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Arabic Calligraphy as a Form of Artistic Expression. Ahmed Moustafa and His Perspective on the Role and Meaning of Art

ABSTRACT

Ahmed Moustafa, an internationally acclaimed Egyptian artist based in London, centers his artistic expression on Arabic calligraphy in its various forms. This article explores Moustafa's perspective on his artistic mission and the profound significance he attributes to calligraphy. The analysis begins with the artist's reflections on his work, emphasizing its spiritual depth and cultural heritage. Moustafa perceives the unity and harmony of the universe as expressed through geometry, which he regards as the divine language. This belief underpins his exploration of the proportional writing system (*khatt mansūb*), originally developed by the 10th-century calligrapher Ibn Muqla. Through years of meticulous study, Moustafa reconstructed this system, revealing its foundational geometric principles. For Moustafa, calligraphy transcends mere artistic expression; it becomes a spiritual practice that draws the practitioner closer to God. His artwork draws inspiration primarily from the Quran, where the Beauty and Goodness emanate not only from geometrically governed script but also from the divine Word itself, with writing serving as its tangible representation.

KEYWORDS: Ahmed Moustafa, contemporary art, Arabic calligraphy, geometry, spirituality

STRESZCZENIE

Kaligrafia arabska jako forma wypowiedzi artystycznej. Ahmed Moustafa i jego spojrzenie na rolę i znaczenie sztuki

Ahmed Moustafa to międzynarodowej sławy egipski twórca, mieszkający na stałe w Londynie, dla którego dominującą formą artystycznej wypowiedzi jest pismo arabskie w różnorodnych odmianach kaligraficznych. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie spojrzenia Ahmeda Moustafy na zadanie, jakie stawia sobie jako artyście, oraz na fundamentalne według niego znaczenie

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kaligrafii. Punktem wyjścia w niniejszych badaniach są wypowiedzi artysty na temat własnej twórczości, jej duchowej wartości i korzeni kulturowych. Ahmed Moustafa dostrzega jedność i harmonię wszechświata wyrażoną poprzez geometrię, którą uznaje za język Boga. Zasady geometryczne są też fundamentem systemu pisma proporcjonalnego (*khaṭṭ mansūb*), opracowanego przez Ibn Muqlę, uznanego kaligrafa z X w., a zrekonstruowanego przez Ahmeda Moustafę podczas jego wieloletniej pracy naukowej. Sztuka kaligrafii staje się w tej perspektywie nie tylko formą wyrazu artystycznego, ale również duchową praktyką prowadzącą ku Bogu. Artysta szuka inspiracji do swoich obrazów przede wszystkim w Koranie, co sprawia, że obecne w nich Piękno i Dobro wynika nie tylko z zapisu rządzonego zasadami geometrii, ale z samego Słowa, którego pismo jest materialną reprezentacją.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Ahmed Moustafa, sztuka współczesna, kaligrafia arabska, geometria, duchowość

Introduction

Ahmed Moustafa* (born 1943, Alexandria) is an artist living and working in London since 1974¹. He has gained international fame as a creator of paintings in which the dominant form of expression is Arabic script in a variety of calligraphic varieties. Ahmed Moustafa, who is also a master calligrapher, draws on the centuries-old tradition of Arabic calligraphy, one of the most revered practices in the entire history of the Islamic world, in creating his paintings. Since he is a painter, however, he consciously chose to replace traditional media (ink and paper) – he primarily creates large-format paintings on paper or canvas using mixed techniques, usually oil and watercolor.²

* I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Stefan Sperl from *The School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics* SOAS (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/stefan-sperl>) with whom Ahmed Moustafa collaborated academically for many years on his project on Arabic script (see below). My correspondence with Prof. S. Sperl has helped me to understand important issues in the artist's views and has reassured me that the interpretive direction I have adopted of the ideological and spiritual foundation for Ahmed Moustafa's work is the right one. I thank the Professor for his time and commitment to me. The responsibility for any errors rests with me alone.

I extend my thanks to Mark Brady, a manager of the London studio Fe-Noon, who sent me a wealth of material relating to the painting of Ahmed Moustafa, irrespective of the modest order I placed. I thank Mark for his selfless help and commitment.

- 1 I have followed the established notation of the artist's name as used in artistic discourse, while employing the scientific IJMES transcription for Arabic terms in all other instances.
- 2 For information on the artist's biography, exhibitions, and museum collections of paintings all over the world, see *Fe-Noon Ahmed Moustafa (U.K.) Limited*: <https://fenoon.com/>

Due to the immense diversity of contemporary Arabic art, it is difficult to place Ahmed Moustafa within a specific context. His work can be positioned within *hurūfiyya*, “a wide range of explorations into the abstract, graphic, and aesthetic properties of Arabic letters” (Khoury, 2015, p. 202), which some describe as a movement or school that emerged in the 1940s and is generally characterized by the use of Arabic script in abstract painting. The problem with *hurūfiyya*, however, is that it encompasses hundreds of artists who work independently, using various media and techniques, often without knowing each other, and only occasionally forming more formal groups or collectives (Khoury, 2015; Shehab, 2019). Art historians (not all of whom consider the term *hurūfiyya* – literally meaning letterism – adequate or clear) have proposed various typologies of *hurūfiyya* (see Shehab, 2019), where there is not always room for Ahmed Moustafa – especially in those categorizations where the defining characteristic of the artists is their detachment from Islamic calligraphy and perceiving the Arabic letter as free from its sacred connotations (Shabout, 2018, p. 142). One of the more satisfying categorizations comes from Bahia Shehab, who, having created two categories of *hurūfiyya* works – calligraphic artworks and script-based art works – accompanied each with a horizontal spectrum (from traditional calligraphy/written script art work towards abstract calligraphy/abstract art work) and a vertical one (from skilled calligraphy/skilled script to conceptual calligraphy/conceptual art work). In this framework, most of Ahmed Moustafa’s paintings would be closer to traditional calligraphy on the horizontal spectrum and they “would also fall closer to the skilled calligraphic innovation than the conceptual one on the vertical spectrum” (Shehab, 2019, p. 62).

Ahmed Moustafa’s body of work can be categorized into three distinct types. His earliest pieces reflect the classical approach to calligraphic training, as outlined in traditional handwriting manuals, where novice calligraphers begin by practicing individual Arabic letters (Rogers, n.d.). These early works often feature mirrored compositions – a technique historically employed by classical calligraphers – and sometimes present horizontally arranged verses. One notable example is *The Blue Fugue* (see Fig. 1), a painting inspired by the rhythm of collective prayer (*dhiḳr*) frequently practiced in Sufi (mystical Islam) circles. In this context, *dhiḳr*, meaning “recollection,” “remembrance,” or “memory” in Arabic, involves repetitive invocation of God’s name, Allāh. As a mystical practice, this “recollection”, usually of the so called “the most beautiful names of God” draw practitioners closer to Him and facilitate a sense of union with the Divine.

ahmed-moustafa/ (access: June 2024), as well as *Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2005, and *Aḥmad Muṣṭafā – Muqaddima fī Khaṭṭ al-Muqla*, 2016.

The composition features a palette of blue and black set against an ochre background, arranged in horizontal rows of overlapping *lām* and *alif* letters that evoke the image of reeds reflected in water. Interspersed among them are overlapping *hā'* letters. The blue letters, forming a distinct layer, create the impression of a struggle for dominance within the painting. This interplay builds visual tension – a hallmark of Ahmed Moustafa's artistic style that recurs throughout his body of work (Rogers, n.d.; see also *Liḳā' al-Fannān al-Tashkīlī wa-Fannān al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2022).

Fig. 1. *The Blue Fugue*, 1976, oil on canvas, 142 x 105 cm



<https://fenoon.com/artwork/gallery/artwork/original-artwork/the-blue-fugue/> (access: September 2024).

The second group of Ahmed Moustafa's paintings is characterized by zoomorphic themes, drawing inspiration from pre-Islamic poetry that emerged in the oral nomadic culture of the Arabian Peninsula. These poems, later transcribed in the 8th and 9th centuries following the rise of Islam, often included vivid descriptions of wild desert animals and those integral to nomadic life, such as camels and horses. One example is the painting *Frolicking Horses* (see Fig. 2), inspired by a poem by Imrū-l-Qays, one of the most celebrated ancient Arabic poets of the 6th century CE.

Fig. 2. *Frolicking Horses*, 1993, oil and watercolor on handmade paper, 153 x 117 cm



<https://fenoon.com/artwork/gallery/artwork/original-artwork/frolicking-horses-2/> (access: September 2024).

It is important to note that Ahmed Moustafa's artistic aim is not to depict the sensory, external world or the individual characteristics of phenomena but to reveal the unchanging essence of things. The painting mentioned above serves as a metaphorical journey toward understanding the nature of the animal, seeking to express its archetype rather than a specific specimen. It reflects an exploration of the universal essence of the horse, encompassing its anatomy, movement, and form (Theophilus,

1993; see also *Liqā' al-Fannān al-Tashkīlī wa-Fannān al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2022).

Finally, the largest and most significant group of Ahmed Moustafa's works conveys the essence of the Quranic revelation. In these pieces, Quranic verses are positioned within spatial contexts – not always three-dimensional – or arranged on geometric forms. The calligraphic compositions often consist of multiple overlapping layers, written in various directions, including diagonal lines and occasionally in boustrophedon (alternating directional flow). Within a single painting, the artist may incorporate different calligraphic styles.³

An example of this is the work *Pavilions of Remembrance and Gratitude*, inspired by verse 2:152 of the Quran, where God says: “So remember Me, and I shall remember you. Give thanks unto Me, and disbelieve not in Me.”⁴

The verse can be interpreted as a divine invitation to engage in a relationship, with the mutual remembrance forming the basis of this meeting. In Ahmed Moustafa's painting, the individual sentences of the verse are arranged on different planes, with intertwined letters that emphasize the reciprocity expressed in the words. This depiction evokes man's first encounter with God. According to most exegetes, especially Muslim mystics, this archetypal meeting occurred in the preexistence of all souls, as referenced in another verse (7:172). At that time, God made a covenant with man, establishing a bond of mutual love. The Creator asked, “Am I not your Lord?” and all of humanity affirmed their loyalty by replying, “Yea, we bear witness” (Eshots, 2006; see also Leaman, 2004).

As interpreted by Kashya Hildebrand (n.d., p. 2), Ahmed Moustafa's work (see Fig. 3) narrates the quest to

recapture the lost memory of that experience, to excavate it from the deepest layers of the soul. This is a life-long process that demands ceaseless renewal because whatever is, in one blessed moment, salvaged and recaptured, disintegrates and falls prey to weakness, disregard and forgetfulness the next.

The pain of this perpetual struggle is reflected in the piling dark, fragmented letters set against a rusty background, while the recovery of memory is symbolized by the luminous hues of green, blue, and copper in the verses in

3 For further exploration of this topic through the lens of Ahmed Moustafa's specific works, including the project combining calligraphy and geometry that culminated in the installation *The Attributes of Divine Perfection within the Cube of Cubes*, see, e.g. Matilsky, 2004; Sperl, 2023; Theophilus, 2003.

4 All Quranic quotations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from *The Study Quran* (2017).

the foreground. This renewal of memory is not merely the result of human effort but is understood as a divine gift. Thus, each act of “remembrance” must simultaneously be an act of “gratitude” (Hildebrand, n.d.).

Fig. 3. *Pavilions of Remembrance and Gratitude*, 2009 CE/1430 AH, 194.5 x 153 cm, oil and watercolor on cotton paper. Painting inspired by Quranic verse 2:152



<https://fenoon.com/artwork/gallery/artwork/iris-prints/pavilions-of-remembrance-and-gratitude/> (access: September 2024).

This article aims to provide insight into Ahmed Moustafa’s vision of his role as an artist and his perspective on the fundamental importance of Arabic calligraphy as a form of artistic expression.

However, before proceeding, it is important to present a few theoretical and methodological considerations. First, the perception of beauty and art is shaped by culture. Understanding Ahmed Moustafa’s concept of art requires an “insider” perspective. This involves examining the role and significance of art through the lens of the original Arab and Muslim cultural framework in which the artist is rooted, as far as it is possible.

Ahmed Moustafa’s worldview is grounded in the principles of Islam. He is a devout individual for whom the Quran represents the authentic Word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is important to note that, according to Islam, God has communicated with man through His messengers, and both the Torah and the Gospel originated from divine revelation, whose archetype resides with God. However, the Jews

and Christians are believed to have distorted their scriptures, prompting God to send the Prophet Muhammad. As the Quran states, Muhammad was sent with “the Religion of Truth to make it prevail over all religion” (48:28). With Muhammad, the prophetic missions for all of humanity were to come to a final conclusion. This concept led to the universalization of Islam, where “Islam supersedes the laws which preceded it, but no one will supersede the Muslim *shari‘a*, which is destined to be valid for all people and for all times” (Friedmann, 2003, p. 26). It is the duty of every Muslim to engage in *da‘wa* (literally: calling up, summoning), to “invite non-Muslims to Islam,” to preach it, and to spread it. This responsibility stems from the metahistorical view of each person as a Muslim (see below).

Ahmed Moustafa views the role of the artist and the significance of art as primarily shaped by the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. However, his thought is also deeply rooted in the intellectual tradition of classical Islam, which emerged during the translation movement (mainly from Greek, Syriac, and Middle Persian). This movement, which took a more institutionalized form in the ninth century, ushered in a golden age for Arab-Muslim civilization, lasting until the early twelfth century in the East and giving rise to distinctive and original works. During this period, the Arab world absorbed, among other things, the heritage of Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. This classical philosophical tradition (Arabic: *falsafa* – referring to Hellenistic philosophy) developed alongside other intellectual currents, such as Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and *kalām* (speculative theology), which also resonate with Ahmed Moustafa’s thinking.⁵

The source material for this article includes statements made by the artist at an academic conference and on Arabic-language television programs, where he discussed his work. Additionally, in order to better understand and interpret Ahmed Moustafa’s ideas, I have consulted exhibition catalogs, as well as Stefan Sperl’s article *Islamic Spirituality and the Visual Arts* (2023) and correspondence with its author in July 2024.

1. The Role and Meaning of Art in Ahmed Moustafa’s Views

Initially, Ahmed Moustafa pursued the career of a figurative painter, trained in the neoclassical European tradition (at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture at the Department of Painting and Stage Design

⁵ It is not my purpose to confront these traditions and analyze them, as this does not pertain to the topic of the article, although the most prominent ideas used by the artist will be pointed out.

of Alexandria University). However, it was only after encountering the works of Nabia Abbott and Eric Schroeder on the Arabic script and Ibn Muqla (d. 940), the renowned Abbasid calligrapher, while in London, that he realized how little he knew about the subject. This realization led him to understand that he could not continue to live and create disconnected from his cultural roots and artistic heritage. Consequently, in the second half of the 1970s, he abandoned figurative painting and turned to his native artistic tradition – calligraphy (*Aḥmad Muṣṭafā – Muqaddima fī Khaṭṭ al-Muqla*, 2016).

At the same time, he combined his artistic practice with scholarly work. For many years, he conducted research into the scientific foundations of Arabic letter shapes. In 1989 he was awarded a Ph.D. by the Council for National Academic Awards for his dissertation entitled *The Scientific Foundation of Arabic Letter Shapes*. This research sought to decipher the geometric rules underlying the so-called proportional style (*khaṭṭ mansūb*), the development of which, based on Greek scientific advancements, is attributed to Ibn Muqla.

The discovery of the laws governing the art of Arabic calligraphy influenced Ahmed Moustafa, leading him to view calligraphy as a form of artistic expression that can serve as a pathway to God (the artist perceives creative abilities as divine gifts entrusted to humanity, to be nurtured and employed for spiritual growth on the earthly journey toward the Divine). Calligraphy, therefore, holds the potential to elevate not only its maker but also its observer to a higher spiritual plane. This understanding places upon the artist the sacred responsibility of a servant role, as the contemplation of calligraphic works invites individuals to embark on a path of spiritual development and transcend sensory perception to access a hidden, metaphysical dimension (cf. *Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2005; *A'māl Fanniyya wa-Manḥūtāt al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī*, 2015; *Aḥmad Muṣṭafā – Muqaddima fī Khaṭṭ al-Muqla*, 2016; *Kunūz al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī ma' al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2019).

According to Ahmed Moustafa, Arabic letters serve as earthly manifestations of heavenly archetypes (*Liqā' al-Fannān al-Tashkīlī wa-Fannān al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2022). Both the act of creating and the contemplation of the shapes of Arabic letters – together with their semantic significance – constitute a journey akin to that of a Sufi. Through this journey, an individual seeks to refine their soul, ultimately enabling a return to God and a restoration of their original state of cognition (private correspondence with S. Sperl, July 2024).

Ahmed Moustafa frequently emphasizes that his art is inclusive and accessible to all. He particularly seeks to engage with representatives of Western culture, believing that the message of his work, rooted in Arabic

calligraphy, is universal. It resonates on both aesthetic and spiritual levels, even for those unfamiliar with the Arabic script or language. Positioned at the intersection of Eastern and Western civilizations, Moustafa advocates for building bridges of understanding and dialogue between these cultures (*A'māl Fanniyya wa-Manḥūtāt al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī*, 2015; *Liqā' al-Fannān al-Tashkīlī wa-Fannān al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2022; Theophilus, 2003).

1.1. The Preserved Tablet

The art of writing holds a central place in Islamic culture. Arabic writing is regarded with extraordinary reverence, maintaining great respect and prestige to this day. Throughout the history of the Islamic world, those skilled in writing were deeply esteemed, and the profession of the calligrapher was held in high regard. This veneration was rooted, in part, in the vital role of preserving divine revelation through the transcription of the Quran. Additionally, the prohibition of figurative imagery⁶ redirected artistic expression toward writing, leading to the creation and refinement of increasingly sophisticated calligraphic styles. Above all, the elevated status of writing stems from its profound connection to the divine, reflecting the creative activity of God.

“Nay, it is a glorious Quran, upon a Preserved Tablet!” (85, 21–22). This verse gave rise to the concept of a heavenly Tablet and Pen, both of which are seen as participants in God’s creative work within Islamic religious tradition and culture. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes:

The Primordial Word [of God – B.P.-S.] was not only the single *kun* or *Be!* whose echo created the whole Universe and which is contained in the Noble Quran as sound. It was also crystallized in the ink with which the Divine Pen (*al-Qalam*) wrote the realities of all things (*al-ḥaqā'iq*) upon the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*), upon the pages of that archetypal book that is none other than the Quran as the “Mother of Books” (*Umm al-Kitāb*), the “Book” containing the inexhaustible possibilities of Divine Creativity (Nasr 1987, p. 17).

The Quranic term *umm al-kitāb* (source [lit. mother] of the book) is enigmatic and has given rise to numerous exegetical interpretations. It may refer to the heavenly archetype of all sacred texts, including the Quran and other revelations sent by God to man. Alternatively, it might correspond

6 It was not absolute and did not entirely eliminate figurative art, though it significantly limited its scope, confining it primarily to handicrafts and miniature painting.

to the Preserved Table, as suggested in the quoted text, upon which the Pen, under God’s command, inscribed the archetype of the Quran⁷ along with all that was, is, and will be until the Day of Judgment (Schimmel, 1990). Through this divine command, the Tablet encompasses the entirety of reality, serving as the foundation for the archetypes of all past, present, and future existence, shaped by divine decree in writing (Nasr, 1987; Prochwicz-Studnicka, 2018).

The Tablet embodies the very essence of God’s universal knowledge and will (Madigan, 2001). Consequently, the concept of the Preserved Tablet imbues human writing with a macrocosmic significance, elevating the practice of calligraphy to a sacred art that mirrors the activity of the divine Pen.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is significant that the first thing inscribed by the Pen on the Tablet was the *nuqta* (Arab. point, dot), which holds a primordial status, particularly in mystical Islam (Sharify-Funk, 2019). This *nuqta* is considered the most fundamental and originating element. It is associated with the letter *bā’* (see Figure 4) which begins the first verse of the opening sura of the Quran in the phrase “In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” (*bi-smi Llāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*). According to a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad:

All that is in the revealed books prior to the Quran is in the Quran, and all that is in the Quran is in its opening chapter ‘Al-Fatihah’, and all that is in the ‘Al-Fatihah’ is in its first verse ‘Bismil Laahir Rahmanir Rahiim’ and all that is in ‘Bismil Laahir Rahmanir Rahiim’ is contained in its first word ‘Bismi’ which is contained in its first letter ‘Ba’ which itself is contained in its Dot (cited after: *Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2016).

Thus, it is not only the beginning of all letters, but also a sign of God’s creative power, a symbol of the beginning of the universe, and the basis of creation.

Fig. 4. Letter *bā’* in independent form, Arabic Typesetting font, *own elaboration*.



7 It is important to note that the ontological status of the Quran remains a subject of debate even today. According to the Quran’s own message, it was created by God. However, the prevailing view holds that it is the preexistent speech of God (*ḳalām Allāh*) (Madigan, 2001; Prochwicz-Studnicka, 2018).

1.2. Cosmic Homogeneity

According to Ahmed Moustafa, behind the seemingly infinite variety of forms in God's created world lies a fundamental unity (Sperl, 2023). God speaks the language of geometry, and the rules of geometry (*qawānīn handasiyya*) govern all of creation, binding it together in such a way that it can be seen as belonging to a single, cohesive category (Aḥmad Muṣṭafā, 2016; *Kunūz al-Khaṭṭ al-'Arabī ma' al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2019).⁸

The principles of geometry reflect the divine principle of justice. God in Islam has 99 most beautiful names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), which indicate his attributes. One of the names is the Just One (*al-ʿAdl*). In the Quran, justice (*ʿadl*) is linked to, among other things, balance and right measure in God's actions, to putting things in their proper place (Campanini, 2006). For Ahmed Moustafa, God's justice is expressed in the perfect order and harmony (*i'tidāl*) of the universe.⁹ In other words, the order and harmony of creation are manifestations of the Creator's justice (Sperl, 2023). It is noteworthy that both terms share the same consonantal root, *'d-l*, which conveys the concept of equality. The first term, *ʿadl*, means both “just” and “justice,” while the second, *i'tidāl*, signifies being proportional and can be translated as “harmony,” “symmetry,” or “balance” (Lane, 1863–1893; Sperl, 2023).

The Quran speaks of the order and harmony of the visible world, stating that “all phenomena and processes in the macro- and micro-worlds form a unified, harmonious, and well-integrated structure, fully subject to the power and control of God” (Muhammad al-Ghazali, 2022, p. 235). For example: “And He it is Who sends down water from the sky. Thereby We bring forth the shoot of every plant, and from it We bring forth vegetation, from which We bring forth grain in closely packed rows ...” (6:99), “God alternates the night and the day” (24:44), “... He made the sun and the moon subservient, each running for a term appointed” (13:2).

The world is profoundly ordered and harmonious. In the artist's own words the laws of geometry are divine principles established by the Creator, bearing witness to His perfection. They shape all dimensions of the visible world according to a specific proportion and measure (*ʿalā-l-nisba wa-l-taqdīr*) (Aḥmad Muṣṭafā, 2016). Ahmed Moustafa draws on the term

8 Plato's vision of the geometric structure of the elements – fire, water, air, and earth – resonates here, where the patterns that govern them can be reduced to geometric forms. In this regard, Plato was influenced by Pythagorean thought and the philosophers who closely aligned themselves with mathematical reasoning (Dembinski, 1999).

9 This vision echoes the thoughts of one of Islam's greatest theologians, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) (see al-Ghazālī, 2007).

taqdīr, citing a Quranic verse (25:2) in which God, having created everything, “measured it out with due measure” (*qaddarahu taqdīran*). This phrase can be translated in various ways¹⁰, but none fully capture its meaning. It suggests that God imbued the very nature of things with a precise measure of ability, inherent qualities, and potential, along with a specific set of laws upon which they depend (Ahmad, n.d.; *The Message of the Qur’ān*, 1980; Mohamed, 2006).

The unity of the universe, or Cosmic homogeneity (*tajānus kawnī*) as Moustafa terms it, is the result of divine action executed according to perfect measure. For the artist, it reflects both the unity of the visible world and the unity of the Creator (Sperl, 2023). This concept aligns with the core Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*, which emphasizes the absolute oneness and unity of God.

1.3. The Geometry of Letters

Before the development of the principles of the proportional writing system, cursive script had already been in use since the second half of the 9th century. It began to appear in various forms, one of which, known as broken cursive, was commonly referenced in scholarly discourse (for more details, see Prochwicz-Studnicka, 2019).

In the 10th century, it is likely that the system of *khaṭṭ mansūb* was developed to standardize broken cursive – a system that defines the proportions of individual letters for each cursive script (six distinct types are recognized). The name most commonly associated with this effort is Ibn Muqla, although no examples of his writing have survived that can be definitively attributed to him. Additionally, the authenticity of his brief surviving treatise on calligraphy is sometimes questioned (Prochwicz-Studnicka, 2019). Similarly, the two explanatory manuscripts of Ibn Muqla’s work have not survived. Ahmed Moustafa has attempted to reconstruct these texts by drawing on other Arabic calligraphy works from the 10th to the 16th centuries that include references to the works of Ibn Muqla.¹¹

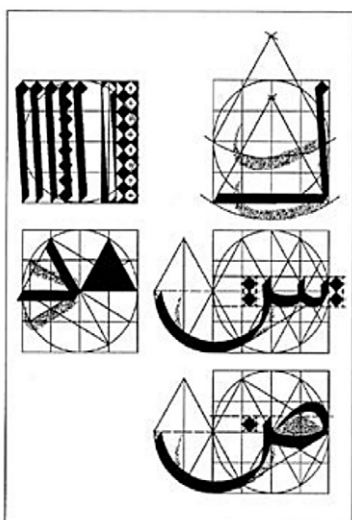
Ibn Muqla’s system is based on the so-called geometry of letters (*handasat al-ḥurūf*). As Janusz Danecki (2003, p. 105) explains, the foundation

10 In Muhammad Asad’s translation preferred by Ahmed Moustafa, this verse is rendered as follows: “determines its nature in accordance with [His own] design” (*The Message of the Qur’ān*, 1980).

11 Based on his doctorate and in collaboration with Stefan Sperl, he prepared a two-volume publication: *The Cosmic Script: Sacred Geometry and the Science of Arabic Penmanship*, Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2014, Vols. 1–2.

of this system consists of “a circle inscribed in a square, a pentagon, and two rhombuses inscribed in a circle, with the diameter of the circle corresponding to the Arabic letter *alif* (a vertical dash – ۱).” The proportions are measured by a point (*nuqṭa*), which is created when the tip of a specially cut reed pen (*qalam*) is applied to the paper. The resulting mark takes the shape of a rhombus. Each Arabic letter is related (*nusiba*) to the size of the *alif* as the basic measure, referencing the circle and its diameter. The point serves as the precise means of measurement (Schimmel, 1990; Tabbaa, 2021, see Figure 5). This point – fundamental in Euclidean geometry – functions as the smallest dimensionless geometric object. It is the same point used as a diacritical mark in the Arabic alphabet.

Fig. 5. Reconstruction of Ibn Muqla’s method by Ahmed Moustafa, letters: *alif*, *lām*, *dāl*, *sīn*, *sād*, cited after Tabbaa, 2021, p. 265.



Ahmed Moustafa believes that Arabic writing has a divine origin, being the work of God (*Kunūz al-Khaṭṭ al-‘Arabī ma’ al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2019; Ibrāhīm al-Sharīf, 2017). In this view, the Arabic letters – in their perfect proportions – are God’s creation, the result of His *taqdīr* as reflected in the Preserved Tablet. As Sperl (2023, p. 415) notes, “the Arabic script as codified by the ‘geometry of letters’ is a prime example of man-made *taqdīr*,” since man, to the best of his ability, should imitate “perfect measurement” (Sperl, 2023, p. 415) in his actions. This includes determining the shape, size, potential, and scope of development of things, and creating rules that allow them to function within their own space.

The artist agrees with *al-Tawhīdī* (d. 1020), one of the most influential intellectuals of his era, who regarded Ibn Muqla as “a prophet in the field of writing. It was poured upon his hand, even as it was revealed to the bees to make their honey-cells hexagonal.” He also observes that God’s last name is *al-Ṣabūr* (the Patient): “God waited patiently for as long as 300 years before the Muslims mastered the geometry (of letters)” (*Kunūz al-Khaṭṭ al-‘Arabī ma‘ al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2019; *Liqā’ al-Fannān at-Tashkīlī wa-Fannān al-Khaṭṭ al-‘Arabī al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2022; see also Tabbaa, 2021, p. 264). In other words, Ibn Muqla subjected the proportions of letter shapes to principles of geometry that had not previously been known in the Arab world. This was made possible after the Arabs became familiar with geometry – specifically through the Arabic translation of Euclid of Alexandria’s (d. ca 270 BC) *Elements*, which set in motion a wave of commentaries that began to emerge in the 9th century (Rosenfeld & Juszkievicz, 2001).

The shapes of the letters, reflecting those inscribed on the Preserved Tablet, thus partake in the cosmic homogeneity of the visible world, created by God. While the diversity of their forms alludes to the variety of shapes in the visible world, they are also imbued with a sense of homogeneity, stemming from the single, foundational order established by the Creator. Therefore, the homogeneity of being applies not only to the natural world but also to human creations (Sperl, 2023).

1.4. Artistic Beauty

For Ahmed Moustafa, beauty manifests in two forms, which he describes using two different Arabic terms: *jamāl* and *ḥusn*. The former refers to external, impermanent beauty, akin to the idea of attractiveness, while *ḥusn* signifies something more permanent and ideal. The consonantal root *ḥ-s-n* conveys both beauty and goodness (Lane, 1863–1893). According to the artist, *ḥusn* represents a higher level of beauty – an unchanging and permanent beauty, “a form of unadulterated goodness which emanates from the law of the Creator” (after Sperl, 2023, p. 419; *Liqā’ al-Fannān al-Tashkīlī wa-Fannān al-Khaṭṭ al-‘Arabī al-Duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2022). Thus, *ḥusn* encompasses both an aesthetic and an ethical dimension.

In the 10th and 11th centuries, many treatises on calligraphy and penmanship were written, offering insights into how the beauty of this art was perceived.¹² The fundamental criterion of beauty in calligraphy was

12 For example Abū Bakr ibn Yaḥyā al-Ṣūlī (d. 947), *Adab al-Kuttāb* (“Etiquette of Secretaries”) or Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī (d. 1023), *Risāla fī ‘ilm al-ḫitāba* (“Book on the Science of

the presence of *i'tidāl* – a harmonious arrangement of elements. This, as mentioned earlier, was seen in the physical world as a manifestation of justice (*'adl*), the divine principle that rules the world. For Ibn Muqla, shaping letters beautifully represented a process of just distribution, a harmonious ordering in which each letter acquires its formal features according to precise proportions (Sperl, 2023).¹³

Thus, the shapes of the letters are beautiful (*ḥasan*), and calligraphy is an art that continuously evokes the remembrance (*dhiḳr*) of the primordial act of the divine pen on the Preserved Tablet. It allows one to contemplate in the various forms of writing the traces of the Formless. Calligraphy guides man to his spiritual homeland by reflecting in its visual form the archetypes of letters found in God (Nasr, 1987), embodying the eternal and invisible Beauty, a reflection of the Beauty of God.¹⁴ As the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad says, God is beautiful and loves beauty (Nasr, 1999).

Art rooted in the eternal, universal principles that govern the cosmos (*qawānīn ḥawniyya*) reveals objective beauty,¹⁵ making it inherently metaphysical. The essence of this beauty lies in harmony, and for Ahmed Moustafa, calligraphy represents the most perfect expression of this harmony.

As previously mentioned, the artist seeks to reach representatives of Western culture through his art, believing that they too can resonate with the message conveyed by his works rooted in Arabic calligraphy. This is possible because every human being, as a creation of God, is imbued with cosmic laws, being part of a universe constructed on the principles of geometry (*qawānīn handasiyya*). The idea that all individuals are permeated by universal laws – and are thus receptive to them – aligns with the Quranic concept of *fiṭra*, a notion to which Ahmed Moustafa frequently refers (private correspondence with S. Sperl, July 2024).

Penmanship”). Aesthetics as a separate branch of Arabic philosophy did not develop in the classical Islamic world (Nasr, 1999).

13 Compare this with the classical theory in the Western tradition, which Władysław Tatarkiewicz (1988) refers to as “the great theory of beauty.” Initiated by the Pythagoreans and further developed by Plato, this theory defined beauty as the result of correct proportions and the harmonious arrangement of parts that constitute a whole.

14 Here, one can see the influence of Sufi thought on the artist, which was particularly sensitive to beauty and perceived in beautiful things a gateway to the realm of Divine Beauty. Sufism recognized the possibility of the higher reality revealing itself in the material world – a reality in which objective standards of beauty and truth exist (Nasr, 1999; Leaman, 2004).

15 The artist contrasts it with contemporary Western art, which is based on an individual creative process (*shakhsī, fardī*), driven by personal feelings, desires, or needs (*Kunūz al-ḥaṭṭ al-'arabi ma' al-duktūr Aḥmad Muṣṭafā*, 2019; Theophilus, 1993).

*Fiṭra*¹⁶ is the concept of the archetypal nature of humanity, developed based on the Quran and the Prophet's Sunna. It represents an unchanging, innate predisposition toward goodness present in every person. From a religious perspective, it is the primordial faith in God instilled in human nature. Islam describes itself as the religion of *fiṭra* – human beings are naturally inclined to submission and obedience to the will of God (cf. the etymological meaning of the word *islām*) (Mohamed, 1996).

Fiṭra is present in every human being. Quran 7:172 is one of the most significant verses, referring to the archetypal covenant between humanity and God, which is said to precede all other covenants made with people on Earth. This covenant is closely connected to the Quranic concept of *fiṭra*, emphasizing that the innate recognition of the oneness and unity of God constitutes the essence of human nature. This acknowledgment leaves an indelible mark on the human soul. This inherent knowledge typically awakens when an individual, at a certain age, encounters the teachings of the prophets, the scriptures, and God's laws (*The Study Quran*, 2017). In Ahmed Moustafa's thought, calligraphy serves as a means of recollection (*dhikr*) of our original *fiṭra* and of our primordial covenant. In other words, the true purpose of art and the mission of the artist is to evoke in the audience an experience of this *dhikr* (private correspondence with S. Sperl, July 2024; see also Leaman, 2004).

Finally, it is worth noting that letters, as a form of artistic expression in Ahmed Moustafa's work, also function as symbols on a semantic level, serving as carriers of meaning (see Sperl, 2023 for a broader discussion). As previously mentioned, the inspiration for the majority of the artist's works comes from Quranic verses. As Nasr (1987, p. 19) writes:

inasmuch as there resides a Divine Presence in the text of the Quran, calligraphy as the visible embodiment of the Divine Word aids the Muslim in penetrating and being penetrated by that Presence in accordance with the spiritual capabilities of each person. The sacred art of calligraphy aids man to pierce through the veil of material existence so as to be able to gain access to that *baraqah* that resides within the Divine Word and to 'taste' the reality of the spiritual world.

The power of the message is thus amplified by the power of the Word. Its beauty and goodness arise not only from the script governed by the principles of geometry but also from the beauty and goodness of the Word itself, of which the writing is a material representation.

16 The word *fiṭra* carries meanings such as "creation," "bringing into existence," "natural, native, innate disposition toward something," (Lane, 1863–1893).

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