The Qur’ān

Catalogue of an exhibition of Qur’ān manuscripts at the British Library 3 April–15 August 1976

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Preface

The exhibition of the Qur'ân has been arranged by the British Library in co-operation with the World of Islam Festival Trust, and features a splendid display of calligraphic and illuminated manuscripts from many countries. These have been assembled from the British Library’s own collection, generously augmented by some of the best examples from public and private collections in the lands of origin and in Europe.

The organization has entailed willing help from many people, both corporately and individually and our grateful thanks go to them. In particular I must signal our appreciation to Dr Martin Lings, former Keeper of this Department, and Mr Yasin Safadi, Assistant Keeper in charge of the Arabic Collections, for their travels and constant labours in selecting and preparing the materials for exhibition, and in compiling the catalogue; and Mr J. Losty, the Exhibition Officer of this Department, for his unspiring efforts on the organizational side.

Geoffrey Marrison
Director and Keeper
Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books

Foreword

The present exhibition has been organized by the British Library, in co-operation with the World of Islam Festival Trust, with significant contributions from many national and private collections in Europe and the Middle East. It has been made possible to present the most splendid Qur'ân manuscripts available today by complementing the famous British Library collection with these contributions and to represent all the important developments of the art of Qur'ân illumination and calligraphy throughout the period from the 2nd/8th to the 13th/19th century.

It is difficult for anyone who has never been directly involved with an international exhibition of this kind to realize the obstacles and dilemmas which are liable to confront those who are responsible for its organization. The many months of planning, travelling and maximum effort have proved insufficient to solve all the problems that have confronted us. It is therefore hoped that the readers of this catalogue will be ready to excuse certain inevitable shortcomings. It is never easy to catalogue items which are not to hand, nor was adequate working access always provided. These difficulties together with numerous others resulted in a few entries being disproportionately shorter than the rest, and in certain deficiencies in the specifications which are normally given. Also, since at the time of submitting this catalogue to the press some loan arrangements had not been completely finalized, it is possible that some exhibits now in the catalogue may be withdrawn or that others may be added. The reader may be assured, however, that these very few and minor alterations will detract little from the certain splendour of the exhibition as a whole, and whatever information becomes available before the opening of the exhibition will be supplied in the captions which will be provided for each exhibit.

We wish to thank all our colleagues who have generously assisted us in our difficult task, and in particular the directors and the relevant staff of all the contributing institutions (listed below) and also the owners of private collections, who have generously loaned their treasures to the exhibition. We are particularly grateful for the much needed and generous help given to us by Dr N. Daniel, CBE, and Mr J. Lankester, the British Council representatives in Cairo and Tunis respectively.

Acknowledgement is also due to Dr J. M. Rogers, of the American University in Cairo, for his generous help and constant encouragement and for the many useful discussions which have been exchanged.
We also wish to thank all our colleagues in the British Library who helped us in various ways, and in particular Mr. K. B. Gardner and Mrs. M. Fosd for their help in cataloguing the Qurʾān bindings in this exhibition. We take this opportunity also of expressing our grateful appreciation to our colleague Mr. J. Lesty and must acknowledge the credit which is due to him for his generous and sustaining help throughout the onerous task of preparing this exhibition. Our thanks are also due to our colleague Mr. Rex Smith.

Martin Lings
Yasin Hamid Safadi
February 1976

Contributors

Cairo, National Library: 53, 60, 61, 62, 63, 71, 73, 74, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 85, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105
Geneva, H.H. Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan: 37, 120, 133
India Office Library: 145, 148
Y. H. Safadi, Esq.: 149
H. E. Muhammad Mahdi al-Tajir: 76, 77, 78, 161, 162
E. de Unger Esq. The Keir Collection: 33, 55, 70, 72, 87, 96, 131, 142, 157
Manchester, John Rylands University Library of Manchester: 95, 128
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Tunis, National Library: 1b, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29
National Institute of Archaeology and Art: 2, 4, 10, 11, 15, 18, 19, 20, 25, 153, 154, 155, 156 (all these items are located in the Great Mosque Museum in Kairouan)
Transliteration

\[\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\text{i} & \text{a} & \text{e} & \text{z} & \text{r} & \text{f} & \text{y} \\
\text{b} & \text{b} & \text{s} & \text{d} & \text{t} & \text{th} & \text{j} & \text{h} & \text{kh} \\
\text{t} & \text{sh} & \text{s} & \text{c} & \text{t} & \text{d} & \text{g} & \text{h} & \text{d} \\
\text{d} & \text{n} & \text{m} & \text{l} & \text{k} & \text{i} & \text{y} & \text{w(u)} & \text{y(r)} \\
\text{r} & \end{array}\]

As to the vowels, fathah is transcribed with a, kafrah with i and 
dammah with u.

The combination dammah + single waw and kafrah + single ya' are 
transcribed respectively ä and ı in closed syllables, and ö and ıı in 
open syllables. So-called 'sun letters' are transcribed phonetically.

Final short vowels are not transcribed: ã and ı at the end of a trans-
scription indicate respectively, in the penultimate of the original 
Arabic, dammah + double waw and kafrah + double ya'. Elsewhere 
these combinations are transcribed uw and iy. Thus, for example, 
as-sāmi (fem. as-sāmiyyah) means 'the lofty one', whereas as-sāmī 
(fem. as-sāmīyyah) means 'the Semite'. Alif is transcribed ā; alif 
marghūb is transcribed ā. The diphthongs fathah + taw and fathah 
+ ja' are transcribed respectively aw and ay.
Introduction

The Qur'an

Like many other religions, in particular Judaism and Hinduism, Islam lays great emphasis on the distinction between revelation and inspiration. Islam teaches that the Qur'an was transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad through the intermediary of the Archangel Gabriel and that it is, therefore, at the level of pure revelation, having the sacramental status of divine speech. The Prophet received the revelation throughout his twenty-three years of prophethood. According to Muslim tradition, Muhammad heard the first of these revelations in the cave of Hira near Makkah (Mecca) with a voice commanding him: 'Recite in the name of thy Lord'. He continued to deliver the divine revelation till his death in A.D. 632, after which the revelation stopped and was mainly transmitted from believer to believer orally by the bukhāris (those who memorized the Quranic verses and can repeat them by heart). In 633, however, a number of these bukhāris were killed in the battles that followed on the Prophet's death, which greatly alarmed the Muslim community. 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb, who was a close companion of Muhammad and destined to be his second successor, urged the first Orthodox Caliph Abu Bakr to commit the Qur'an to writing. The Prophet's secretary Zayd ibn Thabit was ordered to compile the revelation into a book which was later collated and codified by the third Orthodox Caliph 'Uthmān in 651. This canonized redaction was later copied into four identical editions and sent to the four main Muslim regions to be used as standard codices from which all Qur'ān copies were to be produced, first in the script of Madinah and Makkah, then Kufah, and later in most of the various styles of Arabic scripts that were developed in the Muslim world. Adherence to the canonized codex of the Qur'an has been so complete that no textual variants have been introduced, nor can a single copy be produced in the Muslim world today with any variant readings other than those minor ones admitted by the learned Ibn Mujahid in the "seven recognized readings" which were finally fixed and canonized in 321/933.

The Qur'an does not appear, however, to have been arranged according to any criterion other than that of placing the longest surah (chapter) first, preceded by the Fātiḥah (the Opening Chapter) and followed by the other surahs arranged in sequence, with certain exceptions, according to their length and their number of verses. Since Muhammad had to emigrate, in the course of his prophectic
mission, from Mecca to Madina, the Qur’an was revealed to him at these two towns; hence the place of revelation has been associated with each sūrah in the form of the word maṣūkaṭyūḥ or maddāntyūḥ being stated in the sūrah heading which also includes the title and the number of verses of the ensuing sūrah.

Calligraphy and Illumination

It would perhaps be true to say not only that as calligraphers the Arabs have never been surpassed, but also that they have been equalled by only one other people, namely the Chinese, who developed their art along altogether different lines. With the Arabs must be included, needless to say, the Persians and the Turks and certain other Islamic peoples for whom Arabic is the liturgical language, in particular those of the Indian subcontinent; and with calligraphy must be included illumination. Nor could there be any better way of giving the Western world a glimpse of this twofold art than by an exhibition of Qur’an manuscripts, since Islamic calligraphy and illumination are centred upon the Qur’an, for the sake of which they came into existence. Many gifted Muslim calligraphers would grudge devoting the full amount of their talent – and their patience – to anything else, so great is the merit of copying the revealed text, a merit which is extended also to the patron who commissions the manuscript.

It was the revelation of the Qur’an, and the need to record precisely every syllable of it, which imposed writing on the Arabs as an accomplishment. Until then, like other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, they had been somewhat disdainful and even distrustful of the written word. This was not for any lack of linguistic prowess but, on the contrary, because they were in love with the spoken word. Their poets – and the ancient Arabs have been described as a nation of poets – never thought of perpetuating their lines by writing them down, despite their keen desire to be remembered by posterity. To this end each poet would transmit his verses to two men of a younger generation who could be relied upon to transmit them in their turn to others.

The somewhat crude and ungainly script was kept well in the background. But once the Arabs were compelled to focus their attention upon it, attempts were soon made to devise a script more worthy of the revelation. The style which finally prevailed, superseding the results of all the other early attempts, takes its name from the Iraqi town of Kufah which was one of the great early centres of Islamic culture. Kufic may be said to have reached its perfection, for Qur’an manuscripts, in the second half of the second Islamic century which ended in A.D. 814. The establishment of this ligature script was an achievement which was to determine, as we shall see, the whole future of Arabic calligraphy; for though subsequent developments were all in the direction of cursive forms and of easy legibility, Kufic remained as a criterion of conformity to spiritual values, a sort of guarantee that, however easy the script might become, the hieratic level would be maintained.

In the 3rd/9th century, there were two derivations from Kufic which for clarity’s sake will be termed here Eastern Kufic and Western Kufic, though in the East they are usually referred to by the same name as the parent script. From each of the derivatives a highly ornamental style of lettering was developed for purposes of illumination only. There were no further developments from Eastern Kufic, but in Persia Qur’ans continued to be written in this remarkable script until as late as the 7th/13th century, and there, as elsewhere in the East, calligraphers clung to its ornamental varieties as a means of enhancing their illuminated headings and frontispieces until the beginning of the 10th/16th century. From Western Kufic, on the other hand, all the scripts of North-west Africa and Andalusia are descended.

The Eastern cursive scripts were not derived from Kufic, but it is to Kufic that they appear to owe their calligraphic perfection. Partly under its influence at the beginning of the 4th/10th century, a master named Ibn Muqlah devised a cursive script that was mathematically ‘proportioned’, and it was on this meticulously calculated basis that the next generations of calligraphers, amongst whom Ibn al-Bawwāb was the pioneer, were able to write freely and yet hierarchically.

Illumination had been slower to develop than calligraphy, partly because there was a less imperative need for it, but also because it was no doubt held in check by the fear of allowing anything to intrude upon the text itself. Nor is it likely that these scruples would have been overcome except on the understanding that ornaments could be a very positive means of heightening the transcendent effects which the calligraphers aimed at producing by the script. As regards the details, it is in the nature of things that each civilization, for its arts, should draw largely on the treasury of relics left by its predecessors. What counts, however, is the choice it deliberately makes of certain possibilities rather than others, and in the particular case we are considering, that choice, far from being arbitrary, was clearly determined by the Qur’an itself. We have a right to assume this because the Qur’an likens the good word (being itself the best of good words) to a good tree with root firm and branches in heaven (XIV, 34) and it also continually speaks of itself in a light or as radiant with light. It cannot therefore be by chance that the two chief elements of Qur’an illumination are arboreal and solar. Moreover as regards the first of these (the second needs no explanation), the Quranic text abounds in references to trees, apart from the already quoted simile. Particularly relevant, since it combines both elements, is the tree that is mentioned in the Verse of Light (XXIV, 35), a sacred olive tree that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil will wellnigh blaze with splendour though the fire have not touched it.

The most obvious opportunities for illumination are in the sūrah headings and the divisions between the verses. These divisions, usually in the form of rosettes, are made luminous with gold, if gold is available, but they are sometimes solar in form as well as in colour – roundels surrounded by fillets which have the effect of rays. The Arabic terms kashkash (little sun) includes also stellar medallions. The heading, nearly always written in a script different from that of the text itself, consists of the title of the sūrah, the word musḥaqūḥ (Meccan) or musānātqūḥ (Medine), and the number of verses.
perfect calligraphy was held to be a manifestation of spirituality, that is, of inward perfection; and this perfection is, precisely, the essential concern of mysticism. Thus in speaking of the sacred artist’s inward orientation as a necessary basis for producing his art, B. B. Zaklodec writes, with special reference to Islam: “The religious consecration of a process of production, which, generally speaking, is typical for the whole of the Middle Ages, achieves its supreme expression in calligraphy. By maintaining that “purity of writing is purity of soul”, the mediaeval outlook made on the master calligrapher the same stern demands of asceticism as it did on the members of the religious class.” The ideal in question no doubt remained more or less theoretic in many if not most cases. But the connection in Islam between mysticism and calligraphy was made closer by the fact that both the Sufis and the calligraphers trace back their spiritual lineage to one and the same individual, ’Alî Ibn Abî Tâlib. Throughout the Middle Ages, and afterwards, the two vocations were like inseparably close lines, forever overlapping in the persons of eminent calligraphers who were Sufis, not to mention the authors of more than one treatise on calligraphy. It would therefore be surprising if the remarkable spread of the hitherto relatively secret and reserved Sufi orders, which took place throughout the whole of Eastern Islam and also in the West during the 7th-13th century, should have been without its effect upon the sacred arts and in particular upon calligraphy. However this may be, and whatever outward and inward causes may have been preparing the way, no one can deny that there took place in the Islamic East, from the outset of the 8th-14th century, one of the most remarkable flowerings of calligraphy and illumination that the world has ever seen. A great contribution of the Mamluk and Mongol periods lies in the Qu’ran frontispieces and other full-page illuminations, and this exhibition may claim to have brought together some of the finest examples. Not that the frontispiece was an innovation, for it had been a feature of Qur’ân manuscripts since the 3rd-4th century. Nor were any new basic elements introduced; it was rather a question of consummation. The effect, which was produced by means of geometrical forms combined with the arabesque, might be described as a simultaneous expression of profound repose and intense life, a static perfection of plenitude and a dynamic radiance of infinite vibrations. Qur’ân illumination was undoubtedly the source of the illuminative art of the Persian miniaturists. But once it had been adapted to their requirements, it flowed back, as it were, to have an influence in its turn on the Qur’anic art; and in the 9th/15th century, under Timurid patronage, this delicate style began to replace the Il-Khânid style of Qur’ân illumination in Iran and Persia, making itself felt also in Turkey, while that of the Mamluks continued in Egypt and Syria until the Ottoman conquest of those parts in 922-1516-7. Timurid illumination belongs none the less in the spirit far more to the art which preceded it than to that which followed it, as can be seen from the examples displayed.

In the first decades of the 16th/16th century Eastern Qur’ân illumination crystallized into a form which, until the present day, has undergone no significant basic innovations. This final style quickly became inter-regional, not without subdivisions, needless to say,

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*A superb example however is to be found in Istanbul in the Topkapi Saray Library (HS. 427) copied in 654/1258 by Shihh Majmud ar-Nisaburi.*

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contained in the sūrah. This lettering, often highly ornamental, is placed in a rectangular frame which stretches across the page from margin to margin, taking up the space, in depth, of two or three lines of text; and the frame is prolonged into the outer margin by a palmette which may be said to stand for the whole tree of which it is a fragment. This symbolism is reinforced sometimes by an upright marginal palmette and, in the Islamic West, by the ‘tree of life’ which is one of the most strikingly beautiful features of Andalusian and North-west African Qur’āns. These and other marginal ornaments – solar roundels, for example – often serve to indicate, by means of the number five or ten inscribed within them, that five or ten verses have passed. Such inscriptions, like the sūrah heading itself, are nearly always upon a ground of arabesque.

As regards colour, gold was initially the most important element, as can be seen from the Kutë Qu’āns; but after a period of fluctuation, blue gained precedence over green and red and in the East was eventually raised to the level of parity with gold, while in the West, where gold retained its supremacy, blue was second. The use of other pigments seems to be based less on the particular significance of each than on their collective value for achieving a harmony of total effect in conjunction with the two framework colours. As to these, we need only remember that the whole purpose of the art we are considering is to affirm the transcendence of the Qur’ān inasmuch as, like the good tree, its branches are in heaven; and blue and gold are, precisely, the colours of the heavenly vault and its luminaries.

All these aspects of illumination had been fully developed before the end of the 7th/13th century, and all the important cursive hands had been perfected, except for Nastāṣqī which in any case was seldom to be used for Qur’ān calligraphy. Most people would probably agree, however, that the best examples of the larger cursive scripts and of illumination are to be found, at any rate in the Islamic East, in Qu’ān manuscripts of the 8th/14th-15th centuries. The rise almost simultaneously of two new dynasties, the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria and Il-Khānī Mongols in Persia and Iraq, seems to have had an invigorating effect upon art, and to have acted as an incentive in the direction of grandeur and strength. Whatever the faults of the new rulers, no one could accuse them of not being lavish patrons of the arts. Most of the splendid Egyptian Qur’āns in this exhibition were commissioned by one or other of the Mamluk sultans; and as regards the Il-Khānīs, who were pagan, Islam was quickly able to absorb them and thus to conquer its conquers. Seven of the finest exhibits are parts of two famous Qur’āns which were commissioned by a grandson of Hülegu, who had sacked Baghdad some fifty years previously in 656/1258; another particularly fine example is by the hand of Ibrāhīm Sultan, the grandson of another pagan destroyer, Timūr, better known in English as Tamerlane.

But there was almost certainly a more profound factor of invigoration at work, quite unconnected with the new patrons. Sacred art is by its very nature dependent upon mysticism, and in the case of calligraphy, the dependence is particularly direct. In mediaeval and later Islam the generally accepted idea that handwriting is an indication of character was transposed to a higher plane in the sense that
though it can sometimes be difficult to tell, without an explicit
colophon, whether a Qurʾān of the 10th-11th/16th-17th centuries
was written in Persia—Iraq, in India, or in the Ottoman Empire.
Especially powerful was the Safavid influence on either side, in both
an easterly and a westerly direction, as will be seen from the arrange-
ments of the manuscripts which belong to this latest period. For the
last three centuries in the Islamic East, and for a somewhat shorter
time in the Islamic West, there has been a widening gap of disparity
between calligraphy and illumination, with isolated exceptions. But
to this day, there are still schools of calligraphy in both East and West.
Qurʾān manuscripts are still written despite the printing press, and a
remarkably high general standard of script has been maintained.