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Islamic Calligraphy (Book Review)

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Islamic Calligraphy, by Sheila Blair. Edinburgh University Press, 2006. 736pp., 100 B/W illustrations, 150 colour illustrations. Hb. £125/\$295.00. ISBN-13: 9780748612123

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The art of writing in Arabic script is a significant element in Muslim civilisation. Dr Blair's book is a fascinating reference that provides survey of Islamic calligraphy from early times to present. In the introductory part, the book offers a detailed information on Arabic languages and the role of writing in the Islamic culture as well as the principles of writing. Although this is a very general aspect, it might be useful for those who want to gain historical overview about Arabic language. In the same way, the author dedicated the second chapter to highlight the history of the three important supports or materials on which Islamic manuscripts were written on naming papyrus, parchments and papers. The latter however is discussed in a lengthy manner providing that it had become the most popular support in Muslim land. In that section, special types of papers and their decoration was discussed followed by description of different pens and the history of its manufacturing in the Islamic land.

After the two general chapters, the book encompasses a further eleven chapters spread over five parts that provide a chronologically survey of the development of Arabic script and calligraphic traditions in the Muslim world. It starts with the early Islamic times, then it moves to the early middle period where Dr Blair explore the pre-eminence of round scripts, after that she cover dynastic styles in the Age of Empires and finally the last chapter covers the many faces of Islamic calligraphy in modern time. Moreover, the author supports each chapter with a corpus of illustration and examples of different scripts. Endnotes and citations include rich reference platform with further readings and discussions.

As there are various theories on the development of Arabic scripts, part two starts by giving a rich historical background on Aramaic, Nabatean and Syriac scripts as well as an explanation of the evolution of the calligraphic style in early centuries of Islam. This section has rich footnotes of further readings and resources on that particular topic. It would have been better and indeed less chapters if the book focused from the beginning on the calligraphy as a tradition in Muslim culture and referred the readers to further resources that cover any other historical aspects that pertaining to the Arabic language or the development of its script from linguistic point of view.

Dr Blair pointed that there is a great value to use archaeological evidences such as monumental inscriptions, milestones and coins to study the development of Arabic scripts. For instance, inscriptions on Hijazi script possess an important role to study not only the development of the script but also could be used in dating some manuscripts. In my viewpoint, further research in this filed need to be carried because of the unsettled situation in the Middle East.

The book gives a particular attention to the Koran text and manuscripts. It is known that studying the early Koran manuscripts is a crucial aspect in the field of the Islamic manuscripts;

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especially most of these manuscripts are not dated or signed. In addition, there are hundreds of different Koran fragments scattered all over the world. Historically, these manuscripts were originally stored in the courtyards of the great mosque of Damascus until the disastrous fire there at the end of the 19th century. Another large collection of fragments preserved at the mosque of Amr ibn al-ʿAss in al-Fustat and now are kept at Dar al-Kutub in Cairo. Francois Deroche has identified at least three hundred parchment manuscripts that are now in Museums of Turkish and Islamic arts [p.101]. The author therefore provides a summary of how these fragments were originally produced in the early Islamic times. Notwithstanding, there are many methodologies used to localize and date individual manuscripts or at least to group them. Blair Claims that there is no absolute method for dating Koran manuscripts that were produced before the ninth century and further research is required to identify the methodology of dating these manuscripts.

It should be said that starting from this section, the book deals offers details from the field of Islamic calligraphy. Connected to the manuscripts of Koran, the development of round script in early middle period was a significant milestone in this field. After that, Dr Blair discusses one major the refinement of the round script and their transformation from chancery hands into artistic style suitable for Koran and prestigious texts. Another major development, according to the book, was the new Abbasid style or the new style which derived from Kufi script [p.144]

Ibn al-Bawwab who wrote a poem on penmanship was an important character who was able to standardise the round script. The author therefore provided the reasons behind the canonisation of round script. It is worth to mention that the word canonisation is a strong word to be used in this context as it is word that often used with studying Hadith tradition in Muslims history. There are three reasons according to Dr Blair that helped in the canonisation of round script using papers starting from the 9th century in Abbasid chancery and subsequently the new chancery secretaries who worked as cosiest started the tradition of signing their copies. Finally, the adoption of round scripts as a calligraphic script worthy of transcription of Koran and many other types of texts represent the triumph of the secretarial class, scribe who had long used round script, paper and black ink such changes reflect social and cultural changes [p.173]

In a very logical and swift transition, the last few chapters cover the late middle period where various development in the field of Islamic calligraphy were geographically focused and the regional style of calligraphy was emerged. The book takes the reader in a journey in different dynasties and demonstrate features of different pens and fine calligraphy starting with Iran and the development of six pens. The following chapter moves to mention Egypt and Syria under Mamelukes and the rise of different types of arts throughout this period. Just like the development of six pens in Iran and Iraq were exported to the East and West to China, India and Anatolia, so too the mameluke styles were basis of development in adjacent regions notably the Yemen and later Anatolia as well.

It is worth to mention that the largest collection of manuscript from the Mameluke period is housed in the Egyptian National Library, many of which have endowment notes by sultans and Amirs bestowing their fine manuscripts to the charitable foundations in Cairo. A digitisation and analysis project has been undergone in the last few years by the Islamic Manuscripts Association. Chester Beatty Library in Dublin is the largest collection of Mameluke manuscripts outside the Middle East. Other styles and regions such as Anatolia, China and India were discussed in details as well.

In the age of empires. i.e. 1500 onward, when the central Islamic land were portioned among three major empires: Safavid, the ottomans and Mughals. While Persian painting, refinement of six pens as they had developed earlier in Iran as well as the increase of illumination and pictorial writing were flourishing, the canonisation of Naskh as text script was the major feature of the ottomans in Anatolia and Balkans. In addition, the age of printing was almost approaching the Middle East and there was a movement to canonise Thulth to be the display script. While the downfall of the calligraphic tradition started in 1924, the revival of the tradition came back quickly towards the end of the 20th century.

I believe that the size of the book is one of the reasons for some typographical mistakes and it remains minor if compared with the rich information and reference valuable for researchers and readers in the field of art of writing in Arabic script.