



### **Landscape tatoos**

Slogans and badges of Iranian military manoeuvres in the hills between Tehran and Qom. (Photographed by the author; November 2001)



*futility*  
*subverted*

The instrumentalization of calligraphy  
in Middle Eastern politics

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In September 2000 news agencies reported that Saddam Hussein took delivery of a manuscript Qur'an written with seven gallons of his own blood. Reports continued to come until the very end of his regime about the use of blood as a writing medium: to sign an oath of allegiance to the president, to mark referendum ballots, or to paint the leader's portraits.<sup>1</sup>

[ 4 ]

Horror and violence are expressive means of many arts, yet the perception we have of Arabic calligraphy seems devoid of them. That calligraphy is not innocent or aesthetics removed from actuality – after all who thought that a cartoon will degenerate into world-wide riots<sup>2</sup> – should be clear if we consider the role it plays to support the rulers' political interests and the personal agendas of artists. It is the reality outside the studio which carves the shape of letters, as much as the calligrapher's inspiration.

Compared to the prestige of Arabic calligraphy there is conspicuously little material available on its place in contemporary cultural politics.<sup>3</sup> Documentary limitations, however, should not detract from the need to study a relationship that isn't obvious and which relies for its effectiveness on the unawareness of the amateurs of calligraphy.

## *Origins.*

The benefits of linking politics and calligraphy are mutual. To its sponsors calligraphy functions as a sort of power-generating feed-back machine: the investment results in prestige, which attracts various types of support from individuals, communities and institutions. Calligraphers also gain status, and – more important – jobs.

The relevance of the relationship is apparent from calligraphy being the principal art form of Islam, not unlike cathedrals and icons in Christianity. (There is no “Islamic dance” or “Islamic music”, but there is “Islamic calligraphy”; likewise calligraphy was never banned on religious grounds, as dance and music were.<sup>4</sup>) The semi-official status it enjoys goes back to the early days of Islam. The nascent empire produced the necessary wealth and desire for art, resulting in the first known masterpieces of Arabic calligraphy. Among them are the 9<sup>th</sup> century first written Qur’ans<sup>5</sup> and the mosaic inscription in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Both are highly political statements – the former being the textual cornerstone of the Muslim faith, the latter a symbol of Islam as world religion. Calligraphy provides them an aura of splendor and wonder, appealing to the senses and subjugating the mind.

The empire also required scribes for its growing administration, instructors to teach people to read and write, copyists to fill the

[ 6 ]

libraries and stonemasons to engrave tombstones, all eager to begin a career or retain their old employment after the Muslims took over from the defeated dynasties. The reciprocal dependence was further complicated by the introduction of a new script – Arabic – that supplanted Greek, Avestan, Syriac, Latin, Sanskrit, etc., fulfilling at graphical level the gradual religious conversion of vast populations from East and West. Which of the two sides initiated the prosperous relationship between Islamic power and Arabic calligraphy, and what were the life-paths of those having transformed the Arabic script into Arabic calligraphy, are however, by our present knowledge, matters not well understood.

### *Persian Middle Ages.*

The succeeding centuries are dotted with better evidence, such as the exclusive use of writing in the greater part of the Islamic coinage, the role of public inscriptions under the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian Fatimids or the reflection of Sunni politics in calligraphy of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>7</sup> The period extending over both ends of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and covering the lands between Egypt, Persia and Anatolia, had its own particular significance for the history of Arabic calligraphy, because the æsthetic models and the social status of calligraphers that appeared during that time lasted until the present.<sup>8</sup>

Two striking calligraphic inventions were made in Persia: the

*lawha* and the *qalib*.<sup>9</sup> The *lawha* is a calligraphy meant to be hung on a wall, like paintings are in modern houses. It is different from a handwritten book, an official document or an inscription in stone, due to its semi-public nature and easy portability. Whereas books and documents are usually kept closed, the writing of the *lawha* is always visible to its owner and his guests, while still retaining a degree of intimacy. The prolonged visual contact with the calligrapher's work invites a careful appreciation of the æsthetic values of the script. The preponderance of graphical form over semantic content put creators of *lawha*-s in a class apart from scribes, copyists, masons, and other artisans, for whom the communication function of writing was the primary concern. Engaging in a retail commerce – one sheet of paper and one or a few lines of text per *lawha* – rather than in wholesale transactions of bulky manuscripts, the calligrapher was able, with some proficiency, to sell more items and to adapt to a more diversified market, than his fellow scribes and copyists could.

His financial success was improved by the other marketing technique, the *qalib*: usually a sheet of paper with small holes on the outline of characters, serving as stencil for the duplication of calligraphies. While the *lawha* facilitated the distribution of a calligrapher's work, the *qalib* dissociated the physical location of the artist from the place where his work was to be produced. Moreover, his personal style could be applied to any surface, not only paper – stone, metal, wood, ceramics, cloth, etc., all realms of

inscriptions produced by specialized craftsmen, expressing their own stylistic particularities. The *qalib* was a major factor allowing calligraphers to control and monopolize the production of Arabic writing styles. The invention of new styles – like *nasta‘liq* – and calligraphic objects with new functionalities – such as the sample albums *muraqqa‘* – converged to secure the financial autonomy of calligraphers. The relation to political power was no longer dictated by the governors alone.

[ 8 ]

### *Mamluk Middle Ages.*

The long period during which these technical and social changes took place, nurtured an unprecedented enticement for calligraphy among Muslim sultans, princes and emirs. It became fashionable for a ruler to practice calligraphy. Versions of the story about the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II holding the inkstand for the legendary calligrapher Shaykh Hamdullah abounded in many countries.<sup>10</sup> Many Timurid princes were accomplished calligraphers and some of their works have been preserved until our days to prove that their fame was not purely flattery. Mamluk sultans however were with a few exceptions near-analphabets, but honorable manuscripts written by lower ranking Mamluks demonstrate that the fashion spread also into their dominions.<sup>11</sup> In one particular case, Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad was so keen to prove himself as a patron of arts, that an exquisite Qur’an

written for his enemy, the Mongol Öljaytü, had – grossly visible – his name substituted in the original dedication. The episode reflects the general attitude of the Mamluks – former slaves of mainly Turkish and Caucasian descent – of supporting calligraphy as a shield against accusations of lacking sophistication.<sup>12</sup> Despite missing the finer points of good writing, they were astute enough to grasp its symbolic power. When the Moroccan sultan Abu al-Hasan wanted to bequest to Jerusalem a Qur'an written in his own hand after having sent already one to Mecca and then another to Medina, the Mamluks ended by considering his encroaching piety as a diplomatic affront, usurpation of their guardianship of the holy cities and perhaps a humiliating reference to their own lack of graphic abilities.<sup>13</sup>

[ 9 ]

Mamluk times witnessed a militarization of arts, not a surprising defensive reaction of the society as a whole, considering the immense military threat during the era of Mongol and Timurid invasions coupled with the specter of the Black Death, that together almost put an end to the Islamic civilization. While architecture exchanged grace for massiveness<sup>14</sup> and household items were made preferably in metal, calligraphy too acquired martial characteristics: resistance and glory. They translated as big and bold writing often in golden ink and decorated with purple, feet high, finger tick paper, with leather bindings keeping together a manuscript several pounds heavy, the whole cased in a wooden chest and stored under locks in a mosque or a mausoleum

complex looking like a citadel. Apart from the material aspects, calligraphy was equally constrained socially. Because weapons and fortifications were critical, artisans such as stonemasons and smith could develop and maintain calligraphic styles independent of those of chancellery scribes and high street copyists. High quality calligraphy under the Mamluks was heavily dependent on their good will, thus contrasting with the autonomy and poetical turn took by calligraphy in Persia. Moreover, while the link to the military was present in Persia too, the direction of ascendancy between calligraphy and politics was reversed: letter mysticism, connected to the practice of calligraphy, was part of the ideological foundation of the Safavid power and instilled the elite Janissary Ottoman troops.<sup>15</sup> Those times provide an example of calligraphy becoming an active element of the state and military machinery.

### *International influences.*

Arabic calligraphy was tied to politics not only in the countries using Arabic script. Between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries real or imitated Arabic writing became, as a result of trade and crusades, a fashionable decoration in European medieval arts, making palpable and visible the fabled prestige of Islam as a civilization with a luxurious sense of culture.<sup>16</sup> A similar Islamic art craze took hold of Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when

everything Mamluk was copied with great care for details – even the rounded Mamluk serifs on top of vertical strokes were not confounded with the spiked outlines of the Ottoman and Persian styles. Calligraphy was not only an export good, but affected also the politics of import. Chinese silk products and porcelain had obvious qualities, yet in order to guarantee and increase their commercial success, the Chinese government was pragmatic enough while trading with the Mamluks and Persia as to put aside its customary disdain for the “Barbarians” – everything not Chinese – and allow export objects to be inscribed with Arabic letters instead of Chinese characters, to better accommodate the sensibility of the customers.<sup>17</sup>

[ 11 ]

### *Modern times.*

During its fourteen centuries of existence Arabic calligraphy has developed firm social roots: protected by religion, used in politics, displaying æsthetic subtlety, sustained by a mystical credo and subject of poetry and popular lore, more than an art form calligraphy was a culture.<sup>18</sup> This particular setting had a far reaching influence on calligraphy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: many, struggling with the accelerating turmoil of life, ignored it and looked upon it as a boring old custom; others, for the same reasons, found in it a refuge from the world and a guardian of cultural values; while a few took calligraphy straight into

globalization, where it lost, as in an exile, all meaning and was left to be bare movements laden with emotion. In each case – as exemplified by Turkey, Iran and the West – political powers found calligraphy to be a worthy instrument to wield in the pursuit of their ambitions.

### *Turkey.*

[ 12 ]

It is well enough known why in 1928 Kemal Atatürk decided to change the official script in Turkey from Arabic to Latin – to add a supplementary degree of symbolic and technological compatibility with the modernity represented by the Latin-writing West toward which he led his country. This rare example of a political power being detrimental to calligraphy, would prove itself eighty years later to be one hurdle less in Turkey's bid to join the European Union. It is also known that historically most script changes are politically motivated and often related to violent events (here the fall of the Ottoman empire, elsewhere the conquests of Muslim armies, Roman cohorts or Soviet divisions).<sup>19</sup> This is so because they aim to modify national and individual identities (as a counter-example, after 30 years of deliberations the competition for the reform of the Arabic script in Egypt came to an abrupt halt in 1968 after the heyday of Arabic nationalism).<sup>20</sup> What is less well known is what became of the Arabic calligraphy in Turkey after the abandonment of Arabic writing.

The immediate result was that calligraphers found themselves out of job, many of them having worked for the administration, in ministries or for the school of calligraphy in Istanbul, which was closed in 1928. Being clerks and writing daily for many hours, kept them trained, protected the script from fossilization through constant innovation opportunities and replenished the pool of rising masters (some of the finest calligraphers ever had lived during the last century of Ottoman rule). In the new conditions – and without making the transition to Latin calligraphy, or, taking up typographic font design, as many calligraphers in Europe do – their number declined, together with the interest of the public in calligraphy, an art seen, not surprisingly, as moribund.

[ 13 ]

A revival came only in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the relaxing of laws governing political activities in Turkey and a number of other independently converging factors: scholars writing monographs on famous calligraphers and collecting their work in facsimile catalogues; curators setting up exhibitions on various themes around writing (a regular feature in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul), writers using calligraphy and related arts as part of their plots (a growing trend in later years); their publishers, booksellers, and antique dealers (shops around tourist hotspots being outlets for the work of young calligraphers), collectors in Turkey or the Gulf States (an important market for contemporary calligraphers), and Westerners visiting

Turkey (books on calligraphy, when voluminous and lavishly printed, can be expensive). The calligraphic workforce increased with the rise of religion in Turkish politics: calligraphy offers young people a way to combine faith and art, together with a respectable status and a rich heritage. An important role on the Turkish calligraphy scene is played by the Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), Istanbul, a foundation financed by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (its present secretary-general, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, was the former IRCICA director and is a scholar of calligraphy), which since 1988 has organized a famous calligraphic competition.<sup>21</sup> Besides promoting Islamic values and cultural exchanges – there are participants from over thirty countries – the event collaterally also serves other agendas. For the state it is a showcase of Turkish cultural achievements (the link with the past glories being apparent from where IRCICA is housed: Yildiz Sarayi, the former residence of the last Ottoman sultans), while for calligraphy it is a battleground for regional calligraphic styles and an international arena where models are promoted and defended (Ottomans and Persians in the past set worldwide standards for the rules of acceptable calligraphy, so it is usually difficult for outsiders to beat them, especially in a home-game).

### *Iran.*

A substantial cause of the link calligraphy–politics comes from calligraphy not being a totally abstract art, but needing words as graphical building blocks. What to write is a dilemma tormenting calligraphers, and politicians are quick to slip a suggestion. Still, master calligraphers do acknowledge that it is not possible to be a good calligrapher and not believe in what one writes. “Who can give me words outside the dictionaries?” was longing the Iraqi poet and calligrapher Muhammad Saggar from his European exile.<sup>22</sup>

[ 15 ]

In Iran calligraphers were given this chance in the late 1970s, when graffiti started to appear in the streets calling for an end to the Shah’s regime, in an example of revolutionary involvement of Arabic calligraphy. At that moment modern graffiti was just a decade old and was rooted in the social revolt of the late 1960’s. Says one of its founders in New York: “A violent revolution should be the result of what people are forced to go through. But graffiti is what came out of it. Instead of taking arms we just took paint.”<sup>23</sup> It is possible that given the presence of American cultural references among the Iranian youth – youth which played a major role in the Iranian Revolution, some of them having studied in the United States – Iranian revolutionary graffiti was inspired by its American counterpart. It is equally not clear for how long revolutionary graffiti continued to be genuine. For one thing it

didn't revolutionize the shape of script; instead of the fractures, twists and blown-ups typical of graffiti the world over, Iranian graffiti were written in the same, obediently traditional *nasta'liq* or *naskh* styles. Following the breakout of the war with Iraq and the hostility of Western nations, public calligraphy painted on walls experienced an unprecedented boom, very much reminiscent of Maoist China. Graphic arts are an old Iranian tradition, as exemplified by both pre- and Islamic-era wall painting for palaces, miniatures in manuscripts, or glazed tiles for inscriptions on mosques. In contemporary Iran, the huge "revolutionary murals" seen in any city usually mix calligraphy with painting to celebrate martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war and Imam Khomeini, or to invoke the destruction of America and Israel.<sup>24</sup> Some, dating back to 1979, have acquired the status of historical landmarks, while the new ones must employ a sizeable workforce. Painting banners for officially approved rallies is another lucrative niche for calligraphers, albeit debased as lettering and a toxic activity. Some murals are sponsored through the Defense Ministry and veterans' associations to commemorate fallen comrades and provide jobs, many finding in arts and literature solace from the scars of war. It is obvious that state politics did not take long to pick up graffiti and public calligraphy for their own interest, to maintain the fighting spirit of the population throughout the war and beyond, under the cover of graphics reminiscent of the days of the Revolution.

The inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings high on the rocks of the Zagros mountains are prodigious examples of political lettering, but the contemporary Iranian armed forces can be proud on having produced the world largest collection of military geoglyphs.<sup>25</sup> On the barren slopes of the hills between Teheran and Qom, where manoeuvres are regularly held, lie a dozen of hundred-foot-long inscriptions made from white-painted rocks, some saying “Death to America” and some “Death to Israel”, while other outline weapons such a canon, sided by the identification number of the military unit.<sup>26</sup> The inscriptions follow the well-known military tradition of marking with messages the weapons and ammunition hurled at enemies. Discernible on satellite images, the insults end eventually on the desk of some U.S. general, the intended recipient of this mix of low- and high-tech communication, albeit the propaganda didn’t probably mean more than hard work for the soldier who sweated pushing those boulders up the hill – unless he wasn’t rolling them down and be in higher spirits.

[ 17 ]

### *Repression.*

Calligraphy is a silent activity, best accomplished while alone and appreciated in intimacy – the opposite of speech which needs an interlocutor, flies easily from mouth to mouth and can be loud enough to move the masses. In Iran the feeble grindings of

the pen are a golden exile for the liberty of spoken words. No other country using Arabic script witnesses such a large number of practitioners and lovers of calligraphy, actively encouraged and sometimes financially supported by the state. Calligraphers' associations and collectors of valuable historical masterworks are found even in small provincial towns. Specialized shops are bustling trading places for handmade papers, custom-made inks, reeds gathered in the torrid Mesopotamian plains and the island of Java or *made in China* for Iranians, dragon-headed pen-holders from Singapore and knives forged in the Elburz mountains. In contrast to Arabic countries where students of calligraphy are overwhelmingly male, or female in the West, in Iran the proportions are evenly balanced and the classes are well booked – even for a three-stories-high block such as the calligraphers' association branch in central Teheran. The response of the government is equally enthusiastic. Where else in the world is the building of the parliament and its tribune devoted to honoring the life-long work of a codicologist?<sup>27</sup> The Library of the Parliament also publishes since 2000 the first journal in an Islamic country for the study of manuscripts<sup>28</sup> and in Ramadan 2000 the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) sponsored a mega-event: the copy of the entire Qur'an – in the (Persian and Shi'ite) *nasta'liq* style<sup>29</sup> – in a single day by 180 calligraphers each entrusted with four pages of versets.<sup>30</sup> By turning calligraphy into a mass experience, the organizing

religious and political powers increase the number of people which they can manipulate through an instrument they control. The intimate nature and æsthetic appeal of calligraphy are Trojan horses for penetrating the privacy of citizen.

When held in such a place as the halls of the OIC the subject is “Islamic calligraphy,” when in the Museum of Modern Art, it is “Persian calligraphy” – although the exhibiting artists are the same. The naming of Arabic calligraphy is indeed a matter of partisan sensibilities and militant cooptation. Calling it “Islamic” is the usual term for it in English, yet not in French<sup>31</sup> or in Arabic, Persian or Turkish.<sup>32</sup> Such a term ignores the calligraphed poetry, administrative records, scientific treatises and various other writings of Muslims themselves that have nothing to do with Islam. It also excludes Christian, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Animist and many other religious communities living in countries with Muslim majorities and using Arabic script, sometimes as their sole writing or for calligraphic artworks specific to their community – the Coptic Bibles from Mamluk times for example. On the other hand no Persian patriot would call “Persian calligraphy” “Arabic,” on the grounds that it should be named after its origins. Scholars would perhaps prefer “calligraphy based on Arabic characters,” which is hopelessly too long to be practical, or argue that maybe “Islamic” doesn’t refer to the religion, but much more inclusively, to the calligraphy evolved within the Islamic civilization, in which case “Islamicate” would be clearer. The

terminology used to designate Arabic calligraphy – sometimes with overlaps and fluctuations for the same individual – reveals political, religious, national and social identities.

### *Cultural politics.*

[ 20 ]

During the Middle Ages Persia has exported its calligraphy and many times the calligraphers themselves in great quantities to India and sufficiently enough to the Ottomans to fill a small quarter in a cemetery of Istanbul. While being practicing amateurs, the shahs also understood calligraphy as a political commodity to be traded against good-will. Isma‘il II explained the gift of valuable manuscripts to his Ottoman enemy by saying “I need peace and security, not books and manuscripts that I never read or see.”<sup>33</sup> Today’s Iran continues the tradition of using calligraphy as an instrument in foreign relations. Oil, caviar and carpets are successful Iranian export items, but calligraphy has the particularity of being reproducible by anybody who learns it. Also, who would want to visit the oil well from which the fuel in one’s car comes from? Yet calligraphers are ready to travel to meet the masters whose script became theirs as they copied it so many times for training. At least, this is what happened to me. And once in Iran I met other calligraphers and got entangled in a mesh of worlds to explore that left little time to practice calligraphic styles that were not Persian. Efficient “recruiting”

places are the cultural centers of the embassies, which Iran has around the world; given that money is spent in Iran by cultural converts, the government's investment pays back somewhat at least in financial terms. In Syria, where I first started to practice Persian *nasta'liq*, the calligraphers were divided into the local calligraphers, with an Arabic calligraphic accent, those with Turkish allegiances and the Persianates. The divisions were reflected not only in the number of swashes in their handwriting, but equally in the destinations for their holidays, the languages they spoke and the interior design of their apartments. The love for calligraphy might even affect culinary habits (to which I can attest, having not so long ago started to learn the Japanese script).

[ 21 ]

### *Western countries.*

A comparison between Turkey and Iran suggests that the state of calligraphic fitness is inversely proportional to the degree of democracy in each country. While indeed this is often the case, Western countries provide an example where Arabic calligraphy is thriving without political interference – being a civil art so to speak. The evolution of Arabic calligraphy in the West is interesting for the diversity of developments resulting from the particularities of a transplanted art, as sensitive as calligraphy to its linguistic and cultural environment.

There are no clear signs of Western governments being aware of the value of calligraphy for public relations with the Muslim world. Although they do finance initiatives that had a sizeable impact on the popularity of Arabic calligraphy in the West – such as the World of Islam Festival in 1976 in the United Kingdom,<sup>34</sup> the Institute of the Arabic World opened in 1988 in Paris<sup>35</sup> or the *Fikrun wa Fann* cultural magazine published by the Goethe Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany<sup>36</sup> –, governments chose the cultural-political strategy, leaving the actual content to the decision of curators, editors and various collaborators. In the United States government involvement is even less pronounced than in Europe given the importance of private funding for education and arts. Occasionally, calligraphy exhibitions and classes are organized by foreign embassies in the West by embassies of countries with Arabic writing. Even if the political views of the local calligraphers do not converge with those of the sponsoring governments, the relation between local and visiting calligraphers is usually frictionless, the presence of a new artist stimulating individuals to enroll for calligraphic training, for the benefit of everybody involved.

Scholars, librarians, curators, publishers and antiquarians are another group of actors who have contributed intellectually to the status of Arabic calligraphy in the West – which again, might or might not support the interests of all political forces concerned.

A third group belongs to the artistic scene: the calligraphers themselves, calligraphic associations, art galleries, modern art collectors and novelists.<sup>37</sup> Their role was to transform Arabic calligraphy from an art form alien to Westerners into something in which everybody could take part and produce, without the knowledge of Arabic script as a precondition. This was principally the work of a couple of emigrated calligraphers determined not to abandon calligraphy and to educate the public to appreciate it. Originally from Iraq, Hassan Massoudy<sup>38</sup> is an outstanding example, responsible for initiating much of the present dynamism of Arabic calligraphy in France. His successful book *Living Arabic Calligraphy* published in 1981 in a bilingual French-Arabic version succeeded as being all in one a history of Arabic calligraphy, a beautifully designed and printed collection of calligraphic samples and a teaching manual of everything from cutting reed into a writing instrument to making ink according to medieval receipts and to writing in several styles.<sup>39</sup> Muhammad Saggar, who like Massoudy had to leave his country for political reasons involving his professional activities as a calligrapher,<sup>40</sup> is noteworthy for his wide range of cultural contributions as a poet, as a calligrapher experimenting with serigraphy printing techniques, as a digital font designer, and as the editor of what should have been the first arts magazine devoted to Arabic calligraphy, plans disrupted by the first Persian Gulf War.<sup>41</sup> In the U.S. it was Mohamed Zakariya, American by birth and

Muslim-calligrapher by calling, who accomplished much for the popularity of Arabic calligraphy in that country.<sup>42</sup> Although the Iranian diaspora is estimated to be around 1.5 million strong in North America, it didn't contribute to calligraphy to the expected extent, for socio-economic reasons that would be interesting to explore.

[ 24 ]

### *Utopias.*

Given the actors identified above, how are the artistic choices of calligraphers as seen in the respective styles socially and politically influent? A good part of Arabic calligraphy in the West is done in traditional styles, which is the easiest solution for calligraphers, since they only have to reproduce what they were taught. It is also exciting for the public, with the calligraphic training coming wrapped in cultural episodes selected from throughout the history and cultures of Islam and telescoped into the present to make a richly decorated fresco. It's an excellent remedy to relieve Westerners from their Westernness and offer those with Arabic-writing ancestors pieces of identities to imagine. The drawback is the cultural and geographical reliance of this type of calligraphy on an *alibi*, a "somewhere else."<sup>43</sup> First, that of history transformed into a calligraphic amusement park, complete with an infernal Timur Lenk slicing through calligraphers, wise *hurufi* mystics lost in cabbalistic contemplation and calligraphy masters

seeking husbands for their almond-eyed daughters. The illusion is stretched to the point that some calligraphers team up with travel agencies and alternative medicine groups to promote calligraphic sojourns in the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, there is “elsewhere” in the feeling of doing a second-hand calligraphy, away from the countries where Arabic calligraphy evolved, where the true masters still are today, and where one has ultimately to do his calligraphic *hajj*. This is literally what the organizers of the IRCICA competition are doing: from Washington to Kuala Lumpur everybody has to travel to Istanbul, the Mecca of calligraphy, to get his diploma. As a result of such phantasmal references calligraphy is easily used as part of a conservative approach to Islam. Arabic-script writing communities in the West live in different conditions from their countries of origin and if there is a will to assert their particular identities, without constantly depending of the umbilical cord with the “somewhere else,” then artists can have an important social shaping role. There is no better example as Arabic calligraphy itself, every major style that we know today being a successful æsthetic expression of a particular cultural community. Watch for the day when there will be a European or a North American variant of the Arabic script.

### *Generalized phenomenon.*

[ 26 ]

The growing popularity of Arabic calligraphy in the West didn't occur because of its internal strength alone, but is tied to developments in other calligraphic traditions – Latin, with its strong connection to technology and industry due to typefaces and typesetting; Chinese, with its similar background of immigrated calligraphers; Hebrew, less hyped as others are; and on lesser degree many other scripts with their particular aura: Tibetan, Devanagari, Syriac, etc. (Mayan is yet untapped and Hieroglyphs seem to have exited the world of arts and fiction after centuries of fertile creativity). What this means is that there is a teaming-up between individual players from different cultures. The early stage in which the process is doesn't tell what its social and political impact might be, but there is a potential for it.

The process is visible in how its contributing elements are organized. For example the calligraphic associations offer a variety of styles to learn, while master calligraphers are themselves increasingly trained cross-scripts. A sequel of globalization, the metis scripts are material proofs for the advocates of cultural blending: metis scripts are Arabic characters looking like Latin letters.<sup>45</sup> The reverse also exists and there is an equal amount of Latin script calligraphy in the shape of Arabic writing. While metis scripts existed throughout the history of writing in many

cultures, their frequency has increased today, in part to meet the needs of the advertisement industry (the Coca-Cola logo in dozens of world scripts is an excellent example). The next step for the artist, a step that would help make the cultural symbiosis go deeper than the paint layer of corporate labels, is to use metis type fonts to set the main text of books and newspapers, not just titles.

### *Artistic modernity.*

[ 27 ]

Traditional Arabic calligraphy has ensured Hassan Massoudy an international popularity, but his artistic work is devoted to mixing of abstract painting with calligraphy,<sup>46</sup> the personal style being copied in the recent years by a couple of fellow Parisian calligraphers who build upon it their careers. Painting-calligraphy has evolved during the last half-century in most fine arts schools of Arabic-writing countries where the fusion between foreign new with the indigenous and traditional has become a hallmark of the graphical landscape.<sup>47</sup> Politicians have found out, however, that compared to traditional calligraphy, its modern avatar is harder to manipulate. Painting-calligraphy introduces a cut with the past, which, while apparently similar socially (the formal training by a teacher in a school sanctioned by a diploma or the master's approval), is immediately recognized at visual level as not shaping characters according to the rules of traditional

calligraphy and relying heavily on color. It is particularly the aesthetic factor which explains the slow penetration of modern calligraphy in mosques (while modern painting became common features of churches). Architects continue to play an avant-garde role, helped by the decision-making position hold, in making modern calligraphy religiously acceptable.<sup>48</sup> At the functional level the schism traditional/modern has meant that less and less value is put on communicating through words, replaced by abstract graphic stimuli: calligraphy becomes blobs of ink splashed by the Arabic equivalents of Pollock and Hartung. For calligraphers living in the West and those seeking a global audience, shedding the language barrier is a natural turn taken by their art, but it leaves politicians and political pressure groups with little if any means to use calligraphy's writing component.

One also cannot overlook the westernized character of modern calligraphy: by its origins, the training of artists (the educational structure of schools, the textbooks in their libraries, the fellowships abroad) and the public it attracts. The dinosaur-shaped calligraphy of the exile-living Sudani Hasan Musa is not only a playful gift to French children, but equally a poisoned *à propos* of how fossilized traditions can become by not accepting change.<sup>49</sup> The perception of traditional calligraphy as religiously appropriate and modern calligraphy as less correct, was reflected in the wish of the organizers of the calligraphy exhibitions in Teheran to host the former in the building of the OIC and

the latter in the Museum of Modern Arts (which resembles the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan). In the United Arab Emirates on the other hand – a country heavily investing in modernity – the state selected the Tunisian artist Nja Mahdaoui, known for its mesh-like, broken-line modern calligraphies,<sup>50</sup> to design the outward decoration for the fuselages of its national airliners.<sup>51</sup>

One more element makes modern calligraphy difficult to use by politicians, especially conservatives: it is utterly individualistic. While in past times there were only a limited number of script models in usage at any time all over the Islamic world, now there are as many as there are artists. In Iran the state hijacks calligraphy and puts hundred calligraphers on the benches of an amphitheatre to copy the Qur'an without any public present – in the West a single calligrapher gives a live calligraphic performance with an overhead projector in front of a fully packed auditorium and chooses to write whatever he wishes.<sup>52</sup> In a historical role reversal, calligraphy has become to an unprecedented extent a political instrument in the hands of calligraphers.

[ 29 ]

### *Subversion.*

While Atatürk was dancing the foxtrot with ladies dressed in the 1920s airy robes,<sup>53</sup> the Turks were told to forget about Arabic calligraphy. In Iran however penmanship was flourishing by the

end of the century, as was censorship blacking out with chadors the female body from public view. Underlying these trends is the idea that calligraphy acts as an intermediary between politics and sexuality.

Here is how a journalist described in his column of the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1928 the “divorce” of secular Turkey from Arabic script: “They say that woman is the most lyrical poem in nature. But the artist’s brush and the sculptor’s chisel have surpassed even this work of God. Well then, ye bournoused characters, a thousand years ago you came, and told the Turkish genius, ‘Cast away that brush, and fling aside that chisel; take this inkwell and forget woman and nature, to beautify only us.’ A thousand whole years; you should not have done this to us.”<sup>54</sup> These thousand years of abstinence were notwithstanding journalistic fact finding not evenly enforced. Reading for example *Flower-garden of Arts*, a biography of calligraphers and painters centered on 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century Persia, we take notice of the importance of homosexual love as a driving force among calligraphers.<sup>55</sup> Homoeroticism and calligraphy were also two components of the *hurufi* and *bektashi* movements that came to power in those times – an intriguing interplay between sexual behavior, calligraphic art and political game.

In spite of these occurrences and whatever the importance of calligraphy may have been, writing, calligraphy and calligraphers never became topics of the medieval Islamic erotic literature and

painting. Not even Mamluk writers, prodigiously lascivious, felt ruttish on more than a couple of pages about the scribe's writing implements.<sup>56</sup> India too didn't invent a subcontinental version of Hieronymus Bosch's paradise and hell for calligraphers, despite the ancestral ability of its Mughal miniaturists to depict in highly imaginative ways all sorts of sexual activities. In other cultures, however, the shapes of the alphabet are often the pretext to draw them as naked humans – recorded in the West since the Renaissance<sup>57</sup> – and calligraphers have been made part of the plot in erotic fiction, as in Imperial Chinese literature,<sup>58</sup> recent days Hong Kong pornographic filmography<sup>59</sup> and Peter Greenaway's movie *The Pillow Book*.<sup>60</sup> In addition, in the Far East, were the separation between calligrapher, painter and poet wasn't such as in Islam, one would find artists like the famous Zhao Mengfu of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, who could make good use of his calligraphic skills to copy erotic scrolls that he himself wrote and painted, thus possibly achieving a greater – operatic, filmic – or at least other type of integration of the elements of an artistic work.<sup>61</sup>

[ 31 ]

A few examples attest nevertheless to the potentiality of Arabic calligraphy for sensuality: a Kama Sutra-inspired book presents 28 selected positions of Sheherazade in the shape of Arabic characters;<sup>62</sup> bodies serve artists as living writing surfaces during performances, for videos and photography;<sup>63</sup> during a fashion show a seducing transparent dress patterned with Arabic

calligraphy is presented on the catwalk.<sup>64</sup> Are these curiosities? Cheap marketing techniques? Recalling the preeminent place played by calligraphy in Theo van Gogh's movie *Submission* and his ensuing assassination,<sup>65</sup> would indicate a rather politically subversive nature for an alliance between eroticism and calligraphy.



[ 32 ]

Sex is a perennial saboteur, ready to blow up norms, transgress social boundaries and proclaim new laws. Not so calligraphy, the conformist bureaucrat always afraid to be out of pace with the same clique of a handful of old writing styles, which dictate their repetitious content to a mothballed scribe, toiling under a billboard that says "Silence!" It comes as no surprise that governors understood the usefulness of calligraphy as a way to get a firm hold on political matters. Yet if a calligrapher should by profession be as silent a fellow as a reader needs to be, he certainly cannot be blind, blind to what is happening to the world in which he lives. Chances are he too might discover the power of his art as a tool of subversion and change.

## Notes.

- 1 Philip Smucker, "Iraq builds 'Mother of all Battles' mosque in praise of Saddam," *telegraph.co.uk*, 29 July 2001; John F. Burns, "Hussein's Obsession: An Empire of Mosques," *The New York Times*, 15 December 2002, p. 1; "Iraqi leader's Koran 'written in blood,'" *BBC News Online*, 25 September 2000; Neil MacFarquhar, "Shiites in Southern Iraq Loom As a Serious Threat to Hussein," *The New York Times*, 14 January 2003, p. 1; "Saddam aims for total support," *BBC News Online*, 15 October 2002; "In pictures: Iraqi referendum," *BBC News Online*, 15 October 2002; Samir al-Khalil Samir, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991): 103.
- 2 The "Muhammad cartoons" published in a Danish newspaper: "Muhammeds ansigt," *Jyllands-Posten: KulturWeekend*, 30 September 2005: 3, <http://www.jp.dk>; coverage in "Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy," *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten\\_Muhammad\\_cartoons\\_controversy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy).
- 3 The relation between writing and power has been addressed for the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries by Brinkley Messick, *Yemen in The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Outside the Islamic world one might cite Richard Curts Krauss, *Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991) and for Renaissance Europe Armando Petrucci, *Public Lettering: Script, Power, and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- 4 Injunctions to keep calligraphy within the bounds of religious precepts have however been made, such as during the early centuries of Islam to use

less gold for ink and inscriptions (François Déroche, *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2000): 128), to question the morality of a famous Mamluk calligrapher said to have used wine in the ink of a Qur'an (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Al-durar al-kamina fi a'yan al-ma'ia al-thamina* (Hayderabad: Da'ira al-ma'arif al-'uthmaniyya, 1976): 5:196), or transforming traditional calligraphy into modern painting-calligraphy (as discusses hereafter).

- 5 Although there is no known dated copy of the 'Uthmanian Qur'an, manuscripts from the early Islam give an idea of how it could have looked like: François Déroche (1992), *The Abbasid Tradition: Qur'ans of the 8th to the 10th Centuries AD* (London: Azimuth, 1992); François Déroche & Sergio Noja Nosedá, *Le Manuscrit arabe 328(a) de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Lesa (Italy), Fondazione Ferni Noja Nosedá, 1998); *The Qur'anic Manuscripts: The 'Uthmanic Manuscripts*, Islamic Awareness, website, <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/Mss/>; on 'Uthman: Giorgio Levi Della Vida & R.G. Khoury, "'Uthman b. 'Affan," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 946a-951b.
- 6 Said Nuseibeh & Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996).
- 7 Irene A. Bierman, *Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), Yasser Tabbaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001).
- 8 On Persian calligraphy read Francis Richard, *Splendeurs persanes : manuscrits du XII<sup>e</sup> au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1997) and contemplate the superb reproductions in David James, *The master scribes: Qur'ans of the 10<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries AD* (London: Azimuth, 1992) and idem,

- After Timur: Qur'ans of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries* (London: Azimuth, 1992).
- 9 Vlad Atanasiu, *Le phénomène calligraphique à l'époque mamluke (Égypte, Syrie, XIII-XVI siècle)* (Ph.D. thesis, Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2003): 28-81, <http://www.atanasiu.freesurf.fr/thesis/atanasiu2003phd.pdf>.
  - 10 Ugur Derman, *Calligraphies ottomanes: Collection du musée Sakıp Sabancı* (Paris/Istanbul: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Sabancı University, 2000): 46.
  - 11 On Mamluk calligraphy see Atanasiu, *Le phénomène calligraphique...* and David Lewis James, *Qur'ans of the Mamluks* (London: Alexandria Press, 1988). For Mamluk art in general Atil Esin, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981) and on Mamluk history David Ayalon, *Mamluk Military Society* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1979).
  - 12 James, *Qur'ans...*, 113.
  - 13 Canard Marius, "Les relations entre les Mérinides et les Mamelouks au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Miscellanea Orientalia* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1973): 1:54-5, 64-5, 67-8.
  - 14 Nasser Rabbat, "The 'Militarization' of Architectural Expression in the Medieval Middle East (11<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Century): An Outline," *Al-'Usur al-Wusta* 6.1 (1994): 4-6.
  - 15 Popovic Alexandre & Gilles Veinstein, *Bektachiyya: études sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach* (Istanbul: Isis, 1995); Frederick De Jong, "The Iconography of Bektashism," *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 4 (1989): 29.
  - 16 Vlad Atanasiu, *De la fréquence des lettres et de son influence en calligraphie arabe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999): 68-73.
  - 17 Louise W. Mackie, "Towards an Understanding of Mamluk Silk: National

- and International Considerations,” *Muqarnas*, 2 (1984): 127-46; Abolala Soudavar, “A Chinese Dish from the Lost Endowment of the Princess Soltānum,” K. Eslami (ed.), *Papers in Honor of Iraj Afshar*, (Princeton (NJ), Darwin Press, 1998): 125-147, <http://www.soudavar.com/DISHTXT.pdf>.
- 18 For a panorama of the breath of calligraphic ramifications in Islamic societies see Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1984).
- 19 Thomas Milo, *How a Chance Discovery Inspired the Development of Arabic Technology*, conference talk (Mainz: First World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, 8-13 September 2002).
- 20 Roland Meynet, *L'Écriture arabe en question. Les projets de l'Académie de langue arabe du Caire de 1938 à 1968*, (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1971).
- 21 Mohammed Tamimi, *Catalogue of Winners' Plates in the {First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth} International Calligraphy Competition* (Istanbul: Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture, {1987, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2002, 2005}), <http://www.ircica.org>.
- 22 Mohammed Saïd Saggar, *Au-delà des mots*, (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1995): 43.
- 23 Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982): 107. Peter Chelkowski & Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution :The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2002).
- 24 Landart in the shape of military badges is a tradition of the British Army, probably under the influence of the prehistorical, medieval and modern geoglyphs scattered around Great Britain. Most badges were done during World War I, but some date from the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and are found all over the Commonwealth (Khaybar Pass at the Afghan-Pakistani border, Hong Kong, South Africa, Canada). In 2003 Gurkha servicemen participated in

the creation of the White Horse overlooking the Channel Tunnel at Folkestone. (Mark Hows, *The Hillfigure Home Page*, website, <http://www.hows.org.uk/personal/hillfigs/>; Laurence Combes, *Badges in the chalk*, Fovant Badges Society, 1972, <http://www.fovantbadges.com>). While the inscriptions along the Qom-Tehran highway are remarkable by their quantity and visibility, they do exist also at other locations in Iran. On the hills of Lavisan, near the capital, was such one before the Revolution, when the trend has its more recent roots, used for the glorification of the Shah with inscriptions like “*Khaoda, Shah, Miham*” “God, the Shah, the Homeland”. Oversized inscriptions generally reflect a will for strong social impact and are often instruments of propaganda. Another Middle Eastern example with some notoriety is the Atatürk citation under the Turkish republican flag on a hill by Mardin, an area inhabited by Kurds and Arabs to which it might sound as a provocation: “*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene*” “What a happiness to those who can say ‘I am a Turk’”. One form of social coercion in Communist countries was mass alphabetic choreography, in which, after weeks of training, hundreds of executants took position in stadiums during political rallies or at sports events so that as groups their bodies appeared to form the initials of the party or the names of leaders. Floral inscriptions as can be seen at city gates are another type of megaglyphs, yet under the gentle appearance they retain the violence of the group imposed on the individual through the display of power (affording to pay for that multitude of flowers tells the traveler the substantial means the city has at its disposal).

25 34°56'41"N 50°51'48"E and several other locations along the Tehran-Qom highway in the area of Aliabad. In the case of Basij manoeuvres, military training is supplemented with political indoctrination and cultural activities (“Qom Basij members to take part in military drill with real arms,” *Kayhan*,

- 6 March 2006, <http://www.kayhannews.ir>; “Iran Basijis stage manoeuvre near holy city of Qom,” *Mehr news agency*, radio broadcast, 22 September 2005, <http://www.mehmews.com>; John Pike, “Aliabad”, *Iran Special Weapons Guide*, website, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/facility/aliabad.htm>.
- 26 Festivities in honor of the respected Iranian manuscripts scholar ‘Abd al-Hussain Haeri, November 2001, Teheran.
- 27 *Name-ye Baharestan* [*The Letter from Baharestan* (Baharestan being the square where the Parliament is located)] (Tehran: The Library of the Parliament, biannual, 2000-), <http://www.majlislib.com/LIBRARYJOURNALS/NAMEHE.HTM>.
- 28 The connotations are evident from the fact that *nasta’liq* is a very unusual style to copy the Qur’an. “The condition of love is not elegant beauty, just like a Koran in *nasta’liq*,” said a poet and indeed there are only around a dozen known examples of *nasta’liq* Qur’ans (Schimmel, *Calligraphy...*, 30). Apart from following a tradition, there are also aesthetic issues involved, as the participants of the event confirmed to the author, in that the letter shapes of *nasta’liq* are not suited to the letter combinations and graphical rhythm of the Arabic language, but adapted to Farsi (Atanasiu, *De la fréquence des lettres...*, 91-2). Hence *nasta’liq* is preferred for interlinear translations or one or several lines-long excerpts of the Qur’an.
- 29 Ralph Wenge, Asieh Namdar, Ed Abdi, “Iranian Calligraphers Copy Koran,” *CNN World Repport*, 7 January 2001, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0101/07/wr.07.html>.
- 30 Yasin Safadi’s *Calligraphie islamique* (Paris: Chêne, 1978) is only the French version of the eponymous English original (the title of which might in addition have been influenced by the term “Hebrew calligraphy” customary in the area of specialization of the translator, the Hebraist Michel Garel).
- 31 The reason of which might also be that there is no need to name oneself

- in the absence of others. Only if there is some alien calligraphy pit against one's own would it make sense to append the attribute "Islamic" to the word "calligraphy".
- 32 Abolala Soudavar, "The Early Safavids and their Cultural Interactions with Surrounding States," N. Keddie & R. Matthee (éd.), *Iran and the Surrounding World, Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, (Seattle (WA), University of Washington Press): 89–120, <http://www.soudavar.com/SafvdCultrIDpl.doc>.
- 33 John Sabini, "The World of Islam: Its Festival," *Aramco World Magazine* 27:3 (1976), <http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/197603/the.world.of.islam-its.festival.htm>.
- 34 <http://www.imarabe.org>.
- 35 <http://www.goethe.de/kug/prj/fwf/deindex.htm>.
- 36 With bestsellers such as Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci code* as back-drop, the theme of writing was explored also for Arabic calligraphy in a couple of contemporary novels, among them Yasmine Ghata, *La nuit des calligraphes* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); Bahiyiyih Nakhjavani, *Paper* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994).
- 37 His life if told in Hassan Massoudy, *Si loin de l'Euphrate* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004); his website is <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/hassan.massoudy/>.
- 38 Hassan Massoudy, *Calligraphie arabe vivante* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981).
- 39 Samira 'Ali Mandi, *Iraqis in exile: The writer, poet and calligrapher Muhammad Sa'id al-Saggar*, Radio Free Iraq, 1 January 2006, <http://www.iraqhurr.org/programs/diaspora/2006/01/20060101.asp>.
- 40 *Arabic Calligraphy* was to be published in 1990 in France in Arabic, English and French (personal communication, 3 February 2006). The first Arabic calligraphy magazine was finally the *Huruf 'Arabiyya* [*Arabic Char-*

- acters] (Dubai: Nadwa al-thaqafa wa-l-'ulum, 2000–), <http://www.alhadwa.org/?pr=newlev&cid=53>.
- 41 <http://www.zakariya.net>.
- 42 *Soirées ailleurs* (*Evenings elsewhere*) is the title of the series of conferences given at the *Calligraphis* calligraphy association in Paris (<http://www.calligraphie.com/textes/manif-02-ailleurs.htm>).
- 43 Hassan Massoudy in Marrocco (Massoudy, *Si loin...*, 9–12, <http://www.albinmichel.fr/article/extrait/2004/9782226151629-t01.pdf>); Existence also in Marrocco (Danse-thérapie et Calligraphie. Semaine exceptionnelle dans un Riad de la médina de Marrakech, <http://www.existence.fr/index/stage-747.html>) ; Frank Lalou in the Negev (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/lalou.nice/pedago/stagedesert.htm>).
- 44 Atanasiu, *De la fréquence des lettres...*, 103.
- 45 Hassan Massoudy & Jean Pierre Sicre, *Hassan Massoudy, le chemin d'un calligraphe* (Paris: Phébus, 1995).
- 46 Discussion in: Sharbil Dagher, *Al-hurufiyya al-arabiyya: al-fann wa-l-hawiyya* (Beirut: Sharika al-matbu'at li-l-tawziyya wa-l-nashr, 1990). For a collection of works of Maghrebi artists: Brahim Ben Hossain Alaoui, *Art contemporain arabe: collection du Musée* (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1988).
- 47 For example the exterior of the Ghadir mosque in Teheran is entirely covered by Kufic-style writing (Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992): 118).
- 48 Hassan Musa, *Dinosaure*, postcard (Dommesargues (F): Grandir, 1994).
- 49 Nja Mahdaoui, Edouard J. Maunick & E. Madani, *Nja Mahdaoui* (Tunis: Ceres Productions, 1983).
- 50 <http://www.nja-mahdaoui.com/html/cadcrea.htm>.
- 51 Calligraphy-on-stage is usually accompanied by live music performances (Massoudy, *Si loin...*, 158–64, photo at <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/hassan.massoudy/>

expo.htm). Fank Lalou, a Hebrew writing calligrapher, has attached a microphone to the reed, thus supplementing the visual dynamics with an auditory dimension – the new music instrument is called ‘calamophone’ (Marc Dumont, “L’Atelier: Découvrez le calamophone !,” *France Musique*, 20 February 2006, <http://www.radiofrance.fr/listen.php?pr=rtsp&file=/telenium/atelier-2006-02-20.rm>; Frank Lalou: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/lalou.nice/%20spectacles/musiquecontemporaine.htm>). Calligraphic performances are much more frequent in East Asia, particularly China (see the happenings of Gu Wenda: “Turning art inside out,” *South China Morning Post (Hong Kong)*, 25 September 2000; Mark H. C. Bessire, *Wenda Gu. Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium* (MIT Press, 2003)), where it can be part of an opera, inspire choreography (Andrew Huang, “Learning Cursive. Cloud Gate’s Lin Hwai-min has completed the final piece of his calligraphic choreography,” *South China Morning Post*, 14 February 2006, the Taiwanese ensemble Cloud Gate: <http://www.cloudgate.org.tw>) or be practiced as a tai chi chuan style sport by groups of people writing with oversized brushes dipped in water on the ground of public parks across China (“Calligraphy,” *China Daily*, 5 August 2004).

- 52 With the daughter of the governor of Izmir, during the first republican ball in 1925 (Elif Mahir, “Etiquette rules in the early republican period,” *Journal of Historical Studies on Turkey* 3 (2005): 20, [http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue\\_3/Mahir,%20Elif\\_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf](http://www.ata.boun.edu.tr/grad/Issue_3/Mahir,%20Elif_Etiquette%20Rules%20in%20the%20Early%20Republican%20Period.pdf); Nesrin Oran Mavitan, “Women in Turkey before and after Atatürk,” *The Izmir Turkish-American Association website* (20 March 2001), <http://www.izmir-taa.org.tr/english/women.htm>). Among the most famous photographs of Atatürk is one depicting him dancing – it is said tango – with his daughter at her wedding party (*Selected Atatürk photographs from The National Library’s archive*, National Library of Turkey (Ankara) website, <http://www.mkutup.gov.tr/75a.html>).

The image was an international hit, making it to the cover of *The Illustrated London Times* of the epoch, and is used today as projected wallpaper during commemorations of the event (Tolga Adanali, *Atatürk's dance*, photography, Nostalgia Ball of the Republic, Izmir, 2002, <http://www.tolgaadanali.com/tregl19.htm>).

- 53 Ismail Habib (Sevük), “Farwell, Ye Good and Faithful Characters”, *Harfi Harfine*, (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Kültür Sanat Yaincilik, 1998): 19.
- 54 Qadi Ahmad, *Calligraphers and Painters* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1959).
- 55 For an erotic novel from Mamluks times involving a scribe as a character, read ‘Abd al-Rahhman ibn Abi Bakr al-Suyuti (René Rizqallah Khawam trad.), *Nuits de nocés ou comment humer le doux breuvage de la magie licite* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1972): 78–81. René Khawam has published dozens of other medieval erotic manuscripts throughout his life-long translation effort from Arabic to French, *resquiat in pace*.
- 56 Fritz Franz Vogel and Joseph Kiermeier-Debre, *Menschenalphabet: Nackte Models, Wilde Typen, Modische Charaktere* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2001).
- 57 Yu Li, *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996); Michael Mak (film director).
- 58 Michael Mak, *Sex and Zen* (Hong Kong, 1993), vol. 1, a B class comedy film inspired by Yu Li’s 17<sup>th</sup> century novel (reviewed at <http://www.moria.co.nz/fantasy/sex&zen.htm>).
- 59 Peter Greenaway (film director), *The Pillow Book* (Sony Pictures, 1996), Peter Greenaway, *The Pillow Book* (Paris: DisVoir, 1996). In the film we also see a glimpse of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Timurid Qur’an (sequence 526–31, section 34, Nagiko’s apartment in Hong Kong, <http://www.worlds4.com/greenaway/>; Martin Lings, *The Quranic art of calligraphy and illumination* (London: World

- of Islam Festival Trust, 1976): ill. 84).
- 60 On Zhao read Robert Van Gulik, *Sexual Life in Ancient China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961), chapter on the Yuan Dynasty; and check a sample of his writing in Ann Yonemura, Glenn D. Lowry & Fu Shen, *From Concept to Context: Approaches to Asian and Islamic Calligraphy* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1986): 8-9.
- 61 Hassan Musa, *L'alphabet de Schéhérazade* (Dommessargues: Grandir, 2000).
- 62 'Izzal-Dinal Madani (ed.), *Nja Mahdaoui* (Tunis: Ceres, 1983), Gabriele Mackert (ed.), *Shirin Neshat* (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien; London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000).
- 63 Khaled al-Masri, dress, winter 2005 collection (shown at the Beirut fashion week, 10 September 2004), [http://newsbyphotos.com/04/09/beirut\\_fashion\\_week\\_at\\_dubai\\_hall\\_12073.php](http://newsbyphotos.com/04/09/beirut_fashion_week_at_dubai_hall_12073.php).
- 64 Theo van Gogh (film director), *Submission* (Amsterdam, 2004), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Submission\\_%28movie%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Submission_%28movie%29)).

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