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On the Semantics of “Purpose” in the Art of Calligraphy from the Perspectives of Philosophers, Traditionalists, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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ABSTRACT

Statement of the Problem:

The noblest visual art in the world of Islam is calligraphy, an aspect of which is founded on Qur’anic thinking, which reveals averting formalism, on the one hand, and the sanctity of words, on the other hand. The present study aimed to investigate the spiritual and heavenly attraction of the art of calligraphy by focusing on the work’s structure, the artist, the observer, and relevant outcomes in the social system. Also, the views of Muslim scholars about the art of calligraphy were presented.

Objectives of the Study:

This study aimed to explain the concept of “purpose”, i.e., the discovery of a non-objective intention, in one of the holiest Islamic arts, i.e., the art of calligraphy by emphasizing the views of philosophers, traditionalists, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (a traditionalist advocate). It should thus be explored how art originates from Islamic principles so that a relationship between its theoretical foundations is found.

Questions of the Study:

This article aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the artistic and expressive forms of the art of calligraphy to delve into “purpose”?
- What is the aim of implementing the concept of “purpose”?
- What is the structural and theoretical relationship between writing in the art of calligraphy and geometric forms?
- Which subjects of the wisdom of the art of calligraphy are focused on by the views of thinkers and philosophers?

Study findings suggested that the holy art of calligraphy was founded on and aimed to realize the subjective and non-objective concept of “purpose”, and this could provide useful information based on thinkers’ perspectives.

Method of the study:

The study fell under the descriptive-analytical method, and data were collected by library data.

Conclusion:

The calligrapher and the observe, while seeking to detach from the human world, are both infatuated with the manifestation of the existence of the Truth, i.e., they go beyond symbols in the holy art of calligraphy. In essence, the observer and the “purpose” are the unified witness and the witnessed; a subject that thinkers, relying on the pure origins of Islamic and Shiite mysticism, have reaffirmed. These thinkers have characterized this art with the consistency of this art with spirituality and ethics in the social system, the utilization of a conceptual and symbolic expression instead of a merely decorative application, and the numerical representation of letters and geometry. Therefore, the spiritualized human is a pen by himself at the hand of a great artist, i.e., God, to write and promote spiritual conduct, and this is the same concept of “purpose”.



Keywords: Purpose, Calligraphy, Philosophers, Traditionalists, Seyyed Hossein Nasr

INTRODUCTION

Islam introduced a civilization that attached a sublime stature to Islamic art since it was closely related to divine revelation. Muslim artists managed to produce works, which were not only enthralling but also carried messages. Calligraphy may be regarded as the most important achievement of the Islamic culture; an art that led the way to conveying great moral concepts and gave a sublime character to the human being. This holy art became more sacred as it began to write the words of Allah. “*The one who is spiritually linked with the Higher world could keep away from the appearance and outward aspects of objects. For this, the language of art becomes systematic for encrypting the manifestation of the artist’s spiritual vision, i.e., his intuition, which lies between the real manifestation and perception of the Truth and incomputable changes and representations, only laid bare to the artist himself*” (Goodarizi, 2006:127).

Literature Review

This part concerns how the word “purpose” was realized in the art of calligraphy as few studies may have examined it. Out of the literature, the following may be cited:

- The article “Spiritual workings of the art of calligraphy in Tohfah Al-Mohebbin and in the treatise Satr Al-Sotour” by Mohammad Reza Najjarian, the International Conference on Research in Engineering, Sciences, and Technology, UAE (March 2015); here, the researcher examines the two books and emphasizes their calligraphic features, including Safa and Sha’n, thus analyzing the views of their authors, i.e., Siraj Shirazi and Soltan Ali Mashhadi, about script mechanisms.
- The article “A comparative investigation of the concept *abstraction* in Islamic art and Western art using the perspectives of traditionalists” by Ahad Ravanjou, Journal of Baghe-Nazar (June 2022); here, the researcher aims to explore the semantics, functionality, and features of the word “abstraction” by emphasizing the views of traditionalists and western art scientists. This article theoretically debates the appearance of subjectivity and objectivity concerning the artist and refers to the work and how signs and symbols are used.
- The article “Traditional arts in Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s thinking” by Mohammad Ali Bidokhti, Journal of the book of Mah-e-Honar (No. 144) (September 2010); here, the researcher explores terminologies in traditional art and the views of Seyyed Hossein Nasr such as distancing from naturalism and individualism in the light of maintaining the human ethics and dignity by addressing art from theoretical, expressive, and symbolic perspectives.
- The article “Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s philosophy of art” by Elliot Deutsch, Journal of Soroush-e-Andisheh (2002); here, Elliot discusses metaphysical levels based on traditional views and the relationship between art and spirituality from the view of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, introducing him the only one who managed to depict a way out of the crisis of spirituality in today’s art.
- The article “The ethical and aesthetical dimension of figurative classical calligraphy painting, by Indonesian researcher Korniatat, Journal of Islamic Mysticism, 5(2): 2016;



here, the author examines the effects of moral dimensions of the art of calligraphy. The article not only represents the art of calligraphy but is also a blend of the art of painting and calligraphy, i.e., the so-called calligraphy-painting, which produces a new environment of calligraphic features. Calligraphy-painting may have a little distanced from the holy realm of calligraphy and have its apparent principles subjected to western mechanisms.

1. Observer and Audience in the Art of Calligraphy

Audiences' strong beliefs originate from the Islamic knowledge of humans, as Imam Sadegh (Peace be Upon Him) says: "*Invite [people] towards God with things other than your tongues*"¹. A message that appears to influence the audience is derived from Islamic behavior and ethics. The abstract form of the art of calligraphy appears to be a reflection of the intellectual forms of the mystic artist's soul. "*If the soul is the first perfection of the body, then, the intellect is the perfection of the soul*" (Ahmad Harbi, 2003:100).

"The lexical parity of throne meaning arch, and arch in mosque architecture represents an allegory of meanings within this word and other synonymous words in Latin, Persian, and Arabic. Some mystics consider the throne to be the fabric of the universe, and the soul within its heart to be God Almighty, and this is because of the place aspect, i.e., the placeness the word throne has in the Qur'an" (Balkhari, 2013: 378 and 379). Also, in the book "Elaboration of theological terminologies", the entry to the "throne" (A'arsh in Arabic) is defined as: "*For them are elevated seats, carried and guarded by angels*" (Majma' Al-Bohouth Al-Islamiyyah, 1458:212). When the word is said of God, and reference is made to God's throne, it is meant the entire universe, which is, in fact, the seat of the Lord.

René Guénon also has an interesting interpretation of the *throne*: "*As with the interpretation of the throne, the soul lies within its heart, and this is practically the position of Jews' Moitataroun; it is the position of the divine presence, i.e., Shekina, which in the Hebrew tradition is Paredre, or is the complementary aspect of Moitataroun. The soul is said to be specifically assimilated with the throne*" (Guénon, 2010:1). Now that the Arabic word "A'arsh" (throne) refers to an arch in mosque architecture, some kind of interrelatedness or consistency with curved lines and "Dawr" (motions/rotations) used in writing letter motions in the art of calligraphy can be imagined. For instance, in the Tholth (also sols) script, we see 2/3 of Dawr in its writing style. Master Amir Khani has nicely shown this feature in two "Hosn-e-Waz" (well-established) and "Hosn-e-Tashkil" (well-constructed) forms by writing reverse Dawrs when elaborating on the concepts of the beauty of scripts. Thus, divine proportions are an introduction to Islamic calligraphy (Image 1).



¹ Kafi, vol. 2, p. 78



Image 1: The Hadith by the prophet (Peace Upon Him), referring to Imam Ali as the one who is with the Truth and the Truth with him (Amir Kani, 1999:43)

According to philosophers and scholars, the most perfect and beautiful forms are the sphere (in a spatial form) and circle (in a flat form). This is because, in circles, the distance of the central point from all points around it is the same; for this, circles are one the most original forms of unity and multiplicity. “In Buddhist thinking, and a broader ideology, especially, the oriental thinking, circles serve as the most complete and beautiful geometric forms (Plato considered it as the most perfect forms and Mulla Sadra regarded it as the most beautiful forms); circles are indicative of boundlessness, integrity, perfection, survival, and circularity of the universe” (Bolkhari, 2020:62).

“Because [the] temple (here, referring to Kaaba with its squared-shape) emerged to represent the Greatest universe to serve as a point of connection at which human soil bonds with the universe soil, the compound around it was constructed in a circular form, indicating the utmost level of a servant’s rites (achieving perfection). Thus, belief in the four-fold elements constituted the square, and square itself helped underlie [the] temple” (Bolkhari, 2022:37-38) (Image 2). Shekh Bahaei has nicely described the “purpose” as follows”

By Kaaba and idols, I actually mean You

In the taverns and temples, I mean You

The purpose is You, the Kaaba and the idols are excuses

It is noteworthy that the *Kaaba* is a building founded on the four pillars of *Praise be to Allah, Glory be to Allah, there is no deity but Allah, and God is the Greatest*. Also, the art of calligraphy refers to the same conduct and spirituality; i.e., to the holy words and letters written and recited around a geometric axis. Here, Lesan Al-Ghaib (Hafez Shirazi) versifies this as follows:

The sages are the center of the compass of the existence

But love knows that in this circle they are revolving

In the ancient world, especially in Mesopotamia, Iran, Egypt, India, and Buddhist civilizations, circles played a critical role as a religious symbol. Ideal and desirable geometric shapes were a square surrounded by a circle. “This convergence corresponds to the *Qibla* convergence, i.e., the ritual orientation of all places towards *Kaaba*, which is God’s House and is cubic (indicating consistency), lying in the center of a circle that is home to the human world” (René Guénon, 2010:26).

Here, the “purpose” is the realization and manifestation of unity and multiplicity; for example, on the inscriptions of the two sides of the *Dar Al-Syadah* portico, the Sols script has been written in a way that the circle is surrounded by a square (Image 2). The theme of these inscriptions is



sending blessings upon the fourteen infallible Imams. Sheikh Jami describes this praise and eulogy as follows:

Blessings upon the Household of Taha and Yasin

Blessings upon the Household of the best of the apostles

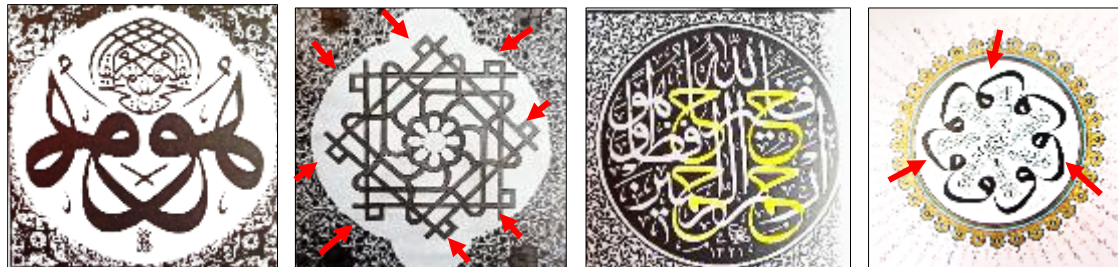


Image 2: from right: a) an image of the Kaaba when prayers form circular queues by the time of performing prayers (author); b) inscriptions on either side of the Dar Al-Siyadah portico, Harem of Imam Reza, with the theme of sending blessings upon the fourteen infallible Imams (Bolkhari, 2019:173).

Muslims used a special abstract language to express their artistic effects, with endless correspondence and similarity being the most salient features of this language. “Repetition” and “similarity”, as indicators of Islamic art, were objectively evident, and, the “purpose” of the scribes was to reveal this expressive effect in their works. This process is also noted in sample Mosanna (also Mothanna) scripts through a kind of symmetry and correspondence, with some subtlety (Image 3).



Image 3: “Repetition” and “similarity” in sample calligraphic arts (from right), a) Sols script by Davod Baktash, contemporary Turkish calligrapher (Nakhi, 2001: 131); b) Sols script by Mafi Afandi, Topkapı Museum (1942); c) Pseudo-Toghari Banai script by Seyyed Hossein Khatun-Abadi; d) هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ , opposite Sols script by Haj Ahmad Kamel, from the book “Arabic script forms” (Fazaeli, 2011:249, 652, and 658).

2. Components of Calligraphers’ Spiritual Conduct

While assuming government positions, many renowned artists dismissed courtier customs and instead maintained their freedom and independence. “*Since the art of calligraphy has a sacred and spiritual aspect, the calligrapher should strive to achieve sensual temperament to be reflected in their penmanship; for this, calligraphy masters have provided missions to train their students, called ‘workings of penmanship and practice’*” (Ravanjou, 2015:51).

2.1. Appearance, Explanation, and Spiritual Training of Calligraphers

Training calligraphy is traditionally a kind of training performed in a master-apprentice relationship. Soltan Ali Mashhadi argues this relationship involves various levels of moral and spiritual customs, including “*Paying homage to one’s parents, continuity over obedience, fasting, the pilgrimage of Imam Reza (Peace Be Upon him), and paying tribute to one’s master*” (Iranpour, 2018:148). In traditional calligraphy training, acquiring guidance and instructions from the master is unique by which the apprentice can start his learning physically and via theoretical practice, which is the first part of his practice. “*Calligraphers are allowed to give their lives and definitions to ideas and sentiments and provide a means by which they can preserve their deep personal sentiments and emotions for future generations. Calligraphy reflects the spiritual world and visualizes the national spirit*” (Yu, 2018:57).

The apprentice should do the so-called penmanship and begin to recognize the relevant seventeen components and the non-acquisitional components so that he achieves sufficient mastery. Then, he is required to deal with imaginative practice, used to strengthen his creativity in making correct combinations. “*As the apprentice completes the stage of individual practice and the writing practice, the master issues for him a letter of permission and allows him to mark his work under the title ‘He wrote it’*” (Blair, 2017:652).

Theoretical practice not only involves a study of masters’ penmanship and deals with penmanship and visual literacy, but it also creates an emotional relationship, together with respect, between the master and the apprentice. A contemporary Iranian calligraphy master has suggested “*Spirituality specifically belonged to master Amir Khani, which made him a charismatic tutor before his apprentices. Master Amir Khani used to represent his good conduct in his relation with apprentices*” (Teymouri, 2012:65).



Image 4: a) Leili and Majnoun at school (1431), taken from Metropolitan Museum, b) sample penmanship by master Amir Khani (Teymouri, 2012:64).

“*Islam conferred an excellent position upon the word, ‘the word of Allah is the greatest of all’, giving it an unparalleled and indefinite breadth while developing such a mystery within its text as if it could create a word-oriented art (rather than an image-oriented art)*” (Bolkhari, 2019:166). A word in calligraphy is the same as the manifestation of the Truth in the universe.

The aesthetics and beauty of words in calligraphy are consistent with miracles arising from mysteries within the words. Now if the apprentice had a nature intermingled with a legacy of excellent human and moral traits, and special talent, that would be great. *“According to Islamic teachings, the Qur’an is a divine revelation, and for this, writing has been the most important task, as reading and writing are inseparably blended with this matter”* (Hage Dorbe, 2015:45). In the treatise, “Sirat Al-Sotour”, Soltan Ali Mashhadi describes the position of writing and penmanship as follows”

It is not the words, nor the letters or points

It is the principles and Safa, and good conducts

2.2. The Feature of Safa in Calligraphy

Safa (which translates to freshness/happiness) is a state that makes the temperament happy and lightens the eye. As a result of the manifold of practices and writing, and also by observing and utilizing combinations, the calligrapher’s penmanship comes to a stage where the eye feels the freshness and mastery of the scribe in the writing. Achieving this stage and its final stage, i.e., Sha’n (which translates to pleasantness/agreeableness) is impossible without the purity of the mind and decent qualities. In this regard, Soltan Ali Mashhadi has described this in his treatise:

The one who is familiar with the heart

Knows that the freshness of the writing comes from the Safa of the heart

Scribing is the slogan of the pious

Wandering is nothing to do with the pious

In his speech entitled “Peace and spiritual conduct of Iranian calligraphers”, Dr. Kamyar Sedaghat-Samar Hosseini says:

“According to the spiritual education, two major terms were formed in calligraphy, i.e., Sha’n and Safa, with the former referring to the calligrapher’s competence and abilities, i.e., his hand and penmanship, while the latter refers to his social and spiritual conducts, i.e., his heart. The highest ranks a calligrapher can attain are Sha’n and Safa. The calligrapher’s Safa lies with his artistic blessing and benevolence for others.”

2.3. Great Scribes of the Qur’an

A study of the biographies and works of calligraphers suggests that they made effort and perseverance in all stages of their lives. The following summarizes the scribes of the divine book.

2.3.1. Ali Bin Hilal (12th century)

Abolhasan Alauddin Ali Bin Hilal was a scholar, painter, and theologian of Iranian descent. Known as Ibn Bawwab, he continued the road of Ibn Moghlah Shirazi after his death. *“He was the greatest Muslim artist who completed a script based on rules. Bin Hilal was born in the second half of the 10th century. His father was a courtier and a chamberlain during the Āl-e Būya (Buyid) dynasty and was thus called Ibn Al-Se’ri (son of the gentleman) and Ibn Bawwab”* (Fazaeli, 2011:300).

Ibn Bawwab composed couplets on writing and script rules. This sonnet is known as the “Raeiyyah sonnet”:

O’ you who want to learn to write beautifully

And think of beautiful writing and the beauty of the forms

Or

If you are standing by a firm determination in writing

Pay attention to God for the simplicity of writing (Fazaeli, 2011:302).



2.3.2. Jaml Al-Din Abol-Dor Yaghut (14th century)

In Umar²'s era, a new script appeared in Kufa, which was written at the command of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and was later called Kufi. The Kufi was a dry script that used geometry and may have originated from Syriac writings, which was common around Kufa, especially in the area of Al-Hirah (Al-Bensi, 2008:342).

Yaghut summarized the beauty of the script in one of his Arabic verses, whose versified translation is as follows (Monshi-Ghomi, 1978:21).

*The principles and combinations, Korsi, and proportions
Ascent, and Tashmir, descent, and sending*

Yaghut Mosta'sami Baghdadi was undoubtedly one of the pioneers of the art of calligraphy. The late Dr. Bayani writes of him: "He was a literary scholar and a poet who took the script to the point where no one had previously managed to achieve".

Yaghut is quoted as saying: "Calligraphy is the art of spiritual architecture that is in the process of creation by physical tools" (Korniawati, 2016:20).

2.3.3. Sheikhzadeh Ahmad (14th and 15th centuries)

The great Iranian master of the art, Sheikhzadeh Ahmad Suhrewardi was skillful in writing types of scripts. "In the late 14th century and early 15th century, Ahmad Ibn Suhrewardi created a new style of Qur'anic writing, which combined illuminated arrays, together with the intelligent use of Kufi penmanship and Ibn Moghlah Shirazi's newly-created scripts. According to this style, Shekhzadeh Ahmad observed Alawite traditions to write proportionate columns and lines, while arranging verses of the Qur'an in a context of innovative scripts" (Heratri, 2013:65).



Image 5: From right: a) Writing "Basmella" by the Roghaei Sols script using ibn Bawwab's method; b) one page of Yaghut's penmanship, held in the National Iranian Museum; c) Ahmad Ibn Suhrewardi's masterly inlaid illumination, the National Iranian Museum (Herati, 2013:46, 58 and 69).

2.3.4. Molana Abdullah Seirafi (15th century)

Abdullah Sirafi was the son of Mohammad Tabrizi, a student of Seyyed Heidar Gondeh Nevis, who was a student of Yaghut Mosta'sami. Khwajah Abdullah Sirafi was indirectly an apprentice

² Second successor to the prophet of Islam

of Yaghut after being trained by four of his apprentices. Majnoun Herawi³ describes the position of his father (Sirafi) as follows: (Herati, 2013:87).

He was confident in the real Lord

Then became recognized as Mahmoud Rafighi

He was sometimes a mystic knowing the great points

He was a sage knowing the tiny points

The author of Golestan regarded Sirafi's art to be the "Jewel of his time" because Sirafi was a calligrapher and a man of virtues and perfection. He was also seen as one of the key members in transferring the art of Islamic calligraphy to Iran and then sending part of it to the Ottomans.

2.3.5. Mirza Ghias Al-Din (16th century)

Mirza Ghias Al-Din bin Shahrokh bin Amir Teymur, also known as Baisanghor Mirza and Sultan Baisanghor Bhador Khan, was the son of Shahrokh and Goharshad, and a grandson of Teimur. He was regarded as the founder of the largest artistic schools for making and writing books in Iran and the world of Islam. The author of Habib Al-Seir said of him: "*He was the king of knowledge and perfection, never ignoring to praise the men of virtues and art, promoting calligraphers, painters, and illustrators, and seeking to admire their positions and their works of art*" (Khandmir, 2001: vol 1:276).

2.3.6. Alireza Tabrizi (Abbasi) (17th century)

Alireza Tabrizi was one of the great calligraphers and artists of the Safavid era, and since he received the attention of the [Safavid] king, he was selected as the royal calligrapher and the librarian of the court. He called himself Abbasi and was titled "Shahnavaz (friend of the Shah)". He learned the Nasta'liq script from Mohammad Hossein Tabrizi. He was also interested in composing poems. "*The king's love of and affection for Tabrizi was so great that the king was rumored to hold burning gold so that Alireza would write his works under its light*" (Fazaeli, 2011:497).



Table 1: Qur'an calligraphers to realize "purpose" (author)

Calligrapher	Century	Under the rule of	Place where the Qur'anic manuscript is held	Script	Titles
Ali Bin Hilal	9 th	Āl-e Būya (Buyid) and Abbasid	Chester Beatty Library (Dublin, Ireland) ⁴	Naskh	Interested, fond of
Jamal Al-Din Yaghut	11 th	Abbasid	The Khalili Collection ⁵	Mohaghegh	Scholar, and knowledgeable, poet, Qibla Al-Kitab

³ Majnoon Rafighi Herawi, nicknamed Majnoun the left-writer, was one of the innovative poets and calligraphers of Herat during the dynasty of Sultan Hossein Baighara in late 9th century and the first half of the 10th century.

⁴ Small and unique Qur'an

⁵ London

Sheikhzadeh Ahmad	11 th and 12 th	Abbasid	The National Museum of Iran	Sols Jali	The second Yaghut, skillful, Knower of skills, Complementary of crafts,
Abdullah Sirafi	12 th	Timurid	The Khalili Collection	Reyhan	Literary scholar, jewel of his time,
Mirza Ghias Al-Din	13 th	Timurid	Astan Quds Razavi Museum	Mohaghegh	Interested, willing
Alireza Tabrizi	15 th	Safavid	Astan Quds Razavi Museum	Mohaghegh Jali	Shahnavaz, Sheikh of calligraphers, master of art, poet

3. The Art of Calligraphy and its Position in the Social System

Art has an ideologically moral effect on peoples' lives since it provides its audience with imaginative insight into their lives, the world, and others, and links their imaginations with their life realities. Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying: *"In South Africa, I found people with great self-confidence despite much poverty and deprivation. To find the reason, I observed that they were writing beautifully and had nice writing styles"*. He also says: *"There appears to be a direct relationship between penmanship and self-confidence among people"* (<http://hedayatmizan.ir>).

3.1. Promotion of Spirituality and Morality

Spirituality denotes highlighting spiritual values, including purity, sacrifice, devotion, trust, and faith in self and society; meanwhile, morality refers to observing such virtues as benevolence, devotion, helping the destitute, truthfulness, bravery, humbleness, self-confidence, and other decent virtues.

The book "the Republic" by Plato contains theories that seek to establish a direct relationship between the moral content of a work of art and its moral effects. To Leo Tolstoy, the type of art that the audience faces affects his humane beliefs.

Over the last century, when the relationship between art and human morality was raised, the author or the speaker could be thought of fanatical approaches or adopting a Marxist position. Ann Shepherd states: *"If art is thought of as reflecting the social and economic reality, it is a simplistic and naïve approach"*. She also ironically criticizes the theory by Arnold, who stressed lyrical poetry, moral themes, and religious effects, by saying that: *"That Arnold gives a religious role to poetry is a kind of retrospective demand for us, as the weaknesses of his theory about religious are fully revealed"* (Goudarzi, 2006;37).

Table 2: Relationship between art, morality, and thinkers (author)

Theorists	Views
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		Art	Morality
1	Plato	Mimesis	The presence of a direct relationship between the moral content of a work of art and its moral effects
2	Mathew Arnold	Grand style	Stressing moral themes and religious effects in lyrical poetry
3	Leo Tolstoy	Expression of feelings	Conveying special moral cases in artwork or seeing them constantly

3.2. Letter of Permission and Leave

Getting permission has been one of the social customs in Islam that creates affection and love between families and people of Islamic society and also establishes sociability. Thus, observing this principle indicates an individual's chastity and humbleness. *“The custom of giving and getting permission for a scientific degree and qualifying for scientific degrees is a common issue in the current academic systems. Scientific letters of permission in the past were not always in writing form, as the Sheikh's giving permission was trusted alone. The permission given by calligraphy masters was, in fact, a leave of signature, given by the master to the apprentice; otherwise, no arbitrary affairs, especially art, took anything for granted, and as Khwaje Ngahshband put it: No one can attain a position from the ranks of a dynasty”* (Ghelich, 29:30).

3.3. Bazoubandi

Bazoubandi was one of the common motifs in writing arts and was inspired by heroes' armlets. *“Bazoubandi inscriptions were derived from combining squares and other similar geometric shapes with medallions (Image 6) and were named after heroes' armlets because of their similarity, as they were widely used in writing, calligraphy, architecture, and page layouts”* (Herati, 2013:180).



Image 6: Two inscriptions with geometric shapes of armlets (2013:73).

3.4. Hilya-writing

“Hilya refers to sentences that mostly describe the prophet of Islam. These signs were the sentences that characterized the traits and conducts of the prophet, and the first such sentences were attributed to Imam Ali., which contained enthusiastic and compassionate sentences” (Khalili, 2000:46). In old manuscripts, a Hilya text was always placed between two crescents,



and another part came in the inscription under a crescent, with the crescent placed inside a larger square. “Geometrically, Hilya was a large rectangle inside of which was a larger circle, with the four circular sides of the circle containing smaller circles. Two more rectangles were used to be placed above and under the circle in a horizontal way, and a low-width rectangle was also placed under the beneath rectangle” (Mohammadi-Parsa, 2017:91).

3.5. Fotovat Nameh and Calligraphy

Fotovat Nameh refers to some poetic and prosaic works containing mystical subjects and the education of faith, morality, manliness, chivalry, and heroic characters. In Soltani’s “Fotovat Nameh”, authored by Mulla Hossein Vaez Kashefi Sabzevari, Fotovvat (which translates to chivalry) is divided into three levels of magnanimity, purity, and loyalty (Vaez Kashefi Sabzevari, 1971:5). The oldest Fotovat Nameh is the book “Al-Fotowwah” by Abuld Rahman Solami, which includes five parts on mystics’ moral customs and laws. “Since the 9th century onwards, when learning calligraphy became important, many of the calligraphers and non-calligraphers familiar with writing styles and codes, authored treatises about training calligraphy and understanding relevant techniques in Arabic and Persian languages” (Haddad Adel, 2011: vol. 15:566).

4. “Purpose” in the Views of Philosophers and Traditionalists

A philosopher is characterized by wisdom, good knowledge, and decent conducts. Philosophers ate the ones who subject their conduct to the rules of reason, and assume limits or an end for anything. As well, traditionalists are the advocates of the school of thought of the 20th century in the West; this movement started with René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Schuon, and continued with Burckhardt, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Iran. As the essence of art, beauty always received the attention of thinkers, theorists, and philosophers. “Like the traditionalists, Nasr argued that eternal wisdom is nothing but ‘Sophia Perennis’ in the Western traditions” (Nasr, 2004:97).

The present study opted for a cognitive approach to deal with some theories by philosophers, traditionalists, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

4.1. Mohammad bin Mahmoud Amoli (14th century)

Shams Al-Din Mohmmad bin Mahmoud Amoli was a renowned Iranian physician and philosopher of the 14th century. He was also the author of the valuable book “Nafayes Al-Fonoun Fi Arayes Al-Uyoun”. In this book, the Sheikh considers the knowledge of writing to include one of the fifteen techniques in the literature. On the knowledge of razoring a pen, he says: “Know that in the knowledge of writing, razoring the pen is key and four things should be taken into account: opening, carving, splitting, and cutting. Also, as regards the latter (cutting), the pen is best to be oblique, as the right side of the pen should be a little elevated to be placed between the fingers” (Mohammad Amoli, 2002: vol. 1: 24-25). This book has also a chapter on the techniques of writing and calligraphy and contains interesting points about the benefits of good penmanship. He writes: “Penmanship is a credible craft and a soul-nurturing virtue”.

4.2. Mohammad Bin Khaldoun (14th century)

Abu Zeid Abdul Rahman Bin Mohammad Bin Khaldoun, known as Ibn Khaldoun, whose surname was derived from his distant relatives, called Khaldoun, had named his history book “Al-Ebar and Diwan Al-Mobtada’ Wa Al-Khabar Fi Ayyam Al-Arab Wa Al-Ajam Wa Al-Barir Wa Min Aserhum Min Zawi Al-Sultan Al-Akbar”. The introduction of this book was recognized



as an independent work during Ibn Khaldoun's time, and called *Moghaddama*, as Ibn Khaldoun attached much significance to the novelty of this book (Ibrahim Bin Senan, 2010:34). On calligraphy, he also said it was an urban art and considered its perfection within the perfection of urbanization. Major events in the history of Islamic calligraphy have occurred in large cities, especially in capitals, such as Baghdad, Herat, Samarkand, Tabriz, Istanbul, Isfahan, Tehran, etc. *"Ibn Khaldoun considered the sign of the cultural decline of a nation to be in the bad-handwriting of books and the plurality of misspellings, thus emphasizing the cultural significance of calligraphy, which can be noted in the works of Ibn Nadim and Ibn Ghatibah"*⁶.

4.3. René Guénon (born in 1886)

He published his first book "Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines" as a turning point in the oriental teachings research. René Guénon was an influential researcher and thinker in metaphysics, holy sciences, and traditional studies. René Guénon's thoughts in the book "Insights into Islamic Esoterism and Taoism" concern encrypted numbers, and reveal: *"Fo. Hsi (first China's emperor) used very simple and combined script symbols to establish principles of tradition, i.e., connected and non-connected lines, which respectively referred to Yung and Yin, two active and passive principles that originated from the transcendental metaphysical unity to create an entire cosmic manifestation"* (Guénon, 2010:76).

4.4. Frithjof Schuon (born in 1907)

Since the mid-20th century, the role of Islam and its relation to artistic works and architecture drew much attention. Some Islamic art researchers suggested that the art was derived from Islamic ontology, thus giving its elements religious and transcendental signification. Frithjof Schuon, under the Islamic name of Sheikh Isa Nour Al-Din Ahmad, was a contemporary philosopher, painter, poet, and theologian, who described the rules and codes of calligraphy to belong to the power of Qur'anic verses, in the book "Understanding Islam", suggesting *"Understanding the major role of Qur'anic verses, these sublime and elevated statements, in the lives of each Muslim is a simple thing. These verses are not statements to convey thinking, rather they are animated, are powerful, and have talisman"* (Bolkhari, 2020:78).

4.5. Titus Burckhardt (born in 190)

Titus Burckhardt was another researcher involved in Islamic arts, architecture, and Islamic civilization. "Burckhardt compared calligraphy and weaving, with the letter *a* (warp) denoting the essence of the universe and the letter *b* (woof) denoting the essence of multiplicity. To Burckhardt, codes, and rules of sacred letters were considered the elements that sanctified the Abjad letter system. For example, the numeral value of *"There is no deity but Allah"* is the equivalent of the word *calligrapher*. *"Writing the Qur'an was a sacred art, and calligraphy served as iconography in the Christian art because it represents the visible embodiment of the divine word"* (Burckhardt, 2010:151). Referring to the Chinese script, Burckhardt states: *"The Chinese script is from top to bottom, as if it is Sharia descending from the skies to the ground, i.e., through motions from the superior to the inferior"* (Burckhardt, 2013:58). Meanwhile, in the Iranian Nasta'liq and broken Nasta'liq, written from right to left, the ending letters and words of a line tend to rise and ascend to the Higher World. In the famous fresco of the Athens School by Raphael, you see Plato on the left side of the image holding the book "Timaeus", which is an



⁶ Speech of Dr. Kamiyar Sedaghat Samarhosseini. Sunday, February 14, 2019, in the Andisheh Hall of the Research Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies

abstract metaphysical work, and refers to the heavens and the sublime objects, while Aristotle is seen pointing to the inferior (underground) universe and realities. This image represents a sensual (underground) and a transcendental world on the two ends of a spectrum. This contrast is also noted between the Iranian and Chinese scripts (Image 7). Similarly, Naser Khosrow describes the beauty of the two worlds:

The Higher and the inferior worlds are You

The body is inferior while the soul is the Higher



Image 7: a) Sample Chinese script (Shamkhani, 2017:8); b) Part of the Athens School fresco (Magi, 2007:33); c) Sample Iranian broken Nasta'liq script (Shirchi, 1999:85).

“The Arabic script takes its richness from two aspects, i.e., vertical and horizontal aspects, which have extended to all sides. The first aspect gives the letters religious solemnity and majesty, while the second aspect causes the letters to link each other in an extension with a connected process. Just like weaving encryption, the vertical lines serve as woven warps and correspond to the eternal essence of creatures. In the contrast, horizontal lines serve as woofs that indicate the matter linking objects together. These senses are especially noted in the Arabic calligraphy whose vertical lines moderate and transcend the wavy process of the connected letters” (Burckhardt, 2010:152).

5. “Purpose” in the View of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born in 1933)

Nasr argues that *“René Guénon was the key exegete of metaphysical teachings, and Coomaraswamy was an oriental art researcher who used the language of artistic forms to describe his expression of metaphysics. Schuon, like the cosmic reason, full of divine grace, appears to look deep into the entire reality around humans and describes what relates to the human being based on the light of the sacred knowledge”* (Nasr, 2004: 116-117). Seyyed Hossein Nasr was born in Tehran and was a theologian philosopher and traditionalist. He also served as a professor of the Islamic sciences at the University of Washington, U.S. Hossein Nasr strives to recover the roots of art in the Islamic tradition to open doors to new dimensions of unity, seemingly remained unknown in the latest Western art. *“Nasr emphasizes that ‘the road towards Allah’ has been created by God himself so that the one who follows the conducts of Sharia and is a pure Muslim would receive the religion in its deepest levels, corresponds wholly with the traditions of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him), and finally ascertains the esoteric meaning of faith through this correspondence”* (Nasr, 1997:95).

“In geometric and mathematical designs, Muslims tend to point and zero, which represent the principle of unity in multiplicity. For this, Iranian artists used nicety and delicateness to reach introversion from extraversion, and finally to monotheism” (Nasr, 2007:304). Here, it should be pointed out that according to the pluralistic hypothesis theory: *“All religious traditions are rightful, with each reasonably reacting to the basic reality we have all been seeking to achieve”* (Von Aragon, 2020:128).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr considered traditional art to be a body of knowledge: *“The holy art within the heart of the traditional art has a sacred and transcendental function and is, like religion, reality and presence”* (Nasr, 2001: 209). *“In traditional art, there is a combination of beauty and benefit, with each object making the traditional art both beautiful and beneficial”* (Nasr, 2001:211). *“The traditional art is necessarily a science, just like traditional science is an art. To Thomas the saint, there is no art without knowledge, and that’s true of all traditions. Knowledge (scientia) here denotes sacred knowledge and involves cosmological uses. Therefore, scientia to which art pays attention concerns the esoteric dimension of traditions, not its external dimension”* (Nasr. 2001:221).

“In the myths of Islamic origin, the first thing God created was the pen. This issue is of high importance in Islamic cultures. Calligraphy was regarded to be a spiritual practice to develop full proportions in the soul and served as a mirror of the divine unit” (<http://habib.edu.pk>). Thus, a calligrapher is likened to a reed-made pen, and for this, man should empty himself like a pen to open the way for God.

“In a calligraphic line, the eye can start from anywhere and stop anywhere; each point can serve as a beginning, which never actually ends, without any beginning or ending. This reminds us of the ubiquitous presence of God, i.e., He is everywhere, and at the same time, nowhere. This invokes a sense of infinity and transcends formal limitations. Thus, again a sense of infinity is created, with the Qur’anic structure directly reflected at an artistic level, and also a way towards describing the realities of Qur’anic verses” (Nasr, 2008). God is present and an observer everywhere.

“So, wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah” (Surah Bagharah, 115).

Any non-Muslim who enters a mosque for the first time could become impressed by the space of it. This observable emptiness in Islamic art leaves two deep impacts on the human soul: first, it reminds one of becoming aware of his nothingness before the court of God, i.e., becoming aware of one’s spiritual poverty, as the prophet says: *“Poverty is my glory”*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr says: *“The most abundant wealth for humans in this world is the understanding of their absolute poverty against the God who is the sole wealthy”* (Nasr, 2008).

“And Allah is the Free of need, while you are the needy” (Surah Mohammad, 38)

The second impact of emptiness is the creation of a necessary space for the manifestation of the divine presence and the spiritual world. This effect represents a touchable symbol of the Unseen. Islamic art had used this emptiness in architecture, calligraphy, and traditional designs.

“Codes and allegories, in a real sense, that Europeans called symbols, were never constructed by the human reason; rather, it was a true reflection of the higher world into the lower world of being, and necessarily unifying the lower world with the higher world, which is the source of manifestation, due to the inherent unity of the principle, its reflection or embodiment” (Nasr, 1998:406). *“Adjusting and developing the science of allegory and the numerical codes of letters (also known as the science of Jafr), the likes of which did exist before the ancient Pythagoras and*



the followers of the Kabbalah School in the West, had been attributed in the Islamic world to Imam Ali" (Nasr, 1998:86), as the science of *Jafr* is considered the second knowledge. The knowledge of letters that is the main focus of this book is much similar to Kabbalah or Hebraic mysticism and is the second knowledge (Lori, 2006: 43). In Islamic art, and especially in the calligraphy, a spiritual human is himself a pen in the hand of God to write and promote spiritual conducts.

Table 3: Purpose" of the art of calligraphy in the views of philosophers, traditionalists, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (author)

Philosophers and traditionalists	Era	Position	Views	"Purpose"	
Mohammad Bin Mahmoud Amoli	14 th century	Philosopher	Techniques and craftsmanship	Virtue and soul-developing	
Mohammad Bin Khaldoun	14 th century	Sociologist	Urban phenomenon	Cultural sublimity	
René Guénon	Late 19 th century	Traditionalist	Numerical value of letters	A and b as two principles of unity	
Frithjof Schuon	First half of the 20 th century	Traditionalist	Qur'anic verses	Soul, power, and talisman	
Titus Burckhardt	First half of the 20 th century	Traditionalist	Numerical value of letters	Representing the invisible embodiment of divine theology. Numerical concepts of Abjad letters	
Seyyed Hossein Nasr (first half of the 20 th century)					
	View	Examples	"Purpose"		
1	-	Link between Islamic art and divine revelation	Discovery of the truth in the heart of revelation; blend of truth and beauty		
2	The Qur'an	So, wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah	Surah Bagahrah, 115	Without beginning and ending	Boundlessness, sense of infinity, observer
3	-	Point and a	The point as the creator of a and as the creator of other letters	Divine identity and the position of Oneness	
4	The Qur'an	And Allah is the Free of need, while you are the needy	Surah Mohammad, 38	And Allah is the Free of need, while	Emptiness and presence of the Unseen



				you are the needy	
5	-	Peak of calligraphy in Islam	Social Phenomenon	Beauty in life	

Conclusion

The calligrapher and the observe, while seeking to detach from the human world, are both infatuated with the manifestation of the existence of the Truth, i.e., they turn into something beyond symbols in the holy art of calligraphy. In essence, the observer and the “purpose” are the unified witness and the witnessed; a subject that thinkers, relying on the pure origins of Islamic and Shiite mysticism, have reaffirmed. These thinkers have characterized this art with the consistency of this art with spirituality and ethics in the social system, the utilization of a conceptual and symbolic expression instead of a merely decorative application, and the numerical representation of letters and geometry. Therefore, a spiritualized human is a pen at the hand of a great artist, i.e., God, to write and promote spiritual conduct, and this is the same concept of “purpose”. It appears that in this type of art and the calligrapher’s thinking, there is a movement from the higher (heavens) world to the human (sensual) world, and it is a search for perfection, and finally realizing “purpose”. Thus, the art of calligraphy has a philosophical nature and is an art based on the principle of correspondence between the world and human beings. Also, the exchange between the art of calligraphy in the world of Islam with other Islamic arts had other outcomes, as the unity created between this art among Muslims was a major subject.



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