Mightier than the sword

Arabic script
beauty and meaning
Mightier than the sword
Arabic script: beauty and meaning
Guest curator: Venetia Porter
A touring exhibition from the British Museum in association
with the Altajir World of Islam Trust

Exhibition The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
22 March to 25 May 2003
Mightier than the sword

Arabic script
beauty and meaning
Mightier than the sword
Arabic script: beauty and meaning

© The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2003
This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under
the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process
without prior written permission from the publisher

Published March 2003
by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia
www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Editors Bala Starr, Joanna Bosse
Design Kate Scott
Printed in Australia by GT Graphics Pty Ltd
Print quantity 500

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Porter, Venetia
Mightier than the sword: Arabic script: beauty and meaning

Bibliography
ISBN 0 7340 2036 5
1. Writing, Arabic, in art—Exhibitions. 2. Calligraphy, Islamic—Exhibitions.
3. Art, Islamic—Exhibitions. I. Ian Potter Museum of Art. II. Title.
745.6198270749451

The Altair Trust was founded in 1982 as a British Educational
Charity by His Excellency Mohamed Mahdi Al Ta’i. The trust
operates a variety of programs, covering student scholarships and
other academic initiatives, together with a program of publications
related to Muslim culture and Muslim-Christian relations under
the registered (working) title of Altair World of Islam Trust.
Mightier than the sword

Arabic script
beauty and meaning
This exhibition celebrates the beauty of the word, of the Arabic word, sanctified by Islam and spread by adoption from West Africa to Indonesia. It is a word both intellectual and physical, where meaning and aesthetic play constantly together, intertwining, enriching and occasionally subverting each other. It was present at the beginning of the British Museum in 1753, for in the founding collection of Sir Hans Sloane was a quartz amulet engraved with verses of the Qur'an. And the great majority of the objects discussed in this catalogue are from the museum’s collection. They offer a glimpse of one of the great universal achievements of Islamic civilisation.

What is shown here is the word set free from the book. No longer narrative, it made its way into every area of human experience: verses of Persian love poetry on a tile, inscriptions on Mongol coins, an Afghan ewer or an axe from the Sudan; calligraphy by an artist living in the United Kingdom, or a ‘calligraffiti’ lithograph based on slogans scribbled on a wall in Gaza; the subtle adornment of an Iznik mosque lamp or the Cairo car-sticker of the 1990s protecting against the evil eye.

Trade ensured that the reach of Arabic calligraphy should not be limited to the Islamic world. The shahada, the Profession of Faith that enlivens a Chinese bronze re-appears in the halo of Gentile da Fabriano’s fifteenth-century Madonna from Pisa, quite legible and apparently quite theologically at home in its new Christian setting.

For most Europeans, however, meaning was less important than form. In Paolo Veneziano’s Coronation of the Virgin from Venice, the artist has turned the Arabic characters into exotically pleasing, but essentially meaningless decorative forms. This is hardly surprising, for the training to become a calligrapher was long and demanding. It is no accident that two of the phrases most frequently set by master calligraphers for their pupils were, ‘Oh Lord, make it easy and not difficult’, followed by a phrase that even in un-aesthetic Roman type, may serve as the wish for this exhibition: ‘Oh Lord may it be completed in the best way’.
An exhibition on the written word, held in a university art museum, should come as no surprise. In spite of developments in digital technology, the written word remains central to the activities of the students and staff of the University of Melbourne. But, in the computer age, the days of the hand-crafted word seem long past. It is refreshing and reassuring, then, to encounter an exhibition in which the fashioning of words themselves is the focus. Here is an opportunity to understand the word in a material sense (as something made), in an historical sense (as something whose form develops), and in an ideological sense (as something whose very character encompasses culture and belief).

It is all the more important that this opportunity arises from a display of Islamic treasures from the British Museum. The items displayed in the exhibition represent craft, history, faith and culture. They allow us to acknowledge not only the breadth and achievement of Islamic culture but also the growing significance of Islam in Australia. The display itself represents values central to the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the University of Melbourne: a commitment to cultural diversity and to the cultural enrichment of the city of Melbourne; a belief in inquiry as a fundamental element of tolerance and understanding; and a determination to form partnerships that will link the university with the best and most challenging of international ideas and scholarship. Our partners in this project—the British Museum and Altajir World of Islam Trust—share this commitment to inquiry and understanding. The outstanding scholarship and expertise of British Museum staff, along with the generosity of the Altajir Trust have made it possible for visitors to the Potter to experience the rich history of Islamic culture.

Staging this exhibition has presented complex challenges of logistics and interpretation. These have been met through the collaboration of staff at the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the British Museum. This partnership commenced in 1997 when the British Museum proposed the initial idea for the exhibition. Particular thanks are due to exhibition curator, Dr Venetia Porter, Curator, Islamic Collections, the British Museum, for her scholarly research and writing for the catalogue. Significant support for the exhibition was provided by the Altajir World of Islam Trust and the Development Division of the University of Melbourne. We are grateful to Mr Alistair Duncan, Director, Altajir World of Islam Trust, and Mr Roger Peacock, Vice-Principal, Development Division, the University of Melbourne, for their efforts in sustaining the partnership that has underwritten this exhibition.
Contents

Venetia Porter

8 Introduction
15 Catalogue of works in the exhibition
16 I Islam and the word of God
18 II Beauty and diversity
30 III Contact with Europe: Arabic script as pattern
33 IV Islam in China and Indonesia
35 V The art of the calligrapher
44 VI Virtuosi scripts on paper
47 VII The contemporary art of writing and calligraphy
50 VIII The power of the word

60 Figures
61 Fig. 1 Map of the Islamic world c. 750
61 Fig. 2 Map of the Islamic world c. 1900
62 Fig. 3 The Arabic alphabet
63 Fig. 4 Table of scripts
64 Fig. 5 The six calligraphic styles (al-aqlam al-sitta)
65 Fig. 6 The system of proportion of the Arabic letter forms developed by Ibn Muqla
65 Fig. 7 The tughra of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (1520–66)

66 Bibliography and further reading
Introduction

Though all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea—seven seas after it to replenish it, yet would the Words of God not be spent. Qur'an 31:27

The phrase 'The pen is mightier than the sword' expresses a universal recognition of the power of the written word. In Islamic culture, the importance attached to writing stems from the fact that Arabic is both the language of God's revelation to the Prophet in the early 7th century and the script in which it was subsequently written down. This has given the Arabic script a unique significance in Islam. The script has become a defining feature of the material culture of the region we can broadly call the Islamic lands, a vast area that at different times has stretched from Spain in the west to the Malay states and Borneo at the furthest point east.

This exhibition has a number of stories to tell. The objects chosen, drawn principally from the collections of the British Museum, come from all over the Islamic world. The thread that unites them is that they either have writing inscribed upon them, or they are in some way connected to the art of writing. This varied group of objects allows us to trace the developments of Arabic calligraphy. As well, through the theme of script, it opens a window onto the culture of a remarkable civilisation that has had so much to offer the cultures it has come into contact with in terms of its scientific, technical and artistic achievements.

The exhibition is divided into eight sections, beginning with 'Islam and the word of God'. Here the religion of Islam is introduced to provide both a sense of the beauty of the script and its spiritual context. 'Beauty and diversity' presents the various kinds of objects that are inscribed and what this writing says; how the forms of Arabic letters change their shape according to time, region and material—paper, a coin, tombstone, metal bowl or ceramic tile. 'Contact with Europe: Arabic script as pattern' examines the fascination in Europe for exotic objects from the Middle-East, as well as how the Arabic script transformed into pattern in Renaissance painting and in pottery from Islamic Spain. Included in 'Islam in China and Indonesia' are objects made for Muslims at the Ming court. Chinese/Arabic calligraphy, a Javanese textile with Arabic inscriptions, and a group of coins that show the remarkable synthesis that took place in the currenies between the local and imported styles. In 'The art of the calligrapher', the focus is on the practical aspects of calligraphy: pens, pen-boxes and other tools of the trade. In 'Virtuosi scripts on paper', some of the extraordinary skills displayed by calligraphers can be seen. 'The contemporary art of writing and calligraphy' includes some dramatic modern examples of the work of a number of Middle-Eastern artists. The final section, 'The power of the word', considers the popular side of Islam with a variety of objects including amulets, standards, magic bowls and popular stickers imbued with amuletic and protective powers.
The origin of the Arabic script

Desolate are the encampments in Mina, places of but a
week or month's stay; the wilderness has reclaimed Ghawl and Ri'jam.
Runnels of Rayyan, stripped of all trace, rubbed smooth
Like letterings long since scored on a stony slab.
Mu'allaqah of Labid

Until the 6th century, Arabic was a spoken language only. It was the language of Arab
tribal kingdoms that had been established in central Arabia, southern Iraq and Syria,
two centuries previously. A sophisticated tradition of oral poetry grew up at their courts,
handed down over several hundred years but only written down from about the 8th
century. The poets of the pre-Islamic era, such as Labid, cited above, conjure up an
image of nomadic life in the desert, of love and warfare and hunting. This body of early
Arabic poetry is a source of inspiration even today. Two contemporary artists in the
exhibition, Ghani Alani (Cat. no. 46) and Ahmed Moustafa (Cat. no. 44) have inscribed
verses from collections of poems by two well known early Arab poets, Imru'l Qais
and Zoheir.

Writing in the Arabic script was known among these communities for about 150 years
before the advent of Islam, but only a few examples, inscribed on stone, have so far
been discovered, at sites in Syria and Jordan. Interestingly none have been discovered
in Arabia. The alphabet used to write Arabic from the 6th century to the present day
is a form of Aramaic script that belongs to the family of Semitic scripts whose ultimate
origins go back to Egyptian hieroglyphs. Aramaic had been used by the Persians as
the official language of the western part of their empire between the 6th and 4th century
BCE in north-west and eastern Arabia. With Alexander the Great's conquest of the
region at the end of the 4th century BCE, Greek became the language of government,
but Aramaic continued to be spoken and written in everyday life, and is still spoken
today in some parts of Syria. The Nabateans (whose powerful kingdom, based at Petra
in Jordan, flourished from about 100 BCE to 106 CE and stretched from southern Syria
to north-west Arabia) wrote in Aramaic and the version of the script they developed
came to be widely used throughout the region. In the centuries following the end of
the Nabatean kingdom, the Arabs in Syria and Jordan and probably those who had settled
in southern Iraq gradually started using the Nabatean Aramaic script to write their
spoken language, Arabic. Scholars have traced the transition and development from
Nabatean Aramaic to Arabic through a number of key inscriptions on stone in this
region, from a beginning of Arabic language in Nabatean script in the early 4th century
CE to Arabic language and script by the mid 6th century CE.

It was the revelation of Islam in the 7th century that was to dramatically change the
role of the Arabic script. For there was now a pressing need to write down God's words
to the Prophet Muhammad.

Proclaim in the name of your Lord and Cherisher who created, created man out of a
mews clot of congealed blood. Proclaim and your Lord is most bountiful. He who taught
by the pen, taught man that which he knew not.

Qur'an 96:4-5
Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed by God (Allah) to the Prophet Muhammad through the intermediation of the Archangel Gabriel. It was revealed to the Prophet over a period of twenty-three years, first in a cave outside Mecca (present-day Saudi Arabia) and after 622 in Medina where he had emigrated with his followers. He continued to receive the revelation until his death in 632. The Prophet’s followers then memorised it and transmitted it orally to members of the Islamic community, as Arabs had done for centuries with their poetry. However, as a method of communication this was too insecure and the fear that the revelation could be lost or corrupted prompted them to commit the Qur’an to writing. It was the Prophet’s secretary, Zayd ibn Thabit, who was entrusted with the task. Members of the community brought fragments from ‘ribs of palm-leaves and tablets of white stone and from the memories of men’. 2 A number of early Islamic inscribed ribs of palm leaves have recently been found in Yemen that corroborate this story. 3 In other words, they brought together verses, perhaps whole chapters of the Qur’an that had been variously inscribed on whatever material came to hand. These were added to those parts that had been committed to memory.

It is believed by many that the Caliph Umar (634–44) collected the first text of the Qur’an, and this, with only a few variations, is the text that Muslims use today. The earliest Qur’ans were written on parchment. Paper, which had been invented in China in the late 1st century, did not appear in the Islamic lands until the 8th century. A probably apocryphal story states that it was introduced when Muslim soldiers captured Chinese paper-makers at the battle of Talas in 751, a decisive moment in Islamic history that opened up Central Asia to the Muslims. Once introduced, by whatever route it came, the use of paper spread rapidly throughout the Islamic lands. The first paper mill was established in Baghdad in 794–95. Used primarily by bureaucrats in the various offices of the empire, this paper quickly displaced the papyrus and parchment that had been used hitherto, and, from about the 10th century, it was used for the copying of Qur’ans.

The spread of the Arabic script

Because it is incumbent upon Muslims to learn the Qur’an in its original Arabic, Arabic spread with Islam, and the Arabic language was often learnt alongside local languages; the Arabic script often displaced local scripts. Arabic has therefore been employed to write a whole variety of languages such as Persian (Iran), Urdu (India), Dari (Afghanistan), Ottoman Turkish (until the reforms of Atatürk in 1928, when it was displaced by the Roman alphabet), and, until recently, the languages of Indonesia and Malaysia. Wherever there were Muslim communities, however far afield, we find the Arabic script. After the Roman alphabet, Arabic is the most commonly written script in the world.

The development of the Arabic script and the role of the calligrapher

The most remarkable aspect of the Arabic script is its extraordinary flexibility, which allowed it to be written in a myriad of ways. This led over the centuries to constant creativity on the part of calligraphers, who perfected, embellished, re-invented and developed new styles. The establishment of Arabic as the language and script of the administration of the Muslim empire (see Fig. 1, p. 61) coincided with the recognition that in order to write the Qur’an, the most beautiful scripts possible had to be employed. Thus came into being a series of scripts that were principally used for copying the Qur’an but were soon also employed in other contexts and media including secular texts, coins, gravestones, foundation inscriptions, tiles and so on.
Pre-eminent among the early scripts is *kufic*, so-called after the town of Kufa in Iraq, one of a number of centres where the art of calligraphy began to develop at the end of the 7th century. This script is characterised by elegant angular forms that were to vary widely in relation to time and place of production. It is in the first dateable Qur’anic inscription in *kufic* script, in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem built in 692, that in order to prevent misinterpretation of the words of God, the first attempts to distinguish letters of the same shape—by placing marks above or below letters of the same shape—can be clearly seen (see Fig. 3, p. 62). This was followed over the centuries by the appearance of a range of other scripts such as the *maghribi* script of North Africa from the 10th century, which elegantly combines the angular features of *kufic* with more rounded elements.

By the 10th century, there were said to be at least twenty different cursive styles of script that had proliferated over the years, largely used for personal correspondence or to meet the needs of the bureaucrats and merchants. This was in contrast to the *kufic* script used to copy the Qur’an. Charged with the task of standardising and refining the myriad cursive scripts was the great calligrapher Muhammad ibn Muqla (died 940), a vizier at the court of three Abbasid caliphs. He and Ibn al-Bawwab (died 1022), who was said to have been taught calligraphy by Ibn Muqla’s daughter after his death, established what are known as the ‘six calligraphic styles’, the *aqama al-sitta*. The aim was to formalise a system for the writing of cursive scripts that would make them as well proportioned and as beautiful as the *kufic* script and therefore appropriate for writing the Qur’an.

The problem with *kufic* was that while beautiful, it became ever more difficult to read and its decorative potential became increasingly exploited as it developed. This was compounded by the frequent lack of dots to distinguish letters, particularly on monumental inscriptions. The new system was based on a set of strict rules. The guiding principle was the use of a standard circle, a standard letter, *alif*, and a ‘rhombic dot’ (see Fig. 6, p. 65):

*The rhombic dot is formed by pressing the pen diagonally on paper so that the length of the dot’s equal sides is the same as the width of the pen. The ‘standard’ *alif* is a vertical stroke measuring a specific number of ‘rhombic dots’. The ‘standard circle’ has a diameter equal to the length of the standard *alif* and provides the proportional grid for all letters. Thus the various cursive styles are ultimately based on the width of the pen used by the scribe and the number of dots chosen to fashion the standard *alif*; these can be five to seven in number.*
The advantage of this system was that it meant that the calligrapher could work in larger or smaller formats simply by varying the size of the nib. The letters would always be in proportion to one another.

The change from kufic to cursive scripts starts to be seen in monumental inscriptions on buildings from the 11th century. By the 13th century, throughout the Islamic lands, the kufic script had been largely abandoned for general use, but had found other roles. It was henceforth reserved for particular types of religious inscriptions, such as the archaic prayer formulas on the brass ewer (Cat. no. 8) for example, or for the Islamic Profession of Faith (shahada) on coins (Cat. no. 16c), or for the chapter headings on Qur’an manuscripts (Cat. no. 3). In each case it provided a contrast of meaning and style to the inscriptions in naskh, thuluth or other cursive scripts. It also continued in some areas to be used in magical inscriptions as it was believed to be more powerful in the writing of charms.

Each of the six calligraphic styles (naskh, thuluth, muhaqqaq, rayhan, tawqi‘ and qifa‘) developed for copying the Qur’an had particular characteristics (Fig. 5, p. 64) and different uses. The small-scale and neat naskh was often used for the copying of documents as well as Qur’ans and the larger scale and more formal thuluth was favoured by the Mamluk sultans of Egypt for its monumental and decorative qualities (Cat. no. 12). One of the greatest contributions of Persian calligraphers was nastal‘iq, the ‘hanging script’, supposedly perfected by the calligrapher Mir Ali of Tabriz (died 1446) after dreaming of flying geese. Particularly suitable for writing Persian, the structure of this poetic language, with its frequent use of final letter nuns (n’s) and yas (y’s) lent itself to being exploited decoratively. This script predominates from the 16th century in Iran (Cat. no. 59) and then in Muslim India, and was even used by British officials serving in India (Cat. no. 15). Other regions developed their own characteristic styles: the sini script of China, divani used by the chancellries of Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran (Cat. no. 38), tughrā‘ in states of Muslim India (Cat. no. 14), with additional virtuosi scripts used in specific contexts—the Ottoman tughrā‘ for example (Cat. no. 39), and zoomorphic scripts (Cat. no. 41).

The association between the act of writing and Islam gave a particular status to the calligrapher. A well known Hadith (saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) states, ‘he who writes the basmala well will obtain innumerable blessings and enter Paradise’. The process of acquiring proficiency in these scripts was, however, an arduous one. The calligrapher (in Arabic, khattat) would start his studies at an early age, and was taught by a recognised master who himself was part of a chain of calligraphers going back to the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib (died 661), well known for his good hand.
The contemporary Iraqi calligrapher Ghani Alani (see Cat. no. 46) evocatively describes how he became interested in calligraphy at the age of twelve. While working on the railways to earn money, he would escape whenever he could and pick up whatever he could find by way of rough pieces of paper or card on which he would trace letters with the black of the locomotive soot. In the evenings and at weekends he would study books on calligraphy in earnest. This continued until he met the man who was to become his ustadh (master), al-Khattat Hashem Muhammad al-Baghdadi, who came from a recognised line of Iraqi calligraphers. Recalling his first meeting with his future master, Ghani Alani recounts being impressed by the sight of the wealth of masterpieces in his studio, the number of pens and the coloured inks. The master asked him:

What do you want to do with calligraphy? Do you want to write in thuluth script, that which is used for architecture and manuscripts which will open you up to universal knowledge, or would you prefer to choose the style of riqa’ which will enable you to become a painter of letters?

I knew I had to make a difficult decision: was I going to content myself with learning calligraphy for utilitarian ends or was I going to place myself in the service of a master and to have to continually prove myself? I chose the latter and was put to the test. At the end of three months, my master decided that my commitment was total and decided to keep me. For the first three years of my apprenticeship, I did nothing but trace the letters of the alphabet.7

The relevance of the master’s question is twofold. Firstly that he clearly only wanted to teach someone intent on achieving the greatest heights of calligraphy. Secondly, it highlights the fact that while the apprentice calligrapher had to learn and become proficient in all the scripts, calligraphers became known for perfecting particular styles.

The calligrapher might study for years until he or she (there are a number of well known women calligraphers) was ready to receive his diploma, the ijaza, which literally means permission, without which he was not allowed to sign his work. The text of Ghani Alani’s ijaza from Hashem al-Baghdadi begins as follows:

In the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate, who made us swear by the pen, who taught us the secrets of writing and the depths of the wisdom which has contributed to our knowledge of kingdoms and nations.

When it appeared to us that the owner of this beautiful ijaza had encompassed the meaning of the different styles, reaching a degree of total perfection, I gave him permission to place his name on beautiful writings ...8
The role of calligraphy in Islamic art and the place of figural representation

The defining feature of Islamic civilisation is the ubiquitous use of writing. There is writing from earliest Islamic times on everything from rocks in the desert (a tradition that had existed before the coming of Islam) to writing on architecture and works of art. The script began to be used very early as much for its decorative potential as for communication. Islamic art has as a result been rightly described as a 'speaking art.' The styles created by the master calligraphers were copied by artists—some probably illiterate—onto objects. How many of the inscriptions, whether carved high up on buildings or on objects, could actually be read cannot be known for certain. However, as far as Qur'anic inscriptions or those of a benedictory nature are concerned, these are likely to have been generally recognisable, since the Qur'an was learnt by heart and people uttered these benedictions or invocations in daily life. In particular spheres of society, other types of inscriptions such as poetry would also have been well known. Even if a person looking at an inscription could recognise that it was in Arabic script but could not understand it (Arabic epigraphy is notoriously difficult even for those who know Arabic), then that object and the writing upon it would still have been familiar and recognisably part of that person's culture.

Figural representation in Islam was discouraged because it was felt that the artist, by drawing living beings, was usurping the creative function of God. In practice, this meant that the human or animal form does not appear in religious contexts—neither in the Qur'an nor in religious buildings—except in very particular circumstances. These exceptions are figural tiles appearing in shrines in medieval Iran (Cat. no. 10) and religious words or phrases making up human or animal pictures in 19th century Turkey and elsewhere (Cat. no. 41). Both of these in different ways have to do with the Sufi mystical aspect of Islam. In secular contexts, figural decoration was allowed but was very much a matter of taste, and more prevalent at certain periods than others. There are two examples of 13th century coins with figural designs in the exhibition (Cat. nos 16m, 16n) as well as figures on the inlaid pen-box (Cat. no. 30). Figures were always allowed in the arts of the book, with miniature painting being an important element of Islamic art. Nonetheless, these are exceptions rather than the norm.

Notes
8 G Alani & JC Meffre, p. 59.
The dates of the objects are represented either in the common era (CE), or, in the case of a dated inscription, in the Islamic calendar (AH). The H stands for hijra, which is the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina that took place in 622 CE. The Islamic, or hijra calendar as it is known, starts in that year. Thus year 1 AH is 622 CE.

All objects are from the collections of the British Museum, London, unless otherwise specified.

Dimensions are expressed as height precedes width precedes depth.

Catalogue of works in the exhibition

Venetia Porter
Islam and the word of God

The Holy Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the early 7th century is divided into 114 chapters (suras), each of which is composed of a number of verses (ayas). After the opening (the fatihah), the Qur'an is structured by length of sura, beginning with 'The cow' which has 286 verses. The last chapter, 'al-Nas', or 'Mankind', has six verses. The text was traditionally divided into thirty volumes ('fuz'), each containing varying numbers of chapters.

The examples of the Qur'an in this section are from two different periods. The single page, inscribed in the majestic angular kufic script typical of early Qur'ans (Cat. no. 2), comes from the 9th – 10th century. The Qur'an section (Cat. no. 3), in the simple, elegant, cursive muhaqqaq script favoured later, comes from the 14th century. The Qur'an was memorised by children in special schools known as kuttab and was recited publicly in mosques—where prayers were led by the imam—and privately. Believers face the direction of Mecca during their prayers. In the mosque, this is marked by a niche known as a mihraab, which is frequently represented by a foliate arch that can be seen in the ceramic tile panel (Cat. no. 4).

Ceramic mosque lamp, painted in blue and white, Iznik, Ottoman Turkey, c. 1510
27.6 cm (height)
1983.5 Godman Bequest

God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of his Light is as a wick-holder
Wherein is a Light
(the Light in a glass,
the glass as it were a glittering star)
kindled from a blessed tree.
Qur'an 24:35–6

In Ottoman Turkey, mosque lamps that hung from the ceiling by chains had more of a symbolic than practical function. Their shape was based on earlier glass examples from Mamluk Egypt (1250–1517) which provided light by means of a wick placed in a container of oil within the lamp. This example, made at the potteries of Iznik in Turkey, is decorated in the designs and colour scheme influenced by Chinese porcelain that was popular at the Ottoman Court at this time.

The inscriptions in cartouches around the lamp in a combination of cursive scripts bear no relation to the function of the lamp. On the base in a cartouche are the words: 'Allah, Muhammad, Ali' (God, the Prophet Muhammad and Ali). Ali was the cousin of the Prophet and married his daughter Fatima. He is the fourth of the Orthodox caliphs. These were the Prophet's closest companions who succeeded him as leaders of the Muslim community upon his death in 632. Ali is also the first of the Shi'a imams and is revered by Sunni and Shi'a branches of Islam. The other inscriptions are in naskh but cannot be deciphered (see also Cat. no. 13).
2 Qur'an page, black ink on parchment, probably Iraq, 9th – 10th century
15.6 x 23.4 cm
2001.0635.1

The text, inscribed in the angular kufic script, is from Qur'an Chapter 4, from the end of Verse 157 to the beginning of Verse 161, written on parchment in brownish-black ink in eleven lines in the oblong format characteristic of early Qur'ans. The device of using red dots to aid with vocalisation and to distinguish letters of the same shape is seen here, while a cluster of gold dots marks the end of Verse 160. While the style of script was originally associated with the town of Kufa in Iraq and hence its name, *kufic*, it is clear that this style was practised in a number of centres in the central Islamic lands.

3 Surat 'al-Mu'min' ('The believer') and surat 'Ha-Mim', also known as 'Fussilat' (Qur'an Chapters 40, 41)
26.5 x 18.5 cm
Collection of HE Mohamed Mahmoud Al Tajir

This is part twenty-four of a Qur'an in thirty volumes (*juz*) copied in *muhaqqaq* script in 14th century Mamluk Egypt. The page on the left consists of the end of Chapter 40 and the beginning of Chapter 41 where we see the *basmala*, the phrase that begins every chapter of the Qur'an but one (sura 9): 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'. The name of the chapter is inscribed in white against a blue and gold ground in eastern *kufic* style, a variant of the *kufic* seen in Cat. no. 2 (see also Fig. 4). This style had been developed for the copying of Qur'ans in the 10th century but by this time had a mainly decorative function providing an elegant contrast to the simplicity of the *muhaqqaq* script. This was the main script favoured for copying the Qur'an in the Mamluk era. The end of the verse is marked by a gold rosette. To the left of it are a series of medallions of different shapes. In the centre of the oval medallion are the words *nisf* and *hizb*. *Nisf*, meaning half, indicates that this is the half-way point in part twenty-four of the Qur'an, while *hizb* means the sixtieth part of the whole Qur'an, which is the place that has been reached here.
6 Limestone tombstone, Aswan, Egypt, 412/1021
64 x 49.5 x 16 cm
1887.0402.1437

The deceased is a woman: Fatima, daughter of Ja'far, daughter of Muhammad al-Sabbagh, who died in the month of Jumada II year 412 (September – October 1021) of the Islamic era. The inscription starts with the basmala and continues with Qur'an Chapter 112. God’s blessings are then called on the Prophet Muhammad and his family followed by the name of the deceased and the date she died. The style of the script is the angular kufic but with flourishes at the ends of the letters that are characteristic of monumental script of this period. What is noticeable here is the increasing veneration of the Prophet’s family at this time and the piety of women. Many of the tombstones recovered from Aswan are the gravestones of women.

7 Slip painted earthenware bowl, Nishapur, eastern Iran, c. 9th – 10th century
19.6 cm (diam.)
1946.1999.62

The Arabic inscription in black angular kufic script includes around the edge the phrase, ‘Livelhood is distributed by God among people’ and in the centre the word Ahmad, which can mean ‘more praiseworthy’ as well as being a name. The remarkable use of script on ceramics of this type, both as a method of conveying words of wisdom and for decorative purposes, has been linked to the aspirations of the ruling Samanid dynasty who were significant patrons of the arts and literature. Many of the inscriptions on such ceramics consist of proverbs or wise sayings in Arabic and as such they are important literary documents. While some of the vessels of this kind were probably functional, others may in addition have been used for decorative effect.
8 Brass ewer, inlaid with silver and copper, Herat, Afghanistan, late 12th – early 13th century
38 cm (height)
1846,6805.1
The ewer, made of several sheets of brass hammered and welded, is remarkable for its extraordinary decoration and sophisticated metalworking techniques. Lions and birds stand out in relief on the shoulder and neck of the vessel. The inscriptions that form the main element of the inlaid decoration are all over the vessel. On the body they are in vertical bands of kufic and contrasting cursive naskhi inscriptions. They consist of good wishes addressed to an unnamed owner and include the following phrases: ‘May it belong with bliss, divine grace, good fortune, immunity, divine solicitude, contentment, long life to its owner’. On the shoulder, another inscription follows the same formula, with the only difference being that at the tops of the letters are rectangular pieces of silver (on similar vessels of this period, these have faces etched into them). This ewer is one of a group of similar ewers made at Herat in the province of Khurasan in present-day Afghanistan. A similar ewer in the Tiflis Museum is inscribed with a poem that shows the pride of the metalworker, what it was used for and where it was made:

My beautiful ewer, pleasant and elegant
In the world of today who can find the like? ...
This ewer is for water and they make it in Herat ...
Let happiness come to him if he gives the ewer to a friend
Let trouble come if he surrenders it to an enemy. 1

9 Group of six stone-paste lustre star and cross tiles, Kashan, central Iran, mid 13th century
31 cm (diam., av.)
These are from a group of about 160 tiles that were once in the Imamzade Yahya, a shrine in the town of Veramin in Iran. Tiles, particularly those decorated in lustre, were the main form of interior decoration of secular and religious buildings in medieval Iran at this time. The Arabic inscriptions around the edge of the tiles in naskhi are from the Qur'an and one of the group is dated to the month of Dhu' al-Hijja 660/1261. This group of tiles and those following (below) were made at Kashan, the principal ceramic production centre of the time.

10 Eight-pointed stone-paste star tile, cobalt and lustre on white ground, Iran, Kashan, 13th – 14th century
20.5 cm (diam.)
1078,1230.561
The main design consists of a pair of seated figures whose figural features and tresses of hair were typical of the Turkic invaders, the Seljuk Turks who came into the central Islamic heartlands in the 11th century. Around the edge of the tile in naskhi is a verse of Persian poetry: ‘Last night the moon came to your house, filled with envy I thought of chasing him away. Who is the moon to sit in the same place as you?’. Love poetry is often found on tiles in medieval Iranian shrines. The love they speak of is often the divine love of Sufi mystical poetry.

11 Rectangular stone-paste tile, Kashan, central Iran, second half of 13th century
36.2 × 16 cm
1983,190 Godman Bequest
Against the turquoise blue ground with overglaze enamelled colours in red and gold, in a style known as minal, the angular letters stand out in relief. Although by the 13th century the angular kufic style had been largely superseded by the more legible cursive script naskhi, the angular style was still used for monumental inscriptions. Here the tile with its single word is part of a frieze of tiles (now dispersed in various collections) which all make up verses from the Qur'an Chapter 15 and which were likely once to have been set into the wall of a shrine or a mosque.
12 Tankard of sheet brass engraved and inlaid with silver and gold, Damascus or Cairo, late 14th century
26.5 cm (height)
1887.0612.1

The Arabic inscriptions, in thuluth script with a band in stylised plaited kufic, are the main features of the design. Repeated all over the vessel are words addressed to an unnamed sultan. Those around the body read: 'Glory to our Lord the Sultan, the King, the Wise, the Diligent, the Just, the Conqueror, the Holy Warrior, the Defender, the Protector of Frontiers, the One Fortified by God.' The most striking aspect of the inscription is the elegant way in which the ends of the letters have been turned into exotic flames. Within the densely decorated background are roundels, such as the one at the base of the handle featuring a delightful pattern of flying cranes. These and other designs such as the lotuses and peonies were largely inspired by Chinese textiles imported into the Islamic world at this time.

13 Large footed bowl, Iznik, Turkey, c. 1510–20
23.5 cm (height). 42.5 cm (diam.)
1887.0618.1

The sheer size of this bowl makes it a technical tour de force and, with its elaborate decoration, it was clearly a prestige object. It has been suggested that bowls such as this were used by people of rank for their ritual ablutions before prayers either in mosques or in private; cleanliness before prayers being incumbent on all Muslims. The Arabic inscription on the outside of the bowl is an integral feature of the design and yet what is interesting is that it appears to be meaningless. The letters are in naskh, making up what appears to be a phrase repeated twice perhaps based on a religious inscription or a verse of poetry and made by a potter who knew no Arabic. Some Armenians are known to have been potters in Turkey at this time and that might explain their lack of knowledge of Arabic. This was also the case with part of the inscriptions on the mosque lamp (Cat. no.1). Here too the blue and white designs are strongly influenced by the decoration on Chinese blue and white porcelain that was imported into Turkey at this time and of which the Turkish sultans had a large collection (that can still be seen at their palace, Topkapi Saray, in Istanbul today). Iznik was the main pottery production centre for Ottoman Turkey and made fine stone-paste wares for the court and other patrons from about the 1490s to 1700.
Bengal at this time was ruled by Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah (1474-81) whose name is inscribed here. His capital was at Gaur where this inscription might have originated although it is unclear at the present time which monument it came from. In Bengal they perfected the script sometimes known as tughra’i which is an elegant variant of the thuluth script; the uprights of the letters creating a dense forest of columns through which words and letters are interspersed. The whole inscription, only a section of which is shown here (there are four other pieces from it) is dated to Sunday 14th day of the month of Muharram, year 885 (Monday 20 March 1480) and gives the sultan’s titles and genealogy: ‘the great and exalted sultan, Shams al-Dunya wa’l Din Abu’l Muzaffar (father of the victorious), Yusuf Shah al-Sultan ibn Barbak Shah, ibn Mahmud Shah, may God perpetuate his kingdom and sovereignty’. The names of rulers in the Islamic world were often long and complex. In addition to stating the names of their father, grandfather and sometimes even further back, they included grand honorific titles known as fageeb. Here our ruler is described as Shams al-Dunya wa’l Din, ‘sun of the world’ and the religion.

Silver seal of Gabriel Harper inscribed in Arabic script, 1199/1734-85
7.2 cm (height), 6.4 cm (diam.)
1986,0335,1

Colonel Gabriel Harper was an important figure in the East India company and was based for some years in the state of Awadh in northern India which had been conquered by the British in 1764. He was appointed to the court of Shuja’ al-Dawlah (a puppet ruler of the British) in 1770 to command the troops based at Cawnpore. The use of seals by East India Company officials to validate documents followed a long tradition in Iran and India. Persian was the official language of the court in India until the mid-19th century and the British used it for many purposes including for their seals. In elegant nasta’liq script against a floral background, the seal is inscribed, ‘Sir Afraz al-Dawla (exalted of the state) Bahadur, Colonel Gabriel Harper Asad Jang (lion of war) servant of Shah Alam Padshah Ghezi (victorious king) and the regnal year 27’. This last refers to the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II (1760-1806).

Islamic coins

Islamic coins are important historical documents. The early coins derive in style from the coins of the peoples the Muslim Arabs conquered in the 7th century: the Byzantines in the west and the Sasanians in the east. Until the coinage reform of 696-97, Islamic coins generally contained figurative imagery. The debt to the pre-Islamic past is reflected in the names of the coins: fals (the copper coin derived from the Latin folis), dinar (from the Latin denarius) and dirham (after the Greek drachm).

As generally official, and, most importantly, dateable documents, coins can offer insights into a range of aspects of Islamic culture, not simply monetary history and the types and denominations of coins used in different regions. Since one of the first actions of rulers when they took control of a particular place was to strike coins, we learn about the cities under their rule and about the titles they used, the languages they preferred, their political or spiritual allegiance to other rulers, and also their religious affiliation, whether they were Sunni or Shi’a. All this information can be determined from the content of the inscriptions on the coins. Of added interest in our present context, is the usefulness of coins when looking at chronological and regional developments of the Arabic script.

Coin weight in the name of Ubayd Allah ibn al-Habhab, Finance Director of Egypt between 725 and 734
3.5 cm (diam.), 6.47 g
CA 1492

Weights made of glass were produced in Egypt from the 8th century. They were struck by the department of weights and measures for a variety of purposes. They often contain the phrase wa’f meaning full weight, as the primary task of the Finance Director was to ensure that no cheating took place in the market-place. The two examples included here were made in the Umayyad period (661-750), the first of the Muslim dynasties that, with their capital at Damascus, ruled the Islamic empire at this time (see Fig. 1, p. 61).

The legends on this weight are introduced by the words ‘In the name of God’ followed by Ubayd Allah’s name who ‘ordered a weight of a fals of four and thirty qirat full weight’. The term qirat is a synonym of khurruba, or carob seed, which had been used as a unit of weight since before the Islamic period, and derives from the Greek kerateia. It was the denomination of the earliest fals, the term used to describe a copper coin. The legends on the weight are in a simple angular kufic script.
16b Ring weight in the name of al-Qasim ibn Ubayd Allah, Finance Director of Egypt between 734 and 742, dated 118/736–37
3.8 cm (diam., irreg.), 149.4 g
OA 4354

This cloudy green weight, damaged on one side, was made to weigh meat. It is inscribed in the same angular kufic script as the disk weight: 'In the name of God, the Amir al-Qasim ibn Ubayd Allah ordered in the year eighteen and hundred, honesty for God, a rati of meat, full-weight. The weight of the rati in the Umayyad period was roughly 440 g (one pound). (This example is lighter because it is fragmentary.) It has been suggested that its shape in the form of a ring and with a large hole through the middle enabled these weights to be suspended together by a cord.

16c Arab-Byzantine copper fals, struck with the mint name, Iliya (the Latin name for Jerusalem), Filastin, province of Palestine
2.1 cm (diam.), 3.55 g
1933.0213.8

This fals was struck at Jerusalem during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik (685–705), one of the major figures in Islamic history and builder of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. This coin shows clearly on one side (the obverse) the influence of Byzantine coins: the cursive 'm' that was a denomination (40 nummi) of the late Byzantine monetary system. This is combined with the mint name, Iliya Filastin, in Arabic in kufic style but using a combination of the Latin name for the city and the Arabic name for the province. The reverse of the coin shows a figure who is described as 'a standing caliph', presumably Abd al-Malik himself, bearded, with a sword, and around him the religious formula 'Muhammad is the Prophet of God'.

16d Arab-Sasanian silver dirham, struck in Isfahan, 60/679–80
3.2 cm (diam.), 4.05 g
1936.0003.11 Presented by C Davies Sherborn

This was struck by Ubaidallah ibn Ziyad, who was appointed governor of Khurasan in north-eastern Iran by the Caliph Mu'awiyah in 672. He then became governor of Basra and Kufa in Iraq in 679.

The coin of Ubaidallah ibn Ziyad shows on the obverse the portrait of the Sasanian King Khosrow II (ruled 591 – 628) wearing a winged crown, the symbol of the Zoroastrian god of victory, Verathragna. The coins legends are in Pahlavi/Middle Persian and follow the Sasanian tradition: name of governor on the right and GDH azpud (may his glory increase) on the left. Sasanian astral symbols and the Arabic bismala appear in the margin. The reverse depicts a Zoroastrian fire altar and two attendants. Again, the legends are in Pahlavi and astral signs are shown in the margin. The mint is abbreviated to letters GD on the left (Gay Isfahan, central Iran).
15e Umayyad gold dinar, struck 128/745-46
1.85 cm (diam.), 4.27 g

This coin inscribed in kufic script was struck after the main monetary reform that took place in the late 690s during the reign of Abd al-Malik, as part of the 'Arabisation' of his empire. Although it bears no mint name it is likely to have been struck in Damascus. This reform consisted mainly of introducing a standard weight of 4.27 g to the gold coinage, and religious legends instead of the figural imagery that had been used on coins hitherto. The obverse is inscribed with most of Qur'an Chapter 112, whose words state the very essence of Islam: 'God is alone, God is eternal, He begots not nor is He begotten.' Around the margin is the date, year 128 of the hijra calendar, introduced by the formula, 'In the name of God, this dinar was struck.' The central inscription on the reverse is part of the shahada, the Islamic Profession of Faith: 'There is no God but God, He is alone and has no partner; while the marginal inscription focusses upon the prophetic mission: 'Muhammad is the Prophet of God sent with guidance and the religion of truth to make it prevail over all other religions although idolaters may be averse to it' (Qur'an 9:33).

16f Abbasid silver dirham, struck in Madinat al-Salam ('The city of peace', Baghdad) in 181/797-98
2.6 cm (diam.), 2.53 g

Struck during the reign of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809), the obverse shows the shahada and in the margin the mint and date formula. On the reverse, the marginal legend is Qur'an 9:33 as on the dinar described above. The central field is inscribed 'Muhammad is the Prophet of God.' Below it is the phrase, 'the Amir al-Amin Muhammad son of the Commander of the Faithful ordered [this coin]' and 'Ja'far'. Al-Amin was the caliph's heir but his succession was contested by his brother al-Ma'mun. This resulted in a bloody civil war in which al-Amin was defeated. 'Ja'far' is Ja'far al-Barmaki, his tutor and father's powerful vizier.

15g Fatimid gold dinar, struck in Tripoli (North Africa), 447/1055–56
2.1 cm (diam.), 4.09 g

The Fatimids, who ruled North Africa before Egypt and Syria (969–1171), adopted legends written in concentric circles for their coins. The Fatimids were Shi'a and the kufic-style religious legends clearly demonstrate their Shi'i affiliations with the phrase, 'Ali is the Favourite [or friend] of God' on the reverse. Another phrase states, 'the imam summons all men to profess the unity of the eternal God'.

16h Abbasid gold double dinar, struck in Baghdad, first half of 13th century
2.7 cm (diam.), 3.67 g

This was struck by one of the last Abbasid caliphs, al-Mustansir (ruled 1226–42) before the Mongol conquest and the destruction of Baghdad and the Abbasid caliphate in 1258. It is inscribed with the traditional religious formulas in an embellished and elegant kufic script.

16i Hafsid gold dinar, struck in North Africa, mid 13th century
2.8 cm (diam.), 4.72 g

This was struck by Abu Abd Allah Muhammad (ruled 1249–77), the second ruler of the Hafsid dynasty whose domain comprised present-day Tunisia and eastern Algeria (1228–1574). The Hafsid gold coins are characterised by the use of an elegant form of maghribi kufic, the script which developed and was adopted in the 10th century in Spain and North Africa. This coin is a double dinar, the primary denomination of gold coinage during the 13th and the 14th century. It bears neither mint nor date, only the religious formulas, 'Thanks be to God' and 'There is no power or strength except in God', and the full name of the ruler as 'Commander of the Faithful'.

16j Ayyubid dinar, struck in Cairo, 631/1233–34
2.1 cm (diam.), 7.06 g

In 1225–26, in Egypt and Syria, during the reign of the Ayyubid sultan al-Kamil (1218–38), the cursive script naskh replaced kufic on all the denominations of the currency. This change took place nearly a century after the cursive script had begun to be introduced on monumental public inscriptions under an earlier ruler of Syria, Nur al-Din Zangi (1146–74). The dinar is inscribed with the Sultan's name, 'al-Malik al-Kamil Abu'l-Ma'ali Muhammad ibn Ali Bakr' on one side, and the name of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustansir on the other. As God's representative on earth, all rulers pledged spiritual allegiance to the caliph publicly on the coinage and elsewhere until the overthrow of the caliphate by the Mongols in 1258.
Mamluk gold *dinar*, struck in Cairo by al-Ashraf Nasir al-Din Sha'ban, 779/1377-78
2.65 cm (diam.), 3.48 g
1804.0056.12

The inscription is set within a lobed cartouche and consists of the names and titles of the sultan on one side and the Profession of Faith on the other in a fine script resembling thuluth, a style of script favoured by the Mamluks.

Anonymous gold *dinar*, struck in Sijilmassa, 13th century
2.9 cm (diam.), 4.55 g
1870.1002.43

This coin is an example of a new style of coinage introduced in North Africa and Spain by the Almohad dynasty (ruled 1147-1269). It was struck at Sijilmassa in present-day Morocco, a key town in medieval times because of its strategic position on the gold route to West Africa. The central square is the dominant feature of the design and the kufic script has been replaced by the cursive naskh. All the legends are religious in content. The obverse has the phrase, 'God the One and Only, Muhammad is the Prophet of God, the Qur'an is the word of God' and below, the mint name, Sijilmassa. In the margin, 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God bless our Lord Muhammad, there is no God but God, He is the Merciful, the Compassionate'. The reverse is inscribed with the phrase, 'Praise to God and favour to God and power and might to God'. The marginal inscription reads, 'He is the One and the Last, the Apparent and the Secret, and He is Omniscient of everything'. There is neither date nor the name of the sovereign on this coin, but it may be dated to the late Almohad dynasty or to their successors, the Marinids.

Silver *dirham* of the Seljuqs of Anatolia, struck in Konya, 640/1242-43
2.2 cm (diam.), 2.91 g
1804.1023.19

These rulers of Anatolia were Turks but were strongly influenced by Persian culture. They spoke Persian at court, and on their coinage they adopted imagery such as the lion and sun motif from the pre-Islamic Iranian past. As well, they used ancient Persian names. In this case, it is Kaykhusraw II, son of Kaykubad (ruled 1236-45), described as 'The very great sultan'. These names feature in Iran's ancient myths and legends. As could be seen with the Ayyubid *dinar* above, the rulers pledged spiritual allegiance to the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. In this case it is the Caliph al-Mustansir (1226-42) with his traditional title 'Commander of the Faithful'. The style of the script is an exuberant cursive, ornamented with dots, florets and stars.

Silver *dirham* of the Seljuqs of Anatolia, struck in Siwas, 646/1248-49
2.2 cm (diam.), 2.74 g
1852.1023.19

This *dirham*, struck by Qilij Arslan IV (ruled 1248-57), is directly inspired by a previous Mongol issue of the Great Khan Ulush Beg (642-43/1244-45) featuring a mounted archer. Since their victory in 1243, the Mongols were the nominal overlords of the Seljuqs and they paid the Mongols an annual tribute. The legends are in naskh, ornamented with dots and florets. On the obverse is the ruler's name: 'The very great Sultan Izz al-Dunya wa'l-Din Qilij Arslan son of Kaykhusraw Companion of the Commander of the Faithful': on the reverse, the caliph's name, al-Mustasim (1242-58), the last of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad. Figural coins are relatively rare in Islam and this is one of the few moments in time when it was clearly acceptable to use such imagery.
**Ilkhanid silver dirham**, struck by Abu Said, Siwas, Anatolia, 734/1333–34
2 cm (diam.), 2.65 g
1972.0814.34

This coin combines a number of interesting features both in terms of its calligraphic styles and the use of different alphabets. Associated with their Mongol origins in Central Asia is the script **Uighur** which on this coin is used to inscribe the ruler Abu Said’s name, while his titles are in Arabic in the **naskh** script. Also emphasizing their Mongol roots is the use of the Ilkhanid era year 734 (1333–34). On the reverse in the margin are the names of the Orthodox caliphs in **naskh**, while in the field the Islamic Profession of Faith is inscribed in a remarkable manner—the **Kufic** script is rendered extremely angular and written in the form of a square (see Fig. 4, p. 63). This style of writing, thought by some to be derived from Chinese seal script, was used to great effect on architecture during the Ilkhanid era and subsequently on all other objects such as gravestones and seals. All Abu Said’s coins struck in the years 733–34/1332–34 bear this design.

**Safavid double dirham**, struck by Shah Abbas II, Tabriz, 1069/1658–59
3.6 cm (diam.), 9.15 g
1865,0804.41

During the reign of Abbas II (1642–67), different scripts and languages were used for different purposes. While the Islamic Profession of Faith on the obverse is in Arabic and in **naskh**, on the reverse are Persian couplets glorifying the ruler written in **Nasta’liq** script: "Throughout the world imperial coinage came, struck by God’s Grace in Abbas the second’s name." This contrasting use of **naskh** for religious inscriptions in Arabic and **nasta’liq** for poetry is typical of inscriptions on the other arts of the Safavids such as metalwork.

**Safavid twenty shahi silver coin** struck by Shah Sultan Husayn, Isfahan, 1109/1697–98
5.2 cm (diam.), 37.05 g
1920,0616.2

The predominant script here is a fine example of **nasta’liq** so popular for the writing of inscriptions in Iran from about the 16th century. Of additional interest is the prominent placing on the obverse of the coin—along with the Islamic Profession of Faith—of the names of the twelve **imams** revered in Shi’a Islam. These were inscribed on a coin of the Ilkhanid ruler Ujayyu (Cat. no. 16p) but their appearance on coins had been intermittent since then. During the reign of Sultan Husayn (1105–5/1694–1722), Shi’ism became more prominent in Iran with less tolerance shown to Sunnies and other minorities. The appearance of the **imams** on the coinage is therefore highly significant as a public affirmation of the growing influence of the Shi’i clerics at this time.

**Ottoman gold coin, one onluk**, struck by Ahmad III, Constantinople, 1115/1703
2.6 cm (diam.), 3.48 g
1877,0703.17

The **tughra** was the intricate device that served as the imperial monogram of the Ottoman sultans of Turkey (see Cat. no. 39 and Fig. 7, p. 65). First adopted on documents and coins from the 14th century, it does not appear regularly on the coinage until the reign of Ahmed III (1703–30). Each sultan generally chose the precise form of his **tughra** on the day of his accession from specimens prepared for him in advance. Ahmed III’s **tughra**, which is embellished with arabesques and florrets, is inscribed, ‘Ahmad son of Mahmoud Khan the Victorious (al-Muzaffar) the ever victorious’.

**Ottoman gold coin, a zeri mahbub or double sequin**, struck by the Ottoman sultan Mahmoud I, 1143/1730
2.4 cm (diam.), 4.33 g
Marais 464

On the obverse is the Sultan’s **tughra**. On the reverse is the mint name, Islimbul (Istanbul), which in Turkish means ‘Where Islam abounds’ and was given to the city following its conquest under Mehmed II in 1453 as an alternative for Constantinople. It is first used as a mint name during the reign of Ahmed III and a **firman** of 1760 decreed that it should be substituted for the mint name Qustantiniyah on coins but it continued to alternate with it until 1867. Unlike other Islamic coinages, the sultans did not place religious phrases on their coins.

Entries 16b–c and 16e–u contributed by:
Cecile Bresc, Curator of Islamic Coins
Entry 16d contributed by:
Vesta Curtis, Pinaz Mardon, Curator of Ancient Iranian coins
Department of Coins and Medals, the British Museum
III Contact with Europe: Arabic script as pattern

There were two main periods when the Christian West was in particular contact with the Islamic East and which resulted in a high level of cultural interchange. The first was the 11th - 13th century—the era of the Crusades—the second from the 14th to 16th centuries, the period that concerns us here, which overlaps with the Italian Renaissance (1400–1600). Trade between the Islamic world and Italy, the presence of Italian merchants in cities such as Cairo, Damascus and Istanbul, created an awareness of the objects produced by Muslim craftsmen. Textiles, carpets, metalwork, ceramics and glass found their way into church treasuries or European private collections. ‘Islamic’ style patterns appeared on European textiles, Islamic carpets were depicted in paintings, versions of the Arabic script appeared. The designs on Mamluk metalwork of the ‘Veneto-Saracenic’ group were to have a great impact on northern Italian metal production of the 14th – 16th centuries; the shapes of the jars known as albarello, which were exported to Venice full of exotic spices, were also made in Islamic Spain. This shape along with the lustre and tin-glaze techniques with which these vessels were decorated, then made their way to Italy. The popularity and acceptance in the Christian world of the ‘Islamic’ designs has been attributed to the fact that the designs had no overt religious symbolism, and the script, although it has great religious symbolism in Islam, did not have those connotations in the West. Thus the fact that Gentile da Fabriano’s Madonnas (see Cat. no. 20) have Arabic inscriptions on her halos which bear a close resemblance to the Islamic Profession of Faith (shahada) was not deemed a reason for concern.

17 Stone-paste albarello with fluted sides painted in olive lustre against a cobalt blue ground, Damascus, Syria, 14th century
36.2 cm (height)
1983.266 Godman Bequest

Containers such as these, painted in lustre and other techniques, were used to export luxury items such as oils, ungents and spices from the Middle East to Europe. These Damascus jars were well known in Europe and frequently listed in the records of medieval apothecaries. The Arabic, which is in a loose thuluth script, is a repetition of what are probably benedictory words but so stylised that their meaning is lost and the words turned into pattern.

18 Hemispherical brass bowl with lid inlaid with silver, gold and an organic black material, Syria, late 15th century
14.0 cm (diam.)
1879,1230.a98

This belongs to a group of wares that were made for the European market—possibly in Damascus, which was known for its inlaid brass work in the Mamluk period and where there were Venetian merchants. They are often designated by the terms ‘Veneto-Saracenic’ because they were originally believed to be the work of immigrant craftsmen from the Islamic world working in Venice. This theory has now been disproved but nonetheless these metal objects were to have a great impact on northern Italian metal production of the 15th – 16th centuries. The designs on this vessel include European coats of arms and pseudo-inscriptions that are based on so-called ‘plated’ kufic, a style popular some three centuries earlier. The intention was to give an impression of writing only. It is this kind of ‘pseudo-writing’ that is picked up by some of the Renaissance artists.

19 Lustre painted tin-glaze Hispano-Moresque jar, Andalucía (southern Spain), c. 14th – 15th century
36.5 cm (height)
1983.542 Godman Bequest

This vessel was made in the domain of the Nasrid sultans (1232–1492), whose capital was at Granada. The techniques of tin-glaze and lustre are among the great contributions of the Islamic world to the West. Both techniques were developed in 9th century Iraq, spread to Egypt and probably from there to Spain. By 1300 the first centre at Malaga was well established. The well known Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta who visited Malaga in 1350 described how ‘wonderful golden pottery’ was made in the city and that it was ‘sent abroad to far distant lands.’ The techniques were later transferred to Italy and had a strong impact on Italian maiolica. On this vessel, the ‘Arabic script’ in cobalt blue is rendered purely as pattern and consists of a series of letters contained within panels repeated along the bottom and the side.
20 Photograph of Gentile da Fabriano’s (c. 1370 – 1427)  
*Madonna and child*  
41 x 36 cm  
Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa, Italy  
Scala, Florence

Gentile da Fabriano was one of a number of Renaissance artists to include elements of Arabic script in his paintings. Having used Latin in his haloes and hems, he began to use Arabic between 1420 and 1426, while living in Florence. In this case, the inscription, which is Arabic written in rather Gothic style, is based on the Islamic Profession of Faith (*shahada*). This is one of a series of paintings by him in which the halo of the Madonna is treated in this way. Unlike other painters who turned the script into more of a repetitive pattern, Fabriano appears to be attempting to convey the real thing.

21 Photograph of Paolo Veneziano’s (active 1312–58)  
*Coronation of the Virgin*, panel from S Zeno altarpiece, c. 1350  
98 x 63 cm  
Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice, Italy  
Scala, Florence

Here the Arabic inscriptions that are on the hems of the robes of Christ and the Madonna are no longer as recognisable as in the halo of Gentile da Fabriano’s *Madonna*. There are clearly clusters of Arabic letters but they have been turned into pure pattern.
IV Islam in China and Indonesia

Muslims first came to China as traders in the 8th century in the age of two great empires: in China, the Tang dynasty (618-906), in the Islamic world, the Abbasids (750-1258) with their capital at Baghdad in Iraq. Up to about the 10th century, Arab ships were sailing all the way to China stopping at the Indian Ocean ports along the way. The intrepid sailors and merchants such as the fabled Sinbad would set off on journeys that lasted years and return with exotic goods, one of the most popular items of which was porcelain, which was in great demand in the Near-East at this time. As a result of the trade, Muslims settled along the South China coast; at Quanzhou are the gravestones of hundreds of Muslims who came as merchants from as far afield as Iran and Yemen.

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1643), in particular in the late 16th to early 17th century, there was a powerful Muslim minority at the court of Beijing. Its importance can be seen by the many mosques built by them at this time, and in the numbers of blue and white porcelains and bronzes inscribed in Arabic script. The earliest known examples of these bear the reign marks of Emperor Hongzhi (1488-1505) while the bulk seem to date from the following reign of Zhengde (1506-21). These inscriptions are generally poetic, benedictory, or Qur’anic in nature and written in a characteristically fluid style that is typical of Chinese-Arabic. This style of inscription appears in other contexts, such as Qur’ans and gravestones. Sometimes legible, at others it is clear that the artist knew no Arabic and was simply copying words he had seen. This characteristic Chinese-Arabic calligraphic style is evident even in the 19th century scroll where the calligraphy has an abstract beauty representing a unique synthesis of Islamic and Chinese aesthetics.

22 Chinese porcelain incense burner, Ming dynasty
Zhengde mark, 1506-21
12.5 cm (height)
1973.0725.357

Porcelain censers such as these would have been used by members of the Chinese elite at temples or at home for burning incense sticks, powders or pellets made from vanilla, aloes, wood or camphor—its scent released after heating on charcoal. The Arabic inscriptions in the rondels translate as follows: 'I am the tender-hearted, ask for me, you will find me, pray for me (?) do not seek any other than me.'

23 Chinese bronze container with bamboo design on rim and base and lion-head handles, six-character
Xuande mark, 1426-35
11 cm (height)
1983.1020.6

In two cartouches on either side of the vessel are badly written versions of the Shahada, the Islamic Profession of Faith, inscribed in the fluid style typical of Arabic written in China.

24 Arabic calligraphy, black ink on paper, probably
southern China, c. 19th century
125 x 76 cm
2002.0729.01

This remarkable calligraphy is an extraordinary blend of Chinese and Islamic aesthetics, and produced with a brush—in the rest of the Islamic world, calligraphy is written with a pen. The word ya (oh) is written vertically with rahim (Compassionate), horizontally. This is one of the beautiful names of God (Cat. no. 541). The signature inscription reads 'written by Abd [the servant] Yusha' whose name is present in the Arabic seal. The Chinese seal is at present unread.
Cotton textile, blue and white batik, Java, Indonesia, early 20th century

While there had been contacts between Indonesia and the Islamic world through trade since early medieval times, Islam was only adopted in Indonesia in the 15th century and rapidly became the dominant religion. Trade and pilgrimage were undoubtedly factors influencing the designs of cloths such as this remarkable batik. There were imported Indian cloths and carpets circulating in the region and the pilgrims to Mecca are certain to have seen the magnificent covering of the Ka'ba (the kiswa) and other calligraphic textiles. The function of cloths such as these is unclear. One suggestion is that they might have been worn as protection by swordsmen (pendekar) going into battle. The inscriptions, which are in mirror image on the textile, consist of the names of the Prophets that appear in the Qur’an, after each of which is the formula, ‘Peace be upon him’.

19th century coins, China, Brunei and Malaysia

These coins demonstrate the effect of the spread of Islam on the local cultures of China and South-East Asia. While they maintain the shape and style of local currencies such as the Chinese cash coins, they include Arabic script, and, as with the gold coin of Kashgar, strikingly beautiful nasta‘liq calligraphy.

Bronze coin struck at Kucha, Chinese Turkestan, 1864

The form of this coin is typical of Chinese cash coinage. With its central square hole it enabled the coins to be carried in strings. It was struck by Ghazi Rashid, a Muslim ruler based at Kucha (1863–67), who headed a major revolt against the Chinese empire until his death. His name appears in Arabic on the obverse, with the Turkish title of Khan and the date, year two of his reign (1864). The reverse has the mint name described as Dar al-Salatana, ‘The house of the Sultanate’, the epithet for Kucha.

Gold tila struck at Kashgar, Xinjiang, China, 1292/1875

2.1 cm (diam.), 3.52 g

BMC 245

This coin, known as a tila (corruption of the Indian weight tota—the coin is also known as ashrafi) was struck by Ya’qub Beg (1864–77) who headed Ghazi Rashid’s revolt in Eastern Turkestan until he was eventually defeated and killed by the Chinese in 1877. This was the focus of Islamic aspirations in this part of the Chinese empire which were recognised by the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Aziz (1861–76) whose name appears on the obverse of the coin. On the reverse is the mint, Kashgar, ‘The house of the Sultanate’ (Dar al-Salatana in Arabic in the cursive nasta‘liq script).

Tin coin, pitis struck in the Brunei Sultanate (Borneo), 19th century

3.7 cm (diam.), 8.05 g

1937.0704.4

This anonymous tin pitis has on the obverse a traditional mythical animal typical of coins of this region, possibly a dragon, and on the reverse the Arabic inscription, Sultan al-Adil Malik al-Zahir, ‘The Just Sultan, the Visible King’, titles that had been used by Muslim sultans since the medieval period (see Cat. no. 12). This follows a coin type that had circulated in Malaya from the end of the 18th century.

Tin coin, pitis struck in the Malay state of Patani, 1309/1991–92

2.55 cm (diam.), 3.34 g

1921.6102.5

This tin coin shows an interesting mix of the use of both Arabic language and script. While the obverse indicates in perfect Arabic the date and the mint, fi bila’d al-Patani, ‘in the country of Patani’, the reverse has an inscription in Malay language but in Arabic script that reads, Ini Pitis Belanja Raja Patani, ‘this pitis is the currency of the Raja of Patani’.

Entries 26a–d contributed by: Cecile Breis, Curator of Islamic Coins
Department of Coins and Medals, the British Museum
v The art of the calligrapher

A well-known treatise by Qadi Ahmad ibn Mir-Munshi (died 1606) provides a wonderful and detailed description of all the calligraphers he knew of, who they trained with, and what particular script they excelled at. Of the great Iraqi calligrapher Yaql al-Musta‘simi (died 1296, who, when the Mongols attacked Baghdad, fled into a minaret with only ink and pen—no paper—and wrote a magnificent inscription on linen), he wrote:

In the art of writing he followed the tradition of Ibn al-Bawwab but in the trimming of the qalam and the clipping of its nib he altered the manner of earlier masters while he drew his guidance from His Holiness the Shah, namely 'Cut the qalam so that its point be long and leave it thick; cut the end of the qalam at an angle, after which it should ring like a Mashriqi’s sword'. And this Mashriqi they say was a man who made sword blades known for their excellency and quality, when someone trying out his blade struck something, he cut it in two and if the blade was set in motion, it vibrated and there was heard a ringing of extreme acuteness. Therefore it is best that the end of the qalam should be cut at an angle, and the point of the qalam be long and fleshy, and when it is put to paper it should vibrate and a ringing be heard.  

Images of the pen were used by Sufi writers, as in, for example, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi’s ‘My heart is like the pen in your hand—from you comes my joy and my despair'.

This section of the exhibition concentrates on the art of the calligrapher and included here are examples of the tools of the trade such as the reed pens, pen-boxes and ink-wells. Traditionally calligraphers made their own ink. One ink (mī‘dād) was made from soot mixed with a binder of gum arabic, and dissolved in water. Other colours such as walnut cordial could be added to make a rich brown. The ink is mixed in an ink-well containing threads of silk. These protect the pen from knocking against the edges of the ink-well. Another traditional type of ink known as ḥibr is more metallic and includes nut gall (an exccessance produced by a parasite on an oak tree) added to either metallic salts such as vitriol, alum or sulphates with, as before, the gum arabic to bind it. Nowadays, many calligraphers use commercially produced inks. Ghani Alani is one of the exceptions (see Cat. 46).
27 Riza, drawing of a calligrapher, Isfahan, Iran, c. 1600
10 x 7 cm
1920.0917.0271(1)

The calligrapher is about to start writing, an open book in his hand, his round ink-well and pens by his side. The painting is signed by this well known Persian painter with the words, 'Riza drew it', and it also bears a seal of the Safavid Shah of Iran Abbas I (ruled 1588-1629) who evidently had this in his library. The seal is inscribed, 'Abbas the servant of the king of holiness'. The chronicler of Persian painters and calligraphers, Qadi Ahmad, wrote of Riza as follows: '...he brought the elegance of his brushwork, portraiture, and likeness to such a degree that, if Mani and Behzad (earlier celebrated Iranian painters) were living today, they would praise his hand and brush a hundred times a day'.

28 Cylindrical cast brass ink-well inlaid with silver, Khurasan, eastern Iran/Afghanistan, late 12th - early 13th century
9.8 cm (height)
1999.0620.1

The inscriptions in angular kufic and the cursive naskh scripts consist of good wishes to an unnamed owner, 'Perpetual glory, honour, dominion, good fortune, peace and long life to its owner'.

The medieval writer Qalqashandi refers to the ink-well (dawat) as 'the mother of all tools' and a scribe without his dawat is compared to 'a man who enters a fight without a weapon'. Cylindrical ink-wells—originally in glass—were recommended because dirt and powder did not accumulate in them and they could be easily cleaned. According to religious sensibilities, because of the relationship between the art of writing and God, some Muslim writers prohibited the use of ink-wells and pen-boxes made of precious metals and recommended the avoidance of figurative decoration on them—proscriptions that were clearly disregarded at certain times.

29 Cast brass writing box, India, late 19th century
30 cm (length)
1998.0223.1

This is made of two separate tubular pen holders and a cylindrical ink-well in the shape of an onion dome commonly found in the Mughal and later architecture of India.

30 Rectangular brass pen-box with rounded ends inlaid with silver and gold, probably Syria, c. 1300-50
22.2 cm (length)
1881.0802.19

Inside the pen-box are two compartments: the larger one for pens, the smaller for the ink. The decoration on the lid and inside the box consists of a series of seated figures within roundels either holding goblets, playing musical instruments or in other poses. Around the sides is a fretwork pattern with alternating squares of facing ducks and geometric designs.

31 Lacquer pen-box, Iran, 19th century
23.5 cm (length)
OA 7410

Made from papier-maché painted and varnished, pen-boxes such as these, bearing designs akin to Persian miniature painting, were made in Iran. A major centre was Isfahan. The design on the top of the pen-box consists of a couple standing in a landscape by a river; buildings and a bridge are in the background. Around the sides are rural scenes with animals, a series of portraits, and a veiled woman being led by a man on a camel. This may be a literary allusion to the flight into Egypt with a camel instead of an ass.
32 Collection of calligraphers' tools, Ottoman Turkey, 19th century
12 cm (length, av.)
2002.0819.1–12

This collection of tools includes two knives with steel blades for cutting pens—one with a coral finial—and six pairs of scissors of different shapes made of steel with gold inlay—the large pairs for cutting paper. The handle of one of these is made up of two of 'the beautiful names of God': 'the Living' and 'the Just'. There is a tool probably used in the binding process that takes the form of a mallet used for smoothing the leather or for pasting the text block onto the binding. Also included are two ivory maqtas. These were used to hold the pen in place while it was being cut. They are signed Resmi and Junaid, who are likely to have belonged to Dervish orders, probably the Mevlevi, like many calligraphers and makers of calligraphic tools at this time.

33 Collection of pens and a sand container
11–26 cm (length)
OA+: 14021, 14027, 14029, 14030; 2003.0322.1–4
Three Qaṣr Ibrīm pens courtesy the Egypt Exploration Society

The pen (qalam) used by Muslim calligraphers was almost always made of reed, although many contemporary calligraphers use metallic nibs. Strict rules were laid down in calligraphic treatises about the type of reed to be employed and the angles at which they should be cut. These practises are still used by traditional calligraphers today. The qalam had to be both solid and pliable. The traditional method to cut the reed is as follows: When the reed is dry, it is placed in the palm of the hand and cut with a knife until it is in the shape of an almond. It is then re-cut to the desired width, which altered with the thickness depending on the size and type of script to be practised. The nib was then slit, which enabled the ink to flow regularly. With extensive use the nib had to be re-cut, as it wore easily, shortening the pen. Included here are a number of reed pens of different periods: 19th century unused decorated Ottoman examples, three examples with ink on their nibs from the site of Qaṣr Ibrīm in Nubia (present-day Sudan and a military outpost of the Ottoman Empire until 1812), and some modern pens that show different stages in the cutting of the pen. Sand was sprinkled onto the ink to help it dry.

34 Calligraphic exercise, Ottoman Turkey, c. 18th–19th century
12.2 x 23.8 cm
2003.0327.01 Presented by Oliver Hoare

The student of calligraphy working with a recognised master had to demonstrate his or her proficiency in all the canonical scripts, a process that could take many years in order to obtain the diploma—ijāza—which then allowed the calligrapher to practise and teach (see 'Introduction', p. 13). In particular the calligrapher had to demonstrate his ability to control the proportions of the letter forms because this lay at the heart of the art of calligraphy as laid down by the great master Ibn Muqla in the 9th century and followed thereafter. This exercise, which is unsigned but shows the influence of the well known Turkish calligrapher Mustafa Rakim (died 1826), is in two styles—nasḵ and thulṯūṯ—and shows each letter with a series of rhombic dots next to it that provided the framework for the creation of the shapes (see Fig. 6, p. 65). It is inscribed with a phrase often set by the master as an exercise for his students: 'Oh Lord make it easy and not difficult, oh Lord may it be completed in the best way'.

34a Qurʾan page, coloured inks and watercolour on paper, Iran, Anatolia or Northern India, 14th century
29 x 18.5 cm
1993.1009.01

Double-page from the Qurʾan Chapter 5, verses 75–77 inscribed with three lines of muḥaqqaq script with interlinear Persian translation and pious sayings in angular script within the illumination. Styles of script that demonstrate the ability of this calligrapher in three script styles are in use here, including the muḥaqqaq script of the Qurʾanic text, nasḵ for the Persian translation, and the angular archaic kufic style for the pious sayings around the margin. There has been some debate about the history of this now dispersed Qurʾan that centres on its unusual and striking marginal decoration. While the main script and the Persian translations suggest an eastern Islamic source, an Indian connection has been suggested for the style of the illumination. An alternative Anatolian provenance has also been put forward.6


Books from the Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, the University of Melbourne

i Qur'an, Arabic naskh script, 16th century
26.6 x 17.4 x 3.4 cm
MUL 4

Text in black ink, with some red and gold, on light-weight laid paper inlaid with heavier paper, washed with brown. Borders of red and blue with marginal decorations in blue and gold and a small unwan (decorative heading) illumination. Binding of red leather stamped in gilt, with title on spine and envelope flap. The end papers have a repeating purple pattern design and the inside covers are lined with maroon cloth.

ii Qur'an, surat 'al-Mujadalah' ('The disputer'), twenty-eighth section, Arabic, 18th century
18.9 x 13.9 x 1 cm
MUL 6

The text is in black and red ink with some gold on laid paper with a polished surface. The fly leaves are washed with yellow ink. Binding with envelope flap and inscription in Arabic pasted to the front board.

iii Al-`Natijah al-Sinniyah il Asma` al-Shuhur al-Qubtiyyah, Arabic, 19th century
20.1 x 13.9 x 1.5 cm
MUL 16

The text is a calendar according to the names of the Coptic months, with astrological and astronomical observations. Text in black and red ink with ruled borders on laid paper. Boards covered in marble paper with title pasted to the front board.

iv Ali ibn Abi Talib, The one hundred sayings of Ali ibn Abi Talib and A description of pilgrimage to Mecca (plans and illumination by Nezanti), Persian, 17th century
22.7 x 14.5 x 1.9 cm
MUL 17

The text block comprises laid sheets with inset text and illumination on each leaf. There is an unwan with painted gilt foliate work. The binding is maroon leather with embossed gilded highlights. It has a doublure and envelope flap.

v Ali ibn Abi Talib, The one hundred sayings of Ali ibn Abi Talib (copied by Shah Mahmud), Persian, 17th – 18th century
21.3 x 15.6 x 0.9 cm
MUL 18

The text is in black ink and gold leaf with multi-colour ruled borders. There is an illuminated unwan in gold and gouache. The boards are covered with brown leather ornamented with gold brushwork. It has a painted and lacquered central panel with floral design.

vi Ahli Shirazi, Majmu`a`i az Mawlana Ahli Shirazi, Persian, mid 19th century
26 x 15.2 x 3.9 cm
MUL 80

The text is the collected poems of Ahli Shirazi, in black ink with gold and red highlights and gold and blue ink borders. Text panels have gold sprinkled paper. There are three double pages heavily illuminated with gold and gouache, including an unwan, and several smaller decorative panels. The boards are covered in lacquered panels of green, yellow and brown while the inside of the boards is heavily coated with orange paint.

vii Abu al-Majd Majdud ibn Adam Sana`i al-Ghaznavi (died c. 1150), Hadiqah i Hakim Sana`i (copied by Ali Husayni Imad), Persian, 951/1544
27.3 x 17.5 x 3.9 cm
MUL 86

The text is on lightweight paper washed with blue and inlaid onto a heavier weight laid paper. Each pair of facing pages have different decorations in margins, in stencil work and have washed backgrounds with detailed drawings in gold and an illuminated unwan. The brown leather binding is incised with gold medallions with leather doublures and an envelope flap.

viii Muhammad Murad, Dastur-i himmat: Qissah Kamrup wa Kamlata, Persian nasta`liq script, c. 1150/1737
25.5 x 15 x 3 cm
MUL 134

The story is the romance of Kamrup and Kamlata and this copy was produced in Northern India c. 1737. The text is in black ink with some red, ruled borders with decoration of silver, red and blue. It is distinguished by thirty-four intact half or three quarter page miniatures in gouache, gold and silver leaf. In addition to the miniatures, it has an illuminated unwan in gold and gouache, with a double page of margins decorated with floral design in silver paint. The dark red leather binding is stamped in gilt and blind. It is a distinctively Islamic binding with a flap that extends the back cover.

Entries i–viii contributed by:
Julianne Simpson, Deputy Curator, Special Collections
Marete Smith, Curator, Rare Books (recently retired)
Information Division, the University of Melbourne
Louisa Wilson, Conservator, Baillieu Project
The University of Melbourne Conservation Service
VI Virtuosi scripts on paper

35 Calligraphic page, signed by Fakhrī, probably Iran or India, c. 16th century
27 x 17 cm
1949.1008.033

The calligraphy is in nasta’liq script in white against the deep indigo blue ground with floral designs, mounted on a green page. The inscription consists of the invocation to Imam Ali (see Cat. no. 54g): ‘Call upon Ali who causes wonders to appear, you will find him a help to you in adversity, all anguish and sorrow will disappear through your friendship oh Ali, oh Ali, oh Ali’.

36 Album of miniatures and calligraphic specimens, c. 17th – 19th century, within ornate Qajar Persian lacquer book covers, mid 19th century
25 x 18.7 cm (closed)
1974.0617. 03 (11)

Albums made up of individual miniatures or calligraphies were popular in Iran and elsewhere from about the 15th century. Collectors who could not afford to commission complete manuscripts would acquire single miniatures, sketches or virtuosi examples of calligraphy from their favourite artists and put them together like a scrapbook. This album includes a number of pages of calligraphy in many different styles, pasted onto coloured card and made up into a book. The page displayed, which is unsigned, is in Turkish style in a format developed by the well known Turkish calligrapher Shaykh Hamdullah (died 1520). Two styles of script, thulūth and niṣā’ḥ, have been used to write one of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

37 Calligraphic page, Lucknow, India, mid 18th century
9.3 x 10 cm
1948.1010.02

The calligraphy is nasta’liq that is written at an angle within cloud shapes that are surrounded by delicate floral scrolls. There are blue triangles filled with flowers and a decorative border, gold on an orange ground. It is inscribed with a Persian quatrain in the larger size script which expresses dissatisfaction with the absence of peace, and recommends searching for a place where those who like to drink go. In smaller script is the signature, ‘written by the guilty servant Hafiz Nurallah may God forgive his sins’. This calligrapher was in the service of the Nawab of Lucknow Asaf al-Dawla (1774–97).

38 Part of a letter of recommendation issued by the shrine of Imam Rida at Mashad in Iran dated 14 Dhu‘l Hijja 939/July 1533
28.8 x 19.5 cm (each part)
1996.0521.01

This document is inscribed in black, blue and gold inks in the divāni script favoured during the 15th and 16th centuries in Iran for decrees and royal correspondence. It was issued for a person named as Darwish Khidr Shah, son of Ustad Mahmud Yazdi, by the shrine that is highly revered by Shi‘i Muslims as it is associated with the Imam Ali al-Rida, the 8th of the twelve Shi‘i imams. It bears two seals, one of which is dated 934/1527–28. The text, which is missing a number of sections, begins by praising the benefits of making the pilgrimage to Mashad. It follows by recounting in essence that Khidr Shah has performed the rituals of pilgrimage and has spent two periods of forty days engaged in devotional exercises at the shrine during which he passed every third night awake in prayer. As he now intends to visit the other shrines of the imams (these, such as Najaf and Kerbela, are in Iraq), he asked for a recommendation and this document was made in response to this request.
39 Tughra of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, blue and gold inks on paper, Ottoman Turkey, 1520–66
43.5 x 62 cm
1949.0409.086

The tughra is an intricate device that served as the imperial monogram of the Ottoman sultans. In addition to its use on documents, it is also found on coins (see Cat. nos 161–u). These documents, known as firmans (commands) or berat (written documents), would have been rolled, and were issued by the Diwan (Council of State) on all manner of subjects concerned with the functioning of the Ottoman Empire, from relations with other states to petitions from individuals. In order to avoid forgery, the tughra was drawn and illuminated only when the document was ready to be dispatched. It is not known what type of document this magnificent example was attached to because only the first introductory line written in the divani script favoured by the Ottoman chancellery survives. Beautifully illuminated, it bears the sultan’s name, Suleyman Shah, and that of his father, Selim, and the phrase, ‘the one who is always victorious’ (see Fig. 7, p. 65).

40 Gold calligraphy on red silk, Turkey, 19th century
56 x 91.5 cm
OA+ 0351

This calligraphy is simply inscribed in jali thuluth (a form of thuluth particularly practised by Ottoman calligraphers) with the phrase, ‘Salvation is in truth’. Silk as a background for calligraphic painting was particularly favoured by 19th century Ottoman calligraphers.

41 Ahmad al-Helmi, calligraphic bird, 1331/1912–13
47.5 x 23.5 cm
Private collection

This bird is made up of words in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish that refer to an unnamed Sufi saint who is described as a grey luminous eagle. This is followed by the phrase, ‘may God hallow his secret’, a eulogy often uttered after the name of a deceased Muslim saint. These words form the body of the bird and also stream out of his beak. It is signed by the artist who describes himself as the poor, the humblest of servants, the Hajj (meaning one who has been on the pilgrimage to Mecca) Ahmad al-Helmi. The Helmi family was a well-known Ottoman family of scribes.
45 Ahmed Moustafa, *Expending in God's cause*, oil and watercolour on paper, 1995
80 x 180 cm
Courtesy the artist

The text is based on the Qur'anic text Chapter 8:59-60, the concluding part of which is, "Whatever you may expend in God's cause shall be repaid to you in full." The composition has been likened to a visual metaphor of a musical score, orchestrated and improvised such as a fugue by Bach or a string quartet by Beethoven.

46 Ghani Alani, *From the Mu'allaqat of Zoheir*, ink on paper, c. 1990s
60 x 50 cm
2003.0326.03

Inscribed in muhaqqaq script and written in different directions are verses by the pre-Islamic poet Zoheir (530-627) that begin:

Whoever does not oppress others is oppressed himself, whoever persists in his obstinacy from afar finishes by mistaking the enemy for a friend, and he who does not respect himself shall not be respected. Whatever a man's nature he had better believe himself capable of hiding it ...

Alani was born in Baghdad but has been living in Paris since the 1960s. He obtained his *ijaza* from two masters, Hashim al-Khattat al-Baghdadi and the Turkish master Harid al-Amidi (see 'Introduction', p. 13). He teaches, publishes and exhibits his work extensively.

47 Nassar Mansour, *Kun*, ink and gold on paper, 2003
46 x 25 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Jordanian calligrapher Mansour recently obtained his *ijaza* from the renowned Turkish calligrapher Ustach Hasan Celebi. He lives in London and studies at the Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts Institute. He has undertaken a number of architectural calligraphic commissions for monuments in Jordan. In this composition, the word *kun* (*Be*) is simply inscribed in kufic script. The word alludes to the phrase in the Qur'an, "and the day he [God] says "Be", and it is" (Qur'an 2:117).

48 Khalid Ben Slimane, *ceramic panel*, 1986
50 x 42 cm
2003.0320.01

Tunisian artist Ben Slimane uses Arabic letters and words which often carry Sufi associations on ceramic and wood panels. In this composition, the single word *huwa* (He) is in bold with *Allah* (God) repeated across the panel. These words are the beginning of Qur'an Chapter 112, 'Say: He is God the one and only ...' In Sufi ceremonies (*zikr*) phrases are repeated and become incantations. The style of this script, basically handwriting and not 'calligraphy' (as with Laila Shawa's *Letter to a mother—below*) has been described by Wijdan Ali as 'calligraffiti'. Ben Slimane comes from the region of Nabeul in Tunisia, a well-known centre of ceramic production. He trained as an artist in Tunis and received further training in Spain and Japan.

38 x 58 cm
1994.0726.02

This work is part of a series called 'The walls of Gaza' inspired by the graffiti written in Gaza during the first Palestinian uprising. Shawa describes the writing as a 'spontaneous form of calligraphy' (see Cat. no. 48). Her intention was to convey the ephemeral and changing messages written with spray paint. Purple was the colour used by the Israeli army to paint over graffiti. Laila Shawa was born in Gaza and studied art in Egypt and Italy and with the Austrian expressionist Osler Kokoescia. She has exhibited widely and her work is held in a number of public and private collections. She has lived in London since 1987.
VIII The power of the word

This section looks at the popular side of Islam and includes a number of different kinds of objects, from weapons and standards used in religious processions to amulets and popular stickers one might put in the car. Each is imbued with amuletic and protective powers by virtue of the inscriptions and symbols engraved upon it. To prevent misfortune and against the evil eye, people call upon God, or revered figures in Islam and utter and inscribe favourite protective verses from the Qur’an. In battle they may wear talismanic shirts inscribed with verses from the Qur’an or use swords inscribed with ‘the beautiful names of God’. To cure sickness they might drink from a magical bowl, or drink the water used when washing clean the writing boards used to learn the Qur’an, or have an amulet made by a holy man. There are myriad purposes for which such objects were made and used; their specific purpose no longer clear to us today. Many of these objects can be termed ‘magical’. But magic in this context is not malign. There were believed to be two kinds of magic: licit and illicit. According to the 10th century writer, Ibn al-Nadim, ‘while licit magicians constrain the spirits by obeying and supplicating God, illicit magicians enslave the spirits by offerings and evil deeds.’

50 Chinese porcelain magic-medical bowl, 18th century
20.5 cm (diam.)
F619A

A 14th century treatise asserted that, ‘protection against delusions and melancholia could be gained by drinking before breakfast for three days from a bowl from which Qur’anic verses and a particular magic square had been written’. This Chinese bowl is based on a form of metalwork magic bowl that is common throughout the Middle-East from about the 12th century. It is likely to have been made either for export to Iran, or for Chinese Muslims—probably Shi’a on account of the invocation to Imam Ali included in the inscriptions on the inner circle and the phrase around the magic square, ‘there is no conqueror except for Ali, and no sword except for Dhu’l Faqar’ (see Cat. no. 540). The other inscriptions include verses from the Qur’an—the ‘throne verse’ (Qur’an 2:255) on the outer ring was known for its protective qualities. There is a 4 x 4 magical square in the centre (see Cat. no. 541).
51 Magical text, Sub-Saharan Africa, 19th century
10 x 10 cm
1998.016.02

Texts such as these, which consist of formulas for protection and that include drawings of magical squares or other elements, are widespread across the Islamic world. Many of them are based on the text of a medieval author, al-Buni (died 1225), who wrote the most popular treatise on occult practice and talismans. The manuscript is cut square and is unbound but would originally have been kept in a leather bag. The style of the script is a form of the maghribi script known as sudani.

52 Double-headed axe, steel inlaid with silver, Omdurman, Sudan, 19th century
28.5 cm (width), 69.5 cm (length)
AF 1936.05098.8

The axe is covered with what appear to be Arabic inscriptions. But while there are some recognisable words such as 'Allah' repeated, the rest are meaningless. The shape of the axe is based on an Iranian prototype of the Qajar period of a type that might have been traded at this time. It has been suggested that such objects, which were largely ceremonial, may have been presented to Sudanese tribal chiefs as a token of appreciation by Arab traders.

53 Osman Waaqialla, Kaf ha ya ayn sad, ink and gold on vellum, 1980
17.5 x 13 cm
1998.0716.01

This calligraphic page is inscribed with Chapter 19 ('Maryam') from the Qur'an. Boldly written in thuluth script are five Arabic letters (kaf ha ya ayn sad) that appear at the beginning of this chapter. In tiny naskh script all around, the rest of the chapter is inscribed. These single letters are some of 'the mysterious letters of the Qur'an' which precede twenty-nine of the 114 chapters. They are imbued with magical protective properties and are often found engraved on amulets. Osman Waaqialla was born in Ruafa'a in Sudan, studied art in Britain and Sudan and trained as a calligrapher in Egypt with the master Sayyid Ibrahim. He has lived and worked in Britain since 1967.

54 Amulets

Throughout the Islamic world, amulets are made in a variety of materials and take many forms. They can be paper and placed inside amulet holders (Cat. no. 59), or made from metal or semi-precious stones. They are often worn as rings or pendants, sometimes written in reverse in order to be stamped onto something, or as plaques or stickers placed in the home. The material of the amulet itself can be important, with beneficary properties attached to certain stones. Carnelian, for example, is very popular, being the stone preferred by the Prophet Muhammad himself. It is often difficult to establish the date or from where in the Islamic world many of these amulets have come (if there is no corroborating evidence such as when a particular object entered the British Museum collection). The amulets are grouped according to the content of their inscription, with verses from the Qur'an first, and the more esoteric examples with signs, symbols and magical squares at the end.

54a Cowrie shell inscribed in angular script with forked terminals
1.4 x 1 cm (irreg.)
1961.0828.34

The words inscribed here, 'Except he the living', are from Qur'an 2:255 known as the 'throne verse'. This verse, which is written out in full on the amulet described below is known as 'the verse of seeking refuge' or 'the verse for driving out Satan' and appears in various other contexts such as inscriptions on buildings. Cowrie shells have traditionally been used in the Islamic world for protection and divination as well as for currency (the latter in Sri Lanka and the Maldives). The style of the script suggests that this may be c. 9th – 10th century. However, the angular script was often favoured for the writing of amulets and this may therefore be later.

54b Black limestone pebble, c. 9th – 10th century
2.4 x 1.8 cm
OA+13499

This amulet, with a hole through the centre, is inscribed on both sides in simple angular script with the whole of the 'throne verse' (Qur'an 2:255): 'God. There is no God but He, the Living, the Everlasting. Slumber seizes Him not neither sleep; to Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Who is there that shall intercede with Him save by His leave? (side a). 'He knows what lies before them and what is after them, and they comprehend not anything of His knowledge save as He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and earth; the preserving of them oppresses Him not; He is the All-high, the All-glorious' (side b).
54c Quartz, brown and white chalcedony, Iran, c. 18th century
3.2 x 4.6 cm
Stoane amulet 8

The amulet is engraved with cursive inscriptions of verses from the Qur'an. In large scale in the centre is Qur'an 13:13, 'Thunder repeats his praises and so do angels with awe.' Around the margin is the 'throne verse' (Qur'an 2:255) (see Cat. nos 54a–b) and one of the 'ninety-nine names' of God (see Cat. no. 54f), 'oh Forgiver.' This amulet and the following belonged to Hans Stoane whose collection formed the basis of the British Museum founded in 1753.

54d Quartz, white chalcedony, Iran, c. 18th century
3 x 4 cm
Stoane amulet 14

The amulet is engraved with cursive inscriptions in two different styles: in the centre is the word 'Muhammad' referring to the Prophet. Within the word is another inscription from Qur'an 66:51–22, 'And the unbelievers would almost trip you up with their eyes when they hear the message and they say surely he is possessed! But it is nothing less than a message to all the worlds.' This style of script within a script, which can take elaborate forms, is sometimes known as gufoor. Around the margin is the 'throne verse' (Qur'an 2:255).

54e Quartz, chalcedony, probably Iran c. 19th – early 20th century, set in a silver mount with purple rope and tassels
3.5 x 5.2 cm (stone)
1923.0203.1

The design of the amulet is in the form of a tree with inscriptions in minute naskh script within the leaves, and further inscriptions in the margin. In the margin are two complete suras, Qur'an 112 and 109. The tree is made up of Qur'anic verses and benedictory phrases that are as follows: 'Peace it is, till the rising of dawn' (97:5); 'Thunder repeats his praises and do angels with awe' (13:13); 'Peace be upon the family of Elias' (37:130); 'Peace be upon Moses and Aaron' (37:120); 'Help from God and a speedy victory' (61:13); 'Peace be upon Abraham' (37:109); 'Glory to God'; 'And he who relies on God'; 'God is great'; 'The one who relies on God is for God'; and, finally, one of 'the beautiful names of God' — 'The living'.

54f Quartz, yellow chalcedony, probably Iran, c. 18th – 19th century
2.8 x 4 cm
1867.1219.1

In minute naskh script, ninety-seven of 'the beautiful names of God' are inscribed. These are referred to in a number of chapters of the Qur'an as the asma' al-husna, 'the beautiful names' (There is no God but he, to him belong the most beautiful names.' Qur'an 20:8). Among the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad is the statement, 'God has ninety-nine names, one hundred less one and whoever enumerates them shall enter paradise'. The subha (rosary), which has ninety-nine beads divided into three groups of thirty-three, is used by Muslims to meditate on the names in their prayers. Only the first few names are transcribed here: 'oh Compassionate, oh Merciful, oh King, oh Most Holy, oh Giver of Peace, oh Believer, oh Vigilant, oh Most Mighty.' The list concludes with invocations to Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn and the words 'oh Budurh'. This is the 3 x 3 magical square (see Cat. no. 54r) whose name itself was assigned amuletic properties.

54g Silver amulet, c. 19th – 20th century
7 x 8 cm
1920.91 Presented by Louis Clarke

This is engraved on both sides with inscriptions in naskh script. The inscriptions, which include references to Imam Ali, Hasan and Husayn, indicate that this amulet was produced in a Shi'a context in Iran or elsewhere. The main text on side 'a' consists of Qur'an 2.255 and on the sides is the invocation to Imam Ali, 'Call upon Ali who makes wonders appear, you will find him a help to you in adversity, all care and grief will clear away through your prophethood oh Muhammad through your friendship, oh Ali, oh Ali, oh Ali.' On side 'b' are the names Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn, the Islamic Profession of Faith, a series of verses from the Qur'an (41:1) and the whole of sura 112 that lies at the heart of the Islamic faith, 'Say he is the one and only, God the eternal, absolute. He begats not nor is he begotten and there is none like unto him' (Qur'an 112).

54h Gold amulet, c. 18th – 19th century
4 cm (diam.)
OR 0231

This amulet is inscribed in nastaliq script on one side with two texts: the invocation to Imam Ali and Qur'an 68:51–52, 'And the unbelievers would almost trip you up with their eyes when they hear the message and they say surely he is possessed.' But it is nothing less than a message to the worlds.'
On this amulet the same inscription can be found inscribed on both sides. Most interesting is the presence of the names of the ‘Seven Sleepers of Ephesus’ and their dog Qitmir, the only animal to enter paradise. The story of the ‘Seven Sleepers’ (known as the ahl al-Kahfi, the people of the cave) and their dog, which also belongs in the Christian tradition, is told in Qur’an 18:1–25. Believed to ward away evil, these names often appear on amulets. The other texts inscribed on the amulet are, ‘As God wills’, and, in the margin, the following invocation, ‘He [God] has provided safety and been kind to the one who came [the Prophet], he has been kind in what he sent down [the Qur’an], you are the strong one, deliver us from grief on the day of darkness [of judgement]’.

The inscription, which consists of Qur’an 112, is acid etched to make it white. Dated amulets are relatively rare.

The cursive inscription in naskh on eleven lines is an invocation to God in the names of two supplicants: Muhammad ibn Abd al-Aziz (line 4) and Muhammad ibn K-ran(?)(line 10). The first lines of the text, which start with the basmala are as follows: Oh God the Clement, the Indulgent, the Merciful, oh God the Abased, Slow to anger, oh God the Living, the Everlasting oh God, Capable of all things, oh God Possessor of Glory and Generosity, oh you who Causes events to happen, oh you who Open doors, Lord of the Scriptures, open the doors of your grace to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Aziz.

The engraving of this seal is a remarkable tour de force. In angular script are the names of the Prophet Muhammad and the twelve imams: Ali, Hasan, Husayn, Ali, Muhammad, Ja'far, Musa, Ali, Muhammad, Ali, al-Hasan, al-Hujja. The last of the imams, Muhammad al-Mahdi, also known as ‘the Proof’ (al-Hujja), is believed to have occulted to return at some future time.
54a Camelot set into a gold ring, c. 18th – 19th century
1.3 x 1.5 cm (stone)
1866.1229.99 Duc de Blacas collection

In this seal, the names of the twelve imams (the same as Cat. no. 54a except that the last imam is here named Muhammad) make up the figure of a horseman holding a split sword in his hand. This is Ali ibn Abi Talib (first of the Shi'a imams) characteristically depicted with his sword Dhu al-faqar, which he reputedly obtained as booty at the battle of Badr (an important event in the early history of Islam). The sword is traditionally shown as having two points and as such is believed to have magical properties. The use of calligraphy in the form of people or animals dates back to the 15th century but was particularly practised by Persian and Turkish calligraphers in the 19th century. The texts are often Shi'a in nature.

54b Octagonal silver plaque, c. 19th century
3.9 x 4.1 cm
1843.0609.2

The amulet is inscribed in cursive script on both sides. In the centre of side 'a', the Islamic Profession of Faith (shahada) with around the margin, two verses, Qur'an 12.64 and 61.13. The latter is known as the 'victory verse' and states, 'Help from God and a speedy victory so give the glad tidings to the believers.' On the other side, following the basmala, are groups of 'the mysterious letters of the Qur'an' (see Cat. no. 53).

54c Circular silver disc, c. 20th century
3 cm (diam.)
1890.0311.1

This amulet is engraved on both sides with an interesting collection of esoteric symbols, numbers, letters and a magic square (see Cat. no. 54a).

54d Brass magical amulet used for healing, c. 19th century
7 cm (diam.)
1893.0215.1

This is an amulet used for stamping onto paper in the case of illness. It is engraved on both sides—its handle can be unscrewed and attached to the other side. On one side it includes six passages from the Qur'an which contain the verb for healing, sh f y and the 3 x 3 square known as bu'duh that itself is associated with healing. Around the square are the four archangels: Jibril, Mikail, Israfil and Uzair (see Cat. no. 54f). On the other side there are other verses from the Qur'an, more magic squares and some of 'the mysterious letters of the Qur'an'. Magical squares are regarded as one of the most impressive achievements of Muslim mathematicians. The link between making squares and magic began with the representation of religious phrases or 'the names of God' numerically according to the old order of the Semitic alphabet known as abjad. In this system, alif = 1, ba = 2, jam = 3 and so on. The earliest of the squares, which is 3 x 3 (known as bu'duh after the letters ba', da', waw and ha, which are in the four corners of the square), is often used to alleviate the pains of childbirth. Magic squares of a larger size were created and in all cases it is intended that the numbers should be equal in whichever direction they are added together. In the case of the 3 x 3 square the numbers all add up to fifteen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

54e Magical brass amulet, probably Iran, c. 19th century
7.5 x 9.7 cm (irreg.)
1891.0418.42

Arm amulets engraved with magic squares and Qur'anic verses were worn to give protection. In the centre of this example is a lion whose body is made up of a 4 x 4 magical square. Undeciphered words make up the inside of his head and rear. A sun with the upper part of a face is behind the lion. The motif of lion and sun has a long history in the Near East, being principally a zodiacal symbol associated with Leo (see Cat. no. 16m). In 19th century Iran, it became the national symbol of the Qajars, where the lion often brandishes the split sword of Ali (see Cat. no. 54a).
54i Brass magical seal, c. 19th century
2.8 (diam.), 3.5 cm (length, including handle)
1900.0205.101

The names of angels often appear on amulets inscribed around the sides of magic squares as in this example. Derived from Hebrew angelology, the four archangels, known as 'the sultans of angels' are each believed to be endowed with special gifts and functions: Jibra'il (Gabriel), the messenger to the Prophets through whom the Qur'an was transmitted; Mika'il, who presides over rain and plants; Israfil, who stands beside the throne guarding the heavenly trumpet; and Uzrafil, the angel of death. The magic square here is made up of 'the mysterious letters' kaf ha ya ayin and sad' from the beginning of sura 19.

54u Nephrite amulet, possibly India, c. 18th – 19th century
4.5 x 4.8 cm
1867.0709.7

This amulet, which was intended to be worn, is inscribed with a series of lines of letters and numbers and magical words. What they actually signify remains a mystery. There is in Islam a vast literature known as 'the science of the letters' which consists of studies on particular properties of letters. Within this there are for example letters of darkness or brotherly love, and letters of fire such as all, ha and te which ward off evils associated with cold.

55a-g A group of Islamic style magic coins, Malay Peninsula, 1950s and later
3.6 to 3.9 cm (diam.)
1990.0303.1; 1998.0105.6; 1992.1043.1; 1965.0867.3; 1980.0105.8; 1998.0105.2; 1990.0105.3

The designs on these amulets (decorated on both sides), which are in the form of European style coins, represent images of a variety of Hebrew Prophets referred to in the Qur'an, as well as historical figures, animals and landscapes. They are frequently accompanied by Arabic texts that name the images or invoke God's protection. 'A' has an image of Khidr, the prophet-saint, the guide to travellers, and on the back the names of the four 'rightly guided caliphs'—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali— with the additional word Yasin (two of the 'mysterious letters' often treated as a single word). 'B' has an old man surrounded by figures depicted in shadow-puppet style with, above, the Islamic Profession of Faith. On the back is a building that possibly represents the Ka'ba at Mecca. 'C' has a bird on one side and Arabic inscriptions on the other that include the words, Allah, Muhammad and some of the 'mysterious letters of the Qur'an'. 'D' has an old man with a stick who is named as Isa (Jesus), with the word Yasin in an attractive design on the back, 'E' has a man in Arab head-dress named Ali holding a sword. This is Ali ibn Abi Talib, one of the 'rightly guided caliphs' and the first of the Shi'i imams, a building on his back. 'F' has two old men facing each other, one of whom is named Isha. On the back, the inscriptions include the four caliphs. 'G' has two old men facing each other, named as Ayub (Job) and Idris. The back includes two kris with crossed swords pointing upwards with puppet-head handles, and again the names of the 'four caliphs'.

56 Silver necklace with amulet holder, Yemen, 19th – 20th century, and two paper amulets
Necklace
45 cm (length)
1999.0413.1

Paper charms
33 cm (length), 10 cm (width); 103 cm (length), 5 cm (width)

The style of the necklace is typical of the silver jewellery of Yemen, much of which was traditionally made by Jewish craftsmen. Inside the amulet holder were found a number of paper charms, two of which are included here. These are inscribed with phrases from the Qur'an, groups of the mysterious letters of the Qur'an, magical squares and the seven magical signs. These protective signs (found on the paper amulet to the right of the magical square) denote the most important of 'the beautiful names of God' and sometimes appear on their own on amulets such as Cat. no. 54q.

57 Cast brass talismanic plaque
11.5 x 9 cm
OA+2606

The scene at the top represents Solomon, who features in the Qur'an as lord of the winds, the jinns (genies), and who can talk to animals and birds. He is surrounded by his jinns and around the edge are magical signs and strange symbols that resemble ancient scripts. Mysterious and indecipherable, these scripts were considered magical.

58 Stone amulet mould, probably Obsidian, acquired in Iraq
6 cm (length), 5.8 cm (width)
1921.0511.1

This is part of a mould that would have been used to make a cylindrical amulet with the lost wax casting method. From the wax, a clay core would have been made from which the metal amulet would have been produced. The runners at the top were used to pour in the wax and the pieces of the mould were held in place with pegs. The durability of the material ensured that despite its fine decoration it could frequently have been re-used. The designs consist of the repetition of the words 'ya Ali', 'Oh Ali' (first of the Shi'i imams), and scratched across the top are the words 'oh Ali, through God'. Moulds such as this are rare and this item is comparable to a mould in the Ashmolean Museum acquired in Syria.
59 Tinned copper footed bowl, made in western Iran, dated in numerals 1070/1659
36 cm (diam.)
1984.0128.1

The main design is the inscription written in elegant nastaliq which lies against a floral ground. In Arabic it calls God’s blessings upon the ‘Fourteen Protected Ones’ (the twelve imams and the prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatima). They are given in the form of their name and attribute. For example, ‘Ali the chosen one’, ‘Hasan the pleasing’, ‘Husayn the martyr’. It is interesting to note that Arabic still continued as the preferred language for religious inscriptions while Persian was read and spoken by the majority of the population at this time.

60 Writing board, West Africa, c. 19th century or earlier
32 cm (height)
Private collection

Children, particularly in Africa, learnt to read and write the Qur’an using writing boards known as jawh. They would start with the short suras and gradually work their way through to the longer ones. When a child had memorised a chapter, water was used to wipe the board clean. It was essential however that the water was preserved. This water was believed to contain the words of God and was regarded as efficacious against numerous afflictions. The inscription in a form of maghribi script is inscribed on one side (illustrated) with sura 106 (‘Quraysh’). Both show traces of where a previous sura has been wiped off, sura 107 (‘Ma‘un’).

61 Steel sword inlaid with gold, Iran, mid 19th century
96 cm (length)
1879.1230.884

At the top of the blade is the name of the Qajar ruler Muhammad Shah (1834–48). It was the custom for rulers to hand out swords as gifts. Muhammad Shah was known for his austere character and mystical leanings. This may in part explain the motif on the one side that consists of a double-headed axe (see also Cat. no. 52), a symbol sometimes attributed with Sufi associations. The blade and the hilt are covered with a number of protective inscriptions. On both sides of the blade are a number of ‘the beautiful names of God’ while on the blunt side of the blade are the names of the ‘Seven Sleepers of Ephesus’ (Cat. no. 54).

62 Standard (alam), gilded brass, Iran, 17th century
128 cm (height)
1888.0901.17

Alams were carried in religious processions, particularly at the annual Muharram (the first month of the Muslim year) ceremony which commemorates the martyrdom of the Shi’i Imam Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the battle of Kerbela in 680. This tragic event features strongly in the religious life of the Shi’a sect of Islam (who mostly reside in Iran and with communities in Iraq, the Gulf, India and elsewhere). In its shape, the standard also symbolises the sword of Imam Ali (see Cat. no. 540). The inscriptions are in open-work against an elaborate floral background. The words God, Muhammad, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn are set in a beautiful composition in bold script with the invocation ‘Oh Ali’ in a roundel above. Along the ‘blade’ of the alam the names are repeated in open-work cartouches. This is one of a pair.

63 Standard, copper, in the form of a hand, probably Iran, c. 18th – 19th century
41 cm (height)
1963.11–1

This standard is in the form of a hand. In some areas it is known as ‘the hand of Fatima’, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, the source of numerous legends who has a huge following among Sunnis and Shi’a. In Iran, although Fatima is widely revered among the Shi’a, the hand is known as the ‘hand of Abbas’, Husayn’s half-brother and standard-bearer who lost both arms in the battle of Kerbela, yet fought on. The hand is engraved on both sides. On one side are the names of the Shi’a imams, on the other are facing winged horses standing on either side of a domed building, presumably the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The winged horse is known as Burāq and is the horse upon which the Prophet Muhammad rode on his night journey to heaven.
ابن الله الرحمان
أبي بكر Макいただきました
فقالا: الله وبنيه
وفي نفس عليكم
المليك
وركب الملك
بما في كلها توضيح
العيان لما رأوا
ومنهند
الله
الله
الله
الله
64 Popular stickers, Cairo, 1990s
6 cm (height)
1999.0010.1-5

Stickers such as these would have been used to stick on the
windscreen of a car or elsewhere in the home or work-place.
They are in the form of the hand; one has an eye in the
centre to guard against the evil eye. The phrase inscribed
is, 'oh God, gracious to his servants' (Qur’an 46:19).

65 Popular print, Baghdad, c. 1960s
25 x 34.5 cm
2003.0302.01

This colourful popular print consists of two birds in the centre
made up of the words, 'In the name of God, the Merciful,
the Compassionate'. The bird on the right is the mirror image
of the one on the left. In the corners are two buildings,
the Ka'ba in Mecca on the right and the Qazimain mosque
in Baghdad on the left. The rest of the picture consists largely
of passages from the Qur’an. This print is of a type that would
be pinned up at home or in the work-place.

66 Rachid Koraichi, silk banner with magical signs,
Algeria, 1988
222 x 190 cm
1992.0303.01

This textile is part of a series that was created for an exhibition
entitled Salome that took place in Paris in 1988. This
composition is typical of Koraichi’s work: symbols, words and
magical squares drawn from the Islamic magical tradition recall
designs on West African talismanic shirts or magic bowls.
Koraichi works in many other media including ceramic,
metalwork and paper. Born in 1947 he has studied in Algeria
and France and has been exhibiting his work since the 1970s.

Notes
1 AS Melkan-Chirvani, Islamic metalwork from the Iranian world
8 – 18th centuries, Victoria and Albert Museum, London,
1982, pp. 16, 114–16; R Ward, Islamic metalwork, British Museum
2 A Cogger-Smith, Lustre pottery: technique, tradition and innovation
3 V Minorsky, Calligraphers and painters: a treatise by Gara Ahmad,
son of Mkr Munshi (circa AH 1015/AD 1606). Freer Gallery
of Art occasional paper, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC,
4 A Schimmell, Calligraphy and Islamic culture, New York
5 Minorsky, p. 37.
6 For pages from the same Qur’an, see D James, Qur’ans
7 M Bayani, Ahkai va ather-i khush-nivisan, vol. 1, Daneshgah-i Tehran,
8 EJ Maunick, Na Mahdaoui, Ceres Productions, Tunis, 1980, p. 5.
9 B Dodges (ed. & trans.), The Istihsan of Ibn al-Nadim, vol. 1,
Figures
Fig. 1 Map of the Islamic world c. 750

Fig. 2 Map of the Islamic world c. 1900
Fig. 3 The Arabic alphabet

The Arabic alphabet is written from right to left and consists of twenty-eight letters that are created from seventeen different letter shapes. In modern Arabic, dots above or below the letters help the reader to distinguish between otherwise similar shapes. Thus the letter 'b' ب differs from the letter 't' ت by having a dot below the line as opposed to two dots above. In early Arabic, however, dots are rarely used and the reader has to judge the correct letters by their context. Many of the letters change their shape depending on where they are situated within a word. For example, the letters that make up the word Ahmad أحمد in their isolated form become آحمد. A number of letters in the Arabic alphabet have no direct equivalents in English. For example, there are two different types of 's', 'z' and 't' and sounds that are made at the back of the throat, 'ayn ع and ghayn َغ. To distinguish between these letters that have no direct equivalent in English, we have placed dots underneath them.

Short vowels that provide the key pronunciation and grammar are indicated by signs placed above or below the letters and are pronounced ba ب, bu ب, and bi ب.
**Fig. 4 Table of scripts**

‘Nun. By the pen and what they inscribe.’
Qur’an 58:1

Kufic was a script whose development from the end of the 7th century has been associated with the city of Kufa in Iraq. It is characterised by angular letter forms and was widely used until about the 12th century. It was the principal script in the early period for copying Qur’ans. The simple and elegant forms were embellished over time.

Eastern kufic was developed by Persian calligraphers during the 10th century and is distinguished by short, sharply angled strokes. This led to its description as ‘bent kufic’ by Western scholars.

Maghribi kufic was developed in North Africa (the Maghreb) and Spain in the 10th century and is characterised by a rounding of the angles of kufic script. Forms of this script are still used in the region today.

Naskh is the cursive ‘copyist’s’ hand, predominantly used from the 12th century for writing government documents in addition to copying the Qur’an. It is one of the ‘six calligraphic styles’ refined by the calligrapher Ibn Muqla (died 940).

Thuluth, meaning ‘one third’, is one of Ibn Muqla’s ‘six calligraphic styles’, a large scale cursive script often used for monumental inscriptions and particularly favoured by the Mamluk rulers of Egypt (1250–1517).

Nasta’liq is the ‘hanging’ script, described as ‘the bride of the Islamic styles of writing’ and reputedly developed in the 13th century, but legend has it that it was perfected by the calligrapher Mir Ali of Tabriz (died 1446) after dreaming of flying geese. It appears predominantly in Iran and India from about the 16th century.

Divani was a highly elaborate script developed by Ottoman Turkish calligraphers during the 15th century. It was particularly used for chancellery documents such as tirmans.

Square kufic was developed in the 13th century for ornamental use after regular kufic had been superseded.

As shown here, it frequently appears in a square on the Mongols’ (and their successors’) coins, architecture and elsewhere.

‘The pen’ copied in different scripts by Nassar Mansour
Fig. 5 The six calligraphic styles (al-aqjam al-sitta)

By the 10th century, there were said to be at least twenty different cursive styles of script which had proliferated over the years, largely used for personal correspondence or to meet the needs of the bureaucrats and merchants. This was in contrast to the kufic script used to copy the Qur'an. The great calligrapher, Muhammad ibn Muqla (died 940), a vizier at the court of three Abbasid caliphs, was charged with the task of standardising and refining the myriad cursive scripts. He, and later, Ibn Bawwab (died 1022), established what are known as the 'six calligraphic styles', al-aqjam al-sitta. The aim was to formalise a system for the writing of cursive scripts which would make them as well proportioned and as beautiful as the kufic script and therefore appropriate for writing the Qur'an.
Fig. 6 The system of proportion of the Arabic letter forms developed by Ibn Muqla

Fig. 7 The tughrā of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (1520–66)
The tughrā was the intricate device that served as the imperial monogram of the Ottoman sultans of Turkey. First adopted on documents and coins from the 14th century, each sultan generally chose the precise form of his tughrā on the day of his accession from specimens prepared for him in advance.

The tughrā is made up of the words “Suleyman Shah ibn Selim Shah Khan al-Muzaffar Daima” (Suleyman Shah son of Selim Shah Khan the ever victorious). Each section has its own particular name: the cluster of letters at the base which make up his name is called the ‘palm of the hand’ or ‘the pedestal’. The two large loops on the left, which are exaggerated forms of the letter nun (n), are known as the inner and outer eggs. These are intersected by the uprights of the word muzaffar (victorious). Within the inner loop is the word daima (ever). The three uprights are known as banners.


Albrow, SC. A checklist of Islamic coins, Stephen Album, Santa Rosa, 1996.


Begley, WC. Monumental Islamic calligraphy from India, Islamic Foundation, Illinois, 1985.


Ettinghausen, R. 'Muslim decorative arts and painting, their nature and impact on the medieval West', in S. Ferber (ed.), Islam and the medieval West, University Art Gallery, Binghamton, 1975.


Frothingham, AW. Lustreware of Spain, the Hispanic Society of America, New York, 1951.


Lane, A, Later Islamic pottery, Faber and Faber, London, 1957


Rogers, JM, Islamic art & design 1500 - 1700, British Museum Publications, 1983.


Acknowledgments

Venetia Porter

This exhibition is the initiative of Alistair Duncan, Director of the Altajir Trust and it is to him and to His Excellency Mohamed Mahdi Al Tajir that I owe the greatest thanks.

I am grateful to His Excellency Mohamed Mahdi Al Tajir, Ahmed Moustafa, the Egypt Exploration Society and the other lenders, for allowing us to include their objects in the exhibition and to Nassar Mansour for the graphics of the Arabic calligraphy and to Ann Seairight for the maps.

Many people have helped in the organisation of the exhibition and the catalogue; first and foremost my friend and assistant on this project, Zelfa Hourani; Carolyn Perry, who helped me in the early stages; and my colleagues at the British Museum in the departments of Oriental Antiquities, Coins and Medals and Conservation. In particular I would like to thank Robert Knox, Steve Drury-Thurgood, Elizabeth Morgan and Stephen Ruscoe, Janet Larkin and David Ward, and the photographers John Williams, Kevin Lovelock, Jerome Perkins and Stephen Dodd.

For writing the coins entries, I would like to thank Cecile Besc and Vesta Curtis. For help with some of the metalwork, Rachel Ward and Sue La Niece. For help with reading some of the calligraphic pages, Marjeh Bayani Wolpert and Nabil Saidi. For reading the manuscript and for making many useful suggestions I am greatly indebted to Sheila Blair, Michael Macdonald, my colleague Sheila Canby and to my husband Charles Tripp. Any mistakes are my own.

At the Ian Potter Museum of Art, my very great thanks go to Chris McAuliffe and Henry Gaughan; to Bala Starr, Joanna Bosse and Jessica Ashcroft in Exhibitions; Kate Scott, Graphic Designer; Belinda Nemec and staff in Collections Management; and Jude Fraser and Louise Wilson in the University of Melbourne Conservation Service. In the Information Division of the University of Melbourne, I would like to thank Ian Morrison and Julianne Simpson for making available to the exhibition books from the university's Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection.