

# the word of GOD

calligraphy and qur'ans from  
the nasser d khalili collection  
of islamic art

The first part of an exclusive new series explores the evolution of the written word. Illustrated by objects from the world's largest collection of Islamic art, the richness and diversity of the Arabic language comes to life through the scribes who devoted their lives to committing the word of the God to paper.

TEXT BY RUDOLF ABRAHAM  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS  
AND COURTESY OF THE KHALILI FAMILY TRUST





Previous pages: Four tiles from a frieze with an inscription in a rounded script. Ottoman provinces, Syria or Palestine. Dated after 1550. The stencils used for these tiles are the same as those used for the decoration of the porches of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, restored in the 1540s under Suleiman the Magnificent. It is possible that they were made for the Great Mosque at Aleppo shortly afterwards. Dimensions of each tile 35 x 35 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Facing page: Folio from a very large Qur'an, copied in Grand Kufic on vellum. Tunisia. Dated early 11th century. Dimensions of folio 45 x 30 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Below: Miniature inkwell carved from banded agate, inscribed with a verse from the Qur'an in Kufic script. Iran. Dated ninth to 10th century. Dimensions 2.7 x 2.7 x 2.7 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

The Nasser D Khalili Collection is exceptionally rich in copies of the Qur'an, containing examples which span a geographical region stretching from Morocco and Islamic Spain to China and Indonesia. It is an area of the collection to which its founder, Professor Nasser D Khalili, attaches particular importance, and of which he can be justly proud.

As the language in which the Qur'an - and therefore the word of God - was transmitted, the Arabic script has always held a pre-eminent status in Islamic art and society. Not only are the pen, ink, the act of writing and the Arabic language all referred to in the Qur'an, it is generally believed that the greater part of *Surah* 68 ('The Pen'), and the opening verses of *Surah* 96 ('The Clinging Clot') were the first two parts of the Qur'an to be revealed to the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH). The use of calligraphy was extended to all aspects of Islamic art, from Qur'ans and other manuscripts to large-scale architectural inscriptions. Fine examples of calligraphy were collected from across the Islamic world and often formed part of album collections (known as *muraqqa'at*) such as those assembled by a number of Mughal Emperors (as illustrated in Canvas volume 2, issue 1); and the study of calligraphy and calligraphers itself forms a venerable tradition in the Islamic

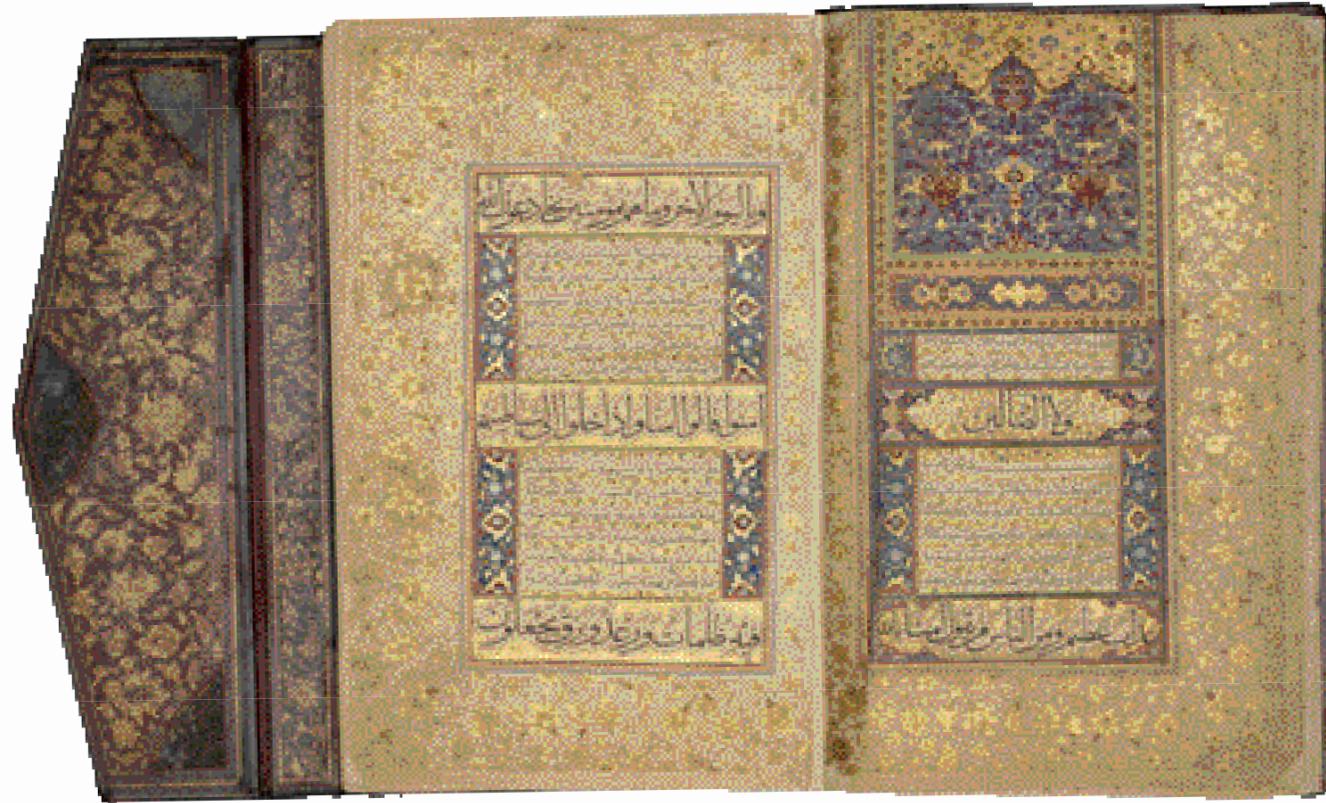
In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful: "If the ocean were ink (whereith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it, for its aid." Qur'an, Surah 18 (The Cave), Verse 109



world - with the result that we often know more about celebrated calligraphers than we do about other groups of Muslim artists within a given period.

In Ottoman Turkey the study of calligraphy traditionally formed part of the education of Sultans. For example, Sultan Beyazid II was taught by the great Ottoman calligrapher Sheikh Hamdullah Al-Amasi (died 1520). Furthermore, the very process of copying the Qur'an was considered an act of piety. The pride taken in this is indicated by the fact that, during the Ottoman period, many calligraphers who specialised in the copying of Qur'ans signed their names with the epithet '*Hafiz Al-Qur'an*' ('He who has committed the Qur'an to memory'). The Arabic script developed during the years immediately after the *Hijra* (the emigration of the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) from Mecca to Medina) from a form known as *Hijazi*, to the angular, clearly recognisable early style

generally known as *Kufic*. A somewhat more refined variation developed later in Iran, known as Eastern *Kufic*. In some cases, *Kufic* became highly stylised, incorporating foliate and other decorative elements. A series of diacritical marks to indicate short vowels (which are not written in Arabic) was developed during the second half of the seventh century and a series of



‘He who taught (the use of) the Pen  
Taught man that which he knew not. /  
Qur’an, Surah 96, Verses 4-5

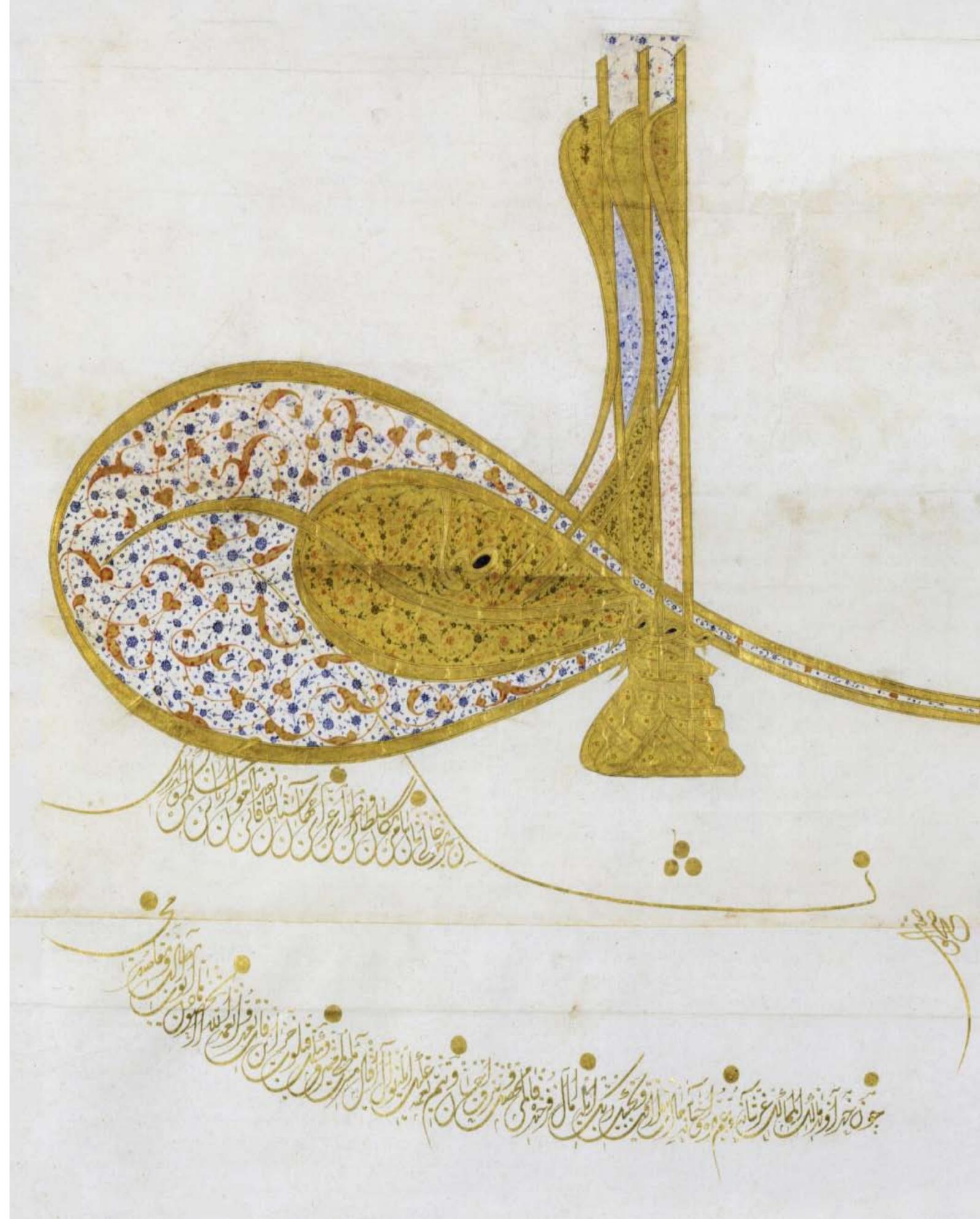
proportions for the script based on the width of the pen nib and the height of an *aleph* (the first letter of the Arabic alphabet) was developed in the early 10th century.

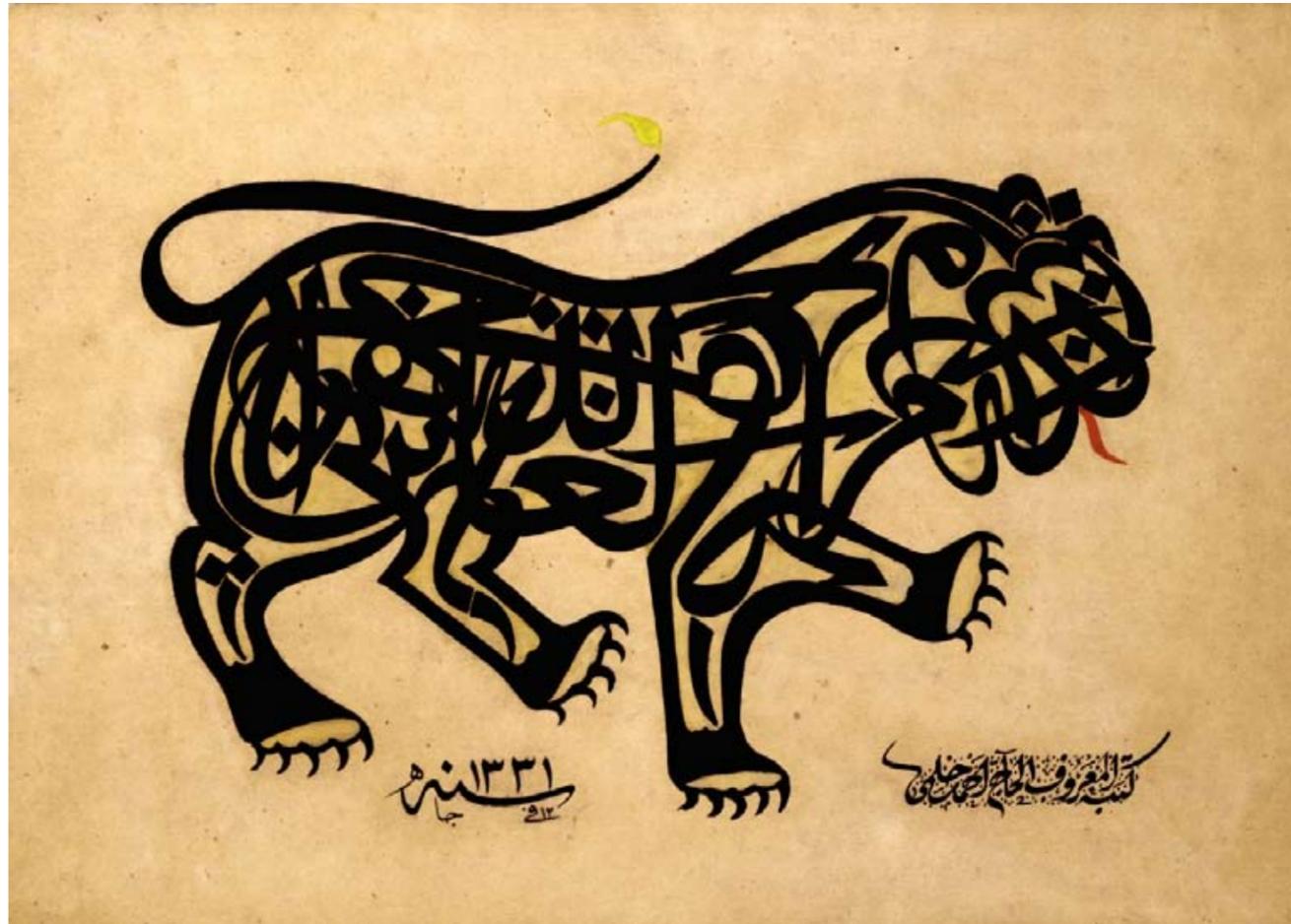
By virtue of its graphic nature *Kufic* was well-suited to architectural decoration and like other scripts, which were to develop later, was applied to a wide range of media within the decorative arts, including pottery, glass, metalwork and textiles. However, its most important application was the copying of Qur’ans, for which it remained the favoured script until the 10th-11th century.

Very few Qur’ans have survived from the early Islamic period; the earliest known examples are from the eighth century. However, examples from the ninth and 10th centuries are more numerous. Qur’ans from this period were written on vellum (parchment), the folios generally bound in a horizontal or

oblong format. The text, written in *Kufic*, was often accompanied by illumination, in particular frontispieces and *Surah* (chapter) headings, as well as markings to indicate the beginning of individual verses or groups of verses.

From the end of the ninth and through the course of the 10th and 11th centuries, the style and format of Qur’ans underwent a number of changes. The horizontal format typical of early Qur’ans was superseded by a vertical format, which led to a change in the arrangement of the text area of individual folios. Multiple as well as single-volume Qur’ans were produced; a division of the text into 30 volumes (one to be read each day of the month) being the most popular. A greater variation in the size of Qur’ans is also apparent from this period onwards - many of the Qur’ans produced during the Mamluk period (1250-1517), for example, are exceptionally large. The use of illumination





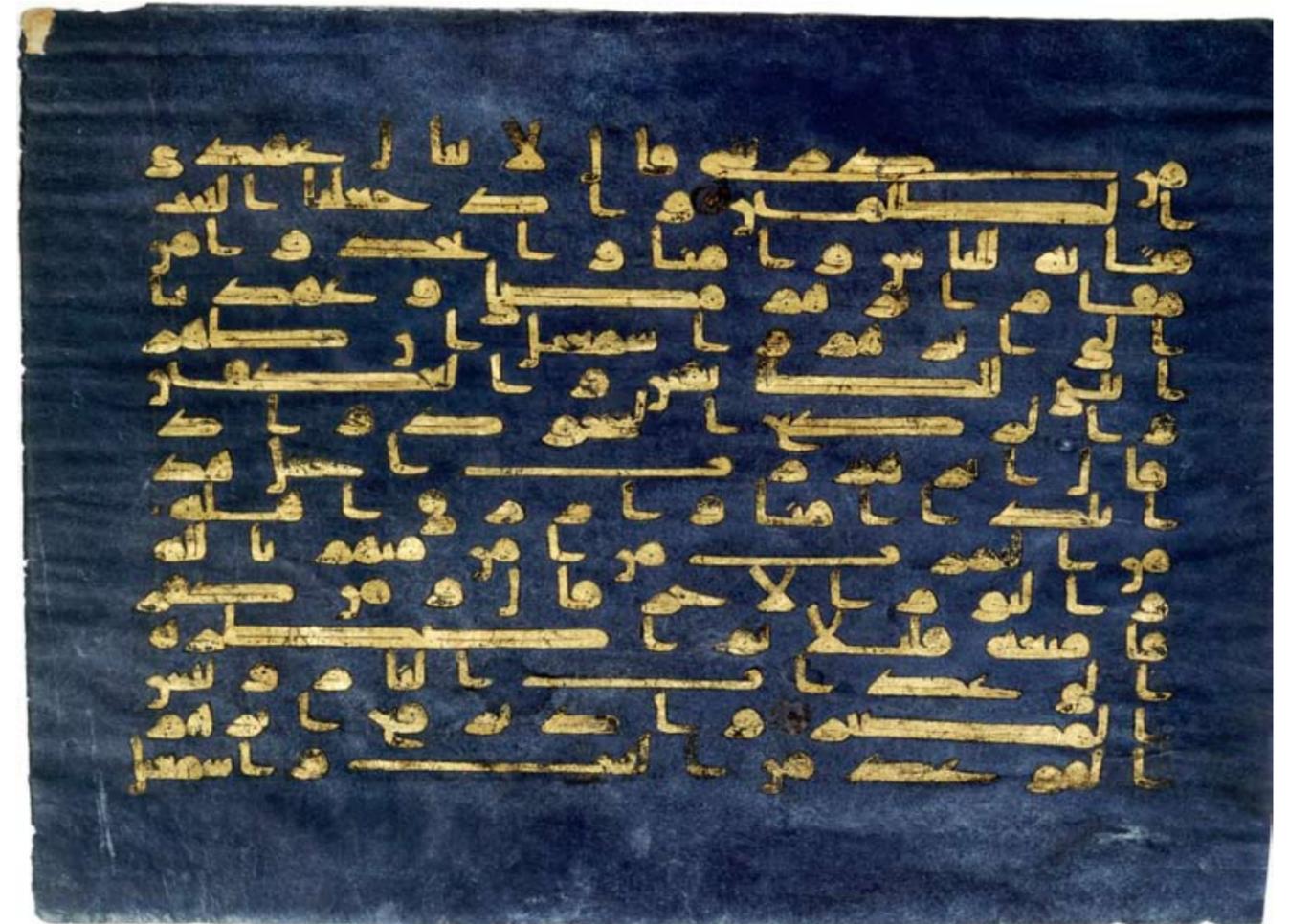
became more extensive and elaborate, and interlinear glosses or translations were often included, in a different or contrasting script to the main text. Following the introduction of papermaking, it was used increasingly in the production of Qur'ans and other manuscripts in place of vellum.

At the same time, a number of cursive scripts were developed, initially in Iran and then throughout the central Islamic lands, including the elegant scribal hand *Naskh*, together with *Muhaqqaq*, *Thulth*, *Rayhan*, *Tawqi'*, *Riqa'* and a number of variations. These scripts became increasingly popular during the ensuing centuries - although they did not entirely eclipse *Kufic*, which continued to find a more modest use in *Surah* headings and other incidentals. *Muhaqqaq* in particular was favoured for the copying of Qur'ans in Iran from the 11th century onwards, and also *Rayhan*; *Thulth*, a somewhat larger script, was often used for *Surah* headings. *Tawqi'* and *Riqa'* were generally used as chancery hands. These calligraphic styles,

known as 'The Six Pens', attained canonical form in the work of the great calligrapher Yaqt Al-Musta'simi (died 1298).

An exception to many of these changes was the Muslim West, which held more tenaciously to earlier traditions. A distinctive, square format was maintained for Qur'ans copied in North Africa and Spain, and the *Maghribi* and *Andalusi* scripts - recognisable by their pronounced, curving loops below the baseline - predominated. During the 18th century a highly refined form of *Naskh* developed in Iran under the master calligrapher Mirza Ahmad Nayrizi, who was active around 1682-1739. *Naskh* had largely gone out of fashion as a script for copying Qur'ans in Iran during the preceding centuries but this new form of *Naskh* was used almost exclusively in the copying of Qur'ans during the late Safavid (1501-1722) and Qajar (1779-1925) periods.

Other scripts also developed but they were not used for devotional and religious texts. One such script was *Nasta'liq*,



which by the 15th century had become extremely popular in Iran. However, it was very rarely used in Qur'ans. Rather, its favoured use was for the copying of secular manuscripts. Similarly, several distinctive, secular genres developed, associated specifically with the art of calligraphy; for example, the *tugra* or Sultan's monogram during the Ottoman period.

Despite the advent of photolithography in the 19th century, handwritten Qur'ans continued to be produced and calligraphy remained a highly skilled art in the Islamic world. It maintains its importance to the , forming an essential component in the work of many Contemporary artists. □

For further information on the Khalili collections and on the forthcoming exhibition 'Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Collection of Nasser D Khalili', which opens at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney on 22 June, visit [www.khalili.org](http://www.khalili.org) and [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)

#### Previous pages

Left: Single-volume Qur'an, copied in *Muhaqqaq*, *Thulth* and *Naskh*, with extensive illumination. Iran. Dated circa 1550-1600. Dimensions of each folio 38.8 x 24 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Right: Detail of a *ferman* (imperial decree), with the *tugra* (Sultan's monogram) of the Ottoman Sultan Murad III. Istanbul. Dated early Safar 984 (May, 1576). Width 40.5 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Facing page: Calligraphic composition in *Thulth* in the form of a lion. Ottoman Turkey. Dated 12 *Jumada Al-Awal* 1331 (19 April, 1913). Dimensions 26.5 x 38.8 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Above: Folio from a Qur'an, copied in *Kufic* on vellum. Diacritical marks are included in red and the *a* of each verse indicated by three thin, oblique strokes. The *Surah* heading, written in gold, is accompanied by a decorative band of illumination. Dated second half the ninth or early 10th century. Dimensions of folio 20.4 x 30.8 cm. © The Nour Foundation.