

# POTS PAINTS PENS

by Valerie Amna Behiery

**M**uslim women artists have arrived on the art scene. They are increasingly visible in North America as more local, national and international opportunities open up to showcase their talents. As the ummah values their importance and role in shaping the Muslim-American identity more, the number of second and third generation Muslim women who consider the arts as a career choice is rising.

Reem Hammad, Hayat Gul and Sana Naveed are part of this growing group of professional Muslim-American visual artists. The potter, multimedia artist and calligrapher were also among the twelve Muslim artists selected for the Sacred Voices multi-faith show at the Canton Museum of Art in Ohio last winter.

Their inspiring personal stories and art highlight the diversity, talent and creativity of Muslim American women artists. In all three cases, it was an unforeseen event—one of life's happy accidents—that led them to their respective means of artistic expression.

## Reem Hammad: CREATING WITH

# CLAY

All who cross paths with Reem Hammad describe her with similar words: generous, warm, compassionate and friendly. The Syrian-American ceramicist certainly possesses the quiet strength and vitality of a mother earth figure, so it's no wonder that Ms. Hammad chose clay as her artistic medium of choice. The artist grew up in Lebanon. In 1981, after just one year of art studies at the Lebanese American University, Ms. Hammad, not yet twenty, came to the US to visit relatives. What was meant to be a short stay turned into a long one; the artist met her future husband, got married and settled in California to start a family.

Ms. Hammad enrolled in a design program at community college, stopping to have two boys just one and a half years apart. When the eldest entered preschool, she put together

a portfolio, applied to art school and three years later, in 1993, graduated with a Bachelors' of Fine Arts degree from UCLA. Ms. Hammad considered applying for graphic design jobs, but instead joined her husband whose real estate business had grown and needed more staff. The arrangement suited her. It allowed her to be present in her children's lives, work as a freelancer and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

A couple of years later, at a friend's casual suggestion, Ms. Hammad signed up for a ceramics course. She had been looking for a fun creative activity and remembered enjoying ceramics in college. She found much more. "I went to play and have fun, but working with clay resonated with me on a deeper level. Plus, it was practical: I could start and stop in rhythm with my family life," she explains. Ms. Hammad became an avid potter, using her spare time to experiment with different shapes, decorative designs and firing methods. With her sons grown, in

2003 she began devoting even more time to her art.

Ms. Hammad's art has an earthy feel to it, displaying muted colors and organic shapes made as much for the touch as for the eye. The recurring arabesque, geometrical and calligraphic designs evoke Islamic art. However, the potter's art also possesses an indigenous source of inspiration. Ms. Hammad discovered Native American ceramics in New Mexico and fell in love with the patterns and the technique of burnished ware. Combining elements from both traditions, her ceramic wares reflect her plural Muslim-American identity. Her latest work, the Bejeweled series inspired by Ancient Egyptian jewelry, shows a new maturity. In each piece, the varied influences as well as the form and decoration coalesce into a harmonious whole. For Ms. Hammad, pottery is both a spiritual and artistic endeavor whose aim is to achieve and express balance and contemplative beauty.



This talented ceramicist has not only participated in many art shows and craft fairs, she also has spent an equal amount of time and energy organizing them. This year, she served as exhibition director of the House of Lebanon Artists' Group "Beyond Borders" exhibit, an annual event sponsored by the Lebanese American Foundation.

Since 2006, Ms. Hammad has been the president of the International Muslimah Artists' Network (IMAN), an online community for Muslimah artists founded by Noura Hammoude and Safiya Godlas in 1997 that serves as a go-to site for curators, students and art lovers looking for information on Muslim women artists. With her art and organizational work, Ms. Hammad is truly an asset to the community.



## Hayat Gul: PAINT, HENNA, MIRRORS & CHOCOLATE

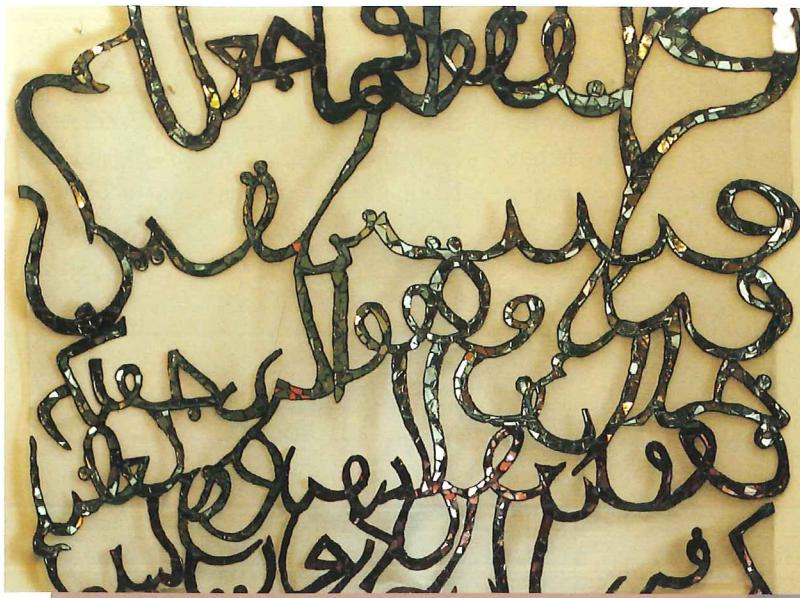
What do paint, henna, mirrors and chocolate have in common? They are among the materials Hayat Gul uses to make art. Of Kashmiri descent, Ms. Gul grew up in Montreal, Canada. The artist moved to the US in 1991, obtained a degree from the Fashion Institute of Technology and now works out of her New Jersey studio.

Ms. Gul has the archetypal artist's personality. Being simultaneously strong and vulnerable, gregarious and shy, self-confident and insecure is the driving force behind her creativity, love of experimentation and dislike of being pigeon-holed. She couples her artistic ambitions with an entrepreneurial spirit. Her business "Henna Couture" is thriving as henna art goes mainstream across North America. Mastering the traditional age-old craft, Ms. Gul innovates by transferring the complex ornate designs onto novel surfaces like cakes, chocolates and walls.

However, the artist's medium of choice is mirror mosaic; Ms.

Gul integrates it into paintings and bas-reliefs that verge on becoming freestanding sculptures. She discovered the medium serendipitously. Upon moving into her New Jersey home in 2001, Ms. Gul accidentally broke a mirror. Smashing into countless pieces, the tiny fragments seemed to spell out words across the floor. Seeing it as a divine message, she had a flash of artistic insight and that very same day, she began experimenting with mirror mosaic calligraphy. Starting with 'Allah' and the asma al husna, she incorporated the sacred words into painted, colorful compositions.

After several years of perfecting the technique, Ms. Gul found inspiration in the Qur'an: here shimmering letters of monumental Qur'anic verses stand against a mesh textile backdrop. These pieces are especially successful in their blending of modern and traditional, and East and West. The artist also uses mirror mosaic to render Islamic patterns. She explains that the light-reflecting quality of mirror and the



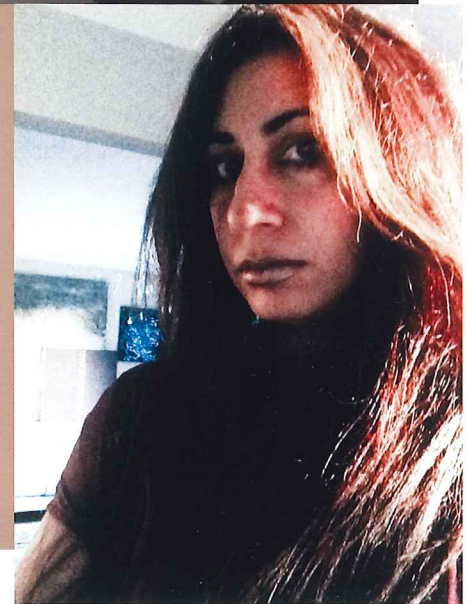
healing property of light drew her to the unique medium. Ms. Gul also likes the metaphor of creating beauty from the broken.

Islamic geometric and calligraphic art are her main inspiration, but she reinterprets them using modern materials and approaches. Islam itself is also central to her work. Growing up, she faced anti-Muslim sentiment and the personal difficulties of belonging to several cultures at once. Art helped her to navigate these terrains: "Islam is such a strong part of my culture. I grew up in an Islamophobic environment, but with very religious parents. I started making art to see what Islam means and how important it was in my life," she says. For her, the

process of art-making is educational and spiritual, a way to both keep learning about the human spirit and communicate with Allah.

Ms. Gul has shown her work in Europe and North America. She has taken part in group shows at the Queen's Museum of Art, the Taubman Museum, MOCADA, the Florence Biennale and the MICA Gallery, London. One of her pieces was bought by the Arab American National Museum and is part of the institution's permanent collection.

When asked about future plans the artist says, "I am working on getting gallery representation. I really want to create large pieces, the work is getting bigger and bigger." Her upcoming art



and projects will undoubtedly glimmer and glisten as much as her personal technique of mirror mosaic.

## Sana Naveed: HOUSTON'S FEMALE ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHER

**B**orn in Pakistan, Sana Naveed grew up on the west coast of Canada. She now lives in Houston, Texas with her husband, two sons, her sister, Faryal and her sister's family. Rheumatoid arthritis afflicts Ms. Naveed hands, but it has neither deterred the calligrapher from practicing *khatt* (calligraphy) nor stemmed the love she has for its source. The artist draws all her inspiration from Islam and her

love for the Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him. If she calls her website "Muhammadan art", it is not to emulate Orientalists use of the word, but to point to something beyond her ego as the impetus for her art.

Ms. Naveed is largely self-taught. She studied for a year with American calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya, best known for the beautiful Eid postage stamp design. He recognized

her talent upon her first exercises, but Ms. Naveed had to stop her lessons for health reasons. Even if she knows that working with a master would demand unlearning all she has learned thus far and beginning again from scratch, she hopes to one day finish what she started and earn her *hijaza* with Mr. Zakariya.

Being an autodidact has not hindered Ms. Naveed from either perfecting or exhibiting her calligraphy. She receives many commissions; some come from within the Sufi *tariqa* of which she is part, and some come from Jewish and Christian collectors interested in the beauty of the Arabic word and Islamic art.

It was in the 1990s, at age fourteen, that Ms. Naveed discovered the art of khatt, quite by accident. A Muslim sheikh visiting Vancouver for an interfaith event asked the teenager to prepare calligraphy posters for the event. Honored, but not knowing anything about Islamic calligraphy, the young girl pulled out an English calligraphy book from her bookshelf and did her best to adapt the templates to Arabic script. Soon afterwards, her

mother offered her a Syrian book on the art and Ms. Naveed devoted countless hours, copying the letters and compositions, first using tracing paper and then daring to do so freehand. A whole new world had just opened up for the young girl, making Sana wonder why she had never been taught about Islamic art.

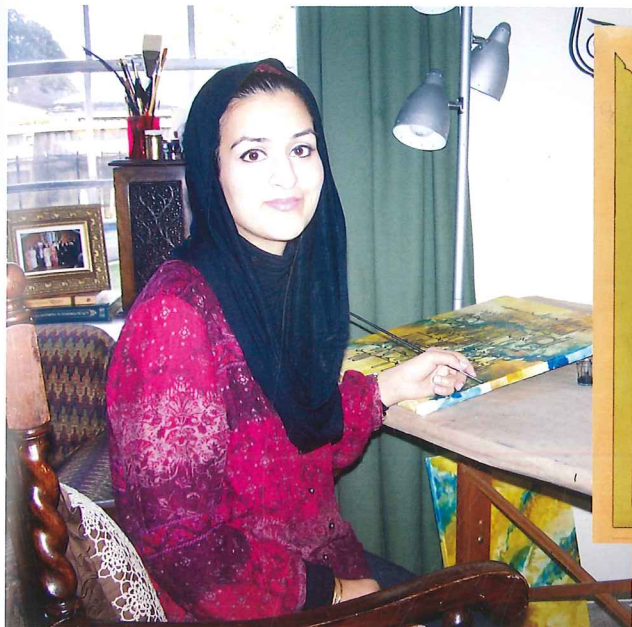
Ms. Naveed continued practicing calligraphy and learning more about Islamic art. At college, she studied kinesiology, Islamic history and fine arts, graduating with a liberal arts' degree. However, she was frustrated because, in her words, she remained, "bound by what was offered, not having many options in the kind of art I was interested in." It was only after settling down, and devoting herself fully to her family and spiritual practice, that Ms. Naveed fully let the gift of art speak to her.

Leading a quiet, albeit fulfilling life, this artist continues to explore, choosing Qur'anic verses for their meanings and testing new compositions. Quiet and unassuming in public, Ms. Naveed expresses a formidable strength and tenacity in

her art. In 2013, she was asked to design and produce the decorative calligraphic program for Masjid al-Noor in Houston. She accepted, believing in the power of traditional Islamic art to facilitate prayerful reflection. For the composition measuring 6 by 95 feet, she chose the ayah al-Kursi and two other verses from Surah al-Tawbah and Surah al-Ahzab, rendering the letters in gold on an earthy red background. With its elaborate scale, the project involved many new technical challenges for Ms. Naveed, who took six months of dedicated labor to complete it. She has since received a commission from another Texan mosque.

Throughout Islamic history, Muslim women have usually been trained in *tezhib* or manuscript illumination. Few have been known for their practice of the art of khatt as master calligraphers, and almost none worked in architectural calligraphy and embellishment. Ms. Naveed faces an additional challenge: genetically inherited arthritis affects her hands, both the fingers and wrists. For as long as the calligrapher can remember, she





has had periods in which she is unable to move her wrists. Convinced there is a reason for everything, she is positive about her disease believing that it has bettered both her personality and her art, making her a more humble person while steadying her hand for khatt.

Her work continues to evolve. In the last few months, she has produced calligrams, calligraphic compositions that take the form of recognizable

objects such as birds, boats and trees. In these new works, the arts of painting and writing come together.

Ever inspired by “the way the words of the Qur’an miraculously flow in such a poetic way,” Ms. Naveed describes the Muslim calligrapher’s role as “just beautifying what is already beautiful.” 🌿

## WHO PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN YOUR DEVELOPMENT AS AN ARTIST?

*Reem Hammad: “I would certainly say that it is my dear husband Mohamed, who has been my supporter and motivator throughout my journey of discovering my path to and in art. He financially supported my college education and still plays a major role in anchoring and motivating me as an artist, and in my most recent role as a curator. He is my chief advisor, my mentor and I feel so blessed to have him in my life.”*

*Hayat Gul: “Definitely it was my father who introduced me to art the day I was born. He was always painting and drawing. Ever since I can remember, he always inspired me to create by being proud of whatever I came up with, no matter how bad. I just have such fond memories of his reactions to and interests in my drawings and creations; those were our happy moments.”*

*Sana Naveed: “My path as an artist has always been enlightened with spirituality. Sufism, to be specific, made me consider Islamic calligraphy a serious, life-long endeavor. As such, my Sufi master, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, is the one person indispensable to my continuing development and learning. This is how it’s always been in the calligraphic tradition, since there is a transcendent aspect to Islamic calligraphy, a sacred art.”*

Reem Hammad [www.reemhammad.com/](http://www.reemhammad.com/) | Hayat Gul [www.hayatgul.com/](http://www.hayatgul.com/) | Sana Naveed [www.muhammadanart.com/](http://www.muhammadanart.com/)  
 IMAN [www.imanworld.org](http://www.imanworld.org)