

# SOME STYLES OF PRACTICE-WRITING BY GREAT CALLIGRAPHISTS

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THE importance of Kalimah in the domain of art is great. Besides the purely religious significance which it bears, its artistic potentialities have been unquestionable. The “letters alif and la—two letters with vertical stems—لا اله الا الله—form a wonderful basic pattern for every kind of decorative ornamentation of the formula which is, of course, found wherever Muslims have reached, and in both minor arts and architectural inscriptions these weighty words have been ornated with so intricate and bewildering interlacing ornaments that an uninitiated would scarcely imagine that the essence of Muslim faith is concealed behind them. ...”t This is indeed enchanting.

In my opinion this Islamic formula is the beginning of Muslim calligraphy. This was the main magic force of Islam in the world of art. The letter alif became the inspiring force in the art of war, where swords and scimitars were fashioned after its different patterns. The letter lam persisted in the imagination of the artists and architects till it found its fulfillment in the towers and monuments of Islam. On paper they both combined to culminate in the exquisite execution of Tughras. This was the height of “compressed” calligraphy.

In its earlier stages it were the Arabs who practiced the art of calligraphy, while it received its highest fulfillment in the hands of

the Persians, the Turks and the Indians. Innumerable styles of writing were developed up to the time of the Abbasids. From the Kufic to the Naskh, and on to Nasta'liq it developed in a dozen other forms. There has been no further development after the last style, and I feel there is no likelihood of another developing in these days of typewriting and printing.

In this short paper I will not deal with the history and development of this art. I have a few specimens of rare calligraphy to demonstrate and show how the calligraphists used to practise their art. There are seven specimens of calligraphy being reproduced here for the readers to ponder. I shall give a brief description of each to explain my point of view. It will show how the calligraphists used to show their skill in the practice of strokes and curves. These seven specimens pertain to the Nasta'liq style of writing. I have not come across any practice-writing in the Naskh style. Maybe some day someone is able to throw some light on this hidden aspect of calligraphy.

There are two main types of Arabic writing, namely (1) Kufic and (2) Naskh. The Kufic type is an angular type of writing, while the Naskh style is cursive and rounded. During the second half of the eighteenth century A.D., a style of writing developed in Iran which was called Ta'liq. This style tended to slope downwards from right to left, and met with great popularity all over the Muslim world. It continued to progress side by side with the other styles, till Mir `Ali Tabrizi combined the Naskh and the Ta'liq styles to produce the Nasta`liq style of writing. In this new style

the “curves develop into most sensual forms— either round and supple like the crescent, or smooth and oval like an egg.”<sup>2</sup> Its strokes are long and sharply or bluntly pointed in the form of a straight sword or a scimitar. In it the strokes flow easily, either straight or horizontally or with a slight gradually increasing bend towards the middle in the manner of a sword (Picture No. 1). This Qit'ah is from the pen of an unknown calligrapher of no mean order. In this you will see all the forms of a circle and other types of strokes beautifully illustrated. The calligrapher has also adopted the unique method of writing in the manner of a “Plough,” in which the writing alternatively appears in lines written in opposite directions, and makes it look as if each letter falls into the bosom of the letter opposite. The symmetry in each line is thus not interfered with. The strokes are spread out as if, like swords, striking in the bellies of the curves. I regret I have been unable to identify the calligrapher, but from his style and standard of writing he appears to be a master of his art. I would not be surprised if he turned out to be the great master Mir `Imad, for I discovered this Qit `ah lying atop another (Picture No 2) in the same shop in Meshed which is signed by Mir `Imad. Except that this writing is more bold than the one you have just seen in Picture No. I, the style of writing, the curves and the strokes are very much similar to the one you have already seen.

Picture No. 3 is another specimen of practice-writing which is again unsigned, but from the pen of a master. There is one striking peculiarity in this practice-writing, and that is the repetition of words and letters in different manners and moods so

as to present various forms of expression in that particular style. This practice-writing should not be taken as an aimless scribble. The writing has a sequence and makes sense. But it takes practice and a good deal of labour to decipher what the calligraphist has written. This will be more apparent from Picture No. 4.

As I have said, all these pictures are practice-writing of great calligraphists. The artist while practicing is creating different moods and patterns, thus covering the entire range of possibilities in which he can mould the words. Look at the bottom third of Picture No. 2, and see the words **ضعيفيم** (Dha'ifaim), **عشقم** (Ishqam) and **مسلمان** (Mussalman). You will find it variously written. Similarly, every word is written in a different style. This was real practice what they called &I. (Mashq). Going back to Picture No. 1, look into each line carefully. You will again find several words written in different styles. I would particularly draw your attention to the central bold lines, written in white ink, in Picture No. 1, which end with the words Khwajah Mahmud. How beautifully the variants have been brought out!

To further illustrate my point, now look at Picture No. 4, which is an autographed Qit`ah of Mirza Muhammad. Incidentally, very little is found about this calligraphist in books on calligraphy. A small mention is, however, found in Tadhkirat al-Khattatan of Hidayatullah.<sup>3</sup> It says :

میرزا محمد شیرازی نسب بمیرزا کوچک وصال رساند و نستعلیق را نیکو نگارد  
و شعر نیز گوید و تخلص داوری گذارد۔ (1290 هجری)۔

The picture shows the practice-writing comprising of a few verses of Hafiz which I am sure is easily readable. To facilitate its reading I re-pro-duce it here. In its upper half, it reads as follows:

ساقی بنور بادہ بر افروز جام ما  
مطرب بگوکہ کار جہان شد بکام ما  
ما در پیالہ عکس رخ یار دیدہ ایم  
اے بیخبر لذت شرب مدام ما

Watch carefully the variants in this-Qit`ah. Notice the word مطرب (Mutrab); how many variants it has! At the bottom in the lower half of the Qit`ah, it reads thus:

گر میفروش حاجت رندان روا کند  
ایزد گنہ ببخشد و دفع بلا کند  
ساقی بجام عدل بدہ بادہ تا گدا

غیرت نیورد کہ جهان بر بلا کند

Look at the word میفروش (Maifarush) or حاجت (Hajat) or ببخشد (Bebakhshad). There are four styles in each word. The fifth one was perhaps not possible!

Another style of writing in Nastaliq is the زلف عروس (Zulf-i `Arus) or the “Locks of the Bride.” It is also a decorative style. Actually under the Nasta'liq style of writing innumerable styles have developed, amongst which is one called Shakastah. This Shakastah or the broken style of writing is again of different types. Zulf-i `Arus is one of the Shakastah styles of writing, the other being شکسته آمیز (Shakastah Amiz). However, I am dealing with the Zulf-i `Arus here. Its strokes are interlocked and curve upward in a thick manner thinning out gradually, usually in a rising fashion. They ascend slantingly, as in Picture No. 5.

Picture No. 6 shows the Shakastah Amiz style of Nasta'liq writing. The calligraphist shows a free flow of his pen by joining words and letters in the most original manner. There is a subtle flourish in his strokes. The end of the line here also is always ascending. He rarely uses dots, except for decoration. This makes the reading difficult. He omits the dots deliberately to keep the continuity of his flow, and rarely stops to annotate the writing with dots or other diacritical signs. This *Qit'ah* is also the work of a master. Unfortunately, it is not signed, although dated. Picture

No. 7 is a clear-cut specimen of Nasta'liq style of writing which is flawless. This is signed by `Abdur Rahim. He is no less a person than `Abdur Rahim al-Jaziri Isphahani, the master calligraphist, who decorated the porticos of Madrassah Chahar Bagh in Isphahan with his writing. He is not to be confused with `Abdur Rahim `Anbarin Qalam, the court calligraphist of Emperor Jahangir. This *Qit'ab* will enable the readers to assess the beauty of Nasta'liq and compare its beauty with that of the Shakastah style.

All the *Qit'abs* reproduced here are from the personal collection of the writer.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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