PLATE VI. The Divan of Hafiz, probably from Shiraz, 1435 AD. The paper of the individual pages has been tinted in different colours, gold-sprinkled and glazed; some pages are further embellished with Chinese-influenced design in gold.
BRITISH LIBRARY, ORIENTAL AND INDIA OFFICE COLLECTIONS, ADD. 7759, 1642-61

PLATE VIII. Pages from a Koran copied in Maghribi script on vellum, in the 15th century AD, in Spain or Northwest Africa. The vowels are in red, with other orthographical signs in blue-green and saffron.
BRITISH LIBRARY, ORIENTAL AND INDIA OFFICE COLLECTIONS, OIL. 1779, F.49-45

PLATE VII. Opening in a Koran copied in seven volumes by Muhammad ibn al-Wahlad in 1306/7 in Egypt for the High Chamberlain (later Sultan Baybars II). The script is Eastern Kufic in the upper and lower panels and Thuluth over a gold folio arabesque in the centre of each folio.
BRITISH LIBRARY, ORIENTAL AND INDIA OFFICE COLLECTIONS, ADD. MS. 2446

PLATE IX. Calligraphy was widely used in connection with architecture in the form of inscriptions on mosques, tombs, madrasas, forts, palaces, gateways, tankas, wells and karnam-seens for religious reasons (verses of the Koran, the name of Allah, the Prophet, etc.) or for political purposes (inscriptions of patrons or rulers), or to provide historical data (references to visits, endowments, etc.). Samarkand (left): glazed tiles decorating the outer walls of the tomb of Timur (reigned 1370-1405AD) with inscriptions in Kufic. Fateh (right): inscribed tiles inside the mosque built for Sultan Mustur II (reigned 1432-1444AD). PHOTOGRAPHED 1976 AND 1991

PLATE 4. One from a group of manjado panels from Korea, elegantly mounted (in Japan) as a scroll. Each panel consists of just one Chinese character (here the character for 'equality') representing one of the eight virtues of the Confucian classics, all written in a highly unusual style of calligraphy. End of the 18th century. BRITISH LIBRARY, ORIENTAL AND INDIAN OFFICE COLLECTIONS.
PLATE XI (OPPOSITE, ABOVE) In the Land of Morgan where the Shadows lie, Variation 1, from J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings by Donald Jackson (1987). Jackson (born 1934), today one of the most prominent British calligraphers, has also been a catalyst for the revival of calligraphy in the United States. Since 1964 Official Scribe to Queen Elizabeth II and the House of Lords, he is a past President of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators, and the author of The Story of Writing, first published in 1981.

REPRODUCED WITH DONALD JACKSON’S PERMISSION FROM THE CALLIGRAPHY OF DONALD JACKSON, 1986

PLATE XII (OPPOSITE, BELOW LEFT) Polycapital calligraphy communicates visually instead of verbally and is as such already removed from Western traditions. It is a method of composition that employs fragmentation and the repetition of words. From Rene Schall’s brush and watercolour Moving Line III Series.

REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF MS R. SCHALL

PLATE XV (OPPOSITE, BELOW RIGHT) In America the golden age of sign painting fell between 1850–1835 when movie posters, billboards and numerous advertisements in streets made use of hand-painted signs. Although three-quarters of signs are now produced by computer graphics, there are still a good number of professional sign painters in the United States (and in Great Britain). Boston has a sign-painting school, Chicago a strong Sign Painters Trade Union, and a magazine called Sign Craft is published in Florida which keeps members of the craft informed. Unlike other areas of commercial art, signs are one-offs, they must be produced quickly, and there is no time to insist on achieving perfection (or, as one sign painter rather ruefully put it, ‘sign painting is the illusion of perfection’), but very good work is still being done.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT MARTHA’S VINEYARD, MASS, USA, AUGUST 1992
What is calligraphy? To answer this question we must first of all ask ourselves: what is writing, and how do the objective and purpose of writing differ from that of calligraphy?

Writing stores information essential to the social, economic and political survival of a particular group. It is thus intimately connected with the practical well-being and the physical survival of society. Calligraphy makes a statement about a particular society, a statement about the sum total of its cultural and historical heritage. Calligraphy is more than beautiful writing. It results from an interaction of several essential elements: the attitude of society to writing, the importance and function of the text; definite, often mathematically based, rules about the correct interaction between lines and space and their relationship to each other; and mastery and understanding of the script, the writing material and the tools used for writing. Unlike writing, the art of calligraphy cannot be acquired simply by learning; it demands insight and individuality, but individuality expressed within strictly prescribed boundaries. Calligraphy is to a large extent an expression of harmony, as perceived by a particular civilization. The calligrapher is in harmony with his script, his tools, the text and his own spiritual heritage.

Why then did some societies develop (or feel the need to develop) calligraphy, whereas others produced at best sporadic manifestations of beautiful writing which in the final instance failed to become codified systems of styles and scripts? A basic requirement is without doubt the presence of enabling agents such as congenial writing tools and forms of writing material. Added to this must be not only motivation, but also a definitely perceived need for a visible declaration of cultural unity. On this definition, only three civilizations have produced true calligraphy: the Arabs (and those who use the Arabic script); the Chinese (and those who use the Chinese script); and Western civilization based on Roman letters, Roman laws and the Christian Church.

Though visually vastly different in each civilization, the purpose of calligraphy in each case is basically the same: to act as a 'corporate logo' for the whole extended group. The differences are based on three elements: the difference in script, the motivation which prompted the development of calligraphic traditions in the first place, and the ultimate objective of those traditions within a given cultural, religious and political context.

The position of the calligrapher within each group reflects the attitude of society to his craft and the level at which it is practised. In a hierarchical
society (and in the final instance all societies are hierarchical), the way in which society sees its members, and the way they see themselves, determines their value and that of their contribution to the community. In the West the calligrapher has always been 'in service' - whether to a human master (Rome), the monastic order to which he had given his life, or eventually simply to the customer who paid him. He was, for most of the time 'market-driven'. The Islamic calligrapher too was 'in service', but in the service of God and the divine revelation, his ultimate reward transcending worldly expectations. Only in the Far East did the calligrapher exist in his own right. His work was first and foremost creative (though within strictly defined lines); it did not propagate, uphold or convert to any secular or religious order but was an expression of his own inner self. There have of course always been women calligraphers; neither Christianity, nor Islam and certainly not the traditions of the Far East excluded them. But until the 20th century women have always been fewer in number and, as we shall see, constrained by different problems.

The objective of this book is to explore the history of calligraphy and the place of the calligrapher within the context of three totally different and well-defined traditions. This leads us invariably to the next question: is it possible to understand a phenomenon so closely linked with cultural identity in a society other than one's own? The answer to this question is a very definite yes, providing we approach the subject with a certain amount of humility and try to look at it not from our own point of view but from the point of view of the 'others'. Cultural identities and national characteristics are the result of interaction between a number of well-defined forces: history, geography, economics and politics (religion being frequently the continuation of politics by other means).

What this book does not attempt is an exploration or definition of the aesthetics of calligraphy since those (especially in a cross-cultural study) do not offer themselves easily to judgement and must in any case be assessed within their own cultural context. Nor is it the objective of this book to offer overall value judgements. Names and examples have been selected mainly for the purpose of illustration. There are many excellent calligraphers who, because of lack of space, have not been mentioned. This is especially true when it comes to the history of 20th-century calligraphy which could be properly explored only in a separate work devoted entirely to the subject. The order of the three great traditions into (first) Western, (then) Arabic and (finally) Chinese calligraphy too has been chosen simply as an aid to the majority of readers who will, since the book has been published in the West, be more familiar with the Roman script, Western traditions and the history which shaped Western calligraphy. There is a good deal less difference between Islam and Christianity, both of which consider the written book and the beauty of writing essential for the preservation of divine revelations (and use a similar amount of written characters and basically the same tools),

than there is between Islam and Christianity on the one hand and Far Eastern traditions based on entirely different concepts (and a vastly different writing system) on the other. One hopes that, having once firmly established his or her own base, the reader may find it easier to venture into new territory.

Albertaine Gaur, 1994
THE TOOLS FOR WRITING

The calligrapher needs five things—a fine temperament, understanding of calligraphy, a good hand, endurance of pain, and a perfect set of implements.

Mir Ali of Herat, Died 1356

Calligraphy depends largely on the tools used for writing. A smooth surface which allows for swift movements across the page, writing instruments which are able to produce a variation of line; these have always been the essential prerequisites for the development of fine calligraphic styles [see 71]. The sharp, unyielding point of a stylus on wax, as used in Rome and Greece, wet clay in Mesopotamia and the ancient Mediterranean, or palm leaves, in South and Southeast Asia, can produce pleasing results but not calligraphy. The enabling agents in the development of Western as well as Islamic and Far Eastern calligraphy have been paper (and before its discovery, silk) and parchment, together with the pen, brush and ink.

Calligraphers have always paid great attention to their tools; the way the pen can be trimmed to create different strokes and angles (and with it different styles), how the brush and other implements are handled (and when not in use, kept in good order), the possibilities for smoothing the surface of paper and parchment, the preparation of ink, and related issues, have been the subject of treatises and discussions throughout the centuries. The attitude to the tools used for writing largely reflects the attitude of society to calligraphy itself. In Islam, where calligraphy is part of a theocentric order, the pen becomes imbued with mystic qualities directly related to the will of God and the purpose of creation. In the predominantly secular Far East, where the ability to write a fine hand was a mark of distinction, the ‘four gems of the study’ (brush, paper, ink and inkstone) testify to the status of its owner. In the West the calligrapher has primarily always been a craftsman, and craftsmen take care of the tools on which their livelihood depends.
Pen, brush and ink

PEN


2. Writing instruments of classical antiquity: a metal stylus with one end pointed for inserting letters into waxed tablets, and the other flat for erasing mistakes or smoothing the surface of the tablet for re-use; a reed pen with a split nib, and two Roman bronze pens. BRITISH MUSEUM, DEPARTMENT OF GREEK AND ROMAN ANTIQUITIES, GR1900.4-11.44.0, 1-13-11, GR 1906. 03-25.0.0, GR 1908. 11-2-2.

The main instrument used by Western, as well as Islamic calligraphers, is the pen—made either of reed, feathers, or metal. Historically the pen dates back to ancient Egypt, where a type of brush-pen [1] seems to have replaced a pointed, more inflexible stylus in about the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, at the time when the hieratic style of writing developed; indeed the difference between hieroglyphic and hieratic (rounding of angular signs and less detail) is more or less the result of this development. Brush-pens were cut at a length of 15–25 cm from the thin stem of a slender rush plant (Juncus maritimus); the scribe would hammer and chew one end to fray the fibre which allowed for a certain amount of ink to be retained during writing. In the 3rd century BC a new pen, fashioned from a hollow-stemmed marsh plant (Phragmites communis), was introduced by the Greeks. This was already a much more sophisticated writing tool: one end, cut at an angle, had a slit made opposite the cut to divide the nib into two halves to draw ink down to the writing surface [2]. Such reed pens wrote well on papyrus but less so on parchment, and by the 6th century AD they were being replaced by the quill pen (penis, Latin for “feather”).

Quill pens [3] are tougher and more flexible than those made of reed; they need to be reshaped less often (though a busy scribe might still have to trim—

3. The Universal Penman by George Bickham, a manual first published in parts between 1753–61, includes Bickham’s own work and that of 25 contemporary penmen. Bickham was responsible for the engraving of most plates and the many decorative head pieces. The one here reproduced shows clerks working in a commercial firm, such clerks needed a good round business hand which could only be acquired through tuition (by a writing master) and practice. The quill pen, dating back to the middle of the first Christian millennium, is still the preferred writing instrument. VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, 67.T.18.
that is, cut across the tip of the nib — as often as 60 times in one day), and it is possible to write smaller letters more easily. The best quills are fashioned from the primary flight feathers of a goose or a swan; they have to be stripped of barbs, dried for several months, soaked in water and then cured (hardened) in hot sand. Feathers from the left wing are usually preferred since they curve more easily into the hand of a right-handed person. The barrel of the quill (a tough and almost transparent tube) is in many ways similar to the stem of a hollow reed and the nib can therefore be cut in a similar manner (32: p.47), which no doubt eased the transition. Claims have sometimes been made that the microscopic scripts employed by some scribes were made with crow or raven quills; this is technically possible but holding such a pen would have caused the scribe a good deal of discomfort. Turkey feathers make excellent quills but as a native of America the turkey was unknown in medieval Europe. Unlike the Islamic calligrapher, the medieval scribe relied more on experience and verbal instructions than on detailed, written treatises about the cutting or manufacture of quill (or indeed reed) pens. When in the 16th and early 17th centuries Western calligraphy began to stage a tentative revival, pioneers like Edward Johnston (see p.185) more or less reconstructed the way the quill has to be cut from the way the letters were written in the medieval manuscripts they had studied. Judging from medieval miniatures, most scribes seem to have held the quill (and where appropriate, the stylus) differently from the way we now hold the pen: that is, pointing downwards on the inside of the tips of the middle and forefinger and steadied by the tip of the thumb, with the rest of the fingers curved away from the pen [4].

In such a way the quill meets the page more vertically, thus facilitating a better ink flow, but the fingers have less control and the whole hand has to involve itself in each movement.

The adoption of the quill coincided with other important changes in the way manuscripts were prepared and written. Between 200 and 400 AD the classical papyrus scroll began to make way for the Christian parchment codex [1], where folded pages are gathered and sewn together. The parchment codex had many advantages: it could be carried more easily, it was more cost-effective, since both sides were suitable for writing, and individual portions of the text could more readily be consulted, all elements which commended it to the new, poor and proselytizing Christian communities who looked upon the Bible as the ultimate source of their authority. In the century which followed the fall of Rome (410 AD), book production, together with literacy, moved from the Mediterranean countries to northern Europe where suitable reed was no longer available. The quill, a writing instrument of great strength and flexibility, became the principal tool of Western calligraphy until the 19th century, easily surviving the change from parchment to paper in the 15th century. Even today many calligraphers prefer it because of its ability to produce crisp strokes and fine hairlines.

Islamic calligraphers used the qalam, the reed pen. Cut from dried reed (c.10 cm long and 1 cm wide), the upper edge was rounded and the shaft curved and blunted at the edge so as not to hurt the fingers of the scribe. Medieval Islamic scribes cut their reeds in March and covered them with fermenting manure for six months to dry the pith and harden the reed in order to make the nib more durable. The best pens came from Wasit (Iraq), and Shiraz (Persia), later also from India, Egypt and the shores of the Caspian Sea.

Arabic handbooks on calligraphy devote much space to the clipping and trimming of the reed pen. To fashion the nib, the shaft is divided into a left and right lip, with a groove for holding ink. The actual width of the nib is of vital importance since it determines the size of the rhombic dot, the most basic unit of measurement in Islamic calligraphy (see p.98). The point of the pen could be cut either straight or bevelled to facilitate a different thickness of stroke. While at first the nib was cut straight, in the 13th century the great calligrapher Yusuf (see p.85) cut it at an angle which introduced a variety of new possibilities, and with it styles (for example, the right side must be double that of the left in the case of Naskhi; the opposite for Dwani; and each side must be equal for Nasta’liq). In other words, each calligraphic style demands a different cut of pen. Occasionally a calligrapher would use a fine steel pen or a quill, but this was considered so exceptional that it was usually noted in his biography. In some early manuscripts from India and Central Asia reference is also made to the use of the brush.

In the Islamic world the calligrapher and his tools [5] enjoyed enormous prestige. Pens were treasured possessions and were considered suitable pre-
sents for high dignitaries: the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir (reigned 1036–1094AD) is reputed to have owned boxes full of precious pens, some of them (he believed) once used by such renowned calligraphers as Ibn Muqlah (died 940AD) and Ibn al-Bawwab (died 1022AD); (see p.102). A rich tradition of metaphors exists in relation to the pen. 'The Pen', writes Ibn az-Zayyat (died 847AD) "introduces the daughters of the brain into the bridal chamber of books"; they were 'cypresses in the garden of knowledge' (AS p.39), and so forth.

According to one of the Prophetic traditions, the Pen was the first thing God created, and Sufis look upon it as the symbol of the First Intellect, if not the First Intellect itself. In sura 96 of the Koran, God appears as 'He who taught man by the Pen', and the first words of sura 68 read 'Nam', and by the Pen'. Everything found in the Koran has been written down since eternity on the 'Well-preserved Tablet' by the pre-existent Pen. 'The Pen has already dried up' is a saying often quoted to underline the belief that whatever has been decreed cannot be changed. Another tradition tells us that when the Pen was about to write down the punishment waiting in Hell for disobedient Muslims, a terrible voice shouted 'Behave, Oh Pen' and from fear the Pen split; to this day every pen has to be split before it can be used for writing (AS p.76).

An important tool for both Western and Islamic calligraphers was the pen-knife. Quill knives [5] usually had a large handle, and a much shorter blade, with one straight and one convex cutting edge (to make different cuts). They could also be used to erase mistakes by simply scraping offending passages from the parchment (see p.27). Western pen-knives were rather simple when compared with their Islamic counterparts. The latter boasted razor-sharp steel blades and were often beautifully ornamented. The cutting of the reed pen itself was usually done on a small ivory or tortoiseshell plate (or one made of similarly hard material) called makta. A 10th-century poet claims that the pen-knife is 'angry with the pen and hurts it' (AS p.46).

6 Idealized drawing of a pen and a quill knife, as shown on the back cover of The Journal of the Society for Italic Handwriting, 1963. BY COURTESY OF MISS KATHLEEN STRANGE.

7 Advertisement for a fountain pen. One of the earliest written advertisements, a reward for a runaway slave, has been found in the ruins of Thebes dating from c.1000BC. Until the advent of printing in the West during the 13th century, most advertising was done by public cries, but the term itself, in its present sense, was first used in The Theatre in 1770. The 19th and 20th centuries saw a rapid increase in the use of handbills, leaflets, posters, newspaper and magazine advertisements, and in the course of the 20th century life has become more and more dominated by them. Though the basic purpose of an advertisement is to attract attention, which means that aesthetic elements have to be subordinated, artists such as Tomaso Lanconier or Andy Warhol have successfully used it as a medium for their work.

BY COURTESY OF MISS KATHLEEN STRANGE.

Already during the 19th century experiments had been made to design a portable fountain pen [7], and by the 1930s America had taken the lead with this product. But it seems the fountain pen was not an entirely new concept.
Already in the 10th century AD, we are told that the Caliph al-Mu'tazz had expressed a wish for a pen capable of carrying a supply of ink which would flow freely when writing, but not otherwise (since this might have soiled his clothes), and after a number of abortive attempts his craftsmen did indeed produce the required pen, made (naturally) of pure gold.

Whatever the technical and commercial advantages, calligraphically the metal pen, which successfully imitated the then still fashionable copperplate writing (see p. 176), could never quite match the quill. As Donald Jackson has remarked:

Using the quill, you have to move your hand more quickly and with speed, like skating on ice, which is an essential ingredient of calligraphy. The quill will do this for you where the steel nib cannot. You have to go quickly with the quill. It has acceleration and flexibility, it can be bent right back on itself and go back together again. If you feel good about the tool, you will write well and it unlocks feelings in you.

The fountain pen proved even less adequate. But the final horror, as far as calligraphy is concerned, occurred after 1945 with the increased use of the ball-point pen. Generally based on a ball revolving in the mouth of a tube, it glides over the page producing thin lines of unrelieved, equal thickness, hardly different from the lines made by a stylus, but often a good deal less tidy.

BRUSH

Chinese calligraphy begins with the brush (bí). Tradition names Meng Tian (died 209 BC) as the inventor, but this is probably more a reference to the growing importance of calligraphy during the succeeding Han period (206 BC–220 AD). The earliest writing brush so far discovered dates from the Warring States period (480–222 BC), but brushes as such were probably known before. Brushes, perhaps made of some kind of hard fur, seem to have been used to apply designs (slips of colour and dye) on pottery vessels belonging to the 3rd millennium BC (ink: p. 50). Some scholars argue that the writing, too, the brush may have been used at an earlier date. Characters inscribed on Shang (1751–1122 BC) oracle bones and Zhou (1100–771 BC) bronze vessels often give the impression of having been formed after writing-brush patterns [8]. During excavations in 1919 three oracle bones (see p. 108) were found containing incompletely written characters; an indication, it was thought, that before being incised characters were first written down with brush and ink. (1977: p. 50). But such evidence is not really conclusive: a bamboo stick dipped in a colouring agent (later an established practice) could have served a similar purpose. Meng Tian’s role may well have been that of an improver; the Han period witnessed a great many developments in the field of Chinese calligraphy, developments which to no small extent were brought about by the availability of new, softer, writing materials (silk, silk paper, and finally paper) on which the (improved?) brush could be used to full effect.

The traditional Chinese brush, about 23–30 cm long according to ancient measurements, consists of holder, hair part, and sheath. According to the type of animal hair used, brushes are generally classified into hard-fur brushes (xián huā) and soft-fur brushes (rú huā). The first are mainly made of weasel hair, are more elastic, and have the ability to produce lines almost as fine as those made by a steel pen. The second category relies mostly on goat hair which makes the brush softer, with a weaker spring, harder to control, but better able to produce a variation of strokes; a certain amount of rabbit and deer hair might be added to increase responsiveness to manipula-