

emprisonnement

dans la forteresse de Famagusta dans l'île de Chypre. La discussion aura pour le sujet les compositions calligraphiques créées par Mishkin-Qalam pendant son

séjour à Famagusta et aussi celles composées à la fin de sa vie quand il a rejoint

Bahá'u'lláh dans la ville d'Acre. On examinera les origines de son expression

artistique dans la tradition calligraphique islamique et on étudiera aussi à quel

point ses formes étaient aptes à proclamer le message de la foi bahaie.

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Gol Aidun, whose own research on Mishkin-Qalam was cut short by her tragic death

while in India in 1987. This article is dedicated to her memory.

** French translation provided by Colette Henriette.

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Resumen *

Este artículo considera la vida y obra de Aqá Husayn-i-Isfahání, llamado Mishkín-Qalam. Conocido por su excelente caligrafía, Mishkín-Qalam fue invitado a trabajar en la corte del monarca Qájár el Sháh Nasirtd-Dín, durante los últimos años de la década de 1850. Durante la década de los 1860

el artista participó en los acontecimientos que acompañaron el nacimiento del movimiento Bahá'í, y se trasladó a Edirne para estar cerca del jindador exiliado Bahá'u'lláh. Las intrigas en la corte del sultán otomano resultaron en

el encarcelamiento de Mishkín-Qalam en la fortaleza de Famagusta en la isla de Chipre. La discusión se centrará sobre las composiciones caligráficas creadas por Mishkín-Qalam durante su estancia en Famagusta y también aquellas que hizo durante sus últimos años, cuando volvió a encontrarse con Bahá'u'lláh en la ciudad de Accá. Las raíces de su expresión artística en la

tradicción islámica de caligrafía serán consideradas tanto como la manera en que sus formas fueron adaptadas para proclamar el mensaje de la fe Bahá'í.

This article will explore the calligraphy of Áqá Husayn-i-Isfahání, better known

by the honorific title, Mishkín-Qalam, or "the musk-scented pen" (figure 1).

Although trained in the Islamic tradition of the calligraphic arts and capable of attaining a high station at the Persian court of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh. Mishkín-Qalam chose to use his artistic talents for service to the BaháT Faith, a choice that caused an unprecedented transformation both in his calligraphy and in his life.

Figure 1. Photograph of Mishkín-Qalam. Reprinted from Balyuzi, Eminent Bahá' is 271

* Spanish translation provided by Isabel Valida.

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Áqá Husayn-i-Isfahání came from a well-known merchant family of Isfahán in Iran. The family seems to have come originally from Khurásán and still maintained business interests in the city of Mashhad. Interestingly, this family played a crucial role in Edward Granville Browne's first contact with the Bahà'is during his famous "year amongst the Persians." It was in February 1888 that the English Orientalist first spoke to a relative of Mishkin-Qalam, the merchant Mirza Javád who, at some risk to himself, confided to Browne, "I am a Bábí." This confession began the chain of events that would lead Browne to his lifelong study of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faiths (Browne, A Year 223).

The Calligraphic Tradition in Islam

The young Husayn-i-Isfahání grew up in Muslim Iran of the nineteenth century and, as a talented calligrapher, absorbed the time-honored traditions of that art.

Calligraphy, or the art of beautiful writing, was considered the highest of all art *

forms in the Muslim world. Arabic letters were essentially the language of God, for it was in Arabic that the Qur'án was revealed. If, in Christianity the Word

was made flesh in the human form of Christ, in Islam the Word was embodied in the Qur'án, a direct Revelation from God. Given the importance of the Arabic script and its religious meaning, it is not surprising to find words and letters to be the basic "subject matter" of Islamic art. The letters appear

everywhere—on ceramics, on textiles, on glass, and as architectural decoration

on mosques. The didactic function of images in the Christian churches was

accomplished in the mosque by the bold and beautiful letters of the verses of the

Qur'ân, or with the names of God, his Messenger Muhammad, and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs. It is no wonder that the history of art in Muslim lands begins with calligraphy as the most respected of all art forms.

No educated Muslim would neglect the skills of calligraphy, for in Muslim lands the connection between moral rectitude and calligraphic excellence was often made. In the ninth century, the Muslim ruler of Khurásán addressed this letter to an underling:

We were willing to accept your excuse, but in view of your bad handwriting we changed our mind. If you had been truthful in stating your case, the movement of

your hand would have aided you. Or, do you now know that a beautiful handwriting

speaks for the writer, makes his arguments convincing and enables him to obtain what he wants? (Welch, Calligraphy 33)

A lifetime of work might go into the cultivation of the ability to write the perfect forms of letters— a goal not easily attained. The following story concerning an event that was alleged to have occurred after a great earthquake in Tabriz in 1777 illustrates this point:

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The calamity fell in the middle of the night. At dawn survivors were running hither

and thither hoping to find those buried in the debris who might still be alive.

One

search party discovered a spark of light from deep down in the basement of a ruined

house. They set to work frantically, hoping to effect a rescue. When they finally dug

their way through, they discovered a man sitting on the floor bent over a small piece

of paper, working by the light of a candle, intensely absorbed in writing. They called

to him to hurry out, more shocks were coming, and the ruins were still dangerous; but

there was no response. He bent over his work, still absorbed. Several times they

shouted to him, till finally he looked up, asking why they were disturbing him.

When

informed that the town had been almost demolished by an earthquake, that thousands

had been, and there was hardly time left for him to escape, he replied: "What is all

that to me?" and proudly exhibited his paper on which was a perfect waw, a

particularly difficult letter to make. “After many thousands of trials I have at last achieved one that is absolutely perfect,” he said, “and such a perfect letter is worth more than the whole city.” (Quoted in Welch, *Calligraphy* 34)

Islamic calligraphy developed into a number of recognizable styles— the vigorous, square kufic of early Islam, the beautiful, flowing thulth with its emphasis on the vertical alefs and lams, the elegant nashki and the small, fine letters of the nasta’liq. A later style, the shikastih, was the favored writing style of Qájár Iran. The word shikastih means “broken,” and the beauty of the letters lies in the sense of the delicately floating quality of the words with their long, drooping tails, almost like tresses of hair. This is one of the scripts employed by both the Báb and Bahá’Vlláh.

Islamic calligraphy also developed into another popular art form in which illustrated birds and beasts were made up of the letters of the Arabic alphabet.

Qádí Ahmad in his seventeenth-century treatise on calligraphers and painters wrote that a certain Mauláná Mahmud Chapnivis of Herat “invented a style of writing in which combinations of letters formed images of men and beasts” (Calligraphers 132-33). This technique has been variously dated as having begun in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It became particularly popular in the nineteenth century, with the most common subjects being those of a lion (associated with ‘All) or a bird, often a parrot, usually made up of the letters forming the quranic invocation hismtlláh al-rahmán al-rahim (in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) (figure 2). Mishkin-Qalam would prove himself to be proficient in all of these forms of calligraphy. Examples of the diversity of his calligraphic forms can be seen in his copy of some of the verses from *The Hidden Words of Baha u’lláh* in nasta’liq, shikastih, and naskh (figure 3). It was later in his career that he developed his proficiency in the depiction of calligraphic birds.

Mishkin-Qalam’s Early Years

When Áqá Husayn-i-Isfahání was about twenty-five years old, he set out for Mashhad to settle the business accounts of his late fnllier. The first leg of his

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Figure 2. ALBUM LEAF WITH CALLIGRAPHIC BIRD. A parrot formed of Arabic letters spelling out the Muslim invocation “In the name of God, the Merciful, the

Compassionate.” Iran, 1834-35. Cincinnati Art Museum, Fanny Bryce Lehmer Fund

Figure 3. Verses from The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh. The calligraphy is by Mishkin-Qalam

and is in the nasta'liq, naskh, and shikastih styles. 1881-82. Reprinted from

Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory 161

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journey, however, led him to Tehran, and it is here, the story goes, that his artistic abilities became known to the royal court when he did a quick sketch of

Nasiri'd-Din Sháh's Prime Minister as he walked through the bazaar.

According

to the accounts of this event, Mishkin-Qalam did this portrait in a technique known as khatt-i-nakhún in which the image is engraved with a fingernail into the back of a sheet. This encounter ultimately led to an appointment for Aqá Husayn-i-Isfahání as tutor to the Crown Prince. His work became known in the court, and Nasiri'd-Din Sháh himself was said to have given the artist the title

Mishkin-Qalam (Ishraq-KMvarí. Núrayn 72-83).

The central event in Mishkin-Qalam's life, however, was not his elevation to a high position in the Qájár court, but his encounter with the Bahá'í Faith.

This

encounter occurred on a leave of absence from the Shah's court when Mishkin-Qalam was returning to Isfahán to visit his family. On the way he met Siyyid Mihdi, a devout Bahá'í who told him about Bahá'u'lláh. In an interview in 1979

with Gol Aidun, Hand of the Cause Mr. 'Abdu'l-Qasim Faizi recounted the story of Mishkin-Qalam's acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith:

... before Mishkin Qalam accepted the Bahá'í Faith, he was a “dervish” with long, flowing hair, detached from the world and attached only to his calligraphy. One day, while he was breaking his journey, he was given a room to share with a stranger.

When Mishkin-Qalam entered the room, he greeted the stranger with the invocation

"Yá Alláh!" (O God!). The stranger who happened to be a Bahá'í, asked him whether

he knew God since he had mentioned His name. Mishkin-Qalam replied, “Of course.” The stranger replied, “No, for you must know the Prophet of your time to

know God.” The stranger then told Mishkin-Qalam all about Bahá'u'lláh, and by

dawn the latter accepted the BaháT' Faith and the next day accompanied the stranger

on his journey towards Baghdad and eventually came into the presence of BaháVUáh in Adrianople. (Aidun, "Mishkin-Qalam" 25)

In the unpublished second volume of his history, Nabil gives the account of how he found Mishkin-Qalam quite ill in the city of Aleppo. It was here that Mishkin-Qalam became truly confirmed in his new Faith (Nakhjavání, Four on an Island 22). 'AbduT-Bahá tells us that Mishkin-Qalam "crossed the great distances, measured out the miles, climbing mountains, passing over deserts and over the sea, until at last he came to A drianople" (present-day Edirne)

(Memorials 98). Here he found BaháV Uáh and became one of a group of devoted disciples happily willing to share Bahà'u'hàh's exile. In a

photograph

taken during this time period (figure 4), Mishkin-Qalam appears in the center of

the back row of a group of BaháTs residing in Edime (Balyuzi, King of Glory 242). Characteristically, he seems to be holding writing materials. After a time,

however, apparently on the order of BaháVUáh, Mishkin-Qalam went to nearby Istanbul where he created several specimens of calligraphy for the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdu'l-Aziz (Momen, Accounts 311). Unfortunately, Mishkin-Qalam

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had an enemy at court in the Persian ambassador who spoke out against him, and Mishkin-Qalam was ultimately jailed in 1867 for his association with the BaháTs

(Balyuzi, Eminent B ahd ís 271). M ishkin-Qalam was said to have been particularly distraught about this occurrence as he had no pen or paper with him.

To quote an account of the incident: ". . . at last, the officials succumbed to his

loud expostulations and, to obtain some peace, provided him with all the writings

material he needed, which greatly pacified him" (Balyuzi, King of Glory 252).

Figure 4. Mishkin-Qalam with the companions of BaháVUáh in Edime. Reprinted from

Balyuzi, Bahd itltáh: The King o f Glory 242

The Exile to Cyprus

However, greater calam ities were to come. In 1868, it was decided that BaháVUáh would be exiled to the prison-city of 'Akká in Palestine. His half-

brother Mtrzá-Yahyá, unsuccessful claimant to the leadership of the BaháT' community, would be sent to the prison in Famagusta on the island of Cyprus.

To insure that each faction would not operate independently of the other, the Ottoman authorities sent a group of followers of Mírzá-Yahyá with BaháVUáh to 'Akká and four followers of B aháV U áh with Mírzá-Yahyá to Cyprus

(Nakhjavání, Four on an Island). Mishkin-Qalam was one of the four sent to Cyprus. For a devoted follower of Bahá'í, this was a calamity of great dimension; in fact, one of the four exiled to Cyprus was so overcome with despair that he threw himself into the sea but was resuscitated by the sailors on

shipboard and sent on to the island (Balyuzi, King of Glory 269).

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Mishkin-Qalam was able to continue his calligraphy in spite of his imprisonment on Cyprus, and ultimately he was allowed to run a small teashop on the island. Several examples of his calligraphy remain to us from this period.

The piece illustrated in figure 5 dates from 1877, and the inscription states that

it was done in the ninth year of Mishkin-Qalam's captivity. The calligraphy is

of the letters contained in the name Husayn- 'Ali, the given name of Bahá'í, lláh,

Figure 5. Calligraphic design with the name of Husayn- 'Ali in the "mirror style." Created by Mishkin-Qalam in 1877 while in captivity in Famagusta. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, Israel

and was created in a style known as 'aynali, or mirror script. This type of design

consisted of a formula repeated to the right and to the left of an imaginary axis

and was particularly popular in the nineteenth century in Turkey (Schimmel, Islamic Calligraphy 11). Mishkin-Qalam could have developed his proficiency in the style during his stay at the Ottoman Court. The use of the given name for

Bahá'í may have served as a kind of personal announcement on the part of

Mishkin-Qalam that his faith in Bahá'í had not wavered in spite of nine years of imprisonment with the treacherous Mírzá-Yahyá and his followers.

A more elaborate work from the period on Cyprus can be seen in this double-page composition (figures 6 and 7). The inscription below states that it was made in Famagusta by "a prisoner of the love of God, He who is the help in

peril, the self-subsisting. These double facing pages were made by the servant at

the gate of Bahá, Mishkin-Qalam in the year 1295" (a.d. 1878). This

distinctive

signature appears in all of the major compositions of Mishkin-Qalam and includes within it references both to the Báb (the Gate) and Bahá'í.

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Figure 6. Right side of a double-page composition by Mishkin-Qalam. Famagusta, Cyprus, 1878. Courtesy of the National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois

Figure 7. Left side of a double-page composition by Mishkin-Qalam. Famagusta, Cyprus, 1878. Courtesy of the National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois

An interesting development in this work is what appears to be a kind of 'cut-out and pasted' floral design in which Mishkin-Qalam has decorated the piece with cut-out and pasted floral designs. This type of design echoes similar elements in Qajar

lacquer works and enamels, which have naturalistic floral decoration much like that which appears in the plumage of Mishkin-Qalam's birds. The odd tilt of the pointing finger in the neck of each bird is a more unusual

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The Release from Cyprus

In 1878 when Cyprus came under British jurisdiction, the Commissioner of Famagusta described Mishkin-Qalam (figure 9) in these words:

Maskin Kalam. From Korassom IKhurâsân. Allowed 660 Pias. per month. Sentence—for life. Been here 11 years. Came here at same time as Subbe Ezel. Sentenced for religious offence against Porte. 53 years old. Has two families, one here, and one in Persia. In appearance is a dried-up, shrivelled old man, with long hair almost to the waist. (Momen, Accounts 307)

Figure 9. Photograph of Mishkin-Qalam. Reprinted from Browne, Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion 44

A further description by the British authorities explains the reason for the imprisonment:

“They wished to invent some new religion, and, when pressed, fled from Persia and settled in Turkey. After a time they again tried to carry out their madness, and were

consequently condemned by the Turkish authorities to imprisonment for life.”
(Quoted in Momen, Accounts 306-7)

Mishkin-Qalam requested permission to leave Cyprus in 1878, but due to bureaucratic entanglements he had to wait until September 1886, when he was finally allowed to go to ‘Akká (Momen, Accounts 311). So it was that after nineteen years of exile Mishkin-Qalam was allowed to leave Cyprus and to join Bahá’ulláh. In a photograph probably dating from this period, the artist is shown in the back row, third from the right, with white hair, visibly aged from his long ordeal (figure 10). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a letter to the calligrapher to celebrate his return to the Bahá’Ts: “O thou divine Mishkin! A thousand praises

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Figure 10. Mishkin-Qalam (top row, third from right) with the companions of Bahá’ulláh in ‘Akká. Photograph courtesy of David L. Smith

be to the One True God that for years thou didst suffer in the path of the Heavenly Beauty, enduring separation, affliction and captivity, and no sooner was there some respite in restrictions, than thou didst hasten to the Most Great

Prison, turned thy face away from all else but Him . . . (quoted in

Nakhiavání. Four on an Island 51).

It was soon after his reunion with Bahá’ulláh and the community of the Bahá’Ts that Mishkin-Qalam painted this beautiful bird (figure 11) now in the

Figure 11. Rooster made up of the letters spelling out “In the name of God, the Most Glorious of the Glorious.” By Mishkin-Qalam.

Bahji, 1887-88. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University. Gift of John Goelet

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Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University. The body of the bird is composed of the letters making up the phrase *bismi’ulláh al-bahíyyu’l-abhá* (in the name of God the Most Glorious of the Glorious), an invocation common among the Bahá’Ts. The talon of the rooster rests upon an open book, which contains a lawh, or tablet, of Bahá’u’lláh that has been written in *shikastih*. The

Tablet is addressed to a follower named Dia and reads:

He is the Eternal! God bears witness that I have believed in the One at the mention

of whose name those brought near drink the wine of life and those who are sincere have drunk that which all in heaven and earth are powerless to comprehend, unless your Lord, the All-Knowing, and all-Wise, has wished them to do so. O Dia, be patient in adversity, content in worldly matters and firm in your conviction of truth. Be quick to strive for the good, be humble toward God and be one who overlooks the shortcomings of other men. Be one who turns from foolish passions and hastens to the Truth. Be one who is compassionate in the presence of sin. Be one who upholds God's covenant and is firm in God's cause. This wronged one counsels you to these things and to the fear of God. He counsels you to fidelity and truthfulness, both are incumbent upon you. Truly, both are incumbent upon you. Blessed are you and blessed is the one who loves you for the sake of God. Woe to the one who annoys you and turns from what God has commanded. (This translation appears in Welch, Calligraphy, cat. no. 71)

A large cartouche at the side of the page contains Mishkin-Qalam's distinctive signature "The servant at the Gate of Bahá, Mishkin-Qalam, year 1305" (a.d. 1887-88).

Some Unusual Works by Mishkin-Qalam

A later piece of calligraphy dated 1890 contains a different theme, that of a human face (figure 12). A work like this has connections to Bahá'í themes but can also be seen to have roots in the Iranian mystical traditions. In fact, before his association with the Bahá'ís, Mishkin-Qalam was a Sufi, a member of the Ni'matu'lláhi order (Balyuzi, Eminent Bahá'is 270). Therefore, it would not be surprising that Mishkin-Qalam would have been influenced by some of the older Sufi traditions, among them the concepts that had been developed in the fourteenth century by Fadlulláh of Astarábád. Among other ideas Fadlulláh stressed the importance of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and their numerical values. Those who followed these ideas were called Hurúfís (the name derives from the Arabic harf (singular)/ huruf (plural) meaning "letters" (Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. "Hurúfí" 3:600-601). This is, of course, an ancient concept already well developed in the Phoenician, Greek, and Hebrew traditions and prevalent in the Eastern Mediterranean area for centuries. It emerged in Islam in

the abjad, a system in which each letter of the alphabet was assigned a specific numerical value. Both the Báb and Bahà'uTlàh used this system, as it made
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Figure 12. Calligraphic design
in the shape of a human face.
By Mishkin-Qalam . 1890.
Courtesy of the National
Bahà'i Archives, Wilmette,
Illinois

their writings more accessible to those trained in the ancient traditions. The Hurúfís themselves placed so much emphasis on the sacred nature of letters and numbers that, for them, all of the letters and their numerical values represented the total of all the emanating and creative possibilities of God and were indeed, God Himself made manifest (Schimmel, *Islamic Culture* 106). Thus the Arabic letters were the archetypes for the entire cosmos (Bausani, "Mystical Language" 234). It was the Hurúfí belief that this divine writing appeared in creation in the faces of humanity itself and that the features of the human physiognomy were reminiscent of the shapes of various letters:

The four eyelids and the two eyebrows and hair of the head, there are seven lines, O just God. Those who had insight and have been granted 'ilm al-kitáb can understand the secret written in the human face. (Schimmel, *Islamic Culture* 106)

Another description reads:

Between the two eyes ('ayn) of the friend from the nun of the eyebrows to the mim of the mouth the nose has drawn an alef on the face of silver. (Schimmel, *Islamic Culture* 107) [Authors' note: 'ayn, nun, mim, alef are all letters in the Persian and Arabic alphabets.]

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The Hurúfí ideas spread into India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A poet in the eighteenth century wrote:

Your face is like a Qur'an copy without correction and mistake which the Pen of Fate has written exclusively from musk. Your eyes and your mouth are verses and the dot for stopping, your eyebrows the madda, eyelashes the sign of declension, the mole and the down the letters and the dots. (Schimmel, Islamic Culture 107)

[Authors' note: The madda is a diacritical mark in Arabic.]

Clearly, Mishkin-Qalam has been strongly influenced by these traditions but has recast them with a Bahá'í meaning. Returning to the calligraphic face (figure 12), one may read the poetry in the cartouches to the side, which can be translated: "From the Dawn of Eternity, O most Sublime of the Sublime, on the surface of the faces of humanity has been written the name-Bahá." The letters making up the head and face are more difficult to read. In fact, it is one of the characteristics of this style that it be like a puzzle, difficult to comprehend and not clear at first, or even second, glance. The letters making up the hair and face (eyes, eyebrows, nose, and hair) of this figure appear to spell out the phrase yá 'á lfu l-'alá' (O Most Sublime of the Sublime) while the ears, the border of the face, and the neck seem to spell out yá ibn al-haqq (O Son of Truth).¹ The use of the number nine in the eye area reflects the importance of this number in Bábi and Bahá'í traditions. In the Bahá'í teachings the number nine suggests the unity of all the other numbers in that it is the last new number before the progression begins again. In the abjad reckoning the number nine is the total of the numbers assigned to the letters in the word Balm and thus a symbol for Bahá'u'lláh. Therefore as the poem suggests, the name Bahá is written upon the human face.

1. The authors have spent many hours struggling with this difficult calligraphic puzzle and would welcome further suggestions for its interpretation. In connection with the use of the word haqq (Truth), which is given such prominence in the face, it is interesting to note that in Bahá'u'lláh's time there existed in the areas around Baghdad and northern Mesopotamia a group of people calling themselves ahl-i-haqq (The People of the Truth). In the early days of Islam, these people believed in the divinity of 'Alí and were known generally as the 'Alíyū'láhi. With the advent of the Baha'í

Revelation, a number of prominent leaders of this group became ardent followers of Bahà'u'lláh; one composed a book in which he pointed out the prophecies of their ancient texts that had all been fulfilled in the coming of the Báb and Baha'u'llah. Sidq-'Ali, a dervish from this background, met Bahá'Vlláh in the mountains of Sulimaniyyih and became such a devoted follower that while Bahà'u'Uáh was in the barracks of 'Akká He set aside a special night each year that would be dedicated to the dervish Sidq-'Ali (Balyuzi, Eminent Bahá'is 314-21). Perhaps further research on this topic will establish a link between Mishkin-Qalam's use of the word haqq in his calligraphic face and the tradition of these devoted followers of Baha'u'llah.

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Above the head we can see a calligraphic arrangement, which the Bahá'is refer to as the *ism-i-a'zam*, or the Greatest Name of God. Islamic tradition holds that there are ninety-nine beautiful names of God, but the Greatest Name is that name "when called by which He (God) answers and when asked by which He gives" (Encyclopedia of Islam, s.v. "dhikr" 2:223-27). For the Sufis, "the hope of discovering the Greatest Name of God has inspired many a Sufi who dreamed of reaching the highest bliss in this world and the next by means of this blessed name" (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 25). For the Bahá'is the sacred character of the Greatest Name of God, "Yá Bahá'u'l - A b h á ushers in the time of the end when all of the prophecies of God are fulfilled and the seekers of the Greatest Name of God will find their desire.

In a final version of the themes that fascinated Mishkin-Qalam, we can see in another work (figure 13) a bringing together of a number of his symbolic elements. Again, the double birds appear holding open books containing verses from *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. The use of the mirror-image of the birds may suggest the Twin Manifestations of God, the Báb and Bahá'V lláh, who are both the Heralds and the Proclaimers of the new age. Behind them, like the Sun of Truth, the face of Light (Bahá) arises from the Dawn of Eternity. One is reminded of the description of the Seventh Valley of Bahá'V lláh in which "on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness,

and
the meaning of ‘All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord .
..’
(Qur’àn 55:26-27) is made manifest” (BaháVlláh, Seven Valleys 37).
(Readers

Figure 13. Double birds and a human face. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual
Department of
the BaháT World Centre, Haifa, Israel

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are, of course, reminded that this “face” is meant only in symbolic terms,
for the
Supreme Deity is not thought of as being anthropomorphic in either the Islamic
or BaháT traditions).

In looking at the work of Mishkin-Qalam, we may have an interesting
glimpse of the development of imagery in the early stages of a religion. The
Baha’i Faith at its beginnings faced the same challenge Christianity did,
that is,
a working out of its relationship to the religion from which it first developed
and a determining of the extent to which its followers still identified with
the
traditions of their ancestors or the extent to which they struggled to create
images that would suggest something new. Although Mishkin-Qalam's art work
is well within the Islamic idiom of the time in which it was created, its
purpose
was different and that was essentially to proclaim the advent of a new faith.
The
old visual vocabulary of the Islamic tradition was charged with new meanings
and expressed a new message to the viewer. The use of letters to make up these
images specifically recalls Shi’ih messianic beliefs that when the Qà’im
appears
“the entire cosmos (although seemingly the same as before) is in reality
destroyed and then recreated anew by the Word of the Divine Manifestation”
(Bausani, “Mystical Language” 238).

Mishkin-Qalam’s Last Years

In the later years of his life, Mishkin-Qalam travelled to Egypt, Damascus, and
India where he became involved in the first publications of the BaháT Faith in
that land. He wrote the words of the BaháT' Revelation in his beautiful hand
so
that they could be mass printed for others to read (Balyuzi, Eminent Bahdís
121). Mishkin-Qalam also continued his figurai compositions as in this work
done in India and dated 1905 (figure 14). The familiar double birds are
present,
yet their type has been changed from a rooster to that of a dove with a long,

drooping tail. The birds hold open books that contain verses from Bahà'u'lláh's Hidden Words', Mishkin-Qalam's signature is at the lower center portion in a decorative cartouche. The birds turn around to face a tree, which also contains a section of the The Hidden Words. The center tree must surely refer to the Sadratu'l-Muntahá, "the Divine Lote-Tree." Described in the Qur'án, this was the " 'Tree beyond which neither men nor angels can pass,' and which stands in the Seventh Heaven, the highest Paradise, at the right hand of the throne of God" (Gail, introduction Epistle by Bahá'Vlláh, xiii). The calligraphic page brings to mind the following passage from Bahà'u'Uàh's Epistle to the Son of the Wolf:

O Shavkh! Thou hast heard the sweet melodies of the Doves of Utterance cooing on the boughs of the Lote-Tree of Knowledge. Harken, now, unto the notes of the Birds of Wisdom upraised in the Most Sublime Paradise. . . . Give ear unto that which the Tongue of Might and Power hath spoken in the Books of God. . . . At this moment a Voice was raised from the Lote-Tree beyond which there is no passing, in the heart of the Most Sublime Paradise, bidding Me relate unto thee that which hath been sent

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Figure 14. Two doves at the Sadratu'l-Muntahá. Bombay, 1905. Design and calligraphy by Mishkin-Qalam. A photograph of this piece, the location of which is now unknown, was sent to the authors by Gol Aidun

Figure 15. A photograph of Mishkin-Qalam near the end of his life.

Reprinted from Balyuzi, Bahá'u'Uàh: King of Glory 249

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down in the Books and Tablets, and the things sfj/ikdn by My Forerunner (the Báb), Who laid down His life for this Great Announcement. . . . (Bahà'u'Hàh, Epistle 140-41)

It was only at the very end of his life that Mishkin-Qalam returned once again to Bahji (figure 15). Hearing that the calligrapher was old and weak, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá requested that Mishkin-Qalam return to ‘Akká in the year 1905.

One of Mishkin-Qalam’s last services to the BaháT Faith was to design the calligraphic inscriptions carved on the marble sarcophagus given by the BaháTs of Burma to hold the remains of the Báb. In an emotional memorial service held on March 21, 1909, the sarcophagus was set into the hillside tomb built by ‘Abdu’l-Bahà on the slopes of Mount Carmel. The signature of Mishkin-Qalam appears on the sarcophagus; indeed, his first wish had been to sign himself as the servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahà. But, at ‘Abdu’l-Bahà’s order, the signature was

changed to the characteristic “servant at the Gate (Báb) of Bahá”

(Mooghen,

“Khoshnevisán-i-BaháT” 147). Mishkin-Qalam was cared for at Bahji until his

death in 1912. ‘Abdu’l-Bahà tells how “when I was absent, he left this darksome,

narrow world and hastened away to the land of lights” (Memorials 101).

There is a moving portrait of Mishkin-Qalam in his old age, which appears in a novel by E. S. Stevens entitled *The Mountain of God* :

An old, old man whose scanty white hair flowed half-way to his waist beneath his

turban, sat on a bed within a simple little room. He wore the native Persian dress. . . .

An elaborate specimen of Persian script in black and gold, framed and hung on the

wall was the only ornament which the room boasted. . . . “And now, Mírzá Mushkín, I beg you to show me the writing if it is finished. . . .” The old man

shuffled off the bed, and going to a wooden chest took from it, after a little search, a

roll of parchment-like paper. Then he drew his tottering old limbs beneath him on the

bed again, and handed the roll to the Persian. . . .

“Your hand does not shake!”

“Eh hamdu’lillâh! My hand is sure. They do not understand how to write nowadays, they are too quick. The values of the letters are nothing to them.

They

even write on tables. There is only one way to write perfectly, and that is to hold the

paper in the palm of the hand. And when one is learning, one should practise by night—there is no light like candlelight. But there are few who can write. .

. . .”

His spare white hair, long like a woman’s, betokening his rank, gave him an eldritch look, as if something not of this world. But there was a youthful

triumph in

his worn, old eyes that had worked so long over the making of beautiful things.
(Stevens, Mountain 110-12)²

2. Excerpts from this novel are reprinted in World Order 4.3 (Spring, 1970):
28-52.

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