

Islamic Art and Spirituality

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II

The Spiritual Message of Islamic Calligraphy

*The beauty of writing is the tongue of the hand and the
elegance of thought.*

(‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib)

*Handwriting is jewelry fashioned by the hand from the
pure gold of the intellect.*

(Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī)

THE PRIMORDIAL creative act was at once the Primordial Word which is the origin of all sound and of the Noble Quran as a sonoral universe, and the primal Point which is the origin of the sacred calligraphy that is the visual embodiment of the Sacred Word. The Primordial Word was not only the single *kun* or *Be!* whose echo created the whole Universe and which is contained in the Noble Quran as sound. It was also crystallized in the ink with which the Divine Pen (*al-Qalam*) wrote the realities of all things (*al-ḥaqā’iq*) upon the Guarded Tablet (*al-Lawḥ al-Maḥfūz*), upon the pages of that archetypal book that is none other than the Quran as the ‘Mother of Books’ (*Umm al-kitāb*), the ‘Book’ containing the inexhaustible possibilities of Divine Creativity. The Holy Book itself attests to this ‘ink’ in the verse, ‘If all the trees in the earth were pens, and if the sea eked out by seven seas more were ink, the Words of God could not be written out unto their end.’ (xxx1;27—trans. M. Lings)

In the same way that the psalmody of the Noble Quran as the sonoral sacred art of Islam *par excellence* is the origin of the traditional sonoral arts, so is the art of calligraphy, which reflects on the earthly plane the writing of His Word upon the

Guarded Tablet, the origin of the plastic arts. Quranic calligraphy issues at once from the Islamic revelation and represents the response of the soul of the Islamic peoples to the Divine Message. The points traced by the Divine Pen created at once the celestial archetype of Quranic calligraphy as well as the lines and volumes of which the cosmic order is constituted and from which issues not only natural space, but also the space of Islamic architecture. In the mystery of the Point, represented by the diacritical point under the first letter which opens the Noble Quran, namely the letter *bā'*,¹ is to be found the principle of both Islamic calligraphy and Islamic architecture, the principle of both the sonoral and plastic arts, the root of both of which is to be found in the Sacred Book. The points and lines of Islamic calligraphy with their inexhaustible diversity of forms and rhythms are related to that Supreme Divine Precinct at whose centre resides the first Point which is none other than His Exalted Word. The Master of Illumination, *Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī*, begins one of his prayers with these words: 'O Master of the Supreme Circle from which issue all circles, with which terminate all lines, and from which is manifested the First Point which is Thy Exalted Word cast upon Thy Universal Form.'²

The Guarded Tablet contains the archetypes of all earthly forms and more particularly of traditional Quranic calligraphy, all of whose styles are made possible by, and reflect, the sacred character of the Revealed Book. Islamic calligraphy is the visual embodiment of the crystallization of the spiritual realities (*al-haqā'iq*) contained in the Islamic revelation. This calligraphy provides the external dress for the Word of God in the visible world but this art remains wedded to the world of the spirit, for according to the traditional Islamic saying, 'Calligraphy is the geometry of the Spirit'.³ The letters, words and verses of the Quran are not just elements of a written language but beings or personalities for which the calligraphic form is the physical and visual vessel. Through the writing and reading of these letters, words, and verses, man enters into contact with these beings and talismans which have come ultimately from the far 'other' shore of universal existence to guide man back to the abode of the One. For him who understands the signifi-

cance of the Quran in both its spoken and written form, 'it is easy to understand the capital part played in the life of the Moslem by those sublime words—the verses of the Quran; they are not merely sentences which transmit thoughts, but are in a way, beings, powers or talismans.'⁴

Inasmuch as there resides a Divine Presence in the text of the Quran, calligraphy as the visible embodiment of the Divine Word aids the Muslim in penetrating and being penetrated by that Presence in accordance with the spiritual capabilities of each person. The sacred art of calligraphy aids man to pierce through the veil of material existence so as to be able to gain access to that *barakah* that resides within the Divine Word and to 'taste' the reality of the spiritual world. 'Calligraphy and illumination are as it were compensations for such contingencies as ink and paper, a "step up" which makes it possible, in a flash of wonderment, to approach more nearly and penetrate more deeply the Divine substance of the Quranic text, and thus to receive a "taste", each soul according to its capacity, of the Infinite and the Eternal.'⁵

Although calligraphy has developed in numerous forms and has embraced functions and domains not directly related to the text of the Quran, something of this principal wedding between calligraphy, which began in a purely Quranic context, and the spiritual substance of the Quran has survived within all aspects of traditional Islamic calligraphy. It has come to occupy a position of special privilege in Islam to the extent that it could be called the progenitor of the traditional Islamic visual arts and the most characteristic feature of the visible aspect of Islamic civilization.⁶ It has become identified over the centuries with culture itself, good calligraphy being taken as a sign of a cultured man and a disciplined mind and soul as well as hand. Calligraphy has continued to be the central visual art with its numerous applications ranging from architecture to poetry. Calligraphy is the basic art of creation of points and lines in an endless variety of forms and rhythms which never cease to bring about recollection (*tadhkār* or *dhikr*) of the Primordial Act of the Divine Pen for those who are capable of contemplating in forms the trace of the Formless.

The Spiritual Message of Islamic Calligraphy

Through the qalam existence receives God's orders,
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.⁷

The Pen or *Qalam* is the Active Pole of Divine Creation; it is none other than the Logos which manifests all the possibilities or Divine Archetypes hidden in the "Treasury of the Invisible" by imprinting the Guarded Tablet with the letters and words which are the *paradigma* of all earthly forms. The calamus with which the human hand writes is a direct symbol of that Divine *Qalam* and the calligraphy it traces on paper or parchment an image of that Divine Calligraphy which has written the very reality of all things upon the pages of the cosmic book, leaving an imprint upon all creatures by virtue of which they reflect the celestial origin of their existence. For as the sixth/twelfth century poet Mīr Mu'izzī has stated,

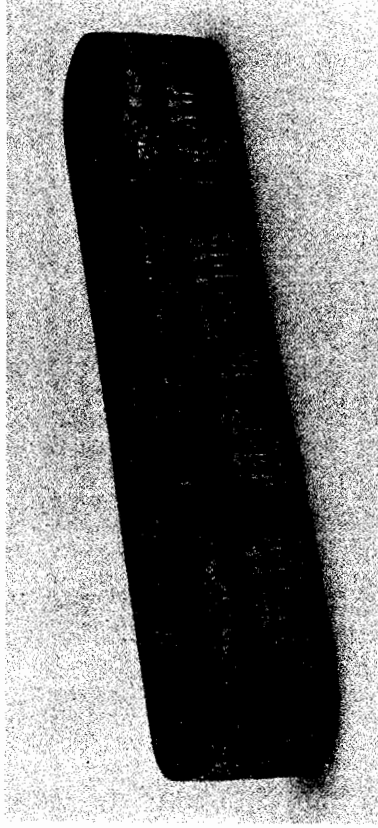
Inscribed upon the pages of the earth and sky
The line: "Therefore take heed, you who have eyes."

The human calamus is usually a reed and thus evokes not only the beautiful lines and forms of traditional calligraphy but also the haunting melody of that sacred music of the lovers of God which calls them back to their Origin in Divine Proximity. It is the reed to which Rūmī alludes in that immortal verse that opens his *Mathnawī*:

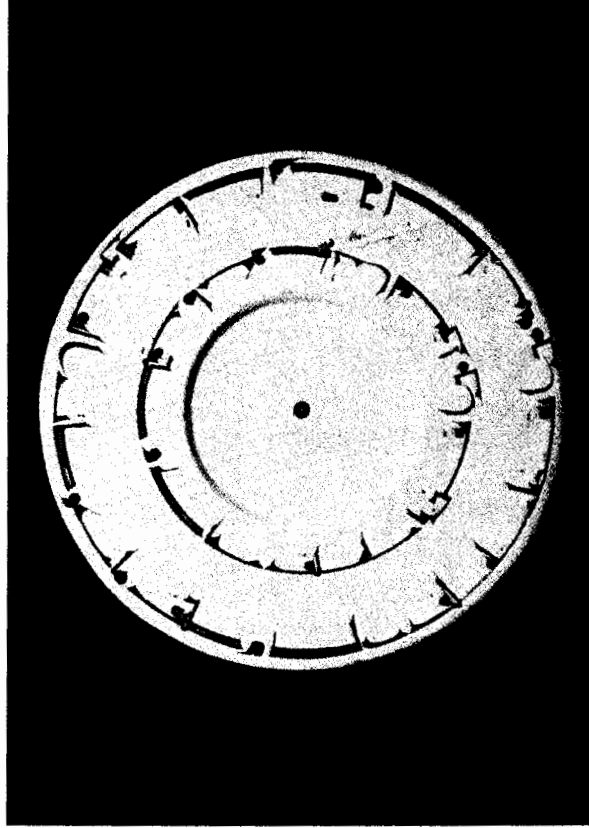
Harken to this Reed forlorn,
Breathing, ever since 'twas torn
From its rushy bed, a strain
Of impassioned love and pain.

(R. A. Nicholson's trans.)

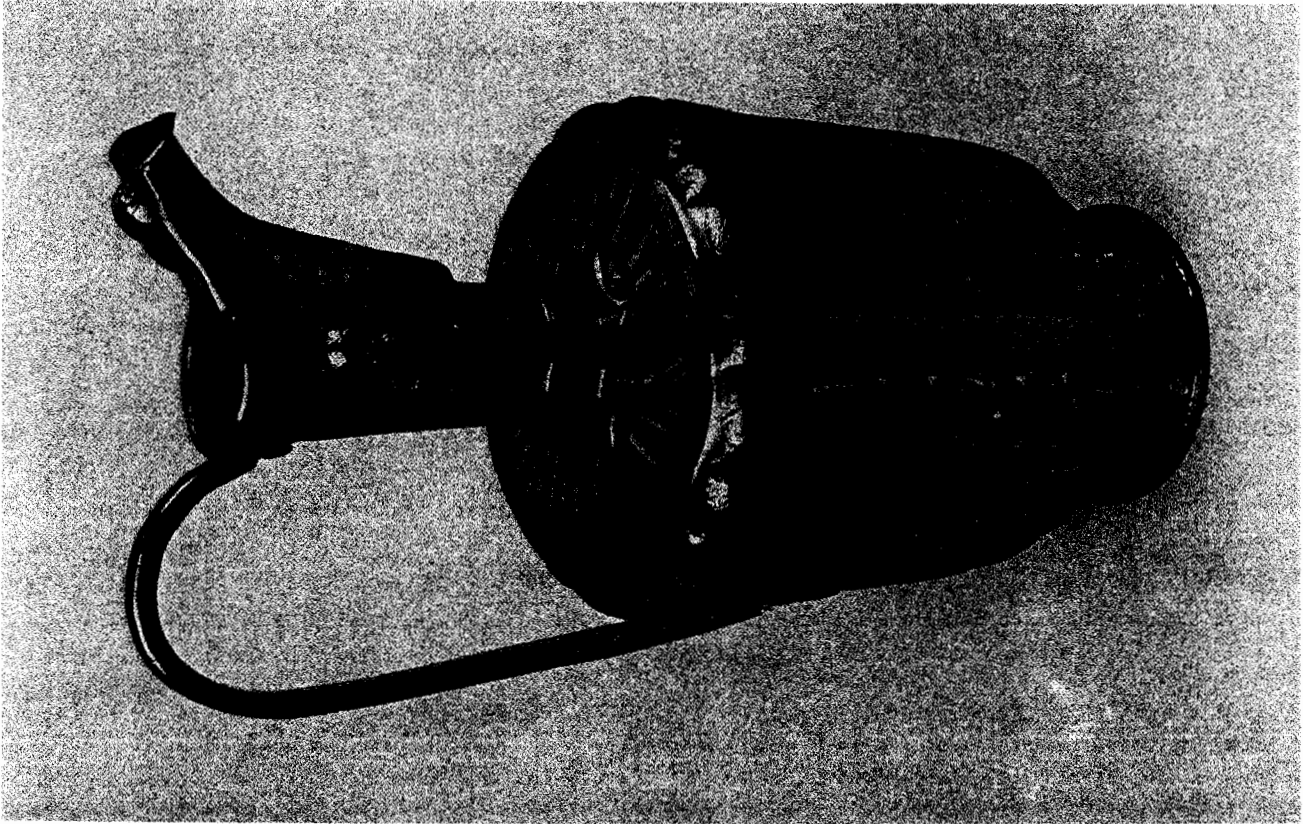
The song of the reed is the sonoral counterpart of the letters and words of the calligrapher. Both are produced by the reed and harken man back to his spiritual homeland through recollection of the archetypes which both traditional music and calligraphy reflect in their sonoral and visual forms. From another



This Pen box made by Shazi for Majd al-Mulk al-Muẓaffar in 607/1210-11 displays the love of the Muslim craftsman for calligraphy used as decoration on objects of everyday life always with the idea of reminding man of the presence of God's Word in all phases of human life.



So many utensils such as this 4th/10th century Persian plate from Nayshapur were adorned with Quranic calligraphy reflecting in the plastic arts the life of the users of these utensils in which the use of such a plate for food or other likely activities was usually combined with the recitation of the Names of God and formulas drawn from the Quran.



The decoration of the most commonly used objects of everyday life such as this 7th/13th century Persian bowl from Rayy reveals the care with which Islamic art dealt with objects of practical utility, identifying art with the making of objects of everyday life—in fact life itself—rather than a special kind of activity relegated to a distinct and separate domain of life.

LEFT As the use of the ewer for the washing of one's hands and face was usually accompanied with the recitation of certain Quranic formulas, so was this late 7th/13th century Persian brass ewer adorned with verses of Quranic calligraphy.

point of view it might be said that the reed used as the instrument of calligraphy represents more the cosmogonic act, the arc of descent (*al-qaws al-nuzūlī*) of traditional cosmology⁸ and the reed as flute the act of return to the Origin, the arc of ascent (*al-qaws al-su'ūdī*). Yet, the reed as both the calamus and the flute creates forms which are related to the very existence of things through that analogy that relates the forms of traditional art to the reality of things by virtue of that correspondence between art and cosmology which is the basis of all traditional art.

The saint has himself become the reed through which the Divine Musician produces the melodies of cosmic existence while he is also the calamus with which God manifests His actions in His creation. By being in perfect surrender to the Divine Will, the saint becomes himself the pen in the hands of the Divine Artist, realizing concretely the Quranic dictum, 'The Hand of God is above their hands'. (XLVIII; 10) He is himself like a pen with which 'he' writes the pages of his life as a masterpiece in both form and content, the saint being himself a work of sacred art. Moreover, when he actually produces calligraphy in such a state, the pen in his hand becomes like his own being an instrument in the 'hand of God'. Through this perfect surrender, concentration, and inner annihilation the art produced by him becomes sacred art. He becomes the instrument through which the celestial forms become manifest in the spatio-temporal matrix, making possible the creation of norms which are then emulated by students and disciples who themselves have not fully realized the truth of the dictum 'the Hand of God is above their hands'. But the sacred art of calligraphy in Islam was created by those who did become themselves a pen in the hand of the Divine Artisan. It is they who established the traditional norms which were then emulated by others. It is not accidental that the style of Kufic, the oldest and most important style of Quranic calligraphy, is said traditionally to have been 'created' by 'Alī who also said, 'The whole of the Quran is contained in the Opening Chapter, the Opening Chapter in the *basmallah*, the *basmallah* in the *bā'*, the *bā'* in the diacritical point, and I am that diacritical point'. Only he who possesses inner union with the Original Point of all lines and

with the Centre of all circles of existence could himself act as a calamus in the Divine Hand and an instrument for the creation of the sacred art of Islamic calligraphy, which like all veritable sacred art is of supra-individual origin.

The Quran itself mentions the *qalam* in the very first verses revealed to the Prophet where in the *Sūrat al-'alaq* ('The Clot') the Prophet is ordered to 'Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who teacheth by the pen' (XCVI; 3-4. Pickthall translation), while the chapter entitled 'The Pen' (*Sūrat al-qalam*) opens with the letter *nūn* followed by the verse, 'By the pen and that which they write.' (LXVIII; 1) The letter *nūn* in Arabic (ن) resembles an ink-pot which 'contains' the ink with which the archetypes of all beings are written upon the Guarded Tablet. This letter also resembles a ship which carries the possibilities of a particular cycle of manifestation upon the 'ocean of non-existence'.⁹

The ninth/fifteenth century Persian Sufi scholar Kamāl al-Dīn Ḥusayn Kāshifī, in his Quranic commentary *Mawāhib-i 'aliyyah*, relates the letter *nūn* to the first letter of light (*al-nūr*) which was the first reality created by God according to the *ḥadīth*, 'the first thing that God created was light', and the last letter of *al-Rahmān*, the Divine Mercy, by virtue of which all creation was brought forth.¹⁰ The very substance of God's creation is the coagulation of the 'Breath of the Compassionate' (*nafas al-rahmān*) which, being 'breathed' upon the archetypes (*al-a'yān al-thābitah*), brought forth the world.¹¹ Kāshifī adds that God first created the *Qalam*, then the Inkpot or *nūn* so that He begins the chapter of 'The Pen' with the lines '*nūn* and the Pen'. According to another *ḥadīth* the *Qalam* symbolizes the tongue and *nūn* the mouth. The Supreme Pen, according to Kāshifī, is light whose 'extension is the distance between heaven and earth'.¹² Kāshifī also states that the letter *nūn* is an allusion to the synthetic Divine Knowledge contained in the All-Comprehensive Essential Unity (*ahadiyyat-i dhātīyya-yi jam'iyyah*) and the Pen refers to the detailed Divine Knowledge contained in the Celestial Unicity (*wāḥidiyyat-i samā'iyyah*). 'What the Pen has written from the [ink] of the eternal ink-pot are the exalted, simple, Divine Letters as well as the inferior, compound, lordly words'.¹³ Kāshifī thus summarizes the meta-

physical foundation of calligraphy based upon the Quranic symbol of the Pen and the Inkpot, of *nūn* and *Qalam*, providing a key for the understanding of the metaphysical principle and spiritual significance of Islamic calligraphy and the role that calligraphy plays in the religious and artistic life of traditional Islam.

The earthly manifestation of the Divine Prototype of Islamic calligraphy, mentioned in the Quranic image of the Pen and the Inkpot, has continued to possess a central spiritual significance. This is revealed first of all by the traditional attribution of the origin of this art to 'Alī, the representative *par excellence* of Islamic esotericism after the Prophet,¹⁴ as well as some of the early pillars of Islamic spirituality who are considered as poles of Sufism in Sunni Islam and as Imams in Shi'ism.¹⁵ Secondly, calligraphy written by human hands has continued to be practiced consciously as a human emulation of the Divine Act, although far removed from its archetypal perfection, for 'the greatest nobility accorded to the art of writing is the fact that it is like the distant shadow of the Divine Act'.¹⁶ Thirdly, traditional calligraphy is based on a precise science of geometric forms and rhythms, each letter being formed from a number of points in a mathematical fashion differing in each major style but all based upon a *scientia* which possesses exact laws of its own. If one can say of all of Islamic art that it is a science as Islamic science is an art, this rapport holds especially true for calligraphy about which one could indeed say categorically *ars sine scientia nihil*. In fact the proportions of calligraphy are the key for the understanding of the proportions of Islamic architecture. Now this *scientia* issues from the *Ḥaqqīyah* at the heart of the Quranic revelation; and by virtue of this science which underlies the rules of various styles of traditional calligraphy, this art unveils certain cosmic correspondences and even reveals through its symbolism realities of a metacosmic nature. This aspect of the calligraphic art, which needs a separate treatment in order to be explained fully, is yet another facet of the profoundly spiritual and sacred character of Islamic calligraphy for the science in question here is sacred science and not simply a knowledge of a profane nature.

There is, however, a temporal separation between the

earthly crystallization of Quranic calligraphy and the advent of the Quranic revelation. It might be said that while the Quran as a sonoral universe was the sound of the Divine Word which became engraved upon the heart of the Prophet and later through him the Companions and later generations, calligraphy was the echo of and response to this Divine Sound which could not but come later. It was the response of the soul of Muslims—first Arabs and then Persians and Turks, from among whose ranks rose most of the greater calligraphers of the later centuries—to the Quran as the spoken and heard Word of God. While based on the original inspiration of the great early saints such as 'Alī, the perfect crystallization of this response in the major styles of Islamic calligraphy could not come but at a later period. Moreover, this response was of a distinctly Islamic character since while the pre-Islamic Arabs were as sensitive to language and poetry as the early Arab Muslims, unlike the Muslims they displayed no interest in calligraphy. The same could almost be said about the pre-Islamic Persians who did possess a written scripture and hence calligraphy, but for whom calligraphy was not an art of central importance as it was to become once they embraced Islam. The sudden rise of Arabic and soon thereafter Persian calligraphy is a purely Islamic phenomenon related directly to the response of the heart and soul of the peoples destined to constitute the Islamic *ummah* to the overwhelming presence of the Divine Word revealed in the Quran. The Quranic revelation was sonoral, yet its earthly embodiment could not but be the creation of one of the most remarkable traditions of calligraphic art, namely the Islamic.

Although the prototypes of all the traditional styles of Islamic calligraphy are contained ultimately in the 'Hidden Treasures' in the Divine Order, without which this calligraphy would not be a 'visual sacrament', the earthly crystallization of various styles took place over a period of time in accordance with the laws of manifestation and crystallization whereby a tradition becomes established in the world of time and space. In fact the different styles of calligraphy 'constitute a providentially long-drawn-out demonstration of the Divine qualities of the messenger'.¹⁷

These styles doubtless show certain regional variations related to the ethnic genius of a particular segment of the Islamic world. But they also display a universality which carries most of these styles beyond the borders of a particular cultural zone within that world. From the beginning there developed the Kufic, or 'Quranic', script and the *naskhī*, which was less strictly related to the Quranic text although in later centuries some of the finest Qurans were written in *naskhī*. Curative styles developed soon thereafter so that Ibn Nadīm, who lived in the fourth/tenth century, already mentions twelve scripts and twelve variations upon them.¹⁸ The famous calligrapher, Ibn Muqlah, who lived at the same time, laid down the rules for writing six major styles, the *thuluth*, *naskh*, *rayḥān*, *muḥaqqiq*, *tawqī*, and *riqā'*, rules which have survived to this day. These styles received their final elaboration in the hands of the celebrated Yāqūt al-Musta'ṣamī in the seventh/thirteenth century. They signify through their persistence over the ages the immutability of the styles of this central traditional art in Islam in conformity with the nature of Islam itself, which after the normal period of elaboration created a civilization marked by permanence, immutability of principles and sacred forms through which the stream of life has flowed over the centuries.

Islamic calligraphy reflects through the symbolism of its very forms this intertwining between permanence and change that characterize creation itself. The world consists of a continuous flow or becoming, yet becoming is nothing but the reflection of Being and the immutable archetypes contained in the Divine Word or Intellect. Islamic calligraphy recreates this metaphysical reality inasmuch as, in 'embodying' the text of the Quran, it repeats the contours of creation itself. Hence, 'as in weaving, the horizontal movement of the script, which is a rippling movement, corresponds to change and becoming, whereas the vertical represents the dimension of the Essence or the immutable essences'.¹⁹ Or from another point of view it might be said that the vertical symbolizes the Unity of the Principle and the horizontal the multiplicity of manifestation.

All the traditional styles share in combining these two dimensions of verticality and horizontality but each in a dif-

ferent manner. Some styles are almost completely static and others almost completely flowing. But in each case some element of each principle must be found no matter how much the other is emphasized.

The Universe can also be symbolized by a tree which according to the Quran has 'its roots firm and its branches spread in the heavens'. The World Tree is one of the most universal symbols of cosmic manifestation. Since the Quran is the prototype of creation and itself the world of multiplicity as issuing from and returning to Unity, Islamic art was bound to combine these two symbols, that of the Word and of the World Tree, in combining calligraphy with stylized plant forms. Many of the mosques and other architectural edifices of the Islamic world from the Cordova mosque to the Minareli school in Anatolia, from the Gawhar Shād mosque in Mashhad to the mausoleums and mosques of Agra, display this intertwining of calligraphy and arabesque forms whose meditation recalls the correspondence between the Quran and the world of nature and also the primordially of the Quranic revelation throughout which the theme of 'creation-consciousness' is repeated.

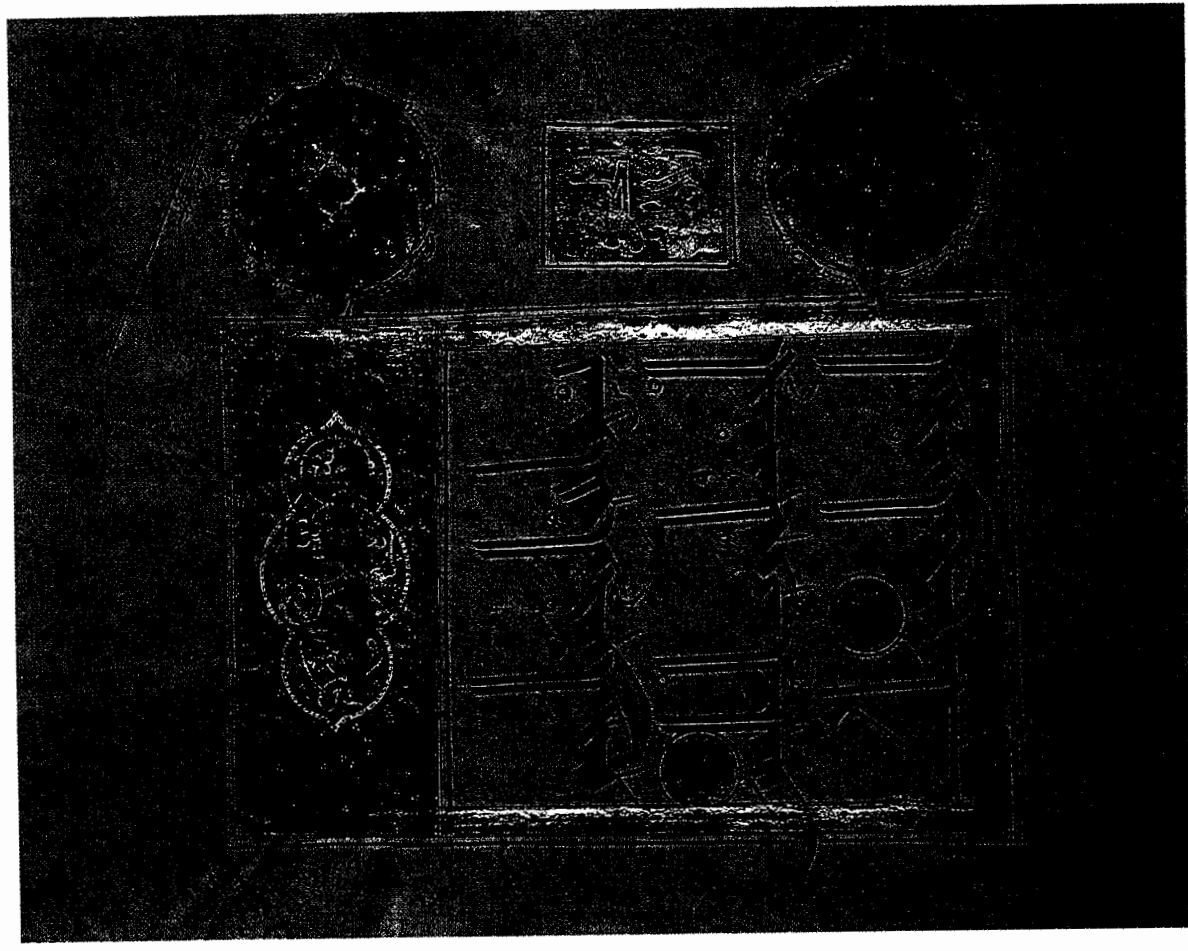
Islamic patterns also often combine calligraphy with both stylized plant forms or arabesques and geometric patterns. Here the calligraphy, related directly to the Divine Word, may be said to symbolize the Principle of creation, the geometric element symbolizing the immutable patterns or masculine aspect while the arabesques, related to life and growth, represent the living, changing and maternal aspect of creation. Seen in this light, the calligraphy can be contemplated as the principle from which the two other elements of Islamic patterns, namely the geometric and the arabesque, originate and into which they become integrated as all cosmic dualities become integrated in the unity of the Principle.

Quranic calligraphy is also related to illumination, which became an ever more present element as the tradition drew temporally further away from its Divine Origin. The remarkable Quranic illumination of the later centuries is a compensation from Heaven for this very separation, making visible a spiritual energy which was always present but had not manifested itself in the world of visual forms during the earlier period of proxim-

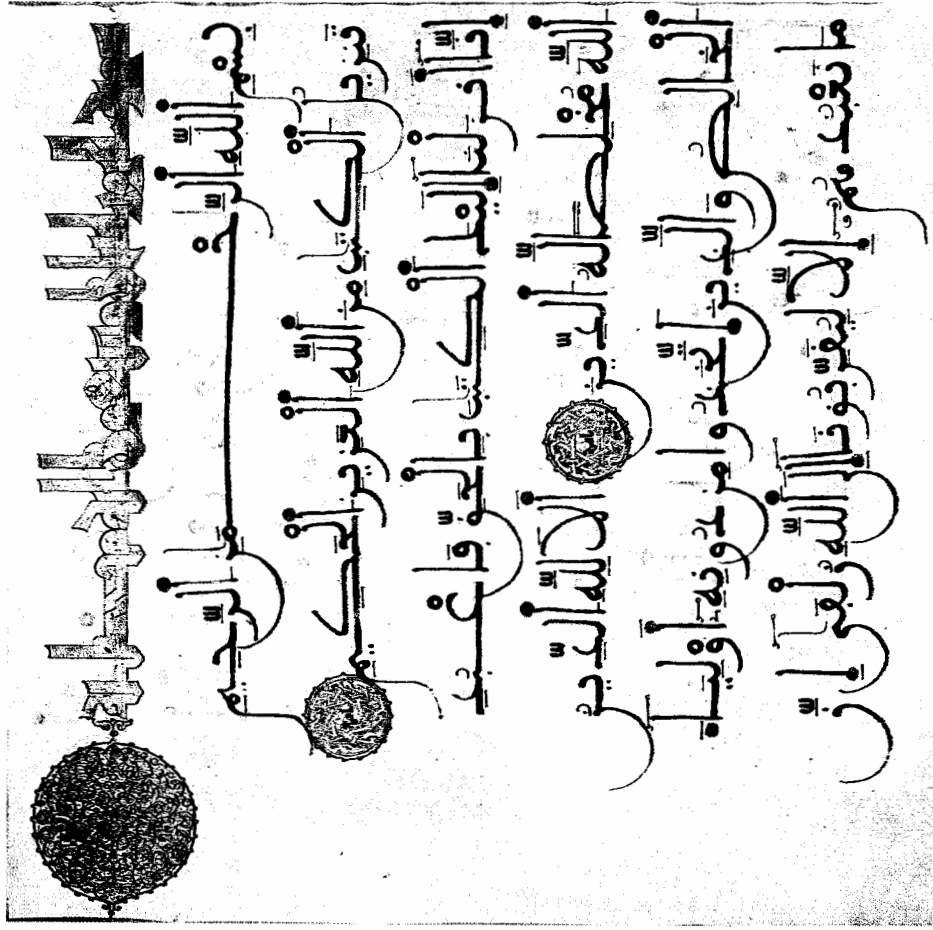
ity to the historical origin of the Revelation. Quranic illumination 'crystallizes' the flow of the soul towards God and is itself an aid in the reintegration of the soul which results from the sacred presence of God's Word. Illumination makes possible the visualization of the spiritual energy which flows from the reading of the sacred Text; it therefore occupies the margin of the page while the calligraphy comprises the text itself. The illumination is like the halo which surrounds the Sacred Word and the luminosity which is generated by the theurgical presence of the word that is the Word of Light.²⁰

Since the verses of the Quran are powers or talismans, the letters and words which make possible the visualization of the Quranic verses also play the role of a talisman and display powers of their own. Putting aside the numerical symbolism and esoteric significance of the letters and phonemes of the Arabic alphabet and language which comprise a vast science of their own,²¹ one can turn to the visible forms of the calligraphy as themselves representing 'beings' as well as direct symbols of spiritual realities to the Muslim mind. Each letter has a 'personality' of its own and symbolizes in its visual form a particular Divine Quality since the letters of the sacred alphabet correspond to features and qualities of God as the Divine Scribe.

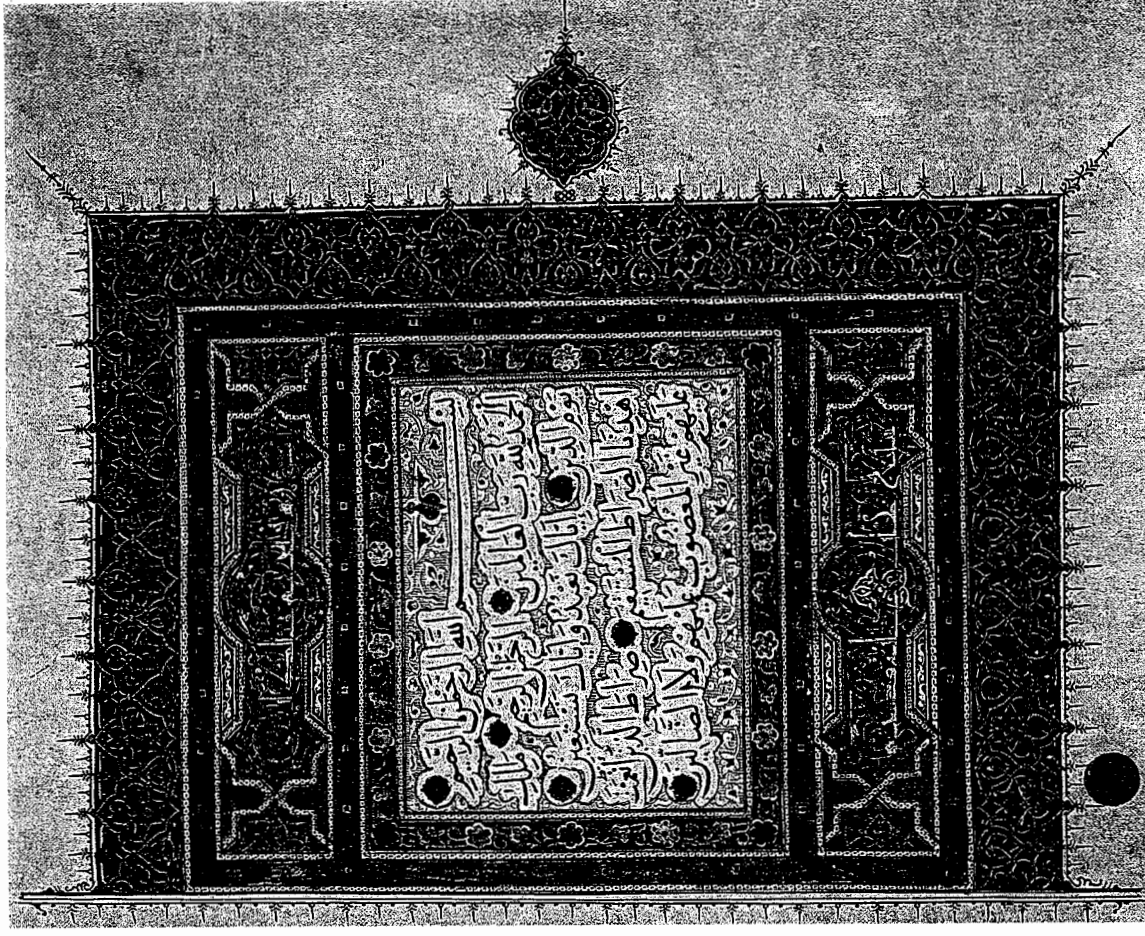
The letter *alif* (ا) by its very verticality symbolizes the Divine Majesty and the Transcendent Principle from which everything originates. That is why it is the origin of the alphabet and the first letter of the Supreme Name of God, *Allāh*, whose very visual form conveys the whole of the Islamic metaphysical doctrine concerning the nature of Reality for, 'in the written form of the Name *Allāh* in Arabic (الله) we distinguish a horizontal line, that of the very motion of writing, then the upright strokes of the *alif* and the *lām*, and then finally a more or less circular line, symbolically reducible to a circle; these three elements are like indications of three "dimensions": serenity, which is "horizontal" and undifferentiated like the desert or a blanket of snow; majesty, which is "vertical" and motionless like a mountain; and mystery, which extends "in depth" and relates to the Divine Ipseity and to gnosis. The mystery of Ipseity implies that of identity, for the divine nature, which is totality as well as transcendence, includes all possible divine aspects including



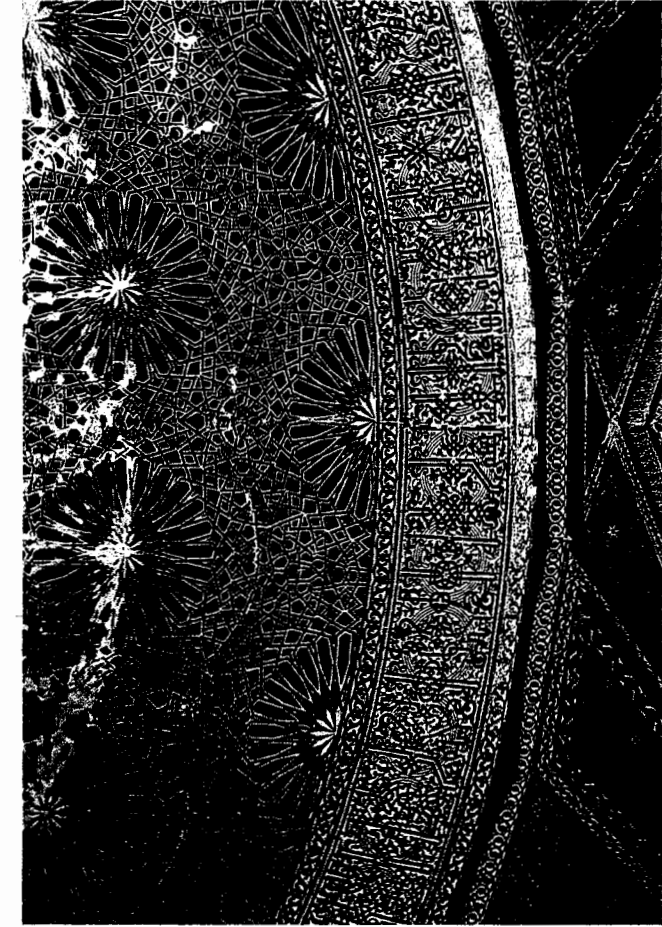
This is the opening chapter of the Quran in the style of Oriental Kufic which is the calligraphic style most closely associated with the Sacred Text and the first in which the Word of God was written in Arabic.



The noble style of the *Maghribi* script developed in the Maghrib and Spain represents one of the peaks of Quranic calligraphy, being a distinct wedding between the spirit of the Quran and the ethnic and artistic genius of the people of the Maghrib.



The *naskhi* style flowered as a later form of calligraphy but continued to serve as a vehicle for the writing of the Quran. It is in this medium of sacred art that one finds the most perfect examples of the *naskhi* style often combined with the art of illumination which is like the visualization of the luminous inspiration flowing from the Sacred Text.



The Karatay *madrasah* in Qonya, a masterpiece of Seljuq architecture, displays the ubiquitous presence of the sacred calligraphy of the Quran intertwined with geometric patterns.

The Spiritual Message of Islamic Calligraphy

the world with its numberless individualized refractions of the Self'.²²

He who loves God empties his heart of all but Him; the *alif* of Allah pierces his heart and leaves no room for anything else. That is why Ḥafiz sings in a famous verse,

نیست بربوح دلم جز الف قامت دوست چکنم حرف دگر یاد نداد استادم

There is no trace upon the tablet of my heart save the alif of the stature of the Friend.

What can I do, my master taught me no other letter.

One need only 'know' this single letter in order to know all that is to be known, for the Divine Name is the key to the Treasury of Divine Mysteries and the path to the Real. It is that Reality by virtue of the essential identity of God and His sanctified Name. That is why in Sufism meditation upon the calligraphic form of the Name is used as a spiritual method for realizing the Named.

As for *bā'* (ب), the second letter of the alphabet, its very horizontality symbolizes the receptivity of the maternal and passive principle as well as the dimension of beauty which complements that of majesty. The intersection of the two letters constitutes the point which stands below the *bā'* and which symbolizes the Supreme Centre from which everything issues and to which everything returns. In fact all manifestation is nothing other than that point for how can the One bear otherness to that which would compromise its oneness? That is why the *alif* and *bā'* themselves together with all the letters which follow them in the Arabic alphabet are constituted of that point which, while being one in itself, is seen as many in the mirror of multiplicity.

In his *al-Kahf wa'l-raqim fi sharḥ bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*,²³ the celebrated eighth/fourteenth century Sufi, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, writes that the point is the indivisible substance (*al-jawhar al-basīṭ*) while all the letters are compound (*al-jism al-murakkab*). The point symbolizes and refers to the Divine Essence.²⁴ Hence when added to any letter the point does not have a sound of its own in the same way that the theophany

of the Essence appears in each creature according to the possibilities of perfection of that creature.

The point 'creates' the *alif* and the *alif* all other letters, for while the point is the symbol of the Divine Ipseity, *alif* symbolizes the station of Oneness. Al-Jīlī describes a dialogue between the point (*al-nuqtah*) and the *bā'* in which the point addresses *bā'* as 'O letter, I am thy Principle . . .', while *bā'* answers, 'O Master, it has become certain to me that thou art my Principle'. *Bā'* also asks from where has come to it that truth which belongs to the point. The point responds that all letters and words are in reality a single form which comes from the point.²⁵ The whole mystery of Divine Union is described by al-Jīlī through the symbolism of the dialogue between the point and the *bā'*.

According to al-Jīlī since the *basmalah* brings all things into being, it is like the Divine Command, 'Be!' (*kun*). But the act itself is symbolized by *alif* while *bā'* is the recipient of the act. The superiority of *alif* to *bā'* is shown by the fact that while the point which is supreme is part of *alif* and internal to it as the written form of *alif* reveals, it is external to *bā'*. The *alif* thus correspond to the Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyyah*) while *bā'* corresponds to creation. God first created the Muḥammadan Reality and from it the rest of creation.²⁶ In contemplating the first two letters of the Arabic alphabet, the person who is able to penetrate into their inner meaning contemplates the symbol of both the principal realities and the manifested order.

The Sufi and philosopher Šā'in al-Dīn ibn Turkah, who followed al-Jīlī by two generations, writes that letters and words descend from the spiritual world into the physical and possess an inner spiritual substance while putting on the dress of the world of generation and corruption.²⁷ In his commentary upon the same saying about the point under the *bā'* treated by al-Jīlī, Ibn Turkah mentions that each Quranic letter has three forms: 'the spoken form which descends upon the ear, the written form which becomes manifest to the eye, and the essential and spiritual form whose locus of appearance is the heart'.²⁸ The calligraphic form is therefore the counterpart of the sonoral

form of the Divine Word and a key, along with the sonoral form, to the inner meaning which resides in the heart.

Over the centuries numerous other Sufis and sages have drawn from the treasury of Islamic wisdom to reveal the spiritual nature of Quranic calligraphy as sacred art and its role in the spiritual life. Some have spoken of the symbolism of letters and words; others of the very forms of the letters. And yet others have expounded the central doctrine of the transcendent unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujūd*) through the symbolism of the ink and the pen; the points and the letters which are created by it. In yet another commentary upon the saying concerning the point under the *bā'*, the great twentieth century Sufi master Shaykh al-'Alawī writes,

The letters are the signs of the ink; there is not one, Save what the ink hath anointed; their own colour is pure illusion. The ink's colour it is that hath come into manifest being.

Yet it cannot be said that the ink hath departed from what it was.

The inwardness of the letters lay in the ink's mystery,

And their outward show is through its self-determination.

They are its determinations, its activities,

And naught is there but it. Understand thou the parable!

They are not it; say not, say not that they are it!

To say so were wrong, and to say 'it is they' were raving madness.

For it was before the letters, when no letter was;

And it remaineth, when no letter at all shall be.

Look well at each letter: thou seest it hath already perished

But for the face of the ink, that is, for the Face of His Essence,

Unto Whom all Glory and Majesty and Exaltation!

Even thus the letters, for all their outward show, are hidden,

Being overwhelmed by the ink, since their show is none other than its.

The letter addeth naught to the ink, and taketh naught from it,

But revealeth its integrality in various modes,

Without changing the ink. Do ink and letter together make two?

Realize then the truth of my words: no being is there

Save that of the ink, for him whose understanding is sound;

And wheresoe'er be the letter, there with it is always its ink.

*Open thine intellect unto these parables and heed them!*²⁹

The esoteric doctrine concerning the nature of calligraphy combined with the beauty of its immediate presence which touches all who are sensitive to the saving and liberating grace of beauty provide the key for understanding the central position of this art in Islam and the reason for its privileged position in the hierarchy of Islamic art as well as its important role in Islamic spirituality itself.³⁰ For centuries Muslims have practiced calligraphy not only to cultivate a good handwriting which is a sign of traditional culture (*adab*), but also to discipline the soul. More than one calligrapher has been aware that in drawing a line from right to left, which is the direction of Arabic calligraphy, man is moving from the periphery to the heart which is also located in the left side of the body, and that in concentrating upon the writing of words in beautiful forms man is also bringing back the dispersed elements of his soul to their centre. Muslim men and women have also meditated upon the beauty of calligraphic forms as consorts of the Divine Word which is beautiful because it issues directly from the source of all beauty. The heart and soul of all Muslims have become refreshed by the majesty, harmony, rhythm, and flow of calligraphic forms which have surrounded Muslims living in traditional Islamic society and which have unveiled their beauty upon the pages of Qurans, on walls of mosques and other forms of architecture, on carpets and curtains, and even upon objects of daily use from dress to plates and bowls in which food is taken. Traditional calligraphy as the central sacred art of Islam is a gift from the *Haqqiqah* at the heart of the Islamic revelation from which this sacred art derives. It remains so for all Muslims whether they are themselves aware of the *Haqqiqah* or whether they remain content with external forms. As for those who follow the Way to the *Haqqiqah*, this central art is a major support for contemplation of the One, for every *alif* cannot but remind us that only the *alif* of Allah should occupy our heart and mind while every point brings about the recollection of the truth of the *ḥaqqīth* that 'God was and there was nothing with Him', and that furthermore, 'He is now even as He was'.

NOTES

1. The chapters of the Quran begin with the heading 'In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate', in Arabic *Bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, the b or Arabic *ba'* being written in Arabic as ب. The point under the b symbolizes the Primordial Point, the first drop of the Divine Pen upon the Guarded Tablet. It is also the symbol of the Divine Essence itself which stands not only beyond the cosmos symbolized by various letters and words but also beyond the Creative Act.
2. This prayer is among the collection of Suhrawardi's prayers and invocations usually known as *al-Waridāt wa'l-taqdisāt*. See M. T. Danechepazuh, 'Niyāyish-nāmāh-yi Suhrawardī', in M. Moḥaghegh (ed.), *Ārām-nāmāh*, Tehran 1361 (A.H. solar), p. 96. On this work and its author see H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. II, Paris, 1971, pp. 126ff.; and S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Albany (N.Y.), 1975, Chapter II.
3. See V. Minorsky, *Calligraphers and Painters*, Washington, D.C., 1959, p. 21.
4. F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. D. M. Matheson, London, 1963, p. 60.
5. M. Lings, *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination*, London, 1976, p. 14.
6. A traditional Muslim authority writes; 'The pen is the beacon of Islam and a necklace of honor with princes, kings and chiefs.' E. Robertson, 'Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahmān on Calligraphy', *Studia Semitica et Orientalia*, 1920, p. 65.
7. Minorsky, *op. cit.* p. 49.
8. On the arcs of descent and ascent see S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, London, 1978, chapter XII.
9. On the symbolism of this letter see R. Guénon, 'The Mysteries of the Letter Nun,' in K. Bharatha Iyer (ed.), *Art and Thought*, London, 1947, pp. 166-168.
10. See Kashifi, *Mawāhib-i 'alīyāh*, edited by S. M. R. Jalāl Nā'ini, Tehran, 1329 (A.H. solar), vol. IV, pp. 229-230.
11. See T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, trans. D. M. Matheson, London, 1976, Part II.
12. Kashifi, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
13. *Ibid.* Kashifi alludes to two levels of manifestation, that of letters (*hurūf*) and that of words (*kallimāt*), both of which transcend the world of material forms and which together constitute the principle and basis of Quranic calligraphy as the visible embodiment of the Divine Word and by extension as the progenitor of all the traditional arts which issue from within the bosom of the traditional universe created by the revelation of the Word.
14. Referring to 'Alī, Qaḍī Aḥmad, the son of Munshī, says, 'And there exist tracings of the miraculous *qalam*s of His Holiness the Shah, the Refuge of Sanctity (i.e. 'Alī) which enlighten the sight of the soul and brighten the tablets of the heart ... and the most excellent *kufī* is that which he has traced ... Masters (of the art) trace the rules of writing and its origin to that Holiness', Minorsky, *op. cit.* pp. 53-54.
15. Especially the fourth Imām Zayn al-'Abidin and the eighth Imām 'Alī al-Riḍā.
16. Burckhardt, *The Art of Islam*, p. 51.
17. Lings, *op. cit.* p. 15.
18. See A. M. Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Leiden, 1970; and Lings, where fine examples of all the major styles are reproduced. Much attention has been paid to Islamic calligraphy in recent years and many works have appeared with various degrees of success in describing the history and characteristics of various styles of calligraphy, many of them containing a profusion of illustrations. See Nāji Zayn al-Dīn, *Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy*, Baghdad, 1968; M. Ziauddin, *Moslem Calligraphy*, Calcutta, 1936; A. Raenber, *Islamische Schönschrift*, Zurich, 1979; Y. M. Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Boulder (Colorado), 1979; A. Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World*, New York, 1979. Since completion of the present work, A. Schimmel's *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, New York, 1984 has appeared. It pertains directly to the subject matter of this chapter and needs to be mentioned here as an important reference.

19. Burckhardt, *The Art of Islam*, p. 47.
20. 'It [the palmette] is a reminder that the reading or chanting of the Quran is the virtual starting point of a limitless vibration, a wave that ultimately breaks on the shore of Eternity; and it is above all that source that is signified by the margin, toward which all the movement of the painting—in palmette, finial, crenellation and flow of arabesque—is directed.' Lings, *op. cit.* p. 74.
21. This subject treated under different Islamic esoteric sciences, especially *al-jafr*, lies outside the scope of our present discussion and needs to be treated separately. Fortunately it has received ample and profound treatment recently in two works of J. Canteins, *Phonèmes et archétypes*, Paris, 1972, especially the introduction; and more directly as far as the Islamic tradition is concerned in *La Voie des lettres, Tradition cachée en Israël et en Islam*, Paris, 1981. See also P. Nwyia, *Exégèse coranique et langage mystique*, Beirut, 1970.
22. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 64. For an extensive analysis of the symbolism of the letters of the Divine Name see Canteins, *La Voie des lettres*, pp. 106ff.
23. This treatise is a commentary upon the saying attributed to 'Alī that the whole Quran is contained in the opening chapter, that chapter in the *basmalah*, etc.
24. *Al-Kahf* . . . Hyderabad (Daccan), 1340 A.H. solar, p. 5.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
26. See Ibrāhīm Basyūnī, *Al-Basmalah min ahl al-'ibārah wa ahl al-ishārah*, Cairo, 1972, pp. 103ff, where al-Jū'ī's *al-Kahf wa'l-raqīm* is analyzed.
27. See his *al-Risālah al-inzāliyyah*, ed. By S. 'A. Mūsawī Bihbahānī, in M. Mohaghegh and H. Landolt (eds.), *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, Tehran, 1971, p. 137.
28. See *Ahwāl wa āthār-i Šā'in al-Dīn Turkah Isfahānī*, vol. 1, Tehran, 1351 (A.H. solar), p. 108.
29. Translated by M. Lings in his *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1971, pp. 150–151.
30. There have been certain sects such as the *ḥurūfīs* which have in fact gone to extremes in their emphasis upon the esoteric significance of letters and thereby left the pale of Islamic orthodoxy. The antidote to such excesses is provided by certain Sufis themselves such as al-Nūfārī, and the traditional use of calligraphy as support for spiritual practice must not be confused with the sectarian use of it by such groups as the *Ḥurūfīs* or *Nuqtawīyān*.