Strangeness-Familiarity and Dynamism – Aesthetics and Cultural Background in Aatifi's Work

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Letters whizz through Aatifi's paintings. They seem to fall, to move freely, and are held fast like a photographic detail snapped at the instant of an unrestrained movement. Colourful compositions with a dynamic fluency and clear-cut forms. They are characters, parts of an alphabet, but not words. They can be identified, but no longer decoded. Read them, if you will, as a reference to a cultural landscape in which Aatifi spent the first chapter of his life. Everything else is inconclusive, creating a charged relationship between graphic form and uncertain meaning. Those who are familiar with these symbols, however, will perhaps recall their grand history.

Cultural Foundations of Persian-Arabic Calligraphy

Aatifi avails himself of the usual characters of his first home, Afghanistan. The main languages spoken there are Pashto and Dari – a form of Farsi – both of which are written in the Arabic alphabet. Various Turkic languages, Urdu, Ottoman up to 1928, and Malay up to the colonial era also use or used Arabic letters. The conquests of the early Islamic era of the 7th and 8th centuries, as well as the spread of Arabic as a unifying and religiously mandated language of the new elites, and naturally of the Koran, were the background to the spread of the Arabic alphabet. Religious factors such as the importance of the Koran as revelation in Arabic and the shunning of images in religious spaces are doubtless additional reasons for the popularity of calligraphy. Few other cultural realms will be able to boast such a stock of written evidence. In addition to pages in books, everyday objects of all kinds such as plates, pots, pitchers, amulets and magic bowls, weapons and coins are inscribed. Textiles bore writing, which was woven, buttoned, printed or embroidered into or on clothing, wall hangings, pillows or rugs. In architecture, large areas of walls, doors, cornices, ceilings, portals and cupolas were often embellished with writing. But the religious significance of Arabic script is just given as an explanatory example – a large part of these written texts is of a secular nature. Societies in the Near and Middle East are shaped by strong urban traditions, containing as they do the most ancient cities of humanity. Material culture illustrates an astonishingly high cultural standard in urban centres over many centuries. At the heart of cultural education in societies shaped by Islam were literary knowledge and creation, which have left behind an impressive and seemingly

inexhaustible treasure of works. Skilled at fashioning speech and writing into pleasing form in both the religious and secular realms, as well as at all levels in between, the calligrapher enjoyed particular esteem. As well as a sceptre or sword, a good vizier or sultan knew how to wield a pen.

Arabic script is a very young script. Developing only in late antiquity in the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries, it spread like wildfire with the birth of Islam, with the Koran as the first monument of this language. The oldest monumental Arabic inscription, therefore, is also found in the Dome of the Rock (692) in Jerusalem, the oldest preserved large-scale Islamic structure. At first the young language had only a few writing styles, such as Hijazi and Kufi, the latter being an angular, initially austere, simple and clear script which is found almost without exception into the early 11th century in Korans and as inscriptions. At the same time, a rapid script was in use which we are familiar with primarily from Egyptian administrative papyri from the 8th to the 10th century. The systematisation of writing styles is generally ascribed to the famous calligrapher and minister at the court of the caliphate in Baghdad, Ibn Muqla (d. 940). He was definitely not the first, for according to historical sources other 8th- and 9th-century calligraphers were at pains to achieve order in this sphere. However, Ibn Muqla not only defined the six important scripts (al-Aqlam as-Sitta); he also developed a system for defining the 'relational harmonies'. What is the relationship between the height and width of a letter? How long and high may a letter be for a well-proportioned script (Khatt al-Mansub)?

The calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022) further perfected the definition: the measure is the width of the reed pen with which one writes. When one draws a stroke with a pen, it has a particular width. If one makes an almost square dot, the length matches the width of the stroke. This is the measuring unit that is set as a rhombus. Each letter is defined in terms of its height and width by a particular number of rhombuses placed one on top of the other or side-by-side. Each reed pen is different, so the very choice of one's writing implement determines how high a letter may be, and how much space the text requires. An 'Alif', for example – the first letter of the Arabic alphabet with the phonetic value of 'A' – may be between five and seven rhombuses high. If the 'Alif' is significantly shorter or longer, it is no longer perceived by most viewers as well-proportioned and beautiful. Because the eye has grown so accustomed to these proportions, the harmony of these letters is of great importance in the aesthetics of many Muslim societies. Aatifi's characters also follow these harmonies.

Script continued to develop and evolve. In Iran and Afghanistan, for example, a 'broken' style, Shikasta, first made its appearance in the 16th century. Though barely legible, this style produced dynamic written images. Aesthetic appearance was more important than legibility. This had always been part of artistic practice, but now

Shikasta 'canonised' the break with the established rules of writing. Over the course of the 20th century, calligraphers went a step further. The global modern era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which naturally also affected countries shaped by Islam, caused far-reaching changes in aesthetic practices. Many classical art forms were transformed; many were lost. Not so with calligraphy, which continued to be cultivated especially in Iran, but also in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to a lesser extent in some Arab lands, and only in fairly small circles in Turkey (with Atatürk replacing the Arabic Ottoman alphabet with the Roman alphabet in 1928). Traditions held firm, though not unchanged. In Ottoman Turkey, for example, calligraphies were now hung on walls, like large paintings. In the second half of the 20th century, script was rediscovered in contemporary art movements such as Saqqakhaneh in Iran, or by numerous artists in the Arab world. In 1978, for instance, the Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata, who is now resident in Berlin, spelled out the word 'Thawra' ('revolution') graphically in grid lines. Form and content were freely altered for the suitable artistic expression of the reality of one's own life. Instead of religion or aesthetic literature, direct political statements now became the subject, script became graphics. At the same time, other artists pursued the decoding of the word and the dissolution of form. Words or letters became elements of abstract art. The collective term for this is Hurufiyya, which we might translate as 'letter movement' (see Venetia Porter's article in this publication). Only Aatifi himself can tell us whether he was inspired by this development, or whether it was the abstract-nonrepresentational art in his second home of Germany, a country where artists also occasionally play with letters.

The Works of Aatifi Exhibited in the Pergamon Museum

Aatifi's letters are markers of his first homeland. Each letter follows the rules of art. They carry the old 'harmonies' in themselves, play with them, clip them, but they don't throw out the rule book – at the outset. Those who set store by classical calligraphy and are familiar with classical scripts will simply find the letters in Aatifi's paintings and graphics beautiful. He is a calligrapher, so of course for him the movements made during the process of creation are internalised and flowing. The aesthetics of his letters are mandatory, not as random as his letters appear. These are the proportions of Ibn Muqla and Ibn al-Bawwab from over a thousand years ago. The period in which these two great founding fathers lived also saw the canonisation of Thuluth, a monumental script and one of the six styles, chiefly popular in building inscriptions and Koranic texts. Aatifi makes use of this characteristic style, the choice of which is interesting. He was not a devotee of the energetic, somewhat playful Nastaliq style, which was largely common to the region, and whose first great master Mir Ali Tabrizi (d. 1416), after all, was from Herat in Afghanistan.

This style is normally preferred in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan for artistic creation, and it was also defining for Aatifi's early works in Afghanistan. This changed with the artist's travel. When producing characters in isolation, he (probably deliberately) uses Thuluth, a script which is very accommodating for the monumentality of letters. And despite the historic ponderousness of this script, it radiates a cheerful freedom in his work. The letters dance, tumble, fall, swarm through space – none of them is complete, and 'proper' connections are in any case dispensed with.

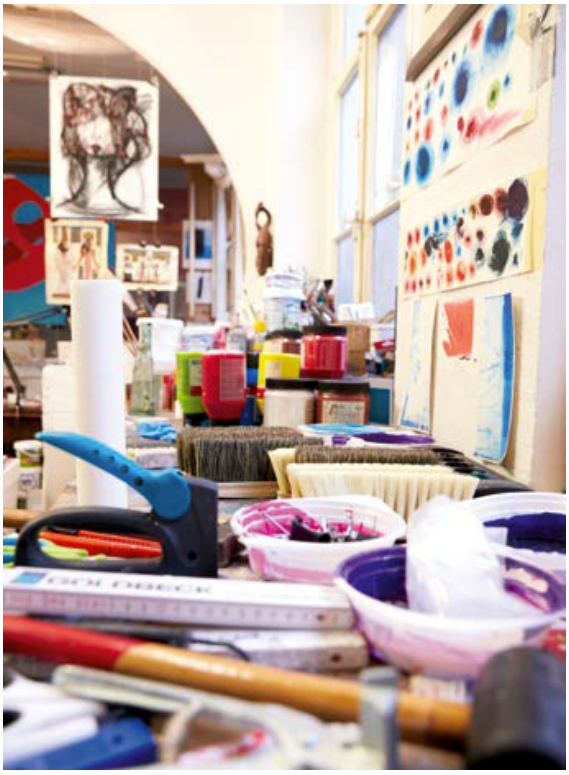
Aatifi masters and interprets a second rule of calligraphy which could be termed 'spatial distribution'. In classical calligraphy, the relationship of a word to space – how long it is drawn, or how it plays with open and blank spaces – is a crucial feature. Here, the artisan parts ways with the master. Joseph Beuys once called the art of the German-Persian calligrapher Shams Anwari-Alhosseyni 'spatial distribution'. Unconcernedly, Aatifi breaks the letters. What results from this, however, is not patchwork. Each letter somehow remains connected with all the others, or at least with space. It is only through the relationship with space that the movement of the letter acquires dynamism. It can no longer be read! With Aatifi, therefore, characters are no longer codes in the sense of saying something. Classical calligraphy was not always legible either, but a member of the educated class could use his literary education to decode it – to grasp the written image, as it were, using just a few legible markers to retrieve the appropriate lines from his stock of knowledge. Decoding calligraphy with Iranians, Arabs or Afghans who have had a literary education is always a wonderful experience. A few words give birth to whole cosmoses. Aatifi abandons this completely, with the result that we are no longer dealing with a content that is more or (more probably) less easy to grasp. The letter is freed from meaning: it plays around in space, becomes colour and form, thereby allowing the carefree flow of form in the painting. Someone who cannot read the letters, who does not understand the quotes about classical harmony, who cannot gauge the fineness of the letters, can still experience the beauty of the colour, the tension of the forms, and the spatial effect. That is a great advantage, and it translocates a culture-specific art language into a global one. Today we can deal freely with this art, and need not have any concerns about not understanding it. There is nothing to understand, nothing that one really ought to decode – not even the content.

Despite this, someone who is familiar with Persian-Afghan and Arabic calligraphy will still see beautifully formed letters. But the connections lead nowhere: the loss of content is flagged. Aatifi's paintings captivate as compositions of colours and forms. Form enters the painting and reaches beyond its boundaries, not modestly, but clearly and robustly. The impetus of the character is taken up, and bursts through the edge of the image with phenomenal dynamism. Elements of individual letters lie unconcernedly one on top

of the other, and enter into competition or become congruent with each other. The shadings caused by the broad brushstroke, paint spatters, or harsh lines – as if the paintbrush had been pulled away too quickly – are the visible traces of the writing or painting, and underscore the processuality and dynamism of the drawing. But why do the paintings and graphics not dissolve into vagueness? The recognisable letter is essential – at least in parts – for avoiding a randomness of forms and colours. This is made clear by the almost motiveless and non-attributable patches of colour in several polychrome works of Aatifi's. Patches of colour may shape the background, impart or create tension, but they remain subordinate. It is the character that dominates the canvas. Here, it is not necessary to know what letter it is. The clarity of form, visible to all, imparts cohesion. The paintings do not disintegrate – they are not random.

Aatifi is not the first to take up letters as pure form. The Hurufiyya movement is older. After his encounter with contemporary art, it is only logical that Aatifi – a trained calligrapher in search of new forms – should go down this route. Even so, his monumental, boldly coloured forms set him apart from the rest. He champions clarity and monumentality of the elements. This is not put-on, however, since he comes from this tradition. It is still there, and it can be found in him. To be sure, the whole thing now is colour, movement, dynamics: playing with one's legacy in a new space.

Aatifi comes from a living tradition, which also distinguishes him from a number of contemporary artists who either (re-)discovered for themselves or appropriated the Arabic alphabet as a local, culturally characteristic idiom in a global art landscape. The Arabic alphabet is ideal for processes of appropriation. As a publicly effective marker of a cultural difference, it is a grateful object of personal/collective autonomy and heteronomy. In times of cultural insecurity, these markers often go into overdrive – in addition to artistically ambitious works, there is a striking amount of kitsch on the market. The strengths of the tradition – i.e. the foundations of classical aesthetics in calligraphy – are not always known, nor is the freedom of distancing oneself from these understood. That's why poor imitations of cultural archetypes are produced. Not so with Aatifi. Aatifi pulls off the balancing act, and for this reason it is highly appropriate – not to mention a great pleasure for us – to exhibit his works in the Museum für Islamische Kunst in the Pergamon Museum Berlin.



Aatifi in his Bielefeld
studio and impressions
of the studio, April 2015

Photos: Wolfgang Holm

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