**Introduction**

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According to Islamic tradition, when the Prophet Muhammad encountered the Angel Gabriel he heard the word “read”, “recite.” This command is the beginning of the revelation, but it also gave the Arabic script which had developed in the first centuries CE critical impetus for further use and elaboration. As the new religion spread, Arabic letters were used for the language of the Islamized peoples. The Arabic script thus virtually became a symbol of Islam. In Muslim cultures, script which serves to give language a permanent, visible form is therefore sacred because of its reference to the divine revelation. Qur’anic script is an expression of the beauty of the word of God. After the Prophet’s companions memorized and then wrote down these words of God in pure Arabic, a unique visual system arose in the Muslim world in the seventh century which, with calligraphy and ornaments, gave expression to the identity of the new religion. Embedded in monotheistic Islam, Arabic calligraphy became the “Queen of the Arts”, simultaneously embodying form and content. Like music, it is usually cultivated in the Muslim world to a high quality.

From childhood on, Muslims therefore have a special familiarity with the Arabic script. Written from right to left, it forms part of daily life and provides a sense of orientation in time. Although the written word plays an important role, particularly in the everyday practice of literate classes of Muslim societies (for example among religious scholars whose life is dominated by texts), the recognition of calligraphic shapes has a distinct emotional value for popular oral culture far removed from the religion. Instead of reading, for “oral people” seeing and feeling the forms in the sacred words constitute particular ritual forms of veneration which convey brooks (healing and blessing power). Pious Muslims touch and kiss the holy book of the Qur’an with great reverence. Accordingly, the word of God may only be written by calligraphers who are in a state of ritual purity. Sacred letters painted on walls, embroidered in textiles, modelled in clay or printed on posters and placards are manifestations of this concrete popular Muslim faith. Veneration of the script is also shown in “proofs of God” found in nature: for example the cactus which has grown in the form of the word Allah, the pattern of a stone read as Muhammad, the name of a Sufi saint detected in the mottled outline on a cow hide, or in the veins of leaves which are read as letters.

The Arabic script and the art of writing (Persian/Urdu Khwārizm) from which it developed are of central significance in Islam. The reasons given for this are the widespread absence of pictures based on pronouncements in the hadith (oral traditions relating to the Prophet) which rejected images, as well as the industrial manufacture of paper which was adopted from China in the ninth century. The high esteem which calligraphy enjoys and its special promotion by Muslim rulers was, however, determined first and foremost by its religious character, “because calligraphy, through its artificially achieved rhythm also induces profound religious emotions in the Muslim observer,” as Alexander Rahnber writes (1997: 11). Among other things, Islam’s system of meanings and orientation is a “semantic culture” which revolves around words and their interpretation. Calligraphers (khattāt) have always been accorded more prestige than miniaturists. Nonetheless, this pre-eminent significance of calligraphy in our times among reformist and fundamentalist groups of Sunni Islam has grown into an exaggerated veneration of non-pictorial characters – as if script must literally overcome illustration. Examples in this context include the questionable official preference given to calligraphy over pictorial arts under the dictatorship of Zia ul-Haq (1977–88) in Pakistan, and also under the Shi’ite Islamists in Iran. Arabic script has thus been misused to construct an Islamic cultural identity. Elsewhere script and illustrations exist in harmony in Muslim cultures.

Islamic inscriptions have been used from early Islamic times up to the twenty-first century in all artistic techniques and genres and appear in a wide variety of Muslim languages (for instance in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu). Alongside parchment, papyrus and then paper as the main vehicles for literary documents, there are inscribed objects made of clay, metal, stone, wood, varnish, leather, ivory, glass, textile fabric and other material (1953: 11-15). Inscriptions can be monumental in size as in Kufic panels and sarcophagi, from 3 mm to 1.3 mm, as in the peculiar phallic (“dent”, “powder”) script which calligraphers initially used for messages transmitted by carrier pigeons and with which they later inscribed miniature Qur’ans and amulets (1959: 35, 36). Depending on the function – of which there are many – script may be undecorated and purely utilitarian or – as is the case with sumptuous early Islamic manuscripts – penned in gold on parchment and ornamented with fine embellishments. Script can stand by itself – as in books and individual inscribed sheets – or exist in hybrid forms in which text and illustration are united – as in the miniature paintings of the Mughals, Safavids and Ottomans and in Sufi art and popular Shi’ite ‘letter pictures’.

The present companion volume to the exhibition of the same name offers a comprehensive, yet not exhaustive selection of important topics related to the art of writing in Islam: from the development of Arabic calligraphy and the art of the book with its various scripts (Ha ikke) to inscriptions in architecture (Koran) and finally to portable objects which appear to speak through their inscriptions (Shahām). These more detailed contributions to Muslim high art are supplemented and enlarged upon by shorter commentaries on aspects of late Ottoman calligraphy influenced by Sūfis (Fremberg) and the sensuality of beautiful writing (Schimminger) as well as on certain groups of objects (Rahim on tombstones, Heidemann on coins) and interesting individual objects (Beherens-Abouesse on a late Mamluk lidded vessel, El Harti an inscribed carpet from Anatolia). Short textual inserts dealing with inscriptions on an early Islamic tizit fabric (Heinemcke, pp. 39) and a saint’s shrine in Afghanistan (Schadl, pp. 125) highlight further important aspects of the beauty of Islamic writing. However, epigraphy and calligraphy are not restricted to works of elite art, but are ubiquitous in everyday life, from folk art (jewellery, amulets, Shi’ite prayer seals, reverse painting on glass, papercuts) to various modern media of popular artistic expression (colour prints, stamps, graffiti, billboards, internet websites). From such ethnographic contexts, examples such as silver amulets with inscriptions (Porter-Freemont on glass, El Harti on glass) and calligraphy at shrines of Sufi saints (Fremberg) are presented here in greater detail.

Writing functions primarily as a medium for conveying information: in Muslim cultures, the contents of texts often refer to historic events (in art, for example, inscriptions on buildings, consecrations and signatures) or are used for administrative purposes (chancery script) and in the sciences, but their character is mainly religious. Most of the inscriptions discussed here are quotations of verses from the Qur’an, excerpts from the hadith, Islamic prayers, invocations of praise, formulas ensuring protection and magic incantations. In contrast to texts with purely religious contents there are lyrics of worldly love and heroism – for example on Persian metal works, textiles and in precious ceramics – which reflect the popular taste of their time, and contain – mainly on ceramics – good wishes rich in blessings, moral aphorisms and proverbs (1959: 2, 6, 19, 20). Persian wine cups are not infrequently decorated with toasts and verses about love’s anguish.4 However, along with its significance in terms of content, in its various styles writing in Islam provides aesthetic satisfaction and reflects status and wealth. For the Western observer this means that he must put aside his rational desire for clear legibility of everything written and his orientation toward the practical use of script in favour of a sensitive approach which requires a ‘larger look’. Only then do the decorative elements of a highly sophisticated work of art consisting of horizontal and vertical lines emerge. Friedrich Speicher once expressed this idea most aptly: “The content of the words of a piece of calligraphy cannot be its main concern, otherwise how could the calligraphic decoration of mosques be accepted and marvelled at by so many different Muslims. The word is a picture, its contents so unshakeable that it need not be read at all. It is internalised as a picture.” (1989). The calligraphy of the Qur’an thus brings to mind the divine message in an aesthetic, an attractive form, lets God appear in a beautifully written word, allows the sight of Allah. In the same way some calligraphic meditations – such as the hilyet-e nabi – evoke the presence of the Prophet. In Sufi art, calligraphs reflect the forms of humans, animals and objects in a fascinating manner (1959: 39–43). Calligraphy thus creates visual encounters with spiritual reality. In this sense the art of calligraphy becomes a primary means of expression of sacralization and a delight to the eye of every artistically sensitive observer. True calligraphy aims to achieve its effect by equilibrium of form, decoration, ornament, abstraction and colouring. It is an artwork which is perceived by the senses. “Script is not only elegant; it can convey a breath, a cadence, a movement. The text already contains music before it is even read,” emphasises Brahim Alaoû (2004: 46). Along with its visuality and legibility (which sometimes morphs into pseudo-script in highly abstracted script compositions), calligraphy has its own haptic presence, for example when it is executed in relief on tiles and metal and can therefore be ‘grasped’ in the literal sense of the word.

The title The Aura of Art, which the editor offers to the friendly advice of Claudia Ott, first evokes the permanent, aural character of script in Islam, indicates its presence in works of art and its relations of meanings and associations. However, it must be conceded that commercial calligraphers today sometimes are quite negligent in their work. Will this, combined with the rapid developments of the computer age, one day lead to a loss of this aura? As any rate, the first of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet (which also serves calligraphers as a unit of measure for the size and proportions of the script) – pronounced as a long ‘a’, has a special mystically deep because it is considered a symbol representing Allah (see cover illustration). It is associated with His breath before he created
the world. In the shape of a slim upright stroke which stands for
the straight, correct path, alif has a numerical value of one and is
thus a fitting symbol for the unity and uniqueness of God. According
to mystical understanding, the other letters developed from alif
just as all people are descendants of Adam. Sufis and dervishes
have therefore often meditated on this letter, which for them repre-
sents access to God. Sultan Bahau (d. 1691) stated: "Those who find
the divine Beloved in the letter alif do not need to open the Qur'an
to read it." Bullah Shah (1680–1752), another ecstatic seeker of
God from Punjub, begins one of his poems with the verse: 'Ilmoh
bas kare a ydr, ikal oll tere sk'Ark - "Enough of your erudition, oh
Friend. Only one alif is required for salvation." This means that all
other knowledge distracts from God. And the refrain of another
mystical song from his pen is: ik alif parho chukdara ehe - "Read the
first letter and be free!" inspired by the same philosophical spirit,
his contemporary Shah Abdul Latif (1686–1753), the great Sufi poet
of Sindhe, wrote in Sur Emam (chapter 5, verse 29):

Read the letter alif, forget all other pages,
Purify your heart, how long can you continue reading page for
page?

What he meant to say is that even a simple peasant who could not
read or write and therefore had not studied any theological treat-
ises could achieve perfection. The poetry of the Punjabi mystic
Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1841–1901) also revolves around the mysti-
cal quality of alif. The first verse of one of his songs in Sindhi, in
which he consults his theological teacher, says: alif niko ham has yeh
miyataf "An alif alone is enough for me, oh honoured one!" The
Turkish mystic Yunu Entce (d. 1320/21) finally sums up dört kitabın
manav bir alidir - "The meaning of the four holy books lies in a
single alif." In Islam, the alif is thus the specially respected letter
of divine wisdom.
FIG. 2 (above)
BOWL WITH KUFIC INSCRIPTION
Afshaqiyah or Nishapur or North Iran; late 10th or early 11th century
Distinctly set off from the dotted olive-green braid of the conical wall in a different colour is the word 'if (celebration) on the bottom of the bowl. If all the dessert contained in the bowl is eaten, for example as part of the ritual when breaking the fast at the end of the month of Ramadan, this calligraphy becomes visible when the last bite is eaten - an aesthetic experience which may well have enhanced the pleasure of the festivities.

FIG. 3 (opposite)
ROSE WATER BOTTLE WITH KUFIC INSCRIPTION
Rajput; 16th century
According to Annesmara Schimmel, Kufic is "the liturgical script par excellence." The spherical body of the narrow-necked bottle shown here is decorated with an Arabic inscription in playful Kufic in slight relief: baraka min Allâh kaifâà min Allâh kaifâà - "God guarantees the blessing." Unusual here is the use of the word kaifâà ("guarantee") which otherwise appears only in legal texts.
FIG. 4 (above)

**Vessel Fragment with Mamluk Inscription**

al-Qustul, Egypt, 14th/15th century

The band of writing along with the goblet motif - the typical emblem of a lord chamberlain - begins in the hybrid Mamluk script (a combination of Kufic, nig’r and naṣṣ) with the word idāh; the rest is barely legible.

FIG. 5 (right)

**Gilded Helmet of an Ottoman Post Runner**

Turkey, second half of 16th century

The tall cylindrical helmet (gozle) etched with rich decorations contains a number of inscriptions in the middle of medallions. These cite the Islamic profession of faith (on the front for the plumage attached on the side). Other religious formulas and invocations as well as the names of the first Ottoman sultans up to Süleyman the Magnificent (d. 1566) are shown.
FIG. 7 A–C
LANCE TIP WITH QUR'ANIC FORMULAS

The gold-plated lance tip was intended to protect the warrior using it through two verses from the Qur'an. On one side (fig. 7 b) is written nurus min Allāh wa futūn qarīb – “Help from God and an early victory” (3:13) and on the other (fig. 7 c) annī fasahāni leke fasahānu subīnān – “Truly, we have given you an obvious victory” (3:92).

FIG. 6 A–B
VESSEL WITH PERSIAN APHORISMS

Central Asia; 12th/13th century

The gilded words written in naskh style on this iron pull read: sipār moksh az qolīdah, freely translated “Remain true to your ruler!”; “Pay attention to what you do!”; and bandagi kuf fākat – “Slavery is unbelief” (jin)! The last admonition is especially popular with Muslims who do not wish to bind themselves to this world. This vessel may have been used on pilgrimages for holy water.
CALLIGRAPHIC TABLEAU
Turkey, early 19th century

In its central rosette, this late Ottoman embroidery shows a very simplified and therefore not exactly identifiable sultan's seal or signature (yughé). In the four corners of the inner field, whose form is reminiscent of the skin of earlier animal carpets, is the name of God, Alifth. This portentous tableau whose colours are influenced by European Rococo might have been a gift for diplomats or deserving dignitaries.

ASHURA BANNER
Iran, 2nd half of 19th century

Each of the two pennants, still intact, shows the Persian lion-sun motif and numerous Persian inscriptions with religious content in the cartouches in the border. Inscribed in the lion's body is the well-known Shi'ite prayer in Arabic, "Call Ali, who manifests wonders..." Such large-format coloured banners were used at religious sites of mourning (‘ishira’) in the first ten days of the month of Muharram by Twelve Shi’ites in Iran.
SHI’ITE INSCRIPTION BOARD
North Indian, dated 1261 H/1845-46 CE

This board was donated to a shrine dedicated to the Shi’ite martyr-seer Abu’l-Fadl ‘Abbas - a half-brother of Imam Husain. The Arabic text with a short introductory formula in Persian is a ni’āz-namāmī, i.e. a prayer with litany-like invocations which is recited by pilgrims in honour of ‘Abbas, pleading for his protection and blessing. The calligraphic style is naskh combined with ni’āz.

FIG. 10 (above)

MAGIC BOWL
Iran, 10th century

Copper or brass bowls engraved with Arabic inscriptions containing verses from the Qur’an, prayers and magic invocations, are filled with clear water – as a healing drink for the sick. Healing bowls from which the drinker inhales the ‘power of the letters’ can also serve divination purposes. To this end, 40 small keys or – as in the present case – abstractly formed fish made of metal are sometimes attached to the vessel. On one side of them the hamsa/nam formula is inscribed and on the other sura 48, verse 1.
FIG. 13 A-B
LARGE PENDANT WITH VERSES FROM THE QUR'AN
Sash-Turkmen, Central Asia, late 19th century
This heart-shaped back decoration of a Turkmen woman is studded on the front with five agates. The central stone is negatively engraved with an invocation in Arabic in which God is invoked as guarantor and with the date 1330 H/1912-13 CE. To give the wearer additional protection, the back of the plate was apparently inscribed later (perhaps mid-20th century) with sura 73, verses 1-15, and names of saints.

SUFI ROBE WITH RELIGIOUS INSCRIPTIONS
Afghanistan or Pakistan, dated 1291 H/1874 CE
The richly embroidered dress probably belongs to an Islamic mystic of the Qadiriyya order. On the front, along with the creed and the names of the four rightly-guided Sunni caliphs are Sufi aphorisms, verses from the Qur'an and invocations to 'Abdul Qadir Jilani, the founder of the largest dervish brotherhood in the Muslim world. On the back are Persian verses by the famous poet San'ūn (d. 1331 CE) of Ghur, in which reference is made to death and the vanity of this earthly life.
FIG. 14 A-C  (LEFT)
BELT CLASP AND DISC WITH VERSES FROM THE QUR'AN
(Central Asia: c. half of 10th century

Verses from the Qur'an on both parts of a clasp and on the crescent-shaped disc of a man's belt from Central Asia are intended to protect the wearer from misfortune. The suras written here are sura 113 "Daybreak" (a), sura 114 "Munkim" (b) and sura 112 "Sincerity" (c, right) and sura 109 "The Unbelievers" (c, left).

FIG. 19 A-B  (Below)
PUMPKIN WITH INSCRIPTIONS
(Yemen: 1970s

In a coffeehouse in a village near the town of Taiz where this puzzling pumpkin was located, some of the visitors scratched their names in Arabic – as if in a guestbook – in the dried body of the pumpkin. Apparently on a whim, this pumpkin became a form of trousseau. What conversations did the visitors hold while they carved? Or did they just pursue their own thoughts and pass the time by carving their names?