Part V: Dynastic Styles in the Age of Empires
CHAPTER TEN

The Safavids, the Qajars, and their Contemporaries in Iran and Central Asia

From c. 1500, any cultural and political unity that had existed within the so-called world of Islam was shattered, and the central Islamic lands were partitioned among three major empires: the Safavids, the Ottomans, and the Mughals.¹ During this period Islam spread as far as south-east Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and Muslims there often looked to these new empires in the central zone as cultural models. The international Timurid style established at the end of the previous period had set the model for much of the art produced in the Islamic lands, and this section on calligraphy in the age of empires therefore begins, as did Hodgson’s political history, with events that took place under the Safavids, rulers of Iran from 1501 to 1722, along with those of their contemporaries in Central Asia, the Shibanids (1500–99) and the Tughay-Timurids (1599–1747), and their successors, the Qajars (1779–1925).

The Safavid age is often regarded as the time when the modern Iranian nation was founded, with Shi’ism imposed as the state religion. This change affected the choice of texts calligraphed, as new prayers and poems to ‘Ali and the Shi’ite imams were added to the traditional repertory of Koran and hadith. This was also a period of prolific historiography – written, oral, and visual.² This was the moment when calligraphy was regularly collected and studied, its styles codified, and its history sketched, marking the first time that we can speak of an art history of Iranian calligraphy. As major patrons of the book, rulers and their courtiers not only maintained princely libraries and commissioned fine manuscripts, but also collected calligraphic specimens and had them mounted in magnificent albums that typically describe the history of calligraphy (and sometimes painting) in the preface and then illustrate it visually in the following pages.³ These treatises, along with the many signed and dated works that have survived, also make it feasible to sketch calligraphers’ biographies in much greater detail than was possible for earlier periods. As a result, the history of calligraphy in the age of empires is traditionally given as prosopography, history sketched biographically. Here, however, this copious and multi-faceted material is organized by type of script, beginning with sections on the traditional styles of the Six Pens [thuluth, naskh, muhaqqaq, rayhān, tawqī‘]
and riqā‘] and the two hanging scripts [ta’liq and nastā’liq], before a third section on the newer pictorial scripts.

Of all eight scripts, by far the most important in this period was nastā’liq. Habibollah Fazā’i, the modern expert on Persian calligraphy, has estimated that 75 per cent of everything written in Persia from the mid-fifteenth century was done in this script. It was reserved for fine copies of Persian literary works, many of them illustrated, and for calligraphic specimens [qītā’], which were often assembled in albums. Calligraphers refined the presentation of these nastā’liq compositions, using fine paper, which was often brightly colored, highly polished, and gold-dusted, as well as colored inks, and often setting their elaborately planned calligraphic compositions into decorated borders [e.g., Figure 10.6]. Calligraphers also streamlined nastā’liq, developing a new style called shikasta-yi nastā’liq [broken nastā’liq], usually shortened to simply shikasta. Marked by many unauthorized connections and stylizations that make it difficult to read without knowing the standard conventions, shikasta was typically used for documents and letters, in which the striking visual effect of the swirling forms sometimes overrides the readability of the text.

This was the time when Persian painting came of age, and the proliferation of images impacted calligraphy dramatically. Manuscript paintings produced by royal workshops in the Iranian lands during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries are universally considered the finest of the genre, with complex compositions executed in crystalline colors. These figural paintings clearly hit their mark, provoking conservative Muslims to condemn them as skirting the fringes of decency or even blasphemy. Contemporary poets raked by articulating the theory of the two pens [galām], which sought to justify painting as the equivalent of writing, sprung from the same roots. First documented in a versified section on the excellence of art in ‘Abdī Beg Shirazi’s A’lān-ī Iskandari [Rules of Alexander] composed in 950/1543-4, the theory of the two pens quickly became part of the standard Safavid historiography on the arts, incorporated in treatises and album prefaces and illustrated visually in them. Despite conservative atavism, figural painting continued to be a major art form in Iran in succeeding centuries, particularly as images proliferated after the introduction of mechanical means of reproduction like lithography, printing, and photography. Calligraphers, in turn, reacted to the importance and spread of images with different types of pictorial writing, adapting zoomorphic, micrographic, floral, and figural decoration to writing. The word and the picture became intertwined.

Refinement of the Six Pens

Calligraphers working in Iran and the adjacent lands in these centuries refined the round scripts known as the Six Pens as they had been developed earlier in Iran. As before, these round scripts were standard for copying fine Koran manuscripts, but in comparison to earlier examples, those made in the early sixteenth century are less important. Few are signed and dated, most are single-volume manuscripts. The main center of production was the provincial city of Shiraz in south-western Iran. Since escaping the ravages of the Mongol invasions, Shiraz had flourished as a center of Persian literature and culture in general and manuscript production in particular. Away from court patronage, calligraphers worked at home or in commercial establishments, producing many illustrated manuscripts whose stock backgrounds, simplified compositions, and repetitive figural figures suggest a certain level of production. R. W. Robinson coined the term ‘commercial Turkoman style’ to describe the many manuscripts produced there in the second half of the fifteenth century, and commercial production continued under the Safavids in the sixteenth century.

A very large [43 × 29 cm] manuscript signed by Ruzbihan Muhammad al-Shirazi [Figure 10.1] exemplifies how calligraphers in the early Safavid period refined the Six Pens. Each of the text pages in this stupendous Koran manuscript has large lines of muqarnas at the top and bottom and thuluth in the middle, sandwiching panels with four lines of naskh.
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and painters who worked at Sufi shrines in Shiraz. The manuscripts produced there include not only codices of the Koran written in the Six Pens but also copies of poetic texts written in the hanging nastālīq, showing that Safavid calligraphers, like their fifteenth-century predecessors, were well versed in both types of script. The poetic texts, furthermore, are often illustrated with architectural scenes showing high iwans and colorful tilework surely meant to represent local shrines. In many cases, the calligrapher, like Ruzbihan, was also responsible for illumination and even illustration.

This single-volume Koran manuscript comprises 445 folios with eleven lines per page (Figure 10.1). The top and bottom are penned in gold in a fine muhaqqaq; in the middle is a line of similar size in thuluth penned in blue. All three lines of large script, with alif c. 2 cm, are set on a pinkish ground. Sandwiched between the three large lines are eight lines of a smaller naskh on a white ground. The script is distinguished by the typical Shirazi style of long-swooping tails with an angular bend. Gold six-petalled rosettes in the text mark the verse divisions, and marginal medallions mark every fifth and tenth verse.

Ruzbihan’s copy bears immediate comparison with the one penned about 150 years earlier by another Shirazi calligrapher, Zayn al-‘Abidin (Figure 7.12). The manuscripts share the same large size, but the thirty volumes of the earlier copy have been compressed into a single, fat volume here. The text pages in both manuscripts juxtapose different sizes and types of script in a tripartite format, but the written area here has shrunk so that it occupies less than one-third of the page, leaving wide spaces for the margins.

Correspondingly, the illumination has increased in both quantity and variety. On these pages, for example, the panels at the end of the shorter lines of naskh are filled with gold arabesques with blue lotus-like blossoms. The palette has also widened to include green and orange.

The increase in illumination is also clear from the elaborate opening and closing pages. The opening pages contain roundels inscribed in white tawqī. Rather than a dedication to a particular person, they contain an apposite Koranic text (17:89), saying that only the clean shall touch this revelation from the Lord of the Worlds. The text is set into a pattern of superimposed clouds and floral scrolls painted in many colors on a deep blue ground. A floating border of blue sprays and spikes bridges the transition from densely covered illumination to blank margin. The wealth of illumination threatens to overwhelm the calligraphy, which disappears in a riot of vegetation. Such elaborate illumination was time-consuming, and to spread it up production, it was produced with templates. The calligraphy, however, was always done freehand.

The closing pages of this Koran manuscript are equally sumptuously decorated. On the final page (145a), the lower lines of naskh of the last two small panels with a text written vertically at a right angle to the rest of the text saying that Ruzbihan Muhammad al-Tabi’ al-Shirazi was responsible for both text and illumination. He was justly proud of his work, for this is one of the finest Koran manuscripts to survive from the sixteenth century. Its judicious combination of scripts, juxtaposing all of the Six Pens, is enhanced by the use of many colors of ink set against brightly painted grounds. The writing is clear and legible, and the illumination glorious.

In many ways the manuscript signed by Ruzbihan typifies Koran production in sixteenth century Iran. Most copies comprise a single volume transcribed in one or more of the Six Pens. Most combine large and small scripts, usually thuluth, muhaqqaq, and naskh, arranged in panels.

Most open with illuminated and inscribed medallions set in illuminated bands or surrounded by borders of blue spikes or fern-like finials. The Fathia, the opening sura of the Koran, is generally spread across the next two pages, and the text is often integrated into double-page compositions or framed by illuminated borders. The first verses of Sura 2 are placed on the following page, often written over a gold ground with scrolls beneath an elaborate rubric that almost always extends to the top of the page. Some manuscripts also have illuminated pages around the opening verses of Sura 18, which marks the middle of the Koranic text. Others have illuminated borders around pages marking the division into thirty sections (juz).

In addition to the decorated pages containing the closing verses of the text, many sixteenth-century copies of the Koran also have several extra pages at the end of the manuscript. They contain a dua ‘al-i khatm, a prayer to be read upon completing the reading of the Koran, and a falnama, an aid to divination, in which the letters of the alphabet are presented in a table together with an explanation, usually in Persian, of the good or bad fortune associated with each letter. The prayer is often written in muhaqqaq, but the aid to divination is written in nastaliq, the hanging script that had become standard for transcribing works of Persian literature. Ruzbihan himself often penned this additional text.

Along with Koran manuscripts, Safavid calligraphers also used the Six Pens, notably thuluth, for inscriptions. Some of the most famous examples are those designed by the calligrapher ‘Ali Riza for the new capital established by Shah ‘Abbas (r. 1587–1629) at Isfahan. ‘Ali Riza was responsible for those in the mosque northeast of the maydan underwritten by ‘Abbas’s overseer nazir Maghsud Beg in 1010-11/1601-2 as well as those on the maqbara in the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah (1012-25/1603-17) and on the
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Figure 10.1. Detail of the inscription designed by 'Ali Riza 'Abbasi and executed in tile mosaic in 1012/1603–4 on the portal of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah in Isfahan.

The inscription, shows how Safavid calligraphers perfected the style of monumental thuluth. Tall verticals march across the inscription and are countered by long horizontals formed by the extended tails of final ya’ which divide the text into two tiers. The signature of the designer, the calligrapher 'Ali Riza, is squeezed in vertically at the end to set it off from the horizontal bands with the foundation inscription.

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foundations inscription on the portal of the Mosque of Shaykh Lutfallah [Figure 10.1]. The signature is set vertically in order to stand out visually from the main text, which runs horizontally around the portal below the muqarnas semidome. The signature reads katabaha 'ali riza al-abbasi 1012, literally saying that 'Ali Riza wrote it in 1012 [corresponding to CE 1603–4] and meaning that he designed the inscription. He wrote his first name 'ali and the last syllable of his epithet 'abbasi in the upper line, with the long final ya’ in each word or syllable extending backwards in a flat horizontal stroke, and then neatly inserted the date in figures in the middle.

Skilled calligraphers adapted the lengthy text in these foundation inscriptions to fit the specific locale. 'Ali Riza, for example, arranged the patron’s long rhyming titles so that the shah’s name and epithets, Abbas al-Husayni al-Safavi, fell over the doorway. Thus anyone entering the building was literally under the ruler’s sway. Tile-cutters added color to enhance the message. On the Shah Mosque, for example, most of the text is executed in white tile which stands out against the background of dark blue, but the name of the patron is written in light blue over the doorway. Like the gold ink used by calligraphers, later tile-cutters used yellow tile to highlight the name of a royal patron. 'Ali Riza’s style of elegant thuluth inscriptions in tile mosaic remained current throughout the sixteenth century, notably in the work of his student, Muhammad Riza, whose fifty-year long career stretched into the 1670s.

The forty-year reign of Shah 'Abbass is considered by many the apogee of artistic production in Safavid Iran, and far less attention has been paid to the arts, including calligraphy, under his successors. Calligraphers in Iran, particularly those associated with the court, continued to produce fine Koran manuscripts, but many have been remargined, perhaps because the pigments used for the multiple rulings around the text were corrosive and ate through the paper, thereby detaching written area from surrounding margin. These refurbishments, combined with lack of study, make it difficult to establish regional styles and even to distinguish a seventeenth-century Koran manuscript made in Iran from a contemporary one made in Mughal India or Ottoman Turkey.

As before, many of the finest Koran manuscripts produced at the end of the Safavid period are large single-volume copies, but the text is written in naskh set in horizontal bands outlined in gold. Large bands of Arabic text inclose narrower bands with Persian glosses written in red in a tiny nastaliq hand. The interlinear translations were part of the religious revivalism that occurred under Muhammad Sadjir Majlisi (1627–98), the most powerful Shi’ite scholar of the Safavid period. Personally austere and erudite, he was a prolific scholar, devoted to promulgating Shi’ism. His magnum opus is the enormous Bihar al-Anwar (Oceans of Lights), a twenty-six-volume encyclopedia amassing all the Traditions attributed to the Shi’ite Imams. In order to make the information available to the many
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Shi'ites in Iran who knew no Arabic, he also translated parts of his work into Persian. These Koran manuscripts with Persian translations served the same didactic purpose and audience.

These Koran manuscripts [Figure 10.3] and related religious texts in Arabic are transcribed in a new style of naskh that is notable for its clarity and readability. Its most famous exponent is Ahmad Niyazi, the most important calligrapher working in Iran at the turn of the seventeenth to eighteenth century. Ahmad Niyazi was both long-lived and prolific. Dated works range from 1067/1656-7 to 1153/1740. Signed works include many Koran manuscripts and prayer books, calligraphic exercises, lacquerwork, and a Koranic inscription in the Chihil Sutun palace dated 1127/1715. These works demonstrate the wide variety of subjects and media that calligraphers in the late Safavid period were expected to control. The signatures also show that, as with other famous calligraphers like Shaykh Hamdallah [see Chapter 11], it is essential to compile an artist's biography from signed works, for the written sources, in the case of Ahmad Niyazi beginning with the nineteenth-century biography by Mirza Sanglakh, tend toward the hagiographic and are often unreliable.

Ahmad Niyazi's specialty was naskh, the round script that had been used for regular copying but that was transformed at this time into a fine calligraphic style used for manuscripts of the Koran and other religious texts in Arabic. The style he perfected has evenly spaced lines and well-formed letters, with vocalization placed at uniform height throughout the text and serifs added on both right and left of the main strokes. Alif is a single, tapered stroke without serif. Double dots for ta' and ya' are often written vertically [Figure 10.3a], and ra' often connects to final ha'/ta' marbutsa [Figure 10.3b]. Ahmad Niyazi closed up the spaces between words so that the letters flow smoothly and rhythmically across the flat baseline, in contrast to the contemporary nastaliq, in which syllables or words are posed on the diagonal. Ahmad Niyazi often played off these various scripts, penning the text in a sweeping horizontal naskh and the headings in a rounded thuluth, but adding his signature in riqa' or in the sloping shikasta. Opening pages in Koran manuscripts penned by Ahmad Niyazi, like this one, typically have exuberant decoration in gold, blue, and a vibrant carmine-red, the same color used for the punctuation indicating required and optional stops.

Ahmad Niyazi is often credited with inventing this style of naskh, but just as Ibn Muqla, Yaqut, or Mir 'Ali Tabrizi did not invent the naskh, Six Pens, or nastaliq attributed to them, so too Ahmad Niyazi did not invent this style but rather codified and regularized what others before him had developed. Ahmad Niyazi himself shows his debt to earlier calligraphers, often copying works by his famous predecessors such as 'Ala' al-din Tabrizi, teacher of 'Ali Riza 'Abasi. By the eighteenth century this adulation of earlier hands was an important part of the Iranian tradition of justifying one's own position by linking it to masters of the past. It is thus a visual equivalent
of written accounts in which the history of calligraphy is described in terms of master–pupil relationships. In the same way, artists copied paintings from earlier works to visually link themselves with earlier masters.34

Ahmad Nayarzi’s reputation soon grew. Many of his calligraphic specimens and manuscripts were collected by later connoisseurs.35 Later calligraphers took Ahmad Nayarzi as the model to be emulated, and his hand became the standard in the Qajar period for copying manuscripts of the Koran and other pious texts. Students of calligraphy were told that if they wanted to write like an important calligrapher, they should try to become like Ahmad Nayarzi.

The continuation of the style of naskh canonized by Ahmad Nayarzi can be seen in the work of the celebrated Shirazi calligrapher and poet, Muhammad Sha’fi (1782–1845), also known as Mirza Kuchuk, and better known by his penname Visal.36 One of the most famous masters of nasta’liq in nineteenth-century Iran, Visal also transcribed pious works in the style of naskh canonized by Ahmad Nayarzi. Some of Visal’s works are direct copies of Ahmad Nayarzi, including even his signature.37 In some cases, the chain of transmission goes further back, as in a calligraphic specimen [Figure 10.4] copied by Visal in 1258/1843–3. The text, written horizontally in naskh, contains the Prophet’s comments when asked about unity with God (ta’wīl). Diagonal lines at the bottom, also written in naskh, explain that Ahmad Nayarizi had copied the text in Jumada I 1120/July–August 1708 from an exemplar composed by his teacher Muhammad Ibrahim Qummi and that Visal the poet was the second copyist in 1258/1843–3. The composer, Muhammad Ibrahim Qummi, the son of Muhammad Nasir, had been active under the Safavid shahs Sulayman and Husayn and died sometime after 1115/1703–4. A master of naskh, he instructed Ahmad Nayarzi, who made the first copy while his teacher was still alive. Over a century later the text was copied again by Visal, who shows his debt to his predecessor by using the same style. In both texts, the naskh resembles that canonized by Ahmad Nayarzi, with large, clear, and upright letters set in cloud bands against a gold ground. Visal used the same bold naskh when transcribing other Arabic texts.38

The transmission of styles from one generation to the next was facilitated by the master–pupil relationship in families. Fathers often taught their sons, and the practice of calligraphy, like many other professions, passed down through families. Visal, for example, had six sons who were also calligraphers and painters. Like many artistic clans in Qajar times, the Visal family benefited from royal favor. Muhammad Shah Qajar, for example, issued decrees in 1845 and 1848 allocating the family a fixed amount of the tax revenues from Fars province, thereby providing them with perpetual financial security.39

The close association between calligraphers and the court meant that many members of the royal family were instructed in the noble art of calligraphy. The shahs themselves were good calligraphers.40 So were many princesses. Ziya al-Saltanat [Light of the Sultanate], the daughter of Fath ‘Ali Shah and Maryam Yardi and known as Shah Begum, was renowned for her fine hand.41 She was in charge of her father’s private correspondence, and the superb Koran manuscripts in her hand show how strong the tradition of Ahmad Nayarzi was, repeating the script and colors of the model.42 She penned the text in the smooth flowing naskh typical of the style associated with Ahmad

Figure 10.4 Hadith copied by Muhammad Sha’fi, better known as Visal-i Shirazi, in 1258/1843–3 from a text copied by Ahmad Nayarzi in Jumada I 1120/July–August 1708 from a text composed by his teacher Muhammad Ibrahim Qummi.

This calligraphic specimen exemplifies the chain of transmission of naskh in the later period. The original was composed by Muhammad Ibrahim Qummi and copied by his pupil Ahmad Nayarzi during the composer’s lifetime. It was copied again over a century later by Visal Shirazi, who showed his chain of transmission and established his lineage by using the same style.
Nayrizi, with words set in cloud bands reserved against a gold ground. As in the model, the opening pages of text are richly illuminated, notably in gold, ultramarine, and carmine red, but on a smaller and more delicate scale with multi-color floral compositions. The codex in Tehran also contains a Persian commentary, written in the margin in a smaller nasta’liq hand, with an ‘Ali hadith, highlighted in red, reporting that the Prophet said, ‘I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate.’ The commentary acts like a rayed halo, with the lines of text flowing out from the central block. The small nasta’liq is subordinated to the strong black naskh. The overall effect is stunning.

Refinement of the hanging scripts

In addition to the Six Pens, calligraphers working in Iran during this period also refined the hanging scripts. Ta’liq remained the main script used for official correspondence by the many scribes [munsif] in the Safavid chancery. Qadi Ahmad devoted a short chapter to the masters of this script, naming some thirty scribes, this at a time when the Safavid administration was just beginning to burgeon. Like calligraphers, many scribes belonged to clerical families. Some worked for members of the Safavid royal house. Qadi Ahmad’s father, for example, began as an amanuensis in the chancery of Tahmasp’s brother, Sam Mirza, governor of Khorasan. Khwaja Majd al-din Ibrahim acted as vizier to Tahmasp’s daughter, princess Pari-khan Khanum. Such scribes were expected to be versed in all the epistolary skills, composition as well as writing. Mirza Ahmad ibn ‘Ata’allah, son of Shah Tahmasp’s vizier and keeper of the shah’s ink and inkwell, for example, was renowned for drafting letters to the Ottomans.

Like its predecessors, the Safavid chancery issued official proclamations written in shikasta [broken] ta’liq. So did the major Shi’ite shrines, who maintained their own chanceries to record deeds of endowments and issue letters and permissions. This letter of recommendation, or ziyaratnama [Figure 10.5], was issued by the shrine of Imam Riza at Mashhad on 14 Dhu’l-Hijja 937/29 July 1531 to commend the pilgrim Darvish Khod Shah ibn Ustad Mahmud Yazdi. Having duly performed the rituals of pilgrimage at Mashhad, he intended to visit Shi’ite sites in Iraq and requested this letter of recommendation from the shrine. The text ends by calling upon Shi’ite leaders [naqibs] and descendants of the Prophet [sayyids] as well as all people who love the imams to recognize Darvish Khod Shah as a Mashhad pilgrim, treat him with honor, and exert themselves to carry out his requests. Such letters were common, but this example is one of the earliest to survive.

The document has now been cut up [this is the last of four surviving pages numbered five to eight]. Assuming that the missing four pages were the same size as these four, the original document would have measured almost two meters long by a quarter meter wide, approximately the same width but twice the length of the Ilkhanid decree issued some two centuries earlier [Figure 7.13]. As with earlier examples, the lines are widely spaced to emphasize the importance of the document and ascend at the left to prevent additions, but the ta’liq used in the letter of recommendation is smoother and more fluid. The scribe has emphasized the calligraphic effect of the script, adding, for example, a very long flourish at the end of the word fit [fn], which introduces the date written in the bottom line. As in contemporary manuscripts, the scribe added color to enhance the message, which is penned in alternating lines of gold, blue, and black, with additional titles and words of veneration added in gold. The letter was written on paper sealed with a stamp dated 934/1527–8 mentioning ‘Ali ibn Musa ibn Ja’far, the seventh imam who is buried at Mashhad. Such paper must have been prepared in advance, as the line with the
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date runs over the seal. Documents issued by the imperial chancery were similarly stamped with royal seals containing the ruler's genealogy and verses to 'Ali. Like the Ilkhanid scroll, these documents typically opened with the ruler's emblem, or tugha, and the beginning of this letter probably had an elaborate invocation.

While ta'liq remained the script of the chancery, nasta'liq, the other hanging script, remained the favored script for transcribing non-religious texts, especially Persian poetry. With repeated use over the course of the sixteenth century, the script became more fluid, with letters posed on a steeper slope and written with longer strokes. Letter forms were increasingly regularized, just as they had been for the Six Pens. Such canonization was possible through the study of earlier masters and the writing down of treatises that described the forms of the individual letters. Calligraphers then extended this style to new forms and formats, often juxtaposing the same script in different sizes.

The more angular western style of nasta'liq that had developed at the Turkoman courts in north-western Iran (Figure 7.18) gradually gave way to the more fluid eastern style canonized by Sultan 'Ali Mashhadi (Figure 7.17). This was only natural in Herat, as many calligraphers who worked there in the early sixteenth century were students of the master. Several were named Muhammad and had to be singled out by various epithets, but the most famous (and most prolific) calligrapher of the next generation in Herat and the eastern lands was Mir 'Ali Haravi [c. 1476-1544]. A poet famed for his quatrains with riddles [ra'ba'at] and chronograms and a master of nasta'liq, Mir 'Ali designed architectural inscriptions and penned manuscripts, but was especially renowned for his calligraphic specimens [qīṭā]. Like most produced in Iran during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they are usually transcribed on vertical portrait format pieces of paper, measuring less than 25 cm high and often colored. Each contains a Persian quatrains [ra'ba'at] written diagonally and reading from top to bottom. The sloping nasta'liq calligraphy used in these poetic specimens left small triangular panels in the upper-right and lower-left corners. The upper one usually contains illumination or a short pious phrase, while the lower one is reserved for the signature of the calligrapher, sometimes written in a smaller nasta'liq hand. Such specimens may well have circulated commercially, and many were later collected and mounted in albums. Many other examples of Mir 'Ali's work also survive separately. According to the Ottoman chronicler Mustafa 'Ali, Mir 'Ali permitted his pupils to put his signature on their works, and this working method may explain the profusion of calligraphic specimens that bear his name.

Some of Mir 'Ali's Persian quatrains were composed for specific events, such as this example (Figure 10.6) from the so-called Rekorkian Album, now divided between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Freer Gallery of Art. It contains a chronogram for the

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Figure 10.6 Quatrain (ra'ba'at) transcribed by Mir 'Ali Haravi c. 1534 and later mounted in the so-called Rekorkian Album. The quatrain in the center signed by Mir 'Ali Haravi contains a chronogram for the second investiture of Shah Muhammad as regent [nasta'liq] in Bukhara in 941/1534-5. Mir 'Ali's thick line set the standard for succeeding generations when it was judiciously collected by Mughal emperors and mounted in albums like this one. In mounting the quatrain on the page, Mughal artists cut-out verses from two unrelated love poems [ghazal] written in a nasta'liq script and encased the poetry in a garden of floral and vegetal decoration.

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second investiture of Shad Muhammad as regent {atâlq} of Bukhara in 941/1534-5 and was probably composed by the calligrapher at that date. Like most of Mir ‘Ali’s quatrains, this one is written on the diagonal with a thick line, much wider than the one used by his master, Sultan ‘Ali [Figure 10.6a]. At the bottom left [Figure 10.6a] is the signature ‘Mir ‘Ali wrote this’ {katabahu mir ‘ali}, in his distinctive hand, with the tail of final ya’ on ‘ali extending back over the word mir and pointed with two dots and a dagger. The verses were cut-out and pasted on the album page, and the importance of the signature is clear, for the lower margin skirts the dot below ba’.

Each line of the quatrains has at least one extended stroke. Whenever possible, these elongations in nasta‘liq should come, as here, in the middle of a line, rather than in the first or last words. This rhythm engendered by these elongations is enhanced by the repeated shapes of the letters and words. The first, second, and fourth lines rhyme in the syllable -an, so the lines end with the same shapes of alf and nun. The name Muhammad is repeated in the middle of lines one and four, and the word atâlq (regent) in lines two and four. Mir ‘Ali was notoriously casual with his pointing. He often omitted dia- critical dots and never added the stroke to distinguish gaf from kaf, as in the word razgar in line two [Figure 10.6b]. Professional calligraphers considered him an autodidact who lacked the discipline of rigorous training, and compared to the nasta‘liq of his teacher, Sultan ‘Ali, Mir ‘Ali’s calligraphy is somewhat impulsive and less formal and dignified. Nevertheless, it set the style for succeeding generations, especially in India.

Sixteenth-century calligraphers often juxtaposed different sizes of nasta‘liq, playing off the larger (jall) size favored by Mir ‘Ali for the quatrains against the small (khull) size perfected by Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi for the signature and date. Such practice engendered a taste for juxtaposing different sizes of nasta‘liq, and when these quatrains in larger script were mounted in albums, they were often surrounded by verses in smaller script. On this page for example, Mir ‘Ali’s quatrains are surrounded by fragments in cartouches written in a tiny version of nasta‘liq. These fragments come from two ghazals, sonnet-like poems with monorhyme that typically deal with love, either human or divine, and often play on the ambiguities and parallels between the two. The verses on this page deal with the beloved’s tresses and mouth. Typically, these verses were taken from other works and bear only a tenuous relation, if any, to the quatrains in the center. In this case, one fragment runs along the upper line and down the left side. It is followed by the beginning of another ghazal, which runs along the bottom and continues up the right side. When Mughal artists mounted the poetic fragments on this page, appearance took precedence over meaning.

The fluid and rhythmic eastern style of nasta‘liq canonized by Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi also became the predominant style in western Iran, as artists gravitated to work in the Safavid royal scriptorium.

[Kitabkhaneh]. Writing in 951/1544, Dust Muhammad included the names of five calligraphers employed there. The first and most famous was Shah Mahmud Nishapuri, who was active in Tabriz from the late 1520s to the late 1540s. Like his contemporary Mir ‘Ali Haravi, Shah Mahmud Nishapuri used nasta‘liq for calligraphic specimens and poetical manuscripts, but he used the script for other projects as well. The most unusual is a large single-volume copy of the Koran [Figure 10.7], completed, according to its colophon, on Wednesday 14 Muharram 945/12 June 1538. Shah Mahmud was aware of the curious choice of script used for this Koran manuscript. The text ends with a lengthy encomium to ‘Ali written in Persian and specifying that the manuscript, from beginning to end, was done in nasta‘liq. It may have been something of an experiment, and though not unique, the choice of script is unusual, for nasta‘liq was never common for Koran manuscripts.

Shah Mahmud Nishapuri laid out the opening pages like those in secular manuscripts, with text set in narrow panels elaborately illuminated in blue and gold, though the margins are decorated with blue finals rather than the figural scenes used in secular texts. The nasta‘liq script allowed Shah Mahmud to vary the rhythms, and he
played up the juxtaposition of expansion and contraction alongside symmetry and balance. In the invocation to God [Figure 10.7a], for example, he centered the phrase and extended not only the usual sin of bism but also the ya’ of al-rahi to create a balanced design. Long sweeping strokes contrast with tightly packed clusters. Some lines end well before the margin, others encroach upon it. Dots are sometimes clustered for visual effect. Note, for example, the multiple pairs arranged in bilaterally symmetrical patterns in il-mutaqina and yaqimuna at the beginning and end of line three on the left page. The hand is precise and shows crystalline control. Although nastaliq is usually written without vowels, they are considered essential in Koran transcription, and so Shah Mahmud added them here in a lighter pen, evoking the Persian metaphor of eyelashes on the cheek of the beloved. For many, this is one of the most beautiful Koran manuscripts ever produced.

Shah Mahmud used nastaliq more often to transcribe Persian poetry, and the copy of Nizami’s Khamsa that he made at this time for Tahmasp is one of the finest examples of this script. He signed and dated the colophons to all five poems sequentially. In the first [Figure 10.8] and the last, he penned the epithet al-shahi [royal] in gold, thus showing that the manuscript was produced in the royal scriptorium. The dates tell us that it took the calligrapher three and a half years to transcribe the nearly 400-page codex, averaging between twenty and thirty verses per day, the same number required of his Timurid predecessor Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi for each of two patrons. To regularize his work, Shah Mahmud used a mustr to rule the large [quarter-baghadi size] pages with twenty-one lines in four columns. Some pages, particularly those preceding or following an illustrated page, have alternate lines of text written on the diagonal from lower right to upper left, the opposite direction of those used by Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi [Figure 7.17].

Shah Mahmud Nishapuri used a thin and graceful nastaliq that is both elegant and rhythmic. He emphasized the regular rhythm by elongating many strokes, often one above the other in succeeding lines. To balance these swinging strokes, Shah Mahmud incorporated the final ya’ with the long backward-pointed sweeping tail that his predecessor Anisi had favored [Figure 7.18], as in the last two verses of line six. Shah Mahmud also reverted to the traditional system of pointing, with a single dot for cha’, thus reducing the number of dots sprinkling the page.

Shah Mahmud’s nastaliq script is finer and smoother than that used a half-century earlier by Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi [Figure 7.17]. Compare, for example, the word gur in. In Shah Mahmud’s hand [Figure 10.7a] the eye of la’ is usually open, whereas in Sultan ‘Ali’s hand, it is filled [Figure 7.17a]. The seat of the kaf/gaf is also different: Shah Mahmud made it a straight and fairly long downstroke, whereas Sultan ‘Ali had made it curved or angled and short. The long diagonal stroke of Shah Mahmud’s kaf/gaf often intersects the vertical ruling.

Figure 10.8 Final page with the colophon from a copy of Nizami’s poem Makhzan al-Asrar signed by Shah Mahmud al-shahi and dated 1 Jamada II 946/14 October 1339 from the copy of Nizami’s Khamsa made for Shah Tahmasp.

This copy of Nizami’s Khamsa is one of the finest manuscripts prepared for Shah Tahmasp and shows the quality of Shah Mahmud’s nastaliq hand. The most famous calligrapher in the royal studio, he proudly signed his work al-shahi in gold, a visual pun on his epithet zarin qalam [golden pen].
emphasizing the diagonal slope of the writing. Shah Mahmud also wrote each individual word on a steeper diagonal slope than his predecessor had. These small but subtle improvements make Shah Mahmud's nastālīq more fluid. It is also better planned, for there is far less piling up of words at the end of the hemistich. Along with more regular rulings that set off four equally spaced blocks of text, Shah Mahmud's copy of the Khamsa also has superb illumination, not only for the colophon pages [Figure 10.8], but also in the opening pages of text. Even without the wonderful illustrations, text and illumination make this manuscript one of the finest produced for the Safavids.

Soon after Shah Mahmud had finished transcribing this magnificent copy of Nizami’s Khamsa, Tahmasp seems to have lost interest in the arts and dismissed his studio, but the style of nastālīq established in the early sixteenth century set the standard for succeeding generations. This is evident from the most important project of the mid-sixteenth century: a de luxe copy of Jami’s Haft Awrang (Seven Thrones) made for the shah’s nephew, Bahram Mirza, governor of Khurasan and a bibliophile who reportedly had a private library of three thousand volumes. The text is a collection of seven Onehavās—long poems in rhyming couplets—composed by the Timurid mystical poet, Jami [1414–92]. This copy was something of a mail-order project, transcribed over nine years (963-72/1556-65) in three different cities (Mashhad, Qazvin, and Herat) by at least five calligraphers (Shah Mahmud Nishapuri, Rustam ‘Ali, Muhhib ‘Ali, Malik al-Daylam, and Ayshi ibn Ishrat). Two of the calligraphers – Shah Mahmud Nishapuri and Rustam ‘Ali – had worked for Tahmasp’s royal studio in Tabriz, while the other three belonged to the next generation, but all wrote in the same style of fine nastālīq such that the individual poems could be assembled into one coherent volume.

All the calligraphers were interested in variety and visual excitement, not only setting verses on the diagonal but also switching the direction of successive lines to produce a zig-zag effect. In many cases, this was done to stretch out the text so that a painting or colophon fell in an appropriate place, but sometimes the zig-zag pattern was inserted to enliven a long section of plain text, as on folio 20a. In some, the art of the calligraphic specimen (gīr) has overtaken the art of the book.

To further decorate the text, the long headings in the rubrics were often added in different colors of ink, alternating red, blue, orange, and green. The text was then enhanced with lavish illumination, including gold contour panels, polychrome column dividers, and margins on different colors of paper which are themselves illuminated in gold with scroll, cloud, and lattice designs. The writing, which had achieved a canonical form, was being subsumed by the decoration, which could expand in complexity and richness almost infinitely.

The dissemination of a style by copying and the collectability of a master’s hand are epitomized in the work of the third master of nastālīq, ‘Imad al-Mulk Muhammad ibn Husayn Muhammad Shaf‘ al-Husn ‘al-Sayf al-Qazvini (c. 1554–1615), usually known as Mir ‘Imad. He became the most important practitioner of the art at the court of the Safavid shah ‘Abbās and the chief rival of ‘Ali Riza ‘Abbasi, designer of inscriptions [Figure 10.2]. Mir ‘Imad’s work was immensely popular both during his lifetime and after his death, and his calligraphic specimens, like those of his predecessor Mir ‘Ali Haravi, were collected assiduously. Many were mounted in sumptuous albums. The most famous is the so-called St Petersburg album, which was compiled in 1734–5 with facing spreads of calligraphies by Mir ‘Imad alternating with spreads of Persian and Mughal paintings dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Another Istanbul University Library compiled for the Ottomans has calligraphic specimens by several masters of nastālīq, of which the finest like this one [Figure 10.9] are signed by Mir ‘Imad.
These practice sheets were known in Persian as siyah mashq (black exercise or practice) because the calligrapher filled the sheet with calligraphic strokes in black ink. This one was signed by Mir 'Imad at the second Safavid capital, Qazvin. He achieved its flowing lines by repeating shapes in practice sheets like these, which soon became collectors’ items. Like many, it was later embellished with cloud bands with wrinkled edges set in reserve against a gold ground.

Figure 10.10 Practice sheet with the basmala, the Fatiha, and a Persian quatrain signed by 'Imad al-Hasani, known as Mir 'Imad, at Qazvin, and datable before 1600.

Mir 'Imad is most famous for his quatrains penned in the diagonal format canonized by Mir 'Ali Haravi (Figure 10.6), but with a bolder, heavier line and an exaggerated contrast between thick and thin strokes. Compare, for example, the thick heads and thin bottom strokes of dal and min, the first and last letters of the opening line. Sweeping strokes widen at the end, both in connecters (as in the first line) and in final kaf (line two), fa (line three) and ta (line four). These provide the steps that lead the eye down the page.

Calligraphers achieved such flowing lines by repeated practice. In addition to finished compositions that were regularly mounted in albums, they prepared calligraphic exercises repeating the same letter or group of letters. These practice sheets, which often survive separately, are known in Persian as siyah mashq (black exercise or practice).

This one by Mir 'Imad [Figure 10.10] contains the basmala, or invocation to God, in the top center, followed by the Fatiha, the opening sura of the Koran. Written across this and upside down is a Persian quatrain about love, followed by the signature of the calligrapher 'Imad al-Hasani at the capital (dar al-saltana) Qazvin. Mir 'Imad moved from Qazvin to join 'Abbas' scriptorium in the new capital at Isfahan c. 1600, so this example can be attributed to the preceding years.

In this practice sheet, Mir 'Imad worked on repeating shapes of nasta'liq. In the basmala [Figure 10.10a], for example, he extended the sin in bism and the connector between ha and ya in al-rabita to create a balanced pattern, the same layout that Shah Mahmud Nishapuri had used in his nasta'liq copy of the Koran. Mir 'Imad also worked on the shape of nun, repeating the letter several times with minor variations in the word alladhina in the penultimate line [Figure 10.10b] until he achieved a perfect form. Similarly, he repeated the initial penstroke qas and the final penstroke in in qazwa at the end of his signature like a coda around the medial waw [Figure 10.10c]. Such repetitive strokes formed the backbone for calligraphic specimens, in which a calligrapher like Mir 'Imad could repeat the same shape seemingly effortlessly.

Calligraphers may have made such practice sheets for centuries to improve their skills, but during this period they recognized their value as collectibles and produced finely crafted examples like this one that shows no trace of smudges or ink spills. The production of such finished works had much to do with the art market, as the uncertain nature of royal patronage meant that artists had to devise alternative methods of earning a living. Mir 'Imad, for example, moved from court to court in search of patronage. These calligraphic exercises can thus be seen as the verbal equivalent of the highly personal drawings that proliferated at this time in the hands of such masters as Riza and especially his pupil Mu'in. Both practice sheets and drawings exhibit the same interest in the methods of producing a work of art, an interest articulated in the treatises on calligraphy that appear at this time.

In addition to manuscripts, quatrains, and calligraphic exercises, calligraphers in the seventeenth-century Safavid chancery also used nasta’liq for diplomatic correspondence, as in a letter [Figure 10.11] sent by 'Abbas to King Charles I of England (c. 1635-49). One of a group of letters about commercial affairs exchanged between the two courts in the 1620s and 1630s, it testifies to Iran’s prominent role in the silk trade with Europe. A seal on the back identifies the sender as the servant of the king of holiness, 'Abbas (banda-yi shah-i vilayat 'abbas). The top line identifies the recipient as Charles (charish), king of the Franks (farmanfarma-yi frank). The text begins by showering Charles with praise and diplomatic phrases of goodwill in flowery