Ink and Gold
Islamic Calligraphy

MARCUS FRASER AND WILL KWIAKTOWSKI

Figure 1: The Canterbury Tales, also known as Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, is a collection of stories that have been popular for centuries. The tales are believed to have been inspired by the life and times of Chaucer, a medieval English poet who lived during the late 14th and early 15th centuries. The collection includes 126 stories, each told by a different character. The stories range in length from short anecdotes to long, complex narratives, and cover a wide range of topics, from religious themes to social commentary. The Canterbury Tales is considered one of Chaucer's greatest works, and has been translated and adapted into numerous languages and media. In this image, we see a representation of one of the stories from the Canterbury Tales, illustrating the intricate artistry and attention to detail that went into the creation of this literary masterpiece.
Ink and Gold
لا يوجد نص قابل للقراءة للإجابة على السؤال.
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Islamic Calligraphy

Marcus Fraser and Will Kwiatkowski

Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin

Sam Fogg, London
Contents

FOREWORD 7
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INTRODUCTION 9
Will Kwiatkowski

CATALOGUE
Marcus Fraser and Will Kwiatkowski
Hijazi Script 14
Kufic Script 18
Eastern Kufic Script 58
Maghribi Script 64
Cursive Scripts 85

Bibliography 141
Acknowledgements,
Photographic Credits, Colophon 144
Foreword

If we in Europe try to seek some understanding of the aesthetics and sense of beauty of our closest cultural neighbour we will very soon turn to the wide range of developments in Arabic calligraphy, the noblest, most stylized and most original of the Islamic arts. Unfortunately this means that we are confronted with signs and textures completely alien to the Western eye: these abstract forms seem wholly 'unreadable' to us — even more than geometrically or organically 'understandable' motifs of abstract Islamic design and ornament. Strangely enough the fact has been neglected that the beauty of a calligraphic design is not wholly connected to its 'readability', for everyone can take the greatest pleasure from contemplating the abstract flow of swelling lines and from compositions of lines and fields within a given space, whether that be pages of books or inscriptions on objects and architecture. Even for Muslims and other readers of the script, the calligraphy is not always readily legible, and what vividly attracts attention is often the inspiring aura of the writing, its serenity and elegance, rather than the meaning of the text, which in some poetry may sound conventional. Thus, Islamic calligraphy can be appreciated not only as a form of writing, but as a work of art in the form of an abstract construction.

In comparison with Chinese calligraphy, Arabic script has occasionally been described as more conservative, but when one considers the very short period of its initial development in the first two centuries of Islam, and surveys its wide range from early Arabic beginnings to new Persian, Mughal Indian and Ottoman styles and then those of the more remote Islamic areas in the West and in East Asia, the horizon widens to an astonishing degree. It is this intense effect and the multiform appearance of Islamic calligraphy which has at all periods induced collectors not only of books but of works of art to preserve great examples of the old masters. Royal patrons such as the Mughal emperors Akbar and Shah Jahan, besides patronizing the work of living calligraphers, added specimens of antique masterpieces to their collections of album pages. Today it seems more difficult to see good calligraphy, as much is hidden in libraries, public or private. We may wonder whether these are the right places for works of art, and it is typical that an institution like the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, founded over a century ago, was not primarily concerned with collecting the arts of the book, as this was left to the Oriental Department of the State Library.

In his studies and publications, however, Ernst Kühnel, one of the former directors of the museum (died 1964), succeeded in bridging this gap between museums and libraries. He wrote one of the first general studies in German on Islamic calligraphy, based not only on objects in the Library and in some private collections, but especially on the Museum's famous collection of Mughal album leaves. Today, when nearly all the funds of the Berlin State Museums are eaten up by the great building activity that is necessary, it should be a primary goal to ask private enterprises to promote such a valuable and aesthetically rich field. We are very proud and glad that a foremost specialist in the field has assisted us in attracting public attention to this magnificent art. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank those institutions and private collectors who have lent works of art to this exhibition.