had been adopted in Iran quite soon after the Islamic conquest of AD 642, largely because it was the official script of the new state into which Iran was incorporated, though also because it was evidently superior to the older script in which the Persian language had been written hitherto. The appeal of the Arabic script was as great for the Iranians as it was for the Arabs, perhaps even more so; for although the Arabs had used their script before the coming of Islam, to Iranians the script was directly associated with the miracle of the Koran and therefore linked with their own religious feelings.

Although Naskh replaced Kufic as the normal Koranic hand throughout most of the Arabic-speaking area of Islam in the 10th century, Iran saw the use of peculiarly local forms of the old script continued for several centuries more. We find Eastern and Qarmathian Kufic, as these forms are called, employed for the writing of Korans down to the 13th century, though we have no idea when or where they originated. Calligraphy in Iran as in the rest of the Islamic world was truly international in the sense that, despite its importance and the numerous biographies of calligraphers, the art was practised so widely that we have very little real evidence to be able to ascribe the various hands with their multiple variations to particular calligraphers.

One of the most striking examples of the ability of Persian calligraphers appears on the white slipware of 9th- and 10th-century Samarkand and Nishapur. This pottery is associated with the Iranian Samanid dynasty, noted for its involvement in the contemporary renaissance of Persian literature. Aesthetically the combination of a smooth ivory-coloured surface and a simple Kufic inscription, painted in black and running around the perimeter of the bowl or plate, is extremely satisfying. Although the inscriptions of the latter examples become too ornate

and are sometimes suffocated by the addition of foliate motifs, the early bowls have a mood truly reflected in Arthur Lane’s description of them: ‘Their beauty is of the highest intellectual order; they hold the essence of Islam undiluted.’ This is made even clearer when one realises that the Arabic inscriptions are not Koranic, which was not permitted for fear of profaning the sacred text, and that the bias of the ruling dynasty was definitely anti-Arabic and pro-Persian. Thus the unique beauty of the Samanid plates can only be explained by reference to a deeply felt attachment to the script itself, as that of the language in which the Koran was revealed. This would have been perfectly normal, even under the Samanids who were by no means anti-Islamic. Kufic inscriptions had been included in the decorative schemes of pottery, metalwork and textiles prior to its use on Samarkand slip-painted ware, but it was in the Samarkand pottery that calligraphy was employed as the central element for the first time.

Cursive script: Naskh

In even the earliest Koran Korans a tendency to introduce cursive forms can be noticed. In fact a purely cursive script had existed almost from the first, being employed for ordinary correspondence. The cursive script called Naskh had many advantages over Kufic; it could be written more rapidly, and because diacritical points and vowel sounds were normally indicated it was readily intelligible. One of the major disadvantages of simple Kufic was its lack of orthographic signs, essential to distinguish the twenty-eight sounds of the sixteen basic characters of the alphabet. The differentiation of the various sounds was usually accomplished by the addition of one, two, or three dots above or below the letter. Although the full range of orthographic signs existed by the mid 8th century, they were often disregarded by conservative Koran scribes who, no doubt, regarded them as an unnecessary modern innovation.

Two famous calligraphers were associated with the calligraphy of the Naskh script. Both of these were a high government official and the other a house-painter further emphasised the universal appeal of calligraphy as an art form in the Islamic world. The first of these was Ibn Muqta (died 939), a minister of the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, and so skilled an artist was he that when his hand was cut off after his fall from grace he was able to attach a pen to his stump and write as well as before. Ibn Muqta’s contribution to the art of calligraphy was not the invention of a new script but the application of systematic rules to the informal Naskh hand. This he did by bringing every letter into relation with the alif, the tall vertical which gives the Arabic script its regular sonorous rhythm.

This ‘proportioned script’ of Ibn Muqta was brought to perfection by Ibn Al-Bawwab (died 1022), a house-decorator who turned his hand to calligraphy. At some time in the 10th century Naskh was used for writing the Koran. However the earliest existing Koran in Naskh script is the well-known copy in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, which has been positively ascribed to Ibn Al-Bawwab. It is a work of almost faultless perfection: Ibn Muqta’s basic notation orchestrated by an artist of genius.

By this time, that is the 11th century, six basic styles of writing were in common use. These were referred to as the Aqamul al-Sitta (the six hands) and given technical names: Naskh, Thuluth, Ribah, Muhaqqaq, Ta‘uliq, Riq‘a. These styles arose in the Arabic-speaking part of the Islamic world, and to them we must add two more which were invented in Iran: Ta‘liq and Nasta‘liq. In eastern Islam all of the six basic scripts, in addition to the various Kufic forms, were in use from the 11th century onwards. The two later forms, Ta‘liq and Nasta‘liq, did not appear until the 14th, but by the 15th and 16th centuries the latter was the predominant style of calligraphy in Iran.

What makes the Arabic script so successful from the artist or decorator’s point of view is its fully developed dimensions. This is not simply because the vertical ‘warp’ and horizontal ‘weft’ establish an automatic equilibrium, but more important because the vertical or horizontal emphasis can be radically altered without disturbing the balance or rhythm. If we want to understand the difference between the various types of script, at first so confusing, we can perhaps see Naskh as a style in which the weight is evenly distributed, the remainder of the six hands as vertically orientated, with the final two decidedly horizontal in emphasis.
22 Koran, Iran, 11th-12th century, 13½ x 9½ in., Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. So-called Qurashian Kufic. This type of script is usually associated with the Seljuks of Iran and is almost invariably written over a composite foliate background. The diacritical points appear as black dots and the vowels are indicated in red. These orthographic signs are similar to those used today. This example illustrates one of the most important advantages of the Arabic script: letters can be extended vertically or horizontally without the overall balance being impaired.

23 Frontispiece from a Mamluke copy of the Kitab al-Burj al-Mawlid (a poem in praise of the Prophet). Cairo, 15th century. 16 x 11 in., Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. This is a calligraphic-abstract equivalent of a pictorial power theme: the entire page consists of the Sultan's name (Bayy Bay, 1468-1499) and titles in majestic Thuluth. The colours, predominantly red and gold, are those generally associated in the East with royalty. The name and titles are used as heraldic symbols, and the latter were partly chosen for the imposing visual effect they created when written. White symbolises purity but here has a particularly Mamluke reference, for while was the official colour of court dress in the summer months.
Calligraphy after the 13th-century Mongol invasion of the Near East

After the disastrous events of the 13th century (the Mongol invasion and the collapse of the Abbasid caliphate), the Islamic world split up into quite separate and definable areas: Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and the Mamluk sultanate of Egypt and Syria. To these regions we can add Islamic Spain and the Maghreb, which since the mid-8th century had been rather isolated from the rest of the Islamic world. We can identify particular scripts with certain of these areas—not necessarily that one form or the other was employed solely in a particular region, but that some forms achieved their highest expression in specific geographical areas, to the extent that several scripts have become permanently identified with definite areas of eastern and western Islam.

The Mamluke rulers of Egypt and Syria were a closed warrior-caste of Turkic-Mongol (the Bahris) and Circassian origin (the Burjis), who had been introduced as slave-soldiers by their predecessors the Ayyubids. Although the Mamlukes were by any standards bloodthirsty tyrants they extended an impressive patronage to the arts, particularly architecture, building a great many mosques and madrasahs (religious colleges) which they equipped with korans, lamps and all the necessary furniture. Many of the korans written for the new mosques are of enormous size, so large in fact that it requires two men to lift them. Nevertheless, contrary to what one might suppose, these are by no means vulgar displays of dubious ostentation. The rigid military society of Mamluke Egypt showed an understandable preference for hierarchic Thuluth, the most dignified form of the Arabic script. This was employed for almost all official calligraphy, whether religious or ceremonial. Korans were written in varieties of lusty Thuluth and so in addition were many of the books destined for the library of the sultan. These were often religious works themselves, such as the Ka’ubik Al-Durrīyyah, a celebrated panegyric on the Prophet Muhammad. These books often commenced with an elaborate frontispiece in which the name of the sultan and his titles were prominently displayed, sumptuously inscribed in gold or white on a red or blue ground. Often the sultan’s name and titles became a heraldic symbol in itself which was repeated in the same way whenever it was required to be used. These titles were partly chosen because of the imposing effect they created when written: the tightly disciplined parade of multiple vertical strokes immediately brings to mind massed ranks and state processions, particularly when done in white, the official colour of court dress throughout the summer months.

The Mamluke artists and craftsmen brought calligraphy on glass and metalwork to a level of perfection never to be surpassed. 12th- and 13th-century inlaid metalwork from Seljuk Iran, Syria and Mesopotamia was dominated by figure decoration; in Mamluke times the human figure disappears and a new emphasis is given to calligraphic inscriptions. Much of this metalwork was for the royal household and thus the inscriptions are grandiloquent.

In Antiquity the craftsmen of Egypt and Syria had mastered the technique of glassmaking. Under the Mamlukes this art was brought to perfection and a variety of fine bottles, flasks and beakers was produced. Unquestionably the noblest pieces of Mamluke glass are the corals destined to hang in the new mosques built by the sultans. These lamps, which look so unstable when seen in museums, were of course meant to be viewed from below with the light inside illuminating the coloured enamel inscription. Many lamps bear on their neck part of the mystical Koranic verse from the Chapter of Light (ch. 24 v. 35), in which God is compared to a lamp whose light illumines the universe, while the body bears the titles of the reigning sultan. This curious combination of spiritual and mundane calligraphy could be taken as an example of the fusion of religious and secular spheres in Islam, though it is probably more realistic to see it as simple evidence of the way in which the Mamluke ruling institution was able to intimidate the religious one.

Iran: the development of new forms

In Seljuk Iran Naqqah was in habitual use by the 13th century for ordinary correspondence and the production of literary works. When Iran began to recover from the Mongol devastation of the 13th century and Timur’s (Tamerlane) invasion of the 14th, we see specifically Persian forms of writing emerging: Ta’liq and its derivative Nasta’liq. Ta’liq (‘hanging’ script) seems to have been formalised in the 13th century, though it had been in existence for several centuries prior to this and was in fact claimed to be derived from the old script of pre-Islamic Sasanian Iran. Ta’liq was written with a thick pen obliquely cut and looks quite different from the earlier scripts. Basically it is the combination of short thin verticals with broad horizontals.
26 Frontispiece from a Mamluk copy of the Maqamat (Assemblies) of al-Hariri, Egypt, 1334–7, 7 1/4 x 6 1/2 in. National Library, Vienna. An excellent example of a power theme with the Muslim painter reverting to the natural propagandist role of the Oriental artist. This formal image of an enthroned ruler, with its gold background, symbolic genii and heavy frame is in complete contrast to the humorous, relaxed atmosphere of the Baghdad Maqamat illustrations, and is entirely appropriate to the rigid military caste for which it was painted.

27 Painted ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, Palermo, about 1140. Executed for the Norman king of Sicily, the ceiling represents the most important work of Fatimid artists. The paintings consist of symbolic courtly and power themes, many of which can be traced back to the art of pre-Islamic Iran. A number of sections depict subjects from everyday life, which came into the repertoire of the court artist from contemporary painting on pottery where such scenes were increasing in popularity. The ceiling has been repainted in parts by European artists.
accomplished calligraphy reproduced in glazed tiles on the walls of buildings in the city.

Calligraphers were an essential requirement for any self-respecting court, both to instruct the prince's children in the principles of the art and, most important, to produce manuscripts for the royal library. A case in point was the famous Jafar of Tabriz who became the court librarian of the bibliophile Prince Baysunqur of Herat (J 397 - 1433). Jafar was conversant with all the calligraphic styles then current, but was particularly noted for his command of Nastaʿlīq at which he was only surpassed by his inventor Mir Ali of Tabriz who, according to tradition, had been inspired to devise the new script at the behest of a princess which appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to shape letters like the wing of a bird.

Nastaʿlīq is a lighter, at times almost ethereal, version of Taʼliq, which due to the tendency of the script to rise up at the beginning of a word, and the emphasising of the slightly disembodied diacritical dots, seems to float in midair, an effect which was increased by the device of writing verses inside cloud shapes. Nastaʿlīq became the national calligraphic style of Iran, 'the expression of a highly civilised, sophisticated people' (A.U. Pope).

Just as in 17th-century Iran highly personal forms of drawing and painting arose, so the final calligraphic development in Iran was a personal style based on Nastaʿlīq called Shikastah or broken script. Shikastah is really an elaborate, romantic form of handwriting in which, contrary to its implied meaning, the natural pauses between the letters and words are blunted by the insertion of normally empty passages of the verse or sentence. A length of Shikastah often brings to mind a sash or turban drawn in the 17th-century Riza-i Abbasi style with multiple folds and 'spattered' endings. In fact, as we shall see (page 52), in that century calligraphy and painting were more intimately related than at any other time.

Under the Timurids, and especially the Safavids, the application of calligraphy to architectural surfaces reached new heights. From the earliest times titles had been used in mosque decoration, and even in the first half of the 14th century we find Persian mosques with whole areas covered in polychrome tile faience. Under the Timurids and Safavids the entire surface of the mosque was covered with coloured tiles bearing decoration and magnificent calligraphic inscriptions. In Safavid mosques of the 16th and 17th centuries these inscriptions are almost invariably written in the same way: pure white script on a ground of celestial blue. The colour symbolism of religious iconography is always complex but the constant use of blue and white for ceramic inscriptions—and koran frontispieces—is clearly explained by the divine and extraterrestrial associations of the two colours.

The Ottoman Turks

The Ottoman Turks, like their Safavid contemporaries, made extensive use of tiles in the decoration of mosque interiors. As in Safavid Isfahan the mosques of Istanbul included inscriptions in blue and white ceramic tile written in several forms of script (though rarely in Taʿliq or Nastaʿlīq), whose location however was often quite different from those in Persian mosques.

The Ottomans excelled at all forms of calligraphy, including the specifically Persian variants, and themselves invented at least one new form, Taʿliq and Nastaʿlīq were in fact used in Turkey for writing poetry, while religious works, the Koran, and historical writing of which the Ottomans were so fond, were rendered in bold Naskh. Turkish calligraphers brought a new dignity to Naskh which it had not known since the 11th century. This can be seen as its finest in the 16th-century Siyar-i Nabi (History of the Prophet) produced for the Imperial Library.

Also produced for imperial edification were albums of calligraphy by the most gifted practitioners of the art. Perhaps the finest Turkish calligrapher was Hafiz Osman (1642 - 1690) who was a master of Thuluth and Naskh. He is credited with invention of the Hilyah or formally written description of the Prophet, a word-picture quite different from those found in both Turkey and Iran where a word or phrase is written in the form of a bird or animal.

Another new and unusual use of calligraphy was the creation of an official monogram for each sultan. This was always written in the same way, though of course the name was different, and called the tugra. The tugra is another example of a monarch's name becoming a heraldic symbol, and in this context we may recall a similar usage by the Mamluke sultans who were also Turks.

Under the Ottomans calligraphy virtually disappeared from domestic pottery, a development not explained by the fact that many potters in Isnik, the centre of the 16th- and 17th-century ceramic industry, were Greek and Armenian. Ceramic calligraphy seems to have been reserved for objects where its application was entirely didactic, on mosque lamps for example.

If the handsome Naskh of the Siyar-i Nabi reflects one side of Ottoman Turkey, the curious Diwan (imperial) of official documents undoubtedly represents another. Necessarily complex and avoid forgery, it evokes the intrigue, splendour and decay of the declining Ottoman Empire.

Islamic Spain and the Maghreb

The far western part of the Islamic world, North Africa and the southern half of the Iberian peninsula, remained virtually unaffected by the calligraphic developments in the east. Until today North Africa has preserved its own peculiar variant of the ancient Kufic script which is usually referred to as Maghribi, that is western. This was rather more cursive than the old simple Kufic, and great play...