



Compositional Aesthetics of Sacred Text the Contribution of Pakistani Artists to Painterly Calligraphy

**Dr. Aqsa Malik*

***Dr. Naela Aamir*

*Assistant Professor, College of Art & Design.

**Associate Professor, College of Art & Design

Abstract

Calligraphy has been an expression of Muslim artistic identity since the arrival of Islam. It primarily grew out of the significance of Qur'an as sacred text and was driven by the aesthetics of ornament central to Islamic art. Since Pakistan sought a national identity after Partition, art forms of the Islamic world became one of the main frontiers of expressing a unique identity. However, as the first few decades of Pakistan coincided with a greater interaction with the West, a new visual idiom developed in calligraphy as well; the Painterly Calligraphy. This paper describes how Pakistani Calligraphers, spearheaded by creative imagination, broke from tradition and infused aesthetics of modern art in indigenous sensibility. After establishing the significance of Calligraphy in Islam, the paper features the pioneers of Painterly Calligraphy in Pakistan and analyses some of their works.

Introduction

Calligraphy is undoubtedly the most characteristic expression of Islamic art to the extent that it, in many ways, symbolizes the essence of Islam itself. It is founded upon the idea that the text of the Qur'an and its meaning are sacred and they contain the ultimate truth about existence as well as the guideline for the believers. The value of Calligraphy therefore lies in its function of communicating the sacred knowledge through beautifying and emphasizing the Qur'anic text. Since the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic, therefore Arabic became the principal language in which Calligraphy evolved as an art form. And since Qur'an was committed to writing in the early years of Islam, therefore, writing in itself became an act of devotion and worship. The exalted status of the Qur'an as word of God made the Calligrapher a highly esteemed artist. Hisham b. al-Hakam, an Islamic

scholar of the 9th century defined calligraphy as “jewelry fashioned by the hand from the pure gold of the intellect. It also is brocade woven by the calamus with the thread of discernment”.¹ Similarly, Abu Dulaf al-Ijli said, “the calamus is the goldsmith of speech. It liquefies and founds the content of the heart and fashions the ingots of the part of the body in which thought and feeling are situated”.² Many similar viewpoints can be found early Islamic theologians and philosophers in praise of Calligrapher and Calligraphy. These views ascertain that Calligraphy was quite more than mere imitation or even beautification, it had a spiritual dimension attached to it. Hashim b. Salim therefore said, “Ink appears black to sight but white to insight”.³

How Islamic art is rooted in the spiritual dimension is a question worth exploring for understanding the true value of Calligraphy. There are four fundamental conceptual paradigms that define the spiritual dimension of Islamic art and these paradigms inevitably contribute to the understanding of Calligraphy. The first paradigm concerns with infinity. Islamic art emphasizes infinity through the continuity of patterns. This idea stems from the religious understanding of the worldly life, which is transient and opposed to the infinite and immortal divine existence. The artists express infinity in order to ascertain the nature of fundamental reality. The arabesque designs are a clear example of this paradigm. The second paradigm is the idea of transformation or dissolution of matter. The ornamentation of surfaces, for which Calligraphy is often used, is an attempt to show how surfaces override the objects that are concrete and since surface decorations draw most attention therefore the solidity of matter becomes secondary. The third paradigm is unity in diversity. Titus Burckhardt noted, “Islamic art embraces a whole range of styles, each of which is clearly distinguishable and corresponds to a specific ethnic environment, although no specific style could be described as being more or less Islamic than any other, this is an example of diversity in unity”.⁴ The unity obviously comes from the sole purpose of Islamic art, which is to express the Divine in its various attributes. The fourth paradigm is that of beauty. Qur’an itself states, “To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names”.⁵ Ibne Arabi, who is one of the most well-known Muslim philosophers stated, “God’s beauty is the source of all types of beauty. It is the source of all spiritual and intellectual beauty as well as beauty of form, although in itself God’s beauty is above all form and shape”.⁶ Apart

from these paradigms, the artist himself is compared with the divine attribute of creativity. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a notable Islamic scholar presents a point of view that defines the place of an artist or Calligrapher. He states:

God is the Supreme Artist. That is why He is called al-mussawwir in Islam...God is not only the Grand Architect or Geometer, He is also the Poet, the Painter, the Musician...man is also an artist who, in imitating the creative powers of his Maker, realizes his own theomorphic nature. The spiritual man, ware of his vocation, is not only the musician who plucks the lyre to create music. He is himself the lyre upon which the Divine Artist plays, creating the music which reverberates throughout the cosmos.⁷

Meeting the above paradigms and being the lyre himself, the Calligraphers as Nader Vaziri notes, “are divine, and divine in the specific sense that they penetrate the Highest being”.⁸ The above paradigms and the additional function of Calligraphy to express and communicate the truth through beautification of form is what makes calligraphy a true representative of Islamic art.

Since the arrival of Islam and subsequent development of Calligraphy, both the art and artist have gone through various phases of development. In the 9th century, Arabic letters became refined, stylized and decorative and calligraphy became one of the necessary component of a larger scheme of ornamentation in art and architecture. The calligrapher also came to be regarded as a person of elevated character and pure soul. The written word became symbolic of divine authority and power to the extent that it was considered a talisman. Annemarie Schimmel commented, “the written word is a talisman, and the process of writing is a magic art connected not only with the master’s technique, skill and art, but also with his spiritual character”.⁹

Calligraphy evolved in two essential respects. One was its use in producing illuminated manuscripts and the other was its decorative potential explored on the surfaces of objects and architecture. The second use was quite suitable for the expansion of Muslim civilization as Calligraphic inscriptions on architectural surfaces gave Islamic architecture a distinction entirely unique. The Abbasid Caliph Mamun-ul Rashid

exclaimed, “How wonderful is the calamus! How it weaves the fine cloth of royal power, embroiders the ornamental borders of the garment of ruling dynasty, and keeps up the standard of caliphate”.¹⁰ This function of Calligraphy initiated a process of royal patronage and therefore Calligraphy evolved in unprecedented diversity of form.

In the usage on objects and architectural surfaces, it was always kept in view that the text should be read in the context of larger design scheme of which it is a part.¹¹ The design scheme whether floral or geometric contributed to the meaning of inscription and vice versa. The script itself evolved from Kufic to eastern kufic and then to proportional scripts. The contribution of Ibne Muqla is highly regarded in the development of script as he introduced geometric principles of text composition. He introduced scripts such as *naskh*, *thuluth*, *muhaqqaq*, *rayham*, *taqwi* and *riqa*. Later on, in the 13th century *Taliq* and *Shikasta* scripts were evolved in 13th century. By 16th century, *Nastaliq* became one of the most practiced scripts. It merged *Taliq* and *Nuskh* in terms of short vertical lines and curved horizontal strokes.¹² The developed tradition of Calligraphy in the Arabic, Persian and Central Asian regions travelled to the Subcontinent and blossomed under the Mughals.

Although Calligraphy evolved on its own accord and according to the requirements and expressions of Islamic art, it took a new form with the arrival of Modern Art. In the 20th century artists from Middle East, North Africa and South Asia experimented with traditional Calligraphy by fusing Western aesthetic sensibilities. In Pakistan, various artists contributed to the new trend and a new genre of Painterly Calligraphy evolved. Calligraphy became a part of intricate design compositions, colour gamuts and stylizations often inspired by movements within the purview of Modern Art. The work of Pakistani artists is worth exploring in the regard that we observe an unprecedented creativity, innovation and experimentation. The original function of calligraphy got further endorsed as it engaged modern sensibilities and modern art forms through a process of creative fusion. The development of Painterly Calligraphy can be attributed to more than a dozen of notable artists, each with a distinct repertoire of style and compositional aesthetic. Many of these artists have been discussed in the following analysis.

Painterly Calligraphy in Pakistan

In a broad conceptualization, Painterly Calligraphy can be defined in the light of three considerations. One, it was a break from the traditional way of Calligraphy in which the whole focus of the artist has been the text in terms of its composition and its stylization. Two, it came into being with incorporating elements from Western aesthetics as expressed in various art movements in the later nineteenth and twentieth century. Three, it belonged to the self-expressive domain of the artist; the essential subjectivity and its creative imagination and output. All these three aspects can be observed in the case of Sadequain, who is considered to be the pioneer of Calligraphic Modernism in Pakistan and the rest who followed. Sadequain thrived at a time when Pakistan was looking for a national identity on political and cultural fronts. Art inevitably had to conform to this trend as the artist lived in the social reality of the time and responded to it.

Sadequain as a modernist calligrapher was part of a larger movement. Iftikhar Dadi mentions that between 1955 and 1975, Middle East, North Africa and South Asia witnessed the transition from traditional to modern Calligraphy. It was an attempt to explore the abstract and expressive possibilities of Arabic Script. Since, it was a new artistic dimension, the only compositional context that Arabic script was bound to have was the personal aesthetic ambition of the artist. Arabic script which was traditionally used as an ornamental form was given a new visual language infused with abstract imagery and figuration. Various inspirations were drawn from the Western art movements particularly cubism. Sadequain who was in the midst of an urge to develop a national identity of the country quickly calibrated with the new aesthetic dimension redefining the scope of calligraphy. It was a creative mix of Islamic tradition and Western sensibility that defined Sadequain's calligraphic modernism. Iftikhar Dadi defined Sadequain's work in calligraphy as a "prodigious output during the 1960s reveals a calligraphic language of figuration and abstraction that is as reminiscent of post-cubist European modernism as of an expressive stylization of the Arabic script".¹³

The work produced by Sadequain was immense and outnumbered any artist in Pakistan. For instance, in the 31 depictions of the Qur'anic verse from Surah Rehman, "Which is it of the favors of your Lord that ye will deny", Sadequain showed how creative imagination, extensive vocabulary

and artistic skill can be combined in a spell-binding way. Let us only examine three paintings from the series. In the first example, he does not follow any traditional style of the Arabic script, the font is self-devised. He places the text in the centre of the composition and uses a geometrical grid as a backdrop; a scheme inspired by cubism. The choice of colors renders the central space more prominent and therefore focus of the viewer's eye. The selection of the verse is such that it directly points to every viewer. It refers to the wisdom and the generosity of the Creator and asks the viewer if there is still a doubt in his or her heart? In the second depiction, he composes the text as components of nature. The text seems to grow out of vegetal forms providing the evidence which the verse endorses. In the third example, he expresses the words in a geometric composition; the horizontal and vertical lines not only give the text a solid character but also contribute to the formation of a mosque.



Figure 1. Sadequain, Surah Rehman I, Oil on canvas, 1969.



Figure 2. Sadequain, Surah Rehman II, Oil on canvas, 1969.

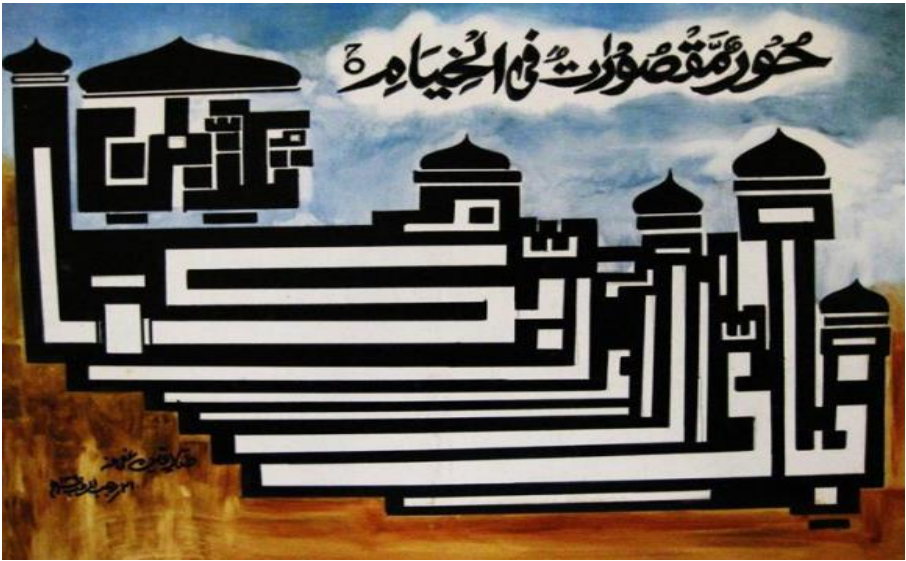


Figure 3. Sadequain, Surah Rehman III, Oil on canvas, 1969.

The idea of depicting the meaning of the text within the painting seems to be a preferred way of communication for Sadequain. In the following painting, the reference to the earth and skies in the text is illustrated in the

painting through a powerful division of surfaces, style and color. The painting illustrates a section from his last project at Frere Hall, Karachi.



Figure 4. Sadequain, Frere Hall Ceiling, Oil on canvas, 1987.

Hanif Ramay, who also contributed to the new explorations of Arabic script produced notable work in the 1950s and 1960s. In the following work, the artist creates a symphony of color in a geometric division with each boundary defined by the movement of. We observe a modern color scheme, a cubism inspired division of space and the depiction of Surah Fatiha in a mix of traditional and contemporary fonts. Although Hanif Ramay did not produce a great number of paintings, he is regarded as the pioneer of Calligraphic Modernism, even predating Sadequain. He fused abstraction in Western art and brought color to the genre of Calligraphy in Pakistan.



Figure 5. Hanif Ramay, Surah Fatiha, Oil on canvas, 1960s.

During the 1950s, another artist who came up with a powerful expression of Painterly Calligraphy was Anwar Jalal Shemza. He was the founder of Lahore Art Circle and had an exposure of European art due to his education at Slade School of Art, where he evolved a compositional scheme for Calligraphy inspired by modern art. Shemza was particularly inspired by the modernist artist Paul Klee. “It was an assimilation of this modernist influence coupled with Islamic aesthetic principles, especially in calligraphic forms that Shemza formulated his personal conception of a rather progressive and individual modernism – a theoretical and practical articulation that sustained his practice till the end”.¹⁴ In the Meem series he incorporated Islamic elements in a modern composition. Meem the first letter of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was presented by him in a radical departure from traditional calligraphic conventions. The departure was such that the readability of the text in calligraphy became secondary while the abstract character, or the pictorial scheme of geometric abstraction with a highly innovative use of color became the primary expression.¹⁵ Mohammad Yasin has eloquently stated, “for Shemza, calligraphy marked the exploration of the line in its aesthetic dimensions”.¹⁶



Figure 6. Anwar Jalal Shemza, *Meem*, Oil on canvas, 1967.

The personal dimension of Shemza became more visible in his *Roots* series, which came quite later in terms of chronology of calligraphic modernism but is closer to the artist's subjective world. Shemza had faced an alienation since his work could not find its place in Pakistani mainstream art, he lived and worked in the United Kingdom. The *Roots* series expresses his nostalgia for origins.¹⁷ He creatively used Calligraphy transformed as roots referring to his Eastern origin.



Figure 7. Anwar Jalal Shemza, *Roots*, Oil on canvas, 1985.

Shakir Ali who developed an identity of modernist painter in Pakistan had his training in the West and therefore searched for an idiom that combined the East with the West. Shakir Ali was successful and evolved a style of his own. Akbar Naqvi explained his style in the following words:

Shakir invented a new calligraphic style based upon the classical naskh as well as the maghribi version cultivated in North Africa. The Arabesque and the luscious curves of the Persian Nastaliq were a part of his pictorial design. The radically untraditional but sword-like alifs consorted with the feminine curves of the painting in a dance divine to the accompaniment, of the vines of the Garden of Paradise become Word.¹⁸

Shakir Ali also selected verses that were profoundly expressive of the all-encompassing nature of Divine authority. Stylistically, he achieved a synthesis that gave rise to a harmonious fusion of East and West, and thematically, he expressed his existential quest in novel ways. In the following painting, depicting *Ayat-ul Kursi*, all these three elements are combined. The visual rhythm is an expression that best describes his work in which line is used as a measure, and angles as transitions, whereas, curves maintain an indigenous sensibility. The collage like appearance of the work comes from his inspiration from cubism. His conception of modernism as Salima Hashmi notes, was restrained and disciplined.¹⁹ It stands true in the following painting.

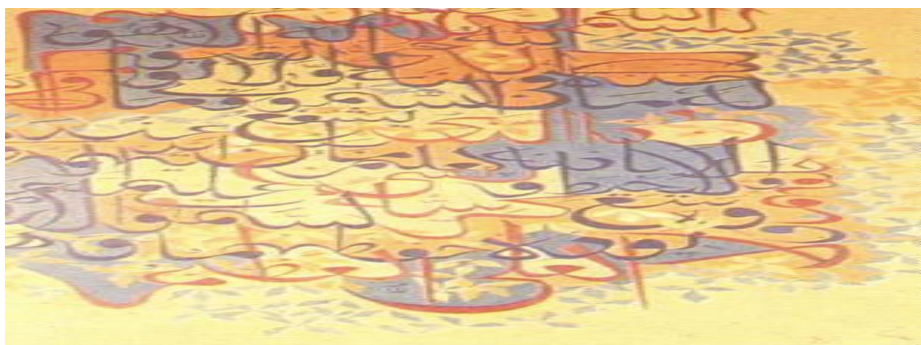


Figure 8. Shakir Ali, *Ayat-ul Kursi*, Oil on canvas, 1960s.

Zahoor-ul Ikhlāq, another painter from the same era, and a prodigy of Shakir Ali, moved to post-modernism in his works that contribute to painterly calligraphy. Zahoor-ul Ikhlāq extensively travelled to Italy, Germany and France and therefore had a considerable experience of the Western art of the time. He also evolved a personal idiom in which techniques and conventions from the West were infused with those of the

East. He would use groups of parallel lines, work from right to left on the canvas. This method was a reminiscent of calligraphy furthered by his use of Tughra, line, rhythm and movement.²⁰ The aesthetic scheme that he deployed is closer to a designer's visual vocabulary. Zahoore-ul Ikhalq learned calligraphy from Yousaf Dehlvi in the traditional manner and also studied miniature in detail. The pictorial planes in his compositions also reminds us of the miniature compositions of the Subcontinent. It would not be incorrect to state that Zahooreul Ikhlalq did not fuse West and East in terms of artistic conventions, but, in fact, transformed the local conventions to a level that they resemble the Western post-modern forms. The following composition is a synthesis of traditional calligraphy, miniature painting and a boundless composition fashioned in post-modern aesthetic.



Figure 9. Zahoore-ul Ikhlalq, Composition 166, 1963.

Another artist, who did not receive formal training of painting, was largely self-taught had an indelible mark on the development of painterly Calligraphy was Ismail Gulgee.²¹ Gulgee explored the potential of action painting in the genre of Calligraphy and is known for his colourful and pulsating compositions. Gulgee explored both abstract and gestural conventions in his unique idiom of painterly calligraphy. On one hand, we observe the power of oil paint and textures and on the other we are mesmerized by the flow of Calligraphic line. His works are full of energy and are unique in terms of colour pallet and gestural brush strokes. The

following work speaks of itself. Every component of painting and calligraphy seems to be isolated in imagination and then reconfigured in a unique visual form expressive of force, energy and celebration.



Figure 10. Ismail Guljee, *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, 1989.

Jamil Naqsh can be seen as another stalwart of Painterly Calligraphy. Trained at National College of Arts in the 1950s, he learned miniature painting from Ustad Haji Sharif. Later on, he drew inspiration from cubism and Shakir Ali. Known for the spectacular nudes that he produced in a cubist style, Jamil Naqsh also pioneered a unique style in Calligraphy. The formal training in miniature and an informal training in cubism set the stage for a blended idiom. For instance, his following painting although breaks all conventions of traditional calligraphy, the impact of miniature is noticeable.

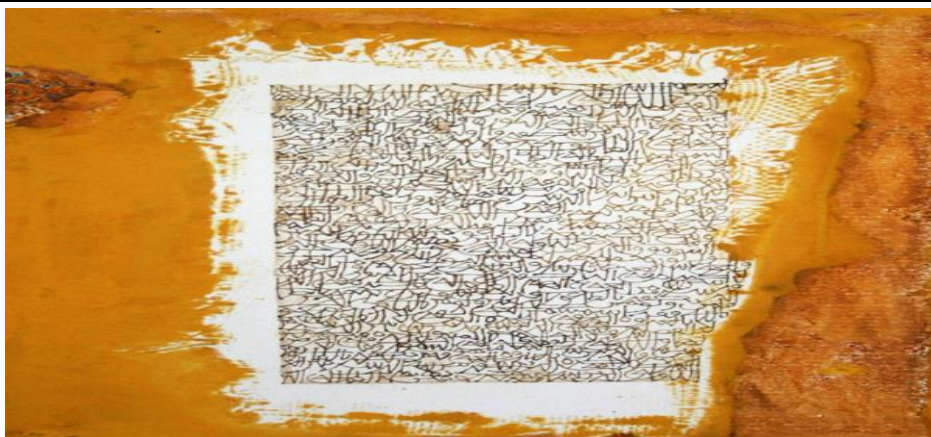


Figure 11. Jamil Naqsh, Modern Manuscript, Watercolour on paper, 1996.

There is a fluidity and spontaneity of brush strokes in his work but at the same time there is a strict discipline and perfectionism. He created a visual idiom of Calligraphy in which words would be used in different sizes against a colorful and textured backdrop. In some cases, the letters appear in an abstract figurative form; an influence from cubism. His calligraphic rendition of 99 names of Allah is a remarkable body of work. The idea behind the work was his conception of names as tools instead of descriptions, he stated that they help the devotee to focus on the nature of Divine.²²



Figure 12. Jamil Naqsh, *Allah and 99 names of God*, Oil on canvas, 2003

Conclusion

The incorporation of Western conventions in painting is not something new in the Subcontinent. There are multiple examples of fusion of the two traditions since the time of Akbar. However, the experimentation in calligraphy by incorporating Western aesthetics, forms and styles is unprecedented. The above exploration, although not exhaustive, shows that Painterly Calligraphy evolved in Pakistan as a product of personalized idioms. The artists did not follow a predictable path, each had his own inclinations and preferences and therefore the subjective element can easily be identified in each case.

On the whole, it was a marvelous effort as it brought calligraphy to mainstream art, opened up new vistas of creativity and enriched the imaginative faculties of both the artist and viewer. As a result, we observe that the essential function of Calligraphy which is to communicate the Divine Message through beautification has an added dimension of visual delight. The heart and mind of the Calligrapher is engaged in a deeper way. Each artist came up with a unique repertoire informed by personal philosophy and devotion to Islamic identity on one hand and an exposure of the modern approaches to art on the other.

The development of Painterly Calligraphy in Pakistan is undoubtedly an evolution of a genre that is a clean break from tradition but not a complete one, an Eastern melody harmonizing the rhythm of the West and above all, a deeper expression of the artist's self.

Bibliography

- ★ Abbasi, Muhammad Yusuf. *Pakistani Culture: A Profile*. National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1992.
- ★ Affifi, Abul Ela. *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din-Ibnul Arabi*. CUP Archive, n.d.
- ★ Ali, A. K. M. Yaqub. "MUSLIM CALLIGRAPHY: ITS BEGINNING AND MAJOR STYLES." *Islamic Studies* 23, no. 4 (1984): 373–79.
- ★ Artemesia | Art in Pakistan. "Anwar Jalal Shemza," January 8, 2017. <https://www.artemesiaartinpakistan.com/anwar-jalal-shemza/>.
- ★ Aziz, Khursheed Kamal. *The Meaning of Islamic Art: Explorations in Religious Symbolism and Social Relevance*. al-Faisal, 2004.
- ★ Bloom, Jonathan, Sheila S. Blair, and Sheila Blair. *Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art & Architecture: Three-Volume Set*. OUP USA, 2009.
- ★ Burckhardt, Titus. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*. World Wisdom, Inc, 2009.
- ★ Dadi, Iftikhar. *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010.
- ★ Ekbal, Nikhat. *Great Muslims of Undivided India*. Gyan Publishing House, 2009.
- ★ Ekhtiar, Maryam D. *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018.
- ★ Hashmi, Salima. *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*. Asia Society Museum, 2009.
- ★ Naqsh, Jamil. *Jamil Naqsh: The Painted Word*. London, 2013.
- ★ Naqvi, Akbar. *Image and Identity*. 2 edition. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- ★ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Knowledge and the Sacred: Revisioning Academic Accountability*. SUNY Press, 1989.
- ★ Puerta-Vilchez, José Miguel. *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought: From Pre-Islamic Arabia through al-Andalus*. BRILL, 2017.

- ★ Rosenthal, Franz. *Four Essays on Art and Litterature in Islam*. Brill Archive, 1972.
- ★ Sirhandi, Marcella Nesom. *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*. Lahore: Ferozsons Ltd ,Pakistan, 1992.
- ★ Vaziri, Nader. *Application of Rectangular Kufic: (Bana'ii Script) as a Decorative Element of Islamic Persian Architecture*. University of California, 1968.
- ★ Welch, Anthony. *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World*. University of Texas Press, 1979.
- ★ Wille, Simone. *Modern Art in Pakistan: History, Tradition, Place*. Routledge, 2017.

References

- ¹ José Miguel Puerta-Vilchez, *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought: From Pre-Islamic Arabia through al-Andalus* (BRILL, 2017), 227.
- ² Franz Rosenthal, *Four Essays on Art and Litterature in Islam* (Brill Archive, 1972), 37.
- ³ Khurshed Kamal Aziz, *The Meaning of Islamic Art: Explorations in Religious Symbolism and Social Relevance* (al-Faisal, 2004), 189.
- ⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (World Wisdom, Inc, 2009), 125.
- ⁵ Qur'an (59:24)
- ⁶ Abul Ela Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din-Ibnul Arabi* (CUP Archive, n.d.), 173.
- ⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: Revisioning Academic Accountability* (SUNY Press, 1989), 257.
- ⁸ Nader Vaziri, *Application of Rectangular Kufic: (Bana'ii Script) as a Decorative Element of Islamic Persian Architecture* (University of California, 1968), 29.
- ⁹ Maryam D. Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 21.
- ¹⁰ Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (University of Texas Press, 1979), 35.
- ¹¹ Ekhtiar, *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*, 23.
- ¹² A. K. M. Yaqub Ali, "MUSLIM CALLIGRAPHY: ITS BEGINNING AND MAJOR STYLES," *Islamic Studies* 23, no. 4 (1984): 373–79.
- ¹³ Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2010), 165.
- ¹⁴ "Anwar Jalal Shemza," *Artemesia | Art in Pakistan* (blog), January 8, 2017, <https://www.artemesiaartinpakistan.com/anwar-jalal-shemza/>.
- ¹⁵ Marcella Nesom Sirhandi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan* (Lahore: Ferozsons Ltd ,Pakistan, 1992), 80.
- ¹⁶ Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *Pakistani Culture: A Profile* (National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1992), 310.

-
- ¹⁷ Jonathan Bloom, Sheila S. Blair, and Sheila Blair, *Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art & Architecture: Three-Volume Set* (OUP USA, 2009), 206.
- ¹⁸ Akbar Naqvi, *Image and Identity*, 2 edition (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 253.
- ¹⁹ Salima Hashmi, *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* (Asia Society Museum, 2009), 45.
- ²⁰ Simone Wille, *Modern Art in Pakistan: History, Tradition, Place* (Routledge, 2017), 45.
- ²¹ Nikhat Ekbal, *Great Muslims of Undivided India* (Gyan Publishing House, 2009), 11.
- ²² Jamil Naqsh, *Jamil Naqsh: The Painted Word* (London, 2013), 195.