An Ottoman Murakkaa and the Birth of the International Style

Mohamed Zakariya
To understand an artifact like the Ottoman album or murakka in the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), you have to begin at the beginning, with the origins of calligraphic writing in Arabic. I would like to take the reader back, in a symbolic way, to the cities of Mecca and Medina (pl. 12.1), the points from which the Islamic religion and the Arabic language radiated. We cannot go back to the way these cities were, but we can return to places remembered in art and idealized in memory, not so much for what they were, but for what they are in the imagination.

The first time I saw these pictures was in 1964, in a Moroccan copy of a Dala’il al-Khayrat, but in its schematic form. I was intrigued. Later, I saw the Ottoman versions, both painted and printed, which evolved up to the late nineteenth century. This genre of illumination succeeds as artworks are supposed to. Can we imagine an Ottoman traveler, looking at these pretty, generic, Turkish-looking towns, perhaps on his way there, maybe even singing the litanies of the Dala’il, feeling as if he is going to the heart of his faith?

In Mecca and Medina the art of calligraphy found its beginnings, shrouded in legend, the province of only a handful of accountants, scribes, and other literate people. It was a simple way of writing, not yet fully understood but poised to take off on a flight that continues today.

Many have hypothesized about where this writing came from, and some have come close to solving the riddle. We know that at the time of the Prophet of Islam, an early form of writing was functioning. If we look at the samples from the Holy Relics Room at the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, I think we can get an idea of how writing was being done in those years. Plate 12.2 shows a page with a full, short sura, al-Takathur, the 102nd chapter of the Koran (Aydın 2005, 89). Perhaps it was written for...
memorization. There are also prophetic letters in the Holy Relics Room. Perhaps they are real, perhaps not, but the writing seems consistent with some of the authentic papyri from this early period. If the letters are fakes, they may be copies of originals and should not be ignored.

The story of how the art of calligraphy, or fann al-khatt, went from these elementary states to the pinnacle of achievement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is one of the extraordinary examples of the evolution of an art. To call it an art at this early stage is premature, however, since its practicality as a writing system transcends its identification as a vehicle of beauty. The development of calligraphy took place over a period of roughly fourteen centuries, with peaks and plateaus, periods of stable progress and of stagnation, but always recovering and moving higher. It is its evolution that is fascinating.

From Writing to Calligraphy, Kitaba to Khatt

Before I discuss the progression that led up to the Ottoman murakka and how the albums itself helped pave the road of development, let us note some roads that led elsewhere. The two distant worlds of Chinese Islam and North African/Andalusian Islam were also areas where great calligraphic art was created.

Plate 12.3 is an example of the calligraphy of Chinese Islam. It is simply one of the most innovative and stunning pieces of the art that I’ve ever seen. It is both fully Islamic and fully Chinese, a perfect amalgam, alchemy in ink. The composition of this masterpiece is totally unintuitive to those who see Arabic structure only from the standard viewpoint. The text is nun wa’l-qalam (Koran 68: 1). Most striking is the lam of qalam, which descends like a thunderbolt from heaven, piercing the heart of the word. This strong vertical stroke gives the composition its drama and impact.

The other geographic and cultural extreme, the counterbalance, is the North African/Andalusian branch of calligraphy. An example of it at its most original and expressive is a manuscript comprising the last thirtieth (juz) of the Koran (or the last two sixtieths or hizb) in the MIA (pl. 12.4). This piece, with its unique writing and layout, gives us a picture of the rich and continuous field of innovation that developed out on the west wing of Islam – perhaps freer from an artistic viewpoint than the more official and regulated styles of the Islamic heartlands. Although the artists and craftspeople occasionally played with eastern themes, perhaps with a touch of parody, at its best the calligraphy of western Islam owes little to the east save its early origins. It is the perfect vehicle for transcribing the Koranic riwaya (reading) of Imam Warsh, the style of Medina favored by proponents of the Maliki school. This riwaya, with its complex orthographic demands, does not work gracefully in the “eastern” scripts.

Unlike the eastern scripts, the western ones are not proportional (mansub); that is, the letters are not regulated by criteria of size, dimension, proportional relationships, and the effects created by the movement of the sharp chisel edge of the pen and the free-flowing black ink on the specially prepared and polished surface of the paper.
Moreover, the western scripts are written with a blunt-tipped pen. The ink is applied heavily and is expected to run out before the end of the letter, leaving just enough to write the thin parts of the letter.

That said, the writing art and scribal practice were part of most Muslim societies wherever they were. By looking at early works, we can see this split-level vision—practical, scribal writing on the one hand, and various approaches to artistic, calligraphic writing on the other. This is an oversimplification of a complex subject, of course, and we do not yet know the true names of the important early scripts. Most extant early manuscripts are written in ways that do not conform to the canonical styles but are often influenced by them, so it is useful to consider the official styles—the canon—in comparison to the more or less vernacular, individual ways of writing. This then leads to other issues, such as how new scripts evolved from old ones and how to read sloppy writing.

With writing like that shown in plate 12.5, we begin to see the artistic and masterly control of the pen. The reed pen can be simply a marking stylus, or it can become an instrument that takes as much time and skill to master as a musical instrument. In this kind of work, we see the birth of Arabic-script penmanship. Unlike the Maghribi scripts from North Africa with their individuality, these are the harbingers of the classic scripts from Iraq. Almost every letter is manipulated by the pen. In lesser hands than those that wrote this, we see minimal or uninspired manipulation. The aesthetics of these works gives us a deeper understanding of the social milieu and the artistic motivations.
of the writers themselves. Without consideration of these factors, the works become cut adrift from their time.

I’m not talking about fiddly decoration here, but structural design engaged to impose visual concepts of motion and stasis, weight and weightlessness, flow, mutuality, texture, surprise, joy, and, of course, legibility, transforming mere writing into something bigger. This was a process that was repeated again and again. Here the work is not micro-perfect, but fast and subtle. The thickened sweep of the alif’s hook, normally the width of a pen, imparts resolve and drive. Other such moves abound. The writing was quick enough that we can read the writer’s moves almost as though we were watching him.

To highlight some of the characteristics of this elegant script, I selected letter groups from the front and back of the folios shown in plate 12.5, which come from the same writer and probably the same volume. I wrote the letter groups randomly on genuine manuscripts; the method is not obvious but could possibly be rubbing it over a string-board (Arabic mastara/mistara). Or it could have been done by eye, which is by no means impossible. In any case, the writing does not sit on a flat base but occupies a subjective, spontaneous relation to the line, giving it energy and loveliness. The writer probably supported his parchment on his right knee, as was the practice later, and wrote holding the parchment at a steep angle to the ground. This allows the ink to flow downwards by gravity, giving the bottom parts of the letters more density.

In these examples, the orthography of the older recension, the one generally associated with the third caliph Uthman (644–656), can be seen in the form ya ayyuha, but on the back of the page, the text continues with the “rationalized” spelling of al-lafsun sa?lamuqa, that is, with long alif written out. Another interesting feature of the manuscript is the use of a yellow dot over, on, or under a consonant to indicate the vowel that relates to a doubled consonant.

These folios have to be counted among the highest examples of this kind of writing. By the ninth century writing had developed a high-end version, written by noted people, which we will call calligraphy — in Arabic san’at al-khatt, fann al-khatt, or just plain al-khatt. In short, some writers were becoming calligraphers, and calligraphy was becoming an art in its social context. Obviously the presence of a high-end product, written by known specialists producing sumptuous manuscripts of the Koran (mushaf), demonstrates the burgeoning presence of a connoisseur culture that understood and appreciated it and paid for it in some way.

While all this writing of so-called kufic manuscripts was spreading through the cities, another concept of writing existed for non-Koranic uses, and presumably such scripts had developed from the kind of writing we see in the Arabic papyri. It is entirely possible that the so-called “Eastern Kufic” scripts or “New Style” (Déroche 1992, 112–84), which had a prolific life in the tenth to twelfth centuries, emerged from the simple, supplc scripts of the papyri, and that even the Maghribi family of scripts did as well. It is likely that in the courts, bureaucracies (diwans), and businesses of the central zone, especially in Baghdad and the Syrian cities, these new forms were being arranged into a hierarchy of value and prestige, becoming mushaqqaq (tawqi, tashqi, tasqi, tas’i), and muhaqqaq — the so-called six scripts — and the forty or so derivative scripts that had some currency at an early stage.

In the early history of calligraphy, three names are pivotal. Ibn Muqala (d.940) is conspicuous and legendary, but no sample of his work has been identified. We know so little about him and his contributions that some skeptics about his inventions and especially his measuring and proportional systems is in order. Ibn al-Haawal (d.1022), as so many later calligraphers, was a respected figure in the religious establishment of his day. A man of humble birth (his name literally means “son of the doorman”), he...
Baghdad, 17

Baghdad, 17

13.8 Author’s copy of the second line of the Koran manuscript by Ibn al-Bawwab (pl. 12.7).

Note that the Chester Beatty manuscript is written in the “rationalized” orthography in a very consistent way. This was the most common spelling after the orthography changes of the ninth to the eleventh centuries and was used until King Fuad I became interested in reviving Uthmanic orthography in the early twentieth century (Tabbaa 2002 gives an overview of these developments).

This Koran manuscript is entirely the work of Ibn al-Bawwab’s hand, including the illumination – in short, a masterpiece of art. He had the distinctation of being a highly intelligent observer of human psychology, as seen in his trenchant work “Rhyming in R.” It is possible that Ibn al-Bawwab was teaching his views on the power of line and flow, as described by the shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Sinjari (fl. c.1442) in his poem Bida’at al-mujawwid fi l-khatti wa usulih, “The Equipment of the Perfectionist in Calligraphy and Its Principles” (cited in Habib 1350, 278–80). In the section on holding the pen, Sinjari writes: “Let the writer use his thumb, index, and middle finger only, and make the middle finger a horse that carries the reed like the breath.” In any case, I think Ibn al-Bawwab’s importance to the art is vastly underrated and overshadowed by the third pivotal figure, Yaqut al-Musta’in (d.1298), who died nearly three hundred years after his predecessor.

We see in Yaqut’s work the culmination of the evolution of the six scripts during the Baghdad period. With him, many features of later writing and book production became established – writing crisply with the slant-cut pen, writing successfully in larger sizes, confining writing within borders, using both large and small writing on the same page, and using free-flowing black soot ink. It may be, however, that his primary achievement was as a teacher.

When Yaqut’s six famous students – among them Arghun Kamili and Ahmad Ibn al-Suhrawardi (d. c.1320) – left Baghdad after the destruction of the city, they spread out to teach his methods. The two great movements in six-script calligraphy began to take shape, the Iranian and the Turkish. Since my specialty is the Ottoman/Turkish approach, I will confine myself to that development.

About 150 years after the death of Yaqut, another star rose in the north-central Anatolian city of Amasya. Amasya was the home of many distinguished calligraphers, as were the surrounding towns of the region, Çorum, Merzifon, and Tokat. But it was Şeyh Handullah (d.1526) – Handullah ibn Mustafa Dede, also known in Turkish as...
Ibn al-Šeyh (Arabic šaykh, elder) ̶  who was to make the most indefensible marks in the annals of the art. The Šeyh himself ̶ he was the šeyh of the archery guild ̶ studied with the well-known calligraphers of his time and location. His work was of a high but not extraordinary caliber until Sultan Bayazid II encouraged him to develop a new way to write and appreciate calligraphy ̶ an experience that made him legendary. In 1481, when Šeyh Handullah was fifty-two, Bayazid invited him to Istanbul, where he soon began his revision and reconstruction of Arabic script writing that earns him the title of godfather of the modern international style.

**The Album and the Book Trade**

Albums have played a role in the art of the book in Muslim cultures from an early period. Most of them are assemblages of separate works. The Ottoman calligrapher’s mümkahaa is something else ̶ a specialty, a teaching and collection book, and an object in itself. Such albums seem to have come into existence in their present form in the latter part of the fifteenth century, based on Persian concepts, primarily collection albums. The Ottoman mümkahaa may have been connected to the calligraphy being undertaken in Amsara, a town that has been called the alebic of Ottoman culture.

By this period, Ottoman preferences in books and texts were being developed ̶ complete manuscripts of the Koran (mushaf), the sixth chapter of the Koran known as An’am (Livestock) and hence known in Turkish as E’nams, other manuscripts of all kinds, short specimens, and albums (mümkahaa). The kitab (a large piece intended for display) had not yet been accomplished. The book arts were fully underway, including cultivating, seasoning, and selecting reeds for pens, paper and ink making, and procuring pigments and adhesives ̶ the whole apothecary of book chemistry. In addition, the tools for these trades were also manufactured, at various levels of utility and luxury ̶ items such as penknives, slabs against which to trim pens, burnishers, scissors, and inkwells. Also active were the arts and trades of book production including gold-beating, illumination, borders, design, binding, restoration, and repair. The tools for these trades were also manufactured, at various levels of utility and luxury ̶ items such as penknives, slabs against which to trim pens, burnishers, scissors, and inkwells. Also active were the designers (sing. nablabil), who produced work for large architectural settings. In short, Istanbul boasted the whole industry, producing everything from prestige books to those for wider circulation.

Significantly, the protocols of calligraphy education also took shape here in the fifteenth century. Part of the curriculum was the making and use of the mümkahaa. In essence, the mümkahaa is a collection of calligraphy that is organized around a concept. Mümkahaa can be collections of short works by a single calligrapher or collections of works by various calligraphers, as is the one in the MIA. A mümkahaa can have a random sequence of individual pieces (kit’an) or it can be designed for a specific purpose, like the lessons mümkahaa (muğrib mümkahaa) that contain the exercises known as muğrib in which the letters of the Arabic alphabet are written in sequence as an example) and muhribbet (words or phrases, often poems or sayings from the Prophet), the basic curriculum for the beginner. A student might collect the teacher’s lessons and have them bound; these collections are often dated consecutively, so we can judge how quickly a student was progressing (pl. 12-9). These books take two basic forms: the book form (kitaab mümkahaa) and the bellows form (komkâb mümkahaa) (see pl. 12-9). Both look like books, but their pages are joined in quite different manners. The book mümkahaa for thuluth and naskh is held with the spine at the top, and each page is opened one by one. The bellows mümkahaa is held the same way, but the pages (kit’an) are joined edge to edge in such a way that they can all be opened at once, in a strip, or folded so that two can be seen at the same time. The ta’likh (Arabic talik) mümkahaa is vertical in format, bound on the right-hand edge, and read page by page like a book. The writing can be horizontal or diagonal in format.

Each page of a mümkahaa is called in Turkish a kit’a, from the Arabic qit’, a fragment or piece. The kit’a form probably has its origins in Persianate culture. Sometimes the kit’an in a mümkahaa become separated and are simply individual specimens. When we see a kit’a whose text is not completed on the page, we can assume it was once part of an album whose text carried from kit’a to kit’a. In addition to its use in mümkahaa, the kit’a is such a cherished and beloved format that calligraphers made countless examples, each with an integral text without any connection and never joined in a mümkahaa.

A mümkahaa can be categorized by the scripts used ̶ thuluth-naskh, muhaqaq-ruq, or ta’likh-ta’likh, the related pairs of the six scripts ̶ or by the texts, which are often mixed. Among the common texts are Koranic verses, hadith, aphorisms, and poetry. One famous type is the kaide mümkahaa, which contains an entire poem. Sometimes the text is on a theme, such as the mümkahaa by Ahmed Karahisi in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul, which commemorates Sultan. The kit’a mümkahaa can include the muğrib, the muhribbet, and kaide lessons, kaide texts, and Ottoman, Arabic, or Persian poetry, especially for quatrains. Specially made mümkahaa can be read straight through from beginning to end, script to script. In other mümkahaa, the lines in thuluth script can be read one after another, before returning to the beginning and reading the lines in naskh through to the end. These are called mutesellil, or sequential albums. Before Şeyh Hamdullah and during his lifetime, cylindrical mümkahaa were made by attaching kit’an edge to edge, laminating them on paper or fabric, and then rolling them like scrolls, to be kept in leather-bound tubes. Owing to its awkward proportions, this format was supplanted by book and bellows mümkahaa.

It is rare to find longish format mümkahaa, in which there is only one line of script per page, often in the script known as cilt ta’likh (Arabic jali talik). One example by Yesari Mehmed Es’ad is in the Abdul Hamid II collection in the Hatcher Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (no. 402). These mümkahaa are bound parallel to the writing. This style, called cınık (Persian jinj), has a long precedent in Persian book making.

The calligraphy for a mümkahaa, as for calligraphy in other formats, is done on atar paper ̶ that is, paper that is varnished with egg white and alum and then burnedish. It is written only on one side. The cardboard support for these pages is made by
wet-laminating three to five sheets of paper stuck down on a wooden panel. The cardboard dries and shrinks tight as a drumhead; it will retain its flatness when the finished kit is cut from the wood panel.

Before it is cut, the writing is pasted down on the cardboard, followed by the border strips, which can be marbled paper (Turkish ebru, Arabic/Persian abri, cloudy), dyed paper, or plain paper that is later painted. When all this is dry, the gold work and outlines are added, and any painting is done. Finally, the gold work can be stippled with a tiny hemispherical point to give it visual texture and articulation. Since the time of Seyh Hamdullah, the design of illumination has become simpler: as a modernist would say, “less is more.” Over time, both colors and design have also become much less stereotypically “Islamic,” diverging from the so-called traditional blue and gold color scheme and delicate illumination.

To compile the murakkaa, the kits are assembled, in pairs, in order and joined by thinly skived leather bands. The unbound edges are then usually covered with leather bands for protection. The book block is bound, sometimes awkwardly, with covers but without a flap known as a şerib or miğlab. Occasionally, used book covers are recycled into murakkaa covers. Any final touches are then added, such as gilding on the leather bands, doublefs, endpapers, and covers.

The murakkaa form preserves calligraphic works and serves as a portable exhibition. Most importantly, it serves as a model for tyro calligraphers to study. The fact that the murakkaa can be held near at hand under various light sources so that the writing can be examined closely adds to its utility as a teaching tool and its critical role in maintaining standards and transmitting artistic values. To copy from a master’s murakkaa is an amazingly effective learning experience. Only by seeing and handling genuine work, not reproductions, can the student understand the fine points of the master’s style. The great albums of Seyh Hamdullah have been copied countless times by later students and artists, some imparting their own characteristics to the work and some few successfully achieving taklid, an almost photographic copy of an original done by eye, a rare tour de force.

Murakkaa were passed from calligrapher to calligrapher for study and inspiration; they were inherited, sold, and collected, and many found their way into museums. Some received so much use that they had to be re-bordered and re-bound, which sometimes gives an anachronistic look to an album. Sometimes, too, a collection is made into a murakkaa centuries after the individual kits were written.

As a result, the murakkaa can be a curator’s nightmare and a collector’s godsend. A fine murakkaa is something to be sought, admired, and, I believe, used. The fit and finish of a good one is revealing of the inherent quality of the work. Some twentieth-century murakkaa are too fussy, with anachronistic illumination and binding design. They don’t feel good in the hand — they are too “technique-y” and feel awkward and fragile. Less modern albums feel good in the hand and are tougher. You are not afraid to handle them; in fact, they should be handled.
A Critical Theory of Calligraphy

But let us digress and take a look at the characteristics of writing that specialists look for in judging calligraphic work. In the flow of calligraphic history, certain masters at certain times have been associated with revolutionary flashes of creativity and invention. Ibn al-Bawwab and Şeyh Hamdullah are prominent among them, but there were many others who have been forgotten. The work of such people formed the axis around which new concepts developed.

To explain some of these concepts, I paraphrase Mahmud Yazır (d. 1952) in his reconstitute work Kalom Güzeli or Beauty from the Pen (1981 and 1989). 7

1. Mekteb school. This includes the type of script, the calligrapher, the era, and the place. A school has a life and a history, and it evolves. The six styles of Ibn al-Bawwab, the taḥqiq of the famous Safavid calligrapher Mir ‘Inād (d. 1615), the saḥīb of Şeyh Hamdullah, and the şeḥ of Rakim Efendi are first and foremost schools, the starting-point.

2. Kol branch. This refers to an artist’s contribution to the script and the school. Calligraphers of a certain kol form a successive chain that carries common features. These commonalities function as a bridge between the style/script and the personal features of the artist’s work. When we analyze a kol, the style and the methodology should be considered separately. One can say, for example, that a work by Şefik Bey is a kol of his teacher Kadıaker Mustaﬁ Izret Efendi’s school.

3. Uṣlub methodology. This refers to the ways and means by which an artist works to achieve the look, rendering it a kol. The way a pen is cut, the ink and paper used, and the artist’s technique and approach factor in here.

4. Tarz style or type. Sometimes specific features distinguish one written work from another. For instance, one can say, “Nefezsadı wrote in the vadi [valley] or tarz of Şeyh Hamdullah. Although his work is in the şeḥ of Şeyh Hamdullah, there are differences.”

5. Ta’avе mode or manner. When one calligrapher’s writing exhibits the characteristics of another’s, that is ta’avе. For example, we might say a Koran manuscript written by Ismail Zühdi has the ta’avе of the Şeyh, implying that although some elements of the work belong to Ismail Zühdi, the writing mainly reflects the şeḥ and tarz of Şeyh Hamdullah.

6. Şe’ve accent. Regardless what script, school, branch, methodology, style, or manner a piece reflects, many specific details and elements in it are unique and belong completely to the calligrapher. These elements are the şe’ve, which may not exist in every example of an artist’s work. If a work is a taḥbīd, it has no şe’ve of the artist at all.

7. Hal state. Hal is more distinctive than şe’ve. When the şe’ves of different works are the same, it may be that the hal will distinguish them. Every piece of calligraphy has a hal. The hal of a work must be understood to assess its aesthetic value. Hal also denotes different instances of a particular letter in a text and how they differ. I think that Yazır is referring here to the state of the calligrapher at the moment of writing and how his or her tools were functioning, both of which give a unique look to a work.

We can approach these seven arcane concepts with some skepticism—indeed, my hat is off to anyone who can isolate and recognize all of these characteristics of writing—but they are part of the intellectual structure of calligraphic analysis and criticism. We should not, however, put the theory before the calligraphy itself. There is little critical analysis of the early texts, aside from rather gushing encomiums about beauty; and it is not apparent what, if any, critical theory may have existed. How much did a scribe attend to what his skill created? Formal criticism came much later and probably developed out of accumulated observations by a multitude of artisans.

Mahmud Yazır’s descriptions are subtle. The eye has to perceive the forms for them to have effect and meaning. Otherwise, calligraphy is just ink on paper, legibility at best. So the eye must be trained and must work to see in order to take perception to
a higher level. I don’t mean to imply that I have been able to come close to these ideals. In fact, most calligraphers today are unaware of these concepts and work as they see fit. So beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder in this art; it is also, and even especially, in the eye of the educated beholder.

Yazır’s precepts are a distillation of the observations of great teachers and the formulations of observant professionals, gleaned over many years. They can help us understand what is and what isn’t beautiful. No calligrapher practiced ugly calligraphy intentionally. This critical approach can challenge misleading notions, such as the derivation of a page at the MIA (pl. 12.10), which features sumptuous illumination and first-class production values, although the MIA page suffers from a much later mounting that deprived it of its burnish. The manuscript is written in richly decorated attempts at muhaqqaq script, but script analysis shows that the writing only approximates the rules of muhaqqaq. The letterforms are in no way proportional or consistent and are jammled together in a cramped and manic fashion.

Ibn al-Suhrawardi has provided us with many examples of his muhaqqaq, which is everything that muhaqqaq should be — stately, dignified, magnificently proportioned, with every letter in its correct dimension and sitting in its best location in relation to the line. There are certain quirks that identify Ibn al-Suhrawardi’s work, and he was not averse to signing it. The puzzle, then, is why the page in the MIA and others like it were signed by the illuminator but not the calligrapher. Whoever wrote the text must have been affluent enough to afford lavish illumination — perhaps a royal. Whoever this calligrapher was, he seems to have made more than one copy of the Koran.

**Deconstructing the Murakkas in the MIA**

The *murakkas* in the MIA (pl. 12.11) is an interesting example of the genre. First, it is both a *körüklü murakkas*, a bellows or concertina album, and a *toplama murakkas*, a collection album. It consists of seventeen *kitâb* s. Two are by the great Derviş Ali (d.1673) and six are by Ismail — certainly Nefeszade Seyyid Ismail (d.1679). These six comprise a *murakkas* in themselves. Both of these artists were teachers of the illustrious Hafız Osman (d.1698). There are two pieces thought to be by Hafız Osman in this album, one of which is signed, but in a way consistent with his earliest work. In addition, there are a few unsigned *kitâb* s and, almost as afterthoughts, a *ta’liq kitâb* by Mir ‘Ali Haravi (d.1545) and three by the découpage specialist Fahri of Bursa (d.1618).

Derviş Ali was a very learned man who studied calligraphy with Halid Erzurumi (d.1631). He wrote more than fifty Koran manuscripts, plus many *enâm* s and *evrâd* s (from the Arabic *award*, religious recitations, and referring to collections of daily recitations in book form) and many *kitâb* s and *murakkas*. He is considered the second proponent (*ustâd-i sami*) of the school of Seyh Hamdullah.

12.11 Two *kitâb* s by Nefezade Seyyid Ismail in a concertina album, Istanbul, 17th century. MIA, Doha (MS.279).
Nefeszade, Mustakimzade (1929, 129) had this to say in his masterwork Tâlîf-i hat-tatîn (The Rare and Wonderful Work on the Calligraphers):

He is from the city [Istanbul]. He is well known as Nefeszade. . . . The tally of breaths a person takes in his life is mentioned by people of insight. It is a concept the point of which is that the one who holds his breath while moving the pen will seek to have the best acquisition of calligraphy.

He learned his thuluth and naskh from Hâlid Erzurumi and took his license [taṣârî] and “breath” [nifîh] from him and became unique in following the Sâyîh’s style. Even after learning calligraphy from him [Nefeszade], Hafız Osman went back to him a second time, starting all over again to learn the style of the Sâyîh. If [Nefeszade] didn’t have such a fat belly, he would have been able to hold the ablâh [writing pad] on his knee for work and practice. It would have been impossible to distinguish his work from that of the late Sâyîh. In the year 1679 [1679], he used up all his allotted breaths and, holding his breath, he dove into the sea of renown with the lord of mankind.

Both of these calligraphers – Dervîş Ali and Nefeszade – learned from Hâlid Erzurumi. They were the living representatives of the Sâyîh school, and both were the teachers of Hafız Osman, who is considered author of the next foundational stage of Ottoman calligraphy. Every good or great calligrapher is also a teacher. From the Sâyîh to Hafız Osman, there is a chain of transmission – Sâyîh Hamdullah, Sîkûrîlah Hafîz, Pir Mehmed, Hasan Üsküdârî, Hâlid Erzurumi, Nefeszade, Dervîş Ali, Suyolkuzade Mustafa Eyyubi, to Hafız Osman.

It would seem that the MIA murakkaa was assembled with the intention of demonstrating that transmission takes place in a small way and over a short period of the Pîr Mehmed, Hasan Üsküdârî, Hâlid Erzurumi, Sîkûrîlah Hafîz, Pir Mehmed, Hasan Üsküdârî, Hâlid Erzurumi, Nefeszade, Dervîş Ali, Suyolkuzade Mustafa Eyyubi, to Hafız Osman.

It would seem that the MIA muhakkak was assembled with the intention of demonstrating that transmission takes place in a small way and over a short period of the calligraphers’ working lives. Many of the kîsâ‘s are worth noting:

Kîsâ 1 is in thuluth and naskh scripts. Could it be by Suyolkuzade Mustafa Eyyubi? Kîsâ 2 is a good Dervîş Ali piece in thuluth and naskh. Kîsâ 3 is another good Dervîş Ali piece in naskh.

Kîsâ 4–9 are mediocre thuluth and naskh pieces by Nefeszade; these six kîsâ‘s make up a manuscript muhakkak.

Kîsâ 10 is a hamâla in Sâyîh Hamdullah’s style of muhakkak with what looks like Hafız Osman’s naskh. But there is such rawness in it that if this is the work of Hafız it comes from an early period of his study, but later than kîsâ‘ 11.

Kîsâ 11. The thuluth line is a version of a line famous since at least the time of Sâyîh Hamdullah, but it is normally written in taṣârî, a more compact, less geometric member of the thuluth family. This one is very inept, like a student’s writing. At first glance, the naskh looks like Hafız Osman’s, but on closer inspection we see a strong influence by Dervîş Ali, to the point that it looks like his work. But the careful control of the ink makes it likely to be Hafız Osman. It is said that Hafız Osman only began to write in his famous style after 1679, so kîsâ‘ 10 and 11 both precede that date.

Kîsâ 12 is a redo of a muhakkak line from a Sâyîh Hamdullah six-script scroll, but altered. It is followed by four lines of a script that is supposed to be a very small muhakkak or tâbi‘i, but is inept. The writer makes a common mistake on the alif-lam-ka‘id of al-hashimi, showing that he wasn’t paying much attention to Sâyîh Hamdullah’s muhakkak. Yet he has a good, firm control of his pen and ink and may well have become a known calligrapher.

Kîsâ 13 is a famous line in thuluth that may have its origins in the work of Yaqut al-Mustâ’imî. The naskh is a shapeless and languid style that does not seem professional.

The album itself, despite its oddities, is a true collector’s item, with interesting illuminations and some very attractive marbled paper (taybi‘). If kîsâ‘ 10 and 11 are indeed early work of Hafız Osman, we can think of the album as showing the influence of his teachers. If would be nice if kîsâ‘ 1 were by Suyolkuzade, his other teacher, as he may have been the one who had the most effect on Hafız Osman. The famous calligrapher Sâmî Efendi (d.1742) once said of him, “I believe that Hafız Osman became Hafız Osman only after meeting Suyolkuzade” (cited in Derman 1998, 68 and 2009, 8).

While the calligraphic works in the album are not exceptional examples of writing and illumination – in fact, they are far from being these calligraphers’ finest work – they still have a rugged and unpretentious beauty. Who knows when these pieces were first collected, who did the binding, reformating, and perhaps rebinding, or who did the illumination (this seems to have been, to some degree, the work of one specialist). Except for the tâbi‘ pieces, all the work, including the two anonymous kîsâ‘s, shows some characteristics of Sâyîh’s style. But the inclusion of the Mu’âl ‘Ali kîsâ and the three découpage pieces appears to have been an afterthought. They add nothing to the importance of the thirteen primary kîsâ‘s. Nevertheless, as an object, the album has a good deal of presence.

The streams and branches of calligraphy, then, run from the Sâyîh to Hafız Osman and on to others, branching out into other schools and folks. Yet the whole enterprise was under the shadow of the great Sâyîh. Dervîş Ali, Nefeszade, and Hafız Osman can be said to have helped revive the Sâyîh Hamdullah school (muhakkak) and set the scene for Hafız Osman’s breakthrough in forming his own school. By the sixteenth century, Istanbul had become the hub of calligraphy and book production in the central Islamic world. Students came to Hafız Osman and radiated out from him, teaching and working.

If we look at another item from the MIA collection (pl. 12.12), we can see why his achievement is so radical and spectacular. This kîsâ‘ is from an album for teaching the thuluth script only. Hafız Osman was known to prepare his own, highly regarded sharì‘ah book, which is probably used in this specimen. He is at the height of his powers here.

The calligraphy shows all the characteristics of great thuluth writing – the “breath-like flow of the pen” is omnipresent, along with strength, drive, crispness, softness, precision, proportion, balance, and elegance. Not all of Hafız Osman’s work achieved this level, but here it is at its highest.

In fact, this work is so good it actually reminds one of recreations of Hafız Osman’s other late work by Muhammad Celalettin (d.1729). As an example of a return to origins, consider these kîsâ‘s from a mubakha by Celalettin (pl. 12.13). In this mubakha, he took a few extant pages from a mufassal collection by Sâyîh Hamdullah and then added
God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty

The missing six pages himself, although, oddly, he did not do the whole necessary set of exercises. These pages can be easily distinguished—the cumulative teaching and technical improvement have become naturalized in the work of Mahmud Celaleddin, a refugee from the Russian usurpation of Daghestan and one of the few self-taught masters. In the pages by Mahmud, we see the same breath-like flow as in the Hafız Osman album. A brilliant follower of Hafız Osman, Mahmud no doubt used murakka by the masters to learn their style. When he devised his own kind of thuluth, however—at a slightly larger than normal size and the even larger celi—he created what no one wants, stasis of line. The style was forced into accepted use for a while, but was not favored and fell into oblivion.

The Ta’lîk Murakkâa

The name ta’lîk—actually the name of an ancient script, the ancestor of shikasta and divanî—was an Ottoman shortening of the Persian nasta’lîq. Mir ‘Imad al-Hasani is credited as being the model for the script and the most consistently elegant

12.12 *Müfredat* exercises on the letters *ayn* and *fa* in thuluth script, by Hafiz Osman, Istanbul, 17th century. MIA, Doha (MS.916).

12.13 (facing page) Two *küfa* from an album in thuluth by Mahmud Celaleddin. Şeyh Hâmidüddin’s müfredat exercises for the letters *fâ* and *lîf* early 16th century (bottom); Mahmud Celaleddin’s reconstruction of the exercises for the letters *aâ* and *kufr* early 19th century (top) (Demir 2009, pp. 132 and 133).
God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty

An Ottoman Murakkaa and the Birth of the International Style

In 1922, King Fuad I of Egypt invited Abdul Aziz Rifai (d. 1934) to come to Cairo and establish the Royal School of Calligraphy. He remained there for eleven years and taught an entire generation of Egyptian calligraphers, who then spread the style. The Royal School published a short-lived periodical and survived until the end of the monarchy, when, in a diminished state, it became a quasi-governmental school. Nevertheless, the style deriving from Şeyh Hamdullah became ubiquitous, with other contenders, such as the Karahisari and Mamluk schools, long forgotten.

In Arabic and Ottoman typography, thuluth never became a printable script, but some very elegant and legible naskh fonts existed for movable type. Books were printed in these fonts during the late years of the Ottoman empire and in Egypt through the 1950s. They set a standard that has not been improved on to this day.

of the Persian masters, in the same way that Yaqut was the model for Şeyh Hamdullah’s innovations.

A young genius in Istanbul, the profoundly disabled Yesari Mehmed Es’ad Efendi (d. 1798), devised a new way to write and experience this script (pl. 12.14). Under the development of his son, the extraordinary Yesarizade (d. 1849), the script achieved its famous look, less romantic and flamboyant than the Persian (pl. 12.15). It became flatter, more under the control of the writer, more vigorous, muscular, and precise in line. In short, it was almost impossibly difficult to write. Many have tried, but few have mastered thuluth — perhaps twenty in two centuries, only six of whom were great masters.

It is worth noting an aspect of the teaching process. When a student has finished the required curriculum, augmenting this study with murakkaa, both original and good printed copies, he or she receives the icaze or license giving the calligrapher permission to sign his or her name to works, along with the document attesting to his or her competence, the icazetname (pl. 12.16).
28  God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty

29  An Ottoman Murakkas and the Birth of the International Style

Evidence, as well as the long view – the amazing linearity of calligraphy’s evolution. It belongs to an earlier time, when scholars had little access to the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature we have now, not to mention the presence of modern scholars such as M. Yazar, M. Ugur Derman, and, of course, Oleg Grabar.

Note that in Ottoman calligraphy, the Turkish names and spellings of the scripts are used: muhakkak, sülüs, reyhânî, tevkî, rıkâ, and nesih.


I am indebted to my student Kuntay Çelik for his help in translating this difficult material, which is summarized here.

Of the six scripts, three are essentially obsolete now – muhakkak, reyhânî, and taqîf. The remaining three – thuluth, naskh, and rıkâ – absorb the imagination and creative spirit of modern calligraphers, along with ta liqâ and celî ta liqâ. Minor scripts such as divani, celî divani, and rıkâ are still quite popular. A few muhakkasas are still made – in fact, I have made two myself – although the format is being explored today primarily in sumptuous printed versions from Turkey.

The flowering of the Ottoman murakkas was from the time of Şeyh Hamdullah to 1920, with the album’s peak during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Representing the dominant political power, the evanescent Ottoman state, calligraphers, teachers, writers, scholars, and consumers ensured that the standards remained intact, that experiments in ornament were made, that production was high – in short, that this style became the international norm for the central Muslim lands.

But it was not power alone that gave the international style precedence. The style and its advocates were supported by biography, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and methodology. Calligraphy was an institution. It had big names. It had critics. It had an audience. For many, possession of one of these wonderful Ottoman murakkas must have been a burning desire, as it is for museums today.

Notes
1  There is a good deal of spelling overlap between Arabic and Turkish terms. When I use a word in a Turkish context, I have used modern Turkish spelling.
2  While types of calligraphy are a matter of taste, the jury is still out on whether calligraphy is an art form at all. Nevertheless, the notion of a golden age that ended around 1500 is simply romantic preference masquerading as science. It totally disregards the textual and manuscript evidence, as well as the long view – the amazing linearity of calligraphy’s evolution. It belongs to an earlier time, when scholars had little access to the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature we have now, not to mention the presence of modern scholars such as M. Yazar, M. Ugur Derman, and, of course, Oleg Grabar.

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