Above | Figure 41
Pen case with inkwell, India, 1700s–1800s, silver and niello, 10.7 × 3.9 × 2.2 inches (27.3 × 9.8 × 5.7 cm).

Below | Figure 42
Pen case with inkwell, stamped with tagus, signed by Mehmed, Turkey, c. 1839–40, silver, 2.4 × 14 × 3 inches (6.1 × 33 × 7.6 cm).

In the preparation of the ink, made of powdered charcoal and water, there is room for a lot of variation. You can add water to the ink to make it more liquid or add more charcoal to make it thicker. You can also add gum arabic or other binders to help it hold its shape. The ingredients needed for the ink will depend on the type of ink you want to make. In other words, it is a very personal choice. The ink is usually made by grinding the charcoal into a fine powder and mixing it with water. The ink can be made with different types of charcoal, such as willow or bamboo, and can be made in various colors depending on the type of charcoal used. The ink is then stored in a container, such as a bottle with a lid. These containers can be made from metal, glass, or other materials.
In the world of post-Safavid Iran, pen cases (P. qalamdan) were most frequently made of lacquered papier-mâché; the same materials were used to make boxes, mirrors, devotional objects, and bookbindings (see Figs. 25–28). The pen case was assembled from two pieces. An outer casing held a retractable compartment that offered ample room for pens and an inkwell, as well as scissors, a penknife, and a spoon for adding water to ink. The craftsman’s skill lay in fashioning the compartment so that it was held snugly inside the casing without the need of an external lock. Two processes were used to make the qalamdan. In one method, layers of paper were built up over a mold — treated with soap to prevent the paper from sticking — using an adhesive paste (P. sirsh) made from bulbs of the asphodel lily (Asphodelus ramosus). The adhesive bonded each sheet of paper to the next, and the number of paper layers was counted to achieve the desired thickness. The second method used two molds and paper pulp pounded with asphodel paste in a mortar.59

The paper fabric of both methods had the advantage of producing a lightweight object that was resilient and whose surfaces could be decorated with intricate pictorial subjects, sometimes composed exclusively of floral patterns in polychrome and gold. In other examples, color was suppressed in favor of a near monochrome, modeled after European prints, and bathed beneath layers of lacquer. Other examples devoid of figural content exploited the potential of the medium to create relief. In one example (Fig. 43), medallions rendered in gold and red stripes are slightly raised from the surface of the lid. The medallions seem have been applied onto a ground resembling a marbled
were seen in pictorial representation of the 17th century, as seen in works by the artist Assilah.

This late 19th-century pumice stone was used in landscapes with children, women, lopes in carts, and landscapes on the lid of a box. The artist's name was transferred to the lid of a box, and the period of its production is uncertain. The production of qalamds was unabated during the 18th century despite the introduction of printing techniques and the impact of technology on the livelihood of professional copyists. European sources also provide much information on the cost of qalamds and inform us that some could take up to five months to make.

Because the qalamds were in effect multiples, made in large numbers to meet the demands of local and foreign marketers, their pictorial programs were repeated. The compositions on the outer surfaces of the qalamdan could be arranged as continuous, uninterrupted spaces, or organized as a number of vignettes, the interstices filled with floral patterns. The varied subjects include portrait busts of men and women, bucolic scenes of landscapes, views of towns and villages, animals, bird and flower themes, narrative scenes including battles, weddings, and royal assemblies, and images of Christian or classical subjects. Conventional behaviors controlled how these subjects were presented to the viewer.
were selected, combined, and composed on the outer surfaces of the pen case. The pictorial corpus reveals a highly inventive artistic practice that looked to Persian models of the 1700s and that continued to be inspired by newly acquired models from European sources. This was especially true in Iran after the 1850s, when artists adapted photographs or lithographs into their painted works, in the same way that earlier generations had assimilated printed sources (engravings).

Three examples of qalamans (Figs. 44–46) portray a Sufi dervish or an Indian woman on their lids. The Indian woman, identifiable as such by her clothes, stands in a landscape cut by a river (Fig. 44). In the distance we see trees and a building and bluish mountains beyond; ducks swim in the foreground near two small antelopes. Both sides of the pen case display the same themes: centrally positioned vignettes of landscape are settings for a mounted rider to hunt a lion in one scene, and two antelopes in another. These vignettes are flanked by portrait busts of a young woman and a man; the surfaces of the rounded ends show landscapes and buildings. An inscription on the lid dates the object and includes the phrase “O! King of Najaf!” a reference to the Shi’ite imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, who is buried in the city of Najaf. This pious invocation names Najaf and infers the person of ‘Ali, but in fact it was a clever pun that conflated the artist’s name, Najaf ‘Ali. A corpus of signed and dated lacquer objects evidences his period of activity between the 1810s and 1860s. He presided over a generation of craftsmen who followed in his artistic footsteps.

Dervishes are found at the center of the lid in another two examples. One portrays a Sufi dervish from the waist up (Fig. 45), identifiable by his kashkul, headdress, wooden walking stick, and long curly hair, which he caresses with a raised hand. The kashkul was a bowl in which the dervish received charity, either alms or food. Both ends of the lid are covered with a rich polychrome ornament and gold composed of overlaid cartouches that contain palmettes and flowers. This decoration continues around the sides. Another qalamdan, possibly by Muhammad Baqir Samirumi, depicts a standing dervish (probably Nur ‘Ali Shah), resting his axe on one shoulder and carrying his kashkul slung across his chest (Fig. 46). Nur ‘Ali Shah was poisoned (and hence martyred) in 1797 by Aqa Muhammad Bibbihani as part of the anti-Sufi program sponsored by Qajar ruler Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1797–1824). In time, Nur ‘Ali Shah was regarded as “the spiritual reviver of the Ni’matullahi order in Iran.” He was a highly charismatic spiritual figure, a prolific poet and prose writer, and greatly contributed to the expansion of the broadly popular Ni’matullahi.

Above and below the dervish are two oval-shaped vignettes containing depictions of green parrots (top) and a green parrot and a white cockatoo (bottom). The birds perch on branches set against landscapes, one showing a sunset. Interstitial spaces on the lid — and on the sides — are decorated with sprays of golden flowers and leaves of different
types set over a dark ground. The sides of the pen box comprise vignettes of landscapes with paired cattle and ibex flanked by smaller vignettes of pure landscape. Although the parrots were sometimes combined with figures unrelated to Sufism, the combination of parrot and dervish on this example may suggest a specific symbolism.

Farid al-Din' Attar's book Mantiq al-tair (The Conference of the Birds, 1287) narrates a journey made by thirty birds through the seven stages of the Sufi's path to “annihilation” (A. fa'ana’), whereby they will achieve union with God—this can only be accomplished by forgetting the ego and the desires it fosters in the self. The birds, led by the hoopoe bird, seek out their king, the simurgh, who has the power to help them overcome any obstacle. When the birds reach the end of their arduous journey, they have forgotten the self, and it is then that the hoopoe reveals that the simurgh they seek is in fact their collective—si-murgh means “thirty birds” in Persian. The parrot is one of the birds in this tale. Specifically, it is a bird that longs for immortality before it undertakes the journey. Near the beginning of 'Attar's story, the parrot loses heart and pleads its beauty as the reason...
for which it should discontinue the journey. But the parrot, like the other birds, presses on and achieves the goal of attaining oneness with the divine. The parrot imagery on the qalamdan in conjunction with the portrait of the youthful Sufi may have caused a specific vector of meaning to have been attached to the birds. Like the Sufi, the parrot suffered hardship in the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. By extension, the iconography was relevant to the path of calligraphy, whose acquisition was often cast as a personal, spiritual journey of devoted self-sacrifice. Another possible meaning of the parrot draws on the poetry of Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi from his Masnuri-yi masnavi (begun between 1258 and 1261). In his Sufiic poetry, Rumi likens the Sufi sheikh to a mirror set before the student — the student learns correct behavior from the sheikh (the mirror is a complex motif frequently invoked in Sufi thought, especially the notion that the Sufi's heart is so polished by piety, and the self so annihilated, that the heart reflects the divine). This relationship between sheikh and student is analogized by Rumi through the image of the parrot set before a mirror in order to teach him how to talk. 28
The Calligrapher’s Practice

Transmission of knowledge of the practice of calligraphy could be realized through various mechanisms. The least mediated mode of instruction resulted from direct training by a master who imparted advice by example to the student in all aspects of writing, from the shaping of letters to their composition on the page, the preparation of tools, and the production of materials and their use. It was not uncommon for calligraphers to seek out instruction and advice from several masters in the course of their career, but direct instruction was by no means the only form of access to lessons in practice.

The effort to comprehend the exemplary calligraphies of earlier historical epochs — often quite remote in time — is given texture by one highly instructive example. Several efforts were made to reconstruct the calligraphic practice of Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022), held up as a key figure in the historical development of the “six scripts” (A. qalam al-sitt), whose canon was established by Ibn Muqla (d. 940). While Ibn Muqla regularized a canon and subjected its scripts to rigorous proportional relations and geometry (termed in Arabic khatt al-mansub, “the proportioned script”), Ibn al-Bawwab is credited with adding elegance to this canon of scripts by a new mode of trimming the pen.

In addition to leaving a physical legacy in the form of books and single-sheet specimens, Ibn al-Bawwab composed a treatise on the art of calligraphy (Ra‘iyya fi-khatt, “Ode Rhyming in the Letter ‘R’ on Calligraphy”). He imparted several kinds of advice to the reader, from preparatory processes, including the shaping of the pen, to the actual production, or performance, of writing. Later calligraphers — Ibn al-Wahid and Ibn al-Basit, active from the late 1200s through the early 1300s, and Muhammad b. Hasan al-Tibi (before 1303) — turned to Ibn al-Bawwab’s text and attempted to decode the advice it seemed to contain. The literary economy of the poetry, and perhaps the coyness of its author, who did not want to reveal all of his secrets, were features that limited or constrained the complete understanding of Ibn al-Bawwab’s “method” or “way” (A. tariqa). This was something about which the later writers complained. In addition to reading the calligrapher’s written source, they also turned to specimens signed by or attributed to Ibn al-Bawwab, contemplating their elements with the eye alone and attempting to take apart the process of writing that had formed them step by step. In so doing, they were trying to extract information about the proportional system followed by Ibn al-Bawwab, how he had cut his pen to produce such elegance, and to generally assess the comprehensive aesthetic effect of his pieces of writing.⁶⁹