Sultans in Cairo and caliphs in Damascus, Asian calligraphers and Persian illuminators, Muslim traders plying the Silk Road and devout pilgrims en route to Mecca— all played a part in creating the vast array and redefining the bounty of Qur’anic manuscripts in the world today. Spanning over 1200 years, from the 7th to 19th centuries, this lavish and authoritative history traces the evolution of Qur’anic manuscripts across the vast expanse of the Islamic empire, stretching from Spain to the borders of China. From the simplest to the grandest, from the miniscule to the monumental, whether designed to be read aloud in the sultan’s mosque, worn as a jewelled amulet or carried across the desert in a saddle bag— all find a place here, many shown together for the first time.

Unique among holy books, the Qur’an—the holy book of Islam—lacks any figurative motifs or narrative scenes. Instead, both calligraphy and abstract design evolved to an extraordinary degree of subtlety in the Qur’an, imbuing its sacred script and spell-binding patterns with spiritual resonance.

Highlighting the interplay between calligraphy, design and illumination, Dr Colin Parker explores the steady sophistication of style, the development of ornate carpet pages and evocative motifs, such as the sunburst. Examining vowel signs, ornamental markers and the blend of variant scripts, including kufic, naskh, thuluth and the extraordinary dart-like naskh, Parker shows clearly how the Qur’an’s ornate illumination, innovative design and elegant calligraphy evolved to serve the faithful in their devotions. A final section explores unusual formats, such as scrolls and miniature, along with bindings and stands.

A feast for the eye and mind, lavishly illustrated with over 80 colour examples drawn from the British Library’s superb collection—some shown here for the first time—Qur’an Manuscripts will delight both scholars and newcomers alike.

Jacket designed by Andrew Shoolbred.
QUR'AN MANUSCRIPTS
Calligraphy, Illumination, Design

Colin F. Baker

The British Library
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This book is for the curious, primarily for the reader with a general interest in understanding Qur’an manuscripts and their development over the centuries. While appreciating the splendour and beauty of Qur’an manuscripts, it is not always easy to take an informed look at what is on the page. In attempting in a small way to remedy this, I have had the privilege and opportunity to draw on the magnificent collection of Qur’an manuscripts in the British Library, which is one of the finest in Europe and North America.

I would like to express gratitude to my colleagues in the British Library for their encouragement and continued support throughout the writing of this book and for their advice, in particular, to David Way, Laza Speicher and Belinda Wilkinson (Publishing), Graham Shaw and Annabel Gallop (Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections), Chris Lee and Elizabeth Hunter (Photography) and David Jacobs (Conservation). I would also like to thank Venetia Porter of the British Museum for her invaluable suggestions. To the many authors whose works I have consulted in my researches, I want to express my inestimable debt of gratitude. Finally, I would like to thank the British Library for granting me a three-month research break, releasing me from my curatorial duties and enabling me to concentrate solely on this project.