THE UNITY OF ISLAMIC ART

AN EXHIBITION OF ISLAMIC ART AT THE ISLAMIC ART GALLERY
THE KING FAISAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND ISLAMIC STUDIES
RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA, 1405 AH/1985 AD
THE UNITY OF ISLAMIC ART
To the memory of King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, may God bless him.
THE UNITY OF ISLAMIC ART
The uniqueness of Islamic civilization can be seen in, among other things, its comprehensiveness and the unity of its components as well as in the richness and originality of its contributions to science, culture and the arts. The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies has been established to contribute to the revitalization of this civilization and to give a true picture of its essence by spreading knowledge about Islam and promoting research and scholarship in the Islamic heritage and culture.

It has been a blessing from Allah that this exhibition, "The Unity of Islamic Art," is one of the first activities of the Center and that this catalogue is its first publication. The exhibition represents the various interests of the Center, and its theme reflects the Center's goal of furthering unity in Islamic thought and solidarity among Muslims. Needless to say, an exhibition and a catalogue of this scope would not have been possible without the assistance of a number of individuals and organizations. Therefore, on behalf of The King Faisal Foundation and The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, I extend my thanks and gratitude to all those who have contributed to this project, especially:

Dr. Ahmed O. al-Tuwafi, Academic Adviser to The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, for supervising the exhibition and reviewing the catalogue.

His Highness Prince Bandar bin Saud bin Khalid, General Director of Public Relations, The King Faisal Foundation; Mr. Abdullah Saad al-Husain, Director of Administrative and Financial Affairs, The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies; and Mr. Ibrahim al-Halad, Personal Assistant to the Director General, for their contributions.

Abuan Islamic Art, London, and its directors, Oliver R. Hoare and David A. Salzberger, for conceiving and organizing this exhibition.

We would also like to thank the many private collectors who have generously loaned the works of art that are exhibited; in particular, we are grateful to Mrs. Salma Es-Said for lending the collection of Islamic inlaid metalwork assembled by her late husband. The collection will be shown publicly for the first time in the Arab world.

Dr. Eim Atli of the Center for Asian Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., generously agreed to write the introduction, which greatly enhances our catalogue. The Center would like to thank Dr. Atli for this time-consuming contribution.

Oliver R. Hoare wrote the descriptive text with the assistance of David A. Salzberger and of Manjich Bayani Wolfpert, who deciphered and translated the inscriptions. This has assured the scholarly value of the catalogue.

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We are also grateful to Saudia, the Saudi Arabian national airline, for its generosity and expertise in transporting the works of art to the Kingdom for this exhibition.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the individuals and organizations who have taken part in sponsoring the exhibition and wish them all success.

Dr. Zaid Abdul Mohsen al-Husain, Director General, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies.

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The King Faisal Foundation was established in 1976 to play a role in the revival and renaissance of Islamic civilization. Its purposes are the enhancement of Islam and the unity of Muslim peoples, as embodied in the goals and aspirations of the late King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, may Allah bless his soul.

To achieve this, The King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies was established by the Foundation. This Center was conceived to become one of the world’s outstanding institutions for research in the field of Islamic Studies.

The inauguration of the Center is accompanied by this exhibition of great works illustrating “The Unity of Islamic Art,” which is being shown in the Center’s two adjoining galleries, the Islamic Art Gallery and the Manuscripts Gallery.

The visitor who views the exhibition carefully will see that within its essential theme, “The Unity of Islamic Art,” the show is in the truest sense three dimensional. The time factor is clear, with works of art spanning nearly all eras of Islamic history. Place is emphasized by the vast geographical area from which these works originate, extending from India to North Africa and Andalusia. Finally, the objects themselves encompass many facets of Islamic culture such as calligraphy, the decorative arts, architecture and science.

The unique composition of the exhibition and its comprehensiveness and consistency are fine reflections of the unity of Muslims in their faith, history, sciences and arts. These elements illustrate the greatness of Islamic civilization and its contributions to humanity in all fields. It is also proof that the Islamic Solidarity Call, initiated by King Faisal, may Allah bless his soul, did not begin in a vacuum but has a firm basis in the history and heritage of the Muslim nation.

The King Faisal Foundation, with all its facilities and the ideals it represents, demonstrates the high status that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its leaders occupy in the world, and the great role it plays in leading all Muslims.

On the occasion of the opening this great exhibition and the publication of this distinguished catalogue, I extend my deep thanks and gratitude to His Majesty King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince for their continuous nurturing and support of the Foundation since its inception.

I also express my gratitude to those who supported the exhibition and assisted in its formation and pray to God that this endeavor may bear fruit for all.

KHALID AL-FAISAL BIN ABDUL AZIZ
Director General, The King Faisal Foundation
Introduction

The unity and diversity of Islamic art have been topics of serious debate among scholars and students ever since the study of Islamic civilization was formally established in academic and other learned institutions. This has led to controversies and hypotheses. Needless to say, the artistic production of the Islamic lands reveals a number of consistent features, as well as distinct regional variations and period styles. Since the arguments, whether for unity or for diversity, are often based on the physical characteristics of the objects and their surface decoration – such as inscriptions and floral, geometric, or figural elements – they can be proven or disproven depending on the examples chosen to illustrate the points.

The arguments presented here for the unity of Islamic art will take a different approach by exploring the common denominators found in Islamic artistic traditions, regardless of period or region, and analyzing the demands society made upon the artist. Since the beginning of the Islamic era, certain art forms and aesthetic approaches always have been held in high esteem and had relevance to peoples of diverse lands and social classes. The most immediately identifiable universal feature of Islamic art and Muslim society is a veneration for calligraphy. This is followed by an insistence on investing works of art with meaningful themes and symbols, and by a persistence of harmonious and refined design.

Although Islam encountered civilizations with divergent political and social systems during the course of its expansion, the new conception of the world that had crystallized with the coming of the Prophet Muhammad soon imposed its own qualities upon the conquered lands. The impact of Islam was not based on physical domination as much as on the cultural power and the inherent universality of its teaching, which accounted for its speedy and far-flung acceptance. There emerged a new community that was profoundly interested in the search for knowledge to comprehend the order and harmony of the universe as well as to express its faith. This inevitably affected the development of the arts.

Within the first century AH, following the death of the Prophet, Islam formulated an artistic vocabulary that became the unique and characteristic expression of this civilization and was unanimously accepted from the Steppes of Central Asia to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. No civilization has been able to spread through such a vast region in such a short time, uniting peoples of widely diverse
ethnic and linguistic origins under a single faith, language and artistic expression.

The strongest unifying force, second only to the faith, was Arabic, the language chosen by the Creator as a vehicle through which His Prophet communicated with mankind. It was not only the tongue, but also the script of the Holy Book, that preserved His teachings. To excel in the art of writing and to copy the Qur'an in the most beautiful and elegant hand possible became a pious act, and calligraphy evolved as the noblest of the arts.

The significance of calligraphy in Islamic civilization cannot be overstated. Throughout the centuries, this form of art has retained the highest aesthetic and technical standards and is possibly the only tradition that has continued to be in demand and in practice by Muslims of all regions and periods. This veneration for the written word is reflected in the respect accorded the calligrapher, who was always the highest paid and most sought after of artists. The calligrapher's name appears in colophons of manuscripts (see catalogue nos. 15, 16), whereas the names of other artists are generally omitted, and the calligrapher's signature is frequently found on samples of calligraphy incorporated into imperial albums (22). In contrast to painters, potters, metal-workers and other artists of whom we know so little, voluminous treatises were written about the calligraphers, discussing their styles and giving detailed information about their lives and training as well as about their masters and apprentices. Sultans, Shias and influential statesmen also practiced the art of calligraphy and spent years with celebrated masters to perfect their own techniques. Following the calligraphers' models, they transcribed the Qur'an and wrote verses on single sheets, which were incorporated into albums or framed and hung on walls.

The great devotion shown to the copying of the Qur'an had a long-lasting impact on the artistic traditions of Islam. The importance ascribed to religious manuscripts generated a similar esteem and demand for texts devoted to science, history or literature. The production of the book developed into a complex art form requiring the expertise of specialists, including those who made papers, inks, pigments, pens and other writing implements; bookbinders who worked with leather and produced tooled and gold-stamped covers for the manuscripts; scribes who specialized in diverse scripts and styles; illuminators who designed and executed frontispieces, finials, chapter headings, and marginal decorations; and painters who made illustrations to accompany the verses and texts (57-44).

The establishment of libraries and the support of ateliers supplying these institutions with manuscripts became essential attributes of princely life and a pre-requisite for great rulers. Manuscripts were either chosen from existing literature or commissioned from scientists, historians and poets who were gathered at the courts (55). The division of labor among the men who worked on the earliest books and the structure of studios are yet to be determined, but it is clear that all rulers, whether great or petty, aspired to be patrons of art and supported the production of costly manuscripts. Books were cherished works of art and their creators were highly respected, a testimony to the intellectualism that existed in early Islamic societies.

The act of devotion implicit in copying the Holy Book is evident in the earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an which date to the 3rd or 4th centuries. Even the uninitiated and the illiterate are impressed by the rhythm and flow of carefully-wrought calligraphy. Although both the angular script and Naskh, the cursive type, were known to exist in pre-Islamic times, early Muslim calligraphers chose the former, transforming it into a majestic style (1-6). Kufic continued to be employed in manuscripts throughout the history of Islam, even though in time variations of the cursive script, such as Nastaliq or Thuluth, became more popular. These latter would be used to transcribe the body of the text, but Kufic, the first Islamic script used to copy the Qur'an, would always retain its prestige and be chosen to inscribe the titles and chapter headings.

The cursive script developed into a number of groups and sub-groups after the 9th century, and many calligraphers became expert in several different styles. Six distinct types of cursive script were defined by Yaqut al-Mustasimi (died 1290), who was employed by the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad and produced legendary works that are still revered by devotees of Islamic calligraphy (16, 17). His canons were revised by another luminary, Shihab Hamidullah (1240-1320), tutor to the Ottoman sultan Bayazid II (22). Among the celebrated innovators were Mir Ali of Tabriz, who is credited with the creation of Nastaliq around the turn of the 13th century; Ahmad Karabesiri (1408-1550), the artist of the Ottoman court whose unique Kufic and Thuluth scripts have yet to be matched (24); Mir Ali of Herat, a 16th-century artist who excelled in single sheets of Nastaliq verses, and was so prolific that today there is hardly an imperial album without a sample of his exquisite work; and the Turkish great master Hafiz Osman (1642-98), whose Qur'an bank became the first to be printed in facsimile in the 19th century and widely circulated (26).

The art of calligraphy flourished throughout the history of Islam and was particularly cherished in the 10th and 11th centuries. Calligraphy, as a unique artistic expression of the Islamic faith, continues to have a special relevance to Muslim society. Patrons, whether rich or poor, imperial or humble, commissioned or purchased individual volumes or single sheets transcribed by the artists they admired. The persistent interest in the tradition and in the aesthetics of calligraphy stimulated this art form to be always vibrant and innovative, kept it alive, and helped to maintain its impeccable standards. Patrons demanded excellence and high quality, and the calligraphers met the challenge admirably.

In addition to its use in manuscripts, calligraphy was also an integral component of the other arts and was used both as a decorative feature and as a means for transmitting messages. The decorative repertoire of metalwork, ceramics, textiles and glass, dating from the formative years of Islam, clearly indicates the impact of the art of writing. The earliest datable examples of metalwork are embellished with inscriptions that include a series of good wishes or pious statements (82, 83). The same sentiments are found in contemporary ceramics, particularly in those produced during the 9th and 10th centuries in north-eastern Iran and Iraq (107, 109, 114). The Arabic phrases bestow "health," "wealth," "power" or "blessings to the owner," advise them to have "trust in God" or contain a number of profound proverbs or aphorisms. Their contents are extremely illuminating, reflecting the desire of the patrons for objects in daily use decorated with sentiments representative of the ethics and morality of the society (85, 86, 93).

Inscriptions in a variety of forms became the most distinctive feature in the artistic vocabulary of objects produced between the 12th and 14th centuries. The information provided by inscriptions can be extremely useful in reconstructing the types of patronage, as well as in identifying the names of the owners and the artists and establishing the chronological sequence of artistic expression.

The second consistent feature that characterizes Islamic art is the tendency to invest an object with universally accepted themes and symbols, thus enhancing its intrinsic value. In addition to the written messages discussed above, the makers employed a
wide range of artistic elements or motifs which were immediately recognized and understood by patrons.

During the formative years of Islamic art, artists relied upon existing traditions and supplied patrons with objects decorated with familiar themes. These were based on the Roman, Byzantine, and Coptic arts of the eastern Mediterranean, the Sassanian traditions of Iraq and Iran and, to some extent, those of Central Asia, India and China. Soon these traditions were synthesized and incorporated with newly-developed Islamic motifs, enabling the artists to formulate an extensive decorative vocabulary.

The harmony of the universe and its perpetual life and movement are represented by delicately entwined floral scrolls bearing naturalistic and fantastic blossoms. These scrolls extend beyond the physical boundaries of the units and are frequently superimposed, creating a feeling of endless space and depth.

This theme appears in manuscript illuminations, architectural decoration and almost all the arts of Islam. Some objects are decorated with a profusion of flowers and blossoming trees that capture the concept of perfect and perpetual spring, as seen on a number of 16th-century Turkish ceramics (129–131); others represent only a single element, frequently a composite lotus bud, which is an abstracted version of the same theme.

Royal themes are far more explicit and portray the prince participating in such activities as banquets, hunts, polo games and battles (90). The princely cycle was particularly favored on objects produced between the 12th and 14th centuries. The models for the vignettes or selected episodes represented on metalwork, ceramics, glass, ivories and other arts were probably taken from manuscript illustrations where the painters portrayed historical or literary kings performing these feats and activities.

When removed from textual reference and transmuted onto an object, such as a lustre bowl or brass basin, these episodes become symbols of good things on earth and life hereafter. The patrons were obviously pleased to own works of art with pleasant and auspicious messages, and sought to surround themselves with objects whose meanings could be searched, analyzed, and understood, and shared. They also understood that such single elements as a lion or eagle attacking prey depicted not only kings overpowering their enemies but also symbolized victory of good against evil and the triumph of faith (157).

Islamic societies were deeply interested in astronomy (64–70), as attested by the large number of instruments and texts devoted to this subject. The heavenly bodies were believed to be an integral part of man’s universe. It is, therefore, not surprising to find depictions of the planets and constellations (57). The crescent and star, which are today represented on the flags of several Islamic nations, point to the persistence of this tradition.

The third underlying feature, the preoccupation with harmonious and refined design, is also one that immediately identifies a work of art as Islamic. Whether the object is a frontispiece, a ceramic plate or a silver-inlaid brass vessel, and whether it was produced during the formative years of Islamic art or under the influence of European traditions in the 16th century, the physical layout bears the stamp of Islamic aesthetics of design. The surfaces are divided into symmetrical units or into zones of predetermined proportions, which are then filled with primary and secondary themes; certain elements are repeated or accented, creating a refined and balanced composition. The formal design of a 16th-century illumination is not that different from one made for a 20th-century manuscript. Decorative elements and proportions of the divisions may vary, but both adhere to the same criteria of aesthetics.

Even when the symmetry of design is abolished, the attempt to harmonize and balance the elements is clearly visible. At times, equilibrium is attained through a “negative” and “positive” version of the same theme. This is the case in several 16th-century Turkish ceramic plates where a floral scroll is rendered in cobalt-blue on white on the interior, while on the exterior the ground is painted blue and the same scroll is reserved in white, the color of the body or paste of the plate. Duality of design, emphasizing both the foreground and background, is frequently employed; the primary and secondary themes attain equal importance and advance or recede depending on the view of the beholder. The artist achieves this vibrating surface interest with formal elements of design as well as with coloristic effects. For instance, a floral scroll with naturalistic blossoms superimposed on one with stylized split-leaves may at the first glance appear above the latter, but upon closer inspection the viewer discovers that some of the split-leaves lie on top of the blossoms, creating an ambiguity in spatial relationships. On other objects, the background is painted in a brilliant pigment, forcing it to advance and

overshadow what logically should have been the main theme. Parts of a painting may flow over the carefully-drawn frame and jut into the margins; certain elements may even be bold enough to transgress the text and sprout between the verses. Physical boundaries are often disregarded, and only a microcosm of the entire design appears to have been captured within the framework of the object (72). This feature is particularly noticeable in rugs where the borders on the four sides cut through the composition and enclose only a segment (157). One realizes that the design continues infinitely in two or even three dimensions, and what is depicted here is only a part of a mere symbol of the whole.

The extension of the design beyond the physical boundaries of the object suggests that we are dealing with the same concept found in radiating designs; that is, the visual representation of the harmony and order of the universe, its intricate and infinite existence. What the beholder observes is a portion with which he is identified and of which he is a part.

The arts of Islam reflect the moral standards of Muslim society and its profound involvement with divine representation of the physical world. The primary concern of the artist was to produce an object invested with intrinsic messages which could be interpreted on several levels. The simplest level was the appreciation of the technical and aesthetic qualities of the pieces. They were beautifully designed and executed and contained recognizable themes that were meaningful to patrons. Some themes and symbols bestowed blessings and good wishes with protective talismans. These very elements also allowed themselves to be interpreted in a more sophisticated manner among scholarly societies; they represented the omnipotence of the universe, its order, harmony and beauty.

The unity of Islamic art, then, is displayed in its use of calligraphy, symbolism and harmonious design, all visual images of the Faith, rendered on objects in daily use.

Esin Atik
The Center for Asian Art, The Smithsonian Institution
1 Double Qur'an Page
Bearing the Waqf notation of al-Majur

Syria, 9th century
Ink, color on parchment
Page size: 12.3 cm × 19 cm
Text: Sura III, v.49-50

The two pages illustrated here have three lines in brown Kufic script, with vocalization marks in red. They are of particular interest for the study of early Qur'an manuscripts because of a Waqf (endowment) inscription along the top margin. The donor, al-Majur, was governor of Damascus under the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutamid between 869 and 877. This implies that the Qur'an was copied in the later 9th century, and very possibly in Damascus. Its calligraphy may be compared with that of another early Qur'an which contains a Waqf notation by Abd al-Munim bin Ahmad dated 289 (901) in Damascus (Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Ms. 1421).

2 Qur'an Page
Iraq or North Africa, 9th century
Ink, color on parchment
Page size: 22.5 cm × 32.5 cm
Text: Sura XXVIII, mid-v.58 - mid-v.59

This page is inscribed with five lines of dark brown Kufic calligraphy. The vocalization is indicated with red, yellow, blue and green dots, while some consonants are distinguished with fine brown strokes. The calligrapher has achieved a monumental effect of considerable beauty.
3 Qur'an Page
Iraq or North Africa, 9th century
Ink, color, gold on parchment
Page size: 12.7 cm x 20 cm
Text: Sura XI, mid-v.104-108
This page contains five lines of brown Kufic script, with gold florets punctuating the verses. Like the preceding example, orthographic marks are rendered with colored dots and fine brown dashes. The calligrapher of this page, however, has compressed the text and minimized the extension of individual letters. As a result, the page has a very different aesthetic effect from no.2.

4 Fragment of a Qur'an
Iran, 9th century
Ink, color, gold on parchment
Page size: 12.2 cm x 18.7 cm
Text: Sura LVI, v.6-LIX, v.16
There are 12 folios written in neat brown Kufic, 14 lines to the page, with vocalization in red and green. Three Sura headings are written in gold.
The section is of great historical interest because the last folio bears inscriptions and seals showing that this Qur'an was seen by a number of rulers and important statesmen.
Folio 12a.
i. A seal with the inscription “The Sovereignty is for God, 762” (1160-61).

ii. Autograph inscription of Shah Ismail (1501-24) first ruler of the Safavid dynasty. “Ismail al-Musavi al-Husayni al-Safavi Bahadur Khan had the honor of seeing this noble holy Qur'an in 917” (1511-12).

Folio 12b.
i. Autograph inscription of Shah Tahmasp, second ruler of the Safavid dynasty (1524-76). “It was seen through the intermediary of Abd al-Hakim in Rajab 971 according to the will of his Highness” (Feb. 1364).

ii. Autograph inscription of Shah Abbas I, fifth ruler of the Safavid dynasty (1619-66). “It was seen through the intermediary of Allah Verdi Khan in the house of... according to the will of his Highness.” (Allah Verdi Khan was Shah Abbas’ minister.)


iv. Five seals, including one with the inscription “Khanehzade Shah Jahan, 1037” (1628).
The last line of the manuscript states that it was written by Hasan ibn Ali. Although scholars would question this attribution to the grandson of the Prophet, it has clearly been accepted for centuries and the manuscript treated as a priceless relic.
5 Double Qur'an Page
North Africa, 9th century
Gold, silver on blue parchment
Page size: 31 cm x 41 cm
Text: Sura XVII, mid-10-23
Each page has 15 lines of gold Kufic script, with silver (oxided) rosettes marking the verse-ends. Silver medallions in the border indicate the divisions of 20 verses.
These magnificent pages come from a Qur'an which is thought to have been ordered by the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-17) as a gift to the great mosque at Mashhad. Most of the manuscript is today in the National Library in Tunis, although several detached folios came into the possession of the distinguished scholar and collector F. R. Martin in the early part of this century. These are now scattered in various museums and private collections. This is an exceptional example since it is a well-preserved double page with a continuous text.

6 Double Qur'an Page
North Africa, 10th century
Ink, color on parchment
Page size: 28.2 cm x 39.4 cm
Text: Sura XXXIII, v.23- mid-v.35
Each page has 15 lines of clear, precise Kufic calligraphy written in dark brown, with red, green and brown diaritical marks. A very similar style of script can be found in a manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (Ms.1401) which has 13 lines to the page (see M. Lings, The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination, London, 1976, p.6).

7 Illuminated Frontispiece from a Qur'an
North Africa, 10th century
Color and gold on parchment
Page size: 11.7 cm x 20.9 cm
Qairouan was one of the most important centers for the production of Qur'ans during the early Islamic period. This horizontal format is typical, as is the geometric ‘carpet’ design (see M. Jenkins, Islamic Art in the Kairouan National Museum: The al-Sahn Collection, London, 1985, cover illustration). This page is illuminated in gold, brown and blue in a design framed and articulated by a knotting band of bare parchment left in reserve. On the other side of this page, a gold vine-pattern border encloses a diagonal trellis field with a trefoil plant in reserve within each lozenge, and a large palmette in the border.
8 Qur'an Page

Iran, 9th-10th century
Ink, color on parchment
Page size: 26.3 cm x 13.2 cm
Text: Sura II, v.185-87

This page has six lines of brown Kufic, with orthographic marks in red and brown. It is tentatively attributed to Iran because of its somewhat attenuated strokes, and the triangular form of certain letter heads. These features may also be seen in a group of scripts collectively called Eastern Kufic, and generally attributed to the Iranian part of the Islamic world. Many of these other examples are vertically-oriented paper pages with secure dates ranging from the mid-10th century to the 13th century. This sample, however, is executed on parchment and retains the horizontal format associated with an earlier period.

9 Qur'an Page

Iraq or Iran, 9th-10th century
Ink, color, gold on parchment
Page size: 15.1 cm x 21 cm
Text: Sura IX, v.26-33

This page has eight lines of script, with gold discs marking the ends of verses. A larger red and gold disc shows the division of 16 verses, and orthographic marks are in red, green and brown. The slightly irregular rhythm and the variable shape of individual letters suggest that the script has not reached stylistic maturity.

10 Kitab al-Muwatta

Copied by Ubaydullah bin Said al-Warrak
Spain, Rajab 391 AH / June 1001 AD
Ink on parchment
Page size: 27.2 cm x 22 cm

The manuscript has 38 folios, with 17 lines of neat brown Maghribi script to the page. The headings are emphasized in larger script, and there are considerable marginal notes throughout. The inscription of an owner, Abu Muhammad Abdullah bin Abdul Azizi, is dated 480 (1087-88).

The text is a juridical work consulted by the followers of the great jurist Malik bin Anas (708-94). It was originally compiled by Yahya bin Yahya Katir al-Masmudi (d.848). Since this legal school was most influential in the Maghrib, it is not surprising that the earliest known manuscripts of the Kitab al-Muwatta come from there. The oldest known copy, dated 277 (896), is in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, and is also written in fine Maghribi script. This manuscript appears to be the second oldest dated copy. Another manuscript, undated but attributed to the 11th century, is in the General Library, Rabat (Ms.840).
Fragment of a Qur'an

Spain, 12th century

Ink, color, gold on vellum

Page size: 27.5 cm x 27 cm

Text: Sura LXXII, v. 10 – XCIX, v. 8

This rare fragmentary manuscript has 30 folios, each with seven lines of Maghribi script. The diacritical marks are rendered in yellow, green, blue, red and turquoise. The Sura headings, of which there are 17 (folios 1a, 5a, 7b, 10a, 11a, 13a, 15a, 18a, 20a, 21b, 23a, 24a, 25a, 27a, 28a, 30a), are written in a gold Kufic script that contrasts powerfully with the flowing Maghribi script, and they are further embellished by exquisitely illuminated medallions which project into the border. Gold knots indicate the end of each verse; crested discs show the fifth verses; and scalloped medallions mark the tenth.

This beautiful free-flowing calligraphy was fully developed in Spain and the Maghrib by the late 11th century and was the only cursive style to evolve directly from Kufic. According to Ibn Khaldun, students of calligraphy in this area learned by writing entire words, rather than repeating individual letters as calligraphers were taught to do in other parts of the Islamic world. The finest surviving example of this style is a Qur'an in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, no. 360 (see M. Lings, The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination, London, 1976, p. 98).
Morocco, 13th century
Ink, color, gold on parchment
Page size: 21.5 cm x 30 cm

Text: Juz VIII

The section has 74 folios and three end pages. Each page has five lines of dark brown Maghribi script, with orthographic marks in red, yellow, blue, and green. A gold medallion containing a red circle with Kufic marks the divisions of ten verses; a crested palmette marks the divisions of five verses; and three gold discs show the end of each verse. A gold illuminated panel heads the text (folio 1b); there is one gold Sura heading in monumental Kufic (folio 34a); and on the last page the calligraphy is written in gold, within an illuminated frame, with a marginal medallion.

The common culture shared by Spain and Morocco is well illustrated by comparing this with the fragment on the previous page. This manuscript lacks the grandeur of the earlier Spanish example, but it is impressive nevertheless, and rendered all the more striking by its remarkable state of preservation. In contrast with the many different styles of writing developed in the East, Maghribi calligraphy continued to be the standard script up until this century in Morocco. Parchment also remained in use in Morocco long after it was abandoned in favor of paper elsewhere.
15 Al-Bisharat w'al-Wuqaf (The Book of Prophecy and Knowledge)
Copied by Muhammad bin Omar bin Abu Bakr

Iran, 5 Jamadi I 646 AH/26 August 1248 AD
Ink and gold on paper
Page size: 19.8 cm x 14.2 cm

The Arabic manuscript has 117 folios and 17 lines in two columns to the page. It is written in neat black Naskhi with significant words picked out in red. The first page has a finely illuminated ex-libris, with an inscription saying that the manuscript was written for the library of the “Exalted Imam Ahmad bin al-Sadr al-Rafi, the Crown of Islam.” The two opening pages of text have illuminated headpieces giving the title of the book and the name of the author. The headings in the text are written in bold Eastern Kufic script.

This appears to be the only recorded copy of this text, which concerns the circumstances surrounding the Revelation of the Suras of the Qur’an. The author, Ibn Taifur bin Mansur, is otherwise unknown as are the calligrapher and patron.

14 Two Illuminated Pages from a Qur’an

Egypt, circa 1300
Ink, color, gold on paper
Page size: 19.5 cm x 13.9 cm

a. The page is illuminated with a rectangular panel outlined in gold cable pattern and enclosing a lobed geometric design. Above and below, the panels enclose a tile-pattern of small hexagons and ‘Y’ shapes in green, white, red and blue on a gold background. The side panels contain floral arabesques on a blue background, each side of a rounded enclosing a palmette in gold and red. The central lozenge encloses lotus flowers on a white ground around a central black window with a white Kufic inscription and gold spiralling vines. A circular medallion protrudes into the border.

b. Sura XVII, v.101–mid-v.102
Three lines of black calligraphy are outlined in gold clouds within a rectangular frame of gold cable pattern. Above and below are blue rectangles enclosing white Kufic calligraphy against floral arabesques in gold and colors. Two circular medallions protrude into the border.

These two pages belonged originally to a small Qur’anic manuscript. Their style of decoration follows closely the patterns of such manuscripts in Egypt in the late 13th and the early 14th century (see A. J. Arberry, The Koran Illuminated, Dublin, 1967, pls. 35 ff., especially pl. 37 for a very close parallel).

Provenance: H. P. Kraus Collection
Published: E. J. Grube, Islamic Paintings from the 11th to the 18th Century in the Collection of Hans P. Kraus, New York, n.d., nos. 15–16.
Qur’an
Copied and illuminated by Abdul Aziz bin Abu'l-Ghanam bin Abu'l Fazil al-Kashi

Iran, 703 AH/1304 AD
Ink, color, gold on paper
Page size: 30.2 cm x 19.5 cm

This Qur'an has 272 folios with 13 lines of beautiful script in two different styles, within gold, blue and green margins. Gold rosettes mark the verse-ends, and illuminated medallions and palmettes in the borders indicate the divisions of five and ten verses.

The first double page has a magnificent illuminated geometrical frontispiece. Each folio has six silver (now oxidized) octagons with a delicate flowing wave-pattern. This pattern forms the background for gold calligraphy that is interlaced with a different flowering vine in every panel. Smaller blue octagons with a gold and red geometric flower link the silver octagons, and the smaller triangular spaces are in reddish gold with a palmer gold leaf-motif. All the Sura headings are written in gold within an illuminated rectangular panel with a palmette projecting into the border. The colophon, identifying the scribe and providing the date, is written entirely in gold. On the final folio, an inscription dated 701 (1660) indicates that the manuscript was given to Mir Sultan Mahmud, “the eldest son.” This notation may have been made at the same time as the floral borders were added; they are distinctly Mughal in style.

The year 1304 saw the death of Ghazan Khan, who had re-established Islam as the state religion in Iran, and the accession of Uljaytu, under whom the arts and sciences revived, after the terrible devastations wrought by the Mongols. His remarkable vizier, Rashid al-Din, established the Scriptorium in Tabriz, which produced The History of the World, the first great masterpiece of the Ilkhan period. Qur’ans produced under Mongol rule are rare, probably because of the after-effects of the terrible upheavals of the 13th century, and also because of the destructiveness of the Timurid invasion in the second half of the 14th century. A Qur’an copied in the same year by Ahmad bin al-Shaikh al-Suhrawardi is in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran, Ms. 3348.