Functions and Contexts of Calligraphy

Proficiency in the production, and/or reproduction, of calligraphy was obviously valued, as was efficiency and legibility. Calligraphers, especially scribes copying manuscripts in imperial-sponsored workshops (P. kətkəhəne; T. nəkkəşəne), or bazaars, often needed to meet stipulated quotas dictated by patrons or to keep up with the demands of the open market. The same abilities were prerequisites for secretaries and scribes staffing bureaucratic institutions in the governmental machineries of early modern Iran under the late Safavid, Zand, and Qajar dynasties, and in the Ottoman lands. Cadres of scribes, assigned to administrative work matching their level of skill, were responsible for generating thousands of official documents in the royal chancellery. The most capable among them not only had excellent penmanship but were also well-versed in the conventions of official correspondence, generally referenced by the term “composition” or “style” (A. isḥāq).

Special scripts were developed for official correspondence—they were easier to write and often had the added advantage of being exceedingly difficult to read for those not trained in them. These included tā‘īq, nasta‘īq, šikasta, divanī, and celifāvanī. One imperial decree (P. firman) issued in the name of Muzaffar al-Din Shah uses the more legible nasta‘īq script (Fig. 52). Several elements make the document immediately identifiable as an official text: the seal stamped in black ink at the center top; the gold inscriptions at the upper right and at the beginning of the first line of text composed in nasta‘īq and tughra’s scripts of standardized protocols; and the long thin format of paper with writing generously spaced down the length of the scroll and whose lines gently turn upward at the left-hand edge. These features also function as a guarantee of the document’s authenticity. After copying was completed, the firman was decorated with illumination. A variety of documents employed unique protocols and formal features—such as the imperial monogram (tughra) of the Ottoman sultan—as a means of visually corroborating authenticity.

The “six cursive scripts” (muhkamm, muhāqqaq, muhāqafa, tawḍīḥ, riq‘ā, and tawqī‘) continued to be used for specific purposes, and another form of cursive script, nasta‘īq, developed in Iran in the late 1300s, also maintained its importance in the arts of the book in the early modern and modern periods. Conventional patterns governed how and where these scripts were used, and they were matched to textual content and function. Other types of script and contexts of calligraphy, however, existed that did not serve overtly practical functions.

Since the late 1400s, calligraphers had increasingly made single-sheet calligraphy specimens as a mode of artistic production freed from any precise need. These texts were usually short poems of different kinds referenced collectively as “fragments” (A./P. qif‘a), a term denoting the format of the specimen itself. These were usually rectangular sheets, and the calligraphy was penned on them in either horizontal or diagonal compositions. Calligraphers made qif‘as as a form of personal artistic expression and as a vehicle for regular practice. The networks and various circumstances of social exchange by
which these works circulated from calligrapher to collector are not precisely known, but a common result was for the gathered specimens to be mounted in an album (P. munaqqa’), perhaps alongside paintings and drawings. The practice of album making had its beginnings in Iran in the 1400s and continued into the 1800s, when Europeans in the Islamic lands also adopted the cultural practice (Fig. 53). Album making was widespread throughout Iran and Turkey by the mid-1500s, and in India by the late 1500s.

Yet another form of practice exercise is termed sighh mashq in Persian, musawwad in Arabic, and kanulsus in Turkish. In each instance, the term references a practice of "blackening" the paper with ink (Figs. 54 and 55). The form had its origins in the early 1600s and became one of the most characteristic elements of calligraphy in Iran, where it was written in boldly scaled nasta’liq or shikasta, but it was also common in Turkey. This kind of practice sheet is immediately recognizable, as visually distinct from other calligraphies as the qit’ā. The sighh mashq offered the calligrapher an outlet for practice whereby characters and words were composed on the sheet and were often written at different orientations relative to each other. In other words, reading the text required that the sheet be rotated (this feature occurs in Fig. 55, where the text written at the top right is upside down relative to the orientation of the other lines). Some sighh mashq are densely built-up surfaces of writing over writing, rendering barely legible texts visually akin to a palimpsest, while others repeat letter shapes, slightly offset from each other, as if to suggest their translation across the paper sheet in a rapid sequence of repetition (Fig. 54). In this last example, the upper portion of the written text repeats the Persian ast/ asat ("is"), while lower down— in the third line—one reads dan ma/ ma/ ma/ man. The same repetitions of phonemes or groups of phonemes occurs down the sheet and is readily visible to the eye, yielding a pattern of repeating images and sounds, a virtual cacophony of sometimes meaningless text. A coherent textual meaning was not the point of the sighh mashq for which calligraphers developed a particular formal logic and artistic value. Though the form might have begun as a practice, it quickly turned into a virtuoso performance. Among the most personal expressions of calligraphers, sighh mashq were avidly collected and gathered into albums where they were appreciated for their composition and abstracted treatments of words.

Larger panels of calligraphy (T. lehā) were also made by calligraphers, especially under the Ottomans from the 1800s to the early 1900s. The large formats called for large-scaled scripts (T. qori; A./P. jali) that were big enough to be legible from a distance. Lehās had an eminently public aspect—freed completely from the physical constraints of a book or an album—because they could be framed and hung on walls. Indeed, lehās could also be transferred to the walls of mosques and other religious buildings. Calligraphers created lehā compositions often by working at a smaller size—which was more manageable—and then enlarging their design by means of gridded papers. The scaled-up design could then be transferred to another surface for completion by means of a pouncing process. The scaled-up design (T. kalīp) — or the calligraphic original, if
large enough — was laid over a sheet of paper and the outline of the calligraphy pricked with a sharp instrument at intervals. The pinpricks were left in the paper sheet below. These sheets could then be used to transfer the design to other surfaces; the sheets carrying pinholes were laid over the surface to receive the design and a bag of chalk powder (the pounce) dusted over it. Traces of chalk were left on the underlying surface and could be inked and completed in whatever medium was desired.  

The process allowed multiple copies of especially esteemed designs to be made and disseminated, often exceeding the memory of the original designer’s name. Two examples from Iran (fols. 56 and 57) employ the same phrase and design but are executed
in different materials, one in ink, the other in a polychrome painting that was varnished. The text, an extract from the Qur’an, was a typical content of these works, as were pious invocations such as the bumala. In another example from Iran (Fig. 58) designed by the calligrapher Mirza Ghulam Riza (d. 1886–87), three panels are carefully inked in black and set over an elaborate pattern of scrolling golden leaves and flowers studded with dots of bright blue and red. The panels praise Dust ‘Ali Khan (master of the mint) and were once part of a much larger set probably intended to be translated onto tiles and then onto the walls of a building.
The multiplication of calligraphies was not an exclusively modern phenomenon, and reproduction was of course integral to the calligrapher's training. Two large-scale calligraphies executed in lacquer attest to this (figs. 59 and 60). These massive panels were made in Iran in 1603–4 by an artist named 'Ali Quili Beg, but, as the signature also indicates, the text was taken from a design by 'Imad al-Hasani. 'Imad al-Hasani became royal calligrapher in Isfahan under Safavid ruler Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) and was a prolific practitioner of this art. As with previous generations of master calligraphers, his specimens made in different formats, but especially the poetic qī'a,