2.0 Introduction

This text is about the history and concept of Islamic calligraphy and painting. It is important to clarify the evolution and development of Islamic calligraphy to be able to identify the form and type of calligraphy to a certain period and the khattāt who invent the system or method of writing calligraphy. The other main element to be clarified is the history of Islamic painting, its practice and relative Islamic law regarding the issue of figurative art and representation.

Since this study touches a lot of issues on the unity of three main traditions which exist in Malaysian art scene: Western, Islamic and Malay art traditions, it is of the utmost priority to identify the underlying Islamic principles related to the issues. It is vital for the researcher to view the philosophy and concept of Islamic calligraphy before embarking into the research. Scholars had dealt the Islamic calligraphy from many angles such as the issue of spirituality, mystical belief and the power of the letters, its numerical values and its function as a charm. Similarly, in the realm of aesthetic, when the reading of the words is no longer important but it is in the beauty of the flow of the letters, form and shape, became the central purpose of artistic endeavor.

On the other hand, many issues have been raised, especially concerning the issue of the implementation of the sacred or holy art of Qur’anic calligraphy in contemporary style. What are the appropriate ways to express one’s feeling in the aniconic tradition? The main important question is how to identify the application of the philosophy of Islamic calligraphy and Islamic art in the contemporary art works? What are the concepts related to Islamic calligraphy: mystical, spiritual, iconological or are they merely a tool of communication? Furthermore, the definition of Islamic calligraphy, Arabic calligraphy and Jawi script has to be solved and identified.

2.1 Islamic Calligraphy: History and Concept

2.1.1 Writing in Early Islam

By the early seventh century C.E., little development of writing had taken place among the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. Evidence of paleographic remains (Plate 2.1) shows that the Arabs of the time possessed some knowledge of the art of writing, but not widely practiced. The Arab tribes that inhabited the Arabian Peninsula were said to be illiterate, but they were known by their eloquent oral poetry. Their natural speech led to the improvement of the Arabic alphabet, which was further developed as the Arabs moved from the desert to the cities.¹

The Prophet Muhammad himself was an illiterate. The revelations to him were immediately committed to memory by the Prophet and his companions, revealing the long practice in the skill of memorizing by the Arab society. After each revelation, the Prophet requested his companions who were able to write to transcribe the revealed words in writing on bits of clay, stone, bones, papyrus, or any other material that could be found. The companions then would re-read them to the Prophet to ensure the accuracy of the inscriptions. The process of inscribing the Qurʾān disclosed the attitude of the Prophet towards the values of reading and writing. This was supported by occasions during time of conquest when prisoners held captive were required to teach the Muslims the skills of reading and writing.


The establishment of the Islamic religion during the seventh century was the most important factor that contributed to the enhancement of Arabic writing. The first verse delivered to the Prophet Muhammad contains an invitation to read, write and learn:

2 Ṣahīh Al-Bukhārī, Vol. 3, Book 31, Number 137: The Prophet said. “We are an illiterate nation; we neither write, nor know accounts. The month is like this and this, i.e. sometimes of twenty nine days and sometimes of thirty days.” Narrated by Ibn ‘Umar.

3 Bishr ibn ‘Abdul Mālik and Harb ibn ‘Umayyah are believed to have introduced the Makkans to the art of writing the North Arabic Script, a derivation from the earlier Nabatean. Harb is credited with popularizing it among the aristocracy of the Quraysh, the tribe of Muhammad. Among the contemporaries of the Prophet who become experts in writing were ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affān, and ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, three of the first four Rashidūn caliphs. Refer to Al-Faruqi, The Cultural Atlas of Islam, London and New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986, p. 376.

Proclaim! (or Read!): In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created.
Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood
Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful.  

Other than Sūrah al-‘Ālq, Welch\(^6\) points out that the following verses are the main factor that shaped the art of Arabic calligraphy:

He who taught (the use of) the pen.
Taught man that which he knew not.\(^7\)

In Sūrah Al-Qalam, (The Pen):

Nun. I call to witness the Pen and what they (men) inscribe.
You are not demented by the grace of your Lord\(^8\)

Islamic theology, therefore, determined that God has honoured man with the gift of knowledge through writing by the pen. However the knowledge of God is the Ultimate, no other creatures including mankind could possibly receive all His knowledge. The passage says: “And if all the trees on earth were pens and the Ocean (were ink), with seven Oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the Words of God be exhausted (in the writing): for God is Exalted in power, full of Wisdom.”\(^9\) Thus, writing became at once a means of transmission, and a way of discovering man’s inability to fully perceive the divine.

Al-Qur’ān flourishes the art of calligraphy. Other motivation comes from the Hadīths which rejected the mimetic representations of living things. A great number of authentic hadiths criticize picture-making and reprimand picture-makers. However, the Hadīths stress different level of Islamic law for different situations. It can be as far as to reject the possession of picture or statues, or display them in one’s house. A Hadīth narrated by Abū Talhā that the Prophet said (translated as): “Angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or there are pictures.”\(^10\) On the other end, there are Hadīths which shows the allowable of possessing it, such as children toys. ‘Aishah reported that she used to play with dolls and that her friends used to come and


play with her and the fact that the Prophet was pleased with these visits is evidence that they are not forbidden. The Muslims are allowed to make, possess and use the picture in certain conditions: it is not made with the intention of making it as a worshipped idol, or making it as the like of Allah’s creation, or for worshipping rulers, leaders or anyone, and should not make the muslims neglect their religious obligations.11

The forbiddence of pictures and statues in Islamic law, however, flourished the art of writing as an alternative. Muslims preferred to conceive ideas in abstraction which conforms with the spirit of monotheism and rejected materialization which are reminiscent of notorious paganism. As a result, writing was elevated into a main ideological vehicle of expression, replacing images used elsewhere as signs for all functions, such as belief, power, and legitimacy. Eventually, ‘images of the word’ became a major characteristic in Islamic art.12

2.1.2 The Development of Islamic Calligraphy

The term Islamic calligraphy is by definition referring to Arabic calligraphy, which nevertheless belongs to the entire Islamic world. Tracing the evolution of Arabic calligraphy and its historical development, the alphabets showed great similarities with the Syriac or Nabatean alphabets and therefore, its existence precedes Islam. But the Nabatean alphabets (Plate 2.2) are no more than a rather rudimentary character, a large number of letters looked alike and without any indictment of vowels or any systematical dotting system. The meaning of many words could often be made out only by the context.13

The Nabatean alphabet contains twenty-two letters. However, during the times of the righteous Caliphs (632-661 C.E.), the characters were added with dots above and below for reasons of clarity, making the Arabic twenty-eight letters.14 (Plate 2.3) The Arabic script further uses diagonal strokes and small characters above and below the letters to indicate sounds and stresses on vowels (Plate 2.4).15 Thus, the development of the script occurs during the Islamic period, by establishing the system of writing. The recognition on its originality is supported by Ahmad Ṣabrī Mahmūd Zāyid who claimed that Arabic calligraphy is considered as the earliest form of Islamic art and the most magnificent art created by any civilization.16 Nasr further

---

11 Ibid, pp. 81-83.
stressed that: “Islamic calligraphy is specifically an Islamic art without any pre-Islamic precedence.” Both refer to the great contribution of Islam towards the development of the script and furthermore, in the aesthetic qualities.


Plate 2.3. The earliest system developed by adding dots to identify the sound of letter. (After Ahmad Riḍā, Op.Cit., p. 163).

---

The early Islamic calligraphy was formed to achieve the ultimate task of the calligraphy itself, on the clarity of text which was meant to be read and appreciated. However, a revolution in the way of writing occurred, when the writing of calligraphy became incorporated into the urban culture of the big cities and became a part of the decoration of its objects. There are also patrons of art who stressed on their own unique style, and finally making the calligraphy vivacious; it can be clear and meaningless as well; its legibility is often ambiguous and the reading of the text is no longer an issue. This sociocultural condition nurtured a development of original and varied uses for writing.

All Arabic scripts fell mainly into two broad categories. One was the Muqawwar wa Mudawwar (curved and round) which was cursive and easy to write. The other was the Mabsūṭ wa Mustaqīm (elongated and straight-lined) which was angular and stiff. These are what referred by Burckhardt as two styles of writing which have co-existed since the first centuries of Islam: Kūfī (Plate 2.5), which is distinguished by the static nature of the letters; and Naskh (Plate 2.6), a kind of cursive script with forms of varying fluidity. From these two styles of writing, the various types of calligraphy of later period were developed.


---


19 The two categories, according to Papadopulo, “correspond to the two types of geometrical motifs used in abstract decoration, one rectilinear (polygons), the other curvilinear (spiral and arabesque).” They are “the concrete evidence of a ceaseless quest for geometrical structure.” Papadopulo, Islam and Muslim Art, p. 176.


However, an orientalist named B. Moritz\(^2\) argues that the angular and cursive scripts co-existed before the coming of Islam. He refers to the original duality due to the technique of writing on different materials. The angular Kufic script as a hieratical and monumental script are suitable for inscriptions on masonry or coins. Whereas the cursive *Naskh* script is adapted for use on parchment.

Khatibi and Sijelmasi\(^2\) clearly rejected the idea that the history of calligraphy has demonstrated that it is the materials which are adapted to the driving impulse of calligraphy, and not the reverse. Furthermore, both scripts are used to express the same theme in the context of Islam.

Overall, the idea of technique is an element in the orientalist theory which brings up the antithesis of sacred and profane. In the same manner toward different issues, other orientalist, Yasser Tabaa\(^3\) remarked the differences of scripts used between Qur’anic scripts and secular scripts in the formation of Islamic calligraphy. For him, the early cursive scripts were used exclusively for secular purposes, never for the *Qur’ān* which was written in the angular Kufic script. His theory is supported by Abbot by saying that secular and Qur’anic scripts were subject to totally different calligraphic rules, those applied to the *Qur’ān* being far more exacting.\(^4\) Therefore, most treatises on calligraphy dealt with secular, not Qur’anic scripts since their

---


\(^3\) Yasser Tabaa, “The Transformation of Arabic Writing: Part 1, Quranic Calligraphy” in *Ars Orientalis* XXI, Vol. 21, USA: The Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan, 1991, p. 120.

authors tended to be scribes and officials of the administration.  

For him, the rules of proportion, such as perfected by Ibn Muqlah and Ibn Bawwāb were not intended for Qur’anic Kufic but for the large variety of scribal scripts. In other words, Qur’anic Kufic, which by the tenth century had reached a very high standard, was not directly affected by the changes of Ibn Muqlah; the reform was at first intended for the more mundane scripts.

It is true that the development of Islamic calligraphy as it is today is indebted to great calligraphers who put their efforts to the perfection of the cursive scripts especially Ibn Muqlah and Ibn al-Bawwāb. However, the idea of dividing Islamic calligraphy to divine and secular art is again rejected by Khatibi and Sijelmasi. The two scripts evolve in parallel. The predominance of the angular script never led to the elimination of the cursive script. The continuity of their existence is rooted in the culture of Islam in its different manifestation but similar importance.

This is supported by Burckhardt, who stresses that none of the various styles of Islamic calligraphy, born at different periods, has even fallen into disuse. On Kufic and Naskh styles, he even elaborates:

The opposition between the two trends in calligraphy – the one accentuating the static form of letters and the other blending them in a continuous flow – is never absolute; in every phase of development, syntheses were made, such as Muhaqqaq whose entire beauty lies in the fact that the polarization of both trends is carried to the extreme limit, without, however, destroying the unity of the whole...

Ibn Muqlah (886-940), the pioneer who contributed to the integration of geometry into the cursive rule of writing and known as ṣāḥīb al-khāṭṭ al-mansūb (master of the proportioned script), gained fame chiefly for inventing a system of proportional writing based on the principles of geometric design (ḥandasah al-hurūf). His system of proportion was based on measurement by dots. The dot was formed by pressing the nib of the qalam (reed pen) on paper until it opened to its fullest extent, after which it was released evenly and rapidly. This produced a square on edge, or a rhombus. The size of the dot affected only the size of the writing; the relative proportions of letters remained constant for each individual script. Placing dots vertex to vertex, Ibn Muqlah then proceeded to straighten the Kufic Alif, which has been bent to the right, and adopt it as his standard of measurement (Plate 2.7). The next step was to standardize the individual letters of the various corrupted secular scripts by bringing them into accord with geometric figures. By giving each letter a proportional relation (nisbah) to the Alif, Ibn Muqlah was able to construct a canon of proportions

25 Ibid, p. 76.
for the entire alphabet. This allowed the creation of a number of systematic methods or templates for each of the major scripts, which henceforth could be produced accurately to scale. The canonical scripts, known collectively as al-Aqlām al-Sittah were Thuluth, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Riq’ah, Tawqī’ and Raihān (Plate 2.8). Of these scripts, Thuluth was to attain the greatest importance in view of its nearly exclusive use for monumental inscriptions and for sūrah headings in the Qurʾān. Naskh, originally a minor and somewhat disdained script, became the preferred style for literary manuscripts and small Qurʾāns, especially during the Ottoman period. Muhaqqaq and Raihan achieved the peak of their fame in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when they were used for writing the splendid Mamluk and Mongol Qurʾāns, the former scripts for large copies and the latter for smaller ones. Riq’ah was employed for correspondence, while the use of tawqī’ was restricted to royal decrees and official letters.

The geometrical basis for building the art form in the letters of the calligraphy in general has the same quality as the foundation of arabesques that illuminate an object, architecture or book, along with the calligraphy. This is stressed by Khatibi and Sijelmassi as:

Calligraphy thus has its own sculptural autonomy as an art which is extremely abstract, and within which one can discern (as certain researchers have done) in geometry, even a mathematical quality, of a sign.

From this point of view, a relationship between calligraphy and ornamentation is established.

---


---


Plate 2.8. Examples of al-Aqlâm al-Sittah. Khat Thuluth and Naskh were written by Fu‘âd Istafan (After Ahmad Rida, Op.Cit., p. 120); Khat Riq‘ah and Raihân were written by Kamil al-Baba (After Ahmad Rida, Ibid., p. 118). For Khat Tawqī‘ and Raihân, the khattāt is unknown (After Nājî Ŭain al-Dîn, Op. Cit., p. 101-102).

If Ibn Muqlah developed the system of writing based on geometrical grids, Ibn al-Bawwâb (d.1022) was another reformer who followed the method of Ibn Muqlah but further improved it by making the script clearer, more cursive, and more elegant. A small Qur‘ân (plate 2.9) attributed to him known as the earliest cursive Qur‘ân and the one of the earliest made, since Ibn al-Bawwâb was the first to write Qur‘âns in fully cursive scripts. The two most important cursive scripts are represented in this manuscript, Naskh in text and a variety of Thuluth in the opening folios and surah
headings. *Naskh* was one of his particular style in writing seems to have been imitated until near the end of the twelfth century. The other script, *Thuluth* was also remarkable (plate 2.10).\(^{32}\)

After Ibn Muqlah and Ibn al-Bawwāb’s period, their influence continues. Calligraphy has been influenced by many peoples and powers; it has accompanied, in its own way, the whole history of Islam. Wherever Islam triumphed, in war or religion, the indigenous culture would reinterpret calligraphy and reestablish it in the adaptation of their own culture. Islamic calligraphy was developed in various forms since it was influenced by the local aesthetics and languages. The scripts which are elongated develop in Afghanistan and India, while the compact scripts establish in North Africa.\(^{33}\) The adaptation to the local languages and the change of its aesthetic qualities concurrently leads to the change of name, giving birth to *Khat al-Fārisī* and *al-Taʿlīq* (plate 2.11) in Persia; *Khat Bihari* (plate 2.13) in India and Afghanistan; and *Khat Sini* (plate 2.12) in China. When it arrived to Malay Archipelago, the script was called *Jawi*. (plate 2.14) Islamic calligraphy simultaneously flourishes until recently used in many forms such as fine art, graphic art and typography.

---


Plate 2.10. Thuluth Calligraphy Written by Ibn Bawwāb, from Topkapi Museum, Turkey. (After Ahmad Riḍā, Op Cit., p. 75).

Plate 2.12. Khat Ṣīni, written by Mohammad Wang Jian Wen, Praise to Allah, 80 x 59 cm. (After The Exhibition of Islamic Calligraphy From China In Conjunction with The Holy Month of Ramadhan 1420 Hijrah, Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 10th December 1999 – 16th January 2000, p. 21).

2.1.3 Islamic Calligraphy: Between Spirituality, Mysticism and Iconology

The contribution of Islam towards the development of Arabic calligraphy does not end in the physical appropriation, transformation and aesthetic properties. Islamic calligraphy also carries the history of a Muslim’s mind and spirituality, understood from its world view. Islamic art does not revolve around images and icons. In Islamic world-view, Allah is transcendent and beyond figural representation\textsuperscript{34}. He is not presented in the form of an image. Instead, He reveals Himself in His words, sacred words which form the Qur’an. Islamic art essentially recapitulates these words,

echoes them, thus creating an ambiance which enhances one’s religiosity. Khat or calligraphy is one of the best forms of expression for this.

Furthermore, the creation of an art work does not emphasize the outer forms of man and nature. Muslim artists as a theomorphic being and a servant of God, prefer to leave the outer forms of nature and the material world and rather concentrate on the inner reality of things and the world of spirits. This make their art abstract in nature and rich in non-natural and geometric designs or patterns. Islamic calligraphy complies with the concentration on the inner reality, in its aesthetic forms and its written words. The form of calligraphy, whether cursive in nature or angular and stiff, represents the beauty that responses with the spirituality. Added by the written words, either from the words of God, the Hadiths or wiseman sayings, the beauty in meaning is enhanced. In most cases, the art objects of the Muslim peoples were to be constant reminders of Tawhid.

Since every act and thought of the Muslim carries a religious connection, the incorporation of Qur’anic passages in every object and utensils is desired. Qur’anic passages in beautiful calligraphy have been used as decorative motifs not only on religiously significant items but also on fabrics, garments, vessels and service trays, boxes and furniture, walls and buildings, even the lowly cooking pot in every century of Islamic history and in every corner of the Muslim world. It reflects the act to make simple utensils to be a reminder of God, from a customary thing to extraordinary, from an unholy utensil to sacred. The calligraphy lifts up an ordinary thing to be a revered and venerated thing, treated with great care since it bears words of God. In other words, the calligraphy itself is the venerated element, and thus, ranks the highest in the hierarchy of Islamic art apart with architecture. As stressed by Nasr:

...in visual arts the highest arts, which are the sacred arts par excellence of Islam are calligraphy and architecture. One is associated with the writing of the Word of Allah in the form of the Qur’an and the other with the creation of spaces in which the Word of God reverberates, the space of the mosque of which all other Islamic architecture is in a sense an extension.

As a divine art, Islamic calligraphy is also related to mysticism. In order to apprehend calligraphy and its beauty, one has to feel the infinite presence of God involving both his body and mind, and also his soul – conceived as ecstatic thought. The invocation and contemplation spark the feeling of the divine presence. There in lies a consideration which must be cleared up to permit a better understanding of calligraphy.

---


One of the mystical qualities associated to calligraphy is that each of the letters contains hidden knowledge and special powers. Dramatic expression of letters can be found in the writings of Fadl Allah Al-Hurūfī from Iran, the founder of the cult of Hurufiyyan, who wrote ‘Ilm Al-Hurūfī (the science of letters) in the fourteenth century. Ilm al-Hurūfī was among those branches of knowledge known as ‘Ulūm Gharība (odd sciences), or ‘Ulūm Khafīyya (mysterious sciences). Al-Hurūfī regards certain numbers as sacred and assigning various meanings to certain letters. He believes that there is a strong relationship between letters and numbers, as he stresses that word is the supreme manifestation of God, and the whole total of letters and of their numerical values, according to the abjad, is the total of all the emanating and creative possibilities of God and is God Himself manifest.

Through his studies, al-Hurūfī referred all religious commands to the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet. The twenty-eight letters could be divided into four equal categories corresponding to the alchemical elements of fire, air, earth and water. Hence, certain combinations of letters were associated with certain situations and were even used in astrological predictions and in magic as charms against particular afflictions: letters of the “water” group could reduce or eliminate fever; letters of “fire” group could increase the intensity of war.38

Furthermore, the script is also related to the symbol of cosmic harmony and the perfection of God reflected in His creation. The twenty-eight scripts express the rhythm of the stars and the form of man.39 It seeks to reveal, through the veil of appearances, the hidden reality in terms of intelligible form. If numbers and letters are combined, it shows the geometry of the soul which is called the science of letters. Everything unfolds, according to this view, in the indivisible unity of Allah. From the root of a word, an extensive growth proliferates, a blossom of number and rhetoric. The cosmic scripture is encoded in the structure of the Arabic scripts. The theory has pervaded the metaphysic of symbol from East to West, especially in the organic and psychosomatic medication.

Perhaps, some of the scholars do not intend to include this mystical aspect of Islamic calligraphy for its mysterious sources and ambiguous basis of knowledge. However the mystery of letters also occurs at the beginning of twenty-nine sūrahs (chapters) of the Qurʾān, called the futūhāt. Certain letters began particular surahs in the Qurʾān, such as the letters alif, lām and mim (١۱ﻟﻢ) to begin Sūrah Al-Baqarah. For the salaf scholars40, the letters are not given any interpretation and left as it is;


40 Salaf is the first group of Tābiʿīn (Companions of the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w.). They took the stand of not confronting the issue of Zāt Allāh and His Attributes, as well as the issue of Futuhat, and lefted it be without any interpretation. Refer to Hassan Mat Leh, “Aliran Salaf Khalaf: Suatu Perbandingan Dari Segi Method dan Konsep-Konsep Utama”, in Jurnal Usuluddin, Bil 1, Kuala Lumpur: Fakulti Usuluddin, Akademi Pengajian Islam Universiti Malaya, 1993, p. 228.
whereas for the *khalaf* scholars\(^{41}\), the letters are deemed to have healing powers.

Other individual letters were also ascribed special strengths, while numerical studies showed that each letter had a numerical equivalent. For example, the divine name “*Allāh*” begins with an *alif*, which is the first letter of the alphabet and has numerical value of one, the symbol of divine unity (plate 2.15). The influence of this mystical aspect has been spreading into Islamic countries, including in the Malay Archipelago. The Malays has used this as a talisman or charm to protect them against evil powers (plate 2.16 and 2.17). However, the practice is in accordance to their previous animistic belief. When Islam came, they replaced their charm with Islamic calligraphy and numerical script, believing in the magical power it bears. Most of the charm were arranged in squares, called magical squares.\(^ {42}\)

![Plate 2.15](image)


\(^{41}\) *Khalaf* is the group *Ahl Al-Kalām*, those opposed to *Salaf*. They hold to the philosophical and logical methodology and interpreted al-Qur’an based on their minds. *Ibid.*, p. 231.

\(^{42}\) Magical squares could be found in Malay world in large amount especially in ceramic. Refer to Othman Mohd Yatim, *Penggunaan Tembikar dalam Masyarakat Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Muzium, 1981.

Letters were also used as metaphors in poetry as well as in writing. As elaborated by Khatibi and Sijelmasi, the letter mīn resembled the mouth; the letter ‘ayn an eye; the alif an upright, slender youth; the dāl a person bent with age, and the combined letters lām and alif a close embrace between two lovers. Those
metaphorical applications of letters are what permitted artists to formulate images with the use of text.\textsuperscript{43}

Moreover, there are infinite possibilities of the creativity process, when the use of writing and letters are transformed into something other than words. The calligraphy may carry the possibilities of iconographic values, especially in the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic shapes, as represented in the shape of human, praying in the \textit{tashāḥud}\textsuperscript{44} form (plate 2.18). The tradition of creating the Islamic calligraphy in accordance to the shape of man and animals is the tradition of Shi’ites since the early nineteenth century. The letters are also stretched and curved to embody the shapes of animals such as birds (plate 2.19), lion (plate 2.20), elephants and other animals.

Other beauty of Islamic art, according to Shabout, is how Arabic letters can be manipulated and used like instruments to create visual music:

\begin{quote}
The Arabic script can be a dance of ascending verticals, descending curves, and temperate horizontals, beautifully choreographed to achieve a measured balance between the static individual form and its rhythmic movement. A great variability in form can be reached by the right play of letters and words. Letters and words can be compacted into a dense area or drawn out to a great length. They can be angular or curving, and small or large.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{43} Khatibi and Sijelmassi claim: ‘Given that this calligraphy derives from an ancient alphabet, it is no surprise to find that it still retains pictographic remnants’. Khatibi and Sijelmassi, \textit{Op. Cit.}, p. 7.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Tashāḥud} is the sit in the şolāh (prayer).


2.2 Painting in Islam: History and Concept

It is of great importance to discuss the concept of painting in Islam and the practice that has been simultaneously done in the course of time. By studying *al-Qurʾān* and *Hadīth* as the two main resources of Islamic law, the main teaching or the principles concerning figurative art and painting may be envisaged. On the other hand, be it the practice of painting parallel to Islamic law, or be it opposite to the teachings, the history of Muslim art continues in making its own tradition. It is vital to overview the practices that had been made by the Muslims in order to analogously test some of the practices in producing contemporary Islamic calligraphy of Malaysia.

2.2.1 Islamic Law and Principles on Painting

The discussion of the prohibition of figurative art is only implicitly mentioned in the *Qurʾān*, but explicitly asserted in the *Hadīth*. A few accounts in the *Qurʾān* implicitly mention the destruction of earlier generations who had worshipped idols. A verse concerning the prohibition of *al-Anšāb* is cited in the *Qurʾān*46. These Qur’anic verses, however, do not refer to the prohibition on creating icons or sculpture, but forbid the action or ritual of worshipping idols. It is quite clear that the main motive in prohibiting icons in Islam is to prohibit Polytheism.

In the *Qurʾān*, the name of God as *al-Muṣawwir*47 is mentioned. As the only creator, He cannot admit any competitors, hence the opposition to idols which by association and by extension could become rivals through representation. But this interpretation, O.Grabar48 suggests was not consciously taken at the time of Islam’s formation, and perhaps may be the reason of the existence of figurative art in the early centuries of the Hijrah.

The existence of figurative art in pre-Islamic private houses was not something new, as pre-Islamic Arabian tradition accepted idolatry. In a tradition reported by Ibn Ishaq,49 he mentioned the story of ‘Amr ibn al-Jamūh, who after the first pledge of *al-‘Agabah*, still kept his idol, *Manāṭ*. When his idol was thrown into a cesspit frequently and secretly at night, he finally admitted that the idols could not defend or protect themselves. He finally converted to Islam.

Islam does not prescribe any special forms of art but merely the field of their expression. The prohibition is found in *Hadīth* materials. “Angels do not enter a house in which there is a dog or a picture.” On one occasion, Zaid fell ill and his companion visited him. They found a curtain with a picture on it. Busr asked ‘Ubaidullāh

46 *Al-Qurʾān*, Surah al-Maidah 5: 90.


Khawlānī whether he had heard Zaid himself informed about the Prophet’s command pertaining to pictures. But ‘Ubaidullāh mentioned that he had heard of an exception for prints on cloth.50 In another tradition, ‘Aishah was reported as taking carpet and screening the door. When the Prophet saw the carpet, his face showed his disapproval. He tore down the carpet and cut it into pieces. ‘Aishah then prepared two pillows from the pieces of the carpet and the Prophet did not find fault with it.51

The reason for this prohibition on figures is mentioned in a Hadīth. ‘Aishah reported that she had a curtain with portraits of birds upon it. The Prophet asked her to change them, because it could possibly bring to his mind the pleasures of worldly life. In another Hadīth, the Prophet tore down a curtain with pictures and said that people who tried to imitate Allah in the act of creation would be tormented on the Day of Resurrection.52

The reasons for prohibition mentioned in the Hadīth indicate that the religious status of the embellishment of houses with pictures or statues was makrāh and the other harām. The intention of the doer and the effects on the viewer are the determinant factors in this respect. In the case where the carpet is torn into pieces and made two pillows, the status was mubah (permissible). The reason this was permitted was the attitude of disrespect towards the figurative pictures. In a tradition narrated by Muslim bin Ṣūbah, he reported that Ibn Abbas told a painter to paint pictures of lifeless objects.53 The status of pictorial art, therefore, has to deal very much with the intention and the effect on the Muslims. This could also suggest that the issue of figurative art is complex and should be approached in depth through the science of al-Qawā’id al-Fiqhiyyah54, as well as the science of Qur’anic and Hadīth interpretation.

2.2.2 Persian Miniature and Art of the Book

Painting is not a term used in association with Islamic art in Islamic tradition. A variety of terms introduced paintings based on its type, and often associated with the architecture and the arts of the Islamic books. In the arts of the Islamic books, for example, the term painting is replaced by other terms such as illumination and illustration, which usually existed to illustrate the written calligraphy. Books became major vehicles for artistic expression.

51 Ibid., p. 10.
52 Ibid., p. 13
53 Ibid., p. 27.
54 It is a science of jurisprudential methods and devices, to find out the origin of Islamic religious status that could change within space, time, intention, means, goals etc. Refer to Kitāb al-Aqmār al-Muḍī‘ah Sharḥ al-Qawā’id al-Fiqhiyyah, by ‘Abd al-Ḥādī Diyā’ al-Dīn Ibrāhīm bin Muhammad al-Qāsim al-Ahdāl, Mecca: Maktabah Jeddah, 1986.
In early period of Islam, the embellishment of Qur’an is the most common type of book embellished. On the other hand, books such as scientific works, histories, romances, epic and lyric poetry were also copied in fine hands and embellished with beautiful illustrations. Islamic book arts did not really mature or reach the point of significance until what is thought of as the middle period of the Islamic empire, a period dominated in architecture by the development of regionally distinctive styles, a period in which books and book artists became objects and people of high value and esteem, a period in which books were made by the order of a prince, signed by the calligrapher and painter, and other books were made to be sold at markets.55

The growth in book arts followed the introduction of papermaking from China in the eighth century. Paper was thinner, more affordable than parchment, and easier to work with. This has some interesting ramifications for painting, not only in terms of ease. Paper was a more accessible medium, drawing as a means of communication evolved in other fields.56 Architects, for example, began to draw plans and facades. It is likely that as architectural drawing became more prevalent, it contributed to the more sophisticated spatial treatment which emerged in painting and to the more complex relationships between text and picture on the single page of a book. Perhaps it was an indirect force in the development of a more proportional style of calligraphy, as well.

Pictures were used in manuscripts particularly scientific and technical books. The pictures were illustrated adjacent to the particular text in order to elaborate the discussion. According to Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair,57

In the ninth century the Abbasid caliph sponsored a revival of Classical learning, and many scientific texts, including Ptolemy’s treatise on the stars and Dioskorides’s herbal, were translated from Greek into Arabic. As the Classical models had been illustrated, it is likely that the Arabic copies were illustrated as well, although the earliest copies have not survived. Illustrations to a manuscript of al-Sufi’s Book of the Fixed Stars, a revision of Ptolemy’s catalogue of the stars and the constellations, show how the Classical models were transformed in Islamic times. The constellation Andromeda, for example, was represented in Classical times by a nude woman chained to rocks, but in this manuscript dated 1009 (101) she has lost her setting and been transformed into a dancing girl with fluttering draperies. Similarly, male constellations, such as Sagittarius, wear turbans or hats. Once established, these new models were repeatedly copied…57

55 Bloom, J. and Blair, S., Islamic Arts, Phaidon Art & Ideas, p. 193.
56 Ibid., pp. 193-4.
57 Ibid., p. 197.

The tradition initiated by the translation of the Greek books in astrology and pharmacology had broadened to other kind of texts. One of the outstanding books is the Maqāmāt al-Harīrī\textsuperscript{58} (1054-1122) which recounts the fifty adventures of Abū Zayd of Sarūj as told by the merchant al-Harīth. The paintings, however, tells less about the text than about the economic and social life in the medieval Islamic life. The most famous and unusual manuscript of the Maqāmāt was copied and illustrated by Yahyā al-Wāṣīfī at Baghdad in 1237, and found as not mentioning any patrons, probably made for sale on the market.\textsuperscript{59}

The most important event to be made an account was the year 1258, where the Mongols invaded Baghdad and destroyed the city and most of the priceless manuscripts and books. After this date, Iran became the new creative centre for the arts of the books, especially Persian miniature.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} The Maqāmāt al-Harīrī or Assemblies of al-Harīrī is immensely popular among the bourgeoisie of the Arab lands for its linguistic inventiveness and punning style. The work was repeatedly illustrated and eleven illustrated copies produced before 1350 have survived.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
After the conquest of Hulagu Khan in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the Ilkhanid capital, Maragha had been established as an observatory directed by the astronomer Nasir al-Din Tusi in 1259. For the Mongol rulers of Iran, astronomy and astrology were extremely important to maintain the shamanic beliefs of their ancestors. After the Ilkhans converted to Islam, they adopted their languages, beliefs and customs of their subjects. Books like *Kalīlah wa Dimnah* were translated into Persian and many other books were written to integrate the different systems of belief of the time. In this heterogeneous and cosmopolitan society, a court physician and vizier named Rashīd al-Dīn produced a book called *Universal History*. The book was completed under Uljaytu (r.1304-16), contains the history of Mongols, Turks, Chinese, Franks, Jews, Indians and Islamic Dynasties which took their inspiration from a great variety of visual sources, ranging from Chinese scrolls to Italian panel paintings of the thirteenth century. The survived manuscripts in Arabic copies comprises of the history of the ancient Prophets, Muhammad and the caliphs, the rulers of Islamic Iran, the Chinese, the Indians and the Jews.

The Ilkhanid patron, however, was not sensitive with the issue of Prophetic representation. In *Universal History*, the scene of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad was clearly depicted and painted. The image was adapted from Christian art, probably from Byzantine panel painting or manuscript illustrating the Nativity of Christ. This work has no tradition in Islamic art for representing an image of the Prophet Muhammad, for it was prohibited. It is also important to highlight that the works of Ilkhanids are not only clarifying the religio-political situation of the time but also juxtaposing with the Chinese-Mongolian style of painting that uses coloured washes to heighten the line drawing.

It is under Uljaytu’s son, Abu Said who was born a Muslim that the illustrated manuscript reached a new height. As a patron, he initiated a new style in painting which could be seen in the great copy of *Shahnama*. If Rashid al-Din’s illustration filled only a narrow horizontal space of the written page, in *Shahnama*, the format has been expanded to fill more than one-third of the written surface. Each of the written line contains three of the poem’s couplets and was done in six columns separated by narrow rulings. At the top of the painting, a box was created to fill in the title for the

---

61 He was born as a Jewish in Hamadan in 1247 and converted to Islam. His position as a court physician and vizier had brought wealth to him as well as envies from others. He eventually executed in 1318. *Ibid.*, p. 201.


64 *Ibid.*

65 It is the Persian national epic composed by Firdawsi three centuries earlier. It is a long poem, consisting of 50,000 rhyming couplets, depicting the history of Iran from the creation of the world to the Islamic conquest. At first, the poem was transmitted orally and the earliest surviving manuscript from the mid-thirteenth century was not illustrated. It is the Ilkhanid ruler, Abu Said, who patronized the work.
scene below. Puppet-like figures almost unemotionally engage in a variety of activities always set in an idealized garden or palace depicted against a rich gold background. It is a world of sensuous pleasure that also embodies the themes of a mystically interpreted lyrical poetry, for what is represented is not the real world but a divine paradise in the guise of a royal palace or garden.

Plate 2.23. A page from Shahnama on Ardawan Captured by Ardashir, ink and colour on paper, 40 x 20 cm. (After Bloom, J., and Blair, S., Islamic Arts, p. 203).

The art of painting, under the name of the art of the book, expands to other countries under different Islamic dynasties as well. All the manuscripts show different complexity and quality of conception, however, as a whole, they reflect the integration of the traditional arts of illustration and calligraphy with the new artistic ideas brought by increased contact with East and West. The book as the work of art was slowly replaced by the single page of calligraphy, drawing or painting, intended to be collected in albums. The change is a reflection of the achievement of the individual artist. The representational arts were also affected by the availability of Western images, which brought to the Islamic lands such new techniques as cast shadows, vanishing-point perspective and oil painting on canvas. Oil painting was introduced in Iran in the late seventeenth century, under the Qajar dynasty (1779-1924). A synthesized mode of representation from Persian and European tradition has produced a distinct style. Some Qajar artists were sent to study in Europe such as Abul Hasan Mustawfi Ghaffari, and his great nephew Abul Hasan Ghaffari, who both are great painters of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Other than Iran, the Ottoman Empire oil painting followed the models of European Orientalism. Likewise in Persia, Turkish artists were also sent to study oil painting in Paris. For instance, ‘Uthman Hamdi (1842-1910) son of the grand vizier Ibrahim Edhem Oasha was sent to Paris in 1857, who later became director of the Imperial Ottoman Museum at Topkapi Palace and then became the first director of the Fine Arts Academy in Istanbul.

Later on, throughout Islamic lands artists continue grappling with the conflicting demands of being true to one’s heritage. Those who are still inspired from Islamic calligraphy, inclined towards the gestural techniques of Abstract Expressionism and other styles. Some painters were still holding on to the tradition by selecting geometrical motifs or arabesque for their canvas. The art of the book which starts from illustration and illumination of the book has become painting as seen in the Western tradition through time.

2.3 Preliminary Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has identified the history of Islamic calligraphy, in terms of the development and the pioneers who perfected it. On the other hand, it is important to study the Islamic law and principles to comprehend the issues of painting and idol from Islamic perspective. The intention of the doer and the effects on the viewer are the determinant factors in this respect. The reasons behind the prohibition

66 Ibid.

67 Bloom, J. and Blair, Op.Cit., p. 419

68 Ibid., p. 420.

69 Ibid.
relate to worshipping other than the One God, imitating the creation of God to challenge Him and finally for the distraction of the worldly life from remembering God. However, if the reasons disappear, the religious status changes. For example, the act of disrespect towards pillows that has the picture of birds has been changed to permissible after the reason for respecting and admiring them vanishes.

The issue of spirituality, mystical belief and the power of the letters, its numerical values and its function as a charm, are also overviewed. The actual practice in Malaysia confirms that the mystical beliefs related to Islamic calligraphy had been accepted and adapted by Malay society.

Apart from the issues, this chapter also reviewed the history of painting in Islamic tradition. The term ‘painting’ is not as what has been proposed in the West, but embedded in the form of illustration and illumination in the art of the books. However, the coming of eighteenth and nineteenth century displays the integration of the tradition with the new media and techniques of the East and West altogether. The pages of the books have been changed into oil paintings. Since then, the challenge to manifest individuality and to pick appropriate subject matter and its styles, art goes on endlessly up until now.