

# **From Kufic Inscriptions to Contemporary Typography**

**Steps towards a comprehensive Farsi Script**

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## Contents

Acknowledgments	6
Introduction by Dr Perette E. Michelli	7
Address by Mousavi Jazayeri SMV	11
Address by Dr Hamid Reza Ghelichkhani	15
Address by Bahram Kalhorna	19
References of images	36



## Acknowledgments

This book is a compilation of addresses given by Seyed Mohammad Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri (Master of Kufic calligraphy), Dr Hamidreza Ghelichkhani and Bahram Kalthornia (Master of Graphic Design and Painting). These were presented August 23, 2012, in the Saraye Ahle Qalam meeting hall, at a meeting to review the book, *Kufic stone-inscriptions, the global cultural heritage*. The meeting was such a successful one that it seemed a pity that to let these presentations by contemporary Iranian artists and researchers slide into oblivion and I therefore invited some friends and colleagues to collaborate on preparing this book for publication. I would like to express my appreciation to those friends here:

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17

## Introduction by Dr Perette E. Michelli

It is my honour to introduce this collection of addresses delivered at a review meeting for the recent publication, *Stone Inscriptions with Kufic Script, the global cultural heritage*, by Seyed Mohammad Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri, Leonie Miss Christian, and Seyed Mohammad Hosein Mousavi Jazayeri, with contributions by Bahaoddin Khorramshahi, Ali Imani, and Fatemeh Danesh Yazdi. This book (with English and Farsi text) laid important foundations for the study and development of the Kufic script by seeking to stabilize the terminology, develop a stronger methodology, and by providing an extensive initial range of beautifully illustrated examples with full identification, date and current location.

A professional calligrapher, typographer and graphic designer, the primary author has first-hand experience of today's pressing need for a contemporary script as capable of meet-



ing the needs of Farsi as the traditional Kufic and Nastaleagh scripts once were. This can only be achieved if those ancient scripts are properly understood as they pertained to different media and functions, and the investigation was initiated in *Stone Inscriptions*.

The speakers at the meeting would all like to see a renaissance in Persian calligraphy and typography: the development of a specifically Persian script rooted in Persian culture and suitable for contemporary needs. They are saddened by today's dependence on the Naskh font, which implements a uniform set of letters, along with punctuation and hyphenation. Undeniably, these features facilitate reading, but their restricted visual range also restricts the intellectual and imaginative scope of reader and writer alike. Scripts rooted in the Farsi language never had these restrictions, and they may provide the source material for developing a spiritually, culturally, and intellectually comprehensive script that speaks through and to Persian consciousness.

Professor Kalhornia presents scripts as “national treasures”, creators and articulators of a rooted Persian identity. He notes that the word *khatt* (خط) refers both to script and line, and that the khatt line has protective and legislative connotations, as well as connotations of personal character, of leading and following. All this, then, is comprised in the concept of script and echoed in the title of a treatise by the Persian calligrapher and poet, Sultan-Ali Mashadi (1453–1520 AD): *Adabe Khatt* (formally translated as *Customs of Calligraphy* but note that the word *adabe* has its own connotations of appropriateness and rightness) that is cited by Dr Ghelichkhani. Professor Kalhornia emphasizes the importance of tradition for the maintenance of societal balance, noting that continual reiteration – as in repetitions of images or texts and scripts – confers power on the thing reiterated. He cites especially the



use of prescribed texts on grave markers and ceramics, and draws attention to frequent cases where parts of the text appear to have been deliberately omitted to augment its nuances: the implication is that there is something more for the reader to do. But, as Professor Kalhornia notes, who is the reader?

The element of mystery thus introduced extends to legibility. Seyed Mohammad Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri has researched the Kufic script in depth over many years, and he notes that it (like all scripts) has coherent internal structures, and therefore variations in the letter forms were never meaningless. He points out that since those internal structures are no longer known and understood, variations introduced by contemporary calligraphers are arbitrary and convey nothing. Legibility is also affected by the presence or absence of decoration and he notes the increasing impact of decoration on Kufic.

Originally confined to adjacent areas, decoration later invaded the spaces and structures of the letter forms in the script itself. My own perception is that, even here, there is evidence that decoration in the form of flowers, foliage, scrolls, pearls and so forth added relevant nuances or commentary on the text.

Paradoxically, however, both Mr. Mousavi Jazayeri and Professor Kalhornia comment on the existence of texts that may never have been legible, and may not even have carried meaning. Such an idea seems extraordinary until it is recalled that in all cultures, gazing on beauty – whether understood or not – obtains blessing.

Mr. Mousavi Jazayeri has previously given an apposite example in volume one of his *Script and Calligraphy* (2011), where he quotes Martin Lings' *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (1976). Lings' comment on the "visual sacrament" of calligraphy is worth giving





in full here: “one of the great purposes of Quran calligraphy is to provide a visual sacrament. It is a wide-spread practice in Islam to gaze intently at Quranic inscriptions so as to extract a blessing from them, or in other words so that through the windows of sight the soul may be penetrated by the Divine radiance of the “signs of God”, as the verses are called. Questions as to how far the object is legible and how far the subject is literate would be considered irrelevant to validity and to the efficacy of this sacrament”.

Historic Persian calligraphy includes two important scripts that are rooted and comprehensive as defined above. The Nastealigh script is a particularly challenging one for today’s typographers and font designers, but as Mr. Mousavi Jazayeri points out, the Kufic presents real possibilities. Its origins are not finally established but an important tradition states that it was developed, and perfected by Ali Ibn Abi Talib for the purpose of writing the Qur’an.

Mr. Mousavi Jazayeri and his colleagues all comment that Kufic is neglected today in the belief that it is “too difficult” to teach and to read. Yet Mr. Mousavi Jazayeri knows from his own experience that it can be taught within two hours. He explains that while this script became increasingly decorative and developed many subtypes over time, Primary Kufic continued unchanged. And this script, with its stateliness, clarity of form, and beauty can indeed be adapted for today’s needs. So the dream is a viable one. The Kufic script is a true national treasure, rooted in Persian consciousness, able to articulate it and to communicate to today’s Persians, thus liberating their historically-attested intellectual, spiritual and scientific vision, and conferring barakah today just as it did in the past.



18

## Address by Mousavi Jazayeri Seyed Mohammad Vahid

I started my studies on Kufic script some 20 years ago. Simultaneously, I've been practicing to learn how to write Kufic script. During those years, my only model was a few black and white photocopies of some manuscripts with Primary Kufic script. Gradually, I obtained models from other visual sources by visiting museums.

In recent years, my main focus has been on study and research on Kufic script addressing various objects, alongside my practice of writing Kufic on both paper and ceramics. In 2004, I published a book entitled, "Kufic Encyclopedia". I touched on how to write Primary Kufic script in that book, in addition to providing general information about Kufic script.

Gradually, I found through subsequent study that the information on varieties of Kufic is much more extensive than I could introduce in a single book. So I decided to consider historical Kufic as it was applied to different objects; and study them, separately and in detail. "Objects with Kufic inscription" include: stone inscriptions, manuscripts, ceramics, coins,



plaster inscriptions and so forth. “Kufic stone inscriptions” were among the first objects with inscription that Muslim artisans had encountered. This creation had been occurring over hundreds of years using Kufic script.

There were two methods to write a Kufic text on an object:

A) Writing method: the Kufic text was written by the qalam (pen, calligrapher’s brush). This method of writing can be seen in Kufic manuscripts and on many Kufic ceramics from Neishabor.

B) Drawing method: the Kufic text was written with an instrument such as a contemporary pencil on stone or ceramic. At that point, calligraphers could make any modification they desired. In the end, the final Kufic inscription was carved on stone or inked on ceramic. If the text was for a coin, the same process would be used to prepare the model. A die would then be cast from that model and used to strike multiple coins with the same Kufic inscription. The “drawing method” of Kufic writing can be seen in wooden inscriptions and in inscriptions on buildings, in many countries.

The use of the drawing method for Kufic inscriptions on stone led to a close artistic association between calligraphers and stone-cutters. Today, after hundreds of years, we can admire how beautifully and richly those Kufic inscriptions were carved on stone!

After some time, decorations were placed just next to the Kufic stone inscriptions. Gradually, as the artisans gained experience, the usage of such decoration increased as well. Finally, those decorations had an obvious influence on the Kufic letters. In this way, the simply designed letters of the Kufic script became highly decorative. In the Kufic stone-inscriptions of the Saljughid dynasty, distinguishing Kufic letters and decorations can sometimes be diffi-

cult. In other words, the reading of Kufic stone-inscriptions has become obscure. This kind of stone-inscription may be what Prof Bahram Kalhornia means when he refers to the “mysterious aspect of some Kufic inscriptions”!

In short, two kind of decoration were used with Kufic stone-inscriptions:

A) Decorations that were placed “beside” and “independent” of the text of Kufic stone-inscriptions.

B) Decorations that were created integrally with, or grafted onto the designs of Kufic letters. “Decorative tails” were created from modifications of this type of decoration.

### **Kufic Script and Contemporary Needs**

The history of the Kufic style of writing includes many sub-styles. Each sub-style was created in response to specific requirements in writing or in accordance with techniques of writing on different objects (such as ceramics, manuscripts, stones and the like). This unique variation could be a logical response to many of our needs in contemporary writing. Unfortunately, without studying our historical scripts, experiments in this field are arbitrary.

A major contribution would be to introduce and present this historical world and its undiscovered writing-values. From such studies, we could develop instruments specifically in order to analyze contemporary writing. This series of studies should produce within them a “new interpretation from the traditional world of writing”.

There are many important and researchable properties in the visual characters of Kufic script. It is now time to study them.

Two further points make it important to study ancient and traditional scripts:





- A) The increasing importance of “writing” in the contemporary era.
- B) The non-studied trend of the written heritage in Muslim societies.

In contemporary times, analyzing letter-design and typographic elements is a serious need. The appropriate response to the range of contemporary needs in writing is to undertake historical studies. Although modifications in the trends of historical writings have been made very gradually, those modifications have been in response to social needs. Artisans of different eras have replied to those needs very resourcefully.

Studies of the history of evolution and modification of scripts could open a new window and provide solutions to “contemporary writing”, in addition to their esteemed historical-cultural values.

**Question:** What can we do regarding the teaching of Kufic script? In fact, some calligraphic associations do not believe in teaching it. They claim that it is too difficult to learn Kufic. However, I think that if it is difficult to read, this is due to our lack of knowledge. If we could learn how to read Kufic script, it would greatly facilitate this task.

**Response of Seyed M Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri:**

I believe that Kufic is legible. This script can be taught in just one or two hours, in the simplest way. Many elements in Kufic script are similar for contemporary readers (who can read Arabic or Farsi). However, there are some differences between the traditional world of Kufic writing and contemporary fonts that are based on Naskh script. So, if we could modify the shape or design of Kufic letters, we would reach contemporary Naskh, which is used as a daily font in many countries.