

An Exploration of Calligraphic Art within the Context of Islamic Thought

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses and describes the importance of calligraphy art in the view of Islam. In Islam, art is seen as something very valuable, and encourages appreciation of beauty, science, technology, and art itself. Calligraphy, as one of the art forms that plays an important role in Islam, is a written art that has high aesthetic value. According to Shaykh Shamsuddin al-Afkani, calligraphy includes understanding the shape of letters, the placement of letters, and how to assemble them into quality writing. Calligraphy reflects the deep meaning of art in Islam and becomes a distinctive spiritual expression. This research uses the literature study method by collecting data from various sources such as books and scientific reports that are relevant to the topic of study. The findings show that the art of calligraphy in Islam has a unique and distinctive aesthetic beauty, and is part of the Arab cultural heritage that needs to be appreciated and understood wholeheartedly.

KEYWORDS

Calligraphy Art
Islamic Thought
Islamic Art

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INTRODUCTION

Islam is a religion revealed by Allah SWT to all humankind, based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is a true religion aligned with human nature, which includes will, desire, instincts, emotions, and reason (Wildan, 2007). In the soul, feelings, conscience and human desires that have a sense of love for beauty in the form of art. This beauty can move the soul, evoke intimacy, bring novelty, pleasure, or even feelings such as hatred and resentment (Wildan, 2007).

Judging from the importance of art and its position, Islam considers that art is something very important. Islam teaches appreciation of three core values science, technology, and art which must be practiced in harmony (Purwanto, 2010). Art is a work made by someone who is done consciously, aims to obtain and achieve aesthetics, as well as a way or way to translate certain symbols (Fitriani, 2011).

According to Ismail al Faruqi, Islamic culture views beauty as the value on which the entire validity of Islam depends, which is radiated through the beauty values of the Qur'an (Fitriani, 2011). Al Faruqi further explains that aesthetics in Islam is the sublimation of evidence of divinity, i.e. the i'jaz (quality) of the Qur'an cannot be imitated or matched, be it in terms of literature, composition, rhythm, beauty, balaghah, perfection of style and strength in displaying meaning (Fitriani, 2011).

Calligraphy is one of the most important works of Islamic art. Islamic calligraphy that emerged in the Arab world is a development of the art of beautiful writing in Arabic letters called *khat* (Fitriani, 2011). Etymologically, the word *calligraphy* comes from the Greek, namely, *calligraphia* or *calligraphos*. Kallos means beautiful and grapho means writing. Thus calligraphy has two elements, namely writing (script) and beauty (aesthetic value) (Raffles, 2017). From the above linguistic understanding, it can be concluded that calligraphy is a work of art in the form of writing that has a beauty value.

Shaykh Syamsuddin al-Afkani is someone who is an expert in the field of calligraphy, in his book *Irsyad al-Qasid* in the chapter *Hasyr al-'Ulum* states "khat is the science that introduces the shape of a single letter, its placement, and how to assemble it into writing or what is written in

lines (writing), how to write it and determine which ones do not need to be written, changing the spelling that needs to be written.

change and how to change it" (Raffles, 2017). This definition explains that the science of khat includes the procedure of writing letters, arranging and assembling them in a certain composition by achieving the harmony and balance demanded by every work of art.

When compared to other Islamic arts, calligraphy occupies the highest position, and is a very distinctive expression of the Islamic spirit. Therefore, calligraphy is often referred to as "the art of Islam", because calligraphy reflects a depth of artistic meaning, whose essence comes from the values and concepts of faith (Raffles, 2017). So it can be concluded that calligraphy is an art that has a high position and beauty value in Islam.

Calligraphy art in Islam is unique and has a distinctive aesthetic beauty. The values of beauty are found in Islamic art, so that everyone who has a soul of art will definitely appreciate Islamic art, including calligraphy art displayed in the form of Arabic writing. Calligraphy is often found in the corners of mosques, prayer rooms, and even in Mecca, so it is part of the aesthetic heritage of Arab culture that must be appreciated and understood wholeheartedly (Lukmanul Hakim, 2020).

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a historical-philosophical approach, as it allows a deeper exploration of the development and philosophical meaning of Islamic calligraphy across time. This method is chosen to explore the meaning, values, and significance of calligraphy art in the framework of Islamic thought in a deeper and more comprehensive manner.

1. Historical Approach

The historical approach is used to trace the development of Islamic calligraphy throughout different periods. Data are collected through literature review of classical and contemporary works that discuss the evolution of Islamic calligraphy, including influential figures, styles, and its cultural as well as spiritual contexts.

2. Philosophical Approach

This approach aims to understand the aesthetic and spiritual values embodied in calligraphy, and how it is positioned within Islamic philosophical thought. The analysis focuses on the perspectives of Islamic scholars and philosophers regarding beauty (*al-jamāl*), art, and spiritual expression through written form.

3. Data Collection Techniques

- Literature Study: Reviewing primary sources such as the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical as well as modern scholarly works.
- Documentation: Collecting images, manuscripts, and calligraphy artifacts from virtual museums, exhibition catalogs, and digital libraries.
- Critical Review: Analyzing academic works and journal articles that focus on Islamic calligraphy in both historical and philosophical contexts.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive qualitative analysis was applied by categorizing historical data and philosophical perspectives related to Islamic calligraphy, followed by synthesizing core themes of aesthetics and spiritual meaning. The study also uses content analysis to interpret the philosophical and aesthetic meanings of Islamic calligraphy based on relevant texts and visual materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Position of Calligraphy in Islamic Thought

Islamic thought places profound emphasis on the written word, rooted in the belief that knowledge is a divine gift and a pathway to understanding God's will. This principle is clearly reflected in the very first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him),

which began with the divine command:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ

Meaning: “*Read in the name of your Lord who created.*” (Qur’an, Surah Al-‘Alaq [96]: 1)

This verse not only initiated the prophethood but also set a foundational tone for the Islamic worldview placing immense value on reading, writing, and knowledge acquisition. The word “*Iqra*” (Read) symbolically elevates the status of literacy and textual preservation, which in turn cultivated a culture that highly esteemed writing, particularly when it came to the transcription of the Qur’an.

From this spiritual foundation emerged calligraphy as a noble art form, uniquely Islamic in its origin and purpose. Because Islam discourages the depiction of animate beings in religious contexts, especially within mosques and sacred spaces, calligraphy became a central means of artistic expression. Unlike other forms of visual art that may be limited or even discouraged, calligraphy is embraced as a *halal* (permissible) and highly respected form of creativity that visually embodies the word of God.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) also emphasized the significance of writing and recording knowledge. In one Hadith, he said:

قَيِّدُوا الْعِلْمَ بِالْكِتَابِ

Meaning: “*Bind knowledge by writing it down.*” (Hadith narrated by al-Tabarani)

This narration underscores the importance of writing as a way of preserving and transmitting knowledge. In the Islamic tradition, calligraphy was not merely a technique of beautifying writing, but rather a spiritual discipline. The meticulous crafting of each letter and word, especially when transcribing the Qur’an, reflects a deep reverence and mindfulness (*khushū*) toward the divine message.

Thus, the art of calligraphy is not just about aesthetics; it is intertwined with Islamic theology, education, and spirituality. It is a visual form of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), turning every stroke and curve into an act of devotion. Through this lens, calligraphy represents the synthesis of form, faith, and function elevating it to one of the highest forms of Islamic art.

2. Aesthetic and Spiritual Aspects of Islamic Calligraphy

The art of Islamic calligraphy is more than an artistic practice; it is a form of spiritual expression that blends aesthetics with devotion. In Islamic culture, beauty (*jamāl*) is closely linked with divine attributes. One of the Names of Allah is Al-Jamīl (The Most Beautiful), and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ

Meaning: “*Indeed, Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.*” (Hadith narrated by Muslim)

This hadith highlights the theological basis for appreciating beauty in all forms, including writing. Calligraphy, as an embodiment of Qur’anic verses and divine names, becomes a visual celebration of God’s beauty. The meticulous attention to proportion, flow, and balance in every script mirrors the Islamic view of a universe created with harmony and order.

In Qur’anic terms, Allah mentions the concept of beauty in His creation:

الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ

Meaning: “*Who perfected everything which He created.*” (Qur’an, Surah As-Sajdah [32]: 7)

This verse not only signifies the perfection of creation but also implies that pursuing excellence and beauty in human endeavors such as art and writing is an act of honoring God’s perfection. Calligraphers, therefore, strive for *ihsān* (excellence) in their work, often preparing themselves spiritually before engaging in their craft through ablution and recitation of prayers.

Calligraphy also serves as a form of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah). Writing Qur’anic verses,

the names of Allah, or the names of the Prophet is considered a meritorious deed. Each curve and line is shaped with intention, turning the physical act of writing into a meditative practice. This is why many calligraphers describe their art not merely as skill, but as a spiritual journey.

In addition, aesthetic harmony in calligraphy is achieved through adherence to traditional scripts, each with its own rules and philosophical foundations. For example:

- a. Kufi script represents strength and structure often used in early Qur'anic manuscripts and architectural inscriptions.
- b. Thuluth script is known for its elegance and flow, symbolizing movement and divine rhythm.
- c. Diwani script, developed in the Ottoman era, reflects intricacy and royal refinement.

Each script style is a reflection of cultural identity and spiritual philosophy, revealing how form and faith are interwoven in Islamic visual tradition.

3. Educational and Cultural Legacy of Islamic Calligraphy

Islamic calligraphy has long played a pivotal role in the education system of Muslim societies, particularly in the traditional learning environments such as *madrasahs*, *pesantren*, and *halaqah*. Writing and memorizing the Qur'an are core elements of early Islamic education, and from these practices emerged a strong tradition of copying texts with precision and beauty.

The ability to write beautifully especially sacred texts was considered not only a sign of scholarly discipline but also of spiritual refinement. In many Islamic educational institutions, students were taught *adab al-kātib* (the etiquette of writing), which includes inner purity, physical cleanliness, respect for the tools of writing, and the proper attitude toward sacred texts. These values reinforced the idea that learning and art are sacred pursuits when directed toward the remembrance of Allah.

This emphasis is consistent with the Qur'anic instruction:

ن وَالْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ

Meaning: "Nun. By the pen and what they inscribe." (Qur'an, Surah Al-Qalam [68]: 1)

This verse highlights the exalted status of the pen and writing serving as a divine oath on their significance. In the broader educational context, this reinforced the respect for calligraphy as both an intellectual and spiritual discipline.

a. Preservation of Cultural Identity

Beyond its religious and educational significance, Islamic calligraphy serves as a vital element of cultural identity across diverse Muslim civilizations from Andalusia to Persia, the Ottoman Empire to Southeast Asia. Calligraphy adorned everything from mosques and palaces to coins, textiles, and ceramics, making it one of the most versatile and enduring art forms in Islamic history.

Each region developed its own style, infusing calligraphy with local aesthetics while still preserving its Qur'anic essence. For instance:

- 1) Maghribi script emerged in North Africa with bold, rounded forms.
- 2) Nasta'liq script, favored in Persian and Indo-Muslim culture, was often used in poetry and literary works.
- 3) In Southeast Asia, Islamic calligraphy was often integrated with local motifs like flora and geometry, reflecting cultural syncretism.

Through these expressions, Islamic calligraphy became not only a sacred art but also a repository of collective memory and identity. It connected generations of Muslims across time and geography through a shared visual and spiritual language.

b. Contemporary Relevance and Revival

Today, there is a renewed global interest in Islamic calligraphy evident in international exhibitions, workshops, academic studies, and digital applications. In modern times, calligraphy is not only found in traditional forms but also adapted into graphic design, architecture, fashion,

and multimedia art. Artists and scholars alike continue to explore the philosophical depth and contemporary relevance of this art form.

Efforts to preserve and promote Islamic calligraphy are now supported by cultural institutions and online platforms, ensuring that this precious heritage continues to inspire new generations. However, preserving its spiritual and educational dimensions remains crucial so that calligraphy is not reduced to mere decoration, but remains a living expression of Islamic thought and devotion.

4. Calligraphy as a Spiritual Expression

Calligraphy in Islam is not merely an aesthetic endeavor it is a profound spiritual practice that reflects a deep connection between the outer beauty of form and the inner beauty of faith. Writing verses of the Qur'an, the names of Allah, or prophetic traditions is regarded as an act of *'ibādah* (worship), performed with humility, presence of heart, and spiritual discipline.

The art of calligraphy encourages *taqwa* (God-consciousness), as every letter drawn is a representation of the divine word. A calligrapher does not merely aim for visual harmony, but also for spiritual sincerity. In many traditions, before a calligrapher begins writing, they perform *wudu'* (ritual ablution) and recite prayers, seeking to purify their body and heart before handling the sacred text.

This aligns with the Qur'anic reminder:

ذَٰلِكَ وَمَنْ يُعِظِمِ شَعَائِرَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّهَا مِنْ تَقْوَى الْقُلُوبِ

Meaning: "That [is so]. And whoever honors the symbols of Allah – indeed, it is from the piety of hearts." (Qur'an, Surah Al-Hajj [22]: 32)

This verse emphasizes that honoring anything associated with Allah—including His words and names is an expression of true *taqwa*. In this context, calligraphy becomes a way to honor the *shā'ir Allah* (symbols or signs of God) through careful, reverent artistic representation.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also emphasized the concept of *ihsān*, which deeply influences the mindset of a calligrapher. In a well-known hadith:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَتَبَ الْإِحْسَانَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ

Meaning: "Indeed, Allah has prescribed excellence (*ihsan*) in all things..." (Hadith narrated by Muslim)

The notion of *ihsan* means performing every action as though one sees Allah, and if one cannot see Him, to know that He sees us. For a Muslim calligrapher, this hadith becomes a spiritual compass. Each stroke of the pen is crafted with mindfulness, precision, and devotion, striving for perfection not for vanity, but as a reflection of the divine beauty (*jamāl*) that permeates all of creation.

Furthermore, Islamic calligraphy often becomes a form of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah), especially when it involves repetitive writing of sacred phrases like *Bismillah*, *Subhanallah*, or *La ilaha illallah*. In this way, the practice becomes meditative connecting hand, heart, and mind in continuous remembrance.

In essence, Islamic calligraphy transforms the act of writing into a spiritual journey. It is a process that cultivates patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), discipline (*mujāhadah*), and presence of heart (*khushū'*). The final artwork is not just a visual ornament, but a manifestation of faith, imbued with the inner light (*nūr*) of the calligrapher's devotion.

5. Preservation and Contemporary Relevance (Expanded)

In today's digital age, Islamic calligraphy continues to thrive as both a sacred tradition and a dynamic art form. While deeply rooted in classical styles such as Kufi, Thuluth, and Naskh modern calligraphers have begun to reinterpret these forms through digital tools, mixed media, graphic design, and street art, allowing Islamic calligraphy to reach broader audiences without

losing its spiritual essence.

This phenomenon demonstrates that, while media and methods may evolve, the core purpose of Islamic calligraphy as a form of worship, reflection, and cultural transmission remains unshaken. The enduring relevance of this art is a testament to its ability to bridge the past with the present, enabling the words of Allah to continue inspiring people across generations and cultural contexts.

In the Qur'an, Allah emphasizes the importance of preserving knowledge and conveying it responsibly:

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

Meaning: "Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an, and indeed, We will be its guardian." (Surah Al-Hijr [15]: 9)

Although this verse refers specifically to the divine protection of the Qur'an itself, it also inspires Muslims to take part in safeguarding the forms and methods by which the Qur'an is preserved and revered including through calligraphy.

Contemporary initiatives such as international calligraphy festivals, online workshops, academic research, and museum exhibitions have played a major role in reviving public interest and appreciation for Islamic calligraphy. Institutions across the Muslim world, from Istanbul to Jakarta, now offer specialized programs and residencies to train new generations of calligraphers.

Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ emphasized the importance of preserving beneficial knowledge, which includes sacred arts:

إِذَا مَاتَ الْإِنْسَانُ انْقَطَعَ عَنْهُ عَمَلُهُ إِلَّا مِنْ ثَلَاثٍ

Meaning: "When a person dies, all his deeds come to an end except three: Sadaqah Jariyah (ongoing charity), beneficial knowledge, and a righteous child who prays for him." (Hadith narrated by Muslim)

Teaching and practicing the art of calligraphy, especially when used to transmit divine words, falls under 'ilmun yuntafa'u bih (beneficial knowledge), which continues to bring reward to its practitioners even after their passing.

Hence, preserving Islamic calligraphy today is not merely about maintaining a visual tradition, but about ensuring the continuity of spiritual values, intellectual heritage, and cultural identity. By integrating this sacred art with modern expressions while keeping its soul intact, Muslim communities reaffirm the relevance of Islamic aesthetics in contemporary spiritual life.

CONCLUSIONS

Islamic calligraphy is more than just a form of artistic expression; it is a deeply spiritual and intellectual tradition rooted in the values of faith, reverence, and beauty. Throughout Islamic history, calligraphy has served as a medium for preserving and transmitting the divine message, reflecting the Muslim commitment to honor the Qur'an not only through recitation, but also through visual devotion.

As an art form, calligraphy embodies the principle of *ihsān* (excellence), encouraging Muslims to engage in creativity with sincerity and mindfulness. It also plays a significant role in Islamic education, reinforcing adab (ethics), discipline, and respect for knowledge. Moreover, its historical development across various Islamic cultures highlights the richness and diversity of the Muslim world, while maintaining a unified spiritual core.

In the modern era, Islamic calligraphy remains relevant and dynamic, adapted into digital and contemporary art forms without losing its spiritual essence. It continues to inspire, educate, and unite communities serving as a living legacy that connects the past, present, and future.

In conclusion, the art of calligraphy in Islam is not only a cultural treasure but also a

manifestation of faith and a tool for spiritual reflection. Its preservation and continued development are essential for upholding the identity, values, and beauty of Islamic civilization.

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