THE Harmony of Letters

ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY FROM THE TAREQ RAJAB MUSEUM
Above: A qira’ah by the great Ottoman calligrapher Hulusi Duman (1642-98).

Front cover: Pages from Al-Asma’ al-Husna (The Beautiful Names), a book which describes the 99 attributes of God.
The Harmony of Letters

Islamic Calligraphy from the Tareq Rojob Museum
The decoration on this pottery hanging ornament, probably from a mosque, is painted in red, blue, black, green and yellow. There are three large oval-shaped medallions on the body, each with an inscription in Arabic (in black). The inscriptions are written in naskhi style and they say:

Oh, my Dear Khalil, see how I am.

Turkey, 18th century, 20.5 x 19.0 cm
THE USE OF DATES IN THIS CATALOGUE

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad were not accepted at first by the community in Makkah (Mecca) and the Prophet left Makkah for Yathrib in CE 622, where he was invited to reside. The journey to Yathrib (later to be known as Madinah) is known as hijrah and it marks the beginning of the Muslim era. Thus the year CE 622 is equivalent to AH 1 (anno hijrah). The Islamic year is lunar and consists of 354 days, with months of either 29 or 30 days. The obvious discrepancy between the Christian and Muslim calendars means that it is very difficult to be accurate when attempting to date within the Islamic system (unless the month or day is already known).

Unless otherwise stated all dates that appear in this catalogue use the CE (Common Era) system of dating, in certain (i.e. non-Christian) contexts CE has replaced AD (anno Domini) as the method of denoting the years since the birth of Christ.

Islamic dates are included where they are known.

TRANSLITERATION

For the sake of simplicity and ease of understanding, the Arabic words in the text of this catalogue are generally reproduced without diacritical marks.
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 Fuller details of the objects can be found on pages 2, 39, 339 and 348, which


Exhibition and catalogue

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The rubbing on the opposite page is a fine example of the bulbs and marks surnace, written by the great Chinese calligrapher Liang Qianxin.

Orihims period. 17th century. 31.5 x 24.7 cm

TAREQ RAJA Museum, KUWAIT

ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM, SINGAPORE

MANUSCRIPTS: CALLIGRAPHY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

A Visual Index to the Six Classical Scripts

POTTERY, METALWORK AND TEXTILES: CALLIGRAPHY ON DOMESTIC ARTIFACTS

APPENDICES: Exhibits

Acknowledgements, Glossary, Main Islamic Dynasties
The Tareq Rajab Museum collection has been built up over the last 40 years. Mr Rajab was the first Kuwaiti to be sent abroad to study art and archaeology. While a student in the United Kingdom, he met his future wife, Jehan Welborn. Jehan was interested in folklore and the cultures of minorities, such as gypsies. Mr Rajab and Jehan married in 1955 and on their return to Kuwait Mr Rajab became the first Director of the Department of Antiquities and Museums of Kuwait. He resigned in 1969 and with his wife opened the New English School. Throughout this period the Rajabs travelled around the Islamic world and also to Central, Southeast and East Asia collecting objects and photographing people and monuments with a view to opening their own museum.

After all their long years of hard work and research the Tareq Rajab Museum was opened to the public in 1980. The museum is located in the basement of the adjacent homes of Mr and Mrs Rajab and their son, Ziad, and is divided into two parts: one area exhibits calligraphy, manuscripts, miniatures, ceramics, metalwork, glass, jade, wood and stone carvings; the other section displays costumes (including Mrs Rajab’s extensive collection of Palestinian and Syrian costumes), textiles and jewellery.
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Within Asia, the countries of East Asia and the Islamic countries of West Asia attach particular importance to calligraphy as a medium of expression. Both Chinese and Islamic calligraphy are believed to be the key to a person’s character and are seen as the highest form of artistic expression. Compared to Chinese calligraphy, much less is generally known about Islamic calligraphy in Singapore.

This publication—which coincides with an exhibition of Islamic calligraphy co-organised by the Asian Civilisations Museum of Singapore and the Tareq Rajab Museum of Kuwait—will go some way to correcting this imbalance. The exhibition, curated by Tan Huism, is the first in a series of exhibitions on an Islamic theme to be presented by our Museum. This exhibition parallels our efforts to build up an Islamic collection for eventual display. The purpose of both the collection and the exhibition is to highlight the rich heritage of Singaporeans, to promote greater inter-ethnic awareness and an appreciation of our people’s cultural roots.

This book also performs the valuable task of documenting and making available to a wider audience some of the best examples of Islamic calligraphy from the exquisite cornucopia that is the Rajab Collection. Dr. Nabil F. Salwati’s scholarly account will, we feel, become a reference work on the subject. Most of all, we are indebted to Tareq and Jehan Rajab for their enthusiastic support from the outset, and to Leila Fonglin Rajab for her patience and determination in expediting the myriad details of this project.

Kenson Kwok
Director
Asian Civilisations Museum
National Heritage Board, Singapore
This calligraphic band is a section of the Kinwah, the extremely valuable material used to cover the Holy Ka'bah in Mecca (Mecca). The Making denotes it with Qur'anic verses Quraysh al-Baqara, II, verses 227 to 235 formed by five wires of gold. It is written in Jali style and the borders are decorated with a well-work of geometric shapes. A three-dimensional effect is created in relief by means of an intricate pattern of embroidery within the calligraphic characters of the inscription.

The band is so large that it is impossible to photograph it in any detail at close range. Hence the seven images you see joined.

The detail of the sukun (left) is reproduced actual size.

Egypt, 19th century, 89 x 638 cm
The Kitab al-Malakat (Guides to Guidance) was written by Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Salih bin al-Muqarrab. A copy of the Kitab al-Malakat, a prayer book written for the purpose of salutations and guidance, can be seen above. This page depicts an aerial view of the Holy Ka'bah in Makkah (Mecca).

Turkey, Ottoman period. 15th century. AH 920/CE 1512. 27 x 11 cm