

Evolution of Islamic Calligraphy as an Extension of Art and Design in Pakistan

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Abstract

Art represents the creative dimension of a society and design is the sense of formal organization that focuses functionality. In a society, art and design plays significant role being representative of its norms, culture, believes, traditions, and socio-political setting. These are the two progressive domains that allows freedom of expression which serve as the foundation of Islamic calligraphy in Pakistan. Although they have been questioned at different time periods but they kept on evolving besides external or internal constraints. Calligraphy is an art of beautiful writing that swiftly influences the sensations of a spectator. It is one such expression which has been celebrated immensely as an extension of art and design in the Islamic tradition that provides it prospering conditions for artistic evolution. In Pakistan, two of its school of thoughts exists: traditional calligraphy and modern calligraphy. In art, modern calligraphy is practiced with liberal approach. Some artists focused on its didactic gesture whereas some explored creative execution of the text beyond conventional means and the rest utilized it according to the consumerist approach. In communication design, calligraphy as typography plays essential role. It is used for purpose-based communication by dragging the attention of spectators towards a certain message. By means of artistic execution, manipulation of calligraphic text has taken the form of an art movement that appreciates its inclination towards the Islamic identity of the country. In Pakistan, practice of this genre is

conceived as an integral part of the religious faith that ensures Divine blessings. As an art form, besides artists, designers have also contributed in finding innovative vistas for the creative execution of calligraphy. Both have used calligraphy as a tool of creative expression coupled with religious symbolism. Artistic manipulation of calligraphy has left strong influence on the development of text-based contemporary art of Pakistan as well.

Keywords: Traditional Calligraphy, Modern Calligraphy, Art and Design, Pakistani Art, Symbolism

Introduction:

Calligraphy is an expressive art form that creates an effect of beautiful writing. In the Islamic world, it is linked with Islamic aesthetics as an independent form of art which is used by the Muslims with creative dimensions. It is one such genre that remained distinguished in Islam with religious fervor. The invention of pioneering styles in Islamic calligraphy introduced by master calligraphists adds to the development of this genre. The angular and cursive proportions of alphabets with strong sense of design is an essential feature which makes it unique for its artistic visualization and execution. Islamic calligraphy embraces Divine essence being the language of the Holy Qur'ān. Immense innovation has been done for the creative enhancement of calligraphy till to date. For beautifying the sacred text, different surfaces and materials have been explored ranging from decorative specimens, architectural ornamentation, painting, ceramics, sculptures to contemporary installations.

The art of calligraphy as a decorative device intensifies the meaningfulness of Divine text.¹ It holds enormous importance in Islam which can be witnessed in the Holy messages that says: *“Recite in the name of your Lord Who created man from a clot of congealed blood, Recite: and your Lord is Most Generous, Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know.”*² (96:1-4)

Calligraphy: The Art of Communication

Writing is conceived as an art of linear graphics which holds rhythmic quality. This rhythmic gesture of line leaves enormous effect on human sensations. Calligraphy is the art of geometry linked with human soul. The use of calligraphy by means of art and design revolutionized visual communication. Through the linear expression of calligraphy everyone can relate with it beyond religious inclinations making their own interpretations. This feature of calligraphy as art of communication is universal which serves as a language based on signs and symbols. The linear expression of calligraphy as the geometry of soul left influential impact on the artists of the Western world. Herbert Read mentions that Abstract expressionism, a modern art movement is an outcome of inclination towards calligraphic expression. Artists like Mark Tobey and Paul Klee got interested in the linear gesture of calligraphy and used it according to their own perceptions focusing on line and its visual representation.³ In today's world art of calligraphy is in practice beyond conventional approach. Muslim calligraphers from across the world have used it for both personal and collective means. Analyzing the impact of this genre in contemporary age, it is interesting to observe that Pakistani artists are utilizing it as a vehicle to express their creative concerns.

Art and Design as the Foundation of Calligraphy in Pakistan:

Art and design are two progressive domains which are interlinked being a reflection of human society. Art is the human concern for aesthetic sensibility and design its necessity. Art identifies creative concerns and design provides possibilities for their solutions. In a country which was created on the name of Islam, and struggled for establishing its own identity, calligraphy as a sacred form of art was well appreciated for its connection with religious belief. In Pakistan, both these expressive fields provided basis for the evolution of calligraphy.

Traditional Calligraphy remained in practice after Independence. Taj al-Din Zarrin Raqam, Hafiz Muhammad Yusuf Sadidi, Parvin Raqam, Sufi Khurshid Alam Khurshid Raqam, and Anwar Husain Nafis Raqam are among the leading traditional calligraphers of their time in Lahore and had their descendants as well. All the traditionally trained calligraphers practiced

calligraphy with great devotion. A number of them used to write in Urdu Newspapers. The master calligrapher was responsible for writing the headlines of the Newspaper. Composing and balancing of text were done by these calligraphers with great sense of design. Although that practice trained the youngest generation of calligraphers but was extremely time taking despite being a healthy activity. The advancement of technology affected this field and the introduction of digital printing replaced master calligraphers for writing Newspapers. Although some of the traditional calligraphers remained focused and continued their calligraphic practice religiously whereas some had to switch to other fields for better living.⁴ Art education played essential role in keeping the tradition of calligraphy alive. The practice of calligraphy remained a subject for learning the basic principles of writing as an offshoot of traditional arts. Artists and designers after learning these principles used text for creative exposure with freedom of expression. The second half of twentieth century unlocked multiple dimensions for artists to think beyond the nut shell for finding their own identity and inclinations globally. The time period from 1955 to 1975, proved to be a revolutionary period for many Muslim artists working in different regions for exploring their own concerns. Their contribution formed a movement that revolutionized Arabic calligraphy into modern art. Although most of the artists were not aware of each other but their concern was the same to modernize the impact and spirit of calligraphy.⁵ *“Many of them created a new aesthetic language of calligraphic figuration and abstraction. Working in Pakistan, Hanif Ramay in the early 1950s, Anwar Jalal Shemza in the United Kingdom from the later 1950s, and Sadequain explored calligraphy in relation to modernism.”*⁶

In Pakistan, the gratitude towards the practice of calligraphy became political agenda during the regime of Zia-ul-Haq for the sake of Islamization. Being a part of political concern, the practice of calligraphic art initiated new horizons for the development of this genre in Pakistan. Artists and designers were encouraged to utilize their creative dynamism in promoting calligraphic art. This response towards art practice left restrictions on figurative and

socio-political art and raised agitation in a certain group of practicing artists but provided sound grounds for the evolution of modern calligraphy in the art scene of Pakistan.

Creative Execution of Calligraphy with focus on Design:

The creative manipulation of text holds enchanting appeal and universal charisma. It engages the viewer for visual and sensory receptiveness. Because of the distinctive features of elasticity and design the art of calligraphy elevates human soul by means of its esoteric appeal. Muslim artists used the art of calligraphy for the attainment of aesthetic standards, for them the spiritual features of beauty lays in the letters and words.⁷ In calligraphy the captivating features includes form, use of space and sense of design that holds its significance.

The focused artists in this group are selected on the bases of their creative execution of calligraphy beyond conventional means which is recognized today as modern calligraphy. Although a number of artists using the language of this genre are known as celebrated artists of Pakistan who have used calligraphy as a favorable device for documenting their artistic concerns in response to the socio-political, religious, and consumerist influence. In the modern age calligraphic painting has gained such a strength which cannot be overlooked.⁸

Shakir Ali (1916-1975) was an exceptional artist who did painterly calligraphy using his own signature style prior to the political influence. He focused on the execution of calligraphic text as a design element over painterly surface (fig.I). His inclination towards abstraction allowed him to modify Arabic text with freedom of expression.⁹ The angular execution of text with interlaced curvilinear motion assisted him in weaving his sensations through sense of design. Primary colors are used in connection with shapes. Ali's radiant color scheme intensified the impact of his fabricated visual vocabulary in which text holds the main essence. His liberal approach in using calligraphic text as an expression of painterly device set novel horizons and initiated individualized response towards this genre.

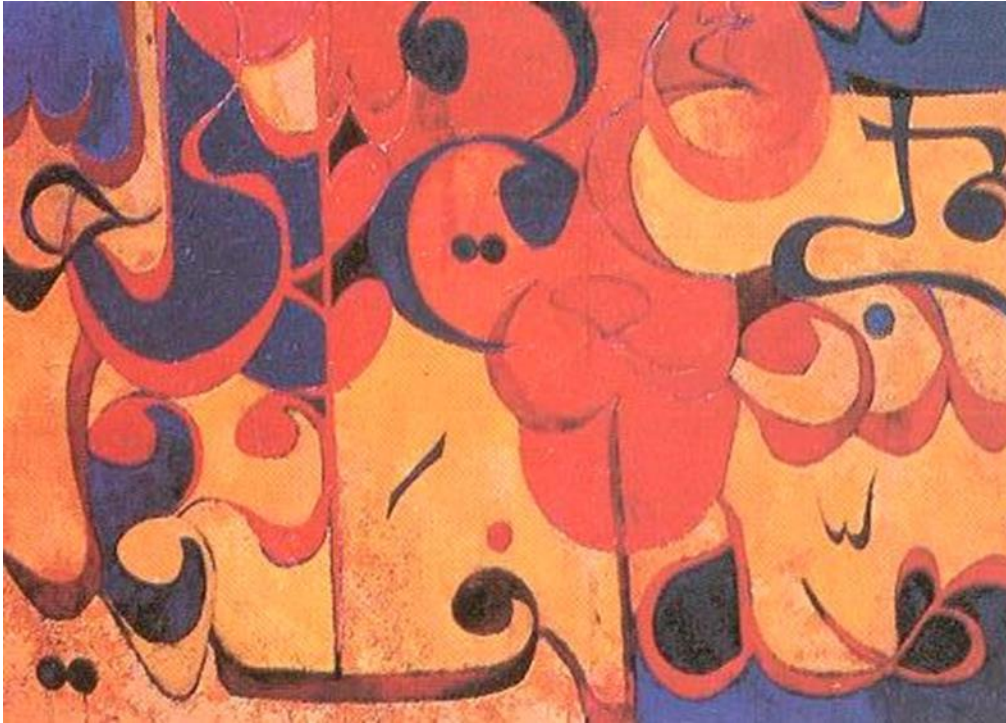


Figure. I. Shakir Ali, *Calligraphy*, 1968, oil on canvas.

Source: Khalid Saeed Butt. *Paintings from Pakistan*, Islamabad: Idara-e-Saqafat, 1988, 77.

Hanif Ramay (1930-2006) and Sadequain (1932-1987) are two exceptions among artist community who owns strong relationship with the creative practice of calligraphy. They are known to be the pioneers of calligraphic modernism in Pakistan for their sincere commitment towards this genre. Both of them were the custodians of a tradition that allows creative execution of calligraphic text in finding inner resonance. Ramay worked as a designer and used to design covers with text including Urdu weeklies *Daily Musawat*, *Nusrat*, and *Sawera* from 1954-72.¹⁰ His interest in calligraphy allowed him to use it according to his own taste. For artistic execution he combined *Naskh*, *Thulth*, and *Kufic* script for developing his individual style which looks similar to Arabesque designs. His compositions were rhythmic, lyrical and somehow gestural. With designer sensibility he used to fabricate text filled with flat colors confined within fine outlines. This treatment gives his

work the effect of stain glass painting with focus on purity of color. In some of his compositions text evolves as abstract designs readable through the application of color (fig. 2).



Figure. 2. Hanif Ramay, *Al-Alim*, 1982, 91 x 91 cm, oil on canvas, private collection, Lahore.

Source: M. Athar Tahir. *The Twain Shall Meet: Calligraphy and Calligraph art from Britain and Pakistan*, Lahore: Pakistan Calligraph-artists 'Guild, 2005-2006, 47.

Sadequain was the most celebrated painter who got recognition as the artist of the state. His visual vocabulary evolves as calligraphic modernism which was accessible for the audience at public places signifying the impact of art in society.¹¹ His work of that phase marks the origin of public art in Pakistan. According to Ijaz ul Hassan, “As a painter, Sadequain was the first to have liberated painting from private homes and transformed it into a public art.”¹² He altered calligraphy in a painterly style to figuration, then his style evolved into more graphical and linear gesture.¹³ Although he was a self-taught artist but had great command over calligraphy following the tradition of his family. He used calligraphy for creating personal expression which represents

mystical nuances, philosophical and contemplative essence with artist's critical judgements. His interest in literature provoked him to express his emotions by writing *rubaiyats* through calligraphic expression. His calligraphic works are divided into different phases that documents his bold style in Illustrative, figural, and abstract calligraphy. Sadequain preferred centralized compositions, he used to exaggerate text with bold strokes according to the requirement of design, he often elaborates the horizontal and vertical strokes of the written text which is today known as *Khat-e-Sadequain*. He tries to fill up the negative space around the words with a variety of decorative designs (fig.3).¹⁴ His traditional calligraphy had illustrative quality with focus on landscape imagery.

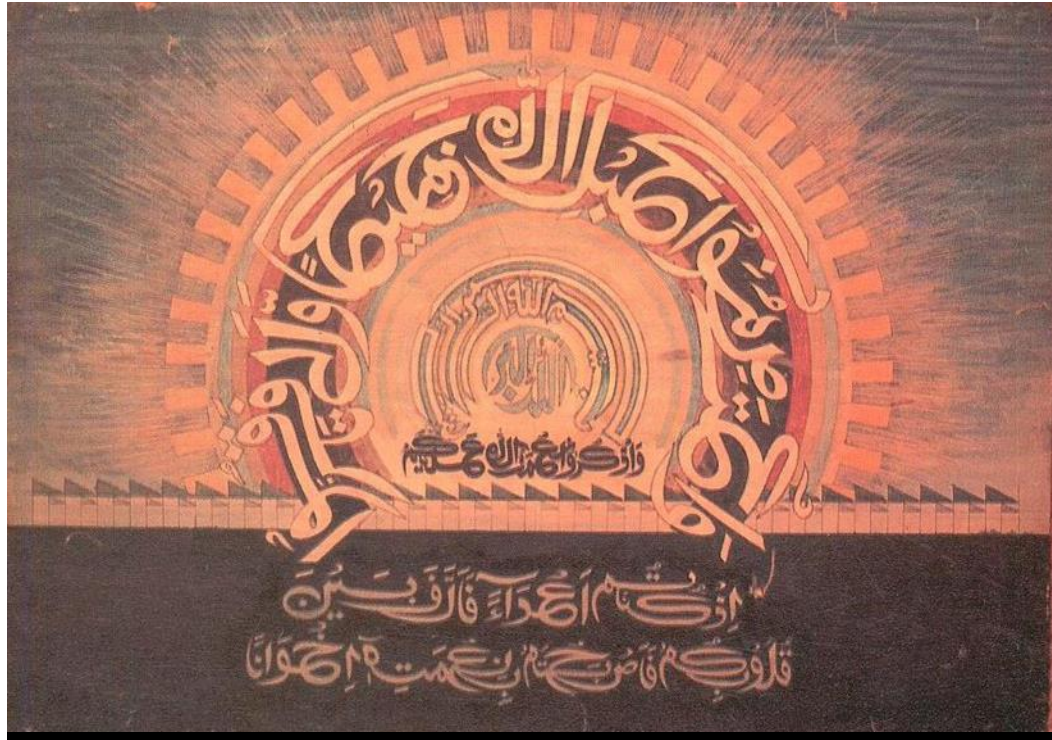


Figure. 3. Sadequain, *All Muslims Be United*, 1974, 58 x 58 cm, oil on masonite, PNCA, Islamabad.

Source: Marcella Nesom Sirhandi. *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozesons, 1992, pl.100.

Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985) was another exceptional artist known for modernizing calligraphy with focus on symbolism. After graduating from National College of Arts Lahore he became an active member of the Lahore Art Circle. Originally from Simla, his family was involved in the business of carpet making. The design sense and fabrication of surfaces were natural features of his artistic individuality which became apparent in his practice with the passage of time. He worked as the editor of a magazine *Ilhās*. Being an active literary person, he wrote poetry, novels, and plays. His interest in writing enabled him to use calligraphy as a subject of painting.¹⁵ His work was a fusion of painting and printing techniques which introduced innovative visual vocabulary for symbolic means. His work evolved with different experiences and is divided into different series. The later phase of his practice represents his interest in gardening. Such interest stimulates him to fabricate his imagery based on unusual botanical forms by using calligraphic text in the *Roots Series*. This series received appreciation for introducing new means of image making with the incorporation of text as metaphors. His training at Slade School of London provoked him to realize his identity which was a mix of religious, national, cultural, and personal associations. Calligraphy being an act of divine practice inspired him as a Muslim. In his *Roots Series* he used fabricated calligraphic forms by means of roots which are inter-related with the development of a plant (fig. 4). These roots represent firm behavior of plants in all challenging conditions for survival and growth. In his work, use of surfaces with representation of threads shows his association with carpet making. The split panels hold the essence with gradation of color scheme in each that makes them a unit. Whereas, the calligraphy come arabesque designs at the lower register of composition blossoms into floral patterns. He used to sign at the top symbolizing himself as a bloomed fragment holding a legacy of its own. The unique visual metaphors fabricated by Shemza introduced possibilities of creating dialogue in modernized way.



Figure. 4. Anwar Jalal Shemza, *Roots Series*, 1984, size unknown, mix medium on canvas, private collection.

Source: Ijaz-ul-Hasan. *Paintings in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozesons, 1991, 67.

Askari Mian Irani (1940-2004) also focused on calligraphy as a painterly expression. He was interested in exploring the visual presentation of this genre on painterly surface and for that he got references from Islamic geometrical designs, Islamic art and architecture. In painting through colors, he wanted to achieve rich and jewel-like effect reflecting the aesthetics of Islamic art. His color palette primarily consists of blue, green, and golden colors. Amulet art (*ta'vīz*) was also incorporated in his practice (Qur'ānic verses are represented through numerical ratio which is an old practice associated with magical properties), with repeatedly used word Allah that

signifies the state of *virid* (repetitive practice). Later he incorporated textural effect in his work with strings of calligraphic words for intensifying compositional effect (fig.5).

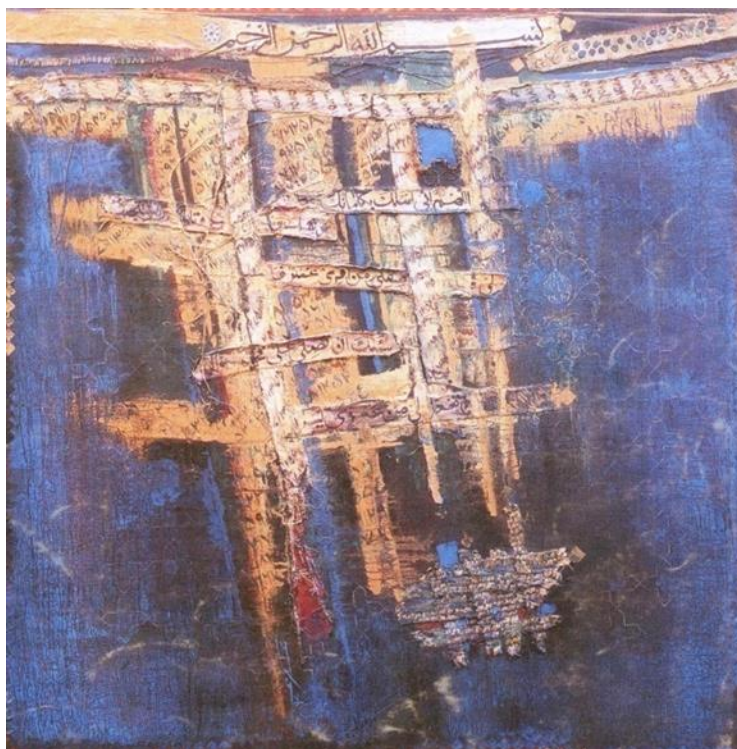


Figure. 5. Askari Mian Irani, *Naqsh-i Kuhna*, 1997, mix media on canvas, 116 x 116 cm, private collection.

Source: Amina Hassan. ed. *Askari: The Jeweller in Paint*, Lahore: Lahore Arts Council, 1998, 159.

Aslam Kamal (b. 1939) is another link of the same chain who was looking for creative execution of calligraphy on two-dimensional surfaces. In 1960's, his career started as a designer for book dust covers and he designed around twelve thousand book jackets.¹⁶ He was inspired by the art of geometry and interested in calligraphic forms which helped him to create his own individualistic style. He worked with flat colors over graphically designed surfaces which gives the impression of stained-glass painting (fig. 6). He used to execute calligraphy with black color against a background of radiant tones. Besides text he used architectural motifs in his work with focus on arches,

domes, and minarets. He got inspiration from surface decoration of Muslim Architecture with calligraphic bands and executed it over the surface of his canvas with calligraphy as the focal point and architectural elements for creating spatial and mystical quality. The use of light in the background represents divine radiance as a source of eternity.



Figure. 6. Aslam Kamal, *Hu al-Kāfi Hu al-Shāfi al-Bāki al Alā*, 1982, size unknown, oil on canvas, private collection.

Source: Aslam Kamal. *Islāmi Khaṭṭā'i: Aik T'ārruf*. Lahore: Urdu Science Board, 2005, n.p.

Ahmed Pervez (1926-1979) another important member of Lahore Art Circle played important role in representing progressive approach in art. His work represents abstract imagery comprised of swirling forms based on loops, circles, and curvilinear calligraphic structure. He learned the art of calligraphy from his uncle Jacobus Michael.¹⁷ He had bold temperament in art making like an abstract expressionist but he fused it with the eastern sense of design. The extracted forms of loops, and circles as calligraphic structure are interlaced with bright colored patches in creating elusive effect (fig.7). His work is neither formal nor decorative. The radiant color scheme of his work

with bursting forms over painterly surface represents his restless personality. Charged with vigorous expression his work represents eastern tradition. Every form is well defined and is outlined with a darker tone that holds individual character. In his work Qur'ānic letters sprang outside the vases giving a unique expression to the eastern imagery.¹⁸



Figure. 7. Ahmed Pervez, *Untitled*, 1977, size unknown, oil on canvas, private collection.

Source: S. Amjad Ali. *Painters of Pakistan*, Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 2000, 137.

Ismail Gulgee (1926-2007) was a versatile artist from Karachi. For the sake of exploring different genres, he executed his work through the mediums of painting, sculpture, and mosaic. For visual manipulation he used calligraphy by means of action painting. Being a celebrated artist of his time, he received commissioned projects from Government in the time period of Zia ul Haq after Sadequain. On expressing his wish to teach the art of calligraphy, he was allotted a space which he utilized for his personal studio come gallery. For the promotion of calligraphic art this serves a rare example in the history of

Pakistani art.¹⁹ He introduced free-hand calligraphy following the influence of abstract expressionism (fig. 8). The swift movement of his hands and body adds to the final execution of calligraphy on the surface. *“His text based gestural and abstract compositions served as artists personal interpretations. With swinging motion of the painterly surface, he created designed compositions.”*²⁰

The created visual expression was a product of thick and thin meditative layers achieved through gestural involvement into his practice. *“During this act of transferring calligraphic words his body moves according to the movement of his hands, it jumps into the air and his hands hits the surface of the canvas in a free-flowing gesture with the heavily charged wide brush of glowing colors.”*²¹

He mixed colors with sweeping strokes leaving a textural effect of words on painterly surface. His composition holds contrasting tonal gradations ranging from light to dark with the addition of overlapping strokes. Akbar Naqvi states that, *“In Gulgee’s work the mixing of colors takes place in action on the canvas placed vertically unlike Pollock who spread it out on the ground. This was as close as Muslim art ever came to the body movement so unlike the dance of the dervish in Action Painting. The emphasis in the paintings on the richness of material and surfeit of ornamentation is a matter of his taste.”*²²

In action painting an artist got involved in such a way that after finishing it he realizes from which experience he went through during the whole process. His work was single stroked executed in layers of luminous colors. On huge surfaces he manages to balance the vigorous flow of the text and the elements of ornamentation mostly executed in golden color symbolizing golden words.

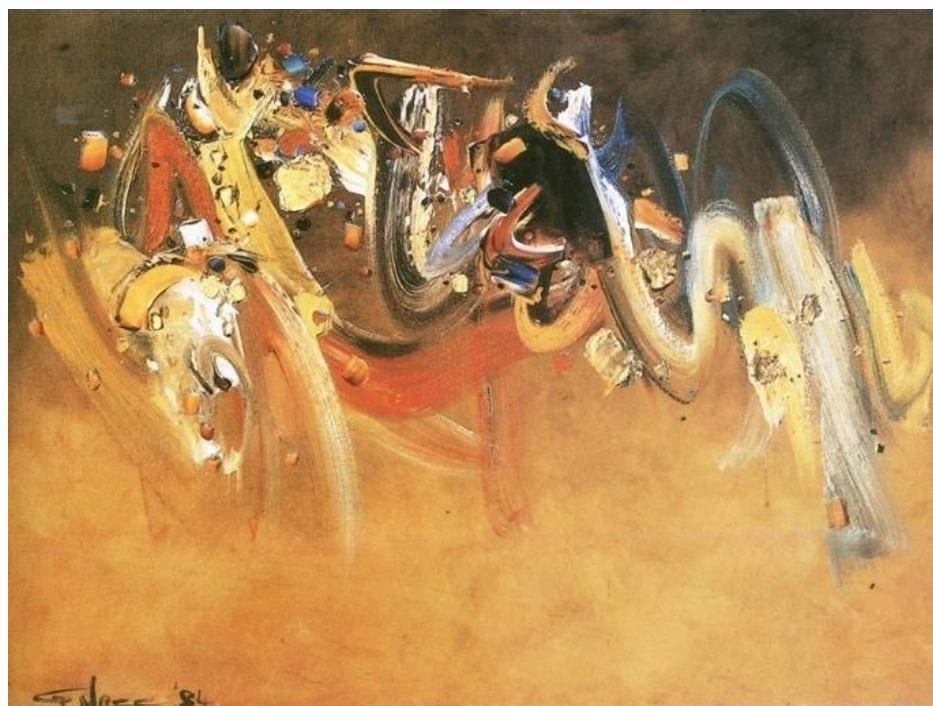


Figure. 8. Ismail Gulgee, *Composition*, 1984, size unknown, oil on canvas, private collection.

Source: Ijaz-ul-Hasan. *Paintings in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozsons, 1991, pl.55.

Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999) the pioneer of conceptual art in Pakistan also used calligraphy with modernized approach. He was inspired by the linear rhythm of calligraphy and for the sake of creative exploration he transformed its visual gesture. His conceptual use of calligraphic forms refers to the cultural façade of Pakistan having meaningless existence. He used the format of miniature painting for creating compositions. His creative concern allowed him to introduce a novel visual vocabulary which sparked a new spirit to the traditional arts of calligraphy and miniature painting. In some works, he utilized calligraphic signs within the frame whereas in others they are evident in borders. With passionate vigor of exploring his identity he worked with different mediums and surfaces. Having knowledge of modern art movements, he was more inclined towards Mark Tobey and Ad Reinhardt (who were influenced by Far Eastern Oriental Arts). He consciously chose

different approach towards art making in comparison to his teacher Shakir Ali, Akbar Naqvi quotes, “*Shakir Ali’s calligraphy was traditional for all its modern modulation. Zahoor’s was conceptual and subversive without dividends. The calligraphic strokes were his visual sensations.*”²³

One of his series titled *firmān* is based on linear characters of calligraphy which turned out in abstracted imagery over two-dimensional surface (fig.9). He used calligraphy as signs for fabricating a modern phrase.

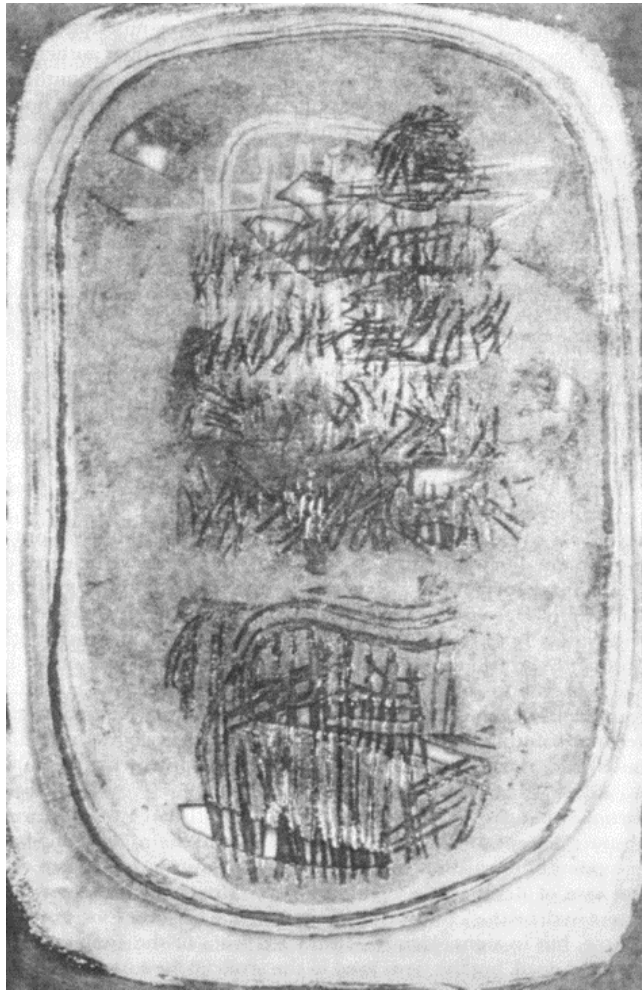


Figure. 9. Zahoor ul Akhlaq, *Firmān I*, 1967, 62 x 38 cm, etching, National Museum of Art, PNCA, Islamabad.

Source: Akbar Naqvi. *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 459.

Rashid Ahmed Arshad (b.1937) is a modernist who introduced creative manipulation of calligraphy according to his own sensibility and aesthetic taste. His use of calligraphy was meant for personal means not as a product of any external influence. The geometric structure of calligraphy helped him to explore possibilities within the genre of painting. For the fulfillment of his desire, he used calligraphy for revealing its spiritual significance which if executed with positive intensions, is no less divine than a prayer.²⁴ He used text in *Shikasta* and *Kufic* inspired scripts with focus on design elements (fig. 10). He never wanted to use text for didactic purpose but to generate meanings out of it. His executed words are symbols which are meant for reviving the legacy of Islam.

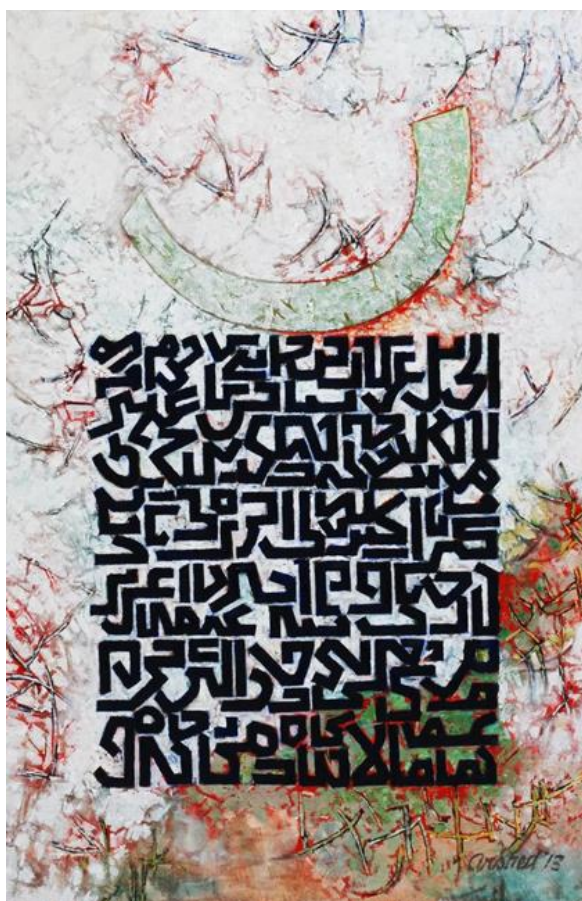


Figure 10. Rashid Ahmed Arshad, 2015, *Text and Texture 4*, 91 x 60 cm, oil on canvas.

Source: Rashid Arshad. Art Scene of Pakistan: The Unwritten Chapter, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2018, 192.

Jamil Naqsh (1939-2019), a follower of cubism from Karachi also explored calligraphic abstraction through his bold style. Although known as a figurative painter, he was also trained in writing different styles of calligraphy. He used calligraphic forms with strong sense of design. The richness of textured surfaces adds to the meaningfulness of his fabricated textual imagery executed with the interplay of vibrant tones (fig. II). With bold strokes he painted with tranquility and harmony the Divine text which at times is spontaneous, fluid, yet controlled.²⁵ With versatility in technique and execution his calligraphic paintings hold a strong aesthetic quality. With layers of color and text he manages to create visual metaphors. He published his work in a book titled “The Painted Words” with focus on the ancient and contemporary calligraphic styles. This book is a documentation of his style executed with calligraphic forms by using aesthetic sensibility for creative concerns. He left a strong influence on the practice of Chitra Pritam (another calligraphic painter based in Karachi). Pritam holds the essence of Naqsh’s painted words while practicing.



Figure. II. Jamil Naqsh, *The painted Words*, 2013, 102 x 152 cm, oil on canvas.

Source: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/472112-in-tribute-of-jamil-naqsh>.

Ahmed Khan (b. 1938) a Lahore based exceptional designer found expressive means while designing calligraphic words onto his surfaces. Being a designer, he explored the possibility of fabricating text with lustrous effect. The colorful harmony of textual surface is achieved by the application of chemicals on pure silver and gold leaves which came out as a reaction into sparkling colors. The natural response of color is more appealing for him than the unsatisfactory illusion of light created through colored pigments.”²⁶ His glazed surfaces own a signature style which represents the aesthetics of a designer. He used calligraphy as patterns, and with the interlaced repetitive patterns he creates rhythmic compositions with specified focal point. Hidden and the evident both entities remained central feature in his compositions enhanced through interweaved rhythmic movement of the text. Khan reassessed traditional interpretation of line and form through calligraphic designs.²⁷ His technique and its effect holds unmatched intensity; he had witnessed primitive to the latest norms of art and technology and they are evident in his art practice.²⁸ He contributed immensely in reshaping the tradition of calligraphy through novel experimentation. In some of his compositions the text is apparent with focus on the first layer that faces viewers whereas in others the focal point is highlighted through luminous light created in the background (fig. 12). The interlaced fabrication of calligraphy with bright colored tones gives the impression of lattice work which was achieved with the incorporation of screen-printing technique. The repetitive and rhythmic flow of text over different layers of tonal gradations highlights symbolic connotations associated with the oneness of God.

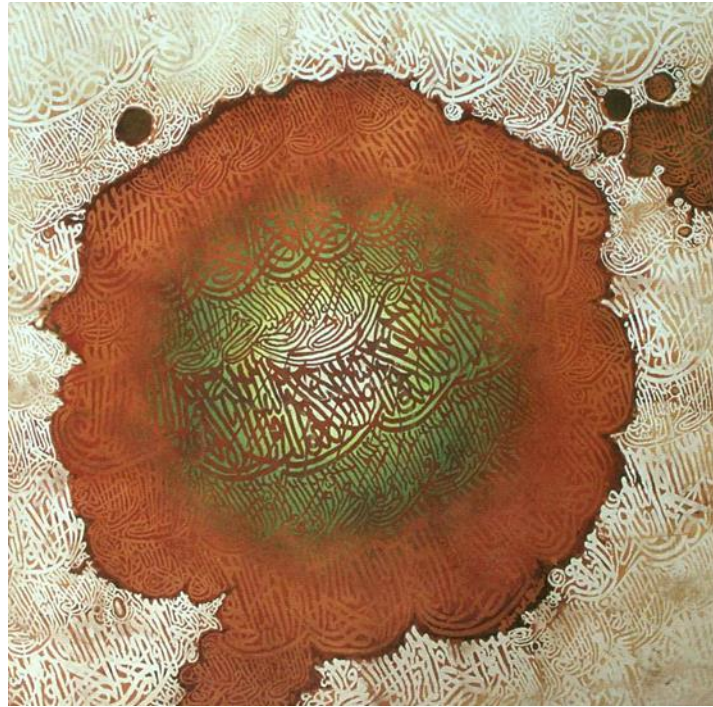


Figure. 12. Ahmed Khan, *Qur'ānic Calligraphy*, 2008, 66 x 66 cm, chemically treated silver on canvas board, private collection.

Source: *Colours of Paradise: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, Group Show April 5-10, 2008, Ejaz Art Galleries Lahore.

Arif Khan (b. 1960) from Lahore is another example who explored the fluidity of his medium for creating design-based calligraphic compositions. His interest in calligraphy strengthened his desire to play with calligraphic text over painterly surfaces and his training as a designer facilitated him to explore his sense of design through text-based compositions. For satisfying his urge he learned the art of calligraphy from renowned traditional calligraphers, Irfan Ahmed Khan and Khursheed Alam Gohar Qalam and later utilized it according to his desired means of creative execution.²⁹ He has evolved his signature style in painting with focus on compositions in which the text flows in descending order symbolizing the shower of Divine blessings from celestial to the worldly. His visual representation of repetitive text is fabricated over layers of colors. His work holds the quality of readability which became vague at a point when it transforms into repetitive *mashq*

(practice). In his practice he mostly focuses on *Ḥarūf-i Muqattʿāt* (a set of letters in the Holy Qurʾān, the meaning of which has not been exposed on mankind) coupled with a *Nuqṭa* (dot) as a unifying feature with the Divine placed in the composition as a focal point.³⁰ His rhythmic flow of color attains the significance of melodious symphonies (fig. I3).



Figure. I3. Arif Khan, Mystic Letters-III, 2018, 27.9 x 43.1 cm, mixed media on paper, artist's own collection.

Source: picture by the author.

Bin Qalandar (b. 1980) is known for creating designer calligraphic paintings. The son of a Sufi sage was interested in the art of calligraphy prior to his admission in National College of Arts. After graduating in miniature

painting, he opted calligraphy as a subject for artistic propagation. He used calligraphy as an element of ornamentation with repetitive geometrical shapes. Most evident in his work are circles which look similar with medallions (represented in Mughal architecture with ornamental motives). These medallions are used repeatedly for creating circular motion. His decoratively charged compositions represent the movement of restless hands with focus on design vocabulary portrayed in centralized, closed compositions. The curvilinear rhythm over radiant colored surfaces with readable text is meant for drawing room spaces fulfilling consumerist taste.



Figure. 14. Bin Qalandar, *Surah-e-Ikhlās*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 45 cm.

Source: Clifton Art Gallery, Bin Qalandur, retrieved from <http://cliftonartgallery.com/artist/bin-qulander/>

Shiblee Muneer (b. 1980) born in Jhang takes pride being a descendent of *Ustad* Haji Sharif (1889-1978). Sharif was the first influential traditional miniature painter after post-partition period in Pakistan. Trained in

traditional arts of miniature painting and calligraphy as part of family tradition, Muneer by following his objectives and artistic concerns graduated from Beaconhouse National University. The exposure of Post-Modern philosophies, critical thinking, and exposure to new media arts helped him to use his art practice for addressing personal concerns, critical analysis on the bases of contemporary aesthetics. His ironic work executed through perfectly rendered calligraphic imagery serves as a comment on historical references seen through the eyes of a realist (fig. 15). *Adhā Musalmān*, his solo performance was a commentary on the present state of Muslims living in Pakistan with ironic gesture of devotion. The use of gold and silver leaf represents the historical legacy of Islamic calligraphy which is rendered with focus on its delicate expression.



Figure. 15. Shiblee Muneer, *Qaṭra-I*, 2019, mixed media on paper, 76.2 x 76.2 cm.

Evolution of Islamic Calligraphy...

Source: O' Art Space, Shiblee Munir, retrieved from <https://oartspace.com/team/shiblee-muneer/>

Besides painting, Pakistani artists used other mediums of expression for representing calligraphic forms. Amin Gulgee (b. 1966), the son of Ismail Gulgee used three-dimensional sculptures and installations made of bronze, copper, and metal. He owns a workshop where he used to work for hour and hours creating his visual metaphors. His meticulously bejeweled works have taken the form of signature style where the task is to achieve perfection of desired expression. In many of his works he has used calligraphic verses, and text but according to his own aesthetic taste. The readable gesture of text loses its character when at a point it evolves into a designed form. His representation and presentation of work is non-conventional which becomes interactive when displayed at a specific place. He says that for him art is another form for meditation.³¹ He used Islamic calligraphy for exploring man's underlying spirituality.³²



Figure. 16. Amin Gulgee, *Surah al-Alaq: The Power of 7*, 2018, metal, bronze and coal, variable in size.

Source: T. U. Dawood, "The Power of 7," April 2018, retrieved from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/you/305239-the-power-of-7>.

Impact of Calligraphy on Contemporary Text-Based Art in Pakistan:

Most of the artists and designers have learned the basics of calligraphy which provided them freedom to use it for personal means. Diversity of style and technique made them masters of their own individualistic styles. In the contemporary age, besides Islamic calligraphy a number of artists are utilizing text with creative concerns as a tool for visual communication. Rasheed Araeen, Mohammad Ali Talpur, Muzzumil Ruheel, Ghulam Muhammad, Shah Abdullah Alamee, Sumaira Qayyum, Zahid Mayo, Muneeb Ali, Samara Shahid and some others are exploring creative vistas in finding their own textual statements. Saleema Hashmi shares that, "*Muhammad Ali Talpur, Muzzumil Ruheel, and Ghulam Muhammad took calligraphy via the routes of language and text, all different in their approach and concept.*"³³

Muhammad Ali Talpur (b. 1976) a graduate of National College of Arts is originally from Sindh. Language was a barrier for him in terms of communication in a new city but with the passage of time he manages to deal with this issue of identity. His interest in calligraphy, paved ways for communicating his concerns related to language through minimalistic and abstract manipulation of text. For visual documentation he used line as a metaphor for creating optical illusion with confined color palette of black and white. While focusing on contemporary aesthetics of image making, he used text as his visual statement. He is of the view that, "*Language is one of the biggest inventions of humanity. Writing has been a method of documenting human ideas, information, creative expressions and secrets from private to public usage. In my work, I translate text, convert sounds into pictorial form, and free them from their original purpose of readability and communication.*"³⁴



Figure. 17. Muhammad Ali Talpur, *Untitled (Alif Series 5)*, 2020, ink on paper, 37.5 x 27.5 cm.

Source: Grosvenor Gallery, Muhammad Ali Talpur, retrieved from <https://www.grosvenorgallery.com/content/feature/26/artworks-3857-mohammad-ali-talpur-untitled-alif-series-5-2020/>

Muzammil Ruheel (b. 1985) is a graduate of Beacon House National University. He learned traditional calligraphy in Arabic, Urdu, and Persian language before opting art education. His interest in writing and text took another dimension after becoming a part of his practice (fig.19). His text-based work is a combination of skill, observation, and analysis of socio-political set-up. By commenting time, space, and history through the incorporation of text he has created multi-disciplinary artworks ranging from mixed media to digital art installations and sculptures. For the manipulation of text, he says, *“For me, words are the bridges through which I communicate and transcribe the visuals of my mind, it’s like*

storytelling, where a storyteller tells a story and we create visuals in our minds. My practice too is the same."³⁵

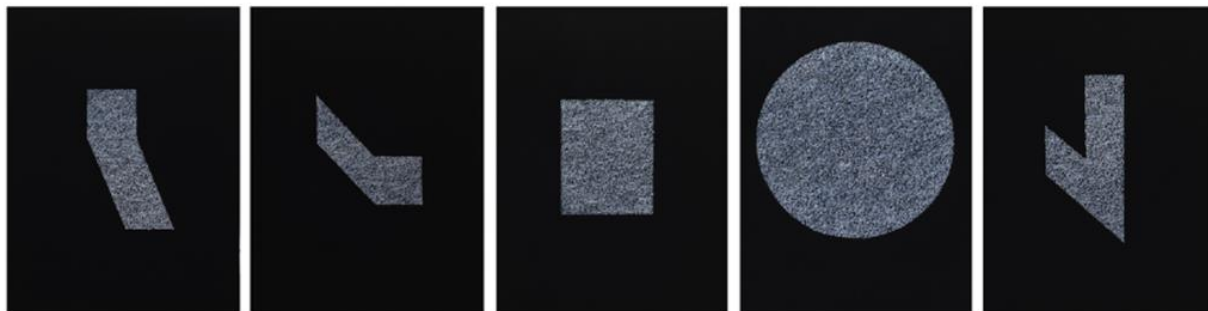


Figure. 18. Muzammil Ruheel, *Yearning for the Beloved*, 2019, Ink and acrylics on *wasli* paper, 23 x 31 cm.

Source: Artsy, Muzammil Ruheel, retrieved from <https://www.artsy.net/artist/muzzumil-ruheel>.

Ghulam Muhammad (b. 1979) from Balochistan graduated from Beacon House National University. His text-based work on smaller scale revolves around his concerns related with language. For creating artworks, he used readable text in the form of cut outs extracted from Urdu books with great care and by reassembling them onto two-dimensional surfaces he introduced new aesthetic meanings (fig. 19). This process becomes meditative for the artist, he shares, "*Languages create boundaries, separations as well as invitations. Language paradoxically conveys meaning, and limits communication. It is this range of language that is incredibly fascinating for me.*"³⁶

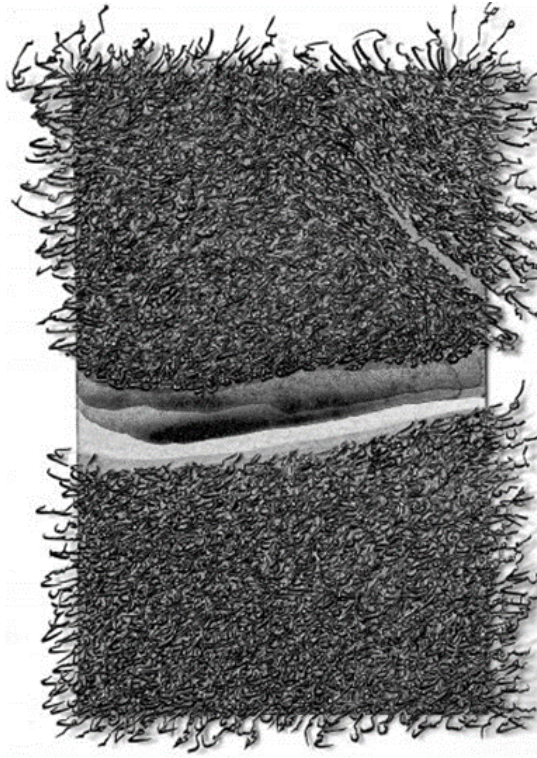


Figure. 19. Ghulam Muhammad, *Khaakstarr*, 2018, cutouts of letters affixed on paper, size unknown.

Source: Daily Times, “Art Show displaying work of Contemporary Artists kicks off,” retrieved from <https://dailytimes.com.pk/244978/art-show-displaying-work-of-contemporary-artists-kicks-off/>

Conclusion:

With ups and downs in the socio-political backdrop, the art of calligraphy is one such expression which has not been questioned till to date. In Pakistan, practice of calligraphy as a form of art and design is conceived as an integral part of the religious faith that ensures Divine blessings. As an art form, besides artists, designers have also contributed in finding innovative vistas for the creative execution of calligraphy. Both have used calligraphy as a tool of creative expression coupled with religious symbolism. Besides being associated with Islamic aesthetics it holds an identity of its own that left enormous impact on contemporary art practice globally. Text-based art is an offshoot of calligraphic practice. Language holds the identity of a society and its

relationship with text provides artists of Pakistan multiples means to express their narratives. This urge for representing language as identity has started reflecting in contemporary design which receives acknowledgement. Calligraphy has evolved as a living art tradition in Pakistan. Unfortunately, in the current scenario with excess of exposure through social media the art of appropriation has affected many artists and without adding their own research and narrative into it they are merely producing works. This feature needs to be explored with truthfulness beyond following consumerist taste.

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