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Viewpoint\ Critical Review

A Critique of Traditionalist Views on Islamic Calligraphy

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Abstract

Problem statement: The opinions and conclusions of traditionalists regarding Islamic art and architecture are often cited without adequate references to historical examples and documentation. Calligraphy, considered by traditionalists as the most noble and distinguished form of Islamic art, has similarly been accepted and applied by researchers without historical verification.

Research objective: This critique examines how traditionalist views, especially those of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, align with the historical development and surviving examples of Islamic calligraphy and illumination (Tezhib). It argues that in many cases, these views conflict with the documented history of the art.

Conclusion: It seems that some of these perspectives, conveyed in generalized and symbolic (abstract) language, aim more at legitimizing the spiritual and civilizational role of calligraphy as the turning point from oral tradition to written revolution in Islamic civilization, rather than reflecting historical accuracy.

Keywords: *Critique of Traditionalist views, Islamic calligraphy, Arabic calligraphy, Persian calligraphy Islamic art, illumination (Tezhib).*

Introduction and Problem Statement

The evaluation of traditionalist views on Islamic calligraphy in contrast to the historical trajectory and surviving examples of this art is of particular importance. A well-documented and rational assessment of the arts of the Islamic world strengthens their standing in the global art scene. In recent years, critical engagement has emerged with the long-dominant conclusions drawn by the French Traditionalist school, rooted in Eastern mysticism and philosophy. These conclusions, as found in the works of Frithjof Schuon and Titus Burckhardt, and their first-generation disciples, have shaped much of the scholarly discourse on Islamic art and architecture. Significant critiques have now been published in the form of scholarly books and articles, paving the way for more rigorous and detailed academic inquiry. One of the major critiques of the traditionalist view on calligraphy concerns their general and metaphysical outlook on the practice, which, in some cases, does not align with the historical development and evolution of script and calligraphy. The body of Traditionalist thought on Islamic calligraphy can be largely drawn from the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1995), particularly in his essay titled "The Spiritual Message of Islamic Calligraphy". The present critique relies heavily on that text.

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Fundamental elements of calligraphy, such as the form of letters, diacritical marks, writing instruments, and the role of illumination (in Persian tazhib), are analyzed and compared with historical sources and extant examples of the art.

The Status of Calligraphy in Islamic Civilization

The Traditionalists regard calligraphy as the noblest and most essential of Islamic arts, often referring to it as a sacred art. According to ethnographic studies, Arab culture is generally considered oral in nature, rooted in pre-Islamic traditions that valued poetry as the primary vehicle for preserving cultural memory (Al-Duri, 2015, 70). In this context, the first Islamic art is best understood as the recitation of the Qur'an, which stems from the very first divine revelation—Surah al-'Alaq, verses 1–4. The rhythm and vocal intonation of Qur'anic verses manifest temporally through sound (Louis Massignon, 2004, 20). Calligraphy, which visually embodies those sounds, occupies a level subsequent to recitation.

During the time of the Prophet Muhammad, and for at least two to three decades after his passing, the preservation of the Qur'an relied primarily on oral transmission and memorization. Writing was not yet the dominant method. Even with the early efforts by the caliphs to compile a unified version of the Qur'an, recitation[1] maintained precedence over writing for nearly two centuries. Hence, in the early Islamic centuries, writing did not yet enjoy an elevated status, and questions about the accuracy and legitimacy of written transmission were still debated.

Some early Muslim Philosophers —such as Muhammad ibn Sirin—considered writing, requesting, or buying and selling written copies of the Qur'an to be reprehensible acts (Hosseini, 2023, 142). Referencing a treatise by Al-Jahiz (1915, 41) on "The Condemnation of the Morals of Scribes", the author recounts an argument that if writing were a virtuous act, the Prophet himself would have been the most deserving of it. Yet God withheld it from him and thereby placed writing within the realm of worldly, rather than spiritual, matters[2].

According to the author, calligraphy is like a garment worn over the body of words. The choice of Kufic, Muhaqqaq, and Thuluth scripts for writing the Quran demonstrates the calligraphers' understanding of the container and contents of the revealed word. This is despite the fact that non-Quranic texts have been written with these scripts, and it cannot be expected that this type of writing will be a type of sacred calligraphy (see Amani, 2023). Just as not everyone who simply wears a Sufi robe is a mystic or a Sufi. Furthermore, traditionalists have not specified the type of script or sacred scripts. If calligraphy is meant to be Quranic scripts, these scripts have also undergone changes and evolution in accordance with the conditions of the time, and sometimes one script has become obsolete and another script has taken its place. Therefore, script and calligraphy in their own right cannot be a factor in creating sacred or spiritual art. Also, according to the author, Iranian scripts such as "Taliq", "Nastaliq", and "Shaskheta Nastaliq" have also changed their nature to some extent in social and political conditions and contexts.

This section problematizes the traditionalist tendency to sanctify calligraphy retroactively. It shows that, historically, the oral tradition dominated early Islamic culture, and writing emerged slowly, often amid legal and theological hesitation. This contrasts with the metaphysical elevation of script found in thinkers like Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1995, 29).

In traditionalist thought—particularly in the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr—much emphasis is placed on the metaphysical symbolism of letters. According to Nasr, after the necessity of script and calligraphy itself, the dot (nuqta) holds a special position. In his view, the dot represents the presence of God, and the letter "alif" (ا) is the first created letter in the Qur'an, marking the divine origin of the Arabic script.

Nasr (ibid., 27) writes: "The hidden mystery of the first dot beneath the letter… alif is the manifestation of God's presence and is the root of all subsequent letters.". Elsewhere, he (ibid., 32) adds: "The dot is the creator of alif, and alif the origin of all other letters… alif itself symbolizes the metaphysical unity of God".

This view is echoed in Sufi literature—for instance, in "Tohfat al – mohebbin" by Ya'qub ibn Hasan Seraj Shirazi (1997, 16): "All letters emerged from the dot… First the dot became alif, then alif gave rise to the rest".

However, these accounts are largely allegorical and literary in nature. They lack historical specificity and do not clearly define what kind of dot is being referenced.

If we turn to historical sources—such as Ibn al-Nadim (1987, 12)'s "al-Fihrist"—we find that before the emergence of Kufic script, other styles like Hijazi were used in early Qur'anic writing. The evolution of Kufic itself was gradual and initially lacked diacritical marks (dots). Many of the earliest Qur'ans were written without Nuqat (dots) or I'jam (diacritical distinctions between similar letters). This caused major challenges for uniform recitation and interpretation of the sacred text.

Hence, contrary to the traditionalist view that elevates the dot as the primordial foundation of Islamic art, historical evidence suggests that dots were added later, out of practical necessity—to aid non-Arabic speakers in correctly reading the Qur'an.

By the second half of the first century AH, efforts to differentiate similar letters using dots began to appear (Ibn Sarraj, 2009, 16). Later, in the 4th and 5th centuries AH, movements arose to remove dots and diacritics again to prevent perceived innovations (bid'at), particularly in Qur'anic copies (Ramyar, 2019, 543).

Even in non-Quranic texts, punctuation (dots) has been met with objection among non-Arabs; for we are told that Abd Allah ibn Tahir (d. A.H. 230/A.D. 844/45), governor of Khurāsān, when presented with a piece of elaborate penmanship exclaimed, "How beautiful this would be if there were not so much coriander seed (dots) scattered over it (Abbout,1939,41).

Furthermore, while Nasr considers the dot to lie beneath the "B" (ب) letter, early Islamic scholars like Yahya ibn Abi Kathir, as cited in al-Muhkam fi Naqt al-Masaḥif, argued that the first mark introduced was the dot above certain letters like "y"(ی) and "T"[3] (ت) (Hosseini, 2023, 88).

This suggests that the process of adding diacritics to Qur'anic script was a gradual, contested, and technical evolution—not the fulfillment of a mystical origin story. This section dismantles the symbolic claims of Traditionalists by anchoring the dot, letter forms, and script development in historical evidence (ibid., 38). Rather than emerging as a sacred metaphysical essence, the dot developed pragmatically to solve linguistic and reading challenges in a rapidly expanding, multilingual Islamic empire.

Tools of Calligraphy and the Influence of the Reed Pen and Brush

A central concept in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1995, 28)'s view of Islamic calligraphy is the reed pen (qalam-e ney). He writes: "The reed pen, carved from a natural plant, is not only a tool for inscribing beautiful forms and sacred geometry but also evokes the mystical music of lovers of God... This is the very ney (reed flute) that Rumi mentions in the opening verses of the Masnavi.".

Nasr draws a symbolic link between the reed used in calligraphy and the reed flute as a Sufi metaphor for divine longing. However, while poetic, this symbolic correspondence does not reflect the full historical reality of writing instruments in Islamic art.

Historically, writing tools in the Islamic world were not limited to the reed pen. As the script evolved, calligraphers began using a variety of implements, including brushes, especially for decorative purposes. The brush offered greater flexibility and fluidity, enabling calligraphers to write on curved surfaces like ceramic, pottery, and glazed tiles.

This evolution played a critical role in the emergence of decorative Kufic script, which was particularly prominent in Nishapur ceramics from the 3rd and 4th centuries AH (9th–10th centuries CE) (Fig. 1).

In some of these ceramic works, we observe how the free movement of the brush in the hand of the calligrapher transformed script into a purely ornamental element—less of a legible text and more of a visual motif. The script in these cases often moved away from angular Kufic lines and into curved, dynamic forms, signaling a shift toward aesthetic experimentation.

These examples reveal that the tools themselves—

Fig. 1. Brush calligraphy on Nishapur ceramics from the 3rd and 4th centuries AH. Source: www.ceramicsnow.org.

whether reed, brush, or even stylus—significantly shaped the form, rhythm, and purpose of script. The transformation from angular, rigid Kufic to rounded, flowing scripts was not merely artistic but deeply tied to material, cultural, and technological factors.

Traditionalists often idealize the reed pen as a sacred implement, imbued with spiritual resonance. Yet history shows that the choice of tool evolved with contextual needs and media types. Rather than being purely spiritual, these tools reflect material innovation in response to artistic, architectural, and social conditions.

The next section includes: The role of illumination and why it appeared later in Qur'anic manuscripts, Concerns about innovation and "corruption" of the divine text through visual decoration, Links to pre-Islamic Persian and East Asian decorative traditions.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Nasr, 1995, 31) believes that the art of illumination —the decorative embellishment that often accompanies Qur'anic calligraphy—is closely tied to the spiritual essence of the text. He writes that illumination becomes more prominent the farther Islamic tradition moves from its divine origin: "The further Islamic tradition distanced itself from its divine source, the more apparent the presence of illumination became. Yet it did not manifest itself visibly at the earliest stages of revelation".

This reflects a traditionalist theory of decline: as the initial purity of the revelation faded, visual beauty emerged to compensate for the loss of direct spiritual presence.

However, many early Muslims viewed any form of embellishment as a potential distortion of the sacred

word. Just as early jurists resisted diacritical marks on Qur'anic script, they were equally wary of visual decoration that might alter or distract from the text. Some scholars believed that using new materials—such as paper instead of parchment—or adopting ornamentation could amount to innovation (bid'at) and even falsification of divine revelation (Sahragard, 2020, 13).

The gradual and cautious inclusion of decorative elements like gold leaf, geometric patterns, and vegetal motifs occurred over centuries. At first, illumination appeared only as tiny signs or symbols at the end of verses or surahs. Over time, it gained broader acceptance and flourished in Persian contexts.

The practice of illuminating sacred texts with gold and designs was not originally Islamic. It drew on pre-Islamic Iranian and East Asian traditions, such as the Manichaean manuscripts discovered in Turfan. According to Ibn al-Muqaffa', even Khosrow Anushirwan, the Sasanian emperor, ordered that the sayings and maxims of Bozorgmehr be written in liquid gold (Mohammadi, 1995, 327).

This heritage influenced later Muslim communities, who began to associate visual grandeur with spiritual importance. The shift from minimal geometric embellishment in early Qur'ans to elaborate floral and figural designs reflects not just aesthetic growth but also a cultural synthesis with Iran's deep history of manuscript decoration.

Even so, many early Qur'ans from the first Islamic centuries contain only very simple flourishes—basic ink patterns, flower-like dots, and spacing devices—often done with the same writing tool. These elements can be seen as a form of primitive illumination, showing that ornamentation and calligraphy began to interact much earlier than some traditionalists acknowledge.

In the early centuries, the preservation of the formal integrity of the Qur'an restricted the dominance of illumination in its common form. Writing with gold or highlighting surah headings was sometimes considered discouraged (makruh).

As Ebay ibn Ka'b is quoted: "If you decorate your Qur'ans and adorn your mosques, know that corruption is upon you." (Hosseini, 2023, 90).

This section shows a clear dissonance between Traditionalist spiritual idealism and the historical reality of Qur'anic manuscript production. Where Nasr sees illumination as a symbolic flowering of sacred form, the evidence reveals a deliberate, cautious, and politically charged evolution, deeply influenced by pre-Islamic artistic models.

Conclusion

In the Islamic civilization, the need for writing to preserve the revealed word of God gained strength after the Prophet's death and through the initiatives of the caliphs. For several centuries, the concept of calligraphy as an aesthetic or "beautiful writing" practice was largely absent. The priority was instead the production of a unified and accurate Qur'anic text, with standardized orthography.

As Islam spread—especially among non-Arabic-speaking communities—the necessity to modify and clarify homographic letters (letters with identical forms) led to the emergence of dots and diacritics, not as inherent features of the script, but as tools to enable correct and consistent reading of the Qur'an.

Over time, due to changing political, social, economic, and environmental conditions, the function and appearance of script evolved. The beauty of form began to take precedence over the strict accuracy of writing. At first, decorative elements appeared only as geometric markers alongside Qur'anic text. But gradually, Persian artists and scribes advanced the use of illumination and gilding until the ornamentation surpassed even the calligraphy in significance. Nevertheless, the author argues that the traditionalist views—particularly the combination of calligraphy and illumination as inherently sacred arts—are filled with subtlety, mysticism, and spiritual imagination. These views contribute meaningfully to the spiritual appreciation of Islamic visual culture. Yet, many of these interpretations do not align with the historical trajectory of script and manuscript development. They often rely on generalizations and symbolic abstraction that serve more to elevate the spiritual status of calligraphy than to document its actual transformation across time. Thus, it appears that much of the traditionalist discourse on

Islamic calligraphy—while elegant and metaphysically rich—is constructed to affirm the idea of calligraphy as the civilizational bridge between oral tradition and the writing revolution of Islamic society, positioning it as the definitive Islamic art form in contrast to the figurative arts. This is not to deny the role of philosophical and spiritual foundations in Islamic arts, especially in calligraphy. But it is essential to critically evaluate such claims within the historical framework in which these arts evolved.

Declaration of No Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

Endnotes

1. In this text, the term "writing" refers to a type of script that has not yet been surpassed by beauty and elegance, although distinguishing between script and beauty in the historical development and evolution of calligraphy and the divine text does not seem to be an easy task.

2. والدليلُ على أنَّ الكتابةَ ليستْ فضيلةٌ هو عدمُ معرفةِ رسولِ اللهِ بها، ولذا منعَ اللهُ رسولهُ عنها وجعلَ الحظَّ فيها دُنْيَةٌ [The evidence that writing is not a virtue is the Prophet's lack of knowledge of it; therefore, God forbade His Messenger from it and made the portion in it insignificant].

3. كان القرآنُ مُجردًا فى المصاحفِ فَأَوَّلَ ما أُحدثُ فيهِ النَّقطَ عَلَى الياءِ والتَّاءِ [The Qur'an was originally written without dots in the manuscripts, and the first innovation introduced was the addition of dots on the letters yā' (ی) and tā' (ت)].

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