of making book covers in “Islamic lacquer” is generally credited to Persian bookbinders of the late 1400s working at the court of the Timurid ruler Sultan Husayn Mirza (r. 1470–1506) in Herat. In this technique, the paper pastebord is covered not by leather, but by designs painted in opaque watercolor, which are then covered in clear varnish. Although either is signed or dated, these two book covers were created about 1800, probably in Isfahan or Shiraz, the leading centers for lacquer production in nineteenth-century Iran. It is next to impossible to capture the ineffable quality of lacquer objects in photographs that, of necessity, minimize reflection. Much of the charm of these works of art comes from their allover shine. The meticulously painted designs seem remote, even elusive, when viewed through layers of varnish. Artists took advantage of the translucency of the lacquer to create optical effects. The reddish background of the central field in FIG. 25 glitters because a sparkling substance, such as ground naqar, has been added to the paint.

The greater freedom that a painter enjoys relative to a leather worker is immediately apparent in the designs of these lacquer bookbindings. Painting has an unrivelled color palette and is an inherently more flexible means of laying down line or adding color to a surface than tanning, punching, gouging, or stamping. Lacquer painting proved an ideal medium in which to develop a hybrid painting style that melded the traditional Persian delight in representation of flowers with the illusionism of Western art, and the planar book cover provided a suitable format for artistic experimentation.

For both lacquer bindings, the artists have retained borders of highly stylized gold decoration. The borders contrast dramatically with the painting in the field. Because the border overlaps the flowers and leaves in the second of these book covers, one has the sense of looking through a window. However, naturalistic the rendering of plants may appear, the simultaneous appearance of narcissus, tulips, roses, primrose, and hazelnuts can only represent an imaginary garden. The small, gray-and-white birds perched on rose stems reference the nightingale (bulbul) of Persian poetry, whose plaintive song expresses his longing for the beloved rose.

The stylized border of one lacquer book cover (FIG. 27) encloses a different sort of painting. Signed by the Iranian painter Abu Talib al-Mudarris, the exterior covers feature fernlike fronds with eccentric and irregular lobes that coil and curl, but never overlap, on a light red background. The fronds are outlined in tiny gold dots, like filigree, and the lobes appear dappled or marbled in medium to dark red. The lacquer doublures of this book cover make an equally emphatic impression (FIG. 28). In composition, they follow the relatively traditional format of central medallion with pendants and corner pieces. The
field is a brilliant red ground; it is literally radiant, because it is painted over a reflective surface, probably silver or gold leaf. The medallions and corner pieces stand out against the ground in appliqué and are painted in tiny rivulets of coppery gold against black. The central medallion terminates above and below in anchor shapes; tiny eyes are painted in the indentations, so that the negative space forms pigeon heads. The overall effect of the decoration is scintillating. A pen box signed by Abu Talib combines the decoration found on the exterior and interior covers of this Qur’an (fig. 43).

The artistry and luxuriousness of calligraphers’ tools testify to the pervasive reverence for the written word that characterized Islamic societies. The tools also demonstrate in a quite graphic way the connections that existed between calligraphers and Sufi orders. It was not unusual for a calligrapher to join a Sufi order, or for dervishes to practice calligraphy. The Bektashi and Mevlevi orders especially promoted the art.

The representation of dervishes on the Persian pen boxes and the repeated use of dervish turbans on calligraphers’ tools are explicit references to mystical allegiances. More abstractly, the small cypress trees appearing as a decorative motif on tools reflect the mystical poetry generally associated with Sufism. Within this context, the tall cypress symbolizes the beloved with whom the soul yearns to be united. The shapes of the individual Arabic letters inspired mystics and poets to assign them hidden meanings. For example, in the inscription “Ahmad,” pierced into one steel maktā (fig. 4), the letter “a” (alif) that begins the word has been positioned in the center and exaggerated in height. “Ahmad” is a common name in Islamic lands, but it also means “heavenly.” The prominence given to the letter alif in this composition was intended to evoke its complex and overlapping associations, such as the Unity of God, the stature of the beloved, or the “straight path” followed by the believer.

The connection of religious orders to artists and craftsmen was not limited to calligraphers, although calligraphy frequently served as a link. Before the late 1800s, artists’ guilds often had a distinctly religious personality, and, like Sufi orders, were concerned with training novices and promoting ethical behavior. The towering figure of ‘Ali b. Abi Talib unites many of these strands. Often cited as one of Islam’s greatest calligraphers, ‘Ali was also claimed as a patron of artists’ groups because of his reputation for learning. As the ideal virtuous “youth” (A. fād), his actions — including the practice of calligraphy — were widely prescribed. Calligraphy often appears as the connective tissue in Islamic society. The Islamic calligrapher practiced an art that defined and shaped the very society in which he was embedded, and which was the wellspring of his profession.
The art and craftsmanship entailed in the production of the calligrapher's tools find equal expression in the expanded array of calligrapher's apparatuses. These apparatuses include pen cases, pen boxes, inkwells, storage chests, and low tables, the objects or "furniture" that constituted the calligrapher's personal work space. The practice of calligraphy did not require any particular kind of architecture—calligraphers could work equally efficiently in any space outside or inside, provided they had sufficient light and could sit or stand comfortably—and it did not necessitate anything more than the most basic tools and materials.  

Representations of calligraphers at work generally depict the scribe seated in a cross-legged position, with a firm surface drawn up over one knee to hold the sheet of paper, and a cluster of implements and objects set on the ground before him, generally a pen case, inkwell, and sometimes paper scissors. Other paintings identify scribes, or individuals empowered with skill in writing, through a pen case hanging from the belt—these were often simple metal casings made to hold a single pen—or a portable pen case tucked under the fabric sash wrapped around the waist.  

Despite the modest requirements of a working space and its tools, the high social status of calligraphy and its practice generated the conditions in which a surplus of meaning accrued in the calligrapher's paraphernalia. This was true wherever one looks, whether to calligraphy pursued as private avocation or calligraphy practiced as a professional occupation in state-organized chanceries or religious institutions. By the subject matter of their decoration and the intricate workmanship of often valuable materials, these objects expressed their owner's social standing, rank, and profession. Like so many other commodities, these objects projected ideal cultural identities and affiliations and signaled their owner's prestige.  

Storage Boxes and Tables

A number of objects were made for the practice of calligraphy, ranging in size and purpose from storage boxes to low tables. Two examples (FIG. 20), though of modest size, hint at the potential visual effect of inlay executed in contrasting materials. One storage box set on small legs is inlaid in colored woods and bone, the sliding lid opening to reveal a storage space. A smaller box is similarly decorated with inlay, though here bone is combined with tortoiseshell laid over a metal foil. A strip of leather stretched taut across the top provided a surface for sharpening knives, while the panel at the side slides
Pen box, Turkey, 1800s, wood inlaid with silver, bone, and colored woods, 3 × 3.7 × 8.6 inches (7.5 × 9.4 × 21.9 cm) (rest); pen box with sharpening strap, bearing the inscription "May you have God’s assistance" (al-aun Allah ‘alayka), Turkey, late 1700s, wood with tortoiseshell, gold leaf, and bone inlay, leather, interior lined with red velvet, 2 × 7.7 × 1.9 inches (5.2 × 19.5 × 4.9 cm) (front).

Tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl were combined in the decoration of some of the most visually striking objects (Fig. 30). By offering the perfect contrast between light and dark, the two materials enabled strong contrasts between figure and ground. The apparent iridescence of mother-of-pearl (nacre) is caused by the fact that its constituent elements—hexagonally shaped calcium-carbonate crystals—are approximately the same thickness as the wavelength of visible light. This creates an interference of light that produces an effect of different colors of light from different viewing positions. The interaction between visible light and tortoiseshell was enhanced by setting the thin, prepared slice of tortoiseshell over a sheet of gold leaf or metal foil. Light passes through the tortoiseshell, reflects off the underlying foil, and then refracts through the tortoiseshell. The first binding known to have combined these materials dates from the era of Ottoman ruler Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566), though the combination of tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl becomes increasingly common in larger-sized objects of Ottoman furniture from the late 1500s onward, including doors to be used for calligraphy. Rather than create forms, this technique encloses the calligraphic work. These elements...
doors to buildings, Qur’an stands, and storage chests. Before that time, the favored materials used for contrasting inlay were wood and ivory or bone. These continued to be used from the 1500s onward; though they lacked the potent visual appeal of mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell, they had the advantage of being less expensive and easier to work.

In one Ottoman storage box (Fig. 30), the entire outer surface is inlaid with complex geometries of tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl arranged as a series of rectangles enclosed in borders. The outer edges are treated with a saw-tooth pattern, assembled from dark wood and bone, and the lid continues with the luxurious materials found on the sides. Rather than geometry, the chosen visual mode here is an organic flow of curvilinear plant forms. Four corner pieces, framing the central cusped medallion, contain split palmettes. The medallion contains an inscription extracted from the Qur’an and of great salience to calligraphers — “Who taught by the pen” (A. alladhi ‘allama bi‘l-qalam) — crafted with as much fluency in mother-of-pearl as if it had been written in ink. The inscription is enclosed by four lotus flowers and flower buds linked together by a scrolling stalk. These elements are executed in bone, probably because of the sheer difficulty involved.

Figure 30
Calligrapher’s storage box bearing the Qur’anic (95:4) inscription “Who taught by the pen” (alladhi ‘allama bi‘l-qalam), Turkey, 1700s, wood inlaid with tortoiseshell (over gold leaf), ivory, brass, mother-of-pearl, and bone, 5.7 × 13.0 × 8 inches (14.4 × 35.1 × 20.3 cm).
in rendering these designs in mother-of-pearl with the details they contain. In any case, it was quite common for objects of such high quality to combine cheaper materials like bone in their program of inlay.

The interior of the storage box (Fig. 31) is also sheathed in tortoiseshell over foil and segmented by strips of bone. A deep groove at one side ascends to the platform at the front edge, where one finds four lidded containers set into the structure of the box. These containers and lids are made from ivory, the lids intricately carved as a sequence of leaves radiating out from the center, which is surmounted by a small piece of wood. The four containers were almost certainly used for inks and for the fine sand used for drying ink.

Grand in size is a low table designed for a scribe of considerable economic means (Fig. 32). The table is set on four legs and contains a drawer for storage. The broad flat surface on the top provided an ideal work surface for the calligrapher seated next to it. The entire surface is covered with inlay, the patterns on the upper surface and side panels dominated by geometric forms. Bordering these panels are zigzag patterns of triangles, interlacing diaper patterns, the common saw-tooth pattern, and an additional broad panel on the front and back that sets pale cloud-band motifs over a dark ebony ground. The contrast of dark and light materials in wood and bone, though subject to modulations according to the palette, (t. 1574-80).

The chair near the table (Fig. 33) is of a well-known form. Some of the bone inlays in the seat and back rest on the brass and the two square panels on the armrests are divided by cuts in the wood and inlaid with bone and ivory. The seat is covered with leather. The armrests are embellished with more bone inlay and a finely carved and pierced design. The legs and horizontal supports are of wood. The chair is a combination of materials and stands as an example of fine craftsmanship.
Pen boxes and pen cases

Some of the oldest known pen boxes from the Islamic lands are made from brass or bronze inlaid with gold and silver and assume the form of a rectangular, lidded box. This form of pen box continued to be made into the modern period, though a wide variety of materials were enlisted for its production.

Among the more striking are those examples made from wood and inlaid on their outer surfaces with tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl. One pen box uses these inlay materials (Fig. 33) for the framed panel on the lid and a band running around the outside. The panels are separated by inlay fashioned from pieces of dark wood and bone arranged in a saw-tooth pattern and other patterns around the edge of the lid and the