Islamic Calligraphy: A Fundamental Art Form

Abstract

Although it could be considered an insignificant part of society, Islamic calligraphy is crucial to its culture because of its role in religion and architecture, and its help in creating unity among Muslims. Calligraphy's function in religion is mainly due to the Muslim forbiddance of the "representation of living beings" (Schimmel, Islamic 11) in art. In architecture calligraphy is used to decorate the interior and exterior of buildings to help remind citizens of the purpose of the architecture: to glorify God. Lastly, calligraphy helps to unite Muslims because everyone must learn the Arabic language to participate in prayers and recitations.

Introduction

Islamic calligraphy is considered to have developed into an art during the time of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph and the son-in-law of Muhammad (Schimmel, Islamic 3). Not only a religious leader, Ali ibn Abi Talib was a great calligrapher and artist. The use and importance of Islamic calligraphy grew rapidly after his extensive development of the art. Muslims are cautioned against producing illustrations of living beings, therefore much of Islamic art is calligraphic. Although it is not seriously considered a real art form by many western societies, Islamic calligraphy is essential to its own culture because of its crucial role in religion, architecture, and creating unity among Muslims.

Background

Islamic calligraphy is unique in several distinct traditions. The letters of the alphabet can be written in different forms, making the writings difficult to read (Piotrosky 27). It is considered a noble art form, and has its own rhythm and harmony (Khan 7). It is written from right to left and lacks capitalization and punctuation marks (11). Each of these characteristics makes it an original and interesting form of writing and decoration. Influenced by many eastern cultures, Islamic calligraphy has changed dramatically since its beginnings in the seventeenth century B.C. (12). Ancient Arabic scripts were eventually fused into one type called Kufic. It was once the "most commonly used form," but has evolved into six basic scripts now considered the most commonly used among Arabic handwritten texts (Piotrovsky 28). The many different styles and types of handwriting contribute to the innumerable designs and artistic decorations that have been created through calligraphy.

Counter Argument

For many western civilizations and religions, handwriting as an art form is not significant, neither culturally or historically. Many western cultures owe their knowledge of the past to written histories and although a good deal can be learned by studying the historical evolution of written language, these cultures have a limited appreciation for written art. Calligraphy is not only unappreciated in western cultures, it is not even considered a serious art form. These unconsciously ingrained cultural beliefs make it difficult for non-Islamic individuals to understand the value of calligraphy in Islam and its architecture. Not only is calligraphy an integral and sacred
part of Islam, it has created unity among Muslims all over the world and continues to grow as a contemporary art form.

Analysis

Islamic calligraphy is important because of its direct relationship with the Islamic religion. According to many direct quotations from the Qur'an, writing is considered of "Divine origin" (Schimmel, Islamic 1). According to Dr. Schimmel, calligraphy is the most direct of all art forms in the "expression of the Islamic spirit" (Islamic 1). The sacredness of writing is made clear everywhere in the Holy Book. The Qur'an teaches that "two recording angels are ordered to write down every man's deeds" and that at "Doomsday" each man will be given his book of recorded actions (Islamic 1). These teachings are proof that the act of writing is important and holy. In fact, Muslims believe that the sacred art of calligraphy allows mortals to penetrate the veil that exists between this world and where God resides (Nasr 19). Although it may seem a strange and impossible path, practicing the holy art of calligraphy is believed to be one way to God's presence. Writing as an art form is an essential part of Islam.

Spiritual symbolism in different writing styles is another key part of the importance of calligraphy to Islam and the Islamic culture. The fluidity of calligraphy symbolizes the "intertwining" of stability and change that exists in the mortal world (Nasr 28). Islamic calligraphy has the appearance of a never ending line; the letters are all connected to one another and the writing seems to be constantly moving (Piotrovsky 29). The continual movement of the line "is one of the ways of manifesting [Allah] to this world" (27) and "projects the concept of continuity, of endlessness, of pluriformity" (29). The symbolism of calligraphy's visual motion is a specific quality that reflects its relationship to a religious concept.

The most significant form of relation between calligraphy and Islam comes from the Islamic tradition of cautioning against the "representation of living beings" (Schimmel, Islamic 11). Because depiction was forbidden, art was based on decoration and the letters were the most important part of the decoration. Instead of drawing pictures, beautiful handwriting was used to create art. Calligraphers would most often paint quotes from the Qur'an, the various names of God, and blessings from Allah on buildings and objects (Piotrovsky 28). To add further artistic touches, calligraphers would also design their texts into shapes of familiar or revered objects. Most frequently they would create birds, especially the stork, and animals, particularly the lion, (Schimmel, Islamic 11-12) and would also incorporate books, boats, and lamps (Piotrovsky 28). Some calligraphers would also create human faces with their writings (Schimmel, Calligraphy 110). The forbiddance of living beings in art is the main qualification of calligraphy as a part of Islamic culture. Islamic calligraphy is vital because of its part in the Islamic religion and culture.

Architecture

Another way in which Islamic calligraphy is proven essential is its role in architecture. Writing was widely used as a decorative element (Rosenthal 54) and became the "most important means" of ornamentation (Schimmel, Islamic 3-4). According to Khatibi and Sijelmassi, "the rhythmic movement of the way in which letters are joined and the harmonious nature of their forms combine to confer a sense of strength and elegance upon the buildings" (191). All aspects of buildings were decorated by painting or carving sacred text as art work (191). Mosques, madrasahs, and mausoleums were decorated with "both Qur'anic verses and historical dates" (Schimmel, Islamic 4). In fact, any place where man wanted to glorify God and Muhammad, the "splendors of calligraphy" were used to provide "the final touch of grandeur" to develop the reputation of the building (Khatibi and Sijelmassi 191). Kufic was the principal form (practically the only form) of calligraphy used in architecture until after the 10th century (196) and was significant in determining the age of early examples of calligraphic decoration of buildings. Islamic calligraphy played an important role in the decoration of significant architectural examples. Unity
The final way in which calligraphy has played a key role in Islamic culture is through the unity it has created among Muslims. Islamic art "is not the art of a particular country or a particular people"; it is more the "art of a civilization formed by a combination of historical circumstances" (Grube 8). Because Islamic calligraphy was formed on such a broad base, it is extremely important to realize the huge effects it has had on bringing Muslims together. All Muslims must learn Arabic if they are to recite the required daily prayers and to be able to read the Holy Book in its original language (Schimmel, Islamic 2). This made the Arabic alphabet the one common feature among all Muslims. Another way in which it brought Muslims together was the fact that foreign artists could not produce copies of the Qur'an; only learned Muslims could accomplish such a daunting task (Schimmel, Calligraphy 81). Such power and superiority made Muslims feel united and confident in their religion and its traditions. Lastly, the letters of the Qur'an became the sign of the victory of Islam all around the world (80). The Arabic language and Islamic calligraphy played an important role in bringing Muslims around the world to a feeling of religious and cultural unity.

Conclusion

Although many western societies have a difficult time appreciating the importance of Islamic calligraphy, it is a crucial and sacred part of their culture. So significant, in fact, calligraphy has begun to gain popularity again in modern times. The ancient art form is "undergoing something of a renaissance" (Parry, First 50) in Middle Eastern countries. Average citizens today are turning to calligraphic art "as a way of rediscovering their roots" (Parry, Calligraphy 54). The "tremendous upsurge in public interest in…calligraphy" (54) has even led to the exhibition of traditional and contemporary calligraphic works by 45 Islamic artists in Atlanta, Georgia during the 1996 Olympic Games (Ali 49). The modern rise in the popularity of calligraphy is proof of its absolute necessity in Islamic culture. Despite modern efforts to increase appreciation of Islamic calligraphy in western cultures, non-Islamic individuals still lack knowledge of this subject and many others concerning Islamic culture. This ignorance is causing contention between nations and peoples. During this time of potential war, more effort needs to be shown by both parties to understand and appreciate the parts of such different cultures. Learning the significance of Islamic calligraphy is just one of the many ways to improve understanding of a complex and foreign way of life.

Even though it may seem virtually impossible for calligraphy to have a significant role in Islamic culture, it does. Through its sacred role in religion and architecture and as a unifying factor among Muslims, calligraphy has proven to be a crucial part of Muslim life throughout history. Islamic calligraphy will continue to be studied and will hopefully someday be fully appreciated by ignorant western cultures.


