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VELID HODŽIĆ, Ornated helmet from the Islamic Art Collection of the Askeri
Museum in Istanbul, Photograph, 2010



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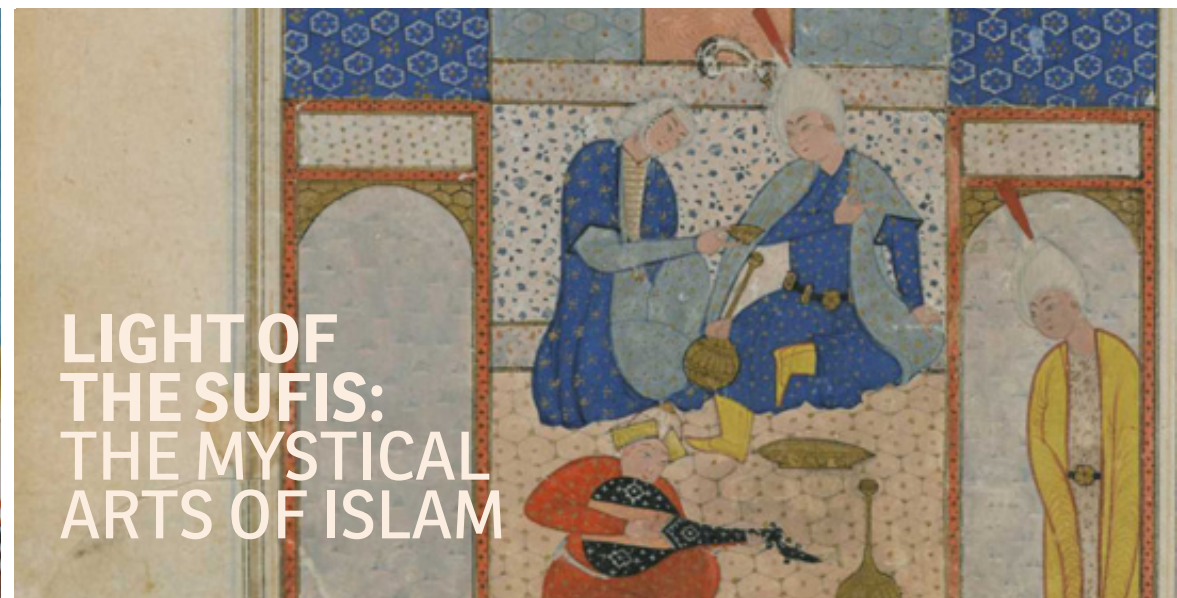
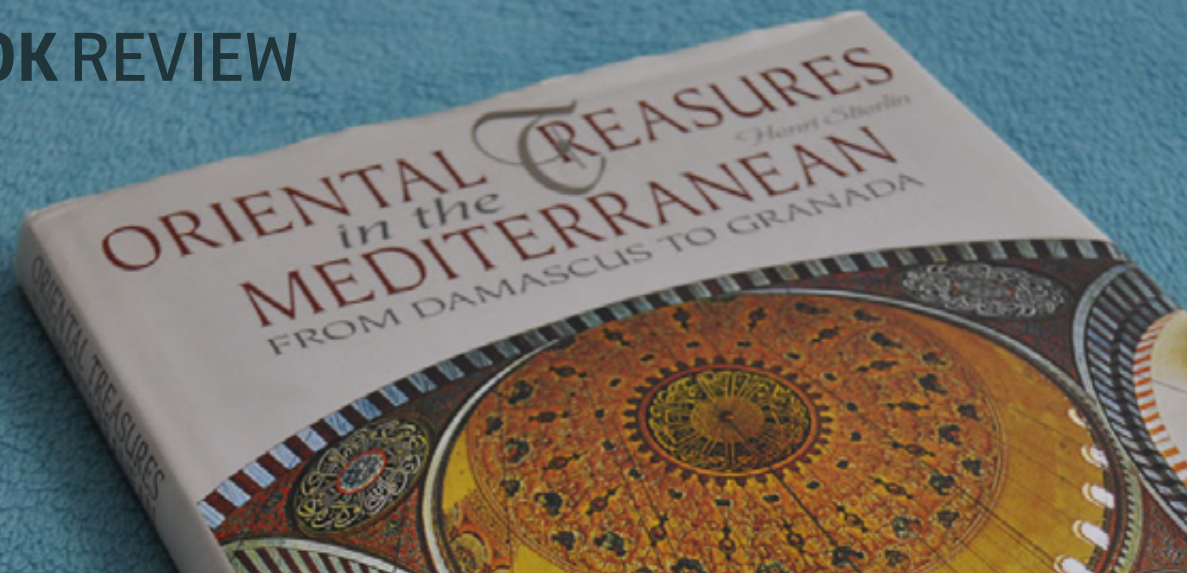


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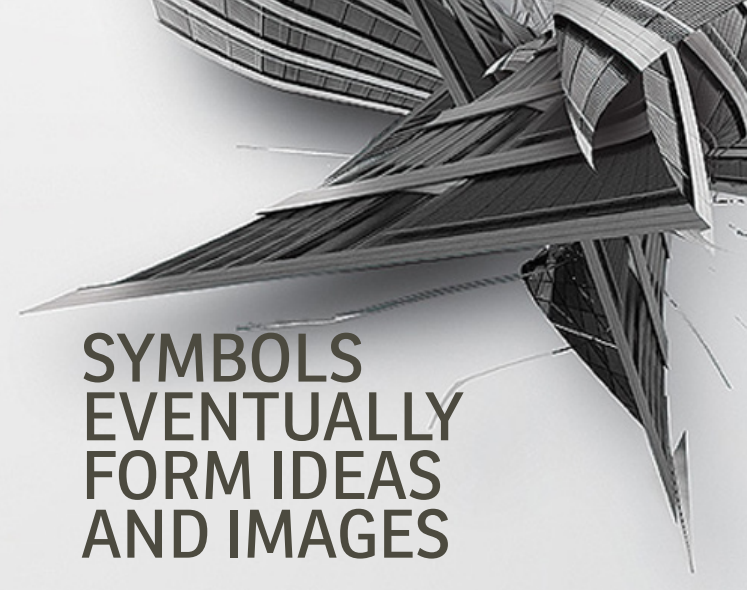


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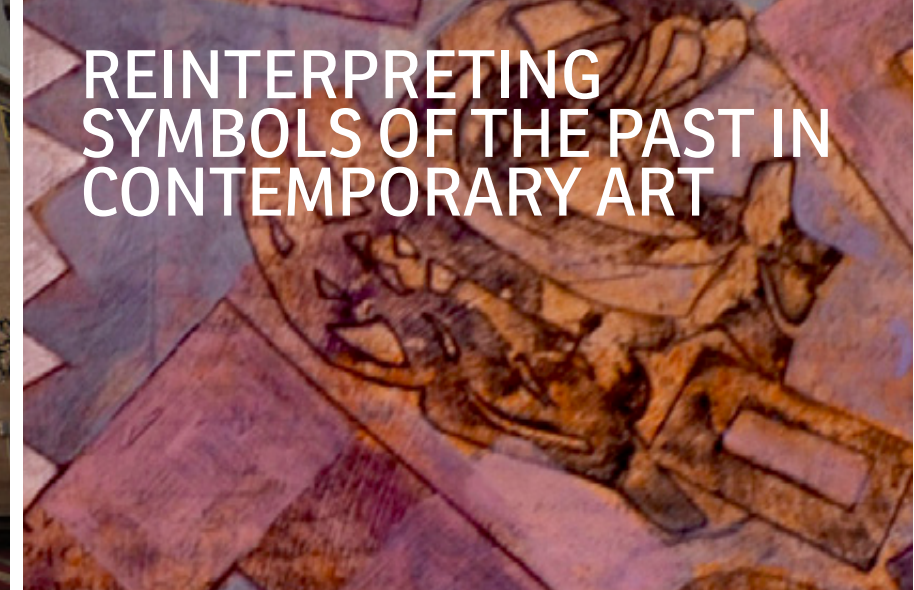
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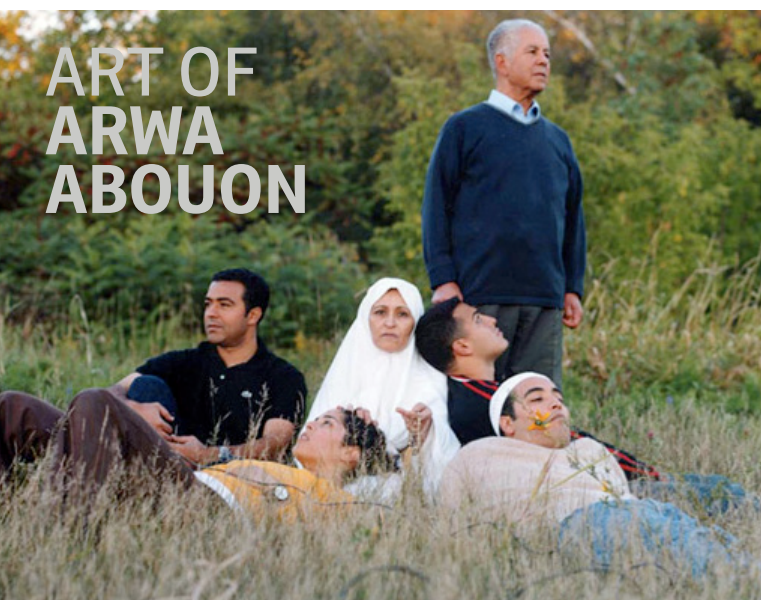
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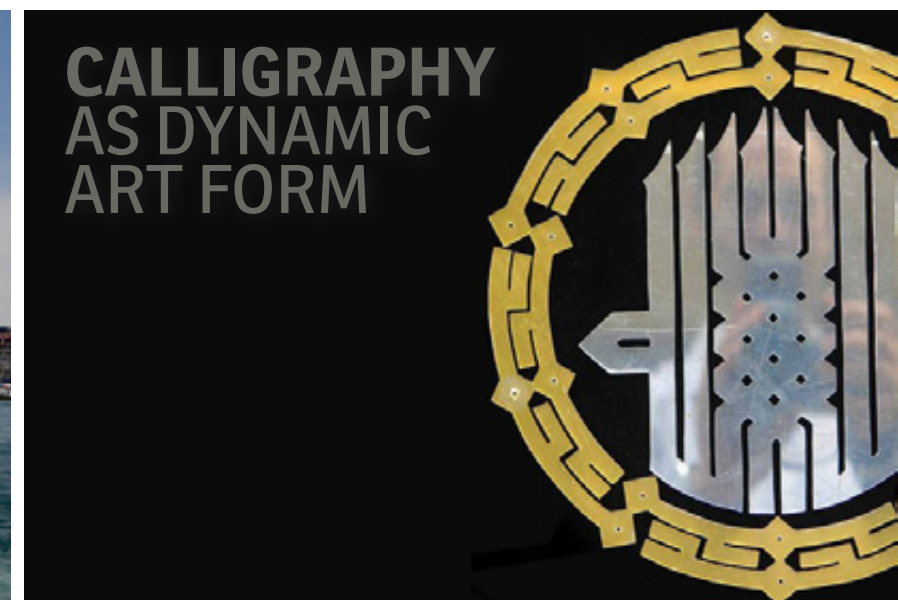
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Interview with **Mohammed Ali**, Aerosol Arabic (*United Kingdom*)

SPRAYING SPIRITUALITY ONE CAN AT A TIME...

by **Nisa Terzi**

Journalist (Melbourne, Australia)

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MOHAMMED ALI

AEROSOL ARABIC

Known for his unique message-filled graffiti murals, Mohammed Ali has been pioneering a unique combination of mediums and delivering them in public spaces all around the world.

Also known as Aerosol Arabic, Mohammed was born and raised in Birmingham UK — a true “Brummie” as he likes to call himself. His passion for graffiti art began as a teen in the early eighties and he has been painting ever since.

Initially aspiring to be a computer games designer, at 20 Ali found he had a bigger role to play, something that was about designing hope and a change for humanity. He decided to leave the virtual realm and focus on reality.

Unlike many graffiti artists, Ali started to incorporate Islamic concepts and script within his art. He has since pioneered what he calls “urban spiritual art,” a fusion between urban street graffiti and eloquent Islamic script.

Much of Ali’s work depicts universal principles of peace, knowledge and patience — concepts that cross faiths and cultures. Ali’s art celebrates spirituality; it’s far from being provocative and controversial. Instead of art that shakes the bridge, Ali’s art aims to build bridges.

The 30-year-old father of one has become a household name across the Muslim community. Some of his accolades include public spiritual murals in the streets of major cities, such as New York, Chicago, Toronto, Melbourne and Dubai.

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From the beginning of time, man has carved his message into the public space, from ancient rock carvings to the modern day spraypainter.

At a time when people are afraid to speak up, graffiti art provides such a platform. It enables artists to illustrate a unique and stylistic view of the world and the problems people are facing. How do you view the world and what does your art aim to do?

George Orwell once said "in these times of universal deceit, speaking the truth will become a revolutionary act". That is all I aim to do highlight truths that are now becoming lost and forgotten, bring back principles and virtues that are fading away from our modern societies. Freedom, justice, brotherhood, seeking knowledge, these are values people don't speak about anymore. We don't see these values anywhere. Quite the contrary, we wonder why we have so many problems in the world today. The Prophet Muhammad s.a.w.s. said "speak the truth, even if it's against yourself", so these truths, however comfortable it may be, someone needs to bring them back and there is no better way to do so, than putting them in the public space, out in the open for people to see on a daily basis.



When did you first decide to incorporate graffiti art with Islamic calligraphy? It sounds like an oxymoron; the two art forms seem like opposites. How is it that you can draw such parallels?

Graffiti art was a frustrated and aggressive display of one's own self. Selfish glorification of one's own identity, glorifying ones 'tag' in a public space. It was about the self, the word of man, wanting to be known and heard, making his mark. Historically even, man has forever left his mark, told his story for others to see in a public space. However Islamic Art was about the opposite, about everything but the self, not the word of man, but the word of God. The artist was anonymous - like a graffiti artist

- but would also be selfless, and pointing to everything but himself, pointing to a divine message. Both artforms were a non-figurative expression of words being the focus, but one being about the word of Man, and the other word of God. Perhaps even Art for Art's sake, and the other Art for God's sake (or mankind's sake).

Has there ever been any conflict between your faith and your art?

Initially, one might have been uncomfortable about the street art and sacred Islamic messages being mentioned in the same breath, two opposing worlds coming together as a clash. In fact, I would say what this represents to me is the very idea of the "clash of civilizations",

because here we see worlds colliding but doing it with perfect harmony, showing how Islam and Islamic art can be meaningful and relevant to modern society. Sometimes I worry about losing myself within the art, and have to pull away and take time out for myself, such as during the month of Ramadan, going on Hajj/Umrah wherever possible, and just taking time out to reflect on the religion. Yes, I love doing things to inspire others, but sometimes I need to refuel my own batteries.

Who would you say inspired you to become the artist you are today?

There is no doubt, that I do what I do today because of my faith in Is-

lam, or I should say re-discovery of Islam. At one stage in life I began to question the purpose of Art in society, question the purpose of my existence. I was immersed in the commercial design industry making computer games - a dream career that I had wanted since I was a kid. But what was I doing? Using this creative ability to turn kids into zombies in front of their TV screens? Surely this skill I had could be used for better purposes, something that could serve mankind, and in turn serve my Creator. So I began using my creativity to bring about change in the world today. I felt that as an artist, I could finally offer something back to society, rather than create art for art's sake. I could benefit the world, just like how doctors and teachers could.



Are you a preacher?

Everyone knows I'm not preaching or telling people to 'come to the truth' but in some ways I am preaching. Just how the billboards preach and say how they are the best product, I tell people to wake up to the injustices in the world and spread peace and understanding amongst one another.

What would you say the role and responsibility of graffiti artists are?

We are using the public space that is seen by millions of people. We are partly responsible in shaping our environment quite literally. We can turn the ugly grey concrete cities into spaces of colour and life. We have the power to transform people's condition through what they see on a daily basis. Just like how billboards that surround us, shape the way the people think and operate. Airbrushed women, latest flash cars, Hollywood mov-



Day 8 of working on the writing on the wall mural in Birmingham UK

ies - this is what becomes our priorities in life when we are bombarded with such visuals. We as graffiti artists must think about our social responsibility in how we offer something back to the public. So for me, it is about offering something not just with colour, but also meaning.

The beauty of graffiti art is that it is not framed or hung in a gallery to be accessed by certain people at a certain time. It is for all people, readily accessible and powerful in the way it can be related to by everyone. Where would you say was the most inspiring location to paint? Is there a country or a specific location you dream of painting in one day?

I always describe graffiti art, as breaking outside of the conventional art spaces, bursting outside of the walls, and spilling out onto the streets around us. This is where art should be. We should be living and feeling art, enhance our



Free Gaza, Birmingham, England

condition, unlike anything else out there. We need art in our lives, it is an essential part of human development. One of the most inspiring places I painted was New York, in the Bronx. Being at the heart of graffiti - the Mecca of graffiti - where it all started and to be able to take something back there, with a spiritual angle, not far from the shadows of the twin towers was pretty special for me. Melbourne was a pretty unique project too. Painting street-art in places other than the run down districts, and doing some in a central business district, was pretty inspiring for me, seeing a totally different atti-

tude to graffiti art. I have been invited to paint in Sarajevo in a few months which I am looking forward to. Taking art into unusual places, places that don't see this type of thing is what I enjoy doing. With the history of war and destruction in Bosnia, and how the people have dealt with it is what appeals to me about painting there.

Having established yourself in the arts scene, your latest project "Writing On The Wall" earlier this year marked a unique point in history with a one-off live performance of painting, poetry and percussion in a vast,

concrete workshop just days before it was demolished. What was this project inspired by and what did it aim to do?

I have always felt I wanted to take graffiti art to that next level. More than just paint street-corner murals or canvas exhibitions. For years I have been saying that I am going to do something really unique - the BIG ONE - the one that will really make some big waves. I wanted to choreograph something powerful and impactful on a scale unimaginable. I wanted to bring together different mediums of expression, the best poets, the best

performers, different mediums of artforms and bring them together as a kind of multimedia experience, with graffiti intertwined with that, at the heart of it.

So I began four years ago on a journey to find the right people for this project. I narrowed it down to three national and international poets that I could work with to develop this unique project. I employed a renowned theatre director to make it happen. And it had to take place in my city, the city of Birmingham where I was born and raised and still based in. I had to give something back to the people of my city. I have travelled all

over giving art to all these cities. I had to give my biggest project to date to my city as a gift if you like. I used the cities most loved and respected 100-year-old theatre, to transform their space into a one-night only performance of spray painting and spoken-word in front of a 450-strong sold out audience. It brought together people of all backgrounds together in an amazing way, women in face veils to the middle-class regular theatre-goers. I have never seen anything like it, so for me, it was mission accomplished.

Aside from painting the murals, I was providing the poets with themes, and then painting from the words of the poets - so it was a two way process where the poet and the painter became one.

What I was doing there, was incorporating for the first time, my background in multimedia (that's what I



*A thirst for change,
Melbourne, Australia*

studied at university). I always loved film, photography, animation and sound, and playing with that. So in the show there were parts where the room was lit dramatically and sounds from my Umrah trip, that I had captured on my mobile recorder, were layered. There was video projected onto the walls, footage I had shot over the years, in subway stations, time lapse footage of a mural being painted over a day, random bits of typography flashing in and out, high energy rhythms that I had put together from the sounds of a spray can - the rattle, the hissing of a can - all of this to create an ambience in the auditorium, accompanied by a live percussionist. This is why I loved this project so much, I felt I was really able to explode and fully utilize all the things I had been trained up to doing over the past decade, just creating an all-round experience.







Brotherhood, Toronto, Canada

September this year, audiences gathered for the first screening of the "Writing On The Wall" documentary followed by a Q&A, a panel discussion and closing performances by artists. Funds were raised for the Pakistan Flooding

Appeal. How did you think this event proceeded? Why do you think there is such a great need for such events to take place?

Since the end of *Writing on the Wall* which was early this year in Janu-

ary, there was an amazing buzz from those who came. Words cannot describe the special vibe that took place in that space that night. The show could have sold out 3, 4 or five nights in a row. But it was a one night only. You missed it, it

was your loss. In fact even more special, is that the walls were demolished two weeks later. So there is no trace left of that momentous occasion on a cold winter evening. So the only record we had was via film. We had a team of four

cameramen document the whole process. I knew this would be magical, so I focused on bringing some of my favorite film-makers on board with this. I flew in someone I had worked with in Australia to direct it - simply because my best project to-date had to have the best working on it. So recently we did a screening of the film, followed by all artists, directors and performers form part of a panel discussion. We wanted to share the magic of that evening. For those that missed out, I wanted to show via the film, this took place. Also it wasn't a sporadic event, a one-hit. This was part of mission, to build upwards, build towards a movement, of how the arts can be used to change the world! *Writing on the Wall* can happen in any city, any country, and that is what I intend to do insha'Allah!

The Hubb Arts Centre is a new and innovative space launched April this year in your home town of Birmingham. The venue



promises to host public exhibitions, workshops and live performances bringing art to the people. What initiated the idea to open up such a venue? What programs have been hosted thus far at the Hubb?

The Hubb is quite a special project for me. Some may say I take a lot on. I paint murals, I deliver educational sessions, both in the UK and abroad, I program different artist events. In fact over the past few years I've only been 50% artist as

I do many other things. Establishing the Hubb is just one part of my mission. I wanted to bring the arts into people's lives, and continuing with the ethos as a graffiti artist of taking art to the people. I decided to launch a unique arts centre right in the community that probably needs it the most. I wanted to bring the 'art gallery' outside of the glitzy parts of the city and right into the inner-city areas, the neglected neighborhoods, where you wouldn't dream of seeing a bright white-walled gallery space.

I decided to place it right in the neighborhood where I was born and raised - an area called Sparkbrook. This was the area where my father decided to stay back in the 60's. So offering something back to that community which has had its fair share of issues, from troubled youth to unemployment and crime. I felt a duty to do something for the area. The gallery has brought people in, people who would never step foot in that part of town, giving them a different perspective. My art is about trying to bring people together, people who don't otherwise get together. One of my favorite projects was when I went to a neighbourhood which had some serious racial problems. These kids told me straight up what they thought of me, as a person of colour - as a Muslim! But by the end of four days of engaging with them, we became the best of friends. This is the kind of reaching out that is required in this day and age.



Educating a woman is educating a nation, Victoria University, Melbourne

Finally, what would be your message to artists and art lovers around the world?

There are many other artists now painting with inspiration from the Arabic script. It is refreshing to see this and really brings a good feeling to me that people are inspired by their own culture and script, rather than imitate something other than their own. But I think it's important that as artists we need to innovate, not imitate. Years ago when I first started doing this, it was quite exciting to be doing something that hardly anyone else was doing, there was a great buzz to deliver something fresh that few had seen. But I think, like with everything, there is a saturation point. Where that visual soon becomes like a visual blur. I feel that about my own work at times, I look back and I know I have to move forward, I have to move on. How do I create something that is unique. If we as artists, cannot deliver unique concepts, then there really is no point.

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