

The Revival of Islamic Calligraphy in Pakistan: Through the Pen & Brush of Sadequain

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Abstract

The present paper traces the revival of Islamic calligraphy in Pakistan through the zealous pen and brush of the Sufi Artist Sadequain. Islamic Calligraphy originated as an Arabic script to preserve the holy verses of the Quran into beautifully written form. Therefore, it embraces a spiritual character as conveying the divine message of the Holy Quran to the whole world. Kufic is the oldest form of the Arabic script. Initially, it emphasized straight and angular strokes. However, the advance progression of Arabic calligraphy enhanced the Kufic writing in remarkably beautiful script. Like many other forms of Islamic art, calligraphy also went through revolutionary changes from time to time and origin to origin. The region of Pakistan also further enriched the art of calligraphy with transnational modernism through the brush of Sadequain who is known as a man responsible for the Renaissance of calligraphic art in the country. He held a distinctive position among the renowned artists of his time as he transformed the calligraphic art into stunning expressionist paintings. His eye catching wall murals of Quranic verses and calligraphy in Kufic script once again raised the status of Islamic calligraphy on international forum. The artist's calligraphic expressions and experimentation with modernism give new meanings to this art form and hence becoming more universal in scope.

Keywords: Islamic Calligraphy, Sadequain, Kufic Script, Murals, Paintings

Introduction

Pakistan is the land of productive and creative people. Like many other artisans, a number of famous calligraphers born on this land like Hanif Ramay, Shakir Ali, Sadequain, Bashir Moojid, Ismail Guljee and many others (Nadeem, 2012). However, the present paper traces the revival of Islamic calligraphy in the country through the zealous pen and brush of the Sufi Artist Sadequain. Sadequain (1930-1987) was Pakistan's most renowned calligrapher, celebrated painter and poet. He revived the Islamic Calligraphy not only in the country, but also set examples of Islamic calligraphy with modernity in the South Asia and West. This is the reason he has been titled as the Renaissance Man of Islamic Calligraphy by the world press (Ali, 2000; Naqvi, 1999).

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Background

Islamic Calligraphy originated as an Arabic Script to preserve the holy verses of the Quran into beautifully written form. Therefore, it embraces a spiritual character as conveying the divine message of the Holy Quran to the whole world. Deep association with Quran and the concept of calligraphy as a power of writing has escorted this form of art as one of the major forms of artistic expression in the Islamic world. Kufic being the oldest form of the Arabic script, with its stiff angular characteristics, was already in practice in the holy cities of Makka-tul-Muazama and Madina-tul-Munawara. After the spread of Islam, it was recognized as an official script and gained popularity from the town of Kufa and therefore, named as the Kufic script (Sourdel, 1986; Ziauddin, 1987). Hence, the first handwritten copies of the Holy Quran were inscribed in the same script.

Initially, the Kufic script emphasized straight and angular strokes. However, the advance progression of Arabic calligraphy enhanced the Kufic writing in a remarkably beautiful script. Like many other forms of Islamic art, calligraphy also went through revolutionary changes from time to time and origin to origin. During the 2nd century of the Hijra, the Kufic script with extreme angular character was in practice. Later in the 3rd century the angular forms turned into soft curves. The compact, bold circular forms with slantingly pointed tips also adorned the Quranic verses in the same century. Muslim calligraphers enjoyed the freedom of manipulation of words as the script did not follow strict geometric rules of writing (Ziauddin, 1987). They were free to adorn the script with different forms and patterns, e.g. plaited, knotted and interlaced designs. Subsequently, fascinating decorative floral and geometrical patterns began to appear during the 5th and 6th century (Sourdel, 1986). In the 8th century the simple script started to transform into decorative style and reached at its ornamental zenith in 11th century; the latter period of the Abbasid Caliphate. This ornamentation of the lettering was in continuing practice of the Muslim artists. Eventually, the Kufic script extended to adorn architecture, ceramics, textiles, glass, marble and many other surfaces in addition to the Quranic lettering (Barbara, 1991).

The early Muslim Calligraphers who were responsible for the preservation of the Holy Quran and the advancement of the writing system are also worth mentioning. Among the early Muslim calligraphers Caliph Hazarat Ali Karamullah Wajhu is considered as the master calligrapher. Abul Aswad al Duali a follower of the Caliph is considered another master calligrapher who brought advancement in the Quranic lettering and introduced vowel marks in the form of dots. Qutba, another great calligrapher invented four different Kufic styles. Later, Abu Ali Muhammad Ibn Muqla, a renowned calligrapher of the Abbasid caliphate became known for developing *al-Khatt al-Mansub* the 'proportioned script' (Sourdel, 1986). Ibn-al-Bawwab was the next calligrapher responsible for the perfection of the *al-Khatt al-Mansub* the 'well-proportioned script' of Islamic calligraphy (Ziauddin, 1978).

In the sub-continent history there were many known calligraphers who worked with heart and soul in this art and helped in spreading it in the region (Nadeem, 2012). Specially, the Mughal Empire was the golden period of Muslim calligraphy in the subcontinent. Due to

the patronage of the Mughal emperors the Muslim arts and crafts fully flourished in the region. Similarly, the art of book illustration with calligraphic panels reached at its peak and every public and private building was decorated with the calligraphic work of the master calligraphers (Barbara, 1991).

But after the decline of the Mughal Empire, calligraphic art like many other art forms was disregarded. Even after the partition, it was considered a low grade and an unrecognized art form in Pakistan. It's in the late sixties when calligraphic art was revived after Sadequain adopted this art form to express his divine inspiration.

Sadequain

Sadequain held a distinctive position among the renowned artists of his time and transformed the calligraphic art into stunning expressionist paintings (Naqvi, 1999). This Sufi artist was a prolific calligrapher as his ancestors had been calligraphers. His eye catching wall murals of Quranic verses and calligraphy in kufic script once again raised the status of Islamic calligraphy on international forum. He frequently received government mural commissions and held several solo exhibitions of his artwork (Dadi, 2011).

Sadequain was also the pioneer of painterly calligraphy in Pakistan (Ali, 2000). He inscribed masterpieces of Quranic Calligraphy, illustrated Urdu poetry and created abstract calligraphy along with numerous paintings, pen & ink drawings and huge murals with his zealous pen and brush. His national, Islamic and “qalandarana” subjectivity was his greatest strength and the spirit, which empowered him to create too many masterpieces within a short period of time. He made almost 15,000 drawings and paintings within three decades (Sadequain Foundation). He produced even more and larger murals than Michelangelo, the famous Italian Renaissance sculptor, painter, poet and engineer (Ahmed, 2015).

He initiated large wall paintings in the South Asia and produced almost more than thirty five huge murals that adorn the buildings of Pakistan, India and Abu Dhabi. For example, the painting he created for the Islamic Institute of Delhi covers approximately seven thousand square feet area (Nadeem, 2011). He also made large murals for the State Bank of Pakistan, (100 x 12 ft, *Treasurer of Time*, 1962), the Power House at the Mangla Dam (200 x 30 ft, *Saga of Labor*, 1967), Aligarh Muslim University (70 x H12 ft), Banaras Hindu University (70 x 12 ft, 1981), Geological Institute of India (70 x 25 ft), Frere Hall Karachi and Powerhouse at Abu Dhabi (1979) and Punjab University Library (*Quest for Knowledge*, 1968). He received numerous awards for his artwork, including Tamgha-e-Imtiaz in 1960, the President's Medal of Honor in 1962 and Sitara-e-Imtiaz in 1980 from the Government of Pakistan, Biennale de Paris in 1961 from the Government of France, and Cultural Award from Government of Australia in 1975 (Naqvi, 1999).

Sadequian's Calligraphy

Sadequian's concern in calligraphy increased from early 60's and soon he obtained world fame in paintings and Islamic Calligraphy (Dadi, 2011; Naqvi, 1999). Some of his calligraphic paintings remind the viewers, the Square Kufic script (fig. 1).

In all of his paintings, whether figurative or calligraphic the forms, letters and words reflect the artist's divine and religious inspiration instilled by the cactus plant and native calligraphy. Dadi (2011) opined that Kufic character with its incredible beauty of abstract pattern appears as the basis of his art yet his canvas transmits his own unique style which is original and unconventional. Sadequian also momentarily describes about his own style that all the letters and forms appear in his calligraphic style characterized his own perception, feelings, and personality (Naqvi, 1999). His canvas is full of forms and colors, though sometimes it is playful, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes luminous; and other times it is dark (Ali, 2000).



Fig. 1. Source: Sadequian Foundation

His calligraphic paintings can be categorized as (i) Calligraphy of Quranic Verses (ii) Abstract Calligraphy, and (iii) Calligraphy used in illustrations of the Urdu poetry of the historical legends; Ghalib, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Allama Iqbal.

Calligraphy of Quranic Verses

Sadequian not only revived the Islamic Calligraphy in Pakistan, but also exerted an incomparable influence on its development in the other South Asian Countries. He set new arena and inspiration for the coming generations to choose this form of Islamic art with full passion and poise. He having an aura of greatness, soon became known as a national hero and a legend in his own time (Ali, 2000; Dadi, 2011). In the late 1960s, Sadequian turned to Quranic calligraphy and produced beautiful calligraphy of Sura-e-Rehman, Sura-e-Yasin, 99 Names of Allah Subhan'nahu and several other calligraphic murals for different institutions of Pakistan and other South Asian Countries.

Indeed Sadequain was blessed by the grace of Allah Subhan'nahu with larger than life personality after creating the calligraphic illustration of Sura-e-Rehamn. He was a Sufi artist and hardly sold his paintings and calligraphies. His entire work was dedicated to the common man; the labor; the people who struggle hard; to earn for their life, and to survive in social injustice (Naqvi, 1999). He called his artistic talent, a divine inspiration and dedicated many of his paintings to the general public. With the same passion and devotion, Sadequain completed several large calligraphies in the early 1970s and donated to the historic Lahore Museum as a gift to the citizens of Lahore. Today one can enjoy some of these large calligraphic panels (20 x 20 feet approximately) in the Islamic Gallery of the museum.



Fig. 2. Source: Sadequain Foundation

Calligraphy of Sura-e-Rehman

He inscribed four versions of the complete Sura-e-Rehman beautifully (fig. 2). Two of them had 31 panels each, while the third version consisted of 40 panels, was painted on transparent cellophane. The fourth version of Sura-e-Rehman was painted on marble slabs exhibited in the Frere Hall, Karachi in 1986. But unfortunately, all those 40 panels disappeared without traces just after the death of Sadequain on 10th February, 1987 (Sadequain Foundation).

Abstract Calligraphy

Many paintings of Sadequain during the nineteen sixties are based on calligraphic forms that represent images of people, cities, buildings and landscapes (fig. 3). The artist's calligraphic representation of the figures creates an impact of abstraction and extends his art across the national boundaries.

About his calligraphic, angular and sharp anthropomorphic forms, Iftikhar Dadi, the writer of the book 'Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia' states that Sadequian's work is not abstract, however, a few of his murals inspired by the Kufic script come close to abstraction (Dadi, 2011). His conventionalized form of the Arabic script reflects the

“post-cubism movement” and the “transnational modernism” (Dadi, 2011). His calligraphy with “transnational post-cubist modernism” rewarded him with the title of the Picasso of Pakistan (Dadi, 2010 as cited in Ku, 2010, p. 134). In its April 1964 edition, the newspaper *Le Monde of Paris*, France acknowledged the skills and talent of Sadequain. It stated “The multiplicity of Sadequain’s gift is reminiscent of Picasso” (Ahmed, 2015).

Sadequain was inspired by the cactus plant of the Gadni desert. Its elongated prickly branches resembled him like Arabic script and the growth of cactus in an upward direction similitude the Iqbal’s concept of Khudi (the selfhood). This inspiration evolved so deep within his soul that ultimately, his brush embraced both the inspirations. It seems that his brush would have been transformed the calligraphic letters into a cactus form and his cactus figures in the Kufic form while working on his canvas.



Fig. 3. Source: Sadequain Foundation

Illustration and Calligraphy of Urdu Poetry

Sadequain also painted the poetry of the three legends of classical Urdu poetry; Ghalib, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Allama Iqbal to pay them homage. In 1968 he illustrated 25 verses of Ghalib poetry (oil painting) (fig. 4). In 1985, on the sixtieth birthday of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sadequain executed more than 45 drawings and paintings (oil on canvas) on Faiz poetry.



Fig. 4. Illustration of a Verse by Ghalib. Source: Sadequain Foundation

Sadequain also illustrated numerous large paintings and murals known as Naqoosh-e-Iqbal based on Iqbal's poetry in 1977. He interpreted Iqbal's ideology realistically. He painted the whole theme of the selected verses faithfully through his vibrant palette. His Sufi nature was coincided with Iqbal's concept of Qalandar and when he inscribed Iqbal on his canvas, every inch of his canvas interpreted the Poet's subjectivity and philosophy of activism. His hatching and 'scratched surface' technique filled the canvas with energy and motion. Aftab-e-Taza (fig. 5) is the famous illustration of Iqbal's poetic verses. The beautiful calligraphy of a couplet from Iqbal's poetry below the red rising sun is the central theme of the painting. The human figures are portrayed in a manner to best illustrate the message of the verse and hence, captures viewers' attention. Another painting titled "Mehro-O-Mah-OAnjum Ka Mahasib Hai Qalandar" illustrates Iqbal's Qalandar, who has the potential to succeed over space and time through attaining spiritual strength and developing Khudi, the selfhood (Dadi, 2011).



Fig. 5. Aftab-e-Taza. Source: Sadequain Foundatio

The calligraphy of the couplet at the lower left with galaxy in the background completes the theme of the painting (fig.6).



Fig. 6. Source: Sadequain Foundation

Sadequain illustrated Iqbal's 'Perfect Man' and his concept of Khudi so well that viewers of his paintings truly understand the depth of Iqbal's message and subjectivity characterized by restlessness, struggle, and heroism. Ifftikhar Dadi (2010) stated that it is his modern calligraphy and profound illustration of classical Urdu Poetry that he soon became recognized as an "Indo-Muslim Artist" (cited in Ku, 2010, p. 134).

Conclusion

Sadequain's Calligraphic work specially, his purposive and intentional creation of Islamic calligraphy made him a national artist. The blend of his love towards native calligraphy; his transitional modernism approach; and the magic of his fingers put forward the endeavor of the Muslim calligraphers and artists to practice Islamic art with modernity. The artist's calligraphic expressions and experimentation with modernism give new meanings to this art form, hence becoming more universal in scope.

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