

The Mysticism of Arabic Calligraphy: A Love Affair between the Reed Pen and Sufism

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Abstract:

The relationship between calligraphy and mysticism has a unique inner dynamic in Islam. Arabic calligraphy has been cultivated for centuries in the context of pious everyday practice of the Sufis and Dervishes. From the symbolic interpretation of the letters to the breathing technique – calligraphy and Sufi mysticism share many similarities. Many Muslim calligraphers were drawn to the spiritual teachings of the Sufis and were often followers of the Sufi Order themselves. The Sufis, on the other hand, found in calligraphy the appropriate artistic expression to visualize their contemplation of the Koranic word and thus to exercise their spirituality.

Due to globalization and open skies we find ourselves standing in front of a major challenge against voices that are claiming that Islamic arts and civilization fell through and they are underdeveloped. Without trying to know the true concept of that art and without studying its influence on the western art and intellect. So we have to confirm the philosophy of the Islamic art through artistic pieces and their influence on pioneers and how they utilize them in such a clear way at the renaissance age through works of orientalists, modern art schools and some artists who were affected by it such as (Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, Bulkeley, Mondrian, Vasarely) who are considered the most iconic western artists in the modern age. Then the identity of artists might be assured in the age of globalization and the 21st century which might have an impact on the western conception of Islam and Islamic arts.

We find out that the research problem is at many elements:

The lack of confirmation of the Islamic identity for western artists at the modern age, such as (Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, Bulkeley, Mondrian, Vasarely).

Assuring the special elements and characteristics of Islamic arts and their influence on renaissance and orientalism.

The research aim:

Realizing the concept of Islamic arts and their impact on the west during the age of globalization and the 21st century.

In order to achieve that we have to know:

What is Islamic art?

the special characteristics of Islamic arts.

The influence of Islamic arts on renaissance, modern schools and orientalism.

The elements of Islamic, Arabic art in (Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, Bulkeley, Mondrian, Vasarely) artistic pieces.

Keywords:

Mysticism, Calligraphy, Sufism, Revelation, Spirituality, Hermeneutics, Aesthetics.

• **Revelation, Script, and Aesthetics**

Islam is, like no other religion, shaped by the written word. Therefore, it is rightly called a “Religion of Scripture and the Book”. For many devout Muslims, the Arabic script is to this day sacred: It is the script of revelation and as such sacred and inimitable. The Qur’an as the Divine speech is for Muslims the most sublime of all things.

With the textualization of the Qur’an the need arose to do justice to the sublime language and to reflect its sacred and aesthetic character in the script. From this desire and the need to mirror the perfection and the aesthetics of the Divine language in equally perfect and aesthetic writing, magnificent Qur’an editions were written over the centuries. According to a prophetic saying, the one who writes the basmala in a particularly beautiful way will be blessed by God abundantly.

• **The Origin and Significance of Arabic Calligraphy**

Writing the Qur’an beautifully became a religious duty in Islam. And so, the Arabic calligraphy emerged: the art of beautiful writing which reached “a unique expressiveness in the Islamic world”. The emergence of Arabic calligraphy is therefore inseparable from the Islamic religion. It is the origin of Islamic art and an aesthetic response of the human soul to the Divine message. Seyyed Hossein Nasr states: “In the same way that the psalmody of the Noble Quran as the sonoral sacred art of Islam par excellence is the origin of the traditional sonoral arts, so is the art of calligraphy, which reflects on the earthly plane the writing of His Word upon the Guarded Tablet, the origin of the plastic arts. Quranic calligraphy issues at once from the Islamic revelation and represents the response of the soul of the Islamic peoples to the Divine Message [...] In as much as there resides a Divine Presence in the text of the Quran, calligraphy as the visible embodiment of the Divine Word aids the Muslim in penetrating and being penetrated by that Presence in accordance with the spiritual capabilities of each person”.

Arabic penmanship was used to preserve and transmit the Qur’an in writing. And even though Islamic art is diverse, calligraphy remains its pride as manifestation of the Divine word. Arabic calligraphy is the most representative element of Islamic art. “The art of Arabic writing is, by definition, the most Arab of all the plastic arts of Islam. It belongs nevertheless to the entire Islamic world, and is even considered to be the most noble of the arts, because it gives visible form to the revealed word of the Koran”. To this day, due to the synthesis between aesthetic complexity and spiritual sovereignty, Arabic calligraphy has retained its significance within Islamic culture. The essential characteristic of Arabic calligraphy is found in the connection between beauty and holiness, between aesthetics and spirituality.

• **Mystical Hermeneutics and the Symbolism of Letters**

The relationship between calligraphy and mysticism has a unique inner dynamic. Muslim mystics, the Sufis were the first to reveal the deeper meaning of calligraphy by approaching its essence and nature through contemplation and meditation. According to mystics, the revealed scripture holds a secret knowledge of letters and their numeric value which can lead among other things to “mystical interpretation of names, terms and a cosmological reference system”. The idea that every letter in a given language venerates God, encouraged the early mystics to interpret the Arabic letters in almost infinite variations and in doing so reveal new meanings. For many mystics “the contraction and expansion of the letter testify to the vibrancy of the creative text.” Muslim mystics held the view that there is no letter that does not praise God, and

therefore they constantly tried to gain deeper understanding in interpreting the word of God correctly and soundfully. The Sufis further assert that the Arabic letters represent the mystery of the Divine that has been entrusted to man.

But the hermeneutic method of ta'wīl is used by Sufis not only for the interpretation of individual verses of the Qur'an but also for the symbolic interpretation of each letter of the Arabic alphabet. In this context, the letter alif holds a key position in both calligraphy and mystical hermeneutics. For the mystic, the straightness of the alif symbolizes either the Divine unity (aḥad) or the mystical union with him ('ayn al-jam'): "Alif is the letter of the aḥadiyya, the unity and uniqueness, and also the letter of transcendence." Sufi poet and martyr Abū Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj regards the alif as the "initiatic" letter par excellence. And the mystic Sahl al-Tustarī sees it as a connection to God. Alif is also often compared to Adam; as Adam is an archetype of humanity, alif is the origin of all letters. According to al-Tustarī, the letter alif contains all creation as it refers to God (Allah) who connects all things (allafa) – and yet transcends them. As defined in mystical interpretation of the Arabic alphabet, the letter bā' refers to bahā'-Allāh ("Divine glory"), sīn to sanā'-Allāh ("Divine majesty") and mīm to mamlakatu-llāh (Divine reign).

A typical hermeneutic approach of Muslim mystics is also to seek deeper meanings in the letters of those words that describe mystical states (aḥwāl) and stations (maqāmāt). One of the first Muslim mystics who sought deeper meanings and symbolic interpretation of individual letters of certain names or terms was the aforementioned Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj. The famous master from Baghdad, 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī also interprets the individual letters of the term taṣawwuf ("Sufism") in this light. Each of these words stands for a specific spiritual "state" or "station": tā' for tawba ("repentance" or "conversion"), sāḍ for ṣafā' ("integrity" or "purity"), wāw for wilāya ("holiness" or "friendship with God") and fā' for fanā' fī-llāh ("passing away", "annihilation" or "union with God").

• Arabic Calligraphy and Islamic Mysticism

The hermeneutic approach of the Muslim mystics to constantly gain new understandings of the meanings of the individual letters found its most creative expression in Arabic calligraphy. Annemarie Schimmel rightly notes that seeing the Divine in the form of a letter is characteristic for a religion that "forbids figural representation – and above all any representation of the Divine". Thus, the letter itself becomes a subtle "manifestation of the Divine" in the Islamic mystical tradition.

Arabic calligraphy has been cultivated for centuries in the settings of pious daily practice of Sufis and Dervishes. In the later years of classical Islam (12th century), Muslim calligraphers drew figures and patterns which depicted Qur'anic verses and mystical statements in a beautiful and subtle form. And due to its contemplative-aesthetic character, calligraphy also represents an "initiatic" way of getting closer to the Divine. It is not only an artistic skill and an aesthetic experience, but also a spiritual exercise and metaphysical experience. It is a method of contemplating the Qur'an and thus the inner ascension of man to God. "It serves as an important spiritual exercise of concentration on the mystical path whereby the musical rhythm of the elegant swings of the letters reflect the inner transformation process of the Sufi. Just like an alif the praying mystic stands before God and the path of the soul to the Almighty is straightened in the same way".

One thing can be said without doubt: in no other area of Islamic art are aesthetics and mysticism as closely linked as in Arabic calligraphy. There is a fundamental interrelation between calligraphic writing and Sufi spirituality. As a symbiosis of the aesthetic and mystical, Arabic calligraphy as a genuine Islamic art becomes a technique of deepening and refining the spiritual life based on the Qur'an. From the symbolism of the letters to the breathing technique, calligraphy and mysticism share many commonalities. Many Muslim calligraphers were drawn to the spiritual teachings of the Sufis and were often themselves followers of Sufi orders. The Sufis in turn took calligraphy as one of the most appropriate form of artistic expression to visually illustrate their venerating contemplation of the Qur'an and thereby engage in their spiritual exercise. Calligraphy does not only decorate numerous Dervish meetinghouses (khānqa or tekke) and Sufi shrines. As an ornament on amulets, it also serves the practice of ritual commemoration of God: "Imagery, symbolism and the content of words evoke vital forces and create an atmosphere that leads to individual or collective forms" of devotion.

• Conclusion

Arabic calligraphy as the most distinguished expression of Islamic art is capable of reflecting the mystical states of the Sufis. Sufis in turn, draw inspiration from the art of calligraphy for their mystical interpretation of the Divine word. Islamic calligraphy as the intersection of the aesthetic and the mystical, the artistic and the religious, presents for us today – perhaps more than ever – a different view of Islam and the Qur'an. The renowned professor of Qur'anic studies, Angelika Neuwirth says "Islam can only be understood by those who understand it aesthetically". To see the mystical Qur'anic aesthetic inspired and regenerated by calligraphy as a doorway to understand Islam appears in today's discourse not only as a very welcoming gesture but also as an almost necessary approach to do justice to the inherent message of this last revealed religion.

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