

Reviving a Calligraphic Style: The rich heritage of Kufic script

by Chip Rossetti



One of the most striking sights at Seyed Mohammad Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri's stand at the Illustrators' Corner is the meter-long rectangular, leather-bound book. The book is even more impressive when opened: the pages, laced with gold leaf, and inked in bold black strokes dotted in red, is a handcrafted manuscript of Sura 36 ("Ya Sin") from the Qur'an. Even more striking is the Arabic calligraphic style itself, a very old form of written Arabic known as Early (or Primary) Kufic.

Named for the city of Kufa, one of the earliest "garrison cities" founded by early Muslims in Iraq, Kufic emerged around the end of the first Islamic century (late 7th century AD), and for the next three centuries, it was the primary script used for copying the Qur'an. For anyone accustomed to more recent writing styles, such as Naskh, Thuluth, and especially modern

Arabic and Persian typefaces, the effect is jarring: the Kufic script appeared at an early stage of Arabic writing, when consonants with the same shape were distinguished by single or multiple short strokes placed above or below a letter (rather than by dots as they are now.) At the same time—also confusing to the modern eye!—the short strokes that are now used to indicate vowels are represented by large colored dots in Kufic.

The craftsman who made this impressive work was born in Tehran in 1969, and he has made a career out of reviving this ancient style of Arabic and Persian writing. For his lifelong work with the Kufic script, he has been awarded the equivalent of an honorary Ph.D. from the Iranian Ministry of Culture. Although he originally studied other well-known calligraphic styles, such as Thuluth and Naskh, Jazayeri was drawn to Kufic for its letters and what they could do: "Its calligraphic capabilities attracted me," he says, although at the time, "no one in Iran knew the Kufic script any more."

After almost ten years of training and research into this now forgotten art, he began teaching Kufic calligraphy in Tehran in 1991. Since then, his initial

classes have expanded into organized workshops and training sessions for budding calligraphers.

His research into Kufic writing led him in two seemingly opposite directions: to historical research and to modern typeface design. His historical research, however, comes with a practical edge: in addition to researching Kufic script on stone, coins, ceramics, and manuscripts, it involved learning the very traditional skill of cutting his own pen, known as a qalam. The Arabic word "qalam" is derived from the Greek word "kalamos," meaning a reed. And just like his Greek, Roman, Arab, and Persian predecessors, Jazayeri has learned how to cut his qalam from an actual hollow reed, which lends a unique quality to the stroke of ink. He learned the lost art of cutting a reed for the express purpose of replicating the Early Kufic style on display in the Illustrators' Corner.

Drawing on his research, he also produces ceramics and calligraphic paintings with Kufic inscriptions and designs. (He has a side business producing Kufic logos and graphics for businesses, which includes even "Latin Kufic"—that is, Roman alphabet script in a Kufic-looking style.)

His interest in the study and revival of Kufic script led him to form a group of like-minded scholars, font-designers, and historians. Known as the KuficPedia Project (www.kuficpedia.org), the group brings together experts on Kufic from the Middle East, Europe, and North America, all drawn by a shared interest in this script. "We are the only group in the world studying this script," says Jazayeri.

His work has also led him to the related skill of contemporary typeface design, although informed by his calligraphic background. It "complements the artistry and workmanship skills that were used in the past," he says. As the KuficPedia website demonstrates, Jazayeri's devotion to Kufic calligraphy has a lighter, albeit spiritual, side as well: he designs spinning circular toys: tops decorated in Kufic lettering that, when spun on yarn or string, display a bright whirl of color. He refers to them as "metaphysical toys" that he makes as a "form of conversation": "They are the product of prolonged thought and are academic investigation and spiritual expression in equal parts," he says.

Whether in bold strokes carved in stone or on delicate spinning paper, the Kufic script that Jazayeri has spent his life mastering is a gorgeous example of a rich calligraphic heritage, revived and reintroduced in the modern era.



Seyed Mohammad Vahid Mousavi Jazayeri will be leading his second workshop on Kufic calligraphy, "How to Do Primary Kufic Calligraphy on Manuscripts," today at the Illustrators' Corner, 17:00-18:30.