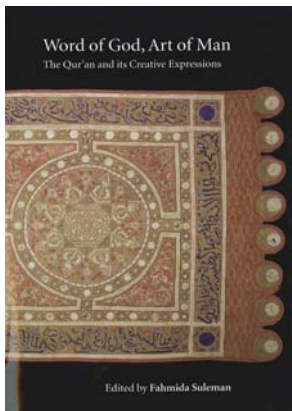




The Institute of Ismaili Studies



Word of God, Art of Man *The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions*

Edited by Fahmida Suleman

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A Reading Guide prepared by Sabrina A Dato for the Department of Community Relations, 2009.

Muslim reverence for the Holy Qur'an as the Word of God can be found in many artistic forms throughout history. It is striking how universally script is used, from small portable objects to grand monumental buildings. The act of writing the words themselves and also the aesthetic qualities of the letters is given great importance, as seen from the effort put into the lavish decoration of Qur'anic manuscripts. *Word of God, Art of Man* explores some of these creative expressions of the Holy Qur'an through a range of media and from a variety of different cultures and regions of the world.

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Does not the Qur'an challenge the artist, as much as the mystic to go beyond the physical — the outward — so as to seek to unveil that which lies at the centre but gives life to the periphery? Is not a great work of art, like the ecstasy of the mystic, a gesture of spirit, a stirring of the soul that comes from the attempt to experience a glimpse of, and an intimacy with, that which is ineffable and beyond being?

His Highness the Aga Khan
"Word of God, Art of Man" colloquium
October 19, 2003

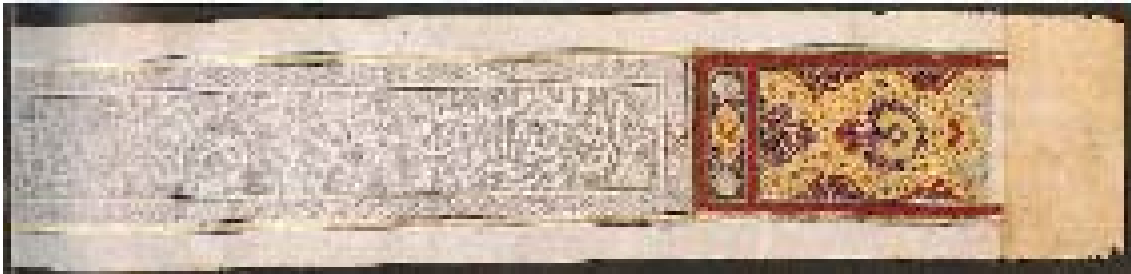


Fig. 1. Holy Qur'an scroll, mid-19th c., Iran, Qajar. Ghubari script in black ink on paper. 575 x 12.5 cm; Aga Khan Museum Collection; (p. 65)

Word of God, Art of Man is a beautifully illustrated volume of papers presented during the international colloquium, 'The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions' held during the 25th anniversary celebration of The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS). As the title suggests, *Word of God, Art of Man* examines the many artistic traditions that developed around the Holy Qur'an, rather than focusing on the legal, theological and philosophical traditions it has also inspired.

His Highness the Aga Khan, in his opening remarks at the colloquium, which are included as a preface to this collection, remarks on the importance of reflecting on this aspect of the Holy Qur'an:

Some among the eminent scholars present today have observed that, while the Qur'an may not propound a doctrine of Islamic art or material culture, it does offer imaginative scope in this direction. From early on, its passages have inspired works of art and architecture and shaped attitudes and norms that have guided the development of Muslim artistic traditions.

By examining the Holy Qur'an as a part of artistic production and material culture, this volume explores how the text of the Holy Qur'an is found in a variety of social spaces, both domestic and public, and how it circulated within and between such spaces in various regions of the Muslim world at different points in its history. Questions about how the Holy Qur'an is seen as a revered object, rather than as a divine message, often falls to historians and scholars interested in the study of manuscripts, book binding and illumination; the art of decorating text.

Word of God, Art of Man offers several essays in this tradition of illumination, including one by the late Duncan Haldane, former Librarian of the IIS, which reviews the masterfully prepared Qur'anic manuscripts held in the IIS collection. However, the volume also looks more broadly at the ways in which the text of the Holy Qur'an appears outside the form of a book. Among its memorable examples is a pair of twelfth century golden earrings from the Mediterranean inscribed with the first three verses of *Surat al-Ikhlās* and a fourteenth century glass mosque lamp with *Ayat al-Nur* painted in bold

blue ink around its neck. These are just two examples of the myriad kinds of materials with which the text of the Holy Qur'an has been fashioned into works of art.

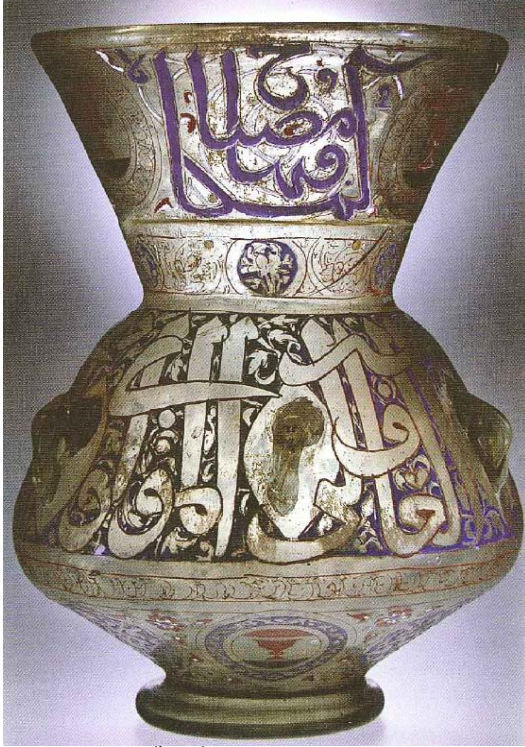


Fig. 2. Glass mosque lamp made for the Mamluk amir Sayf al-Din Shaykhu, second half of the 14th c., 33 cm (h). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891, 91.1.1537 (p. 281).

This collection of short, readable essays demonstrates the universal presence of the word of God in the social life of objects. It seems to have been assembled to remind us of *Surat al-Baqara* (Q. 2:15): 'Wherever you turn, there is the face of Allah'. This is one of the themes addressed by Fahmida Suleman in her introduction to the volume, which grounds each essay in a wider field of research concerning the appearance of Qur'anic text in art, architecture and material culture. She remarks that:

...the broadest theme of the volume concerns the ability of the Qur'anic text to sanctify, politicise, beautify or bestow talismanic properties on objects and buildings and several

essays in this volume attest to the multiple interpretations and uses of the Qur'an in informing particular Muslim worldviews, practices and beliefs.

Oleg Grabar's opening remarks are certainly consistent with this statement. His approach to studying how the Holy Qur'an has inspired the arts is divided into three parts. These include the inscription of Qur'anic quotations on monumental architecture, reviewing the importance of the arts of the book in studying the Holy Qur'an and the Qur'an as a public text displayed in the homes of nobility and mosques.

Public Display of Qur'anic Text

Gülru Necipoğlu's essay argues that Qur'anic text on the Great Mosques of the Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid capitals should be studied in the political context of competing ideologies and not only with respect to the form of the text. She is especially interested in the Qur'anic inscriptions on Ottoman mosques whose construction was overseen by a chief court architect, Sinan, between 1539 and 1588. Her thesis is that Sinan was central to the 'creation of a novel decorative idiom' in which mosque inscriptions were written in large, clear and simple script.

This was a departure from fifteenth century Ottoman mosques which emphasized form over content. They often featured overlapping, superimposed and reversed scripts and used various kinds of texts, including 'monotheistic litanies', the 'beautiful names' of Allah, as well as fragments of Qur'anic verses. Sinan's new decorative idiom is best illustrated by the epigraphy on the Süleymaniye mosque in Istanbul and the Selimiye mosque in

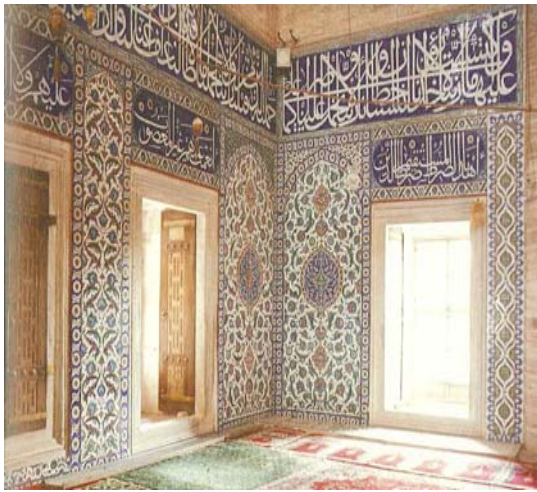


Fig 3 Selimiye Mosque, 16th c., Edirne. *Mihrab* recess with *Surat al-Fatiha* (Q. 1:1-7) on the window lunettes and verses from *Surat al-Baqara* (Q. 2:285-6) on the upper inscription band (p.79).

Edirne as seen in the fine colour detail images of these buildings.

Necipoglu compares the 'inscription programmes' of Sinan's Ottoman mosques with those of the Safavids, epitomised in the Masjid-i Shah in Isfahan, and the Mughals, as examined in the Jami Masjid in Delhi. She concludes that the Qur'anic text displayed on mosques in these three imperial centres is of political as well as aesthetic value. It demonstrates the political and religious tensions that were playing out between the imperial courts.

Hülya Tezcan's description of the Kaba covers housed at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul also includes a brief history of the political tensions surrounding the honour to provide the decorative cover for this most sacred of public spaces. She demonstrates the changes in the colour and design of the Kaba covers over several centuries. These include a white and red Khurasani cloth cover, another of white and green satin with 'Indian work' and a 'magnificent Kaba covering embroidered with jewels that was woven in Egypt by order of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz, likely produced at one of the Fatimid weaving workshops, known as *dar al-kiswa*.

We also learn that the familiar image of the sleek black Meccan cube became pervasive only in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century when Kaba covers came to be produced exclusively in black. Although the change in Qur'anic inscriptions is less apparent in her narrative, Tezcan provides a thorough analysis of texts on the Kaba covers available at the Topkapi palace, all of which include the *shahada* and a selection of ayats from the Holy Qur'an.

The public display of *ayats* is not limited to mosques or to regions where people are literate in Arabic or Persian. Huism Tan's insightful essay on Qur'anic inscriptions in woodcarvings on Malay homes suggests that the text of certain *ayats* is understood as part of an existing spiritual ethos in which a traditional Malay home is built. Within Malay cosmology, these homes' foundations are carefully arranged in order to maximise the *semangat* or vital life force of the home. The nature of the wood and the position of supporting pillars in relation to one another are of utmost importance. Tan suggests that the location and content of *ayats* carved above doors and over windows may be understood to have the power to protect those, usually the families of aristocrats and sultans, who live in such spiritually fortified homes.



Fig. 4. Front entrance to the Istana Tengku Nik, Terengganu. Contains a mirror composition of part of *Surat al-Kahf* and other panels displaying verses from a 13th c. praise poem to the Prophet, the *Qasidat al-Burda* of al-Busiri. The palace was originally built in AH 1305/AD 1888 for Sultan Zain al-'Abidin III (r. AH 1298-1336/AD 1881-1918) and is now housed in the gardens of the Terengganu Museum (p. 210).

Qur'anic Text on Objects

Inscriptions of the Holy Qur'an are not only displayed on buildings, but also appear on a variety of objects within domestic spaces. Qur'anic *ayats* have been and continue to be inscribed on various metals to make amulets, or woven into articles of clothing and are also etched into hand held mirrors, suggesting a very intimate relationship between the divine book and the believer.

Venetia Porter's essay on amulets at the British Museum traces the relationship between the Christian legend of the 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus' and *Surat al-Kahf* (Q. 18, 'The Cave'), which describes the adventure of several young men who fled from religious persecution with their dog and sought refuge in a cave. Porter includes several interpretations and elaborations of this *sura* that emphasise the talismanic power of the names of the 'seven sleepers'. These seven names, along with the name of the dog, Qitmir, are engraved on gold amulets that would have been worn as necklaces or woven into clothing to protect the wearer from misfortune and harm, especially during travel.

The protective power of the Holy Qur'an's *ayats* is also examined in Anne Regourd's study of two 'magic mirrors', one likely produced in the thirteenth century in Iran and currently at the Louvre and another used in the 1990s in Yemen. Although there is little historical evidence about the use of the thirteenth century mirror, whose design is a hybrid of Korean decorative motifs and Qur'anic inscriptions, Regourd argues that:

Based on the evidence available it seems that on the whole the practice of

re-engraving talismanic designs and inscriptions on the flat surface of early thirteenth century mirrors was a common practice in the Shi'i communities of fifteenth century Iran and later.

Her fieldwork in Yemen, however, illustrates another usage for magic mirrors: they were employed in medical cures of specific diseases, such as facial paralysis.

The use of calligraphic writing of verses from the Holy Qur'an is also highlighted in Ismaheel Akinade Jimoh's study of the arts in southwest Nigeria. Jimoh introduces us to a world of Qur'anic art in which decorative motifs used in the embellishment of manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an are visible in various forms, including birth certificates, men's shirts and hats. The copies of the Holy Qur'an produced by Yoruba Islamic scholars are therefore marked by an indigenous aesthetic in which unique locally made papers, inks and calligraphic modes are used.

This group of essays, with their attention to the circulation of Qur'anic fragments in domestic space, offers an interesting counterpoint to the great volume of work on the public display of the divine word.

Other essays explore material objects that cannot be confined to the public or the domestic sphere, but may have resonances in both. These include military banners, coins and manuscripts



Fig. 5. Fatimid dinar of Imam al-Zahir, AH 426/AD 1035, Misr: obverse & reverse; Institute of Ismaili Studies Collection (p. 109).

of the Holy Qur'an, which circulate through a wide range of spaces.

A powerful symbol of this kind of circulation is currency inscribed with sacred writing. Alnoor Jehangir Merchant offers us the first systematic analysis of Qur'anic inscriptions on Fatimid coins in a thorough study of fifteen types of coins preserved from 913 AD to 1095 AD. He presents a history of coinage under the Fatimids along with colour illustrations of both sides of each type of coin and detailed notes, including translations, of their text.

Other material objects imprinted with both the signs of the state and the word of God include military banners, such as those described by Miriam Alide-Unzaga. Her essay seeks to revise the origins of a particular banner, the Las Huelgas banner, used by the Muslim rulers of medieval southern Spain. After an analysis of the Qur'anic inscriptions, the materials employed and the unique display of reversible

Fig. 6. Woven yellow banner of the Marinid sultan, Abu'l Hasan, AH 739/Ad 1339, Fez, 3.74 x 2.67 m. Cathedral of Toledo, Spain (p. 250).



script on this banner, she refutes the attribution of this banner to the early thirteenth century and argues that it was likely made much later, in the fourteenth century under Marinid rule. The banner continues to be of relevance in the national imagination of Spain's past as replicas of the banner are paraded by military officials in a yearly religious festival around the monastery in which the banner is stored.

Aesthetic Uses of the Qur'anic Text

The text of the Holy Qur'an has also been revered for its aesthetic value, rather than how it might be used to legitimate political practices or grant divine favour of good health. Ayse Turgut's essay on contemporary Muslim artists and their attempt to portray calligraphy through novel media, such as digitally generated images and finger painting, offers a glimpse into a world in which one strives to create something new and original with the materials of one's heritage. The phenomenal manuscript culture of Muslims compels many scholars to consider the ways in which the creative spirit of artists has displayed the text of the Holy Qur'an.

Several selections in this volume attest to how regional artistic traditions modified the material form of the book in which a fixed Arabic text spread throughout the world. Annabel Teh Gallop's lavishly illustrated analysis of copies of the Holy Qur'an from Southeast Asia shows us decorations of the Book that are bright, vivacious and distinctly Malay. Marie Efthymiou's examination of Persian marginal notes on a Holy Qur'an kept at a research institute in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, reveal how the Holy Qur'an was merged into regional prayers for the fulfilment of one's wishes and to keep harm at bay.

A central piece in this section is the catalogue of the copies of the Holy Qur'an held at the IIS, prepared by the late Duncan Haldane. He describes the production, binding and decoration of a small selection of the numerous copies of the Holy Qur'an in the Institute's collection. Noteworthy among these is the famous 'Blue Qur'an', whose fragments are scattered in collections around the world. The IIS has two pages from this manuscript of gold lettering on blue-dyed parchment, which was likely produced in North Africa between the 9th and 10th centuries.

There are also several splendid copies of the Holy Qur'an from the Safavid period including a lovely illuminated page on which stark, clear *nastaliq* script on cream paper is framed by a border of

pale blue paper decorated with a scrolling golden floral motif. A Qajar Holy Qur'an written on a narrow scroll, 12.5 cm in width and 5.75 metres long, in miniscule script called *ghubari* could be rolled up and carried by a traveller in a pouch or pocket. This demonstrates an example of how the Holy Qur'an could be made portable.

Conclusion

Word of God, Art of Man bears witness to the creative spirit the Holy Qur'an has inspired in various arts and to the variety of its regional forms. With its extensive glossary, index of Qur'anic citations and thoroughly annotated articles, this collection also serves as a guide and useful reference to those interested in reading about this fascinating subject in greater detail.

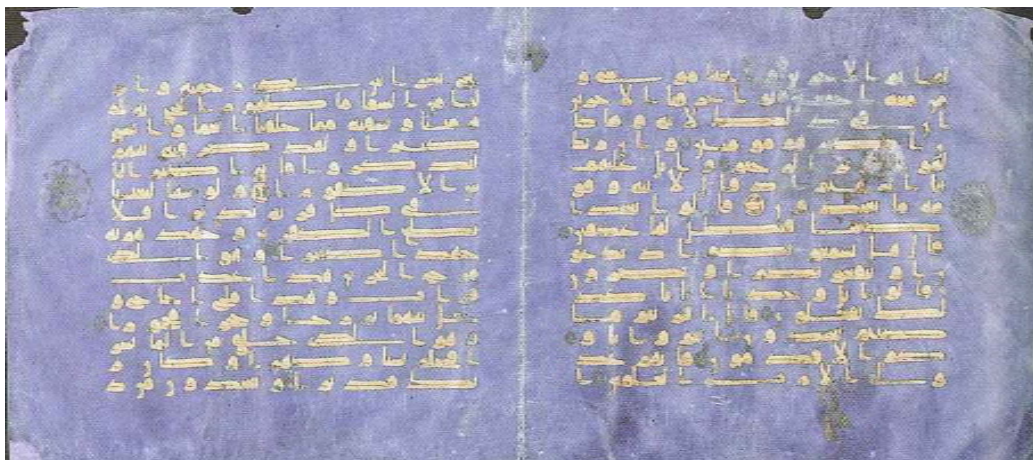


Fig. 7. Bifolium from the Blue Qur'an, 9th-10th c., North Africa or Spain. Kufic script in gold ink on blue-dyed parchment with *Surat al-Furqan* (Q. 25:48-60) and *Surat al-Shu'ara'* (Q. 26), each leaf measures 30.5 x 40.4 cm; Aga Khan Museum Collection ARM00477; (p. 52).

In summary, Word of God, Art of Man makes a significant contribution to the study of visual manifestations of the Qur'an in Islamic culture from its earliest times to the present. Meticulously edited and lavishly illustrated, the book is most impressive for the diverse media and geographical range represented in the individual contributions. That Muslims in regions as dispersed as Nigeria and the Malay Peninsula have been and continue to be fascinated with the challenge of giving a visual form to the revealed word of God should come as no surprise, but what is illuminated so effectively in this book is the myriad of approaches adopted by calligraphers (and related craftspeople) and the ways in which indigenous artistic traditions influence these practitioners.

Marcus C. Milwright Book review, *Journal of Islamic Studies* vol. 20 no. 1, January 2009