

MIDĀD

THE PUBLIC AND INTIMATE LIVES OF ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY

Midād investigates the ways in which Arabic calligraphy has throughout history mirrored notions of the public and private, the political and personal, the performative and poetic, as well as the literary environments of its time.

Unbound to chronology or geography, *Midād* explores Arabic script's development, transformation and diverse application over time and across the world. Beyond the texts they contain, manuscripts, panels, ceramics, textiles and tools are objects that have been redefined by a process of circulation in different social, geographic and cultural contexts of history.

Curated by
Rachel Dedman,
and researched
by Dr. Alain
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The inaugural exhibition of the El-Nimer Collection, *Midād* presents over 75 pieces from the eighth to the twentieth centuries alongside five new commissions from contemporary artists.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARABIC SCRIPT

The Arabic script is a late form of Aramaic, the ancient script from which the Syriac and Hebrew alphabets also emerged. More specifically it is an offshoot of Nabataean, the written form of the Aramaic dialect of Petra, in modern Jordan, and the surrounding region. This strain of Nabataean eventually generated the alphabet we know as Arabic, a century or so before the birth of Islam.

With the rise of Islam from the seventh century AD, the practice of calligraphy evolved to give visual form to the Qur'an, the word of God, and to preserve its sacred text. From the eleventh century onward, this led to the creation of a series of codified scripts in the Arabic alphabet used for both religious and secular texts.

The twelve objects in this section trace the development of Arabic script over time, from early Kufic to the refined calligraphy of the Six Pens, the elegant fluidity of Nastal'iq and the transition to printed typography. While Arabic calligraphy is intrinsically associated and connected with Islam, the complexity of the region in devotional, social and political terms means that Arabic has been used in multiple confessional and cultural contexts.

Folio from an
Early Qur'an

Abbasid Empire,
mid-8th to
early 9th
century, Kufic
(style D.IV),
Parchment





MATERIAL AND PRACTICE

'Tell the captain that this inscription did not take six hours to write: it took sixty years. Go and tell him that I give him not six days, not six weeks, not six months: I give him a full six years. If, in that time, he can write just one letter like what I have written, I will make him a gift of six times what I have asked'.

This declaration, attributed to renowned Ottoman calligrapher Mehmed Şefik, may be apocryphal, but it certainly testifies to the extended and exacting training required of the professional calligrapher, who might labour for decades in the mastery of certain scripts.

In classical Arabic calligraphy, every individual letter is ruled by strict definitions of form and relative proportion. A pupil masters these first and then moves on to groups of letters, words, and full composition. Repetitive copying of the teacher invests the pupil with unrelenting attention to detail and an internalised understanding of ideal forms. Once a script is mastered, an *ijaza* is bestowed – a professional license that grants a calligrapher the right to sign their work.

PUBLIC FAITH, ARCHITECTURE AND AUTHORITY

The written word has long been employed in the articulation of power, piety and governmental authority; used to make statements, literal and symbolic, in public. In varied monumental or architectural contexts – stamped into stone, carved into marble or woven into textile – the word of God is embedded in public space as proclamation of communal faith.

Beyond its religious importance, calligraphy has also operated as a tool of administration and legislative power. The introduction of script on coinage in the Umayyad era was revolutionary, unseating the dominance of imagery on currency and allowing the Arabic language and script to circulate across wide social strata and vast territory as a sign of newly Islamic political identity.

Umayyad copper
coin (fals)

Palestine, Early
8th century





PRIVATE DEVOTION, THE BODY AND THE TALISMAN

Since ancient time, the written word has been invested with latent talismanic power; its potency related to its association with the divine and otherworldly, underpinned by theories of astrology. Such beliefs were shared across multiple cultural traditions, derived in Islamic contexts from Syriac and Judaic practices, with talismans used by Muslims, Christians and Jews alike.

A talismanic chart could be activated by the gaze of its owner; holy text on armour might protect the body in battle; liquid sipped from magic-medicinal bowls was believed to heal the sick. The forms of such objects establish an intimate relationship between a reader and the text: scrolls made for partial unfurling, tiny manuscripts in miniature script, and amulets intended for wear round the neck all extend and catalyse the power calligraphic script was imagined to wield on the body.

Illustrated
Prayer Book
of an Ottoman
Consort

Istanbul,
1267/1850-1,
Nash, Cream
machine-made
paper

PERFORMANCE, PIETY, POETRY

Since the earliest Islamic times and the genesis of the written form of the Prophet's teachings, manuscripts have been a material platform for an essentially oral culture. The Mu'allaqāt are legendary pre-Islamic odes shared verbally for centuries, until seven of the finest were, it is said, stitched onto cloth for hanging on the Kaaba. The Qur'an itself is intended for memorisation and recitation, along with Christian hymns and psalms and the performance of poetry. In the theory, if not the practice, of Islamic law, oral testimony was considered superior to written documents.

Literary gatherings occupy an important place in Arabic history, with performance a central element of these. Story-telling and oral transmission of both religious and secular texts were crucial tools of learning and the continuation of tradition. Manuscripts and books thus sit at the interstice of public and private, associated with both personal reading and communal performance. The nasta'liq script emerged around 1350 in Iran, and its sinuous lines and elegant rhythm made it well-suited for copying verse.

At the same time, orality manifests in these objects in more than social terms. Certain texts are believed to have their talismanic powers activated by reading aloud, while many Sufi orders consider music, sound, poetry – as well as calligraphy, dress and dance – powerful expressions and activations of a relationship to God.

Sufi Tall Hat

Iran, late
19th to early
20th century,
Nasta'liq
White felt wool
with black
embroidery





CALLIGRAPHY BEYOND THE CENTRAL ISLAMIC LANDS

The Islamic world lies at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, and the Arabic script has been diffused for centuries on these three continents. Over hundreds of years of trade and travel, Arabic has reached places beyond the core regions of historically Muslim rule. Centuries before the Latin script spread with European colonisation, Arabic found expression, use and adaptation in diverse global contexts.

By the eighth century, Muslim merchants were trading on the South China Sea with those posted on the Arab-Persian Gulf, whose ships also stopped in Southeast Asia. Trade on the Indian Ocean branched into East Africa, while North Africa and Spain traded via land routes further down the continent. Muslim traders were also active on the Volga, trading with Central Asian communities, and in what is now eastern Europe.

The El-Nimer Collection includes pieces from India, China, Daghestan and an extraordinary Qur'an written by a freed slave from Africa. Its pieces from the Maghrib show how Kufic and early Islamic manuscript convention remained in use for longer than in the central Islamic lands, with mabsut, a new script, emerging from these practices. This is just one example of Arabic calligraphy's diverse development and elaboration in different contexts.

Devotional
Book about
the Prophet

Morocco, 19th
century,
Mujawhar, White
machine-made
paper

THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: SCRIPT AND SOCIETY

Calligraphy Licence

Edirne,
1269/1852-3,
Naskh, thuluth
and rika',
Paper mounted
on two card
sheets

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was experiencing a period of transition, reflected in its calligraphic and manuscript culture. While many norms and social customs were rooted in traditional Islam, the sultanate was adopting European systems of law, military, dress and art in the development of its own modern and cosmopolitan culture. The Ma'arifatname, or book of knowledge, reveals this dynamic most clearly – its polyglot pages mingle different epistemologies and philosophies of science side by side.

Despite cultural change, calligraphy remained an important decorative art in the late Ottoman world, and calligraphers enjoyed high social status. While the canonical state of major scripts had largely been reached by the seventeenth century, diwani reached its peak in the late nineteenth century and ruq'a, a new, simplified style, was created for administrative use.

The emblematic form of the period is the large calligraphy panel. Initiated in the late eighteenth century, possibly as a response to the European canvas painting, it has been adopted by virtually every trained calligrapher thereafter. Mastery of this format, and playful experimentation with others – from delicate leaf calligraphy to mirror-painting and perspectival trickery – characterises the development of calligraphy in this period.





CALLIGRAPHY IN PRINT AND MASS PRODUCTION

Qibla Pointer

Ottoman Turkey,
990 AH / 1582 AD,
Naskh, Lacquered
wood and paint

The first Arabic printing press in the Ottoman Empire was established in Aleppo in 1706, with an important press founded in Choueir, Lebanon, by 'Abd Allah Zakhir in 1733. Hailing from a Greek Orthodox family of goldsmiths in Syria, Zakhir was a translator and transcriber of Catholic literature. Driven from Aleppo by anti-Catholic sentiment, Zakhir moved to Lebanon where he began movable-type printing with a local French Jesuit priest. Zakhir drew and cut the typeface, based on naskh, himself – aided, perhaps, by his background in jewellery-making. The press continued working until 1899, printing dozens of different books, examples of which are in the EI-Nimer collection.

The introduction of press technology, and invention of printing processes suited to Arabic, prompted centuries of experimentation in type-setting and the application of calligraphy in mass production. Lithography (stone-printing), allowed for the elegant reproduction of the flawless naskh of master calligraphers. The Ottoman state authorised lithographed Qur'ans in the late nineteenth century, and holy texts in print became more commonplace thereafter. This, and the broader spread of printed books in Arabic, changed the role of professional copyists, and the course of calligraphy itself. Today graphic designers and typographers stretch the histories of Arabic's scribal traditions in new directions.

CALLIGRAPHY: NEW COMMISSIONS

Five contemporary artists based in Lebanon create new works in response to the ideas, interests and objects of the exhibition. Pieces by Marwan Rechmaoui, Roy Samaha, Mounira al-Solh, Jana Traboulsi and Raed Yassin explore notions of the talisman, the book, the narrative, the margin and the interlinked authority of word and image. Their projects open up fascinating new avenues of interpretation around the histories of Arabic script, testifying to its continued potential for stimulating artistic thought in the present.

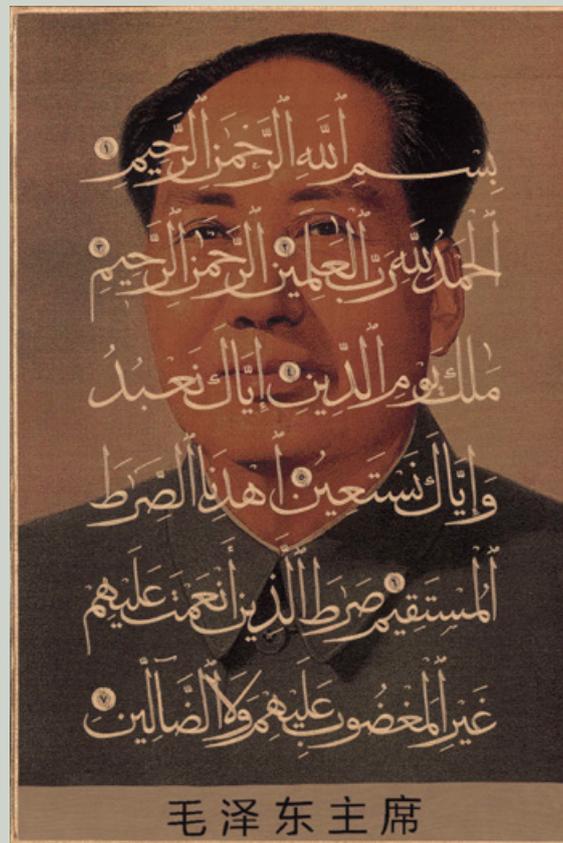
MAO I, MAO II, MAO III, MAO IV

RAED YASSIN

In this series, embroidered Suras from the Qur'an invade portraits of Chairman Mao of China. The pieces layer apparently distinct cultural practices, referencing Mao's oppression of Chinese Muslim communities under communism. The embroidery gestures towards a reversal of Mao's destruction of Islamic heritage, with calligraphy used to disrupt and distort his image in return. The ubiquity, flatness and mass reproduction of Mao's portraits sit in contrast to the singular, three-dimensional nature of the embroidered script. While Islam and the militant secularism of communism seem incompatible, this work attests to the shared ability of image and word to convey authority and power.

Raed Yassin was born in Beirut in 1979. An artist and musician, Yassin's work originates from an examination of his personal narratives and their workings within a collective history, through the lens of consumer culture and mass production. Yassin is one of the organisers of IRTIJAL Festival, and is a founding member of Atfal Ahdath, a Beirut-based art collective.

Silk thread
embroideries
on embroidered
cloth, 2015
90 x 60 cm





VENTRILOQUIZE

**MARWAN
RECHMAOUI**

This work has developed from Rechmaoui's research into djinns and spirits, and the ways in which magic and talismanic ideas manifest in the present within language. Though belief in djinns and genies is associated with pre-modern superstition, seemingly overwritten by post-Enlightenment science, Rechmaoui's drawings unravel the ways in which traces of the former persist in Arabic etymology. Taking language as a site in which different epistemologies meet, the work reflects on the continued power of mysticism and reveals how ancient modes of understanding the world persist, unnoticed, in everyday speech.

Marwan Rechmaoui, b.1964, is a Lebanese artist whose work often deals with themes of urban development and social history. Frequently deriving inspiration from the geography, demographics and rich cultural history of Beirut, Rechmaoui's work explores material, both industrial and subtle, on different scales.

Mixed media on
paper, three of
75 x 55cm, 2017

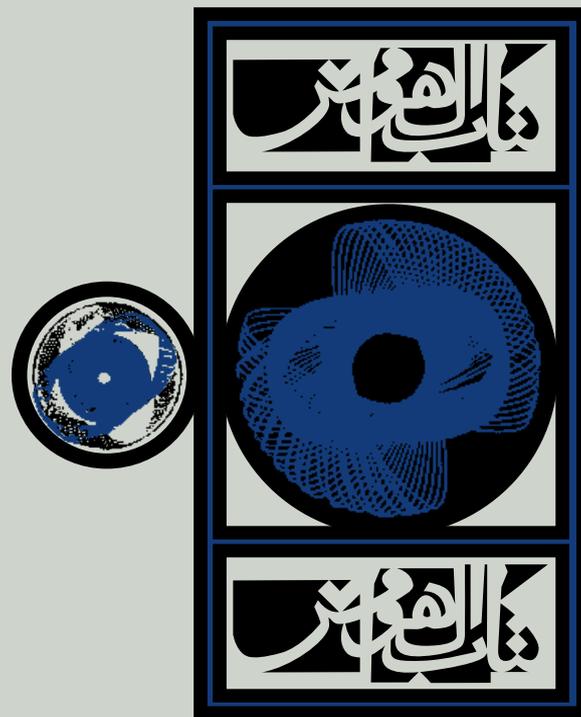
KITAB AL- HAWAMISH

JANA
TRABOULSI

Driven by extensive research into the objects of Midad, Kitab al-Hawamish explores notions of the margin and the marginal in manuscript practices. Taking as starting points the dots around letters and the scars on parchment, Traboulsi traces the stories they tell, reorienting the visual and literary functions of diacritics, catchwords, harakat, images and palimpsestic text. The work investigates the materiality of the manuscript, and challenges the relation of the centre to the periphery, through narrative, illustration and layout design.

Jana Traboulsi is a graphic artist and illustrator. For the past fifteen years she has been teaching while maintaining an active practice, collaborating with social and cultural institutions, mainly around publications. She is the co-founder of Sigil art collective, and art director of Snoubart Bayroust publishing house, Bidayat magazine and Dawawine cultural center.

printed book,
64 pages,
16cm x 22.5 cm
paper, 500
copies, 2017





NO NEEDLES IN THESE BOXES

MOUNIRA SOLH

Solh's work explores the ways in which objects echo stories and narratives beyond those they contain. A needle-box from Damascus, collected from a market in Istanbul, is placed with an extract from a Khalid Khalife novel in which a woman walks through a souq, feeling invisible. A text by Iman Mersal on motherhood sits next to embroidered pages from the prayer book of Nisrene -- an Ottoman Sultan's consort who commissioned it as a protective talisman for her children. A portable qibla pointer, used by travellers, is set with writings by sixteenth century Emir Fakhreddine, who travelled to Italy and was amazed by the perspectival visuals of European theatre. The embroidery brings these objects into shared scale, as Solh's scroll connects them in space, demonstrating the ways in which they resonate with histories not their own.

Mounira Al Solh's visual practice embraces video, painting, drawing, embroidery, publishing and performance. Al Solh's artwork aspires to ask large questions in small places, operating according to Ginzburg's notion of microhistory.

These embroideries have been hand-stitched with the help of Fatimah Hamadah and Salha Abbas.

Embroidery and mixed media on canvas and felt, 2016
340 x 81cm

A BOOK OF SIX DIRECTIONS

ROY SAMAHA

A Book of Six Directions centres around an unusual item in Midad: a book in the form of a slim leather-bound square, from which emerge multiple leaves of paper bearing Qur'anic script, magic squares, illustrations of Mecca and the bleak darkness of hell. The ritual unfolding of the book, and whispered reading of its texts, resonate with the talismanic significance of the object, while the opening and closing shots ground us in Istanbul, the city of its original production. Figurine dervishes whirl between miniature Blue Mosques as the sun sets on the Bosphorus – hinting at the devotional context of the book's writing in 1870.

Lebanese video artist and photographer Roy Samaha, b. 1978, lives and works in Beirut. With a background in film studies, he has been exhibiting videos since 2003. Samaha's work deals with personal history, mourning and the memory of objects. He is particularly critical of the constant assault of images – propaganda and advertising – one is subjected to in contemporary society.

5'02", HD
1080p, colour
and stereo
sound, 2015

