Harmony of Lines.
Islamic Calligraphy from Ottoman Dervish Lodges

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Alongside the art of the book, which was promoted by rulers at their courts and by religious scholars in mosques and Qur'an schools, Arabic calligraphy was also cultivated in the context of everyday religious practice. The popular calligraphy of Sufis and dervishes is an example of artistic expression which reflects piety and spirituality to a particular extent. Characterized by the harmony of their lines and the magic of their beauty, many of these works exhibit a special aura: decorating the walls of aesthetically designed rooms in dervish lodges (khâbâb, teke), they create not only an important visual dimension in veneration and contemplation of God or charismatic Sufi saints, but also in concrete practices of ritual recollection of God. They are calligraphic devotional and protective images with blessing power and at the same time express religious affiliation to a mystical order. In dervish lodges and at saints’ shrines they are frequently presented as a picture gallery or part of holy assemblages. Their imagery, symbolism and contents evoke vital dynamic forces and create an atmosphere conducive to individual or collective forms of devotion.

In the Muslim world many calligraphers felt drawn to the esoteric teachings of mystics and were themselves often members of Sufi orders. In this way calligraphy developed into the epitome of Sufi art. It is, in fact, an important spiritual exercise on the mystical path in which the musical rhythm of the elegant sweeps of the letters while writing do reflect the process of transformation of the inner self. Saying his prayers the mystic stands straight like an olive in front of God, and equally straight is the path of the soul towards the Almighty.

In Turkey under the Ottomans, the spiritual aspects of the art of writing were emphasized not only by the Mevlevis and Bektashis but also by other orders. Most of the often symmetrically composed calligraphic images for dervish lodges (teke levha) were delicate works of art, sometimes illuminated, which were applied on paper, wood or glass with a pen. Artistic expression also took the form of reverse glass pictures (camalı), fretsaw and straw work, paper cutting and embroidery. In many of these panels, we see the difficult mirror writing (mâzarne, qanîf) known since the
seventeenth century and particularly appreciated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other works show figural compositions. Although sharply criticized by orthodox theologians, the artists created calligraphic tableaux presenting animals (lions, falcons, storks, fish) formed from letters, buildings (mosques), trees, boats, objects (derwish caps, water jugs, fruit) and human faces. The contents here are sacred formulas, invocations and names. Margareta Pavlova commented as follows on this type of religious art: “Using script to form figures is, however, not an Ottoman invention. This art form has famous models in pre-Ottoman times since the creative and artistic possibilities of the script in the truest sense of the word have always appealed to many calligraphers in the Islamic world.” (Pavlova 2003: 161). Very similar calligraphy is thus also widespread in the Iranian world and among Muslims in South Asia.

In the small selection of Ottoman lekile levha shown here, most of the artworks are from the collection of Friedrich Spohler; two other figural pictures in the Bektashi tradition are from the Museum of Ethnology in Munich:

1. (FIG. 38): This very balanced tableau in mirror writing shows the invocation huwa illah (“He is God”) - a religious formula recited by the dervishes. The typical peaked dervish cap (sikke) worn by the Mevlevis is situated prominently in the upper middle above the letters.

2. (FIG. 39): The characteristic form of the Mevlevi sikke is formed on this reverse glass painting by Arabic letters of the invocation yâ Hzâret-i Mevlevân. The first and the last letters, û and na, form the brim of the hat. In the upper part of the hat we read qaddas Allahu sirrhu elli – “God blesses his exalted secret”.

3. (FIG. 40): A calligraphic composition in thuluth is printed on marbled paper (ebur) showing in compact form the outlines of the sikke of the Bektashi order known as the Hâşâyin tak ("Husain’s crown"). The extended verticals forming the folds of the cap are striking.

4. (FIG. 41): Another example of the pictorial art of the Bektashi is a reverse glass image with a mirrored writing composition (Allâh üzâ nuvâ), in whose centre a mosque with a green dome and two flanking minarets shaped like pencils is depicted. Next to a large round medallion with the name of God placed above the dome are four smaller medallions on the sides of the picture in which Muhammad (bottom right, on a red background) and Ali (bottom left, on green background) are invoked and the Prophet’s grandson Hasan (bottom right, on green background) and Husain (bottom left, on red background) are named. This emphasizes the Shi'ite relationship to the Bektashi order.

5. (FIG. 42): A work of consummate harmony signed by the dervish Haqî describes the form of a ‘tree of life’ or a blossom. The text is an invocation to the “Seven Sleepers” (ashab al-kofî), mentioned in sura 18, verses 9-26 of the Quran.

6. (FIG. 43): The hunting falcon is an important symbol in Sufi art; in mysticism it is regarded as a soul bird and model for the pupil’s strict education by the master. In the eastern Muslim world the well-known Shi‘ite protective prayer add al-Sanjîlan ("Call on Allâh, who works miracles...") is written in the form of a falcon whose head is turned to the right. On the reverse glass image shown here, however, the text contains the well-known basmala (Turkish: beşmele) “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” This formula is frequently found on devotional pictures which are hung not only in derwish lodges but also in mosques or homes.

7. (FIG. 44): This tableau from a Bektashi lodge shows the typical cap of the order, the name ‘Ali (with the last letter extended in the form of double-edged sabre) and the figure of a lion at rest. The lion (Persian: hâzîr) is a common symbol for the strength and greatness of ‘Ali, the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs and the first imam of the Shia who plays an outstanding role in Sufi tradition and is praised as the “Lion of God.” In the animal’s body is written the Turkish double verse: “As a necklace you put on the chain of your locks. Pray toll, lion mine, are you of the People of Haidar?”

8. (FIG. 45): The dramatic picture of a lion attacking a snake also comes from a Bektashi lodge. Both animal figures are artistically formed by letters: formulating a double verse in Persian by Farîd ud-Dîn Akhtar: “Destruction of evil desire is everyone’s ideal. I killed the snake, it is in Haidar’s claws.” This depiction thus reflects the core idea of Sufism, namely that the lower animal soul (nafs) embodied by the dragon, i.e. the ego of the mystic, is annihilated.
FIG. 29
CALLIGRAPHIC PICTURE OF A MEVLEVI DERVISH CAP
Turkey, 15th/16th century

This tall cap of the Mevlevi mystics is formed here by the letters of the invocation to Mevlana (Mawlana) Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273) who founded this order of 'dancing dervishes'. The Mevlevi's centre is the city of Konya in Anatolia.

FIG. 40
CALLIGRAPHIC PICTURE OF A BEKTASHI DERVISH CAP
Turkey, 19th century

This printed composition with an invocation to the saint Haci Bektas is designed in the typical Ottoman manner in which the letters are shaped in 'layered' calligraphy (unif). The vertical letters are drawn upward and form the segments of the cap.
FIG. 81
MIRROR COMPOSITION IN THE SHAPE OF A MOSQUE
Turkish, 1st third of 16th century
The composition dedicated to praising Ali is a popular theme in the pictorial art of the Bektashi dervishes whose traditional Sufi order established itself in Anatolia in the 14th–15th centuries and spread from there to the Balkans, Egypt and Iran.
FIG. 42
CALLIGRAPHIC PICTURE IN THE SHAPE OF A ‘TREE OF LIFE’
Turkey; dated 1235/1827–28 CE
The text in this picture, harmoniously composed in mirror script, contains a pious invocation to the ‘Seven Sleepers’. The legend, of which there are numerous versions and which is also mentioned in the Qur’an, tells of several young men and a dog who God causes to fall asleep in a cave. They awaken only after 309 years.

FIG. 43
BAISMA A IN THE SHAPE OF A FALCON
Turkey; dated 1530/1603–04 CE
The popular invocation to God, the Merciful, is written here in the shape of a falcon which plays a special role as a soul bird in Islamic mysticism. Special blessing power is attributed to the baisma formula everywhere in the Muslim world.
FIG. 48 (Left)
 TABLEAU WITH EMBLEMS OF THE BEKTASHI SUFI ORDER
 Turkey; before 1526

 This picture unites three important Bektashi symbols: the dervish cap made of bright felt, the name 'Ali and the lion (with an enscripted double verse in Turkish), which also represents the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law.

 FIG. 49 (Above)
 CALLIGRAPHIC TABLEAU WITH LION AND DRAGON
 Turkey; dated 1220 H/1805–6 CE

 Since the 15th century, particularly in Sufi art, figural presentations made of letters with mystical content (in which the ban on figural representations in normative Islam is cleverly circumvented) play an important role particularly in Sufi art. In the tableau here, which comes from a Turkish Bektashi-dervish lodge, a Persian couplet by the poet Farid ud-Din ‘Attar (d. 1220) has been calligraphed into the figure of a lion who kills the lower self in the form of a dragon.