

Becoming a Calligrapher: Memoirs of an American Student of Calligraphy

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“Let us offer you a deal.” Those words, spoken to me by Dr. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, would change my life—and bring me eventually into the company of M. Uğur Derman. It was January 1984, a cold winter day. We were in İhsanoğlu’s sedately ornate office in the Yıldız Sarayı in İstanbul. Across from me was Hasan Çelebi, successor to the great Hamid Aytaç and the leading calligrapher in Turkey—by extension, in the entire Islamic world.

“Let us offer you a deal,” İhsanoğlu repeated in his impeccable diplomat’s English. “In order to make progress in calligraphy, you must give up all you have learned and learn everything again from the beginning, from your *hoca*, who will be Hasan Çelebi. If you accept, we will help you.”

Years of searching and self-instruction had landed me in this place, among these people here at the Research Center for Islamic Art, History, and Culture (IRCICA). I had reached a crisis in my art: I could make no progress. I had run into a barrier—calligrapher’s block, if you will. But now what was I to do? It seemed a bit insulting to be faced with such a choice at the age of 44. I could politely decline, walk away with my pride intact, and go see the sights of İstanbul. Or I could ignore my pride, roll up my sleeves, and begin.

Twenty-three Years Earlier

In 1961 I had just returned to Los Angeles from my first trip to Morocco. I was a cocky young machinist, itching to get on with life. I resumed my job in one of the small rag-tag factories that served the growing Southern California aerospace industry, but I wanted more. Morocco had opened my eyes to a different world—a new language, a new culture, a new religion. I began teaching myself Arabic and converted to Islam.

One afternoon, walking along Santa Monica's Wilshire Boulevard, I happened to look into the window of the local Oriental rug dealer. What I saw framed on the wall pulled me into the shop. "What is it?" I asked the Armenian shopkeeper. "It's a piece of Muslim calligraphy," he replied, "but it's too expensive for you, kid!"

Thinking, "If I can't buy it, I can make it," I went to the local library and began to track down works of calligraphy to admire and try to copy. Primarily, I found black-and-white photographs of Kufi Kur'ans, ancient manuscript pages, and lines from *firman*s. I even bought an incomplete 19th-century Persian Kur'an from an Iranian antique dealer. I cut lengths of bamboo into what I thought a calligrapher's pen would look like, tried all the different inks I could find, and used every conceivable type of paper. Discovering how difficult it was to copy from these examples made me try all the harder, made me want more than anything else to write calligraphy, to become a calligrapher.

I made my first *levhas* that year and gave them to friends and to my mosque. They must have been outrageously bad. I knew no one remotely qualified to offer constructive criticism. The only pieces of Islamic calligraphy I could actually handle were works brought from China by my friend Suleiman Ma, who fled the mainland at the time of the Communist takeover. These were elegant pieces, but their dry, airy brushwork was not what I was after. I wanted the magnificent solid and electric line of the classical thing.

By 1964 I had saved up enough to go overseas again, and I spent the next two years moving between Morocco and England. In Morocco I studied Arabic, art, and religion on my own in mosques and libraries; in England I studied calligraphy from ancient works in the British Museum, scratching a living by restoring houses and performing on stage with a comedy group called Bruce Lacey and the Alberts. A.S. Ali Nour, an Egyptian artist I had met in Morocco, was then working for the B.B.C. in London. He had been introduced to Islamic calligraphy in Egypt and

showed me how to use the classical Arabic sources to research the history and lore of calligraphy.

Back in Los Angeles, I went to work for an art dealer, restoring original antiques and crafting a collection of Age-of-Enlightenment-style *bibelots*, sundials, and scientific instruments. In my spare time, I immersed myself in the little-known literature of Islamic calligraphy, basing my writing on the method of the 11th-century Baghdad master İbnü'l-Bevvâb and his Mamlûk disciples. I developed my skills in gilding and illuminating and began experimenting with paper coatings, burnishing, lamination, adhesives, inks, colors, and marbling.

My work was progressing—I was even making money at it—but by 1980, I began to sense an obstacle to further progress. Dr. Esin Atıl, then curator of Islamic art at the Freer Gallery in Washington, suggested I seek renewal in Turkey, the heartland of calligraphy. She told me about the newly founded IRCICA and introduced me to its head, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, who accepted me as a candidate for study. Thus it was that, with some trepidation, I found myself on a flight to İstanbul in late December 1983.

Starting Over

"In order to make progress in calligraphy, you must give up all that you have learned and learn everything again from the beginning, from your *hoca*, who will be Hasan Çelebi. If you accept, we will help you."

We shook on it, and that afternoon I took my first ferry ride to Üsküdar and walked up the Bağlarbaşı Road to Kuruçeşme and the Selam-i Ali Camii, where Çelebi was the *imam*. The interior of the mosque is a marvel, a fantasia in calligraphy. Every interior space is strategically adorned with Çelebi's writing and decorated with the work of a good *nakkaş*. Great works of *Celî Divanı* sail across the walls, large *levhas* of *Celî Süllüs* hang between faux marble panels and faux porphyry columns. *Kuşaks* of *Celî Süllüs* articulate the upper walls and *kasnaks* encircle the dome drums—all in surprising colors, all supporting and playing off the architecture. This interplay of architecture and calligraphy was exciting to see, and I knew then that I would be working with a real master.

Following prayer, Hasan Çelebi gave me the basic tools of the trade—two reed pens, paper, and an inkwell with ink and *lika*—and the

lesson began. The teaching process goes back to at least the 11th century, and its conditions and techniques are observed to this day among the Turkish *hattats*. The *hoca* sits with the student standing or sitting next to him to get a clear view of his hand. The *hoca* then writes the *meşk*—usually, two lines of *Sülüs* with two lines of *Nesih* between them—in plain view. The student concentrates on every aspect of the master's technique, takes the *meşk* home and practices writing and rewriting it, then takes his work to the *hoca* for correction. Using red ink, the *hoca* goes over the student's work, writing the letters as they should be done (*çıkartma*) and marking things to note. This process derives from the classical Islamic study pattern *taklid*, in which the student follows and copies a known master of a subject until the master signifies the student's ability and competence to proceed on his own. The master indicates this by granting his *icazet*, or permission, which allows the student to work alone. In Turkey, the *icazet* is granted as a document called an *icazetname*, usually a beautifully illuminated *levha*. Receiving it is a great honor, a milestone in one's career, but it is only the beginning of becoming a calligrapher.

That January day, my *icazet* was a far-off dream. Normally, calligraphy students go to their teachers once a week, taking two to five years to master the material. But with only one month in İstanbul, I went every afternoon to Çelebi and practiced far into the night and every morning; it was agreed that I would continue my lessons by mail after I returned to the United States. All our communication was in Arabic, as my spoken Turkish was virtually nonexistent, as was Çelebi's English. My first lessons had so many red correction marks on them Çelebi joked, "It looks as if your *meşk* has chicken pox!" Still, it was a time of intense study and concentration, and I found it immensely satisfying. As the Turks say, "*Aşk olmayınca, meşk olmaz.*" It is also said that for a student of *hat*, this is the most peaceful time of life, and I found that to be true. The pressure is to assimilate knowledge and action, not to perform.

As I watched Çelebi at work, I was surprised to see how slowly he moved his pen and what a loud screeching sound it made. I realized that I had to concentrate intensely on the exact movement of his pen. Part of the success of calligraphy lies in making letters consistently the same size and shape. By watching the letters come into being under Çelebi's pen, I began to understand what they should look like and how big they should be. Then, comparing my attempts to his, I was gradually able to bring elements of beauty and order to my previously chaotic work.

The Traditional Course of Study

I began, as calligraphy students traditionally begin, with *Sülüs* and *Nesih*, two of the famous Six Scripts originally formulated by the Abbasid masters in Baghdad, İbnü'l-Bevvâb and Yâkût-ı Mustâ'sımî. The six are usually paired: *Muhakkak* and *Reyhani*, *Sülüs* and *Nesih*, *Tevkî* and *Rika'*. *Sülüs* and *Nesih* were the Ottoman scripts par excellence. *Nesih*—a small script used for texts, most famously for Kur'ans—is roughly one-third the size of *Sülüs*, which has a more monumental and spectacular character. Both scripts have real presence and artistic power. Both are suffused with subtleties that baffle the beginner. The experienced seek these subtleties—they make the difference between old work and new, between Ottoman and non-Ottoman work, between poor work, good work, and great work. The two scripts are theme and countertheme; that is why they are taught together and often used together to write *murakka* albums. *Sülüs* also has a *celî* form that is based on normal *Sülüs* and studied after the student has learned the basic script. *Celî Sülüs* can be written straight, in lines (*düz*), or stacked and interlaced (*istifli*) into rectangular, circular, oval, or even pear-shape or teardrop configurations.

The first half of a course in calligraphy is called the *müfredat* (units or simple shapes) and normally includes from 15 to 20 lessons. The first lesson begins with a famous prayer for success: رَبِّ يَسِّرْ وَلَا تَعَسِّرْ رَبِّ تَمِّمْ بِالْخَيْرِ "Lord, make it easy and not difficult. Lord, make it result in good." (In *Nesih*, a *besmele* is sometimes used in place of this sentence.) This is followed by the individual letter shapes and their variations. After these, the student works on pairs of letters, beginning with B: B + *elif*, B + B, B + C, B + D, and so on throughout the alphabet. These are the building blocks of calligraphy, which will eventually allow the student to write spontaneously, as though "sight reading."

The first four or five of these lessons are usually the hardest and may take many, many repetitions, even years. Once the student has passed the *müfredat*, he begins on the *mürekkabat*—lessons in which the *müfredat* are used in sentences, such as poems, odes, or sayings of the Prophet. At this point, the student begins copying a work by an old master, which may have many pages, called *kit'as*. This method is the only one to have proved itself over the centuries. There are no shortcuts to good calligraphy.

If all goes well, a warm relationship develops between *hoca* and student. The master accepts no payment and gives no grades; the student

continues until he passes, quits, or dies. The *hoca* looks out for the student's interests and needs in his art, introducing the student to the great calligraphers and their works and initiating him into the calligrapher's tradition. In my case, Çelebi took me to mosques, graveyards, and other sites where there were inscriptions by great artists. Knowing my interest in the religion, he took pains to present information from that standpoint.

The student's goal, of course, is to be able to reproduce the teacher's examples as closely as possible and eventually to compose one's own works—even, ultimately, to develop a recognizable style. Once the student receives the *icazet*, he can sign his own name on his work using a traditional Arabic phrase, as in *ketebehu Çelebi* (Çelebi wrote it).

Meeting Uğur Derman

My time in İstanbul was to be even more intense and eventful than I had imagined. In addition to my lessons with Çelebi, I was also beginning lessons in *Ta'lik*, which I studied with Dr. Ali Alparslan, professor of Persian literature at İstanbul University. Alparslan—a student of the great Necmeddin Okyay—is the last living calligrapher listed in the 1955 book *Son Hattatlar*. My days were crammed with lessons and practice, but one day I was surprised to receive an invitation to meet M. Uğur Derman at IRCICA.

Derman was almost a mythological being to me, author of the most awesome works on Islamic calligraphy and the world's leading authority on the topic. I especially treasured volumes 1 and 2 of *Kalem Güzeli*, his redaction of Mahmud Yazır's immortal tour through the history of the art. How could I meet and converse with such a towering figure—especially given my pathetic Turkish?

I need not have worried. When Çelebi and I met with Derman in İhsanoğlu's office, we felt immediately at ease, despite the language problem. Derman showed us a rare *murakka* album (the first I had ever seen) by Şevki Efendi, which consisted of a *hilye* in four *kit'as*. The album took my breath away and I exclaimed, "*Mudhish!*" In Arabic, the word means "surprising" and "marvelous," but in Turkish, it carries a meaning somewhere between "extraordinary" and "terrible" or "fearsome." My choice of words struck us all as hilarious, and my Turkish friends still joke with me about it.

Oddly, though, my malapropism got us off to a good start. Derman showed us the mock-ups of his masterpiece-to-be, *The Art of Calligraphy in the Islamic Heritage*. I said I would redouble my efforts to improve my Turkish so I could put this great work into English, but a translator had already been engaged.

That short month was my introduction to the world of Ottoman calligraphy, the city of İstanbul, and the hospitality of Turkish life. I had found myself among a group of learned, cultivated, and serious, yet fair, open-minded, and humane people who were willing to share their art and culture with me. It was an overwhelming experience, and I took home with me a renewed sense of commitment and anticipation. Over the next three and a half years, countless *meşks* moved between Virginia and İstanbul until, in 1987, Çelebi said the time to receive the *icazet* had come. I was to write a *hilye-i saadet* and send it to him. If he approved it, it would become my *icazetname*. This I did, and Çelebi then wrote his *icazet* text (with a little joke in it) and took it to the calligrapher Şeyh Bekir Pekten to have him write the *tasdik*, or confirmation. These two texts appear under the *hilye*, and the whole was fully illuminated by Çelebi's son Mustafa, one of the modern masters of *tezhib*, the art of manuscript illumination.

I saw my IRCICA friends again in April 1998, when some 70 Islamic calligraphers took advantage of one of Saddam Hussein's propaganda galas and met in Baghdad for a week of seminars and exhibitions. The political overtones of this oddly named "Festival of Arabic Calligraphy and Islamic Decoration" were impossible to mistake, and it was wrenching to see Iraqis living under such cruel totalitarianism. Nevertheless, it was an opportunity to meet calligraphers from around the world.

Uğur Derman, Hasan Çelebi, Ali Alparslan, Hüseyin Öksüz, Hüseyin Gündüz, Savaş Çevik, and Talip Mert were the calligraphers from Turkey; they were accompanied by Mohammed Tamimi of IRCICA and a few journalists. I spent a good deal of time with them, as did my colleague from Japan, Fuad K. Honda, and it gradually began to dawn on me that I was understanding more Turkish than I expected.

Following the conference and a brief trip to Qatar, I met up with Derman and Çelebi again in İstanbul for my *icazet* ceremony, which was held at the Çit Kasrı of the Yıldız Sarayı under the auspices of IRCICA. Then it was home again to renew my study of Ottoman and modern Turkish and continue my study of calligraphy.

Over the next nine years, I made three more trips to İstanbul, and in 1994, I was given the task of re-translating Derman's *Art of Calligraphy*, which IRCICA published in 1998. When that collaboration was done, Derman suggested I translate his catalogue for the Sakıp Sabancı collection, *Letters In Gold*, which was to be shown in New York, Los Angeles, and Paris.

Derman came to New York for the opening of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and my wife and I had the good fortune of having him as our guest for a week that summer—and of introducing him to American beefsteak tomatoes. He still asks me regularly, “How are the beefsteaks?” And he still asks after the squirrels I’ve taken to feeding on my daily walks, on which he accompanied me that week.

Derman has his *icazet* in *Ta’lik* from Necmeddin Okyay but does not practice the art. Nevertheless, he retains the hand and eye of a professional, and I was able to watch him work and learn from his skill and taste. This was especially fruitful in one particular case. I had a contract to produce an inscription in Ottoman for the banners that would be displayed when the Sabancı exhibition opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Uğur Bey suggested we work together on the job and produce an authentically Ottoman inscription. His ingenious idea was to use an inscription by Sami Efendi in *Celî Talik* in addition to my composition and, by judicious cutting and pasting, arrive at an entirely new piece by the great master. This was a very important experiment for me, as it gave me an opportunity to observe hands on, as it were, the spacing and placement of the letters. The result was splendid, but the designers decided in the end to use only my circular composition in *Celî Süllüs*.

The Triumph of the Ottomans

For the past decade, I have had my own private students. Seeing the teaching process from the other side has made me realize how important it is for the *hoca* to help the student learn to recognize and, ultimately, to create calligraphy that is truly effective. The Muslim world today positively bristles with calligraphy, from signs to magazine covers to television titles, and most of it is flat and lifeless. The Ottomans taught calligraphy as art, and as art, it “worked.” Non-Ottoman calligraphy, in my opinion, doesn’t work as well; bad calligraphy doesn’t work at all. In Western and Far Eastern calligraphy alike, there are many successful practitioners, but the Islamic world has relatively few. To thrive,

calligraphy needs to exist in an environment that can both understand it and criticize it. The environment must also appreciate and support calligraphy if artists are to have an incentive to make it their life’s work.

The true triumph of Islamic calligraphy was arguably in the Ottoman period, but it is instructive to study pre-Ottoman work as well, to understand the evolution of the art throughout history. Only through knowledge of calligraphy’s origins and development can one understand what Şeyh Hamdullah accomplished—that sea change that gave us modern calligraphy. Here, a study of Mahmud Yazır’s *Kalem Güzeli* is indispensable, if difficult. Not only did Yazır understand the important relationship of the art to religion and culture, but he had a critical understanding of its aesthetics as well. “The line must have a breath-like flow,” he wrote. Before Şeyh Hamdullah, that flow is not evident; after him, it is more and more apparent until its culmination in the last century of the empire. I first noticed this flow in a large *hilye* by Fehmi Efendi in the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., where it is no longer on public display. At the time, I had no words to describe the effect, yet I found it boundlessly exciting, even electrifying. It was *belâgat* (eloquence) made visible.

Recently, a colleague who works in the field of Arabic studies experienced the same effect when she went to see a large exhibition of Ottoman royal artifacts. The collection didn’t much impress her, she told me, until she found herself in front of a huge Baroque-style *hilye* by Kadiasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi. The work seemed to draw her like a magnet. She had never heard of a *hilye*, but when she read it, she felt in awe of the text and the art, almost as if transposed to a clearer state of perception. Such a work never tires the viewer; the more you look at it, the more you see in it. This is the effect that calligraphers try, not always successfully, to achieve.

It is what I hope for my own work. Along the way, I have learned the rudiments of *ebru* from Alparslan Babaoğlu and paper preparation from Sabahattin Başaran and have developed my own style of *tezhib*, drawing from my favorite examples of Ottoman Baroque. I find this style, with its rugged vigor, uniquely congenial—perhaps because it has Western origins, like myself, yet is innately Islamic. It is not always what traditionalists expect (or want), but it points the direction I wish to take my own work.

In 1997, I received my *icazet* for *Ta’lik* from Ali Alparslan at IRCICA, and I continue to work toward *icazets* in *Celî Süllüs* and *Celî*

Ta'lik. The subtleties in these larger scripts make them difficult to master. The closer I get to them, the more they seem to recede from my grasp. The best works in these scripts exhibit a seamless perfection, an effortless perfection that suggests the work is totally organic, that it grew by itself, rather than being the result of conscious hard work. Sometimes I wonder why I pursue such an elusive goal. But I cannot help but go after it, just like that time so long ago in the rug dealer's store. Sometimes people ask me, "What does it feel like to do such work?" There is no good answer, except awareness of the standards that have been set for the art and the responsibility to be faithful to them. So, rather than think of myself as a calligrapher, I still think of myself as becoming a calligrapher.

Hezarfen bir Hattat, Necmeddin Okyay: Hayatı ve Türk ve İslâm Eserleri Müzesinde Bulunan Kitapları

Şule Aksoy

1977 yılı kışında bir gün, Türk ve İslâm Eserleri Müzesi Müdürü Afif Süreyya Duruçay, son dönem hattatlarından Necmeddin Okyay'ın vefatı üzerine ailesinin, hattata ait kitapları muhafaza etmek imkânı bulamadıklarını, babalarına ait tüm eşyanın bir müze veya kütüphanede korunmasının daha doğru ve amaçlı olacağını düşündüklerini, bu iş için çok sevdikleri, güvendikleri ve yakından tanıdıkları Eczacı Sayın Uğur Derman'ı Müzemize gönderdiklerini anlatarak neler yapabileceğimizi sordu.

İslâmiyetin ilk yıllarından günümüze kadar yüzyılları kucaklayan inanılmaz uzun zaman dilimi içinde yazılmış çok zengin bir hat sanatı koleksiyonunu bünyesinde bulunduran Türk İslâm Eserleri Müzesinin üniversiteden yeni mezun olmuş, kitap sanatlarını çok seven, yeni şeyler öğrenmek amacıyla gayret gösteren Yazma Eserler Kütüphanesi sorumlusu olarak ben, bu haberi büyük bir sevinçle karşıladım. Sadece hat sanatı konusunda değil, ciltçilik, ebruculuk, okçuluk, din ve dini ilimler konusunda da bir derya olduğunu bildiğim ancak hiç karşılaşmak şansına sahip olamadığım Hattat Necmeddin Okyay'ın şahsi kitaplarının Müzemize kazandırılabilmesi için her türlü gayreti göstereceğimi, bunun, hem kendim, hem de müzemiz için büyük bir şans olduğunu düşündüğümü Müze Müdürü Duruçay'a bildirdim.