

# The Holy Quran *in manuscript*

A selection of fine and rare Holy Quran leaves and manuscripts exhibited by the National Commercial Bank  
of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

*Collection formation  
by Bernard Quaritch Limited of London*

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*'We have, without doubt, sent down the  
Message: And We will assuredly guard it'*

God has promised, and God never fails to fulfil a promise,  
that the words of the Holy Quran shall be engraved in the  
hearts of men before they shall be recorded on paper.

With God's help we are now able to present this collection  
of manuscripts of the Holy Quran. These manuscripts,  
which we are honoured to display at the head office of the  
National Commercial Bank, are centuries old and were  
written by prominent calligraphers who lived in different  
periods of Islamic History.

We implore Almighty God that His Holy Words may be  
to our benefit now and in the Hereafter; and that They  
may inspire us to act with good sense and righteousness.  
Our final call is 'Praise be to God, Lord of Creation'.

Salim Ahmed Bin Mahfouz

البنك التجاري الوطني  
THE NATIONAL COMMERCIAL BANK



## INTRODUCTION

This exhibition is intended to focus attention on a small collection of rare and beautiful Holy Quran manuscripts and leaves. They have been chosen by way of an introduction to some high-points in the setting-down of the Holy Quran in book form over a thousand-year period. In addition to complete Holy Quran codices of major importance from the Abbasid period to the last century, the collection contains single folios and bifolia surviving in fine condition from Holy Quran manuscripts whose pages have otherwise been lost, damaged, or dispersed.

Starting with gold Kufic script from the central Abbasid lands of the 3rd century AH (9th century AD), we move westwards through the medieval Islamic world to the Fatemids in the city of Qairawan of the 4th century AH (10th century AD).

A Holy Quran manuscript written on vellum in Eastern Kufic script and dating to the 4th century AH (10th century AD) is followed by examples from Seljuq domains of the larger form of that script written on paper with rich illuminations. The use of vellum predominates in manuscripts from the western Islamic world, from Andalusia and the Maghrib; and here too there are examples including an outstanding Quran from the Almohad period, probably copied in Spain. Muhaqqaq script of the Timurid period is shown in monumental style with a two-line fragment from a manuscript that may be the largest ever copied.

Illumination, script, and binding are particularly rich in manuscripts produced in the great Safavid and Ottoman dynasties, and we are fortunate in being able to include a number of these from the 10th century AH (16th century AD). Among them is a manuscript copied by a scribe employed by the Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp, which later passed to the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Selim II. The collection concludes with a number of manuscripts from a great period of manuscript book production in the 13th century AH (19th century AD) when printing was being introduced to different parts of the Islamic World.

Manuscripts of this quality with similar script styles, illumination, writing materials, and bindings exist in major museums and libraries around the world and in private collections. It has been both a challenge and a privilege to assemble this collection for display in Jeddah. Beyond the staff at the National Commercial Bank and at Bernard Quaritch Limited, the success of this project has resulted from the cooperation and assistance of a number of professionals and organisations, among whom we should mention and thank Shaykh Abd Allah Ali Basfar (Quranic recitation on video), Don Baker (conservation), David Cripps (still photography), Piers Jackson (video production), John Ronayne (exhibition design), Crispin Rose-Innes Limited (catalogue design), SIDCO (display cases), Osman Waqialla (Arabic title calligraphy); and for catalogue editorial comment, Adam Gacek (McGill University), Makram Irani (Connoisseur Gallery), Maaz Salih (London University), Tim Stanley, Dr Jan Just Witkam (Leiden University).

### NOTE

The catalogue has been written according to the usual scholarly conventions governing the description of Holy Quran manuscripts and leaves. Chapter and verse citations refer to both sides of the leaf; dimensions in millimetres refer to individual page sizes, vertical by horizontal.

## Catalogue List

1. **Surah L, al-Qaf, 'The Letter Qaf',** verses 6-22.

A leaf surviving from a Holy Quran written on vellum in fine gold Kufic script with coloured vowel points and blue rosettes between verses. Abbasid, 3rd century AH (9th century AD). 179 x 260mm.

Examples of this Kufic script-style from the central Abbasid lands written in gold are scarce. The use of gold script in early Kufic Quran manuscripts was reserved for royalty and noble patrons.

2. **Surah XXIX, al-Ankabut, 'The Spider',** verses 31-33.

A leaf from a Holy Quran written on vellum in fine gold Kufic script with coloured vowel points and gold and blue rosettes between verses. A gold marginal medallion contains the verse number 'thirty'. Qairawan, 3rd-4th century AH (9-10th century AD). 149 x 209mm.

This leaf is remarkable for its perfect state of preservation more than a thousand years after it was written. Another leaf from the same Holy Quran manuscript is preserved in the Al-Sabah collection: it has recently been exhibited in St Petersburg, and is currently part of a loan exhibition entitled 'Islamic Art and Patronage' touring North American museums.

3. **Surah III, Al Imran, 'The Family of Imran',** verses 188-195.

A leaf from the famous Holy Quran written in gold Kufic script on vellum dyed deep blue with indigo, with silver rosettes between verses but no vowels. Qairawan, early 4th century AH (early 10th century AD). 289 x 383mm.

From a Holy Quran manuscript formerly attributed to the Eastern Islamic world of the 3rd century AH where it was said to have been commissioned by the Abbasid caliph Ma'mun. Recent historical research suggests it was copied early in the following century in North Africa for one of the Fatimids at Qairawan. The use of vellum dyed blue probably imitates a Byzantine imperial manuscript. A large part of this Quran survives in Tunis, though individual leaves came into European and American collections from the early part of the 20th century.

4. **Surah XXXVII, al-Saffat, 'Those Ranged in Ranks',** verses 90-94.

A leaf from a Holy Quran written on vellum with five lines of dark brown Kufic with coloured vowel points and gold rosettes between verses. A gold marginal medallion on the verso contains the verse number 'ninety'. Abbasid, 4th century AH (10th century AD). 229 x 322mm.

In manuscripts written in Kufic script, the system of vocalisation and of diacritics differs from that used today: the coloured dots represent vowels; and small oblique lines are used for diacritical points.

5. a. **Surah XI, Hud, 'The Prophet Hud',** verses 26-34.  
b. **Surah X, Yunus, 'Jonah',** verses 72-83.

Two leaves from a Holy Quran written on vellum in dark brown late Western Kufic script and with coloured vowel points. Probably Qairawan, 4th century AH (10th century AD). 326 x 398mm; 325 x 399.

These two leaves were formerly in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum and are preserved in remarkably good condition. Other leaves from the same manuscript are in Bahrain's Beit al-Quran, the Al-Sabah Collection, Leiden University Library, and the David Collection in Copenhagen. The writing in this famous Holy Quran represents a stage in Kufic script prior to its development into Maghribi script. The date of the script-style has been established from a manuscript bearing a dated endowment inscription in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

6. **A Holy Quran from the 4th Century AH.**

A small format Holy Quran manuscript, written on vellum in early Eastern Kufic with gold and red marginal medallions and surah headings in gold ornamental Kufic outlined in black extending to illuminated palmettes outlined in blue. Later red leather binding. Abbasid, 4th century (10th century AD). 97 x 80mm.

Only a very few manuscript Holy Qurans of the early period exist in private hands or even in museums and libraries. This example, written in an early form of the script known as Eastern Kufic, is particularly important and unusual. It represents a transitional stage between the Kufic script and the large Eastern Kufic script that developed in Seljuq domains.

7. a. **Surah LXVI, al-Tahrim, 'The Prohibition',** verses 11-12; and **Surah LXVII, al-Mulk, 'The Dominion',** title and bismillah.  
b. **Surah LXVIII, al-Qalam, 'The Pen',** verses 48-52; and **Surah LXIX, al-Haqqah, 'The Sure Reality',** title and verses 1-3.  
c. **Surah LXXVI, al-Insan, 'Man',** title and verses 1-5.

Three leaves from a Holy Quran, now otherwise dispersed, written on paper in Eastern Kufic with richly illuminated gold surah headings ending in gold and blue marginal palmettes. Seljuq, 5th century AH (11th century AD). 192 x 160mm.

The elegant script known as Eastern Kufic remained in use until the 7th century AH (13th century AD). Its emergence coincides with the development of elaborate illumination and cursive script forms, the use of paper rather than vellum, and the introduction of a vertical rather than a horizontal page format.

8. **Surah VII, al-Araf, 'The Heights'**, verses 35-41, 43-60, 67-82.

Twenty leaves from a Holy Quran, now otherwise dispersed, written on vellum in handsome ochre Maghribi script with colourful vocalisation and gold roundels. The Maghrib, 8th century AH (14th century AD). 200 x 217mm.

In North Africa and Spain, vellum was used for important manuscripts for considerably longer than in the central and eastern Islamic lands where paper predominated from the 5th century AH (11th century AD). Techniques of paper production had been introduced to the Islamic world from China in the middle of the 2nd century AH (8th century AD).

9. **Surah LXXVII, al-Mursalat, 'Those Sent Forth'**, verses 37-50.  
**Surah LXXVIII, al-Naba, 'The News'**, verses 1-8.

A beautiful bifolium from a Holy Quran written on vellum in large Maghribi script with richly illuminated marginal medallions and a gold surah heading ending in an elaborate marginal medallion. The Maghrib or Spain, 6th century AH (12th century AD). 272 x 266mm.

Scholars still debate this script-style. It is not yet possible to attribute a manuscript fragment unequivocally to Spain rather than the Maghrib on the grounds of script alone.

10. **An Andalusian-style Quran.**

A small format Holy Quran written on vellum in light brown Maghribi-Andalusi script with six pages of illuminated geometrical patterns, highly intricate marginal medallions, and surah headings in gold Western Kufic within gold geometric bands ending in marginal medallions. Almohad, probably Spain, 6th century AH (12th century AD). 112 x 114mm.

This remarkable little Quran evokes one of the most splendid episodes in the history of Islam – the Arab civilization in Spain. It is not possible to decipher a place or date of copying in the colophon. But two other very similar Holy Qurans, now in Cairo and in Istanbul, bear colophons stating that they were copied in Valencia in the mid-6th century AH (mid-12th century AD). This manuscript was formerly in a private European collection.

11. **Surah XXXIV, Saba, 'The City of Saba'**, verses 44-45.

A two line fragment with a gold roundel surviving from a very large Holy Quran written in splendid Muhaqqaq Jali script. Timurid, early 9th century AH (15th century AD). 473 x 985mm.

This fragment is from a Holy Quran that may have been the largest ever written. Despite the difficulty of writing on such a large scale, the script is one of great elegance. It is reputed to have been copied by Prince Baysunqur ibn Shahrukh for the tomb of his grandfather Timur (Tamerlane) at Samarkand.

12. **Surah XXXIV, Saba, 'The City Saba'**, verses 42-47.

A bifolium from a manuscript containing a selection of surahs from the Holy Quran written by a master calligrapher in Muhaqqaq script with intricate inter-verse markers and a marginal medallion in gold and blue. Timurid, early 9th century AH (15th century AD). 430 x 348mm.

Two other privately owned leaves from this Holy Quran were displayed in the touring exhibition 'Islamic Calligraphy' which was sponsored by the Treasures of Islam, Geneva, and the World of Islam Festival Trust, London. Another leaf is preserved in the David Collection, Copenhagen.

13. **Surah XXXVI, Ya-Sin, 'The Letters Ya-Sin'**, verses 43-68.

A leaf from a copy of the Holy Quran written in Muhaqqaq script with the word 'Allah' in gold throughout. Safavid or Ottoman, 10th century AH (16th century AD). 548 x 388mm.

14. **Surah V, al-Ma'ida, 'The Table'**, verse 41.

A leaf from a thirty-volume Holy Quran written in three lines of fine Thulth with a Persian interlinear interpretation in Naskh. Around the edges of the page are lines of pious sayings in coloured Kufic script over arabesque scrolls. Turkey or Central Asia, 8th century AH (14th century AD). 289 x 189mm.

Pages from this Holy Quran have often been attributed to Sultanate India, but it is now regarded as more likely that the manuscript was copied in Anatolia or Turkish Central Asia.

15. **A Safavid Holy Quran of royal provenance.**

A magnificent Holy Quran written in Naskh and Thulth surrounded on every page by rectangular compartments containing polychrome floral decorations with gold and lapis blue marginal medallions throughout. At the beginning, two elaborate chamses contain Quranic verses and prayers; there are also three richly illuminated double-page openings. The contemporary binding of stamped and gilt leather with colourful doublures is of the highest quality. Safavid, copied by Abd Allah al-Shirazi in the third quarter of the 10th century AH (16th century AD). 209 x 134mm.

The scribe who copied this Holy Quran worked for the Safavid ruler, Shah Tahmasp. The manuscript passed to the Ottoman ruler, Sultan Selim II, and was kept in the Selimiye mosque at Edirne until it was given to the French Consul General. It has remained in European hands throughout the 20th century.

16. **A Safavid Quran.**

A Holy Quran written in blue and gold Thulth and black Naskh with marginal medallions in blue and gold, rich illuminations on seven pages. Contemporary gilt stamped brown leather binding. Safavid, copied by Muhammad al-Katib al-Shirazi in AH 943 (AD 1536). 162 x 110mm.

17. **A Safavid Quran Section.**

Section (juz') twenty-eight of the Holy Quran, comprising surahs LVIII-LXVI, written in Naskh and large gold Thulth with illuminated headpiece and marginal medallions. Contemporary block-stamped and gold decorated leather binding. Safavid, copied by Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Muqaddam in AH 979 (AD 1571). 352 x 236mm.

The gold decorated binding on this manuscript is typical of the period and may be found on manuscripts from the Ottoman as well as the Safavid worlds.

18. **An Ottoman Quran from the 10th Century AH.**

A Holy Quran written in black Naskh with double-page illumination. In a gilt stamped leather binding with the flap. Ottoman, copied in Turkey in the late 10th or 11th century AH (16th-17th century AD). 270 x 170mm.

This Quran does not bear a colophon giving the date when it was written. But the paper, which is European, contains a watermark datable to the late 16th century AD. European paper was used in the Ottoman world throughout that century and beyond. As in the case of innumerable other scientific and technological borrowings, Europe learnt about paper production from the Arabs in Spain and Sicily.

19. **An Ottoman Quran from the 10th Century AH.**

A Holy Quran written in black Naskh with an attractive blue and gold double-page opening. Contemporary brown leather binding overlaid with gold-painted decorations. Ottoman, copied in Turkey in AH 962 (AD 1555). 190 x 140mm.

The binding of this manuscript, and of several other manuscripts in this exhibition, bears an inscription on the flap from the Holy Quran, Surah LVI, al-Waqi'ah, *'The Inevitable Event'*, verses 77-80: 'This is indeed a Quran most honourable, in a Book well-guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean: a Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds'.

20. **An Ottoman Quran of the late 12th Century AH.**

A Holy Quran copied in Naskh, with a richly illuminated initial double-page opening and an attractively painted rose on the final page. Ottoman, copied by Ahmad Na'ili of Galata in AH 1195 (AD 1780-1). 173 x 122mm.

A manuscript of similar age and quality was displayed in the exhibition entitled 'Splendeur et Majesté' at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

21. **A Holy Quran in the style of Shaykh Hamd Allah.**

An Ottoman Quran written in elegant Naskh with a richly illuminated initial opening, and a colophon reproducing the original manuscript from which it was copied and giving the scribe's name as Shaykh Hamd Allah. In a fine contemporary binding. Turkey, mid-13th century AH (19th century AD). 243 x 160mm.

Shaykh Hamd Allah, who flourished around AH 900 (AD 1500), is regarded as the greatest of Ottoman scribes; and this Holy Quran is a deliberate and highly successful attempt to imitate that greatness. According to attributions at the end of the manuscript, it was actually copied by Qadi al-Askar Mustafa Izzat, the outstanding 19th-century scribe who is best known for the enormous roundels of calligraphy that can be seen today inside the mosque of Ayasofya in Istanbul. Another manuscript Holy Quran copied by Mustafa Izzat for Sultan Abd al-Majid is preserved in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

22. **A Holy Quran from Afghanistan.**

A Quran written throughout on a gold background with three richly illuminated double-page openings, in a lacquer binding. Kandahar or Kabul, copied by Muhammad Munawwar for one of the viziers of the ruling Durrani, Yaqub Khan Bamazay in AH 1226 (1811 AD). 178 x 109mm.

23. **The Holy Quran on Two Pages.**

An entire Quran written in minute Ghubari script on two leaves with each section (juz') within an illuminated panel. Contemporary blue leather binding, blind stamped and gilt. Qajar, copied by Sayyid Ali Tabatabai in AH 1283 (AD 1866). 656 x 457mm.

24. **Surah II, al-Baqarah, 'The Cow', verses 26-29.**

A leaf from a Holy Quran written in black Naskh, within gold cloud bands and with gold roundels between verses, with a Persian interlinear interpretation in red Nastaliq. The text is surrounded by a gold floral frame and the whole length of the right-hand margin is illuminated with an attractive blue and gold medallion and pendants.

Qajar, 13th century AH (19th century AD). 446 x 339 mm.

25. **A Qajar Quran.**

A Holy Quran written in clear Naskh script with two fully illuminated double-page openings at the beginning, in a contemporary lacquer binding. Qajar, copied by al-Hajj Mir Abd al-Karim Muhammad Sadiq al-Husayni al-Yazdi in AH 1271 (AD 1854). 292 x 191 mm.

Formerly in a private collection in Switzerland, this Quran was exhibited in Geneva in 1985 and was illustrated in the accompanying catalogue, 'Treasures of Islam', item 196.

## The Holy Quran in other International Exhibitions

### Arabic Calligraphy in Manuscripts.

An Exhibition on Arabic Calligraphy held at the Islamic Art Gallery of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Riyadh, AH 1406 - AD 1986.

### Arts Islamique dans les Collections Privées Libanaises.

Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock sous le Haut Patronage de son Excellence Monsieur Sleiman Frangié Président de la République Libanaise. Beirut, 1974.

### Arts of Islam.

An Exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. World of Islam Festival Trust. London, 1976.

### Beit al-Qur'an, Bahrain.

Treasures from Beit al-Qur'an - a temporary exhibition at Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Kuwait, 1987.

### Islamic Art and Patronage.

Treasures from Kuwait. Published on the occasion of a loan exhibition from the Al-Sabah collection. Organised and circulated by the Trust for Museum Exhibitions. Washington D.C., 1990

### Islamic Art.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1973.

### Islamic Art.

The David Collection. Copenhagen, 1990.

### Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum.

The Al-Sabah Collection. Sotheby Publications, 1983.

### Islamic Calligraphy - Calligraphie Islamique.

Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva with sponsorship by Treasures of Islam, Geneva and the World of Islam Festival Trust, London. Geneva, 1988.

### Masahif San'a.

Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Kuwait, 1985.

### Qurans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library.

A facsimile exhibition, World of Islam Festival Trust. London, 1980.

### Splendeur et Majesté.

Corans de la Bibliothèque Nationale. Institut du Monde Arabe - Bibliothèque Nationale. Paris, 1987.

### The Islamic World.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York, 1987.

### The Qur'an.

A British Library Exhibition, World of Islam Festival Trust. London, 1976.

### The Sabanci Collection of Calligraphy.

Sponsored by Akbank. Istanbul, 1985.

### The Treasures of Islam.

Musée Rath, Musée d'art et d'histoire. Geneva, 1985.

### The Unity of Islamic Art.

The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Riyadh, 1985.

### Variety in Unity.

A Special Exhibition on the Occasion of the Fifth Islamic Summit in Kuwait. Kuwait, 1987.