‘Sheila S. Blair is a seasoned author with an excellent track record in publishing both specialized and general books on Islamic art. Indeed she is an undisputed star in her field.’
Professor Robert Hillenbrand, University of Edinburgh

‘I can think of no one more qualified to produce such a volume ... She is a recognised and highly regarded expert in the field.’
Professor W. M. Thackston, Harvard University
ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY
SHEILA S. BLAIR

This stunning book is an important contribution to a key area of non-western art, being the first reference work on the art of beautiful writing in Arabic script.

The extensive use of writing is a hallmark of Islamic civilization. Calligraphy, the art of beautiful writing, became one of the main methods of artistic expression from the seventh century to the present in almost all regions from the far Maghrib, or Islamic West, to India and beyond. Arabic script was adopted for other languages from Persian and Turkish to Kanembo and Malay. Sheila Blair’s groundbreaking book explains this art form to modern readers and shows them how to identify, understand and appreciate its varied styles and modes. The book is designed to offer a standardized terminology for identifying and describing various styles of Islamic calligraphy and to help Westerners appreciate why calligraphy has long been so important in Islamic civilization.

The argument is enhanced by the inclusion of more than 150 colour illustrations, as well as over 100 black-and-white details that highlight the salient features of the individual scripts and hands. Examples are chosen from dated or datable examples with secure provenance, for the problem of forgeries and copies (both medieval and modern) is rampant. The illustrations are accompanied by detailed analyses telling the reader what to look for in determining both style and quality of script.

This beautiful new book is an ideal reference for anyone with an interest in Islamic art.
ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY
ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY

Sheila S. Blair

Edinburgh University Press
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Abbreviations

BL  British Library, London
BM  British Museum, London
BN  Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
CBL Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
DK  Dar al-Kutub, Cairo
DoA Dictionary of Art
Elr Encyclopaedia Iranica
El2 Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edn
EQ Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an
FGA Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC
INM Iranian National Museum, Tehran
IUL Istanbul University Library
LACMA Los Angeles Country Museum of Art
MMA Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
RAS Royal Asiatic Society, London
RCEA Répertoire chronologique d’égigraphie arabe
TIEM Turk ve Islam Eserleri Museum, Istanbul
TRS Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>åjada</td>
<td>term derived from the first four letters of Arabic script (alif, ba‘, jimm, and dal) in their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>traditional order and used to designate either [1] a type of writing system that denotes only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consonants (Arabic is the most widespread of these systems), or [2] the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>alphanumerical system of numbering in which the letters correspond to numerical values;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>alif, for example, is equivalent to one, ba‘ to two, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ajza‘</td>
<td>plural of juz’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-tamgha</td>
<td>royal seal, used in the Mongol period in Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asbā‘</td>
<td>plural of sub‘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ash‘ār</td>
<td>literally, hairs or hair-strokes; used for a type of script used in the Mamluk period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that is [1] outlined in thin hair-like strokes of a different color and/or [2] a variant of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>large muhaqqaq but with shorter and deeper descenders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aspect</td>
<td>overall appearance of a hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>celī</td>
<td>Turkish form of the Arabic jālī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colophon</td>
<td>inscription at the end of a written work containing some or all of the following information:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>name of the work, author, scribe, date, and place of writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daqīq</td>
<td>fine or small, the opposite of jālī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>display</td>
<td>script or style of script used to differentiate parts of a text, such as headings or chapters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>divānī</td>
<td>literally, belonging to the imperial chancery, the type of hanging, unvocalized script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>developed from ta‘liq by scribes in the Ottoman chancery and used for official documents;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the developed form with vocalization, reading signs, and decoration is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>called jālī divānī (Turkish celī divānī)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghabār</td>
<td>literally, dust; either [1] a tiny round script used in later periods in both Iran and the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arab world, or [2] a tiny variant of any of the Six Pens popular in Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gulzār</td>
<td>literally, rose garden or full of flowers; a decorative script used in Iran in later centuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in which the individual letters, usually written in nasta‘liq, are decorated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with or composed of flowers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hand</td>
<td>individual’s execution of a particular script or style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hibr</td>
<td>brown ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hijāzi</td>
<td>literally, from the Hejaz, the coastal region of north-west Arabia where both Mecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Medina lie; a name applied to the angular script used in some early manuscripts of the Koran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hīya</td>
<td>literally, adornment; term used for a description of the Prophet Muhammad and for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a particular kind of arrangement containing this text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hizb</td>
<td>section [of the Koran]; one-sixtieth of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>icāza</td>
<td>Turkish form of the Arabic iḥāza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iḥāza</td>
<td>license, particularly the license granted by a master calligrapher to his pupil showing that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he had mastered the scripts; the Turkish form is icāza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>istif</td>
<td>pl. istifār, literally, arrangement; Turkish term for a large calligraphic composition,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>often with superimposed or interlaced letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jālī</td>
<td>literally, clear, evident, and applied literally as in jālī divānī or metaphorically to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a large and bold variety of one of the Six Pens, especially muhaqqaq or thuluth; the Turkish form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>is celī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jālīl</td>
<td>large, the opposite of daqīq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jung</td>
<td>literally, slip; the Persian term for album</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juz‘</td>
<td>pl. ajza‘; section [of the Koran]; usually one-thirtieth of the text. The text is divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>this way in order to finish a complete reading during the thirty days of the sacred month of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ramadan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kalīf</td>
<td>Turkish form of qalīb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kātīb</td>
<td>scribe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khattātī</td>
<td>calligrapher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kāfi/kufic</td>
<td>literally, from Kufa, a garrison city in southern Iraq founded in 638 CE and one of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>intellectual centers in early Islamic times, a general term used to refer to the angular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scripts used for early copies of the Koran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kāwī</td>
<td>writing tablet or board, still used in Africa by students learning to write the Koranic text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>levha</td>
<td>pl. levhalān, Turkish for signboard and the term used for a panel, typically inscribed in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>large thuluth, suitable for framing and hanging on the wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la‘īr</td>
<td>literally, a small and compact type of thuluth with shorter vertical and flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strokes used in the Mamluk period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mā‘āl</td>
<td>literally, leaning, a misnomer mistakenly applied to the angular script used in some early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>manuscripts of the Koran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masāḥif</td>
<td>[1] codices [of the Koran]; the plural of masāḥif [2] the name used by the Mamluk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chronicler al-Tayyibi for a script resembling medium-sized muhaqqaq [khāṣif al-muhaqqaq]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masāḥif</td>
<td>also masāḥif; pl. masāḥifs, codex, commonly used for a manuscript of the Koran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mawṣūla</td>
<td>also masāḥif; pl. masāḥifs, to extend or elongate; elongation, particularly of the form of an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>individual letter like kaf; also for a rough copy or for the exemplar that is transcribed by the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>master and copied by his student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mastār(a)</td>
<td>also mistara, a set of strings stretched over a pasteboard frame, rubbing the paper over a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mastār creates indentations or raised lines which provide a baseline for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>calligrapher to transcribe his text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miṣāq</td>
<td>black ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mise-en-page</td>
<td>layout of a page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muḥāża</td>
<td>a calligraphic exercise in which the letters of the Arabic alphabet are written in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sequence as an exemplar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muḥrada</td>
<td>Turkish form of muḥāża</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muḥaqqaq</td>
<td>Turkish form of the Arabic muhaqqaq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muḥaqqaq</td>
<td>literally, exactly each [1] having the individual letters executed perfectly; in this sense the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>opposite of muḥāṣa [to] or [2] one of the scripts known as the Six Pens, characterized by the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stately proportions and elegance, the Koranic script par excellence in the later periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muhāmala</td>
<td>unpointed (literally, loose or free) letters like ha‘, sad and ‘ayn that are often written with the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>smaller form of the letter beneath them to distinguish them from pointed letters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

xxi
Glossary

**Glossary**

(mu'arna, literally, bolted or fastened) letters, other homographs, or versions of the same form, that have diacritical marks, such as kha'īra, da'd, or ghayn

munshi

correspondence secretary or chancery scribe who was in charge of official letters and correspondence (insha')

muqābala

proofreading or collation, comparison of the text against the original

murakkabat

literally, compounds or assemblages; calligraphic exercises with words or phrases, often poems or sayings from the Prophet; the second stage of the traditional Ottoman system of calligraphic training, these exercises are often appended at the end of the alphabetic exercises (mufradā)

murqqa

literally, patchwork; Arabic term for album, often one with calligraphic specimens and paintings

murattaba

literally, wet; figuratively rounded or plump; used for scripts such as jahāl; the opposite of yahis

mürekkeb

Turkish for murakkabat

musalsal

literally, chained or interlocked; an intertwined script in which all the letters are interlocked and the alif-lam combination resembles links in a chain. It was often used in the Mamluk and Ottoman times, particularly for architectural compositions and frontispieces

musebel

Turkish form of the Arabic musalsal

mu'tanā

literally, doubled; term used for mirror writing in which the left half of the composition repeats in mirror reverse what is written on the right

mu'taq

literally, unrestrained; i.e., allowing letters to be assimilated and interlaced; the opposition of muhaqqaq

naqqāsh

literally, painter or artist; figuratively designer; used in the Iranian lands since the fourteenth century for a calligrapher who designed inscriptions

naskh

literally, copying, transcription; the most common script of the Six Pens, used for regular transcription

nastaliq

from the Persian naskh-i nastaliq (literally, hanging or suspended naskh), a calligraphic and sloping script that developed from naskh beginning in the thirteenth century to become the premier script for transcribing Persian and Turkish verses and poetic manuscripts in later times; it was rarely used for Arabic in Turkey; it was called ta'liq

nesib

Turkish form of the Arabic naskh

papyrus

a writing support made from fresh-water reeds

parchment

a writing support made from the skin of various animals, known in Arabic as raqq, riqa or id'd

protocol

the heading written on an extra, heavier sheet attached to the beginning of a roll of papyrus

galam

reed pen, the standard writing implement in the Islamic lands

gālib

pricked drawing used in later times for producing large-scale calligraphy and inscriptions; the Turkish form is kalb

qit'a

from the Arabic qita' a, to cut or cut up, either [1] generally, a calligraphic exercise or specimen, or [2] more specifically, one that is cut out from another sheet term used to designate a multi-volume manuscript of the Koran (pl. rāb iṭ) or the container or box in which it is held

rayhān

literally, sweet basil; one of the six scripts codified by Yaqut; it was usually considered the minuscule counterpart of the majuscule muhaqqaq

riqa

Turkish form of riqa'

riqa'

literally, pieces of writing material; a curvilinear script that was one of the Six Pens; it was often considered the smaller counterpart of tawqī
tawqī

literally, a boat; metaphorically a small book stitched together at the narrow end; used also for the format of Ottoman documents written in celi divanı, in which the writing is set in ship-shaped cartouches; the Turkish form is safina

script

system or style of writing

Turkish form of the Arabic safina

pl. ashbā; literally, a seventh, a section of a Koran manuscript designed to be read in one week

sūlās

Turkish form of the Arabic tawqī

ta'liq

literally, hanging or suspended, [1] a script developed in Iran by the thirteenth century and used for documents; it is characterized by numerous ligatures between letters; it was sometimes known as ta'liq-i qadīm (old ta'liq) or ta'liq-i aṣr (original ta'liq) to differentiate it from regular or broken (ṣikasta) ta'liq; when this script was adopted in Anatolia, Ottoman calligraphers developed their own style known as divanı; [2] a misnomer adopted in Ottoman times for the hanging script known in Iran and elsewhere as nastālīq

tamūs

literally, effacement; filling in or blackening the loops of the letters

taqīf

copying; used to refer to the classical system used to train calligraphers in Ottoman times, in which a student learned by copying the works of a master

tarwa

serif or hook at the beginning of a stroke

tawqī

hairlines used to connect regularly unconnected letters in tawqī

tawqī

Turkish form of the Arabic tawqī

tawqī

also known in the plural tawqī a or tawqā; literally, signature; one of the Six Pens; this curvilinear script is marked by its connection of regularly unconnected letters, its smaller counterpart is riqa

tawṣīl

literally, one-third, one of the Six Pens, typically marked by large size and rounded endings and regularly used for architectural inscriptions. The Turkish form is sūlās

taḥrīr

heading, the personal emblem of a sultan

lit., scroll; either [1] the largest of all the scripts; although usually considered a rectilinear script, it could be written according to the rules of either muhaqqaq or the curvilinear tawqī or [2] a larger variant of any of the Six Pens; in this sense, the opposite of ghībat

waqf

pious endowment; many fine manuscripts were made for and/or given to charitable foundations as a pious endowment

waqīf

the notice of a pious endowment, giving a terminus ad quem for a manuscript leaf or page

waqīf

copyist or bookseller

yābis

literally, dry, figuratively sharp-edged, used to refer to scripts such as muhaqqaq; the opposite of muharrama

zammaka

to outline the letters of one script in another color, the noun is tazmik
Preface

This book is both an introduction to and a survey of Islamic calligraphy. What does this title mean? The English calligraphy derives via European languages from the Greek kallia (beauty) and grafos (writing, writer). The Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions for the English noun, both in use since the seventeenth century: (1) beautiful or fair writing as a product; also, elegant penmanship as an art or profession; and (2) handwriting, penmanship generally, style of handwriting or written characters, a person's characteristic handwriting or 'hand'. The former is attested slightly earlier, in the third edition of an alphabetic table published in 1613, followed soon by the latter, in Milton's Colasterion, published in 1645. Webster's Third International Dictionary repeats the same definitions in the same historical order: (1) fair or elegant writing or penmanship, the art or profession of producing fair or elegant writing, and (2) handwriting, penmanship. The former definition is thus narrower, implying an aesthetic quality not inherent in the latter.

In its broadest sense, calligraphy is roughly equivalent to the Arabic noun khatt, defined in Edward Lane's Arabic-English Lexicon as line, stroke, or stripe; track, path or road; and writing and the like. The Arabic khatt was traditionally bound with the notion of trace. Pre-Islamic poets such as Imru'ul-Qays and Labid use the noun khatt to refer to the traces in the sand left by abandoned camels, standard tropes in their qasidas, or odes, notably the ones in the collection known as the Mu'allaqat. Medieval Muslims were well aware of this imagery. They commissioned splendid manuscripts of such pre-Islamic verses from famous calligraphers like Ibn al-Bawwab (Figure 5.11). Ibn Faris (d. 1004), the medieval lexicographer who produced the most in-depth study of Arabic roots, defined khatt as the extended trace of a thing (athaar sha'y yamtaddhu iztidadan). This feeling of looking back or nostalgia for the past still reverberates in Arabic calligraphy today, which is often seen as the evocation of tradition.

The Arabic noun khatt also contains the idea of writing. Lane's immediate authority for his definition was Taj al-'Arus, the huge dictionary compiled in eighteenth-century Cairo by Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi, himself a calligrapher. Lane added a gloss in brackets on the last meaning as handwriting, character, or particular form of letters. These various meanings of the word khatt are current in modern standard Arabic as well: Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, for example, defines khatt as line and stroke, stripe as well as handwriting, writing, script, calligraphy, penmanship. The meaning of khatt as writing is common, and the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam devotes a long article to khatt as writing. The narrower definition of calligraphy, with its implicit assumption of a script's aesthetic qualities, is conveyed in Arabic by phrases such as al-khatt badi or al-khatt al-jami (beautiful writing).

This book follows the more restricted definition of calligraphy, that is, script that the writer intended to impact the viewer aesthetically, writing that not only conveys information by its semantic content but also speaks through its formal appearance. To make a linguistic analogy, calligraphy is to writing as fusha (literary Arabic) is to plain speech. Calligraphy is thus the opposite of cacography.
The narrower definition, in turn, helps to frame the contents of the book. It excludes, for example, the grocery list. Usually handwritten, it conveys information and must necessarily be readable, but the items on it are hazardously penned, often by different hands with different implements, in no useful order. This definition also excludes many graffiti, in which the desire to record some presence or event supersedes the form in which it is written. Similarly, following this more restricted definition of calligraphy, I exclude many but not all of the papryi that survive from early Islamic times. These documents have beenably studied by Geoffrey Khan,14 who drew the distinction between the ideal or standard forms of the letters—the ones that scribes intended to write, and their actual realization—the ones they did write. Following terms developed by Noam Chomsky for literary theory, Khan separated script competence, the ideal forms as realized by a scribe's careful execution, from script performance, the actual result of a scribe's writing.15 Most of the papryi, especially private and commercial correspondence and accounts, were not carefully and consistently executed according to a specific standard but used a poorly executed unofficial script which was current for popular purposes. In other words, they are written in a rough script in which the need to convey information supersedes the form in which it is given. By contrast, the letters that I have included, such as one on papyrus from the chambery of Qurra ibn Sharik to the sovereign of Aswah, c. 710 (Figure 3.11), are carefully and consistently executed and come closest to the ideal forms. They fall at the higher end on the scale of execution.

Following the same line of reasoning, I have included several examples of documents from later periods, ranging from a twelfth-century pilgrimage scroll [Figure 6.12] to letterettes and decrees issued by the major Islamic dynasties, including the Fatimids [Figure 6.7], Ilkhansids [Figure 7.13], Aqqoyunlu [Figure 7.14], Mamluks [Figure 8.11], Tughluqs [Figure 9.7], Nasrids [Figures 9.11, 10.11], and Ottomans [Figures 11.16 and 11.17]. Mughals [Figure 12.8], and sultans of Acheh [Figure 12.10]. I chose these examples because their calligraphic form, as well as their materials and decoration, were meant to impress the receiver visually, just as their lofty prose was intended to do so orally. These letters are written in a formal script, just as the language used in them represents an official rhetoric as opposed to colloquial speech. They are thus calligraphy or fine writing.

But what of the first word in the title, Islamic? It is the adjectival form of Islam, literally in Arabic, submission to (God). Islam as a noun referring to the faith professed by Muslims is a relative neologism. The term occurs only six times in the Koran, in which the more common word was simply al-din [the faith], but it has been adopted in modern times to designate the religion that God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia.16 The adjective Islamic refers specifically to matters related to that religion, but it has often assumed a broader connotation of matters related to the culture or civilization in which Islam was the prominent religion. The renowned historian Marshall Hodgson tried to underscore this important distinction between the religion of Islam and the overall society and culture associated historically with that religion.17 He coined the terms 'Islamdom' for the society in which Muslims and their faith in one way or another are recognized as prevalent and socially dominant and 'Islamicate' for the culture centered on a lettered tradition that has been historically distinctive of Islamdom, the society. His terminology, however, was somewhat unwieldy and has not been generally accepted. But his point is an essential one.

Here, I use Islamic in Hodgson's sense of Islamicate, meaning related to the culture that developed in the lands in which Islam has been a major presence over the last fourteen hundred years. Many of the calligraphic specimens illustrated in this book are written specifically to the faith. Indeed, folios from Koran manuscripts form the vast majority of the illustrations. But these are not the only ones. In addition to official documents, there are examples from literature, especially poetry (e.g., Figures 3.10 and 7.15). There is even a cookbook [Figure 9.10].

One can question the suitability of such a broad rubric as 'Islamic calligraphy,' asking whether any community exists in the various scripts used during the past fourteen hundred years over one quarter of the globe. Hodgson already called attention to the inadequacy of the term 'Islamic world' as projecting the image of a single, unified entity, when no such thing has ever existed historically. Similarly, he rejected the term 'Muslim lands' as understating the collective aspect of this society. Hence, he coined Islamdom, meaning not an area but a complex of social relations, to be sure one that is defined more or less territorially.

Art historians are also taking up some of Hodgson's objections and questioning the very idea of an 'Islamic art.' As was created by Western art historians at the end of the nineteenth century, partly as a by-product of European interest in delineating the history of religion. It came into favor only in the twentieth century when Westerners began to look back to a golden age of Islamic culture they believed had flourished in the eighth and ninth centuries and to project it splendidly onto the kaleidoscopic modern world. The term privileges the lands where Islam first spread in the seventh and eighth centuries, the so-called 'Rug Belt' that stretches from North Africa to Central Asia. It often excludes areas to which Islam spread in later centuries, notably India, Indonesia, and central Africa, although these are precisely the areas with the largest Muslim populations today. In addition, the term often excludes the diaspora community, although the Muslim populations in Europe and America are expanding rapidly. Islamic art is, in short, a poor name for an ill-defined subject and one that works better for the early period than the later.

Such criticism cannot be leveled so easily at the term Islamic calligraphy, for writing is one of the most important threads that runs through Islamic civilization. Hodgson already noted the lettered tradition central to this culture that is historically distinctive of Islamdom, the society. The major script used in the Islamic lands was devised for writing Arabic. As Arabic was the language in which Muhammad received the revelation from God, perhaps it is not surprising that writing the sacred word was adopted for many other languages spoken in the lands where Islam flourished. This was not true of written Syriac, which was written in only not Persian (e.g., Figures 6.1, 6.14, 7.6, 7.10, 10.10), Chaghatai (Figure 9.3) and Ottoman Turkish (Figures 11.1, 11.5, 11.16), Urdu (Figure 12.13), Malay (Figure 12.10), and Kanembo (Figure 13.1), all illustrated in this book, but also others such as Kurdish, Pashto, Kashmiri, and Sindhi, which are not. After the Roman system, Arabic script is the most used segmental script in the world. Every dot and stroke are added to indicate the sounds in these other languages that are not represented in Arabic, but the basic form of the letters remain the same (see Chapter 1 for a description of Arabic script). This book might have been titled 'Arabic calligraphy,' meaning calligraphy written in Arabic script, but such a title threatens to confuse script with language, and hence I have opted for Islamic calligraphy, meaning by that calligraphy written in Arabic script.

I write this survey of Islamic calligraphy as an outsider. I was not raised writing Arabic script, nor have I trained as a calligrapher. I am not a Muslim. Rather, as a Canadian-born, American-educated art historian, I approach this subject, as many readers will, from the outside. I first encountered Arabic calligraphy as a graduate student at Harvard University in the early 1970s. During my second year there, I took a seminar on the subject with Annemarie Schimmel, the noted authority on Islamic mysticism and herself the author of several erudite studies of Islamic calligraphy, ranging from a manual to a survey of its social aspects. For her seminar, I chose to write about the calligraphy in a superb copy of the Shafihnama made for the Mongols (Figure 7.6), a manuscript that I just happened to be studying in another seminar with Oleg Grabar. I convinced not only these two professors, but also Wheeler Thackston, with whom I was studying Persian poetry, that the calligraphy in this manuscript would make an appropriate topic for the required research paper in each of their courses. By doing so, I was able to concentrate my research and came up with some quite startling findings, some of which became the basis of my first book, co-authored with Professor Grabar. That research convinced me of the primacy of the written word in Islamic art, a subject often slighted by art historians, who traditionally favor the picture. Yet, the dots formed by pressing the
of the pen to paper and the ruling of the page determine the layout of most book illustrations, and the direction of writing determines the direction of looking at works of art, for both book illustrations and other objects of Islamic art need to be ‘read’ from right to left. A seminar on Persian paleography given by Wheeler Thackston under the auspices of the Medieval Academy of America during the summer of 1983 confirmed my interest in Arabic scripts. The subject has intrigued me ever since, and many readers may know that I have written on various aspects of it from the viewpoint of a historian of Islamic art. But precisely as a result of this, I fully realize that I miss much of the passion and fervor that calligraphy evokes in both the practitioner and the believer. Readers interested in the subject from these vantage points should look elsewhere, and several examples of practical manuals and handbooks written by present-day practitioners are discussed in the final chapter here on modern calligraphy.

There are still other viewpoints as well. The noted Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for example, approaches the subject of Islamic calligraphy as a Sufi or mystic. For him, all Islamic art embodies a spiritual message, inspiring the remembrance and contemplation of God. Citing a range of writers and philosophers, mainly Persian, he maintains that calligraphy is the visual embodiment of the crystallization of the spiritual realities (al-haqqa‘iyya) contained in the Islamic revelation. He is interested in universalities rather than mundane chronologies and historical developments. One cannot object to his claim that calligraphy – especially the fine hands used to pen Koran manuscripts – creates awe and emotion in the believer, but his connection to actual examples and objects is tenuous. His essay, then, evokes the overarching spiritual message of Islamic calligraphy, particularly Koranic verses, but does not help the reader understand its developments over time.

Similar reservations pertain to the recent study of writing by the French-born American-trained art historian Oleg Grabar, who began his 1989 Mellon lectures on The Mediation of Ornament with one on ‘The Intermediary of Writing.’ Writing, for him, is a form – to judge from its primary position in his book, the most important form – of ornament, that aspect of decoration that appears to have no other purpose but to enhance its carrier. Like Nasr, Grabar’s perspective is transcendent, rather than specific, and he draws his examples from a wide range of cultures, ranging from early Chinese bronzes to the Book of Kells. Intensely poetic, he consistently throws out questions, many of them unanswerable but stimulating in causing the reader to ponder. His purpose was not to produce a history of Islamic calligraphy, but rather to put forward theoretical reflections on its function. In short, it is an armchair think-piece, not a practical guide.

My purpose, though similarly art historical, is somewhat different here: to apply some of the methodologies developed in the study of Western art history to delineate the development of Arabic writing over the last fourteen centuries and to put it in global perspective. Such work can be done, in part, because of the longevity and tradition of collecting and writing about Islamic calligraphy. Treatises on Islamic calligraphy and calligraphers survive from medieval calligraphy, and some of the works referenced, ranging from the brief entries by the tenth-century encyclopedist ʿat-Nadim to the full-length treatises by the Safavid chronicler Qadi Ahmad and the Ottoman Mustafa ‘Ali, have been edited and sometimes translated. In accordance with the prosopography standard in the Islamic lands, much of the information in these works is biographical. Modern scholars, beginning with the monograph by Clemens Haart, in turn have produced biographical compendia on individual calligraphers. This sort of study is particularly valuable among contemporary authors, both in the Islamic lands and in the West. Another tack used to study the history of Islamic calligraphy has been to select surviving works signed by famous calligraphers, and many ‘studies’ of Islamic calligraphy are catalogues with short essays accompanying many beautiful illustrations of individual examples. One of the first was Salah al-Din Munajjids’s collection of pre-eleventh-century specimens available on microfilm at the Institute of Manuscripts in Cairo. The recent publication by M. Ugrur Derman under the auspices of IRCICA is a far handsomer example of the same type. Other publications were linked to exhibitions. Martin Lings and Yasir Safadi’s catalogue of the Koran manuscripts exhibited at the British Library as part of the Festival of Islam held in London in 1976 was a milestone in this regard: it comprised short descriptions of the 164 manuscripts in the exhibition, alongside many illustrations, including twenty-four color plates. Lings’ companion volume contains 114 larger plates, all in color, that allow the reader to savor the glories of Koranic calligraphy and its effects, including more drawn from a wider repertory, including works in many media. In general, these are picture books, in which the importance of the image supersedes the analysis of it.

These catalogues do not represent a new tradition: collectors and connoisseurs have been compiling and collecting calligraphic specimens for many centuries. Some of the oldest of these albums, known in Arabic and Persian as muqaddima ‘patchwork’, survive in the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul; they show that collecting calligraphic specimens was already popular in Iran by the twelfth century. The tradition continued, particularly in the eastern Islamic lands, and became even more specialized, with some albums devoted to the work of a single calligrapher. In the so-called St. Petersburg Album, for example, 123 of the 125 remaining folios contain exercises penned by Mir ‘Imad, the sixteenth-century master of the sloping script known as nastaliq, making it by far the richest repository of his style.

Only in recent times have scholars begun to analyze Islamic calligraphy within a historical context, trying to identify the salient characteristics of individual styles. The best studies address the calligraphy of a particular period in a particular period, as, for example, Adolf Grohmann’s two-volume study of paleography from early Islamic times or Priscilla Soucek’s essays on Persian calligraphy in the Timurid and Safavid periods. What I have tried to do here is to put these separate studies and my own work together on a coherent narrative that also sketches development and change.

I am also looking to criteria such as balance, line, modulation, and repetition to distinguish fine Islamic calligraphy from ordinary writing. These qualities are not so different from those that distinguish all calligraphy. Legibility, rhythm, consistency, and style are the four features mentioned as the components of world-class handwriting, according to the director of the 2004 World Handwriting Contest. Nevertheless, the exigencies of Arabic script exact certain parameters. Arabic is written, for example, using multiple penstrokes per word and has the possibility of expansion between letters. Freckle, flowing line, and tension are therefore qualities uniquely prized in writing Arabic. Compare, for example, the same word penned by a master calligrapher with the softer and looser copy done by his student (Figure P.1). Furthermore, since Arabic is written from right to left and
material gain through commercialization.42 I have therefore organized this chapter on modern calligraphy differently than the historical ones, choosing instead the fontline of traditional approaches and newer ones, including the application of calligraphy to different media ranging from typography and computer graphics to painting and sculpture.

The chronological and regional organization I have followed in this book is not written in stone. Not every illustration is later than the one that precedes it, but readers can get an overall feel for the evolution of Arabic script simply by flipping through the pictures. Those at the beginning of the book are generally earlier. Many readers will also note, no doubt, that material from Persia often precedes that from the Arabic or Turkish lands. Thus, calligraphy done under the Ilkhans and the Timurids [Chapter 7] precedes that by the Mamluks (Chapter 8), and likewise the Safavids and Qajars (Chapter 10) come before the Ottomans (Chapter 11). This was a deliberate choice made for many reasons. In large part, it is a value judgment, as, in my view, calligraphers in the eastern Islamic lands were often—though certainly not always—more innovative than their counterparts elsewhere. Thus, the styles known as the Six Pens practiced by Yaqut in Baghdad (Chapter 7) emerged in Iran earlier than in the Mamluk domains (Chapter 8). Persian calligraphers developed the hanging script for writing Persian (Chapter 7), and these were then taken up in the Ottoman lands (Chapter 11).

In small part, the order of the chapters is due to the accessibility of the material. I have tried to draw my examples from a range of museums and archives, but I have given preference to those examples that I have been able to examine first-hand. The major repository of Arabic manuscripts, the Dar al-Kutub, or National Library, in Cairo, has been undergoing difficulties for many years, and I have rarely succeeded in penetrating its walls, and then only briefly. Similarly, the library at the Topkapi Palace has reopened only recently after several years of much needed expansion and recon- struction. Iran was closed to Americans for twenty-five years following the Iranian Revolution, but once I got back, the doors to most museums and libraries were wide open. The publication of the material there, however, lags.

Readers will also note that the discussion is mainly taxonomic. In other words, I am trying to pinpoint the salient characteristics that distinguish one style or script from another. In many cases, particularly for the earlier periods, I have avoided adding names or labels to these scripts, other than strictly visual ones. For I feel strongly that such labeling is premature. Written references give a plethora of names for various scripts. The tenth-century chronicle Ibn al-Nadim, one of our earliest sources for the history and development of Arabic script, lists some sixteen scripts used to transcribe the Koran in the early period.43 Some names are geographical (e.g., from Mecca, Medina), others descriptive (munattalath, ‘tripled’ or ‘three-fold’, madawwar, ‘rounded’, and massh, ‘model’), and some are incoprehensible and of unclear vocalization (munaath). Unfortunately for our purposes, these same sources do not illustrate what they are talking about and, rarely, if ever, give a specific description of what distinguishes one script from another. The first surviving source that gives both names and examples of the individual scripts dates only from the very beginning of the century: al-Tayyibi’s slim volume compiled for the last Mamluk sultan, Qansaw al-Ghawri, in 908/1503 (see Chapter 8). In other words, for the first two-thirds of the Islamic period—more than nine hundred years—we have no surviving examples of a script identified by a named sample. The lack of information given in the sources has resulted in a plethora of terms used today for different scripts. Many are confusing, if not downright contradictory. The layperson—and even the specialist—may not know that the names eastern kufic, eastern Persian kufic, broken kufic, kufic naskhi, Carmathian kufic (also spelled Qarmathian, Qarmat or Karmai) and even western kufic, new style, new ‘Abbasid style, broken cursive, and waraqi have all been used to identify the same script. Furthermore, much of what is written about Arabic calligraphy is very subjective: what one person calls mubaqqaq, another may call rayhan, for authors rarely lay out the criteria they use to distinguish different scripts. Lacking such a handbook, surveys of Islamic art often understate and
underrepresent calligraphy, privileging pictures over words [or, more precisely, pictures of pictures over pictures of words].

In view of this massive lacuna in the evidence and confusion in the secondary literature, I have adopted an alternative methodology: to begin not with texts, but with extant examples. Although most are executed on suppil supports as part of codices (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of supports), a few are written in other media, ranging from coins and mosaics to stucco and stone. These fill out the record in the early period when dated examples do not exist in manuscript. They are also important in the later period when paper was readily available for cartoons and patterns, so that calligraphers could – and did – design inscriptions that were executed by different craftsmen in other media. The calligrapher’s work on paper may not have survived, as did the stucco or tile, which was executed by masters or craftsmen but drawn by calligrapher. Such a transformation of the calligrapher’s art was made easier with the introduction of graph paper and squaring.44

I have also tried to work from dated, localized, and well-attested specimens. Dated examples form the framework on which to establish the chronological parameters of a style or technique. For localization, I have relied first on works whose colophons specify where they were produced. Failing such direct evidence, I have occasionally used the epithet, or nisba, of the scribe. By contrast, I have ignored the current location of a specimen, as Françoise Déroche has repeatedly shown that manuscripts moved widely, even in early Islamic times. One of the earliest Koran manuscripts with a colophon (Figure 5.4) states that it was made in Madinat Saqqīyya, referring to Palermo, yet it ended up in the mosque of Damascus.45 Of the enormous libraries amassed by the Fatimid caliphs in Cairo, only two manuscripts have survived: one with single volumes now in Cairo and Calcutta, the other, made in Baghdad, in Rabat, Morocco.46 Manuscripts or pages may have migrated between various places, as was also the case in Tunisia.47

Secure provenance is equally important, as imitations and forgeries were already rife in medieval times. According to the twelfth-century chronicler Yaqut, the acclaimed tenth-century calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab himself claimed he had successfully imitated the hand of the ninth-century master Ibn Muqla. When in charge of the Buyid library in Shiraz, Ibn al-Bawwab had come across twenty-nine parts of a manuscript penned by the master. They were scattered among other manuscripts in the library, but an intense search failed to bring to light the remaining volume (juz'). After Ibn al-Bawwab reproached his patron for failing to preserve the precious manuscript, the prince Baha‘ al-dawla instructed the calligrapher to write out the missing part imitating the master’s hand. Should the prince fail to detect the imitation, he promised to reward the calligrapher with a robe of honor and one hundred dinars.

Ibn al-Bawwab gives details about how he achieved his goal. Scouring the library, he procured old paper on which to transcribe the missing juz'. He then illuminated it, giving the gold an antique appearance, and bound it in one of the original bindings. He had removed from an authentic volume. No wonder that a year later, when the prince recalled the incident and inspected the manuscript, he was unable to detect the forgery. The incident shows that already in the early tenth century calligraphers were expected to make undetectable copies of earlier masters’ hands. Such imitations can fool the best experts, medieval or modern. Using manuscripts with an established pedigree means that even if not ultimately authentic, they are, at the least, models of what the masters’ hands were considered to be like in earlier times.

It should be understood that male-dominated, for Islamic calligraphy is traditionally a man’s art. Our earliest reports about female calligraphers are only textual. The theoreticians and masters who taught them (904–1064), for example, says that he was taught calligraphy by women.48 His contemporary Ibn Abi‘l-Fayyad (d. 1066) reports that 170 women were employed copying Koran manuscripts in kufic script in only one eastern quarter of Córdoba. They are said to have worked day and night by candlelight.49 We cannot, however, identify any of their work. We are on firmer ground in the eastern

Islamic lands, and the earliest surviving manuscript calligraphed by a woman that I know is a multi-volume copy of the Koran transcribed by Zumurrud Khattun bint Mahmund ibn Muhammad ibn Malikshah and endowd to the shrine at Mashhad in Rabi‘ 1540/August–September 1345.50 By the age of empires, women were more common as calligraphers as well as patrons and collectors of calligraphy. Families of calligraphers, including wives and daughters, are said to have worked in Safavid Shiraz, and many Qajar princesses were trained in the art of calligraphy [see Chapter 11].45 The tradition existed at the Mughal court [see Chapter 13]. It was more widespread under the Ottomans, when women from clerical families like Emine Serai Tekin and Maryam also became noted calligraphers. The youngest daughter of the Shaysk al-Islam, Sayyid Hasan Haydarullah, she married a bath-house owner but separated from him and went to live in Madina with her grandfather. Childless, she regarded her nine hilya (calligraphic compositions describing the Prophet) as her offspring, including the one that she penned for her license issued in 1391/1874–5 and certified by the major Ottoman calligraphers of the day, including the master Qadi-askar Mustafa ‘Izzet.51 The balance continues to evolve today. There are dozens of female calligraphers practicing in Iran, and artists like Wijdan ‘Ali [Figure 13.1] and Eslad Adan [Figure 13.12] integrate calligraphy into their art.

This handbook, then, is designed to show a general audience, even those who do not read Arabic or other languages written in the Arabic script, how to recognize and appreciate the different styles of writing in Arabic script. It is a survey, with examples drawn from all periods and places. I have tried to speak (or more precisely, write) specifically to the appropriate illustration. When this was impossible, I have tried to refer the reader to readily accessible places where a particular example is illustrated. My guideline was to be accessible, not exhaustive.

In the further useful friendly in this age of increased specialization, especially in view of the enormous scope of this enterprise, I have tried to specify the degree of the artist’s identity. I use as few foreign words as possible. Words in the text are generally written without the diacritical marks often so important to scholars writing in Arabic. A glossary gives the fully pointed transcribed form of the most important terms, as well as a definition, the equivalent in other languages, and other related forms such as the singular or plural, the nouns formed from verbs, and the like.

Anticipating that my audience will be mainly Western-based and Western-oriented, I have given century dates using only the Common Era calendar (typically abbreviated as CE) to allow readers to readily situate these works in the historical past they know best. Most of the calligraphers who penned these pieces, however, used a different, lunar calendar that was reckoned to date from the year of the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina in the early seventh century and is commonly known today as the hegira date (anno hegirae, typically abbreviated as AH). To find the equivalent century in the Muslim lunar calendar, one can estimate by subtracting six. But I have clung to the specific hegira dates given in signatures or colophons, citing them in the two calendars, following the normal scholarly practice. In the months of the Common Era calendar, the colophon tells us that Sultan–Al ‘Ali Mashhadani finished transcribing the magnificent copy of Farid al-Din ‘Attar’s Shams al-lama‘ in a year that he made at Herat for the Timurid sultan Husayn Bayqara [Figure 7.17] on 1 Jumada 1 892/25 April 1487. Any particular year in the Islamic calendar often overlaps with two in the Common Era calendar, and therefore the same dates often end up looking somewhat lopsided. For example, another colophon tells us that the renowned calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab copied his Koran manuscript [Figure 5.8] at a beginning in Jumada 1, a lunar year that ran from 1 December 1000 to 19 November 1001 CE.

I have also simplified place names, using standard modern spellings, such as Mecca and Medina (not the technically correct Makkah and Madina). I have also used historically generalized areas. Thus, Persia refers not specifically to the territory occupied by modern Iran, but to a broader area that at
times incorporated parts of present-day Turkey, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian republics. Similarly, India refers to the subcontinent, not the modern country. Other common words are equally simplified. Thus, I have opted for the traditional Anglicized spelling Koran, over its hypercorrect form Qur'an, which is typically mispronounced by many. Again, my goal is ready recognition and accessibility over literality.

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Notes

1. Similarly, epigraphy [inscriptions] derives from the Greek ‘to write on.’ Generally written on harder materials such as stone and wood, epigraphy can thus be distinguished from calligraphy, which is written on soft supple supports. For these supports, see Chapter 3, for Islamic epigraphy, see my comparable survey, Sheila S. Blair, Islamic Inscriptions (Edinburgh, 1998).


6. See Atanasii, ‘Hypercalligraphie,’ 84.

7. For details of his biography, see Chapter 11.


10. A similar compound is used inPersian [ka‘shmat] and in Turkish [gizal yazik]. The latter is attested already in the treatise on calligraphy, Tuhfat al-muhitibin [The Gift of Friends], written by Abu’l-Da’l Ya‘qub ibn Shaykh, known as Siraj al-Husayni al-Shirazi c. 1500; see Atanasii, ‘Hypercalligraphie,’ 83.

11. By script, I follow the definition given by Michael Gullick in the introduction to his article in Jane Turner [ed.], The Dictionary of Art [London, 1996], Script: system or style of writing. Scripts are identifiable, and their particular features enumerated, as a consistent graphic representation of notations or letters of the alphabet. A script is therefore a hypothetical model; it can be distinguished from a hand, what a particular individual writes. Gullick used the example of italic: ‘Michelangelo and Queen Elizabeth I wrote not an italic script but very different italic hands.’ Gullick makes the further point that all scripts pass through periods of immaturity, maturity and decline, generally maturing quickly and declining slowly. His article concerns the history of Western scripts, but the same holds true for the various scripts used in Arabic calligraphy.

12. Edward M. Caith, The Origin of the Serif: Brush Writing and Roman Letters [Davenport, IA, 1998], 15, defined calligraphy as the art of making letters of fine quality by either writing or lettering, and cagography as its opposite.

13. I am thinking here of the grocery list that hangs near our kitchen door. All members of the family add to it when necessary, either because we are running out of a particular item or because we need something new for a special dish. They write using whatever implement is laying about, be it a crayon, a pencil, or a pen with black or colored ink. In order to do logical shopping, the items need to be rearranged mentally.


15. The distinction is in some ways comparable to Gullick’s script and hand.


22. For the role of the dot and ruling in determining layout, see Chalhum Awad, ‘Recherche sur le module et le tracé correcteur dans la miniature orientale. 1. La mise en évidence à partir d’un exemple,’ Le Modele