MASSOUDY

Breath, Gesture and Light
The pigments Hassan uses are valued for their vibrancy and purity. Some of the colours he works with aren't possible to reproduce with four colour printing.

For more accurate colour reference, download a PDF of this catalogue from: www.octobergallery.co.uk/massoody.pdf

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Gerard Houghton: In your intriguing autobiography, *Si loin de l'Euphrate*, you describe your early years in the desert town of Najaf, and how fascinated you were by the calligraphic ornamentations decorating the renowned Imam Ali Mosque. Ultimately, this childhood interest led to your studying calligraphy in the capital, Baghdad. What inspired you to travel from there to Europe – where such calligraphy is hardly known?

Hassan Massoudy: Well, that first move to Baghdad, with its monumental architecture and large, open spaces, already seemed to transport me centuries away from Najaf. In the late 50s the prominent Iraqi artist, Jawad Salim, had decorated Baghdad’s Tahrir Square with his *Nasb Al Hurriya* (Monument of Freedom), which symbolised every Iraqi’s aspiration for a flourishing and prosperous future. Salim’s gigantic mural celebrated the unity of all Iraqis regardless of their ethnic, religious or political backgrounds. There’s a black and white photo of me, in 1961, just seventeen years old, with Salim’s bronze panels visible in the background. Like any adolescent, my mind was full of the heady dreams of youth, and I was more worried about my own future than the worsening political situation around me. The unrest had just begun, yet everyone still hoped things might just calm down. No one imagined the rapid descent into the horrors that still continue today. At the time, I was learning to support myself as a calligrapher, but I knew I didn’t want to do that forever. Why be just a craftsman? There, in front of that powerfully persuasive *Monument of Freedom*, I knew I wanted, like Jawad Salim, to study in Paris and become an artist!

GH: How did you imagine becoming an artist might differ from being a craftsman?

HM: Well, the objective of art is more complex – more profound – than the craftsman’s aim. Art asks pointed questions about the human condition. Art deals with the entire range of human experience, it engages with life and death and examines what must be done to make something new. Anyone can ask what it means to be human; but it’s the artist’s responsibility to continue to question even when no satisfactory answers can be found. This, for me, defines the matter of art. The craftsman, however, is concerned with the ambiance that surrounds us all, and with making necessary objects that are both useful and agreeable. The origins of art lie in the mysterious act of creation, whereas artisanal production is based upon reproducing what has been done before, using previously developed ideas and often-repeated motifs. In art one can’t simply replicate: if there’s no advance, then one stagnates. So, art is predicated on a cycle of continuous development, which is what makes it such a struggle. The artist is always striving to surpass the very best of whatever’s been done before.

“I’d like to be the choreographer of my letters, and make them dance across the white page.” — Hassan Massoudy
GH: Tell me about those years in Baghdad, where you practised long and hard to master the calligrapher’s craft.

HM: At first I worked with other calligraphers, but by the time I was twenty-four, I’d established my own studio in the centre of Baghdad. I accepted all kinds of work: pieces accompanying newspaper articles, small signs, advertisements in other media and any commissions I could get. Eventually, I became the resident calligrapher for a cinema chain, creating graphics for all their publicity materials. I remember being a bit of an exception amongst Baghdad’s calligraphers, since I’d cocoon myself away trying to create the conditions for sustained concentration. The master calligrapher, Hachem Al-Baghdadi, would visit my studio and often stay for a quiet chat. He once told me, ‘You know, Hassan, I never mind visiting your office, because it’s always neat and so clean that I can be sure I won’t get ink-stains all over my clothes, which always happens when I visit other calligraphers’ studios!’

GH: Do you still have any examples of the calligraphic work you created in those early days?

HM: No! When I left Baghdad for Paris, in 1969, I took only a few souvenirs along with me, an inspirational piece of Hachem’s calligraphy, and a Persian qalam, since they’re amongst the very best. Islamic calligraphy follows precisely codified rules, which one learns from one’s master who follows exactly the same rules that his master taught him. If changes in style do occur, therefore, they might be noticeable from one century to another, but they remain invisible from one generation to the next. However, in the western arts tradition, change is de rigueur, even over a few decades of any single artist’s development. If I’d continued to work in the calligraphic traditions I’d learned, I’d have been accepted as a calligrapher anywhere in the Islamic world. But, after becoming conscious of the necessity of exploring things more deeply, and of adding something new, I sacrificed that continuity of tradition to search for something else. When one does that, one breaks with a traditional system that doesn’t accommodate change. That’s a very painful step to take, because one enters into a place of uncertainty, where there are no guides.

GH: So, you chose to follow your destiny, and break with both tradition and place. Tell me what happened next, after you arrived in Paris almost empty-handed?

Above: Man in conflict with letters, mirroring my own struggle between figuration and abstraction, 1979.

Right: I saw that the eye was the window of the heart. Al Buhturi (9th c.)
Water-based pigments on paper, 75 x 55 cm.
HM: I owe nearly everything to this amazing city of Paris and to my encounters with a whole range of other artistic styles and expressions. Exchanges with artists from all over Europe have given me insights I could never have had in Baghdad. It’s true that when I arrived in 1969, I came empty-handed – but I carried many other things inside my head. I was just twenty-five years old, and, since I couldn’t speak much French, the first work I found, ironically enough given my intention to quit the field, was as an Arabic calligrapher working for an Algerian newspaper. Luckily, I had my Persian qalam! I expected it to be a temporary job, but I quickly realised that this arrangement freed me up to attend the Beaux-Arts School, where I could spend the rest of my time painting – which was what I really wanted to do. During those first years, that job paid enough to cover my rent and allow me to eat, cheaply, in the University restaurants. I survived my first decade in Paris by living frugally, and eventually I supplemented my income with earnings from various live performances I did.

Most importantly, I was attending the premier arts school of the day, L’Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts on the left bank of the Seine, just across from the Louvre. After the student strikes of May 68, the Beaux-Arts school exuded a pervasive air of freedom. It felt very different to anything I’d encountered before. Obviously, I was delighted to be studying under fine teachers who taught many different courses on both practical and theoretical subjects: painting, sculpture, drawing, the dynamics of composition - most of which were new to me, and all of which I worked hard to master. I painted over a hundred canvases during my six years there, mainly figurative works using oil paints or acrylics. There’s a conscious brutality about the figures in those paintings, which owes everything to their subject. Even though I was deeply involved in that new Parisian world, I was very much preoccupied by the frequent news about events in Iraq and the brutalities being inflicted on the ordinary people. That was the underlying theme of all my paintings from that period.

GH: So what moved you away from figurative painting to begin to explore calligraphy again, and in such novel ways?

HM: Essentially, I’d become impaled on the horns of a dilemma, and I wavered back and forth trying to solve the riddle. Signs began to creep back into my work, almost unconsciously, as though my spurned scriptorial tradition wanted to express itself. But if I let that happen, then I’d have to abandon everything I’d escaped to France to explore. This predicament appears in a work, from 1979, displaying a figure (me, actually!) surrounded by calligraphic signs, which seem to invade the space he occupies. Actually, the encircling signs are the Arabic letter waw, which is unique amongst the letters of the Arabic alphabet in its ability to stand alone. Calligraphically speaking, I’ve always loved its beautiful shape. Here, these letters seem to link themselves into a mesh, and I’m the fish caught within that net of signs. This marks the realisation of a necessary separation between two opposing impulses: between abstraction and figuration, between integration and differentiation and ultimately between eastern and western approaches to art. It marks a painful moment – but maybe a necessary one. This acknowledgement heralded the start of something new.

Ink on paper, 1981. The word Liberty written as glyphs in a desert landscape composed of the same word.
Towards the end of my time at the Beaux-Arts, around 1975, I was caught in this impasse. Sometimes I’d introduce abstract letters that made no sense at all; other times I’d use letters mixed in with people and faces. For a good five years, I experimented with all kinds of signs, but nothing led in the right direction. Then, came a moment of crystal clarity. I remembered something I’d experienced in the desert outside Najaf, when I’d envisioned Arabic letters as though they were physical sculptures in the desert landscape. That’s when the barriers opened, revealing the first step of a path I’ve been following for the last forty years or more.

GH: It’s as though that remembered vision was a necessary seed-crystal to start the process of transformation. What’s interesting is that, in some sense, you'd already discovered the answer to your later questions much earlier in life!

HM: It’s true! The desert landscapes of my childhood held the secret to my adult quest. The resolution can be seen in a work that uses the word ‘Liberty’ endlessly repeated to create a landscape in which there appear sculptural emblems of the same word. I often have images of the desert in my head when I’m working, and here the landscape rises into a sand dune, that simplest of forms evoking the rigorous conditions of sun and wind that shape those extraordinary zones. Somewhere between abstraction and figuration the landscape is composed of repeated signs that signify the meaning of the piece. This breakthrough had the maximum potential for progress, and my work advanced again. Soon, the written lines suggesting landscape reduced to a single quotation representing the horizon line. Over time, black ink gave way to carefully mixed inks of differing hues, and a dramatic style of gestural strokes merged Middle Eastern and western aesthetic modes. More recently, I’ve begun translating these figures into a new series of paintings on canvas. So the cycle repeats again, and oriental and occidental modes become ever more tightly intertwined.

GH: Were there any other factors that contributed to bringing about this sense of liberation that set you off exploring new directions again?

HM: Well, of course, it really came from a mixture of influences, several interweaving strands developing interactively over time. Most significantly, I’d recently encountered something entirely novel. Every year in Paris, there’s an Autumn Festival, and, in 1978, special emphasis was given to Japan, with exhibitions and performances by Japanese architects, musicians, dancers and so on. Amongst the programmed events was a series of demonstrations, at the Sorbonne Chapel, by six Japanese master calligraphers, each demonstrating a different aspect of Japanese calligraphy, from traditional to the avant-garde. I went every day and watched dozens of different demonstrations. I was amazed by this work, and became enamoured with this radically different approach, using soft, flowing brushes of all sizes to produce strikingly beautiful displays. Two things differed from the calligraphy I knew: the use of huge brushes, while standing on the paper itself, to produce characters as large as a man's body; and the speed at which they worked, with rapid strokes giving expression to the calligrapher’s intense emotions. In traditional Arabic calligraphy, no rapid gestures are made. The calligrapher consciously holds his breath, as the qalam advances millimetre by millimetre across the paper.