

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHIC PAINTING IN MALAYSIA AND IRAN

(KAJIAN PERBANDINGAN ANTARA SENI LUKIS KHAT DI MALAYSIA DAN IRAN)

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Abstract

This article compares Islamic calligraphy paintings produced in Iran and Malaysia, since the 1950's as a means to better understand their arts educational systems, their distinctive artistic identities, and provide closer looks at the works of significant artists from each country. It examines twelve works using a framework that examines elements of form, context, content, and Islamic unity (tawhid), as a means to better understand contemporary developments as calligraphy and painting techniques converge.

Keywords: Islamic calligraphy, painting, Malaysia, Iran.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengenai kajian perbandingan seni kaligrafi Islam antara Iran dan Malaysia sejak dekad 1950-an untuk memahami sistem pendidikan seni kedua-dua buah negara, identiti kesenian yang berbeza dan menyediakan pandangan lebih dekat tentang karya-karya artis dari setiap negara. Ia juga mengkaji dua belas karya menggunakan kerangka kerja yang memeriksa

elemen rupa, konteks dan isi, dan juga kesatuan Islam (tawhid) sebagai kaedah yang lebih baik dalam memahami pembangunan seni kontemporari dan pertemuan teknik lukisan.

Kata Kunci: kaligrafi Islam, lukisan, Malaysia, Iran.

A phenomenon took root in the visual arts communities of both Iran and Malaysia during the 1950s and early 1960s. In Iran, this innovative style evolved from the Saqakhaneh School of contemporary painting and the Siyah Mashq style of contemporary calligraphy, which emerged as a combination of calligraphy and painting known as the **Naqashi Khat School**. In Malaysia, Malay artists generally arose from different educational streams: the English medium educated, who were inclined towards fine arts; and those who attended Islamic religious schools, who were oriented toward calligraphic arts. From these two streams, a new group of artist followed who formed an amalgamation of the different approaches, roughly concurrent with their contemporaries in Iran.

This article takes a brief look at the history and formation of Naqashi Khat in Iran as a means to distinguish the origins and developments of that stylistic school, and then looks at Islamic calligraphy painting in Malaysia, and its formation in relation to the different educational systems of that country. It compares visual elements, formal principles, and various aspects of expression found in each through the works of several renowned Iranian and Malay artists.

Despite their geographical separation, the artists from both Iran and Malaysia can be seen as innovating upon their respective traditions. In one respect, the visual aesthetics of calligraphy went beyond its traditional, functional role (as a medium for Quranic verses and handwritten script) to become incorporated into the forms and compositions of painters. Developments in both countries present several interesting questions: How have educational systems in both countries influenced the development of Islamic calligraphy as an artistic medium? Who were the important pioneers and figures that promoted these changes? What concepts were conveyed through the visual elements and

formal principles of their calligraphy? And what similarities and differences can be identified between calligraphic artists of the two countries?

Relevant Literature on Iranian Art

Traditional rules of calligraphy in Persia (now Iran) were established from the thirteenth century. Ibn Muqla, Ibn Bawwab and Yaqut gradually developed creative ideas and personal artistic concepts that led to the foundation of the Naqashi Khat School in 1960s and 1970s. Naqashi Khat can be considered as having two distinct stylistic sources: one related to calligraphy, and another to painting. For calligraphy, the stylistic school of Siyah Mashgh was influential, whereas for painting, the contemporary Saqakhaneh School was an important force. The following is a brief look at both schools.

It is believed that the appreciation of calligraphy for art's sake started when artists and calligraphers began to appreciate the aesthetic value of a calligrapher's practice sheet with its repeated letters, written up and down a sheet of paper while 'warming up' the hand (Moarek Nejjhad, 2009). In their views, if the repeated words and composition could be applied more carefully on the page, it could lead to the beautiful creation of Siyah Mashgh (literally, blackening the page in practicing the writing). Mirza Golamreza Esfahani became known as the most famous practitioner of this art in Iran.

The Saqakhaneh school was established in the 1960s, when a group of painters, responding to the modern approaches toward painting Pakbaz (2007), used various religious symbols and other Iranian motifs. As calligraphy was seen to fulfil both these aspects, it became part of the artistic repertoire of this school, with Charles Hossein Zendeiroodi recognized as the movement's founder.

Various authors have written on the history of Naqashi Khat. Khosravi (2013) notes that Naqashi Khat was not a novel phenomenon, as the combination of calligraphy and painting already existed in the inscriptions, containers, and seals of the earliest Islamic states. The author adds that the history of Naqashi Khat in Iran, may be traced to the Qajar

dynasty (1785-1925 CE), when calligraphy was adorned with foliation and Islamic motifs. Iranian art critic Parviz Barati, disagrees, writing that the history of Naqashi Khat began earlier, in the early Safavid period (1501-1722 CE) when Safavid calligraphers used intertwined spaces, symmetry, and shifting in their artworks in order to enhance them aesthetically (press conference, 2014). Karim Emami sees this school having first gained global recognition in 1959, when the first painted calligraphic tile panel by Sadegh Tabrizi was exhibited in London (2013).

Based upon the above sources, we might understand that Naqashi Khat appeared in the early fifteenth century. However, certain principles of Naqashi Khat developed later during Iran's Pahlavi Dynasty (1925 to 1979 CE), when it gained a larger presence in the contemporary art of Iran. Following Iran's Islamic Revolution (1979), calligraphy became increasingly popular among young people, who produced wide and varied works in traditional or and modern styles of Naqashi Khat. During that time Sadegh Tabrizi, Faramarz Pilaram, Reza Maafi, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Nasrollah Afjei, Jalil Rasouli and Mohammad Ehsai were the foremost pioneers of the Naqashi Khat School of contemporary art in Iran.

Literature on Contemporary Malaysian Art

The most recent study of contemporary Islamic painting in Malaysia was by Ahmadrashidi bin Hasan, who completed doctoral research in 2010. He establishes the development of contemporary Islamic art in Malaysia during the 1980s and '90s. He identifies characteristic features produced during those decades, and analyses their iconography, in order to understand how they relate to a resurgence of Islam in Malaysia. As with this article, Ahmadrashidi's study uses Panofsky's Theory of Iconology, applying it to over eighty-three painting samples. However, the differences between his study and this one lie in the guiding terminology that differentiates the samples. Ahmadrashidi focuses on providing a general overview of contemporary Islamic art and its historical development. The findings identify styles and their meanings, particularly the use of the term 'Islamic art' to define certain contemporary works. Ahmadrashidi's

study is useful to this one as it applies theoretical framework, as well as terms and concepts that assist in understanding such art works.

Other works that address modern and contemporary art in Malaysia since independence in 1957 include artists' biographies by Wharton (1971); an outstanding review by Syed Ahmad Jamal, titled "Seni Lukis Malaysia" (1992), which looks at thirty years history of Malaysian art since the founding of the National Art Gallery; in addition to writings on the history of modern art in Malaysia by Marco Hsu (1999), Mulyadi (2001), Tan Chee Khuan (1994), and Ooi Kok Chuen (2002), and art such as "Arts and Life" (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1992), which not only introduce selected paintings and painters, but also the visions that produced art exhibitions.

In addition to the aforementioned writings, numerous newspaper and magazine articles have been written on the subject of Malaysian art, such as the "Fine Arts" column in *Dewan Budaya* by Zakaria Ali, during the 1980's, and other columns concerned with art, that have appeared over the years such as "Art Panorama," "Painting," "Local Painting," "Visual Art," and "Art," which have been filled their pages with stories on artists, critics, painters, art events, and discussions. The work of the art writer, Piyadasa, has appeared in "Art Panorama" as well as in his book, "Modern Artists of Malaysia," published in 1983.

Methodology

This study seeks to compare visual elements and concepts related to Islamic calligraphy painting in Malaysia and Iran, based in a sample of twelve significant artworks produced between the 1950s and the present. It is a qualitative study that uses visual observation and documentation within a theoretical framework based on Nor Azlin Hamidon's Theory of History of Muslim Art Tradition (2012). This theory draws from Islamic concepts found in the theoretical works of al-Ghazzali and other Muslim scholars, and the Theory of Iconology as propounded by Panofsky. Figure 1 illustrates this framework.

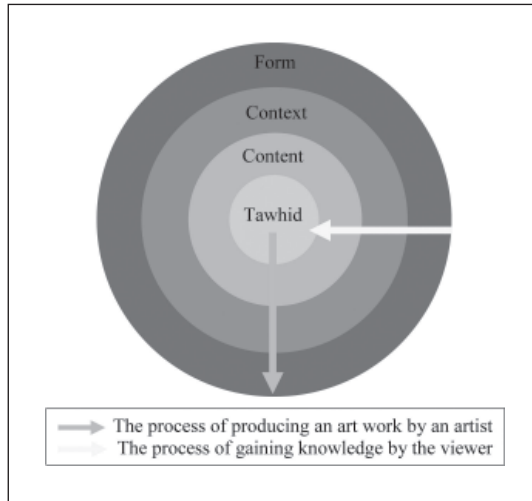


Figure 1: The Theory of History of Muslim Art Traditions.

Strictly speaking, Islamic art means that every stage of production, from formulating ideas, through the creation process, until the final product, must be in line with accepted practices in Islamic theology, laws, and principles. Muslim art, however, only refers to works produced by a Muslim artist, which may or may not be in line with Islamic teachings. In any case a Muslim is not without individual agency, and faith in God is not the only force driving his or her actions. Given these differences, a study of Muslim art should include contextual background, such as, artist's intentions and personal expressions, because not all such art works are guided by an ultimate goal of unity of God (*tawhid*). However, in acknowledging the potentially multi-directional nature of Muslim art, this study endeavors to create a taxonomy for Islamic calligraphy painting works that groups them into new categories, based on legibility, style, form, and other aspects that derive from the data analyses. Based on the Theory of Iconology, three levels of interpretation are conceptualized as outer layers of this theoretical framework, with a fourth level of interpretation situated at the center, which represents the goal of Muslims art activities, or the sources of inspiration for contemporary Muslim art.

Analyses and Findings

The samples here are chosen for different criteria in the analysis stage. The works of Iranian and Malaysian artists are divided into two groups: the first group includes those by Iranian artists, whereas the second group includes those by Malaysian artists produced since the 1950s. An outline drawing represent to support visual data. Each figure includes the name of the artist, date, and size of the artwork.

The analysis of these works begins with a study of their forms, and then moves on to examine related contextual data. This is followed with a third interpretive stage for which various ideas and elements of each piece are synthesized, so as to better the art works which will define characterize their content, and suggest the deeper spiritual meanings they contain and express. From these processes, we might gain a better understanding of the history of this Muslim art tradition.

Study of Form

Studying the formal attributes of an art work is merely a starting point in the larger objective of understanding. Certain visual art principles may be identified and similar traits may be highlighted as a means to form discrete categories. According to al-Ghazzali (n.d), humans have a ‘discursive spirit’ which could liquidize the category to formulate new shared traits. The process of deconstructing and reorganizing ideas can be infinitive and continuous. Even when examining similar samples of art, new categories can emerge if they are interpreted from different perspective.

Iranian Artworks

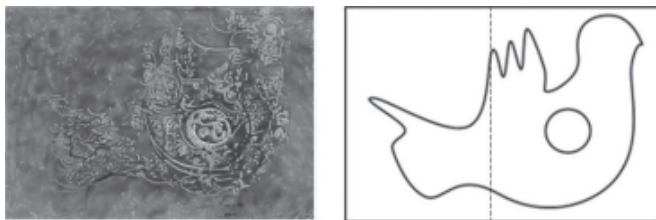


Figure 2: Faramarz Pilaram, 1969, 60 x 85 cm.

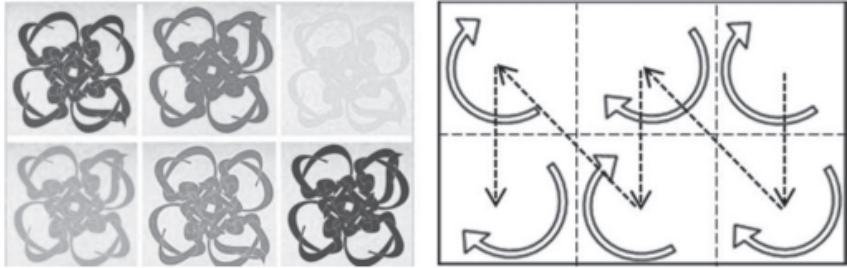


Figure 3: Mohammad Ehsai, 1973, 96.1 x 96.1 cm.

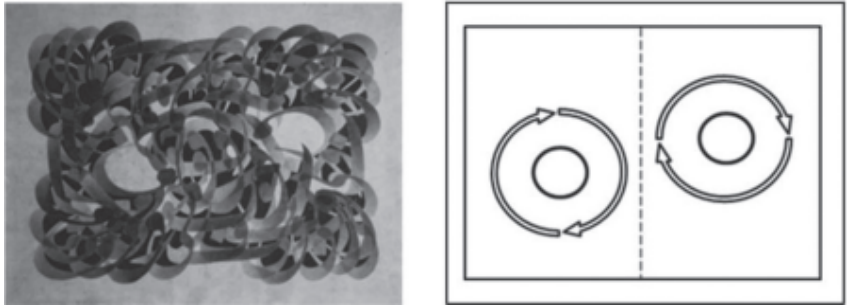


Figure 4: Reza Mafi, 1974, 99.06 x 76.2 cm.

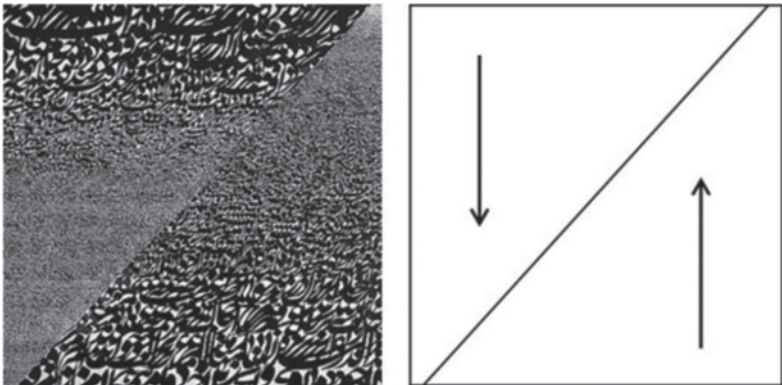


Figure 5: Nasrollah Afjei, 1976, 70 x 70 cm.

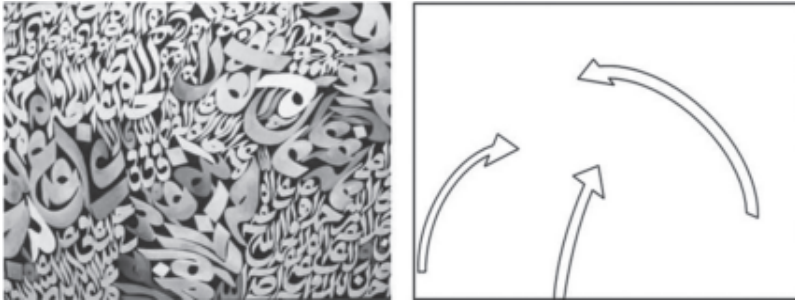


Figure 6: Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, 1981, 96.5 x 129.5 cm.

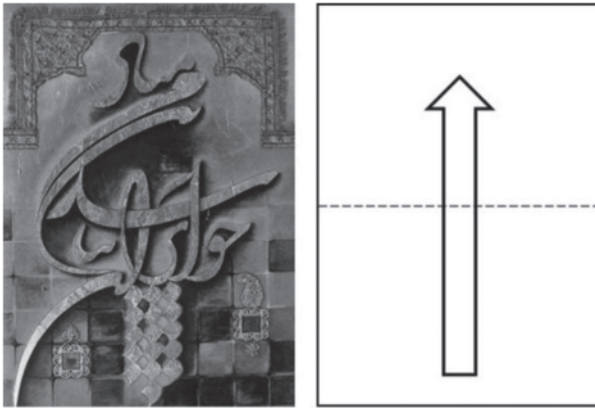


Figure 7: Jalil Rasouli, 1994, 97 x 63.5 cm.

Malaysian Artworks

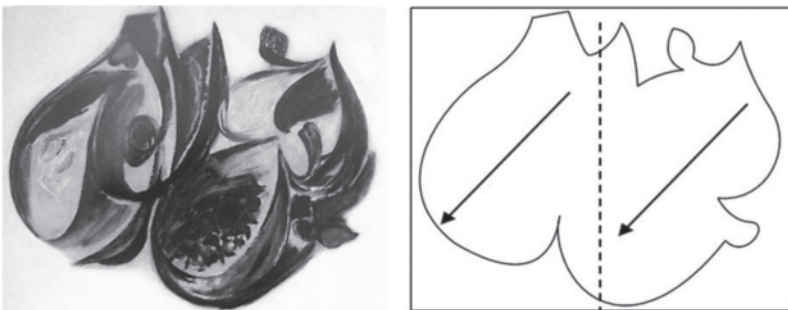


Figure 8: Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1958, 74.5 x 120.5 cm.

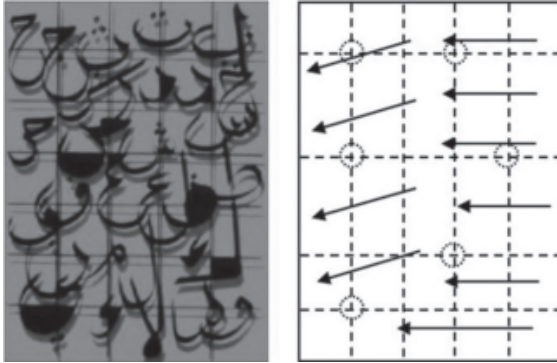


Figure 9: Ahmad Khalid Yusof, 1971, 83 x 65 cm.

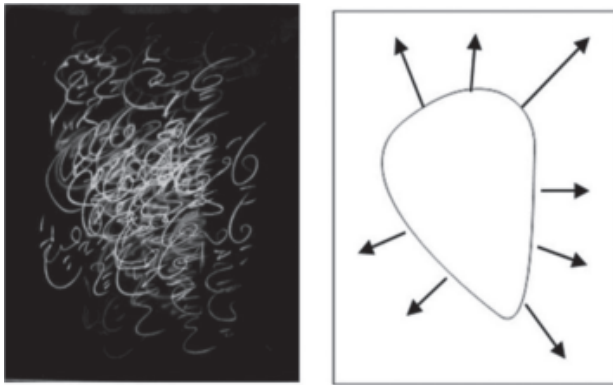


Figure 10: Abdul Ghaffar Ibrahim, 1977, 63 x 53 cm.

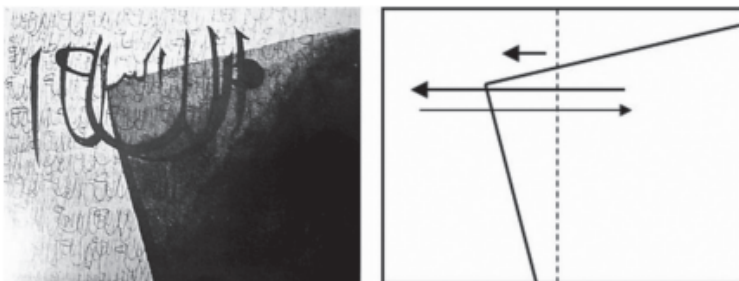


Figure 11: Raja Azhar Idris, 1979, 37 x 49 cm.

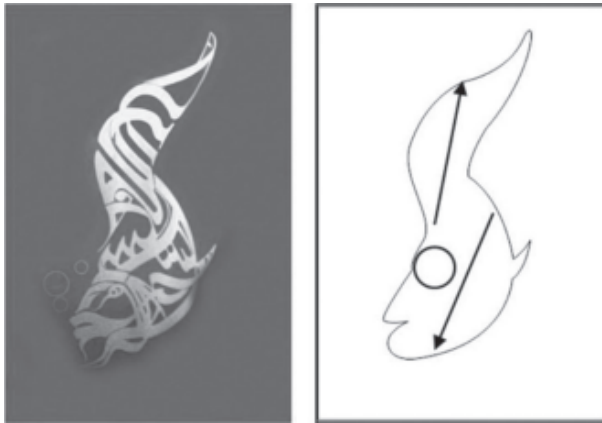


Figure 12: Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, 1980, 63 x 48 cm.

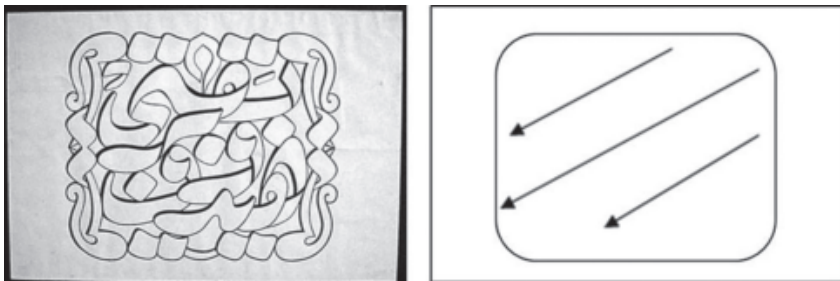


Figure 13: Hassan Abdul Rahman, 1981, 45 x 55 cm.

The tables below indicate the analysis of the main elements and principles of visual art such as color, movement, composition, style and technique, in order to help identify the similarities and differences in the artworks of Malaysia and Iran.

Tables 1 and 2 show significant similarities in the artworks of Faramarz Pilaram (Figure 2) and Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas (Figure 12). For instance, in the limited use of colors and composition, and the animal representations of the bird, which symbolizes peace in Pilaram's work, and the fish in the work of Al-Attas, which conveys calmness and liveliness.

Table 1: Elements and Principles of Selected Artworks by Iranian Artists

Artist	Color	Movement	Composition	Style	Technique
Faramarz Pilaram	Dark red/ Orange/ Golden	Center of right half	Coherence of text in the form of bird	Conceptual	Oil on canvas
Mohammad Ehsai	Yellow/ Blue/ Red/ Green/ Purple/ Orange	Clockwise	Symmetry & Color properties	Conceptual	Acrylic on canvas
Reza Maafi	Brown/ Black	Negative spaces in center of both half & Clockwise	Coherence of the text & Symmetry	Siyah Mashq	Ink and oil on canvas
Nasrollah Afjei	White/ Black	Diagonal, Up to down and reverse	Resizing Fonts, Symmetry & Diversity to unity	Conceptual	Black ink on canvas
Charles Hossein Zenderoudi	White/ Black/ Colorful	Diagonal, from the corners to the center	Bold, Regular, Large, Small Fonts	Mixture of calligraphy styles	Acrylic on canvas
Jalil Rasouli	Green/ Dark red/ Blue/ Golden	Down to upward	Harmony & Symmetry	Shikaste Nastaliq	Acrylic and collage on canvas

Table 2: Elements and Principles of Selected Artworks by Malaysian Artists

Artist	Colours	Movement	Composition	Style	Technique
Syed Ahmad Jamal	Dark Blue/ Red/ Orange/ Brown	Right side, Diagonal up to down & left side, Diagonal up to down	Coherence of the bold text	Conceptual	Oil on hardboard
Ahmad Khalid Yusof	Red/ Black	Right to left, slight slant to down & Center of junctions	Regular distribution of letters and lines & Symmetry	Conceptual	Acrylic on canvas
Abdul Ghaffar Ibrahim	Black/ Yellow/ Blue/ Red/ Green/ Purple/ Orange	Center & Split around	Coherence of the Regular text & Color properties	Conceptual	Pastel on paper
Raja Azhar Idris	Black/ White	Right to left	Contrast	Conceptual	Etching on paper
Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas	Blue/ Yellow	Center	Coherence of the text in the form of a fish	Diwani	Printed poster
Hassan Abdul Rahman	Black/ White	Center, Down half to Up	Coherence of the bold text & Symmetry	Conceptual	Ink on paper

It is important to note the limited use of color, and the emphasis on negative space found in the artworks of Reza Maafi (Figure 4), Ahmad Khalid Yusof (Figure 9), Raja Azhar Idris (Figure 11) and Hassan Abdal Rahman (Figure 13), which serves to convey gentility, power and stasis. In contrast, the widespread use of sharp colors in the works of Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (Figure 6) and Abdul Ghaffar Ibrahim (Figure 10) suggests concepts of flowing and happiness, whereas the balance between the characters and colors conveys concepts of volume and radiant light, respectively. The artwork of Afjei (Figure 5) suggests notions of power, stability and duality. He also succeeds conveying concepts of perspective through movement, which are not present in the works of Malaysian artists.

Moreover, this analysis reveals that visual elements present in both groups are particular to the artist. It seems that the Iranian artists give more consideration to certain principles of calligraphy than their Malaysian counterparts, and the Malaysian artists have a tendency toward certain principles of painting. This means that the principle techniques of Naqashi Khat in Iran are calligraphic, based on aesthetic and visual features, whereas in Malaysia, they are instead based in principles of painting, such as style and technique. In addition, the size and orientation of artworks prove that Iranian artists mostly render their works in a horizontal direction, whereas the Malaysian artists tend toward a vertical orientation: an aspect that may demonstrate contrast between the visual knowledge of each group.

Generally, for both groups, the composition of visual elements enhance the beauty of the work, and reflect the artists' efforts to achieve some features in their artworks through formal principles such as movement and balance. In this regard, formal principles may be seen to underlie basic techniques of artistic creation.

Study of Context

The art works examined here elaborate upon personal experiences and interpretations of the world of the individual artists. To better understand these aspects, we may analyse the contexts of both the creation of the art work as well as the life of the artist. Dimensions of time and space are

determinant factors that explain the birth of an artwork, and are keys to opening the secrets of the artist's intentions. We must also understand them through the overall environments that produced the artists, including their social histories and cultures.

The Formation of Islamic Calligraphy Paintings (Naqashi Khat) in Iran

Apart from historical issues, the formation of Naqashi Khat raises several arguments among three groups of artists: painters, graphic designers and calligraphers. Some painters believe that a calligrapher just draws letters and words, but that the remaining elements are considered as painting. Conversely, Khosravi asserts that painters create artworks that rely on basic principles of painting, and due to their lack of knowledge regarding letter and word selection, they produce non-professional Naqashi Khat.

The second group includes graphic designers, who claim that the Naqashi Khat embodies a visual language, and thus qualifies it as an offshoot of graphic design. For this group, Khosravi argues that graphic designers may produce a relatively coherent and consistent calligraphy by using flat colors and forms, but they lack sufficient background in calligraphy for their works to be considered as Naqashi Khat.

The third group consists of calligraphers. Interestingly, traditional calligraphers rejected the Naqashi Khat School because it conflicted with their traditional biases. However, as the main core of Naqashi Khat is calligraphy and painting (the latter of which helps create an attraction and connection with the audience), modern calligraphers assert that it may be considered a modern calligraphic style. Khosravi appears to support the above belief, saying that those groups of artists who practice and study calligraphy for years are able to create an artwork based on the aesthetics and principles of calligraphy. Maryam Amjadi (2012), in an excellent interview with Iranian artist (and prolific calligrapher), Kaveh Teimouri, discusses the formation of Naqashi Khat. She also agrees with Khosravi, and notes that the major emphasis in Naqashi Khat is on calligraphy, whereas painting and colors only enhance the visual appeal of calligraphic texts. A discussion on the formation of Naqashi Khat is also found in a 2012 article by Hojat Nemat. He points out that this

school is a combination of calligraphy, painting, and graphics. In other words, the techniques of painting and graphics help maintain the principles of geometry and formation of words in calligraphy. To summarize, Nematı deduces that all the above mentioned groups of artists seek to describe and understand the language of calligraphy and its effects. Therefore, visual elements such as point, line, size, unity, direction, movement, rhythm, balance, texture and command are based in the knowledge and ideas that are the foundation of calligraphy. They utilize properties of colors to create artworks that convey the feelings and concepts of the artist to their audiences, without limitations in terms of language, dialect, or lineage. Hence, this confirms that calligraphy based in various visual approaches forms the fundamentals for the creation of Naqashi Khat.

The Formation of Islamic Calligraphy Paintings in Malaysia

To elaborate on the historical relationship of the Malaysian educational system to the artists and artworks it has produced, it is important to understand the development of the former since the colonial period, and how it has emphasized different approaches, which have shaped the general world views and the manifestations of the arts in Malaysia. In the British colonial era, secular education was established for urban populations in the form of English-medium schools. The objectives of these English schools were to improve the civil service and contribute to the country's economic development. It was during this time that the Roman script formally replaced the Arabic-based Jawi script.

The opportunity to get a better job for the students from these schools is far more varied. The Malacca Malay College (MMC) was established in 1900 as the country's first teacher's training school, followed by Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in 1924. These two institutions produced many Malay leaders, and became centers for academic excellence. Another institution, the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), trained Malay elites who mastered English language and became professionals and administrators (Wan Abdul Kadir, 2002).

On the other hand, Malay-medium schools did not stress English. Their objectives were to introduce basic skills of reading, writing, and

mathematics to their students, who would typically end up as school teachers, constables, labourers, and more typically, agriculturists. In these schools, the principle medium for teaching reading and writing was Jawi script, which provided a form of continuity of the Malay writing traditions that had existed since the pre-colonial Sultanates. As this method of using Jawi was utilitarian, emphasizing the spelling system rather than its aesthetic beauty students did not receive much exposure to the Arabic-based script as a calligraphic art.¹

In addition to English- and Malay-medium schools, Malaysia has a long educational tradition of Islamic religious schools (*sekolah pondok*) that provide curricula in an Arabic-language medium. Whereas prior to the widespread dissemination of print technology in the Malay world around the sixteenth century, these institutions relied upon manuscripts that were hand-copied. This was a long and tedious process, and privileged the quantity of the writing produced (as a means to spread knowledge widely) rather than the beauty of the script. In some cases, the latter was a result of the scribes being unfamiliar with writing methods, spelling rules, and aesthetic styles.²

Based on these historical facts, it can be concluded that the Jawi script and Islamic calligraphy have followed different trajectories in their development. The division of Malaysian educational systems into English, Malay, and Arabic mediums, widened the gap of the scripts used among different social classes. In sum, urban English-medium schools used Roman script, which took root among Malay elites, and provided them with better opportunities to further their studies locally and internationally, and gain positions in the British colonial government, and later in post-independent Malaysia; Malay schools used Jawi, which became the medium of the literate Malay masses; whereas Islamic *pondok* schools used an Arabic medium, and introduced Islamic calligraphy to their curriculum.

¹ Personal communication from Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal.

² See, for example, a manuscript of “*Syair Marifah*,” written by one Zainal Abidin, a few generations after Syeikh Abd al-Rauf al-Singkeli (MS441/PNM), written approximately between the mid-eighteenth century until the nineteenth century.

There are several ways to look at how Malaysian calligraphic arts have developed in light of various internal and external factors. This study examines some motivations that led the production of such art works by looking at the educational and psychological backgrounds, and ways in which artists have been socialized into different groups. They may be classified as follows:

- Arab-educated (in Arabian countries) artists, and trained by Arab master calligraphers.
- Pondok-educated (Islamic religious school) artists who have not studied overseas, but learned from foreign-, typically Arab-educated teachers.
- Self-taught artists who learned out of personal interest from books, friends, and/or relatives.
- Formally trained artists from Western institutions who came into contact with calligraphic writing earlier in life, during their primary and secondary education, or through acquaintances with local Islamic leaders.
- Graphic or photographic artists who were exposed to calligraphy through exhibitions and social contacts.
- Market-oriented artists who produce on-demand calligraphic works.
- Non-Malay artists who have learned Jawi script and socialized with the Malay community.

The previous illustrates differences between educational systems in Iran and Malaysia. In Iran, a specific school or discipline has been the site most responsible for the development of both calligraphic and painted artworks. In Malaysia, a diverse educational system has produced an equally diverse range of calligraphic artists.

Content: Analyses of Iranian and Malaysian Artworks

A third area for comparison of Iranian and Malaysian artists through a study of their works, interpreting their explicit and implicit meanings from quotations upon which an artwork is based, from the artists' own

perspectives, or the voices of outside interlocutors such as curators or contest judges.

Table 3: Textual Sources for Iranian and Malaysian Calligraphic Artworks, by Artist

Artist	Country	Source of Text
Faramarz Pilaram	Iran	Poetry
Mohammad Ehsai	Iran	Individual stylized Letters
Reza Maafi	Iran	Individual stylized Letters
Nasrollah Afjei	Iran	Individual stylized Letters
Hossein Zenderoudi	Iran	Individual stylized Letters
Jalil Rasouli	Iran	Poetry
Syed Ahmad Jamal	Malaysia	Al-Quran
Ahmad Khalid Yusof	Malaysia	Alphabet
Abdul Ghaffar Ibrahim	Malaysia	Individual Words
Raja Azhar Idris	Malaysia	Al-Quran
Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas	Malaysia	Al-Quran
Hassan Abdul Rahman	Malaysia	Hadith

A comparison between the content of Iranian and Malaysian artworks reveal significant differences in the source of the texts used. As Table 3 shows, the majority of artworks in Iran are based upon stylized letters, with the remainder based in works of famous Iranian poets. In contrast, Malaysian works tend to quote from the Quran and Hadith (prophetic traditions). Iranian works prioritize the beauty of form and artistic expression. Mere repetition of letters are deemed meaningless without achieving some form of unity through the work. Malaysian works, on the other hand, often evoke individual personalities and emotions, and are more reliant upon decorative elements.

Tawhid (the Oneness of God)

The final level of analysis conducted here examines the spiritual content (rather than formal attributes or styles) of an artwork that deals with the Islamic concept of tawhid: the notion of a single, unifying deity. A piece may be labelled as Islamic art if it clearly conveys spiritual principles; however, the unity of a piece (and thus its expression of tawhid) may be more intrinsic, encompassing explicitly Islamic principles, or abstruse in connecting the various elements in a work. For example, the work by Jalil Rasouli (Figure 7) renders a beautiful poetic verse in praise of Iran, which not only conveys through its text a sense of humanity, but also a feeling of unity through its colors, movement, and composition.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated new directions for Islamic calligraphy painting in Iran and Malaysia that, since the early 1980s, have increasingly drawn from contemporary art. The educational systems of both countries have contributed to the different trajectories of each. In Iran, the calligraphic school known as Naqashi Khat has produced modern artists as well as calligraphers, whereas in Malaysia, a separation of Western-, Malay-, and Islamic-based education has produced artists who may be skilled in calligraphy, but untrained in the production and appreciation of modern art, and vice versa.

Despite all of these works being of the same general type, significant differences in the worldviews of artists from each country exist in the artworks and in the choices of calligraphic styles, texts, and scripts. Following Hamidon's theory of form (2012) based in analyses of visual elements (namely colour, movement, composition, style of calligraphy and technique), we may see a similarity in the use of colour between Iranian and Malaysian artworks, such as the limited colors found in the works of Nasrollah Afjei and Reza Maafi, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Raja Azhar Idris, Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas and Hassan Abdul Rahman. In contrast, the colorful artworks of Mohammad Ehsai and Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim indicate a similar approach. The greatest similarities feature in the compositions of Faramarz Pilaram and Syed Muhammad

Naguib Al-Attas coherence of the text is reproduced in the forms of a bird and fish. These works further represents the tendencies of artists to create novel forms that challenge existing principles of calligraphy. In terms of style, eight of the twelve artworks examined here use a conceptual style of calligraphy, in which calligraphy is used as a visual language. Few artists, on the other hand, employ the certain principle of calligraphy such as found in the Siyah Mashq, Shikaste Nastaliq, and Diwani styles produced by Reza Maffi, Jalil Rasouli and Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas. Through this analysis of technique we may gain insights into how knowledgeable artists are regarding the painting principle. It appears that the concept of form is the last detail considered in the process of creating an artwork.

In the development and evolution of Islamic calligraphy, painting has played an important role. Painters generally have been more concerned with principles of color and form, whereas calligraphers are more attentive to the proportions and the aesthetics of the texts. As the two disciplines converged, these two concerns became interdependent, and the expression of an artwork has developed to employ unique methods as well as adhere to formal principles.

In terms of content, this article, in examining textual sources for calligraphic artworks, finds that for Iranian artists the sources often draw from poetic texts and make use of repeated letters. For Malaysian artists, the sources are most commonly the Quran and Hadith. Despite these differences, each uses the medium to present the Islamic spiritual principle of tawhid, and unite the two central concerns of calligraphy: the beauty of form, and the beauty of meaning.

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