

IN ENGLISH



FOREWORD

PER KRISTIAN MADSEN
DIRECTOR GENERAL

The emirate of Sharjah is on the Arabic Peninsula, and is one of The United Arab Emirates. It is a true pleasure for The National Museum to present the exhibition *Sharjah - Art from the Emirates* to a Danish audience. The exhibition has been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Regent of Sharjah, His Royal Highness Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, and is part of his strong commitment to fostering cultural dialogue. His Royal Highness' own collections have been made available for the exhibition, which is the result of a close collaboration with The Directorate of Art at the Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah.

With the exhibition and related events we want to give visitors new knowledge about life, art and cultural currents in Sharjah and The United Arab Emirates. An outstanding collection of historical maps explores the geography of the Gulf, and especially Sharjah and The United Arab Emirates. The contemporary, global art and calligraphy of Sharjah provides a contrast to the Orientalist lithographs of the Scottish painter David Roberts from Egypt in the 1830s.

For their excellent contributions to the ca-

talogue we would like to thank the historian and cartographer Dr. Ben J. Slot, advisor at The Sheikh Sultan Center of Gulf Studies in Sharjah, the Sharjah-based calligrapher Tagelsir Hasan, and in Denmark former principal of The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts Dr Else Marie Bukdahl, Head Librarian of The Royal Library Stig T.Rasmussen, and PhD candidate Anne Haslund Hansen, The National Museum.

For their generous support of the catalogue we would like to thank the C.L.David Foundation and The Department of Arts in Sharjah. Our thanks also to Peter Lassen, CEO of Montana, for his commitment and his GRID exhibition units, which create a fascinating framework for the exhibition's art works. Our warmest thanks also to Director Hisham Al Madhloum from The Directorate of Art in Sharjah for an inspiring collaboration. And last but not far from least, we would like to thank Dorte Dahlin and Else Marie Bukdahl, who for more than ten years have run the *Nomad Academy* project, creating an extensive network of artists and cultural institutions in Sharjah. Without these contacts and the commitment of both *Sharjah - Art from the Emirates* would never have been possible.



ART FROM THE U.A.E.

JUNE 17 - OCTOBER 31 2010
AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN,
DENMARK

We at the Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah, always seek for the creative and intellectual communication with the different societies of the world, therefore comes the Sharjah Cultural Days in Copenhagen, under the patronage and continued support of Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council member and ruler of Sharjah. These cultural activities will include a series of historical and artistic exhibitions, and popular music shows, which shall transfer a very thriving image for the local culture and the genuine and contemporary arts in the Emirate of Sharjah, the Capital of Culture. The exhibition has a historical section, which includes the collection of His Highness of rare historical maps that documents the area of the Arabic Gulf, in old times. In addition, the exhibition includes a collection of art works that was done by the International artist David Roberts. These works represent

an aesthetic documentation for the time and the place. This exhibition will hold some of the Danish antiquities; also, it will include about 34 calligraphic and ornamentation paintings done by thirty artists from the U A E, and from different Arabic Countries. These calligraphic works varies between classical and contemporary. In addition, there will be live calligraphic workshops, and video shows about some of the calligraphers.

The exhibition of Contemporary arts includes about 21 works of art, for a group of local artists, and of different generations. There will be video shows, and a section for the Sharjah Arts Biennial.

The musical band will present shows of local traditional music that is distinguished for its old styles and its musical instruments.

Government of Sharjah
Department of Culture & Information

THE JOURNEY TO SHARJAH - AND ART FROM THE EMIRATES

CHRISTEL BRAAE

The Ethnographical Collection at The National Museum has wanted to show contemporary art from the regions of the world where we have historical collections for a long time. This wish could come true with the donation from Sharjah, which also gave us the opportunity to present a part of the Arabic world that a Danish audience does not usually have the chance to meet.

SHARJAH

Sharjah is one of seven independent emirates that comprise the United Arab Emirates, founded as a federation between Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras-al-Khaimah, Umm al Qaiwain and Fujairah in 1971. Sharjah lies south of Dubai, and stretches further south to the Gulf of Oman where the emirate has three enclaves: from north to south Dibba, Khor Fakkhan and Kalba. These three towns, beautifully located at the foot of the Al-Hajjar Mountains facing the sea, are historically important areas for the Al-Qawasim tribe, who played a crucial role in the battle for the region's independence, and who are still the regent families in both Ras-al-Khaimah and Sharjah.

Unlike the larger emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which have experienced almost explo-

sive city development, life in Sharjah is taken place at a much slower pace. The active trade and financial centre is limited to a few high-rise buildings surrounded a city full of recreative areas, open squares and parks. The historical city centre of Al-Mereijda, from the 1800s, includes a group of restored houses around The Cultural Heritage Square. Here Sharjah's many new museums and cultural institutions lie side-by-side with artist's studios and calligrapher's workshops - a meeting place and forum for all kinds of artistic and cultural activities. The neighbourhood lies between the pulsating trade of Sahrjah's busy container port and the old city suq. The emirate of Sharjah has invested heavily in art, culture and higher education. Initiated by His Royal Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Al Qasimi, himself a learned historian, no less than sixteen museums have been established over the past two decades. The most recent is The Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, which opened in 2008 - the same year as The Dr. Sultan Al Qasimi Centre of Gulf Studies, where the 28 historical maps in the exhibition come from.

*From Mohammed Nouri's workshop in
Sharjah Calligraphy Studios.
Photo: Christel Braae, November 2009.
Mohammed Nouris atelier.*



THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is divided into three sections: historical maps, calligraphy, and contemporary art. The unique collection of 28 maps, the oldest of which are hand-coloured, introduce the historical and geographical context of Sharjah. Together with the exhibition texts, written by Dr. Ben J. Slot, this section provides a fascinating introduction to the cartographic story of the Gulf in images of the world since the 1500s. This is a story more fully explored in Dr. Slot's contribution to this catalogue. In the section on Arabic calligraphy there are 16 works from The Sharjah Calligraphy Museum, and 11 brand new works commissioned especially for the exhibition. Both groups of works show the many styles and expressions of classical calligraphy and contemporary art calligraphy that breaks the rules of the traditional discipline. The exhibited calligraphy works show that regardless of the expressive form used, all calligraphy starts with inspiration from a text, be it the Koran or modern poetry. The source of calligraphic art is thus always the classical genre's basic principles and spiritual inspiration.

In the next section the contemporary art of Sharjah is represented by a total of 26 artworks produced by six international artists: Karima Al Shoumali, Ebtisam Abdulaziz, Abdutarahim Salim, Abdallah Al Saa'di, Mohammed Ahmad Ibrahim and Khalil Abulwahid. These works demonstrate the wide range of media on Sharjah's contemporary art scene, including video, installation, photography, sculpture and paint-

ing. Whilst this powerful art gives us access to a locally based world of imagery with intensity and humour, its meanings are universal and all the works address global issues.

With an analysis of the contemporary art in the exhibition - and its role in a broader, global art context - Dr. Else Marie Bukdahl's article *Tradition and Innovation: The Local and the Global* also charts the artistic connections between contemporary art and modern calligraphy. Local calligraphic art in Sharjah is described by the calligrapher Tagelsir Hasan, whilst Head Librarian Stig T. Rasmussen's expert introduction to the history of calligraphy and the typology of different calligraphic styles completes the contributions beautifully.

The exhibition has been developed over eighteen months, and is based on three trips to Sharjah. It was on these journeys, with my fellow traveller Else Marie Bukdahl, that the works were selected in collaboration with the artists and calligraphers of Sharjah. One of the recurring themes of our meetings with the artists was how to display contemporary art in a traditional cultural history museum where the desire is not only to give visitors a visual experience, but also to locate that experience in a broader cultural context. How to do this without - in terms of art or significance - limiting the works to a specific locality and culture? We could not imagine doing these discussions justice in an exhibition, so why not let visitors meet the artists too? This is when the idea of films to accompany the calligraphic and contemporary art works came into play.

The first two films of the four on calligraphy offer insight into the basic principles of calligraphy, what Stig T. Rasmussen calls 'the rational aspects', i.e. the tools, systems and styles. The next two films on composition and illumination present the wider world of imagery of Sharjah Calligraphy, as well as showing examples of the modern, commercial use of calligraphy as design. This aspect is also explored in the many objects collected in the calligraphers' workshops, which are exhibited in the workshop installation where the films are screened: reeds, sketches, ink bottles, calendars - and Galaxy chocolate tins. Finally there is a small display of traditional calligraphy writing tools, as well as artefacts with calligraphy scripts from The Ethnographical Collection's own collections.

The exploration of the relationship between the viewer and the work is continued in filmed interviews with the contemporary artists, who all address visitors directly and comment on their exhibited works. The six interviews, which visitors can select via a touch screen, are shown on the back wall of the contemporary art section. The interviews were filmed on the last trip to Sharjah in March 2010 by the anthropologist and filmmaker Berit Madsen, and edited by her anthropologist colleague and cinematographer Anne Mette Jørgensen who is on the staff of

The National Museum. The complex installation was designed and implemented by the museum's multimedia expert Michael Bjørn and Mikkel Hjort Hansen.

To add a further personal dimension to the exhibited works we asked each contemporary artist to contribute a 'personal object' to the exhibition, an object which could express the artists' relationship to their art, but could also have a personal twist. The object was to be accompanied by a short comment. Four of the

Chocolate tins from the company Galaxy with calligraphy by Tagelsir Hasan. Made on the occasion of Ramadan. Firmaet Galaxy's chokoladedåser med kalligrafi af Tagelsir Hasan. Produceret i anledning af Ramadan. Photo: Christel Braae March 2010.





*Mohammed Ahmad Ibrahim's workshop
in Khor Fakkhan.
Photo: Christel Braae, November 2009.
Mohammed Ahmad Ibrahim's atelier
in Khor Fakkhan.*

six artists chose another artwork, like Abdullah Al Saa'di's pages 9-10 from his manuscript *The Naked Sweet Potato*, and Mohammed Ahmad Ibrahim's 'family album' of Cazan - a globe-trotting yellow toy dog. This is also true of Ebtisam Abdulaziz, who has chosen a piece from her major installation *Re-Mapping the World*, which caused a stir at Dubai Art Fair in March

2010, and finally for Karima Al Shoumali, who fast-freezes her own image from the series *Behind* in a circle of clear wax. Body art is crucial to Abdularahim Salim's artistic practise, so here the choice was straightforward: his *khandura* - the full-length garment he wears when he paints. Khalil Abdulwahid has chosen a white wooden cube, which simply and precisely captures his perception of perspective in art from painting to video.

On behalf of The National Museum I would like to thank all the artists and calligraphers for their kind hospitality and exceptional generosity - and patience - during filming in Sharjah. By joining us in this way, they have contributed to the creation of the visual documentation of a unique collaboration. We would also like to thank The Department of Culture for their support in also making this part of the exhibition possible.

The exhibition is on the second floor of The National Museum, but it actually begins in the front hall to the museum, where several video works are shown in a purpose-built 'tower' together with text and images. The tower is built using cube-shaped elements - GRIDs - invented by Peter Lassen, CEO of Montana, and generously on loan to the museum. In the hands of museum architect Maruiska Solow they form fascinating, almost integral new walls.

For the exhibition opening the museum lobby will house a working calligraphy studio where visitors can watch the work of the calligrapher Majida Salim, who will also write their names in Arabic calligraphy. A 14-piece percussion

and wind orchestra from Sharjah will also play and perform *Liwah* folk music.

Finally, I would personally like to thank my colleagues on the exhibition team and elsewhere for an inspiring and educational collaboration. We have called our exhibition *Sharjah - Art from the Emirates*. Despite the fact that many Danes might not recognise the name or know its geographical location the museum staff soon adopted it. They simply liked the name and sound of the word: Sharjah!

And 'What's in a name?' you might ask. The name Sharjah (in Arabic Sha-ri-qa) contains the roots of the word for 'sun' and 'something suddenly illuminated' - in other words a sunrise. This radiance is present in the calligrapher Tagelsir Hasan's logo for the exhibition, where the first letter *shiin* is crowned with a small sun.



*Logo by Tagelsir Hasan: 'Shariqa' in free Kufic.
Subtext 'Fan-min-al-Emarati', in Thuluth Script.*

MAPPING THE GULF

BEN J. SLOT

Printed maps have existed since 1477 in most regions of the world, including the Gulf area. It was in 1477 that a world atlas containing maps reconstructed from the coordinate tables of Claudius Ptolemaeus in Alexandria's manual of geography (c. 150 CE) appeared in Bologna. The oldest printed maps of the Gulf region were not maps that showed the actual situation at the time of printing; they show the state of knowledge in 150 CE. In 1477 almost no recent knowledge of the Gulf region was available. This state of affairs changed in 1507, when a Portuguese naval squadron under Alfonso d'Albuquerque attacked Arab cities on the coast of Oman and established Portuguese control over the kingdom of Hormuz, a small state which dominated most ports in the region. From that time on Portuguese cartographers produced nautical charts of the Indian Ocean with a small image of the Gulf region in the corner. This image was too small to contain much information and the maps were not printed, since they were seen as classified information.

Printed maps showing the contemporary situation were introduced by commercial firms in Italy from 1548. For the Gulf region they reflect limited knowledge produced by the Portuguese expedition of 1507, but no later

results of Portuguese expeditions. The map of Asia by Giacomo Gastaldi, printed in Venice in 1561, was imitated uncritically by the great cartographers Mercator and Ortelius, and became the basis of almost all commercial printed maps until 1700. They show only limited accurate information about the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz. The toponyms of the Arabian Peninsula within the Gulf in particular were largely fictitious or duplicated in multiple places to make the map more complete and visually attractive according to the fashion of the time. One island, for example, found itself in three different spellings in three different places. Names of non-existing places from Gastaldi continued to appear on maps from as late as the 1830s. The gradually improving maps of Portuguese cartographers had not remained entirely unnoticed in Europe. Somehow the Dutch enemies of the Portuguese had acquired Portuguese nautical charts of the Indian Ocean. On some maps by Hendrik Hondius and his relative Petrus Bertius a more realistic shape of the Gulf than the trapezoid drawn by Gastaldi from Ptolemy appears. From 1596 there were also a few Dutch printed versions of the most accurate Portuguese drawings of the Gulf since 1561. The most interesting version is the



The French cartographer Nicolas Defer repeats earlier mistakes regarding a river between Basra and Bahrain. The Land of the Emirs derives from a travelogue of Jean-Baptiste Tavernier from the mid 1600s. Her gentager den franske kartograf Nicolas Defer fra 1705 forgængernes fejl hvad angår en flod mellem Basra og Bahrain. Emirernes Land kendes fra Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's rejsebeskrivelse fra midt 1600-tallet.



On this map from 1780 is Mekehoan (Umm al-Qaiwain) - one of the Arab Emirates. På dette kort fra 1780 ses Mekehoan (Umm al-Qaiwain) - et af de arabiske emirater.

first map of the Gulf on its own, a detail frame of the general map of the Indian Ocean attributed to Barend Langenes but clearly based on the work of the Portuguese Lázaro Luis, who drew the most accurate image of the Gulf.

Only a few such improved maps exist, whilst there are many editions of the Gastaldi image. A slight adaptation of the Gastaldi image appeared after 1652 in the work of the French cartographer Nicolas Sanson, who from the study of a medieval Arab text rather than an expedition replaced a number of toponyms in the Arabian Peninsula. In itself it was logical to believe an Arab geographer instead of vague cartographic knowledge, but the Arab source of the 12th century was remote from the actual situation in 1652.

The Sanson image immediately replaced the original Gastaldi version on the market. It is on imitations of the Sanson maps that one sees a new representation of up-to-date knowledge. Dutch navigators had drawn more accurate charts of the route from the entrance of the Gulf to Basra, and had explored the Musandam Peninsula between 1644 and 1646. Some later versions of the Sanson maps show a more accurate tracing of the rivers and creeks between Basra and the Gulf based on the Dutch drawings. These same maps often replace Gastaldi's fabulous toponyms on the Persian coast with more realistic ones from French travel accounts. The full extent of Dutch information leaked out very slowly, and it was not until after 1703 that printed maps

appeared with more than the bare minimum of new knowledge.

The official Dutch nautical charts had been issued as manuscript charts to Dutch ships sailing to the Gulf, but were kept secret by the Dutch East India Company. That originals or copies were leaked to Britain or France was unavoidable, and it is here that they were first printed.

In the meantime, however, Guillaume Delisle, a French cartographer with scholarly inclinations, was working in a different direction. He had a more critical attitude to the scholarly traditions based on Gastaldi, having more faith in the instruments of the navigators and recorded experiences of travellers. In a first attempt from 1700, the Gulf takes the shape it usually had on nautical charts, but more conspicuous is a new error: a non-existing river between Basra and Bahrain based on a misunderstanding of travellers' accounts. A later version from 1721 was based on the work of the Arab geographer Abulfida (13th century).

The French cartographer Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville is commonly regarded as the founder of modern cartography, but he too was unable to distinguish reality from fiction. For the Gulf region modern cartography starts with Carsten Niebuhr, who for his 1772 map used the London edition of a French nautical chart based on the 17th century manuscript charts of the Dutch East India Company. Niebuhr plotted the toponyms he had heard of during his stay with the Dutch on



Carsten Niebuhr's map of the Gulf. He did not visit any unexplored regions, but collected information from the British and the Dutch, which he added to the British edition of a French nautical chart. Here are names as Bani As (Bani Yas tribe) and Scharedje (Sharjah). Carsten Niebuhr's kort over Golfen. Han besøgte ingen ukendte steder i regionen men indsamlede information fra britiske og hollandske repræsentationer, som han tilføjede til en britisk udgave af et fransk søkort. Her er navne som Bani As (Bani Yas stammen) og Scharedje (Sharjah).

Kharg Island or from the British in Bushire. The plotting of names was still approximate, but in Niebuhr's case at least the names were not fictitious.

Niebuhr's books were almost immediately translated into French and Dutch, and today these translations are much more common than the original German editions. The map of the Gulf was used by other cartographers, but only as an element in a mixture of the old and the new: most maps were now a mix of d'Anville and Niebuhr. The British attacks on the coast of the Emirates from 1808-1818 resulted in the appearance of some new toponyms in the region, but this new data was mixed with old. The French cartographer Adrien Brué's map of 1822 is like an archaeological site: there are unverified elements going back as far as Ptolemaeus, some elements from Gastaldi and Dutch nautical charts of the 17th century, a bit of d'Anville, Delisle and Niebuhr, and new names from 1808-1818. Yet at the time the map was printed the first systematic survey of the coasts of the Gulf was already underway. Between 1821 and 1829 officers of the British Indian navy made the first systematic survey

of all the Gulf coasts. Since then, the maps of the Gulf show its real shape, which is quite different from the shape on older maps. The parts of the Arabian Peninsula behind the coastline of the Gulf had remained largely unknown, with the exception of the section of Oman on Niebuhr's map. The first knowledge of the Najd area came from French officers participating in the Egyptian attack on the first Saudi state in 1818. During the 19th and 20th centuries the exploration of the inland areas of the Arabian Peninsula can be followed from the proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society in London, but also in books like that of the Danish explorer Barclay Raunkiaer. Finally, several British representatives in the Gulf collected data on all the regions bordering the Gulf. The data was collated in J.G. Lorimer's *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* between 1908 and 1915, which remained classified until 1970.

The maps are courtesy of Sheikh Dr. Sultan Al Qasimi and the Sheikh Sultan Centre of Gulf Studies in Sharjah.

ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY

STIG T. RASMUSSEN

LEARNING BY THE PEN

Being able to read and write plays a crucial role in Islam, since the Koran is believed to have been dictated to Muhammad: “Read: In the name of thy Lord Who createth. Createth man [...] Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who teacheth by the pen, Teacheth man that which he knew not.” These verses from sura 96 are considered the first in Muhammad’s revelation, granting writing its central status in Islam as the medium God used for his message. The pen also plays a central role elsewhere in the Koran - sura 68 is literally called ‘The Pen,’ and begins with the invocation “Nûn (the initial ‘N’). By the pen, and by what they write!”

Arabic calligraphy is rooted in the desire to give the word of God the most beautiful worldly form, and consequently the first calligraphy is to be found in handwritten Koran manuscripts and on religious buildings (the name of God, the names of Muhammad and the first caliphs, quotes from the Koran) followed by other manuscripts where it decorates title pages and chapter headings, and later when it adds visual expressiveness to poetic texts.

HISTORY

The Arabic script developed from the Nabataean script, which builds on the Aramaean script. Around the 10th century BCE, the Aramaeans adopted the script of the Phoenicians, the earliest known alphabet (from which Greek developed, then Latin - still the written alphabet of modern Western languages today). Only a few Arabic inscriptions prior to Islam are known to have existed, and no written texts have survived, even though the pre-Islamic poems that were annually selected as the best are purported to have been written in gold and hung in Mecca.

As a consequence of the rapid Arab military expansion in the 7th century BCE, many languages - in countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan - adopted Arabic writing (despite its relative unsuitability to render them). These languages, together with Arabic, contributed to the development of the calligraphy first influenced by the calligraphers of the Iraqi city of Kufa.

These pre-Islamic inscriptions are carved in stone, and the strokes are therefore square with sharp angles. This also characterises



A so-called ‘lawh’ - wooden board traditionally used by schoolchildren in the Sudan. Sharjah Calligraphy Museum. Photo: Christel Braae, March 2009. En såkaldt ‘lawh’ - træbræt, der traditionelt anvendtes af skolebørn i Sudan.

the Kufi script which, signalling legitimacy and strength, was primarily used in Koran manuscripts during the first century of Islamic culture. All early Islamic coins are also embossed with Kufi, partly for technical reasons, but also due to the perceived suitability of the script to express the stature of the Prince: upright and proud his name could guarantee the value of the coin. The early ceramics of Islam’s eastern territories also have square glaze texts, that contrasts with their round forms. Parallel to the Kufi script, a rounder, more fluid script was developed for administration and commercial correspondence, where speed and legibility were called for. This script was called Naskhi, and is the body type of the Arabic alphabet still used today.

Ibn Muqlah (886-940 CE), a high-ranking official at the caliphate in Baghdad and a calligrapher (a prerequisite for the position), is regarded as the person who systemised calligraphy and adopted the geometric principles of proportion for each letter that still prevail today. He introduced a rhomboid point as the basic module, and from that point each letter and its components were given dimensions (see below). The system reflects the epoch’s passion for mathematical and musical harmony. Unfortunately, none of Ibn Muqlah’s handwriting is known to have survived. Ibn al-Bawwâb (d. 1022 CE) made the differences between the individual letters of the alphabet



Abbas Al Baghdadi: 'It is from Suliman, In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most merciful.' The Koran, Sura 27, verse 30. Thuluth script. Ink on paper. 'Den er fra Salomon og lyder: 'I den nådige og barmhjertige Guds navn'. Koranen, sura 27, vers 30. 1994.

clearer, as well as developing their aesthetic qualities. He was closely associated with the caliphate in Baghdad, and was for a period responsible for the ruling family's library in Shiraz, Persia. His writings include a thesis on the script and a didactic poem on the art of writing, but he is most famous as a calligrapher. He invented new scripts - Muhaqqaq and Rayhânî - and revised those that already existed. The Naskhi and Muhaqqaq scripts were his favourites, and his version of them is

considered to be unequalled. Ibn al-Bawwâb is reputed to have transcribed 64 copies of the Koran and numerous other works, but only a single Koran and mere fragments of other manuscripts have survived.

Yâqût al-Musta'simî (c. 1221-1298 CE) is the third of the three great masters in the history of Arabic calligraphy. He invented the slanted cut of the reed pen, making fine nuances in the thickness of the stroke possible and introducing an unprecedented elegance

of script. Legend has it that he transcribed 1,001 copies of the Koran and gave 70 writing specimens away daily, but only 5-6 copies of the Koran and a few poetry collections from his hand are known to exist today. When the Mongols conquered Baghdad in 1258 he hid in a minaret with a pen and ink. In the rush of his flight he forgot paper, so he wrote on a towel instead to maintain his high calligraphic standards - despite the circumstances.

TYPOLGY

Basically, as mentioned above, there are two types of Arabic writing: the square and the round.

The square Kufi script has characteristics of the region's earlier writing, primarily Nabataean and Syrian scripts, which were used in the northernmost part of the Arabic Peninsula around the beginning of the Christian era and the first half of the first millennium CE.

The letters of the Kufi alphabet can be divided into three groups according to their position in relationship to the base line: one group that has long straight or diagonal lines from and above the line; one that consists of small, round forms on or just above the line; and that one has curves below the line. In the beginning only consonants (not vowels) were written, but the need for more precision and nuances soon became apparent, especially in establishing the correct reading of the Koran. The earliest vowels were coloured dots. Later vowels were symbolised by short lines above and under the consonants.

The earliest manuscripts in Kufi script can be found on milestones, coins and religious buildings - including the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem, Islam's first prestige building from 691-692 CE. Koran manuscripts were written in Kufi until the mid 10th century CE, the script being well suited for writing carefully on parchment. Kufi was also used as a distinctive ceramic decoration, especially in the eastern regions.

The Kufi script developed, especially ornamentally, into a number of styles. These were named after the ruling dynasties that used them, and are characterised by the ornamentation of the upward strokes: leaves and flowers, elaborate knots and animals - even human faces. In extreme cases these experiments also affected the basic form of the script, making it extremely difficult to distinguish individual letters and impossible to read what was written. The function of the text had become entirely ornamental.

The rounded script can be seen as originating in an italicised version of the square script, and was first used by administrators for extensive daily correspondence where there was no time for formal calligraphy. Later the script was used for less important texts, and finally also for texts from the Koran. This interim script - between the two main styles - was used longest in the western region of the Muslim world - in Maghreb and Andalusia - where the regionally specific scripts have Kufic characteristics.

The rounded script gradually crystallised into

six classical styles: Muhaqqaq, Rayhân, Thuluth, Naskh, Tawqî' and Riqâ'.

The hallmark of **Muhaqqaq** is the curves under the line, which are almost straight and at a diagonal angle to the line (resembling a slightly curved sword blade with the tip pointing slightly downwards).

Rayhânî is a reduced-scale Muhaqqaq.

Thuluth has curved lines and high upward strokes with right-turned hooks at the top. As well as the conventional joining of words, the letters are also joined decoratively, and individual words can be divided over two or more lines, one above the other, to fill the page.

Tawqî' is a slightly more compact and round variant of Thuluth; eight of the letters are also joined to those following in opposition to standard practise. Thuluth is commonly held to be the most difficult of the six classical scripts to write. It is used on the title pages and chapter headings of manuscripts, on mosque lamps and metal candlesticks, and on architectural friezes and elaborate calligraphic murals.

Naskh or **Naskhi** is clear and simple and easy to read and write. It has short, straight upward strokes, strong curves, and a balance between the parts of the letter above and below the line. Naskhi is still the most common printed script.

Riqâ' or **ruq'ah** is compact and round with short upward strokes and the simplification of some details. It is a reduced-scale version of Tawqî,' and was primarily used for private letters and other informal texts. Ruq'ah is

the script used for handwriting in Arabic countries today.

In Iran several distinctive styles emerged primarily to write Persian texts. Arabic was usually written with Naskhi or one of the more elaborate scripts.

Ta'lîq is written diagonally from the right down to the left, so a line of text is comprised of a series of short, slanting lines that are 'hooked' to each other (the name of the script means "hanging"). **Nasta'lîq** is a further development with more heavily slanting lines. The letters are more rounded, and some of the strokes are heavily extended. Urdu is usually written in Nasta'lîq.

In **Shikasteh** the rapid, flowing characteristic of Ta'lîq is so exaggerated that it seriously limits its legibility. Many of the words are joined, the individual letters are indistinct, and the rhythm of the writing is irregular.

Dîwânî is a more disciplined Shikasteh script, used primarily in Turkey for official texts. The name of the script comes from the word **dîwân**, meaning ministry.

The sultan's proclamations were written in a highly ornamental style to prevent forgeries, and furnished with an elaborate, illuminated ruler's emblem or **tughra** at the top. The emblem includes the sultan's monogram, and may have originally been his handprint. With a little imagination, the thumb, three raised fingers and little finger of the right hand can be seen formalized in the two long lines running towards the right.

In other parts of the Islamic world a whole

range of geographically named script variants emerged. Furthest east is Sînî, the Chinese-influenced Arabic script seen in manuscripts from western China. The Sînî script is characterised by the obvious use of a brush rather than the traditional reed pen.

The basis for calligraphy is writing. Its enhancement of writing is a practice that can be perfected and a graphic aesthetic that can be learnt, with the deliberate goal of adding emotional value to the letters.

Calligraphy can in turn influence the calligrapher, contributing to the expanded consciousness that grants deeply religious experiences - and a new, subjective calligraphy to reflect them.

Finally, calligraphy can provide a starting point for the art's optimal synthesis of both aspects, the dynamic complexity of combining rational form and emotional significance.



*Tughra
by M.S. Saggâr*

CALLIGRAPHY IN SHARJAH

TAGELSIR HASAN

With its modern evolution and growth, the UAE has attracted many Arab experts. Arabic calligraphers are among the experts who have found the perfect place to meet, pursue their art and exhibit their work at The Emirates Fine Art Society (EFAS). In 1989 the Arabic calligraphy group was formed under the EFAS. The group has provided a solid basis for collective works, resulting in a strong revival of the art of Arabic calligraphy thanks to the dedication of its members.

Over the past two decades, with the generous support and patronage of H.H. The Ruler of Sharjah and the officials in the Sharjah Department of Culture, the art of Arabic calligraphy has become a major feature of the art scene in the UAE. Among significant events, the publishing of two issues of *Al-Khattat* – the first ever journal of Arabic calligraphy – is worthy of note. This was followed by *Hroof Arabia*, today a highly-reputed, specialized magazine with 25 issues to date.

In 2002 the unique Arabic calligraphy square was founded. The square includes The Sharjah Museum of Arabic Calligraphy and Ornamentation, The Sharjah Centre for Arabic Calligraphy and Ornamentation, as well as studios for professional calligraphers. This represented a significant move in consolidating the interest in and renaissance of calligraphy, as well as paving the way for the foundation of



*Tughra. Tagelsir Hasan.
Courtesy to the artist.*

The Sharjah International Arabic Calligraphy Biennial, which was held for the fourth time in April, 2010.

Prior to the renaissance of the art of Arabic calligraphy in Sharjah, calligraphy was only used on signage and in education. Today, with the flourishing of the art, the UAE and Sharjah in particular is one of the most important centres of this noble art in the Arab world. Calligraphy today continues to flourish and win respect as an art form in both private and public collections, as well as at international auctions.

THE SHARJAH MUSEUM OF ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY AND ORNAMENTATION

The Sharjah Museum of Arabic Calligraphy and Ornamentation is central for anyone interested in the history, styles, and development of Arabic calligraphy. The museum provides new

generations with education, fostering a close relationship between them and their written heritage. This is achieved by visits to the museum – especially by schools – and participation in museum events. The museum also hosts major calligraphy exhibitions and the exhibits of The Sharjah International Arabic Calligraphy Biennial. The museum collaborates with local organisations that also prioritise to Arabic calligraphy and ornamentation, such as The Calligraphers' Studios, The Ceramicists' Studios, and The Sharjah Centre of Arabic Art Calligraphy and Ornamentation.

THE SHARJAH CENTRE OF ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY AND ORNAMENTATION

The Sharjah Centre of Arabic Calligraphy and Ornamentation provides teaching and training in the art of Arabic calligraphy. The centre employs skilled calligraphers and instructors to fulfill its mission. At the centre students learn Arabic calligraphy and its crafts

and their different uses. The centre teaches students of both genders from the age of eleven in separate private classes. To encourage students, the education is basically free. The only fees are nominal – to cover transportation and the study materials for each course. The centre develops the students' talents through organizing continuous training courses at different levels, and holds regular, publicly announced workshops.

CALLIGRAPHERS' STUDIOS

The Calligraphers' Studios are the main ateliers and workshops provided for professional and distinguished Arab calligraphers in UAE, enabling them to produce and exhibit their works. These calligraphers cooperate with The Sharjah Centre of Arabic Calligraphy and Ornamentation to demonstrate their talent and conduct training workshops for the centre's students. These professionals also mentor students through a series of permanent and periodical events and activities. The establishment of The Calligraphers' Studios is entirely due to the generosity of H.H. The Ruler of Sharjah, and is part of his strong commitment to the promotion of Arabic calligraphy. These studios are run by the Directorate of Art in the Department of Culture and Information, which also supervises membership of the studios.



*Sketches in Tagelsir Hasan's workshop at the Sharjah Calligraphy Studios.
Photo: Christel Braae, November 2009.
Skitser fra Tagelsir Hasans atelier i Sharjah Calligraphy Studios.*

TRADITION AND INNOVATION: THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

ELSE MARIE BUKDAHL

Art and culture are some of the very best instruments for promoting mutual understanding and co-operation between different peoples and cultures.

H. H. Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, UAE.¹

In a number of Arabic countries during the last two decades, it has been possible to follow contemporary art and calligraphy, often with considerable originality, which has developed as a result of both the following: a network of visual and verbal dialogues between tradition and innovation, and the combination of inspiration from the local art scene and the international art world. This development is clearly seen in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, where the Directorate of Art has - as it has stated - worked towards building bridges between Arabic and Western cultures: 'This is a time of major cultural and artistic transformations that are happening around the world and are breaking the existing barriers between people and communities. The gap is being bridged and narrowed for the benefit of mankind and the horizon is thrown wide open to talented creators around the world in their respective fields of art, architecture, music,

television, cinema, internet.'² It is first and foremost the Emirate Sharjah that has become internationally known for its considerable support of art and culture and for its generous views regarding other cultures. In 1998 Sharjah was designated **Cultural Capital of the Arab World** by UNESCO and is often called **The Cultural Pearl of the Emirates**.

*Windtowers around
the calligrapher's
courtyard in
Sharjah.
Photo: Christel
Braae, March 2009.
Vindtårne omkranser
kalligrafernes
gård i Sharjah.*



The Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah emphasises the importance of creating a productive dialogue between tradition and innovation - as the department itself expresses it: 'the Emirate maintains its artistic and cultural identity whilst also supporting contemporary art and innovative artists'.³

THE ART SCENE IN SHARJAH

The **Emirates Fine Arts Society** was established in 1980 in order to provide favorable conditions for the development of the visual arts. In 1996 its head office was placed in one of the beautiful buildings of The Heritage Area in Sharjah. This **Society** is intended to promote art education and the public's appreciation of art, as well as to hold exhibitions at various levels that present painting, sculpture, calligraphy, ceramics, graphics, photography, installations and various forms of digital art. The **Society** also organises lectures, seminars, workshops and publishes articles and periodicals about the fine arts. In 1983 the **Emirates Fine Arts Society** founded an Annual Exhibition for its members. In the foreword to the catalogue for **Memory**, which is the title of their 27th Annual Exhibition, it is stated that this exhibition, as the previous exhibitions, 'seeks to present a true portrayal of the art movements and the visual production of its members, regardless of their different nationalities and styles'.⁴ In 1993 His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qasimi established **The Sharjah Biennial of Contemporary Art**, without doubt,

because His Highness has always been immensely interested in promoting intercultural projects and dialogues amongst all the peoples of the world. This Biennial has often been described as 'one of the most celebrated cultural events in the Arab world and the region's largest exhibition'. The **Sharjah Biennial 6** signaled a change with the involvement of H.H. Sheikh Hoor Al Qasimi and many more international artists, seminars and other activities. Most of the Biennials have had a theme that has been explored and discussed in seminars. The theme for **Sharjah Biennial 4**, in which Danish artist Dorte Dahlin participated, was the frequently discussed relationship between the global and the local. The theme for **Sharjah Biennial 8** was the topical question regarding the relationship between 'art, ecology and the politics of change'. In the foreword of the catalogue, Director of the Biennial, H.H. Sheikh Hoor Al Qasimi, urged for the formation of an 'ecology of choice' and for the transformation of the space of the Biennial into a 'platform for an open discussion for various parts of the Arab region and the world'.⁵ Over time, the Biennial has widened its vision and lifted its artistic level. Today over 80 contemporary artists participate in this event.

His Highness has also taken the initiative to establish the **Sharjah Cultural Festival**, which presents aspects of Arabic and other Islamic art and cultures in various cities around the world. Through these exhibitions new visual dialogues between Arabic art and artistic

forms of expression from other countries have arisen and artists from different nations have had new opportunities to meet each other. In the exhibition at the National Museum in Copenhagen calligraphy and the visual arts from Sharjah are prominent because it is precisely these two art forms that are not only centre stage in the art scene in the Emirates, but are also achieving a greater impact internationally. In both the calligraphic works and the different genre within the visual arts one can see, more or less clearly, connections between the local and the global, between tradition and innovation and between inspiration from the Arabic and the international art world alike. It is through very personal artistic interpretations of this complex network of sources of inspiration, that the calligraphers and artists, who are presented here in the exhibition, have achieved an original profile.

WRITTEN IMAGES AND ABSTRACT SIGNS

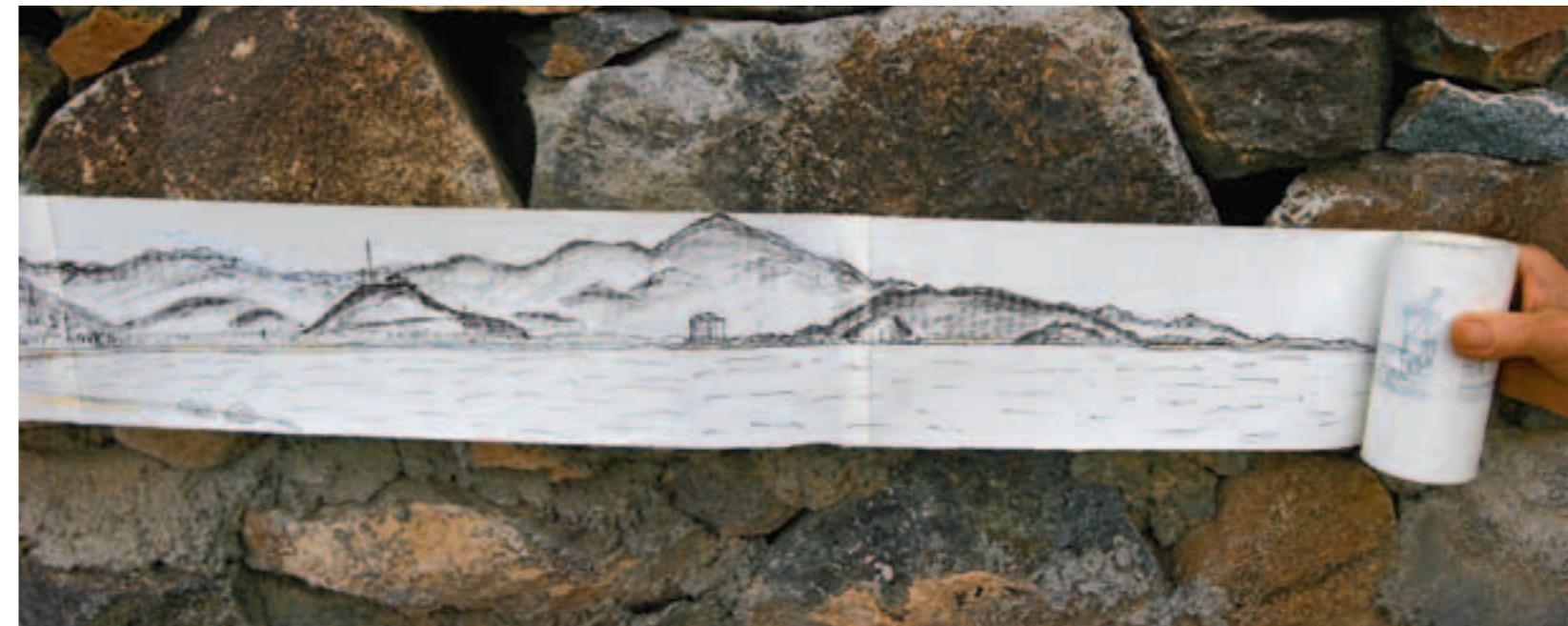
Stig T. Rasmussen points out: 'Arabic calligraphy has its source in the desire to give the most beautiful earthly form to the word of God; calligraphy has developed alongside architecture to be the most important form of art in the Islamic world, which adopted pictorial art later in time and with reservation. Calligraphy is used today by many artists as a starting point for abstraction'.⁶ Most of the calligraphers presented here in this exhibition are masters of several of the time-honored calligraphic forms of expression and types of script.

Sharjah Calligraphy Museum contains a large collection of classical calligraphic works and several of them are presented in this exhibition, providing a varied impression of this art form's many scripts and forms of composition.⁷ Several of the calligraphers have also developed a more abstract visual art production that uses characters and segments of characters as elements in a non-figurative totality, which emerges from the visual pattern of the script or the characters. These artists have, especially during the last three decades, actually created a new artistic form of expression noted for its great power of emotional fullness, and which builds upon interpretation of classic calligraphy and inspiration from modern art. For example, from the works of American abstract expressionists, such as Franz Klein's black-white pictures, the abstract sequences of which remind us of calligraphic patterns. There are also traces of that form of conceptual art that, for example, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Wiener created, in which the concept, or the text involved in the work of art, take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns.

In, for example, **Kahled Al Saa'is** calligraphic works the characters are interwoven in a complex filigree-like pattern of variegated lines. The works have a light, almost ethereal quality - a dream-like vision that can quickly disappear (p.106). He comments that: 'If we work deeply enough we can find new and different ways of communicating'.⁸ **Tagelsir Hassan** also masters classical calligraphy and

the modern and free artistic interpretation of this genre. This is clearly revealed by his classical works, *My lord relieve my mind and ease my task* and *Merciful mercy by Allah*⁹, and the more modern picture that he exhibits. He explains himself that it is created in a **free Kufic style**. The calligraphic signs seem to be almost sunk down into an abstract surface that is penetrated by intense tones of red, violet and orange (p.107).

Mohammed Nouri¹⁰, **Khalid Nafisi** and **Fatima Mohammed** who exhibit together with **Eman Al Bastaki**, **Majida Salim** and **Farough Haddad**,¹¹ master the different classical types of calligraphy in a way that is new, innovative and supremely skilled (p.98-105). However, several of them and others of the exhibiting calligraphers, for example, **Mousaab Shamil** and **Mousaab Al Douri** are also interested in creating abstract painterly patterns with



Abdallah Al Saa'di with part of his 15m long prospect of the coastline from Dibba to Khor Fakkhan. Photo: Christel Braae, March 2009. Abdallah Al Saa'di med sit 15m lange prospekt af kystlinien fra Dibba til Khor Fakkhan.

segments of letters in combinations that are governed by principles other than the meanings (p.98 and 108). At the exhibition the viewer experiences a varied view of the richness of classical and modern calligraphy, which is in a constant state of development in the Arabic world and is centered in Sharjah.

Muhammad Sa'îd Saggâr, who is master of both the classical calligraphy and the modern abstract, more freely formed calligraphic expression, has defined the common denominator for these calligraphic art forms thus: 'For the skilled practitioner, calligraphy is exploring the unity of the world, penetrating deep into our innermost being, giving shape to the fundamental pure core of feeling'.¹²

INNOVATION IN VISUAL ART

The six artists participating in this exhibition each have their individual profile and have produced pictorial interpretations of the world around them and the world within; interpretations in which traces of both their own culture and meetings with international art and culture constantly appear. They have all been through a demanding journey of development along many **main roads and byways**, as well as participating in a considerable number of exhibitions in Sharjah, the Gulf countries and abroad.

Karima Al Shoumali has always been interested in finding new artistic interpretations of the relationship between art and people. The visual dialogue between the artwork and the viewer

has therefore been a great influence on her production. It also explains why various forms of installation art have increasingly become her favored genre. Sometimes her installations are documented through video or photography. There are lines of connection between her installations dealing with social issues and those of Joseph Beuys and other Fluxus artists, as well as younger artists' contribution to this genre, for example, Pipilotti Risti's. In several of her installations, photo-series and videos, for example, the video, **Internal Dialogue** (2005) and the photo-series **Behind** (2007), she is intent on visualising what she calls 'an unspoken language (...) of painful ideas and emotions that remain hidden, that go unheard or are suppressed'. It is precisely through language of form that she visualises 'those words that too often remain silent'.¹³ In the project **Value Lost** (2009) she attempts to create 'a connection between the loss of human value and the usage of plastic bags'.¹⁴ She has visualised this theme in several media. In some works she has sewn the plastic bags into the canvas. Then she has painted over with luminous yellow, blue or pink colours. Finally she has covered the surface of the picture with wax (p.96-97). She has used the same complicated technique in the triptych **Without title** (p.94-95). These pictures reveal - as do Kurt Schwitter's collages - the reality that we ignore, whilst creating a bright poetic artistic totality.

In the installation, **Burqa**, Karima Al Shoumali has placed traditional face masks from

the Gulf on brightly coloured cylinders. The contrast between these two elements, which create a deep tension between tradition and modernity, visualises indirectly that we all bear masks and it is never really possible to see how someone actually is. Deep inside we are all a mystery (p.93).

Through intense and personal pairings between abstract European expressionism and Arabic song, music and a wealth of rituals, **Abdulrahim Salim** has created pictorial art that has its own unique form of expression. Like the American abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock he prefers to place his canvas on the floor and paint with his hands, feet and other media. He is in agreement with the point Pollock made that 'on the floor I am more at ease, I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and be literally 'in' the painting. This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West'.¹⁵ In October 2003, at the Royal Danish Academy of the Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Abdulrahim Salim performed his ritual Zarr¹⁶ and body painting, accompanied by the musical rhythms of the Gulf, **liawah**.¹⁷ He danced forcefully, became enshrouded in nylon to be later covered in ink, before creating a monumental painting; a painting that was a powerful fusion of tradition and

From Karima Al Shoumali's performance **Value Lost**. London 2009. Courtesy to the artist.



innovation. Khalil Abdelwahid has made a video about a similar ritual performance by Abdulrahim Salim. In the last couple of years he has created new, very long, expressive black pictures, which are done with ink and resemble banners. They have been painted with hands and feet and are decorated with white cross-like figurations that produce light patches in the suggestive black background (p.88). Abdulrahim Salim has also made collages with a very complex woven structure of pieces of canvas, patterned cotton material, paper and

other items that have been painted with oils, water-colours and ink (p.89-91). The works are marked by a filigree-like pattern of white and black lines with occasional traces of blue or orange, that pop up like shiny points of intensity. The collages appear almost as a micro cosmos that reflects the macro cosmos that is our fragmented world with so many criss-crossing tracks and openings.

Abdallah Al Saa'di has, always in an independent and surprising way, renewed the expressive potential of drawing and painting. On long lengths of paper he has drawn the landscapes of Khor Fakkhan so they can be experienced in a new way and you can feel that he himself lives in this part of Sharjah. During the last couple of years a visual artistic investigation of the nature, individuality and way of being of the sweet potato has dominated his creative production. In a series of works entitled *The Naked Sweet Potato* he investigates the sweet potato from an artistic point of view, from all possible vantage points. Initially he ignores that we eat sweet potatoes without thinking about what they are and what they are composed of. The results of his investigations are visualised on canvas or paper with both humour and convincing artistic force, and with intense, light brushstrokes.

Abdallah Al Saa'di has also made a manuscript of the Naked Sweet Potato called *Naked Findale or Naked Sweet Potato (Batata) (20042008)*, which in text and pictures tells about its history,

characteristics and comings and goings. He describes his experience of the sweet potato this way: 'How to enjoy it, sense it, see it, touch it, listen to it, smell it, taste it, feel it - to come inside of us or to inside him (the potato) - that is important'. He also tells us that the sweet potato is called *findale* in the local dialect because, in a certain sense, you destroy its life when you dig it up. When the potato grows the water is removed from it a month before it is dug up and that is why, comments Al Saa'di, that 'it takes shape in pain - and often has erotic attitudes'. When it is dug up it is naked, but while it is still in the ground it is what he calls 'a hidden treasure' or 'a secret'. The white potato he sees as being masculine, whilst the red is feminine because it has a round shape. Finally, he has made a video that tells about the naked sweet potato's wonderful life. It is typical for this artist that he seeks objects that resemble sweet potatoes. He has, for example, found a type of flute called *ocarina*, which has the form of a sweet potato.

Al Saa'di has also noticed that if you stop looking at the sweet potato as a food, it appears in a different light as a fascinating object, which has a very expressive form. In order to present this aspect of the potato he paints it in bright blue or green colours or intense red or yellow (p.56). Then, to emphasise the form and the colour of the potato, he paints the background in colours that are complementary or contrasting to the colour of the painted potato.

He points out that when the potato comes up - out of the soil, it becomes a part of our civilisation. It is this life that he also visualises in his paintings. We witness a primitive kitchen or bathroom inside a potato. A bicycle and a portrait of a sweet potato can be found within another potato (p.80-85). In 2008, a series of Al Saa'di's *Sweet Potatoes* shown at Sharjah Museum provided everyone with the fascinating experience of how amazing a sweet potato's life is, when it is the object of an artistically convincing interpretation.

Ebtisam Abdul Aziz has been particularly interested in working with video art and developing her own forms of conceptual art, op art and body art. Through new artistic interpretations of aspects of both society and science, she stimulates the viewer to pose new questions about the surrounding world. She is convinced that art can express what cannot otherwise be expressed:

1. The world is full of artists, but to be special, simply be true to yourself first
2. My art is not for the closet, but rather to make people look and deal with my messages
3. To me, the concept has to be sufficiently interesting to make me produce a piece
4. I was told I'd never make it as an artist as I had three strikes against me - I am young, female and pretty!
5. I don't like to make art that's comprehensible, preferring to make art that forces the viewer to ask questions

6. For me, art is not what we see but what we think

In several of her works, in which she combines installation art, video and body art, she is interested in exposing the breakdown of values that Western consumerism (often called 'enoughism') has caused. She considers *Autobiography (0307) Part II*, which is a video filmed in the public space, to be a second and more complete version of *Autobiography (03-05) Part I*. In *Part II* the artist wears a black garment that completely hides her face and body. It is covered with green numbers, which represent a summary of her autobiography over a certain period of time, and which symbolizes the eroding of personal identity, which occurs in a modern society with materialistic values and consumerism. The human being is transformed into a code or a set of numbers. As a living symbol of humanity made anonymous, the artist moves around in public space hoping to awake in those she meets a more critical view of society's materialistic foundation (p.66-69).

Through her art she also exposes an alternative understanding of the world, alternative to that proposed by scientists. For - as she explains: 'Science seeks knowledge of the complexity of structure and composition, while I search for the human aspects of the mind whose complexity the scientists cannot grasp with their tools alone'. So, in the performance entitled *My Brain 06* she seeks 'different new ways of seeing, hearing and understanding the processes of nature'.¹⁸

In *Words in Art - 08* (p.64-65) she has created what she calls 'a geometrical optical art'. The first part of the creative process involves a piece of conceptual art that contains statements about her artistic vision. With these she points out that she wishes the viewer to ask questions and that it is important for her that art is not hidden away in an ivory tower, but is seen and studied by us all. These statements are replaced with numbers that she uses to create mathematical equations, which become the formulas that are the basis for her abstract figurations. In this way she transforms words to pictures that present new meanings. There is in this work a critical sting too. For - as she explains: 'manipulating numbers and mathematical systems is a cry of revolt against the shackles of oppressive regimes'.¹⁹

Mohammed Ahmad Ibrahim masters several genres that he imprints with imaginative strategies, innovative presentation and technical skills. For several years he has mainly been known for his sculptural works featuring unconventional materials and surprising categories of form. They are permeated with humour and often created out of special materials such as grass, sand, clay and

stones - often found in the mountains. Some of his sculptures have several figurative features and can, for example, make one think of fantasy camels. Thus in *Khor Fakkhan 3* (p.75)

The author with artist Khalil Abdulwahid in Sharjah.
Photo: Christel Braae, November 2009.
Forfatteren med kunstner Khalil Abdulwahid i Sharjah.



have an eye-catching and intense character because they are painted over with a strong red colour, green hues and shocking pink. In other cases Ibrahim has created sculptures that display associations with furniture and other household objects such as bowls. This

is true for the bowl-like objects *Without title* (p.74). with which the resemblance to a bowl is shifting so that they appear as a sculptures with their own special expressive force. Out in nature he has created flat, abstract sculptures, for example, *Khor Fakkhan II*, which is 10 meter in diameter. Such works change and extend the space that they are placed in and can be considered as Arabic parallels to the American land art created by Robert Smithson.

Ibrahim has also experimented with photography and through this medium reveals hidden aspects of our daily lives that we have not noticed. In the photo series *Dijon is a Floor* (2009), (p.78-79) he has used his camera to expose 400 signs - some official others mysterious - on the streets in Dijon, France. 146 of the photos are compiled into a finely composed series. Using a special technique he has succeeded in visualising, small, often ignored, but still fascinating and mystical abstract signs, in either pink or bright red tones or more discreet colours.

The funny little yellow toy dog called Cazan plays a special role in Ibrahim's artistic universe. It is the main character in a series of surprising and humorous installations that Ibrahim has created during his travels, for example, in France and Jordan, and during his visits to Vienna, Paris and other cities. In 2009 Cazan visited Cairo and had many experiences that Ibrahim has photographed from interesting and unusual angles. In the photographs we can see Cazan sitting

on cars, having fun - he has been picked up, carried and talked to by locals and tourists. The little dog has ensured that many people have taken a break in their busy daily lives, and have had the chance to participate in an adventure with him and meet the art world in an untraditional and fascinating way.

Khalil Abdulwahid works with painting and video art. He has, for example, created new forms of *Still-life painting*. They convey a strong emotional current, and are less concerned with exactness and more interested in mood. They are painted with broad, dabbling brush strokes.

However, it is video art that he has worked most intensely with and innovated in various ways. Artist and art critic Talal Mualla has described the essence of his video art with these words: 'He uses light as a preliminary material in many of his works. But light can also be an emotive material that detaches the past from the present. Wahid presents dynamic images which pulse with energy and compressed history'. In 2003 he made the video *Wahid*, which has also been presented by the artist at the Royal Danish Academy of the Fine Arts in Copenhagen.²⁰ In this video he filmed a paint brush being pulled back and forth over a canvas. He succeeded in creating a mystical space in which - as Peter Lewis remarks: 'the eye loses the instinctive equilibrium and abandoning everything (...) space loses its depth and its definition'.²¹

Several of Abdulwahid's videos contain visu-

alisations of experiences that he has had in Sharjah and on his travels. In his own words: 'My memory contains a lot of scenes that are connected to art. The videos in which I express myself artistically are only memory flashbacks; these might mean nothing to many people, but they carry many meanings connected to my memory and artistic ideas'.²² In *Memory of Place* (2008) we see a fascinating depiction of an evening in the *Fine Arts Society* in the beautiful moonlit courtyard in the Heritage Area. Children are busily occupied drawing while the adults talk with each other and walk around looking at everything going on around them. Abdulwahid has created lighting effects that produce a poetic atmosphere that turns all the scenes into enchanted situations. In the videos *Bicycles* and *My Way*, there are situations from daily life - a drive in the car and long row of bikes in Amsterdam - in which he reveals hidden poetic aspects and humorous details (p.70-71).

The 6 visual artists and 11 calligraphers have concentrated on establishing new relationships to their surroundings and created a multitude of spatial effects with which new

meanings arise and standpoints are intensified. Finally, several of them have striven to capture the many tiny nuances that only the artistic idiom is able to express. At the same time, they have attempted to create new perceptions of space that mediate unexpected images of the world around us, or forgotten perspectives capable of changing our outlooks and beliefs. Their visual space is often very complex but always open and thus suggestive of the infinite and multifaceted space that surrounds us.

On the whole, numerous efforts within contemporary visual arts in Sharjah have been made to arrive at, what a modern anonymous Arab poet has called, a *world of re-enchantment*, which is eternally in a state of dynamic transformation. It is a world in which one doesn't long for a constantly lost *enchantment*, but rather recreates it in a contemporary form on present-day terms, interpreting it in the pictorial, sculptural or digital idioms of our time. But a *world of re-enchantment* is also a world where a fruitful and extensive interplay exists between tradition and innovation, such that the innovations might organically blossom out of the many layers of national culture.

NOTES

1 Quoted in the foreword *Art and Peoples* of the catalogue (ed. Dorte Dahlin and E.M. Bukdahl (translated into Arabic and English) p.3, for the exhibition *Nomad Academy Goes Public. Pilot Projects for Art in the Public Space in Sharjah and an Arabic Cultural Institute in Copenhagen*, Sharjah Art Museum, 12/11 - 12/12 2008, organized as part of the cultural exchange program between The Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah and The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. This exchange program, entitled *Nomad Academy*, was started in 2001 and has since developed a lengthy series of collaborative projects that are described on its website: www.normad-academy.org.

2 See the foreword written by the Directorate of Art, Department of Culture and Information, Government of Sharjah, for the exhibition *Overlaps. North-Southeast. Contemporary Danish Art and Architecture*. Ed. Dorte Dahlin, Sharjah Art Museum 15 / 2 - 12 / 3 2000., p.8. In English and Arabic.

3 See the foreword for the catalogue for the exhibition, *Five from Afar*, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, 1/1020/10 2003, organised as part of the above mentioned Exchange Program, p.1. Five artists from Sharjah participated in this exhibition; their works were described by artist and art historian, Talal Mualla.

4 See the catalogue for *The 27th Annual Exhibition - Emirates Fine Arts Society*, March - 2008, curated by Mohammad Al Qassab, p.19.

5 See the catalogue to the exhibition *Still Life. Environment and the Politics of Change*. Sharjah Biennial 8, 2007, p.25.

6 Stig T. Rasmussen, *Written images. On Arabic calligraphy* in the catalogue for the exhibition *Written Images - Arabic Calligraphy - Art Exhibition*, The Royal Library, Copenhagen., 2007, p.59. The exhibition was created in cooperation between

The Royal Library in Copenhagen and Department of Culture and Information in Sharjah, Directorate of Art, and The United Arab Emirates. Stig T. Rasmussen is leader of The Center for Orientalia and Judaica in the Royal Library.

7 See Stig T. Rasmussen's article in this catalogue.

8 Khaled Al Saai, exhibition in The Majlis Gallery, 2008, p.1.

9 *Written images. Arabic Calligraphy. Art exhibition. Object Description*. The Royal Library, Copenhagen, 2007, pp. 1819 and illustrations..

10 *Written Images. Objects description, op.cit.* p.25 and illustrations.

11 *Written Images. Objects description, op. cit.* p.27 and illustrations.

12 Cited in *op. cit.* by Stig. T. Rasmussen, p.73.

13 *Silent Words*. Unpublished article.

14 *Value Lost: representing the undervalued life in art*. Unpublished article. 2009.

15 B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible*, New York 1972, p.228.

16 *In Egypt zarr* is a ritual performed to drive away evil spirits. It is also performed in other Middle Eastern countries.

17 See *Five from Afar: Workshop and works that bring meaning nearer* in *Al Tashkef* 2003, nr. 15, p.81 and illustration.

18 *My brain* in *Ebtisam Abdul Aziz*, Solo Exhibition, Sharjah Art Museum - Sharjah Arab Contemporary Art Museum, 2007, p.33.

19 *Ebtisam Abdul*, Solo Exhibition, *op. cit.*, p.5.

20 *Five from Afar*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1011 and illustrations.

21 *6th Sharjah Biennial* in *Universes in Universe*, 2003.

22 *The 27th Annual Exhibition - Emirates Fine Arts Society*, March-2008, p.46.

IMAGES FROM THE NILE

ANNE HASLUND HANSEN

In the early 1800s more and more European artists travelled to North Africa, Turkey, the Levant and Egypt. Their representations of the remote and unfamiliar became part of what is known as Orientalism - a curious mixture of actual observations and fantasies of the untouched Orient and the Holy Land. The Scottish artist David Roberts (1796-1864) was among the most productive. His drawings from his travels in Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon from 1838-39 were published as colourful lithographs. These mass-produced images soon became souvenirs and provided inspiration for increased travel.

Many of the artworks of Orientalism are still popular, but David Roberts' work is perhaps better known than most. His pictures of Jerusalem, for example, play a central role in the novel *The Last Supper* (*Ostatnia Wieczerza*, 2007) by the Polish author Paweł Huelle. He recounts how he coincidentally came across Roberts' work in one of Jerusalem's many souvenir shops. Here reproductions of Roberts' lithographs lay side by side with postcards and guidebooks. Travelling in Egypt one often finds Roberts' images of Pharonic monuments on posters and postcards and in albums. No other artist of this historical genre has received the same attention.

Roberts represents his subjects with reliable precision, but he also has an eye for the

fascinatingly exotic. The pictures are clear and almost contemporary, but at the same time shrouded in sand and the golden light of the desert that erases all modern noise. Roberts appeals to present-day tourists precisely because the atmospheric universe rendered in his works responds to what they themselves feel and want to remember.

Roberts made as many as 250 lithographs of his travels. Colour lithography was a technical innovation that made it easy to print multiple copies. Roberts' images were sold individually and were also collated in books. His main subjects are landscapes and historical architecture from antiquity to the Islamic Period. There is also a smaller group of street scenes and folklore. These almost 200 year-old images are also valuable as archaeological documentation. The images of the Egyptian temples, for example, show how well preserved the colours still were in Roberts' day.

Roberts' works are influenced by Romantic painting, which used untamed landscapes and crumbling ruins as a symbol of inner emotional struggles. In his depiction of the Luxor temple, Roberts has chosen a radical angle with the majority of the image showing the dispersed ruins of the barren west bank. In Roberts' rendition, the two Colossi of Memnon on the west bank of the Nile appear with their backs to the viewer - melancholically watching



Abu Simbel. Lithograph from 1839



*View from the Luxor temple.
Lithograph from 1847*

the setting sun. The enormous Abu Simbel, a temple for Ramses II, was the southernmost site Roberts visited. A sand dune makes the image simply but effectively dramatic. The picture of the merchants' quarter in Cairo demonstrates Roberts' talent at combining registration and atmosphere. David Roberts is represented in a number of museums throughout the world. The lithographs in the exhibition belong to Sharjah Art Museum.

*Merchants' quarter, Cairo.
Lithograph from 1848*





*The Colossi of Memnon, Thebes.
Litograph from 1839*

