Persian Calligraphy

The Development of an Art Form

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Iran is one of many cultures in which the written word has been transformed into an art form, an extension of its function beyond documentation and communication. Iranian calligraphers employed their talents to produce styles and patterns of writing that were applied to such different mediums as architecture, pottery, and metal work, in addition to the page itself. They have made Persian script rich in variety and beauty and produced many masterpieces of art, particularly when calligraphy was combined with miniature painting.

In this article I shall outline the major types of Persian calligraphy, with a brief reference to some of the master calligraphers. I will also draw on my own experiences to provide an example of the role that this art form still plays in Persian life and culture.

Historical Background

Before the Islamic era, there were several types of script in Iran. The earliest was cuneiform, executed with wedge-shaped strokes made on clay tablets or cut into stone. Cuneiform script was used for several millennia by peoples speaking a variety of languages, who occupied the area from the eastern Mediterranean to the Indus Valley. In Iran both the Elamites in the third and second millennia B.C. (Figs. 1, 2) and the Persians in the first millennium employed cuneiform script.

At the end of the Achaemenian Empire, the angular and relatively inflexible cuneiform script was gradually replaced by cursive scripts. In Iran, Aramaic script was used along with cuneiform during the Achaemenian Period (Fig. 3). Beginning in the 7th century B.C., Aramaic served as a lingua franca throughout the Near East until it was replaced by Arabic after the Islamic Conquest. Later, during the Parthian and Sassanian periods, Avestic (Fig. 4) and Pahlavi scripts were used, Pahlavi being the more common.

With the downfall of the Sassanian dynasty and the emergence of Islam (7th century A.D.), two new scripts appeared in Iran: Kufic, which was angular with horizontal connections (Figs. 5, 10, 16, 19); and Naskh, which was more rounded (Figs. 10, 16, 19). Based mainly on Coptic and Sogdian scripts (which had in turn developed from Pahlavi), these were used in religious literature (Fig. 5) as well as in secular literature (Figs. 10, 16, 19).

1. This tablet found at Naqsh-e Rustam is written in the Elamite language and dates to the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C. Located in the lowland plains of southwestern Iran, Naqsh-e Rustam was an important political and religious center. The text gives instructions on the use of a sheep's liver to predict future events concerning the fate of the army and the city itself. (H.T. no. 152)

2. Trilingual inscription of Darius the Great carved in cuneiform script on a sheer rock face at Bisitan, Iran. The text, written in the Elamite, Babylonian, and Persian languages, tells of the Persian king's victories. It is located next to a profuse spring on the main road from Mesopotamia to the east, and for the past 2500 years its illustrious figures have served to impress travelers with the power of the Persian empire. (Photo courtesy of M. M. Voigt)

3. Fragment of a stone altar with Aramaic inscriptions, from a storeroom of the treasury building at the Persian capital of Persepolis, 5th c. B.C. Many mortars, pails, and plates, all made of green chert, were found in this room when the site was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C. Inscriptions such as this one indicate that these artifacts were used in a religious rite. H. 3.8 cm. (Photo courtesy of The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, P. 6055J/ N. 4053J/ Persepolis field neg. P.1156; Bouman 1976:Pl. 21a/b)
developed from the Aramaic and Phoenician, both were already in use in Arabia before the time of Mohammad (Fazaeli 1971).

During the first centuries of the Islamic era, Kufic and Nashk were used in a simple form, but gradually the Iranian scribes began to develop them, adapting them to the Persian language. New styles and patterns evolved during the period of the Abbasid Caliphs, particularly during the time of Ma'moon (786-833 A.D., 170-218 A.H. [After Hijra]), when a great expansion took place in all branches of art, especially calligraphy.

One of the great pioneer calligraphers was Ibn-Mogheheh Bedouhi Shirazi, the Grand Vizir of Al-Moghtader Biahah. Shirazi codified several types of script in the alkashk-Aferisheh (The Six Styles of Writing). These six styles included Nashk, the slightly rounded script which had been known before the emergence of Islam (Fig. 10); Moghehel, also known as Argaz or Warraghi, a compact cursive script; Reyhan, similar to Moghehel but more elaborate; Tholth (Figs. 13, 14, 21, 30), subdivided into

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Inscription in Decorative Kufic style copied from a painted frieze in the tomb of Pir-i-Alamdar in Damghan, Iran, 418 A.H. / 1027 A.D. (Fazaeli 1971:160)

Thaqafi (Difficult) and Khaff (Light or Simple); Toghi, between Nashk and Tholth, with rules similar to Tholth but written deeper and rounder (Fig. 23); and Hogha, similar to Tholth and Toghi, but more elaborate and finer. Shirazi introduced rules and regulations in twelve original patterns that standardized the different styles of writing and initiated a new era in Persian calligraphy.

About a century later Hassan-i-Farsi introduced a new script known as Ta'ligh (Fig. 15), which was mainly developed from the already established styles of Nashk and Hogha. In Ta'ligh the characters were more connected leading to greater ease and fluency, so that it soon became the preferred script in which to write letters. For this reason it was called Ta'ligh or "Letter Writing" script. Later Ta'ligh was made much more balanced and fluent through the rich contributions of Khajeh Abdollah Monshi asterabadhi (907 A.H.), who added new rules for writing the script. Mirdabakhir (about 950 A.H.) introduced, or perhaps only codified, a style of writing derived from Nashk and Ta'ligh. This warmly welcomed script became known as Nasta'liq. Nasta'liq developed into such a beautiful

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Tombs of the early Seljuq period are richly decorated with designs created in brick and stucco. This example (Beti-cheri Dokhtarvan or the Forty Girls Tower) from Damghan, Iran, dates to 490 A.H. / 1097 A.D. An inscription in Decorative Kufic script forms the central element of the banding frieze. (Photo courtesy of M.M. Voigt)
The Persian alphabet as it changed from Kufic script to Shekasteh Nasta'liqh.

Na'īth script was used for this Koran, dated to 559 A.H./1164 A.D. from Hamadan, Iran. The Koran text is written in black, with Arabic commentary in red. Another page from the manuscript is shown on the cover of this issue. (University Museum no. NE-P27, neg. T4-188; H. 34.3 cm, W. 19.7 cm)

The Kufic script was frequently used as a design element in the decoration of buildings. The Masjid-i Jami (Friday Mosque) in the city of Isfahān was begun in 473 A.H./1080 A.D. and completed about 500 A.H./1100 A.D. The entire surface of the building is covered with decorative brick patterns, some of which form letters and inscriptions. The arch in the background has a Kufic frieze along its edge. (Photo courtesy of R.H. Dyon)

Detail, brass candlestick inlaid with silver made in Iran during the mid-7th century A.H./11th century A.D. The Arabic inscription in Kufic style says: "Fermin triunph, evading, happiness, and growing prosperity." (University Museum no. NE-P-12; photo by Fred Schoch; H. 35.5 cm)

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Another view of the Masjid-i Jami from the entranceway of the south façade (hall), which was decorated in 1112 A.H./1733 A.D. In the foreground, the banded frieze in blue contains an inscription in Thuluth script, while the one below is in Architectural Kufic. The facade of the south façade in the background dates to 938 A.H./1531-32 A.D. (Photo courtesy of R.H. Dyon)

Mosaics made of brick, plaster, and glazed faience tiles began to be used in the decoration of major buildings in Iran during the 7th/13th century. The "Blue Mosque" (Masjid-i Jamshidzah) in Tabriz, finished in 870 A.H./1465 A.D., provides some of the most beautiful examples of this kind of tilework, employing both Decorative Kufic and Thuluth inscriptions. The building was destroyed by an earthquake which leveled the city in 1194 A.H./1780 A.D. (Photo courtesy of M.M. Voigt)
form of Persian calligraphy that it was called the "Art of Writing" (Figs. 17, 24, 25, 29, 30). The script emphasizes horizontal elements, so that it "seems to hang or float across the page" (James 1999:22). One outstanding calligrapher who employed this script was Sohtan Ali-i-Mashhadi (926 A.H.), who devoted most of his 85 years to the service of Nasta'liq and produced many masterpieces. He composed a poetic guide to writing Nasta'liq called the Sarvat-ones-tawor (Ways of Lines of Writing) and trained many students who went on to become master calligraphers in their own right.

In the middle of the 11th century A.H., Shekasteh Nasta'liq or Broken Nasta'liq was introduced by Morteza Chokhchakan-Shamloo, the governor of Herat. It spread rapidly due to its fluent beauty and particularly its ease, which made it suitable for fast writing since it could be used almost as a form of shorthand (Figs. 22,28). This elaborately complex style was particularly popular during the Qajar dynasty, when the art of calligraphy underwent a period of revival, and several new variant scripts were developed.

In recent times calligraphy has continued to be a much revered art. Nearly 30 years ago the Society for Calligraphy (Anjoman-e-Khosrow-namin) was founded by Mr. Hossein Zalimi, an associate institution of the Ministry of Culture and Arts. The society has been very active and successful in keeping

A Modern Calligrapher at Work

The art of calligraphy so permeates Persian culture that it has become interwoven in the daily life of the people. In the old traditional system of Iranian education the development and practice of a beautiful writing style was extremely important. It was a source of honor and pride to have good handwriting and to know calligraphy. Even at the beginning of the modern Westernized system of education, which was being introduced at the time I first entered school as a child, great importance was still given to the teaching of good handwriting, and teachers of these courses were highly respected. We were given patterns made with dotted lines for each character which we were supposed to complete with one movement of the reed pen (Fig. 25), and we were expected to spend many hours following these patterns of correct and beautiful writing for each character of the alphabet.

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In the old days in Iran the best ink was imported from China and came in the form of small dried pieces. These pieces would be mixed with water and left to dissolve; the ink would then be diluted to the proper consistency—thin enough to flow smoothly, but not so thin as to be watery. The prepared ink would be put in a glass or ceramic inkwell whose rim turned well inward so that little ink would be lost if it overturned. This inkwell would be filled with small bits of cut rag, preferably silk, so that the pen would not pick up too much ink. The pen would be dipped in the inkwell and the nib touched against the inward rim to remove excess ink. Some scribes would put their pen into the inkwell, touch it against the side of the rim to remove excess ink, and then rub the nib on the top of the second knuckle of the thumb of their left hand, which would be in a horizontal position as they held the paper. When needed, more ink could be picked up from the top of the knuckle until it was gone, and then the pen would be dipped in the inkwell again.

The paper used for calligraphy should have enough of a glossy coating so that the ink does not spread out and lose the cleaness of the writing. In my youth the best paper, like the best ink, came from China, from the city we called Khun-Balk (Peking). When I was young we did not sit on chairs at tables, but rather on the floor. The best position for writing was to sit with the left leg bent and doubled under, while the right leg was bent at the knee with the right foot on the ground. The diagonal column of the right thigh thus made a

Masters of Calligraphy

Modern Iranian scholars consider the four main styles of Persian calligraphy to be Thulth, Naskh, Nasta’ligh, and Shekasteh Nasta’ligh. For these four styles the greatest masters, who are known as the Arkana-Arbae or Four Pillars, are: for Thulth, Jami‘-ed-din Yaqut Monts Semi (988 A.H.); for Naskh, Mirza Ahmad Neyrizi (912/1512 c. A.H.; Fig. 19); for Nasta’ligh, Mir Emadoll-Hassani (1024 A.H.; Fig. 18); and for Shekasteh Nasta’ligh, Darvish Abdol-Majid Taleghani (1185 A.H., Fig. 20).
stable surface on which the paper could be positioned for writing.

Although I make no claim to be an expert calligrapher, I derive great pleasure and satisfaction from the hours that I am able to devote to calligraphy, writing out verses of some of our illustrious poets in Nasta’iigh and Shekasteh Nasta’iigh script (Fig. 27). I have now reached a time in my life when I can no longer comfortably sit on the floor to write, but to an Iranian of my age and background, Persian calligraphy remains an abiding interest, an interest inextricably interwoven with a love for and appreciation of our great Persian poets.

Calligraphers often combine two or more different styles of script in order to emphasize different words or different parts of the text. In Figure 29, I have used both Nasta’iigh and Shekasteh Nasta’iigh. The basic text has been composed by Ferreidoum Tavalloli, a contemporary Persian poet. It describes a scene on the Karun river, the main river of Khuzistan province in southwestern Iran. A despairing lover, a riverboatman who has been rejected by his beloved, sings sorrowful verses of Baba Taher, a famous old poet of Khuzistan. In my rendition the verses of Tavalloli are written in fine Shekasteh Nasta’iigh style, while the verses of Baba Taher, which express the essence of the story, are written with a larger pen in Nasta’iigh style.

The lampshade shown in Figures 29a,b, which was created by Bahman Negahban, illustrates the richness and creativity still to be found in the art of Persian calligraphy. This eight-sided shade has an interlocking hexagonal structure, both of the shade and of the poetry written on it. A six-word verse (four repeating, two changing, AABBA), written in Persian Nasta’iigh style, is arranged within a honeycomb lattice, verse overlapping verse interconnected by shared words. Each of the six triangular panels contains a complete verse arranged so that it can be read in a meaningful way from any direction. When the lamp is turned on, direct light shines through the central grid of each unit, which carries the name of God (Fig. 29b).

The poetry written on this lampshade, about love and care ("Mohabat"), is one of the masterpieces of Molavi (Moulana Jalal-Ed-Din). (Molavi was the foremost teacher and poet of Sufism—Islamic Mysticism—and the notions of rhythm and repetition found in his poetry are central to the practice of Sufism.)
Through love bitter things (are made) sweet
Through love bits of copper are
made gold
Through love pains (are turned)
to healing
Through love the dead (are made)
living
Through love the king (is as) a
slave
Through love thorns become
(flowers)
Through love vinegar (is made)
sweet wine
Through love (a branch) is made
a throne
Through love (a burden) is made
a blessing
Through love a prison (is made)
a rose bower
(Through love a house is made
enlightened)
(Through love a thorn becomes a
rose)
Without love soft wax becomes
iron
Through love fire (becomes)
light
Through love the Devil (is made)
an Hour
Through love stone (is made)
salt as butter
Without love a garden (is as) a
grate of ashes
Through love grief is made joy
Through love (a) ghost (is made)
an angel
Through love (a) sting is as
honey
Through love (a) lion is as harm-
less as a mouse
Through love (wrong is made
right)
Through love wrath (becomes)
mercy.

(Translation of the Persian
original by E.H. Whitfield, Okto-
gon Press, London, date, with re-
visions contained in parentheses by
Bahman Neghaban.)

Two styles of script were combined on
this page of calligraphy by the author. The
eastern Nastaliq high script was used for a poem
by Baba Taher, while Shekasteh Nastaliq
was used for a poem by Fereydoun Tavalloli.

Honeycomb latticework lampshade designed by Bahman Neghaban, with verses from the Manuscript of Mokaddes written in
Nastaliq high script by the author, 1965 A.D. When the lamp is turned on, the light shines through each central unit,
illuminating the name of God. (Photograph by Bahman Neghaban)

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Title dome of the Madar-i Shah theological school in Isfahan,
completed in 1129 A.H./1714 A.D. The inscription in the dark blue
frieze is in the Thuluth style. The turquoise frieze below contains
inscriptions in two types of Kufic script. (Photo courtesy of Mary
Virginia Harris)