Kamal al-Molk as an inspiration for Modern Iranian Art

Whereas the Western art tradition over the centuries had been transformed, and the artist appeared as the creative power and the focus of cultural and artistic identity, it was not the case in Iran. Iranian artists did not inherit anything similar to the Western legacy of evolutions in artistic styles. Hence, such artists were attracted by the former times of the West and assumed themselves incongruous with contemporary art in Europe.

When modernity introduced figurative art into Iran, artists embraced the representation of nature as a replacement for idealising it (Daftari, 2002, pp. 39-48).

Thus, artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries were more entranced in the naturalistic

styles of the distant past than the more abstract art of contemporary Europe. The most prominent naturalistic artist, Muhammad Ghaffari, known as Kamal al-Molk (1848-1940), was the last painter of the Qajar court. The Academy of Fine Arts, *Madreseh sanaye mostazrafeh*, was established in 1911 by Kamal al-Molk (Pakbaz, 2011, p. 167). He radically altered Iranian art, and although he was not a modernist, the stimulus of Iranian modern and contemporary art. The distinctive feature of Kamal al-Molk was that he separated from the traditional Iranian painting techniques and even ostensibly from the customary practices of seeing his milieu. He was basically affected by European painting in such a manner that cannot be seen in the artworks of other painters of that time and pursued a style of nearly photographic realism, which does not surrender to the principles of perspective. During this time, when imitating the Western lifestyle and ideas was very popular, he did so in the context of visual art by introducing Western practises of seeing and depicting reality and emancipating himself from his predecessors' non-realistic techniques and styles. Nevertheless, his paintings were more imaginative and less naturalistic than is commonly presumed (Daftari, 2002, p.43). After Kamal-al-Molk's retiral in 1927 from the School of Applied Arts and Crafts, his influence endured in the painting and sculpture style of his students and adherents, up to the 1940s; some artists still practise it today. The influence of the Kamal al-Molk school was fundamental in the early advancement of Iranian art in the 20th century.



Figure 24. Kamal al-Molk, 1889, the spring hall of Golestan Palace, oil on canvas, 52,5 x 65 cm, Retrieved from (Afsharmohajer, 2005, p. 236).

2.4. Early Pahlavi: Revivalism and Modernity

From the end 19th century to the Pahlavi regime, Intellectuals and politicians in Iran concentrated on state modernisation. Since the beginning of the 20th century, when the modern Iranian state emerged under Riza Shah (r. 1921–41), there has been a

hierarchical structure to control apparatuses that fostered a specific national identity (Eimen, 2013, p. 85). When Riza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, came to power in 1925, the opening of art schools and the granting of scholarships to students to continue their studies in Europe continued. Riza Shah supported traditional and modern arts such as calligraphy and painting. His accomplishments could be summarised under three rubrics: constructing the foundation of a modern government, claiming autonomy from alien domination, and beginning sociological-cultural renovation (Lenczowski, 1979, p. xvi). The time of Riza Shah witnessed the forming of a new-found order. He consolidated his authority by reinforcing his help on three principles: the new military, the government bureaucracy, and the court patronage. For the first time following the Safavid dynasty, the state controlled the community with extensive means of domination, administration, and regulation. By consolidating his power, he was able to start an ambitious programme of political, social, and cultural reforms and successfully executed many of the innovations and changes that unsuccessfully had been presented during the past century by reformers such as Abbas Mirza, Sepahsalar, Amir Kabir, Malkum Khan, and the Constitutional Revolution's Democrats (Abrahamian, 1982, pp. 135-136). When this nationalist, modernist, and traditionalist ruler came to power, a new political programme was set on the agenda for Iran.

Reza Shah's renovation policy affected a variety of social life in Iran. The artistic and architectural legacy was considered an indicator of the nation's history and civilisation and became a research topic by Iranian intelligentsia and Western scholars

invited to Iran. Through their commentaries, the ancient past was aligned with the aims and values of the new nation. The antiquity roots already had been recognised by Western archaeologists and historians; what continued was to gather the findings for the nationalist objectives and racial identification (Rizvi, 2007, p.46). Government policy was a determined factor in bringing into existence a united nation. Thereby, fundamental modifications were seen in various fields, including the disarmament and settlement of the tribes, the establishment of a modern structure of bureaucracy and military, the construction of rails, roads, and harbor facilities, the introduction of Western attiring, the commencements of industrial development, and the presentation the European educational and legal method (Hambly, 1991). This procedure stimulated Iranian society to adapt itself to Western life. However, convincing people to alter their beliefs and lifestyle was not effortless. In many instances, the regime had to force the people to comply with the new laws. One of the main attendants was the *Anjoman-i Asar-i Melli* (Society for National Heritage) (1922-1978). Supporting cultural and artistic publications, formulating cultural policies, preserving monuments, supervising archeological diggings, and implementing construction projects and memorials of Iranian poets are contained in the society's statement (Diba, 2013, p.49). During the Pahlavi time, the Persian language was promulgated as a means for bringing into existence a national body and instilling cultural awareness as well as for the cultural resistance against the broad culture of Arabs (Vaziri, 1993, p. 197; Keshmirshekan 2013, p. 12). Due to the importance of the Persian language, the regime even established the *Farhangestan-i zaban-i farsi* (Persian Language Academy). This strove to eliminate alien loanwords from

the Persian language and substitute them with Persian words. Another endeavour of the regime was to glorify the *Shahnameh*¹⁷ as an everlasting section of national culture.

The government unconditionally announced its secular nature through Western materialistic means; by intermeddling in the people's lives about street clothes, the unveiling and education of women; introducing innovations such as European-style names and the non-Islamic almanac; and announcements and lawmaking that made it clear that females and religious minorities were considered as full citizens on an equality with males (Hambly, 1991, p.233). These reforms introduced the concepts of modern society to Iranians and promoted nationalism as one of the inspirations of the West. Interestingly, politicians did not pressure artists to modernise. However, the alterations in socio-culturalism caused considerable changes in art. In addition, the Westerners who held jobs in universities and the artists who came back from the West had the most impact, and the art arena occupied a new procedure under the influence of modernisation.

Madreseh Sanaye Qadimeh (the School of Traditional Arts) (1929), the University of Tehran (1934), and the Faculty of Fine Arts (1939) were established. By founding these academies and adopting Western paradigms and approaches to learning and teaching, the state acquainted Iranian society with Western culture. The French

¹⁷ *Shahnameh* (the Book of Kings), is a long saga poem written by Abu al-Qasim Ferdowsi (940–1020 CE). This monumental poetry of some 50,000 verses was finished in 1010 and dedicated to Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi. The manuscript encompasses the entire of the legendary and, from the time of Alexander onward, Iran's semi-legendary history. The poem commences with the first king Gayomart and continues through to the Arab conquest.

archaeologist and first dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University André Godard was taken into employment by Merat to build the bases of a faculty of art modeled after the *École des Beaux-Arts*. The faculty was a combination of Iranian and foreign masters, and students became acquainted with Western methods and styles in both thematic and technical aspects under their supervision (Mujabi, 1998, p. 7). These changes cumulatively affected Iranian artists, enabling them to conform new visual languages to the altering context. The data presented by Western academics aided artists in creating a new Iranian identity.

2.5. The Perspective of Orientalism

One reflection of Orientalism could be seen in the acceptance of Western ideas about the East. European culture produced and controlled the Orient at the ideological and sociopolitical levels (Mackenzie, 1995, p.9). As Said stated, ‘The sensation of the power of the West over the Orient is considered a scientific truth’ (Said, 2003, p.46). Iranian society in the 20th century endured socio-cultural alter because of the government’s intentions, which caused it to embrace Western principles and educational and legal systems. The effect of these changes assured most Iranians that the West was more developed and modern than the East. They thought that to have better lifeforms should imitate Western styles in all fields.

Western orientalists highlighted the ancient national elements and the resulting curiosity and interest in the distant past awakened pre-Islamic awareness among

Iranians¹⁸ (Vaziri, 1993, p.3). Iranian scholars and historians were profoundly impacted by Western achieves and have made very little endeavour to expand their systematised study, whether about Iran or foreign nations (Ibid, p. 152). Therefore, they took Western methods to study their past and contemporary histories. Iranian art and architecture books were primarily produced in the West and were derived from archaeological data and art objects of that time. Previously in the 19th century, such material objects had been exhibited in European fairs and were recorded in companion pamphlets. As a result of archaeological discoveries of the early 20th century, Iran's history was identified as an antiquated and effectual one whose findings were deserving of regard and study, and Persian art with a background of more than 2,500 years, was shown as a monolithic whole (Rizvi, 2007, p. 45). The texts of Western investigators shaped the ancient history of Iran and introduced Iran as one of the initial nations that have a major role in the history of humanity culture and civilisation.

2.6. Modernism and Its Connection with Iranian Politics and Culture

Eastern countries, including Turkey and Iran, accelerated the influence of the West by adjusting to Western principles and applying them in their societies. But these states

¹⁸ Iranian art's historiography, first carried through art historians such as Arthur Upham Pope (1881-1969) and Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948) from the early 1920s, conformed to the secularist and nationalist viewpoints of Reza Shah's government and Iranian intellectuals, who were trying to find their genuine identity. At this time, Iran's Islamic history, unlike that of other areas in the Middle East, was seen as part of a continual story of a native people who had undergone the multiple cultures' onslaught, from the Arabs to the Mongols, but nevertheless somehow kept their unique cultural sensibility and aesthetic.

did not become acquainted with the meaning and concept of modern society similar to the Western nations¹⁹. In Iran, after the entry of Western thoughts, a discussion arose about how to imitate or restrict its capacity. Amongst intellectuals and academics, some, in the beginning, became persuaded that the only possible way to salvation was to follow the West, leave behind the former times, and elusion any native creations in this process of enculturation. The most conspicuous and convincing reality of the modern and contemporary Middle East is the transition from traditional society through advancement and social reform. As William Millward states, ‘just like Middle Easterners, Iranian society is also struggling with the complicated forces of transition and is forming a new order in connection with its values. Often unknown and varied forces of modernism have excited a broad range of reactions. In the face of these forces, an extensive variety of responses may be observed. One perspective maintains that if Iranian society aims to take any of the basic structures of the West, it has got to go the whole way and adopt its set of values as well. The opposite position says that whatever is alien is wrong and should be opposed uncompromisingly. Between such comments lies a reaction that tends to adopt the new structures, but a notable facet has been added to this acceptance: We employ the

¹⁹ The idea of modernity, as Marshal Berman believes, ‘in the first phase, from roughly the beginning of the 16th century to the late 18th, people are starting to experience modern life and have little perception of a modern society in which to share their hopes and trials. The second phase commences with the grand revolutionary wave of the 1790s, such as the French Revolution, and a great modern community suddenly emerges, which imposes a feeling of modernity on every aspect of life. Finally, in the 20th century, the process of modernisation affected world culture, acquiring spectacular success in thought and art. On the other hand, the concept of modernity, realised in many disjointed ways, loses its capacity to give meaning to people’s lives. Consequently, today we find ourselves in a time that has missed contact with the roots of its modernity (Berman, 1982, pp. 16-17).’

foreign forms, but we maintain our values, traditions, and heritage and show the new structure with our identity (Millward, 1971, pp. 2-3).’ Such remarks are usually seen amongst Iranians of different levels of modernity and education and typically can be attributed to sensitivity to externalities, nonetheless, raising some relevant questions and were inescapable that preoccupied the minds of Iranian artists. Therefore, it was not surprising that numerous artists who had taken the structure of modernism for their practices were preoccupied with the intellectual challenges of their society over the matter of cultural identity.

2.7. New Currents

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, contemporary artists such as Ahmad Esfandiari, Mahmud Javadipour, and Jalil Ziapour, through their articles, lectures, and exhibitions had exerted substantial influence on Iran’s modern art. The first group exhibitions of modern art were held at the foreign cultural institutes, including the Franco-Iranian Cultural Institute and the Irano-Russian Cultural Society (Ahmadi, 2012, pp. 366-371). Later, outstanding artists, such as Javad Hamidi and Hossien Kazemi, displayed their artworks in private galleries, such as the Apadana and Saba. Meanwhile, Jalil Ziapour, Gholamhossien Gharib, and other leaders in art published magazines including *Khorus Jangi*²⁰, the *Kavir*, *Panjeh Khorus* to expose Iranian society to modern art. The

²⁰ European surrealists first affected Iranian art and culture through literary works, chiefly via Sadegh Hedayat’s writings. Surrealist concepts and practices progressively arrived from literature to visual arts during the 1940s and 1950s. This matter occurred primarily via the endeavors of the *Khorus Jangi* (Fighting Cock), which was the title given to an avant-garde group of artists and writers, as well as to the magazine inside of which they published their critical and innovative works. Each issue was displayed

endeavours of the art movement towards modernity were not going unchallenged. Modern art got little consideration in the early stages and rarely any official patronage. Following the 1953 coup d'état, whereby Mosaddeq's government was ousted, the regime entered a legitimacy crisis, and most intellectuals became critical of the political structure. During the 1960s, while the suppression of political dissenters continued, the regime addressed cultural affairs and provided space for cultural and artistic activities²¹. Holding biennials and awarding prizes, opening communication with international galleries and associations, recruiting foreign instructors, converting the old educational programs into modern ones, and founding the *Hunarkadeh-ye hunar-haye tazini*,²² each had a significant role in the advancement of Iranian painting during the 1960s.

with the figure of the Fighting Cock designed by Jalil Ziapour. There was a break when the magazine was discontinued by Government coercion. Ziapour abandoned *Khorus Jangi* in this situation and commenced an alternative magazine entitled *Kavir* (The Desert). This also was prevented by the state, and Ziapour carried on beginning yet another magazine, called *Panjeh Khorus* (The Cock's Claw). *Khorus Jangi* was resuscitated in 1951, by Gholamhossein Gharib and another group of writers and artists. The second series includes numerous articles about contemporary art, and most significantly the Manifesto *Sallākh-e Bolbol* (The Slaughterer of the Nightingale). The lively burgeoning of the *Khorus Jangi* at the initiate of the 1950s was temporary, but it helped notably to the appearance of a surrealist visual shape that had before been in evolution for some decades in literary forms.

²¹ One of the purposes of the cultural revolution was to formalise modern art. The Fine Arts Department employed many modernist artists, and some foreign associations played a part in the formation of a motivated and active art movement. Some chief players in this were the Goethe Institute, the Cultural Associations of Iran-America and the Iran-Italy, the Sirius Gallery in Paris, artistic clubs, several museums, active galleries including *Talar-i Qandriz*, *Saba*, *Litu*, *Mes*, *Borghese*, *Zarvan*, *Hunar-i Jadid*, *Saman*, and *Zand*.

²² The college was founded in 1961 with the aim of training applied arts experts. Several modernist designers, sculptors, and painters who had an essential role in the growth of modern and contemporary visual art in Iran were educated in this institution under the supervision of Iranian and foreign educators. Varied disciplines including interior architecture, painting, graphic design, decorative painting, and sculpture with fundamental stress on applied arts were trained in this college. Here, pupils were encouraged to pursue symbols, idioms, and folklore sources of inspiration to acquaint themselves with the decorative legacy of Iran through diverse courses.

2.7.1. The Tehran Biennials (1958-1966)

The Tehran Biennial commenced with the backing of the General Administration of Fine Art, established under the surveillance of the Ministry of Culture in 1951. The earliest Biennial was on 14th April 1958, and the fifth one occurred on 21st June 1966 (Mohajer, 1998). The Biennials commenced when the regime and parts of the artistic community had specific aims. Therefore, the organisers were aligned with the interests and goals of the regime. The First exhibition took place through the collaboration of Marcos Grigorian (1925–2007) and was placed in the Abyaz Palace, part of the Golestan complex. Almost 60 artworks by 49 artists were displayed for four months (Yarshater & Grigorian, 1958). The numeral of awards enhanced over the following periods, inclusive of a scholarship to Europa at the Fourth Biennial. The number of partakers would alter to over a hundred, and the juries also would change. The fifth exhibition in 1966 showed a fundamental change in the direction of Regional Cooperation by underemphasising national representation and including Turkey and Pakistan as equal partners. Also, the place changed to the Ethnography Museum (Emami, 2014, p. 215), and attendance was confined to just 37 artists by invitation. This biennial took place to help Iranian managers and artists attendance in international art exhibitions, introduce modern art to the community, and make a unique national school. Biennial selection as a form for depicting artworks in society indicated the influence of Western ideas on the displaying of works internally and externally of the country.

The discontinuation of the national exhibitions was because of numerous factors, inclusive of the increase in substitute exhibit spaces and the accessibility of other Universal platforms for artists. Furthermore, the significance of the Ministry of Fine Arts diminished, and Queen Farah Pahlavi commenced to play a noticeable part. After that, another biennial will not occur for 27 years, and artists displayed their artworks at some festivals guided by Western cultural offices, the Farah Foundation, and private galleries. In the meantime, the regime and artists aimed to expand the effect of visual culture and art in society. The first Biennial after Islamic Revolution took place in 1991. The content of subsequent Biennials was essentially dissimilar from before the revolution. Nevertheless, there kept likenesses between the attitude to these occurrences in the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic government. For instance, artists continued to partake in foreign Biennials after the revolution under the surveillance of the Islamic government, and the artworks exhibited in such festivals reflected the ideology of the new regime, one that had Islamic principles at its essence. This is analogous to the attendance of artists on the universal scene during the Pahlavi regime, which aimed to demonstrate the modernisation of Iranian society. In both, the objective of participation in Biennials and art fairs was to promulgate the regime's intentions and values.

2.8. Iranian Modernism: 1941–79

The early years of the rule of Mohammed Riza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979) were along with the striving towards independence from occupying powers that commenced in 1941 and eventually terminated in 1947. The sovereign established his power and in the

early 1960s initiated a series of reforms labelled the *White Revolution*, which aimed to redistribute the nation's resources and wealth (Pahlavi, 1967) but eventually led to opposition and revolution. The accelerated velocity of modernisation, consumerism, the expansion of education, and dissatisfaction with Westernization affected all spheres of endeavour, including the arts (Al-i Ahmad, 1984). International politics, the Cold War, and the advent of nationalism all over the world also influenced art and cultural advancement in Iran. The Iranian state attempted to bring from abroad the appearance of modernity but did not incorporate one of the essential principles of modernity, that is, the democratic government system. They modernised some social and cultural policies but never forfeited traditional manners of thinking in the political aspect. In other words, society was confined within the bygone social systems while endeavouring to acquire modernity, which led to discord and eventual breaks in socio-political procedures. The regime's objectives were to maintain hegemony over the nation. Even though Mohammed Riza Shah strived to modernise the country through Western contact, he was aware of the hazards of false emulation and surrender to foreign powers. Consequently, his modernisation plan was aligned with a national narrative that viewed the far past and stressed genuine Iranian tradition from the earliest days of the Persian Empire (Pahlavi, 1960, p. 171). The appearance of groups of modernist artists in the form of elitist intellectuals came to be the outcome of the development of the middle class at this time. As Ervand Abrahamian states, following *White Revolution*, the middle class developed rapidly. Hence, the label intelligentsia, previously equivalent to the waged middle class, became more distinguished and specifically attributed to intellectuals, academics, writers,

journalists, and artists (Abrahamian, 2008, p. 138). During these years, accompanied by the Ministry of Culture and Arts, which chiefly executed plans on traditional art and architecture, the Farah Foundation prepared a suitable area for more varied activities in diverse artistic fields; through the patronage of contemporary artists, the assemblage of worthwhile artworks, the reconstruction of old homes and historical places, and directing various cultural festivals and events. These policies not only prepared conditions for more interactive communications with the West but also attempted to create a new national identity by regaining traditional values (Mousavi-Aghdam, 2014, pp. 137-8). With a more moderate perspective on tradition and modernity, she promulgated Iran's modern art without destroying or ignoring artefacts after Islam. Despite the fact that the queen's reformist approach resulted in many positive changes in culture and art, she failed to form a suitable solution to the challenges facing the country, because the intellectual space was previously contaminated by the hardliners' ideological doctrines from both the government and its opponents. Private initiatives in the late 1960s flourished, and informal art galleries and clubs blossomed; amongst these were Talar-e Qandriz²³ and Rasht 29. Studios of artists and Cafes became places for the exchange of thoughts and

²³ This group of artists, during its activity from 1964 to 1977, headed by Ruyin Pakbaz, Mohammad Riza Jawdat, and Mansur Qandriz, held art exhibitions, organised discussion sessions, published magazines and books, and translated and wrote articles on art history, art criticism, and aesthetics (Afsharmohajer, 2005). Also, they exhibited reproductions of modernist works of art along with the relevant pamphlets, considering their mission to teach both the public and intellectuals. However, although the gallery came to be a place for gathering various groups, it did not aid in narrowing the gap between artists and literary characters. The purpose of founding the Talar was to create a national art. Nevertheless, despite all these endeavors, the Talar-e Iran's trajectory did not result in the formation of national art, and the group had terminated its activities by the dawn of the revolution.

ideas as well as debates centralised on local modernism and critiques of academic styles (Diba, 2013, p. 55). The voices of prominent leftist writers were heard. The treatise *Occidentosis* was inscribed by Jalal Al-i Ahmad (1923- 1969), which openly challenged the mores of the West. As a result, the discourse against Iranian society's *Westernisation* arose among intellectuals (Al-i Ahmad, 1984). At this time, Ali Shariati (1933–1977) also addressed the same issue with a new revivalist attitude that considered Islamic identity the basis of Iranian culture. He said that to achieve genuine identity, Iranians must first know what led to their historical breaks and restriction of the more positive facets of national culture (Shariati, 2015). These intellectuals considered Western culture as their point of reference and reacted to it with the ways of thought originating from the West itself. Though the discourse of *Westernization* was chiefly about social and political matters, in the context of art, the matter of artistic identity and genuineness by reference to pictorial approaches and traditional materials was the principal worry in the 1960s. With revolutionary passion boiling over, the national identity was intensely disputed and eventually reconstructed. This change was fostered by a reshaping of every field, from the political to the cultural and definitely the educational. Identity politics was literally imposed on Iran during the formation of the Islamic Republic (Eimen, 2013, p. 90). Following the revolution, the art of the former regime was affected by distinctive currents following the revolution's mainstream. In addition to inculcating the Islamic spirit into the people, the regime aimed to develop a revolutionary spirit in society's cultural and artistic life (Hunter, 1992, p. 92). Anyway, the 1979 event suddenly ended the official cultural and artistic approaches of the Pahlavi rule, which were in regard to the

promulgation of modernism and nationalism. These policies were challenged by the Islamic government as elements of the previous regime policy.

2.9. Summary

In the 20th century, Iran incurred massive transformations, coups, and conflicts, and the sovereigns who governed during those times employed various readings of modernity. In investigating the socio-political viewpoints that Iranian society adopted to form its genuine identity, the intellectual and cultural movements of 1940, 1950, and 1960 are essential because, during these decades, social and economic advancements supplied a context for cultural events that resulted in notable productivity in literature and art. Governmental policies and social currents affected the formation, continuity, and decline of modern art. Iranian artists in this atmosphere depicted a form of modernist art via their reading of the history of modern art and aesthetics. Likewise, the idea of authentic and national art formed, endeavouring to demonstrate Iranian identity by combining modernist principles and local elements. In the process of adapting to Western artistic models, Iranian contemporary art has included principles of so-called world contemporary art whilst pursuing to reflect the events and issues of its contemporaneity. The artists' products clearly reflected the opposition between global forms, concepts, and aesthetics against local desires and values.

Iranian modernism was complex and aimed to create a new identity for a society that had been militarily, politically, and culturally marginalised. Iranian art has withstood

three significant transformations since the 1940s: The first structural change occurred with the nascence of Iranian modernism. The second change transpired with the appearance of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement (1961–62). Since the modernists paid more attention to European-American techniques and styles, the *Saqqa-khaneh* members had a propensity for themes of Iranian-Islamic iconography and Islamic calligraphy in modern Western methods. However, all the artists did not practice in the way of the movement and investigated the figurative styles of Iranian painting from the 17th to the 19th century and the image potentialities of ancient times Iranian art. At the same time, some painters took inspiration from Iranian landscapes, and others remained in their utilisation of abstraction and transformation of Western modernist conventions. On the other hand, the new generation of modern and contemporary artists came to have artistic ripeness in the time of the Islamic Republic. The artistic productions of this generation have shown themselves involved in the semiotics of society.

Chapter 3. The *Saqqa-khaneh* Movement in Iran

Within a few years, Iranian artists absorbed fifty years of Western modernism, and this period of engagement was discontinued at its peak in 1979. The term national art during the 1940s and '50s was frequently declared by both cultural managers and artists and even efforts were made by modernist artists to produce this form of art (Balaghi & Gumpert, 2002). To put it another way, when modernism was embraced by Iranian artists, many of those tried to see Western modern art from an Iranian perspective. The artistic products are amalgamations of Western methods with Iranian themes, resembling their prototypes in the early Pahlavi era. At that time, the decline of the conventional manners of representation, either naturalistic painting or miniature, caused modernist painters to refuse these modes and seek new ideas and concepts in native folk arts. The state's patronage and sponsorship of other private and foreign institutes fostered the art's active development in the 1960s. At that time, the state cultural institutions were the artistic activities' major leaders. They attempted to form, through the support of movements and individual artists, a formal art that would structure the foundation of a kind of national school of art (Godarzi, 2001, p. 108). During this decade, gradually this sort of art was comprehensively supported and propagated by governmental backing. If we regard the circumstances of the choice of artists' artworks, awarding of prizes, and the statements written in formal exhibitions, including the Tehran Biennials, sponsored by the state, this process could be readily recognised. thus, these external factors should be regarded in the emergence of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement which could also be a primary type of Iranian

formal art and was approved by the cultural organisers. Eventually, Iranian painting with the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement gained its genuine visual language.

This movement came into being amid the country's renovation in an endeavor to connect the traditional culture of Iran with visual arts' modern and contemporary facets and especially with Western contemporary paintings. Abiding by Iranian tradition was not the primary engine driving *Saqqa-khaneh* art, nor was it to emulate Western art. New viewpoints, visual forms, and compositions of art employed by the movement's artists as the expression of their beliefs, visions, and emotions in the process of artistic creation arise from the contemporary cultures of Iran. The *Saqqa-khaneh* movement's practitioners have taken Iranian ethnic literary and artistic traditions further than their actual context, presenting a style that combines Western and Iranian artistic conventions. The movement artists' works exemplify and testify to a time in the history of modern Iranian art. These artists sought inspiration from pictorial elements and mores of local culture and aimed to be specific and meanwhile pay attention to the discourses of contemporary modernism. This approach provided a context in which Iranian art was understandable.

Any discussion of modern art in Iran must encompass consideration of facets of the emergence of Iranian modern art that are related to the role of the past. The rediscovery of popular art forms, including votive objects, printing blocks, stamps, and everyday utensils, that conveyed powerful local and universal messages, both exhilarated and empowered artists of *Saqqa-khaneh* and provided the inspiration necessary to release

them from the conventions of Iranian traditional art and academic painting. The scholar Peter Lamborn Wilson has written eloquently, “Popular Shiism provided a complicated imagery representing a vast, profound and multi-dimensional legacy: a visual, auditory, and intellectual symbolism virtually shared by every Iranian.” *Saqqa-khaneh* artists deeply delved into popular culture to shape individual and unique styles in a dazzling show of vitality and creativity.

3.1. The Term *Saqqa-khaneh*

In fact, distributing water amongst people has been the principal cause for the construction of watering holes in Islamic lands. The water distributor is named *Saqqa* and the water storage place is called *Saqqa-khaneh*. In the past, words such as *Sangab* were also employed in addition to *Saqqa-khaneh*. *Sangab* was a large stone vessel and used for drinking or ablution. The *Sangabs* were the undeveloped form of *Saqqa-khaneh* that were installed in some public places and passages and were held by philanthropists for drinking water storage. Though building a place for quenching the thirst of passersby has been one of the reasons for the construction of the *Saqqa-khaneh*, there are various functions behind the idea of this unique architecture. These functions, however, may have been added over time to this architectural element and institutionalised. By contrast, recently, because of lifestyle changes and technological advances, many of these functions have undergone a major change, so that except for the Iranian cities’ old texture, *Saqqa-khaneh* is not regarded as an architectural element. The chief task of the *Saqqa-khaneh* was to provide water. Nonetheless, according to studies, other functions

can be considered for this place, including social, religious, cultural, and artistic. The Persian word *Saqqa-khaneh* refers to the public freshwater fountains constructed in honour of a historic episode, in which the religious Shiite leader Imam Hussein and his loyal companions were denied drinking water during the tragedy of Karbala in 680 AD. In the cities' older districts, each *Saqqa-khaneh* in the traditional form comprised an inconspicuous and small niche inside which fitted out with a water tank, bowl, mirror, religious images, trays to which candlesticks were connected, and some other objects (Yarshater, 1979, p. 368). In the outside part, small locks and pieces of cloth were tied to the metal grille for votive reasons, all instilling a holy atmosphere.

3.2. The Formation of the *Saqqa-khaneh* Movement

For the first time, the title *Saqqa-khaneh* was employed by the journalist and art critic Karim Emami at Tehran College of Decorative Arts. At first, the title was applied to the artists' works, both in sculpture and painting, who used some elements of Shiite votive in their modern artwork (Pakbaz & Emdadian, 2001). Gradually, it was employed in diverse forms of painting and sculpture that utilised traditional ornamental elements. Sculptor and art historian Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), One of the principal begetters of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, describes the commencing of the movement. Tanavoli narrates how someday in the late 1950s, he and Zenderoudi (b. 1937) went to the *Shah Abd al-Azizim* Shrine and found and were absorbed by some printed religious images, and talismanic seals. He declared at that time they were seeking indigenous raw materials to be employed in their works. The simplicity and repetition of forms, and bright colours

fascinated them. According to Tanavoli, the first specimens of *Saqqa-khaneh*'s works were the sketches Zenderoudi prepared on the basis of those materials (Tanavoli, as cited in Maleki., 2010, p. 65). However, from Imami's viewpoint, the official formation of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement was in 1962, when the paintings of Zenderoudi were exhibited at Tehran's third Biennial, and fascinated viewers: compositions of geometric shapes or simplified figures, filled throughout with signs, words, and numbers in subdued colours (Emami, 1977, pp. 2-3). In these works, exterior lines of figures were formed in geometric order with the alphabetic lettering in the background penned meticulously and the circles, rectangles, and squares coloured in tones of green, black, mild blue, red, and yellow ochre. These colours made up a set of Shiite mourning colours. He says that the atmosphere of the works was religious and a spectator of Zenderoudi's paintings would be evoked images of Shiite assemblies and shrines (Fig. 25).

In the first discussion of this movement, Karim Emami stated that script was employed in conjunction with popular art's abstracted forms in the creation of the *Saqqa-khaneh* visual language. Two tendencies, from the early 1960s, appeared in the way artists utilised text: *Saqqa-khaneh* avant-garde artists employed it as a means to form an aboriginal semi-abstract style in amalgamation with other shapes; calligrapher painters exclusively concentrated on the writing, whether the medium was traditional, such as ink on paper, or modern, such as oil on canvas. The differentiation is critical. The works of calligrapher painters did occasionally tend towards abstraction, which reflected an existing lack of readability in the script.

The *Saqqa-khaneh* movements' artists looked to products of popular culture and rituals for inspiration. These roots, in their view, needed to be linked to contemporary styles and merged to create a national and esthetic expression. These artists found that the modernist form and an expression of distinguished individualism shaped a crucial component of the identity of the artist. This individual visual experience of an artist contains signs or icons from his background. The general understanding of the artists of the movement was according to the opinion that they could attain a modern-traditional fusion that contained an Iranian nature and identity. By exploring the artistic movements and tendencies of Western art, the artists were looking for universal credibility between modernism and the inherited features that Iranian art demonstrated in its time. Searching the different sources of Iranian traditional arts and crafts rewarded the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists with the capability to create distinctive and innovative works. As stated by Emami, the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists attained sources through which they could analyse, examine, and incorporate those forms, textures, and colours. These elements of Iranian-Islamic art were employed in various forms and structural combinations by the *Saqqa-khaneh* artists due to their flexible potential for artistic performance. During their examination, many shapes of traditional arts were utilised, inclusive of figures from the ethnic craft; ancient pottery patterns; talismanic shapes, and magical seals; elements and themes of Qajar art; Assyrian carvings and bas-reliefs, Achaemenian and Sasanian epigraphs or inscriptions, and Persian painting, calligraphy, and poetry. Generally, these artists focussed on formal pictorial traditions that overall could create a traditional and occasionally religious atmosphere instead of specific subjects and content. However, apart from the curiosity in

the representational facet of images, the artist's consideration to the subject matter can be observed in the artworks of some artists (even though entirely rarely). Also, these cases can be emphasised as pictorial features of the group members' works, such as the constant presence of ornamentation with the utilisation of various figural motifs and decorative elements and the multiplicity of forms in different parts of the paintings. Other characteristics to be stated comprise the employ of Persian classical painting's colouring system and Iranian popular art's colour schemes including green, black, red, vermilion, turquoise, lapis lazuli, and gold. Furthermore, these artists chiefly employed calligraphic elements in different forms, sometimes as a main element and occasionally as ornamental elements that exist in most parts of the works. Sadeq Tabrizi, one of the members of the *Saqqa-khaneh*, believes that the movement artists separately commenced their artistic careers. Each of the members in various ways was enthralled with different traditional sources, though probably they were conscious of each other's activities due to their contact with artistic clubs such as the *Kaboud Atelier* and also, the College of Decorative Arts. He adds that when the artists gathered and their works were displayed together, a relationship emerged between their works of art, though the works had been separately formed and none of them could be regarded as following in the steps of the other (Tabrizi, 1999, pp. 93-95).



Figure 25. Hossein Zenderoudi, *Untitled*, 1962, oil on paper fixed on wood, 100 x 154 cm. Retrieved from (Pakbaz & Emdadian, 2001).

3.3. Inventing Iranian Modernism: The Main Pioneers of the *Saqqa-khaneh* Movement

The resulting emerging style of *Saqqa-khaneh* artists was culturally distinctive and formally modern at the same time. More than narrative content or theme, it was the iconography, decorative qualities, and colour scheme that led to visual synchrony in the group. Zenderoudi and Pilaram were two of its first artists, both of whom utilised writing as a point of departure. As artists traditionally found calligraphy an expression of beauty, these practitioners challenged its privileged status and preferred instead to use more commonplace sources of text for their artworks, including talismanic spells. The selection to concentrate on ostensibly mundane texts instead of religious and literary ones was an act of political insubordination. It meant that the artist was more enthralled in the language of the masses than in that of the royal elite. Moreover, the *saqqa-khaneh* artists elected to stress the visual properties instead of the content of these texts. Their utilisation of basic materials such as pen, ink, and paper further turned calligraphic art into something usual, even banal. The considerable backing these artists acquired from the government helped their creative output and visibility. The unique combination of local contact between members, international curiosity, and national patronage helped the quick growth of the movement. While movement artists never wrote an official manifesto, there was one unifying concern by the late 1960s to introduce a national art shape, a kind of visual vernacular for the Iranian people. The pioneers and also prominent artists of the movement consisted of Hossein Zenderoudi, Parviz Tanavoli, Faramarz

Pilaram, Massoud Arabshahi, Mansur Qandriz, Sadeq Tabrizi, Nasser Oveisi, and Zhazeh Tabatabaei.

3.3.1. Hossein Zenderoudi

The group's influential artist and outstanding member, Hossein Zenderoudi was educated first at the College of Decorative Arts and since 1961 carried on his career mostly in Paris. When Zenderoudi went to Paris, the movement of Letterism was yet at its peak. Stressing the signs, letters, and words' visual effects, regardless of their meaning, letterists attempted to give them a communicative and expressive function. This artistic atmosphere affected Zenderoudi, and he deserted the figurative and geometric elements of his preceding paintings and concentrated on writing: the rhythmic repeat of syllables, letters, and sentences. There, he became acquainted with all the European painting trends of the period. He did not reject them. Although, he had commenced with some Shiite iconography, in diverse ways and stages he turned to employing calligraphy as the main element of his paintings. He was incipiently fascinated by Abstract painting with talismanic shapes, numbers, geometrical patterns, and calligraphic decorations, accompanying references to the votive Shiite iconography (Fig. 26). Zenderoudi, in those works, presented the paintings employing written forms as texture-producing material in the background for the circles, rectangles, squares, and triangles, then colouring them with the religious popular art's distinctive colours: red, orange, gold, and green. The originality, freshness, and intuitiveness formed in his early paintings inspired by

talismanic shapes were unique and noteworthy. Later, he became more interested in calligraphy and began experimenting with mere calligraphic elements. It is apparent that among the begetters of the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, Hossein Zenderoudi must be regarded as the forerunner of the calligraphic approach in employing calligraphy as the only compositional element. He overlooked all the principles of calligraphy and focused his endeavors on exploring graphic elements' visual nature and their signification aspects. His efforts for innovative writing climaxed in the origination of a sort of hyper-graphic space: a dynamic and abstract composition through the movement, rhythm, and merging of signs. To attain unified and complex structures, the artist covers the whole painting surface with numbers, dots, letters, or imprints of diverse signs, deftly applying radiant colours inside and amongst them (figs. 27 & 28). Therefore, Zenderoudi's enchanting letterism was a fusion and interaction of writing and painting. Though Zenderoudi's works seem to be calligraphic at first glance, they are regarded as paintings more than anything else. Zenderoudi, painting letters of diverse sizes, challenges words' formal qualities and customises calligraphic forms to define new bounds for visual perception. Emphasising the figurative structures of alphabetical elements, he separates them from their known meanings and redefines calligraphic values in Persian art to strengthen the words' aesthetic value and to channel them towards a general meaning – an entirely personal experience for him. Unreadability bears specific significance in his mind, indicating his intention to differentiate letters from manuscripts and calligraphic art. Zenderoudi himself was not a taught calligrapher but took benefit of the abstract trends of Persian calligraphy previously seen in *siyah mashq* practise sheets of the late 19th

century. With his pseudo-scripts, characters had no meaning in themselves but were meaningful as visual art's organic elements and alive with cultural and artistic connotations. At the intersection of calligraphy and geometry, the optic art-like structures of alphabetical characters and the purity of calligraphic forms are found, in which the painter intellectually refines the script's graphic geometry. It seems that he has developed the calligraphic and talismanic trends into a personalised pseudo-script of signs. He stays away from the acquainted images because he is unconcerned about the words' meanings he employed in the past. He has consistently traced things. Hence, it does not matter whether these things are icons or abstract signs of landscapes.

3.3.2. Parviz Tanavoli

Parviz Tanavoli graduated from the sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Tehran University. He instructed in Iran and abroad after studying at the Accademia de Belle Arti in Carrara and then in Milan, where he was the invited sculptor at the Minneapolis School of Art from 1962 to '64. After coming back to Tehran, he became linked to the artistic movement of *Saqqa-khaneh* and made sculptures reminding of religious shrines and associated objects. Tanavoli worked with a wide range of materials, from brass, bronze, and clay to scrap metal, and a range of dimensions, from small-scale to large sculptures sizing some three meters or more in height. His most renowned subject is the sculptural representation of the *heech* (هیچ) (the Iranian word for nothing). In his primary and innovative composition, which was first exhibited in 1965 at the Borghese Gallery, plaster hands holding a metal grid were surmounted with the plastic circle encompassing

the word *heech*, formed in Iranian script (Fig. 29). In subsequent representations, sub-elements came to be modified or even discarded. The word *heech*, in his most notable version, is placed on a chair similar to a stooping cat. The head of the cat is composed of the letter *ha-ye du chashm* (ح), and the cat's body comprises the initial stroke of the final letter *cha* (چ), whose down-stroke in the *nasta'liq* style becomes the long curving tail of the cat. In his works, there is an interaction between shape and meaning (Fig. 30). In addition to the *heech* sculptures, the series of the Wall is also regarded as a notable accomplishment of the sculptor. These walls, in their abstract and minimalised forms, indeed, are the artist's homage to inscriptions and epitaphs of the ancient monuments of Iran. Aesthetically, the Wall is a mass of pure bronze that resembles minimalist cubes with compacted unreadable writings in various calligraphic forms (fig. 31). Walls are amongst the oldest architectural elements that have taken various forms all over history, and in a classic sense, are expressive surfaces with decorative and aesthetic significance further than a dividing fence and remind us of the mosques' domes or any other holy space when they come to be ornamented with inscriptions. Therefore, the walls of Tanavoli in our minds become symbols, signifying Iranian or global cultural heritage and ancient wisdom. These monolithic works, even though, are noticeably resembling American minimalist artists' sculptures of the 1960s, evoke an Eastern treasure-trove due to the calligraphic work and also the allusion to historical epitaphs.



Figure 26. Hossein Zenderoudi, 1962, *K+L+32+H+4*, Felt-tip pen, crayon, coloured ink, and metallic paint on board, 225.9 x 148.7 cm.

This painting, executed after the artist moved to Paris, represents the amalgam of personal, religious, and national mythologies that characterises his practise. Its dense decoration reflects the astrological talismans and patterns of vernacular prints found in the bazaars of Tehran, as well as sacred calligraphy and Shiite iconography. Zenderoudi's painting *K+L+32+H+4* is more of an enigma due to its title (like many other of his primeval works) than its composition. The cubic form on the right side, accompanied by luminous embodies over it, is possibly referring to an altar, as on the left, the raised hands are likely alluding to a genealogical of the martyred Shiite imams. In his cryptic and symbolic approach to art, Zenderoudi placed the letters K, L, and H for Karbala, light, and Hossein. They are shown in Roman letters and numbers, maybe because in spite of his nationalistic and religious trends, he addressed the non-Iranian spectators, and this meretricious trend does indicate an attribute of the *Saqqa-khaneh*. Zenderoudi style possesses Western art's syntax, and also it expresses the attendance of Western audiences. Shiva Balaghi says, "Zenderoudi founded a quite developed syntax taking out private mythology from religion, divination, augury, superstition, coded signs, and numerology (Balaghi & Gumpert, 2002)." Zenderoudi's works and particularly the early ones are formed with such frightening emptiness that the onlooker is conquered, if not with religious passion, then pictorially.



Figure 27. Hossein Zenderoudi, 1970, *DAL+DAL+DAL*, Acrylic on canvas, 124 x 212 cm.

Zenderoudi's compositions pay tribute to centuries of Persian religious illustration and utilise a systematic replication of letter forms that finds its origin in the Sufi numerologists' mystical practise, who believed in the spiritual importance of singular letters and employ these principles into extremely complicated talismanic charts. His methodical compositions, while not accurately pursuing the axioms or grammar of numerology, capture conceptual and aesthetic qualities of its mysterious nature. The works he produced in the 1970s marked a shift toward a more avant-garde, measured, and technical approach to calligraphy. The early works' crowded iconography is replaced by a more concentration on singular and recurring letter forms, which display a formal refinement missing from their previous counterparts. This work (*DAL+DAL+DAL*) also indicates a conceptual change from the more overtly traditional subjects and more toward a pure, patterned aesthetic that stresses the meditative and visual elements of letter depiction over their linguistic connotation. Zenderoudi, spontaneous but measured, spur-of-the-moment yet technical, manipulates Iranian calligraphy with ease and boasts a visual scope that honestly and diligently captures the prominent elements of traditional religious aesthetics popular in Iran. His canvases, rendered using vibrant and rich colours, replicate the votive art's textural and tonal qualities so prevalent in the Iranian urban landscape.

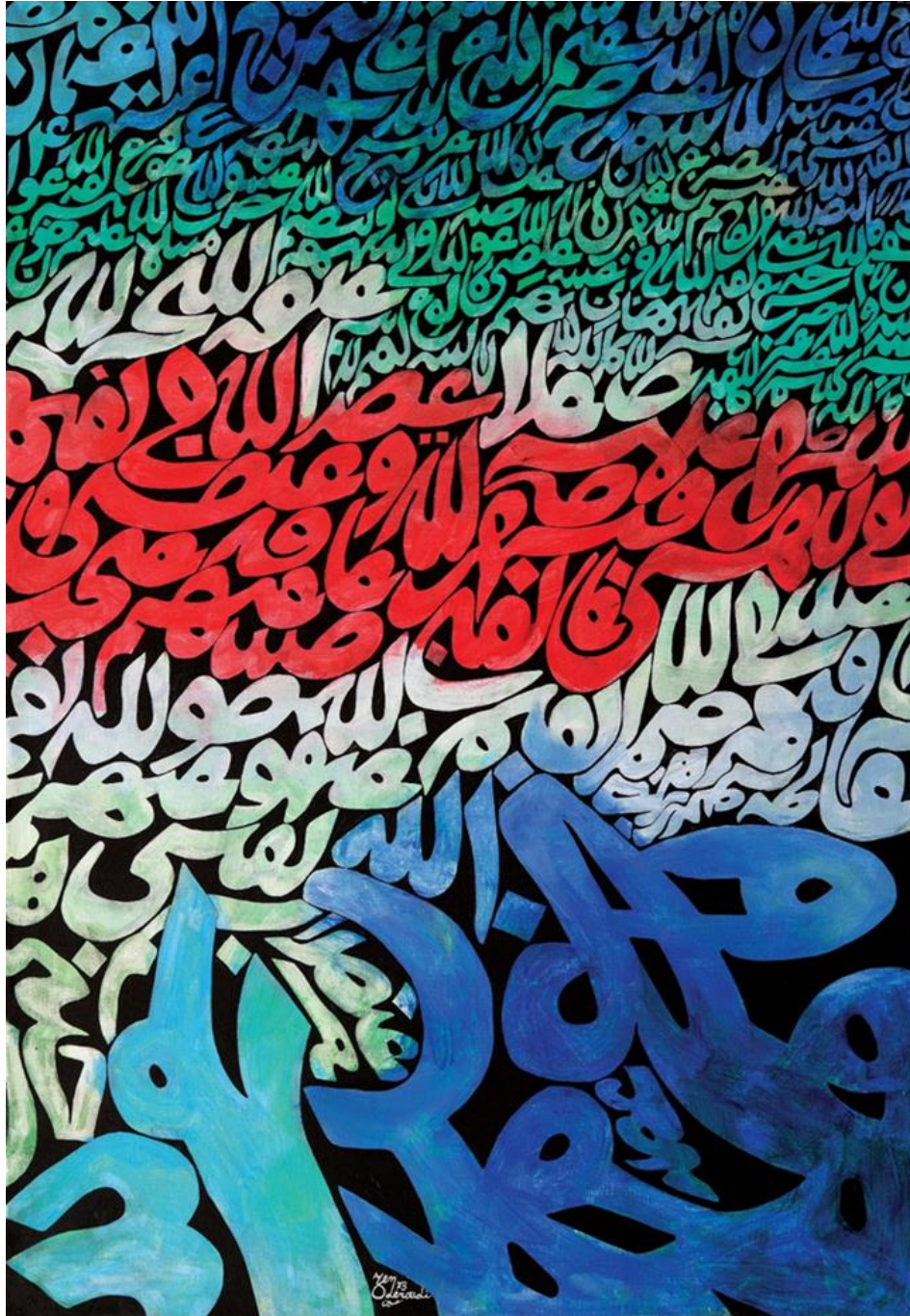


Figure 28. Hossein Zenderoudi, 1973, SAT+HE+SAT, Acrylic and Mineral Pigment on Canvas, 142 x 212 cm. This work consists of several horizontal colour surfaces covered with letters and words of diverse sizes. The creative utilisation of twisting lines of calligraphic characters is regarded as a modern graphic element that, combined with the resulting rhythm, evokes a sense of depth. The text is purposefully free from lingual barriers and illegible. Zenderoudi is inspired by Persian traditions of imagery in forming dense spaces. The employ of dense spaces, as Persian art's essence, is evident in carpet design, mural painting, and ornamental tiling of architectural designs.



Figure 29. Parviz Tanavoli, 1965, *Heech and Hands*, 82 x 80 x 8 cm, Plexiglas, wood, plaster, copper, neon light and oil paint, Retrieved from Manijeh Collection.



Figure 30. Parviz Tanavoli, 2007, *Heech and Chair VII*, 26.5 x 17 x 11 cm, Bronze. Retrieved from <https://www.tanavoli.com//works/sculptures/bronze/heech-and-chair-vii/>



Figure 31. Parviz Tanavoli, 2001, *The Wall and the Window*, 30.5 x 14.5 x 7.5 cm. Bronze. Retrieved from <https://www.tanavoli.com/works/sculptures/bronze/the-wall-and-the-window>

3.3.3. Faramarz Pilaram

Faramarz Pilaram (1938-1983) graduated from the College of Decorative Arts and was among the Iranian artists' first group who focussed on Iranian legacy and mythological motifs. And at one stage, his artistic development ran similar to Zenderoudi's, enclosing geometrical forms, letters, and words inspired by votive Shiite iconography (fig. 32). This artist, whose employment of old seals was a characteristic of his artistic career's first part, utilised these in his paintings as a connective texture for geometric compositions. In the ensuing stage, Pilaram experimented with diverse styles and techniques in which calligraphy, particularly the *nasta'liq* and *shikasta* scripts, played the principal part (fig. 33). He created a number of expressionist calligraphic paintings and colourful *shikasta*-like tableaux, during the late 1960s and the early '70s, which can be interrelated with some traditional epigraphs. In Pilaram's artworks, calligraphy not only finds a traditional position, but its abstract character is integrated with other organising elements of the work. In this way, the interpenetration of lines and their continuous change, the crossing of colors and the sinking of knots and straight, round, and spiral shapes on one hand, and various volumes on the other hand, creates unity - which is the ultimate quality of a style. Pilaram, in some works, which are part of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art collection, demonstrated musical compositions using calligraphic forms. Rhythmical words, in these paintings, play visual motions in a symphonious space. In actuality, the indigenous arts' homogeneous quality consciously appears with harmonious symmetries in his paintings.

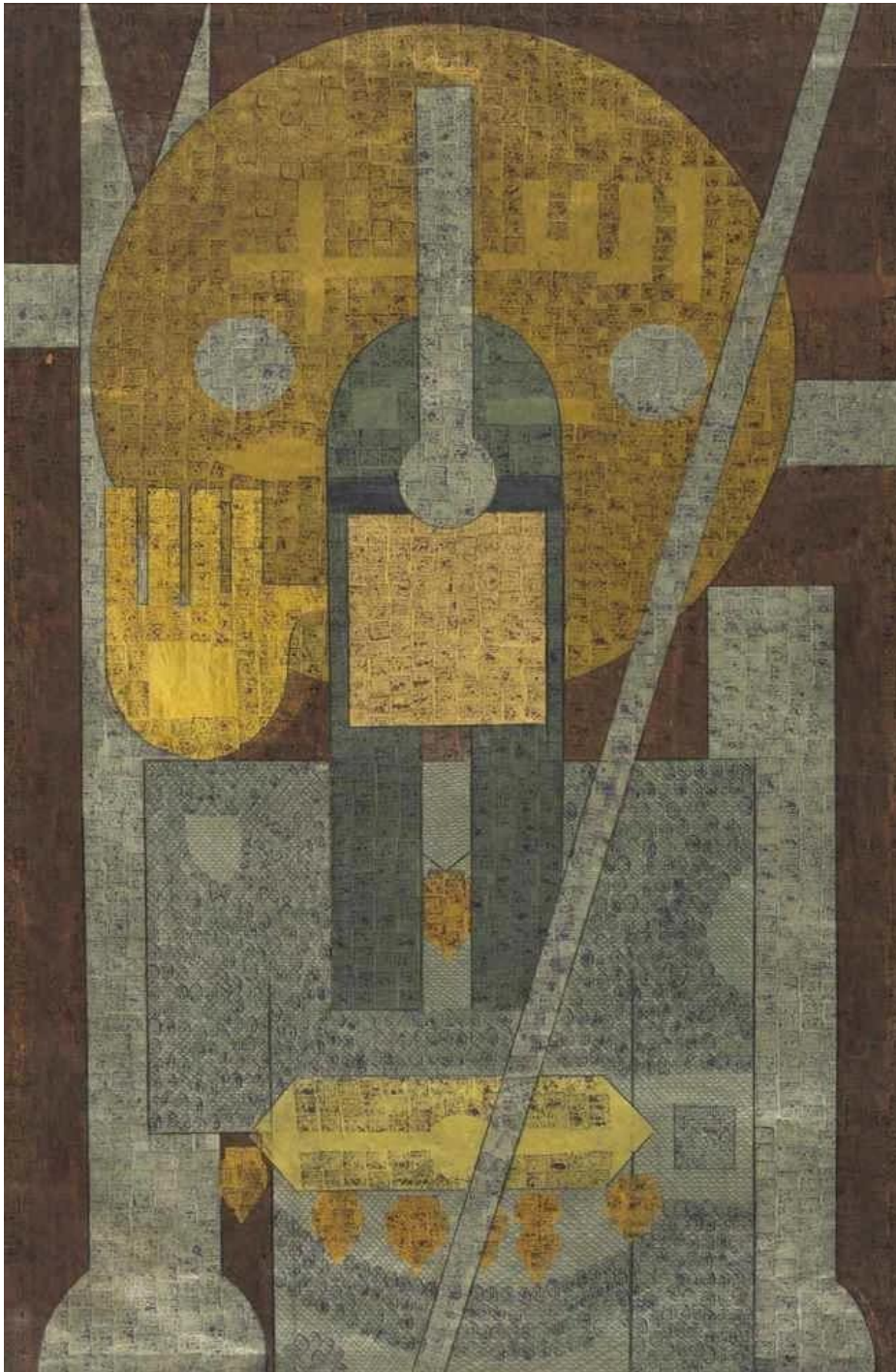


Figure 32. Faramarz Pilaram, ca. 1960–1965, *Untitled*, ink, metallic paint and acrylic on paper, 199×130 cm, Retrieved from <https://www.artnet.com/>



Figure 33. Faramarz Pilaram, 1977, *Untitled*, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 199×130 cm, from <https://tehranauction.com/>

3.3.4. Massoud Arabshahi

Massoud Arabshahi (1935-2019), who also graduated from the College of Decorative Arts, went further back for inspiration to the art of pre-Islamic Persia, specifically the motifs of Assyrian, Babylonian, and Achaemenian inscriptions and epitaphs. Inspired by the Avesta Zoroastrian texts, his drawings look like ancient cities' archaeological maps (Issa, 2001, p. 20). He was the *Saqqa-khaneh* group's only member who did not use religious folk art, and his dissimilar viewpoint and spirit distinguish him from others. Nevertheless, his early and even later works match up to some prominent of the movement's aesthetic characteristics. Specifically, one can mention the perpetual attendance of varied motifs and adornments, the employ of Iranian folk art's colour schemes, and the multiplicity of elements in different parts of the tableau. Also, the close connection with the shapes of Islamic architecture and handicrafts can be observed in the forms and colours that he utilised in these paintings (Fig. 34).

3.3.5. Mansur Qandriz

Mansur Qandriz (1935-1965) was another student at the College of Decorative Arts who utilised mystical symbols and signs to amalgamate modern and traditional elements in his abstract designs. He was a painter's semi-abstract who employed stylised Persian motifs and emphasised tribal shapes, archaic metalwork, and Iranian textiles through the utilisation of limited colours (fig. 35). He was an artist who obsessively tried to develop and define an Iranian style in different phases of his artistic development (Pakbaz, 1974, p.33). His early figurative paintings (before joining the *Saqqa-khaneh*

movement) indicate the influence of Persian paintings, Matisse, and Picasso. Then during his *Saqqa-khaneh* period, employing traditional designs and textiles, Qandriz developed a semi-abstract personalised style, indicated through geometric motifs and stylised figures, including humans, horses, birds, swords, fish, the sun, etc. Qandriz, through painting, delicately juxtaposed tradition and modernity and actively participated in contemporary discussions relating to Iranian art, in particular, the emergence of cultural identity and the regeneration of the common pictorial legacy.

3.3.6. Sadeq Tabrizi

The works of Sadeq Tabrizi (1939 -2017) were inspired by symbolic objects found in folk art, such as old locks and keys, penmanship sheets, engraved metal bowls, old-fashioned seals, pages of manuscripts, bits of semi-precious stone or colored glass, blue beads ..., (Yarshater, 1979, p. 370), also utilise Persian miniatures, Qajar figures, and popular and religious forms of *Qahveh-khaneh* (coffee-house) painting (figs. 36 & 37). One can see, in his paintings, the rhythmic repetition of traditional patterns and calligraphic forms. By emphasising the Iranian painting's pictorial tradition in a creative confrontation with Western modernism, Tabrizi has presented new expressions of the combination of tradition and modernity in his tableaux. To acquire Iranian modernism, he explored the components of archaic Iranian art and literature, and in studying his homeland's indigenous arts, he instituted a connection between familiar motifs and nostalgic themes in Iranian tradition and perspectives based on modernism. The integration of calligraphy and figural motifs, by overstating the proportions of the forms

originated from Iranian miniature in his works, indicates that Tabrizi enthusiastically aimed to discover new horizons in the arena of contemporary Iranian painting and, with ceaseless experimentation, put himself on a route that was amazingly new at that period.

3.3.7. Nasser Oveisi

Figural motifs inspired mainly by Persian miniatures, ceramics, *kalamkari* (printing patterns on fabric), and calligraphic forms are featured in the works of Nasser Oveisi (b. 1934). His works are closely related to Persian painting and traditional book illustrations, but he brought them to a contemporary sensitivity. Actually, Oveisi can be considered a postmodern artist who combines traditional and modern sources to create his masterpieces. While he creates complicated designs, the subject matters of his paintings are simple and few. They comprise human and animal (horses and birds) figures and painted pottery influenced by archaic Persian pottery. Oveisi's women, single or in groups, with joined eyebrows and large oblong eyes, are remindful of the Qajar large-scale paintings' portraits, and the figures of males, whether lovers, polo players, or heroes on horseback, recall some standard kinds of Iranian figurative tradition and Persian painting forms. However, in all cases, the figures' different sections are illuminated chiefly with calligraphic forms (fig. 38).

3.3.8. Zhazeh Tabatabaei

Zhazeh Tabatabaei (1931-2008), who was one of the pioneers of modern and contemporary art in Iran, in the late 1950s, began with the Qajar patterns, but he suspended midway between the distorted representation and the more serious personalities (Emami, 1971, p. 357).” Tabatabaei, a prolific sculptor, and painter, has endeavored various styles; nevertheless, he is known best for Persian patterns’ bold re-statements such as Qajar women, decorative shapes, imaginative scenes, and calligraphic forms (fig. 39). He skillfully transformed what was innately devoid of artistic quality and characteristics into authentic, sumptuous art. His Intellectual independence and abstaining from conventional clichés, spheres, styles, and persuadings in Iranian modernism turned him into an independent artist with a unique style.



Figure 34. Massoud Arabshahi, 1979, *Untitled*, mixed media on canvas, 124×135 cm, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>



Figure 35. Mansur Qandriz, early 1960s, *Untitled*, oil on sack, 158×110 cm, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>



Figure 36. Sadeq Tabrizi, circa 1980s, *Saqqā-Khaneh*, mixed media on canvas, 70×100 cm, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>



Figure 37. Sadeq Tabrizi, 2008, *Untitled*, Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 96 cm. Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>



Figure 38. Nasser Oveisi, 2010, *Untitled*, acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 80×203 cm, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>

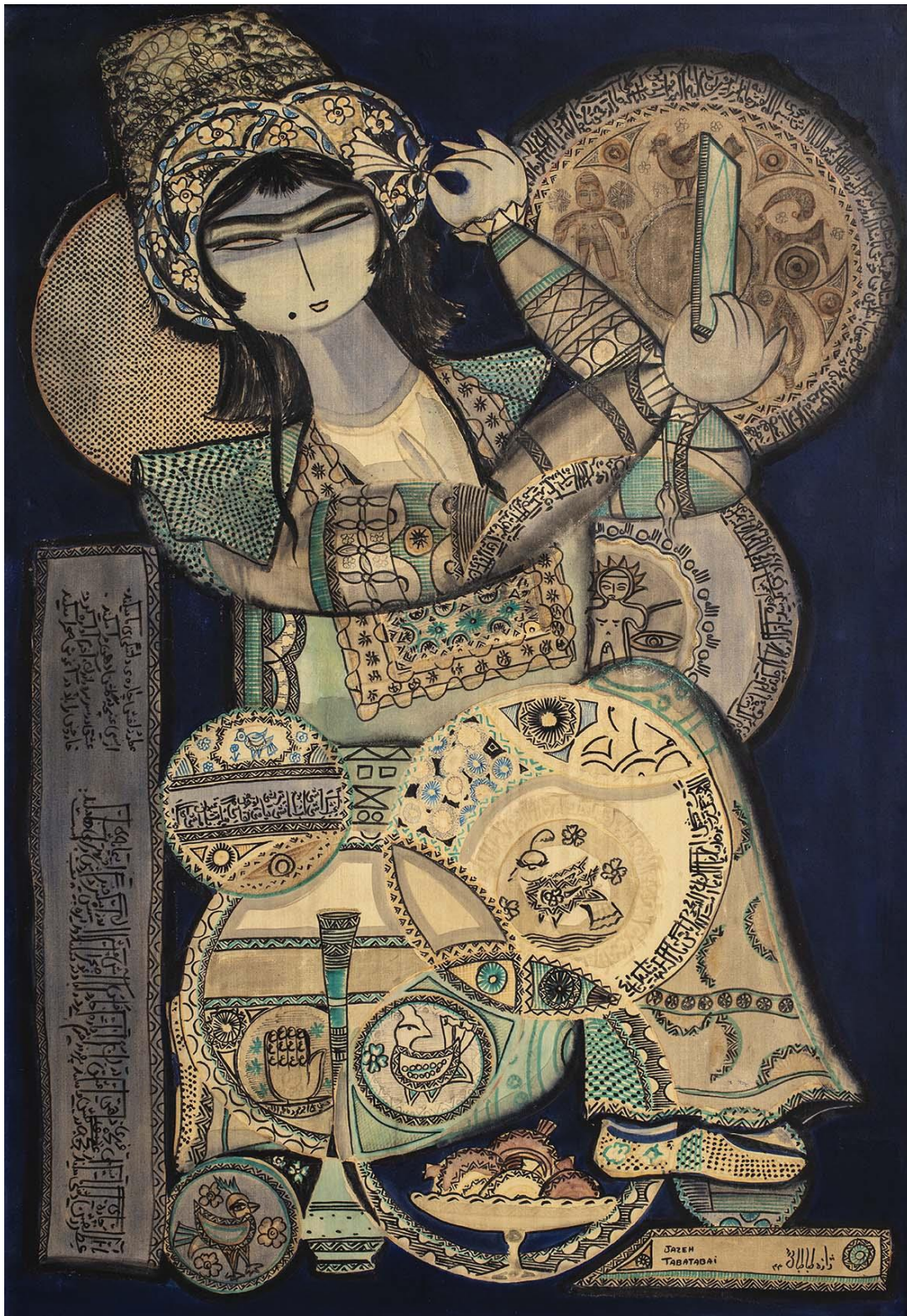


Figure 39. Zhazeh Tabatabaei, 1964, *Untitled*, 140×93 cm, oil on canvas, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>

3.4. Summary

The *Saqqa-khaneh* movement is the noteworthy product of the interactivity of the national, traditional, and religious elements with the structure of modern art. This movement, because of its dual nature, has invariably played a consequential part in the popularisation of modern and contemporary art in Iran. What binds group members is that their works are composed of symbols and signs that indicate the golden attributes and the golden eras of the Iranian civilisation, both pre-Islamic and Islamic. Besides the expansive internal realisation that they acquired, their artworks were successful in receiving international recognition as well, because it was regarded as constituting a good way of representing Iranian art, or more vastly Middle Eastern. Artists such as Zenderoudi, Pilaram, Arabshahi, and Qandriz considered the apparent closeness and resemblance between traditional decorative art's stylised aspect and abstract art. Diverse abstract shapes were created wherein geometrical forms and the decorative elements of Iranian-Islamic and calligraphy were elected and then spread across the entire space of the paintings chiefly in symmetrical structures. And other artists, inclusive of Oveisi, Tabrizi, and Tabatabai, drew their inspiration from the Iranian painting's figurative tradition (from antiquated manuscripts to the artworks of the Qajar period). They endeavoured to employ these to present contemporary modern art via a multiplicity of figural motifs in a decorative mode with free utilisation of calligraphic elements in their compositions.

The *Saqqa-khaneh* movement, in contemporary times, has continued through the movement's artists and other artists who were affected by it in various ways. There has not been any analogous movement in Iranian art nationally since the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement. Particularly after the Islamic revolution and following Iran's social, cultural, and political transformations, art was also entirely affected. One of the effects of the revolution on movements like *Saqqa-khaneh* (non-adherence to the Islamic revolution and its ideals and whose works with their modernist attributes as formal art had been significantly backed by the Pahlavi regime) was that the group members mostly immigrated out of the country, and those who remained had no chance or possibility to present their artworks. One can witness in the last decades that the predominant preoccupation of contemporary artists is to identify what comprises the particular features of Iranian art, and it is in this continuous search that the *Saqqa-khaneh* movement's essence still survives. This movement has gained a nationwide significance in contemporary Iranian society and culture, leading to an increasing number of practitioners, collectors, and a presence of calligraphic painting-inspired advertising and design. Moreover, it has gradually found a position in the global art world.

Chapter 4. Aspects of Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy

In this chapter, due to the abundance of data concerning contemporary Islamic calligraphy, I have examined to identify some of the various directions in which artists are practising today. In this regard, I have divided the topic into three general parts. The first covers the continuity of traditional calligraphic styles in contemporary times. The second part deals with the employ of Arabic script in typography, computer graphics, and printing. And finally, a third part treats new tendencies in calligraphic art. In the first and third parts, I have endeavored to select a few practitioners as exemplary of the various career patterns that have been followed by contemporary modern artists, as well as learners and investigators of calligraphy. My aim here is not to be comprehensive but elective, and I have knowingly drawn my examples from over the lands of Islamic and non-Islamic to illustrate the dynamic and alive role that Islamic calligraphy plays throughout the globe today. The artists examined here display notable uses of alphabetical characters while exploring relationships amongst culture, tradition, and modernity. Each examined artwork has formed in specific contexts based on the artists' cultural communication and personal experiences. Contrasting works of art by modern artists facilitate an understanding of the role of letter forms within these works as well as in the artistic period's larger context. The incorporation of the letters and words within their works does not be at variance with tradition, modernity, or contemporaneity. Their works are suitable for my study due to the fact they have developed deep, contemplative, and creative standards to merge the Arabic-Farsi letters or their calligraphic forms' abstract as

influential components for their artworks. These specimens indicate some of the ways that contemporary artists incorporate Islamic calligraphy into their artworks. They show the many media that practitioners are utilising to emphasise different facets of writing, from its talismanic attributes to its formal and semantic qualities.

4.1. Traditional Calligraphy Styles

One of the prominent scholars of the early 20th century was Mehdi Bayani (1906-1968), a trailblazer in the sphere of librarianship, manuscripts, and calligraphy in Iran. He took a doctorate in Persian language and literature in 1945 from Tehran University. Bayani was the director and establisher of Iran's first national library and was appointed in 1956 as head of the Royal Library, as well as he taught courses in calligraphy and founded *Anjuman-i himayat-i khatt va khatatan* (انجمن حمایت خط و خطاطان) (a society for the backing of calligraphic arts and calligraphers). Besides catalogs of Iran's major collections, he compiled *Ahval va athar-i khushnivisan* (احوال و آثار خوشنویسان), a huge biographical book of calligraphic masters. This dictionary is an essential beginning point for studying Iranian calligraphy and calligraphers. It is an eminent accomplishment compiled in pre-computer time by hand based on a personal investigation of the major collections. However, some of the data requires updating and approval. The most outstanding contemporary writer of Iranian calligraphy is Habiballah Fazā'ilī (1922-1997). He was one of the few scribes who were skilled in writing all types of Islamic calligraphy, especially *thuluth*, and *naskh*. *Atlas khat* (اطلس خط) (reproduces many examples by well-known calligraphers), and *Ta'lim-i khatt* (تعلیم خط) (introduces the

complete teaching of all sorts of calligraphy methods and the required instruments for this art) are his two important works. Both are considered significant reference books in the field of calligraphy.

Reza Mafi (1943–1982), was one of the most influential artists in contemporary Iranian art and came from a background of calligraphy and religious conservatism. He applied his remarkable calligraphic abilities in works ranging from decorative to political. Mafi is most famed for his calligraphic paintings that utilise various scripts: illuminated manuscript pages' trompe l'oeil evocations, the *bismillah* bird (a popular religious form in the late 19th century), and works in relief utilising brilliant colours that draw upon medieval ceramic tile work. Mafi's familiarity and good knowledge of Persian literature were reflected in the poetry and text choice and were one of his work's strengths. Though he was considered an experimental and progressive artist who worked with various materials, he endeavoured to stay faithful to the calligraphy's traditional mood in facets such as the election of colours. Mafi, in creating works, did not hesitate to employ new and diverse materials and techniques, and he always attempted novel experiences and achieved the theme of the work by amalgamating different materials. This Iranian artist paid attention to both tradition and modernism. Although his works of art are aware of and affected by traditional arts, obtaining new shapes was an inviolable principle for him. His works' visual expression is not one-dimensional and monotonous, and one of the significant attributes of his works was his attitude's multi-dimensionality in the sphere of calligraphic art. This characteristic differentiated him from his contemporary

calligraphers and painters. Mafi, during his short life, created many calligraphic works, a remarkable number of which are black and white. One of the interesting points that can be seen in his *Siyah mashqs* is the new and innovative forms that exist amongst them. He penned on canvas without utilising a brush, with a reed pen and ink, and he was skilled in different calligraphic styles including *nasta'liq*, *shikasta*, *thuluth*, *ta'liq*, and *riqa*. Other calligraphers have moved a further step toward abstraction, creating works with pseudo-scripts that resemble writing but are not readable. Nasrallah Afjaei (b. 1933), for example, is a full-fledged master in the sphere of traditional Iranian calligraphy and is regarded as one of the most outstanding artists in this field in the last few decades because of his consistency and continuity in producing modern calligraphic works.

Afjaei has retained his loyalty to calligraphy and if he has employed the materials of painting in producing his new works, he has utilised burnt and warm monochromatic forms. Rhythm is the feature of his works, and he pursues the same traditional pattern of black practises in his works of art and also gives space to the word while maintaining its meaning. His works have an eye-catching performance and solid payment. Afjai seeks to play with various methods and forms of calligraphy and its diverse items, which gives a spell-like appearance to his works of art and evokes on a monochrome background the composition of freedom - from a distance. The diversity of his calligraphic paintings in the last decade has concentrated on providing inspiring works of familiar and simple forms in nature and humans. In this new composition, the semantic facet of the writing gives its place to symbolic decorative shapes, and he, who is more interested in

redefining the ornamental aspect in his works, tries to reread an abstract narrative from *Siyah mashq* writing in Iranian calligraphy. What differentiates his art from this old tradition is that the goal of writing in his works, unlike in the past, is not to read the text but to represent the form in a new context. From this point of view, the audience for his works is inclusive, i.e., there is no need to be acquainted with the poetry, reading, and comprehension of the written meaning. Afjahi's works, on the other hand, contrary to many calligraphic artists, lack the Islamic attitude's geometric foundation and are closer to organic shapes. Hence, the order dominating his works is an order originating from nature instead of the abstraction governing Islamic art.

In the period after the revolution in 1979 and the Islamic Republic of Iran's relative isolation, today, the works of scholars of calligraphy and calligraphers are not widely known. In turn, Iranian scholars have not gained access to the outsiders' works, and the sphere has become rather introspective. Over the last few years, there has not been much intention to promulgate calligraphy internationally via the state-owned sector. Apart from the *Fajr International Visual Arts Festival* (the yearly celebration of the Islamic revolution); and calligraphy expos (conventionally, these exhibitions take place in public art centres under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Iranian Academy of the Arts) are the sole major events; everything is within the framework of the government's cultural policies.

A completely different scenario is related to Turkey. The adoption of Latin script in 1928 by the Republic of Turkey broke the long-lasting tradition of employing the

Arabic script for daily affairs. Arabic script and language kept going to be utilised for religious intents, and there has been a resuscitation in its calligraphic potential recently. In Turkey, the recognised authority on calligraphic art is M. Ugur Derman (b. 1935). He is a skilled calligrapher (especially in the traditional scripts of *ta'liq* and *nasta'liq*). Derman has composed much about the history of calligraphy²⁴, and in recognition of his accomplishments, he was appointed as an honorary professor at Istanbul's Mimar Sinan University in 1996, previously the Academy of Fine Arts, wherein formal calligraphy instruction in 1936 was reinstated. He represents the standpoint of Turk and argues during the past five centuries, the best calligraphy produced in the Islamic lands was accomplished in Istanbul. In spite of the forsaking of Arabic writing and the period of stagnation that followed, Derman believes that the system has been capable of surviving thanks to the traditional master-apprentice system. In Turkey, such a system has made the new generation fascinated by calligraphy's aesthetic merits. This system utilised today to instruct calligraphy is well described by an American calligrapher, Mohammad Zakariya (b. 1942), who went to Istanbul (there he practised *thuluth* and *naskh* under Hasan Chelebi) to improve his proficiency in the subject in 1984. He took his diploma in 1988 in *thuluth* and *naskh* scripts and continued studies with Ali Alparslan in *ta'liq* and *nasta'liq*, getting the second diploma in 1997. The training of Zakariya indicates that the traditional Turkish system of transcribing, followed by M. Ugur Derman under the master

²⁴ Derman is the author of three books (*Türk Hat Sanatının Şaheserleri; The Art of Calligraphy in the Islamic Heritage*, trans. Mohamed Zakariya and Mohamed Asfour; *Letters in Gold: Ottoman calligraphy from the Sakip Sabanci Collection*, Istanbul) and more than three hundred articles on calligraphy.

Necmeddin Okyay persists today. He, who studied under the auspices of the Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) in Turkey, has become one of the most prominent representatives of Islamic calligraphy in the America nowadays. Besides translating many works of Derman, Zakariya has written concise overviews of calligraphic art's state and history, which include specimens scribed by him of various styles based on historical samples (Zakariya, 1979).

These contemporary writers' and calligraphers' work indicates how Turkish styles continue to prevail nowadays. This is true not only in the Islamic world but also in Europe and America. In academic circles of the West, perhaps Wijdan Ali, a practising artist, and a Jordanian royal family member, is the most recognised contemporary commentator on Islamic calligraphic art. She earned her doctorate in Islamic art from London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Her book, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*, calls the Arabic letters' aesthetic interrogation in circles of modern and contemporary the "School of Calligraphic Art (Ali, 1997)." Ali knowingly selected this label to distinguish the modern school from traditional styles and the term *Hurufiyyeh*, which she literally translates as letterism. The book concludes with research of diverse subdivisions, subject matters, and the contemporary calligraphic art movement's styles, as well as key movement artists' biographies. During her investigation, Ali commenced collecting noteworthy pieces and helped establish the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in 1980. One of the main focuses of the gallery is collecting, preserving, and displaying contemporary calligraphic art.

4.2. Islamic Calligraphy: Print and Typography

In the 19th century, printing on a wide scale was introduced as a part of the stream towards modernisation and the renewal of intellectual and literary culture in Islamic lands. The late acceptance of print by Islamic societies is often ascribed to Islamic conservatism and the new technology's cultural clash with Muslim beliefs and attitudes. The employment of print changed Islamic practises of writing. Nevertheless, the new technology simply did not replace scribal production's traditional methods. Beside the new technology, the scribal and calligraphic methods continue to operate. Printed texts were considered for getting extensive audiences, and typographic letters and words began to emphasise the clarity of design for the aim of readability. In response, calligraphic practises stressed writing's aesthetic design as a means of artistic expression and religious reflection. The traditional scripts kept their association with the Koranic preservation, and hand-crafted written work presented qualities of spiritual insight and ethical character. The calligraphic composition presented an aesthetic discourse that operates alongside and reflects upon the printed text's standardisation. These various writing styles' messages were read not only in the content of letters and words but also in the kind and appearance of the letter. Designers expanded modern forms of Islamic script and attempted to incorporate them within an international information economy. They tried to convey each message in a way that fits the specific textual part it plays and the requirements of a particular customer. Letters, as a result, became supple, and their forms altered in reaction

to the function and state of the text. Visually, modern printed Arabic's fundamental structure reflected the Arabic tradition's handwritten script.

4.3. Calligraphic art

Besides refinement of traditional styles, contemporary artists are seeking to extend the materials and media utilised for writing and the ways to integrate them into artistic compositions. Generally, these works vary from traditional calligraphy because the message is subordinate to the artwork's formal qualities. Writing can be the only constituent, but artists often employ it as part of a composition. Some practitioners are also converting written shapes into pseudo-scripts, purposed to indicate the talismanic and not the semantic attributes of writing. I selected an example of a group of artists, 3 Iranians and 5 Arabs, whose art, inspired by modern and contemporary trends is rooted in the Islamic art of calligraphy. Amongst the many Iranian and international artists whose works inspired me, I choose Mohammad Ehsaei, Shirin Neshat, Farhad Moshiri, Ahmed Moustafa, Madiha Umar, Etel Adnan, Dia Azzawi, and Rachid Koraichi. Their techniques and the way they look at their subject matter and bring together past and present is inspirational. For instance, their approach to history and contemporary time and representing them simultaneously can be seen in the utilization of traditional art techniques such as painting and sculpture along with newer media like photography, video, and installation.

4.3.1. Contemporary Iranian artist: Mohammad Ehsaei

One of the most noteworthy pioneers in what is currently known as calligraphic painting art in the Middle East, specifically Iran is calligrapher/instructor Mohammad Ehsaei (b. 1939). Even though his works before Iran's Islamic Revolution were aligned with the modernisation movement, they did not get sufficient international regard. Ehsaei's art, inspired by modern and contemporary trends was rooted in Islamic art of calligraphy and hence was still considered traditional and too religious. By selecting abstract subjects like *ayat*, thoughts, and words, his artworks express the metaphysical tradition, which aims to the audiences' awareness and the spirit's incarnation of vision. Inspired by Islamic art's traditional geometrical motifs, Persian hanging scripts, and their proportional system, Ehsaei created forms and compositions that carried the construction's freedom as well as the liberation of making different variations, therefore introducing a new approach to the implementation of Iranian calligraphic art. He boldly embraced Iran's modernist movement of the 1960s and benefited from many taken components of traditional scripts and constructed his art more expressive, lighter, and dynamic. Ehsaei, as a trendsetter, was able to form a framework to break away from the calligraphic expression's established techniques. Utilising his unconstrained liberty, he was able to try new and various paint materials and work with new mediums. Ehsaei in recent decades has continually attempted to display a pictorial narrative of Persian alphabetical characters' combination with abstract application and energetic and lively textures. His thoughts' origin is his knowledge of former times and his in-depth

comprehension of Oriental ontology. Even so, he passed the principles and rules of the calligraphy tradition and carries a modernist approach to employing calligraphy in the area of painting. The precise calculation of the potentialities of letters, the powerful aesthetic forms' extraction, and the lines' energy in his artworks rely upon his loyalty to the traditions of calligraphy and his approach from calligraphy to painting. He adheres to the tradition of Iranian art in both its meaning and form and its method, which comprises practise, hard work, and reiteration for coming to have the utmost accurateness, proportion, and solidity of the structure. Not only has he dominated calligraphic art with years of endeavour, but he also utilises this breathtaking practise in designing all his calligraphic paintings.

The specimens of his early compositions comprise entwined letters and words in one of the primary colours of blue, green, or red that emerge from a black background (fig. 40). The mastery of Ehsaei is embodied in his understanding of an extensive range of potentials of colour, form, and composition regarding the letters' prolongation, deviation, and overlapping. His cursive calligraphy has an imposing fluidity that glorifies symmetrical iteration. Often in the compositions and the backgrounds, the filled and empty spaces are visually of equal value, balancing one another and encouraging the audience not to stop on a specific component of the composition. Also, this technique is amalgamated with an exclusive interlacing style, with rich graphical nodes, that carry a rhythmic and intricate quality. The interlacing letters' consistency and repetition invite the spectator to move on and insight into the rhythmic flow and the whole composition's

regularity, adding modern abstraction to his calligraphic paintings. He combines all the characters' distinctive shapes with the whole's fluidity and integrates the rhythmic qualities of the signs devoid of sequestering them. Ehsaei, with a long history in the art of graphics, is well conscious of the impact of calligraphy on the attention of the viewer and the charm of words in the visual works' text, as well as he is aware of the unique nature of Iranian calligraphy in its capacity to express human emotions and feelings. His role in the validation of contemporary calligraphy is irrefutable. The basis of Ehsaei's work are qualities including independence, contrast, elegance, and character of letters and words' character, the background of which turns back to Mir Emad and is a specimen of the manifestation of Iranian ingenuity in the sphere of visual beauty. By embellishing all these virtues, he was able to delineate a perfect scale for the onlooker and a lofty level of quality for artistic creation. The expressions Allah (الله) and *La ilaha ila Allah* (لا اله الا الله) in one of the most significant periods of his work have been reduplicated many times (figs. 41, 42 & 43). The presence of Allah's names (الاسماء الحسنی) in the works of Ehsaei commenced almost in 1975 and persists up to the present time. Visual representation of mysticism and pure spirituality is an important subject stressed in this collection. The most important contemplative effect of these works is the quick, active, and energetic pen strokes, which both recall the painting style of abstract expressionism and evoke the tradition of *Siyah mashq* (black practise) in Iranian calligraphy. Ehsaei, in fact, has depicted an in-depth and thought-provoking subject matter in a configuration that fluctuates between calligraphy and painting. Over the years, he has developed a particularised procedure for creating precise constructions of his calligraphic painting

style. He has a special method of converting the procedures and traditional cursive scripts into his accurate visual signature, leading to an abstract form of self-expression, which best assists his artistic language devoid of negating calligraphic sacred art's original premise. His unique methods of measurement and division used in his inscribing process, his approach to organising and dividing space and its utilisation in the construction of calligraphic characters, and his innovative notions of ratio, proportion, symmetry, and balance revolutionised Iran's traditional techniques of calligraphy. Ehsaei employed many traditional geometric tenets and concepts of the repeating unit in Iranian and Islamic drawing and formed new comprehensive compositions that thereby perfected the endeavours of his preceding masters. To properly evaluate the extent of his success, many of his calligraphic paintings can also be contemplated as works of modern gestural. However, his calculated rhythm and movement constantly invite the onlooker to ponder the spiritual. The mastery of Ehsaei, his regard for formal bases, and his loyalty to rich traditional attributes of Islamic and Iranian calligraphy, bring on a distinguishable and exclusive style that encompasses modernist variety and perpetually experimenting with new innovations.



Figure 40. Mohammad Ehsaei, 2007, *He is the Merciful*, mixed media on canvas, 347 x 202 cm.
Retrieved from <https://mohammadehsaei.com/>



Figure 41. Mohammad Ehsaei, 1998, *Allah*, mixed media on card, 70 x 50 cm.
Retrieved from <https://www.artnet.com/>



Figure 42. Mohammad Ehsaei, 2019, *Allah*, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 cm. Retrieved from <https://www.artnet.com/>



Figure 43. Mohammad Ehsaei, 2019, *Yazdan*, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 175 x 175 cm.
Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>

4.3.2. Contemporary Iranian artist: Shirin Neshat

Shirin Neshat (b. 1957), with significant audiovisual productions, is one of the most characteristic artists of contemporary Iranian art. She went to the United States in 1975 to continue her study, but the ambiguities and vicissitudes that arose out of Iran's Islamic Revolution and the subsequent hardships caused by the Iran and Iraq war (1980-88) convinced Neshat to stay in America (Ho, 2015). She was able to visit Iran only in 1990. The result of this visit and other following visits is the *Woman of Allah* series.

Woman of Allah indicates an artist who grapples with the contradictory and changing ideologies and principles that have been associated with the Iranian woman's figure, both by the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West. The main tension in the series must be the texts inscribed by herself on the images after had been taken by other photographers (fig. 44). Basically, these texts are from four contemporary Iranian women writers and poets: Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–67), Simin Behbahani (1927-2014), Tahereh Saffarzadeh (1936–2008), and Moniru Ravanipur (b. 1954) (Vitali, 2004). There has been a lot of discussion on whether one needs to read the written contents in the images, whether it is feasible, and if the deed of reading these writings is important. Neshat has stated that she does not anticipate non-Iranian spectators to read the images, as their comprehension of them would be inadequate: "I don't believe it matters that the written texts can't be understood in the West. Most of it is inscribed within the framework of the Islamic religion, history of feminism, and politics in Iran, so it will not have the identical meaning for somebody who is not from Iran as it does for an Iranian (Neshat, 1997)." She

stated in a 2004 meeting with Scott MacDonald, a film scholar, “Iranians could both read and comprehend the meaning of the poems and are very acquainted with the history and position of the authors in regard to Iran – something that is impossible for Westerners to translate (MacDonald & Neshat, 2004, p. 630).” Neshat, furthermore, sets up a duality within her viewers: those who can read Farsi and those who cannot, which indicates that some can and will be able to read the writings, but most will not, hence creating multiple exegeses depending on the audience’s background. In spite of her expressed assurance to those who can understand the meaning of the Persian texts in photographs, the writings are fragmented and incomplete, as the demarcations of skin and clothes cut them off. There are blunders in the texts indicated in the images as well. However, I do not think that the texts are only decorative or not meant to be read because of these fractures and mistakes. Their imperfections, on the contrary, are aimed at a dialogue between the audience and the subject because she has always acknowledged that Iranians can identify and read written texts. The texts are indeed extremely readable and penned in obvious handwriting (Firat, 2006, p. 212). The point should also be made that she did inscribe the laborious writing and ornamental motifs inspired by North African and South Asian tattooing and henna. Technically, the photographs are of differing quality and mainly cannot be specified by the kind of aesthetic capability that an impactful tradition of black and white American photographers has applied since Edward Weston (1886-1958) and Ansel Adams (1902-1984). Neshat’s writing, while meticulously accomplished, compares unfavourably with the master calligraphers’ works of Persian and Arabic. Likewise, the ornamental designs are elegantly drawn but do not resist some of the complicated

achievements of henna artists (Dadi, 2008, p. 137); Nevertheless, of far greater importance is the reality that the texts, penned with much accuracy and patience by Neshat, are totally illegible for the immediate principal audience of the images, the Western onlooker. Neshat determinedly refuses to present translations accompanied by her photographs, such that understanding the poetry is certainly impossible for a foreign reader. Calligraphy doubles as adornment in these compositions, but it also functions as an undecipherable text, repeating the cliches of Eastern inscrutability (Ibid, p. 142). Thus, the texts are not overall calligraphic, which means they are not merely aesthetically pleasant. If the writings are not purely calligraphic, then texts must convey a message that aims to be heard and communicated. The interruptions, therefore, may be expressive of the women's subaltern voices in Iran, As Neshat has said, "the woman, coerced to conceal behind the hijab, has no way to express her ideas and emotions (Neshat, 1997)." The series has four main signs: women (the female figure, a very challenging issue in Islamic culture because it indicates ideas of sexuality, shame, and sin), texts (poems by Iranian women writers – penned directly on the images), chadors (the veil, which has been regarded as both a symbol of suppression and emancipation – resistance to counter Western influence), and weapons (a symbol of violence), all of which form the representation of women in Iran after the post-revolutionary.

The image itself has an area encompassing four frames, and if the image is like a window of the globe, then the frame displays these representations of women in Iran. The reality that all the images show veiled women means public spaces open for unrelated

men because women do not usually hijab in private spaces (Naficy, 2003, p. 146).

Furthermore, the writing on the images makes a break that opens these spaces to greater possibilities for the representation of women. Neshat complicates the calligraphy's visual tradition in a very similar way. Here she imposes the calligraphic writing's aesthetics onto the photographic image, and the corporeality of the words opens up a scriptural aesthetic space on the visual surface. The images, as such, show a viewing position that fluctuates between seeing and reading the image. This combining of ways of viewing is one of the main characteristics of Islamic calligraphic practise.



Figure 44. Shirin Neshat, 1996, *Speechless*, Photo by Larry Barns. Retrieved from (MacDonald & Neshat, 2004).

4.3.3. Contemporary Iranian artist: Farhad Moshiri

One of the second generations of modern and contemporary Iranian artists who have experimented with painting with Iranian calligraphy is Farhad Moshiri (b. 1955). Over the last two decades, Moshiri's art has followed a growing path that tends to include calligraphic shapes and abstract-creative structures (fig. 45). Referring to decorative motifs and visual elements of Iranian folk culture, he has constantly pursued the pop-art approach in his paintings. This approach in many of his works, with a correct comprehension of the forms of old pottery and the *nasta'liq* script's geometry and rhythm, offers a different narrative of Iranian neo-traditionalist artists in the field of painting. His well-known jars evoke the connection between tradition and modernity in current Iran, crammed with the visual remains of the times past hinting at more profound social matters. The artist plays with the texture of his works to attain a new form of art. To achieve the highly textured surfaces on his paintings, he folds, rolls up, and crushes the canvases so that the nearly dried pigments crackle and flake, a process that alludes to his constant theme of devotion and admiration to Iran's golden age (fig. 46). The works of Moshiri addressing simple issues search for common and popular attitudes of the spectators and strive to display them in a critical view of the antiquities or the recreation of daily images. Following the efforts of the audience to find and redefine the underlying layers of his images, all kinds of childlike, ethnic, and cultural nostalgia bring to mind and call the onlooker to a soft, occasionally critical, and warning challenge between the

notions of culture and identity. The border between worth and art, copy and reproduction, originality and reiteration, is another sphere called for in his artworks.



Figure 45. Farhad Moshiri, 2009, *Golden Allah*, acrylic, crystal and gold leaf on canvas laid down on panel, 256 × 116.5 cm, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>



Figure 46. Farhad Moshiri, 2005, *Ya Abolfazl*, mixed media on canvas, 141×111 cm, Retrieved from <https://tehranauction.com/>

4.3.4. Contemporary Egyptian artist: Ahmed Moustafa

A good specimen of how artists have turned traditional Islamic scripts into art can be witnessed in the works of Egyptian calligrapher Ahmed Moustafa (b. 1943). He trained as a printmaker and painter and received his doctorate from Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in 1989. Many of his works include prominent Koranic verses about the power and omnipotence of God. While traditional calligraphers had copied the Koran's entire text or major parts, he focuses on verses and passages. Moustafa, at first, transcribed these straightly over the flat surface and played with diverse writing forms silk screened in various colours. For specimen, his *Scriptorial Fugue* shows the letters of the word God (الله) by overlapping the *thuluth* script letters of black, gold, and green (fig. 47). In his *Perspective of the Bismillah*, he penned the Koran's opening line (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم) in square *Kufic* words in a rectangular panel that remembers the stucco specimens from the 14th-century shrines that inspired designers (fig. 48). His *The Heart of Sincerity* is inspired by the letters from *Sura al-Ikhlâs* (سورة الإخلاص) and designed to the form of two tomes' compositions leaning on each other (fig. 49). Moustafa, in the 1980s, took a new path and depicted 3-D geometrical shapes on a flat surface. For example, *Still Life of Qur'anic Solids*, watercolor and oil on handcrafted paper accomplished in 1987, displays spheres, pyramids, and cubes written with Koran (*al-Qamar:49*) put on a floor consisting of repeated triangles in square *Kufic* with Koran (*al-Imran:2*) (fig. 50). Others represent the same geometrical shapes' interior view. *God is the Light of Heaven and Earth*, worked in the same year and media, and has the Koran (*al-Nur:35*) inscribed on the

rectangular box's walls open above to reveal the sky. The spaces and three-dimensional forms are aimed to strengthen the meaning intrinsic to the Koranic writings: The power and solidity of Allah in the first case, and his divine revelation's power in the second (fig. 51). His other works, such as *The Attributes of Divine Perfection*, combine penned solid and ground and various texts written in diverse scripts. Besides the Throne Verse (آية الكرسي) inscribed in the background in square *Kufic* script, it is inspired by the holy Koran (*al-Isra:110*), a verse that alludes to the God's names (الاسماء الحسنی) (fig, 52). Moustafa set these divine attributes in a cut-away cube. Cubic motifs have become one of his favorite shapes, indicating multiplicity in unity.



Figure 47. Ahmad Moustafa, 1975-6, *Scriptorial Fugue*, silk screen edition, 110 x 80cm. Retrieved from <https://fenoan.com/artwork/artwork/original-artwork/scriptorial-fugue/>

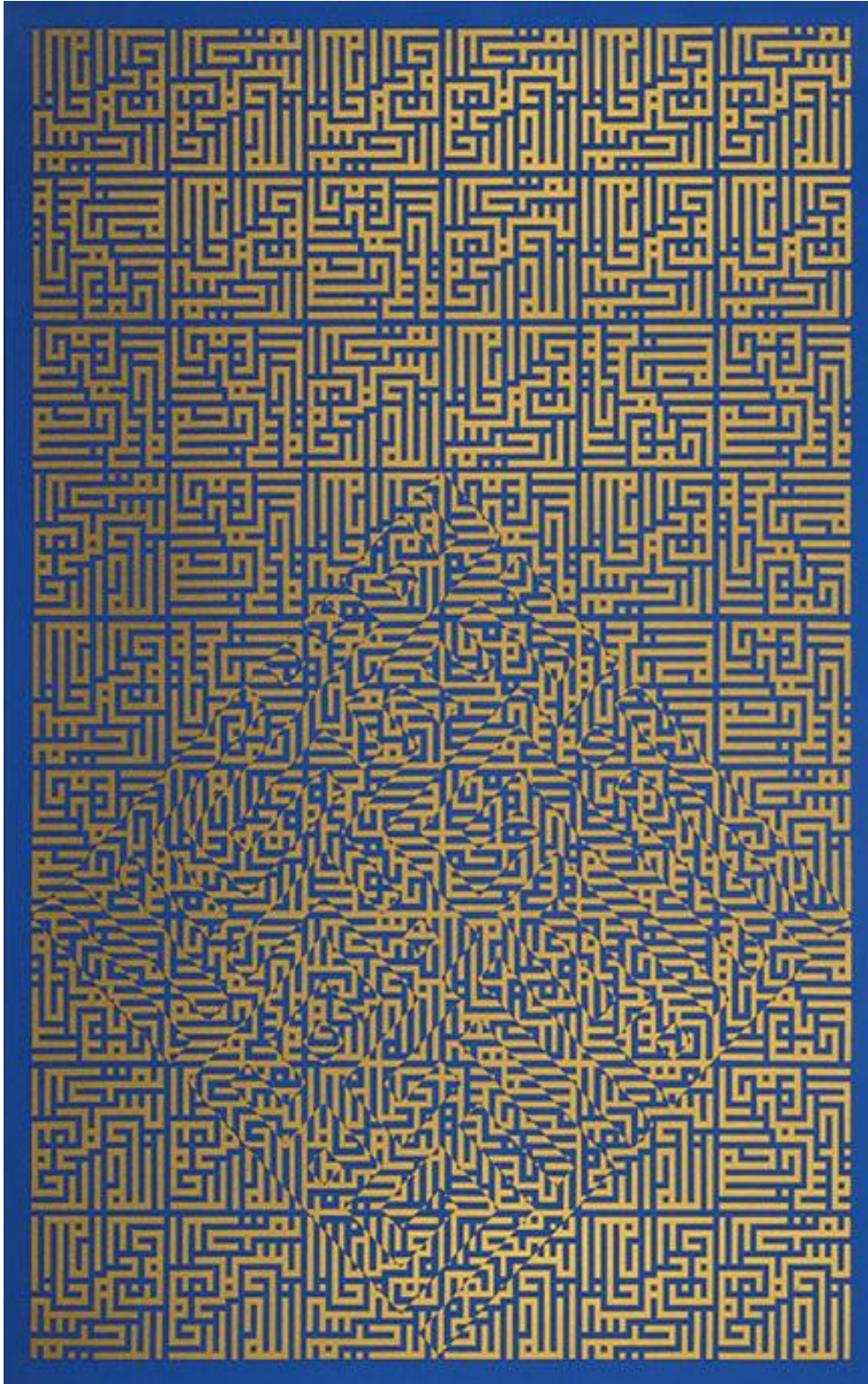


Figure 48. Ahmad Moustafa, 1977-78, *Perspective of the Bismillah*, silk screen, 110 x 75cm, Retrieved from <https://fenoan.com/artwork/gallery/artwork/silk-screen-prints/perspective-of-the-bismillah/>



Figure 49. Ahmad Moustafa, 1977, *The Heart of Sincerity*, inspired by the detached letter shapes of Surah 112, Silk screen print. 80 x 110 cm. Retrieved from <https://fenoona.com/artwork/artwork/original-artwork/the-heart-of-sincerity/>



Figure 50. Ahmad Moustafa, 1987, *Still Life of Qur'anic Solids*, Oil and watercolour on hand made paper, 76 x 125 cm. Retrieved from <https://fenoona.com/artwork/artwork/original-artwork/still-life-of-quranic-solids/>



Figure 51. Ahmad Moustafa, 1987, *God is the Light of Heaven and Earth*, Oil and watercolour on hand made paper, 76 x 125 cm. Retrieved from <https://fenoon.com/artwork/gallery/artwork/silk-screen-prints/god-is-the-light-of-heaven-and-earth/>

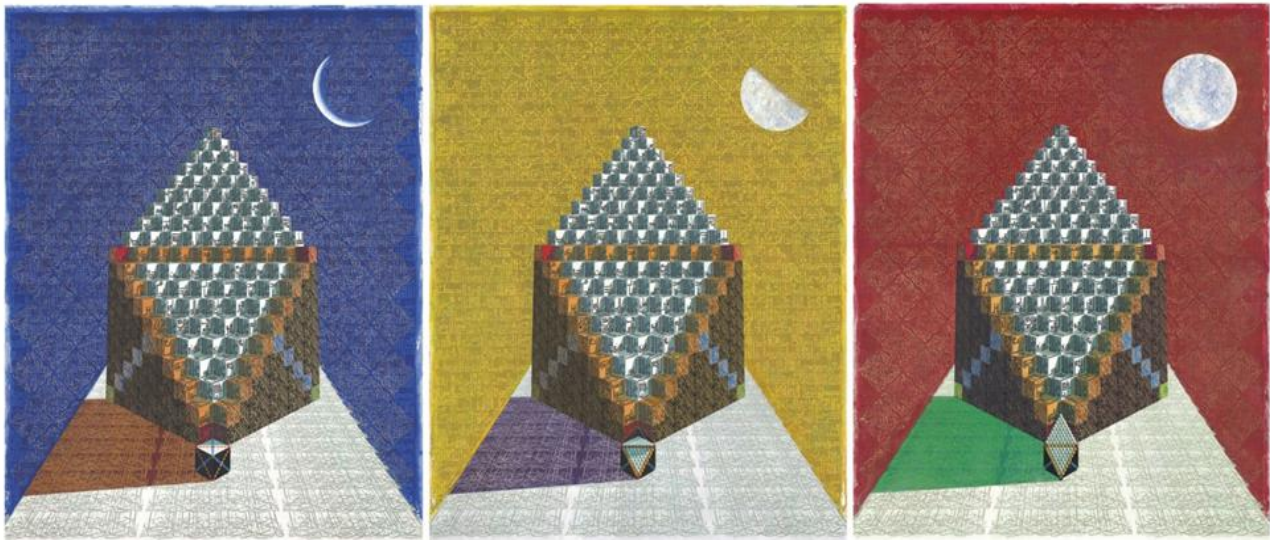


Figure 52. Ahmad Moustafa, 2013, *Naming Infinity – 100 minus One (triptych)*, Oil and watercolor on paper, each 192.5cm x 149 cm. Retrieved from <https://fenoon.com/artwork/gallery/artwork/original-artwork/naming-infinity-100-minus-one-triptych/>

4.3.5. Contemporary Iraqi artist: Madiha Umar

The utilisation of abstracted letters began in modern and contemporary Islamic art with Iraqi painter Madiha Umar (1908-2005), who examined the connection of Arabic calligraphy with the West's abstract art. She graduated from Beirut's Training School of Teachers attended later Istanbul's Sultaniyya School, and then studied painting at London's Maria Grey Training College (Ali, 1997). After returning to Baghdad, Umar joined the women's teacher training school and was appointed to be the head of the Arts and Painting Department. Later she relocated to Washington, D. C. in 1942 and took a course in art criticism at George Washington University and then studied painting and sculpture at the Corcoran School of Art. There, Umar encountered Nabia Abbott's calligraphy book, which shows the evolution of Arabic characters, and thus, she paid attention to the abstracted shapes of letters and commenced examining them. She shared with Richard Ettinghausen her first specimens of calligraphic painting, who encouraged Umar to keep exploring in the same direction, employing Arabic calligraphic shapes in modern compositions because nobody had done it yet (Oweis, 2008). Umar followed his advice and continued experimenting with letter characters as her paintings' main element. At the Georgetown Public Library in 1949, she displayed 22 of her artworks, marking the first exhibition of modern and contemporary Arabic calligraphic art in a Western city. In addition, wrote a pronouncement labelled *Arabic Calligraphy: An Element of Inspiration in Abstract Art*, (Puerta Vílchez, 2010, p. 7) wherein she characterised her approach to the analysis of Arabic letter forms and their relationship to the abstract art of the West.

Umar's analysis and description of the alphabetical characters documented their historical transformation to their present forms (Shabout, 2007). Her treatment with letter form is contrary to a traditional calligraphic practise, which emphasises the words and their related content; instead, she changes and uses the letter form as her composition's crucial graphical element, wherein the letter is an intertwined element in the work of art, giving a peaceful harmony to unitizing all compositional components. Madiyah Umar's philosophy highlights the attributes inherited from scripts, organically abstracting the form of the letters and bringing them to life as vibrant elements. Her examinations showed that the Arabic script in its essence has both symbolic expression and abstract meaning and thus should not be considered only as a combination of geometrical shapes (fig. 53). She understood the Arabic letters' graphic qualities and their dynamic features, hence, managed to employ them abstractly, stressing their symbolic meaning accompanied by specific ideas. Her paintings strive to glorify the form of Arabic letters and words beyond a geometrical, fixed structure, which not only fills the canvas but also interacts with her compositions' other elements. She was the first Arab artist to fully allocate her work to combining Arabic calligraphic forms in an abstract style. Umar uses calligraphic motifs as the major element of her painting, employing the Arabic letter forms as images that carry multiple meanings and interpretations. In her paintings, the letters are not decorative elements, but rather, she considers them as living entities that centrally interplay with other constituents in the composition. Throughout her career, Umar created many paintings that contributed to the range of visual culture and heightened Arab modern and contemporary art, whilst affecting artists' many generations to utilise Arabic

calligraphy in their works. As a modern artist, she attempts to modernise her own artistic language by emphasising her cultural roots, generally by abstracting the alphabetical elements and words of her aboriginal language. She believes that each letter carries a specific meaning as an abstract image, and via their dissimilarities in expression these letters come to be a source of inspiration: the letter ya (ﻱ), “Y,” has an energetic and vigorous character that conveys many meanings; the letter ayn (ﻉ), which in English has no equivalent, is a vital, powerful letter that in Arabic has two different meanings — it is the eye via which people see as well as a spring of water; the letter lam (ﻝ), “L,” indicates musical and delicate movements (Daghir, 1990; Puerta Vilchez, 2007, p. 315). Umar’s abstract paintings, from this perspective, take Arabic alphabetical characters as their basis, intending to convert their simple shapes into expressive images of thought. She perceives the letters, comprehending them as both images and text, creating works that possess powerful semiotic language. Hence, her approach visualises the letters as both living entities and abstract signs.



Figure 53. Madiha Umar, 1963, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 80.5 x 99 cm, Retrieved from <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/madiha-umar/>

4.3.6. Contemporary Lebanese artist: Etel Adnan

The works of art by Lebanese poet and painter Etel Adnan (1925–2021) are most closely related to the idea of writing and the book. She, since 1964, has been constructing *artist's book* by folding Japanese paper rolls similar to an accordion and ornamenting the pages with poetry and words in Arabic writing along with watercolour paintings (fig. 54). Ordinarily, the verse or word is penned in black above diverse coloured blocks in an amalgamation of visual art and literature that calls to mind the accordion book's Japanese tradition but with Arabic writing. In these versions, she has reiterated the word God (الله),

written in a clearly ordinary hand that varies from specimen to specimen. The roughness of the handwriting is heightened by the nearly childish scribble of the coloured ground (fig. 55). While calligraphers attempted to reiterate the same shape without change, Adnan takes pleasure in the dissimilarities, emphasising the plainly modern concept of individual expression. Adnan, explaining her philosophy and practise, noted that she was striving to find the visual potentials of manipulating letters and words given the plasticity of Arabic writing. According to her own words, her script was very imperfect. It was deliberately not calligraphic and ignored the classical legacy based on the standardisation of script styles and the perfection of formulated pen strokes. Instead, she desired the fluidity that comes from inscribing and the experience of leafing through the pages of a book to convert those paintings and written words which they are a part, into a sort of musical score that every individual, including their creator, interpreted into her/his inner language. Wijdan Ali calls this calligraffiti, a label she created for a script devoid of the principles of proportions, with rough forms nearing graffiti scribbling (Ali, 1997, pp. 167-8). Nevertheless, as graffiti in the New York subway system has transformed into art, here, too, conventional Arabic writing has become a medium that, like Chinese calligraphy, depicts the motion intrinsic in writing.

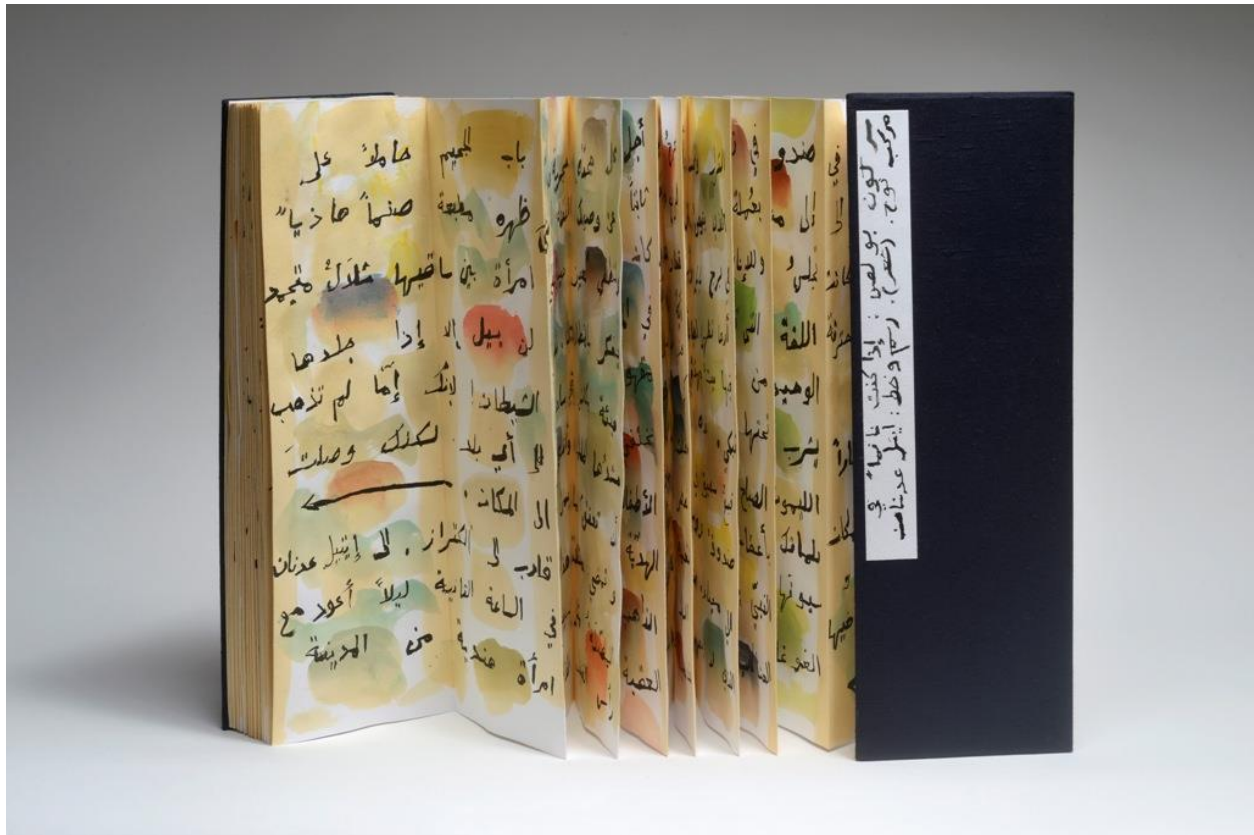


Figure 54. Etel Adnan, 2012, *Sarjoun Boulos, Markab Nouh*, ink and watercolour on Japanese book, 60 pages, 27 x 540 cm. Retrieved from Galerie Claude Lemand



Figure 55. Etel Adnan, 1998, *Zikr*, Ink on Japanese book, open 24 x 540. Retrieved from Galerie Claude Lemand.

4.3.7. Contemporary Iraqi artist: Dia Azzawi

Dia Azzawi (b. 1939), an Iraqi artist, studied archeology at the University of Baghdad and later followed art courses at the Institute of Fine Arts. The Iraqi Cultural Centre in London appointed him as an art consultant in 1976. At the centre, Azzawi was able to introduce Iraqi and Arab art to British society by setting up exhibitions. However, due to the events and political instability in his country, he was forced to leave Iraq, and he, in response, turned himself into a leader of Iraqi art and promoted Iraqi art. His point of view as an artist was stirred toward legacy because of his research in archaeology. Furthermore, because of Azzawi's profound relationship with the histories and cultures of Iraq, his works derive from various inspirations and sources, including arabesque motifs, folk patterns, and Babylonian and Assyrian figures. Therefore, his works of art become points of junction amongst Arabic literature, Arabs' contemporary conditions, and Arabic-Islamic and Iraqi heritages. He is particularly known for utilising Arabic calligraphic characters, and even poems to engage the viewer's attention (poetry invites audiences to engage with the literary content of a work and its allusions, and on the other compels the viewer to step back and see the painting as a visual work). In spite of living abroad, Azzawi has formed his individual figurative style, mainly inspired by Iraq's historical and cultural legacy, and hence, he is never restricted by time or distance. He believes that just his artistic history can help him in creating his unique identity. Thus, he meticulously selects visual elements, interweaving them while hinting at their cultural and symbolic connotations, permitting substitute meanings to be understood and interpreted by his

subjects. Azzawi, at the same time, believes in the importance of being inspired by his legacy, as it enriches and clarifies the present because heritage is extensive, not limited or separated from the present time. Moreover, as a contemporary Arab artist, because of political events, Azzawi developed an exhaustive epistemological understanding of his legacy and was passionate about creating his own identity, and hence, he boldly experimented with Arabic alphabetical characters. He views the letter forms as graphic bodies with political and cultural signification, amalgamating letters with other decorative and figurative elements within his paintings, especially in his early career. However, the letter is just one component of his works. Letters are not dominant in his works, as he wants to integrate them with other characters in his compositions and perceive letters as both sign and form. The alphabetical characters have historical roots; thus, they are naturally found within the area of visual culture and project various states of visibility to their audiences. Azzawi comprehended the Arabic letters' energies and properties that reach out to the globe, as he recognised the letters' visual language that reflects visual culture, in which visual indications can substitute text. In this context, his works indicate that such notions of visual communication are insufficient in the Arab nations' cultures. Azzawi is not only searching for inspiration from his country's heritage via visual culture but also is adding and enhancing new artefacts to our visual universe. Specifically, his utilisation of letters, words, or poems within his works is a follow-up to illustrated poems, i.e., traditional Islamic miniatures, and he is developing Iraqi heritage and culture's modern visual poem as a means for linking letters and words with painting. He wanted to create a connection between alphabetical elements and other visual shapes,

i.e., a dialogue between visual arts and writing. Therefore, reading Azzawi's works is an act that capacitates us to recognise the Arabic letters' symbolic language that he simplifies and clarifies with his figurative style. Consequently, we can read his concepts and ideas and generate many reactions and feelings to his artistic endeavour to reflect his pride and cultural identity, as a modern Iraqi artist (figs. 56 & 57).



Figure 56. Dia al-Azzawi, 1986, *Object: Oriental scene*, mixed media on cardboard, 51 x 41 x 1.20 cm. Retrieved from <https://www.britishmuseum.org/>



Figure 57. Dia al-Azzawi, 1981, *Ijlal li Iraq*, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. Retrieved from <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6061410>

4.3.8. Contemporary Algerian artist: Rachid Koraichi

Much of Rachid Koraichi's work also includes typically magic squares and pseudo-writing characters. Though many of his elements are inspired by writing, they cannot be read in any language. He was born in 1947 in Algeria, studied in Paris, and currently lives in Tunisia and is thus aware of North Africa's long artistic tradition. This artist incorporates popular talismans and symbols in his works, much of which comprises local craft traditions, from smithing and pottery to weaving. Some of his work is inspired politically. Often, his lithographs and prints revolve around the writings of popular poets, including Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish, whose poem 'Beirut' was inscribed Israeli siege of the city in 1982, or Mohammed Dib, whose work covers the breadth of 20th-century Algerian history, concentrating on Algeria's war for independence. Koraichi never in their entirety writes the poems, instead electing fragments that he reverses, reorients, or repeats, frequently in mirror reverse. Also, his works of art are Sufi-inspired, and he credits his family with stimulating his mystical tendencies. Koraichi prefers monochrome or bichrome to polychromatic, commonly contrasting gold on blue or black on white. In the 1990s, he worked in various media. For example, three series of 98 amulets produced in 1994 were small polished steel arrows etched with pictograms (geometric shapes, numbers, scarabs, crescent moons, and a variety of letters - some look like Japanese or Arabic characters). Golden Barque from the series of 7 silk-screen banners produced between 1993 and '95, is ornamented with pseudo-Chinese elements in gold on a ground of dark blue. Koraichi selected the colours as symbols: gold to represent

sheer matter and royalty and blue to symbolise the sky. The combination of gold on indigo blue also remembers the Dome of the Rock's mosaic epigraphs, our earliest historical evidence of the penning down of the Koran. He set some signs or symbols in a grid bringing to mind a magic square, recalling the same popular imagery utilised by Moustafa, but arranged others in the form of a barque, evoking Egyptian funerary papyri. Also, he plays with orientation and mirror, and like many of his texts, his signature underneath the banner is shown in mirror-reverse, although the date in numbers correctly reads. This arrangement is intentional, as he believes texts should be inscribed as if reflected in a mirror such that the meaning is concealed from those who do not understand. Therefore, the artist is a mirror and mediator that reflects divine transcendence. He has recently amalgamated many of these unique works of art in multi-media installations that indicate his Sufi-inspired philosophy. Koraichi's *Le Chemin de Roses* (Path of Roses) exhibited at the 49th Venice Biennial in 2001, entitled *Authentic/Ex-centric* and in the winter of 2002-3 presented at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in Ithaca, NY, is a collection of embroidered silk banners (scroll-like), ceramic basins, and steel sculptures fixed on wooden blocks and the wall (figs. 58 & 59). The installation, according to the artist, was meant to recreate the *safar* (travel) of the great Islamic Sufi Maulana Jalal al-Din al-Rumi across the continents, both metaphorically and literally. These basins, inspired by indigenous and local pottery traditions and aimed to evoke those utilised for ritual ablution, are penned with quotations from Maulana. The 28 free-standing sculptures, measuring a meter high, reflect the 28 Arabic alphabetical characters. In shape, they recall the whirling darwishes

who dance to the music of time. He seeks to form an alphabet of memory that goes beyond the boundaries of time and space, wherein the sacred and indecent converge into one. Koraichi has abstracted writing and signs and turned the alphabetical elements into an ideological and aesthetic act.



Figure 58. Rachid Koraichi, 2001, *Le Chemin de Roses*, embroidered silk banners, Retrieved from <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2001/authentic-ex-centric/rachid-koraichi>.



Figure 59. Rachid Koraichi, 2001, *Le Chemin de Roses*, steel sculptures. Retrieved from <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2001/authentic-ex-centric/rachid-koraichi>.

4.4. Summary

Examining the artists' works backed by referral to their personal and career lives — clarifies their applications and potentialities of letters and words, converting their meanings into national and cultural identities. On the other hand, among the fluctuations of contemporary visual culture, the artworks of practitioners reflect the capabilities of the

alphabetical characters as a visual expression with different interpretations that display collective or individual experiences and demonstrate a glimpse of the artist's culture and identity. The universal ideas of modern and contemporary artists present hybrid viewpoints of the alphabet and use the letters' dynamics and vitality as navigation sites for opening dialogue with oneself and others. Forasmuch as most artists see themselves in an international context and thus are aware of many cultural factors and influences, their letters have identical attributes, in spite of being styled with Arabic script or transmitting Islamic text. As such, the letter forms are an extension of their contemporary practitioners, representing a predominant feature of their universal identity.

Contemporary Islamic world art carries the essence of modern art, but it functions within a much larger context. Contemporary works of art typically operate as dots of navigation, enabling interplays amongst traditional and modern, local and universal, while regarding political, social, and personal alterations without contradiction. On the other hand, contemporary artists developed their own comprehensions and interpretations of letters within their works. They have a distinct understanding of world culture and, in response to contemporary Islamic art, codify their artistic languages and use Arabic letter shapes to reflect political, cultural, social, and personal experiences, but in connection with a larger framework and audience. These artists comprehend the nature of the alphabetical characters and incorporate them in a powerful visual method to present their viewpoints and experiences, thus giving us a glimpse of their contemporary hybrid identity.

Therefore, letters within modern artwork also transmit numerous interpretations and allow the viewers to engage based on how they see, perceive, and read the work.

Conclusion

Calligraphy is the sole kind of visual art invariably acclaimed by Muslims, and its pervasiveness is the one attribute that distinguishes Islamic art from other traditional art forms. In contemporary times, besides modifying traditional methods, artists are proceeding to develop the aesthetic borders of Islamic calligraphy, aiming to extend the media and materials utilised to write calligraphy and to integrate them into their artistic structures. Contrary to traditional calligraphy, modern calligraphic art celebrates the letter's visual display, and these new artistic expressions emerge as individual creations and expressions rather than a replication of a Koranic message. While the aesthetics of traditional calligraphy were formed based on religious aims, modern aesthetics respond to the universal streams of a contemporary secularised globe and art markets. Modern aesthetics, like modern national and textual structures, are rooted in Western traditions, not Islamic. The base of the modern calligraphic movement in contemporary Islamic art is the traditional Islamic art of calligraphy. It was calligraphy's central nature as a medium of Islamic art and aesthetics that caused artists to come back to the alphabet in pursuit of artistic identity. Islamic calligraphy is alive and energetic in the contemporary period. Many artists are copying and duplicating traditional scripts, many associations and schools are educating traditional procedures, and many scholars and academics are studying traditional styles. Other practitioners are moving in new innovative directions, substituting pen and ink on paper and parchment with various media. Some are converting calligraphic elements into three-dimensional shapes and creating calligraphic

sculptures of novel materials such as bronze and wood. Many others are supplanting the pen with the paintbrush, painting calligraphic motifs in watercolours, acrylics, and oils, getting them in collages, or employing them on other media like etching and silkscreen. Calligraphy is an element often integrated into multi-media structures that can be either abstract or symbolic. In these artworks, the balance has mainly shifted from legibility to visibility, meaning that calligraphy is regarded more by its formal qualities than by its semantics.

Iranian contemporary artists have employed the written language in many unique ways that examine their potentialities and capabilities to represent philosophical, historical, cultural, social, and political themes. With artists using materials and media to extend their creative energies, such explorations have become platforms for practitioners to express their identities, whilst enriching our visual universe. Contemporary artists varyingly utilise letter shapes to create exhaustive and appealing experiences for the audiences whilst formulating their cultural and artistic identities. They have been affected by Western art philosophy and methods, through which they have strived to represent their national and cultural legacy while investigating new possibilities. Within this context, the Iranian art of today can be seen as collective, ingenious, and varied attempts at self-expression, influenced by the individual artist's lifestyle, culture, and history, to reflect specific identities. Hence, modern Iranian artists utilise elements from their legacy and culture, altering and combining them based on their artistic techniques and styles to use them as the principal components in their artworks. In particular, the letters are used

not only as unique textual or visual elements but also, they are tied to contemporary artistic currents, and hence, the utilisation of the alphabetical characters was a powerful expression of a desired Iranian national identity. Therefore, in modern Iranian artworks, the letters are abstracted, modified, simplified, reduced, or stretched, according to the visions and desires of artists. The utilisation of the calligraphic elements indicates the artist's realisation of the letter forms as entities powerful enough to convey textually and visually thoughts, beliefs, and feelings.

Contemporary Iranian artists, like their modernist antecedents, see themselves as partaking in both national and international art, in a similar way formulating their artistic techniques, integrating the letters within their works but using the letter shapes in new approaches to varied mediums appropriate for contemporary procedures. They do not forsake their oriental traditions or origins to embrace Western ones. These artists do not move away from the theoretical and cultural structures of the East and assert to be Westernized. They belong everywhere, especially currently, in a universe that is more than ever global and strongly connected by developed communications. Since contemporary artists see themselves as universal citizens, their letters are also comprehensive and appeal to worldwide viewers, not only those who comprehend the language but also those who can find pleasure in the sheer visuality of the calligraphy.

The present study investigates the potentialities of the Islamic calligraphic image for contemporary Iranian painting. This study includes different viewpoints from artists who moved in similar directions. Hence, the iconographical study of their works reveals

an awareness of a time in modern art's history of the Islamic universe, specifically in Iran. In addition, examining modern calligraphic painting pioneers' ideas and works allows me to build on their practise without repetition. Tracking the pioneers uncovers further significant contextual material that brings to light international influences and connections, innovations in practise, and new relationships with history, socio-political movements, and theory. This research indicates that representing identity with visual motifs presents a straight way to communicate with viewers from diverse backgrounds. Also, it demonstrates more tangible features of the way that people perceive their traditions. This research aims to inspire both traditional calligraphy and modern calligraphic painting practitioners to share, improve, enhance, and develop the Arabic-Farsi alphabetical characters and their writing system. Regarding future work, I will keep exploring, experimenting, analyzing, creating, sharing, teaching, and learning about the potentialities and visual applications of Islamic calligraphy. I hope the study of calligraphic art from modern times and a contemporary practise can resonate in more research.

Appendix A: The Arabic and Persian Alphabet

The Arabic and Persian writing systems are alphabetical in nature and run in texts from right to left and in mathematics and numbers from left to right. The Arabic alphabet includes 28 letters, but only 18 have distinct and basic letter forms, as some letters have the same shape but distinguish themselves with directional dots. Alphabetical characters can be arranged within historical or graphical methods. The most common way to arrange letters is according to their graphical similarity. In this system, letters with the same basic shapes are arranged one after the other and are differentiated by direction points. But, in the historical system, the abjad letters are grouped based on their numerical values. This system is less common but is still utilised, for example, to outline or number pages in some classical books. The Arabic language alphabet has only consonants, so short vowels are added above or below the letters to clarify the pronunciation. These short vowels are directional indicators, called vocalisation marks. The texts can be inscribed without these vocalisation marks, but they are necessary for transcribing the Koran because they help prevent ambiguity and misinterpretation. The consonants are divided into solar and lunar letters, each with 14 letters. These two groups of letters behave in a different manner when pronounced with the definite article *al*. With a solar letter after *al*, just *a* will be pronounced, not *l*, while with a lunar letter after, both sounds of the letters *al* will be pronounced. The standard Arabic manner of lettering employs notably different forms based on whether letters will connect to preceding or following letters. Except for 6 letters that connect just from one side, most letters are connected to the adjacent letters on

both sides. Hence, letters constantly amalgamate and change their forms according to the suitable formation of words.

1	alif	ا	ا	1
2	bā'	ب	ب	2
3	tā'	ت	ج	3
4	thā'	ث	د	4
5	jīm	ج	ه	5
6	ḥā'	ح	و	6
7	khā'	خ	ز	7
8	dāl	د	ح	8
9	dhāl	ذ	ط	9
10	rā'	ر	ی	10
11	zāy	ز	ک	20
12	sīn	س	ل	30
13	shin	ش	م	40
14	ṣād	ص	ن	50
15	ḍād	ض	س	60
16	ṭā'	ط	ع	70
17	ẓā'	ظ	ف	80
18	ayn	ع	ص	90
19	ghayn	غ	ق	100
20	fā'	ف	ر	200
21	qāf	ق	ش	300
22	kāf	ک	ت	400
23	lām	ل	ث	500
24	mīm	م	خ	600
25	nūn	ن	ذ	700
26	hā'	ه	ض	800
27	wāw	و	ظ	900
28	yā'	ی	غ	1000

Table 1. The Arabic alphabet in graphical and historical systems.

Solar letters	ت - ث - د - ذ - ر - ز - س - ش - ص - ض - ط - ظ - ل - ن
Lunar letters	ا - ب - ج - ح - خ - ع - غ - ف - ق - ك - م - ه - و - ی

Table 2. The Arabic solar and lunar letters.

Name	Transcription	Final	Medial	Initial	Independent
alif	ā	ا	ا	ا	ا
bā'	b	ب	ب	ب	ب
tā'	t	ت	ت	ت	ت
thā'	th	ث	ث	ث	ث
jīm	j	ج	ج	ج	ج
ḥā'	ḥ	ح	ح	ح	ح
khā'	kh	خ	خ	خ	خ
dāl	d	د	د	د	د
dhāl	dh	ذ	ذ	ذ	ذ
rā'	r	ر	ر	ر	ر
zā'	z	ز	ز	ز	ز
sīn	s	س	س	س	س
shīn	sh	ش	ش	ش	ش
ṣād	ṣ	ص	ص	ص	ص
ḍād	ḍ	ض	ض	ض	ض
ṭā'	ṭ	ط	ط	ط	ط
ẓā'	ẓ	ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ
ayn	.	ع	ع	ع	ع
ghayn	gh	غ	غ	غ	غ
fā'	f	ف	ف	ف	ف
qāf	q	ق	ق	ق	ق
kāf	k	ك	ك	ك	ك
lām	l	ل	ل	ل	ل
mīm	m	م	م	م	م
nūn	n	ن	ن	ن	ن
hā'	h	ه	ه	ه	ه
wāw	w/ū	و	و	و	و
yā'	y/ī	ی	ی	ی	ی
lām-alif	lā	ال	ال	ال	ال
tā' marbūta	a/at	ة	ة	.	ة

Table 3. Chart of the 28 letters in the Arabic abjad (when Arabic script was adapted to write Persian, which have sounds like *p* (پ) and *g* (ج) that are not utilized in Arabic, the abjad was increased to 32 letters by adding extra bars or dots. For example, *p* (پ) is written like *b* (ب) but which three dots below instead of one)

Sign	Description	Visual Representation
<i>Fathah</i>	One stripe placed above the letters, denoting a short vowel <i>a</i> .	◌َ
<i>Kasrah</i>	One stripe placed beneath the letters, denoting a short vowel <i>i</i> .	◌ِ
<i>Dammah</i>	Placed above the letters, denoting a short vowel <i>u</i> .	◌ُ
<i>Tanwin Fathah</i>	Dual stripes placed above the letters, denoting a short vowel <i>an</i> .	◌ً
<i>Tanwin Kasrah</i>	Dual stripes placed beneath the letters, denoting a short vowel <i>in</i> .	◌ٍ
<i>Tanwin Dammah</i>	Placed above the letters, denoting a short vowel <i>un</i> .	◌ٌ
<i>Sukun</i>	Placed above the letters, denoting a lack of a short vowel, indicating a kind of consonant enhancers.	◌ْ
<i>Shaddah</i>	Placed above the letters, often joined with any mark of the short vowels, denoting an emphasis on the consonant-letter, as a kind of consonant enhancer.	◌ّ
<i>Hamzah</i>	Placed above the letters, usually joined with long vowel letters— <i>alif</i> (a), <i>waw</i> (u), <i>ya</i> (i), denoting a glottal stop. Also, when <i>hamzah</i> is placed beneath letter <i>alif</i> it indicates the vowel <i>i</i> , as a short glottal. <i>Hamzah</i> is accounted a letter when applied in a free-standing shape and in a bigger size.	ء
<i>Maddah</i>	Placed above the letter <i>alif</i> denoting a prolonged sound, as it indicates the diphthong.	◌ِى
<i>Waslah</i>	Placed above the letter <i>alif</i> , with no pronounciational value.	◌ِىْ

Table 4. Vocalisation marks for the Arabic writing system

Appendix B: Timeline

The following timeline outlines major shifts and contributions with regard to the visual and material form of Arabic script. Entries highlight the multiple visual conventions and practices of inscription employed in Arabic writing. Special attention is directed toward movements and developments explored in the dissertation chapters.

300-400 C.E.	From the 2nd century B.C. to the 4th A.D., Nabateans travelled the pathways from Yemen to Petra and used written Aramaic language to record their documents. The Nabatean inscriptions' epigraphic study traces a gradual transformation from Aramaic alphabetical characters of distinct shapes into cursive writing of ligatured letters. Also, written Nabatean, over time, incorporates all kinds of Arabic words and names.
600-700 C.E.	The earliest reference to a specific Arabic script appears in the 6th century with the label <i>Jazm</i> . It originated from the Nabataean writing system and became the primal reference from which ensuing Arabic scripts formed. <i>Jazm</i> is an unrefined script, characterised by letters of a stiff angular appearance and equal proportion. Bishr Ibn Abd al-Malik and Harb Ibn Umayyah are credited with transmitting a similar script to the Hijaz and Mecca.
570-632 C.E.	The Holy Koran, during the 7th century, was revealed to the Prophet Mohammad. Though many fragments of the Koran were documented in writing within the Prophet's duration of life, because of the historical possibility of new revelations and additions, the verses were not formally collected in their entirety. When the Prophet died in 632 C.E., the Koran's revelation ended.
632-650 C.E.	The Koran was memorised orally by a faithful group of <i>huffaz</i> . Nevertheless, in the military campaigns that followed the Prophet's death, a number of loyal and trustworthy <i>huffazes</i> were killed in war.

Concerned about the consequences of this loss, Umar ibn Khattab suggested that Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, collect and collate the Koran as a written text. Abu Bakr requested the Prophet's personal secretary, Zayd ibn Thabit, to oversee the gathering of an organised and written Koran. He accepts the assignment and commences collecting fragments inscribed (on the materials including cloth, parchment, palm stalks, and the camel's shoulder bones). Each written piece is carefully confirmed and verified against two witnesses from dependable *huffaz*.

644-656 C.E. When Zayd had assembled a complete version, the Caliph Uthman permitted the formal written text to be authorised for distribution. Muslims refer to these texts as *mushaf* to differentiate them from the Koran's orally recited. *mushaf*. Initial *mushaf* are transcribed in a number of styles, commonly called after the place wherein they were written. These consist of the Makki and Madini, which are called after Islam's holy cities, and the Kufic script from the city of Kufa, which obtains popularity for its grandeur, refinement, and aesthetic balance. There were two main writing styles that led to the formation of all other ensuing script styles, each with distinct attributes; one was called *Muqawwar va Mudawwar* (مقور و مدور), and the other, called *Mabsut va Mustaqim* (مبسوط و مستقيم). These two major characteristics governed the growth and development of the primary Makki and Madini styles and resulted in the shaping of a few scripts, the most significant of them were *Ma'il*, *Mashq*, and *Naskh*.

661-755 C.E. The Umayyad capital, Damascus, became a centre of Arabic writing with the advent of *Tumar* and *Jali* scripts. Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) mandated the official utilisation of Arabic for all government documents. Umayyad coins show Arabic script instead of images as an indication of visual dominance. The *Tumar*'s grand *naskh* script turned into the official script of the Umayyad state, and numerous styles based their relations and measurements on the height of the *alif* (الف) in the *Tumar*.

675-725 C.E.	<p>Abul Aswad al-Du‘ali (d. 688), an Umayyad scholar, in the 7th century, notices that spoken Arabic’s linguistic habits are changing and commences an examination of Arabic grammar. Ad-Du ‘ali, to address the matter, offers the <i>tashkīl</i> (diacritisation or vocalisation) system, wherein coloured marks indicate the vowel sounds as diacritics that do not exist as independent Arabic letters. In primal Arabic writing, however, certain letter forms could also have more than one consonant. So, Yahya ibn Ya‘mar and Nasr ibn Asim, innovate a system wherein diacritical <i>nokte</i> (dots) are placed below and above basic letter forms to differentiate consonants. Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 786), an Abbasid scribe, facilitated the earlier diacritical marking system for general utilisation. He keeps <i>nokte</i> for distinguishing consonants but substitutes the <i>tashkīl</i>’s coloured marks with 8 new diacritical signs.</p>
750-1258 C.E.	<p>During the Abbasid time, script development continued, fueled by the spread and introduction of paper across Muslim lands. a series of <i>naskh</i> styles known as <i>al-aqlam al-sittah</i> were commonly utilised across the East of the Islamic universe. The six pens became formalised as three pairs of scripts: <i>Thuluth</i> and <i>Naskh</i>, <i>Muhaqqaq</i> and <i>Rayhani</i>, and <i>Tawqi</i> and <i>Riqa</i>. Every pair included a larger ornamental variety and a smaller script with finer lines. The Abbasids later employed the <i>Tawqi</i> as the official autograph script of commands and administrative declarations. This selection visually differentiated the new dynasty from the Umayyads’ <i>Tumar</i> texts, stressing the territorial role of writing as a sign of religious and political unity.</p>
786 C.E.	<p>Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (d. 786), an Abbasid scribe, facilitated the earlier diacritical marking system for general utilisation. He keeps <i>nokte</i> for distinguishing consonants but substitutes the <i>tashkīl</i>’s coloured marks with 8 new diacritical signs. The changes were encountered with resistance and at first confined to secular writings (written changes may have been assumed as modifying the Koran’s text). However, opposition decreases over time, and vocalisation marks become functional and helpful, especially for instructing the right Koranic recitation. These marks are still applied to the transcription of religious documents and books.</p>

886-940 C.E.	<p>Ibn Muqlah (866-940) for administrative objectives, pursued systematising the appearance of <i>naskh</i> styles, and his subsequent reforms drastically reorganised the universe of Arabic writing. He applied an accurate system of geometrical reform in the writing and, specifically, the gathered canon of the six pens. The system came to be recognised as <i>al-khatt al-mansub</i> (الخط المنسوب) (proportioned script). <i>Al-khatt al-mansub</i> presented the Arabic script with an official constancy of written design and gradually became the basis of the Arabic calligraphic tradition. The new system proportioned the shapes and sizes of letters based on three parameters: <i>nokte</i> (dot), <i>alif</i>, and the circle. The visual integrity of a script is controlled by repeating identical forms amongst letters. Consequently, the script's distinct styles came to be recognisable regarding their employed proportions and the base <i>nokte</i> (dot) measurement of the <i>alif</i>. Therefore, the <i>alif</i> in <i>thuluth</i> script measured 7 <i>nokte</i> tall; the <i>alif</i> in <i>naskh</i> measured 5, and the <i>alif</i> in <i>muhaqqaq</i> measured 9. Ibn Muqlah, proposing these standards, wanted to ease the interchange of written communication amongst a rapidly extending scribal community.</p>
900 C.E.	<p><i>Kufic</i> variants, alongside <i>al-khatt al-mansub</i>, were revitalised as a symbolic and decorative pattern. New <i>Kufic</i> scripts stressed visual and aesthetic shape rather than readability, including intricate woven, floriated, zoomorphic, and geometric designs. Stylised <i>Kufic</i> might display Koranic verses, religious phrases, or religious figures' names as a running epigraph or it might shape religious content in the form of complicated visual puzzles.</p>
1022 C.E.	<p>Ali ibn Hilal ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022) was a scribe with an artistic look at the movement and rhythm that found expression in the graceful curves and flowing lines. Ibn al-Bawwab's writings meticulously reproduce the <i>al-khatt al-mansub</i>'s strict proportions. He, who was famous for the elegance, harmony, and consistency of the script, perfected and beautified the calligraphic system of Ibn Muqlah and raised the <i>naskh</i> script to the position of a visual and aesthetic art worthy of the Koran by relying on the <i>al-khatt al-mansub</i>.</p>

1298 C.E.	Yaqut practised calligraphy in Baghdad under master Safi al-Din Abd al-Mumin al-Urmawi (d.1294), and like Ibn Muqla, became the Abbasid chancery's secretary. After Hulagu (r. 1256-1265), in 1258, took Baghdad, Yaqut stayed in the city, where his art flourished under new state support. Yaqut became well-known for his script, exemplary teaching, prodigious output, and way of trimming the pen.
1256-1508 C.E.	In the early 13th century, the Mongol invasions disturbed the eastern Islamic lands' political and economic infrastructure, and the year that the caliphate was overthrown by the Mongols is often taken as a landmark. Nevertheless, in spite of the devastations wrought, many cultural and social norms persisted, and after these heathen warriors' conversion, Islam again appeared as the official religion across west Asia. This was the era of Persianate culture and Mongol prestige, and the Persian speaking lands, under the domination of Mongol and Turkoman dynasties, set the basis and standards in calligraphic tradition like other arts. The Six Pens (round styles) continued to be the main scripts for writing, and the Korans produced during this period are some of the best recognised. One of the important innovations of the time was the expansion of calligraphy to other areas and media, including stucco and tile. The increasing dominance of the Persian language and literature also caused the development of hanging scripts, <i>ta'liq</i> (تعليق), and <i>nasta'liq</i> (نستعلیق).
1370 -1507 C.E.	In the early 15th century, under the backing of the Timurid sovereign, the revival of Ilkhanid traditions expanded to the arts, including calligraphy, and the calligraphic masters adopted the scripts canonised by Yaqut. The Timurid princes were very creative, celebrated devotees and skillful administrators of Fine Arts. It was during the Timurid rule that calligraphic art found its full development, and this art underwent a revolutionary transformation, and the <i>nasta'liq</i> script was invented.
1501-1736 C.E.	The Safavids were a religious sovereignty based upon Shiism that continued for almost two centuries. With the imposition of Shiism as the state-enforced dogma on the whole of society, a new dimension of socio-cultural identity began to take root. Notwithstanding the expansive ethnical and linguistic variety within the Safavid realm, the state-supported Shiite credo with a Persian interpretation and the Arabic theological semblance demonstrated to be significantly

	<p>enduring. This alter influenced the election of texts penned, as new poems and devotions to the Shiite imams came to be introduced into the traditional index of the Koran and hadiths.</p>
1554-1615 C.E.	<p>The influence of master Mir Imad al-Hassani Qazvini (assassinated 1615), who was recognised for his crisp and unique writing style, in later centuries extended to Ottoman Turkey, where <i>nasta 'liq</i>'s practitioners still follow his specimens precisely. He became the most noteworthy calligrapher at Shah Abbas's court and the chief competitor of Ali Riza Abbasi, a designer of epigraphs. His creative compositions were immensely known and popular both the duration of his lifetime and after his demise, and his calligraphic specimens, as those of his predecessor, master Mir Ali Haravi, were gathered diligently. He is most celebrated for his quatrains inscribed in diagonal structure canonized by Mir Ali Haravi (1476-1544), but with a heavier, bolder line and an excessive contrast between thin and thick strokes</p>
1601-1800 C.E.	<p>Calligraphic artists also streamlined the style of <i>nasta 'liq</i>, and developed a script entitled <i>shikasta nasta 'liq</i> (شکسته نستعلیق) (<i>broken nasta 'liq</i>), commonly shortened to <i>shikasta</i>. One of the first trailblazers was Mohammad Shafi Haravi Husayni (d. 1670-1), and another was Murtadaquli Khan Shamlu (d. 1688-9) (Isfahani, 1990, p. 179). But with the emergence of Abdul Majid Taliqani (d. 1773), this style reached the height of perfection and beauty and there was a change in calligraphy.</p>
1796-1925 C.E.	<p>The Qajar sovereigns were well-informed in the traditional Persian arts and literature, and during their rule, many beautiful books were produced, usually penned in a compact and elegant <i>nasta 'liq</i> sumptuously decorated. However, few specimens have been published, especially in the West, because traditionally this period has been taken as one of downturn and decline. Now even as the arts of this period are being reexamined, most Western studies focus on architecture, figural painting, or other arts. Today, this situation is being rectified to some extent in Iran, and various centres of Islamic and calligraphy are producing comprehensive investigations on 19th-century calligraphic masters.</p>

1829-1892 C.E.	<p>Mirza Mohammad Riza Kalhur (1829-92). Kalhur was the most significant calligrapher of the 19th century, credited for revitalising the <i>nasta'liq</i> style perfected by Mir Imad al-Hassani. Mir Imad's heirs in the 17th and early 18th centuries had developed a more elongated <i>nasta'liq</i> style with greater spaces between the words, while Kalhur revived the more compacted tradition, inscribing words on a smaller measure in a single movement, making shorter connections and strokes, and piling letters and words together to get a thicker structure. In the 19th century, <i>nasta'liq</i> was also adopted for lithographed books. At this time, Iranian society was taking the first steps toward modernisation, and calligraphy was included in applied arts and was accompanied by these evolutions, pursuing new tendencies vis-à-vis the requirements of contemporary society in the previous century.</p>
1851 C.E.	<p>The founding of the <i>Dar al-funun</i>, the earliest modern academy of its kind by Amir Kabir in 1851, was a noticeable movement in Iran's educative system. European educators (chiefly French, Italian, and Austrian) instructed students in the spheres of engineering, medicine, music, foreign languages, and military sciences. Also, the school held classes inclusive of lithographic printing and photography.</p>
1861-1936 C.E.	<p>After Kalhur, a new era began with Imad al-Kitab (1861-1936) that continues up to this time (today, our traditional calligraphy has been influenced more by Imad al-Kitab than by Kalhur). Imad al-Kitab is mentioned as the perfecter of the Kalhur style. Without being Kalhur's direct pupil, he practised from his printed books, learned his manner with great loyalty and obsession, and passed it on to others without interfering too much with this method. Imad al-Kitab experienced the troubled and critical period of the Constitutional Revolution, and not only calligraphers but also painters, writers, and intellectuals contributed to this experience. Generally, our contemporary calligraphy begins with Imad al-Kitab, and he is the last link in the chain of old masters of calligraphy who connected this art to contemporary calligraphers.</p>

1905-1909 C.E.	The Constitutional Revolution, whose principal purpose was to establish a parliamentary government and overthrow despotism, was a considerable moment in the history of Iran that indicated Iranians' historical consciousness of their new role in the system of modern nations. The revolution resulted in the foundation of the first <i>Majlis</i> or parliament on 30 Dec 1906 in Iran.
1911C.E.	The Academy of Fine Arts, <i>Madreseh sanaye mostazrafeh</i> , was established in 1911 by Kamal al-Molk. The school kept its activities after Kamal al-Molk's departure in 1927, but it was brought under closer government control until its demise following World War II. In 1930, with the arrival of Hossein Taherzadeh Behzad, Madreseh's administration was reorganised.
1914-1918 C.E.	World War I was concurrent with the rule of Ahmad Shah Qajar, and Iran's constitutional regime was going through its worst and weakest period. Hostile forces, in spite of the declaration of the Iranian government's neutrality, entered Iran from the north and south. Due to Iran's occupation by Russia and Britain, and the commencing of the famine of 1917-1919, at that time, many Iranians died.
1925- 1941 C.E.	When Riza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, came to power in 1925, the opening of art schools and the granting of scholarships to students to continue their studies in Europe continued. Riza Shah supported traditional and modern arts such as calligraphy and painting. His accomplishments could be summarised under three rubrics: constructing the foundation of a modern government, claiming autonomy from alien domination, and beginning sociological-cultural renovation. The time of Riza Shah witnessed the forming of a new-found order. He consolidated his authority by reinforcing his help on three principles: the new military, the government bureaucracy, and the court patronage. For the first time following the Safavids dynasty, the state controlled the community with extensive means of domination, administration, and regulation. Riza Shah's renovation policy affected a variety of social life in Iran. Government policy was a determined factor in bringing into existence a united nation. Thereby, fundamental modifications were seen in various fields, including the disarmament and settlement of the tribes, the establishment of a modern structure of bureaucracy and military, the

	<p>construction of rails, roads, and harbor facilities, the introduction of Western attiring, the commencements of industrial development, and the presentation the European educational and legal method. This procedure stimulated Iranian society to adapt itself to Western life.</p>
1928 C.E.	<p><i>Hunaristan-i Kamal al-Molk</i> (Kamal al-Molk Fine Arts High School of), established by Ismail Ashtiani; after Kamal al Molk's resignation, it was re-organised and renamed <i>Madraseh Sanaye pisha va hunar</i> (School of Crafts and the Arts).</p>
1939-1945/6 C.E.	<p>After the beginning of World War II, despite the declaration of Iran's neutrality, after the starting of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, because of the expansion of Iran's boundary with the Soviet Union, this neutrality was unsteady. The Allied forces decided to utilise Iran as a corridor to equip their forces, and thus, on August 25, 1941, they occupied Iran.</p>
1941- 1979 C.E.	<p>Mohammad Riza Pahlavi was the second and last king of the Pahlavi dynasty. After the abdication of his father Riza Shah, he became king in the National Council and was deposed by the revolution of 1357.</p>
1953 C.E.	<p>After the 1953 coup d'état, whereby Mohammad Mosaddeq's government was ousted with the backing of the British and American intelligence agencies, the Pahlavi's regime confronted a crisis of legitimacy, and most intellectuals became critics of the political structure.</p>
1934 C.E.	<p>The University of Tehran was established as a centre for scientific and cultural modernism.</p>
1939 C.E.	<p>Tehran Faculty of Fine Arts was founded under the direction of André Godard. Its teaching staff was drawn from French-trained architects and Kamal al-Molk's students.</p>

1949 C.E.	<p>Surrealist concepts and practices progressively arrived from literature to visual arts during the 1940s and 1950s. This matter occurred primarily via the endeavors of the <i>Khorus Jangi</i>, which was the title given to an avant-garde group of artists and writers, as well as to the magazine inside of which they published their critical and innovative works. Each issue was displayed with the figure of the <i>Fighting Cock</i> designed by Jalil Ziapour. There was a break when the magazine was discontinued by Government coercion. Ziapour abandoned <i>Khorus Jangi</i> in this situation and commenced an alternative magazine entitled <i>Kavir</i>. This also was prevented by the state, and Ziapour carried on to begin yet another magazine, called <i>Panje Khorus</i>. <i>Khorus Jangi</i> was resuscitated in 1951, by Gholamhossein Gharib and another group of writers and artists. The second series includes numerous articles about contemporary art, and most significantly the Manifesto <i>Sallākh-e Bolbol</i>. The lively burgeoning of the <i>Khorus Jangi</i> at the initiate of the 1950s was temporary, but it helped notably to the appearance of a surrealist visual shape that had before been in evolution for some decades in literary forms.</p>
1958-1966 C.E.	<p>The Tehran Biennial commenced with the backing of the General Administration of Fine Art, established under the surveillance of the Ministry of Culture in 1951. The earliest Biennial was on 14th April 1958, and the fifth one occurred on 21st June 1966.</p>
1960 C.E.	<p>The <i>Saqqa-khaneh</i> movement came into being amid the country's renovation in an endeavor to connect the traditional culture of Iran with visual arts' modern and contemporary facets and especially with Western contemporary paintings. Abiding by Iranian tradition was not the primary engine driving <i>Saqqa-khaneh</i> art, nor was it to emulate Western art. New viewpoints, visual forms, and compositions of art employed by the movement's artists as the expression of their beliefs, visions, and emotions in the process of artistic creation arise from the contemporary cultures of Iran. The <i>Saqqa-khaneh</i> movement's practitioners have taken Iranian ethnic literary and artistic traditions further than their actual context, presenting a style that combines Western and Iranian artistic</p>

	conventions. The movement artists' works exemplify and testify to a time in the history of modern Iranian art.
1961 C.E.	<i>Hunarkadeh-ye hunar-haye Tazini</i> , was founded with the aim of training applied arts experts. Several modernist designers, sculptors, and painters who had an essential role in the growth of modern and contemporary visual art in Iran were educated in this institution under the supervision of Iranian and foreign educators. Varied disciplines including interior architecture, painting, graphic design, decorative painting, and sculpture with fundamental stress on applied arts were trained in this college. Here, pupils were encouraged to pursue symbols, idioms, and folklore sources of inspiration to acquaint themselves with the decorative legacy of Iran through diverse courses.
1963 C.E.	The <i>White Revolution</i> (the Revolution of the Shah and the People) is the name of a series of social and economic changes that were realised in Iran during the regime of Mohammad Riza Shah Pahlavi and with the aid of the then prime ministers.
1979 C.E.	The Islamic Revolution was a political-social transformation. It was accomplished with the participation of diverse classes of Iranians. It ousted the Pahlavi regime and paved the way for the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini.
1980 C.E.	Five different institutes of arts (Tehran Faculty of Decorative Arts, Farabi University, Tehran Faculty of Dramatic Arts, National Music Studio and Conservatory of Music) combined together and <i>Daneshgah-ye Hunar-i Tehran</i> (Tehran University of Art) was founded.

1980–88 C.E.	The eight-year war with Iraq caused major problems in Iran for many years but also increased the sense of nationalism across the country. During the war: panel drawing, wall painting, and poster design on political, religious, and epic themes flourished.
1991 C.E.	The First Iranian Painting Biennial was held, twelve years after the triumph of the Revolution.
1997 C.E.	In the mid-1990s, among factors that in general led to the development of art, we may note the role of the country’s art officials. Particularly, after the 1997 presidential election, the Arts Centre of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was very active, as was the main organ of the Centre, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.
2005-Now	The start of the new radicalism in cultural enterprises and official politics. Though the level of the official body’s patronage and artistic choice has shifted in a completely different direction, institutions and individual artists have been able to empower and continue the path that they had already commenced in the previous phases. The private sectors, including galleries, also achieved more influence from their international communications and shared their artists with the international art scene.

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