

The divine script: The art of Islamic calligraphy

by [George Dardess](#)

This article appears in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue.

For Muslims, the Qur'an is revered as God's own art. Islam is essentially an aural religion; God's word came to the Prophet Muhammad as a voice, instructing him to *iqra'*, "Recite!" In fact, *iqra'* is the word from which we get *qur'an*, the "reciting." Reciting or chanting the Qur'an is the highest human art form for Muslims, and over the centuries lusciously melodious chanting styles have developed. But the beautiful writing of God's word followed close behind.

While *iqra'* is usually translated "Recite!" it can also be translated "Read!" Take the Qur'an's sura 96 (verses 1-8), in which God the Creator and Sustainer is linked with God as Teacher:

Read in the name of your cherisher and sustainer who
creates
Who creates humankind from a leech-like clot of blood
Read in the name of your cherisher and sustainer, the
Most Generous,
Who instructs with a pen
Instructs humankind in what it does not know
For indeed humankind goes beyond bounds
Thinking themselves their own masters,
But to God is their return . . .

The word for "pen" in line four is the same word used by calligraphers to refer to their own precisely sharpened tool for inscribing the sacred words. The visual act of reading leads to the visual response of writing. Calligraphers take their inspiration from God's divine example. God's use of the divine pen encourages calligraphers' use of their own pen, fashioned from a simple reed.

Calligraphy differs from ordinary written Arabic, which today is a bare-bones version of the commercial and legal script that began to develop around the time of the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. Islamic calligraphy dates from that same period, but it turned plain Arabic script into a sacred art enshrining the words first of the Qur'an, then of the hadith (stories about and sayings of the Prophet) and then of spiritual poetry. Islamic calligraphy quickly developed a variety of special styles and schools. Exacting conditions governed the production of pen, ink and paper, as well as the formation of individual letters and the planning of the entire composition. Yet this labor and the art resulting from it were seen never as ends in themselves but as encouragement to a more ardent faith.

While the ear in Muslim tradition is the first means of apprehending God's word, the eye follows in short order. Hastening this development historically was the need the Muslim community felt, after the Prophet's death, to correct divergent oral versions of the "Reciting" and to stabilize the text. Having the Qur'an in written form achieved those goals. The written text also made the Qur'an easier to study. But since the Qur'an was the word of God, its written expression needed to enhance worship as well, to be worthy of the God whose 99 names are called collectively the Beautiful Names. Already by the end of the seventh century (that is, within the lifetimes of those who might have met the Prophet as children), those beautiful, highly stylized calligraphic inscriptions from the Qur'an adorned the upper walls of the Dome of the Rock.

Calligraphy has thus played a key role in the encouragement and expression of faith almost from Islam's inception, and continues to do so to the present day. Ear and eye are supremely conducive to the one thing necessary, worshipful attention. No competition exists between Qur'anic chanters and calligraphers in Muslim tradition because both recognize their arts as contributing complementary responses to the divine communication. Indeed, Muslim calligraphers often describe their visual work in terms of sound, but a sound that reverberates within the spirit and imagination, not the ear.

Take the way that the famed contemporary American calligraphic master, Mohamed Zakariya, talks about the tradition of his chosen art form. Zakariya is the designer of the U.S. Postal Service's Eid stamp (seen below), commemorating Islam's holy month of Ramadan. Calligraphy for him, as for all its greatest practitioners, is not an end in itself, but an offering of beauty to God. A famous hadith states: "God is beautiful, and loves beauty." Calligraphy, Zakariya writes on his Web site, is "a kind

of worship, a religious event that prepares one for prayer.”

In evoking this beauty, Zakariya readily employs the language of song: what Qur’anic calligraphy does is “celebrate the sounds and meanings of the sacred text and preserve its accuracy.” Zakariya cites approvingly an old saying that Arabic calligraphy is “music for the eyes.” He quotes with great appreciation a phrase coined by the renowned Turkish scholar Mahmud Yazir, “breath-like flow” (from the book *The Beauty of the Pen*), to characterize examples of calligraphic excellence.

Whether the calligraphic artist draws on the Qur’an, on the hadith or on other spiritual texts, they are always inspired by God’s ever-creative love for humankind. This is not so far from the core inspiration of Christian artists today, who often speak of their vocation by alluding to the foundational statement of Genesis 1:27, that “God created humankind in his image.” For Christian artists, the implication is that—as poet Luci Shaw puts it in an essay titled “Beauty and the Creative Impulse”—“we were each, in the image of our Creator, created to create, to call others back to beauty.” Christian artists interpret their creating “in the image of our Creator” as creating in the image of Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

Muslim artists see their creativity’s relation to God a bit differently. According to the Qur’an, God gave humankind his ruh, or spirit, not in order to bring humankind into the divine life, but to enable humankind to serve him and care for his creation. Hence Muslim artists see their creativity as responding to God’s creative work without ever sharing directly in it.

Yet this restriction doesn’t prevent great intimacy between the Muslim artist and God. As British calligrapher Soraya Syed writes, “The Qur’an plays a direct role in my creativity. In practicing this sacred art, my aim and the hope is that the distance between Allah’s and one’s own creativity is minimal. There is a Hadith Qudsi that God says about his servants: ‘When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks.’”

Muslim calligraphers see themselves as creating beauty that can invite others into this intimacy with God. For many calligraphers today, awareness of working in the context of unprecedented sociopolitical situations moves them to stretch the media of their art beyond the traditional reed pen on specially prepared paper.

For example, Libya-born, England-based Ali Omar Ermes prefers the relative freedom of oil painting to the strict procedures governing the use of the reed pen and ink in the calligraphic tradition. His setting of calligraphic elements against abstract, textured backgrounds connects him broadly with Western painterly traditions. Ermes's aim in uniting specifically Islamic elements with elements outside this tradition is to suggest the positive universal effect that the arts of Islam can still exert through the calligraphic word. "My vision," says Ermes on his Web site, is to help viewers "recognize the power of Islamic thought to reignite our modern imagination in its individual and universal sense" so that our imagination can embrace all of Islam's characteristics, "enjoy its fruits and refer to it as a major resource of hope and optimism for a better future for all humanity."

Even farther from traditional media, yet just as grounded in Islamic faith, is the calligraphic work of the British artist Mohammed Ali, known as "AerosolArabic" because he creates his art with aerosol spray paint. Growing up in Birmingham, England, Ali caught from his peers an enthusiasm for graffiti art applied with aerosol paint cans. When he rediscovered Islam in his early 20s, he saw a connection between his beloved graffiti art and calligraphy. "As a graffiti artist," Ali explains in the American Muslim magazine Horizons, "I already had an obsession with the written word. So, it was fascinating to discover how Islamic art was focused primarily on the written word. But instead of man's word, it is the word of God, written in intricate, elegant and fluid styles. . . . I became drawn to Islam. This was my solace. It gave me meaning, and Islam was now a big part of my life."

Ali has turned his gift as an internationally celebrated street artist into a means to heal society's wounds wherever he might find them. On one trip to the U.S. he went to the Bronx in New York, where he spray-painted a calligraphic mural to honor the eight immigrant children from Mali killed in an apartment fire in March 2007. The completed wall bears the final words of a Qur'anic verse: "Blessings on those who, when calamity befalls them, say, 'To God we belong, and to Him we will return' (2:156). Ali painted the phrase "To God we belong" in calligraphic Arabic letters and the rest in English, along with the names of the dead children.

While Ali was creating this extraordinary work, passers-by naturally stopped to look, mesmerized. A video produced by Arts Council England, which had sponsored Ali's trip, captures their responses. Family members of the dead children stand and weep. Ali then invites them, along with other onlookers, to help him in completing the project. Members of both groups add strokes of aerosol paint to the overall design

under Ali's direction. In this way the finished work acquires a communal meaning, and an otherwise barren sweep of brick is transformed into a place of remembrance, of solidarity, and even of worship of the God to whom "we will all return."

Are we far here from the famed calligraphic art on the upper walls of the Dome of the Rock? Maybe not. Calligraphy on both walls is calling viewers to worship, to come together in praise of the God who across the ages continues unceasingly—as the Qur'an states—to create us afresh at each moment. No human grief is so great that the Merciful One cannot transform it when we turn, re-turn, to him. Islamic calligraphy is music for the eyes, yes, but even more it is music for the whole being.

George Dardess recently wrote Do We Worship the Same God? Comparing the Bible and the Qur'an (Saint Anthony Messenger Press). Peggy Rosenthal's books include The Poets' Jesus: Representations at the End of a Millennium (Oxford University Press).