

## Book Review

### A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Collections of the Visual Art of Dr. Ezzat Abouleish

For most Muslims, the highest form of visual art—and for some, the only spiritually meaningful one—is calligraphy, the art of beautiful writing.

After the revelation of the Qur'an, over the centuries, calligraphy developed many scripts and styles, and calligraphy has permeated all forms of Islamic visual culture. Thus calligraphy can be found on everything from mosques, schools, and palaces to humble books, beakers, and decorative dishes.

The two books reviewed are *Islam in the Eyes of an Artist* (ISBN-978-977-6278-172) and *Allah and the 99 Names of God* (ISBN-978-977-6278-189), both by Dr. Ezzat I. Abouleish. The author is well known to IMANA members. He is an accomplished academician and pioneer of obstetric anesthesia. He has authored several important articles published in JIMA, and has generously donated one or two of his paintings from *Allah and the 99 Names of God* over the last 3 years, for each issue of JIMA. Thus it gives me great pleasure to write a review for books authored by an active IMANA life member.

*Islam in the Eyes of an Artist* contains 110 original paintings with text descriptions and reflections. The book aims to present Islam and express its meanings and spirituality in paintings, making it easier for the interested person to understand Islam and its teachings. The author has succeeded in this endeavor.

Painting 13 is entitled "Badr Battle." In this painting the author brings out the basic reasons for the success of the outnumbered Muslims against the unbelievers in the famous battle of Badr. They controlled the wells, had the sun behind them and had unwavering faith in God. One look at the painting brings out these facts (Glorious Qur'an, chapter 3, verse 13).

In addition to paintings on canvases, Dr. Abouleish also has painted a vase with four names of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. These four were Muhammad, Ahmad, Yāsīn, and Abu al-Qāsīm. The first three were mentioned in scriptures, including the Qur'an. The fourth name, Abu al-Qāsīm, literally the father of al-Qāsīm, reflects the

common Arab tradition of naming a person with his or her son's name.

The importance of discretion and privacy in distribution of charity is depicted in the painting entitled "Zakat," which shows a masked needy person receiving a generous gift from a masked donor.

The author shares his understanding of the Day of Judgment, when humans deeds are weighed. The painting "Day of Judgment" represents good deeds with golden hearts and bad deeds by black hearts (Glorious Qur'an, chapter 101, verses 6-11).

The author's paintings are his interpretation of passages from the Qur'an. For example, in the Glorious Qur'an, chapter 31, verse 34, Allah ﷻ mentions five items whose knowledge Allah ﷻ has reserved to Himself. Dr. Abouleish drew a painting for each one: the end of the world, the source of rain, the future of the unborn, the future earnings and the place of one's death.

The painting "Thanksgiving" combines the American tradition, symbolized by a turkey, with the words "Allah is the Generous Provider" painted in Arabic. The background consists of innumerable stars, representing Allah's blessings ﷻ, as He described in the Glorious Qur'an, chapter 14, verse 34.

The painting "Greed" shows currency, real estate, gold, boats, and other items of material wealth juxtaposed with a grave marker with two passages of Qur'an, "My wealth did not protect me," and "He believes his money makes him immortal," Glorious Qur'an, chapter 69, verse 28 and chapter 104, verse 3, respectively. The author writes that this painting was inspired by the scandal of the Enron Corporation, whose headquarters was in the author's hometown of Houston, Texas, in 2001. It is equally applicable now with the stock market crash, the Madoff scandal, and the obsession with material gains these developments revealed. God ﷻ says: "O h mankind, you have been preoccupied by gathering materials till you get to the grave" (Glorious Qur'an, chapter 102, verses 1-2).

A group of paintings deals with stories from the Qur'an. The painting "Moses" depicts Moses's staff changing into a huge serpent empowering other snakes and convincing Pharaoh's magicians to follow him. "Knowledge" summarizes the encounter between Moses صلى الله عليه وسلم and the sage al-Khidr. Al-Khidr's apparently blameworthy actions earned Moses's reproach. When Moses صلى الله عليه وسلم learned why God جل جلاله had ordered al-Khidr to do these things, he learned the important lesson: "Don't prejudge and jump to conclusions before knowing all the cards." (Glorious Qur'an, chapter 18, verses 60-82).

I have highlighted only a small sample from the book. For me, the book represents a visual Islam 101 course and represents an excellent contribution. It is particularly suited for Western-born Muslims and for non-Muslims. It is da'wa (calling to Islam) par excellence.

*Allah and the 99 Names of God* is a collection of oil paintings on 11" x 14" canvas that took more than 2 years to complete. They were completed in 2007 on the 76th birthday of the author. *The 99 Attributes of God* are written in Arabic with a sidebar commentary in English. Several of these paintings have been reproduced in previous issues of JIMA, and we look

forward to continuing this tradition.

In conclusion, Dr Ezzat Abouleish, after a very distinguished career in anesthesiology, has devoted his "retirement" years to sharing his brilliant artistic talent with a focus on Islam. For this he has been recognized by numerous institutions and has received awards and accolades. As the author states: "Art, a universal language, gives a better image of Islam than words and also highlights the deep spiritual meaning and message of Islam".

Personally, I thank Dr. Ezzat for his contribution and strongly recommend both books for JIMA readers. They are an ideal gift for colleagues and co-workers who have many questions regarding Islam.

These books may be obtained directly from the author by writing to tazze67@hotmail.com.

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