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Chapter IV    Samir Sayegh: A Master of Tradition and Abstraction

*Philosophical Insight and Timid Experimentations*

Throughout his life, Sayegh was an aspiring poet, journalist, art critic, Islamic art enthusiast, university instructor, calligrapher, Arabic type designer, artist and Sufi.¹⁶⁰ There are several reasons why I have decided to write about Samir Sayegh’s work as a case study. The first is because his art is unique in that it has managed to carve its way into the larger frame of calligraphic abstraction with originality. Also, there is a conceptual dimension to his work and a serious reflection process. When he produces paintings they are sometimes accompanied by texts reflecting on his experience. I am interested to look at his artwork within the largest modernist trajectory. He can be called a latecomer to the art scene and a second-generation letterist. His work starts from classical aspects of calligraphy, but breaks away from them to create a new visual language of his own. The most important aspect for me was his ability to reach a global audience without a solid infrastructure for the arts in his country. And the final reason for my choice is his impact as an educator and a mentor to a new generation of leading Arab designers.

¹⁶⁰ To capture all facets of his journey, interviews with very different individuals from his close circle of people were conducted. The interviews ranged widely, including conversations with journalists, educators, critics, Sufi poets, designers, art dealers, print-shop owners, calligraphers and students. Each of these testimonials helped me weave a more intricate presentation of Sayegh’s attitudes towards his work at various points of his artistic development. The research with the artist was conducted over the course of four major interviews, one in Cairo in January of 2014 and three in Beirut in April, June and October of the same year. Interviews with contemporaries also took place during these periods, although some were conducted over Skype because the subjects lived in different parts of the world. Being a writer himself, Sayegh’s journalistic, academic and poetic writings were also used as primary sources of information and analysis. His first poetry book, *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* (1980), and his two later books published as part of two different exhibitions, *Muthakarat al-Huruf* (2003) and *Alif bihourouf kathira* (2014), were analysed to gain insight into the artist’s creative process and output. His publication *Islamic Art - A Reading into its Philosophy & Aesthetic Characteristics* (1988) was used as a source for understanding how his research on Islamic art influenced his creativity. Finally, the artist’s paintings, book designs, typographic experiments and students’ work were all used as primary sources to outline Samir Sayegh’s artistic and visual concerns, as well as their development throughout his career.
Before we discuss his career as an artist and his first exhibition, it is important to highlight that throughout his life Sayegh was traveling between mediums. He was seeking a means of expression, which intensified his questions because he carried these same issues into every genre he worked with. In poetry, journalism, art, calligraphy, teaching and philosophy, Sayegh was seeking answers. Thus he took his first steps in art as a seeker and not under the pretense of being a master; he came as a thinker expecting dialogue.

It is significant to note that this major step took place in a phase of Sayegh’s life where he was still trying to find a new voice and a new mode of expression. Three years earlier (1980) he had published his first collection of poems in *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm*. This collection was originally published in *Mawaqif* magazine, which was his patron Adonis’s second periodical publication after *Majallat Shi’r*, both of which Sayegh was a contributor to as a journalist. *Mawaqif* was close to the concept of going back to tradition and spirituality, and it was very much influenced by Sufi thought. Sayegh’s writings reflected the philosophy of the publication that featured his work. But after *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* he did not publish another independent poetry book until twenty years later when he published a book alongside “*Muzakarat al hurouf*”, an exhibition which I will discuss in detail in the coming pages. So *Maqam al-qaws* can be considered Sayegh’s only independent poetry collection.

But why did Sayegh stop writing poetry, and what drove him to calligraphy? And why did he choose it as a medium of visual expression and not take the path towards realism or abstraction or even photography? When confronted with the decision of starting a new career pathway and a new visual and social expression, the art critic and disappointed poet chose to work with the Arabic letter. It is not that Sayegh was unsuccessful as an art critic; he had established himself as a valuable reference on the arts in the Arab world. Sayegh was an influential critic in the artistic and intellectual circles of Beirut in the sixties and seventies as he practiced criticism in Lebanese journals. Before the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) Beirut was attracting different intellectual conglomerations from all

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over the Arab and non-Arab countries, they came to Beirut looking for a podium for their opinions and for modern arts at the time.

Sayegh’s time as a journalist eventually eliminated his quest to be a poet.\(^{162}\) He had moved in his early adulthood to the capital Beirut from Mashgarah, his home village in the mountains of Lebanon, for two reasons: modernity and the Palestinian cause.\(^{163}\) He started his career in the early 1970’s in Beirut, which was, at the time, the cultural laboratory of the Arab world. Talent fled to it seeking inspiration and a platform for expression after the defeat of 1967. Sayegh described the atmosphere at the time as follows: “Beirut was the center of Arab modernity, the capital of Arab revolution; intellectuals gathered around the cause of Palestinian resistance. It was also the capital of self-criticism and re-thinking history, religious affiliation, and political rule.”\(^{164}\) The talent pool varied among the professions, but they came from different parts of the Arab world and lived in Beirut for a period or regularly traveled to and from the city. The list included artists, journalists, art critics, musicians, poets, performers, writers, academics, and publishers. Beirut was the Mecca of Arab culture and a big center for Arab publishing, so it served as the pulpit from which all new ideas from the region were emerging. Whether progressive ideas in support of modernity or ideas about Arab nationalism, communism, the Palestinian cause, breaking with tradition, or any idea that was gripping the world at the time, as in any cosmopolitan city, Beirut was center stage.

Artists who experimented with letterist abstraction like Dia al-Azzawi and Shakir Hassan al-Sa’id from Iraq, Ahmed Shirbini from Sudan, Hamid Abdallah from Egypt, Mohammad Malihi and Farid Belkahia from Morocco, and many others, were either living or exhibiting in Beirut. In addition to the presence of different Arab modern artists, exhibitions of Western art movements and artists were also present, including an exhibition of Henri Moore’s work, a display of Salvador Dali’s books, and copies of the lithographic works by Picasso and Miro. Big names in world music, and dance also came to perform at Lebanese music festivals, such as Ravi Shankar, Martha Graham, Elvin Ailey and others. Beirut was a lively, important cultural

\(^{162}\) Ibid.
\(^{163}\) Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehbab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
\(^{164}\) Ibid.
center. In this atmosphere, Sayegh was practicing art criticism by writing for the various newspapers he worked for.

Sayegh remembers how he cried while listening to Egyptian President Abdel-Nasser’s resignation speech, though the people sitting with him met his sorrow with indifference. In his *naksah* (defeat) speech, Abdel-Nasser stated: “The hope of Arab unity started before Abel-Nasser and it will remain after Abdel-Nasser,” an idea many Arab intellectuals at the time held to be true. Sayegh, throughout his career as a young journalist and poet, sought individuals and institutions that shared his beliefs and views of an Arab unity separate from religious affiliations. Thus he left his village to obtain the company of people who shared his Arab nationalism and who believed in building Arab nations that were not based on tribal and religious affiliations, but on modern national institutions devoid of the clan and tribal favoritism. Through these creative friends, a clearer vision of art, philosophy, and identity was formed. Clearer ideas crystallized on the meaning of modernity, or artistic modernity, which was exchanging the family for the institution, opening up to outsiders, considering all humankind as one, considering all art as one. When a person believes in these ideas and the ability to create, he or she has to have a vision; this new vision of man and the universe is the reason why a person can feel the urge to express him/herself creatively thus becoming an artist or a poet or an architect.

The defeat was what pushed Sayegh into Arab nationalism, more than the Arab political parties present in Lebanon at the time. He confirms that throughout his life, he never belonged to any political party. The defeat of June 1967, made him feel that he is an Arab at heart, so he began meeting with Arab nationalist figures and people who were Leftists and moderate Rightists, all of whom supported the Palestinian cause in the beginning. Eventually, however, they began moving apart as they returned to their original political affiliations. This relationship with and sympathy towards the Palestinian cause is what brought him closer to intellectuals

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166 Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

at the time that shared his same sentiment and paved the way for his career in journalism. He maintained the sensitivity of a poet even when he was not utilizing that form of expression anymore. He was seeking a new philosophy, and that led him to Sufism. After writing his diwan *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm*, he felt that writing poetry has reached a stage where it failed him as a tool of expression, and he felt that the “poet” was no longer the prototype, providing an ideal example for society. After the *Naksah* many poets in the Arab world committed suicide, some due to depression and for personal reasons but many for political ones. These suicides are a statement on the state of Arab poetry and society’s appreciation of it. Art cannot live without an audience. It is not that surprising that Sayegh felt that poetry was no longer a valid or expressive art form. He confesses that he stopped writing because modernity failed, and poetry did not have an audience anymore. He used a very local Lebanese term to describe its state, “mallasit,” meaning the screw is not hanging on to its anchor because they are both so worn out. The people, which poetry was supposed to address, and society, in general, were surrounded by wars, and thus poets and poetry both became obsolete and irrelevant. In Sayegh’s times of political unrest, unfortunately, the sword was mightier than the pen.

So this explains why Sayegh chose to stop writing poetry but why did he decide to express himself utilizing a very traditional art form like Arabic calligraphy? Sayegh credits the years that he spent at the *al-Anwar* newspaper for the formation of his ideas and reservations on modernity and tradition. In his view, being progressive did not mean opening up to Western cultures anymore because that meant complying with the concept of colonialism. To him, it did not make sense that

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168 *Naksah* is what Arabs refer to the 7th of June, 1967, as. It marks the battle for Jerusalem in which the Israeli army defeated an Arab coalition army. That event drove Sayegh to start writing political articles about Jerusalem and the loss out of his village Mashgarah. He sent the articles to *Lissan el Hal*, a newspaper founded by Khalil Sarkis in 1877 (out of circulation in 1959). So even though the *Naksah* was the cause of the death of some poets in the Arab world, it was the birth of the poet and journalist in Samir Sayegh.

a person could be progressive and still comfortable with the idea of colonization.\textsuperscript{170} At the same time, the need for a unique cultural identity labeled as traditional was evident, but there was also a necessity for modernity that was in keeping with the times and current events, having historical relevance to the time and place to where a person lived. Cultural identity represented itself in the arts and in going back to the arts of tradition that were divided between the arts of the distant past, whether in the Assyrian or Pharaonic culture and Islamic art in its different aspects, whether building, ornamentation, calligraphy, music or folklore. That is why his responsibility as an art critic was to look for how these positions stood out in the arts or how they were represented in the slogans and headlines that he witnessed emerging from the artistic life in Cairo, Baghdad, Khartoum, Beirut, Damascus, Marrakesh and other Arab cities.

It is worth noting here how Sayegh in his career as a journalist, was very familiar with the cultural atmosphere in the region. At the various newspapers he worked for between 1969-1985, Sayegh interviewed most of the important contributors to Arab culture around the Arab world.\textsuperscript{171} Any artist who exhibited in Lebanon between the late 1960s till the early 1990s, Sayegh interviewed and wrote about their work.\textsuperscript{172} So he was quite well informed on what was going on in the cultural arena at the time. By interviewing all of these cultural figures he must have been looking for answers on Arab culture, on Arab identity, on what it means to be an Arab intellectual at the time.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Sayegh looked for modernity and authenticity as an art critic, he published his thoughts in newspapers in Lebanon, like \textit{al-Balad} and \textit{Beirut el-massa}, along with others mentioned earlier. By traveling to art shows in Damascus, Baghdad, Casablanca and Cairo, or by seeing the work of artists

\textsuperscript{170} Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

\textsuperscript{171} Sayegh started with interviewing Helen el-Khal who was the founder gallery One, and the wife of Youssif el-Khal the co-founder of Majalit Sh’ir. He then interviewed cultural figures like Naguib Mahfouz, Paul Guiragossian, Youssif Idriss, Tajamou’ el-Fanaini al-Sharquiyin, Michel Basbous, Jean Khalifa, Rafiq Sharaf, Moussa Tiba, Hassan Joune, Evette Ashkar, Hussien Madi, Stelio Skamanga, Munir Najim, Saloua Raouda Choukair, Aref el-Rayyes, Shafiq Abboud, Amin el-Basha, Halim Jurdak, and Mohammad el-Rawas, amongst many others.

visiting Beirut, he formulated a complete vision of the art scene of the Arab world at the time. His key insights were that there was absolutely no representation of Arabic calligraphers or ornamentation artists within these circles of modern art. Abstract artists had a strong view on modernity, and they were looking for cultural identity and language, but they rarely had any knowledge of the art of Arabic calligraphy or ornamentation. The reason for this state was the lack of references, museums and books on the topic. He noted that access to more knowledge on the history of Islamic art for these artists might have possibly sparked richer and deeper ideas and insights in their artistic expression and made it more culturally relevant.

In his quest for a unique Arab identity Sayegh became an artist acutely aware that in his locality, post-war Lebanon, there was no place for culture. The country needed rebuilding and, with a focus on getting Lebanon to function again, culture’s days were yet to come. He researched Islamic art, in an attempt to solve the problem of Arab cosmopolitanism and modernity. Sayegh held his first exhibition during the war in 1983 in Hamra, one of the very few areas in Lebanon that did not suffer from sectarian division; Muslims, Christians, and Jews were still living together in spite of the dangers that the war brought. In the beginning his solution was to be an art critic on all art forms, learning more about the current situation of the arts. Being a journalist allowed him to interact with various artists and cultural figures, but in parallel, he wrote, and when the poetry stopped for him he practiced calligraphy and painted. In his view, Arabic calligraphy was the solution to the problem of Arab identity, and he set out to learn more about it. He had been interested in calligraphy since childhood.

Sayegh confesses that, “With the codification of the script and the Ottoman Empire playing the role of a computer that wants to create ‘fonts’ and official documents, not scripts, calligraphers became like computers, repeating the same exact text over and over again. All creativity was lost.” He attributes the loss of creativity also to the absence of the meaning of a master or a “mo’alem” the traditional teacher of the craft. The job of a teacher, Sayegh insists, is to instill...

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174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
creativity in the repetition, citing the example of Arabesque, and how it is impossible to ignore the quantity and creativity of the variations on the same motif. He will illustrate this idea extensively in his work when he starts developing his own style of Arabesque utilizing calligraphy as the main module. To him, Arabesque is order and precision, an abstraction created from the lines without any perception of its content. Thus the job of a master Islamic artist was to maintain the plurality of a concept: he considers that Western historians of Islamic art had misunderstood Arabesque as an art of repetition when to him it was the ultimate mastery of the plurality of a concept.\(^{176}\) Sayegh concludes that Islamic art is a “fan motashabih” not “motmathil,” being similar but not repetitive. To him, Islamic art entails a way of translating the oneness of everything in the universe, expressed in the visual, design-based language of the calligrapher. His affinity with this philosophical perspective on Islamic art can be understood since his childhood was very engrossed in nature, the seasons and the natural cycles of the universe. To him, the artist is the witness to the hidden secrets of the universe, just like a tree that blooms and then yields fruits and then blooms again and yields more fruit. This vision lay at the heart of Islamic art when it was an all-encompassing, alive language. And that art started losing its focus when this vision of the arts changed during the end of the Ottoman period.

Sayegh’s insight that Islamic art was the underdog in the international study of art history at art schools around the world thus developed in this period. Through his interest in modernity he discovered that knowledge on Islamic art was almost non-existent. He noticed how books about the history of art would reach the Byzantine period and then jump to the Renaissance, skipping nearly 1,000 years of Islamic culture. Thus he started his personal explorations into the history of Islamic art. His real beginning with Islamic art as a research interest started at Al-Kifah al-Arabi magazine between 1982-1990. He developed a series of long articles on the topic, and his ideas crystallized in Istanbul after visiting the exhibition “Islamic Arts Exhibition Commemorating the 15th Centennial of Heigra” in 1983. These articles eventually developed into his book on Islamic art that was published in 1988. In parallel, and through his contact with the different artists and calligraphers, he

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\(^{176}\) Sayegh cites Ibn al-Nadim’s Fihrist, which mentions many Kufic scripts, but never provided any visual references to what the author meant or what the different Kufic scripts actually looked like.
formulated the idea that calligraphy should be recognized as an independent art form. He confesses that he became an artist because he did not feel that calligraphers could translate the right vision of what had to be done.\textsuperscript{177}

Sayegh considers Arabic calligraphy an art that needs space, a flourishing society and patrons to nurture it. Its purpose is to create and organize life around the individual living in his or her environment, when the belief in this conviction is gone the vision of the art stops. To him, the Ottoman Empire felt its arts to be inferior to the arts of Europe; they copied its form without understanding its philosophy, and in the process, they forgot their own.

After exploring and learning the state of Arab art and calligraphy first-hand through his work as an art critic, and his research on Islamic art history, Sayegh felt the urge to express his new understandings visually because poetry was not delivering the message he wanted to communicate. Being, however, unable to abandon the poetic side of his personality, his solution to this dilemma was to combine the two art forms, to write about what he is exhibiting and, when he could, publish a book of poetry. Sayegh's exhibitions produce a total cultural experience that feeds the mind and the eye.

Sayegh entered the art world hesitantly. His artwork was his first step in an attempt at trying to find a solution to Arabic modernity, which he thought should be explored through a re-representation of Arabic script. That is why his work was concerned only with the exploration of the aesthetic qualities and possibilities of the visual representation of Arabic. In bringing Arabic calligraphy into the modern art world, Sayegh was not experimenting with a new formula. It had been explored and confirmed as successful. He was tapping into and reflecting the identity issues among artists of the region dating as late back as the 1940s. His addition to this equation was in studying the exact forms of Arabic letters, and studying them in

\textsuperscript{177} As a journalist, Sayegh witnessed the work done by the newspaper’s calligraphers. Every day they drew and engraved the headlines of the day in linoleum. He admired their craft and remembers having long conversations with them about calligraphy as an important art form that needed to be cared for when he first started his quest for modernism and tradition. It was by contemplating their work that his own ideas on calligraphic modernism gradually evolved. Later in his life, when he interacted with calligraphers, asking them to develop the traditions they were working with and to move beyond simply designing headlines and titles for books, magazines and newspapers and classical calligraphic painting, he found that their imaginations were dry. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014
their totality, not just as language, but by also studying their history and philosophy. Arabic letters became Sayegh’s world, and his journey of exploration attracted a large group of followers and admirers. He stands at the center of Sufism, calligraphy, and poetry as a triangle that has made Sayegh’s work stand out in a society pressured to deliver answers on the future of its identity.

In an interview with Saleh Barakat in October of 2009, Samir Sayegh clearly states the reasons why he joined the art world:

It commenced as a comeback to calligraphy from the perspective of Arab modernism, as I was searching for a deeper conviction about the issue of authenticity and modernity, and looking for a personal artistic identity, the ultimate objective of modernism.\textsuperscript{178}

It is 1983, Lebanon has suffered from the Israeli invasion a year earlier and is struggling with an aggressive civil war. Sayegh realizes that there is a desperate need in the Arab world for a unique cultural identity and that calligraphy is the right visual appearance for the representation of this new Arab visual and cultural identity. He also concluded that modern Arab artists did not have access to their visual heritage specifically the Islamic one, and traditional calligraphers were stuck in their old ways and did not have access to concepts of modernity. Sayegh must have realized that there is a need for a bridge between these two schools of thought, the modern and progressive one associated with the West and the traditional and local one related to Islam and the Arab world as a whole. He exhibited \textit{“Ma la youktab wa ma la youqal”} at Galerie Elissar in Beirut, which was the official launch of his career as an artist.

I will proceed to examine his creative output based on the criteria I have devised for the assessment of letterist abstraction work. Sayegh’s artworks start most of the time on the calligraphic style not the written script. In his early exhibitions his work is closer to the traditional side of the spectrum, and then he slowly starts breaking away moving more towards the abstract and the conceptual.

“What Cannot be Written or Said” (1983) “Ma la youktab wa ma la youqal”- Galerie Elissar, Beirut.

When studying the few examples that are still owned by the artist from that period, it is clear that he used a mixture of the Naskh style and the Diwani Jali style of clear letters surrounded by diacritic marks to fill in the negative spaces around the letters. But whereas the Diwani Jali – used in the royal Islamic courts (diwans) – always communicated a message, here the letters are random compositions that are trying to create new forms. The letters are individually legible, like a mim, or a ha, but they do not communicate any words. They are just letters surrounded by many diacritics marks.

This first experiment seems like a very timid one for the artist. But years later and in spite of many exhibitions to his name, Sayegh still does not label himself an abstract artist, but rather an innovating calligrapher trying to create “illegible scripts.” Sayegh believes that his first exhibition, “What Cannot be Written or Said,” should have been his last. It summarized the main idea that emerged from his study of the issues and problems of Arab identity, which resulted in his understanding that there are things that can be said outside of language and writing in this line or this mark that we call script. The main aim of this exhibition was to start a dialogue. His show in 2014 was entitled “Alif bihourouf kathira” (Alif in Many Letters). After thirty years since his first exhibition, we notice that he has come full circle and is still asking the same questions he posed in this first exhibition.
On his first exhibition, Sayegh states:

My first experience revolved around what cannot be written and what cannot be said. I wanted to liberate calligraphy from language and meaning of words, and go back to the first moment of its birth, to the universe of signs and symbols, when the letters were hanging between mud and water. It was imperative to separate between calligraphy’s role as a medium of communication and its other mission, that of aesthetic beauty. To distinguish between the two parts is a necessity to understand the polarity of calligraphy and therefore to try to deal with it, because if you look at calligraphy in order to read, you don’t see the calligraphy. And when you let yourself immerse in the meanders of calligraphic beauty, reading becomes secondary.\(^{179}\)

\(^{179}\) *Ibid.*
In spite of his intentions for the exhibition, these concepts could be a later reflection by the artist on his work. The early works fall on the traditional side of the spectrum. Sayegh used classical calligraphic styles that were easily recognizable while adding the layer of illegibility, which was a concept already highly experimented with by many previous letterist artists around the world.

“Repeating Unity” (1987) “Al wahid al moutaadid” - Kulturzentrum, Kaslik

In “Al-wahid al moutaadid” the challenge that Sayegh was exploring was the possibility of using just one word “Allah” to create an exhibition. This word, in a sense, was the beginning of everything and he wanted to study it to start from the beginning; this was the way he began turning from the beginning of the cycle of learning and exploring the Arabic script with its first word that starts with the first letter of the alphabet. He wanted to learn how to draw the alif, and he was repeating it in different ways; this word, at times, became a line, and, at others, three dashes. He wanted a word that could be read but also looked at and contemplated. Thus he started scribbling and drawing dots, which provided the insight that he understood later when he read Ibn Arabi, who wrote that “al-tajreed howa al–tawhid,” a clear statement and comparison between modern abstraction and Islamic abstraction, a theme Sayegh explored extensively in his book on Islamic art.

But before analyzing the work, it is worth noting that the venue of this exhibition was in Kaslik, Lebanon, during the civil war in 1988 after the division of East Beirut and West Beirut took place. Society had been segregated into Christians inhibiting the East side of the town, and Muslims living in West Beirut, and not interacting with each other. The religions aligned the factions who were fighting on the streets. At the time militias would check a person’s passport and based on their religious affiliations would let them pass or would stop them, interrogate them or possibly kill them. With that political atmosphere in mind, Sayegh decided to exhibit the word “Allah” utilizing Islamic art logic and composition in Kaslik, part of the Christian part of town. His book on Islamic art was published in the same year, both the exhibition and the book were acts of defiance and asserting cultural unity over
religious divisions. They were attempts at looking beyond the immediate reality and proposing a different one. Till today, getting into a taxi in Beirut some of the older drivers would refuse to drive to the other side of town because in their mind it has been ingrained that the other side, which is only a few kilometers away, is far and is hostile.

Visually the works are an interesting experiment and study in repetition that we will see Sayegh applying extensively in several other works in the future. The exhibition did contain some new visual experiments but the black on white compositions and the quality of the lines are reminiscent of the work done by Hussain Madi (1940-) who was a contemporary of Sayegh and the work of Omar al-Nagdy (1931-) from Egypt. But Sayegh’s compositions only borrow some of the quality of line from the work of Madi, whose work is not necessarily legible, and moves on to create more organized pieces inspired by Islamic art logic and arrangements found on many monuments around the world, the main feature of which is organized repetition.

Other artists have explored the theme he used of the repetition of “lafz al-jalala” (“the utterance of Allah”) in his artwork. Egyptian artist Nagwa Abdelgawad (1948-1987) who passed away the same year that Sayegh’s second exhibition
opened used to print very similar “Allah” compositions to work developed by Sayegh with black and white or by utilizing gold and silver leaf. In this exhibition, Sayegh was apparently inspired by the work of his contemporaries, whether he was conscious of that or not, but what is certain is his awareness of applying Islamic art logic to the modern art painting.

Again, the works are traditional in their experimentations and similar to experiments already taking place in Lebanon and Egypt at the time. There are no major creative breakthroughs here. Sayegh based his designs for these works on classical calligraphic styles staying on the predictable and legible side of the scale, as explained earlier. On the topic of the audience of “Repeating Unity” and most of Sayegh’s artwork, he advises that his work should be read through the lines in their naked simplicity. Meaning: in the straight and cursive lines, in the vertical and the horizontal, in the long and the short, in the thick and the thin, in the sharp and the relaxed, in the attached and the detached, in the closed and the open, in the ascending and the descending, and in the reclined and the flat. He thinks that the early Kufic script of the Quran in the first 300 years of Islam was a fabulous example
of the evolution, maturity, and depth of this new language of forms and their capacity to express and communicate. A contemplation of the letter alif, for instance, unveiled to him the stunning multiplicity of the possibilities derived from the straight line, especially when this straightness goes astray. “With some imagination, this alif starts to move and dance, paving the way to various interpretations, as many as the eye can foresee. No wonder one can perceive the alif as falling rain, a staggering stallion, a fruit-bearing branch or a razor-sharp sword. Also, one can see the same alif as a shy inclination, acting as a cautious standing, a perfect stature, a sudden turn, a lonely “aparté,” a deep meditation or as an abundance gone overboard.”

Alif to Sayegh is not only a representation of all letters, but also a symbol of the unity of existence. While these ideas were formed by artists in later years, his earlier work does not necessarily reflect abstraction just yet, and it could be because he was still experimenting and discovering in these early stages. It was still legible and quite similar to visual experiments taking place in his proximity.

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180 Barakat, “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”
"Similar but not Identical" (1992) “Moushtabih ghair moutashabih,” Galerie 50 x 70, Beirut.

With the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1992 “Moushtabih ghair moutashabih” was exhibited as Sayegh’s third visual experiment. The exhibition had two parts, one where the ninety-nine names of Allah were painted in an elegant Kufic style but with each two opposing meanings on top of each other and one with repeating words printed in black on white. In the first part, al-khafid/al-rafi’ (The Abaser/ The Exalter), Al-muh’iyi/al-mumeet (The Giver of Life/The Taker of Life) and al-m’uizz/al-muzil (The Bestower of Honors/ The Humiliator), some of the ninety-nine names, are
placed in a mirror image composition on top of each other. Even though they are all names of Allah, they mean two opposing things. The definite meaning is painted in white, and the negative one is painted in a solid color like blue, black or brown. The words are painted on light-colored paper with different shades for each one like a light blue or a light brown. The name of the show, “Similar but not Identical”, hints also to the names of Allah that are supposed to be the same but they are not identical.

6. al-muh’yi/al-mumeet (The Giver of Life/The Taker of Life), Samir Sayegh, 1992

7. al-khafid/al-rafi’ (The Abaser/ The Exalter), Samir Sayegh, 1992

8. al-m’uizz/al-muzil (The Bestower of Honors/ The Humiliator), Samir Sayegh, 1992

In “Moshtabah”, Sayegh started experimenting with the geometry and Kufic of the Quran, and his big surprise was in realizing that the most productive
experiments with Arabic script came in the first 300 years of its inception with a form of Kufic that is called *kufi al masahif al oula*. The Kufic script provided the foundation for the art of Arabic calligraphy, but also was a vision. Kufic appeared during a time when Arabs had an oral tradition, and the script was utilized to scribe the words of Allah in the Quran. Experiments involved many materials, like ceramics and wood, but mainly it was the DNA of the Islamic holy book. The early manuscripts did not have the names of their calligraphers; the aim was to celebrate the word of *wahi*, the name of Allah, or to create a form, a shape for this word, which is why Sayegh believes that the Kufic script is a foundation and vision. But as we have stated earlier, it could also be that the names of these calligraphers have not been researched properly for different reasons. Sayegh noticed how for 300 years, the Kufic to the unknowing eye might have looked similar in all the early books. But he emphasized that each *mushaf* was different. This fact pushed him to try and find the laws of this script, from which Sayegh created the Kufic that he used to write the 99 names of Allah and that later became his signature style. He tried to unite calligraphy and ornamentation, seeking to make calligraphy become ornamentation by transforming the letter, or the word, into a “written” module. At the same time, he attempted to make repetition become reproduction, to make it absolute and not patterned, by regenerating itself all the time.  

Kufic is like people: it is similar to race, but it is different as individuals when we have a closer look.

In the second part of the exhibition, Sayegh’s experimentation with repetition and words developed further with words like Allah, *Baraka* (prosperity), *Salam* (peace) and *Ne’ma* (blessing) printed on (50x70cm) white sheets in black. The artist realized that the Sufi ideas that were formulating for him were a shared element between writing and calligraphy. His work was based on ornamentation, or what some scholars call arabesque. But, out of fear of falling victim to misconception he replaced the geometric and the vegetal forms with letters. He worked on having these letters treated with the same geometric logic of rotation and parallelism,

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utilizing all types of geometry that the dictionary might imply about the formation of this letter. These letters were the backbone of the exhibition.  

Sayegh considers ornamentation, whether geometric or vegetal, an integral representation of the concept of abstraction in Islamic art. The laws of mathematics and geometry that are represented by Islamic ornamentation are for him the secret order of the universe. These universal secret laws are absolute, and the philosophical appearance of Islamic art is the representation of what cannot be seen, the perfect image, in contrast to the abstraction that the West understands as the ramifications of what can be seen. Ornamentation has been misunderstood because it was perceived as merely a decorative feature, based on repetition. This perception is at the core of Islamic art philosophy because there is a difference between repetition or rebirth and the re-partition of the ONE.

Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

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The central principle in Islamic art is based on the ability to always find a new manifestation of a single principle. This exhibition was a significant accomplishment for the understanding of this basic idea. Sayegh felt that ornamentation from the Western point of view — the viewpoint on which the history books and scholarly work on the subject over the previous 200 years had been based — unfortunately, did not have an accurate understanding of the philosophy of this tradition.\textsuperscript{183} He saw geometry as providing universal rules that were perceived by others as drowning in primary forms like the square, triangle, hexagon, etc. On the other hand, vegetal ornamentation held the secret laws of nature that should be followed. The blowing of the wind has musical sounds that seem in the beginning to be free, but are closed like the transformation of light and sea waves, being linked to the bigger picture of the universal ocean of a geometric universe like the triangle, square and the corner, etc. There is a balance that is robust and vigorous like there is a balance

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
at the edge of the abyss. He worked on balance and parallelism; he did not work on broken ornamentation. Even in the Kufic of the early manuscripts that inspired him and that seems as if it is breaking the rules, there is, in fact, a very meticulous order.

In this show, Sayegh starts to develop a clear independent artistic voice. The repetition, which began with just the word Allah in the “Repeating Unity” show five years ago is now maturing into a new visual system based on words repeated in grids. Sayegh will start using these patterns and his elegant Kufic style in mainstream design applications, as we will see in later pages. But all of these experiments could be seen as legible and skillfully traditional, what was new was his development of the Kufic script as a style, with the words still legible and religious in their meaning. But in terms of our analytical chart of letterist abstraction styles, and in relation to the trajectory of other artists, Sayegh was still very classical in his visual representation basing his work on legibility and minor visual breakthroughs.


The formation of Sayegh’s free script was born with this exhibiton. Eshq was freedom. The freedom of stepping out of the geometry of Kufic was in reality at the same time validating the geometry for the artist. What this means in relation to our analytical chart is that Sayegh moved from being on the calligraphic spectrum to being on the script spectrum of the chart. In the beginning, he was confident that when order is established in the form and when form stands strongly, the result was a joy; the same joy a person feels when he sees a blossoming tree or a field of flowers. For Sayegh, pleasure came from lines that were parallel and organized, but the free script made him reach the same pleasure, only through freedom. “Eshq was the freedom of the hand running over the pages, the same way a lover runs, and his happiness, his running before the meeting or after meeting the beloved.”184 But in a later interview, he comments on this freedom by asking:

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Is my hand free while it draws the letters fluidly at its ease, reducing and adding, flowing and stopping, going straight or astray, twisting and twirling at its convenience without restrictions or limits? Maybe. However, I am not entirely confident because I am attracted to a similar freedom in geometry. Mathematical systems built in ornamentation bring me satisfaction, joy, and exaltation very close to freedom. Ornamentation is one of the attributes of Islamic art, amalgamating in its diverse manifestations the characteristics of this art and its aesthetic philosophy. It does not mimic nature in its visible
images, nor does it aim at that. It has always aspired to replicate the hidden systems behind nature, systems of evolution and maturity, systems of reproduction, and the systems of similarities. Since the beginning, it united with geometrical systems as an entire structure of strict calculations to replicate a core module, which, in its various intersections, creates the final scene. Ornamentation is proof that all hidden systems are one in principle. However and unfortunately, it faces a lot of denigration, probably because of ignorance in the Western canons of its actual aesthetic value.\textsuperscript{185}

The words used in his paintings are sometimes simple and sometimes illegible. The compositions are fluid, but it is also apparent from Sayegh’s compositions that even though the script and arrangements seem fluid, they were still contained within a frame with a sort of a grid in the background. Eshq is also an experiment with color for Sayegh where he starts using gold and silver in his compositions with bright colors like magenta and bright green and blue. He does move on to explore geometry and ornamentation in his future exhibitions, creating in the process some of his most iconic work, but he also maintains the freedom and fluidity that he acquired in Eshq to develop more signature styles.

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\textsuperscript{185} Barakat, “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”
These four early exhibitions were timid beginnings towards experimenting and exploring Arabic calligraphy. The first one, “What Cannot be Written or Said” (“Ma la youktab wa la youqal”) was a statement on the fact that Arabic calligraphy should be appreciated for its beauty and not only for its ability to illustrate language and transmit knowledge. It came after Sayegh contemplated the state of art in the Arab world and suggested the Arabic script as a solution for the projection and visual representation of Arab identity.

“Multiplying Unity” (“Al wahid al muta’did”), was a visual experiment with the concept of repetition, which is one integral aspect of Islamic art that is again a call for unity, illustrating how one can be different but similar at the same time. Humans themselves are like a pattern of an arabesque, we might all rotate in a different direction, but at the end, the same fabric unites us. He used the word Allah, us being a reflection of the divine. In “Similar but not Identical” (“Moushtabih ghair moutashabih”), the same idea of arabesque is explored with more words, and Sayegh was exploring more visual techniques in printing while still working on an organized grid. Freedom comes with “Love” (“Eshq”) when the civil war has officially ended and where the artist breaks away from the grid of the Kufic script and the repetition of arabesque to create free flowing forms to express love in the Sufi sense, love to the other, love for humankind and everything around us.

An idea to be kept in mind is that the first four exhibitions took place during and slightly after the Lebanese civil war. During this time people on the street were struggling with life and death on a daily basis, people woke up in the morning not certain whether they would come back home alive or on a stretcher that night. That certainly created an existential dilemma and a need for intellectuals to express their human condition. Under such conditions three kinds of artists arise, the type who decides to pursue his/her artistic expression in spite of what is going on, creating an alternative reality and choosing to invest time in their practice and in creating new forms of expression. The second type is the revolutionary kind who is concerned with current events and who stands at the forefront of expressing political opinions publically, whether for or against a regime. Finally, the third kind is the philosopher who sees the aftermath of the current situation and suggests a way forward. Sayegh falls in this third category, he lived through the civil war but decided to rise above it.
and try to find an existential solution to the immediate problem at hand. Arab modernity had failed for different reasons, the ideas that were formulating during his youth on Arab nationalism and unity were all destroyed right before him, and an apocalyptic scenario was unfolding right outside his door. He thought his way through it and tried to find a medium where he can express his reflections on his immediate human condition.

The summary for this first phase was a statement in the artist’s choice of medium for expression, which is to use the Arabic script and to highlight its role as an integral part of our identity. Another important idea is that Islamic art to Sayegh is at par with any other art in the world in spite of the facts that it is underrepresented. Sayegh used its elements in his artwork even though he grew up in a Christian convent and lived in a society where segregation between different religious sects became the norm during the civil war. The artworks have letters that are legible but not necessarily words. Sayegh’s early experiments were timid, and even though to his mind they were novel, the visual output was quite traditional. After his “Eshq” exhibition, Sayegh stopped exhibiting artwork for seven years, but his next creative output would be more of a whole expression in becoming at peace with his poetic aspirations and presenting a total intellectual experience in his work by exhibiting artwork and producing a poetry book for the same show. This will be a formula he will follow in the years to come.

*Arabic Letters Speak to an International Audience*

When Sayegh eventually recovered and started writing poetry again, he decided to make it part of his artwork, using it to launch his books at the gallery where he exhibited. He will do this in three of his exhibitions, “Muthakarat al-huruf” (2003), “Fi madeeh al-hourouf” (2009) and with his latest “Alif bihourouf kathira” (2014). According to his readers at the time, he was a pure voice compared to his contemporaries in his first poetry book *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* (published in 1980),186 Mahmoud Zebawi, an artist and historian was very close to Sayegh in his transitional period from poetry to art. Zebawi labels Sayegh’s poetry as

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very spiritual, citing the poem “Seman al-‘amoudi” (Saint Simeon Styliates) as one of the poems that actually reflected Sayegh’s saintly aspirations, which had developed while studying at the convent during his childhood. Unlike his contemporaries who were mostly revolutionaries, Zebawi appreciated Sayegh because he was not political, nor historical, nor social in his themes; his work transcended time and was relevant to humanity at large. Sayegh was not religious, but a “poète d’inspiration religieuse.”

In his youth, Sayegh was familiar with the magazine Majalit Shi’r, which was a platform that gave poets the role of visionaries and liberated poetry from restrictions, thereby empowering a whole generation of poets who grew under this premise. These inclinations towards modern poetry in Shir magazine and its poets later dispersed over different political and ideological parties. Some of these poets were inclined towards Arab socialism, nationalism and liberal thought. By being exposed to these poets and their parties, Sayegh came into contact with modernity in form while getting inspired by the Sufi atmosphere in the writings of Gibran and the Islamic Sufi tradition. In 1969 Sayegh worked with the poet Adonis on founding Mawaqif magazine as an editorial board member. Mawaqif was where his first poems were published and that eventually culminated in his first book of poetry, which was issued under the title Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm in 1980. To him, the new source for modern poetry was Sufism, it came in at the same time as modernity, and sufisum was not something he had explored before.

Huda No’mani thinks that the post-seventies era in the Arab world also witnessed the death of poets like al-Mutannabi, al-Neffari, and IbnArabi, who all fell

188 Sh’ir magazine was something of a cultural revolutionary movement founded by Yousif el-Khal, featuring poetry by Adonis, Khalida Said, Nazir el-Azim, Mohamad Maghout, and Fouad Rifqah from Syria, who were joined by Shouki AbuShakra, Onsi el-Haj and Essam Mahfouz from Lebanon. The rest were famous names during the same period like the early Iraqi poets Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Boulaind el-Haidari, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Nazik al-Malaika, and Fadouwa Touqan from Palestine. The Karkouk group that was formed in Iraq in 1958 included Sarkon Boulus, Jean Demo and Fadel Azzawi. It was another revolutionary movement that was most active between 1964-68. Some of its artists moved in and out of Beirut and were aware of their contemporaries throughout the Levant. Both of these groups were new and revolutionary in their style and content, while Sayegh was aware of their work having published in the same magazine, he belonged to a narrower group of poets who had been influenced by Sufism.
189 Without forming a school, the most famous poets with Sufi influence were Adonis, Adeeb Saab, Fouad Rifqah, Huda No’mani, Mohamad Ali Shams elDine.
out of the public discourse. Their words were no longer relevant to the Arab present. She believes that as a civilization Arabs have regressed with what she calls, “the death of words and the death of poets.” A wall of depression rose in the imagination of every Arab especially poets who, “carry hearts that are fragile and transparent as water.”

When asked about her opinion on Sayegh’s calligraphic work, she clearly stated that Sayegh, in her view, would always be a poet. For No’mani, the title of Sayegh’s latest book Alif bihourof kathira, even if its purpose was to parallel an art exhibition, is already a poem; in her view, calligraphy in Islam was a form of piety and to some extent a form of Sufism. In a Sufi like Sayegh, she finds a thirst for the truth, and the meaning in his poetry does not spring from solitude like hermits, Sufis, and saints, but rather from an internal energy that runs in his heart and his soul.

Even though Sayegh stopped writing poetry for a very long time, in No’main’s view and many others he remained a true poet, which is a statement to the quality of his work. The poetry came back to Sayegh in 2003 with his “Diary of Letters” exhibition.


For Saleh Barakat, the gallery owner of Agial, the biggest challenge was to get Sayegh to develop artwork after seven years of abstaining. He was able to achieve that, considering the outcome a great success for himself as a dealer when art buyer Remon Audi, from Audi Banks, became interested on the opening night of the exhibit in acquiring the thirty-nine paintings that were on display. “Mouzakarat alhourouf” proved to be a great success and the beginning of a long, fruitful

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190 Huda No’mani is a Lebanese poet born in 1930 in Syria who published her first poetry book Elika, in 1970. In the seventies when No’mani returned to Beirut from Cairo after living there for seventeen years, she confessed that she came back for the poetry. When she wrote her first book, Elika, she placed in it her Sufi experience in its totality after which she met Sayegh. No’mani confesses that throughout her life she had met a very few people who were truly connected to the holy and she considers Sayegh to be one of them and with the most optimistic views on life. She used the Sufi word “sirran” which literally means secret but as with many Sufi words, holds dual meanings, it also means knowledge of the unseen and the unknown, a person with “baseera”.


collaboration and friendship between the young and ambitious art dealer Saleh Barakat and the artist Samir Sayegh.

The exhibition’s accompanying book is a relatively small (17x20cm) artist’s diary composed of 160 pages, with poems and confessions written between 2001 and 2003, printed on high-quality off-white paper all scribed using Sayegh’s handwriting. The diary of letters brings the Arabic alphabet to life, opening with a quote from Ibn Arabi on letters and continuing with, “questions to reach the letter ba.” That is followed by five abstract visual compositions of letters and a section entitled “dairat al-alif” (the circle of alif). In this section, the first entry is the “Diaries of the letter alif 1”, followed by the “Diaries of lam on alif,” then a letter from “lam to alif” and another from “yaa to alif” followed by ”Diaries of the letter alif 2” and a long conversation with the letter alif. This section ends with four abstract artworks. Sayegh brought the letters to life and had them converse with each other through poetic correspondence.


The section that followed was entitled “rasail wa mouthakarat,” or “Letters and diaries”. Those start with the diaries of “hamza”, “mim”, “geem”, “raa”, and include the journals of “sad on seen”, “seen on sad”, then a letter from “raa to seen and sad” and from “ain to raa”, from “seen to ain”, from “seen to sad”, from “hamza to ain”, from “ain to hamza”, from “kaf to seen and sad”, and a conversation with the letter mim. This section ends with six abstract calligraphic artworks signaling the beginning of another section entitled “daeirat al-waw” (the circle of the letter waw). It starts with the diary of the letter waw on the letter ha, followed by a conversation with the letter waw ending with a break of three abstract artworks followed by questions to the teacher and a final page with a calligraphic abstraction slide. Sayegh’s own handwriting with a beautifully designed book that leaves a white page next to each visual composition is a calm and entertaining read.

What Sayegh did in his diary was to create intimacy between the reader and the letters by bringing them to life, giving them memories and feelings, making them converse and write diaries and letters to each other. Through this very special tool of writing, Sayegh was able to communicate on the aesthetic qualities of each letter, discussing its history, its structure, its relationship to other letters in the alphabet and how various philosophers perceived it. The letters in “Mouzakarat alhourouf” get jealous, fall in love, dream, sing, mutate, remember, dance, win and lose, fly, sleep and die. The letters become human; they live life to the fullest with all of its sorrows and pleasures, and like any living thing, they eventually die. Sayegh’s romantic style, if compared to his first diwan in 1980, reached in this work a rich maturity, successfully translating all of his historical and Sufi knowledge into a formula that could be comprehended by any layman. He deals with very profound and meaningful issues using very simple musical words that can be perceived according to the knowledge of their reader. In these diaries, Sayegh practiced what he preached and attained what he wished in his previous works, the accessibility of art to a broad audience.
In his artwork, he hand-painted on small squares modular words that appeared in his previous exhibitions, like peace, prosperity, blessings, etc. He assembled these in different arabesque patterns using a very austere color palette; like dark red and purple with a line of silver, or different shades of brown with some words painted in gold. He did not only break the modules in his compositions, but he also manipulated and broke the color pattern within his grid to give a whole new impression of the same module. Such logic of making and breaking the grid in an Islamic art project can be seen on the walls of mosques and Islamic schools around the world like the monument of Qalawun in Cairo, for example, or the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul amongst many others. Thus again his interventions might not be new in their concept but their novelty is in their coloring and their structure. The words are designed differently from historic examples, and they building modularity in relationship to each other was also different.
Even though 39 artworks were on display, the critics still felt that Sayegh presented himself more as a poet than as a visual artist.¹⁹⁴ The artist laughs loudly as he candidly confesses that “Mouzakarat alhourouf” was a declaration of his acceptance of the fact that he had to stop writing poetry, which was why he used his handwriting to scribe the script of the book and presented the book as part of the exhibition. He wrote without publishing or distributing the book commercially; he writes to display now, not to publish. This book was a manifesto for the artwork. It is amusing to discover that only when Sayegh came to terms with the idea that he would not write poetry again, was he abler to write one of his most influential and honest works. In this sense, he is different from other calligraphic abstraction artists because in addition to visually translating and updating a bank of historic Islamic art visual language through his artwork, he was reflecting poetically on that experience. While different artists were inserting the letters into their painting compositions, few were working on innovating the architecture of Arabic letters, Sayegh being one of them. Sayegh here is slowly moving on the spectrum from one point to another. This exhibition marks an important milestone for him as an artist in metamorphosis towards a new place on the spectrum of abstraction.

After this show, Sayegh would move on to develop work and exhibit work internationally. First starting with a Special Guest Exhibit at the First Sharjah Biennale for Calligraphy in 2004, then at the British Museum in the “Contemporary Arab Art” in 2006. An exciting exhibition on artist poets from the Arab world and that reunited him with his old friend the poet Adonis was at Galerie Atassi in Damascus “Shou’ara tashkiliyoun” in 2008.

“Word into Art” was an exhibition curated by Venetia Porter at the British Museum in London, and was composed of works from the museum’s collection, along with some loaned objects. It included pieces by about eighty contemporary artists from the Middle East and North Africa, of which Samir Sayegh was one. The work on display by Samir Sayegh was a black-and-white composition based on the word “Allah,” which Sayegh turned into geometric shapes. In the central section, the two sides of the rectangles are the letter alif while inside are the two lams and ha making up the rest of the word. What was important in this contribution was finally placing Sayegh’s work within the international arena, which gave audiences the ability to compare his style to that of other artists utilizing the Arabic script in their artwork.

For “Shou’ara tashkiliyoun - tashkiliyoun shou’ara”, (“Painting Poets, Poetic Painters”), Mouna Attasi invited four artists in 2008 who combine poetry and modern art to display their work at her gallery in Damascus. She thinks that the relationship of various literary forms of expression to contemporary arts is one that intersects and integrates different aspects, whether apparent or hidden. The distinct issues become evident in the shape of the harmonious dialogue between two artists from different artistic domains, while the secret aspect works to camouflage an

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195 The exhibition was part of Middle East Now, a season of special events, which included lectures, films, poetry readings and music. The exhibition and the season were produced in partnership with Dubai Holding. The United Arab Emirates’ government supported the exhibition, and the two first forwards in the catalogue were by H.E. Mohammad al-Gergawi, the executive chairman of Dubai Holding, and H.E. Dr. Anwar Gargash, UAE’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. Both letters expressed the idea that the Arab world was behind in the arts but that the UAE wanted to play an important role in the development and support of the arts in the region, which it has done since 2006. The show opened in London, then moved in 2008 to Dubai and was reported to have been a huge success.

196 She states that she got the idea for the exhibition in 1998 after an extraordinary meeting that brought together the artists Fateh Mudarras and Adonis for a public debate at her gallery, at which the relationship between literature and illustration was discussed. Painting Poets, Poetic Painters. (Damascus: Attasi gallery, 2009), S. Exhibition catalogue.
obsession whose existence most great artists strive to acknowledge. She exhibited the work of Etel Adnan, Adonis, Fateh Muderres and Samir Sayegh, considering these works to be more than simple attempts to draw pictures with words or to create verses using lines and colors, commenting that, “they are a harvest of lovers’ strolls on the banks of creative art.”

In his forward to the exhibition catalog, Ziad Dalloul states that poetry and drawing are different in their techniques of creativity, in their tools of creation and means of expression. They are also different in their process of reach and access. While poetry requires an in-depth, practical understanding of the language of the poet, painting transcends geographical boundaries of language, visual awareness being its only gateway to being “read.” Among the four featured artists’ works, Fateh Muderres isolates his writings from his drawings while Adonis turns poetic texts and graphics into collages. Etel Adnan writes her verses, and those of other poets on paper and accordion-like books and Samir Sayegh’s drawings entail abstractions of letters as free graphic forms. To Dalloul, Sayegh draws the details of letters and portions of words, not letters and words. This perhaps means that Sayegh has transcended the meaning of written words and the implication of language to arrive at the graphic essence of the message, and also to get at contemplation in its structural harmony. Sayegh’s work invokes the asceticism and austerity of the philosophical rhetoric of the line, where writing and poetry become a single whole; the poet declares himself to be a Sufi, clad in the abaya of line and verse.

Reviews of the exhibition placed Sayegh’s work outside of the letterist group of artists and into the contemplative Sufi arena. His artwork is described as being obsessed with the musical dimension of the letter, and involving a philosophical aspect of Islamic art. He delves into the details of the letter to create, with great asceticism, a new meaning for the letter. Thus his letters become a musical composition that is based on deep historical research. Sayegh’s work is like, “a

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197 Ibid.
198 Ibid, 11.
building that derives its light from its core through philosophical debates because every letter has its majesty and visual pleasure.”


In 2006 Lebanon was invaded by Israel, and once again all cultural life came to a halt. Sayegh’s 2009 “In Praise of Letters” exhibition production was proportional to the situation of the country where he lived at the time. Twenty-nine paintings in acrylic were on display, accompanied by a very thin, folded A4 booklet, hand bound with a thread by the award-winning designer, Sayegh’s disciple Lara Aswad. The booklet contained no photos, but only text using a computer font, which contained Sayegh’s thoughts with twenty-one entries.

It opens with “Esm” (Name), and Sayegh explains that he wanted to call his exhibition “awliya wa qidiseen”, but did not do so for fear of religious connotations overshadowing the meaning of the letters. He declares in the second entry, “hourouf jadida”, that he is seeking new letters and shapes of new letters, not for better legibility or more beautiful writing, but to attain letters that are illegible and unpronounceable, but that are there to be looked at and seen, letters to be contemplated by the eye and read by the imagination, to be filled with meaning and imagery so they can be reinterpreted, and thus become the body of a new text and a
new book. “Altariq” is a small story about how Sayegh was attracted to calligraphy in his childhood, and “Mafaza” explains simply how the letterist movement is a political one, describing the death of the script with the Ottoman Empire and the role modernity has yet to play for the advancement of the art of calligraphy. “Al-akl”, (The Mind), describes the state of the modern Arab artist who has to be a witness and a fighter at the same time, continuing with an entry entitled “Bayad”, which calls for advancement, even if there is not a rational way forward yet. Perhaps the eye, or the hand, or the dream, or the heart, or the ink, or the pen, or the paper, or the whiteness can give us the answers on how to progress. Sayegh started listening to the ink and surrendered to the reed. “Taamoul” explains two difficulties, the first being the importance of understanding the birth of Arabic calligraphy as an independent art form that is more than a thousand years old, and the second lying in our ability to understand and accept that this art form has declined and is almost non-existent.
“Bayna al maa wal teen” (Between Water and Mud), highlights the difference between calligraphic script and the script used for legibility as two separate entities. In “Alam al-ashkal”, Sayegh explains that shapes are the new language of letters that the eye should be trained to read. “Hadatha” discusses the concepts of modernity in art and the 1968 student revolution in France. “Fil shakl” explains that in calligraphy the letter is stronger than a word, and the shape of the letter is stronger than the meaning of a word, also explaining that in calligraphy lies the spiritual ability of the letter and its form. “Fil khatt” Sayegh lists the descriptions of the script that is followed by “Taamul”, in which he discusses the development of Arabic script from Kufic. “Al khatt al arab” explains that Arabic script, which is not only relevant to people who speak the Arabic language, but also includes Persian and other languages that utilize the same letters. He believes that Arab national movements in the 1960s and 1970s gave a bad name to the letterist movement, in the same way that fundamental Islam is ruining the reputation of Arabic calligraphy by owning it and considering it an aspect of Islam. “E’tiraf” (confession), points to the importance of remembering that Arabic script is an independent art form and giving it a new life. “Ezdiwajiyah” discusses the duality between the shape of the text and its meaning, and “Shahada” explains the importance of geometry as the essence of the universe as represented in the Kufic script and Islamic geometric art.

“Alalwan” explores the way color serves calligraphy in Sayegh’s artwork and “Horiyya” investigates how Sayegh combines the writing with arabesque. “Mousiqa” is a comparison between Arabic calligraphy and music, as well as being a request to consider the script as a presence with the multiplicity of manifestations and a multitude of births. Sayegh closes with: “In calligraphy, the letters are like angels that descend to us from the sky; they whisper in our ears and hide in our dream. In calligraphy, the letters are angels that fall to take us and go back to the sky.”

He elaborates on this exhibition, saying:

How can a contemporary calligrapher be a witness and a fighter at the same time? How can they be present and absent simultaneously? How can they be the mirror and the face all at once? So my first reflection concentrated on researching the birth of Arabic calligraphy as a full-fledged art more than a
thousand years ago and at a later stage trying to understand the regression of this art and its decline. I firmly believe there is always room for advancement and progression. So if reason cannot find a solution, maybe the hand can - perhaps the hand or the eye, the eye or the spirit, the spirit or the passion, the passion or the ink, the ink or the pen, the pen or the paper, the paper or its whiteness. This is how I started: I listened to my hand, to the call of the ink, and I surrendered to the reed.

Sayegh summarized his experience as a historian and an artist in short quick notes, again addressing a wider audience by simplifying his views. They are not directly related except in that they discuss one or another aspect of Arabic calligraphy and his experience with it. For him, the text was a supplement to the paintings.

22. Allah, Samir Sayegh, 2009

200 Barakat. “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”
Regarding artwork and visual representation, the idea in this exhibition was not to turn one letter into an independent entity, but for the letter in itself to become a freestanding universe, thus ceasing to be merely a printed legible letter. There were several artworks on display, Allah repeated in geometric compositions, the words “howa” (he) and “heya” (she) as large geometric Kufic compositions, and single letters of the alphabet as independent paintings. What is significant in the He and She paintings is the retaliation that Sayegh had intended or not indented towards the work of the Egyptian giant Salah Taher (1911-2007) who spent the span of his career painting the word howa, or He (The Almighty), in various creative and colorful forms. Sayegh painted the He but added the feminine She the other part of the equation.

Sayegh’s aim was to transform the Arabic letter from a line in a dictionary to become a dictionary in itself; in this way, the letter takes the whole space of the painting without losing the essential structure or image that make it a letter. That is why he tried to look at this letter as an icon and this is why in the accompanying book to the exhibition he called the letters “saints” and “holy figures.” The work is to be understood not concerning the spiritual abilities of these letters or the spiritual outlook, but from a transfigurational point of view. He looked at this transfiguration as a universal independence, and existential presence at the same time. The letter itself becomes the content from an artistic point of view, and thus the audience will have to read it in the same manner that they read ornamentation, meaning they have to look for stability and softness and strength and tenderness, amongst other graphic qualities. They should read ultimate qualities in the letter, as it is transformed into a freestanding entity that represents in its formation the secret order of the universe.

Critics describe his work as open to imagination more than reality, even though it depicts a very concrete element, one Arabic letter, but letters that are like

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201 Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.
fleeting moments and that cannot be described concretely.\textsuperscript{203} The exhibition brought a new form of modernity; geometric abstraction on the one hand filled with pop colors stands side-by-side with the gold leaf of Byzantine icons and Islamic ornamentation in an exotic mix of religions, woman and man, East and West and, containing an element of visual shock to its viewer. The critics placed the work in the post-painterly abstraction and minimalist schools found in work like Frank Stella’s, this maybe so in some of Sayegh’s geometric studies.\textsuperscript{204} But if compared to other calligraphic abstraction artists he falls behind on the trajectory of abstraction that we have developed. His letters and words even if innovative in their structure and design are still legible. They do not stray far from the original letters, maybe conceptually speaking, but visually his letters can still be viewed as letters.

To Sayegh, it is a great cultural achievement that the “quadrangular Kufic” script managed to construct letters and words into a matrix based on the intersection of vertical and horizontal lines above a right angle. It is a summon of pure abstraction, based on a squared black point and a squared white point; two equal square points, a black one in ink forming the body of the letter, and a white one constituting the void between letters and words. Sayegh asks, what are these squares that alternate black and white, fullness and void, vertical and horizontal? Are they shadow and light? Body and soul? Day and night? Absence and presence, or other distinguishable polarities and dualities that can be associated with the script? Are they names of prophets and saints? Are they \textit{surat} and verses? Are they signs? Challenges? Mysteries? They are all of the above, he believes. They revolve in this supreme sphere, therefore their universality. Mathematical systems, absolute values, and antagonistic pairs are the language of the human character, an inherent part of the essence of being.\textsuperscript{205}

The further development of this exhibition came when it was selected to take part of the tenth Sharjah Biennial Commissions and Productions Program in

http://www.alraimedia.com/Articles.aspx?id=156263


\textsuperscript{205} Barakat. “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”
Sayegh re-created his comments in the small booklet he had produced in Beirut in 2006 as printed artworks scribed with his handwriting accompanied by small compositions for Sharjah in 2008. The series was composed of 17 framed elements of 50x70cm each, and 15 framed elements of 35x50cm each. With this Biennial, Sayegh came to the eyes of the younger curators and dealers around him, becoming an official international player. His work was also exhibited in 2012 at Athr Gallery in Jeddah as part of the collective exhibition “Journey of a line.”

Creative freedom and international fame are the key features of this period of Sayegh’s artistic career. He was acquired by major collectors and introduced to the Arab modern art world from its widest doors. What helped is the international interest in Arab artists that was taking place during this period. With the launch of international auction houses like Christie’s in Dubai in 2006 and Doha’s Sotheby’s in 2008, acquiring and selling art became a means for affluent residents of the Arabia Gulf to flaunt their fortunes as their countries compete to become new global cultural hubs. Sayegh’s work before this time had been grouped with the artists working only on the traditional script; an example was his work being featured in the Special Guest Exhibit at the First Sharjah Biennale for Calligraphy in 2004. Fast forward seven years later, and Sayegh is part of the tenth Sharjah Biennial Commissions and Productions Program in 2011 with his work being featured next to the names of the biggest international players in the art scene around the world. It came as a clear outcome of his collaborations with Galerie Agial and its owner Saleh Barakat who understood Sayegh’s creative production and its value and found the right platforms to exhibit him. Their collaboration would yield more interesting outcomes shortly.

Saleh Barakat considers this a breakthrough because he was able to bring Sayegh to what he calls a “cutting edge” platform. For him to be able to penetrate the Biennial with Sayegh’s work was an achievement, and he gives a lot of the credit to Rasha Salti for her involvement as one of the curators. Saleh Barakat, Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

This was produced with the help of yet another one of his students-turned-artist, Joumana Medlej, and printed in Lebanon by Interprint.


http://www.christies.com/locations/salerooms/dubai/.


The Spring of Creative Expression

A series of exhibitions and collaborations follow the events of the 2011 Arab Spring for Sayegh. In 2012 “Yawmiyat horriya” (Diaries of Freedom), was exhibited at the Beiteddine Festivals in Baaklin, Lebanon. Here the artist experimented with many free forms of expression by repeatedly writing only one word: “Freedom”. The following year he was part of a creative collaboration with the Chinese calligrapher Wang Dongling at Athr Gallery in Jeddah for the exhibition “Strokes In Dialogue”. And in 2014, he exhibited “Alif bihourouf kathira” at Galerie Agial in Beirut. These three shows are each unique for a different reason. The first one because it is the first time that Sayegh comments on a political event, even if it was utilizing only one word, but he was moved by the hopes of change and this affected his work. The collaboration with Dongling must have been an eye opening experience, and Sayegh would use the learning from this collaboration to develop his artistic practice based on utilizing the whole body for the act of creation instead of using just his hands to draw. “Alif bihourouf kathira” was another intellectual product with a poetry book and paintings that surpass, in their minimalism and structural virtuosity, any work the artists has developed earlier.


“Yawmiyat horriya”, which was an intuitive reaction to the events of the Arab Spring, was on show at the Beiteddine Palace as part of the 27th Beiteddine Art Festival. Sayegh’s statement on the exhibition, entitled “Freedom Diary” begins with:

This diary is a tribute to the rare historical moments that we witnessed last year; it was ignited by burning flames that later turned into soothing rain, then was followed by footsteps rushing into town squares, hands rising in the

210 Beiteddine Art Festival is one of the most prestigious music and art festivals in the Middle East.
air and voices mounting from streets and porches to fill the Arab sky with cries for freedom.\textsuperscript{211}

Each day during the events of 2011 in the Arab world, Sayegh wrote the word \textit{horriya} in different calligraphic scripts. As the artist emphasizes, his exhibition is also an outstanding tribute to Arabic calligraphy, being:


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\text{[...] a refined and fine art pursuing its path to liberation to become once again an art capable of seeing the invisible, hearing the inaudible, and saying the ineffable such that it may free itself from ages of oblivion and darkness, and relate to the heart, not to the past, to the eyes not to the rules and conventions, to the realm of imagination and dream, not to past achievements.}\textsuperscript{212}
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The work, ink on paper, was not framed; instead, it was placed between two sheets of Plexiglas giving the impression that the sheets of paper are flying in mid-air. The works range from large sheets of paper covered with tiny sketches – simple studies in preparation for larger paintings – to colourful series of overlapping words, so layered in some cases that they become chaotic and nearly illegible. One critic, who thought that only a handful of the works appear to be finished pieces, with thicker, more deliberate-looking lines contrasted with a sketchier background.\textsuperscript{213} Elias Khoury beautifully describes the artworks in this exhibition as showing people demonstrating, bending like martyrs, bursting like throats, rising like hands, softening like lovers, and lying like bodies torn by bullets.\textsuperscript{214} But Sayegh states that the strongest impact the Arab Spring had on Arab nations was not merely the raising of hope but the initiation of thinking and questioning about things that had been

\textsuperscript{211} www.vista.sahafi.jo/art.php?id=a2b1c127f017abb4b25aab03ce72e53fb8049174
\textsuperscript{212} Beiteddine Art Festival. (Beirut: Calligraph, 2012). Festival catalogue.
\textsuperscript{214} http://www.palestine-studies.org/files/pdf/mdf/11552.pdf
taken for granted, encouraging a new reading of the surroundings, renewing Arabs’ confidence in themselves and recognizing the ability of humanity to rebuild itself.  

Sayegh insists that the experiment of Hurriya is a very personal one, and he feels the need to clarify that:

I was never in poetry or writing or art, a political artist; I do not comment on the event; historically, I was not with the movements that represented politics in the painting. I did not comment on June 2006 and the Israeli invasion nor Palestinian issues or the wars of the Arab world. I never wrote a word on these matters. Suddenly I found myself confronted with an event that opened all of history to me; I was one of the people who had been plagued with deep depression and hopelessness about the possibility of change, and I was in that time raising the motto of ‘losing hope and continuing to work.’ I was that hopeless about change in the Arab world, especially culturally and then politically. From the moment of the Tunisian fire to Tahrir Square in Cairo, then to the raised hands in Yemen, I saw that my personal experiment was rapidly meeting the raised hands.  

Hope started burning in the midst of this depression and my hand at that moment was seeking a way out of depression and politics to free Arabic script from its oppression. I was in my work seeking to write my experience of renewal because I got the confirmation on this from what had happened to Chinese scripts in the past centuries. I still insist that I am not on a political platform, but I had to represent my Arab nationalistic sentiment. For me, even if the experiment failed and we came to see that we would not see the new day we had hoped for, these moments can only stay like the crying voice in the garden, calling the calls of God.

The designs were free form calligraphic texts that are legible and that represent a culmination of Sayegh’s calligraphic experiments in the past two decades. Thus

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216 In reference to Mohamad Bouaziz the Tunisian who set himself on fire and started the Jasmine revolution of Tunisia in 2011.  
creatively there were no visual breakthroughs, but a reflective culmination of previous experiments.


Comparing between the Arabic script and its counterparts in the Far East has been a pressing subject for Sayegh. But Sayegh is not they only artist with such interest. Several calligraphic abstraction artists had already ventured on that journey of discovery. Nja Mahdaoui started that process of understanding and studying Far Eastern calligraphy in the late 1960’s when he met the French art critic Michel Taipié who introduced him to the work of innovative Japanese and Iranian calligraphers in Italy.218 Rafa Al Nasiri, who studied printmaking at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in the late 1950’s, is clearly influenced by Chinese art and calligraphy in his work. Many of the calligraphic abstraction artists have been influenced by Japanese or Chinese calligraphy. It is understandable since calligraphy is a highly respected art

218 Issa, Nja Mahdaoui, 7.
form in both the Arab world and the Far East. But there are some main differences between the art forms in the two civilizations. On one hand calligraphy in the Arab world historically has not been about personal expression. While Far Eastern calligraphy is about the individual style of the calligrapher.\footnote{Sheila Blair, \textit{Islamic Calligraphy}, 6.} The French artist Julien Breton demonstrates in his work the beautiful marriage between Far Eastern and Arab calligraphic styles. Before he paints his light paintings in Arabic, he poses and trains repeatedly creating gestures in the air. He contemplates, just like a Japanese calligrapher, before he performs his masterstroke. His final designs are very much influenced by the work of Hassan Massoudy in their structure and composition. But Breton’s individuality is conveyed through his use of light sources in long exposure photographs with scenes of urban landscapes as backdrops for his medium instead of paint and canvas.

Sayegh witnessed the art of Chinese calligraphers on his visit to art and calligraphy museums in Shanghai, Beijing, and Xi’an in 2010, almost five decades after some of his contemporaries were exposed to it. The major insight from his China visit was the comparison he made between the Arabic script and its Chinese counterpart, which was constantly renewed by masters of calligraphy. This renewal of styles was to him similar in logic to the way Arabic has been renewed throughout history. He sites Nasta’liq script as an example of such renewal. On that trip, Sayegh confirmed what Ibn Khaldun had stated about the development of the script and how it is linked to the development of architecture and urban scape and how all the blossoming of script is related to the flourishing of the society that surrounds it. So like many art forms, a prosperous economy is key to the development of any civilization’s script because the script becomes a reflection of social stability and development. The development in the \textit{Diwan} that Sayegh witnessed with the Ottomans was similar to what the Chinese were renewing in their script, but because the Chinese were constantly refreshing their art and calligraphy and there were no restraining outside influences, their renewal continued. The case of Arabic was different; the development and regeneration were halted because of the decline and eventual defeat of the Ottoman Empire.
One of the renewals in the script that he saw in China was called the “fast and concise,” in which he found a lot of similarity with his free Italic script that is also fast. His insight, however, was that he needed to record what he wrote as an accomplishment; as Sayegh was recording it with the reed and writing it with speed, he arrived at a transparency, which he witnessed not only as a renewal of the shape but also as a renewal of the aesthetic content. It was not the language or meaning content, but the aesthetic content in the colour of the ink that became similar to the relationships between the structure and thickness or thinness of letters in a word and the way they relate to each other. He began studying the thin and the thick and the delicate in relation to colour. But regarding content, there was no change because he always felt that the real innovation in Islamic art is finding a new formula for the same principle, and science and nature both proved this possible. This experiment might have seemed new to Sayegh, but this notion had been experimented with extensively by other artists including Hassan Massoudy from Iraq and a large number of calligraphers in Iran.

Sayegh’s insights from visiting China was that a natural development of the Arabic script was halted with the demise of the Ottoman Empire, and his discovery of the fast and concise style that reminded him of his experimentation. But the breakthrough exhibition that Sayegh witnessed was “SHO1, 41 Maîtres calligraphes contemporains du Japon” in Paris in 2012. At that exhibition, he saw the logic he had applied almost thirty years before in his first art exhibition “What Cannot be Written or Said” in 1983 in Beirut. The premise that the Japanese master calligraphers applied was to stop writing words. Unlike the work he had seen in China where the calligraphers were building on and reinventing and reinterpreting a tradition, the Japanese calligraphers had decided not to use the written letter for legibility but rather to use the forms of the letters to create a new visual language. These calligraphers did not feel the need to build forms or brush strokes that represented legible letters influenced by content, so they started writing poems. They began by listening to these poems and drawing them; the scripts of the poem did not translate the words of the poem nor did they contain the words of the

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220 At the Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, between March 14th and May 14th, 2012
221 Samir Sayegh, Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
poems, but they documented, somehow, its meaning, or perhaps a relationship with its meaning or perhaps just the reaction of the calligrapher to the meaning of the words.

He describes how he was deeply affected by the work that he saw there. The beauty and virtuosity that impacted him the most was the large size of the artworks and the Japanese calligraphers’ ability to create many colours (many shades of grey) in one stroke of black. That, to him, was fascinating. After that exhibition, he started noting the difference in body posture between Arabic calligraphers and those of China. How Arabic calligraphers mostly sit down at a desk for hours to scribe, while their Chinese counterparts meditate for some time and then with one steady stroke create significant works of art. He started working on big pieces of paper and painting with his hand off the table like the Chinese artists he admired. He also experimented with the technique of staying away from the table and maintaining the same consistent lines and proportions. Sayegh thus concluded that movement for these big works of art that these Eastern calligraphers were producing was internal, not external. To produce the big works of art in the air require that you create balance and have discipline, but the shape of the letter is not confined to a single symbol or meaning. The letter can express itself within itself without the burden of language, as a form or for the shape to move and become a language other than Arabic or its primary language. He considered this step crucial for opening a new door for this art. What he wants to build on is the fact that Arabic calligraphy has acquired the respect of people in different social circles and can be renewed and revived. He sees that the script does not come out by the practice the hand has had in making it; it should come out of the heart or the soul. The pen alone does not write. It needs ink, in the same way, the hand alone does not write. It also needs a heart, and energy to express. This line that writes, these shapes that are drawn on pages do not gain presence except from the heart, just like the words for this art should do not come from a teacher or a book.

Sayegh felt that he was with the Japanese on “the same page” and if he were in Japan, he would have joined them. What was peculiar is that this movement happened in Japan after their defeat in WWII, meaning at a time when they had insufficient words to express how they were feeling. Possibly this is why Sayegh felt
close to the human condition and expression that these calligraphers were experimenting because his exhibition in 1983 was held during the Lebanese civil war when the major ideas about Arab nationalism that he and his friends were working towards had failed. But calligraphic abstraction as a whole movement started with the decolonization of the Arab world. It was a reaction by artists and a statement of confirmation about their Arab identity. It could be that the manifestation of the script is a confirmation of identity in failures and successes for different artists at different times in history.

After these two trips to China and France, Sayegh’s question became whether there was a chance for the Arabic script to learn from the Chinese experience and if he could apply that learning to his artwork. The opportunity arose when he was invited by Athr gallery in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to collaborate on creating artwork with the Chinese master calligrapher Wang Dongling. It was a vague idea because of the tremendous differences between Arabic and Chinese. Arabic is written on a table with a pen, while Chinese is written with a brush and could be free-standing. In Arabic, the enlargement of the script happened later and not directly, while the Chinese had worked on a large scale for a long time. Sayegh’s experiments with writing were always small, but they documented his freedom in style, like his work on Abjad Houaz and the ninety-nine names of Allah. The plan was for the artists to interact with one another in the gallery, and to produce a one-off artwork that blended Arabic and Chinese calligraphy in an attempt to create a contemporary expression of cross-cultural experimentation and visual forms.

What controls the Arabic script is the reed that two parallel lines in a curve called a kat, which allows the two parallel lines that do not meet to meet at the end of the alif when it curves, or on the edges of the seen. It does not matter if the line is large or small, the shape of these two lines forces the form of the script, and that is the essence of the structure of Arabic calligraphy. Chinese script can use a free brush

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not limited by two parallel lines, which pushes calligraphers to work in new areas where this text appears in new forms.

Sayegh earlier had tried to enlarge his brush, his early attempts involving wrapping a sponge on wood or Plexi slab so the script would be bigger, and using 140x15 cm-sized paper, but he still had to work on the table. He confesses that he was nervous for not knowing what lay ahead and that his biggest challenge was the size. He knew that Chinese calligraphers worked in freely large scale because of the liberty that working while standing gave them, something he could not do with Arabic because of the working-on-a-table tradition. His worries were confirmed when Dongling started painting using a large brush, which he dipped in a bucket, on 3x3 meter-wide sheet of paper placed flat on the floor of the gallery in front of an audience and TV camera, having chosen the theme “the path.” There was a language barrier between them. Thus communication was difficult, and Sayegh felt this delayed the development of a real collaboration. With the limited time frame they had, Sayegh decide to also work on “the path” or al-tariq and his first attempt was to write “the road is not one” in a composition. Dongling relaxed, and they decided to move forward and work on common words like beauty, peace, and baraka to justify the concept of unified work or collaboration.224

Dongling would start by writing the word in Chinese and Sayegh would write its equivalent in Arabic to complement the other’s composition. Arabic and Chinese civilizations had been using the script as an art form for a long time, and their results are similar in philosophy to work done during the Renaissance in Europe. The dialogue was severed for the Arabs because of the loss of the Ottoman Empire and the colonization of the Arab world by European countries, while the tradition continued for the Eastern civilizations. Sayegh thinks that Arabs need to find a new 
tajali in the originality of the Arabic script, in its attempt to belong to an identity of the spirit, not in the details and the shape without activating the ana or the “I” of the calligrapher, meaning his feelings or his personal endeavours. The artist’s skill should

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be seen as an individual part of a larger whole, his belonging should be to the aesthetics and not to his ego.  

This collaboration and experiment might have been new to Sayegh but it has been experienced by various other calligraphers that were more exposed to the Eastern calligraphic traditions. A good example is Hassan Massoudy, whose work is very much inspired by the movement of the whole body and does not just entail scribing on a desk. Thus this experimental collaboration might have been a novelty for Sayegh but the results it yielded were no novelty.


Sayegh witnessed the development of both Japanese and Chinese scripts when the calligraphers turned their craft into an art form. From that research and experience he decided that it was time for his Arabic calligraphic pen to become larger in size than the printed letters, and for this, he borrowed techniques from the Eastern schools of calligraphy. First, he had to change his movements, from one that is mainly based on the wrist, which is the case for Arabic calligraphy, to one that springs from the whole body because he began—like Eastern calligraphers—to do his work standing up. Previously, to create larger scripts, Sayegh had had to draw the outline and then fill it with colour. He had started using a much bigger pen by wrapping a 15-25 cm of Plexi with a cloth and dipping it in ink on a 150x150-cm paper; he worked standing up and not sitting at a table, thus for him, there was a fundamental change of time, space and place.

Ibn Muqla, when elaborating on the technique of the script, describes a good shape and a good placement, meaning where a calligrapher is supposed to place the text and its relationships, balancing between the different forms and elements of the body of the script. When the hand is on the script, the place changes, becoming air, and the hand, instead of putting itself in the air, puts itself on the head of the brush, meaning on the ink. When it bases itself in ink, it has to become a movement, and that will create the balance between the air and the ink. This is not true of the

movement of placing hand on paper—to put the hand in the air you must move the hand from the wrist to the shoulder. Sayegh does not think that this change challenged the concept of Islamic art, which, for him, involves creating a time with no time and a place with no borders, in essence representing the philosophy of Islamic art.


The second novelty that he discovered with this experiment is that the beauty of script was related to the speed of the hand, which should not be too fast so the ink does not spatter, and it should not be slow, so the ink does not burst. Based on tawfiyya and itmam, the ink should have the same thickness, in the beginning, the middle and at the edges. Sayegh overcame this concept of consistence with the new technique because when the body of the script became wider, it was important for the space to be coloured between the thick and the thin, between the black and the white, so that this space would again be expressed in multiple languages or multiple signs. He thinks that perhaps this technique is closer
to drawing and colouring than to calligraphy, but at the same time, it gave him the ability to express and place equal importance on letting go of the actual words and their meaning. Each letter is scribed using one kind of ink, thus the same colour, and so the words present their shape as the reading; Sayegh replaced colours with their ability to express. He considers himself a purist in the sense of going back to the basics, coming back to drawing with ink or going back to using only the black and white and to the possibility that once again, script can create a connection between itself and the Far Eastern styles, instead of with European art.

The exhibition contained thirty-eight paintings of various sizes and it was accompanied by publication under the same title *Alif in Many Letters.* The book is 144 pages and 30x24-cm, and it combines all of Sayegh’s previous book layout styles. The text is set using a font while the titles are scribed in Sayegh’s handwriting. All the text is accompanied by calligraphic abstractions on each page utilizing Sayegh’s free style. The cover and the chapter headings are scribed in Sayegh’s signature Kufic style with highly stylized letters with hair-thin horizontal parallel strokes. Similar to his *In Praise of Letters*, the style involves short notations on clear concepts, but this time Sayegh used the book as a platform to explain the summary of his accumulated

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ideas on Arabic script, its past and his hope for its future evolution using his usual poetic prose style.

The first chapter is entitled “Atabat” (steps), with five entries: “Fil lugah”, which discusses the limitations of language: “Fil khatt 1”, which elaborates on the fact that it is not the job of the script to explain language all the time. “Fil khatt 2,” confirms that the script has to betray language in a superficial form so that it is aligned with it in the “batin” (unseen), giving the language a voice; khatt has a colour, the ear is for language and the eye is for khatt, this is how real unity is achieved. “Abjadiya lithatiha” insists on the importance of freeing the letter from its duty towards language because there is a lot that cannot be seen, heard, written, or said. “Al’oudah ila almustaqbal”, (back to the future), illustrates the need to build on the past so we can advance to the future.

In the second chapter “Simiya” there are thirteen sections. “Fil tariq” is in eight small parts and it starts by describing the path or paths for calligraphers to take
and the challenges they will face while making them. This is followed by “Wasl”, which is a conversation with the letter mim. “Fil tariq” is the following section on the difference between the road to language and the path towards khatt. “Wasl” follows with a conversation with the letter baa. “Fil tawazon” discusses the concept of balance and is followed by yet another “Wasl”, a poem on the act of calligraphy, which is followed by another “Fil tawazon”, which discusses the lack of balance. “Fil tajawiz” describes the beauty of the connection between certain letters in Arabic, ending with the line that reads: “in proximity, there is warmth, the cheeks of the letters blush, and the heads of the fingers are light”. “Harf al-khatt wa harf al-lugha” describes the difference between the letter when used in calligraphy and when it is used in language. “Wasl” is a small poem on the letter sad. “Harf al-lugha wa harf al-khatt” builds more on the differences between language and calligraphy, separated by another “Wasl” poem on the letter sheen, which is followed by another “Harf al-lugha wa harf”, which ends the second section in the book.

“Ahwal” is the title of the third chapter with twelve topics. “Hiwar” is the first, and it is a conversation between letters, followed by “Ta sin mim”, a poem on the initial unexplained letters in the Quran, the title being one of them. “Sad” is a poem on the letter sad, which is followed by “’An al-yad”, a series of questions and suggestions by a calligrapher on what should be done for his hand to deliver the beautiful script. “Qaf” is a Sufi poem playing on the letter qaf, followed by “Fil jasad”, instructions from a master to his disciple on the preparations needed for calligraphers to be able to scribe. “Taqoul li” is poem building on a quote from the letters of Ibn al-Bawab, followed by “Wasil” on the letter nun and another “Wasil” on the letter qaf. “Taqoul li” is another entry on a quote from the notes of Ibn al-Bawab, followed by “Harf al-lugha wa harf al-khatt”, which discusses marriages between letters. The chapter closes on a final “Taqoul li” that opens with advising the “seeker” to abandon everything before starting on the journey of khatt.

The fourth and last chapter is “Rasael”, and it has four letters from “sin to mim” and from “alif to al-Naffari”, from “sad to Ibn-Arabi” and from “baa to al-Hallaj”. The last two-page spread in the book is “Shahadat” with short quotations from letters and calligraphy by Ibn Araby, al-Naffari, al-Hallaj, Haidar Amouli, Ibn Khaledoun, al-Soumi, Ibn-Abbas, Mohamad Nassir ‘Andalib, and Abdeulkarim al-Jili.
To Sayegh, calligraphy is founded on concepts and objectives different from those of writing. Writing is one thing, and calligraphy is another, even if they share the same letters and both belong to the same language. Writing is meant to be read; calligraphy is destined to be contemplated in a state of exaltation. Writing is mainly a means of comprehension and clarification, transmission and delivery. Calligraphy starts when it transcends itself as a tool to become a goal in and of its self, achieving a self-sufficient presence capable of initiating its own dialogue. This idea finds resonance throughout the book.

The reviews of the exhibition varied from the appreciative and complimentary to the descriptive, and including some that lacked admiration or understanding of the works. Some found the work avant-garde and others felt that it was an experiment already explored by the Iranian School of calligraphic abstraction, depriving the fact that Sayegh had discovered it at this stage of any novelty. His lines were described as drawn by an angry and nervous hand, yet confident in its movement. His poetry was felt to be redundant, the second version of his previous book In Praise of Letters. His visuals, however, were conceived as more striking than his poetry this time. Sayegh replied, “Abstract calligraphy might not be new but in this exhibition and the previous one I am trying to catch the inner pulse of the letter and to use my research and experience in showing the letter in a form that reveals its beauty regardless of its content. In my work letters are not ‘ingredients’ for a word, not transmitters of an idea; the letter for me is the means and the end. It is what you see in front of you, disconnected from its utilitarian task in any script; it is the beginning and the end; it is the open world.”

The thirty-eight paintings that were on display varied in style, 27 were of the smaller free brushstroke compositions on a white background, utilizing the free brush technique with an illegible form of letters in different colours. This is where Sayegh scores high on our previously devised scale of abstraction, pushing the script into new dimensions in form and content. Five paintings (150x75cm) were minimal geometric forms of the letters: lam-alif, ha, waw, nun and qaf painted with acrylic on

228 Barakat. “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”
229 https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/
230 Within the size of A4 but the compositions inside each painting varied.
canvas. But the letter design for each letter is so minimal and elegant that if compared to other letters these would emerge as royalty. Finally, only four paintings were in the new style of large sized brush strokes of ink on white paper, this is where Sayegh is trying to apply the Chinese lesson in calligraphy to his practice. Both of these trails bring a new visual experiment to the calligraphic abstraction global language. The new geometric solutions are elegant as new letter designs, and the brush strokes, even though they are not new in their style; the energy that they bring into Sayegh’s work is one that was not seen before in his previous exhibitions.

Abdo Wazen considered Sayegh not far from the calligram art of Apollinaire: letters under Sayegh’s brush become drawings, symbols, elements, icons, visual texts with musical dimensions, symbolic. He confirms that drawn poetry has had a fertile period of experimentation from the Frenchmen Stéphane Marlarmé, and Henry Michi and the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the American Kaings, and mentions a French publishing house, Dante, which published an anthology with almost 400 visual poems. For Wazen, Sayegh could have easily been one of these artists presented in this book, adding his unique experience of combining calligraphic abstraction, poetry and Sufism. To him, Sayegh’s experience is universal, the equal to any similar poetic abstraction expertise in the modern West.

“Alif bi hourouf kathira” is an experiment where Sayegh familiarized people with and removed reverence that had been bestowed on letters by al-Nafari and Hallaj and Ibn Arabi, so the letters, as he presents them, are happy, sad, and replete with other emotions. They love and feel pain – like the two crucified letters that are hanging on the wall, which are mentioned in his book. And this way, the extensions and roundness and ersal, ehmal, khatf, mashq and eshiba’ in Arabic calligraphy, as Sayegh talks about them, are characteristics of the human condition but bring a higher level to their understanding. Ali Shouraba considers the latest artistic experiments of Sayegh as a continuation of what he started in the 1980’s. After he worked on a Naskh script where he made it appear, at first glance, to be a derivative of the Moroccan script in Qairawan, but at the same time seemed closer to the

Gothic Latin font in which the Bible was written. Then Sayegh worked on a script that was similar to the Nishapouri, then the Shikasteh. To complete his vision of the globalization of Arabic script, he went to China to study works of calligraphy by the masters of this art, working with a swift and eye-catching speed to explore the missing link between Arabic and Chinese scripts and to present samples of their similarities. Shouraba summarizes Sayegh’s artistic expression by stating that, “What Samir offers are intellectual insights and not just art exhibitions; the meaning in Sayegh’s exhibitions is not seeing the painting, but seeing what is behind the painting. His painting can be seen from the front and read from the back and understood when the eye is closed. And the saying here goes: ‘The exterior reflects the inside, they are two and they are one.’”

The world-renowned Lebanese artist Mohammad Rawwas respects the fact that Sayegh refuses to be labelled as an artist; he considers himself more a researcher in form and shape when it comes to Arabic calligraphy. While Shouraba insists that Sayegh does not make art, and that he is a regional and international cultural figure because when Sayegh creates a letter he tackles two issues, the first is the art of Arabic calligraphy, and the other is Arabic language and culture, which are two separate things. Thus the artist takes his audience to the conventional “spring” of Arab culture, the spiritual one based on the long philosophical debate around Eastern religions, as he tries to combine their spirituality through the letter since artists were never able to combine them through physical realities. In that regard, his stand on religion is “tawhid” in the spiritual sense, there being no difference in his mind between Mohammad or Christ or Lao Tzu.

Rawwas confesses that in his creation he does not relate in depth to what Sayegh’s research is all about, but he can understand it, seeing it as involving purely visual artistic research. Tackling the movements of a line, of a brush stroke, texture and the visual dynamic, on their terms is only a part of visual arts as an intensive broad research, all of which are very present in Sayegh’s work. In the exhibition “Alif” Rawwas thinks that Sayegh’s work has approached the Minimalist school of art, utilizing the gestural style of painting. He had the strength and the insight to “go

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big,” using the shoulder as a pivoting point rather than the wrist, as is common for Arabic calligraphy, which is why Rawwas linked it to gestural painting. The challenge is “how to say more by saying less.” Sayegh is aware of all the rules of visual composition, and he experiments through this channel. What Rawwas appreciates in Sayegh’s artistic career and experiments is that he did not go to art school. His attitude is puritan, free from the dogma of art classes, which gives it a new flavour to his creation and makes it, in Rawwas’s view, more true, more sincere and more personal.

Some critics felt that in Sayegh’s latest exhibition he was adapting to the conditions of the market and becoming more commercial; they did not find the Sayegh they knew. They preferred his earlier period with the smaller works using engraving and gold leaf, claiming that galleries ask artists to make larger works of art and artists comply and that this had been the case for Sayegh. On the criticism that Sayegh received regarding his becoming commercial by working on larger-scale paintings, Rawwas clarifies that scale in art is a crucial issue. When artists work small, they work on an intimate entity that they dominate in reference to the range of human beings; when, however, they work big, the work dominates them, which is a major factor in determining the visual impact of any work of art. Rawwas favours large-scale experiments, regardless of the reasons for them, which, in his opinion are minor elements in that regard, whether commercial or not; what he cares about is the outcome, and Sayegh’s work created a new power related to a larger size of his brush strokes. Rawwas comments on the exhibition, saying, “I liked the big scale he did, much more than any other works of him I had seen before.”

Some people do not like the new work by Sayegh because they do not find in it the content that is emotional and that someone can find in the classical script. They would go back and tell him what they used to say about Hussein Madi, that he is stiff, that his work has no softness, but Tarrab thinks this is a matter of personal taste not a proper analysis of the work. He thinks that what happened is a critical development on the concept of the letters because Sayegh is working on the letters to give them a new place, a new maqam. He is experimenting in their conditions to reach this maqam. It is the same experience of distillation; Sayegh is distilling it from all of the imperfections that go into it. What pleases Tarrab is that Sayegh is working
on paper and canvas, because he used to work on wood and Tarrab was not a great fan of the wood period. There were many nice things, but he thinks that Sayegh was heading towards the artisanal. Here he surpassed the artisanal phase and is going back to the origin of the script. Tarrab was not convinced by Saygh’s preceding compositions because the script is script and compositions are compositions, he felt that Sayegh had a lot of potential in experimenting with the text, but the experience helped him reach where he is now. All artist experiments are useful, and sometimes the benefit is unexpected because when they stop, it makes them miss the freedom and in Sayegh’s case, miss writing the script directly and thinking of the shape as a shape. The shape as a shape of the writing gives meanings that are not shapes.

Sayegh says, “I was mesmerized by the positive ‘eltibas’ that the Arabic letter carries; it is a symbol and a term and a shape and a possibility. And after that, it became a number and mystery and darkness. In the time when it was a tool for some, in reality, it was a representation of the wahi. This multiplicity amazed me.” Sayegh’s curator and owner of Agial gallery where Sayegh’s latest exhibition was on display, Barakat felt that it was the first time that the revolution was apparent to his eyes, being the first time Sayegh was radical and did not use comprehensible text within his artwork. While previously he would use recognizable words, like Allah, hiya, hou, salam, baraka, etc., this time there was no script and the letters were in a place where only their beauty was revealed in abstraction. He feels that it was a radical decision, and the first time the decision was taken to divide the text from its context clearly. Previously, beauty and elegance of Arabic script had been relevant only to religion, but in the last 100 years and with the development of concepts of Arab nationalism, any artist who placed Arabic letters in their painting felt that he could claim that it was “Arab.” For Barakat, Sayegh today has released Arabic script from both concepts, religion and Arab nationalism. He thinks that if we are to pursue a truly universal Arabic script, then we should liberate it from it cloaks of religion, and this can place Arabic in a radical position today. He believes that Sayegh has started a revolution. All of his previous attempts were timid and were not getting his point across to the audience, but in this exhibition, they went very far, the furthest

\[233 \text{http://al-seyassah.com/}\]
they have for the entirety of the artist’s career. In Sayegh’s words: “The universe of forms is the new language that calligraphy should aim to reach to achieve human conveyance. All that is needed, then, to appreciate its beauty is to learn how to read this language and how to decipher it.”

Finding someone who understands and relates to Sayegh’s artwork is a difficult task, confesses Saleh Barakat; they have to be transgressors of norms and relationships. This enlightened audience, Barakat says, must be: “Ouroubi el hawa, ladiyhim elmam bil khatt wa ousoulouh, wa infitah lil qouboul bil thawra ala al takalid.” They have to love Arab culture, know about the Arabic script, and be open enough to accept revolt against tradition. There is however, only a handful of people who combine all of these traits. He believes they will never reach the lay audience; those want to buy what they recognize and what they already know.

One of the problems with the public is that they look at Arabic as an art form that belongs to the past, while Barakat perceives Sayegh as progressive, and knowing how and where to frame this point of view has proven complicated. The Sharjah Biennale was a good start, but Barakat wanted to frame Sayegh’s work in unexpected places, one example is exhibiting the work influenced by Psaltica at a show on art and music in Brussels in 2014. In his fifties, Sayegh became obsessed with writing shapes that looked like pseudo-Arabic. He realized that the shapes he was creating were based on the long, swooshing calligraphic lines and dots that he had been exposed to in the Psaltica classes at the convent in his youth, even though the artist had not particularly cared for the associated religious rituals. But he always saw a relationship, including the connections as well as the disconnections, between calligraphy and music. To Sayegh, disconnected, connected or expanded Arabic letters resemble music. He finds a similarity between listening to classical Western or Oriental music and Islamic ornamentation that builds on a sentence like music builds on a note. But his feeling was that music is one line in his mind, forming a unity when heard, but that on paper such a single track is not

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235 Barakat, “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”
237 Psaltica is a Byzantine musical system with its own peculiar music notes
attainable. Music is ultimately the hidden voice of humanity. He quotes a passage from the Psalms (mazamir): “wa sabihouhou bil mizmar wal kina, sabihouhou bil qithara wal sounouj”, you can praise the Lord with the flute and harp and other musical instruments. Sayegh’s understanding of this psalm is that music is, ultimately, a form of prayer. It is then not surprising that Barakat also sold some of Sayegh’s work to Cleveland clinic in the Untied States; the buyers were curating and looking for work that can heal. The curator confesses that he is sure that the audience might not understand these works, but to him, it is all the more reason to get out of the places where artists like Sayegh are always placed. Sayegh, to his curator, is a person who looks toward the future and not the past. He is concerned with retaining the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy without the burden of heritage, tradition, and religion. He has no canonic interest in the new culturally regressive interpretation of tradition like other artists; he works with ease and is interested in the technique of creating the artwork. But the most challenging aspect is the conceptual work; Sayegh is an intellectual and there is a reading that his audience has to go through. Regarding where he would place Sayegh’s work internationally if he had the choice, Barakat would prefer to put it with the Minimalist school, next to artists like Ellsworth Kelly or with far-Eastern inspired artists from China and Japan.

To Sayegh, his exhibitions, in spite of the clarity of their descriptions, repeated questions and attempts, were experiments seeking to be reborn every time with a new name. The exhibitions did not go in either an upward or a linear progression, but rather in a circular line that tightens at times and then grows. That’s why he felt as if he were going, in his last exhibition, “Alif in many letters,” back to his first exhibition “What cannot be written and what cannot be said.” He feels like the Arabic letter nun is seeking to go back to the beginning every time it is attempting to complete itself, but the minute it reaches the end it forgets whether it is beginning or ending, it like a natural cycle. In the “Diaries of letters,” he asks, have you seen the end before the beginning? We have to see the beginning in the same

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239 The Bible. Psalm 150:4 KJV: 3. Praise Him with trumpet sound; Praise Him with harp and lyre. 4. Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; Praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe. 5. Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with resounding cymbals.
way we see the end so we can start. We have to keep contemplating the past so that we can discover how the future is hidden in it.  

In his artwork, he is always calling upon the Arabic script to abandon the Arabic language and to focus on its form. For him to keep writing poetry is a bit of contradiction, but he solves that problem by stating, “I created a problem between language and khatt, like the fight between a man and his lover; he cannot live with or without her.”

I hope that this book will place him and his work in a broader political and social context, illustrating and clarifying the questions he has raised during this very critical time of Arab modernity. For the past fifty years, Sayegh has carried with him the same question, wherever he went: how to create a unique, modern Arab identity that builds on the solutions of the past but remains true to the present and, most importantly, becomes valid for the future. He chose Arabic calligraphy, art criticism, poetry and education as the media through which he would manifest his ideas on revival, modernity, and identity. To him, Arabic calligraphy remains the essential medium, carrying the power to develop the modern Arab identity in a positive, dynamic manner. Even though in the beginning of his career he had no visual creative breakthrough with work, using more traditional scripts, and was strongly inspired by the work of other calligraphic abstraction artists. He eventually created a style that is characteristically his own and that is more on the conceptual and the abstract.

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