

## UNIT 2

# Arabic Script and the Art of Calligraphy

After reading this unit, you will:

- ◆ understand why calligraphy is the most esteemed art form in the Islamic world;
- ◆ be able to identify the function and visual characteristics of some of the key scripts represented in the featured artworks; and
- ◆ recognize ways calligraphers use the shapes of letters to decorate objects and convey a wide range of messages.

## Introduction

Calligraphy is considered the quintessential art form of the Islamic world—Arabic letters decorate objects ranging from bowls to buildings. Numerous scripts have emerged over the centuries that serve a multitude of religious, political, social, and cultural functions. This unit explores the variety and versatility of Islamic calligraphy and historical efforts to perfect and codify scripts and generate new forms.

## Arabic and Islam

The written word acquired unparalleled significance with the arrival of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. The Prophet Muhammad's trusted companions and followers collected the divine revelations from written and oral sources and compiled them into a manuscript known as the Qur'an, Islam's holiest book. Since the divine revelations were conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic, Muslims regard the Qur'an in Arabic script as the physical manifestation of God's message. Copying text from the Qur'an is thus considered an act of devotion. The organic link of the Arabic language to Islam elevated it to the *lingua franca*, or common language, of the Islamic world.

The text of the Qur'an was codified in its present form under the Caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (reigned 644–56). To preserve the authentic pronunciation of the Qur'an, a system of diacritical (or accent) marks indicating short vowels was developed.

## Arabic Calligraphy as an Art Form

Calligraphy, from the Greek words *kallos* (beauty) and *graphos* (writing), refers to the harmonious proportion of both letters within a word and words on a page. While some of the best examples of calligraphic writing make this art form appear effortless, each letter and diacritical mark is the result of painstaking measurements and multiple strokes.

Calligraphy appears on both religious and secular objects in virtually every medium—architecture, paper, ceramics, carpets, glass, jewelry, woodcarving, and metalwork. In addition to its decorative qualities, it often provides valuable information about the object it decorates, such as function, maker, patron, and date and place of production.

A number of factors, such as the prospective audience, content of the text, and the shape and function of an object, informs the type of script employed. Graceful and fluid scripts such as *nasta'liq* are used for poetry (fig. 14), Qur'an manuscripts are written in bold and stately scripts (fig. 13), and royal correspondence utilized complex scripts that are difficult to forge (see image 23). Although there are exceptions, most scripts have several specific functions (figs. 11, 13, 14).

## Origins and Characteristics of the Arabic Alphabet

The origins of the Arabic alphabet can be traced to the writing of the semi-nomadic Nabataean tribes, who inhabited southern Syria and Jordan, Northern Arabia, and the Sinai Peninsula. Surviving stone inscriptions in the Nabataean script show strong similarities to the modern Arabic writing

system. Like Arabic, their written texts consisted largely of consonants and long vowels, with variations on the same basic letter shapes used to represent a number of sounds.

Arabic is written and read from right to left. There is no distinction between upper- and lower-case letters, though shapes of letters usually vary depending on whether they are in an initial, medial, or final position in a word. Punctuation marks were not adopted until the twentieth century. Short vowels, represented by a set of marks below or above the letters, aid in the pronunciation of a word—these are usually only written in the Qur’an, where correct recitation is important, and in texts for novice readers.

The Arabic alphabet consists of eighteen shapes that express twenty-eight phonetic sounds with the help of diacritical marks. The same letter shape can form a “b” sound when one dot is placed below (ب), a “t” sound when two dots are placed above (ت), or a “th” sound when three dots are added above (ث). (See fig. 10 for more examples.)

FIG. 10. The Arabic alphabet

alif	ا	za	ز	qaf	ق
ba	ب	sin	س	kaf	ك
ta	ت	shin	ش	lam	ل
tha	ث	sad	ص	mim	م
jim	ج	dad	ض	nun	ن
ha	ح	ta	ط	ha	ه
kha	خ	dha	ظ	waw	و
dal	د	ain	ع	ya	ي
dhal	ذ	ghain	غ		
ra	ر	fa	ف		

## The Arabic Alphabet and Other Languages

With the arrival of Islam and the conversion of many regions, a number of languages adopted the Arabic alphabet even though they bear no linguistic similarity.

Today, Persian (or Farsi, spoken in Iran; Dari in Afghanistan; and Tajik in Tajikistan), Pashto (spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan), Kurdish (spoken in parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey), and Urdu (spoken in Pakistan and parts of India) are among the languages that adopted Arabic letters. Turkish also used Arabic letters until 1928, when the country officially switched to the latin alphabet.

## The Development and Spread of Calligraphic Scripts

The first calligraphic script to gain prominence in Qur’ans and on architecture and portable works of art was kufic, which features angular letters, horizontal format, and thick extended strokes. Eventually, variations of kufic emerged. Examples range from letters intertwined with floral ornament (floriated kufic) to letters that appear to be woven into knots (knotted/plaited kufic) (fig. 11).

FIG. 11. Kufic script variations, all reading *bismillah*

A horizontal line of calligraphic text in a standard Kufic script. The letters are angular and blocky, with thick, uniform strokes. The text reads "Bismillah" (Bismillah) in Arabic.

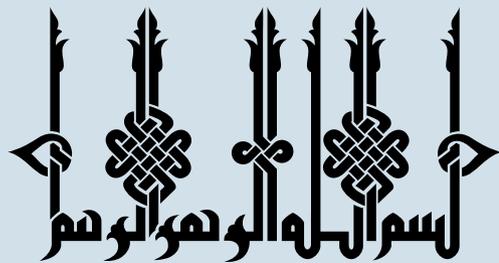
SCRIPT NAME  
kufic

USES  
Qur’ans, architectural decoration, textiles, carpets

A horizontal line of calligraphic text in a floriated Kufic script. The letters are highly decorative, with intricate floral and geometric patterns integrated into the strokes. The text reads "Bismillah" (Bismillah) in Arabic.

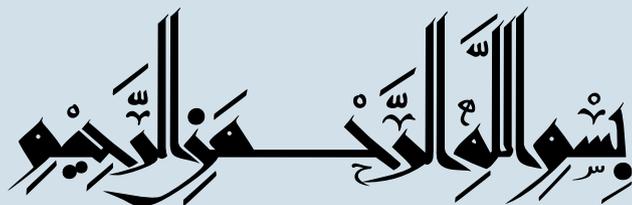
SCRIPT NAME  
floriated kufic

USES  
Qur’ans, ceramics, metalwork

A horizontal line of calligraphic text in a knotted/plaited Kufic script. The letters are highly decorative, with intricate knotting and plaiting patterns integrated into the strokes. The text reads "Bismillah" (Bismillah) in Arabic.

SCRIPT NAME  
Knotted/plaited kufic

USES  
Qur’ans, architectural decoration

A horizontal line of calligraphic text in a "New style" script. The letters are highly decorative, with intricate geometric and floral patterns integrated into the strokes. The text reads "Bismillah" (Bismillah) in Arabic.

SCRIPT NAME  
“New style” script

USES  
Qur’ans, architectural decoration

## Proportional Scripts

A new system of proportional cursive scripts was codified from the tenth to the thirteenth century. In a proportional script, each letter's shape is determined by a fixed number of rhombic (diamond-shaped) dots (fig. 12). A rhombic dot is the shape formed when a calligrapher presses his or her pen to paper in one downward motion, producing the diamond shape. A word written in one of the proportional scripts can vary in size but the letters will always be in strict proportion to one another. There are six proportional scripts (the Six Pens)—*naskh*, *thuluth*, *muhaqqaq*, *rayhani*, *tawqi'*, and *riqa'* (fig. 13).

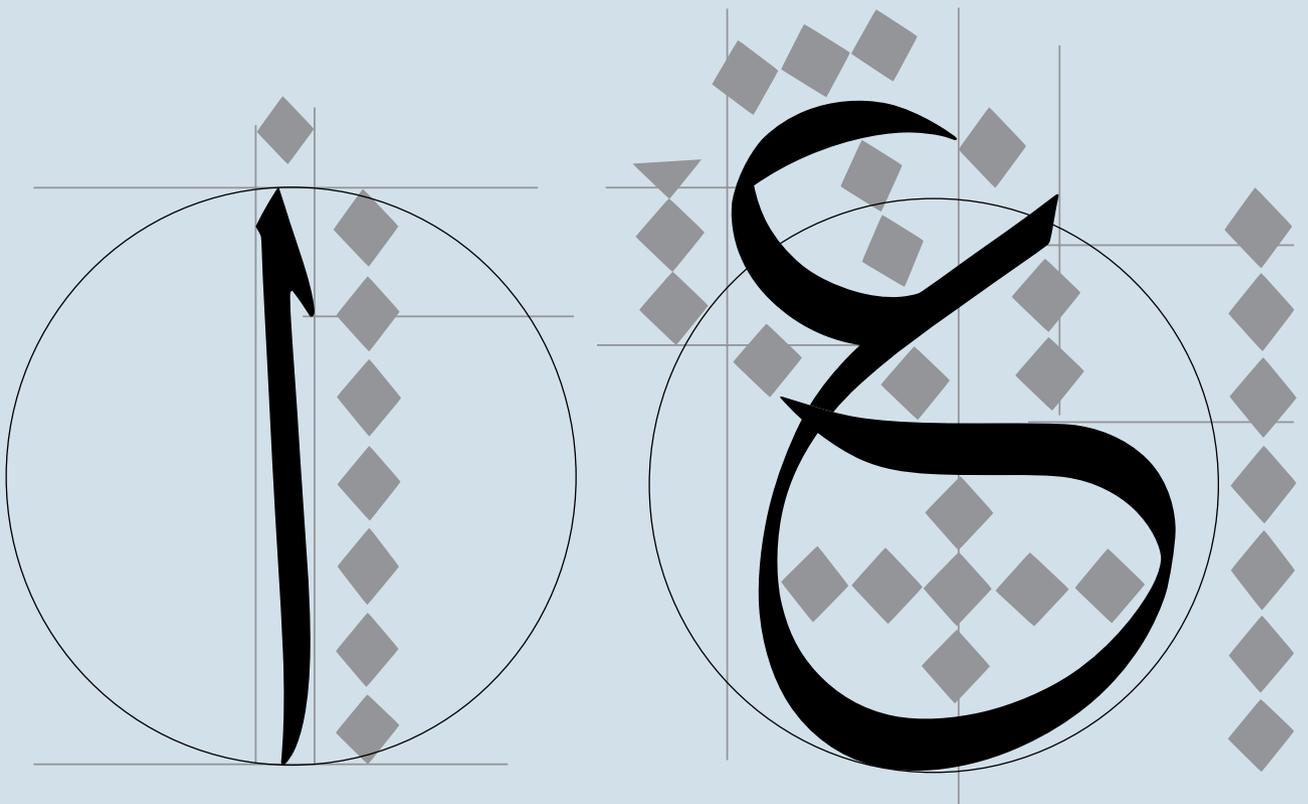


FIG. 12. Calligraphic diagrams of the letters *alif* and *ain* using the proportional system based on rhombic dots described above

FIG. 13. Six Pens (proportional scripts), all reading *bismillah*

The image shows the Bismillah (Bismillah) written in the Naskh script. The text is 'Bismillah' in Arabic, written in a clear, uniform, and highly legible style. The letters are well-proportioned and the overall appearance is clean and modern.

SCRIPT NAME                      USES  
naskh                              Manuscripts, ceramics, tiles

The image shows the Bismillah written in the Thuluth script. The letters are more elongated and have a more decorative, calligraphic feel compared to Naskh. The script is characterized by its elegant and flowing lines.

SCRIPT NAME                      USES  
thuluth                            Qur'ans, architecture, metalwork, ceramics, manuscripts

The image shows the Bismillah written in the Muhaqqaq script. This script is a variation of Thuluth, with letters that are more compact and have a more rounded appearance. It is often used for decorative purposes.

SCRIPT NAME                      USES  
muhaqqaq                        Qur'ans, architectural decoration, ceramics

The image shows the Bismillah written in the Rayhani script. This script is a highly decorative and stylized form of Thuluth, often used for official documents and architectural decoration. The letters are more elongated and have a more ornate appearance.

SCRIPT NAME                      USES  
rayhani                            Chancellery script for letters, missives, edicts, architecture

The image shows the Bismillah written in the Tawqi' script. This script is a highly decorative and stylized form of Thuluth, often used for official documents and architectural decoration. The letters are more elongated and have a more ornate appearance.

SCRIPT NAME                      USES  
tawqi'                              Qur'ans, missives, edicts, architecture

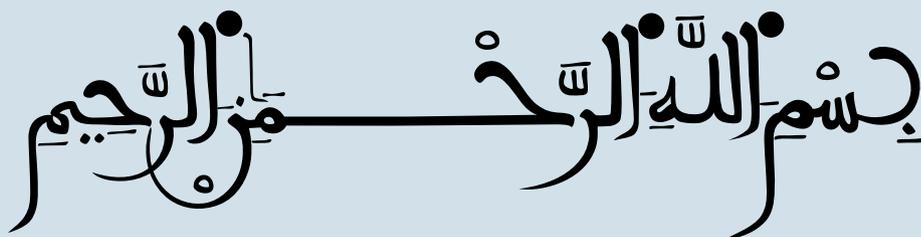
The image shows the Bismillah written in the Rika' script. This script is a highly decorative and stylized form of Thuluth, often used for official documents and architectural decoration. The letters are more elongated and have a more ornate appearance.

SCRIPT NAME                      USES  
rika'                                Letters, edicts, manuscripts

## Regional Scripts and Variations

Scripts have their own distinct function and history; some were used widely while others remained local. For example, *maghribi* was developed and used primarily in Spain and North Africa, while *nasta'liq*, a flowing script originating in Iran and Central Asia, spread eastward and became popular in Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey (fig. 14).

FIG. 14. Examples of regional scripts, both reading *bismillah*



SCRIPT NAME  
*maghribi*

USES  
Qur'ans and other manuscripts



SCRIPT NAME  
*nasta'liq*

USES  
Poetry (in manuscripts or on objects),  
album pages, textiles, carpets



## Calligraphers and Their Tools

Calligraphers are the most highly regarded artists in Islamic culture. The art of calligraphy was passed down from master to student, often within the same family. In order to become a master calligrapher and acquire a formal license, a student had to train for years by copying models to perfect his or her skills.

Training to become a calligrapher was a long and rigorous process. Most calligraphers were highly educated and some came from the upper echelons of society. Many rulers received extensive calligraphic training from the best court masters and became accomplished calligraphers in their own right. While most calligraphers at the time were men, some wealthy women practiced calligraphy too. Today, the art of calligraphy is widely practiced by both men and women.

Tools and materials affected the quality of the final product. Every calligrapher learned how to prepare pens, inks, and paper. Pens (*qalam*) were often fashioned from reeds due to their flexibility. First, hollow reeds were harvested and left to dry; the calligrapher then cut a tip in the shape, width, and angle that best matched the particular script he or she planned to use. Inks were made of natural materials such as soot, ox gall, gum Arabic, or plant essences. Manuscripts were written on papyrus and parchment (animal skin) before paper was introduced to the Islamic world from China around the eighth century. Because of the status of calligraphy as an art form, the tools associated with it—shears, knives, inkwells, and pen boxes—were often elaborately decorated and sometimes made of precious materials.

Detail, image 10

## 7

### Bowl with Arabic inscription

10th century

Iran, Nishapur

Earthenware; white slip with black-slip decoration under transparent glaze; H. 7 in. (17.8 cm), Diam. 18 in. (45.7 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1965 (65.106.2)

#### LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

This bowl exemplifies the use of calligraphy as decoration on ceramics, and illustrates the dramatic impact a simple inscription can make.

#### FUNCTION

In addition to its use as a bowl, a ceramic vessel of this quality was a visual indicator of wealth and status. The proverbs featured in the calligraphic decoration on bowls like this are powerful tools for understanding the values and mores of the society in which they were made.

#### DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

This vessel is made of local earthenware, covered with white slip (semifluid clay), which offers a smooth surface and uniform background for decoration. The brownish black inscriptions encircling the interior of the bowl present a striking contrast. The elongated letters of the text radiate toward the center of the bowl, creating a harmonious relationship between the shape of the vessel and its surface decoration. Written in “new style” script, the letters feature angular shapes and slender vertical shafts. “New style” script was used primarily in the eastern Islamic lands in Qur’ans, architectural decoration, and ceramic vessels.

#### CONTEXT

This vessel was produced in the city of Nishapur, in northeastern Iran, during the tenth century. The bowl belongs to a larger group that includes some of the oldest existing records of proverbs and adages in the Islamic world. The writing on this vessel offers the following advice: “Planning before work protects you from regret; good luck and well-being”—an appropriate warning given the careful planning needed to ensure the text fit properly around the perimeter of the bowl. The inscriptions on wares unearthed at Nishapur sometimes mention the name of the maker, but hardly ever the name of the patron. Based on the content of the inscriptions, we know that such ceramics were not made for royal patrons, but rather for members of an affluent urban class.

#### KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Calligraphy (kufic script), proverb, secular, Iran, urban class, ceramic



7. Bowl with Arabic inscription

## 8

### Tiraz fragment

Late 14th–early 15th century

Spain

Silk, lampas; 10 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (27 x 54 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.31)

#### LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

Calligraphy was an important social and political tool within the royal courts of the Islamic world and text was used as both a decorative and functional element on many objects, including textiles.

#### FUNCTION

Textiles with calligraphic bands are called *tiraz*, which means “embroidery” in Arabic. They were produced in royal workshops and presented to individuals in service to the court. Inscriptions followed a formula that often included the name of the ruler, his titles, honorifics, the place of manufacture, and sometimes the name of the workshop superintendent. The prolific production of these gifts in royal workshops led to the workshops themselves being referred to as *tiraz*. Though many *tiraz* were used in clothing, this specific textile fragment’s function remains unclear. Nevertheless, it is certain that *tiraz* served to celebrate and reinforce the power and authority of the ruler and his court.

#### DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

A calligraphic inscription in yellow letters against a red background decorates the center band of the fabric. The inscription repeats the phrase “Glory to our Lord the Sultan.” The tall vertical shafts of the letters are balanced by the horizontal sections of the inscription and the decorative elements embellishing it. At the center, the decoration is more ornate and emphasizes the word *sultan*, successfully fulfilling the main purpose of the textile—to glorify the ruler and acknowledge his authority.

#### CONTEXT

With examples dating from as early as the seventh century, *tiraz* textiles from Egypt are among the oldest inscribed objects in the Islamic world. In addition to mentioning the ruler’s name, these bands of calligraphy sometimes bear wishes of good fortune to the owner or provide historical information such as the date and place of production. Textiles containing good wishes for the ruler were common in North Africa and Muslim Spain, where this example was produced. The calligraphy on this textile is executed in a Spanish version of *thuluth*, a script also widely seen in other media such as stone, metal, wood, glass, and metalwork.

#### KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Calligraphy (*thuluth* script), Spain, sultan, courtly life, textile, silk



8. Tiraz fragment

## 9

### Lamp stand with chevron pattern

Dated A.H. 986 / A.D. 1578–79

Iran

Brass; cast, engraved, and inlaid with black and red pigments;

H. 13¼ in. (33.7 cm), Diam. (base) 6⅝ in. (16.8 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1929 (29.53)

#### LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

This lamp stand is inscribed with a mystical Sufi poem that, in its description of a moth drawn to a flame, links the surface decoration with the object's function.

#### FUNCTION

Hollow brass stands such as this incorporated a separate element containing lamp oil that fit into the socket. They were sometimes also used to hold large candles. The writing on the stand transforms this everyday object into a symbol of mystical devotion. Some of these stands were commissioned as gifts for shrines, mosques, or other religious institutions.

#### DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

The surface of this brass lamp stand features alternating bands of engraved poetic inscriptions, in *nasta'liq* script, and vegetal scrolls. The diagonal arrangement of the writing is a common feature seen in Persian and Mughal album pages containing rhyming couplets of lyrical poetry (see image 10). The residue of red and black pigments suggests the background may originally have been inlaid with different colors of enamel or mineral paste.

The inscriptions are from well-known Persian and Indian poems. Starting at the top of the stand, verses belonging to the *Bustan* (Orchard) by the Persian poet Sa'di translate as follows:

*I remember one night as my eyes would not sleep  
I heard a moth speaking with a candle  
[Said the moth:] "Because I am a lover, it is [only] right  
that I should burn.  
[But,] why should you weep and burn yourself up?"*

(Translation based upon the work of  
Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani)

Around the shaft, two couplets by Indian poet Amir Khusrau Dihlavi, each from a different lyric poem (*ghazal*), read:

*There is not a moment that my soul is not burning from  
love for you.*

*Which heart is not burning from that artful coquetry?*

*I am burning from jealousy because you set fire to another  
You set fire to another, yet no one else is burned but me . . .*

(Translated by Denise-Marie Teece)

#### CONTEXT

The verses belong to the mystical tradition of Islam called Sufism and speak of a moth (the lover) drawn to the flame (the beloved). The lover and the beloved are common metaphors in Sufi poetry, meant to express the relationship between God and the believer and the yearning of the believer (the lover) to unite with the divine (the beloved). The dialogue between the moth and the candle represents the desire of the devout believer, who, like a lover, seeks the object of his or her love, God. The flame of the lamp represents the intensity of the divine, in whose presence no mortal can survive. Despite this, it is the nature of the moth to be captivated by the bright flame.

The maker of this brass lamp imbued it with multiple layers of meaning through his use of metaphor. The poetry, rendered in highly decorative yet legible calligraphy, links the lamp stand to the rich symbolism of fire. The expertly chosen passages by different authors would have been immediately recognizable by the patron, who would have admired their arrangement and calligraphic rendering. In this case, calligraphy transforms an everyday object into a symbol and a reminder of a rich poetic tradition, prompting reflection on faith, devotion, and love.

#### KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Calligraphy (*nasta'liq* script), poetry, metaphor, symbolism, Sufi, Iran, brass



9. Lamp stand with chevron pattern

## 10

### Illuminated folio with poetic verses from the Shah Jahan Album (verso)

About 1500

Calligrapher: Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi (active late 15th–early 16th century)

India

Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; 15 $\frac{5}{16}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (38.9 x 26 cm)

Purchase, Rogers Fund and The Kevorkian Foundation Gift, 1955 (55.121.10.32v)

#### LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

This page from a royal album demonstrates the high status and importance of calligraphy as a court art. This example features the popular regional script *nasta‘liq*, which was developed in Persia but also widely used in the Mughal court in India (1526–1858).

#### FUNCTION

Calligraphy by well-known masters was often collected by royal patrons and arranged in albums. This page, containing a love poem, belongs to an album assembled by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan.

#### DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

A short lyric poem, written in elegant *nasta‘liq* script, is set against a background of elaborate floral *arabesques* at the center of the page. The verses, which flow diagonally, are framed in cloud-shaped compartments. The poem reads:

By Khwaja Salman, may God’s mercy be upon him  
In your curls seek and ask how I am  
Ask about those broken by the snare of misfortune  
Ask about all the broken ones  
Then ask me first, for I am the most brokenhearted [of  
them all].  
Written by Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi

(Translated by Maryam Ekhtiar)

Several decorated frames surround the text; the outermost frame, the wide page border, is comprised of a blue ground covered in gilded floral elements—*palmettes*, leaves, blossoms, and elongated stems.

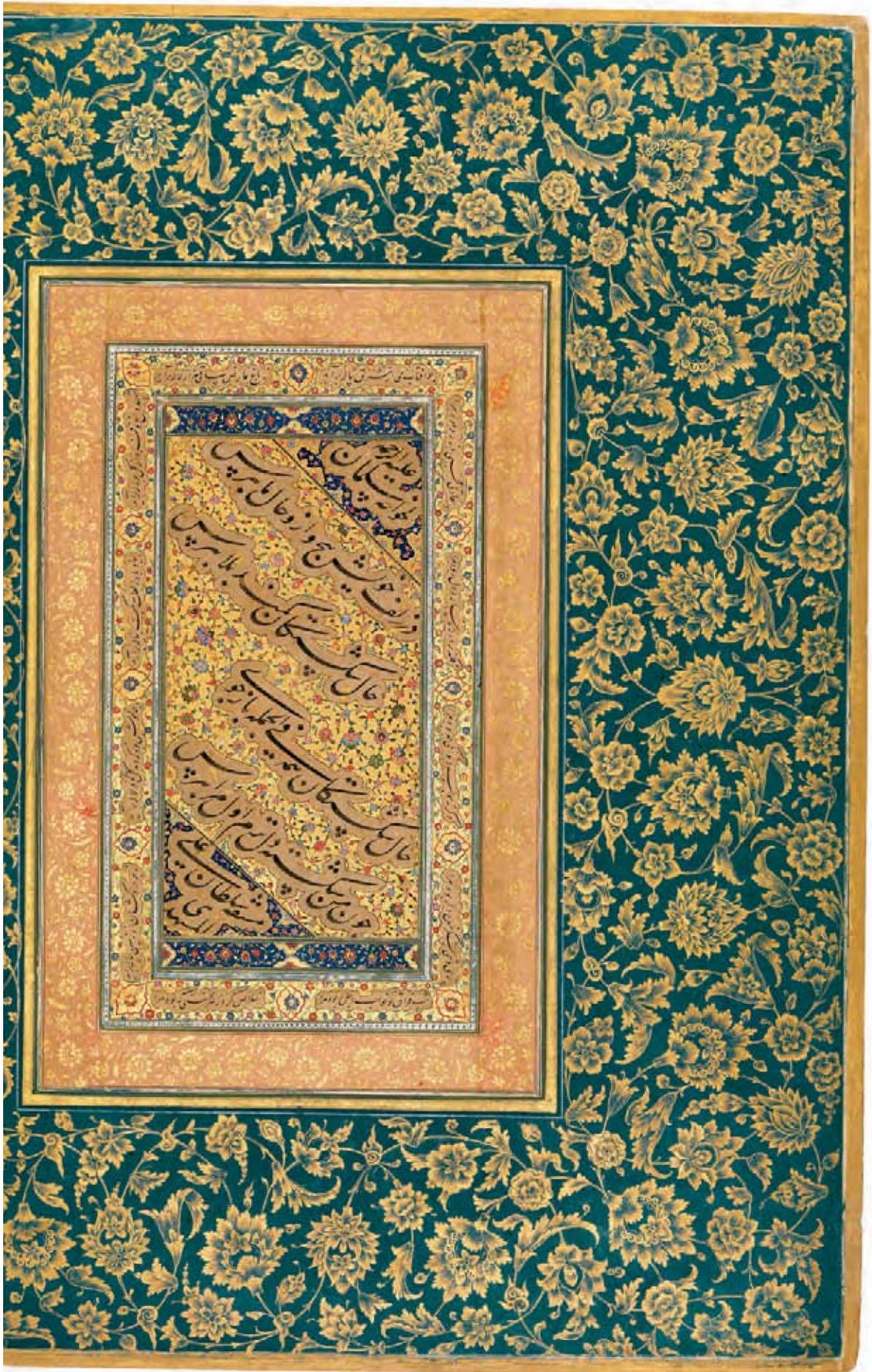
#### CONTEXT

Collecting paintings, drawings, and calligraphy—and assembling them in bound volumes—was a favorite pastime of the Mughal royalty and elite. The emperor Shah Jahan, the patron of this album, was an especially avid patron of the arts and collected beautifully written poetry set against ornate backgrounds, calligraphic exercises, and paintings to assemble in albums such as this one. Albums were made for private viewing, enjoyment, and meditation and often contained brief notes written by the owner. (See, from the same album images 30, 32; and fig. 34)

The inclusion on this page of the name of the calligrapher, Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi (below the verses), as well as that of the poet Khwaja Salman (above the verses), draws attention to the high status of the calligrapher within the royal workshop. The poem uses a familiar trope in Persian love poetry—that of the beloved who ensnares others with the “ropes” of her curls, but leaves them in a trap of misfortune. The verses in the border are from other love poems.

#### KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Calligraphy (*nasta‘liq* script), poetry, Mughal court, Emperor Shah Jahan, album, floral and vegetal ornament, painting



10. Illuminated folio with poetic verses from the Shah Jahan Album (verso)

## Calligraphic galleon

Dated A.H. 1180 / A.D. 1766–67

Calligrapher: ‘Abd al-Qadir Hisari

Turkey

Ink and gold on paper; 19 x 17 in. (48.3 x 43.2 cm)

Louis E. and Theresa S. Seley Purchase Fund for Islamic Art  
and Rogers Fund, 2003 (2003.241)

### LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS UNIT

This calligraphic drawing (calligram) of a ship at sea exemplifies one of the most innovative artistic genres developed by Ottoman calligraphers while also conveying an important religious message.

### FUNCTION

The combination of Qur’anic verses, prayers, and poetry venerating the Prophet renders this calligram an object of talismanic devotional power.

### DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

The prow, deck, hull, and stern of the ship are formed by a gilded calligraphic inscription that names the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, as well as their dog Qitmir (see Context, below). On the stern, the Throne verse from the Qur’an (2:255) acknowledges God’s power to protect and preserve everything in his kingdom. The verse is believed to have the power to avert evil. Below the distinctive imperial emblem or insignia (tughra; see also image 23) on the stern is a dedication to the Ottoman sultan Mustafa III (reigned 1757–74). Calligraphy dominates the composition; even the waves in the scene contain aphorisms in a minute script whose name, *ghubar*, means “dustlike.”

### CONTEXT

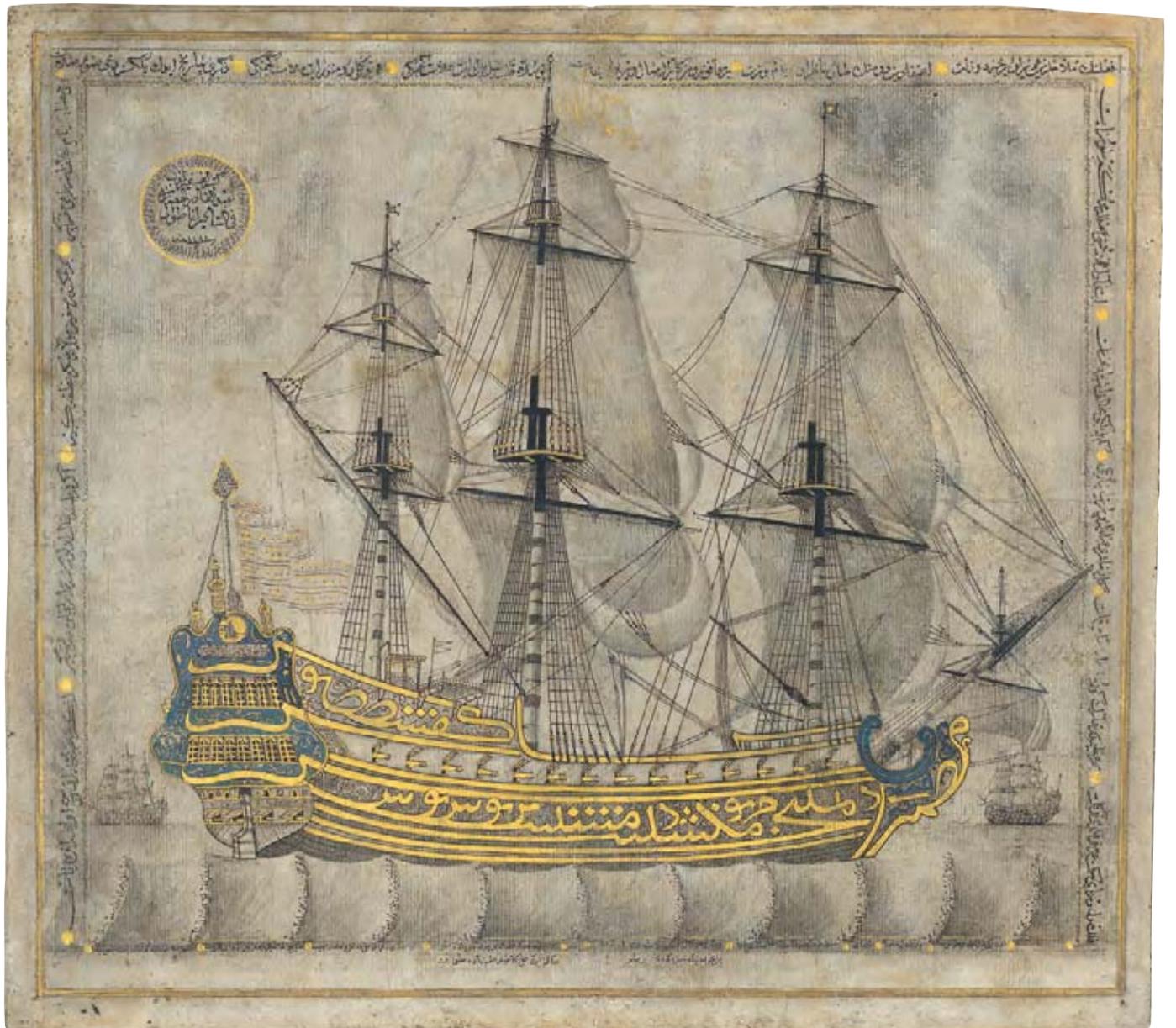
Calligrams were especially popular in Ottoman art; many were made in the form of lions, storks, peacocks, mosques, and ships.

The imagery and text featured here derive from the story of the Seven Sleepers—a legend dating back to pre-Islamic times that became a metaphor for divine protection. The story, included in passage 18:9–25 of the Qur’an, took place in Ephesus (a town in present-day Turkey). Three Christian youths fled a pagan town and were later joined by four others and a dog. Determined to punish the fugitives for not respecting the pagan gods, the ruler set after the youths. The seven men and their dog found refuge in a cave, where they fell asleep. God ordered the angels of death to take their souls until the danger had passed. Three hundred and nine years later, God breathed life into them again.

The image of the ship also carries symbolic meaning. In illustrated manuscripts and written sources, the Islamic faith is sometimes represented as a ship in a stormy sea. According to religious sources, if a ship was inscribed with the names of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, it would not sink.

### KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Calligraphy (thuluth, naskh, and *ghubari* scripts), calligram (calligraphic image), Ottoman empire, poetry, talisman, ink



11. Calligraphic galleon

## Lesson Plan: Unit 2 Arabic Script and the Art of Calligraphy

### FEATURED WORK OF ART

#### Lamp stand with chevron pattern (image 9)

Dated A.H. 986 / A.D. 1578–79

Iran

Brass; engraved, cast, and inlaid with black and red pigments; H. 13¼ in. (33.7 cm),

Diam. (base) 6⅞ in. (16.8 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1929 (29.53)

**SUBJECT AREAS:** English Language Arts and Visual Arts

**GRADES:** Middle School and High School

**TOPIC/THEME:** Art and Writing

### GOALS

Students will be able to:

- ◆ identify visual qualities of several calligraphic scripts;
- ◆ recognize ways artists from the Islamic world engage various scripts to enhance works of art supporting a range of functions; and
- ◆ assess the merits of several computer-generated fonts in supporting specific uses.

### NATIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

English Language Arts

- ◆ NL-ENG.K-12.5 Communication Strategies
- ◆ NL-ENG.K-12.6 Applying Knowledge

Visual Arts

- ◆ NA-VA.K-12.2 Using Knowledge of Structures and Functions
- ◆ NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections Between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

English Language Arts

- ◆ R.CCR.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text
- ◆ R.CCR.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text
- ◆ SL.CCR.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally

**ACTIVITY SETTING:** Classroom

**MATERIALS:** Paper, pen or pencil, copy of the alphabet (or the same word) in ten or more fonts

### QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

- ◆ What function might this object have? What do you see that makes you say that?
- ◆ Describe the way the object is decorated. What do the forms remind you of? Why?
- ◆ What strategies has this artist used to unify the decoration and the form? What aspects of the design do you find most successful? Why?
- ◆ Look closely at the bands of calligraphic writing that surround the lamp stand (see detail below). What adjectives would you use to describe the visual qualities of the script (*nasta'liq*)? Why?



Detail of the calligraphy, image 9

- ◆ Around the shaft are two couplets by the Indian poet Amir Khusrau Dihlavi, each from a different lyric poem (*ghazal*). Read the following text translated from Persian. How does the content of the text challenge or reinforce your initial impressions of the writing?

*There is not a moment that my soul is not  
burning from love for you.  
Which heart is not burning from that  
artful coquetry?  
I am burning from jealousy because  
you set fire to another  
You set fire to another, yet no one else  
is burned but me . . .*

(Translated by Denise-Marie Teece)

## ACTIVITY

**SUBJECT AREAS:** Language Arts and Visual Arts

**DURATION:** Approximately 30–40 minutes

Look at the font choices employed by three different businesses or institutions. What messages or ideas does each font bring to mind? What might you infer about each company based on your observations? If possible, use the Internet to locate the company or institution's mission statement. Compare and contrast the ideals conveyed in the mission statement with your initial impressions of the text. In what ways, if any, do the mission and font align? If you do not feel they make a strong match, consider how you might refine the font to better support the company or institution's mission. *Extension:* Collect copies of company or institution mission statements and create a font for one of the selections before looking at the solution posed by their designer.

## ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITY

**SUBJECT AREAS:** Language Arts and Visual Arts

**DURATION:** Approximately 30 minutes

As noted in the chart outlining various Arabic calligraphic scripts (see figs. 11, 13, 14), each has distinct visual qualities that align with various functions. Consider how these principles apply across other cultures and languages. Choose five fonts in your language as a focal point for this activity. After looking closely at each example, write a sentence or two describing the visual qualities of each. Share the fonts and your observations with a partner. If you had to match one of your font selections with each of the following functions/purposes, what pairings would you make? Why?

- ◆ Job application
- ◆ Love poem
- ◆ Billboard
- ◆ Political message
- ◆ Wedding invitation

## RESOURCES

Department of Islamic Art. "Calligraphy in Islamic Art." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cali/hd\\_cali.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cali/hd_cali.htm) (October 2001).

## OBJECTS IN THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION RELATED TO THIS LESSON

Image 4. *Mihrab*, A.H. 755 / A.D. 1354–55; Iran; mosaic of polychrome-glazed cut tiles on stonepaste body, set into plaster; 135<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 113<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (343.1 x 288.7 cm), Wt. 4,500 lbs. (2041.2 kg); Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939 (39.20)

Image 7. Bowl with Arabic inscription, 10th century; Iran, Nishapur; earthenware; white slip with black slip decoration under transparent glaze; H: 7 in. (17.8 cm), Diam: 18 in. (45.7 cm); Rogers Fund, 1965 (65.106.2)

Image 11. Calligraphic galleon, dated A.H. 1180/ A.D. 1766–67; Turkey; ink and gold on paper; 19 x 17 in. (48.3 x 43.2 cm); Louis E. and Theresa S. Seley Purchase Fund for Islamic Art and Rogers Fund, 2003 (2003.241)

Author: Adapted from lessons by classroom teachers Dr. Sujay Sood and Erin Fitzgerald

Date: 2012

## Unit 2 Suggested Readings and Resources

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Asia Society. "Traces of the Calligrapher and Writing the Word of God." Exhibition website. New York: Asia Society, 2008. <http://sites.asiasociety.org/islamiccalligraphy/>.

**MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL**

See also the related exhibition catalogues:

McWilliams, Mary, and David J. Roxburgh. *Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600–1900*. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2007.

**HIGH SCHOOL**

Focuses on the tools and craft of the calligrapher.

Roxburgh, David J. *Writing the Word of God: Calligraphy and the Qur'an*. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2007.

**HIGH SCHOOL**

Department of Islamic Art. "Calligraphy in Islamic Art." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cali/hd\\_cali.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cali/hd_cali.htm) (October 2001).

**HIGH SCHOOL**

Ja'far, Mustafa. *Arabic Calligraphy: Naskh Script for Beginners*. London: McGraw-Hill, 2002.

**MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL**

An instruction manual for learning naskh calligraphic script; especially useful for art and design classes.

Khan, Gabriel Mandel. *Arabic Script: Styles, Variants, and Calligraphic Adaptations*. New York: Abbeville Press, 2006.

**MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL** (some of the visuals may be used for elementary school)

Kvernen, Elisabeth. *Calligraphy Qalam: An Introduction to Arabic, Ottoman and Persian Calligraphy*. Website. Baltimore: University of Baltimore MFA thesis project, 2009. <http://calligraphyqalam.com>.

**MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL**

Whitesides, Barbara. *Sugar Comes from Arabic: A Beginner's Guide to Arabic Letters and Words*. Northampton, Mass.: Interlink Books, 2009.

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL; MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL**

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### UNIT 2 SOURCES

Allan, James. "Early Safavid Metalwork." In *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1501–1576*, edited by Jon Thompson and Sheila R. Canby, pp. 203–40. New York: Skira with the Asia Society, 2003.

Blair, Sheila S. *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Derman, M. Uğur. *Letters in Gold: Ottoman Calligraphy from the Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul*. Exhibition catalogue. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998.

Ekhtiar, Maryam D., Priscilla P. Soucek, Sheila R. Canby, and Navina Najat Haidar, eds. *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011 (cat. nos. 67, 49, 164, 206).

George, Alain. *The Rise of Islamic Calligraphy*. London: Saqi, 2010.

McWilliams, Mary, and David J. Roxburgh. *Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, c. 1600–1900*. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2007.

Melikian-Chirvani, Assadullah Souren. *Le chant du monde: L'Art de l'Iran safavide, 1501–1736*. Exhibition catalogue. Paris: Somogy, 2007.

———. "Of Prayers and Poems on Safavid Bronzes." In *Safavid Art and Architecture*, edited by Sheila R. Canby, pp. 86–94. London: British Museum Press, 2002.

———. *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World, 8th–18th Centuries*. Exhibition catalogue. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982.

Roxburgh, David J. *Writing the Word of God: Calligraphy and the Qur'an*. Exhibition catalogue. Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2007.

Safadi, Yasin Hamid. *Islamic Calligraphy*. Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala, 1979.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.