# 1 Introduction

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*In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.*
*Recite in the name of your Lord who created,*
*Created humanity from a clot of blood.*
*Recite! And your Lord is the Most Generous,*
*Who taught by the pen,*
*Taught man what he knew not.* (*Sūrat al-ʿAlaq,* Q. 96:1–5)[1]

The Holy Qur'an, the sacred book of Muslims, literally means 'recitation' and thus, originated not as a written text to be read silently, but an orally transmitted message from God to be memorised and recited aloud. It is also a work that has been 'taught by the pen', to borrow a phrase from the Qur'an, since manuscripts of the holy scripture have been copied out by hand more than any other book in the Islamic world. Both practices – the verbal recitation and the physical copying of the text – have had a profound effect on Muslim faith and practice for almost a millennium and a half. The science of the regularised readings and recitation of the Qur'an (*ʿilm al-qirā'āt wa'l-tajwīd*), systematised in the tenth century, is the medium through which Muslims experience the divine through the oral cantillation of His revealed message. Additionally, many Muslims continue to express their faith and devotion through visual artistic means; for example, by producing exquisite illuminated copies of the Qur'an, or by carving out the sacred word as architectural ornament, or by painting verses from the Qur'an on a digital canvas. Although the art forms vary from country to country and age to age, the unifying factor is the inspiration derived from God's word – connecting the metalworker in Syria to the calligrapher in China.

The international colloquium, **'Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions'**, held at the Ismaili Centre in London, was organised as part of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations of the Institute of Ismaili Studies from 18–21 October 2003. Most Qur'anic Studies conferences focus on the textual reading, codification, transmission, and interpretation of the holy text.[2] This colloquium, attended by more than two hundred scholars, students and artists, was unique in that it focussed on the sacred word as a source for creative and artistic inspiration for Muslims worldwide and throughout the ages. In this colloquium, the Qur'an was thus approached from the perspectives of art and architectural history, palaeography, numismatics and material anthropology.

From its influence on the built environment, metalwork, woodwork, coins, textiles and the arts of the book to its impact on contemporary painting, the language and interpretation of the Qur'an have engaged the minds of Muslim artists, craftsmen and patrons of the arts as much as the minds of theologians and jurists. The papers delivered at the colloquium examined both how and why the Qur'an has provided the motivation and impetus for many Muslims to adorn the spaces they inhabit and the objects which they cherish with its verses.

The papers in this volume offer a multi-disciplinary approach to the subject and are not limited to a particular historical period or geographical space. In doing this, we sought to present a broad spectrum of recent scholarly work illustrating the diverse expressions of the Qur'an vis-à-vis the material arts, spanning the globe and ranging from the earliest period of Islam to the present day. Before discussing the overall themes of the volume and summarising individual chapters, I will present a brief outline of the main studies, exhibitions and conferences to date that relate to the Qur'an and the arts, in order to provide a broader context in which the essays in this volume may be situated.

## I. Recent studies, exhibitions and conferences

### *The written word*

> The centrality of the Qur'an to the Islamic faith and its status as divine revelation have meant that for generations Muslims have made copies of their scripture that are as fine as their resources permitted.[3]

Studies on Qur'anic manuscript illumination and calligraphy dominate all other published works related to the artistic expressions of the Qur'an. Many of the largest collections of Qur'an manuscripts are held in the Muslim world,[4] including Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, Iran, India, Pakistan and Uzbekistan.[5] Although most of the chief collections in the Islamic world are published in one form or another, many of them remain understudied, particularly by western scholars, for various reasons. In some instances, scholars must have knowledge of Turkish, Persian or Urdu, in addition to Arabic, in order to read the secondary material available. Second, the unsettled political climate in specific regions of the Muslim world can prevent access to manuscripts. Finally, in some cases, gaining access to certain collections requires an ability to surmount a great deal of bureaucracy and often the collections are simply closed to public access.

Difficulties related to the accessibility of public and private Qur'anic and other Islamic manuscript collections across the globe have led to

various international academic efforts, including the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation (TIF), a not-for-profit educational trust affiliated with the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge, UK. The foundation has established an annual conference on 'The Islamic Manuscript: Conservation, Cataloguing, Accessibility, Copyright and Digitisation';[6] participants at the first two conferences held in 2005 and 2006 included librarians, scholars, manuscript curators and conservators from around thirty countries across Africa, Europe, North America, the Middle East and South, Southeast and Central Asia.[7] These international initiatives, although relatively new, are a welcome first step towards greater accessibility.

In the meantime, scholars in the west must rely on the smaller but more accessible Qur'an collections in Europe and America. In recent decades, the study of the Qur'anic arts of the book has accelerated in the west through the production of several high calibre publications based on these collections, particularly the series of catalogues focussing on the Qur'an collection of Dr Nasser David Khalili (London, England).[8] Most major published collections in the west belong to libraries, including the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the British Library in London, but there are other published collections in both private and public hands across Europe and America.[9] The catalogues of these collections, produced by experts in the fields of Islamic manuscript production and Qur'anic codicology, have presented new information on the development of the Arabic script and the various styles of Arabic calligraphy. These catalogues have allowed scholars to provide provenances to unsigned or previously un-attributed Qur'anic manuscripts and identify the works of several master calligraphers and their ateliers. They have also provided helpful records for scholars wishing to theoretically reconstruct Qur'ans which were detached from their original bindings and sold as separate leaves to various collections. Finally, the geographical comprehensiveness of many of these collections has allowed scholars to make cross-regional comparisons, and to trace the transmission of knowledge through the movement of Qur'an codices, calligraphers, illuminators and the dominant styles and artistic influences across the Muslim world from the medieval to the modern period.

The acceleration of studies on the arts of the Qur'an in the west is a relatively recent phenomenon which seems to have gained greater momentum in the wake of the exhibitions and publications connected to the 1976 World of Islam Festival.[10] Held in London and various other cities in the United Kingdom, the World of Islam Festival hosted a number of events related to the arts of Islam, including an impressive exhibition of Qur'an manuscripts from the British Library and from other private and public collections around the world.[11] For the first time over 150 Qur'ans, dating

from the eighth to the nineteenth centuries, were brought together and displayed for several months to a predominantly western audience. A number of publications emerged out of the Festival, including two influential works on Qur'anic calligraphy and illumination by the late British Muslim scholar, Martin Lings.[12] Four years later, a facsimile exhibition of the Qur'ans from the Chester Beatty Library was organised by the World of Islam Festival Trust.[13]

While the study of Qur'anic calligraphy, illumination and manuscript production has greatly advanced in scholarly terms since the 1976 Festival, the latter undoubtedly made the art of the Qur'an accessible to a wider general audience in the west.

This accessibility has been reflected in major publications and exhibitions since the turn of the century. Sheila Blair's work *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh, 2006) provides an excellent summary of the content and form of the Qur'an and brings together significant scholarly discussions to date on the development of Qur'anic calligraphy from the earliest specimens on parchment to the lavishly illuminated manuscripts of the Safavid, Mughal and Ottoman eras.[14] Blair's study also discusses modern examples of Qur'anic calligraphy by artists such as Osman Waqialla (b. 1925) and Ahmad Moustafa (b. 1943), demonstrating that the art is still alive and well, not only in the Muslim world, but also in Europe and North America.[15] The art of modern Qur'anic calligraphy was also showcased at the British Museum in 2006 as part of the engaging exhibition 'Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East', curated by Venetia Porter. The exhibition included a section devoted to 'Sacred Script' that presented the works of modern Muslim artists – hailing from the Middle East to the Far East (i.e. China and Japan) – who were visually inspired by individual words, phrases and entire verses of Qur'anic text and artistically applied them onto pottery, paper and the painted canvas.[16]

Another noteworthy and innovative exhibition entitled 'Livres de Parole: Torah, Bible, Coran' was held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) in Paris (9 November 2005 – 30 April 2006). Literally translated as 'Books of Speech: the Torah, Bible and Qur'an', the BNF exhibited manuscripts and early printed editions and translations of the sacred texts of all three Abrahamic faiths together for the first time. Drawing primarily from the BNF's vast collection of manuscripts, the curators of the exhibition also enriched the displays with numerous artefacts from other European holdings, from writing implements to amulets, in order to contextualise the transmission, reception and interpretation of the holy scriptures within all three monotheistic religious traditions.[17] As part of the exhibition, visitors were able to listen to various examples of recorded recitations of the Torah, Bible and the Qur'an in order to gain a better sense of the liturgical and oral signifi-

cance of the revealed texts in the daily lives of practitioners of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In 2006 the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin, and the Sam Fogg gallery, London, hosted a one-day symposium entitled 'Ink and Gold: A Symposium on Islamic Calligraphy' in Berlin (July 2006) to inaugurate an exhibition entitled 'Ink and Gold: Masterpieces of Islamic Calligraphy' on show at the Museum.[18] Of the six papers presented at the symposium by leading scholars in the field, four were dedicated to Qur'anic calligraphy and a significant proportion of items on display at the exhibition comprised individual leaves and complete manuscripts of the Qur'an spanning from the 'Abbasid to the Mughal periods.[19] Despite these advances, there is still a need for further conferences and publications related to the arts of the Qur'an in both the east and the west. Professor François Déroche, Director of Advanced Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, has organised three international conferences on the Codicology and Palaeography of Middle Eastern Manuscripts.[20] Palaeography, the study of ancient scripts, and codicology, the study of the structure and production of a manuscript or codex, are significant to the study of the Qur'an and were discussed vis-à-vis the sacred text to some degree in the three conferences; however, in September 2002, Déroche organised an International Conference on Manuscripts of the Qur'an in Bologna which highlighted the diversity of the latest research being undertaken by scholars from across the globe. Although the gathering focussed primarily on manuscripts of the Qur'an, the conference at Bologna brought to light a wealth of ideas and perspectives that could be applied to the broader topic of the Qur'an and the arts, and as a result, many of the speakers who presented their research in Bologna also participated in our 'Word of God, Art of Man' colloquium in London.

As in any field, new primary material continues to emerge. While preparations for the World of Islam Festival were underway in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, a new and exciting discovery was coming to light in the Yemen. As a result of heavy rains in 1972, the western wall of the Great Mosque of San'a' collapsed and exposed a cache of early Qur'anic manuscripts and bindings which had been stored, centuries earlier, in a space between the ceiling and roof of the mosque.[21] Over 40,000 fragments from 1,000 early parchment and paper manuscripts of the Qur'an were identified, sorted, cleaned and restored through a joint effort of the German and Yemeni governments. Several articles and an exhibition catalogue have explored the implications of this wealth of material, dating mainly to the Umayyad period (AH 41–132/AD 661–750), for the study of the development of early Qur'anic epigraphy, illumination and bookbinding.[22]

## *Beyond the written page*

At present, scholarly material which focuses on the expressions of the Qur'an on media outside of the written page is somewhat uneven and scattered. Publications related to the Qur'anic inscriptions on monumental and funerary architecture, as well as wood fittings and furniture for mosques and shrines, are relatively numerous, while studies focusing on the use of the Qur'anic text on portable objects (e.g. metalwork, ivory, ceramics and glass) are meagre by comparison.[23] Sheila Blair's 1998 publication, *Islamic Inscriptions*, is an excellent study on the vast subject of Islamic inscriptions, and includes an extensive bibliography on the subject. Her study covers the various types of inscriptions, including Qur'anic ones, which feature on monumental architecture and portable objects of different media.[24]

Research on arts outside of the written page recently received support through the publication of the influential *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (*EQ*) in 2001–06. A major contribution to the field of Qur'anic Studies, the *EQ* contains well-researched scholarly articles on a wide range of topics, including entries on 'Archaeology', 'Art and Architecture', 'Manuscripts', 'Material Culture' and many other essays related to calligraphy, numismatics and epigraphy. The significance of including essays related to the fields of Islamic art and architecture in the *EQ* cannot be overemphasised. The field of Qur'anic Studies often presumes the preeminence of the textual interpretation of the Qur'an over the study of the ways in which the holy text has affected the material culture of Muslims throughout the ages. By including entries on material culture, the editors of the *EQ* have ensured that the physical manifestations of the Qur'anic codex, and its many expressions in Islamic material arts, are given due scholarly attention, and that such subjects in the fields of Islamic art and architectural history are finally accepted as key topics within the purview of Qur'anic Studies.[25] Topics on the physical and aesthetic aspects of the Qur'an have also been included in recent multi-authored volumes that are more accessible to the general reader, who may be encountering the Qur'an for the first time as a result of a 'curiosity evoked by the popular media' or who may already appreciate the text from a religious point of view, but have 'little or no understanding of the scholarship that surrounds the Qur'ān'.[26] *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Andrew Rippin, and *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, both published in 2006, are excellent starting points for the study of the Muslim scripture as a whole and cover a wide spectrum of subjects including the history of written transmissions of the Qur'an, its oral recitation and aesthetic reception and Qur'anic inscriptions in art and architecture.[27]

The earliest studies of inscriptions on Islamic monumental architecture are the large published tomes initiated by the epigrapher, Max van Berchem (d. 1921), *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum (MCIA)*, followed by the multi-volume *Répertoire Chronologique d'Épigraphie Arabe (RCEA)*. In both corpuses, one needs to comb through each volume in order to find precise instances of the Qur'anic text on architecture.[28] The arduous task of trawling through these and other publications was undertaken by Erica C. Dodd and Shereen Khairallah, who produced their two-volume work, *The Image of the Word, A Study of Quranic Verses in Islamic Architecture*, in 1981.[29] In their study, Dodd and Khairallah raised important issues regarding the frequent use of specific Qur'anic verses on architecture and the particular placement of the sacred text on buildings, and they provided three individual case studies from Jerusalem, Cairo and Damascus.

Based on the research of Dodd and Khairallah, Robert Hillenbrand took the discussion further by analysing the four thousand Qur'anic inscriptions provided in *The Image of the Word*, arriving at some stimulating conclusions and suggesting avenues for future studies.[30] Individual studies on the reading and interpretation of the Qur'an on specific monuments and funerary contexts are far too numerous to elucidate in detail here.[31] Many scholars have deciphered and interpreted the Qur'anic inscriptions on the more famous Islamic monuments such as the Dome of the Rock and the Taj Mahal, while research has also progressed in lesser-known contexts, including Muslim China.[32]

The *RCEA* also includes inscriptions on many portable objects, although this area remains the least studied with regards to the use of specific Qur'anic citations on objects. Many museum catalogues simply mention the presence of Qur'anic verses on objects, such as jewellery, 'magic bowls', arms and armour, or ceramic tiles, while others go as far as identifying the verses but do not enter into a discussion on their significance.[33] Qur'anic inscriptions on seals, talismans and amulets are better researched for their importance in the study of magic and divination in Islamic societies and the study of Arabic palaeography.[34] Two other areas of research that have involved the study of Qur'anic inscriptions in the material arts are Islamic textiles – particularly *ṭirāz* textiles woven with caliphal inscriptions in state-managed factories – and coinage, mainly in conjunction with other historical epigraphic information they furnish.[35]

Finally, as computer and information technology has advanced by leaps and bounds since the production of the *MCIA* and the *RCEA* corpuses, it is befitting that the Max van Berchem Foundation, Geneva, named after the late epigrapher and author of the *MCIA*, has sponsored a new ground-breaking Islamic inscriptions database project which, through the medium of CD-ROM, is continually updated and is fully

searchable by an inscription's date, location, material or individual keyword. Published as a series of CD-ROMs entitled the *Thesaurus d'Épigraphie Islamique*, the aim of the project is to 'bring together all of the inscriptions in Arabic, Persian and Turkish (as well as other languages) from the Muslim world up to the year 1000 of the Hegira'.[36] The inscriptions – numbering at 17,000 thus far, well over a third of which are Qur'anic – have been collected from architectural monuments, tombstones and *objets d'art*.[37] Under the direction of the great scholar and epigrapher, Ludvik Kalus, Professor at the University of Paris-Sorbonne and Director of Advanced Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, the *Thesaurus* has been published in six volumes to date, covering North Africa (vol. I), the Arabian Peninsula (vol. II), Central Asia (vol. III), Egypt (vols. IV–V) and the Subcontinent (vol. VI). Forthcoming volumes will include Sub-Saharan Africa (vol. VII) and Iraq (vol. VIII), with more to follow.

## *Ways forward*

While scholarship with respect to the Qur'an and the arts has grown in recent decades, there are some areas which remain somewhat fragmented or are still in their nascent stages. Manuscript and architectural studies continue to dominate research at present, both as a result of the strength of western collections of Qur'anic manuscripts and due to the passionate labours of several early giants in the field of Arabic epigraphy, whose works remain essential building blocks for contemporary scholarship. However, many Qur'anic manuscripts from China, Central Asia, East Africa and West Africa are in urgent need of scholarly attention. Some of this work has already begun. Hundreds of thousands of hidden and long-forgotten manuscripts, including Qur'ans, are currently being recovered and preserved in Mali through local efforts and with the assistance of various foundations, foreign governments and international agencies.[38] Similarly, rare Qur'anic manuscripts produced in northern China have come to light in recent years, together with other Sino-Islamic manuscripts and material artefacts which are invaluable sources for the study of Islam in China. Unfortunately, unlike the situation in Mali, there is still not sufficient state and external funding to properly catalogue and study these items, and this needs to be a priority.[39]

More scholarly attention must be paid to the use of Qur'anic text on objects, as they too may help to shed light on the reception and interpretation of the holy text by Muslims throughout history. Take as an example a pair of twelfth-century gold and enamelled earrings housed at the Kuwait National Museum with a provenance of Spain or Morocco (Fig. 1.1).[40] Using the cloisonné technique of enamel and gold wiring, the

Fig. 1.1
Pair of gold earrings with cloisonné enamel decoration, 12th c., Spain or Morocco. The earrings bear the first three verses of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q. 112:1-3) on each side, 4.8 × 3.1 cm.

medieval jeweller expertly inscribed the following verses from *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Sincerity) on each earring (Q. 112:1–3):

> Say: He, Allah, is One.
> Allah is He on whom all depend.
> He did not beget, nor was He begotten.
> [Missing fourth verse: And there is none comparable to Him]

These verses were often used as architectural epigraphy on mosques and in funerary contexts (e.g. gravestones and stellae) as they aptly stress the Oneness of Allah and contrast His essence from that of humanity bound by the cycle of birth and death.[41] But why would a woman wish to bear these verses on her body as jewellery?

Perhaps the answer lies within the context in which these earrings were produced – twelfth-century Maghreb or al-Andalus (encompassing parts of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula). This was the age of the Spanish *Reconquista* and the history of this period is predominantly written from the point of view of the two reigning dynasties of al-Andalus, first the Almoravids and then the Almohads, and their constant battles against the Christian armies. But could these earrings bear testimony to a more personal Muslim resistance against the invading Christian forces? The third verse of this particular sura has often been interpreted as a direct challenge to the Christian notion of Jesus as the Son of God, the Holy

Father. It is conceivable that the Qur'anic text was employed in this context as an identifiable marker of one's faith at a time of religiously driven strife. A Christian at this time would have worn a cross as a symbol of religious allegiance; so too, perhaps, a Muslim possibly might have worn inscribed verses of the Qur'an as jewellery. Investigations of this kind would provide some new information on how the Word of God was read and interpreted by a larger cross-section of Muslim society, beyond the spheres of religious scholars or the ruling elite.

## II. The international colloquium, 'Word of God, Art of Man'

The scholarly gathering at our colloquium focussed on both the written word and a wide range of material culture. It continued the discussions and debates related to the arts of the book and architecture within the ambit of the Qur'an and the arts, providing a wealth of new material for further investigations. It also presented research on the creative expressions of the Qur'an in other artistic media, to help build a more balanced picture of the extent to which the Qur'an has affected the works of Muslim craftspeople and weavers in addition to the calligraphers and architects. In this vein, the colloquium included a paper on the ways in which modern Muslim artists continue in the footsteps of medieval masters by incorporating the sacred words of the Qur'an in their work using new and innovative technologies.

Like most gatherings of this kind, not all aspects of the arts were represented nor all issues covered. However, the aim of the colloquium was to bring together scholars with different academic perspectives to begin a discussion on the role of the Qur'an in Islamic material culture, in order to generate further interest and study in this area. It is hoped that the essays in this volume will provide material for further investigations, in addition to being a lasting document of the event. In this half of the introduction, I will first summarise the volume, and then discuss a few emerging themes.

### *Volume summary, by section*

This volume is divided into four main sections, which correspond roughly to the way the papers were grouped at the colloquium: 'Qur'anic calligraphy and inscriptions in the medieval Muslim world', which includes Gülru Necipoğlu's plenary lecture; 'Amulets, talismans and magic'; 'The Qur'anic text in recent times'; and 'Qur'anic inscriptions on textiles'. The main sections are framed at the beginning by His Highness the Aga Khan's address and the opening reflections by Oleg Grabar, and they are

brought to a close with Sheila Blair's final reflections. What follows is a brief summary of the contents of the volume, section by section, followed by a discussion of several reoccurring themes.

The first section of the volume, 'Qur'anic calligraphy and inscriptions in the medieval Muslim world', incorporates essays by Doris Behrens-Abouseif, Duncan Haldane, Gülru Necipoğlu and Alnoor Jehangir Merchant. **Doris Behrens-Abouseif**'s essay (Chapter 3) points to crucial questions surrounding the use of inscriptions, noting how difficult it is to define strict categories of the 'religious' versus 'secular' arts in the Islamic context simply based on the presence or absence of Qur'anic inscriptions. After engaging with some thorny questions tackled by medieval Muslim theologians, such as the extent to which the sanctity of the Qur'anic text disallows its use for inscriptions on material objects which may be exposed to physical impurities, she concludes that apart from the mosque, Qur'anic inscriptions were not universally employed in all religious settings. On the other hand, they frequently appear on politically charged objects, such as coinage, to emphasise the secular and religious authority invested in the caliph in the early medieval period.

The chapter by **Alnoor Jehangir Merchant** (Chapter 6) presents a concrete example that underscores Behrens-Abouseif's latter point. Investigating coins minted during a specific period in Fatimid history, from AH 297–487/AD 909–1095, Merchant notes that the majority of coins are inscribed with Q. 9:33 (*Sūrat al-Tawba*). However, a horde of silver coins discovered in the 1980s displays a multitude of Qur'anic verses. As the coins are dated to the first Fatimid imam-caliph, Merchant suggests that this variation and experimentation reflects the political and religious complexities surrounding the establishment of the Fatimid state in North Africa during the early tenth century. The use of Qur'anic inscriptions as markers of political and religious authority in later periods of Islamic history is addressed in **Gülru Necipoğlu**'s plenary lecture (Chapter 5). She examines the work of a unique figure in the history of Islamic architecture, Sinan (d. AH 996/AD 1588), who was royal architect at the Ottoman Court for 50 years. Necipoğlu's essay explores the influence of Sinan's architectural legacy in Ottoman Turkey, and particularly his use of carefully selected, highly legible Qur'anic inscriptions in mosque constructions as a means to promote the religious and political supremacy of the Ottomans.

The colloquium was accompanied by the exhibition 'Illuminating Beauty, Illustrating Harmony' at the Ismaili Centre in London. Chapter 4 in this section was written by the late scholar **Duncan Haldane**, former Head Librarian of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, and describes thirteen superb items under the care of the Institute that were part of the original exhibition. The selected items range from the ninth to the nineteenth

centuries, cover a geographical expanse from North Africa in the west to Central Asia in the east, and include Qur'anic manuscripts, scrolls, single- and double-page illuminated folia of the Qur'an, and an illuminated two-volume Persian *tafsīr* (commentary) of the Qur'an by al-Kashifi (d. AH 909/AD 1504), thus demonstrating the breadth of the collection and the richness of Islamic artistry in manuscript production.

The second section in the volume, 'Amulets, talismans and magic', features papers by Venetia Porter, Anne Regourd and Marie Efthymiou. **Venetia Porter** (Chapter 7) examines a group of objects inscribed with the names of the legendary 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus', identified as the un-named *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (Companions of the Cave) from *Sūrat al-Kahf* (Q. 18:9–26) – a story that caught the imagination of both Christians and Muslims. In her chapter she demonstrates how the names of the *Aṣḥāb* and their dog, Qitmir, became associated with protective properties, and so often feature on Islamic amulets and architecture.

Taking an ethnological approach, **Anne Regourd** (Chapter 8) discusses the function of engraved 'magical mirrors' in present-day Yemen in order to provide a comparative case study for the use of engraved mirrors dating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from Iran and Anatolia. The engravings on the latter examples, which include verses from the Qur'an, magical squares and symbols, were added two centuries after the mirrors were made and, according to Regourd's findings, possibly functioned in the context of Islamic magico-therapeutic or medicinal practices, although the objects themselves may be traced stylistically to Chinese or Korean models. **Marie Efthymiou** (Chapter 9) discusses a different kind of 're-engraving' – that is, the later additions of Persian glosses or marginal commentaries on a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Qur'an from Central Asia. The carefully added marginal notes were inscribed between the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries and were meant to act as guidelines for the reader in the use of specific *āyāt* or entire suras for propitiatory or apotropaic purposes.

The fourth section, 'The Qur'anic text in recent times', brings together papers related to West Africa, Southeast Asia and the United States. In Chapter 10, **Ismaheel Akinade Jimoh** explores the little-known yet lively tradition of Qur'anic manuscript production and illumination among Yoruba scholars of Southwestern Nigeria, concentrating on the period after independence in 1960. He traces how patterns used in crafts such as calabash (gourd) carving, embroidery and mat weaving, also appear in Qur'anic illumination; in so doing, his paper demonstrates that when particular motifs and symbols of the material arts are transferred onto the surface of the Qur'anic page, they are given further significance as recitation and verse markers on the holy text.

As with the case of Qur'anic manuscript production in West Africa, the

art of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia has been understudied and largely neglected by both eastern and western scholarship.[42] **Annabel Teh Gallop** (Chapter 11) introduces the vibrant and dynamic tradition of Qur'anic illumination from Southeast Asia, dated mainly to the nineteenth century, and suggests a useful typology of the broad distinctions among regional styles of illumination from the Malay world. Her work is complemented by that of **Huism Tan** (Chapter 12), who explores the use of the Qur'anic text in nineteenth-century sultanate palaces in the Northeastern Malay state of Terengganu. Tan investigates the intricately carved wooden panels found in domestic and palace architecture, considering the Qur'anic and other religious inscriptions they bear in light of their contemporary political and religious contexts, and with regard to the particular artists and craftspeople who produced them. Moving to the twenty-first century, **Ayse Turgut** (Chapter 13) finishes this section by focusing on four contemporary Muslim-American artists whose creativity is inspired by embracing the Holy Book and the art of Arabic calligraphy on the one hand, and by combining them with modern western art practices on the other. The artists live and work in the United States, but some of them maintain a strong connection to their countries of birth, including Syria, Morocco and India.

The fourth section comprises two chapters dedicated to 'Qur'anic inscriptions on textiles', both of which demonstrate the careful selection of specific verses from the Qur'an for two important but very different types of textiles from the Muslim world: the *kiswa* and military banners. **Hülya Tezcan**'s investigation (Chapter 14) begins by outlining the history of the *kiswa*, the deluxe textile covering of the holy Kaʿba in Mecca, which according to tradition was produced from the time of the Biblical Patriarch Abraham. In her study Tezcan focuses on those Kaʿba covers produced for the Ottomans in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries and currently housed in the Topkapı Palace Museum. She identifies six typological groupings based on the designs and Qur'anic inscriptions on three types of material: the black and dark blue coverings which were made for the exterior of the Kaʿba; the red coverings produced for its interior; and the green coverings that were fashioned for the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad at Medina.

**Miriam Ali-de-Unzaga**'s essay (Chapter 15) re-opens the discussion on the exquisite Andalusí military banner widely associated with the famous battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (AH 608/AD 1212), where the Muslim Almohads (AH 524–667/AD 1130–1269) were disastrously defeated at the hands of the Castilian Christian armies during the *Reconquista*. Now housed at the Monastery of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas in the city of Burgos, Spain, the banner has acquired semi-legendary status as an emblem of Christian victory over the Muslims.

Through her analysis of the banner's Qur'anic inscriptions, and a comparison with the inscriptions and weaving techniques used on other lesser-known Andalusí banners, Ali-de-Unzaga puts forward a radical readjustment of the date and provenance of the Las Huelgas banner, placing it perhaps a century later and in the artistic purview of the Marinid dynasty (AH 592–869/AD 1196–1465).

The volume is neatly framed by the opening and closing reflections of two highly-regarded leading experts in the field. The colloquium opened with a paper presented by **Oleg Grabar** (Chapter 2), who raised fundamental questions regarding the nature of the relationship between the Qur'an and the arts, asking 'As one surveys the works of Islamic art, when and where, and in what shape, does the Qur'an appear?' **Sheila Blair** (Chapter 16) provided the summary remarks at the colloquium, and brought the discussion initiated by Professor Oleg Grabar full circle by summarising how Muslims have evoked the Qur'an in the arts through three interrelated modes: the written, the oral and the visual. I will return to Blair's and Grabar's remarks in more detail in the following section on emerging themes.

## *Emerging themes*

Four key themes are highlighted by the volume as a whole and, each to a greater or lesser extent, by the individual papers. These themes include the notion of intertextuality and the Qur'an; the development of the Arabic script and its impact on the arts of the Qur'an; the power of the sacred text to sanctify, beautify, politicise, or bestow talismanic properties on spaces and objects; and the encounter between the Qur'an and indigenous artistic traditions. While some of the subsections have more obvious links to one theme than to others – for example, the encounter between the Qur'an and indigenous traditions is a shared concern of the chapters in the section 'The Qur'anic text in recent times' – individual papers vary in focus and emphasis, thus creating cross-cutting ties across this volume.

### Intertextuality

The opening address by His Highness the Aga Khan, Chairman of the Institute's Board of Governors, sets the tone for the volume by describing the colloquium as

> [An] opportunity for achieving insights into how the discourse of the *Qur'ān-e Sharīf*, rich in parable and allegory, metaphor and symbol, has been an inexhaustible well-spring of inspiration, lending itself to a wide spectrum of interpretations. ... Whatever its vernacular forms, the language of art, more so when it is spiritually inspired, can be a positive

barrier-transcending medium of discourse, manifesting the depths of the human spirit.

Many of the papers in this volume, including the Aga Khan's address, implicitly evoke the notion of 'intertextuality', or the Qur'anic text's ability to produce a number of literary and other associations and meanings within and outside of its own content. In other words, the viewer of an artefact or a building with a Qur'anic inscription is potentially responding to it through multiple points of entry. For example, the names of the legendary 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus' are inscribed on many Islamic artefacts – from headgear to small carnelian amulets. This pre-Islamic legend is also narrated in the Qur'an and, as Venetia Porter (Chapter 7) demonstrates, is therefore given religious credence so that the recitation of the verses of the *Aṣḥāb al-Kahf* (Companions of the Cave) from the Qur'an (Q. 18:9–26) and the possession of the inscribed artefact are both valid expressions of Muslim reverence for the sacred word.

One may argue that the Ottoman sultans were 'intertextually savvy' when it came to selecting specific verses of the Qur'an for their personal building projects. As Gülru Necipoğlu (Chapter 5) explains in one case, Sultan Selim II commissioned his chief architect, Sinan, to inscribe specific verses from the Qur'an which included the word '*salīm*' – a pun on the patron's own name – in the more private spaces of his mosques, where only he (and those closest to him) would pray. In Marie Efthymiou's essay (Chapter 9) on the Persian glosses of a Central Asian Qur'an, intertextuality takes the form of the addition of a text within the sacred text, a veritable demonstration of 'reading between the lines', providing instruction on the potency of specific verses of the Qur'an. These glossed Qur'anic passages were meant to be repeated as formulae at a given time or place, and although they were detached from the whole, they maintained the full power of God's word for the reciter.

## Arabic script

Another key theme that emerges from the papers in this volume is the evolution of the Arabic script, and the high level of experimentation exercised by artists over the centuries in manipulating the visibility and legibility of the sacred text in various contexts. One issue that arises in the study of the application of the sacred word on architectural surfaces is the extent of the legibility of the text in public spaces. As Necipoğlu (Chapter 5) argues, during the Ottoman period, the increased size and legibility of the Qur'anic inscriptions executed in monumental *thuluth* on the imperial mosque projects under Sinan signalled the transition from a Timurid paradigm of mosque architecture to a distinctive Ottoman style. Concerns surrounding the legibility of the Qur'anic text also featured in

the context of military banners, as Miriam Ali-de-Unzaga (Chapter 15) illustrates, so much so that a more expensive and labour-intensive system of weaving was adopted in the production of some banners so that the inscriptions could be read on both sides of the textile. Hence, the woven Qur'anic verses featuring God's assistance in securing a military victory were visually broadcasted to the ranks of battling troops, as were the verses describing the rewards of paradise in the hereafter.

Artistic experimentation and the evolution of the Arabic script are further explored by Duncan Haldane (Chapter 4) in his examination of some of the finest specimens of Qur'anic calligraphy under the care of the Institute of Ismaili Studies. From a page of the famous yet mystifying ninth- or tenth-century 'Blue Qur'an' to an exquisite complete Safavid Qur'an copied by a royal scribe in the mid-sixteenth century, Haldane's chapter visually charts the progression of the main calligraphic styles which were ultimately based on the 'Six Pens', or cursive scripts established by the great master Ibn Muqla (d. AH 328/AD 940) and later refined by his followers. In her investigation of the use of sacred calligraphy by contemporary Muslim artists in America, Ayse Turgut (Chapter 13) focuses on the works of four artists who pay homage to their artistic heritage yet challenge the established rules of Arabic calligraphy by using unconventional tools, such as the human hand or oil paints on a canvas.

## Power of the Word

The broadest theme of the volume concerns the ability of the Qur'anic text to sanctify, politicise, beautify or bestow talismanic properties on objects and buildings, and several essays in this volume attest to the multiple interpretations and uses of the Qur'an in informing particular Muslim worldviews, practices and beliefs. Hülya Tezcan's (Chapter 14) study of the Qur'anic verses on the textile coverings (*kiswa*) of the sacred Ka'ba is a compelling example of how the holy text not only sanctified the cloth-covering, but the specific mention of *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* (i.e. the Ka'ba), inscribed on the *kiswa* itself, raised its status as a protective and holy armour that enveloped the holy Meccan sanctuary. The sanctification of the cloth was maintained even after its removal from the Ka'ba, so that the *kiswa* was cut up and its pieces were distributed as blessed relics.

The interpretation of the sacred text as a politicising force is exemplified through its emergence on Muslim coinage. The shift in the iconography of Islamic coinage from a figural to a purely epigraphic design, during the reign of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (d. AH 86/AD 705), signified a pivotal moment in Islamic history and paved the way for subsequent rulers to select various Qur'anic verses for their currencies. The chapters by Doris Behrens-Abouseif (Chapter 3) and Alnoor Jehangir

Merchant (Chapter 6) discuss the ways in which Qur'anic verses on Muslim coinage were seen to reflect the political and religious ideology of particular Muslim monarchs. However, Behrens-Abouseif adds that the Qur'anic inscriptions on the Nilometer, a state-sponsored monument which measured the flooding of the Nile, may be understood as both political statements of caliphal authority and also as talismanic incantations to invoke a good flood and prosperous crops.

Various talismanic uses of the Qur'an are discussed in greater detail in the chapters by Porter and Efthymiou (Chapters 7 and 9). Furthermore, Anne Regourd's (Chapter 8) ethnographic investigation of the use of 'magic mirrors' with Qur'anic verses, which were employed in both contemporary and medieval Islamic societies, attests to the longevity of magical practices that were used as alternate therapies for physical ailments, and which blurred the boundaries between science, magic and religion. In addition, another relatively modern example of the talismanic use of the Qur'an is the subject of Huism Tan's study (Chapter 12) of the intricately carved wooden calligraphic panels fitted in nineteenth-century Malay homes and palaces. Carefully designed by master calligraphers, Tan's discussion reveals that such panels included Qur'anic verses, together with the names of the 'Seven Sleepers' and religious poems, all of which were believed to offer protection for the inhabitants within.

## Indigenous expressions

The interaction between the Qur'an and local cultures and traditions outside the Arabian-Hijazi context produced a myriad of vernacular artistic expressions, each with its own history and significance. Ismaheel Akinade Jimoh's (Chapter 10) study demonstrates the seamless transfer of indigenous Yoruba motifs onto the Qur'anic page as ornamental verse and recitation markers. For example, the embroidered *Arèwá* symbol, which signifies unity among the northern Nigerian emirates, is transformed into an illuminated *ḥizb* marker.[43] The creativity of Qur'anic calligraphers and illuminators in Southeast Asia has also resulted in regional stylistic variations that are so distinct, as Annabel Teh Gallop (Chapter 11) shows, that they allow us to determine the regional provenance of a given manuscript and yet, they maintain a characteristic Southeast Asian aesthetic.

In addition to the arts of the book, other examples of the creative expressions of the Qur'an have distinctive vernacular manifestations. Timber is the main construction material used in indigenous Southeast Asian societies and it becomes the naturally chosen medium for the elaborately carved Qur'anic verses which, as Tan (Chapter 12) investigates, are used to both embellish and protect Malay domestic spaces. Her chapter also demonstrates how the use of the holy scripture in domestic

spaces may be read in light of traditional Malay understandings of the sacredness of natural materials, such as wood, and the centrality of the home as a space infused with spiritual and protective powers. Finally, Turgut's study (Chapter 13) elucidates how the traditional arts of Arabic calligraphy and illumination are adapted in a modern American context through contemporary artists' experimental use of video imaging, computer graphics and the painted canvas.

## Opening and closing remarks

When Oleg Grabar asks, in his opening address, 'As one surveys the works of Islamic art, when and where, and in what shape, does the Qur'an appear?', he provides an answer by identifying three main areas of enquiry: the traditions of Qur'anic manuscript illumination and calligraphy; the uses of the Qur'anic text on buildings and objects; and indirect or remote uses of the Qur'an. In all three cases, Grabar provocatively concludes that a discourse on art and aesthetics rarely occurs, if at all, within the Qur'an itself, and it was predominantly external influences that were at play in the decoration of the Holy Scripture itself or through its usage in an artistic context. Some of the material presented in this volume tends to support this general conclusion, as several chapters demonstrate how local traditions, beliefs and artistic practices have influenced the reception, interpretation and presentation of the Qur'anic text, whether in carved panels or as copies of the Qur'an. Similarly, the political uses to which Qur'anic inscriptions have been put, whether on coins or monumental architecture, suggest the influence of external forces rather than an intrinsic imperative from the Qur'an itself.

In her closing remarks, Sheila Blair concentrates on the modes through which Muslims have evoked the Qur'an in the arts in their daily lives, rather than the motivation for such activity. She identifies three interrelated modes – the written, the oral and the visual – which underscore the themes of the development of the Arabic script and the visual potency of the Word of God. In examining the written mode, Blair discusses the intense level of care and expense devoted to the production of many medieval Qur'anic manuscripts, which often rivalled the quality of the finest illustrated literary manuscripts such as the *Shāhnāma*, as amply born out by the manuscripts discussed by Duncan Haldane (Chapter 4). For her second category of human interaction with the Qur'an – the oral – she examines direct evidence from the material arts that underline the importance of the act of reciting the Qur'an throughout Islamic history. For example, it is well-attested that Qur'anic calligraphers purposely manipulated the length and spacing of letters, and the number and colour of dots added to the text, in order to facilitate reading the sacred word out loud. Furthermore, Blair contends that the reason why verse 78 from

*Sūrat al-Isrā'* (Q. 17:78) was often inscribed on *miḥrāb*s (prayer niches) was because it is perhaps the only Qur'anic verse that emphasises the practice of reciting the Qur'an aloud in the context of ritual prayer..

In her last theme of Muslim interface with the Qur'anic text, Blair examines the creativity exhibited by artists across the globe and throughout the ages in order to achieve the greatest visual impact in presenting the Word of God to their audiences. From medieval enamelled glass lamps and ceramics to the elaborate ceiling of a mosque in a modern-day airport, Blair provides ample evidence for the artistic expressions and interpretations of the Qur'an in various media, over a vast period of Islamic history, which testifies to the significance of the written, spoken and envisioned facets of the holy text.

## *Conclusions and acknowledgements*

It is clear from the individual papers and the broader themes discussed in this volume that Muslim reverence for the Qur'an as the Word of God was manifested in various artistic forms just a few decades after its advent. As Sheila Blair explains in her essay, one can engage with the Qur'an on many sensory levels using several human faculties: the ears listen to its recitation in the mosque and other settings, the fingers touch it through the turning of its pages, the tongue recites it out loud, and the eyes appreciate it visually through its artistic expressions. From decorating manuscripts of the Qur'an to applying its sacred verses on buildings and objects, Muslims of every nation and epoch have been inspired to engage with the divine message using their visual creativeness as another means of expressing their piety and faith. The words of the Qur'an were inscribed on material artefacts and monuments in order to publicise and disseminate the faith of Islam; to harness the power of God's word; to sanctify a building or object; and to display the sheer beauty of its language and calligraphy – the latter of which was appreciated by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

As Grabar concludes in his opening address, further research needs to be carried out on the ways in which the sacred word implicitly and explicitly defines and justifies attitudes towards visual creativity within Islamic culture. He also emphasises that a comparative approach to studying the arts of the Qur'an together with the holy books of other world religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity, would yield 'universal modes of behaviour in the development of the arts'. As this volume goes to press, an exciting exhibition is unfolding at the British Library, London, focusing on the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths. Such endeavours are sure to lead to a more developed understanding of the specific cultural contexts in which religiously inspired works of arts were and are

created, and the place of the Qur'an in world society.[44] I hope this volume also serves as a step towards that understanding.

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