

# Calligraphic Art in Pakistan Some Myths Uncovered

by Rafya Tahir

Calligraphy is a revered art in Muslim cultures, and Pakistan being a country of Muslim majority is no exception. The word calligraphy or *khattāti* as it is called in Urdu evokes an instant sense of religious awe in pious Muslims. Calligraphy is a vast subject which includes a variety of styles and techniques. For over fourteen hundred years Arabic calligraphy has been practiced by expert calligraphers in a variety of styles. From this basis of calligraphy a progressive style emerged in the 1950s called by different names like “calligraphic art”, “modern calligraphy” or “painterly calligraphy”. This art has gained popularity in all contemporary Muslim countries. While this form of calligraphy makes use of the letter forms, it employs painting techniques for the execution of the final work.

In Pakistan calligraphic art provokes mixed reactions. Public opinion differs from that of the artists. Some of these opinions are: all calligraphic art is religious; the artists involved in calligraphic art are trying to preserve the tradition of Islamic calligraphy; and it is an expression of personal creative energy. How many of these perceptions are myths and what are the ground realities? This paper aims to evaluate the real situation through contextual and analytical procedures.

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the word myth, as a fictitious narrative. In this article the word myth is used to explain the imagined or fictitious concepts regarding calligraphic art in Pakistan. The idea to explore myth and reality regarding calligraphic art emerged during a research project titled “New Dimensions of Calligraphy in Pakistan”. Interviews with calligraphic artists, art gallery owners and writers brought to light some very interesting ideas. The study was conducted in Lahore in 2007 and is based on opinions about painterly calligraphy or calligraphic art.<sup>1</sup> The first half of this article aims to develop a contextual background for the common myths about calligraphic art selected largely from the print media. Comments of people at calligraphic art exhibitions have also been considered. The second half of this article provides an analysis of the present situation, based on the opinions of calligraphic artists themselves.

The most common of the impressions related to calligraphic art in Pakistan is that it is a sacred art. It is believed that this art is strictly religious and as a sacred expression it is to be treated with respect and awe. The practice of calligraphic art is also thought of as a spiritual way to achieve enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> This idea leads to the notion that artists involved in calligraphic art are religious people who take up

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<sup>1</sup> The art of calligraphy in Arabic script has evolved over a period of fourteen-hundred years in the Muslim world. The classic styles are practiced according to strict rules mainly based on geometry. After the end of the Colonial Period a new and more liberated style of calligraphy evolved using Arabic letter forms combined with painting techniques. Calligraphy rendered in this way is called by such terms as “painterly calligraphy” or “calligraphic art.”

<sup>2</sup> Shamim Akhter, “Spiritual and Artistic”, *Dawn Gallery*, August 9, 2008.

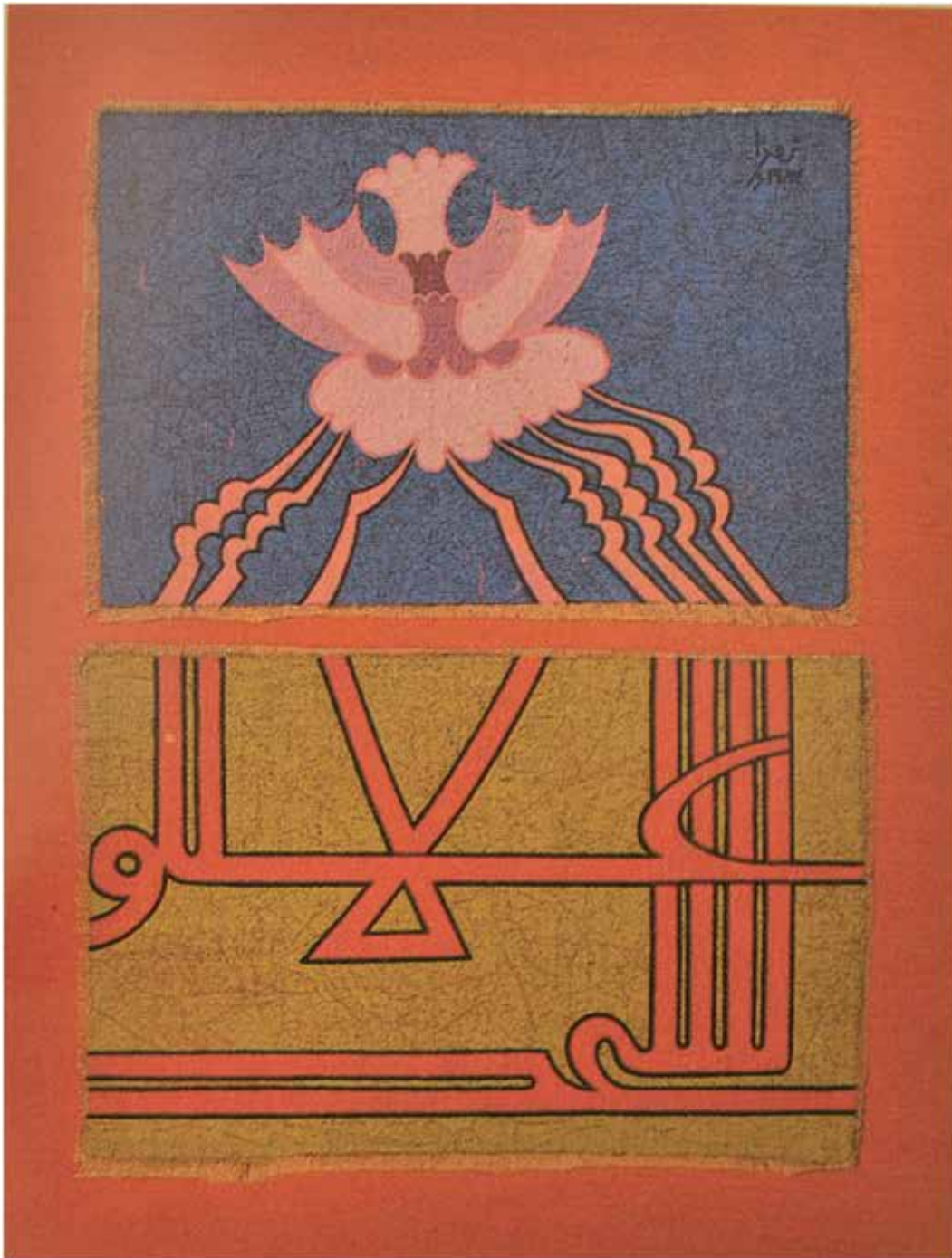


Figure 1. Untitled painting from “Roots Series” by Anwar Jalal Shemza Source: Marcella Nesom Sirhandi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*. Reproduced by permission of Ferozsons.

calligraphy as part of a spiritual quest.<sup>3</sup> Visitors to the exhibitions of calligraphic art feel that religion is somehow involved in this art. The immediate reaction is always an attitude of reverence. The works of eminent scholars like Annemarie

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<sup>3</sup> Salwat Ali, “Elements of Spiritual Discovery”, *Dawn Gallery*, February 24, 2007.

Schimmel, who described calligraphy as an integral part of Muslim cultures,<sup>4</sup> has helped in popularizing the religious aspect of this art. There is no denial that calligraphy in Muslim cultures played a pivotal role in transmitting religious education but at the same time it was equally important for non-religious tasks. The existence and development of cursive styles in early Arab society indicate its role in record keeping in government offices.<sup>5</sup> It is thus not fair to assign only a religious provenance to calligraphy, and when it comes to calligraphic art religion is certainly not the only dimension it has.

The art of calligraphy is also linked with the tradition of writing the Qurʾān and is considered a way of preserving the tradition of writing religious text in beautiful scripts.<sup>6</sup> Islamic calligraphy has developed into a fine art over a long period of time. From the haphazard early scripts to the more proportioned and regulated styles, Arabic calligraphy underwent many stylistic changes. Along with its various forms, the functions of calligraphy also have kept on changing. From its early purpose of recording the Qurʾān, it became an essential part of Muslim education. The art of calligraphy in our times has now moved to a more aesthetic and visual experience.<sup>7</sup>

It is a general notion that artists practicing calligraphic art are involved in the preservation of calligraphy. While talking to gallery owners and art lovers viewing calligraphic art exhibitions, I gathered that people link calligraphic paintings with the preservation of Islamic calligraphic traditions.

Calligraphic art is also thought of as a form for expressing creative energy. This is a popular notion with the artists and critics.<sup>8</sup> They place works of calligraphic art in the same category as that of the abstract art of 20th-century Europe.<sup>9</sup> In art circles it is thought that since Pakistan is a Muslim state, the general population is more receptive to calligraphic paintings and artists can make a name for themselves more quickly. During the 1980's, Zia ul-Haq's Islamic policies led to confusion and restrictions in art circles. His actions led people to believe that calligraphy is the only art form permitted in Islam and put restrictions on creative artistic expressions. As figurative art and sculpture were not allowed to be displayed in art galleries, and only art works in line with Islamic teachings were permitted to be exhibited, people who had some knowledge of writing styles chose to practice calligraphic art rather than to totally abandon their artistic skills. Aftab Ahmed, Shafique Farooqi, Bashir Moojid, Neyar Ehsan Rashid, Ibn e-Kalim, Shakil Ismail and Sardar Mohammad are some of the artists who rose to prominence during the 1980's.<sup>10</sup> There were still other artists who adopted a calligraphic style closely linked to abstract painting and action painting of the West. Gulgee and the followers of his school are good examples. These artists looked at calligraphic art as a means of venting their creative energy.

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4 Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co, 1990), 1.

5 Yasser Tabbaa, *Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival* (London: I.B Tauris & Co, 2002), 1-10.

6 Qurat ul Ain Siddiqui, "Inspired Calligraphy," *Dawn Gallery*, July 28, 2007.

7 Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 3-16.

8 Salwat Ali, "Bold and Brilliant," *Dawn Gallery*, February 10, 2007

9 Marcella Nesom Sirhandi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan* (Lahore: Ferozsons, 1992), 47-48.

10 S. Amjad Ali, *Painters of Pakistan* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 2000), 278-293.



Figure 2. Beitul Quran Mural in the Punjab Public Library by Shakir Ali. Oil on board. Source: Sirhindi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, 83. Reproduced by permission of Ferozsons.

The trend of using letter forms in art is linked with the post-colonial era after World War II. The first half of the 20th century saw the rise of abstract art in the West. Many artists from the colonized Muslim countries got their art training in European art institutes. The influence of western art imagery promoted a search for Muslim identity based on Islamic heritage. This thought initiated the usage of Arabic alphabets as a formal design element which developed into an abstract art form resembling calligraphy. In the Arab world this art movement was called *hurūfiyya*. It took its inspiration from the Western artists such as Paul Klee who used bright colours and letter forms in his paintings.<sup>11</sup>

In Pakistan the trend of using Arabic alphabet was started in the 1950's by painters such as Hanif Ramay, Anwar Jalal Shemza (figure 1) Sadequain (figure 3) and Shakir Ali (figure 2) who used letter forms as major components of their paintings. One point to be noted is that all calligraphic art produced during the early days was not based on rendering of religious texts. The paintings of Anwar Jalal Shemza (who is considered a pioneer in this form of art in Pakistan) can be termed more abstract, taking inspiration from the calligraphic forms themselves (figure 1). The story of Shemza as told by his wife Mary Shemza discloses the struggles of the artist who was trained on Western models and his search for identity and self discovery. Originally trained in commercial art from the Mayo School of Art (now National College of Art) his efforts to find an identity led him to the study of Islamic art from where he borrowed a unique kind of letter symbolism which appeared in his paintings. His initial paintings display the use of English alphabetic forms used in a very abstract manner. It was much later

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 10:366.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Shemza, "Anwar Jalal Shemza. Search for Cultural Identity," *Third Text Asia 2*, (Spring, 2009):27.

that Arabic letter forms started to appear in his paintings. In the case of Anwar Jalal Shemza, the letter forms were used with a different motive, that is, to find an original way to express one's Muslim identity in the Western world but not to promote a conventional religious art. Shemza started working in this style in 1950s and continued till his death in 1985. It was only much later that he started to be labeled as a calligraphic artist pioneering a type of religious art.

The story of Hanif Ramay (1931-1994) is not much different. In 1950s he was painting in an abstract style. As a result of the first "All Pakistan Exhibition of Calligraphy" in 1960 he became interested in calligraphic art.<sup>13</sup> As he was a book jacket designer as well as an artist, he started designing book covers with Arabic words. Later on he incorporated this style of paintings for his own art. In his work he was trying to fuse Western abstract art and local elements to find a new kind of expression. Since he was involved in graphic art it seems natural that he evolved this kind of style, but preservation of conventional calligraphy was probably not his motive.

Shakir Ali (1916-1975) was trained in line with the British art education models and started painting in cubist style. During his tenure as the principal of National College of Arts, Lahore (1961-73) he was given an assignment of making a mural for the "House of the Qur'an", a section of the Punjab Public Library, Lahore (figure 2). Saeed Akhtar, an eminent artist of Pakistan who was a student at the College during Shakir Ali's tenure as principal, revealed in an interview in 2008 that Shakir Ali chose to paint the mural based on a calligraphic design because he thought that it would be appropriate for the "House of the Qur'an".<sup>14</sup> Again, the motive of the artist was not to promote religious art but to use calligraphic forms in his typical abstract manner. He had no training in the art of calligraphy, but was interested in using calligraphic forms in painting. He exploited the linear quality of the words in the few calligraphic paintings which he was commissioned to make.<sup>15</sup>

Shakir Ali's mural at the Punjab Public Library, Lahore is rendered in primary colours. The work was painted on board and then attached to the western wall of "The House of Qur'an" situated within the library (figure 2). Known for his abstract cubism he painted this mural in calligraphic design because it was meant for the Qur'an section of the library. In this mural the letters are composed both vertically and horizontally. The composition seems to lack in balance, one of the usual prerequisites of classical calligraphy, and the letters also vary in sizes and thickness. If readability was the artist's prime motive, he does not seem to succeed as the words can be read only with much difficulty, and if achieving a balanced painterly composition was the main intention, this particular work cannot be termed as having attained this quality.

Since 1950 over sixty years have passed. During this time the number of calligraphic artists has increased tremendously. With the rise in the number of artists there was also a sharp increase in public awareness of calligraphic paintings. The media has played an important role in developing our understanding

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<sup>13</sup> S. Amjad Ali, *Painters of Pakistan*, 279.

<sup>14</sup> Saeed Akhtar gave this interview at the opening ceremony of his exhibition at Ejaz Art Gallery on 22nd

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Saeed Akhtar, 2008.



Figure 3. “Bismillah,” April 1985, by Sadequain. Ink on paper. Photo by the author during a group show of calligraphy at Ejaz Art Gallery, Lahore, 2008.

about calligraphic art but it projects this art exclusively as religious. Articles in newspapers and magazines as well as exhibition coverage in electronic media both contribute in shaping public opinion, with a leaning towards the idea of calligraphic art as being religious.

Religious politics has played an important role in the development of art in Muslim world.<sup>16</sup> Since its inception as an independent country in 1947 Pakistan has been faced with multiple challenges, including the role of religion in its political fabric. There is an ongoing debate on this issue in the light of Quaid-e-Azam’s vision of religious balance; he wanted a state where people of all religions could freely practice their beliefs, but the religious political parties forcefully stated

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<sup>16</sup> Tabbaa. 25-50.

that Pakistan was created only to practice Islam.<sup>17</sup> The effects of such political conflicts can be seen in the changing expression of public opinion. After 1979 there was a forceful religio-political movement that ended in the longest period of martial law Pakistan had ever witnessed. The factor of religion was played by Zia ul-Haq to its fullest to legitimize his dictatorship at that time. In the art world calligraphy was taken up as one form of visual art which had no clash with Islamic ideology. Since then religion has been pivotal in the development of art forms in Pakistan and calligraphic painting has carved a permanent niche for itself here. Calligraphic painting has come a long way since then and today relies less on its religious content, but this has done little to dispel the general notion that links it with religious beliefs.

Although public opinion is balanced heavily on the sacred nature of calligraphic art, it is of interest that artists involved in making calligraphic paintings were actually not looking at their art in this manner. In public perception calligraphic art is linked with the preservation of Islamic tradition of calligraphy, but the fact is that very few modern artists are actually trained in the art of classical calligraphy, and thus can do little to preserve this art.

In Pakistan the artists credited as the pioneers of calligraphic art turned to calligraphy with motives other than religious and certainly not with any inclination towards the preservation of this art form. In fact, they evolved their calligraphic style in an attempt to create an art relevant to Pakistani society. The nature of their work is less sacred and more design based. Hanif Ramay, a contemporary of Shemza, refrained from using alphabets in a purely abstract manner. In fact, his compositions were readable and illustrated the meanings with the help of colour, yet they were a far cry from the classical calligraphy.<sup>18</sup> His calligraphic paintings had a strong graphic value in which letters were enhanced through colours. After Ramay, Sadequain produced a large number of calligraphic paintings. He had his own style reflecting classical styles of writing but was more illustrative, and was based on both religious and secular texts (figure 3). His earlier work exploited the linear quality of the letter forms but his later work paid more respect to the meaning of the words.<sup>19</sup>

Calligraphic art produced by the next generation of artists, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, Rashid Ahmed Arshed, Ismail Gulgee and Ozzir Zubi, all used Arabic letter forms in a very abstract manner. A painting by Zahoor ul Akhlaq includes some elements of calligraphy (figure 4). The painting seems to be based on the hand-written manuscripts from Muslim cultures. The composition is framed in a border arrangement of calligraphic forms. The focal point of this piece is the central globe featuring unreadable calligraphic forms that seem to explode. The painting, in contrast to the one by Shakir Ali, displays non-readable calligraphic forms, but it has a stronger composition placing it nearer to painting than to calligraphy. The use of a codex format and a limited palette are the factors which show that the artist aimed to achieve an effect of calligraphy rather than the readable calligraphic writing.

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<sup>17</sup> Tarik Jan, *Pakistan Between Secularism and Islam: Ideology, Issues and Conflict* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy, n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> Sirhindi, 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

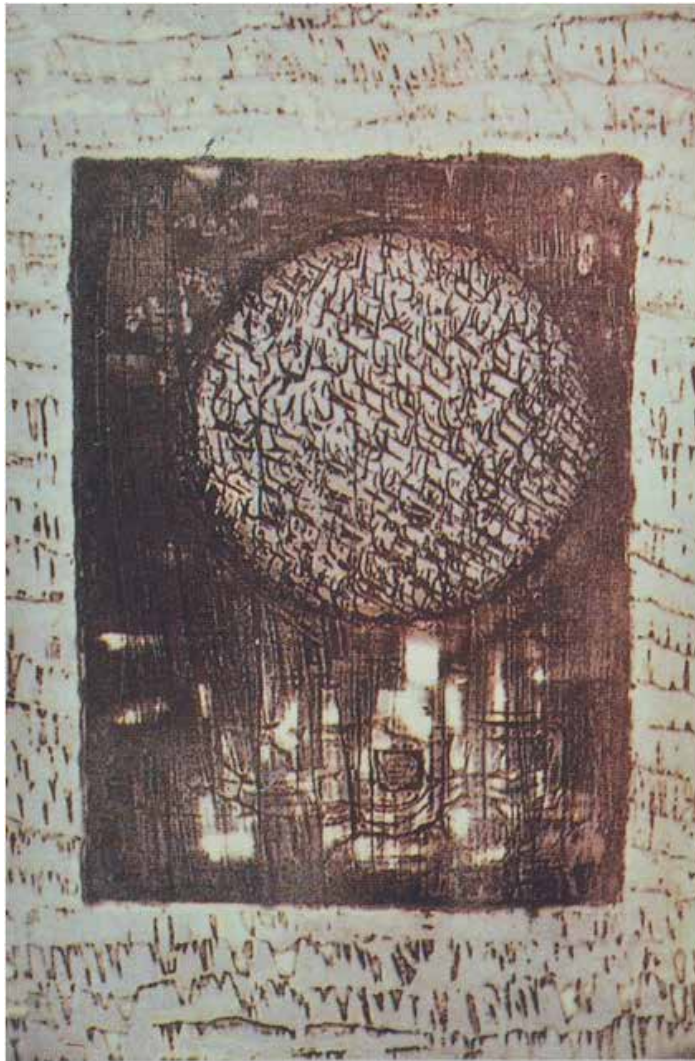


Figure 4. "Calligraphy" by Zahoor ul Akhlaq. Source: Sirhindi, *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, 83. Reproduced by permission of Ferozsons.

Analysis of these four often published and acclaimed works clearly shows that the concept of calligraphic art as an attempt at preserving the Islamic tradition is formed on weak grounds as very few artists (including Shakir Ali and Zahoor ul Akhlaq) have been trained in the art of classical calligraphy. Furthermore, classical calligraphers are not in favour of the non-traditional use of calligraphy. They regard it with disdain and condemn the usage of calligraphic forms in modern art.<sup>20</sup> Classical calligraphers can make an attempt to preserve their formal criteria but to expect it from the artists who use calligraphic forms as a design inspiration is not justified.

The sacred nature of Qur'anic text is usually lost in modernistic compositions. In fact, the new generation of calligraphic artists, R.M. Naeem (figure 5), Irfan Hassan, Ufaq Ehsan, and Ijaz Malik (figure 6), have evolved a style where calligraphy is combined with figural compositions.<sup>21</sup> Although they are using religious texts, such experimental works certainly do not fit into the parameters of sacred Islamic art. The artists have tried to break free from the restrictive image of calligraphy but have found little favor in public reception.<sup>22</sup>

The first idea examined for this paper was that in public opinion all calligraphic art is religious. Though many artists start their calligraphic careers using religious texts these days, they do deviate from it later on. As already

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Khurshid Alam Gauhar Qalam, a renowned classical Pakistani calligrapher, September 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Calligraphic Exhibition at Ejaz Art Gallery, Lahore, 22nd September 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Interviews with R.M. Naeem and Ijaz Malik during their exhibitions at Ejaz Art Gallery and Nairang Art Gallery respectively, in 2008.





Figure 5. "Allah" by R. M. Naeem. Acrylic on canvas, 15 x15 inches. Photograph by the author from a group exhibition at Ejaz Art Gallery, Lahore, 2008



Figure 6. "Bismillah" by Ijaz Malik. Oil on canvas. Photo by the author from his exhibition at Nairang Art Gallery, Lahore, 2008

discussed, the artist credited with originating calligraphic art in Pakistan, Shemza, used calligraphic forms in an abstract manner. His work cannot be called religious. Hanif Ramey, was a book cover designer and later on he started using religious texts to make paintings. Sadequain, another big name in Pakistani art, held his first solo exhibition of calligraphy based on verses of Ghalib's poetry. He turned to religious calligraphy quite late. On the other hand, the artists of the 1980s did start their calligraphic career with religious calligraphy.<sup>23</sup> Gulgee a well known calligraphic artist had "nothing to do with Islamic calligraphy"<sup>24</sup> but chose to work in this genre after he was commissioned to design a copper shield for the Export Promotion Bureau of Pakistan. His paintings are well known for their skillful use of colour and the vibrant letter forms, and he was not a trained calligrapher either. Since 2000, many artists are using calligraphic forms for a more modern and contemporary effect. Inspection of numerous exhibitions of calligraphic art from 2007-2009 has revealed that the artists do not use only Arabic religious texts but also use Urdu letter forms to convey a message. Thus the concept of all calligraphy being sacred and pious is not true and calligraphic art should be given an equal status to other art forms like figurative painting, landscape painting, and abstract painting.

Presently there are various trends in calligraphic art. Close observation of specimens of calligraphic art produced in Pakistan in the past sixty years brings forth the existence of five distinct trends in the genre of calligraphic art. The first category is the designer/painters of the 1950's and 1960's who started their careers as graphic designers and moved towards calligraphic paintings. Anwer Jalal Shemza (trained as Commercial Artist) and Hanif Ramay (working as book cover designer) are examples of this category. The second category includes the illustrator/painter of the 1960's and 1970's who are known for the illustrative qualities of their calligraphic paintings. Sadequain, Gulgee and Aslam Kamal's work exemplifies this category. The third category emerged to the art scene as a result of the restrictive policies of Zia ul Haq regime in 1980's and 1990's. This can be termed as accidental painters whose work reflects little artistic value. A whole lot of artists fall in this category that faded away with the change of political scene. In late 1990's and the first decade of the twenty-first century trained calligraphers and artists moved to create an art form which has artistic value and calligraphic knowledge. Contributions of Calligraph Artists Guild, Lahore; Pakistan Calligraphic Artists Guild, Islamabad; National College of the Arts, Lahore; and College of Art & Design, University of the Punjab, Lahore is invaluable in this regard. The last category of artists/calligraphers is the product of these institutions. Works of Arif Khan (figure 7) and Jamshed Qaiser (figure 8) exemplify their training as artists and calligraphers. Instead of whimsical renderings their work represents a knowledgeable use of colours and calligraphy. Great names in classical calligraphy, like Khurshed Alam Gauhar Qalam and Rasheed Butt have also moved to join this category of artists. Their involvement in

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<sup>23</sup> S. Amjad Ali, 278-293.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 291.



Figure 7. "Calligraphy" by Arif Khan, 2006. Mixed media, 18x 24 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

the teaching of this art in major art institutions has bridged the gap between the artists and the calligraphers. There exists a more experimental category of calligraphic artists who combine unconventional elements with this art. They also attempt three dimensional works. R.M. Naeem, Ijaz Malik and Ameen Gulgee fall in this category. The constant interest of artists and calligraphers in this genre reflects the vibrant nature of this art.

As far as calligraphic art in Pakistan is concerned, the early artists were not trained calligraphers, and the classical calligraphers had little training in painterly skills. In rare cases when an artist is trained in both calligraphy and art, his/her understanding is reflected in the art which they produce.

But major artists such as Shemza, Ramey, Gulgee and Shakir Ali were not trained calligraphers. For this reason it is not appropriate to put the onus of a revival of Islamic calligraphy on these calligraphic artists. Despite the conflict between the classical calligraphers and the artist community, all the calligraphic painters have helped to promote an interest in traditional Muslim calligraphy in the post modern world and the art is yet again taking a new turn. Questions raised about this art are now being answered in logical manner. It may not be true to suggest that the calligraphic artists have revived the art of Islamic calligraphy, but it will not be so untrue to say that a genuine interest has developed in the artist community and the calligraphers to work together to revive the dying art of calligraphy.

The concept held by artists that calligraphic art is a creative expression seems to be true, and as with other art styles the nature of an art work can be realistic, naturalistic, semi-abstract or abstract. In the case of calligraphic art, it can be based on classic models, abstract or stylized and experimental. But this art is definitely different from classical calligraphy where strict rules have to be followed while writing a particular script. Today's trained artists/calligraphers have given a polished touch to calligraphic paintings but generally calligraphic art adheres less to the rules of scripts, and relies more on innovative ways of using letter forms. Calligraphic painting of today should be appreciated with all its diversity in mind, and this concept needs to be publicized.



Figure 6. "Bismillah" by Ijaz Malik. Oil on canvas. Photo by the author from his exhibition at Nairang Art Gallery, Lahore, 2008.