



Origination, Development and the Types of Islamic Calligraphy (Khatt Writing)

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Abstract:

Calligraphy is purely handwriting for recording and conveying information, sometimes observably and at times not, but in most cases quickly with fewer concerns to its appearance. The brilliance of Islamic writing lies in its infinite creativeness and versatility. The sense of balance, created and executed by calligraphers, is not only for transmitting a text but also expressing its significance through a proper aesthetic code. What distinguishes Islamic script from ordinary writing is basically beauty. This article is an effort to revive this beautiful art and investigate its origination, development, and types.

Key words: Islamic Calligraphy, Khatt Writing, Islamic history.

Origination and Development of Islamic Calligraphy:

Like Islamic history, calligraphic history too is very old and Muslim artists are researching on Islamic writing. In the initial phase of Islamic epoch, two kinds of the script emerged that have been in fashion, both the scripts were derived from the different shapes that the Nabataean alphabets were being written in. Out of these two styles, one was *Kufic*¹. It was square in its basic form with pointed or angular finishing. This style was used for the first time for the handwritten copies of the Holy Quran. Later, the same script style was used for the beautification of architecture erected by the earlier Islamic Empires. The other type of script that was cursive and circular in form was known as *Naskhi*. This style of script was more prevalent in official or business documents and letters, because of its free flowing technique and quick to write facility. *Naskhi*, in the *Kufic* style of the second century Hijri, was then limited only to special uses, except for the northwest Africa, where it was evolved into the *Maghribi* style of script². On the other hand, the rounded style script *Naskhi* remained in use all the times.

From this *Naskhi* mostly later styles of Arabic writing have been developed. “*Khatt-e-Koofi*” that is the advanced form of “*Khatt-e-Moakli*”. Later, during the Umayyad period³, calligraphy flourished in

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Damascus and scribes started to introduce alteration in the original heavy and thick style of *Kufic* style to evolve a form employed in the modern times, especially for ornamental purposes. Besides, they also developed several new more cursive styles from *Naskhi*.

However, under Abbasids, calligraphy was started to be schematized for the first time, and during the initial half of 10th century, Ibn Muqlah⁴ accomplished the systematic development of the *Kufic* style with some established rules of shape and proportion. Since, then the following generations of calligraphers started adopting this very style. Ibn-Muqlah further developed “six styles” of cursive style writing that became the traditional classification of Arabic writing. These are:

1. “*Khatt-e-Suls or Thulus*”
2. “*Khatt-e-Muhaqqeq*”
3. “*Khatt-e-Toqufe*”
4. “*Khatt-e-Naskh*”
5. “*Khatt-e-Rihan or Reyhan*”
6. “*Khatt-e-Riquaa*”

Among these writing styles, “*Thuluth*” and “*Naskh*” were more familiarized normally used for general use because of their constricted principles. Later, from these styles and kufic, all calligraphers from Arab, Iran and Turkey elaborated and developed other writings. Such as, in Iran, with the combination of “*Khatt-e-Riquaa*” and “*Khatt-e-Toquee*” another delicate and graceful writing style developed and came into practice named as “*Khatt-e-Taaliq*”. Further, the *Khatt-e-Taaliq* was evolved in *Khatt-e-Nasta'aliq* form. This beautiful, light and comprehensible *Nasta'aliq* was the resultant combination of Persian Taliq and Arabic *Naskhi*, and Mir Ali Tabrazy invented this style. This style became famous due to its lucid charm and sweetness characteristics that it forgets all earlier styles.

However, later calligraphy gained highest development in Turkey, under the Ottoman Empire, other than in any other place in the Middle East. The Ottomans were not just interested to develop and improve the inherited scripts of Persians and Arabs but also further added some new styles such as “*Diwani*”⁵ script. This style was used mainly for official documents that were issued by Ottoman council. Another Turkish contribution in style is “*Tughra*” that was formerly used for regal rulers just like an authentication stamp, and it’s the stylized and elaborate writing version of the Ottoman ruler’s name. This imperial style was later adopted

by the Turkish and the Arab countries' rulers as a royal insignia on the coins and stamps.

A large number of the Mamluk Holy Quranic manuscripts were written with extraordinarily refined and restrained *Naskh* and *Thuluth*scripts, and these styles became synonymous with that period.



Surat Al-Tauba, 9, part of verse 1. A 14th C. Holy Quranic manuscript on paper from Mamluk Egypt or Syria written in the Muhaqqaq script.

Another style of calligraphy that was not frequently used nowadays is “*Muthanna*.”⁶ It is not considered as a type of script; however, it contains text in any one of the standard scripts, for example in *Naskhi*. Then it is worked into a pattern having one-half as the mirror image of the other. In other words, It may be named as pictorial calligraphy in which script⁷ is written in either bird or animal, tree or any other object shape. These all styles are historical and conclusion of Islamic calligraphy.

After several ages, later during Mughal period, Emperor Babur pay attention and contribute another new style of the script known as “*Khatt-e-Babri*,” but this script could not gain popularity. After Babar's death, *Khatt-e Naskh* followed and Shir Shah coming to power. Epigraphs stand in testimony to Suri’s use of *Naskh* as a statement of power. During Humayun times, he brought with him several craftsmen from Persia like Khawaja Abdul Samad and Mir Ali Tabrazi (both were scribes too).

In the Emperor Akbar’s times, another style developed known as “*Dewani*” but it could not attract the royal courtiers or princes who ignored this style because mostly in the past, calligraphic creations were

carried out in *Khatt-e-Nasta'aliq*. The renowned calligrapher Mir Punja Delhvi also worked in the *Nasta'aliq* style following his predecessors calligraphers, Abdul Majeed *Raqm*⁸ and Tajud-Din *Zareen-Raqm*⁹ who were considered master of this style. In late Akbarian period, more manuscripts were written, which showed a gradual shift to a refined *Nastaliq*.

Jahangir's age is marked by several specimens of calligraphical panels and calligraphical albums. Some panels also depict scientifically correct portraits, plants and animal. *Nastaliq* was introduced by Abdul Rashid Dailimi. Further, ShahJahan period architectural monuments showed masterpieces of *Nastaliq*, especially Taj Mahal. Alamgir showed a decline in *Nastaliq* and court customs shifted to *Shikasta*. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last of the Mughal Emperors, was a master scribe of *Naskhi* script.

All the history of calligraphy explains the vastness of this field to work and research. Modern calligraphers are still using the rules of these past Muslim calligraphers. The recent calligraphy, with modern and altered styles, is further contributing towards the contemporary possibilities of traditional and abstract calligraphy. However, modern or contemporary calligraphy with abstractive beauty, together with the traditional principles, touch the world of fine arts as well. Meanwhile several calligraphers still infuse the traditional way on modern calligraphy skill. Such as, Sadequain is well-known for his symbolic calligraphy, and he normally worked through color and brush on canvas.

Modern techniques and abstraction art inspired several fresh artists such as another artist "Ibn-e-Kaleem" from Multan who worked in Quranic calligraphy. He researched on these all six style of Islamic calligraphy and invented another contemporary style named as "*Khatt-e-Ra'ana*". He justified all previous styles and prepared rules of this new style. This style has sharpness and little bitterness, tang and dryness of recent taste. It has been pleasing curves and attractive form.

All Types of Islamic Calligraphic Scripts and its characteristics:

***Kufic*:** (Pronounced "koo-fik"; Persian–Koufi)

Although its name refers to Kufa¹⁰ but this style is not believed to be originated in Kufa. The *Kufic* style is the one that remained in fashion for earlier scripts of Quran writing. Sometimes Kufic variants were also used for Quran writings. The *Kufic* style evolved precisely during the third and fourth century CE. Formerly, this style developed for writing on stones but later this style was adopted for religious text due to its formality and angular style. By the eleventh century, the *Kufic* script attained an ornamental peak under the Seljuqs, and this style remained in used until

the end of thirteenth century. This style has become almost obsolete today due to its difficult writing style but sometimes still used as text on tiles or for inscriptions on architecture.

The distinct feature of this style is its angular shapes of lettering, have wide and short upright strokes and horizontal strokes with extended lengths. It is accomplished on a horizontal baseline. The early *Kufic* style avoided vowels and dots¹¹ around letters. Sometimes coloured dots were used around the letter that helps in pronunciation. This writing style is difficult in its nature as the letters and alphabets are carried out with a pen in a linear style instead of the series of pen strokes.

Types:

The early two main types of scripts were produced in Kufa. One is “solid heavy” lettering style or “*Al- Khat al-tizkari*”. This is ceremonial writing style and usually on hard materials like wood or stone. It has beautiful decorative nature. Occasionally it avoided any points or link between the letters. Second style is “flexible script.” This style moved to Kufa from Madina. It has easy writing style and also identified as an editorial script, mostly used for communication, writings and registrations. The combination of these two types formed another third type that was used for writing the Quran due to its elegance and beauty, flexibility and firmness. This style remained popular during the first three centuries of Islam. Later several *Kufic* style types were derived due to its decorative and artistic nature. The historians have divided it into four main types.

The “simple *Kufic* script” has plain style without any ornamentation or leaf-like shapes. This style spread during the emergence of Islamic world and remained favorite writing style in the western Islamic world up to later ages. Writing on Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem) is the example of this style. “Vegetal *Kufic* script” is another type that flourished in Egypt and then spread both east and west of Islamic world. This style has leaf-like ornamentations, and vertical strokes were used in its letter's ending.

Another third type of *Kufic* script is “connected braided” style. This style ornamentation addition makes it highly complicated to distinguish between script elements and ornamentation. Letters are braided and joined in a beautiful framework of weaving style. The fourth type of *Kufic* is “geometric” style that remained dominant in Iran and Iraq. It has geometrical features like use of acute angles and straight elements. It's purely a decorative handwriting and the interweaving style of letters mostly makes its sentence difficult to understand.

Calligraphy in the *Kufic* Script



Decorative *Kufic*



Plaited Eastern *Kufic*



Early *Kufic* Script



Eastern *Kufic*

Maghrebi

“*Maghrebi*” is Arabic word means “western.” Name refers to the western Islamic world. This script is stylized *Kufic* script form that developed in Spain (in Morocco) and North Africa in the 10th century and still used there but now its use is decreasing. It used not only for Quran and other religious manuscripts but also for scientific and legal writings.

This style is derived from earliest Arabian Peninsula rounded script. The main feature of this style is that its writing style is on parallel baseline with uniform thickness stroke and often brown ink is used. However, vowel-marks are mostly flat rather slanted. Descendant strokes carry huge bowls, with sweeping curves *Al-Khat al-tizkari*.

Ibn Khavarazmi, (a historian of 14th century) explained the different strokes of huge bowled calligraphy, that Maghreb calligraphers were trained to write the whole word. On the other hand, the eastern calligraphers used to write the word in separate letters. The change in the shape of letters, was mainly dependant on the meaning of the word they were in, rather than on a sequence of given rules.

Calligraphy in the *Maghribi* Script



Naskh (Pronounced “nask”; Turkish–Nesih)

“Naskh” is derived from “nasakha” (verb), meaning “to transcribe or copy”. It developed in 10th century and in 15th century, Seyh Hamdullah refined its style. It finally replaced Kufic for Quranic writings and now mostly Quran is written in this style. It is still used by the calligraphers. This style is mostly popular for book writings and in printing for printed Arabic font due to its clear readability quality. *Thuluth* script is often used in combination with *Naskh*.

Its main features are that it is quick, balanced, small and neat in writing and more curved than *Rayhnai*. It is flat and round-shaped and light with heavy strokes have an equal division. Letters are, to some extent, slim to left and descendent letters end in an upward hook. This style letters are based on diverse proportions, and one cannot learn this style easily.

Examples of calligraphy in the naskh script



Thuluth (Pronounced “thoo-looth”; Turkish–Sulus)

“*Thuluth*” means “one-third.” This maybe refers to its pen size. As one-third pen size used for the larger scripts so-called *tumar*. It developed in 10th century and refined in 15th century by Seyh Hamdullah and still in use. It is used mainly for architecture and tile inscriptions. This script is often used as a companion’s script with *Naskh* and is the most versatile powerful script. A calligrapher is not considered perfect if he is unable to write in *Thuluth*. Its vertical strokes have a slope on the left side, and horizontals have a profound curve. The end of mostly descendant letters, turn up in hook. Often written to connect letters and many alternative letter forms occurs in this script. This script has quality for writing diverse types of texts.

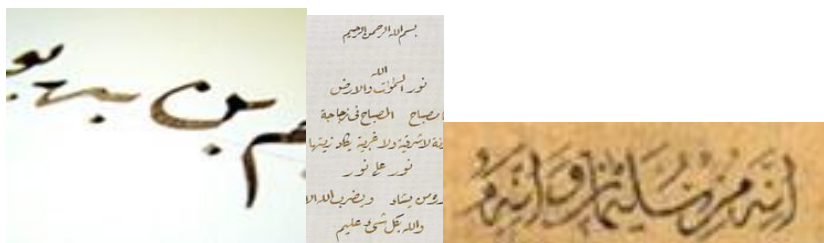
Calligraphy in the *Thuluth* Script



Riqa: (Pronounced “rik-ah”; Turkish–Rika‘)

“*Riqa*” is derivative of word *ruq’a* (the Arabic noun), which means “a patch or piece of cloth.” The script was entitled so because it was often written on tiny pieces of paper to petition royalty. It developed in the 10th century and got refined in the 15th century by Seyd Hamadullah. This script progressed in the Ottoman script known as *Ijaza* (Turkish–Icaze) but now obsolete. In the early development stages, this script was used for personal communication, stories, poems, writing letters and later for official letters and documents. This script has remained more in fashion for writing colophons of the books; displaying the place and date of writing. *Tawaqi* is its companion larger script that mostly used in combination with *Riqa*. This script features round letter shapes and small form of *Tawaqi*.

Calligraphy in the *Riqa* and *Tawaqi* Scripts



Muhaqqaq (Pronounced “moo-huk-uk”; Turkish–Muhakkak; Persian–Mohaqqaq)

“*Muhaqqaq*” meaning is “fully-realized,” and also “strongly expressed.” This script also developed in 10th century and refined in 15th century by Seyh Hamdullah and at the 17th century end, it grants its place to *Thuluth*. This script was used all over Islamic world to write Qurans and fine architecture inscriptions. Now, this script is obsolete but by practice still used to write the “*bismillah*.”

Often, this script is written in combination with the *Rayhani* script that is a minor variation of the *Muhaqqaq*. Its main features are that its angular script with straight letters, precise and cautiously well-balanced ascenders and horizontal letters. Descendants curved strokes every so often encircle the next letter. It has strong horizontal emphasis and descendant strokes finish in pointed ends rather than rotating upwards in a hook shape.

Calligraphy in the *Muhaqqaq* and *Rayhani* Scripts



Rayhani (Pronounced “ray-ha-nee”; Turkish–Reyhani; Persian–Raihan)

“*Rayhani*” word meaning is “the aromatic plant basil” or “having a fragrance.” It developed in 10th century and refined in 15th century by Seyh Hamdullah. This script was used for copying Quran. *Muhaqqaq* is its companion script, and its larger script is often used in combination with *Rayhani*.

Unlike *Muhaqqaq*, this script use started to decline after 17th century, and Naskh took its place. The distinct characteristics of this script are that it is easily legible script whose lettering shapes are pointed than *Naskh* and generally has a prominent spike-like format on initial alif-lam letter shape. This script is a small form of *Muhaqqaq*.

Calligraphy in the *Rayhani* scripts



Tawaqi:(Pronounced “Tao-kee”; Turkish–Tevki‘; Persian–Toqi‘)

“*Tawaqi*” is a derivation of Arabic word, waqa’a, (verb) which means “to sign,” as it was frequently used to write as a sign on a ruler’s announcements. This style developed in 10th century and refined in 15th century by Syed Hamdullah. Later, *Diwani* replaced it in 19th century and generally obsolete today. This script was mostly used for royal official documents and certificates and scrolls. However, in ancient Persia this script was used for colophon writing of books that depicts the place and date of writing. *Tawaqi*’ companion script is *Riqa* which is the smaller form of the same script.

This script’s main features are that its letters do not connect to the left and are often linked in the script (unauthorized ligatures). This feature causes it to be written in speed. Its features are proportionally smaller ascending strokes, and more profoundly are curved with horizontal strokes. This script is a smaller variation of *Thuluth*, and its letters are comparatively rounded and compacted in shape and style.

Calligraphy in the *Tawqi* Scripts



Ta'liq

“*Ta'liq*” word meaning is “suspension,” or “hanging together.” This script was formed in the eleventh century but standardized in thirteenth century; even in the modern times, it exists in practice. This script was used for recording literary works, poems, letters and book-writing, for official communication in royal courts and calligraphy specimens. The distinct characteristic of this script is that its descendant strokes seem as loops. Wide spaces between lines and letters are more rounded with extreme contrasts in letter spacing. The lines ascend upward when they go from the right side to the left and the letters that do not unite on left are every so often linked in the script (unauthorized ligatures).

Calligraphy in the *Ta'liq* script



Nasta‘liq: (Pronounced “nes-tah-leek”; called "talik" in Turkey, so-called “farsi” in the Arab world)

“Nasta‘liq” is supposed to be an amalgam of “Naskh” and “Ta‘liq.” This script developed in Iran in 15th century but finalized in Tabriz and Baghdad in 16th century and still in use today. Possibly this script was created by Mir Ali Tabriz when he dreamed about the flying ducks. This script was initially developed for Iranian language writings, Persian poetry and the albums of calligraphic samples known as *Qit‘a*.

This script used in both Persia, and in the subcontinent (India and Pakistan) for Non-Quranic works such as literary works. It’s very difficult to execute, and it contains the features of both *Naskh* and also *Ta‘liq*. Its letter shapes seem deep hook-like, and differ generally in thickness. It has short vertical strokes while broad and sweeping horizontal strokes. Swift, calm and flexibility is its overall impression, and its letter seems floating or hanging across the folio. This feature is looks more enhanced when the text is organized on a diagonal line, a practice more suitable for writing poetry in *Nasta‘liq*. This script is never written with vowels, however, *Shadda* and *Hamza*¹² are found.

Calligraphy in the *Nasta‘liq* script



Shikasteh : (Pronounced “shi-kas-teh”; Persian–Shekasteh)

“*Shikasteh* or *Shikastah*” word meaning is “broken,” as this script is a “broken” form of the *Nasta‘liq* (or *ta‘liq*). It is the second

famous Persian calligraphic style, which is "Cursive *Nas'taliq*" or "*Shekasteh Nas'taliq*" that prominently follows the similar rules of *Nas'taliq*, with extra flexibility. This script evolved in the fourteenth century but became widely popular in Iran during the nineteenth century during the Qajar reign, and even used today.

This script due to its quickly written quality used for large-size documents, official declarations and also for poetry due to its flowery visual style. The unique characteristic of the script is that it is unreadable to the inexperienced eye. Its letters are complex and dense shape and written slantwise across the folio. Its vertical strokes are enormously short and letters and words that normally do not unite are frequently joined in this script. The *Shikasta* is either *Ta'liq* or *Nasta'liq* script, written in a swift manner. Every word in this style is accomplished with a single pen stroke, whereas, the pen always remain in contact with the surface or the page.

Calligraphy in the *Shikaste* Script



Diwani

“*Diwani*” is a derivation from the word “*divan*¹³.” It developed in 16th century and reached at the topmost in 19th century and is still in use. This script was used for official documents, letters and communication in Ottoman court. Its distinctive quality is that its letters and words do not connect to the left side and are often united in the script. Its lines ascend as they move from right to left and wide spaces appear in between lines. *Diwani* script is not easy to read and write in its large (*Dijali*) form.

When written in *Dijali* form, the empty spaces in a script are filled with small dots that add a cover of decorative detail in this style and because of this, it creates an extreme stylization and unauthorized links. This made *Diwani*, an idyllic script to be used as court documents, as it assured secrecy and secures them from forgery.

Calligraphy in the *Divani* Script



Conclusion:

The development of calligraphy explains the connection of style with one another. Initial Islamic phase two script appear angular and square *Kufic* (for Quran) and round and cursive *Naskhi* (for official documents). Both extracted from Nascripts alphabet and from *Naskhi* mostly Arabic writing letter style developed. *Kufic* later developed in *Magribi* style in Northwest Africa and during the *Naskhi*, alteration in the original heavy and thick style of *Kufic* and several new more cursive styles from *Naskhi*.

Under Abbasids, calligraphy schematized and Ibn-e Muqlah accomplished the methodical and organized expansion of the *Kufic* style and developed some rules of shape and proportion. He also introduced “six styles” of cursive style writing, among these *Thuluth*” and “*Naskh*” were more familiarized that are normally used. The *Kufic* attains its peak during the Seljuk and several *Kufic* types appeared in history such as solid, flexible, simple, vegetal, braided, and geometric.

Later in Iran, combination of “*Khatt-e Riquaa*” and *Toquee*” evolved as the *Khatt-e-Taaliq*”. Further, it was developed in “*Khatt-e-Nasta’aliq*” form, which depicts the qualities of Persian *Taliq* and Arabic *Naskhi*, and Mir Ali Tabrazy invented this style. Later in Turkey, “*Diwani*” script appeared mainly for official documents and “*Tughra* used as an authentication stamp.

However, Mamluk Holy Quranic manuscripts were in *Naskh* and *Thuluth* scripts. Another style not frequently used muthanna which is a kind of pictorial calligraphy in the standard script such as *Naskhi*. Later, during Mughal period new style *Khatt-e-Babri*, " could not gain popularity and again *Khatt-e Naskh* followed. In Akbar's times, "*Diwani* style developed but not gain interest and again refined *Khatt-e-Nasta'aliq* in manuscripts became popular in his later period and also in Jahangir and ShahJahn period too.

Alamgir court customs shifted to *Shikasta* and the BahadurShah court to *Naskhi* script. Recent calligraphers mixed the traditional and abstract style, and new style appeared such as Sadequian's calligraphy style and *Khatt-e-Ra'ana*" by "Ibn-e-Kaleem." Thus all the styles depict not only the connection with one another but also explain that though all styles have unique qualities but still among them; *Kufi*, *Naskhe*, *Nastaliqe*, *Shikasta*, have been more widely used in India and Pakistan.

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¹ Name derived from the town Kufa (Iraq). Though this style was used before the town was founded.

² still used in that area nowadays.

³ in the beginning of 4th century of Hijria

⁴ Abbasid vizier

⁵ Derived from word diwan meaning government office or state council

⁶ Arabic for “doubled”

⁷ Normally qur’anic verse of religious significance phrase

⁸ Raqm refers to writing in Persian language and a title of distinction for masters of calligraphy

⁹ An elated title for a calligrapher meaning master with golden writing

¹⁰ City in southern Iraq.

¹¹ diacritical marks

¹² Punctuations of Arabic language

¹³ the name for the Ottoman royal chancery