

Gertrude Stein & Islamic Calligraphy:  
The Traditional Roots of Experimental Modernism

by  
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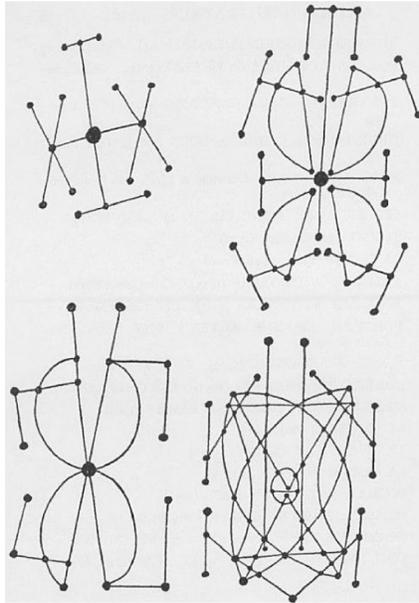
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“LINES AND STARS: *Drawing in Pure Calligraphy* (1923)”

- A drawing of Pablo Picasso's as cited by Gertrude Stein in her 1938 book, *Picasso*.



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## Abstract

In her final section of her 1938 book, *Picasso*, Gertrude Stein discusses her friend and artistic compatriot Pablo Picasso's use of "Saracen" calligraphy. While many scholars have discussed Picasso's influence on Stein, this thesis argues that Gertrude Stein's own exploration of the relationship between Picasso and calligraphy might be applied to Stein's *Tender Buttons* and the practice of calligraphy, defined as "beautiful writing" (Serikoff 10).

In chapter one, I explore Islamic calligraphy in its history, practice, and application. I identify the function of words in Islamic calligraphy. Finally, I build the bridge between Islamic calligraphy and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* through Pablo Picasso. With this, I present specific examples of calligraphy in Picasso's art and show how it translates into Stein's work.

In chapter two, I further demonstrate the influence of Islamic calligraphy on *Tender Buttons* by situating the reader in relation to *Tender Buttons* and then identifying the function of words in *Tender Buttons*. Here, the identities of words in Islamic calligraphy and *Tender Buttons* both engage in a process drawing from Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" that I term "linguistic thingification."

In chapter three, I revisit the topic of anti-idolatry (iconoclasm) exhibited in Islamic calligraphy in order to frame Stein as an iconoclast. I address the religious contexts of Islamic calligraphy and address these concerns, which may also be present in Stein's work even though Stein's work holds no apparent relation to religion. I will further explore the ethical dimensions of Stein's work in order to show how anti-idolatry in Stein's work reminds the reader/viewer of the traditional roots of experimentalism. In a sense, Stein's experimental writing is centering and progressing the practice of anti-idolatry. Finally, I argue that by defetishizing words, readers/viewers gain more nuanced interpretations and avoid the reversion of words into symbols.

In chapter four, I explore the implications of recognizing that what is new is highly inspired by what is old. I move beyond what has influenced Gertrude Stein's work to a contemporary world that is now influenced by Stein's work. The exploration of Gertrude Stein and Islamic Calligraphy allows us to consider the broader implications of associating experimental modernism to its traditional roots. Ultimately, by comparing these wide ranging forms of expression, the reader, I propose, will become more aware of the unfamiliar.

**Key words:** Modernism, Calligraphy, Influence, Iconoclasm



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### Introduction

[Picasso's designs for the ballet *Mercure*] were written, so simply written, no painting, pure calligraphy.

-Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (1938)

In 1938, Gertrude Stein published *Picasso*, a book centered on her longtime friend and modernist artist, Pablo Picasso. In *Picasso*, Stein is completely in awe of Picasso. When describing Picasso, Stein contrasts the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to the vast differences in views of the world created by the invention of the airplane. Specifically, the twentieth century saw “the earth as no one has ever seen it” through airplanes, while the nineteenth century was limited to automobiles, having not been granted this unique perspective just yet (*Picasso* 50). In Stein's eyes, the world gained a new form from above, and what she saw was what she saw in Picasso's cubism. While Picasso had never been on an airplane, Stein knew from this view that Picasso was ahead of the world. He was creating things that no one before his time could have ever created. This innovativeness and experimentalism excited Stein as she herself was interested in different approaches to language. Recognizably, Stein mimicked the effects of cubism to create new forms of writing.<sup>1</sup> Cubism, a form of art that highlighted taking apart objects and recreating them, relied on multiple perspectives to achieve a greater understanding of artwork (Hilder 67-68). Cubist artists also experimented with still life artwork, a type of artwork that represents inanimate objects, typically on a two-dimensional canvas attempting to represent a three-dimensionality. Cubist artists strayed from traditional still life artwork, as artists attempted to simultaneously show different perspectives of an inanimate

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as (but not limited to) Jamie Hilder, Ulla Dydo, and Bob Perelman have written on this topic.

object on a canvas, breaking the rules of dimensionality. Not only did Stein try to decipher cubism, but she attempted to decipher Picasso's artistic form as a whole. We see a loose reiteration of cubist experimentalism in Stein's *Tender Buttons* as she breaks from the conventions of literature and experiments with the usage of words. However, Jamie Hilder argues in "Gertrude Stein and Picasso and Cubism" that critics of Stein jump to the conclusion that Stein's work is visual by mistaking her work for mimicking cubist processes (Hilder 67). While I agree that Stein did not aim to mimic cubism as a form of visual art, I do suggest "the effect" (68) of *Tender Buttons* Hilder considers does result in a type of visualization of words because of Stein's unique application of cubism.

Stein spends the latter half of *Picasso* both describing and praising Pablo Picasso's interest in calligraphy, specifically, "Saracen<sup>2</sup> calligraphy" (*Picasso* 33). With Picasso's own exploration of calligraphy and cubism, we learn Stein's interest in Picasso's calligraphy did not originate from her own explorations. According to Stein, it was from 1913 to 1917 and briefly in the 1920s that Picasso immersed his art in calligraphic style, and during this period, Stein had published *Tender Buttons*. As Stein understood it, Picasso's "most intense moment" of calligraphy was in his collaboration with other artists in the production of *Mercure* (*Picasso* 37). Before *Mercure*, not many others realized Picasso's affinity with calligraphy, having been branded as an innovative genius in the creation of cubism. It was in his work on the ballet, *Mercure*, that Picasso achieved recognition for his calligraphic practices. In fact, it was Picasso himself who said he would have chosen calligraphy before painting had he known about it years

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<sup>2</sup> The term "saracen" is a medieval word for Muslims that has travelled into modern times (Britannica). While the term refers to the religion, "saracen" has been very commonly used to refer to both Arabs and Muslims. Although the two populations are distinct, the conflation arises as a result of many historical and stereotypical information. For example, as Arabic is the language of the Quran, it is common to connect language to geography and culture.

ago (Frembgen). This affinity towards calligraphy was not separate from his work in cubism; instead, as Stein says, “they [calligraphic drawings] were really cubism” (*Picasso* 38). Essentially, Picasso molded two customarily distinct artistic styles and, once again, created something new.

Stein argues that Picasso’s identity as a Spaniard allowed him to apply Islamic calligraphy into his art without becoming a part of it or losing any part of himself (*Picasso* 34). We recreate this idea through noticing how Stein, a Jewish American with no relation to Spain or the “Saracens,” is able to look back at Picasso’s work with calligraphy. Only with the retrospective perspective of *Picasso* does a reader uncover that Stein herself reproduced some of the effects of Islamic calligraphy into her own writing of *Tender Buttons*. As a result, I argue that Picasso’s inclination towards “Saracen” calligraphy in his own work influenced Stein to begin to explore how she might reproduce the effect of this very foreign aesthetic tradition in her own work. Again, the influence Picasso had on Stein is not to say Stein mimicked Picasso’s methods; instead, it is to say she mimicked the effects of his methods. With this, the relationship between Stein and Islamic calligraphy represents a productive approach similar to how Stein explained the relationship between Picasso and “Saracen” calligraphy as a productive approach. To reiterate, this connection exists in recognition of Stein modeling herself after Picasso. By extension,<sup>3</sup> she is interested in the potential of Islamic calligraphy to serve as a model for her own modernist experimentalism.

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<sup>3</sup> This argument holds true for other poets during Stein’s time, such as W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, who were interested in non-modern models to influence his form.

Furthermore, Stein's path into literature was as unconventional as her actual writing. From a medical student<sup>4</sup> at Johns Hopkins to a prominent poet in Paris, Gertrude Stein was frequently criticized for so much more than her writing. Most commented on her unusual appearance, where she dressed in unfeminine and simple clothing with slicked back short hair, which many observers linked to her sexual identity. This, however, did not dissuade the public from immersing themselves into Stein's personality, and subsequently, her writing. While some of Stein's words, such as, "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," are now used in contemporary popular culture, it is important to note that Stein did not gain most of her recognition until the publishing of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Considered as her most conventional regarding literary standards, this book seemingly allowed her readers to interpret her words as windows onto the Stein's world. In contrast, Stein was forced to self-publish *Tender Buttons* many years earlier due to a lack of interest in her highly experimental writing. In her American tour,<sup>5</sup> Stein noted that the public's response to her work had put her in a temporary writing block. Nevertheless, Gertrude Stein is considered as one of the most, if not the most, experimental writers of her time. In her inner writing circles, she was regarded as a mentor to writers such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. All in all, both in her own time, and in the eyes of subsequent generations of readers, Stein's work has been regarded as either brilliantly experimental or cheaply meaningless.

Like many of these readers, I initially found Stein's work frustrating and unreadable. Despite this, I soon realized interpreting Stein's writing does not particularly consist of understanding the meanings of her sentences. For Stein, it is important to consider her writing in

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<sup>4</sup> Stein had left medical school during her fourth year as she was frustrated with both her struggle with her identity and the male dominated politics and practices of medicine.

<sup>5</sup> In 1934, Gertrude Stein travelled America visiting universities to discuss her work.

relation to her use of words rather than looking for a narrative structure seeking both plot and depth. This is especially true of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, which is my primary focus when discussing Stein in this thesis. Because of Gertrude Stein's aesthetics in this piece, her writing blurs the line between reading and seeing. As Jamie Hilder argues, "It is a text that demands that the reader see what s/he is looking at" (Hilder 67). For this reason, my aim is to identify the identity of a word in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* by first identifying the identity of a word in Islamic calligraphy. In this thesis, I seek to find a new way to overcome readers' difficulties with Stein's writing, and the difficulty of conceiving--as I am arguing that Stein does--words as concrete things, rather than as transparent windows onto the world. In order to address these difficulties, I take an unusual, new approach of considering Stein. More so, my thesis is committed to the principle that sometimes comparing things that may seem unlike on the surface is the best way to bring new understanding of unfamiliar material. Here, I am using Stein as one of two aesthetic models in order to explore that function of words and what comes from such an exploration between modernist and traditional models. To reiterate, this thesis puts Stein's use of words as things in *Tender Buttons* in conversation with a very different aesthetic model: Islamic calligraphy. Within this aesthetic model, I hope to also show, contemporary, avant-garde artists who draw on Islamic traditions and heighten our awareness of the persistence of influence through time as well as paying attention to words in calligraphic script as both the words of God and as untranslatable shapes, material objects, and things. By putting together Gertrude Stein and Islamic calligraphers, I bring into conversation two radically different aesthetic models where, I will argue, one serves as a model for the other. In essence, in this

thesis, I use the Islamic calligraphers as a lens that can give us a new look at Stein, and I use Stein's avant-garde poetry as a lens that can give us a new context for understanding calligraphy.

In the first chapter, I introduce Islamic calligraphy in order to build the relationship between *Tender Buttons* and "Saracen" calligraphy. In simple, calligraphy is defined as "beautiful writing" (Serikoff 10). Islamic calligraphy is an expression of faith through an aesthetic linguistic representation. My goal is to holistically look at Islamic calligraphy along with calligraphers and consider form, background, influence, and purpose. I explore Islamic calligraphy as one of two aesthetic models in my overall discussion on the function of words, specifically, words as things through Bill Brown's "Thing Theory." The importance of these pieces is that they use words in unconventional ways. This form of art presents language being used in an alternative way, in which the artist and the audience experience a new relationship with language. Finally, I build the bridge between Islamic calligraphy and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* through Pablo Picasso. With this, I will present specific examples of calligraphy in Picasso's art and its translation into Stein's work.

In the second chapter, I explore the status of readers of *Tender Buttons* as well as the identity of words that make up the poem. I argue that a definitive meaning of *Tender Buttons* is impossible for the reader to accomplish. The multitude of meanings created by various close readings of Stein's *Tender Buttons* only serves to show the ambiguity of her writing. In order to illustrate the importance of these claims, I read Stein in light of the work of French theorist Maurice Blanchot and American thing theorist Bill Brown.

In the third chapter, an effect of the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Islamic calligraphers is the shared practice of anti-idolatry. In simple, idolatry is the worshiping of "an

image of a god” (Mitchell 58). Anti-idolatry can also be defined in terms of iconoclasm, which is the destruction or forbidding of these worshipped visual representations (Mitchell 58). I will address the religious contexts, in particular the context of anti-idolatry that may have shaped both Stein’s and the Islamic artists’ views of words. In order to begin my discussion on *Tender Buttons* within a religious framework, I will discuss anti-idolatry in terms of Stein’s religious and ethical background. This will allow me to continue to explore how Gertrude Stein’s work is observed most saliently in the work of Islamic calligraphers. Thus, I will examine the effect of the connection between Stein and these artists. Finally, I consider the fetishization of words, in which to fetishize an object is to “attribute powers that it does not have” (Idolatry 42). In other words, I address the misattributed function of words as symbols in Islamic calligraphy and seek to dismantle this fetishization of words. As a result, I argue that by defetishizing words, readers/viewers gain more nuanced interpretative readings and avoid the reversion of words into symbols.

In my final chapter, I begin to generalize what is new as being highly inspired by what is old. I move beyond influencers of Gertrude Stein’s work to a contemporary world that is now influenced by Stein. I spend time focusing on contemporary Islamic calligraphy to more clearly illustrate not only the influence between *Tender Buttons* and Islamic calligraphy, but the generative potential of Islamic calligraphy practices. This chapter will also explain why I am studying the use of words in literature and art, which, in other words, is to help my reader rethink language within and between different forms of expression through time. Additionally, the comparison between Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and Islamic calligraphy is designed to illuminate how the difficulties of understanding modern experimental art can be reduced through

exploring traditional art. In particular, Stein's *Tender Buttons*, I propose, will be shown to have fundamental premises similar to Islamic calligraphy. Correspondingly, the practice of the linguistic thingification of words in highly different forms of expression through Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" allows the reader to gain more from the already well-established conversation on persisting influence. This exploration, ultimately, becomes a tool to reflect on past, present, and future linguistic art forms.

## Islamic Calligraphy: Reading the Divine Word

اقرأ (Read)

—Jibril (Gabriel), 610 A.D.

### **Introducing Islamic Calligraphy**

During the seventh century, God sent down a number of revelations to the Prophet Muhammad. While the Prophet Muhammad was sleeping in a cave, the Cave of Hira, he was aggressively awakened by an angel. The angel, Gabriel, through God's words, commanded Prophet Muhammad to "Read." Although the prophet was unable to read, Gabriel continued pushing the prophet multiple times to read, each command repeated more boldly with the angel grasping Muhammad. According to the Quran, Gabriel then conveyed the intended first revelation, "Read in the name of your Lord Who created; created man from a clinging substance. Read, and your Lord is the most Generous Who taught by the pen; taught man that which he knew not" (Quran 96:1-5). Eventually Muhammad, an illiterate man, was able to recite the revelations of God.<sup>6</sup> With that, Gabriel had completed his mission in bringing God's messages to man who then would bring along the revelations to others. Before his death, the prophet passed along the revelations, which were orally memorized and repeated by followers. However, many of these followers who had memorized the revelations had later been killed due to religious conflicts. In response, the Muslim leaders led a movement to have all the revelations written and by the end of the eighth century, many copies of the Quran and stories of the prophet's life lessons were immortalized through scripture. As a result, the significance of the written word in Islam was solidified ("Journey Of The Line | Installation Views").

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<sup>6</sup> Although there are many accounts of what actually happened by different sects of Islam as well as by various poets and historians, there is a level of consensus in the significance of this story.

With the rise of writing in Islam, the Arabic language progressed rapidly, becoming more accessible to the common reader. The Arabic script developed both technically and stylistically. As a result, to read in Arabic, in the context of Islam, was more than reading, but “to collect and articulate information,” as a byproduct of the physical aesthetic appearance of the script (*By The Pen* 46). This distinction in function solidified a practice of writing, calligraphy, that was both linguistic and visual. To that end, I attempt to introduce Islamic calligraphy through its importance and progression within both Islamic and Arabic cultures. In Arabic, writing and reading takes place from right to left.<sup>7</sup> In Islamic calligraphy, not only are words read from left to right, but the styles, designs, and outlines that are embedded within and around the words are also viewed from right to left. Consequently, we see that Islamic calligraphy not only relies on the content of the word, but the outward characterization of the word in order for the reader to gain full meanings (*By the Pen* 46). This is echoed in Sheila Blair’s *Islamic Calligraphy*, where Blair discusses the “... play between the form of the script and the meaning of the words” (*Islamic Calligraphy* 7). It is in this practice of representation that religious meaning through art can be transmitted without idolatry. This is important because idolization or pictorialization of religious figures is discouraged in Islam; thus, Islamic calligraphy takes on the role of art in the religion, in which, “Writing in Arabic script thus became a signifier, or outward manifestation, of Islam” (*By the Pen* 22). The importance of visual representation seen in other cultures and religions is replicated through written words rather than images in Islam (*By the Pen* 26). In this art form, not only does context of the script matter to convey God’s words (through the Quran) as well other religious messages (hadiths), but so does the method of writing. The outward

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<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the left to right of the English language.

characterization of written words such as where and how they are written is important to allow the reader to go beyond the context of the word and to rely on the physical word itself to derive meaning (*By the Pen* 36; Serikoff 11). Islamic calligraphy has a sole purpose of providing the closest visual representation of God's words and the prominent figures that have influenced Islam without actual pictorial representation, where one can, "appreciate the unwavering line and modulated forms that reflect the transcendence of the Almighty" (*Islamic Calligraphy* 7). Here, art not only includes words, but are the words themselves. As a result, in the process of the visualization of the word, we favor the importance of a physical word rather than a symbolic word.

In Arabic, idolatry translates as *shirk*, which is considered a sin because by worshipping figures and images, it leaves room for people to worship more than God. This is considered a negative practice as to associate God with other divine forces is to limit God's will and existence. This belief is stated within the Quran, to which, "Surely, Allah does not forgive that a partner is ascribed to Him, and He forgives anything short of that for whomsoever He wills. Whoever ascribes a partner to Allah commits a terrible sin" (Quran 4:48). Because the bounds of idolatization are not clearly defined, artists have combined the importance of writing and iconoclasm. Despite the unanimous feelings on the traditional purpose and importance of this expression of art, Islamic calligraphy does not exist within a uniform style. Islamic calligraphy forms are extensive, such as Kufic, Muhaqqaq, Naskh, Tawqi, Riq'a, Shikasta, Thulth, and many other styles of Islamic calligraphy (Serikoff 16). Each of these styles differ as a result of their regional, cultural, and linguistic influencers. In the two examples of traditional Islamic calligraphy below, we see how use, style, and background vary despite both originating from the

late fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries (“Section of a Qur'an Manuscript”; “Panel of Four Calligraphic Tiles”).

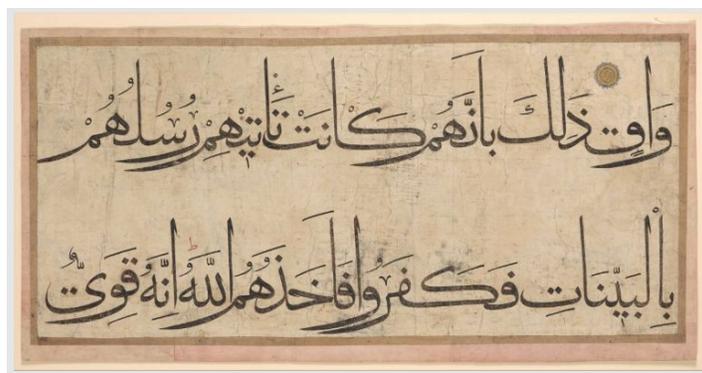


Figure 2: Section of Qur'an Manuscript by Umar Aqta

The following lines are from the 40th chapter of the Quran, which roughly translate as, “... protector (21) That was because their messengers were coming to them with clear proofs, but they disbelieved, so Allah seized them. Indeed, He is Powerful ...” (“Section of a Qur'an Manuscript”; Quran 40:20-21). While the words of the Quran have never changed from the beginning of Islam, the multitude of styles, sizes, colors, etc., has led to the creation of many unique Quranic manuscripts. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Umar Aqta, an acclaimed left-handed calligrapher, had attempted to impress Amir Timur<sup>8</sup> with the smallest Quranic manuscript ever written, but the Amir Timur remained unimpressed. As a result, Umar Aqta did the opposite and created what is considered the biggest Quran to date. It was so big that the manuscript supposedly was brought to the Amir on a cart. In itself, the manuscript page above is approximately one and a half feet tall and three feet wide. The letters are written in one

<sup>8</sup> Amir Timur was the first of the Timur dynasty and founder of the Timurid Empire, which was located in Persia and Central Asia. As a conqueror of most of the Muslim-world, Amir Timur adopted many Islamic practices; therefore, he has been labelled by scholars as a Muslim (his sect within Islam remaining controversial among scholars).

of the most common calligraphic styles, Thulth,<sup>9</sup> which is a style that has survived into present-day decorative and publicational uses (Serikoff 16). This particular style is characterized “on the principle that one-third of each letter has a slope,” in which its name, Thulth, literally means “one-third” in Arabic (Serikoff 16). Due to its large script, this style is used to write larger manuscripts of the Quran. Not only does Umar Aqta replace the more standard Kufic script with Thulth script in order to capture the largeness of his artwork, but uses this elegant, cursive script (as opposed to the angular Kufic script) to appeal to the Amir Timur (“A Monumental Qur'an”). In the end of this interesting story, the Amir was impressed by Aqta’s work and rewarded him with acclamation by displaying the Quran in Timur’s mosque in the original Timurid<sup>10</sup> capital.



Figure 3: Panel of Four Calligraphic Tiles

In this second calligraphic example, four tile pieces, translate as, “What excellent companions are happiness and good fortune” (“Panel of Four Calligraphic Tiles”). The following inscription is repeated as the fourth tile begins. By looking at how the letters are joined, including letters that are normally not connected, this style can be characterized as Tawqi. This style is similar to the Thulth’s elegant, cursive style, but is distinguished by both the compression and connection of letters. Decorations such as these inscriptions on wall tiles were and still are

<sup>9</sup> Can also be written as “Thuluth”

<sup>10</sup> The original Timurid capital was Samarkand, a city in modern-day Uzbekistan, before it was moved to Herat.

very common in Morocco and Spain. This specific inscription was made of stone and coated in “purple-black glaze,” located in Morocco (“Panel of Four Calligraphic Tiles”). The panel of tiles belonged to a larger collection of tiles that spanned the interior of a building. Most importantly, these tiles were located at eye-level, which is reflected in the connection of the letters allowing it to be both written and read with speed. Not only this, but this style was important to the structure of the panel of tiles, as the compressed letters are much shorter and horizontally inclined than other calligraphic styles. Interestingly, this style was most used in professional, political settings, allowing an observer to assume these particular panels were a part of a building belonging to authoritative figures of the time. Ultimately, while both Thulth and Tawqi scripts were invented by the same master calligrapher, Ibn Muqlah, Thulth style has outlived Tawqi style, which is now considered obsolete (Zakariya 24).

### **Reading Words as Things**

Interestingly, many readers and viewers of Islamic calligraphy can simply see the art with or without the ability to understand the words and not lose the significance of the message. In this, the words become less like symbols that reference a real world object, but actual pieces a part of an image. Jila Peacock, a calligraphiti<sup>11</sup> artist, says, “... the word became the image” (Stoughton). In this case, the words functions less as an element of writing and more as an element of art. This identity of a word is true for both traditional and contemporary Islamic calligraphy. I shall argue, using Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory,” that when an object is no longer doing what it is supposed to do, it loses its ability to be an object. Therefore, according to Brown,

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<sup>11</sup> A form of contemporary Islamic calligraphy that will be described and discussed in subsequent chapters.

the *object* becomes a *thing*, in which a *thing* is an abstract, not completely accurate or working form of the *object* (Brown 4).

We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 4)

In chapter two, we will see that to a reader of *Tender Buttons*, a word is no longer doing what it is supposed to do when it no longer serves as a symbol or image due to its lack of connection to any definitive authorial meaning. Determinately, we see a different series of processes from *Tender Buttons* of why a word becomes a thing than in Islamic calligraphy. However, in a similar way that Gertrude Stein did not mimic the artistic process of cubism (Hilder 81), Gertrude Stein does not mimic the process of reading and viewing words in Islamic calligraphy. Just as in *Tender Buttons*, words in Islamic calligraphy function separate from their standard roles as symbols. In effect, as we will see, the parallel between Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Islamic calligraphy allows readers to gain new insight into the cultural possibilities that are opened upon questioning the identity of words. This, therefore, allows readers to glimpse into the

possibilities that are opened when words are separated from their referential function. In the next chapter, I will build an argument to present the words in *Tender Buttons* as things. I do this in order to present words in Islamic calligraphy as holding an identical identity to the words in *Tender Buttons*. As a result, I would like to form the link between Gertrude Stein and Islamic calligraphers.

### **Picasso's Calligraphic Potential**

In forming the link between Gertrude Stein and Islamic calligraphy, it is Pablo Picasso who serves as the bridge between the two. Stein's book, *Picasso*,<sup>12</sup> allows one to build this bridge. While it is possible Stein was not thinking of calligraphy when writing *Tender Buttons*, it is also possible Stein was retrospectively thinking of calligraphy as an influence of *Tender Buttons* while writing *Picasso*. As I have established in this thesis thus far, Stein has been both influenced by and an influencer of various sources. What can be most agreed upon by critics is the mutual influence between Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso. In art gatherings, Stein had an eye for masterpieces, being cited as a major influencer of Picasso's success, buying his work<sup>13</sup> years before he had formed the world-renowned reputation he holds today. Not only was Stein a curator of art, but she also appeared as the object of desire in at least one important painting of her time, namely, in Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*. While Picasso's work is largely important to interpreting Stein's work, it is Stein who saw Picasso for all his potential during his early days as an artist and it was she again who understood Picasso's exploration of experimentalism. In her book, *Picasso*, Stein calls to attention Picasso's ability to create art that

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<sup>12</sup> As well as other unlisted sources who discuss Picasso's "calligraphic" style, but who do not particularly recognize the style was influenced by "Saracen" calligraphy as Stein did in *Picasso*.

<sup>13</sup> Some works include, but are not limited to, "A Little Girl with a Basket of Flowers," "Head of a Woman," "La Bouteille de Marasquin," and "Portrait of Gertrude Stein."

surpassed the conventions of time. Picasso was able to innovate paintings and drawings that ultimately resulted in his reputation as someone who knew what others “did not yet know” (Picasso 50). It was Stein who recognized Picasso’s ability to pull and manipulate from unlikely sources in order to influence originality within his own work. She argues that this is precisely what he does with calligraphy, Picasso was able to bring forth an aesthetic tradition of over a thousand years and hundreds of master calligraphers<sup>14</sup> and make it undoubtedly new. While Stein most focused on Picasso’s engagement with calligraphy in his works surrounding 1913 to 1917 and the 1924’s *Mercure*, it is in Picasso’s collaboration with Pierre Reverdy in his book *Les Chant Des Morts (The Song of the Dead)* that, “the birth of calligraphy [became] the joining of two discrete modes of the mark” (Small 166). In the piece below, Picasso’s red marks are complementary to Reverdy’s writing (Picasso).

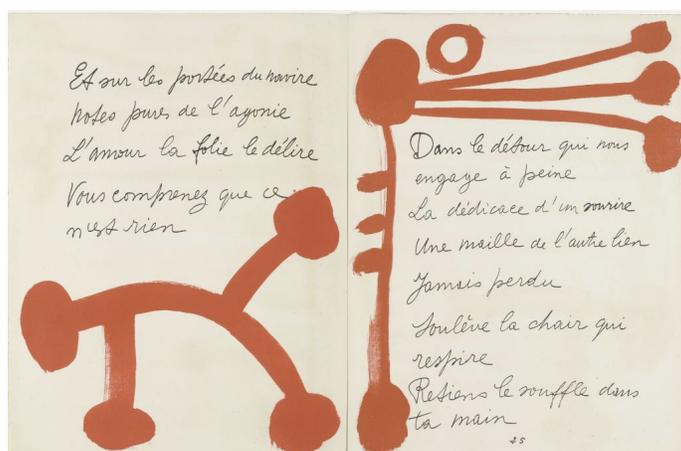


Figure 4: Pages from *Les Chant Des Morts* (1948)

The red painted lines, connected to filled and unfilled red painted circles, represent more than art to support the aesthetic of Reverdy’s book, but I believe represent a mixture of meaning between

<sup>14</sup> Master calligraphers are professionally trained for years and must create a piece at the end of their training to be judged by a panel of master calligraphers. If approved, the student is granted their license, *ijaza*, in calligraphy.

the red marks and black writing in order to simulate a function neither art nor writing alone can accomplish alone. The words and paintings compile their functions into one, similar to that of the words in Islamic calligraphy. In its natural form, Islamic calligraphy represents an artistic representation of faith, where the words serve as physical pieces of an image without forming a concrete image or icon. In *Les Chant Des Morts (The Song of the Dead)*, Picasso, with each page of poetry and red marks, creates his own representation of things as to how he imagines them rather than how he physically sees them (“Surrealism”).



Figures 5 and 6: (5) Final stage curtain and (6) Photograph of scene from *Mercure*

In the first image, the production team of the ballet, *Mercure*, was able to replicate a painting of Picasso’s onto the stage curtain to be used as the final curtain drop (“Now Impressionist & Modern Art Day Sale”). In this piece, we see “painting as a kind of writing,” in which Picasso adds an importance to the lines in his paintings in order to communicate his thoughts (Small 162). Here, Picasso was able to bypass the challenges of expressing “things seen” in order to express “things really known at the time of knowing them” (*Picasso* 36). This,

to Picasso, was his moment of perfection (*Picasso* 36). More so, in a way surrealist art<sup>15</sup> rejected conscious thought in order to access the full potential of the imaginative mind, Picasso's calligraphic style allowed him to express his art as he knew them in his mind rather than how he physically saw them ("Surrealism"). We see this in the second image, in which Picasso was also invited to complete the stage and costume designs of *Mercure*. It was in this ballet that Picasso used his calligraphic style to debut his practice of surrealism.

As we have seen a word become a thing in Islamic calligraphy, and will once again, in *Tender Buttons*, we see both forms of expression creating an identical effect that Pablo Picasso had created, "as a picture that itself can be 'read'" (Small 167). While language is typically defined as a mode of communication either written or spoken, we see that communication via language is recreated in Islamic calligraphy, various works by Picasso, and Stein's *Tender Buttons*. More specifically, it is in *Tender Buttons* that Gertrude Stein offers a shared manipulation of language. It was in Bob Perelman's *The Trouble with Genius*, this idea is reinforced, in which, "Stein experimented [in *Tender Buttons* and other early works] with the basic mechanism of verbal representation, inventing, according to some views, a kind of written Cubism ..." (Perelman 129). Ultimately, in thinking about Picasso's connection to calligraphy, we begin to center our focus on Stein.

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<sup>15</sup> Surrealism is defined as, "A twentieth-century literary, philosophical and artistic movement that explored the workings of the mind, championing the irrational, the poetic and the revolutionary" ("Surrealism - Art Term").

Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*: Interpreting Literary Words

**Poetry and “Beautiful Writing”**

Islamic calligraphy is seen as a form of literature as much as it is seen as a form of visual art. In Greek, the word “calligraphy” translates to “beautiful writing” (Serikoff 10). Similarly, in Gertrude Stein’s poetry we see a form of writing that makes us focus on the surface-level aesthetics of writing. Essentially, the comparison of an early twentieth-century Jewish American, Europe-based modernist poet to often Middle East-based Muslim Islamic calligraphers is not meant to confuse readers. Instead, the comparison attempts to add nuance to the conversation of words as things and the effects of such claims. This unusual connection stems not from my interest in Islamic calligraphy, but from Stein’s interest in the connection between Picasso's experimentalism and "Saracen" calligraphy. This parallel of modernist poets influenced by non-western aesthetic traditions is not uncommon. In other words, the affinity I am forming between Stein and Islamic calligraphers is not just a reflection of two specific bodies of writing, but is a reflection of Stein in the modernist moment and her interest in non-western models.

This reflection bears some similarities to Ezra Pound and his translations of Chinese poetry. Different from the Arabic language, “the Chinese writing is not alphabetical” (Wang 346). Each character in the language presents its own meaning of a word, which relies on the reader to derive meaning through the context of the Chinese character. The characters themselves are recognized as “pictures or a group of pictures” (Wang 346). In Chinese poetry, lines are usually limited to no more than seven characters. The simplicity of these lines allow the poet to focus on the context of the poem rather than the grammatical shaping, which is seen as extraneous. Pound accurately represents the meaning and rhythm of the Chinese poetry as well

as avoids the loss of the beauty of the original pieces (Wang 349-350). His translated lines mimic the importance of short lines, thus, recreating the pictorial rhythm of the words created in the original Chinese poetry. The patterns of the words in Pound's translations not only create meaning, but also present words as more than their standard use as symbols. This comparison between Pound's translations, Gertrude Stein's poetry, and Islamic calligraphy serves as one of many<sup>16</sup> examples of modernist figures drawing from non-western aesthetics tradition.

### **The Reader and Writer of *Tender Buttons***

Gertrude Stein, specifically in *Tender Buttons*, sought to deviate from the established norms of language. Her work continues to be avant-garde and highly criticized by society, significantly different from traditional western literature in both form and effect. Stein's application of language in literature is unique to her, and as a result, to experience Stein is to experience something new. Stein's words are pushed outside the customs of reading for meaning, such that, "To follow Gertrude Stein is to discover the world in words we had never known until she used them" (*A Stein Reader* 9). As a result, the role of the reader in *Tender Buttons* is complicated in order to navigate Stein's words. Nevertheless, despite its popularity for over a century, close readings of *Tender Buttons* do not appear frequently in the critical literature of Stein. With views that readers of *Tender Buttons* do more damage than good to Stein's words, the influence of literary critics of *Tender Buttons* becomes restrictive to reader experiences. The dismissal or suppression of the reader goes against what Stein intended, who while indifferent to her reader's conception of meaning, wrote "for myself (Stein) and strangers" (*A Stein Reader* 55). In effect, a hazard of Stein is that the lack of critical consensus surrounding her work

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<sup>16</sup> Picasso and "Saracen" calligraphic influences in *Mercure* (1924), W.B. Yeats and Indian influences in "The Second Coming" (1919), as well as Henri Matisse and Asian influences in *Joy of Life* (1905-06).

becomes a focus rather than her actual writing. This focus is considered a trap by many critics, but I believe there is significance in remaining attentive to all these critical sources. Through these sources, the reader is not only relevant to Stein's *Tender Buttons*, but also a tool towards its success in experimental language.

### **Close Readings of *Tender Buttons***

In "Words and the Murder of the Thing," Peter Schwenger makes an attempt to interpret a portion of *Tender Buttons* in order to show that his interpretation is no more and no less a "failure" from other attempts to make sense of *Tender Buttons* (Schwenger 104). Schwenger recognizes that Stein is not telling the reader to interpret her work, but that by interpreting her work, the reader has submitted to the fact that the piece will remain ambiguous (105). In my own attempt to read Stein in the way Schwenger calls for, I realize there must be a method to excavate meaning while maintaining ambiguity. It is in Koestenbaum's "Stein is Nice" that the reader's business is outlined as focusing only on the present sentence being read, and disregarding any of the surrounding sentences. For the reader to try putting all Stein's sentences together in attempt to figure out what she meant as a whole piece is not the reader's business and a betrayal of Stein's trust in the reader. The only responsibility the reader is given is the sentence they are reading "right now" and this allows the reader into Stein's "space" without assuming ownership of the text (Koestenbaum 302).

In order to illustrate the process of reading Stein that Koestenbaum advocates, I attempt a close reading of a small excerpt from *Tender Buttons*. My own close reading of *Tender Buttons* may seem promising, but because I am not Stein, the writer, I hold no definitive authority of meaning. In other words, definitive authority of meaning is derived from ownership of words,

which belongs only to Stein, who tried to, “make words write without sense,” but had, “found it impossible” (Schwenger 103). Regardless, my lack of definitive authority does not diminish my claim as a reader; instead, my lack of authority is what allows *Tender Buttons* to break literary reading conventions.

A PETTICOAT.

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm. (*Tender Buttons* 13)

By breaking down this significantly small part of *Tender Buttons*, I am following Koestenbaum’s logic that to correctly read Stein, the reader must focus on only the current sentence being read. In the title, “A PETTICOAT,” a petticoat signifies a garment that is typically feminine and fashionable among women, which is ironic because Stein’s own mode of dress was neither feminine nor fashionable. Often, especially in her 1934 American tour, newspaper articles<sup>17</sup> focused on her style as heavily as they did her writing (“Princeton Dazed By Gertrude Stein” 23). The next line begins a new sentence with each thought separated by a comma, but due to the thoughts being separated by commas and not periods, the thoughts are not necessarily sustainable alone. “A light white” prompts me to think that “light” is used in terms of intensity and “white” is used as a form of illumination. The illumination is delicate, such that Stein continues with a theme of irony most obviously seen in Picasso’s *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, a painting that most found to portray Stein harshly with a cold face. “A disgrace” focuses on Stein’s attire again because the way she dressed mirrored the way she pushed against social norms in every aspect of her life, such as her sexuality, speech, writing, and most obviously, attire. “An ink spot” can be interpreted in two ways. First, as a nod towards Stein as a writer; thus, explicitly linking Stein to

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<sup>17</sup> Publishers included (but not limited to): New York Times, The Michigan Daily, The New Republic, Vogue, Etc.

her own writing and showing the autobiographical theme she has created in the sentence.

Conversely, the thought could represent a more social meaning, in which a stain on a petticoat is seen as improper. Similarly, “A rosy charm” can be interpreted in two ways. From “rosy” to “rosary,” the bit becomes “a rosary charm,” inciting an ambiguous religious link. Contrarily, the bit may rely on synonyms in which “charm” is synonymous to “attitude” and “rosy” is synonymous to “reddish” or “bright,” in which a bright or reddish attitude is a reference to a typically feminine inclination that I had precedingly said was uncharacteristic of Stein.

Therefore, while I read the sentence in pieces separated by commas, as a whole, I read it as a discrete anti-Stein marker that is emphasized by her repeated use of “A/An” as opposed to having used “The.” This grammatical distinction marks Stein’s descriptions as a generalization rather than specific to herself.

When reading another excerpt from *Tender Buttons*, it seems as if the reader has been pushed into a whole new piece. Instead of going through each and every word, I chose to look at various sentences in the section that stood out to me. I have omitted the parts of the excerpt that are not being close-read, in accordance with Koestenbaum’s idea that each sentence only matters alone. Thus, to put the whole piece together misguidedly encourages that the reader needs the whole piece to read Stein.

SUGAR.

A violent luck and a whole sample and even then quiet.

...

There is precisely that noise.

...

A puzzle, a monster puzzle, a heavy choking, a neglected Tuesday.

...

Cuddling comes in continuing a change. (*Tender Buttons* 28-29)

The first line seems to represent the action of using a spoon to pierce the sugar pot and take a significant portion out. The portion is gone unnoticed as the individual specs of sugar fill the hole almost immediately due to the force of gravity. Skipping a few lines, “There is precisely that noise” is written as if the first part of the sentence has been conveniently left out describing what sugar is supposed to sound like or what the concept of sugar sounds like. For me, it is out of place more so than the other sentences of the passage. Then, there is “A puzzle, a monster puzzle, a heavy choking, a neglected Tuesday,” which makes me think of a tea party going wrong. Those on the table are at a loss for words, confused as to how to proceed, and there comes the awkward clearing of the throat to fill the silence. Everyone’s time has been wasted to coming to a tea party where no one knows where to fit words into a conversation, a puzzle, and so the day, Tuesday, was lost. I was especially interested in, “Cuddling comes in continuing a change,” because it made me think of sugar being sweet, which is linked to a warm and cozy personality. Thus, in the process of the continued change referenced in the sentence, a person goes through a change in personalities, eventually passing a warm and cozy personality that seeks cuddling. Meanwhile, none of these sentences really work together. They may all seem to surround the title, “SUGAR,” but each sentence works without the other present. Consequently, if I read the excerpt as whole, I would break Koestenbaum’s ideas as to how to correctly read Stein. Although, by going against Koestenbaum’s ideas, I would show how he is right, such that *Tender Buttons* pushes the reader to read sentences as singular, isolated entities. As a result, the

sentences in this sample all work, but alone as they appear. Interestingly, the same goes for sugar, in the sense that Stein isn't considering sugar as a collective mass, but instead, as the specs of sugar themselves that are singled out.

My own close readings of Stein is for the purpose of showing that there are a possibility of meanings in each sentence--each word--of *Tender Buttons*. In other words, I am contributing my meaning to the mass of different possible meanings without any hold to the right meaning. Since it is impossible for me to make a definitive meaning as the reader, I am given a different opportunity of experiencing *Tender Buttons*. Stein writes in seemingly simple sentences that tempt the reader to read her words as transparent; thus, the reader is able to push beyond the words on the page and to the world the words reference. This is true for Stein because behind her words is the world she extracted ideas from to write *Tender Buttons*. However, the temptation is not accessible to the reader. Her words do not lead to a referenced world because just before passing the page, the reader is met with an opaque cloud. The reader is stuck on the page with the words without a guiding light through the cloud, a light that only Gertrude Stein is in possession of. Accordingly, by pointing to Islamic calligraphy, I suggest a way out of this opaqueness in the reader's efforts to read Stein.

### **Visualizing *Tender Buttons***

When considering cubist still life art and *Tender Buttons*, the connection is more apparent in that Stein is supposedly depicting inanimate objects such as "A PETTICOAT," or "SUGAR." In actuality, neither of these objects are actually a petticoat or sugar. It happens that Stein presents the reader with an object within her subheaders, as we supposedly see the word referencing the object. This is where *Tender Buttons* diverts from traditional still life and

coincides with cubist still life artwork. When she offers a description beneath the subheaders, it is the descriptions that are what lose the object. In still life artwork, cubists' use of multiple perspectives of an object makes it hard to actually see a realistic object. Stein creates a similar effect, such that the words that make up the description require so much unpacking and varying perspectives that the object is lost. Consequently, Stein promises meaning with her subheaders, but essentially, decides to withhold it with the language she uses in her descriptions.

In order to read Stein, readers must navigate the supposed trap mentioned earlier to avoid a more damaging end, which is to force meaning where it does not belong. If the reader follows Koestenbaum, it is supposedly possible to form a close reading of *Tender Buttons* as I did. Unfortunately, the reader falls into a trap of wanting the close reading to be consistent each time the same sentence is read. In doing so, the reader violates Koestenbaum's requirement of reading Stein exclusively in the present space of a sentence because each re-reading serves as a new space for interpretation; therefore, a new meaning can be formed repeatedly from the exact same sentence. While Stein maintains authority as the beholder of a sole meaning, the reader is still being asked to seek meaning. For this reason, my close reading is embedded in not trying to make an enduring sense of Stein; instead, to try to visualize what I see/read in *Tender Buttons*. I agree that Stein is not asking me, the reader, to make sense of her work because she already knows the meaning of her writing (Schwenger 103). Even so, her reader's multitude of varying meanings executes the purpose of *Tender Buttons*.

Peter Schwenger states that *Tender Buttons* is not without "sense," but the only knowing person is Stein, as stated by her, such that, "Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them" (103). In the case of Schwenger's piece, "sense" is synonymous to meaning.

Because the language is ambiguous to the reader, there is a loss of “sense.” Schwenger recognizes the reader has no authority to reach a “definitive sense” (Schwenger 105). However, the reader’s interpretation is encouraged to keep the “senseless(ness)” alive in *Tender Buttons*. “Senseless(ness)” becomes synonymous to a lack of definitive meaning due to the multitude of varying meanings. Schwenger uses Maurice Blanchot, a French writer and literary theorist, to show that the multitude of interpretations of *Tender Buttons* is less a nuisance to Stein’s writing and more a mode of turning her words into actual “things” (103). According to Blanchot, if an idea makes sense, the word gains its meaning, but the physical object is lost. Because there is no “definitive sense” in *Tender Buttons*, the absence of the idea results in the presence of the “thing” (103). By recognizing Stein is the only person who can make sense of her work, it exposes that the only person who loses the visualization of the piece is Stein herself. As a compromise, the reader’s role is defined by submitting to a truth that Stein, the writer, is the only authority of meaning. The reader is granted a role in *Tender Buttons* through a shared recognition that meaning is ambiguous due to the multitude of possible meanings found in the piece via close readings. Thus, for *Tender Buttons* to be a success, the reader is crucial for her “senseless(ness)” to be established and for the reader to become the viewer of the “things” Stein has created.

### **Maurice Blanchot and Bill Brown in Relation to Stein**

By applying French theorist and philosopher,<sup>18</sup> Maurice Blanchot, to conceptualize the identification of Stein’s words, I aim to present the language of *Tender Buttons* as more than modes of meaning, but words as things. Blanchot questions, “what is literature,” and throughout

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<sup>18</sup> Despite translations and criticism, Blanchot’s theories are riddled with confusing ideas and lack of conclusions. The complexity of his theory though has been attributed to his strong ties to philosophy.

his piece, *The Space of Literature*, we see flaws that exist within and as an effect of literature. Specifically, Blanchot questions the identity of a word in literature.

So we must express what we are seeking differently: in literature, doesn't language itself become altogether image? We do not mean a language containing images or one that casts reality in figures, but one which is its own image, an image of language (and not a figurative language), or yet again, an imaginary language, one which no one speaks; a language, that is, which issues from its own absence, the way the image emerges upon the absence of the thing; a language addressing itself to the shadow of events as well, not to their reality, and this because of the fact that the words which express them are, not signs, but images, images of words, and words where things turn into images. (Blanchot 33)

Blanchot works through how to categorize language in literature. Literature is separate from reality; therefore, language in literature is separate from reality. Words can mean a multitude of things, and so to place meaning on a word, the reader loses the physical reality of the object. As a result, the words written down lose their link to the real world as they are no longer referencing an object. Interestingly, by being symbols, words can no longer be signifiers. Thus, with the absence of the object, words are not a tool to signify a physical reality. Instead, words themselves are the images. However, if the words themselves are the images because meaning has taken away the object, then how does *Tender Buttons* play into this theory? Here, Stein's refusal of the referential in words leads us to look at Blanchot. In other words, as I noted earlier, each interpretation of Stein's *Tender Buttons* must be read in its present space. Therefore, if I were to close read "A PETTICOAT" again, it would vary from my earlier first attempt of close

reading “A PETTICOAT.” To illustrate this, I attempt another close reading of “A PETTICOAT.”

A PETTICOAT.

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm. (*Tender Buttons* 13)

The title, “A PETTICOAT,” still signifies what I interpreted precedingly as a garment that is typically feminine and fashionable among women. However, this leads me to consider the historical background of petticoats. Considering the location of where *Tender Buttons* was written, Europe, petticoats there have been worn as an exterior garment more than as an undergarment. More so, this particular excerpt seems less a description of one tainted petticoat, but a possibility of petticoats. Each comma in the sentence separates each notion of a petticoat in *Tender Buttons*. The commas here serve to distinguish between each historical significance attached to petticoats, such as conservatism, political messages, the introduction of colored petticoats, and finally, the revival of the petticoat in fashion in the early twentieth century. Here, “A PETTICOAT” does not represent the symbolism of a petticoat in relation to Stein, but instead, it represents the symbolism of a petticoat through history and the significance of its role in different moments and spaces in time. Resultantly, while my first interpretation of “A PETTICOAT” surrounded Stein’s self, this new interpretation considers Stein as simply one moment in the multitude of moments a petticoat exists in. Despite my first interpretation of “A PETTICOAT,” this second attempt at an interpretation is no less and no more a “failure” from my other attempt at an interpretation (Schwenger 104). We see here that the meaning of words Stein uses are ambiguous to the reader due to its unfixed characteristics. Without a definitive meaning and without a connection to a physical reality, I ask, in reference to Blanchot, if it is

possible that Stein's words materialize beyond an image, to a thing? This presents as confusing because Blanchot himself questioned the relationship between an image and a thing, but never clearly resolved this question.

As a result, I have taken it upon myself to resolve the question of, "What happens when words are not symbolizing an object in the real world?" Through the discovery that words may not be functioning properly in Blanchot's reasoning, we incorporate Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" as the second step to the considering the identity of words in *Tender Buttons*. To reiterate, by removing a reference to a real world object, words in *Tender Buttons* lose their standard role as symbols and become images. However, this works if the words in *Tender Buttons* were actually attempting to reference a real world object per custom of a word. Because Stein's words in this piece result in no actual reference due to the multitude of meanings, the words in *Tender Buttons* have lost their standard usage. This is where Bill Brown's "Thing Theory" is important to bring word to thing as we saw with Islamic calligraphy. In short, when an object is no longer doing what it is supposed to do, it loses its ability to be an object. Therefore, the object becomes a thing, in which a thing is an abstract, not completely accurate or working form of the object (Brown 4). Therefore, my "senseless(ness)" of the pieces I chose to close read allows me to supplement the absence of an idea with a thing (Schwenger 103). Here, a word becomes a thing, leading to the visualization of *Tender Buttons*. In effect, the connection between Stein's writing and visual art is established through the linguistic thingification of words.

## Idolization: What is Being Represented?

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I would like to explore a further context and consequence of words being things in both Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Islamic calligraphy. Based on chapter one, we know that Islam has a strict belief of anti-idolization, which is why Islamic calligraphy is seen as the mode of art in Islam. With this, I would like to refer back to Stein and ask, "Does *Tender Buttons*' writing embody beliefs of anti-idolization?" However, it is important before we begin a discussion on examples of anti-idolatry in two very different forms of language, to define key terms surrounding idolatry. In his essay, "Idolatry: Nietzsche, Blake, and Poussin," W.J.T. Mitchell asks, "What is an idol? What is idolatry" (Mitchell 58). Mitchell defines an idol as "an image of a god" (58). With "-atry" coming from its Greek origin, "latreia," meaning "worship," idolatry can be defined most simply as the worshiping of an idol (Mitchell 58; "Idolatry"). Frequently, when the word idolatry is present, iconoclasm is close behind as its "evil twin" (Mitchell 56). Iconoclasm is defined as the destruction of icons, symbols, idols, and images. In his essay, Mitchell situates iconoclasts and idolaters as opposing sides. Thus, for the purpose of this chapter, I will be defining anti-idolatry in terms of iconoclasm, in which the act of worshiping idols is forbidden and/or excluded.

### **Stein and Idolatry**

As we saw in chapter one, idolatry is forbidden in Islam. Of the Abrahamic religions, Islam is not the only one to follow an iconoclastic belief system. In Judaism, believers follow a similar theme of anti-idolatry. Specifically, in the the Hebrew Bible, anti-idolatry is referenced, such that, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in

heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (*Holy Bible*, Exod. 20:4). Similar to how Islamic beliefs of anti-idolatry are referenced in the Quran, Judaic beliefs of anti-idolatry are referenced in the Hebrew Bible. While Gertrude Stein was Jewish American, Stein was not particularly religious, or, at least, did not publicize her practices of faith. However, referencing James Elkins, I will be introducing religious topics and terms to Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, a piece that is not apparently religious, in order to be able to formulate a more nuanced reading. In other words, it would be foolish for me, as a reader seeking meaning from an author who withholds meaning, to dismiss a connection between Stein’s background and her writing that could provide me with new insight of reading *Tender Buttons*.

Islamic calligraphy developed as a form of iconoclasm. This term is used in Bob Perelman’s *The Trouble With Genius*, in which he labelled Stein as an “iconoclast” (131), but we take his use of this term to mean something that is new and breaking from traditions. However, my version of Stein being an iconoclast is more than that definition, but parallel to the definition of iconoclasm in Islamic calligraphy. Her approach to writing avoids idolatry; therefore, I am portraying Stein as more than an avant-garde aesthete, but as an avant-gardist fueled by a practice of ethical and/or moral writing.

In James Elkin’s essay, he introduces the idea that secular words are being brought into religious meanings and topics (“Iconoclasm and the Sublime” 146). Elkins points out that by adding religious meaning to an apparently secular piece, “the author’s and reader’s sense of their work” would be manipulated (148). But is that not a good thing for Stein? By doing this, we follow Stein. By distilling an ethical stance out of Islamic calligraphy, I am proposing that Stein

manifests this stance in *Tender Buttons*. As a result, by completing a “religious” reading of *Tender Buttons*, we once again show the ambiguity of meaning Stein has put forth for the reader.

BOOK.

Book was there, it was there. Book was there. Stop it, stop it, it was a cleaner, a wet cleaner and it was not where it was wet, it was not high, it was directly placed back, not back again, back it was returned, it was needless, it put a bank, a bank when, a bank care.

Suppose a man a realistic expression of resolute reliability suggests pleasing itself white all white and no head does that mean soap. It does not so. It means kind wavers and little chance to beside beside rest. A plain.

Suppose ear rings, that is one way to breed, breed that. Oh chance to say, oh nice old pole. Next best and nearest a pillar. Chest not valuable, be papered.

Cover up cover up the two with a little piece of string and hope rose and green, green.

Please a plate, put a match to the seam and really then really then, really then it is a remark that joins many many lead games. It is a sister and sister and a flower and a flower and a dog and a colored sky a sky colored grey and nearly that nearly that let. (*Tender Buttons* 17)

In my close reading of this excerpt, I begin by focusing on the title of the excerpt, “BOOK,” in which I immediately thought of the Hebrew Bible. This mention of “book” continued into the first two sentences of the excerpt, both indicating a presence of a “book,” which I interpreted as the Hebrew Bible. The next sentence ends with multiple mentions of a “bank,” where I then

attributed it to some sort of wealth of information. In the next line, “a man” might refer to a religious figure, particularly the prominent Jewish figures, which include Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac. In the same sentence, we read, “no head” and “soap,” which I referred to my background in Islamic anti-idolatry, such that artists have withheld detailed faces or whole heads in their work to avoid forming idols. The “no head” is a nod toward anti-idolatry and “soap” is reference towards purity. In the sentence that mentions “a pillar,” I considered the pillars of beliefs in Judaism. In the next sentence, “be papered” sounds like “be prepared.” I understood this to mean that the written word in Judaism has allowed for the religion to grow through language and reflect on its recorded history. Then, we see the word “hope” in the next line, which I immediately attributed to faith. Finally, in the last sentence of the excerpt, I linked “flower” to “dog” to “sky,” where life and the divine exist at the most basic and lowest parts of the earth flowing through those who exist on earth to the heavens. This religious reading of Stein, in reference to Elkins, manipulates meaning and/or lack of meaning. This follows core beliefs of Stein’s, in which, “she aspired to more than a simple fame as an iconoclast ... it needs to be remembered how opposed to, or indifferent to, general ideas of exactitude, efficiency, and “good writing” her own writing is” (Perelman 131). By applying religious meaning to Stein’s secular writing, the reader forms yet another interpretation of *Tender Buttons*, thus, reinforcing the distance between “exactitude” and *Tender Buttons*.

### **The Practice of Linguistic Representations**

There are competing thoughts on the status of linguistic representation in regards to religion. Some argue that the effect of language is much different than the effect of an idol (i.e. sculpture, drawing, painting, shrine, etc.), such that the words produced in language do not

produce an object to worship unlike the actual physical objects created by pictorial representations. This is then complicated by Halbertal and Margalit by saying, actually, we see so many representations of objects using linguistic representation that we begin to form ideas of what they are. Thus, when language is used, the word is a symbol with an idea, this idea blurs reality and permits a sense substitution of what is being worshipped (*Idolatry* 52-53). These abstract words result in an “‘idea’ of an object,” in which the word is a “tag” that provides linguistic representation. The example used in the book is of a painting with a tag attached to it with the word “Peter” and how easily the idea of the painting will be changed when the tag is switched out for “Judas” (53).

The linguistic representation is thus distanced from the concrete object because it depends upon an idea that is created from the repeated appearance of sense data. This distance between language and object is mediated by the “idea,” which is an internal image that a person has of an object, and this mediation produces the feeling that the linguistic description is less intimate and more distanced from direct contact of the senses, with respect to the object being described. Those philosophical standpoints which attacked this empiricist view of language, and described language as the mediator between objects and sense data, did not accept the approach that distances the linguistic representation from the represented object. (*Idolatry* 53)

In this excerpt, Halbertal and Margalit have recreated Blanchot’s theory on words as images when words serve as symbols. Ultimately, as the anti-idolatry forbids representations in the form of images, pictures, sculptures, etc., this excerpt shows that language creates the same effect of

idolatry, in which reality is blurred by the representational piece. In other words, just as these visual representation are forbidden, Halbertal and Margalit explain how some can say linguistic representations should also be forbidden (*Idolatry* 54).

So far in this chapter, we have explored anti-idolatry and the intertwining of religious and secular terms to excavate meaning. Furthermore, I would like to answer Jan Assmann's question, "but how does one answer images" with both secular and religious works ("What's Wrong with Images?" 31). In *Idolatry*, Halbertal and Margalit state, "error of substitution... occurs when a representation acquires the features of the thing represented. The mechanism of such an error involves forgetting that it is a representation and seeing it as something autonomous" (*Idolatry* 42). When read in light of insights offered by Blanchot and Brown, Stein's words in *Tender Buttons* do not fit as images because they come with no idea. Therefore, when Jan Assmann asks, "but why forbid images," we see that Stein has bypassed this and has removed her words from being images ("What's Wrong with Images?" 19). Accordingly, I ask, does this allow us to consider Stein's work in an ethical dimension comparable to the one of Islamic calligraphy? With this we consider the relationship between religion and secularism, which emphasizes reader/viewer tendencies to see religion and secularism as exclusive of each other. With Stein, we question if there are traces of religion in the secular. This, therefore, helps us to break down the binary between religion and secularism, in which the practice of ethics serves as the tool to do so. As we've seen, Stein's words as things lose their reference to whatever they are conventionally supposed to symbolize. Her words do not lead to generalized traits attached to words because as we see both in idolatry and in Blanchot's notion of a word holding an idea that neither the image through visual representation nor the word through its idea will form their

accurate reference. In Blanchot's theory, the presence of an idea results in the loss of the real-world object, such that the word takes on the role of the symbol. In other words, we see the word and not the actual object. Consequently, although Stein's writing is assumed secular, the ethics of writing we see here mimics both Blanchot's and Stein's attitude that the actual physical world cannot be completely represented in words.

Interestingly, if we focus again on Islamic calligraphy, again, we answer Assmann's question. It is that words lose their role as symbols by becoming parts of an image. Therefore, a new form of visual representation was created in order to deliver religious meaning through aesthetics without disobeying an iconoclastic belief system ("The Painter's Breath" 46). As seen in chapter one, Islamic calligraphy serves as a mode of the visualization of faith without forming symbols and/or pictorial representations that encourages idolatry. However, in a critical sense, focusing on Islamic calligraphy also allows for the reader/viewer to consider the possibility of idolatry in linguistic representation that Halbertal and Margalit discuss.

Does the qur'anic script fulfil some sort of iconographic or symbolic function for the Qur'an in the eye of the Muslim? ... The calligraphy employed for the Qur'an, it seems to me, ... is a symbol for Muslims. ... On the other hand, it is a physical environment. (Librande 42-43)

Here, application muddies the idea, such that there is reversion to symbolism and idolatry with the representation of the holy word to Muslims. In other words, the thingification of calligraphic words is actually symbolic, and so the words are no longer exclusively things. While this is not a popular belief, Islamic calligraphy straddles the line between idolatry and iconoclasm. This conflict of effect relies on the attribution of meaning and importance placed upon words by those

who rely on these words as more than visual representation, but revelations (Librande 43). We see this in idolization, in which an, “idol takes the place of the god in the eyes of the worshiper” (*Idolatry* 41). This leads me to ask if the symbolification of words is a fetishization rather than a conventional function. As Halbertal and Margalit explain, “A fetish is an object to which people attribute powers that it does not have” (*Idolatry* 42). Consistently, we fetishize words and that leads a reader/viewer to add labels to words. Because words are core factors of communication, words then are required to represent meaning. As a result, in order to represent meaning, words become symbols (windows onto clarity) and are tools towards interpretation. To move beyond this, the reader/viewer must reject the fetishization of words as symbols. I say this because we have seen through Stein and Islamic calligraphy that words as things work just as well as words as symbols. Ultimately, words as things is not meant to confuse communication instead it adds depth to it. By reassigning the identity of a word, we potentially gain more meaning. With words being things in Islamic calligraphy, we take a step towards being okay with words being things in literature, such as we’ve seen in Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. This allows us to learn more about experimental literature, such that this supposedly new theme of words as things actually isn’t so new.

## Experimentalism: A History and Future of Influence

### **Gertrude Stein in the Contemporary World**

On Wednesday, December 15, 1934, the *Ann Arbor News* announced that Gertrude Stein would be speaking at the University of Michigan. The announcement depicted Stein as, “the founder of a conception of poetry origination which has caused controversy in the field of literature” (“Gertrude Stein to Talk Friday” 7). Gertrude Stein, who was simultaneously “the subject of harsh criticism, ridicule and profound praise,” wrote for decades before her work was actually widely popular outside of her own circle of writers and artists (7). Today, we see Stein, a modernist poet, influencing contemporary writers and artists. In other words, as Stein was influenced by pre-modern and modern aesthetic traditions, we see the practice of influence continue as Stein reaches the contemporary world of readers and writers. In Deborah Mix’s *A Vocabulary of Thinking: Gertrude Stein and Contemporary North American Women’s Innovative Writing*, she considers a study of contemporary North American feminist writers. Mix focuses on Stein’s vocabulary and how different aspects of her vocabulary have allowed contemporary writers to experiment in their own work (Mix 3). Utilizing her unique work, “at the level of the word, the sentence, the paragraph, the genre,” Mix acknowledges that contemporary writers have gained insight from Stein’s own writing (3). Her book covers a study of contemporary writers who, like Stein, have pushed beyond traditional classifications of writing and language. In this book, we are being shown how Stein’s literary experimentalism has pioneered a movement of literary experimentalism in contemporary feminist writers.

In her book, Mix clarifies that she is not seeking to create a straight path from Gertrude Stein to contemporary North American feminist writers. This is because to show that this subset

of contemporary writers are “repeating the same patterns of thought and action” as Stein, is to diminish not only the validity of these writers, but also is to misguidedly reshape and “mute” Stein’s work (Mix 17). Thus, instead of forming a pathway, Mix is forming a relationship, one of implicit and explicit connections, between Stein and contemporary North American feminist writers. In this excerpt from Mix’s book, we see that the reader of Stein is encouraged to recreate Stein’s work, but in respect to both understanding Stein’s strategies and the subjective meanings of her work.

For Stein, any reader may be capable of ‘doing the same work’ that she has done, and in order to read Stein successfully, a reader must do the same kind of work Stein has done. That is to say, Stein asks her readers to participate actively in her writing, to create their own meanings in her work. (Mix 5)

Mix’s book provides a link from Stein’s *Tender Buttons* to contemporary works. Even more so, through research of contemporary artists,<sup>19</sup> it is clear that there is a large market for words in contemporary art. Words in contemporary art has become widely popular and continues to bloom with time and audiences. A series of articles in “Circa 104” study the links between word and image, as, “Word/image encounters are as inevitable in contemporary art as they are in our lives” (Lerm Hayes 31). In the article, “Word and Image,” Lerm Hayes emphasizes the benefits of “word/image encounters” as these methods of artwork allow for the blurring of boundaries between genres (Lerm Hayes 31). We’ve seen this “blurring of boundaries between genres” throughout this thesis between visual and linguistic art and will continue to do so in the contemporary Islamic calligraphers presented in the subsequent section.

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<sup>19</sup> Such as (but not limited to) Jenny Holzer, The Guerrilla Girls, Martin Creed, Tracey Emin, and Dread Scott.

## Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy

When thinking of the perspective Gertrude Stein had of Islamic calligraphy, it is important to question whether or not Stein thought of Islamic calligraphy as a static art. While Picasso and Stein were close, the way she wrote about him in *Picasso* represented a level of exoticism. Not only this, but when describing Islamic calligraphy, Stein had chosen the term “Saracen,” (*Picasso* 33) an othering term, in place of “Islamic.” This emphasis of Stein’s habit to exoticize foreignness is not to emphasize a flaw that exists within everyone at some level, but is to emphasize that this otherness could lead me to assume that Stein did not realize Islamic calligraphy, like western literature, was subject to progression. Decidedly, Islamic calligraphy was not immune to contemporary influences as Stein was not immune to Picasso’s influences, therefore, opening the conversation to contemporary Islamic calligraphy in the cycle of influence we’ve seen thus far. In other words, I have shown how Stein's work can be seen as a modernist art form that reflects the same iconoclastic impulse that informs Islamic calligraphy, and now I am showing how contemporary calligraphy reflects a similar non-traditional application of this impulse. As a result, not only is Islamic calligraphy linked to influencing experimental modernism, but we can now see the generative potential of Islamic calligraphy.

Contemporary Islamic calligraphers differ from traditional Islamic calligraphers most obviously in a modern progression of form and style. Some have taken traditional forms of Islamic calligraphy and have added personal touches to the style. Contemporary Islamic calligrapher Nihad Dukhan has created his own “modern” style, which resembles the traditional Islamic calligraphy forms, but differs in that Dukhan attempts to make his letters more “stylized” and “simple.” This allows the letters to remain embedded in their original forms, but also allows

the letters to “achieve new organic forms” (“Modern and Traditional Arabic Calligraphy”).

Another contemporary Islamic calligrapher, Haji Noor Deen, has also created his own style of Islamic calligraphy, in which he incorporates both Arabic and Chinese calligraphic style into one Islamic calligraphic piece. The resulting piece is a modern composition that includes various parts of his own identity through “Chinese traditions and Islamic art” (*Haji Noor Deen Master Calligrapher*). In their own ways, both these contemporary Islamic calligraphers have achieved representing a divine message through their work, where, “The outward appearance of this art form represented an inward significance of spiritual purpose incessantly making of a page of Arabic script the magic mirror that arrests the desert voice” (Zakariya xi). They have done this by altering the traditional script and forming styles modern to their audiences and to themselves. In turn, they have allowed their work to follow the genre while also following a method of personalization, which is a stamp of contemporary artists as a whole in a generation that seeks for their voices to be heard. We see this method of personalization in my first interpretation of “A PETTICOAT” from *Tender Buttons* upon considering “A PETTICOAT” in relation to Stein’s own personal style of dress.

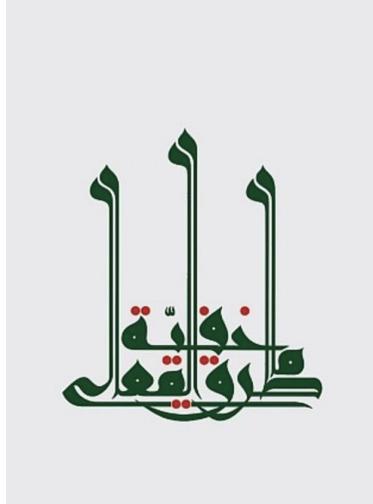


Figures 7, 8, and 9: (7) *Mother*, (8) *Coffee*, (9) *Oh Allah*

In the first two examples of contemporary Islamic calligraphy, we see Nihad Dukhan's modern work. The first piece, is the arabic script for "Mother," while the second is the Arabic script for "Coffee." By the form of the calligraphy, the reader, with or without the ability to read Arabic, has a high chance of knowing the meaning of the script. In the first piece, the mother is the *alif* (straight line) and the child wrapped around her is the *meem*. Together, the letters spell "Mother" in Arabic, pronounced "Em." In the second piece, the Arabic letters begin at the top of the script and work their way down, from the steam of the coffee to the coffee cup it resides, with the pronunciation of the Arabic word for "Coffee" being "Qahwah." The third piece is by contemporary Islamic calligrapher Haji Noor Deen, whose work fuses both Arabic and Chinese script styles. As a result, the audience is presented with what looks like Chinese script, but is actually Arabic letters that spell "Oh Allah (God)," which is pronounced as "ya Allah."

Other contemporary Islamic calligraphers like Mouneer El Shaarani and Yazan Halwani have followed along modern pushes to be political. In Mouneer El Shaarani's work, we see that the Islamic calligraphy is embedded in the form and style of traditional Islamic calligraphy, while the context of his words differ in purpose ("Mouneer El Shaarani"). Meanwhile, Yazan Halwani, a Lebanese artist, is possibly the most extreme of the contemporary Islamic calligraphers presented in this study of artists. Halwani is one of many artists who are a part of a "calligraffiti" movement. Calligraffiti is a new art form that combines traditional Islamic calligraphy and "Western graffiti" in attempt to do more than either can do alone (Stoughton). Here, the messages of a divine unity is used in a provocative way in order to highlight politically

driven messages under a cloud of sacred practices. Like Gertrude Stein’s method of writing in literature, we see this method of art as highly experimental both in calligraphy and in graffiti.



Figures 10 and 11: (10) *What Subtle Methods of Oppression* (11) *The Flower Salesman*

Above, we see pieces by Mouneer El Shaarani and Yazan Halwani, respectively. The first piece, El Shaarani’s, is a contemporary Islamic calligraphy piece that combines the traditional style of Islamic calligraphy and the contemporary thoughts of activism in response to the current Syrian refugee crisis. He writes, “What subtle methods of oppression,” in Arabic using the colors of the Syrian flag, red and green (“Mouneer El Shaarani”). The second piece, Halwani’s, is a mural of a little Syrian boy, Fares al-Khodor, killed by airstrikes (Stoughton). Paradoxically, Halwani, along with other contemporary calligraphers, have brought representation back into their work, meanwhile, still upholding the traditional practice of calligraphy. Inspired by a book of traditional Islamic calligraphy that belonged to his uncle, Yazan Halwani began at the age of fourteen to combine this calligraphic practice with messages relevant to his time and environment. His work diverged from divine words to politically and socially driven words.

Contemporary Islamic calligraphers break the rules of traditional Islamic calligraphy by stepping beyond the artification of Islam and the conveying of religious messages. These contemporary artists have put their identities into their work. These artists have made a non-political art practice political. The practice has not lost its religious ties, but instead, the divine and unifying thoughts observed through the implications of traditional Islamic calligraphy is recreated with these contemporary Islamic calligraphers. In the contemporary Islamic calligraphers we have looked at, they've differed from the standard use of Islamic calligraphy such that, "The reader is not meant to glean the calligrapher's personality from the script" (*Islamic Calligraphy* 7). Fundamentally, contemporary Islamic calligraphy not only loses the conventional function of a word we've seen in Gertrude Stein and traditional Islamic calligraphy, but the conventional function of Islamic calligraphy as a whole. This practice, similar to Gertrude Stein's writing, is a clear stray from the norm of which it lives in. In other words, this contemporary radicalization of Islamic calligraphy mimics Stein's radicalization of literature.

### **Closing Thoughts**

At this point, we have considered the relationship between Islamic calligraphy and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, regarding both functions and effects. In essence, Islamic calligraphy presents a method of reading *Tender Buttons*. This relationship between the two serves as a teaching model for both Stein and experimental modernism. I believe the surface layers of words in poetry and in linguistic representation has morphed through time, but the core function of a word in the examples I have shown do not submit to a depth of experimentalism. Instead, they submit to a play on traditions. This isn't to summarize what I have said so far, but to validate a longstanding tradition of influence I have discovered in both traditional and

experimental practices. Therefore, this is to bring in a multitude of examples of writers and artists from different eras of expression and to show the stability of influence through time. In other words, we are forming a generalization that the basic premises underlying a traditional religious culture (Islam) can find unexpected resonances in modern, experimental art forms. Naturally, we begin to follow an idea that experimentalism is rooted in an exploration of traditions and reusing/recreating them. An effect, one of many, of such an idea are what we've seen in chapter three, idolization. Because of this, we gain a deeper insight into supposedly uncrackable writers and artists.

In light of what Stein's relationship to Islamic calligraphy tells us, I consider the potential of this thesis as a reframing of Ezra Pound's phrase, "Make it new" (Pound). The assumption that each artist exists in their own eras as innovators, leads to a "before and after" mentality. Stein had this mentality with the distinction between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specifically in terms of Picasso. She drew this distinction with the invention of the airplane in the twentieth century, which symbolizes a whole new perception of the world (i.e. from the ground vs from a bird's eye-view) (*Picasso* 50). This distinction signified Picasso's distinction from every artist before him, such that Picasso was the "after" image in the exclusivity of eras of expression. However, this mentality proves to be false as we have just seen how Stein draws from traditional Islamic calligraphy and how contemporary Islamic calligraphy draws from both traditional Islamic calligraphy and experimental modernism. More so, the continuous effort to categorize writers and artists represents the self-imposed bold lines between each era of expression. With the influences of old and new forms of expression, our classification of writers within their respective eras is blurred. This build up of distinctions between eras, centuries,

writers, artists is all intentional. Even so, while these distinctions are real and important for progression, we must question whether they are truly as defined as we have made them. For example, we consider Gertrude Stein's joy, "when later she was told that Eliot had said in Cambridge that the work of Gertrude Stein was very fine but not for us" (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* 202). It was in this situation that not only is the distinction between Stein and other poets created by T.S. Eliot, but is perpetuated by Stein, herself. Therefore, marking a level of superficiality to the bold lines between writers and their eras of expression. Altogether, I have been able to enter the conversation on the identity and function of words in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* through a unique lens that tests both literary and social norms. This leads me to revise Pound's quote from "Make it new" to "Make the old new." In other words, the unfamiliar (experimental) is diluted with the familiar (traditional) in order to achieve a familiarity by association. This practice of anchoring new concepts with already known concepts is a part of the Social Representation Theory<sup>20</sup> (Wagner 97). Inherently, through this type of anchoring, traditions continue their presence in conception, application, and in periphery criticism by viewers and readers.

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<sup>20</sup> This theory asserts that the unfamiliar (i.e. ideas, objects, etc.) "... can only be properly understood if they are seen as being embedded in historical, cultural and macrosocial conditions" (Wagner 96).

What is the difference between a thing seen and what do you mean.

-Gertrude Stein, *Mrs Reynolds* (1940-1943)

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