



THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS AND MODERN TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract:

Islamic art is widely recognized as a historical and culturally significant form of artistic expression throughout the Islamic world, with calligraphy occupying a central position within it. Islamic calligraphy emerged during the period of the revelation of the Qur'an and has since been extensively used to adorn the interiors and exteriors of mosques and prominent Islamic architectural structures. This article aims to examine and highlight both traditional and contemporary Islamic calligraphy painting through the works of well-known calligraphers. Rooted in the Arabic language, Islamic calligraphy transforms sacred text into a distinctive visual art form expressed through both classical and modern painting practices. The study provides a brief historical overview of Islamic calligraphy and explores its diverse stylistic developments, including traditional Arabic scripts and contemporary interpretations. Calligraphers draw inspiration from Qur'anic verses, historical poetry, and spiritual texts, creating compositions characterized by intricate structures and overlapping letterforms. Whether executed in traditional or contemporary modes, Islamic calligraphy paintings convey movement, rhythm, and visual dynamism through expressive linear formations. The study concludes that both traditional and contemporary calligraphy paintings represent innovative artistic practices, distinguished by their unique scripts, evolving visual identities, and diverse materials. Through the creative application of sacred language, calligraphers continue to produce a rich and evolving artistic tradition known as contemporary Islamic calligraphy painting.

Keywords:

Modern Calligraphy, Islamic art, Islamic painting, Arabic Calligraphy, Islamic Art, Arabic language, Contemporary painting.

Introduction:

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and the era of the Caliphates, calligraphy was still considered an ancient art, and scripts were named according to specific regions. These included the Makki script (Mecca), Madani script (Medina), Hijazi script (Hijaz), Anbari script (Anbar), Hiri script (Hira), and Kufi script (Kufa). Among these, the Kufi script was the most widely used and the only script employed for writing and compiling the Holy Qur'an, a practice that continued until the end of the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. The Kufi style is known for its proportionality, angularity, and square forms and is among the earliest scripts used for Qur'anic writing¹.

During the Umayyad period, calligraphy developed in relation to different cities and regions, giving rise to new styles. Alongside the evolution of the Kufi script, several additional forms emerged. Gradually, scripts other than Kufi advanced more rapidly and came to be used more frequently for Qur'anic manuscripts, religious texts, correspondence,

¹ Faye, Oweis. (2002). Art as an Educational Tool about the Teaching of Islam. Published by: National Art Federation of KSI Muslim Communities United Kingdom, P:76



and other purposes. In the Abbasid era, calligraphy experienced accelerated development, producing many renowned calligraphers.

The most famous Abbasid calligrapher was Ibn Muqlah, who introduced a system of letter construction based on geometric principles involving the dot, the alif, and the circle¹. His students further refined these principles, introducing innovations. Later, Yaqut al-Musta'simi developed a more fluid and refined method for writing the six scripts. He is regarded as the last great calligrapher of the Abbasid Caliphate. During this period, calligraphy expanded beyond manuscript production and was increasingly applied to architecture and decoration.

In contrast to the eastern (Mashriq) regions of the Islamic world, the western regions (Maghrib)—from west of Libya to al-Andalus (Spain)—developed a distinct calligraphic style. Western Kufi became prominent and differed from the Baghdad style. Ibn Muqlah's system was not fully adopted in these areas, resulting in cursive scripts that retained a more conservative character.

Following the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate to the Mongols, the arts revived in the eastern regions within half a century, and Qur'anic manuscript calligraphy reached its peak. Islamic art reflects a unity of style and purpose, and its works are easily recognized by the delicacy of their lines and their visual grandeur. From Arabia to North Africa and Spain, and from Turkey to Asia and India, the Islamic world shares a rich and unified cultural heritage².

The development of this period includes several phases:

- The El Khani period (up to the 14th century)
- The Timurid period (up to the 15th century)
- India and Afghanistan, where the Bihari style flourished
- The Ottoman period in Turkey

Islamic calligraphy originated in the 7th century and continues to flourish today. The vast geographical reach of the Islamic world produced a wide range of calligraphic styles. In every region where Islam spread, artists developed local styles and tools to create Islamic calligraphy.³ Recognized as a geometric form of writing, Islamic calligraphy demonstrates how traditional Islamic art influenced diverse cultures across time and place.

TRADITIONAL CALLIGRAPHY PAINTING:

Definition and Principles

Traditional calligraphy is a classical art form in which calligraphers produce refined and elegant compositions through strict adherence to established rules. It emphasizes discipline, precision, and the preservation of principles transmitted across generations.

Calligraphers follow carefully structured regulations, giving priority to accuracy, proportion, and balance. Traditional calligraphy focuses strongly on formal rules and depends on conventional tools and methods.

¹ Yuyun Yunita, THE ROLE OF CALIGRAPHIC ARTS IN CIVILIZATION ISLAMIC CULTURE, RI'AYAH, Vol. 7, No. 02, July- December 2022

² Brend, Barbara. (1991). Islamic Art. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, P:10

³ Brend, Barbara. (1991). P:37



Scripts and Styles

Traditional calligraphers draw inspiration from six classical Arabic scripts: Thuluth, Naskh, Persian (Nastalik), Kufi, Diwani, and Riq'a¹. Each script is governed by specific techniques and rules essential for creating traditional calligraphic compositions.

Traditional calligraphy is commonly used for writing Qur'anic verses and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and is widely applied in both Qur'anic manuscripts and decorative contexts.

Process, Tools, and Materials

The creation of traditional calligraphy paintings is a demanding and time-intensive process that requires extensive practice and patience. Even a few words on a single page may take several hours to complete².

Artists employ tools influenced by older cultures, primarily the reed pen (Qalam) and ink. While black ink remains dominant, a limited range of coloured inks is also used. Calligraphic works are produced on materials such as paper, silk, and linen³, reflecting a balance between classical aesthetics, respect for tradition, and contemporary artistic needs.

MODERN / CONTEMPORARY CALLIGRAPHY PAINTING:

Concept and Approach

Modern or contemporary Islamic calligraphy is largely regarded as a decorative and expressive art form. It reinterprets traditional calligraphy through a modern perspective, emphasizing creativity, experimentation, and visual impact over strict adherence to classical rules.

Contemporary calligraphers move away from rigid traditions, adopting personal styles and working freely with innovative letter forms. Experimentation with structure and composition is central, and visual expression often takes precedence over literal meaning. As a result, readability may decrease while emotional and artistic impact increases.

Materials, Tools, and Aesthetic Impact

In addition to traditional materials, modern calligraphy incorporates contemporary media such as brushes, diverse paints, and canvas⁴. Colours used in Islamic calligraphy often carry symbolic associations with Islamic culture and belief.

Arabic script is frequently rendered in abstract form, with poetry and short supplications commonly included. Repeated movements, complex linear structures, and harmonious colour combinations create visually rich compositions⁵. The interlocking of words and letters conveys a strong decorative message.

Energy, Diversity, and Purpose

Contemporary calligraphy often blends traditional Islamic and Western artistic influences. These works are dynamic and visually striking, while still maintaining balance

¹ A Brief History of Arabic Calligraphy, Jacqueline Holland, Aug 27, 2018
<https://www.skillshare.com/en/blog/a-brief-history-of-arabic-calligraphy/>

² Faye, Oweis. (2002). Art as an Educational Tool about the Teaching of Islam. Published by: National Art Federation of KSI Muslim Communities United Kingdom, P:76

³ Arabic calligraphy: knowledge, skills and practices, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/arabic-calligraphy-knowledge-skills-and-practices-01718#:~:text=Arabic%20calligraphy%20is%20the%20artistic,and%20women%20of%20all%20ages>

⁴ Faruqi, I. R., & Faruqi, L. L. (1986). *The cultural atlas of Islam*. American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, 40(4), P:20–90.

⁵ Zakariy, Mohamed. (2015). The Art of Islamic calligraphy, <http://www.zakariya.net>

and proportion in letter composition. Styles vary across regions, reflecting local artistic traditions.

In some cases, traditional and modern approaches are combined¹, presenting line quality as a dynamic force, an approach often described as abstract contemporary calligraphy. Inspired by classical styles, artists modify established rules to generate new visual meanings. Through this transformation, words may lose literal readability and become rhythmic, almost musical expressions.

Modern calligraphy is primarily used for decorative purposes. Due to its emphasis on visual harmony between lines and colours, compositions typically contain a limited number of words. In the contemporary era, abstract calligraphy has become a prominent form within decorative calligraphic art.

TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY PAINTING AND MODERN CALLIGRAPHERS

Traditional Islamic calligraphy painting is a refined two-dimensional art form that emphasizes aesthetic harmony and the spiritual essence of the Arabic language. Modern calligraphers continue this tradition by focusing on the spiritual significance of Qur'anic verses and Prophetic Hadith. The process is labour-intensive, with letters carefully constructed according to strict proportional rules often symbolically linked to the human body². By adhering to the "golden rule" of writing, practitioners maintain a sacred connection to the past while expressing faith through disciplined artistic labour.

This practice is grounded in six classical styles—Thuluth, Naskh, Farsi, Deewani, Rika'a, and Kufi—each governed by specific methods and tools. Kufic script holds particular importance as one of the earliest scripts used to record the Qur'an, valued for its angular and square forms³. Traditional tools such as reed or bamboo pens are used alongside historically significant materials including vellum, silk, and paper. While black ink remains dominant due to its historical significance, a broader colour palette is also employed to reflect Islamic culture and belief⁴.

Artists such as Haji Noor Deen and Mohamed Zakariya demonstrate the global continuity of this tradition. Noor Deen combines traditional techniques with a distinctive aesthetic to educate modern audiences⁵. Mohamed Zakariya serves as a vital link between classical standards and contemporary practice in the United States, employing traditional tools and natural pigments to create culturally resonant works. Their work illustrates how Islamic calligraphy remains rooted in tradition while evolving to express a contemporary spiritual identity.

CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY PAINTING AND MODERN CALLIGRAPHERS

¹ Duaa Mohammed Alashari, Abd.Rahman Hamzah, Nurazmallail Marni. (2020). The Journey of Islamic Art Through Traditional and Contemporary Calligraphy Painting, UMRAN International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies

² Faye, Oweis. (2002). Art as an Educational Tool about the Teaching of Islam. Published by: National Art Federation of KSI Muslim Communities United Kingdom. P:76

³ Faye, Oweis. (2002). Art as an Educational Tool about the Teaching of Islam. Published by: National Art Federation of KSI Muslim Communities United Kingdom. P:90

⁴ Faruqi, I. & Lois L. (1986). "The Cultural Atlas of Islam". American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, 40(4), P:20

⁵ Haji Noor Deen's home page, accessed April 17, 2015, <http://www.hajinoordeen.com/artist/artist.html>.

Contemporary Islamic calligraphy represents a shift from strict grammatical conventions toward creative expression. While traditional calligraphy adheres to established rules, modern practitioners move beyond these structures to develop a dynamic and expressive style. Arabic script is treated as a visual element, where line quality and movement often take precedence over readability. By incorporating regional and global influences, calligraphers transform language into an abstract artistic form.

Themes, Materials, and Aesthetic Value

In contemporary calligraphy, poetry and sacred texts often lose literal readability and transform into a visual “melody” of form. This approach emphasizes:

- Media diversity, including canvas, board, oil, acrylics, and tapestry
- Visual complexity, characterized by repetition, swirling forms, and interwoven letters
- Spiritual purpose, as the expression of faith and Islamic principles remains central

Through the elegant movement of Arabic lines, contemporary calligraphers create intricate ornamental compositions. By combining traditional colours with modern motifs, they ensure that Islamic calligraphy continues to function as a living, evolving language of spirituality and aesthetics.

Conclusion:

Islamic calligraphy is a continuously evolving art form that moves from tradition toward modernity while remaining deeply rooted in its spiritual and cultural foundations. Traditional calligraphy reflects the sacred essence of the Qur'an and Hadith, whereas contemporary calligraphy presents a fusion of creative expression, abstraction, and cross-cultural influences. Despite their stylistic differences, both approaches maintain a profound relationship with spirituality, aesthetics, and visual harmony.

Traditional and modern Islamic calligraphy should not be viewed as opposing practices but rather as extensions of one another. Traditional calligraphy embodies the spiritual depth of the Qur'an and the foundational values of Islamic civilization, while contemporary calligraphy provides new generations of artists with creative freedom, technical innovation, and a renewed spiritual language. Together, these approaches sustain the continuity of Islamic artistic tradition while adapting its spirit to the demands of changing times.

From the earliest beginnings of the Islamic world to the present day, calligraphy has remained central to Islamic art. Muslim calligraphers have long expressed their creativity through distinctive artistic works, making calligraphy the most significant and esteemed form of Islamic visual expression. Today, this art has matured into both traditional and modern forms, reinforcing its status as the highest and most refined of Islamic arts.

Islamic calligraphers have developed numerous styles of Arabic script characterized by delicate lines and rich colours. By transforming letters and words into visual compositions, they emphasize the spiritual dimension of language. Calligraphy painting thus becomes an emotional and creative expression of the Muslim artist, revealing the beauty, power, and sacred nature of the Arabic language through both traditional and contemporary forms.

Inspired by Qur'anic verses, Arabic poetry, and wisdom literature, calligraphers initiate their compositions by translating meaning into movement. In both traditional and modern paintings, calligraphic marks convey rhythm, vitality, and life. These works reflect the aesthetic principles of Islamic culture, highlighting both its simplicity and complexity, while presenting the spiritual essence of Islam through a refined artistic form.



Contemporary calligraphers often treat the canvas as a page, using abstract designs of lines and forms to transcend literal language. Through repetition and reconfiguration of letters and words, they generate meanings that move beyond textual readability. In contrast, traditional calligraphers continue to employ classical tools and techniques. Together, traditional and modern calligraphy paintings present a harmonious visual language that reflects the beauty of Arabic script and the enduring richness of Islamic civilization.

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