

PIONEERS OF MODERN CALLIGRAPHY IN THE ART SCENE OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The art of Arabic calligraphy is considered to be the soul of Islamic art since the advent of Islam. The practice of traditional calligraphy has always been given immense importance in the Islamic world. This practice left strong mark on the aesthetic sensibility of the artists as well that paved new avenues in its development which resulted in modern calligraphy. The Pakistani art scene is magnificent in terms of art practice. Pakistani artists have played vital role for the expansion of modern calligraphy by using their own expressive visual language. The pioneers of modern calligraphy in Pakistan used this genre for visual communication. They proved themselves to be the trend setters of a new wave that left enormous impact on the practice of contemporary artists in Pakistan. Pioneers of modern calligraphy are observed promising in bridging gaps between the contemporary and the traditional practice of calligraphy in Pakistan.

Keywords: Modern Calligraphy, Islamic art, Pakistani artists, art scene, contemporary artists, visual communication

The art of calligraphy is regarded with great esteem in the Islamic world. This artistic expression went through secure developmental course since its emergence. It evolves with the birth of many stylistic inventions done on the bases of regional grounds throughout the world. The moderate practice of this art presented through zoomorphic calligraphy along with *Tughra* offers stimulation in terms of its aesthetic development which was attempted and extensively practiced by the artists who were employing calligraphic text as a reference of their visual investigation. Besides this, the artistic play of calligraphic specimens on the splendid Muslim architecture further provokes the aesthetic sensibility of the artists. The history of Sub-continent also provides some notable examples of excellence in this regard that stimulates the creative sensations of Pakistani artists. It is essential to provide a brief history with reference to Pakistan that how modern calligraphy paved its way from traditional to the contemporary practice?

Pakistan is among those Muslim states which shares strong connection with the history of art. These channels of creative practice dates back to the pre-historic times. After independence, Pakistan was blessed to have artists who kept on working in their own creative style. Besides artists, traditional calligraphists were also playing immense role, while practicing in the traditional manner. Amongst them, few of the prominent calligraphers were Parvīn Raqam, and Tāj al-Dīn Zarrīn Raqam. Hāfīz Muḥammad Yūsuf Ṣadīdī, Ṣūfī Khurshid ‘Ālam Khurshid Raqam and Anwar Ḥusain Nafīs Raqam, all were the descendants of Tāj al-Dīn Zarrīn Raqam. All these traditionally trained calligraphers used to inscribe the principal captions/main headings in the newspapers of their time. Hāfīz Muḥammad Yūsuf Ṣadīdī worked with the leading daily newspaper of Pakistan “*Imroz*”, he was the master calligrapher for inscribing the main headings of this paper.

Writing for the newspaper was not an easy task it requires adjustments according to the necessity of the paper. The modern age of digital media brought many challenges for the traditionally trained calligraphers and as a result many of them switched their jobs to earn for a better life. Those who were skillfully strong kept on practicing their traditional style and on the bases of their calligraphic specimens they are still earning well. Due to explorations and innovations in the contemporary age, it is generally observed that this practice of rapid changing trends in art making has affected the connection of people with the classical traditions.

Currently, the practice of modern calligraphy is serving as a link between the past and the present. This genre has opened doors for the artists to experience calligraphic art according to their own medium of expression. Modern Calligraphy offers aesthetic measures to the viewers and people from any religion can relate with it through the creative representation of the artist. Modern calligraphy is appreciated and encouraged globally. It fulfills multiple meanings, though the importance of traditional calligraphy remains the same but because of the fixed proportions, rules and regulations it offers less experimentation. Calligraphy under the umbrella of contemporary visual arts proposes more diversity and creativity than traditional calligraphy. The liberal use of text was taken as a source of connection with the masses in general that offered durable stimulus in widening the spectrum of art in the genre of modern calligraphy especially within the panorama of Pakistani art. Presently, it seems stimulating in reviewing the artists of Pakistan who are using calligraphic expression as a vehicle of their creativity and exploration with diversity. Besides Arabic calligraphy, artists are using Urdu, Persian and English alphabets that also offer multiple notions.

A number of the practicing artists have learnt the conventional style of calligraphy with basic understanding of its proportions but many of the artists are in-cooperating this genre with freedom of expression. Modern calligraphy is not only restricted to the didactic purpose. In fact, it offers multiple prospects. People who are unable to comprehend its underlying connotations expressed through the religious text (written in

Arabic language) can create a connection with it through the symbolic fervor present in the visual language of colors. Colors have their own dialect; it can profoundly influence human senses. Colors also add ornamental essence and it also fulfills the religious esteem. It is believed in Islamic arts that the art of writing is the soulful exercise that bridges the gap between God and His mankind. In this regard, man has to express immense dedication while inscribing the celestial message; as a result, the acquired knowledge of truth starts reflecting through his inventive artistic visual language. In modern calligraphy, the visual impact of text contains multiple meaningful nuances. Modern calligraphic artists have their own individual signatures in terms of visual language that have helped them in sustaining their own identity.

Visual expression of every artist varies because of his/her multiple associations whether religious, cultural, social or personal. All these provide a podium for the intellectual growth of an artist in terms of creative practice. The vistas of art making in the contemporary world is constantly shifting and advancing gradually. Diverse mediums and their creative attributes established as an outcome of consistent endeavor and expansion. In visual arts, the meaning of calligraphic expression has amplified in the present age. Not only in Pakistan but the artist community from the eastern part of the world is in-cooperating calligraphy not only to achieve the aesthetic parameters but also as a tool for achieving multiple meanings. Apart from the nationalist alliance remarkable endeavor has broaden communal discourse in its creative countenance. Artists from Turkey and Persia are actively contributing in this genre for achieving heights of freedom in visual expression. Among these contemporary artists Shirin Nishat, Wijdan Ali and Golnaz Fathi are noticeable because of the diversified conjunction of modernity and calligraphic text in their works.

While analyzing the expansion of painting in Pakistani history, it has been observed that calligraphic art has not been objected socially, religiously and politically, but has been favored throughout and as a result been given respect, recognition and political support because of its religious association. For the sake of receiving blessings and good fortune people preferred calligraphic paintings to display at their homes. It also provides them the aesthetic bliss prevalent in the colorful rendition of these paintings. In Pakistan most of the artists used modern approach in calligraphy as compared to the traditional one, although both schools retain their importance. The predecessors of this creative expression were Shakir Ali, Hanif Ramay, and Sadequain. Their engagement in this visual art form offered their contemporaries, a refreshed podium for investigating instinctive philosophy which then enhanced with the participation of more artists from Lahore including, Zahoor ul Akhlaq, A. J. Shemza, Aslam Kamal and Askari Mian Irani.

It has been said that art is the only expression that could serve for bridging the gaps within a society. This fact was subsequently realized by the painters of Pakistan in 1970's. The adaption of calligraphic forms was not influenced by any alienated theory; in

fact, it instigates from the cultural roots not from any unfamiliar connections. Initially, calligraphic forms were employed in visual art practice by Shakir Ali and then by Zahoor ul Akhlaq for the creative advancement of individualistic aesthetic sensation without the insertion of any religious connotation. These artists were the forerunners of Pakistani modern art. Although modern calligraphy has not been examined as a proper art movement in Pakistani art but it has been witnessed a move towards exploration and experimentation that turned out as a novel trend.

Being an innovative visual form, the need to formulate individual creative statement enlightened artists for revealing new dimensions and potentials in the formation of art (Halem, 1975). The artists used calligraphic interpretation in their paintings to express their personal investigations and visualization. Within the visual practice of Shakir Ali and A. J. Shemza, modernism was fused with traditional elements whereas in Hanif Ramay's work it was modest in nature with the infusion of design elements. Later on, in 1970's the political setting supported calligraphic art in its astonishing progress. It is observed that socio-political background in one way or another influenced art practice within particular time frames. In Pakistan under the dictatorship of general Zia, Islamization as a conception became dominant and resulted in the encouragement of calligraphic art as a visual expression.

Shakir Ali (1914-1975) is considered to be the pioneer of modern painting in Pakistan. Besides his signature style, he also explored the diversity of calligraphic forms according to his own perception of design and space. He received westernized training from the Slade school of Fine Arts, London and was more leaning towards the use of abstract compositions in his work. He had complete grasp on the values involved in design because of the two years training he received at the Industrial School of Design, Prague from (1950-1951) (Tahir, 2002). His predilection towards abstraction helped him to use the Arabic letters with freedom to utilize it in his own language of expression (Ali, 1995). The angular display of text with horizontal, vertical, diagonal and curved gesture facilitated him to interweave his ideal facade of design.

In one of his mural painting displayed at Bait al-Qur'ān Punjab Public Library, the quality of perspective is evident in which tinted background of yellowish ochre color has been used for generating the sense of depth (figure 1). For breaking the monotonous effect of the background, blue and red colors were used in some of the overlapping forms of the letters which also demonstrates a luminous effect, these colors symbolically signify the magnificent legacy of calligraphy being an Islamic expression. He created a unique writing style by amalgamating both cursive and kūfic scripts. The sword like depiction of the letter *Alif*, effects his composition in terms of harmony. One of his identifiable features in this composition was the representation of leaf which was used as a repetitive pattern intertwined with Qur'ānic verses. He took the first and foremost verse from *Sūra al-Iqra'* that declares 'Recite in the name of your God'. His simplified and inflated

lettering alongside the painted layers was distinctive in its overall impact. However, he was a modern abstract painter and left a few calligraphic paintings but these works helped in paving an innovative disposition of fabricating an aptitude towards modern calligraphy.



Figure 1. Ali, Shakir. (1969) *Qur'anic Verses on Mural*, oil on canvas, 118" x 334",
Bait al Qur'an Punjab Public Library, Lahore. **Source:** Khalid Saeed Butt (1988),
Paintings from Pakistan (p. 81). Islamabad: Idara-e-Saqafat.

Hanif Ramay (1931-2006) is also amongst the predecessors who worked in the genre of modern calligraphy. He was basically a designer and used to supervise publishing and printing as well. He also designs the covers with written text and was known for illustrating books. Besides this he worked as editor of Urdu weeklies titled as *Sawerā*, *Nūsrat* along with a regularly published *Masawāt* from (1954-72) (Butt, 1988). For developing his own writing style, he fused Kūfic, Naskh and Thulth scripts to get an innovative one. The formation of the words he created attained sinuous design like effect, identical to Arabesque in expression. The lyrical and unique quality in his style helped him to distinguish his work from his contemporaries. His linear and rhythmic two-dimensional surfaces had extensive variety of color tones. The flat depiction of colors also adds cubistic mood in his work (Ali, 1995). His work had stained glass effect. The continuous flow of fine lines facilitated him to create a link between the colored areas and the written text.

Being a designer, he had the quality of designing his text in a stylized way. His stylized rendering of the text over the colored surface became his signature style. In his paintings he mostly inscribed *Muhammad* and Allah and some short religious set idioms including *Bismillāh* and *Lā ilāha il-Allāh*. He sought to unfold the mystic connotations hidden within the phrases with the help of colors he used in each. His work entitled *Lā ilāha il-Allāh* is symmetrically designed within the picture plane (figure 2). The design like gesture of *Lā* shares similarity with the form of sand timepiece or a flame burner.

The segment below seems like a lotus flower which is known as an emblem of purity in Buddhist art. The designed shape of *Lā* is significant in character as it contains the whole inscription inside which is divided in two sections. The top written word is Allah which is inspired by the Kūfic script, seems to resemble with the form of *trishul* whereas the rest of the written character seems inspired by Naskh style. The written text against blue background is dominant that seems to be like an infinite sky. It expresses the firm belief of the Muslim community within the inscribed text which says ‘No God exists except Allah’. The overall painterly effect is peaceful and pleasurable for spectator’s visual sensation. The unconventional approach expressed by Hanif Ramay opened new means of self-expression in modern calligraphy with his expertise in the handling of design.

Calligraphic expression was further explored by Sadequain (1930-1986). Sadequain is remembered as a creative genius in the history of Pakistani art, he besides other artforms utilized his skills of calligraphy in the later period of his creative practice. He is among the well-known artists who have worked in this genre and has also written *ruba’yāt* and the inspiring verses Ghālib and the revolutionary Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Initially after adopting calligraphic idiom, the work he produced was more towards its illustrative expression. Abstraction was dominant in his work with the amalgamation of his personalized symbols like cactus whereas the application of the colors shows his intense passion. In some of his paintings he has composed the human figures in abstract style which seems to be fascinating in effect with symbolic interpretation. His lines were bold in effect, and he usually exaggerated vertical and horizontal measurement of the calligraphic script according to the requirement of the design. He used to cover the negative spaces with a variety of ornamental designs (Ali, 1995). During the period of 1980’s, his calligraphic style became readable and meaningful. His expression of representing the visual meaning beneath the text became illustrative where subject became objective with the representation of realistic imagery taken from real life objects alongside the infusion of landscape imagery in most of the cases.



Figure 2. Ramay, Hanif. (1981). *Lā ilāha il-Allāh*, 24”x 48”, oil on canvas, private collection.

Source: Khalid Saeed Butt (1988), *Paintings from Pakistan* (p.69). Islamabad: Idara-i Saqafat.

Readability became a permanent feature of his work during his later period. His inherited practice of calligraphy helped him and it provides fruitful results for the later creations. Besides scripting them, he designed some phrases that were representative of certain things (figure 3). The illustrative approach of the artist in this painting helps the

spectator to fully comprehend the meaning of the verses that have been taken from *Sūra al-Rahmān*. The selected verses express about the heavenly feast that will contain heavenly fruits. In this work, at the right corner he symbolized a bowl filled with fruits and a container/vase having flowers. The central point of the composition is the text which is readable in expression; colors are brilliant with heavenly attributes. Sadequain continued to work in the same genre till the day he died and has left behind an immense volume of calligraphic paintings.



Figure 3. Sadequain. (1980). *Sūra al-Rahmān*, marker on marble, private collection. **Source:** Khalid Saeed Butt (1988: 55), *Paintings from Pakistan*. Islamabad: Idara-i Saqafat.

Another Lahore based modern calligrapher known for his execution in decorative style was Askari Mian Irani (1940-2004). His work was comparatively of a different fashion. He had great command on different techniques in painting and he experimented a lot to get jewel like rich luminous effect of colors. His use of colors was according to the aesthetics of Muslim philosophy. His color palette was comprised of blues, greens, golden etc., which are allied with spiritualism. Irani's paintings depicts an amalgamation of cultural and historical attributes with the infusion of innovative approach. This stimulation he received from traditional style of calligraphy;



Figure 4. Irani, Askari Mian. (1989) *Naqsh-i-Sitār*, 23”x 23”, mixed media on canvas, private collection.

Source: Amina Hassan (ed.) (1998: 99), *Askari: The Jeweller in Paint*, Lahore: Lahore Arts Council.

besides this *ta'vīz* shaped amulet form accompanied with mathematical renderings in the form of numerical became his motivation for pursuing a distinctive style. *Ta'vīz* art is based on Qur'ānic verses which are then converted into mathematical ratio, this art is believed to bring good destiny and it also serves for keeping the evils away.

His work showcased painterly characteristics with enormous sense of design (figure 4). He has used amulet as main feature of the designed surface which was further rendered with the shape of a star having eight sides, this shape is known as eight-pointed star. The tinted background created while using dripping technique fabricates mystical ambiance in his work. The use of eight-pointed star in repetitive way is done with such expertise that the negative space creates additional geometric pattern, in most of the examples from Mughal architecture this pattern can be seen over floors as a repetitive design vocabulary. Among the notable elements in his paintings was the repetition of word “Allah” that makes a delicate and flowing visual thread which transfigures into interweaved designed imagery. He created the base of the painting with light colors to create different levels of intensity. The background surface highlighted with the application of light heightened the shape of eight-pointed star created over it. Irani was successful in achieving strong effect of chiaroscuro by the brilliant contrast of dark and light colors. Most of his paintings were square in dimensions. According to him the shape of a square was a symbol of perfection, for example the house of Allah located in *Makkā* represents a square shape, which yet again is conceived religiously as a sign of perfection in itself (Sirhandi, 1992). Later in his practice, he further explored variability in textured surfaces achieved through the application of multiple-colored layers.

Aslam Kamal (b. 1939) is also known as a calligraphic artist who was drawn towards modern calligraphy in 1960's. He was extremely inspired by the art of geometry. He explored a different method of working with calligraphic forms. He employed geometric forms for the modernization of calligraphic text according to his own perception. With the amalgamation of geometry in calligraphy he created his unique style. The time period from 1970's to 1980's proves to be more productive in his creative expedition. His palette was soft and comprised of luminous colors which were achieved with the help of gouache technique. Moreover, his palette had tonal diversity where green, yellow, red, blue and orange colors were used with brilliance. The prominent feature in his work was the application of text in black color, against a background of bright colored tones. Besides this his interest in geometrical construction was also evident where he used to reform his text with the addition of architectural illustrations comprised of arches, minarets and domes. These elements were used to fill spaces and for balancing his compositions with two-dimensional effect. He has also been credited for introducing a unique script that is based on the proportions of geometry; this script is known as *Khatt-i Kamāl*.

One of his paintings with the title *Hu-al Kāfi* showcased words made of geometric construction that seems to be like an architectural design (figure 5). The words are written on a colored surface that gives an image of architecture adorned by the addition of domelets on the corners. The light-colored base of the painting suggests celestial radiance or *nūr* descending from the heaven to show infinity. The composed text in the foreground against the radiant background suggests architectural enhancement, this feature was highlighted to show the historical importance of Islamic architecture in which calligraphy was used as a fundamental part. It seems that the artist is emphasizing the importance of religious text in reference to Islamic architecture, the religious text is shown emerging from the foreground which demonstrates that calligraphic art will remain aesthetically pleasing and valuable to the Muslim community. Over the monochrome layer, calligraphic text was inscribed with black color which was then painted with red, green and yellow colors to highlight its overall visual effect.

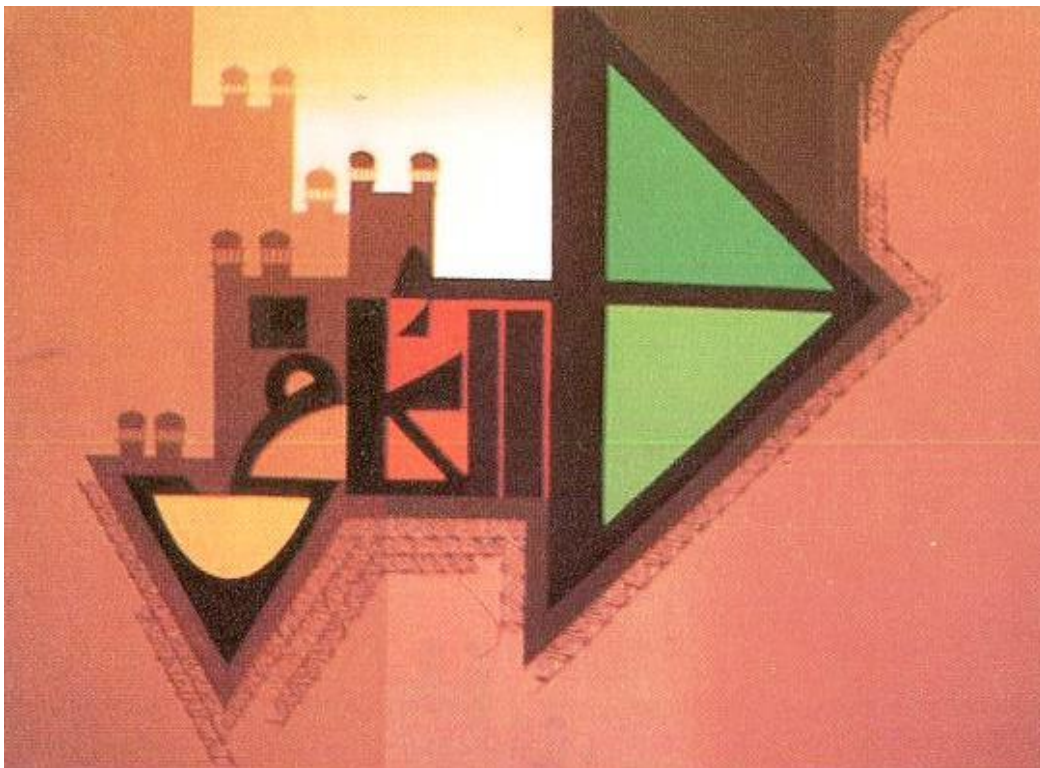


Figure 5. Kamal, Aslam. (1984) *Hu al-Kāfi*, 36" x 24", oil on canvas, private collection.

Source: Marcella Nesom Sirhandi (1992), *Contemporary Paintings in Pakistan* (p.106), Lahore: Ferozesons.

Anwar Jalal Shemza (1928-1985) is known as a visual artist who was a dynamic literary person. He was amongst those artists who brought the introduction of symbolism in modern calligraphy. His work was extremely modern conceptually and in terms of its formation. He developed a new style after the introduction and amalgamation of diverse painting and printing techniques. The visual vocabulary of his work had aesthetic tendencies with the amalgamation of the attributes from his cultural heritage and the

techniques he learned from Modern Europe. Among the Modern masters he was inclined towards Henri Matisse and Paul Klee. A. J. Shemza, under the influence of Klee employed line as a strong tool of expression by taking it to a long route; which resulted into strong unification of linear forms within his work. Once he said that his visual imagery was not simply to look at whereas, it invites the spectator to understand it (Schmitz, 2010). His work was strongly tied with his religious association, cultural identity and his geographic roots.

In his later phase he used Arabic calligraphy in a unique manner. The roots series was amongst his acknowledged body of work for the emblematic depiction it has (figure 6). His roots were allied with Islamic calligraphy as a Muslim. In his work he has symbolically represented plant's growth and life which is interconnected with the roots it has. If the plant is rooted deeply, it will grow more. The character of roots is significant; it searched out for the survival of a plant in the hard conditions beneath the soil. Its character is identical with a mother for the benefit of the plant (Schmitz, 2010). In this body of work, calligraphic text has been engaged as a form of roots, sometimes they appear like arabesque designs created with the movement of the text. The arabesque formed roots tend to blossom into floral shapes. The floral forms created above looks like the focal point of his paintings. He used to write his name next to the bloomed flower created at the top register as a symbolic suggestion, representing himself with the flower which remained intact with its roots. In the root's series, over a solid ground he composed canvas in pieces. These pieces gave the feeling of carpet pieces which are executed in bright colored scheme where calligraphy transformed into the character of roots beneath the floral forms. His use of line was delicate in its effect over small canvases. His work was unique in the manner of conceptual understanding and representation; he left strong inspirations for his youngsters that opened multiple avenues for research as well.

Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999) is also credited for using calligraphic text in his work with the unique modern expressive vocabulary. He is well-reputed for the introduction of a new stream in conceptual art. He tried to find out some innovative ways

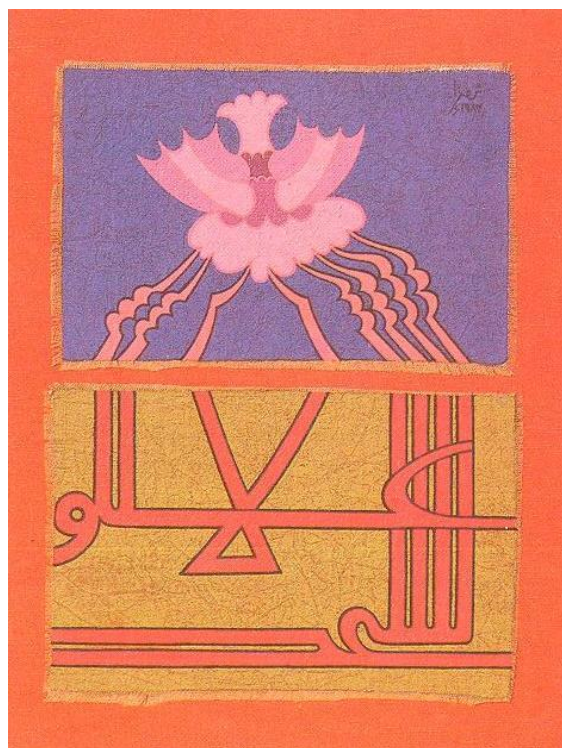


Figure 6. Shemza, Anwar Jalal. (1984), *Roots Series*, 20"x 12", mix medium on canvas, private collection.

Source: Marcella Nesom Sirhandi (1992: 141), *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozsons.

for transforming the nature of calligraphy and in doing so he got success while rendering the meaningless embodiment of calligraphy in his work. In his perception, Pakistan was like a façade of cultural heritage that lacks in meaningfulness and feelings, this point provides him the theoretical foundation and framework for his art practice. Being familiar with the art of miniature painting, he depicted the abstract structure of calligraphy over the same visual arrangement. Inside the frame of painting, he used to compose calligraphic signs and symbols and, in few references, these calligraphic impressions were applied at the bordered margins of the painting.

He desired to search for his individualized visual metaphors, for that he mainly got inspiration from calligraphic art for the reason that they had abstracted lettered forms. From 1960's to 1970's he worked with abstract compositions of calligraphic text in an absolute diverse manner. He was familiar with the modern and post-modern art movements but was more inclined towards abstract expressionism and renowned practitioners who worked under this style including Motherwell, Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Mondrian, and Ad Reinhardt. Amongst these artists, Zahoor pursued the path of Mark Tobey and Ad Reinhardt.

His paintings were rooted with profound contextual philosophy. He once said that he used the abstract reference of calligraphy for visual impression (Naqvi, 1998). While working under this genre he executed a series of work entitled *firmān*. The complete effect of which was based on abstract nature with the inclusion of linear characters. Zahoor in one of his *firmāns* (symbolically representing the royal seal of authority) has used the shape of a circle (figure 7). A sort of restive energy could be observed in his work which shows his passionate urge for restoring the faded tradition in modern phrase. His broken linear imagery in his work contains the modified structure of *Khatt-i Ghubār* and *Shikasta*. At all four sides of the rectangular composition margins are drawn with continuous representative imagery of linear forms. The black and white scheme of color also enhances the linear character of the composition, where the focal point of the painting could be easily observed and that is the circular seal like shape filled with calligraphic broken

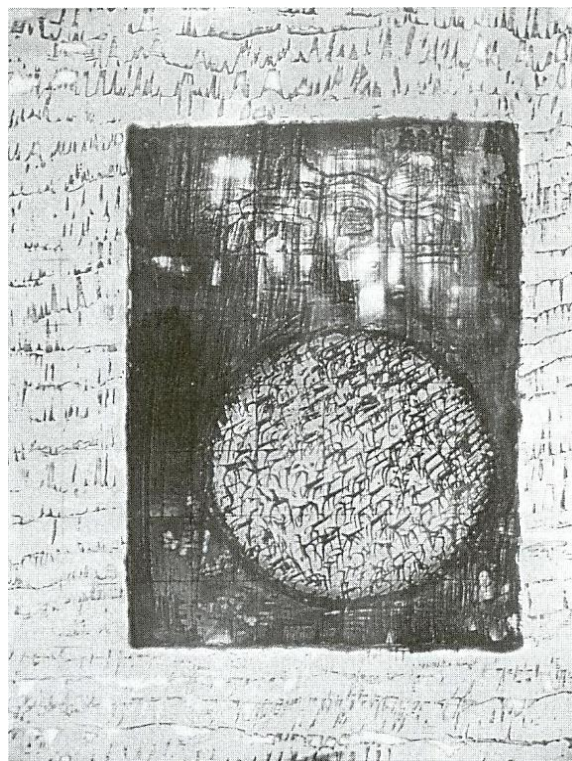


Figure 7. Akhlaq, Zahoor ul. (1967), *Firmān II*, 24.5"x 15", etching, National Museum of Art, PNCA, Islamabad.

Source: Marcella Nesom (1992: 83), *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozesons.

signs placed over a dark textured background. The positioning of the circle is off centered at the lower right corner near to the border, emphasized by tinted variation.

Freedom in visual exploration offered by modern calligraphy, captured attention of some other promising Pakistani artists, among them Rashid Ahmed Arshad (b.1937) emerged on the art scene during the same formative phase. As a calligraphic painter he fused calligraphy with modernity in an ingenious manner. He attempted in his own way for bridging gap between both the classical and modern genres through his artistic endeavor. He struggled to create for himself a sound ground for shaping a creative space as an artist among his contemporaries with commitment, which was evident in his visual metaphors. His interest in calligraphic text was not a result of any religious pressure during the Government of 1970's in fact it was his own passion and personal choice which provides him encouragement to select this genre as his personal visual statement. His initial modern practice was inspired by the small cubical structures of mosques that gave two-dimensional appearance and abstract quality to his work. From this style he moves forward to formulate a vocabulary of text based calligraphic references symbolizing both the celestial and the worldly. He experimented with the compositional surfaces as an intrinsic structuralist. His visual practice expressed his devoted belief towards religion which was expressed by highlighting the mystical significance of words, if the words are executed with truthful intention then its meaning is no less sanctified than prayer (Naqvi, 1998). He preferred to use Iranian script known as Shikasta with some variations for the conservation of the sacred structure.

He expressed his reflection into visual dialect where calligraphic letters and phrases have been vaguely worked against gleaming color scheme that is comprised of blue and red tones (figure 8). In this work his use of old manuscripts is symbolic in execution and unique is character where the impression of a royal seal is visible, circular in shape located over an egg-shaped scripted surface that resembles a slab of stone in reference to its application of color and form. The red colored background surface of the painting has some impressions of calligraphic words at the upper register which are executed with green color.

Rashid was not concerned with the readable character of the letters but was interested to show its hidden philosophy through metaphorical display. The modernized impact

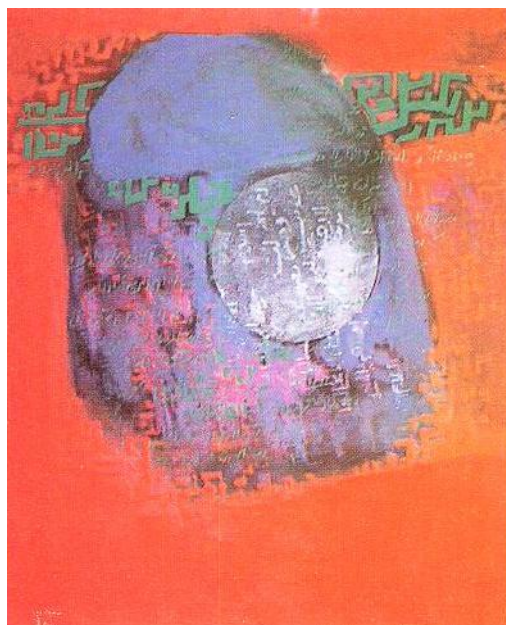


Figure 8. Arshad, Rashid Ahmed. (1974), *Calligraphy*, 33" x 28", oil on canvas, PNCA, Islamabad.

Source: Marcella Nesom Sirhandi (1992: 104), *Contemporary Painting in Pakistan*, Lahore: Ferozesons.

of Rashid's calligraphic vocabulary seems deeply embedded with the ideology to revitalize its connection with the religious legacy.

Besides Lahore based artists, Gulgee (1926-2007) was a renowned Karachi based versatile artist who explored the genre of modern calligraphy along with painting, mosaic and sculpture. Like Sadequain, in the 1970's he adopted calligraphic expression. He is known for the introduction of freehand synthesis of calligraphy with abstract expressionist style. He was inspired by action painting which was introduced by an American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. Gulgee with the rapid movement of his hand used to transform the Arabic text on his surfaces, while performing this act of transforming the words of calligraphy his body moves in the same way in accordance to his hand's action. This action resulted as a rhythmic sweeping gesture of extensive strokes on the painting's surface achieved through the application of luminous colors. Instead of mixing colors on the palette, his colors got mixed with the spirited movement of the charged brush resulting into an additional effect of textured calligraphic letters on his surface. He was credited to initiate action painting in Pakistan through his visual charged calligraphic vocabulary, the achieved rhythmic effect in his paintings seems alike mystical dance/ *dhamāl* of the *darvīsh* (Khan, 2012).

He once said that while working on his modern calligraphic paintings, he never realized whatever he was doing, but after finishing his job when he looks at the painting, that time he realizes from which trance he has been through (Naqvi, 1998). His work was decorative in execution and he used to get this lustrous effect by using gold leaves with the amalgamation of luminescent colors (figure 9), golden color is a divine symbol in Islam. In his work he stressed more on the expressionistic technique, while doing so, balance was kept between the dynamic flow of the script and the elements of ornamentation.



Figure 9. Gulgee, Ismail. (n.d), *Qur'anic verse*, size unknown, mix medium on canvas, private collection.
Source: S. Amjad Ali (2000: 140), *Painters of Pakistan*, Islamabad: National Book Foundation.

The contemporary Lahore based artist Ahmed Khan (b. 1938) is promising to highlight for his significant contribution towards modern calligraphy. A graduate of NCA, designer by profession served for more than last five decades in this genre and has great command on the fundamental scheme of design. His color application has sparkling

effect. His basic training being a graphic designer enabled him to play with his surface and as a result of which he got diverse compositional arrangements. Aesthetic sensibility also plays an essential role in his compositions. He selected the genre of modern calligraphy as a powerful device to express his ideology visually and became successful in introducing his own signature style.

In his luminous paintings traditional understanding of form and line are re-examined as a design for creating visual imagery. He took a long period of research to create his individualized calligraphic vocabulary by employing a multi-layered process achieved through the help of certain chemicals while recording their reaction over the foils of silver. His expertise in this process resulted into successful execution and matchless intensity. In an interview with the researcher he said, “he has witnessed all cultural attributes since previous to the present age of technology and these symbols are insightfully represented through his works” (Khan, 2012). Khan developed an innovative technique of achieving colors over the painted surface through the application of chemicals for attaining its response on untainted silver. He developed this technique because he never gets satisfied by the effect of light achieved through simple application of tinted colors.

Most of the compositional frames created by Khan seems replicating the forms of cloud mostly evident in Chinese and Persian miniature paintings (figure 10). The composition of his text in interlaced manner gives them a specified character that seems to be like filigree work. The technique of his painting includes chemically treated gold and silver leaves along with screen printing. Text is readable in style but has rhythmic flow achieved through repetition of the words. Repetitive flow of script visible in multiple glazes directed towards symbolic nuances creating a link with the concealed mystery. His use of text has a kind of depth because of the layers which moves in descending order. The rhythmic movement in the written text is similar to the flow of the composition. The overall impression of the repetitive *mashq* seems like designed patterns. Sense of depth has also been achieved through the use of light and tonal gradation. In one of the catalogues of this show entitled “*Transcending Borders*” (held in Lahore at Ejaz Art Galleries, 2006), he expressed: “depth is beyond dimension in my work, a confined certainty cannot be experienced through vision, sense of sight asserts connotations is an image; brilliant, pure, and deep as unseen, mystified beyond imagination and experience. Its emulated echo sketched a spotless structure over sensations like an absolute transcendental dose which sheers the image to audible range” (Khan, 2012).

After analyzing all the artworks produced by the pioneering figure of this genre, it is observed that were dutifully performing the mission to revitalizing the calligraphic text. Their work was exhibited both on national and international forums and they played

their part in reestablishing calligraphy in modern visage. Their sensations were realized through their individual style. Alongside individual impression their work symbolizes affiliation with the cultural legacy expressed by the use of modern visual language which is itself promising.

These pioneering figures of Pakistani art contributed a lot for the promotion and preservation of calligraphy in a modern phrase which was then named as Modern Calligraphy. Although this artform has never been given the status of an individual art movement in Pakistani art but it has been observed as an expansion of exploration and research that turned out as a trend setter. All the predecessors of this modern trend were having specific philosophies related with their own experiences and explorations of multiple dimensions. Their motivation and meditative practice towards this genre encouraged the younger lot of today and this was how the chain of the trend found its way to the contemporary age. In the current art scene, many among the young visual practitioners are actively participating in the promotion of this genre following the footsteps of the promising pioneers. Looking at the secure graph of modern calligraphy in Pakistan, it is appropriate to say that the art scene of Pakistan has served promisingly for bridging gaps between the traditional and modern practice of calligraphy and is still on the way.

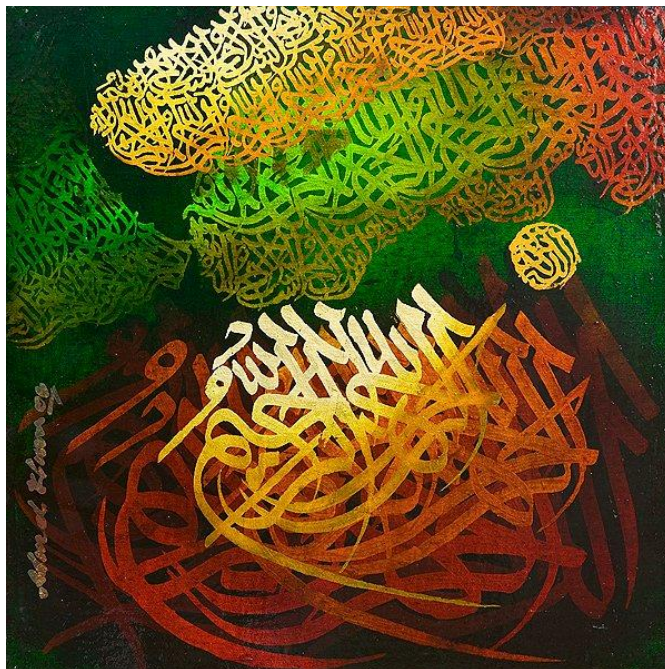


Figure 10. Khan, Ahmed. (2008), *Al-Rahmān Al-Rahīm*, 13”x 13”, chemically treated gold and silver leaves on board, private collection.

Source: <http://www.Artscene galleries.com/calligraphy-sold.asp?Page=2> (Accessed on 17th January, 2012)

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