

# Al-Huriffya, Colours and Text

All three of the keywords I have chosen are important to me personally. The first, 'Al-Hurufiyya' is a pan-Arabian art movement that mixes parts of my cultural heritage (Arabic letters) with typically abstract art. The second keyword I chose is 'Colours', to me this instils the power to bring art to life. For this keyword I present the perspective of three artists who are renowned for their use of colour. Lastly, my third keyword I decided on is 'Text' – to me the use of text contrasted with an image has the ability to captivate and convey a powerful political message. I present some work of two artists who have used text in their art to depict exactly that.

## Al-Hurufiyya

The hurufiyya movement is an aesthetic art movement combining traditional Islamic calligraphy within an artwork, typically an abstract composition. An artistic experimentation with the Arabic letters, 'hurufiyya' loosely translates to 'letterism'. This movement is not to be confused with Islamic calligraphy, which follows the use of the cursive script known as naskh and adheres to more strict guidelines. The movement emerged in the late twentieth century amongst middle eastern countries, in a postcolonial era. The emergence of postcolonial nations taking pride in their cultural heritage is significant to this aesthetic movement. Arabic calligraphy, a cultural significance to many people from middle eastern countries, began to be combined with the previously dominant colonial western artwork in these nations. Following the works of two Iraqi artists, Madiha Omar and Jamil Hamoudi, a pan-Arabian movement was born, whereby the Arabic letter was used as a visual element in an abstract or modern art composition. The abstract art was merged with Arabic letters to produce letter art known as Al-Hurufiyya.

During 1955 and 1975, various Artists from North Africa, Middle East, West and South Asia, engaged in a movement that converted Arabic calligraphy into modern art without direct knowledge of each other's work. Artists Ibrahim El Salahi in Sudan, Sadewuain Naqqash in Pakistan, Charles Hossein in Iran, and Shakir Hassan Al Said in Iraq, all these artists created a beautiful harmonious language, based on calligraphy, figuration and abstraction. Some artists who practice the art of craftsmanship believe that the combination of modern school and Arabic calligraphy allows the viewer to enjoy his sight with these creative works. That holds two ideas, the first represents modern schools, and it is the background of the painting, and above it the linear plate that represents the Arabic calligraphy stands with the preservation of its aesthetic, depending on its own rules. While some artists rebelled against the rules of Arabic calligraphy, others considered that drawing the painting with a line outside the accepted rules is a quest for liberation (Mercer, 2006).

Ibrahim El-Salahi, a visionary modernist artist and politician, is one of the most prominent proponents of the Al Hurufiyya movement. Born in 1930, Al-Salahi learned Arabic calligraphy techniques from an early age at his home in Omdurman, Sudan. Later, he moved to the Jordan Memorial College to obtain a degree in Art and Design followed by the Slade school in London. He currently lives in Oxford, England, at the age of eighty (*Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist – Exhibition at Tate Modern*, 2020). He said: "I left Sudan and came back, and started to look around for things, for patterns. I lived with it all my life and yet I never saw it before, until I went outside and came back, with a different outlook towards things" (Mercer, 2006). El-Salahi was affected by two elements that had a great impact on his artworks, Arabic calligraphy and African motifs and decoration, an substantial tradition in Sudan (figure 1). He was attracted by the visual spaces in Arabic calligraphy, his memory of his childhood and early schooling, his own father who ran Quranic school in his house for the

children, had a huge influence on his artwork (*Who is Ibrahim El-Salahi?*, 2020). El- Salahi said: “My work has always been influenced by religious teaching and upbringing. I have always had it in the family and in me - it’s something I don’t think about. I just found it there.” (Hassan, Adams and El Salahi, 2013).

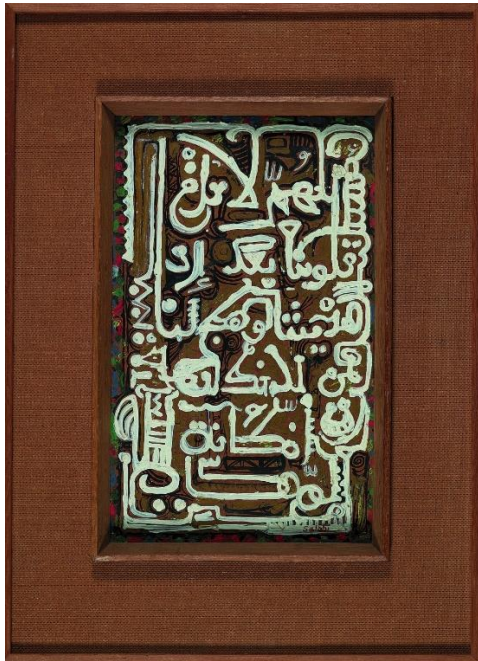


Figure 1: *The Prayer*, 1960.

Jamil Hamoudi (1924-2003), an Iraqi artist considered to be a pioneer figure in hurufiyya movement at a time when calligraphy was the focus of much attention by artists throughout the fifties and sixties. Hamoudi was known for its pure colours, geometric patterns, and sharp corners, depth line, shading (figure 2). After completing his studies in Paris he took a distinguished style as he tried to integrate modern European art with Iraqi heritage. After his exhibition in 1950, Hamoudi’s works were exhibited internationally in many galleries and museums (*Jamil Hamoudi*, 2020).



Figure 2: *Untitled*, 1980. Embedded within the image the letters form “Bismillah”, which translates to “The Name of God”.

## Colours

Colours contribute greatly to expressing what goes on in the human psyche, it reveals its psychological and mood states. Therefore, in ancient civilizations, such as during the times of the Pharaohs, Indians, and Chinese it was used for treatment, and it continues to be used to the present day as a treatment in some parts of the world. When psychologists use it as part of the treatment and study of its effect on the psychological state of the patient, a positive reaction represents a sense of fun and optimism, whereas a negative reaction is expressed with a sense of frustration and sadness by the patient. Colour is one of the main characters in a palette, regardless of whether it is figurative or abstract. In nature and in art, colours have profound affection on the viewer, regardless if the expression of colours is vivid or subtle.

Pierre Bonnard was one of the first of the Nabis group to use pure colour in his paintings, he was one of the greatest colourist artists of the twentieth century as he preferred to work from memory and imagination, allowing him to capture the soul of the moment and deal with its unique colour and sensual elements. (Ormiston and Robinson, 2009). For Bonnard, the colour was so essential that when he mixes the colour that suits him, he returns to touch this colour in other drawings, as if he wants to feel this colour or mix it with his feelings (*Pierre Bonnard: Painting Arcadia*, 2016).

Colours was also Kandinsky's main concern, his interest in colours was represented by the special relationship between each colour and the other colour in the painting (Vergo, 1986). In expressive and powerful ways, Kandinsky manages to convey the content of the painting mysteriously to the beholder (figure 3). Kandinsky articulates: ‘colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which play, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul’ (Kandinsky and Sadleir, 2004). In 1958, Kandinsky continued for a while to paint quite naturalistically. Kandinsky admits that he had always loved colour, even as a child, far more than subject matter.



Figure 3: *Transverse Lines*, 1923.

French artist Robert Delaunay similarly had very strong views on the nature of colours. Husband and wife Robert and Sonya Delaunay, after breaking with cubism pursued an art of pure colours, based not on contrast of form but on what Robert describes as 'simultaneity of colours' (Gooding, 2008). When viewing Delaunay 's artwork (figure 4), you can see the style of orphism that he created with his wife, in which he used bold and strong colours and their shades, eliciting a feeling of simplicity and purity.



Figure 4: *Rhythm*, 1912.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Delaunay published a periodical in the German magazine on realism entitled “Notes On the Construction of Reality in Pure Painting”. In this essay Delaunay argues that the most beautiful thing that an artist can create is reality, and that colour is the main element in reality. Delaunay reaches these beliefs following his sixty years of artistic research and practical experience, in essence “it is our eyes that transmit the sensations perceived by nature to our soul”. Thus, colour can convey to our eyes the beauty of nature and fill our soul with feelings (Willette, 2019). Delaunay was captivated by the idea of dividing the colours and the relationship between them and the image that can be embodied when they are stuck together next to each other. This idea is especially apparent in his portrait of his friend and artist Jean Metzinger (figure 5), where he enlarged cubes of colours and creates a relationship between reality and colour. Delaunay’s beliefs begs the question “what about colour-blind people or blind people?” if colour is so intrinsically tied to reality then what reality do these people experience? It is more apt to conclude that each of us have our own reality, and that for Delaunay colour is his reality.



Figure 5: *Portrait of Jean Metzinger*, 1906.

## Text

Letters and the words have become part of our lives and that we are so used to, that we have forgotten that these letters are forms, it has its own composition and aesthetic, and it is only natural for an artist to have their own look, who tries to embody their artistic works which corresponds to their own ideas, feelings, and philosophy.

It can be argued that political artists have especially recognized the power associated with words and characters and tried to use it in their own way with colours or any other way to convey this power to the beholder.

Barbara Kruger is an American conceptual artist and one of many artists who use words as powerful tool to give meaning to her artwork. She was best known for configurations of strong directional slogans using the three bold colours: white and black with red, and a combination of type and image. Her short phrases carry stinging cultural critique such as "*Thinking of You*", "*You are a captive audience*", "*I shop therefore I am*", and "*We don't need another hero*". These confrontational texts explore themes of gender roles, social relationships and a myriad of other social constructs. Kruger's clever use of juxtaposing her text on silkscreens or posters designed for other purposes ensures that the message sticks with the viewer (figure 6). She was able to broadcast her ideas in countless ways, such as prints on T-shirts, posters and electronic signs. Explaining her work she said "I'm fascinated with the difference between supposedly private and supposedly public and I try to engage the issue of what it means to live in a society that's seemingly shock-proof, yet still is compelled to exercise secrecy". (Barbara Kruger, 2020).



Figure 6: *Untitled*, 1986.

Jenny Holzer, another American conceptual artist, is also well known for her use of slogans combined with images. Holzer employed the use of everything from LED lights to T-shirts to broadcast her art and was especially prominent in the late 70s and early 80s. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Holzer articulates her thoughts boldly: "Why put these words on posters? I knew the reading list had genuinely important material and I knew most people in the world wouldn't read it. So I thought, 'Maybe I can convey some of the valuable content in an accessible way'." (Jeffries, 2012). In her provocative and blunt political work 'Endgame' Holzer uses revised secret documents obtained using the Freedom Act of 1966 to direct her art towards social purposes. These documents detail the U.S. government's involvement in torture following 9/11, in particular Guantanamo Bay. Every painting is accompanied with headings of "Top Secret" and the text that had not been redacted only becomes more powerful by being contrasted with the blocks of redactions that compose the rest of the painting. In her own words: "Lack of content is the message" (Laster, 2014). Holzer however did not limit herself to using only blocks of black redaction, instead she made the conscious decision to colour the redactions. She alludes to the Suprematist Kasimir Malevich in these series of paintings (figure 7), using his colour bands of white, black and red for the blocks of redaction, Malevich himself was a big proponent of art directing social change (Johnson, 2012).



Figure 7: *TOP SECRET 21 U.S. GOVERNMENT DOCUMENT*, 2012

In her work 'Protect Protect' (2007) Holzer presents a military screen print representing the map of Iraq photocopied first onto clear film then transferred onto a linen canvas fabric, covered with a transparent layer of oil-violet colour (figure 8). The map contains codes and directions for American military aircraft heading to the capital, Baghdad, located in the centre of the map. Three large labels read 'Protect', one framed in the west, where Iraq borders with Jordan, the other framed in the south where the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia borders with Iraq and last to the north, the border between Iraq and Turkey. Other text and in smaller font can also be read on the map: 'Exploit', 'Suppress', 'Isolate', 'Seize, and 'Fix'. At the far-left corner are three consecutive text: 'Shock and Awe' – 'Exploit' – 'Gain Control'. Instructions to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Holzer, who is renowned for her dramatic and provocative use of text provides no explicit critique in this presentation, the subject matter is laid out transparent and bare for public scrutiny.

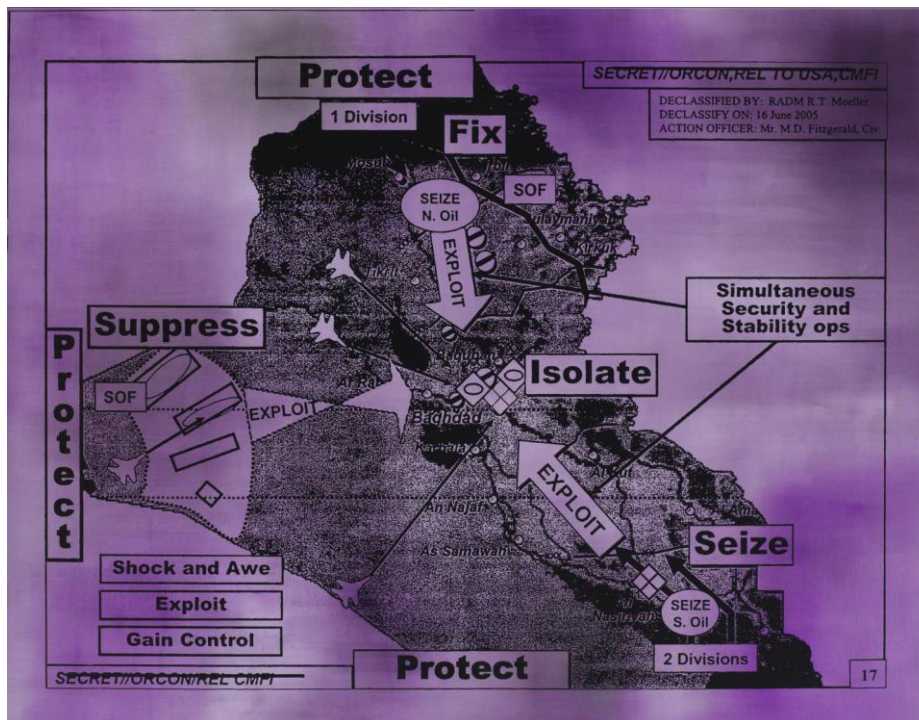


Figure 8: *Protect Protect*, 2007.

## Further Research

The research into how El-Salahi beautifully intertwines his cultural roots with his art, Delauney's strong convictions about the power of colour and Holzer's clever and captivating use of text in her art has motivated me to continue exploring these themes for my third year research projects. My focus will be to use a combination of all three of these researched keywords to further develop my art.

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