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Iranian Contribution to the Art of Islamic Calligraphy

The art of Islamic Calligraphy is considered to be one of the highest forms of artistic expression in the entire Muslim world. In view of its widespread use even-to-day, only second to the Roman Alphabet, the Arabic script which is the mother of all Islamic scripts, was developed at a much later date. If we compare the kind of script used by the nomadic Arabs of Hijaz before the appearance of Islam with the great progress it made in the wake of Islam and the revelation of the Holy Quran we discern on it the tremendous influence of Islam—the discipline, beauty and elegance which it lent to this script. A comparison of the two inscriptions written in Nabataean script (The Pre-Islamic script of Arabs) fig. I & 2 first dated 250 A.D. and the second dated 568 A.D. will reveal how little change has taken place in course of about 300 years until the birth of Islam. Immediately after the advent of Islam we witness the invention of the Kufic script. Unlike the primitive Nabataean script, the Kufic, an early Islamic script has a strong geometrical structure (Fig. 3). It has based mainly on long horizontal and short vertical lines with very minor curves. The Kufic later developed into various decorative styles. It reached its perfection during the second Islamic Century, (8th Century A.D.) and by and large greatly influenced the Islamic Calligraphy. It is to be noted that for centuries copying the Quran as perfect as possible was the one and the only moving spirit which gave impetus to the development of Islamic Calligraphy.



The Six Styles of Cursive Writing

As Islam began to spread throughout the world, the need for new and more suitable scripts besides the Kufic was felt. The six styles which came into being are known in Arabic as *Al-Aq-lamul-Sitta*, and in Persian and Turkish as *Shish Qalam*. The cursive scripts were subjected to strict Calligraphic rules by Ibn-Muqlah (d. 940 A.D.) Ibn Muqlah originally hailed from Pars (Persia) and served as Wazir (Minister) in the courts of three Abbasid Caliphs. The scripts designed by Ibn Muqlah gained beauty and grace at the hands of succeeding master calligraphers like Ibnul-Bawwab (d. 1022 A.D.), the great Yaqootul Musta' semi (d. 1298 A.D.). Sheikh Hamdullahal Amasi (d. 1520 A.D.) and Hajiz Uthman (d. 1698 A.D.). The six styles referred to above are designated as Thulth, Naskh, Muhaqqaq, Rayban, Tawqi and Riga. Out of these, the Thulth and the Naskh are of prime importance and are more widely adopted. The other four have close affinity with the former two (Fig. 4,5,6).

The Naskh script also known as the Qur'anic script succeeded the Thulth and in times to come grown to be the most important style of calligraphy in its religious sense. Since the time the Naskh was introduced, copies of the Quran have been calligraphed in this style in greatest number than in all other Islamic scripts. The reason is that the Naskh is more crystallized, more balanced, more well-spaced and above all more legible than others. This unique quality of the Naskh made it the most appropriate script for God's words. As by this time Islam had spread to other land's, a script structurally as complete and perfect as the Naskh was of vital importance.



Well disposed, organized and balanced this script reduced to minimum the misinterpretation of the Quran (Fig. 5).

Having less straight and stiff lines and relying more on beautiful curves, Thulth had a lot of potential to be adopted as an outstanding decorative script, and that is exactly what happened. Although the copies of the Qur'an were still calligraphed in the Kufic, the Tulth at later stages was used as the most popular script for calligraphing the title, heading and colophones of the chapters of the Holy Quran. The Thulth is still the best choice for decorating the façades and gate tops of *Masjids* both in the form of stone carving and inlay tile work (Fig. 6).

Influence of the Iranian Aesthetics on the Art of Calligraphy

Iran is a country with a rich ancient heritage and artistic tradition. One can hardly find an Islamic society the world over that had not been influenced by Iranian art, culture, language and civilization. Islamic art and for that matter the calligraphic art was no exception. Though some scholars have argued and produced evidences as to the influence of the ancient Din-Debireh¹ script of Persia on the development of the Kufic script but this article is intended to discuss and deal with the later contributions i.e. the invention of new Iranian scripts namely Taliq, Nastaliq and Shikastah.

¹ Din-Debireh was the script in which Avesta, the holy book of the Zoroastrians was written.



The Taliq

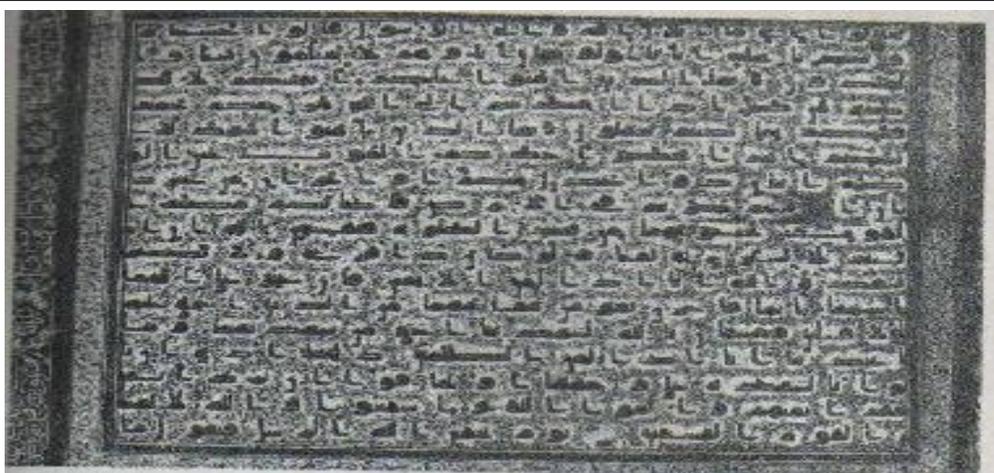
The Taliq script is of entirely Persian origin despite the fact that historically it came into being after the Naskh having quite different aims and objects. The Taliq script in the beginning i.e. seventh Islamic century, had close affinity with the Tawqi and the Riqa but its feature gradually changed. The following two major reasons account for this change.

(a) Geographical and Cultural; and

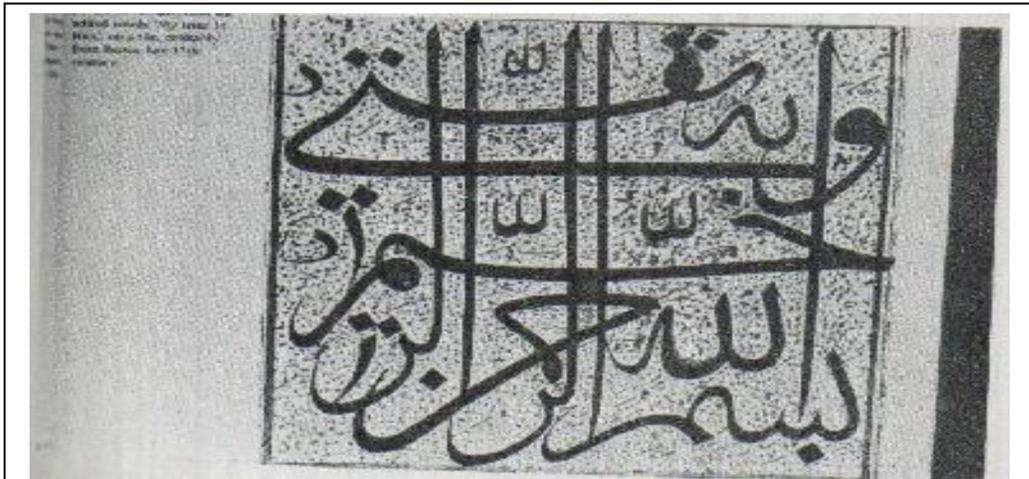
(b) Application.

(a) As the Iranians had their own script, which is believed even to have influenced the Kufic, they naturally in the course of switching over to a new script, preserved some of the structural qualities of their traditional writing which consequently brought about certain changes in the new script. These changes introduced the Persian Aesthetic; to the art of Islamic calligraphy. So the Geographical parameter was an important factor by itself.

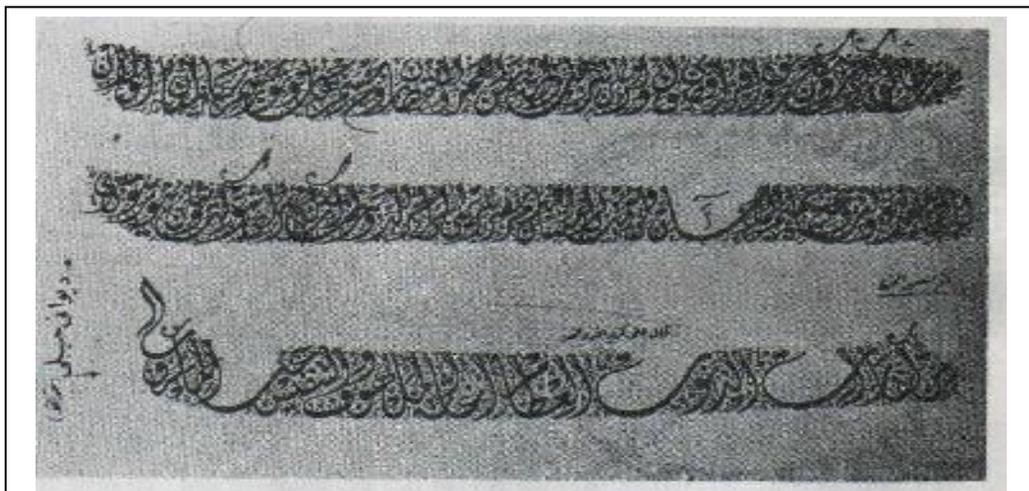
(b) The application or the practical use of the script is another dimension which is in no way less important than the Geographical factor. It has been explained earlier that copying the holy Quran and other religious texts was the most important element that caused the development of Islamic Calligraphy and brought into being new scripts. At this stage the Islamic calligraphy besides being an artistic or cultural expression of a particular human society may rather be called a religious script.



Kufic Script



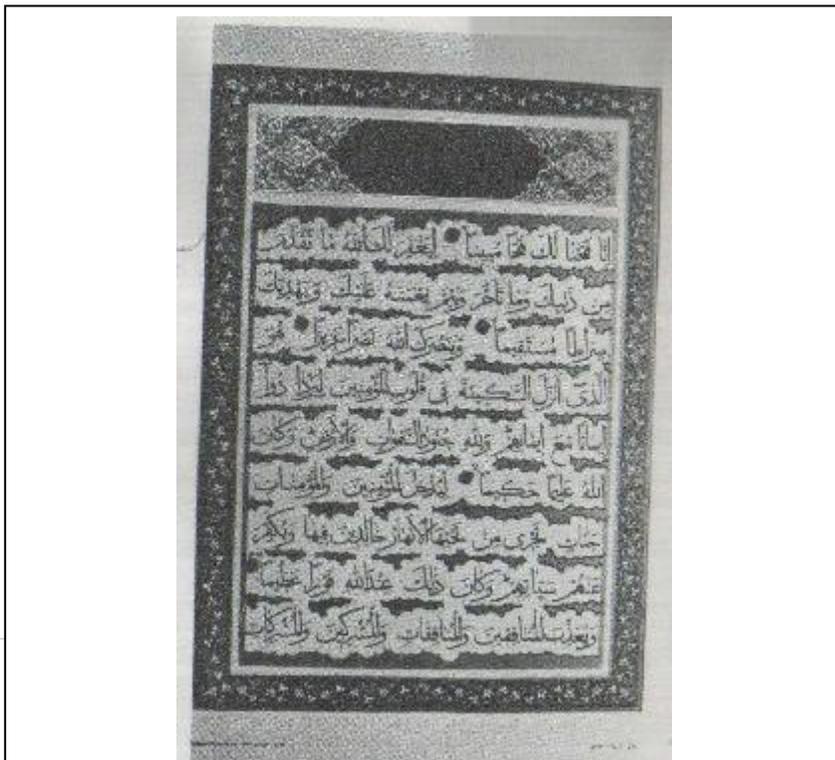
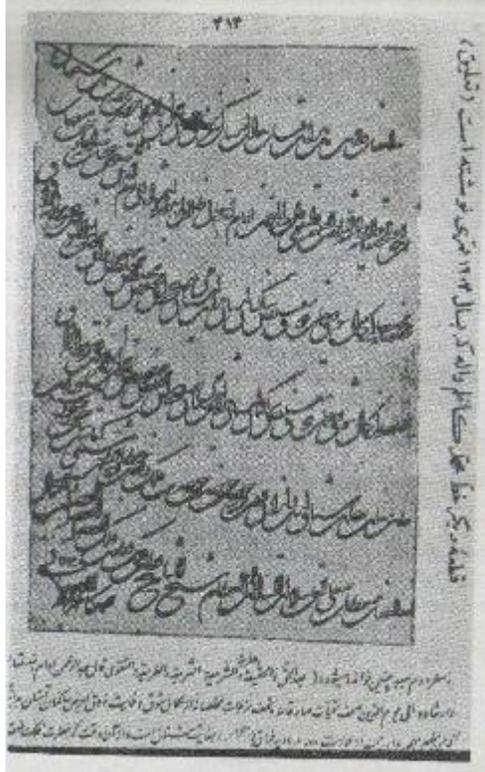
Thuth Script, late 17th century

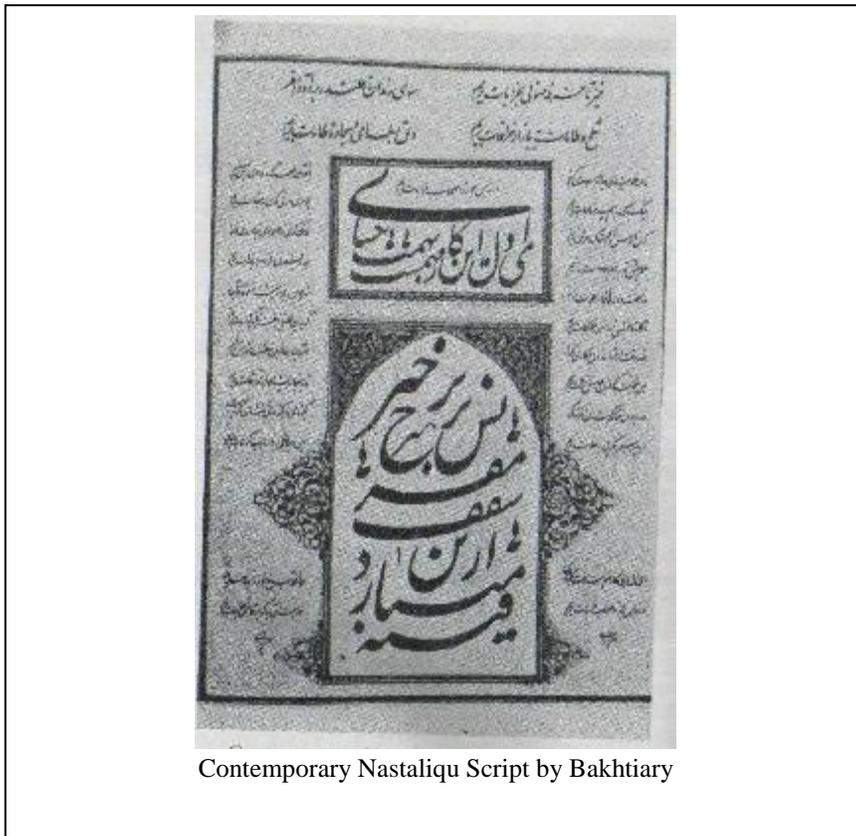


Diwani Script

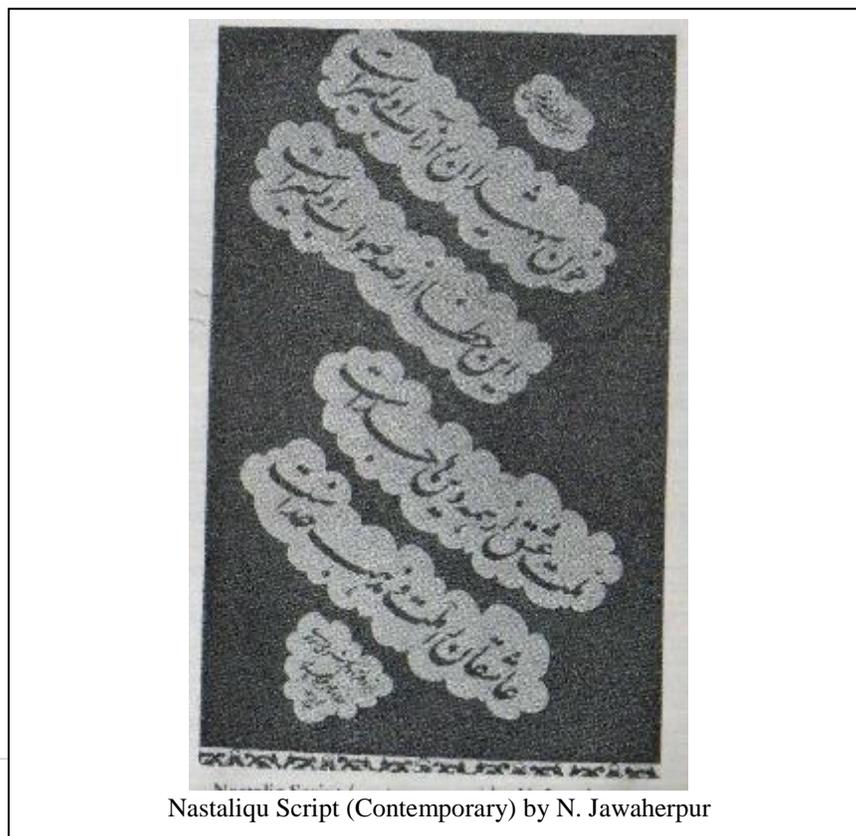


Taliq Script by M. Kazim dated 1204 Islamic Calendar (Late 17th century)

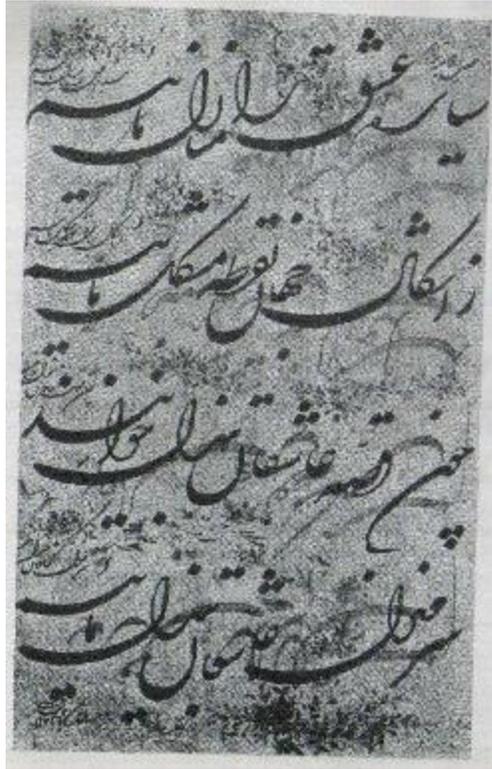




Contemporary Nastaliq Script by Bakhtiary



Nastaliq Script (Contemporary) by N. Jawaherpur



Shikasteh Script



Shikasteh Script by Y. Kaboli Khwansari



Syah Mashq by R. Mafi



Syah Mashq

Hence naturally every effort was made to develop and beautify this art; but as time went on the horizon of the practical use of the script opened up. The scripts that were used in the past failed to respond to the requirements of day to day life, official use and better letters as they were too slow. Therefore, the Taliq which suited the ever growing bulk of writing produced in Iran of that time came into being. (Fig. 7)

The Taliq script was very popular so far as the maintenance of the royal account books and the proceedings of the judicial courts were concerned. Ibn Khaldun (d. 808 A.D) writes “Among the contemporary Katibs it has become a habit that they connect some of the parts of the words and deliberately eliminate some letters that is not known by anyone except themselves and others will get confused. These are the writers of the royal account books and juridical register books”. (Ibn-i-Khaldun: The Introduction: Chapter 30). The above statement reveals the importance of the new script and the role it played in the contemporary new social system. The Taliq later developed into a new decorative script called Diwani. (Fig...).

Nastaliq

The next outstanding script to follow the Taliq and which later became the most popular script was the Nastaliq. This new script elevated the art of Islamic Calligraphy to its highest peak of perfection. The word Nastaliq is actually an abbreviation of the compound word Naskh-Taliq. This name was correctly chosen as this new script had the merits of both the scripts without their dimerits. The Nastaliq script is as complete, balanced, well spaced and organized as the Naskh and having the same speed as the Taliq. This script deviated also all the complexities and



imperfect round forms of the Taliq and made them simple and delicate. (Fig. 9, 10). The Nastaliq script first appeared at the Second Half of the eighth Islamic century and; later in the skilful hands of Mir Ali of Tabriz got organized. Mir Ali, therefore, is known as the inventor of the Nastaliq script.

The Iranians, after switching over from their old Pahlavi script to the Arabic script, had to add four more letters to the twenty eight Arabic alphabets. These four sounds i.e. پ (P) چ (ch) گ (G) as pronounced at the end of the word garage and گ (G) as pronounced in the word give were therefore designed by Iranians using the forms already available in Arabic, so that the harmonious form of the whole system might be maintained. The Safavid period in Iran was the golden age of fine arts. During this period the art of Islamic Calligraphy like other fine arts, reached a high degree of beauty, delicacy and grace.

The Nastaliq, having most delicate and attractive curves, is a script of utmost structural as well as aesthetical balance. If free, flexible nature allows the calligrapher to adopt his artistic talent in an unlimited variety of compositions. Therefore, the Khursi Bandi (compositional structure) though was always an inseparable element of Islamic calligraphy, by the introduction of the Nastaliq, was raised to a high status. The Nastaliq is said to be the most difficult of all Islamic scripts to aspire to perfection. By the introduction of the Nastaliq, it is believed the art of Islamic calligraphy reached its peak and since then no great contribution has been made to this delicate Art.



The Nastaliq in the Indian Sub-Continent

The Indians and the Iranians besides springing from the same origin, shared together about one thousand years of their history. A thorough and judicious study of India's history and cultural heritage is almost impossibility without consulting and benefitting from an enormous bulk of Persian books and manuscripts. Persian had been the court language and the main source of knowledge and learning in the sub-continent for about 800 years. It was but natural that this script became the most prominent script. Along with the language and the script, the arts related to them i.e. illumination, book binding, book illustration etc. became popular and a large number of artists were engaged in producing such works of art. History bears testimony to the wide appreciation and recognition of the Nastaliq script in India.

The people accepted it and the Emperors patronized it. In fact the Mughal emperors not only patronized and encouraged this art but some of them were good calligraphers of their own time. Babur, Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb and Bahadur Shah Zafar were outstanding calligraphers. The History of Islamic Calligraphy owes much of its greatness to the works produced under the patronage of these great patrons. Murraqa-e-Gulshan, for example, is a valuable Album produced during the reign of Shah Jahan, which contains beautiful Nastaliq specimens along with a large number of Miniature paintings and designs. This Album is considered to be an important source of information for the scholars studying the cultural heritage of the Muslim India. When Urdu was born, it took up the Nastaliq script as its own. The Nastaliq is still a very popular script in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. In Iran especially after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the art of Islamic calligraphy received a lot of attention, and the Nastaliq is often adopted by the



artists as a medium of artistic expression. Many canvases have been produced during the past two decades using calligraphic elements as pictorial motifs thus bringing the art of Islamic calligraphy to a new stage of artistic approach.

The Shikasteh

The Shikasteh is the latest calligraphic style invented by the Iranians. The word ‘Shikasteh’ means ‘broken’. The Shikasteh at the beginning was nothing but Nastaliq written speedily by the official secretaries during the 11th Islamic century (16th century A.D.) as a result of which some letters were written in a broken form and some of them were joined together as a result of writing speedily. This new way of writing became very popular in the official paper works. As the secretaries were normally good calligraphers of their time, the Shikasteh gained certain degree of beauty in their hands. At this stage the script was called Shikasteh Nastaliq (broken Nastaliq). Later, this new style which actually came to be written by breaking the rules and restrictions, thus giving more freedom to the artist, was accepted by the people as well as the calligraphers. In no time the Shikasteh, though maintaining its links with the Nastaliq, developed as an almost independent style (Fig. 11, 12).

The Shikasteh as most of the master calligraphers believe reached perfection in the hands of Darvesh Abdul Majid of Taleqan. He was followed by a number of calligraphers who tried to formulate certain rules for the Shikasteh script. Many calligraphers, it seems, were in favour of freedom rather than being trampled by rules. It is because of this fact that even about three



hundred years of its existence, the Shikasteh, in spite of being very popular among the calligraphers and the people, does not have any defined and definite rules.

The Shikasteh script can definitely be considered as a very successful movement towards abstraction. It allowed the calligrapher to distort the forms of the original letters, and according to compositional requirements even connect the letters that as a rule may not be joined calligraphically. In the Shikasteh, the form receives more attention than the content. The script becomes more personal, therefore, more capable of representing feelings and emotions of the calligrapher. In many cases we find that the rule line and even the direction of writing become unimportant because the contents and other matters regarding principles of calligraphy are just excuses for creating a composition. At this stage we find the Shikasteh getting close to music, dance or an abstract painting as to say. The written matter, whatever it may be, emotional, spiritual matters or a poem, loses its identity in the dominating compositional harmony. Creating rhythm, movement, positive and negative space, is the most important aim of the artist and at a glance the page looks like a tracery of the rhythmic movement of the waves of ocean. One can obviously recognize that, in some of the works executed in the Shikasteh script, the intention of the calligrapher was mainly to create a pleasing composition rather than saying something or conveying a message through words.

Though the Shikasteh in its artistic form is widely used, but it is also popular with the people at large as a beautiful style of daily writing.



The Siyah Mashq

Extensive practice and hard work are called for to achieve expression in any style of Islamic calligraphy. Even after reaching the high level of mastery the calligrapher must use his hand constantly to stay in form and keep the command of the led pen.

The Syah Mashq the literal meaning of which is ‘black (rough) practice’ was the name of the paper filled with words and letters, repeating a certain alphabet several times and often overlapping of the words and letters in order to get the maximum use of the paper. The paper used for such exercises was often of cheap qualities or left-over of other works as they were not meant to be displayed and seen by the public.

As mentioned earlier, the art of calligraphy being closely associated with the Islamic faith was considered as a somewhat sacred art. The calligraphers were also extremely religious: poets, sufis etc. In the Siyah Mashqs they subconsciously wrote verses of their favorites or something sad or happy according to their mood. From this point of view the Siyah Mashq is very important, for by analyzing these works, the content as well as the form, the psychological dimension of the artist’s personality can be gauged and studied (Fig. 13-14). Comparing different pieces of the Siyah Mashq is like comparing abstract paintings by different artists. Some of them are simple in composition having quite large area of negative space; in others the words are overlapping and woven together, the page is filled intensively with a wandering words and letters, very little space negative is used as if the artist was confronted with a difficult psychological problem. Unfortunately most of the old Siyah Mashqs are not signed or dated probably because from the artist’s point of view they were only rough exercises. For a Muslim



artist the content of whose art was absolute words of God, and inspired by this kind of approach he expected himself and his work to be perfect. Most probably he did not consider the Siyah Mashq as a presentable art form. Only after popularity of the Shikasteh script and the gradual change of approach regarding the aims of calligraphic art and the introduction of abstract beauty of calligraphy through the Shikasteh, the calligrapher realized the beauty that could be achieved through the Syah Mashq. Since then some calligraphers started adopting the concept of Syah Mashq and executing them on fine papers or even on canvases. The Syah Mashq though today is completely different from what it used to be, but still because of the overall appearance is called by the traditional name.

At the end it is to be noted that as different major styles of Islamic calligraphy were born for different practical use we still find them practical by devoted Muslim artist throughout the world. The printing industry and sophisticated printing equipments now used to print books, newspapers etc., could not replace the skilled hands of calligraphers, as calligraphy in Islamic tradition is not only a vehicle for conveying information but also it has been an act of faith and a means of celebrating God's glory as well as a mode of self expression.

Therefore, so long as the faith, the human motions and the alphabet live the art of calligraphy may also continue.

