



SPECIAL REPORT



In one room after another there are masterpieces of the calligrapher's art from all parts of the Muslim world. Strategically-placed benches provide a place to sit and ponder the technical excellence and divinely-inspired beauty.

TAREK RAJAB MUSEUM

Calligraphy

Prayer Pride

Photos and story by Claudia Farkas Al Rashoud

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In 2007 Tareq Rajab established the Tareq Rajab Museum of Islamic Calligraphy, the first museum of its kind in the entire Arab world. An expert on antique Quranic manuscripts, Rajab single-handedly collected some of the world's finest examples of calligraphy, including works of unsurpassed beauty by some of the Ottoman sultans. He also designed the stunning museum premises in Jabriya which now stand as testament to his extraordinary vision and expertise.

Tareq Rajab and his wife, Jehan, founded their first museum, the world-renowned Tareq Rajab Museum of Islamic Arts, in 1980, also in Jabriya. Jehan passed away in 2015 and Tareq died a year later. The couple made tremendous contributions towards documenting and preserving Kuwait's history and traditions and left behind a rich legacy in the fields of art, archaeology, Islamic culture and heritage, and education.

The job of curating the magnificent collections fell to the Rajab's son, Dr Ziad Rajab, and daughter, Nur. Stepping in to continue their father's life work, they are in the process of labeling artifacts and will produce a catalogue of the calligraphy museum. It is a monumental task.

Calligraphy is undoubtedly the greatest and most beloved form of art in the Muslim world. Born of faith and devotion and practiced with infinite patience and amazing technical skill, it beautifies a wide range of materials. These include paper, vellum, ceramics, metal, wood, fabrics, glass, stone, and gems. Many superb examples of all of these can be found in the museum.

With one breathtaking artifact after another, the museum tells the tale of the development of Islamic calligraphy. The story begins with samples of very early Kufic pieces from the first century after Hijra (eighth century AD) and continues with works by the most renowned calligraphers throughout the ages.

"There are a few contemporary pieces but the emphasis is on historical examples," Ziad remarks.

"Among the very important works in the collection in terms of the historical development of the Arabic script is a book by Yaqut al-Musta'simi, a very well-known calligrapher who was a slave in the court of the Caliph al-Musta'sim, the last Abbasid caliph. The calligrapher was in Baghdad and was captured by the Mongols when they sacked the city in 1258. He spent the rest of his life in their employ and his career



Left: Arabic calligraphy on this cobalt blue and light blue jar made in India in the 19th century says, "Write down knowledge in books." Right: A large Kashan lusterware jug from early 13th century Iran.



actually flourished under Mongol patronage."

Ziad recalls that his son Khaled once asked his grandfather, if he could only keep one of the artifacts in his collection, which one would it be. Without hesitation Tareq Rajab replied that he would choose a work by the fifteenth century Ottoman calligrapher Ahmet Al Karahisari, who served in the Imperial Court of Suleyman I.

"The artifact my father was referring to is only a small panel of calligraphy and we really don't know why he had such a particular fondness for that calligrapher," Ziad muses.

The story of Islamic calligraphy not only covers a wide timeframe but also a vast geographic area extending from China to the Atlantic Ocean. The Muslim culture in China is one of Ziad's particular interests and an area in which he has done a lot of research. He has visited some of the oldest mosques in China, including China's first mosque in Guangzhou that dates from the eighth century AD. He explains that while Chinese mosques are laid out according to traditional Islamic specifications, many reflect the local architectural style.

Like the mosques, Islamic calligraphy produced in China also has a distinctive Chinese look. Although the calligraphy uses the Arabic script it can immediately be identified as Chinese in origin due to the use of the horsehair brush as opposed to the reed pen.

Paper came into the Islamic world from China via Central Asia in the eighth century AD and was an important development for the art of calligraphy. Prior to the invention of paper, animal hides known as vellum, or papyrus, had to be used for writing. Vellum actually continued to be widely used in producing Qurans for quite some time as it was considered more durable than paper and many early as well as later examples can be seen in the museum.

The focal point of the museum is a large, central open area where six-meter long curtains from the Holy Kaaba in Makkah are hung. Ziad explains that these precious curtains, formerly part of the kiswa, or covering of the Holy Kaaba, were made in Egypt and embroidered with real silver and gold thread. They date from the nineteenth century and were commissioned by Ottoman sultans. Over the years the silver thread

Continued on Page 3

editor's choice

