



SIT/Study Abroad

The Beauty of Arabic Script: Tracing the Artistic Significance of the Arabic Letter in Morocco

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Spring 2009

Abstract

This paper explores the reference to traditional Moroccan craftwork in contemporary art, specifically in the microcosm of the incorporation of Arabic letters in contemporary painting. The line between craft and art, calligraphy and symbols is examined. What is the purpose of these designs and what meaning do they carry? Through interviews with five artists that employ this technique as well as conversations with other members of the art community, it was found that the artistic significance of these letters has changed throughout history. In the past, calligraphy, although containing some embellishing flair, emphasized the literal linguistic and religious meaning in the letter. The preliminary use of letters in modern art was a nationalistic statement as the Moroccan art community broke with the European. Now, the meaning seems to be a creative one: the personal quest to innovate by redefining a banal and familiar object. This adventurous and questioning quality is felt to be missing in the art community and one wonders whether artists like these five can drive a new movement – one that extends to the entire Moroccan society as well.

Acknowledgements

The hospitality and kindness of the Moroccan people was extremely helpful in completing this project. It is not easy or always possible for a young Anthropology student to grasp a rich history, complex concept such as art, and individual and unique stories often through a substantial language barrier. I hope my final product rings mostly true despite these obstacles and a short time limit. I apologize for the inevitable errors that remain.

I want to thank my cousin, Richard Dana for connecting me to the Moroccan art world, Malika Agueznay, Khadija Smiri, Villa des Arts – Casablanca for its “Convergences” exhibit and helpful staff, Tania Chorfi Bennani-Smires, Abdelhai Diouri, Rim Laabi, Farah Moudden, Said Graiouid, Amina Agueznay, the April edition of Exit Magazine, Mostafa Bizaoli and Meryem Anedam at l’Ecole Supérieure de Beaux Arts – Casablanca, and finally but most importantly the gracious participation of my five subjects: Abdellah Hariri and his daughter, Raja Atlassi, Youssouf El Alamy, Mehdi Qotbi and Noureddine Chater.

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Introduction

Approach

In the preliminary stages of my research, I found that the topic could include deep academic research to analyze the definitions of such loaded terms as “art” and the ancient relationship between Islam and art. However, considering the challenges of performing research in this country with limited library collections and internet connection, I decided to mainly draw my information from interviews.

Method

Some research was necessary as I am not an art or art history student and also not a Moroccan or Muslim. But after laying a foundation, and using the CCCL’s relationship with Youssouf El Alamy and Abdelhai Diouri, I used the “snowballing” technique of walking into first the Villa des Arts (which had held the exhibit that gave me the topic idea) and l’Ecole Superieure de Beaux Arts in Casablanca, explaining to the first person I met what I was doing and then following their suggestion of who to talk to next. Through these connections and the Exit Magazine’s exhibit listings, I walked into or called other galleries in Casablanca and Marrakech. Either upon meeting the artist or later in arranged meetings, I asked my subjects a few predetermined questions as well as others that seemed logical at the time.

Process

Reflecting on what I learned, not only from the answers to my questions, but also what was told to me, how I was corrected and what I observed along the way, I realized my misassumptions and restructured my topic multiple times. My advisor was extremely helpful in pointing out my interpretations that were not actually felt by the artists as well.

Challenges

The time limit was of course a challenge. There is so much history as well as current diversity that deserve a much larger expanse of time to understand. In addition, because I was aware of how little time I had, I attempted to simplify and focus things too much and created a self-fulfilling prophecy thesis. Although my interpretations were not dead wrong, they were often ethnocentric and not the principle feelings or opinions of my subjects. Once this was pointed out by my advisor, I had to go back and ensure I was being a true anthropologist – listening to each artist with an open mind.

The language barrier was also a challenge. Although towards the end of my research time I tried to make things easier for myself and stick to those who spoke English, I did not want this to be a limiting factor and so half of my subjects spoke little to no English. Translators in the form of my friend, Khadija, and students or sons or daughters on hand were very helpful for this dilemma, however.

Finally, creating a thesis on art is much more challenging than I had thought. Not only is it naïve to ask an artist why it is they do what they do, no two artists are the same. As someone who loves organization and finding patterns or general trends, it was difficult to settle on research results that either determine what these artists are *not* doing or presenting each individual story and leaving it at that. There is also the danger that my paper conveys that the choice to use

Arabic letters is a much larger trend in the Moroccan art community than it actually is. Since the formation of my topic came from the basis of calligraphy, rather than art, I devoted more time to studying the former field. However, the project ended up more about modern art and therefore is deserving of more research in that area. I tried to make it clear that this technique does not represent the entire Moroccan painting, or art community.

Findings

This project found that the subjects from the art community feel there is a clear distinction between calligraphy and the artistic employment of Arabic letters. What is in their pieces should not be described as calligraphy, but instead as Arabic letters, the alphabet, or simply symbols. In multiple academic sources and the international art community, calligraphy also seems to stand separate from art because of its functional purpose.

The subjects also revealed that the contemporary art movement is not principally about balancing Moroccan and European identities. Although there was an important nationalist movement in the Moroccan art community post-independence from France, the need to assert an identity through art has subsided.

Instead, these artists combine a Western medium with a traditional design for the enjoyment of the redefinition of a familiar symbol. It is part of the greater devotion to creating a novel, unconventional piece – by their own individual standards as well as the community's. They feel this quest brings necessary change to the arena.

Symbols and Culture

Clifford Geertz in The Interpretation of Cultures describes culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols...by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about an attitude toward life” (89). It is by studying these symbols, or “any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception” (Geertz 91) that one can begin to understand a society. A person’s view of themselves, their neighbors and the more distant world around them is embedded in these symbols and their assigned meanings.

But culture is constantly evolving. We cannot expect it to be stagnant. In the midst of “globalization” as nation-state borders are blurred in the wake of a growing global culture, some fear that local identity is being eroded. However, this fear derives from the misconception that a “pure” definition of one’s culture exists. In reality, a mixture and fluctuation is nothing new. Culture, an assembly of unique individuals, separated from the animal kingdom by their capacity to think, is a constantly flexible definition. Geertz’s symbols are anchored by a definition agreed upon by a culture, however there will always be and needs to be individuals who question this definition and venture to remove these objects from those conventions. These are the leaders of a civilization, these are the brave ones among us who are unafraid to be different, to test the boundaries. They exist in all spheres of society, but the art world holds values that are especially conducive to this questioning mentality. In the midst of the contemporary art era, the art community strives to create something new and unique, to break down the walls of mimicry and instead embrace abstraction. In a humanistic fashion, they are acutely aware of the variation between each individual and illuminate it in their diverse creations.

Certainly, not all artists possess this drive due to the simple variation in personality types. And in Morocco, it is possible that artists are still inwardly focused and competitive as they orient themselves in the recently established practice of exhibited art and painting. However, there is a small collection of painters who choose to work with one of society's most familiar set of symbols: the Arabic alphabet. Their pieces personalize and redefine the mundane – the same goal that is pivotal to advancing society. Perhaps others can learn from their drive as the country seeks to venture into the uncharted territory of democracy and other development models that may seem foreign. The artists' creative ability to fashion something old and familiar into an innovative format is as beautiful as the pieces they produce. At the hands of Morocco's artists, these symbols have carried linguistic, religious, nationalistic as well as aesthetic significances.

Crafts and Calligraphy

Although not labeled as art because of their functional nature, crafts in Morocco form the root of aesthetics in the country. Artisans throughout history as well as today painstakingly build one piece at a time, paying close attention to detail. There is a wide array of Moroccan crafts: woven rugs, gold-leafed tea glasses, silver teapots, Essaouiran wooden furniture, leather goods from the Fes tanneries, woven scarves, needlework tablecloths, brightly colored Berber pottery, intricate mosaics and architectural flourishes. The artisan's details give these objects a presence that goes beyond its practical purpose, however this purpose is what separates crafts from art.

Arabic calligraphy is another functional skill that blurs the line with artistic creation and can be traced back to 632 AD (Khan 9). Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes in Islamic Art and Spirituality that calligraphy and the word on the Guarded Tablet could be considered the “progenitor of the traditional Islamic visual arts and most characteristic feature of the visible

aspect of Islamic civilization” (19). In Islamic universities, calligraphers are taught to form the words of God with the pen while their peers, the muezzins, form the same words with their voice. Its connection with the Qur’an elevates calligraphy to a special regard that has not been sullied by a contrast to the newly arrived Western art forms (Ali The Status 187). One of the many gifts of God was the ability to read and write. The Arabic word for pen, “qalam” appears twice in the Qur’an: in the first verse of Surah Al-Qalam, Chapter 68 and again in the fourth verse of Surah Al-Alaq, Chapter 96 (Searchtruth.com +1). Surah Al-Alaq states, “Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created, Has created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous, Who has taught by the pen, Has taught man that which he knew not.” (Quran.net “Al-Alaq” +1)

As the language developed, variations evolved for practical as well as aesthetic purposes. Although there are seven main categories: *naskh* an inscriptional style, *kufi* the first widespread script used to write the Qur’an, *ruqa* for clerical purposes, *maghribi* from North Africa, *thuluth* the first cursive form, *diwani* typically Turkish and suitable for decorative variations and *farsi* from Iran, there are many further divisions within each category (Khan 14-15). In addition, variation occurred on an individual level as calligraphers added artistic flourishes to their pieces. Al-Qandusi was a famous Moroccan calligrapher in the 19th century whose version of the Qur’an and other writing pieces are known for their particularly fluid and intricate *maghribi* styles.

However, despite the liberties calligraphers take with their task, calligraphy is nevertheless a craft, not an art. Its supreme purpose is to communicate the word of God, and if not that, then other explicit messages through the codes of language. The specific letters of the Arabic alphabet come together to form specifically spelled words and specifically structured

grammatical sentences. The Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris published an article, “The Arab Contribution to Civilization” that explains:

...the calligrapher does not produce independent and autonomous works of art, but rather brings an aesthetic added value to pre-existing, functional objects...a calligrapher is therefore an artisan who, as it were, decorates reality, a craftsman whose job it is to put the finishing touches to the outer envelope of things (Institut du Monde Arab +1). A calligrapher may experiment with the presentation of his work, but he does not completely depart from the original purpose of the language. As the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art explains, “calligraphy is principally a means to transmit a text, albeit in a decorative form” (Calligraphy in Islamic Art +1) That purpose must stay intact; the work should not be available for interpretation or criticism.

The Arrival of Art

The beginning of the twentieth century brought the beginning of art and modern art to Morocco. The start of the 1900s marked the arrival of the Europeans to the upper West corner of Africa and with them came easels and paints. As Moroccans working on these French and Spanish estates watched the Europeans work with such foreign materials, they began to try themselves. Without any formal schooling, these artists are known as “naïve painters” and taught themselves by imitating the European pieces.

The Western influence goes beyond the technique of painting and fine arts, however. The Europeans brought two important mindsets as well. The first was the concept of art for display-sake. Attention to detail no longer complemented a functional object, but stood alone on its own. The creation makes a statement about much greater things than itself: about the artist, society and the world. Artists incorporate emotion and impart to the viewer not an urge to use, but an urge to

feel. Viewers also have the freedom to approach the product in whichever way they want. There is more than one way to interpret the piece.

Another mindset is a focus on the individual. Artists have the creative license to design what they chose and stray from tradition's path and rules. Gone was the requirement to imitate or mimic the classical definition of a perfect piece. The definition of "skill" was recreated. With crafts, skill is the ability to execute the best version of a design or model. Western art, however, asserts that mastery is achieved by the creation of something unique.

Abstraction became a popular technique to achieve this goal; however it was not a new concept to the region. Jocelyn M. Ajami explains in an *Aramco World* article that, "Western abstraction derives from the embrace of individualism, and is produced in a secular cultural context. Islamic abstraction, on the other hand, is a cultural, intellectual and communal expression of faith" (Ajami +1) Historically, abstraction was nothing new to Arab and Islamic society. By abstracting an image or figure, the creator was avoiding idolatry, something strictly forbidden in Islam. There is nothing on the same plane as God. One of the five pillars of Islam is the "shahada" or testament of faith, which declares "there is no god but God." The cartoon of Mohammed in 2005 broadcasted to the world that human depiction was thought to be strictly forbidden in Islam. However, the resulting discourse illuminated that the Qur'an does not explicitly state anything on this subject. A search for the word "picture" in the English-translated *Hadith Al-Bakari*, the documentation of Mohammed's life however, yields 42 matches. Most passages involve the Prophet Mohammed declaring that either "angels do not enter the house in which there are pictures" or that painters will be asked to breath life into their pictures on the Day of Resurrection and when they are unable to (for only God can give life), they will be severely punished (Quran.net "Bukhari Literal-Phrase Search Results" +1). This restriction

contributed to the flourishing of abstraction and calligraphy as an alternative form of religious expression, although it is hardly considered a limitation by artists today.

In contrast, the point of Western abstraction is to emphasize the distinction of each individual. This motivation, over the religious one, is driving most artists of our time although they may still employ the results of religiously-driven abstraction. Western abstraction is connected to the principles of humanism as a way for each artist to put a personal spin on an existing definition. This is not to say the West “freed” Moroccan artists from religious and societal constraints and prohibitions. Western art itself went through a similar progression, although much more elongated than what occurred in Morocco. The techniques of portraiture and commissioned paintings of courtesans required mimicry, imitation and the adherence to rules as well. However, as the arts developed, artists and painters began to depart from the constraints of compensation – they no longer wished to paint only what others would buy. Therefore, European court painters evolved into impressionists and abstractionists just as Moroccan artisans creating specific products for payment evolved into artists designing for personal expression. It is beyond the scope of this paper, but interesting to reflect on what economic fluctuations allowed this embarkation from financial constraints.

The European departure in the mid-1900s marks the beginning of contemporary art in Morocco, although this label is more complex than the changing of a year (Diouri 4/28/09). The major shift that occurred in art at this time, however, is a step away from imitating the Europeans. Political independence brought creative independence. Artists struck out into their own styles and compositions. The “first generation” was allowed to go abroad to study the fine arts and plastics in European schools. They returned, empowered by their education (Bennani-Smires 4/27/09).

The Nationalist Moroccan Art Movement

In the field of calligraphy, the Western emphasis on individual expression, emotional significance instead of functional and abstraction meant that Moroccans began to use the script for other reasons besides the traditional religious and linguistic purposes of the craft. After the Europeans left the country, and even though Morocco had been a protectorate and not a colony like its neighbor Algeria, the post-colonial mindset was prevalent. In all spheres of society, Moroccans asserted their national identity, tradition and history in contrast to the European lifestyle. This sentiment carried into the art world in the 1970s and 1980s as many artists infused their work with links to their homeland. There were many techniques to achieve this reference for the individual nature of artistic expression persisted. One style was the incorporation of Arabic letters. Artists combined the principles of abstraction with the Arabic alphabet and separated the letters from their linguistic and religious contexts. The letters did not always form coherent sentences, or actual words or even one of the 28 actual letter structures. The point was that these symbols were at the heart of Moroccan identity: embodying its religion and language. Therefore, by referencing them, an artist could evoke those complex subjects in a visual format. At the brushes of these artists, the symbols took on another layer of significance: that of politics.

The Current Art Movement

While this purpose may continue to be evident in some artists' use of letters, the post-colonial mindset seems to have subsided. The reference to Moroccan tradition has shifted from a nationalist statement against an outside threat, to a more simple personal expression. There is little anger towards imperial powers behind current pieces. Furthermore, the religious and linguistic function remains in the background. The letters stand alone as an abstraction of both

the language and even the letters themselves. Working with letters is an exploration of cultural aesthetics: drawing on an established design culturally defined as beautiful and making it one's own. The pieces and ideas of five Moroccan artists support these theories.

Abdellah El Hariri



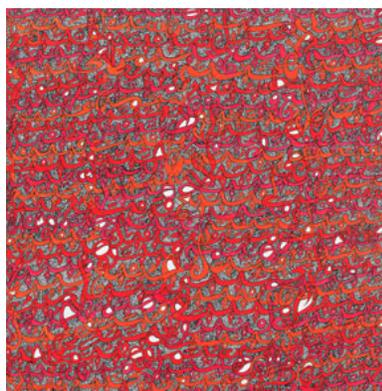
Abdellah Hariri, like all of my subjects, is Moroccan born. But unlike others, he is not jet-setting all over the world. I met him unexpectedly when I first found his gallery, l'Atelier du Creation in Casablanca. I asked the man sitting at the front desk in my broken Standard Arabic if he knew whether Hariri spoke English and he replied, in beautiful Standard Arabic “Well, I’m Hariri and no, I don’t speak English.”

I also visited his studio which, like many of the artist studios I visited and with many Moroccan addresses in general, is nestled in winding streets. The first time I visited, he sent a friend to pick me up and drive me there by car, but the second time he waited as it took me a half an hour to get there from his gallery – only a few blocks away. The smell of freshly cut wood and paint reminds me of my grandfather’s workshop. Some of his work is displayed on the walls along with a framed verse of the Qur’an. A bookshelf filled with books on calligraphy and art takes up one of the walls. He guides Amane, a student at the art and communication school who speaks English quite well although she does not admit it, owns three cell phones (one for each service provider), and complains that her parents refuse to accept art as a possible career path. Together, they form Arabic letters in multiple scripts using mediums from ink to sand. He turns

their red ink spill into a beautiful creation all its own. Neighbors drop in to say hello including a photographer, another painter whom I will meet again later at Villa des Arts, and a man with three young children. The littlest girl gives each of us a “bisous.” Hariri’s teenage son stops by after school and his daughter visits from university in Ifrane on the Labor Day weekend. She translates for us and as she studies computer programming, sometimes asks for clarification herself.

He explains to me the history of modern art in Morocco as he experienced it. He attended l’Ecole Superieure de Beaux Arts in Casablanca when it was opened to Moroccans. While the art school in Tetouan follows the Spanish emphasis on figuration, the Casablanca branch focuses on abstraction, following the French. After his Moroccan education, he traveled around Europe, seeking to learn more, a desire and priority that continues today. He points to two of his pieces on the walls and explains that you can see in them the progression of not only his artistic technique, but general Moroccan trends. The canvas on the left is filled with large calligraphic-style letters made with broad sweeping brush strokes. The one on the right is a painting with swaths of color in different textures. Small letters painted free-hand freckle the piece. He mastered the classic calligraphic style, rule by rule, measurement by measurement and centered his work on that as a statement of his Moroccaness, a departure from the painting that is a French tradition. He uses the metaphor that his use of the Arabic alphabet (he never uses the term “khat” or calligraphy) in 1970s painting was the Moroccan fingerprint. And now, he makes those designs his own and uses them as accessories, complements to his works along with other symbols such as the Amazighi alphabet and tattoo designs.

Mehdi Qotbi



Probably largely because Hariri and my friend, Khadija wrote off Qotbi as not worth the visit, I emailed him and when his quick response asked to call his cell phone, I did. I was greeted by a flamboyant and somewhat maniacal French accent. He promptly invited me to his house for coffee that day and when I was unable to come due to a meeting with Hariri that went longer than expected, he told me he is very exact and that my behavior “was not good.” Nevertheless, he invited me to couscous when a president of something would also be attending. Unfortunately, I could not make it to that and luckily told him so well in advance. Finally, as I was walking up the stairs to his apartment the following day, I admit I was a bit afraid of what I would find.

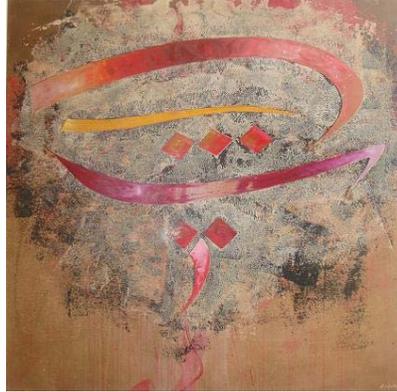
What I did find was a small man with curly hair wearing a Moroccan robe covered in his designs. After greeting me, he led me out to the back patio and introduced me to his 18 year old daughter visiting from her mother’s home in Paris. He was impressed that I could identify fliio in his Moroccan iced tea and fetched me a copy of his book as well as some copies of newspaper articles in English about his work. He then admitted that his English was not good enough to express his inspiration and artistic purpose. He would show me his home and we would set up another meeting with a translator. His colleagues call him a “businessman” more than an artist and the mass-produced framed canvasses, woven tapestries, cushions, shirts, robes and his own blue jeans line that are dominated by his designs could not support that identification more. On

the surfaces that remain are framed photographs with or letters from various world political and artistic leaders.

Later, he picked me up from my apartment in a blue BMW. He yelled at a kid who had been trying to get my attention and then answered a phone call. Gesturing to put my seatbelt on, he pulled out of the parking lot. After a stop at the bank and while we waited for Khadija to arrive to translate, I followed him around the neighborhood as he greeted various car parkers and other individuals on the street with a “Salaam Alaikum!” To a specific portion of these people, he would also hand money in what seemed to be a routine occurrence. He never referenced or explained what he was giving to these men, and I did not ask. He explained on the way he was from a poor family in Rabat, but he moved to France and lived there for over 30 years. However, he always spoke Arabic at home. He worked for a short time as a professor and then returned here. He divides his time between homes in Casablanca, Marrakech, Paris and a small city on the Atlantic coast. Very busy, he does not have much time to spend outside of Casablanca and Paris and he does not go to visit his family in Rabat often.

As Khadija was slightly late and he seemed to have a busy day in front of him, our interview was rushed and he spoke as he jumped between two pieces, adding a design in pencil here and a touch of paint there. Unlike Hariri’s work, Qotbi’s canvasses are nothing but his symbols. He emphasized that his designs were not calligraphy, not real Arabic letters, but symbols of his own making that represent the Arab World’s openness to the rest of the world. He wishes to express that the culture does not wish to cloister itself off to fundamentalism, but is attentive to the “other” and exposed to change, mixing and evolution.

Noureddine Chater



Noureddine Chater lives in Marrakech and works closely with the Matisse Art Gallery, which is also home to another painter who uses abstracted Arabic letters in his work, Noureddine Daifallah. Early in Chater's art career, he worked as an art professor with the Ministry of Education, but now is committed solely to making art. The lettering in his work is the focus. However, the lettering is a complete abstraction – he does not form actual letters, but suggests them with curves and dots assembled in another composition (Chater, Clement).

Chater believes that art can build a community around the concept of beauty. And by using a symbol, the artist not only unites those who already attribute a meaning and emotions to it, but then goes further to disseminate that emotion to a wider audience. From there, the symbol evolves as others lay claim to it. He finds this multi-layered unification power truly amazing (Chater, Clement).

Chater sees his role as looking at these banal elements in a new light and displaying that novel perspective for others. By denormalizing an object and infusing it with beauty and emotions, the artist frees it from definitions and allows each individual to perceive it in whichever way they choose. This transformation process requires that the artist is brave enough to challenge the current fashion and place his or herself outside the realm of fixed ideologies. The artist is thus transformed as well (Chater, Clement).

When asked to reflect on Moroccan art of today, Chater responds that it will take time to see the essence of the current trends. He feels “we lack real thinkers” and that we must wait until those who are “content to imitate or those who pretend to create but are essentially venal” are eliminated (Chater, Clement).

Youssouf Emine El Alamy



Having had to cancel our tentative appointment the day before, El Alamy managed to fit me in the day before he left for Rotterdam, for the opening of his exhibit there. I waited for him to finish speaking with a friend and film producer, who he hopes will document his impending exhibit, and then we relocated to the upstairs of the café (the place for lovers, he told me), so that the voice recorder would work better. Born just south of Tangier, he grew up in Morocco and attended university there as well, with a few joint programs abroad. Similar to Raja, Youssouf El Alamy comes from the literary world into the visual arts. He has a Master's degree in English literature, looking at erotic literature from a formal point of view. His mother is a staunch Arabizer, refusing to speak French, and his father was a perfect bilingual who published works in both Darija and Classical Arabic. As a result, El Alamy speaks Darija, French, English and has a firm grasp on Classical Arabic.

Technically, El Alamy is a novelist and a writer, but his books push conventional definitions. He is currently in the midst of launching his book Nomad which will, like its namesake, travel to various cities around the world, simultaneously bringing its content but taking away characteristics from these distinct locations as well. The identity fluctuation and conglomeration evident in his work is not unlike the work of my other subjects, although the

intention is missing in theirs. It is part of their work, whereas for him, it is what his work is about. When I asked him what his definition of “art” was, he replied that to him, art is a medium and he does not believe in “art for art’s sake.” He uses art to make a statement about the world around him and believes that artists are often a more trusted source than academics. However, he thinks of himself only, as the audience of each of his pieces. It is this intended message that separates him from the artists I have interviewed.

The chapters of his book, Tqarqib Ennab, are visual, displayed pieces. Although their plots fit together, each one is the story of one character, and therefore it can stand alone as well. Often framed in the border of a Persian carpet, the character of the chapter is the focus of each work, created from pieces of the figures on Moroccan playing cards. Then, surrounding them is the story, written by hand in Darija. El Alamy explained that all of his books are written in French, however he wished to make a statement with this one: that it is possible to do so in Darija, the often belittled spoken vernacular. He chose to take the novel out of the book form and into a visual one as an artistic statement that turns the act of reading into a collective, public one.

In addition to the political significance behind his inclusion of Darija, as a novelist, his use of script is for the linguistic and semiotic purpose to communicate a specific thought. The way in which he presents that message is the artistic flavor. But the melding of these two worlds is important. He warns of the temptation of finding a successful formula for one’s work and never leaving it. He argues he has managed to avoid it because he gets bored and needs to keep challenging himself. It seems that the unusual, dual-form nature of his work is an example of this drive.

Raja Atlassi



As I stood in the middle of the ten artists who inspired me to write about this topic, I was intimidated and unsure of how to approach them. Not dressed in black with red lipstick or flashy accessories, I certainly was not part of this chic gathering. But one of them approached me, interested in why I was there. Her piece “Poesie” was one of the three works that stood out to me in the exhibit as it incorporated calligraphy. Raja Atlassi (named after her father’s favorite Casablanca soccer team), described her recent work that further pursued bringing in lettering. She invited me to call her and set up a time to speak more.

Later, as she drove me to her house, she explained her career progression: from an education in French literature, to theater, to jewelry design, to the study of Moroccan clothing and then finally the junction she came to when her children were grown: she still hadn’t found something that truly fulfilled her. She felt her life had thus far been limited professionally and geographically by family obligations including ill parents and the raising of a family. She realized that art had always been a part of her life, from the drawings she did when she was little to her preference in visiting museums when traveling. And so, without a degree, she launched into the art world.

She shows me the progression of her art that is displayed either on the walls or temporarily propped up on the couch in her living room. All include a central muse-like woman, and while the earlier pieces use an oil and knife technique, the later ones employ collage and script. In the latter, the women are enveloped in a repetition of the alif maksura or mamduda. As with all Muslims who were surrounded by the word of God starting from a young age, Raja finds the alphabet to be mystical. She thinks that most Muslims have a favorite letter and that that significance might be linked to their real name, the name of their soul. Her letter is the alif mamduda because it is the final form of the first letter of the alphabet, thereby encompassing everything. Echoing this thought, the designs nest in one another, the tails lengthening to accommodate the load. She also respects the letter for its sound “ahh,” evident in all languages and the sound of respiration. The alif designs get lighter and darker, reminiscent of waves of breathing: in and out, sighs and gasps. She explains that although she did not think about the meaning behind her works as she created them, she feels it is important to ask herself why she did what she did afterwards.

This thinking and reflection is essential for two aspects of art, two aspects that she feels the Moroccan art community is lacking. The first is that you must reflect and question internally to be able to push and challenge yourself further. Thinking is what leads to evolution. She feels that too many people seek money and fame, stopping as soon as it is achieved even if their work only achieves mediocrity. You must be unafraid of investing all you have and more into your work. She expands that this applies to Moroccan society in general and might even be traced to Islam: only God is perfect. However, she explains that just because God can only be perfect should not keep us from reaching our personal best. It is this commitment without inhibitions that creates skill.

And with this thinking and boundary-pushing must come social interaction and collaboration. She feels the Moroccan art community is filled with individuals stuck in a competitive mentality. They isolate themselves, afraid that others will copy their work. “Copy my work!” she exclaims, and through the copying they will create their own. She prefers to exhibit her work with others so that she can learn from them and see how they master the techniques she cannot. She would like to see an exhibit that requires all artists to work with the same materials and guidelines; the divergences of the products will persist. Her interest in collaboration goes outside the art community as well. She serves on the board of the Academy of Education that will soon launch a series of educational videos created by the partnership between Ministry of Education officials and local artists.

Conclusion

None of my subjects use the word “calligraphy” when they refer to the content of their pieces. Instead, they use the terms “letters” “alphabet” “symbol” and “script.” These words clarify that the purpose of these designs is not to form words and messages according to Arabic grammar rules. They all stressed the term “abstraction.” Their word choice contradicts the theories of Wijdan Ali and Sheila Blair, who have both written about Islamic art, contemporary art in the Islamic World and calligraphy. Ali states in The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art that calligraphy has expanded “into an independent art form that was used in every decorative context” (51). However, at its core, calligraphy is a functional symbol of language. When those symbols enter the art world and leave linguistic meaning, they become something new. The same word “calligraphy” cannot be applied.

Ali also uses terms such as “calligraffiti” and “pseudo-calligraphy” for the script observed in art like that of my subjects. “Calligraffiti” refers to script without rules of proportion and “pseudo-calligraphy” is a complete abstraction (Blair 618-619). Perhaps El Alamy’s book falls into the category of “calligraffiti” because he handwrote his book and therefore it strays from required proportions. However, only his work and not Hariri’s is “calligraffiti” because he formed a readable, logical message. “Pseudo-calligraphy” is a misnomer when applied to the artwork of these five artists. Ali states that “pseudo-calligraphy” is “confusing” while Blair relates it to the history of language in North Africa as spoken rather than written (Blair 619). Ali finds it disorienting because she desires to attribute the out-dated meaning to these symbols incorporated in art. She judges a piece by a standard from which the artist wishes to stray. The symbols cannot be interpreted as text and must be recognized as such. Blair’s belief also attributes too much linguistic significance to these figures. Abstraction, redefinition and

reinterpretation is a better explanation of the symbols evident in the work of the five Moroccan artists.

The lack of a nationalist statement when speaking with these artists is also noteworthy. That stage of tying in a political purpose to art seems to have passed. Ali, in The Status of Islamic Art in the Twentieth Century again makes an assertion that does not accurately apply to the goals of these five artists:

What most contemporary artists in the Islamic world aspire to is the establishment of an artistic identity which, like their forefathers, would draw on advanced procedures, art media, and styles learned from the West, adjust them to their own beliefs, aesthetics, and convictions, and come up with new formulas for modern Islamic art that would contribute to other cultures and artistic traditions as well as to their own (Ali The Status 188).

Although these five artists cannot represent the entire Moroccan art community, living in it, they may have more insight than would the Jordanian Ali. Perhaps Morocco differs from other Muslim countries formerly under European occupation. Or perhaps Ali's findings applied when the book was written in 1992, closer to the time of emancipation when nationalist feelings were more prevalent, and now it has become out of date.

Toni Maraini's article "Morocco" from the "Contemporary art from the Islamic World" exhibition at the Barbican Concourse Gallery in London in 1989 seems to be a more accurate assessment of the Moroccan art world:

For today's painters, the question of whether 'Moroccan painting' exists is a moot one: they have moved beyond this, individually and collectively, always influenced and inspired by a variety of forms, symbols and ideas. Morocco has always been a crossroads of cultures – Saharan, Iberian, Berber, Mediterranean, Islamic – and its painters, 'trans-occidental' (Maraini)

Atlassi echoed this feeling that Morocco has a unique ability to adapt to foreign presence and internalize it as part of the culture. When our conversation strayed from the topic of art and into that of the wearing of the *hijab* in Morocco, she confidently asserted that it is a fashion, distant

from the fundamental religious significance. It was an example of Morocco's incorporation of foreign elements. Atlassi does not worry that fundamentalism will be a problem for Morocco because Moroccans will adapt rather than angrily react to foreign influence as is the case in other Muslim countries. Although this was a different subject matter, the principle also applies to art.

These five artists value integration and progression rather than isolation and fundamentalism in the content of contemporary art and the relationships of the art community. Even Qotbi, who seems to focus on financial profit rather than creative exploration more than the other subjects, expressed a similar desire in the goal of his pieces. Both Hariri and Atlassi enjoy working and exhibiting with other artists and Hariri, Atlassi, El Alamy and Chater all reference a need to continually question boundaries in their artistic plight (Personal interviews, Chater, Clement, Haimoud +1). With this mentality, these five artists are driving the Moroccan contemporary movement forward. Blair similarly diagnoses the benefit of crossing boundaries between semantic and talismanic usage of Arabic letters: "for those outside the Islamic tradition, the use of writing can at times seem heavy-handed and the symbolism rather blatant, but these works are instructive in charting new paths for an old field" (621).

And although many seem to feel that Morocco is unique in its adaptability, perhaps the society can still learn from the drive of artists like these. Many in the country still cling to tradition in the face of democratic reform. Corruption, a rampant problem in the country is another form of avoiding redefinition and exploration. Instead, many government officials settle for the easy method of paying for success rather than putting in effort and earning it. They achieve mediocrity and quit. More partnerships like the one in which Atlassi participates with the Academy of Education, in which artists lend their unconventional thinking and quest for change to the government and civic sector may be highly beneficial. There is no limit to what redefining

a mundane object can do, be it the creation of a original art piece by shifting the symbols of the Arabic alphabet through linguistic, religious, nationalist and aesthetic significances, or advancing a the ethics and ambitions of a culture.

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