

ABSTRACT CALLIGRAPHY: LEBANESE AND JAPANESE ARTIST MEET

Samir al-Sayegh.

Samir al-Sayegh's (b. 1945) and Toko Shinoda's (b. 1913) artistic approach is conceptually similar as their abstract calligraphy transcends the boundaries of signifier-signified relationship, surpasses the established religious connotations of their respective traditions, although, perpetuating the craftsmanship and ultimately the spirituality of those traditions through the mastery of form.

Some contemporary calligraphic artists in the Arab World and Japan have a tendency to leave behind the established composition rules of calligraphy and create a new kind of art that is based on the visual power of the letter shape. Examples include Japanese action painting-style calligraphy, seen in the works of Yuichi Inoue (Figure 1) or Arabic graphic-style superpositioned colourful Pop pieces of Mohammed Ehsai (Figure 2). Another tendency is for contemporary artists to remain within the boundaries of the signifier-signified 'word art' concept of calligraphy, as seen with acclaimed calligrapher Ahmed Moustafa, that uses the religious connotation of Arabic Qur'anic calligraphy in his works (Figure 3); or within its functional decorative purpose. However, Sayegh and Shinoda do not belong to any of those as they both present the viewer with the simple aesthetic purity of their single brush strokes, attached to the acquired technique of old calligraphy masters.

Samir al-Sayegh is a Lebanese artist who has studied the origins of Arabic Calligraphy extensively and attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He creates his own interpretation of single Arabic letters, typically through the use of geometry (Figure 4). He does not belong to the tradition versus modernity debate that other Arabic artists are engaged in with the Hurufiyyah movement. Hurufiyyah started in the fifties as part of the nationalist drives of post-colonial Arab world to go back to asala authenticity of Islamic religious and secular traditional art of writing. It is part of the larger movement of modern Arab artists to define themselves outside of Western influences by reviving the 'Arabness' of calligraphy in contrast to the 20th century Western abstract, deconstructivist or existentialist aesthetics. But Hurufiyyah also transcends the signifier/signified relationship of traditional calligraphy by freeing the Arabic letter from its sacredness , and thus playing with abstract, deconstructivist and existentialist

Western thoughts.

This dichotomy is at the heart of redefining Arab art away from Islamic art; and according to Sayegh it “endows the artwork [with] some Arab or Islamic traits (...) addressing political ideas and directions far more than the artistic questions related to the artwork itself.” Avoiding the political ‘Arab art’ versus postcolonial ‘Islamic art’ discourse, Sayegh revives his cultural heritage by celebrating its craftsmanship, not its political meaning in today’s world. He goes back at original root of Arabic calligraphy that is the katt al-mansub, “proportioned script” . In this way, he takes traditional calligraphy techniques for what they are, not for what they represent.

In Asamaa Allah Al husna (Figure 5), a full sentence written in kufi style black and red ink presents the viewer with incredibly crisp-cut rectangular endings and perfectly round accents. This kind of calligraphy looks like it is machine-made, insofar it is aesthetically so clean and perfected. In contrast to the kufi main script style, a sepia diwani writing strikes the viewer with its cursive delicate humane spirit. The whole composition is simple yet extremely effective: centered in the middle, on a completely straight invisible line, the quote is secondary to its visual experience, reminding the lines of Heraclitus: “the hidden harmony is stronger than the visible.” A tremendous drafting of geometrical shape of each letter and the overall sentence was behind the production of this final work that seems presumably simple and pure. There lies the essence of traditional calligraphy: the brush stroke is never empty, and never random. In this work, tradition does not confront modern art appreciation of white negative space and shocking crisp visuals: the two meet.

Toko Shinoda is a Japanese artist, known for her abstract calligraphy works that completely delete the letter’s signified meaning from its signifier in terms of shape, meaning, sound and language. Her works present brush strokes that can be recognized as calligraphic Japanese strokes, meticulously painted and composed on white paper. She studied traditional Japanese calligraphy before coming to New York in the 1950s, at the midst of Abstract Expressionism.

Her work Reminiscence (Figure 6), can be described in four strokes: a red square dot, a smaller white one, a straight black brush stroke, and a final touch of gold strike. Shinoda’s way of handling the contrasting types of strokes is similar to the contrast of the different scripts used by Sayegh (Fig.2). A more direct formal comparison between the two artists is the way Shinoda, in Nexus (Figure 4) celebrates the straight

rectangular brush stroke as a shape to be admired by itself, which is oddly similar to the way Sayegh created *Kalimat wa Hurouf* (Figure 7). Shinoda's minimalist approach to calligraphy goes back to its innate spirituality as an artistic activity. The single-word titles that she gives to her compositions justify the calligraphy brush's power to create mystical atmosphere. It is no coincidence that calligraphy was used for religious purposes in both Sayegh's and Shinoda's home countries.

Calligraphy is in itself spiritual: more than a means of communicating words in a written form, it is an art practice honoring the unique black ink stroke on its opposite white surface. There is no acceptable mistake in calligraphy; one cannot simply erase or paint over a badly drawn brush stroke. Calligraphy requires therefore an immense concentration; and is venerated when mastered. Abstract calligraphy bases its formal qualities not only on the artist's immense concentration but on the profound viewer's experience too. Viewing Shinoda's works requires a special mental activity consisting in the search of meaning in a visual that superficially presents us none. Ultimately, she transports the viewer by the formal two dimensionality of her forms, linking to an experience similar to the one argued by Robert Gunn when viewing traditional Japanese calligraphy: "by beholding it, opening to it, allowing it to enter into oneself and attending to the effect it has on one's body sensations."

Abstract calligraphy can be thus defined as an incorporation of contemporary abstract shapes into a particular cultural calligraphic tradition. I do not agree with Nada Shabout's view that Arab modern and contemporary calligraphy "is not a continuation of calligraphy, nor did it find its beginning in traditional sources." Although Sayegh does not define himself in the continuation of Islam or Arab traditions, he pays tribute to the act of calligraphy as a respectable art practice. He says: "My first reflection concentrated on researching the birth of Arabic calligraphy as a full fledged art more than thousands years ago and at a later stage trying to understand the regression of this art and its decline". He does not associate with the Hurufiyyah movement because unlike others, he does not view the Arabic letter as an "Aladdin's lamp" securing the artist's acceptance both locally and internationally – but views it still as an elegant practice that should be commemorated in concordance to modern aesthetics.

Some may argue that Sayegh and Shinoda did not find by themselves the drive to celebrate calligraphy techniques in a Western minimalist and abstract fashion: Western influences might have helped them have the confidence to present a single brush stroke as a 'work of art'. It is true that American Abstract Expressionists have

influenced Shinoda in her stay in New York, but her strokes are too conscious, accurate and positioned on the blank space to be compared to a Pollock canvas. As she said: "they had Abstract Expressionism, but I had calligraphy, too." Sayegh's letter-inspired geometrical shapes (Fig.4) might provoke associations to Stella's post-painterly abstraction, but they carry a quality that Abstract American and European artists never possessed. Sayegh's works come from an extensive study of the different Arabic calligraphy scripts that were themselves developed over generations of calligraphers.

Sayegh's and Shinoda's works fundamentally remain a sequel of their unique art traditions. It should not be forgotten that calligraphy is regarded, in both Islamic and Japanese history as one of the highest form of art. I have argued in this article that this heavy heritage developed itself to the culmination of Sayegh's and Shinoda's abstraction and minimalism – that not only carry revival of traditional local art forms, but also the original spirituality found in the activity of calligraphy.

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