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Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective

Ibrahim El Salahi's painting *The Last Sound* (1964), executed on a square canvas with a carefully limited palette of grays and earth tones, is organized around a central circular dynamic core. Radiant lines thrust outward from a barely perceptible African mask–like form. Celestial bodies, elements of calligraphic geometric and animate shapes, and actual palimpsest-like Arabic calligraphic prayers surround the central form, creating a metaphoric universe in which the last sound is echoed. The title of the work refers to the Islamic practice of reciting prayers for the dead and dying. In the work, El Salahi renders the soul's passage from the corporeal to the celestial as it travels toward heavenly forms inhabiting the universe and beyond. *The Last Sound* is, however, not a narrative or realist work but a manifestly modernist one, in which the terrifying event is metaphorized in a dynamic formal composition. Here, the abstraction of African sculptural forms and calligraphy serves to universalize the event—no realist or academic visual language could obviously be adequate to the scope of the subject. The relation El Salahi creates between African abstract forms and Ara-

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bic calligraphy that itself refers to Islamic discursive textuality invokes the gravitas of its theme.

The assured handling of the visual language with which *The Last Sound* is painted might lead one to imagine that El Salahi is working from an aesthetic grammar already in place, perhaps developed much earlier. But it was only very recently that El Salahi himself had articulated the linkage between Arabic calligraphic and African sculptural forms. *The Last Sound* was painted during the middle of an intense period of modernist experimental effort carried out by El Salahi between 1958 and the late 1960s. It is the working out of his concerns by praxis and the overthrowing of his academic training (1954–57) at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, that mark El Salahi's intellectual concerns during that era. While El Salahi's contribution is distinctive in developing an aesthetic of decolonization for the Sudan and much of Africa—situated among Islamic textuality, African plastic forms, and transnational modernism—it can be usefully compared to other modernist artists from the Muslim world who were engaged with similar cultural problems in the wake of decolonization from the mid-twentieth century onward.

Calligraphic Modernism in Context

Between 1955 and 1975, artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia reworked Arabic calligraphic motifs in entirely new ways.[1] Earlier attitudes about classical Arabic calligraphy were not only decisively modified, but modern Western genres such as academic realism in portraiture, landscape, and still life (which were still in vogue in the 1950s) were also reshaped by a renewed concern with the abstract and expressive possibilities of the Arabic script. The Arabic script was not simply utilized in a classical manner to render beautifully a religious verse or endow it with ornamental form; rather, the script was often imbued with figuration and abstraction to a degree that resisted a straightforward literal or narrative meaning.[2] The imbrication of modernist calligraphy with postcubist art represents a broad artistic movement, but my concern here is not to conduct a survey of its development, a task that has been accomplished by Wijdan Ali and by others in numerous monographs on various national modern art histories.[3] Instead, this essay explores the reasons why these artists were compelled to grapple with aesthetic issues during the post-

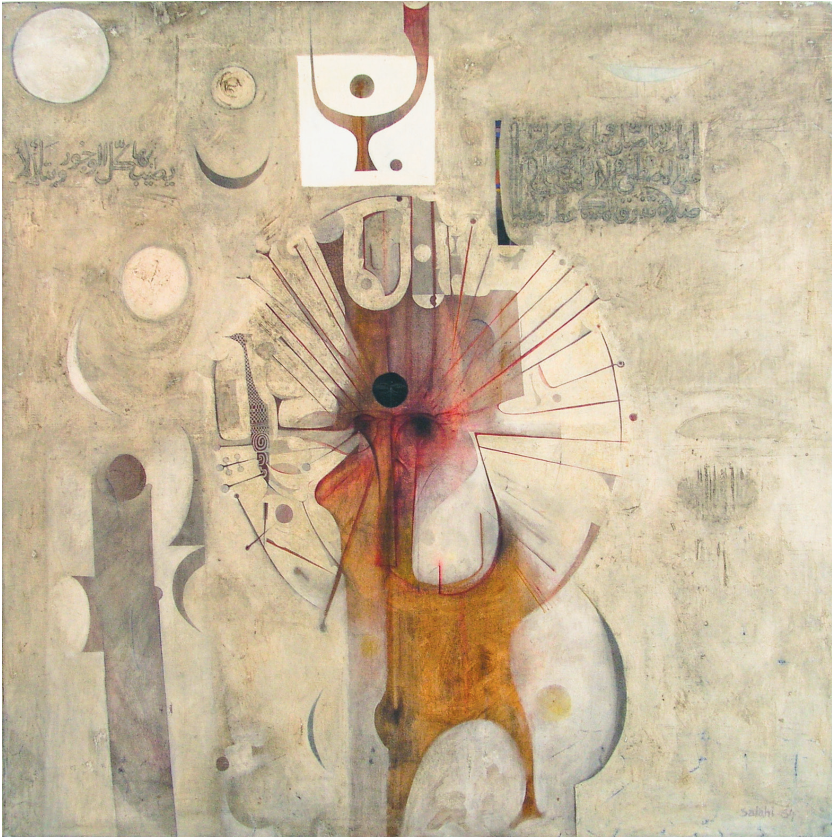

Figure 1. Ibrahim El Salahi, *The Last Sound*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 121.5 by 121.5 centimeters

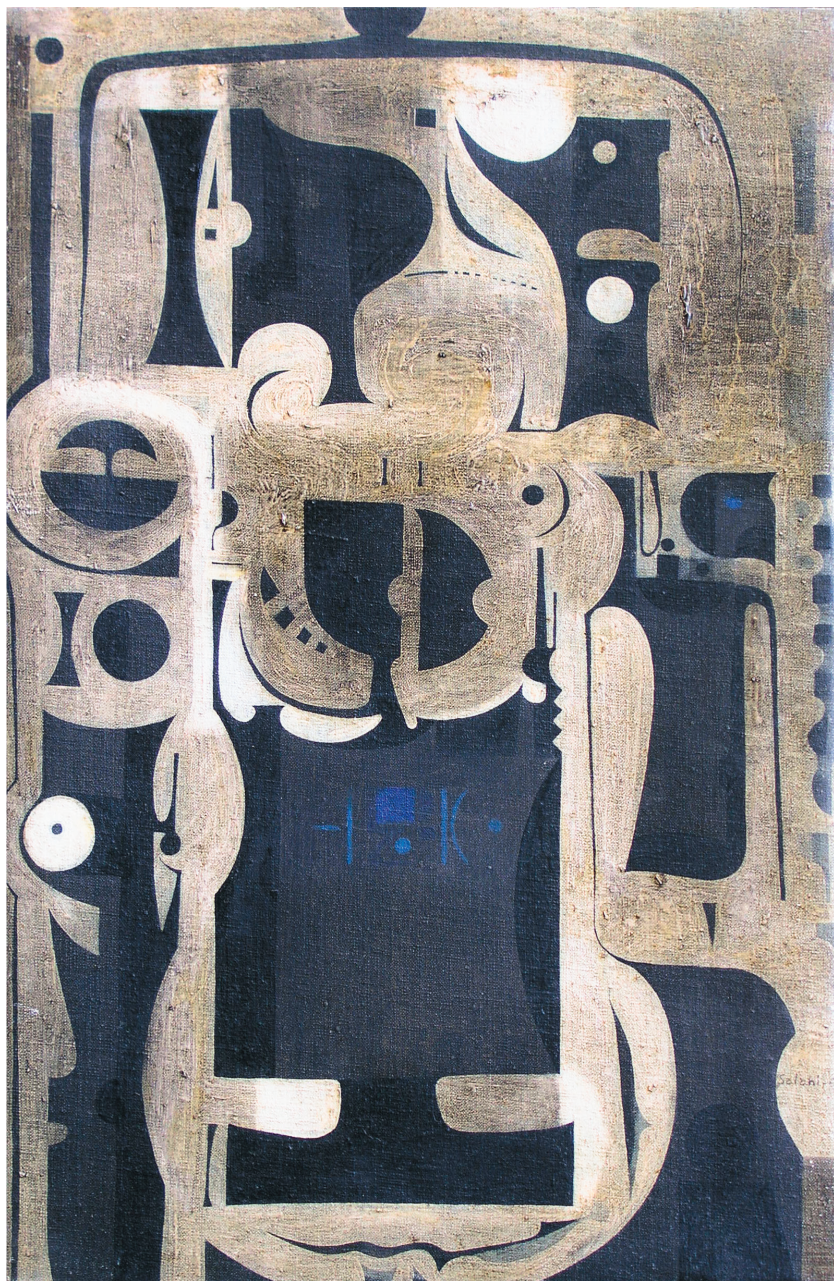

Figure 2. Ibrahim El Salahi, *They Always Appear,* 1964–65. Oil on canvas, 30.5 by 45.5 centimeters

1945 period and how their experiments remain relevant to our globalized world today. Their groundbreaking artistic projects can be understood in a variety of ways: as individual and subjective expressions, as enacting a dialogue with nationalism, and as a critical engagement with metropolitan modernism and cosmopolitanism. In order to demonstrate how these works transcend the borders of the nation and gesture toward larger forms of affiliation, after first introducing key artists and their works, I will briefly trace the broad contours of decolonization and its relationship to the visual arts in the region.

As stated, between 1955 and 1975, numerous artists working in the diverse region from North Africa to South Asia contributed to a movement that transformed Arabic calligraphy into modern art—mostly without direct knowledge of one another's work. Ibrahim El Salahi (1930–) in the Sudan, Sadequain Naqqash (1930–87) in Pakistan, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (1937–) in Iran, Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id (1925–2004) in Iraq, and many others all created a new aesthetic language of calligraphic figuration and abstraction. Zenderoudi worked out these possibilities in his paintings of the late 1950s, inspired by Shiite talismanic designs and popular posters and shrines. He was one of the founders of an Iranian artistic approach to calligraphy that was named the Saqqakhaneh school in 1963 and included artists such as Parviz Tanavoli and Siah Armajani, who subsequently immigrated to the United States and became a prominent installation and conceptual artist.[4] Iraqi theorist and artist Al Sa'id was part of a group that discarded mimetic representation in favor of a "purer" calligraphic form. Al Sa'id was a key participant and theorist in the movement that mounted the One Dimension Group exhibition, held in Baghdad in 1971.[5] This important exhibition also included artist Madiha Umar, who was a pioneer in developing modernist calligraphic paintings from as early as 1945.[6] 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. Sadequain transformed calligraphy to figuration in a painterly manner during the late 1950s, but his work became more linear and graphic by the mid-1960s, leading him to visually explore the poetic subjectivity of the dominant Indo-Persian cultural milieu that characterizes South Asian Muslim culture.[7] During the late 1950s in the Sudan, El Salahi created a dialogue between calligraphy and figuration that introduced West African motifs to his multifaceted response to the heterogeneity of the linguistic, religious, and cultural landscape of the region, and his paintings

acknowledged the persistence of Islamic influences in Africa and the Arab world.[8]

The Western avant-garde was clearly significant for this revival of calligraphy. For mid-twentieth-century non-Western artists, the aftermath of Picasso's cubism, Wilfredo Lam's surrealist synthesis of cubism with Africana religions in Cuba during the 1940s, and such mid-twentieth-century movements as lettrism, art brut, and art informel were far more compelling modalities than older perspectival and realist European academic styles. The Parisian avant-garde was extremely salient in this regard,[9] but developments in Italy and the work of English artists such as Graham Sutherland and the American abstract expressionists were also important. A genealogy of European-inflected training was a common factor for many artists. For example, Zenderoudi studied in Tehran in the late 1950s with teachers who trained in Paris and Italy, and he has resided primarily in France since 1961.[10] Al Sa'id, who visited Paris on a scholarship in 1956, was a member of a group of Iraqi impressionist painters that maintained extensive contact with Western Europe during the 1950s.[11] Sadequain was self-taught, but after he won a prize at the Biennale de Paris in 1961, he spent the next seven years working mostly in Paris.[12] El Salahi trained in London from 1954 to 1957 and then traveled extensively during the 1960s, in West Africa, Europe, and Mexico, including holding extended fellowships in the United States. The significance of the work of these artists, however, is by no means reducible to European and American prototypes.

Art and Decolonization

The challenges that decolonization posed for culture in Asian and African nations formerly under direct or indirect British rule were especially acute in the two decades after 1955.[13] A profound and intensive search for new artistic languages began at that time, which would seek to recover expressivity that had been repressed under colonialism but that would also actively *produce* a new modern culture. This growing awareness of national independence and sovereignty created a demand for a new aesthetic of decolonization, one that would remain in dialogue with metropolitan developments but would also account for regional and nationalist specificities. Artists attempted to find visual languages adequate to the aspirations of decolonization by creating work that appeared to fulfill the expectations of a *national art*; hence, it is no surprise that this intensive

and fertile period of artistic creativity has been primarily understood as a nationalist undertaking. Indeed, one can find numerous studies in which the artistic and aesthetic developments during this period are understood as "national" ventures. However, the demands put on cultural production in the mid-1960s were highly overdetermined: the new culture was to be individuated, yet collective; it was to be completely modern in the sense of being in dialogue with artistic production in the industrialized world, yet it was also mandated to represent local histories and lived practices that were hitherto suppressed; and, above all, the new culture was to be emblematic of national specificity.[14] The gap between academic art and postcolonial realities could be vast. El Salahi, reflecting on the lack of interest among the Sudanese for an exhibition of his work in Khartoum during the late 1950s, states:

> I understand that every artist has a message to deliver in his or her society. . . . By nature, to start with, one has to address one's *Self*, the satisfaction of which is initial and crucial in the creative process. Secondly, one addresses *Others* in one's own society and culture from which one has borrowed and absorbed a great deal that is to be repaid in kind. And thirdly, last but not least, one ultimately does address *All*, meaning humanity and human society at large.[15]

Clearly the stakes were very high, as artists were expected to produce nothing less than the development of a new cultural language that would exploit the opening provided by decolonization—understood at the time as an opportunity to enact a truly world-historical shift in politics and culture—but these demands could not be reconciled easily.

The artists who grappled with these challenges in their sweeping, highly charged careers became national legends. The importance of the national framework remains highly significant in the specific context of calligraphic modernism. Indeed, since the beginning of his career in 1955 and certainly after his return from Paris in 1968, Sadequain enacted the persona of the supreme Pakistani national artist, a role that was celebrated in a 2002 retrospective in a national museum, accompanied by a massive, largely congratulatory, catalog of his career.[16] In Sudan, El Salahi is regarded as one of the founders of the Khartoum school of art and through his teaching and artwork became a highly influential and dynamic exemplar for successive generations of Sudanese and African artists. In Iran, Zenderoudi's paintings were highlighted in a number of state-sponsored exhibitions, includ-

ing the Tehran Biennial in 1960,[17] to a 2001 retrospective at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art.[18] Since 1958, the Iraqi government has been a major patron of the arts, sponsoring numerous public works,[19] planning exhibitions of modern art within Iraq and in international venues,[20] and encouraging scholarship and publications on ancient, classical Arab and modern Iraqi art and culture.[21]

The national framework is thus fundamental in situating these artists as eminent cultural figures who each developed schools of national artistic practice. However, the link between national art and the diaspora also needs to be taken into account. It is in the diaspora that many such artists encountered the range and strength of Western artistic practices firsthand. They were able to visit the great Western museums, filled with canonical works, which many had previously seen only in magazine reproductions. It is in the diaspora that many of these artists met with other Western and non-Western artists, learning about one another's methods and concerns. Moreover, artists frequently sought institutional support to develop their careers in the diaspora, as such support was not as well established in their own countries.[22] El Salahi's intellectual formation was forged during his study in London and became even broader during his travels in the United States during the early and mid-1960s, when he had a chance to meet with artists, jazz musicians, political activists, and black intellectuals. He also traveled to Mexico to meet with artists there and to China to study its artistic pedagogy. As the example of Négritude shows, in an important sense, the experience of diaspora engendered transnational aesthetic movements, as well as new affiliations of identity and community.[23] El Salahi also facilitated the imagining of a broader Africanist aesthetic, not least by his participation in exhibitions in Nigeria in 1961 and in Senegal in 1966.[24]

It is worthwhile to look more closely at two figures here—El Salahi and Sadequain—to understand the circumstances of their careers and their aesthetic choices. Both artists are considered heroic national figures in their respective countries. Metropolitan experiences were formative for both artists, who each evolved formal artistic languages influenced by Arabic calligraphy. They were born in the same year (1930), but their educational backgrounds differ sharply—El Salahi was formally trained as an artist in Khartoum and London and has been a cosmopolitan intellectual with wide-ranging interests. Sadequain, self-taught, was not able to acquire much formal Western-style education and throughout his life felt most comfortable in the cultural milieu of Urdu. Both artists started their careers during

the 1950s as modernist artists, although with the rise of Islamist politics, both artists also faced political crises in the mid-1970s, which had, in different ways, profoundly transformative effects on both.

El Salahi's rejection of the academic training he had received in England was prompted by his awareness, when he returned to the Sudan, of his training's inadequacy and irrelevancy to the role that art ought to play in postcolonial Sudan. By the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the failure of academic painting to break out of the narrow elite salon and gallery exhibition circuit of Khartoum and engage with a more democratic and vernacular visual culture impelled El Salahi toward a radical aesthetic shift. As he describes it, this transformation demanded breaking open the Arabic letter and exploring the new aesthetic universe that emerged from the fragments and the interstices. Fracturing the Arabic letter also broke the classical calligraphic text as a repository of received meaning. This is evident in a series of paintings whose very title, *They Always Appear* (1964–65), signifies the emergence of figural forms among the spaces defined by the figure-ground relationship of abstracted calligraphic shapes. The artist recalls:

> I limited my color scheme to somber tones. . . . In the next step I wrote letters and words that did not mean a thing. Then came a time when I felt I had to break down the bone of the letter, observing the space within a letter and the space between a letter and the other on the line. I wanted to see what was there and find out their basic components and origins.
>
> There the Pandora's box opened up wide before my eyes. . . . in place of those broken-up letters I discovered animal and plant forms, sounds, human images, and what looked like skeletons with masked faces.[25]

El Salahi's experiments thus resulted in an abstraction that was regional, yet modernist, and that indexed a vast ensemble of referential material, traversing the Arabic-Islamic discursive tradition and West African iconography.

Sadequain's explorations of modernist subjectivity in postcolonial Pakistan led him to articulate the Parisian avant-garde with abstracted constructions of artistic subjectivity in the Indo-Persian poetic tradition. During his years in Paris, Sadequain's figuration became more linear and more recognizably calligraphic. In a characteristic self-portrait from 1966, his contorted fingers spell the word *Allah*.[26] Sadequain's growing involvement with calligraphy culminated in 1968 and 1969, after his permanent

return to Pakistan from Paris, when he illustrated the poetry of the famous nineteenth-century Urdu poet Ghalib,[27] published his own collection of poetry that he had himself calligraphed and illustrated,[28] and began writing verses from the Koran for the first time in his career.[29]

Sadequain also broadly shared many aspects of El Salahi's artistic explorations in discovering possibilities of textuality and figuration, and indeed, both artists were exhibited at Galerie Lambert in Paris during the 1960s, albeit in separate exhibitions. The rise of repressive governments during the mid-1970s, however, had a major impact on their careers. During their early years, both artists were mostly apolitical, but when both the Sudanese and the Pakistani governments turned toward the Islamist Right during the mid-1970s, the response of each artist was quite different. El Salahi was arbitrarily jailed for six months in 1975 and 1976 without charge. This traumatic event decisively shifted his career trajectory—his postprison concerns achieved an even deeper aesthetic dialogue with calligraphy and figuration, especially in his black-and-white panels. By contrast, Sadequain publicly accommodated himself to the new political environment, while remaining nonconformist in his private life. Critics have accused Sadequain, who produced state-sanctioned Koranic calligraphy in his later career, of aesthetic complicity with the regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, and some observers see the coarsening of the artist's work after the mid-1970s as the price paid for this unfortunate alliance.[30] But even in his later years, however compromised, Sadequain never created works that function as instruments of propaganda for Islamization, and in this sense, it would be misleading to regard him as an artist merely working on behalf of the state.

The mid-1970s crisis in the lives of both artists corresponds to a larger crisis in postcolonial sovereignty in many nations in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, which is clearly visible in the aesthetic realm. Wijdan Ali has noted a clear decline in artistic production, attributing it to the "amount of poor-quality work that has passed itself off as calligraphic art."[31] However, the rise of political nation-based Islam and the general degeneration of calligraphic art is hardly accidental. By the late 1970s, individual artistic achievement was subsumed under official state culture, especially with the rise of Islamist regimes in Sudan and Pakistan, the Iranian Revolution in 1978, and the consolidation of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq in 1979, and much calligraphic art became more instrumental, propagandist, and in this sense, degraded.[32] The Iranian Revolution, for example,

engendered an entire universe of posters and popular graphics in which calligraphy was deployed as an instrument of propaganda.[33] With characteristic hyperbole in Iraq, Saddam Hussein (who increasingly turned to Islam after the 1991 Gulf War) was reported to have commissioned the complete Koranic text calligraphed in his own blood.[34] General Zia's Pakistani state also promoted calligraphy during the 1980s in accordance with his wider project of the "Islamization" of Pakistan.[35] Many of the most gifted and creative artists who continued to work in calligraphic modernism without succumbing to ideological instrumentality ended up living in the diaspora—Zenderoudi, Rachid Koraïchi, and Hassan Massoudy chose to reside in Paris, and El Salahi went into lonely exile in Qatar, which nonetheless provided him with an inner space to explore his innovative linear monochrome works on paper.

During the 1980s and 1990s, political Islam came to denote internally dictatorial and oppressive regimes that are externally weak, and the effects of such a compromised politics are visible as symptoms in the national art of the contemporary period. However, this political and aesthetic crisis was not purely national in nature, for it represents a passing toward a "postnational" and global world in which the place of the nation-state has been further diminished by a range of developments. In general terms, the optimistic phase of decolonization in much of Asia, Africa, and other regions lasted only two or three decades, from around 1950 to the mid-1970s. The naive understanding of decolonization as freedom itself was compromised by the growing awareness of the stubborn persistence of (neo)colonialism. In the wake of the 1973 oil crisis, the initiation of new U.S.-led financial restructuring deeply impacted developing nations. Such nations had faced numerous difficulties in achieving sovereignty during the Cold War period, but these hurdles became virtually insurmountable after 1990 as neoliberalism became more intrusive. Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the projection of United States–led financial interests became intrusively and blatantly global.[36]

It is now widely understood that contemporary globalization has largely obliterated the promises of the postcolonial nation-state and substituted little in its place. By this account, then, the "postnational" condition has rendered anachronistic the developmental project of the nation-state, along with its cultural and artistic symbols. For if the post-1945 developmental nation-state had represented itself through imagining a timeless and essentialist past, as argued by Benedict Anderson,[37] it equally viewed itself

through the idiom of "nationalist modern."[38] The artistic projects of this heroic age responded to this array of forces by simultaneously claiming to be emblematic of individual meanings, of national traditions, and of modernist strivings for universal values.

The artists I have discussed were once applauded as emblematic figures embodying national specificity in Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and the Sudan, yet their aesthetics share many concerns that lie *beyond* the obvious relationship with metropolitan modernism. It needs to be recognized that even during the heroic age, the artists themselves took on a much wider canvas than the nation-state. For example, Zenderoudi's vernacular Shiite motifs extend across western Asia into South Asia; Sadequain's Indo-Persian world of poetry is certainly larger than the borders of Pakistan; El Salahi is as much a West African and an Arab artist as he is Sudanese; and the salience and centrality of modern Iraqi culture provides paradigms for the entire Arab world. Clearly, the works of these artists constantly exceed national borders, even as they exceed their relationship to the metropolitan centers of modernist art. These complex relationships are evident early on, when the careers of these artists led them to ceaselessly shuttle between the nation and the still-attractive metropolitan center, while also visiting other "horizontal" locations. For example, El Salahi traveled widely to Nigeria, Mexico, China, Europe, and the United States, and Sadequain, apart from his stay in France, visited other European countries and traveled to Iraq before returning to Pakistan in 1968. During 1973, El Salahi was invited to Baghdad to attend a meeting of Arab artists, where he met Al Sa'id and others and was able to compare his aesthetic explorations in calligraphic modernism with the more established explorations by Iraqi artists. Later, when El Salahi was in a Sudanese jail in 1976, the brother of the deceased Iraqi artist Jawad Selim, who worked in the Iraqi embassy in Khartoum, quietly supplied El Salahi with Iraqi cultural journals, notably *Afaq Arabiyya* and *Al-Aqlam*.[39]

The Discursivity of Calligraphic Modernism

For many artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, there were two main ways in which experiments with modern art were broadly undertaken: folkloric, figurative, and representational styles can be contrasted with practices that emphasize the textual and the calligraphic and those with figural absence. It is important to stress that rather than describing actual motifs these two modes are analytical categories that help us

map the character of artwork produced in the post-independence era—one often finds that both modes are active in the works of a single artist and both are frequently present even within a single artwork. The folkloric/figurative mode consists of motifs that denote *presence*—village scenes, symbols from ancient civilizations, cityscapes, still lifes, portraiture, and so forth. But in the textual, abstract, and calligraphic modes, however, there is *absence* and an evacuation of iconic signifiers, and even calligraphy itself is often deployed in a highly abstract and largely illegible fashion. Rather than indexing specific meanings from a textual source, mutilated calligraphy indexes *textuality itself*. The deferral of meaning that textuality enacts as a general phenomenon is further doubled by the difficulty in deciphering such calligraphic forms that lean heavily toward abstraction. If the folkloric/figurative mode, which was inevitably tied to nationalist iconography, no longer speaks to us in any tangible sense, the abstract/calligraphic mode pries open the boundaries of the nationalist frame. Unlike premodern calligraphy, the modernist experiments no longer render a sacred or wise quotation in beautiful and ornamental form but rather raise questions of legibility. In the hands of El Salahi, Zenderoudi, Sadequain, Al Sa'id, and others, the *illegibility* of calligraphy—in its dialogue with postcubist figuration and in its nonornamental renderings—opens up the phenomenon of textuality to refer to a constellation of identity in which elements from Africa, from Shiite vernacular culture, or from Indo-Persian poetry all exceed the boundaries of nationality. Such artists reterritorialize the Arabic script, foregrounding its discursivity, while also making its aesthetic permeable to the outside, thus problematizing a simple binary homology between art and national identity.

Calligraphic modernism draws new links among the shared conceptions of a vast region. By virtue of the Arabic script, it generates a form of textuality that indexes the force of discursive and institutional authority. This is not a "past" that was simply "lost" through the epistemic violence of colonialism, as the "past" was, to a significant degree, already *text*. Indeed, colonialism itself, by its reliance on discursive knowledge, further emphasized textuality. Unquestionably, this past does undergo a "discursive rupture" under the force of colonialism and modernity, but this is not a simple loss.[40] Talal Asad has argued for a conception of an Islamic discursive tradition that problematizes existing temporal and affiliated notions of modernity (as simply characterized by empty secular time and limited to the horizon of the nation-state). In an interview, he states:

> In my view, tradition is a more mobile, time-sensitive, more open-ended concept than most formulations of culture. And it looks not just to the past but to the future. A tradition is in part concerned with the way limits are constructed in response to problems encountered and conceptualized. There's always a tension between this construction of limits and the forces that push the tradition onto new terrain, where part or all of the tradition ceases to make sense and so needs a new beginning. And looked at another way: with each new beginning, there is the possibility of a new (or "revived") tradition, a new story about the past and the future, new virtues to be developed, new projects to be addressed.[41]

Summarizing some of the implications of Asad's approach, Ovamir Anjum notes: "The most fascinating questions about any contemporary Muslim society, those of reform, revival, modernity, and tradition, cannot even begin to be addressed until the mutual interaction of the Muslim world within the framework of a global Islamic discursive tradition is accounted for. And hence the idea of discursive tradition, which by definition is attuned to the idea of teaching and argument through time, becomes capable of transcending local dimensions and encompassing various Islamic spaces."[42]

Calligraphic experimentation accordingly acknowledges the persistence of the textual past, but under modernity, this is now abstracted, opened to a dialogue with metropolitan artistic languages and therefore more global in scope. However, as African artistic traditions were not primarily discursive while the Islamic discursive tradition largely did not attend to visual art, the modernist artist needed to work out the imbrications of textuality and Africanist forms *through practice*. El Salahi notes:

> We had a problem then that separated the contemporary artist from the local public. I personally felt that a bridge had to be built to close that gap between the two parties. Something work-wise had to be done. I said to myself, "Man, let us for a time forget about those archaic concepts of art for art's sake, and that unreal nonsense of the muse and ivory tower recluse that we read about, and get down to work that might solve our problem." . . . I worked like mad, introduced Arabic writing and decorative patterns in a corner of my works like a stamp on an envelope, and exhibited some of those works. People, recognizing something that they were a bit familiar with, took note and came a bit closer. I gradually spread the lettering with symbols, words from

> the Qur'an and Sufi poetry over the surface of the picture, mixing it with figurative work. They came closer, showing a greater degree of interest.[43]

Here, the formation of a decolonized audience is seen as inextricably tied to experimentation and praxis.

Artists who have undertaken modern calligraphic works since 1975, from Indonesia to North Africa, are too numerous to mention here,[44] although it is relevant to note that few modern artists deployed calligraphy before the mid-1950s.[45] Moreover, within the Muslim world itself, the broad artistic interest in classical calligraphic styles was largely absent until about 1955—books published on Arabic calligraphy before that date are very few in number, in contrast to numerous publications devoted to histories of calligraphy, and the presentation of samples of calligraphic styles in substantial albums, which date mostly from the mid-1950s.[46] In Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and other Arab countries during the heroic age, modern calligraphic art emerged together with scholarly and popular interest in traditional calligraphy, and the two should be viewed as constituting a wider discursive and aesthetic field.[47] Emerging scholarship in the history of calligraphy thus provided a backdrop for Islamic art that was not easily congruent with the boundaries of postcolonial nationhood during the golden age of national sovereignty. Modern calligraphic experimentation, then, is as much a dialogue with this body of discursive and artistic tradition as it is with metropolitan modernism. The term *cosmopolitanism* indexes the fluidity of contemporary identity, in which affiliations are unmoored from fixed referents during a period of transition and where a new stability and synthesis of institutions and identity are not yet in place. For some observers, a (non-critical) cosmopolitan identification with metropolitan culture was precisely to be resisted by recourse to "national" formations. For example, describing Iraqi art from the 1950s through the 1970s, the noted Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (who settled in Iraq in 1948) writes:

> One fact that has always to be recognized in understanding Arab art today is that however revolutionary Arab artists may be in concept and in aspiration, a spirit of tradition hangs on to them which they cannot, will not, shake off. However much they may subscribe to the view of "internationalism" or "cosmopolitanism" in modern art, they will not give up the notion that their identity can only be shaped by rooting themselves in a tradition of their own, which helps to give a distinc-

> tion to their work, marking them off as the creators and extenders of a national culture.[48]

Here, the idea of cosmopolitanism is aligned with metropolitan internationalism and with art whose paradigms are defined by work produced in Paris, London, and New York. In order to remain "national" and Arab, and thus retain a critical difference, Jabra argues that Iraqi artists consciously resist a facile cosmopolitanism in their artistic projects.

Jabra's conception of the nation contains multiple dimensions, however. In a 1986 text, he maps out how his idea of the "national" addresses the specificity of Iraqi (Mesopotamian) history while also referring to a wider Arab world, which is not necessarily geographic. Indeed, according to Jabra, the modern Iraqi artist's awareness of Mesopotamia as the cradle of civilization—and the centrality of the Baghdad-based Abbasid caliphate for the Arab imaginary—"has given an impetus to the idea that Arab tradition not only predates Islam but actually goes back some 5,000 years, and is still viable, Islam being simply one of its more recent manifestations."[49] Thus, while the "nation" is a modern creation, it is also somehow an integral historical part of a wider Arab/Islamic identity, which is to be situated in multiple and overlapping modalities. Building on this approach, the recourse to "Arabness" today is best understood as a discursive process, since the boundaries of Arabic-speaking regions have shifted widely over the centuries. During the medieval era, for example, Spain, Iran, and Central Asia were all key centers of Arabic/Islamic literature and culture. Jabra's Arab "nation" clearly does not consist of a simple, fixed, and stable locus. At least four concepts are contained within his use of the term, which simultaneously refers to a geographically bounded modern state, a reconstructed and imagined ancient pre-Islamic past, a distinctive Arab character, and an Islamic identity. If the first two referents are delimited by geography, the latter two are emphatically discursive constructions. In much of the Muslim world, repressive governments were supported by Cold War ideologies, which largely succeeded in destroying the organized nationalist-leftist movements, especially in Pakistan and Sudan. Iran and Iraq (until recently) have remained "nationalist," but since 1979 their nationalism has hardly been optimistic or celebratory, at least for any artist of integrity. The attenuation of the national ideal has also diminished appeals to the ancient past, which was in any case a largely folkloric maneuver to invest the timeless past with the halo of national glory. In contrast to Jabra's read-

ings from the 1970s and 1980s, when it seemed that Islam was subsumed into Arab nationalism, the relationship appears to have reversed, as now Islam is seen to overshadow and incorporate Arab nationalist sentiment.

The complex imbrication of various historical layers and the ideological battles within these nation-states were mostly invisible to the metropolitan gaze viewing the regions through nation-state-based and area studies approaches. However, the works of artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, who pioneered calligraphic modes of expression in abstract forms of art, reveal precisely the tensions between the "national" and the "universal-Islamic." Such artists as El Salahi and Al Sa'id were as responsive to creating a dialogue with Western visual languages of the mid-twentieth century as they were aware of the glaring need for developing a new national culture. But as this nation came to be imagined through the complex ensemble of concepts described here, these artists also re-created a dialogue with regional emblems (African, Arab, Shiite, Indo-Persian, and so forth) and thus with the discursivity of the Islamic tradition. From 1955 to 1975, their practices mapped local and regional referents together, and by sidestepping direct political motifs, their calligraphic modernism also performatively contributed to the rise of broader Muslim aspirations by furnishing it with aesthetic and affective templates. Even if modern and contemporary conceptions of the Muslim *ummah* (the idea of a translocal Muslim community) are invented and imagined, and bear only a fictional relationship to historical reality, these imaginings nevertheless remain deeply constrained by discursive and textual referents. Having enacted textuality in pointedly "nonpolitical" articulations, the calligraphic modernist project has relayed its effects into the present, some two decades after the end of the heroic age of decolonization.

Conclusion

The rapid emergence of calligraphic modernism after 1955 was a result of a complex play of forces that included new conceptions of modernist subjectivity, the need for national culture during decolonization, and a desire for equal participation in transnational modernism. The wider cultural movement of this era projected a new visual aesthetic of pan-Islamism—although this may not have been the conscious intention of the artists themselves, whose aims were often misunderstood due to the dominant framing of their work as exemplifying national art or as a dialogue with

metropolitan centers. The calligraphic modernist artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, by virtue of their mediation of the Islamic discursive tradition and by refusing national Islamist politics, have relayed aesthetic and affective potentialities across the heroic age of decolonization into the present. To seriously rethink the contemporary valence of the Islamic discursive tradition implies that artistic endeavours during the era of decolonization have retained critical affiliations *and* differences from metropolitan modernisms that were not merely local or national but gestured toward imagining a broader community of interests. In the case of El Salahi, these include his commitment to a larger Africanist aesthetic, his participation in the imagining of a wider, modern Muslim aesthetic, and his affiliation with the universalism (in its best sense) engendered by transnational modernism.

Notes

1 By Arabic calligraphy, I also refer to Persian and Urdu, which share the Arabic alphabet. Especially in artistic works, the slippage between a language that uses Arabic script, even for nonreligious ends, and the textual tradition of Islam is productive of multiple meanings. On the traditional role of the calligrapher in the Islamic world, including examples from South Asia, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

2 For an attempt at a taxonomy of modern calligraphic paintings, see Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), chapters 15 and 16.

3 Wijdan Ali, "Modern Islamic Art," in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, ed. Wijdan Ali (London: Scorpion Publishing, 1990). A useful online resource is the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, www.metmuseum.org/toah (accessed December 26, 2005). On the lettrists in the Arab world, see Sharbal Daghir, *al-Hurufiyah al-'Arabiyah: al-fann wa-al-huwiyah* (*Arabic Lettrism: Art and Identity*) (Beirut: Sharikat al-Matbuat lil-Tawzi wa-al-Nashr, 1990).

On the modern art of Iraq, see Maysaloun Faraj, ed., *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2001); Iraq Ministry of Information, *Iraqi Art Today* (Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1972); Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* (St. Helier, Jersey, Channel Islands: Wasit Graphic and Pub., 1983); May Muzaffar, "Iraqi Contemporary Art: Roots and Development," in *Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics*, ed. Shams C. Inati (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), 63–89; and Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité Arabe: l'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996).

The art history of modern Iran is outlined in Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, eds., *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002); Rose Issa, Ruyin Pakbaz, and Daryush Shayegan, *Iranian Contemporary Art* (London: Booth-Clibborn Edi-

tions, 2001); and Ehsan Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," in *Highlights of Persian Art*, ed. R. Ettinghausen and E. Yarshater (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 362–77.

The most comprehensive (but idiosyncratic) work on Pakistani art is by Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity: Fifty Years of Painting and Sculpture in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

4 Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, *Saqqakhanah/Saqqakhaneh* (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977); Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Picturing Iran*, 39–87; and Rose Issa, "Borrowed Ware," in *Iranian Contemporary Art*, 13–28.

5 May Muzaffar, "Iraq," in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, 166; Ulrike al-Khamis, "An Historical Overview 1900s–1990s," in *Strokes of Genius*, 29; Rashad Selim, "Diaspora, Departure, and Remains," in *Strokes of Genius*, 52.

6 Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, Laura Nader, and Etel Adnan, "Arab Women Artists: Forces of Change," in *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, ed. Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi (Lafayette, CA: International Council for Women in the Arts, 1994), 33.

7 Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), chapter 3; Naqvi, *Image and Identity*, 364–436 passim; Abdul Hameed Akhund, Farida Munavarjahan Said, and Zohra Yusuf, eds., *Sadequain: The Holy Sinner* (Karachi: Mohatta Palace Museum, 2003).

8 Ulli Beier, "The Right to Claim the World: Conversation with Ibrahim El Salahi," *Third Text* 23 (Summer 1993): 23–30; Ibrahim El Salahi, *Ibrahim el Salahi: Drawings*, text by Ulli Beier (Ibadan, Nigeria: Mbari Publications, 1962); Salah M. Hassan, "The Khartoum and Addis Connections: Two Stories from Sudan and Ethiopia," in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clémentine Deliss (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

9 For an anecdotal account of the life of diaspora intellectuals in Paris, see Es'kia Mphahlele, "Paris in the 1960s," in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, 254–56.

10 Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism," in *Picturing Iran*, 67–78. Charles Hossein Zenderoudi's Web site is www.zenderoudi.com (accessed December 6, 2005).

11 Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité Arabe*, 250–53 passim; al-Khamis, "An Historical Overview," 29; May Muzaffar, "Iraq," in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, 162.

12 For a description of his experience in Paris, see his letters in Sadequain Naqqash, *Ruq'at-i Sadiqaini* (Karachi: Matbu'at-i 'Irfani, 1979).

13 While Iran was never formally colonized, its intellectuals remained caught in many of the same perceptions as those from formally colonized areas, namely, of seeing the country as economically, socially, and culturally backward. In this sense, decolonization as an intellectual and cultural idea is applicable to Iran. Also see Vijay Prashad, "Tehran: Cultivating an Imagination," in *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), 75–94.

14 As an example of this outlook, the curator Fereshteh Daftari writes, "Zenderoudi embodies the 'authentic local' with whom begins a movement away from Western idioms and back into the depths of Shiite iconography, articulated not in terms of miniature tradition, say, but rather of the local vernacular," adding "Zenderoudi seemed to satisfy the thirst for a national modern art." Daftari, "Another Modernism," 68, 73.

15 Ibrahim El Salahi, "Chronologue" (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), 34.
16 See especially the critical essay by Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali, "The Making and Unmaking of a National Artist," in *Sadequain*, 54–67.
17 Daftari, "Another Modernism," 67–74.
18 "Two Modernist Iranian Pioneers—Hossein Zandehroudi, Massoud Arabshahi," Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, www.artfacts.net/en/exhibition/two-modernist-iranian-pioneers-hossein-zandehroudi-massoud-arabshahi-19084/overview.html (accessed February 3, 2010).
19 For a study of Jawad Selim's *Monument of Liberty*, see Lorna Selim and Ulrike al-Khamis, "Lorna Selim Remembers," in *Strokes of Genius*, 41–46; Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Jawad Salim wa-Nusb al-Hurriyah: dirasah fi atharih wa-araih* (*Studies in Jawad Selim's Monument to Liberty*) (Baghdad: Wizarat al-Ilam, Mudiriyat al-Thaqafah al-Ammah, 1974).
20 For example, the Iraqi Cultural Centre, London, held art exhibitions during the 1970s and 1980s such as this exhibition of works by a traditional twentieth-century calligrapher, Muhammad Hashim: *Hashem al-Khattat* (London: Iraqi Cultural Centre, 1978).
21 See Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), chapters 5 and 6.
22 In this regard, the governments of Iran and Iraq were able to provide better opportunities for artists during the period between 1958 and 1975. Mostly, national support meant showing in a limited number of galleries and in private collections, participating in a few official exhibitions and public art projects, and on occasion, traveling for the purpose of providing national representation in international fairs and so on.
23 Michael C. Lambert, "From Citizenship to Negritude: 'Making a Difference' in Elite Ideologies of Colonized Francophone West Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35.2 (April 1993): 239–62.
24 El Salahi, "Chronologue," 96.
25 Beier, "The Right to Claim the World," 29.
26 Many of these drawings were published in Sadequain Naqqash, *Sadequain* (Karachi: Editions Mystique, 1966).
27 Sadequain Naqqash, *Ghalib* (Karachi: Illit Pablikeshanz, 1969).
28 Sadequain Naqqash, *Ruba'iyat-i Sadiqain Naqqash* (n.p., 1971), with illustrations; and Sadiqain, *Tazah ruba'iyat-i Sadiqain Naqqash* (*New Rubaiyat of Sadequain*) (n.p., 1971), without illustrations.
29 Sadequain Naqqash, *Ayat Qur'aniyah* (*Koranic Verses*) (Karachi: Matbu'at 'Irfani, 1979); Naqvi, *Image and Identity*, 408; Akhund, Said, and Yusuf, *Sadequain*, 602.
30 Naqvi, *Image and Identity*, 435.
31 She also notes, "In the 1960s the calligraphic movement in art gained momentum, reaching its peak in the 1980s." Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art*, 158–59.
32 BBC, "Timeline: Iraq," http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/737483.stm (accessed December 6, 2005).
33 Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2000); and Peter Chelkowski, "The Art of Revolution and War: The Role of the Graphic Arts in Iran," in *Picturing Iran*, 127–41. Monumental propagandistic calligraphic inscriptions near highways in Iran are

described in Vlad Atanasiu, "The President and the Calligrapher: Arabic Calligraphy and Its Political Use," in *Studies in Architecture, History, and Design: Papers by the 2003–2004 AKPIA@MIT Visiting Fellows* (Cambridge, MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT, 2006), 13.

34 Sue Chan, "Saddam's Mosque of War," January 17, 2003, www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/01/17/eveningnews/main537051.shtml (accessed October 14, 2009). Also see "Emirate official: Saddam's writting [*sic*] of the Quran with his blood is prohibited," Arabicnews.com, September 26, 2000, www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/000926/2000092622.html (accessed December 6, 2005). On the instrumental use of art in Saddam's Iraq, including a painter who with his own blood painted Saddam portraits, see Samir al-Khalil/Kanan Makiya, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 103.

35 See Iftikhar Dadi, "Visual Modernities in a Comparative Perspective: The West, and South Asian and Asian-American Art" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2003), chapter 4.

36 Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

37 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

38 James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

39 Ibrahim El Salahi, interview with the author, Ithaca, New York, December 22, 2005.

40 David Scott, "Appendix: The Trouble of Thinking: An Interview with Talal Asad," in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 289–90. On "discursive rupture," see Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 5.

41 Scott, "The Trouble of Thinking," 289–90.

42 Ovamir Anjum, "Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007): 656–72, 670.

43 El Salahi, "Chronologue," 36.

44 Indonesian examples can be found in Pameran Kaligrafi Nasional, *Pameran Kaligrafi Nasional, diresmikan oleh Bapak Wakil Presiden Republik Indonesia* (*National Calligraphy Exhibition, Opened by the Vice President of Indonesia*) (Jakarta: Sagittarius Offset-Printing, 1979); Kenneth M George, "Ethical Pleasure, Visual *Dzikir*, and Artistic Subjectivity in Contemporary Indonesia," *Material Religion* 2.2 (July 2008): 172–93. Rachid Koraïchi from Algeria is an important second-generation artist interested in calligraphic modernism.

45 The Iraqi artist Madiha Umar was a pioneer in this regard. See Ali, *Modern Islamic Art*, 152.

46 To get an idea of the limited number of studies on calligraphy in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholarship, see the bibliography in M. Ziauddin, *A Monograph on Moslem Calligraphy, with 168 Illustrations of Its Various Styles and Ornamental Designs* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati Book-Shop, 1936), 71–72.

47 Significant examples of studies of calligraphy are Naji Zayn al-Din, *Musawwar al-khatt al-'Arabi* (*Arabic Calligraphy Illustrated*) (Baghdad: al-Majma'al-'Ilmi al-'Iraqi, 1968);

Muhammad Abdullah Chughtai, *Pak o Hind men Islami khattati* (*Islamic Calligraphy in India and Pakistan*) (Lahore: Kitab Khanah-yi Nauras, 1976); and Habib Allah Faza'ili, *Atlas-i khatt: tahqiq dar khutut-i Islami* (*Atlas of Calligraphy: Studies in Islamic Calligraphy*) (Isfahan: Kitabfurushi Shahriyar, 1971). Iraq, in particular, has published detailed albums and histories of calligraphy. For works by nineteenth- and twentieth-century traditional Iraqi calligraphers, see Walid A'zami, *Tarajim khattati Baghdad al-mu'asirin* (*Contemporary Calligraphers of Baghdad*) (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam; Baghdad: Maktabat al-Nahdah, 1977). Also see Sheila Blair's survey of calligraphy in modernity: Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), chapter 13.

48 Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art*, 12. Also see Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, "Calligraphy and Modern Art in the Arab World," in *A Celebration of Life: Essays on Literature and Art* (Baghdad: Dar al Ma'mun, 1988), 166.

49 Jabra, "Calligraphy and Modern Art," 169.