NEW MATERIAL IN ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Asma Ayadah Alshammari

1. INTRODUCTION

Arabic calligraphy is the foremost form of visual expression in Islam. Historically, it represented an instrument of religious expression and a means of conveying religious language and thought (Hamidon 2012, 5). El Seed's Perception (ca.2016) contributes to this view of Arabic calligraphy as an instrument of religious expression where it encourages the residents of the impoverished Mansheyat Nasser area to take pride in their contribution to society as garbage collectors who have developed an efficient recycling system from a religious angle. As such, the significance of El Seed's work is that it illustrates the extent Arabic calligraphy evokes religious thought that compels religious reflection via the artwork among viewers (mainly residents of Mansheyat Nasser). In fact, the Quran repeatedly emphasizes the importance of writing through calligraphy as necessary skill worth pious devotion to ensure the continued spread of Islam and thought among human societies. For instance, Surat Al-Alaq 96 (3-4) declares that Allah taught man as a means of conveying his abundant knowledge and capacity to elevate man intellectually. Similarly, Surat Al-Qalam 68 (1) highlights the importance of writing through the Quranic oath that declares "Noon, by the pen and by the [record] which [men] write" (ElAraby 1997, 1). As such, this literature review highlights the evolutionary history of Arabic calligraphy before conveying it contemporary stance and finalizes with a brief review of El Seed's Perception as the latest innovation that incorporates new materials that not only embodies aesthetic qualities that quality it as fine art but also relays Arabic calligraphy's traditional role as an instrument of religious expression that compels religious thought.

2. EVOLUTION OF ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY

Over the course of 13 centuries, the traditional role transformed as Arabic calligraphy increasingly became prevalent in secular applications, particularly scientific disciplines such as mathematics and astronomy (ElAraby 1997, 1). For instance, Petersen (2002, 22) report that calligraphic expression is a fundamental form of decoration in all forms of Islamic art including architecture and ornamental designs that has been used consistently both historically and in contemporary Islamic art. Comparatively, Marks (2011, 307) argues that Arabic calligraphic can manifest as a document or the realization of an unknown concept previously either overlooked for its obviousness or over-utilized in religious contexts or doctrines thus undermining its significance over time when spoken or written without enhanced calligraphic representation to attract readers or viewers. Calligraphic representations encourage viewers to internalize the significance of the elements or phrase used by enhancing the emotional appeal of the words (Blair 2006, 8).

As such, the role of Arabic calligraphy has gradually transformed from an instrument for communication and record keeping to an instrument for artistic expression using line and color to enhance its aesthetic appeal. According to ElAraby (1997, 1), Arabic calligraphy was not only a method of communication and recording information but also infused artistic structure/form, proportions and aesthetic qualities that made it appealing to an increasingly larger population across the world, particularly in the Middle East and Asia. As a result, several variations of Arabic calligraphy emerged including the cursive styles (also known as the soft styles) such as Nastaliq, Riqa, Thuluth, Naskh and Muhaqqaq as well as the kufic styles (also called the dry styles) including early, eastern, foliate, knotted and square kufic styles (Sakkal 1993).

Irrespective of the style of Arabic calligraphy, they each maintain the linguistic properties of Arabic text in terms of comprising of 22 consonants and representing vowels using markings or diacritics or not representing them at all (Sakkal 1993). In her research, Waterman (2009, 2) argues that current Arabic alphabet comprises of 25 consonants and 3 short and long vowels. The short vowels include alef, waw and yey while the long vowels include fatha, damma and kasra (Waterman 2009, 2). The north Arabic script was historically adopted to convey Islamic text thus became the official Arabic text over time even though Arabic, Hebrew and Phonecian alphabets are examples of Semitic alphabetic scripts that emerged in 1700 BC (Sakkal 1993). With each successive century and as

Islam spread to different regions of the world, new words emerged that have become part of the original North Arabic script such as the infusion of new letters by the Ottoman Turks who used Arabic text officially until 1929 (Sakkal 1993).

Symmetric calligraphic expressions can have rotational symmetry or bilateral symmetry (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 295). The more common symmetry is rotational symmetry because it comprises of 3-6 or eight rotation centers, preserve handedness and thus readability of the message presented through the text (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 295). Comparatively, bilateral symmetry is symmetry created about a vertical reflection axis as such requires simple reflection symmetry to ensure readability when complete (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 295). Irrespective of the symmetry mode applied, the process of creating Arabic calligraphy with aesthetic properties or qualities worthy of being considered as artistic remains the same (Hillenbrand 2006, 51).

3. CONTEMPORARY ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY

Arabic calligraphy has always represented the aesthetic properties of combining a cultural language and the language of geometry by exploiting the fluidity of Arabic text in terms of its ability to stretch and transform in indefinite ways towards designing calligraphic expressions even when using a single word in Arabic (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 295). Mahmood (2013, 1) argues that this same attribute is the reason Arabic calligraphy cannot be used to appeal to a mass audience. It prioritizes the use of beauty and aesthetic to convey visual meaning thereby undermining readability and functionality (Mahmood 2013, 1). He further argues that the typography of the words/elements used conveys the cultural identity of the calligrapher and the audience he/she wants to attract (Mahmood 2013, 1). Nonetheless, contemporary Arabic calligraphy is rudimentarily similar to traditional in terms of design but differs due to the contemporary emphasis on true symmetry and implied symmetry. Moustapha & Krishnamurti (2001, 295) argue that true symmetry calligraphy compositions are created by applying isometric transformations to an already prepared stencil or motif while implied symmetry calligraphy compositions are created by fitting an expression within a symmetrical layout or organization.

Contemporary Arabic calligraphy explores innovative ways of expressing the symmetry between words in more artistically pronounced ways. For instance, contemporary rotational symmetry often develops from an initial 3-rotation center to five-rotation center using the same word to extend its spread across towards the viewer/reader where the initial 3-rotation center features as smaller calligraphic representations of the world while expanding/stretching as they transform into the 5-rotation center (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 296). Other innovations include combining both bilateral and rotational symmetries within the same composition. The ICE program represents one innovative way through which such combinations can be developedwithin contemporary Arabic calligraphy using information technology. Indeed, the ICE represents one of the major evolutionary changes to Arabic calligraphic in modern society that utilizes information technology tools to enhance the aesthetic properties of calligraphic compositions created using Arabic text. It represents the emergence and spread of Arabic animation calligraphy (Marks 2011, 307).

Marks (2011, 307) argues that calligraphy animation transforms the focus on the aesthetic qualities of Arabic calligraphy from representation of elements/Arabic text in an aesthetic manner to performance representation where the layout in which they are presented also holds meaning beyond the meaning of the words/phrase/text presented in calligraphic form. The transformation represents the consequential effects of various theological and philosophical texts and writing in Islamic traditions such as the perceived talismanic qualities of writing, mystic sciences of letters and latency associated with Shi'a thought (Marks 2011, 307). However, the general context or Arabic animation calligraphy emerged because of Western-style art education influencing contemporary artists who specialize in Arabic calligraphy such as Mounir Fatmi and Paula Abood (Marks 2011, 307). Unlike Arabic typography which Mahmood (2013, 1) argues suffers from effective adaptation in contemporary global society because of the inherent lack of structural system for designing Arabic typefaces, Arabic animation calligraphy employs enhanced information technology that requires less manual input to contextualize the design of the elements used.

Contemporary Arabic calligraphy employs new technologies for writing on and the format for developing the generated elements and the symmetry they share (Hamidon & Ishak 2015, 404). In their study, Moustapha &

Krishnamurti (2001) conduct a computational exploration of Arabic calligraphy through a computer model called Interactive Calligraphy Exploration (ICE) that creates calligraphic compositions using symmetries. ICE manipulates symmetries in line arrangements to create aesthetic forms comprised of Arabic calligraphy using regulators that create an abstract composition based on symmetry information and formations that develop when the calligraphy or phrases used are aligned in specific ways. The formulation of meaning using the symmetry focuses on the transformation of symmetry information regarding various elements thus creating unusual but aesthetically appealing visual effects or representations (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 294).

The ICE approach extracts the abstract the organizational dimension of the symmetry from the physical dimension of the elements in terms of being representations of letters and words or phrases within the calligraphy (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 296-297). To achieve this result, the ICE applies three interactive features of the calligraphy explorations created through the program including creating the symmetry between the elements while designing the overall calligraphic composition (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 297). The second interactive feature is manipulating the calligraphic elements while exploring and maintaining symmetry options following successive iteration (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 297). The final interactive feature is manipulating the symmetry achieved/created to achieve visually significant changes in the overall composition created (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 297). As such, the process of creating Arabic calligraphy using the ICE involves two levels of abstractness: for the calligraphic elements/symbols (Arabic text) and for the regulating organizational symmetries (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 297).

The symbols represent Arabic text while the regulators highlight the symmetry properties of the symbols used in each composition by graphically depicting the lines and points that convey specific isometries that are most appropriate for the composition. Therefore, regulators convey symmetry properties by controlling the symbols and attributes of the elements used by using the line and points identified to ensure dependency between the elements (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 297). In other words, they ensure the phrases developed through the identifies symmetry properties continues to make sense as per the calligraphers desired outcome or expression since the calligraphy developed must still have meaning. In addition, the regulators facilitate the transformation and changes that emerge from exploring the different symmetry combinations thereby preserving the integrity of the compositions in terms of still making linguistic sense as Arabic text. These ICE properties ensure the program can superimpose different symmetries within the same composition because a single regulator can serve multiple symbols and multiple regulators can use/manipulate a single symbol (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001 297). In his study, Al Shiekh (2016, 1) proposes the creation and utilization of a parametric calligraphic machine that produces, connects and separates calligraphic elements as images or realities of overt Arabic calligraphy statements. Unlike the ICE, the parametric calligraphic machine contemplates the ideal symmetric measures feasible towards the manifestation of ideal patterns and layouts for Arabic calligraphy. It also emphasizes a process description for the creation of Arabic calligraphy rather than the traditional state description emphasized in other calligraphic design patterns such as the ICE (Al Shiekh 2016, 1). Overall, the ICE and parametric calligraphic machine represent the innovative use of information technology to enhance the aesthetic appeal of Arabic calligraphy.

4. NEW MATERIAL IN ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY: FOCUS ON EL SEED

Contemporary Arabic calligraphy does not rely exclusively on information technology instruments to create enhanced and aesthetically appealing formats beyond the creation of the stencil or motif before printing and presenting it as art. El Seed is one such artist. His innovation centers on his use of mixed materials such as building as his canvas for hosting Arabic calligraphy thereby enhancing the building's aesthetic qualities or properties irrespective of the surroundings. Odeh (2015, 8) refers to El Seed's technique as calligraffiti because he combines Arabic calligraphy and graffiti to create large-scale paintings of Arabic calligraphy made of vivid colors on edifices across the world. For instance, his Lost Walls collection comprises of calligraffiti on various abandoned buildings in his home country, Tunisia, painted using vivid colors ranging from azure blue to orange, red, white, green, black; sometimes combined within the same calligraffiti composition.

In terms of subject matters presented using calligraffiti, Naguib (2016, 53) argues that street art, graffiti and calligraffiti characterized the most striking forms of art to emerge in the wake of the Arab Spring. As such, El Seed's

artworks represent social self-reflection on the outcomes of the Arab Spring and the sociopolitical revolution sought after in many Arab countries across North Africa and the Middle East. For instance, Perception is an innovative dedication to the hard work of Cairo's garbage collectors in Mansheyat Nasser for their dedication towards developing an efficient recycling system. The calligraffit covers 50 apartment buildings in the area and can only be read from a single point on Moqattam Hill (Naguid 2016, 78). The quote belonged to a third century patriarch of Alexandria, St. Athanasius, who said, "Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly must wipe his eyes first" (Naguid 2016, 78). In fact, Boukerroui (2013, ii) argues that extracting such forms of local art as calligraffiti 'directly from the milieu' fosters the desired self-reflection that strengthens identity, culture andbelonging by replacing the imitation of other art forms and providing artists like El Seed a means to nurture their self-confidence. El Seed's artwork bears close resemblance to the works of the favela painters, Jeroen Koolhaas and Dre Urban, who create community art by painting entire neighborhoods thus splashing color onto urban walls (Odeh 2015, 8).

5. CONCLUSION

El Seed's Perception effectively illustrates the extent Arabic calligraphy not only conveys religious expression but also embodies the aesthetic qualities of fine art through it innovative design and use of formal element such as color. All Arabic calligraphic expressions El Seed, Perception. 2016, mixing anamorphosis and calligraffiti. performed in the streets of Cairo, Egypt. Available online from: https://goo.gl/images/GWG6HF represent a form of creative design made through a non-deterministic iterative process that involves repeatedly redrawing Arabic characters and the relations they share towards communicating a specific sentiment (Moustapha & Krishnamurti 2001, 296). Despite its long evolutionary history in terms of scripts to emerge and the dynamics of symmetric calligraphic expressions, contemporary Arabic calligraphy incorporates new technologies and materials towards achieving its traditional role of evoking religious thought through artistic expressions with enhanced aesthetic qualities.

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