The Safavid Tradition

The Safavids are a dynasty which ruled Iran and parts of Iraq between 1501 and 1732. They patronised the arts and calligraphy like their Timurid predecessors in the area. Under their patronage, beautifully written Holy Qur’ans were commissioned, and these were usually adorned with magnificent illumination in a characteristically lavish style.

The Safavid’s major contribution to Arabic calligraphy was their introduction of the Nasta’liq (slanting) style in which the horizontal strokes of letters were boldly elongated and the text was often written at an angle across the page. This script was further developed into a lighter and more refined style called the Naskh which also had roots in the classic Naskh.

The Nasta’liq established itself through sheer elegance as one of the most important styles of Arabic calligraphy and was adopted as the national script of Iran and is in use there to this day. The Nasta’liq style also gained favour in Turkey and in the Indian subcontinent and became the common script for the writing of illuminated literary works, miniatures, epics and other secular works in these areas. It is interesting however, that despite Nasta’liq’s beauty and clarity, the script was very rarely used in the writing of the Holy Qur’an. Beit Al Qur’an’s Collection includes a magnificent folio which must be one of the very rare examples of Holy Quranic manuscripts in the style. The script was used however for commentary and interlinear translation of the holy words in many of the Qur’ans written in Iran, Turkey and the Indian subcontinent.
**Surat Al-Irāq, 17, and the beginning of Surat Al-Kahf, 18.** A beautifully illuminated Holy Book from the Safavid period. The arts of calligraphy and illumination achieved great heights in Iran during the 16th/17th C., a rich artistic period of Islamic history. This page is well illuminated in this beautifully written and illuminated Holy Qur'an.

**Surat Al-Fath, 48, part of verse 11, verses 12 & 13 and part of verse 14.** A rare Holy Qur'anic manuscript on paper from Safavid Iran, dated 1548. The Holy Qur'ān, verses, are written in the Nastāʿīq script within a frame of calligraphy in the Nashī script. The writing of the Holy Qur'ān in the Nastāʿīq script is very rare as the script is usually utilized for interlinear translation, while the Nashī script is utilized for the text of the Holy words. Nastāʿīq as a script was perfected in Iran during the Safavid period and became the national script of the country and is popular here to this day.
The Ottoman Tradition

The Arabic scripts had reached a peak of refinement during the Ottoman rule, and the splendid works of Ottoman calligraphers remain amongst the finest ever written. The Ottomans ruled Turkey, almost all of the Arab world and parts of the Balkans and Europe between 1281 and 1924. They became renowned for their patronage of calligraphy and elevated the writing of religious text and particularly the Holy Qur'an into a sacred art.

The Ottomans were not content with the mere improvement of the calligraphic styles and traditions they inherited. They added also a number of new styles to the calligrapher’s repertoire. One of the important stylistic additions of Ottoman calligraphers is the Dirman script, so-called as it was developed in the Council of State (dirman) and used extensively in the writing of government directives and decrees. This graceful decorative script is very rarely used in the writing of the Holy Qur’an and was mainly used for secular purposes. This script became popular throughout the Arab world for use in formal documents and architectural decorations.

Another contribution by the Ottoman calligraphers to the art of writing was the introduction of symbolism and imagery in the composition of text. The Tughra, which was a symbol of the Sultan’s signature remains one of the most enduring calligraphic images produced during that age, as was geometry and the representation of vegetal forms and birds and other animals in calligraphic compositions.

The deep interest in calligraphy by the Ottomans is reflected in the great mass of beautifully written and exceptionally illuminated Holy Qur’ans and religious manuscripts produced during that period, in addition to the illuminated literary and scientific works and miniatures. These great works by the Ottoman calligraphers stand today an eloquent witness for another golden age in Arabic calligraphy.

The Basmalah: ‘In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate’ written in the form of a Tughra.

Surat Al Fatihah and the beginning of Surat Al Baqara. A lovely illuminated Holy Mushaf from Ottoman Turkey written in the Naskh script in Istanbul, in 1843. This Mushaf illustrates the degree of excellence that the Ottoman calligraphers and illuminators had achieved in the 19th C.
Surat Al Fatho and the beginning of Surat Al Baqara. An illuminated Holy Koran written in Ottoman Turkey in 1857.

An illuminated Holy Koran written in Ottoman Turkey in 1872. The Koran is open on the first two chapters: Surat Al Fatho and the beginning of Surat Al Baqara.
The Various Calligraphic Traditions

It is significant to note that in addition to Kufic, and later the Naskh there developed a number of other calligraphic styles, some with regional characteristics, which added further interesting aspects to the writing of Arabic, particularly when used in the recording of the Holy Qur’an. Of these there are the styles prevalent in the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan and further east in China.

Calligraphy in India and Afghanistan was directly influenced by the developments in Iran and the traditional Naskh scripts were used in these areas in the writing of the Holy Qur’an. There was preference however for the Naskh script for literary and non-religious works. In addition, those developed in these areas, two specific scripts used for religious manuscripts, the first was called the ‘Beheri’ script, which appeared in India during the 14th century, written in gold and heavy horizontal strokes that contrasted markedly with its thin and delicate verticals. The style possesses certain charm as it is invariably written in black with the significant words or sentences such as ‘The Ninety Nine Most Beautiful Names of God Almighty ‘Aamu’d Allah Al Huwa’ and Sanaa headings highlighted in bright colours or in gold. The second is a variation of the traditional Naskh with a much bolder and heavier use of line. This style remains popular in India to this day and is used in the printing of the Mishaf Al Shafeef and in normal publications. These two styles are well represented in the Beit Al Qur’an Collection, examples of which are shown in this book.

In China, the Arabic script acquired distinctive regional character which remains in use amongst the many million’s of Chinese Muslims today. ‘Al Khat Al Sini, as the Chinese script is known, has thin spiderly lines and exaggerated roundness which somewhat emulates the aesthetic qualities of the local Chinese language script. A monumental version of Al Khat Al Sini was adopted in the writing of the Holy Qur’an in these areas. This style retained the roundness of the original script but was written with its vertical lines boldly drawn with downward pointing strokes. The script also has a horizontal emphasis as it moves along the lines. Like other regional styles of the Arabic script, the Chinese script remained localised and is only popular amongst the Muslims of China. It is rarely used in other areas of the Islamic world.

A complete Holy Mishaf written in the fine Ghubari script in Iran in 1835. Mishafs such as this example were put in finely made gold or silver boxes and carried in the pocket of the owner.

Surat Yusuf, 10, verses 1 to 3. A 16F./17F. C. section of the Holy Qur’an written in India in the Beheri script. The top, middle and bottom lines of the text are highlighted in gold, so are the significant words in the text such as the PP Most Beautiful Names of God Almighty ‘Aamu’d Allah Al Huwa’. These decorative techniques were used in India in the writing of the Holy Qur’an. Note also the commentary in small Farsi script which is arranged decoratively in a zigzag pattern to frame the main body text.
Calligraphers of the Arabic script from the 16th century to this day strove to perfect their art and produce within the rules and principles of the recognized styles variations and innovation to enliven their work and enhance its position as a supreme artistic expression. As one sees from the variety of calligraphic exhibits at Beit Al Qur'an, there have been attempts at creating symbolic compositions with the text arranged in designs reflecting the religious content. Other calligraphic arrangements aim to produce in the 'Muhanna' images where the composition doubles itself in a mirror image. In addition, a favourite style for the writing of religious text is the use of a miniaturized scripts called the 'Ghirban' and these are used for very small Holy Qur'ans that are carried in the pocket. Another use of calligraphy in Holy Quranic text is the writing of small highly refined scripts for the body text of the manuscript which in turn forms a grander composition in the same or in a different script. The total composition produces an image with religious content or a grand calligraphic composition in harmony and balance with the smaller text.

Presently, calligraphy has also gained favour as a medium for modern artistic expression and this remains true, particularly for religious text. Like their earlier brethren who adorned mosques and religious buildings with Holy Quranic text in the past, present day artists and calligraphers in the Arab and Islamic worlds are producing lively and interesting compositions of calligraphy with the Holy Qur'an as the principal subject matter. This is of course a testimony that the art of calligraphy is very much alive and will remain so in the future as long as the bond between all Muslims and the Holy Qur'an remains unbreakable.
Surat Al Baqara, verses 142 and part of 143. An 18th. C. section of the Holy Qur’an written in China in the Chinese script.

Surat Yasin, 10, verses 1 & 2. An 18th. C. A beautifully illuminated Holy Mi’kat from India. The text is written in the bold Nikah showing the characteristic of this style of writing in the Indian Sub-Continent, a style which remain popular in the area to this day.
Illumination & Colour

Following the reform and development of the Arabic scripts, illumination and colour were added at a later period to Holy Qur’anic manuscripts. The early Holy Qur’ans were simple and austere in their execution of calligraphy, devoid of decorative elements and frugal in the use of space and material. This was understandable in view of the puritanism of early Islam and the dearth of materials on which the Holy Qur’an could be recorded. The earliest recordings of parts of the Holy Qur’an were on a variety of relatively scarce media such as leather, tree bark, wood and even stone. When parchment came into its own as the most convenient material on which the Holy Qur’an could be written, it took the skins of a large number of animals to complete one copy. Naturally, this was both laborious and expensive, and as a result, the early Holy Qur’ans were simple manuscripts, extremely economical in the use of space. The division between its 114 ‘Suras’ Chapters of the text were left unmarked, with the beginning of each individual Sura usually immediately following the end of the preceding Sura on the same line.

By the end of the first Islamic century, and with the growth of available resources, decorative elements consisting of simple single coloured bands began to appear at Sura headings, with the titles of Suras occupying a full line. Later, by the end of the Umayyad
period (661-750), these elements became more elaborate in composition and use of colour. Early Qur’anic manuscripts, however, did not have inscriptions indicating the titles of the Suras, the location of their revelation, whether in Mecca or Medina or the number of their verses (Ayat) were shown within these compositions. These conventions were introduced later as additions to the design of Sura headings. Decorative elements were also added on the margins to indicate the subdivision of the Holy text into sections according to prevalent traditions.

Bolder use of colour and gold began to appear in the decoration of Holy Qur’ans from as early as the beginning of the 9th century. Sura headings were highlighted either with separate complex palmette motifs on the margins or set within large decorative frames which stretched across the page. These frames were decorated with palmette or other foliated patterns at their shortest sides. Text was added later to show Sura titles and the verse count either within the frame or on the margins. These designs became more elaborate with the passage of time and by the end of the 11th century they assumed complex strapwork designs with Sura titles drawn in monumental Kufic or other curvilinear scripts, particularly the Thuluth, executed against highly decorative backgrounds of foliated arabesque scrolls in gold and colour. The colour palette for these designs was predominantly in shades of blue, though other colours were also used. Regional preferences for specific colours also appeared such as the use of gold, reds and greens in North Africa and Andalusia.
By the 11th Century some formal decorative standards were adopted by the calligraphers and the illuminators of Holy Qur’an. The titles of the first two Suras, chapters, of Al Fatihah and Al Baqara were separated on the opening pages of the book and each title was framed with complex decorative patterns drawn often in colour and gold. Later, the text of the whole of Surat Al Fatihah and the beginning verses of Surat Al Baqara on the first folio of the book were framed with combined complex designs, which were sometimes made of geometric, strap work or arabesque patterns. These decorative motifs developed, particularly under the Mamluks and Timurids, into highly complex art.

The decorative traditions and styles for the first two Suras were further developed and perfected under the Sufis (1501-1732) and later Qajar (1779-1924) dynasties in Iran and during the Ottoman reign in Turkey, particularly during the 19th Century. The frames assumed elaborate patterns of arabesque, floral and geometric motifs in a variety of bright colours and in gold. The text of Surat Al Fatihah and the beginning of Surat Al Baqara was often executed against highly complex backgrounds consisting mainly of arabesque and other patterns, drawn in soft colours which contrasted with the pattern of calligraphy. These decorative concepts were adopted for the remainder of the text in highly decorative Qur’ans.

In later Quranic manuscripts, gilt clouds began to intersperse with calligraphy and this popular motif did not only appear at the beginning of the Holy Qur’an but was also incorporated within the text of each and every line. These patterns of illumination gained favour and remain to this day the preferred methods of embellishment for illuminated Holy Qur’an whether written or printed.

Colour and illumination were also added to the last three short chapters of the Holy Qur’an. These were decorated and set in highly coloured and gilt frames, occasionally, in combination with a decorated colophon. The colophon sometimes stated the name of the calligrapher, the date of the manuscript and place it was written and ended with a personal prayer specifically said on successful completion of the reading of the Holy Qur’an. It is interesting to note that when the proud name of the calligrapher appeared in the colophon, it invariably did so in extremely humble and self-effacing terms. The calligrapher usually seeks in this colophon the blessing of God Almighty not only to himself, but also, and firstly, to his patrons and teachers, indicating the great reverence that Islamic teachings hold for the family and for those who impart knowledge.