

The President and the Calligrapher: Arabic Calligraphy and Its Political Use

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In September 2000 news agencies reported that Saddam Hussein took delivery of a manuscript Qur'an written with 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 president's portraits.

Horror and violence have long been integral parts of many arts, yet Arabic calligraphy is generally perceived as having preserved its grace and innocence, and belonging to a blissful realm away from the realities of this world. That this is not the case is made clear by a closer look at its history, where the relationship between art and power, between artists and the men in power, was a defining characteristic. It still holds true today, as exemplified by Saddam using calligraphy as a propaganda tool—which of course didn't change the course of Arabic calligraphy, unlike his silencing of a couple of talented Iraqi calligraphers and the exile of others, some of whom ended up in the West founding new calligraphy schools.

Compared to the prestige of Arabic calligraphy there is conspicuously little material available on contemporary cultural politics regarding this art form. 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.

The benefits of a link between state politics and calligraphy are mutual: part of cultural politics, calligraphy brings its sponsors prestige which attracts in turn various types and levels of support from individuals, communities, and institutions, while calligraphers also gain prestige and—more important—jobs. The importance of this link for both the political and cultural history of Islam and the history of Arabic calligraphy is apparent from the fact that calligraphy was and continues to be the principal art form of Islam, similar to 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.) Furthermore, the semiofficial status that it enjoys goes back to the very 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 caliph ‘Uthman’s first complete written Qur’an and the mosaic inscription in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Both are highly political statements—the former the cornerstone of the Muslim faith, the latter a symbol of Islam as world religion—to which calligraphy provides a supplement of credibility, importance, and attraction.

The empire also needed scribes for its growing administration, instructors to teach people to read and write, stonemasons to engrave tombstones, all part of a numerous workforce involved with the shaping of letters who needed to retain their jobs after the Muslims took over from the defeated dynasties. The mutual dependence was further complicated by the introduction of a new script—Arabic—that supplanted Greek, Avestan, Syriac, Latin, Sanskrit, etc., which fulfilled at a graphical level the gradual conversion of vast populations from Gibraltar to the Indus. Which of the two sides—governors or calligraphers—initiated the profitable relationship between Islamic power and Arabic calligraphy, and what was the story of the individuals who transformed Arabic script into Arabic calligraphy, are however matters not well enough understood in today’s scholarship.

The succeeding centuries are dotted with anecdotal evidence on the politics–calligraphy link, the period spanning before and after the 15th century and centered on Persia being particularly significant for the history of Arabic calligraphy because the aesthetic models and social status of calligraphers that appeared during that time lasted until the present.

Among the most striking inventions was the lawha and the qalib. 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 aesthetic values of the script. The preponderance of graphical form over semantic content put creators of lawhas in a class apart from scribes, copyists, or masons, for whom the communication function of writing was the primary concern. Being a small-scale commerce—one sheet of paper and one or a few lines of text per lawha—rather than a transaction of bulky manuscripts, the calligrapher could, with some proficiency, sell more items and adapt the content to a more diverse market than his fellow scribes and copyists could. His financial success was improved by the other marketing technique, the qalib: 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, wood, ceramics, or metal—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 to the sole benefit of governors.

The long period during which these technical and social changes took place witnessed an unprecedented attraction for calligraphy among Muslim sultans, princes, and emirs. It became fashionable for a ruler to practice calligraphy. Stories like the one about the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II holding the inkstand for the legendary calligrapher Shaykh Hamdullah abounded in many countries. Many Timurid princes were accomplished calligraphers and some of their works have been preserved until our days to prove that their fame was not merely self-interested praise. Mamluk sultans were with a few exceptions near-analphabets; honorable manuscripts written by lower ranking Mamluks demonstrate that the fashion spread also into their dominions. 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 Il-Khanid Öljaytü, had the sultan's own 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. Despite not having the appropriate training to appreciate 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 one to Mecca and then another to Medina, the Mamluks considered this act of great piety as a diplomatic affront, a humiliating reference to their own lack of graphic abilities. One of the most spectacular instances of the ascendancy of calligraphy over politics took place in the Safavid and Ottoman empires, through the ideology of letter mystics that were at the basis of Safavid power and instilled the elite Janissaries Ottoman troops. Calligraphy became an active element of the state and military machinery.

Arabic calligraphy was tied to politics not only in the countries where Arabic script was the state script, but it played a role in foreign politics too. Although not intended for this use, as a result of trade and crusades, between the 11th and 14th centuries real or imitated Arabic writing became a fashionable decoration in European medieval arts, thus substantiating the prestige of Islam as a civilization of luxurious cultural sophistication. A similar Islamic art craze took hold of Europe in the late 19th 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 imports. Chinese silk products and porcelain had obvious qualities, but in order to guarantee and increase their commercial success, the Chinese government was pragmatic enough while trading with the Mamluks to put aside its customary disdain for the “Barbarians”—everything not Chinese—and allow that instead of Chinese characters export objects be inscribed with Arabic letters, to accommodate the sensibility of the customers.

During its fourteen centuries of existence Arabic calligraphy has developed firm social roots: protected by religion, used in politics, boasting aesthetic sophistication, sustained by a mystical credo, and subject of poetry and popular lore, more than an art form, calligraphy was a culture. This particular setting had a far reaching influence on calligraphy in the 20th 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 exile, all meaning and was reduced to 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.

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 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), aiming at and implying modifications of national and individual identities. (The competition for the reform of the Arabic script in Egypt came, after thirty years of deliberations, to an abrupt halt in 1968 after the heyday of Arabic nationalism.) What is less well known is what became of Arabic calligraphy in Turkey after the abandonment of Arabic writing.

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

A revival came only in the last quarter of the 20th 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, are not inexpensive). 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, which since 1988 has organized a famous calligraphic competition. 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 Sarayı, 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 set 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.)

A substantial cause of the calligraphy–politics link comes from the fact that calligraphy is not a totally abstract art, but needs words as its graphical building blocks. What to write is a dilemma tormenting calligraphers, and politicians are quick to jump in with a suggestion. However, master calligraphers do acknowledge that it is not possible to be a good calligrapher and not believe in what one writes. 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 the first substantial and documented example of revolutionary involvement of Arabic calligraphy. At that moment modern graffiti was only a decade old and was also rooted in social revolt. 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.”¹ 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 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* style. 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

¹ Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982): 107.

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. 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 Achemenid kings on the rocks of the Zagros mountains are prodigious examples of public lettering, but the contemporary Iranian military can pride itself on having produced something truly unique: a collection of landscape graffiti. On the barren slopes of the hills between Teheran and Qom, where maneuvers are held and rockets test fired, lie several dozen ten-foot-long inscriptions made from white painted rocks, some saying “Death to America” and “Death to Israel,” some others outlining weapons such a cannon, accompanied by the identification number of the army unit and the date of the exercise (*Fig. 1*). The inscriptions follow the well-known military tradition of marking with messages the weapons and ammunition hurled at enemies. Clearly 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, but probably the soldier who sweated pushing those boulders up the hill didn’t care too much about the propaganda—unless he wasn’t rolling them down . . .

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 or as far as Egypt and the island of Java, dragon-headed pen-holders from Singapore, and knives forged in the mountains



Fig. 1 Military inscriptions on the hills along the Tehran-Qom road.

of the Caspian region. 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 codicologue?² The Library of the Parliament has also published since 2000 the first journal in an Islamic country for the study of manuscripts and calligraphy and regularly organizes calligraphic exhibitions. When held in such a place as the halls of the Organization of the Islamic Conference 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 a matter of partisan sensibilities and militant cooptation. Calling it “Islamic”—the usual term in English, but not in French—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, and also ignores the calligraphed poetry, administrative records, scientific treatises, and various other writings that have nothing to do with Islam. 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. Naming Arabic calligraphy—sometimes with overlaps and fluctuations for the same individual—reveals political, religious, national, and social identities.

During the Middle Ages Persia exported its calligraphy—and many times the calligraphers themselves—in great quantities to India and sufficiently to the Ottomans to fill a small quarter in a cemetery of Istanbul. 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? But 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 cultural references whose exploration left little time to practice calligraphic styles not Persian.

2 Festivities in honor of the respected Iranian manuscripts scholar ‘Abd al-Hussain Haeri, November 2001, Teheran.

Among the efficient “attraction” 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 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 Persianites. The divisions were reflected not only in the number of character elongations kashidas-s of their handwriting, but equally in the destinations for holy days, the languages they spoke, and the interior design of their apartments. It might even affect culinary habits (to which I can attest, having not so long ago started to learn Japanese).

Comparing Turkey and Iran would suggest that the state of calligraphic development 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 influence, 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 that is sensitive to its linguistic and cultural environment.

There are no clear signs of Western governments being aware of the public relations value of calligraphy for relations with the Muslim world. Although they did 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,³ the Institute of the Arabic World opened in 1988 in Paris, and the *Fikrun wa Fann* cultural magazine published by the Goethe Institut of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany—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. 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.

³ John Sabini, “The World of Islam: Its Festival,” *Aramco World Magazine* 27:3 (1976), also available via www.saudiaramcoworld.com.

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, and modern art collectors. 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 Masoudy is responsible for initiating much of the present dynamism of Arabic calligraphy in Europe. His book *Living Arabic Calligraphy* published in France in 1981 in a bilingual French-Arabic version succeeded as being all in one a history of Arabic calligraphy, a beautifully designed printed collection of calligraphic samples, and a teaching manual of everything from cutting the reed and making ink according to medieval receipt to writing in several styles.⁴ He had many epigones and soon France became the center of intense calligraphic activity. In the United States it was Mohamed Zakariya, American by birth and Muslim-calligrapher by choice, who accomplished much for the popularity of Arabic calligraphy in that country. 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.

Given the actors identified above, how are the artistic choices of calligraphers as seen in the respective styles expressed socially and politically? 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 picked from throughout the centuries and geography of Islam and telescoped into the present to make a richly decorated historical fresco, an excellent remedy to relieve Westerners from their Westernness and offer those with Arabic-writing ancestors pieces of identities to be imagined. The drawback is the reliance of this type of calligraphy on the "somewhere else," transforming a history into a calligraphic amusement park (complete with Horror Timur Lenk slicing through calligraphers, wise hurufi mystics lost in kabbalistic contemplation, and beautiful-eyed sons and daughters of calligraphy

4 Hassan Massoudy, *Calligraphie Arabe Vivante* (Paris: Flammarion, 1981).

masters ready to be married), as well as 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. (Which 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 their diplomas.) A result of this is that calligraphy is easily used as part of a conservative approach to Islam. Arabic-writing communities in the West live in different conditions from their countries of origin; if there is a will to assert their particular identities, without constantly depending on the umbilical cord with the “somewhere else,” then artists can have an important social shaping role. Every major style of Arabic calligraphy that we know today is a successful aesthetic expression of a particular cultural community. Watch for the day when there will be a European or North American variant of the Arabic script.

A sequel of globalization, the metis scripts are material proofs for the advocates of happy cultural blending: these are Arabic characters made to look like Latin letters. The reverse was also tried and there exists 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 greatly today due to the need of the advertising 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 level of corporate labels, is to use metis typefaces to set the main text, not only the titling of books, newspapers, and all sorts of printed matter. It would be a real case to test the open-mindedness of would-be cosmopolitan readers (or at least the limits between legibility and anger).

Hassan Massoudy’s best-selling book on traditional Arabic calligraphy has ensured him an international popularity, but his artistic work is devoted to mixing abstract painting with calligraphy, 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 and those with Muslim communities where the fusion between foreign new with the indigenous and traditional has become a hallmark of the graphical landscape. Politicians have found out, however, that compared to traditional calligraphy, its modern avatar is harder to manipulate. Paint-calligraphy introduces a cut with the past, which, while apparently similar socially (the formal training by a teacher, in a school, and sanctioned by a diploma or the master’s approval), is immediately sensed at visual level by not shap-

ing characters according to the rules of traditional calligraphy and relying heavily on color. It is particularly the aesthetic factor that explains the slow penetration of modern calligraphy in mosques (while it became a common feature of churches). Architects continue to play an avant-garde role, helped by the decision-making position they hold, in making modern calligraphy religiously acceptable. At the functional level the traditional/modern schism 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 fine arts schools, the textbooks in their libraries, the fellowships abroad), and the public it attracts. 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 Organization of the Islamic Conference and the latter in the Museum of Modern Arts (which resembles the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan). In the United Arab Emirates, which heavily invests in all material aspects of modernity, on the other hand, the state selected the Tunisian artist Nja Mahdaoui, known for mesh-like, broken-line modern calligraphies, to design the outward decoration for the fuselages of its national airliners.

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 a historical role reversal, calligraphy has become to an unprecedented extent a political instrument in the hands of calligraphers.

While Atatürk was dancing the foxtrot⁵ and the Turks were about to forget

5 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; 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 the 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

Arabic calligraphy, Iranians let calligraphy flourish in the 20th century and let the black of chadors censor from public view the female body. The idea that calligraphy acts as an intermediary between politics and sexuality appears to be one of the latest novelties regarding Arabic script. Here is how a progressive journalist described in his column of 1 November 1928 the “divorce” of laic Turkey from what the Qur’an itself names a God that doesn’t bear:⁶ “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.”⁷ These thousand years of abstinence were however not evenly enforced. Reading for example *Flower Garden of Arts*, a biography of calligraphers and painters from mainly 14th and 15th century Persia, the importance of homosexual love as a driving force for calligraphy becomes evident.⁸ It is also known—but not yet studied by scholars in order to assess the interplay between sexual behavior, calligraphic art, and political action—that homoeroticism was a component of the hurufi and bektashi movements that came to power in those times. Notwithstanding these occurrences, writing, calligraphy, and calligraphers never became a topic of Islamic erotic literature and painting, despite the importance of calligraphy in Islamic cultures. Not even Mamluk writers, prodigiously lascivious, felt ruttish on more than a couple of pages about the scribe’s writing implements—even while script was one of their favorite subjects of administrative treatises.⁹ 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 Renaissance¹⁰—and calligraphers have been made part of the plot in erotic fiction, as in Imperial Chinese literature, recent Hong Kong pornographic

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>).

6 Qur’an 112:3.

7 Ismail Habib (Sevük), “Farwell, Ye Good and Faithful Characters,” Harfi Harfine, (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 1998), 19.

8 Qadi Ahmad, *Calligraphers and Painters* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1959).

9 Suyuti ‘Abd al-Rahman, *Nuits de nocés ou comment humer le doux breuvage de la magie licite* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1972), 78-81.

10 Fritz Franz Vogel and Joseph Kiermeier-Debre, *Menschenalphabet: Nackte Models, Wilde Typen, Modische Charaktere* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2001).

filmography,¹¹ and Peter Greenaway's movie *The Pillow Book*.¹²

A few examples, however, attest to the potentiality for sensuality of the Arabic calligraphy: a *Kama Sutra*-inspired book presents 28 selected positions of Sheherazade in the shape of Arabic characters;¹³ bodies serve artists as living writing surfaces during performances, for videos and photography;¹⁴ during a fashion show lingerie patterned with Arabic calligraphy lace is presented on the catwalk. Are these curiosities? Cheap marketing techniques? Recalling the preeminent place played by calligraphy in Theo van Gogh's movie *Submission*, and his ensuing killing,¹⁵ would indicate the politically subversive nature of an alliance between eroticism and calligraphy.

Sex is a perennial saboteur, ready to blow up norms and transgress social boundaries, proclaiming new laws, when in the somber seclusion of its dealings the possessed souls are bound to meet. 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 should come as no surprise, to those who hold such a cynical viewpoint, that rulers found an interest in calligraphy as a way to get a firm hold on sexual matters. Furthermore, if a calligrapher should by profession be as silent a fellow as a reader needs to be, he certainly cannot be blind, blind to the role he was given to play in society, and the chances are that if his spirit is rebellious, he might ally himself to sulphurous sex in an attempt to subvert the politics he dislikes.

11 Yu Li, *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996); Michael Mak (film director), *Sex and Zen* (Hong Kong, 1993), vol. 1.

12 Peter Greenaway (film director), *The Pillow Book* (Sony Pictures, 1996), Peter Greenaway, *The Pillow Book* (Paris: Dis Voir, 1996). In the film we see also a glimpse of the 15th century Timurid "Baysunghur Qur'an."

13 Hassan Musa, *L'alphabet de Schéhérazade* (Dommessargues: Grandir, 2000).

14 'Izzal-Dinal Madani (ed.), *Nja Mahdaoui* (Tunis: Ceres, 1983), Gabriele Mackert (ed.), *Shirin Neshat* (Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien; London: Serpentine Gallery, 2000).

15 Theo van Gogh (film director), *Submission* (Amsterdam, 2004), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Submission_%28movie%29).