Masterworks of Islamic Book Art: Koranic Calligraphy and Illumination in the Manuscripts found in the Great Mosque in Sanaa

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In the Great Mosque in Sanaa, one of the oldest in the Islamic world, a manuscript brought to light fifteen years ago: a hoard of ancient manuscripts, which were discovered during restoration work to the west wing, between the roof and an inner, suspended ceiling. It consists of about 40,000 fragments from more than a thousand different Koran manuscripts; some few are re- mains of documents, annals, and non-Koranic manuscripts. Over 700 of the Korans are written on parchment, another 350—400 on paper. Although paper was known to the Muslims as early as the 2nd cent. H. (i.e. the 8th cent. A.D.) its use spread very slowly and was common in book production only from the early 5th/11th century onwards. Thus the parchments—with which this article is exclusively concerned—doubtless constitute the oldest group of finds in this hoard. An agreement whereby the Republic of Yemen offered to lend in 1980 it possible for the Federal Republic of Germany to send experts and supply technical equipment, thus contributing considerably towards the preservation of this treasure and paving the way for subsequent research. The find confirmed early reports of the high quality of Yemeni book art during the early Islamic period, thereby adding a new dimension to our knowledge of Yemeni culture. Beyond that, the large number of the fragments and their great age make the discovery particularly valuable for a study of early Koranic manuscripts and the development of Arabic calligraphy and Islamic book art in general. To be allowed a glimpse of the emergence of this tradition is a rare stroke of luck—a tradition central to the entire Islamic world, which subsequently determined the production of manuscript copies of the Holy Book for more than a thousand years: here we are given a chance to observe the lengthy phase of experimenting with different formats—from miniature pocket editions to the first hand, not simply reflected in literary tradition or seen as a complete system. The discovery of these manuscripts is one of incredible variety. Already a cursory survey, as e.g. afforded by the beautiful permanent exhibition in the "House of Manuscripts" in Sanaa, impresses upon the viewer the enormous range of different formats—from miniature pocket editions to monumental volumes, as indeed the variety in the types of scripts. Both aspects mirror the intention of the donor who commissioned the work, the emphasis being sometimes on the effect of the fineness of the Koran, sometimes on a reliable and precise copy of the text.

Experimentation did not affect the text of the Koran itself; this was already standardised under the third successor of the Prophet: Caliph 'Uthman (died 643, 1st/2nd A.D.), and achieved its final form then, which it has retained ever since. There are minor variants in the area of orthography, as in the use of full length or shortened version of a word, or in the rare substitution of a synonym for a standard word. A wider range of variants can be found in the area of signs which supplement the basic stock of consonants in order to clarify the notation: this is done by means of diacritical marks which allow a distinction between otherwise identically shaped letters, and by vowel symbols, mainly in the shape of additional coloured marks.

Outside the canon, and therefore open to conflicting interpretations, are the additional marks which visually transform the text: various signs, sura, dividers, and marks which divide the entire Koran into, usually, seven, thirty or sixty parts (I have also come across a division into 14). The date of the manuscript or the verse number given to a certain sura title may indicate that a particular manuscript could be allocated to a certain "school" of verse counting; the shape of such a sign, on the other hand, can at times help to put the manuscript in an art-historical context, while the richness of the ornamentation reveals the art of the illuminator and might allow a conclusion as to the rank of the person who commissioned the book.

The scripts which occur in the manuscripts can be divided into two groups: a cursive type, Hijazi (and some closely related variants), which finds close parallels in the papyri of the 1st/7th century, and an angular script, traditionally called Kufi, a term which may, however, cover two quite distinct ductus.

Hijazi script is still represented here by only a few of the manuscripts, is sometimes regarded as a purely functional script. However, some of the newly discovered material shows beyond doubt that the writers aspired to fulfilling the high demands of calligraphy, and succeeded. This script is executed with a thin-cut reed and usually written on high size pages, rarely on oblong size, the predominant format of Kufic codices. Characteristic of this ductus are the tall ascenders and descenders, as well as their slant (cf. plate 1). A vertical tendency is also very obvious. Not quite so obvious is the fact that this script is a hybrid between two early type forms, a characteristic bloom motif is used, which was well known in Hijazi art. In their use of color, these verse variants closely resemble the two preserved coloured sura dividers. In other places the suras are separated simply by an interlinear channel: this, too, seems to suggest (that the sura dividers were not part of the original shape) of the second version. It is strange, though, that the illuminator did not think it necessary to mark all sections in a uniform way.

So far, all reports have assumed that the development of Koran illumination started with small, casual ornaments, like verse counters, and only later led to the use of proper ornamental bands. In this context the newly discovered group of fragments has made a valuable contribution to the discussion. While the two dozen or so preserved sheets in the first version show only verse dividers in the shape of dots arranged in lines (as described above), the wash-off first version already contained band ornaments, three of which can be distinguished still. Their patterns are simple and find their closest parallels in a papyrus fragment published by Grohmann and dated to the 1st/7th century. It is not clear whether or not these bands were ever coloured.

About one in eight parchment Korans was illuminated, with band ornaments between the suras or marginal ornamentation beside the sura titles; with ornaments framing an entire block of script and thus setting off important sections or with illuminated pages inserted before or after such points in the text. An examination of the illuminated fragments has led to a series of interesting results, the most important being the fact that the oriental character of the Koran is often strengthened by non-Yemeni illuminations, and that we have been able to establish a relative chronology. The latter is beyond the scope of this article: I shall have to content myself with characterising briefly the different groups of illuminations.

Yemeni illuminations of the early period can be divided into five groups. Some of these can be defined exactly and distinguished clearly, others are made up of some manuscripts with definite characteristics and others which transcend their groups. The overall picture is one which transcends clear categorizing due to the fact that the groups are all interrelated. It is easy to see why this is the case once we assume that they originated roughly at the same time in or around the same region. It is very difficult; however, to draw conclusions as to the state of early Yemeni book production based on our present information.

Only few Hijazi manuscripts contain illuminations; none of them show a constant number of lines per page. The suras are divided by means of drawings, sometimes by two columns, elsewhere by simple double lines, and with double lines in body paint. There are bands made up of geometrical shapes, e.g. circles or diamonds; zig-zag bands form triangles or make up other individual shapes. In the second group, the illuminator demonstrates a characteristic element being a sura divider drawn by pen, occa-
ensation in two colours. But some multi-coloured examples (in effect coloured drawings) must also be allocated to this group. One reason for this is the similarity of their motifs, e.g. a type where the bands are made up of oblong or square blocks which are often filled in with, and structured by, various combinations of arches (occasionally architectural motifs occur as well, cf. plate 4). Moreover, one manuscript of which several fragments have been preserved shows two sura dividers which were designed in colour from the start, along with a number of purely graphic ones. In contrast to all other groups this one uses a colour-type, transparent colours. The fact that in nine manuscripts of this group the number of lines varies would point, in conjunction with other reasons, to an early date of origin; the others, with one exception, contain 13–19 lines per page.

3. Most codices of this group, in which the shades of yellow, orange and green predominate, have between 14 and 17 lines per page; only one—still—has a variable number of lines. This group favours plant motifs and woven band ornaments. (cf. plate 5)

4. The most distinct group is one where the illustrations are executed in the two colours red and green (cf. plates 7–9). All of these manuscripts have between 13 and 16 lines per page, and geometrical patterns predominate. Any plant motifs are concentrated in the finials, i.e. the "flower" spreading out into the margins. On the inner margins we often find an ana in the shape of a "stepped vase with leaves".

5. Group five, that of the "Great Umayyad Korans", comprises only three manuscripts, all of them made up of pages of 20 lines. This group stands out amongst the rest through the exceptionally high quality of their Kufi, their high size format (in contrast to all other Kufi manuscripts) and their monumental size (plates 3 and 6). In two of these codices the script on each page is completely or partially framed, and both are obviously indebted in their motifs to late Graeco-Roman-Roman culture. One of these Korans (see below) can be dated to the early 2nd/8th century.

These five interrelated groups are, then, distinguishable through their illuminations, but at the same time each of them is also connected with a much larger number of non-illuminated manuscripts. The illuminations of the five groups have in common a particularly visual, sensual quality which is in stark contrast to a completely different group which probably originated outside the Yemen. The non-Yemeni illuminations which are found in the treatises are dominated by the use of gold, whether in simple frames, resplendent sura dividers, or uniquely structured ornamental pages. Even where there is a wealth of motifs and great complexity of composition, their structure is in a way which is in sharp contrast with the vivid opulence of the richest works of Yemeni illumination, even where they are of comparable motifs.

A fair proportion (about 40%) of the illuminated manuscripts are non-Yemeni: their share in the overall number of manuscripts is considerably smaller than are the few related non-illuminated manuscripts. This is hardly surprising: it seems, on the contrary, that logical that mainly manuscripts of visual excellence (this might also mean calligraphic excellence, cf. plate 10) would have been brought the long distance to Sanaa. Our still very limited knowledge of early Islamic book art precludes any attempt at gauging the origin of these manuscripts.

Finally, we shall examine the most significant of these "Great Umayyad Korans" and, by attempting to piece together an impression of its illuminations from its 25 fragments, demonstrate the exceptional nature of this manuscript.

As in all the more recent Korans, the text in this one starts already with a page on the right side. It displays sura 1, one of the shortest. For this, less than the space of an entire page is needed, so the calligrapher reduced it in size, thereby gaining enough space for a 10 cm margin consisting of light coloured braiding interwoven with golden acanthus wreaths. The opposite page showed the beginning of the second sura, which is lost but was presumably executed in the same fashion. On turning the pages one is confronted with a full page text, at first still surrounded by a frame of 1.5 cm: narrower than the first but more structured and colourful. The bulk of the book consists of exquisite calligraphy (cf. plate 3) punctuated only by splendid sura dividers as the only form of illumination. Geometrical patterns alternate with plant ornaments as the dominant motifs; usually these two are interwoven. Towards the end of the manuscript the narrow framing band re-emerges, and finally the last suras are once more framed, one at a time, by a wider margin. From the sura divider preceding sura 100 up to the last, No. 114, an astonishing climactic effect is achieved, as the motif is developed in ever increasing complexity.

This Koran is unique and quite distinct from other traditional forms; just how different it is can be seen on examination of the pages immediately preceding the text. A splendid eight sided star spreads out across the title page, but the first double page displays two full-page pictures: on the left, that of a courtyard mosque (plate 2), on the right, a prayer hall consisting of four naves with a two-storey side elevation and a transept leading off the mihrab. Ground plan and side elevation are combined in an intriguing way. Despite the rich detail, which shows the painter's interest in the way these buildings "function", these are definitely pictures whose purpose is representational, while at the same time showing off the splendid architectural and ornamental details of these buildings.

It has proved unexpectedly difficult, though, to attempt a reconstruction of the models for these buildings in spite of the obvious metricalness of the artist: whatever he could not manage to fit into the picture is not indicated in any way.

Compared to the mosque on the right—the of the of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus—the courtyard

splendour like that displayed in this Koran remains a question for future research to solve.

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6. 'Abd al-Malik al-Mukmallu 'Ali (289–925 h., 902–908 m.)
gold dinar, San'a' 292 h., 2.92 gms.
legends as on no. 4 but with the name of the Caliph al-Mukmallu 'Ali.
The coin's elegance of the calligraphy on this coin belies the politi-
cal chaos of the period. At the time the Qurayshites were besieging
the city of San'a' only for it to fail to al-Hašā in the year 293 h.

7. Rashid Imams
al-Hašā Illa al-Haqq
gold dinar, Zenjil 298 h., 2.88 gms.
legends as on no. 5, but with the word 'alla moved from the end
of the field line to the beginning of the fourth in the reverse field.
All Hašā died at Zenjil on 10th Dhūl Hijja 298 h.

8. Anfāl
gold dinar, Dhamir (3) 37 h., 1.87 gms.
reverse field as no. 2
inner margin: mint and date
outer margin: al-Dhaher, at 6:00 h.Dham'at
reverse field: Lā ilāha 'l-Muhammad 'r-Rasul Allāhu 'l-Mukaffir bi llah
inner margin: Snah 38 vs. 4—5
outer margin: al-Dhaher, at 6:00 h.Dham'at
Coins of this type are generally associated with the mint of San'a',
but unrest in the latter city probably caused mint production to be
transferred to Dhamir for a brief period in 337 and 339 h. These
coins also bear the name of the Caliph al-Mukaffir who was de-
posed by the Banu Shaytans in the year 334.

9. The Ziyādīd Rulers of Zabād
Abū-Iskāf Ibn Abī 'Umar (291–371 h., 903–981 m.)
gold dinar, Zabād 346 h., 2.77 gms.
reverse field: 'Allūthbl-Muhammad 'r-Rasul Allāhu 'l-Mu'ta'
Nabī bi llah bin Bishān
in margin: Snah 17 vs. 81—82
During the early years of the fourth century the Tihāmīs enjoyed a
period of calm under the rule of Abū-Iskāf Ibn Abī 'Umar, the
Ziyādīd, who died in 371 h. Although his coins were 'Abbasīd
in their design, he adopted the Qurayshite reverse used by the
Rāṣīc al-Hašā Illa al-Haqq which by this time had become accept-
ced everywhere in the Yemen.

10. Najāhidī
al-Mu'taffar bin 'Abī'
gold dinar, Zabād date uncertain, possibly c. 371–381 h., wt. 2.70
grms.
reverse field as no. 5
margin: mint and date formula
reverse field: al-Tawīb 'llah bi 'llah al-Mu'taffar 'r-Rasul bi 'llah
margin: a blundered rendering of Snah 17 vs. 81—82
Unfortunately the date on this coin is badly blundered, and the pe-
riod of its striking is tentatively assigned to 371–381 h. Following
the death of the Ziyādīd Abū-Iskāf and during the caliphate of
al-Tawīb. The only other coins of this ruler were published by Lottick,
and attributed to the founder of the Najāhidī dynasty.

11. Anṭūr al-Anbārī
Abū-Iskāf bin Muhammad
gold dinar, Anbār 373 h., wt. 2.69 gms.
reverse field: al-'ādāb illa 'llah bi 'llah 'r-Rasul al-Muhammad 'r-Rasul Allāhu 'l-Mu'ta'
in margin: four groups of unread words
outer margin: four groups of unread words

Plate 2: Koran page with full page picture of a courtyard mosque, from an omatic Umayyad Koran, Yemen (?), early 2nd/9th cent. (to be viewed from back), San'a', House of Manuscripts, Inventory 20, 33, 1. 184
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Plate 1: Kufic page (sura 75:22-35), from a parchment manuscript, ornamental band and letters of the first verse visible in the bottom quarter of the page. Yemen (7) 1st/7th cent., Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 01-27.1.

Plate 2: Kufic calligraphy and illuminated sura divider at sura 74, in an ornamented manuscript. Yemen (7) 2nd/8th cent., Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 20-32.

Plate 3: Kufic calligraphy and illuminated sura divider at sura 74, in an ornate manuscript. Yemen (7) Early 2nd/8th cent., Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 20-33.1.

Plate 4: Surah divider with architectural motifs before sura 29, 1st-2nd/7th-8th cent., Yemen. Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 01-25.2.

Plate 5: Coloured sura divider between suras 45 and 46, in a Koran from the 2nd/8th cent. Yemen. Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 17-17.

Plate 6: Kufic calligraphy and illuminated band between suras 69 and 70 in one of the 'Great Ornamented Korans', Yemen. Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 20-31.1.

Plate 7: Surah divider of the red-green type, 3rd/9th cent., Yemen. Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 13-16.2.

Plate 8: Kufic calligraphy, richly illuminated at the beginning of sura 16, 2nd/6th cent., Yemen. Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 25-23.3.

Plate 9: Koran page (sura 6:143-73) with an exceptionally ornate ornamental band on sura divider, with a "serpent vasa" and foliage on the margins. Yemen. Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 15-23.1.

Plate 10: Kufic calligraphy and illuminated verse divider and the name of God picked out in gold; non-Yemeni, 3rd-4th/9th-10th cent. (7), Sa'ā', House of Manuscripts, Inventory No. 10-27.1.
Tomb of Sayyid Ahmad bin Yahia al-Mahdij in central Hadramawt, between Salibah and al-Ghawla, the ancestors of the Sayyids of the Hadramawt (4th cent. H.). The two funeral chapels follow the style of the pre-Islamic temple structures.
Ta'izz: Town facade of the Musaffahiyah, with the fortress al-Qahirah towering above.

Left: Ta'izz: view from the Ashrafiyah over the Musaffahiyah.

Page 193: In the mosque of al-Jamal near Ta'izz, founded by Mu'ad bin Ishab during the Prophet's own lifetime, probably the 2nd oldest mosque in the Yemen.
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In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate
On 28th April 1987 in the highly renowned town of München, at the State Museum for Ethnology, the Exhibition

Yemen — 3000 Years of Art and Civilisation in Arabia Felix

is to be opened. It gives me great pleasure to write a few words of welcome to salute the publication of the catalogue which has been prepared for this occasion.

It is my foremost concern to express my thanks to all those who have contributed towards this exhibition, in particular the executives of the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, who have made it possible for our Yemeni culture to take up its place amongst the many civilisations already represented there. At the same time I should like to convey my gratitude to the Government of the Free State of Bavaria, for the generous support they have given to this exhibition and the welcome they have extended to us in their capital. My thanks are further due to the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, and the German—Yemeni Friendship Association. Last but by no means least, I would like to thank Werner Daum for editing this catalogue and for all that he has done — together with his friends in the Federal Republic of Germany, in the Yemen Arab Republic and many other countries united by their love for Yemen — to make this exhibition possible.

Any culture is an expression of the spirit which pervades its society, of its ideas and experiences, its principles and endeavours. The basic ideas which determine our political thinking in these areas go back to the roots planted by our Revolution, whose 25th anniversary we celebrate this year. The sights which the Yemeni people have set for themselves in recent years and the ideas which are embodied in the National Charter have strengthened the original impetus of the Revolution and increased its force.

Cultural matters are of particular importance to us Yemenis as we understand our culture as a characteristic expression of our national identity, and because to us it is an integral part of our sovereignty and a guarantee for the eventual return towards a united fatherland.

Scholars have found that the ancient Yemeni culture ranks equal in importance with other civilizations of the Ancient Near East. Much archeological and ethnological evidence has been collected which confirms that Yemen is amongst those countries in which stood the cradle of civilization; our part of the world has been shown to have produced a civilization which, along with others, made an active contribution towards the development of mankind.

Yemen of today is an Arab and Islamic country; in this fact are embodied the true and secure roots of our culture. Our Islamic Faith determines our national character; it is the basis for the continuity in our cultural experience and the reason why so many lasting achievements have emerged from here throughout the centuries of our Islamic history. This faith has always allowed great new ideas the scope to develop, ideas which express respect for the future and stipulate freedom of thought, opposed to all forms of authoritarianism and tyranny. This