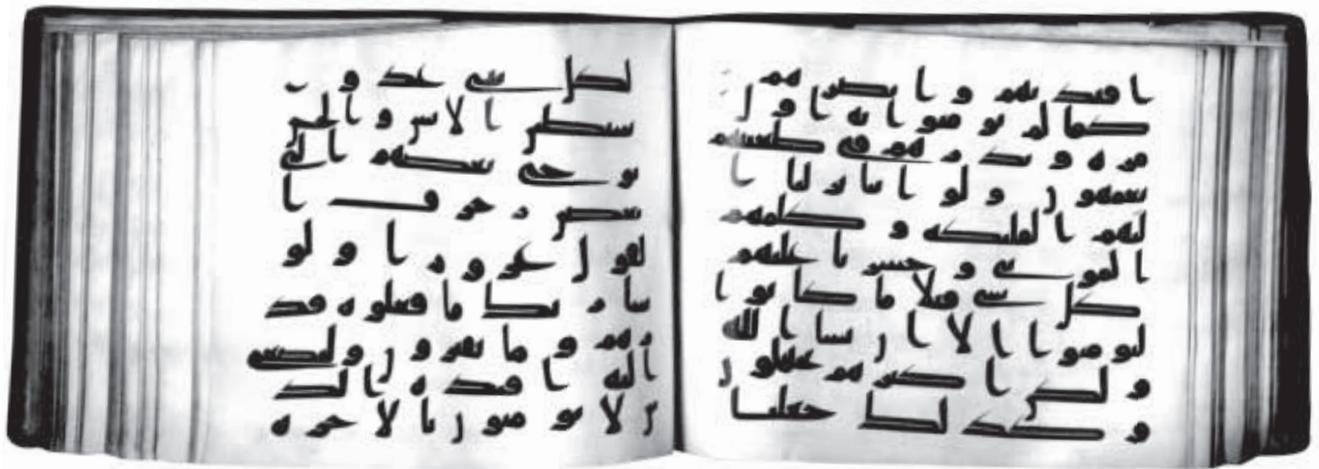


ISLAM, CALLIGRAPHY, & GENDER: AN OVERVIEW ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN CALLIGRAPHERS IN ISLAM



THE MAJOR ART FORMS OF ISLAM INCLUDE ARCHITECTURE, LITERATURE, ARABESQUE AND CALLIGRAPHY. CONSEQUENTLY, ISLAMIC ARTISTS FOCUSED THEIR EFFORTS ON REFINING THE ART FORMS THAT WERE AVAILABLE TO THEM. CALLIGRAPHY THUS ASSUMED A PROMINENT PLACE IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD, WITH SKILLED PRACTITIONERS BEING HELD IN HIGH ESTEEM AND EVEN BECOMING IMPORTANT GOVERNMENTAL OFFICIALS AS THE RESULT OF THEIR CALLIGRAPHIC TALENTS. ALTHOUGH THERE IS A GROWING BODY OF KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC CALLIGRAPHY IN GENERAL, LESS IS KNOWN ABOUT THE ROLE OF WOMEN CALLIGRAPHERS IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC WORLD, A GAP THAT THIS PAPER SEEKS TO FILL.

Islamic art exists in a wide range of artistic forms including architecture, literature, arabesque and calligraphy. Studying the origins of Islamic calligraphy and its practice over the centuries represents a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the people who developed its modern form, as well as its role in Islamic society in the past and the present. It will examine the purpose and the aim of women taking the role of educators to teach calligraphy and also examines their pedagogical approach in this respect.

Islamic art has traditionally been viewed as “the art made by artists or artisans whose religion was Islam, for patrons who lived in predominantly Muslim lands, or for purposes that are restricted or peculiar to a Muslim population or a Muslim setting” (Blair and Bloom, 2003, p. 152). The term “Islamic art” encompasses a wide variety of art forms produced over a period of 1,400 years through a large geographical area covering three continents during the Islamic conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries. Despite the expansion and integration with the newly added nations, calligraphy maintained its characteristics, as well as its identity and its sophistication was not affected or influenced by the arts of these nations. Instead, Islamic calligraphy represented by its creativity and elegance made its imprints on the other Nations’ arts after the spread of Islam. Thus, calligraphy maintained its personality and distinctiveness as a great symbol of art which was built by the Arabic civilisation.

The rise and expansion of Islam after the revelation of the Qur’an promoted the spreading of the scripture (Qur’an, 46:12; 26:195). The first verse revealed to the Prophet



Page from the “Qur’an”. A sample of the Muslim calligraphy of the 19th century. Rewritten in Azerbaijan. From the book “Saved masterpieces. Part 2”. Baku, 2000

Muhammad indicated that reading and writing are central to the Islamic faith (Qur’an, 96:1-4).

Muhammad asked his disciples, companions and scribes to write and memorise the revealed verses in order to preserve the Holy words. He even set a ransom on the literate captives to teach ten illiterate Muslims in exchange for his/her freedom. The Arabic script needed to be evolved and improved because writing held as a vital medium to spread the word of God (Bierman, 1998). Thus the art went through chains of changes due to political and geographical factors (Tabbaa, 2001). The gradual improvement over time led to the creation of the original Islamic art of calligraphy. The revelations during the life of the Prophet were written down on various materials.

They were kept with his disciples and close relatives and were compiled in a Standardised Copy for all Muslims. After the death of the

Prophet, many of men who memorised the Qur’an were killed in Islamic battles and conquests. An urgent attempt was made by the first three guided caliphs to compile the Qur’an because standardised copies of the Qur’an were required in abundance for the new geographical regions. The compilation in true letter and spirit occurred during the reign of 3rd Rightly Guided Caliph [a term used in Islam to refer to the first four Caliphs who headed the Islamic nation after the death of the Prophet, Esposito. 2004] Uthman Ibn Affan. He delegated the writing of compiled verses in one standard copy to the Prophet’s Companions; to be distributed to the new geographical regions. The compilation occurred during the reign of the 3rd Guided Caliph Uthman Ibn Affan.

Due to the expansion of Islamic region and the need for more literate Muslims to write legible Arabic scrip, men and women alike were assigned the role of improving the

Arabic scripture. This could help avoid confusion in some Arabic letters for the new Muslims with Arabic as a second language. The result was a desperate need for a scientific improvement to ultimately preserve the Holy word of Qur'an from being misread or misunderstood. The scientist grammarian, Abu al-Aswad Al-Du'ali (c.603-688), was the first to place dots on the Arabic alphabets. He was a close companion to the 4th guided Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib (Ibn Khlakan). Educated Muslim women and men were assigned a mounting role in writing copies of the Qur'an as well as teaching the art and religion to the young gen-

is the creation of images of sentient living beings, meant that Islamic was essentially dedicated to decorative applications. Ettinghausen (1950) indicated that Islamic calligraphy became an essential part of decorations and architecture, particularly for mosques decorated with illuminated calligraphy on mosaic. Undoubtedly, calligraphy assumed the highest form of divinity for Muslims, its aim was not merely to write and decorate but also to fulfil and connect the artist with religion in an aesthetic and pure modality.

The counts and a short history of the development of writing and the art of calligraphy has been estab-

beautiful of all of the arts in Islam.

The inextricable connection between the divine and calligraphy elevated the art form throughout the Muslim world, making its practice a highly esteemed profession and an enviable skill. Blair and Bloom (2003), emphasise the value of calligraphy as the highly regarded trend of visual by Muslims and non Muslims alike. They added that its visual value differs from other trends because of the fact that calligraphy to Muslims was intertwined with the Islamic teachings and traditions (Ibid.).

Indeed, the calligrapher is not merely an artist mastering a skill but a religious scholar with the role of passing on the Islamic faith.

It is known that the escalation of this art form to sublime and captivating level was due in part to the fact that Islam prohibits the depiction of idols in art forms such as sculpture and painting (Zakariya, 1991).

The absence of human and animal representation from Arabic calligraphy is replaced by various motifs and decorations such as geometrical patterns, flora, and abstract decorations (Schimmel, 1992, p. 46).

Consequently, Muslims throughout the centuries have largely focused their efforts on improving the uniqueness and artistic forms and styles of Islamic art including architecture, literature, arabesque and calligraphy. Like their monk counterparts in the Western world during the medieval times, who painstakingly copied the Holy Bible in their scriptoriums with elaborate illuminations, calligraphy in the Muslim world was also important for copying the Quran, an effort that was deemed to imbue significant merit on the calligrapher (Zakariya, 1992).



Page from the "Qu'ran". A sample of the Muslim calligraphy of the 19th century. Rewritten in Azerbaijan. From the book "Saved masterpieces. Part 2". Baku, 2000

eration of Muslims to preserve the Holy Qur'an. This art was not limited to the writing of Qur'an but extended to include everyday items such as small plates, carpets, literature, metalwork, ceramics, glass, textiles, wood, ivory, rock crystal and even gardens.

Iconism in Islam, proscribing that

lished. The following is an examination of the pioneers and master, including women, and their improvement to achieve the best outcome of calligraphy style known as Kufic. The Kufic style derived its name from the city of Kufa in Iraq. As aforementioned, calligraphy is arguably among the most important and

It is worth reflecting on the improvement on the forms and styles of calligraphy and the contributions of women in this perspective. In order to spread Islam as the new faith and invite people to embrace it (the Da'wah/missionary) around the World, the Prophet summoned the Kings and Emperors of the world to embrace the Islam through dialogue and peaceful means. This invitation took the course of sending letters (these letters are still preserved in museums around the world) carried by trusted companions of the Prophet to:

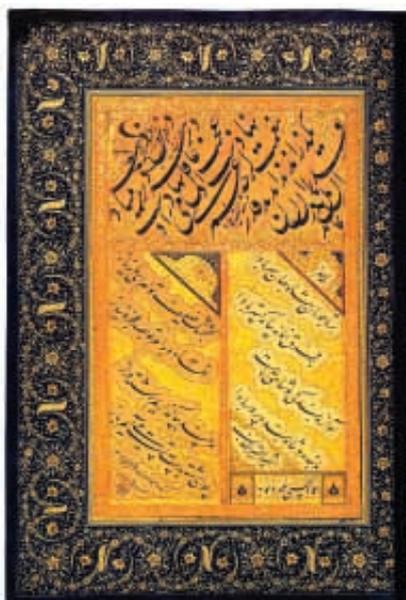
- Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantines (Eastern Roman Empire)
- Maqauis, the king of Egypt
- Chosroes II Khosroe, the Emperor of Persia
- Nijashi, the King of Abyssinia
- AlMundhir bin Sawa, the Ruler of Bahrain
- Harith Gassani, Governor of Syria

An exceedingly talented and renowned Baghdadi calligrapher, Ibn Muqla of Baghdad endeavoured to redesign the old styles in order to make them more suitable for copying the Quran. Ibn Muqla's effort was a major milestone in the history of Arabic calligraphy that transformed the basic strokes to an art form. He used the science of mathematics and geometry to transform the Arabic script into a harmonious and flexible letters that were visually attractive and practically coherent.

Ibn Muqlah's continued contributions to calligraphy earned him the title of 'Godfather' by the masters of calligraphy. A century later came Ali bin Hilal Ibn Albawab (d 413AD) to complete the font rules of his predecessor. Ibn Khallikān from seventh century Hijri said: "no calligrapher before him or after him calli-

graphed like him or even closely", he was the one who improved, beautified and made calligraphy aesthetically and visually pleasant. Ibn Albawab, born in Baghdad, refined the rules of his master Ibn Muqla's six scripts and developed a system of proportional measurement so that each letter could be measured by its height and width in dots.

Ibn Albawab born a commoner, the son of a doorkeeper, began his career as a house painter, and then became a book illuminator. He wrote 64 copies of the Qur'an, only one of which still exists in Dublin's



Commentary for the miniature "Al Khadir gives Shah Jahan a vessel of living water. A sample of Islamic calligraphy of India. The 18th century. The Museum of History of Religion, St. Petersburg

Chester Beatty Library. His student Yaqut al- Musta'simi, the student of Ibn Albawab, refined the six scripts set down by Ibn al-Bawwab and developed the school that was followed later by the Turkish and Persian calligraphers.

In examining the history of calligraphy, one must not fail to ignore the role of women and their distinguished presence in this field since the dawn of Islam. A number of women calligraphers emerged as masters and scholars of Hadith, Qur'an and calligraphy. The body of research on these women as pointed out earlier is very hard to identify. Calligraphy was a kin to the pedagogical teaching of the Qur'an and the Prophet's traditions. It was also an inherited profession from their fathers, brothers and husbands. However, males had the priority and women were secondary. Education was rarely available for poor working class groups, particularly females, and thus women who were schooled in calligraphy were naturally from a high socioeconomic class. The list below supports the deduction about women in the early Islamic period, however, male calligraphers were not limited by class. Below is a summary of women considered masters in their profession.

A'isha bint Saad bint Ibn Abi Waqqas (عائشة بنت سعد بن أبي وقاص). The daughter of a great Companion (the cousin of Amina bin Wahab, the mother of the Prophet). She was very learned in Islamic sciences to the point that Imam Malik, Hakim Ibn Utaybah and Ayyub as Sakhtiyani, the famous jurists and scholars of Hadith were her pupils.

Hafsah bin Umar al-Khattab (). Married to the Prophet (56 years old) after the battle of Bader in 2 AH when she was around twenty years old. According to Islamic tradition, Hafsah had memorised the Qur'an. The copy of Zayed ibn Thabit which was recorded by the instructions of Abu Bakr was given to her. Uthman Ibn Affan, when he became Caliph, used Hafsah's copy



A sample of Islamic calligraphy of the early 20th century. Shama'il. Kazan. The Museum of History of Religion, St. Petersburg

when he authorised a single text of the Qur'an to be designated.

Um Kalthum bint Aqaba (حفصة بنت عمر بن الخطاب). Married four of the companions, Zayed bin Haritha who died in the battle of Mu'tah, Alzubair bin Ala'wam and divorced after giving birth to Zaynab, Abdul Rahman bin Awf and lastly Amr ibn al-'As.

Alshifa' bint Abdullah Aladawya (الشفاء بنت عبد الله العدوية). Using the former as a pseudonym for her real name, Laila bint Abdullah Abdshamis bin Uday bin Kaáb Alquraishya Aladawya (Al-Asqalani, 1991). She was the founder of the first school

in Medina to practice medicine and teach writing to Muslim women. Hafsa bin Umar al-Khattab was her first writing student.

Farwa bin Aisha bint Saad (فروة بنت عائشة بنت سعد) learned from her grandmother Aisha who learnt from the Prophet's six wives (ibid).

Karima Bint Almuqdad (كريمة بنت المقداد)

Hind Bint Abi Sufyan (هند بنت أبي سفيان) was the daughter of a leading man of the Quraish of Mecca. He was a staunch opponent of the Prophet before accepting Islam later in his life. Her mother was Safyah Bint Amr Bin Umayyah Bin

Abdshamis. Hind married Alharith Ibn Nawfal.

In later Islamic periods, group of women masters in all fields of knowledge have emerged, particularly the traditionalists and calligraphers. Auraib from Basra (died in 277 H), a poet and a calligrapher known for being a master of calligraphy. Fadel Mowlat Abi Ayub (died in 295 H), Lubna bint Abdumaula (died in 374 H), calligrapher of the Caliph Al-Mustansir Billah Al-Hakam II of Umayyad Andalusia. Fatima Bint Al-Hasan bin Ali al-Baghdadi Al-Atta Alaqra' (died in 480 H) was accredited master and of good dexter-

ity in calligraphy. She was assigned to write the Caliph's letter of Truce to the tyrant Roman Emperor. She was also known for writing a complete version of the Holy Qur'an.

Shuhida Aldinouriy-Al Baghdadya (around 479-574 H) known as 'Fakhru Alnissa', a traditionalist, a scholarly narrator, and a glorious calligrapher was born and died in Baghdad. Her father, the traditionalist Abi Nasr Ibn Abi AlFaraj Bin Omar al-Baghdadi Aldinori then the Aberie from Dinor North West Iran migrated to Baghdad and worked for the Caliph's Council. Shuhida held many certificates of Isnad, Hadith, calligraphy and her transmission was very religious, pious, and of noble status. She learned from masters of scholars like Ibu Alkhotub Naser bin Ahmed bin Abdullah Ibn Albutter and Abu Abdullah Alhussein bin Talha Alzainabi amongst others. She was the most prominent scholar of Hadith, and was heard by many scholars such as: Ibn Asakir, Ibn Al-Jawzi, and Abd-el-Kader Alrihawi.

Shuhida was a master of calligraphy, hence she took to be known as "Shuhida the Calligrapher" and later "Fakhru Alnisa". She learnt the art of AlMansoob style from Muhammad Bin Mansoor Bin Abdullmelik following the style of his master Ibn Albawab. She improved on Ibn Albawab's Kufi script which he has improved on his master Ibn Muqla.

Fakhru Alnisa' married the State's Trustee Ibn al-anbari, a Senate to the Abbasid Caliph AlMuqtasi Billah. Ibn Khallikān in his book the "Death of Nobles", indicated the large scale of attendance to her funeral ceremony in the Palace where all the gates and windows were opened to accommodate the prayers before her burial at the Gate of Abriz near the Taji School in Baghdad on Sun-

Page from the "Qu'ran". A sample of the Muslim calligraphy of the early 20th century. Rewritten in Azerbaijan. From the book "Saved masterpieces. Part 2. Baku, 2000.



day 13th Muharram year 574 at the age of ninety plus.

The Qur'an defines the role and status of women from two perspectives. The first is total equality between women and men manifested in many verses and it relates to the origin of creation of the "same one", contrary to the Torah, which is part of Adam and Eve (created from the rib/ribs, said later that the bended side that needs always to be corrected). The second aspect is the equality of religious duties and consequent reward or punishment, as it clearly revealed in the many verses such as: 4:1/ 34:124, 7:189, 16:97, 40:40, 3:195 and 23:71/72.

Despite this lack of scholarly research, some evidence has emerged in recent years concerning how and why women came to practice calligraphy during this period in Islam's history. The role of women in adopting calligraphy as a livelihood was based in large part on pragmatic needs and the traditional practice of entire families engaged in the dis-

cipline. Sakkal (1993, p. 3) reported that calligraphy is an inherited profession that passes from one generation to the next. It is even taken as the last name of the family and most commonly a skill often passed down from father to son. It was not uncommon to find entire families who earned their livelihoods as calligraphers. Although, the vast majority of calligraphers in the early Islamic world appear to have been males, there is some indication that women also played a role in the art form. In fact, Simonowitz (2010, p 75), stressed the encouragement of the Prophet Muhammad for women to actively participate in teaching of all sciences especially calligraphy.

They are some brief counts of them in some biographies and historical documents refereeing to them primarily as traditionalists of Hadith and Qur'an but not as contributors and achievers to the art of calligraphy. Few names of female calligraphers are known, there is no doubt a number of women



Page from the “Qu’ran”. A sample of the Muslim calligraphy of the early 20th century. Rewritten in Azerbaijan. From the book “Saved masterpieces. Part 2”. Baku, 2000

practiced calligraphy in the early Islamic era, as students, teachers or as part of a family tradition. Simonowitz highlights that one of the reasons for the small number of famous women calligraphers probably originates in the fact that men have traditionally been responsible for transmitting history and thus may have been “hesitant” to name them. One may assume that calligraphy was therefore widely practiced by women. It is known that women from rich families and princesses were taught calligraphy as part of their education. Akin to the European noble women practicing various religious art forms as a distinction of respectability and piety, as means of passing time and as skills they would be able to transmit to their children (male or female), women in Islamic countries learnt the art of calligraphy as a religious expression. Atiyeh (1995) emphasised that

copying the Qurán in its best shape, form and style, is the main purpose of calligraphy. Women calligraphers practiced this art all over the Islamic world, from Spain to Syria, Iraq, Persia and India. In fact, they even used to compete with each other in the copying of wonderful Qurans. During the Islamic era in Spain, the authorities wished to build up the libraries of the main Islamic cities with books of Arabic script. One hundred and seventy women were employed in the eastern quarter of Cordova for the purpose of copying the Qur’an and they did par excellent efforts by working day and night by candlelight that illuminated the streets of three parasangs (farsakhs). Aisha, the daughter of Ahmad (d 400/1009), was one of the Cordovan women who copied Qur’ans. Her expertise can be gauged by the fact that she was a poet, calligrapher and a bibliophile

with a great collection of books and highly respected by the kings.

Throughout the Islamic world, there appears to have been a number of revered female calligraphers and in Islamic literature, there are numerous references to men being influenced by some of these women’s talents. In more recent times, women calligraphers have been influencing the perpetration of this traditional art. Ghata’s (2004) award winning novel, *La Nuit des calligraphes* follows the story of Rikkat Kunt, the author’s grandmother, who was acknowledged as one of the great Turkish masters of calligraphy. The book evoked Turkey in the 1920’s as Ataturk’s new reforms on the use of the Arabic language were threatening the future of the art. It appears, however, that this has not been the case and that calligraphy remains very much as one of the most active of all the Islamic art forms. Ataturk’s reforms may have indeed changed the secular life in Turkey, but Islamic calligraphy remains a major element of transmitting the religious word.

The tradition perpetuates, and more and more women calligraphers are being recognized by their peers. One such master identified by Simonowitz is Hilal Kazan, described by this authority as “a Turkish female master calligrapher who holds traditional authorizations to practice” (p. 76). The license to practice calligraphy in early Islam afforded the license-holder’s significant prestige that is not reflected in Western societies. The practice of awarding certificate to calligrapher at present is not different to that of the past. For example, Kazan is a PhD holder in Islamic art and also been awarded with the certificate of calligraphy in Thuluth and Nakish styles from her master after the fulfilment of hard

and long trainings (Ibid). Once the student has achieved the certificate, he/she can sign the name of their master unlike any other profession or art.

Hilal Kazan now has calligraphy students of her own – male as well as female – and takes part in exhibitions throughout the world. She is a widely respected scholar lecturing in Islamic art and calligraphy. The International Centre for Islamic Culture and Arts (IRCICA) is also reportedly supporting more and more women calligraphers.

Calligraphy requires well educated individuals, who can read, write and teach and that was not the predominated factor for the majority of people, particularly women. Education was only available for the wealthy and the elite. Less fortunate women were deprived from education because if it was available, it was for the male(s) of the family. Their names may not have been inscribed into the history books, but their role was nonetheless central to perpetuating this most important form of Islamic arts. Also in more recent times, there has been a renewed interest in the art of calligraphy and Muslim women are very much at its centre. They are now being acknowledged by the highest Islamic institutions and are revered throughout the world. The example of Hilal Kazan perfectly illustrates this new trend. The work covered in this paper is just a first step towards the realisation and documentation of an early woman calligrapher in order, comparable to create a path that connects the past to the future. It is also, to a learning experience, to celebrate the achievements and the contributions of early women calligraphers. 🌱

References

1. Al-Asqalani, Ibn Hajaar. (1412). *Finding the Truth in Judging the Companions*, 11615, volume 8/72. AlJeel Publishing House, Beirut.
2. Atiyeh, G.N. (1995). *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*. State University of New York Press, Albany. 145-146.
3. Bierman, I. A. (1998). *Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text*. University of California Press
4. Blair, S. and Bloom, J.M. (2003). *The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field*. The Art Bulletin 85(1): 152-154.
5. Brown, K. Anderson, A.H. Bauer, A.L. Berns, M. Hirst, G and Miller, J. (2006) *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Boston: Elsevier, 178.
6. Eaton, G. (1985). *Islam and the Destiny of Man*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 204.
7. Ernst, C.W. (2009). *Sufism and the Aesthetics of Penmanship in Siraj Al-Shirazi's Tuhfat Al-Muhibbin*. The Journal of the American Oriental Society 129(3): 431-433.
8. Esposito. John. L. (2003). *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford University Press.
9. Ettinghausen, R. (1950). *The Unicorn*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution. 137.
10. Ghata, Y. (2004). *La Nuit des calligraphes*. Paris: Fayard
11. Haddad and Findly, E.B. (1985). *Women, Religion and Social Change*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 147.
12. Hubbard, G. (2006, March). *Artistic Lettering*. Arts & Activities 139(2): 21-23.
13. Ibn Khallikān (1970) *Book of Wafiyat Ala'yan (Death of Nobles)*
14. Humble, R. (1999, May) *Arabic Script Revealed*. Ahlan Wasahlan, Volume 15, Issue 5.
15. Moghadam, V.M. (1993) *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc.
16. Nasr, S.H. (1997) *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*. New York: Crossroad Herder, p 506.
17. Sakkal, M. (1993). *The Art of Arabic Calligraphy: The Language and the Script*. 3,6,9 Sakkal.com. <http://sakkal.com/MamounSakkal.html>
18. Schimmel, A. (1992) *Islam and Introduction*, State University of New York, 46.
19. Simonowitz, D. (2010). *A Modern Master of Islamic Calligraphy and her Peers*, Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 6(1): 75-79, 85.
20. Tabbaa, Y. (2001). *The Transformation of Islamic Art During the Sunni Revival*, University Washington Press.
21. Zakariya, M. (1991). *Islamic Calligraphy: A Technical Overview*, in Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing, edited by Carol Garrett Fisher. East Lansing: Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University.