The Turks also excelled in the art of mirror writing [62], a technique by which the left reflects the writing on the right. Another style, Siyyar, already in existence at the time of the Turkish Seljuks of Asia Minor, combines complexity of line with elements of cryptography, and was used to communicate important political information within the same department. An impressive device is the Tughra [63], an elegant, elaborate ornamental design, based on the names and titles of the reigning Sultans which served as a signature legitimizing official degrees. Over the following centuries Turkish calligraphers produced large numbers of illuminated Korans and thousands of calligraphic secular manuscripts in addition mosques [64]; public buildings and schools were richly decorated with calligraphic inscriptions in a profusion of different and well executed styles [see PLATE IX].

Outsiders often speak of the abstract beauty of Arab calligraphy but, from the Islamic point of view, calligraphy has nothing to do with art or abstraction. It is at the very centre of the spiritual and political life of the people. In the Koran the word of Allah is revealed through the Arabic language written down in Arabic characters. Calligraphy is thus part of a sacred bureaucracy designed to impress on society a political order based on the Koran.
As a result of its close connection with the Koran, calligraphy has always been held in high esteem by Muslim society and in consequence gifted calligraphers had possibilities for advancement not open to others. But becoming a good calligrapher (a khattat) was no easy matter. It involved not just learning how to read and write (a skill taught to most upper- and middle-class children) but a long period of training under an established master who might, under certain circumstances, be a member of one’s own family – the profession being more often than not hereditary. Students started young, usually at the age of eight. Those who succeeded were not expected to receive their hazra (from Turkish czvat ‘permission’, to sign copies of their work) before they were well into their twenties, though especially gifted pupils were sometimes allowed to do so while still in their teens. Like the Sufis, with whom they have close connections (both claim descent from the Prophet’s cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib), calligraphers placed a high value on the relationship between master and disciple which was thought to provide the essential spiritual chain of initiation (sella) between a pupil and the founder of a particular style; indeed the imitation of models written by the founder was an important feature of a calligrapher’s training. At times the identification between master and disciple went so far that a master specially satisfied with his pupil might, as a mark of appreciation, put his own kataba (signature) to the latter’s works in the same way a pupil might sign an exceptionally good piece of his own work with the master’s name. Teaching methods varied. In the eastern part of the Muslim world the master would instruct the students letter by letter (each letter had to be endlessly repeated and rehearsed), but in the Maghrib (see p.55) pupils were taught straightaway how to write whole words. Students spent all day practising their craft, either squatting, or sitting on their heels, holding the paper in the left hand, or on the knees (this was thought to enable them to learn writing curves more easily than on the hard surface of a table). After graduation (an occasion for celebration amongst friends and family members) the newly qualified calligrapher would try to earn his livelihood, either in an independent position, or by joining a profession where the ability to write well held prospects of advancement. Talented young men were usually anxious to obtain a position at Court, either as teachers in the Imperial school or at a madrasa (theological college), or they would seek employment within the religious or secular administration. Most coveted were posts in a Royal (or at least one of the princely) libraries, but few were able to realize such an ambition. Patronage was of the greatest importance and could quickly advance the prospects of a good calligrapher however humble his background. The profession was not entirely free from snobbery, however, and occasionally we come across pointed remarks about a master who had originally been a cook or the son of a saddler (as p.52). Patronage could at times also be a mixed blessing since it obliged the calligrapher to share the misfortune of his patron should the latter fall on hard times.

Whatever the prospects for advancement, the life of a calligrapher was not necessarily always an easy one. For one, he could never allow himself to stop practising [65] because, as the 16th-century calligrapher Mir Ali wrote, ‘if one sits leisurely for a moment without practising, calligraphy goes from one’s hand like the colour of henna’. Copyists (the lowest rank) were expected to produce large quantities of well-written pages if they wanted to support themselves in a reasonable manner. One such copyist is reported to have finished 100 pages in 24 hours. But even good calligraphers worked at considerable speed. We are told that Muhammad Simi Nishapuri, one of
al-Bawwab asked for permission to complete the Koran by writing the missing portion in Ibn Muqlih's hand. The prince was much impressed and promised a reward of 100 dinars should he find it impossible to recognize the forgeries; but princes being notoriously fickle he promptly forgot his promise. Eventually Ibn al-Bawwab asked for some cut pieces of Chinese paper which were kept in the library; the wish granted, he was at least able to continue writing without having to buy paper for several years (HSX p.64). Despite his fame Ibn al-Bawwab never achieved material success, a fate he shared with many other calligraphers. Yet even those who managed to obtain high offices of state were not immune from misfortune, as the life of the great script reformer Ibn Muqlih shows. Having served as vizier under three Abbasid Caliphs, Ibn Muqlih had his right hand cut off and his tongue torn out, and eventually died in prison.

Others were more fortunate. At the Mughal court in India exceptional calligraphers could gain lavish rewards and were also often given high sounding titles ('Model of Scribes', 'Jewel Letters', 'Amber Pen' and so on). The Mughals were great patrons of calligraphy and during their rule Persian poets, miniature painters and calligraphers migrated to India to try their luck. Master calligraphers could find wealth and fame, and receive special honorary titles some had their portraits included in the manuscripts they copied [84]. About 50 such calligraphers are known to us by name on the basis of their signed works. The most successful calligrapher at the Mughal court was without doubt Abd al-Haq (died 1645) of Shiraz who designed the calligraphy for the Taj Mahal. Having come to India from Persia in 1608 he entered the employ of Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627AD) and was immediately commissioned to compose, in Tahiri and Nasta’liq, a Persian anthology for the gateway of the late Akbar's (reigned 1556–1605AD) tomb at Sikander. Jahangir remained well pleased with him and six months after the work on the Taj Mahal commenced Abd al-Haq was raised to a fairly high level of Mughal nobility and awarded the title Amanat Khan [67]. He certainly did not die poor: his last work was extensive calligraphic decoration on a funerary mausoleum he built from his own funds, a day's journey outside Lahore (CWP p.16).

Unlike in the West, calligraphy was never an anonymous art form in the Muslim world. The names, dates and achievements of famous calligraphers have been carefully recorded and handed down since the 7th century. The first calligraphers are thought to have been some of the Prophet’s companions skilled in the art of writing, who took down the text of the Koran at the Caliph’s order. Caliphs and rulers were known for their beautiful calligraphy. The fourth Rashidun Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib (died 661AD) was much praised for his beautiful handwriting Mu’awiyah (reigned 661–680AD), the founder of the Umayyad house, was a good calligrapher and it is said that the Prophet himself gave him instructions about how to write the jamnaliyah [68]. Some of the rulers of Iran, India and Ottoman Turkey were not only
patrons of calligraphy but also very often personally skilled in the art of fine writing. Timur (reigned 1370–1405 AD) and his descendants excelled in it; the Mughal Emperor Babur (reigned 1526–1530 AD) is said to have invented his own style referred to as khatt-i Bahari, and sent the copy of a Koran he had written in this hand to Mecca. Akbar, who attracted many master calligraphers to his Court, was in fact the only Mughal Emperor who remained illiterate. Jahangir, another member of the Mughal family, was an expert in Nasta’liq (see 65) and, in Turkey amongst the Ottomans, almost every Sultan was a known calligrapher. The Arabic historian Ibn Khaldun (died 1406 AD) praised Cairo as the centre of civilization and calligraphy; the same was said, with even greater justification, of Istanbul from 1500 onwards (AS p.72).

But calligraphy was not just an elite art form, it was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people, irrespective of whether they themselves were skilled in it. There are frequent references to calligraphy in that compendium of Arab folk tales, the Arabian Nights. Thus the story of Asma’i and the three girls from Basra stresses the importance of writing, and of writing with ‘erect alf’, ‘swelling ha’ and ‘well-rounded wa’; and another story, that of the First Qalander, tells of the monkey who wins the king’s heart because of his elegant calligraphy.

Writing and Islam were from the beginning a powerful combination. The Koran is the revealed word of the hidden God – revealed in Arabic and written in Arabic – which raises both language and script to the level of a divine gift. According to Abu al-Abbas Ahmed al-Bhuni the Arabic letters arose from the light of the Pen which inscribed the Sacred Tablet; after wandering through the universe the light became transformed into the letter alf from which all other letters arose (Khal MS p.32). Being so close to the centre of reality imposes its own demands. Ultimately the calligrapher must be worthy of his task; apart from ability and dedication he is expected to have a sweet and unassuming disposition, and since he is writing the name of God, he is not supposed to be unclean for a single hour. To this day calligraphers (and girls who embroider the golden texts of tomb clothes) perform ghusl, the major ritual ablution, every morning before starting their work (AS p.32). Copying the Koran is an act of mercy, an essential part of propagating the message. The calligrapher was therefore never an anonymous servant, but a guardian of the faith, a man in harmony with the purpose and the will of God.

An often quoted hadith (Prophetic tradition) says that he who writes the basmalah well will obtain innumerable blessings and enter Paradise. The story goes that after his death the famous calligrapher Imaduddin ibn Aff (died 1336 AD) appeared to a friend in a dream and told him that he had been forgiven all his sins because he had always written the basmalah so well.
WOMEN CALLIGRAPHERS

Islam neither denied women literacy nor did it object to women as calligraphers. Indeed in the Maghrib women were told that they would have to write at least one Koran before they could hope to make a good marriage (Aṣi, p. 23). Tradition tells us that one of the Prophet’s wives could write—a significant role model. (The Prophet himself was of course unlettered, since to receive the revelation his mind had to be pure, just as the body of Mary had to be pure, to receive Christ.) Muslim ladies from noble families were often highly educated and skilled with the pen (Aṣi) but slave girls too could be literate, become scribes and obtain important positions because of their ability to write a fine calligraphic hand. More orthodox members of the community did at times have certain misgivings about this and one can appreciate their point when listening to the poet Hamza al-Isfahani (died 961) who waxed lyrically about a girl scribe, comparing her writing to the shape of her figure, her ink to the blackness of her hair, her paper to the skin of her face, her pen to one of her fingers, her style to the magician of her eye, her penknife to her flirtatious glances and her cutting board to the heart of her lover. Similar remarks abound throughout the following centuries and eventually an 18th-century Turkish treatise on calligraphy says rather sternly ‘do not allow them (i.e. the women of the family) to come down to the public sitting rooms, and do not teach them how to write’, obviously sensing some connection between the two. One contemporary Turkish lady, who is literate herself, explained that while it is right for women to be taught how to read (they should after all be able to study the Koran and convey its message to their children), it was perhaps less prudent to teach them how to write, since they might use such skills to compose love letters— to others than their lawful husbands (Aṣi, p. 172).

But the role of women calligraphers was more important than those frivolous remarks suggest. Some Muslim ladies achieved a high level of competence and were widely renowned for their work. We know that the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb’s daughter Zebunissa (died 1701 AD), who was a great patron of poets, scholars and calligraphers, was able to write three different calligraphic styles with equal skill. The Lady Malikah Jahan, probably the wife of the Sultan Idris II Adilshah of Bijapur (reigned 1580-1626 AD) wrote at least one Koran (in unusually bold and colourful letters) which can now be seen in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. In the 18th century some Turkish women produced such excellent pieces of calligraphy that examples of it are still kept in the mosques of Istanbul; one of them is reported to have received her ijazah in the year 1756, well before reaching puberty, and she also wrote a book of calligraphy at the age of 12. The famous calligrapher and script reformer Ibn Muqlah, after having lost his right hand, taught his art to several pupils, among them his own daughter with whom Ibn al-Bawwab is said to have studied. The school of Ibn al-Bawwab did in turn continue in

69 A Muslim lady holding book and pen. Miniature from an album assembled in Delhi by Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, between the years 1633-4350, probably as a present for his wife Nadira. BRITISH LIBRARY, ORIENTAL AND INDIAN OFFICE COLLECTIONS, ADD. MS. 51129. (25V)

Baghdad, and one of the best exponents of his style was again a woman, Zaynah Shuhda al-katib (died 1178) from whom a direct chain of transmission goes to the third great calligrapher, Yaquf.
Chinese calligraphy

The forms of the characters must seem to sit, to walk, to fly, to stir, to set out, to return, to sleep, and to wake. They must appear sorrowful and joyous; they must be like the seasons; they must peck like birds and devour leaves like silkworms; they must be as sharp as the blade of a dagger-axe; and last as a bow with its arrow set; they must be like water or fire, mist or cloud, sun or moon; they must reflect every image in the world. Only then may they be called calligraphy.

Cai Xing, 139–1439 AD

Chinese calligraphy begins with the Chinese brush and the Chinese script. Unlike other writing systems, the Chinese script does not primarily represent the sounds of a particular language but the concept by which language as such can be represented. Many of the characters (words) have their roots in pictures derived from nature, and this pictorial origin is very often still clearly visible [35 c]. Unlike systems based on the Phoenician consonant script (such as the Arabic and Roman alphabets), Chinese characters do not represent meaningless sound units, but words, and with it, by implication, ideas. Such a script does by necessity need a large number of signs (2,000–4,000 for everyday use, some 50,000 for the reproduction of classical literature) and, in consequence, the calligrapher finds himself in a position where he is able to manipulate a wide range of variants. This range is further increased by the fact that a Chinese character is formed by a variable number of strokes (up to 37), all executed in strictly defined order, which allows for a certain amount of individualism in the choice of shape, thickness of line, and overall composition. Ultimately, two factors dominate Chinese calligraphy: the nature of the Chinese script, and its identification with visual art. Not only does the calligrapher use the same tools as the painter, they both abide by the same aesthetic principles. In China, calligraphy is part of the ‘three perfections’, the others being painting and poetry. It is the most prestigious of the three: Chinese artists would rather be remembered for their calligraphy than their painting.

The earliest extant examples of Chinese writing can be seen on animal bones (gǔ) and tortoise shells (jiǎ) used for the purpose of divination. This ‘shell and bone script’, Jiaoguwen [70], which was discovered at the beginning of the 20th century in the province of Henan, has until very recently been dated to the Shang period (c. 1766–1122 BC) [71]. In 1987, however, scholars from the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Science in Beijing announced that similarly inscribed bones, found during the previous year in Sian, had been dated 3000–2500 BC [PMM/ICG, p. 19]. So far some 2,000, largely pictographic, signs have been identified; they are predominantly
The next recorded style, referred to as Jinwen zhengshuigun [see 6], reaches us mainly in the form of inscriptions inside ritual bronze vessels belonging to the Zhou period (late 1st millennium BC). The characters retain the general principle of the oracle bone script but are more elaborate and aesthetically more pleasing; they have also been well planned to harmonize with the decorative elements on the outside of the vessels. This style was eventually supplanted by the Great Seal script, Dazhuan [72], which flourished from 1700–1000 BC. Invented, according to tradition, by a Recorder at the Zhou court, this style was more a synthesis of previous ones than a totally new development. The number of characters had by now greatly increased and individual characters show much higher levels of sophistication; inscriptions preserved on stone have lines of equal thickness, but the line work is still limited to the use of centre brush (see p.33). The most famous examples of this style so far discovered are the so-called Stone Drum Inscriptions (8th century BC) found in the Shannxi province; some of the Confucian classics were perhaps also originally written in this script.

In the 3rd century BC China was finally united under the first Qin Emperor Shi Huang Di (259–210 BC) who, we are told, instructed his Prime Minister Li Si (221–109 BC) to collate the existing writing systems and design a new script capable of meeting the growing demand for documented records. This new script, Xiozhuan, Small Seal script, remained in general use until the 3rd century AD. Its 10,000 characters were to provide the basis for future developments; in later calligraphy they are often used for their balance and beauty, especially for seal engraving. Xiaozhuan, written with the tip of a long-haired brush, mainly on bamboo slips and wood, shows certain characteristics which differ from those of the early bone and bronze scripts. Though lines are still of even thickness, they are more curved, and individual characters have a more defined and harmonious appearance. Each character (word) seems to have been executed within an imaginary square [73], and these squares are neatly arranged in columns (from top to bottom) and rows (from right to left).
Unfortunately for a script primarily designed to aid the demands of administration, Xiaozhuan had one serious shortcoming: it could not be written with speed. What the new unified Empire needed was a quick, easy-to-write and easy-to-read clerical script, which could be used for the preparation of Government records, and also for the execution of official inscriptions on stone monuments. Such a script, Lishu (official or clerical script [74]), is traditionally held to have been invented by Cheng Miao (240–207BC), an official at the court of the first Qin Emperor. At one point in his career Cheng Miao seems to have offended the Emperor, who sent him to prison for 10 years. Cheng Miao spent his enforced confinement designing a new script which not only facilitated speed but also had possibilities for further developments.

Lishu began as a simplified variation of the Small Seal script. At first written on bamboo with a thicker brush, it came into its own with the introduction of paper when the instruments for writing were greatly refined. It has no circles and very few curved lines, the circles having been turned into squares and the curved parts having become more angular; short straight lines, vertical and horizontal, are mainly used. Because of the speed with which the brush could move over the smooth surface of paper an even thickness of line could no longer be enforced. As the thickness of individual lines began to vary, the calligrapher could concentrate on giving them artistic shape and expressions. Between 200–400AD (three new variations of Lishu came into existence: Caoshu (fl. 200–400AD), Xingshu (fl. from the 3rd century AD to the present), and Kaishu (which originated in about the 4th century AD and is still the standard script for writing the Chinese language). The most important variation was undoubtedly Kaishu (75), the standard or ‘regular’ script. This was the ‘proper style of Chinese writing’ used for government documents, for public and private correspondence dealing with important matters and, eventually, also for printed books. The regulations for the Civil Service examinations, enforced during the Tang period (618–907AD), stipulated that each candidate must be able to write a good hand in the regular style, and, in consequence, every Chinese who wanted to become a scholar and enter the Civil Service (one was dependant on the other), took care to perfect his mastery of that style; despite the fact that the examinations were abolished in 1905, Kaishu is still the standard script.

In Kaishu the individual characters changed their sideways compressed rectangular form and became almost perfect squares. It is a style which allows for a maximum of individuality. Each line, square or angle, each dot, the structure and composition of the characters, can be shaped according to the will of the calligrapher. The greatest exponents of Kaishu were Wang Xizhi (321–379AD, 303–364 according to some sources) and his son Wang Xianzhi (344–388AD) who have influenced Far Eastern calligraphy ever since. Few original pieces of their calligraphy have survived but, in keeping with tradition, examples had been inscribed on stone tablets from which rubbings were later made, and many famous calligraphers have tried to imitate their style. Wang Xizhi relaxed the tension in the arrangement of
Chinese calligraphy depends on skill, imagination and, above all, on training. Like the painter, the calligrapher learns his art by careful and patiently copying the ancient masters, and by following the instructions of his own master. This eventually enables him to write with speed and without hesitation; a line once drawn cannot be retouched or corrected. The inspiration for the calligrapher, as for the painter, comes from nature: each stroke, each dot suggests a natural object. Su Qianli (596–608 AD), a Tang calligrapher, wrote:

‘of the wonder of shu fa (the art of writing) I have seen many and many a one... I have seen flocks of quern swans floating on their stately wings, or a frantic stampede rushing off at terrific speed; Sometimes in a line a flaming phoenix dances a lordly dance, or a sinuous serpent wriggles in speckled fright, and I have seen sunken peaks plunging headlong down a precipice, or a person clinging to a dry vine while the whole valley yawns below. Some strokes seem as heavy as the falling banks of clouds, others as light as the wing of the cicada.’

Two keynotes dominate a piece of good calligraphy: the stimulation of a well executed line held in balance by the dynamic equilibrium of the final structure.

KOREA

When the Chinese (Han) Emperor Wu Di conquered much of the northern part of the Korean peninsula in 109 BC, the area which today constitutes modern Korea was ruled by several small independent states. During the following centuries three important kingdoms emerged: Koguryo in the north, Silla in the south-east and Paekche in the south-west. Contact and a steady cultural exchange (by land to Koguryo and by sea to Paekche from the southern coastal areas of China) introduced, in due course Buddhism, Confucianism, and the Chinese system of writing. By the time of the unification of Silla in 668 AD Chinese characters had become the official script of the Court and were used as such by the educated, powerful elite. But the basic unsuitability of the Chinese script for transcribing the very different grammatical features of Korean soon led to repeated attempts to devise more acceptable alternatives. The first experiment of this nature was a system that represented Korean words by Chinese characters having the same sound. Later, similar schemes using Chinese characters to convey Korean words of identical meaning were used, but the issue remained problematic until the reign of the great reorganizing monarch of the early Choson dynasty, King Sejong (reigned 1418–1450 AD). In 1446 a simple alphabetic script called Hangul was promulgated, an event of enormous importance which is still remembered in Korea by the celebration of Alphabet Day on 9 October of each year.
Korean calligraphy has a long and distinguished tradition but few written examples have survived the many foreign invasions and internal conflicts. In the 1350s the invasions launched by the Japanese army of Toyotomi Hideyoshi caused particular damage to cultural objects and historical monuments, and only some 20 calligraphic fragments pre-dating this period, have survived. Fortunately, the practice of stone engraving has (as in China) left us with additional information. In fact the first surviving evidence of calligraphy on Korean soil is examples of Chinese writing on a number of stone monuments from the time of the Three Kingdoms (c. 57BC–668AD). The following period, under the Unified Silla dynasty (668–935AD), was much influenced by the culture of Tang China. Contemporary Korean calligraphers, such as Kim Saeng (fl. c.680AD) and Ch’oe Ch’u-reun (born 857AD), based themselves on Chinese models, especially the style of Onyang Xun (557–641AD) [78] and You Sinan (550–638AD). This was a square, angular script which continued throughout the time of the Koryo dynasty (918–1392AD) until around 1350, when the style of yet another Chinese calligrapher, Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322AD) [79] came into fashion. The new shuo style, more graceful, rounded and fluent, remained an enduring influence on Korean calligraphy.

Hangul [77], consisting basically of 11 vowels and 17 consonant signs, met considerable resistance from the aristocratic Confucian scholars of the time who opposed the extension of literacy and education to commouners as fiercely as they revered Chinese language and culture. Thus the new script did not supplant, but rather complemented the use of Chinese writing, and was used side by side with Chinese characters as an aid to pronunciation, for grammatical terms or to clarify ambiguities, in a similar way to the Japanese use of syllabic kana signs (see p.130). Indeed, as in Japan, the ability to read and write Chinese continued to be a highly esteemed sign of social and intellectual superiority: popular literature, novels written in the Korean script, were thought suitable only for consumption by women or people of low rank. During the Japanese occupation between 1940–45, when the Japanese authorities tried to encourage the use of their own language as the publishing medium of first choice, Hangul became a nationalist issue. Today a mixed script (Chinese and Hangul) is still employed in the south; in the north of the country all writing is done in Hangul.