

A new dimension in Islamic art

OSMAN A. WAGIALLA

(in conversation with Abdul Wahid Hamid)

Osman Wagialla opened the door of his Hampstead home and greeted me with an effusive *Marhaba* which made me feel instantly at home and at ease. He immediately began to speak and I didn't even get the chance to ask him about his health and the slipped disc which had been plaguing him for some time.

We (I had gone with a friend) were ushered into the huge sitting room and there mounted solely for us was an exhibition of the most breath-taking kind. I couldn't believe that such wonders could be wrought simply with calligraphy. Here before our eyes assumed reality something which was first mentioned at the Festival of Islam last year as a new school of Arabic flourishing under our very nose in this cultural entrepôt that is London.

Soon we were talking about art and the world of the artist, about calligraphy and its possibilities, the contrast between Islamic art forms and the western, the current nihilism and apparent aimlessness in contemporary western art and a host of related subjects. Osman Wagialla spoke with such a bounding enthusiasm (blended now with sobriety, now with a strange intensity) which often seems to be the preserve of artists and which makes mortals like me seem rather flat and gauche. But Sayyid Wagialla was quick to point out that the unique world of the artist was not such a

strange world after all because "it is the world of creation and creation is not strange. Creation is very natural indeed . . . we are the result of creation. It's the world of faith, the world of meditation, it's the world in which we think of the greatest Being, of the Highest, of Allah the Almighty".

Osman Wagialla is no ordinary creator. The years which he has dedicated to calligraphy as an art form have brought many rewards. The rhythm and the music of the letters, the overall finesse of the compositions bespeak a dedication to his work which can only come from deep concentration and a certain reverence. Many exhibitions of his work have been staged. Some of his compositions have been reproduced in various magazines and he has achieved a great mark of distinction when his gilded carving on marble of *Surah Inshirah* was placed in the Prophet's mosque in Medina.

The particular carving, explained Wagialla, was undertaken as a token of gratitude to Allah. It is finished in green, blue, red and gold and decorated in Arabesque foliage at the corners. Carving out this surah was started and completed in the month of Ramadan and was a great form of meditation. "I have never had the meaning and the image of this surah revealed to me as at that time although I had repeated it hundreds of times since the age of five" he said.

Osman Wagialla spoke of his art as a whole. "A calligraphic work of art is deliberately woven so intricately and made difficult so that it is not legible at a glance. Now think of a Picasso or a Leonardo da Vinci or a David Hockney for instance or of this man who is very fond of blood and twisted limbs—Francis Bacon for instance; people stand there for more than an hour trying to fathom it. It is somewhat the same with calligraphy. You have to search for the end of the thread and then go the long journey towards unravelling it and appreciating it."

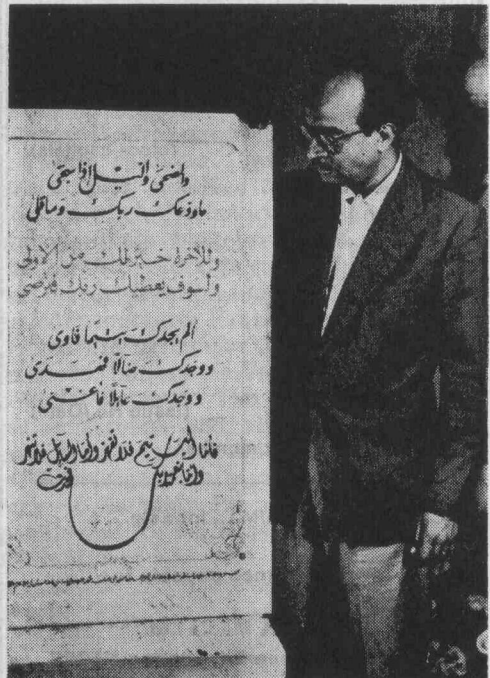
Although there are certain set hands in which Arabic is written, for example the *Thuluth*, the Kufic, the Diwani, the elegant Persian, these hands are capable of tremendous variations and development. Osman Wagialla has sought not merely to vary, but to give a completely new dimension to Arabic calligraphy by giving it a plastic abstract setting on canvas. He concentrates on the 14 abbreviated letters known as the *Muqatta'at* which appear

... have extended unlimited facilities for those returning to the local level as the new and old population returning back with the local population as already pointed out under other paragraphs that in this context the



The black and white reproduction does not convey the exciting beauty of the original.

at the beginning of various surahs in the Qur'an. These letters have always held a fascination for Muslim scholars. Mystic and philosophers have pondered upon them, but their secrets have been revealed to none. For Osman the message of these letters lies in their beauty. In his calligraphy, he is not so much interested in a written message, for example, that the Qur'an says such and such. What he is concerned to do is to reveal the beauty of the letters through arranging it in a way which is more plastic than truly calligraphic: "The difference is obvious. Where it is calligraphy it is a bit flat and it does not form part of the surface it is executed upon. It's no more than design. The purpose here is to seek the dynamic power inside the letter itself and bring it out, ignite it! Since these fourteen letters have a secret not known by any human being at all, this makes you go on and on and try to see the hidden possibilities in every letter. A whole month I spent designing the letter 'noon'. There are worlds . . . a whole universe opens before your eyes, my brother when you do that because there is something in the innermost being of that letter which makes it come out so vividly and explode with life much more than any other form of writing I have seen. It could



Osman Wagialla with his marble carving at the Prophet's mosque in Medina.

be the reverence I have for it. But, my God, without reverence, where would we be."

"Take the history of European painting" Sayyid Osman went on, "much of it was worship and reverence starting from Botticelli coming down to Leonardo da Vinci, Michaelangelo and his 'Moses', Raphael and the Madonna; Chagalle today paints the Return to Jerusalem and no one actually says there is anything wrong about this reverence these painters have for their paintings. We too have reverence for our art."

One does not have to be a scholar in Arabic to appreciate the work of Osman Wagialla. In fact someone completely alien to Arabic letters would see in his work the most beautiful abstract you can think of. And Osman himself believes that Arabic calligraphy has reached this beautiful abstract form 'beyond which there is no beauty'. "I am somewhere between East and West", he says. "I am trying to play a part by which I can bring the art I know best in the forms which I know best from my part of the world."

"To me the art of the Muslim is calligraphy", asserted Osman and we went on to discuss the reasons and the implications of the Islamic prohibition on the reproduction of the human form. Other ways of expression have been invalidated by this prohibition, which gave rise to a field of ornament and decoration and did contribute to the development of the Arabesque as a geometric pattern, to the development of the pattern of foliage—another form of the Arabesque pattern. He does not think that there was any harm in doing painting and sculpture. But "because Islam is so strong, so stable, and deeply rooted, neither a statue or a painting or a nude in any form could actually shake it in the souls and minds of the Muslim peoples".

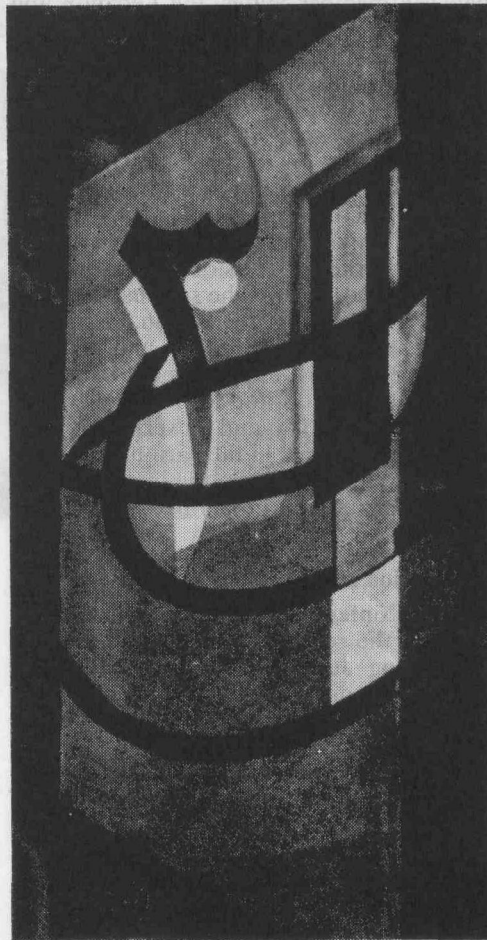
"I would not refuse illustration in a book of history for example, but not of course for the Prophet and the Khulafaa al Rashidin. But if it is to portray Khalid ibn Walid and the campaigns to bring them closer to our children, I see no harm in it. Art and visual aids do play a great part in the process of learning especially where children are concerned. But I don't even approve of the portrayal of other prophets, like Michaelangelo's 'Moses' for example. I don't think this serves any purpose."

This led us on to some of the basic differences between Islamic and western art forms. We discussed the idea of space in Islam as something negative. This helps, Osman Wagialla explained, in the appreciation of the all-embracing, infinite nature of that which is spiritual and divine. This is why a mosque is designed in the way it is and there is no painting in it. Even too elaborate calligraphy is too much for a mosque, he maintained. In contrast art quantified and solidified "does no justice

to the Almighty, who being absolute fills up everything and cannot be embodied in a piece of stone etc."

But were there not Muslim painters who dwelt in figures like in the Persian miniatures? Osman explained that many of these Persian miniatures were the products of artists that were either taught by Dutch or Italian painters who were brought all the way to the East to the courts of the rulers to teach the artists.

We discussed the possibility of the influence on western art of Islamic concepts and forms especially at this time when we seem to hear more and more of the nihilism



of western art or at least of its floundering for a purpose. Sayyid Wagialla very much hoped that this possibility would be there: "If western artists hit on these concepts they would have struck a vein whose core is so rich and whose source so unrestricted as never to dry up. For example, the arts of the calligrapher is eternal as it was the vehicle for the Qur'an—the greatest of the books on earth, besides which there is nothing greater. Moreover, just as many orientals were and are being influenced by western art so there were western artists who were influenced by other forms. Van Gogh for example was influenced very much by Japanese and Chinese prints and Picasso was influenced by African, specifically west African, masks. And the artists

who were in charge of designing the Festival of Islam exhibition, one could see from the lines and the notes of their work that they were able to appreciate the abstract Islamic forms and that they really enjoyed creating in a new medium."

He made some fascinating comparisons, or rather contrasts, between Romanised letters and Arabic calligraphy. "If the Gothic and the Kufic were compared, you would find that the Gothic is very solid and austere and you can't play about with it very much. And although the Kufic hand is a bit solid and not as flexible as the beautiful and graceful Thuluth hand, it is still so beautiful that it lends itself to variations and up to this day you can play about with it. That's why the monogramic treatment has always been a success in Arabic calligraphy. There is nothing more rigid than the way the Greeks and the Romans with their Gothic and Lombardic and Roman hands have retarded, or rather gone astray with the alphabet which we have given them from the holy land."

Sayyid Wagialla had earlier explained how the Greek Alphabet had come from the Hebrew and from the Arabic originally. The present arrangement of the Arabic alphabet was done by the great calligrapher Ibn Muqta who arranged it into family groups. Before that the alphabet was the *Abjad Hawwiz*—the A for Aliph meaning ox from which we get Alpha, the B for Bait meaning house from which we get Beta, the J or G for Jamal meaning camel from which we get Gama etc.

We continued talking well into the night. And we had the great pleasure of seeing Sayyid Wagialla at the blackboard and easel as he wrote our names in various hands and fitted them deftly and swiftly into any shapes that we wanted—a circle, an equilateral triangle and other forms. It was so fascinating and I couldn't help regretting that we didn't have the technical equipment to preserve and to transmit this work to a greater public. It was in this vein that Sayyid Wagialla said: "I hope this work is going to be a stepping stone for other Muslim artists and they would be able to carry on this beautiful relaying race."

Biographical Note

OSMAN ABDALLA WAGIALLA, born in Rufa'a, Sudan, in 1925, studied at the School of Design at Omdurman from 1945-46. He continued his studies in London at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts from 1946-49, then on to Cairo in 1950, where he studied for one year at the School of Arabic Calligraphy and College of Applied Arts.

Returning to the Sudan in 1951, Wagialla taught at the Technical Institute of Khartoum, retiring in 1954 to form "Studio Osman" which was responsible for the design and execution of most of the major art assignments following Sudan's Independence. Studio Osman remained the central meeting place for those concerned with arts until 1964.

Wagialla made regular contributions of art and poetry to Radio Omdurman and the Sudanese Press. He has worked for Radio Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and the Arabic Service of the B.B.C., London.