The term ‘calligraphy’ derives from the Greek words *graphein* (to write) and *kallio* (beautiful). However, fine writing, even the development of distinct styles, is not necessarily calligraphy. A number of definite elements must combine before true calligraphy can develop. One is the availability of tools which allow for a swift movement across an even surface – such as pen and brush together with parchment and paper. Calligraphy did not develop wherever the script was incised with a stylus or knife into materials such as palm-leaves (South and Southeast Asia), clay bricks (ancient Mesopotamia and Crete), or bone (early China). Although stone itself is not the best medium it is well suited to receive and preserve calligraphic copies; indeed Western calligraphy can be said to trace its roots to Roman stone inscriptions (such as, for example, those on Trajan’s column) but such inscriptions were, no doubt, first composed on perishable material. Very much the same holds true of wood, especially in relation to block printing in the Far East (see p. 164).

The second vital factor is motivation, and the attitude of society to writing. In the case of Islam it was revelation and conquest; in the Far East artistic sensibility and political hegemony; and in Western Europe, both secular and religious legality and a stress on (letter) form and function. The third element, which invariably distinguishes calligraphy from ‘beautiful writing’ is the existence of definite, often mathematically-based rules which guide the construction of letters and the relationship between line and space. Calligraphy may be defined as harmony between script, tools, text and cultural heritage. ‘Beautiful writing’ on the other hand is an expression of spontaneous individuality; it is not rooted in a generally accepted knowledge and technique, and it can therefore develop under a variety of circumstances, either because of individual effort or because it is connected with a certain sphere of the cultural or religious life of a particular community. Finally, if all the right elements combine, beautiful writing can move towards calligraphy.

An intimate relationship exists between picture and script (85, 96). Both are visual means of communication and information storage. Indeed most scripts known to us started in the form of pictures – Egyptian hieroglyphs, early Sumerian writing, the Indus Valley script, the pre-Columbian scripts of Central America. In the case of the Chinese script, this pictorial origin is often still clearly visible. A letter of the alphabet may not be a picture in the sense of representing a known object, but it is still a visual sign. Representation is not
an essential element of visual art, for an abstract painting is no less a painting (or less valuable) than a representative one. The way the text forms a pattern on the page is again purely visual. When in the 19th century a number of new scripts were invented in Africa, America, and Asia (either by indigenous people who had so far been without a script of their own, or by missionaries working among them) most of them were initially pictorial (AG pp.130-4); this despite the fact that the inventors were usually familiar with alphabetic writing.

In calligraphy the pictorial element retains a dominant position. Indeed in the Far East painter and calligrapher are considered not only intimately linked but more or less identical. Writing informs us about content in a verbal manner, calligraphy communicates something beyond the mere verbal. For example, by drawing out the lines of the Arabic letters in Kufic [see 87] to make them move across the page in relentless pursuit of an ultimate truth, the calligrapher appeals to a deeper level of consciousness.

There are various calligraphic devices which increase the pictorial impact. Texts can be written to form pictures, the shape of the picture being determined by the subject matter of the writing itself [97]. Such text-pictures are generally referred to as calligrams, a term first used by the French poet
Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918) to describe his own work, published in 1910 [30]. But the convention itself is much older. It can in fact be traced back to the Greek poet Simias, who, in the 4th century BC, wrote poetry in the shape of an egg, a double axe, and the wings of a bird. Simias was not the only Greek poet who used this art form; the tradition continued and was eventually introduced into Christian Europe in the 6th century, by a Bishop of Poitiers, Venantius Fortunatus, who wrote his poem De Sancta Cruce in the form of a cross. Text-pictures remained popular throughout the middle ages and the Baroque period. In more recent times artistic groups such as the Dadaists (see p.137), and individual poets like George Herbert, Hans Arp, Dylan Thomas, or Robert Herrick have repeatedly made use of them. In the 1960s, the Concrete Poetry Movement greatly revived and popularized the tradition.

Though Islam does not look with favour on the visual representation of living forms, calligraphers (especially in Turkey) have been skilful in using the Arabic script to form pictures of animals [99], human faces [100], birds, or flowers, to write down invocations, sacred words, or even the basmalah. The basmalah (‘in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’) a formula which opens each sura of the Koran, holds an important place in Islam and he who writes it beautifully obtains great blessings, if not Paradise itself (see p.60). Other popular motifs for Islamic text-pictures are lamps.
100. A human face made up of the names of Allah and Muhammad, and those of the first three Imams: Ali, Hasan, and Husain. Under certain circumstances the tendency to equate figures with letters, or compose figures with faces from sacred words, names or formulas, developed naturally out of the concept of the hidden meaning within calligraphy.

Photographed 1931

101. (below) A short text in Arabic written in square Kufic in the form of a mosque. Pictures of sacred buildings were often constructed from such formulas or from the prejudices of the faithful. See also 90.

Photographed 1931

102. (opposite) The goddess Annapurna giving the ritual meal to the mendicant Siva. The picture is composed of repeated innumerable written in Bengali script (mid-19th century). Tantric Hinduism holds that the non-dual Supreme Reality has two aspects: Siva (male) and Sakti (here in the form of Annapurna - female). Tantrism is associated with a number of highly unconventional practices and insists on the efficacy of mystical diagrams (sometimes formed by written pendants) and mantras made up of mystic syllables (as for example the siddham seed syllables; see 111). In Tantrism, Buddhism and Hinduism overlap and after the 8th century Tantric practices spread from India to Nepal, Tibet, Southeast Asia, China and eventually also to Japan.

Victoria and Albert Museum, D. 422–1907
There was, however, a large body of highly literate users, many of them producing their own manuscripts without any editorial guidance. This situation created a demand for good reliable copyists but not for calligraphers. In addition, the correct reproduction, and the legibility of words and letters had in any case always been considered of greater importance than their visual impact or the question of exact (mathematically defined) measurements. An exception is made in the case of the Sefer Torah used in the Synagogue, which has to be written (on skin) by a scribe observing special rules. For this text the parchment is prepared with great care, the quill is cut from a turkey feather, and only the square Hebrew script can be used. Particular care is taken with letters of similar appearance (to avoid confusion), and though Hebrew is written from right to left, for this particular text each individual character is written from left to right. Definite rules govern the space between the letters and words: a nine-letter space between portions of the text, a gap of four lines between each of the five books, and so on. When writing, the scribe omits the name of God, which can only be written after special purification; this the scribe performs once the whole text is complete and then proceeds to fill in the appropriate blank spaces.

Unlike the Romans, the Greeks did not develop a distinct tradition of calligraphy. The earliest surviving documents of alphabetic Greek writing so far discovered date from the 8th century BC. They are for the most part epigraphic in nature, showing a predominantly monumental style of often well-executed stone majuscule (106) which do not, however, quite match the mathematical precision and the grandeur of early Roman capitals. Greek inscriptions were not vehicles of imperial power but a means of communication between free men, enabling them to take part in the democratic process. More rounded letterforms were employed when writing with brush or reed pen (a Greek invention; see p.24) on papyrus, leather, or, later, parchment.

Hebrew manuscripts, especially in connection with the representations of the so-called masoretic notes (103).

Apart from micrography no calligraphic traditions exist within Hebrew writing. As a result of the political situation created by the Diaspora, the Jews did not have religious or secular institutions such as monasteries, madrasas, or princely courts to provide patronage, stimulus and scriptorial authority.
though one must remember that surviving examples of book hands (documents mostly written on papyrus) between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD are still rare and come mostly from Egypt where the climate favoured their survival. During the later part of this period an Uncial type of script [105] developed and remained the preferred book hand until the 9th century AD. This hand was eventually replaced by various more cursive forms, in particular a minuscule script [106], which became the true Greek parchment script of the middle ages. But for the whole period a remarkable uniformity persisted throughout the Greek dominated regions no sharply differentiated regional or national styles arose (as in the Western part of Europe), nor did form and function exercise the same decisive influence on the various book and documentary hands. Writing remained a means of communication and information storage; it never quite managed to make an aesthetic or socio-historical statement about the Greek world in the way that the Roman script did.

Calligraphy played no major role in South Asia before the establishment of Islam after the 12th century AD; neither the tools nor the writing material (palm-leaves and stylus), nor the socio-religious attitude was congenial to its
development. Although a knowledge of writing had been introduced to the Indian subcontinent by Semitic traders as early as the 7th or 6th century BC, Hinduism, the major religion of that area, was decisively hostile to it. The memorizing and recitation of the sacred Vedic hymns which ensured the well-being of the community and the continuation of the universe, were the carefully guarded property of certain Brahmanical sub-groups whose power and status depended on their ability to maintain this monopoly; low caste people were not even permitted to listen to such recitations. It was only after a point had been reached when the innumerable commentaries and sub-commentaries began to outstrip human memory that texts were written down. But even then the grammarian Pāṇini (c.400BC) says grudgingly that ‘things from books are not as good as things from the living and abiding voice’, thus endorsing the superiority of oral tradition over written texts. Buddhism too (especially of the original austere Theravadā persuasion), though not overtly hostile to writing, placed the importance of the text above its visual representation. Monks should not take delight in visual beauty [107]. In consequence the vast majority of South Indian and Sri Lankan palm-leaf manuscripts are at best only adequately, and indeed often indifferently written.

This, however, does not mean that no fine manuscripts were produced in South Asia. In the northern part of the Indian subcontinent most writing was done on palm-leaf or birch bark (later on paper), with reed pen and ink and, judging from the few remaining examples, beautifully written manuscripts, often meant for royal or temple libraries, or for rich patrons, seem to have been plentiful. In Tibet, where writing was introduced from India together with Buddhism in the 7th century AD, good writing was taught in the monasteries as part of the curriculum. Soon a number of definite styles developed: book hands (du-bu-can) mainly for printing Buddhist texts with wooden blocks; cursive scripts (du-bu-need) for everyday use [106], or for official documents (Sam-yig); decorative scripts (bru-thsha); and a special style called lentea based on the ancient Gupta characters which could be used for seed syllables and titles of texts.

Fine writing also played a major part within the complex and esoteric world of Hindu Tantras, poplar Dāsism [109] and in Tantric Buddhism, and in the case of the latter, beautiful writing, combined with other elements, did eventually move towards calligraphy. The script which underwent this transformation was siddham, an Indian syllabic form of writing going back to the Gupta script [110] of the 4th century AD. The Gupta era (320-647AD) has often been called the golden age of Indian Buddhism; it boasted a definite style of art and flourishing monasteries where writing was taught to young monks and many outstanding literary works were composed and copied.

According to Tantric Buddhism the siddham letters ‘exploded’ out of emptiness (Buddhist philosophy rejects the concept of first causes) and were taught by the Buddha but kept secret until the Indian saint Nāgārjuna
In the field of popular Chinese religion calligraphy could become endowed with supernatural powers. Popular Daoists would make talismanic diagrams with calligraphic elements, paste them on walls, burn them to send messages to the spirit world, or fashion them into pills to be used as medicine. Copy of a Chinese secret society magic banner on silk with tiger and talismanic drawing.

(c.200AD) revealed them to his disciples. From the 7th century onwards siddham letters were mostly used for the representation of 'seed syllables' within mantras (sacred diagrams), each letter personifying a different cosmic force of the Buddha [111]. Awareness of emptiness, so the teaching goes, is transformed into a seed syllable, from the seed develops the Buddha, who may be portrayed by an icon (in this case, the seed syllable); contemplation of the icon unites the devotee with the seed and returns him to emptiness.

Buddhism brought Sanskrit texts, mainly written in Sanskrit in the siddham script, to China. Unlike India, China had always given much importance to the written word since within its realm the large number of different dialects made oral communication difficult. In keeping with this attitude Chinese Buddhists paid great attention to the form and the correct construction of siddham characters. Once the pen had been replaced by the Chinese brush, siddham became a special branch of Chinese calligraphy connected with sacred writing. From China Buddhism brought the siddham script to Korea and in the 9th century two Japanese monks, Kukai (773–835AD) and Saicho (767–822AD), who had both studied in China (see, p.121), introduced it to Japan where it soon gained great popularity within certain circles. Both the Heian period (794–1192AD) and the Kamakura period (1192–1333AD) produced a number of well known siddham masters. After a period of decline siddham calligraphy re-emerged in the 17th century. It is still an important calligraphic style (see, p.208) and indeed has experienced something of a renaissance (see, pp.12–40).