Patronage and the development of single folios

The Language

In quest of harmony, beauty and mysticism, the Persian artist ventured into the world of calligraphy, bestowing the highest degree of accomplishment upon this art. With the advent of Islam to Iran, Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent, the Arabic alphabet replaced numerous existing ancient scripts, soon to develop their own style, movement, and aesthetic preferences. The flexibility of the Arabic script manifested itself in the development of the linear angularity of the Kufic to the undulating curves of the Naskh, and in this process, paved the way for exuberant new indigenous styles to flourish.

The pre-Islamic Pahlavi language, which was mainly used by the Zoroastrian priests of ancient Iran, developed into the new Persian language. This language, the New Persian, welcomed the Arabic alphabet as its written script, and incorporated over 50 percent Arabic vocabulary. A translation movement came about, where Pahlavi works were selected and translated into Arabic, providing the Arabic language with a rich literature and presenting the Pahlavi language as the source of Sassanian Iranian literature.

Since as early as the first century Hijra, both languages, the Arabic and Persian, were used in Iran. Bilingualism was common among the aristocratic, learned men and religious milieux in Persia. The Ulama or religious scholars and Kuttab, scribes, were more inclined to use Arabic. But in Baghdad, where literature and poetry developed, the new Persian or Farsi-e Dari was in favour. According to Al Jahiz, the first Persian couplet was composed by an Arab poet in the 7th century AD, while at the court of Harun al Rashid, Arab poets recited rhyming poems using Persian expressions. (Jahiz, I, p.141-4)
Single Folios
15th - 19th century in Persia

What distinguishes single folios from either loose pages of manuscripts or exercise folios assembled under a particular royal workshop is the intention of the calligrapher. Their aim was to produce samples of calligraphy that could stand on their own as precious works of art. The “architecture of the folio”; or the page design of each independent leaf, reveals its intent of being a separate unique product that can display the beauty of its content. Within the folio, the relationship between text and ornament became regulated in favour of the text. The addition of a signature and date by the artist’s own hand added to the value and uniqueness of each artifact.

Single folios produced in Persia as early as the 14th century were collectable items for royal ateliers of subsequent eras. Qadi Ahmed, the 16th century art historian, explains that the compilation of single folios was premeditated to safeguard records of renowned calligraphers, distinguished styles, important sketches and paintings from being lost. (Minorsky, 1959) With this intention of preserving invaluable heritage, the Muraqqa’ or album production, where antique single folios were pasted together, became a popular art in Iran. An album compiled during the 16th century, by Dust Muhammed for Bahram Mirza, collected mainly the works of earlier artists such as Bihzad the painter, Ya’qut al Mu’tasimi and the works of calligrapher Mir Ali (Thackston 2001). Such folios were admired as exercise work rather than the finished product, and perhaps were intended for the existing royal atelier’s exercise albums rather than the developed art of royal Muraqqa’ and Qata’i or decorative panels.

At the royal ateliers of Persia and Turkey, patterns, illustrations, styles of scripts and miniature paintings were collected and displayed side by side in albums with no particular order. The earliest of such albums is the Fatih Album at the Topkapi Saray, presumed to be the product of a Tabriz atelier which was moved to Istanbul as part of the booty collected by Sultan Selim I (1520). (Grube, 1981, p.1) In many cases, a signature or a dedication to a calligrapher or a painter was added at a later period, granting the folios respect and guaranteeing them a market value.

Signature of Al Nishapuri

Several factors set forth the production of single panels as independent leaves during the first centuries of Safavid rule. Towards the second half of the 16th century the royal ateliers of Shah Tahmasp reduced their patronage of the arts, which in time led to the dispersal of the ateliers, allowing calligraphers to seek new workplaces. Simultaneously, paper produced in Europe and China became available in the Persian market. This break in the royal monopoly of paper granted the calligraphers a new option of developing private studios. Freedom from court atelier’s regulations and strict control gave artists new artistic expression, leading them to depict explicit themes and perhaps allowing new literature to be inscribed within single folios. This era saw the emergence of the signature of calligraphers as an indispensable part of the folios. In most of the single folios produced towards the second half of the 16th century in Persia, dated signatures were inscribed in prominent places, sometimes more than once. They further accompanied historical information, leading these single folios to be viewed and appreciated as important documents. During the late 16th and early 17th centuries a total transformation in the social and cultural milieu of the Iranian artist took place,
and single folios started to invade the markets of Iran and India. At this stage the relationship between calligraphers and painters took another direction. No longer were they complementing each other’s work and no longer did they limit the creativity of one another. A century earlier, the colophons of manuscripts clearly indicated both the calligrapher and painter as collaborators in the same project. For example, in Ibrahim Mirza’s Haft Awrang of Jami, now at the Freer Gallery, Aqa Mirak and Muzaffar Ali worked on the illustrations while Malik Daylam was the calligrapher (Welch, p.151). With this change, two types of single folios emerged, one reflecting the power of the reed pen and the innovation of calligraphers, while the other honoured the hair brush and uplifted the naqqash (the illuminator) and the musawir (the painter). Perhaps this innovation was also a break from the norm, from the guide lines of size, subject matter, religious restrictions and royal taste. These instruments that orchestrate the folios set the artists and calligraphers in two distinct paths in the world of Persian art.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, single folios flourished and secured themselves a market value in Iran. The famed calligrapher Mir Imad noted that when Shah Abbas sent seventy Tumans to the Mir to copy the text of the Shahname, the Mir sent with the Shah’s envoy only seventy couplets. When the Shah sent back the text, the Mir cut them into pieces and sold them on the spot to collect the 70 Tumans and reimbursed the Shah. (Bayani, vol.2, pp.525-26) This incident indicates that single folios were not necessarily a royal choice, and the folios did not gain recognition as a royal product nor attracted royal patronage. It may also indicate that royalty such as Shah Abbas still preferred Shahname manuscripts and valued the quantity rather than the quality. With this presumption, single folios reflect a shift of taste; the taste of a new rising intellectual class seeking to complement royal patronage. This shift could also be felt in the type of literature and the subject matter inscribed.

During the reign of Shah Tahmasp, intellectual gatherings known as heavenly assemblies and celestial gatherings took place to view the single folios and put them in an order suited to a royal Muraqqa’. According to calligrapher Mir Sayed Ahmed (d. 1564/5): “With the assistance of rare masters, skilful artists, and peerless experts on calligraphy an order appeared and an album unveiled itself, every page of which is deserving of one hundred cheers, may every one of its specimens is worthy of one thousand bravos”. (Thackston 2001). The word Muraqqa’ is the singular of Muraqqaat (fragments or patchworks). Such albums gained popularity in royal workshops as well as in minor ateliers, where large-scale production of manuscripts was unfeasible.

Several albums from the Mughal emperor Jahangir (1605-27) and Shah Jahar (1628-57) included masterpieces by major Iranian calligraphers as specimens for enjoyment and inspiration. According to Shams al din Mohammed, the compiler of an album: “even those people who are incapable of reading and writing are indined to look at the calligraphy and to persevere and admire it.” (Thackston, 2001, p4-40). Many of the folios selected for the Muraqqaat were chosen for their artistic merit, personal taste and historical importance.

Under the Mughal emperor Akbar a systematic format of Muraqqa’ came about. Akbar’s album started to reveal some type of order, where every facing page of calligraphy would alternate with a double folio of illustrations and paintings. (Soudavar, 1992 p. 304). During the 19th century in Iran, albums entirely made up of calligraphy were favoured. (Safwat, p.71) This preference was also marked in Turkey where it was called Tertibli Muraqqa’, and reflected a theme or was a specific calligrapher’s portfolio. (Safwat p.72)
The art of the *Muraqqa'* necessitated the development of cardboards as they were used as the background for single folios. In many cases the vulnerable and fragile sheets were cut and placed on such boards, varnished with vegetal glaze which in due time cracks. The art of cardboard making developed in Iran where it had to control the moisture of the adhesive paste and place the sheets on top of each other in accordance to their grain to ensure that the finished board would not curl. The *Muraqqa'* board was used to combine numerous folios of different calligraphers and painters.

*The Decorative Repertoire of the Single Folios*

The magnificence and splendour of the single folios lies not only in the serenity conveyed in their meanings, but also in the harmonious integration of calligraphy and its complementing decorations. In the limited space of the single folios the relationship between calligraphy and decoration is held sacred, with the decorative patterns falling into a more supportive role to give calligraphy its deserved elevated status.

Illumination and decoration supplementing single folios and manuscripts is said to have started by the 4th righteous caliph Ali ibn abi Talib. This added to the grandeur of the text and in time played a functional role in indicating the end of partitions, Juz and verse divisions within Qur'an manuscripts. In classical Qur'an folios the Unwan (chapter heading) is lavishly decorated, followed by a rigid layout where the text is written in horizontal rows on a plain or gilded background with margin medallions and
decorative rosettes. In such cases, the calligrapher's signature would comprise the last line and would be in a different script style. (Catalogue no. 10/11) Another format of single folios developed revealing folios with Qur'anic text in an unconventional style. These folios, as in Catalogue no. 1 and 5, where the verses are selected from more than one Surah of the Qur'an, reveal a harmoniously flowing movement throughout the folio. The beauty of the flexible arrangement enhanced the appearance of the single folio as a decorative panel, to bestow the ultimate blessings on their beholder.

During the Safavid period, the Qitah or single folios attained a principle format called the chalipa (diagonal). The chalipa or diagonally placed lines of Persian poetry were usually written in Nasta'liq and arranged within a rectangular space. Each pair of lines is slightly separated from the next pair by decorative foliage, in order to produce a more rhythmic and recurring flow. Strokes of certain letters were extended to balance the length of each pair of poetic line and to indicate a vocal elongation of the word, achieving the challenge of echoing the tones and rhythms of the poems. In the Chalipa composition, a triangular compartment at the upper and lower corners of the folio usually houses the signature or date of the calligrapher. Floral motifs and decorative scrolls do occupy this triangular space, which in due creates out of two couples of poetry a zigzag arrangement, bringing in a sense of melody to the overall composition.

Decorative motifs incorporated within single folios reflect the patterns embellished on all existing surfaces in Safavid Persia. Perhaps this indicates the importance of design and perfecting motifs on paper prior to its application onto other media. A great deal of decorative themes and patterns were available; Chinese dragon motifs, phoenix, lotus and cloud bands, European floral bouquets, three-dimensional portraiture and bird motifs. Many such motifs were absorbed into the Persian decorative repertoire and gave the court atelier an archive of diversified patterns. And although the gap widened between single folio calligraphers and single folio miniature painters in the later part of the Safavid rule, a desire to illuminate and decorate single folios can still be felt.

The 17th century witnessed Chinese, Armenian and European merchants and traders importing foreign goods on a large scale into Persia. The new goods stimulated the Persian designer and craftsmen to synthesise new designs, among which were European bouquets of flowers, intertwined plants, insects and birds as well as biblical themes.

For example, the Safavid court painter Safie Abbasid excelled in themes highlighting the flower,
butterfly and bird motifs on lacquered surfaces. A hybrid style, where Euro-Persian designs prevailed, became very visible in single folios and lacquered pen boxes. During the Qajar period and up to the 19th century, the existence of this hybrid style created a wider gap between the spiritual and mystical single folios and Iranian artists and miniaturists.

The art of *Muraqqā* or album making flourished during the 19th century, and part of the IAMM collection was incorporated within albums dated to the end of that century. In the *Muraqqā*, the folios adhere to similar mounting, where extra decorative and colourful borders added to the beauty of the single folios. These borders in many cases incorporated continuous arabesque scrolls rendered in two tones of gold. Furthermore, many of the cloud bands surrounding calligraphic texts were added during the process of creating the album of *Muraqqā*.

Single folios depended heavily on the paper decoration for their market demand and desirability. The decoration of paper used for single folios developed from simple tinting with colour to gold flecking or "hali-Kari"; then to marbling or "kaghaz-e-abri".

The first technique which is the simple pigment dyeing technique is referred to in the Persian treatise "Tesalet dar bayen-e-rang kardan -e-kaghaz" as the solution to reduce the glare of the white bleach from "stressing the eyes of their viewer". This technique necessitated the soaking of the paper in organic or non-organic dyes for a certain period to secure the homogeneous coverage of the folio with the colour. The second technique is gold flecking, which gives the folio a royal look. This technique was referred to as the pulverized work, where finely ground gold and silver particles suspended in glue and water solution were brushed or sprinkled on the paper resulting in a paper which glitters in the light. The third technique of marbling necessitated the pouring of pigments into a container of mucilaginous water, whereupon the paper is suspended and the colours spreading onto its surface to create an irregular pattern.

These decorative techniques were prevalent practice during the 15th - 19th century in Persia. Records of artist that excelled in each of these techniques are numerous. Among them was Shahab al Din Abdullah Morvarid (1441-1501 AD), famed for his paper flecking and gold dust, Mir Mohammad Taher, the master of paper marbling who moved from Shah Tahmasp’s atelier to India, and Ghiyas al din Mohammad Mozanheb of Mashhad (d. 1537) a master of illumination and paper marbling.

Facing page: bouquet of flowers on gold ground, 17th century, Iran. Upper left: Date of Muraqqā. Above: Bulbul Ve Gui a bird and flower motif popular in Iran
Decorative embellishments on single folios beyond doubt reflected the content of the folios. Complete Qur'anic surahs, selected verses, Hadith of the Prophet, wise sayings of Caliph Ali, pious words, and aphorisms adhered to a more conservative decorative repertoire. Poems, prose, anthologies, and folk tales preferred a more aesthetically appealing layout. The Persian calligrapher endeavoured with all of these subjects to reveal his excellence and the superiority of his intellect. He presented the single folios as a piece of music, with a heavenly air, delicate and harmonious. As Persian calligraphy is rendered in different styles, the poems of Hafiz and Rumi interweave through the physical form of the words leading to an intimate relation between the poetry, its decoration and script style. Thus the single folios sparkle with the transcendent rhythms of values that sedate the soul, yet nourish the mind and transform the viewer through the mystical nature of its beauty.
The Sound of Calligraphy

"Oh Shah source of light to my blood weeping eyes
Unite with a glance the knot of my affairs
Oh problem solver of the kingdom of Iran
Grant me, this year, last year's wage"

Calligrapher and painter Ghiyath al Din
15th century Iran

The calligraphers of Persia mastered the art of poetic writing, the beauty of rhyming words, the tranquillising sound of heart-ravishing verses. To the calligrapher honouring rhythmic verses was part of the disciplines they acquired during the course of their study. Starting from an early age, they memorised the verses of the Holy Qur'an, and mastered its measured tones. And through the perpetual copying of the verses in the Siyah Mashq (exercise) folios, the hymning sound of the words the calligrapher inscribes fills his entire soul and mind. Gatherings of poets, calligraphers and intellectuals in royal courts produced masterpieces of Persian literature, divans of poetry and prose. At these gatherings, Muraqqa’ albums were compiled, calligraphers composed their prefaces and intellectuals admired the album’s masterpieces. (Soudavar 1992, p.304) The calligrapher was expected to be more than a scribe, he was a composer, designer, poet and a littératue. The calligrapher’s zealous training, and his high degree of devotion and wisdom, created out of the art of calligraphy a branch of knowledge.

Different forms of writing developed in Persia, allowing for new literature to infiltrate the intellectual milieu of Safavid Iran. Praise and invocation to Caliph Ali, Sufi anthologies, and royal decrees attained a more prominent presence in single folios. Nizami’s Khamsheh, Mathnavi of Jalal al Din Rumi, the Fainamih of Ja’far al Sadiq (the ascent of the Prophet to heaven) and the epic poems of the Shahname of Firdawsi found preference in illustrated manuscripts, where outstanding visual miniatures developed to illustrate their imagery.

Royal correspondence developed to reveal the calligrapher’s ability to ask in a polite manner and to impress in a subtle fashion. Letters of reprimand and complaint, words of sweet and tender affection and ambassadorial decrees were all rendered in rhyming oracular language. It was expected from the literate class not just to write but compose what they inscribed in a poetic form.

"Were it not for writing, how could
the colourful meaning of a
Soul nourishing thought remain
in bloom?
If there were not lines of water
in the garden,
No trace would remain of
flowers or herbs"

Muraqqa’ album preface
(1572)

As the calligrapher recites verses of famed poems, humming their tune and tapping their melody with his fingers, he feels compelled to transfer this art of recitation to the next generation. An intangible art
needed to rest on a two-dimensional plane, a task
and a challenge well met by Persian calligraphers.
The rules of recitation of the Holy Qur'an: the art of
Tillawah guided the calligrapher when inscribing the
Holy text. The Holy Qur'an can be recited in seven
different ways and its articulation guides the reader
to these ways.

Allah's apostle said: "Gabriel recited the Qur'an to
me in one way. Then I requested him to read it in
another way and continued asking him to recite it in
other ways and he recited it in several ways till he
ultimately recited it in seven different ways."
Sahih Al Bukhari
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So the challenge to articulate the verses of the
Qur'an to be recited with their proper rhythmic tones
was met by theologians early on in Islamic history.
After all the Prophet ﷺ said: "Allah does not listen
to a prophet as he listens to a prophet who recites
the Qur'an in a loud and pleasant tone"
(Al Bukhari, vol 6, 81,542)

In Persia and around the Islamic world, mysticism
developed and sufs held rhythms and melodies in
the highest esteem. The recitation of verses and
words at the same intervals, creating a rhythm,
became an essential element of the dhikr
ceremonies, (remembrance of God), a fundamental
component of Sufism. In the dhikr ceremonies, the
repetition of the names of God, for example, aims at
lifting the soul to the sublime world, where he
may seek perfection and reach out for God.

Calligraphy was beyond doubt the most expressive
form of art that a sufi would utilise as a "source of
remembrance and evocation". (Bakhtiar, p.52).

Single folios can be viewed as reflecting recitation
performances of dhikr ceremonies. The selection
and inscribing of specific verses in bold, large and
prominent lines within the text, while adding several
of the ninety-nine names of Allah in reverse as a
background, may be interpreted as creating the
distinction between different speech tones. It is as if
a vocal group would recite the verses in a loud and
clear tone, while a delicate voice comes from behind
softly enchanting the names of God.
(catalogue no. 1, 5)

Mohammed Ismail, the ‘9th century calligrapher,
listened to the elongation of the verses by the
vocalists during the performance. He noticed that
the sound doesn’t end abruptly and how it flows and
becomes incorporated within the next melody. He
then set the reed pen in the course of writing
sentences in lineal arrangements, chanted in similar
tones. Yet when they come to their finale, they don’t
just end, the calligraphy elevates itself upwards,
almost touching the previous line, and fading into the
background in vibrant sounds, as music would.
(catalogue no 5 & 7 ) (1998,2.9, 148)
Some folios demonstrate a less creative musical effect on the document. One group of single folios reflects the continuous recitation of prophetic hadith, wise sayings by Caliph Ali and aphorisms. (Catalogue no 13, 14, 21, 24, 25) Yet one of the aims of such aphorisms is to recite them non-stop. In the process of repeating them over and over with a rhythmic acceleration, the member of the choir clears his mind of worldly matters and starts the contemplation stage. Therefore, perhaps the calligrapher was compelled to create the same mood within the folio to reflect its monotonous melody.

The use of two different script styles or two different languages in one folio may reflect two different tones during the recitation. The manner in which the Arabic of the Qur'an would be recited is certainly different from the flowing unculturing Nastaliq of the Persian. In the marriage certificate single folios the appearance of the two scripts and languages simultaneously gives the ceremony a joyful atmosphere, albeit with a blessed religious grace.

The impression is that even the body movements of the khatib (the preacher) would need to change according to which text he recalls. (catalogue no. 31, & 32)

The beauty of the Nastaliq and Ta'liq scripts gave way for more melodies to be expressed through the folios. The chalipa or diagonal composition of the folios regulated the manner in which each couplet should be recited. In many cases the first line of the couplet would be chanted loud and the sound of its last word strong and elongated. The following line would start soft toned but the voice grows stronger complimenting the first part of the couplet. (catalogue no 58, 1998.2.24).