The Qur'an, Scholarship
and the Islamic Arts of the Book

A FURTHER SELECTION
OF FINE MANUSCRIPT MATERIAL
Preface

The twenty-nine items assembled in this catalogue testify to the ubiquity and paramount importance of scribal skills across the vast extent of the Islamic lands from medieval times to the recent past. The beginning is unequivocal: vellum pages from the Qur’an, written down a thousand years and more ago in different forms of the Kufic script, maintain a powerful and perennial attraction. We include Qur’an manuscripts from later periods, whole or only a single surviving section, their colophons providing information, so often elusive, on the circumstances in which they were copied. There is calligraphy for its own sake: demonstrations of a sublime refinement of style in the work of major Ottoman scribes, while in one unusual survival a famous Arabic poem of the pre-Islamic ‘Age of Ignorance’ is elaborated on a monumental scroll as a virtuoso exercise in penmanship.

The choice of material in this catalogue is intended to complement the range of manuscripts illustrated and discussed in our Catalogue 1213, *The Qur’an and Calligraphy*. Here, however, we take the additional step of including major texts in copies that are significant for their early date, provenance, or quality. Those copied in Spain and North Africa are particularly revealing as to their origins, but there are manuscripts from Syria that are no less important. One work, an historical account of the Ottomans, is a rare example of an illustrated seventeenth-century Turkish manuscript. It contains three miniature cityscapes of a type that derive from European topographical views of the 16th century, but uninhibited here in deference to the Islamic prohibition on representational art.

European interest in the manuscript traditions of the Islamic world goes back for many centuries. During the Middle Ages, especially through the mediation of Spain, the Christian West became hugely indebted to the intellectual content of these books. But it was not until the European Renaissance that Islamic manuscripts entered our material culture in substantial numbers. If the great national collections of European cities owed their origins to the energy of Renaissance pioneers, their later consolidation resulted from the colonial encounter with Islamic culture, the rise of Orientalism in its various forms, and the enthusiasm of powerful, individual collectors. Today in London we witness a continuing fascination on the part of institutions and individuals, trade and scholarship, with the handwritten legacy of our neighbouring culture. In the preparation of this catalogue we are grateful to the assistance of a number of friends and in particular to the contribution of Tim Stanley.
Qur'anic Material in the Kufic Scripts

**ITEM 1**

**Folio with illumination and text**

NEAR EAST, 9TH OR 10TH CENTURY AD

15.7 × 9 CM

The opening leaf of Part 7 of a copy of the Qur'an in thirty parts (ajza') prepared on vellum in the horizontal format. Both this and the next item appear to be from the same volume. The recto of item 1 bears a full-page illumination, originally one of a pair (compare Sotheby's, London, 22 April 1999, lot 5). The size of the design (5.5 × 11.7 cm) corresponds to that of the text area on the verso, the upper and lower borders being formed by the lines on which the first and last lines of text stand. This alignment appears to have been a common practice when scribes were preparing such frontispieces. The design is divided into three parts. The smaller central compartment is rectangular and is filled with a diaper pattern. The outer compartments are square, and each contains a central lozenge filled with a larger pattern of strapwork. There are interlocking borders, and an outer border of interlace. A large and splendid palmette device protrudes into the margin. It is composed of a symmetrical arrangement of split leaves around a central blossom.

The verso is inscribed with five lines of a Kufic script, within an area measuring 12 × 7 cm. The text consists of part of verse 83 of the surah al-Ma'idah (v). The script is part of Déroche's group D, either D.1 or D.11, which occurs in many leaves from codices attributed to the 9th century (Déroche 1992, pp.36–37, and table IV; see also Stanley 1996, pp.2–6). Vocalization and other aids to pronunciation are supplied by means of a system of coloured dots.

A juz' with five lines of text to the page would have consisted of approximately 80 folios. One example dated by Déroche to the 10th century AD (Déroche 1992, no.59) is smaller at 6.2 × 9.3 cm than the present example, but both have five lines to the page with four or five words to the line. It has 69 folios, with four lacunae amounting to not more than ten folios.

**ITEM 2**

**Page of illumination**

NEAR EAST, 9TH OR 10TH CENTURY AD

9.5 × 16 CM

An illuminated page from the same multi-part manuscript as the previous item. One side has a panel of illumination measuring 5.5 ×
executed in gold and colours. The motif employed in most cases is a small, segmented band set at an oblique angle, but at one place on the recto this is replaced by a roundel containing the word *thulūtbātin* ('thirty', 30 'verses'). The leaf has a guard strip along one side, indicating that it was made as a single folio.

ITEM 4

Folio with illumination

NEAR EAST, 9TH OR 10TH CENTURY AD
23 x 31.5 CM

A single leaf from a copy of the Qur'an on vellum. As in the previous item, the presence of a guard strip indicates that the leaf was prepared as a single folio. It has five lines of a Kufic script within a text area measuring 20.5 x 14 cm. The text is the heading, *bismillah* and verse 1 of the surah al-*Hādīth* (xxxiii). The script is a slightly less refined version of that categorized by Déroche as D.1 (see also Stanley 1966, p.6). The distance between the lines is 2.5 cm, and the *alif* is 3 cm in height. Diacritics are in the form of short strokes, written at an angle, whilst vocalization and other aids to pronunciation are supplied by a system of coloured dots. The single verse is punctuated by a gold rosette, which may be a later addition.

The surah heading is reserved within a finely illuminated horizontal panel. The illumination was executed in red, gold and sepia, offset by the natural ivory tone of the vellum. The title and verse count are in white Kufic outlined in gold and set against a ground of gold foliage. The two parts of the heading are separated by a white circle containing a knot motif, again in white. The circle is attached to the inner border of the panel, which is also white, and there is an outer border of gold squares filled alternately with four oblique lines and one oblique line running in the opposite direction, flanked by two dots. In the margin there is a large and complex palmette-based device.

ITEM 3

Monumental folio

NEAR EAST, 9TH OR 10TH CENTURY AD
25 x 35 CM

A leaf from a monumental copy of the Qur'an on vellum, in the horizontal format. The text is from verses 32–34 of the surah Fāṭir (xxvii) on the recto and from verses 34–37 on the verso. The script is a fine example of the type of Kufic categorized by Déroche as D.1 (Déroche 1992, p.44), and there are ten lines to the page. The distance between the lines is 1.5 cm, which is also the length of the *alif*. The diacritics were originally confined to one or two strokes placed above or below the letter *sin* or *‘ayn*, but at a much later date a complete set of diacritical dots was added. The vowels are indicated by a system of large red dots, while verses are punctuated by ornamental motifs
ITEM 5

Bifolium with compact lines
NEAR EAST, 9TH OR 10TH CENTURY AD
10 × 13.5 CM

A bifolium from a copy of the Qur'an written on vellum with six lines of script to the page. The text consists of part of verse 120 from the surah Tasuresh (ix) and parts of verses 2 and 3 from the surah Yusuf (5). The Kufic script is that categorized by Déroche as 0.1. The distance between the lines is 1 cm, and the length of the alif is 1.5 cm. The lines of script are therefore written so closely together that they intermingle, but the scribe has so contrived it that the letters never overlap. There are no diacritics, but vowels are marked by a system of coloured dots. Verses are marked by pyramids of three gold dots.

ITEM 6

Leaf with illuminations
NEAR EAST, 9TH OR 10TH CENTURY AD
12 × 17.5 CM

A folio from a copy of the Qur'an on vellum, with five lines of script to the page. The distance between the lines is 1 cm and the height of the alif is 1.5 cm. The text on the recto is from verses 58–60 from the surah al-Rām (xxx), and that on the verso is from verse 60 of al-Rām, followed by the title and part of the kasemallah of surah Luqmān (xxxx). The script is that categorized by Déroche as 0.1. Vowels are indicated by a system of red dots, and verses are punctuated by pointed devices framed by gold, red and green dots, bearing the inscription Ayah in gold. In the right-hand margin at the end of al-Rām there is a complex ornamental device composed of three interlocking squares set in a lobed medallion. This is inscribed with the word sab'as in gold, indicating that the last verse in al-Rām was the seventy-first according to an archaic system of counting the verses. According to the count used today, the surah has 60 verses. The heading of Luqmān was written in gold, in a hand identical to that of the main text. The number of verses is given in the grammatically irregular form, thalathān saw-ara'.