

---

## LIVRES/BOOKS

---

ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*. New York and London, New York University Press, 1984. XIV + 264 pp., illus., \$56.00 (cloth).

Writing and the image of the word are perhaps nowhere more intimately connected than in Islamic lands. This may come as a surprising revelation to those more familiar with literate societies of the Western world in which the written word is so prominent in books, printed matter, newspapers and now even word-processors, where the word in its context serves as the standard means of communication. But in the Islamic world the emphasis on writing is somewhat different. The origins, derivation and significance of this difference are, in part, what distinguish historically Islamic civilization from the development of civilization in the West.

Within Islamic societies, the word together with the image of the word have a specific connotation associated with the Word of God; this goes back to the divine revelations as received by the prophet Muhammad in the 7th century A.D. These revelations, received orally in Arabic, were written down in the form of the Qur'an as it has survived to the present day and continues to serve as the basis for Islamic faith and life-styles.

Both the rapid expansion of Islam beyond Arab speaking lands, and the subsequent adoption of Arabic script for other language groups, have contributed to the varied roles of calligraphy within the Islamic realm. The word and the image of the word serve not only to inform and inspire or to convey meaning by content alone, but they also – themselves – beautify and convey by that beauty a particular form of divine, albeit immaterial presence. Wordplays, penmanship, theories and systems of proportion, as well as poetic metaphors based upon the terminology of calligraphy, all contribute to the complex of values

placed upon writing in the Islamic world.

Annemarie Schimmel, Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture at Harvard University, is known for her impeccable scholarship on poetry and mysticism in Islamic lands. In this work she explores both the significance and the nature of the relationship between writing and Islamic culture. Based upon an annual series of lectures given at New York University's Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, this book presents, in written form, Schimmel's eloquently stated insights and carefully selected anecdotes, which bring a deep understanding of forms expressed in another culture. Her text is sprinkled with apt quotations from Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Indian sources (all her own translations), as if to illustrate verbally, rather than visually, calligraphy in terms of puns, double meanings, visual imagery, metaphor and allegory. A rich artistic vocabulary is arrayed to justify her contention that the presence and beauty of calligraphy not only suffuses Islamic culture, but is also an ineluctable part of it.

Her style of writing transforms exotic esoterica into digestible nougats: compare her description of the «demir leblebi» («iron chick peas,» p. 46), which in the «master's mouth ... turn into wax.» Schimmel has divided four chapters by subject: Styles of calligraphy, Calligraphy, dervishes and kings, Calligraphy and mysticism, and Calligraphy and poetry, covering in considerable detail many of the social aspects of calligraphy and calligraphers. Preceded by a brief foreword and a table of Arabic letters with their various forms and numerical equivalents, the body of the book is followed by two appendices which provide additional interpretations of individual letters according to other systems. Extensive notes, a bibliography and four indexes (Proper Names, Technical Terms, Koran and Prophetic Traditions, Book Titles) complete the volume,

allowing ready access for specific information on selected topics.

The text is illustrated with diagrammatic drawings which serve an explanatory function. Although Schimmel emphasises that Muslims in general are educated through writing rather than through images, more photographic illustrations of actual calligraphy on monuments and the arts would help to convey to a non-Muslim audience specific uses of Islamic writing.

From the earliest inscriptions and scraps of Arabic written on parchment and papyrus fragments, to the important textile inscriptions of Faïmid Egypt and the great architectural monuments of Iran and Anatolia, through the florid lines of Ottoman calligraphy and the delicacies of poetic composition from the Indian subcontinent, Schimmel wends her way, taking us along through time and space on a journey of great intricacy and cultural explication. The use of numerous anecdotes and quotations in translation helps to convey the sense of time and space amidst the sensual delights of contemporary thought. Hers is a book to be read and savoured while one gains understanding and appreciation of symbols and meanings held dear by others.

The extensive consideration of the social position of calligraphers and the role of Sufism brings to the fore a range of new sources for the study of Islamic calligraphy. Schimmel discusses relevant passages in Persian and Turkish biographical literature, Sufi treatises, and commentary on letter mysticism, provides insights for the interpretation of abstract and abstruse written symbolism. Her command of the requisite languages is extraordinary; combined with her own sensitivity, it has enabled her to penetrate adroitly calligraphic imagery, both verbal and visual, throughout the Islamic world.

CAROL BIER  
*The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.*