

Hossein Razavifard

Iranian Calligraphy:

*An Analytical History
with Illustrations*



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Preface

Writing about the Persian calligraphy with its various scripts in the art history of Iran seems an easy yet difficult task to accomplish. Iranian calligraphy can be viewed from two perspectives: first, the non-Iranian scripts in which Iranians have exercised their good taste and thus created artistic works; and second, the ones which have their origin in the Iranian culture and talent. Some scholars, however, raise doubt about the non-Iranian origin of the first group; hence we will have a review of their opinions on the genuineness of some Islamic scripts as well. It goes without saying that the magnificence and evolution of the Islamic calligraphy has been a result of the collaboration between Persian, Turkish, Arab and Indian artists, that is to say, all the nations and ethnic groups believing in a single holy book, Quran, and Arabic is their common language of religion and worship. Accordingly, the development of any of such scripts reflect the cultural and artistic taste of that particular nation, but all originate from a single initial stimulus. In other words, the visual similarities of the scripts are the result of a superficial alliance, but the differences arise from the background of each region's civilization and cultural achievements. Regardless of assigning priority to inventors or initiators of the scripts, we should note that the unity of countries involved in this historical activity is of utmost significance, no matter under which title they may be categorized, whether it be the Silk Route, its source of inspiration be a unique holy book or the worthy treasures of Persian literature.

The term khat (writing) refers to the general form of letters in a single language distinguishing which from the other forms of writing in other languages. Yet, *khoshnevisi* (calligraphy) is an arena for implementing aesthetic changes based on geometric principles to a single form of writing from which different scripts would be derived. Such scripts are of artistic aspects concerning the skill of design and other features of a certain culture. Albertine Gaur has offered one of the clearest definitions of "calligraphy" in her *A History of Writing*. She believes that the act of writing beautifully and the evolution of different styles of writing can't be regarded as calligraphy in itself. Hence, in her view, a synthesis of several factors would be required for the creation of true calligraphy, including a social understanding of writing, significance of the text, mathematical rules dominating the writing forms and the page on which they are written, writing skills and perception, and the material and tools for writing. From the phrase "true calligraphy" in Gaur's definition it is understood that one can imagine a kind of calligraphy that is untrue, so it can be said true calligraphy is the art of calligraphy. This becomes even more evident when two years later in her "History of Calligraphy", Gaur repeats the same definition adding: "Unlike writing, the art of calligraphy cannot be acquired simply by learning; it demands insight and individuality, but individuality expressed within strictly prescribed boundaries".

When talking about pre-Islamic Iranian writings, some raise doubt whether to consider some of these beautiful works as calligraphy or not? When evaluating ancient paintings, we make no attempt at finding any other name for painting medium, so we just study such works in the "period of time" they were created and the "influence" they have asserted on the historical trend of painting. We should also note that children's crude drawings, paintings by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel and the works of the Coffeehouse Movement artists in Iran are all called "painting". All these works would only be distinguished from each other by some specific terms as Balance, harmony, draughtsmanship, style, expression and so forth. It is evident that calligraphy can't achieve artistic value unless the calligrapher enjoys deep insight and individuality. Despite all the evidence offered, it seems better to compare the title "painting" with "writing" rather than calligraphy. Because, current understanding of the conceptual and semantic arena of traditional "calligraphy" is based on the principles of aesthetics and goodness; that is, a system which would put the basic rules taken from the pre-Islamic Iranian secretarial system in a gradual process under a single geometric and at the same time imaginative, flowing and modifiable and would put a high visual valuation on the nature of letters after the advent

of Islam. Hence, we can determine some distinct stages of development for this medium, from the preliminary stage of writing to the final calligraphy. Here we can categorize the issue under four stages, namely "writing", "good writing", "script-graphy" and "calligraphy". It is an approach in which - in a historical process - both play a role; society's understanding of the artist's writing and individuality. Accordingly, it is thought that the above-mentioned pre-Islamic works could sometimes be regarded as "good writing" or "script-graphy", while the calligraphy itself and its concept of being considered art should be judged cautiously according to the quality of works and conditions under which they have been created. "Script-graphy" could even be applied to some works made in the contemporary period without observing traditional principles of calligraphy, such as those done by the *Saqqā-khaneh* Movement artists, Iran, and afterwards. It seems evident that the concept and arena of modern and pre-Islamic Script-graphies reveal essential differences.

In compiling the present book, as concise and possible, it's been tried to offer a general view of the Iranian calligraphy. Therefore, I have taken Matthew Arnold's criterion into consideration, that is, a survey of a subject dealt with much, yet not yielding a general perspective. In the triple categorization of Stanford, writing about history contains three aspects: descriptive historiography, historical historiography and analytical historiography. The present book pursues an analytical or critical type of historiography in a particular field, Iranian calligraphy. Since this text adopts a formal and structural approach towards writing, and it takes into account historical, social and cultural conditions, it's been tried to view it from the perspective of "style", so that all analyses would concentrate on one basis.

Regarding the historical aspect of the text, such "stylistic" coherence may in some cases be unseen and sometimes seen, however is omnipresent in every part of the book. In a general view, we can divide the stylistic turning points of Iranian calligraphy in the Islamic period into three stages: invention or organization of a script, evolution of a calligraphic form, and "inserting" certain techniques and experience into a script. Some scholars and artists claim that such "insertion" was not to deny nor deconstruct the former foundations, but it was supposed to present a new method by offering some "slight" differences, however they seemed "radical and enormous" to experts.

Here, it should be noted that "style" is just a vehicle for realizing the intended, potential dream of the artist not a goal. It is, in fact, the genuineness and the side, unwanted product of a successful attempt of a talented artist who wants to be honest and sincere, and to trace the origin of whatever he/she sees. Conscious attempt at achieving a personal style may inevitably demolish the true essence of the work, for it deliberately inserts an element or feature into a process which can only be guided by "necessity". In a nutshell, Iranian calligraphy has perfect balance and harmony in terms of form and content.

In accordance with the cultural geography of Iran and Islamic instructions, it is an art that has both a very strong geometric and imaginary basis, and historical-social roots. Therefore, one should have grand strategy in evaluating its works and in dealing with its artistic aspects and neither limit it to a mystical approach and religious symbols nor see it radically only in terms of geometry and form. Expert calligraphers, masters, artists and researchers are ropewalkers who have achieved this cultural and formal balance, from the point of view of this author.

If we are to mention scholarly studies published formerly in the field of the glorious history of Iranian calligraphy, *Ahval va Asar-e Khoshnevisan* (Biographies and Artworks of calligraphers) by Mehdi Bayani, *Atlas-e Khat* (Atlas of Writing) by Habibollah Fazaeli and *Darāmadi bar Khosnevisi-ye Irāni* (An Introduction to the Iranian Calligraphy) by Hamidreza Ghelichkhani are significance sources in identifying the status of the Iranian calligraphers up to the present time. The mentioned reference is truly admirable in terms of identifying calligraphers and making amendments to previous chronological mistakes by researchers.

Furthermore, other definitive studies carried out and essays written by Aydin Aghdashlou, Alireza Hasheminejad, Mahdi Sahragard, Kianoush Motaghedi and Mohammad Fadaei as well as several articles penned by Kaveh Teymouri including an analysis of the Iranian contemporary masters have all been useful and enlightening in compiling the present book. Numerous biographical dictionaries on calligraphers and Arabic and Persian treatises on calligraphy, and a few thousand books on instruction and research in the history of Iran are all indicative of the expansion and depth of the scholarly history of Iranian calligraphy. Here, I have used these treasures as much as possible.

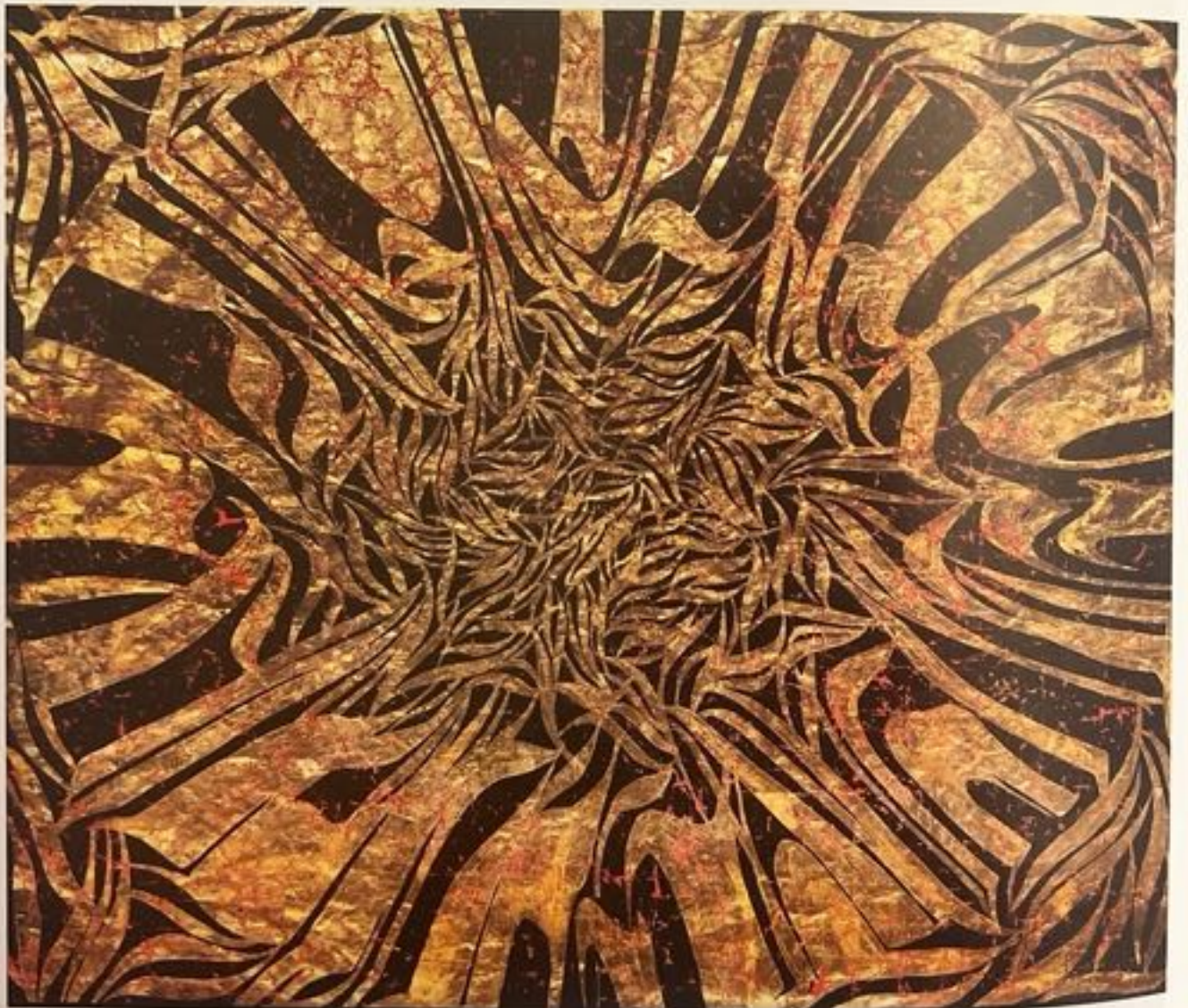
This book deals with several analytical subjects: pre-Islamic writing, Kufic scripts, sextet pens such as *ta'liq*, *nasta'liq*, *shekasteh*, decorative scripts, calligraphic painting, contemporary innovative pens, an introduction to Iranian Calligraphers Forum, and the female calligraphers. Among the two written traditions of writing and inscription in Iran, except with brief hints, there was no provided the opportunity to enter the broad topic of inscription in architecture, so in all chapters of the book focusing on books and exhibition works, a history of Iranian calligraphy is shown by illustrations from the appearance of a certain script to its evolution to the contemporary period, besides referring to the names of distinguished calligraphers.

On some scripts like *Taliq* and *Nasta'liq* and also calligraphic painting have been emphasized more due to their historical significance or their great number of artists available. Apart from the contemporary issues of chapters dealing with the history of Iranian calligraphy during the past century and hence may be subject to probable mistakes or misconceptions; it's been tried in other historical parts to offer academic attitudes. Incidentally, some works are being presented for the first time. It is evident that the present study is not to take an analytical approach for every detail like that done in analytical essays. Therefore, the text doesn't raise explicit and serious criticisms, for it could have deviated from its original route that is the general history of Iranian calligraphy. Having adopted such a stylistic approach in historiography, names of a great number of calligraphers were omitted; however, recognition of the pioneers and innovative masters in this field has been representative of the whole trend. Here, I have to extend my sincere apologies to two groups: first, masters who have played a major role in the history of Iranian calligraphy, yet their names were not mentioned in the book; second, those mentioned but without any of their works presented. This book is open to any opinion or criticism by calligraphers and scholars, since it may bring about improvement. Incidentally, the title "master" has been omitted in all chapters in order to be brief, however we hold both old and contemporary masters in considerable respect.

Finally, I should express my gratitude to the acknowledged master and friend, Mohammad Heydari, for encouraging me to compile this book and helping in this respect. I should also extend my genuine appreciation to Dr. Hojjatollah Ayoubi, the respected UNESCO secretary-general of the National Commission in Iran, for giving lots of support and for helping me and the grace and support of dear publisher and artist, Mojtaba Sabzeh, besides others in gathering data and pictures and in writing the titles of the chapters for this book.

Hossein Razavifard
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طراحی و مهندسی حروف از ویژگی‌های آثار نقاشیخط محمد بزرگی، یکی از پرکارترین هنرمندان جوان معاصر است. محمد بزرگی، در شناخت شخصیت حروف با قلم‌های مختلف ورزیده شده است. دفرماسیون حروف از کوچک‌ترین فرم‌ها در عناصر تزینی همچون انگشتر تا نیمرخ‌های تنومند بر بوم‌های عظیم، تقارن کلی و معمارانه‌ی مفردات، کهن‌نمایی اثر و بهره‌گیری از ظرفیت‌های مینی‌مالیسم و آپ‌آرت خط، آثار باشکوه این هنرمند را، هم برای جمال‌شناسی اسلامی مطلوب کرده است هم زیبایی‌شناسی مدرن. (نک. تصویر ۲۰۵) از دیگر هنرمندانی که با دفرمه کردن نویسه‌ها در تعادلی نامتقارن، آثاری چشمگیر و پرمخاطب آفریده‌اند می‌توان به میریعقوب سنگ‌تراش و وحید آرنک اشاره نمود. آرنک که در پیکره‌بندی گرافیکی خطوط، دستی توانا دارد؛ درک تجسمی و قوت قلمش در طراحی سنجاق‌سینه و انگشتر و اکسسوری‌های خوشنویسانه ستودنی است.



تصویر ۲۰۵. نقاشیخط، Nobody Cares About Us، ترکیب مواد روی بوم، محمد بزرگی، نسل سوم و چهارم، ۲۰۲۰

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