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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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Liberating “Khatt” from Calligraphy: Samir Sayegh on art,  
religion and spirituality

**Kirsten SCHEID, Hala SHOUCAIR, Saleh BARAKAT, Samir SAYEGH**

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## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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### LIBERATING *KHATT* FROM CALLIGRAPHY: SAMIR SAYEGH ON ART, RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Kirsten Scheid, Hala Shoucair and Saleh Barakat  
Converse with Samir Sayegh

**Kirsten Scheid**

**Hala Shoucair**

**Saleh Barakat**

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The eminent Samir Sayegh has contributed substantially to Arab modernism as a critic, historian, and artist himself. His writings in Arabic are well known, through numerous journal articles, interviews, and most notably his 1988 book, *Islamic Art: A Speculative Reading of Its Philosophy and Aesthetic Particularities*.<sup>2</sup> Further, his thinking impacted scores of students and colleagues in architecture or graphic design from the American University of Beirut, where he lectured from 2003-2007. However, his voice has not been heard loudly in English. This transcript amalgamates multiple sittings with Sayegh, between 2009-2022. He kindly allowed us to merge them.

Several elements deserve attention: First, Sayegh distinguishes carefully between the *orthography* of Arabic writing as beautiful script and its inherent *logic* as a set of measured but scalable relationships. We have attempted to preserve this distinction by using “calligraphy”—the Greek etymology of which means “beautiful writing”—and *khatt*, the Arabic word for line, font, script. It is the latter which Sayegh uses to define his practice. Second, the artist also distinguishes between “religion” (*al-din*), as an institutionalized, rule-bound practice and set of designated actors on the one hand, and on the other, “*ruhaniyyat*,” “*al-sufiyya*,” and “*al-tasawwuf*,” which mean for him

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1- Portions of this essay were previously published on the website of the now defunct cultural ezine, *Muraqqa*, which can still be accessed at <http://www.muraqqa.org/samir-sayegh.html>. The transcript here follows the transliteration recommended by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, without, however, using diacritics. Our hope is that readers familiar with Arabic will recognize the words in their own script, while those unfamiliar Arabic will be encouraged to think how these terms could shift their concepts.

2- SAYEGH Samir, *al-Fann al-Islami: Qir'a Ta'ammuliyya fi Falsafahi wa Khasa'ishi al-Jamaliyya* (Islamic Art) (Beirut, Dar al-Ma'rifa li-l-Tib'a wa-l-Nashr, 1988).

respectively spiritualisms, Sufism, and the Sufi path, none of which has a particular denomination of religiosity according for him. Our translation follows suit. Third, Sayegh's narrative positions modernity/modernism (both of which he refers to with the single word *al-hadatha*) as the instigator for a quest to think of spirituality newly, globally, even cosmologically, while also availing oneself of local/traditional aesthetic practices. Offering poignant and humorous anecdotes about the controversies that surrounded Modernism's Arab instantiation (or we might as easily say, Arabs' Modernist manifestations), this interview underscores a not uncommon experience of Sufism, particularly in the material application of an artist's practice, as a direct relationship with divinity and global art-making.

### ■ **Barakat: How did you start your quest in modern Arab art?**

- Sayegh: In fact, it was a return, but from a new perspective. You could say I entered the world of *khatt* twice. The first time was during childhood, when the calligraphy teacher at the Dayr al-Mukhallas nunnery where I was from ages 10-15 stood by my desk and said, "You have beautiful handwriting." That was the beginning of a long relationship. I also remember a picture from the nunnery, of Symeon the Stylite atop his pillar. (Fig. 1) It is said that Symeon sat up there feeding birds and performing miracles. I told myself I should become exactly like him. I developed a passion for Sufism and poetry. Meanwhile, *khatt* remained on my mind. I practiced it as a hobby. So, to emphasize, poetry, Sufism, sainthood, and *khatt* were of one cloth for the young me.

My second entrance into the world of *khatt* ensued from the 1967 "great defeat" and the cultural movements of 1968 in France. At 23, I had just moved from my village of Magdoucheh to Beirut and gained employment as a writer and critic focusing on cultural, intellectual life. The sense of an essential unity – an idea impacted by the circulation of new (social) conceptualizations – spawned innovation in poetry, music, theater, architecture, and so on. All this innovation formed a single, worldwide project. We established this shift on a (new) concept of modernity (*al-hadatha*), meaning our motto shifted too, from the revival of heritage and openness to the contemporary era, which led modernization (*istahdatha*) across the Arab world at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to authenticity and modernity (*al-asala wa-l-hadatha*). Authenticity, *our* authenticity stems from our heritage, and the core of our heritage is the legacy of ancient civilizations. Modernity, for its part, was the era to which we wanted to contribute. It included the West, which had opened itself to previous civilizations, among them cultural Arab civilization (*al-hadara al-'Arabiyya al-turathiyya*), i.e., 'Islamic', or 'Middle Eastern', or 'Levantine'. The point, however, is that human innovation is one, and from that unity came our strength to move away from the classical idea of poetry, with its required compositional rules, verses, and forms of flattery, to the idea that the poet has a vision. It is the same for painters, who now must have a vision embracing all civilizations, not merely a project of duplicating people

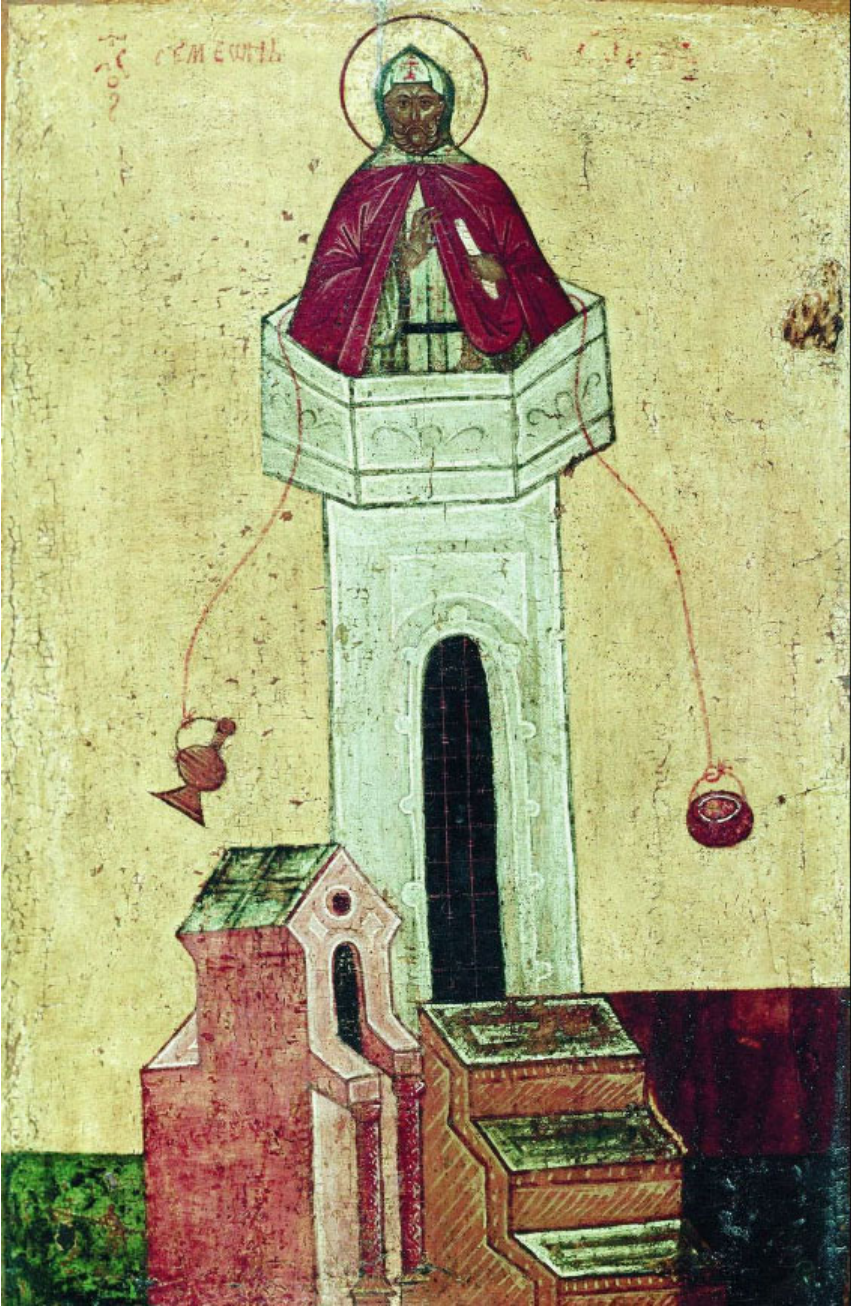


Fig. 1, Symeon the Stylite, 1465, public domain. Accessed at [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/V%C3%A9n%C3%A9rable\\_\(orthodoxie\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/V%C3%A9n%C3%A9rable_(orthodoxie))

and natural views as they are. Painting should first grasp the internal dynamics, feelings, and thoughts of the artist as a human.

As an art critic at that time, my job was to examine the true impact of the calls for modernity and authenticity in the Arab world: Was this joint charge really being respected and reconciled? How did it relate to a requisite Arab identity? Some artists had started going back deep in time, to Mesopotamian, Phoenician, Assyrian, Sumerian, Babylonian, and Pharaonic practices. Some took up calligraphy and ornamentation. I felt something was missing from both. I wanted to consider *khatt* from the perspective of Arab modernism, to deepen my conviction in authenticity and modernity, and to establish a personal artistic identity, the ultimate objective of modernism. Building on my own experience with both heritage and contemporary practices, and thinking about *khatt*, which I had studied and whose practitioners I started researching, traveling throughout the Arab world. I began to rethink the practice of *khatt* and the meaning of beauty.

### ■ Barakat: What challenges confronted your quest at first?

- Sayegh: I found that 75-90% of the artworks based on calligraphy did not evince actual understanding of *khatt*. It's not that they hadn't studied calligraphy; they were no good at writing. They practiced *khatt* as if drawing. They looked at *khatt* through the eyes of Paul Klee. Just like they looked at Islamic ornamentation (*zakhrifa*) through the eyes of Matisse. When Arab artists (as professionals) started heading to the West for training, the artists there said, "What are you doing here? You have a rich, magnificent cultural heritage!" But here, there was no museum of ornamentation and *khatt*. There were no books at hand to consult. Any books that did exist had been locked up in the national libraries of France or the Vatican, or private museums.

### ■ Scheid: Do you mean no one was still practicing *khatt* in the Arab world, maintaining it as a living tradition? What about the calligraphers whom one can read about in 1930s newspapers, such as Nassib Makarim (1899-1971), who wrote 1,000 words on a grain of rice and specifically disliked the common attitude summarized then with the aphorism, "*kul shi Franji branji*" [everything from the Franks is best]?<sup>3</sup>

- Sayegh: *Khatt* never stopped developing. People got curious about other things and stopped contributing to it. Nassib Makarim was one of the last classical calligraphers. (Fig. 2) His influences were from the Ottoman Sultanate's renaissance of *khatt*, its final moment of glory. But around the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the

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3- `Isa Mikhail Saba, "*Sa`a fi Maktab al-Ustath Makarim (An Hour in Mr. Makarim's Studio)*," *al-Ma`rid*, 29 February, 1931. Archived material at the American University of Beirut, Jafet Library, Special Archives Collection.

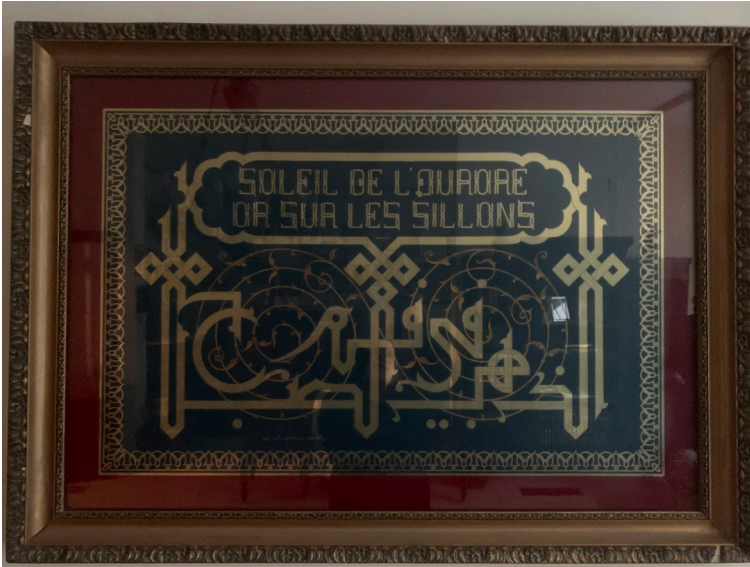


Figure 2, Sheikh Nassib Makarim, [title as is], 1936, oil on glass, 80 x 150 cm.  
Signed as "The calligrapher of His Majesty the King of Iraq and the Lebanese Republic."

Turks had started looking westward, and they gradually stopped supporting *khatt*'s constant evolution.

If we gather up all Qur'ans made since that time, we will find their *khatt* is practically the same. Whereas, if you collect all Qur'ans from before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, especially those we call "the first," and all their accompanying ornamentation, you will quickly notice there are no two alike. They may all be written in a script called "Kufic," but none are precisely the same. However closely they resemble each another, they always exhibit distinctions: here, the letter is thick; there it is tall, and so on. The letters themselves ornament the pages! In fact, previously, *khatt* was everywhere, part of everything: On walls, doors, copper utensils and instruments. It did not exist simply to be read, or just for the sake of the Qur'an. *Khatt* served the project of life (*kana al-khatt li-l-hayat*). It was a part of the vision (*ru'ya*) of Eastern art. *Khatt* participated in the knowledge of the world's hidden structuring (*al-nizam al-khafiya li-l-kaun*). Its practitioners looked at a tree and saw its structuring; they didn't look for its size or shape. They saw its hidden architecture. They respected Nature as an inherent order. This vision joined all of the arts, from carpets, to engraving, to ornament (and you find the same unity in China and Japan).

*Khatt* gave a new role to the copper platter that could be only a thing to carry other things. It turned engraved silver into a tableau (*lawha*) whose very order disseminates comfort by affording a kind of constancy (*thabat*). *Khatt* holds you fast within the laws of Nature, just like any invisible ordering. For example, in Andalusia, in Alhambra Palace, an entire wall bears the repeated inscription of

a single phrase: “There is no victor but God.” Do you think its makers needed to teach you that Allah triumphs over all? We get that. So what does that vast wall mean as a whole? It teems with natural laws and formal relationships. Tall, small, thin, fat: fused, they make a profoundly informative language. That’s what I concluded from my research.

■ **Scheid: If as you say, such art formally resembles a tree, and if we consider that for some Nahda-era artists, trees were signs of God (*ayat Allah*), could we say that when people looked at *khatt* formally, they also perceived such signs?**

• Sayegh: Of course! They saw God, and not only God but everything. When the structuration (*al-nizam*) is *khatt*, with the exactitude of its “alif,” its verticals, horizontals, columns, and slants, and when all the ornamentation whirls around it, both the maker and the viewer feel the same pleasure you feel looking upon a blossoming tree. That pleasure is the pleasure of unity with Nature, of oneness with Order, of being one with God and Nature. Natural beauty merges the mind and senses. Absolute beauty (*jamal mutlaq*) connects us to the unity of Being and imparts the philosophical sense of beauty: perfection, completeness (*al-kamal*).

I wanted to join that world, to practice with those *khatt*-artists, but in vain! I found the practitioners of *khatt* in present times had become craftsmen, implanting their trade like carpenters or blacksmiths. They gained expertise and mastery. Indeed, this art demands professional skills and advanced techniques, and achieving those deprives one of innovation and imagination. People still admired calligraphers, but for them it was an “impenetrable magic.” Not an art (*fann*); just a re-appearance of the Qur’an. So for the public at large, *khatt* was an appendage of religion, but one that neither served religion nor was served by it.

■ **Scheid: Were there any writings or studies you consulted to construct your understanding of earlier *khatt* practices?**

• Sayegh: Yes! Though they were very few. Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (c. 932, Baghdad - 1023, Shiraz) speaks of *khatt* as an architecture that is difficult and onerous to make. A line too thin is weak; too thick, unyielding; and so on. Balance eludes us. He’s talking about formal relations. Letting one form dominate another upsets the balance. To make balance, you must be well-learned in the language of forms. Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022, Baghdad) says, if you want to enter the world of *khatt*, you must give up your wife, your children, and your friends. You must surrender your mind and senses to reach anywhere, and who knows if you really will. You cannot traverse the distance quickly. Ibn al-Bawwab is talking about a spiritual relationship, like love (*al-`ishuq*) or prayer. He treated *khatt* like a lover: Take care! Leave it for a second, and it will quickly betray you.

■ **Scheid: From your description of formal relationships, one could say the earlier calligraphers practiced an abstract art. So, how did this heritage become an obstacle for your research and practice in the 1970s?**

• Sayegh: It was hard to find a common language to talk about *khatt* as art. I had many long conversations with the art critic Joseph Tarrab and the artist Saloua Raouda Choucair. We could make sense when we agreed to speak about the form (*al-shakl*) of *khatt* and not its relationship to institutionalized religion, which designates jurists and serves power's interests.

■ **Schoukair: When you spoke before about the “absolute,” it reminded me of how my mother always spoke about the essence (*jauhar*).**

• Sayegh: Those are *the* words we came to use for talking about form. I would tell her [about her art], “This form, it is the content itself.” That was the language we developed. She said that abstraction (*al-tajrid*) had become the language of Being and the cosmos (*lugha kauniyya*). She worked on duality, on fullness and emptiness, on the convex and the concave, on lines and masses.

■ **Scheid: Relationships!**

• Sayegh: Yes, relationships of different types of lines. This is an essential feature of Eastern abstraction, not geometrical abstraction (*al-tajrid al-handasi*). This vocabulary came to us because we were at the inception of this modern thought (*al-fikra al-haditha*). Look at Choucair's experiments from that period: rugs, what she called “composition” (*sigha*). They lay in proximity both to the artisanry of this civilization and The Bauhaus School.

When in 1988, I published my book *Islamic Art*, which I had been researching in the 70s, showing that Islamic art spoke to contemporary concerns, al-Muntada al-Thaqafi held a colloquium about it.<sup>4</sup> Salah Steitieh came in his capacity as Minister of Culture. The Islamic historian Tarif al-Khalidi, the scholar of Byzantine icons Mahmoud Zibawi, the philosopher and professor of Islamic Studies Radwan Al-Sayyed formed a panel to discuss my book. The lead attendee, however was Janine Rubeiz [founder of Dar Al Fann] arriving with an aggressive attitude. She interrupted our panel saying, “Excuse me. You're holding a colloquium on Islamic art, but is there even such thing?!” At this point, Saloua Raouda Choucair entered, and hearing Rubeiz, she took her seat. We waited for the chair of the panel to reply, “We'll see if there is.” The very idea caused a fuss!

The panelists spoke, and when the discussion was opened to the audience, Choucair rose saying, “Just a moment. If you would permit me, I would like to

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4- See Note 1.



express my position on this topic: I would sign that book with my own name. Thank you.” She left immediately. She, Tarrab, and I had long discussed the unity of Islamic art *as an art unto itself* with a different conception of art than that inherited from the Ancient Greeks, through the Renaissance, to modernism with its human at the center of the world and the source of art inspiration. Whereas Eastern art puts the Truth or the Absolute at the center of Creation. Note, I don’t say “Allah” because Allah transcends all. The laws of Nature, the human cosmos (*al-kauni al-insani*), the unity of these lies at the center. Thus, artists do not express a personal ‘I’ (*al-ana al-khassa*); they express ‘I, the Truth’ (*ana al-haqq*).

Remember, I hadn’t wanted to work in *calligraphy*; I wanted to work in *modernity*. I could do that with *khatt* because the art stands on its own. It is true that Arab modernism was a main catalyst in the rediscovery of the past, especially the art of *khatt*. Nonetheless, it is not the right path to give *khatt* a new cycle of life. Though it may seem that contemporary art meets seamlessly with the art of the past on many grounds, a closer reading of the past leads us to the conclusion that there are two visions of the meaning of art and the role of the artist.<sup>5</sup> The first sees art as revolving around the absolute, where the artist stands as a witness to the unity of being versus the unity of the metaphysical. The second makes the artist the center of the world and his art the register of his successes and failures in his continuous fight with himself and the world.

The Hurufiyyah movement had lost that vision [of unity].<sup>6</sup> I felt it had lost its way. Using Arabic letters and Islamic ornamentation to compose a ‘modern painting’ automatically demotes them to a secondary artistic element, even if it gives the artwork some Arabic or Islamic traits. The problem was, modernism had so many currents, because it took over a century to emerge. For us, what brought us to insist on spiritualism (in modernism), was the Sufi way of life (*al-tasawwuf*). For the Arab world, for Choucair, for us all, it was a liberation (*khalas*). It was a window onto Creation. It was an escape route from the petrification of religion (*tahjir al-din*), whether Christianity, Islam, or any other. Religion had become a stumbling block on the route to progress. We would not be able to advance if we stuck to a religious order and its rituals. We liberated ourselves completely from religion. We did not consider Sufism a matter of Islam or Christianity. It was a matter of Arabism, the Arab human, the person who speaks Arabic, carries this heritage, memorizes its poetry, has a specific history, and set of possibilities, has familial and human relations, and at the same, relates to the world (*al-alam*).

Whereas, to put it very bluntly, Hurufiyyah was addressing political ideas and directions much more than the artistic questions of the *khatt* itself, its vision, and its creative values.

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5- Nota Bene: Here Sayegh handles a common art history, from pre-Islamic to the global contemporary, thus including 19th century Europe.

6- The artistic movement that used Arabic letters as a source of inspiration from the fifties onwards.

### ■ Barakat: So how did you proceed?

- Sayegh: The critical mind cannot compromise between those two visions. How can a contemporary *khatt*-artist be a witness and fighter at once? How can one be present and absent simultaneously? Can one be the mirror and the face together? My first reflection concentrated on researching the birth of Arabic calligraphy as a full-fledged art more than a thousand years ago and at a later stage trying to understand the regression of this art and its decline. That occurred when talk about technique took over. In the many (Arabic) books on calligraphy, you read nothing of the creative side. When they cite Ibn al-Bawwab, they only quote his poem about rules for cutting the feathers or the stick, or for making the ink. How long and thin an “alif” should be – they copied this information as a ‘recipe’ without heeding the call to creativity. I met many calligraphers and artists while conducting my research in Morocco, Sudan, and Iraq. I became close to Dia al-Azzawi who was interested in the topic. I attended an exhibition for calligraphers, and there I met Mukhtar al-Baba who said he got what I was talking about, this language of forms. He invited me to see his sketches: The same “alif,” with its quarter-sizing and head made to fit - a kind of distribution, but no comprehension beyond that. The same as the other calligraphers. Mukhtar said, “What can I do? That’s as far as I can get.” *Khatt* had reached its end, for him. That is why Abu Hayyan’s ideas were not advanced.

### ■ Schoukair: I want to understand how you reach this spiritual element, how do you see yourself in that line, as being both modern and spiritual? (Fig. 3) [pointing towards a central line in a painting on display]

- Sayegh: I firmly believe there is always room for advancement. So if the reason cannot find a solution, maybe the hand can. This is how I work: I listen to my hand, to the call of the ink, and I surrender to the reed.

My first experiment, for example, took up what cannot be written and what cannot be said. I wanted to liberate *khatt* from the language and the meanings of words and go back to the first moment of its birth, to the universe of signs and symbols, when the letters were hanging between mud and water. It was imperative to separate *khatt*’s role as a medium of communication from its mission of aesthetic beauty. You must comprehend the polarity of *khatt* to deal with it. If you look at it in order to read, you don’t see it. And when you let yourself immerse in the meanders of *khatt*’s beauty, reading becomes secondary.

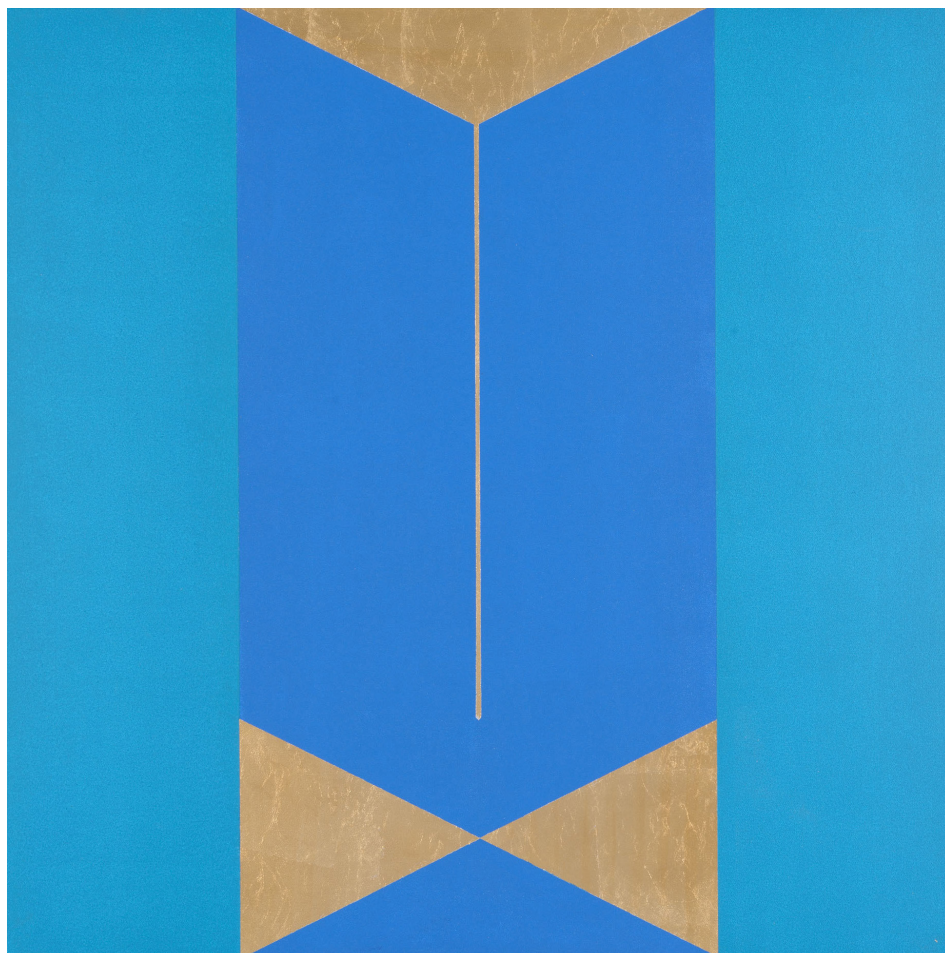


Fig. 3 Samir Sayegh, *Lam-alif 3*, 2009. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, 100 x 100. Courtesy of Saleh Barakat.

■ **Scheid: It is as if *khatt*, or any work based on natural relationships, provides a pre-verbal access to The Truth, right? So how would this be translated?**

• Sayegh: *Khatt* roots itself in concepts and objectives different from those of writing, even if they share the same letters and belong both to the same linguistic source. Writing is meant to be read; *khatt* is destined to be contemplated in a state of exaltation. Writing mainly offers a means of comprehension and clarification, of transmission and delivery. *Khatt* starts when the line transcends itself as a means, to become a goal by itself; achieving self-sufficient presence capable of initiating its own dialogue: a dialogue of forms.



Fig. 4 Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, 1237, al-Hariri's Maqamat, scholars in the library scene, ink, watercolor, and gold pigment on paper. Department of Manuscripts, Arabe 5487. Bibliotheque nationale de France, Paris. Public domain photograph. Source gallica.bnf.fr.

Let me tell you the story of how I learned about Yahya al-Wasiti. I was a journalist for *Annahar* newspaper in 1972, when an invitation came to something called “Al-Wasiti Festival” in Baghdad. I asked who this Al-Wasiti was, and no one knew. Only the artist Paul Guirgossian, who was also my friend, had an answer, “The guy who drew camels.” So we went to Baghdad, where we found copies of his pictures, because the originals belonged to the National Library of France, in Paris, and they did not share all the pictures, just enough to fill a frame. We studied what we saw. (Fig. 4) At first you see something of Byzantine icons in his work. Then you see that he wasn’t drawing Zayd and Amer [fabled people]; he was drawing forms and then applying color and juxtaposing them. The result is aesthetic. Like a rug: drawing persons or plants; making ornament (*zakhrafa*), geometrical ornament.

## ■ Barakat: Tell us about forms.

The universe of forms is the new language that *khatt* should aim to reach to transport humans. All that is needed to learn how to read this language and how to decipher it.

## ■ Barakat: And how should we read those letters?

Sayegh: Read them through the lines: in their nudity and their simplicity, their uprightness and curvature, their verticality and horizontality, their length and shortness, their thickness and thinness, their sharpness and softness, their attachment and detachment, their binding and unfolding, their ascension and descension, their lying and being laid down.

The early Kufic script of the Qur'ans in the first 300 years of Islam exemplify the fabulous evolution, maturity, and depth of this new formal language. Contemplating the letter *alif* for instance unveils the stunning multiplicity of the possibilities of the straight line, especially when this straightness goes astray! With some imagination, this *alif* starts to move and dance, paving the way to various interpretations, as many as the eyes can foresee. No wonder then to perceive the *alif* as a falling rain, a staggering stallion, a fruit-bearing branch, or a razor-sharp sword. No wonder, too, in seeing the same *alif* as a shy inclination, a cautious standing, a perfect stature, a sudden turn, a lonely *aparté*, a deep meditation, or abundance out-bounding itself.

It is a great cultural achievement that the quadrangular Kufic script managed to construct letters and words into a matrix based on the intersection of vertical and horizontal lines over a right angle. It's a summum of pure abstraction, based on a squared black point and a squared white point; two equal squared points, a black one in ink forming the body of the letter, and a white one constituting the void between letters and words. What are these squares that alternate black and white, fullness and void, vertical and horizontal? Are they shadow and light? Body and soul? Day and night? Absence and presence? Are they names of prophets and saints? Are they surats and verses? Are they signs? Challenges? Mysteries? They are all of the above. They revolve in this supreme sphere, hence their universality. Mathematical systems, absolute values, and antagonistic pairs are the language of the human character and an inherent part of the essence of being.

## ■ Barkat: Have you reached total freedom in creation?

Sayegh: Is my hand really free while it draws the letters fluidly at its ease, reducing and adding, flowing, and stopping, going straight or astray, twisting and twirling at its convenience without restrictions or limits? Maybe... But I am not fully certain because I am attracted to a similar freedom in geometry.

Mathematical systems built in ornamentation bring me satisfaction, joy, and exaltation very close to freedom. Ornamentation is one of the attributes of Islamic art, amalgamating in its diverse manifestations the characteristics of this art and its aesthetic philosophy. It does not mimic Nature in its apparent images, nor does it aim for that. It has always aspired at replicating the hidden systems behind Nature, the systems of evolution and maturity, the systems of reproduction, and the systems of similarities... And since the beginning, it united with geometrical systems as an absolute structure of strict calculations to replicate a core module which, in its various intersections, creates the final scene. Ornamentation is a proof that all hidden systems are one in principle. I have tried to unite between *khatt* and ornamentation, reinscribing it as ornamentation by transforming the letter, or the word, into a “written” module. At the same time, I try to make repetition become a reproduction, to make it absolute and not patterned, regenerating itself all the time.