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 Quarmich Limited of London

JEDDAH 1991 - 1412
‘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
INTRODUCTION

This exhibition is intended to focus attention on a small collection of rare and beautiful Holy Qur'an manuscripts and leaves. They have been chosen by way of an introduction to some highlights in the setting-down of the Holy Qur'an in book form over a thousand-year period. In addition to complete Holy Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Fatimids in the city of Qairawan of the 4th century AH (10th century AD). A Holy Qur'an 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 Qur'an from the Almohad period, probably copied in Spain. Mut'aqiq style 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 11th century AH (17th 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 Waqalla (Arabic title calligraphy); and for catalogue editorial comment, Adam Gacek (McGill University), Makram Irani (Connoisseur Gallery), Mazr Salih (London University), Tim Stanley, Dr Jan Jan Westkam (Leiden University).

NOTE

The catalogue has been written according to the usual scholarly conventions governing the description of Holy Qur'an 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


A leaf from the famous Holy Quran written in gold Kufic script on vellum dyed deep blue with indigo, with silver rosettes between verses. A gold marginal medallion contains the verse number 'thirty'. Qairawan, 3rd-4th century AH (9-10th century AD), 290 x 183mm.

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 Mansur. 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 xxxviii, Al-Saffat, 'These 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 'nineteen'. Abbasid, 4th century AH (10th century AD), 229 x 321mm.

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 10, Hud, 'The Prophet Hud', verses 26-34.
b. Surah 11, Yunus, 'Jonah', verses 72-83.
c. Surah 12, Hud, 'The Prophets', verses 1-34.

Two leaves from a Holy Quran written on vellum in dark brown Kufic script with gold ornamentation, probably Qairawan, 4th century AH (10th century AD), 326 x 398mm, 325 x 399mm.

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 Best al-Qur'an, 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 gold 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), 27 x 200mm.

Only a few very few manuscript Holy Quans 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 Safanqis domains.

7. a. Surah lxvi, Al-Tala'umin, 'The Prohibition', verses 11-12; and Surah lxvii, Al-Mulk, 'The Dominium', title and bmullah.
c. Surah lxix, Al-Ilaah, 'God', title and verses 1-3.

c. Surah xxvi, Al-Ilaah, 'God', title and verses 1-3.

Three leaves from a Holy Quran, now otherwise dispersed, written on paper in Eastern Kufic with richly illuminated gold and blue headings ending in gold and blue marginal palmettes. Safanqis, 5th century AH (11th century AD), 193 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 curious script forms, the use of paper rather than vellum, and the introduction of a vertical rather than a horizontal page format.

Twenty leaves from a Holy Quran, now otherwise dispersed, written on vellum in handwritten Arabic Maghribi script with colourful illumination and gold rounds. The Maghribi, 6th century AH (12th century AD).

200 x 150mm.

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 8th century AH (15th 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).


A magnificent birchah from a Holy Quran written on vellum in large Maghribi script with richly illuminated margin goldworks and a gold surah heading ending in an elaborate marginal medalion. The Maghribi or Spain, 6th century AH (12th century AD).

272 x 200mm.

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

10. An Andalusian-style Quran.

A small format Holy Quran written on vellum in light brown Maghribi-Andalusian 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. Almoravid, probably Spain, 6th century AH (12th century AD).

112 x 144mm.

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.


A two line fragment with a gold roundel survive from a very large Holy Quran written in splendid Muhaqqaq Jali script. Timurid, early 15th century AH (11th century AD).

473 x 505mm.

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 Baysanur ibn Shahrukh for the tomb of his grandfather Timur (Tamerlane) at Samarkand.


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

348 x 388mm.


A leaf from a thirty-volume Holy Quran written in three lines of fine Thuluth 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 190mm.

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 Naskhi and Thuluth surrounded on every page by rectangular compartments containing polychrome floral decorations with gold and lapis-lazuli marginal medallions throughout. At the beginning, two elaborate chanceries 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 Abul Ali al-Shirazi in the third quarter of the 16th 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.
A Holy Quran written in blue and gold Thulth and black Nashk with marginal medallions in blue and gold, rich illuminations on seven pages. Contemporary gilt stamped brown leather binding. Safavid, copy by Muhammad al-Karīb 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 118-146 (VII), written in Nashk and large gold Thulth with illuminated headpiece and marginal medallions. Contemporary block-stamped and gold decorated leather binding. Safavid, copy by Ibrahim Muhammad ibn Muqaddam in AH 979 (AD 1571). 352 x 235mm.
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 Nashk with double-page illumination. In a gilt stamped leather binding with the Ilah. 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 Nashk 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 LVII, 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."
24. **Surah II, al-Baqara, '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-Hujj Mir Abd al-Karim Muhammad Sadq al-Haury al-Yaidi in AH 1271 (AD 1854). 256 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 Fahd Center for Research and Islamic Studies. Riyadh, AH 1406 - AD 1986.

**Arts Islamiques dans les Collections Privées Libanaises.**

Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicola Soutouc sous le Haut Patronage de l’Excellence Monseigneur Sleiman Frangé Président de la République Libanaise, Beyrouth, 1974.

**Arts of Islam.**


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


**Islamic Art and Patronage.**


**Islamic Art.**


Islamic Art.


Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum.


Islamic Calligraphy - Calligraphie Islamique.


Masahif San'a.


Qurans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library.


Splendeur et Majesté.


The Islamic World.


The Qur'an.


The Sabanci Collection of Calligraphy.


The Treasures of Islam.


The Unity of Islamic Art.

The King Fahd 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.