

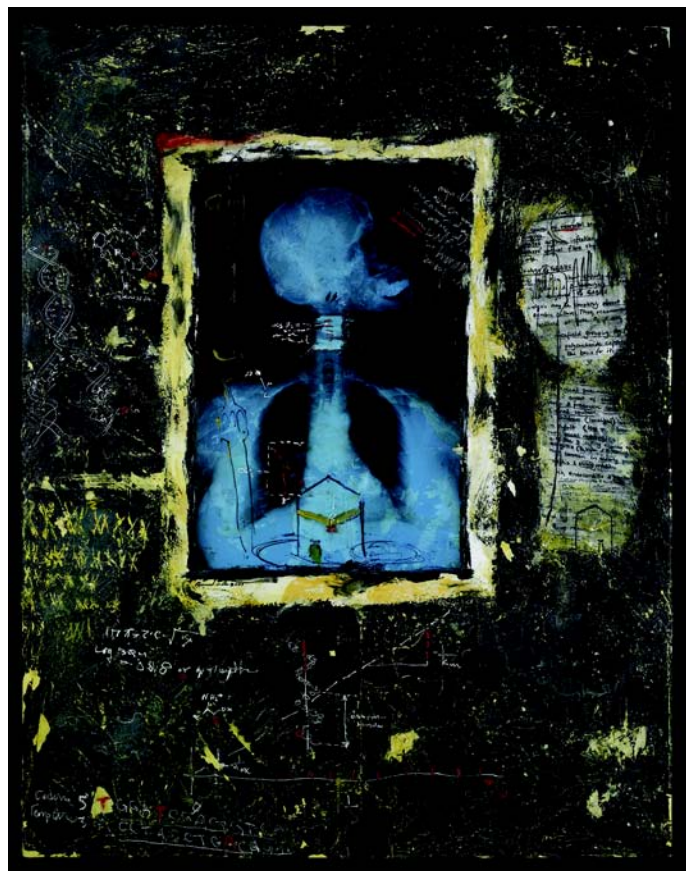
'WORD INTO ART:

Artists of the Modern Middle East' at the British Museum

Dr. Sheila Canby, Curator of Islamic art and antiquities, British Museum

On May 18th, 2006 the British Museum opened 'Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East', its first special exhibition devoted exclusively to the contemporary art of the Middle East. Consisting of about one hundred works by over eighty artists, the exhibition centres on art that uses Arabic and other alphabets either as its main motif or as one of its primary elements. The British Museum is not usually associated with contemporary collecting, but since the 1980's it has been steadily adding to its collection of works, mostly on paper, by living artists from North Africa and the Middle East. As a result, the majority of exhibits in 'Word into Art' come from the Museum's permanent collection.

Curator Dr. Venetia Porter has organised the exhibition and its catalogue in four sections: A Sacred Script; Literature and Art, Deconstructing the Word, and Identity, History and Politics. The first section is perhaps the most traditional, featuring works that contain Qur'anic verses



Ahmad Mater al-Ziad, Saudi Arabia, *X-Ray*, mixed media and x-ray film, 2003 (135 x 105 cm.). British Museum. Al-Ziad, a practising physician, uses x-rays, medical texts and diagrams to highlight the confusion in the modern world about the identity, objective or subjective, of individuals.

or phrases, some or all of the ninety-nine names of God, and even a verse from the Bible. All exemplify the beauty and versatility of the Arabic script, attributes that have characterised the script since the late seventh century.

An amazing range of Arab and Persian poetry, from pre-Islamic to modern, has inspired the artists whose work appears in the section on Literature and Art. From Wijdan 'Ali's writing of a poem by the Lebanese poet Charbel Dagher on long strips of brightly coloured paper to the majestic 'Harf al-kaf' by 'Ali Omar Ermes with its poetic lines from Caliph al-Mansur (d. 775), these works demonstrate the close relationship between artists and the written words that have moved them. In some cases, such as Rachid Koraichi's *L'Enfant Jazz*, the poetry of Algerian Mohammed Dib, written by calligrapher Abdelkader Boumala, is juxtaposed with Koraichi's lithographs, composed partly of his characteristic magical symbols, and Arabic and Roman script. While readers of Arabic and Persian have found this section particularly moving, the beauty of the images and the helpful availability of a free booklet with English translations have made the works accessible to all.

As Venetia Porter explains in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, the trend for using Arabic script in Middle Eastern art is so strong that it has been named '*hurufiyya*, after the Arabic word *harf*, meaning 'letter', and alluding to the medieval Islamic scientific study of the occult properties of letters.' This aspect of writing in Middle Eastern art comes to the fore in the third section of the exhibition, 'Deconstructing the Word'. Works by the pioneers of *hurufiyya*, Madiha Omar and Shakir Hassan al-Said, take individual letter forms and incorporate them in abstract compositions or overlapping words written like graffiti on walls. Some works in this section, like those of Maliheh Afnan or Mahmoud Hamadani, suggest words without actually using them. In the case of Saudi artist Faisal Samra, deconstructed Arabic words are written on a form made of wire-mesh and clay which resembles something organic, perhaps part of an animal carcass that one might find in the wilderness. Yet, the letters, written in their isolated forms, give the object a magical potency, recalling 'paper charms and amulets in which strings of incomprehensible letters are inscribed to heal the sick or ward off evil.'



Ali Omar Ermes, Libya/France, *Harf al-kaf* (Brushwork in Maghribi), black ink on paper, 1991 (153 x 123 cm). British Museum. This dramatic work focuses on the single letter, *kaf*, 'K', and includes a verse attributed to eighth-century Caliph al-Mansur about social injustice and the plight of the poor.