Design Structure In Malaysian Islamic Calligraphy Contemporary Paintings

Nor Azlin Hamidon[1], Siti Mastura Md Ishak[2], Wan Samiati Andriana WMD[3]
{norazlin@uitm.edu.my[1], ct_mastura@upm.edu.my[2], samiati@uitm.edu.my[3]}

Department of Visual Culture Studies, Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA[1],
Department of Industrial Design, Universiti Putra Malaysia[2], Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA[3]

Abstract. This article entitled Design Structure in Malaysian Islamic Calligraphy Contemporary Paintings is based on the issue of artist preference in designing calligraphic paintings. Even though the artworks referred to as Islamic Calligraphy was based on the tradition by writing on paper; however, creating Islamic calligraphy paintings is a challenging issue that incorporates the styles of modern painting and the background of art that is different from the tradition. Therefore, this article aims to review the designs established by the artists in their artworks. The methodology used is qualitative, through observation, and formal analysis, especially in studying the orientation and writing style of calligraphy that existed in contemporary paintings in Malaysia. This research applies the theory of History of Islamic art Tradition, which comprises four steps of appreciating Islamic artworks. However, in this study, only the first level of interpretation will be used, which is the formal analysis to discover the design structured in those artworks. The findings of this research enlighten the tendency in design style and perhaps suggest further studies to find the answers behind this inclination.

Keywords: Design Structure, Malaysia, Islamic calligraphy, Contemporary Paintings, History of Islamic Art Tradition.

1 Introduction

The trend to project Islamic calligraphy in contemporary artworks in Malaysia has been increasing since the 1970s. This is a very interesting phenomenon and can be analysed from different perspectives. The main problem arises when the tradition of writing is changing towards the new media and presentation in contemporary artworks. Thus, the objectives of this research are first to analyse the formal analysis of Islamic calligraphy design, which is to bring

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[1] Nor Azlin Hamidon is a Phd holder, as an Associate Professor in the Department of Visual Culture Studies, Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, norazlin@uitm.edu.my.

[2] Siti Mastura Md Ishak is a PhD holder, a senior lecturer in the Department of Industrial Design, Universiti Putra Malaysia, ct_mastura@upm.edu.my.

[3] Wan Samiati Andriana Wan Mohd Daud is a PhD holder, a senior lecturer in the Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, samiati@uitm.edu.my.

out every possible design structure used in the contemporary Islamic calligraphy of Malaysia. Secondly, to synthesize the favourable style of Malaysian artists related to formalistic and expressive qualities. This will deduce the favourable style of Malaysian artists. By placing the form in the timeline, one can construe the development of style within a certain period. A total of 707 works of Islamic calligraphy have been documented in the database for this research. It includes a variety of media, styles, the artists' backgrounds, and provenance. The works of art are collected from personal collections, galleries, and museums. Among these works, only 110 works are carefully chosen as samples for the study.

2 Literature Review

Most of the Islamic calligraphy research focuses on sociological issues, particularly the acceptance of traditional art in modern settings. A few studies have highlighted critical topics, such as the usage of Islamic calligraphy in murals, [1] the reformation of Islamic calligraphy in computer art and design typology [2], and the metamorphosis of the Arabic letter in modern Arab art. [3]. Even though the studies were conducted in different societies, the researcher owes them a debt of gratitude for covering most aspects of Islamic art and calligraphy in general.

In Malaysia, however, there is very little research on Islamic calligraphy. Zakaria Ali [4] touches on Islamic art in Southeast Asia in general, including items with calligraphy inscriptions. Another researcher, Faridah Che' Husain [5], wrote on Islamic calligraphy as a marker of Malay Islamic civilisation, while Abdul Rahman Che Tajuddin [6] on the acceptance of Islamic calligraphy by Malaysian societies.

On the other hand, the study on Islamic calligraphy in the preserved beauty may be identified in the research on Malay traditional craft. On the *tudung saji* [7], Islamic calligraphy was woven as motifs [8] [9] [10] [11] [12] in Malay textile. Islamic calligraphy was embroidered on brocade or velvet material, or woven into *songket* designs, and then stitched into *kebayas*. The calligraphy inscription always blesses the wearers or reminds them of the existence of God and angels [13]. Furthermore, the upper coverings of the deceased are always made of long batiks with Islamic calligraphy [14] [15]. As for Malay ceramics, Islamic calligraphy was hardly embellished on them except for the modern ceramics produced by PKENJ (*Perbadanan Kemajuan Ekonomi Negeri Johor)* [16] or by the modern artists.

Islamic calligraphy can also be traced back to Malay wood carvings and metalwork, according to the study of Islamic calligraphy. Calligraphy was carved as part of the primary structure of a Malay traditional house [17] [18] [19] [20] [21], *Masjid* [22], and as part of a craft, such as a *rehal*, an upper post of the bed, and little cupboard to store the *Qur'ān* [23] in woodcarving. Moreover, Islamic calligraphy is used to beautify Malay jewelry, such as pending and *keris* (Malay daggers) [24] as well as other metal works, such as seals [25], coins [26], and everyday items like *batil* or bowls [27], *gantang* (measurement tool), and tray [28]. Malaysians continue to practice and admire the decoration of Islamic calligraphy on Malay items, architecture, and craft [29].

One of the latest publications by Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, *Mightier than the Sword, Arabic Script: Beauty and Meaning* [30] contributed compelling writing, revealing that the

script's extraordinary flexibility allowed it to adhere to various aesthetic principles, be woven in many cultures, and shaped into a myriad of styles. The book explained the rise, development, spread, and uses of the Arabic script across the Islamic world and highlights the evolution and diversity of the script, mainly its influence on Southeast Asia art. The most related part of the book to this study is the final section, which includes the contemporary art of writing and calligraphy, exhibiting the contemporary paintings of Malaysia and other countries that incorporate Islamic calligraphy in modern artworks. In the same year, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia organised another exhibition and produced Al-Kalima [31], a book that explores the meanings of calligraphy used in Islamic art projects. The book instructs the researcher on how to classify the themes in Islamic calligraphy, which are examined in the exhibits. Rhythm and Verses: Masterpieces of Persian Calligraphy [32], the Islamic Arts Museum's third exhibition on Islamic calligraphy since 2004, was exhibited in 2005. It shows many calligraphy styles and how the examples and classic masterpieces are similar in strokes. The exhibition book contains many artworks that can be compared.

There are articles regarding the interaction of displays and artworks with the audience, and the most beneficial study was done by Khanwalkar and Venkataram [33] in researching the museum exhibition information for visitors. It relates to this study in terms of using the interaction of letters to convey the meaning. The other article is written by Vayanou et.al., [34] especially related to the artists' role in social groups to create games. These two articles signified the artists themselves to be involved in their society to get an understanding of the overall design thinking, and for this study to project the ideas involving Islamic calligraphy.

These works of literature are advantageous to the researcher to examine the design of Islamic calligraphy in Malay societies, particularly in tracing the important role of Islamic calligraphy and its aesthetics in Malay craft and writing tradition. Therefore, they can be apprehended and appreciated as existing in Malaysian contemporary paintings.

3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In general, only qualitative methodology is used in the research. Since the study is focused on Islamic calligraphy or Islamic art in general, it must be adjusted to fit into the Islamic worldview. Therefore, this research is intended to contribute to the working Islamic theoretical framework and methodology. The framework is constructed based on the theory of the History of Muslim/Islamic Art Tradition [35]. It constitutes of four levels of analysis as illustrated in Figure 1 as follows:
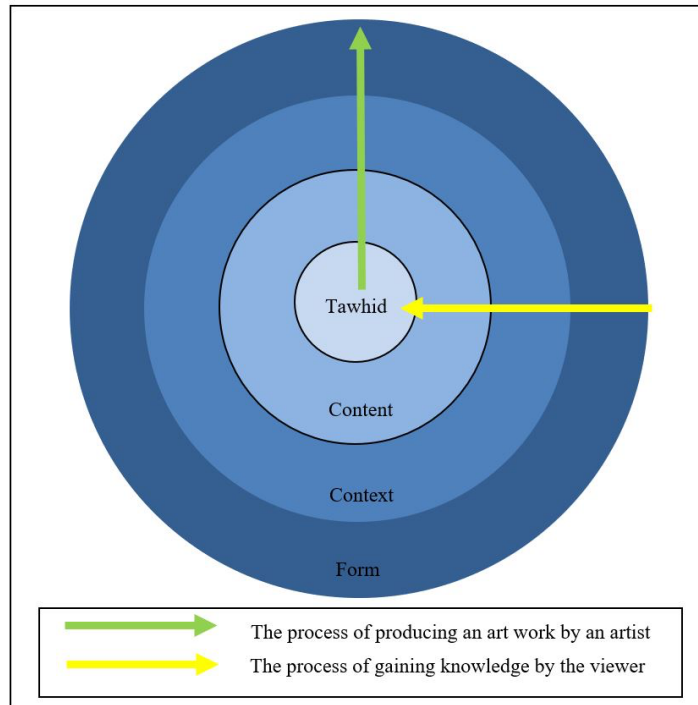
Figure 1: History of Islamic Art Tradition.

The direction of producing artworks by an artist begins from the inner circle (centre) to the outer circle, indicated by the dotted arrow. It begins with the *Tawhīd* principle, which forms and governs the process, and ends with the creation of the artwork (most of the time under the guidelines given by Islamic law and principles). A researcher and a viewer, on the other hand, will first be presented with the artwork, then with the inner circle, and finally with the circle's centre. Therefore, the direction of this research is conducted initially from the study of form and then moves to the second level towards the perusal of the context. The third level of interpretation depends on the ability of the mind to synthesize the artworks, which will define the theme and content. The direction to the centre is a search for the deepest meaning and for the source of direction and action where the ambiance of the spiritual experience may be represented by the forms, the composition, and the symbolism. Hence, the overall process will formulate the History of Muslim art tradition. This theoretical framework, which was created to deduce the history of modern art, adheres to Islamic art conceptions' goals, particularly in elevating the concept of *Tawhīd* as the ultimate goal of Muslim art.

Studying an artwork's formal qualities is only the first step towards understanding it. Similar qualities can be used to identify and highlight the structure and composition of calligraphy and its themes, resulting in the formation of categories. Deduction and reorganisation of concepts is an endless and continual process. This indicates that on this level, many categories that establish levels of meaning can be determined. If the art pieces are seen from diverse perspectives, new categories will arise even from similar samples. The formula for the presence of these categories will aid in identifying the shapes that dominate the artist's taste

and originality, allowing the formula for the hierarchy of Islamic calligraphy works to be regulated. However, the significance attained at this level is only on the surface level. The History of Style is the guiding principle of interpretation at this level.

Other pieces of art might expound on a person's personal experience and interpretation of the universe, based on their mental proclivities. This could be accomplished by looking at the context in which the work of art and the artist exist (level two). The determining aspect that further describes the genesis of artwork as well as the key to unlocking the secrets of artist purpose will be the dimension of time and space. The driving principle at this level will be based on a general history of cultural symptoms or symbols.

On a slightly deeper level, the research is expanded and elongated to include external and supporting data about the artwork, rather than being limited to only formal analysis and context analysis. Oral and written data could be used as a source of information. The data, on the other hand, should be validated, either by additional sources of information or by the original source, which is the artist or writer. The second level of interpretation concludes with themes and concepts that are derived from outside the work of art or from external sources. The controlling principle is in the History of Types. In the category of studying Islamic calligraphy, it could be done by referring to the enlightenment from the curator of an exhibition, jurists of a contest, or from the artists themselves.

The themes and concepts concluded are the signs of the actual art scenario of Malaysia. Perhaps the themes range from the themes of *al-Qur'ān*, individualistic, and emotive as well as decorative. The works of art identified as quoting from *al-Qur'ān* and *Hadīth* could be a symbol of the implementation of Islamic principles and spirituality and holding to the *Tawhīd* doctrine.

The ultimate analysis, which is the fourth level, has no connection to the study of formal qualities and styles. It is the stage in which the true meaning of the calligraphy or its quotation is sought. The controlling principle will be on the reference to *al-Qur'ān* and *Hadīth* books as well as supporting books in understanding these two sources, such as interpretations and exegesis, the method of finding verses and chapters, the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reasons of *al-Qur'ān* revelation) and *asbāb al-wurūd* (reasons of *Hadīth* occurrence), and many others. The specific interpretation of the poems will be done at this level to obtain the messages of the quotations in discovering the deeper meaning of the work of art. Since spiritual components are present in the works of art, they can be linked to the Tawhidic concept. It is not considered an analytical level, but rather a level of concentration on ultimate reality and objective significance. Finally, the integration of all four levels, namely the History of Style, the History of Muslim Cultural Symbols, the History of Types, and the reference to the *Al-Qur'ān* and *al-Hadīth*, will contribute to the History of Islamic Art Tradition.

However, due to this article only focusing on the study of design structure, only the formal analysis will be applied. Further research can elaborate the exploration of meaning of these artworks.

4 The Design Structure of Islamic Calligraphy in Paintings

The structure of calligraphy demonstrates the multitude of styles used in developing the design of calligraphy writing (and reading). Single focal, multifocal, rotating works, and any other structure can be used to classify the artworks. It is based on the structure of writing and reading as well as the flow of reading, such as flat, descending, ascending, slanting, rotating, and so on. All of these will provide insight into the calligraphy design structure in Malaysia.

Islamic calligraphy has a structure that represents many writing styles (as well as reading). Some calligraphy pieces are written in a single focus region, while others feature two or more. The calligraphy in several pieces of art has a reflection, either horizontally or vertically. The calligrapher may also project the calligraphy in the negative region, though most people prefer the positive areas. The calligraphy is rotated clockwise and anticlockwise in some circumstances. The study reveals that calligraphy is presented in a variety of styles.

4.1 Structured Calligraphy

The term "structured calligraphy" refers to the subject matter that has been composed and organised in a specific order. It is crucial to figure out the calligraphy's underlying reading structure since it reveals information about the styles used by Malaysian artists and calligraphers. It will also highlight particular biases or tendencies toward certain compositional structures, with the results of the analysis shown in Table 1. In rare circumstances, the examples may contain two or more groups of calligraphy, each with a different structure. However, to meet the percentage, the total samples are still 110.

Table 1: The structure of Islamic calligraphy.

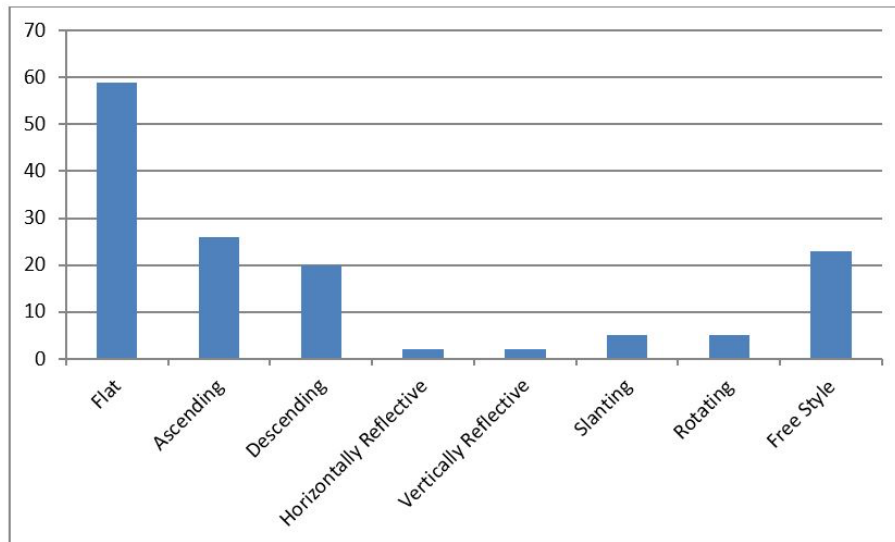| Structure	No. of Samples	Percentage
Flat	59	53.63%
Ascending	26	23.63%
Descending	20	18.18%
Horizontally Reflective	2	1.82%
Vertically Reflective	2	1.82%
Slanting	5	4.54%
Rotating	5	4.54%
Free Style	23	20.9%

Figure 2: Bar chart on the structure of Islamic calligraphy.

According to the findings, there are just a few types of Islamic calligraphy writing styles: flat, ascending, descending, horizontally reflected, vertically reflective, slanting, revolving, and free style. Flat calligraphy is the most popular of all forms, accounting for 53.63 percent of all art pieces (59 out of 110 works). The rising structure, which consists of 26 artworks, is the second. The third category is free style, which accounts for 20.9 percent of the works chosen. The fourth is the declining style, which is the most notable and consists of 20 pieces out of a total of 110. Some styles are regarded as unique lanting and rotating calligraphy account for 4.54 percent, followed by vertical and horizontal reflected calligraphy in which each has two art pieces and accounts for 1.82 percent. The scarcity is most likely due to the unpopular structure or the degree of difficulty in the authoring process.

Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 demonstrate all styles of writing. Calligraphy with a flat structure is the least complicated, and it allows more opportunities for the viewer to see the composition. Each letter can be detected by the accuracy of writing in length and width as well as the curvature of each letter.

Samples in Figures 4 and 5 are both using the same type of calligraphy and the same dome shape. However, the sample in Figure 4 is in ascending style while the other is in descending style. This proves that the shape and type of calligraphy do not limit creativity. The composition of the letters depends mostly on the structure of each letter, where the letters with upright pillars and the reclined letters are beautifully arranged with harmony and balance.

Sample in Figure 10, the word "*cinta*" (means love) is broken up into individual letters and scrambled up. Therefore, to read the word, one has to search for the letter one by one and arrange it together to make sense. It is like a jigsaw puzzle. The title of the work *Pohon Beringin II* does not correspond with the written word. It is even tougher when there is no indication of the direction of the letters. It starts in the middle with the letter *cha* (ﺡ), goes up to meet the second

letter *yā* (ي), and the third letter *nūn* (ن). Then it turns downwards to meet the fourth letter *tā* (ت) and ends up far below to the letter *alīf* (ا).

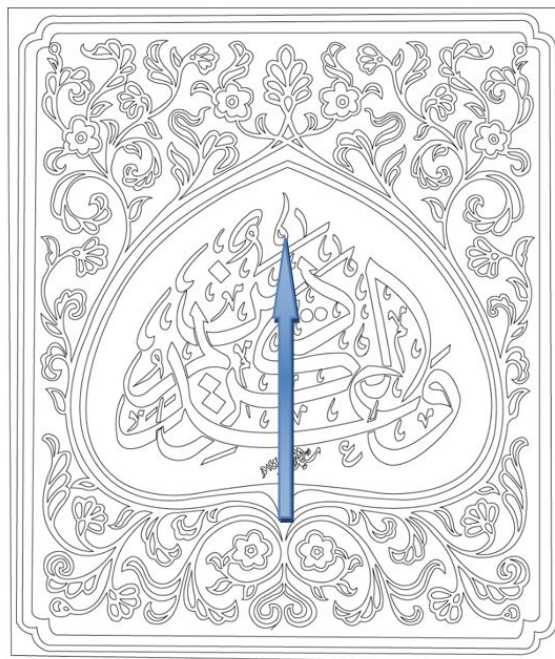Figure 3: Sample of flat structure of writing calligraphy.

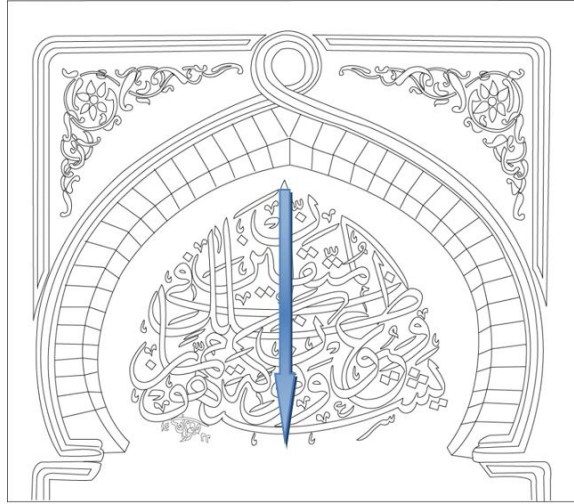Figure 4: Sample of ascending structure of writing calligraphy.

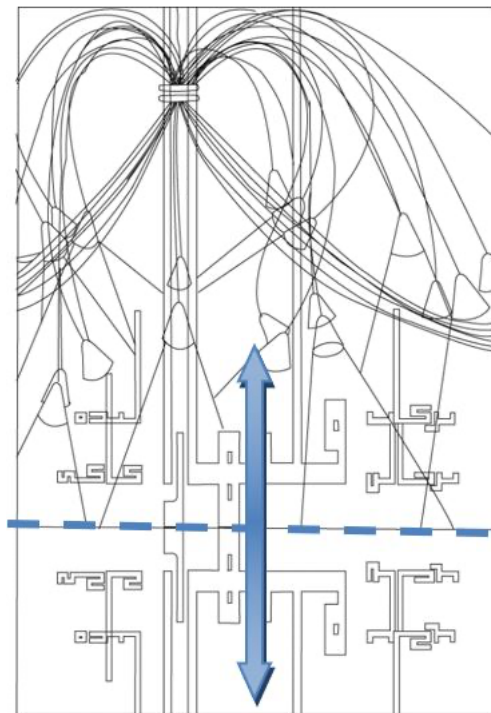Figure 5: Sample of descending structure of writing calligraphy.

Figure 6: Sample of horizontally reflected structure of writing calligraphy.
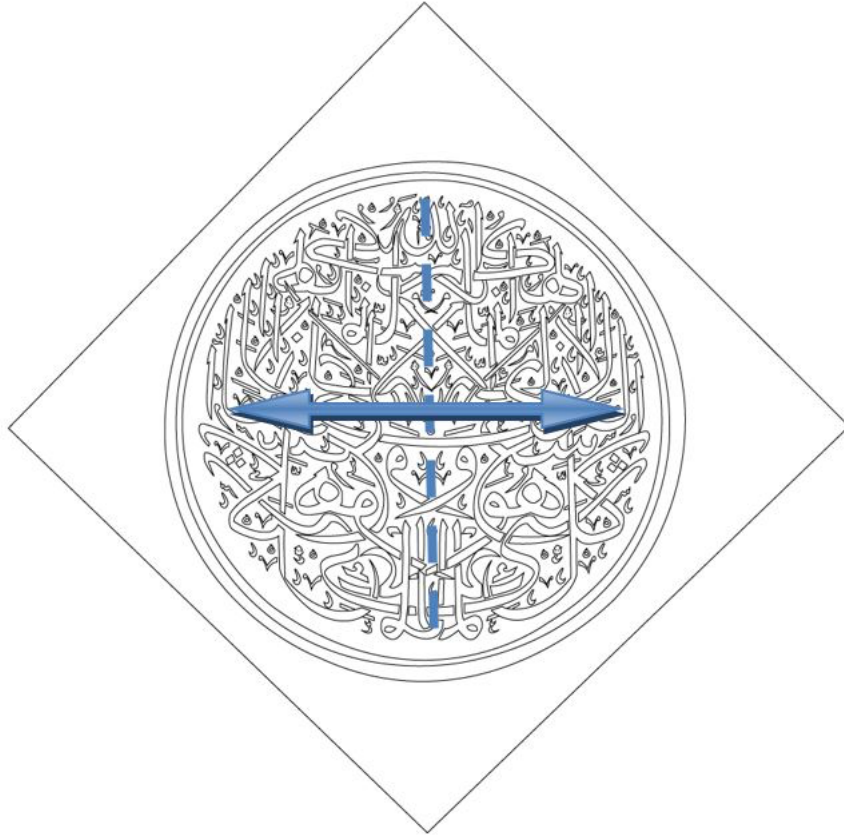
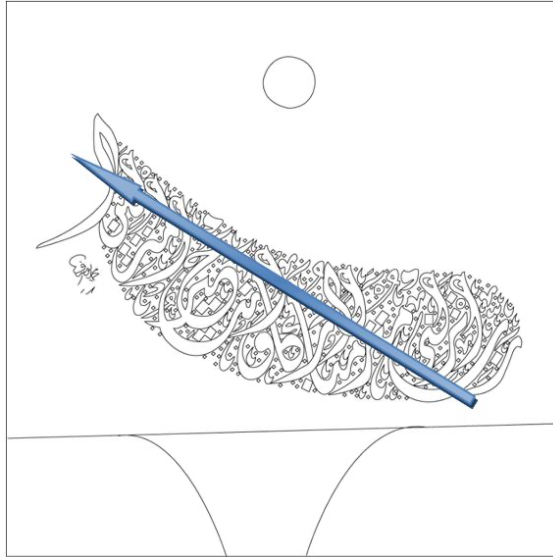Figure 7: Sample of vertically reflected structure of writing calligraphy.

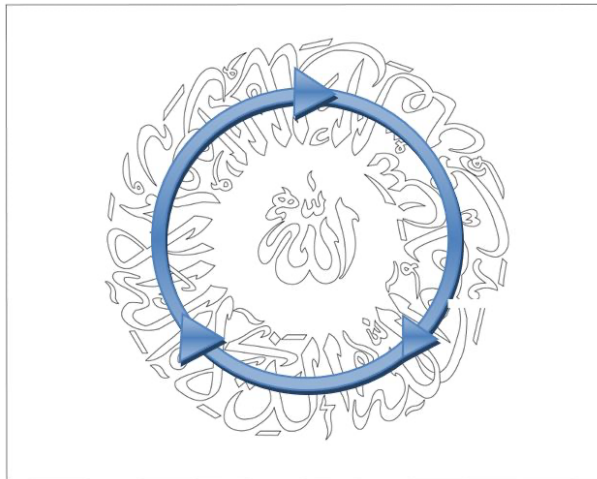Figure 8: Sample of slanting structure of writing calligraphy.

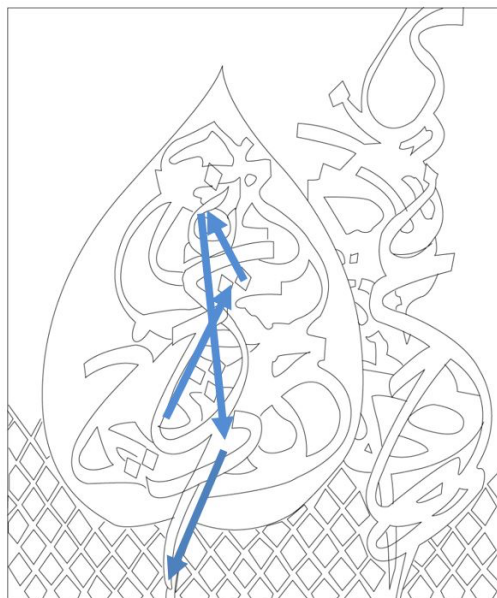Figure 9: Sample of rotating structure of writing calligraphy.

Figure 10: Sample of free style structure of writing calligraphy.

4.2 Unstructured Calligraphy

Unstructured calligraphy denotes the absence of specific words that may be deduced from the calligraphy. It consists of letters and may appear to be words at times, but it makes no sense. This occurs in works with an abstract expressionist bent in which the use of colour, scribbles, and letter strokes are only to generate viewers' emotions. Due to its ambiguity and painted approach, calligraphy is usually impossible to trace.

The table below shows that there are two categories of unstructured calligraphy:

Table 2: Unstructured calligraphy and its distribution.

Unstructured Calligraphy	No. of Samples	Percentage
Separated Alphabets	8	0.91%
Overlapping Alphabets	9	8.18%

There are eight works in the category of unstructured calligraphy with separated alphabets, which could be seen in Figure 10 where the works of the overlapping letters make 8.18% of the whole selected samples. This could be seen in Plate 1.

In Figure 11, sample 2001.1 presents the Jawi written individually in each box. Another example is from the work of Syed Ahmad Jamal that displays only one letter ('*mīm*') at the centre of the picture plane and this letter stands alone.

In both samples, the letters act as symbols. The letter '*mīm*' in the work of Syed Ahmad Jamal stands for three words, which are "*Melayu*", "*Malaysia*", and "*Merdeka*". This was stated

by the artist himself during the interview session with him [36]. The work was completed to fulfill the request of Syed Alwi, his friend, for a theater presentation in 1998. Unfortunately, he could not recall the title of the theatrical play.

The work *Wafa and Water (Old Documentation)* by Abu Bakar Idris, on the other hand, consists of nine letters inscribed in a square of nine boxes. This square's feature is reminiscent of the magic square and the magical powers of Arabic letters. The work's title, '*Wafa*', tells the audience about the purpose of the letters, which are related to their mystical quality to treat a sick person during a psychosomatic medicational session.

In conclusion, both of the works are presenting separated letters of unstructured calligraphy to function as symbols. Individual letters are presented separately without the use of an overlapping technique to emphasize the significant character of each letter, which represents symbolic meanings on its own.

Referring to Plate 1, sample 1984.1 by the late Ahmad Khalid Yusof is an example of unstructured calligraphy. He used overlapping techniques to write a variety of individual letters to fill up the whole picture plane. His work titled *Jawi and Nature 13* is an example of his established style, which had been repeatedly used since the 1970s (since the *Alif Ba Ta* series) until it became his niche and signature. He relentlessly uses Jawi scripts, such as '*lām alīf*', '*nūn*', '*'ain*', '*sād*', '*dād*', '*yā*', '*mīm*', and '*hamzah*' entangled and interlocked to each other [37]. The action of integrating Jawi scripts with a creative colour interplay gives the impression of musical writing floating on the surface of the art piece. This is evidence of one's effort and capacity to comprehend and develop symbols based on experiences.

Another sample (1994.3) is the work entitled *Tenaga Khat I* by Mohamad Din Mohamad. The lines and forms are slanted yet in the same direction, thanks to the employment of repetitive brush strokes over the canvas. The alternate warm (red) and cool (blue) colours help to generate the impression of movement. All of these provide energy to the canvas, making the calligraphy appear alive and dynamic. Hence, it fits the title of the work: *The Calligraphy Energy I*.

Siti Zainon Ismail's work entitled *Gelora Gelombang Jugra* (sample 1997.5) has presented calligraphy that has been repeatedly painted on the canvas until words are incomprehensible. In an interview with Siti Zainon [38], she explains that the word that she wrote repeatedly is '*Allah*'. The word has been interlocked, entangled, and overlapped to represent a symbol of a vein in which the word of '*Allah*' reverberates during the *zikir* period. Her paintings usually have a theme that represents the artist's history or experiences. Wherever she goes, she always has her canvas with her. She was able to transfer her spiritual experiences onto her painting as a result of the experiences she gained from meditating and remembering God. The blue colour indicates Jugra's ocean while the shape of the stones depicts Acheh's gravestones, which are a symbol of her birthplace. The gravestones also symbolize the afterlife. As a result, the viewers are told a story by the composition's colours, style, and subject matter.
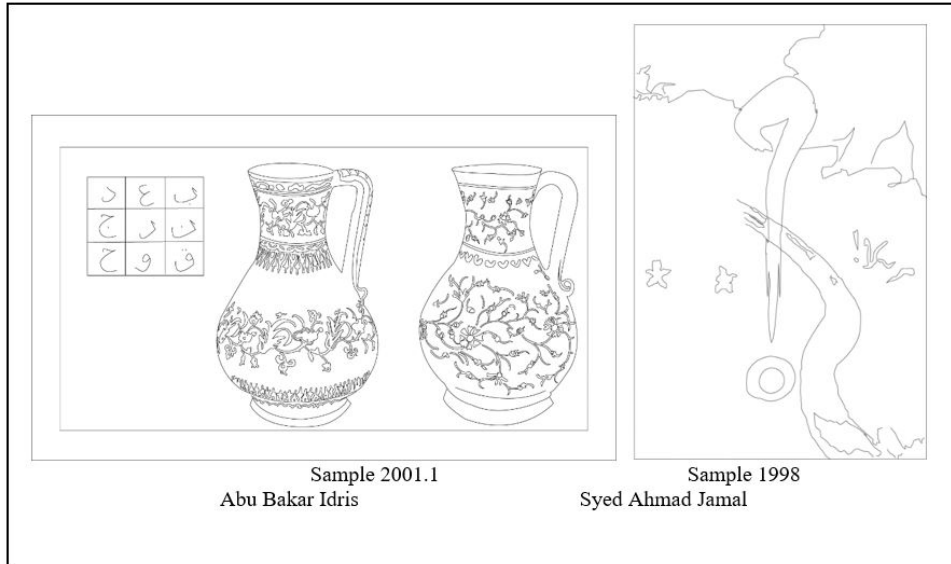
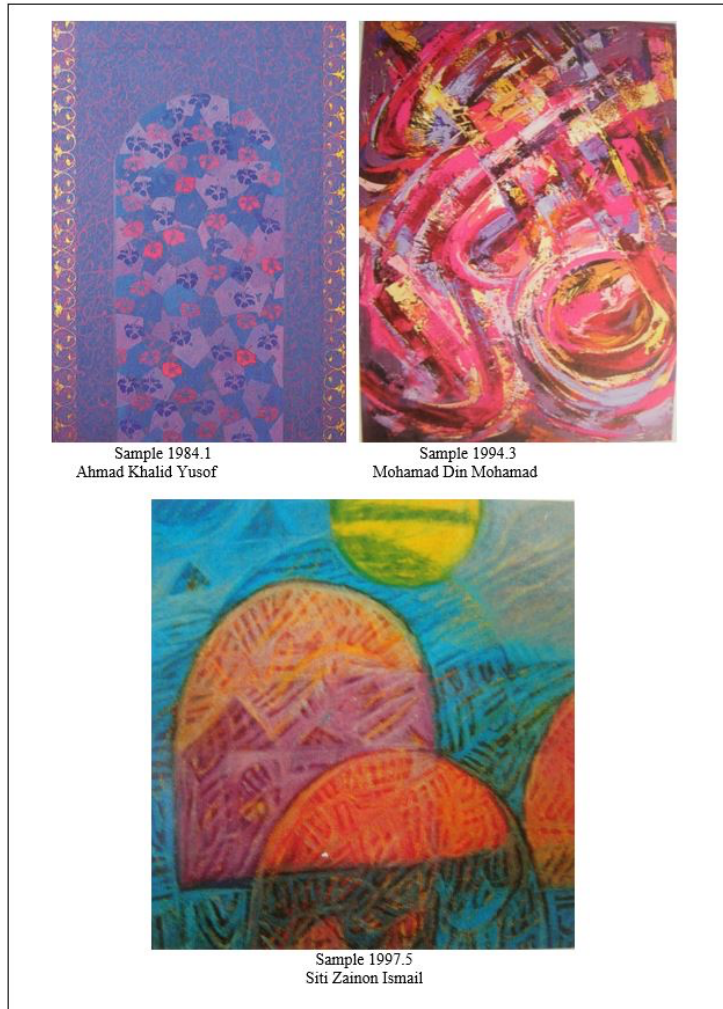Figure 11: Samples of separated alphabets of unstructured calligraphy.

Plate 1: Samples of overlapping alphabets of unstructured calligraphy.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, based on this study, eight design structures had been identified, which are flat, ascending, descending, horizontal reflection, vertical reflection, slanting, rotating, and free style. However, the flat design is the most favorable.

It should be stressed that the indecipherability of calligraphy in unstructured work is done to send messages through visual languages. In terms of evoking feelings and touching the hearts, the use of expressive qualities is more provocative. However, the feeling is only part of a human being. As a whole, there is also the mind and the physical senses that should be given the same

treatment. Thus, it could be concluded that the comprehensibility in calligraphy affects the human mind whereas indecipherable calligraphy deals with the human heart and feeling. As for the viewing and touching it is part of the sensual satisfaction. Overall, the work of Islamic calligraphy can be a reliable tool in bringing happiness to the viewers.

It is recommended that this research is continued by future researchers focussing on the impact of each design on the viewers. This will highlight the acceptance level as well as the interaction between artworks and the viewers.

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