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2006

Word into Art

Artists of the Modern Middle East

THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS

Introduction



1 Qur'an page (detail), brownish-black ink on parchment, probably Iraq, ninth–tenth centuries
H 15.6 cm, W 23.40 cm
British Museum, 2001 6-5 1
The text, inscribed in the angular script known as *kufic*, is from Qur'an Chapter 4, 'Women' (*al-Nisa*), verses 157–61. The red dots were an early device for distinguishing between letters of the same shape; they were also used as an aid to vocalization.

Contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum

In the mid-1980s the British Museum began acquiring contemporary Middle Eastern art (the Middle East in this context also includes North Africa). This was part of a broader initiative across the Museum to return to the guiding principles of its eighteenth-century founders and actively collect contemporary artefacts from around the world (Carey 1991: 6–10). The primary aim for the Middle Eastern collection was to acquire works on paper. This collection, mainly housed in the Department of Asia, now comprises the work of some hundred artists from across the region, from Iran to North Africa. An early decision was to choose work which somehow 'spoke' of the region and showed continuity with 'Islamic' art. Thus works which contained modern examples and interpretations of Arabic calligraphy were initially favoured over more global, generic forms of contemporary art. The emphasis today continues to be on work on paper, although there are also a few works in other media. The collection is constantly growing, the ultimate objective being to create a body of work that is representative, as far as possible, of the whole region. It is significant that a number of the artists whose work is included here no longer reside in their countries of origin, having left the region either temporarily or permanently. It is also striking that, whether inside or outside their homeland, the art they produce shows strong links with their own artistic heritage and history, powerfully demonstrating their reactions to conflict or exile.

Why Word into Art?

In trying to choose a suitable framework within which to exhibit some of the British Museum's collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art, the obvious focus was on works that use script in the broadest sense. This was not simply because the writing takes so many different and interesting forms, but because grouping the works together thematically, and looking at what is written within them, allows us to gain some insight into different aspects of the rich literary and artistic cultures of this region, as well as into the ways in which artists are affected by history and by the politics of the world of today.

In the exhibition the focus has been on Arabic script which, like Hebrew, is powerfully connected to the religions of the region. In addition to works from the British Museum's collection, the exhibition includes a number of objects that have been kindly lent for this purpose. The works are divided into four sections. 'Sacred Script' can be regarded as the starting point. It explains the relationship between the Arabic script and the religion of Islam (fig. 1), showing the enduring vitality of the Arabic calligraphic tradition today. It focuses on artists and calligraphers who use established styles of script (see pp. 20–21) but in contemporary formats, inspired by a belief in God and the holy texts. The powerful literary tradition of the Middle East, the enduring appeal of ancient and modern Arabic and Persian poetry, and the appeal of the work of Sufi writers is evoked in the second section, 'Literature and Art'. It shows how artists seek to find ever more inventive ways of writing these texts. The third section, 'Deconstructing the Word', focuses on the use of script in Middle Eastern abstract art from the mid-twentieth century to the present day. Here the



2 Fu'ad al-Futaih (b. 1948),
The Immigrant, ink on board, 1975
Collection of the artist

During the 1970s young Yemenis left their country, often for years at a time, to work in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States; the remittances they sent back provided for their families. Fu'ad al-Futaih is one of Yemen's most prominent artists and in this work he captures the spirit of optimism of these young men. The Arabic script at the top are lines from a Yemeni poem declaiming that the protagonist will overcome any obstacles he finds on his journey. Of his work al-Futaih has said: 'I want to give Arab or Islamic art a modern face with a strong personality'.

messages are more ambivalent and link with past or present identities in subtle ways, unlike those of the works in the other sections where texts tell specific stories. Letters and words are sometimes legible, but more often they are not, having been turned into beautiful abstract patterns or sometimes hinting at poetry or the magical tradition. The last section, 'Identity, History and Politics', looks at the ways in which the words embedded in these works, when combined with an image, or even books themselves, can provide us with real snapshots of history as well as revealing reactions to the region's devastating conflicts during the past few decades.

The modern art of the Middle East

Placing the work of artists now in a broader context, the end of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a profound divergence of approach and style in the art of the Middle East. On the one hand, throughout much of the region there were the continuing traditions of so-called 'Islamic' art: calligraphers, miniaturists, potters and metalworkers carried on using age-old techniques, sometimes deliberately harking back to former styles – as in Egypt with the nineteenth-century 'Mamluk revival'. On the other hand, a distinctive 'modern' art was emerging in the region. Its creators sometimes used elements of the stylistic vocabulary of 'Islamic' art, but they differed from its traditions in terms of materials, techniques and formats, using lithography or photography, for example. These are specifically associated with Western art traditions and were introduced into the region only from the mid-nineteenth century. As members of emerging national communities, these artists and intellectuals had a clear view of their own identities and increasingly sought to express subjective and political truths through a medium that they themselves had transformed. They created new genres that owed much to international artistic schools of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but were unmistakably informed by views of their own artistic traditions and heritage. They established schools and movements with clear manifestos and they responded powerfully to the politics of their own countries in particular and the region as a whole. This strongly evoked sense of identity, which continues to be evident in the work of many Middle Eastern artists today – as in, for example, the work of Yemeni artist Fu'ad al-Futaih (fig. 2) – is arguably the single most important theme of the art highlighted here and what lends it its extraordinary richness.

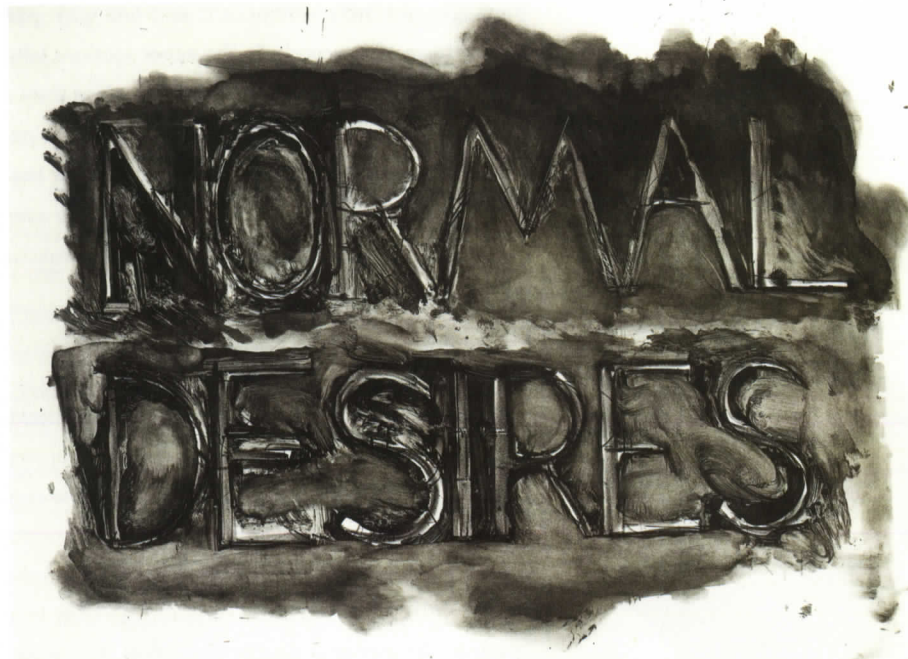
Hurufiyya: the development of an artistic movement

The focus of this exhibition on the use of script in Middle Eastern art is not simply an accident of the British Museum's collection. It captures a powerful thread in the art of the region as a whole, encompassing beautiful calligraphy with its ancient roots, and the random graffiti of other artists. So important is this trend that a special term has been coined for it: *hurufiyya*, after the Arabic word *harf*, meaning 'letter', and alluding to the medieval Islamic scientific study of the occult properties of letters. The Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata (cats 10, 23, 37) describes how he was haunted by the Word and developed a 'talismanic relationship with it', like so many other artists of the region (Boullata 1983).

Words, of course, appear in Western visual art and distinct parallels may be made with Western manifestations. A number of the early generation of Arab artists who studied in Paris would certainly have been exposed to these art forms. At the forefront was the Cubist painter Georges Braque, who placed painted letters within his well-known work

3 Bruce Nauman (b. 1941), *Normal Desires*, lithograph (32/50), 1973
H 61.8 cm, W 89 cm
British Museum, 1979 10-6 22

Nauman was interested in the visual presence of words. Previously using neon signs, in 1973 and 1975 he published a series of lithographs in which statements such as 'Normal Desires' appears as though carved out of stone (Carey and Griffiths 1980: 50, Coppel 1989).

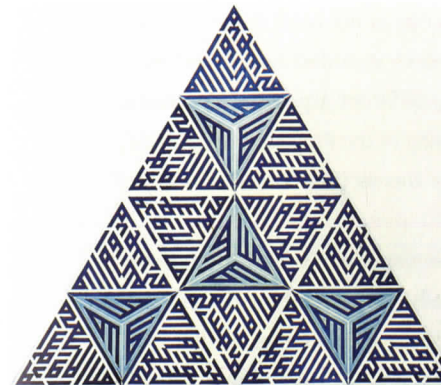


Le Portugais, painted in 1911. Many others, including Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, Juan Miró, Antoni Tàpies – who was a powerful influence on Shakir Hassan al-Said – and contemporary American artist Bruce Nauman (fig. 3), continued to incorporate letters and words in one form or another into their work (Butor 1969, Legrand 1962, Adler and Ernst 1987). Another example is Paul Klee, who painted poems in Latin capital letters within coloured squares in 1917–18. In an interesting reversal, Klee, who visited Tunisia in 1914, was influenced by Arabic script in his work as well. This can be seen, for example, in his *Insula dulcamara*, painted in 1938, in the collection of the Zentrum Paul Klee, Berne.

Hurufiyya is a term that denotes works of art 'which deal with the Arabic language, letter or text, as a visual element of composing' (Daghir 1990: 11, Shabout 1999: 164). Some of the earliest uses of Arabic letter forms in Middle Eastern abstract art – arguably the true beginnings of *hurufiyya* – were deployed by Iraqi artists such as Madiha Omar (d. 2005), who was perhaps the first artist fully to incorporate Arabic letters in her abstract work (cat. 40). Shakir Hassan al-Said (d. 2004) did the same (cat. 41). In his case, this was his practical articulation of a specific philosophy: a brilliant artist and art theorist, and profoundly influenced by the Sufism of Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (c. 858–922), he was one of the towering figures of the modern Iraqi art scene. Drawing on a synthesis of Sufism and Western existentialist philosophy, his increasingly abstract works focused on the inclusion of letters and reflected his view that artistic expression is achieved by stages, similar to the stages that bring you closer to God, as articulated by the Sufi mystics. He believed that 'the Arabic script, in its different forms and schools, reflects and is a reflection of the history of the Arab individual and social reality, which remained stored in the intellectual unconsciousness of culture and society'. He also found that it contained 'the mythological consciousness of Mesopotamian societies and all others that followed. Thus, language and its written form are the means of revealing the hidden' (Shabout 1999: 244). Like other key Iraqi artists of this generation, such as Jawad Selim (d. 1961), his aim was to find ways to create a fusion with their heritage, or *turath*. Although not associated with

4 Issam el-Said (1938–1988), untitled, lithograph, (1980s)
H 78 cm, W 58 cm
Private Collection

Fascinated by the concept of geometric proportion in Islamic art, el-Said embarked on a series of studies based on the structure of Arabic letter shapes. In this triangular composition, in a style based on square *kufic*, he has inscribed the *shahada*, the phrase 'There is no God but God, Muhammad is the prophet of God'. His favourite maxim was apparently: 'As long as the proportions are right, then an object or design has beauty' (el-Said 1989: 47).



using script in his work, Selim – in his iconic monument that still stands in Baghdad today, *nasb al-huriyya* (the Freedom Monument, al-Khalil 1991: 81–93) – conceived his series of bronze figural reliefs as a story that had to be read like the Arabic script, from right to left. Another Iraqi artist, Issam el-Said (d. 1988), who trained at Cambridge as an architect and lived in self-imposed exile from Iraq, was the first artist to explore 'Islamic' design fully and within it the structural forms of the Arabic script (fig. 4; el-Said 1989). The Egyptian artist Ahmed Moustafa also took his inspiration from the structure of the script, going back to the tenth-century work of the calligrapher Ibn Muqla, who is said to have developed the system of proportion of the Arabic script (cats 7, 8). One of the first artists to turn the script into, in essence, word pictures was Moroccan artist Mehdi Qotbi (fig. 5; Guesdon and Nouri 2001: 184). Going beyond the word, Dia al-Azzawi stated, 'I believe in using visual elements in a painting as primary material: Arabic script could be part of it. I do not find that a painting becomes Arabic through the use of the Arabic script. The painting's identity comes from a group of elements, not script or ornaments alone' (Rotterdam 2002).

But can this now ubiquitous use of script be described as a movement? Are the reasons for including script always the same? To what extent does it still consciously connect with Arab/Iranian/Muslim identities, or in some cases with a rejection of Western representational art? A series of studies by Sylvia Naef (1992), Wijdan Ali (1997), Nada Shabout (1999) and others has looked in depth at this subject and only some of these broad questions can be touched upon here. It is interesting to look at the case of Turkey, for example, where the Arabic script was abandoned in favour of the Latin alphabet as part of a raft of modernizing reforms during the Ataturk era. Apart from a few traditional calligraphers continuing the age-old tradition of teaching the script, it rarely appears in abstract or other forms of modern art, reflecting perhaps the secular influences in the artistic life of modern



5 Mehdi Qotbi (b. 1951), *Ecriture*, gouache on paper, 1979
H 70 cm, W 51 cm
Ministère de la culture, FNAC,
Inv. 33569

Moroccan artist Mehdi Qotbi has been living in Paris since the 1970s. He was one of the earliest artists to create abstract pictures out of words which have become devoid of meaning. He works with writers and poets creating *livres d'artistes* as well as paintings.

6 Erol Akyavaş (1932–99), *The glory of the kings*, oil on canvas, 1959
H 122 cm, W 214 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York,
Gift of Mr and Mrs L.M. Angeleski
Trained in Turkey and then Paris with
Lhote and Léger during the 1950s,
Akyavaş espoused European modernism,
later studying in America with architect
Mies Van Der Rohe. This painting, in
which he deconstructed Arabic words,
was exhibited in 1961 at the Angeleski
Gallery in New York where his work was
widely acclaimed. The painting was
acquired by the Museum of Modern Art
in 1961.



Turkey. One of the few Turkish artists to include Arabic script in his work is Erol Akyavaş (d. 1999) (fig. 6; Akyavaş 2000: 39–45), whose early works included Arabic letters in abstract compositions, but who was increasingly inspired by different aspects of the Islamic tradition. This is evident from his *Mi'rajname* (the night journey of the Prophet Muhammad). There is a clear intention to form a bridge with the past, a theme that recurs in works of other artists from the Middle East.

Certain Arab artists also use script to help express their engagement with current political issues: in particular, the growth of anti-colonial nationalist movements and a series of cataclysmic events that have affected the region in significant ways. In Egypt, for example, the regime of King Farouk was overthrown in 1952 by Jamal Abd al-Nasir, whose *Philosophy of the Revolution* (1959) stressed the ethnicity of the Egyptians, their role as Muslims and as Arabs, and the position of Egypt within Africa. This was to affect the course of modern Egyptian art: figural representation was abandoned in the art schools and nudes could no longer be exhibited; there was instead much concentration on geometry and on Arabic calligraphy – in effect, a self-conscious return to 'Islamic' themes.

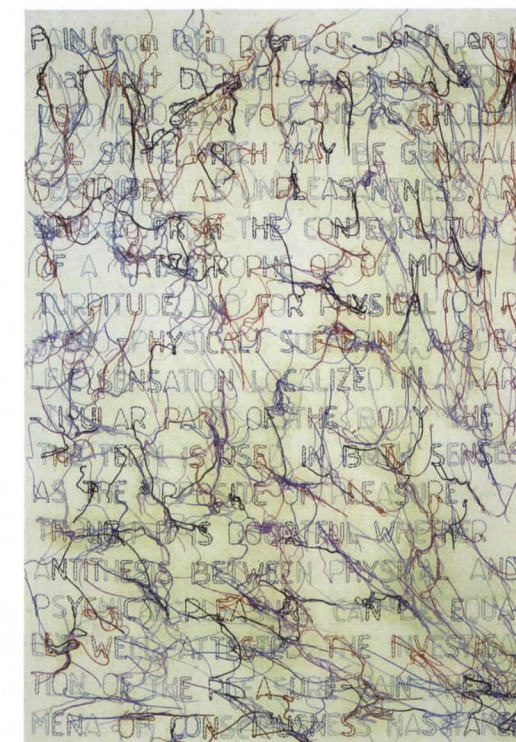
An event that deeply affected the Middle East as a whole was the defeat of the Arab armies by Israel in the June war of 1967. This caused a major re-evaluation of the direction that the Arab world should take, in which artists and intellectuals participated. Poet and critic Buland al-Haidari, writing on the theme of 'Arabness', described artists after 1967 as 'vying with each other in trying to blaze a new trail which would give concrete expression to the longing for Arab unity, and end by giving the Arab world an art of its own' (al-Haidari 1981: 21–2). As a consequence, Arab artists, many of whom had trained in the West or had been exposed to Western art traditions, began to seek inspiration from aspects of their own indigenous culture. The increased use of script by some artists can certainly be seen in the light of this. Wijdan Ali, for example, describes her abandonment of figural representation and the focus on script in her *Kerbala* series as a direct result of the Gulf war of 1991 (Ali 1997: 163) (cat. 56).

In Iran, as perhaps elsewhere, the use of script in modern art was a response to the increasingly ferocious criticism of the abstract tendency among Western-trained artists. Writing in the journal *Sokhan* about the third Tehran Biennial in 1962, the critic Cyrus Zoka called for 'a visual language that would speak specifically to Iranians' (Daftari 2002: 67).

Saqqakhaneh was the result and is the term coined for the artistic movement that began in Iran in the 1960s which not only sought to integrate popular symbols of Shi'a culture in art, but also found new ways of using calligraphy and script – particularly the traditional Iranian styles of *nasta'liq* and *shekaste*. Literally meaning 'water fountain', *Saqqakhaneh* specifically refers to public fountains offering drinking water constructed in honour of Shi'a martyrs who were denied water at Kerbala and in this way alludes to the powerful traditions of Shi'a Islam. Among the key artists in this movement were Parviz Tanavoli (cat. 52) and Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi (cat. 2).

It is not only Arabic script that has been adopted as a medium of expression and turned into art in this region. Israeli artist Michal Rovner has become fascinated by 'notions of text, signal sign, the visual appearance of language; marks that people make, or leave behind' (Rovner 2005: 332). Some of her video installations take the form of books, in which the scripts, which could be Hebrew or Aramaic, are in fact lines of constantly moving people (cat. 61). El Hanani as a Moroccan Jew is inspired by his complex cultural background and is particularly drawn to the minute script used by medieval and later Muslim and Hebrew scribes to write their holy texts (cat. 57). Another interesting phenomenon is the use of Latin script by Middle Eastern artists such as Youssef Nabil occasionally in his photographs (cat. 89) and Ghada Amer in her complex embroidered works (fig. 7), powerfully fusing Western and Eastern traditions.

The works presented here all have many stories to tell. One can detect a deep love for Arabic calligraphy and the art of the book itself, which has a long tradition in the region and is now being dramatically transformed. Obvious, too, is the fascination with the structure of letters across the region; and the words themselves, which invite us to dig deep into the culture of the region. And finally, it is the potent messages contained in these works that cry out and haunt us.



7 Ghada Amer (b. 1963), *Pain*,
embroidery and gel medium on canvas,
(2005)

H 66 cm, W 45.7 cm

Gagosian Gallery

Egyptian-born Ghada Amer lives and works in New York. Her work is characterized by an examination of stereotypical notions of femininity. Embroidery, stitching, and sewing, traditionally identified as 'female' techniques, are the hallmarks of her work. This work is part of a recent series in which Amer has embroidered definitions of 'desire', 'pain', 'torment', 'longing' and 'absence' from a variety of sources, with one word presented on each canvas. Using a commercial machine and stencilled font, Amer embroiders the text directly onto canvas. The loose threads hang from individual words and create an abstract quality to the work.