Wherever there are Muslims, you find calligraphy."

Ohamed Zakaria

As the medium in which the Qur'an was written, Arabic script has a fundamental importance in Islam. It is regarded with particular respect. The beauty of God's word is expressed in the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and Muslims therefore revere calligraphy as the 'queen of the arts'. In individual branches of the arts, script is given an aesthetically attractive frame so that its literal meaning often takes second place and the letters are perceived as decoration and image.
The Aura of Alif

THE ART OF WRITING IN ISLAM

EDITED BY JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN

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Foreword

1910 was the year in which the exhibition entitled Masterpieces of Muslim Art was shown in Munich - at that time the most outstanding exhibition of his kind worldwide. It could not be foreseen that, one hundred years later, this event would not have lost any of its historic significance. With its accompanying catalogues, this exhibition is considered the beginning of Europe's scholarly discussion of Islamic art and to this day it has remained a point of reference for countless exhibitions. The current exhibition at the Museum of Ethnology in Munich The Aura of Art, is one such case: it takes up the subject of calligraphy in Islam in all its diversity, which a century ago was scarcely known in Europe and if known was not perceived as an art. Our aim now is to give this complex topic the space it deserves and thus provide a more in-depth perspective through the presentation of outstanding examples.

In selecting this subject which is one of a series of exhibitions and events in the Munich Islam Year 2010, Jürgen Wasim Freigang has directed our Western view to the central, original meaning of the 'aura' in the sense of a hint of something and of an effect. The diversity of the artefacts exhibited - from household objects and tombstones to veritable works of art - reflects the broad spectrum of calligraphy in Islam from the early ninth to the early twenty-first century and ranges from simple notes to magical effects, from religious cult to the art of poetry. The museum's own holdings, important loans from other museums and private lenders make it not only tangible for visitors but 'legible' in the literal sense of the word. In the catalogue, a distinguished group of experts has dealt with the various facets of the Islamic art of writing and in many cases read inscriptions - particularly on works of art belonging to the museum in Munich - for the first time, thus making their meaning and significance accessible.

An ethnographic museum is an ideal venue for an exhibition of this kind. After all, the purpose of this institution is to present culture in its totality. This is accomplished through the meaningful interaction of the various artefacts and documents and through its creative aesthetics which point the way to beauty for which we must first develop an eye. It is our good fortune to be able to hold this exhibition in the Museum of Ethnology in Munich, not least as it enables us to recall the prominent role played by Lucian Scherman, director of the museum from 1907 to 1933, who here - also under the impression of the Islam Exhibition in Munich in 1910 - implemented this basic conception of a comprehensive presentation of culture in all its diversity.

CLAUDIUS MÜLLER
Director
Museum of Ethnology, Munich

Silk Brocade Panel (Yasfik) with Inscriptions
Turkey, 19th century

This fine Ottoman silk brocade panel was already displayed in 1910 in Munich in the world-renowned exhibition "Masterpieces of Muslim Art". Its pattern develops from overlaid, diagonal lines which alternate, forming the starting points for the crosses and octagons inscribed in the squares. Each of their corners is formed from a rosette from which tulip-petalled emblems in horizontal-vestigial or circular arrangement to the Ottoman court style. The rosette in the middle of the three crosses are derived from the tradition of Central Asian Turkic peoples. The border consists of cartouches strung together and filled with barely legible script. In the niche-like borders on the narrow sides there are alternating differently floral motifs. The spaces between the gables, reminiscents of the Central Asian egg form, are decorated with small crescent motifs made of three bars. The latter originate in a Chinese symbol for power and good fortune in Buddhist times.
Some remarks on the transcription and publishing of this catalogue, which accompanies the special exhibition of the Museum of Ethnology, Munich (Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München, abbreviated SMV) of the same name:

Since the technical terms used in the essays come from a wide variety of Oriental languages – and regional languages – a simplified system was selected on the basis of English in the interest of standardization and better legibility for a broad circle of readers. Diacritical remarks have been omitted with the exception of the lengths of vowels and the 'qaf' (as in 'qita') and 'hinds' (as in 'quras'). Technical terms appear in italics and are for the most part not capitalized.

Captions by J.W. Frembgen in collaboration with the authors

English translation of the German essays by Mülter, Häse, Schlamming, Korn, Rahim and Frembgen as well as the captions by Jan Ripken. The English translations of poetic verses in the captions to figs. 27, 28 and 26–30 are by Hugh van Skyhawk.
“Where there are Muslims, there is calligraphy.”
Mohamed Zakaria

“Whether someone can read or not, he will take pleasure in seeing a beautiful script.”
Qadi Ahmad, sixteenth century

“The purity of script is the purity of the soul.”
old Arabic adage

“If I had known there was such a thing as Islamic calligraphy, I would never have started to paint.”
Pablo Picasso