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**Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East**

**edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan**

# Impressum

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Manazir  
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## Hamed Abdalla: Talismanic Modernism<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

Hamed Abdalla (1917–85) is a key figure in Egyptian modernism and postcolonial art history. His experimental inventions around the Arabic Letter reflected over thirty years of aesthetic debate in the region – often identified as related to the concept of Hurufiyya and its artistic network. Abdalla's much more political and militant use of the Arabic Letter places him as almost as a unique case. By giving shape to an exiled modernism (Cairo, Copenhagen, Paris, Beirut...) his practice is paradoxically affected by his complex exchange with the West. For instance, with Paul Klee, whom he sees with distance and a critical look but still studies him as a “visual translator” of Oriental(ist) and Egyptian sources.

**Keywords:** Hamed Abdalla, Egyptian modernism, Hurufiyya, Letterism

Hamed Abdalla is one of those artists who, having inscribed their name in the annals of history, reanimates in a single gesture the buried collective memory that made this inscription legible to humanity. Every work he signed was like the seal of a particular civilization, or rather, one of a series of stops in a quest for civilization(s). The young Abdalla's saga began in the 1930s. During his formative years, he learned traditional calligraphy while depicting the Egyptian man in the street, an anti-conformist act in the context of the neo-Impressionist academicism that had reigned in Cairo since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was already engaged in a *pas de deux* between writing and figuration, between a solemn reverence for the Book and appreciation for the insolent brouhaha of the world, so to speak. His story, based on classical (even ancient) culture, is also one of a man of the first scientific and poetic revolutions and a man of the Second World War and modern geopolitics – the period during which the artist became Abdalla with a capital “A”.

### Abdalla in the Center of the Periphery

The name “Abd-alla” – beyond its etymological vocation and its union with the name of God (Allah), i.e., transcendence – was honored by Hamed, son of a *fellah* (farmer), who was to play one of the most decisive, steadfast pictorial scores within the concrete equation posed during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Western modernist challenge to all peoples and to the intelligentsia of non-Western countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was a challenge to their political imagination on one side, and to their art history and images on the other; it could be said that *epistemological rupture* was an experience associated with various decolonization movements of the time.

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<sup>2</sup> This article was first published in Morad Montazami ed., *Arabecedaire. Hamed Abdallah* (Paris: Zamân Books, 2018), <http://www.zamanbooks.com/abdalla/>. Courtesy of Zamân Books. Translated from French by Heidi Ellison.

At the confluence of the Arab-Muslim world, the Mediterranean region and the large Western cities where the concept of the avant-garde was forged, the name "Abdalla" is also – and perhaps above all – a story of philosophical intermingling. For someone like Abdalla, who lived in Egypt, Denmark and France, and was also familiar with many other world heritage sites and visual memories, Sicily is linked to Africa, and the ancient mosaic tradition is linked to the modernist tradition of collage. This interlacing – like an arabesque extended into a word before the same word comes undone into an arabesque – makes sense only in the dialectic of origins and uprooting, of near and far, in the back and forth between culturally and geographically distant ideals woven together and set in motion. An artist who adopts the philosophy of cultural interweaving agrees to become a symbol of mobility and exchange between a triumphant modernity (in the center) and a disenchanting modernity (on the margins), between a past in the making and a present in ruins. "Abdalla" is therefore a name that fits between the asperities of archaeological stones and those of modern mechanics. It is also a sound echoing fragmented knowledge, beyond the profane and the sacred, where individual fate *becomes* collective history and vice versa.

Born in Cairo in 1917, a year before the fall of the Ottoman Empire and on the eve of the great 1919 Egyptian revolt against British colonialism led by Saad Zaghloul, Abdalla developed his artistic language during the time of Nasser's revolution and later arrived in Paris, where decolonization and emancipation movements were beginning to be reflected in European social struggles. "Abdalla" is thus more than just a signature, more than the mark of a person vouching for his own subjectivity, tested by exile and utopia; "Abdalla" is also the name of our urgent contemporary need to decolonize modern European and American art history. The official story contains the seeds of other stories, chiseled by other masters and artisans, other aesthetic strategies (other "I"s and "we"s) and those who would have participated but whom we have preferred to keep in a geographical and cultural enclosure at the risk of no longer being able to read the names of our own ancestors, let alone decipher their secret dreams and map their detours. It is now up to us to transform the stories of the exiled, displaced and uprooted, to build a structure for art history in exile, on the move and free from ideological ties.

Abdalla had already travelled a great deal, well before his more or less definitive departure for Denmark in 1956, and also just before Gamal Abdel Nasser took power in Egypt in 1952, dethroning King Farouk and symbolizing the affirmation of Cairo as the cultural and political center of the Arab world. During this crucial period, the colorful cosmopolitanism of Belgian, Italian, French, Jewish, Greek, American and Syrian Cairo gradually buckled under the effects of pan-Arab nationalism and the Nasserite revolution, which worked for land reform for the peasants (*fellahs*) and against the feudal lords, but also led to the gradual impoverishment of the working classes, rural migration, full-on urbanization, the consolidation of the Arab League on the international scene and especially the emergence of the anti-colonialist movement of nonaligned countries, in which Nasser took a leading role (alongside Tito, Sukarno and Nehru) with the Bandung Conference in 1955, followed by the triumphant economic plans for the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 and the construction of the Aswan Dam. Other consequences were the cultural break with the West, censorship of journalists and writers, and the opening of political prisons.



Figure 1: Hamed Abdalla, *Fellaha* (Peasant), 1953, gouache on cardboard, 55 x 46 cm. Hamed Abdalla estate.

## Cultural Counter-Currents and Emancipated Writing

Cairo, where Abdalla spent five more years developing his art in the 1950s, was at that time synonymous with rising nationalism and traces of authoritarianism in a city once described as *the* Arab capital because of the freedom of thought in intellectual circles (fig. 1). Abdalla sensed that the lives of artists and intellectuals would become increasingly difficult. The years of French Surrealism, symbolized by writers like George Henein, Edmond Jabès and Albert Cossery, were followed by a period of "socialist realism", state art and the ruling bureaucracy. Beginning in 1956, the Nasser government called on local artists to participate in major public campaigns, during which they were sent to Nubia, for example, to study the life of the peasants and produce works glorifying the little people, the "Arab nation" and other Third World utopias (Abdalla immediately refused to participate).<sup>3</sup> These artists ended up creating a new urban and industrial folklore germinated on the back of the *fellahs* who came to the city to profit from the economic boom but instead found devitalized land and a worn-out social fabric: "Fields of rubble, miserable neighborhoods crammed with hundreds of thousands of poor people who live – on what? – which are gutted by the Revolutionary soldier-urbanist to build wide roads, with little regard for the miserable inhabitants, who cram themselves into other overcrowded slums a little further away"<sup>4</sup> (while the same "poor of the nation" adorn frescoes by artists selling their art in exchange for the patronage of the "benefactor" state). Those were the compromises and pretenses in force in Nasser's society, which began as a symbol of renewal and a breath of freedom and then darkened into repression. And those were the paradoxes of the post-colonial Egyptian era that Abdalla fought unrelentingly, whether actively or through silence and withdrawal, beginning with his early exile in Denmark as of 1956. Far from the Cold War, geopolitics and the class struggle, Abdalla grieved perhaps most of all for the dynamic, cosmopolitan language of the 1940s, the same language commemorated by Edward Said, nostalgic for the "cultural crosscurrents" of 1940s Cairo, where he grew up: "The spoken Cairo dialect of Arabic, virtuosically darting in and out of solemnity, colonial discipline, and the combination of various religious and political authorities, retaining its quick, irreverent wit, its incomparable economy of line, its sharp cadences and abrupt rhythms."<sup>5</sup>

This same darting, virtuoso language of the 1940s can be found in the first novels of Naguib Mahfouz and the comedies of Naguib al-Rihani (whom Edward Said saw as the Balzac and Molière of Cairo) or in the evanescent yet inexhaustible images of Egyptian cinema. Said continues: "A cohabitation of Islamic, Mediterranean, and Latin and erotic forms, the latent promiscuity of this semi-underground Cairo...what I can easily imagine that the European colonists were attracted to, drew on, and – for their own safety – kept at bay...The traffic between Europe and *this* Cairo is what we are beginning to lose, as Nasser's Arabization, Sadat's Americanization, and Mubarak's reluctant Islamization efface its transactions altogether."<sup>6</sup>

Abdalla took inspiration from the letter and from writing – a symbol of civilization if ever there was one – a sensitive area with extraordinary visual power. This writing is the opposite of that which, under cover of a ban on images, tried to establish rules for the meaning of words. Abdalla's writing is the product, in painting, of several registers of writing, from the most tangible to the most metaphysical

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<sup>3</sup> Among the most remarkable artists who participated in the state art project for a certain period of time were Tahia Halim (1919-2003) and Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar (1925-1965). Abdalla had not waited for the project; he had already visited Upper Egypt and Nubia for several months in 1939 and 1940.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Lacouture, *Egypte* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 74. The author, speaking of the children of the Nile Valley who had been trained to work with wool and needlepoint, was amazed by the beauty of their productions. She mentioned Abdalla as a leader of the "Cairo School" and as an innovative artist who knew how to experiment with tradition: "The most impressive, Hamed Abdallah, creator of large compositions with an angular design and daring expenses of solid color, drew his inspiration from the Egyptian lower classes so close to his childhood." *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Said, "Cairo Recalled: Growing Up in the Cultural Crosscurrents of 1940s Egypt," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001 [1987]).

<sup>6</sup> Said, "Cairo Recalled: Growing Up in the Cultural Crosscurrents of 1940s Egypt."

(calligraphic writing, choreographic writing, talismanic writing, etc.), themselves conditioned by extremely (dizzily, we might say) varied visual media (from paint on papier mâché or on tissue paper to combustion as a principle of composition, and from relief print to watercolor).

We might say, therefore, that the *emancipation of writing* is the nodal point, or the most critical issue in the "Abdalla" chapter in the history of modern art. That means writing not only as a gesture, but also as a social and symbolic practice (writing is always circular, written for both oneself and for the recipient). By celebrating the visual, plastic power of writing as well as the freedom to *take on* writing, to re-appropriate and desacralize it to better glorify it, Hamed Abdalla joined a constellation of peers who were also concerned with this problem, this *malaise of civilization*: the search for a new language while reconnecting with a language's ancient roots, a problem that could be defined, to some extent, by the European avant-garde's interest in so-called "primitivism". In this context, we could mention the Europeans Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet and Henri Michaux, but also the painters Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Ahmed Cherkaoui, who, in countries as diverse as Iran, Iraq and Morocco, were dealing with writing that had a status very different from that of their metropolitan counterparts. It was more rooted in a widespread, living literary tradition (the Qur'an and more generally calligraphy as a *symbolic form*), one that was no doubt far more standardized and codified than Dubuffet's involvement with the art of the mentally unstable or Michaux's mescaline-fueled wanderings. The case of Hamed Abdalla in the story of "Letterist" or "bookish" art (a cosmopolitan story whose geographic dynamism transcended national and colonial divisions) is certainly more exemplary because of its pioneering nature as a contemporary equivalent of the Parisian Letterist movement, whose founder, Isidore Isou, was exiled there during the Second World War. But even though Abdalla cultivated an intimate knowledge of sacred and mythological texts, backed up by a mastery of calligraphy, which he had practiced since childhood, his investigation of the letter was no less liberating and experimental than that of the heirs of Dadaism and especially Surrealism, with which Egyptian artists had been familiar since the 1930s (the generation of George Henein, Ramses Yunan and Kamel el-Telmessany, among others, and the activities of the Art and Liberty group). The difference was that Abdalla's ties with Western modernism were closer to informal abstraction and the CoBrA<sup>7</sup> movement, probably the most intense (and transnational) seat of analytical deconstruction that refused to choose between figurative and abstract art (in this context, we might highlight the importance of the letter and the bookish paradigm in the painting of the artist Pierre Alechinsky, who was affiliated with CoBrA). In the specific context of the post-Second World War avant-garde and a Europe in ruins, this presented the risk of division between an increasingly open (progressive) definition of abstraction and an increasingly closed (conservative) definition of figuration. In the Egyptian and Afro-Arab context, it would take on a different connotation.

## Hieroglyphs, Talismans and Tattooed Memory

Abdalla invented – and never stopped using – many ways of extending the power of writing to the power of the image (and vice versa), instead of opposing or separating them, as was done by some orthodox modernists who were in love with purity and minimalism, and by those who fetishized either the image or the text. His unlimited repertoire of mobile signs, spirit words and other talismans were encompassed by the invention of what he called the "creative word", or the unity of original meaning in a system he developed in the manner of a scribe-chemist, creating a half-scriptural, half-anthropomorphic alphabet. It was as if the *sacred* message of writing were concealed or nestled (in the most erotic sense of the term) in the speculative, hallucinatory contours of a body dancing,

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<sup>7</sup> CoBrA, or "Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam", was an art movement founded in Paris on 8 November 1948 by the poets Christian Dotremont and Joseph Noiret and the painters Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille and Asger Jorn in response to the quarrel between abstraction and figuration. The movement, which published the journal *Cobra* (1948–1951), was dissolved in 1951.

praying, mourning or rejoicing in the effusions of colors and rhythms of the material. The *profane* body of a dancing child or drunken individual (or even of a bent-over peasant or a couple making love) joins its contortions to the Arabic letter like a fingerprint – engraving and suspending the meaning at the same time. Abdalla's alphabet is also related to a bestiary worthy of writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, who wanted to break down limits on language (to the point of mysticism) while bringing together encyclopedic knowledge, combining a taste for nomenclature with a taste for collections (or series). In this sense, words are treated as moving bodies that retain and reveal meaning, which also moves, since the word-concept (the idea) is integrated into the mainly visual dynamic force field that Abdalla called "creative word". This shows with renewed eloquence how the *painting of symbols* or the art of the letter as practiced by Abdalla is close to the original collision of text and the body found in ancient memory games, which we could call, as Abdelkébir Khatibi did, the emanations of a "tattooed memory", a memory that goes beyond the spoken word by turning writing into a rite of passage between the here and now and the hereafter, between desire and mourning, a *bodily* memory (we are even tempted to say that Abdalla created a kind of Kamasutra of the Arabic language). The Egyptian painter seems to be reflected perfectly in the words of the Moroccan writer, as if the two had known each other well: "I wrote, an act without despair that was meant to conquer my sleep, my wandering. I wrote because it was the only way to disappear from the world, to cut myself off from chaos, to accustom myself to solitude. I believed in the destiny of the dead, so why not unite with the cycle of my eternity?"<sup>8</sup>

If Abdalla said, "I painted..." as Khatibi said "I wrote...", it would not be so much an analogy between the painted image and the literary text as an analogy between the act of painting and the act of writing; in both cases, there is the same desire to find a higher consciousness amidst the drifting of the mind and the passage of time, to make oneself the tattoo artist/witness of a collective memory that lies under our feet and would be like the symbol of the separation between a Me-body and a Me-word. Imagine Abdalla having exactly the same dream as Khatibi: "I dreamed the other night that my body was words."<sup>9</sup> There is no more dazzling equivalent in the work of the painter/tattoo artist than his monument to dreaming and wandering, *Al Sharida*, a word that can be translated as "lost" (in the sense of "lost in thought") or "escaped" (in the feminine).

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<sup>8</sup> Abdelkébir Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée* (El Jadida, Okad, 2007 [1979]), 87. Abdalla and Khatibi did not know each other either personally or through their work, but a comparative analysis shows that they were driven by the same meditation on the relationship between marginality and universality, to the point of creating a path of initiation.

<sup>9</sup> Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée*, 79.





Figure 2: Hamed Abdalla, *Al Sharida* (Lost), 1966, mixed media, wooden relief on isorel, 116 x 89 cm. Tate Modern, London.

This imposing work with an outstanding conception consists of a system of wooden bas-reliefs with an architectural stature that allows the letters of the word "AL SHARIDA" to be arranged like a dismembered body or a couple whose bodies are entwined (or sitting on each other), as Abdalla often suggested in many of his works (fig.2). *Al Sharida* is a fine example of this research into the hybrid and the *third sense*, beyond the visual form and the form of language. It is even more evident here since the wandering or sleep of the spirit refers to what we do as readers/interpreters looking at the painting: we recognize the word written out "in full" while letting ourselves wander through untold, unpredictable ramifications, as if the moment when we read the word and the moment when it escapes us (the moment when the letters seem to let go of each other or break free of their own meaning) were basically the same. For Abdalla, the only meaning is nomadic, like human nomadism, beginning with his own discontinuous journey across Africa and Europe. *Al Sharida* dates from 1966, when the artist left Denmark for France, a turning point marked by the return to forms even more ingrained in Egyptian and Arabic identity. Edouard El Kharrat, in a remarkable text on Abdalla, was the first to speak about them as "Arabic hieroglyphics", observing with keen insight the "expressionist treatment of Lettrism...the dynamics of the letters, their inner movement and the incessant waves of their exuberance".<sup>10</sup>

Amongst the collection of symbols invented by Abdalla is an exact double of the prostrate figure: the figure of the *fellah*, the peasant whose freedom is attached to his land yet threatened by the expropriation of that land. Abdalla started using this figure in the Egyptian years (the 1940s). With his arms thrown up in the air, like a letter seeking its destination, or, more precisely, the crescent of the character *lam-alif* stretching up towards its silent accent, Abdalla's *fellah* is a symbol of resistance, revolt, insurrection – he is like the closed fist of the prostrate body, which suddenly opens. Again, language and image are never completely separated; they come together in the search for a third space, an area of recognition of symbols not identified by purely encyclopedic knowledge. Abdalla's language is inspired by the architecture, calligraphy and miniatures of the so-called Islamic tradition as well as by Persian, Chinese, African and European modernism, which he first confronted, almost without realizing it, in the 1940s. Above all, however, to completely free himself of distinctions between abstract and figurative, geometrics and symbolism, he takes even more liberties in layering the painting space and the writing space, i.e., the space of projection and of inscription.

### Fragments of Knowledge, Fragments of Sensations

Abdalla's attraction to the concept of the *talisman* is related to this idea of *a posteriori knowledge* (as opposed to *preconceived knowledge*) and also to the analogy between the shape of the painting and the structure of a cartouche in which a name (divine or secular) is inscribed. He used this concept – at once numerological, ritual and chromatic – as a title for a group of works and suggested it in all his work as of the 1950s, especially when he finally stopped figuratively representing the *fellah* and other humans (as crude and childish as those figures from the Egyptian period seem, Abdalla was deconstructing the figure like a puppeteer frantically manipulating his marionettes). With the symbol of the talisman, he gradually moved away from this chapter to follow the Letterist "Arabic hieroglyphics", an adventure that was at once esoteric and erudite, speculative and narrative, like a sequence of numbers that we are asked to first *recognize* and *interpret* rather than read or just contemplate (fig. 3).

Navigating between memory games and mirror games, Abdalla's talismans make the substance and form shine one over the other, unfolding words (playing on the sound each contains, the utopia it covers, the institution that sets its value, etc.). Everything takes place in the folds, that is, in the infinite, which begins again with each new interpretation, each new interpreter who tries to decipher the

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<sup>10</sup> Edouard El Kharrat, "Hamed Abdalla, The Artist of Monumentalism" (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, July 29, 1994, pages numbers unknown, (newspaper clip from Hamed Abdalla Archives).

talisman. But also in the identification with the physical folds, between the folds of the material (crumpled paper, cracked paint and other textures creating linings, interstitial spaces) and folds of vision: the deep meaning contained in Abdalla's talismans represents a hatching in both directions, up and down, open and closed. As if to remind us of the precept of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, questioning the idea of the *fold*, developed at the end of his life by Gottfried Leibniz in his *Monadology*: "The task of perception entails pulverizing the world, but also one of spiritualizing its dust."<sup>11</sup> For Leibniz, one cannot access remarkable perceptions through the simple ratio of parts to the whole, but by synthesizing microscopic perception and macroscopic perception; a model that seems particularly suited to the talismanic language of Abdalla, for whom a letter was never a pure component of one word, and one word was never a pure component of a phrase or concept. The material the work is made of is also involved in this stratification of sensory experience. Deleuze continues: "That we are always perceiving in folds means that we grasp figures without objects, but through the dust without object that the figures raise up from the depths, which falls back again to let them be seen for a moment. I see the folds of things through the dust they stir up, whose folds I move aside. I do not see into God; I see into the folds."<sup>12</sup>

There is a stratification of perception but also a metaphysical splitting into two of the subject in a search for a synthesis between the two poles of existence, as the reader of the Qur'an is invited to do in two suras noted by Abdalla himself: "To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (verse 2:115). Or: "Have they not regarded all things that God has created casting their shadows to the right and to the left, bowing themselves before God in all lowliness?" (verse 16:48).<sup>13</sup>

Abdalla's talismans, in spite of the swirls and jumbles that animate them, retain something of this transcendental experience; even when they are expressed in the world of profane symbols, they recall this immanent symmetry, this all-encompassing space (no top, bottom, left or right) and especially the deity's power of ubiquity.

While Abdalla's talismanic modernism ultimately offers a clear, unambiguous message ("sadness", "surrender" and "slavery", "prostration", "pain", "war", "defeat", "resistance" "revolution", "freedom", but also "love", "affection" and "desire"), above all it gives the (Arabic) alphabet a new plasticity, which belongs as much to the popular tradition as to the science of movement and the theory of decoration. In so doing, his experience of Arabic was influenced by his study of Chinese calligraphy, his knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Paul Klee's use of the broken line. Abdalla expressed this eclectic, interdisciplinary spirit in the modernist context, but its origins can also be found in many ancient works, such as the cosmographic books of the 16<sup>th</sup> century published during the second Mamluk dynasty, in which the miniatures reflect the Arabic, Persian and Turkish styles, with some even exhibiting Indian or European traits.<sup>14</sup> In other words, beyond international cosmopolitanism, Abdalla was particularly interested in the cosmopolitanism of the Arabic world itself, with its wealth of sources and influences (literary cosmopolitanism). This was well before the advent of Impressionism and European painting in the bourgeois Egyptian society (the cosmopolitanism of the salon) of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 87.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Hamed Abdalla Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Abdalla took particular note of one such book, *Qanun al-dunya wa-'aja'ibiha*, by Sheikh Ahmad [Misri], which he read about in Jean-Jacques Lévêque and Nicole Ménant, *La Peinture islamique et indienne* (Lausanne: Rencontre, 1967), 182. Hamed Abdalla Archives.



Figure 3: Hamed Abdalla, *Al Amal (Hope)*, 1958, gouache on paper, 30 x 21 cm. Collection Philippe and Olivia Maari, Cairo.

One of his most significant trips in this context was undoubtedly the one he made to Sicily, where he exhibited in 1957 at the Mediterranean Cooperation Center in Palermo, during which he discovered the Palatine Chapel (dating from 1143 and built over an old mosque) on the first floor of the Norman Palace, with its magnificent Byzantine mosaics; its mix of Byzantine, Norman and Arab influences; and its coffered wooden ceiling, which was designed by the workers of the Caliphate of Cairo. Fascinated by it, Abdalla studied its history and decorative and iconographic system. He also looked into the presence of Islam in Palermo at that time (fig. 4). The encounter with these mosaics featuring characters that Abdalla "recognized" as his own played a totally paradoxical role: he re-discovered his Arab identity outside of the Arab world imagined by Nasser's conservative pan-Arabism; Abdalla's pan-Arabism is an intercontinental dream that extends throughout the Mediterranean and re-creates the link with Africa.



Figure 4 : Illustrations from Ugo Monneret de Villard's *La Pittura musulmana al soffitto della cappella Palatina in Palermo*, Rome, La Libreria dello Stato, 1950.

From the palm trees of Palermo to those of Cairo, sacred figures mingle with secular figures. The salt and ash of the Arab street rain down on conches filled with holy water and candles burning in the Christian chapel. The Muslim shrine recalls Italy, a country he had known under another name and under other meridians, the kingdom of Sicily, a land with a perfectly composite identity, born of the rapid succession of Byzantines, Arabs and Normans between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. From the palm trees of Palermo to those of Cairo, the painter discovered a multiple identity, the product of a nomadic, multilingual, mixed civilization. This experience, both imaginary and real, is reflected in his love for the fresco – Abdalla has all the qualities of a fresco painter, even though he painted on paper throughout his life. In the same year as the trip to Palermo, the Danish art critic Ib Paulsen

immediately detected signs of an agitator and a primitivist universalist in Abdalla: "The strength of Abdalla's works is to plunge consciousness through centuries of evolution, going back to cave paintings, beyond borders, around the world, as far as the Babylonian cults, all the while retaining a firm desire to transform images according to the temperament that alters them, whether it is Chinese, Egyptian, Aztec, Sumerian, or that of Abdalla, Klee, Picasso, Munch or Gauguin . . . [Abdalla] is a flame, a storm in the burning desert. We have much to learn from him."<sup>15</sup>

The big difference between European primitivists and Abdalla, like many artists of the Middle East and Africa, was that his reinvention of a vernacular or "authentic" language was not based on the invention of a faraway, foreign Other, but on an introspective movement, a self-analysis, which goes far beyond considerations of identity, whether related to pan-Arabism or the Egyptian identity.

### The Body of the Letter in the Philosophy of Being

Abdalla was a perceptive observer of major avant-garde advances, such as the "free words" dear to Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, but he was more concerned with encircling words with a halo so they would regain their lost aura, another way of expressing the purpose of his talismanic modernism. The talisman is an invisible grid that gives the word its plastic relief and metaphysical depth. It is activated as a spiral inside the word, darting into the impure space of the material and the ideogram, an ideogram that is transformed under our eyes, abandoning calligraphy for a blind task and discontinuous, dismembered, even atomized writing. From that same radical movement, consisting of distorting the links between the letters of a word, stripping the language for the benefit of torn symbols, Abdalla foreshadowed many typographical innovations in relation to the Arabic "alphabet": typography is not just a given repertoire of symbols representing a language, it is also a reserve of meaning (and sounds) awaiting reincarnation. In this respect, the Arabic alphabet – which differs from the Latin alphabet in that it is foliated writing with letters that are joined together and no capitals (on the Western printing press) – goes against the very idea of "typography" or detached letters. This is why Abdalla's contribution to typographical and spatial uses of the Arabic letter goes far beyond the confines of the fine arts and the avant-garde, with which it is usually associated.<sup>16</sup>

If Abdalla's greatness lies in his proposal to merge *being* and the *letter*, like two sides of one and the same coin, it is to better reveal the function of the mirror, meaning that being can always find its salvation in the text, the source of all interpretations. And interpretations of the text themselves will win over minds when they also open to body language, the language of symbols, meaning in motion, which can operate both on an architectural surface, in the ornamental grammar of Islamic traditions, in tapestry and mosaics, but also in musical composition and mathematics – related areas Abdalla used with an economy of means and a variety of admirable procedures. Ultimately, this sacred union of being and the letter is perfectly situated beyond the formalistic games of the European Letterist movement, but it is close to the vitalist and political (or even anti-colonial) concerns of the CoBrA movement. It perfectly represents Abdalla's uniqueness in a trans-history of modern art beginning in the 1940s. If we were to summarize the terms of this union (being = letter), it would be hard to find a better definition than that of Gilles Deleuze when he explain the triad *percept*, *concept* and *affect*, or the very dynamic of creation, the same three dimensions in which we can perfectly break down each of the talismans engraved by Abdalla (*percept*: what is seen; *concept*: what is read; *affect*: what transforms our being).

Similarly, the way he signs his paintings distorts the difference between Latin and Arabic; we do not know if "Abdalla" is written in "French" or in Arabic; in other words, he is distorting the difference between two symbolic systems that are foreign to each other to better merge them into a set of

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<sup>15</sup> Hamed Abdalla Archives.

<sup>16</sup> An Iranian artist influential in this area was Reza Abedini, a leading player in the creation of a Perso-Arabic "typography". Cf. *Reza Abedini, Graphiste/Graphic Designer* (Paris: PYRAMID ntcv, 2004).

horizontal and vertical lines, or a kind of wild fictional cuneiform. The name "Abdalla" then becomes a pure effusion of space and movement that falls outside a specific idiom but, in an exquisite paradox, uses a language that seems both vernacular and futuristic.

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### Biography

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