



Calligraphy in Islamic art

The development of sophisticated calligraphy as an art form is not unique to Islamic culture. Other examples include Chinese and Japanese calligraphy and illuminated bibles from north-west Europe including the famous Book of Kells. In the Islamic world, however, calligraphy has been used to a much greater extent and in astonishingly varied and imaginative ways, which have taken the written word far beyond pen and paper into all art forms and materials. For these reasons, calligraphy may be counted as a uniquely original feature of Islamic art. The genius of Islamic calligraphy lies not only in the endless creativity and versatility, but also in the balance struck by calligraphers between transmitting a text and expressing its meaning through a formal aesthetic code.



Tile with Arabic inscription, Iran, about 1215. Museum no. 1481-1876

The Arabic language, and subsequently the art of calligraphy, is held in great esteem by Muslims because Arabic was the language in which the Qu'ran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. The Arabic text of the Qu'ran is sacred to Muslims, and its high status gave rise to an associated respect for books in general. However, it is important to remember that while the Qu'ran's holy status provides an explanation for calligraphy's importance, by no means all Arabic calligraphy is religious in content. In general, calligraphic inscriptions on works of art comprise one or more of the following types of text:

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- Qu’ranic quotations
- other religious texts
- poems
- praise for rulers
- aphorisms

These types of text can be seen across all art forms.

Since Muhammad's time, Arabic has become a great world language, used over a huge area as a language of religion, government, commerce, literature and science. In time, the letters of the Arabic script, with the addition of a few new letter forms, were also used to write in Persian, Turkish and other languages, as well as Arabic.

How the scripts developed

Although many dialects of Arabic were spoken in pre-Islamic times, and some are known to have been written down, most literature was transmitted orally. The Qu’ran, too, was preserved by oral transmission until after the Prophet’s death when it was recorded in written form. This required that the Arabic script be standardised. We know that the standard form of script was in use by the end of the 7th century. It was employed, for example, on the first surviving monument of Islamic architecture, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built in AD 691. The new writing also appeared on the coins minted for Muhammad’s successors, the caliphs. Both the Dome of the Rock and early Islamic coinage use Qu’ranic quotations to declare Islam as the new monotheistic faith.

The first formal calligraphic style is called the Kufic style after the city of Kufah in Iraq. It was used in many early Qur’an manuscripts and for inscriptions, including those at the Dome of the Rock. Confusingly, the same name is also commonly used for a second



Leaf from the Qu’ran, Middle East, 800-900. Museum no. Circ.161-1951



Dish with inscription in floriated Kufic script, Iran or Uzbekistan, 900-1000. Museum no. C.66-1967

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major group of script styles, which came to prominence in the 10th century. These new, more angular styles came to include many fanciful variants such as foliated Kufic (decorated with curling leaf shapes) and floriated Kufic (decorated with flower forms). This second group of Kufic styles was used in contexts as varied as Qu'ran manuscripts, coinage, architectural inscriptions and the decoration of ceramics.

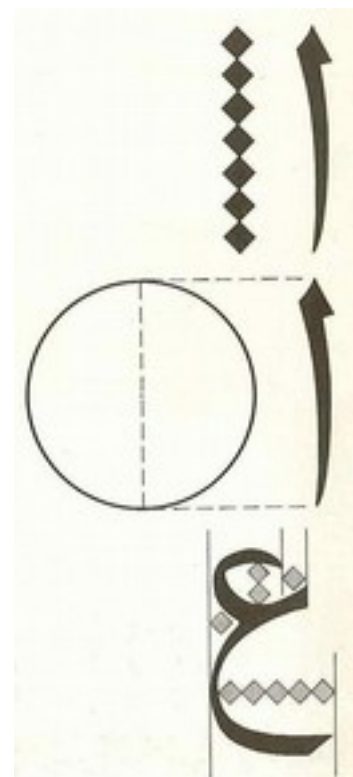


Bowl, Iran or Uzbekistan, 900-1000. Museum no. C.47-1964

While this second type of Kufic was being developed in the Middle East, probably in Baghdad, a new style was developed far to the west, in Muslim-ruled Spain or Morocco. The Arabic name for this western region is al-Maghrib, and so the new style was called Maghribi. Some calligraphers in the region still use this Maghribi style today. In the Eastern Islamic world, however, the Kufic styles had more or less died out by the 13th century, replaced by the range of more rounded styles in use now.

It may be that the new, more fluid styles developed in the East because paper had replaced parchment and papyrus as the main medium for important manuscripts and documents. The surface of the paper could be sized (coated with starch) and rubbed with a stone until extremely smooth and glossy. The pen moved over this surface with great ease. (Parchment continued to be used until a much later date in the Maghrib).

Another factor was the type of pen used, which was made from a reed. The nib was made by cutting the end of the reed with a knife. Different effects could be achieved by cutting the nib in different ways. The later, rounded scripts were written with a nib cut at an oblique angle, which allowed the calligrapher to create both thick and thin lines, adding elegance and variety to the script. The width of the pen was also important: wider nibs were needed for larger script so that the width of the line stayed in proportion to the overall size of the writing.



Alif image

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A system of proportion based on the width of the nib also determined the shapes of the individual letters, and the relative sizes of the letters in a line of writing. The letter Alif, for example, consists essentially of a single vertical stroke. In one style, it is only three times as high as it is wide, while in another it is seven times as high. The letter Alif is therefore far more prominent in the second style and contributes to its overall appearance. Variations were allowed to take account of the different contexts a letter might occur in, and there was also flexibility in the length of the ligatures, or joins between the letters. This was important because the Arabic script is always cursive, or joined-up, and never has separate letters, as in printed English.

Another basic ingredient in the formation of a style was the nature of the base line. In many scripts, the imaginary line on which the letters were written was strictly horizontal. In others, each new group of letters began above the base line and then sloped downwards to the left to meet it. Arabic script, unlike English, reads right to left. These 'hanging' scripts were originally devised as a security feature in official documents, because the 'hanging' groups could be placed very close together to prevent unauthorised additions. Later, though, this feature was used in other contexts because it was considered elegant.

Materials and techniques

Designs with calligraphy were created out of many different materials. Yet calligraphy often imitates the technical effects of pen on paper, even when it appears on other media. It is possible to see, for example, the graceful range from thick to thin line and the square shape of superscript dots written with a square-cut pen nib. Artists often made their designs by copying from prepared templates written out (on to paper) by a calligrapher.

Ink on parchment

Before the invention of paper, vellum or parchment was the highest quality writing material available. It is made from prepared animal hide. A reed pen, with the tip cut at an angle and filled with ink, would have been used. Writing on vellum can be erased or altered.

Ink on paper

The calligraphy would have been created using a reed pen and ink directly onto starched and polished paper, which provided an excellent smooth surface for writing.

Ceramics

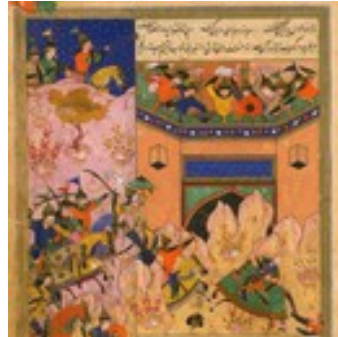
The calligraphy tile pictured below was deeply carved with the inscriptions (and plant designs) and covered with coloured glazes, before the final firing. This technique was used in Central Asia only for a brief period, from around 1350 to the early 1600s.

Wood

The letters were carved and then painted. In the image below the paint has now mostly worn off though you can still see some traces remaining.



Leaf from the Qur'an,
Middle East, 800-900.
Museum no. Circ.161-1951



Detail of page from the
Zafar Nama epic, Iran,
1500-1600. Museum no.
E.2138-1929



Tile fragment, Bukhara,
about 1359. Museum no.
971-1901



Detail from wooden panel
with Arabic inscription,
Spain or Morocco, 1150-
1250. Museum no. 378A-
1907

Stained glass

This window pictured below is made from small pieces of glass of different colours, which have been arranged in patterns within a plaster framework.

Textiles

The weaver of the silk from Muslim Spain has accurately reproduced the flowing lines of a written inscription in Arabic, a task requiring enormous care in the design. The phrase 'Glory to our lord the sultan' has been repeated within the widest band in the design, creating the illusion of a long frieze of calligraphy.

Enamelled glass

The lamp was made by blowing hot glass into shape and then leaving it to cool. The enamel colours and gilding were then painted on - the enamel was a solution of colours and ground glass that melted and fused on to the lamp when it was reheated in a kiln. The blown glass would have been decorated with enamel and gilt, possibly using fine brushes.

Metalwork

Metalworkers chiselled out tiny areas of the brass surface and filled them with pieces of silver and gold. They added details by chasing the surfaces of the softer inlaid metals with a hammer and tools and adding a black filler to create contrast. The casket pictured below has a strip of calligraphy around the sides and on the lid.

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Window with the Shahadah, the Muslim profession of faith, carved stucco and coloured glass, Egypt, 1800-80. Museum no. 1202-1883



Silk with Arabic inscription, silk and metal-wrapped thread in lampas weave, Spain, 1300-1400. Museum no. 830-1894



Mosque lamp, gilt and enamelled glass, Egypt or Syria, 1340. Museum no. 1056-1869



Casket, brass with inlaid gold and silver, Iran, 1300-1350. Museum no. 459-1873

Decorating calligraphy

As well as being written with great elegance, there were many ways in which calligraphy could be enhanced by adding decoration. The words themselves could be written in gold, or in colours other than black. Letters and words could also be outlined or could lie against a background pattern. In addition, calligraphers combined different sizes, colours and styles of text for different phrases or sections of text (but always sticking to the rules of proportionality within each section). These Qu’ran folios show how calligraphers could make functional details of formatting and punctuation into beautifully designed elements.

Notice that the decorated frames and background patterns do not interfere with the clarity of the script, or distract from the content of the text. This is very important because the Qu’ran is considered to be the word of God.



Leaf from the Qu’ran, Egypt, 1400-1500. Museum no. 7217-1869



Qu’ran manuscript, Iran, about 1370. Museum no. 365-1885

The calligraphers

Calligraphers were among the most highly regarded artists in Islamic societies, and this remains the case in many places today. Their status was based on the excellence of their work, but also on the eminence of their teachers. As a result, a literary tradition developed in which the history of calligraphy was conceived as a chain of transmission between masters and pupils, covering very long periods.

Training could take many years, with the pupil learning to copy exactly models provided by the teacher. Only when the pupil had mastered the principles in this way could he or she - both men and women trained as calligraphers - become a master and begin to create new work. Learning calligraphy was therefore similar to apprenticeships in other trades.

Many people who studied calligraphy were content to stop their training when they knew enough to earn their living as copyists. Printing was introduced to the Islamic world gradually between the 18th and 20th centuries but the majority of books continued to be produced by hand for most of the Islamic period. Not all copyists were calligraphers, and many books were copied in untidy personal styles that did not obey a set of rules. A book copied in a good, clear hand was therefore at a premium.

Others studied calligraphy to enter specific professions, such as that of chancery scribe. These men copied out official documents for the ruler, using distinctive styles of script. Some examples can be extremely impressive, and it was generally the case that the excellence and complexity of the writing reflected the status of the document.

The calligraphers who progressed furthest produced the most elegant manuscripts. Their work was expensive and they generally worked on commissions from the richest members of society, especially sultans, shahs and other rulers. The best were often employed within a department of the ruler's palace devoted to book production and associated tasks. Once the text was complete, the book was finished by other artists and craftsmen employed there, who produced the painted decoration and a rich binding.

The best calligraphers were also commissioned to create compositions that could be executed in other media. This was a different task from that of copying out a continuous text in a manuscript. The calligrapher had to bear in mind the space available and design the lettering to fill that space in a well-balanced way and according to the rules for the style of script. The calligrapher would work out the design on paper for transfer to the new medium.

These designs and other single sheets produced by great calligraphers were often preserved so that they could be copied by later generations. In later times, they were gathered into albums to be appreciated by connoisseurs. As a result, calligraphers began to produce single sheets specifically for inclusion in albums. Even later, it became the custom to hang calligraphy on the walls of houses, in the manner of paintings. Calligraphers had found yet another way to make money, and, together with

fees from teaching and commissions for inscriptions, this allowed some outstanding calligraphers to remain independent. This, too, is how calligraphers often work today.

This article was written as part of the Teachers' resource: Exploring calligraphy through the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art.