

INTERNATIONAL
STUDIO

CALLIGRAPHY of the MOSLEMS

OUR TEACHERS of penmanship, unhonored and unstrung by an age of writing machines—may theirs be the paradise of the Prophet! Only there will they find the reward they deserve. Only there will they be among kindred spirits, among spirits who appreciate the beauties of the written letter, who esteem them beyond the paintings of Raphael and the statues of Phidias.

But, before our harassed professors of the second "R" accept the creed of Mohammed, one word of warning: In his paradise they must prepare to lose their standing as instructors and to sit humbly at the feet of great masters unknown to them. Arabs, Persians and Turks who have carried the art of calligraphy to heights no westerner ever dreamed it could attain. For penmanship in the Moslem world is not looked down upon as a necessary—or worse still, an unnecessary—evil. It is looked up to as a fine art, as the finest of arts. It has claimed for more than a thousand years the flower of the decorative genius of the widespread peoples of Islam.

Why? Certainly not because these peoples have any more natural inclination toward calligraphy than we have. If the Arabs themselves did any writing before the time of Mohammed, it has not come down to us. True enough, they had already developed an alphabet of their own from the letters of ancient Syria, but the earliest known inscription written in it was made only two years before the birth of the prophet. In Mohammed's own tribe of the Koreish it is said that only seventeen persons knew how to write at all—and the

The medieval Mohammedan scribes made an art of penmanship comparable to that of painting in the West

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prophet is not numbered among them.

Yet it was the religion he preached that caused the extraordinary development of calligraphy in Arabia and throughout Islam. Forbidden

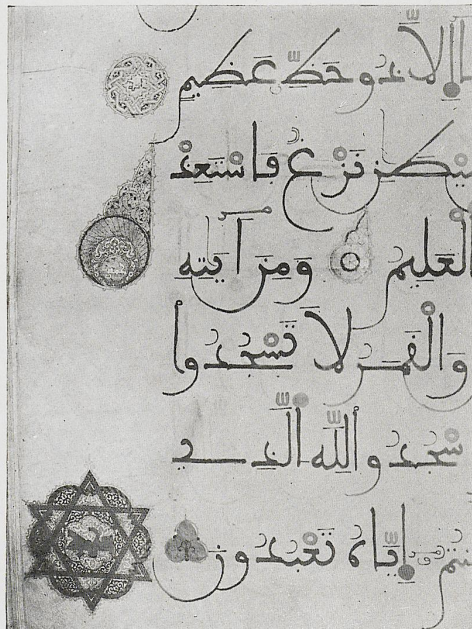
to make images of any living being by their iconoclastic prophet who was bent on destroying the worship of idols, the True Believers could not cultivate the arts of painting and sculpture which other religions have so greatly stimulated. But art, like love, laughs at locksmiths. The Moslem had to have some means of expressing the Beautiful; he found it in the written word.

Only by the word could the abstract idea of the invisible God of Mohammed be expressed. And the words which Mohammed used were of such surpassing poetic beauty that the Moslems have always considered the Koran as the masterpiece of the Arabic language, a work whose literary perfection was in itself a miracle sufficient to prove that it was inspired by God.

Only by the writing of the word could Mohammed's revelation of God be preserved and transmitted intact to all the Faithful. And as the divine word fell from the lips of the prophet, the few among his disciples

who could write took it down on skins, palm leaves, shoulder bones of animals—whatever was near at hand. After his death this precious legacy of verses was collected and copied with loving care—for what pains could the True Believer spare on any letter of the word of God? Thus the Koran became a book, The Book of Islam, the source at once of its religion, its law, its civilization and its art.

With a fervor equaling that of the monks of



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