Inside Arabic Calligraphy From Alef to Zaha: an Artist’s View
By Doris Bittar

The cultures of the Middle East, often times called Islamic bear the traces of the ancient histories of Egypt, Assyria and Mesopotamia. Within them we bear witness to the tribal arts of the Berbers, the Kurds, the gypsies who influenced all harmonic folk music, the early Christians of Byzantium: Armenians, Greek Orthodox and Aramaic cultures of the Chaldeans and the Syriacs who still practice in their beloved Aramaic language through textiles, ceramics and decorated texts. We cannot look at Middle Eastern languages and not see that the local and idiosyncratic dialects have embedded within it traces of Phoenician, Hebrew, early Nabitean Arabic and bits of local oddities. The language of Arabic, when first developed and to this day refuses to erase the pictographs of Egypt, the cuneiforms of Ugaritic culture or to incorporate the technological contemporary world. Arabic, although a phonetic language, has an embedded pictographic mission, a spatial intent and within it there is one and two point perspectives and spatial notations delivered through the *harakat* or diacritical and vowel marks that literally punctuate spaces – emphasizes the decorative here and a light or distance there.

**Introduction**

Arabic calligraphy’s structural characteristics and unexpected spatial depths make it a dynamic and versatile language for the conveyance of form and space as well as meaning. In this paper, examples of Arabic letters, words and phrases culled from a wide range of sources will be visually interpreted as images or pictures with depth and form. How we “read” a language such as Arabic that is both phonetic and visually spatial will be analyzed. In other words, this paper’s conceit is to look at calligraphy as a visual language - temporarily bereft of its primary phonetic and communicative function. This gestalt view of the origins and structure of Arabic offers us a dynamic perspective on a language whose scholars have focused almost exclusively on spiritual, aesthetic and didactic functions while ignoring the basic illusionism of space with which all artists work. The influence of calligraphy on several contemporary artists, in particular the highly acclaimed architect Zaha Hadid, master calligrapher Samir Sayigh and installation artist Jamelie Hassan will be considered in order to offer us the opportunity to understand their process of working with calligraphic structures and forms.

First, we will look at examples of Arabic calligraphy that are iconographic. These images contradict the belief, widely held by Westerners and Middle Easterners alike, that iconography is forbidden by Islamic laws and practices. Fortunately or unfortunately this question always lingers when we are considering “Islamic” art, regardless of the make-up of the audience. Second, we will consider the process by which calligraphers make their marks from a perspective of codes established in basic drawing techniques. We will define the process of drawing as a way of activating the illusion of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional surface. Third, we will look at calligraphic examples and focus on ones that define a kind of architectural space, often with human proportions in mind. This sequence of analysis will support a comparison
between Zaha Hadid’s architectural projects and models and a broad range of calligraphic examples.

The “Forbidden” Use of Graven Imagery in Islamic Art

Examples of iconography are to be found throughout the Middle East and in all kinds of locations including mosques, synagogues and, of course, churches. The art of Arabic calligraphy and that of Islamic art intertwine and diverge. Often, the assumption is made that both are non-iconographic. Although there is truth to this belief, when looking at particular religious examples, it is generally not true given the number of exceptions both in Islam and the secular Middle East. This premise rests on the fact that monotheism at its inception through Judaism forbade the use of graven imagery in the context of prayer or places of worship. The pre-monotheistic pagan hegemony that was the Middle East was soon to be replaced with Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Early Christian art supported the turn away from many gods by emphasizing the images of a single God as seen in many renditions of God and Christ with smaller saints surrounding them. Judaism usually did not portray God at all but told the stories of the prophets throughout the torah and often depicted the events. Islam borrowed this “rule” and at least in terms of rhetoric, emphasized it. However, like many examples within Judaism, Islam did not always follow it, even in places of worship. Famous examples abound throughout the Levant, Iraq, Turkey and Persia, such as the dazzling mosaics of the Umayed mosque in Damascus and the focused painterly murals of Dura Europa Synagogue found in eastern Syria near the Iraqi border. These examples, among many others, make us wonder if it was as important a factor as we are led to believe by certain interests: political/cultural entities in the West and religious orthodoxy within Islam.

Arabic: Embedded Iconography

Unlike the writings of other Semitic languages such as Phoenician, Aramaic and Hebrew or Latin writings (whose roots are also Phoenician), Arabic created a language infused with visual dynamism, perhaps to establish the new monotheistic religion of Islam as evidence suggests. For the purposes of keeping our attention on calligraphy we will include some examples of writing that use “graven images”.

In the cartoon-like and blatant realization above, the Hindu influenced Persian letters are twisted action figures intertwined and occupying a concentrated and shallow space.
The letters of the Lion in Ta’liq by Sah Mahmud Nisabura largely fill in the lion’s frame. However, it is not pure fill-in because we can see that the letters are also defining detail in the lion: a nostril, an eye, a jaw, joints and paws as well as the outline of his body. The Arabic functions as shape and ornamental punctuation rather than movement or structure.

Every part of the “Bismallah” hawk above is articulated. The hawk’s musculature and finer ornament such as feathers and claws seem detailed and are all formed by the Arabic letters. It has a potent energy and a sweep to it, thus also defining its action. Not a single thing is fill-in or outlining. The interior and its details move in and out of various spatial roles with great fluid articulation. We could say that it is a kind of ornamental structuralism in which the parts cannot be separated from the whole.

In Canadian artist, Jamelie Hassan’s playful piece “Ya!” we can see that she is stretching the meaning of basic calligraphic function by directly linking it to the function of the messenger angel Gabriel. The word “Ya!” which is the first word one says before saying a name - in a typical Arabic greeting is implied in neon on the right side. The letter/ ya conversely trumpets back to the angel. The thrust of both the letter ya and the angel Gabriel mirror each other. The letter becomes a figure and the figure becomes a letter. They exchange places with each other through gestured form, symbolism and meaning as they assert their message of greeting and affirmation. Seen as a diptych they fuse to mean: “Ya!”, the greeting. The neon’s photons bathe the viewer’s face and greet him/her in a metaphorical and literal “illumination” of recognition and historical references.
The Structure and Proportions of Arabic Letters

The structure of the Arabic alphabet is based on intervals and proportion. Although Arabic is a phonetic language, its roots like the roots of Phoenician are based in pictographs. What may be different about Arabic writing is that through its structure and practices, both artistic and prosaic a very clear tradition of emphasizing the human form in a human space has somehow endured along side its better-known aesthetic and spiritual evolution.

When we closely examine the alphabet beginning with its first letter, Alef we can see a clear resemblance to the standing or kneeling human figure. The nuqta or the diamond mark that the calligraphic pen makes when its nib presses against paper is the basic unit that usually determines proportions and measurements for all of the letters. If we divide Alef into seven components - which is a standard way of structuring it and the way the human figure is traditionally sectioned in artistic anatomy instruction, then we may assert that its proportions are based on those of humans with a head, a spine and legs. The length of Alef is used to determine the diameter of other letters that are rounded such as Ain.

Calligraphic Realms of Drawing: Chinese and Arabic Calligraphy

Artists are trained to “read” two-dimensional worlds: to see illusionistic space on a two dimensional plane. When they look at other artwork they may try to see it as the artist who made it may have seen it, from a structural point of view - as a terrain for the creation of varied spaces. In Jamelie Hassan’s piece, “Seek Knowledge Even Unto China,” the Arabic letters appear to pose in reclined positions, leaning against the elegant Chinese “boulders” that seem to be near a tree or vertical structure, all within
the same realm or “landscape”. Both the Arabic and the Chinese reiterate the title of the piece. The Arabic letters are privileged because they function in two ways as sound and picture. The Arabic letters recline, as any privileged subject would, but they also pay homage to one of their parents: Chinese calligraphy.

Arabic and Chinese calligraphy, in terms of drawing actual pages, share a similar practice that involves an artist’s body at the most basic level: that of the breath. In Chinese calligraphy it is required that the beginning of a mark, whether it is a character or elements of a scene, begin with one’s inhalation and end with one’s exhalation. The breathing could be slow or fast, nervous and angular or relaxed and rounded. Many states and emotions of being are reflected through the artists’ “signature” marks as he/she renders the words. Chinese ink and brush landscapes follow the same “rule” as they reside in the same space with the characters. Rather, Arabic is usually rendered more slowly and through more segmented bodily movements and several breaths to account for embellishments, careful design and geometry.

The backbone of learning to drawing is to be able to “push” and “pull” the white spaces or the empty parts of the paper. As we apply dark and colored pigment to a blank white surface, we are implicitly or explicitly indicating a space here and a void there, often with an imaginary horizon line as a reference point. When we read text we read linearly, from one direction to the other. In fact, we tend to scan images from left to right (Western text) or right to left (Semitic texts) or top to bottom (Asian texts), if we are patient lookers eventually our eyes begin to follow a variety of directions. The marks of interest, pigmented components or images keep our gaze circling. The obvious question, given the focus of this research on Arabic calligraphy, is: How do we interpret calligraphic realms?

**Defining the Calligraphic Spatial Realm:**

I first came to see space within the world of calligraphy when I visited the City of the Dead in Cairo over 25 years ago. The tombs of Ibn Barquq’s double-domed monumental structure gripped me. I first saw that the concentric spaces of the dome were ebbing and flowing, receding and zooming in. The second dome above Ibn Barquq’s wife’s tomb was more spatially articulated. It has a large and heavy floral pattern at its center and a calligraphic edging with text that was framed with a series of repeating arches. The letters appeared as figures standing, lying and kneeling. If we look more closely at a segment that has been rotated to an upright position, we can
examine the space more closely. It seems to be a courtyard-like space. Perhaps we can speculate that it is a mosque in which the random placement of letters evenly throughout the space may be how people may arrange themselves before prayer. Its message was sublime, as though the words for these revered rulers were transmitted to them in as human a way as possible.

The Significance of Alef’s Role in Creating Perspective

The kinds of spaces that calligraphy creates are varied and nuanced. Note that these delicate gilded leaves appear to be quite similar. However, when we navigate through the letters, note that the spatial particulars and the feelings evoked make them quite distinct from each other. We find that the one on the left (Sweet Chestnut leaf) defines a smaller space than the one on the right (Tobacco leaf). It is a more shallow and intimate space. The tobacco leaf on the right has more air, height and light within it. Through the use of the letters’ scale and the verticality of the leaf itself we can determine that one is a room-like space and the other a courtyard or a chapel. Whatever role the leaves may play, the Alef determines what the directional dynamics will be as well as how deep and wide the space is according to intervals among the grouping of alefs (in the tobacco leaf example) and the singular thicker alefs (as seen in the sweet chestnut leaf). In both examples the “background” is seen as a varied space with deep, shallow and emerging parts. The letters are usually also levitating or floating slightly off of the imagined gravitational ground which is determined by the horizon. The horizon, in turn is determined by the alefs as they angle and line up like telephone poles along a road. This creates a sense of air or atmosphere. As they hover, the alefs, at every point and depending on their position, corral the other letters back into the central space. This creates a sense of isometric tension that activates the atmosphere around them, thus helping to articulate our experience of air, scale and distance.

Greetings for a Festive Occasion, Wrap Around Text, Interplay of Red Kufic and Thuluth
Private Collection, Casablanca, Morocco, (Khatibi & Sijelmassi, 1976)

Here we examine a text written on paper devoid of any architectural or decorative
context. However, if we look at it carefully we can see a specific space with depth, a kind of courtyard space or a deep porch space in which some letters recede and others come forward. The wrapping around of the letters on the left side also indicates a kind of conceptual playfulness with the idea of two “real” spaces on one surface. The verticals of Alef and Lam show us degrees of depth that closely follow the rules of one point perspective. In fact, the Alef when joined with the Lam angles back like a wooden beam reaching to the letters and phrases in another space behind it. The longer you look the more complex the space becomes. The white “background” is hyper active in this example because of the various roles it plays: floor, air, faraway space and in between space.

In Samir Sayigh’s current project “Al Qalam, Al Kalaam” we can see that the architectonic world meets the traditional world of Arabic calligraphy. Sayigh’s lens is one that merges his philosophical interest in Sufism into a visual entity that acts as a field for him to work with his more specific concerns of finding harmony between Christian and Muslim religious texts. The opportunity of meeting Sayigh, a living calligrapher in Beirut in 2005, prompted me to ask abruptly, “Do you see yourself as manipulating space and depth when you are rendering and defining your calligraphic designs?” He said, “Yes, of course”. We looked at the examples above and defined the spaces and the micro spaces as well as his use of figure ground techniques. Proportion and the “fractile” numbers must add up in Sayigh’s work and in the work of other calligraphers, he insisted. Above to the left, the figure and the ground are clearly articulated. We can imagine that an ancient boat may be floating in front of a tall and elegant structure - perhaps one that imitates either contemporary buildings or is based on austere ones from ancient civilizations. Above on the right, the “parallelogram” shaped design exemplifies the concepts of figure-ground which are explored through the black and white shapes that recede or emerge from the ground. We are not sure what is figure (thing) and what is ground (background). At one moment the whole seems to point outward like a pyramid. At another moment it implodes like a maze with deep voids and walls. The two readings contradict and entangle our perceptions.
Above, we can see a vast complex of directional forces, suggestions of interior as well as exterior spaces and sail-like fabrics that together twist our eye’s path through the varied topography. We can almost see a piece of earthmoving equipment digging and shoveling. This could only have been rendered in the post-machine age. The manufactured musculature of machines, ships and earth-digging equipment are the heroic images of today, having replaced the pre-industrial lions and hawks of the past.

“I Am From the East.”

Zaha Hadid, the first woman to receive the highly esteemed Pritzker award for architecture, was born in Baghdad, Iraq and schooled both in Europe and the Middle East. Hadid majored in mathematics at the American University of Beirut and received her architectural degree at the Architectural School in London studying with the highly regarded Rem Koolhaas. Hadid’s repertoire reflects a gamut of influences that include Constructivism and the Russian Suprematists. The Deconstructivist architects and theorists claim her as one of their own, but she has shied away from this label. Hadid has also repeatedly asserted an affinity with the East and her interest in calligraphy. Despite this vague affinity with the East, Hadid has not articulated a specific analysis of how Arabic calligraphy may have influenced her projects. Her critics and admirers have largely ignored these references even though they have been forced - to a small extent - to reconsider Hadid’s work in light of her hints. Even, former New York Times critic, Herbert Muschamp, Hadid’s strongest supporter over the years, has wondered out loud about her use of the phrase “energy lines”, by offering us: “I’ve often thought that her emphasis on movement derives from the nomadic tradition of her native Iraq. More likely, it reflects her personal history as a cultural and political exile.”

When Western critics attempt to discuss the “Eastern” influence they usually attribute it to “decorative or ornamental” impacts rather than structural ones. In Western discourse decoration is defined both negatively and positively depending upon which theories are being pushed. Generally, most traditional Western critics, especially in the past century, have defined decoration as superfluous and thus as unnecessary. By contrast, Oleg Grabar defines it as adding “intelligence” and punctuation to the existing design of a structure. Others have made a point of asserting that decoration and ornament are at the center of bringing in non-Western and Third World issues. Within the field of architecture our definition of what is decorative ought to be confined to those elements that add to a structure: color, texture and repetition of form or patterns. When we look at the shape and structure of Hadid’s projects, we find that elements considered decorative are almost absent. The comments about “East as decorative”, therefore, could hardly ever be justified in her work. A deeper analysis may strongly suggest that
the East through calligraphy and other geometric manifestations may act as structure, as well as decoration.

Despite Hadid’s and her critics’ lack of elaboration on these provocative phrases and casual remarks, we can carefully examine Hadid’s sketches and formal drawings, look to her detailed project descriptions, and find many spaces and buildings with direct and obvious links to Arabic calligraphy. Our spatial readings of Arabic calligraphy can illuminate how we understand Zaha Hadid’s projects as well as how Arabic calligraphy may affect architects, engineers, font designers and other practitioners in the visual arts.

**Gesture in Space, Energy as Line**

In project descriptions Hadid often uses such words as “calligraphy”, “energy” and “levitate” to describe the kinds of spatial flows that she wants her structures to have as the public moves through them. Above are shadow studies by Hadid that show a direct affinity with calligraphy. They lean leftward and are loosely tied together with occasional gaps, similar to the way Arabic writing links its parts. They are referring to the impact upon the environment surrounding them.

Hadid’s Melbury Court model defines a floating interior space situated inside a boxed-in one. In this early example of her work we see Hadid working with a specific problem: creating flow in a small and confined space. The additions of curved walls have varying degrees of thickness and seem to float between the rectangular spaces – past the perimeter’s “grid”. The soft line of light below the curved walls suggests that the walls are levitating, much like calligraphic letters extend into other phrases or letters. Hadid clearly wants the flow and movement of the space to extend and stretch through the confines of the segmented rectangles but without necessarily destroying the grid’s premise. This may be why she does not share an affinity with the Deconstructionist in that she still privileges the status of the squared perimeter. By contrast, in later work her ability to challenge the traditional premise by creating an experience of “sharing” spaces between exterior and interior becomes more pronounced.
The images above are a stamp of a sultan’s signature used when sending a letter. In this case the sultan’s name is in the shape of a hawk. The image on the right is a blown-up segment of the tail feathers turned upside down (as letters they are now right side up). The different perspectives of the hawk illustrate the close up dynamics of the interaction between the letters.

In Zaha Hadid’s Bergisel Ski Jump in Austria the letter Alef is literally the structural support for the ramp, which could be the letter “ain”. This project seems to mirror the tail feathers of the hawk.

The previous examples of Arabic calligraphy may suggest that all spaces are within the realm of human proportion. However, not all examples of calligraphy are of shallow spaces. Here the exaggeration of height suggests a space of vast proportions, a cathedral reminiscent of the Hagia Sophia. The large banner text that hovers above is like the larger than life banners hanging down in Istanbul. Again, for dramatic purposes one point perspective is utilized. The vast expanse of letters, below the large inscription of this Sultan’s signature, declares that those under his tutelage are supportive and faithful subjects. The sultan’s signature stamp shows off his greatness.
Through a simulated aerial perspective, the Habitable Bridge Model shows how the “letters” can intertwine and by so doing parts of them can levitate off of the base creating in-between spaces. The “letters” are lying down yet continue to adhere to the “levitation and movement” principles to create a hyper dynamic environment with unexpected gestures.

The *Huwwa* or Him above is an exquisite example of a merging of form with meaning. This refers to God during incantations and shows the relationship of God to man because *Huwwa* means Him with a big “H” and it also means him with a small “h”. This is a space that circulates and returns back to itself, creating a kind of loop that beautifully suggests a unity between spirituality and humanity. It is an intimate space that keeps the eye from wandering outward. Likewise, Hadid in the Moonsoon Lounge keeps the focus on the activities within the space. The backrests act as visual punctuation – as decoration because they repeat and add color. The backrests can be moved from one position or space to another depending on the micro-spaces created within the larger circle. Here the punctuation imitates diacritical marks and vowels within Arabic that tend to ornament the main letters. Perhaps these punctuated backrests are intended for the promotion of thoughtful and congenial activity: for contemplating all the possibilities of a calligraphic design and space. Zaha Hadid’s choice to pursue difficult projects, through complex and breathtaking compositions fills a need that our world yearns for. Her greatest accomplishment may not rest in a single project or even in a body of work but in her ability to re-bridge the divide, real or imagined, between East and West.

**Conclusion**

Zaha Hadid, Samir Sayigh and Jamelie Hassan are engaged in their respective visual practices via a strategy that borrows from past and present traditions. Through contemporary lenses, their visions lead them to embed explicitly and implicitly from the Arabic language within the range of its various manifestations and its milieu.
their visual frameworks we can extrapolate various histories, trends and philosophies. These artists, among others who live and work within varied disciplines and spaces, help to articulate, redefine and affirm our shared cultural inheritances.

Doris Bittar
University of California, San Diego
Presented on April 1, 2006 for the DIWAN Conference
Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, Michigan

Bibliography

Books


Articles


Web Sites
ArtArabicCalligraphy.html


Other References & Image Credits
Hassan, Jamelie, images of art work “Ya!”, courtesy of the Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt. Image of “Seek Knowledge Even Unto China” courtesy of the artist, London, Ontario.

Sayigh, Samir, courtesy of Samir Sayigh, Images from work in progress book project, Al Qalam, Al Kalaam”, Photographed by Doris Bittar, Beirut, Lebanon, 2005