

**Calligraphy Paintings in Malaysia:
Clarification as an Art Tradition**

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CALLIGRAPHY PAINTINGS IN MALAYSIA: CLARIFICATION AS AN ART TRADITION¹

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From the perspective of history and tradition, the art of calligraphy painting is seen to co-exist from two distinct traditions of the arts, that of the west and east traditions. Both traditions converge to form a new phenomenon via the assimilation process of the modern era. The phenomenon led to the formation of an art tradition – a premise both assumed and proven – wherein the form is indicative of the times seen in the light of conflicting cultural and ideological knowledge vis-à-vis the Islamic and secular values. However this phenomenon can be seen as an integrative element between various racial entities of early post-modern Malaysia for more than a decade. It also gave rise to the commitment of certain quarters to create a work of art that imbues the Islamic ideology, a reactive alternative to the variety of trends and art forms occurring in Malaysia then and generally viewed as lacking in art philosophy as compared to the Islamic Tawhid philosophy depicted in calligraphy paintings especially when associated with the holiness and preciseness of its meaning. To some artists, the art of calligraphy painting is a preferred choice because of the fulfilment in depicting mature and deep spiritual experience. All these observations led to the need to investigate the calligraphy art works in Malaysia more seriously in the form of a proper research endeavour, in order to enable its history as an art form be given due attention as one that is precise and able to promulgate the Malay national identity.

Keywords: Calligraphy, Painting, Traditional Art, Malaysia.

¹ This paper is presented at Universidad de Granada, Campus La Cartuja, Granada, Spain, during Ninth International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities, 8-11 June, 2011, organized by College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA and Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

1.0 Introduction

Islamic calligraphy in contemporary art of Malaysia is one of the art phenomena in the history of the revitalization of traditional art in contemporary world. It does not stand alone in this issue as many other traditional crafts such as textile, ceramic, woodcarving and metal craft are also invigorated in the new form and function.

This paper sets out to discuss and highlight one aspect of fine arts in Malaysia which has not been taken seriously namely the art of calligraphy or calligraphy painting. It is unascertained as to the earliest calligraphy painting produced in Malaysia, however to date the earliest collection found at museums and galleries dates back to 1947, a creation attributed to Mohd Salleh Hassan Farid titled *Al-Maghfur Lahu*. Presently it is in *Muzium Seni Asia* (Museum of Asian Arts) collection (UM77.35), University of Malaya. It is made with red and black ink, assumed to be a preliminary sketch to tombstone writing. The calligraphy composition depicts the shape of a shield and is kept in good condition by framing. This work has been exhibited in conjunction with *Pameran Pertandingan Seni Khat* (Exhibition of Calligraphy Arts Competition) organized by Pusat Kebudayaan University of Malaya held between 22 September to 2 October 1981 at Dewan Tunku Canselor of the university. Although this calligraphy art work, which is inscribed on paper, is arguable in terms of being accepted as calligraphy painting, therein is seen the aesthetic value of its composition, the use of ink in two alternate colours of red and black exquisitely arranged portraying a high level of aesthetic execution of the art form then. The crest shaped frame surrounding the calligraphy work, helped to project its value as art and functions as such, factors that has contributed to give relevance to the art form as having a high aesthetic strength to early calligraphy drawing arts. Another strong factor is the existence of art works that employ the method of traditional calligraphy writing by means of using ink in making its art work, generated at a later time and contemporary in nature, due to the use of other materials and techniques so common in the era of pluralism nowadays. As such, Mohd Salleh's work should not be waived aside, rather it must be perceived as an early step of artists during the period to utilise calligraphy as an art form. For indeed, calligraphy as an art existed in Malay culture through the means of calligraphy composition crafted and portrayed on tombstones (plate 1).

The second oldest calligraphy (plate 2) found during the research is an art work that does away with the use of pen and ink, in preference of use of gestural painting using brushes. The work is produced by *Seniman Negara Malaysia* (National Artist of Malaysia) namely Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal in 1958. His work entitled *Chairil Anwar*, is preserved in his private collection. Instead of painting human portraits parallel to the trend of the time, he chose to paint calligraphy with the composition of calligraphic alphabets spelling "Chairil Anwar". Therein lies his ability to describe human and their emotions in expressionistic style, as against to the popular approach as in realism. His admiration of a literary figure called Chairil Anwar, prompted Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal to etch the figure's name in the form of

calligraphy using paint brush technique creating a style similar to *dīwānī*² calligraphy. His admiration and honour of that literary figure is captured in the final product made by the touch of the brush extending the feeling to people who were able to observe the work. Like Chinese calligraphy, his work seem to allow the brush to have its own strokes. The result is the creation of soft word formation, the mixing of colour as an act of spontaneity when spread on to the hardboard. He created an illusion of movement, dynamically executed in repetitive brush strokes, expressing a calligraphy that flows within its dimension of time and space.

As one of the earliest painters of calligraphic art, plus the recognition bestowed upon him as a National Artist of the country, his works especially his calligraphy art work should be recognized as one that help to form the history of art for the nation. Something which needs to be realized by the public is Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's perseverance to using calligraphy art form in his works up to the present decade, a fact that would mean that his work on calligraphy painting has increased as he gets on in age. This makes him as an artist of prominence not only in the expressionism and abstract expressionism school, but also as proof of his integration with another form of art work, that of calligraphy art as something close to his soul since 1950. His paintings serve to project meanings that are at once implied and confidential, for spiritual experiences that emerges from the heart is difficult to express in words. Only those who have experienced intimate moments of the pleasure associated with overwhelming temporariness and peacefulness in feeling their love for the Almighty, or have undergone a similar experience on a more personal and individual level, would be able to share it via the expression offered by the creation on his canvas space as an artistic fulfilment. Thus it is appropriate to recognize him as an artist who has championed not only calligraphy art, but in fact Islamic art as a whole. His loyalty towards producing calligraphy art is a personal struggle, occurring at the time when some other artists surface and disappear during Islamic art exhibitions, Islamic civilisation exhibition and exhibitions of calligraphy art organised. This personal motivation has overridden such external impetus as material, fame and fortune or in allowing himself to be engulfed in current but not lasting waves of national policy.

Discerning the art phenomena, a few issues had to be discussed.

- a) What are the styles developed in contemporary art of Malaysia pertaining to Islamic calligraphy?
- b) What are the forces that influence the production of the artworks?
- c) To what extent are the spirituality manifested in the works of art?

2.0 Literature Review

² Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal himself admit that he doesn't know about the writing he produced was similar to calligraphy *dīwānī*, one of the famous variety of "*khat*" in the Islamic world. He said that it was basically from the education he received in the school, because schools in Johore used Jawi writing. He himself never learns "*khat*" calligraphy instead exposed to calligraphy art work from the surrounding environment that use "*khat*" calligraphy as billboard and etc. The interview was held at his house at Gombak in 13th September 2005, 10.00am to 1.00pm.

Islamic calligraphy that is also called Arabic calligraphy has been studied by many scholars since the early of the 20th Century. The study covers numerous areas, such as the cataloging work³, the development of calligraphy,⁴ the writing equipments,⁵ the calligraphers and painters,⁶ the relationship between calligraphy and Sufism, and Islamic culture.⁷ Islamic calligraphy is also studied by Muslim scholars, as seen in the history of Islamic calligraphy,⁸ the biography of calligraphers⁹ and the techniques of writing calligraphy.¹⁰

It is vital to notice that the western scholars, even in the early stage of the studies focusing on the cataloging work, the later writings show their tendencies to search on the historical aspects, as well as the spiritual and cultural of the calligraphy itself. It is important to highlight a few writings such as the translation of *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise By Qadi Ahmad*¹¹ from the Persian to Russian language, and finally translated to English by T. Minorsky. The book is important for students of Persian art, presenting the details of those involved in the production of

³ Moritz, B., *Op.Cit.*; and Arberry, A.J., *The Koran Illuminated: A Handlist of the Korans in the Chester Beatty Library*, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co. Ltd., 1967.

⁴ Grohmann, A., "Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Letters in the History of Arabic Writing", *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte* 38, 1951, pp. 117-22. See Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

⁵ Herzfeld, E., "A Bronze Pen-Case", *Ars Islamica* 3, 1936, pp. 262-69 and Baer, E., "An Islamic Inkwell in the Metropolitan Museum of Art". In Richard Ettinghausen (Ed.) *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1972, pp. 199-211.

⁶ Minorsky, V. (translator), *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise by Qāḍī Ahmad, Son of Mīr-Munshī*, Washington: Publication 4339, 1959.

⁷ Lings, M., *The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy & Illumination*. London : Scorpion Publishing, 1976, Ahmad Ṣabrī Mahmūd Zāyid, *Ahdāth al-Ṭuruq Li Dirāsah Wa-Tahsīn Khaṭ al-Thuluth*. Al-Qāhirah : Maktabah Ibn Sīnā, 1993; and Schimmel, A., *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, New York & London : New York University Press, 1984.

⁸ Zakī Muhammad Hasan, *Funūn Al-Islām*, Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, n.d.; Khatibi and Sijelmasi, *Op.Cit.*; Safadi, Yasin Hamid, *Islamic Calligraphy*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978; Israr, C. (1985). *Dari Teks Klasik Ke Kaligrafi Arab*. Jakarta : Yayasan Masagung, 1985; Ahmad Riḍā, *Risālah al-Khaṭ al-'Arabī*. Lubnān: Dār al-Rā'id al-'Arabī, 1986; Habāsh, Hasan Qāsim, *Fann al-Khaṭ al-'Arabī Wa al-Zakhrafah al-Islāmiyyah*. Bayrūt : Dār al-Qalam, 1990; Ṣafwāt, Nabīl F., *The Art of The Pen: Calligraphy of The 14th to 20th Centuries*, London: Nour Foundation In Association With Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1996; Sirojuddin A.R., *Seni Kaligrafi Islam*, Bandung : Penerbit PT Remaja Rosdakarya, 2000; and Mustafa Ogur Derman, *Seni Khat Warisan Islam*, (Translated by Romzi Omar & Fauzi Mustafa), Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2000.

⁹ Ahmad Ṣabrī Mahmūd Zāyid, *Ahdāth al-Ṭuruq Li Dirāsah Wa-Tahsīn Khaṭ al-Thuluth*, Al-Qāhirah : Maktabah Ibn Sīnā, 1993; Oweis, Fayeeg Saleh, *The Elements of Unity in Islamic Art As Examined Through The Work Of Jamal Badran (Palestinian)*, Ph.D. Thesis. Ohio: Union Institute and University, 2001.

¹⁰ Hāshim Muhammad, *Qawā'id al-Khaṭ al-'Arabī*, Baghdād: Maktabah al-Naḥḍah, 1980.

¹¹ Minorsky, *Op.Cit.*

manuscripts, the processes involving the calligraphers and painters, the patrons and patronage of the Persian art of the 16th Century.

On the illumination of *al-Qur'ān*, Arberry wrote *The Koran Illuminated: A Handlist of the Korans in the Chester Beatty Library*.¹² His book highlights the valuable and excellent collection of the *Qur'ān* in The Chester Beatty Library, stressing on the admirable examples of every century and every style, and thus illustrates with astonishing completeness the history of the artistic transcription of the *Qur'ān*.

One of the outstanding writings of Islamic calligraphy from the cultural and spiritual aspect is the book written by Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*.¹³ Divided into four chapters: Styles of Calligraphy; Calligraphers, Dervishes and Kings; Calligraphy and Mysticism; and Calligraphy and Poetry; the coverage into the art history of calligraphy is really excellent. Especially in the second chapter, the discovery of symbolism of individual letters in calligraphy related to Sufism had given the researcher important information for this study, especially in the stages of analysis and interpretation of calligraphy.

Apart from the western scholars, studies on Islamic calligraphy by Arabian scholars are generally focusing on the sociological studies especially on the acceptance of traditional art by modern societies. Doctoral studies that are done on Arab societies highlight imperative issues, among others, are the use of Islamic calligraphy in murals¹⁴, the reformation of Islamic calligraphy in the typology of the computer art and design¹⁵, and the metamorphosis of the Arabic letter in modern Arab art¹⁶. Even though the studies were done in different societies, the researcher is indebted to them for covering most issues regarding Islamic art and calligraphy in general.

Nada M. Shabout, in her doctoral thesis, *Modern Arab Art and The Metamorphosis of the Arabic Letter*, concerns on the Western influences in shaping Middle Eastern cultures and how those that were adopted from the West were systematically Arabised, through intellectual approaches, and how, despite persistent Western influences, a contemporary Arab art, an art with unique Arab elements operating within Arab aesthetic values which not only expresses Arab cultures but also takes part as a potential factor in constructing new realities and identities. Examining only artworks of two major artists, Shakir Hassan Al-Said and Dia al-Azzawi, the conclusion recapitulates the salient points of the study, discussing the position of Arab art in both the Arab world and the international art scene.

¹² Arberry, A.J., *Op.Cit.*

¹³ Schimmel, *Op.Cit.*

¹⁴ Sida, Youssef Mohamed Ali, *Arabic Calligraphy in Contemporary Egyptians Murals, With An Essay on Arab Tradition and Art*, Ph.D. Thesis, Ohio: The Ohio State University, 1965.

¹⁵ al-Najdi, Khaled, *Reforming Arabic Calligraphy for Computer Art and Design in Kuwaiti Art Education*, Ph.D. Thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2001.

¹⁶ Shabout, *Modern Arab Art and the Metamorphosis of the Arabic Letter*, Ph.D. Thesis, *Op. Cit.*

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However, one can hardly find any doctoral thesis on Islamic calligraphy in Malaysia. A thesis that has touch Islamic art in general in Southeast Asia is written by Zakaria Ali, taking in the artifacts that have the calligraphy inscriptions. To date, research on Islamic calligraphy are only accomplished in post-graduate dissertation. Faridah Che' Husain¹⁷ wrote on Islamic Calligraphy as a sign of Malay Islamic civilization; while the latest dissertation was written by Abdul Rahman Che Tajuddin¹⁸ on the acceptance of Islamic calligraphy by Malaysian societies. Nevertheless, the first degree's academic writings are profuse, in a very descriptive nature¹⁹ as they referred to outstanding writers on Islamic art in general, or on the biography of Malay *khattat* or calligrapher copied from the existed writings in the exhibition catalogues²⁰. However, the research made by Ahmad Sufri and Ahmad Suzani are more specialized to the appreciation of Terengganu societies towards Islamic calligraphy²¹; and Islamic calligraphy as a decorative motifs in Kota, Kelantan²², respectively. The research on these topics is feasible to be further studied and concentrated. Therefore, in the light of these limited literatures, the research on Islamic calligraphy and *Jawi* script as existed in Malay paintings is proposed, to illuminate an area that is hardly documented or studied in the line of history of art.

There are also studies made on contemporary art works. According to Syed Ahmad Jamal²³, contemporary art of Malaysia started from 1930's, thirty years in advance from the time line given by Pooke and Witham²⁴. If we refer to the decade of 1930s as the starting point of contemporary art, it means that the period of modern art is included in this study. It is believed that the transition period from modern art to Post modern art is ambiguous in the case of Malaysia. Therefore, the study on the literature of contemporary art of Malaysia will include the three early decades of 1930's until 1960's.

¹⁷ Faridah Che' Husain, *Seni Kaligrafi Islam di Malaysia Sebagai Lambang Tamadun Melayu Islam*, M.A. Dissertation, Universiti Malaya, 2000.

¹⁸ Abdul Rahman Che Tajuddin, *Seni Khat Islami dan Pena Khat di Malaysia: Konsepsi dan Penerimaannya di Kalangan Masyarakat Malaysia*, M.A. Dissertation, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 2003.

¹⁹ Syed Mohamad Al-Haddi Syed Aluwi, *Sejarah Seni Khat Islam dan Perkembangannya*, Academic Exercise, Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya, 1989 and Suhbah Abd. Aziz, *Seni Khat Islam: Sejarah dan Perkembangannya di Malaysia*, Academic Exercise, Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya, 1998.

²⁰ *Manifestasi Perdana Seni Khat*, Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan dan Pelancongan, 1988.

²¹ Ahmad Sufri Buyong, *Seni Khat Arab: Penghayatan oleh Masyarakat Islam di Malaysia di Negeri Terengganu Khususnya*, Academic Exercise, Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya, 1990.

²² Ahmad Suzani Jaafar, *Seni Khat Sebagai Motif Ragam Hias dalam Masyarakat Melayu di Kelantan: Satu Kajian Khusus di Daerah Kota*, Academic Exercise, Akademi Pengajian Islam, Universiti Malaya, 1992.

²³ Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Op. Cit.*

²⁴ Pooke, G. and Witham, G., *Op. Cit.*

Studies in English and Malay Language on the history of Modern Malaysian Art are scarce. Sulaiman Esa's²⁵ doctoral dissertation can be considered as one of the main references regarding Malay art in its formative period under social and cultural conditions of post-independence Malaysia. Other studies on modern Malaysian art are more limited in scope, focusing on a specific issue, among others, on Malaysia art education by Khatijah Sanusi²⁶, while the history of modern art of Malaysia by Wong Kew Lit²⁷ was only done in the first degree level.

However, the latest study at doctoral level on contemporary Islamic painting in Malaysia was done by Ahmadrashidi bin Hasan,²⁸ completed in 2010. The objective of the study is to establish the historical development of the contemporary Islamic art in Malaysia in the 1980's and 1990's, as well as to identify the determinant factors of styles of the decades. It also provides an iconographical analysis in order to understand its meaning in relation to the resurgence of Islam in Malaysia. The study applies the same theoretical framework, using Panofsky's theory of Iconology over 83 samples of paintings. These samples, on the other hand, have different guiding terminology that differentiates between samples of his study with the samples determined in this research. Ahmadrashidi focused on the general overview of the contemporary Islamic art and its historical development. The findings are to lead the identification of styles and meaning, especially towards the establishment of Islamic art as a term to define certain contemporary works. His thesis is beneficial for this research, firstly in the application of the same theory; secondly in terms of ideas and meaning documented to describe the samples has given the extension of understanding on art works.

One can hardly find any historical writing on modern and contemporary art written for Malaysia in the early period of independence. We are indebted to early works by Wharton²⁹ and T.K. Sabapathy and Piyadasa³⁰ for the biographic documentation. An outstanding work was done by Syed Ahmad Jamal³¹ who wrote *Seni Lukis Malaysia 57-87*, as a review of the thirty years history of Malaysian art since the foundation of National Art Gallery. Other writings regarding the history of

²⁵ Sulaiman Esa, *Islam and the Politics of Art in Post-Independence Malaysia*, PhD. Thesis, Temple University, 1997.

²⁶ Khatijah Sanusi, *Visual Art Education in Malaysia (John Dewey)*, Ed.D Thesis, Temple University, 2000.

²⁷ Wong Kew Lit, *Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia*, Project Paper, University Malaya, 1995.

²⁸ Ahmadrashidi Hasan, *Contemporary Islamic Painting in Malaysia: 1983 to 2000*, Ph.D Thesis, Shah Alam: UiTM, 2010.

²⁹ Wharton, D.D., *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: published for the ASIA SOCIETY by the Union Cultural Organization Sdn. Bhd., 1971.

³⁰ T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, *Op.Cit.*, 1983.

³¹ Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Seni Lukis Malaysia 30 Tahun: 1958-1987*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1987.

modern art of Malaysia can be traced in books written by Marco Hsu³², Syed Ahmad Jamal³³, Mulyadi³⁴, Tan Chee Khuan³⁵ and Ooi Kok Chuen³⁶.

3.0 Calligraphy Works in Malaysia

From the standpoint of its distribution, to date as many as 707 works have been documented. These documented works are chosen as calligraphy paintings which are confined to use of basic materials like canvas, paper, wood and textile. Those forms of traditional works of calligraphy art which are done on paper such as the written manuscript in book form, letters and others using paper were not included in this study.

The collected works signify various forms of calligraphy painting and its functionality. It is found that calligraphy does not only be the main subject matter, but also marginal works, such as ornamental framing for other art objects, title of art work or part of other objects. Still others are seen to create calligraphy as indecipherable scribbling created from brush strokes, filling up the painting space, as occurring one or two *Jawi* alphabets within the painting. There are also some paintings found to carry the calligraphy only as the signature of the artist.

The period of works production varies from 1947 to 2005. The latest record entered in the collection was taken from an exhibition sponsored by the National Organization of Islamic Calligraphy (*Persatuan Seni Khat Kebangsaan*) and several other associations together with the National Art Gallery, carried out in July 2005. Those accumulated works were collected and kept in a database built of FileMaker Pro. This is a necessary move to consolidate picture data with the art work documented. Almost all documented works are taken from museums and galleries all over Peninsular of Malaysia. This anthological effort should continue in order to upgrade the collection to current and future works.

4.0 Calligraphy Painting as an Artistic Tradition

As an artistic tradition, the study will use the approach introduced by Erwin Panofsky³⁷ who outlined on the method of analysis, as follows:

a) Pre-Iconographical Description

³² Marco Hsu, *Op.Cit.*

³³ Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Rupa dan Jiwa*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992.

³⁴ Mulyadi Mahmood, *Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia: Era Perintis Hingga Era Pluralis*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors, 2001.

³⁵ Tan Chee Khuan, *Perintis-Perintis Seni Lukis Malaysia*, Penang: The Art Gallery, 1994. Tan Chee Khuan, *A Criticism of Art Critics*, Penang: The Art Gallery, 2000.

³⁶ Ooi Kok Chuen, *A Comprehensive History of Malaysian Art*, Penang: The Art Gallery, 2002.

³⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies In Iconology: Humanistic Thems In The Art of The Renaissance*, London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1939.

A pseudo-formal analysis to study fact and expression in the formation of history of artistic style.

b) Iconographical Analysis

A study of subject through existing image to search the knowledge embedded and perusing all records that has been said about them. This will formulate its historical type into theme and expressive concept seen from the object or event associated with it.

c) Iconographical Interpretation

This is a form of carrying out iconographical synthesis, using capability of intuition to study human mind and its tendencies as formulated by personal psyche and his world view. This helps to conclude on the historical significance of the use of symbols in the works based on the perception that people act under various influencing condition and situation.

All the three steps above form history of art tradition.

4.1 Pre-Iconographical Description

Analysis was carried out only on 110 selected works out of the 707 works gathered. Selection on those works were based on its own uniqueness, being able to represent its artist and based on basic material used in the selection, year produced, works that has been chosen from competition or exhibition, and each artist chosen in the study is limited to only three art works each. In the final analysis it is found that the production of art works showed an improvement in numbers between 1940 to 2000. The production had increased from 0.91% in 1940s to 37.27% in the years after 2000. This shows that in terms of number the production of calligraphy painting has increased considerably.

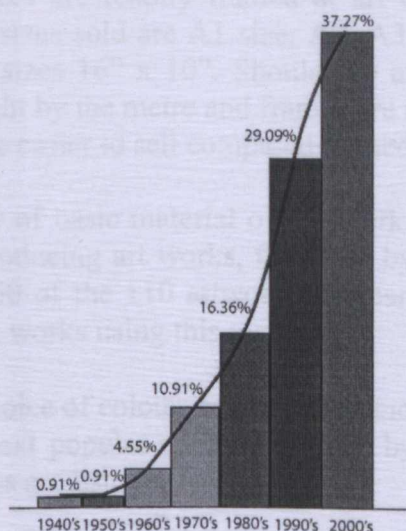


Figure 1.0. Chart showing the increase of artwork in calligraphy between 1940 to 2000.

Using the basis of events organized between the seven decades involved, the result can be seen in the following table:

Table 1:
Event Frequency Based on Selected Works Involved.

Decade	Event Frequency	Percentage
1970's	1	0.27%
1980's	7	18.9%
1990's	14	37.8%
2000's	15	40.5%

From the perspective of involvement of the artist, 91% are men and only 8.9% women. From the aspect of race involvement, 3.8% are Chinese and over 96.15% are Malays.

In terms of size of the art works, the smallest is entitled *Semangat Ikan Kering* by Aidanismah Yahya. It is 9.75 cm x 8.75 cm. in size. The largest size art work was produced by Ibrahim Hussein entitled *Allah* with the size of 193 x 286 cm. This largest work is in the collection of the Museum of Asian Arts at University of Malaya. Statistically, 87% of the selected works are small-sized, 6% medium-sized and 5% large-sized. The other 2% could not be ascertained in size because there was no information given in the exhibition catalogue and the researcher has no information as to its location to enable measurement work to be done. Upon further study, it is found that a majority of small works are attributed to the following factors:

4.2 Iconographical Analysis

- a) Work sizes are predetermined during competition.
- b) Paper and canvas sizes are readily framed at art outlets and suppliers. For paper, the stipulated sizes sold are A1 size, A2, A3, A4, whereas for canvas, are mostly found in sizes 16" x 10". Should the artist need a larger canvas size, it has to be bought by the metre and frames are not provided.
- c) Small-sized works are easier to sell compared to medium-sized and large ones.

Studies on popularity of basic material of the work, has found that canvas is the material used most in producing art works, followed by paper, wood and textile. The research revealed that 50 of the 110 artworks use canvas as the base material. Paper comes next with 43 art works using this material.

From the aspect of choice of colour, acrylic is the most used when found on 32 art works. Oil paint is the next popular choice followed by ink. Techniques used to generate calligraphy art works are listed below as:

- a) Writing
- b) Drawing (making sketches, image reversal and tracing)
- c) Painting (with brush strokes, sketching with wood, knife, spattering, air blasting and so on)
- d) Printing (wood print, etching and serigraphy)

- e) Collage (cement-based filling, modelling paste and photocopy collage)
- f) Batik
- g) Sewing, embroidery and weaving.

From the analysis on base material, colouring substance, size, orientation, technique and various other aspects of calligraphy painting production, several styles was discovered. The more prominent styles can be grouped into those by state, by organization and by workplace. For example, based on analysis of technique of painting and material used, the same style can be seen occurring among several artists such as Syed Abu Bakar Siddik Syed Mohamed, Syed Omar Syed Mohamed and Syed Ubaidillah Syed Mohamad. Coincidentally all three artists are siblings. Another two artists can be included in this group, Ahmad Zafuan Embong and Halias Abu Bakar. All of them are close friends therefore enhancing the factor of similarity of style among them. Normally they use colour schemes that are opposite each other in the colour wheel to create a strong contrast between the written and the background colour, and customarily they would colour in the calligraphy after completing the background painting. A similar resemblance is perceived from the state of Terengganu group of artists. It is also found that the Terengganu group usually leave their trademark signature while the Selangor group seldom sign on their art works.

Examples of other styles of producing calligraphy painting was begun by Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, who uses the gestural brush strokes rendering a highly dramatic and expressive effect. This style is used by later generations of artists such as Cheong Lai Tong, Sharifah Zuriah Al-Jefri and Mohamad Din Mohamad, in samples shown as indicated in plate 8, 9 and 10 below:

4.2 Iconographical Analysis

These art works were not only analyzed based on formal studies, but also analyzed based on usage of themes and concepts, usually from writings about the artworks.

Themes that can be identified are those of God's attributes, gratitude, life's journey, personalities, justice, love and romance, prophecy, brotherhood, culture and suchlike.

Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar's work, Zainurrahman and Ahmad Suzani whose works are displayed in plates 11, 12 and 13 touches on the same theme of perceiving this world as a journey to the after world. Although taking from different *surahs* of the al Qur'an, all three artists formulated the words in the shape of a ship (in Ahmad Suzani's work, his calligraphy forms an upturned ship). The ship form is synonymous with the temporariness of human life upon this mundane world.

Two of the examples shown below seem to project the theme of gratitude. In the sample of Mohamad Din's art work, the theme is projected from the words taken from the al-Qur'an which means: "If you are grateful certainly We increase". Likewise in Zainon Abdullah's art work the saying "*Alhamdulillah*" is repeated twice in the form of a continuous cycle. In picture 16, the projection of the words "*Subhana*

Allah” that seemingly floats on the base material of silk fabric expresses awe towards the beauty of God’s creation.

4.3 Iconographical Interpretation

Productions of calligraphy art works in Malaysia are results of various internal and external factors. These internal and external factors are manifested in various ways. For example, a study could embark on what encourages someone to produce calligraphy art works. The research investigates educational and psychological background as well as socialization had concluded in classification of artists into groups as laid out below:

- a) Those who have Arabic educational background in Arab countries and learned the art from their Arab masters who were great calligraphers.³⁸
- b) Those who never study overseas, but studied under those people who were educated from Arabia usually under the system of *sekolah pondok* and normal schools.³⁹
- c) Those that were self taught out of personal interest and knowledge or learned from books or family members.⁴⁰
- d) Those who learned the art from formal schools in the West, but because they have also gone through primary and secondary education in the country they would be exposed to calligraphic writing, or have the opportunity to get the acquaintance of wellknown local Islamic leaders.⁴¹
- e) Those who started off as graphic artists or photographic art works group, but gain exposure through exhibitions and social contacts.⁴²
- f) Those who produces calligraphy art works by demand and for the market.⁴³
- g) Those who are not Malays but gained exposure from learning *Jawi* writing in schools and by socializing with the Malay community.⁴⁴

Through socialization and education, the Malaysian society has assimilated and acculturated into the national culture concept of the nation. Non-Malay artists are

³⁸ For example Ustaz Wan Salleh Fathi Wan Isa, Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar, Halias Abu Bakar, Muhammad Asrak Mohd Osman, Ahmad Zafuan Embong.

³⁹ For example Ustaz Muhammad Yusof Abu Bakar, Abdul Ghani Othman, Zainurrahman Afandi

⁴⁰ Prof. DiRaja Ungku Aziz

⁴¹ Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Sulaiman Esa.

⁴² For example: Mohd Aris Atan and Omar Rahmat.

⁴³ Anuar Dan

⁴⁴ Cheong Lai Tong, Patrick Ong Kah Onn.

seen to benefit as a result of the educational system and cultural sharing when they too use calligraphy in their art works. For example, Patrick Ng Kah Onn put his signature in paintings in *Jawi* calligraphy. An art work done which is a *Selamat Hari Raya* greeting card was produced by a Chinese artist named Cheong Lai Tong, addressed to Frank Sullivan.⁴⁵ That work was written the word "Selamat" in an abstracted gestural form of calligraphy. The card has the words "Selamat Hari Raya" from "Lai Tong and Yew Oi" his wife. Discovery of such a work is very significant in the country's history of calligraphy painting, because a Chinese painter has created an art work that all this while has been considered an art form dominated by Muslim Malays. The discovery is a symbolic one in its significance as an indicator of the effectiveness of the national educational system in realizing national integration for at that time *Jawi* and its calligraphic writing was a part of the educational curriculum.

The aspect of internal motivation is perhaps the strongest factor leading to some artists to embark on the creation of calligraphic painting; to explore upon the use of different base materials and techniques; and to continue giving their lifelong commitment to the art form. It is artists like these that becomes a source of inspiration for other artists. For example, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal has already been mentioned as one such inspiration, then there are other figures like Ustaz Mohamed Yusof Abu Bakar, the late Omar Basaree, the late Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Prof Madya Sulaiman Esa, Prof Bukhari Lubis, the late Shamsuddin Mansor, the late Syed Makhdar, the late Idris Salam and many more. For example, Ustaz Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar had started to introduce calligraphy to Malaysian society when he assisted Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal in the 1970's and helped in initiating a series of calligraphy exhibitions under the auspices of University Malaya and with the cooperation of a few state governments. At that time, Royal Professor Ungku Aziz as the Vice Chancellor of University Malaya mooted the idea when he was inspired by a book on calligraphy in the Arabic language authored by Naji Zain al-Din. This led him to discuss with Syed Ahmad Jamal who was then a visiting lecturer attached to *Muzium Seni Asia*, University of Malaya. The discussion culminated in the national exhibition on calligraphy at University Malaya. Because Syed Ahmad Jamal needed assistance in identifying various forms of calligraphy, a religious education officer at the Ministry of Education, Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar, was contacted to help him. The teamwork established during the first exhibition, organised between 26th September to 8th October 1975 proved fruitful. About eight thousand visitors from within and without the campus community visited the exhibition which obtained extensive publicity and front page coverage in local newspapers. Because of the huge success of the exhibition, Ungku Aziz, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar agreed to continue with eight more nationwide exhibitions which ensued in Kelantan, Terengganu, Johore, Penang, Perlis, Kedah, Tapah and Batu Gajah, Perak.

These organised exhibitions give a large impact in educating society, especially to inculcate the spirit of love to the calligraphic arts that had once been an integral part of Malay society, although the calligraphy itself as an art form originated from West Asia. For decades the Malay community has been producing their own calligraphy art works on their products crafted from textile, cookware, sculpture, pottery and so on. For the Malay community, rediscovering calligraphy through those exhibitions is an eye opener enabling them to reflect upon their identity through their

⁴⁵ Look at the plate 9.

own works and learning to elevate what were once regarded by them as worthless everyday utensils and equipments into something worth preserving and sacred in nature.

Apart from that, another inducement to compose calligraphy art works was the fact that the Islamic religion frowns upon the production of painting based on living things as understood from hadith of the Prophet s.a.w.: "Angel will not enter the house wherein preside a dog or painting".⁴⁶ This prohibition in fact carries a positive implication because in terms of calligraphy art, it becomes a challenge to muslims in general to alternatively produce art works which call for not only high creativity but in so doing be able to project God's holiness through their artistry. Thus, calligraphy as an art form becomes a vehicle for expression of spiritual ideology, as a means of avoiding images and statues used by those of other religious entities to portray power and beliefs. "Images from words" or "images derived from words" has become the main feature of Islamic art.

This issue has become a major polemic at seminars and conferences in Malaysia. Cases in point are such as *Seminar Seni Khat Kebangsaan* in Islamic Teachers Training College, Bangi in 1996. At that gathering, painters questioned their career as artists, because religion prohibits the reproduction of any living creature in paintings that they produced. Mohd Salleh Yaapar and Fatimah Daud, who wrote the working paper on this issue, cautioned participants to be careful in choosing subject matters as God is beyond any representation. In the same year, Universiti Teknologi MARA organised *Seminar Seni Islam Peringkat Antarabangsa* in which Seyyed Hossein Nasr, as the main speaker, when presented with the same issue offered alternatives such as painting arabesque and calligraphy. The 1980s and 1990s era was a period of islamization of knowledge for the country, a trend that has deep impact upon institutions of learning that caters to fine arts as a subject and UiTM had played a role in moving towards this direction in Malaysia. Likewise, many institutions showed strong support by organizing calligraphy exhibitions and Islamic civilisation exhibitions, including the National Art Gallery which for the first time gave patronage to calligraphy as an art through *Pameran Seni Lukis & Seni Khat : Exhibition of Islamic Civilization* held in its premises for nearly six months between 21 March to 3 September 1984. This trend was attributed to the leadership of the institution at that time, for Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal was heading the gallery and continued his legacy there. The exhibition also created a large impact because it was launched by the Malaysian Prime Minister, YAB Dato' Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Many artists from within and without the country joined the occasion and exhibited their calligraphy art works including great names from overseas such as Hasan Celebi (Turkey), Abdul Djalil Pirous, Ahmad Sadali, Amri Yahya, Saiful Adnan, Subarna (Indonesia), Saiful Islam (Bangladeshi) and Wajih Nahle (Lebanon). Local artists include Awang Damit Ahmad, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Zakaria Awang, Sulaiman Esa, Omar Basaree, Syed Abdul Rahman Al-Attas, Syed Mahdar al-Shahab and many more.

⁴⁶ For the information on this issue, please refer to Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *Diversion and Arts in Islam*, translated by oleh Rawaa Al-Khateeb, Islamic Incorporation Publishing and Distribution, page 67.

The effect of that exhibition, gave inspiration to the late Omar Rahmat to start creating calligraphy. Wajih Nahle's work displayed in that exhibition had inspired him. Finally, he could master the skill and produced calligraphy art works from modelling paste and his works has been displayed in several international exhibitions. One of his work is valued tens of thousands of ringgit, in fact one had been sold at one hundred thousand ringgit (RM100,000). His works follow and is very similar to his mentor Wajih Nahle's art works.

5. Conclusion

This article hopes to explain calligraphy art as an artistic tradition in Malaysian art scene. Nevertheless, what has been gleaned from the study is a partial yet significant evidence that calligraphy painting has a strong place in the historical tradition of the arts and it served to help formulate the identity of the Malay people, even the Malaysian identity generally.

The research ardently suggests that national institutions of the arts like the National Art Gallery can focus on calligraphy as an important aspect of Malaysian art work and enrich its collection by buying calligraphy works from well-known persons who still keep their works in their private collection. The works by Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal are exceptionally significant when viewed from its historical value. As a National Art Laureate, his calligraphy paintings in his private collection, should be lifted to become the collection of the National Art Gallery and made as a government property because it serves as a milestone for the one of western educational background in the field of fine arts but at the same time producing deluxe Islamic calligraphy art works. This is applied to many other renowned artists as well such as Ustaz Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar, Syed Makhdar, Shamsuddin Mansor, Mohd Aris Atan, Omar Rahmat and many others who have largely helped to stimulate calligraphy into an art form in the nation's art history.

Calligraphy painting as a form of fine arts has shown symbolically the successful integrative force of its worth in racial solidification for the nation when it was part and parcel of the education system. Because of that realization it is sensible to keep the art works as a reminder and symbol of national identity, as well as an icon of the spiritual aspect contained in the contemporary painting.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1: Mohd Salleh Hassan Farid, *Al-Maghfur Lahu*, 1947, ink on paper, 34 x 32 cm., Asian Art Museum collection (UM77.35)

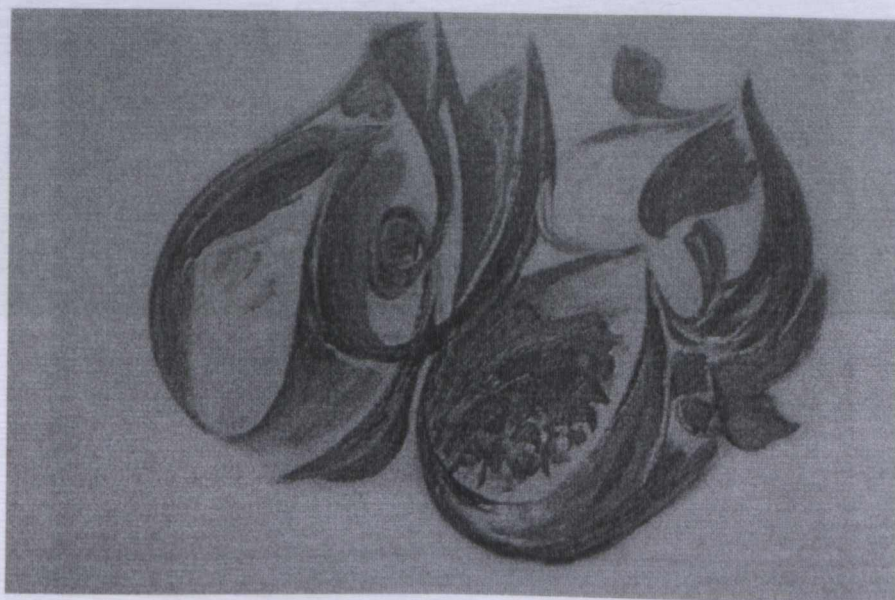


Plate 2: Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1958, *Chairil Anwar*, 74.5 x 120.5 cm, oil paint on hardboard, artist collection.



Plate 3: Smallest Art Work by Aidanismah Yahya, *Semangat Ikan Kering*, 9.75 x 8.75 cm., serigraphy on paper, artist collection.

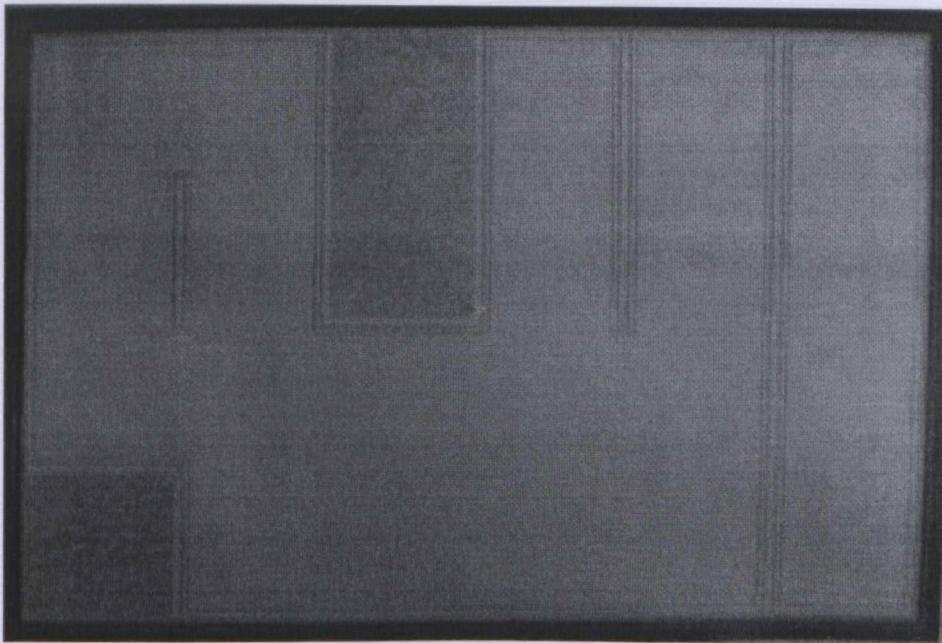


Plate 4: Biggest size art work by Ibrahim Hussein, *Allah*, 193 x 286 cm., acrylic on canvas, artist collection.

Plate 5: Halus Abu Bakar, 1992, *Alhamdulillah*, 37.3 x 43 cm., oil on canvas, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia collection.



Plate 5: Ahmad Zafuan Embong, 1999, *Panjang Sarung Begitulah Kerisnya*, 51 x 61 cm., oil paint on canvas, Muzium Kesenian Islam Malaysia collection.



Plate 6: Halias Abu Bakar, 1999, *Khairul Ashab*, 57.5 x 85 cm., oil paint on canvas, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia collection.

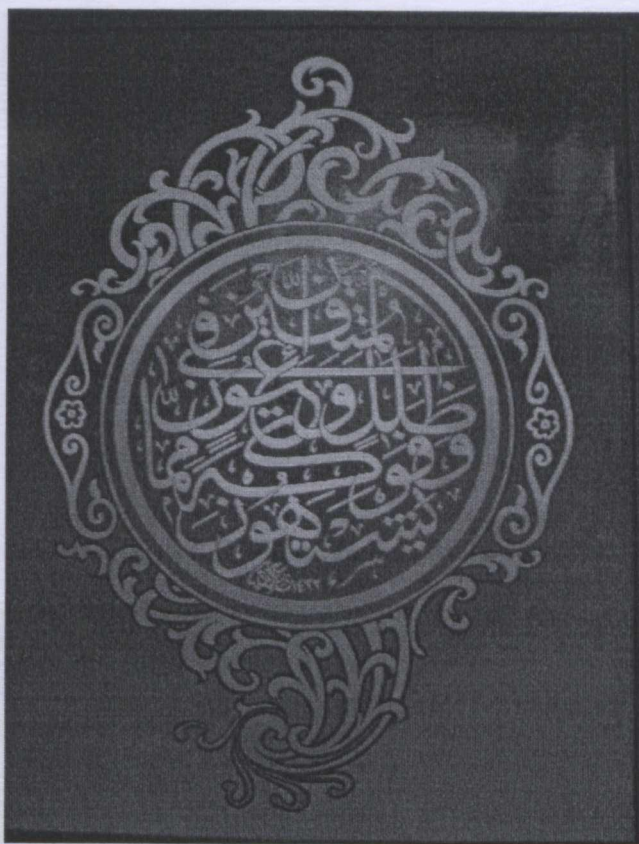


Plate 7: Syed Ubaidillah Syed Mohamad, 2001, *Surah al-Mursalat* 77: 41-42, 93 x 75 cm., oil paint on canvas, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia collection.



Plate 8: Syed Ahmad Jamal, 1961, *Tulisan*, 33 x 74 cm., oil paint on canvas, Museum and Art Gallery USM collection.

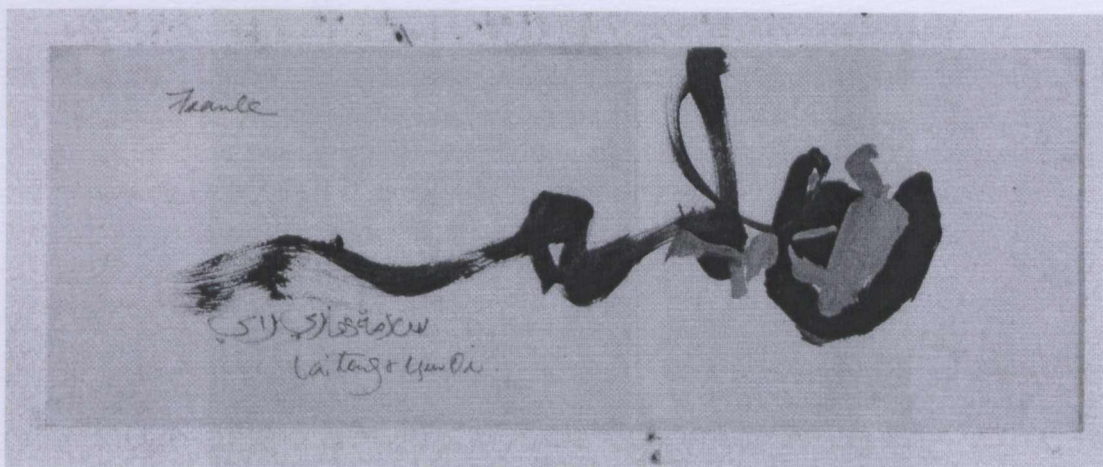


Plate 9: Cheong Lai Tong, 1979, *Selamat Hari Raya*, 14.5 x 39 cm., water paint on paper, National Arts Gallery collection (1979-026).



Plate 10: Sharifah Zuriah Al-Jefri, 2005, *Al-Rahman Al-Rahim*, x 35 cm., Chinese brush and ink on paper, artist collection.

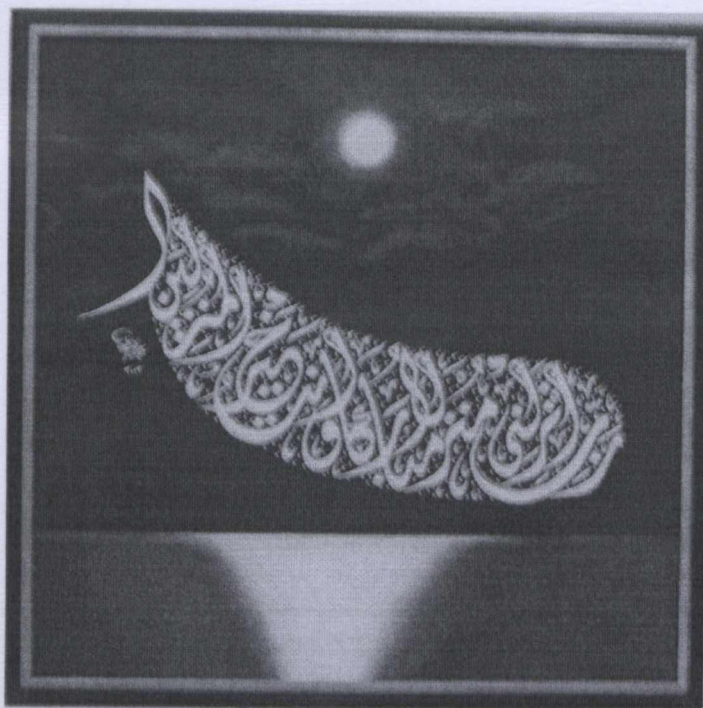


Plate 11: Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar, *Surah Al-Mukminin* 23: 29, 2002, 90 x 90 cm., acrylic on canvas, artist collection.

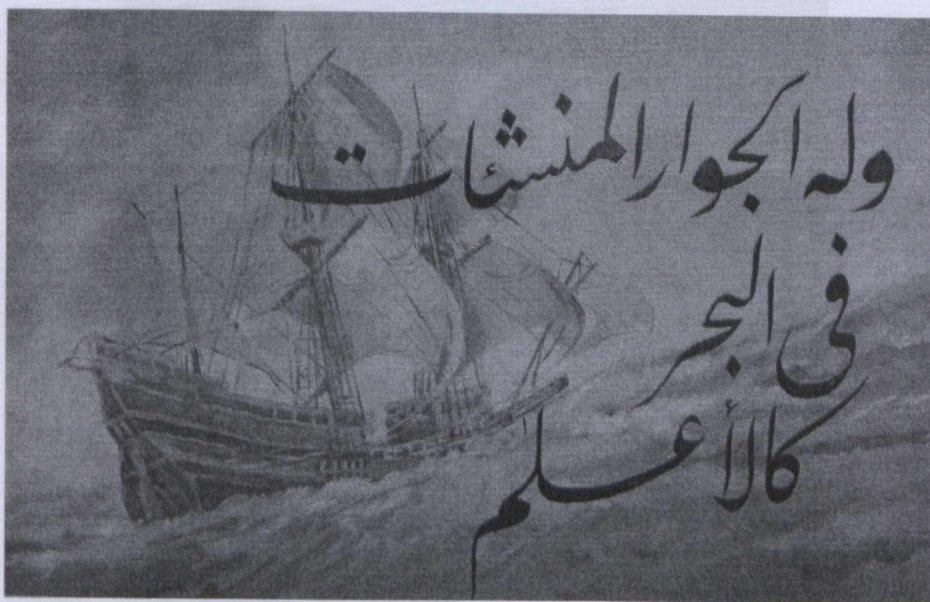


Plate 12: Ahmad Suzani Jaafar, *Surah Al-Rahman* 55: 24, 2001, 50.5 x 80 cm., Museum of Islamic Art Malaysia collection.



Plate 13: Zainurrahman Afandi, *Surah Al-Rahman 55: 24*, 2001, 62.5 x 81.25 cm., acrylic on canvas, Museum of Islamic Art Malaysia collection.



Plate 14: Mohamad Din Mohamad, *Feeling of Gratitude*, 2000, 78 x 63 cm., acrylic on canvas, artist collection.



Plate 15: Zainon Abdullah, *Never Ending*, 1997, 30 x 21 cm., pencil on paper, artist collection.

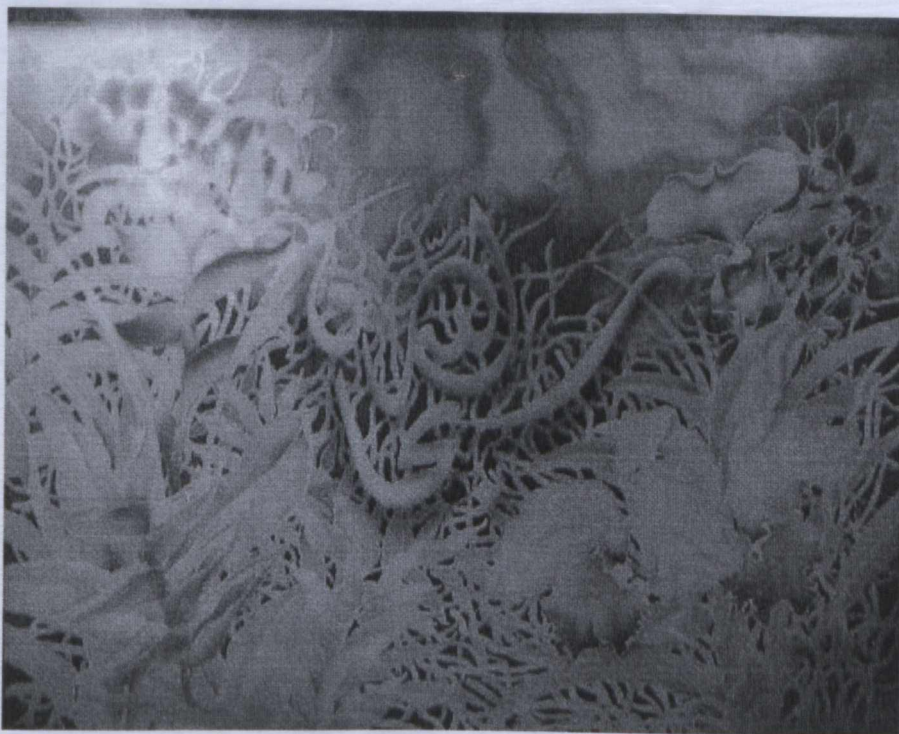


Plate 16: Ahmad Zafuan Embong, *The Splendour of Islamic Art*, 2000, 55 X 60 cm., oil paint and pastel on silk, artist collection.