



Islamic Calligraphy

by

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Calligraphy, from the Greek "*kallos*" (beauty) and "*graphein*" (to write), is the art of beautiful writing. Within the Islamic tradition, no art form has been so much honoured and esteemed or so diligently developed and practised than that of calligraphy. The special significance attached to calligraphy stems from the central role that writing plays in Islamic thought. More than any other religious tradition, Islam has stressed the importance of the Book. It was the first religion to make the distinction between people who have received a written revelation (*ahl al-kitab*) and those without it. The Qur'ân, which lies at the heart and encapsulates the essence of Islam, attaches great importance to reading and writing. The Prophet, when he received his very first revelation, was commanded: "Read! Read in the name of Your Lord who created ..." (sura 96:1).

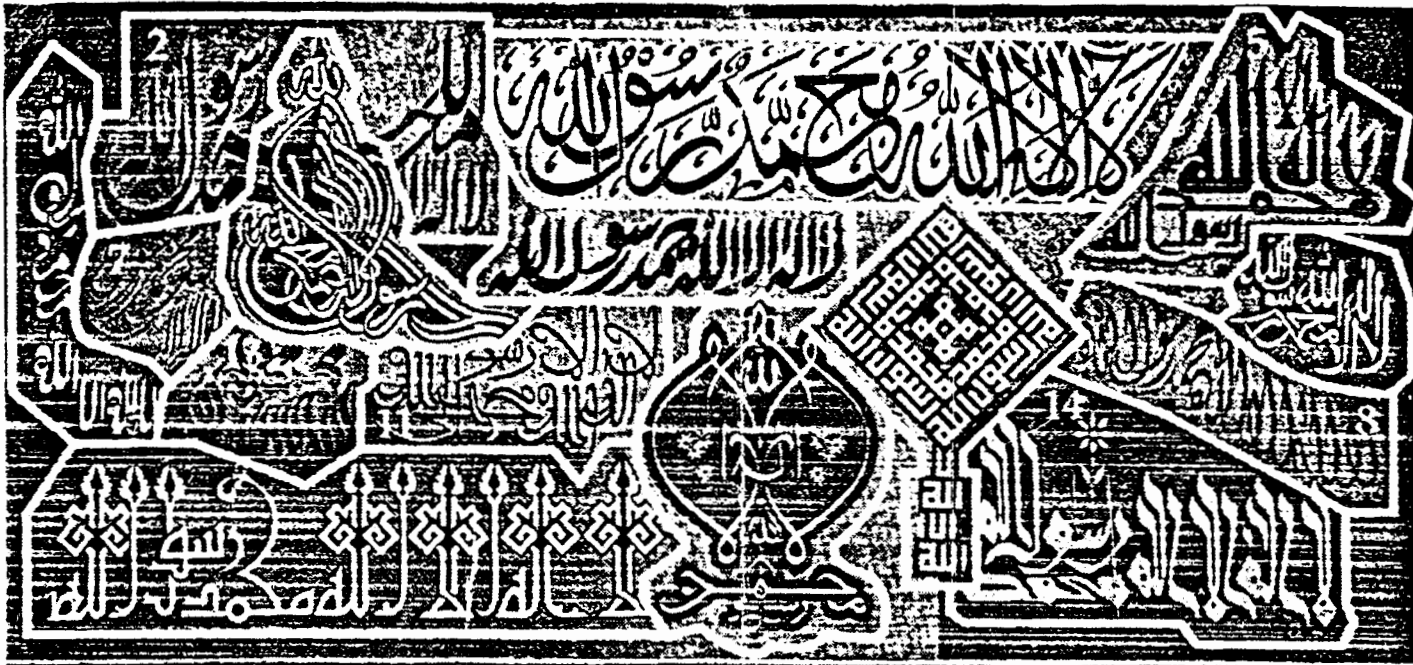
Sura 96:3 emphasises that God taught man by the pen, taught him that which he knew not, and Sura 68 begins with the words "'Nun' and by the Pen!" — words that have been interpreted by some commentators as an allusion to the exalted status of writing. The fact that the Qur'ân refers to the *lah al-mahfuz*, the Well-Preserved Tablet, on which everything from eternity has been written by the Celestial Pen, and also speaks of the *kiram al-katibin*, noble scribe angels, who sit on a person's shoulders recording his every action, gave the art of writing a special place in Muslim life and thought.

Writing came to be seen as having a divine or other-worldly origin, giving rise to the idea, in many Islamic languages, that each person's fate, (*maktub* in Arabic, *sarnivisht* in Persian, *alin yazisi* in Turkish, *likha* in Urdu-Hindi, *likhyo* in Sindhi), was "written" on his face, particularly on his forehead. The Prophet, too, gave importance to writing when he had the early Muslims record Qur'ân revelations on materials such as leather, parchment and shoulder blades of sheep. Furthermore, according to *hadith*, (sayings ascribed to the Prophet), the Prophet is believed to have said "He who writes beautifully the *bismillah* obtains innumerable blessings", or "will enter Paradise".

The sacred character of the Qur'ân also contributed to the importance of calligraphy or "beautiful writing" among Muslims, for the Qur'ân represents the Word of God, and it was only natural that it had to be written in clear and beautiful letters, befitting its special status. Through the centuries, Muslims have lovingly produced pages of Qur'ân text, ornamented with such splendid design that some of these are considered to be "the greatest achievement in the history of abstract art". Indeed, it was not unusual to employ real gold in embellishing such pages. Copying the Qur'ân was a pious act in which all Muslims, ranging from rulers to the most humble devotee, could engage.

The Qur'ân was first written in a somewhat slanting style, an Arabic script known as *ma'il*, and then a more angular style known as *kufic*. Pious tradition considers Hazrat Ali to be the first calligrapher in the kufic style, ascribing to him the invention of certain types of kufic letters. Most calligraphers, in fact, traced their pedigree to Hazrat Ali. For more secular purposes, such as administration, record-keeping, normal correspondence and the copying of books, a cursive, round and easy to write style was used, which later developed into *nask* style. When, after 751 A.D. the Muslims became acquainted with the manufacture of paper, a cheaper and lighter material than the parchment or papyrus that were then in use, more elegant writing styles emerged. Master calligraphers such as Ibn Muqla (d.940), Ibn al-Bawwab (d.1022) and Yaqt al-Musta Simi (d.1298) outlined the scientific rules for beautiful writing by using circular and straight lines and rhombic points that gave the letters the right size and shape. Ibn al-Muqla is credited with inventing the *aqlam as-sitta*, the six major styles which remained in use through the centuries: *thuluth*, *naskh*, *rihan*, *muhaqqaq*, *tauqi* and *riqa*. Later, distinctive calligraphic styles developed in the different geographical regions of the Islamic world, such as Spain, North Africa, India, Iran and China.

Within the corpus of religious literature, calligraphy was by no means confined to copying the Qur'ân. The *asma al husna* (the 99 beautiful names of God), the *haarith*,



Shahadah: The shahadah, or profession of faith, written in 13 different calligraphic styles.

beautiful renderings of pious phrases such as *bismillah*, *alhamdulillah*, *ma sha'llah*, and, in the *shi'a* environment, the names of Hazrat Ali and the Imams all became themes for elegant calligraphic compositions. Calligraphy also became an important means of decorating buildings in the Islamic world. Qur'anic ayats and assorted religious phrases were used to adorn and sanctify mosques, *madrasahs*, mausoleums and tombstones. Calligraphy made its appearance on a wide variety of everyday objects that included coins, eating and drinking vessels, weapons, jewellery and textiles. Even objects such as glass lamps were inscribed with calligraphy, the most exquisite examples coming from Fatimid mosques. In short, calligraphy pervaded every aspect of Islamic culture.

The calligraphy on these objects was more than a decoration: it was often seen as a means of conveying blessing or warding off the evil-eye. Letters and individual words of the Qur'an, on account of their divine origin, were seen to contain a sacredness and power of their own. Thus, in many parts of the Islamic world, one finds that vessels with Qur'anic quotations are filled with water and used in case of illness, or that one would wash off the ink from scraps of Qur'anic verses or prayers, and have the ailing person drink the water.

Among mystically-minded Muslims, the art of writing developed an even further significance. Individual letters of the Arabic script were, in addition to an outward form, considered to be endowed with deep mystical symbolism. This kind of interpretation was inspired by the speculation surrounding the detached letters found

at the beginning of 29 Qur'anic verses. Typically, in such speculation, *alif*, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet and the numerical equivalent of one, came to be the symbol of Allah, the one God, the Absolute Unity. Similarly, the letter *mim* (m) was the letter of the Prophet Muhammad, while the letter *ain* was that of Hazrat Ali. Through the *abjad* system, numerical values were assigned to the various letters, so that it was possible to abbreviate a phrase such as *bismillah* to the number 786. The numerical values of letters were often used to create chronograms which, when deciphered, reveal dates commemorating events such as the death of a prominent personality, the completion of a book or a building, the conquest of a region. Thus, the death of the Mughal emperor Akbar's court poet Fayzi, considered to be a heretic by some, was hailed by his opponents with the unfriendly sentence: *qa ida-i ilhad shikast*, "the pillar of heresy broke", the numerical value of which works out to 1004, i.e. 1004 Hijri/1595 A.D. — the year that Fayzi died.

A great deal of the charm of Islamic calligraphy stems from the freedom, flow and elasticity that the Arabic script, in contrast to the more rigid Roman or Latin alphabet, offers to the artist. Manipulating the flexibility of the Arabic script, the artist is able to create an infinite number of designs from one letter or even a word. Thus the *Nadi Aliyyan*, the invocation to Hazrat Ali, was frequently written in the shape of a Lion, representative of Hazrat Ali's epithet, the "Lion of God". The phrase *bismillah* could be written as a bird, or the *shahadah*, (confession of faith), was formed into a boat of salvation which carries the faithful to the shore of paradise.

The beauty of designs that utilized the Arabic script had a universal appeal and charmed even the Christian world, for we find imitations of it occurring in the decoration of churches and shrines in medieval Italy, Spain and France. And thus, quite unknowingly, verses of the Qur'ân were quoted in the Kufic script on church walls!

The central role that calligraphy and writing played in Islamic religious life resulted in Arabic script becoming a badge of identity for Muslim people. Muslims all over the world were obligated to learn the script in which the Qur'ân was written, so that they would be able to recite the Qur'ân properly. Hence the script served as a common link and unifying factor within the linguistically and culturally diverse *ummah* (community). More importantly, the Arabic script, commonly known as the *huruf al-Qur'ân*, "the letters of the Qur'ân", was considered to be the most precious treasure for Muslims and was adapted to write almost all the languages of the Islamic world including Persian, Urdu and Sindhi, to name a few.

The importance of calligraphy also meant that the calligrapher, (*khattat*), enjoyed a special importance in Islamic society. Popular legend had it that, because he wrote God's Word, the calligrapher was destined to go to Paradise. Furthermore, because the Qur'ân can be touched or recited only in the state of ritual purity, calligraphers had to be physically and spiritually pure, in order that they could be worthy of writing the Qur'ân. The calligrapher was required to be morally impeccable, modest and hard working, and had always to practice, lest he lost his skill. Becoming a calligrapher was a long and arduous task that required, as did most branches of Islamic learning, the interested person to find a master to instruct him and supervise him during the constant rehearsing of letters of the script. The pupil often had to spend the whole day practicing. As the calligrapher, Mir Ali, puts it:

Forty years of my life were
spent in calligraphy. The
tip of calligrapher's tresses
did not easily come in my hand.
If one sits leisurely for a
moment without practicing
calligraphy goes from his hand
like the color of henna.

Under the master's guidance, the pupil learned many things: how to sit in a proper position, how to hold the paper, how to measure the letters by circles and dots so that the letters would be perfectly formed, how to clip

and trim the reedpens used for writing, and so on. After years of instruction and successfully copying classical works, the calligrapher would receive the *ijaza*, that is, the permission, to sign his pages with his name by writing *katabahu*, "so-and-so has written it". Though calligraphers copied all kinds of texts for the sake of earning money, copying of sacred or religious texts was considered to be spiritually rewarding — whether the text was the Qur'ân, *hadith*, a text of a work like Maw'ana Rumi's **Masnawi** or Jazuli's collection, **Dala'il al khayrat**, which contains blessings and expressions of love for the Prophet.

Calligraphy in the Arabic script still enjoys great appreciation and popularity in Muslim countries, even in those countries which, like Turkey, abandoned the Arabic script during the Westernization process. Throughout the Islamic world, one finds nicely written prayers and invocations adorning houses, public buildings, cars, buses, trucks — in short, everywhere. (One can even purchase glittering and shiny "stickers" with religious formulae in any bazaar). Therefore, in order to understand and appreciate his cultural heritage, every Muslim should know at least a little about the Arabic script and about calligraphy, which is, after all, the most typical of Islamic art forms.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

This article was compiled from the following works:

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SAYINGS OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD

"God will give a great reward to
those who control their anger when
they are in a position to show it."