Introduction to Arabic Calligraphy (الخط العربي)

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A component of a population's culture is the way in which its constituents express themselves. This expression can be orally, through written word, art, or music, or even in actions or gestures. It can be a combination of these artifacts, such as the case of Arabic or (used interchangeably) Islamic calligraphy. Many definitions of Arabic calligraphy exist; in my opinion, it is best stated as "the art of beautiful or elegant handwriting as exhibited by the correct formation of characters, the ordering of the various parts, and harmony of proportions". **[1]** It has also been compared to music, as it "has its own rules of composition, rhythm, harmony, and counterpoint -- elements that bring joy to the eye of the experienced beholder and to the lover of beauty and form". **[2]** Calligraphy is an important art form in the Middle East, and is often interleaved with religious significance. Although this art form dates back centuries and calligraphers often study techniques of the "masters", new styles constantly evolve, with some touting a modern influence.

Before we begin with the history of Arabic calligraphy, it first helps to have an understanding of Arabic. The next section briefly introduces the alphabet and its constructs.

The Arabic Alphabet

Arabic is an ancient language belonging to the Semitic family of languages, which includes Hebrew and Aramaic. Semitic languages are often read from right to left across a page, and many letters in their alphabets are connected to the preceding and/or anteceding letter.

In the case of Arabic, there are 28 letters. Of the 28, there are 3 long vowels (alef, waw, and yeh) and 25 consonants. There are three short vowels -- the fatha, the damma, and the kasra. The short vowels are denoted by diacritical markings, which are rarely used in everyday writing. They often appear, though, in Qur'anic writings.

The Arabic letters often take multiple forms, depending where the letter falls in the word. Most letters have an initial form (starting a word), middle form (middle of a word), ending form (ending a word), and stand-alone form. Many of the forms connect to the previous letter (if there is one) and connect to the following letter (again, if there is one). However, there are six letters which are non-connectors, meaning that they do not connect to the letter that follows. These six letters are alef, daal, thaal, zey, rey, and waw.

Some Arabic letters are pronounced sharply, producing sounds that are difficult for Westerners to reproduce. The letters ayn, ghayn, and kheh in particular are different. The Arabic language is also known as the "daoud" language because Arabic is the only language in

the world that supports the sound made by the letter daoud.

Arabic words have gender; an object may either be masculine or feminine. A special character called a tah marbuta is often associated with words of feminine form. The tah marbuta is not a letter in the Arabic alphabet.

There is also a glottal stop in Arabic called the hamza. Like the tah marbuta, the hamza is not considered one of the 28 letters in the alphabet, but occurs on vowels often.

There are occasional "rules" in Arabic designed to keep its aesthetics intact. For example, the letter combination lam followed by an alef was not pleasing to the eye, and so a special character (ﻻ) was created for that letter combination.

The Origins of Arabic Calligraphy

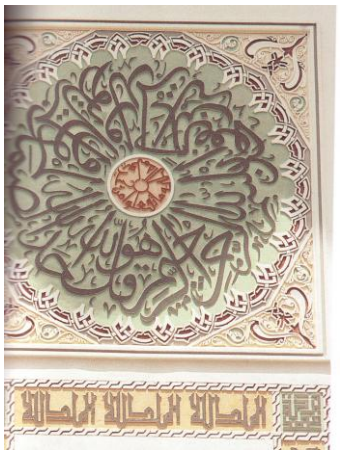
Although Arabic writing existed before Mohammad received Allah's words, it was the spread of Islam that served as the catalyst for Arabic calligraphy. During the Othman caliphate, these words were compiled into the Qur'an, or holy book of Islam. Followers wanted to demonstrate their devotion to Allah, and one way to do so is to exalt the verses and surahs of the Qur'an. The written word became very important in Islam, and so beautifying it and making it into an art form served as a way to honor Allah. Thus, calligraphy began to boom during the caliphate, and even the fourth caliph Ali was himself a calligrapher. Islam began to grow in popularity and quickly spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain, and with it, the increased need to read and write Arabic. **[3]**

In many religions, paintings or sculpture of religious figures is commonplace. However, in Islam, images of the Prophet Mohammad were prohibited. It was felt that pictures of him were idolatry, which is forbidden in Islam. This turned the focus again on the words of the religion, and further bolstered the rise of Arabic calligraphy.

While Ali was alive, calligraphic schools began to develop and support the two main branches of Arabic calligraphy -- cursive script and straight-lined (angular) script. There were three main centers -- in Mecca/Medina, Kufa/Basra, and Isfahan. Another Persian-based school later developed in India. **[3]**

The Arabic language underwent many changes during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. Short vowels (diacritical markings) were first introduced during the Umayyad rule. The dots that we see above and below modern Arabic letters were first used in conjunction with Arabic forms during the Abbasid era. As the alphabet evolved, so did the calligraphy forms. Court papers began to be written in early cursive scripts. Abu Ali Muhammad Ibn Muqlah, a calligrapher and vizier (advisor) to three Abbasid caliphs, defined the six styles of calligraphy

(writing) and establishes the concept of proportion. Before this time, proportions of letters were never considered. Ibn Muqlah designed a set of “rules” for Arabic calligraphy, including a suggestion that the height of the letter alef is the same size as the diameter of a circle in an Arabic letter. He also set standards for the size of the dots on Arabic letters. These remarks led to more uniform styles of writing. **[3]**



Calligraphy was also used in architecture, particularly in mosques, where it became a competition to see who could create the most beautiful mosque, where beauty was measured in part by the Arabic calligraphy that graced its walls. Arabic calligraphy on buildings was popular in the 8th century, and both angular and cursive scripts were used in architecture. The image shown here demonstrates both angular and cursive calligraphy on the Hassan II mosque in Casablanca, Morocco. **[4][3]**

Arabic calligraphy flourished under many Arab dynasties. During the time of the Mamluks, decorative art really took off. Everyday objects began sporting calligraphic designs, thereby increasing the need for experienced Arabic calligraphers. The art form itself was now reaching a larger audience and thus experiencing a deeper appreciation. **[3]**

During the Timurid dynasty in 14th century Persia, an emphasis was placed on written materials. As to be expected, calligraphy’s importance was emphasized during this time; in the following reign of the Safavids, Ta’liq and Nasta’liq (two Persian scripts) were developed and used extensively. Coinciding with the Safavids, the Mughals in India built the world-renown Taj Mahal. This massive mausoleum displays cursive style Qur’anic sayings throughout the exterior and interior of the building. **[3] [5]**

The Ottoman dynasty (1444-1923) is where we see a huge resurgence in Arabic calligraphy. During this time, many new styles develop including Tughra and Diwani. Jali Diwani, a highly intricate style of calligraphy that is still used today in royal circles, was born during the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, during this time period, Arabic calligraphy was considered paramount. **[3]**

Today, Arabic calligraphy continues to be a treasured art form in the Middle East. It has evolved tremendously since the days of the Ottomans, but nevertheless, retains a mixture of its traditional art form and the new modern approach.

The Seven Scripts of Arabic Calligraphy

There are many different scripts of Arabic calligraphy, with various different styles

associated within a script. In this paper, I will introduce seven influential styles that impacted the Middle East, Persia, and Northern Africa. The scripts vary by cursive/straight lines, the amount of slanting, and in letter creation.

Kufic

One of the earliest scripts is the Kufic or Kufi script, which is thought to originate in the city of Hira. This angular script uses bold, short strokes for each letter. There is a squarish component to each letter. In manuscripts, the letters often appeared as bold black characters while the diacritical markings were a contrasting character, often red. Due to its thickness, it was often used in stone carvings and in architecture. It was also used on various coins. For three hundred years, it was the primary script used in copies of the Qur'an and is still in use today. There are various forms of Kufic script, including foliated, plaited, and Qarmatian Kufic.**[2][4][1]**

Maghrebi

Maghrebi, in Arabic, means Moroccan, so as one could imagine, the Maghrebi style of calligraphy was predominantly studied in Northern Africa, although the writing style did contain some Persian and Turkish influence. Many of the final forms of the letters are lengthened in this script, and some letters, such as fa (ف), are written completely differently. **[4][1][2]**

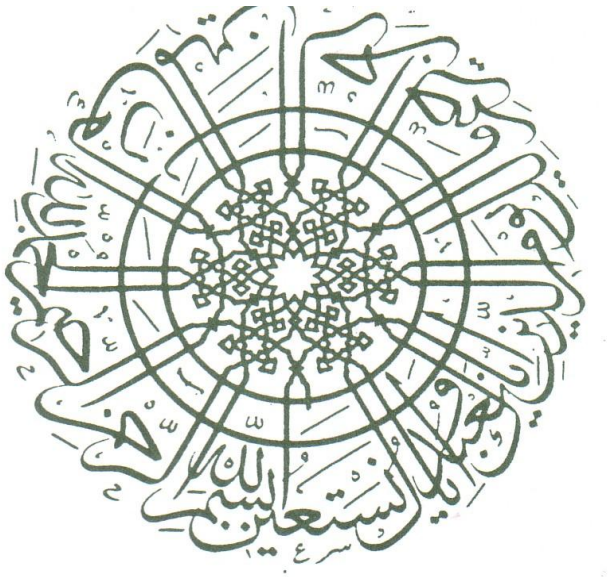
Naskhi

Naskhi, which means “copying” was one of the earliest forms of cursive script, and is

credited to Ibn Muqlah. It was used extensively during the Abbasid dynasty for two main reasons. It was used to port classical work; in other word, classical literature was rewritten into additional copies using the Naskhi script. Secondly, many administrative documents during the Abbasid reign were written in Naskhi. Naskhi is usually the first script that children are taught, and many computer fonts use a derivative of Naskhi when printing Arabic letters. **[4][1][2] [6]**

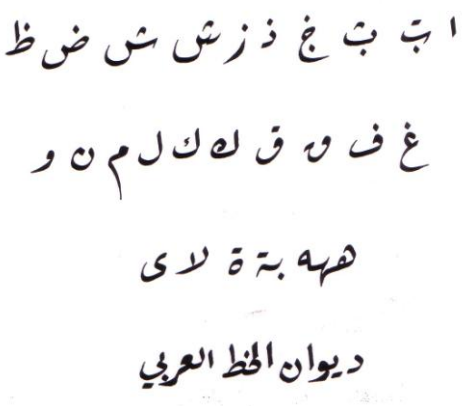
Thuluth

Thuluth is one of the most common forms of the cursive scripts. This method originated in the 4th century, and is credited to Khalil Ibn-Ahmad al-Farahidi from Basra. The word "thuluth" in Arabic means the fraction 1/3, as this form of calligraphy slants approximately 1/3 of each letter. Thuluth is a large, clear script that likely may be seen today in an everyday setting (such as on money). The way that I personally identify thuluth calligraphy is by the elongated vertical letters, such as alef (ا) and lam (ل). In fact, this style is often used as ornamentation on buildings and on titles and headings in books. It was also used in large print copies of the Qur'an.



There were three events during which major changes to thuluth calligraphy were introduced; these events were referred to as the “calligraphers’ revolutions”. The first event occurred in the 15th century. The second revolution during the reign of the Ottomans occurred in the 17th century. The last upheaval, which resulted in the thuluth that we are familiar with today, happened at the end of the 19th century. **[2][4][7][1]**

Riq'a



Riq'a is actually an everyday style of writing, often used in modern printings of books and magazines. It is characterized by small, neat lettering in straight lines or curves. Riq'a is usually the second script that Arabic children learn, after Naskhi. The stroke marks used in Riq'a tend to be very short and crisp, as characterized by the size of the downturns in letters. Both Turkish and Arabic make use of the Riq'a script. **[4][8][2][1]**

Diwani

Diwani, and its variant Jali Diwani, were developed during the Ottoman Empire. This style is probably the most decorative form of Arabic calligraphy. The letters are very close together, making it hard to read, in some cases even by those that are fluent in Arabic. The style is highly ornamental and decorative; pieces of Diwani calligraphy are often adorned with minute details as to showcase a calligrapher's skill level. Diwani calligraphy for a long time was kept a secret to only a talented few, and was used as a royal calligraphy form. In my opinion, Diwani calligraphy is very elegant and requires much skill to produce such stunning works of art; it is my favorite style of all those listed here. **[2][4][9][1]**

Ta'liq/Nasta'liq

These two styles are Persian in nature and were developed during the 14th and 15th centuries. This style is known for its rounded forms and elongated letters. Ta'liq was often used in Persia for royal correspondence and was used extensively during the Mughal Empire. Nasta'liq is a

combination of Naskhi and Ta'liq, and is considered the most ornamental of the Persian scripts. These scripts continued to be used today to write Persian (Farsi), Urdu, and Pashto. **[2][10][4][1]**

Zoomorphic calligraphy

Animals are often used as themes in Arabic calligraphy, and this practice is called zoomorphism. Zoomorphism, as a rule, is common in calligraphy in general. Recall that images of Mohammed are forbidden, but images of other people or animals are not. This makes zoomorphic calligraphy a high desirable form of art. Zoomorphic pieces tend to be very ornate, and serve as a showcase of the calligrapher's skills. Seeing zoomorphic calligraphy for the first time piqued my interest because I appreciated how much planning and effort was involved to make such stunning works of art. Two examples of zoomorphic calligraphy are displayed here, the bird **[2]** and the lion **[11]**.

The Tools

The most important piece of equipment for the calligrapher is the pen. It is called a calamus or a qalam. It is usually created from a piece of reed, and it can be a long process to find a reed that is satisfactory to the calligrapher. The reed is fashioned into a stalk, which holds a nib. The nib is the point of the pen. The nib can be straight across or it could come to a point, depending on the style of writing. The nib could be wide (as in the case of Kufic calligraphy) or it could be very fine (to create the intricate detail of the Diwali styles). A

calligrapher will often grow attached to a particular pen, and that pen may be passed down generation to generation in their family, or the pen may be buried with the calligrapher upon his death.

A calligrapher usually mixes their own inks. Although black and brown are the two most popular colors of inks, other colors may be used. For black ink, the calligrapher will use a very fine dust of charcoal or soot mixed with gum arabic to create the ink. Arabic calligraphy is often created on a cotton-based, rather than a papyrus-based, paper.

Arabic calligraphers are chosen at an early age, and begin their training very young. They must learn the works of the masters, and their daily lessons are called “mufradat”. **[12][2]**

Modern Arabic Calligraphy

Arabic calligraphy continues to be a valued art form. It is used everywhere, from advertising to computer fonts and graphics, to political items, such as the flags of Iraq (in kufic) and Saudi Arabia (in thuluth). Arabic calligraphy is an important facet of Middle Eastern culture, with a rich history steeped in tradition. I, for one, never tire of looking at the intricate details.

Arabic calligraphy is often shown in galleries around the world. In the next section, I will talk about an Arabic exhibit at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The artwork of Hassan Massoudy, a famous contemporary calligrapher, was the centerpoint of the exhibition. **[13][7]**

Arabesque -- an Arabic cultural exhibit at the Kennedy Center

An exhibit on Arabic culture, entitled Arabesque, was held at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts from February 23 – March 15, 2009. There were many art forms at this event, including Arabic clothing and dress, <>, and Arabic calligraphy. The *Desire to Take Wing* event showcased two Arabic calligraphers – Hassan Massoudy (حسن المسعود) and Farah Behbehani (فرح البهبهاني).

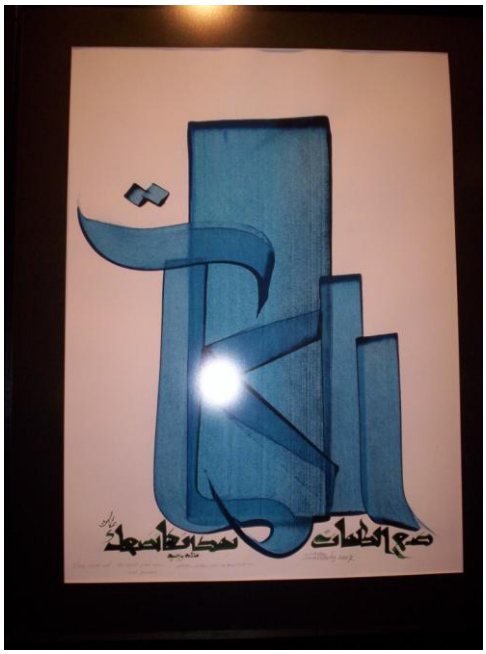
Massoudy was born in 1944 in Iraq and studied with master calligraphers in Baghdad. In 1969, he left an oppressive political climate for France. Living in such diverse cultures afforded him a unique perspective; a perspective that is reflected in the art that he creates.

In the *Desire to Take Wing*, Massoudy's work was displayed on four facets of a cube. Each side of the cube consisted of three rows and four columns to form twelve cells. Eleven of

the twelve cells displayed a calligraphy image. The remaining cell (in the first row, third column) played a video showing how the images were created. Each side of the cube was monochromatic, with the colors blue, teal, red, and black being the hues for each side. Two sides of the cube appear above.

When viewed from a distance, the cube side makes a dramatic statement. Arabic calligraphy is often seen as delicate and intricate, in muted colors. Massoudy's images are anything but. The letters are thick brushstrokes in bursts of color. His work is bold and modern, a juxtaposition of the French influence upon his Arabic upbringing.

Yet, you have to look closely at the images not to miss the details. Close-up images of two panels appear below. These two images were portions of the blue side of the cube. In the first image, the paint at the ends of the letters is heavy and dark. You can see the outlines of the letters that appear behind a letter, indicating that the painting was done section by section (in this case, probably

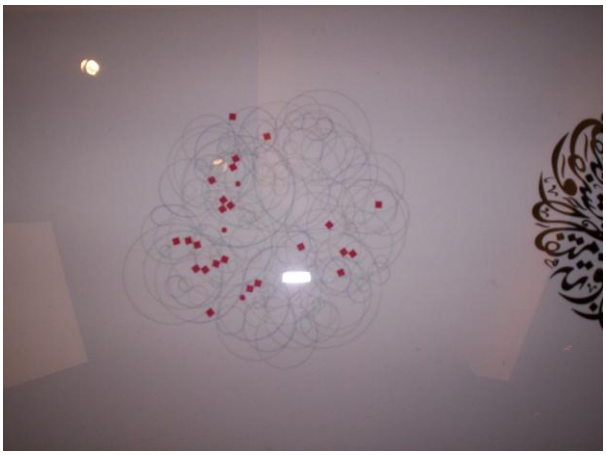


letter by letter) over time, letting the previous section dry before painting another. In the second image, a detailed motif is displayed in the bottom center of the image. The intricate black writing at the bottom of the image, in various sizes, must also be noted to obtain the full effect of the work.

Behbehani was born in 1981 and studied with master calligraphers in London. She has received many citations and merits for her work, and is considered a rising star in the Arabic calligraphy world. Behbehani displayed ten images in the gallery, drawn in the Jali Diwali style of calligraphy. The theme was *Conference of the Birds*, derived from a 12th century Sufi poem, and each image is based upon a bird.

The theme of the first image is a hawk, which symbolizes the sun and the eye of the journey[1]. The circular form is a common shape in Arabic calligraphy. Note the detail and fragility of the Jali Diwali style; it's almost like looking at a piece of fine lace as opposed to a series of letters!

Accompanying each image were pencil drawings which show the placement of letters and diacritical markings. I included one of the pencil drawings for the hawk below. As one can imagine, there is a tremendous amount of preparation involved to produce a single piece of Arabic calligraphy, and the pencil drawings serve as guides.

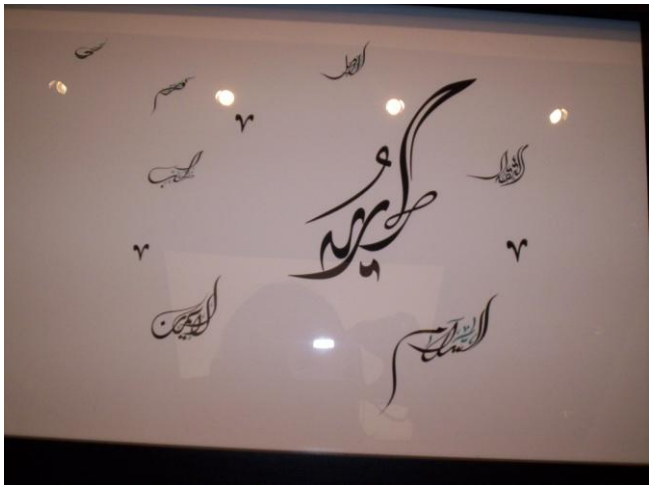


The theme of the second image is the finch. The main black image shows a fragmented version of the finch. Because the finch is known as a weak bird, the bird is encircled by the blue text (ضعف), which means weak in Arabic. The word for weak, which appears three times in the

[1] Many of the interpretations and meanings behind these drawings accompanied each work of art at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, March 15, 2009.

drawing, is written in three differing forms of calligraphy.

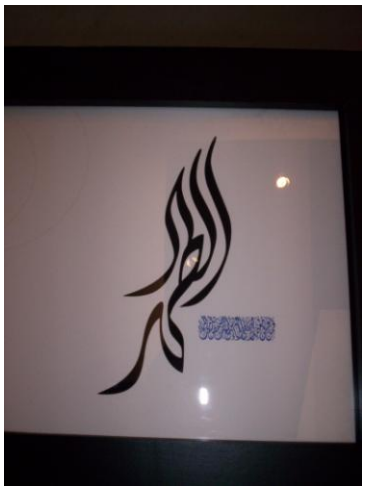
The theme of the third image is "Seven Valleys of the Way". This depicts seven birds, with each bird one of seven different words -- confidence, peace, freedom, hope, faith, love, and happiness. The letters are in black, while the diacritical markings appear in a teal ink. The large black image in the middle is also a bird.



The fourth image was the Simorgh. Part of the “Conference of the Birds” poem mentions the Simorgh, saying:

> *“It was in China, late one moonless night,*
> *The Simorgh first appeared to human sight –*
> *He let a feather float down through the air,*
> *And rumours of its fame spread everywhere;”* **[14]**

The letters qaf (ق) and alef (ا) are used in this piece to represent Mount Qaf, where the bird meets the king. In typical Diwani style, the letters qaf and alef are very close together, but I had little trouble distinguishing these letters when I first saw this piece. The intertwining of the letters made me think of a flame; there is a famous Arabic calligraphy piece that has the word Allah appears as a flame, and this artwork reminded me of that image.



The fifth image was the Duck. I had a lot of trouble understanding this piece; I didn’t see a resemblance to a duck, and I wasn’t familiar with

the story that the image is based upon (a story about a duck being “pure”). The description did mention a duck’s fascination with water, and in my interpretation, the image does look like flowing water, perhaps a waterfall or a river.

According to myth, the Homa is said to have a role in choosing the next Ottoman sultan. There is a very nice juxtaposition in this image, as the homa (depicting as the bird in black) has as its shadow the name of the sultan (in gold lettering). The name, or signature of the sultan, is referred to as the Tughra. This image seems to indicate that this bird is above, looking down upon the sultan from its lofty flight.

The word for partridge is hajalah (الحجل). The first two letters, ح and ج, are depict the partridge in this drawing. Note that the dot for the letter jeem (ج) is drawn in red ink; in fact, red, blue, and green inks adorn the second part of the image. According to the story of the partridge, these birds hoard precious jewels and gems, which are depicted by the rich colors of ink in the drawing.

The next image was, without question, my favorite piece in the whole exhibit. It was a drawing of a peacock. It really was exquisite; the detail on the bird, especially the tail, was incredible. The tail was supposed to signify paradise and heaven; it was noted that green is considered the color of heaven by the Sufis. I also took a picture of the pencil drawing for the peacock, since it clearly took a lot of planning and effort to create this piece.

The ninth piece signified a parrot. It was the only piece in Behbehani’s collection that was symmetric; every letter appeared twice in the image, with the exception of the red tah

marbuta in the middle.

The last picture was for the hoopoe. According to the Sufi poem, the hoopoe was the leader of all the birds. It was fitting, therefore, that the words chosen for the hoopoe was the Bismillah (بسم الله) – In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. It is undoubtedly one of the most famous lines from the Qur'an, and routinely appears in Arabic calligraphy.

I was impressed with the calligraphy exhibit at the Kennedy Center. Although I had expected a larger display of calligraphy (it was held in the Nations Gallery, and so I had assumed that there would be rows of various pieces), I felt that the pieces were well chosen and had a common theme. It was a little thrilling to see the artwork of Massoudy up close; his name appears frequently on the Internet as a famous calligrapher of today, and his works appear at least twice in one of my main sources – the Arabic Script book by Khan.

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[1] http://www.arabiccalligraphy.com, April 6, 2009.

[2] Khan, Gabriel Mandel, Arabic Script. Abbeville Press Publisher, New York: 2001.

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[4] Khatibi, Abdelkebir and Sijelmassi, Mohammed, The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy. Thames & Hudson, London: 1976.

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taj_Mahal, May 8, 2009.

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naskh_(script), May 12, 2009.

[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thuluth, May 12, 2009.

[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruq%27ah, April 14, 2009.

[9] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diwani, May 8, 2009.

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[11] http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/eastwest/rooms/room25.htm#calligraphylion, April 26, 2009.

[12] http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Learning_Arabic_calligraphy.jpg, April 26, 2009.

[13] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kufic, May 17, 2009.

[14] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Conference_of_the_Birds, May 11, 2009.