

Embracing Modernity: The Evolution of Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy in Indonesia (1979-2014)

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the journey of the acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia from 1979 to 2014. Initially, contemporary calligraphy faced opposition from calligraphers who considered it a violation of Arabic script grammar and often linked it to issues of Islamic jurisprudence concerning halal and haram. The research employs a narrative-analytical historical approach, using data collection techniques such as interviews and exploration of print media. The findings reveal that the acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia involved a lengthy process, beginning with its controversial emergence, conflicts between painters and calligraphers, a phase of revival, and ultimately its acceptance as one of the competition categories in the Mushabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ). This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of cultural change and acceptance in the context of Islamic art in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Islamic Calligraphy, Contemporary Art, Cultural Acceptance, MTQ, Islamic History.*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis perjalanan penerimaan kaligrafi Islam kontemporer di Indonesia dari tahun 1979 hingga 2014. Pada awalnya, kaligrafi kontemporer menghadapi penolakan dari para kaligrafer yang menganggapnya sebagai pelanggaran terhadap tata bahasa aksara Arab dan seringkali dikaitkan dengan isu-isu hukum Islam terkait halal dan haram. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan sejarah naratif-analitis, dengan teknik pengumpulan data seperti wawancara dan eksplorasi media cetak. Temuan penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa penerimaan kaligrafi Islam kontemporer di Indonesia melibatkan proses yang panjang, dimulai dengan kemunculannya yang

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kontroversial, konflik antara pelukis dan kaligrafer, fase kebangkitan, dan akhirnya penerimaannya sebagai salah satu kategori lomba dalam Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ). Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai dinamika perubahan budaya dan penerimaan dalam konteks seni Islam di Indonesia

Kata Kunci: Kaligrafi Islam, Seni Kontemporer, Penerimaan Budaya, MTQ, Sejarah Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic calligraphy, as a distinctive and profound art tradition in the Islamic world, holds significant spiritual meaning alongside its visual beauty (Majeed, 2020). However, by the late 20th century, a contemporary Islamic calligraphy movement emerged, offering a new, freer form of expression often unbound by traditional rules (Ahmad, 2021). This phenomenon sparked intense debate within society, particularly in Indonesia, where Islamic calligraphy is seen not only as art but also as a sacred religious expression. This shift in artistic practice created social-religious tensions, with contemporary artists on one side and traditional calligraphers adhering to strict rules on the other (Blair, 2020). This conflict reflects broader social-religious dynamics within Indonesian Muslim society at the time, where innovation and tradition frequently clashed (Blair, 2020; M. D. H. Sidik & Setia, 2024).

The literature gap in this study lies in the lack of research examining the acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy within Indonesia's social and religious context. Most previous studies, such as those by Sanjaya (2023) and Pramesti & Khairunnisa (2023), focus on the historical and aesthetic aspects of Islamic calligraphy and its development from the time of the Prophet Muhammad SAW to the present. These studies provide deep insights into the evolution of calligraphy and its contribution to Islamic culture but do not detail how contemporary Islamic calligraphy has been received by modern society, especially within complex social and religious contexts. Additionally, research related to calligraphy, as discussed by Fan et al. (2023), Shi (2023), and He et al. (2020), focuses more on technical and aesthetic aspects of calligraphy, from technological innovation to artistic aesthetics across traditions, without addressing social acceptance contexts.

The novelty of this research is its effort to fill this gap by examining the process of acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia, which was initially controversial but eventually accepted and even accommodated in official competitions such as the Mushabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ). This study not only focuses on artistic or theological aspects but also investigates the social impact and dynamics of the acceptance of calligraphy within society, considering the social, cultural, and religious factors influencing this acceptance. It provides new contributions to understanding how contemporary Islamic calligraphy can adapt to and be accepted within the modern Indonesian context.

The aim of this study is to analyze the journey of the acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia from 1979 to 2014, focusing on the conflicts and reconciliation processes between tradition and innovation in calligraphy. This research aims to uncover how changes in public perception of contemporary calligraphy occurred and what factors contributed to its widespread acceptance.

The main argument of this study is that the acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia did not happen instantly but through a complex process involving intense debates among artists, scholars, and the broader public. This process reflects broader changes in how Indonesian society understands and practices art and religion, ultimately allowing for innovation in new forms of religious expression. This study argues that the

acceptance of contemporary calligraphy is an important example of how tradition and innovation can interact within a dynamic social-religious context.

METHOD

This study focuses on contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia, specifically the calligraphy that has been recognized in official competitions such as the Mushabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ). The research covers various locations in Indonesia where this calligraphy is displayed and practiced, including art institutions, religious organizations, and Islamic art exhibitions. The cases selected for analysis involve renowned calligraphy artists and calligraphy competitions held at the national level.

This study is qualitative in nature, utilizing a narrative-analytical approach. The data collected comprises both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is obtained through in-depth interviews with calligraphy artists, curators, and competition participants. Secondary data is gathered from relevant literature, documentation, and recordings of calligraphy competitions and exhibitions.

The study participants include calligraphy artists, Islamic art experts, curators, and MTQ competition participants and judges. They are selected as primary sources of information due to their extensive experience and knowledge of the development of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia. Their participation provides rich and detailed insights into the acceptance process of calligraphy among society and religious institutions.

The research process involves several stages, starting with field data collection through direct observation and in-depth interviews. Data collection techniques also include document analysis, such as exhibition catalogs, competition reports, and relevant literature. The collected data is then categorized and organized according to the themes emerging from the study.

The data analysis techniques used include data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The collected data is processed by identifying key themes relevant to the research focus. Subsequently, the data is analyzed in-depth to explore the meanings and implications of the studied phenomena. The results of the analysis are then interpreted using the religious aesthetics theory of Sayyid Hossein Nasr to understand how contemporary Islamic calligraphy reflects Islamic values within the social and cultural context of Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Emergence of Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy in Indonesia

The emergence of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia began with painters seeking to establish their artistic identity through the interplay between painting and spiritual meaning. Therefore, its inception was not initiated by traditional calligraphers but by painters through calligraphic art.

Before the 1970s, calligraphic painting was still considered an unconventional product, both by calligraphers and by the painters themselves. Calligraphic painting was pioneered by artists from the art academy group at ITB (Institut Teknologi Bandung), who often faced criticism from other painters. However, the criticism directed at the ITB artists was not due to their calligraphic paintings but rather their abstract style, which was seen as too Western.

Academic art education in Indonesia began in the 1950s with the establishment of ITB and *Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia* (ASRI) in Yogyakarta. Unlike ASRI, which was founded by autodidact and nationalist artists from *Persagi* and *Kelompok Lima Bandung*, ITB had many Dutch professors and some Indonesians who had completed their education in European and

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Dutch universities. Among the Dutch artists who became lecturers at ITB were Simon Admiral (born 1903), a Dutch-born Jakarta native, and the more famous Ries Mulder (born 1909), from the Netherlands. Mulder, an autodidact artist with a geometric abstract style, significantly influenced the art style at ITB (Sumardjo, 2009).

The paintings from the Bandung Academy artists featured a formula consisting of lines, colors, shapes, and textures. Representational objects such as landscapes, still lifes, and human figures were still identifiable, but these objects were treated in such a way that they were subordinated to intersecting geometric lines, effectively submerging them in their own arrangement. Paintings with this formula were later identified as the Bandung school (Pirous, 2003).

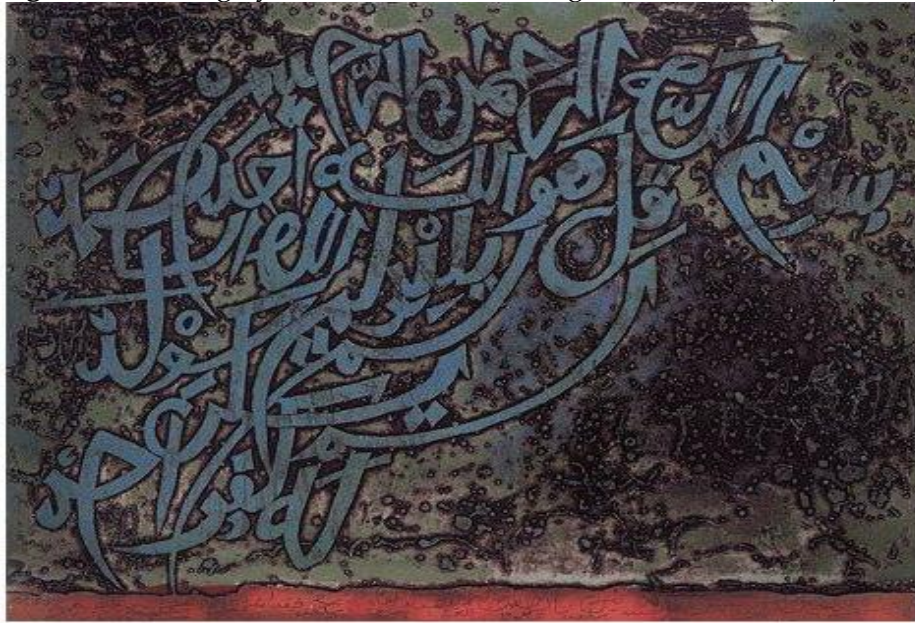
The Bandung school painters faced increasingly severe criticism, especially when ITB-trained artists first exhibited their paintings at Balai Budaya Jakarta in 1954. The exhibition received harsh and severe criticism from prominent art critics of the time, such as Trisno Sumardjo and Sitor Situmorang. Trisno Sumardjo referred to the Bandung painters as a "Western laboratory," while Sitor Situmorang accused the Bandung group of swallowing modernist values wholesale (Pirous, 2003).

Despite facing such severe criticism from art critics at the time, the style brought by the Bandung school became mainstream in the 1960s. The leading figures of the Bandung Academy, who were also the driving force behind the Bandung school, generally experienced a transformation from pure abstraction to a religious abstraction style using Arabic calligraphy as a medium for deepening their expression. These figures included Ahmad Sadali (1924-1987), But Muchtar (1930-1993), Mochtar Apin (1923-1994), Abdul Djalil Pirous (born 1932), Srihadi Soedarsono (born 1931), Popo Iskandar (1927-2000), and many others. Among them, Ahmad Sadali, But Muchtar, and Abdul Djalil Pirous were the pioneers of contemporary Islamic calligraphy through calligraphic painting, all of whom were students of Ries Mulder (Pirous, 2003).

In the 1960s, a fresh breeze swept through Bandung school painters, especially after the 1965 G30S/PKI incident, which led to the dissolution of the Lekra cultural narrative that had suppressed the Western-influenced Bandung style of painting. The early New Order's development spirit stimulated the emergence of religious art styles aimed at counterbalancing the increasingly materialistic urban life. In this context, the first calligraphic paintings emerged from Bandung Academy artists such as Ahmad Sadali, who still adhered to the pure Persian script style. His painting titled "*Ayat-Ayat Al-Quran*" was followed in 1968 by another painting titled "*Gunung Pertama dengan Sisa-sisa Emas*" (Aswita, 2023).

Unlike Ahmad Sadali, who adhered to the pure style, AD Pirous, an ITB artist from the next generation, provided a new perspective and approach to Islamic calligraphy by deforming Arabic letters into new forms that were uniquely Indonesian. He discovered this approach while observing various modern art exhibitions held in America. However, he felt disappointed that none of the modern Indonesian artworks were displayed at these American exhibitions. When Pirous saw modern paintings from the Middle East, he was reminded of his birthplace, Aceh. The nostalgic memories of his childhood in Meulaboh, Aceh, became a source of inspiration for Pirous to seek an Indonesian form. He became aware that he had been looking more towards the West than the East (Yuliman, 1985).

Figure 1. Painting by AD Pirous titled “Kaligrafi I/Ikhlas” (1970)



Source: Indonesian Visual Art Archive, 2024.

Upon returning from America, Pirous immediately held an exhibition in August 1971 at TIM Jakarta titled “Group 18.” He showcased seven paintings that he had worked on in the United States. Three of the displayed paintings featured calligraphy, titled: “*Calligraphy I/Ikhlas*,” “*Calligraphy II/Pembukaan*,” and “*Calligraphy III/Tarikh*.” His paintings featured Arabic calligraphy with complete strokes, long or short curves drawn from right to left, creating a dynamic composition in dark brown and black, evoking a sense of the past in religious reflection (Yuliman, 1985).

In 1974, Dewan Kesenian Jakarta organized the Indonesian Painting Exhibition I, held from December 18-31, 1974. This prestigious national exhibition featured many painters representing various styles and meeting specific quality standards. The exhibition was attended by 31 participants from different regions in Indonesia and was judged by seven jurors, including Affandi, Rusli, Popo Iskandar, Dr. Sudjoko, Alex Papadimitriou, Fadjar Sidik, and Umar Kayam (Sirojuddin, 1987). Two years later, Dewan Kesenian Jakarta organized the Indonesian Painting Exhibition II from December 16-30, 1976. The exhibition took place at three locations: the Taman Ismail Marzuki Exhibition Room, the New Gallery Room on the Third Floor, and the Grand Theater Room.

Since 1976, interest in calligraphic painting has grown increasingly widespread over time, both in terms of the number of painters and public interest. This can be observed in national and regional painting or graphic art exhibitions where calligraphic paintings are consistently present. However, the existence of calligraphic painting remained largely within the realm of artists and was not yet widely recognized by the general public.

The peak of the national spread of calligraphic painting occurred in 1979 when the first National Calligraphy Painting Exhibition was held in Semarang. Calligraphic paintings began to gain national recognition and received serious attention from calligraphers, especially during the subsequent exhibition in 1986 at the Sarasehan Calligraphy event at Gedung Seni Sono Yogyakarta. At this event, calligraphers affiliated with pesantren openly criticized contemporary calligraphic painters for their careless writing of Arabic script. Despite this, the

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event marked the beginning of a new phase in contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia, characterized by significant turmoil.

The Dispute Between Calligraphy Painters and Calligraphers (1970s-1980s)

Since calligraphic painting began to be introduced more widely to the Indonesian public, especially after the First National Calligraphy Painting Exhibition in 1979, various responses and reactions emerged in the print media. For example, H.M. Abdul Razzaq Muhili, one of the pioneering figures in pure calligraphy among calligraphers, commented on this phenomenon by raising issues related to the fiqh (*halal-haram*) aspects of calligraphy painting, declaring contemporary Islamic calligraphy paintings as “*makruh*” (Sirojuddin, 1984a).

This comment sparked numerous responses from painters. Syaiful Adnan, a young calligraphy painter, questioned the meaning of the “*makruh*” ruling. He defended that calligraphy painting is an artistic expression that transcends the boundaries of writing (*khat*). The presence of calligraphy paintings is not merely about text but also about text as a painting (Adnan, 1985).

A month later, on February 1, 1985, D. Sirojuddin AR, a student of H.M. Abdul Razzaq Muhili and someone sympathetic to the presence of calligraphy painting, sought to clarify the intention of his teacher. He explained that “*makruh*” should be understood if the form of the verses is unreadable, as in the style of Manshur Dompou, whose form makes reading difficult (Sirojuddin, 1985).

The dispute reached its peak during the Sarasehan Calligraphy event organized by the Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah (IMM) of Gadjah Mada University on September 12, 1986, coinciding with the Islamic New Year 1407, held in Yogyakarta. This event ignited a fierce debate between painters and calligraphers. Previously, calligraphy paintings had been criticized and commented on only through print media, but this time both parties faced each other in a heated and open discussion (Sirojuddin, 2022).

During the exhibition, there was a confrontation between calligraphy painters and pure calligraphers, who were generally affiliated with certain pesantren. A kyai representing the calligraphers pointed out writing errors made by the painters. He criticized “*Qul Huwallah*” for having a writing error, turning it into “*Qoola Huwallahu Ahad...*” He also pointed out another calligraphy error, saying, “Another mistake over there. The *alif* in the word '*amanu*' is placed at the bottom line, making it separated from the following words. This is clearly wrong. Words in Arabic must be written in full, unlike Latin script” (Sirojuddin, 1984b).

Drs. Marwazi NZ also commented on Affandi's painting, describing it as “inappropriate” and highly improper for placing the name of Allah above his own portrait. D. Sirojuddin AR, Chairman of the Al-Quran Calligraphy Institute (LEMKA) and a lecturer at IAIN Jakarta, responded to the criticism of Affandi: “*If a painter like Affandi is willing to depict the name of Allah, isn't that a victory for Islamic da'wah?*” Sirojuddin's response was warmly received by the painters, who were mostly from Yogyakarta (Sirojuddin, 2022).

At the 1986 calligraphy seminar, which was open and candid, the discussion was led by Drs. D. Sirojuddin AR, then Chairman of LEMKA and a lecturer at IAIN Jakarta, and Drs. M. Soehadji, Chairman of the National Handicraft Council (Dekranas) Yogyakarta. A heated argument ensued, with thirty calligraphy painters participating in the exhibition, along with artists and UGM students, discussing the legal aspects of writing calligraphy. The discussion focused on comparing calligraphy paintings with pure *khat* calligraphy established by earlier calligraphers. Styles such as Naskhi, Tsuluts, Riyhani, Farisi, Diwani, or Kufi were used as references and standards for calligraphy works. Deviations from these roots were seen as

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violations or deviations. Another issue raised was the discovery of fundamental errors in *ilm'iyah* principles. This criticism arose from a desire to maintain the integrity of the Quran as the basis of Islamic inspiration (Sirojuddin, 1984b).

In addition to the issues mentioned, there were also matters that were actually outside the context of *khat*. For instance, accusations were made against painters for allegedly selling verses of the Quran. However, Sirojuddin defended against these accusations: *"Although the Quran in Surah Al-Baqarah 41 says 'Do not trade the verses of Allah for a small price,' this verse does not relate to honor. The verse means not to exchange the truth for falsehood. In fact, the best halal sustenance comes from the Book of Allah"* (Sirojuddin, 1984b).

Despite the numerous accusations directed at calligraphy painters, the Sarasehan also became a venue for expressing ideas, marking a resurgence of interest in Islamic calligraphy. They hoped that calligraphy would be recognized as a "science," not just a craft. The painters acknowledged that calligraphy holds a profound philosophical dimension, being inherently elegant, flexible, striking, and endlessly engaging.

The Rise of Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy in Indonesia (1990s-2010s)

Despite receiving numerous criticisms during the Calligraphy Seminar at Gedung Sono Yogyakarta, the enthusiasm of the painters did not wane. On the contrary, the trend of calligraphy painting continued to rise. Painters and calligraphers filled each other's gaps. Painters studied Arabic letter anatomy, while calligraphers learned painting techniques to enrich their styles. Moreover, many people suddenly took up calligraphy painting, even though they had never previously studied Arabic script (Sirojuddin, 2023b).

Additionally, the rise of contemporary Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia was marked by the increasing frequency of calligraphy exhibitions, especially during Islamic celebrations. Interestingly, calligraphy exhibitions always garnered significant public attention. For instance, the calligraphy exhibition organized by Lemka in February 1987 at Istiqlal Mosque received special attention from the then-Minister of Religious Affairs, Munawir Sadzali. There was also the Maulid 1408 H calligraphy exhibition held from October 18 to November 4, 1987, at the Sonobudoyo Museum in Yogyakarta. This exhibition featured regional painters and calligraphy works by nationally recognized artists such as AD Pirous, Amri Yahya, and Syaiful Adnan (Sirojuddin, 1987).

Interestingly, although these exhibitions were called calligraphy exhibitions, the majority of participants were painters rather than calligraphers. This was exemplified when, for the first time, a state institution organized a calligraphy exhibition. The Department of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Depdikbud RI) held the exhibition from March 12 to 16, 1991, in anticipation of the holy month of Ramadan 1411 H. Despite being titled a calligraphy exhibition, most of the 27 artists who participated displayed calligraphy paintings that deviated from pure calligraphic rules (Sirojuddin, 1991).

During the 1990s, contemporary Islamic calligraphy that deviated from traditional *khat* was no longer a subject of debate among painters and calligraphers, though not all calligraphers had accepted its existence. However, there was a growing awareness to distinguish between pure calligraphy and calligraphy that deviated from traditional rules. At that time, the term "contemporary calligraphy" had not yet been coined. Various terms were used in exhibitions and print media, such as calligraphy painting, modern calligraphy, rebellious calligraphy, and others. Therefore, painters who worked with calligraphy preferred not to be called calligraphers; they preferred to be referred to simply as calligraphy painters (Sirojuddin, 2023b).

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Meanwhile, the celebration and appreciation of Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia increased. Enthusiasm for both contemporary and traditional calligraphy grew. Various calligraphy celebrations emerged with enthusiasm, such as the Istiqlal Festival from October 15 to November 15, 1991, which featured 400 calligraphies on display (M. N. Sidik, 1991). The Islamic Calligraphy Painting Exhibition at the Lobby Area, Jakarta Hilton Executive Club, from February 16 to 24, 1994 (Ahmadun, 1994). The "Faces of Islamic Art in Indonesia" calligraphy painting exhibition at Depdikbud Jakarta from August 9 to 16, 1994 (Ahmadun, n.d.). And the calligraphy painting competition organized by Surya Citra Televisi (SCTV) in 1995 to commemorate Eid al-Adha, which saw high participation enthusiasm (Oki, 1995).

Many more Islamic holiday celebrations featured calligraphy exhibitions in the following years. Despite the initial criticisms, contemporary Islamic calligraphy, which initially deviated from traditional rules, eventually became a catalyst for the revival of Islamic calligraphy art in Indonesia.

The Inclusion of Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy in MTQ (2014 onwards)

The plan to include calligraphy painting as a competition category in the MTQ (*Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran*) had actually been proposed earlier by Syaiful Adnan, a calligraphy painter from Yogyakarta, to D. Sirojuddin AR. This conversation took place at the Planetarium Gedung Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) Jakarta while they were waiting for the opening of the Islamic Painting Exhibition at the end of the 1980s. At that time, Syaiful Adnan asked Sirojuddin, "Mas Didin, could you advocate for calligraphy painting to be included in the MTQ, specifically for painters so they can participate in the MTQ?" However, Sirojuddin found this request quite challenging due to the widespread suspicion and criticism of calligraphy painting in the 1980s (Interview, Sirojuddin, 2023).

Syaiful Adnan's suggestion continued to bother and disturb D. Sirojuddin AR's thoughts. It was only in 1994, during the XVII National MTQ in Pekanbaru, Riau, that Sirojuddin actively began discussing in forums the inclusion of calligraphy painting as a category in the MTQ. Many welcomed the proposal, but others strongly criticized and rejected it.

These oppositions did not deter Sirojuddin's resolve to advocate for calligraphy painting. He believed, "because this is for Allah's sake." This was similar to Umar's response when his proposal to compile the Quran was rejected by Abu Bakar. During this time, Sirojuddin also received advice from Amri Yahya, a calligraphy painter known for his distinctive batik style, "If you want to advance, close your eyes and ears!" Sirojuddin persisted. Finally, it was not until the XXV National MTQ in 2014 in Batam that calligraphy painting was accepted as a competition category under the name "Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy." It took Sirojuddin 20 years, from 1994 to 2014, to achieve this inclusion (Sirojuddin, 2023b).

When proposing this, Sirojuddin still searched for the right terminology to use for the MTQ competition. The popular terms at the time were "calligraphy painting" or "alternative calligraphy." However, these names did not accurately represent the form of calligraphy distinct from traditional calligraphy. The term "calligraphy painting" focused too much on the technique rather than the calligraphic form, meaning any calligraphic letter created through painting could be labeled as calligraphy painting. This was not the intended meaning. Meanwhile, the term "alternative calligraphy" lacked academic rigor and did not have a clear foundation (Sirojuddin, 2023a).

Thus, the term "Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy" was adopted, referenced from Ismail R. Al-Faruqi and Lois Lamya Al-Faruqi's book *Atlas of Islamic Culture*. From Al-Faruqi's work, five contemporary calligraphy styles were introduced as competition categories: first,

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traditional contemporary Islamic calligraphy, referencing works by Muh. Ali Syakir, Said Al-Saggar, Emin Berin, Ilham Al-Said, and Adil Al-Saggar. Second, figural contemporary Islamic calligraphy, referencing works by Sadequain and Sayid Naquib Al-Attas. Third, expressionist contemporary Islamic calligraphy, referencing works by Dhiya Al-Azawi, Hassan Massoudy, and Qutaiba Al-Syeikh Noury. Fourth, symbolic contemporary Islamic calligraphy, referencing works by Qutaiba Al-Syeikh Noury. Fifth, abstract contemporary Islamic calligraphy, referencing works by Al-Said Hassan Shakir, Naja Al-Mahdawi, Hossen Zenderoudi, and Muhammad Ghani (al-Faruqi & Lois Lamy al-Faruqi, 1992).

In the early days of contemporary Islamic calligraphy's inclusion in the MTQ competition, participants were still dominated by traditional calligraphers. Many of them misunderstood the definition of contemporary calligraphy. Many contemporary calligraphy participants remained bound by traditional *khat*, thus their letter forms were not yet liberated. Ahmad Safari, a calligrapher from Gumulung Lebak Village, Greded District, Cirebon Regency, affiliated with Pondok Pesantren Buntet Cirebon, experienced this firsthand. Initially, Safari often participated in MTQ competitions in the decorative category. His career at MTQ later focused on contemporary calligraphy.

Safari recounted his experience when contemporary calligraphy was first introduced as an MTQ competition category in Cirebon. He acknowledged that at that time, his contemporary calligraphy had not yet liberated itself from the traditional *khat* he had practiced autodidactically. This was due not only to his adherence to traditional rules but also to the limited dissemination of contemporary calligraphy concepts at the time. Participants did not fully understand the essence of contemporary calligraphy, which was supposed to break free from traditional *khat*. Ahmad Safari understood contemporary calligraphy simply as calligraphy that was painted. Despite this, he won second place in the first contemporary Islamic calligraphy competition at the MTQ in Cirebon. He later received feedback from the judges regarding his calligraphy: "Try if you can tilt the letter *wawu*. Make a stroke. There is no need to adhere to the rules" (Safari, 2023).

A similar situation occurred during the contemporary Islamic calligraphy competition at the ITB Provincial MTQ. D. Sirojuddin AR, who was asked to be a judge at that time, found a calligraphy that was considered the best by other judges. However, this best calligraphy was not chosen as the winner because it still used pure *Khufi khat*. To Sirojuddin, no matter how good the calligraphy was, if it did not free itself from traditional *khat*, it did not meet the criteria to be called contemporary calligraphy in the MTQ competition. Contemporary calligraphy that does not deviate from traditional styles is like a believer praying without ablution. The necessary conditions are not fulfilled (Sirojuddin, 2023b).

Today, contemporary Islamic calligraphy no longer faces debates about its existence. It has been accepted by Indonesian society as a distinct genre within Islamic artistic heritage. Its presence is not merely considered as a shallow artistic craft but has become a discipline in its own right, reflecting rich spiritual insights and marking an era of pursuit of calligraphic styles, similar to the period during the Umayyad Dynasty thousands of years ago.

CONCLUSION

The presence of contemporary Islamic calligraphy, which originated from calligraphic paintings, cannot be separated from various oppositions, even from its embryonic form as abstract-style paintings. Abstract and cubistic paintings, popularized in Indonesia by artists from the Bandung academy, faced much criticism from nationalist painters, who viewed them as a Western laboratory. When the Bandung academy artists began transitioning to religious-

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themed paintings and used Arabic calligraphy as a medium for their exploration, they faced opposition from calligraphers who believed that these works desecrated the sanctity of Arabic script. Despite these challenges, the developments popularized by the Bandung academy artists eventually gained widespread acceptance. Abstract paintings became mainstream in the 1970s, and calligraphic paintings similarly became mainstream among Indonesian Muslims. However, it took a long time before calligraphy paintings were eventually included in prestigious calligraphy competitions like the Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ).

Contemporary Islamic calligraphy, in its attempt to find its own form, received harsh criticism from calligraphers who believed that it corrupted the Arabic script. Critics often framed the debate in terms of Islamic jurisprudence, questioning the halal (permissible) and haram (forbidden) aspects. The painters, however, rejected these accusations and argued that the calligraphers lacked artistic nuance. Rather than diminishing the existence of contemporary calligraphy, these criticisms only heightened its popularity. It became a topic of discussion in many forums and exhibitions. Contemporary calligraphy dominated almost every calligraphy or Islamic art exhibition held. As a result, many individuals began creating calligraphy paintings, even if they had never studied the Arabic script. Eventually, painters and calligraphers started complementing each other. Painters began learning Arabic orthography and grammar to enhance their calligraphy paintings, while calligraphers started learning painting to enrich their artistic expression.

The full acceptance of contemporary Islamic calligraphy became evident when it was included as a category in the MTQ competition in 2014. The idea had actually surfaced much earlier, in the 1980s, when Syaiful Adnan proposed it to D. Sirojuddin AR at the Planetarium Building of Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) in Jakarta while they were waiting for the opening of an Islamic Art Exhibition. However, due to the widespread rejection of contemporary calligraphy at the time, the idea remained just an idea. It wasn't until 1994, during the XVII National MTQ in Pekanbaru, Riau, that Sirojuddin revisited the issue and brought it up for discussion in various forums. Many supported the idea, but others strongly opposed it. Despite the opposition, Sirojuddin remained resolute, believing, "By Allah, this is good." His efforts finally bore fruit during the XXV National MTQ in 2014 in Batam, when the term "contemporary Islamic calligraphy" was officially introduced.

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