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## Unified multiplicities : Arabic letters between modernity, identity, and abstraction

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## Chapter II            From Traditional Calligraphy to Calligraphic Abstraction

*An Alternative Reading of Islamic Art: Lessons in Appreciating and Understanding Islamic Art*

It is a challenging task for a scholar to study Islamic art since its creativity and artistic production have spanned such a wide and long history across several nations and continents. The length and diversity of Islamic history is just one of the problems. Many of the buildings that were built under Islamic patronage exist in politically unstable countries, exposing the monuments to severe damage and cultural loss. The artefacts on the other hand are dispersed in major museums around the world, making their study a laborious and expensive task. Academically speaking, Western scholars initiated the field of studying Islamic art. This adds to the above mentioned problems that Islamic art has been erroneously labelled as “minor arts” or “decorative arts” in most Art history surveys, only during the post-colonial era did scholars from the Arab world start specializing in and publishing on the topic.<sup>9</sup>

But what is Islamic Art? In the 1970s, Oleg Grabar asked the question, “What makes Islamic art Islamic?”<sup>10</sup> In another article he asked if Islamic Art is Art of a Culture or Art of a faith?<sup>11</sup> Several Islamic art scholars have recently debated the question and a special issue dedicated to understanding the field was published in the 2012 *Journal of Art Historiography* under the title “Islamic Art Historiography.”<sup>12</sup> The prologue by Avinoam Shalem entitled, “What do we mean when we say “Islamic art”? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam”, comes as a clear indication that practitioners in the field are aware that writing on Islamic art history and how it is categorized and studied still has some serious issues to be addressed. Almost forty years after Grabar asked his questions, one is still struggling for answers.

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<sup>9</sup> Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art* (2007), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Grabar, “What makes Islamic art Islamic?”, 1-3

<sup>11</sup> Grabar, “Islamic Art”, 1-6.

<sup>12</sup> “Islamic Art Historiography.” *Journal of Art Historiography*. Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, eds. <<http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/>> (last checked January 2016)

The idea that Islam can be grouped under one umbrella is one of the biggest challenges that Islamic art historians are still facing. Oleg Grabar cautioned that, “[...] it is foolish, illogical and historically incorrect to talk of a single Islamic artistic expression. A culture of thirteen centuries (now fourteen centuries) which extended from Spain to Indonesia, and is neither now nor in the past a monolith, and to every generalization there are dozens of exceptions.”<sup>13</sup> Grabar classifies three major themes as distinct of Islamic art: its social meaning, its characteristic abstract ornaments, and the tension between unity and plurality. Salah Hassan states that Grabar’s arguments are admirable but problematic because the conclusions he reached might have approximated certain aesthetic and artistic practices associated with Islamic art, but they go against Grabar’s cautionary note regarding generalization about a highly complex region with centuries of diverse and complex artistic practices and philosophical orientations.<sup>14</sup>

There have been a number of publications on the subject that have demonstrated the difficulty in defining the meaning and restrictions of what the term “Islamic” art really presents.<sup>15</sup> Dadi argues that the term “Islamic art” remains highly challenging and conversational in art historical discourses.<sup>16</sup> As he sums up, “the study of Islamic art has historically been a Western scholars’ and connoisseurs’ endeavour, one that remains unable to situate a discursive ground in the Islamicate tradition.”<sup>17</sup> This renders the field of Islamic art primarily an Orientalist construction. It is troubling that its scholars see Islamic art as having ended in the nineteenth century and all museum collections end around the same time. One attempt at highlighting and tackling this problem is the Jameel Prize launched in 2009 in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK. The prize “is an

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<sup>13</sup> Grabar, “What makes Islamic art Islamic?”, 1-3.

<sup>14</sup> Salah Hassan, “Contemporary “Islamic” Art: Western Curatorial Politics of Representation in Post 9/11.” *The Future of Tradition - The Tradition of Future: 100 Years after the Exhibition ‘Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art’ in Munich*, (München: Prestel and Haus de Kunst, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on an Unwieldy Field.” *The Art Bulletin* 85 no. 1 (2003). Reproduced by permission of the authors and the College Art Association.

<<http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/blairbloomdoc.pdf>> 6-SSB/1 (last checked January 2016)

<sup>16</sup> Eftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 35.

international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition. Its aim is to explore the relationship between Islamic traditions of art, craft and design and contemporary work as part of a wider debate about Islamic culture and its role today.”<sup>18</sup>

Islamic art is seen by scholars of its classical period as having ended by the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is as Dadi points out, “precisely the period that witnesses the rise of the Orientalist study of Islamic art, when Western society was undergoing the process of industrial modernization.”<sup>19</sup> This has resulted in what Barry Flood has characterized as situating the “location of Islamic art in a valorised past from which ‘living tradition’ is excluded,” which “amounts to denial of coevalness with the art of European modernity.”<sup>20</sup> Hassan states that this is exemplary of the larger issue of the place of non-western art within the discourse of western art history where modernism and the modernity are relegated as derivative or secondary to the “Western” modern.<sup>21</sup>

To some extent, the origins of what evolved with Western scholarly circles as Islamic art can be found in the art of the Byzantine and Sassanian dynasties. Aspects like abstract geometry, ornamentation, script, decorating carpets, floors, and ceilings were applied consistently on the exteriors and interiors of buildings and art associated with both civilizations, which preceded Islam. Calligraphy is an element often incorporated into different compositions that can be either representational or abstract. During the ninth century, Kufic script on the Fatimid plates and monuments was very similar to that on buildings and objects that spanned the length of the Islamic empire. In these works the balance has generally shifted from readability to visibility, as the intention was to appreciate them more for their formal than for their semantic qualities.<sup>22</sup> Still, calligraphy was an integral ingredient for decoration in Islamic architecture and artefacts, both religious and secular. What

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<sup>18</sup> “Jameel Prize 4. The Shortlisted Artists and Designers.” V&A. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/jameel-prize-4/> (last checked January 2016)

<sup>19</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 33

<sup>20</sup> Finbarr Barry Flood, “From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art.” Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2007), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Salah Hassan, *Contemporary “Islamic” Art: Western Curatorial Politics of Representation in Post 9/11* (München: Prestell and Haus de Kunst, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: 1998), 589.

differed was the content. Where buildings such as mosques and schools had verses from the Quran scribed and engraved on their facades and interiors; poetry, proverbs and sayings of the Prophet graced the walls of royal and domestic Islamic architecture. Grabar stated that the fundamental reason for Muslim artists' choice and preference of calligraphy as their central "intermediary function" for so many centuries is related to the notion of the ephemerality of life, and writing being its essential link to the true and only life.<sup>23</sup> Calligraphy enjoyed an official endorsement greater than all the other arts because it was used to scribe the Quran, and the belief in the sacred essence of Arabic as the language through which it is believed the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Being "the language of the hand, the idiom of the mind, the ambassador of intellect, and the trustee of thought, the weapon of knowledge and the companion of brethren in the time of separation."<sup>24</sup> Abstract or nonfigurative art also generally enjoyed a higher position in Islam than in Byzantine and Christian art. Decoration in mosques, including calligraphy, was an end in itself, representing independent structures and symbolizing internal meaning. Taking the difference in content, context and function of Islamic art compared to the art of the West and consequently art in the modern world, it is important to understand how to look at and appreciate Islamic art.

Samir Sayegh, whose artwork is discussed in this dissertation, sets four rules for the viewer to be ready to appreciate and re-look at Islamic art. The first one is *how* to see, not *what* to see.<sup>25</sup> And by seeing he does not mean simply using the physical eye, but actually involving the human totality, in mind and imagination and sensibility. The second point of readiness is in unifying Islamic art in all of its forms, architecture, calligraphy, drawing, engraving, carpets and textiles, ceramics, glass, wood, silver, brass, gold, in the mosque and in the house.<sup>26</sup> He calls for this unification of vision so the viewer can read all of these "*tajaliyat*" as one. He elaborates by stating that this unity is not only the most effective way for us to read

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<sup>23</sup> Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*.

<sup>24</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 66.

<sup>25</sup> Sayegh, *Qir 'a T'amuliyah fi Falsafatihi wa Khasaisihi al-Jamaliyah* (Islamic Art: A Contemplative Reading on its Philosophy and Esthetics). (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'arifa, 1988), 55.

<sup>26</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 57.

this art form, but it is also the aim, or the statement of Islamic art. This similarity in style, in spite of the vast differences in time and place, is what implies unity. He attributes this unity in expression in Islamic art to the fact that it did not deal with the actions of individuals in a place or time, but rather dealt with the understanding of humanity of itself and of the world, as a total understanding derived from one religion.<sup>27</sup>

The third point for appreciating Islamic art is unifying art and religion. Sayegh does not consider Islamic art to have taken the role of preaching or advertising or explaining the Islamic religion, as art in Christianity did for example, meaning it did not serve religion by representing its ideology, in spite of the fact that it could not be separated from religion.<sup>28</sup> And this point becomes part of the dilemma for Arab modernity. How do you separate the elements that represent religion and are an integral part of it, thus an integral part of your identity from the everyday life? This art was the everyday life, it was woven into it, but it also represented the religious philosophy behind it. Thus the religious philosophy of looking at things becomes one with its cultural by-products, whether art or architecture.

The fourth and final point for understanding is learning to listen, in which Sayegh calls for a revival of the art of discernment that is the vehicle for man to read what is behind the letters, what is behind the obvious, when the viewer becomes a contemplator of the artwork unveiling its hidden treasures. The Sufi philosopher and poet, Jalal al-Dine al-Rumi is also cited as confirming that the contemplator of Islamic art needs "*basirah*" [vision] to understand and appreciate this art, he states: "The *zahir* [exterior] image is for you to understand; the *batin* [ulterior] image is formed for the perception of another *batin* image to be formed, based on your ability to see and comprehend."<sup>29</sup> This can only come with education and training, and if people inhabiting the Arab world are constantly placed in situations of political instability, art and its appreciation will always be at the bottom of the social priority list. Survival comes before culture.

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<sup>27</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 62.

<sup>28</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 67.

Learning how to see beyond the exterior of things, unifying the vision for Islamic art, reinterpreting the religious philosophy behind Islamic art to fit our modern way of life, and learning to meditate internally and externally are all key elements to reading and understanding Islamic art.

Art before Islam, whether Pharonic or Assyrian, was not about representing a visible reality. It may portray a war, but it is not really a war, it is not a battle. If the topic discussed is surrender and coronation, this is not represented realistically, but in mode of depiction. Because it is not reality that is an issue for these art forms, the issues of Islamic art are larger than reality, it is not required that history be exactly copied because the art acts as a witness to the unity of this universe or to the unity of the unknown or Allah, that everything will disappear: "*kul shay zaeil*". According to traditional conceptions, the artist working with the parameters of what is called "Islamic Art" is one with nature, standing *with* nature and not in front of it to draw it. The artist is standing with it and is witnessing its changes. The common traditional perception was that Islam created ornament because the artists could not draw, even though they drew everything, but they did not depict reality like the Greeks. However, if we take these drawings and look at their aesthetic, we discover aesthetic principles in the colouring, in the techniques, and in the geometric virtuosity.<sup>30</sup> Within what is known as Islamic art, the idea is that artists were not concerned with depicting reality, but rather they translated reality into a visual philosophy of abstraction.

Islam's major text and sources did not necessarily forbid iconography, it rather presented a new vision, and as such it abandoned the representation of reality because of this alternative point of view. The Quran placed the concept of *tahrim* [prohibition] on images associated with so-called "pagan" rituals [non-Islamic and non-monotheistic religions], but it was addressing the matter from a functional perspective, as a practice that had a specific role in non-Muslim life and rituals. As for the Prophet's tradition, they were addressed to the non-believers, as well as aimed at distancing Islam from the representation of the creator.<sup>31</sup> Many scholars have cited passages from the Quran, Prophet Mohammad's *hadith* [sayings] and

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<sup>30</sup> Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 130.



other references to prove that Islam did not forbid iconography. Instead it had an alternative philosophy with regards to representation. It is sufficient to look at the paintings of Qusayr 'Amra from the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE or the hundreds of examples of zoomorphic illustrations on different materials and artefacts scattered in collections around the world or even the volumes of illustrated miniature art from the Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman empires, to realize that iconography historically has not been a taboo in Islam. Sayegh argues that whether Islam permitted iconography or not, this has never been a major issue historically, certainly not if compared to the Iconoclast Wars of the early Christian faith's period that ended in 869 CE and that resulted in what is known as the Byzantine style of drawing.

There is no clear text in the Quran like the one in the Jewish Ten Commandments that clearly states, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them."<sup>32</sup>

The agreement was that "shapes and colours are like words in the *Bible*; they can express the holy or the sacred." These shapes and colours, and the depiction of Christ, are representations of the holy, but they had to be two-dimensional, flat, without the illusion of depth created by linear perspective. The idea behind icons is that they do not represent what is seen but rather what cannot be seen. Sayegh states that Islamic art realized the essence of this theory, and that Byzantine art did not.<sup>33</sup> His argument is that if we examine surviving early manuscripts in Islamic art and study the illustrations in *Maqamat* al-Hariri by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, who was a 13th-century Iraqi-Arab painter and calligrapher, we discover that the style by which he illustrates the clothes is very close to the clothes that are found in Byzantine's Christian icons. And this flatness and these faces do not look like anyone, meaning they are not real depictions of an existing human in reality. He finds that the main principles that the art of drawing miniatures follows is very close to Byzantine art, because also, this art does not depict reality, not out of short-sightedness or because it is forbidden, but because the visible reality was considered

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<sup>32</sup> Exodus 20:4 KJV.

<sup>33</sup> Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

to be irrelevant. Some scholars argue that the rise of Islam must have created a new environment in which images were seen as being at the heart of the Christian iconoclasm's intellectual questions and debates, but there is no proof that Islamic iconoclasm had any direct role in the development of the Byzantine image debate. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE was held and its proceedings restored the drawing of icons and holy images, which had been suppressed at the Council of Hieria in 754 CE, which ended the debate about iconoclasm. What Sayegh is suggesting is that Islam adopted concepts that Byzantine iconoclastic tradition could not adopt. This remains a theory that is yet to be proven.

Several scholars denoting the unity of Islam identify how this idea at times merges perfectly with the concept of *tawhid* or the Oneness of Allah in Islam. But in Islamic art the purported unity appears as a projection a "strongly felt universal aspect", as Ettinghausen suggests. Shalem affirms that Islamic art is rather a mixture of different cultures and the adaptation of different styles and aesthetic notions with no thoughts of a unified formation. He wonders if one should simply argue for diversity? And not diversity in unity.<sup>34</sup>

But in its essence, Islamic art is an art that does not struggle or confront, but complements. Allah is one, thus the art is one and the earth is one. It is not about the individual artist. The philosophical understanding of modern abstract art is that it freed the artwork from the subject, whether this subject was marginal or central to humankind. Modern art balanced between the elements of the artwork as independent entities, thus the artwork in itself becomes an independent language. That same logic was utilized in what is perceived as Islamic art, which freed art from its subject more than ten centuries ago. It grew to be prominent as a balance between subject and form, and between images and meaning.<sup>35</sup>

Within what is known as Islamic art, the artist is perceived to have no special presence in the artwork from an individual perspective. The work of artists is a witness to taste and technique, to skill and mind, and to ability as general human attributes. In other words, the "I" of the artist does not represent his emotions,

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<sup>34</sup> Avinoam Shalem, "What do we mean when we say "Islamic art"? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam" <<http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/shalem.pdf>> 6-AS/1 (last checked January 2016)

<sup>35</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 78.

mood, suffering or individual traits.<sup>36</sup> According to prevalent notions of Islamic art, the relationship between the artist and himself or the world is not based on conflict. It is a relationship that equates the outside world, as one in nature and topic.<sup>37</sup> It leads either to the *shahadah* [testimony] on the unity of existence and the *ghaib* [absent], and knowledge as a way to reach that unknown.<sup>38</sup> The relationships between the human and himself/herself, between the absolute “I”, and the essence “I” do not aim at the conquest of one over the other or the cancelling of one by the other.<sup>39</sup>

As a result it is impossible to read the history of Islamic art through its artists the way you can with Western art starting from Da Vinci up to Picasso. The concept of the individual “star” artist was virtually absent in tradition related to the classical canons of art, aside from rare instances like the Ottoman architect Koca Mi'mâr Sinân Âğâ or the Safavid painter Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād . But there is no documented history of artists within the mostly western discourses of Islamic art history. The reasons for that might be the way in which Islamic art was produced; it was the work of a collective of artisans not an individual. The carpet, the chair, the manuscripts all involved a team, thus it is not an individual who can be credited. But it also could be that – as in the case of non-Western art historical discourses in the Western academy – the way history of Islamic art has been written, the individual artist’s role, or their biographies are written out and remain anonymous. Shalem confirms that “[...] in claiming modernity as a Western phenomenon, art histories have defined Islamic art in the twentieth century as traditional, folklorist, religious and even as an art that no longer exists. Islamic art was set back in time. Any continuity was regarded as an adherence to tradition and no space was given for other, modified versions of modernity.”<sup>40</sup>

Within the parameters of classical Islamic art, works of art are not a documentation of accomplishments by the Islamic rulers or their armies as it was with the case of Ancient Egyptian or Roman art. It is a translation of a philosophy and

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<sup>36</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 266.

<sup>38</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 268.

<sup>39</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 267.

<sup>40</sup> Shalem, “What do we mean when we say “Islamic art”?”, 17.

not a documentation of historic events. It was concerned with eternity and the afterlife, not with a realistic depiction of reality.

In summary, Islam presented a vision for humanity and the world, and its artistic tradition embodies such a vision.<sup>41</sup> What makes classical Islamic artistic tradition specific is that it translated the religious language into an artistic one. Classical Islamic art witnessed the message of unity in its vision to how the part can become the whole and the whole is part of a bigger whole. Art was part of the bigger vision, it is grander than artistic power, because it is based on a vision. The fact that there was a product of a diversity of people producing artwork across a long historical period does not undermine the line of continuity that was evident in the art produced under different dynasties in different contexts.

#### *Islamic Art vs. Modern Art: The Modern Arab Artist*

In order to understand the modernist experience in Arab art we need to analyse the two sources that are credited for its foundation: classical Islamic art and Western modern art movements. The preconceived idea is that Arab modernist art movements are simply an imitation of modern Western art since many of its artists had studied in Western capitals or were exposed to Western schools of thought in their own countries due to colonization. The second idea is that it is a continuation of Islamic aesthetics modified to fit the modern age. Shabout criticizes both claims by stating that the problem emerges from the implication that the visual language of the modern Arab world relates neither to the idea of art as expression, nor as reflection of its realities or its cultures.<sup>42</sup> The last one hundred years can be considered a time of creative stagnation in the eyes of some modernist Arab artists, while the West and its civilization, and its art represented modernity and advancement. The dilemma in the Arab art world started with the realization that the West not only stands for modernity, but it also stands for the colonizer. This became the impasse that artists during the early phases of Arab modernism had to

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<sup>41</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 139.

<sup>40</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 3.

struggle with: how to detach modernity from the colonizer without a regressive interpretation of the past?

Many have argued that art in previously colonized countries became an essential tool in the search for, and creation and maintenance of national consciousness and identity. Another obstacle faced by Arab art was related to the nation state and the political realities, which require artists to become subordinate and sometimes serve in political positions in the government. Arab governments would send their most prominent student artists on scholarships to Europe, Russia and other parts of the world. Upon their return many of them would serve in governmental institutions. This happened to artists and intellectuals especially in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and other Arab countries. Ibrahim Salahi went on a scholarship to Slade School of Fine arts in the UK from 1954-1957. He later received several other scholarships to continue his education in the US. He eventually served in Sudan as Director of Culture then Undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Information until September 1975, when he was imprisoned for being accused of participating in an anti-government coup under Jaafar Nimeiri's regime. Abudulkader Arnaout went to Rome and France to study in the 1960s and 70s. Subsequently, he held positions in the Syrian Ministry of Culture and the School of Fine Arts in Damascus. Artists thus become tools that are used by the state to serve its agenda. They serve in the machine as cultural operators or practicing artists. They translate the losses and victories of their governments, sometimes as public artworks that document accomplishments and defeats.<sup>43</sup> A great example is the Iraqi artist Jawad Saleem's *Nasb al-Hurriyah* (Monument of Freedom) in Baghdad's Liberation Square commemorating the 1958 revolution that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy.

Colonialism and the instabilities of the post colonial state, in addition to subsequent wars and their consequences in the Arab world, have caused many artefacts to be transported from the region, ending up in European private or public collections and museums in the West. It became easier for a scholar of Islamic art to study Islamic artefacts in the Western metropolises than it was to study it in their home country. Because of colonization, constant invasions, wars and revolutions,

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<sup>43</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 35.

there has been no continuity for the arts in the Arab region. Islamic art was not taught in schools, but was rather erased from the collective memory of the people inhabiting the lands where it originated. Flood states that since the inception of Islamic art and architecture as a sub-field of art history in the West, it has not been properly located within its mater narrative.<sup>44</sup> He goes on to criticize the representation of Islamic art in major Western references on art history. Starting with Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture* published in 1896, up until Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* published in 2001, Flood illustrates how in the span of a century, Islamic art still has not been properly represented in text books on art history produced in the West. He criticizes the term "Islamic art" as caught between a religious identity and cultural identification. He then elaborates on the books, on the topic of Islamic art published in Europe and the US between 1991-2001 as providing "a representative impression of the field as currently constituted, over a century after its emergence at the intersection of text-based Oriental studies, archaeology, connoisseurship, and museology."<sup>45</sup> He elaborates saying how these references contain illustrations of artefacts only present in Western collections, meaning "[...] works illustrated are those most readily accessible to European and American scholars." To Flood what is most striking is how all of these references unanimously exclude any art produced in Islamic lands after 1800. Nasser Rabat states that Western textbooks on Islamic art history "begin with the building of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina around 620AD, and inexplicably fizzle out with the dawn of the colonial age in the late eighteenth century."<sup>46</sup>

The troubled historiography of Islamic art is an important ingredient for understanding the history of calligraphic abstraction, since the act of calligraphy is central to Islamic art. Islamic art is one of the sources that the calligraphic abstraction movement found useful. Since Sayegh is one of those concerned with calligraphic history and abstraction and since he is also a historian and a critic, it is essential to highlight that aspect of his work within this larger discussion. What has been happening in recent decades is a process of re-learning. In the case of Sayegh

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<sup>44</sup> Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism?", 31.

<sup>45</sup> Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism?", 33.

<sup>46</sup> Nasser Rabat, "Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Enquiry." *Architectural Design* 74 no. 6 (2004), 19.

and a few others, it has been a process of re-learning and educating a new generation of designers and artists who are now trying to create a new visual language for the region.

Western artists ran most art schools in the Arab world, specifically the last wave of orientalists that were present during the late nineteenth century. Through these schools new and more successful approaches to education were followed in the colonized countries. Colonial administrations started teaching artists of the Arab world history, tradition and approaches to Western art education, and their artistic values.<sup>47</sup> This was clear in the work of the early modern artists in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Algeria and Iraq. After the mid-twentieth century, not only did the West become the model for culture, but its capitals also became the Promised Land, providing the hand that blesses and witnesses the second birth of those who come from the Arab world seeking Western knowledge, art and science.<sup>48</sup> Both the Ottoman Sultans and Mohammed Ali of Egypt had European artists flocking to their courts to paint their portraits. The patrons also commissioned architects and designers to build and decorate their new palaces and public parks in Baroque and Rococo styles. The Dolmabahçe palace is a great example of this transformation in the Islamic patron's tastes. Till today, wealthy Islamic and Arab patrons commission Western architects to design their major projects.

In 1891, Egypt's Ruler, Khedive Ismail, patronized the first modern art exhibition of orientalist painters in Egypt and Arab world.<sup>49</sup> The exhibition was attended by a number of dignitaries who, along with the Khedive, purchased several works. Many Islamic masterpieces were also transferred to European museums and became inaccessible to Arab artists. Newer generations of artists consequently did not have the opportunity to connect with their artistic heritage.<sup>50</sup> Islamic artefacts are stocked in different collections around the world and curators have been working with the question of how to display these collections for the past one hundred years. The concept of displaying Islamic art is a contradiction in itself since Islamic art is an art of practice and not display. In reality, what we know as Islamic

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<sup>47</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Khedive Ismail ruled Egypt between 1863-1879.

<sup>50</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 16.

art objects is that they are art objects of everyday life; in the house, on the plate, on the carpet, on the door, on textiles, in the city, in the mosque, and in the book. To put all that in a museum, one must fence around this life and give it a door.

Islamic art has become a part of history, and for it to come back to life it has to be reformulated. Thus, Islamic art needs a new curatorial formula to be displayed, not necessarily in the Western style of displaying art, which is either by historic progression, or by movements or by artists. These curatorial concepts do not work for Islamic art because the ingredients of Islamic art and its philosophy are very different from Western art. To start with, all of the artists and artisans during what is known as the Islamic civilization periods till today are not researched. And the different elements used in the artworks do not necessarily reflect their patron solely. For example, the Kufic script does not reflect the Umayyads or the Fatimids, or the rulers of Nishapur or Cordoba. The Cordoba Kufic decoration gave a specific aesthetic to Cordoba on certain material but it remained Kufic. There are aspects that are specific to certain periods like the Mamluk Thuluth script, but still it should be labelled as Islamic art in the Mamluk period, not Mamluk art because the same elements were being utilized by other contemporary Islamic dynasties.

Sayegh proposes a possible solution to the problem of displaying Islamic art. He does not think most museum collections have solved the problem of reading and understanding Islamic art, either by placing the objects in chronological order nor simply by grouping together artefacts of the different mediums, like wood, glass, marble, etc. because the way it is displayed does not reflect its essence and its philosophy. He is concerned with the representation of Islamic art as a tool for education and knowledge; ultimately this is what museums are for. And if these tools still have no understanding of the philosophy of the art, how can they reflect its true essence and thus display it in such a way that the world can study and understand it. He expresses his dissatisfaction with the way museums are displaying Islamic art, saying:

It [Islamic art] is a unifying abstraction that equates all forms of existence; to make them one in the face of the unknown, if *al-ghaib* [the absent or hidden]



is one, then the present should be one too. If we are to unify the present we have to look at its soul and not at its image.<sup>51</sup>

A solution could be to bring the classical tradition of Islamic art back into the public space. Sayegh proposes the mosque as a museum, because, as a religious symbol and building, it contains all the types of styles and techniques that Islamic art has known since its inception.<sup>52</sup> Thus a revival in the use of these already-existing buildings for display of the arts is called for. This is also a call to bring the art closer to the people, to make it present and available even if that means in a religious setting. The virtual world, with its online museums, has brought Sayegh's wish closer to life. He summarizes his philosophy by saying, "The real museum for Islamic art is life itself."<sup>53</sup> Sayegh calls for a look at Islamic art not merely as a religious by-product but as the summary of the philosophy of a civilization. With all the economic and social difficulties that face it, the Arab world still has a long way to go before it can build sustainable cultural spaces that can cater to the four hundred and twenty million people inhabiting it.

But even in the digital spheres Islamic art history is still not well represented if compared to other Western historic disciplines in spite of a number of commendable efforts.<sup>54</sup> Hussein Keshani suggests that future Islamic art historians are less well positioned than scholars of European, American and East Asian art to benefit from the developments taking place in digital technological advances. He clarifies that "the efforts of Islamic art historians and the broader field of Islamic studies to date pale in comparison with other fields in terms of the scale of the efforts, the use of computational analytics, the deployment of the most advanced

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<sup>51</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 413.

<sup>52</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 407.

<sup>53</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 414.

<sup>54</sup> Examples of Islamic art online platforms are Archnet, the Shahnama project, the Prince Sultan Ibn Salman Islamic Architectural Heritage Database of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), the Chester Beatty Library Seals Project, segments of the ARTstor database, and the Discover Islamic Art database of the collective enterprise Museum With No Frontiers, as well as the efforts of various museums and national libraries in Europe and North America

technologies, and the digital infrastructures being built.”<sup>55</sup> He concludes that the historiographical challenge that Islamic art historians face is not simply to consider and employ new theoretical structures, but to analyse and participate in the design and development of scholarly digital infrastructures, databases and analytical instruments specifically geared to the interests of Islamic art historians, while confronting the field's archival legacies.

The Arab world has long suffered from scarcity of critical and theoretical publications about the subject matter of the arts of the region. This is owing to many factors, beginning with the fact that creativity and art education were never given priority in elementary and secondary schools, while universities lack programs that teach art theory. The result is a scarcity of publications and well-trained curators who can document and analyse the work produced by artists. The other problem is the limited number of professional spaces that can host art and artists such as galleries, exhibitions or museums. The latter problem has seen a slight improvement in the past ten years, but without the proper human resources, such spaces will remain empty buildings unable to attract audiences. Solid institutions that can foster culture and cultural activities are much needed all over the Arab world.

Museums should be playing a more robust role in collaboration with educational institutions to foster arts education and creativity in Arab societies. Unfortunately, these same museums suffer from a lack of funding, sometimes because they exist in impoverished societies with no resources to support the arts. The hope falls on the new, emerging Arab economies that are promising to support the arts in the region. The biggest challenge they will face is preparing and showcasing talent that is relevant to their societies and that engages audiences in a quest towards a contemporary Arab identity. Students should be exposed at an early age to creative thinking and the appreciation of culture so they will become the generation that will grow-up to change society's perception of cultural identity. Without an audience for the arts there will be no art; there will only be an art market.

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<sup>55</sup> Hussein Keshani, "Towards digital Islamic art history." *Art Historiography Blog*. <<http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/keshani.pdf>> 6-HK/1, (last checked January 2016).

Since the West became the main reference for the arts it is understandable that artists would flock to study there. But even with these waves of knowledge seekers who studied in the West, Arab artists always came back with out-of-context artistic influences. The schools where these students were studying were not a reflection of the conceptual struggles that their societies were facing. They were possibly avant-garde and possibly speaking an international language that these students' societies were not ready for. In her article on the topic of *The Hurufiyah Art Movement in Middle Eastern Art* Nadia Mavrakis draws parallels between the calligraphic abstraction work produced by modern Arab artists like Madiha Omar, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, and their Western counterparts like Cubist painter Georges Braque, Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Bruce Nauman, and Paul Klee.<sup>56</sup> But she also states that though Western art is often credited for the *Hurufiyah* abstraction, it was also just a further abstraction of traditional Arabic calligraphy. She settles that as countries in the Arab world “gained independence from colonial rule in the early to mid twentieth century, they faced a growing tension: the need to understand and express their cultural identity while at the same time reconcile Western values and norms that had been imposed upon them. In the visual arts, the *Hurufiyah* movement resolved this tension by incorporating Arabic text into art pieces while still retaining many of the Western art forms that had been learned.”<sup>57</sup> Other than coming back home with modern ideas on art, some might argue that Arab artists accepted modern Western aesthetics in a creative manner only after it turned its back on naturalism and the realistic approach to art; in other words, that it was acceptable because it did not conflict with an attitude ingrained in the Arab/Muslim consciousness. Shabout states that this was not the case. The artistic experience of the first half of the twentieth century had altered the initial public refusal of naturalistic art into a tradition where – similar to the European experience – modern non-representational art trends were now rejected by the public and denounced as meaningless, static, and devoid of talent. This attitude was

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<sup>56</sup> Nadia Mavrakis, “The Hurufiyah Art Movement in the Middle East.” *McGill Journal of Middle East Studies Blog*. <https://mjmes.wordpress.com/2013/03/08/article-5/> (last checked January 2016).

<sup>57</sup> Mavrakis, “The Hurufiyah Art Movement in the Middle East”.

encouraged by the bourgeois ruling classes, which made the Arab artists' transition to abstract art more difficult.<sup>58</sup>

To some historians the steps that abstract modern Arab art took to join the international art circles was by copying the arts of the "Renaissance" in the nineteenth century. They assume that it was an attempt to "open up to the West" and regain their modern Arab identity. This is repeated in the mid-twentieth century, when Arab modern art movements tried to develop their expression of the modern art world from the viewpoint of independence. Thus the criticism is that the development of the modern art movement was not a natural artistic growth, meaning it did not spring from the problems of its locality. That is why some consider that the modern Arab art movement, in the past one hundred years, could not find a visual language that expanded to become popular. It also failed to create a language that allows communication between the artist and his audience or between the artwork and the encounter with that work. Thereby it is argued that the role of the artist as agent of change and influence in their society was and still is non-existent.<sup>59</sup> You just need to look at the crowds that flock to the opening of major art exhibitions in the West and draw comparisons with any art opening in the Arab world and how society relates to it. Art in the Arab world never became mainstream because it sometimes did not spring from its locality; it also never had the infrastructure that art enjoys in Western society. It was sometimes imported in its expression and thus alien to the society. The people in the Arab world could not relate to it because it did not reflect their identity.

We can argue that modern Arab artists were actually in a direct conversation with global trends, a testament to that are the two exhibitions on the Egyptian Surrealist movement in 2016 in Cairo and Paris respectively.<sup>60</sup> What these exhibitions proved is that artists in the Arab world were at par in conversation with their international contemporaries and not mere copies of Western discourses. As

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<sup>58</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> 'When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)', held at Cairo's Palace of Arts in 10-2016 and organized by Sharjah Art Foundation, focused on "The evolution of the Egyptian Surrealist group," and documented "modernism in Egypt from the late 1930s to the early 1960s." The second, 'Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)', at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

historians and curators in the Arab world are still re-writing art history in the region, it is becoming clearer that conversations on the contextualization of the work produced by artists of Arab modernity needs to be revisited. The course of modern art history is being redirected and decentralized from its current European and Western stand. And this is not only happening with Arab art, but also for art in Africa, and other previously colonized cultures.

Shabout confirms that the rise of modern Arab art is not a continuation of Islamic art or cultural heritage because Arab artists have been disconnected from their past due to colonization. Artists studied art techniques of the West under European teachers, not under guild masters that were practicing Islamic art previously in the region. This pushed artists to start thinking about their art practices as forms of expression and to develop new forms of expression to represent their identity by utilizing modern means of expression. Thus Arab artistic expressions become the result of local creativity, which is subject to its own conditioning and values.<sup>61</sup> Still, there has been an essential change in attitude toward the arts. The attitude held during the Islamic period is no longer viable. It is the difference between the art produced by an intellectually rich and thriving society and that of a colonized mentality struggling to exist. Whether this was the result of an intellectual need or was imposed by western influences is a matter of debate. Islamic aesthetics responded to an Islamic religious philosophy while modern Arab aesthetics responded to Arab national secularized ideas. Many of the artistic experiments and artists were actually trying to breakaway from religion and tradition in an attempt to create a new modern Arab identity. Thus Arab artists created a new visual language as an expression of their ideas, emotions, and visions that were generated by contemporary Arab cultures. After interviewing several artists on their work during this period, it is clear that there is an overall sense of loss.<sup>62</sup> It is evident that the hopes they had for the creation of this new identity were not successful for all of them. This is understandable since the artists in Syria are currently facing the horrors

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<sup>61</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> I interviewed several artists in the past year about their careers these include: Mouneer Elshaarani, Youssef Abdelke, Nja Mahdaoui, May Muzaffar (wife of the late Rafa al-Nasiri), Shalabiya Ibrahim (wife of the late Nazir Naba).

of war and displacement, a situation that Palestinians, Lebanese, and Iraqi artists have experienced before them. Before the recent political turmoil, the region had never witnessed a peaceful existence since colonization. In the post-colonial Arab world there has always been a region with political instability for one reason or another till today. This is the main reason why modern and contemporary Arab art is not a continuation of Islamic art traditions, but an interpretation of a newfound reality.

Still, one could argue, even though these artists are trying to reflect their immediate reality and human experience in their artistic expression, they are still disconnected from their history also because of the lack of written sources or documentation of any artistic processes. They are indeed still receiving their recognition by and from the West. Thus they are largely isolated from their social context, and consequently their future. Fine arts still belong to the elite, which considers the West as the centre of creativity and innovation, while the masses decorate their houses with cheap reproductions of Islamic artefacts, which have now become part of folk tradition. In this way, Islamic art becomes associated with the lower classes and kitsch, while modern art is associated with the Western educated select. The public expects art to resemble its needs, not to surpass reality and traditional norms. Translation and modernization of tradition and the collective self should stem from its locality but when its artists are educated by the West and their experiments are based on Western discourse of art, the locality is only represented by an archaic translation manifested by a society that has been disconnected from its past and the result is considered either folkloric or kitsch. Thus, Arabs do not always perceive Arab modern art as a reflection of culture but rather a "counterculture."<sup>63</sup>

But the divide is not merely the one that manifests itself through this social schism. There resides a philosophical and intrinsic difference between Islamic art and that of the West. The source for early major traditions in Western art, whether Greek, Roman or during the Renaissance is realism, tangible and visible, while the source for abstraction in Islamic art is abstract, unrelated to reality and invisible.

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<sup>63</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 46.

Modern abstraction in the form of Abstract Expressionism still confirms the “I” of the artist. The difference is that modern artists reached these ideas after personal endeavours while Islamic art was a representation of a philosophy. Thus modern art abstraction is in close proximity to tangible reality even if it was not copying that reality and abstraction in modern art is an abstraction of reality, unlike Islamic abstraction, which is a representation of the philosophy of the unseen and useable. The creativity in Islamic art reaches its truths regarding the laws and orders of the universe through an order that is applied by the artist, and not by copying nature with its leaves and flowers and trees.<sup>64</sup>

Abstraction in Islamic art is abstract in its essence, because it is a subject derived from purely philosophical and intellectual subjects, or geometry, and it joins, in its logic, the hidden laws of the universe. A concept that modern artists caught on to and developed further to become an international language relevant to humanity at large, because they maintained pure geometry in cases like Mondrian. When leaves and trees are depicted in Islamic art, we are confronted with an inspiration of the pure movement of nature, un-inspired by the reality. Islamic ornamentation stands against nature to follow its hidden order and absolute laws in shape and colour and growth and order. Thus the law of nature is the subject, not nature itself in its different forms.

But there are also parallels between Islamic art and specifically abstract modern art. Sayegh compared theories by Kandinsky such as “art is an internal necessity, but for the outside world for the artists it turns into an ‘impression’ then becomes intuitive and voluntary expression to express this impression,” and he parallels this statement with a statement on Islamic art from *Fihrist ibn al-Nadim*, “calligraphy is spiritual engineering even if expressed with material ‘bodily/human mechanism’ or ‘al-khatt aseel fi al-rouh’ or ‘al-khatt lisan al-yad wa matiyyat al-‘akl’”. He also compares Paul Klee, “[Klee] hears what cannot be heard by any ear, and sees what cannot be seen by any eye, and feels the growth of plants, and understands the ripples of water,” with al-Ghazali’s statement in “*Ihya ‘loum al-din*”:

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<sup>64</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 177.

Beauty is divided into beauty of the image that is obvious to the mind's eye and the internal beauty that is perceived in the heart's eye and the enlightened vision. Boys and animals realize the first, and the second is only perceived by '*arbab al-quloub*', and those who only know the surface of life do not share that. To the one who sees the beauty of engraving and building, its internal beauty is revealed that leads the seer to knowledge and ability.<sup>65</sup>

Toni Maraini argues that while modern art found its beginnings in the West, it is not uniquely Western. Maraini's argument highlights the fact that the rise of modern art was influenced by other artistic traditions that predicted, the progress of its forms, including that of Islamic art, without which it would not have found its direction. Many European artists - Monet, Degas, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, and Klee - have discovered and adopted techniques from other cultures like African masks, Chinese calligraphy, Japanese prints, Arabesques and other motifs - without losing their Western natures. Thus those who accuse Arab art of being a by-product of Western art share the Western conception of an unchanging tradition and primitive purity.<sup>66</sup>

A growing number of Arab art historians and artists are stressing the influence of Islamic art on modern Western art. Syrian art historian Afif Bahnassi has stated that modern abstract art of the twentieth century, "is not the art of Europe, but the art of the European crisis." He cites numerous examples to demonstrate the influence of Islamic art on modern Western movement, such as the spirituality of Islamic art and Sufism on Matisse, who admitted that "inspiration always came to me from the East." Or Picasso, who was born in Spanish Malaga, which was under Islamic rule for eight centuries. According to Bahnassi, Matisse's arabesque-inspired work announced the return of Islamic art; his art should serve as the model for Arab artists who desire to renew and authenticate their art in the twentieth century.<sup>67</sup>

The influence Islamic art had on Modern art is clear in the work of the above mentioned artists but Sayegh argues that to compare modern abstract art and

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<sup>65</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 120.

<sup>66</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> Bahnassi, *The Avant-Garde Artists of Modern Art*, 50.



Islamic art is in itself a superficial endeavour. Even if we compare the aesthetics of traditional art and that of modern art we discover that similarities are only in the broad headlines –there being a wide and significant contrast between the two aesthetics in their targets, philosophy and logic. The first difference is in regards to the philosophy of colour. While modern painting considers colour an independent expressive entity, in traditional Islamic art colour remains a tool that the artist uses as one of the expressive elements, not being independent as a language or emotion or idea.<sup>68</sup> Secondly, modern abstract art was not able to create one existence out of two, the image of the self and reality, while Islamic art was able to do this, because when it eliminated the concept of the other it also eliminated itself. Islamic art is a witness to the greatness of the creator, thus artists are able to combine two existences in one; Sayegh wonders if it is not better to call Islamic art “unifying art” (“*fann tawhid*”), rather than abstract.

In Islam, the art of calligraphy first arose in the Quran and on religious buildings, after which the practice of worship and laws of ablution and prayer pushed the roles of Islamic art to appear on carpets, *minbars*, *mihirabs*, *minarets*, *mishqats*, candlesticks, Quran holders, and astrolabes pointing to the direction of Mecca. At the same time, the design of these tools did not stop at their utility, but quickly and from the beginning, turned into an art form through calligraphy and ornamentation.<sup>69</sup> Islamic art was intertwined with everyday life in its most basic necessities and rituals. Islamic abstraction is a cultural, intellectual, and communal expression of faith, its main goal being to reflect Islamic philosophy. However, this does not mean that there were no representational art forms created at the time, as many historical examples testify.<sup>70</sup>

Abstract Islamic art does not describe and does not tell; it does not rally nor condone; it does not flatter and does not document.<sup>71</sup> It is an art that does not get angry, nor fight nor express. It is an art of declaration not an art of expression; it does not ask questions—it is the answer not the question. It does not suffer and does not seek, being an art of principle not of the individual. It is an art that

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<sup>68</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 122.

<sup>69</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 14.

<sup>71</sup> This does not include miniature manuscripts that are narrative and descriptive in their nature.

surpasses the “I” of the individual, and the “I” of the artist to raise the truth, to place the maker at the centre of the universe and the unknown as the point of departure, around which is the circulation and the return.

The main difference between Islamic art and Western art lies in its vision of ways to understand the meaning of art and the role of the artist, as well as in its philosophy about the meaning of the Human and existence. Islamic art is communal and utilitarian while Western art is individual and expressive. So Western philosophy sees the universe in an individual while Islamic philosophy sees the individual as a cell in the universe. One considers art as an expression and documentation of human struggle with nature, with life and death, with the other, and with the self, while the other considers it a testament to the unity of humanity and nature, of life and death, between the self and the other, perceived as multiple manifestations of one truth and one order.<sup>72</sup>

Modern Arab art clearly has partial roots in Western artistic traditions. Arabs' modern, secularized conception of the world caused a further estrangement in the process of artistic creativity, which prompted a change in aesthetics from Islamic to Arabic. But modern Arab artists have been colonized and were consumed with a feeling of inferiority, unlike their ancestors a few centuries ago who were in a position of power and only accepted what was in harmony with their way of life. Thus, modern Arab artists did not have the luxury of being selective, particularly since they were beginning the process of shaping their own identity following liberation, a time of uncertainty and reassessment of culture, history, and tradition. It has been argued that learning and imitating Western art was a necessary step to compensate for the lack of artistic creativity Arab artists faced and a means of liberating themselves from a restrictive, stagnant tradition.<sup>73</sup> According to Liliane Karnouk, Western aesthetics helped Arab artists bypass their ethnicity, particularly after embracing the idea of nationality.<sup>74</sup> Once Arab artists had accomplished a certain degree of comfort with respect to the new media and language of Western

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<sup>72</sup> Walid Mohsen, “Al- fann roiya moutakamila lil woujoud” *Sabah alKheir* edition 810. (Syria: 16/11/1991). [http://maaber-new.com/nineth\\_issue/art\\_3.htm](http://maaber-new.com/nineth_issue/art_3.htm) (last checked July 2014)

<sup>73</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910-2003*. Rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press), 2005.

art and had attained a sense of individual freedom, they started realizing the shortcomings of their own artistic expression and attempted to search for an art that could better represent their postcolonial reality. This realization “led them to modern art which, in turn, forced them to recognize their own artistic inheritance offering them a modern model of nonrepresentational art by means of which they might reconcile their present with their past.”<sup>75</sup>

Cultures always build on the ones present around them or the ones that have preceded them, and just as the early Muslim artists were inspired by the art of the Byzantine and the Sassanian, modern Arab artists appropriated the forms and techniques of the West and freely adopted what they needed to suit their lives that had changed from religious to secular. They embraced what they needed to suit their new vision of the world without any restrictions from ancient pre-Islamic civilizations and Islamic art as from Western art.<sup>76</sup> Arabic calligraphy was just another one of the elements and the visual vocabulary that modern Arab artists adapted, but because of its strong link to tradition and religious discourse, it became a very controversial one.

#### *Art as Identity: Artists of Letterist Abstraction*

In the context of decolonization, identity became central to Arab artists in their quest for modernism that is authentic but also global. Two issues stand out in such a quest for identity. The first was to define a national (local or regional) artistic identity through style and content to affect an authentically Arab modernity and artistic modernism. The second was to create a visual vocabulary that is global or universal, but rooted in their own tradition and cultural heritage.<sup>77</sup> This is the crisis between modernity or “*Hadatha*” and tradition or “*asala*.” In the Arab world, historically there has been what Halim Barakat identified in his important work, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and the State*, as “the constant struggle in Arab culture between creativity and conformity, modernity and tradition—what Taha Hussein has called the battle of the old and the new.” As Barakat explains:

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<sup>75</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 35.

<sup>76</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 36.

<sup>77</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 25.

These two opposed currents manifest themselves in much of Arab life, from the religious to the political, from the ideological to the literary aspects of Arab culture. In every period of Arab history, there has been a modernist trend that rejected prevailing traditions and static values. This creative trend aspired to change the world and to create a new mode of thinking as well as new forms of literary expression.<sup>78</sup>

Hassan states that this continuous struggle, and internal process of self-critique, has been largely ignored by mainstream Western scholarship.<sup>79</sup> The focus, as Barakat highlights has been the conventional side of Arab society. The emphasis, as he argued, “has been on conformity rather than creativity, or and on *naql* (traditional-authoritative transmission) rather than *'aql* (reasoning).” Barakat shows how “cultural struggle [has been] an integral part of a larger struggle between the dominant order, which represents the interests and values of affluent classes and groups, and countercultural or revolutionary movements motivated by alternative visions,” a perspective that has been variously advanced by other Arab thinkers such as Adonis [Ali Ahmad Said], Mahmoud Amin Al 'Alim, and Constantin Zureiq. Adonis, the ardent modernist philosopher and poet, similarly insists that modernity is born out of the struggle between *Al Thabit* (the static salafiyya-or religious based order) and *Al Mutahawil* (the dynamic or changing) that he identifies as the desire to transform the static order.<sup>80 81 82</sup> Hassan argues that Arab modernity was not simply imposed externally (although outside vectors are certainly salient), but also emerged historically out of the interactions between these two trends.<sup>83</sup> Such tensions have been the mainspring in all aspects of creativity in the Arab and Islamic cultural production of the last two centuries. They have been at the heart of many modernist

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<sup>78</sup> Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and the State*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 197.

<sup>79</sup> Hassan, “Contemporary “Islamic” Art.”

<sup>80</sup> Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), *al-Thabit wal-Mutahawwil: Bahth fi al-ittiba 'wa-al-ibda' 'ind al-'arab* [The Permanent and the Changing: A Study of Arab Conformity and Creativity, 3 Volumes]. (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1977).

<sup>81</sup> Mahmoud Amin Al 'Alim, *Consciousness and False Consciousness in the Arabs' Way of Thought Today*. (Cairo: Dar ath-thaqafa al-Gadida, 1988).

<sup>82</sup> Constantine Zurayk, “Cultural Change and the Transformation of Arab Society.” Michael C. Hudson, ed., *The Arab Future: Critical Issues*. (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1979).

<sup>83</sup> Hassan, “Contemporary “Islamic” Art.”

movements in literature and in the visual arts (although such tensions, as Iftikhar Dadi (2010, pp. 33-34) has argued, are relatively better theorized in literature – poetry included–than in the visual arts).<sup>84</sup>

As a result of the political and sociocultural changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Arabic script lost its sacredness. In the early decades of the twentieth century the vocabulary and styles of western modern art were the main focus of study by Arab artists, with the Arabic script limited to the realm of traditional craft. Around the middle of the twentieth century, however, the Arabic letter reappeared in Arab art. Shabout argues that its reappearance was purely the result of nationalistic concerns.<sup>85</sup> Blair confirms that in addition to its semantic and aesthetic goals of conveying meaning and form, artists started using calligraphy for socio-political ends.<sup>86</sup> Calligraphic abstraction presented a good solution, allowing reconciliation with a forgotten past. Thus, through modernity the Arab artist started seeking to create a connection between him and the past, especially the artists' past, which slowly began to represent a major symbol of the originality of motivations and ambitions.<sup>87</sup> The main issue now was neither the artistic value of the work nor the tradition of art, but became, instead, “identity,” with the past as the source of that identity.<sup>88</sup> That is when artists started using Arabic letters in their paintings.

The “one dimension” group in Iraq was one of the earliest groups to present a bold discourse in terms of addressing the artistic problems in a calligraphic abstraction style. Their name “one dimension” reflects an attribute of traditional arts because it stops trying to represent nature with its various dimensions. All of the artistic experiments that raised the slogan of tradition were responding to political expectations, not artistic ones. Going back to tradition and identity is a political ambition that passed through the Arab world towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, opening up to the victorious West should be done in such a way that it does not become also subjection to it, but merely justifying separation from the ailing Ottoman Empire. Sudanese artist Osman Wagialla states that, “The idea of

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<sup>84</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*.

<sup>85</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 70.

<sup>86</sup> Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 590.

<sup>87</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 372.

<sup>88</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 30.

moving the art of calligraphy out of the confines of a merely Turkish craftwork to the wide horizon of artistic freedom is something I have fantasized about and [...] have been arguing for from the beginning of the 1940s.”<sup>89</sup>

This situation came to the forefront again after the First and Second World Wars, as the contradictions of colonization and progressive thought were made visible. Thus the European civilization could not be both progressive and a colonizer of the Arab countries. The different political, social and national movements that were sweeping the Arab world were actively pursuing characteristics that would ultimately achieve independence. If we look at what was proposed by thinkers, intellectuals and political parties in the nineteen twenties, thirties and forties, we will find the same sentiments and ideas echoed in art and culture in general.<sup>90</sup>

While searching for local and national art styles inspired by tradition, the Arabic letter became the means for connecting the present with the past, a way of Arabizing or localizing Western modern art, as well as a key element in the reinvention of tradition.<sup>91</sup> But, in modern Arab or Western painting that was inspired by the arts of Islam, it is rare to find an artist who was inspired directly by the logic of Arabic calligraphic order, scribed through the letters. What they were inspired by was the Arabic letters, even if these letters formed the painting through the values of colour and space and void that was called for by the modern painting. Arabic letters, or the artists' elements inspired by tradition, were elements connoting identity more than the aesthetic qualities that these elements carried in the traditional arts. Arabic words and letters became elements that differentiated Arabic painting from Western, but the painting in terms of role, message and presence was still modernist in essence. Modern Arab artists made a distinction between calligraphy as an abstracted art form, and calligraphy as an artistic tool that has a basic utility in delivering a meaningful language. Thus Arabic letters in modern painting do not connect to form words or meaningful sentences; they meet and distribute as letters that are just forms or lines or spaces or colours or sizes, elements that modern painting has labelled as the synonyms of a new artistic

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<sup>89</sup> Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity*, 30.

<sup>90</sup> Mohsen, "Al- fann roiya moutakamila lil woujoud."

<sup>91</sup> Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 75.

language.<sup>92</sup> For the calligraphic abstraction artists, the Arabic letter gave an identity to their paintings. But in Sayegh's view this was a bad marriage because it contained entities that were in contrast with one other. The Arabic script is a freestanding art form in itself. It is based on length and curves that unite and create a visual language that is filled with symbols; it should not be used as an element or other value reporting to the laws of modern abstraction because its laws are intrinsically different.<sup>93</sup> In the larger group of artists, it cannot be denied that many of them used letterist abstraction as a reflection of their identity. Whether their work was based on Arabic calligraphy or Arabic writing, they used the Arabic letter as a main ingredient in their artwork.

There is no consensus on what to call artists who utilize the Arabic script as a dynamic element in their compositions. We have opted in this research to adopt the expression letterist abstraction. Dadi and Hassan's use the term calligraphic abstraction to comprehend the complex dimension of Calligraphism as a movement. According to Hassan, in the search for a better label to historicize the experiments using the Arabic script in modernism, "calligraphic abstraction" proves to be a far more appropriate designation. As a term, the "juxtaposition of calligraphy and abstraction proves to be much more encompassing of such a diverse and multifaceted movement, and its multifarious intersections with western and transnational modernism."<sup>94</sup> But calligraphic abstraction does not include the script that is not calligraphed, thus letterist abstraction is more encompassing. We have to discuss the history of critics who had previously attempted to label this movement so that we can justify this choice.

Calligraphism or calligraphic abstractions must be understood within a larger modernist search for a new visual language that emerged in the context of decolonization in the Arab world, rooted in Islamic discursive traditions. Decolonization helped the development of a distinct postcolonial modernism in the post-World War II era, which resulted in changes in forms of visual artistic expressions. Such "new" art forms were certainly the result of a process of

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<sup>92</sup> Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 375-6.

<sup>93</sup> Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahya Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo, January 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Hassan, "When Identity Becomes Form" in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, 2016, 221-225.

hybridization that shaped them in terms of media and material, technique, personal, and cultural identity.<sup>95</sup> To Hassan, since the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century numerous African and Arab modernist artists have already crossed geographic and cultural boundaries and moved beyond national identities to express themselves in a more transnational visual language integrating a diverse range of motifs, images and objects. Although nationalism remains fundamental to any analysis of post-war art in the context of decolonization in North Africa and the Arab world, the presence of Arabic literacy, in addition to a developed body of art and literary criticism, facilitated forms of Pan-Arabism and Pan Islamism in the modern visual arts. According to Hassan, in North Africa and the larger Arab world, this has been strengthened by the occurrence of a “diglossia” specific to Arabic language, namely the co-existence of two forms; the standardized “high” version known as Modern Arabic which is used across the Arab world in education, mass media and press, and the various vernaculars specific to regions and countries. Consequently, Modern Standard Arabic further helped the transmission of artistic and literary ideas across the Arabic and Islamic worlds in North Africa and the Middle East. In a visual sense, Hassan’s idea of Arabic “diglossia” in language can also be seen in the written words. Just as there is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) there is calligraphy, and similarly just as there is different dialects there is handwriting. Both MSA and calligraphy follow set rules and are considered formal forms of communication. In the same sense regional dialects are just as expressive as personal handwriting. The Arabic language used in the Quran is considered sacred, but it was also used in poetry on walls of palaces and everyday items. This is why calligraphic abstraction does not fully represent the movement; letterist abstraction is more encompassing of the different styles developed.

As the vehicle of the Quran, the Arabic language is viewed as sacred, but considering the fundamental role calligraphy has played in the aesthetic and style of classic “Islamic” art such as non-religious poetic verses on the walls of palaces and

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<sup>95</sup> A. Alexander, and M. Sharma, “(Pre)determined Occupations: The Post-Colonial Hybridizing of Identity and Art Forms in Third World Spaces.” *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* 33. 2013, 86-104.



on everyday items not intended for sacral use, this tradition did not necessarily predict modernist experimentation with the Arabic letter.

In the context of the Arab and larger Islamic world (North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia) letterist abstraction has evolved into a complex set of artistic practices especially during the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>96</sup> Artists such as Ibrahim El Salahi, Ahmed Shibrain, and Osman Wagialla in Sudan, like their pioneering counterparts elsewhere such as Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id in Iraq, and Nja Mahdaoui in Tunisia, Pervez Tanavoli in Iran, Sadequain in Pakistan, all have reworked Arabic calligraphic motifs in modernist forms that “defied any literal meaning or simple interpretation.” Such experimentation continues among contemporary artists such as the Algerian Rachid Koraichi, the Iraqi Dia Al Azzawi, and the Lebanese Samir Sayegh who have developed a more conceptual approach to letterist abstraction.

As Iftikhar Dadi argued in the context of Muslim South Asia, the imbrication of modernist calligraphy with post-cubist art represents a broad artistic movement, which can be understood in a variety of ways.<sup>97</sup> In the work of the above-mentioned artists, such abstraction and figuration could be interpreted as renewal of a traditional artistic form in a modernist fashion. It could also be seen as a vehicle of individual expression and a new subjectivity, as the fostering of a renewed sense of nationalist pride, or as in the case of El Salahi, and Shibrain, as a critical engagement with Western modernism.

By way of concluding, there is no doubt that letterist abstraction was intricately linked to the Western avant-garde tradition, which was significant in the revival of calligraphy in the context of a postcolonial modernism. Western avant-garde modernists movements such as cubism, surrealism, European letterism and Art Brut among others have proven to be more engaging for non-Western artist in the context of mid 20<sup>th</sup> century than older realist and academic schools of painting in Europe. However, this does not make letterist abstraction as pursued in the context of decolonization in the Arab and Islamic world merely a derivative of the Western notion of being modern. Decolonization presented a challenge for Arab modernists,

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<sup>96</sup> Okwui Enwezor, [Katy Siegel, and](#) Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Postwar Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*. Prestel, 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*.

Dadi, “Ibrahim El Salahi: Calligraphic Modernism in Comparative Perspectives.” 555.

and hence, the urgent task of engaging in a process of recovery and revival of expressive visual practices suppressed under and/or interrupted by colonization was necessary.

Consequently, nationalism has offered one crucial avenue in the practice of letterist abstraction as a form. Letterist abstraction is also a transnational aesthetic form that has been shared across the region. This becomes acutely important when we consider the fact of diaspora and mobility in the life and work of artists such as Madiha Omar, Shakir Hassan AlSaid, Dia Azzawi, El Salahi, Shibrain, Wagiallah and others, whose Western education and the experience of living in the West in the early 1950s challenged them to create a new “transnational modernism, in which forms developed from experiments with calligraphic modes has become fundamental.”<sup>98</sup> In spite of many exhibitions held on the topic in the region and other parts of the world, the single critical and analytical source of study for these movements and their major players remains Charbel Dagher’s *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity* that was published in 1990 and translated and republished recently by Barjeel foundation in 2016. The translation lacks the work of many artists who have contributed to the field in the past two decades.

*Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti* by Merrell Publishers, also published 2016 is an attempt at updating the data and presenting a new vision for understanding calligraphic abstraction artists. It is more curatorial than scholarly in its endeavours and thus does not provide a solution to our dilemma at hand. A better understanding of this form of expression is needed. What exists now also are separate attempts by individual artists who have documented their work in publications such as the volumes about artists Nja Mahdaoui, Rachid Koraïchi and Hassan Massoudy, among others. A general reading of the various movements that started in the mid-1940s and influenced artists during the 1960s and 70s, such as Shakir Hassan al-Said with the *One Dimension* school in Iraq or artists of the Khartoum school in Sudan, is yet to be written. New terminology needs to be invented and a proper analysis is yet to take place. In the next chapter, I will try to suggest a new way to categorize and understand letterist abstraction works. I am

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<sup>98</sup> Hassan, “When Identity Becomes Form” in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, 2016, 221-225.

hoping to present a solution to this two-decade long problem that has been tackled by several critics and historians but that has been never fully resolved. It will place artists' work within the larger frame of the calligraphic abstraction movement and its attempt at creating an alternative modernist representation of Arab identity. My analysis is by no means comprehensive but it will provide an outline that can be followed to categorize any work of calligraphic abstraction based on a new formula that I have devised.