

Ahmad Hasan Dani

ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

An Analytical Study

In the present paper an attempt is made to give, in brief, an analysis of the trends seen in the different styles of beautiful writing as developed by the Muslims in course of history. Several books and papers have been published on the general theme of calligraphy. Yet no comprehensive work has been produced to assess its development in the different countries of the Muslim world as a whole. From Arabic, Persian and Turkish works we get names of several styles of writing and of hundreds of calligraphers, some of whose works are still extant. They are generally reducible to one or the other school of writing. Even after such copious material, when one goes through the paper on "The Arts of Calligraphy" by Professor Priscilla P. Soucek in a recent UNESCO publication,¹ one feels still to be groping for the exact identification of different styles as seen in the illustrations. The problem has been well stated by Dr. Abdelkebir Khatibi Mohammad Sijilmassi:²

"How is one to distinguish the precise number of calligraphic styles and definitive models? The complications of historiography provide a mass of information, but little qualitative elaboration. Moslem historiography is basically genealogical in approach, classifying calligraphy according to the form of origin and the One. These historians and chronicles display in discouraging detail the genealogy of the calligraphers for every style, a mass of detail without any synthesis. No doubt there still exist innumerable treatises on calligraphy, but they constitute the backing for an orally transmitted teaching and this reduces their actual scope. Some styles have changed their names or have merged with others no longer in existence. From one country to another, from one epoch to another, typologies and nomenclatures undergo transformations which baffle the contemporary researcher. So let us try to establish a major typology, based on six styles, and maintaining a noteworthy continuity. These are Kufic, Naskhi, Andalusian Maghribi, Riqā', Diwani, Ta'liq (or Farsi)."

In these six styles four are definitely geographical in nature. Only Riqā' and Diwani relate to cursive types of writing. However, these six styles, as recognised by the author, are different from the traditional *sitta*, or the six traditional styles, viz., Muhaqqaq, Rayhan, Naskh, Thuluth, Riqā' and Tawqi' – the styles, which were precisely defined in mathematical proportion by Ibn Muqla, further refined by Ibn al-Bawwab and perfected by Yaqut al-Musta'simi in the time of the Abbasids. There are other writers, like Titus Burkhardt,³ who have dealt with the aesthetic character of calligraphy. Thus the vast material at our disposal

makes a bewildering puzzle and leaves little room to come to the exact nature of the subject.

One common factor in Islamic Calligraphy is that it is based on Arabic alphabet which implies a particular technique of writing. This technique may be derived from the following verse of the Qur'an:⁴

اقرأ وربك الاكرم الذي علم بالقلم

“Read. Yours is the most generous Lord who taught men by the pen.”

Here *Qalam*, or “pen” refers to a particular method of writing. A second verse⁵ is still more informative:

ولو ان ما فى الارض من شجره اقلام والبحر ويمه

“And if all the trees on earth were pens and the oceans (were ink)...”

Here the use of pen as well as of ink is clearly specified. The material used for writing is also given in another verse:⁶

ولو نزلنا عليك كتاباً فى قرطاس

“If we had sent unto thee a written (Book) on parchment...”

This material of parchment appears to have been the common medium then in use. Thus all the three elements of writing – the pen, the ink, and the parchment – are attested in the Holy Qur'an.

Several authors have commented on sanctity⁷ attached to *Qalam*, but from our point of view two things are important: (i) the evolution of the Arabic alphabet, which has not been discussed here but is taken for granted, and (ii) the methodology adopted to put that alphabet in writing. This is implied in the verses quoted above. The question of the origin and development of Arabic alphabet is outside the scope of this paper because we are strictly confining ourselves to calligraphy – a word which is derived from two Greek words, “kalios”, meaning “beauty” and “grapho” meaning “to write”. Hence calligraphy is the art of beautiful writing. The following saying⁸ is generally attributed to the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him):

من كتب بحسن الخط بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم فدخل الجنة

“Whosoever writes ‘Bi Ism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim’ beautifully will enter paradise.”

It is this beautiful writing that comes under calligraphy. It should be distinguished from the simple method of writing. The latter involves grammatical evolution of letters to express sounds. However, it is in the very nature of writing achieved by pen and ink that the letters develop ligatures differently in different hands so that the speed of writing could catch up with the speed of

speaking or thinking. It is the ligatures that make the writing move from a set form to take cursive shape. As language makes a continuous flow of speech so the writing interweaves the letters to express speech in rhythmic flow. All these tendencies lie at the base of calligraphy and they give rise to new ideas for developing calligraphic forms. The structural forms of the letters are already known, developed and perfected before a calligrapher sits to evolve his own style.

However, the structural form of the letters is directly related to the type of calligraphy that could possibly develop in the Muslim world. Although Arabic letters have preserved, in their names, a memory of original figures, like *Alif*, meaning "bull's head", *be* meaning "house", *sin* meaning "teeth", *ain* meaning "eye" etc., yet their forms had become standardised and stylised before they were adopted in Arabic. Hence the structural form of the Arabic lettering is not based on any figurative root but it derives its form from geometry and therefore its shape is dictated by geometrical proportions. In contrast to this the Chinese and the Japanese writings have figural forms of expression. As a result the latter use the brush but in Arabic it is the *Qalam* that is seen to play an important role not only in obtaining the actual shape but also in the development of different calligraphic styles. It is because of the influence of the pen that Islamic calligraphy is linear in expression.

This fundamental character of Islamic calligraphy influenced all subsequent development of painting in Islam and hence calligraphy is sometimes said to be mother of painting because it is the linear rhythm that has characterised the majority of the paintings done by the Muslims in history. The linear feature of the Arabic alphabet takes its origin from the very source wherefrom the letters of Arabic are derived. Hence the earliest system of writing imbibes the spirit of monumental writing, to which the name of Kufic was given later. Although Kufic takes precedence as far as chronology is concerned, yet the system did not die out at all. It has continued right down till modern time though its use has now become restricted and taken a more ornamental colour. It can also not be localised to one geographic region as its use is universal though its origin lies in the earlier system known in the heartland of the Arab world. Kufic is one system of writing, and not one style. In it we can distinguish several styles. Generally three styles are given prominence — the rectangular Kufic used in units like bricks or window panels, floreate Kufic found in the titles or headings in books, and Kufic with interlacing shafts, very well known in *Maghrif* art. But these are not all. Several other possibilities are seen by regulating the verticals in different proportions to the horizontals that are connected with the verticals in angular links. The emphasis on angularity is the hall-mark of Kufic writing. It is from this writing that the *Andalusian Maghribi* makes a further advance by rounding the ending letters. On the other hand the earliest Arabic inscription found from a mosque in Bhambore emphasizes on the verticals which end in thickened triangles on the upper side. The Bhambore calligraphy starts with

thickened pointed *Qalam* on the top and then the lines are flattened out evenly.

Could such a monumental writing like the Kufic be used for everyday purpose? Such a question has not been raised. The very fact that it gives rise to different shapes in *Maghrib* and in Sind suggest that there must have been more elasticity seen in its letter forms than what is known from monumental writing. However, as the origin of the Kufic is linked with the earlier form of writing in Arabia, there has been for a long time a clerical style derived from the same Semitic source but made popular throughout the Iranian empire for official correspondence. This is the Aramaic writing, which gave birth to many other systems in Western and Central Asia. What was the clerical style in the early period of Islam? It is difficult to give a definite answer to this question. But the one which received great popularity in the time of the Abbasids is generally given the name of *Naskh*, which literally means "transcription". It owed its name probably to the fact that in the time of the Abbasids several transcriptions or copies of books from different languages of the world were prepared. Hence each transcribed book is even now known as *nuskha*. The traditional six styles of writing are a development from this system. With this system the art of the book received great impetus and wherever the Abbasid influence reached, *Naskh* became the popular system of writing. This was a cursive writing with a flowing rhythm of its letter forms and hence it was most suited for writing on paper that became extremely popular at this time. The easy flow and transcription in this hand surpassed the stiff nature of the Kufic and hence *Naskh* became the common medium for all production, even including the Holy Qur'an. Once the angularity of letters and their joining were given up and they were replaced by curves and semi-circles, the letters could achieve various shapes by having different proportions of their length and breadth. It is this geometric proportion that differentiates one style from another. It is from this *naskh* that various other scripts were derived. In Pakistan the Sindhi and Pashtu alphabets are based on it. Even the old Panjabi manuscripts are written in this style. In Bangladesh when some Bengali books were written in Arabic character in the medieval period, it was this same *naskh* that was adopted for this purpose. Although great masters have framed rules of geometric proportion to contain *naskh* within typological limits and hence the six well-known styles, as given above, developed from this, yet the later evolution of the writing has followed innumerable trends that are difficult to assess within these six styles. In Bangladesh, for example, the arrow-and-bow type of writing⁹ became the arche-type in epigraphical transcription on stone during the time of the Independent Sultanate. In fact *naskh* or a style developing out of it, has become, and remained, a common medium for transcribing as long as the influence of Arabic continued to be strong. This system of writing is seen in metal plates and cups, on porcelain, on fabrics or even on buildings. Wherever Arabic is written, *naskh* has been the usual medium.

The same Aramaic system of writing gave rise to other forms in the eastern countries. In Iran it took the form of Pahlavi. In the region of Samarqand it was

transformed into Sogdian. In eastern Turkestan Uigur was developed from this proto-type. In Pakistan Kharoshti, written from right to left, became the common medium just before and after the Christian era. Out of all these it is the Pahlavi that survived the longest. Some inscriptions in this script have been brought to light by Brigadier M. Usman Hasan from Baluchistan. It is perhaps this writing which influenced the origin of *Ta'liq* in the later medieval period in Iran. Two factors are responsible for its development: first is the association of Persian language with it and second is the free hand allowed to it as it was not bound down in the early stage by any geometric rules and regulations. This freedom gave to it more elasticity and breadth that could not be achieved in *naskh*. In the hand of the master calligraphers of the fifteenth century A.D. it developed a definitive shape, popularly known as *nasta'liq*, based on two words namely, *naskh* and *ta'liq*. However, this is a system of writing which can hardly be said to be a combination of the two. Along with the Persian language the use of *nasta'liq* became common. In the time of the Timurids and later of the Safavids the writing achieved its final form and reached the height of excellence in neatness and draftsmanship. Yet *nasta'liq* remained a pen style quite distinct from painting. In fact the linear rhythm seen in the paintings of this period is traced to the influence of this calligraphic style. In the subcontinent it is the Mughals who popularised it. A cursive development from this writing is *Shikasta*,¹⁰ which is now followed in all Urdu correspondence. The chaste lettering of *nasta'liq* was so appealing that it became part of many illustrated manuscripts. Several decorative panels were invented to frame Persian couplets or quatrains written in *nasta'liq*. In spite of its beauty and facile nature we hardly find this writing adopted for transcribing the Holy Qur'an or even Arabic verses or phrases. Such a transcription in this writing is very rare. However, the beauty of *nasta'liq* lies in the free handling of the pen — in the twist that a calligrapher can give to his hand while forming the letters either alone or in combination. As Urdu received its legacy direct from Persian, there was no hesitation in adopting *nasta'liq* for its script. On the other hand the provincial languages continued their older scripts derived from *naskh*.

So far we have discussed different systems of writing and the varying styles of calligraphy that arose from each one of them because of different trends obtaining in one or the other region of the Muslim world. Besides, all of them have been used for decorative purposes. First of all is the intermingling of writing with arabesque in ornamenting the buildings. Very often the two supplemented each other as geometric and floral tendencies are common to both. They are seen particularly around the doorways, *mihirabs*, tympanums of the arches or as a basal ornamentation of the domes either inside or outside. The most lovely are some of the pulpits in the mosques of the Muslim countries. The media also changed from mosaic to painting or glazed tiles or inseting in marble, wood or metal. Such a fine calligraphy is also seen in porcelain, metal works, fabrics, rugs, furniture and numerous other objects of daily use that are to be seen in the

Muslim household. Still richer is the decorative calligraphy of the Holy Qur'an, in which multiple colours have added beauty to the headings of chapters or *surahs*. The book illustration, particularly in *nasta'liq*, reached high watermark in medieval painting. On the other hand a trend is seen to build bird and animal forms with the help of calligraphic writing. Certainly the object is not to represent figures for the purpose of figural art but rather to see their forms through calligraphic medium. Another tendency is to produce floral patterns known as *Gulzar* style – with flowers or other patterns within the breadth of the letters or outside in the space available. There is also a tendency to draw the ligatures longer so as to give the semblance of *zulf-i-urusi* (bride's hair) or even to shake the hands to produce wavy lines of the letters. Very often dust is thrown over the writing to create *ghubar* style. The tendency of decoration is so varied that it is impossible to catalogue all the forms in this brief paper.

However, one important ornamental design that became special to the Turks is what is called "knotted" design, within which calligraphic writing was filled in. Such a design is also seen in Mughal architecture. But it was the Turks alone who developed this style into a *Tughra* containing signatures of the Turkish Sultans. It is from this *Tughra* that the design for *Hukumat-i-Pakistan*, seen in some older Pakistani coins was derived. The Mughals, in their *farmans*, used different type of *Tughra* for their signature. It is generally marked by elongated verticals with the basal horizontal lettering in *nasta'liq*.

All these decorative designs follow from pen style. This character of writing has not been changed. However, a new tendency is nowadays seen which is derived from the tradition of painting. In this new tendency, as seen in Pakistan, it is the brush that comes to give new forms to calligraphy. Hence it has often been called calligraphic painting.¹¹ These are the works of painters who have attempted to revive the older styles of calligraphy to fit into their new style of painting, in which colour and visible forms play a dominant role. They not only give new dimension to older forms but also place the writing in the setting of their own visual art. Among these painters Sadeqain stands out foremost. He visualises and creates the idealised background and figures in order to give meaning to the words used in calligraphic writing. In his illustrations it is his painting and vision that shine out most prominently. Another artist Aslam Kamal from Lahore makes an interplay of triangles to interweave the writing taken from different styles. Sometimes he draws an architectural piece like a *minar* on the basis of Kufic writing. On the other hand, Sardar Mohammad recedes into a fantasy of forms to create his calligraphic style. Generally it is the colour and the background that support calligraphy and bring it into limelight. This is certainly a new experiment by the painters in order to bring new trends into the traditional styles of calligraphy. Here brush has invaded the field of pen and it is the painting that overshadows calligraphy rather than *vice versa*. In the new age of printing press the hand-written calligraphic styles in the traditional pattern are bound to recede in importance but perhaps the painters may save

calligraphy and give it a new place in their own art.^{1 2}

NOTES

1. Basil Gray (ed.by): *The Arts of the Book in Central Asia*, Paris, 1979, pp. 7-34.
2. *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy*, Eng. Tr. by James Hughes, London, 1976, p.154.
3. *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, England, 1976, chapter IV,2, on Arabic Calligraphy, pp.47-55.
4. Surah, XCVI, 3-4.
5. Surah, XXXI, 27.
6. Surah, VI, 7.
7. S.R. Dar, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Lahore, 1982, p. 7.
8. Quoted in *Ibid*, p.7.
9. Shamsuddin Ahmed: *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. IV, Rajshahi, 1960, pp. 46-48.
10. For detail see Zafar Hasan: "Specimens of Calligraphy in the Delhi Museum of Archaeology", *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, No.29, Calcutta, 1926.
11. Tariq Masud: *Muraqq'ah-Khatt*, Lahore, 1981, pp.31-32 and several plates that illustrate this tendency.
12. As I learn from Sadeqain himself, he takes the actual words, like sun, moon, stars, etc., occurring in the Quranic verses and tries to recreate the forms on their basis, or sometimes he distorts the human forms to suit the meaning of the verses.