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THE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE*

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Calligraphy (hüsni hat) is a characteristic Islamic art form, practised in the Arabic writing method developed from the Nabatean script. The fact that such a strong aesthetic language developed from a rather simple way of recording language surely has to be regarded as one of the miracles of Islam. Because of the proliferation of the Islamic faith, a great many different peoples practised this art of calligraphy.

The dynastic rulers of the Islamic world (Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, Seljuk, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safevid, Akkoyunlu, ...), with their capitals as cultural centres in such diverse locations as Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba, Cairo, Konya, Samarkand, Herat, and Tabriz, were always attracted by the art of calligraphy and accordingly patronised its practitioners. During the Ottoman period, calligraphy reached the zenith of its aesthetic power over an extensive period, and as a result, calligraphy in the Ottoman dominions, which became known as “Turkish Calligraphy,” established its own distinct character.

Figure 1: The Imperial Gate of the Topkapı Palace (Bab-i Hümayûn): the calligraphic panel displays an inscription in celi sülüs executed by Ali Sofî, active in the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, date 1478. The tuğra underneath belongs to Mahmûd II and was executed by Mustafa Râkim.

* All figures were taken from Prof. Dr. Muhittin Serin’s Hat Sanati ve Meshur Hattatlar (Calligraphy and Eminent Calligraphers), Istanbul 2004, by his permission.

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In the city of Baghdad, first the centre of Abbasid and later Ilkhanid power, the Arabs gradually perfected calligraphy to reach its ultimate form in the style of Yâkûtü'l-Musta'simî (died e. 1298). The calligrapher died at a time when the Ottoman state was only in its infancy, but posthumously his pupils promulgated his style into the wider Islamic world. The six basic styles (or pens) of calligraphy (âklâm-i sitte), whose rules were regularised by Yâkût replaced the Kufic script that had previously dominated calligraphic practice. The six scripts can be enumerated as sülüs, nesih, muhakkak, reyhânî, tevkî' and rika'. In spite of the fact that the Ottomans had been expanding their power-base from the fourteenth century onwards, because of their defeat at Timur’s hands at the outset of the century (1400), the only early examples of calligraphic art to have survived are the inscriptions on monumental buildings. In a number of calligraphic examples, dating from the period of the establishment of the Ottoman state after Celebi Mehmed, one can see that the Yâkût style also was being practised in the Ottoman dominions of Anatolia and Rumelia. In addition to such capital cities as Bursa and Edirne, one can also point to the city of Amasya during the second half of the fifteenth century to argue that provincial centres in Ottoman Anatolia had also become loci of calligraphic learning and education. The conquest of Istanbul at that time ensured that this exceptional city would shortly develop into the cultural and artistic centre of the world of Islam, a position of excellence that has secured up to this day in the field of calligraphy.

![Figure 2: A dual zahriyye illumination executed in a mushaf written by Şeyh Hamdullah. The illumination was rendered by a team under the direction of Hasan bin Abdullah (active in the reign of Bâyezîd II) (Library of the University of Istanbul).](image)

There is no information available pertaining to the relationship Ottoman rulers might have had with the field of calligraphy during the first 150 years after establishment of the Ottoman state. In contrast, the importance Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror gave to the fine arts in general and the art of writing in particular is attested. Moreover, there survive to this day a number of the books written by calligraphic genius Sheikh Hamdullah (1429-1520), donated to the sultan’s library by his son Prince Bayezid, at the time governor of Amasya. Further inscriptions in jelî sülüs made by two calligraphic masters, Yahya Söfî and his Ali Söfî, active in Mehmed’s day, were added on a number of monuments after the conquest of Istanbul. The signatures of calligraphers identify these works. The first two names asserting the Ottoman dynasty’s association with the field of calligraphy are those of Sultan Bayezid II and his Prince Korkut. Both had been taught by Sheikh Hamdullah in Amasya.
After Prince Bayezid’s accession to the throne in 1481, Sheikh Hamdullah moved Istanbul, where he set out to create the most perfect examples of calligraphy in the style of Yâkût. Sheikh Hamdullah himself had learned Yâkût’s style from his master Hayreddin Mar’asi. Upon the personal instigation of Sultan Bayezid, Sheikh Hamdullah was able to create a new original style, elaborating upon examples Yâkût work available in the Imperial Palace (Topkapi)’s treasury. Sheikh Hamdullah succeeded in this important task around the year 1485, after he had undergone a four-month period of mystical seclusion. This accomplishment promoted him to the position of spiritual founder (pîr) of Turkish calligraphy. As matter of fact, the articulation of the aklâm-i sitte that had until then be predominant was subject to an Abbasid understanding of the style. Even though is rumoured that Yâkût himself had been a Turk from Amasya, the culture atmosphere of Baghdad pervaded his work, and he should thus be regarded representative of the culture of the Arab world. However, after Sheikh Hamdullah’s astounding accomplishment, the aklâm-i sitte as practised in the Sheikh’s style prevailed in the Ottoman dominions and drove Yâkût’s style into oblivion.

Figure 3: A *murakka* displaying the aklâm-i sitte executed by Şeyh Hamdullah. The individual *kitâb* contain samples of the following scripts (top to bottom): sülüs, nesih, muhakkak, reyhanî, tevkî and rık’a (Library of the Topkapi Palace Museum).
The letters or letter-groupings constituting the style of Sheikh Hamdullah can be shown to stem partially from Yakût’s writings. Hamdullah’s genius has to be looked for in his choice of beautiful elements and their repetition in his numerous calligraphic samples.

The calligrapher Ahmed Karahisarî (1469?-1556), active shortly after Sheikh Hamdullah was engaged in reviving and continuing Yâkût style in the Ottoman dominions. But resistance to the style of Hamdullah was only able to continue for the duration of one calligraphic generation and, following Karahisari’s death, Hamdullah’s way again became dominant. Among the various scripts of the aklâm-i sitte, perfected by Sheikh Hamdullah and his pupils, nesih became assigned to the writing of the Holy Book, whereas the scripts of sülüs and nesih became the pre-eminent vehicles for calligraphic practice. Muhakkak and reyhânî were gradually phased out by the end of the seventeenth century. The place of tevki’, on the other hand, was taken over by the script types of divânî and jelî divânî which will be elaborated on later. The script of rika’ then gradually became the script reserved for the writing of calligraphers’ certificates (icâzetnâme) and signatures and thus became known as icâzet hatti.

Figure 4: A large size mushaf written by Ahmed Karahisarî, displaying the aklâm-i sitte. On each page, four rectangular panels (koltuk) show examples of high-quality illumination as executed in the reign Sultan Süleyman I, (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

The road followed by Sheikh Hamdullah was continued by his son-in-law Sükrullah Halife (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries), his son Mustafa Dede (1495-1538) and his grandchildren continued the road followed by Sheikh Hamdullah. Through their
pupils, the Hamdullah style was transferred to younger generations. Through Sükrullah Halife’s son Pir Mehmed (died 1580) and via Hâlid Erzurûmî (died 1631), the style was taken over by Dervish Ali (died 1673). The calligrapher Kayiszâde Hâfiz Osman (1642-1698), who had first been a pupil of Dervis Ali and subsequently of Suyolcûzâde Mustafa Eyyûbî (died 1686), continued the aklâm-i sitte in the sty of Sheikh Hamdullah and was able to develop a new aesthetic appreciation of the style. As a result, these six scripts, some of which had fallen into disuse, went through a second phase of purification and became known as the “style of Hâfiz Osman” (see Figure 2). This new sty slowly replaced the style of Sheikh Hamdullah, and younger generations of calligraphers preferred practising the newer style. However, the script form of jeîl sülüs, designed to be read from afar, did not undergo progressive development during this period. Mustafa Râkim (1758-1826), a genius in the art of calligraphy, was able to improve the jeîl sülüs script towards the end of the eighteenth century (see Figure 3). After having learned the sülüs script from his elder brother Ism Zühdî (died 1806), Mustafa Râkim scrutinised Hâfiz Osman’s sûlûs in great detail and was then able to transpose his insights to the jeîl form of the sülüs style. In the hands of Mustafa Râkim pupils Hasim (died 1845) and Recâî (1804-1874), and particularly Sami Efendi (1838-1912), the calligraphic form of jeîl sülüs reached its pinnacle. Calligraphers such as Carsanbali Arif Bey (died 1892), Abdülfettah (1815?-1896), Nazîf Bey (1841-1913), Tugrakes Hakki Bey (1873-1946), Ömer Vasfi (1880-1928), Emin Yazici (1883-1945), Hamid Aytac (1891-1982), Halim Özyazici (1898-1964), (see Figure 4) and Mâcid Ayral (1891-1961) were all practitioners of the said sty and they design calligraphic compositions in jeîl sülüs in hitherto unseen arrangements applied in panels (levhas) and framed inscriptions. The last six names listed were practitioners of the art of calligraphy in the Republican period and as such stand out as exemplary representatives of the art of calligraphy. Moreover, Mâcid Ayral was even called to Baghdad, where he received the honorific hoca and taught Iraqi calligraphers the intricacies of Turkish calligraphy (1955-1959).

Figure 5: A decorative lacquer writing board (yazi altlığı), executed by the illuminator Ali Üsküdarî for Sultan Mustafa III, dated 1757 (Library of the Topkapi Palace Museum).
Mahmud Celâleddin (died 1829), whose work in the jelî sülüs form is of a rather hard and static nature, was no rival for his famous colleague Mustafa Râkim, whose tense style was full of movement. In contrast, Mahmud Celâleddin’s wife and pupil Esmâ İbret (born 1780) produced elegant writings in sülüs and nesih in the way of Hâfiz Osman and as such should be seen as the most successful female calligrapher.

Figure 6: A picture of a layered rose by Abdullah Buharî, dated 1733 (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

In the nineteenth century, the two incomparable calligraphers Kazasker Mustafa Izzet Efendi (1801-1876) (see Figure 6) and Mehmed Sevki Efendi (1829-1887) were the most important representatives of two different schools of calligraphic practice. Both had taken their lead from the work of Hâfiz Osman and produced samples in sülüs, nesih and rika’ (icâzet) Mustafa Izzet Efendi’s style was continued by pupils such as Sefik Bey (1819-1880), who was also very successful in jelî sülüs; Muhsinzâde Abdullah Bey (1832-1899), Abdullah Zuhdi Efendi (died 1879), and Kayiszâde Hâfiz Osman Efendi (died 1894). Sefik Bey was succeeded by Hasan Riza (1849-1920) and Ali Efendi (died 1902), who both stand out as outstanding practitioners of their master’s style.

Among Sevki Efendi’s pupils, Bakkal Arif (1830-1909) and Fehmi Efendi (1861-1916) stand out as extraordinary calligraphers. Arif Efendi’s pupil Aziz Efendi (1871-1934) even taught this style in Cairo at the school named Medresetü Tahsîni’l-Hattâtîn during the period 1923-1933, whereas Sami Efendi’s pupil, the Reîsü’l-Hattatîn Kemal Akdik (1861-1941), also became well-known in Cairo as a result of the exemplary works he wrote while he was there.
Let us now turn our attention to the scripts used in official writings by the Ottomans. Because of the rather localised practice of the scripts of tevkî and its smaller form rikā in Iran, a script form evolved, called ta’līk because of its suspended letters. This script form (called kadîm (ancient) ta’lîk) was used by the local scribes (münsis) in official correspondence. Since the foundation of the Ottoman state, tevkî and rikā had been in use as the official scripts of state and administration. However, after Mehmed II’s war with the Akkoyunlu (1473), Akkoyunlu scribes were brought to Istanbul where they introduced the ta’lîk script. This script underwent a number of important changes and modifications in a short period and gave rise to the official Ottoman script of divâni. From the sixteenth century, onwards the divâni script, embellished with diacritical signs, and in its further developed form, was assigned for use in high-level official correspondence and referred to as jelî divâni. These two scripts were reserved for official use only, non-official use being strictly prohibited. The use of the scripts of divâni and jelî divâni was taught only in the Dîvân-i Hümâyûn (Imperial Council). During the nineteenth century, the practice of these two scripts reached its peak, a state of affairs that continued into the twentieth century. These scripts, which are rather difficult to read and write, are recognizable by the upward movement towards the endings of lines. These comparatively complicated scripts had been chosen purposefully for official matters to avoid easy reading and falsification, ensuring the safety of official correspondence.

Figure 7: A kit’a displaying a text written in nesih by Mehmed Şevki Efendi, dated 1872 (Private collection).

The calligraphic form called the tugra, containing the names of the ruling sultan and his father together with the prayer “el-muzaffer dâimâ”, was placed at the to of every official written order (fermân, berât, menshûr, …). The earliest example of a tugra dates back to the reign of Orhan Gazi (1324). Throughout
the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the most striking examples of illuminated tugras were produced. However, in time, the purity of the form of a tugra was lost and, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the search for new relational proportions in the lay out of tugras began. Eventually, the previously mentioned Mustafa Râkim started reforming the calligraphic shape of the tugra. The tugra of Sultan Selim III was the first to undergo a serious revision, which reached its definitive form in the tugra of Mahmud II. The tugra found its definitive shape in the era of Abdulhamid II, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the hands of Sami Efendi, who employed a combination of mathematical and aesthetic considerations.

Figure 8: An exercise sheet of Yesârî Mehmed Es’ad Efendi displaying different combinations of letter forms in ta’lîk, dated 1784 (Medina, Saudi Arabia, Library of Ârif Hikmet Bey).

Next to the aklâm-i sitte, the Ottomans also favored the calligraphic script of ta’lîk. As opposed to the other scripts, in the ta’lîk form no room is given to the vowel and reading signs (hareke), and the script is written in a pure and unadulterated form, which makes it very compatible with the writing of Turkish.

The ta’lîk form of writing originated in Iran, and was applied to a very broad field. Aside from calligraphic panels, the script was also used for the writing of divâns (collections of poems) and canonical and juridical judgments. The above-mentioned kadîm ta’lîk script underwent a number of changes as a result of intense application and gave way to a new form by the name of neshta’lîk, which replaced the old ta’lîk script completely. In time, the name changed to neshta’tâlîk. This name was
not adopted by the Ottomans who referred to it as ta’lîk. In same way, in the application of the script, changes in style were implemented as well.

Figure 9: A levha with a calligraphic composition painted in gold (zer-endûd), written by Sâmi Efendi in celî sülüs, dated 1903 (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

Figure 10: A serlevha (the two illuminated opening pages) of a mushaf written by Hâфиз Osman in the neshîh script. The marginal decoration was executed by the illuminator Kanbur Hasan Efendi, dated 1692 (Library of the University of Istanbul).
From the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, the ta’lîk script became widespread. Its finer form (hurde, hâfî) in particular became widely used in the writing of books and also became popular in the Ottoman dominions. In Iran the script had been propagated by the calligrapher Mîr Imâdü’l Hasenî (1554-1615), and his exceptional style reached Istanbul through his pupil Dervish Abdi (d. 1647). The artists of the city immediately acknowledged the Iranian visitor’s calligraphic excellence. Ottoman calligraphers, practicing ta’lîk in the eighteenth century, such as Durmuszâde Ahmed (died 1717), Kâtibzâde Mehmed Refi’ (died 1768), and Sheikhüslâm Veliüddin Efendi (died 1768), were consequently always compared to the earlier Iranian master and received epithets such as Imâd-I Rûm (the Imâd Anatolia) or Imâd-i Sânî (the second Imad). Dedezâde Mehmed Efendi (died 1759)’s pupil Mehmed Es’ad Efendi (died 1798), whose right side had been afflicted with paralysis and who subsequently wrote with his left hand and thus became known as Yesârî, had scrutinized the aesthetic of Imâd’s writings and was able to improve upon the master’s style and introduce an Ottoman version of ta’lîk in about the year 1780. Yesârîzâde Mustafa Izzet Efendi (1770-1849) was able to compensate for his father’s deficiencies and went on to produce numerous incomparable samples in jelî ta’lîk. Sami Efendi continued along the same path, (see Figure 8) and his pupils Nazif Bey, Hülüsî Yazgan (1869-1940), Ömer Vasfî and Necmeddin Okyay (1883-1976) were able to introduce the beauties of Ottoman ta’lîk into the Republican period.

Figure 11. A large, perfectly written hilye written by Kadıasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi. The marginal decoration was done in a Westernised fashion, (private collection).
The script called siyâkat, used to keep title deeds as well as financial and other records, does not possess any kind of artistic or aesthetic merit. Therefore, we will only mention its name without going into details. As handwriting has the tendency to differ from person to person, in the nineteenth century it was resolved to regularize this practice and the name rık'a was given to this new form of regularized handwriting. The application of this script to official and speedy writing was called Bâb-i Âlî rık'asi (the rık 'a of the Sublime Porte). The calligrapher İzzet Efendi (1841-1903) practiced rık 'a according to a very strict of rules, giving rise to a very regularized form that was given his name as İzzet Efendi rık'asi. The Arab world appropriated this script as an artistic medium to the practice of calligraphy.

Figure 12: A gilded marble panel, carved in low relief, commemorating the restoration of the Kubbealtı building in the Topkapı Palace. It was written in celi ta'llık by Yesarızâde Mustafa İzzet in 1820 (Topkapı Palace Museum).

The Ottomans practiced calligraphy over a period of nearly five hundred years attaining the highest level of expertise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These calligraphic productions, which never failed to display the particular characteristics of the Ottoman Turks, increased dramatically as time progressed. This
context, the calligraphic form of jelî, which can be applied to any of the calligraphic scripts mentioned as its large-scale and monumental form, we through a similar evolution. This calligraphic form of jelî was used for decorative panels of inscriptions applied to religious buildings as well as to civil architectural constructions. Manuscripts surviving from the Ottoman period can take the form of books, such as mushafs or divans, but can also come in the shape of so-called murakkaas. A murakkaa is a collection of kit'as (small origin works) that are hinged together on their edges, executed in one or two scripts, on one side on with illuminated margins, on the recto side only and approximately the same size as a book. Large-scale panels, executed in jelî sülüs and jelî ta'lik, were used for the interior decoration of a great many public and private building. The above-mentioned calligrapher Hâfiz Osman devised a calligraphic composition called hilye towards the end of the seventeenth century. A hilye contains the description of the Prophet’s physical and moral characteristics, and from the nineteenth century onwards, this form began to be executed on a large scale.

Figure 13: A berât (patent) written by Halim (Özyazi) Efendi, a graduate of the Madrasat al-Hattatîn. The first line underneath Sultan Reşad’s tughra was written in celî divanî, whereas the subsequent five lines were executed in divanî, dated 1916, (Collection of Muhsin Demironat).

The names of those calligraphers listed do not constitute the totality of the practitioners of this art in the Ottoman sphere of influence. It would be impossible to enumerate the hundreds of names of individuals who attained high levels of expertise.
in the field of calligraphy. These individuals were true artists and should not be confused with mere scribes, who were known in Ottoman times as nāsihs or nessâhs.

The tools and materials used by calligraphers constitute primary examples of the applied arts in the Ottoman dominions. Calligraphers piled their art on hand crafted paper that, after being dyed in various colors, was sealed and polished according to a special method called âhâr. They used an ink called mürekkebi, produced from soot and gum Arabic pounded in a mortar, but other inks were available as well such as altın mürekkebi, a pure gold ink produced from crushed gold leaf. Red inks called l and yellow inks called zirnik (arsenic) were used as well. Other instruments used by calligraphers included dîvîts (if cylinder shaped called kubur), boxes to keep the reed pen and inkwell. The kalemtras (penknife) and the makta’ (a device to hold the pen while carving and clipping the nib), were used to prepare the reed pens. The production of these tools was undertaken by guild of artisans.

Calligraphy was taught in Ottoman educational institutions, such as mektep, madrasa, or the Endert Hümayûn and Dîvân-i Hümayûn in the Imperial Palace or official institutions such as the Galata Sarayi, which had been set up as pious foundations (vakîf). However, the best way to learn the art of writing was to attend individual tutorials at a calligraphic master’s house. These lessons were given without any form of material remuneration but rather as a blessing (teberrüken). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ottoman government decided institute an academy for the instruction of calligraphy. The then minister of Pious Foundations (Evkaf Nâzirî) and the Seyhulislam Hayri Efendi (1867-1922) founded this undertaking. The historical building of the Yusuf Aga Sibyan Mektebi (today the building houses the Ministry of Education’s press office) in the Cagaloglu district of Istanbul was converted into the Medresetü’l-Hattatîn 1914. Outstanding calligraphers of the day, such as Hasan Rizâ, Kâmîl, (Akdik), Nûri (Korman) (1868-1951), Hulûşî (Yazgan), Tugrakes Ismail

Figure 14: Ivory devices employed in the process of cutting pens (makta) and penknives (kalemtras); which should be regarded as elegant examples of Ottoman material culture (Library of the Topkapi Palace Museum).
Hakki (Altunbezer), and Mustafa Ferîd (1857-1930?) taught at this madrasa. In addition to calligraphy, various arts related to book and paper production, such as illumination, binding, ebrû (marbling), miniature painting and āhâr (sizing and polishing) were taught as well. A great number of students, graduates of this crucible of artistic culture continued practicing their trade after the abolition of madrasas (1925) in a school called Hattat Mektebi, which discontinued its activities after the introduction of the new Turkish alphabet in December 1928.

Calligraphic instruction was based upon the observance of a strict discipline according to a master-apprentice system. It was a process that continued from generation to generation. Pupils were able to complete their instruction only after years of practice and received a written permit (içâzet) to practice the art of calligraphy at the end of the process. The art and practice of calligraphy was a closed world, able to withstand any Westernizing influence that had taken the other Ottoman arts under its sway. Therefore, Ottoman calligraphers were able to enter the twentieth century on a high level of expertise unhampered by Western styles.