

The Art of Islamic Calligraphy

Presented by Lady Bres oSeachnasaigh

“Calligraphy is a spiritual geometry produced by a material instrument.”

“Letters in Gold”, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This is a very basic overview of Islamic calligraphy, with examples focusing on the SCA period of the Ottoman Empire. This hand out summarizes some basic information and is meant to be a starting point for your own research and discovery of the beauty of Islamic calligraphy. For your enjoyment, I have attached two different pseudo scripts for your use with SCA award scrolls and anything else that might need that final touch.

Background

A word of caution when using period references for scroll work, check how the piece is dated. Muslims use a lunar calendar which began with Muhammad flight (or hijra) from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. A date based on the hijra will be younger than a piece with a Western date. (Derman, page xi)

The Arabic alphabet originated from a writing system called nabati from a North Arabian tribe called the Nabataeans. It is written from right to left, has no capitals, uses vowel signs (hareke) and a rosette decoration (durak) between each verse as a stop or period. (Derman, page 3 and 5) Depending on the position of the letter, beginning, middle, end or standing alone the shape would change. (Mahee of Acer, page 1) The height of the letters is determined by the dot made by the reed pen that is being used. The Ottoman used six different script styles which adds a variety of letter shapes and sizes. (Derman, pages 3, 5, 13)

Tools and materials

The reed pen, the writing instrument of choice, was harvested from marshy banks of lakes and rivers, was buried in horse manure for a traditional period of four years. The reed changes color to a reddish brown, light or dark brown or even black. Depending on script size hard bamboo would be used or a pen carved from wood. The nib was cut at an angle with a penknife (kalem turas) much like a quill is cut for Western scribes. Pens were kept in cases with inkwells at one end known as a divit. (Derman, pages 7 & 11)

Paper was used in SCA period of the Ottoman Empire. There are examples of early Qurans from Africa which did use Velum (animal skins). The paper was dyed using the following colors since the white was consider hard on the eyes:

- Cream or tan from tea (was the most popular),
- Brown from pomegranate skins and green outer skins of walnuts
- Yellow from seed of the dyer's buckthorn,
- Red from red logwood
- Purple from purple logwood
- Yellowish white from the dark brown soot formed in a chimney of a confectioner stove during the production of caramel
- Reddish from onion skins

(Derman, page 11)

Once the paper was dyed a coating of ahar size, egg white with alum, was applied with a sponge. Another method was starch or flour boiled with water into a thin paste. This prevents the ink from penetrating the fibers of the paper and allows for easy correction of errors. However, according to “Letters in Gold” official documents of the Ottoman Empire were written on unsized paper which had been burnished. This allowed the ink to be absorbed and helped prevent forgery and alterations. (Derman, pages 11 & 12)

The sized paper was allowed to dry and was then burnished with a Cakmak muhre, which is a wooden tool with handles and a protruding piece of polished flint in the center. Basically you

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would rub the paper with a piece of wool that has been coated with soap and then rub the cakmak muhre, stone side down, over the paper until a bright sheen appears. After burnishing the paper was aged for a year. If burnishing did not occur within a week of the sizing being applied the paper would crack during the burnishing process and would be ruined. Once the paper had been aged, it was prepared for writing by dusting it with chalk to remove the slippery finish of the soap and any oils from handling. (Derman, page 12)

INK

Lampblack ink, instead of oak gall ink, was used. Lampblack is the soot from burning linseed oil, beeswax, naphtha or kerosene. The soot is collected and then mixed with gum arabic. One period recipe is:

- Soot
- Dissolved gum arabic
- Distilled water
- Mixed and ground together for a long time.

The ink would then be poured over a piece of raw silk which was kept in the ink well of the divit. This prevented spills and allowed only the right amount of ink to be deposited on the pen. (Derman, page 12 & 13)

Bibliography

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Giotto, Florentine, probably 1266 - 1337
Madonna and Child
probably 1320/1330, tempera on panel, 85.5 x 62 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Samuel H. Kress Collection

“Beginning about 1285 Tuscan painters clothed their sacred figures in exotic garments that were based on the most prestigious textiles in the contemporary Near East. The gold borders that edge the left sleeve and mantle of Giotto's Madonna suggest these Islamic tiraz fabrics, which were distinguished by bands with woven or embroidered Arabic inscriptions honoring Muslim rulers. To western viewers of the time, the garments located the Virgin or other religious figures in the Holy Land during Old Testament or early Christian times. Imitation tiraz bands, which remained common in Italian religious art until the early sixteenth century, are painted with an illegible pseudo-Arabic script.”

In fact, Giotto's pseudo-inscriptions--others are barely visible along the edge of the background--blend letter shapes derived from Arabic and the Mongol Pags-Pa script. He must have known the latter from the paper money or travel certificates brought by Italian merchants and missionaries who traveled across the Mongol Empire, which stretched from Mesopotamia to China.”

Images and text captured from National Gallery of Art

http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2004/artexchange/artexchange_ss1.shtm

