

A STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF CALLIGRAPHY IN BALKH**Pohanmal Mohammad Omar Qanoni**

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Abstract. Art is a collection of human works or activities created to influence emotions and feelings, serving as a means to convey diverse meanings and concepts. Calligraphy, as an authentic and valuable art form within Afghan culture, reflects beauty, delicacy, and the noble sentiments of humanity. This art not only holds a special place in Afghanistan's cultural history but is also recognized internationally as a distinguished artistic discipline. The present article examines the history of calligraphy in Balkh.

Calligraphy in Afghanistan, from the past to the present, has been predominantly used in non-religious texts such as collections of poetry, refined artistic compositions, and administrative correspondence. In contrast, among the Arabs and the Ottoman Turks, calligraphy was mainly applied to religious writings, with their artistic mastery centered on the Thuluth and Naskh scripts. In Afghanistan, however, all forms of calligraphy — including Nasta'liq, Shekasteh Nasta'liq, Naskh, and Ta'liq — have experienced remarkable growth and development. The period spanning the ninth to the eleventh centuries can be regarded as one of the most brilliant eras in the history of Afghan calligraphy.

The art of calligraphy is observed in nearly all cultures; however, in the East—particularly in Afghanistan—it has long held great significance among the visual arts. One notable example is the province of Balkh, which has been a cultural center and cradle of knowledge and art from ancient times to the present day. In Balkh, calligraphy has evolved among calligraphers based on highly unique, innovative, and intricate systems and principles.

The practice of calligraphy in this province is not confined merely to the beauty of script and writing, but is also regarded as a profound medium for expressing deep meanings and human emotions. Just as this art has flourished throughout history, it continues to thrive today, thanks to the efforts of prominent calligraphers from this region.

Keywords: Balkh, Script, Calligraphy, Art.

Introduction:

Calligraphy and handwriting are among the world's ancient arts. Due to the delicacy and elegance embedded within this art form, it may rightly be regarded as an expression of human nature itself. A calligrapher is one who inscribes each letter with precision and grace, positioning every stroke along its proper course to create visual manifestations of beauty through script. The historical trajectory of this art can be traced from prehistoric inscriptions, where the principles of aesthetic writing were observed in symbolic forms, through successive historical eras.

Across centuries, the significance of calligraphy and fine writing has evolved through various scripts, from cuneiform and Pahlavi to Persian-Dari, each stage marking the continued refinement and preservation of this timeless artistic tradition.

Research on the history of calligraphy in Balkh can help us better understand the historical and cultural roots of this art within the geographical boundaries of Balkh and gain insight into those who are actively involved in this field. Moreover, by examining the works of both contemporary and traditional calligraphers, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the social and cultural influences of this art on today's society.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to gain a deeper understanding of the history of calligraphy in one of the world's great scientific and cultural centers, the province of Balkh, and to identify who valued this art in various fields and what artistic masterpieces have been left behind by them.

For this purpose, books and biographical records were consulted to search for distinguished and creative individuals in the field of calligraphy.

Research Background

The art of calligraphy in Islamic societies was recognized as an independent art form during the Timurid period in Herat. Even before that time, attention to writing and beautiful script—especially in the transcription of the Holy Qur'an, as well as in scientific and literary works—reflected the distinguished history of this art. Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Jabbar ibn Muhammad wrote one of the earliest books on orthography. Muhammad Ali Heravi, a contemporary of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, discussed the importance and status of calligraphers in his book *The Treasury of Afghan Scripts*.

Azizuddin Popalzai, in his book *The Art of Calligraphy in the Last Two Centuries of Afghanistan*, has also made significant contributions in introducing calligraphers. His other works, such as *Khazinat al-Ashraf* and *The Principles of Calligraphy*, have likewise attained a high position in the study of calligraphy. Numerous books have been written about calligraphers and handwriting in the modern era. Among them, Khal Muhammad Khasta authored *The Etiquette of Nasta'liq Script* and *Calligraphers from the 11th to the 13th Centuries AH*. 'Abd al-Hay Habibi's book *The History of Writing and Ancient Scripts of Afghanistan from Prehistoric Times to the Present* has also been preserved. Inayatullah Shahrani, in his book *Calligraphers and Contemporary Painters of Afghanistan*, has provided specialized and in-depth introductions to calligraphers, accompanied by samples of their works. Fariba Pāt wrote an article on the calligraphers of the Timurid period in Herat, while Alireza Hashminejad authored a paper titled *A Review of Research on the Theoretical Foundations of Calligraphy in the Past Fifty Years*. Saleh Muhammad Khaliq, in his book *The Literary History of Balkh*, introduced not only poets and writers but also those skilled in the art of calligraphy, and in some cases, provided useful and well-reasoned explanations about their writing styles. Muhammad Omar Qanuni, in his book *Calligraphy and Contemporary Calligraphers of Balkh*, provided a detailed introduction to the contemporary calligraphers of Balkh province for the first time and compiled examples of their work within the book.

However, this article examines the history of calligraphy in Balkh province and provides an overview of the most renowned and active individuals in the field of handwriting and calligraphy in this region.

Research Methodology

The method employed in this study is the library research method, and credible sources have been used in the preparation of this research.

Definition and Importance of Calligraphy

In a brief and clear definition, it can be said that calligraphy is the artistic writing of letters and words based on specific and established principles and rules (Rashvand, 1331, Introduction).

Calligraphy is not only an art but also a visual language that conveys deep emotions and thoughts. Throughout history, this art has served as a communicative and cultural medium, reflecting the identity and history of nations. Therefore, the study of calligraphy can help us gain a deeper understanding of various cultures.

The relationship between calligraphy and the concepts of aesthetics, mysticism, and Persian literature throughout the history, culture, and art of Iran and other regions where the Persian language has been prevalent is quite evident and almost self-explanatory. Script is one of the important means of understanding the culture and civilization of different peoples and of recording and transmitting human ideas. Therefore, examining the development of writing and script clarifies the process of human civilization's evolution over time (Obaidinia, 1331, p.111).

"Now, the important function of script is beauty and expression. Artists, while pursuing innovation and defining wonder alongside beauty as essential visual goals, introduced transformations in letters through three key artistic approaches: deformation of letter shapes, exaggeration of forms, and stylization. These innovations elevated the aesthetic quality, expressive power, and communicative spirit of calligraphy. Thus, at first glance, script could neither intend nor attempt to convey meaning and form simultaneously within the course of these transformations." (Khorasani, 1331, p.12)

Furthermore, those who believe in calligraphy as a true art form state that a work of calligraphy is the mirror of the calligrapher's soul. For the writing to possess charm, appeal, and elegance, the calligrapher must strive for inner refinement, purity of heart, and moderation in conduct and character. This is because the calligrapher transfers what exists within to the art itself, and in the writing of one who has attained spiritual balance, serenity, and dignity are naturally manifested (Ravanjoo, 1331, p.11).

This art requires deep and scholarly analyses. By examining various aspects of calligraphy, one can attain a better understanding of its cultural and historical influences. Such research can enrich our knowledge about calligraphy and its role in society.

In theoretical discussions, calligraphy is regarded as a field of study based on reflection, contemplation, and recognized methods concerning the nature and philosophy of calligraphy, aesthetics, stylistic analysis, methodological approaches, and the historical foundations of this art (Hashminejad, 1111, p.51).

Writing and calligraphy are not only tools of communication but also factors in the advancement of human civilization. Without script, the transmission of knowledge and culture would have been almost impossible. This demonstrates the significance of calligraphy in shaping human history and culture. In clearer terms, it can be said that all of humanity's progress has been achieved through the blessing of the invention of writing, and if script did not exist, human life today would be entirely different (Shahrani, 1331, p.22).

Initially, writing was employed primarily as a means of communication and information recording.

However, over time and with the advancement of societies, it evolved into an independent art form. This transformation reflects the cultural and social evolution of civilizations, of which calligraphy has been an integral part.

At the beginning of nomadic and agricultural life, and with the emergence of early tribal monarchies, writing was practiced as a basic human necessity. However, during the flourishing and consolidation of royal power, this social and civil human phenomenon, like other arts, attained an artistic status and entered the realm of the fine arts (Habibi, 1311, p. 31).

Calligraphy is recognized as a formal art, which means that in some cases, it can be perceived purely as an abstract form without content. There is also a reference to the influence of calligraphy on contemporary art in the West, particularly in the emergence of the *Lettrism* movement. Khorasani, in his article, states: "In the field of semantics, calligraphy is a type of inventive shape and form. However, we must understand that, fundamentally, calligraphy is formalistic, because if it is read within the boundaries of content, it serves a communicative purpose; but when it is not readable, it conveys nothing beyond abstract form and shape. In the twentieth century, the potential of calligraphy was utilized in the West, leading even to the emergence of a movement called *Lettrism*. Some Western artists, inspired by Far Eastern calligraphy, conducted experiments and created artworks. Paul Klee, in Germany, imitated ancient Egyptian and Arabic scripts." (Khorasani, 1331, p.11)

It must be acknowledged that calligraphy has made significant contributions to humanity's scientific advancement and is recognized as a vital part of the history of culture and art. "Calligraphy is considered one of the fine arts. The history of script and its emergence is very ancient. Two major aspects of humanity have led mankind toward scientific progress." (Shahrani, 1331, p.22)

History of Calligraphy

From a historical perspective, we find that calligraphy is among the world's most ancient arts, manifested in diverse forms and styles. Rafi'i Rad, in his research, states: "Before the invention of writing, we witness certain line-based paintings that demonstrate an awareness of linear order. The discoveries of Közl in 1311 CE, dating to the Bronze Age in Said Qala and Mundigak, include painted pottery decorated with geometric designs, as well as depictions of flowers and animals such as goats, executed with realistic proportions and in a linear manner." (Rafi'i Rad, 1111, p. 31)

In our country, too, since the earliest stages of civilization, attention to writing and the beauty of script has been a common practice. Evidence of this can be found in the inscriptions of the Hazar Sum caves. Professor Habibi supports this claim, stating: "In the caves of Hazar Sum, there are engraved forms and plaster reliefs, some of which archaeologists have found similar to the prehistoric scripts of Western Europe—in Spain, Italy, Switzerland, and Ireland. In the works of Hazar Sum, human figures, handprints, animal forms, and broken, curved lines can be seen, which we may consider as the developed and refined forms of the incised lines of Laghman." (Habibi, 1311, p. 1)

This observation, in fact, indicates that writing and the attention to the drawing of lines existed even before the invention of script. Although writing had not yet been created, proportion and the aesthetic arrangement of lines appear to have been innate human inclinations. This practice continued until the emergence of script, and after its invention, we observe the same principle—particularly in cuneiform inscriptions—that has been preserved with distinct order and precision to this day.

“After the invention of writing, hieroglyphic, cuneiform, and other scripts were successively created, developed, and put into use.” (Shahrani, 1331, p. 22). During historical periods, evidence also exists of the role of calligraphy in the early governments of this land. The *Avesta* was written in beautiful script and adorned with gold. “In the inscriptions of Achaemenid buildings in Iran, the use of color and ornamentation has been identified. As mentioned in Zoroastrian texts, it is said that the *Avesta* was written on cowhide in beautiful golden script.” (Habibi, 1311, p. 31)

Mani, the prophet and painter of this land, who lived in the pre-Islamic era and had many followers due to his art of painting and calligraphy, also left evidence showing that calligraphy was highly valued by him and his followers. Professor Abdul Hay Habibi states: “Likewise, the religious works of the Manichaeans were illuminated and illustrated, and historians of the Islamic period, such as Ibn al-Muqaffa‘, al-Baladhuri, Ibn al-Nadim, and Ibn Qutaybah, have reported many beautifully written and illustrated artistic works.” (Habibi, 1311, p. 31)

Initially, individuals in the Arab lands established rules for scripts and created stylistic forms for the art of calligraphy, naming specific types of scripts; however, the artists of this region expanded and refined them. Among the scripts that gained significant prominence in calligraphy is the *Nasta‘liq* script. According to Mirza Jafar Tabrizi (Baysunghuri), “It must be known that the origin of *Naskh-ta‘liq* is *Naskh*. A group from Shiraz made modifications to it, incorporating the curved ‘sin’ and elongations from other scripts, observing both light and heavy strokes within it, and thus transformed it into another distinct script which they named *Naskh-ta‘liq*.” (Haj Mohammad Hosseini, 1331, p. 121)

“No religion has paid as much attention to the beautiful art of script as Islam, and no art in Islam has been as emphasized, endorsed, encouraged, and promoted as calligraphy. Almighty God, in the Holy Qur’an, swore by the Pen — the tool of writing — and in the first revealed verses to the Noble Prophet of Islam, the topics of reading, writing, and the pen were mentioned.” (Eynallou, 1331, p. 3) In Islamic societies, painting has always existed under the umbrella of calligraphy. “The art of painting, whose large-scale use was permitted only in non-religious buildings, always occupied a secondary place and followed after calligraphy.” (Miran, 1331, p. 111)

“It is also evident from Islamic narratives that calligraphy was esteemed during the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the primary reason for this was the attention given to the transcription of the Holy Qur’an. Fariba Pāt, in her related research, explains: ‘The connection between Sufis and calligraphers traces back to Imam Ali. Referring to a Turkish poem from the nineteenth century, she further extends the links between the Qur’an and the Rightly Guided Caliphs as follows: Abu Bakr al-Siddiq recited the revealed Book; ‘Umar stitched and bound it; ‘Uthman arranged and recorded it properly and preserved it; and Ali gilded and adorned its pages.’” (Pāt, 1331, p. 111)

“Artists such as Zenderoudi advanced the art of script toward the boundaries of artistic movements; Tanavoli transformed script within his ‘Nothing’ sculptures and his ‘Nothing’ paintings on bowls and plates. Following them, Pil-Aram introduced such deformations in letters that completely severed the relationship between form and content, turning script in his works into a collection of letter movements within colored surfaces. Reza Mafi, through his *Siah Mashq* (black writing) works, continued this break from tradition until it reached Ehsai, who, in his final artistic developments, attained a composition solely consisting of letter movements and named it *Bismillah*. After him, Afjei painted with script.” (Khorasani, 1331, p. 12)

Likewise, the Abdali kings also paid special attention to the art of calligraphy. “The calligraphers of Herat, which during the ninth and tenth centuries AH was the capital of great kings and the home of distinguished poets, artists, and calligraphers, enjoyed high prestige. When His Majesty Timur Shah Durrani transferred the capital from Kandahar to Kabul, the art of writing and calligraphy flourished greatly in Kabul.” (Kahgaday, 2111 AD, p. 1)

Study of the History of Calligraphy in Balkh

Balkh, one of the oldest and most historically significant cities in Afghanistan, has been renowned since ancient times as a cultural and intellectual center. The coins discovered in this region demonstrate the rich history and advanced civilization of Balkh. As noted in the historical background of calligraphy, writing, and a focus on the beauty of lines have been inherent human inclinations. In the forms and drawings obtained from prehistoric times, the aesthetic value of lines was already appreciated. With the emergence of the hieroglyphic and cuneiform scripts — the oldest known writing systems in the world — the art of penmanship was observed in its finest form. The stone inscriptions from those periods were engraved with great precision and delicacy and have survived to this day.

Regarding Balkh province, the first script found there was the *Kharosthi* script. Professor Abdul Hay Habibi states: “The first script discovered in Balkh province was the Kharosthi script. Research on this writing began in 1331 CE, when a number of coins from Afghanistan and northwestern India bearing both Kharosthi and Greek inscriptions were discovered. What further contributed to this study was a short Kharosthi inscription found on a vessel in Balkh.” (Habibi, 1311, p. 21)

Following the discovery of the Kharosthi script, numerous findings suggest the presence of the Pahlavi script in Balkh province. Historically, Balkh was renowned as a hub of trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West, resulting in the widespread adoption of various languages and scripts in the region. The coins unearthed in the area reflect Balkh’s cultural and economic influence in the past. “Traces of the Pahlavi script have also been found; the coins struck in this language indicate that this script was also common in Balkh province.” (ibid., p. 11) With regard to the art of calligraphy and attention to script, we also see evidence of this practice dating back to the era of the Aspa dynasty — one of the earliest ruling families originating from Balkh. Abu Mansur Tha’alibi writes: “Goshtasp was in Balkh, and Zoroaster brought him a book that was written on the hides of twelve thousand oxen, with each word engraved into the skin and inlaid with a layer of gold.” (ibid., p. 51)

Calligraphy After the Advent of Islam in Balkh

Following the advent of Islam, Balkh became renowned as one of the most significant cultural and religious centers. The Arab rulers used writing in coin minting, which indicates the integration of various cultures in Balkh and also reflects the influence of Arab culture upon this land. Abdul Hay Habibi states: “After the rise of Islam in the first century, we witness the presence of the Arabic language and script in Balkh province, where most of the Arab rulers in Balkh, Marv, Herat, and Zaranj minted their coins in this script.” (Habibi, 1311, p. 13)

Following the emergence of Islam, many arts associated with calligraphy were developed, and these arts significantly contributed to the advancement of penmanship. Among them were the transcription of the Holy Qur’an, Islamic architecture in mosques and places of worship, the writing of Islamic texts, and the rulers’ attention to the beauty of the scribes’ handwriting. All these disciplines flourished greatly through the blessings of the sacred religion of Islam.

Inayatullah Shahrani states: “The art of bookbinding and publishing reached the highest degree according to the method of the ancients and was of great importance in the ancient histories of Herat, Tabriz, Balkh, Samarkand, Kabul, and other places.” (Shahrani, 1331, p. 351)

From the texts that have been discovered, it becomes evident that the art of calligraphy in Balkh province was valued by the elites from the beginning of Islamic rule. The Barmakid family utilized and possessed profound knowledge of this art. “Yahya Barmaki (d. 131 AH) had a great interest in calligraphy, and he trained the greatest calligrapher of the court of al-Ma'mun, Ahmad ibn Abu Khalid Awhal.” (Habibi, 1311, p. 31). This tradition continued in later periods, and many distinguished figures in this province became renowned for their fine handwriting. ‘Awfi, in *Lubab al-Albab*, reports the collective attention given to the art of calligraphy and states that al-Katib al-Balkhi held a position in calligraphy that no one could rival. “Muhammad al-Katib al-Balkhi is mentioned in *Lubab al-Albab* as having reached such a degree in calligraphy that even Ibn al-Bawwab could not place his finger on his letters; in his writing, Mercury was in conjunction with Jupiter.” (Shahrani, 1331, p. 11)

No potter shapes a bowl complete and whole
For the bowl's own sake — not merely to hold food.
No calligrapher writes letters with his art
For the script itself — not merely to be read.
The visible form exists for the unseen image,
And that unseen one is bound to another beyond.
(*Balkhi, Mathnavi*, Book 1, 1333 AH, p. 313)

In the above poem, Mawlana clearly states that no one engages in calligraphy merely for the sake of beautiful writing itself, and that the purpose of fine script is solely for the reading of the text. This semantic perspective of Mawlana regarding writing and calligraphy reflects the position and understanding of this art in the past.

The Flourishing Period of Calligraphy and Calligraphers of Balkh

In later periods, we also observe scattered artistic activities in various fields, including calligraphy; however, the true flourishing period of calligraphy — or, in other words, the beginning of the era of modern calligraphy — commenced during the Timurid period in Herat. Inayatullah Shahrani also states:

“The great Khwaja Shams al-Hukama Ahmad ibn Hasan Maymandi, the renowned vizier of the Ghaznavids, as well as Baysunghur Mirza, the artistic son of Shahrukh, the Timurid ruler of Afghanistan, and Mir Ali Shir Nava'i, the vizier of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, are counted among the greatest patrons of the art of calligraphy in Afghanistan.” (Shahrani, 1331, p. 11)

Among the notable calligraphers of this province, one can mention Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Jabbar ibn Muhammad (d. 132 AH), who authored one of the oldest books on orthography. This book, *Abniyah 'an al-Haqa'iq al-Adwiyah*, is preserved in European museums. The manuscript was copied in 115 AH by Ali ibn Ahmad, and its unique copy is kept in the Vienna Library. (Hosseinzada Shanechi, 1331, p. 211)

The Timurids of Herat made great contributions to the development of art within our societies, and the traces of this period can be seen in Balkh and other provinces of Afghanistan and Iran. During this time, the *Nasta'liq* script had not yet reached its full maturity, while *Thuluth* and *Naskh* scripts were used for specific forms of writing, and the *Kufi* script still held a prestigious position. Since Balkh was known as one of the artistic and scholarly centers of that era, the presence of *Kufi* inscriptions on the historical buildings of this city demonstrates both the

attention of the Timurids of Herat to other provinces and the high standing of the *Kufi* script among other styles of writing. "The *Kufi* script can also be observed in several ancient works of this land, including the architectural monuments of the Timurid period in Herat, particularly in Balkh." (Habibi, 1311, p. 111)

Likewise, "Abdullah Sultani Darvish Balkhi was a student of Khwaja Abdul Hay Munshi and lived during the reign of Abu Sa'id Ghurkani." (Shahrani, 1331, p. 12). He is considered one of the prominent figures in the field of calligraphy in Balkh province, and several valuable works by him still exist.

Calligraphy in Contemporary Balkh

In the contemporary era, with the growth of industry, technology, and the general spread of literacy among the people, calligraphy has received more attention than before. In earlier times, opportunities for writing were limited, and not everyone had access to literacy, writing materials, or related resources. However, after the establishment of formal schools and the rise of literacy among the population, access to writing became much easier, and many individuals were able to demonstrate their abilities in this field.

In Balkh province as well, many prominent figures have been active in the field of calligraphy. Among them: "Ustad Khasta possessed great skill in writing two scripts, *Nasta'liq* and *Naskh*. His works are numerous in his homeland, and samples of his fine handwriting have been published in various magazines and journals. He authored a treatise entitled *The Etiquette of Nasta'liq Script* and *The Principles of Arabic Orthography*. Ustad Mawlana Khal Mohammad Khasta, a man of heart and spirit, was himself a calligrapher; therefore, he had precise and comprehensive knowledge of the rules of writing, the proportions of letters, and the other disciplines of calligraphy. Undoubtedly, Mawlana Khasta was among the most famous and prolific figures of his time." (Shahrani, 1331, pp. 33–35)

According to Dr. Hasan Anousheh, Khasta compiled numerous works in Persian literature and calligraphy, among which his well-known works on calligraphy include *The Etiquette of Nasta'liq Script* and *Calligraphers from the 11th to the 13th Centuries AH*. (Anousheh, 1331, p. 111) Mawlana Khasta also transcribed several works, including *Sirat al-Nabi* by Mawlana Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, in his own handwriting. (Shahrani, 1331, p. 33)

Balkh, in the contemporary period, is considered an active center in the field of handwriting and calligraphy. Sayyid Mohammad Sediq Gohari, the son of Sayyid Osman Awraq and grandson of Sayyid Mohammad Mir Asad, known as "Ishan Awraq," was born in 1311 AH. He was a historian, mystic, calligrapher, and poet who pursued his education under his brother Sayyid Mohammad Omar, and studied calligraphy and poetry under Sayyid Ata Mohammad Shah Khattat and Mawlana Johari. By the order of Abdur Rahman Khan, he migrated with his family to Kabul. (Anousheh, 1331, p. 313)

Mawlana Sharif Wala-e Shibargani was a poet who, according to Mahmoud Ketabdar in *Bahr al-Asrar*, was born in the village of Ashraf Shibargan, a district of Balkh. His ancestors were scholars and jurists. He entered the court of Imam Quli Khan and became his companion.

This individual was also a fine calligrapher and was therefore assigned to write selected poems and other compositions. In his youth, he fell ill and passed away in 1133 AH. (Kehzad et al., 1333, p. 231)

Mawlana Sa'd al-Din Zaygham, who occasionally used the pen name "Ghazaz," was born in the city of Balkh. He was among the well-known scholars and poets of Balkh, and his ancestors had long been distinguished in the fields of religious sciences.

According to the author of *Bahr al-Asrar*, Zaygham (or Ghazaz) Balkhi was also a master in calligraphy and in the elegance of expression. (Khaliq, 1353, p. 251).

Contemporary Calligraphers and Poets of Balkh

Qazi Mohammad Nasir Balkhi was a contemporary poet with Abdul Aziz Khan Ashtarkhani. He began his studies in Balkh and completed them in Bukhara. Some biographical sources refer to him as Nasir Bukhari; however, the biographers of his own time, including Malihā Samarqandi, identify him as Balkhi. Nasir Balkhi was skilled in *Nasta'liq* script and was also a master in seal carving. His death occurred in Bukhara, where he was buried near the shrine of Khwaja Naqshband. (ibid., p. 235). The poet Balkhi was an official of the Ashtarkhanid government and, alongside his administrative duties, also wrote poetry. (Anousheh, 1331, p. 1135)

Mulla Mohammad Nabi Balkhi, the son of Mulla Mo'men Balkhi, was a poet and calligrapher who served as the preacher (*khatib*) of the Khwaja Parsa monastery in Balkh. In addition to poetry, he was skilled in miniature painting, bookbinding, and especially in calligraphy, particularly in *Nasta'liq* script. (Khaliq, 1335, p. 11) Qazi Abdul Wahid Sarir, the son of Abdul Shakur Khurmi, was a scholar, poet, writer, and calligrapher born in 1313 or 1313 CE in Khurram or in Balkh. Idris Khwaja Raji Bukhari, in his *Mathnavi*, mentions contemporary calligraphers of his time in Bukhara, including Sarir. (ibid., p. 311)

Makhdoom Mohammad Rasul Shaheed Marmali, in addition to his poetic talent, was a master of calligraphy, especially excelling in the *Nasta'liq* script. (ibid., p. 313). Haji Khalilullah Hafid, the son of Haji Izzatullah Sahhaf and grandson of Mirza Habibullah, was a writer, researcher, calligrapher, and poet born in 1331 CE in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. (ibid., p. 113).

Gaday Shah Miskin, the son of Artuq and grandson of Barat Pahlawan, was a writer, poet, calligrapher, bookbinder, sculptor, and painter. He was born in 1323 CE in the Qubadian quarter of Mazar-i-Sharif. After completing his studies, he worked in the Provincial Accounting Office, the Government Printing House of Balkh, and the *Balkh Newspaper*. He was a talented poet, a skilled calligrapher, a capable miniaturist, and an exceptional student of Ustad Khasta and Ustad Gohari. (Qanuni, 1331, p. 331)

Qari Mohammad Azim Azimi, son of Qazi Mirza Mohammad Ismail, was an Uzbek scholar and poet. According to Mawlana Khasta, in *Contemporary Speakers*, he was born in 3391 CE, while according to Sima-ha wa Awa-ha, he was born in 3133 CE. He received his basic education from his father and had memorized the Holy Qur'an before the age of twelve. He wrote scripts of all types beautifully. (Khaliq, 3111, p. 634). Haji Sayyid Salahuddin Khan, known as Mirza Babajan, the eldest son of Sayyid Abdul Aziz Khan, son of Sayyid Mohammad Yusuf Khan, son of Sayyid Ibrahim Khan, and the eldest son of Sayyid Amanuddin Khalifa Tajdar, was born in the "Hauz Sarput" quarter near the *Rawza Sharif* in 3111 AH. He pursued his studies under his noble grandfather, Sayyid Padshah Khwaja Nadim, and learned the art of calligraphy from Qari Ghulam Nabi Khurmi. During the Amanullah period, he worked as a teacher at the First School of Education and, after the end of the Saqawi period, became a member and founder of the Chamber of Commerce, later turning to private business for a time. (Qanuni, 1331, p. 311)

In the modern era, the art of handwriting and calligraphy faces numerous challenges. Among these, the emergence of new technology and the expansion of modern facilities have had a profound impact on traditional arts, such as painting and calligraphy. These technological developments have led to a decline in interest in manual arts and have significantly influenced

public appreciation for these artistic forms. Moreover, the considerable difference in cost between traditional calligraphy and its digital equivalents in signboard design, as well as the general public's lack of interest in decorative panels based on calligraphic compositions, has caused this art form not to receive the attention it deserves. Nevertheless, calligraphy remains an ancient art form with its own devoted admirers. Numerous calligraphy exhibitions have been held in Balkh Province in recent years, bringing together enthusiasts of this art form. Masters of handwriting and calligraphy have been able to exhibit and present their artistic works to the public.

Conclusion

Writing and calligraphy are among the arts that have been passed down from ancient times to the present, with abundant evidence and traces indicating a focus on script and beautiful handwriting even before the advent of Islam. Among these are the transcription of the *Avesta* and the remains from the Achaemenid, Kushan, and Sassanid dynasties, all of which emphasize the importance of this art. However, during the Islamic era, unlike other forms of art such as music, painting, dance, and even poetry, the art of calligraphy was consistently approved and endorsed by religious scholars, and significant efforts were made to promote and highlight it. Although in its early stages this art was known primarily as transcription and not recognized as an independent art form, during the Timurid period in Herat—when rulers placed great value on the arts—calligraphy came to be regarded as a distinct artistic discipline, and numerous individuals achieved remarkable success in this field. The principal reason for the heightened attention to calligraphy compared to other arts was the sacred task of transcribing the Holy Qur'an, which involved no religious restriction and was instead encouraged. Following the Timurid period, many individuals continued to work in calligraphy, leaving behind notable works and, through the creation of the Nasta'liq script, paving a new path for this art.

This artistic heritage has endured into the modern era, where many contemporary calligraphers and scribes have developed their own unique styles and techniques. Balkh province, as one of the major cultural centers, has produced numerous distinguished figures in this field. Among them are Khal Mohammad Khasta, whose exceptional skill in calligraphy was matched by his scholarly writings on the status of calligraphy and calligraphers, as well as other masters such as Sayyid Mohammad Sediq Gohari, Sayyid Ata Mohammad Shah Khattat, Mulla Mohammad Nabi Balkhi, Qazi Abdul Wahid Sarir, and Makhdoom Mohammad Rasul Shaheed Marmali, all of whom were adorned with this art and whose works have endured to this day. In summary, Balkh province is considered one of the leading regions in Afghanistan in the field of calligraphy. The outstanding works of its calligraphers stand as a lasting testimony to the enduring place and prestige of this art in the province.

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