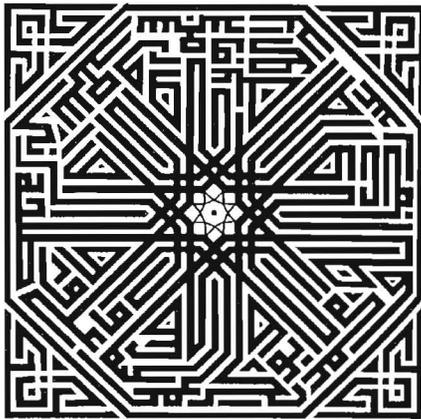




## ARABIC WRITING



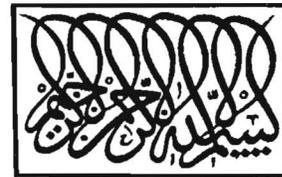
A maze-like ornamental square of angular *kufic* is made up of the names of the ten most revered Companions of Muhammad.

The Arabs gave to a large part of the world not only a religion -- Islam -- but also a language and an alphabet. Where the Muslim religion went, the Arabic language and Arabic writing also went. Arabic became and has remained the national language -- the mother tongue -- of North Africa and all the Arab countries of the Middle East.

Even where Arabic did not become the national language, it became the language of religion wherever Islam became established, since the Qur'an is written in Arabic, the Profession of Faith is to be spoken in Arabic, and five times daily the practicing Muslim must say his prayers in Arabic. Today, therefore, one can hear Arabic spoken -- at least for religious purposes -- from Mauritania on the Atlantic, across Africa and most of Asia, and as far east as Indonesia and the Philippines. Even in China (which has a Muslim population of some forty million) and the Central Asian republics of the USSR, Arabic can be heard in the *shahadah*, in prayer, and in the chanting of the Qur'an.

Of those people who embraced Islam but did not adopt Arabic as their everyday language, many millions have taken the Arabic alphabet for their own, so that today one sees the Arabic script used to write languages that have no basic etymological connection with Arabic. The languages of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are all written in the Arabic alphabet, as was the language of Turkey until some

fifty years ago. It is also used in Kashmir and in some places in the Malay Peninsula and the East Indies, and in Africa it is used in Somalia and down the east coast as far south as Tanzania.



The basmalah ("In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate" -- the opening words of the Qur'an) is here done in an elaborate *thuluth* script with the letters joined so that the entire phrase is written without lifting the pen from the paper.

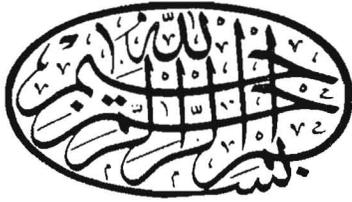
It is generally accepted that the Arabic alphabet developed from the script used for Nabataean, a dialect of Aramaic used in northern Arabia and what is now Jordan during roughly the thousand years before the start of the Islamic era. It seems apparent that Syriac also had some influence on its development. The earliest inscription that has been found that is identifiably Arabic is one in Sinai that dates from about A.D. 300. Another Semitic script which was in use at about the same time and which is found on inscriptions in southern Arabia is the origin of the alphabet now used for Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia.

The Arabic alphabet has twenty-eight letters (additional letters have been added to serve the needs of non-Arabic languages that use the Arabic script, such as those of Iran and Pakistan), and each of the letters may have up to four different forms. All of the letters are strictly speaking consonants, and unlike the Roman alphabet used for English and most European languages Arabic writing goes from right to left.

Another significant difference is that the Arabic script has been used much more extensively for decoration and as a means of artistic expression. This is not to say that the Roman alphabet (and others such as the Chinese and Japanese, for instance) are not just as decorative and have not been used just as imaginatively. Since the invention of printing from type,



however, calligraphy (which means literally “beautiful writing”) has come to be used in English and the other European languages only for special documents and on special occasions and has declined to the status of a relatively minor art.



Another basmalah in ornamental *thuluth* script is written in the shape of an oval.

In the countries that use Arabic alphabet, on the other hand, calligraphy has continued to be used not only on important documents but for a variety of other artistic purposes as well. One reason is that the cursive nature of the Arabic script and certain of its other peculiarities made its adaptation to printing difficult and delayed the introduction of the printing press, so that the Arab world continued for some centuries after the time of Gutenberg to rely on handwriting for the production of books (especially the Qur'an) and of legal and other documents. The use of Arabic script has therefore tended to develop in the direction of calligraphy and the development of artistically pleasing forms of hand lettering, while in the West the trend has been toward printing and the development of ornamental and sometimes elaborate type faces.

Another and perhaps more important reason was a religious one. The Qur'an nowhere prohibits the representation of humans or animals in drawings or paintings, but as Islam expanded in its early years it inherited some of the prejudices against visual art of this kind that had already taken root in the Middle East. In addition, the early Muslims tended to oppose figural art (and in some cases all art) as distracting the community from the worship of God and hostile to the strictly unitarian religion preached by Muhammad, and all four of the schools of Islamic law banned the use of images and declared that the painter of animate figures would be damned on the Day of Judgment.

Wherever artistic ornamentation and decoration

were required, therefore, Muslim artists, forbidden to depict human or animal forms, for the most part were forced to resort either to what has since come to be known as “arabesque” (designs based on strictly geometrical forms or patterns of leaves and flowers) or, very often, to calligraphy. Arabic calligraphy therefore came to be used not only in producing copies of the Qur'an (its first and for many centuries its most important use), but also for all kinds of other artistic purposes as well: on porcelain and metalware, for carpets and other textiles, on coins, and as architectural ornament (primarily on mosques and tombs but also, especially in later years, on other buildings as well).

At the start of the Islamic era two types of script seem to have been in use -- both derived from different forms of the Nabataean alphabet. One was square and angular and was called *kufic* (after the town of Kufa in Iraq, though it was in use well before the town was founded). It was used for the first, handwritten copies of the Qur'an, and for architectural decoration in the earliest years of the Islamic Empire. The other, called *naskhi*, was more rounded and cursive and was used for letters, business documents, and wherever speed rather than elaborate formalism was needed. By the twelfth century kufic was obsolete as a working script except for special uses and in northwest Africa, where it developed into the *maghribi* style of writing still used in the area today. Naskhi, the rounded script, remained in use and from it most of the many later styles of Arabic calligraphy have been developed.



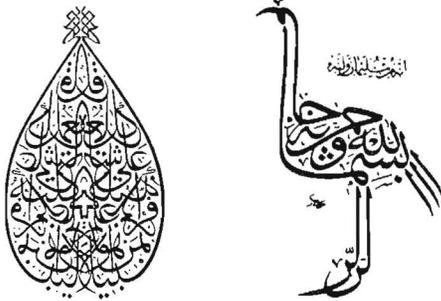
The basmalah is here written in ornamental “floriated” *kufic* (above) and in *naskhi* (below).

Calligraphy flourished during the Umayyad era in Damascus. During this period scribes began the modification of the original thick and heavy kufic script into the form employed today for decorative





to be used both in Turkey and by rulers of the Arab countries as a kind of royal insignia or emblem, on coins and stamps and wherever a coat of arms or royal monogram would be used by European governments.



In the *muthanna* or "doubled" style of calligraphy shown on the left each half of the design is a mirror image of the other. The basmalah in the *thuluth* script on the right has been written in the shape of an ostrich.

Another unusual variation of calligraphy, not often used nowadays, is the style called *muthanna* (Arabic for "doubled"). This is not really a type of script in itself but consists of a text in one of the standard scripts such as naskhi worked into a pattern in which one half is a mirror image of the other. Even more imaginative is what may be called pictorial calligraphy, in which the text (usually the profession of faith, a verse from the Qur'an, or some other phrase with religious significance) is written in the shape of a bird, animal, tree, boat, or other object. A Quranic verse in the kufic script, for example, may be written so that it forms the picture of a mosque and minarets.



The angular *kufic* script is here used to put a well-known religious expression into the form of a mosque with four minarets.

The art of calligraphy is still very much alive in the Arab world and wherever the Arabic alphabet is used. The list of everyday uses is almost endless:

coins and paper money bear the work of expert calligraphers, wall posters and advertising signs in every town show the calligrapher's art, as do the cover and title page of every book, and the major headlines in every newspaper and magazine have been written by hand. Calligraphy -- the art of "beautiful writing" -- continues to be something that is not only highly prized as ornament and decoration but is immensely practical and useful as well.

Source: *Aramco and Its World: Arabia and the Middle East*, Edited by Ismail I. Nawwab, Peter C. Speers, Paul F. Hoyer. Arabian American Oil Company, Washington, D.C., 1980.

## BOOKS FOR FURTHER READING

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