

m the Islamic tradition, of the time for dawn prayer -- hence a bird whose picture evokes thoughts of clarity and splendor, baha. It is, therefore, not surprising that the leading Baha'i calligrapher, Mishkin Qalam, has devoted some of his calligraphic paintings to the representation of this bird of light, made up from religious formulas.

For Mishkín Qalam was not only a master calligrapher. Born in Iran in early nineteenth century, he became an ardent believer in the Baha'i Faith and spent a considerable time in Turkey -- first in Edirne, then in Istanbul'. However, on the instigation of the then Persian ambassador he was like many other Baha'is, imprisoned between 1885 and 1894 in Famagusta'. He also spent a few years in India. He died in the Holy Land in the early years of the twentieth century. His art was greatly admired in Iran and the countries under her cultural influence, and E. G. Browne remarks in his account of his sojourn in Iran (A Year among the Persians) that Mishkin Qalam's calligraphies were very famous and would be eagerly sought after by Persians of all classes, were it not for his signature which betrayed him as a Baha'i and made him, therefore, unacceptable for a faithful Shiite.

This is certainly a sad statement, for there is no doubt that Mishkin Qalam (he with the musk black, fragrant pen) is one of the finest calligraphers at the turn of this century. He wrote in different styles, especially in nasta'líq,

and his crisp, clear hand immediately proves that he grew up in the tradition of Mir 'Imad (assassinated 1615), the leading master of Safavid Iran, about whom the Mughal Emperor Jahangir said: "If Shah 'Abbas had sent him to me I would have paid his weight in pearls."

Mishkín Qalam's firm hand makes the observer feel that he was well versed in large inscriptions for he forms his letters (e.g, the wide initial kh in the style used in architectural inscriptions. His rounded letters in nasta'líq are of flawless beauty, and the upper endings of the high strokes show that he liked to write with a sharp, freshly cut pen by which the contrasts between the thin and the thick strokes become very prominent so as to enhance the writing's beauty. Remarkable is also his elegant way of writing the heart-shaped medial h which occurs so frequently in the words baha and abha.

Mishkín Qalam would not be such a widely acclaimed artist had he remained always faithful to the traditional style. His writings show some innovative trends which were to become more prominent in the calligraphies of a later period; his way of somewhat softening the end of the ra is a novelty. Not satisfied with writing only traditional nasta'líq or inventing delightful birds, Mishkín Qalam tuned in with those who tried to give calligraphy a new character by creating as it were calligraphic porticoes or curtains, and he perfectly mastered the art of mirror script which had become very popular in Turkey in his days for pious formulas and invocations.

A firm hand, a flawless technique in shaping the letters, a vast imaginative

power and a deep love for calligraphy as a means of expressing religious feelings, these are the qualities of Mishkin Qalam, a truly great master whose influence -- beyond the Golden Rooster -- can be detected in the works of the masters in our century.

3. Mishkín Qalamby Vahid Rafati, PDF

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4. Mishkín Qalamby Vahid Rafati proofread text

Mirza Husayn, known as Mishkín Qalam (Musk-Scented Pen), was a renowned Persian calligrapher, painter and poet. He was the son of Fatimih and Haji Muhammad 'Aliy-i-Isfahani, who were born of merchant families originally from Shiraz, Iran. Born in Isfahan, Iran, in 1241 or 1242 AH [1826 A.D.1) Mishkín Qalam passed away on 25 Dhu'l-Hijjih 1330 AH [6 December 1912] in 'Akka.

Little information is available about the childhood of Mishkín Qalam, but it is known that he received his primary education in Isfahan, and that from his childhood he showed a great deal of interest in different styles of calligraphy and painting. Mishkín Qalam married, in Isfahan, Agha Bigum who gave birth to a daughter, Shah Bigum, and a son, Mirza Ali-Akbar.

When Mishkin Qalam was about twenty-five years old, his father passed away during a business trip to Tihran. Mishkín Qalam hastened to Tihran to attend to his father's affairs. While there, Mishkín Qalam visited a friend who was a shopkeeper. As he sat in the friend's shop, the Grand Vizir passed by. A skilled artist even in his youth, Mishkín Qalam was inspired to sketch a portrait of the Vizir with the mere impression of his linger nail on paper, a technique which he had perfected. He presented the portrait to the shopkeeper and left. Later, when the Vizir passed by once again, the shopkeeper showed him the portrait Mishkin Qalam had created. The Vizir was delighted and insisted on meeting such a brilliant artist. The shopkeeper with great difficulty located Mishkín Qalam and arranged the meeting. The Vizir invited Mishkín Qalam to the royal court to be presented to Nasiri'd-din Shah, the ruler of Iran. The Shah, recognizing the extraordinary talent of the young artist, gave him the title of "Mishkin Qalam" and appointed him as a tutor to his Crown Prince who was in Tabriz.

Mishkín Qalam lived in Tabriz for several years as a teacher of the Crown Prince and other members of the royal family. During those years he made a trip to Isfahan to visit his family. On the way back to Tihran, he met a certain Baha'i by the name of Siyyid Mihdi who told him about the Baha'i Faith. The impact of this meeting on Mishkín Qalam was so great that, without informing the court or his family, he decided to visit Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, who was residing in Adrianople (Edirne) at the time.

En route to Adrianople Mishkín Qalam stopped at Aleppo where he was hired by Jawdat Pasha, the governor of that city, as a tutor for his children. While he was in Aleppo, Nabil Zarandi, the great Baha'i teacher and historian of the Baha'i Faith, arrived in the city. He met Mishkín Qalam and brought him to a full recognition of the station of Baha'u'llah, Prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith.

Mishkin Qalam then travelled to Adrianople, where he attained the presence of Baha'u'llah and became one of his scribes. At this time the use of the invocation "Ya Baha'u'l-Abha" (O, Thou glory of the Most Glorious) became prevalent among the Baha'i. Mishkin Qalam, deeply moved by the implications of that invocation known as the Greatest Name, arranged it in the beautiful form in which it is generally represented today.

Mishkín Qalam later settled in Constantinople (Istanbul) where he came into contact, through his art, with many distinguished Persians and Turks. His stay there, however, was brief. As a result of the machinations of the enemies of the Baha'i Faith he was arrested and sent to Gallipoli. Together with some other Baha'is, he arrived there on 16 August 1868. Baha'u'llah and his companions arrived a day later on their way to exile in 'Akka, Palestine. Shortly afterwards Mishkín Qalam and the other prisoners who were brought from Constantinople were put on board ship with Baha'u'llah and His companions bound for 'Akka. On arrival in Haifa, however, Mishkin Qalam and three other Baha'is were sent to Cyprus while Baha'u'llah and most of his followers were taken to 'Akka. From 1868 to 1877 Mishkin Qalam was in exile in Famagusta, Cyprus. When Cyprus came under British rule the Ottoman prisoners were set free. In 1886 Mishkin Qalam was finally able to go to 'Akka and join the entourage of Baha'u'llah.

During his years in 'Akka Mishkin Qalam devoted himself to transcribing the Baha'i writings and to creating magnificent works of art. He produced many calligraphic copies of Baha'i writings, including two volumes of the writings of Baha'u'llah, which he completed in 1892 and had printed in Bombay. A copy of Baha'u'llah's Hidden Words in the handwriting of Mishkin Qalam was published recently (1983) in Germany.

After the passing of Baha'u'llah, Mishkín Qalam continued to render devoted services to 'Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'u'llah's son and His appointed successor as the leader of the Baha'i community. In 1893 he transcribed 'Abdu'l-Baha's Treatise on Politics, which was published in Bombay the same year.

In 1905 Mishkin Qalam was directed by 'Abdu'l-Baha to go to India to assist with Baha'i publications. He continued his services there until he fell ill and, at the invitation of 'Abdu'l-Baha, returned to the Holy Land where he resided until the end of his life. One of his last services was to design the calligraphic inscriptions carved on the sarcophagus presented by the Baha'is of Burma to hold the remains of the Bab, founder of the Babi

Faith.

Not only was Mishkín Qalam a distinguished calligrapher and artist, he also composed poetry. Yet his enduring fame is due to his penmanship, which is characterized by elegance in a wide range of different styles of Persian and Arabic scripts. Baha'i historians have described Mishkin Qalam as a pleasant man with a keen sense of humor who was always ready to offer a witty response in conversation.

A full study and thorough evaluation of the work of Mishkín Qalam remains to be undertaken by experts, But without doubt, Mishkin Qalam's most outstanding contribution is that he was the first Baha'i artist to have used the art of calligraphy and painting to express profoundly his religious convictions and mystical experiences. The concept of combining epigraph and images in a figural calligraphy was well established in Islamic culture, but Mishkin Qalam's main source of inspiration was the Baha'i writings. Bird imagery, which appears so frequently in Mishkin Qalam's calligraphic renderings, is a powerful expression of the theme of the "Nightingale of Paradise" or the "Cockerel of the Throne" announcing the dawn of the new :Faith and the bringing of a heavenly message to the mortal world.

Besides his transcriptions of the Baha'i writings, Mishkin Qalam produced scores of calligraphic renderings of verses from the Baha'i texts, and of invocations such as "Ya Baha'u'l-Abha," "Ya 'Alfu'l-A'la," (O, Thou Exalted, the Most Exalted) and "Ya 'Abdu'l-Baha" (O 'Abdu'l-Baha) in various sizes and designs of exquisite beauty, proportion, and originality. Mishkin Qalam had mastered the traditional styles of calligraphy such as Nasta'liq, Naskh, and Shikastih, in addition to his own unique "bird script," and he often incorporated several styles in one piece. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of examples of his artistry are preserved in Baha'i archives or displayed in Baha'i Centers or Holy Places or in the homes of some Baha'is around the world. Some pieces even are in prominent museums such as Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University.

Mishkin Qalam usually signed his works as "Servant at the gate of Baha', Mishkín Qalam." The story of this signature dates back to his days in Aleppo. When he had finished one of his pieces, he asked Nabil to write a verse to be put on the work. Nabil inscribed the following verse:

Dar diyar-i khatt shah-i sahib 'alam,
Bandy-i bab-i Baba, Mishkín Qalam.

[In the realm of calligraphy
the King who possesses the Banner
is the Servant at the gate of Baha',
Mishkin Qalam.]

Or in Marzieh Gail's translation,

"Lord of calligraphy, my banner goes before;

But to Baha'u'llah, a bondsman at the door,

Naught else am I,

Mishkín Qalam"²

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Notes

1. Dr. Mehrdad Meshkin as well as the late Gol Aidun report the year of Mishkin Qalam's birth as 1810

2. 'Abdu'l-Baha, Memorials of the Faithful, English translation by Marzieh Gail, p. 99n.

5. English Preface
by Persian Letters and Arts Society, PDF

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6. English Preface
by Persian Letters and Arts Society
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PREFACE

Mirza Hussain Isfahani, who was given the title "Mishkin Qalam" (black or musk-scented pen) by the Shah of Persia, will always have a special and exalted rank among the great masters of calligraphy and design.

Although some Iranian scholars, perhaps due to religious prejudice, have either ignored or made only a passing reference to Mishkin Qalam's work,¹ many fair-minded scholars and researchers have praised him as a great master of his art. For example Muhammad 'Ali Karimzadeh Tabrizi has testified² that Mishkin Qalam was "an innovative creator of tughras from Isfahan who produced masterpieces by combining calligraphy with figure-drawing (now called calligraphic painting) and illuminated them in gold and other decorative colors. I have seen his tughras that were in the form of a bird, Bismillah or a human face, or in chalipa style and all were signed Mishkin Qalam and dated between 1305 to 1325 A.H. The best of the artist's tughras displayed in Islamic World Festival exhibition in London was in the; form of a bird composed of letters and it was signed 'servant of the gate of Baba, Mishkin Qalam, 1305.' Another beautiful work of this master was in the form of a bird facing its mirror image, composed of words, and the margins were exquisitely illuminated. This fine piece which was sold in 1977 by Spinks Gallery in London was signed 'Servant of the gate of Baha, Mishkin Qalam, 1307.' Mishkin Qalam died in 1330 A.H. and is buried outside Iran"³

There is no doubt that Mishkin Qalam's skill was not limited to nasta'liq, the style that was perfected by Mir 'Imad Hassani Seifi Qazvini. He excelled in every style of calligraphy prevalent in his days. Evidence of his mastery is a piece in which he has written some of the verses of Baha'u'llah⁴ in the seven principal styles of calligraphy. In that masterpiece he has demonstrated the highest level of calligraphic skill. Another example is a copy of The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah the opening page of which he has written in nasta'liq and naskh.

In *Ruhu'l-Khat Al'Arabi* (the spirit of Arabic calligraphy) [2nd. edition, Lebanon, 1988] Kamal-el-Baba, himself a peerless artist, has included five works of Mishkin Qalam in the chapter entitled *Lawhat-i Fanni* (masterpieces). All of them are in very fine nasta'liq style. One which stands out is a special arrangement of a verse which means "He will glorify the one who is humble and will abase he who is greedy." Another piece that catches the eye is a verse from the Holy Qur'an in the form of a cone. Kamal-el Babel refers to Mishkín Qalam as the Persian Baha'i calligrapher.

'Abdu'l-Muhammad Irani, editor of the periodical *Chihrihnama*, in his book *Peydayish-i Khat va Khattatan* (Calligraphy and Calligraphers) [Tehran: n.d., p. 3.56] has these words about Mishkín Qalam. "In mastery of the seven styles he was indeed peerless among his contemporaries and must be counted among the geniuses of his age. His work which is of unparalleled beauty is now displayed in libraries in Syria and Egypt."

Mehdi Bayani in his three-volume work *Ahval va Athar-i Khushnivisan-i, Nasta'liq Nivisan* (Life and Work of Calligraphers in Nasta'liq) after quoting the above words of Abdu'l-Muhammad Khan adds that the inscriptions in the mausoleum of Mirza Muslim (located near the shrine of Seyyed Hamzih in the Sorkhab district of Tabriz) are the work of Mishkin Qalam. These inscriptions were made on paper and attached to the walls of the shrine under glass. Bayani praises Mishkin Qalam's nasta'liq, shikastih ta'liq, and sitikastih nasta'liq calligraphy.

It is worth noting that although Mishkín Qalam is an outstanding calligrapher, he was not the only eminent calligrapher among the Baha'is. From the very beginning of the new religion special attention was paid to calligraphy, and all that is written in the hand of the central figures of this Faith witness that attention. The Bab⁵ writes "Permission is not given to anyone to write even a single letter of the Bayan except in the best of handwritings."⁶

The Bab himself most often used shikastih nasta'liq and the speed of his writing was the source of astonishment of those present. Calligraphic exercises in the handwriting of Baha'u'llah when still a child are available. The beauty of those pieces is evidence of being instructed by His illustrious father Mirza 'Abbas (Buzurg) Nuri, who was one of the greatest calligraphers of the Qajar era.

The publication of the present collection of the works of the great master

of calligraphy and graphic design, Mishkin Qalam, honors one who lived for many years in the presence of Baha'u'llah and received from His words the inspiration to create unique pieces of calligraphy and art. It also commemorates the centenary of the passing of Baha'u'llah.

Baha'u'llah has not only given humanity a set of moral and spiritual teachings, he has also laid the foundation for a new civilization and a new world order. His goal is to gather all of humanity together under the banner of peace, fellowship and justice. In His teachings, Baha'u'llah has emphasized art, creativity, praise and respect for nature, and loving care for whatever God has created. This compilation is but a small tribute to all those who are striving to build a better and more beautiful world and hope that one day goodness, beauty and truth will take the place of ugliness, evil and deceit.

In conclusion it remains for us to acknowledge the contributions of all those who have helped in the production of this compilation, especially Dr. Vahid Rafati and Professor Anna Marie Schimmel who have provided brief introductions to the life and work of Mishkin Qalam; Dr. Mohammad Afnan and Mr. Saeed Mohamed who assisted with the selection of the specimens of Mishkin Qalam's calligraphy and took charge of technical matters connected with printing of the compilation with great patience, sincerity and care; also Dr. Manuchehr Derakhshani and Mr. Foad Rousta'i who assisted in the translation and editing work for this volume. Finally we express gratitude to Mr. Amanullah Mooghen who, himself an acknowledged artist, has graced this volume with his calligraphy.

The production of such a compilation requires a substantial capital. Without the generosity and support of Mr. Hussaingholi and Mrs. Khojasteh Kiayani the project would not have been realized. We wish all of these dear colleagues evermore success in their literary, artistic and humanitarian services.

Persian Letters and Arts Society

Notes

1. For instance the four volume *Ahval va Athar-i Khushnivisan* (Life and Work of Calligraphers,) 2nd. ed. Tehran: 1363 AH (1984).
2. *Ahval va Athar-i Naqqashan-i Qadim-i Iran va Barkhi az Mashahir-i Nigargar-i Hind va 'Uthmani* (Life and Work of Ancient Iranian Painters and Some Indian and Ottoman Artists), 2 volumes, London: 1369 AH (1990)
3. For a biography of Mishkin Qalam see "Mishkin Qalam" by Dr. Mehrdad Meshgin (his great grandson) in *Herald of the South*, Vol. 3, April 1985, pp. 2-11, or articles by Amanullah Mooghen in *Khoosh-i-ha'i az Kharman-i-Adab va Honar*, Vol. I, and by Saeed

Motamed in

Khoosh-i-ha'i az Kharman-i-Adab va Honar, Vol. 4.

4. Mirza Husayn-'Ali, entitled Baha'u'llah, Founder or the Baha'i Dispensation

5. Mirza 'Alf-Muhammad or Shiraz, known as the Bab, was the inaugurator of the Babi

Dispensation and the Forerunner of the Baha'i Dispensation

6. Persian Bayan, Bab-i Hifdahum (chapter 17), Vahid Sivum (unit 3)

7. Persian front matter and introductory material, PDF

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8. Complete book, links to PDFs

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