Traces of the Calligrapher

ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY IN PRACTICE,

C. 1600–1900

Mary McWilliams and David J. Roxburgh

THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON
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In Islamic culture, calligraphy has long been considered a quintessential art form. The Qur'an states, "The first thing God created was the pen," and this beautiful writing practice constitutes an expression of piety. Calligraphy not only conveys the ideas of a person but also represents a hallmark of high culture.

Traces of the Calligrapher reconstructs the intimate world of the calligrapher during the early modern period of Islamic culture, bringing together the "tools of the trade"—works in their own right that are rarely exhibited or published—and the exquisite art made with these functional objects in India, Iran, and Turkey.

Drawn primarily from a prestigious private collection in Houston, the works in this fascinating book include pens, pen boxes, chests, tables, paper scissors, knives, burnishers, and book bindings of superb manufacture and design. These objects are presented with examples of calligraphy that were executed as practice exercises, occasional works, wall hangings, and manuscripts. Seen together, these rare works reveal the traces of their makers.
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Cover illustrations: Detail of interior of a pen box, inlaid with the phrase "He [God] is" (thurz), Turkey, c. 1850, steel overlaid with silver and gold; Album of calligraphy signed by 4-Has al-'Arif, Turkey, 1826–97, ink, opaque pigment and gold on paper, the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection of Turkish Art at the Harvard University Art Museums, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 1995.83.

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Traces of the Calligrapher is a beautiful exhibition that presents masterpieces of Islamic calligraphy from important public and private collections. Each example was chosen by Mary McWilliams and David J. Roxburgh for its high quality and distinctive style. As the superb essays in this catalogue explain, the rigorous training and brilliant pedagogy that master calligraphers developed gave this artistic form of communication more than a millennium of life, inspiring the highest standards in all human endeavors.

Achieving this level of aesthetic expression, however, required appropriate tools and furniture so that calligraphers could maintain the fresh, energetic, and individual styles consistently over extended periods of time. Seeing the writing tools and reading about their use permit museum visitors to look at the calligraphies in practical and utilitarian ways, which are often lost in museum exhibitions that focus exclusively on the preciousness of art.

The message, the medium, and the tools are vividly described in the essays by Mary McWilliams and David J. Roxburgh. In addition, Christine Starkman, MFAH curator of Asian art, has brought together the scholars, lenders, and generous donors who collaborated to create this exhibition. Special thanks go to Vahid Kooros, who initiated the idea for this exhibition and gave his stalwart support at every stage. Paul Johnson, MFAH associate director, development and membership, also deserves recognition for his invaluable help in the fundraising efforts for this exhibition.

—Peter C. Marzio, Director
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston