CALLIGRAPHY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

In a recently published book I wrote that it has become generally clear that each mother tongue teaches its users a way of seeing, feeling and acting in the world that is unique, and that language is man’s richest art form. Thus from the very beginnings of Islam, the sacredness of the Arabic language played a central role in the development of Arabic script and writing came to be considered as possessing divine power. This language, with its unique structure and message to the world, shaped the framework of a civilisation with a speed unmatched in history. The effect of the Arabic language on the growth of the Arabic civilisation is no longer elusive or difficult to define, nor is its function as a unifying cultural force disputed.

The art of writing this language – calligraphy – is regarded as the supreme achievement of Islamic art, enjoying a distinction and importance which is unsurpassed in the Arab world. Most general readers on Islamic calligraphy, if they know the splendour of Arabic calligraphy at all, have only a vague and indistinct idea of what this discipline conveys. Moreover, even the few people who have indubitably gleaned information from the available works on the subject remain ignorant of the many creative processes it incorporates.

Even the most basic aspects of the actual practice of calligraphy, which are taken for granted by the non-practising observer, require a high degree of skill and conceal an art. The placing of the letters is one important example of this; an anecdote from my own experience may illustrate the point. One day my little daughter, watching me write said: ‘This is easy Dad, all you’re doing is dipping the pen in ink, like painting, and drawing the letters in the proper places.’ Responding to my silence, she continued: ‘But maybe knowing which are the proper places makes it calligraphy’.

Arabic calligraphy represents one of the most important and universal contributions to the art of the world and is the height of Islamic aesthetics. Among calligraphers it embodies knowledge and is a disciplined science. It can be said that ‘the verbal art and the art of the pen are the real art of the Arab’.

THE SCRIPTS

Kufic is considered to be among the oldest of the Arabic scripts. By various coincidences, and through the influence of Western scholarship, this script became associated with the city of Kufa. In a similar way, Western study of the culture of ancient Mesopotamia might speak of Babylonian or Mesopotamian art, etc., interchangeably; as scholarly writing accumulates, usage tends to

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become established within a field of study, not always in what, with hindsight, seems the most logical way. The great diversity of early Arabic scripts have been known as Kufic but our knowledge of the early forms of Arabic scripts is patchy and incomplete, and scholarly discussion of these early scripts has been hampered by using terms without paying particular attention to progressive changes and developments of form. In fact, when we begin to investigate the changing forms of early Arabic scripts and proceed to examine the affinities between them, we find that they fall into diverse categories each with particular defining characteristics.

Kufic script dates back to the early Islamic period (from CE 622 to the 10th century). As the Islamic world grew to encompass much of the East, North Africa, Spain and other parts of Europe and to include vast numbers of non-Arabic speaking people, so too the religious texts, particularly the Qur'an, but also the hadith or sayings of the Prophet — all of which had to be copied by hand grew too. This rapid expansion placed tremendous pressure on the script of the time, for three main reasons: ease of writing was required — a needlessly time-consuming script limited the output of texts, ease of reading was essential, non-Arabic speaking converts to Islam needed easily decipherable texts, and the desire for an aesthetic dimension to the written word — partly to reflect the religious fervour of the faithful and partly because Islam does not allow the use of images. As time passed and the work of successive generations of skilled calligraphers grew, individual calligraphers of genius appeared who were able to develop new scripts.

The first of the classical new scripts such as thuluth and naskh were developed in Baghdād by the great calligrapher Ibn Muqlah (d. 930). These were muhajjāq and tāyihān which have been attributed to Ibn al-Rawšash (d. 1022), also from Baghdad. Compared with Kufic both these scripts tend to be more curvilinear, with very specific and well-developed set proportions. Indeed, to the modern eye, accustomed to thuluth, naskh or scripts based upon them, Kufic script appears very angular. The set proportions characteristic of thuluth and naskh imposed a great degree of uniformity on these scripts, which achieved the aim of aiding both writing and reading. However, these scripts also allowed the creativity of the calligraphers full expression. This disciplined freedom is the essential power of Arabic calligraphy.

These classical scripts were the basis for all that came after: other scripts were developed later, particularly in the Ottoman and Persian areas of the Islamic world in later centuries, but these scripts are variations of the basic themes laid down by the classical masters.
'Kufic' script is not Kufic

The above title was one of the subject headings in an important article written in Arabic in 1986 by Yousef Thaaneen. He suggested that, if anything, this script should be attributed to the city of Baghdad rather than to Kufa. His argument was that these early scripts were not known as Kufic, and instead were not called Kufic. The city of Kufa had almost nothing to do with the formation of this script and Thaaneen argued that the term Kufic betrayed dated knowledge of Islamic calligraphy.

This perplexing ambivalence about early Arabic scripts has been noted and discussed by many scholars. A master of rhetoric as well as calligraphy, Mohamed Zakaria, explains that: 'the first group of styles are called Kufic, but the word is not contemporary with the scripts that today bear this name.' The misnomer Kufic is a convenient label that refers to a group of calligraphic styles in use from the beginning of Islam. These could also be called the 'dry' scripts. The terms 'dry' and 'wet' are often used to refer to the relative straightness (dry) or curvaturesness (wet) of a writing style. Another general term that is beginning to gain acceptance is horizontal, vertical, 'delicate', and 'balanced'.

In a recent study by Francois Desroches that attempts to develop a typology of early scripts, Desroches attempts to identify a type of script the term which has lain historically, if not exclusively, at the door of the southern Iraqi town of al-Kufa for too long. Desroches changes the attribution, not like Thaaneen to Baghdad, the capital city of the Abbasid Dynasty (750 to 1258) to the north of Kufa, but to the name of the dynasty which encompassed the three centers of literary activity: Basra, Kufa and Baghdad. Hence Desroches suggests calling the script characteristic of this dynamic period the Abbasid style. Old terms die as harsh as old habits, and I suppose one has to concede that the term Kufic is going to be used for a long time to come by the general reader and serious scholars alike regardless of academic debate.

For the purposes of this catalogue, and as a contribution to contemporary usage, we shall adopt the hybrid term Kufic-Abbasid when describing 'Kufic' manuscripts. On the one hand, to discard Kufic altogether seems an overreaction, and would be confusing to those already familiar with the term.

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For the purposes of this catalogue, and as a contribution to contemporary usage, we shall adopt the hybrid term 'Kufic-Abbasid' when describing 'Kufic' manuscripts. On the one hand, to discard Kufic altogether seems an overreaction, and would be confusing to those already familiar with the term.

On the other hand, to ignore 'Abbasid would seem to perpetuate past misconceptions, and would overlook Déroche's useful contribution. Our dilemma here is similar to that facing historians particularly historians of mathematics when they discuss the replacement of Roman numerals by Arabic numerals -- which are, of course, Hindu in origin. The hybrid term 'Abbasid-Hindu' is a more useful definition of these numerals and a good example of hybrid terms illuminating our existing knowledge about a subject.

The Issue of Terminology

I wish to return briefly to the issue of terminology. The more comprehensive study of Arabic calligraphy which has taken place during this century has engendered a kind of self-consciousness about the use of technical terms. We tend to think that what we see in an early Arabic script is just what is on the page (by this I mean whatever category the script falls into, whatever 'label' the script can be given); but the more one studies the scripts, either as an interested member of the public, a historian or as a calligrapher, the more one discovers that what is called a 'script' involves a great deal of interpretation.

Once I was explaining this to a calligrapher, to whom I perhaps sounded rather pedantic. His reply was: I am not a professor of calligraphy; I am a practitioner, concerned with its technique more directly than its origin. His reply was not without common sense.

The Need for Clarity

We can recognize the difference between thuluth and naskh scripts because there are sufficient differences of essential form, movement of the pen, spacing, the way in which the nib is cut, the shape of the dot, and the actual process of making strokes with the full or partial width of the pen. It is less obvious, but true, that such individual differences exist within one script, particularly when written by different calligraphers at different times. One obvious example is the naskh script writing of two great master calligraphers, Yaqut al-Mustasirri (d. 1298) and Shafei Handullah (d. 1350). The style of Yaqut continued without substantial change in Iran. In 15th-century Ottoman Turkey the Yaqut tradition was interrupted by the naskh style of Handullah, which has remained dominant in that country to this day.

A similar evolution took place in the Kufic-Abbasid script. From the earliest stages in the development of Arabic writing there was a conscious endeavour to make lettering more readable. Proverbs saying on this matter are numerous. Demands for easier-to-read, more accurate and more reader-friendly Qurans denote an important stage in the development of the Kufic-Abbasid scripts. From the beginning of the 10th century onwards the Qur'an was no longer
written for Arabs alone, it was to be read by ethnic groups of increasing variety, who accepted the religion of Islam and needed to be able to read the words of God as they were originally revealed to His Prophet. Sometimes they were barely capable of reading Arabic.

Calligraphers were at the centre of this important stage in the history of calligraphy. Enthusiastic to meet this new demand, calligraphers must have turned to their writing boards to seize the opportunity for change. The calligrapher of this transitional period was not mere technician but a creative and skilled artist responsive to the milieu in which he lived.

It is useful to examine, in a simple survey, the development of early scripts by comparing the manuscripts on pages 27, 30, 31 and 37. These three examples illustrate, even to the non-Arabic reader, a strong and continuous advance towards visual clarity and page design. The early script called Hijazi (on pages 26-27) displays a slight tilt to the right and there is a classical resemblance in the forms of some letters, such as qaf and waw, to each other; we should also observe the letter alif, with its slight anti-clockwise curve at the base. The famous 'Blue Quran' (page 30) and the gold Kufic-Abbasid Quran leaf (page 31) illustrate a transition, while the 14th-century Quran on pages 36-37 illustrates a clear development and a new visual consistency.

The development of Arabic calligraphy was a long process. We can imagine the first questions that must have occurred to the artist-calligrapher: how do I 'simplify' reading? How do I make the strokes and curves of the words pleasing to the eye? One of the first and foremost needs was for a more utilitarian approach: words had to be designed for visual accuracy rather than beauty. We must always bear in mind that the subject matter of Quranic writing is sacred: the faithful transmission of the subject matter was a prime religious duty, as well as a practical matter. Happily, experience demonstrated that there was no contradiction between the demands of clarity and beauty, but rather that one reinforced the other: visual accuracy is a major component of beautiful writing. This conscious endeavour to make adaptive as well as aesthetic changes in the calligraphic structure (in response to changed conditions), inspired vigour and gave Arabic calligraphy its own distinctive character.

**ARABIC SCRIPT IN NORTH AFRICA AND SPAIN**

Do not talk of the court of Bagdad and its glittering magnificence; Do not praise Persia and China and their manifold advantages; For there is no spot on the earth like Cordoba . . .

An old Arabic poem
From the far west of the Muslim world in the region of al-Maghrib (North Africa) to Tripoli and Morocco, and from there to Spain and Sicily, the rule of Islam brought the beauty of Islamic art and the Arabic language to Europe. Just as English is the international language of today, and Latin was the language of the Middle Ages (during the period of European dominance), so Arabic was the language of culture and scholarship during the great flowering of Islamic civilisation in the West. Hundreds of Greek texts, especially on mathematics, science and philosophy were translated into Arabic. From 900 to 1200 the most important works carried out anywhere in the world in mathematics, astronomy, physics, medicine, and geography was pursued in Muslim countries and had a decisive influence on Western civilization. It is well known that in their first attempts to learn from ancient scientific texts, Western European scholars and scientists had to refer to the Muslims of Spain and Sicily. It is equally well known that the West would not have developed a scientific tradition of its own without the assistance of Muslim scholarship. The Islamic civilisation was characterised by its unique capacity for integration. Islam teaches its followers to have respect for the other peoples of the Book – that is, for the Jewish-Christian tradition – and this respect for the religion and culture of the conquered was an important part of the success of the Arabs in Spain. This push towards integration left deep traces of Islamic influence in architecture, ceramics, furniture and aesthetics throughout Moorish Europe. In particular, Arabic calligraphy left its mark on the sense of pattern in Spanish culture: its energy was haunting and irresistible.

The evolution of Kufic-Abdish script into Maghribi in North and West Africa, as well as Spain, had a charm, sophistication and beauty of its own. Maghribi also had unique technical characteristics. The cutting of the nib, the type of reed, and the position of the hand are all quite different from the early Kufic-Abdish of the Arab world. The pen is usually a slit – a flat piece of reed or bamboo split from the round original segment – held with the inner curve of the pen towards the body and the convex, skin-side, away from the body. The cutting of the nib is almost at right angles – straight – and rounded at the end which touches the paper at the very extremity of the nib. The pen shaft is held slightly pointing away from the body – that is to say the pen forms a greater angle with the paper.73

The obvious characteristics of the Maghribi script are the descending strokes below the baseline, such as the letters m, r, s, w and l, which give these curved strokes a gracefulness and charm that is fascinating. In the descending strokes, when a particular letter happens to be repeated or to be close to a
similar letter, the curves flow into each other and seem to embrace the words and letters above them. But the descending strokes of the upper line must 'clear' the ascending strokes of the lower line. A good example of this skill can be seen in the book from Valencia on pages 42-3.

The significance of the early Western Islamic scripts must be evaluated in the light of the connection between two different worlds, each with their own physical and cultural surroundings. It is the sum effect, the combined artistic impact of the calligraphy, the layout, the colouring and illustration, that gives real significance to the early Western Islamic scripts, rather than the technicality of the calligraphy alone. The secret, one might say, lies in the richness of the mixture.

The Power of Language and of the Book

The practice of calligraphy is an effort to attain perfection. This journey to perfection can only be attempted if the calligrapher submit his will to the form and content of the subject matter. This control of the creative forces requires a specially attained mental balance as well as manual skill and technical knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad was a reformer, a puritan and an iconoclast – the worship of idols in Arabia was one of his major concerns and the decadent state of other religions in his day repelled him. The Prophet's intention was that everything associated with Islam, formally or otherwise, must have at its base a truthful touchstone. Words, not pictures, were to be the vehicle through which the new religion was to be taught to mankind.

In Islam, language forms the basis of the community and the foundation of a common Humanity. Language, in this context, is power. This power is exercised rather than possessed. It is not the privilege of any particular class. Wittgenstein's dictum: 'The master of the language is the master of us all' is applicable to the Arabic language. The great Sultan Saladin had a vizier who was a renowned master of the Arabic language; he used to say: 'Don't think that I was able to own three lands by your swords, rather it was by the pen of His Eminence', pointing to his great vizier:

كان السلطان صلاح الدين يقول عن عبد الرحيم (الفاصل):

لا تفقدهم أي ملك البلاد بسيرةكم بل قلم الفاصل.

The aesthetic achievements of Arab-Islamic culture were enhanced by the contributions, responses and cultural cooperation of the Ottoman Turks, the Persians and many others. The impact of converts to Islam on the development of Arabic calligraphy is well known, fully recognized and should never be underestimated. Equally, their contributions to the fields of
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The aesthetic achievements of Arab-Islamic culture were enhanced by the contributions, responses and cultural cooperation of the Ottoman Turks, the Persians and many others. The impact of converts to Islam on the development of Arabic calligraphy is well known, fully recognized and should never be underestimated. Equally, their contributions to the fields of ceramics, metalwork and architecture are extremely original and important. However, no-one can dispute the supremacy of the book in Islamic art.

The Harmony of the Senses: Sight and Sound in Islamic Calligraphy

This catalogue, this exhibition and the whole subject of Islamic calligraphy, appeals most obviously to our sense of sight; the treasures of Islamic calligraphy are a delight to the eye. In addition, as with any art whose subject matter concerns the sacred, the Islamic context of these texts resonates with the religious and emotional feelings of the Islamic audience for whom this art form was created. Perhaps less obvious to the non-Islamic observer, but nevertheless very important, is the hidden element of sound. One should always remember that the Qur'an means, literally, the Holy Recitation, and that its main purpose was to act as a guide for the spoken word. The Arabic language lends itself extraordinarily well to rhetorical delivery. The use of rhythms in the Qur'an — all the more effective for being used sparingly, in passages of the greatest significance — creates a haunting effect on the listener: We should remember that Islamic calligraphy itself was developed to capture in visual form the effect of the spoken word, and that the visual rhythms to be found in the shape and treatment of letters and words reflect those of the spoken word. One would wish, in an ideal world, to have recordings of the spoken word available as a complement to the written word in an exhibition such as this. For example, in the writing of the last surah of the Qur'an in the manuscript on the left (and also on pages 40-1) the rhythmic use of sibilants at the end of every line creates a haunting and unforgettable powerful atmosphere when read aloud.

The Tools of Calligraphy

A reed pen, a knife and ink are the basic tools of calligraphy. All these implements have a natural yet technical flavour. This simplicity is seldom noted. But, in essence, it is a simplicity that originates amongst the very earliest dictated instructions of Allah to his messenger Muhammad; Allah entrusted the Prophet to 'learn to read' in order to 'learn that which is still unknown' and advised him to 'obtain knowledge by the power of the pen. [22] These instructions carry in their tenor suggestions of the pen occupying a divinely inspired place in Islamic culture. It is for this reason that it has been said that

(22) Surah al-Baqarah (2: 31).
the power of the pen is cardinal: a well-cut pen in the hand of a master calligrapher is mightier than a sword.

It was believed that he who knew the art of trimming the pen knew the art of writing. Indeed the travelling calligrapher, apprehensive of the impending danger of highwaymen, used to blunt or chop off the nib of his pen. There were two reasons for this. The first was a desire to protect professional secrets: the cutting of the reed pen was an art in itself, almost unattainable except from a master willing to demonstrate the technique. The second reason was that it was believed that possessing a pen prepared by a master calligrapher for his own use was a way of connecting to, and acquiring some part of, the master's creativity, knowledge, energy and power.

**Chinese papermakers and the Arabs of Samarkand**

Early experiments in writing on bone, clay tablets, stone, wood and metal found these materials to be inconvenient, heavy and clumsy. Vellum (made from animal skins) and Egyptian papyrus (made from reeds) were a considerable improvement. But no material could match paper, the invention (in 105) and gift of the Chinese to the world. Chinese history tells us that a eunuch named Cai Lun first presented paper to Emperor Han (2nd century, Han Dynasty). The emperor, in his wisdom, recognized the potential and the implications of this great invention. The formula was a national secret until a clash of arms with Arabs at Samarkand on the border of the Chinese empire in 751 yielded Chinese prisoners for the Arabs. These prisoners happened to be papermakers and readily agreed to teach their skills to the Arabs, who were probably very impressed by these remarkable men. In their turn the Samarkand Arabs kept secret the art of papermaking and there began one of the Arab world's most lucrative trading activities, not only with other Arab and Islamic countries, but with the West as well. Camel caravans laden with paper went from Samarkand to Baghdad, Syria, Cairo and North Africa. This writing material had an instant impact on Islamic cultural development. Thousands of books and magnificent libraries were established throughout the Islamic world. In comparison, the Christian world had only a few books at that time, mostly written in monasteries on parchment. Eventually knowledge of papermaking was introduced to Iraq under Harun al-Rashid (d. 809) and paper mills were established in Baghdad and Damascus. These cities quickly became the most important centres for paper production in the world, supplying Europe for several hundred years with the main material of the book.

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Chinese and Arabic Calligraphers

Mention should be made of similarities between Chinese and Arabic calligraphers. This is a neglected aspect of calligraphic studies. Both cultures regarded calligraphers as artists and men of knowledge. Copying the works of the masters has always been the most important activity in the apprenticeships of both Chinese and Arabic calligraphers. In addition, a comparison of the Chinese emperors, particularly those of the Tang Dynasty, and those Ottoman emperors who became adept at calligraphy makes a fascinating study. The aspirations of sophisticated peoples seem to be very similar.

Arabic calligraphy made the art of the book the most important area of Islamic art; in Chinese civilisation, calligraphy was considered the ultimate expression of Chinese art. Both the Chinese and Islamic worlds identified calligraphy and calligraphers with the values and power of the Divine universe.

Master Calligraphers and the Chain of Transmission

Those who can see the hidden language of Arabic calligraphy, and they are only a few, know that understanding the past is like being on a pilgrimage. The form of Arabic letters becomes the visual language through which the calligrapher speaks, and reads this language, in the surviving calligraphic works of the masters, creates a signpost on this journey into the past. Enthusiasts who understand calligraphy in its cultural context recognize the importance of the 'Chain of Transmission' - the passing of knowledge from master to student.

For the would-be calligrapher, choosing the teacher was only half the task. The other half was decided by the willingness of the teacher to accept the individual as a student. To be accepted was a great honour. We who taught me a single letter made me his slave' is a well-known Arabic proverb which illustrates this point. The Chain of Transmission is a teaching method unlike any used today. It is a sophisticated method of transferring a traditional body of knowledge from one individual to another. This method of teaching has been perfected over hundreds of years by generations of calligraphers.

In general, the first stages of the study of Arabic calligraphy involve mimicking. The student is given a model-writing from a master and is asked to give an imitative representation of the master's work. This first may appear a closed pattern. Soon the student will realize that this model is far more amazing than anything which he can yet express. He will soon realize that calligraphy strives to reflect morality as well as to replicate form. In many ways it is an attempt to overcome the self. Towards the last stages of his development the student will realize how calligraphers differ in style and why.

Master calligraphers and writers, such as Müsâfîrî and Sâlehu'd-Dîn Sâdeddin Efendi (d. 1787), stressed the importance of the control of the
mental, emotional and moral powers of the calligrapher. Mastery of these personal qualities was believed to manifest itself in the calligrapher's work. Furthermore, the control of these characteristics was believed to relate to the student's intellectual understanding of the work of a master calligrapher. Even in the present-day, a potential master will occasionally emerge who seems to have inherited some of the qualities of his teacher. His personality and character instills a sense of continuity and development in the process of transmission. It is important to recognize, however, that the Chain of Transmission has gone through a continuous process of development.

Two all-important questions remain: How does this system of transmission work? and how is the student able to act creatively under these restrictions? The answers to these questions remain elusive. Consider this answer from a master calligrapher: "It is foolhardy to think that because one practices an activity one can give a theory of it." Historically, attempts to bring the master calligrapher to explain the Chain of Transmission have failed. The great Mohammed Sharqi Birladi (d. 1887) once explained: "They have taught me [the forms of the letters in the world of dreams]. For the traditional master, calligraphy was religious love, it embodied the highest religious ideals of the time. The great Mawlid Jalal al-Din Rumi best expressed the calligrapher's reluctance to damage the 'ideal' by having strong theoretical motives in one of his poems:

Explanations by words make many things clear, but love, unexplained, is clearer

(8) This master and calligrapher, whom I have described as 'The Ottoman Vault', is the author of ạch-ı destin, which was written in 1599 and is the most important work on the lives of calligraphers (Great Ottoman).


DIACRITICAL MARKS

The Arabic alphabet consists of 28 letters but only 17 of these letters differ in basic shape. This makes it necessary to add dots to these similar shapes in order to distinguish them from each other. These dots are called diacritical marks. Thus diacritical marks in Arabic, by enlivening 17 basic shapes to convey a 28-letter alphabet, serve the vital function of changing one letter into another.

For example, consider the Arabic letter َب. By placing one dot above the 'ب', the letter 'ن' (or 니) is indicated. By placing two dots above the 'ب' the letter 'ث' (or 니) is indicated, by placing one dot below the 'ب' the letter 'ل' (or 니) is indicated, by placing two dots below the 'ب' the letter 'ت' (or 니) is indicated.

Note: Arabic is read from right to left and from the top of the page to the bottom.
moral, emotional and moral powers of the calligrapher. Mastery of these personal qualities was believed to manifest itself in the calligrapher's work. Furthermore, the control of these characteristics was believed to be related to the student's intellectual understanding of the work of a master calligrapher. Even in the present-day, a potential master will occasionally emerge who seems to have inherited some of the qualities of his teacher. His personality and character adds a sense of continuity and development to the process of transmission. It is important to recognize, however, that the Chain of Transmission has gone through a continuous process of development.

Two all-important questions remain: How does this system of transmission work? and how is the student able to act creatively under these restrictions? The answers to these questions remain elusive. Consider this answer from a master calligrapher: "It is foolishly to think that because one practices an activity one can give a theory of it." Historically attempts to bring the master calligrapher to explain the Chain of Transmission have failed. The great Muḥammed Shawqī Efendi (d. 1887) once explained: 'They have taught me [the forces of] the letters in the world of dreams.' For the traditional master, calligraphy was religious love, it embodied the highest religious ideals of the time. The great Muḥamma al-Din Rūmī best expressed the calligrapher's reluctance to damage the 'ideal' by having strong theoretical motives in one of his poems:

Explanations by words make many things clear, but love, unexplained, is clearer.

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**Diacritical Marks**

The Arabic alphabet consists of 29 letters but only 17 of these letters differ in basic shape. This made it necessary to add dots to these similar shapes in order to distinguish them from each other. These dots are called diacritical marks. Thus diacritical marks in Arabic, by enabling 27 basic shapes to convey a 29-letter alphabet, serve the vital function of changing one letter into another.

For example, consider the Arabic letter ب. By placing one dot above the 'b', the letter و (or و) is indicated. By placing two dots above the 'b' the letter 'ت' (or ت) is indicated. By placing one dot below the 'b' the letter 'ئ' (or ئ) is indicated. By placing two dots below the 'b' the letter 'ي' (or ی) is indicated.

**Note:** Arabic is read from right to left and from the top of the page to the bottom.
This Qur'anic folio is a good example of a Qur'an written on parchment. The calligraphy is sometimes called the 'best style' in Arabic or miftal script.

The Hijazi script (an early form of Kufic-Abbasid) is generally difficult to read, as it usually lacks dots and other diacritical marks. The calligraphy on this piece is outstanding for its time and so the folio is of exceptional significance. It is interesting to note the form of the letter alif, which from the earliest times had that peculiar anti-clockwise return at the base. The letters qaf and waw show their classic similarity of head formation and the understated return of the alif is also noteworthy. This folio probably dates from the late 8th or 9th century (AH) and illustrates the earliest progression of Arabic writings of the Qur'an. This folio is from Sura al-Maidah (V), starting with the second word of verse 18 and ending with the sixth word of verse 20: The end of every verse is marked with two small oblique colon-like punctuation dashes followed by five small dashes. This folio contains 20 lines.
An Early Hijazi Qur’anic Folio

PERIOD FROM WESTERN ASIA
AH 1st-2nd CENTURY CE 7th-8th CENTURIES
49.4 x 39 cm
Hijazi

This Qur’anic folio is a good example of a Qur’an written on parchment. The calligraphy is sometimes called the ‘best style’ in Arabic or mask script.

The Hijazi script (a cursive form of Kufic-Abbasid) is generally difficult to read, as it usually lacks dots and other diacritical marks. The calligraphy on this piece is outstanding for its time and so the folio is of exceptional significance. It is interesting to note the form of the letter alf, which from the earliest times had that peculiar anti-clockwise return at the base. The letters qaf and saw show their classic similarity of head formation and the understated return of the law is also noteworthy. This folio probably dates from the late 1st or 2nd century (AH) and illustrates the earliest progressions of Arabic writings of the Qur’an. This folio is from Surat al-Ma’idah (V), starting with the second word of verse 18 and ending with the sixth word of verse 28. The end of every verse is marked with two small oblique colon-like punctuation dashes followed by five small dashes. The folio contains 28 lines.
A VERY LARGE QUR'AN FOLIO

NORTH AFRICA
MUSLIM SADDIS
55.2 x 82.6 cm
FIRST KUFIC-ABUSSAYD

This very large North African Qur'anic folio on parchment is immaculately written with dark brown ink and generously spaced. For an early Kufic-Abdui script, it is very legible indeed.

It is a monumental writing: the letters are large and clear, the blackness of the ink is deep. The scribe was obviously not concerned with private or personal matters. The text is a complete copy of the Qur'an, with the verse endings indicated by vertical strokes, and the decorative square indicating the number of verses that have already been written. This type of writing shows the quality and care of the scribe. The text is clear, and the reader can easily follow the flow of the verses.

The text here is from Surah al-Nahl (XVI), from the end of the third word of verse 50 to the middle of verse 52.
This very large North African Qur'anic folio on parchment is immaculately written with dark brown ink and generously spaced. For an early Kufic-Ahmad script, it is very legible indeed.

Incipit marks are absent. The verse endings are principally indicated by oblique strokes and the decorative square indicates both verse endings as well the number of verses that have already been written. This type of writing shows the thick and thin, and crab curves of the pen, which are the result of the controlled and well-timed gradual repositioning of the nib. Notice the elegance of the word fi (the penultimate word of the third line) and the letter yaf' of the word ya'aci (second word of the eighth line). This simplicity and power gives the writing its brilliant effect.

The text here is from Surat al-Nahl (16), from the third word of verse 30 to the middle of verse 32.
A FOLIO FROM THE 'BLUE QUR'AN'

PROVENANCE: KAIROUAN, TUNISIA
9TH CENTURY
29 x 40 cm
KARL ROBERT AL-BUKHARI

The 'Blue Qur'an', written on parchment dyed blue, has an interesting history. It is said to have been written by order of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun for the tomb of his father, Harun al-Rashid in the great Mosque at Mashhad in Iran, and to have been written in Kairouan in North Africa during the early 10th century. But for some unknown reason it never left North Africa.

This folio contains 15 lines of early Kufic script, written in gold on a blue ground. There are small silver rosettes as verse marks. It is from Surat al-Kafir (XVIII), beginning with the last two words of verse 82 and continuing through to the beginning of verse 91.

This particular folio is in exceptionally good condition. One reason why this Qur'an seems fascinating, even to those who cannot understand the script or read Arabic, quite apart from its sumptuous blue colour, is that the 12 base lines are rather close to each other in relation to the size of the script. This makes a compact visual statement: extreme simplicity and unpretending vigour. The applause and attention it receives in the Teyr Rahn Museum is not without pleasant significance. Close study gives us a more sophisticated insight into this delightful calligraphic specimen. The spacing between letters and between words has a special fluidity of its own. In any kind of Kufic script, where the available space is either insufficient for the given word or too generous, as the case may be, the calligrapher must ensure that his work does not give rise to confusion when the text is read aloud. This folio illustrates the type of skill needed by the calligrapher when writing on both the smooth side of the skin of parchment and the rougher, hair side. The eye detects little or no loss of character even when the difficult curved forms or the upward strokes appear on the rough side of the parchment. This is truly a great calligraphic work.
written on parchment dyed blue, has an interesting history. It is said to have been written by order of the for the tomb of his father, Harun al-Rashid, in the great Mosque at Mashad in Iran, and to have been written in Africa during the early 16th century. For some unknown reason it never left North Africa.

A Folio from the 'Blue Qur'an'

Provenance: Kairouan, Tunisia
9th century
20 x 40 cm
Larsen Kupisch

The Kufic-Akhshab script, written in gold on a blue ground. There are small silver inks as verse marks. It is from the 9th century, beginning with the last two words of verse 82 and continuing through to the beginning of verse 91. Exceptionally good condition. One reason why this Qur'an seems fascinating, even to those who cannot understand its text, is that the 12 base lines are rather close to each other in relation to the size of the lines. The illumination of the page, extreme simplicity and unpretentious vigour. The illumination and attention it receives in the Tareq is significant. Close study gives us a more sophisticated insight into this delightful calligraphic specimen.

A Single Qur'anic Folio in Gold

Provenance: Kairouan, Tunisia
9th century
24.5 x 35 cm
Larsen Kupisch

Originally part of a Qur'an manuscript, this folio belongs to one of the most lavish early Qur'ans written on parchment. It is written in gold, outlined in fine black ink, and vocalization is indicated by red dots. The verse endings are shown by an oblique dash in gold outlined in fine black ink. The square in gold with alternating red and green dots, after the second word in the first line, indicates certain arithmetical subdivisions of the Qur'an. There are 15 lines to the page.

One extremely valuable aspect of this folio is that it shows the ending of Surat Al-Fatihah (XLI), verses 12 to 30, and the first five verses, with two words of the 12th verse, of Surat Al-Shura (XLII). The script is early Kufic-Akhshab, which prevailed until the 10th century. We can usefully compare this folio with the one opposite. Observe first the differences in calligraphic treatment: here the script is written in bold gold, outlined in fine black ink, while the other is executed by straightforward use of the nib – as if with ink, though gold is being used – without outlining. More important, however, are the features of the style, which may be seen in the handling of the different letters. Certain letters need quick and abrupt strokes, others need a more formal and finished treatment of the horizontal strokes which run parallel to the, sometimes invisible, baseline. The page is surrounded by a decorative border with interwoven embellishment in gold, red and green. The gold squares in the middle and corners of the horizontal rectangular grid add to the visual unity of the page. The tendrils, with graceful edges placed at the centre of the left margin, are like the towelled work of a master's script – from the Arabic script meaning to knit or to tie. These interlink and plated ornaments are reminiscent of the habit of placing peacock feathers between certain pages of the Qur'an to act as book-marks. These seemingly simple decorative elements demonstrate the unfolding expressions and influences of local traditions.
Two Qur'an Pages in Early Kufic-Arabic

10th Century
13.5 x 10.5 cm (one recto)
copy Kufic-damascene

Written in a Kufic-damascene style, these Qur'an folios have 20 lines to the page and represent an early form of this script. The script is clear and very legible with dicritical marks in red and verse endings in gold (above the baseline). The chapter heading is in bold and the ornamental writing is in white on an inlaid gold ground.

This Qur'an is a good example of the early use of the vertical rather than the horizontal page. The text shows the end of Surat al-Masih (LXX) and the beginning of Surat al-Muntakhabah (LXXII).
**A Qur’anic Leaf Featuring Later Illumination**

*Probably from North Africa*  
8th-11th centuries  
14 x 23 cm  
Early Kufic-Arabic

This Qur’anic leaf is written in early Kufic-Arabic. The script is very well executed and displays the early characteristics of splitting the word – faced with a space at the end of a line insufficient for the whole of the next word the calligrapher would fill up the line with part of the word, continuing on to the next line with the remaining part without indicating that the word had been split. The page has seven lines and the verses are surrounded with cloud decorations. There is a ground of floral patterns, with suspens in the corners; the decoration clearly dates from a later period than the script. The diacritical marks are in red; there are no visible verse endings. Consequently, to read aloud from such a Qur’an demands familiarity with the text. The text is from Surat al-Fir`a (XV), verses 35 to 38.

**Two Qur’anic Pages in Early Kufic-Arabic**

*Iran*  
10th century  
13.5 x 10.5 cm (Qur’anic)  
Kufic-Arabic

Written in a Kufic-Arabic style, these Qur’an folios have 20 lines to the page and represent an early form of this script. The script is clear and very legible with diacritical marks in red and verse endings in gold (above the baseline).

The chapter heading is in bold and the ornamental writing is in white on an intricate gold ground.

This Qur’an is a good example of the early use of the vertical rather than the horizontal page. The text shows the end of Surat al-Mas’ûdî (LX) and the beginning of Surat al-Mu’mâdhîf (LXX).