

Arabic letters as a formative element in contemporary murals in the Arab world and their role in preserving heritage and identity

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Abstract:

Arabic calligraphy has always been one of the most important elements of plastic art creativity in the various types of visual arts. The Arabic letters are in themselves a plastic creation, and they have their philosophy, organic rhythms and meanings, and are distinguished by their versatility in formation and the possibility of formulating them in multiple ways, allowing the artist to express movement and mass according to aesthetic systems.

This research is concerned with emphasizing the value of Arabic letters as an Arab cultural heritage that should be preserved, developed and employed in the fields of plastic arts design in general and in the art of mural painting in particular. As the art of mural painting is one of the oldest visual arts that records and reflects the features and aspects of human life's societies throughout history. Mural painting is distinguished in our time as an exit to art outside the boundaries of exhibitions and museums in a way that makes it more related to the recipient audience, which puts on the mural painting artist shoulders' a greater challenge, which is to improve the artistic sense of the recipient and preserving heritage and enhancing identity.

This research deals with the study of forming with Arabic letters in contemporary murals in some countries of the Arab world such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Which were implemented with different techniques of mural painting techniques such as: mosaic - painting on ceramic tiles - modern colors. In addition, they took place with the support of the ministries of culture, Arab universities, civic cultural and artistic institutions as an effort to preserve heritage and identity.

Some of those murals relied on employing letters as an element of the composition of the mural in a legible manner according to the rules of writing, but most contemporary murals in the Arab world that relied on calligraphy were not related to the linguistic content, meaning that they were illegible to emphasize the potential of Arabic letters and their ability to be renewed and keep pace with global modernity in mural painting.

Research problem

It is concerned about studying and monitoring the tremendous potential of Arabic letters as plastic elements and their role in contemporary murals in many countries of the Arab world and the ability of these murals to preserve Arab heritage and identity for current and future generations through implementing modern methods that keep pace with international arts such as calligraphy and with techniques that have the ability to survive. Furthermore, it is about how to achieve this goal by supporting institutions concerned with culture and arts in the Arab countries by implementing these murals on the facades and walls of buildings in the streets of Arab cities and capitals to impart aesthetic values to the various sites with murals related to Arab heritage to remind current and future generations of the importance of preserving our identity and our heritage through the arts.

Research Importance

It is the emphasis on the impact of contemporary murals in the Arab world, which depends on diacritics in Arabic letters in preserving the heritage and identity of the Arab peoples of their various classes.

Research Aims

Monitoring the value of Arabic letters as a cultural heritage should be preserved, developed and employed in the fields of plastic arts, especially the art of wall painting in some Arab countries in the last ten years.

Research limits

Spatial boundaries: some countries of the Arab world.

Time limits: (2010-2020)

Research Methodology

The research follows the descriptive method.

Introduction

Visual arts are the mirror that reflects and records the features and manifestations of human societies' life throughout history. Mural painting is one of the oldest visual arts that is directly related to the recipient audience of various groups and builds a bridge between cultural legacies and people which is able to convey a message about peace and hope. It also implants values in the souls and preserves heritage and identity.

The technological development and openness that the world is currently witnessing may have a negative impact on the Arab identity for future generations, and from here comes the role of cultural and artistic institutions in the Arab world to support artists to implement murals that preserve our Arab culture and identity, including murals that depend in their formation on the Arabic letters as one the most important legacies of the heritage.

The art of Mural painting in our current era is characterized by a departure from art outside the boundaries of galleries and museums in a way that makes it more related to the recipient audience, which puts on the photographer's shoulders a greater challenge, which is to improve the artistic sense of the recipient, preserve heritage, consolidate values and enhance identity.

Some of the murals that will be covered in the study are based on the use of letters as a component of the composition of the mural in a legible manner according to the rules of writing using verses from the Noble Qur'an or verses from Arabic poetry or a saying by one of the wise men. However, most contemporary murals in the Arab world that relied on vowelization were not related to the linguistic content, which is not readable to emphasize the potential of Arabic letters and their ability to form, renew and keep pace with Global Modernity in the art of mural painting.

Aesthetic and Formative values of Arabic letters:

Arabic calligraphy has always been one of the most important elements of plastic creativity in the various types of visual arts. The Arabic letters are in themselves a plastic creation and have a philosophy, organic rhythms and meanings, and are distinguished by their versatility in formation and the possibility of formulating them in multiple ways in order to allow the artist to express movement and mass according to aesthetic plastic systems. Where the types of

Arabic calligraphy carry different formative values based on aesthetic foundations such as (proportionality - diversity - homogeneity - interconnectedness - harmony - mass and emptiness - balance). Those are the foundations on which the mural design depends.

The Arabic calligraphy possesses many formative capabilities that result in artistic values that give the person who sees it a visual pleasure even without the ability to read it. The Arabic letters and their durability, flexibility and the resulting movement in the design lie in the extension, ascending, descending, bending and rounding, giving them aesthetic characteristics that enable the artist exploited them as plastic objects. Among these characteristics are: vertical extension - extension (horizontal extension) - rotation or bending - elasticity and stretchability - compressibility - multiple form of a single letter - reversibility - diacritics - deafness (character highlighting points) - ability to warp - ability to interlock and overlap. These features helped the artist to easily integrate them with other plastic elements, which made it easy to form and reconstruct them visually in contemporary murals with their different techniques such as mosaics - painting on ceramic tiles - modern colorings, whether with paints or spraying colors suitable for surfaces and exterior walls.

Calligraffiti art and its Relationship to Mural painting

Contemporary Arabic calligraphy is defined as forming lines that have not been seen before, but rather than an extension and development of the ancient types of calligraphy. Hence, the introduction to the emergence of the art of calligraphy began through the direction of some Arab artists in the seventies of the last century affected by the abstract movement, by employing Arabic letters in their artworks on the different surfaces of what is known as calligraphy.

The art of calligraphy is a type of modern visual art that combines the art of calligraphy and graffiti, in a formative style to create an artistic composition, but in a style free from the rules of Arabic calligraphy, and this is what distinguishes calligraphy artists from calligraphers. Calligraphy works are carried out on the external walls of the architecture, they are messages related to societies and with the support of the institutions concerned with arts and culture using modern techniques of colorings to make them have the ability to survive and resist weather factors, which made these works one of the most important contemporary murals in the Arab world where it is well- known. **Mural painting** is known as painting with colored materials on surfaces associated with architecture. This is what distinguishes the art of **Calligraffiti**: (painting on walls through the formation of Arabic letters as elements and formative units within the wall design), from the art of **graffiti**: (the art of expressing opinion by drawing on walls, which is used to convey political or social messages of rebellion against power, society and the art of museums or the propaganda on the walls without the permission of the owner of the place is sometimes considered a form of vandalism and is punishable by law).

One of the founders of **Arabic Calligraffiti** in the Arab world is the Tunisian-French artist Fawzi Al-Khalifi, known as El Seed, whose works spread on the walls of buildings around the world to transform the streets into open museums and over spread messages of peace and respect for others on his murals, as we will see in this research. This trend represents a strong desire of the artists to move towards artistic expression in a manner that expresses their Arab identity derived from their culture and heritage.

Therefore, contemporary murals in the Arab world came to reflect the attempt of contemporary artists to achieve harmonization between the originality of Arabic calligraphy and the

modernization that stems from that originality to preserve personality and identity while keeping pace with the development of arts and human civilizations.

Some of the mural samples presented in the research

Murals of Saudi Arabia- Mecca mural

The mural of the artist Saud Khan, was built on the road leading to Al-Haram al-Sharif in Makkah, is one of the largest murals that rely on Arabic letters in their formation, with an area of 3 m x 150 m (Figure 1), and the artist was inspired by the art of Arabic calligraphy because of its aesthetic value and ability to express the spirit of Islamic art and the identity of this sacred place. This is done by writing the phrase "Prayer is better than sleep." in a manner of overlapping words and repeating them in different sizes and shades that give depth to the mural. In the implementation of the mural, the artist used the mosaic technique because of the ability of this technique and the materials used in it to survive and resist weather factors in the environment surrounding the artwork. Linear balance is achieved in this mural in terms of equalizing the opposing forces between the vertical and the horizontal, relying on the accuracy of drawing the letters and adjusting them in a stable way in the horizontal direction with the letters that the artist has extended and increased their length in a vertical direction up to achieve a sense of visual balance for the recipient.



(Figure 1) a mural of Mecca and details of it - by the artist Saud Khan - Saudi Arabia - 2014

Riyadh Water Tower

The Tunisian artist El seed transformed the water tower building in Riyadh, which is one of the most important landmarks of Riyadh, from a solid building to a work of art based on the formation of Arabic letters on the entire body of the reservoir, which is about 60 meters high in bright colors and in a creative way that expresses the identity of the Arab and Islamic Kingdom (fig. 2). The artist chose the composition with words from a poem by a Bedouin poet, Abdullah Al-Dandan, to shed light on one of those who enriched literary and poetic life, and part of the cultural heritage of the Kingdom. It seems that the artist's regular repetition of the formative treatment of Arabic letters in a vertical direction of the same size and thickness achieves the combination of unity and change in order to achieve the linear rhythm as a formative aesthetic value, as well as achieving balance by relying on the accuracy of drawing letters in vertical lines.



(Figure 2) Water Tower - Riyadh - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – 2019

Dubai murals

The first phase of the (Dubai Art Museum), launched by (Brand Dubai), the creative arm of the Dubai Government Media Office in partnership with Dubai Municipality, witnessed the participation of a group of the most important and famous mural artists in the world who executed murals inspired by the history of the UAE and its cultural and social heritage, and presented them in a creative manner which is in line with the renewed civilized landscape of the Emirate to transform the streets of Dubai into an open museum. A group of international artists participated in this stage and found the UAE's rich heritage of ancient values, customs and traditions as a source of inspiration for distinctive works, which reflected the extent of their interaction with the Emirati cultural heritage, as in (Figure 3) where the design of the mural by the Tunisian artist Inkman relied on forming Arabic letters with white lines. Also, it depends on only against a background of shades of blue, taken from a poem. The artist took advantage of the capabilities of Arabic calligraphy and letters in shaping in the form of different bodies such as geometric shapes, natural elements, etc., and here the artist chose the shape of the circle, so we find that he formed the letters within the circular shape in a harmonious unity.



(Figure 3) One of the murals of Dubai and a detail of it - Emirates - 2017

One of the most important and largest murals in Dubai is a mural (rain lettering) by the French artist Vincent Abadie Hafez, known as Zepha, who is one of the most famous calligraphy artists (fig. 4), executed on the facade of a hotel and is the longest work of art in Dubai and UAE, where the length of the mural reaches up to 50 meters. The mural was given this name, as the formation of the letters appears to be raindrops in the depths of a dense forest, but the artist

replaced the water droplets with Arabic letters, using shades that recall the fibers of trees in the forests. In this mural, the artist achieved many aesthetic and formative values of the art of calligraphy, including linear balance in drawing letters accurately in a balanced way in a vertical direction that gives a sense of more visual stability, as it is evident that the artist's ability employs the ability of Arabic letters to stretch and extend in the design with the artist's control over the length and shortening the letters to give a sense of growth and ascension to achieve the design philosophy.



(Figure 4) Letters Al-Matar mural and detailed ones - Dubai - UAE - 2017

Qatar Mural

The Public Arts Department of the Qatar Museums Authority and the Public Works Authority commissioned the Tunisian Artist El Seed to beautify four underground tunnels on Salwa Road with murals. The murals are characterized by themes inspired by the legacies of Qatari culture and signs of Qatari life (Figure 5), as one of the most important and largest infrastructure projects in the State of Qatar, which seeks to promote Qatari heritage, culture and traditions by using Arabic letters to emphasize their importance in preserving Arab heritage and identity. It carries sentences that refer to the State of Qatar and reinforce the spirit of national belonging, and the writing includes sentences from the national anthem of the State of Qatar, including (Walk on the path of the God, they will see, and on the brightness of the prophets and doves on the day of peace, the prey of the day of redemption). In these murals, the extent of the artist's ability to achieve the aesthetic values of the art of calligraphy is evident and to take advantage of the ability of Arabic letters to extend and bend with art controlling the length and shortness of the letter, which gives a sense of growth, ascension and horizontal extension that gives a sense of stability and balance.

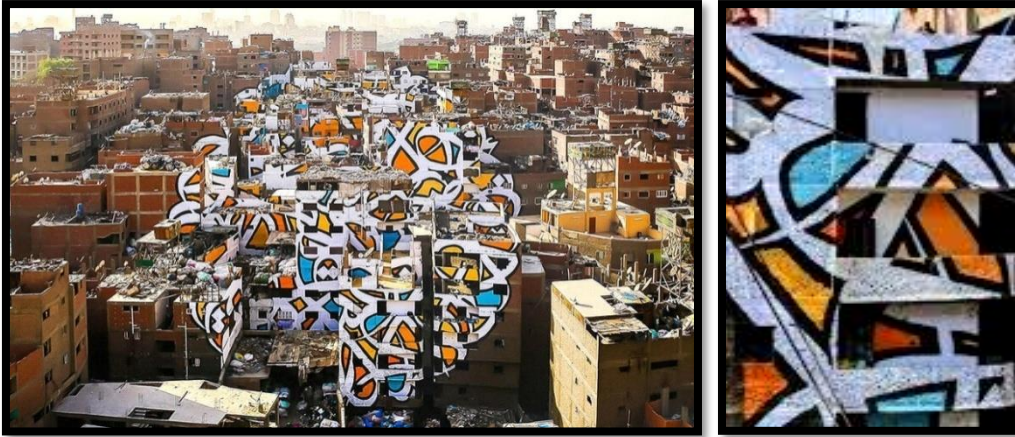


(Figure 5) Murals on Salwa Road - Doha - Qatar - 2013

Cairo Mural

This mural is considered as one of the most important works of the Tunisian artist, El Seed, which he carried out on 50 buildings in one of the slums in Cairo, where he transformed the walls of his buildings into a giant mural, and the initiative was very popular on social media (Figure 6). In that area, where most of its residents live by collecting garbage from various areas of Cairo, then sorting and selling it to recycling factories, El Seed implemented his design on the walls of about 50 houses that were built of red bricks. In its design, it relied on Arabic calligraphy and Arabic graffiti in the form of a large circle. The phrase that was written is taken from a quote by a Coptic bishop (Pope Athanasius) which says: "If someone wants to see the sunlight, he must wipe his eyes first." The whole mural can be seen clearly from a certain point on the Mokattam Mountain, 15 km from the site.

This mural is a message to the world to change its view of this neighborhood, shed light on this community and reinforce the sense of identity among its residents. It took three weeks to implement the mural, but it took a year to prepare. A large team including Tunisians, Algerians and French participated in the implementation, and were joined by Egyptian workers, and the idea was well received by the people of the region. In this mural, harmony and unity in linear design are achieved, which are ones of the aesthetic values of the art of calligraphy, through the association of letters and words with linear formations that emphasize the aesthetic values of Arabic letters such as extension, rotation, curving and forming within different areas and shapes, including the shape of the circle chosen by the artist.



(Figure 6) One of the murals in Cairo, and a detail of it - El Seed - 2019

Tunisia murals

One of the most important artists in Tunisia whose murals were based on the formation of Arabic calligraphiti, the artist Safwan Milad, who was inspired in his creativity from ancient Islamic architecture and its decorations in Arabic calligraphy and its coordination with the old ceramic tiles, so his murals depend on the swaying lines of Arabic letters, colors that simulate the color of the sky and the decorations of the multi-colored architecture according to the artistic peculiarity of the ancient city of Kairouan, which was rich in murals and calligraphy inscriptions and which influenced his artistic style (Fig. 7, 8).



(Fig. 7, 8) Murals of the artist Safwan Milad - El Menzah VI – Tunis

Continuing his creativity in plastic art that relies on Arabic letters as plastic elements on the walls of many buildings and institutions with giant murals, the artist Safwan Milad decorated a number of domes influenced by the identity of the city as in (Fig. 9, 10). In his mural designs, the artist relies on improvisation in forming letters as if they were a piece of music, the rhythms of which depend on liberation, creativity, and the diversity between loud and quiet letters at other times, stripping away from the academic rules of writing Arabic calligraphy to create a free line and flowing letters. The artistic style of Safwan Milad in the art of calligraphiti depends on interlacing and overlapping, and it is one of the most important aesthetic values of Arabic calligraphiti where the letters extend and intertwine to create among themselves a distinctive rhythm that occupies the area of the wall and achieves the proportion between the work and the space. As it increases the length of the letters in different directions, it also employs the values of rotation and curvature of the letters, which gives a softer appearance to his designs in general.



(Figure 9) Formation in Arabic letters on walls and domes - Safwan Milad - Tamim House in Nabeul Governorate - Tunisia



(Figure 10) Formation in Arabic letters on domes - Safwan Milad - in the Mediterranean city, Yasmine Hammamet, Tunisia

Algeria Mural

The Tunisian artist El seed designed this mural on the wall of a building in Algeria and relied in his design on the formation of Arabic letters Arabic calligraphiti inside the shape of the circle with hot colors to look like the rising sun (fig. 11), with verses from the poem Bilad al-Khair to enhance the sense of identity among citizens, and from the most important aesthetic and formative values in this design is the unity that binds the letters organically and makes them coherent within a harmonious unity, and the artist took advantage of the ability of letters to form within different bodies and employed them within the shape of the circle.



(Figure 11) Algeria mural by the artist El -seed – 2014

Morocco Mural

The Asilah Forum Foundation in Morocco, under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, organized the Asilah International Cultural Season, which includes painting murals, plastic exhibitions and a writing workshop, as a contribution to raising the population's sense of fun and tranquility through plastic arts. The initiative also seeks to revive the dynamism of associative work in the city and revive the heritage, and in the vicinity of the wall overlooking the sea, the Moroccan plastic artist Abdul Rahim Hamzah implemented his mural, whose design is based on the intersecting and repetitive circle shape based on the formation of Arabic letters (Figure 12), graduated from largest to smallest inside the circle in an attempt to achieve a sense of depth, and the artist also exploited the potentials and aesthetics of calligraphitiin shaping and its ability to extend, rotate and bend in different directions in a manner that achieves linear harmony while preserving the unity that connects the letters and achieving proportion between the work piece and the surrounding spaces.



(Figure 12) A mural in Morocco - 2019

Research results

- Arabic letters are one of the most adaptable and evolving technical elements.
- Arabic letters and Arabic calligraphy are among the most important Arab cultural legacies.
- The formative values of the Arabic letters enable the artist to adapt them and employ them in mural painting with his various techniques.
- Forming with Arabic letters in mural painting requires a designer and artist fully familiar with the basics and rules of Arabic calligraphy.
- Contemporary murals that rely on Arabic letters to shape them bring visual pleasure to the audience and interact with them.
- The art of mural painting is one of the arts capable of preserving heritage and enhancing identity.
- Many artistic and cultural institutions in the Arab world are aware of the importance of Arabic calligraphy and the art of mural painting and its ability to directly influence the recipient.

Recommendations

- The researcher recommends the importance of teaching the rules of Arabic calligraphy in technical colleges in all their specializations because of its ability to adapt in various types of arts to play an important role in establishing the values of belonging, identity and preservation of heritage.

- The necessity of establishing a center for Arabic calligraphy in all Arab countries that cares about this art and preserving it as a cultural heritage and supporting those interested in Arabic calligraphy, their research and their artistic works.
- The need to support artistic and cultural institutions and parties concerned with preserving heritage for artists.
- The importance of the artist developing his abilities and familiarizing him with modern techniques and methods in mural painting.

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