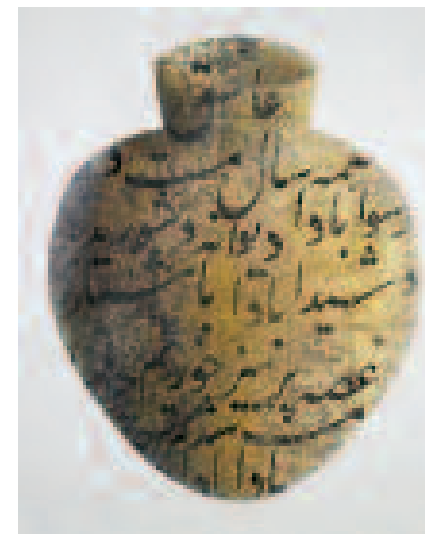




Left: *Mi'rajname*, by Errol Akyaras, 1987; above: *Drunken lover*, by Farhad Moshiri, 2003; right: *Adonis*, by Dia al-Azzawi, 1990

Middle Eastern artists are finding innovative ways of putting the power of letters at the centre of their art. **Venetia Porter** gives insight

## Mighty as the word



It all began with a chance encounter in May 2005 with Saeb Eigner, a committed enthusiast for modern art and the contemporary art of the Middle East in particular, which led to the major exhibition that is now on view in the Joseph E. Hotung Gallery. The exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, which starts in the Great Court with imposing and colourful sculptures, is based on the collection of Middle Eastern contemporary art at the British Museum and is enhanced by a number of loans. It highlights the innovative ways in which artists of this region use script – with Arabic as the main focus. This concept was chosen because it enables us to use the collection to tell a number of different stories about the region, about history, past and present, about literary traditions of the Middle East and, significantly, about the importance of writing and Arabic script.

As the language of the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad and the script of the Qur'an, the holy text of Muslims everywhere, Arabic has a strongly sacred aspect. Complex rules were established for writing the Qur'an and other texts, and regional scripts developed. These calligraphic rules inspired and ensured the flexibility of beautiful letter shapes that could be used to decorate any surface. Artists today

continue to seek inspiration from the script but are constantly breaking new ground. On the one hand, the traditional teaching of calligraphy still flourishes, most strongly in Istanbul – under the great master or *ustadh* Hasan Celebi – where it still takes a number of years to perfect one style of script. On the other, there are many other important directions being followed, which this exhibition sets out to explore.

The use of script to create identity is one such development. This began to emerge as a strong element from the 1940s onwards: Iraqi artists in particular set out to create regional identities in otherwise European-inspired abstract art. Many Middle Eastern artists studying in Paris and elsewhere had become imbued with and enthused by the European art movements of



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the 20th century, but on their return sought to integrate what they had learnt with indigenous styles. Poet and critic Buland al-Haidari, writing on the theme of ‘Arabness’, described artists after 1967 (the year of the defeat of the Arab armies by Israel) as ‘vying with each other in trying to blaze a new trail which would give concrete expression to the longing for Arab unity, and end by giving the Arab world an art of its own’. Using script was one such way. So popular did the use of script in various forms subsequently become that a special term for it was coined – *hurufiyya*, after the Arabic word for letter. Artists from across the region began to focus on single letters, to make legible or deliberately illegible patterns out of words and letters creating different layers of meaning.

In addition to examining the work of artists delighting in the possibilities of the script itself, the exhibition looks at what it was that so many of the artists were actually writing, what inspired them and why, and uses it as a starting point to explore Middle Eastern cultures on other levels. It emerged, for example, that the sacred text of the Qur’an could inspire a Christian artist, a text from the Bible a Muslim one. A Jewish artist could be inspired by ancient traditions of microscript, practised by both medieval Muslim and Jewish artists.

Poetry emerged as another major theme. The literary traditions of the region are so strong that almost everyone you meet can recite passages of Arabic or Persian poetry. Many artists love to illustrate these works by either writing out poems in imaginative ways, making images to go with them or creating beautiful artists’ books.

The final theme that emerged by studying the words themselves, or by extending this to the notion of a book, was that it offered an insight into aspects of the region’s history – the interest of contemporary Iranian photographers in early developments of photography, particularly as regards the photography of women in 19th-century Iran, or how artists express their preoccupation with politics today. Some of these works are powerful indeed, and the potent messages contained in them cry out and haunt

Left: *Heech in a cage*, by Parviz Tanavoli, 2005



Left: *Nahar mubarak (Blessed day)*, by Etel Adnan, 1990; below: *Untitled*, by Kareem Risan, 2002



us, whether it is the burning of the libraries in Iraq following the invasion by the US-led forces in 2003 or the Lebanese civil war.

To tell these stories, *Word into Art* includes the work of 84 artists who come from across the region extending from Turkey and North Africa in the west to Iran in the east and encompassing many of the countries in between. While the majority of works are in the collection of the BM, a number of pieces have kindly been lent to give our story greater breadth. The exhibition is not intended to be representative of contemporary Middle Eastern art as a whole but by focusing on four main themes – ‘Sacred Text’, ‘Literature and Art’, ‘Deconstructing the Word’, and ‘Identity, History and Politics’ – it aims to open a window

onto the rich cultural mix of the region and the passion shown by artists for their traditions, literature, history and the events that continue to affect this troubled part of the world today.

*‘Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East’, generously sponsored by Dubai Holdings, is on view to 3 September. The accompanying catalogue is published by BM Press (£16.99 HB/9.99 PB; ISBN 0-7141-1163-5). For a full listing of the extensive season of lectures, films, conferences and performances, see the ‘Middle East Now’ leaflet or consult the Museum’s website at [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/middleeastnow](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/middleeastnow).*



Left: *Dictionary Work*, by Khalil Rabah, 1997