

On the art of **NASSER ASSAR**

by Sir Herbert Read

Nations, like individuals, have their characteristic forms of handwriting, and no doubt the history of their lettering could be read as an epitome of the history of their civilizations. How closely the Greek and Latin scripts seem to reflect the distinctive qualities of these two great nations of antiquity! These two nations, one might say, used their scripts for utilitarian purposes—but the Chinese, the Japanese and the Persians raised calligraphy to a great art. I will not try in this brief note to distinguish between the respective merits of these scripts, but each has its distinctive qualities, and the quality of Persian calligraphy is its joyful rhythm. A page of *nasta'liq* (as the classical norm of this calligraphy is called) is "like the laughter of saints". Eric Schroeder, a great authority on the subject, has said that "a page of *nasta'liq* at its best has a delicate and sparkling limpidity unlike any other human writing, and a curiously exclusive range of forms. Its falling, rippling ductus is varied with hearty fullness, the *pashan* of the master, and there are permitted only three general shapes: budlike knots or twists, long slopes, and deep pool-like dips. The poised uprights of *alif*, *lam*, and *kaf*, which in earlier scripts had played heroic roles, are in *nasta'liq* so light as to afford

barely perceptible pauses in the general flow. To these three shapes all other letters are coerced, sometimes to the detriment of legibility, for even educated Persians occasionally misread very beautiful examples of the script. For those who developed it and loved it, its beauty was the main thing."

This may seem a long way round to the purpose of this note, which is to introduce the paintings of Nasser Assar. But Mr. Assar is a Persian and his art has been influenced by his native tradition. It is essentially a calligraphic art, and it carries to the logical extreme the development referred to in Dr. Schroeder's last sentence. Legibility is no longer the purpose of such calligraphy: beauty is the main thing.

I cannot resist quoting from some lines which a Persian amateur wrote as a foreword to an album of painting and calligraphy nearly four hundred years ago—the translation is Dr. Schroeder's:

God's Writings and God's Paintings are too fair
And strange for even the Wise to understand.
And though the Mind may never know the Meaning,
The Eye can know the sweeping line—by Joy!

It is assumed, of course, that the grace and art of God are made manifest in Man, and that the artist's intuition of Form is a revelation of the divine intention. We are afraid of attributing such a mediatory function to the contemporary artist, but if we approach Mr. Assar's paintings in this spirit, we shall be following him on the daring path he has chosen to tread.

The quotations from Dr. Schroeder's essay are taken from *Masterpieces of Persian Art*, by Arthur Upham Pope. New York. (Dryden Press), 1945.