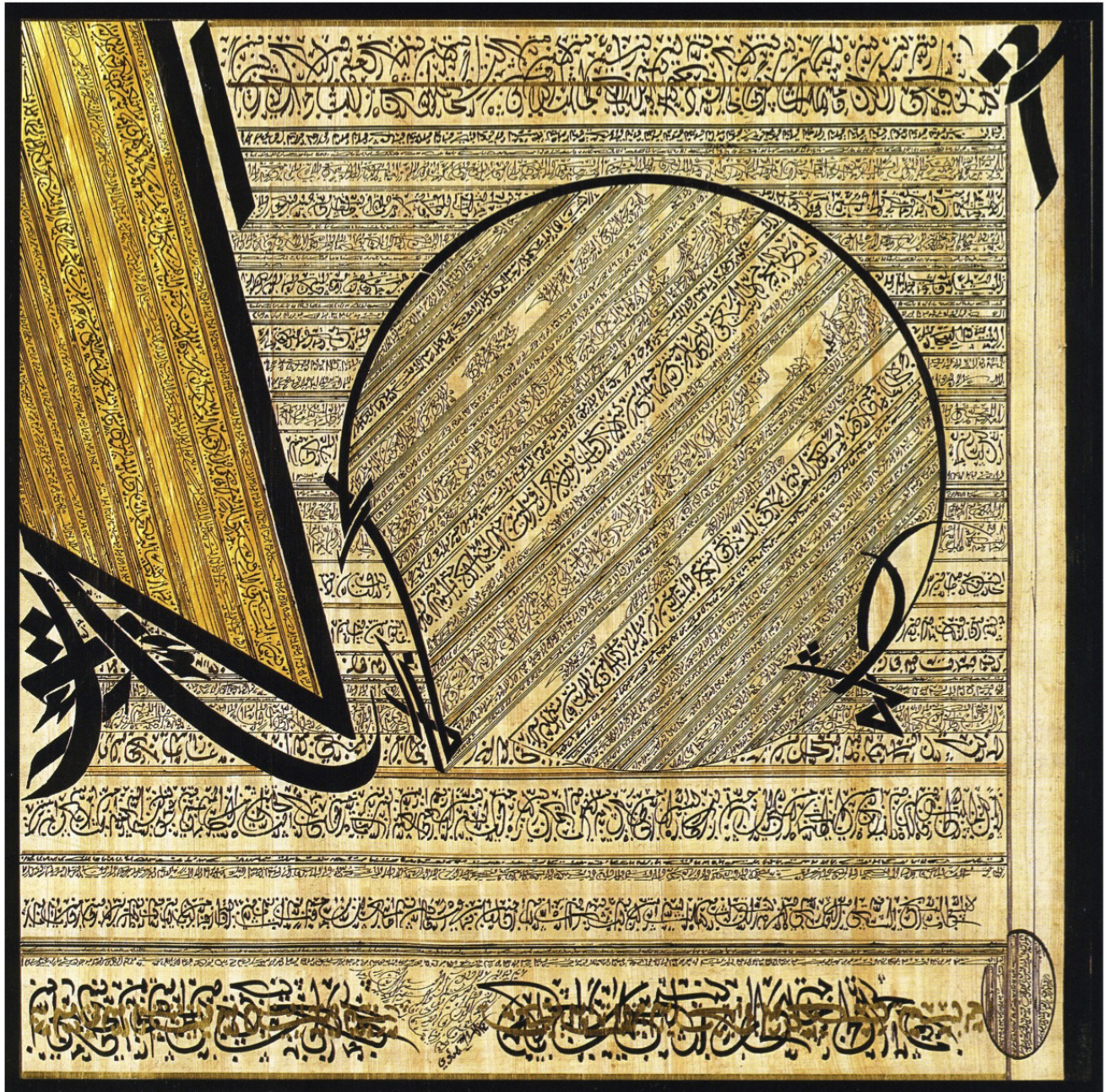# What does Islamic Art Mean for Islam?

An examination of word/image in the calligraphic works of
Nja Mahdaoui, Mohamed Zakariya, and Kamal Boullata

Thesis by
Hannah Lise Simonson
B.A. Religion | Reed College | May 2011

Image: Nja Mahdaoui, *Calligramm on Papyrus*
Indian ink and acrylic painting on papyrus, 60 x 60 cm, 2004 | Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).

What does Islamic Art mean for Islam?

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Zakariya, and Kamal Boullata

A Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines calligraphy, taken for now as an inclusive term, as an object of religious meaning and inquiry. It is premised that definitions of religion, and in this case Islam, have shaped the course and terminology of the study of what is known as "Islamic art." This thesis challenges previous art historical conceptions of both Islam and Islamic art. Rather than asking questions such as, 'what is Islamic about Islamic art?' which assume a structure or essence of Islam that is represented in Islamic art, this thesis asks the question, 'what does Islamic art mean for Islam?'

By taking seriously the religious work of art and material culture, this thesis aims to understand how individuals and religious communities utilize material objects as ways of negotiating identity and working through problems. Art, in this case calligraphy, as much as religion can be a medium of creative expression, which is to say that the materials and styles of calligraphy and the beliefs and practices of religion can be understood, reformulated and reiterated by individuals and communities to address their historical moment.

In particular, this thesis examines the early development of the relation of word and image by looking at the Qur'an and genres of calligraphy such as the *basmalah* and the *hilye*. The following is a close examination of the calligraphic works of Nja Mahdaoui, Mohamed Zakariya, and Kamal Boullata, three living artists, representing the diversity of the Islamic and Arab calligraphic tradition. Nja Mahdaoui is a Tunisian Muslim who studied in Europe. Mohamed Zakariya is a Californian convert to Islam who has studied in Morocco and Turkey. Kamal Boullata is a Christian Arab from Palestine who has studied in Europe. Although contemporary art discourse seems to find "contemporary Islamic art" to be an oxymoron, this thesis finds that Mahdaoui, Zakariya and Boullata use calligraphy to engage in conversation with Islamic tradition and to understand their position in a modernized world. Themes of religion, mediated through calligraphy, are a means of negotiating the universal and particular, humanity and culture.

Islam is a religion that could be characterized as a *process of* negotiation of the relationships between human-God-community and characterized as a religion existing in a heterogenous society. Visual culture, and calligraphy as particularly explored in this thesis, is a space in which Muslims can negotiate relations with God, other Muslims and non-Muslims. The medium of calligraphy allows for a unique type of negotiation by straddling a tension between word and image; the calligraphic medium recognizes that although core tenets of Islam distinguish it from other religious traditions, there is space for practical, everyday negotiation of Muslim and non-Muslim identity where these contentions need not be primary.

Introduction

Geometry is to the plastic arts as grammar is to the art of the writer.
— Guillaume Apollinaire[1]

When (a man) is internally free from affliction, the writing is good. . . . The sage Plato says: 'Writing is the geometry of the soul, and it manifests itself by the means of the organs of the body.'
— Qadi Ahmad[2]

This thesis could best be described as a *process* of discovery and challenge. I began with an interest in contemporary Islamic art, only to discover that "contemporary Islamic art" was essentially an oxymoron within the discourse. Artists who are Muslim and who are, even at first glance, clearly thinking in religious terms are referred to as "contemporary Middle Eastern artists," "contemporary African artists," or referred to by their nationality.[3] The descriptions of artists and their work are highly secular. Yet in certain cases descriptions would privilege a Sufi mystical reference over the trend of secular language. Alternatively, my initial research on "Islamic art" found little evidence of work produced after 1800 CE. The categories of Islamic art and contemporary art, then, appeared to be mutually exclusive. It seemed that there are a few possible explanations for this: (1) there is, in fact, no such thing as contemporary Islamic art due to the decline of Islamic art that began in the 1800s (which is to say, during colonialism, at the moment of Islam's supposed contact with modernity), (2) there is, in fact, no such thing as contemporary

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[1]Boullata, Kamal, and John Berger. *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present*. London: Saqi, 2009. 326.

[2]Ahmad ibn Mir Munshi, al-Husaini and Vladimir Minorsky. *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise by Qadi Ahmad, Son of Mir-Munshi (circa AH 1015/CE 1606)*. Washington: Freer Gallery of Art, 1959. 12/51–2. Qadi Ahmad's treatise, originally in Persian, was translated from Russian by T. Minorsky. The translated text retains the numbering according to the original folios. When I cite the text I will include first the original numbering and then (separated by a forward slash) the pagination corresponding to the translated text published by the Smithsonian.

[3]See for example: Porter, Venetia, and Isabelle Caussé. *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*. London: British Museum Press, 2006; Sloman, Paul. *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*. London: Black Dog, 2009; Enwezor, Okwui, and Chika Okeke-Agulu. *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*. Bologna: Damiani, 2009; and Boullata, *Palestinian Art*.

Islamic art because contemporary art rejects religious subject matter, (3) there *is* contemporary Islamic art, but scholars of Islamic art have conceived of the category of "Islamic art" and/or "Islam" in such a way that the contemporary era has been thus far ignored or rejected, (4) there *is* contemporary Islamic art, but the contemporary art-world disguises it with predominately secular labeling and description, or (5) the apparent contradiction of "contemporary" and "Islamic" is due to a combination of these explanations.

As a student of religion, and particularly of Islam, the third explanation seemed most likely, as well as some degree of the fourth explanation. Already suspicious of scholarship that suggests that Islam is anti-modern or c. 1800 CE "contact with the West" incited a "crisis of modernity," the suggestion that Islamic art, like Islam, might be anti-modern rang false. I decided, then, to investigate the so-called category of "Islamic art" and the scholarship that participated in its discourse. I read works by many of the most prominent and influential scholars in the field, including Oleg Grabar, Jonathan Bloom, Sheila Blair, Richard Ettinghausen, Seyyed Hossien Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, and Wijdan 'Ali, with a mind toward analyzing how each scholar was conceiving of and then examining the category of Islamic art. A critical reading of these scholars revealed that preconceived definitions of Islam, and religion in general, were radically affecting how objects qualified as "Islamic art," how they were subcategorized, and then the degree of intellectual engagement that the scholar afforded them. The study of Islamic art, by these parameters, is more of an exercise in matching art-objects to conceptions of Islam than it is a critical engagement with the art-object itself. That is, art-objects were assumed to represent or act as evidence of Islamic phenomena, and thus, the study of these objects was primarily a project of categorization and cataloguing. Where the questions have been 'What is Islamic art?' and 'What makes Islamic art Islamic?' I pose the question, reformulated: What does "Islamic art" mean for "Islam"?

Within this general trend in Islamic art history, I recognized three predominant sub-trends; while it is common for scholars of Islamic art to begin un-reflectively with an assumption about the nature or definition of Islam, the definitions themselves varied, resulting in disparate histories of Islamic art. The three sub-trends that I identify are the "perennialists," "cultural relativists," and "global art narrativists." In Chapter 1, I closely examine works of scholarship that are representative of these trends, and tease out their underlying assumptions of Islam in order to determine how the field of Islamic art history has been shaped.

In the practical interest of narrowing the scope of my investigation, I decided to pick a sub-category of Islamic art to examine in both its historical and contemporary iterations. I

chose Arabic calligraphy[4] because I had come across innumerable pieces of contemporary works (both in Middle Eastern art galleries and in surveys on Middle Eastern art, African art, etc.) using different forms of Arabic calligraphy. Moreover, calligraphy is a medium that has garnered much attention by art historians. My examination of the state of the field of Islamic art history in Chapter 1 focuses on Islamic art more generally since the assumptions made by scholars about Islam, and thus Islamic art, are strongest during discussions that ask and attempt to answer the questions, 'what is Islamic art' or 'what is Islamic about Islamic art?' In Chapters 2 through 5, however, I focus specifically on the medium of calligraphy.

In Part I, that is, Chapters 1 and 2, I address Islamic art and the sub-category of calligraphy in their historical iterations and in Part II, or Chapters 3 through 5, I address calligraphy in its contemporary iterations. In Chapter 1, I examine the category of "Islamic art," which, as defined by most art historians, covers art created up until c. 1800 CE. In Chapter 2, I examine established calligraphic traditions. Although the genres that I examine in Chapter 2 might be included in the canon of Islamic art as defined by most art historians, I take a rather different approach to the material. Although this project is primarily dedicated to understanding calligraphy in contemporary art, I take seriously the aspect of the project in Chapter 2 that does more than superficial justice to understanding the origins and philosophical engagements of calligraphy that inform how contemporary artists interact with the tradition of calligraphy.

In approaching calligraphy as a historical tradition, I sought to understand its development and prominence in Islamic culture by starting at its philosophical roots. As I will explicate in Chapter 2, upon close examination of the Qur'an, I argue that the unique Qur'anic treatment of word and text informs a number of calligraphic genres, including the Qur'anic manuscript, the *hilye*, and the calligram. In this chapter, I seek to understand the internal logic of calligraphy, taking into account its visual form, physical material, semantic content, and ritual practice. By examining calligraphic traditions in this manner, rather than trying to categorize them as "art" or "craft," "visual" or "textual," "decorative" or "artistic" (which are terms endemic to the way that the art historians, who I discuss in Chapter 1, talk about about Islamic art), it became apparent that the power and versatility of calligraphy, in large part, came from the medium's self-conscious recognition of a tension between word and image. Calligraphy is not, as it has been often described, a mere decorative form, nor is it an Islamic alternative to represtational art.

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[4]Henceforth, when I talk about "calligraphy," I continue to refer to the category of Arabic calligraphy. To make any theoretical statements extending to the traditions of calligraphy in other languages would be outside the scope of my project.

Rather, calligraphy occupies a unique theoretical space on its own terms, negotiating the tension between word and image.

Upon beginning the part of the project that would examine calligraphy in the contemporary era, I started by looking at wide range of artists. I eventually narrowed my focus to three artists, Nja Mahdaoui, Mohamed Zakariya and Kamal Boullata. The artists have in common an international renown and respect that, practically speaking, made them good candidates for research; I wanted to examine artists for whom I could relatively easily access visual and textual sources. Additionally, their work has in common what could broadly be called a calligraphic medium.[5] The other reason for my decision to examine these three particular artists was their diversity of nationality, language, training and religious background; for example, Mahdaoui is a Tunisian Muslim who studied visual arts in Europe, Zakariya is a Muslim convert from California who studied calligraphy in Turkey, and Boullata is a Christian Arab from Jerusalem who studied icon-painting in Jerusalem and visual arts in Europe. These differences resist the categorical assumptions made by many scholars based on the sub-categories, under the heading of "Islam," based on national, regional, linguistic or ethnic identity.

In Chapter 3, I examine four projects by Nja Mahdaoui, namely his series of "*calligrammes*" on papyrus and parchment, his "illustration" of a text by Ibn al-Arabi, a screen in the KAUST Mosque, and a painted Tunisian drum. All of these pieces include Mahdaoui's unique word/image calligraphy that *appears* to be Arabic, but in fact has no semantic content. Although manuscript calligraphy and epigraphy can be obscured to the point of illegibility, he uniquely rejects semantic content entirely. However, Mahdaoui's work is still approachable because it is in conversation with calligraphic tradition; he is able to push an engagement with word/image tension because he utilizes visual tropes of the genres of the calligram, the *hilye* and mosque epigraphy. Mahdaoui uses this engagement with tradition to understand his position in a globalized world by denying semantic content, which is an exclusive knowledge available only to a linguistic in-group[6], and pushing the tension between word and image to create what he calls a "total art," art that could speak to global audiences.

In Chapter 4, I look closely at the works and practice of Mohamed Zakariya, who was trained by a master calligrapher in Istanbul and now teaches calligraphy to students. Zakariya's philosophical engagement with calligraphy is inseparable from the calligraphy

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[5]In other words, their work in some way involves word or text. Also, their work refers to the tradition of calligraphy, whether or not it could be strictly called "calligraphy." The categorical distinction between "art" and "calligraphy" is one to which I return, albeit briefly, in Part II.

[6]Which is to say that, while calligraphy could be appreciated for other reasons, Arabic calligraphy provides semantic content only to those who can read Arabic.

that he creates; for him, the master-disciple lineage of calligraphic knowledge is the intellectual and aesthetic basis for how he approaches the art. The calligraphic knowledge passed from master to disciple consists of aesthetic preferences, methods of preparing tools and materials, and the engagement between calligrapher-God-community that should be fostered. Calligraphers of this type of training and technique are generally referred to as "traditionalists," as opposed to Boullata and Mahdaoui who are more commonly called "visual artists." Zakariya, however, is expressly not anti-modern, and in fact, supports the artists efforts of people like Boullata, arguing that calligraphy must be kept relevant and engaging to audiences. Zakariya's art exists very much in a liminal space, somewhere between "art" and "craft," text and image, the prestigious and the practical. Although this is in part a problem of the art historical terminology that I will discuss in Chapter 1, it is also in part the nature of the medium of calligraphy. Calligraphy, as evidenced by Zakariya's works, writings and practice, defies categorization by actively and consciously engaging in tensions, especially between word and image.

In Chapter 5, I examine the square *kufic* silkscreen works of Kamal Boullata, a Christian Arab artist from Jerusalem. Due to the fact that calligraphy has established a powerful visual culture, a multivalent engagement with word and image, Boullata is able to participate in the discourse as a Christian. What Boullata creates is not a Christianized Arabic calligraphy; rather, he engages the tradition of Islamic Arabic calligraphy in order to understand Christian-Muslim interactions in Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, historically, is an example of engagement with heterogenous society through art or visual culture. The Dome of the Rock, completed in 691 CE, was able to create a multivalent, heterogeneous space in a way that text-based laws could not; Christian, Jewish and Muslim claims to space in Jerusalem are negotiated through word/image calligraphy. Boullata's childhood fascination with the Dome of the Rock manifests itself in an artistic engagement with square geometries, a medium that through his own experience and research, he uses as a means of negotiating his Christian-Arab identity and memories of Jerusalem in the contemporary world.

Rather than trying to categorize these artists according to the adjectives "Islamic," "Arab," "religious," "secular," "modern" or "traditional," according to nationality, or according to the use of paint versus ink, as has been common scholarly practice, I examined each of these artists and their works individually. By approaching the artists individually, commonalities that would have been otherwise obscured began to appear. Using a variety of formal techniques, the three artists interact with an Islamic visual culture that resists the strict distinction between "past" and "modern." This is not to say that the artists are tapping into a timeless essence, but rather that they engage the tension between word and

image that has historically been a tension played out in calligraphy. The use of calligraphy by these contemporary artists is *not* a modernization of tradition or a traditionalization of modernity. More appropriately, the engagement with word/image can be understood as a negotation of past and present, lived reality and memory.

As calligraphy is a means for the individual and communities to negotiate Islamic identity, it is apparent that what calligraphy, as a genre of Islamic art, means for Islam is that Islam, as a religion, is *process of* negotiation and renegotiation of the relationship between human-God-community. While there are certain tenets of Islam that are un-negotiable, for example the fact that there is one God and Muhammad is His messenger, the religion of Islam has recognized that the practical workings of everyday life must often be worked out in the moment. Likewise, Islam has always been self-aware of its situation as a religion amongst other religions, recognizing the need to define against and live amongst people of other beliefs. Calligraphy is a space for working out the practical interactions of Muslims and non-Muslims in which disputes over core theological tenets need not be primarily important.

Part I

Islamic Art quote/unquote

Chapter 1

Art Historical Scholarship

Islamic art historical scholarship could be categorized as three distinct groups. These groups are made distinct not only by the training of individual scholars and their particular approaches to art history, but also by the basic assumptions of their arguments. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Wijdan 'Ali, and Titus Burckhardt, and to some extent, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, are the most prominent scholars of what I will call the "perennialist" school. These scholars hold each other in much higher esteem and rarely cite the scholars within what I call the "cultural relativist" school. I call this camp the perennialist school for their essentialist understanding of religion, specifically Islam, as timeless, or *sui generis*. While scholars sometimes argue directly against each other, for the most part, these groups are very self-referential. For example, Sheila Blair, Jonathan Bloom and Oleg Grabar, who are representative of the cultural relativist school, have all worked and published together extensively. These scholars make up a Western-trained art historical niche that is very rarely in conversation with the perennialist school; and while these are not the only camps their works comprise the majority of scholarship. The major underlying question running through the methodology of perennialist and cultural relativist scholars tends to be either 'What is Islamic art?' or 'What makes Islamic art Islamic?' Ultimately, these questions are questions about essence and categorization. After examining in-depth, the problematic assumptions of these types of questions, I suggest a reformulation.

I also will address the arguments of scholars I call the "global art narrativists." This group is unlike the perennialists and the cultural relativists in that it is not comprised of scholars taking a similar approach to material. Rather, the global art narrativists are categorized by their common interest in challenging the predominant Western-centric narratives. Their common, broad inquiry is: Can there be a global historical narrative? More specific sub-questions related to art history include, 'Can there be a global art historical narrative?' and, alternately, 'Can scholars write an art history of non-Western

cultures?' The arguments in response to these questions highlight important problems such as the "narrative" in art history, the Western origin of the art historical discourse, post-colonial provincialization, and multiculturalism. These critiques are usually broad theoretical critiques that cite specific examples, and thus do not necessarily talk specifically about Islamic art. However, I think that it is important to look at how scholars are questioning different ways of conducting art history, particularly given that "Islamic art" has been marginalized by traditional art historical narratives and canons.

A close examination of the scholarship of the perennialists, the cultural relativists and the global art narrativists, reveals that the field of "Islamic art" has been informed by a particular definitions of religion. Although these groups of scholars conceive of religion in different ways, all of the groups *begin with* assumptions about religion and religious art, and then try to fit or theorize Islamic art based on these assumptions. Islamic art, then has not been examined based on its inherent characteristics or logics, but based on external concerns, categories and questions established by the discipline of art history prior to engagement with Islamic art. Scholarship based on assumptions about Islam, assumptions that thus far have not undergone any critical examination or self-reflection, has obscured understandings of Islamic art. While Islamic art could be seen as a medium through which Muslims negotiate their religion, Islamic art has been taken to be *representative* of their religion.

1.1   The Perennialists

In part as a reaction to Western art historical scholarship as represented by the cultural relativists, the perennialists are very self-conscious in their definitions of Islamic art. Not only do they specifically ask and answer the question 'What is Islamic art?,' these scholars are prescriptive in their works. They not only analyze Islamic art but they also explicitly state *who* can approach Islamic art. "In order to understand and appreciate the art of any people one must be united with them in spirit," A.K. Coomaraswamy argues.[1] It is their shared understanding of religion that allows the perennialists to make this argument. The perennialists ascribe to an Eliadian definition of religion, which suggests that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon existing outside time and outside of profane, or human, construction.[2] The perennialist school embodies this definition of religion in general and

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[1]Coomaraswamy is quoted by Wijdan 'Ali in her text, *What is Islamic Art?*. See: 'Ali, Wijdan. *What Is Islamic Art?* Amman, Jordan: Royal Society of Fine Arts, 1998.

[2]Nasr cites Eliade specifically in an essay in *Problems of Art Education in the Islamic World*, saying, "During the past half century, thanks to the works of Coomaraswamy, Zimmer, Eliade and others, the significance of symbols and myths in the art of the orient has become more widely

when applied to Islamic art in particular, they emphasize art as an act of remembrance of the sacred or God, *dhikr*. Rather than making an Eliadian argument, however, that Islamic art is a symbol *of* the sacred, they argue that Islamic art is, in fact, an act of remembrance of God. In examining three important tropes of the perennialist argument, timelessness, lack of differentiation of form, and art as praxis, the underlying assumptions about religion that form the perennialist argument about Islamic art and how Islamic art should be studied, become clear.

Criticizing scholarship by Creswell and Ettinghausen, who are part of the cultural relativist school, Wijdan ʻAli argues that Western art historical scholarship has tended to focus on, to the point of over-emphasis, the diversity of Islamic art and on the incorporation of Western influences. She argues that the obsession with influence, that is, where a particular form or style originated, tends to dominate Western scholarship on Islamic art. Whereas ʻAli and the perennialists would argue that this undue emphasis on form and material ignores the spiritual aspect, the most important aspect, of Islamic art. "Islamic art is the result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of multiplicity. ... Islamic art does not imitate the outward forms of nature but reflects their principles," Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues.[3] It is the basic argument of the perennialists that there is a timeless essence and *unity* to the Islamic religion, and that this unity is manifest in art. Islamic art, although expressed through different mediums, techniques and styles, always maintains a spirit of unity, or reaffirmation of the Unity of God.[4] The perennialist argument about spiritual unity suggests that style and form are unimportant, and thus the importance of Islamic art is divorced from its material grounding. By this definition, there is no distinction between "high art" and "low art," which is to say, craft and material culture.

Likewise, there is no distinction between art for art's sake (indeed this concept does not exist by the perennialist definition) and utilitarian art.[5] Nasr argues that Islamic art

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realized. But in the case of Islamic art there is still much to be done to bring out the meaning of Islamic art which can only be achieved by unveiling the reality to which the art alludes by means of symbolism." See: International Seminar on Islamic Art, ʻAli, Wijdan, Jamʻiyah al Malakiyah lil-Funun al-Jamilah, and Islamic Arts Foundation. *Problems of Art Education in the Islamic World: 36 Working Papers, 29 in English and 7 in Arabic by Scholars from the Islamic World and the West: 18-20 October, 1988 in Amman* Amman, Jordan: Ministry of Culture; Royal Society of Fine Arts, 1992. 43. Also, for a deeper understanding of Eliade's definition of religion and symbols, Eliade's *The Sacred and The Profane* is particularly helpful.

[3]Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

[4]Burckhardt in particular reemphasizes this fact with every discussion of a new genre or medium in his art history of Islamic art: see Burckhardt, Titus, Roland Michaud, Peter J. Hobson and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. Westerham: Kent: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976. 117.

[5]ʻAli, *What is Islamic Art?*, 17–8.

is not one that can be confined to the art museum.[6] Through this argument, he implies that the museum is an institution that draws this distinction by consciously housing high art, and thereby relegating low art to the mundane world (or perhaps a museum of natural history). This lack of distinction between practical art and art for art's sake in Islamic art is important because it is a product of the theory that all art is a creative manifestation of remembrance of God; thus, all art is for *God's* sake and, in that sense, "practical." A piece of art, then, is not understood in the context of other artworks that might share similar formal qualities, but it is understood in the context of an idealized understanding of a materialized Islamic essence.

It is this "Islamic essence" that the perennialists take to be timeless. 'Ali explains how Islamic art particularly achieves this relationship with spirituality, arguing, "Accordingly, Islamic aesthetics seek to represent the spiritual and nonphysical qualities of what is depicted while taking into account the natural harmony and balance within and without the art work. Thus by totally ignoring the imitation of nature, art is freed from the confines of its period and is rendered timeless."[7] This conception of artwork is removes considerations of motive, intention and patronage from the realm of the study of Islamic art. Again, unlike Western-concieved notions of art, the perennialist notion resists identifying influences or formal movements of art; this is justified by not only the lack of differentiation in perennialist art historical discourse, but also here by the notion of timelessness. The implications of ahistorical art are far reaching in that sociopolitical history becomes a story that could be told alongside an artwork or building, but it is a story that does not *affect* the artwork in any significant way. As such, art becomes proof of the sacred, a "hierophany" in Eliade's terms.[8] Problems such as the sociopolitical reasons that an architect chose particular Qur'anic quotations for mosque epigraphy become irrelevant, except insofar as Qur'anic epigraphy is understood, in general, to be a remembrance of God. "The primordial creative act was at once the Primordial Word which is the origin of all sound and of the Noble Quran as a sonoral universe, the primal Point which is the origin of the sacred calligraphy that is the visual embodiment of the Sacred Word," Nasr states.[9] Nasr argues that the Qur'an was a moment of connection to the "Primordial Word," which is to say a return to the timeless sacred. The art of calligraphy, then, is in its every iteration, a re-Creation. Emphasis, then, is placed not on the formal qualities (such as color, line quality, and composition) of calligraphy as an art form, but on the reflection, the hierophany, of a perfect, primordial form. In a separate essay, Nasr states,

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[6]Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 64.
[7]'Ali, *What is Islamic Art?*, 35.
[8]Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 12.
[9]Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 17.

"Islam is not based upon a historical event but on a non-temporal truth, that of *shahadah, lailaha illa'Llah*."[10] This statement expresses the basic sentiment of the perennial idea of religion. The perennialist understanding of Islam, then, is based on a sacred truth or essence, the Unity of God, rather than a set of human historical reactions and interactions.

If Islam is ahistorical, Islamic art, which directly taps into the essence of Unity, too must be ahistorical. The art is ahistorical in that its essence is unaffected by problems of patronage, audience, or political manipulation, meaning that if the art is "practical" it is practical insofar as it is a remembrance of God, but it could not be practical to a particular social or political end. The very close relationship between Islam as a religion and Islamic art as a creative act is very much part of the perennialist project to understand religion as timeless and above profane differentiation. For the perennialists, the distinction even between Islam and Islamic art falls in on itself; Nasr argues, "The sacred art of Islam is, like all veritable sacred art, a descent of heavenly reality upon the earth. . . . If one were to ask what is Islam, one could in answer point to the *miḥrāb* of the Cordova Mosque, the courtyard of the Sulṭān Ḥassan Mosque in Cairo . . . not to speak of the calligraphy of the Sacred Text itself."[11] The perennialists argue that the creation of and even contemplation of Islamic art is a form of *dhikr*. Thus, as religious praxis, art become inextricable from the religion itself. ʿAli argues, "For a Muslim, Islamic art is one of the means by which he can attain this 'knowledge,' whether through creating it or by contemplating its beauty,"[12] Here ʿAli is making an argument similar to Nasr's when he says that Islamic art is a kind of remembrance that can penetrate "all moments"[13] of a person's life.

Titus Burckhardt argues that the precedent for art being a medium for ritual was the Prophet Muhammad's injunction to his followers to recite the Qur'an in a melodic way; "Sacred art therefore fulfills two mutually complementary functions: it radiates the beauty of the rite and, at the same time, protects it."[14] According to Burckhardt, the beauty of sacred art adds to its appeal and authority, while simultaneously providing a means through which to negotiate the theological implications of the ritual. Burckhardt uses a *hadith*, or prophetic saying, to argue that the abstract designs in mosque architecture are a way of responding to the Prophet saying that having figures on the walls disturbed his prayers; thus, art is protecting the ritual of prayer from idolatry. Because the perennialists see art being so intricately connected to ritual, the spirituality of both the ritual and

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[10]International Seminar on Islamic Art et al. *Problems of Art Education*, 40; 38.

[11]Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 195. For an almost identical statement, see also: Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 1.

[12]ʿAli, *What is Islamic Art?*, 19.

[13]Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 198.

[14]Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 83.

the ritual actor become very important. If one could point to Islamic art as a means of defining Islam there is certainly a lot at stake in what is allowed to be called "Islamic art"; Islamic art must appropriately illustrate the theological tenants of the religion. Moreover, the person who creates Islamic art must be spiritually sound, given that he or she is to be, essentially, creating Islam. ʿAli asks, "Who is a traditional artist? He is humble, honest and pious, conscious of the values entrusted to him which he strives to keep alive, often regardless of his unfavorable circumstances. . . . It is the ability of the artist to project his inner self, by adhering to tradition, in order to create a form that reflects to the outside world certain spiritual and aesthetic values." [15] Because the religious character of an artist is exhibited in his or her artwork, by this argument, one could look at an artwork and gauge how good of a Muslim the artist is; it would seem that works and faith, in the case of art, are inextricable. The only way to judge art, then, would be to have a normative definition of the essential message of Islam and judge how well this message was manifested in a piece of art.

While all perennialists do not have the exact same definition of Islamic art, nor the same means of understanding aspects of Islamic art such as aniconism and the role of the artists, the major themes of their arguments are similar. Their similarity stems from a common understanding of religion in general and Islam in particular. To summarize, perennialists regard religion as a category to be perennial and *sui generis*, and regard Islam as unique because it is particularly concerned with *dhikr*, the remembrance of God. For this reason, they resist differentiating within the category of art. All Islamic art must reflect the Unity of God, and thus distinctions such as high/low and utilitarian/decorative (or, perhaps, aesthetic) become irrelevant. Likewise, the context of the art or the considerations of with form, style, and trend also become irrelevant; religion and art are both timeless. In this view the historical context becomes a variable, whereas the art itself, and its spiritual content, are timeless and unchanging, unaffected by profane human society. Since a person is able to interface with divine unity through art, the act of creating and contemplating art must necessarily be a sacred ritual. Thus, the perennialists see art as an inextricable aspect of ritual remembrance. As a ritual, art must embody the spiritual essence of Islam and then is a microcosmic manifestation of Islam.

1.2   The Cultural Relativists

While the perennialists addressed Islamic art as a ritual remembrance of God, a ritual that actively participated in and served as a visual reminder of the Unity of God. In

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[15]ʿAli, *What is Islamic Art?*, 22–3.

much of Western art historical scholarship religion is read as the underlying constant that unifies a canon of artwork as "Islamic art." In this case, art is not an act of religion, but instead, religion is the common denominator in otherwise disparate art forms and movements. Although art historians have argued about and, over the years, revised their *approaches to* this body of art, their definitions of the *bounds* of the Islamic art canon have varied little. Some iteration of the definition of Islamic art as all art created under Islamic rule, "beginning in the seventh-century Arabia and encompassing by the fifteenth century all the lands between the Atlantic and the Indian oceans, the steppes of Central Asia and the deserts of Africa," has remained standard, both explicitly and implicitly.[16] Many scholars state some iteration of this definition in the beginning of their work, while others, particularly museum collections and catalogues, implicitly reproduce this definition by only including works that fall within these bounds, essentially, art that is Middle Eastern (and sometimes South-East and West Asian) in origin and pre-1800 CE in date.[17] The boundaries that prescribe the canon of work, the pieces that are included under the heading "Islamic art," have varied little, but scholars will debate *what makes Islamic art Islamic*. This question, in fact, a title of one of Grabar's essays, is itself an Orientalizing question.[18] By an Orientalizing question, I do not mean one born out of an underlying desire to manipulate knowledge of Islam for a political end; I do not believe that, the art historians that I discuss, had divisive political intentions. However, I *do* mean to say that the idea that there is an Islamic structure that could be found in a body of artwork, is born of an Orientalist project to "understand" the "nature" of the Orient, a project which has been engaged in the othering of a group of people under the assumption that they are

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[16] Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islamic Arts.* London: Phaidon Press, 1997. 5.

[17] Bloom reiterates this definition in the introduction to *Early Islamic Art and Architecture.* Robert Hillenbrand says pointblank that it is "the generally accepted opinion that the best Islamic architecture dates from before the 18th century" and, thus, takes for granted the bounds of his study on Islamic architecture to be the "medieval" period between 700–1700 CE or "pre-modern Islamic architecture from Spain to Afghanistan"; see Hillenbrand, Robert. *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 1–6.) The *Pelican History of Art* series also sets these bounds even in the titles of their volumes; *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* and *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800.* Barbara Brend uses a scope in her work, published and distributed through the British Museum: see Brend, Barbara. *Islamic Art.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. 10. The geographic and chronological boundaries of the study of Islamic art are also reflected in museum collections and exhibitions; that is both in the objects they include and the essays in exhibition catalogues. This is illustrated by, but not limited to, the following examples: the "Images of Paradise in Islamic Art" exhibition at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, the Victoria and Albert Museum collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, and the "Heavenly Art, Earthly Beauty" exhibition.

[18] Richard Ettinghausen also explicitly asks this question in his essay "Decorative Arts and Painting" in Schacht, Joseph, Clifford E. Bosworth, and Thomas W. Arnold. *The Legacy of Islam.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974. 2nd ed.

fundamentally different.[19] Close readings of cultural relativist scholarship will reveal that the very premises of their definitions of Islamic art have assumed a definition of Islam; a definition that asserts that Islam is a consistent, pre-formed means of structuring identity and that Islam is "other" because of its supposed anti-secular and community-oriented nature.

The question, 'what makes Islamic art Islamic?', assumes that Islam is an unchanging structure present in lives of people that causes them to act, think, and produce in a certain way. The assumptions leading to this question, however, are flawed and have not been critically addressed, causing the field of Islamic art to endlessly debate categorization without critically engaging content. While reacting to the old school of Orientalism, scholars like Ettinghausen, Hillenbrand, Grabar, Blair and Bloom engage in what I will call "cultural relativism." These scholars are all Western-trained art historians who have studied with each other and have published together; they make up the bulk of contemporary Islamic art scholarship. While there are any number of scholars engaged in very narrow, specific fields, this group of scholars have published extensively and are engaged in the type of larger projects where the idea of "Islamic art" as a broad category is more important and more consciously engaged.[20] Thus it will be these latter scholars that I will take as representative of what I call the cultural relativist school.

I call this group of scholars the cultural relativists because the question mentioned earlier, 'what makes Islamic art Islamic' is indicative of a set of assumptions that leads these scholars to the self-gratifying conclusion that Islamic art is "different" than other forms of religious art. These assumptions include the assumption that Islam is a "way of life" and thus informs and can predict how Muslim individuals will think about and react to things. The quality difference in Islamic art is one that the cultural relativists ascribe to the particular cultural structure of Islam. The conclusion is self-gratifying in that Islamic art as a category separate and different from other categories of art must have some semblance of cohesion; that is, the art in the category "Islamic art," must somehow

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[19]I make this distinction because any discussion of Orientalism is immediately reminiscent of Said's *Orientalism*. Here I am not addressing an issue of power, which was particularly highlighted in Said's argument, but the issue of "othering" that is one aspect of Orientalism.

[20]Blair, Bloom, Grabar, and Ettinghausen published together in the two volume *Pelican History of Art* on Islamic art.They have also written innumerable catalogue essays for museum exhibitions, such as Blair and Bloom's in *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*. On the other hand, Gülru Necipoğlu's *The Age of Sinan* and Annemarie Schimmel's *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* are seminal works in the narrower fields of the architecture and calligraphy, respectively; Necipoğlu was a student of Grabar and Blair was a student of both Grabar and Schimmel. These are just a few examples of how interconnected this community of scholars is. In addition to publishing trends, we can see the overlap in scholarship in the footnote above where I talk about the basic geographic and chronologic bounds of Islamic art scholarship.

be similar. Assuming that there is some similarity between these artworks justifies, even demands, the question 'what makes Islamic art Islamic.' The very asking and exploring of this question reflexively reinforces the idea that Islamic art is different and unique.

It is within this discourse that Georges Marçais's thesis, 'I'll know it when I see it,' remains applicable to Islamic art. Marçais argues that there is something visibly perceptible about Islamic art that would allow someone to see a picture of a work of Islamic art or architecture, without any contextual knowledge or information of the particular work, and identify it as Islamic. This thesis assumes that Islamic art is visibly unique from other art forms and also that Islamic art shares a similar quality or personality.[21] Grabar, even as he problematizes Marçais's "definition" of Islamic art, calls Marçais's work "still one of the best short introductions to Islamic art."[22] In *The Formation of Islamic Art*, Grabar concludes that "a priori the impulse for a uniquely Muslim art lay not in monuments but in certain identifiable habits and thoughts, which had to be translated into visually perceptible forms."[23] Grabar says that Islamic forms are not uniquely Islamic in and of themselves, but are uniquely Islamic in the way that "habit and thoughts make them functional; thus, the uniqueness of Islamic art is still maintained."[24] This assertion by Grabar suggests that there is a particularly Islamic way of engaging with the material world, which denies the possibility that humans can have a multiplicity of reactions in particular times and places, regardless of their religious beliefs.

It is this theme of a unique difference that inspired my categorization of these scholars as cultural relativists; difference for the cultural relativists stems not from a spiritual argument as was the case with the perennialists but from a notion that Islamic civilization and culture, like the art it produces, is uniquely different from other civilizations. The concept of cultural relativism attempts to give objective, egalitarian agency to all cultures by broadly asserting that the beliefs and actions of an individual or community should be understood from the context of their "culture." I think the phrase cultural relativism here captures both the positive and negative aspects of current trends in scholarship on Islamic art; the positive resistance to understand art and art history as a universal phenomenon in which we could read Western-developed aesthetics and theories into non-Western art forms, and the negative tendency to then see an intellectual gap between "our" Western tradition and "their" Islamic tradition.

It is perhaps Richard Ettinghausen and Robert Hillenbrand who most explicitly state a theory of Islamic art and architecture based on the assumption of Islam as constant.

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[21]Marçais, Georges. *L'art de l'Islam.* Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1946.
[22]Grabar, Oleg. *The Formation of Islamic Art.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973. 1.
[23]Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 17.
[24]Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 17.

While the cultural relativists very consciously want to consider the variety of Islamic art, as Hillenbrand says, "there was continuity — the adoption of a single faith ensured that — but this continuity also permitted remarkable variety, as might be expected from the many linguistic, ethnic, and social divisions within the fold of Islam."[25] While the cultural relativists recognize that the people who built the Alhambra in present-day Spain and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem certainly were not in direct conversation and most likely didn't self-consciously think of themselves as participating in an "Islamic architecture," the cultural relativists still emphasize a unity in variety. That is, they argue that the variety of Islamic buildings and arts are all born of a common essence. For example, Richard Ettinghausen writes of contemporary Muslims:

> Having grown up in a secular and nationalistic period of history, most of them see their past primarily as a national achievement in which international religious and cultural factors played only a small part. ... However, for various reasons the traditional point of view seems to be still fully warranted. In spite of the 'dialectal' differences all the arts in the *Dār al-Islām* do speak the same basic language.[26]

Ettinghausen insists that Islamic art has an aesthetic legacy that, despite its variety in form, style, medium and socio-historical context, holds "some overriding and unifying characteristics."[27] He argues that, even before globalizing technology, Islamic forms and styles separated by geography and time could "form an interconnected, all-embracing unit."[28]

For the cultural relativists, it is the religion of Islam that spans impossible gaps of time and space, and that provides the common language of artists who would have otherwise had no contact with each other; Ettinghausen in fact, calls it the "common denominator."[29] Since these scholars are taking Islam to be the constant and decisive element in justifying the field "Islamic art," their conception of Islam, and of religion in general, is formative in how they understand the relationship between Islam and art produced by Muslims. In their catalogue essay for the exhibition, *The Here and the Hereafter: Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*, Shelia Blair and Jonathan Bloom note that this exhibition is, in part, an attempt to "show that an understanding of the Islamic belief in the world to come is vital to understanding Islamic art and society both historically and in the contemporary

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[25]Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 22.

[26]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 275. "*Dār al-Islām*" translates literally to "house of Islam" and refers to the Muslim majority world.

[27]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 274.

[28]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 274.

[29]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 284.

world."[30] Their understanding of Islam is summarized in their essay; "Throughout history, all Muslims have followed the five Pillars of Islam. . . . Beyond this, it is virtually impossible to characterize the fourteen centuries of Islamic civilization from Spain to Indonesia in the limited number of works of art selected for exhibition."[31] Like Ettinghausen and Hillenbrand, Blair and Bloom see variety within unity in Islam. According to Blair and Bloom, in religion this unity is found in the "five pillars of faith" and in Islamic art it is found in "Islamic culture."[32]Ironically, it would seem that Blair and Bloom are attempting to recognize that there are many "Islams" worldwide, and thus trying to counter a monolithic definition of Islam. By asserting that the five pillars are the core or essence that makes all Muslims the same, however, they have only reformulated an essentialized understanding of Islam. Blair and Bloom's definition suggests that the five pillars are the unchanging structure of Islam and everything else is merely cultural variation. The primary problems with this understanding is that it presupposes an essential Islamic core, or orthodoxy, the very notion of which, if put to the test, would be variously contested inside and outside of the Islamic tradition, and it diminishes the real significance of the complex religious tradition.The peripheralization of anything that is not the supposed core tenets of Islam, suggests that these other diverse modes are somehow less Islamic, which leaves out the possibility of these types of variation to be the very basic ways that Muslims negotiate their identity on a daily basis.

It is important to note here the difference between the perennialist and the cultural relativist arguments for a unique character to Islamic art. The perennialists speak of "essence" and a spiritual connection to God that imbues all Muslims and all Islamic artwork. The cultural relativists, on the other hand, although they sometimes use the language of essence are referring to an Islamic structure, or cultural system. They take Islamic sacred texts and laws to provide a structure for society that in turn produces a certain kind of Islamic character. According to this argument, the Islamic character is evidenced in the way community is formed, in political governance and expansion, as well as in how religious and cosmological beliefs are expressed verbally and physically, practically and artistically.

Premised in the cultural relativist understanding of Islam is that Islam is different, specifically from two other major religions that span the globe and have inspired visual art, Christianity and Buddhism; Islam is different from both the monotheistic and familiar tradition of Christianity and the major "Eastern religion" of Buddhism. Blair, Bloom,

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[30]Blair, Sheila, Jonathan Bloom, Hood Museum of Art and Asia Society. *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*. Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991. 11.

[31]Blair, *Images of Paradise*, 12.

[32]Bloom, *Islamic Arts*, 5.

and Grabar all use the comparison of Christian and Buddhist art to suggest that Islamic art is of a different type.[33] Islam does not fit into conceptions of "Eastern religions." In part, this is because Buddhism is often considered to be more of a 'philosophy' than a religion. Also, Hinduism and Buddhism are both associated with highly visual traditions and idols. Assumptions that Islam is inherently iconoclastic have caused scholars to immediately reject any connection to "Eastern" art traditions. This distinction is argued because Islamic art is not a style or movement (unlike Baroque, for example) and is not strictly religious (like Christian art), which is to say made and consumed only by Muslims for religious purposes. "Muslims were no less religious than their Christian brethren, but Islam never developed institutions comparable to those that played such an important role in the making of Christian art," Blair and Bloom write, noting the lack of a hierarchical church institution with clerics and priests.[34] Ettinghausen too, argues that the "pervasive influence" of geometric, floral and epigraphic designs "in a mostly illiterate and publicly frugal but emotionally responsive community which was endeavoring to find salvation without the immediate intercession of a prophet or saints and without the help of a clergy."[35] This basic problem of dealing with a lack of institutional clergy greatly affects the scholarship on Islamic art, but is, of course, only a "problem" insofar as it is treated as such by such scholars.[36]

Without a specific location for religion to take place, that is, a church or a temple[37], and a specific group of people in charge of defining orthodoxy, that is, some kind of priestly caste, Islam becomes hard to locate in the same terms that one understands Christianity, Buddhism. Islam is then talked about as a social structure, "cultural" phenomenon or a "way of life." Where in the study of Christian art, it is arguably easier to draw a line around religious art, as art sponsored by the Church, art historians have trouble doing the same with Islamic art, but insist on trying. Islamic art, they argue, exists both in what they term "religious" spaces and in the "secular" spaces of town, palaces, and residential decoration. The way that Hillenbrand addresses this problem is by arguing that, "The

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[33]Bloom, *Islamic Arts*, 5; Bloom, Jonathan. *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002. xi.; Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 1–2; and Irwin, Robert. *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture, and the Literary World*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997. 12.

[34]Bloom, *Islamic Arts*, 7.

[35]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 289.

[36]Which is to say that the lack of an institutional clergy in Islam is not something that a Muslim would find problematic.

[37]Mosques cannot be considered "sacred space" in the way that a church or temple might be. Mosques provide a space for a variety of social functions beyond prayer. Additionally as Islam does not have an institutional clergy, the mosque is a much more "anarchic" space in which relations are formed. This is in contrast with a strictly consecrated or ritual space.

advantage of the word 'Islamic' is that it refers as much to a culture — a culture as self-contained as that of Western Europe — as to faith." [38]

A cultural relativist approach allows scholars to see Islam and Islamic art as "different" without the need to critically engage the religious aspect of Islamic art. By way of example, Ettinghausen, cited above, argues that artists growing up "in a secular and nationalistic period of history" incorrectly view their art as a "national achievement," whereas Ettinghausen correctly, to his mind, sees the art very much in the international language of Islam. [39] When scholars understand religion based on a definition that priviledges Christianity, that is religion as defined by sacred space, notions of orthodoxy, and clerical institution, Islam becomes "problematic" because it does not fit into understandings of the delineated spheres of the sacred and the profane. Islamic art, then, becomes defined as any art created by a Muslim, for a Muslim or under Muslim rule.

In addition to being unable to spatially locate Islam, and thus Islamic art, using the same parameters of the sacred and profane and the site of the church, [40] Islamic art becomes problematic to the Western-trained art historians, such as the cultural relativists, because of a notion of Christian individualism. Where cultural relativists characterize Islam as being primarily about the community, the *umma*, they seem to have a complimentary opposing definition of the Christian tradition as being very centrally concerned with the salvation of the individual soul through its personal relationship with God and Christ. For example, Grabar argues that, "it is not only in architecture that we see an art at the service of a society. Practically all other artistic activities were similarly directed to making daily, public or private, life more attractive and more exciting." [41] Grabar argues that this particularly strong emphasis on the "service of society" is part of what makes Islamic art Islamic; which is to say that society and practical function are being emphasized in art, rather than individual artistic expression. Grabar further argues:

> Other explanations may exist as well, but the more important point is that, whatever the reasons, Islamic art did manage to evolve a type of visual tension which is quite different from the man-centeredness of Western art or the natural complexities of Chinese art. It is the tension which ought to be stressed, it seems to me, for, in a deeper sense, it bequeaths the interpretation and pleasure of the artistic experience to the viewer and leaves him free to make his own choices and judgments. Therein lie its greatest achievements,

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[38]Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 8.
[39]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 275.
[40]In the Weberian sense of the word.
[41]Grabar, Oleg. *Islamic Art and Beyond.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate Variorum, 2006b. 248.

even if we cannot quite explain as yet why it is so.[42]

Unlike the perennialists, the cultural relativists argue that Islamic art is historically contextual in its social function. Indeed, part of the argument that Islamic art, while "Islamic" is not necessarily religious, relies on the assumption that the Islamic nature of art is related to the Islamic way of life, or social structure. By this argument artistic form, say a dome or a floral pattern, is not inherently Islamic, but is Islamic because of the way that it is utilized, because of the social function it serves. Thus, a work of Islamic art, taken out of its social context, is no longer Islamic art. This thesis suggests that "Islamic"-ness is a result of interaction with material objects, rather than understanding art as a means, or process, through which religious identity could be negotiated. While the cultural relativists don't explicitly state this (which is unfortunate, as it would have particularly interesting implications for modern scholarship and museum curation), many of them do argue that it is Islamic art's necessary social function that has allowed Islamic art to be so popular in the West. The argument goes that Islamic art, especially in the form of calligraphy[43], geometric design, and floral patterning, became popular in the West because, as Ettinghausen argues, "there was no specifically Muslim iconography or overt religious symbolism, which would have been offensive to the Christian mind."[44] In addition to being characterized as "aniconic," artistic tradition and thus devoid of explicit, especially narrative, religious imagery, Islamic art can be appropriated, the cultural relativists argue, because when not being used to serve an Islamic function, the forms lose their connection to Islamic structure.[45]

Furthering the thesis that the constant of Islamic art is Islam as a structural, organizing principle, Ettinghausen suggests that Islam is a personified force that can act on its own rather than through the actions of individuals; "Thus it is clear that Islam exerted a very strong, even vital force, which was readily mirrored in the arts of the Muslim world. This having been said, it should nevertheless be stressed again that divergences do of course exist under the umbrella of the universal Islamic civilization."[46] Ettinghausen's "vital force" is reminiscent of Marçais's "personality." The fact that Ettinghausen emphasizes a disembodied Islamic influence illustrates his understanding of Islam as not being lived

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[42]Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 251.

[43]Even Qur'anic or religious calligraphic inscriptions could be co-opted by the West, arguably, because most people in the West could not read Arabic, and thus, could ignore the semantic content of calligraphy.

[44]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 295.

[45]I use the term "aniconism" as defined by Terry Allen in *Five Essays on Islamic Art*, where he says, "I prefer to term the Islamic phenomenon not iconoclasm, the rejection of images, but aniconism, the nonuse of images." See Allen, Terry. *Five Essays on Islamic Art*. Manchester, MI: Solipsist Press, 1988. 20.

[46]Schacht, *Legacy of Islam*, 276.

through individual experience, but as being a societal structure. This conception of Islam argues that Islam is different from other religions for its focus on community rather than individual salvation, thus Ettinghausen focuses on "Islamic culture" rather than "Islamic religion." This is of course problematic in terms of understanding Islam since Islamic communities have been constantly reinterpreting and living out a tension between God-community-individual. However, the notion that Islam is focused on community and culture is apparent in subsequent definitions of Islamic art throughout cultural relativist scholarship; that is, in the definitions that include all Islamic art made under Islamic rule, which is to say in a predominantly Islamic community, whether made for and by Muslims or non-Muslims. The definition of Islamic art including art made by or for non-Muslims is a direct product of this idea that Islam is more about community and culture than about the individual; it allows for a non-Muslim living in a community to still have some access to the Islamic structure that is represented in Islamic art.[47]

The idea that Islam is a way of life, which permeates all aspects of culture, allows the art historian to take an art object from any time or place in Muslim history and call it Islamic. This means of defining Islamic art, then, is teleological rather than empirical. It is as if art historians walked into a room full of the art objects created under Islamic rule and started picking up objects, asking "what makes this Islamic?" rather than coming into the room and asking "which of these objects are Islamic?" Their Islamic nature was assumed based on their location under Islamic rule, and the Islamic structure variously argued *after the fact*. Thus, much scholarship on Islamic art focuses on the problem of categorization rather than on issues of content. Much of the theoretical discussion is dedicated to arguing about categorization based on major versus minor arts, secular versus religious, imperial versus nationalistic versus *umma*-tic, or dedicated to questions of periodization that would allow scholars to delineate when Islamic art started, at what moment it had become "formed," and when it "declined."

The definition of Islamic art based on a notion of the Islamic religion as a cultural and civilizational phenomenon creates a space for contingent ideas of a classical or golden age of Islamic art. Hillenbrand states definitively that, "the best Islamic architecture dates from before the 18th century,"[48] which is in line both with statements about Islam such as the one made by Blair and Bloom who write, "In world history, the heyday of Islamic civilization is the millennium from the seventh to the seventeenth century,"[49] and

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[47]While it might be argued that I am at fault for exactly this by analyzing Kamal Boullata, a Christian, in the context of other Islamic artists. However, I would not argue that Boullata has created "Islamic art." Rather, I argue that Boullata engages an Islamic visual culture of calligraphy in order to understand his Christian-Arab identity in Jerusalem *in relation to* Muslims.

[48]Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 6.

[49]Bloom, *Islamic Arts*, 6. Blair and Bloom have, in addition to writing extensively about Islamic

with the time-frame of art covered in the vast majority of scholarship and curation. Not only is it implied by the lack of scholarship on Islamic art post-1800 CE in general, but also the thesis of decline in both Islamic civilization and art is expressed explicitly by a number of the cultural relativists. Hillenbrand argues that the 18th century, which is to say the colonial era, marks the end of what he calls the "medieval period," at which point, contact with the West "was destructive to indigenous modes."[50] He connects this moment of contact to the "demise" of medieval styles, which "ushers in a period of political and cultural decline."[51] Blair and Bloom too argue that contact with "Western modernity" was detrimental to the Islamic structure of Islamic art and write:

> Architects followed this first, but rather superficial, national style with one in which inspiration was sought in the traditions of domestic and vernacular building, rather than in the urban and monumental tradition of architecture with which this book has been largely concerned. Instead of looking at Sinan, they looked at the anonymous wooden houses of Turkey with projecting balconies and overhanging eaves. This search for authenticity in the vernacular tradition was not limited to Turkey, and it has enjoyed favor in many countries of the Islamic world in the second half of the twentieth century.[52]

Nationalistic expression is criticized as a decline from the tradition of classical, which is also to say pre-modern, Islamic art. It is suggested that encounters with nationalism and modernity preclude an Islamic means of creation, which is to say that, by this argument Islam, or religion, cannot be a means through which the individual or the society deals with change. We can see here the failings of the cultural relativist definition of Islamic art because, too caught up in a pathology of a golden age, it cannot successfully incorporate or understand Islamic art in the modern era. These scholars cannot develop a vocabulary for understanding Islamic art in a globalized world because their definition of Islamic art is too tied up in a notion of Islamic structure, associated with high Islamic civilization and power, and thus is situated in the past rather than the ever-changing present. At this point we can see that there is more than a problem of categorization at stake. The very premises of these definitions of Islamic art have assumed a constant, unchanging, antiquated notion of Islam that is "other" because of its supposed anti-secular and community-oriented nature.

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art and architecture, about the history of Islam; see Bloom, Jonathan, and Sheila Blair. *Islam: A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

[50] Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 6.

[51] Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, 6.

[52] Blair, Sheila, Jonathan Bloom, and Richard Ettinghausen. *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995. 314.

Clergy, community, and secularization are themes that Western-trained scholars have marked as "problems" thereby establishing Islam as "different," precluding the possibility that Islam is more complex, and is indeed concerned with the individual and has its own means of dealing with the demands that are solved in Christianity by clerical institutions and secularization of the public sphere. The unfortunate result of cultural relativism has often been that scholars will accept the differences of a culture without critically engaging them. Islam, in this case, is othered and not taken seriously, but merely accepted as different. This type of perspective creates an intellectual divide in which scholars suggest that they cannot say much about the content of Islam or Islamic art because they are "outsiders."

In the field of religious studies, this is not a new issue. In fact, scholars have been debating it for years. Who is allowed to interpret religious materials? What is the relative importance of emic and etic perspectives? Is religion necessarily a distinct realm from, say, politics, culture or economics? If we accept that only individuals within a tradition can speak about their tradition, any work on religion will be in the category of something like theology. Religious scholars are generally hesitant to say that only outsiders can understand a religious tradition, as this would be to diminish the importance of an individual's experience and suggest that religious people are delusional, ignorant, or lack perspective. A balance between these positions allows us to take seriously what individuals within a tradition say about their tradition and to take seriously the primary sources (in the form of literature, ritual and material culture that are accessible both to outsiders and those within the tradition), while at the same time engaging rather than othering the subject.

Cultural relativist scholarship, however, errs on the side of refusing to engage a subject for fear that as outsiders we not only don't "get it" but also *cannot* get it. This mindset leads to, in the case of scholarship on Islamic art, the over-emphasis of artist intention; we see this particularly in Grabar's essay "What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?"[53] Grabar, to his credit, recognizes the *possibility* that there is no Islamic art in the sense of a body of works connected by an Islamic essence.[54] Ultimately, however, Grabar does affirm an Islamic structure, less because of an explicit theoretical conviction but through the implications of his other concerns and assertions.[55] For example, Grabar's apology for being a non-Muslim writing about Islamic art very clearly indicates both an assumption that there is

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[53]This essay was first published as "What Makes Islamic Art Islamic," in *AARP*. The essay was then published, unchanged, in *Islamic Art and Beyond*.

[54]Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 247.

[55]In addition to the examples I will discuss in detail, Grabar talks about "inner characteristics of Islamic art" on page 247; the effect of the "deep egalitarianism of Islam" on page 249; and "Islamic culture" developing the tendency of aniconism on page 249.

Islamic-ness to Islamic art (although what this structure might be is not specified) and a cultural relativist stance regarding "Islamic culture."

> Another cautionary word is also an apology. The views and opinions which are here expressed were developed as a Western observer sought to understand an art. They do not derive from a Muslim experience, and it is indeed a problem faced by nearly all scholars in the field that neither the traditional nor the contemporary Muslim cultures have so far provided the kind of intellectual and verbal framework which facilitated the perception of Chinese or Japanese art for those who are outside the culture itself. ... All of us will greatly profit from contemporary Muslim meditations on Islamic art as well as from more practical investigations into the psychological and emotional attitudes of the modern Near East toward its own visual expression. For the time being, we have no choice but to understand the Muslim tradition of art from the outside and for this reason whatever follows is still preliminary.[56]

Grabar sets up an outside versus inside, observer versus observed, dynamic in which he situates himself, and all non-Muslim scholars, by definition on the outside.[57] Non-Muslim scholars become voyeuristic, or passive observers, looking in on a culture that they cannot, or will not, engage. Grabar's argument is particularly interesting because it admits the defeat of both art and art history by suggesting that neither could have anything meaningful to say on their own, that is, without the aid of insider information. Although historical and literary sources can add great depth to art historical analysis, many subfields of art history get by with the help of few or no written sources expressing artistic intention, with regards to Grabar's lament of a lack of Islamic theorizing on art and aesthetics, we must also remember that not all fields need to be individually theorized by separate cultures.Which is to say that theories of politics, economy and psychology, to name a few, have been widely applied to societies in times and places that far overreach the geographic and temporal bounds of where they were originally theorized. This is not to say that I believe there is necessarily one, universal theory of art or aesthetics, but would argue that theories about Islam (or Islamic art, culture, etc.) need not be necessarily be

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[56]Grabar, *Dome of the Rock*, 248.

[57]Shelia Blair writes similarly, "I write this survey of Islamic calligraphy as an outsider. I was not raised writing Arabic script, nor have I trained as a calligrapher. I am not a Muslim." Both an apology, like Grabar's comment, and an implicit, uncritical assertion of the right to use Western art historical methods, Blair's statement reinforces the norm of scholarship on Islamic art rather than challenging it to approach the material in new ways to make this "problem" of the outsider less of a problem. See: Blair, Sheila. *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. xxvii.

developed by Muslims. As I mentioned, we recognize that while nobody will ever have the 'full picture,' outsiders and insiders can both add to the analysis of religious, and likewise art, histories.

In addition, the emphasis on artist intention is uncharacteristic of most art historical scholarship. Indeed, artist intention is often regarded as being of very low importance. Art historians tend to recognize the importance of an artwork, in terms of form, function and content, based on the effect it has on the viewer or society at large, often regardless of what it was initially intended to do. Not all art is either propaganda or a visual form of a personal diary entry. Thus artist intention is only one potential piece of an art historical analysis. Indeed, it is generally accepted that artistic intention rarely lines up exactly with public perception of artworks since the artist cannot, but can only attempt to, control perception once the artwork has entered the public realm. Demanding that the artist present his or her intention is rather similar to asking someone to engage in self-psychologizing; while it is potentially useful, it will not necessarily expose the "correct" analysis.

Ultimately, what is problematic about this cultural relativist approach is that it assumes and reproduces an otherness that encourages the notion that there is an incommensurable intellectual, even human, gap between "us" and ''other" cultures, as if there is something so different that we just cannot understand. Rather than critically engaging a study of Islam, as well as political and socio-historical trends, in conjunction with a study of Islamic art, the cultural relativist feigns ignorance. Although the scholars I have grouped around the rubric of cultural relativists have added much to the study of Islamic art and architecture, some of their basic assumptions and approaches have both flawed their analysis and set up roadblocks to the advancement of further scholarship. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, I examine the works of three contemporary artists by starting with the works and the artist themselves. What questions do the works demand that we consider? It has been the case that these types of questions about contemporary "Islamic" artists have been overshadowed by the stagnant terminology and methodology of the field of "Islamic art."

1.3 The Global Art Narrativists

The global art narrativists, although they do not examine Islamic art-object directly, speak more to the theoretical discourse from which Islamic art histories, and other non-Western narratives, have been formulated. Rather, those addressing the question of the global art narrative are connected not by a similarity in methodology or argument, but by a common

problem, the problem of the globality of the "global art narrative." Art history has always
been written as a global art narrative (insofar as it has claimed to be a "narrative of art"
with no qualifiers), but has always placed primary emphasis on classical Greece and Rome
and Europe. The rethinking of what needs to be included in the narrative of art in order
to be properly considered "global" is a more recent project of the scholars that I have
called the global art narrativists; the critique is a product of critical engagement with
post-coloniality, the subaltern and globalization.

Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art* provides the seminal foundation of the art historical
narrative around which the field understands itself.[58] Gombrich's survey of the historical
development of the visual arts is, while increasingly less cited, a primary influence for
the ordering and organization of art historical survey texts and classes. Although many
scholars, especially scholars in non-Western fields, are trying to reformulate art histories,
Gombrich might be considered an irreversible, inextricable, event in the formulation of the
discipline. Much of art historical scholarship is based off of the narrative of a "global art
history," which is intellectually founded on Gombrich's work, which suggests that there
is a singular, coherent narrative of art history. His narrative begins with "prehistoric and
primitive peoples" and their art, in a chapter entitled "Strange Beginnings."[59] The narra-
tive then moves chronologically and geographically through ancient Egypt, ancient Greece
and Rome, stopping momentarily to pay lip-service to Islam and China in the 13th century,
and then moving on to Christian, Renaissance and modern Europe. Gombrich's project,
if superficially and unequally, covers the temporal and geographic span of human history.
His project then is to write an all-encompassing, or global, narrative of art as represented
by the most important moments, artists, and artworks. In his preface, Gombrich writes:

> I may as well confess that I have found no room for Hindu or Etruscan art, or
> for masters of the rank of Quercia, Signorelli or Carpaccio, of Peter Vischer,
> Brouwer, Terborch, Canaletto, Corot, and scores of others who happen to
> interest me deeply. To include them would have doubled or trebled the length
> of the book and would, I believe, have reduced its value as a first guide to
> art.[60]

Gombrich groups the entirety of Hindu art with second-tier European masters in terms of
importance to a basic understanding of world art, and implies by not including them that
they are not vitally important to understanding the shaping of the global art narrative. I
will take two seminal global art history texts, Janson's *History of Art* and Gardner's *Art*

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[58]Gombrich, E H. *The Story of Art*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1978.
[59]Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 19.
[60]Gombrich, *Story of Art*, 2.

Through the Ages to be primary examples of this narrative attempt; these texts are taught in survey classes and are considered to be a basic foundation in art historical knowledge. It is against these texts and scholarship based on this kind of foundation that James Elkins and other scholars argue, questioning the very validity or possibility for a global art history.

Recently these global art history narratives have gone through somewhat of a crisis, prompted by the critiques of scholars such as Elkins, in which they have had to consider whether or not they can call their narratives "global" or merely "Western." The ways that Janson and Gardner's tome-like surveys have dealt with the problem thus far, however, should be recognized as superficial. In part this can be seen as a superficial response to many critiques which are also superficial complaints about there not being enough attention paid to non-Western cultures. Elkins tackles a more theoretical core of the problem by challenging the terminology and methodology of the field of art history and by critically questioning what it means for art history to be a Western-concieved discipline and what it means to be "global" and "multicultural." However, many multiculturalist complaints only attack the surface of the problem, demanding less of a theoretical altering of the project of the global art history, but demanding a more egalitarian coverage of all cultures, Western and non-Western. Thus Janson and Gardner respond by simply changing their respective titles, adding in the subtitle "the Western perspective" or "the Western tradition." Janson simply removed content on "non-Western" art in order focus on "Western" art, and Gardner simply relegated "non-Western" content to a smaller volume "non-Western perspectives."[61] Looking more closely at Gardner's 10th edition of *Art Through the Ages*, we can see some of the general trends in the treatment of Islamic art, and other non-Western art.[62] The chapter on Islamic art is titled "In Praise of Allah: the Art of the Islamic World," an interesting choice because palatial and luxury arts, that is, what Gardner deems "secular" arts, are highly emphasized in the short chapter.[63] The chapter begins by stating that Islam is Arabic for "submission to God" and proceeds with a political history of the spread of the Islamic empire.[64] Architecture, considered a high art in the Western tradition, is heavily emphasized. Material culture, in the form of

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[61] We see this transition in Janson's *History of Art* between the 7th edition (2006) and the 8th edition (2011) and in Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* between the 9th edition (1991) and the 11th edition (2001). In the Gardner's 10th edition (1996), there was both a single volume version and a two volume version that was broken up into: "Ancient, Medieval, and non-Western Art" (vol. I) and "Renaissance and Modern Art" (vol. II).

[62] I focus on the 10th edition because it is amid the transition between separating "Western" and "non-Western perspectives"; Islamic art is still being addressed in the global narrative, but will soon be segregated to a different volume.

[63] Gardner, Helen, Richard G. Tansey, and Fred S. Kleiner. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996. 357.

[64] Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 357.

carpets, clothing and palatial decoration are discussed as "luxury arts," as is the "art of the Koran."[65] This take on Islamic art is a kind of masterpiece history of art, focusing primarily on "high art" and royal patronage, rather than the everyday or the so-called practical or devotional arts. In order to justify the inclusion of Islamic art in the global narrative of art history, which had previously been Western-centric (usually only narrowly focused on parts of Western Europe and America), the Islamic art history narrative must be interwoven through emphasis on influence; Gardner's text emphasizes the Greco-Roman and Christian origins of many forms and styles in Islamic art and ends the chapter by talking about Christian patronage of Islamic art. Thus, Islamic art is included and made relevant by its precedent in the Western art and by its subsequent contributions back to the Western art.

While surveys such as Janson's and Gardner's are considered introductory, they are still of great importance because they teach students of art history how to "do" art history based on the Gombrichian model; thus, these surveys provide insight into how scholars of art history, and in our case Islamic art history, envision the broad, underlying narrative of the field. Scholars of Islamic art, we will recall the cultural relativists in particular, have been, as Finbarr Barry Flood puts it, "constituting and consolidating a canon, an 'imagined community' of select artifacts and monuments," that fit into the Gombrichian narrative of art history.[66] Flood also notes the art historical tendency to read art objects as lessons, representative of some social situation; he points to a particular problem in Islamic art, where the adjective Islamic slips between pointing to a religious identity and a cultural identity.[67] Flood argues that the "unwieldy" field of Islamic art may be symptomatic of the equally unwieldy discipline of art history.[68] It is a discipline in which the global art historical narrative was theorized before any scholars seriously studied or included non-Western arts.

Scholars of non-Western art history struggle to remain relevant or "scholarly" within the field of art history, while still doing justice to a thus-far unprivileged body of work. It is in the face of these problems that some scholars have tried to re-imagine the way one creates a narrative of art history. For example, Ikem Okoye has suggested the "possibility of framing art history simultaneously from a multiplicity of positions and locations."[69]

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[65]Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 367.

[66]Mansfield, Elizabeth. *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*. New York: Routledge, 2007. 32.

[67]Flood's essay provides, among other things, an interesting look into how the Western-developed art history of "Islamic art" has been variously politicized in museum institutions and contemporary exhibitions.

[68]Mansfield, *Making Art History*, 47.

[69]Okoye is cited by by Finbarr Barry Flood in his essay, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism?:

The "problems" of writing an art history of a non-Western culture are faced, not only by Western scholars such as Janson and Gardner, but by scholars and artists in the non-Western world. For example, many Muslim artists and art historians are being trained in institutions that were established under colonial rule and that were modeled after Western institutions. Jamila Zaidi, a professor of art in Pakistan, wrote in a paper for the International Seminar on Islamic Art:

> Fine Art courses are loaded with theory papers consisting of Art Histories especially that of European and Western modern art which exercises greater influences on the mode of our thinking and creativity. Eastern, Far Eastern and African Art is not included at all. ... But some of the writers [i.e. foreign authors] lack full understanding of deeply rooted Islamic philosophy and the underlying spirit and meaning, while some have superficial knowledge of Islamic cultural and social structure, and of intellectual and emotional approaches to art, the major factors which have played a significant role in the shaping of the various arts and architecture of the Islamic world at different times and in different countries some of the authors are based in.[70]

While many Muslim artists and scholars recognize the problems of the global art historical narrative, including the problem of the scholar and artist's positionality and the privileging of "Western" art styles, method and terminology, into which they and their tradition have been read, the question remains: how does one go forward?

Art historian James Elkins has addressed the problem of the global art history extensively in his work *Stories of Art*, a response to Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. While many scholars such as Okoye and Zaidi advocate for a multiplicity of voices and narratives in art history, that is, narratives that return to "native" methods and terms, Elkins argues that stories can be added to Gombrich's narrative, but can never "supplant it" or entirely break away from it.[71] Elkins and Dipesh Chakrabarty, author of *Provincializing Europe*, follow similar lines of argument. Both scholars recognize theoretical problems with the universal application Western historical time.[72] However, each takes Western or Euro-

New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," published in *Making Art History: a Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, edited by Elizabeth Mansfield. See Mansfield, *Making Art History*, 47.

[70]International Seminar on Islamic Art et al. *Problems of Art Education*, 48.

[71]Elkins, James. *Minulost' v Prítomnosti: Súčasné Umenie a Umeleckohistorické Mýty = the Past in the Present: Contemporary Art and Art History's Myths*. Bratislava: Nadácia, Centrum sú?asného umenia, 2002. 250.

[72]Chakrabarty additionally emphasizes the problem, which he sees endemic in European social sciences, of seeing the human as "ontologically singular," separate from and prior to gods and spirits. In his scholarship on India he takes "gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human."

pean contributions to their respective disciplines to be foundational and irreversible. As
Chakrabarty puts it, "European thought is at once indispensable and inadequate in helping
us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and
provinicializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought — which is now
everybody's heritage and which affects us all — may be renewed from the margins."[73]

Elkins, with respect to his own field of art history, notes that, "the very idea of
writing art histories, setting up and running art history departments, publishing art history
books, and teaching students to be art historians, is Western."[74] He argues that it is the
very terminology and aim of art history that is Western, and since they make up the basic
structure of art history they are indispensable. In as much of a critique of multiculturalism
as of the field of art history, Elkins concludes that, "If we want to move beyond postcolonial
theory and what Stanley Fish[75] calls 'boutique multiculturalism,' books on new subjects
shouldn't sound like existing books: in fact they shouldn't even be identifiably art history.
Otherwise they will really only be new occasions for Western narratives and descriptions."[76]
Elkins argues that true multiculturalism would give up the entire canon of art historical
scholarship, as it is of Western origin and precedent, and participate in a field of study
that is no longer recognizable as art history. He thus concludes that art history as we
know it and can identify it today has no potential for strong multiculturalism. Although
Elkins sticks to his point that true non-Western art histories would not in fact be art
history per se, when pushed to look at practical trends, Elkins recognizes another option
for scholars. The other option is to accept the Western heritage of the art historical
discourse and to proceed in the globalizing world with a critical eye. Elkins recognizes
that, in practical terms, art history is *in fact* being practiced on a global scale with a
critical recognition of where terms and methods have come from. In the proceeding of
a seminar entitled, "Is Art History Global?" Elkins concludes his opening essay stating
that, "A worldwide set of practices identifiable as art history poses a fascinating challenge.
No one can read everything, but a worldwide endeavor, especially one whose coherence is
contested and problematic, requires worldwide reading."[77] Although these discourses have

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See Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.*
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 16.

[73]Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16.

[74]Elkins, "Why it is Not Possible," 255.

[75]In "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech,"
Stanley Fish argues that true multiculturalism will never exist because people are always tolerant
only up to a point. He demands that rather than participating in boutique multiculturalism, people
should be critical of the very notions of multiculturalism and liberalism; thus, one is forced to accept
the limits and shortcomings of these theories, but can still move forward critically.

[76]Elkins, "Why it is Not Possible," 255.

[77]Elkins, James. *Stories of Art.* New York: Routledge, 2002. 23.

not been recognized by the predominant narrative of art history, alternative terminology and methodologies are being used outside Western discourse and could be incorporated into common art historical vernacular.

The critiques of Elkins and Chakrabarty are valuable insofar as they point to the underlying problems in globalizing a discourse that was developed in a very specific historical time and space, modernizing Europe. Elkins and Chakrabarty provide a more general and theoretical critique of the structures that created problems grappled with by Muslim art and art history professors and curators, the cultural relativists, and the perennialists alike. Although Elkins, very much an art historian, does not take the particular path of writing "art histories" that no longer look like art histories, he has left us with the option.

As a student of religion, I don't feel the same trepidation that I sense art historians feel when incited to forge a new path in studying previously marginalized traditions. The discipline of religious studies, is in fact, particularly suited for the task of addressing Islamic art which has been peripheralized by art history. Religious studies has already undergone a process of self-evaluation regarding the study of world religions. Critiques of Christian-biased studies helped the discpline self-reflectively consider the theoretical implications of terms such as "sacred," "orthodoxy," "ritual," and "sin" (to name only a random, but prominent, few). Additionally, religious studies has evaluated the critique that "such-and-such a term is a modern innovation and is thus anachronistic." For example, it is certainly true that there was no word for religion in ancient China. However, this does not mean that Chinese rituals and cosmological beliefs cannot be studied as a religious phenomenon, in which we recognize that belief, action and society are mutual co-forming. Indeed, we recognize the fact that economics has not always been a theoretical field of examination, but we would never say that economies did not exist prior to our development of the term economics.

We need not ask "what makes Islamic art Islamic?" as we now recognize that this question of categorization is mistakenly obsessed with essence; an essence that implies that religion is a discrete object that an individual or society could or could not possess. Rather, as a student of religion, I am more interested in understanding how art and religion are mediums through which the individual engages the world and society around him or her. We have no obligation to accept either the terminology of the Western art canon or to confine our study of a religion or religious artist/artwork solely in the terms provided by the religion or artist. Art historical terminology should be scrutinized and provincialized where necessary. Likewise, the actions and creations of the religious individual should not be understood based solely on terms that they set, but on terms that arise from both primary and secondary sources and that are based on the way scholars see individual,

society, and belief interacting and co-forming.

1.4   Islam and Islamic Art

The global art narrativists struggle with categories and narratives established by scholars like the perennialists and cultural relativists. Questions asked by the perennialists and cultural relativists such as 'What is Islamic art?' and 'What makes Islamic art Islamic?' necessitate categorization based on, usually, unself-conscious definitions of Islam as a religion. Taking this implication seriously, I ask: What does Islamic art do for Islam? How are artists engaging with their religious beliefs and community? How are artists using Islam to address problems that they see in the world around them? Art is not a mere representation of Islamic essence or an ideal vision of Islam. Rather, art is a medium through which individuals can negotiate Islam; it is a medium that, as we will see, functions in a unique manner, unlike mediums such as theology, legal rulings or ritual.

I have no interest in this thesis of writing a history of Islamic art, finding a better definition of Islamic art, or even in trying to find the indigenous Islamic theory of art that Grabar seeks. While not rejecting all vocabulary and methodology developed by Western art history, I reject the notion that art history is innocent in its approach to religion and religious works. It is not only that pieces of "Islamic art" can tell us something about Islam, but theoretical approaches to Islamic art have held certain assumptions about religion, that are reinforced by the canonization of, approach to, and categorization of Islamic art. That is, if we acknowledge that how we approach and understand material culture affects how we understand a religious tradition, we can gain a nuanced understanding of both rather than subordinating art and material culture to a definition of religion and thus not moving forward in our understanding of either. By approaching artworks in their socio-historical context as well as examining how they place themselves in conversation with Islamic traditions, that is, how they support existing or develop new understandings of God's relationship with individual and society, and how they utilize the traditions of the *sunna* and Qur'anic exegesis, the work will not be overshadowed by problems of categorization. Rather, for example, examining how an artwork places itself in conversation with other religious traditions can posit a distinct Islamic identity.

By taking seriously the implications of considering something "Islamic," in my case studies in Part II I will parse out the references to religious texts, practices and beliefs. It is too easy to write off Islamic art and architecture as *evidence of* religion; by this I mean that art and architecture are often seen as a byproduct of religion. When treated as a byproduct, it is too often assumed that art and architecture replicate an Islamic essence or

structure, as if these objects are necessarily good and accurate representations of Islam. I approach art and architecture as potential mediums through which people can *work through* their religion and religious beliefs. While I will not say that art can be "read" like a text, I argue that art like text can make an argument. Approaching art as a process of thought and engagement we can ask questions that we might ask in approaching an Islamic text or ritual. How is the relationship between God, the community and the individual being understood? What role does the Qur'an and ritual play in these relationships? How is Islam understood in conversation with Judaism and Christianity? How is the religious sphere delineated, or is it at all? What social values are being propagated as Islamic? What is the relationship between belief and action? How are political problems addressed through religious arguments or means, and why?

Calligraphy presents a particularly interesting case for my approach to Islamic art. The connection between older, often deemed "traditional," forms of Arabic calligraphy and calligraphy in contemporary visual art has been tenuous. At most there is an introductory paragraph or two on the tradition of calligraphy in books on contemporary calligraphy, or a short concluding section looking toward contemporary trends in texts largely on pre-1800 calligraphy; any continuity between traditional and contemporary calligraphic forms is only weakly implied, which is to say that "contemporary" and "traditional" forms have not been substantively addressed in the same projects. This is largely due to the problems of categorization and terminology in the wider field of Islamic art that I have discussed in this chapter. I use the question 'what does Islamic art do for Islam?' as a starting point for a critical engagement with both "traditional" and "contemporary" forms of Islamic art. Rather than framing my analysis of contemporary calligraphic artists in terms of a globalizing (art)world and modern encounters with the West, I will approach my case studies in contemporary calligraphic art in Chapters 3–5 in the context of this question. It should go without saying, not all Muslim artists are creating art that deals with Islamic themes. However, through examining art that does deal with Islamic themes, I will argue that there is something valuable to be learned about both Islam and Islamic art by approaching these contemporary artworks as a site of negotiation of Islamic belief, practice and identity. By, even subconsciously, beginning with a definition of Islam, the canon of Islamic art becomes endlessly reiterated in a game of categorization, fitting evidence to theory. Looking at material culture (as one would approach a text, ritual, etc.) as a site of negotiation, it becomes clear that Islam and Islamic art are living traditions that meet the changing context around them.

Chapter 2

Word/Image

In examining the Qur'an and subsequent traditions of calligraphy, I aim to identify particular Islamic theoretical engagements with word and image. While the Qur'an is certainly not the only, or even the most direct, source of inspiration for the contemporary artists that I will address in Part II, it has been vital in conceptualizing particularly Islamic ways of thinking about word, language, text and speech. Subsequent traditions of calligraphy, such as the calligram, the *hilye*, and the Qur'anic manuscript, tease out a tension between word and image. While I do not go through the historical development of calligraphy as an art-form, this discussion is focused on the theoretical development of the material medium itself. Using the Qur'an, I identify the particular theoretical problem through which calligraphy must understand itself, a tension between word and image.

2.1   The Qur'an, or the Word

> *We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, in order that ye may learn*
> *wisdom.*
> — Q 12:2[1]

Qur'anic inscriptions can be found on any number of objects (including coins, pottery, architecture and clothing), throughout Islamic history and Islamic spaces since the Umayyad Dynasty. Thus, I will insist that before looking at Qur'anic inscriptions in their material form, Qur'anic inscriptions must first be examined in their conceptual form; that is to say, before Qur'anic inscriptions are inscriptions, they are words or verses of the Qur'an. It is the self-awareness of the Qur'an *as word of God*, as exemplified in Q 12:2

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[1] All Qur'anic quotations are from Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's translation, unless otherwise stated. See: 'Ali, Abdullah Y. *The Meaning of the Holy Quran*. Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1997.

above, that must first be examined. Given that the Qur'an is aware of its medium, how does it conceive of word? By looking at specific Qur'anic verses, we will see that the concept of word is constructed as word *in relationship* with community, self and nature (or the cosmos).

The Qur'an uses nature as a comparison to assert its own power and the greatness of God. Nature provides an appropriate measure for the Qur'an as it is unimaginably powerful and vast compared to individual humans. This is a classic move of religious discourse appeals to what Rudolf Otto called the elements of *mysterium tremendum*.[2] For example, Q 59:21 states, "Had We sent down this Qur'an on a mountain, verily, thou wouldst have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder for fear of Allah. Such are the similitudes which We propound to humans that they may reflect." The mountain, an immensely powerful and stable element of nature compared to humanity, would humbly acknowledge its own smallness and fragility if compared to the Qur'an. The Qur'an provides this metaphoric example to self-consciously illustrate to Muslims just what a task they have taken on by accepting the "sign of" the Qur'an. Q 31:27–8 likewise uses a metaphor of nature to illustrate God's power relative to man by stating:

> And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven
>   oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the words of Allah be
>   exhausted (in the writing): for Allah is Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom.
> And your creation or your resurrection is in no wise but as an individual soul:
>   for Allah is He Who hears and sees (all things).

As powerful as the Qur'an is, as exemplified in Q 59:21, God's words have indefinite power and are exhaustive even beyond the Qur'an. More impressive than the sheer size of God's vocabulary, is God's ability to hear every word of every individual, all the while having a command over all creation. God also bestows upon man the ability to *perform* words, that is, to read, write and hear words. It is also through these God-given abilities that man can receive the graces of God, or maintain a relationship with God. Humanity's relationship with God is transgressed if man is so arrogant as to think he can independently perform words:

> Proclaim! (Read!)[3] In the name of your Lord and Cherisher, who created —
> Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood:

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[2] Otto, Rudolf, and John W. Harvey. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational.* London: Oxford University Press, 1928. 12.

[3] 'Ali notes that *iqra'* may be translated as 'read,' 'recite or rehearse' or 'proclaim aloud' in commentary note C-6203.

> Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, —
> He Who taught (the use of) the pen, —
> Taught man that which he knew not.
> Nay, but man does transgress all bounds,
> In that he looks upon himself as self-sufficient.[4]

Man's relationship is in large part formed by the notion expressed in this Qur'anic passage, the notion that man owes his life and faculties to God.

Man must then realize that his own words do not compare to the word of God in terms of veracity. Not only is the Qur'an infallible in that, "No falsehood can approach it from before or behind it," but it takes physical form "In Book well-guarded, // Which none shall touch but those who are clean."[5] As the Qur'an was initially revealed aurally in words, we might imagine it as something sensory, but intangible. These verses, however, exemplify a tension between the auditory and physical nature of the Qur'an. Here we begin to see how the words of the Qur'an can take on physical form, as in book and inscription. Mundane and human-inspired words, on the other hand, are different in that they are fallible and people are directed to "be not too complacent of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak ye a speech (that is) just."[6] While we are reminded that human words are fallible, we are also reminded of their potential power, a combination not to be taken lightly. Words come with power, danger and responsibility; remembrance of God and God's words orients a believer toward truth and justice.

The Qur'an uses Muslim historical and religious dialectic with the Jewish and Christian traditions as a means of understanding its own truth-claims. The Qur'an positions itself in conversation with the Jewish and Christian traditions and texts by asserting itself as part of the same Abrahamic and revelatory lineages, while simultaneously arguing that Abraham stood at the Ka'ba, the Qur'an also places itself within the Arabian tradidion. By categorizing itself as last in the line of aural/oral revelation, following the Commandments of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus, the Qur'an can appeal to the sensibilities of monotheistic audiences, and simultaneously hierarchize revelation and claim to be a final and most complete iteration of the revelatory tradition. Q 3:3 is just one example where this negotiation occurs: "It is He Who sent down to thee (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the criterion (of judgment

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[4]Q 96:1–7
[5]Q 41:42 and 56:78–9
[6]Q 33:32

between right and wrong)." The Qur'anic argument then follows that the Jews and Christians strayed from the words of the Law and the Gospel. In Q 4:46 the Qur'an holds the Jews accountable for their improper treatment of God's word: "Of the Jews there are those who displace words from their (right) places, and say: 'We hear and we disobey'; and 'Hear what is not Heard'; and 'Ra'inā'; with a twist of their tongues and a slander to Faith." While words are powerful and their manipulation can have large consequences for faith, even for an entire community, their subordination to God is constantly reiterated.

Indeed, the Qur'an goes out of its way to distinguish itself from magic, insofar as it is not an object whose power can be wielded by individual humans. In what can be called the "Qur'anic Challenge," the Qur'an self-consciously and self-confidently challenges those who doubt it:

> And if ye are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our
> servant, then produce a Surah like thereunto; and call your witnesses or
> helpers (if there are any) besides Allah, if your (doubts) are true.
> But if ye cannot — and of a surety ye cannot — then fear the fire — whose
> fuel is men and stones, — which is prepared for those who reject faith.[7]

This passage affirms the supremacy of both God, the monotheistic God of the Qur'an, and God's word. The confidence of the challenge asserts that the Qur'an already knows that no *human*-created "*surah*," or Qur'anic chapter, will compete with the divine inspiration of the Qur'an. Also, the passage, hardly subtly, mocks the belief that any other deity exists to assist man in creating such a *surah*. And of course, any potential challenge would have to be in the form of a *surah*, that is in the form of *words*, rather than, for example a person or a miracle. This is largely significant because it illustrates the truth-value that the Qur'an places on words. It also indicates a distinction in the inspiration of words; the divinely inspired word of God, the Qur'an, is distinct from the words that spew from the mouths and pens of men. In a reformulation of the Qur'anic challenge, Q 28:48-9 refutes the criticism that both the Commandments of Moses and the Qur'an are magical.

> But (now), when the Truth has come to them from Ourselves, they say, 'Why
> are not (Signs) sent to him, like those which were sent to Moses?' Do
> they not then reject (the Signs) which were formerly sent to Moses? They
> say: 'Two kinds of sorcery, each assisting the other!' And they say: 'For
> us, we reject all (such things)!'
> Say: 'Then bring ye a Book from Allah, which is a better guide than either
> of them, that I may follow it! (do), if ye are truthful!'

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[7]Q 2:23–4

The recitation of the Qur'an is not and does not perform magic. If the Qur'an is called a miracle it is distinguished as a miraculous sign of God, as a opposed to act of magical sorcery, such as the acts of sorcery by the Pharaoh. While one cannot use the words of the Qur'an to "do" or perform magic, the power of the words of the Qur'an are illustrated through ritual remembrance.

When we looked at *surah* 96 earlier, we focused on the warning to humankind against transgression. The passage asserted that humanity was not self-sufficient outside of God. Focusing on just the first five verses, these specific verses being the first direct Revelation to the Prophet Muhammad, we will note the primacy of words; "Proclaim! (Read!) In the name of your Lord and Cherisher, who created — // Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: // Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, — // He Who taught (the use of) the pen, — // Taught man that which he knew not."[8] While it is ambiguous whether the Arabic *iqra'* here connotes a written or spoken medium, it is clear that word has primacy in Muhammad's revelation. These very first verses also emphasize the concreteness of this revelation; the revelation is closely associated with the pen, indicating a direct message from God rather than an abstract philosophy or cosmology. In another early Meccan revelation, it is argued the second revelation after Q 96:1–5, the very validity of Muhammad's revelation is legitimized by the pen: "*Nun*. By the pen and by the (record) which (men) write — // Thou art not, by the Grace of thy Lord, mad or possessed."[9] Referring to the same pen as in Q 96:4, the verse argues, in a formulation similar to the Qur'anic Challenge, that the pen and record, which is to say the revelation of the Qur'an, necessarily proves that Muhammad is not mad, because words of such power and wisdom could not come from a madman.

The Qur'an's power is not just realized in the arguments of its verses, but in everyday ritual use and creative expression of its content. Ritual remembrance of God is most often enacted through recitation of God's words during prayer: "Recite what is sent of the Book by inspiration to thee, and establish regular Prayer: for Prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds; and remembrance of Allah is the greatest (thing in life) without doubt. And Allah knows the (deeds) that ye do."[10] In addition to the work that prayer does restraining the individual, it establishes a community of ritual performers. Prayer is a common *ritual* language in that the members of the Islamic community, despite minor variances, are largely performing the same acts of faith on a daily basis. More literally, the Qur'an provides a common language to the Muslim community, despite the fact that

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[8] Q 96:1–5
[9] Q 68:1–2
[10] Q 29:4

the community stretches across history and innumerable countries, cultures, and first-languages; even though not all Muslims are fluent in Arabic, the Qur'an can be seen as a common "language" in that all Muslims will at least know how to recite particular verses for prayer, even if they don't know their exact translation. As Islamic prayer establishes a mnemonic tradition, the Qur'an is a communal memory. For those who are familiar with the Qur'an, a small Qur'anic quotation will evoke the memory of the context around the quotation and other related quotations throughout the Qur'an.

Rather than thinking of Qur'anic words as noises in space or as lines on a paper, we can think of them as structural elements. That is, we can think of how the Qur'anic word provides structure to the individual-God relationship and provides structure to the Muslim community. When I say "word" here I am talking about the *idea* of words as put forth in the Qur'an, not necessarily the semantic content of the Qur'an. The words of the Qur'an provide their own structure of truth, religion and community formation by materializing Revelation, a hierophany. Putting this into comparative perspective, we might note that truth and community structure are *not* primarily negotiated through genealogy, ethnicity, miracles, or pure reason in the Qur'an as they are in other traditions. Erica Dodd puts this simply, perhaps overly so, when she writes:

> Since a link with God was vouchsafed to man through His Word the way to acknowledge His omni-presence was through the eternal image of His Word. This concept is fundamental to all Moslem expression and it contrasts dramatically with Christian expression where God is revealed through the Son, in human form. ... To the learned mind in Damascus, in the eighth century A.D., the substitution of the Word for the human figure carried with it all the intellectual, philosophical and religious implications of the classical and Christian *Logos*. At any rate, it was the only kind of symbolism open to Islam.[11]

Dodd is, at least in part, trying to assert that there is something about the Islamic tradition that uniquely puts it on track to emphasize the word. However, her conclusion is over simplified in the sense that she takes the Qur'anic idea of the Word of God and the Christian idea of the Son of God at a very surface value to justify her claim. One could too easily insert the Jewish tradition with the Torah and Commandments of Sinai into Dodd's claim about Islam, as the Torah and Commandments, too, are understood to be "the Word of God." I would argue that the way that the Qur'an self-consciously structures itself

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[11]Dodd, Erica C, and Shereen Khairallah. *The Image of the Word: A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981. 3–18.

and justifies truth-claims is what compels the Islamic tradition to treat words uniquely and, then later, to effectively utilize Qur'anic inscriptions. The Qur'anic formulation of humanity's relationship to word, spoken and written, underlies the visualization of revelation through the word the form manuscript, epigraphy and other calligraphy.

2.2 The Tension Between Text and Image

In *The Image of the Word* Dodd introduces the theoretical argument that Islamic calligraphy can be understood, as suggested by the title, as "the image of the word." Many discussions of calligraphy, in addition to geometric and vegetal patterns, as *representative of* an Islamic art-form suggest that calligraphy is a stand-in for representational art; that is to say, calligraphy is merely an answer to the "problem" of aniconism. Rather than acknowledging the internal logic of calligraphic art, it has been widely suggested that calligraphy is an alternative to image, implying that calligraphy attempts to do the same thing as the image. From this thesis it is rather easy to both conclude that Islamic art is afraid of, or fighting, the power of images, and that calligraphy is a second-rate medium of symbolic representation. This, from what we have seen in the Qur'anic explication above, misses the autonomous power of words. Dodd's phrase "image of the word" takes a step toward thinking of calligraphy as a visual medium that incorporates both semantic content and visual aesthetic; however, it still privileges the image by suggesting that calligraphy is a subfield of image.

Michel Foucault says of calligrams, "Pursuing its quarry by two paths, the calligram sets the most perfect trap. By its double function, it guarantees capture, as neither discourse alone nor a pure drawing could do. It banishes the invincible absences that defeats words, imposing upon them, by the ruses of a writing at play in space, the visible form of their referent."[12] Foucault is specifically referring to the painting by René Magritte (d. 1967 CE), *La trahison des images*, or 'The Treachery of Images,' but he provides an interesting segue into the calligraphic art of Qur'anic inscriptions, which seems to be a natural (visual, if not historical) precursor to Qur'anic epigraphy (see fig. A.1). Magritte's painting and Foucault's analysis provides a conversation that is illuminating to Islamic visual culture, not because they are propagating or responding to a universal aesthetic, but because they are critiquing particular theoretical assumptions that have informed Western art histories and, in turn, scholarship on Islamic visual culture. The "separation between linguistic signs and plastic elements; the equivalence of resemblance and affirmation," is, as Foucault recognizes as a Western aesthetic phenomenon, one that

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[12]Foucault, Michel. *This Is Not a Pipe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983. 22.

he critiques with the help of Magritte's painting.[13]

In response to Orientalist theories of Islamic "iconoclasm," as represented by K.A.C. Creswell's assertion of an "inherent temperamental dislike of Semitic races for human representations in sculpture and painting," scholars now tend to reject the term iconoclasm.[14] Terry Allen justifies his rejection of the term saying, "Despite later theological doctrine, this rational division between religious and nonreligious subject matter was probably the original basis of Islamic iconoclasm too. ... [In contrast] with Byzantine iconoclasm, I prefer to term the Islamic phenomenon not iconoclasm, the rejection of images, but *aniconism*, the nonuse of images."[15] Allen is correct in pointing out that icons-proper, particularly in comparison with the Christian tradition do not have a place in the Islamic tradition; however, one shortcoming of Allen's aniconism is that it does not entirely alleviate the implication that Islamic art is universally non-figural or non-representational.[16] While it is easy to point to cases of Islamic visual culture that include figural representations and symbolic geometries, and Allen himself does this, we are still left with a term and a theory that suggest that image is the intellectual, material, and aesthetic *exception* in Islamic art. A corollary of this problem is that discussions of aniconism still retain the aspect of iconoclasm which suggests that geometry, calligraphy and other non-representational forms are a mere stand-ins for images, which is to say that these forms were not arrived at by their own theological or aesthetic significance, but were secondary to the avoidance of images.

2.2.1 The Calligram

I began this chapter with an exploration of the word in the Qur'anic tradition so as to illustrate the efficacy of the word, in and of itself, and as an object of scholarly examination. Before being subordinated to the discourse of iconoclasm and aniconism that permeate art historical scholarship on Islamic art and aesthetics thus far, I wanted to establish an intellectual basis for examining the word through an art historical lens. While scholarship on Islamic art is still obsessed with images (or lack thereof), outside a specifically Islamic context art historians are more generally questioning the distinction between word and image. On the subject of word and image, W.J.T. Mitchell writes:

> As a practical matter, we have no trouble in saying which is the word, which

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[13]Foucault, *Not a Pipe*, 22.

[14]Dodd, *Image of the Word*, 8.

[15]Allen, *Five Essays*, 19–20.

[16]"There is no proper Islamic equivalent to the Christian practice of prayer to a holy intercessor, which is the point of a cult image in Christianity." See Allen, *Five Essays*, 22.

> is the image. The problem comes when we try to explain the difference, to define the precise features that make one sign a word, the other an image. ... Our only choice is to explore and inhabit this space [between word and image]. Unlike Mieke Bal and others who have written on this matter, I do not think we can go 'beyond word and image' to some higher plane, though I respect the utopian and romantic desire to do so. 'Word and image,' like the concepts of race, gender, and class in the study of culture, designates multiple regions of social and semiotic difference that we can live neither with nor without, but must continually reinvent and renegotiate.[17]

In this essay Mitchell goes into detail illustrating, rather literally, the problem of defining a distinction between word and image. However, rather than examining Mitchell's argument here, we can look at real examples in Islamic visual culture, particularly calligraphy, where the blurring between word and image is a phenomenon that is consciously dealt with in the artwork itself.

Taking the 17th century lion calligram in fig. A.2, "written," or just as easily "drawn," by the calligrapher, as an example, we remember what Foucault said about the calligram's ability to trap both word and image. The curve and flexibility of the Arabic alphabet allows the stroke of each letter to be integrated into the "drawing" of the lion, such that letters accentuates even the nose and paws. This Arabic calligram might be contrasted to the work of French poet, Guillame Apollinaire, who is famous for his calligrams. In his calligrams, Apollinaire generally uses entire phrases, rather than the individual letter, to create line and shape. This calligram, indicative of the majority of Apollinaire's work, illustrates the unique differences between the Latin and Arabic alphabets. While the rendering of the lion is technically secular, the Arabic language is inexorably reminiscent of the Qur'an due to the centrality of Arabic for the Qur'an. Thus, we will also remember arguments that Islamic and Arabic (or even Semitic, generally) traditions are anti-image, aniconic, or lacking in figure and see the obvious flaws in these arguments. In terms of a specifically Islamic visual culture, the lion calligram is not easily called aniconic. The lion calligram participates in traditions of what we would want to call both word and image. The term calligram is a convenient fix when we want to point to this type of work, but it does not actually solve the problem of delineating where image begins and word ends; nor does it acknowledge or overcome a subordination of image to word (or vise versa).

Renderings of the Qur'anic *basmalah* are a subfield within the tradition of Arabic calligrams. *Basmalah* calligrams can take the form of anything from a stork to a pear to

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[17]Nelson, Robert S, and Richard Shiff. *Critical Terms for Art History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 60.

geometric shapes (see fig. A.4; see also A.5). The *basmalah* is an invocation that opens 113 of the 114 *surat* of the Qur'an; the *basmalah*, translated roughly, reads "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." The A.6 illustrates similar visual principles as the lion calligram, but with recognizably Qur'anic linguistic content. The ubiquitous tradition of *basmalah* calligrams indicates that there is no concern over profaning the Qur'anic word by visually representing it as a figural calligram. In an interesting opposition to the traditional calligram where many letters create one figure or shape, there are also cases of anthropomorphic calligraphy composed of many human figures, each figure shaping an individual letter. Stepping back into Foucault's frame of mind, we can ask (knowing the impossibility of a satisfactory answer): what part of the calligram is word, and which is image? Is the calligram, as a whole, word or image?

Although we cannot answer this question on a universal, philosophical level about universal-word and universal-image, we can examine the Islamic notion of word's intersection with image. The calligram is rather intuitive in the context of Arabic and the Qur'an as a visual manifestation of the concept of word as structure. In the calligram, the subsections of words and letters provide a physical structure for visual rendering. Neither purely a caption, nor purely an image, the calligram is a manifestation of the word self-consciously structuring its own efficacy. We cannot say that the calligram is "word" or that it is "image," or even that it is "word as image" as this would imply a hierarchical preference for image.

A detail of the end of Q 12:64 in an Egyptian Qur'an scroll exemplifies a more subtle use of the calligraphic word. The text that is shown would be translated into English as, "But Allah is the best to take care (of him), and He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy!" and refers to God and Joseph.[18] The beginning and end segments of this fragment, "But Allah is the best to take care" and "Most Merciful," are the most visually intricate. More specifically, these sections of calligraphy mimic architectural detailing. Notably, both sections refer to God, either by his most common title, *allah*, or by one of his Beautiful Names. God's name and remembrance are built into the text of the manuscript. The architectural structure of the names gives them added visual prominence, and permanence. In the case of the first segment, what looks like a house is built around God and his attributes. Like the calligrams, this text as script is self-aware of its physical context. It is aware of the book's written form and mimics its rectangular structures and borders.

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[18] McAuliffe, Jane D. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 162.

2.2.2 The *Hilye*

In addition to the calligram and the *basmalah*, the *hilye* is yet another genre of Islamic calligraphy. "*Hilye*" has a number of meanings in Turkish, including "natural disposition," "depiction" "characterization," and "description."[19] The term is closely related to the Arabic word "*hilya*" which likewise has a number of meanings, including "ornament," "beauty" and "embellishment."[20] Calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya, whose work I will discuss in Chapter 4, draws from both the Arabic and Turkish glossing of the term to conceptualize the tradition of *hilye* as "beautiful and significant description."[21] This tradition is both literary and calligraphic, in that the calligraphic works quote literary descriptions. The *hilye* has been perfected in the Ottoman tradition of calligraphy and tends to focus on *hilye* of the Prophet Muhammad. The *hilye* literary tradition, however, includes descriptions of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as, his companions and pre-Qur'anic prophets, including Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, John the Baptist, and Jesus.[22] As with *hadith* literature, a collection of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, *hilye* are predicated upon chains of transmission going back to the time of Muhammad. Zakariya states that the *hilye* "gives parameters to the imagination so that one can think about the Prophet with a mental or spiritual image to hang onto yet not attempt to visualize him or portray him in a painting. The *hilye* is not an icon in words."[23] The central focal point of the calligraphic *hilye* is a text, enclosed in a circle or circular crescent, which describes physical, behavioral and spiritual qualities of Muhammad. The standard format also includes the *basmalah* above the central circle, an *ayah* (or verse of the Qur'an) that refers to Muhammad below the central circle, and the names of Muhammad's four companions surrounding the central circle (see fig. A.18).

As a visual form, the *hilye* plays out tensions between text and image and between written and spoken texts. The literary *hilye*, now written, were once part of an oral tradition surrounding the life and sayings of Muhammad. Thus, like the Qur'an, the calligraphic *hilye* is a material, visual form that acts as a mnemonic to a larger oral tradition; Qur'anic inscriptions recall entire *ayat* (verses), and the Qur'anic manuscript is inextricable from the memory of its oral/aural recitation and reception. The *hilye* too cannot be understood purely in the context of the written word since it relies on the once oral tradition of remembering the life and sayings of Muhammad. The *hilye* problematizes

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[19]Zakariya, Mohamed. "The Hilye of the Prophet." *Seasons: Semiannual Journal of Zaytuna Institute* 2003–4. vol.1. no. 2. pp. 13–22. 13.

[20]Zakariya, "Hilye of the Prophet," 13

[21]Zakariya, "Hilye of the Prophet," 13.

[22]Zakariya, "Hilye of the Prophet," 15.

[23]Zakariya, "Hilye of the Prophet," 13.

image, as noted by Zakariya, because it recounts certain physical characteristics of the Prophet. The *hilye* is not an icon in that it is neither an image nor a stand-in for an image. And while the *hilye* is often thought to bring blessings, just as a Qur'anic inscription or reciting the *basmalah* might, this is not to say that it is meant to be an object of reverence, nor is it viewed as such in practice. The descriptions of Muhammad's physical characteristics are vague, and the *hilye* is incomplete without additional accounts of Muhammad's actions and spiritual character. Thus it is clear that the description is meant to encompass the complete, dynamic idea of a character, that is body and soul. The result of the *hilye*, which Zakariya calls a "spiritual image," is a memory of Muhammad as an individual and the social and religious importance of his message. The *hilye* negotiates a tension between description, text and image regarding the memory of Muhammad.

2.2.3   Self-Conscious Calligraphy

What we learn from the Arabic calligram and *hilye*, and from Foucault and Magritte, is that just because an "image" includes "text," we cannot simply read the textual element and expect to appreciate the full workings of the object. I cannot just read the text on Magritte's painting *La trahison des images* expecting it to convey the kind of semantic meaning one expects of a textbook. To ignore this fact would suggest, for example, that the textual content of a calligram conveys the same kind of meaning and associations as that of a scholarly essay. Additionally, it would suggest that Qur'anic epigraphy could be understood as purely informational, or merely a commentary on a building (that could be conveyed equally in an informational sign, like the ones you might see at a historical site). Foucault expresses his concern, particularly regarding "Western painting from the fifteenth to twentieth century," that text and image have always been in a hierarchical or subordinating relationship; "But no matter the meaning of the subordination or the matter in which it prolongs, multiplies, and reverses itself. What is essential is that verbal signs and visual representations are never given at once. An order always hierarchizes them, running from the figure to discourse or from discourse to the figure."[24] Even though we are not looking at Western painting, we must respond, like Foucault, to this issue of hierarchy because it has informed art historical scholarship even on Islamic visual culture including calligraphy, painting, architecture, and manuscripts. As we have seen thus far in Arabic calligrams and manuscripts of the Qur'an the text is not subordinate to the image/object. This is not to say that there is a hidden meaning, per se, to the text, but that the [text+image] is participating in a [semantic+visual] discourse larger than itself.

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[24]Foucault, *Not a Pipe*, 32–3.

As an integrated element of the object, the word performs a structural function that is more than descriptive.

Although she is overly poetic in her defense of Muslim aesthetic at times, Valérie Gonzalez aptly describes the integration of Qur'anic verse and geometric patterning on the dome-ceiling of the Alhambra: "Thus, the stellar vocabulary, together with its centrifugal motion and the limitless aesthetic space of the ceiling initiate the process of identification between the dome and various images of cosmological entities, providing it with the aesthetic status of a cosmological metaphor."[25] The "stellar vocabulary" that Gonzalez refers to comes from the poetry of Ibn Zamrak (d. 1393 CE), which is inscribed on the walls of the Hall of the Two Sisters. Gonzalez argues that the long poems refer directly to the structure of the Hall of the Two Sisters by comparing it to constellations and other celestial bodies. One section of verse particularly emphasizes the heavenly inspiration for the geometry, with reference to God; "Praise be to God! // Delicately have the fingers of the artist embroidered my robe, after setting the jewels of my diadem // ... // As if I were to bow of the clouds where it first appears, and the sun of our Lord Abu'l-Ḥajjāj."[26]

In defending her anti-Orientalist thesis that the Islamic tradition *does* in fact have a coherent aesthetic sensibility, Gonzalez argues that the geometrical design of buildings such as the Alhambra are not structurally necessary. She goes on to conclude that these geometric principles were a means of "transcending the world of images"[27] into a kind of non-representational visual metaphor;

> In other respects, it is necessary to insist on the fact that this aesthetic system differs radically from observable representation, insofar as it does not yield the same kind of apprehension of the work of art. Representation designates and denotes its object and fixes its rules of designation and denotation in the visual configuration, whereas metaphor suggests its object and, resolutely inspirational, is essentially variational, leaving an active part to the individual subjectivity in the perception process it induces.[28]

Unlike Allen's aniconism thesis, which posits an initial Islamic disinterest in images, Gonzalez suggests that Islamic design was consciously trying to transcend philosophical limits of imagery in much the same manner as Stella and Rothko (both mentioned in her work) were in the 1950s. Gonzalez, however, does not address the fact that artists such as Stella

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[25]Gonzalez, Valérie. *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture.* London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2001. 77.

[26]Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam*, 44.

[27]Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam*, 71.

[28]Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam*, 78–9.

and Rothko were both responding to a particular moment in art, Western art, whereas Islamic artists are and have been dealing with, largely, a different set of aesthetic and philosophic ideas and problems. Foucault's discussion, on the other hand, is relevant in that it challenges *art history* rather than art. While I suggest that Foucault's analysis provides helpful insight as he attempts to, with the aid of Magritte's work, move beyond the art and architecture scholarship that is bounded by the limitations of Western painterly ideas of strict separation of text and image, I would not say that Magritte is participating in the same discourse as early or Medieval Islamic artists, calligraphers and architects. Nevertheless, because Magritte challenges the Western painterly notions that have informed even Islamic art historical scholarship, he is worthy of our attention. Magritte challenges our construction of "reality" and draws attention to the blurred definitions of image and text, whereas the Islamic tradition from early on, with the first Qur'anic manuscripts, was integrating word and "image" in a way that defied the strict definitions that Western art historians later tried to read into them.

Although the Qur'an is disinterested in secular artistic representation, the integral importance of word (spoken and written) in visual art, architecture and material culture often refers to the Qur'anic construction of words and truth.[29] While common parlance has forced us to talk about the object of art historical analysis as "image," from our exploration thus far, we see that it is much more fruitful to avoid notions of ideas of pure image and instead fully engage in the dialectic between word and visual or material manifestation. Instead, it is more productive to fully engage with the dialectic between word and visual or material manifestation. Henceforward, when refering to a visual rendering that expresses this tension between word and image, rather than priviledging either category, I will use the term "word/image."[30]

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[29]We can say that the Qur'an is uninterested in artistic imagery in that Q 27:44 is the only instance in which visual representation is, arguably, addressed. Idols are of course condemned in favor of a strict monotheism, but this is to say nothing of visual representation, even figural representation, in general. This Qur'anic disinterest is neither obviously positive or negative, and has been much debated. The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, of which Q 27:44 is part, goes that Solomon uses blocks of glass to create the illusion of a pool. The Queen of Sheba falls for this and upon realizing her mistake, converts to Islam. Before this episode, the Qur'an tells us that Solomon rejecting the material gifts of wealth that the Queen of Sheba sends him. More than being a commentary on the demerit or offense of visual representations, this story addresses materiality. Much beyond the scope of art, the Queen of Sheba recognizes the insignificance and impermanence of the material world relative to God.

[30]While the term is not particularly eloquent, it retains the connotations of both word and image *and* acknowledges the tension between the two theoretical categories.

Part II

Contemporary Calligraphic Art

The Contemporary Case Studies

What follows in the next three chapters is a close examination of the works and practices of three contemporary artists, all of whom are currently alive and creating artworks.[31] Hailing from different three different continents, Nja Mahdaoui, Mohamed Zakariya and Kamal Boullata represent a diversity of tradition, training, inspiration, and interests. Embodying internationalism and globalization, these artists speak, or are acquainted with, a variety of languages (including English, Arabic, French, and Turkish) and have studied all over the world (including Tunisia, Italy, France, California, Morocco, Palestine, Washington DC, and England), not to mention the innumerable galleries and museums in which they have exhibited or the times they have created works for architecture or installation. Even their relationship with Islam is varied, such that it would be awkward to call them "Islamic artists" collectively. Mahdaoui was born into Islam, Zakariya converted to Islam at the age of nineteen, and Boullata is, in fact, a Christian Arab. What does, however, connect these artists is their engagement with the medium of calligraphy, particularly calligraphy that is inspired by a Muslim-Arabic tradition. From a close examination of these artists, we will see how religious, social and political themes are addressed by engagement with what might be called an Islamic visual culture.

In order to not assume a particular way of engaging the tensions between word and image, and tradition and modernity, I approach each artist beginning with an examination of his personal background, training and artistic development. With context and

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[31]I have chosen to refer to Mahadaoui, Zakariya and Boullata by the general term "artists." I take this term to be an umbrella term that will contain the subcategories art historical categories such as "fine artist," "craftsman," "painter," "sculptor," and "calligrapher." I do not call these three artists "calligraphers" because, especially in the Arabic-speaking world, the title calligrapher is loaded with assumptions of tradition, training and audience. Many contemporary artists explicitly state that they are *not* calligraphers to indicate that they have not been trained as calligraphers and/or that they do not follow the aesthetic philosophy or tradition of calligraphy. These distinctions, for example between artist and calligrapher and craftsman, are relevant in terms of training and consumer markets. And for the artist there is often much at stake in how they categorize themselves, and how they are categorized by the art market or received audiences. However, what an artist calls him or herself, I think is not a good enough method of categorization and it is not within the scope of my project to theorize a categorization of art historical analysis for these particular artists. Indeed, this type of categorization could be detrimental at this point in my project.

positionality in mind, I then approach particular examples of the artists' work or practice (this might be a particular artwork, or a statement on calligraphic practice). These more focused examinations allow us to see how the artist is approaching a variety of problems and situations. Thus, although we can see these artists similarly engaging calligraphic visual culture, utilizing the unique tension between word and image, to communicate an identity position in relation to past and present, tradition and modernity, Islam and other religions, we can also appreciate the unique social, geographic and religious situation of each artist.

Chapter 3

Nja Mahdaoui

Variously called a "choreographer of letters," "an explorer of signs" and a visual artist, Nja Mahdaoui constantly plays with text and image in his work.[1] Although Mahdaoui explores numerous material mediums (including parchment, paint, metal, light, textile, and glass), calligraphy as a conceptual medium is ubiquitous in his work. Born in Tunisia in 1937, he then studied at the Atelier Libre in Carthage, the Academy of Arts of Santa Andrea in Rome and at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris. Mahdaoui currently lives and works in Tunisia. He is widely respected by the international art community, evidenced by the lengthy list of exhibitions, awards, and honors to his name. Since Mahdaoui was trained as a graphic artist, rather than as a calligrapher, it is of particular interest that his recognitions include awards and positions in the category of calligraphy.[2] He chaired the Grand Prix de la Calligraphie in Tunisia in 1993, aided in the development of Des Journées de la Calligraphie Arabe (an Arabic Calligraphy Festival) at Bayt al-Hikma in Carthage in 1993, received an award from the Department of Calligraphy from the University of Tokyo in 1997, and participated as Guest of Honor and Jury Member of the Sharjah International Arabic Calligraphy Biennial in the United Arab Emirates in 2006.[3]

Early in his career Mahdaoui was greatly influenced by the work of Charles Hossein

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[1] These titles given to Mahdaoui appear in innumerable biographies, press releases and catalogues, to the point that they constitute a common parlance. The term "explorer of signs" seems to be a self-description; see Mahdaoui, Artist Website. Accessed 1 March 2011. <http://www.nja-mahdaoui.com>. "Choreographer of letters" can be attributed to curator Venetia Porter; see Porter, Venetia. "Choreographer of Letters." Meem Gallery Press Release. 30 October 2007. <http://www.meemartgallery.com>.

[2] Rather than being trained as a calligrapher, like Mohamed Zakairya for example, Mahdaoui's exposure to calligraphy would be from its ubiquitous presence in North Africa and basic classes as part of primary school education.

[3] Mahdaoui, Artist Website. Accessed 1 March 2011.

Zenderoudi[4] of the Saqqakhneh School of Iranian artists.[5] Zenderoudi was part of an Iranian artistic movement in the 1950s and 60s, along with artists Sadegh Tabrizi and Parviz Tanavoli, that worked with objects and themes closely connected to Iranian history and religious practice and pushed the boundaries of their visual discourse.[6] As a means of dealing with the perceived tension of traditional Iranian life and new Western technologies, the Saqqakhneh artists re-enchant the art forms such as Persian miniatures, illuminated manuscripts, and calligraphy.[7] Their work seeks to retain the tie to spirituality and history, at a time of modernization in Iran, and inflects traditional mediums with new uses of color, layering and visual manipulation. Zenderoudi is particularly noted for his work with the calligraphic form, which he colored, stretched, and twisted into circles. His calligraphic roundel entitled *MIUZ+SFKE* (1972, acrylic on canvas, 195 x 195 cm) (see fig. A.3) is exemplary of the distorted calligraphic form he uses not to convey semantic meaning, but to engage the visual tradition of the word/image.

Mahdaoui similarly uses the visual form of calligraphy to produce works devoid of semantic meaning. Curator of Northeast, East, and South African art at the British Museum, Chris Spring writes of the artist:

> Mahdaoui began to push the boundaries of acceptable practice in using calligraphy as an art form. While always mindful of its sacred role recording and revealing the word of God as set down in the Qur'an, Mahdaoui and others began to explore the artistic potential of forms rather than the literal meaning of these words and letters, and of the radically different types of script that had been developed by the calligraphers over the centuries.[8]

In many of Zenderoudi's works, forms are variously distorted and colored, but can often be identified as letters; however, they are not attached so as to look like fully formed words. Mahdaoui's calligraphy, on the other hand, appears to have the form of Arabic letters and words, even sentences; it is, however, is only superficially composed of words.

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[4]Born Hossein Zenderoudi in 1937 in Tehran.

[5]The name of the school was coined by journalist Karim Emami in 1962 and means "drinking place" in Persian. Saqqa-khneh are traditional public drinking fountains found throughout Iran. The fountains also serve a votive purpose and commemorate the martyrs of Karbala. Saqqa-khneh are often decorated in beads, prayers, Quranic inscriptions, paintings and a picture of an Imam. The arts of the Saqqa-khneh provided both the material and spiritual inspiration for the work of the Saqqakhneh School; see Tabrizi, Artist Website. "The Saqqakhneh Movement." Accessed 1 March 2011, <http://www.tabrizigalleries.com>.

[6]"The Saqqakhneh Movement."

[7]Since Persian has the same alphabet as Arabic, Persian and Arabic calligraphy are easily comparable. Although the Persian tradition has unique poetic genres, much Persian calligraphy is inspired by the Qur'anic conceptions of word/image that we discussed in Chapter 2.

[8]Spring, Christopher. *Angaza Afrika: African Art Now.* London: Laurence King, 2008. 178.

In fact, his calligraphy only mimics the visual form of Arabic, and upon close inspection, is composed of no recognizable letter or pattern. With no semantic content, his work can hardly be said to be composed of calligraphic words, but rather holds a tension between text and image, as seen in fig. A.8.

In all of the following examples, Mahdaoui reiterates his unique word/image calligraphy, which *appears* to be Arabic, but in fact has no semantic content. Although he disrupts narrative, Mahdaoui invites new experiences of association and interpretation by re-enchanting familiar genres, such as the calligram, the manuscript and the mosque screen. By engaging the tension of word/image characteristic of calligraphic visual culture, Mahdaoui pushes "text" and "language" to their limit. The calligraphy he creates does not allow text to perform its semantic function. However, rather than being rendered useless, Mahdaoui understands text *in relation to image* to be a "total art" which could speak to a global audience; Mahdaoui re-imagines, in his particular contemporary moment, what it means to communicate to humanity.

3.1 *Calligrammes*

Mahdaoui's calligraphy is distinct, but not unprecedented; which is to say that the conceptual composition, the strokes of ink, of his work utilize concepts and forms that are historically prior, but Mahdaoui manipulates and composes them in an innovative and defined manner. By calligraphic hand, I refer to the distinguishable character of a calligrapher's handwriting, which is apparent especially to a trained eye even if multiple calligraphers are writing in the same style. In the tradition of Arabic calligraphy a style or script is roughly analogous to a font. Legendary calligrapher Ibn Muqla (d. 940 CE) canonized the "Six Scripts," ("*al-aqlam al-sitta*") which are the six foundational cursive scripts in calligraphic training, but there are also many other scripts including the very popular geometric *kufic* script.

Mahdaoui's work *Calligramm on Papyrus* (2004, Indian ink and acrylic painting on papyrus, 60 x 60 cm) is representative of his calligraphic hand and his series works using ink and papyrus (see fig. A.7). In French, "*calligramm*" literally denotes "beautiful writing." It was French poet Guillaume Apollinaire (d. 1918 CE) whose work was published a collection of poetry entitled *Calligrammes: pomes de la paix et de la guerre (1913–1916)*, which included poems in the shapes of faces, flowers and the Eiffel Tower, effectively establishing the current accepted connotation of the term.[9] The term, "calligram" in

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[9]Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Calligrammes, Pomes de la Paix et de la Guerre (1913-1916)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966. An edition with English commentary has also been published; see Apollinaire,

English, refers to a word, poem or phrase that is written or arranged in such a way that it creates a visual image. The Arabic calligraphic tradition was of course producing calligrams long before Apollinaire, but the French and English artistic-literary category and terminology is indebted to Apollinaire. Mahdaoui plays with this linguistic history when he refers to his works as calligrams; he is both referring to the literal French translation as beautiful writing, and the Arabic calligraphic tradition.[10]

The *basmalah*, we remember, is a phrase that opens 113 of the 114 *surat* of the Qur'an that translates to "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful," and is often rendered in the form of a calligram. As mentioned in the previous chapter calligram is most often a discrete image, such as a *basmalah* in the form of a stork or a pear (See fig. A.4; see also A.5). In Mahdaoui's work *Calligramm on Papyrus* the concept of a calligram is likewise being used to create a visual image; the usual form of the lettering is stretched and manipulated to form new patterns and compositions. However, there is no single, discrete form; rather the piece looks like both a manuscript and a calligram. The central, bold circular form, the form most reminiscent of a calligram, surrounded by narrative looking text and is literally embedded in the text; the bold arc fades straight into the underlining of the narrative-like text. Mahdaoui questions and manipulates all of these visual forms, word as text, calligram, narrative, and image.

When one looks at the composition as a whole, the work appears as a page of a manuscript. It is ink on papyrus with text laid out, for the most part, in a linear book-like fashion. However, the textual narrative is disrupted visually by word/image that cuts the page in a point on the left and an arc in the center. The text inside the central arc is reminiscent of a magnifying glass, which is a means of heightened understanding rather than obscurity. It is this arc that compositionally draws our attention in; it invites us to zoom in. Looking at the work closer, we can analyze the text itself. Visually, the text is readily identified as Arabic. The native speaker even is fooled at first glance. Upon close inspection, however, the viewer finds that Mahdaoui's text is not Arabic at all. The viewer is drawn in only to find that while the black ink imitates the motion of Arabic text, there is no single word or even single letter that is clearly identifiable. Lacking semantic content, the interwoven calligram-like shapes create a tension between text and image. The viewer is invited to "read" the work, but is forced to do so in perhaps a less literal way. Mahdaoui accentuates the power of "word" as a category while questioning the need for narrative, that is, specific words. This is a common trope of Mahdaoui's body of work;

Guillaume, and Anne H. Greet. *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War (1913-1916)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

[10]From both his upbringing in Tunisia and schooling in Paris, Mahdaoui is fluent in both French and Arabic.

for example, a similar composition is found in the piece *Untitled* (1984, gold and ink on parchment, 100 x 100 cm) (see fig. A.9). Parchment and papyrus were the two materials most often used for Arabic calligraphy until the gradual shift to the use of paper in the 10th century.[11]

By looking at the formal qualities of the work we can see how Mahdaoui's calligrams is participating in a conversation with Qur'anic forms. The layout of the text is very clearly reminiscent of a Qur'anic manuscript. Many, but not all, Qur'anic manuscripts have similar delineations between rows of text as we see here in Mahdaoui's piece. In addition to this delineation, the rows of text vary in size, adding to the spatial incrementalization. In some Qur'anic manuscripts a line of Qur'anic larger text is used to visually break up the page. More often however, varying sizes in text indicates commentary and translation. This intra-textual commentary is exemplified in the Qur'an manuscript copied by Muhammad Salah ibn Tukl al-Shahdi in *naskh* script in 1711 CE (see fig. A.10). The manuscript has, in *taliq* script, a Persian translation in smaller, red text embedded in-between the larger Arabic Qur'anic verses, along with Persian commentary in the margins. The *basmalah* should be noted for the dramatic extension of the letter *sīn*, a common trope in Qur'anic manuscripts (see fig. A.6; see also fig. A.10). This letter functions to make the *basmalah* perfectly sized to the line, and it draws our eye and our attention to it as the introduction of the *surah*. As previously mentioned, the *basmalah* is often the inspiration of Arabic calligrams. While these can be in the shape of flora or fauna, they are often circular as seen in fig. A.5; in these cases the circumference of the circle is often rendered by the extended and arced letter *sīn*. With these traditions in mind, the viewer will see a strong reference to the *basmalah* in Mahdaoui's *Calligramm on Papyrus*.

We have already made the visual and conceptual connection between the central arc and the calligram genre, but we can now see that more particularly it is reminiscent of both a calligram and the *basmalah*. In Mahdaoui's work we will now notice the similar dramatic extension of the arc, which immediately draws our attention to the page. The viewer is drawn further into the center of the composition by the notable voids. Aside from the consistent spaces between lines of text, the piece is completely covered in lettering; the small gaps between text in the center, then, become much more remarkable. The more discrete units of text are reminiscent of chapter, or *surah*, titles. I am certainly not arguing that Mahdaoui's work is an "abstracted" Qur'anic manuscript. Rather, I am pointing out the formal elements of the composition that cause the viewer to, at first glance, recall the Qur'an, as well as other calligraphic traditions. It should be noted that Mahdaoui's composition is in conversation with a long and diverse tradition of Islamic

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[11]Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 41–50.

calligraphy. In addition to evoking the calligram, Mahdaoui's piece also evokes the *hilye*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *hilye* negotiates a tension between word and image by describing in beautiful calligraphy the physical and spiritual characteristics of the Prophet Muhammad (see fig. A.18). Mahdaoui's work too is negotiating word/image tension, emphasized by the central arc of the piece that visually evokes the characteristic central circle of the *hilye*. Mahdaoui's work, rather than referencing the memory of a person, is evoking the memory of written revelation and the calligraphic tradition. To say that post-colonialism was the driving force behind the concepts in Mahdaoui's work denies the importance of the philosophy already embedded in Islamic calligraphy. There was already a visual, intellectual and theological precedent within native and Islamic art that could inspire Mahdaoui's work.

Despite his international renown, little scholarly attention has been paid to Nja Mahdaoui; there is next to nothing in terms of analysis of his work and descriptions of his work tend toward the poetic aesthetic or post-colonial political. For example, *Calligramm on Papyrus* is reproduced in a survey text called *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*; the description of Mahdaoui's work is notably secular and makes only vague, non-specific references to Tunisian "tradition and heritage."[12] This secular and nationalist reading of contemporary art is typical of the kinds of approaches that I critiqued in Chapter 1. The close association of Islamic art with Islamic civilization and political rule, justifies the thesis that Islamic art existed in its pure form only up until about 1800 CE, at which point, Western colonialization supposedly put Islam in a crisis with modernity and Islamic art degenerated. Islamic art, then by these scholars definitions, becomes a pre-modern phenomenon where later art is either nationalistic or global (as in part of global art history). The scholarship on Islamic art that has implicitly and explicitly relegated Islamic art to the pre-modern era suggests that contemporary works whether made for or by Muslims, even if they engage religious or "spiritual" themes, are of a different type. Thus contemporary art in the Middle East is discussed as primarily related to or a product of colonization, new technologies, globalization, and post-colonialism. The description of *Calligramm on Papyrus* in *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* reads, "Calligraphy has been traditionally associated with the Quran, but with anti-colonial struggles and increase globalization came opportunities for a more liberal employment of scripture as an art form."[13] This analysis suggests that Mahdaoui is participating in a particularly post-colonial discourse, rather than acknowledging his conversation with a wider, physically and temporally, Islamic discourse. This analysis also privileges the aesthetic of "abstraction" as a modern,

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[12]Sloman, Paul. *Contemporary Art in the Middle East.* London: Black Dog, 2009. 84.

[13]Sloman, *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, 84.

Western import. However, abstraction in the sense of presenting texts that blur or entirely overstep the bounds of readability is precisely not a modern phenomenon within the tradition of Islamic calligraphy. Mahdaoui is very much in conversation with the tension between word and image that has been explored in Islamic calligraphy, as illustrated by the examples of the calligram and the *hilye* discussed in the previous chapter.[14]

3.2 Illustrations

Mahdaoui also explores the tension between word and image in his "illustrations." His most notable illustrations are *La Volupté d'en Mourir*, a collection of selected French translations of A Thousand and One Nights, and *Le Maître d'Amour*, a tribute to the life and thought of Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240 CE). Mahdaoui's calligraphy in *Le Maître d'Amour* is a particularly interesting interpretation of Ibn al-Arabi. One of the most historically famous Sufi thinkers, Ibn al-Arabi is referred to as "the Master of Love" in this collaborative work by Rodrigo de Zayas and Nja Mahdaoui. Rodrigo de Zayas tells the story of Ibn al-Arabi's life and pays particular attention to his philosophy of love within the Sufi mystical tradition and Mahdaoui "illustrates" this text with 60 of his calligraphic compositions. It was Mahdaoui himself who deemed these particular compositions "illustrations."[15] From this categorization we would except a figural accompaniment to the text; in other words, pictures that drive a narrative. Rather, Mahdaoui uses word/image, the same calligraphic form used in *Calligramm on Papyrus*. His illustration defies both representation and signification. Describing this text and other similar illustrations by Mahdaoui, artist and

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[14]I have already mentioned the extensive tradition of calligrams, many of which are much more complicated and stylized than the *basmalah* calligrams tend to be. We could also consider the roundels containing Qur'anic inscriptions on mosques, which often have lettering that is manipulated such that horizontal strokes are interwoven into complex geometric patterns. Additionally, the calligraphy of mosque inscriptions is often stylized to the point of illegibility. These inscriptions are recognizable as Qur'anic verses, but their exact semantic content is obscured. Thus these particular inscriptions are not meant to be read, but rather are part of the visual structure of the ritual space that is further providing structure for the relationship between human-society-and-God. Even Qur'anic manuscripts participate in this so-called abstraction of the textual form. For example, the *diwani jali* script is highly stylized and difficult to read. This particular script is difficult to read because it often includes unauthorized/unorthodox connections between letters; also, letters are compressed into a delineated space such that they appear to be stacked vertically, in addition to running vertically (see fig. A.11). This particular script was largely reserved for official use in Ottoman courts, but is also found in certain extant Qur'an manuscripts. While many Qur'ans are in very clear script with diacritical marks for the purpose of proper recitation, these more intricately illuminated manuscripts privilege the beauty of God's word by taking liberties with the calligraphic form. The Qur'an is also, as I said earlier, part of a communal memory; so while it might be difficult to read each individual letter of this text, this calligraphy provides a mnemonic to the verses that have already been internalized.

[15]Mahdaoui, Artist Website.

critic Talal Moualla writes, "the event disappears and is transformed into an exhibition bearing no relationship or representation. Thus the viewer cannot separate a single work from the entire body, because the whole is what bears the truth."[16] Moualla emphasizes the fact that not only is Mahdaoui's illustration not a figural depiction, but the viewer cannot precisely match text and illustration, which is to say, it is not possible to decode a logic of translation where one word or phrase of the text corresponds to one section of illustration. Moualla suggests that "reading" becomes entangled and dependent on both text and illustration. The illustration project challenges the idea of an image or representation by moving even further a way from text than in the *calligramme* project. Additionally, the position of Mahdoui's word/image calligram directly next to legible text, especially Sufi mystical text, suggests the Sufi concept of "inner meaning" is relevant.

Mahdaoui's illustration of text with word/image is particularly stimulating in the context of Ibn al-Arabi's Sufi philosophy, since a particular trope of the Sufi tradition is to distinguish between inner and outer meaning. Outer meaning is associated with the material, the surface, bodily action and God's command, whereas inner meaning is associated with the spiritual, the heart (or soul), intuition and God's will. Mahdaoui's calligraphy conveys meaning beyond narrative and semantics. Evoking the visual, the oral and the emotive, the experience of meaning in Mahdaoui's work might be called visceral. Especially paired with pure text, Mahdaoui's word/image highlights an anxiety of communication. Will text or image better convey an idea or meaning? Does using both, in an illustrated text, insure the best conveyance? Rather than answering these questions, Mahdaoui's word/image calligraphy problematizes the very motivations behind them. Ibn al-Arabi's Sufi philosophy and Mahdaoui's word/image calligraphy both privilege multidimensional exploration over surface value. Mahdaoui reflects on his own work:

> What I am concerned with is to weave and to achieve a visual work from parts of a material (speaking code) after I have blocked all the a priori phonetic faculties and while retaining only the morphology of an aesthetic reflection. This obligation towards independence allows me to produce plastic combinations where the absence of prosaic matters urges to see-experience rather than penetrate-read.[17]

Mahdaoui sees text and symbols as culturally and socially constructed, thus situated in a particular time and place in which only certain people can read or penetrate them. In the calligraphic from, however, he tries to provoke experience that is both personal

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[16]Moualla, Talal. "Nja Al-Mahdaoui in Oratory Paradise." *Chinar Tree*. February 2009.

[17]Meem Gallery. "Red Square Series." Accessed 7 March 2011, <http://www.meemartgallery.com>.

and universal, both contextual and timeless; personal in that the viewer's state will affect the experience, but universal in that calligraphy is not directed to a specific group of people. Mahdaoui states, "to avoid classifying works of art in relation to subjectivities, to a definite time in history or to a determined group eliminates oneiric notions of space and paves the way for universal exchange."[18] Even with the express intention of reaching a universal, human audience, Mahdaoui is using a calligraphic form that is undeniably reminiscent of Arabic, and might even be mistaken for Arabic by the untrained eye. As noted in the previous chapter, the Qur'an states in Q 12:2, "We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an, in order that ye may learn wisdom." Wisdom, here, is explicitly connected with the Arabic language. The Qur'an is not only self-aware of its medium as word, but it is also unwavering in its specification of *Arabic word*; translations of the Qur'an, it should be noted, are considered "interpretations," and not the true word of God. The Qur'an, a message for all of humanity and evidence of one man's relationship with God, positions itself as both personal and universally human. Mahdaoui too uses the medium of Arabic calligraphy to reach these audiences. Although Mahdaoui removes the semantic content of Arabic, he still utilizes the aesthetic of Arabic, formal elements of calligraphic styles, and the logic of wisdom.

3.3 Mosque Screen

Mahdaoui reiterates his emphasis on personal poetry in the mosque screens he designed for the KAUST Mosque. He writes, "in calligraphy the written letters acquire a symbolic status which they maintain until they vehicle a significance. But as soon as the letter loses its contours, the reader is bound to resort to his imagination in order to reach the meaning of the word."[19] He again asks the viewer to see-experience, provoking intuition and prioritizing inner meaning. In the case of the mosque screen, the power of the calligraphic form is very clearly not *only* a trope of Sufi mysticism, but a recognition of the power of Arabic and word/image in general. The mosque screen was designed in 2009 for the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (see fig. A.12). Mahdaoui employs his word/image calligraphy using the mediums of metal and light. The screens themselves are made out of metal and are located on a non-*qibla* wall (in contrast with the *qibla* wall, which indicates the direction of prayer), part of the ceiling and the minaret. During the day light pours into the *haram*,

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[18] "Red Square Series."

[19] Urban Art Projects (UAP). "KAUST Mosque Screen — Nja Mahdaoui." 23 Mach 2010, <http://uapmarker.com.au>.

the interior sanctuary, of the mosque and the shadows of the calligraphy lay on the backs of individuals inside (see fig. A.13). Mahdaoui's use of his unique word/image calligraphy in a mosque suggests a continuity of calligraphic art. Mosque epigraphy is not a modern artistic medium, as one could argue with painting for example, and can be understood in the context of other mosques, rather than just as a decontextualized case of artistic genius.

While it is traditional to have Qur'anic inscriptions in mosque architecture, neither the content nor the style of mosque inscriptions are theologically or aesthetically prescribed. Rather, epigraphy in different combinations and styles is used to make various theological and political arguments and to variously structure the relationships that occur within the space. Indeed, mosque epigraphy can be illegible due to high stylization or placement.[20] These cases are an extreme that emphasizes the fact that Qur'anic inscriptions in mosques are not meant to be explanations or instructions for prayer. Qur'anic inscriptions serve as visual, and in some cases semantic, mnemonics to Muhammad's Revelation and the Word of God. In other words, the inscriptions participate in a communal memory such that even non-Arabic speakers can find religious meaning in the recitation of Qur'anic verses during prayer and remember the Revelation of the Qur'an as a historical moment that began the development of a community surrounding a unique body of practices and beliefs.

No particular Qur'anic inscriptions are found universally in mosques, nor do inscriptions "sacralize" mosque space. Rather, mosque epigraphy is a diverse and contextual tradition. Therefore, while it should be recognized that Mahdaoui's word/image calligraphy is a unique case (in the sense that mosque epigraphy is usually Qur'anic, and we can safely say, always has semantic content, regardless of its degree of legibility), we can still examine the work that his calligraphy is doing in relation to other other mosque inscriptions. Mahdaoui says of the visitor within the KAUST Mosque, "I hope the reader does not remain confined to the visual content but that he rather journeys through a prose in process."[21] The mosque screen seems to take into account more than just the experience of viewing, but the larger experience of praying or congregating in the mosque. The light streaming in through the windows allows the calligraphy to become entangled in and participate with the human activity. Thus, the calligraphy is active even when the visitor is not directly viewing it. In this way, the experience of the calligraphy within the context of the mosque "does not remain confined to visual content," as Mahdaoui says, not only because there is no semantic content in the calligraphy, but also because one does not have to visually read the word/image to experience it. Light allows the calligraphy to take part in ritual

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[20]See footnote 14 in this chapter.
[21]"KAUST Mosque Screen - Nja Mahdaoui."

activity.

Rather than being able to read, penetrate, or understand the calligraphy, which would give the individual power over the work, the individual participates in and experiences the calligraphy. We are reminded once again of Q 96:3-7, which states, "Proclaim! And your Lord is Most Bountiful — // He Who taught (the use of) the Pen — // Taught man that which he knew not. // Nay, but man does transgress all bounds, // In that he looks upon himself as self-sufficient." This verse asserts that God taught humanity language, and that humans must recognize that all knowledge, skills and materials are God-given. Humans could not achieve the same level of mastery over word as God, a point reiterated, we will remember, in the Qur'anic Challenge of Q 2:23. While the Word of God is meant to impart wisdom and the skills of the pen and speech are taught to humanity, word and language still retain a certain amount of mystery. Mahdaoui's mosque screen re-evokes this mystery. In this way, Mahdaoui's work although unique for not using Qur'anic verses, is successful because it plays with precedented conceptions of the power of the word, the mystery of God's power, and stylized word/image.

3.4 Drum

Mahdaoui has explored numerous mediums; in addition to the ink, papyrus, paint, metal, and light that we have seen, he has also explored texile, glass and lithograph. One of his more unconventional mediums is the drum. Mahdaoui has rendered calligraphic word/image on both faces of a double-sided drum in his work *Double Membrane Drum* (1998, wood, skin, pigment, synthetic material, metal, 67 x 47.5 cm) (see fig. A.14; see also A.15). It is common to find calligraphy on many everyday objects throughout the Muslim world, including bowls, coins, amulets, and lamps. However, in this piece Mahdaoui plays with this practice by using the calligraphy to interrupt the use of the object. Rather than decorating the wooden body of the drum, he paints the faces that would be struck during use. He explains this choice by saying:

> This drum, transformed into a silent sculpture, has temporarily ceased to be an instrument; it simply exists. Its cultural function — as a catalyst to the senses articulated through formal and improvised melody – has been interrupted. More importantly, it has renounced its particular voice as part of a multiplicity of resonances, it has become a dynamic symbol of cultural pluralism, a kind of 'total art' to which people throughout the world can

respond to in a myriad different ways.[22]

Mahdaoui curiously picks an object with very clear cultural heritage, that is, with specific associations to a particular time, place and group of people. Rather than picking an object found more universally, he uses a recognizably North African drum associated with religious events, public gatherings and private ceremonies.[23] Again, as previously discussed regarding his illustrations, Mahdaoui also uses calligraphy of clearly Arabic influence, in his project to create "total art." There is perhaps something universal about the silence that comes from the painting of the drum, but it might not be obvious how what looks like Arabic calligraphy could be easily understood as culturally pluralistic. Whether or not it is explicit, Mahdaoui seems to draw on a particularly Qur'anic notion that beautiful words could be a universal message to humanity.

The key to understanding the drum might be what Mahdaoui calls its "multiplicity of resonances" after giving up its culturally "particular voice." Although the drum is literally silenced in that it will not be played as a drum again, it still connected with sound. The drum is still intact and recognizable as a drum; therefore, the memory of its sound is not erased. But perhaps more important is the application of calligraphy, typically associated with words that have an audible counterpart. Although Mahdaoui's calligraphy does not spell out any words in particular, the description of him as a "choreographer of letters" here I think is apt. Choreography, the steps or sequence of movements in a dance or ritual, inextricably links sound and movement. While choreography itself is silent, it is also meaningless without consideration of sound, rhythm, and music. Likewise, text is meaningless without the prior knowledge of spoken language. Calligraphy then can be said to be inextricably reminiscent of sound. In our discussion of the Qur'an, we noted the very close association of text and recitation, as all manuscripts are a remembrance of the first aurally received Revelation. In addition to Mahdaoui's *Double Membrane Drum*, he has done a number of performance pieces that involve music, movement and the visual evocation of word, creating a kind of time-based calligraphy. In a self-portrait, Mahdaoui uses light and movement to create word/image; his self-portrait is a performance, captured on film (see fig. A.16). This performance emphasizes the bodily involvement in both word and art. Choreographer, then, seems to be an appropriate way of describing Mahdaoui's role as he creates word/image calligraphy, which, while having no recognizable text or semantic content, is still reminiscent of word in both its visual and audible mediums. While silencing the music of the drum, Mahdaoui's calligraphy evokes both the memory

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[22]Spring, *Angaza Afrika*, 178

[23]British Museum. "Nja Mahdaoui, a Double Membrane Drum." Accessed 9 March 2011. <http://www.britishmuseum.org>.

of sound and invites viewers to imbue it with their own resonances.

3.5 Toward a Total Art

Nja Mahdoui's work has been little theorized either in an art historical or in a religious studies context. While his international renown precedes him, the literature on his work is confined to poetic catalogue descriptions, biographies, and short blurbs alluding to post-colonial struggle. These descriptions limit our understanding of Mahdaoui's works to "abstractions" and "modernizations" of traditional forms brought on by the supposed liberation of post-colonial modernity, relegating the works to the realm of the political and reactionary. This shallow understanding of Mahdaoui's work denies the possibility of a complex reading that could take seriously religion, tradition, calligraphy, visual art, and the globalizing world. Mahdaoui's work, we have seen, is certainly more than a liberated calligraphy.

Mahdaoui's "beautiful writing" participates in a historical Arabic-Islamic dialogue about the tension between text and image. Within the practice of calligraphy the theoretical problem of distinguishing between text and image is an old one. Calligrams and Qur'anic inscriptions are particularly ubiquitous examples of Muslims playing with word/image tension to aesthetic and theological success. While Orientalists in particular have argued that the Islamic tradition is iconoclastic or, more recently, aniconic, these calligraphic traditions seem to suggest that the Islamic tradition is neither dogmatically destroying images nor disinterested in images. Although there are of course historical cases of iconoclasm, these are not necessarily indicative of a larger Islamic intellectual engagement with images. Without getting too far into the semantics of these arguments, from historical evidence of calligrams and Qur'anic inscriptions in particular, we have seen that text has been stylistically manipulated to engage the theoretical category of the image. The resulting word/image is not a symbol or an icon. Rather, through the logic of the Qur'an and the privileging of wisdom of word (whether in the form of aural Revelation), oral recitation or textual manuscripts and calligraphy, calligraphy is used to play with the tension between word and image. Mahdaoui's calligraphy is very aware of this tension, and the attention that has been paid to it within the Islamic tradition.

In his word/image calligraphy Mahdaoui emphasizes the form of text without semantic content, he leaves interpretation open, challenging the idea of a strict narrative reading of text with a clear semantic meaning. Like many calligrams and Qur'anic inscriptions, Mahdaoui's *calligrammes* toy with the boundaries of legibility. The case of Mahdaoui's word/image calligraphy poses a question of legibility that does not have a yes or no an-

swer. Certainly the viewer cannot read his calligraphy as Arabic. The viewer, however, is still engaged. While narrative is disrupted, interpretation is not. There is an inter-textuality to Mahdaoui's work. Understood with reference to Qur'anic manuscripts and other calligraphic practices, his calligrams evoke the power of the Word as evoked by the Qur'an. While channeling the power of word, Mahdaoui questions our human ability to master language. Mahdaoui's execution of calligraphy on the technical level of pen and ink is precise, meticulous and detailed; however, he relinquishes nearly all authority over semantic meaning. His word/image calligraphy is semantically meaningless, making the bounds of interpretation not infinite but certainly much wider. Mahdaoui's calligraphy, in his calligrams, as exemplified by *Calligramm on Papyrus*, as well as his word/image calligraphy in his illustrations, the mosque screens, and on the drum, evoke the mystery of word, very much connected to the memory of Revelation.

Through the mystery of word, Mahdaoui addresses another tension, that of the personal and the universal. His desire is to create calligraphy that allows for personal interpretation and experience, and that can resonate with a universal human audience. The tension between personal and universal audiences is not a new one, and indeed was a tension that we saw the Qur'an is very conscious of. However, the iteration of the tension in the globalizing world of Mahdaoui's era is a particular problem that Mahdaoui seeks to address using the medium of calligraphy. It could be said that Mahdaoui uses "tradition" insofar as he uses visual and material reference points to evoke the memory and association of calligraphic genres such as the calligram and *hilye*. Mahdaoui pushes text to its limit, where it has all the appearances of text with no semantic content. However, because of the visual reference points, he engages the viewer and reminds the viewer that "reading" is a process involving more than just text. Although technically illegible, Mahdaoui's works are intelligible because of the tension between word and image; the image and the visual and material presentation of text radically inform how we "read" and understand "word." Mahdaoui uses these ideas to argue that calligraphic visual culture could be a way of bypassing the exclusivity of language and communicating globally.

Chapter 4

Mohamed Zakariya

As a renowned contemporary calligrapher, an American, and a convert to Islam, Mohamed Zakariya occupies a unique cultural position within the lineage of Islamic calligraphers. Born in 1942 in Ventura, California, Zakariya worked without any formal education in aerospace machine shops as a young man. His experience in Morocco during a trip in 1961 led to his conversion to Islam. While making a living in other ways, Zakariya began to study Arabic and Islamic calligraphy. Still based in Southern California, he traveled extensively to Spain, Morocco and England. After moving to the Washington, DC area in 1972 he began to travel to and study in Turkey as well. In 1988, Zakariya received his *ijaza*[1], or calligraphy diploma, in *sulus/nesih* script from the Turkish master, Hasan Çelebi. He later, in 1997, received another *ijaza* in *talik* script from another Turkish master, Ali Alparslan. The *ijaza* is a prized possession of and rite of passage for the professional calligrapher as it marks the moment at which the teacher gives the student the right to sign his own work and teach students. Zakariya is the first white convert to receive an *ijaza* from a master calligrapher.[2] Zakariya's work as a calligrapher is extensive and includes a long list of both solo and group exhibitions. His experience has also included two terms as an artist-as-residence, the first at Scripps University in 1971 and the second at the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art in Honolulu in 2005. Some of his most prominent commissioned works include the design of the "Eid Greetings" stamp design for the US Postal Service, an epigraphic piece in the Jidda International Airport in Saudi Arabia, epigraphic pieces for mosques in Maryland, Georgetown University, and Hawaii, and most recently, a gift of calligraphy to King Abdalaziz of Saudi Arabia commissioned

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[1] The Turkish term for diploma is *icazet*. Zakariya often uses the Turkish term, due to his training in Istanbul.

[2] Biographical information is collected from Zakariya's essays, CV, and website; see Zakariya, Artist Website. "Mohamed Zakariya, Calligrapher." Accessed 15 March 2011, <http://www.zakariya.net/index.html>.

by the US State Department and President Barack Obama.

I mention these works, not only to reiterate Zakariya's mastery of the art and extensive resume, but also to illustrate the great respect that the international community has paid to Zakariya as a calligrapher. American politicians as well as American and Arab Muslims have sought out his skill. Zakariya is not just famous as the first and arguably most skilled American Islamic calligrapher, but he is recognized as a master calligrapher in his own right, that is, without the qualifier "American." Even professional calligraphers in Turkey and North Africa have expressed their great respect for his work and are proud to be able to connect themselves to him through either association or professional lineage. Hasan Çelebi, a preeminent master of the classical Ottoman style, an imam, the restorer of the calligraphy in the Sultan Ahmet Mosque (more commonly known as the Blue Mosque in English), and Zakariya's teacher, said of his student, "even among Turkish calligraphers, there are not many who both write and illuminate their work. Zakariya does. I am proud to know that he is ably representing this branch of Islamic art in the United States."[3] Although his background as a Californian convert has certainly shaped his experience as a calligrapher, it is by no means the primary source of Zakariya's renown.

In a documentary interview, *Music of the Eye*, Mohamed Zakariya discusses his first experience creating calligraphy. He remembers only one mosque in Los Angeles when he was a recent convert in the 60s. Zakariya "realized that it [calligraphy] was an important thing in Muslim cultures," and decided to paint four panels of calligraphy with gold leaf on plywood to put up in the mosque.[4] He says of his first attempts at calligraphy, "Now, if I saw them today, I'd burn them. They were probably horrible."[5] Zakariya attributes this effort to "'61 or '62."[6] Not only was this his first effort as a calligrapher, but this act is also, relatively, one of his first as a Muslim. Zakariya marked his entrance into the faith and the community by participating in what he saw as an important aspect of Islamic culture and tradition. When Zakariya says, "we put them [the panels] up in the mosque," it is clear that, although he designed the panels, the installation of them in the mosque was a communal effort and decision.[7] While forming a relationship with his local mosque and with the Muslim community that made up the congregation, Zakariya was also helping to establish himself and his mosque (at the time, a new and still rare phenomenon in Southern California) in conversation with the narrative of Muslim tradition.

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[3]Kesting, Piney. "The World of Mohamed Zakariya." *Saudi Aramco World*. January/February 1992. vol. 43. no. 41. pp. 10–7. <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com>.

[4]Naim, Sanaa Boutayeb. "Music of the Eye." Documentary Film. 2008. Washington DC.

[5]Naim, *Music of the Eye*.

[6]Naim, *Music of the Eye*.

[7]Naim, *Music of the Eye*.

Reflecting upon this early work, Zakariya passes harsh judgment on his novice work. From the materials used to the cutting of the reed to the strokes of the pen, calligraphy is a product of precision and craft. The visual evidence of this precision and craft are easy to recognize and isolate for Zakariya's critical eye. In the documentary, Zakariya talks about the tradition of the critical calligraphic eye:

> Calligraphy is a new art in the Western world. It was almost unknown, and people didn't understand that it had this very critical philosophy section to it and they didnt know that it had a whole tradition of criticism within the art about how we judge what's good and what's bad, and how we judge color, form, line, motion, and things of that kind.[8]

At the beginning of their endeavors into calligraphy, Zakariya was ignorant of the "critical philosophy" of calligraphy, and Zakariya admits as much when expresses the desire to burn his first works. At the time that he executed his first work on plywood, his engagement was primarily social and religious, rather than aesthetic and technical.

However, when reflecting as a master of the technical craft, Zakariya puts a high value on both aesthetics and technique, to the point that he expresses desire to burn the pieces of work. Although the calligraphy was made with honesty and good intention, such that it would not be considered in the category of offensive, the calligraphy is dysfunctional in Zakariya's critical eyes. By not following the technical structures of form, line and motion, the calligraphy does not engage the aesthetic theories that allow calligraphy to function as a genre. By Zakariya's definition functional calligraphy is active and it involves "exploring meaning through the image of the words."[9] In a more lengthy definition, he writes:

> Words are the raw material of calligraphy, which is never divorced from meaning. But like music, true calligraphy also works on a wordless level, the level on which all great art functions. Together, the semantic cooperates with the aesthetic to enhance meaning; or, as another classical aphorism puts it, 'Calligraphy gives to truth more clarity.' For Muslims, the function of calligraphy is to support and strengthen the spiritual edifice of faith.[10]

We have seen calligraphy function in a number of ways through historical examples and in the work of Nja Mahdaoui; these functions of calligraphy include making beautiful and clear the Word of God, remembering God and Revelation, constructing spaces of ritual

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[8]Naim, *Music of the Eye.*

[9]Naim, *Music of the Eye.*

[10]Zakariya, Mohamed. "Music for the Eyes: An Introduction to Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy." *LACMA*. 1998.

piety, remembering the character of Muhammad, exercise of knowledge and discovery of wisdom, meditation on the power and mystery of word as a sign of God, creating a universal visual/aesthetic for humanity, and others. Without necessarily precluding the other functions of calligraphy, Zakariya emphasizes faith, truth and meaning in his description of calligraphy *as means of* clarification and support. By his definition medium and message become intertwined. Zakariya's particular definition is of great interest because it is derived from a tradition of "critical philosophy," as he calls it, on calligraphy, but is also very personal and contextually situated by his experience with Islam and the craft of calligraphy. Rather than looking closely at individual pieces, I will examine Zakariya's body of work and calligraphic practice in light of his definition of calligraphy.

Zakariya's practice is very much informed by his dedication to the memory and propagation of the calligraphic lineage. The reiteration of the myth of calligraphy's development, from the inspiration of Revelation to 'Ali, the first Arabic calligrapher, to Ibn Muqla to Ibn al-Bawwab and so on, is a means of preserving the aesthetic, spiritual and material values of the calligraphic tradition. Once a student of calligraphy, Zakariya is now a teacher. Not only does he have students that he works with personally, but he makes a point of educating the wider, especially American, public about the calligraphic tradition through both his art and his writings. Lineage and myth are also means by which Zakariya understands calligraphy in the contemporary moment. While a lineage provides a step-by-step account of how calligraphy began and arrives in the present, myth is a means of reiterating a story about calligraphy that is relevant to the contemporary audience. Zakariya does not see calligraphy as a practice of traditionalism, as this would suggest that calligraphy was either stuck in the past or always trying to return to the past. Rather, he understands calligraphy as a living tradition, by no means at odds with modernity and ripe, even, for new iterations. He argues that in order for contemporary audiences to engage and understand calligraphy, especially audiences who are relatively unfamiliar with calligraphy, should recognize that calligraphy is a medium that exists successfully in a liminal space between "art" and "craft," word and image, aesthetic and functional. Additionally, as evidenced by Zakariya's calligraphic practice, it might be said that calligraphy exists in a liminal space between past and present; his work denies both the category of "traditional" and the category of "modern," but rather, retains the memory of tradition, lineage, and myth as well as speaks to a contemporary moment. This particular liminality between past and present makes calligraphy an especially adept site for Zakariya, as an American convert, to negotiate and understand his Islamic identity; calligraphy provides him with a means of engaging tradition and communicating with other Muslims through shared visual culture.

4.1   Myth and Lineage

Zakariya points to the tension of constraint that calligraphy and calligrapher must navigate. He notes that calligraphy as a discipline plays out a tension between representation and abstraction:

> Because calligraphy isn't bound by the need to represent objective reality, it's free from the cultural and political constraints associated with the pictorial arts. This sets the calligrapher free and, at the same time, adds new constraints. This constant tension between constraint, tradition, and standards makes Islamic calligraphy neither a representational art nor an abstract one but something entirely other — a living, evolving art of the word, of meaning itself.[11]

The calligrapher negotiates break and continuity with the myth of calligraphic tradition. This is not to say that the tradition is somehow fictional, but rather that through myth the "history" of calligraphy is a perfected story of great calligraphers and aesthetic prowess. Tradition is in large part a narrative that is told so as to present strict continuity and downplay the role of historical context. Through myth, then, periodization and concepts such as "tradition" and "modernity" hold little relevance. Zakariya is particularly aware of this tension as a contemporary American calligrapher because he sees calligraphy as a living practice grappling with "constraint, tradition, and standards" while still having the possibility, which advocates for, of adapting to and utilizing contemporary trends, forms, and medias to keep the tradition "living."[12]   I will examine the interrelated themes of continuity/break, tradition/modernity, myth and ritual by looking at Zakariya's practice and corpus of work; in particular I will examine his relationship to and theorization of craft, his mythical telling of lineage and his use of lineage to negotiate identity, and his practice of calligraphy as ritual, with reference to perennialist philosophies.

   A primary aspect of Mohamed Zakariya's calligraphic practice is the propagation of lineage through teaching and through written preservation and dissemination of history. When Zakariya initially became interested in calligraphy he spent much of his time in public libraries and museum collections, learning what he could. In *Music of the Eye*, he talks about trying to glean information from informal manuals about calligraphy in L.A. libraries. Zakariya also spent a fair amount of his time abroad in London studying the Qur'anic manuscripts in the British Museum collection. Realizing that if he seriously wanted to progress in the art of calligraphy, he needed to find a teacher. So he took

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[11] "Mohamed Zakariya, Calligrapher."
[12] "Mohamed Zakariya, Calligrapher."

an acquaintance's advice and went to study with a master in Turkey. Istanbul (and formerly as Constantinople), has long-since been the seat of calligraphic excellence. Since the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul has been the home to many of the greatest international calligraphers and patrons of calligraphy. Entering into an intensive master-disciple relationship, Zakariya was able to begin mastering specific styles of calligraphy.

In an important Persian treatise (important for its unique length, depth and preservation) entitled *Calligraphers and Painters*[13], Qadi Ahmad lists innumerable important calligraphers and establishes them in lineages of masters and disciples. Establishing Adam as the first human to learn the skill of language and the pen, Ahmad continues the traditional lineage narrative through to 'Ali, cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, who is considered to be the first Arabic calligrapher. Ahmad's treatise, although longer and more independent, is part of a genre of writings on calligraphy. Prefaces to albums of calligraphy were often written in a style similar to Ahmad's treatise, emphasizing the Qur'anic and divine precedent of calligraphy, discussing at length the powers of calligraphy, and the particular skills of a calligrapher's work. These works establish a myth of calligraphy, with a tale of origin, prophetic lineage, pious undertaking and even magical, but certainly spiritual, power. The preface to the Bahram Mirza Album reads:

> The first person to write, the founder of this magnificent affair and noble occupation, was Adam, who fashioned a pen and wrote on a tanned hide. ... Nonetheless, it reached perfection at the glorious hand of the Prince of the Faithful and Imam of the Pious, the Conquering Lion of God, Ali ibn Abi-Talib.[14]

This origin story is particularly important within the tradition of calligraphy because of the understanding of God's creation being dictated by the Pen.[15] Additionally, the Qur'an emphasizes God's gift of word to humanity and importance of the medium of Arabic word as being integral to understanding and wisdom. The message of Revelation and the practice of calligraphy are mutually supported by the myth of Adam as the first scribe and 'Ali as the first calligrapher, especially because this lineage mimics the prophetic lineage. Traditionally, calligraphers' lineages are ideally traced back to 'Ali in a fashion that is similar to the tradition of *isnad*, or the chain of transmission of *hadith*.

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[13] As mentioned in the Introduction, when I cite this text I will include first the original numbering and then (separated by a forward slash) the pagination corresponding to the text translated by Minorsky and published by the Smithsonian.

[14] Thackston, W M. *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters*. Leiden: Boston, 2001. 7.

[15] A similar myth is expressed in a number of other writings, but particularly in Qadi Ahmed's treatise; see al-Husaini, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 12/51–2.

Not only is a connection back to the companion of the Prophet legitimating to both calligrapher and calligraphy but is also particularly important to the lineage because it emphasizes calligraphy as a tradition of learned craft rather than independent genius. Although it is often said that God could give the gift of skill in calligraphy to certain individuals, this inherent skill must still be cultivated with a teacher. In a particularly dense section of his treatise Ahmad highlights some of his most prominent themes, including the importance of the master-disciple relationship:

> When (a man) is internally free from affliction, the writing is good. It is said: 'Good speech conquers hearts, and excellent writing clears the eyes.' If someone, whether he can read or not, sees a good writing, he likes to enjoy the sight of it. The Prophet has also said: 'Know that writing is revealed only by the teaching of a teacher, and proficiency in writing depends on exercise, and on practice in joining letters. The teacher's duty is to shun what is forbidden and to observe the prayers, but the basis of writing is in the knowledge of single letters.' Certain great sages have said: 'The essence of writing is in the sprit, even though it is manifested by means of the limbs.' ... The sage Plato says: 'Writing is the geometry of the soul, and it manifests itself by the means of the organs of the body.'[16]

The *hadith* about teaching is of present interest because, not only does the *hadith* remind us that the skills of writing and speech are gifts from God, but additionally that they are skills that cannot flourish in a vacuum. The very knowledge of letters, let alone the formal rules for creating especially beautiful writing, must come from a teacher. Both the requisite bodily craft and the state of mind must be passed down through direct communication, much like knowledge of God's will is passed from *sheikh* to disciple within the Sufi tradition. Zakariya adds to this discourse on the master-disciple lineage in both practice and scholarship. In his text, *The Calligraphy of Islam: Reflections on the State of the Art*, Zakariya notes that, "to become a calligrapher, the beginner needed not only a teacher but also good models to copy from. For each script, he needed to learn the proper proportions and to practice the basic strokes first. ..."[17] Zakariya goes into detail about the lineage of calligraphy through 'Ali, as well as the hierarchies and technicalities of schools of calligraphy that develop around prominent calligraphers.

As was noted earlier, master calligraphers will award their students with an *ijaza* when they are deemed worthy of signing their own works and capable of teaching others.

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[16]al-Husaini, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 12/51–2.

[17]Zakariya, Mohamed U. *The Calligraphy of Islam: Reflections on the State of the Art*. Washington: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1979. 9.

The diplomas are given out separately for the different canonical scripts and indicate a mastery over the particular style. Mastery is defined by the point at which the student can successfully imitate the teacher and build on these skills. In his treatise, Ahmad often writes, as a form of extremely high praise, that a calligrapher was able to perfectly imitate so-and-so or such-and-such a script. Zakariya details the canonical scripts by providing examples of his own calligraphy and by giving the history of their development. He gives the most detail in describing the development of the Six Scripts, which were codified by Ibn Muqla (d. 940 CE) and further perfected by Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022 CE). These calligraphers are part of the myth of calligraphy's creation and development. While some scholars are beginning to look into the historical context of the development of the styles, historical evidence of the calligraphers' biographies, and often of their calligraphic work, is scarce.[18] The story of calligraphy's development is largely speculative, in large part due to a lack of scholarship, such that even art historical texts reiterate the mythic story of these few great calligraphers shaping the entire tradition; Zakariya too tells this myth. While this myth should not be seen as counter-factual, it is very much a story of great men. The lineage myth portrays the skills of calligraphy being passed down from person to person and at certain moments, personified by particular great calligraphers, refined. This myth of great calligraphers stands outside of historical time, and does not take into consideration social contexts or theological debates, but sees calligraphy and calligraphers as an autonomous and pure phenomenon of aesthetics and spirituality. While we can point to the obvious methodological and theoretical problems of accepting this myth in place of historical investigation, the use and reiteration of the myth by calligraphers and admirers is an important phenomenon in its own right.

Zakariya approached the tradition of a calligrapher as a social outsider. Whether we consider his affinity towards calligraphy as a mark of inherent artistic character or as a spiritual impetus, Zakariya "discovered" calligraphy through his own travels and journeys, rather than by any cultural indoctrination. Not living or growing up in a society that values Arabic calligraphy, and not yet knowing any calligraphers personally, Zakariya had to actively seek out a calligraphic community. In light of Zakariya's experience converting to

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[18]While Zakariya does go into the origin myth of the Six Scripts of Ibn Muqla and some later developments of new styles, his historical examination of this subject is mostly anecdotal. Historian Yasser Tabbaa, on the other hand, goes into great detail about the social and theological context of the transformation of Qur'anic writing from *kufic* to cursive scripts during the Sunni revival. Tabbaa critiques scholarship of calligraphy for its perennialist tendencies, which emphasize "variety within unity" and ahistoricisity. Tabbaa's scholarship is part of a recent and much needed move toward a historical examination of the development of calligraphic scripts that looks at social, religious and political motivations, rather than propogating perennialist readings or merely reiterating the myth of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab: see Tabbaa, Yasser. *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001.

Islam, the calligraphic community serves as a sub-community of the Islamic *umma* in which Zakariya could both develop personal relationships with other Muslims and participate in the on-going creation of Islamic visual culture.[19] In *Music of the Eye* Zakariya speaks of his travels in Muslim-majority countries as an American convert in positive light, emphasizing his earnest interest in calligraphy as being a common ground he could share with others. His passion for and practice of calligraphy was an expression of intention to honestly participate in the Islamic community, an intention that Zakariya felt was either intuitively or intellectually understood by the Muslims he met.

In addition to establishing relationships on a personal, daily basis, Zakariya's participation in the calligraphic field includes his role as a teacher. Zakaryia says of teaching in *Music of the Eye*, "We never, never take anything for it. It's a gift. And we give the gift back. And every calligrapher is a teacher."[20] As a teacher, Zakariya continues the chain of master-disciple relationships and keeps the tradition of calligraphy living. Along with teaching students the discipline of calligraphy, Zakariya's numerous publications on calligraphy are very much part of his role as a teacher. Although partly as an accident of history, as the first prominent American Muslim calligrapher Zakariya enacts an ambassador role, spreading textual knowledge of calligraphy to Muslims, non-Muslims, calligraphy enthusiasts, specialists, and non-specialists alike.

4.2 Craft

Zakariya is troubled by the problem of encountering calligraphy for viewers, mostly non-Arab or non-Muslim viewers, who have not often encountered calligraphy. Since exhibitions and catalogues often present the calligraphic tradition in an encyclopedic fashion, the viewer is inundated with images with little context. Zakariya fears that calligraphy is understood by these viewers as "unspontaneous, uncreative. At worst, it can be thought to be mere ornamentation" and blames it on the viewer's "limited perception which, untrained, misses what has been accomplished and fails to discern the nuances that make the appreciation of this art so rewarding."[21] Zakariya sees this a temporary problem of aesthetic translation, one that can be overcome through increased knowledge of the lineage and craft involved in calligraphy. The Western viewer is trained to value artistic genius, breaks with tradition, and the "new and different," the viewer is temporarily misinformed by the otherness of Islamic art. However, Zakariya argues that anyone, regardless of

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[19]There are, of course, other potential sites of this negotiation of Islamic identity, the mosque being a prominent one.

[20]Naim, *Music of the Eye*.

[21]Zakariya, *Calligraphy of Islam*, 10.

literacy, fluency and culture, can appreciate the aesthetics of calligraphy. Calligraphy, he argues, is not an art of the "other," the viewer merely needs to look closely and shift focus slightly to appreciate the genre. Although artistic genius and innovation are not valued as they are commonly understood to be by Western-concieved art discourse, Zakariya emphasizes the personality of the individual calligrapher and the development of new styles and techniques.

Zakariya's concern points to a problem of terminology and art historical discipline discussed in Chapter 1. Calligraphy lies in a liminal art historical space between art and craft, text and image, prestige and practical, canvas and object, and independent genre and decoration. This liminality stems in part from the inadequacy of Western-developed art historical terms, but also in part from the nature of calligraphy's medium, tools, function and social reception; in many ways calligraphy defies the categories we try to place it in, whether they are art historical terms or terms that come from the Arabic language itself. In his text, *A Theory of Craft*, Howard Risatti endeavors to theorize craft based on the object itself, using, not necessarily conventional art historical terms, but terms that develop organically from the craft-objects. Rather than arguing that craft and art are one in the same, or arguing for new terminology, Risatti seeks to reinvigorate the term "craft" by critically examining the function (as opposed to use, which he argues does not denote intentionality) and object-hood of craft. He concludes his text by saying:

> Simply claiming there is no difference between craft and fine art isn't a solution. For craft to achieve genuine aesthetic parity with fine art, its tradition of "fore-understanding" must be broadened and deepened so as to encourage the viewer of fine craft objects to want to understand that these objects have to say, to approach them with an openness of mind that is attentive to their aesthetic possibilities. The viewer must be encouraged to accept the fine craft objects challenge to be understood on its own terms. Only in this way will the expressive possibilities of fine craft take on a meaningful role as part of living culture in our society.[22]

Risatti argues that comprehension of craft in the long term will require the viewers of craft to "recognize" craft through its own terms and history.In terms of understanding craft through its own terms, Risatti argues that we must become open to the possibility of aesthetics in craft, while still acknowledging function or an idea of function, and that we must be familiar with the "rules" of craft-making, including the tools, materials, and

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[22]Risatti, Howard. *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 306.

knowledge and skills required. Zakariya argues for similar theoretical engagement of calligraphy, emphasizing the technical aspects of cutting reed pens, preparing ink and paper, learning through a master-disciple relationship, and appreciating calligraphy aesthetically based on its own ideas of nuance, perfection, imitation and transformation. Risatti's theorization of craft, however, does not address the discipline of calligraphy, and it is unclear where calligraphy could fall in terms of his categories of "craft," "studio-craft," and "art."

We can examine how Zakariya constructs and articulates his relationship to a tradition of craft or technical mastery, and how this relates to aesthetics. Risatti points out that craft and art equally require "fore-understanding" to be appreciated by viewers. This an important point that is oft forgotten in viewing art, particularly in our contemporary moment which tends to value "breaks" with tradition. Craft, on the other hand, is associated with continuity of tradition. While Risatti challenges this binary on a theoretical level, we can see how Zakariya's work, especially in the additional context of other contemporary calligraphers such as Nja Mahdaoui and Kamal Boullata, and understanding of craft challenge the binary through material creation. Zakariya has translated a poem entitled "Rhyming in R," which was originally composed by legendary calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab. This poem which goes into great detail about the technical preparation of materials and execution of craft, begins by talking about the cutting of the reed pen:

> To you who wishes to excel in writing / and strives for the beauty of calligraphy
> and the drawing of letters:
> If your resolution to learn calligraphy is genuine, / then beseech your Lord
> and Master to make it easy.
> Prepare from among your pens the straightest and hardest / that will form
> and shape elegantly with ink,
> And when you turn to carve it, strive / when judging the dimensions, for the
> medium proportion.
> (Commentary of Ibnul-Wahid: Don't cut the tip too long or too short.)
> Inspect the two ends of the reed and make the cuts for shaping the tip / on
> the narrower end.
> On making the opening cut, make it clean and fair, / not too long or too
> short.[23]

This poem is often cited in calligraphic album prefaces in discussions of technical prepa-

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[23]Zakariya, who translated this poem, notes, "This poem was written in the traditional form called *qaida.* Each line is divided into two hemistiches, indicated here by a slash (/). The poem is named for the fact that each line ends in an "r" sound." See "Mohamed Zakariya, Calligrapher."

ration.[24] These preparation techniques, like the pen-strokes and styles themselves, have
been passed down from master to disciple for generations. For example, Zakariya uses
17th century Ottoman recipes for ink and paper dying.[25] "Like all Islamic calligraphers,"
Zakariya writes, "I use a number of specialized materials and techniques," before going
on to explain in detail the preparation and execution of said instruments.[26]

Zakariya is obsessed with precision. Like al-Bawwab, Zakariya emphasizes the metic-
ulous attention to detail that is required to cut a proper reed pen, and prepare ink and
paper. In *Music of the Eye*, Zakariya reminisces about his early days of calligraphic prac-
tice when he and a Japanese friend who was also starting to practice Arabic calligraphy
realized that they were "doing it all wrong" and had to "relearn" their entire practice.[27]
From years of daily practice and international recognition, it is clear that Zakariya, as
assistant curator Vicki Halper states, "has been trained precisely and rigorously in ancient
forms."[28] Zakaryia says of his own endeavor for perfection, "I could have become a sur-
geon several times over in the amount of time it took me to become a calligrapher."[29]
This hyperbolic statement emphasizes the time and devotion that Zakariya put into the
process of learning, as well as, the precision and attention to detail required of the callig-
rapher. In his treatise, Qadi Ahmad repeatedly emphasizes notable calligraphers' ability
to precisely imitate their predecessors. For calligraphers, the precision of preparation and
execution are one-in-the-same. The tradition of criticism of calligraphy, which Zakariya
has noted lays out the groundwork for judging line and form, is intimately tied to the aes-
thetics of precision. Master-disciple lineage, technical mastery, and preperation of tools
and materials, and precision of execution are all visually evident in the final product of the
calligraphic work. Production is not only an essential philosophical aspect of calligraphy,
but is also an aspect of practice that the calligrapher does try to hide or overcome.

Zakariya argues in his writings and calligraphic words for the *clarity* of calligraphy. For
example, in *Zakariya Asks God for a Son* (*celi sulus* script, *ebru* border), the strokes of the
calligraphy are precise and definitive (see fig. A.17). Although to the non-Arabic reader,
this calligraphy might appear confusing, there is a learned familiarity with calligraphy for
the Arabic speaker. The linear nature of this piece, as well the visual discreteness of the
letters makes this, perhaps one of Zakariya's more visual complicated pieces, still precise.
We will remember him quoting an Arabic aphorism, "Calligraphy gives to truth more

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[24]Thackston, *Album Prefaces*.
[25]"Mohamed Zakariya, Calligrapher."
[26]"Mohamed Zakariya, Calligrapher."
[27]Naim, *Music of the Eye*.
[28]"The World of Mohamed Zakariya."
[29]"The World of Mohamed Zakariya."

clarity."[30] Zakariya argues that because communication is facilitated by both the form and content of calligraphy, the form must be clear and precise. Ahmad cites an interesting debate about legibility and clarity regarding *ghubar*, or "dust," script:

> For the Lord of the Time, Amir Timur Gurkan, he wrote a copy (of the Quran) in *ghubar* writing; it was so small in volume that it could be fitted under the socket of a signet ring. He presented it to the Lord of the Time, but as he had written the divine word in such microscopic characters, (Timur) did not approve of it or accept it and did not deign to favor him.[31]

Qur'an manuscripts of this miniscule size are not the stuff of legends. Indeed, Indiana University has a Safavid miniature Qur'an in its collection, which has been dated to 26 May 1551 and measures 6.3 x 5.7 cm.[32] The "Qur'an on Two Pages," housed by the Aga Khan Institute, is a manuscript in *ghubar* script, measuring just 48.6 x 69 x 0.8 cm, which has been the popular prototype for copies owned and displayed by Muslim families. While Amir Timur Gurkan appears to have disapproved of Qur'anic manuscripts in *ghubar* script on the basis of a theological preference for practical legibility, miniature Qur'anic manuscripts have elsewhere been well-received by patrons and the popular audience. The "Epistle of Maulana Sultan-'Ali" states, "O *qalam*! Sharpen the tongue of explanation."[33] The varied reactions to Qur'anic manuscripts in *ghubar* script suggest that there is not a singular understanding of whether by privileging clarity the calligrapher must also necessarily privilege legibility. Zakariya, in fact, creates mirror-writing calligrams, which is illegible except with the aid of a mirror. We also saw in the previous chapter that Nja Mahdaoui seeks to provoke experience through illegibility. Legibility in the strict linear-narrative-textual is challenged by many calligraphic genres, but the invitation to engage knowledge through visual and aural mediums is encouraged.

4.3 Ritual

In addition to adhering to precise guidelines in preparing and utilizing the tools and materials of the calligraphic craft, Zakariya argues that calligraphy when properly executed performs specific religious and social functions. Zakariya's dedication to precision and legibility are intimately related to his understanding of calligraphy as a religious, ritual

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[30]Zakariya, "Music for the Eyes."

[31]al-Husaini, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 24/64.

[32]University of Indiana Website. "Miniature Qur'an." Accessed 24 March 2011. <http://www.iub.edu>.

[33]al-Husaini, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 61/106.

practice. The object, calligraphy, as a *finished product* does not have the same functional relation to the body, as say a bowl, but as Zakariya understands calligraphy, it does have an essential relation to the body during production. We will also remember Ahmad's praise of the calligrapher who is "free of affliction."[34] The state of the spirit and body, which are not strictly spererated, is in Ahmad's opinion, essential to the quality of the calligraphy produced. The preface to the Amir Husayn Beg Album also states, "With God's assistance and help, I dove into the deep sea of calligraphy, which is 'spiritual geometry that is manifested through a physical instrument,' and brought forth pearl-bearing shells onto the shore for those of sobriety and understanding to view."[35] This calligrapher similarly argues that the spirit of the calligrapher is present in the finished product; the body and the pen act in harmony. The precision of the body's movements are argued to be a reflection of the purity of the soul.

Zakariya compares the practice of calligraphy to a science and religious practice in *The Calligraphy of Islam: Reflections on the State of the Art*:

> It is partly this ordering of ingredients that makes calligraphy more of a science, a religious knowledge, than an art. It was never an effort at self-expression, yet no calligrapher produced work exactly like that of another. It was, rather, an individual's attempt to express something inherent in the Islamic experience, synthesizing many facets of faith into a visual form.[36]

Individuality in calligraphic work is a direct product of the individuality of the human soul. Zakariya maintains an understanding of calligraphy as a kind of craft by seeing it as "more of a science," which is to say, focusing on the rules of production. However, his understanding of calligraphy as performing a religious function, both for the individual in practice and the community in contemplation, suggests that the execution of the calligraphic craft is both an adherence to structure *and* a bodily act, one associated with muscle memory, that is akin to the ritual of prayer. Zakariya argues that calligraphy is functionally meant to strengthen faith. In his essay "Music for the Eyes," Zakariya writes:

> For Muslims, the function of calligraphy is to support and strengthen the spiritual edifice of faith. The art can be said to be successful if this is its effect; if it diminishes faith, it fails. This is a weighty responsibility, but calligraphy is not a ponderous or brooding art; rather, the finest calligraphy is light and uplifting.[37]

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[34]al-Husaini, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 12/51-2.
[35]Thackston, *Album Prefaces*, 20.
[36]Zakariya, *Calligraphy of Islam*, 6.
[37]Zakariya, "Music for the Eyes."

In Chapter 2 we came across Zakariya's writings on the importance of the *hilye* as a calligraphic form and religious object. Zakariya's *He Was Not Tall:* Hilye *in Black and Yellow* (2005, *talik* and *celi talik* scripts, ink on paper, 33.5 x 21.75 in) is an example of his practice of calligraphy as religious ritual (see fig. A.18). This piece serves the function of remembrance for the community of viewers, and is a ritual act of remembrance in its creation. By creating this *hilye*, Zakariya is transmitting the memory of Muhammad's character and in the act of creating calligraphy is, himself, remembering Muhammad's Revelation, the creation of the Islamic community, and the personal and spiritual qualities of the good Muslim.[38]

Zakariya defines Islamic calligraphy by its fulfillment of an Islamic purpose or function. The act, then, cannot be divorced from religion or faith, and is in some way a representation or manifestation of it. These understandings are rather reminiscent of the perennialist understandings of "Islamic art." We will remember Wijdan 'Ali who wrote of the Islamic artist, "It is the ability of the artist to project inner self, by adhering to tradition, in order to create a form that reflects to the outside world certain spiritual and aesthetic values,"[39] and Seyyed Hossein Nasr who wrote of Islamic art, "Islamic art is the result of the manifestation of Unity upon the plane of multiplicity."[40] In *The calligraphy of Islam: reflections on the state of the art*, Zakariya cites perennialist, Martin Lings's texts *The Qur'an* and *The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* as useful texts for further understanding the calligraphic discipline.[41] However, Mohamed Zakariya does not identify with the perennialists, nor is he commonly listed among them. Although Zakariya shares similar understandings of art, or at least calligraphy, as religious practice and the function of calligraphy, Zakariya does not seem to share the perennialist rejection of history.

Although there is a certain *type* of history being propagated in the calligraphic lineage that Zakariya puts forth, it is a mythical form of history rather than actually ahistorical. The perennialists, we saw, argue that Islamic art can and should tap into an "essence' of Islam that is divine and unchanging. While the myth of the calligraphic lineage lacks certain historical details that are about the sociopolitical development of calligraphy, it does not deny history entirely and recognizes an aesthetic and social transformation over

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[38]In his essay "The Hilye of the Prophet Muhammad," Zakariya translates the "most popular" texts used by calligraphers which is related by 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and progenitor of the calligraphic lineage. See Zakariya, "Hilye of the Prophet," 13.

[39]'Ali, *What is Islamic Art?*, 22–3.

[40]Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 7–8.

[41]Martin Lings is closely associated with perennialist Frithjof Schuon and is most famous for his work on the Prophet Muhammad. I have included the three aforementioned texts by Lings in my list of references.

time. Indeed, Zakariya is very aware of changes in the styles and practices of calligraphy as
these are important moments in the calligraphic lineage. While Zakariya might be called
a "traditionalist" in the sense that he adheres to established methods of calligraphic
preparation, practice, and learning, it would be incorrect to call him anti-modern. In the
conclusion of his text *The Calligraphy of Islam*, Zakariya articulates a modern incentive
to reinvigorate the practice of calligraphy:

> Most calligraphy today is being done as a graphic art for the publishing and
> advertising fields, to which it is remarkably well suited — often strikingly
> so. . . . On the other hand, some modern artists are using the Arabic script
> as a design element of their artwork, with varying degrees of success. One
> artist who does this to particularly good effect is the Palestinian artist, Kamal
> Boullata, who uses the square Kufic script in a very intriguing way, often
> producing striking optical illusions. Many of these artistic experiments cannot
> truthfully or specifically be called calligraphy, however, since the script is often
> illegible or a mere meaningless combinations of letters. Nevertheless, whether
> it is called calligraphy or not, it adds yeast to a pursuit that is in some danger
> of going flat. We must hope that out of the flux of modern calligraphy will
> arise new directions, keeping alive and vigorous this ancient tradition and
> contributing to a revivification of all the traditional arts of Islam, which, with
> the exception of calligraphy have lost their essential patronage and become
> merely tourist curiosities.[42]

It is apparent from Zakariya's practice, which includes his textual and visual works, that he
can be considered a "traditionalist" insofar as he is very conscious of the history, lineage
and myth of calligraphy. Zakariya takes a personal stake in preserving the methods and
techniques of calligraphy through both textual history and artistic renderings. He also
takes a personal stake in seeing calligraphy adapt or reformulate to remain relevant to
audiences. He has been traditionally trained and creates works of calligraphy that follow
precise formal rules. Zakariya, however, is a self-conscious calligrapher, not simply a
copyist. By expounding a philosophy of how, when and where calligraphy should be
used, Zakariya uses creative choice to pick his projects and execute them. Additionally,
we have seen that while imitation is a part of calligraphic training, it is not the end of
the calligrapher's practice. The brushstrokes, color, and subject matter are all potential
areas for the calligrapher to express his or her signature. This not to make an argument
about agency and creativity in general, but to challenge the connotations of the category

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[42]Zakariya, *Calligraphy of Islam*, 41–2.

"traditional" as unchanging, seeking to mimic a past aesthetic, rather than speak to the present moment. While Zakariya participates in a "traditional" practice of calligraphy, he is certainly *not* anti-modern. From the above quotation, we see that while Zakariya is not lacking in personal opinion on what calligraphy *ought* to be. Rather, he is very much open to the possibilities of what calligraphy *could* be in our contemporary world.

4.4   The Liminality of Calligraphy

We see from Zakariya's writings that he understands the craft of calligraphy as having a very precise philosophical and technical lineage *and* that calligraphy should not be a practice of return to traditionalism. Rather, for Zakariya, calligraphy preserves tradition within its practice while still answering to the needs and transformations of the present. Assistant curator of the Seattle Art Museum, Vicki Halper, has said that Zakariya "particularly identifies himself with the tradition because he works completely within it. He is not trying to push the boundaries of his craft into contemporary American idiom."[43] Piney Kesting, the author of the article "The World of Mohamed Zakariya," which quotes Halper, disagrees and argues that, "To the contrary: His work honors and revitalizes the past."[44] It is clear that Kesting's more nuanced understanding is a better analysis of Zakariya's work and practice. It is true that Zakariya is not seeking to create an American idiom of calligraphy, that is, he has no interest in "Americanization" or "modernization" categorically. He sees no need for radical overhaul or tailoring more to an American or modern audience than to the calligraphic lineage. However, Zakariya respects the new and often unfamiliar iterations of calligraphy made by artists such as Kamal Boullata. This is not surprising given his understanding of calligraphy as a "living" tradition, which, like Islam more widely which is not in contradiction to modernity or changes in technology and society, but as a malleable tradition that can meet these new developments or be an active way of engaging them. In fact, Zakariya's engagement with calligraphy suggests that calligraphy could exist in a liminal space between past and present, successfully playing with this tension in order to preserve memory and remain relevant. For Zakariya personally, calligraphy is a way of engaging a memory that he might not otherwise have access to as a white Californian. Through calligraphy he is able to write himself into an Islamic lineage, as well as communicate his religious intention to the Muslim community. Calligraphy is a personal means of negotiating Islamic identity for Zakariya, but also, he argues, could be a means for the Muslim community to communicate with non-Muslim

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[43] "The World of Mohamed Zakariya."
[44] "The World of Mohamed Zakariya."

Americans.

Chapter 5

Kamal Boullata

Kamal Boullata was born in Jerusalem in 1942 into a Christian Arab family. The creation of the Israeli state in the 1948 was a critical event in the formation of Boullata's childhood and later political views. Both his past in Jerusalem and his participation in an ever-present political struggle for Palestinian freedom have informed Boullata's artistic works and his theoretical writings.

> I was less than ten years old when the meaning of no-man's-land first found its way into my life. At the time, Jerusalem, the city in which I was born, had just been divided into two separate worlds. On one side, the city's Jews began to live in a state all their own. On the other side, Arabs, regardless of their religion, staggered together under the burdens of their newly broken lives.[1]

Place and the memory of Jerusalem are ubiquitous themes in Boullata's artistic and intellectual works (which are arguably inseparable). After studying Byzantine-style icon painting informally with the artist Khalil Halabi in Jerusalem, Boullata studied at the Fine Arts Academy in Rome and at the Corcoran Gallery School of Art in Washington, DC. Since then, he has lived, painted, and researched in Washington DC, Morocco, and Paris.[2]

Boullata's work is very conscious of how individuals exist in spatial relationships with each other, as well as, with or within a society. In writings and interviews he often recalls the childhood experience of sitting at the Dome of the Rock, sketching and contemplating its geometries and epigraphies.[3] These designs form the intellectual and artistic basis for

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[1] Boullata, Kamal, and John Berger. *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present*. London: Saqi, 2009. 309.

[2] Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 313; Haus der Kulturen der Welt. "Statement of the Artist for the "Postcard Project." Accessed 30 March 2011, <http://www.culturebase.net>.

[3] Darat al-Funun. "Kamal Boullata." Accessed 30 March 2011, <http://www.daratalfunun.org>; "Postcard Project"; Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 312, 314.

Boullata's body of work that uses geometry as a medium for the communication of texts from Christian and Muslim sources. The square is the basic unit that, for Boullata, can communicate regardless of the religious content and regardless of audience. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt ('the House of World Cultures'), a contemporary arts institute in Berlin, sent postcards out to a large group of artists, asking them what questions and themes were important to their work at the moment.[4] Kamal Boullata responded to their postcard saying:

> Being a visual artist who practices writing on art, the two major questions
> I am grappling with in my work are: 1. How can today's art be activated
> in such a way that it may inspire hope in a world that is increasingly being
> haunted by despair? 2. To retain the integrity between ethics and aesthetics.
> What is the strategy to proceed with that would secure the means of political
> and cultural resistance in our fast-changing world?[5]

The geometries of Boullata's cultural memory are the medium through which he has chosen, as an individual, to engage the community around him, in order to inspire hope, ethics and aesthetics. In his survey text, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present*, Boullata discusses his theoretical engagement with square geometry, which is the basis for a variety of types of visual patterning. He writes:

> From the seventh-century arabesques of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem
> to today's cross-stitched embroidery of Palestinian women, passing through
> the Byzantine iconography of my Jerusalem childhood, the basic form of
> the square acted as a fundamental geometric unit preserving the matrix of
> abstraction that constituted a decisive part of my cultural memory.[6]

Engaging Boullata's personal experience of the Dome of the Rock and his historical understanding of the site, alongside his geometric visual works, suggests that there is something about geometry and epigraphy that allow for particularly effective cross-cultural communication. Further examining the function of geometry and epigraphy in the Dome of the Rock, particularly at the moment of its founding, I argue that we learn something about the way that the calligraphic medium can be and has been used in Islamic and Christian-Islamic discourses. It is also Boullata's historical awareness, his conscientious use of calligraphy and geometry, and his interest in heterogeneous communal living that

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[4]This project was ongoing from 01 March 2007 – 31 December 2008 and conducted in order to gauge possible directions for the institution's future foci; see "Postcard Project."

[5]"Postcard Project."

[6]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 312.

put Boullata, although not a Muslim, in discourse with Arabic calligraphy. Calligraphy and visual culture negotiated heterogeneous space at the time of the Dome of the Rock's founding, and it is this ability of word/image to be multivalent that Boullata draws on for inspiration in his square *kufic* silkscreens.

5.1   Memory

Sitting on a hill, glittering gold, the Dome of the Rock marks the visual landscape of Jerusalem and the memory of Kamal Boullata's childhood. The monument marks a contested geographic space; a space of religious, social, and political importance; a multivalent space. As a single space that holds historical and mythic religious importance to the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Dome of the Rock has become a symbol connoting both negative and positive aspects of Jerusalem's heterogeneity. A place open to and with meaning for all three religious traditions; it is a space of commonality and contention. In our contemporary moment, Boullata uses geometric concepts derived from the mosaics and inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock to express his own memory of and hopes for the city of Jerusalem; geometric concepts that were first inspiring during childhood visits to the site, and that are now further informed by Boullata's research and historical understanding of the site. Boullata sees the square and the circle as the basic geometric units. He traces this theory back to his early experience with the octagonal stars found in the Dome of the Rock, which are composed of overlaid squares within a circle. After further research, Boullata further argues that the "symbolical and philosophical connotations" of the circle and the square, as heaven and earth respectively, are realized in the architectural monuments of Jerusalem.[7] He writes:

> By circumscribing the intersection of two squares within a circle, the earliest ground plan of the Basilica of the Resurrection[8], the Church of the Ascension and the Dome of the Rock all sought to mark the divide between heaven and earth. Only in the Dome of the Rock, however, did the architectural expression of the convergence between the physical and the metaphysical realms itself reflect a historical meeting that made Jerusalem a city open for all its citizens and the rest of the world. The meeting, documented by various chroniclers, took place between Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and Sophronius, the Byzantine patriarch of Jerusalem. According to the legend, it was Sophronius who demanded that the caliph come to Jerusalem in person for the signing of

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[7]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 328.

[8]Also known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

the treaty that handed the city over to the Muslim Arabs. We are told that
it was he who led the caliph through the city and who, legends claim, helped
him remove the debris from thirteen hundred years of Jerusalem's crowning
jewel. Is it any coincidence, then, that Islam's foremost monument continues
to mirror the visual expression of a perfect architectural marriage between
Byzantium and Islam?[9]

In his comparison, Boullata argues that the connection between heaven and earth repre-
sented in the architectural geometry of the three monuments is not coincidental. Rather,
it should be noted that all three monuments mark sites in which a messenger of God,
whether Jesus or Muhammad, ascended to heaven. Regarding the construction of the
Dome of the Rock in particular, the myth of the meeting between Islamic caliph, 'Umar,
and Christian patriarch, Sophronius, is essential.[10] The Dome of the Rock, completed in
691 CE, was able to create a multivalent, heterogeneous space in a way that text-based
laws could not. By exploring how the Dome of the Rock was able to utilize visual culture
in this way, we will better understand the principles on which Boullata is drawing in order
to negotiate his own Christian-Arab identity in Jerusalem.

According to Boullata's reading, the myth of the founding of the Dome of the Rock
emphasizes an inter-religious dialogue that is expressed in the meeting of community
leaders and in architectural form. Although 'Umar's presence in Jerusalem marks a shift
in political control from the Byzantine to Islamic empire, the interaction between the
two leaders that is highlighted is their joint journey through the city and discovery of
"Jerusalem's crowning jewel" a certain amount of respect. This understanding of the
myth is important for Boullata's interaction with Dome of the Rock as a Christian Arab,
experiencing it as an egalitarian space. While not always experienced as egalitarian, the
Dome of the Rock certainly has a precedent of multivalent readings and experiences. Oleg
Grabar argues that a religious plurality was maintained in early Jerusalem in a manner
not replicated in other "holy" cities due to the willingness of the ruling Islamic elite to
facilitate this plurality from a secure position of power. Grabar writes:

> Yet, on balance, one key difference exists between medieval Islamic Jerusalem
> and all other religious centers, including Muslim ones. It is that three religions
> were able to share in the holiness of the city and use it for their separate
> purposes. The reason does not lie in an early medieval display of ethnic

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[9]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 329.

[10]This meeting occurred in 647 CE or early 638 CE; see Grabar, Oleg, Mohammad Al-Asad,
Abeer Audeh, and Said Nuseibeh. *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*. Princeton, N.J:
Princeton University Press, 1996. 46.

> pluralism and ecumenical acceptance; it is rather that the self-assured sense of legitimate power by the ruling elites of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid dynasties led to an ethos that minimized the need for coercion or the arbitrary exercise of force to effect control. ... This fragile harmony between faiths, probably frequently broken in daily life, distinguishes early Islamic Jerusalem from all other holy cities.[11]

Grabar's understanding of Jerusalem's plurality is based on politics and dynamics of power and argues that the same spaces are experienced or used differently by various groups. Although it seems convincing that the use or experience of the space of the Dome of the Rock would be different for individuals depending on what symbolic, and historic, or mythic narrative they are privileging, the theory of same space, different experience perhaps suggests too much separation or discreetness between individuals and communities.

During the early period of Muslim rule to which Grabar refers, the Dome of the Rock was multivalent and reflected the heterogeneous space of Jerusalem. That is, experience would not be entirely separate or discreet based on religion, but could be different or unique, while simultaneously and necessarily affected by the fact of heterogeneous *inter-actions*. In *The Shape of the Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Grabar recounts a section of the story in which Sophronius invites 'Umar to pray in Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which 'Umar refuses.[12] This invitation, according to Grabar, would be customary form and intended to impress 'Umar with the beauty of the Christian holy space and associated revelation, and to inspire conversion, suggesting that Muslims not yet taken as a serious religious threat. The story of 'Umar and Sophronius itself can be variously read or reiterated to emphasize Islamic triumph, the cohabitation of Jerusalem, the benefits of living under Muslim rule for "people of the Book," the Islamic effort to solidify its connection to the Abrahamic lineage and appeal to Jews and Christians, or even the expected impermanence of Muslim presence. In addition to the story of the meeting of 'Umar and Sophronius, which highlights the transfer of power in Jerusalem, the discovery of the site of the Temple Mount, and the impetus to build the Dome of the Rock, the architectural structure and decoration of the Dome of the Rock itself can provide further insight on the multivalence of the space. Both the form and the content of the mosaic inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock contribute to a multivalence accessible to a heterogeneous public both at its founding and in our contemporary moment.

The inscription on the Inner Octagonal Arcade of the Dome of the Rock primarily addresses the themes of God's supreme power and relationship between "people of

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[11]Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, 173.
[12]Grabar, *Shape of the Holy*, 47.

the Book" and the Islamic community. The inscription includes embedded quotations of phrases and passages of the Qur'an. Although these quotations are not marked as quotations, their Qur'anic origin would likely be apparent to the Islamic community, if not implicit to other audiences. The entire text of the Inner Octagonal Arcade reads, counter-clockwise starting facing the *qibla*:

> In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, there is no God but God, One, without associate. *To Him is dominion and to Him is praise, He gives life or death and He has power over all things* (Q 64:1 and 57:2). Muhammad is the servant of God and His envoy. Verily God and His angels send blessings to the Prophet. *O you who believe send blessings on him and salute him with full salutation* (Q 33:54). May God bless him and peace upon him and the mercy of God. *O people of the Book, do not go beyond the bounds of your religion and do not say about God except the truth. Indeed the Messiah Jesus son of Mary was an envoy of God and his word he bestowed on her as well as a spirit from him. So believe in God and in his envoys and do not say 'three'; desist, it is better for you. For indeed God is one God, glory be to Him that He should have a son. To Him belong what is in heaven and what is on earth and it sufficient for Him to be a guardian. The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of God, nor do the angels nearest [to him]. Those who disdain serving him and who are arrogant, He will gather all to Himself* (Q 4:171–172). Bless your envoy and your servant Jesus son of Mary *and peace upon him on the day of birth and on the day of death and on the day he is raised up again. This is Jesus son of Mary. It is a word of truth in which they doubt. It is not for God to take a son. Glory be to him when He decrees a thing. He only says 'be' and it is. Indeed God is my lord and your lord. Therefore serve Him, this is the straight path* (Q 19:33–36). *God bears witness that there is no God but He, [as do] the angels and those wise in justice. There is no God but He, the all-mighty, the all-wise. Indeed the religion of God is Islam. Those who were given the Book did not dissent except after knowledge came to them [and they became] envious of each other. Whosoever disbelieves in the signs of God, indeed God is swift in reckoning* (Q 3:18–19).[13]

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[13]Grabar, Oleg. *The Dome of the Rock*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006. 91–2. Grabar appears to have collated this translation of the inscription from a number of sources, listed in his bibliography and has included the sections that are Qur'anic quotations in italics. 'Ali's translation of Q 4:171–2, which I address in depth, reads, "O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of

This inscription is vital both in form and content to the multivalence of the space of the Dome of the Rock. As Boullata has mentioned, the location of the structure is significant to the three Abrahamic traditions, creating a space that would certainly attract the attention and visitation of Jews, Christians and Muslims. The inscriptions were clearly chosen with a heterogeneous Jerusalem audience in mind. The beginning of the inscription would appeal to all of the monotheistic traditions by asserting God's singular and supreme power. The mention of Muhammad clearly indicates a Muslim author, but then also places Muhammad in a lineage with other messengers and prophets, appealing to the traditions of the other Abrahamic religions by validating their prophets. The quotating of Q 4:171–2 and 19:33–6 is particularly interesting because of their multivalence with respect to the Christian community. The verses both confirm Jesus's status as a *messenger of* God, and denies his status as *son of* God. The inscription between the verses also blesses Jesus, furthering his status in relation to Muhammad linguistically and religiously. The inscription then asserts, quoting Q 3:18–9, that Islam is the proper path for following God, but also that there is a mutual connection between the three religions through Revelation. The final note of the inscription emphasizes the negative effects of sectarianism on the community, where sectarianism could be taken to be within one tradition or between the Jews, Christians and Muslims. The inscriptions invite a heterogeneous community into a space where differences can both be forgotten in name of the shared Abrahamic lineage, or can be contested regarding issues such as the birth of Jesus. What is important is that the space does not exclude groups, physically or spiritually; even though it expresses a clear stance on the oneness of God, the space itself is open to all and spiritually, the possibility of conversion is alway open.Through the inscriptions, the space of the Dome of the Rock neither denies the memory of contention, nor forces Islamic faith onto anyone unwillingly. Rather, the inscriptions make an argument based on Qur'anic logic that could be a source

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Mary was (no more than) an apostle of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His apostles. Say not 'Trinity' : desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah. Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs. // Christ disdaineth nor to serve and worship Allah, nor do the angels, those nearest (to Allah: those who disdain His worship and are arrogant,— He will gather them all together unto Himself to (answer)." Additionally, Q 19:33–6 reads, "'So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)'! // Such (was) Jesus the son of Mary: (it is) a statement of truth, about which they (vainly) dispute. // It is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him! when He determines a matter, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. // Verily Allah is my Lord and your Lord: Him therefore serve ye: this is a Way that is straight." And Q 3:18–9 reads, "There is no god but He: That is the witness of Allah, His angels, and those endued with knowledge, standing firm on justice. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Power, the Wise. // The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will): Nor did the People of the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account."

of comfort, contention, or conversion for the heterogeneous Jerusalem population.

The content of the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock is explicitly conscious of a heterogeneous population. While confident of both power and correct revelation, the inscriptions acknowledge the reality of pluralistic society; that people do and will have different religious beliefs. In addition to the content of the inscriptions, *the form* or medium of the inscriptions reinforces the acknowledgement of heterogeneous society. The inscriptions of the Inner and Outer Octagonal Arcades are rendered in blue and gold mosaic. The gold inscriptions on a blue background are additionally set off by vegetal mosaics on a gold background (see fig. A.19). These mosaics are reminiscent of a widespread use of mosaic imagery in churches to render icons, narrative scenes and similar vegetal decoration. Constantinople, the seat of the Byzantine Empire at the time of the Dome of the Rock's founding, is particularly noteworthy for these mosaics, which are found prominently in the Hagia Sophia and the Chora Church. Umayyad Caliph, al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik (d. 715 CE) "translated" this mosaic style into the Islamic context during his immense architectural program, which included projects such as the Great Mosque of Damascus and the al-Aqsa Mosque (which is next to the Dome of the Rock).[14] Al-Walid was the son of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (d. 705 CE) who built the Dome of the Rock, which was completed in 691 CE. Al-Malik and al-Walid were both certainly concerned with the mosaics of the Byzantine Empire for their aesthetic qualities and for their semantic potential. We will remember that, with his particular interest in both the structural architecture and the geometric patterns and inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock's interior, Boullata called the Dome of the Rock a "perfect architectural marriage between Byzantium and Islam."[15]

The Dome of the Rock does more than just imitate Christian mosaics, however. Mosaics had been widely used to create images of humans, plants, animals and landscapes, and were often found in Christian religious spaces. Thus, the medium itself evokes the memory of figural imagery. Notably the Dome of the Rock mosaics are not used to render human or figural images, that is, icons. Rather, mosaics are an aesthetic means of negotiating tensions simultaneously with icons and the Christian community from an Islamic perspective. The Islamic use of mosaics in the Dome of the Rock, and later in al-Aqsa Mosque and the Great Mosque of Damascus and other buildings, does not try to deny this memory, but rather harnesses it to new theoretical ends. The memory of imagery in the mosaic medium becomes a way to invigorate the textual inscriptions. As we have

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[14]Flood, Finbarr Barry. *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture*. Leiden: Brill, 2001. 11.

[15]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 329.

discussed, calligraphy's aesthetic and intellectual success is largely related to an engagement with the tension between word and image. While this tension has been exercised in the medium of pen and ink most commonly, in early architectural forms the mosaic plays a key role in the development and recognition of this tension. Created out of the same squares of tile as the vegetal patterns, the Qur'anic inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock are rendered only by a difference in color or position. The mediums for text and image, then, are the same, emphasizing the blurred distinction between the categories word and image.

The Islamic use of the mosaic medium then is not an attack on or obliteration of the Christian aesthetic of church decoration but is a reformulation. The memory of Christian mosaic icons would be inviting and familiar to a Christian audience. However, the iconicity of Christian mosaics is entirely disrupted and absent, in accordance with Islamic theology of strict monotheism. Not only is the aesthetic of the combined medium and message of the inscription at once welcoming to Christians and didactic in its Muslim understanding of revelation and Islamic-Christian relations, but the decision to use and act of translating mosaics is indicative of the plurality of Jerusalem's society. The Islamic use of mosaics in a new formulation to particular social and theological ends is reflective of larger trends in which Muslims in Jerusalem were not destructive of other cultures or religious thought and artifacts, but were tolerant of them. Tolerant, not in the egalitarian sense we often think of today, but in the sense that they were willing to allow other religious communities to live under Islamic rule, so long as they adhered to certain laws, rather than be force them to convert or destroy them. The acknowledgement and negotiation of heterogeneity expressed and reflected in the Dome of the Rock historically informs Boullata's experience in the space, and his later artistic experience creating calligraphy. From this background we can better understand how and why Boullata's use of Arabic, and arguably sometimes Islamic, calligraphy is an effective means of Christian communication. Visual culture, particularly calligraphy, has historically been a means of communicating to heterogenous because it allows for a multivalence not possible in other mediums. Boullata recognizes the multivalent potential of word/image, inspired by his relationship to the Dome of the Rock, and uses it to address the religious heterogeneity of Jerusalem in his particular, contemporary moment.

5.2   *Kufic*

Kamal Boullata, explicitly inspired by his experiences sitting in the Dome of the Rock viewing the calligraphy and geometric patterns, created a series of silkscreen works using

square *kufic* script to render different expressions, quoted from the Qur'an, the Bible and famous religious figures. The mosaic inscriptions on the Inner Octagonal Arcade of the Dome of the Rock are in *kufic* (see fig. A.19). *Kufic* was a popular script for early Qur'anic manuscripts and has been popular on ceramic bowls (see fig. A.21; see also fig. A.20). This script is slightly more curved than the square *kufic* that is frequently found in mosque architecture (see fig. A.22). It is this more angular, square version of *kufic* that Boullata uses in his calligraphic series. While some of the color combinations that Boullata uses in his silkscreen work are unconventional with regard to the tradition of calligraphy, the square *kufic* inscriptions on architecture are generally rendered from colored tiles or glass, often in blues, greens and yellows. It is this more angular, square version of *kufic* that Boullata uses in his silkscreen calligraphic series. When Boullata discusses this silkscreen project, he is self-conscious of the tension between word and image, which he frames in terms of the tension between reading and seeing:

> I was in Washington DC, working on a series of silkscreen prints that were also inspired by Arabic text in which sayings of Christian and Muslim mystics formed the sole focus of visual composition. Words assuming angular form were transformed into 'colorful laceworks ... partly to evoke the primordial element of visible language and partly to articulate the interplay between language and art ... [where] each work is made up of a system of signs in which both linguistic signification and graphic expressiveness are independent.' Words take a linear structure, giving 'shape to mandalas of Arabic in which the art of reading is interchangeable with that of seeing'. Through this interchangeability, the distance is traversed between 'word' as sign and sound in one's mother tongue and as a visual form belonging to geometric abstraction, bringing the language of one's culture of origin within the space of one's exile.[16]

We will remember Mohamed Zakariya praising these silkscreen works, saying that the calligraphy formed "striking optical illusions."[17] The concept of an optical illusion points to the confusion or blurring between image and text. The eye is being constantly tricked, forcing the viewer to experience the theoretical problem of strictly differentiating between the two categories. For Boullata, this tension is a means through which to understand particular and universal human identity. As a Christian Arab exiled from Jerusalem, the desire and need to connect to particular and universal identities becomes particularly

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[16]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 254. Boullata notes that he is quoting one of his own earlier text from a catalogue for the Alif Gallery in Washington, DC.

[17]Zakariya, *Calligraphy of Islam*, 41.

poignant for Boullata. It is through his experiences in and out of Jerusalem that Boullata recognizes the individual's tendency to form attachments to particular spaces, communities, and cultural identities. For him, the memories of the Dome of the Rock, learning icon painting in churches, and navigating the geography of Jerusalem, all define both his individual childhood and his connection to an imagined community of fellow exiles. He also seeks to talk across sectarian religious, social, and political divides in order to appeal to a universal human experience.

Boullata argues that the square *kufic* of his silkscreen works both evoke the "sign" of language, connoting the particular, localized community that participates in the language (in this case, Arabic), and geometry, which he sees as transcending the particulars of language and appealing to universal aesthetics. Looking specifically at Boullata's works, *Ana al-haqq, ('I am the truth'), al-Hallaj* (1983, silkscreen on paper, 76 x 30 cm) and *Fi-l Bid' Kan-al-Kalima, ('In the Beginning was The Word'), St John* (1983, silkscreen on paper, 58 x 58 cm) we can examine how the medium of calligraphy allows Boullata to coherently utilize Muslim and Christian quotations and address the tension between the universal and the particular (see fig. A.23; see also fig. A.24).[18] At first glance, we notice that these two works are rendered in the same square *kufic* script. The entire composition is rendered simply from straight lines, ninety degree angles, and contrasting colors. The calligraphic style square *kufic* is more than just a name in Boullata's work, the square is visually stressed and reiterated. Formally, the differences between these two works lie solely in color and orientation. *Ana al-haqq* is rendered in red and gold tones and the central square identifiable in the image is parallel to or mimics the orientation of the piece as a whole, while the greater part of the "text" is oriented at a 90 degree angle. In contrast, *Fi-l Bid' Kan-al-Kalima* is rendered in blue tones and has the reverse orientation, where the central, purplish square is oriented at a 90 degree angle to the whole composition, rather than the bulk of the "text." In the context of the whole series, these very formally oppositional compositions should not be seen as dualistically opposed; Boullata uses a wide variety of color schemes and manipulations of orientations of squares and texts. Rather, the formal similarities of the pieces are notable. Both compositions are in Arabic square *kufic* and both are complex iterations of a series of squares. It is the simplicity of the geographic element, the square, that registers immediate visual similarity between these complex pieces.

The formal similarity of the basic unit of the square is contrasted with the semantic distinction that is built from this basic unit. The title of the piece, *Ana al-haqq*, reveals

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[18]Porter, Venetia, and Isabelle Caussé. *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East.* London: British Museum Press, 2006. 65.; Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 254.

the semantic meaning of the calligraphy, which in English translates to "I am the truth"; Truth is one of the 99 names of God in the Islamic tradition. This is a quotation by the Sufi mystic, al-Hallaj. The other piece is entitled *Fi-l Bid' Kan-al-Kalima*, translating to "In the Beginning was The Word," the oft-quoted opening line of the Gospel of St. John. Both rendered in Arabic and square geometry, the pieces present quotations from distinctly separate religious traditions. Referring to the seemingly contradictory semantic and aesthetic "modes" that formulated his artistic development, Boullata discusses the culturally embedded experience of text due to his Arab/Arabic heritage and the experience of icon art as a Christian, saying:

> The neutral language of geometry common to medieval Arab art as well as to contemporary schools of geometric abstraction was to serve as a bridge linking the two sides of my cultural formation. The visual sensibility cultivated by looking at geometry from two cultural perspectives involved the reconsideration of characteristics from two modes of expression, which over the centuries unfolded in opposite directions but which were destined to cross over each other by the twentieth century. The first mode excelled in developing abstraction in visual expression partly as a consequence of the Semitic veneration of the word. The second mode mastered a language of figurative representation that gave a tangible body to narratives and whose illusionist quest ultimately lead to abstraction in art. My attempt at crossing between the two modes belonging to two distant cultural traditions inevitably produced works in which aesthetic boundaries gradually dissolved between verbal and visual expression. The process began in the late 1970s with the exploration of the plastic potentialities found in the supreme art in Arab and Islamic culture, namely that of Arabic calligraphy.[19]

Identifying Arabic with the "verbal" and icons with the "visual," Boullata seeks to, by putting these particulars in conversation, break down 'aesthetic boundaries' in favor of universal communication. Boullata recognizes Arabic calligraphy as ripe for this endeavor. As we have seen throughout the tradition of Arabic calligraphy, from early Qur'anic manuscripts to Mahdaoui's word/image calligramms to Zakariya's precise calligraphy, acknowledges the tension between word and image either by emphasizing it or attempting to further blur it.

One unique way that Boullata emphasizes the tension between word and image in these silkscreen works is by creating what he calls a "mandala."[20] In the Buddhist and Hindu

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[19]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 315.
[20]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 254.

traditions mandalas are generally religious artforms meant to, in addition to depicting complex cosmological structures, focus attention or to aid with meditation. Mandalas do not generally include text, but Boullata might also be drawing an association with Chan Buddhist tradition of koans. Koans are words, phrases, questions or short stories that are meant to be approached with intuition rather than rationality, often for the purpose of focus and meditation.While the mandala tradition itself does not self-consciously play with the word/image tension in the way that we have seen calligraphy to do, Boullata's connection of his calligraphy to mandalas is interesting for the connotation of focus. The calligraphy of Boullata's silkscreens use words or short phrases, more like the tradition of koans, in striking geometric visual forms, more like the tradition of mandalas, to focus the viewer's attention. The viewer should recognize the particulars of language, text and historical context of the quotation, but also experience the universal visual aesthetic of "pure" geometry.

Additionally, referring to *Ana al-haqq*, 'I am the truth," Venetia Porter, curator of the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum, notes that "deliberately echoing the incantation of mystics, Boullata frequently focuses on single words or short phrases such as this."[21] The association of certain of the phrases from the silkscreen series with spoken quotations that were or have become incantations, or verbally repeated phrases as part of religious practice, evokes an aural element to Boullata's works. Although Boullata believes that his square *kufic* calligraphy evokes the "neutral language of geometry," implying a universal aesthetic to geometry, we cannot ignore the fact that his work is consistently in Arabic and, now we note, evokes the idea of mystic incantation.[22] This connection to particular language, written and spoken, remains at tension and never entirely transcended by geometry. We will remember Nja Mahdaoui's concept of "total art," in which he uses his Arabic-inspired calligraphy to, by his assertion, create an art that moves beyond cultural to the universal human. Both artists are using Arabic as a mediator for understanding more universal humanity. Rather than trying to completely transcend the tensions between word and image and the universal and the particular, they harness these tensions to their respective aesthetic ends.

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[21]Porter, *Word Into Art*, 65.
[22]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 315.

5.3   Square

Although Boullata is a Christian Arab, he utilizes the "plastic" quality of calligraphy as a means of understanding his Palestinian identity, in and out of Jerusalem.[23] Whether what Boullata creates could be called "Islamic" or "Arabic" calligraphy, his work is in Arabic and draws on precedents of form and theory that we have seen in Qur'anic manuscripts and mosque architecture, and used by other Muslim artists. Rather than this being ironic in some way, Boullata draws upon aspects of an artistic and aesthetic tradition that have previously been used as a means of inter-religious communication, making his project not unrecognizable.

Unlike the illusion of Mahdaoui's calligraphy, which appears to be Arabic but is in fact no particular language, Boullata's calligraphy does have very specific semantic content. The "optical illusion" of Boullata's work, then, lies in the coloring and the compositional relationship of geometric letters to one another, rather than in the strokes of the pen as in Mahdaoui's work. This is important because Boullata is using legibility to a different end. Visually complicating the style of square *kufic*, Boullata renders calligraphy almost entirely illegible, but reinstates some semantic understanding through the accompanying titles of the works. Where the viewer of Mahdaoui's calligramms is drawn in by seemingly legible content, only to be presented with illegibility, the viewer of Boullata's work has a nearly opposite experience. The viewer is drawn into Boullata's work by the central square shapes and radiating patterns, which from a distance appear purely geometric, bordering on mathematical. To the 21st century viewer, the central square shapes, particularly in *Fi-l Bid' Kan-al-Kalima* connote digital pixilation.[24] To the Muslim or Arabic-speaking viewer, another or additional connotation would be the geometric renderings of inscriptions, particularly in architecture using square tiles or mosaic glass.

For Boullata, this association with architectural patterns and epigraphies can be

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[23]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 315.

[24]Although the term pixel is slightly anachronistic as it was likely to have still been only used in highly technical circles in the early 80s, having only been coined in 1969 as a combination of the words "picture" (already being abbreviated as "pix" at the time) and "element" [pix + el], the visual concept could have been known from mediums such as TV, photography and video games in the 80s when Boullata is working; see Lyon, Richard 4. *Oddysseys in Technology: Piexels and Me, Lecture by Richard Lyon.* Computer History Museum, 23 March 2005. While this is not to say that Boullata was primarily inspired by this kind of pixel, it does point to a possible visual connection that allows many viewers to make an immediate judgment of Boullata's work as being particularly modern, even though the scholar of Islamic art or someone familiar with mosque architecture might just as readily associate his calligraphy with architectural forms of square *kufic*. This points to a broader line of inquiry that has only recently been addressed in depth. In her text *Enfoldment and Infinity*, Laura U. Marks discusses the intellectual and historical connection between "Islamic art" and "new media art"; see Marks, Laura U. *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.

sourced directly to the Dome of the Rock, and is also mediated by additional childhood experiences. He recounts his reflections during the process of creating the silkscreen series, and says that early experiences with square geometries were, "a window into the future of my art."[25] Although he was not consciously thinking about these experiences entirely prior to starting this project, Boullata notes that the process of creating lines and grids during the project quickly evoked memories of geometry in Jerusalem. In addition to the aesthetics of the Dome of the Rock, he notes that the grid evoked memories of his foray into icon painting with Khalid Halabi, who trained him "to see the outline of curvilinear forms through the rigid structure of a grid."[26] The Islamic and Christian associations with the grid is for Boullata a subconscious visual connection, a connection was made during childhood, when he was living in Jerusalem amongst a religiously and culturally heterogeneous community.

The implicit and experiential knowledge of square geometry, whether or not related also to text, forms a lived memory for Boullata to return to when his is both temporally and geographically separated from his experience of Jerusalem. Through his silkscreens, Boullata reclaims and understands these memories for himself and for other past and present, Christian, Muslim, and Arab residents of Jerusalem. He writes:

> I seek to invoke the recreation of a *place* through the language of geometric abstraction. John Berger once wrote 'the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer'. This particular 'form of prayer', manifested through a visual language of geometric abstraction whose roots have insinuated themselves into my earliest memories of Jerusalem, is here retraced to describe the state of exile experienced, on one level, from Arab culture that had been dominated by verbal expression and on another from the sense of homelessness experienced in the culture of my place of residence.[27]

As evidenced by the historical multivalence of the Dome of the Rock, geometry and epigraphy could be meaningful to multiple audiences both in form and content. Boullata's personal experience with these geometries as a Christian Arab in Jerusalem reaffirms their effective multivalence. His particular experience motivates the continued emotional and intellectual engagement with problems of cross-cultural communication, the tension between visual and verbal communication, and the idea of exile. For Boullata, the silkscreens were an active and meaningful way to engage with a memory of Jerusalem, a present need for communication, and a necessarily constant acknowledgment of heterogeneity. The use

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[25]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 314.
[26]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 313.
[27]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 34–5.

of square *kufic* calligraphy was an active engagement with a tension between word and image, while also serving as a way to understand and engage the tension between particular and universal, or heterogeneity and humanity.

5.4   Negotiating Heterogeneity Through Geometry

The nature of calligraphy, as practiced by Boullata, as a medium for thinking through and addressing problems becomes especially apparent in the 90s when he moves away from calligraphy to focus solely on square geometry, that is, without any semantic content. Boullata writes:

> [My] explorations of the relationship between form and content through the creation of geometric compositions of Arabic expressions came to an end as soon as the reproduction of traditional Islamic epigraphs devoid of meaningful relevance along with pseudo-calligraphic signs became a widespread phenomenon invading modern Arab art. Every upstart and dilettante rushed to swamp a growing market with imitations that vulgarized a grand tradition.[28]

In Boullata's view, calligraphy is only as good as it is communicating with the world and people around it; it is not a purely aesthetic endeavor. By "meaningful relevance," Boullata is clearly not referring to clarity of semantic meaning. Since the use of calligraphy in visual arts, which is to say calligraphy that is not part of the master-disciple lineage like the works of Zakariya, is a relatively young phenomenon (a phenomenon that, according to Boullata's view, too quickly ran its course), there is not an accepted understanding of what successful or unsuccessful calligraphic art looks like. In examining Zakariya's work, we saw that calligraphy has had a long tradition of self-conscious understanding of quality of form and content. Boullata does not go into detail about what in terms of form or content differentiates this rush of new artists, but only suggests that their motivations for creating calligraphy are driven by the desire for money and fame. It would seem that this judgment would be accepted by the longer tradition of calligraphy, which Zakariya repeatedly noted always (at least ideally) passes calligraphic knowledge and technique on for free. It also seems that Boullata's judgment of recent calligraphic art is related to historically contextual meaning. By this I mean that Boullata is very much concerned by how artworks express experience within society. His silkscreens are a means of understanding the memory of Jerusalem and working through how Muslims and Christians can communicate and live in a heterogeneous space. While the negotiation

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[28]Boullata, *Palestinian Art*, 316.

of space and identity between religious groups in Jerusalem, as we saw in examining the Dome of the Rock, is not a new problem nor is it newly being worked out through art. Indeed, Boullata's work is largely inspired and successful because of the history of this problem. However, the problem cannot be timeless, not can calligraphy be successful in attempting to be a timeless art. Rather, Boullata recognizes that his calligraphic work was engaging ideas that stemmed from particular historical circumstances and personal experiences. We need not say that calligraphic art is "practical" to say that "successful" art, as inferred by Boullata's practice, certainly not partaking in "art for art's sake." Calligraphy rather is itself a media for the negotiation contention of identity and memory.

Conclusion

After examining the works of three artists from very different backgrounds, working contemporaneously, we have seen that calligraphy can take on many visual forms. Form and content combined allow calligraphy to be a medium in and of itself. The works of Mahdaoui, Zakariya and Boullata defy static conceptions of art and craft and calligraphy, tradition and modernity, Islamic and Arab. We have seen that it is unhelpful to try to put either the artist or the work into any one of these categories. Rather, the artist and works are actively engaged in a challenge of these categories. Variously reiterating the tension of word/image in creating calligraphic work, these artists use both art and religion as media for communication and negotiation of identity. Calligraphic art for these artists is a means of communicating particular, or individual, experience with religion and society to a global, human audience. Their works do not attempt to create an egalitarian, universal, or in other words, the works do not try to *deny* particular cultures, religions, or political identities. Rather, the tension and paradox of particular and universal, as experienced by the individual in our contemporary, globalizing world, is recognized. The artists individually try to "deal" with problem of this tension from their own perspective; Mahdaoui seeks to create a "total art" in which aesthetics provide a forum for communities to experience and create multivalence; Zakariya seeks to preserve history, lineage, and myth in order to disseminate knowledge and beauty between communities in order to both personally engage the Islamic community and Islamic history, and as a way of familiarizing an American audiences to new aesthetic and religious practice; and Boullata seeks to illustrate a memory of Jerusalem, a memory of heterogeneity and multivalence, through calligraphic work.

Calligraphy in particular, and visual culture in general, can be a medium or mode of expression and working through of theoretical and practical problems. When we see religion as being negotiated through various media such as theological writings, scripture, ritual, and others, *rather than* as a monolithic or essentialized dogma that predicts and dictates an individual's beliefs and actions, we realize that as much as text and ritual, art can, as a visual medium, participate in religious activity. In getting caught up in

classification, categorization, periodization and narrative, it is easy to fall into the trap of trying to force-fit evidence into theory, obscuring the work that visual culture can and does do for the Islamic tradition and what work individuals do to a visual culture. In some contemporary cases, such as names of organizations or buildings in the form of monumental epigraphy or in virtual or print graphic design, calligraphy is used as a marker of Islam, or Islamic association; which is to say that the calligraphy is not a symbol, but evokes the association of Islam in general. Beyond pointing to Islam, the calligraphy can then visually and semantically *mean* many other things given its context. The fact that the association with Islam (which is *not* to say that calligraphy is necessarily representing or visualizing ideals or principles of Islam) can occur from the visual representation and seeing of calligraphy, regardless of content, suggests that at this point in history there is a developed visual culture around calligraphy. A visual culture within Islam then, especially as an interdisciplinary topic, is worthy of further investigation. In this thesis I have suggested that current methods and terms utilized by art historians have thus far proven inadequate. I have also argued that there are artists and works of visual and material culture worthy of study, particularly but not exclusively, for their importance to the field of Islamic studies. In this thesis, I argue, we have learned something about a visual culture *of* Islam rather than Islamic visual culture; which is only to say that I have not looked for or at, nor theorized, a visual culture that is particularly Islamic, but rather have looked at visual aspects of Islamic culture.

I mentioned that calligraphy as a type of visual culture might be thought of as a medium with similarities to textual and performative mediums. I would however also emphasize the differences that calligraphy presents as a medium of negotiation. As a visual medium, calligraphy has the capacity to communicate on multiple levels in a way that text, with perhaps the exception of poetry, cannot. However, calligraphy does not deny or attempt to transcend text. Rather, the calligraphic medium is grounded in a tension between word and image. The visualization of text or textualization of geometry, as the case may be, allows and even encourages multivalence. These characteristics of calligraphy are not at all a modern phenomenon or discovery, but rather have been variously played out, consciously and unconsciously examined, in works dating back to the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts. Mahdaoui, Zakariya and Boullata, however, as contemporary artists bring their own particular personal, cultural, regional and religious backgrounds to their work and practice as they explore the communicability of calligraphy. Calligraphy is interesting in terms of a tension between word and image, not only because theoretically the distinction between these categories is problematic, but because artists can draw from a wide range of sources and inspiration. For example, Boullata although creating Arabic calligraphy

uses words from both Christian and Islamic sources, as well as oral and textual traditions. Likewise, Mahdaoui draws inspiration from Sufi mystical thinking, while referencing no particular person or text, when he creates "Arabic" calligraphy with no semantic content. The artists, then, provide the opportunity for a multivalent experience of these sources that might not have otherwise existed, or that has been obscured by history.

Nja Mahdaoui pushes the tension between word and image to a logical extreme where semantic content, an exclusive knowledge available only to a linguistic in-group, is denied. Evoking the Sufi concept of inner or hidden meaning, Mahdaoui seeks to create what he calls a "total art," art that could speak to global audiences. Mahdaoui challenges us to recognize that how we "read" and understand "word" is greatly informed by image and the visual and material presentation of text, that is, how we *see*. Mohamed Zakariya illustrates the liminality of calligraphy by showing, artistically and philosophically, that calligraphy defies strict categorizations such as art or craft, word or image, prestigious or practical, aesthetic or functional. Calligraphy then also provides a unique space to negotiate past and present, myth and memory. Through calligraphy Zakariya wrote himself into an Islamic lineage, adopting the myth and lineage of calligraphy as part of his own memory. Kamal Boullata uses calligraphy to understand his own memories of Jerusalem in his contemporary moment. He is able to understand his Christian-Arab identity in relation to Muslims by using calligraphy because the tradition of Islamic visual culture was already so successful in Jerusalem. From the case of the Dome of the Rock, we have seen that, historically, visual arts can mediate heterogeneity by spatially defining relationships; Boullata reiterates this this type of communication in his square *kufic* silkscreens.

Veiled by secular terminology and framing, the problematic categorization of Islamic art, and the lack of critical engagement in Islam as a religion has caused the works of Mahdaoui, Zakariya, and Boullata to understood as being part of generic, broad phenomena such as globalization, post-colonial modernity or traditionalism. Upon close examination of the works of these artists, however, we have seen that they are each understanding their position in the contemporary in nuanced ways. Through calligraphy, the artists do not modernize the past, nor do they traditionalize the present. Rather, they are engaged in an on-going negotiation of the particular and universal as well as of past, present and future. For these artists Islam is not merely a structure for identity and culture, nor is Islamic art merely the result of the state of being Islamic. Rather, Mahdaoui, Zakariya and Boullata use the Islamic calligraphic engagement with word/image as a medium through which to understand what it means to live as Muslim, or in relations to Muslims, in a heterogenous, contemporary world.

Appendix A

Images

NOTE: The following images are either in public domain or have been reproduced with the intention of adhering to the principles of "Fair Use." The artist, institution or gallery in possession of image copyright was contacted to the best of my ability. Explicit written permission has been given for a number of works, along with digital copies of the works, and is appropriately indicated in respective captions. In the cases where the copyright holder did not respond or could not be found, I have provide full citations of the source of the image.

Figure A.1: René Magritte, *La trahison des images* ('The Treason of Images'), oil on canvas, 55 x 72 cm, 1929; Accessed 22 April 2011, ARTstor database, <http://library.artstor.org>.

Figure A.2: *Artist Unknown, Calligram of a lion*, 12 x 19.2 cm, 17th century; *Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum* exhibition at the Sakip Sabanci Müzesi, Istanbul, Turkey.
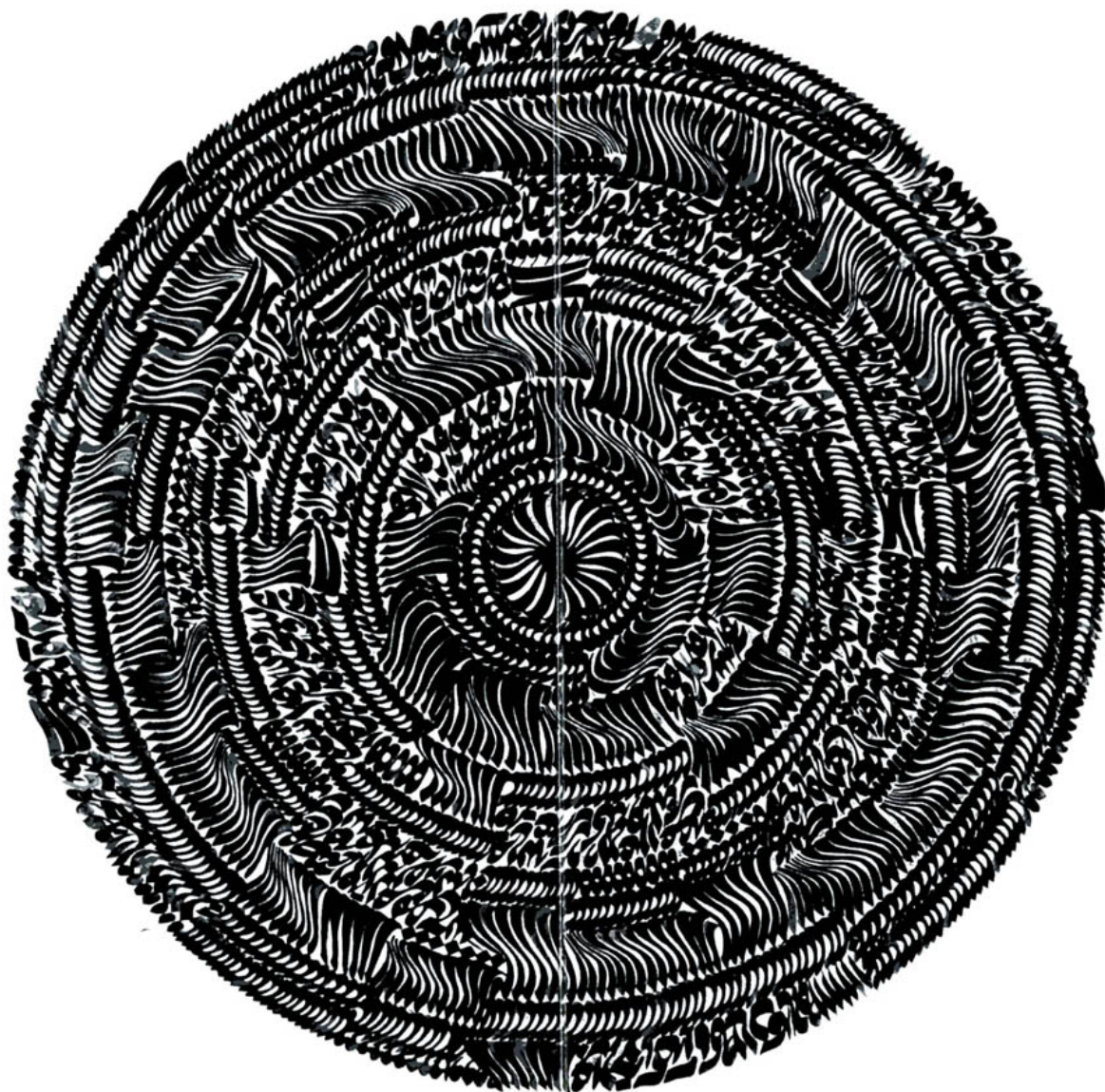
Figure A.3: Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, *MIUZ+SFKE*, acrylic on canvas, 195 x 195 cm, 1972; Accessed 15 March 2011, <http://www.zenderoudi.com>.

Figure A.4: Artist Unknown, *Basmalah* in the shape of a stork, graphic design; Accessed 22 April 2011, <http://obviousmag.org>.

Figure A.5: Artist Unknown, *Basmalah* in the shape of a circle, graphic design; Accessed 22 April 2011, <http://swedishmuslimah.blogspot.com>.

Figure A.6: Artist Unknown, *Ottoman Workshop Album Topkapi H.2152; Calligraphy, folio 29b detail* (*Basmalah* illustrating elongated *sīn*), calligraphy album, c. early 16th/late15th century; Accessed 22 April 2011, ARTstor database, <http://library.artstor.org>.
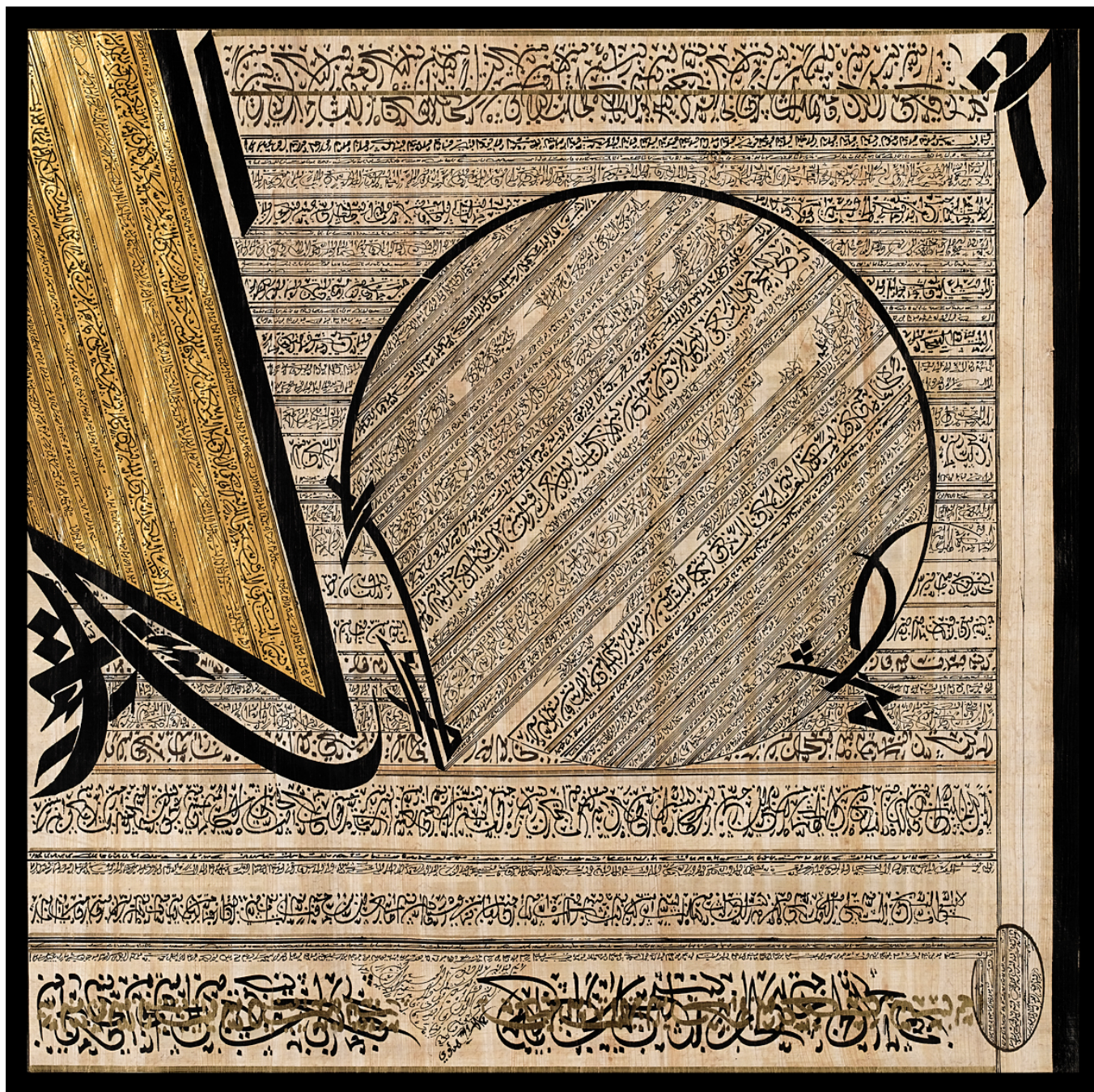
Figure A.7: Nja Mahdaoui, *Calligramm on Papyrus*, Indian ink and acrylic painting on papyrus, 60 x 60 cm, 2004 — Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).

Figure A.8: Close-Up of *Calligramm on Papyrus* — Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).

Figure A.9: Nja Mahdaoui, *Untitled* — Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).
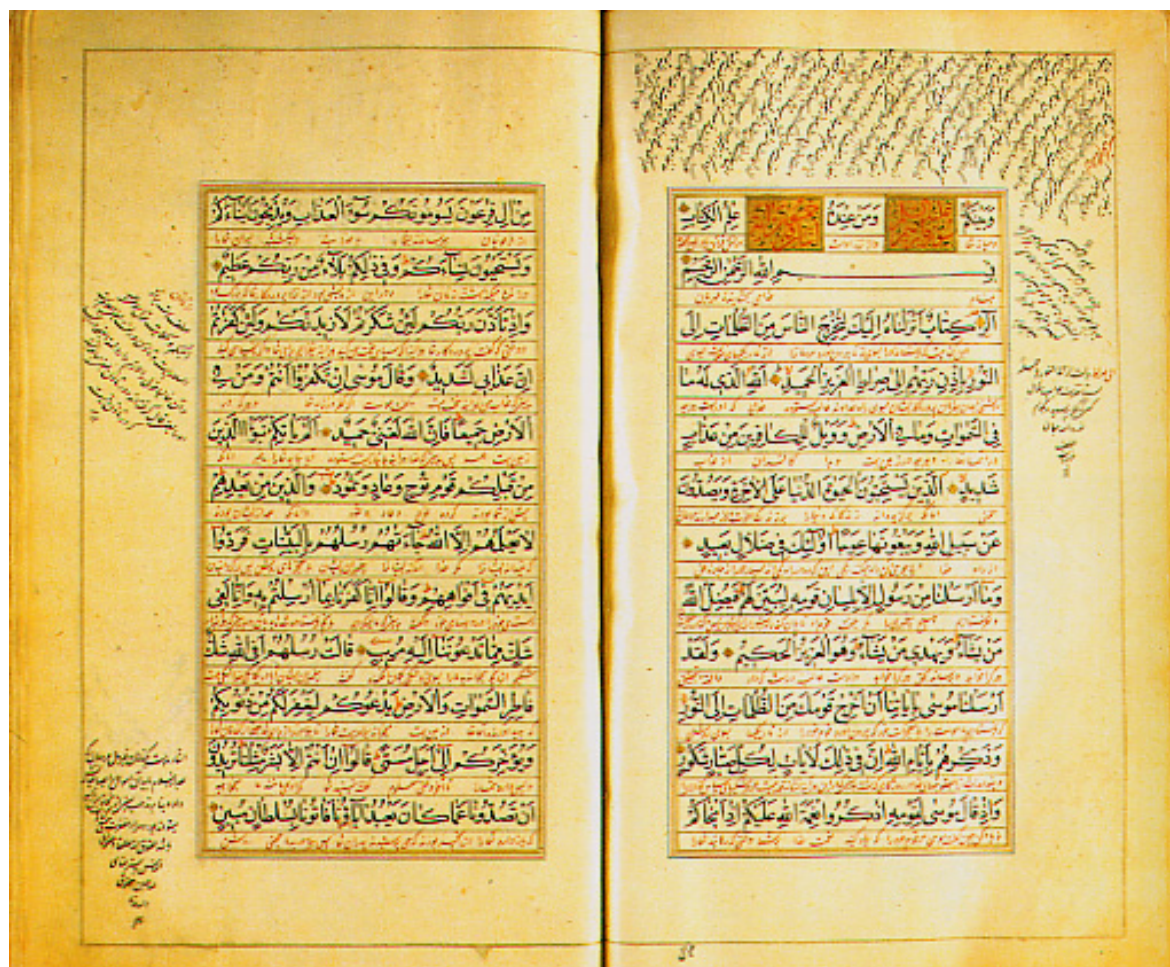
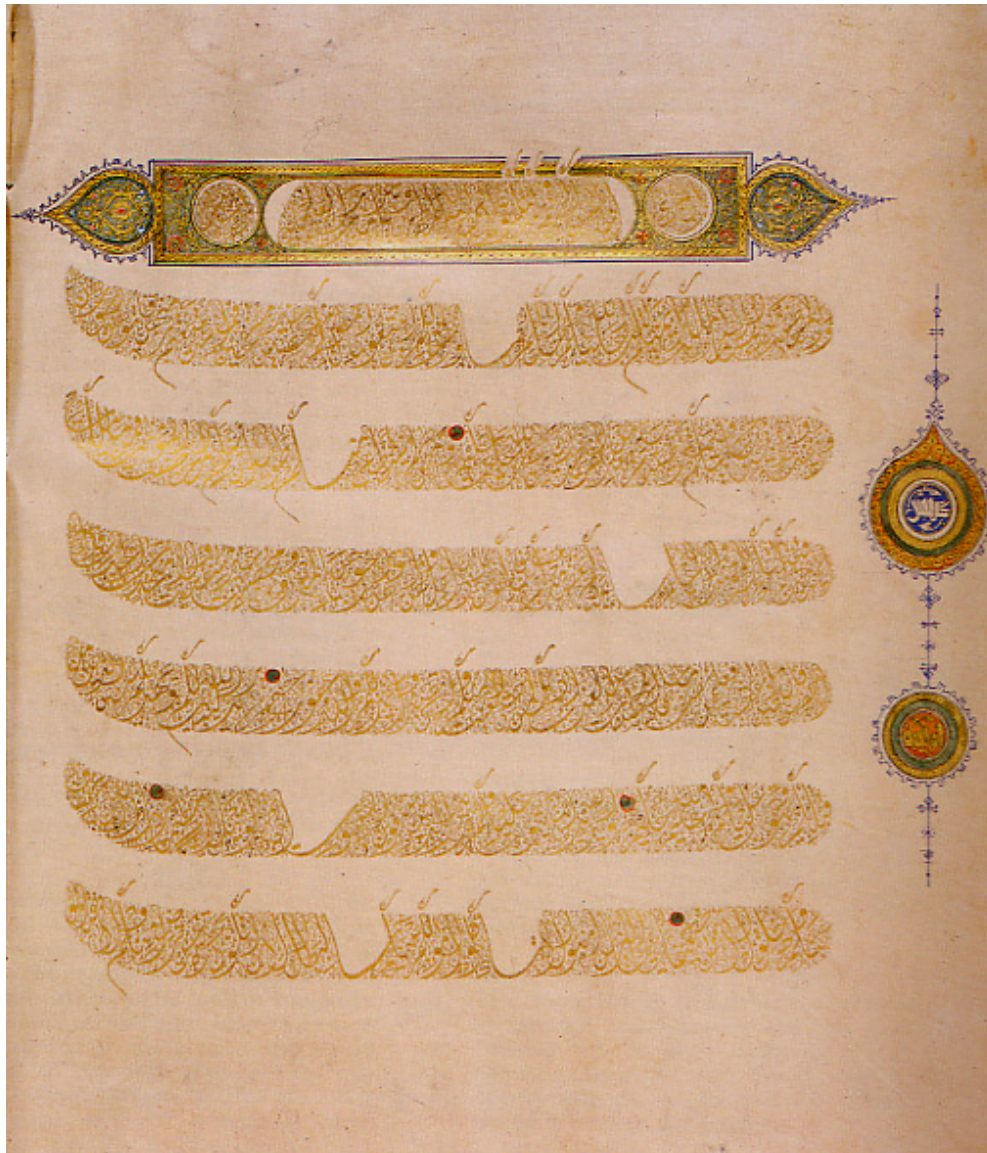Figure A.10: Muhammad Salah ibn Tukl al-Shahdi, Naskh *manuscript*, Taliq *in margins*, 1711 CE; Accessed 20 November 2010, <http://www.justislam.co.uk>.

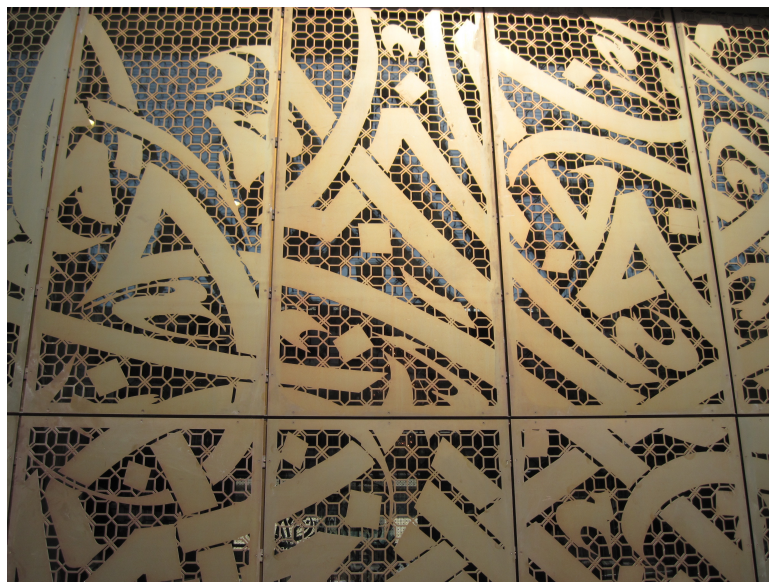Figure A.11: Artist Unknown, Diwani Jali *manuscript from the Ottoman period*; Accessed 20 November 2010, <http://www.justislam.co.uk>.

Figure A.12: Nja Mahdaoui, *KAUST Mosque Screen*, 2009 — Courtesy of Urban Art Projects (22 March 2011).

Figure A.13: Nja Mahdaoui, *KAUST Mosque Interior*, 2009 — Courtesy of Urban Art Projects (22 March 2011).

Figure A.14: Nja Mahdaoui, *Double Membrane Drum*, wood, skin, pigment, synthetic material and metal, 67 x 47.5 cm, 1998 — Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).

Figure A.15: Nja Mahdaoui, *Double Membrane Drum* (Opposite Side), wood, skin, pigment, synthetic material and metal, 67 x 47.5 cm, 1998 — Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).
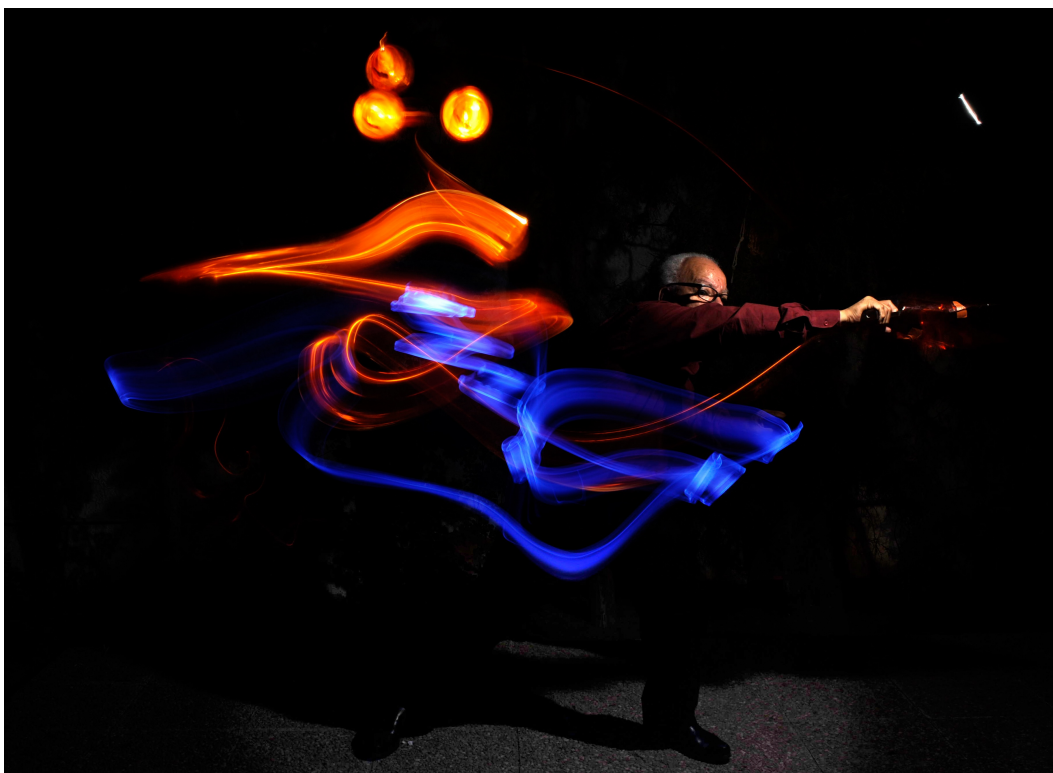
Figure A.16: Nja Mahdaoui, *Self-Portrait* — Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdaoui (Tunis, 24 March 2011).

Figure A.17: Mohamed Zakariya, *Zakariya Asks God for a Son* — Courtesy of Artist Mohamed Zakariya and the Linearis Institute (28 March 2011).

Figure A.18: Mohamed Zakariya, *He Was NOt Tall:* Hilye *in Black and Yellow,* talik *and* celi talik *scripts,* ink on paper, 33.5 x 21.75 in, 2005 — Courtesy of Artist Mohamed Zakariya and the Linearis Institute (28 March 2011).
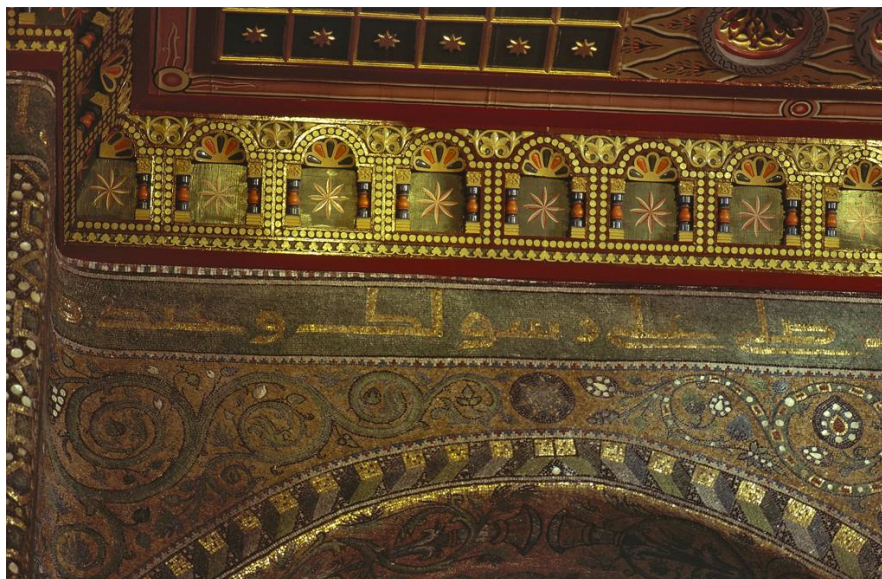
Figure A.19: Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, Inner Octagonal Arcade; Accessed 22 April 2011, ARTstor database, <http://library.artstor.org>.

Figure A.20: Artist Unknown, *Abbasid dish with* Kufic *script*, c. $11^{th}/12^{th}$ century CE — Courtesy of Saskia, Ltd.; Accessed 20 April 2011, Reed College CONTENTdm database, <http://cdm.reed.edu/u?/vrcwork,37775>.

Figure A.21: Artist Unknown, *Qur'an manuscript in* kufic *script*, ink, colors and gold on vellum, Abbasid Syria, c. late 9th/early 10th century CE; Accessed 22 April 2011, ARTstor database, <http://library.artstor.org>.

Figure A.22: al-Hakim Mosque, Isfahan, Iran (built in 1656 CE), Square *Kufic*; Accessed 22 April 2011, ARTstor database, <http://library.artstor.org>.
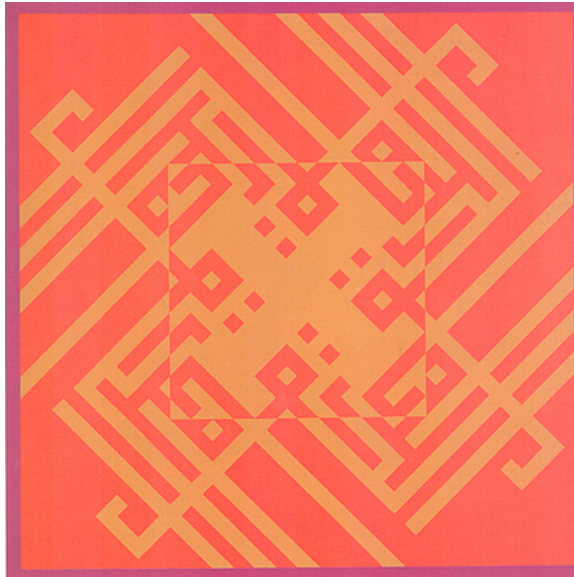
Figure A.23: Kamal Boullata, *Ana al-haqq* ('I am the truth,' al-Hallaj), silkscreen on paper, 76 x 30 cm, 1983; *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, by Venetia Porter. London: British Museum Press, 2006. 65.
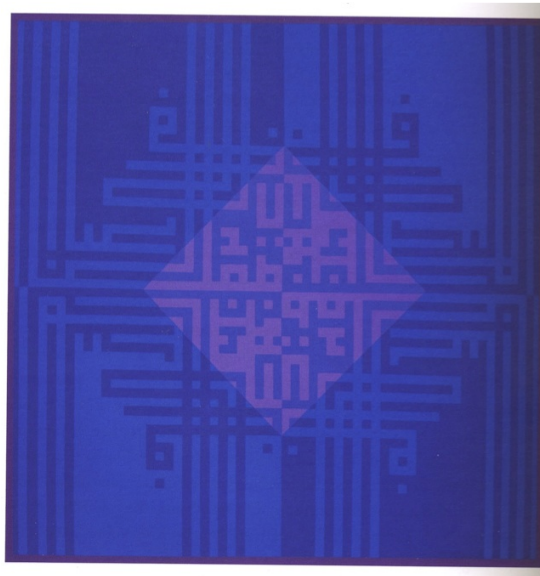

Figure A.24: Kamal Boullata, *Fi-l Bid' Kan-al-Kalima* ('In the Beginning was The Word,' St John), silkscreen on paper, 58 x 58 cm, 1983; *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present*, by Kamal Boullata. London: Saqi Books, 2009. 254.

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