

The Written Word in Islamic Art

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Islamic art and culture is heavily influenced by both the meaning and form of the written word. Prior to the advent of Islam, the written word was significant. However, with the rise of Islam and the holy book of the *Qur'an*, the written word became a symbol of both Islamic faith and civilisation. Arabic writing, expressed through the fine art of calligraphy, has pervaded the visual arts. The universal custom among the faithful, of reading the *Qur'an* in Arabic has resulted in the spread of calligraphic arts throughout the Islamic world, beyond Arabic speaking nations. It is believed that Arabic calligraphy should be a whole subject by itself in modern Arabic schools.¹ Given the position of the written word and the Islamic aversion to figural images, calligraphy proliferated in Islamic art. As a visual art, the skill of calligraphy relies on the use and knowledge of Arabic. The belief that the *Qur'an* must be read in Arabic in order to ascertain its proper meaning has created an environment in which the religious and aesthetic aspects of the word have come to dominate the arts. Thus, the divine importance given to the Arabic language has transformed the word into a symbol of the faith from Africa to Indonesia. The ideographic properties of the word have led to a tradition of poetry that relies on a blending of meaning derived from the physical appearance of the letters in a poem as well as from the literal meaning of the verse. The elevation of the written word in Islamic culture has made a great contribution to the Islamic arts more generally.

'Islamic art' is a term given by Western art historians to the artistic styles that have existed throughout the regions of the world that have been influenced by Islamic faith and civilisation. This Western approach to Islamic art has traditionally concentrated on the unity and commonalities that have been found in art throughout the countries of the Islamic world, mainly in Egypt, the Middle East, Central Asia and Northern India.² Recent in-depth studies have shown the peculiarity

¹ J. Michon, (or A A al-Khaliq): 'Education in the Traditional Arts and Crafts and the Cultural Heritage of Islam' In S H Nasr, editor, *Philosophy, Literature and Fine Arts*, Jeddah, 1982, 58.

² P L Baker: *Islam and the Religious Arts*, London, 2004, 9.

of the art of each particular locality. However, while regional influences of particular Islamic communities exist, Arabic calligraphy provides a unifying theme in Islamic art. While art from individual regions can readily be seen as having an authentic style, the strong influence of Islamic belief that informs each style brings them all under the umbrella of Islamic art. It is also important to consider what is meant by the 'arts' in Islam. This will be restricted to the visual arts and poetry. The distinction between craft and art must also be examined because in Islamic culture the artist and the craftsman are not clearly differentiated.³ All crafts are intended to be beautiful and thus, artistic. Therefore, the decorative aspects of craft represent legitimate artistic expression and shall be included in the discussion of the written word in Islamic art.

Historically, Western art history has looked at Islamic art primarily in terms of its figural art.⁴ However, art involving the depiction of the written word is more central to Islamic culture.⁵ The written word holds an important place in Islamic art and, more generally, in Islamic culture. Moreover, the written word was of importance even before the advent of Islamic culture in these regions at a time when writing was used mainly for administration and commercial purposes.⁶ It also predated Islamic culture in Arabic art as captions to pictures and in sculpture, as seen on the 2100 BCE statue of Prince Gudea of Lagash, the skirt of which was ornamented with cuneiform script.⁷

Through the prophet Muhammad, Allah's revelation was manifest in the form of the spoken word. Thus, the word became important because of the manner in which Allah had chosen to reveal himself. In Christianity, Jesus Christ was viewed as a physical manifestation of God and so it was his actions that were important. However, Muhammad was merely the messenger of Allah and so the *Qur'an*, which contained the word of Allah, became the essential element of the Islamic faith. The *Qur'an* elevates the written word to the centre of human culture: 'Thy Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who teacheth by the pen, Teacheth man that which he knew not.'⁸ Furthermore, Allah

³ Ibid, 17.

⁴ A Welch: *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World*, Austin, 1979, 19.

⁵ B Brend: *Islamic Art*, London, 1991, 33.

⁶ Welch, op cit, 24.

⁷ L L al-Faruqi: *Islam and Art*, Islamabad, 1985, 35.

⁸ *The Koran*, translated by N J Dawood: surah 96:3-5; al-'Alaq, London, 1978, 26.

chose the language of Arabic in which to reveal his divine message and so Arabic was viewed by believers to be a divine language in itself. The *Qur'an* advocates the spreading of the word using the Arabic language.⁹ The Arabic script came to be viewed as having divine authority and was used in all Islamic countries, from Spain to India, regardless of the native languages spoken. The domination of the Islamic culture frequently meant that, while the spoken language of a conquered region was retained, that language came to be written in Arabic script, demonstrating the primacy of the written word in Islam.¹⁰ Subsequently, the prevalence of Arabic script helped to spread the appreciation of the written word as art¹¹ and, therefore, calligraphy developed into an acclaimed form of art. Whereas the beautiful script of Christian monks in the Middle Ages became largely obsolete with the development of the printing press,¹² beautiful script in Islamic culture still remains important and a major art form. For all believers, writing retains its sacred nature and is potentially a spiritual experience.¹³

Calligraphy, which comes from the Greek for 'beautiful writing',¹⁴ is a suitable name for the artistic act of writing found in the Islamic world. It became a highly regarded form of art in Islamic culture from the very first years of the religion. Ali, the fourth caliph, is credited with being the first Islamic calligrapher.¹⁵ Through him, as a relative of the prophet Muhammad, the *Kufic* script gained religious legitimacy. Some Islamic people even trace the art of calligraphy back to Allah himself, who wrote the original celestial *Qur'an*.¹⁶ The beauty of calligraphy is seen to enhance the religious appreciation of a text. Of course, the importance of writing has not been solely religious. For example, writing was an essential skill for anyone wishing to achieve a position in administration.¹⁷ In the legal sphere, handwriting was used as verification of a legal document, such as a will.¹⁸ Calligraphy

⁹ See for example, *Ibid*, 46:12; surah al-Ahqaf, 128; and 207 26:195; surah The Poets.

¹⁰ Welch, *op cit*, 23. Cash claims that the spoken language of almost all conquered Islamic regions is now Arabic, in W W Cash: *The Expansion of Islam*, London, 1928, 82.

¹¹ F Rosenthal: *Four Essays on Art and Literature in Islam*, Leiden, 1971, 53.

¹² Welch, *op cit*, 17.

¹³ Rosenthal, *op cit*, 54.

¹⁴ Welch, *op cit*, 17.

¹⁵ E Atil: *Art of the Arab World*, Washington DC, 1975, 11.

¹⁶ J Renard: 'Aesthetics' In *Seven Doors to Islam*, Berkeley, 1996, 126.

¹⁷ Rosenthal, *op cit*, 54-55.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

became the principal art form in Islamic culture,¹⁹ developing into a variety of styles and following historical trends. These trends include variations in the use of diacritical marks and in the shapes of the letters. For example, the earlier *Kufic* script is angular compared to the slightly more rounded *Maghribi* script of North Africa and Spain.²⁰ The physical beauty of calligraphy provided an aesthetic dimension to the written language beyond its literal meaning.²¹ Great calligraphers are held in reverence for their contribution to the art. Ibn Muqla (886-940CE) incorporated the medieval Islamic passion for mathematical and musical harmony with his geometric principles for calligraphy. Then Ibn al-Bawwab (d 1022 CE) brought elegance and grace to the rules set out by Muqla, further beautifying calligraphy. The third great calligrapher, Yaqut al-Musta'simi (d 1289CE) made innovations to calligraphy by cutting the *qalam* (calligraphy reed) nib at an angle, thus achieving more fineness and beauty in the writing.²² These people are recognised for their creative role in the development of the written word as a fine art.

Transcribing the word of Allah was an important task, as there was a constant demand for the *Qur'an* which encouraged the continual development of the art form. For instance, it was traditional for a person to be buried with a *Qur'an* behind their left shoulder.²³ This meant that every individual required a copy. The acquisition of the holy book usually cost a lower-middle family the equivalent of their living expenses for a fortnight,²⁴ illustrating the value that was placed on owning the written word of god. However, the outright purchase of a *Qur'an* was discouraged and transactions were often disguised as a monetary donation to the calligrapher.²⁵ The *Qur'anic* calligrapher had a highly responsible job as a reproducer of the holy book. There was an expectation that medieval calligraphers would be ascetic, similar to the religious class.²⁶ It was assumed that Islamic calligraphers shared a special affiliation with words and letters and this relationship was even viewed by some as devotional love. The practise by most Islamic cultures of writing in Arabic script has

¹⁹ Baker, op cit, 52.

²⁰ Atil, op cit, 24-27.

²¹ Rosenthal, op cit, 56.

²² Welch, op cit, 29-30.

²³ Baker, op cit, 54.

²⁴ Baker, op cit, 76.

²⁵ Ibid, 53.

²⁶ Renard, op cit, 126.

assisted the development of the art of calligraphy and has resulted in calligraphy being a universal Islamic art form. Although, historically the *Qur'an* has been translated and commentaries written in Chinese, Indonesian and other languages²⁷ as late as 1980, Islamic theologians have declared that the printing of the *Qur'an* in languages other than Arabic was against Allah's revealed will.²⁸ It could be argued that if Arabic had not become the universal script of Islamic culture, then the art of the written word would not have risen to such prominence, especially outside the Arabian Peninsula.

The art of calligraphy was complimented by illustration and illumination of the page, as well as by the way in which the book was bound. These became art forms in their own right and gained legitimacy through their association with the written word. Illuminations became elaborate and illustrations in texts other than the *Qur'an* sometimes bore human figures under the guise of enhancing the text.²⁹ Historically, the representation of the human form was censured and many painters referred to themselves as calligraphers. Human representations were stylised to help the artist avoid condemnation to hell when, upon their death, they found themselves incapable of fulfilling the request of Allah that they breathe life into their paintings. Illustrations often flourished outside the borders of the text, showing the overpowering and boundless will of Allah. In this way, the unacceptable became accepted because of the elevated position of the written word. The importance of book production was reflected in the prevalence of the guilds of bookbinders and paper makers.³⁰ The art of bibliopegy became highly developed. Intricate bindings of leather, wood and paper *maché* reflected temporal and regional fashions. However, bookbinding was not always practiced, as in Egypt, before the nineteenth century, it was seen as advantageous that a volume of free pages could be read by more than one person at one time.³¹

Calligraphy is ubiquitous in Islamic culture. Every Islamic visual art has incorporated writing into its representations. Perhaps the most prominent example can be seen in Islamic architecture. As the public

²⁷ Baker, op cit, 72.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Brend, op cit, 17.

³⁰ Baker, op cit, 53.

³¹ Ibid, 61.

face of the Islamic culture, buildings were often decorated with inscriptions, in order to affirm the faith³². Both secular and religious inscriptions were used in Islamic architecture. Even the earliest known Islamic building, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, displays extensive inscriptions. Some of these inscriptions were religious but some also denounced the religion of the defeated Christian population of Jerusalem and celebrated the victory of the Muslims.³³ There is a 240 metre long inscription at the Dome of the Rock,³⁴ which is not merely informative but also has artistic merit. On the Quwwat al-Islam Mosque near Delhi, inscriptions denounce polytheism and deprecate people who worship idols.³⁵ Not only mosques, but also palaces and other secular buildings were inscribed with quotes from the *Qur'an*, the Hadith and other prose, as well as the names of the people in charge of the building, the date of completion and the ruler of the time.³⁶

These were carved in prominent places, such as just below the dome or framing the entrance gate, so as to show the commitment of the patrons and builders to Islam. The calligraphy for these inscriptions was initially drafted on paper by professional calligraphers, who took into account the angle and distance from which the inscriptions would be viewed. It was then the job of a stonemason to take the draft and create the art on the building. The fact that the mason was not the calligraphic artist did not demean his task, as it was viewed that the work of rendering the planned inscription onto a building was as religiously significant as the designing of the original inscription.³⁷

Words incorporated into textiles were also common. In 1351, Taqī-as-din as-Subkī, a Shafi-ite jurist and author, strongly disapproved of stepping on a carpet in which there were letters making up words such as 'blessing' and 'enduring strength.'³⁸ He believed that Allah had made each thing with a given purpose and so while a carpet was

³² Welch, op cit, 35.

³³ Atil, op cit, 10.

³⁴ This inscription is from the Qur'an, 36:1-6; surah Ya Sin: <http://www.noblesanctuary.com/DOME.html>, accessed 26 May 2004.

³⁵ Welch, op cit, 35-38.

³⁶ R Ettinghausen: 'The Man-Made Setting: Islamic Art and Architecture' in *The World of Islam*, edited by B Lewis, 1976, 60.

³⁷ Welch, op cit, 39.

³⁸ Rosenthal, op cit, 50. Note that 'enduring strength' was not a marketing claim by the carpet manufacturer.

intended for walking on, this was not true for sacred words and so he disapproved of walking on such letters in carpets. This illustrates the importance of the word in that, once written, it became a religious symbol in its own right. The written word was also woven into robes, which were given to distinguished people as a mark of governmental appreciation. These inscriptions included the name of the caliph, the date and, somewhat surprisingly, the workshop, its location and the name of its director. These robes were highly prized despite the fact that the inscriptions were in *Kufic* script and were hard to decipher.³⁹ In fourteenth century Cairo, inscribed textiles were also used to protect the newborn in birth rituals. A seven-day-old baby traditionally had its head wrapped in fabric that had a *Qur'anic* verse painted on it to encourage good health.⁴⁰ This demonstrates the powers with which words and letters were imbued.

The importance of being able to read the *Qur'an* and the subsequent emphasis on the written word contributed to the academic tradition in Islamic culture. Although some Muslim sultans⁴¹ and many common people were not literate in Arabic, theologians promoted the ideal that every boy should be able to read the *Qur'an* in Arabic. This emphasis on literacy meant that the reading of Arabic in medieval times was far more widespread in Islamic countries than the reading of comparable languages in medieval Europe.⁴² Distinct literary and poetic styles were developed based on Islamic principles. Poetry, mainly a Sufi tradition, is an art that has benefited from the importance placed on the written word in Islamic culture. Individual Arabic letters developed their own mystical powers, numerical importance and symbolism.⁴³ Arabic calligraphy has an ideographic aspect. This visual imagery of the letters was exploited in Islamic poetry. One popular poetic device involves the coupling of the two letters 'lām' (ل) and 'alif' (ا), which look like two young lovers entwined. However, when combined, these same letters form the word 'no', alluding to forbidden love.⁴⁴ Whereas Western masters of poetry, such as Shakespeare, utilised the

³⁹ Ettinghausen, op cit, 61.

⁴⁰ Baker, op cit, 224.

⁴¹ For example, the Mamluk sultans Qaitbay and Inal in the fifteenth century. Baker, op cit, 71.

⁴² Ibid, 72.

⁴³ Welch, op cit, 25. There was much lore surrounding the properties of letters and the Hurufis, an Islamic group, even wrote a systematised 'Science of Letters' in the fourteenth century.

⁴⁴ Rosenthal, op cit, 56-57.

ambiguity of word meanings, or 'plays on words,' Arabic poets made 'plays on letters,' the meaning and symbolism of which were widely known. Arabic is a language that lends itself to these letter plays, as many letters are similar and words are ambiguous if they are not annotated with diacritical marks, the use of which only became popular in the eighth century.⁴⁵ While in copies of the *Qur'an* diacritical marks were added to the original to promote a precise understanding of the sacred text, in poetry, diacritical marks were often omitted, so as to allow extra meanings to be derived from the text of the poem.

Calligraphy in Islamic culture can move beyond the representation of the word itself. That is, writing, as an art form, developed such that it was not readily decipherable by many skilled epigraphers, let alone by the general Islamic population. As mentioned above, this trend is seen in the use of *Kufic* script to adorn textiles. This calligraphic development was also incorporated into arabesque, along with images such as flowers, vases, foliage, fruits and geometrical patterns.⁴⁶ Letters and words can often be recognised within the symmetrical patterns. This calligraphy in arabesque was intended to be deciphered by Allah alone. The elements of arabesque form no simple pattern and it is the frustrated attempts of viewers to discern a pattern, which leads them to an appreciation of the infinite and, hence, the absolute nature of Allah.⁴⁷ Thus, the art of calligraphy, which was promoted by the elevated position of the word, eventually transcended the literal meaning of the word and became an abstract art form pointing to infinity and ultimately the divine.

The significance of the word in Islamic art is largely derived from the role of the *Qur'an* in the revelation of Islamic faith. The disapproval of figurative art reinforced this significance. Moreover, the insistence that the word of Allah be written only in Arabic provided a bond between diverse Islamic regions across the world. Written Arabic developed over time into a rich tradition of calligraphic art. This calligraphy came to have its own intrinsic beauty and transcended the need for legibility inherent in the written word. This development was promoted by the continual need to produce the *Qur'an*. Related crafts

⁴⁵ Baker, op cit, 52.

⁴⁶ A Delbridge: editor, *The Macquarie Dictionary* (Third Edition), Sydney, 2001, 99.

⁴⁷ I A Faruqi: 'Islam as Culture and Civilisation' in *Islam and Contemporary Society*, London, 1982, 172.

such as illumination, illustration and book production also flourished. Writing came to be linked with various crafts and professions, which often gained respectability through their association with the word. Some artists made a point of utilising calligraphy because calligraphy was a *halal*⁴⁸ form of artistic expression. The ideographic nature of letters came to be incorporated into the meaning of some poetry and non-scriptural texts. However, calligraphy was not confined to books but became a ubiquitous theme throughout the Islamic world in fields including architecture, textiles and rug design. Calligraphy became incorporated into the arabesque style, which was seen as pointing to the infinite and, hence, the divine.

Contemporary Islamic art continues to give significance to the written word. For example, calligraphy is an important component of modern Islamic jewellery, which protects and strengthens the wearer through the power of the word.⁴⁹ Calligraphy is commonly used on calendars, wall posters and compact disc covers, showing the appropriation of traditional styles of art into contemporary art forms. In the present day world of nation states, the word has continued to develop in its significance and has become part of the symbolism of the modern Islamic state, as evidenced in contemporary flag design.

The Auburn Gallipoli Mosque in Sydney was completed in 1999. Calligraphy is prominently displayed both inside and outside the mosque. Guides at the mosque readily describe the importance of the word in Islamic culture. It is explained that the prophet Mohammad lived at a time when the need for literacy and knowledge was of critical importance and so these values became central tenets of Islam. The illiterate Mohammad was commanded to read by Allah and thus, the written word became of central importance. As mentioned before, Arabic is valued above all other languages because the true religious meaning of the *Qur'an* can only be grasped in the original Arabic.

Although the art of the Gallipoli mosque is calligraphic and geometric, the mosque holds western art classes in its women's *madrasa*. This art is non-figurative and still life, which, in its representation of nature, is seen to be spiritually fulfilling and representative of the divine. While Islamic art in contemporary Sydney can embrace aspects of

⁴⁸ *Halal* means 'legal' in Islamic law.

⁴⁹ D Morris: *Bodyguards: Protective Amulets and Charms*, Shaftsbury, 1999, 148-149.

western art, many art shows in Sydney that seek contributions by Islamic artists continue to look for works of calligraphy.⁵⁰

The prominence of the word can be seen in the work of the well-known contemporary Indonesian artist A D Pirous. His work combines Western abstraction with traditional Islamic forms, especially *Qur'anic* calligraphy, in his attempts to highlight the political situation in his homeland of Aceh.⁵¹

Dr Nihad Dukhan is a Palestinian engineer who grew up in Gaza. He was also trained extensively in classical Arabic calligraphy. His modern interpretations of calligraphy are regularly exhibited throughout the USA. Dukhan has developed a style of calligraphy that he feels is both contemporary and legible.⁵²

Thus it can be seen that, from the earliest days of Islam, the written word was highly significant. *Suras* of the *Qur'an* were written down during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, and were collected into the authoritative text of the *Qur'an* by the third Caliph, Uthman. Since that time, the written word has dominated Islamic art forms, and it continues to do so in the twenty-first century.

⁵⁰ Personal observations of the author.

⁵¹ http://www.artgallery.org.my/html/words_of_faith: accessed 26 December 2004.

⁵² <http://www.ndukhan.com>, accessed 26 December 2004.