

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

Inscription as Art in the World of Islam

7–9 *Dhū al-Hijjah* 1416/25–27 April 1996
Hofstra University, Hofstra Cultural Center
Long Island, New York

During April 1996, the Hofstra Cultural Center organized an international interdisciplinary conference that focused upon the role of inscription in Islamic art. The conference included diverse areas of inquiry. For instance, it accepted a paper that addressed the usage of Arabic script as inscription in different parts of the world and provided an opportunity to listen to papers that considered inscription as an icon as well as its context, function, and comparative features. In addition, the coordinators organized an exhibition of the works of several artists who were invited specifically to talk about their works. This exhibition started with the opening of the conference and continued into May. On display was a unique blend of traditional and modern uses of Arabic calligraphy—objects from the seventh century as well as those produced via contemporary technology.

Habibeh Rahim, who is attached to Hofstra University's department of philosophy, and Alexej Ugrinsky of the Cultural Center, were the conference director and coordinator, respectively. The former initiated the idea and, with a committee of individuals, hosted the conference and exhibited a selection of Islamic art. This exhibition was supported further by permanent displays in New York City at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Pierpont Morgan Library, and the New York Public Library.

The conference opened with prayers from each of the major religious traditions and two brief addresses by Habibeh Rahim and David Christman, the dean of New College and current director of Hofstra Museum. The first session, chaired by Sheila Blair (Harvard University), consisted of the following scholars and presentations: Valérie Gonzalez (Ecole d'Architecture Provence-Méditerranée Centre Habitat et Développement, Marseille, France), "The Significant Esthetic System of Inscriptions in Muslim Art"; Peter Daniels (University of Chicago), "Graphic-Esthetic Convergence in the Evolution of Scripts: A First Essay"; Solange Ory (Université de Provence at Aix-Marseille, France), "Arabic Inscriptions and Unity of the Decoration"; Sussane Babarie (New York University), "The 'Aesthetics' of Safavid Epigraphy: An Interpretation"; Ali al-Bidah (Dār al-Athār al-Islāmīyah), "Aesthetic and Practical Aspects of a Hexagonal Emerald in Dār al-Athār al-Islāmīyah"; and Howard Federspiel (McGill University, Canada), "Arabic Script on

Covers of Popular Islamic Books in Southeast Asia: Background, Examination, and Illustrations.”

After lunch, participants viewed the artistic work of Amin Gulgee, Pakistan's most well-known contemporary artist–calligrapher. It was a fascinating and most exciting experience to listen to an artist explain and offer a slide presentation of some of his most recent works. In fact, throughout the conference artists gave lively and in-depth presentations of their works. It was enjoyable to listen to the interpretation of their works and the type of response they received from interested parties.

The welcoming ceremonies, held after the opening sessions, were conducted by the deputy of the president of Hofstra University, James M. Shuart (who was unable to attend). Oleg Graber (Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton University), the leading scholar and specialist in Islamic art and architecture, provided the opening remarks and contextualized and elaborated upon this creative field.

The second session was chaired by Stefani Carboni (Metropolitan Museum) and consisted of Oleg Graber, “Inscription, Epigraphy, Calligraphy: The Case of the Dome of the Rock”; Akel Ismail Kahera (Princeton University), “The American Masjid: The Problem of Image, Text, and Form”; Hakan Karateke (University of Bamberg, Germany), “The Use of the Arabic Script in the Fountain Inscriptions of Istanbul as a Didactic and Ornamental Element”; Mohammad Yusuf Siddiqi (Islamic University Kushtia, Bangladesh), “Epigraphy as an Important Source for Islamic History: With Special Reference to the Inscriptions of Bengal”; Naseem Ahmed Banjeri (Weber State University, Ogden, Utah), “Connections between the Qur’anic Surah of Light, Sufi Light Mysticism, and the Motif of the Lamp within a Niche in the Adina Masjid in Pandua, India”; and Salah Sherzad (Istanbul University, Turkey), “The Orderly Script.”

After dinner, participants observed Mohamed Zakariya, the American calligrapher, at work. He exhibited some of his works and informed participants how he teaches and guides his students in the art of calligraphy. He had two of his (traveling) students with him. Without a doubt, he has become an internationally known calligrapher, a sought-after scholar in the United States, and has even impressed many traditional calligraphers in the Muslim heartlands. Later that evening, participants watched a demonstration by two artists: the Kuwaiti Ali al-Bidah and the Arab–American Mamoun Sakkal (University of Washington). The latter demonstrated his designs via the computer, and the former displayed some of the skills used in guiding individuals into the art. On Friday morning, Salah Sherzad demonstrated some of his works.

The third session was moderated by Erica Dodd, an independent scholar presently based in Islamabad, and consisted of: Mamoun Sakkal, “Arabic Calligraphy in the Digital Age”; Mahnaz Shayesteh (University of Birmingham), “The Religious Inscriptions of the Timurid and Safavid Periods”; Karen Barret-Wilt (Indiana University), “Literacy in Early Islam: The Dome of the Rock and the Great Masjid at Damascus”; Holly Edwards

(Williams College), "The Sura in Context"; Yasser Tabba'a (University of Michigan), "Canonicity and Control: The Sociopolitical Underpinnings of Ibn Muqla's Reform"; and Maryam Ekhtiar (Brooklyn Museum), "A Little-Known Source for the Study of Persian Calligraphers and Their Craft: *Tazkireh al-Khattatin* by the Nineteenth-Century Calligrapher Mirza Muhamad 'Ali Sanglakh."

After lunch, the Malaysian artist Sharifa Aljeffri, who has become well-known for her works on Bosnia, presented her creations. She gave an exciting and interesting presentation about her insights and experiences as an artist. In the early afternoon, participants listened to Sheila Blair's reflections, "Interpreting Inscriptions: How to Read the Arabic Texts on Ivories from Islamic Spain."

The fourth session, moderated by Oleg Grabar, consisted of Annamarie Schimmel (Harvard University), "The Importance of the Arabic Script for Islamic Culture" (read in her absence by William Chittick [Harvard University]); Michael Bates (American Numismatic Society), "Who Was Named on Abbasid Coins? What Did It Mean?" (read in his absence by Stefani Carboni); Muhammed Haron, "A Portrait of the Arabic Script in the Cape, South Africa"; Erica Dodd, "Inscriptions in the Wazir Khan Masjid, Lahore"; Karen Rose Matthews (University of Notre Dame), "Negotiated Meanings and Urban Audiences for the Inscriptions on the Sultan Hasan Madrasa/Mausoleum Complex in Cairo"; and Elizabeth Lambourn (University of London), "The Tomb of 'Umar al-Kazaruni: Epitaphs and Epigraphy in the Fourteenth Century."

At the evening banquet, Sayyed Hossein Nasr (George Washington University) presented the keynote address, "The Divine Word and Its Depiction in Islamic Art and Culture." This was followed by a relaxing session of entertainment provided by American and Middle Eastern musicians, who presented a concert of traditional Muslim melodies.

The following morning, Amri Yahya, a famous Indonesian artist, displayed some of his works and demonstrated how he produces his batik creations. This was followed by the fifth session, which, moderated by Daniel Varisco (Hofstra University), consisted of Alexandra Bain (University of Victoria, BC, Canada), "A Contemporary Sufi Master's Use of Sacred Inscriptions"; Richard Weissman (University of California-Los Angeles), "Islamic Inscriptions as Apotropaic Art: A Study of Turkish Talismanic Shirts"; Alhaja Rahmatallahi Ogunmuyiwa (Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria), "The Arabic Script as Sacred Writing in Nigeria" (read in her absence by one of the organizers); and Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad (Princeton University), "Towards a Cosmology of Sacred Inscription in Islam: Glimpses of *'Ilm al-Huruf*."

The final session, moderated by Mustapha Masrouf (Hofstra University), consisted of Kadri M. G. ElAraby (New York Institute of Technology-Manhattan Campus), "The Art and Design of Arabic Calligraphy"; Mohammad Khazae (University of Birmingham), "Kufic Inscription and Its Association with Arabesque Motifs in the Early Islamic Art of Iran";

and Nada Shabout (University of Texas at Arlington), "Text as Image in Arab Art." Closing remarks were made by Alexej Ugrinsky.

Since the conference invited a small number of presenters and artists from various parts of the Muslim world and elsewhere, one was able to interact with one's copresenters without having to miss any of the lectures and demonstrations. It was an ideal forum for networking.

Most presenters delivered their lectures with audiovisual aids, which made their presentations quite interesting. In addition, the demonstrations of the various artists were very educational and stimulating. In fact, the close interaction between attending artists and academics made the conference a great success.

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