

SPLENDOURS
OF QUR'AN
CALLIGRAPHY
& ILLUMINATION

MARTIN LINGS

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ST. JAMES'S PALACE

There can be no doubt that every summit of sacred art belongs in a sense to us all, encompassing as it does a universal meaning that goes far beyond the literal message of the divinely-established religion in which it is rooted. Some of these wonders are monumental, such as the cathedrals and mosques of the Middle Ages. Others, much smaller in size, such as icons and manuscripts, are portable, and many of these have been removed from their original setting and can now be seen, rather like refugees, in museums and libraries. The summits of sacred art reproduced in the following pages belong to this second category.

This book by Martin Lings gives us over one hundred and eighty excellently reproduced openings, carefully chosen from the greatest collections of Quran manuscripts in the world. Let us hope that in addition to their immediate message of beauty, these plates may help to revive the sacred art of illumination so that it may accompany once again the art of Quran calligraphy which remains to this day a living reality.

Martin Lings

• Introduction •

The story of the spread of Islam has often been told, but it bears repeating; and it will not be irrelevant here to outline it briefly, for it is above all the story of an impact which directly caused, among other effects, the art that is the theme of this book.

In the sixth century A.D. the tribes of Arabia were poor, disunited, often at war with each other, and little known to the rest of the world. It was to a member of one of these tribes that the Divine Revelation was given, and some years later, in 620 A.D., having been rejected by the majority of his people, the new Prophet, in apparent danger of his life, left his home in Mecca with one companion and made his way to an unknown future in the eleven-camel-days distant township of Yathrib, soon to be known as Medina. One hundred and three years later the vanguards of his empire were crossing the Pyrenees into France, having conquered the whole of North Africa and most of Spain, while in the East that same empire had penetrated, through Persia and India, as far as the borders of China; and with subsequent losses outweighed by subsequent gains, Islam has remained in possession of most of those territories until the present day.

The force of the impact which produced this transformation was clearly such that it could scarcely have avoided striking, at the same time, other domains of human receptivity and potentiality; and another result of the Revelation, analogous to the more general one, was the birth of a new style of architecture, which showed, not in details but in total effect, an independence of anything that had gone before. In a relatively short space of time this new style of architecture was producing monuments such as have seldom been equalled and never surpassed.

There was yet another analogous “creation out of nothing”, which cannot possibly be considered as the natural development of an already existing means. One of the great qualities of the pre-Islamic Arabs was what might be called an acute language-consciousness, centred upon poetry. But this love of poetry had not produced anything in the way of a sister art of calligraphy. On the contrary, rather than write

The Quranic Art of Calligraphy

The need to record and hand down to succeeding generations every syllable of the Qur'ān with exactitude made it impossible to rely on anything so fallible as human memory, even though the memories in question were outstanding. But the point to be made here is not that a people ungiven to writing and building should have come to be, through the force of circumstances, both writers and builders. The analogy we are drawing is based on the change from almost nothing to almost everything; and in the case of calligraphy the change is perhaps even more striking than in that of architecture. It might even be said not only that the Arabs have never been surpassed as calligraphers,⁵ but also that they have only been equalled by one other people, namely the Chinese, whose art has, however, developed along very different lines.

It cannot, however, be considered a paradox that the civilization of *the unlettered Prophet*⁶ should have been destined to excel in the art of lettering. Even apart from the probable advantages of starting an enterprise uncluttered by previous experiences, the Arabs' disinclination to write down precious words had no doubt a very positive part to play in the genesis of Arabic calligraphy. These people were in love with the beauty of their language and with the beauty of the human voice. There was absolutely no common measure between these two summits on the one hand, and the ungainliness of the only available script on the other. Their disdain for writing showed a sense of values; and in the light of final results it is legitimate to suppose that it was the reverse side of an openness to calligraphic inspiration, as much as to say, "Since we have no choice but to write down the Revelation, then let that written record be as powerful an experience for the eye as the memorized record is for the ear when the verses are spoken or chanted."

5 With the Arabs must be included certain others of those peoples – pre-eminently the Persians and the Turks – for whom Arabic is the liturgical language. But the Arabs themselves were the pioneers.

6 So Muḥammad is named in the Qur'ān (VII, 157–158) and, by extension, in many Islamic litanies.



115



116

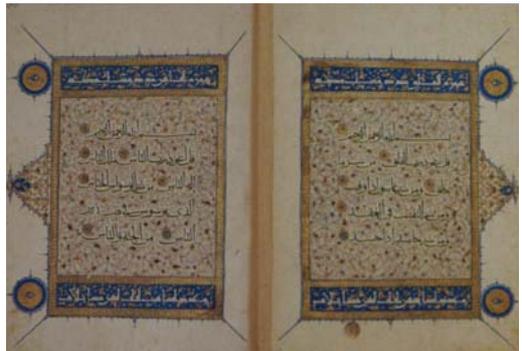
115
Frontispiece to the following (ff. 1v–2r).

116
CII, 8–CVII, 2, Muḥaqqaq with *sūrah* headings in ornamental Eastern Kufic (51 x 36 cm), written by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Kamāl al-Anṣārī al-Mutaṭabbib, 734/1334, Cairo (Cairo, National Library of Egypt, 81, ff. 374v–375r).

117
CXIII, 1–CXIV, 6, from the same (ff. 375v–376r).

118
Finispiece to the same (ff. 376v–377r).

119
Frontispiece to the following (pp. 1–2).



117

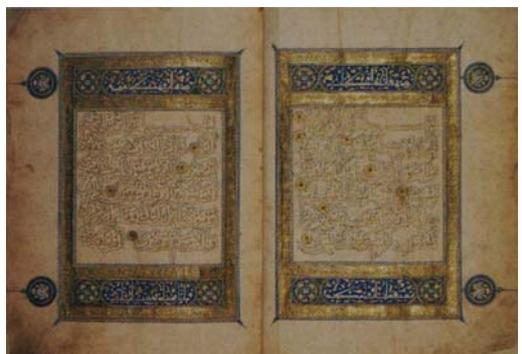
120
I, 1–II, 5, large gold Naskh with *sūrah* headings in ornamental Eastern Kufic (39 x 29 cm), written by Aḥmad ibn al-Muḥsinī, 739/1338–9, probably in Cairo. It belonged to the Sultan Qayt Bay, then to the Safavid Prince Bahrām Mirzā, who bequeathed it to the Ardabil Shrine (Tehran, Iran Bastan Museum 4242, pp. 3–4).



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121



122



123



124



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121

XCv, 8–XCvIII, 1, from the same (pp. 733–734).

122

CXIII, 1–CXIV, 6, from the same (pp. 743–744).

123

Frontispiece to the following (ff. 1v–2r). Richard Ettinghausen (*Arab Painting*, Lausanne, 1962, p. 173) draws attention to the Chinese lotuses and peonies. This feature suggests an Il-Khanid influence, but the overall style is typically Mamluk. The same, in both respects, may be said of the frontispieces of about the same date which figure in plates 126, 136 and 140. XXVI, 192–197 is the text of the ornamental Eastern Kufic inscription in the rectangular panels above and below the central square. The manuscript is generally well preserved, but the marginal palmette of the right-hand page of the frontispiece has been badly damaged, as is indeed well known since this masterpiece of illumination has been reproduced again and again. In our certitude that if it were possible to consult the artist he would say: “If I were here, I would repair the palmette myself, but since I am not, do it yourselves with the help of my undamaged left-hand palmette”, we have followed these instructions; but nowhere else in this volume have we taken any such liberty.

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Part of the previous frontispiece.

125

I, 1–II, 5, Muḥaqqaq with *sūrah* headings in ornamental Eastern Kufic (70.5 x 55 cm) from a Qur’ān written and illuminated for Arghūn Shāh al-Ashrafi, an official in the service of the Sultan al-Ashraf Shaḥbān, c. 770/1369, Cairo (Cairo, National Library of Egypt, 54, ff. 2v–3r).