

The Art of Calligraphy in the Ottoman Empire

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THE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE *

Prof. M. Ugur Derman **

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Calligraphy (*hüsni hat*) is a characteristic Islamic art form, practised in the Arabic writing method developed from the Nabatean script. The fact that such a strong aesthetic language developed from a rather simple way of recording language surely has to be regarded as one of the miracles of Islam. Because of the proliferation of the Islamic faith, a great many different peoples practised the art of calligraphy.

The dynastic rulers of the Islamic world (Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, Seljuk, Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safevid, Akkoyunlu, ...), with their capitals as cultural centres in such diverse locations as Damascus, Baghdad, Cordoba, Cairo, Konya, Samarkand, Herat, and Tabriz, were always attracted by the art of calligraphy and accordingly patronised its practitioners. During the Ottoman period, calligraphy reached the zenith of its aesthetic power over an extensive period, and as a result, calligraphy in the Ottoman dominions, which became known as "Turkish Calligraphy," established its own distinct character.



Figure 1: The Imperial Gate of the Topkapı Palace (*Bab-i Hümayûn*): the calligraphic panel displays an inscription in *celî sülûs* executed by Ali Sofî, active in the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror, date 1478. The *tuğra* underneath belongs to Mahmûd II and was executed by Mustafa Râkım.

* All figures were taken from Prof. Dr. Muhittin Serin's *Hat Sanatı ve Meshur Hattatlar (Calligraphy and Eminent Calligraphers)*, Istanbul 2004, by his permission.

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In the city of Baghdad, first the centre of Abbasid and later Ilkhanid power, the Arabs gradually perfected calligraphy to reach its ultimate form in the style of Yâkûtü'l-Musta'simî (died e. 1298). The calligrapher died at a time when the Ottoman state was only in its infancy, but posthumously his pupils promulgated his style into the wider Islamic world. The six basic styles (or pens) of calligraphy (*aklâm-i sitte*), whose rules were regularised by Yâkût replaced the Kufic script that had previously dominated calligraphic practice. The six scripts can be enumerated as *sülûs*, *nesih*, *muhakkak*, *reyhânî*, *tevkî'î* and *rika'*. In spite of the fact that the Ottomans had been expanding their power-base from the fourteenth century onwards, because of their defeat at Timur's hands at the outset of the century (1400), the only early examples of calligraphic art to have survived are the inscriptions on monumental buildings. In a number of calligraphic examples, dating from the period of the establishment of the Ottoman state after Celebi Mehmed, one can see that the Yâkût style also was being practised in the Ottoman dominions of Anatolia and Rumelia. In addition to such capital cities as Bursa and Edirne, one can also point to the city of Amasya during the second half of the fifteenth century to argue that provincial centres in Ottoman Anatolia had also become loci of calligraphic learning and education. The conquest of Istanbul at that time ensured that this exceptional city would shortly develop into the cultural and artistic centre of the world of Islam, a position of excellence that has secured up to this day in the field of calligraphy.

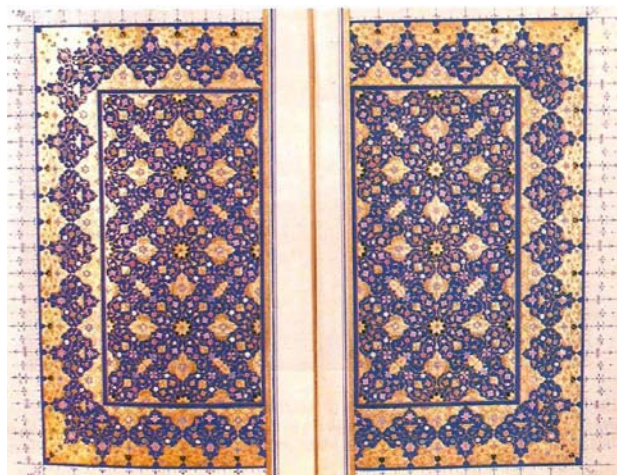


Figure 2: A dual *zahriyye* illumination executed in a *mushaf* written by Şeyh Hamdullah. The illumination was rendered by a team under the direction of Hasan bin Abdullah (active in the reign of Bâyezîd II) (Library of the University of Istanbul).

There is no information available pertaining to the relationship Ottoman rulers might have had with the field of calligraphy during the first 150 years after establishment of the Ottoman state. In contrast, the importance Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror gave to the fine arts in general and the art of writing in particular is attested. Moreover, there survive to this day a number of the books written by calligraphic genius Sheikh Hamdullah (1429-1520), donated to the sultan's library by his son Prince Bayezid, at the time governor of Amasya. Further inscriptions in *jeli sülûs* made by two calligraphic masters, Yahya Sôfi and his Ali Sôfi, active in Mehmed's day, were added on a number of monuments ere after the conquest of Istanbul. The signatures of calligraphers identify these works. The first two names asserting the Ottoman dynasty's association with the field of calligraphy are those of Sultan Bayezid II and his Prince Korkut. Both had been taught by Sheikh Hamdullah in Amasya.

After Prince Bayezid's accession to the throne in 1481, Sheikh Hamdullah moved Istanbul, where he set out to create the most perfect examples of calligraphy in the style of Yâkût. Sheikh Hamdullah himself had learned Yâkût's style from his man Hayreddin Mar'asi. Upon the personal instigation of Sultan Bayezid, Sheikh Hamdullah was able to create a new original style, elaborating upon examples Yâkût work available in the Imperial Palace (Topkapı)'s treasury. Sheikh Hamdullah succeeded in this important task around the year 1485, after he had undergone a four-month period of mystical seclusion. This accomplishment promoted him to the position of spiritual founder (pîr) of Turkish calligraphy. As matter of fact, the articulation of the *aklâm-i sitte* that had until then been predominant was subject to an Abbasid understanding of the style. Even though it is rumoured that Yâkût himself had been a Turk from Amasya, the culture atmosphere of Baghdad pervaded his work, and he should thus be regarded representative of the culture of the Arab world. However, after Sheikh Hamdullah's astounding accomplishment, the *aklâm-i sitte* as practised in the Sheikh's style prevailed in the Ottoman dominions and drove Yâkût's style into oblivion.

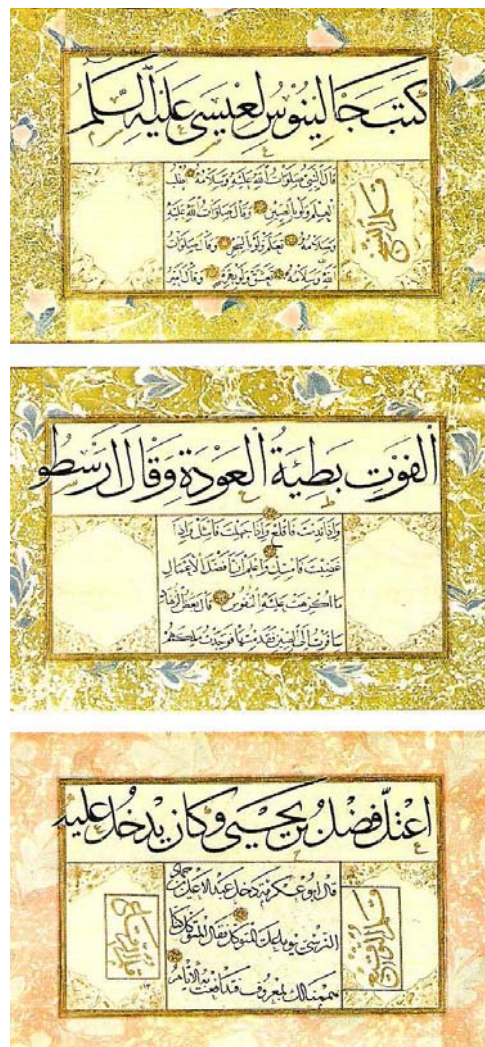


Figure 3: A *murakka* displaying the *aklâm-i sitte* executed by Şeyh Hamdullah. The individual *kit'as* contain samples of the following scripts (top to bottom): *sülüs*, *nesih*, *muhakkak*, *reyhani*, *tevki* and *rik'a* (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

The letters or letter-groupings constituting the style of Sheikh Hamdullah can be shown to stem partially from Yakût's writings. Hamdullah's genius has to be looked for in his choice of beautiful elements and their repetition in his numerous calligraphic samples.

The calligrapher Ahmed Karahisarî (1469?-1556), active shortly after Sheikh Hamdullah was engaged in reviving and continuing Yâkût style in the Ottoman dominions. But resistance to the style of Hamdullah was only able to continue for the duration of one calligraphic generation and, following Karahisarî's death, Hamdullah's way again became dominant. Among the various scripts of the *aklâm-i sitte*, perfected by Sheikh Hamdullah and his pupils, *nesih* became assigned to the writing of the Holy Book, whereas the scripts of *sülûs* and *nesih* became the pre-eminent vehicles for calligraphic practice. *Muhakkak* and *reyhânî* were gradually phased out by the end of the seventeenth century. The place of *tevki'*, on the other hand, was taken over by the script types of *divânî* and *jelî divânî* which will be elaborated on later. The script of *rika'* then gradually became the script reserved for the writing of calligraphers' certificates (*icâzetnâme*) and signatures and thus became known as *icâzet hattı*.

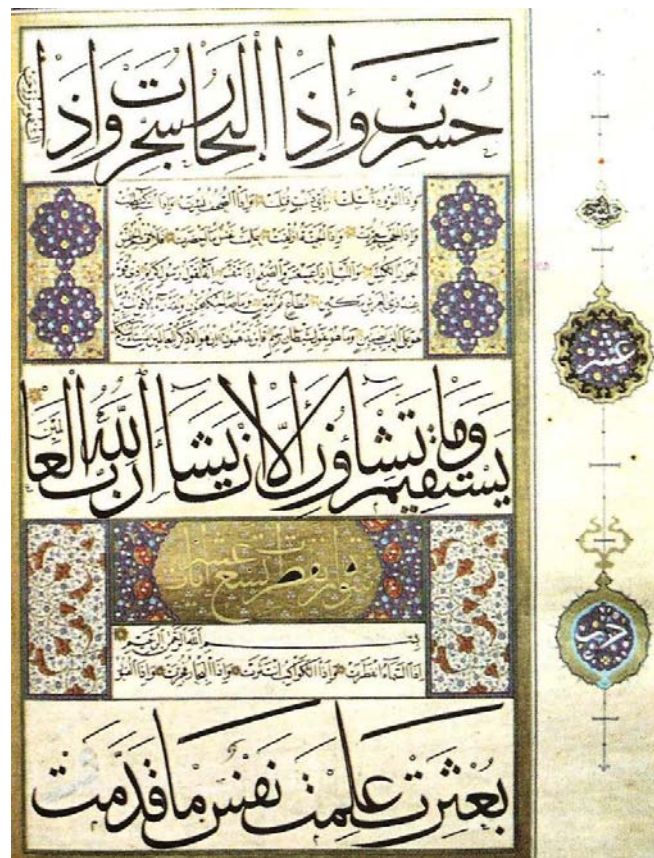


Figure 4: A large size *mushaf* written by Ahmed Karahisarî, displaying the *aklâm-i sitte*. On each page, four rectangular panels (*koltuk*) show examples of high-quality illumination as executed in the reign Sultan Süleyman I, (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

The road followed by Sheikh Hamdullah was continued by his son-in-law Sükrullah Halife (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries), his son Mustafa Dede (1495-1538) and his grandchildren continued the road followed by Sheikh Hamdullah. Through their

pupils, the Hamdullah style was transferred to younger generations. Through Sükrullah Halife's son Pir Mehmed (died 1580) and via Hâlid Erzurûmî (died 1631), the style was taken over by Dervish Ali (died 1673). The calligrapher Kayisizâde Hâfiz Osman (1642-1698), who had first been a pupil of Dervish Ali and subsequently of Suyolcuzâde Mustafa Eyyûbî (died 1686), continued the *aklâm-i sitte* in the sty of Sheikh Hamdullah and was able to develop a new aesthetic appreciation of the style. As a result, these six scripts, some of which had fallen into disuse, went through a second phase of purification and became known as the "style of Hâfiz Osman" (see Figure 2). This new sty slowly replaced the style of Sheikh Hamdullah, and younger generations of calligraphers preferred practising the newer style. However, the script form of *jelî sülûs*, designed to be read from afar, did not undergo progressive development during this period. Mustafa Râkim (1758-1826), a genius in the art of calligraphy, was able to improve the *jelî sülûs* script towards the end of the eighteenth century (see Figure 3). After having learned the *sülûs* script from his elder brother Ism Zühdi (died 1806), Mustafa Râkim scrutinised Hâfiz Osman's *sülûs* in great detail and was then able to transpose his insights to the *jelî* form of the *sülûs* style. In the hands of Mustafa Râkim pupils Hasim (died 1845) and Recâî (1804-1874), and particularly Sami Efendi (1838- 19 12), the calligraphic form of *jelî sülûs* reached its pinnacle. Calligraphers such as Carsanbali Arif Bey (died 1892), Abdülfettah (1815?-1896), Nazif Bey (184 1913), Tugrakes Hakki Bey (1873-1946), Ömer Vasfi (1880-1928), Emin Yazici (1883-1945), Hamid Aytac (1891-1982), Halim Özyazici (1898-1964), (see Figure 4) and Mâcid Ayral (1891-1961) were all practitioners of the said sty and they design calligraphic compositions in *jelî sülûs* in hitherto unseen arrangements applied in panels (levhas) and framed inscriptions. The last six names listed were practitioners of the art of calligraphy in the Republican period and as such stand out as exemplary representatives of the art of calligraphy. Moreover, Mâcid Ayral was even called to Baghdad, where he received the honorific *hoca* and taught Iraqî calligraphers the intricacies of Turkish calligraphy (1955-1959).



Figure 5: A decorative lacquer writing board (*yazı altlığı*), executed by the illuminator Ali Üsküdarî for Sultan Mustafa III, dated 1757 (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

Mahmud Celâleddin (died 1829), whose work in the *jeli sülüs* form is of a rather hard and static nature, was no rival for his famous colleague Mustafa Râkım, whose tense style was full of movement. In contrast, Mahmud Celâleddin's wife and pupil Esmâ Ibret (born 1780) produced elegant writings in *sülüs* and *nesih* in the way of Hâfiz Osman and as such should be seen as the most successful female calligrapher.



Figure 6: A picture of a layered rose by Abdullah Buhârî, dated 1733 (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

In the nineteenth century, the two incomparable calligraphers Kazasker Mustafa Izzet Efendi (1801-1876) (see Figure 6) and Mehmed Sevki Efendi (1829-1887) were the most important representatives of two different schools of calligraphic practice. Both had taken their lead from the work of Hâfiz Osman and produced samples in *sülüs*, *nesih* and *rika'* (*icâzet*) Mustafa Izzet Efendi's style was continued by pupils such as Sefik Bey (1819-1880), who was also very successful in *jeli sülüs*, Muhsinzâde Abdullah Bey (1832-1899), Abdullah Zuhdi Efendi (died 1879), and Kayıszâde Hâfiz Osman Efendi (died 1894). Sefik Bey was succeeded by Hasan Rıza (1849- 1920) and Ali Efendi (died 1902), who both stand out as outstanding practitioners of their master's style.

Among Sevki Efendi's pupils, Bakkal Arif (1830-1909) and Fehmi Efendi (1861-19 16) stand out as extraordinary calligraphers. Arif Efendi's pupil Aziz Efendi (1871-1934) even taught this style in Cairo at the school named *Medresetü Tahsini'l-Hattâtîn* during the period 1923-1933, whereas Sami Efendi's pupil, the *Reisü'l-Hattâtîn* Kemal Akdik (1861-1941), also became well-known in Cairo as a result of the exemplary works he wrote while he was there.

Let us now turn our attention to the scripts used in official writings by the Ottomans. Because of the rather localised practice of the scripts of *tevkî'* and its smaller form *rikâ'* in Iran, a script form evolved, called *ta'* because of its suspended letters. This script form (called *kadîm* (ancient) *ta'lik*) was used by the local scribes (*münsis*) in official correspondence. Since the foundation of the Ottoman state, *tevkî'* and *rikâ'* had been in use as the official scripts of state and administration. However, after Mehmed II's war with the Akkoyunlu (1473), Akkoyunlu scribes were brought to Istanbul where they introduced the *ta'lik* script. This script underwent a number of important changes and modifications in a short period and gave rise to the official Ottoman script of *dîvânî*. From the sixteenth century, onwards the *dîvânî* script, embellished with diacritical signs, and in its further developed form, was assigned for use in high-level official correspondence and referred to as *jelî dîvânî*. These two scripts were reserved for official use only, non-official use being strictly prohibited. The use of the scripts of *dîvânî* and *jelî dîvânî* was taught only in the Dîvân-i Hümâyûn (Imperial Council). During the nineteenth century, the practice of these two scripts reached its peak, a state of affairs that continued into the twentieth century. These scripts, which are rather difficult to read and write, are recognizable by the upward movement towards the endings of lines. These comparatively complicated scripts had been chosen purposefully for official matters to avoid easy reading and falsification, ensuring the safety of official correspondence.

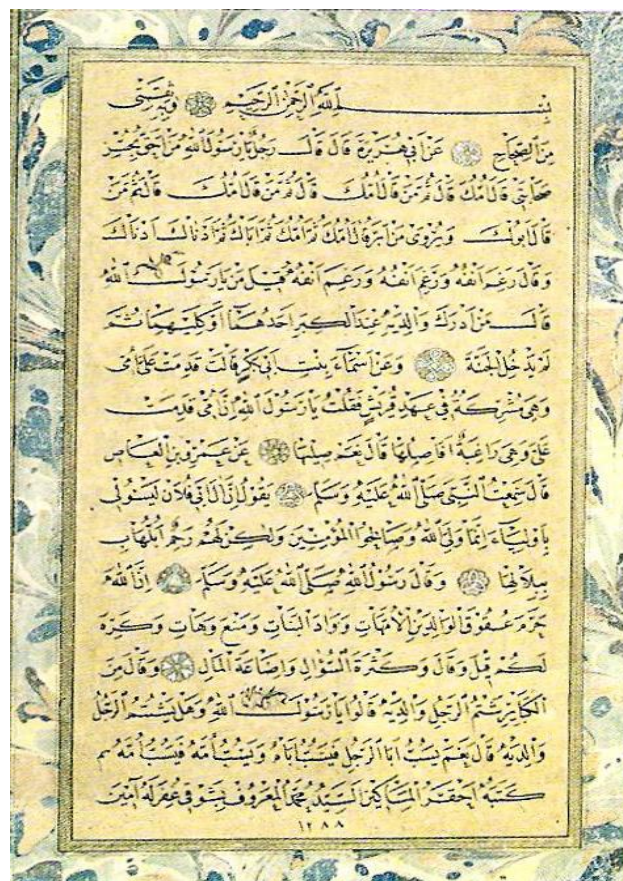


Figure 7: A *kit'a* displaying a text written in *nesih* by Mehmed Şevki Efendi, dated 1872 (Private collection).

The calligraphic form called the *tugra*, containing the names of the ruling sultan and his father together with the prayer "el-muzaffer dâimâ", was placed at the top of every official written order (*fermân*, *berât*, *menşûr*, ...). The earliest example of a *tugra* dates back to the reign of Orhan Gazi (1324). Throughout

the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the most striking examples of illuminated *tugras* were produced. However, in time, the purity of the form of a *tugra* was lost and, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the search for new relational proportions in the lay out of *tugras* began. Eventually, the previously mentioned Mustafa Râkım started reforming the calligraphic shape of the *tugra*. The *tugra* of Sultan Selim III was the first to undergo a serious revision, which reached its definitive form in the *tugra* of Mahmud II. The *tugra* found its definitive shape in the era of Abdulhamid II, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the hands of Sami Efendi, who employed a combination of mathematical and aesthetic considerations.

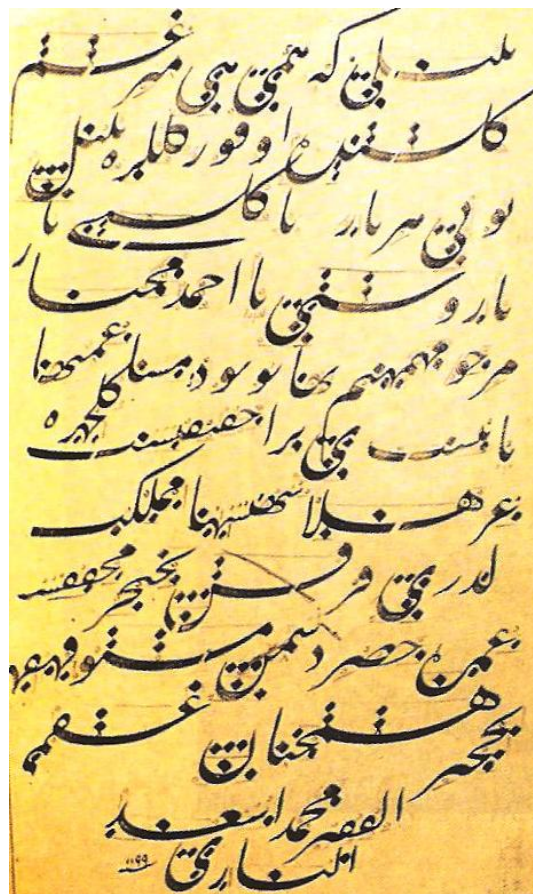


Figure 8: An exercise sheet of Yesârî Mehmed Es'ad Efendi displaying different combinations of letter forms in *ta'lik*, dated 1784 (Medina, Saudi Arabia, Library of Ârif Hikmet Bey).

Next to the *aklâm-i sitte*, the Ottomans also favored the calligraphic script of *ta'lik*. As opposed to the other scripts, in the *ta'lik* form no room is given to the vowel and reading signs (*hareke*), and the script is written in a pure and unadulterated form, which makes it very compatible with the writing of Turkish.

The *ta'lik* form of writing originated in Iran, and was applied to a very broad field. Aside from calligraphic panels, the script was also used for the writing of *dîvâns* (collections of poems) and canonical and juridical judgments. The above-mentioned *kadîm ta'lik* script underwent a number of changes as a result of intense application and gave way to a new form by the name of *neshta'lik*, which replaced the old *ta'lik* script completely. In time, the name changed to *neshta'lik*. This name was

not adopted by the Ottomans who referred to it as *ta'lik*. In same way, in the application of the script, changes in style were implemented as well.

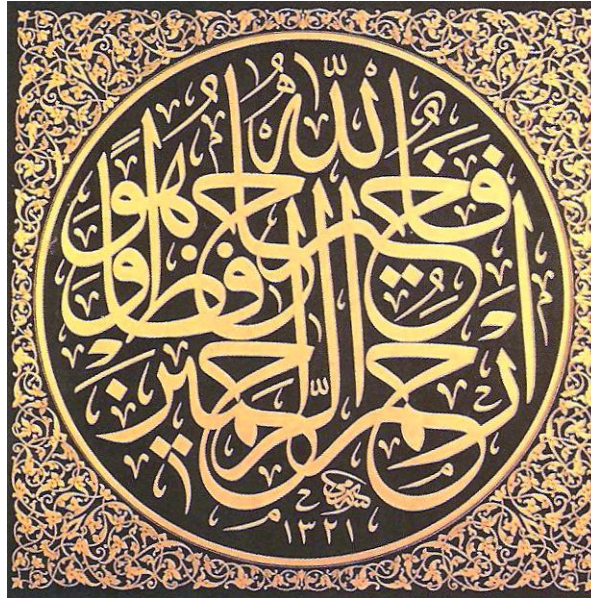


Figure 9: A *levha* with a calligraphic composition painted in gold (*zer-endûd*), written by Sâmi Efendi in *celî sülûs*, dated 1903 (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).



Figure 10: A *serlevha* (the two illuminated opening pages) of a *mushaf* written by Hâfız Osman in the *nesih* script. The marginal decoration was executed by the illuminator Kanbur Hasan Efendi, dated 1692 (Library of the University of Istanbul).

From the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, the *ta'lik* script became widespread. Its finer form (*hurde*, *hâfî*) in particular became widely used in the writing of books and also became popular in the Ottoman dominions. In Iran the script had been propagated by the calligrapher Mîr Imâdû'l Hasenî (1554?-1615), and his exceptional style reached Istanbul through his pupil Dervish Abdi (d. 1647). The artists of the city immediately acknowledged the Iranian visitor's calligraphic excellence. Ottoman calligraphers, practicing *ta'lik* in the eighteenth century, such as Durmuszâde Ahmed (died 1717), Kâtibzâde Mehmed Refî' (died 1768), and Sheikhülislâm Veliyüddin Efendi (died 1768), were consequently always compared to the earlier Iranian master and received epithets such as Imâd-I Rûm (the *Imâd* Anatolia) or *Imâd-i Sâni* (the second *Imad*). Dedezâde Mehmed Efendi (died 1759)'s pupil Mehmed Es'ad Efendi (died 1798), whose right side had been afflicted with paralysis and who subsequently wrote with his left hand and thus became known as *Yesârî*, had scrutinized the aesthetic of Imâd's writings and was able to improve upon the master's style and introduce an Ottoman version of *ta'lik* in about the year 1780. Yesârîzâde Mustafa İzzet Efendi (1770?-1849) was able to compensate for his father's deficiencies and went on to produce numerous incomparable samples in *jeli ta'lik*. Sami Efendi continued along the same path, (see Figure 8) and his pupils Nazif Bey, Hulûsî Yazgan (1869-1940), Ömer Vasfî and Necmeddin Okyay (1883-1976) were able to introduce the beauties of Ottoman *ta'lik* into the Republican period.



Figure 11. A large, perfectly written *hilye* written by *Kadiasker* Mustafa İzzet Efendi. The marginal decoration was done in a Westernised fashion, (private collection).

The script called *siyâka*, used to keep title deeds as well as financial and other records, does not possess any kind of artistic or aesthetic merit. Therefore, we will only mention its name without going into details. As handwriting has the tendency to differ from person to person, in the nineteenth century it was resolved to regularize this practice and the name *rik'a* was given to this new form of regularized handwriting. The application of this script to official and speedy writing was called *Bâb-i Âlî rik'asi* (the *rik 'a* of the Sublime Porte). The calligrapher Izzet Efendi (1841-1903) practiced *rik 'a* according to a very strict of rules, giving rise to a very regularized form that was given his name as *Izzet Efendi rik'asi*. The Arab world appropriated this script as an artistic medium to the practice of calligraphy.

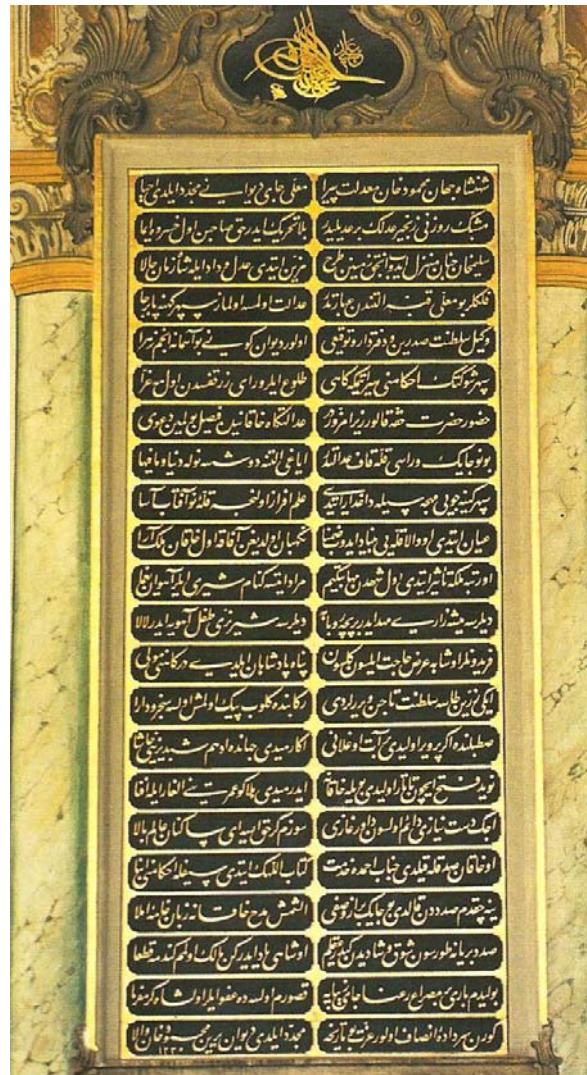


Figure 12: A gilded marble panel, carved in low relief, commemorating the restoration of the Kubbealtı building in the Topkapı Palace. It was written in *celî ta'lik* by Yesarîzâde Mustafa İzzet in 1820 (Topkapı Palace Museum).

The Ottomans practiced calligraphy over a period of nearly five hundred year attaining the highest level of expertise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These calligraphic productions, which never failed to display the particular characteristics of the Ottoman Turks, increased dramatically as time progressed. This

context, the calligraphic form of *jeli*, which can be applied to any of the calligraphic scripts mentioned as its large-scale and monumental form, we through a similar evolution. This calligraphic form of *jeli* was used for decorative panels of inscriptions applied to religious buildings as well as to civil architectural constructions. Manuscripts surviving from the Ottoman period can take the form of books, such as *mushafs* or *dîvans*, but can also come in the shape of so-called *murakkaas*. A *murakkaa* is a collection of *kit'as* (small origin works) that are hinged together on their edges, executed in one or two scripts, on one side on with illuminated margins, on the recto side only and approximately the same size as a book. Large-scale panels, executed in *jeli sülüs* and *jeli ta'lik*, were used for the interior decoration of a great many public and private buildings. The above-mentioned calligrapher Hâfiz Osman devised a calligraphic composition called *hilye* towards the end of the seventeenth century. A *hilye* contains the description of the Prophet's physical and moral characteristics, and from the nineteenth century onwards, this form began to be executed on a large scale.

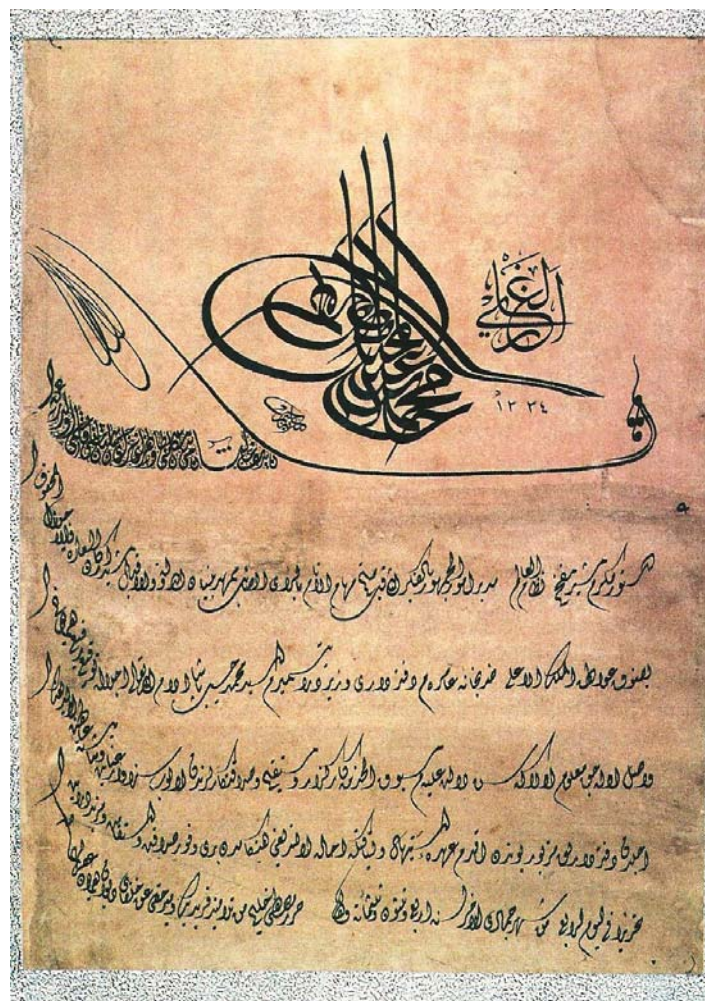


Figure 13: A *berât* (patent) written by Halim (Özyazıcı) Efendi, a graduate of the *Madrasat al-Hattatîn*. The first line underneath Sultan Reşâd's *tuğra* was written in *celî divanî*, whereas the subsequent five lines were executed in *dîvânî*, dated 1916, (Collection of Muhsin Demironat).

The names of those calligraphers listed do not constitute the totality of the practitioners of this art in the Ottoman sphere of influence. It would be impossible to enumerate the hundreds of names of individuals who attained high levels of expertise

in the field of calligraphy. These individuals were true artists and should not be confused with mere scribes, who were known in Ottoman times as *nâsihs* or *nessâhs*.

The tools and materials used by calligraphers constitute primary examples of the applied arts in the Ottoman dominions. Calligraphers piled their art on hand crafted paper that, after being dyed in various colors, was sealed and polished according to a special method called *âhâr*. They used an ink called *mürekkebi*, produced from soot and gum Arabic pounded in a mortar, but other inks were available as well such as *altın mürekkebi*, a pure gold ink produced from crushed gold leaf. Red inks called *l* and yellow inks called *zirik* (arsenic) were used as well. Other instruments used by calligraphers included *divits* (if cylinder shaped called *kubur*), boxes to keep the reed pen and inkwell. The *kalemtras* (penknife) and the *makta'* (a device to hold the pen while carving and clipping the nib), were used to prepare the reed pens. The production of these tools was undertaken by guild of artisans.



Figure 14: Ivory devices employed in the process of cutting pens (*makta'*) and penknives (*kalemtras*); which should be regarded as elegant examples of Ottoman material culture (Library of the Topkapı Palace Museum).

Calligraphy was taught in Ottoman educational institutions, such as *mektep*, *madrasa*, or the Endert Hümâyûn and Dîvân-i Hümâyûn in the Imperial Palace or official institutions such as the Galata Sarayı, which had been set up as pious foundations (*vakıf*). However, the best way to learn the art of writing was to attend individual tutorials at a calligraphic master's house. These lessons were given without any form of material remuneration but rather as a blessing (*teberrüken*). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ottoman government decided institute an academy for the instruction of calligraphy. The then minister of Pious Foundations (*Evkaf Nâziri*) and the Seyhulislam Hayri Efendi (1867-1922) founded this undertaking. The historical building of the *Yusuf Aga Sibyan Mektebi* (today the building houses the Ministry of Education's press office) in the Cagaloglu district of Istanbul was converted into the *Medresetü'l-Hattatîn* 1914. Outstanding calligraphers of the day, such as Hasan Rizâ, Kâmil, (Akdik), Nûri (Korman) (1868-1951), Hulûsî (Yazgan), Tugrakes Ismail

Hakki (Altunbezer), and Mustafa Ferîd (1857-1930?) taught at this madrasa. In addition to calligraphy, various arts related to book and paper production, such as illumination, binding, *ebru* (marbling), miniature painting and *âhâr* (sizing and polishing) were taught as well. A great number of students, graduates of this crucible of artistic culture continued practicing their trade after the abolition of *madrasas* (1925) in a school called *Hattat Mektebi*, which discontinued its activities after the introduction of the new Turkish alphabet in December 1928.

Calligraphic instruction was based upon the observance of a strict discipline according to a master-apprentice system. It was a process that continued from generation to generation. Pupils were able to complete their instruction only after years of practice and received a written permit (*icâzet*) to practice the art of calligraphy at the end of the process. The art and practice of calligraphy was a closed world, able to withstand any Westernizing influence that had taken the other Ottoman arts under its sway. Therefore, Ottoman calligraphers were able to enter the twentieth century on a high level of expertise unhampered by Western styles.