

## An Interview with M. Uğur Derman

Carol G. Fisher and Alan Fisher

In the summer of 1992, as a second phase of a larger project that began with an exhibition of calligraphy at the Kresge Art Museum and an accompanying catalogue,<sup>1</sup> we, with our son Garrett, interviewed and videotaped a number of calligraphers, ebrûcus, and illuminators then working in İstanbul.<sup>2</sup> Our work was made possible by the assistance of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture in İstanbul (I.R.C.I.C.A.), its director Dr. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, and Muhammad Tamimi, a member of his staff. They introduced us to key artists, collectors, and scholars, and provided invaluable assistance in arranging interviews and studio visits. On July 21 of that Summer, we videotaped an interview with M. Uğur Derman at I.R.C.I.C.A. in which he spoke at length about the importance of calligraphy to Turkish culture, and about the current and future state of calligraphy as an art form. The following is

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<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank both the Institute of Turkish Studies and its director, Dr. Heath Lowry, and the All-University Research Initiation Program at Michigan State University for funding our project in Turkey during the summer of 1992. We also thank our son, Garrett Fisher, for his assistance with the videotaping of our interviews and the demonstrations. The catalogue: Carol Garrett Fisher (ed.), *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing*, Kresge Art Museum, East Lansing, Michigan, 1991.

<sup>2</sup>Those we interviewed and videotaped—both discussion and demonstrations—were: Professor Ali Alparslan, interview at I.R.C.I.C.A. 7/14/92; Davut Bektaş demonstration, at I.R.C.I.C.A.; Fuad Başar, interviews and demonstrations at his studio, 7/14/92, 7/15/92, and 7/23/92; Hasan Çelebi, interview at I.R.C.I.C.A., 7/16/92 and demonstrations, including his teaching, at his studio, 7/25/92; Mustafa Bekir Pekten, interview at his home, with videotaping of his collection, 7/21/92; M. Uğur Derman, interview at I.R.C.I.C.A., 7/21/92; Dr. Çiçek Derman, interview and demonstration at her home/studio, 7/21/92, and videotaping of parts of the Derman's collection; Muhamed Tamimi, interview at I.R.C.I.C.A., 7/23/92; and Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, interview at I.R.C.I.C.A., 7/23/92.

an English translation by Ms. Ayşegül Acar of the interview, which was conducted in Turkish.

Although we had not met Uğur Bey before, we knew of his reputation as the leading scholar of calligraphy, its history and aesthetics, in Turkey, and were very pleased to be able to meet with him, both on this occasion, and later, with his wife Dr. Çiçek Derman in their home. We discovered in the process a scholarly and delightful person. We discussed not only calligraphy itself but viewed and videotaped parts of his collection, and received valuable advice on our project. We remember the time spent with both of these cultivated and outgoing artists, scholars and collectors with both respect and warmth.

### Interview

**F:**<sup>3</sup> In our project this summer we hope to meet, discuss, and record the most important calligraphers, paper makers, illuminators and marblers working in İstanbul, and are very pleased that you are willing to talk to us about the art of calligraphy in general. We know, too, that you are yourself an accomplished calligrapher.

**D:** It's interesting that you've come from America to do this here. Back in America there is Professor Heath Lowry who would explain this better. He's an American who appreciates *hüsn-i hat*. He should be the one to explain this rather than me!

**F:** It is true that Islamic calligraphy is available for viewing in some American museums, and there are calligraphy specialists in the United States, like Professor Lowry. But for the most part, Americans do not understand calligraphy as an art form, not only historical but contemporary. It is for this reason that we are carrying out this project. We hope at some time in the future to make available our video recordings to the broader American public. How would you begin to explain calligraphy to an American audience?

**D:** Yes, what I will say on this subject is the following: First of all, Arabic letters are very suitable for the plastic arts by their very nature. That is, it is possible to manipulate them like dough. Of course this is not true for every type of calligraphy. There are many styles of calligraphy, but among them, particularly the *sülüs* style and its *celî* form, the

<sup>3</sup> F = either Carol G. Fisher or Alan Fisher; D = M. Uğur Derman.

calligraphy found on monuments, are very suitable to be shaped, that is, these are forms that conform well to the concept of plastic art.

Not only do the letters lend themselves to this. In addition to the single letters, in the Arabic writing system itself, a letter will have a very different shape at the beginning, middle or the end of a word. Thus in a single style of writing there would be many forms. For this reason, variety, that is, as we used to call it, *tenevvi*, is a good way to describe these letters.

At the same time when various unrelated forms of writing appear, a situation arises which does not exist in the Latin alphabet. For example, the Latin alphabet has 29 letters as used in Turkish. It only has upper- and lower-case letters, and it goes on like this—you cannot find another form; it does not lend itself to extending, lengthening.

Now in Arabic calligraphy, in addition to having many different shapes, you can also lengthen the letter. We call this *keşîde*, and so it is possible to write the same sentence with very different compositions. For this reason, at one point a link can be established with abstract painting. Among western painters, such as Kandinsky, some have applied the art of calligraphy to painting, and were inspired by it. I remember something that Picasso said: "Islamic calligraphy long ago reached the ultimate point I have wanted to attain in painting." This is because Picasso is seeking not color but lines. An abundance of lines. Lines coming together—and this is very much the case with calligraphy.

The same thing is also found in the writing styles in the Far East, that is, in Japanese and Chinese calligraphy. But in both languages, characters are written as individual shapes. It is not possible to combine them into compositions as we can here in Arabic calligraphy. The writing technique there is with a brush—it is much different from our own, which uses reed pens whose tips are slanted, not straight.

The stroke is thick or thin according to how the pen is held. And the art lies precisely in how the calligrapher makes use of this. The essence of the art begins with holding the pen. According to the writing style, the pen's tip may either touch the paper in its entirety or it may touch it only partially. When you apply a downward stroke, you get narrow contact.

For example, the calligraphy style that we call *talik*, and the Iranians call *nastalik*, is based on the principle of one thin, one thick; that

is, the harmony in *talik* writing is entirely based on the principle of thickness and thinness. If there were two thick strokes next to one another, then the aesthetic would vanish. It should be one thin, one thick, one thin, one thick. Visualize *talik* writing, and you will immediately feel it.

Yes, in short, the art of calligraphy is “a spiritual geometry created with material tools,” as the ancients put it. That is, the mystical side of calligraphy is very important.

**F:** Would you say that the art of calligraphy is primarily a religious art? That its spiritual or mystical side is primary?

**D:** Religious in this sense: There is a saying attributed to the Caliph Ali: “The art of calligraphy is perfected through repetition and practice, and it acquires substance by being based upon Islam.”

So there is definitely a mystical side to calligraphy. For example, you know our friend [Mohamed] Zakariya in the United States, he became interested in calligraphy after he was exposed to Islam. But this is not to say that people outside of Islam cannot feel this. Of course they can. After all, this is a storehouse of aesthetics. Any one who sees it admires it.

**F:** Are the calligraphers working in Istanbul today mainly those who view it from its spiritual and mystical side?

**D:** Yes, well—this script has been the collective writing of the Islamic *ümmet*. Certainly that has had an effect, but it is not absolutely necessary that it have a religious aspect. However it is to be noted that the development of the art of calligraphy was born out of the desire to write down the holy book of Islam, the Qu’ran, in the most beautiful fashion. Consequently, religious effort was involved in this. Today, if you look at past centuries, the work that has been most written is the Qu’ran—it would either be written down in its entirety, or written in parts, the verses. But this does not mean that calligraphy is necessarily only a religious art.

We have to consider this: before, and even during the Renaissance, most subjects in the western art were religious in nature. Can you show me any subjects outside religion in painting or in sculpture of those periods? Either Christ or his apostles were depicted, or some narratives relating to religious history. Thus, it is not possible to separate that art from religion. But it is not correct to say that the art is related to

religion. Indeed, in the centuries after the Renaissance, art in the west has been completely separated from religion.

It’s the same with calligraphy. Now, let’s see ... for example ... one can write a poem that has nothing to do with religion. We have some examples, there are examples in Iran. Though there are not many in the Arab world ... and well, you can encounter a couplet on a wall having nothing to do with religion. You can see something amorous, a lyric couplet. It is not a requirement, but its emergence in written form certainly is related to religion. Particularly if the written form is beautiful Arabic calligraphy. The connection is only this—the purpose of calligraphy was to write down the Qu’ran in the most beautiful way.

**F:** Obviously with the Qu’ran written in Arabic, the art of writing here was of Arabic letters and Arabic words and Arabic phrases.

**D:** Yes.

**F:** But the greatest calligraphers have been in the past five centuries in İstanbul—not Bagdad, not Damascus, not Jerusalem, not Cairo. Why İstanbul?

**D:** Yes, well, calligraphy developed over time. Actually, in the past, in the Islamic world, calligraphy developed in those states which wielded the most power. For example, when we look at the Abbasid period, we see that calligraphy did develop in Bagdad. Now, if it had not been for Ibn Muqla, or Ibn al-Bawwab, calligraphy would not have reached this stage. Later, Yaqut arrived in the last period. After the Abbasids fell, then, well, the Mamluk period began and calligraphy moved to Egypt and Syria. Then that was over, and it was the turn of Iran, and calligraphy and the related arts reached their climax mostly in Herat, in the Timurid empire. Of course, this happens also because the rulers of those states are also interested in calligraphy.

Later, after the conquest of İstanbul, the Ottomans—though calligraphy was also important in the Seljuk period—but after the conquest, İstanbul became the center of all arts. It was both the center of the Caliphate and the center of all the arts in that period. Consequently, calligraphy developed in İstanbul. Because Ottoman rule continued for many centuries, calligraphy evolved in İstanbul over a very long time. The Timurid empire existed only a short time, the Abbasids lasted longer and for that reason calligraphy developed there for a longer period.

It depends on each period, and well, the Ottoman territory was quite extensive and calligraphy traveled far and wide. Because the learning process of calligraphy was not necessarily always done under religious auspices—but, let's say an official would be interested in it as an amateur and would learn it, and then, let's say, when he was appointed to Cairo, he would teach calligraphy there. So, a seed would be sown in a far away place. So this is how calligraphy was spread.

And then I think the reason why calligraphy was able to exist continuously until today without stagnating was mainly this: first of all, it was always learned in a master-apprentice relationship rather than in a school. Let's say you are interested in studying calligraphy; you come to me and say that you wish to learn. I say, certainly, and make a place in my home and set aside a day for you. I teach you, and moreover, there is no remuneration for this, no financial remuneration. Thus there was a mystical side to this that is incomprehensible in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is no exchange, no financial exchange, because you will teach this to someone else later on. This is an *emanet*, given to us for safekeeping. It passes from me to you, from you to someone else. This is the process.

Another important reason is that such arts have always been corrupted in the Islamic world due to western influences. For example, the art of miniature is a particular painting technique, that developed until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But when the western movement of realist painting appeared in İstanbul in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the special character of the art of the miniature was lost. It's a matter of perspective. When you introduce perspective to a miniature, then it loses its essence.

Also, for example, in gilding and illumination, there is a special group of motifs, and these motifs are never an imitation of nature. They are always stylized motifs. They may take a flower, but do not depict it exactly, but give it a different form, stylize it, and then it is not an imitation of nature. But the western world's concept of natural art also influenced illumination, and so it too was corrupted. Calligraphy is the only art form that was not corrupted, because it had no equivalent in the west. That is, there was nothing that could influence it directly. The Roman alphabet and the *elifba*, the Arabic alphabet, were different systems of writing. And because it was not influenced, it was able to maintain its own character.

Then, too, there is Ottoman architecture. After the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Rococo style, the Baroque style, the Empire style arrive, ... and it is

gone. But in calligraphy there is no Baroque, no Empire, no Rococo. Calligraphy is calligraphy, and this is why it has kept its characteristic.

**F:** Hasan Çelebi, with whom we visited a couple of days ago, said that the climate of İstanbul is best for calligraphy. Is it true?

**D:** From what perspective? I have never thought of it.

**F:** Hasan Bey said that Damascus and Bagdad are too hot for calligraphy in its best forms—too hot for the ink, too hot for the paper.

**D:** Of course, yes, that may also be a reason. But there was no single reason. You can see it too, and if only you had seen the old İstanbul ... today İstanbul has become westernized, those tall buildings here, gone is the old İstanbul. The old İstanbul had a picturesque, special character; they are gone. Of course İstanbul's climate was also good, as were other factors. That may also be a reason. But of course calligraphy did not develop here specifically because the weather was good.

**F:** How much did calligraphy change here during the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

**D:** Well, calligraphy ... and particularly its *celî* style, that is the large letters inscribed on monuments, was not developed in earlier centuries. Then it was book writing. Or for *sülüs*, and *muhakkak*, calligraphic styles that were written using thin pens, such as *nesih* and *reyhânî*, began to flourish already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

For example, with Hafız Osman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, calligraphy entered a new phase, but the thick, *celî* style could not be developed then. Because the human hand had a great deal of difficulty in writing in the *celî* style. One must use a pen with a broad tip, and you are supposed to write something from close up, the proportions of which you are able to see only from afar, and this without distorting its form. This was not to be realized then.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a truly exceptional artist named Rakım appeared. This individual wrote in *celî* style in a sense for the very first time. That is, you can throw out anything that was written before him. He put down everything, with all its rules. If you have not filmed it, go to the Nusretiye Camii in Tophane. There is a *kuşak* calligraphy there. *Kuşak* refers to calligraphy that is written all around in monuments like a belt, it goes around like a band. I recommend that you film it. It is a calligraphy by Rakım. He also painted. Oh yes, let me mention something else here: the *istif* or composition truly stands out in the works

of those calligraphers who also worked on figurative painting. Among those calligraphers whom I have studied, those who also worked on painting, the way they put letters together has an entirely different feel, it is more perfect. Rakım is one of those. Rakım was a painter, and for this reason, he approached calligraphy a bit from the viewpoint of perspective.

Now, these thick calligraphic styles ... it is one thing to look at a writing close up, and something else when viewed from afar. Of course it is more difficult to read as you move away, so you will either look at it with binoculars, or move closer. Also, to make a piece of writing that is far away legible, one has to resort to some changes in the scale. Let's say, in a piece of calligraphy that is nearby, the "eye" of the letter *vav* will be four dots, while in a piece of calligraphy that is far away, he made that *vav* as big as five dots. He leaves the inner curve wider so that it will be easily seen from far away. These are things that depend on a knowledge of perspective. And because Rakım knew these, he was able to bring a different feeling to the art; and those who came after him followed his direction and path.

We see the same thing in the calligraphic style we call *talik* and the Iranians call *nastalik*. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a father and son named Yesârî and Yesârîzâde applied the same rules of perspective to this style.

**F:** What do you think will happen to calligraphy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**D:** Now, calligraphy has undergone a period of stagnation. For one thing, calligraphy, as we said before, had always seen more interest in İstanbul. Because we adopted Latin characters, we have now been cut off from these letters. Actually they are still used in religious education, but this is not enough for its use everywhere. Consequently, there are fewer people who are interested in calligraphy as an art form. But now there are some in the new generation who appreciate it purely as an art form, without being interested in religion. For example, you came all the way from the U.S., not to study it as a religious expression, but purely for its aesthetic powers. Now we too have a new generation, and it is again an object of interest. But it is difficult to say whether this trend will go as far as going on to a new phase, or whether it will maintain its present level.

For example, this new publishing system, the electronic media, the computerized systems—all have been to the detriment of calligraphy. Why? In our country, typesetting is now done on computer. This is no longer used in publishing here. It is used in the Arab world, but

unfortunately, there is not much taste in calligraphy in the Arab world, except to some extent in Iraq and Syria. Of course we can also include Iran. There is a taste for calligraphy in Iran, though not as much as was the case here in the past. In newspapers and street advertising and so forth, all we see is this computerized calligraphy, but it is a disgrace. There is no beauty in this new "calligraphy," it is just script. For this reason, it is unlikely to expect that anything will come from it. So, if calligraphy is to develop at all, it will have to be done again here in İstanbul. But we still don't have such a medium. I don't know if we will have in the future, but I no longer think "will there be a new calligraphic style in the future?" etc. I think it would be a great source of happiness if they were able once more to attain the level of perfection achieved in the past. That is my opinion.

**F:** In this century, in the U.S., for abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, painting has emphasized movement rather than static form. Is this also true for calligraphy today?

**D:** That already exists in some styles of calligraphy today. For example, think of the *celî divânî* style. It is such an animated writing. So I believe there is no need to look for innovation, for some new style. Because everything has already been tried in this art of calligraphy. One cannot come up with anything else. As a matter of fact, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a few calligraphers did try to discover new styles, they tried, but did not succeed. Everything that can be done in calligraphy has already been tried, the latest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But this does not mean that calligraphy is something rigid, that it will always stay as is. No, with time, there will be another genius like Rakım, but these things ... There is a saying in Turkish, "*marifet iltifâta tabiidir, müşterisiz metâ zâyidir.*" Skill depends on appreciation. If there is interest in it, then it will flourish; if not, it will be finished. So I have given up on searching for something new. I think the best success lies in maintaining the old level of perfection.

**F:** If no new calligraphic styles can be found, do calligraphers today add their own interpretations to existing styles?

**D:** For example... The most popular style of writing today is *sülüs*. The others have been pretty much abandoned today. But of course, still some use *talik*, and *divânî*—or rather *celî divânî*. These are the styles most often used today. In the *sülüs* style, there was a Şevki Efendi, who lived in the last century in Turkey. Today, many of those interested in calligraphy try to write in the Şevki Efendi style, because he truly was the

zenith of the *sülüis* style. As for the *celî sülüis*, there is Sami Efendi who was a continuation of Rakım. In *celî sülüis*, it is the Sami Efendi style which is prevalent. Everybody tries to imitate him. Then in *celî talik* people also follow Sami Efendi's path. The same is true of *celî divânî*—it is Sami Efendi's way that is followed. These are what we have today in Turkey. The other styles are not used.

**F:** Have not calligraphers in the past changed the styles of their teachers or former masters?

**D:** Among calligraphers in history? Of course, that has happened—it's for that reason that schools of calligraphy emerged. Now, after calligraphy arrived in İstanbul, there emerged a calligrapher named Şeyh Hamdullâh. Şeyh Hamdullâh at first wrote like Yâkut. Yâkut, as you know, was the last great name in the Abbasid period. But with time Şeyh Hamdullâh's hand achieved a mastery and he made a selection from among Yâkut's letters. That is, he chose the letters of Yâkut's that best suited his own sense of aesthetics, and there emerged a Şeyh Hamdullâh style.

Then Şeyh Hamdullâh's writing appears as an entirely new script. Now, if you bring me a piece of calligraphy, I could say this is Şeyh Hamdullâh's writing, even if it is unsigned. But the letters in this calligraphy exist also in Yâkut's calligraphy. Yâkut wrote that one somewhere, and Şeyh Hamdullâh liked it, and chose it; he wrote another letter somewhere else, and Şeyh Hamdullâh liked that one too, and chose it as well. In other words, he developed a new style according to his own aesthetics.

Later on, Hafız Osman did the same thing for Şeyh Hamdullâh's calligraphy. He did not look at Yâkut at all, but went directly to Şeyh Hamdullâh's calligraphy and chose the ones, the style he liked. So what happens? It's like a continuously flowing stream. You hold a strainer underneath, some things are left at the top, a clearer water flows through. You hold another strainer underneath .... The holes of each strainer are smaller than the previous one. So it becomes progressively more refined, there is a purification in the writing, and consequently the style that emerges actually exists in the older style, but it doesn't look like it, as it is strained and strained ....

The same thing happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was some "filtering." That is, the differences in style are born out of this process. For example, Rakım was faced with a calligrapher named Mahmud

Celâleddin. Mahmud Celâleddin did not preoccupy himself with Rakım's style. He selected some other letters from Hafız Osman's writing, according to his own taste. Both exist in Hafız Osman's work, the forms, etc., but they appear different in the two due to this divergence.

For example, there was a calligrapher named Ahmed Karahisârî in İstanbul immediately after Şeyh Hamdullâh. He said, "I will not follow Şeyh Hamdullâh's path," and so what did he do? He took Yâkut's writings as his guide. And there emerged an entirely different style. But with these different styles, one is always eliminated in favor of another, depending on the prevalent taste of that time. For example, Karahisârî could not survive faced with Şeyh Hamdullâh. Mahmud Celâleddin could not succeed faced with Rakım. The style that remains is the surviving style. But these styles, as I have explained before, are not against the fundamentals; they emerge through a selection process.

**F:** For the video that we would like to produce, using the current İstanbul calligraphers in demonstration and discussion, we hope to use some music in the background. What kind of music do you think would be most appropriate as such a backdrop?

**D:** Well, the best would be *ney* and *tanbur*. Not only *ney*, but both *ney* and *tanbur*. Because the *tanbur* is especially appropriate when you will show movement in the *sülüis* style. The sound of the plectrum on the *tanbur* strings should be heard.

**F:** We thank you very much for your ideas, and your help with our project.