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**Calligraphy as an Expression of  
Spirituality: Arabic Calligraphy**

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Various definitions have been given for calligraphy. They can roughly be divided into two: Those that start from the calligraphic script; and the ones that start from the calligrapher himself. The common point among all the definitions is that it is an art. It is addition of beauty to the function of writing, as it is the case with many other functional activities. Some regard it as a branch of painting, others as a unique art, resembling music rather than painting.

Letters of an alphabet are the only tools to be used by the calligrapher. His basic aim is not to convey thoughts through symbols he draws on a paper or inscribes on a stone, neither is his concern the clarity or legibility of writing. Calligrapher's principal mission is to impart feelings and spirit onto letters which otherwise as vehicle of thoughts and ideas are dead tools. In this respect, an analogy can be drawn between calligraphy and music on the hand and calligraphy and architecture on the other. In one of the letter arts the raw materials of sounds are transformed into lively elements of a song or a special musical rendering, while in the second, bricks and stones, at the hands of an architect, turn into a meaningful structure as extension of man's play with nature.<sup>1</sup>

Calligraphic writings as conveyers of beauty and emotions do inform thoughts and meanings as well, though of secondary degree. The letters and symbols of any language, as a matter of fact, are essentially invented and designed for the purpose of preserving thoughts and articulation for correspondence. Thus, the substantial features of any letter or, character of a language are meticulously kept in the variety of forms and pictures created by the calligrapher. This aspect of calligraphy is best shown in certain artistic script that is in alignment with the message of the text. This is to say, a calligrapher is bound by certain rules while enjoying limitless freedom in the manipulation of his tools. He has also to observe some other rules that are sought in any piece of art: Repetition, harmony, contrast and unity.<sup>2</sup> What is unique about the calligrapher is that he does not drive on an impression he has received from nature or, an abstract scheme reminiscent of an external perception.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I would like to talk on Arabic calligraphy as the embodiment of few remarks made above.

Arabic script, as a branch of Semitic Languages is written from right to left. It has 17 phonetic symbols. With the addition of dots above and below some of these symbols Arabic alphabet reaches 28 letters (Figure 1). Most of these letters take different shapes

as to their position in a word. Thus, a letter as a first symbol of a word has a form which assumes a new shape when it is at the middle or at the end of the written word. This flexibility gives the calligrapher a wide scope of configuration of his tools whereby he enhances the realization of bestowing beauty and sophistication, through numerous strokes and lines on the script at hand.

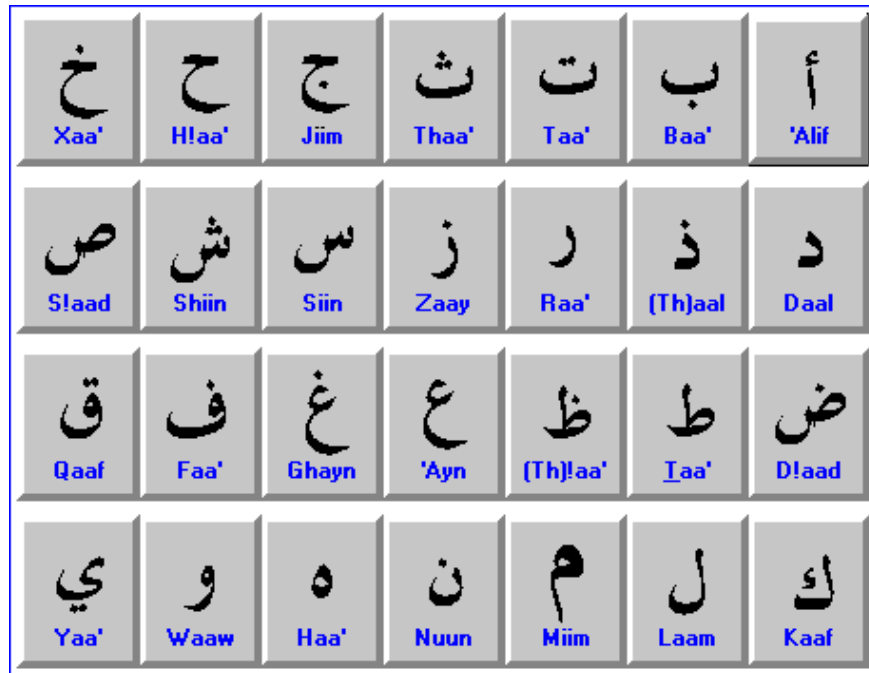


Figure 1. Arabic Alphabet

Early examples of Arabic script give the impression that Arabic characters evolved from its Nabatean ancestor.<sup>4</sup> It is called Kufic (Figure 2). First copies of the Qur'an were written with this script. The symbols are written in straight, square and angular lines. Though it is not fit for quick cursive notation, it is the best instrument for the calligrapher to inscribe it on stone and metal and manipulate it in architectural decoration.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Kufic style

During the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century, Arabic script went through serious changes and new calligraphic styles were introduced. Calligraphy further developed at the Abbasid Caliphate between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Master calligraphers such as Ibn Muqla, Ibn Bawwab and Yaqut al-Musta'simi laid down basic rules of this art. The impact of these great artists can be detected on the works of Ottoman calligraphers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Turkish calligraphers of the Ottoman period, improved the Naskh (Figure 3) and Ta'liq (Figure 4) styles (the last is of Persian origin) adding to it polishing strokes. These cursive styles were suitable for quick handwriting. At the same period Persian calligraphers devised a new style by certain modification of the *Ta'liq* script. This new style was called *Nasta'liq* (Figure 5). It consists of rounded forms and exaggerated horizontal strokes.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 3.** Naskh style

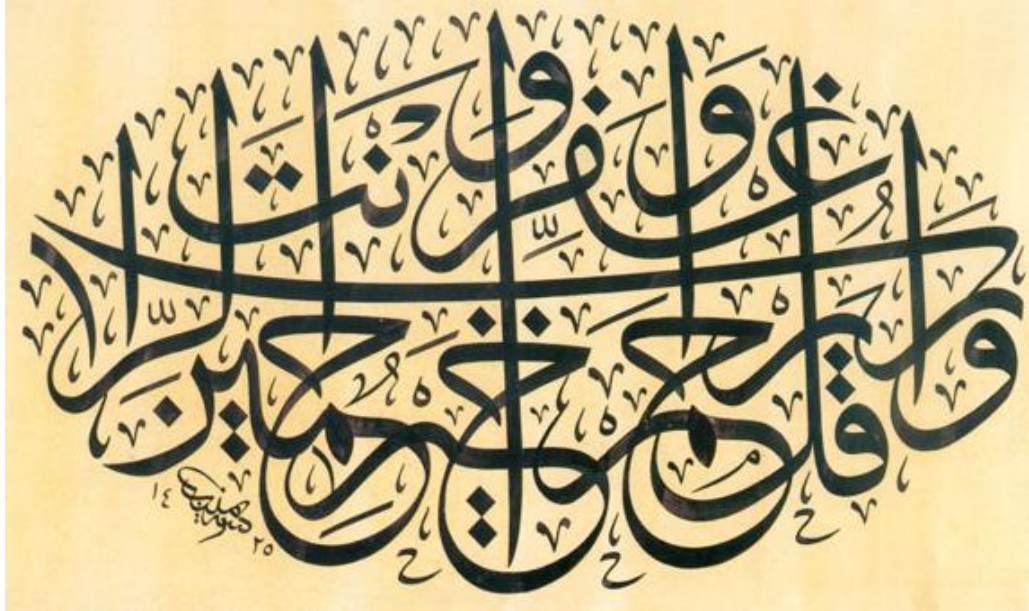


Figure 4. Ta'liq style

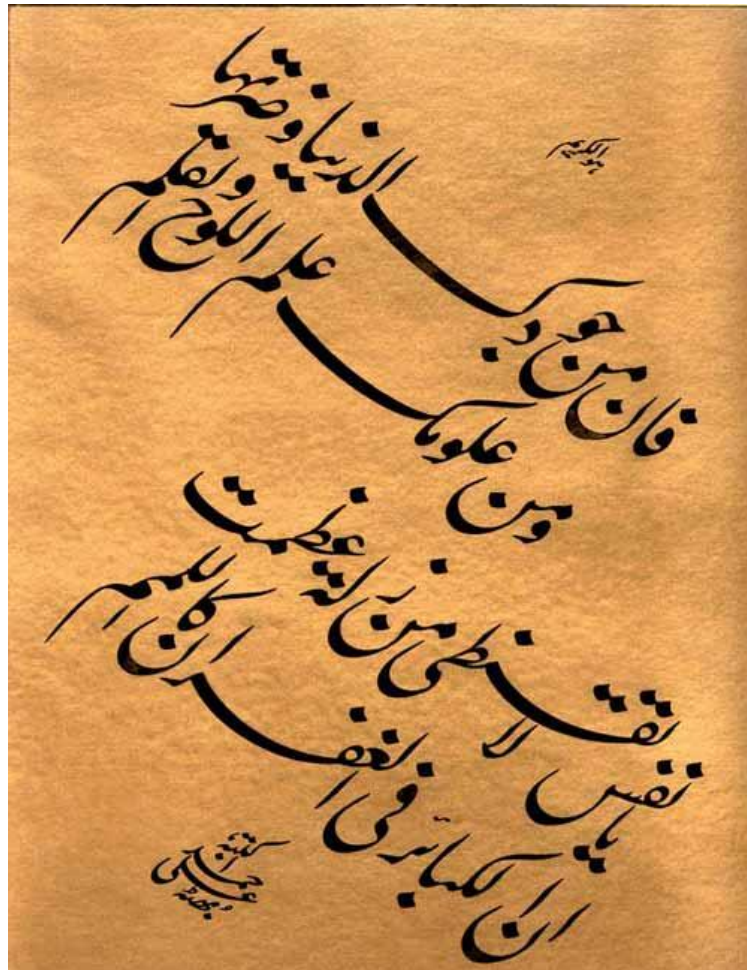


Figure 5. Nasta'liq style

The well-known Ottoman calligraphers Hafiz Osman and Mustafa Rakim of 17<sup>th</sup> century wrote the best manuscripts of the text of Qur'an using a highly developed version of

Naskh style. The Ottoman calligraphers also devised a new style for the writing of Imperial Orders. It was called Diwani (Figure 6). It is a highly decorative cursive style, with complex lines within a word and close juxtaposition of letters in the composition of the word. They also developed a monographic style that is called *Tuğra* (Figure 7). For example the *Tuğra* of Süleyman I. which is exhibited in the Topkapi Museum.<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 6.* Diwani style



*Figure 7.* Tuğra

Turkish calligraphers have also developed a semi-style of *Karalama* or *Meşk* (Figure 8) which can be defined as preparatory activities of the calligrapher to sharpen his skills of penmanship. However, such exercises of a would-be calligrapher are preserved as a variant branch of artistic writing, though in most cases, they consist of piecemeal sketches denoting nothing at all, as far as the combination of letters are concerned. There,

one finds arbitrary drawing of a letter or group of letters many times jointly or separately at various directions with no prearranged plan or outline. Despite such a coincidental combination of letters written haphazardly, these sketches may possess certain features of an object of art, such as proportion, harmony and unity. *Karalama* and *Meşk* are also the process of absorbing the rules of calligraphy set by grand masters.<sup>8</sup> However, any would-be calligrapher is conscious of the fact that his craftsmanship will not be recognized unless he breaks some of the rules he bequeathed from his masters.



**Figure 8.** *Karalama*

Calligraphy occupies a special place in the Islamic Arts. Its distinctive status originates from the negative attitude of the religion of Islam against painting human and animal figures. This phenomenon has naturally diverted the artistic talents of a Muslim artist towards calligraphy and abstract drawing. Probably, the development of various species of arabesque drawings on the domes and walls of mosques are due to the prohibition of human image and sculpture by Islam. A parallel development has also taken place in music in the Muslim world. Worldly music for entertainment and singing songs and melodies as expression of a joyful soul is regarded as a distraction from the man's basic mission of servitude to God. Because of this position of religion on music, Muslim artists who were gifted as musicians turned to the recitation of the Qur'an, songs of praise for the prophet and also the call for five-times-a-day prayers. As the consequence of such forcefully directed artistic talents, the Muslims have, throughout history, devised almost ten different ways of recitation of the words of the holy book. This way, reading of the divine scripture has become an established discipline having relation to the art of music on the one hand, and as an act of piety on the other. It is not surprising that many well-known classical musicians in Turkey, until recently, were the distinguished readers of the Qur'an with their good voices. It is also ironical that in some Arab countries wine drinkers in a restaurant may prefer listening to the Qur'an while enjoying their food despite the fact that alcoholic drinks are prohibited by the same book.<sup>9</sup>

It can be claimed with some probability that some branches of Islamic arts present instances of an artist whose freedom of use of his talents is curtailed.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferit Edgü, *Türk Hat Sanatı (Karalamalar/Meşkler)*, Ada Yayınları, ND, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Maitland Graves, *The Art of Color and Design*, New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1951, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Edgü, *Türk Hat Sanatı*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> M. Uğur Derman, "The Ottoman Calligraphy," *The Great Turkish Civilization*, ed. Prof. Kemal Çiçek, Ankara: Yeni Türkiye, IV (2000), 659.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Huart, "Kufi Yazı Okulu," *Türk Hattatları*, ed. Şevket Rado, İstanbul: Yayın Matbaacılık Ticaret Ltd. Şti., ND, 23-26.

<sup>6</sup> Derman, "The Ottoman Calligraphy," 662.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 665.

<sup>8</sup> Edgü, *Türk Hat Sanatı*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Yasin Ceylan, "İslam Medeniyetinde Sanata Felsefi Bir Bakış," *Felsefe ve Sanat*, ed. Ö. Naci Soykan, İstanbul: Ara Yayıncılık, 1990.

