

Research article

The Aesthetics of Contemporary Arabic Calligraphy in the Paintings of Nja Mahdaoui

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ORCIDDuaa Mohammed Alashari: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8365-3979>**Abstract.**

Contemporary Arabic calligraphy art is related to the practice of handwriting or lettering. Traditional Arabic calligraphy art was used as a way of expression that delivered the aesthetic spirit of the Arabic language. The use of contemporary Arabic calligraphy art by the artist Nja Mahdaoui raises a question dealing with the aesthetic quality of Arabic calligraphy in terms of form and theme. This study discusses the visual characteristics illustrated in contemporary Arabic calligraphy paintings created by Nja Mahdaoui. The visual analysis approach by Feldman was chosen and highlighted through the application of line, shape, texture, balance, repetition, and space. The research concludes that the art of Mahdaoui defies the static conceptions of fine art and the tradition of modern calligraphy. The Arabic calligraphic art created by this artist is a means of communicating a particular aesthetic experience with the spirit of the Arabic language. Mahdaoui seeks to create a total art, which could speak to global audiences. Mahdaoui's calligraphy art is not only about how we read the Arabic word, it is also greatly informed by the beauty of the composition and the rhythm of the calligraphic line.

Keywords: contemporary, Arabic calligraphy, aesthetic

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1. INTRODUCTION

Calligraphy derives from the Greek word; it means beauty and write. Arabic Calligraphy has to do with beautiful writing or the beautiful art of writing. In Arabic the calligraphy is called khat. Khat means line or graffiti, in other words, the lines which formed the handwriting. Calligraphy has been a prominent approach of visual expression, especially in Islam. At its beginning, Arabic calligraphy was a tool of expression and a pattern of delivering language and thought. Traditional Arabic Calligraphy art is associated with the greatness of Islamic art. Most of the traditional Arabic calligraphy art expressed the Qur'an verses, Hadith and the words of wisdom. Contemporary artists explicitly state that they are not calligraphers to indicate that they have not been trained as calligraphers and/or that they do not follow the aesthetic philosophy or tradition of calligraphy. These

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distinctions, for example, between artist and calligrapher and craftsman, are relevant in terms of training and consumer markets [1].

In the tradition of Arabic calligraphy, a style of writing is roughly analogous to a font. Calligrapher Ibn Muqla (d. 940 CE) canonized the Six Scripts of Arabic calligraphic styles, that developed in various Arabian cities. There are six classic styles that remain known: Kufi, Thuluth, Naskhi, Riq'a, Farsi and Diwani. These six styles of calligraphy are considered as the foundational cursive scripts in calligraphic training. But there are also many other styles of Arabic calligraphy including the very popular geometric kufi script. Calligraphy in general has two categories: pure calligraphy and painting calligraphy. Pure Calligraphy is beautiful written art that follows the rules of the pattern *khatun*. Pure calligraphy is experiencing to be new forms of expression in the letter composition, it combines with a decorative motif or it is called calligraphy painting. Contemporary calligraphy painting refers to a contemporary style which is full of dynamic creativity in regard to creating the works that are strange and unique in terms of its form and composition.

2. Artist biography

Nja Mahdaoui was born in Tunisia in 1937. He studied at the Atelier Libre in Carthage, the Academy of Arts of Santa Andrea in Rome and at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris. Nja Mahdaoui was called an explorer of signs and a visual artist. Mahdaoui plays with text and image in his work. Mahdaoui deals with numerous material mediums, such as, parchment, paint, metal, light, textile, and glass. Also, Mahdaoui explores Arabic calligraphy as a conceptual medium. He is widely respected by the international art community. He has participated in many exhibitions, as well as received a great number of international awards [2]

Mahdaoui Arabic calligraphy appears to be Arabic, yet as a matter of fact it has no semantic content. Mahdaoui uses the aesthetic visual form of Arabic calligraphy to create an artwork devoid of semantic meaning focusing on the spirit of Arabic language. As Curator of Northeast, East, and South African art at the British Museum, Chris Spring writes of the artist:

"Mahdaoui began to push the boundaries of acceptable practice in using calligraphy as an art form. While always mindful of its sacred role recording and revealing the word of God as set down in the Qur'an, Mahdaoui and others began to explore the artistic potential of forms rather than the literal meaning of these words and letters, and of the

radically traditional types of script that had been developed by the calligraphers over the centuries” [3]

The critic of fine art, Dan Suwaryono, insisted that the calligraphy paintings are basically supported by two elements of art: form, line, colour, space, light, and volume [4]. This study came to analyse Mohdiou’s artwork, because there is little scholarly attention that has been paid to Mahdaoui’s artwork in terms of the analysis and descriptions of his Work. Mahdaoui invites new experiences, such as, the mosque screen and the calligram painting which is the focus of the study.

3. METHOD

This study employed a Visual Analysis method which encompasses the four-step procedures in art criticism. The theoretical framework of this visual analysis is by Edmund Feldman which is a four-step structure of criticism consisting of description, analysis, interpretation and judgment. The visual analysis is going to emphasize the line, shape, texture, balance, repetition and space of the artwork as well as the composition of the artwork within the context. Also, the visual analysis is going to investigate the material and techniques that that have been applied by the artist as recognized through observation [5]

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion section is going to deal with one painting created by the Artist Nja Mahdoui to reveal the aesthetic concept behind the artwork based on the art critic method by Feldman.

TABLE 1: Method of Art Criticism – The Critical Process by Edmund Feldman (1993).

NO.	Edmund Feldman Critical Process	The Critical Process
1.	Description Naming and describing the facts	Naming what an observer sees is part of the overall process of description.
2.	Analysis Analysing the facts	Dealing with visual evidence. It is an advanced type of description.
3.	Interpretation Interpreting the evidence	The crucial third stage of art criticism: this is the point at which our search for meaning reaches a climax.
4.	Judgment Judging the works of art	Final stage of evaluation of criticism is the evaluation of whole works of art. This sort of judging may seem presumptuous or perhaps it is downright foolish.

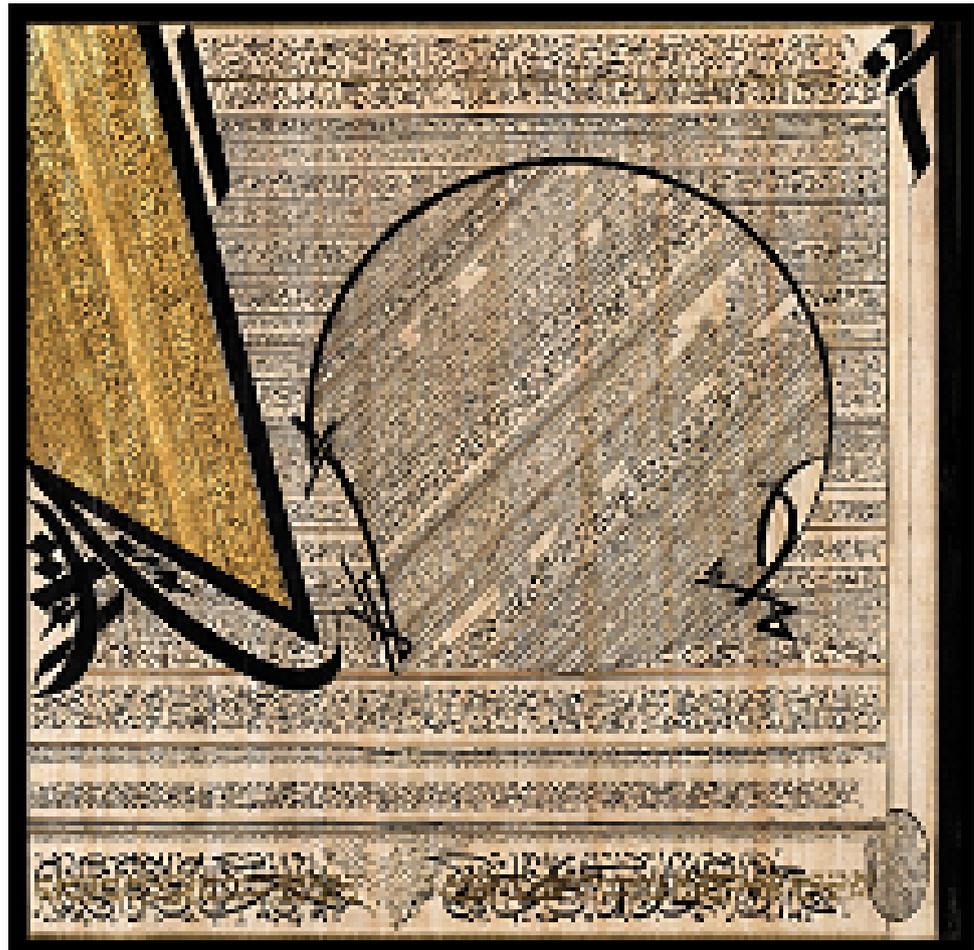


Figure 1: Nja Mahdaoui, Calligramm on Papyrus, India ink and acrylic painting on papyrus 60 x 60 cm, 2004 - Courtesy of Artist Nja Mahdoui (Tunis, 24 March 2021).

Description: The material of the Mahdaoui's painting is Papyrus, Indian ink and acrylic painting on papyrus. The size of the painting is (60 x 60 cm). The theme of the painting is Calligramm. The style of writing is a representation of the artist's calligraphic hand. Calligram literally denotes beautiful writing.

Analysis: The analysis step is focusing on the line, shape, balance, repetition and space in the artwork by Mahdiou. states that, "The basic visual symbols in the language of art are known as the elements of art" [6]. Mohdiou's painting of contemporary Arabic calligraphy is considered as an abstract form of art. It is mainly about resembling the Arabic alphabet and words. In Mahdoi's artwork the Arabic alphabet does not appear in the conventional sense. The artist seeks to form his painting to almost deny, in a certain sense, the linguistic meaning of the letters by focusing on the pattern and movement of the line. The diversity in the patterns of the several different forms of calligraphy display a work of art as a certain form of aesthetic. The style of painting Midhiou employs is considered as a contemporary composition and design because the artist uses certain

words as a symbol of a group of ideas. The Arabic words are arranged in such a way that describes objects that want to be associated in order to convey a specific message. The depiction in the way the words and letters are emphasized has unity, rhythm, harmony and balance. The calligraphy composition appears to be Arabic words, but in fact has no semantic content.

The artist in his painting try to engage the tension of characteristic of calligraphic by pushing the language to their limit. The concept of the calligraphic painting is to create a visual image by using the form of the Arabic letter, on the one hand and on the other hand the artist has stretched and manipulated the form of Arabic words to create a unique composition. the whole painting looks like a modern Arabic manuscript. In the centre of the painting there is a bold circular form surrounded by narrative text. There is a beautiful colour contrast between the font colour and the background, which creates an aesthetic visual rhythm. The artist manipulates these visual forms of words and letters to create a narrative story. The whole composition of the painting appears as a page of a contemporary manuscript. In terms of analysing the text itself, it appears visually as Arabic calligraphy even though there is no single word or even single letter that is clearly readable. In Mohdoiu's painting there are interwoven lines and there is a balance between the calligraphic shapes as well as between the text and geometric lines. There is a repetition and rhythm of calligraphic line in the painting. According to Ocvirk "rhythm is also present when regulated units are repeated" [4]

Interpretation: Calligraphy painting is not only present in the Arabic letters and words that are painted, but also as the real painting that includes the letters as one of its elements. According to Affandi, calligraphy painting is the work of a man as the result of the processing of inner expression through the arrangement of the elements of writing and the other two-dimensional elements. These elements have a symbolic nature, religious, and aesthetic and bring the ethical message between human and God, human and human, and human and nature. That which is referred to as Nja calligraphy painting has a unique style of handwriting that creates a unity of form and content. Moreover, this painting has an aesthetic expression of beautiful writing based on the arrangement of words that were completed by certain other elements that are involved with the painting work of art. Therefore, this calligraphy painting expresses the spirit of the Arabic language in a contemporary composition.

The rows of Arabic calligraphy vary in size. The various sizes of the Arabic calligraphy indicate a commentary about contemporary painting. In Mahdaoui's painting there is a conceptual connection between the central arc and the calligraphic genre. In Mahdaoui's painting there is a similar dramatic extension of the arc, especially into the centre of

the composition. The consistent spaces between the lines and Arabic words create a completely covered composition. The design of the composition of the painting is in conversation with a certain tradition of Islamic art.

Judgment: In terms of the beauty concept of Nja's artwork, it comes from the form and the content of the painting, as well as the organization and unity of the calligraphic lines. The creativity in creating a contemporary calligraphy work of art is reliant upon the intellectuality. The artist considers the materials and techniques to express his ideas of Arabic calligraphy in a contemporary method and not only consider the aesthetic aspect of the embodiment of his work. Nja's painting evokes the spirit of Arabic calligraphy but in a contemporary style. This painting also evokes a negotiation between the words and the Arabic letters expressed in beautiful calligraphy. Moreover, the painting is evoking the memory of writing the tradition calligraphy. This painting is tending toward the poetic aesthetic. In Mahdaoui's painting there is a conversation between the word and the geometric line that has been explored in Islamic calligraphy, but in a contemporary way.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The research concludes that the art of Mahdaoui, defies static conceptions of fine art and calligraphy tradition and modernity. The Arabic Calligraphic art created by Nja artist is a means of communicating a particular and aesthetic experience with the spirit of the Arabic language. Mahdaoui seeks to create a total art, art that could speak to global audiences. Mahdaoui's contemporary calligraphy art is not about how we read the Arabic word but is greatly informed by the beauty of composition and the rhythm of the line. This analytical study reveals the aesthetic of abstraction and the contemporary aspect of Arabic calligraphy art that is embedded in Nja Mohdiou's painting. Mahdaoui pushes the Arabic language to the limit. He conveys the traditional Arabic calligraphy art as a unique contemporary visual image which we acknowledge as a total work of art. The critical analysis increases the ability to understand, appreciate, and enjoy the contemporary Arabic calligraphy by Mohdiou.

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