From the very first points of contact in the medieval period, likely no more than “traces” themselves, Islamic calligraphy elicited a wide range of perceptions and emotions from the non-Muslim world. The inevitable confusion of those early encounters soon gave way to fascination and even awe for many. Muslim scripts, largely misunderstood and conflated with the luxurious ornament of imported textiles, metalwork, ceramics, and glass from Muslim lands, assumed a different kind of importance at the highest social and cultural levels of Europe, which were seduced by the dazzling technical perfection and sheer visual audacity of Muslim calligraphic practice. The rich material holdings of church treasuries and the lesser-known evidence of Renaissance painting—where Madonnas and saints, lavishly adorned with rich garments decorated with meticulously copied Arabic Kufic and nasth inscriptions, inadvertently proclaim the tenets of the Islamic faith—attest to this phenomenon and its extraordinary visual power.

But stories of reception by others are ultimately ancillary to understanding the forces behind the conception and development of a culture’s system of writing. In the case of Islam, that system stands as its primary cultural identifier, and the early part of that history has received considerable attention from historians. Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600–1900 sheds welcome additional light on the later “post-classical” period, an era of increased contact between the Muslim world and those outside it who sought to alternately understand, interact with, exploit, or dominate it. The authors, David J. Roxburgh and Mary McWilliams, have assembled a superb group of objects, many of them unknown even to Islamic art historians. Their strong command of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources and their welcome focus on the practice and tools of Islamic calligraphers provide new insights into the complex metaphorical, theoretical, and spiritual dimensions of this ever-vital tradition. Particularly gratifying is the collaborative aspect of this undertaking, one that involved two museums, a private collection, a curator, and a professor. Two individuals, however, deserve special gratitude. Peter Mazzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, who encouraged and supported this project, and Vahid Kooros, whose deep love for and profound understanding of the unique contributions of Islamic calligraphy served as inspiration to this undertaking. The Harvard University Art Museums, with its long tradition of teaching and collecting Islamic art, is happy to participate as co-organizer of this important effort; this exhibition provides an expanded context for deeper understanding of works in the Art Museums’ collections, and we are grateful to the authors,
lenders, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for this opportunity to collaboratively advance awareness and knowledge of Islamic calligraphy.

There is one lasting impression of this exhibition and catalogue worth noting. They remind us that there are fundamental commonalities across cultures—in this instance, all of us write to convey ideas, values, and emotions. Yet at the same time, one can sense in the apparatuses and examples assembled here something larger at work: the quiet, almost perfect, hum of a long, refined tradition of visual complexity, beauty, and perfection that has few rivals in the history of art.

—THOMAS W. LENTZ
Elizabeth and John Moores Cabot Director
Harvard University Art Museums
This publication accompanies an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), which we were invited to guest curate. The focus of the exhibition, comprising close to 150 objects, is the tools and furniture used by calligraphers in the Islamic lands from the early modern through modern periods. Selected loans of calligraphies came from the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The objects in Houston have been generously lent by an anonymous private collector who has assembled a collection that finds few equals in the world today, whether one thinks of private collections or public institutions. We have enjoyed our research visits to Houston and our many discussions with that anonymous collector: we are deeply grateful to him for forming such a collection and for making it available for study and public exhibition. The exhibition and publication have given us a rare and valuable opportunity to explore what are largely neglected aspects in the practice of Islamic calligraphy.

We owe the greatest debt of thanks to Vahid Kooros, the principal supporter of the exhibition. Christine Starkman, curator of Asian art at the MFAH, was an enthusiastic and tireless supporter of the project from its very inception, and she has addressed all aspects of its planning and organization with extreme care. We also thank with the deepest gratitude Vivian Li, curatorial assistant at the MFAH. Vivian attended to many matters large and small, from object documentation to photography, with an impressive professionalism. Jack Eby, exhibition design director, and Thomas R. DuBrock, catalogue photographer, also deserve special thanks. The publication was carefully edited by Heather Brand at the MFAH and was designed by Leslie Fitch. Diane Lovejoy, MFAH publications director, brought this publication to the attention of Patricia Fidler at Yale University Press, who lent her support with characteristic generosity and grace. At Harvard University Art Museums, we are grateful to Thomas W. Lenz, director, for his support and encouragement; Francine Flynn, Karen Gausch, and Erin Hyde of the registrar’s office; Peter Schilling, mount designer; Anne Driesse and Penley Knipe, paper conservators; Katya Kallsen and Junius Beebe, photographers; and Patricia O’Connell in the Department of Islamic and Later Indian Art. We greatly appreciate the assistance of Andreas Riedlmayer, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University, who helped to translate primary sources from Turkish. Any errors are ours alone.

—Mary McWilliams and David J. Roxburgh
The transliteration of terms and extracts from written sources in Arabic (أ.), Persian (پ.), and Turkish (ت.) has been kept to a minimum. Dates are given in Common Era and are accompanied by dates in the Islamic calendar (ه) — which begins after the Prophet Muhammad’s “Flight” (هجر) from Mecca to Medina (622 CE/1 H) — where they are provided on objects.
Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600–1900
Most people of Islamic art until the 16th century, its high cul
tion, the Qur'an was divinely reve
to the Prophet. But among Islamic Qur'ans (A. R. 1891) a
cration, but no other bo
t all books an
t throughout
Other v
the pen, wh
or actions a
with what w
was the pen'
(A. L. A. 11-1
early history of
the Prophet
Talib (d. 661)
Compassion
and “I recom
Sayings of it
culated from
ography is sp
Wisdom of p
combine tec
Calligraphy in the Islamic Lands

Most people know that calligraphy, beautiful writing, is one of the fundamental elements of Islamic art and that it has retained that status across the history of Islam from the 600s until the present day. That the art of writing in the Arabic script should have attained its high cultural and social status is no surprise. The belief that God issued His revelation, the Qur’an, in the Arabic language to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) through the angel Gabriel lent sanctity to that script as well as to written, physical records of the divinely revealed text. The chapter of the Qur’an considered to have been revealed first to the Prophet Muhammad proclaims that God “taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know” (96:4–5). The holy status of the Qur’an prompted different solutions among Islam’s four schools of law to establish the legal means by which dilapidated, old Qur’ans (A. mushaf, pl. masāḥif) were to be disposed of—whether by permanent preservation, burning, burial, or washing out the ink from their folios in water. Although no other book matched the Qur’an in holiness—as God’s eternal, uncreated word—all books and the art of writing partook of its importance.

Arabic script became the medium of choice for writing in other languages, including Persian and Turkish, throughout the Islamic lands.

Other verses in the Qur’an stress the importance of writing and its instrument the pen, while among the considerable number of traditions (A. hadīth), utterances, or actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, one learns that “[t]he pen dried up with what would be until the Day of Judgment” and that “the first thing God created was the pen” with which He wrote the totality of Creation on “the preserved tablet” (A. lawh al-maḥfūz). A host of sayings attributed to the authority of figures from the early history of Islam developed these notions about calligraphy. One such figure was the Prophet Muhammad’s son-in-law, fourth caliph and first Shi’ite imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661)—who is believed to have said, “Whoever writes ‘In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful’ in beautiful writing will enter paradise without account,” and “I recommend to you the beauty of calligraphy for it is among the keys to sustenance.”

Sayings of the early Islamic period were joined in works of belles lettres with other sayings culled from the earlier Greek tradition—including Euclid’s famous statement, “Calligraphy is spiritual geometry made visible by a bodily instrument”—as well as with the wisdom of pre-Islamic Persian culture. Some treatises from the Arabic literary tradition combine technical know-how on the practice of calligraphy with long lists of quotable
wisdom imparted by revered historical figures. One of the best-known treatises of this kind was composed by Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (b. c. 926–d. 1023), himself a scribe (A. waraq) by profession. This corpus of wisdom about calligraphy, formed in Islam’s early period, was perpetuated in calligraphic specimens, and also adorned objects used by calligraphers, up to the modern period. Aphorisms about the merit of calligraphy were often selected as the primary visual content of works of art and reveal persistent cultural attitudes about the art of writing.

One of the core elements in the literary formation of many genres, subjects, and functions that coalesced around the practice and reception of calligraphy was the concept of the “trace” (A. athar). “Trace” can also be understood as relic, vestige, or footprint, basically something left behind. The Arabic noun was used to reference works of calligraphy (as well as painting and drawing), hence the couplet “Verily our works point to us; gaze after us at our works.” However, in previous usage athar and its cognate ma’athir—“achievements,” “memorials”—had often been applied to compendia of texts attributed to the speech or deeds of important historical figures or to architectural monuments of the past, what we might today call heritage. One component of the concept of the trace, as it refers to calligraphy, related the fact that writing preserves what is in people’s minds—that writing mediated speech, which mediated thought (writing was an image of an image of an image)—hence the sayings “Handwriting is the tongue of the hand” (“Abbas), “Handwriting is the necklace of wisdom” (attributed in some sources to Ja’far b. Yahya [i.e., al-Barmakî], d. 803), and “The pen is the fetter of the intellect. Handwriting is the deployment of the senses, and the desire of the soul is attained through it” (Plato).

Another component of the concept of the trace was the notion that writing was an impressed presence; like a perpetual footprint, it recorded for posterity the moral fiber of its maker. Hence, one reads in a poem composed by the calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022):

Strive that the fingers of your hand
will write what is good.
So that it will be left behind you
in the abode of deception.9

The idea continued to have currency into the 1500s when it was enlisted in the highly metaphorical compositions of Persian writers. Commenting on the calligraphy of ‘Ali b. Abi Tālib, Shihab al-Dīn ʿAbd Allah Murvarid (in 1491–92) wrote:

Like an unbored pearl from the ocean of sanctity
is every point that came from his pearl-scattering pen.
You say it was as if his fingers were in the hands of the Omnipotent,
as if the reed in his miraculous fingers were a sign of Him.10

Elsewhere, the historian Ghīyāth al-Dīn b. Humām al-Dīn Muḥammad, known as Khvandamīr (writing before 1519), describes calligraphies as “pearls brought forth by...
the bejeweled pen of the diver from the sea of the inkwell to the shores of these folios.”

“Ocean” and “inkwell” are used by Murvaid and Khvandamir, respectively, as metaphors for the calligrapher’s body, the source from which calligraphy emanates or stems.

Even the Arabic word used for calligraphy, khatt (P. khatt; T. hat), was resonant with meaning. Persian writers used it in characteristically complex ways to conjure the image of the hair on an adolescent’s face (dark calligraphy on light paper was analogous to the physical ideal of male youth at the point when the beard first started to grow). Pre-Islamic poets working in the Arabic language, including Imru’ al-Qays, used khatt to refer to the traces in the landscape of the camp, or temporary occupation, while the lexicographer Ibn Faris (d. 1004) glossed the noun khatt as “the extended trace [sitar] of a thing,” invoking again the concept of something left behind.

The promise of calligraphy was great: it vouchsafed a future for the calligrapher not simply as a physical legacy, but as a moral record. It could be put no more directly than in the poem composed by calligrapher Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi, which he set aside his treatise on the practice of calligraphy (Sirat al-surur, “The Way of Lines of Writing,” 1514):

The aim of Murtada ‘Ali in writing
Was not merely characters and dots
But fundamentals, purity, virtue;
And he pointed this by the beauty of his writing.

Calligraphy in the historical Islamic lands was theorized in such a way that it came to embody a calligrapher’s moral character structure and not only a perfected practice that was achieved through patience and discipline. Hence calligraphy involved the calligrapher’s body in two forms of emanation: the first as a capturing of his spirit; the second as the active production of writing through physical movements of the arm and hand.

These potent ideas, often voiced through complex cultural metaphors, continued to have salience across the history of Islam and in its multiple social formations spread across different geographical regions. Written sources about Islamic calligraphy — ranging in purpose from strictly practical to philosophical in tone — reveal its high status as artistic expression and incite individuals to develop skill in its meritorious activity. Calligraphy held a doubly evidentiary status: it preserved both religious texts and the literary activity of generations of thinkers and writers; and its aestheticised expression offered a means for the calligrapher to operate as author though he was mostly copying preexisting, received, texts.

Calligraphies of different formats and functions, and books themselves, offer one way to think about the “trace” in the context of Islamic calligraphy. Another way to think about the “trace” of the calligrapher engages a wholly different corpus of material, the physical apparatus associated with the art of writing (FIG. 1). Its study entails an examination of the calligrapher’s tools — pens, knives, rests for cutting pens, burnishers, and scissors — and the calligrapher’s “furniture” — storage chests, tables, pen boxes, pen cases, and inkwells — the range of objects that made up the physical environment of writing and that were used in its processes of production. The high social status of
calligraphy and calligraphers had the result of making these inherently practical objects also subject to artistic elaboration, whether through the choice of their materials, the shaping of their physical form, or their decoration. The surplus of labor and materials that accrued in the calligrapher’s writing instruments and furniture has left a rich material legacy, particularly from the premodern through modern periods of the Islamic world.\textsuperscript{34}

By the 1500s, the Islamic lands were controlled by three principal empires, the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals. The Mughal and Ottoman dynasties lasted until 1858 and 1922, ending with direct British rule over India and the formation of the Turkish Republic, respectively, whereas Safavid power came to its end much earlier in 1732. Control over Iran ultimately passed to the Qajar dynasty, which was challenged by Riza Shah in 1921 and was brought to an end in 1925 when it was succeeded by the Pahlavis. Though the techniques of instruction and production associated with calligraphy and the arts of the book followed traditional patterns and frameworks, new types of scripts and materials continued to be added to the artistic repertoire, subtly changing its aesthetic across this chronology and these regions. Both art forms had

Figure 1
Calligraphers’ tools, storage box, and pen cases from Turkey, Iran, and India.
never been the exclusive domain of courtly patronage, and they were also pursued in the city’s workshops and guilds by either direct commissions or through speculative production for the market. The practice of calligraphy continued to be a hallmark of the literate, cultured individual and assumed the role of a personal avocation, while for others skill in writing served as a primary occupation.

Even in the face of various internal reformist tendencies—in both political and cultural spheres—associated with the advent of modernity and increased exposure to Western European cultures through commerce, diplomacy, and travel, the supremacy of calligraphy was unchallenged. Though understudied until recent years, the early modern through modern periods of the Islamic lands remained a vibrant phase in calligraphy’s artistic history, a history characterized by an ever-increasing expansion in subroyal patronage and the emergence of new stylistic synergies.23 It may well be that, even in light of printing, other reproductive technologies such as the photograph, and the transplantation of nonindigenous Western artistic institutions (the art academy) and styles (verisimilitude) over the course of the late 1700s and into the 1800s, the art of writing acquired a still stronger capacity to function as cultural identifier as art and as practice.