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## Significance of Islamic Calligraphy with Traditional Architectural Elements of the Mosques of Punjab, Pakistan: Impact of Spiritual Reality of the Verses on Ambiance

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### Abstract

Mosque architectural surfaces played vital role in the representation of Arabic calligraphy in rectilinear and cursive form. Different techniques such as tile mosaic, mirror mosaic, relief work, sculpture in relief, enamel paint, wood carving metal engraving and metal carving are preferred for its representation. In Punjab, several historical and contemporary mosques' surfaces are adorned with calligraphy and the use of different decorative techniques enhances its value. In present research significance of Islamic calligraphy and its spiritual link to the area where it is written and its impact on the ambiance and surroundings is analyzed. Knowledge of calligraphic style, representation of design elevation, and harmonious or contrasting composition of the surface embellishment will also be under discussion. The present research aims to document traditional calligraphic styles, materials and decorative techniques used for mosques surfaces of Punjab, Pakistan. Creation of calligraphic artwork with innovative modern technique, material and art trends are vital parts of the research.

**Keywords:** Rectilinear Calligraphy, Calligraphic Styles, Techniques, Surface Decoration, Spiritual Reality

## Introduction

The art of calligraphy involves the creation and maintenance of a harmonious, rhythmic flow of words that are governed by aesthetic criteria. The proportions and letter forms in this word art are solely determined by mathematical geometry.<sup>1</sup> The impression of form has enhanced by the seamless joining of its characters with forming words.<sup>2</sup>

Punjab as a center of art and culture is known for its many historical and contemporary buildings. The most prevalent and significant decorative element seen in Punjab's mosques, both old and new, is Islamic calligraphy used as architectural ornamentation. The presence of Quranic verses and *aḥādīth* in Arabic calligraphy is considered an integral part of Muslim religious monuments. There are several mosques of Punjab which have representation of classical calligraphic styles. The verses enhance the ambiance and play vital role to create divine atmosphere and make spiritual link between Allah and His creation. That's why any mosque construction is not accepted complete without the presence of Islamic calligraphy. Historically calligraphic styles are introduced with the diversity of rectilinear and cursive appearance. Islamic calligraphy is written in different styles by using straight and cursive lines. In the mosques of Punjab, a variety of traditional and pseudo calligraphy are used. Knotted *Kūfic*, floriated *Kūfic* combination of eastern *Kūfic*, western *Kūfic*, standard *Kūfic*, square *Kūfic*, rectangular *Kūfic* stylized *Kūfic*, *Thuluth*, *Naskh*, *Nastaliq*, and *Rayhāni* all these calligraphic styles are under discussion.

An effort has been made to study the classical traditional styles of Islamic calligraphy with different techniques of the surface embellishment of the mosques of Punjab, Pakistan which help to create relation with material and maintain cultural legacy. The objectives of the research are about the variety of architectural traditional decorative techniques and materials of the mosques of Punjab. Research questions will be covered that what is the impact of classical calligraphic style and traditional techniques on the architectural surface of the mosques of Punjab? Which kind of traditional calligraphy is selected to adorn architectural surface of the mosques? Qualitative research method will be adopted in Chicago manual style of citations. It is an exploratory research study of the Arabic calligraphic styles and traditional techniques used for the completion of the mosques of Punjab, Pakistan. The styles and their significance related to spiritual values and meanings will be documented. The aim of the research is to explore and highlight traditional and contemporary techniques, and to keep in touch with the spiritual reality of verses.

## History

Arabs have a long history of using Islamic calligraphy. Safadi's study provides history and a description of different styles. Aramaic writing is the source of the script used by the Nabataeans (semi-nomadic Arabs), which is closely connected to the Arabic used in the Qur'ān.<sup>3</sup> Sheila Blair points out that while the Arabic language existed before the advent of Islam, Arabic calligraphy as an art form only emerged in the seventh century.<sup>4</sup> *Kūfīc* calligraphy is one of the various styles used in Arabic calligraphy. *Mashq* is an Arab pre-Islamic writing system from which *Kūfīc* script is developed. The *Mashq* inscription's word structure and proportions were comparable to *Kūfīc* character throughout the Islamic era. *Kūfīc* possesses a static characteristic that adheres to the Safadi's study provides history and a description of different styles.

According to Yasin Hamid Safadi, there were three primary calligraphic styles that emerged from Jazm scripts and they are the evolution of Nabataean derived forms in the early Islamic era: the rounded *Mudawwar*, the triangular *Muthallath*, and the twin *Tim*, which was made up of both rounded and triangular elements. Only two forms persisted; *Mudawwar* was a cursive, easily readable style. The other was known as *Mabsut*; it had angular writing with rectilinear symbols formed by thick, straight strokes. The Mecca-Madina writing style evolved from these two types. They gave rise to new trends. The *Mudawwar* and *Mabsut* writing styles gave rise to the *Mali* (slanting), *Naskh* (inscriptional) and *Mashq* (extended) styles. In Hijaz, all three types were practiced simultaneously: Kūfa was developing the *Kūfīc* style.<sup>5</sup> Arabic lettering in Hijaz was first divided into two major categories: *Mabsat-wa-Mustaqim* (elongated and straight-lined) and *Mudawwar-wa-Mudawwar* (curved and circular). Cursive was associated with the first category, while *Mashq*, *Mali*, and *Kūfīc* styles were derived from the first.<sup>6</sup> These stylistic distinctions have persisted across the ages to the present.

Arabic calligraphy is called the sacred art of Muslims, characterized by different styles. Hadrat Gabrail was the first one who transmitted the Qur'ān in this language. Usually, for mosque ornamentation, Arabic is preferred because it is a divine language. Muslim religious buildings are often decorated with the names of Allah and His ninety-nine attributes, the name of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), the four orthodox caliphs, Qur'ānic verses, and *aḥādīth*. Embellishment of the mosques' surfaces with calligraphy is the most important and common practice. Traditional and contemporary mosques of Punjab are enhanced with it. The calligraphic features are giving grace to the interior and exterior of the mosques' structures. The forms of calligraphic consonants are characterized by high and low verticals and extended horizontals.

The oldest examples of *Kūfic* inscription as architectural ornamentation in South Asia are found on carved stones at the Mosque of Bhambhor, which were created during the time period of Muhammad ibn Qasim (695-715).<sup>7</sup> According to Ahmad Nabi, two of the fifteen *Kūfic*-character inscriptions that have been unearthed from Daybul's remains (Bhambhor) in Pakistan have been dated. the earliest example of the floriated *Kūfic* was found in the mosque of Daybul built in 727 A.D.<sup>8</sup> Qur'ānic phrases were carved on stone in *Kūfic* calligraphy to adorn the Quwat-ul-Islam Mosque built in 1291.<sup>9</sup> The Qutb Minar features exquisite calligraphic carvings with intricate patterns of *Kūfic* and *Naskhi* inscriptions. Later on, surface ornamentation with Islamic calligraphy was continued and adopted by the calligraphers of Sultanate and Mughals' period. The mosques of Mughal period were embellished with *Naskh*, *Thuluth* and *Tughra* Calligraphic styles to enhance the surfaces with amalgamation of different floral motives and geometric patterns with the help of decorative techniques. Wazir Khan Masjid Lahore built in 1634 A.D, Badshahi Mosque Lahore built in 1671-73 A.D. are evident of such kind of calligraphic styles (figure 1).

Islamic calligraphy as mean of expression adopted by Muslims to write *aḥādīth* and Qur'ānic verses on surfaces, lead to spiritual reality of religion by creating mysticism to the ambiance. In mosque architecture walls are engaged and Qur'ān in book form is placed in the sanctuary of the mosques for recitation and enhance the spirituality in surroundings. Traditional architectural elements of the mosques of Punjab, Pakistan have variety of calligraphic styles in which *Kūfic*, *Thuluth*, *Naskh*, and *Nastalik* are on the top of the list.



Figure 1. Calligraphic Panels exterior of the Wazir Khan Mosque Lahore Built in 1637 A.D. Picture by Author.

After the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, several mosques were constructed, following traditional trends of calligraphic styles and mostly *Naskh* and *Thuluth* calligraphic styles were preferred. *Kūfic*, *Naskhi*, *Thuluth*, and *Rayhāni* types are used in Punjabi mosques, along with a number of additional ornamental methods such as marble carving, metal engraving, tile mosaic work, and inlay work. The decorating of Punjabi mosques using *Kūfic* calligraphy is currently being studied. Various styles are what define it. Every chosen area's style has significance of its own.

The sanctuary's ceiling of the *Masjid-e-Shuhda*, built in 1970, is embellished with ninety-nine attributes of Allah in *Naskh* calligraphic style. Its *mihrāb* niche has royal look due to implementation of *Thuluth* calligraphy on its spandrels and surrounding bands in white marble with carved embossed *Thuluth* calligraphy painted in golden enamel colour (figure 2). Pakistani mosques from the late 20th century are embellished with traditional calligraphy and inscriptions. Various calligraphic styles, including *Kūfic* calligraphy, *Thuluth*, *Naskh*, *Nastaliq*, *Muhaqqaq*, and *Rayhāni*, are used in Punjabi mosques to create visually rich environments with a range of traditional architectural ornamentation techniques.



Figure 2. Masjid-e-Shuhda built in 1970. Picture by Author.

The Faisal Mosque, which was constructed in 1987, features a range of calligraphy, both classical and faux. The mosque's sanctuary contains thirty Para of the *Qur'ān* in *Thuluth*, pseudo-knotted *Kūfic* in the ablution area, is giving divine impact by repeating the name of Allah written with light and dark tile mosaic work. Floriated *Kūfic* on the planter near the women's gallery entrance doors, is rightly place in accurate place that the hadith is belong to mothers importance. The calligraphy on the west wall is rectangular *Kūfic* with repetition of

*kalima tauheed*. Stylised *Kūfic* on the *kursī* is in golden rectilinear forms on white marble. *The mosque's sanctuary contains thirty Paragraphs of the Qur'ān in Thuluth*. Accumulatively all are giving grace to the interior of the prayer hall. *Kūfic* is a key element of the calligraphic decoration that uses various materials to embellish the Faisal Mosque's surface. Words with *Kūfic* consonants have a lower height than their breadth because to their low verticals, long horizontal profiles, and lack of strokes beneath the main writing line. In the history of Islamic inscription, it is regarded as the earliest calligraphic style.

The surface of the Faisal Mosque is decorated with various materials, with *Kūfic* serving as a main component of the calligraphic decoration. The height of words became shorter than the breadth because *Kūfic* consonants had low verticals and extended horizontal profiles, and they don't have any strokes below the primary writing line. In Islamic inscriptional history, it is regarded as the earliest calligraphic style.<sup>10</sup> Using *Kūfic* and cursive writing styles, the Faisal Mosque's calligraphic appearance aims to create a spiritual space for devotion. The *Kūfic* calligraphy complements the mosque's architectural decoration's general linear composition. In this mosque, calligraphy is used to communicate the significance of the Qur'ānic text in straightforward traditional and pseudo-calligraphic techniques rather than as floral decorations with floral designs.



Figure 3. Free standing book form *mihrāb* in the sanctuary of the Mosque Islamabad. built in 1987. Picture by Author

Calligraphy of Qur'ānic *Suras* in the sanctuary of Faisal Mosque is intelligently selected. For example *Sura Rehman* on the free standing mihrab in the form of book is written. It conveys concept of creation of word and blessings of Allah which has been showered on the humans of the earth and give them comfort. Similarly ninety nine attribute of Allah are written in the



sanctuary of mostly mosques of Pakistan show Allah's presence every where. Vegetation with *kalima-e tauheed* on the west wall. *Sura Rehman* on free standing mihrab in marble 3D book form is center of interest of the mosque, mention the blessings of God especially illustrated on the west wall of the sanctuary with ceramic tiles. *Sura fateha* in *Rayhāni* Calligraphy fixed on the top of *mimber* the calligraphy is prepared in metallic frame with semi-precious stone Lapis Lazuli.

The *Jami'* Mosque of Defence Housing Authority in Lahore was constructed in 1988 and features a unique, large, fashionable entrance. The external walls of the mosque include rectangular *Kūfic* calligraphy in relief. On a white background, the rectangle calligraphy is in relief and has a light green hue. *Kūfic* is also built on the exterior boundary walls and minaret in built form having two levels (figure 4).



Figure 4. The *Jami'* Mosque of the Defence Housing Authority in Lahore, built in 1988, Picture by Author.

Mosque of 'Ali Hajwiyri Data Darbar, Lahore, built in 1989, has *Kūfic* and *Tughra* in the sanctuary (figure 5). There are two horizontal sections to the western wall on either side of the *mihrāb*. The western wall's upper section features two large arches in the shape of a Tudor arch or pseudo-four-centered arch, embellished with white and cerulean blue tessellated glazed tiles. Seven concentric rows are used in the design of each arch to produce a perspective recession movement. Around the arches, the renowned modern calligrapher Rashid Butt has inscribed *Sūra al-Ikhlās* seven times in white *Kūfic*. It is the western *Kūfic* script that was in use in the early eleventh century at Qairuwan, Tunisia.

The serene ambiance of a mosque sanctuary, provides imagery of the verses of Surah Al-Ikhlās. The 112<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'ān, emphasizing as a visual reminder of the central tenet of Islam: oneness of Allah. Its significance lies in its concise yet powerful declaration of

Allah's unity and transcendence. The mosque sanctuary, with *Surah Al-Ikhlās* inscribed on its walls in tile mosaic work, creates a contemplative atmosphere, inviting worshipers to reflect on the profound meaning of these verses. The blue and white hues evoke a sense of calmness and serenity. The link between *Surah Al-Ikhlās* and the creation of a divine reality in the sanctuary lies in the profound spiritual significance of both the Surah and the sanctuary.

The angular lines and precise strokes of the *Kūfīc* script seem imbuing the space with a sense of elegance and sophistication. In this setting, the Surah's message of Allah's oneness is conveyed through the harmonious blend of art, architecture, and spirituality. The *Kūfīc* calligraphy serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving and honoring the artistic heritage of Islamic calligraphy, while also highlighting the timeless relevance of *Surah Al-Ikhlās* in the lives of believers. Inscriptions on the minaret and entrance gate of the sanctuary of the Shaukat Khanam Hospital Mosque, Lahore, 1994 (figure 6), has its own significance. Mavi Mosque, Sukh Chain Gardens, Lahore, was built in 2006. The tops of the columns built in the sanctuary for the side chambers, with Naskh calligraphy, have the holiest impact, surrounded by a colourful ambiance with tile mosaic work.



Figure 5. West wall of the Mosque of 'Ali Hajwiyri Data Darbar, Lahore, built in 1989. Picture by Author.



Figure 6. Shaukat Khanam Hospital Mosque, Lahore, 1994. Picture by Author.



## Conclusion

Islamic calligraphy is considered integral part of mosques' construction especially in the sanctuary and around the *miḥrāb* niche. In the mosques of Punjab variety of calligraphic styles were implemented. Mughal architecture was influenced by Persian and regional styles. Mughal mosques were found to have Arabic, *Thuluth*, *Naskh*, *Nastaliq*, and *Kūfīc* calligraphy using traditional techniques such as mosaic, inlay, fresco, wood and marble carving. Both the interior of the Badshahi Mosque and the Masjid Wazir Khan were regarded as historical predecessors. Using traditional calligraphy *Thuluth* and *Nastaliq* for ornamentation with a range of decorative techniques and materials were seen to be a frequent practice. Building and surface adornment changed to meet the demands of contemporary trends while preserving local values.

Comparatively in contemporary mosques *Kūfīc*, *Thuluth* and *Naskh* are dominantly used to adorn the surfaces with tile mosaic work marble carving, metal engraving and enamel paint. It is concluded that the calligraphy in early mosque architecture is following strict geometrical rules of traditional *kat*. Later on, contemporary mosques' are embellished with mixed concept implication of traditional calligraphy, stylized application of words and inscriptions. But the aim to implement Quranic verses and convey the message of oneness of Allah is same. Careful selection of verses according to the area is another positive move towards spiritual and divine reality.

In order to enhance the composition, contemporary trends occurred, combining stylized and classic letter forms to create new compositions. Stylisation, decorative approaches, and the continuation of old aspects in construction designs with new concepts were regarded as a departure from tradition and had their own value because of their unique structures. Calligraphy was designed in large-sized glazed tiles. Calligraphy with tile mosaic was not the only decoration in the sanctuary of the modern mosques. There were several other decorative techniques, such as marble carving, and inlay work but in simplified form.

Engraving on metal, marble carving, inlay of lapis lazuli semi-precious stone in metallic frame are used in the Faisal Mosque. It is evident that the history of architectural traditions has been preserved through the use of calligraphy and historic techniques, which have been integrated with contemporary architectural forms. Initially, the *miḥrāb* niche was decorated with mirror mosaic and tile work, but over time, the entire west wall was decorated to signify Kabbah, the mosque of Ali Hajveri Data Darbar Lahore and the Faisal Mosque Islamabad are major examples of such kind. The free-standing books with, metal engravings, marble carvings,

and metal inlay that adorn the book form *miḥrāb*. West wall of Ali Hajvery Mosque in Lahore and Faisal Mosque in Islamabad demonstrate design advancement and the innovative use of tile mosaic work.

The entire west wall of the Mosque of Ali Hajvery Data Darbar in Lahore was decorated with *Kūfic* calligraphy of *Sūra al-Ikhlās* in tessellated glazed tiles, which was a novel touch that demonstrated the continuation of tradition with fresh modifications. As a result, a creative and sustainable strategy for diversity is developed. The secret to successfully demonstrating evolution in mosque calligraphy is upholding traditions while also seeking out new and cutting-edge techniques by embracing creative concepts and difficulties.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ptv.com.pk/decorative.asp> (accessed Feb 26, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthefmonth/march02\\_index.php?1=4](http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthefmonth/march02_index.php?1=4) (accessed May 3, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Yasin Hamid Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: University Press Edinburgh, 2006), 77.

<sup>5</sup> Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Nabi Khan, *Iran and Pakistan* (Karachi, Dacca: The National Publishing House, 1971), 100.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Nabi Khan, *Islamic Architecture in South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>9</sup> R Nath, *The History of Sultanat Architecture* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1978), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1984), 3.