

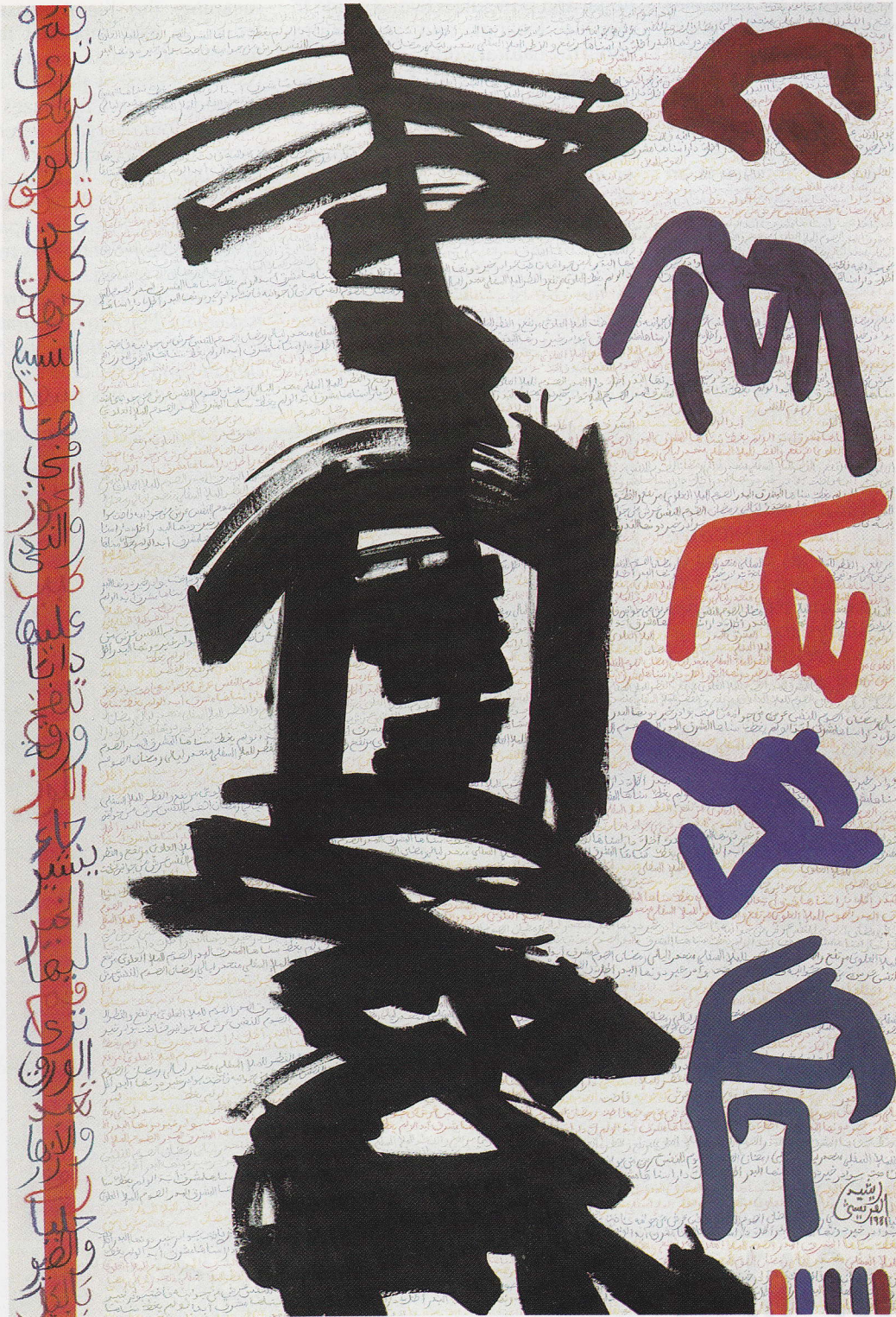
"Untitled" by Rafa al-Nasiri of Iraq, mixed media on paper.

CONTEMPORARY

Modern Painters of the Arab World

ARAB ART

Arab artists today are in a distinctive position. Their roots are in a highly developed artistic tradition which is more or less separate from that of the West. The Islamic faith, touching as it does on all aspects of life so that there is no division between the sacred and the secular, has had a unifying effect on its art.



Composition by Algerian Rachid Koraichi, mixed media on paper.

Western art suffers, or benefits, from leaps and reversals. Islamic art – abstract, highly decorative, symbolic, impersonal – remains for centuries remarkably consistent. Calligraphy is its supreme expression. It is an intellectual, a spiritual discipline which involves the refinement and the perfecting of the divine language: the script of the Koran.

It is this spiritual impulse in art which inspires Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata's series of screen-prints. These designs, based on devotional writings in the Kufic script, appear to combine Western modernist and Eastern ideas about abstraction.

Arab calligraphy then, which has been taken up in this century by Western artists for its rhythm, cypher-like attributes and all-over decorative qualities, is not just a tributary of Islamic art, it is a central stream. In one way or another, most contemporary Arab artists have reacted to the art of 'beautiful writing'. Even when script is absent there are hints of its influence. In the thickets of lines which describe leaves and grasses in Walid Abu Shakra's drypoints, based on the landscape surrounding his native Palestinian village, we can sense the nervous yet controlled line, the feeling for pattern and rhythm of the calligrapher.

Mehdi Qotbi's works on paper, with their fields of script, modified by changes in the flow of the writing, or the scale of the letters, or by washes of colour, resemble the patterns in sand at low tide, or the exotic woven design of an oriental carpet, or the movement of foliage in wind. The works of this Moroccan suggest the exchange between the art of painting and the writing which is his own

tradition, and between expression and control. Letters form the images, so that calligraphy, non-representational and non-subjective, is made to express feelings and perceptions about the natural world.

Algerian Rachid Koraichi has also tended to use letter forms to make up the grounds of his works, often setting dramatic, quasi-human or animal characters against blocks of script (Japanese and Chinese as well as Arabic), seals and cabbalistic signs. In some of his works the decorative vein in calligraphy is underlined by the use of pastel colour, and the near-human letter forms appear stronger – immense and black, they dominate the picture space. Koraichi's expressionist impulse is

in direct contrast to that of the anonymous scribe.

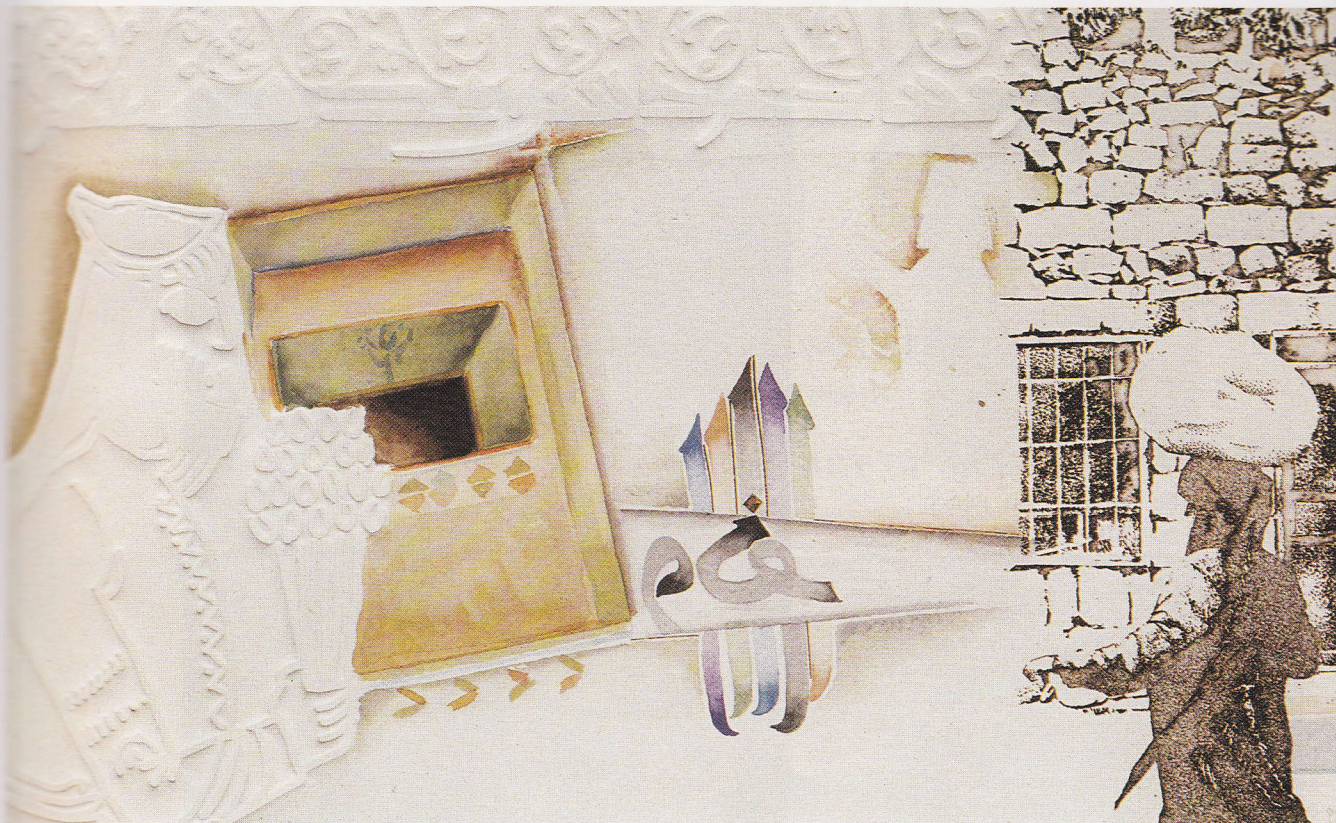
In most of the modern works, the meaning, the literal sense of the letters, is less important than their function as visual images. Rafa al-Nasiri's works, with their impasted surfaces washed by glazes of turbulent colour, contain letters which carry only the traces of linguistic meaning. Nasiri lives in Iraq, his native country, and the dust storms, the red skies, the desert spaces suggested in his recent series may imply the troubles of Iraq.

The idea of tracks left by tradition is displayed by two other Iraqi artists: *Pages from Old Books* by Salah al-Jumaie, and in the drawings of Sahfiq Alnawab, who has tended to give an

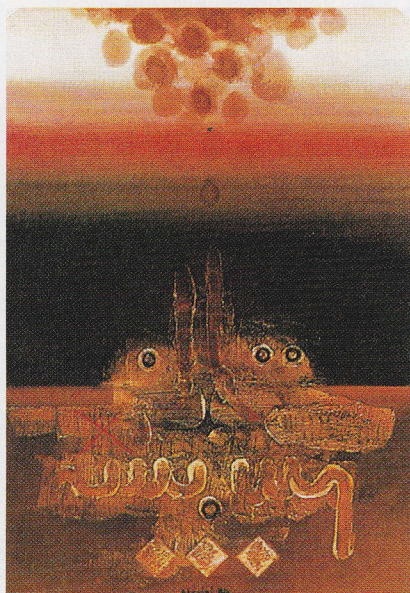
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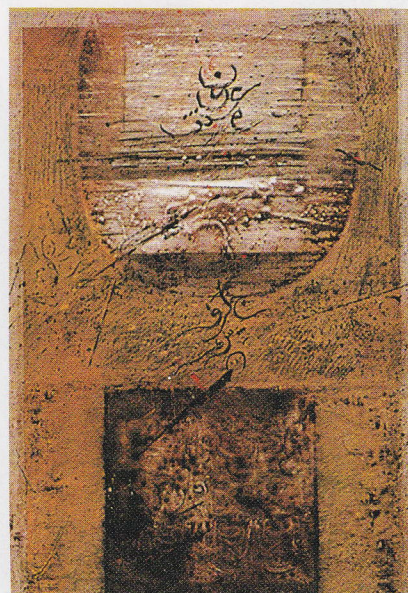
"Pages from Old Books No. 1" by Saleh al-Jumaie of Iraq, mixed media on paper.



Untitled work from the series Nostalgie Syrienne by Ghayas Akhras, in watercolour with etching and embossing.

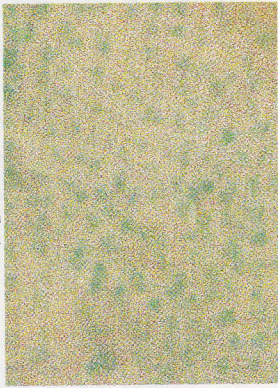


"Untitled" by Rafa al-Nasiri, mixed media on paper.



Calligraphic composition by Shafiq al-Nawab in mixed media on paper.

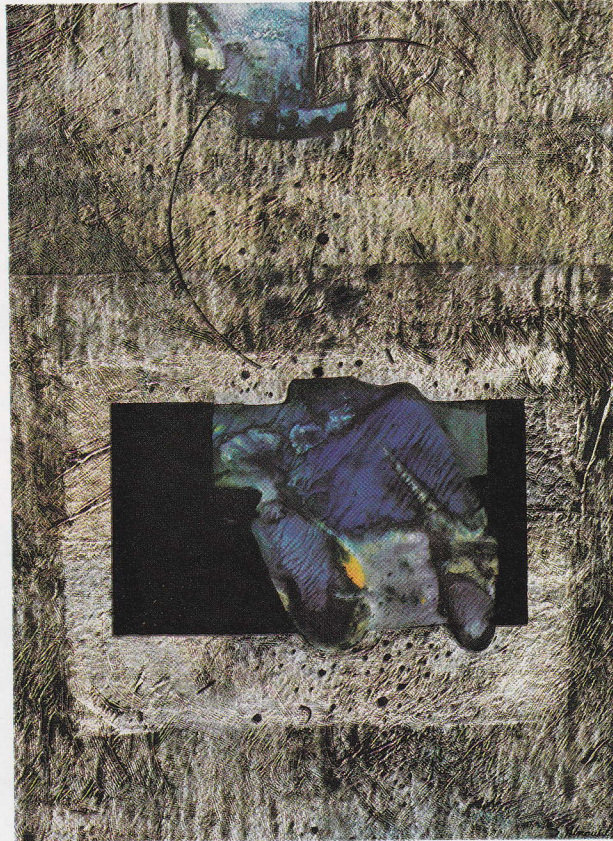
"Sacre
du Printemps"
by the Iraqi
artist Medhi
Qotbi in
gouache on
paper.



illusion of the surfaces on which fragments of script have been written – crinkled parchment, for instance, or a scratched, eroded wall. In newer works, the calligraphic element is fainter. We are left with the carefully worked surfaces, the grounds for the nearly-obscured lettering, which has given way to splashes and pools of pigment. It is as if the new drawings suggest the near-impossibility of expressing or imposing order or form.

Over the last four or five years, Dia al-Azzawi's works have become less dependent on the transcription of Arabic lettering, and more on directly representational images. Yet in his recent constructions, with their strong organisation and their confident sense of colour, the effect of calligraphy is still felt. There are also echoes of the observed world – hints of buildings, landscape and natural things such as suns, moons and the effects of light. The forms of letters are absorbed into the configurations of coloured shapes, in relief, or layers. Azzawi's works are partly to do with memory. He lives away from his native Iraq, and his paintings are reworked themes from Arab art and poetry.

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"Reminiscence" by Iraqi Shafiq Alnawab in oil on paper.



"Arabic Motif No.2" by Dia al-Azzawi of Iraq in mixed media on paper.



"Ya Subhan al-Khaliq" (Glory be to the Creator)
by Kamal Boullata of Palestine, screenprint.

Since the Second World War, Western influences have flooded the Arab world, and for a time these had a weakening effect on contemporary Arab art, threatening to rob it of its identity. Recently, Arab artists have become confident enough to use a variety of sources and influences, while keeping in touch with their own Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Elements which are not recognisably Islamic – most notably calligraphy – are not used by these artists as embellishment, but they stem inevitably from the attempt at finding a visual language capable of making the personal objective.

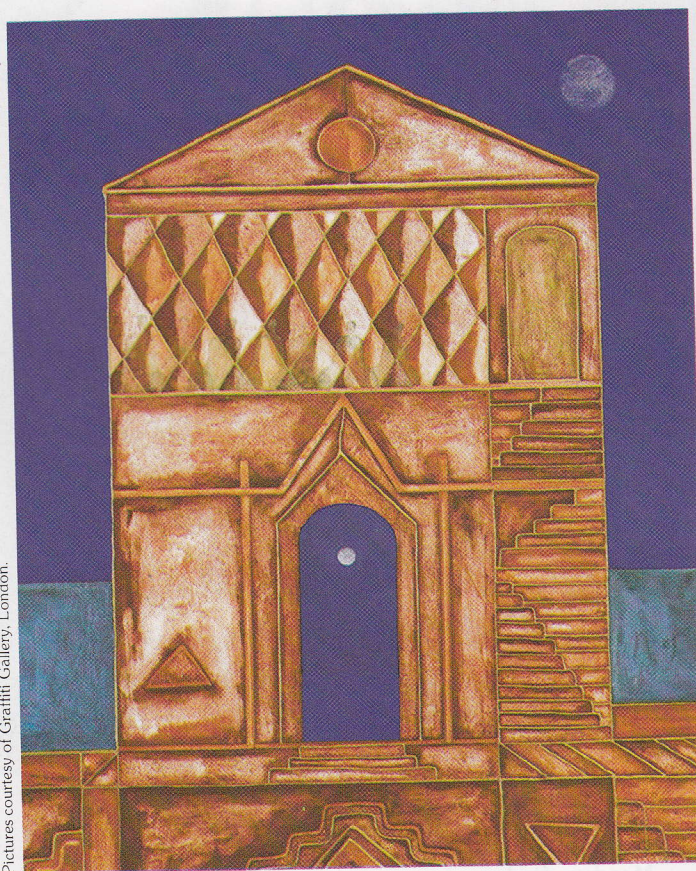
In the Arab world the written word has a significance and a richness of association which is lacking in the Western tradition. Again and again in modern Arab works we are referred to the art of writing – to the word as image.

Caroline Collier

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"Oriental Garden No.3" by Dia al-Azzawi, an
etching and aquatint on paper.



"Xania, This House of Love, Forever Blessed II"
by Basil Alkazzi in gouache on paper.

Pictures courtesy of Graffiti Gallery, London.