The Aesthetics of Arabic Calligraphy and the Materials Used in Crafting Traditional Art

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Abstract
The art of Arabic calligraphy is particularly concerned with the value of beauty and therefore requires specific tools and materials for its writing, formulation, and production. The writing of Arabic calligraphy, both ancient and modern, has been linked to fixed geometric rules and specific tools. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the most prominent materials and tools used in writing it in the past. This study also aims to identify the most important basic rules that calligraphers must follow. The methodology used in this study is historical and descriptive, as it aligns with the study's objectives and goals. One of the most important findings of the study is that the Ottoman calligraphy school developed calligraphy writing tools, beginning with paper, reeds, and knives used for sharpening pens. The study also concluded that each of the tools used in the past in writing Arabic calligraphy is of immense importance, as they form the foundation of the calligraphic work and the essence of its existence.

1. Introduction

Arabic calligraphy has a long-standing history in the Muslim society. Qur'anic verses have traditionally been written using this art form making it not only aesthetically pleasing but sacred in nature as well. Arabic calligraphy has deep spiritual and artistic values and principles such as harmony and balance (Alashari,2021). Duaa Alashari (2019) stated that "Arabic calligraphy is beyond the recipe of shrouds of Islamic art because of its aesthetic, religious and spiritual values. The Arabic alphabet is one of the most beautiful characters in the world. It is distinguished by its unique beauty and uniqueness. It has a great cultural material. It has schools and professors in various times and places such as Kufic, and Thulth line. The Persian calligraphy, which originated in Persia, and the Diwani line, which was drawn by officials and successors of the Ottoman Empire. Arabic calligraphy appeared at the hands of famous Turkish calligraphers. In addition to the multiplicity of schools, Calligrapher Ibn al-Maqla and Ibn al-Bawab and the Ottoman calligrapher Haddad Al-Amassi who reached the Arabic calligraphy to the top of what reached the line of Tawheed and especially the Thulth line".

David (1989) concurs that "the history of Arabic calligraphy began in the seventh century A.D in a script from that of the Nabataeans, a Hellenized Arabic-speaking people from west of River Jordan, the builders of Petra in Jordan and Median Salih in Saudi Arabia." Furthermore, beauty is an incredibly important cultural value in Islamic philosophy and a prominent feature of the art of Arabic calligraphy. This art manifests many aesthetic characteristics, such as harmony, consistency, and balance in the distribution of artistic elements and vocabulary in its writing and artistic production. The art of Arabic calligraphy has been particularly concerned with the value of beauty, and therefore utilised special tools and materials for its writing, formulation, and production. Louay Al-Bayati (2018) defined beauty in calligraphic formations as "the expressive image of organization in the structures of calligraphic formations (Arabic calligraphy) due to the beauty it reflects to the viewer in the distribution of letters and words according to equal proportions, creating a state of visual harmony and coherence." Hassan Al-Basha also defined the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy as "the beautiful intrinsic characteristics and values that Arabic calligraphy encompasses, which inspire ecstasy and pleasure in those who practice, are inspired by, or appreciate it, as well as the potential it contains to help them achieve mastery and beauty" (1999). In this study, the researcher defines the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy as a set of characteristics, principles, and materials used that address the aesthetic aspect of Arabic calligraphy within its functional framework. The researcher relies on the availability of tools, materials, and raw materials for writing calligraphic work to produce a calligraphic composition that simultaneously embodies aesthetic and artistic features.

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2. Method

The method employed in this study is the historical method, through an analytical induction of the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy and the most prominent materials, tools, and raw materials used in its writing and artistic production, related to the traditional style. The researcher utilised the historical and descriptive methods in this study as a method through which she explores the traditional tools used in writing Arabic calligraphy. The researcher will conduct a brief historical study of the most prominent tools, materials, and raw materials used in writing Arabic calligraphy in the past.

3. Results and Discussion

The writing of Arabic calligraphy is linked to fixed geometric rules and specific tools. Among these tools, the "pen," which is considered the first writing tool mentioned in the Holy Quran, is the word "pen," as God Almighty says. [ن وَالْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ] سورة القلم: 1. The pen is used for writing, memorizing the Qur'an and the Prophet's hadiths, and for transcribing manuscripts and scientific works. A pen is not called a pen until it is sharpened. Trimming is cutting, and one cannot write with a pen without cutting off a part of it to give it a head. In the past, pens were made of wood and iron, and there were several pen shapes, including triangular and square. This can be observed by contemplating the writing styles of the Samaritans in Iraq. Later, calligraphers used reeds for writing. Reeds are a plant that grows near rivers. Calligraphers in the past also paid great attention to perfecting pen craftsmanship, as this is one of the secrets of good and beautiful handwriting (Al-Alusi, 2008, p. 69). Among the basic rules that calligraphers must follow is careful placement of the pen, making it neither too long nor too short. They must also pay attention to learning how to sharpen a pen, as learning how to sharpen a pen is more important than learning how to write. There are four pillars of sharpening: opening, carving, splitting, and cutting.

The length of the opening should be the length of the thumb's knuckle. Moreover, the sharpener indicates the quality and type of handwriting and the calligrapher's creative ability (Al-Alusi, 2008, p. 76). Ibn Al-Muqla (1991, p. 345) says, "The pen has a face, a middle, and a width. Its face is where you place the knife when you want to cut, its middle is what is next to its bark, and its width is where you move it to the left nib." Calligraphers consider the pen, ink, and paper to be among the most important pillars of the art of Arabic calligraphy, which must be present and without which it is impossible to write correctly (Al-Zaftawi, 1980, p. 69).



Figure 1. The basic Arabic Calligraphy tools
(https://www.neala.co.uk/index.php/arabic-for-adults/arabic-calligraphy)

The second tool that comes after the pen is ink, meaning ink. God Almighty said: [قُل لَّوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِّكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَن تَنفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا] [الكهف: 109] Ink is called "ink" because it inks the writing. The ink of the nation was Abdullah ibn Abbas, may God be pleased with him. In ancient times, ink was made from plant materials, and the Arabs developed its industry, especially during the Abbasid era. Some ink was made from tannins, some from rice, and some from olive oil and onion juice. This ink has a distinctive property and was used for secret writing in ancient times (Al-Jabouri, 1961, p. 124). Writing in ancient times was done on various materials, including palm fronds, wooden boards, leather, parchment, or textiles. It is said that these textiles were used in the pre-Islamic era to write the Mu'allaqat on the curtain of the Kaaba (Al-Alusi, 2008, p. 75). It is said that the noble companion Zayd ibn Thabit, upon compiling the Qur'an, said, "And I began to trace the Qur'an from palm stalks and likhaf" (Al-Qalqashandi, 1914, p. 475). "Likhaf" refers to thin stones.

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Al-Qalqashandi (1914) said: “The Companions, may God be pleased with them, agreed to write the Holy Qur’an on parchment because of its longevity, and people continued to do so until Rashid took over the caliphate, and paper became plentiful and its use spread among the people. He insisted that people should only write on paper.” Paper is a piece of paper made from tree leaves. The word “paper” appears in the Holy Qur’an in more than one verse, including the Almighty’s saying: [وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ كِتَابًا فِي قِرْطَاسٍ فَلَمَسُوهُ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ لَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِنْ هَذَا إِلاَّ سِحْرٌ مُّبِين [الأنعام: 7] Al-Qalqashandi also praised the Baghdad paper, which was formerly called "kaghad" (1914 AD, vol. 3, p. 55), in his book "Subh al-A'sha" (1914 AD, vol. 3, p. 55).

He stated that only the Holy Qur'an was written on it. Among the historical accounts of the manufacture of "kaghad" is that the people of China were the first to know the manufacture of paper, or what is called "kaghad." The Arabs of old used to import Chinese paper, thanks to their close ties with the countries of the Far East. The Arabs called paper "kaghad" (with a fatha on the "ghain") (Al-Alusi, 2008 AD, p. 78). Yahya Wahib al-Jubouri (1994 AD, p. 275) indicates that the Arabs of old preferred to use and increase their use of "kaghad" because it was a light, soft material that was easy to carry and transport. They used it to ink and make their books, preferring it to papyrus. The raw materials for ancient papermaking were plant resources such as cotton or other plant materials. Various types of paper emerged, varying in colour, thickness, and flexibility (Al-Alusi, 2008, p. 72).

Among the ancient types of paper is Baghdadi paper, which came from Baghdad and was among the finest papers. The Holy Qur'an was written on it. Then came Egyptian paper, including Mansouri paper, which was characterised by its large size. Another type of paper, known as Pharaonic paper, came from Egypt. In addition, there was Shami paper, which came from the Levant, including what is known as "Hamawi," considered one of the finest and most valuable types of Shami paper at that time. Other types of paper included Tal'i paper, Ja'fari paper, and Taheri paper, most of which were produced in Baghdad (Al-Alusi, 2008, p. 79). Arabic calligraphy was not limited to paper, but extended to other materials.

Other materials on which Arabic calligraphy was written include brick, stone, plaster, ceramics, and wood, all of which were used to decorate the facades of palaces and Islamic buildings. Stone and plaster were used for writing and engraving and were considered among the oldest materials used in the Umayyad and Abbasid eras. Ceramics are among the most important artistic crafts that express Islamic civilisation. After ceramics, wood received a great deal of attention, especially during the Abbasid and Fatimid eras. They incorporated Arabic calligraphy and Islamic decorations through engraving and inlay (Al-Alusi, 2008, p. 73).

Ali Afifi Ghazi (2019, p. 198) says, "The Ottoman calligraphy school developed calligrapher tools, starting with paper, reeds, knives used for sharpening the pen (the pencil sharpener), inkwells, and pens made of reeds, palm leaves, reeds, or reeds. They used special pens for calligraphy, varying in size and sharpening according to the type of calligraphy. They also made special pen cases (muqalama) for storing the calligrapher, which were cylinders made of ivory. The Ottomans excelled in polishing paper and manufacturing ink and ink." In addition to the above, the researcher identified the tools used in writing Arabic calligraphy and the importance of each tool, as they are the foundation of calligraphy and the essence of its existence.

4. Conclusion

The study concluded that the materials used in writing Arabic calligraphy have a long history. The study also concluded that the pen, ink, and paper are among the most important components of the art of Arabic calligraphy, which must be present and without which calligraphy cannot be properly executed. There are basic rules that calligraphers must follow when writing calligraphy. Finally, the study concluded that ancient writing was done on various materials, including palm fronds, wooden panels, leather, parchment, or textiles. The tools, materials, and raw materials used in ancient Arabic calligraphy are important, as they form the foundation of calligraphy and the essence of its existence.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/ or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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