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**THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY AND THE
MUGHAL CONTRIBUTION IN SOUTH ASIA**



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Abstract

The paper traces the origins of Islamic calligraphy, examining its theological and historical roots. It inspects the evolution of reproducing the sacred scripts of the Quran in the seventh century to till to the refined visual art form that unifies faith and design. The development of the script from the early Nabatean roots towards Kufic to its cursive forms as Naskh, Thuluth, Muhaqqaq, and Rayhan. The focus is set on the Mughal period in South Asia, highlighting the imperial patronage for the development of styles like Nastaliq, Khat-i-Babari and Shikasta. The blend of Persian elegance with the indigenous craftsmanship is found in political and cultural ornamentation. The research also features the technical principles of proportions, geometry established by the early calligraphist and theorist Ibn Muqla, who shaped the penmanship. The paper demonstrates through the analysis of Arabian, Persian, Ottoman and Mughal Indian approaches towards Islamic calligraphy in shaping the visual languages of the Muslim world. Although the manual calligraphy declined due to the advent of print, it continues to serve as a sacred and devoted cultural identity, inspiring contemporary artists and designers up to the digital era.

Keywords: Islamic Calligraphy, Mughal Art, Visual Culture of Islam, South Asian Manuscript.

Keywords: Sentiment Analysis, Linguistic, Corpus, Support Vector, Approaches

Introduction

The ideal embodiment of Islamic visual culture is evident when art, religious intent, and intellect are unified within a single creative piece. Early art was fundamentally shaped by the sacred agenda of safeguarding and embellishing the Quran, which Muslims believe to be the verbatim and enduring word of God. The act of writing the Quran was far more demanding than ordinary transcription; it was carried out with profound spiritual faith (Alashari). Every line, curve and proportion was imbued with worship and piety, giving the printed word an appearance that echoed divine order. For this reason, Islamic calligraphy was valued less for practical utility and more as a sign of sacredness, discipline and refinement (Barrucand).

Islamic calligraphy can be viewed as a reflection of the cultural and intellectual growth of Islamic civilization. Beginning with the Hijazi and Kufic scripts of the 7th century, the art evolved through centuries of experimentation and regional adaptation. The strongly geometric and stable qualities of early Kufic enabled its use in the earliest Quranic manuscripts. In the later periods, cursive scripts such as Naskh, Thuluth, Muhaqqaq, and Rayhan introduced a rhythmic and flowing aesthetic. (Shahryanshah Sirajuddin, Fatma Ulusoy Sirajuddin).

With the arrival of the 10th century and the introduction of Ibn Muqla's proportional system, calligraphy became governed by precise mathematical principles combined with spiritual symbolism. His theory, which standardized letterforms using the proportions of the alif and the geometry of a circle, laid the basis for the later achievements of Arabic penmanship (Ibid).

As the Islamic culture expanded beyond Arabia into Persia, Central Asia and the subcontinent of India, it absorbed the visual aesthetics of these regions, with calligraphy adapting to the new material, media, and architectural environments (baekyuneel234). The Mughal era (16th-19th centuries) represented a major phase of modernization in which the Persian tradition was gradually reshaped within a distinct South Asian sensibility (Fatima Zahra, Safrizal Shahir). The Mughal emperors themselves were learned patrons of the arts who supported calligraphers, painters and poets, incorporating calligraphy into manuscripts, coins, textiles and monumental architecture (Rahman). Zahir al-Din Babur developed his own script, Khatt-i-Baburi and later emperors- Akbar, Shah Jahan

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and Bahadur Shah Zafar further advanced the refinement of Nasta-liq and Shikasta calligraphies. These fluid and elegant styles became markers of imperial power and the elite culture that is evident in major manuscripts such as the Padshahnama and in architectural masterpieces like the Taj Mahal, where calligraphy enhances both the aesthetic and spiritual impact of the structure (Ibid).

In discussing the history of Islamic calligraphy, the article highlights the significant role of the Mughals to its stylistic development and evolution (Barrucand). It traces the shift from angular to cursive scripts, from manuscript use to the monumental display and from the sacred to the decorative refinement that broadened the scope of the Islamic artistic expression (Sah). The study positions Islamic calligraphy as part of a broader universal visual language, one capable of describing the beauty of the text written and enduring discussion on faith, knowledge, and artistic imagination across centuries (Duaa Mohammed Alashari, Abd.Rahman Hamzah, Nurazmallail Marni).

Islamic calligraphy depicts one of the most significant contributions to the visual arts. Although it has only recently been widely recognized in the West, Muslim calligraphers have regarded the writing of the Quran as a devotional act rather than an aesthetic one. Its value lies in the harmony of line, movement, and form. As a discipline grounded in the geometry of script, calligraphy holds a central place in both religious and secular Islamic artistic traditions. Because the Quran is understood as the literal word of God, its sacred status sparked a powerful artistic impulse that began in the seventh century and continues to shape calligraphic practice today.

Were design and composition central concerns for calligraphers? Does the Quran shape the theological and aesthetic dimensions of the art? What are the origins of calligraphy and the names of scripts? These are the guiding questions of this article, which seeks to connect between present and the past.

Historical Background

The calligraphy is available in sizes alike gigantic and minute and all mediums except the most significant ones, which are on paper using a reed pen known as Qalam in the Arabic language. The seventh century produced the first written copies of the Quran, which was the time when calligraphy appeared. The Nabateans, a Hellenised Arabic-speaking population who lived to the west of the Jordan River. The Islamic calligraphy represents the supreme achievement of the Islamic visual culture, where art, religion were combined in a creative activity, and intellect. This art was invented during the early centuries of the Islamic religion and its motive was very holy in that of preservation and beautification of the Quran, which is the literal word of God that is regarded as such by Muslims. The writing of the Quran was not, therefore, merely a process of writing but a spiritual belief (Alashari). The inspirations of reverence and devotion were the directing elements of every line or curve, every proportion, and transformed the printed word into a vision of the divine order. The calligraphy of the Islamic world was, consequently, perfect for realism and should have represented a symbol of sanctity, control, and aesthetic equilibrium (Ernst).

Even Islamic calligraphy can be considered a continuation of the cultural and intellectual development of Islamic civilization. Drawing on the Hijazi and Kufic scripts of the 7th century, the art did not stop its evolution, but centuries of experimentation, local adaptation, and development of the styles went on. Kufic was originally defined by the strict geometricity and architectural permanence and was employed to prevail on the earliest copies of the Quran, and afterwards on the scripts of the cursive script, such as Naskh, Thuluth, Muhaqqaq and Rayhan, which gave rhythm and movement in the usage and readability (Anderson).

The fresh beginning was resumed during the 10th century, with the theory of proportion introduced by the Abbasid calligrapher Ibn Muqla: calligraphy was emancipated into a government of regulated beauty, within the jurisdiction of mathematical accuracy and spiritual allegory. All future

accomplishments in the Arabic script were based on this theory that pegged the letters to the percentage of the alif and the circle shape (Yaghan).

As the Islamic culture left Arabia to enter Persia, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, the calligraphy also borrowed the aesthetics of these places and responded to the new materials, media and the architecture (Asif Ali). The Mughal period (16th-19th centuries) was among the most astonishing periods of growth as the impact of the Persian world was compounded with the South Asian native sensitivities (Dev). The Mughal rulers were themselves scholars and amateur works, and supported calligraphers, painters, and poets; they integrated the art even in the manuscripts, coins, textiles, and even great structures. Emperor Zahir al-Din Babur made his own calligraphic style, Khatt-i-Baburi and the subsequent emperors, such as Akbar, Shah Jahan and Bahadur Shah Zafar promoted the art of perfection of calligraphies Nasta-liq and Shikasta (Khan). The fluidity and elegance of such types of manifestations acquired symbolic meaning of the imperial power and high culture, which is particularly conspicuous in manuscripts like the Padshahnama or architectural masterpieces like the Taj Mahal, where calligraphic texts can promote the aesthetic and spiritual experience of the building (Pashai).

In this article, the history of the evolution of Islamic calligraphy is analyzed, specifically how the Mughal contributed to the stylistic and cultural evolution of the said calligraphy (Asif Ali). It explores how the shift towards the removal of the angular scripts to the cursive scripts, the use of a manuscript to monumental scale, and the sacred to the ornamental use has expressed continuity and creativity in the Islamic artistic practices (Yagmur). The study contextualizes Islamic calligraphy as a twofold aspect, i.e., one that may be applied in the defining of the aesthetics of the written word and also regarding the evolving discussion of the faith versus the learning and creative imagination between centuries, where the originators of the manuscript ween centuries were the originators of the manuscript (The Calligraphy Society).

Modern Latin	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Early Latin	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Early Greek	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Phoenician	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Early Aramaic	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Nabataean	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Early Arabic	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T

Figure 1, The Evolution of the Phoenician Script into Modern Latin and Arabic Image Source: <http://leedscalligraphy.blogspot.com/2010/10/history-of-arabic-alphabet.html>

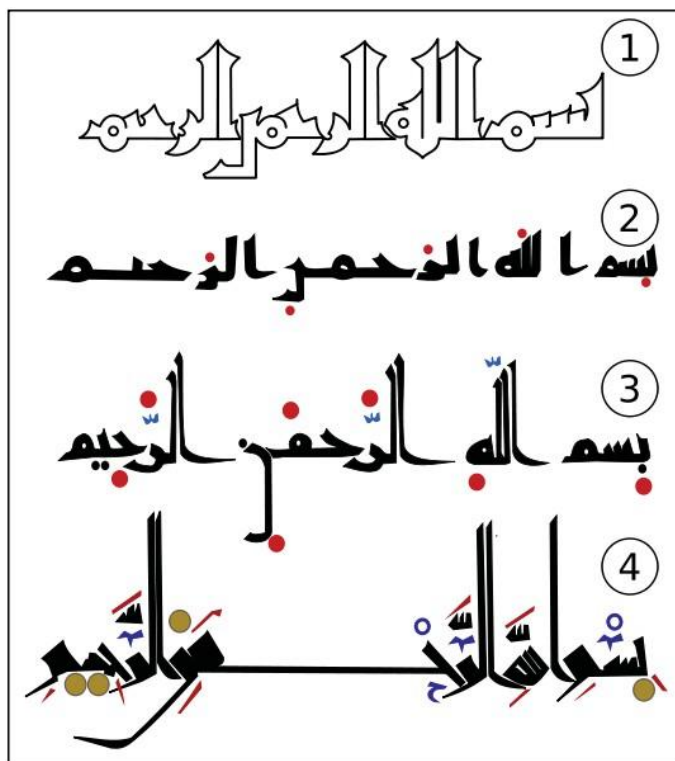


Figure 2, Development of the Arabic Script Through Time

Image Source: <http://leedscalligraphy.blogspot.com/2010/10/history-of-arabic-alphabet.html>



Figure 3, Early Calligraphic Scripts into Three Main Families Hijazi, Kufic and Persian Image

Source: <http://islamic-arts.org/2012/calligraphy-the-geometry-of-the-spirit/>.

The earliest writings were severe, crude and plain. Then, they lacked indicators of short vowels. That the reader may have to rely on the sense to bestow what vowel, to place in a given syllable. It also did not have the arrangement of dots that were employed above or below the definite characters. The seventh to the eleventh century script, later came into being in Hijaz, Makkah and Medina (See figure 2).

Three major broad categories of script families exist (see figure 3).

1. Hijazi
2. Kufic
3. Persian Kufic

The Hijazi

The standard Quranic script that was first published was the Hijazi in page format, which was vertical. In contrast to Kufic, which uses horizontal page formats, a more stable type of script and the base is the most significant characteristic, as the strokes are up and down the base. Al-Qaeda delivered a universal Islamic civilization by applying all the type styles in the case of Islamic Spain via Iran. (James)

The Kufic

The name of the script originated as the name of the town Kufa, capital of the fourth caliph, Haḍrat Ali, and it was known by the name Kufic. The Holy Quran contained twenty-nine letters used in the first five centuries. The Quran had inspired the proud and unbending Arabs by speechmaking bold and rhythmic speech. To this end, the Holy words impregnated in it probably appear more compelling and closer to the style of writing to differentiate between Arabs and town traders.

The Kufic script was best used by the Fatimid Dynasty of Egypt in 1155 CE. Development of floral and geometric patterns took place between the 11th and 12th centuries CE. The various styles evolved. The marks of vowels were introduced as dots by Abul Aswad 69 A.H., a devotee of the caliph Ali, and it was practiced for approximately a century. Qutab came up with four Kufic styles (The Art & Heritage of Kufic Script).



Figure 4, Kufic script from the 9th – 10th centuries

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>



Figure 5, Kufic script from the Holy Qur'an, 11th century

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

The Persian Kufic

Persian Kufic was created in the 10th century and continued to evolve up until the 12th century CE. The possibilities of decoration were pushed to extremes. The legibility was, however, maintained in of significant condition (See figures 4, 5). It was a Persian Kufic which made use of a cursive script like Naskh. The word cursive that West used distinguished scripts like Naskh, Thuluth, Muhaqqaq and Rayhan. These are all the cursive Kufic families and angular families (Sardar). However, there are two types of calligraphy script according to the Muslim medieval writers, other than Kufic.

- 1- Murattab, meaning curvilinear
- 2- Yabis meaning rectilinear

Muhaqqaq, Naskh and Rayhan were the rectilinear; Thuluth (see figure 6,7) was curvilinear; Tawqi and Riq a (see figure 8). There were also divisions of Quranic and non-Quranic scripts. The sacred text is the straight line and the civil documents or correspondence are the curvilinear ones (See figure 9). (James)

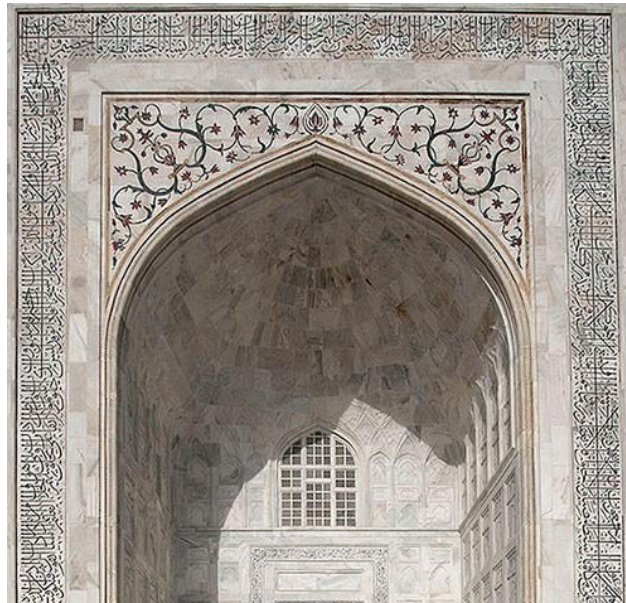


Figure 6, The exterior decorations of the Taj Mahal in India, written in the Thuluth script Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>



Figure 7, One page from the Holy Qur'an, written in the Naskh script Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

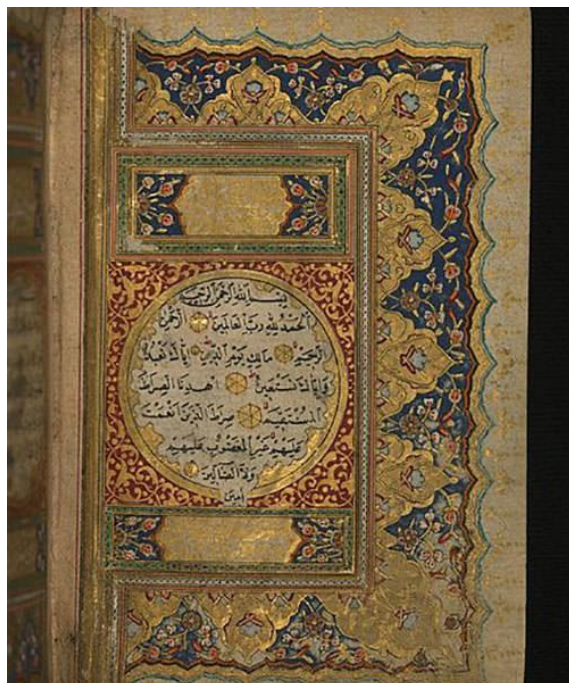


Figure 8, Paper from the Holy Qur'an in Riq'a script

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

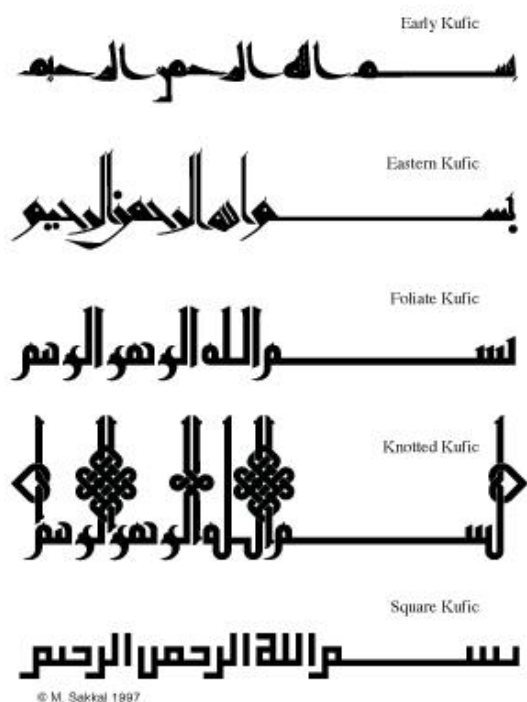


Figure 9, Five categories of Kufic

Image Source: http://shukoryahya.blogspot.com/2008_12_19_archive.html

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Types of Kufic

- 1- Primitive or simple Kufic
- 2- Kufic with elaborated peaks
- 3- Foliated Kufic (with curling leaf shapes on it)
- 4- Floriated Kufic (decorated with floral shapes)
- 5- Interlaced Kufic
- 6- Bordered Kufic
- 7- Architectural Kufic
- 8- Rectangles Kufic

In East, the Kufic style had faded away in the 13th century and was replaced with a more rounded style, which is currently in use. The two great causes of the downfall of Kufic were one the paper that had substituted the papyrus and the surface was made smooth so the pen could move with ease. The second was that the reed, which was in use, was a pen. To cut the nib, the end of the reed was cut using the knife. The nib may be cut in various shapes to create various effects. The calligrapher produced crooked and thin lines very easily because the nib sliced in a slanting shape and created a feeling of beauty and diversity. In order to maintain the proportion, larger script and nibs were employed. It was a system of allowing out, by the breadth of the nib, of giving shapes of the distinct letters. The proportional writing format of Ibn Muqla, which was created based on the circle and the width of the letter Alif, was developed. He invented theories of letter shape through which the basic letter shape of the Arabic alphabet could be managed. His writings were the landmark achievements in the history of Arabic script. The guideline he provided led to the development of the primitive Kufic into agreeable artwork. The Arabic calligraphers still cut their reed pen as was developed by the devised nib cut technique of the Muqla to cut the formal curves, strokes and dots in line with the principles over ten centuries.

Just as in one style the alphabet Alif is three times its own breadth high in one stroke, as in another style its own breadth is seven times its own height. The letters had flexibility of length and joined between the letters, as the Arabic letters never possessed separated letters, as in printed English. Baseline is the cardinal property of Arabic Calligraphy and since it is read right to left, there is no allowance to insert an unauthorized letter to any of the groups (See figures 10, 11, 12). (Mohamed Zakariya)

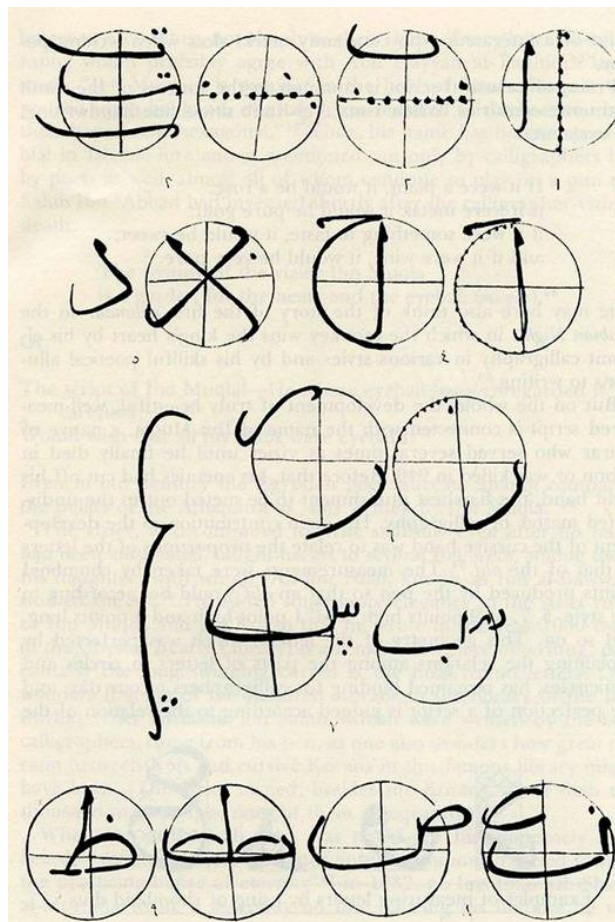


Figure 10, Ibn Muqla's Four Rules: The alif and circles as a guide to proportions Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

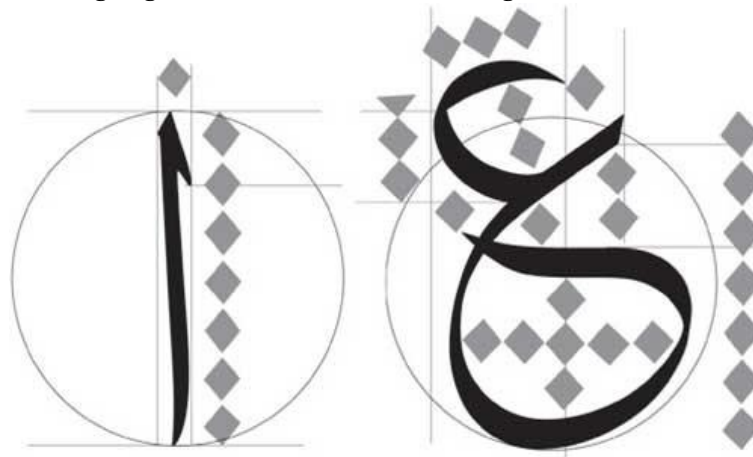


Figure 11, Ibn Muqla's Four Rules: The rhombic dot, the alif, the circle and the similarity system Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

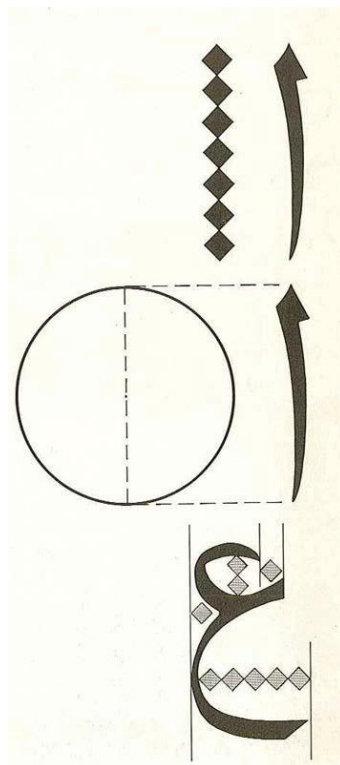


Figure 12, The Rhombic dot as a guide to proportions

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

Khatt-i-Bāburī

Calligraphy in South Asia had Persian origins and later took up (Khat) forms. The sultans and kings were also promoting the art by giving high salaries to the calligraphers. Other Mughal rulers were also themselves calligraphers like Zahir, otherwise called 8aharaz, who created his version of the calligraphy, Khaati-Baaburi. It may as well have been, more likely resembling the calligraphic script developed at Herat, made available by the cousin of Babar Mir 3Alis Shirwan. Traces of Herat taqlik. Amir Khusru Mathnawiya and Mathnawiya Abd ul-Rahm2an Jami (See fig 13). The real nature of this Khatt i Baburi has been debatable, but the latest unearthing of a soviet scholar, Dr. S. Azimjanova, has proved that it was a variant of the new alphabet invented by Babur, which was the altered form of the Arabic alphabet. (Bhutta)

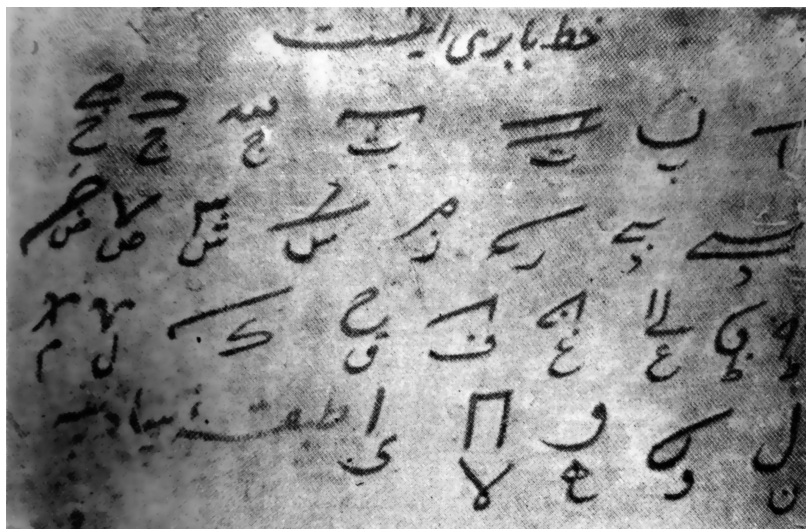


Figure 13, Specimen of Calligraphy claimed to be in Khat-i-Babri Introduced by Emperor Babur (d. 1530). Image Source: Book, Murraqa-e-Khat by Tariq Masood, Publisher Lahore Ajaeb Ghar, June 1981.

Khatt-i-Naskh

Naskh emerged out of the term Nasakha, which translates to write a copy. It was to replace the Kufic as the script to use in the Quran. Due to its legibility, more Quran and books were written. It is also printer-friendly and the Arabic font is most used in the modern digital landscape. Letters have balanced and neat curves that are fluent. Balancing proportions of flat and round forms, rough and smooth lines, and quick and easy to draw. Letter shapes have dissimilar proportions. (Kvernén)

Naskh in a statement of power on epigraphs was employed by Shair Shah Surī. Other craftsmen who were taken by Humayun to Persia had a more favorable climate in Mughal India. Sayyad 1) Al-Tabrazi, as well as Khuwaja Abd ul-Samad, were both scribes and painters. The final Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar himself was a mature scribe of Naskh and his album is in the British Library (See figure 14). (James)



Figure 14, One page from the Holy Qur'an, written in the Naskh script

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

Ta'liq to Nasta'liq

However, Iranian and Turkish Ottoman types were adopted beyond their national borders. Nasta'liq, which was invented in 15th-century Iran, was the most significant script. The horizontal aspect of the Arabic script was pointed out, even exaggerated, which is the primary characteristic of Nasta'liq. It was used as a literary implement in Persian. Not only Iran but also at the Mughal court and in the kingdom of Deccan. It was used as Taliq by Ottoman calligraphers in Istanbul, and it was used to write poetry in Ottoman Turkish that was known to the literate in Persian. (Ibid)

One of the earliest Hindu Tantric scriptures in North India is the Tatu Nama of Akbar. The overpowering influences of Persian artists in both the Mughal and the Ottoman adhere to the Ottoman scripts. During the reign of the late Akbar, a transition was affected towards a fine Nasta'liq. Nasta'liq thrived during the Shah Jahan period in zenith of Padshahnama. Taj Mahal is the lavish architectural monument of the Nasta'liq art. (See figure 15, 16). (The Davis Museum at Wellesley)

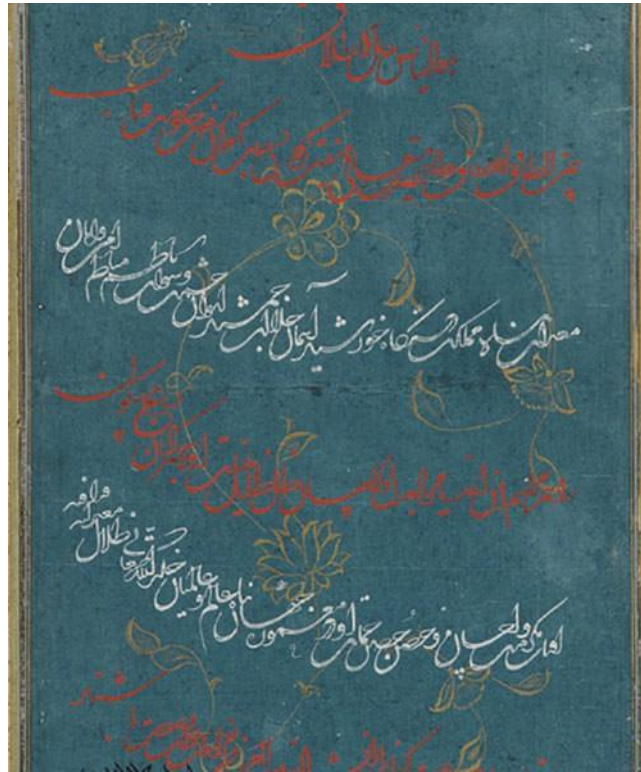


Figure 15, Example of Ta'liq script

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>

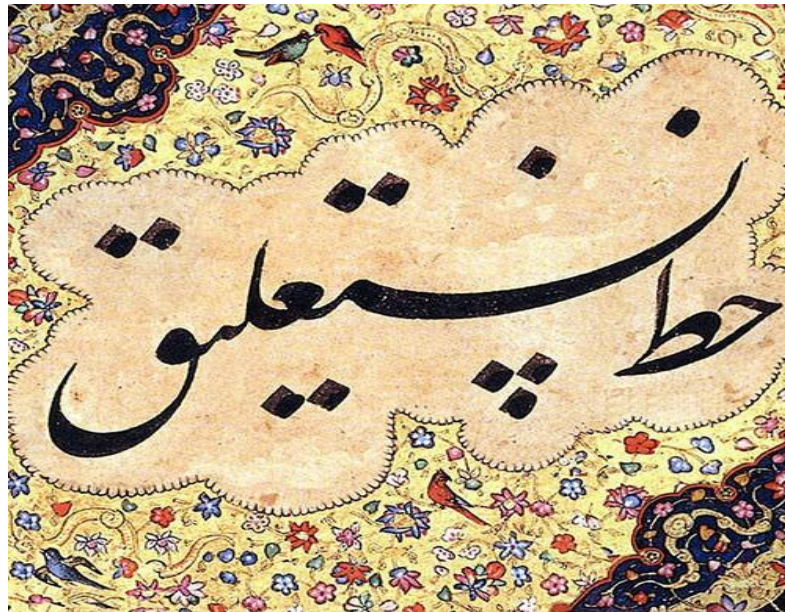


Figure 16, Example of Nasta'liq

Image Source: <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2014/03/20/taking-a-closer-look-at-arabic-calligraphy/>



Figure 17, This calligraphic fragment is in fine shikaste (literally, “broken”) script and includes an initial bismillah and chapters (surahs) 1 and 114 of the Qur’an.

Image Source: <http://islamic-arts.org/2011/islamic-calligraphy-1450-1925-east/>

Shikasta Script

It took the form of Nasta'liq written in local Iranian as Shikasta, in which the script was so complex, decorative, and legible to the layman almost impossible (The Shekasta script, its roots and characteristics). Nevertheless, despite the flaws of the official language, the communication of the civil service is offered in a fantastic manner. The period marks a decline of Alamgīr to Nastaqilliq and court custom had changed to Shikasta, as on the customs of Istanbul Diwani was formed (See figure 17).

Ṭughrā Script

The most amazing invention of Ottomans was the magnificent Ṭughrā. Traugr was a term that originated in Tura, which translates to seal or cipher that was applied by the Seljuks. The writer of the most popular Ṭughrā of Abu Ismail Amidi Jawzakani at the time of the Seljuq. There was employed a vast diversity of forms was employed, such as conspicuous, tending to be decorated in the fashion of the period. Palmette, lotus, carnation and cloud patterns were replicated many times.

Frequently beautiful in ornamentation, and beneath the Tughra was Diwani of a kind of Ta'lliq, each line rising to the left and being invested in covering the information of the ornament, glittering nearly unreadable writing. The fabulous Ṭughrā. of the reign of Akbar is found in the inscription in Gold written on the blue walls of the resting place of Salīm Chishtī at Fatehpur Sikri (Salim Chishti Tomb) T. The minor defects in the shape, mould and design of the original letters may pass unnoticed in a complex pattern. The single type has a heavy influence of the character of Ṭughrā.

The evolution that was at its zenith during the reign of Akbar continued until the reign of Aurangzeb. The weaker kings of the Mughal emperor were too occupied to uphold their power to patronise arts

until the last of the Mughal rulers, Bahadur Shah Zafar, was like the last gleam of the expiring fire before its utter extinction (See figure 18).

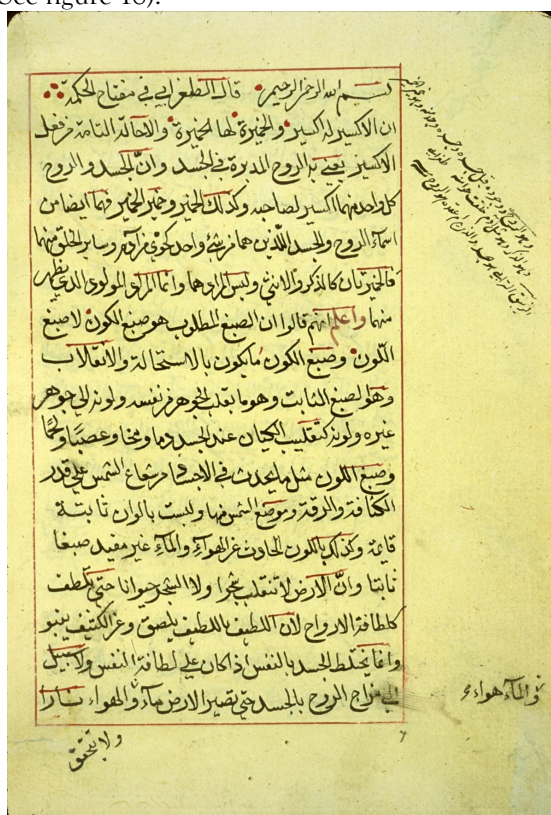


Figure 18, Paper from the Holy Qur'an in Riq'a script

Image Source: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/arabic/images2/a65148b.jpg>

The earliest identifiable form of calligraphy is thought to be Tasmia, which appears at the beginning of each surah. Independent calligraphic works later flourished, reaching their peak during the 18th and 19th centuries under the Iranian and Ottoman calligraphers. The significance of these compositions increased when they were transferred onto functional items. Several 10th-century ceramics from the Samarkand area display early instances of this application. Common white ceramic plates and dishes were often decorated with traditional Kufic script. Such objects may be understood as instances of applied Islamic calligraphy. The earliest use of calligraphy in Islamic art appears in architecture, such as the Umayyad-era inscription in gold at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Architectural inscriptions were generally drafted on paper before being carved into stone by masons. The name of the workman who made these monumental inscriptions is rarely recorded.

Conclusion

In terms of styles, scripts and sizes, Quranic production in the Iranian and Ottoman regions had already begun experimenting by the 12th century. Under the Safavid times, these experimentations intensified, offering calligraphers expanded possibilities in design and composition. Comparing with the above, Mughal calligraphy demonstrates the way in which Islamic visual culture was integrated into the local aesthetics, technical accuracy and spiritual faith. The analysis of the Mughal calligraphy

demonstrates aesthetic values and cultural expression. It represents the pinnacle of the history of Islamic calligraphy. The royal patronage encouraged the development of detailed script styles such as Khatt-i-Babri, Nasta'liq and Shikasta. These are the expressions of skilful Persian and local calligraphers. These scripts are manifested in manuscripts, architectural monuments and artefacts. This incorporation makes the solid signifiers of Mughal cultural identity. With the advent of print technology, manual calligraphy diminished; however, its main concept of rhythm, proportion and ornamentation is still a source of inspiration. Contemporary designers, artists and typographers get inspiration from classic style, thus establishing the field connecting traditional artistic innovation to the present day.

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