

ART LIKE THAT



Be and It Is by Sabah Anees

What is calligraphiti?

Islamic and/or Arabic calligraphy developed from two major styles: Kufic and Naskh. There are several variations of each, as well as regionally specific styles. Arabic or Persian calligraphy has also been incorporated into modern art, beginning with the post-colonial period in the Middle East, as well as the more recent style of calligraphiti i.e. an art form that combines calligraphy, typography, and graffiti.



La Hawla Ouala Quata Ellah Billah by Mahfuzur Rahman

The holy art, calligraphy offers baraka

Pursuing the art form connects the seeker and practitioner not just to the scripture, but also provides additional means of contemplation, aids the memorisation of Quranic passages, and offers opportunities for oral recitation of the verses — echo UAE-based art practitioners of calligraphy

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Calligraphy is an important art form in the Islamic world. The Qur'an, written in elegant scripts, represents Allah's — or God's — divine word, which Muhammad received directly from Allah during his visions. The art form has always been a significant part of the Islamic arts, allowing its practitioners to train the soul to be patient with all the little details and draw every line in a way that fulfils the soul. As the faithful embrace the spirit of Ramadan, we speak to a few UAE-based artists, who are dedicating the holy month to pursuing calligraphy. At present, there are numerous artists from the Arab world and around the globe working to further elevate Islamic and Arabic art, based on centuries-long work pursued by historical artists, philanthropists and scholars. Abda Fayyaz, a Pakistani artist, who has been actively practising calligraphy for the past ten years says, "I take pride in the fact that I am amongst these young artists, representing a fusion of modern and contemporary art and traditional techniques."

The first thing God created was the pen

It is noteworthy, for instance, that the Prophet Muhammad is related to have said: "The first thing God created was the pen." Islamic calligraphy is the practice of handwriting and calligraphy, based on the alphabet in the lands sharing a common Islamic cultural heritage. It includes Arabic, Ottoman, and Persian calligraphy. Calligraphy has been explored in Sufism to state that each Arabic alphabet is related to a divine value. In a spiritual sense, calligraphy provides an additional means of contemplation. Sabah Anees, an Indian artist, with 24 years of experience, suggests that the art form dates back to the sixth century, and calligraphy is the most highly regarded and fundamental element of Islamic art.

"Arabic calligraphy has been recognised since Ottoman Empire. Arabic calligraphy would mean any calligraphy in the Arabic language. For Arab speaking countries, it can be a poem. But for a non-Arab country, it is mostly verses from the Qur'an or prayers written on the canvas in an artistic manner," says Mahfuzur Rahman, a Bangladeshi artist Rahman, who has been pursuing arts since 2015.

Practising calligraphy is akin to offering prayers during Ramadan

Rahman has been practising calligraphy for almost five years. He says, "Ramadan is the most important month for any Muslim. It's a month when our wishes get fulfilled such as forgiveness from our sins. I will attempt to create a min-

imum of 5-7 calligraphy pieces in the holy month." Anees adds, "As a Muslim, practising Arabic calligraphy holds a special place in my heart. As I create a piece, it feels like I am offering prayers. At other times, it is like meditation, which soothes my soul." Fayyaz adds, "Ramadan is the holiest month and for many, cultivating mastery of Quranic calligraphic expressions is a method of Islamic spirituality that opens hidden dimensions of the universe."

Why is it a popular art form?

As per Anees, one of the dominant aesthetic reasons for the popularity of Arabic calligraphy is its symmetry, "Having a perfect balance of dots, edges, curves, and points; the Arabic lettering and script make up for perfect components." For writing, the calligrapher can choose between cross-cut bamboo sticks, a double pencil, an angled brush or a marker.

Quranic verses on the canvas

Anees adds how a few particular verses and Surahs from the Qur'an hold a powerful and strong place in her life, "I feel a strong connection with them and they provide me comfort while reciting. I would express them on the canvas in the coming days." Rahman says his work focuses on the mention of the greatness of Allah and he is keen to take the beautiful verses from the Qur'an that speak of His greatness and kindness to the canvas. He adds, "One needs to remember that if a Muslim reads just one word of the Qur'an, Allah gives him/her bounties ten times over. In Ramadan, it's 700 bounties for one word. So, it is a service we do to ourselves as practitioners of the art form." All of Fayyaz' works are based on the first alphabet of Arabic script 'Alif' and the sacred name 'Allah'. "...and He (Allah) is with you wherever you are..." (Surah Hadeed, Al Quran (57):4). "The alphabet Alif and the word Allah are so infinite that I don't think my lifelong work will be enough to construe them or even scrape the surface," she says.

Exploring the fonts

Anees' calligraphy style is freestyle. She informs how there are almost 500 fonts of Arabic calligraphy including A Thuluth font, one of the most fascinating and difficult fonts to perfect in terms of drawing and implementation. Others include Farsi, Kufi, Diwani, Ruq'a, Alnaskh, and more. Anees plans to create a minimum of ten artworks during this month, "Each would help me work on my relationship with Allah." Most people specialise in a maximum of two-three styles. Rahman specialises in Kufic and Sunbuli Khaat (styles). "The medium for me is mostly ink or watercolour on paper, acrylic or oil on canvas," he adds.



Pattern of Life and Time by Abda Fayyaz



A bridge between the past and the future

At 5 metres high, the sculpture located on the lobby terrace of Address Beach Resort, The Sail, a work of Emirati artist Mattar Bin Lahje, includes calligraphy, incorporating quotes from HH. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister, UAE and Ruler of Dubai. "The future will be for those who can imagine, design, and implement it, the future does not wait for the future, but it can be designed and built today."

Islamic arts

The field of Islamic art includes a range of visual arts produced from the seventh century onward by both Muslims and non-Muslims, who lived within territories that were inhabited by or ruled by culturally Islamic populations. It is not limited to religious art but rather expands to a range of fields including architecture, calligraphy, painting, glass, ceramics, textiles, et al.



Soul by Sabah Anees

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“Calligraphy is important during Ramadan because through practising it as an art form, a Muslim reminds himself of the bounty of Allah. A calligraphy piece praising Allah hanging in front of your eyes both as a piece of devotion and art serves as a chance to read the words repeatedly, especially, during this month.

Mahfuzur Rahman,
a Bangladeshi artist

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Practising calligraphy is challenging as it is mostly a representation of the Quranic verses. It's my responsibility as an artist and as a Muslim that what I 'write' doesn't clash with the authenticity or originality of the verse. In Arabic, if a small dot or an alphabet is written or placed incorrectly, it can change the meaning of the word and the whole verse.

Sabah Anees,
an Indian artist

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The practice of calligraphy is an existential journey, a basis for looking deep into a divine mirror to rediscover the core of one's being in a transcendent context. I fully believe in, 'what I am seeking was seeking me first'. Therefore, I'd say Islamic and Arabic calligraphy chose me as a means of connecting and communicating with Allah and the universe.

Abda Fayyaz,
a Pakistani artist