Foreword

At its most spiritual, language is life; at its most profound, language is wisdom; at its most noble language is art. The first is familiar to people of the Book: there is A

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F, and there is the WORD. The sense of the divine, of the sacred, in language is widespread. Hindus and Buddhists have OM. For some Chinese, Tao is the origin of all order in the world. Next wisdom - however engendered and begot - in the form of proverbs, adages, sayings and couplets that give sweetness and light to big and small civilities. More often than not, these formulations are made memorable by the subtle, intensifying power of language. To monotheists, the greatest are from the Bible and the Qur'an, making two great civilizations. Other immemorial sources include the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Tao Te Ching attributed to Lao Tzu, and the Analects of Confucius. And there is the poetry of nations, considered by many to be the most glorious of the arts, manifest in the works of Sa'di, Hafiz, Sappho, Libai, Su Shih, Tirukkural, Tagore, Basho, Buson, Dante or Shakespeare; or classic collections such as the Kuruntokai and the Manyoshu.

Where no else do all three gifts of language come together with greater passion, point and delicacy than in Islamic calligraphy. Having to eschew 'the human form divine' which inspired western art from the time of the Greeks, its genius was devoted to the most intricate patterning of form, giving it judicious repetition, cadence and rhythm. It is there in the architecture, the decorations, and how they combine, find a focus. There is both geometry and calculus in how, for instance, a pattern based on a vine scroll, or a display of tulips, diminishes gradually, in proportion, as it moves to the point of a dome. It reflects a way of looking at the world, of combining imagination and science. Add to these the voice of belief, the touch of wisdom, the wings of poetry. Then place all in the hands of a master calligrapher, and the results are these folios you see. They remind us that at their most profound, when substance finds its best form, we get that art which touches the soul and soars to the heavens. As title, Rhythm & Verses is apt. It tells of the tempo of the stroke; the perfect synchrony of hand and instrument moving as one.

From the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, this exhibition spans four hundred years, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century AD. It offers a rich gateway to the various styles and attributes of Islamic calligraphy. Among the more prominent calligraphers featured are those responsible for the development of different forms and styles of scripts. They include Sayyid Mir ’Imad al-Hasani Al Husselini (d.1615) in his fine Nasta’liq style, Dervish Abdul Majid Talliani (d.1771) in Shikasteh style and from the atelier of Shah Tahmasp, examples of Shah Mahmud Nishapuri (d.1564-5).

The folios vary in size, script and decorative elements. Some small pieces were intended as Ghobar or protective charms, while other folios were mounted in Muraqa’ style, intended for large albums. The beauty and delicacy of the scripts are highlighted in numerous folios with stamped seals and signatures, making this collection one of historical importance, shedding more light onto the development of Persian calligraphy. Accompanying the exhibition is a publication that sets forth to reveal the development of calligraphy as a traditional discipline passed down from masters to pupils and exemplified in the practice sheets and professional folios. Dr Heba Barakat has given us an excellent introduction through which we enter and appreciate the world of the calligraphers, and the riches it has to offer.

The Centre will take advantage of the richness of Rhythm & Verses to organize a series of activities. These will include a seminar on Islamic calligraphy in Singapore, and discussion to explore how the internet could be used to promote the art.

I would like to express my profound thanks to Tuan Syed Mohamad Albukhary, Director, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia for making the beauty of Persian calligraphy accessible to Singaporeans, to Dr Heba Barakat for sharing her wide knowledge, and to the curatorial and management teams at the Iamm for their hard work in making this possible. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank you, the viewer-visitor whose appreciation, renews the life of each of these beautiful, and wise folios. As this free translation of a couplet by Sa'di, recalled across fifty years,

The thirst that parches me I cannot ease
With limpid water, though I drank the seas.

Edwin Thumboo (Prof)
Director
NUS Centre for the Arts
National University of Singapore
Acknowledgements from the
Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

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Foreword

"And instructing you in Scripture and Wisdom, and what you did not know"

The Holy Qur'an
(2:151)

Scripture and Wisdom are two fundamental components of the calligrapher's foundational years. In the world of calligraphy, Scripture is the essence of all knowledge, while Wisdom becomes the tool by which the art of calligraphy is elevated beyond penmanship. Conjointly, they are reflected in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia's distinguished collection of Persian single folios produced from the 16th to the 19th century.

Single folios mounted in albums and separate sheets have not attracted the attention of many scholars in the past. Today, Rhythm & Verses will attempt to contribute towards constructing a clearer history of the development of this art form and the role of its' calligraphers.

Rhythm & Verses further ventures into the manner in which these calligraphic works were recited, bringing the vibrations of the sacred sounds to the surface of the page. Visually, the script styles start to reveal the rhythm of the poem, the enchanted melody of the prose, and the measured tone of the verses. Throughout the exhibition and publication of Rhythm & Verses, the artful strokes of the calligrapher's pen will reveal the perpetual aesthetic beauty and devout wisdom of the single folios.

"He granteth wisdom to whom He pleaseth;
and he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth
indeed a benefit overflowing, but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding."

The Holy Qur'an
(2 : 269)

Syed Mokhtar Albukhary
Executive Chairman
The style of the Holy Qur’an, with its rhythm and verses, penetrated the heart and mind of every Muslim scholar, calligrapher and poet. The verses influenced their writings and the rhythms echoed in the artistic expressions, elevating the gift of arranging words above ordinary impressions. The Muslim calligrapher embarked on the challenge of developing visually pleasing script styles to complement the beauty of the meanings of the Holy Qur’an, Hadith and aphorisms. To the calligrapher the responsibility multiplied with his desire to reveal the prolongation, pauses and accentuation of the verses. His aim focused on exhibiting folios with chanting narratives, by using his instrument, the reed pen, he orchestrated the rhythm of each word throughout the folio.

Persian calligraphers played an important role in the transformation and adaptation of the Arabic script in Iran and Central Asia. With the spread of Islam, the Arabic alphabet conquered the earlier existing languages, altering their written form and introducing numerous Arabic words. In this manner, the newly developed language, the Neo Persian, remained accessible to the people, while its script was confined only to the elite and educated few. The shapes of the alphabetic letters changed and new rules were introduced to regulate and guide the size, width, height, and the method by which they connect. Ta’liq, Nasta’liq and Shikasteh are three new scripts that developed in Persia. They were rendered to appear light, floating, rhythmic, and ‘free hanging’, leading to their appreciation in a mystical and spiritual manner.

To the Persian calligrapher of the fifteenth century, the beauty produced by his human hand was attributed to God’s inspiration and divine guidance. The calligrapher Mir Ali Tabrizi (b.1416), founder of the Nasta’liq script, is said to have had a vision of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, in a dream, whereupon Caliph Ali directed his sight to flying geese, and showed him how the line of their silhouette and free-flowing shapes can be compared to elegant calligraphic strokes. In time, the Nasta’liq
script was born. The Ta'liq and Nasta'liq scripts, perceived by many as mystical, bring with them a great deal of order and regulation, which takes a calligrapher a lifetime to learn and perfect. The Shikasteh style displays a multitude of short phrases, uttered in all directions as hymms of rhythmic verses.

Rhythm & Verses sets forth to reveal the development of calligraphy as a traditional discipline, through a chain of transmission from masters to pupils, exemplified in our collection of practice sheets and professional folios. Among the signatures of famous calligraphers unveiled in the IAMM collection are examples of fine Nasta'liq folios of Sayyid Mir Imad al Hasani Al Hussaini (d. 1615), melodic folios of the Shikasteh script by Dervish Abdul Majid Taliqani (d. 1771), rhythmic couplets in Naskh and Riqa' style by Ahmed Al Nairizi and from the atelier of Shah Tahmasp, specimens of calligraphers Shah Mahmud Nishapuri (d. 1564-5) and Malik Deylam (d. 1562).

The collection varies in size, script and decorative elements. Some miniature pieces were intended as Ghobar (dust like) or minute protective charms and secret messages, while other folios were mounted in Muraqqa’ (albums) and intended for large royal display. The beauty and delicacy of the scripts are highlighted in numerous folios with stamped seals and signatures making this collection of great historical importance and shedding more light onto the development of Persian calligraphy.

Rhythm & Verses invites its viewers to listen to the beat within the couplets of masnavis and the poems of Rumi to feel the resonance of each line and reveal their melodies.

Syed Mohamad Albukhary
Director
Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia
Introduction
Historical Introduction

By the western shores of the Caspian Sea, and under the guidance of Sultan Ali Mirza, grew the young prince Ismail Safavid. Ismail Safavid (1501-24) was the grandson of Uzun Hasan, a celebrated leader of the Turkmen Aqqoyunlu. More significantly, he was the heir to the wealth and religious leadership of the Sufi order and the shrine of Ardabil. At the advent of the 16th century, the young leader founded an army from his religious followers, called them the Qizilbash (red headed – describing their head dress with a long red baton), and defeated the Aqqoyunlu army. Soon after, he was proclaimed the shah of western Iran and eastern Anatolia.

Shah Ismail (d. 1524) enjoyed the pleasures of royal life, composed poetry and became a devout patron of the arts. Under the patronage of Shah Ismail, continued under his son and successor Shah Tahmasp, one of the most exuberant, impressive and magnificent manuscripts of the Shahnameh was commissioned. The young Shah Tahmasp (1524-76) was appointed governor of Herat at an early age, and received extensive education in all fields including the art of writing, illumination and miniature painting. In 1524 he was proclaimed Shah and continued to share his passion for the arts with his brother Sultan Bahram Mirza.

Shah Tahmasp’s patronage of the arts stopped in the middle of the 1550s, a period which coincided with the moving of his capital from Tabriz to Qazvin. It was during this period that he went into religious seclusion, released all his artists and nearly closed his ateliers. Some artists sought employment under the court of other members of the Safavid royal family, some migrated to Mughal India, while others went into an independent practice hoping to produce single folios that would attract wealthy and non-royal patrons and collectors.

Upon the death of Shah Tahmasp, his long-imprisoned son Shah Ismail II came to power, soon to be succeeded by Shah Mohammed Khudabanda, who was constantly threatened by the Ottomans from the west and the Uzbeks in the east. During the reign of Shah Mohammed, single folios with religious verses or beautiful poetry couplets flourished, and prominent artists were proud to compose, present and sell their works in the market.

The long reign of the powerful Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) brought back the old glory of the Iranian empire. Shah Abbas secured the borders and halted the advance of both the Ottoman and Uzbek armies. He embarked on a reconstruction scheme to transform the City of Isfahan into the sparkling jewel of the empire, with magnificent monuments, organised districts, and superior facilities. In the process, he welcomed foreign embassies and became exposed to their ideas, styles and luxury goods, aiming at facilitating the economic prosperity of his lands.

Silver coin of Shah Tahmasp II
Mint date 1136 AH / 1722 AD at Herat

Once more, art ateliers flourished and royal patronage was extended to not only complete manuscripts but also supported the growing demand for single-folio panels of calligraphy, paintings and drawings. A tendency to incorporate European ideas, portraiture and three-dimensional representations came about during the first quarter of the 17th century. This hybrid style remained throughout the reign of the weak Shah Safi I (1629-42). Shah Abbas II (1642-66) succeeded in re-
securing the Iranian borders and even annexed Qandahar in 1649. Shah Abbas II supported the palace pavilion of the Chihil Sutun, built in 1647, and expressed pride in the wall paintings displayed there. With the increased tendency to imitate European avant-garde paintings, some patrons looked to Indo-Persian artists and ateliers for more conservative alternatives.

The enthusiasm that marked Shah Abbas II's era came to an end with the succession of Shah Suleiman, followed by his son Shah Sultan Hussein. In due time the chaotic situation led to civil factions and in 1722 the Afghan invasion brought the Safavid dynasty to an end. It was not until the establishment of the Qajar dynasty (1179-1924) that royal patronage of the art flourished once more, to produce masterpieces, yet with a more religious orientation.

During the reign of Nadir Shah Afshar (1736-1747), Shah Rukh, his grandson, created an independent rule in the province of Khurasan, making Mashhad its capital. He was soon blinded and deposed by Mir Sayyid Muhammad, the son-in-law of Shah Sultan Husayn. A few weeks later Sayyid Muhammad was deposed and Shah Rukh reinstated. Mir Sayyid's son Sultan Dawud Mirza took refuge in Murshidabad under the protection of the Allahvirdi Khan Mahabatjang, the governor of Bengal. Both Sultan Dawud and his son Muhammad Khaili lived in Murshidabad and together they produced several literary works. Later, the British extended their direct rule of the province through the East India Company, and Persian and Arabic were reduced to a few written folios infrequently produced for and by Muslim calligraphers.
Script Styles of Persia

After the Islamisation of Iran, Kufic and cursive scripts like Naskh were both used for inscribing the Holy Qur'an. The oldest known Qur'an written in Persia is dated to 198 AH / 813 AD. It coincides with the reign of the Abbadid Caliph Al Ma'mun. The Qur'an was written in a type of Kufic script, the eastern Kufic, that was characterised by its slanting and elongated characters. The eastern script flourished all during the Ghaznavid and Seljuk periods yet came to an end towards the 12th century when its use was reduced to ornamental calligraphy on artifacts and architectural surfaces.

In the first half of the 10th century, the Persian Vizier Ibn Muqla gave the cursive, flexible Naskh script its set of rules and measured the relationship between letters, regulating their size, height and width. Naskh script accordingly spread beyond official and administrative documentation and records, it became a favourite script for the calligrapher, artist and craftsman. It dominated all fields, historical accounts, poetry and prose as well as religious manuscripts and Quranic volumes.

The Naskh script reached its apogee under Yaquq al Musta'simi (d.697/1298) and came to be known as "Ayyubid Naskh". Al-Musta'simi was the last great calligrapher at the Abbasid court, who carried with him the fundamentals of the Akrami-salta to the art centres of Herat, Mashhad, and Tabriz. In this codification of the script the difference between the distinguished six styles came to light. The six scripts were the Muhaqaq, Rihaan, Thuluth, Naskh, Tawqi', and Riqqa'. In Persia, these styles were utilised and modified in accordance with the Persian taste, leading to the further development of indigenous scripts.

From among the six scripts the Naskh was the script that flourished in Persia. This script became associated with the copying of the Qur'an and religious texts, while the thuluth script was reserved for the title panel amidst foliage on gold ground. In Persia a tendency to join the letters for aesthetic effect overwhelmed the calligraphers transferring the proper manner of recitation into the folios. Riqqa's script, with its small compressed and rounded letters, paved the way for the final letters of a word to connect with the following words. Accordingly the Riqqa script secured a favoured status in Persian art and artifacts. Riqqa also ventured into the world of historical accounts and epics but was confined to the colophons of Qur'ans. It was not preferred for writing religious texts as the content may be distorted or hard to decipher. The most prominent calligraphic styles that emerged and dominated the ateliers in Iran were undoubtedly the Ta'liq, Nasta'liq and Shikasteh.

Ta'liq and Nasta'liq became two of the most important contributions of Iran to the art of penmanship. Ta'liq acquired its formal rules in the 13th century yet spread to a wider audience during subsequent centuries. Ta'liq was referred to as the hanging script, and finds its origin through the combination of the Riqqa' and Tawqi' scripts. It was developed by Calligrapher Taj-i-Salman from Isfahan while its principal rules were laid down by Abd al Hayy from Astrabad. By the 16th century the
Nasta’liq script had conquered the ateliers and spread rapidly replacing Ta’liq. Nasta’liq is believed to be the combination of Naskh and Ta’liq scripts and that it was Mir Ali Tabrizi (d. 1446) who set its formal rules. Nasta’liq written in an intricate manner combines the fast and fluid way of the Naskh script with the connected letters regulated in the Ta’liq script. Yet it attained delicate movements of rhythmic virtuosity and surpassed all other existing styles in elegance.

During the reign of Shah Tahmasp (1534-76), Nasta’liq became the predominant script for anthologies, epics and literary works. Nasta’liq with a Khurasanian style flourished and was mastered by Sultan Ali i Mashhadi (d. 1519), Mir Ali Harawi (d. 1544) and Mir 1mad (d. 1615) Sultan Ali Mashhadi was a student of the Ustad-i-Ustadan or master of masters, Mowlana Azhar of Tabriz (d. 1475/6), who travelled and spread this style all around Persia and the Mosul area.

During the Safavid dynasty the Shikasteh style was innovated and became the vogue. It is a rapidly rendered script, very difficult to decipher yet was used for official correspondence and letter writing. The Shikasteh script is believed to have been invented by Muhammad Ja’far Khan, known as Kifayat Khan. It is known as the broken script and demonstrates energy creativity and rhythmic movement. It depends on linking the letters together in a new manner, developing a rhythm, and flow, which was widely used in marginal writings. In 1773 the script was made glitter under Abdul Majid al Talighani. In time the essence of the script was to place lines of calligraphy over one another as if thrown on to the page with no apparent order. Sacred as the script may be, or sensuous as the poetical quotes may reveal, they are all admired without attempting to decipher their meaning. The Shikasteh folios became images, inspiring and gratifying.

Similarly during the 18th century, a revival of the Naskh script took place. Naskh rendered in Iranian style gained popularity as the main script for religious texts produced in Iran. Calligrapher Ahmed Nairizi (1682-1739 AD) emerged as the father of the Iranian Naskh. As a student of the great calligrapher Aqa Ibrahim Qumi, Mirza Ahmed’s work reached the royal atelier of Shah Sultan Hussein in Isfahan, which he was invited to join. Nairizi rendered the letters in an angular manner and stressed the
finesse of the vertical strokes. Mirza Ahmed Nairizi became a preeminent calligrapher whose style was followed during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The size of the single folio varied from very small, dust-like, Ghobar to large wall panels called jali. Jali Thuluth was the most popular script for large levhas (panels). They were mounted and hung on the walls of dwellings, mosques and public places as devotional decorative units to proclaim God’s blessing (Barakah). The Ghobar style is the smallest script a calligrapher produces in any language and in all script styles. According to Al-Qalqashandi, the fifteenth-century Mamluk historian, this script developed due to the need for sending messages by pigeon post. The letters accordingly had to be light in weight, filled with information yet still legible. The word Ghobar means dust in both the Arabic and Persian languages, implying that the calligraphy is so minute that it could be mistaken for specks of dust. It also implies that the folio is so delicate that it needs careful handling. In Iran a popular saying emphasises the spiritual importance of the Ghobar style:

“When people record the Qur’an
written in Ghobar (dust)
All impurities (dust) are washed away from their eyes.”

In the late 14th century, a miniature Qur’an in the Ghobar style was inscribed for Sultan Timur by the calligrapher Umar Aqta. This Qur’an is known to have fitted inside the cavity of his seal-ring, yet Sultan Timur expressed dissatisfaction with the Ghobar style in copying the Word of God. He commented that the Qur’an be copied in script that was easily read. Under the patronage of Shah Tahmasp (d.1576) calligrapher Nizam al Din Zarrin Qalam, copied in Ghobar script the famed anthology Khamse of Nizami, which caught the admiration of its patron. In Persia the Ghobar style was used for all subjects and in all types of scripts. Ghobar continued to be an important script used by calligraphers in association with protective charms and amulets, where certain verses from surah al Baqarah would be chosered. Ghobar accordingly created around it an aura of mystery and perplexity, and its fame spread to Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India.

Through the migration of Persian calligraphers to the Ottoman world, Te’liq and Nasta’liq were introduced to the royal Ottoman ateliers of Istanbul. During the reign of Mehmed II, the first uses of these styles were recorded, yet they flourished during the 17th and 18th century, after attaining a Turkish identity.

In India, the Nasta’liq script was introduced to the existing Bahari and Nasik scripts during the Mughal period. The close connection between the Safavid and Mughal courts made way for the transfer of calligraphers and manuscripts. During Jahangir’s reign (1628-57), two calligraphers Rykna and Abd al Rashid Daylami produced masterpieces of Persian calligraphy. The established cursive style in India, the Bahari, developed as early as the fourteenth century, yet came to a regulated form during the following period. Later, all the Iranian styles were copied and even their decorative repertoire followed up to the 18th century.