

Hee Sook Lee-Niinioja

**ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY
& MUSLIM IDENTITY**

A Case study of Kuwait

NOVEL[&]NOBLE COMMUNICATIONS
HELSINKI 2018

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Helsinki 2018

To my God who endowed the meaning of life; Parents who inspired it; Family who supported it.

F O R E W O R D

The words of the Koran, given by God through the Prophet Muhammad to Muslims, are the core of Islam. His Will accomplished by the invention of calligraphy which regarded as one of the greatest achievements in Islamic civilisation. Islamic calligraphy has become not only a direct-indirect driving force of Muslims' strong identity but also an object of high appreciation to non-Muslims due to its beauty. This attitude has tremendously praised by artists and calligraphers in religious and applied art. Kuwait is not an exception.

This paper investigates Arabic calligraphy as an illustrative tool for religious and applied art in modern Kuwait, in parallel with an examination of its role in Muslim identity. As a better understanding of Islamic culture is unavoidable in current societies where many conflicts take place, this paper could open up more dialogues between different beliefs and religions through the common culture and values.

This book is based on the researcher's MA from Syracuse University in the USA (2000) and intends for education and research overall.

Hee Sook Lee-Niinioja, PhD

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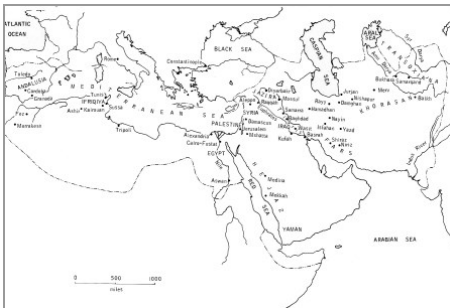
PART I

The extraction of part one is theories of calligraphy, establishing its means of Islamic art and Muslim identity.

T H E S P R E A D O F I S L A M

Islam was founded by the Prophet Muhammad Before his death in 632. He had established a Muslim state in large part of Arabia, and his successors were known as the caliphs. However, 30 years after his death, the state became split between the followers of Uthman, the third caliph, and those of Ali, the fourth, Muhammad's son-in-law. This division led to the two religious parties - the Sunni (Uthman's followers) and Shi'i (Ali's followers).

In 661, the ruling patriarchal caliphs from western Arabia succeeded by the first dynastic caliphate, the Umayyad, whose main base located in Syria. The Islamic Empire extended east as far as the borders of India and China, west to the Atlantic Ocean and the Pyrenees mountains. The Umayyad was overthrown by a revolution in 750 and succeeded by the House of Abbas. The Abbasids transferred the capital from Damascus, Syria to Baghdad, Iraq, and reigned until the year 1258.



Early Islamic world

In the beginning, the Arab conquerors and their descendants had control of the caliphate but later had to share power with non-Arab converts to Islam, especially Persians in the east. During the tenth and 11th centuries, the Seljuk Turks as a third ethnic element entered the Middle East. They were migrating both north and south of the Caspian and the Black Sea westwards, and established a new sultanate and claimed authority over the whole of Sunni Islam. During their domination, Islam reached new areas in Central Asia, and the Turkish converts to Islam carried the new faith to India by conquest and preaching. A new Islamic principality was founded in Asia Minor by a branch of the House of Seljuk.

The independent dynasties under the Abbasid caliphate recognized the supremacy of the Abbasid caliph as the single legitimate head of all Islam. However, in the tenth century, this was challenged by the rise of the Fatimid dynasty in Tunisia, and the migration of the people of Central and Eastern Asia in the Middle East reached its climax in the 13th century when the Mongols

conquered the whole of Southwest Asia and incorporated into the empire. Beijing as their capital, they ruled over Central Asia, Iran and Iraq, and extended their suzerainty to Anatolia. Later they were themselves converted to Islam, and several new Islamic states with a robust Turko-Mongol character were set up in the Middle East.



Suleymaniya mosque, Istanbul, Turkey 1550-57 (left); Taj Mahal Mausoleum, Agra, India 1632-53 (right)

There were five main political centres in the Islamic world after the Mongol invasion. The first was the Ottoman Empire. With the capture of Constantinople in 1453, it became the greatest of all the Islamic empires. And the sultans were patrons of book culture, favouring calligraphy. The second was the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, creating the central citadel of the old Arab-Islamic learning for some time. The Koran brought religious and cultural unity to the Sultanate and was the instrument of power for its rulers, explaining Muslims' interest in calligraphy and the art of the book. Mamluk conquered, and its territories belonged to the Ottoman Empire in 1516-17.

The third based in Iran. At the beginning of the 17th century, a new and powerful monarchy covering the whole country created by the Safavids. They were Shi'ites and made Shi'ism the state religion of Iran. Among several patrons of the arts, Shah Abbas favoured a style of production that distinguished Iran for more than a century. The fourth centre was in India, where a succession of Turkish Muslim dynasties ruled over most of the northern part of the country. In the 16th century, these dynasties succeeded by the Mogul house, founded by Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane who came to India from Central Asia. The empire lasted until its overthrow by the British in the 19th century. Under the great emperors, artistic creativity prevailed in prestigious books.

The last centre of the Islamic world is now southern Russia and Central Asian republics. Two large states of Muslim Mongols are the Khanate of the Golden Horde in southern Russia and the Chaghatay Khanate in Central Asia. Islam had both advanced and retreated in various areas. In Southwest Europe, the Muslims drove out of Spain, Portugal, and Sicily. In Eastern Europe, the Ottoman Turks brought Islam to the walls of Vienna but were forced to withdraw. In Eastern Europe, the Golden Horde for a while managed to extend its sovereignty over large parts of Russia.

However, the most important area of Islamic conquest was in Southeast Asia, where traders from Arabia and India brought Islam. By the 16th century, a large part of Malay had already become Muslim. From this century onwards, Islam was in retreat, when Europe was expanding both in the Southwest and Southeast. During the past decades, Islam has regained a foothold in Europe when the number of immigrants from Muslim countries has increased.*

* (1) Lewis 1980, *The World of Islam: Outline of Islamic History* (2) Musée d'art et d'histoire 1988, *Islamic Calligraphy*

B E L I E F I N A L L A H

Islam as an Arabic word interprets peace, purity, soundness, safety, submission, and obedience. Its religious term has two principal meanings: (1) Full submission to the Will of God (Allah) and obedience to His Law, (2) God's divine guiding system revealed to humankind through the prophets and completed in the Koran to the last Messenger, Muhammad. Everyone who submits himself to the will of God and obeys his law termed "Muslim".

For Muslims, there is the one and only God. Undertaking strict rules of worship, they are supposed to submit themselves to the Will of God and follow the way of the life of Muhammad. As Creator of the Universe, God ordains and decrees all acts of worship and show Muslims must observe. Islam is a comprehensive religion that deals with every aspect of human life, both spiritual and physical. Religion gives Muslims guidelines and instructions on how to deal with social, economic, and even political issues.

The Prophet is the bearer of God's revelation, the messenger of God's purpose, the ruler of God's community of believers, on God's behalf. In Islam, he is the last of the prophets. The revelation of God's will to humankind had fulfilled, and there would be no more prophets and no further revelations.

The Five Pillars

Shahada (the Profession of Faith)

Ash-hadu An La ilaha illa Allah

Wa Ash-hadu Anna Muhammadan Rasool-Allah

I bear witness that there is no god but God

and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of God.



"There is no god but God)", square Kufic, Samarqand (left); An open hand, symbolizing the five pillars of Islam on a doorway, Alhambra, Granada, Spain (right)

The first pillar is Shahada or Testimony. It is the confession of faith recited by Muslims: Muslims' firm acknowledgement and belief in God's existence and oneness. There is none to be worshipped but God, and He must be worshipped only according to the teaching of the Prophet. As Muslims believe Muhammad as God's Messenger, the Koran, the word of God, and his *Hadith* (sayings) forms a comprehensive system to guide man's life to the right path.



Shahada, flower pattern at the pulpit, Turkey, 17c (left); Image of Mecca in rug or tile, Ottoman miniature, 1666 (right)

Salat (Prayer)

The second pillar is prayer. Between two kinds of prayer, *Du'a* is a personal and spontaneous prayer, not bound by any rules or rituals, while *Salat* has a ritual prayer to be offered with Koranic words and actions five times every day at sunrise, midday, afternoon, sunset, and evening. It is a religious obligation of all adult Muslims, both men and women, except those incapacitated by illness. *Salat* is a direct link between the worshipper and God. The worshipper must be in a state of ritual purity, facing to Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet.

Hajj (Pilgrimage)

The third pillar is a pilgrimage, the *Hajj*. At least once in his lifetime, every Muslim is required to go on pilgrimage to the two holy cities (Mecca and Medina) and to follow the migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina. Women are allowed to go with the permission of their husbands and with a safe escort. Those who are unable to go may entrust this duty to others on their behalf, even by testament. The pilgrimage takes place between the seventh and tenth days of the month of *Dhu'l-Hijja* and culminates in the Festival of Sacrifices known as the Greater Festival. Pilgrimage has made Muslims belong to a single entity. This sentiment reinforced by the participation in the ritual and ceremony of the pilgrimage. The annual pilgrimage, which brings together Muslims from different lands in a single act of devotion, is one of the strongest unifying factors in Islam.

Sawm (Fasting)

The fourth pillar is fasting. During Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year, all adult Muslims should observe fasting except for the old and the sick. Those on a journey may postpone the fast. For the whole of this month, believers must abstain from food, drink and sexual relations from sunrise till dusk. During the night, special prayers recited. When the new moon appears, and the month of fasting ended, there is a festival called the Lesser Festival (Id al-Fitr) for three days. Besides health benefits, fasting can help to attain piety and humbleness, and share feelings in the community to be more benevolent and charitable.

Zakat (the Poor-Due)

The last pillar is Zakat, a financial contribution paid by Muslims to the community. Originally it was a charitable levy collected from the believers but was transformed into a kind of tribute or tax whereby converts to Islam express their formal acceptance of Islam and loyalty to the Islamic state. It encourages new Muslims' faith and solves those who have problems with finance. It purifies or legitimizes one's wealth and property too.

God (Allah)

The name of God in Islam is Allah. God is the One, the Sole, and the Indivisible. His essence does not resemble other essences. God is the Omnipotent, the Omniscient, whose knowledge perfectly comprehends all things, hidden or visible. God is the most Merciful and is the God of the worlds. According to "Tawhid" (monotheism), Muslims must believe in the Oneness of (1) the Lordship of God, (2) the Worship of God, and (3) the Names and the Qualities of God.



Allah in Kufic, mosaic part of a mosque in Samarqand (left); Allah on the gazelle leather, Magribi Kufic letter, 14C (right)

The Koran

Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

(The opening phrase of the Koran)

The Koran is Scripture of God, which angel Gabriel brought down to Muhammad over 23 years. The Prophet memorized the verses which he received and recited them to his companions to write down immediately. The Koran is divided into 114 chapters (*surah*) of unequal length. It is one of the primary sources of Islamic teachings. God revealed some chapters and verses in Mecca and the rest in Medina. The Meccan chapters and verses dealt mainly with the belief in the Oneness of God, the Existence of God, and the Day of Resurrection, while those revealed in Medina were about the actions of the individuals and all sides of life, including forms of worship.



15 lines of Koran manuscript in Kufic on blue parchment, Qairawan, mid of 10C

As a second source of guidance, the Koran can supplement by *Hadith*, sayings of the Prophet. The Prophet is believed to have been divinely inspired by all that he did and said. The Koran and *Hadith* form the basis of Shari'a, the Holy Law. Shari'a covers all aspects of Muslims' public and private, communal and personal life. In those relating to property, marriage, inheritance and other matters of own status, it is a normative code of law, which men were expected to obey and society to enforce. In the political prescriptions, it is a system of the ideals towards which men and society were presumed to aspire and strive.

Muhammad, the Prophet

Muhammad was born in Mecca, in western Arabia in about 571. The Arabian Peninsula lay on the edge of the civilized world in touch with both the Byzantine and Persian empires. Though agriculture and cities had flourished since the ancient times in the southwest, the greater part of Arabia consisted of arid steppe and desert, relieved by scattered oases and crossed by a few caravan tracks. Most of the population were nomads, tending their herds or raiding rival tribes and the peoples of the oasis and borderlands. Only a few small towns existed, because of the traffic that passed through Arabia between the Mediterranean and the East. One was Mecca. The Arabs had a common literary language and a rich poetic literature which gave a shared sense of identity. However, there was no standard political order, and Pagan was still in religious beliefs, they worshipped various gods under one supreme god, called "Allah". When Muhammad started to

preach in Mecca, he converted first in his own family, then in more full circles. He was opposed by the Meccan polytheists, who regarded the new preaching as a threat both to their faith and interests. Nevertheless, neither his faith was affected, nor more people stopped from responding to his preaching. In 622, Muhammad agreed with emissaries from Yathrib, north of Mecca. The people of Yathrib selected him their arbitrator, and those converts were along with him from Mecca. Yathrib now became the centre of the new faith and community, known as Medina (the City).



The birth of the Prophet Mohammad, Rashid al-Din's "Universal History"



Shahada, in a square pattern, Tabriz, 15C

The migration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina, named in Arabic “the Hijra”, is considered to be the decisive moment in the mission of the Prophet. It is from the year in which the Islamic calendar reckoned; thus year 1 of the Hijra began in 622. Contrary to Mecca, in Medina, he was first a chief, then a ruler, and had political and military as well as religious authority. On 8 June in 632, the Prophet died after a short illness. He had established a new monotheistic religion and ethical doctrines on a higher level of the people in western Arabia. Moreover, not only he brought a book of revelations which became the guide to thought, faith and conduct of Muslims, but he also set up a new state, well organized and armed, whose power and prestige made it a dominant factor in Arabia.*

* (1) Murad, Islam in Brief (2) Lewis 1980, The World of Islam: Introduction

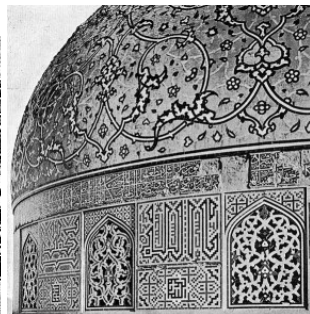
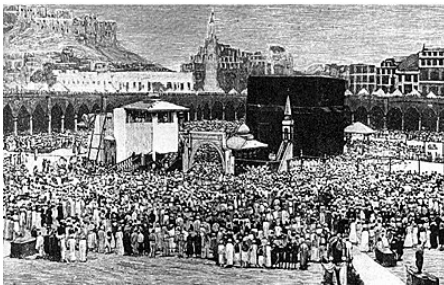
E X P L O R I N G S C R I P T S

The attitude of Islam towards pictures of living beings is negative. The Koran forbids only cult status, but Islamic Tradition (*Hadith*) reveals negative expressions concerning images. Grabar (1973) identifies six different kinds of document: (1) pre-Islamic art (2) the Koran (3) traditions of the prophet (4) accounts of the conquest (5) early monuments (6) coinage.

Islamic Art Tradition

The architecture of pre-Islamic Arabia was not particularly impressive. Sacred places poorly constructed for simple ceremonies, and the holiest Kabaa was composed of parts without decoration. In general, pre-Islamic writing does not indicate an aesthetic reaction to the Kaaba in terms of visual beauty. The emotional and pietistic idealization of the holiest place in Islam did not appear in the early times.

The Koran was not significant to artistic creativity and never used as a source of illustrations. The absence of major narrative parts lets the Korean difficult to translate into visual forms. Instead, it was and still recites in mosques at prayer time. As a most important legal document, its aesthetic appeal is in the sound of its divinely inspired words. The central theological message of the Koran is the total uniqueness and the power of God. He alone is a “Fashioner”, a *Musawwir* (Koran 59.24), which is the term, used for a painter. God is the only Creator and cannot admit of competitors. Therefore, the artist who makes something lifelike is thought to compete blasphemously with God, and on the Day of Judgment, he will be punished for being unable to obey the divine command. Besides, such pictures distract one away from prayer, because a picture is thought to have magic and supernatural qualities, and worshipped as an icon.



Pilgrims around Kaaba in Mecca (left); Koran phrase in geometric Kufic and Thuluth, Isfahan mosque, Iran, 1603 (right)

Hadith, the traditional sayings and practices of the Prophet, is quite clear about this hostile point of view. It calls artists of figured pictures “the worst of men”. It is as bad as to keep a dog, a despised, unclean animal which hinders the entry of the angel’s mercy within the house. Human and animal figures are, however, allowed on carpets and pillows, since stepping, sitting, or leaning on them is not worshipping. The only themes permitted are trees and objects of “no living spirit”. *Hadith* also says that possessing figural paintings are forbidden almost as severely as making them. The legendary life of the Prophet soon after his death was occasionally illustrated from the 13th century onward. Muhammad considered himself as an ordinary human being whom God had selected to bring His message. Unlike Christianity, Islam has never developed a sacred iconography on the life of the founder of the religion. Instead, the Koran in its written form was elevated to a highly praised position, and its texts borrowed to the decorative schemes of buildings. In other words, the lack of liturgy in Islam prevented it from developing the sacramental setting, contrary to the requirements of the church.

At the beginning of conquests, Muslims admired the art of the conquered Christian world, noting the brilliance of church decoration as a superior technique. Due to a powerful impact on churches of Jerusalem, the Byzantine mosaicists were brought to decorate the mosque of Damascus and probably that in Medina. However, Muslims’ initial awe and admiration may raise rejection and contempt.

Several scholars have argued that architectural compositions in the mosaics symbolize a paradise vision of a peaceful Islamic world. Regardless of their ornamental value, the mosaics could have a symbolic meaning, the same as the decoration of churches with an iconographic sense.

The avoidance of figures was systematic and deliberate concerning a religious building; thus the symbolic significance was given to new forms or forms in older artistic languages, such as in coinage. Before the conquest of the Fertile Crescent, nothing knew about Islamic coinage. The local coins, Byzantine ones in formerly Byzantine territories and Sassanian ones in the East were continued with Arabic inscription, indicating a date, the name of a caliph or governor, the profession of faith, and a mint. Among numerous modifications in more imitation of Byzantine coins than that of Sassanian ones, some removed a Christian symbol like the cross and replaced it with a knob.

It can say that the prohibition of living figures led to the use of other patterns. In the religious and secular sectors, vegetal, geometric and epigraphic decorations, and even non-figural landscapes emerged. The Muslims’ creative potentiality was channelled into decoration. There was no scope to the figural painter; instead, the artistic talent directed toward calligraphy or floral and geometrical designs, as a characteristic of Islamic art.

Origin of the Arabic Scripts

Recite in the name of thy Lord who created
Created man from a clot;
Recite in the name of thy Lord,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught man what he knew not
(The Holy Koran 96.1-5)

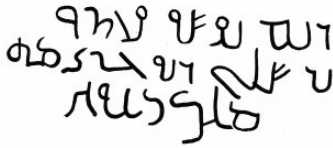
These were the first words which God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and underlined the central role of writing in Islamic culture and art. The Koran, Chapter 68 opens with the words, "By the pen and what they write", and it has suggested that the pen (*qalam*) was the first thing created by God to write down upcoming events. Man's every deed is recorded in the Book of Reckoning for the final accounting on Judgment Day (69.18-19).

The growing importance of writing mostly mentioned in early times. Another poetic message says, "And if all the trees on earth were pens and the sea - seven seas after it to replenish it -, yet would the Words of God not be spent." (31.27) Again, God has sent His divine message through writing. Writing had known to the pre-Islamic Arabs, especially in trade. Two flexible surfaces were the most common. Papyrus from the pressed fibres of a plant along the Nile in Egypt was used for business correspondence, while parchment, more durable material from the skin of an animal, was intended for books.

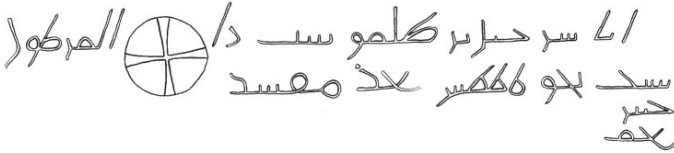
However, the Arabic script was developed much later than the Roman alphabet, because the Arabs were chiefly a nomadic people and did not trust the written word. They relied much on oral tradition for keeping information and communication. In pre-Islamic times and particularly in the sixth century at the heroic age of literature for the Arabs, poetry was dearest to their hearts and the only means of literary expression. The Arabs were dependent almost exclusively on the oral tradition of preserving their poems. It says that the Koran was at first transmitted among Muslims, not through the written word but by oral tradition. Soon Muslims realized the necessity of using writing and wanted to make their script beautiful too.

In a relatively short time, they produced an astonishing calligraphic development and transformed the Arabic script into an artistic medium that reflected their genius and talents. Among different views on the origins of the Arabic script and its relation to those in the Semitic group, North Arabic script relates most substantially and directly to the Nabataean script whose source is the Aramaic script. It is a consonantal script of 28 letters, recording long but not short vowels. The Nabataeans were in close contact with the other Arab tribes and had long-standing trade and cultural links with them. As semi-nomads, they lived in an area extending from the Sinai and North Arabia to southern Syria and founded a kingdom until Roman's destruction in

about 105 A.D. Nevertheless, their language and script outlived and had a profound impact on the early development of the Arabic writing.



Nabataean script on Um Umm al Jimal's tombstone, 250



Nabataean from Haran, starting "Ana Sharhil", 568

The earliest reference to the Arabic script proper is with the name Jazm. Probably it is a further development of the Nabataean-derived forms of letters. The Jazm's stiff and angular characteristics and the equal proportions of its letters affected the development of the Kufic script later. Gradually, Jazm became the script of all the Arabs and gained the status of the sacred script for God's divine message until the arrival of Islam.

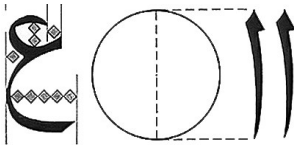
However, words from the written text were difficult to read and could even be misunderstood, if one did not know the text. The Arabic script, written from right to left, is a flowing continuum of ascending verticals, descending curves, and temperate horizontals with a balance between the static perfection of individual form and a rhythmic movement. Two styles of writing have co-existed since the first centuries of Islam: Kufic and Naskh. Kufic named after the town of Kufa in Iraq, one of the leading centres of the Islamic culture in the days of the Umayyad. However, due to its difficulty to read, Naskh became the most common in the Koran later.

Development

Calligraphy has accompanied the whole history of Islam in its way. Wherever Islam was victorious in war or religion, the indigenous culture would reinterpret calligraphy. The adoption of the Arabic script in Afghanistan, Persia, Turkey, or even China, shows the power of this inspiration. The Arabs have always been proud of their learning and mastery of the language. Already in the pre-Islamic era, the Arabic language had a high reputation, because of its vast vocabulary and power of expression. The first book was the Koran, which set a new standard in the Arabic language and the starting point of calligraphy. Calligraphy beautified with fresh styles and new decorative motifs, seen from the walls, minarets, and arches of mosques.

The origin of Arabic calligraphy has been twofold: (a) Kufic with an angular geometric script of a hieratic and monumental character, and (b) Naskh with a rounded, cursive and stenographic type. Both existed side by side. The more stiff Kufic used in copying the Koran, cutting inscriptions on stones, and scribing legends on coins, while the more simple Naskh was in daily use. The insufficient use in everyday life created Kufic a floriated and decorative shape for the specialists who can read and understand it.

During the beginning of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), Kufic began losing ground, and almost disappeared from the Islamic world by the end of the 13th century, despite an occasional combination of Kufic and Naskh on a single page of text. Arabic calligraphy entered its most glorious phase during the ninth and tenth centuries. Ibn Muqla (d. 940), the vizier to the three Abbasid caliphs, was the founder of the cursive scripts. By the late ninth century, more than 20 cursive styles were in use, but most of them were not as elegant as the perfected Kufic and had to avoid the degeneration and proliferation into different types of style. Ibn Muqla decided to design a cursive script which would be both beautiful and perfectly proportioned to compete with Kufic. He laid down a comprehensive system of basic calligraphic rules, based on the rhombic dot as a unit of measurement. He redesigned geometric forms of the letters and fixed their relative shape and size by the rhombic dot, *Alif*, and circle as the three standard units.



Ibn Muqla's system of proportion for the drawing of Naskh, the letter 'Ayn



Shahada in Kufic on tombstones, Iran, 10C

In the system, the rhombic dot formed by pressing the pen diagonally on paper; thus the length of the dot's equal sides was the same as the width of the pen. The standard *Alif* was a straight vertical stroke measuring a specific number of rhombic dots placed vertex to vertex, and the number of dots varied, according to style, from five to seven; the standard circle had a radius equal to *Alif*. Both standard *Alif* and standard circle also used as basic geometric forms.

This new method of writing was called “Al Khatt al Mansub” and was readily applicable. Ibn Muqla applied it in the six major cursive scripts (Thuluth, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Rayhani, Tawqi’, Riqa’). Among his pupils, Ibn al Bawwab (d. 1022) made a significant addition to Ibn Muqla’s work. Without violating any of the rules, his artist’s soul gave elegance to the geometric harmony of the letters designed by Ibn Muqla. This more elegant style was known as “Al Mansub al Fa’iq” (the elegant Mansub). Ibn al Bawwab’s artistic contribution to Arabic calligraphy and in particular to the six scripts praised as much as that of his great predecessor. Despite perfection and beautification of the six styles, Ibn al Bawwab favoured the Naskh and Muhaqqaq scripts. He is said to have written 64 Korans and a large number of secular works, but only one of his Korans and fragments of his secular works remain to the present day.

During the following century, Yaqut al Musta’simi (d. 1298) developed a new method of trimming his reed pens with an oblique cut, giving the six scripts to a new dimension of grace and beauty. By his hand, calligraphy had attained the ideal. To crown his achievements, Yaqut evolved a new style from Thuluth, named “Yaquti”, which is said to have surpassed all other styles. Yaqut had a reputation of being a strict tutor, who required his pupils to practice for long hours. He practised daily by copying two sections of the Koran. Having attained the levels of perfection, the cursive scripts, especially Thuluth, evolved unique ornamental forms which began to use in the Korans and secular manuscripts. They could compete with Kufic in epigraphy.

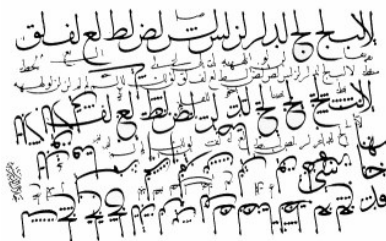
The Mongol invasions that culminated in the destruction of Baghdad in 1258 had severe disruptive effects on the Muslims’ religious and cultural life of the conquered areas. The reconstruction followed almost immediately with the establishment of the Il Khanid dynasty. After less than half a century, Islam became dominant again. Il Khan Ghazan (d. 1305) himself converted to Islam and made it the state religion. As a learned and pious Muslim, he devoted himself to enhance Islam and to revive its culture and arts, including calligraphy and book illumination. During this time, many calligraphers produced splendid works in the writing of the Korans, continuing the traditions of Yaqut al Musta’simi and his followers. Many of these works which remain today were mostly in the Thuluth and Muhaqqaq scripts.

The Il Khanid’s reign over Islam’s eastern area was followed by the Timurids who also supported the arts of bookmaking and calligraphy. The dynasty founded by Tamerlane (d. 1405), and the patronage of calligraphy and bookmaking reached a zenith under his son Shah Rukh (d. 1447). The Timurid style of writing the Korans was a balance between calligraphy and illumination. The Timurids used different sizes and styles of the script on the same page in the Korans. Although this practice dated back to the time of Ibn Muqla, the Timurids were probably the first to extend it to the Koran. They also established traditions of writing very large Korans in the Rayhani, Muhaqqaq and other Naskh scripts. Naskh used less, but later influenced the scripts of Persian Ta’liq and Indian Naskh.

The Mamluks sultanate (1250-1517) ruled Egypt, Syria, and parts of Arabia, and calligraphy attained its ultimate perfection during the first century of the Mamluk rule. The extensive use of calligraphy gave rise to special styles of Thuluth and Naskh. Moreover, other materials, such as metal, glass, ivory, textiles, wood, and stone, were introduced in writing. Sultans commissioned several illuminated Korans, and the beauty of these works set up standards of calligraphy.

By the turn of the 16th century, the calligraphic traditions of the Arabic script had been firmly set up. It achieved through the evolution of the first scripts from their early roots and the development of Kufic in its different forms. The various styles of Naskh consolidated into magnificent works, particularly in the writing of the Koran. The real followers of the traditions were master calligraphers under the Safavids and Ottomans. They refined the art of Arabic calligraphy of the previous generations, rendering calligraphy both an artistic activity and a spiritual act mainly within the established classical styles. The Safavid dynasty, which lasted until 1736, was the longest and most glorious of the later dynasties that ruled in Persia and Iraq with high culture.

The significant contribution was the introduction of Ta'liq (hanging), in which the horizontal strokes of letters were boldly elongated, and the text often written at an angle across the page. This script further developed into a lighter and more refined style called Nasta'liq whose origin also found in the classic Naskh. Nasta'liq established itself as one of the most important styles of Arabic calligraphy and was adopted as the national script of Iran, still in use today. The style gained favour in Turkey and the Indian subcontinent, as the common script for illuminated literature, miniatures, epics, and other secular works. Despite its beauty and clarity, the script seldom appeared in the Koran.



An exercise invented by Ibn Muqla, drawn by the Ottoman calligrapher M. Jalaudin, 1768

The Arabic scripts had reached a peak of refinement during the Ottoman (1281-1924), and the works of Ottoman calligraphers remained amongst the finest ever written. The Ottomans ruled Turkey, almost all of Arabia and parts of the Balkans in Europe. They were renowned for the patronage of calligraphy and elevated the writing of religious text and especially the Koran into a sacred art. They added several new calligraphic styles. One was Diwani, used extensively in the

secular writing of government directives and decrees, and architectural decorations around the Arab world.

The Ottoman's another contribution is the introduction of symbolism and images in the composition of the text. Tughra, the Sultan's signature, remains one of the most enduring calligraphic images, whose geometry represents vegetal forms, birds, and other animals as calligraphic compositions. The high esteem of calligraphy by the Ottomans is apparent in the vast number of illuminated Koran manuscripts, ornamental scripts in mosques, schools, and public buildings, and calligraphic manuscripts of secular works.



Surah al Fatiha, in Muhaqqaq, Mamluk Egypt or Syria, 1245



Surah al Fatiha, Safavid manuscript, Holy Mishaf, 16C (left); Surah Al Fatiha and Surah al-Bakara, Ottoman Turkey, 1845 (right)

Besides Kufic and later Naskh, there developed several calligraphic styles with regional characteristics which added further aspects to the writing of Arabic. That of Iran directly influenced calligraphy in India. The traditional Naskh scripts were used in the Koran, while Nasta'liq for literary and non-religious works. During the 14th century, two specific scripts for religious manuscripts emerged: Behari in bold and heavy horizontal strokes and a variation of the traditional Naskh with a much bolder and heavier use of line.



Roundel in mirrored Muthanna, Indo Deccan or Bijapur, 16-17C

Calligraphers strove to perfect their art and produced it within the rules and principles of the recognized style variations and innovation. Attempts made at creating symbolic compositions of a doubled Muthanna text in a mirror image, and a miniaturized script of Ghobari for pocket size Korans. Arabic calligraphy became a medium for modern artistic expression. Artists and calligraphers created an interesting composition with the Koran as the subject matter, testifying the art of calligraphy as a bond between Muslims and the Holy Koran. *

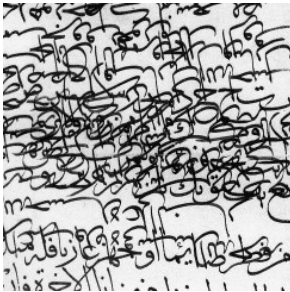
* (1) Grabar 1973, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (2) Ettinghausen 1977, *Arab Painting* (3) Ettinghausen 1980, *The World of Islam* (edited by Lewis); *the Man-made Setting* (4) Bloom & Blair 1997, *Islamic Arts* (5) Grabar 1992, *The Mediation of Ornament* (6) Safadi 1978, *Islamic Calligraphy* (7) Welch 1979, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (8) Burckhardt 1980, *Art of Islam Language and Meaning* (9) Khatibi & Sijelmassi 1995, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy* (10) Ahmad 1984, *Islamic Calligraphy* (11) Saif-Ur-Rahman Dar 1986, *The Roots of Muslim Calligraphy*, *Musee d'art et d'histoire* 1988, *Islam Calligraphy* (12) *A Beit Al Qur'an Publication* 1996

V A R I E T Y O F S T Y L E S

The art of calligraphy thus attains the fullness of its effect at the moment when the letter, word, line or even the whole page ceases to be a vehicle of meaning...and glides into 'the pure visual significance' of the stroke. Nevertheless...no complete disappearance of intellectual perception...of the sensory, but...simultaneous and overall grasp of the signified and of its material expressions as released together by the motion of the writer's hand. It is even this uncertainty...which drifts unattached between the will of the text and the exuberant grace of its formal wrapping, this gap between the concept and continual movement, and this transcribed deletion which constitute the miracle of calligraphy.¹

A line of calligraphic decoration...stands in perfect harmony with its background. Its adaptability ensures its fitness with the surrounding scheme and gives it grace and life...its abstract nature calls for even greater artistic skill...the lines in themselves have to be so supple and round in form and graceful in a movement that they must give the impression of being alive to the sight...Thus rhythm, movement, and grace...by realizing them in lines abstracted from those object.²

All Muslims most widely share calligraphy. Anyone who can write can appreciate the merits of an excellent calligrapher. Nothing typifies the aesthetic sense of Muslims as much as the Arabic script. Thomas Arnold relates that "No art has been so much honoured or assiduously cultivated as that of calligraphy."³ Calligraphy started by the Arabs but was received its highest fulfilment at the hands of the Persians.



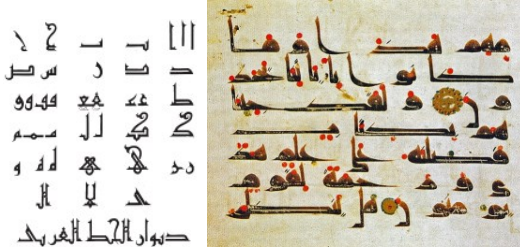
Lettering, Ottoman Turkey, 190

¹ Musée d'art et d'histoire 1988, Islamic Calligraphy

² Ziauddin 1979, A Monograph on Moslem Calligraphy

³ Cited in Ziauddin 1979

Kufic



Kufic (left); Variation of Kufic, Iraq or Syria, 8-9C (right)

The simple Kufic, as a hieratic script, was used in the Koran, due to its bold character in the form. It was not until the second half of the eighth century that the script reached perfection for copying the Koran. It wrote on surfaces of which the height was less than the width, because the script had a relatively low vertical profile with almost no strokes below the main line of writing, but had extended horizontal strokes. The Kufic Korans were in an oblong format. In the ninth century, the Koran had rounder curves and slanting, pointed tips, and by the middle of the tenth century, Kufic was finally replaced by Naskh, no longer used in the Koran.

As the Kufic epigraphy was not subject to strict rules and allowed the artist a free hand in his concept and execution of its ornamental forms, the letters extended into simple ornaments without hindering the basic outlines. From the beginning of the 11th century, the letters created ornamental letterforms. And new geometric elements were seen in the shape of plaiting, knotting, and intertwining at the verticals of certain letters. The free ends of some squared letters acquired ornamental extensions as well.



Variation of Kufic and arabesque, Mosque, India 13C

The Fatimid dynasty of Egypt (1155) elaborated the most of Kufic, but with the passing of this dynasty, the script also fell out of use except in architectural and ceramic decorations. The more complex ornamental forms continued until late in the 12th century. Foliated, floriated, plaited, knotted, interlaced, intertwined, and animated letters took the form of human heads or figures or

animal shapes. The purest angular Kufic became geometric patterns on minarets, and in mosques and calligraphic patterns. The ornamental Kufic could apply to every kind of surface - brick, stone, stucco, tile, wood, metal, glass, ivory, textiles, and parchment.

Eastern Kufic



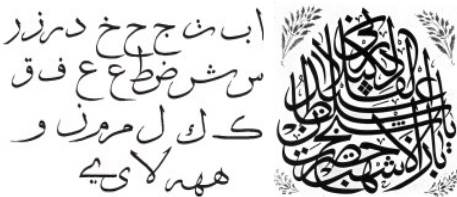
The Koran leaf, Surah 54, Iran, 11C, in Eastern Kufic

Eastern Kufic, along with Kufic of Fatimid Egypt, described the early scripts in the Islamic East, particularly in Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. Eastern Kufic remained as the primary script for the writing of the Koran into the 11th century when Naskh replaced it. Since then, the script has appeared on chapter headings and other ornamental and decorative elements, instead of the body text.

The “Six Styles” of Cursive Writing

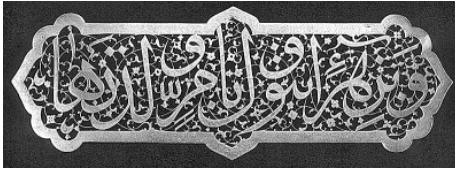
The “six cursive styles” were raised to the status of major scripts by Ibn Muqla and gained grace and beauty in the hands of succeeding master calligraphers, such as Ibn al Bawwab, Yaqut al Musta’simi, Shaykh Hamdullah al Amasi (d. 1520), and Hafiz Uthman (d. 1698). They are Thuluth, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Rayhani, Tawqi’, and Riqua’. All scripts have their own special character: Naskh (from which all present-day printing types are derived), Thuluth (more cursive outgrowth of Naskh), Muhaqqaq (bold script with sweeping diagonal flourishes), Rayhani (more ornate version of Thuluth), Tawqi’ (derivative of Thuluth with the letters sometimes joined together), and Riqua’ (cursive style, common in use for handwriting in almost all of the Arab world).

Thuluth



Thuluth (left); Thuluth in Iraq or Turkey, 18C (right)

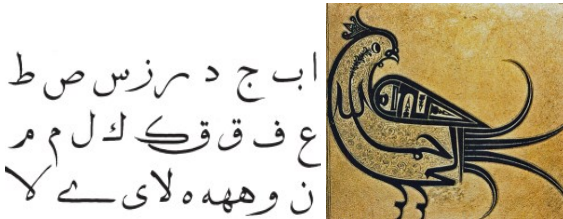
Thuluth first formulated in the seventh century during the Umayyad but was fully developed in the late ninth century. The name means “a third”, because of the proportion of straight lines to curves, or because the script was a third of the size of another popular contemporary script, the Tumar.



Thuluth on iron frame with a phrase of Arab poem, Iran, 17C (left); Naskh and Thuluth, by Shaykh Hamdullah al Amasi, 16C

Thuluth is an ornamental variety of Naskh. Its structure differs only from Naskh in the proportion of its curves and strokes that are about three times the size of Naskh. The script brings out the wavy movement which suppresses in the peculiar curves and strokes of Naskh. It has letters of rounded shape, linked and intersected, giving rise to a cursive flow of ample and complex proportions, as the most elaborate graphics and outstanding plasticity. Thuluth has been extremely popular and the most crucial decorative script for calligraphic inscriptions, titles, headings and colophons. One of the varieties, developed by Ibn al Bawwab and Yaqut, was so closely associated with the Koran and other religious texts that it achieved the status of the hieratic script.

Naskh



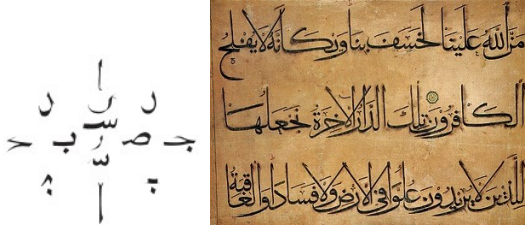
Naskh (left); Bird in Naskh, Iran, 17C (right)

The Naskh scripts had developed different lines than those of Kufic. The scripts were derived from the pre-Islamic and early Islamic scripts of Hijaz, but appeared in a more systematized form at the end of the ninth century. As Naskh did not have much elegance and discipline, it used for secular purposes. Naskh was easier and faster to write than Kufic, due to its cursive nature. When

the introduction of paper in 750 replaced other writing materials such as papyrus and parchment, Naskh spread throughout the Islamic East.

Ibn Muqla made it to perfection. His rule was to make the diameter of a circle corresponding to the length of an *Alif*. The circle became the reference measure for each letter. With rhythmic lines, the graphic movement of Naskh is well-proportioned and rapidly applied, because of its regularity. Having become a major script, Naskh was transformed by Ibn al Bawwab into a script worthy of the Koran. Despite its first aim for everyday purposes, the script was favoured by the Koran copyists and used for religious books and translations from Greek and Persian as well. It is the supreme script for the dissemination of Islamic culture and art.

Muhaqqaq



Muhaqqaq (left); Koran leaf, Surah 28:83, Muhaqqaq, Timurid, 15C (right)

Muhaqqaq was less angular than Kufic with well-spaced ligatures. With the discovery of paper and its rapid spread, it became widely used. During the caliphate of Al Ma'mun (813-33), the script acquired certain roundness for easier writing. Although Ibn Muqla did modification and reproduction, it kept the main features of extended upstrokes. Ibn al Bawwab made the perfection of Muhaqqaq, giving it shallow and sweeping horizontal sub-linear flourishes for impetus and more extended upstrokes for grandeur. For more than four centuries, this characteristic allowed it to be the favourite script for large Korans in the Islamic East. It was the 13th and 14th centuries in Egypt under the Mamluk sultans, and in Iraq and Persia under the Il Khanid Mongols.

Rayhani



Rayhani first developed during the ninth century and was probably derived from Naskh. It has characteristics in common with Naskh, Thuluth, and Muhaqqaq. It also has some of the

features of Thuluth, despite more delicacy. Another feature of Rayhani, as compared with Thuluth, is that its vertical strokes are straight and extended. The curves of Rayhani like those of Muhaqqaq are little angular, pointing almost horizontally leftwards. The script became close to Muhaqqaq, considered as a sister script, but wrote with a pen about half as wide as that used for Muhaqqaq. Rayhani was a favourite script for large Korans and preferred in Persia under the Il Khanid sultans who were contemporary with the Mamluk sultans of Egypt.

Tawqi'



Lion, "May God Almighty be pleased with him and honour him", Persia, 19C (left); Leaf, Nastaliq, Muhaqqaq, Tawqi', Safavid Iran, 16C

Tawqi' (signature) invented in the time of the Caliph Al Mamun in the ninth century. It is close to Thuluth and has many similar characteristics as Riqā', despite more rounded its letters. The difference is that the lines in Tawqi' are thicker than those in Riqā', and its curves are less rounded, which makes it look like a much heavier script. The script did not develop fully until late in the 11th century. Its establishment as a major script was brought about by Ibn al Khazin, who was a second-generation pupil of Ibn al Bawwab. During the late 15th century, a heavier variety of Tawqi', similar in size to Thuluth and more closely on its characteristics, was developed in Turkey, favoured by the Ottoman caliphs.

Riqā'

ا ب ت ج ذ ز س ش ض ظ

غ ف و ق ك ل م ن و

ه ه بة لى

Riqā'

Riqā' was derived from both Naskh and Thuluth. The geometric forms of its letters resemble those of Thuluth in many respects, but the script is smaller with more rounded curves. Mumtaz Bag, the counsellor of the Ottoman Sultan Abd al Magid Khan, laid down the rules for its compact graphic form. The spaces between letters and words are equal, and the height of the letters gives a

certain rhythm. The most graceful Riqā' is found in ornamentation, more decorative than Thuluth. Riqā' was one of the favourite scripts of the Ottoman calligraphers and was improved by the famous calligrapher Shaykh Hamdullah al Amasi (d. 1520). It was progressively simplified later, becoming the preferred script of handwriting throughout the Arab world today.

Maghribi

أ ج ب ت ث
 ج ح خ د ذ
 ن ش ص ض
 ط ظ ع ف ق ك
 ه و ز ح ا ل م ن
 ه و و ي ي ء ا ل ح ا ل
 ح ج و ا ن الخ العربي



Maghribi; Koran leaf, Surah 39:1 (left), Maghribi and Kufic, Spain, 14C (right)

Maghribi, Western Kufic, has its roots in the Eastern Kufic styles, but from the tenth century onward, it developed own character in North West Africa and Muslim Spain. It started in Qairawan (670), making the city a centre of power, religion, and culture between the ninth and 12th centuries. The lightness and grace of Maghribi contrasted with the massive ornamental Kufic for the headings. The size of the script relative to the page and its density depended upon calligraphers and the occasion.

The script acquired elegance and lightness with various styles, distinct in compact characters, delicate letters, and finesse of line. By the beginning of the 17th century, individual styles produced the present Maghribi for the Koran and in ordinary correspondence, sharing aesthetic details.



Surah al Baqara, bold Western Kufic Maghribi, in Qairawan

Ta'liq

ابستج درز سر شصط

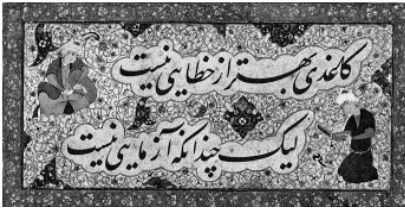
ع ف ف ق ک کل

م ن و ه ه ی ی

دیوان الخط السعوی Ta'liq

Ta'liq (hanging) was developed by the Persians from the Arabic script, called Firamuz, a simple cursive script in use until the early ninth century. It never gained great favours among the Arabs, despite establishment as a defined script in this century. In the development, the script particularly influenced by Tawqi' and Riqā', and its invention attributed to the calligrapher Taj I Salami. Ta'liq became the native calligraphic style among the Persian, Indian and Turkish Muslims.

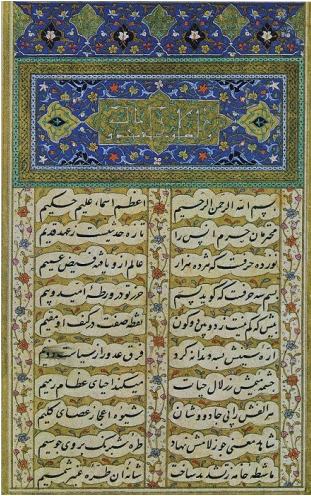
Nasta'liq



An album was written by Mir Ali during his stay in Bukhara, c.1535-40

Nasta'liq (compounded from the names Naskh and Ta'liq) considered as a variant style of Ta'liq. It was developed in the late 15th century by the Persians and has ever since been their national script. The Persian calligrapher Mir Ali Sultan al Tabrizi (d. 1416) was the founder of this script. Legend tells that Mir Ali, a devout Muslim, prayed earnestly to be granted the gift of creating a beautiful new calligraphic style. Imam Ali appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to study a particular bird. Soon afterwards, he was visited in his dreams by a flying grouse and was inspired to model his letters on the shape of its wings. Legend apart, the bold and clear lines of Nasta'liq and its perfectly rounded curves suggest a bird in flight. Its clarity and geometric purity give Nasta'liq a casual elegance which belies its highly sophisticated and strictly applied rules⁴. As the latest style, the curves develop into a most sensual form: round, crescent, or oval. Its strokes are long and sharply pointed in the form of a straight sword.

⁴ Safadi 1978



Jami poem, Nasta'liq and decorated Kufic, Herat, Afghanistan, c.1500

Diwani

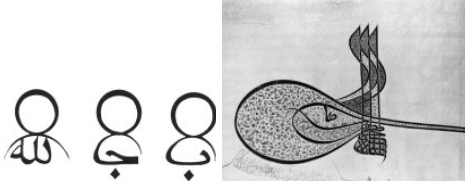
لا ادرى منى و منى
صا ط ع ح ف ف ا ن ك
م ه ه و ه ه ل ل ا



Diwani (left); Peacock in Diwani, a blessing for Ottoman ruler, Turkey, c.1700 (right)

Diwani constructs from a cursive movement accentuated by a balanced up-and-down and right-to-left slant. The visual form of its letters shows a mixture of Thuluth, Naskh, and Rayhani, the latter being a variant of Thuluth. Each letter begins with a downstroke and ends with an upstroke. The rules for this style are attributed to the 15th-century calligrapher Ibrahim Munif, but reached perfection in the 17th century under the pen of the calligrapher Shahla Pasha. Diwani prized by the administration became the noblest manner of writing in the Ottoman chancellery.

Tughra



Tughra (left); Tughra of Sulayman the Great, Mid 16C (right)

The clever use of the Arabic script is Tughra; a symbol of the Sultan's signature. A sentence from the Koran or common prayer wrote in a way that the composition outlines a bird or any animal excepting those considered unclean or of ill omen. Tughra writings were used as amulets by the superstitious masses. A lion or a tiger, a symbol of the valour of Ali, are mostly used. Such animal figures are a ubiquitous object of decorating Muslim homes, serving both decoration and a means of warding off the evil spirit from the house. However, Tughra needed not to be in animal figures and might write in any other ingenious way. The names of Allah, Muhammad, his daughter and those of the succeeding caliphs wrote in various ways to keep in mind the characters of those whom the names signify.*

* (1) Musee d'art et d'histoire 1988, Islamic Calligraphy (2) Ziauddin 1979, A Monograph on Moslem Calligraphy (3) Burckhardt 1980, Art of Islam Language and Meaning (4) Safadi 1978, Islamic Calligraphy (5) A Beit Al Qur'an Publication 1996

I N I T I A T I V E C A L L I G R A P H E R S

You will abandon peace and sleep,
Even from your tender years.
Like unto a qalam you will rub your head against the paper.
Not resting a day or a night from labour,
Discard your desires,
Turn away from the road of covetousness and greed,
Wrestle with the cravings of the concupiscent soul,
...
He who knows the soul, knows that
Purity of writing proceeds from purity of heart.
Writing is the distinction of the pure.
- Epistle of Maulana Sultan Ali -⁵

The ideal of a calligraphist...was to express an emotion, which he strove to realize through the medium of the linear rhythm that his script was capable of producing...The charm of a calligraphic writing is contained in the structure of strokes and curves which aim at producing a graceful movement instinct with universal appeal...A line, by its nature, is symbolic of a movement, of a particular rhythm abstracted from a natural object. A calligraphist selects a particular kind of line which he feels would produce the desired suggestion. His success depends upon the successful execution of the theme of his rhythm. Styles in calligraphy differ from each other in the styles of rhythm they convey.⁶

According to one of the earliest handbooks, the future calligrapher needed specific psychological characteristics: he should be “of sweet character and of an unassuming disposition.” As writing often dealt with sacred words, Sultan Ali also warns in his epistle “Sirat al Khatt” that the calligrapher should not be unclean for a single hour. “Purity of writing is purity of the soul” reflects external purity too. To write the Koran in a worthy style was the highest goal for the calligrapher, and it can be touched or recited only in the state of ritual purity (56.79). A master calligrapher like Shaykh Hamdullah (d. 1519) was an excellent sportsman. His absolute concentration on the target was a spiritual exercise, strengthening both his eye and his mind, for his mystical concentration is at the heart of calligraphy.

Although many Muslims had received a general education in the basics of decent writing, it took more time for them to be rightly called “calligrapher” (*Khattat*). Calligrapher needed an extended study with his master by receiving the permission (*Ijaza*), which gave him the right to

⁵ Qadi 1959, Calligraphers and Painter

⁶ Ziauddin 1979, A Monograph on Moslem Calligraphy

sign his work with his name. A teacher wrote a document in 1775 under the condition that he did not divide a single word to write it on two lines. He always wrote the formula ‘God blesses him and gives him peace’ after mentioning the noble name of the Prophet. Even, he did not place himself arrogantly above his colleagues, ‘I give him permission to write the Kataba’.



A scribe, attributed to Bichitr, Mughal India, c.1625. Leaf from an album

In other words, the person who was interested in calligraphy had to find a master to teach him, individually or in a small group, letter by letter. The pupil then had to spend all day practising, as Mir Ali says:

Forty years of my life were spent in calligraphy;
The tip of calligraphy’s tresses did not easily come in my hand.
If one sits leisurely for a moment without practising,
Calligraphy goes from his hand like the colour of henna.⁷

The pupil should learn how to sit correctly, usually squatting, but also sitting on his heels. The paper should rest on his left hand or the knee; thus it is slightly flexible because the round endings could be written more easily for large pieces. Then he learned the measurements of the letters by the dots and circles introduced by Ibn Muqla. All this happened under the guidance of the master. Mir Ali recommends that “The calligrapher needs five things - a fine temperament, understanding of calligraphy, a good hand, endurance of pain, and the necessary utensils. And if any of these five is missing, then it will be of no use even if you strive for a hundred years.”⁸

The relation between master and pupil was similar to the close and loving relationship between a spiritual guide (Sufi) and his disciple. If someone spoke against the master or annoyed him, it could cause punishment. When a disciple of Shaykh Hamdullah claimed to write better

⁷ Schimmel 1990, Calligraphy and Islamic Culture

⁸ *ibid.*

than his teacher, the disciple soon cut two of his fingers with a penknife, and the wound did not heal for a whole year. The future calligrapher usually began his training early, even before he was ten years old. However, the average age range seemed to have been in the twenties, and calligraphy often connected with individual families. Ibn Muqla's father and brother were well-known calligraphers.

In most cases, the development of a calligraphic career followed the same pattern. They grew up in an intellectual environment and studied, often with relatives. Afterwards, they tried to gain their livelihood as independent or court calligraphers, or joined some practical profession.

During the time of the Abbasids, when the paper had taken into use, and more people educated, the art of book reproduction became extremely important. The scholars including the government officers employed skilled calligraphers as secretaries and amanuenses. In Ottoman Turkey, talented young men from all parts of the country came to Constantinople to receive the training in calligraphy. Many worked as teachers in the imperial or religious schools, offices of the sultan or some vizier, an ethical administration, and a financial office.

It told that Yaqut wrote 1,001 copies of the Koran, which amounts to two Korans a month. Ibn al Bawwab wrote 64 copies of the Koran, of which at least one preserved. The work of calligraphers was always expensive and much admired. They were devoted to their profession and led an almost ascetic life filled with strict discipline. Moreover, they were highly respected in society and had a reputation of having a robust moral purity and religious character.



Permission certificate to Ali Ra'if Efendi, 1796

Hundreds of calligraphers worked in the studios next to the halls of a library. They were grouped copying the Korans; some were appointed to go through the copied manuscripts and to add short vowels and diacritical marks. The caliphs set up the standard and style, and the calligraphers got the credit for educating the masses. Kings and dervishes were also very fond of calligraphy. Sultan Ali of Mashhadi boasted that, despite his being sixty-three years old, his musk-coloured pen did not spoil a single page and manuscripts that he copied ten years later are still beautiful. In Constantinople from 1500 onward, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent was surrounded by excellent calligraphers. The most outstanding of them was Ahmad Qarahisari. His large

inscriptions in roundels at the Suleymaniya mosque are the *Bismillah*, in which he reached the perfection of the large Tawqi’.

In many cases, calligraphers had to work hard to achieve perfection, though a few managed to do so. Every calligrapher must have felt, consoling for a repeat of the same letter thousand of times. A 17th-century writer in Sind expressed: “Everyone who lives through the Water of Life of the pen will not die, but remain alive as long as life exists.”⁹



Middle Age's Arab public library from Al Hariri's Maqamat, Hulwan near Baghdad, 1237

Ibn Muqla (886-940)



Ibn Muqla

Ibn Muqla (“the Son of the White of the Eye”) was the inventor of the six styles of writing (*Sittah*) - Thuluth, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Rayhani, Tawqi’ and Riqā’. He took the circle for the basis of writing, although rounded styles of writing had long been used for correspondence and documents. His full name was Abu Ali Muhammad ibn Ali bin al Hussain bin Muhammad bin Muqla. He was a non-Arab by descent but rose to the prime post of vizier during the reigns of three Abbasid caliphs, Al Muqtadir, Al Qahir, and Al Razi. Around the year 900, Ibn Muqla developed a system of proportioned writing, based on the diamond-shaped dot formed when the nib of a pen made of reed pressed against a piece of paper.

⁹ Schimmel 1990

He utilized his knowledge of geometry and mathematics fixing the measurement of the letters, calculating the length of *Alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet and a straight vertical line, and then extrapolating the size and shape of other letters from the *Alif*. These became the fundamental proportions of the letters and the basic points of reference in measuring the length and breadth of letters. Traditionally, the first script was known as *Muhaqqaq* (“accurate”, “well-organized” or “ideal”), where the *Alif* was nine dots high.

Ibn Muqla brought the easy, rounded and cursive style of Naskh to the world. In his Epistle 6, he shows general principles: “round off the shape of the characters; observe the laws of proportion; clearly distinguish the geometric forms according to their movement, horizontal, vertical, oblique and curved; observe carefully the thickness and thinness of the line; keep the hand steady but relaxed when handling the pen, so that the line shows no sign of wavering. These principles were to give harmonious form to the art of calligraphy.”¹⁰

Throughout his career, Ibn Muqla was in rivalry with Muhamad bin Yaqut and remained deeply engaged in intrigues and counter-intrigues against him until his death in prison. The envious courtiers were not content with his mere imprisonment. His right hand was cut off, and a hole made in his tongue. Finally, in 940, he was killed. Nevertheless, Ibn Muqla remains the best known Islamic calligrapher until today. It said that when his right hand was struck off, he continued to write with equal skill with his left hand. Ibn Muqla established a geometric codification of “*Khatt al Mansub*” (Proportioned Writing) which inspired subsequent scholars after the tenth century.



A follower of Ibn Muqla's writing from the Koran, 1000-01

Many poems and tributes celebrate the talent of Ibn Muqla. Abdullah ibn al Zariji wrote in the tenth century. “Ibn Muqla is a prophet in the art of calligraphy. His gift is comparable to the inspiration of bees as they build their cells.”¹¹ No examples of Ibn Muqla’s work are known to have survived, but he taught his art to many followers, including his daughter who became the teacher of the most important calligrapher of his day, Ibn al Bawwab.

¹⁰ Khatibi & Sijelmassi 1995

¹¹ *ibid.*

Ibn al Bawwab (944-1022)

The second most significant name in Arabic calligraphy is Abul Hasan bin Hilal al Baghdadi, better known as Ibn al Bawwab. He esteemed by sultans and enjoyed favour and high rank. Nobody was equal to him, either in his time or after him. Ibn al Bawwab ("the Son of the Doorman") was born in 944. He began his career as a house painter, but soon turned his attention to calligraphy, and later, was appointed as a librarian. The library contained a thirty-volume manuscript of the Koran penned by Ibn Muqla, but one volume was missing. Ibn al Bawwab was asked to make a replacement for the lost volume, and the calligrapher wrote so successfully that it was impossible to distinguish the replacement from the original. Ibn al Bawwab was told to know the Koran by heart. Though he copied it 64 times, only one copy is known to have survived in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

He proved himself to be the true successor to the great innovator Ibn Muqla, but explored the aesthetic possibilities, making them daily experience. He used a cursive Naskh script, precisely regular according to the proportions and rendered his characters more regular and simple, clothing them in grace and beauty.



The "Bismillah" written by Ibn al Bawwab

Naskh was given its final shape by Ibn al Bawwab. He writes of the calligraphy:¹²

When you propose to cut and nib your reed,
See that your goal is perfect symmetry;
Examine well both ends, and then proceed
To cut the slenderer end, so that it be
Of moderate length, not over short nor long,
Middling the split - that way you will secure
An equal match both sides. With purpose strong
When you have done all this as firm and sure
As any expert certain of his aim.
Next turn your whole attention to the task
Of fashioning the point, for in this game
The perfect point's the nub of what we ask.

¹² Saif-Ur-Rahman Dar 1981

When Ibn al Bawwab died, a poet wrote about him: “The scribes must have had a premonition that they would lose you and that this day would be spent in weeping. That is why the inkwell was filled with black as if it were mourning you, and the pens were split.”¹³ In 1955, R. S. Rice published Ibn al Bawwab’s single surviving manuscript with a well-documented and detailed analysis.



Koran in Naskh, by Ibn al Bawwab, Baghdad, 1000-01 (left); Koran finispiece of Ibn al Bawwab, brown ink on paper, gold, Chester Library, Dublin, 1000-01 (right)

Yaqut al Musta’simi (1214-96)

Among the later disciples of Ibn al Bawwab was the famous Yaqut al Musta’simi. As the calligrapher of the last Abbasid caliphate, he gave the Thuluth script its prominence. His full name was Abu ‘l Majd Jamal al Din Yaqut ibn Abdallah al Musta’simi. He was born in 1214 at Amasya in central Anatolia, a city at that time in Byzantine territory. He was a slave in the service of Caliph Musta’sim Billah in Baghdad, but the caliph saw his aptitude for artistic skills and sent him an apprenticeship to learn calligraphy. He became librarian of a rich foundation and later produced several exquisitely written manuscripts of the Koran with a high reputation in Baghdad.



The Koran in Naskh, written by Yaqut al Musta’simi

¹³ Schimmel 1990

Yaqut was famous for his skill in the Six Pens, the name given to the six scripts as the standard repertory of Arabic calligraphers. He credited with standardizing and beautifying Naskh by trimming the point of the reed pen obliquely and the clipping of its nib the point. But his precise contribution to the development of the format scribal hands has still to be elucidated. He was the one who started the favourite tradition of confining the Koranic page to eleven lines, only with first and sixth and eleventh lines in Thuluth and the remains in Naskh.

Yaqut drew his guidance from the words of His Holiness the Shah, the Refuge of Sanctity, namely: “Cut the *qalam* (pen), so that its point be long, and leave it thick; cut the end of the *qalam* at an angle, after which it should ring like the ringing of Mashriqi’s sword.” He wrote in the six styles of writing with extreme elegance and beauty: “My enchantress writes in six styles, without any trouble: thuluth, rayhani, muhaqqaq, naskh, tawqi’, and riqa’.”¹⁴



Yaqut al Musta'simi on a minaret (left); Surah title, Rayhani and East Kufic by Yaqut al Musta'simi, Baghdad, 1286 (right)

When Hulagu Khan seized Baghdad in 1258, and the Mongol army sacked the town, Yaqut fled to a minaret. He took ink and a pen but had no paper for practising. All he had was a towel, and so he wrote a few words on it. One of his friends happened to take refuge there also asking, “Why do you loiter here? (All) Baghdad has been subjected to massacre and looting, all have been ruined.” Yaqut replied, “Do not worry. I have written a sufficient quantity of what is worth the whole world.” He died in Baghdad in 1296.*

¹⁴ Qadi 1959, Calligraphers and Painters

* (1) Qadi 1959, Calligraphers and Painter (2) Ziauddin 1979, A Monograph on Moslem Calligraphy (3) Schimmel 1990, Calligraphy and Islamic Culture (4) Bloom & Blair 1997, Islamic Arts (5) Saif-Ur-Rahman Dar 1981, The Roots of Muslim Calligraphy (6) Ahmad 1984, Islamic Calligraphy (7) Khatibi & Sijelmassi 1995, The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy (8) James 1992, The Master Scribes

T O O L S F O R P E R F E C T I O N

The arts of calligraphy, illumination, illustration and binding have reached maturity during the middle period of Islam (900-1500). Paper became common for writing, replacing parchment. Rounded scripts were regularized and perfected, taking over the angular scripts of the previous period. Much earlier, the Koran was the most popular book to be produced and embellished, but now, a wide range of books was available. These continued to include manuscripts of the Koran as every Muslim wanted to read. Scientific works, histories, romances, epic and lyric poetry were also copied in fine hands and decorated with beautiful illustrations.

Paper

There is no paper better than Chinese (Khitai),
However much you may try.
Saffron, henna, and a few drops
Of ink are (the means of the test?). Until then, do not approve!
How good is the Samarqand paper!
Do not reject it, if you are wise.
Writing upon it comes out clearly and well,
But the paper should be clean and white.
-Maulana Sultan Ali-¹⁵

Instruments of writing were essential, and much of the Islamic literature on calligraphy dealt with practical matters of sound materials and proper application. Most calligraphers were first and foremost scribes who earned their living by writing holy texts or official documents. Their training, exercises, and finished products were almost all on paper, and it was on this material that nearly all the innovations in Arabic script completed.

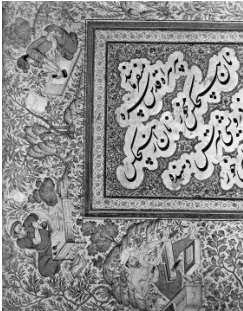
Papermaking was brought to the Islamic countries from China in the eighth century. Some of the Chinese prisoners who captured in a battle near Samarqand between the Chinese and the Muslims in 750 were papermakers, and that was how the technique of papermaking slowly spread westward. Before that, parchment and papyrus were commonly used, although a small amount of paper imported from China. As the paper has the advantage of being difficult to alter what wrote in ink, papermaking spread quickly further to Egypt and eventually Sicily and Spain, while the western Islamic lands continued to use parchment for manuscripts of the Koran, due to the conservative nature of the art of copying the Koran and its practitioners.

When the Arabs learned the skill of making paper, they also improved paper quality with polishing. As the great Chinese invention and discovery of paper went to Europe through the

¹⁵ Qadi 1959

Muslims, Bertrand Russell states that the period of “Dark Ages” in Europe was to the period of knowledge and light in the Middle East, Muslim European and North African countries.¹⁶

Paper became increasingly available, particularly after 1250, and people started to use it for making architectural plans and drawings. Artistic ideas and motifs could transfer over long distances from one medium to another and on a different scale which was impossible in the previous period.



Polish of paper and scribe from the border of the Jahangir Album, India, c.1615

Calligraphy required extraordinarily fine paper. The highly burnished surface was achieved by sizing the paper with vegetable starch or gum to fill in the pores and by polishing it on a board. The sizing and burnishing were carried out by the paper dealer or the calligrapher himself. After this work, he could begin to write. However, he had to practice page after page, using oriental ink that was soluble in water and could wash off again.

“The inkstand is one-third of the writing, the pen, one-third, and the hand, one-third,” says a tenth-century handbook for secretaries.¹⁷ After preparing pens and ink, the paper had to specially treat. Papermaking had a decisive impact on every aspect of Islamic civilisation, while paper became the new medium in written communication. It was on the paper that almost all subsequent invention and reformation of the Arabic script took place.

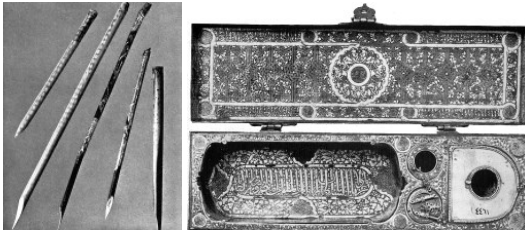
Pen

The Prophet Muhammad said that the first thing that God created was the pen; thus Adam could acquire knowledge and learn the names of various things. A reed pen was the most valuable tool for the calligrapher. Among different qualities, brown reeds, fine and light with a hard outer skin and soft inner fibre are the best. They should be firm to last throughout a long text. Mostly, the

¹⁶ Ahmad 1984

¹⁷ Schimmel 1990

reed pen came from Wasit in Iraq, India, Egypt and the Caspian Sea area. As a high value, they became an object of trade in the Islamic world.



Reed pens, 17C latter - earlier 18C (left); Pen box, Naskh and Kufic, Mamluk sultan Mansur Mohamed), Egypt, 1361-63

The pen had to cut in a slightly different way of writing different scripts, and each master had the own technique of cutting. “Make your knife sharper than a razor; do not cut anything else with it but the pen, and take very good care of it”, was good advice.¹⁸ The penknife had beautiful ornaments and esteemed by the masters. The cutting did on a small plate of ivory or tortoiseshell or similar hard material. The standard pen cut from dry reed, and its length was approximately 10 cm with the width 1 cm and its upper edge rounded. The shaft was curved and blunted at the edges, in order not to hurt or to rub the fingers. Its lower end needed most care and attention from the calligrapher who would cut it to a tapering shape, ending in a point.

The pens were made of different materials which often had a symbolic meaning. For example, a pen made of red copper was used to seal a marriage. For communication with an enemy, a pen cut from the branch of a pomegranate tree used, probably to counteract an evil spell. Reed pens regarded as treasures even in the palaces of the kings, and poetical metaphors described them as “cypresses in the garden of knowledge”. The Fatimid Caliph al Mustansir had boxes filled with all kinds of pens, and Ibn Muqla and Ibn al Bawwab had used some of them.

Ink

The stars of wise sayings shine in the darkness of ink.
-Caliph al Ma'mum-¹⁹

¹⁸ Welch 1979

¹⁹ Ahuan Gallery 1987



A bronze inkwell, Iran, 12C or early 13C, written in Eastern Kufic

With its power to preserve knowledge and extend thought over time and space, the ink compared to the water of life that gives immortality. Humans likened to many pens in God's hand. An essential part of a calligrapher's arsenal was ink. There were many different types and colours of ink, but black or dark brown inks were common. The intensities and consistencies of inks could vary greatly. The basic ingredient was soot. It added to a heated mixture of water, salt, gum arabic, grilled gall nuts, iron sulphate and honey. Yellow inks made with the addition of different metal oxides or arsenic. Silver and gold inks could use, instead. Red, white, blue, and yellow inks were regularly applied, particularly in illuminating headings. A wad of raw silk or cotton was placed in the inkwell to absorb the ink and prevent the pen from overfilling. Inkwells were often works of art themselves. Glass, pottery, precious metals, and Jade also used.

Knife

A good knife was essential to the calligrapher. In Constantinople during the 18th and 19th centuries, there was a whole street, occupied by the masters of this craft. The blades were usually stamped with the maker's signature and sometimes set into a gold or brass lozenge. The highly decorative handles made of ivory, walrus tusk, horn, agate, jade, wood, tortoiseshell, steel or silver, and some were hollow to contain a much smaller knife for splitting the nib.

Makta

The 'open' reed pen laid on a plaque called "Makta", where a raised groove held it in place while the nib cut. They usually made of ivory, walrus tusk, tortoiseshell or mother-of-pearl. These materials were hard but did not damage the blade of the knife. Some had the signatures of makers.*

* (1) Bloom & Blair 1997, *Islamic Arts* (2) Qadi 1959, *Calligraphers and Painters* (3) Welch 1979, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (4) Ahuan Gallery of Islamic Art 1987, *The Calligraphers' Craft* (5) Ahmad 1984, *Islamic Calligraphy* (6) Schimmel 1990, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (7) Khatibi & Sijelmassi 1995, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy*

M Y S T I C A P P R O A C H E S

Arabic calligraphy has a sacramental character. God's first creation was *qalam* (pen) and *loh* (writing tablet). The 17th-century Persian historian Qazi Ahmad asserts:

Through the qalam existence receives God's order,
From Him the candle of the qalam receives its light.
The qalam is a cypress in the garden of knowledge,
The shadow of its order is spread over the dust.²⁰

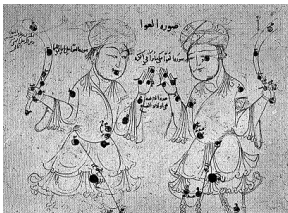
Sacred art is dependent upon mysticism, and for calligraphy, the dependence is particularly direct. In Medieval and later Islam it was generally accepted that perfect calligraphy was a manifestation of spirituality, and this inward perfection was the essential concern of mysticism. B. B. Zakhoder refers to Islam, "The religious consecration of a process of production...is typical for the whole of the Middle Ages, achieves its supreme expression in calligraphy. By maintaining that 'purity of writing is purity of soul', the medieval outlook made on the master calligrapher the same stern demands of asceticism as it did on the members of the religious class."²¹

The Sufis (mystics) and calligraphers traced back their spiritual lineage to the same individual, Ali ibn Abi Talib, who made mysticism and calligraphy closer. During the Middle Ages and even afterwards, the Sufis and calligraphers had close lines that could not separate from each other. Therefore, it would be surprising, if the spread of the reserved Sufi orders throughout the whole of Eastern Islam and in the West during the 13th century should not have affected the sacred art, particularly calligraphy. From the beginning of the 14th century, there took place one of the most remarkable flowerings of calligraphy and illumination.

Even in Muhammad's lifetime, some of his followers did not want to obey his rules merely; instead, they wanted to have a closer relationship with God. They tried to have looser ties with the world to purify the soul of evil qualities. This movement got more followers as Islam spread in the seventh and eighth centuries. The Arab ascetics found imitators in the new areas and among the newly converted non-Arab Muslims. Sufi mysticism existed side by side with orthodox Islam, providing a direct means of contact with God through solitude, prayer, and other techniques.

²⁰ Saif-Ur-Rahman Dar 1981, *The Roots of Muslim Calligraphy*

²¹ Cited in Lings & Safadi 1976, *The Qur'an*



Bootes constellation, astronomy paper, Persia, c.1300



Epitaph, the tomb of Sufi Abd Allah al Ansari, Herat, 15C

Islam stresses the importance of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad, because of the preservation of the divine message and the Prophet's pure mind. Consequently, Muhammad praised in ever-changing images: "The orphan, who recites the Koran without a lesson, drew the line of abolition over the ancient pages, for the message that he brought abrogated all previous revelations." The message itself in the Koran has many references to writing. At the very beginning of the revelation (*Surah* 96), God appears as He "who taught man by the pen," and the first words of *Surah* 68 read: "Nun, and by the Pen!" These sentences have inspired many poets and mystics.

According to *Hadith*, the pen is the first thing that God created. For the Sufi theoreticians, it is regarded as the symbol of the First Intellect. The 15th-century Shia thinker Ibn Abi Jumhur followed Ibn Arabi's system and considered the Divine Throne, the Pen, the Universal Intellect and the premium mobile as the same. Much earlier *Aql* (intellect) interpreted as God's "book written by His hand", and a mythology of the heavenly Book and the Pen developed.

A Persian writer says:

The world found name and fame from the Pen:
 If the Pen were not there, there would not be the world.
 Anyone who did not get a share from the Pen-
 Don't think that he is noble in the eyes of the intelligent.²²

²² Schimmel 1990, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*

The relationship between calligraphy and religion is quite clear. Copying the Koran with often *Hadith* promises was considered a religious act. "He who writes the *Bismillah* beautifully obtains innumerable blessings" or "will enter Paradise." A story tells about a famous calligrapher who appeared to his friend in a dream and said to him that his sins forgave since he had written the *Bismillah* so well. "If a man writes *Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim* and writes it very well and carefully, God will pardon him". It is a Tradition attributed to the Prophet.



"Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim." The sentence starts every chapter of the Koran

All the Islamic arts and crafts have been in some way connected with Sufism, but in calligraphy, this relationship is most evident. A Muslim child begins his learning process with the *Bismillah* ceremony in which the boy is taught the formula *Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim*. His entering into the world of the Holy word, to the points of God's splendour, God's sublimity and God's kingdom was then duly celebrated.

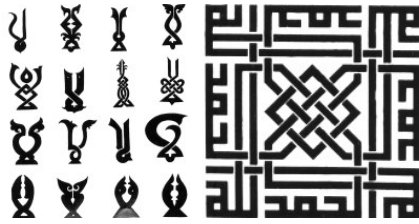
The Koran is the most precious treasure. A modern Turkish author writes, "Even though foreign artists could build mosques, yet they could not write a copy of the Koran. Calligraphers have regarded as destined for Paradise for writing the Koran."²³ As Arabic letters are said to bear sacredness, anything written in them has to treat carefully. Those who picked up a piece of paper with Arabic letters, particularly Sufi, should not destroy it, because the name of God or a sacred word might write on it.

Letters or holy phrases are frequently duplicated, mirrored, and used as ornamentation. Many families had water-filled vessels with Koranic quotations in the case of illness. Sometimes the ink from scraps of Koranic verses or prayers would be washed off for an ailing person's recovery. Weapons had Koranic inscriptions which referred indirectly to the owners' name. Pilgrim's clothes and tomb covers were embroidered with sacred texts, in which sometimes the Prophet was appealed to and blessed, indicating the owner's hope for the Prophet's intervention on Doomsday.

The names of God, or the Prophet, or Ali in rectangular Kufic added to the sanctity of religious buildings, and the words of *Shahada* convey a blessing to the onlooker. Belief in the particular, even the magical efficacy of the letters, the Arabic script was widespread, though learned Muslims were suspicious regarding this aspect of their culture.

²³ Schimmel 1990

Among several expressions on the properties of letters, the most dramatic one is in the writings of the Hurufis, whose *Ilm al Huruf* (the science of letters) gave organized form to earlier occult treatments of the alphabet. This thinking divided the 28 letters into four equal categories, corresponding to the alchemical elements of fire, air, earth, and water. The letters *alif*, *lam*, and *mim* which begin the *Surah al Baqara* (The Cow) of the Koran were believed to have healing powers, and to some other individual letters were ascribed specific strengths too.



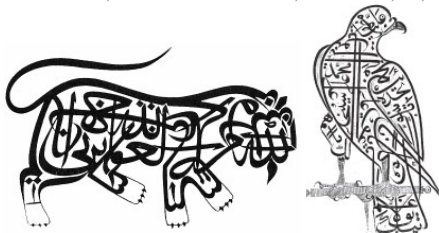
Lam-alif (left); Geometric Kufic alif and lam, al hamdulillah- God be praised (right)

Moreover, the Arabic letters should be metaphorical in poetry, inspired by mystical thought. The letter *mim* resembled a mouth; the ‘*ayn* an eye; and the combined letters *lam* and *alif* of the embrace between two lovers. The Prophet’s name looked like a worshipper bowing in prayer. Ascending vertical letters of the name Allah and *Shahada* was said to be calligraphic evidence for the divine origins of the script and the truth of the faith. In other words, the letters are the expression of a higher order. The thinkers mused on the relation between the written word and its hidden meaning. The mystical interpretation of individual letters may base on Avicenna’s philosophical alphabet, such as *alif-al amr* (the Divine Order), *ba-al aql* (Intellect), *jim-an nafs* (Soul), and so on.

Alif was highly respected in early Islamic thought. For Rumi, the *alif* was honoured by being the first letter of the alphabet, because of its unity and sincerity. As the letter *mim* connects with the Prophet, *alif* and *mim* are letters for God and the Prophet, respectively. The tendency to equate human figures to letters developed out of the art of calligraphy. A modern Turkish author, Ismayil Hakki Baltacoglu, has compared that some letters can be drawn in human shapes and express empathy and antipathy. Thus, one should never combine the inimical letters in a perfect calligraphic representation. “Talking letters” can be found on metalwork, mainly from the 11th and 12th centuries. A contemporary of Husayn Bayqara and Babur in Herat invented letters that looked like animals and human beings. The pictorial representations of the name of Ali belong to the Hurufi tradition. The face was composed of the names of Allah and Muhammad, and the first three imams.



A human face, from the words of Allah, Muhammad, Ali, Hasan and Husayn, Persia, 18-19C



Lion, meaning the power of Ali, Shia's prayer, "In the name of the lion of God, the face of God, the victorious Ali", Turkey, 19C (left); Calligraphy of a hawk, Shia's prayer, Thuluth, written by Muhammad Fathiyab, Persia, early 19C (right)

Oriental calligraphers, especially the Turks, created original pictures of living beings built up from religious expressions and sacred formulas. The pigeon composed of the *Bismillah* in the mystical tradition is one of the numerous soul-birds. The pious bird was a fitting calligraphic symbol. Mustafa Raqim, an Ottoman calligrapher, made his famous stork in 1808. The rooster has used for calligraphic pictures, because of a religious bird in the indigenous Iranian tradition and also an angelic animal that calls Muslims to their morning prayers.

Ali appears in numerous pictures as a lion, written from the *Bismillah*. Flowers also represent pious words. Gul I Muhammadi contains the Prophet's family tree or his 99 names. Lamps were created from letters, reminding Muslims that God is the light of the heavens and the earth. Pictures of sacred buildings, especially mosques, were often constructed from *Shahada* and some additional formulas in a squared Kufic. The Sufis, who had searched for the secrets of the letters and invented new explanations of each letter, reached the point where the letters are "pure otherness which symbolizes everything as far as it is 'other', in connection to God". They found that the letter is "radically incompatible with the quest for the Absolute".^{*}

^{*} (1) Saif-Ur-Rahman Dar 1981, *The Roots of Muslim Calligraphy* (2) Lings & Safadi 1976, *The Qur'an* (3-4) Fritz 1980, *The World of Islam* (ed. by Lewis); *The Mystic Path* (5-6) Schimmel 1990, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (7) Ahuan Gallery of Islamic Art 1987, *The Calligraphers' Craft* (8) Welch 1979, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World*

A P P L I C A T I O N S

Islamic art and architecture had great originality in the whole Islamic world. They had the same character everywhere beyond time and space. One of the places where Islamic art reached its highest level was Egypt. At the beginning of the Muslim conquest, some Christian architects worked for the first caliphs, and there might have been a Byzantine influence in the earliest mosques in Arabia. The first building free of any imitation of other styles was the mosque that erected in Cairo in the eighth century.

Mosque

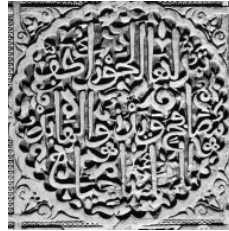
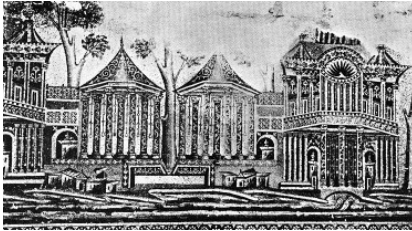
“Do so, but construct no more than three rooms, and above all let no edifice be erected; adhere to the ‘practice of the Prophet; thus will you preserve your rule.’” The assertion of Ibn Khaldun about the Muslims’ ignorance of art proves in the description of the mosques of Mecca and Medina.²⁴ Islamic architecture was not necessarily always luxurious. A mosque could be very simple, just a place in a desert surrounded by walls or, two or three stones piled together, facing towards Mecca. The mosque of the Prophet in Medina was at the beginning tiny. It was made of crude brick and was built open on a stone foundation without decoration. The roof’s material was palm branches, covered with plaster.

The mosque (*masjid*) is the centre of religious life for Muslims. It is a place of prayer and contemplation where people gather together to worship the one and only God. The rites are simple: an annual holy day, ablutions, and prayer five times a day. The pulpit (*minbar*) of the mosque used to be the platform from which important decisions and announcements were pronounced, such as the appointment and dismissal of officials, the first appearance of a new ruler, policy statements, news concerning war and other major events.

Muslims erected monumental buildings to glorify God and the Prophet, and to this, calligraphy added its splendour, raising the governing class above the common, and enhancing the prestige of the building’s patron. Calligraphy appeared in architecture from the end of the seventh century. The earliest known inscription is in Jerusalem. When the Dome of Rock erected, the population of the city was mostly Christian, and Caliph Abd al Malik was aware that their sacred structures made the city very beautiful.

However, as the system of writing Arabic is unsuitable for the preservation of God’s revelations, due to various ways of reading and interpretation, he introduced significant changes. The inscriptions are the earliest evidence for the written text of the Koran, rendered in archaic Kufic script.

²⁴ D’Avennes 1983, Arab Art



Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 705-15 (left); The Alhambra Palace, Spain, 14c, stucco work with Arabic script (right)

The Dome of Rock is the first significant Islamic urban monument and demonstrates Islam's religious essence. The second important inscription is in the mosque of the Prophet in Medina. The building was started in his lifetime and enlarged, rebuilt several times before its completion in 709. The calligraphic verse in archaic Kufic took from the Koran. This mosque inspired the architectural use of calligraphy and how to organize the mosque's internal space. Repeatedly, one of the striking aspects of Islamic architecture is calligraphy as a key element of decoration. Its greatest achievement happened in the Alhambra of Granada in Spain. The brilliant mosaic with stunning Kufic and other styles of calligraphic writings cut in relief with geometrically intricate bands in arabesque.

Islamic civilisation spread gradually further from Arabia. When more major building works took place, the rules became to make for governing the structure of calligraphic texts, their arrangement, themes, and contents. Initially, the subject matter was short, unadorned phrases, inscribed on friezes in particular significant parts of the building. But, when calligraphy was a regular feature of decoration, covering the whole building, the subject matter draws not only on quotations from the Koran but also phrases celebrating the glory of Islam and so on.

Religious and political texts from *Hadith* showed at the Royal Mosque of Isfahan in the early 17th century. And secular buildings bore pious epigraphs; thus nearly every wall of the Alhambra palace displayed the sentence, "There is no Victory but God." Poetic texts, signature monograms (*Tughras*), funerary inscriptions, information on commissioning the building, the names of patrons, and details of historical circumstances added. Later, famous public figures and words were applied purely for decorative effect without meanings.



Minaret of Shah Mosque, Isfahan, Iran, 1611-38

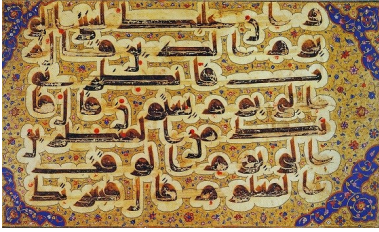
The Koran Copying

Of all the Islamic arts, the art of writing was the most superior. All writers from the monarch down to the humblest men competed with each other to determine whose writing was the most beautiful. The central position of the Koran to the Islamic faith and its status as the divine revelation have meant that for centuries Muslims have made copies of their scripture as fine as their resources permitted. This pious desire for good manuscripts led to creating the most impressive examples of religious art. Arthur Upham Pope relates,²⁵

The Koran was the sole way to life and salvation. Upon it depended on the whole structure of society, the order of the day and the path to the future. Supernatural in origin, the final authority and standard of the good in life, it was deserving of every tribute that human skills could lavish upon it, and from the tenth to the 12th century, its pages were ornamented with such knowledge and such sure feeling for splendid design that these early pages remain today almost the greatest achievement in the history of Abstract art.

The earliest still existing copy of the Koran is believed to have copied at Mecca or Medina in the late eighth century. It was written in the Ma'il script, exceptionally, in vertical format. The other surviving are done in Kufic script in black or dark brown ink and afterwards occasionally in gold, on white vellum. The Kufic Korans were all oblong, but Koranic inscriptional panels in mosques were horizontal. Its long, thick horizontal strokes give it momentum, despite its overall static quality. Until the beginning of the ninth century, the Kufic Korans had little illumination, but gradually, the developing art of illumination afforded many ornamental devices to the Koran and served necessary functions in arranging the Koranic text as well.

²⁵ Cited in Ziauddin 1979



Koran lea, early Kufic, Abbasid, North Africa, 8-11C

Umar ibn al Khattab, a close companion of Muhammad, urged the first Caliph Abu Bakr to commit the Koran to write. The Prophet's secretary, Zayd ibn Tahbit, was ordered to compile and collate the revelation into a book and was later codified by the third Caliph Uthman in 651. This canonized redaction was copied into four or five identical editions and sent to the main Islamic regions as standard manuscripts; first in local variants of the Jazm script, then in Kufic, and further in most of the various Arabic scripts that developed in the Islamic world. From the time of Ibn al Bawwab to the end of the 14th century, two groups of the script divided. Naskh, Muhaqqaq and Rayhani were for the Koran writing, and Tawqi', Riqqa', Thuluth and Kufic for inscriptions such as chapter headings, colophons and other complementary written material. Ibn al Bawwab's Koran (1000-01) wrote in a consistent and well-proportioned script for understanding the verses quickly.

The Koran has a small volume (17.5 x 13.5cm) of 286 brownish paper folios and contains 114 chapters (*surah*). Each text page has 15 lines of the round script written with a straight cut reed pen to produce letters of equal thickness. The inscription gives the name of the chapter, several verses, and place of its revelation, Mecca or Medina. Muslims know them by a common name or title.

Ibn al Bawwab's Koran is the first example that has chapter headings in the gold, cursive Thuluth script, written on an undecorated ground with a palmette medallion in the margin. The brown ink subtly enhances with blue and gold. Chapter headings, five double pages of illumination and tables at both the beginning and end of the book enrich with white, green and red. The combination of script and ornament make this manuscript a masterpiece, which Ibn al Bawwab signed in a colophon at the end. In the same way as most early manuscripts, this was written on parchment. It also exhibits the horizontal layout, more frequent than either the nearly square or the upright format.

Almost all early Korans that still exist wrote in Kufic. A later variant, Eastern Kufic, introduced oblique elements and played with the contrast between thick and thin pen strokes. In Iran, various forms of Eastern Kufic continued in use until the 12th century. More cursive styles became the standard for writing the Koran from the 11th century onwards.



Koran Surah 96, Thuluth and Kufic, Mamluk Egypt, 14C (left); Muhaggaq Koran, Kufic-Abbasid with a decorated frame, Iran 15C (right)

At this time, the Korans developed in format, material, script, and decoration. It took place first in Iraq and affected most other parts of the Islamic world except for the Maghrib where a more conservative style of book production was maintained. In the early 14th century, the Koran production reached its highest point in the Mamluk and Il Khanid empires. On the other hand, the arts of the book in the Eastern part came under the influence of a new style formulated in the Timurid courts of Western Central Asia.

Gold was initially the most crucial element in the Kufic Korans, but by the middle of the tenth century, blue became more used than green and red. In the East, blue reached the same level soon as gold, whereas in the West, gold preserved its original supremacy over blue. Other pigments had the collective value for harmonising total effect in combination with the two framework colours. As the colour of light, gold is intrinsically a symbol of knowledge and extrinsically teaching or manifestation. Blue in the presence of gold is Mercy, inclined to reveal itself.

Coins

Coins and monetary paper note are tokens of consciously chosen visual forms and symbols. They are the official transcripts to indicate the prestige and power of the ruler. During the classical Islamic period, the variety and spread of mints were practically due to the necessity of political power and domination condition. The independent sovereignty of the rulers was validated by the appearance of their names on coinage and praying for blessings upon them in the Friday sermon. The design of monetary currency had a wide consequence, because of the historical indicators of the “official” aesthetic and conceptual values, and its portability. The Arabs of Mecca and Medina did not have their coinage before Muhammad. There was no need for new currency during his time, but in the seventh century, they issued their first coins in the regions conquered by them, influenced by the Byzantine or Sassanian Iran prototypes.

A gold dinar from 692-4 shows three standing figures on the front and imitates coins of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. The Christian symbolism was removed simply by eliminating crosses and changing the Byzantine imperial costume to Arab dress. The most notable addition was the Islamic profession of faith (*Shahada*) inscribed around the edge on the reverse. Gradually, the coinage was consolidated in the epigraphic normative style, indicating the formal coins made by the imperial powers.



Gold dinar, imitated Byzantine coin, Syria, 694-97 and 696-97

Minting in Syria began in Abd al Malik's time. By the end of the seventh century, the Arabic alphabet had assumed its role. A decree from the Caliph Abd al Malik (685-705), the fifth Umayyad ruler, ordered that Arabic should be the official language of Islam and that epigraphic statement should replace the ruler's portrait on coins. From this time on, word and non-image gave value to legitimize the rule on coinage. On documents, minarets and objects, the ruler's name, not his face, symbolized the state.

After 698, with few exceptions, coinage is purely epigraphic, presenting Koranic and other pious texts, combined with relevant information about the ruling caliph, the minting lord, date, and place of minting. Abd al Malik's epigraphic coinage remained the standard for centuries, and rarely coins contained images. The lack of images is that it is God, the *Musawwir*, who shapes and forms images. The human figure to make the image in stone or in the paint was wrong.

Ceramic and Tiles

One of its most essential features of Islamic art is the ceramic tradition. Although ceramics were used for domestic objects, bowls, and jars, but have more significance on architectural facades. Entire structures, both inside and outside, have been covered with beautiful and colourful tiles. Tile work already knew in pre-Islamic times, and later, several superior innovations were introduced, such as the use of the lustre to create a metallic sheen. Several design techniques like cobalt blue on white surfaces started, while love for colour, geometry, and pattern made ceramic

items into brilliant artistic creations. Tiles were a favourite architectural adjunct, which produced a delicate surface. The decor and writing were made to suit the purpose of the structure.



Tile, Surah 2.285, Thuluth, Kashan, Iran, 13C (left); Blue Kufic in earthenware, Mesopotamia, Iraq, 9C (right)

Kashan was one of the key centres for tiles, other ceramic plates, and bowls. While individual pieces built a huge ceramic mural, single interlocking star and cross tiles collected into friezes for mihrab niches. Each tile on these friezes had its independent design, frequently structuring a border of the cursive inscription. The script was from Koranic quotations, *Hadith*, and verses of poetry. Sporadically it contained historical information, date, and the name of maker and place of manufacture. Within the calligraphy, the design ranged from arabesques to human figures and animals with finely delineated foliage. Later, during Safavid and Qajar times, the tiles were collectively composed into large narrative panels.

Tiraz Textile

Muslims had a custom of honouring a distinguished person by giving him a fine robe, in which the name and titles of the caliph, the workshop, the names of its director, place of manufacture and date in formal Kufic or in the later cursive script included. Textiles have two basic functions: dress and furnishings. Everyday clothes' material is cotton or wool; ceremonial robes of honour are silk such as Tiraz. Furnishings are utilitarian items; rugs, wall hangings and cushion coverings.

Tiraz is a significant fabric with official inscriptions. It is made with wool or linen ground, then of silk with linen one. The textile technique had its origin in Sassanian Iran and transported to Egypt, mainly in the Coptic workshops on the Nile Delta and Fayyum regions. It has the *Bismillah* or other inscriptions of pious wishes, titles, and names of the caliph's family, the governor or the minister who superintended Tiraz, the weaver's name, place of manufacture and the year. Tiraz functioned like medals or coins for robes of special honour or presented to members of the court on important occasions.



Kufic in plain cotton, Yemen, 11C



Thuluth in weaving textile, 'Glory to our lord the Sultan', Spain, 15C

After the fulfilment of imperial requirements, the excess fabric sold to the public. Fatimid Egypt used a lot of the Tiraz tradition. The ruler owned workshops, and a select steward would bring the finished robes ceremonially. The robes were distributed several times during the year. Not only clothes like robes but also everyday clothes such as stockings would have an inscription to bring merit to the wearer and owner. An ordinary and inexpensive article of daily wear would be significant as a result of the inscription. *

* (1) D'Avennes 1983, Arab Art (2) Khatbi & Sijelmassi 1995, The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy (3) Ettinghausen 1980, The World of Islam (ed. by Lewis): The Man-Made Setting (4) Bloom & Blair 1997, Islamic Arts (5) Ziauddin 1979, A Monograph on Moslem Calligraphy (6) Welch 1979, Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World (7) James 1992, The Master Scribes (8) Lings & Safadi 1976, The Qur'an (9) Safadi 1978, Islamic Calligraphy (10) James 1998, Qurans of the Mamluks (11) Ettinghausen 1997, Arab Painting (12) Hofstra University 1996, Inscription as Art in the World of Islam

I S L A M I C O R N A M E N T

Islamic ornament seems to be conceptual and intellectual rather than emotional, expressing contemporary ideas of beauty and aesthetic concepts to communicate Muslim thoughts and to reflect the spirit of their times. In the context of a belief that ‘God alone is the Creator’, a new way of expression in ornament was created, using floral, geometric, and epigraphic motifs, bringing ambiguity to their function as purely decorative, but also as possessing significant meaning.

Islamic ornament was inherited from Byzantine and Sassanian culture, and changed over time, stretching from Spain to India and Indonesia. Therefore, it cannot be understood without detailed studies of the regional, social, and temporal variations of the techniques and use of individual motifs. Islamic ornament consists of three genres: arabesque, geometry, and calligraphy.



Islamic ornament at Al Hambra, Nasrid dynasty (1232-1492), Granada, Spain.

Arabesque is a stylized form of the vegetal scrolls, signifying a concept of Paradise. Kühnel in *Die Arabesque* (1949) argues that arabesque is the most expressive artistic manifestation. Many debates on the term “arabesque” took place over a long period, ranging from the sole vegetal scrolls to the whole range of Islamic ornamentation. Moreover, Islamic ornament is best shown in geometric patterns where basic devices of repetition, rotation, and reflection found, evoking mystical thoughts. As the only novelty, calligraphy became the chief means of expressing symbolic connotation and aesthetic beauty. Muslims understand it as a visible form of the revealed Word of God, the Holy Koran. It is no wonder that a fine script had to develop as a Muslim’s religious duty, and the most appropriate ornamentation for mosques. Arabesque, geometry, and calligraphy are integrated to maximise their beauty and symbolism.*

* (1) Mitchell, G. (ed) 1978, *Architecture of the Islamic World*, Thames & Hudson (2) Hillenbrand, R. 2001, *Studies in Medieval Islamic Architecture*, The Pindar Press (3) Baer, E. 1998, *Islamic Ornament*, Edinburgh Univ. Press (4) Riegl, A. (1893/1992), *Problems of Style: Formation for a History of Ornament*, Princeton Univ. Press (5) Burckhardt, T. 1976/1980, *Art of Islam Language and Meaning: The Common Language of Islamic Art*, World of Islam Festival Publishing Company Ltd (6) Ardalan, N and L. Bakhtiar 1973, *the Sense*

PART II

The extraction of part two is an empirical research to prove Islamic calligraphy as a means of Islamic art and Muslim Identity.

of Unity: The Sufi Tradition in Persian Architecture, Univ. of Chicago Press (7) Irwin, R. 1997, *Islamic Art*, Laurence King Publishing (8) Grabar, O. 1973/1987, *the Formation of Islamic Art*, Yale Univ. Press (9) Davies, J. G. 1982, *Temples, Churches and Mosques, a Guide to the Appreciation of Religious Architecture*, Blackwell

K U W A I T

Kuwait, the name of the country and the capital, became an independent country on June 19, 1961. Its size is about 17,818 square kilometres, and topographically, it is an almost entirely flat desert. The climate is hot and dry with sandstorms and rain in the spring. Kuwait has borders with Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The population of Kuwait is 2,200,000, of these 800,000 are Kuwaitis (ethnically Arabs), and 1,400,000 are non-Kuwaitis from different countries. The Constitution specifies “a hereditary emirate” and fixes succession among male descendants of the late Mubarak al Sabah.



The discovery of oil in 1936 brought Kuwait to become one of the richest countries in the world. Kuwaitis have a right to a job and a loan for a house which is given by the government. The majority of them work in governmental positions, while non-Kuwaitis provide the human resources needed in professional and technical occupations. Until age fourteen, all citizens and foreigners undergo compulsory education, and all education is free from preschool through university. The official language is Arabic, although English is widely read and spoken in official and government circles and is considered the second language in the schools.

Most Kuwaitis are Sunni Muslim, and about 20 percents of citizens are Shia. Most foreigners are also Muslim, and the majority is Sunni. The *Dewani*, a traditional sitting room, plays a vital role in Kuwaiti life. It is a place for social gatherings where aspects of duty and social, economic or political problems discuss.

C A L L I G R A P H Y & I D E N T I T Y

A short while after the residence in Kuwait in 1998, the researcher found out the importance of Arabic calligraphy as a tool for Kuwaitis' daily life directly or indirectly. Reading the Koran is their duty. Mainly, Muslim artists and calligraphers use calligraphy in their work to express the Muslim identity to the West. In researching this subject, the collection of information is not sufficient, because the method of data collection depends on the type of issue and the subjects. Consequently, two modes (quantitative and qualitative data) approached. The multiple choice technique is a convenient way to gather general information in a statistical form. On the other hand, a qualitative method of more-in depth knowledge can support the validity of quantitative data.

Accordingly, a survey conducted by questionnaires concerning the role of Arabic calligraphy in modern Kuwait. The respondents ranged from artist, calligrapher to computer designer in related fields in Kuwait. Of the 26 recommended candidates, 20 replied to a 19-item questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 15 multiple-choice queries and four short answer requests, either structured or not. During this process, a few difficulties met: 1) understanding Arabic or English, 2) contacting people by pager, mobile, and fax at certain times, 3) Kuwaitis' attitude to non-Muslim foreign women and, 4) lack of enthusiasm for academic research on calligraphy.

The data compiled from the survey analysed in two ways. The first analysis tabulated the cumulative statistics in the form of percentages of the entire survey group. Afterwards, the respondents' few comments were noted down to enrich the question information. The second analysis sought to examine noteworthy opinions on particular questions. The finding of the survey can identify "Arabic calligraphy as an illustrative tool for religious and applied art in modern Kuwait". It can also examine the relationship between calligraphy and Muslim identity.

More detailed information is as follows:

Artist: Abdul Khader Hasan, Ahmed Abu al Adas, Jaber Ahmed Mokkar, Mohaad al Shekh al Faresi, Ms. Haya al Khalifa, Nabeel Ali, Naser al Rifai, Qasem Yaseen

Calligrapher: Abdul Elah Abu Jaish, Monther Ganam, Naif al Haza, Zuhair Zuharr, Pseudonym

Artists/calligrapher: Ali al Bidah, Farid al Ali, Fadel al Rais, Hmood al Anizy, Khariy Mohammed Farran, Mohamed al Moathen

Computer designer: Waleed al Askar

Letter from Khajal al Qatas

السيدة الفاضلة / سووك لى نيقيونا

تحية طيبة وبعد

أولاً أود أن أشكرك على الاتصال وارسال الفاكس والذي يجعل في طياته كثير من الحكمة... والاستفادة.

وأما بالنسبة للخط العربي وتشكيله في لوحاتي فهو قليل جدا ومن الصعب أيضا أن يقال بأنى من الفنانين الخطاطين ، ففي الساحة كثير من زملاء الفنانين الكويتيين والمعروفين وأنا سأذكر بعض الأسماء لعل ذلك سيفيدك كثيرا إذا ما اتصلت بهم هذا إذا لم يكن تم الاتصال بهم مسبقا . الفنانين المعروفين باهتمامهم بالخط العربي هم : قاسم ياسين ، فريد العلى ، وليد فرهود ، جابر احمد ، ناصر الرفاعي وكثير غيرهم .

وأما أنا فالخط العربي لم أتأوله في أعمالي إلا قليل جدا ولا اذكر بأني عملت أكثر من عمل أو وعلى العموم هذه فرصة سعيدة بان تعرفنا عليك وأسعدنا كثير اهتمامك بالخط العربي وما يتناولون ...عملين الفنانين في لوحاتهم من تشكيلات تزيد الخط العربي جمالا وتطوره في التشكيل وتطويقه الى ان يصبح لوحة فنية ، هذه الاهتمامات التي تواصلين في دراستها ستوصلك الى جماليات الخط العربي والى تاريخ هذه اللغة على كل حال مرة ثانية أشكرك وأرجو لك التوفيق ...التقديمه
وتحياتي لك ،،،

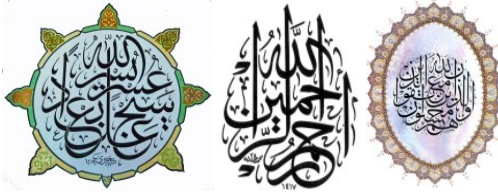
الفنان / خزعل القاص



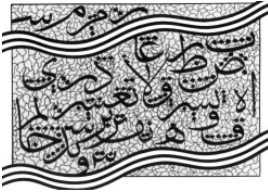
Ahmed Abu al Adas; Fadel al Rais



Ms. Haya al Khalifa; Jaber Ahmed Mokkar



Abdul Elah Abu Jaish; Khariy Mohammed Farran; Mohamed al Moathen



Mohaad al Shekh al Faresi; Zuhair Zuhrrar; Monther Ganam



Nabeel Ali; Naser al Rifa

Questions

1. What do you consider to be the most important element of your work?

- a. Artistic concept and idea as an artist: 70%
- b. Quality of the artist's craftsmanship: 20%
- c. The message of Islam as a Muslim: 10%

The central importance for artists and calligraphers is the artistic concept and idea, but delivering the message of God should not be neglected. (1) I need the message of Islam as a Muslim as well because my art is related to religion. I cannot get away from the message, as my works are about the Koran and Islam. Idea and message are both valuable to me. (2) I am a serious Muslim artist and calligrapher. I need to give people messages from God through my writing.

2. To what extent do you consciously utilize principles of calligraphy in your work?

- a. Very mindful of incorporation with calligraphy principles: 60%
- b. Somewhat mindful: 0%
- c. Rely on momentary happening: 40%

The rule of calligraphy is necessary but is not obligatory all the time. The difference between artist and calligrapher is that artist creates calligraphy with ideas, while calligrapher must follow the rule. However, calligrapher sometimes breaks the rule. (1) Without a specific rule, calligraphy cannot be beautiful. The man who knows all the rules knows how to break them. I do not care about any rule, although it can destroy the beauty. I am looking for the beauty, relying upon the moment. (2) Every letter should be written very precisely.

3. A few calligraphers refused to be called “artist”, saying that “I am not an artist, but am a calligrapher”. What do you feel most about you?

- a. Calligrapher: 25%
- b. Artist: 40%
- c. Both calligrapher and artist: 30%
- d. No comment: 5%

The definition of artist or calligrapher is not clear in Kuwait. The purpose of the artwork determines the title. If the idea found, the person referred to as an artist. Two types of calligraphers exist - classical and artistic calligraphers. Classical ones follow the rules of calligraphy and do not believe in abstract modernism; artistic calligraphers use the aestheticism of alphabets in the formative art. However, Arabic calligraphy, both classical and artistic, should be classified as the formative art, because it follows the rules of a balanced aesthetic structure, considered space, formation, and direction. Moreover, calligraphy in many parts of the world generally recognized as the formative art. (1) I do not write calligraphy but draw calligraphy. I have an artistic feeling and do not mind to religion. I only care about art. As a calligrapher, you would compare with other calligraphers all the time, but as an artist, you have freedom. (2) I feel myself both artist and calligrapher. I want to be an artistic calligrapher.

4. If you do not wish to be called “artist”, what is the main reason?

- a. Calligraphy as a religious tool for the homage of God: 7%
- b. Calligraphy as superiority than art from early Islamic tradition: 45%
- c. Calligraphy as the only skill of enabling to execute your work: 7%
- d. No comment: 41% (this belongs to artists)

Calligraphers prefer to keep their titles, because calligraphy is considered a more superior tool than art, according to the early Islamic tradition. (1) I do not like to call “artist” all the time. Calligraphy, for me, is a way to pay homage to God. The tribute to God every moment is very important in my life. (2) Calligraphy is more challenging to make, because you have to follow the rules with discipline. Many artists cannot write calligraphy. That is why they imitate calligraphy. Calligraphy has admired all the time.

5. If you use calligraphy for your work, what is the reason for it?

- a. The best way to pay tribute to God: 25%
- b. The most suitable tool for your work, keeping Muslim identity: 55%
- c. The easiest and safest method to sell your work: 5%
- d. No comment: 15%.

Calligraphy is the foremost means of keeping Muslim identity. (1) People know that I am a Muslim, and calligraphy is the alphabet of the Koran. (2) The beauty of calligraphy enforces me to work with it. Calligraphy is a trademark for Muslims.

6. How much control do you have in determining the use of calligraphy for your work?

- a. Complete: 40%
- b. Partial: 50%
- c. Little or none: 10%

Calligraphy is used for artworks both entirely and partially. (1) I use calligraphy for almost 100% in my works. (2) Partly, when I take calligraphy only to my work, I make a decoration with colours and patterns on it.

7. How much does Western art influence your art?

- a. Greatly: 15%
- b. Partially: 35%
- c. Very little: 50%

Western art has influenced artists and calligraphers very little. (1) Colours and techniques of Western art taught me a lot. Nevertheless, designs are absolutely mine. (2) From the beginning, I completely influenced by my own Islamic culture, but started to see the works of Western-style through magazines and the Internet.

8. If you use calligraphy for your work, which way do you use?

- a. Classical and traditional calligraphy: 45%
- b. Abstract and free in styles of calligraphy: 10%
- c. Combination of the two styles: 45%

Both the classical and combination of classical and abstract styles favoured among artists and calligraphers. (1) As a calligrapher, I use classical calligraphy. As an artist, I use modified Kufic in a modern style. (2) Combination. If you write calligraphy, you must repeat the same thing all the time, and I do not like it.

9. What is your favourite calligraphy style in your work?

- a. Elongated and straight (Kufic): 10%
- b. Curved and round (Naskh, Diwani, Thuluth, etc.): 35%
- c. Combination of straight and curved styles: 50%

d. No comment: 5%

The combination of straight and curved styles mostly applied to art and calligraphy. (1) Combining both lines suits best for painting, due to the artistic beauty of calligraphy. (2) Combination. For me, the beauty of calligraphy means everything, allowing movements three-dimensionally.

10. Which material do you generally use for your work?

a. Paper: 45%

b. Textile: 5%

c. Others including paper (Please specify): 50%

Paper is used for classical calligraphy, but for other purposes, all materials and techniques are allowed.

11. How do you execute your work?

a. Manual work (by hand): 85%

b. Computer aid: 10%

c. Combination of manual work and computer aid: 5%

Calligraphy should be written only by hand. (1) I do not like a computer. There is no human touch. When I use my hand, I feel that God is with me. (2) I do not consider selling my works, because they did by a computer.

12. Whom do you consider primarily when you start to work?

a. Yourself as a Muslim artist: 50%

b. General viewers: 40%

c. Galleries/ Art buyers/ Art commissioners: 5%

d. No comment: 5%.

Concerning their work, artists and calligraphers think of themselves first, then of general viewers. (1) Public viewers: My work should be international, regardless of Muslims or non-Muslims. (2) I am a Muslim and must be honest with myself. (3) Being myself first: I discover something new and enjoy it for my happiness. (4) I love to do. I do what they want to see in their eyes.

13. For which purpose is your work being used?

a. Religious message to Muslims and non-Muslims: 55%

b. Art as a decorative purpose: 20%

- c. Applied art for daily practical use: 20%
- d. No comment: 5%.

The purpose of calligraphy is to deliver a religious message to Muslims and non-Muslims. Calligraphy applies to the decoration and daily use. (1) I do not want to use my work just for the message of the Koran, but somehow for applied art. I want to show that calligraphy is not only for the Koran, but it also is the most beautiful art in the Arab world. (2) I want to keep Arabic folklore, culture, and heritage.

14. Are you employed or self- employed?

- a. Employed: 15%
- b. Employed and Independent: 50%
- c. Independent: 35%

Artist and calligrapher are employed or Independent.

15. How do you promote your work?

- a. Through personal contact: 50%
- b. Selling through galleries: 45%
- c. Commissioned by others: 5%

Sales of artworks made through personal contact and galleries. In Europe, there are art agents, but in Kuwait, we do not have them.

16. List a few calligraphers and artists who have influenced your work.

Foreign calligraphers from Iraq, Turkey, and Iran have influenced Kuwaiti artists and calligraphers greatly, and most of Kuwaitis studied calligraphy abroad.

17. List a few contemporary calligraphers and artists you admire.

Contemporary artists and calligraphers from Iran and Turkey are the most popular among Kuwaitis.

18. What are the advantage and disadvantage of using calligraphy in your work?

Calligraphy has more advantages than disadvantages. For advantage, calligraphy distributes the words from the Koran and enhances Muslim identity. Besides, it endows human beings with beauty. For disadvantage, calligraphy needs much time and demands an understanding of the Arabic language. (1) My reason for being calligrapher was that I found myself in calligraphy. (2)

For disadvantage, I believe that non-Arabic people do not understand the language, but can see and feel the beauty of calligraphy. For advantage, Arabic calligraphy is a direct and clear message and is easy to be learned and understood by Muslims. (3) One of the advantages is; 'pleasure for general viewers; decoration for Amir (King); and money and beauty for the poor people.' I do not see any harm in calligraphy.

19. Comment about calligraphy as an illustrative tool for religious and applied art in modern Kuwait.

In Kuwait, calligraphy plays a vital role as an illustrative tool for religious and applied art. (1) I would not do calligraphy if there were no money to earn and time enough. It is a professional job for me and others too. (2) Calligraphy as a religious means; I hope to distribute my new art calligraphy to all over the world to change the idea about our Islam. Western people think that Islam is blood and killing, but is a flexible religion.

Several other findings observed during fieldwork and interviews.

- Muslim artists and calligraphers often emphasize the word "Islam".
- There is no modern invention in calligraphy.
- Religious calligraphy more seriously treated than an artistic one.
- The words of the Koran should not display on the ground.
- Kuwaitis love calligraphy more than modern art.
- In the applied art form, calligraphy found on textiles.
- Calligraphy shows on television, in newspapers, and on the streets.
- Calligraphy is the most suitable form for illustration in Kuwait.
- Historically, calligraphers were highly respected; now they are not.
- Between classical and artistic calligraphers, conflicts exist.
- Calligraphers who write Thuluth feel superior to others.
- Calligraphy is considered to be a creative hobby and pleasure.
- Artists and calligraphers do not have financial problems.
- Calligraphers are relatively small in number, compared to artists.
- No calligraphy school or association has founded yet.
- The majority of artists and calligraphers learned calligraphy abroad.
- Calligraphers' qualification is generally low without a family tradition.
- Artists and calligraphers do not practice enough, despite their workspace given.
- Calligraphers write poems and love music.
- Some calligraphers work as a religious leader at mosques.

Conclusions

From all the findings, Arabic calligraphy has significantly applied to religious art in Kuwait as an illustrative tool for keeping Muslim identity. Moreover, it has utilized the beauty in an applied art; thus Muslims can enjoy calligraphy with pleasure.

The homage to God every moment in my life. Keeping identity. I love calligraphy. Calligraphy is a special art of Islam. For me, beauty means everything. Arabic calligraphy in Kuwait became one of the Kuwaiti elements. Calligraphy is a trademark for Muslims. Without it, no Kuwait exists.

Arabic calligraphy created for the writing of the Koran. Muslims must read it to honour God and to deliver messages of Islam to non-Muslims at the same time, as a duty. The exception does not find in Kuwait. Arabic calligraphy has been loved among Muslim Kuwaitis and will be enlivened in their hearts as long as the country exists on this globe. It strengthens Kuwaitis' identity, due to a precious gift from God who provides a strong relationship between Him and Muslim Kuwaitis. And for non-Muslims, it is its beauty.

Recite in the name of thy Lord who created,
Created man from a clot;
Recite in the name of thy Lord,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught man what he knew not
(The Holy Koran 96.1-5)

PART III

The extraction of part three highlights the relationship between Islamic calligraphy and Muslim Identity.

C O N T E M P O R A R Y

Calligraphy derives its strength from the act of reading, and that of looking without reading. There is...an imbalance between the two, a displacement, scansion and a loss of meaning...a picture in process of developing from its original conception. It opens the way to another stage of reading, that of their writer, who searches continually for an emotional and perceptual rhythm for the written structure that he strives to create. It is within the very syntax of a style that one senses this desire for rhythm and for ways of varying it: the variations of appearance...belongs to modern art.²⁶

The Calligraphic School is not limited to a single country, but reaches across the Islamic world and shares a collective identity. It consists of all works where artists have used calligraphy in their art for identity. The school began when the Iraqi artist Madiha Umar held an exhibition of letters in Washington, D.C. in 1947. It was liberation from the word. This awakening of calligraphy spread to the whole Arab world, and reached their zenith in the 1980s, although independent experiments of works separately did. Different artists tried different ways, and four main types of school arose.

The first one is “pure” calligraphic works, in which the meaning of letters and words plays an important role. The second is “abstract” works which abstract the letter and the word from its original context and meaning. The third is “figurative calligraphy” including human, animal, and other recognizable shapes that formed with writing. The last is “calligraphic combinations” which range from mixed media with a background of Arabic script to paintings with superimposing text on the image.

Despite the similarity of material and formats to Western style, these works are non-Western, pointing to a culture in which the writing has historically played a central role. This clear, non-Western element is attached to the issue of identity, and Arab artists confirm that identity has many aspects worth exploring. An artist says: “assertion of one’s identity is an act of survival”.

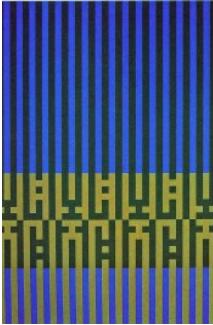
When Arabic artists showed their work for the first time to the international stage in the early post-colonial years, they had ideas full of old western masterpieces and a new stream of modern avant-garde. They were trained as Western artists, but felt “marginalized”. No matter what they did, they ran the risk of being dismissed as mere foreign imitators. They had to cast about for a visual vocabulary that would reflect their cultural identity. Arabic script was the answer. “Using calligraphy in contemporary modes tells people, ‘this is how we are trained, but we’re not cut off from our heritage, and our heritage did not stop with the demise of the Ottoman Empire”.

This case is apparent in works of Zenderoudi, an Iranian artist, who has lived in France since 1961. The desire for a culturally identifiable art stirred him. “I wanted to take advantage of the

²⁶ Khatbi and Sijelmassi 1995, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy*

richness of Eastern art and mix it with Western art to produce a synthesis in works that would be avant-garde". Calligraphy, words and letters became the means to self-knowledge, providing the tools to express his hope too: "a truly universal language of geometry, rhythm, proportion, space, light colour". As a result, Arabic calligraphy moved from mosques, monuments, and the page of manuscripts to framed canvases, metal sculpture, and tapestries with beautiful colours and shapes in the last four decades.

However, the Calligraphic School had its destiny. After the '60s and '70s, numbers of calligraphic works gradually diminished, as many artists no longer dealt exclusively with letters and script. At the same time, the younger generation chose international modes of expression like video art and installations that have no connection with Arabic culture. Whether calligraphy or writing appears as an artist's primary concern or not, it is "a means to identify the modern Islamic artist". (Lee, A. L. 1997, "Letter Word Art")



Boullata goes to the linguistic and symbolic roots of calligraphy. Instead of playing with calligraphy, he takes it as the foundation of Islamic art. For him, the arabesque is a geometric development of Arabic letterforms, providing the basis for its vegetal and floral motifs. Within classical Arab science, geometry, mathematics and the form of letters share an identical basic structure. However, the artist does not intend to teach the grammar of signs of science and history, but his job is to enable us to see ourselves. His works are written in Kufic with a pure line and a certain angle, as he attempts to uncover the secrets of

Arabic lettering by this transparent linearity. Being inspired by classical calligraphy, his works brought him to an important status in contemporary art. He enjoys examining the kind of abstraction that characterises the art of Islam.



In Korashi's engravings, the appreciation of the spatial directions lets viewers know that the artist is left-handed like the Arabic alphabet. The strength of his work is that the viewers have no idea of the starting point and its end. His art has no distinction between form and formlessness, structure and chaos. It is this quality which distinguishes graphic art from other art. Korashi also created a connection between Arabic writing and painting for pure signs both from Western and Far Eastern ones. His art plays a bridge between civilisations. He discovered that each word is already inwardly written before being pronounced and written in

any particular style. Despite the readability of his work, time still needed for them to read. Reading is not linear, although he follows the rule of the line: it suspends duration, separating

language from its immediate signification. Calligraphy has a root at the point where the word is a painting, a visual form.



Shaker Hassan has developed a theory which symbolizes painting as the artistic identity of the Arab intellectual. He sees language as an “open field in which all known aspects of contemporary Arab civilisation are in operation”. If the letter loses all links with language, one can achieve a logical complement. What an artist does is a transformation of calligraphy, writing, and language into a pure sign and visual line in other symbols, taking ideas from everywhere. Hassan throws letters into the space of abstract art by liberating

them, as a means of new abstraction. He integrates the violating action within abstraction. Then there is no longer calligraphy, but with an extended space in which the painted letter, whether readable or not, refers back to itself.



Hossein Zenderoudi is a versatile Iranian artist in traditional calligraphy. He has shown his capability of creating compositions with various single letters. Among his multiple series of letters with a meaningful phrase, sometimes one can find it hardly readable, because of the saturation of letters in the whole space of his painting. However, he is capable of losing its original written form, retaining only its moment and essence. He knows a rhythm behind his successful calligraphy. Sometimes, his letters are differently presented: horizontal, vertical, slanting and

reversed to give effect, so that the writing can move in the space. Or, the artist brings the viewer into a maze where one is liable to “trip on a reading of a word”. The artist desires to create an image in which the conscious viewer can read the letters both as signs and as images equally. Zenderoudi inherits a great graphic tradition in calligraphy, miniature painting, and illumination. (Khatbi and Sijelmassi 1995)



Mohamed Zakariya is a calligrapher and artist. He works with both Arabic and Ottoman Turkish language. He considers: the meaning is cast into the art by a proficient master artist and preserved for the future like a recording of a musical performance. Just as one can love opera without knowing Italian purely for what is communicated, great calligraphy can enjoy without reading. The reading makes visual communication more involved. Words frequently appear banal

or trite with repetition, but when enveloped in an exquisitely written form, they are renewed and enriched. In his calligraphic compositions, almost invariably the entire process is completed by himself which includes the preparation of writing paper, the making of *ebru* (marble paper used for borders), blending the ink, illuminating with gold leaf. (Hoifstra Museum 1996)*

* (1) Khatbi and Sijelmassi 1995, The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy (2) Lee, A. L. 1997, Letter Word Art (3) Khatbi and Sijelmassi 1995 (4) Hoifstra Museum 1996, Inscription as Art in the World of Islam-Unity in Diversity

S E A R C H I N G F O R S E L F

Naser Afjehee

Naser Afjehee has been working as a calligrapher-artist and influenced Kuwaiti calligraphers and artists. My interviews with him took place both in October 1999 during his visit to Kuwait and my visit to Iran in January 2000.



(Why do you use calligraphy in your work?) Calligraphy is a kind of communication. It is important both for Muslims and others who use calligraphy. See old paintings from the Far East and Hartung's modern art! I am a Muslim and use calligraphy for my painting, due to its international language. Moreover, calligraphy is a kind of graphic design. A section of calligraphy has logotypes, and language is a sign. So, I choose calligraphy to show my idea to be understood. I add poems too. Although people do not know the Persian language, they can understand my idea. My "painting calligraphy" is communication like that of TV and radio.

(Is Arabic calligraphy used in different ways?) There are two types. The first is "classical calligraphy". A calligrapher writes calligraphy only for aesthetics, showing the principle of calligraphy, as he learned from his master who taught him to follow the rule. This calligrapher does not have a new idea. The second is "painting calligraphy" which I am trying. Artists use calligraphic alphabets for the basic design of the painting. This painting calligrapher uses colours for different compositions. With what he creates, he can speak with a new language, because he realizes his ideas into work. In short, the only difference between the two types is "idea" as new material.

(Does an idea of "painting calligraphy" connect with your identity as a Muslim?) I do not copy the materials or techniques of others. Everybody should have his source; otherwise, he would be named "He is a copy of mine". You might copy how to use brushes from Van Gogh, but you never do it as he did. "When I see your work, I can still guess that this is yours, even though you are absent". Through my work, I can show my real and unique identity which also has a background as a Muslim.

(What is the role of a “painting calligrapher”?) “Classical calligraphy” during Safavid as the best was my first love, but, later, I changed. I had different ideas because painting bears symbols. For example, graphic designers use a very simple form of calligraphy for telling messages. A painter must be a graphic designer. He can only show a simple sentence with the idea. If your painting cannot tell a short sentence, you cannot tell your idea either. You are unsuccessful. Contemporary artists use short sentences to show their ideas. Painting is an international language.

(How is it possible to become a master of calligraphy?) When a master was a student, he had to practice very hard until he could arrive at the same writing as his master. But becoming a master means a new beginner at the same time, like a musician. You have to practice enough so that you can decide to be a composer or a violinist. You have to specialise in your calligraphy.

(Why do you use Iranian love poems in your work?) In Iran, you can find many poems, which gave meanings to Sufis. Iranian poems based on religion. We are religious people. Hafiz, the famous poet, used the words of the Koran. We are dealing with painting with our sense. We are searching for our romantic feeling within religion. When we read poems, we can catch powers or energy from God.

(What is your favourite style and colour?) Nasta’liq. When I finished school, I got a degree in Nasta’liq. But I know all the styles. I can design the Arabic alphabets. I use various colours like vocabulary, such as white for peace. Olive green is my main colour.

Farid Al Ali

Farid Al Ali’s 500 calligraphic designs for the Prophet Muhammad’s name are used at schools in the Arab world. My interview took place in September 1999 in Kuwait.



(Are you both artist and calligrapher?) If you see my works, I am both an artist and a calligrapher. I participate in all exhibitions with other artists and calligraphers.

(What is the mission for you, using calligraphy?) What I like to show to people is I am trying to mix calligraphy and art. If you are a Muslim, you feel happy when you read words from the Koran. To non-Muslims, I want to show that we, Muslims, have flexibility in Islam through

the variety of simple calligraphy design.

(How can you make non-Muslims understand you?) From the start, I do not make a complicated design. I discuss with non-Muslims about the whole procedure of doing calligraphy. But sometimes, I create complicated things and leave them to my viewers' imagination. They can try and understand them to step by step. After a while, they can feel that this is the Arabic script.

(Do your colours have a meaning in your writing of the Koran's words?) Yes, there is a meaning for myself. I like to put many colours. Islamic script uses colours, but I want to make modern colours with Islamic design.

(By which style are you most influenced?) My designs are mostly architectural Kufic due to its simplicity. I like Diwani too.

(Besides giving messages to people about Islam, do you do works for sale?) No, not all the time. I made many exhibitions all around the world at my own expense. My works are not just for sale, but I want to say that our Muslims' mind is big, and God gives us useful knowledge, nourishment, and unlimited imagination.

Qasem Yaseen

As an artist, Qasem Yaseen expresses the beauty of Arabic calligraphy to his mix media. My interview with him was in October 1999 in Kuwait.



(What is the distinct character in Arabic calligraphy?) If you see Chinese characters, you find lines and circles. English letters have lines and angles, while there are a triangle, circle, and half edge in Latin. But Arabic calligraphy is one type in the world which finds all these things: triangles, lines, and shapes. Everything is in there. You can create

so many things from Arabic calligraphy. If you cannot find the word of the Koran from my work, then you can find figures or shapes, which are moving through space. I make abstract calligraphy without details. I create the same, but the new effect as does in traditional styles. They are design-related. I do "calligraphy painting": open and loose, no geometry and shape. I open up calligraphic lines related to ground space. If you see my calligraphic words, you can play with them. My words are playing on the ground. My line is dancing.

(Do you have a reason for using colour?) Through centuries, most mosques used blue, because it was easy to get it. Islamic art created from the Koran, from which I get my main inspiration. I explain the words of the Koran with my colour paintings.

(Why do you favour calligraphy, despite your study in the West?) When I was doing my master degree in the U.S.A, I wanted to do new things. My professor told me: “Do not do arts which we are used to doing. Do not try to do full abstract either. Try to do something new which is different from other countries, but which we can understand. Make things which connect to your environment.” I do not have any interest in a still-life style or traditional Kuwaiti things. In general, Bedouins (nomads living in the desert) connect with a falcon, but I do not feel to do it. If it is not a fascinating subject, I do not feel to do it and do not do it. I found that the strongest, biggest and most exciting thing is the work of God. I have collected all Arabic calligraphy since then.

(How do you promote your message to non-Muslims?) First, I translated the titles of my works in English, so that non-Muslims could understand the meaning behind, but I realized that they were more interested in my three-dimensional shapes, lines, and painting techniques which I had learned there. If you can understand Arabic, you know what it means. Furthermore, calligraphy effects visually to non-Muslims. Although they cannot understand the words, they can get a benefit from it, becoming emotional and passionate for calligraphy. They are allowed to feel the beauty of calligraphy because the words of the Koran give artists a new power of creation. God is the Creator.

(What is your style?) My character is to work with space. I show up moving figures in space. For “painting calligraphy”, I have to work with the concept. I also want people to understand that my message, new style, and technique are different from others. Many famous calligraphers use the Koran for decoration. They are decorators. I am an artist, painting the words of God. I want to come out from the title of a calligrapher. I recreate Koranic words through painting. The rule of calligraphy controls you if you are a calligrapher. I am an artist who controls calligraphy.

(Does Arabic calligraphy provide you with a stronger identity as a Muslim?) No. I do not lose my identity, whether I do with calligraphy or not. But, when I work with calligraphy, I feel the strongest.

Abdul Al Arab

Abdul Al Arab owns a calligraphy school in Manama, Bahrain. My interview with him took place in January 1999 in Bahrain.



(Do the different Islamic countries have preferences for different styles of Arabic calligraphy?) In Egypt, they write all kinds of scripts. In Iran, they use their calligraphy, Farsi. Now, the new generation prefers Thuluth. However, I learned Thuluth, the most difficult one, in Egypt.

(What is a difference between Arabic & Chinese calligraphy in the material?) For Arabic calligraphy, we only use a pen, not a brush used in Chinese calligraphy.

(When did you start calligraphy, and what are you doing now?) In 1975, I went to a particular institute in Cairo to learn calligraphy from old masters, since there was no such school in Bahrain. This institute was the first of its kind in the Arab world. There, I was lucky to study for four years. After, I worked at the Bahraini Ministry of Defence as a calligrapher for 17 years. I became one of the founders of “The Society of Bahrain Calligraphers”. Now, I am writing, teaching, and participating in international art exhibitions.

(What was the reason for opening a calligraphy school?) Unfortunately, we had a few calligraphers in Bahrain at that time. We did not learn calligraphy at school either. So I could open a school, not only for teaching calligraphy but also for keeping our heritage, because Bahrain is a Muslim country. After returning to Bahrain from Egypt in 1990, I established a school. Bahrain people were happy with it, especially Arabic language teachers.

(What are your teachings?) Calligraphic letters. Beginners start with Kufic and end with Thuluth or Naskh. Contents are poems, Koranic words, and *Hadith*. We, Arab artists, use calligraphy for the part of our life, as it is our Muslim culture and character. Although many artists went to the West to learn art, they came back. Calligraphy is the most suitable for modern art with a variation.

(How long does it take to learn basic calligraphy at your school?) It takes minimum one or two months if you study 16 hours per week. I have an exercise book which students must follow. Many young people and children learn calligraphy.

(What is your working process?) I do sketches with pencil and ruler; then I write it with a pen. The best pen comes from Iran. Using the correct pen is imperative. Depending on the material, different results come out. I use black ink. I put silk in the inkwell for the control of ink in pen. I sometimes place colour to calligraphy and execute it by silkscreen, a kind of modern art. Now,

commercial calligraphers use a computer, due to its fast and cheap reasons. I also work with advertising.

(Which style do you feel better between classical calligraphy or modern?) I am working for both, but I prefer the classical one. I like contemporary art with Arabic letters which look classical. I am a calligrapher and designer. My works are “design calligraphy”.

(What is your style?) I write all types, but I like old Kufic. I write the words from the Koran, but I do not follow the rule of calligraphy anymore. Every calligrapher has his character. Some people break up the rule. Best calligraphers are Iranian, but Arabs have a close relationship with them.

(How can non-Muslims understand your message?) It is impossible to understand it if you do not know the Arabic language. However, you can feel it.

Ali Al Bidah

Ali Al Bidah learned both the rules of calligraphy and its aesthetic beauty from distinguished Egyptian and Turkish calligraphers. He has received prizes in competitions. My interview with him was in May 1999 in Kuwait.



(Why do you need calligraphy?) There is a strong relationship between the Koran and Arabic calligraphy. Kufic already showed in the Koran after its invention. To write the Koran, we needed calligraphy. Of course, I need it to give a message of Islam to the people.

(How many types do you have in Kuwait?) We have many types, at least five, which we are using. Some types are still alive, and some disappeared. Different schools of different types. However, Iran favours of Ta'liq, and Turkey Diwani. I prefer to Iranian style. I also take from Turkey. In Kuwait, calligraphers and artists are mixing with everything. It is nothing to do with our mentality. When you become professional, you can choose your style.

(What is your advice for material?) We have different tools for writing. The best quality made from bamboo material. You should not write so hard. Otherwise, you cannot move your hand. But not so light either. You have to cut bamboo very sharply with a special knife. The pen needs a hard edge. Iranian one is good. The thickness of writing depends on the different cutting of angle. In calligraphy, the angle is critical. It decides the beauty of calligraphy. You also prepare correct ink,

so that you do not need to put your pen twice in the inkwell. Becoming a calligrapher demands much quiet time. For a beginner, I recommend to use different magic pens, ordinary HB pencils and tracing paper for repetition of writing calligraphy.

(What is the beauty of calligraphy?) Each style has its character. Not all the time, you can make variations of it. You must follow the rule of calligraphy. The hidden beauty of calligraphy comes from straight lines and neat shapes of letters. If the line is not neat, calligraphy does not look good. You have to correct it. Calligraphy is architecture- space between length and width of letters. You can have linked or separate letters. Vertically, *Alif* (the first letter of the alphabet) has 12 dots, and horizontally, seven dots. It is the most beautiful balance. The relationship between verticals and horizontals decides the whole beauty.

(Why do people like calligraphic works?) Without understanding Arabic, you cannot read calligraphy. However, I believe that some people like our works, because of strange ideas with the rule of calligraphy. It is “design calligraphy”. Someone like our works, due to new techniques and different media, while someone for the harmony of colour. When I explain of “peace”, I use green, as colours have meanings. It means, some like our works, caused by their interested in art. But some can understand the meaning of the Koran, despite no idea of styles of calligraphy, and whether the writing is wrong or not. Therefore, we use the favourite part of the Koran.

(What is the easiest way to learn calligraphy?) Start with the easiest one! Kufic is the easiest way to do. You can use a ruler on ordinary paper. First, measure and follow the rule of calligraphy. After that, you can combine Kufic with other cursive styles. Cursive scripts give you more artistic feeling.

(How do you like calligraphy done by computer?) Sometimes, I use a computer to show my work. Calligraphy should do by hand. It is the human touch.

Mohammed Qambar



Islamic civilisation has its brightness all over the world. It greatly influenced the world heritage and contributed to the happiness of humankind. Arabic calligraphy is a prominent feature of the Islamic civilisation which contributed to the spread of numerous features of life worldwide. Calligraphy is a means for aesthetic expression and a way to become closer to God as well as a feature of worship and purity. When the Muslim artist adopts Arabic calligraphy as a means of expression, then he deepens his faith in God and the Holy Koran. Therefore, I found that Arabic calligraphy has beautiful components. I formed them with spiritual and psychological coherence with a link to the movement. Accordingly, I have executed the collection of works - 'pictures', quoting Arabic letters with its partial beauty and, added to the beautiful oriental ornaments which bestowed the beauty on the whole (Artist, Kuwait, February 2000).

Fawaz Abdulla Al Dowaiish



Arabic calligraphy has been known since the dawn of Islam and is the language of the Holy Koran. Muslims highly value it; it is the language that granted the Arabs distinctiveness and beauty among the world civilisations. Islamic civilisation has been characterised, during the past era, with these beautiful writings and ornaments which are now evidence of the existence of this civilisation. And these artistic works are being displayed in museums of Islamic and foreign countries. Therefore, I used Arabic calligraphy in my ornamental works and shaped them accordingly. Artworks that harmoniously did by using Arabic calligraphy make the viewer feel that they are like musical and beautiful artwork. I want to register Arabic calligraphy for the coming generations. Since pottery is an old art craft that lasts for ages to come, I used calligraphy in this art to be a highly artistic work (Ceramist, Kuwait, February 2000).

V O C A B U L A R I E S

Allah the name of God among Muslims.

Ablution the ceremonial washing of parts of the body or of sacred vessels.

Arabesque geometric patterns with intertwined leaves, scrolls on forms of Islamic art after the tenth century.

Bismillah (from the Arabic *Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim*, “in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”) The invocation with which a pious Muslim begins most utterances and activities.

Byzantine of “Byzantium”, dated from Constantine’s transfer of the capital to Constantinople in 330 until the Ottoman capture of the city in 1453.

Caliph the chief Muslim civil and religious ruler, regarded as the successor of Muhammad’s death in 632.

Hadith the traditions relating to the life, deeds, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The second source of Islamic Law after the Koran.

Hajj a Muslim who has been to Mecca as a pilgrim, and also a title given to such a pilgrim.

Hegira Muhammad’s departure Mecca to Medina in 622, the date from which the beginning of the Muslim lunar calendar is calculated.

Islam submission to God. The religion of the Muslims, monotheistic faith revealed through Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah, and the Muslim world.

Kabaa a sacred building in Mecca, the Muslim Holy of Holies containing the sacred black stone.

Koran “revelation” or “recitation”. The sacred word of God as dictated to Muhammad and written down in Arabic. A primary source of Islamic law.

Kufic an early angular form of the Arabic alphabet found chiefly in the decorative inscription, which was popular in early Islamic times.

Madrassa a theological college, often founded by Sunni Muslims.

Mihrab a niche or slab in a mosque to show the direction of Mecca, in which Muslims pray.

Minaret “place of light”. A tall tower attached to a mosque. It is often used to call the faithful to prayer.

Minbar the stepped pulpit in a mosque used by the preacher or community leader for the Friday prayer.

Mosque “place of prostration”. Muslims’ place of worship.

Muslim “one who submits to God”, a follower of the Islamic religion.

Qibla the direction of prayer. All Muslims pray towards Mecca.

Ramadan the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, during which strict fasting is observed from sunrise to sunset. One of the five duties of Muslims.

Shiite Muslims who believe that leadership of the Muslim community passed from the Prophet Muhammad through his son-in-law Ali.

Simurg a monstrous bird of Persian myth, with the power of reasoning and speech.

Sufi mystics, whose very personal approach to religion became increasingly important alongside the communal practice of Islam.

Sunni one of the two main branches of Islam described as orthodox. Differs from the Shia in its understanding of the Islamic law and in its rejection of Ali as Muhammad’s first successor.

Tiraz “embroidery”. Inscribed fabrics made in state workshops and distributed by the ruler to his courtiers. Also, refers to the inscriptions on such fabrics.

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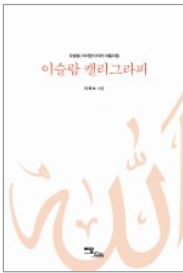
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(Images from different book sources above.)



Detailed information on Islamic Calligraphy and Moslem Identity can be found in a Korean book version, called “Islam Calligraphy”. Published by Korean Studies Information, 2014. <http://ebook.kstudy.com>

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