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# From holy script to Huroufiyah — the sweep of Islamic calligraphy through the centuries

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Beginning with the angular scripts of a thousand years ago and evolving into abstraction in the 20th century, the Arabic written word has been used to create some of the most beautiful and sophisticated artworks in the world

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When the prophet Muhammad died in 632 AD, he left behind the religion of Islam, flourishing among a few nomadic tribes in the Arabian desert. These communities were small, ideologically divided and surrounded by the powerful Byzantine and Sasanian empires. Within a few decades,

however, Arab armies had conquered and converted a territory so vast it extended from southern Iran to the Iberian Peninsula.

‘It is one of the most significant events in world history,’ says Frances Keyworth, Christie’s cataloguer in **Islamic** and **Indian Art**. As the armies spread out across the continents, they introduced Islamic ideas to the societies they encountered, ushering in what Keyworth describes as ‘a golden age of Islamic art and architecture’.

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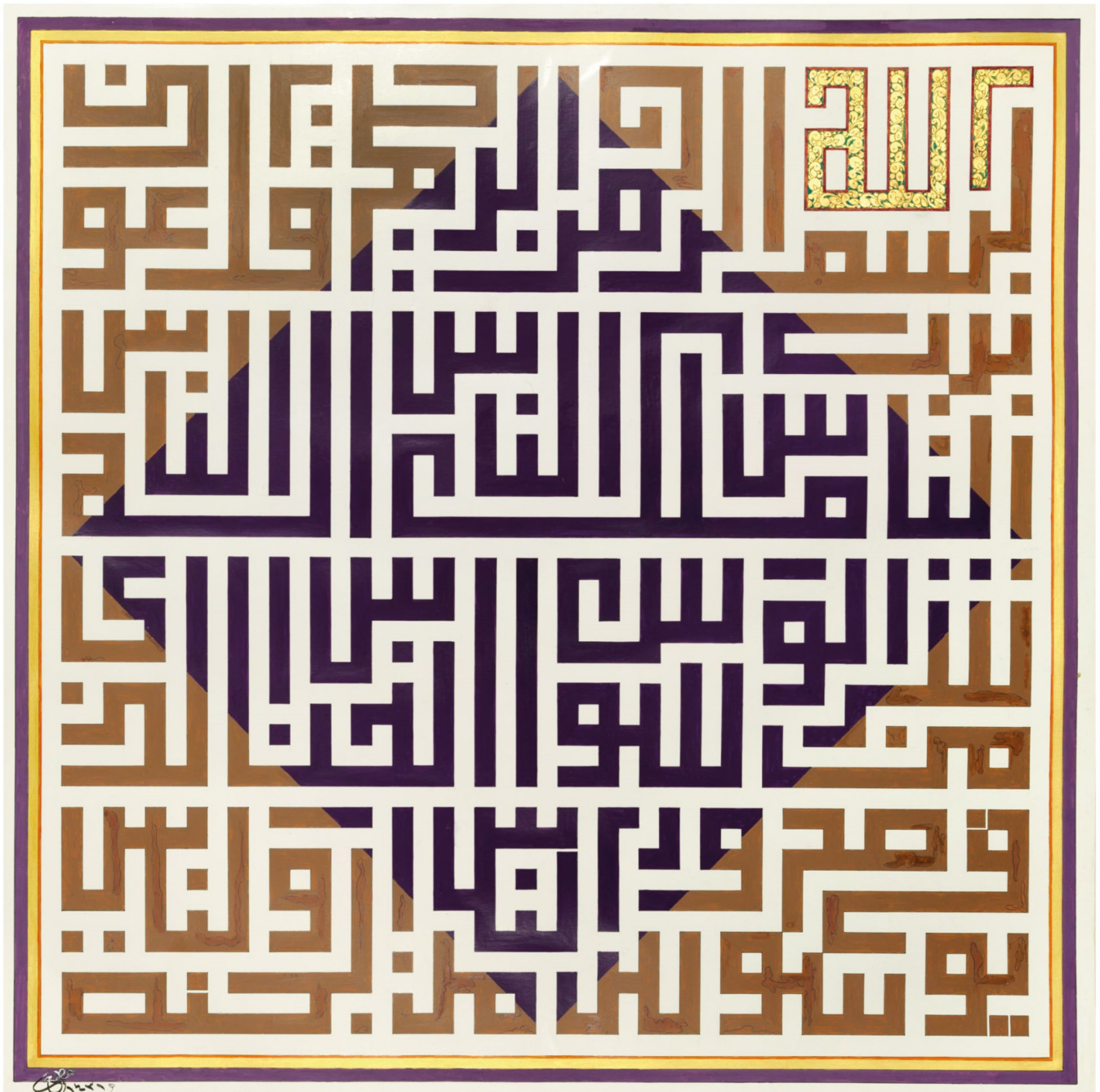
‘Calligraphy is transmitting the voice of the Divine. No other art form is so exalted’ — specialist Frances Keyworth

This rich culture was forged from a combination of classical influences, religious laws and scientific concepts, with the written word at its centre. ‘One Arabic proverb proclaims that purity of writing is purity of soul,’ says Keyworth.

**Calligraphy: Art in Writing** brings together an extraordinary collection of artefacts from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe to celebrate the thousand-year-old art of Arabic, Persian and Ottoman calligraphy. It also shows how the written word has been used across a range of materials to create some of the world’s most beautiful and mathematically sophisticated artworks.

### **The three key elements of Islamic art**

‘Arabic calligraphy primarily developed as a way of delivering the Word of God through the holy scripture of the Qur’an,’ says Keyworth.



A calligraphic composition In Square Kufic, Qur'an CXIV, *sura al-nas*, the word *Allah* picked out and illuminated in gold, green and red. Signed and dated lower left, the reverse plain, mounted. Signed Mati, dated AH 1431/2009-10 AD. 28 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 28 $\frac{1}{8}$  in (71.5 x 71.5 cm) including margins. Offered on 17 March-7 April 2021, Online

There are three key elements in Islamic art: geometry, arabesque and calligraphy, and they are used separately or together to create intricate designs. ‘Calligraphy is at the top of the hierarchy,’ says Keyworth, ‘because it is transmitting the voice of the Divine. No other art form is so exalted.’

### The origins of Arabic calligraphy

One of the earliest known forms of calligraphy is Kufic, named after the city of Kufah in Iraq. Offered in the sale is a 9th-century Qur’an folio (below), which shows the angularity of the style.



The Qur'an was still an oral tradition at the time, says Keyworth, so this text, written on vellum, would merely have served as a reading prompt for the speaker.



A Kufic Qur'an folio, North Africa or Near East, 9th-10th century. Arabic manuscript on vellum. Folio: 5½ x 8⅝ in (14 x 21.8 cm). Offered on 17 March-7 April 2021, Online

From the 11th century, scripts became more cursive thanks to the availability of paper, which was smoother, enabling the pen to glide over the surface with greater ease. Scribes began experimenting with different-sized nibs, and precise rules were devised prescribing the size and length of each letter.

This resulted in a series of proportional scripts, among them Naskh, Thuluth and Muhaqqaq, which used a sophisticated system of measurements based on a specific number of diamond-shaped dots for each letter. Other scripts, notably the Maghribi that developed in Spain and North Africa, were characterised by deep swooping curves.





A pink Qur'an folio, Spain, 13th century, Sold for £9,375 on 7 April 2021, Online

### Arabesque motifs, geometrical designs and luminous gold

As calligraphy developed, artists began framing their scripts with arabesque motifs and geometrical designs. 'Geometric patterns can form letters and vice versa,' says Keyworth, revealing that the three primary elements of Islamic art are to some extent mutable and can tessellate into one another.

'You begin to see scripts such as Kufic and Thuluth decorating glazed ceramics and metalwork and appearing on the walls of secular and religious places,' says Keyworth. 'Great attention was given to the aesthetic appeal and ornamental quality of the writing.'

The sale includes a 19th-century pair of wooden doors (below) that are intricately carved in a complex pattern using the Kufic script.





A pair of carved wooden doors, Qajar Iran, 19th century (detail). 76 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 20 $\frac{3}{8}$  in (194 x 53 cm); 76 x 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  in (193 x 47.5 cm).  
Sold for £12,500 on 7 April 2021, Online



As calligraphic techniques became more sophisticated, artists were sought out by rulers to create opulent commissions. One of the most famous scribes of the 16th century was the Persian calligrapher Sultan 'Ali Mashadi (1453–1520), who served at the court of Sultan Husayn Mirza Bayqara (1438–1506) in Herat.

‘His calligraphy is surrounded with beautiful scrolling arabesques on gold,’ says Keyworth, adding that his work is instantly recognisable on account of its luminous clarity.







A calligraphic panel signed Sultan 'Ali (Mashhadi), Herat, early 16th century. Text panel: 10 x 6¼ in (25.5 x 16 cm). Folio 12 x 8¼ in (30 x 21cm). Sold for £3,250 on 7 April 2021, Online

## The move towards abstraction

By the late 19th century, manuscripts had become so resplendent that they sparked a desire in some to find a purer aesthetic. The female artist Ruqiyah Banu was a pioneer of the spare *nakhuni* style, using only a sheet of white paper and a fingernail to create impressions.

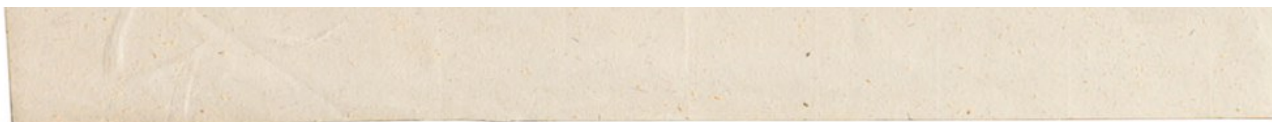
Such technical innovation had a profound impact on modern artists in the Middle East and North Africa, who recognised in these radical techniques the elements of abstraction. A revolutionary new art was on the horizon.











Khatt-i-nakhuni (fingernail) calligraphic panel, signed Ruqiyah Banu, Qajar Iran, 19th century. Folio 10¾ x 6¼ in (27 x 16 cm). Sold for £3,500 on 7 April 2021, Online

## The birth of a new visual language: Huroufiyah

In the early 20th century, Islamic artists, aware of the innovations in the West, invented a new visual language, liberating the Arabic letter from its religious context and using it in a purely abstract way. The movement came to be known as Huroufiyah, from the word *hurouf*, meaning 'letter'.

One of the major exponents of the movement was the painter Madiha Umar (1908–2005), whose 1949 text, *Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art*, outlined the possibilities for the medium.

'The letter still stands out, so magnificently colourful, fascinating, intricate, and ornamental... The idea dawned on me that Arabic calligraphy, which is abstract and yet so symbolic in its essence, need not be limited any more to the space-filling of geometrical design.'









Ismail Gulgee, *Untitled (Abstract Forms)*, 1966. Mixed media on canvas. 61 x 40 in (154.9 x 101.6 cm). Offered on 17 March-7 April 2021, Online

Soon artists were exploring the potential of the letter in all aspects of modern art. The Pakistani painter **Ismail Gulgee** (1926–2007) revealed the dynamism of Huroufiyah in his action paintings, the Modernist **Jamil Hamoudi** (1924–2003) recognised its potential for Surrealist wordplay and Cubist abstraction, and the Iraqi artist **Dia al-Azzawi** (b. 1939) experimented with the graphic possibilities of calligraphy in poster design.



Dia al-Azzawi, *Hommage to Baghdad*, 1982. 10 screen prints on Arches Velin handmade paper. Sheets 21½ x 19½ in each. Sold for £16,250 on 7 April 2021, Online

Some saw Huroufiyah as a pan-Arabist art movement that could unite the Islamic world in the wake of colonialism; others, notably the painter **Shakir Hassan Al Said** (1925–2004), still held onto the spiritual, meditative qualities of calligraphy. Al Said wrote in his 1973 manifesto *One Dimension* that the act of calligraphy was an almost existential experience that brought the creator closer to God.



Such ideas continue to be explored in the harmonious paintings of the young, contemporary artists Muzzumil Ruheel (b. 1985) and Mohammad Ali Talpur (b. 1976).



Muzzumil Ruheel, *Holding on to the Sky*, 2020. Ink and acrylic lacquer on *wasli*. 26½ x 20 in ( 67.3 x 50.8 cm). Sold for £3,000 on 7 April 2021, Online

Many of these artists are also on show in *Abstraction and Calligraphy — Towards a Universal Language*, an exhibition at the Louvre Abu Dhabi (until 12 June) that charts the history of Arabic calligraphy over the past 100 years, as well as exploring the idea that painters in the West were influenced by artistic innovations in calligraphy in the East.

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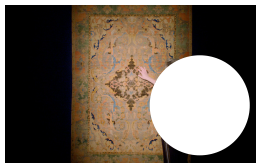
As Keyworth observes, ‘The art of calligraphy has a universal appeal, and that is why it developed so quickly and became so sought-after from the Middle Ages onwards. Its beautiful proportions and exquisite luminosity are something that everyone can appreciate.’

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