

## Qur'anic Calligraphy: The Flourishing Art of Divine Words

**Ms. Amber Munir**

*Lecturer Fine Arts, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore*

**Dr. Sadia Arshad**

*Assistant Professor Fine Arts, Lahore College for Women University Lahore*

**Dr. Wardah Naeem Bukhari**

*Lecturer, Graphic Design Department, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore*

### Abstract

The art of Divine Writing-Calligraphy has exceptional features that truly revolve around the Islamic ideology. It is represented in diverse visionary, imaginative and creative ways. In many parts of the world the importance of hand writing or calligraphy is waned due to the modern approach in the fields of technology, science as art as well. Present day, calligraphers and artists producing such art works that are the combination of traditional scribal writing and transformed it into stylized form of calligraphic art. By utilizing assorted methods and techniques they are contributing to flourish and strengthen this art form. Therefore, in Islamic culture it is regarded as the major art form and has as a central position. By the time it is not diminished but still alive, significant and vibrant as it was from the advent of Islam.

**Keywords:** Divine words, Calligraphy, Islamic art, Script, Tradition, Contemporary

### Introduction

The history of Islamic calligraphy is too old as the history of Islam; dated right after the revelation and writing of Qur'an. From the early angular scripting to the latterly formed cursive scripts passed-on through the scribal



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hands majorly producing handwritten copies of Qur'an, officially used for governmental purposes and artistically employed to illustrate the ideology of Islam in textual form in multiple ways. The artistic elements and scribal writing are the rudiments that artisans from centuries and round the globe always acknowledge as their source of inspiration. For an artist, calligrapher or even a student of Islamic history, it is hard to avoid the fundamentals of Islamic traditional elements. Presently the artists and calligraphers are considering the conventional elements and producing art forms that are the fusion of tradition and modern scripts, styles and techniques. The alphabetical art of Arabic language is generally a nonrepresentational art that truly involves line, design and construction<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Scripting and Materialization of Divine Words**

By the advent of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula witnessed the written form of divine revelations into codex and formation of various scripts. Therefore the art of calligraphy is considered as a noble artistic expression in Arabic alphabet and a practice of handwriting. It is emerged as the major component of Islamic art practices that shared a mutual Islamic cultural tradition. During the courses of Muslim caliphates on Arabian and African lands, Ottoman and Persian empires embraced the Arabic language not only for writing Qur'an but elevated as an eminent artistic tradition, varied calligraphic scripts and styles were introduced, innovated and canonized by the Muslim scribes. This art of calligraphic writing is passed-on to next the generations of calligraphers by devoting their lives for this esteemed art form under the patronization of caliphates or by the Muslim rulers remain supportive in all times. Evidences provide information that the initial period of Islamic epoch, two kinds of scripts remained in-fashion that were the derivation of Nabataean alphabets. One was the Kufic angular with pointed finishing and basically in square shape, generally used for writing Qur'an and afterwards for the formal usage

as surface decoration or to embellish the architecture erected during the reigns of Muslim caliph/rulers. The other kind was cursive formed *Naskh* script prevalent for official and business documentation due to its free flowing writing technique by *qalm*. As Islamic empires expanded, more and more calligraphers contributed for the arts of Islam. From the early Arabian Islamic centers Kufa, Baghdad, Cairo majorly considered as the schools of calligraphy and other Islamic arts. These schools of Islamic arts were responsible for the creation and development of classical scripts by splendid *ustad* or master calligraphers. However from the Abbasid dynasty a renowned calligrapher *Ibn-e Muqlah* canonized and schematized the Arabic scripts. Including Kufic script, he systematically developed the “six scripts” of cursive style<sup>2</sup>.

1. *Khatt-e Sulus*
2. *Khatt-e Naskh*
3. *Khatt-e Muhaqqaq*
4. *Khatt-e Riq'a*
5. *Khatt-e Reyhani*
6. *Khatt-e Tawqi*

Among all these scripts *Naskh* and *Sulus* remain in general usages due to their constrained rules<sup>3</sup>. The art of traditional calligraphy and its forms remained in-practice in the Middle Eastern and South Asian region. *Khatt-e Nastaliq* was innovated by 14<sup>th</sup> century's professional Persian calligrapher *Hazrat Khawaja Mir Ali Tebrezi*<sup>4</sup>. Both *Naskh* and *Nastaliq* are Perso-Arabic scripts; *Naskh* is momentous and is highly acclaimed to write Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages. *Nastaliq* script is more cursive and a standard writing

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style for Urdu language. The elegant curvilinear script is a combination of *Nas* and *Taliq*; featuring elongated horizontals and exaggerated curved forms<sup>5</sup>. It proved as more fluid and rhythmic for Persian calligraphy with the obliquely cut of *qalm* creating verticals and round forms<sup>6</sup>. This script is transmitted through many scribal hands. Splendid Pakistani national calligraphers such as *Taj ud Din Zarrin Raqam*, *Abdul Majeed Perveen Raqam*, *Suffi Khurshid Alam Khurshid Raqam*, *Hafiz Mohammad Yousuf Sadidi* and *Khurshid Alam Gohar Qalm* contributed for the endurance of this script specifically (**Figure 1**)<sup>7</sup>.

Figure 1: *Khurshid Alam Gohar Qalm*, late (1956-2020), *Surah Yusuf*, (12:64), Color on Paper, 2015.



Regarding the Islamic calligraphy in Pakistan, prominent legendary calligraphers inherited and transferred this art form. Understanding the traditional commandments and approaching modern trends numerous apprentices produced and introduced the scribal writing into a creative and innovative contemporary art form. For them also, writing of sacred words is purely a spiritual practice that purifies the thoughts and heals the soul. Having the mystical thoughts such forms of writing emerged that are the combination of traditional and modern elements often the utilization of *qalm*, brush and colors on the same surface. On the same side, another

Contemporary artistic form of calligraphy is appeared that have schematic arrangement of alphabets and compositional values. It comprises the utilization of colors, lines, shapes of Arabic alphabets with natural elements. However the power and beauty of sacred words remain apparent in every script, form and style whether it is traditional calligraphy or any contemporary/modern art form. In a broader perspective, it is proved as an innovative form of Islamic artistic expression that is originated from a strong historical background.

### **The Master Scribe**

Remaining within the parameters of tradition and adopting modern trends, a competent successor of eminent calligrapher *Ustad Khurshid Alam Gohar Qalm* (late) (1956-2020) is *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed. His art works demonstrates some exceptional features that can be relate with the former artistic elements and technicalities of his predecessors (Figure 2). His native affinity is with the Multan city but moved/settled to Lahore where he is working as a practicing calligrapher. Committedly working in a peaceful environment of his studio he recalls the time of his early practices when he learnt the basic skills of the traditional writing/calligraphy from *ustad Gohar Qalm*, the recipient of literary award by the Government of Pakistan 'Pride of Performance' (1991). He is well known for the traditional *khat-e Nastaliq* is one of the major cursive forms of writing among all other Islamic calligraphy. While learning calligraphy under the apprenticeship of *ustad Gohar Qalm*, Saeed remarkably achieved the technicalities of *Nastaliq* and *Sulus* scripts (Figure 2). Like his contemporaries, he acknowledges his teacher as the finest scribe of traditional/classical scripts and feels pride to be the student of a world's renowned calligrapher having an uppermost rank among the contemporary calligraphers in Pakistan.



Figure 2: *Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, The Five Sacred Names, Sulus Script, 24"/24", Ink and Color on Paper, 2015.*

### A Reflection of Master Scribe

The traditional calligraphic art works of Saeed are the true representations where he seems to pay homage to the sacred words of Qur'an. Like other calligraphers he also considers the writing of Qur'anic verses as a spiritual practice; he himself is a *hafiz-e Qur'an* and understands the spiritual link with the divine verses. Saeed feels that the memorization and recitation are soulful experiences that purify the soul as well as they are helpful to strengthen the skill of writing those sacred words. Simultaneously he is striving to revitalize the relationship of *qalm* and surface by employing brown and black ink tones. His style of writing *Nastaliq* is reminiscing the masterly hand of his legendary teacher *ustad Gohar Qalm*. Sometimes it is little hard to differentiate the technical application and similarity in style of both calligraphers (Figure 3). His calligraphic art works can be segregated in two phases; the early one is an inspiration from the cursive classical forms and other is a blend of traditional with modern elements by employing geometrical shapes and conveying mystical thoughts.



Figure 3: *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed, *Dua* for Protection, *Nastaliq* Script, 12" /24"  
Ink and Color on Paper, 2016.

The art works from the first phase of *Hafiz* Saeed comprising the cursive *Nastaliq* script are entirely based on traditional elements. As a complementary part of the overall calligraphic compositions, he adopted specifically those floral patterns and plant motifs that are part of traditional arts of Turkish heritage. While framing with vegetal motifs and submissive colors the majestic words of *Nastaliq* script written with bold strokes of brown and black inks remain dominating. And the traditional or customary mannerism is maintained wisely (**Figure 4**). The unique vocabulary of Islamic art comprises the scripts majorly; whereas its components are varied classical decorative elements mainly floral and geometrical patterns. There is an extensive range of motifs and floral patterns that are significantly used in almost all Islamic arts, crafts and for surface decoration of architecture. From the earliest Islamic art practices, vegetal/floral patterns always remained the part of Islamic arts and architectural elements producing unification among all the Muslim caliphates and empires throughout the centuries. Among the Muslim realms, the art of calligraphy expanded simultaneously the vocabulary of plant motifs extended from single motif to heavily stylized and complicated patterns. They organically appeared along with the angular and cursive scripts to enhance the aesthetical necessities mainly. Generally included as the adjacent component of calligraphy, for the border designing and to fill the necessary spaces as the elements of nature. From scripting to ornamentation, Saeed is seems to be concerned with the application of classical elements

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whether it is script, motifs/patterns and colors but having a distinctive style and a distinctive approach.

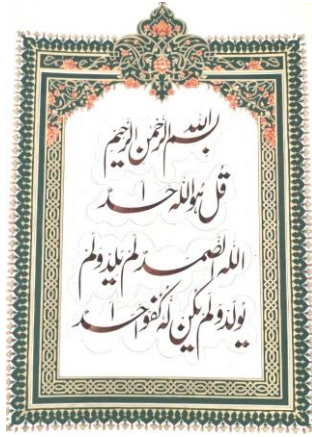


Figure 4: *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed, *Surah al-Ikhlās*, (112:1-4), *Nastaliq* Script, 12”/24”, Ink and Color on Paper, 2017.

Concerning with significance of Arabic scripting and its relationship of ornamental elements, the recent art works by Saeed are finest examples to maintain balance with beautification. The writing style of *Sulus* script is justified with its rudiments whereas the orderly application of geometric elements is functioning as the complementary part of the script. The *Sulus* script is momentous and historic as it was started to formulate during Umayyad caliphate in 7<sup>th</sup> century, finally gained progression in later centuries<sup>8</sup>. *Sulus* means ‘a third’ possibly due to its proportion of straight lines to the curve; it was rarely used for early Qur’an writing but gained reputation as an ornamental script for specific calligraphic inscriptions, chapter headings, titles and for colophons. Regarding its features, it is considered as equivalent to Kufic script; it employed for ornamental purposes as Kufic used for religious inscriptions, epigraphs, governmental and princely titles<sup>9</sup>.

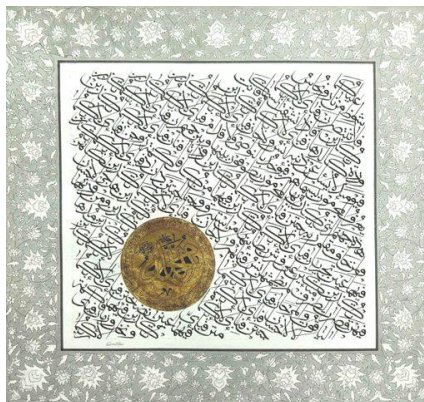


Figure 5: Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, *surah al-Rahman*, (55:35-68), *Sulus* Script, 24"/24", Ink on Paper, 2018.

### A Fusion of Modernity in Tradition

Saeed received *Sulus* script exceptionally by making it as part of his calligraphic art works. He does not confine it for specific writings but wrote by filling the entire surface. Apparently, this practice is suggesting the continually written words of '*mashq*' by attaining a diagonal setting (Figure 6). Saeed share a mystical reason which he associates to render the one-sided or obliquely written words. He associates '*nuzul*' (revelation of Qur'anic verses) with rain; as the words of Qur'an are true blessing of ALLAH, whereas among natural elements *barish* (rainfall) is also believed as the indication of blessing and came down to Earth in diagonal direction. He symbolizes the falling rain droplets with the divine words of Qur'an that revealed and descended as blessing and the diagonal setting of words is representing the direction of rain<sup>10</sup>.

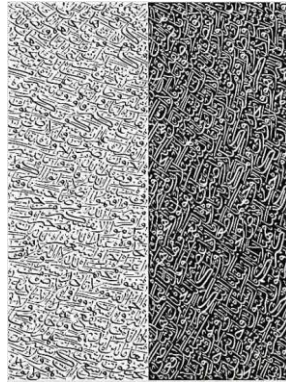


Figure 6: *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed, *Surah Yaseen* (36:I-83), *Sulus* Script, 24"/48", Ink on Paper, 2019.

While discussing the art of Arabic alphabets, '*nuqta*' (dot) is the significant element; it is used for measuring the Arabic alphabets as *qat*, a unit to design shapes and geometrical patterns, symbolic representation of varied natural elements and have spiritual significance. In some of the recent art works, the square units of geometrical patterns are intended to further dissect in eight dots referencing from the cuboid-shaped of Holy *Kabah*<sup>11</sup>. The fragmented eight dots create a squared-cube shape and symbolically associated with the shape of this venerated Islamic structure.

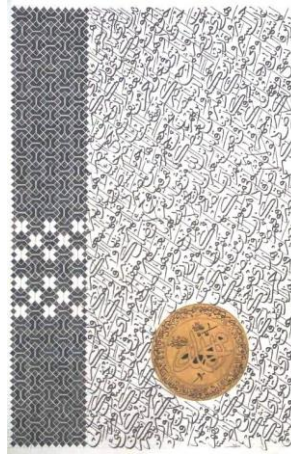


Figure 7: *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed, *Surah al-Mulk*, (67:I-22), *Sulus* Script, 24"/48", Ink and Gold Leaf on Paper, 2020.

The uniqueness and individuality of his artistic expression is observable; apart from achieving traditional fulfillment he diverts attention towards modernity and stylization. Though, cursive scripts and geometrical pattern have diverse nature of arts but often remained counterparts of each other by sharing mutual surfaces whether it is for Islamic art or architecture. Saeed strived to place both natures of arts on same surface, maintaining their dignity in a formal way. Acquiring a contemporary approach, his calligraphic art works are well planned. The entire surface is equally divided in portions aiming to allocate spaces for cursive scripting and geometrical patterns. In some art works, dot is represented as the unit of woven interlacements whereas words in *Sulus* are written in overlapping entangled style aiming to create a checkered pattern. Though all elements are allotted particular places but are visually captivating and aesthetically satisfying. Such kind of visual unification is matchless and hard to find in the realm of Islamic calligraphy.

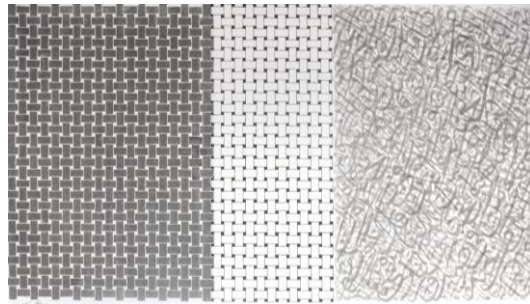


Figure 8: Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, *Mashq and Checkered Pattern, Sulus Script*, 24"/50", Ink on Paper, 2020.

Regarding his style of application, the subtle strokes and précised tonal variation of black ink is emotively and sensitively controlled. The usage of *qalm* facilitates him producing tones of ink from black to silver-grayish effect. It is reminiscent of the brush work technique frequently known as *Siyah qalm* (black pen) that is one of the traditional practices of Persian and Mughal miniature paintings and illustrative manuscripts. As the counterparts of overall gray scaled effect which he used with selective complementing

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colors; a specific example is the Turquoise color that suggests the affinity with Iranian/Persian art and architectural elements<sup>12</sup>. As an obligatory element the use of gold always remained in the Islamic art practices; it is symbolically used to venerate the verses of holy Qur'an as well as to express affection with the divine words<sup>13</sup>. Saeed is also concerned for the glorification of sacred words by specifying an area with gold. He occasionally specifies an unadorned surface to use gold and generally allocate a spherical shape and occasionally a section within the vertically formatted compositions. He usually intends to work on an underlying graph that facilitates the words to write diagonally is possibly an effort to akin with the application of text as written in Persian manuscripts. His calligraphic art works are such specimens that present some distinctive dimensions of this esteemed art. Remaining within the parameters of conventional scribal calligraphy, there is an open way for the artists to adopt modernity and stylization. Islamic calligraphy, either a customary or a contemporary, is a source to expresses movement, vitality and dynamism by employing the calligraphic lines and shapes. The research reveals that traditional writing and contemporary art of calligraphy are considered as progressive and innovative art forms.



Figure 9: *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed, *Surah al-Rahman* (55:1-72), *Sulus* Script, Ink, 24"/48", Color and Gold on Paper, 2021.



Figure 10: *Hafiz* Mohammad Saeed, *Nuqta: Geometrical Pattern*, 24"/48", Ink and Gold on Paper, 2021.

## Conclusion

The history of Islamic calligraphy demonstrates that art of beautiful writing was always honored and admired. Moreover the aesthetical values of Islamic calligraphy are the true expression the represents the power of Arabic language. The genius of Islamic art of calligraphy perseveres not only in the boundless creativity and adaptability, but also lies in the parameters of balance with beautification that is achieved by the calligraphers throughout the centuries. For every calligrapher it is a flourishing art of divine words and an infinite journey that starts from intricate stylized lines, involving shapes and rich color vocabulary as a visual pictorials. It leads to transmit its connotations and mystic aspects through formal aesthetic codes.

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