10.20378/irb-57646

'The Aroma of a Tulip'

Negotiating Readability and Design in Ottoman Calligraphy

Bilal Badat

Introduction[1]

A prominent and persistent thread in the field of Islamic calligraphy is the attempt to study the relationship between the word and image. In recent years, the scriptural, symbolic, iconic, and indexical aspects of calligraphy have been analysed through multiple theoretical perspectives. Such research has been undertaken in recognition of both the difficulty of grasping the symbolic and aesthetic language implemented in calligraphic works, as well as in respect of the analytical challenge of defining 'Islamic calligraphy' itself.[2] To borrow a quote from Irvin Cemil Schick, calligraphy is "deeply polysemic," capable of being 'read' in a multiplicity of ways.[3] Central to this 'reading' of Islamic calligraphy is the question of whether calligraphy is intended to be read, in a literal sense, as text, or looked at as an object of art, an interrogation set in motion by the existence of numerous inscriptions and calligraphic compositions that possess, at least ostensibly, a questionable relationship with readability. This paper seeks to contribute to this

[1] A Note on Orthography: Ottoman calligraphic terms, and the names of Ottoman calligraphers and authors have been transliterated following the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration system for Turkish. Hence, the Qur'anic invocation which precedes the chapters of the Qur'an known as the *basmala* in Arabic ('In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful') is given the Turkish transliteration of *besmele,* and the scripts *thuluth* and *naskh* are given as *sülüs* and *nesih*. The transliteration system used for Arabic texts and Arabic letters is that of the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) for Arabic.

[2] Cf., for example, Blair, Sheila: *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006; Schick, İrvin Cemil: "The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey". *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53–54 (Spring–Autumn 2008), pp. 211–224; Gharipour, Mohammad – İrvin Cemil Schick (eds.): *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013; Schick, İrvin Cemil: "The Content of Form: Islamic Calligraphy between Text and Representation". In: *Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300–1600 ce)*. Eds. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak – Jeffrey F. Hamburger. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2016, pp. 173–194; Kokoschka, Alina: "Reading between the Line – Arabic Script, Islamic Calligraphy, and the Question of Legibility". In: *Ways of Knowing Muslim Cultures and Societies. Studies in Honour of Gudrun Krämer*. Eds. Bettina Gräf – Birgit Krawietz – Schirin Amir-Moazami. Leiden: Brill, 2018, pp. 246–264; and Ekhtiar, Maryam D.: *How to Read Islamic Calligraphy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.

[3] Schick 2008, p. 211.

critical debate, not by offering an alternative interpretation of Islamic calligraphy, but by increasing the aperture of analysis to focus on how Ottoman calligraphers approached the question of legibility versus design. This is achieved in the main through a study of process; that is to say, through a study of the artistic journeys taken by master calligraphers in the development of calligraphic compositions, taking into full consideration their training as apprentices, and also how master calligraphers negotiated legibility with the diversity of traditional aesthetic principles upon which calligraphic works were constructed. As this paper contends, although Ottoman calligraphers privileged readability in a composition, calligraphic works cannot fully be conceptualised in terms of the mutual exclusion of legibility and design, but rather, through a recognition of the chorus of values that prevailed upon a final design, including legibility, proportion, balance, and harmony.

Pedagogy and the Ottoman Apprenticeship

In seeking to investigate attitudes towards legibility and design in the Ottoman period, a rewarding point of entry is the traditional apprenticeship in calligraphy. This rigorous period of training was the fiery crucible in which true calligraphers were formed, and it was during this phase of education that calligraphers were inculcated with the technical expertise, aesthetic values, and ethical guidelines for practice that subsisted and sustained their artistic careers. By subjecting the content of the apprenticeship curriculum to historical enquiry (alongside an examination of how the curriculum was taught) in particular, one can arrive at a critical awareness of how master calligraphers defined the art of calligraphy to their apprentices. This definitive process, enacted by master calligraphers throughout the apprentice's training, is embodied by the transmission of a knowledge that encompassed a trinity of meanings (amongst others) for the disciple that are relevant for the purpose of this study: the definition of what calligraphy should look like (its visual attributes), what calligraphy consisted of (the texts to be transcribed), and what constituted 'mastery' in calligraphy. In recognition of the pivotal role played by the master in defining what calligraphy is for his disciples, therefore, this paper takes seriously, at both an epistemological and referential level, the teachings and practices of the master as information that is of primary importance to an art historical study of calligraphy. Although it may be argued that privileging the perspective of the master calligrapher as being the judge of how calligraphy should ideally be is to endorse just one authority claim among many within the cultural phenomenon of Ottoman calligraphy, it must be reiterated that master calligraphers were central to the production of calligraphy, and also controlled who could be licensed as a calligrapher in Ottoman society. As such, this paper privileges master calligraphers as invariably the final legitimate

and authoritative arbiter of what constitutes calligraphy according to the Ottoman tradition.

Stages of the Apprenticeship

Although the incremental stages of the apprenticeship in Ottoman calligraphy have been published elsewhere, it will be instructive to take a preparatory pause to reiterate the content of each stage in order to fully contextualise the following discussion.[4] At the first stage of the apprentice's training, the master would copy out a model line of calligraphy (*meşk*) in front of his student known as the *Rabbi Yassir*, a short prayer invoking God to remove any potential difficulties that may lay ahead, and requesting that the student's journey ends with blessings: *Rabbi yassir wa lātu'assir. Rabbi tammim bi'l khayr*, 'O Lord make it easy and do not make it difficult. O Lord may it end in goodness.'[5] After writing the line, the master would append the letters with a series of symbols or auxiliary aids that articulated the precise formal attributes and dimensions of the individual strokes (cf. fig. 1 for an example of appended auxiliary aids).[6] These dimensions were governed by a strict proportional system based on the *nokta*, a rhomboid shaped dot that was employed as a fixed unit of measurement. The *nokta* itself was fashioned by making a diagonal movement of the pen towards the bottom right, thus creating an active square with roughly equal sides. Crucially, the length of each side of the *nokta* was exactly the same as the width of the nib of the pen, thus creating a flexible unit of measurement which could be applied to any size or format of calligraphy.[7]

Following the completion of the line the master would underline the calligraphy exercise, or *meşk*, with a double looped horizontal line (known as the *saʿy*), and instruct the new disciple to imitate the entire line of calligraphy to the best of his ability, and bring his own *meşk* for corrections the following week.[8] This instructive process marked the beginning of the apprentice's training, a training that, if

[4] Cf., for example, Serin, Muhittin: "Meşk". In: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 29 (2004), pp. 372–374, pp. 373–374; Derman, M. Uğur: "Hattat". In: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 16 (1997), 493–499, pp. 494–497. For a complete published late-Ottoman curriculum, cf. a facsimile of an album of Mehmed Şevki Efendi's *meşk*s. Şevki Efendi, Mehmed: *Şevki Efendi'nin Sülüs ve Nesih Meşk Murakkaı*. Prepared by Muhittin Serin. Istanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyâtı, 2011.
[5] Serin 2004, pp. 373–374; Derman 1997, pp. 494–496.
[6] Yazır, Mahmud Bedreddin: *Medeniyet Aleminde Yazı ve İslam Medeniyetinde Kalem Güzeli*, I and II, second edition. Prepared by M. Uğur Derman. Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası A.Ş., 1981, p. 208.
[6] Yazır, *Kalem Güzeli*, p. 203.
[7] Yazır, *Kalem Güzeli*, p. 203.
[8] Serin 2004, 374; Derman 1997, p. 495. Known as the *saʿy*, this double looped line was an artistic interpretation of the Arabic word *saʿy* (deriving from the Arabic triliteral root *sīn-ʿayn-yāʾ*) translating as both 'persevere' and 'work hard'). For examples, cf. Şevki Efendi, *Şevki Efendi'nin Sülüs ve Nesih Meşk Murakkaı*, p. 16; Derman, M. Uğur: "Ölümünün 30. Yıldönümünde Reîsü'l Hattâtîn Kâmil Akdik". In: *Ömrümün Bereketi*: 1. Istanbul: Kubbealtı, 2011, pp. 112–123, p. 117.

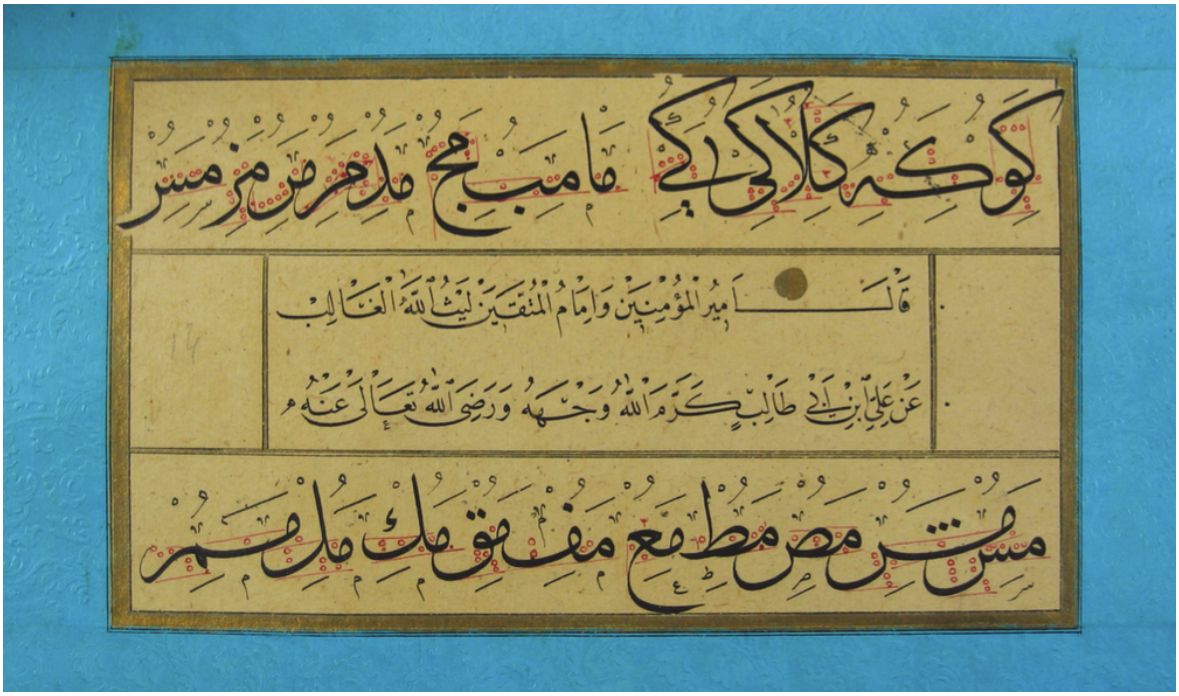

Fig. 1: The *müfredât* exercises; *kāf-wāw* to *mīm-mīm* in the *sülüs* script (upper and lower line). The auxiliary aids articulating the precise formal attributes of the letters can be observed here (small circles are used here in lieu of noktas). From an album of calligraphic practices (*meşk murakkaı*) written by Mehmed Şevki Efendi, dated 1276/1859–60 (Süleymaniye Library, Yazma Bağışlar, 02637). ©Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı

successful, would result in the investiture of the authority to practice and teach calligraphy.

Once the student completed his attempt at imitating his master's model line, he would bring his *meşk* to the master for corrections at the following session.[9] During the corrections, the master would review and revise any letters that did not meet his approval by demonstrating the student's mistakes in a different colour ink. This corrective process was known as the *çıkartma* or *harf çıkartma*, literally meaning to 'extract' or 'take out.'[10] If the corrections were too great in number, then the student would be instructed to repeat the lesson until he demonstrated enough proficiency in imitating the model line. Upon reaching this point, the student would be allowed to pass onto the next lesson, which consisted of the letters of the Arabic alphabet (*hurûf* or *hurûf-ı mukattaa*), arranged in alphabetical

The *saʿy* appears on Ottoman *meşk*s from as early as the fifteenth century. Cf. for example, a *saʿy* appended to a late fifteenth/early sixteenth century model line written by Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 926/1520), reproduced in Rado, Şevket: *Türk Hattatları*. Istanbul: Yayın Matbaacılık, 1984, p. 52.

[9] Serin 2004, p. 374.

[10] Serin 2004, p. 374. For examples of *çıkartma*s cf. a corrected *meşk* held in the Istanbul University Library of Rare Manuscripts. Unsigned and undated, most likely nineteenth century (İÜK H 001388), a *çıkartma* administered by Mehmed Hûlûsî Efendi (d. 1264/1847–48) on one of his student's writings. (Süleymaniye Library, Yazma Bağışlar 2783), and a *çikartma* of Hamid Aytaç's calligraphy, possibly by Hacı Nazîf Bey (d. 1331/1913) (undated), reproduced in Kazan, Hilal: *Hasan Çelebi*. Istanbul: İstanbul Ticaret Odası, 2013, p. 113.

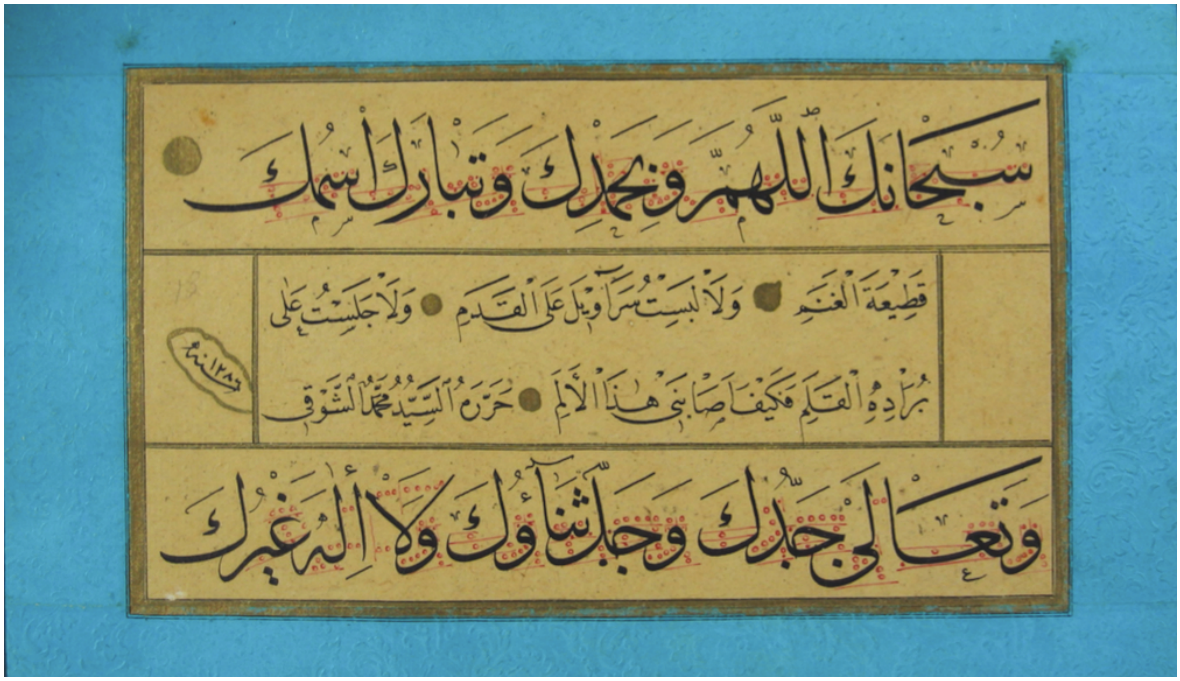

Fig. 2: The *subhânek* exercise from the *murekkebât* stage of the apprenticeship (see fn. 13 for a full translation). The *subhânek* is accompanied by a balanced distribution of diacritical markers to ensure readability. From an album of calligraphic practices (*meşk murakkaı*) written by Mehmed Ṣevki Efendi, dated 1276/1859–60 (Süleymaniye Library, Yazma Bağışlar, 02637). ©Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı

order and written in their unconnected and singular forms.[11] Much like in the *Rabbi Yassir* phase, a similar process of correction and repetition would ensue until the student had completed the letters to the master’s satisfaction.

In this respect, at a very early stage in his education, the student was inculcated with the awareness that his success or failure as a calligrapher was contingent on two distinct elements: firstly, the degree to which the student was able to imitate his master’s letters. And secondly, his ability to work within the rules upon which the master’s writing was constructed. These notions were further articulated when the student committed too many errors, in which case the student would be forced to repeat the initial lesson over and over again until he had demonstrated enough proficiency in imitating the master’s model line. As the surviving *meşk*s and *çıkartma*s show, this process of correction during the initial *Rabbi Yassir* phase could endure for any space of time between three months to three years.[12] The Ottoman pedagogical methods of commendation and criticism thus reflected a system of education which rewarded conformity and punished individuality; artistic license had no place here, and it was only through the imitation

[11] Serin 2004, p. 373; Derman 1997, p. 495.

[12] Derman, M. Uğur: “Ölümünün yirmibeşinci yıldönümünde Tuğrakeş İsmâîl Hakkı Altunbezer”. In: *Ömrümün Bereketi*: 1. Istanbul: Kubbealtı, 2011, pp. 92–105, p. 96; and Eriş, Muin: *Hat Sanatında Vazifeli Bir Hattat Hamid Aytaç*. Istanbul: İBB Kültür A.Ş. Yayınları, 2011, p. 185.

of the master's style and the respecting of traditional values that the student could progress to next phase of learning. Calligraphy was thus defined by an extraordinarily specific configuration of forms and aesthetic values through a pedagogical technique that made it abundantly clear how calligraphy *should* appear at the most fundamental level.

After completing the individual letters the student could then move on to the *müfredât* (fig. 1), a series of compound two-letter combinations, and after that, the student could advance through a series of sentences known as the *mürekkebât* (fig. 2). These sentences typically included verses of the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*s (collected traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), pious phrases and prayers, *kasîde*s (poems or odes), and a mnemonic device known as the *ebced hesabı* (also known as the *ebced hurûfâtı*).[13] The primary purpose of the *mürekkebât* exercises was to instill an awareness within the student of how to connect letters into word units, and word units into full sentences that conformed to the stipulated rules of balance, layout, and spacing.

Once the student had completed all of the necessary assignments, he would be granted his *icâzet* (fig. 3), a certificate or license which finally permitted the student to sign works with his own name, and pass on his knowledge to his own apprentices.[14] For the *icâzet*, the master would choose a Qur'anic verse, *ḥadīth* or sometimes a *hilye* (a composition consisting of a text which describes the Prophet Muhammad) written by another master calligrapher, and instruct the student to imitate the work to the best of his ability. If successful, the master calligrapher, alongside a number of other master calligrapher counter-signatories, would sign the student's work with a short commentary affirming that, by the grace of God,

[13] Serin 2004, pp. 373–374; Derman 1997, p. 495. The *ebced hesâbı* facilitated the memorisation of the numerical value assigned to each letter of the Arabic alphabet. Cf. Uzun, Mustafa "Ebced". In: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 10 (1994), pp. 68–70, p. 68. Although a significant number of surviving *meşk murakkaı*s (albums of calligraphic exercises) conclude with the *subhânek* exercise (translated as: "Glory be to Thee, O God, In Your praise may Your name be blessed, Your realm exalted, Your Majesty commended, and there is no God but thee"), these albums can be contrasted with those that do not follow a fixed order of sentences. Furthermore, in some instances, master calligraphers would instruct their students to develop their own compositions based on a particular text without relying on a prior example to imitate (cf. Serin 2004, p. 374). For examples of *meşk*s that conclude with the *subhânek*, cf. a *meşk murakkaı* written by Hocazâde Mehmed Enverî (d. 1106/1695) (Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul, Yazma Bağışlar, 0031), a *meşk murakkaı* written by Mehmed Şevki Efendi, dated 1276/1859 (Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul, Yazma Bağışlar, 02637), and a *meşk murakkaı* written by Derviş Ali (d. 1084/1673) (dated 1077/1666) (Sakıp Sabancı Museum Collection, 120–0380). For examples of those that continue beyond the *subhânek* cf. an anonymous *meşk murakkaı* dated 1127/1715 which includes the *Qaṣīdat al-Burda* ('Poem of the Mantle', a 13th century ode in praise of the Prophet Muhammad composed by the Egyptian mystic Imām al-Būṣīrī (d. 695/1294)) in the *sülüs* script, and *Sūrat al-ʿAṣr* in the *nesih* script (Istanbul University Library Collection, Istanbul, H001242), and a *meşk murakkaı* written by Hafız Osman (1110/1698) (Istanbul University Library Collection, Istanbul, 6478) which also includes the *Kasîde-i Burda*.

[14] Tabrizi, Mohammad Al Karimzadeh: *Ijazat Nameh. The Most Unique and Precious Document in Ottoman Calligraphy*. London 1999, pp. 1–2.

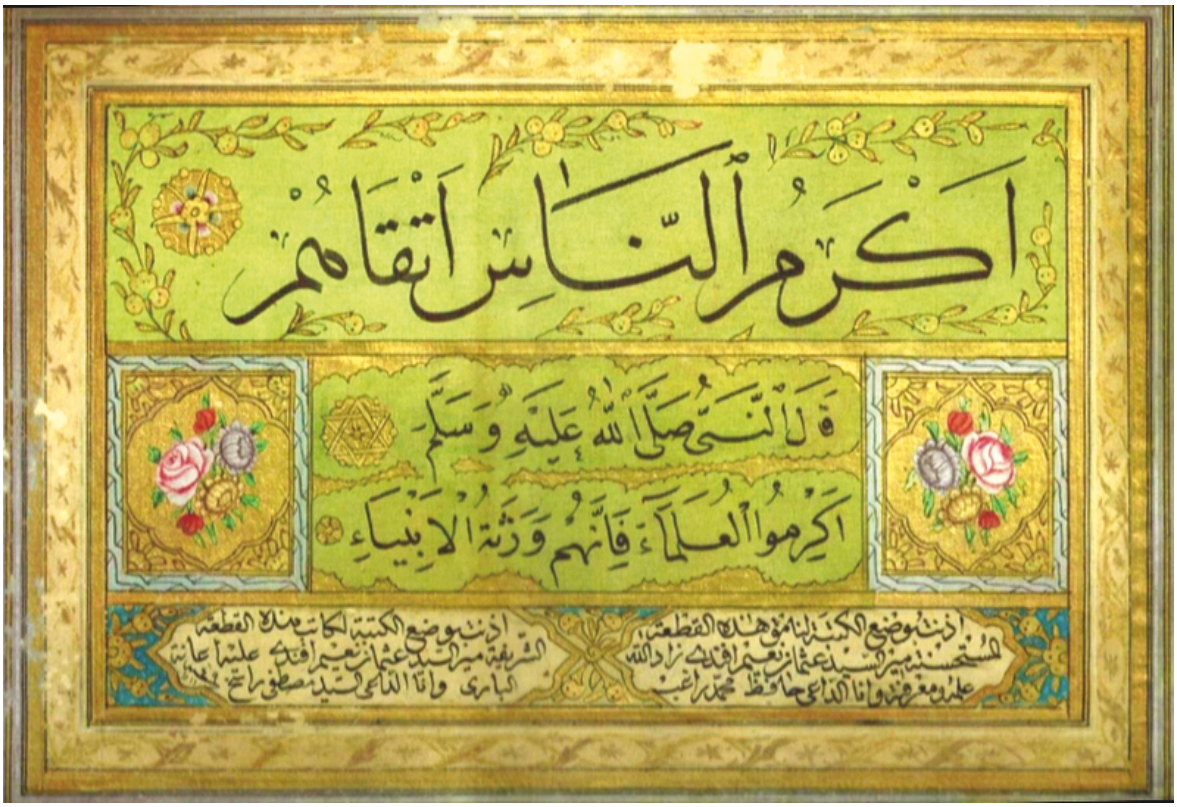

Fig. 3: An *icâzetnâme* granted to Mîr Seyyid Osman Naʿîm Efendi and signed by Hafız Mehmed Râgib and Mustafa Râsih. *Sülüs* and *nesih* scripts. Dated 1249/1833 (Istanbul University Library of Rare Manuscripts, H001160–0001) ©Istanbul Üniversitesi Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi

the student had successfully completed his apprenticeship and was now a master calligrapher.[15]

Taken against the backdrop of the apprenticeship therefore, the *icâzet* can be recognised as the culmination of years of critical and corrective processes that engendered within the graduated apprentice an idea of how calligraphy *should* (and more often than not, *shouldn't*) look, and thoroughly established a solid foundation for artistic practice. As confirmed by a significant number of surviving *meşk murakkaı*s (albums of calligraphic exercises consisting of *meşk*s arranged in chronological order and pasted onto boards to form foldable albums (*murakka*, cf. figs. 1 and 2), this curriculum concluded with the copying of sentences completed in a series of horizontal lines, a fact that draws forth two observations pertinent to this study.[16]

Firstly, it is evident from the vantage point of the master calligrapher (who established to a significant degree the parametric boundaries of what defines and constitutes calligraphy), that one of the most essential artistic requisites of mastery is the ability to compose and transcribe texts consisting of sentences that fol-

[15] Derman 1997, p. 496.
[16] For examples, cf. fn. 13.

lowed the prescribed rules of writing. As a study of the surviving *mürekkebât* reveals, apprentices were not taught how to compose complex compositions (such as *istif* compositions, discussed in further detail below), but texts that unfolded in a horizontal and clear linear format, including verses of the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, the *besmele*, the *hilye*, verses of religious poetry, and a miscellany of pious phrases and prayers. These texts are clearly legible with an easily identifiable sequence of words, and their readability is increased by the accompaniment of diacritical marks that follow very specific rules of spacing and construction (fig. 2). At the most fundamental level, therefore, the primary objective of calligraphy as an artistic medium was to actualise the transcription of texts in a beautiful and legible form. The absolute necessity of these twin requirements was firmly ingrained within the student through numerous cycles of correction and repetition, the enforcement of which ensured that the student coded a legible text that followed the rules of calligraphy as a 'correct' and 'successful' composition, and that that readability was a rarefied attribute to aspire towards.

A further observation that can be elicited through a study of the curriculum is that the exercises primarily consisted of sacred texts. This characteristic bears consideration in light of the fact that for Muslims, the Qur'an is the literal Word of God; when transcribed, Qur'anic calligraphy is both the symbol, as well as that which is symbolised. As such, Muslims deemed it necessary for the Qur'an to be written in a format unconducive to false reading, for to do so could misconstrue the Words of God. Although *ḥadīth*s, pious phrases, and religious poetry are not necessarily the literal Word of God, it was nevertheless important for both aesthetic (the poetics of reading) as well as ethical, spiritual, theological, and legal reasons that they be written in a clear and concise manner.[17] This mandate is heavily reflected in the manner of transcription of these texts in the *mürekkebât* sentences, which utilise both the *sülüs* and *nesih* scripts to transmit the texts in a highly legible format. To develop the aforesaid conclusion further, therefore, for

[17] The socio-cultural, political, and theological determinants that necessitated the readability of inscriptions and compositions have been discussed in detail elsewhere. Cf., for example, Tabbaa, Yasser: *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*. Washington: University of Washington Press, 2002 (particularly chapters two and three); Necipoğlu, Gülrü: "Qur'anic Inscriptions on Sinan's Imperial Mosques: A Comparison with Their Safavid and Mughal Counterparts". In: *Word of God – Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions*. Ed. Fahmida Suleman. Oxford: Institute of Ismaili Studies Conference Proceedings, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 69–104. Talip Mert has also documented archival evidence describing some of the ceremonies and rituals that accompanied the hanging of certain *istif* compositions. Both Mert and Hilal Kazan have discussed the active participation of state officials in selecting specific texts for calligraphic composition. Cf. Mert, Talip: "Archival Evidence on the Commissioning of Architectural Calligraphy in the Ottoman Empire". In: *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*. Eds. Mohammad Gharipour – Irvin Cemil Schick. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 230–252, p. 241; and Kazan, Hilal: "On the Renewal of the Calligraphy at the Mosque of the Prophet (al-Masjid al-Nabawī) under the Reign of Sultan Abdülmecid". In: *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*. Eds. Mohammad Gharipour – Irvin Cemil Schick. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 253–274, p. 255.

Fig. 4: A *celi sülüs istif* composition written by Sâmi Efendi (d. 1330/1912), prepared as a *kalıp* (stencil designed for reproduction*): jannāti ʿadnin mufattaḥatan lahumu l-abwābu*, 'Gardens of Eden, whereof the gates are opened for them' (Qurʾan 38:50). Dated 1328/1910. Reproduced with permission from the Süleyman Berk Collection.

a writing to be considered calligraphy, sacred texts should be legible, and mastery is achieved through transcribing sacred texts in a beautiful and readable form.

The Layered Composition *(istif)*

The overriding emphasis in this paper thus far on linear successional sentences should not imply that the designing of composite and multilayered compositions was of peripheral concern to Ottoman master calligraphers. On the contrary, the stacked composition, or *istif*, was a noteworthy barometer for a calligrapher's individual style, visual acumen, and aptitude for successful design, especially from the 18th century onwards.[18] The visual format of the *istif* perfectly mirrors the semantic content of the assigned term, literally meaning to 'stack,' 'layer,' or 'arrange.'[19] Typically *istif*s comprise a text (verses from the Qur'an, traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, pious phrases, verses of poetry, names of prophets and

[18] Although there are many examples of complex layered calligraphic compositions in the early Ottoman period, particularly within architectural settings, the presence of layered compositions proliferated from the late 18th century onwards in tandem with the increasing popularity of the *levha* form. Cf. Blair, Sheila, *Islamic Calligraphy*, p. 500.

[19] Bedruddin Yazır also uses the more specific term *'girift yazı istifi'* (interlaced calligraphic stacked composition) or *'girift istifi'* (interlaced stacked composition) to describe more composite and layered *istif*s. The term *istif*, as it is used throughout this paper, refers to both simple and composite *istif*s. Yazır, Mahmud Bedreddin: *Medeniyet Aleminde Yazı ve İslam Medeniyetinde Kalem Güzeli*, II. Prepared by M. Uğur Derman. Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası A.Ş., 1974, p. 224.

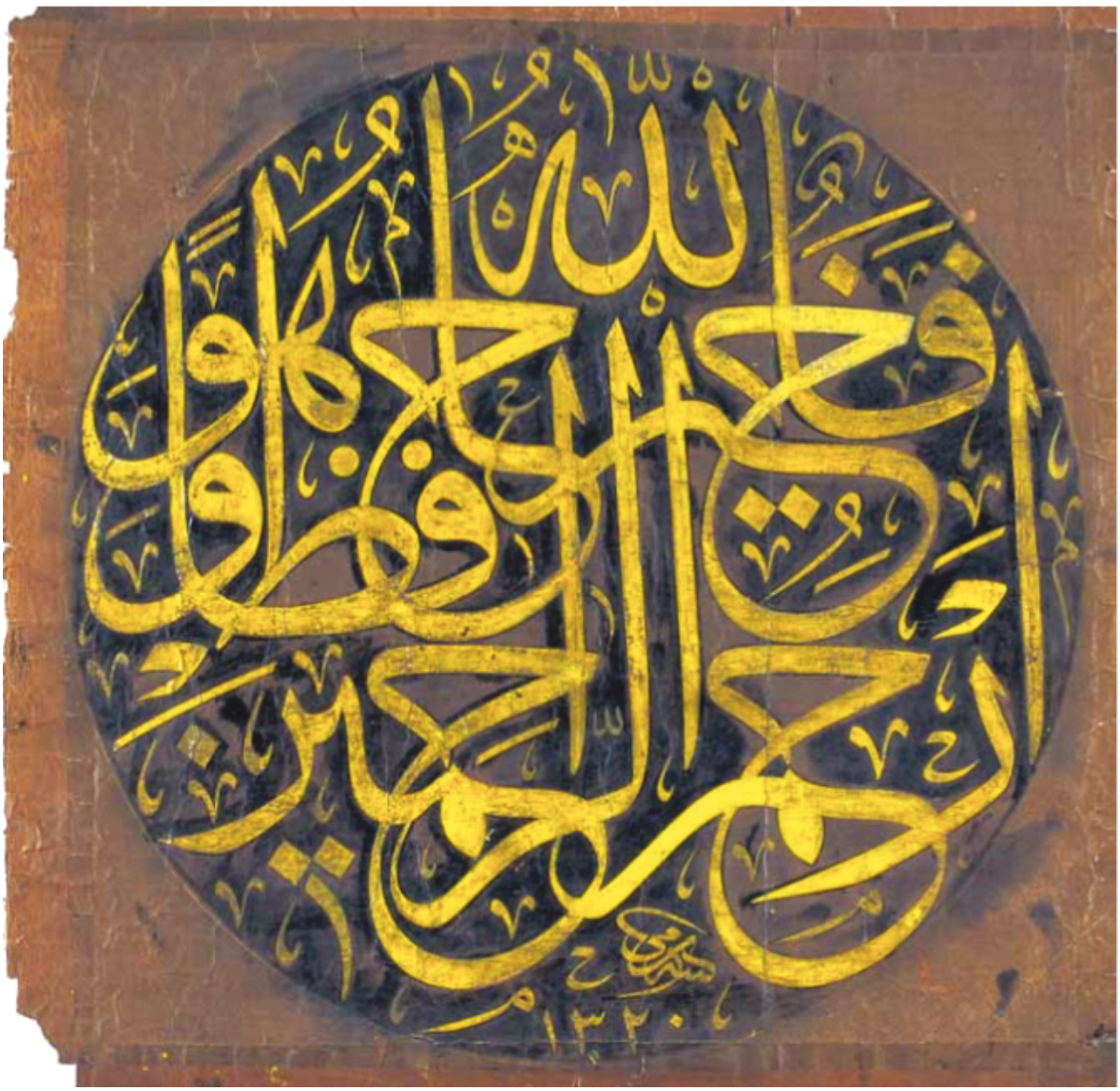

Fig. 5: A *celi sülüs istif* composition written by Sâmi Efendi, prepared as a *kalıp* (stencil designed for reproduction): *fa-llahu khayrun ḥāfiẓan wa huwa arḥamu r-rāḥimīn,* 'Allah is better at guarding, and He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy' (Qurʾan 12:64). Reproduced with permission from the Süleyman Berk Collection. Dated 1320/1902-03.

saints, as well as other non-sacred texts) arranged in layers, either in singular or in mirror form, configured to a specific shape (most often a circle, oval, rectangle, arch, raindrop or turban) (figs. 4–6).

To all appearances, the composite format of the *istif* affords more creative freedom for the calligrapher, in that it breaks away from the strictly linear format of the *mürekkebât*, and thus grants an opportunity to configure the text to a particular size and shape. However, a study of the surviving *istif*s reveals a persistent concern to maintain legibility; the words comprising the composition are almost always arranged in the sequence found in the original text, typically from bottom

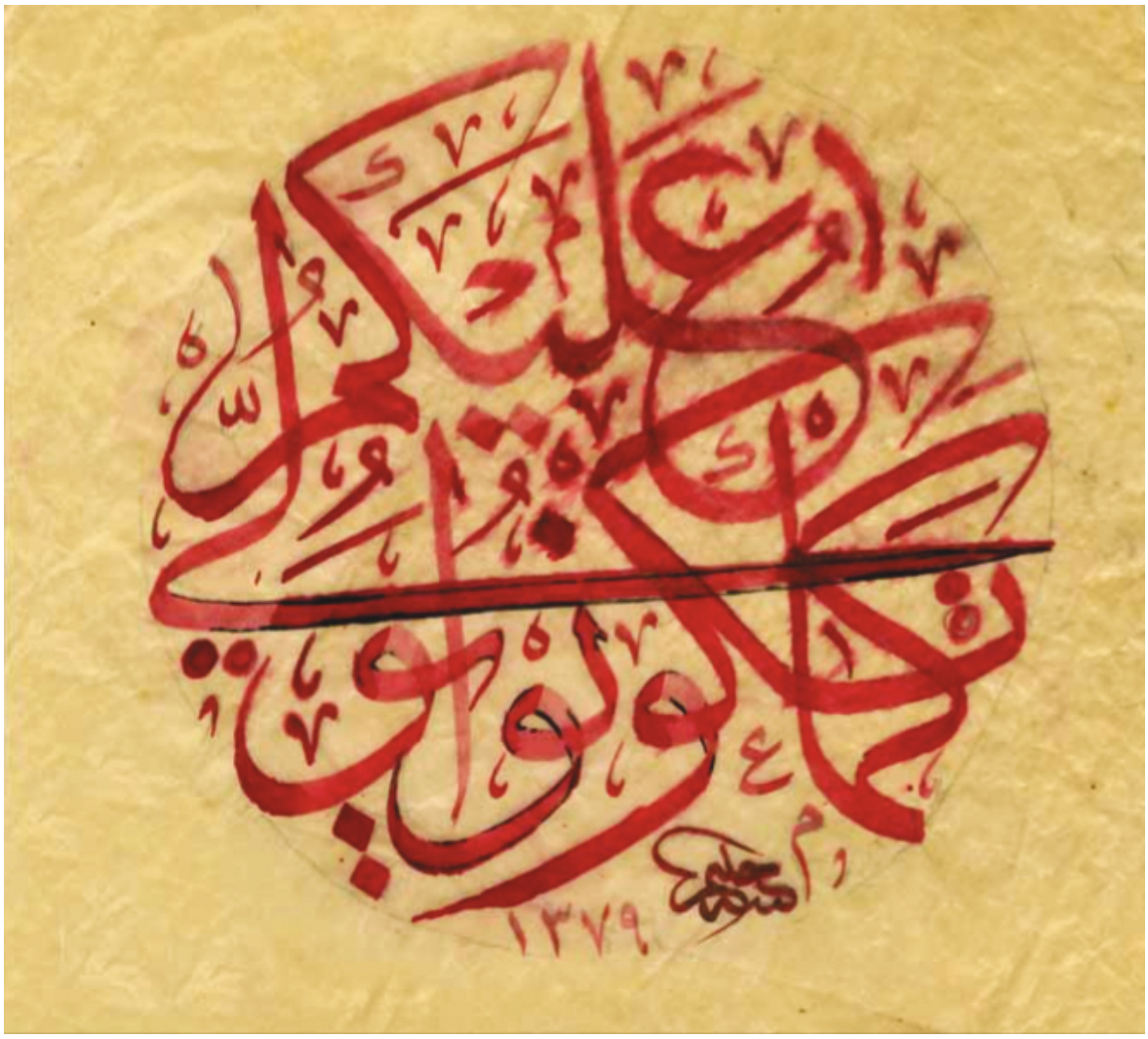

Fig. 6: Preparation for *celi sülüs istif* composition written by Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı: *kamā takūnū yuwallā ʿalaykum*, 'Just as you are, so will be those in authority over you.' Reproduced with permission from the Süleyman Berk Collection. Dated 1379/1959–60.

to top (figs. 4 and 6[20]) or top to bottom (fig. 7) in successional horizontal or diagonal movements (fig. 7), and this rule is only broken when the name of God is transcribed. In this case, 'Allah' is almost always placed towards the top of the composition (fig. 5) as a symbol of respect. Even this exception to the rule cannot be said to negate the importance of legibility, as this reformulation of the word order is widely acknowledged, encouraged, and enforced, and thus constitutes an essential component of normative reading patterns. Almost all examples of Ottoman calligraphy can be analysed and read through a similar progression, thus testifying to a shared concern with respecting the legibility of the composition, and a prevailing awareness that the arrangement of words into a sequence that followed the reading of the text was an integral constitutive element of any *istif* composition.

[20] For the original narration of the *ḥadīth* see al-Tabrīzī, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Khaṭīb: *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ*. Translated by James Robson. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1975, p. 789.

This visible concern with readability is also corroborated by the descriptive terminology that developed around compositions. As Uğur Derman relates, the category of readability for a composition was known as '*yazının teşrifat*' (protocol or rules of writing) or '*harflerin takdim ve tehirine riayet*' (respecting the placement of the letters), and a highly legible composition was described as *teşrifatlı* ([correctly] ordered). Conversely, if the master calligrapher disrupted the correct sequence of words through an arrangement that was unconducive to reading, the composition was described as '*bozuk*' (broken), or '*teşrifatsız*' (lit: without proper order).[21]

Although there are, to my knowledge, very few explicit statements in the Ottoman sources that rationalise the privileging of legibility, a study of both surviving works as well as descriptive terminology illustrates a deep concern for readability.[22] That is to say, the prodigious fact that the majority of *istif* compositions respected the value of legibility indicates the scale at which Ottoman calligraphers were historically sensitive to the inescapable conditions of readability inherent to a successful composition. It is highly likely that such concerns were activated by the nature of sacred texts, whose meaning and poetics relied on the proper conveyance of word order, and whose ontological status as the very Words of God (in the case of the Qurʾan) mandated a commitment to exactitude. Returning briefly to pedagogy, it can also be suggested that the master calligrapher's commitment to legibility when developing an *istif* can also be understood when analysed in conversation with the instructive training he received during his apprenticeship, during which it was made painstakingly clear that tradition mandated that sacred texts were transcribed in a beautiful and readable form.

[21] Derman, M. Uğur: "İstif". In: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 23 (2001), pp. 330–333, p. 331. As an example, Uğur Derman explains that due to the fact that some of the *istif*s developed by the late Ottoman calligrapher Abdullah Zühdi (d. 1296/1879) do not obey the traditional rules for the placement of words in a composition, the Qurʾanic verses that are contained within them can only be read without any mistakes by those who have memorised the Qurʾan. Cf. Derman, M. Uğur: *Türk Hat San'atından Seçmeler*. Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 2017, p. 474.

[22] A rare example in the Ottoman sources is found in Mustafa Âlî's *The Epic Deeds of Artists*, in which the author cites the following *ḥadīth*: "Writing is what is legible." Cf. ʿÂlî, Mustafa: *The Epic Deeds of Artists*. Edited, commented, and translated by Esra Akın-Kıvanç. Leiden: Brill, 2006, p. 163.

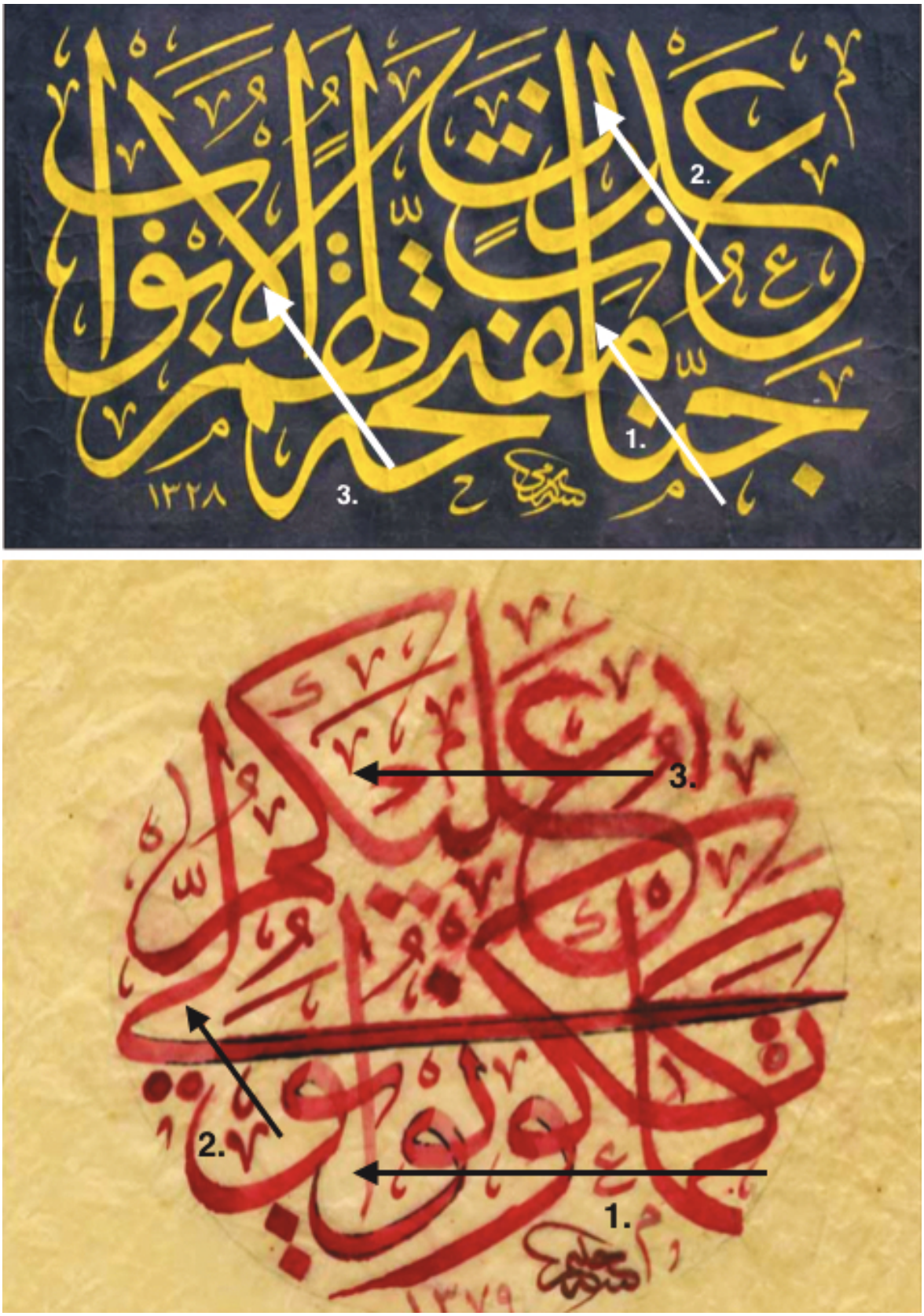

Fig. 7: As the inserted arrows illustrate, Sâmi Efendi (above) and Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı’s (below) placement of the words follows a logical sequence that respects the order of the text.

Developing a Composition

Having explored some of the structural motives for ensuring legibility, an interrogation of legibility versus design can now be formulated: When developing a composition, how did master calligraphers negotiate the mandate of legibility with the multitude of other demands that prevailed upon a successful *istif* composition? Put another way, how did a master calligrapher develop a composition that was at once legible, subscribed to the orthodox rules of calligraphy, reflected his own style or artistic contribution, and possessed aesthetic value? In seeking to answer this question, this section examines a number of aesthetic values that calligraphers took into careful consideration when developing an *istif*, ultimately with the view to establishing a context for how legibility is imbricated within the aesthetic system of a composition. As a caveat, it bears mentioning that a full inventory of the aesthetic values that calligraphers aspired to could easily occupy a series of volumes arranged according to school, style, or chronology. In recognition of this, the following simply lays claim to providing a cursory overview of the most important and accessible values pertinent to this discussion.[23]

First and foremost amongst the aesthetic values that calligraphers took into careful consideration was proper form. It was imperative that the letters, ligatures, and words of any composition followed the precise rules of calligraphy (which stipulated the correct proportion, dimensions, contours, 'thresholds' or limits, thicknesses, and negative spaces within letters) transmitted by the master to the disciple during his apprenticeship (figs. 1–2) as well as those learned through other post-*icâzet* courses of instruction and practice.[24] The letter units also had to be configured to an equilibrium within the compositional space. That is to say, calligraphers had to ensure that there was enough space for the letters to 'breathe', yet not too much space that the composition appeared open, weak, and disjointed. This task was further complicated by the necessity of overlapping particular segments of the composition, especially for works that contained an abundance of text. If there was too much of an overlap in a particular area (due to a convocation of the thicker parts of letter units, or due to too many letter strokes in a particular space), then this could constitute, in the words of the late scholar and calligrapher Bedruddin Yazır (d. 1952), a '*sırıtan yer*' in the composition. Literally meaning 'a place that smirks or scowls,' the *sırıtan yer* constituted a section of a composition which detracted from the overall balance of the design by immediately drawing

[23] For a more detailed discussion of the aesthetic values that calligraphers aspired to, cf. Yazır, Mahmud Bedreddin: *Medeniyet Aleminde Yazı ve İslam Medeniyetinde Kalem Güzeli*, II. Prepared by M. Uğur Derman. Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası A.Ş., 1974, pp. 263–279; Dere, Ömer Faruk: "Terkîb-i Hat Yazı Sanatında Kompozisyon". *El Sanatları Dergisi*, 12. Istanbul: İsmek, İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2015, pp. 154–160.

[24] These can include lessons undertaken with the master after graduation, and studying the works of old masters.

undue attention to a particular area, thus compromising its overall harmony.[25] In order to prevent this, calligraphers had to ensure that the strokes that collectively comprised the text were distributed throughout the composition in such a way that dense areas and overlaps were equitably (but not symmetrically) distributed. As Muhittin Serin explains, if the calligrapher could achieve this, and the letters and units conformed to the formal prescriptions of calligraphy, and all of the aforementioned categories manifested seamlessly into a unified whole, then the composition may be said to manifest harmony (*âhenk*).[26]

The calligrapher's task was further complicated by content of the text itself. In seeking to establish balance and harmony in a composition, the calligrapher has to take into consideration the multitude of letter combinations available to him when writing a text in the Arabic script (figs. 8–13). If the calligrapher is developing a composition that contains the Arabic word *ʿamal* (consisting of the Arabic letters *ʿayn*, *mīm*, and *lām* in that order) in the *sülüs* script, for example, the letter *ʿayn* can be written two ways when at the beginning of a word, the letter *mīm* can be written four ways when located in the middle, and the letter *lām* can be written two ways when located at the end of a letter unit. The ligatures connecting letters in a word can also often be extended by using a *keşîde* (elongated stroke). The ligature between *ʿayn* and *mīm* can be a *keşîde*, as can the ligature connecting *mīm* and *lām*. Thus, when all permutations are calculated, the word *ʿamal* can be written in forty-eight possible ways. When writing a Qurʾanic verse or a *ḥadīth*, therefore, the calligrapher has to navigate between hundreds, possibly thousands of permutations in order to arrive at a suitable composition. This selection process was in large part guided by the aforementioned requisites of balance and harmony; relative to the composition, certain letter-forms are better suited in combination with others, certain letter-forms are more efficacious in filling empty spaces than others, and certain permutations are more successful in eliminating disagreeable overlaps. The calligrapher's skill is thus revealed in not only the way he wrote the letters themselves, but also through the way he navigated between the seemingly endless combination of letters and words in order to create a balanced piece of calligraphy that fit harmoniously within a designated space.

[25] For Mohamed Zakariya's discussion of the '*sırıtan yer*' with examples, cf. Zakariya, Mohamed: "Criticism in Islamic Art". *Mohamed Zakariya:* http://mohamedzakariya.com/essays/criticism-in-islamic-art/ (last viewed 20.03.2020).
[26] Serin, Muhittin: "Ahenk". In: *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 1 (1988), pp. 521–23; and Serin, Muhittin: *Hat Sanatı ve Meşhur Hattatlar*. Istanbul: Kubbealtı Neşriyatı, 1999, pp. 26–27 and p. 30.

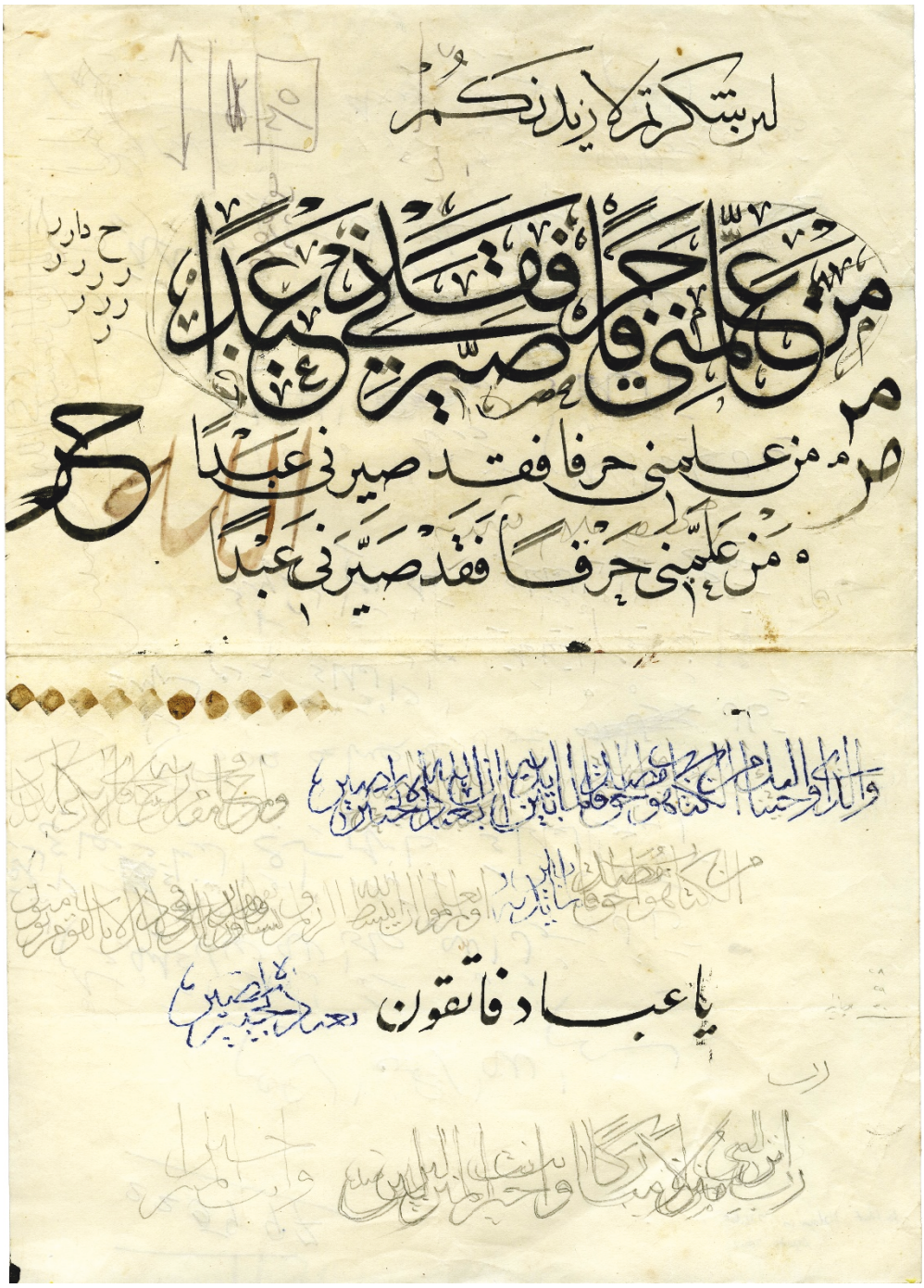

Fig. 8: A *karalama* (practice/planning exercise) of Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı. Undated, reproduced with permission from the Süleyman Berk Collection. Pencil drafts for an *istiʿ* composition are seen below. On the upper page is a draft composition completed with a reed pen. On the right hand-side of the upper page are two different permutations for the *mīm-nūn* connection.

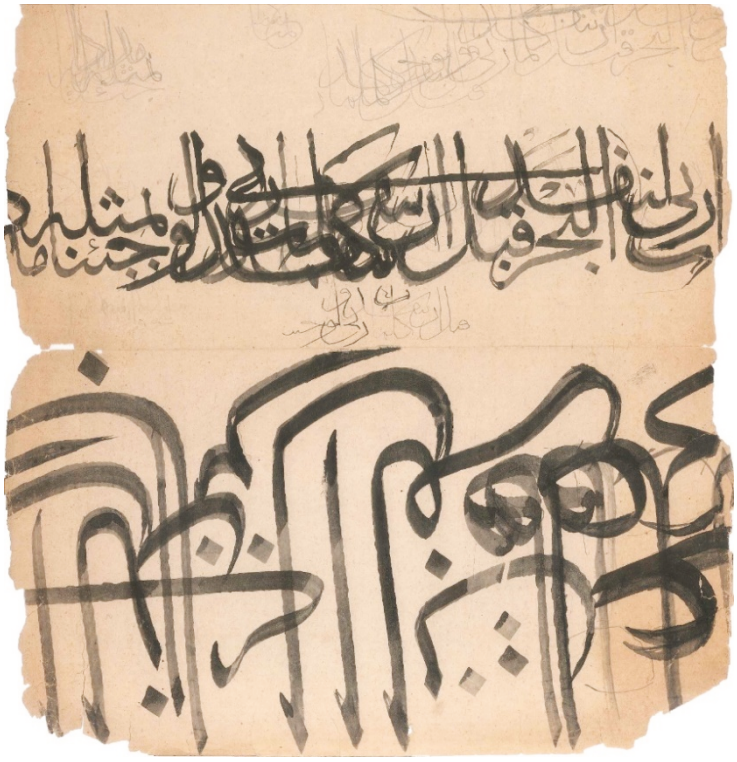

Fig. 9: A *karalama* (practice/planning exercise) of Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı. *Celi sülüs* script, undated, reproduced with permission from the the Abdullah Rüştü Collection. At the top of the page are sketches in pencil drafting a possible arrangement for the *istif*. Directly below these, a draft composition has been written with a reed pen with minor changes. See for example, the *qabl* connection, which is sketched with a *keşîde* in pencil, but shortened in the later draft with a reed pen.

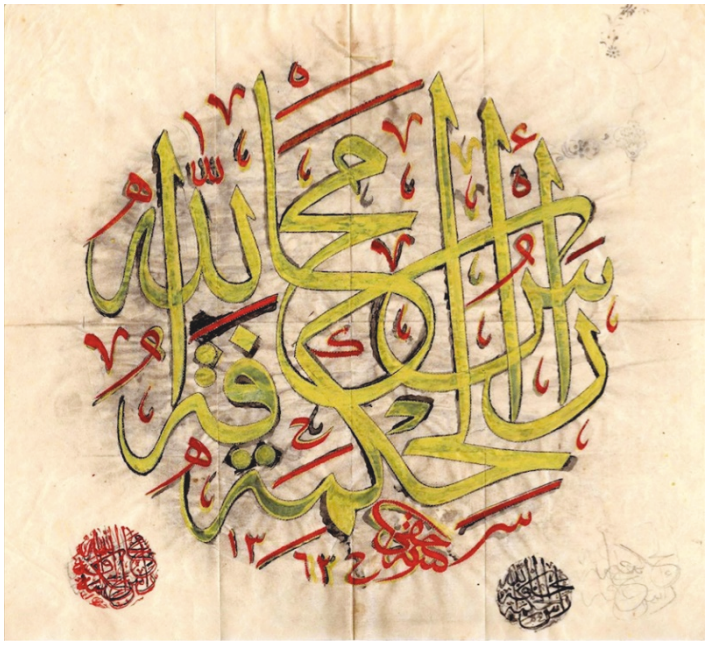

Fig. 10: A *celi sülüs kalıp* (stencil designed for reproduction) designed by İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (d. 1365/1946): *Raʾs al-ḥikma makhāfat Allāh,* ‘The fear of Allah is the beginning of wisdom’. Evidence of later alterations to the calligraphy can be seen in the outlines of some of the letter units, which have been repainted using black and yellow ink. Draft sketches exhibiting different permutations for the composition can be seen at the bottom left and right. Reproduced with permission from the Abdurrahman Depeler Collection.

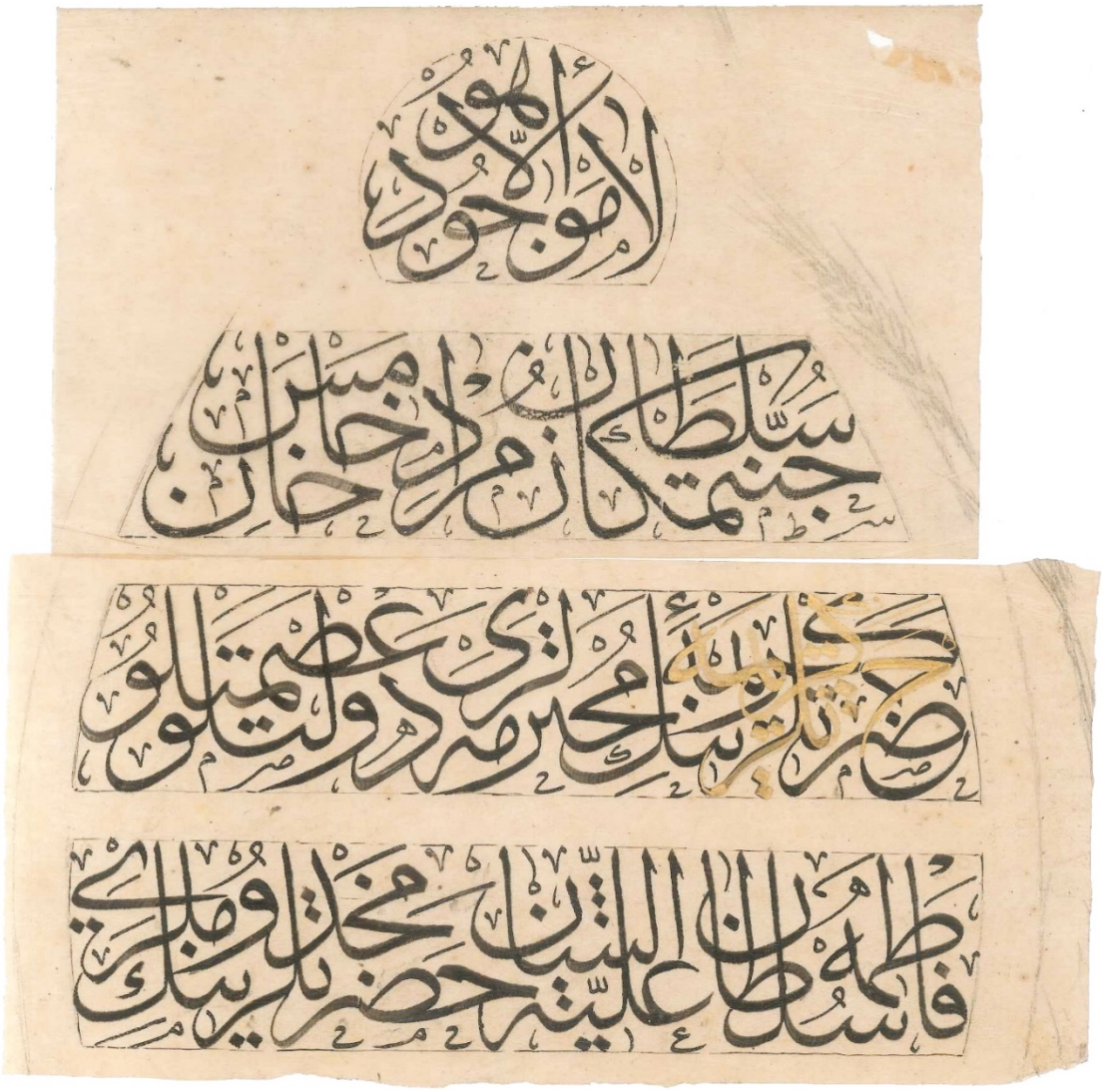

Fig. 11: Draft *celi sülüs istif* composition for a gravestone inscription. Undated, attributed to İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (d. 1365/1946). Reproduced with permission from the Abdullah Rüştü Collection.

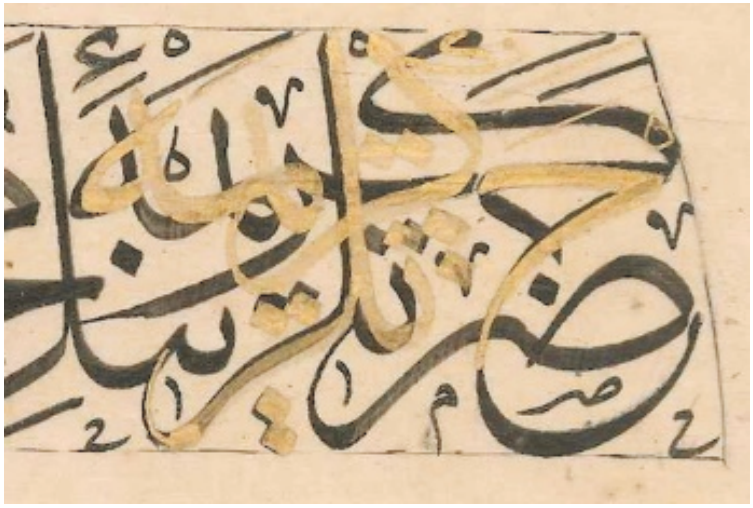

Fig. 12: Detail of fig. 11. The calligrapher İsmail Hakkı has explored two possible ways of writing *Hazretlerinin kerîme*.

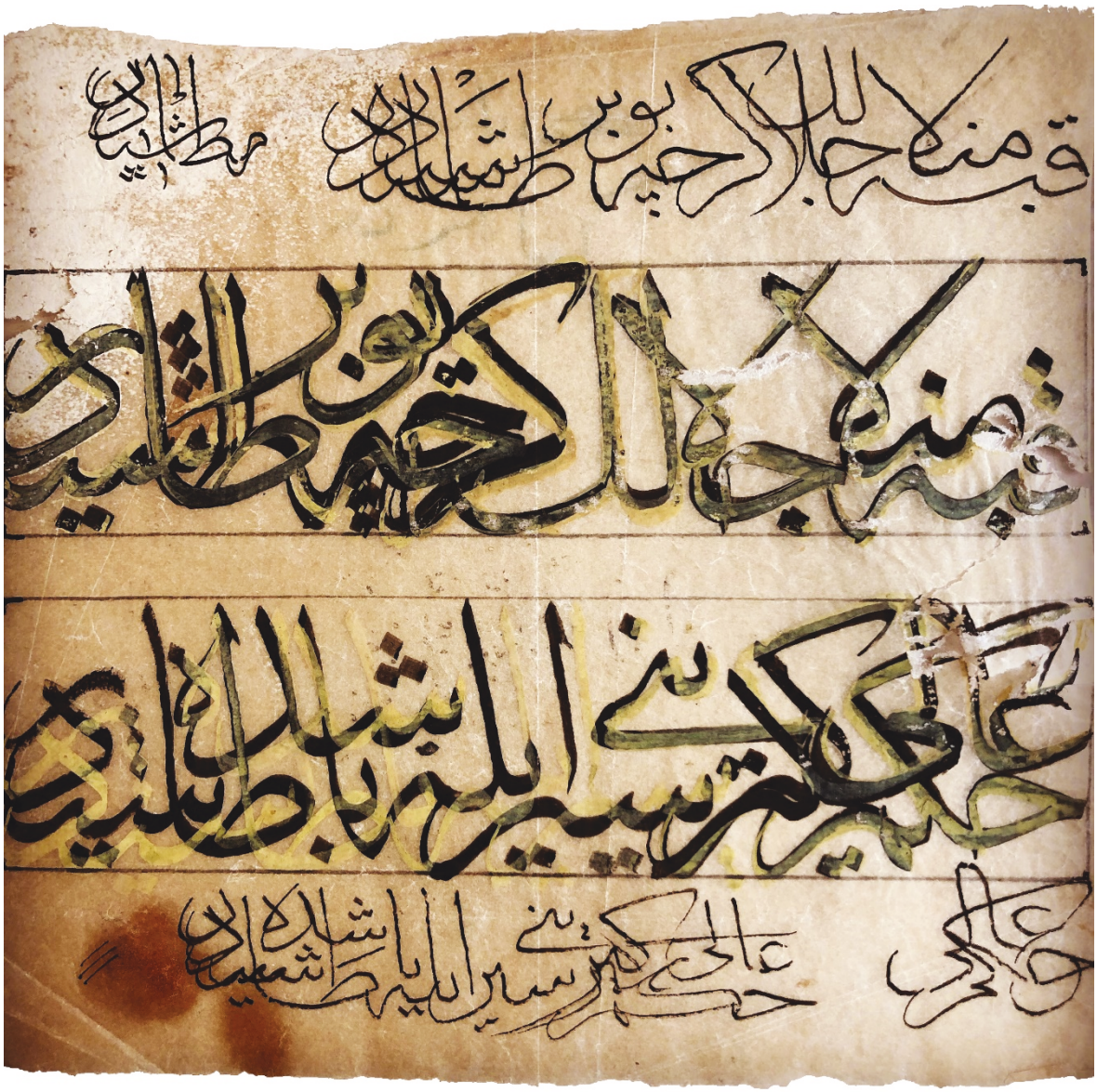

Fig. 13: Draft *celi sülüs istif* composition attributed to İsmail Hakkı Altunbezer (d. 1365/1946). Different permutations for the text can be observed. Reproduced with permission from the Abdullah Rüştü Collection.

Process

Despite the fact that the struggles of this selection process could be ameliorated by breaking the word order of the selected text, as mentioned earlier, master calligraphers always sought to ensure legibility by obeying the designated sequence of words. As the following anecdote conveys, this rule was followed despite the immense challenges that came with it.

When developing a *müsenna* (mirror composition) *istif* composition for the newly built Şişli Mosque (*Şişli Camii*) in Istanbul (fig. 14), the calligrapher Hamid Aytaç (1891–1982), explains how he initially practiced writing a section of the verse that he chose for the inscription (Qur'an 9:18) with a reed pen, but struggled

to find the right placement for the *lām-elif*s. After numerous unsuccessful attempts Aytaç became fatigued, closed the light, folded his hands across his chest, and closed his eyes. After a short while he fell asleep, and in a state that he describes as being "between a dream and wakefulness" (*rüya ile yakaza arasında*), the entire composition appeared in front of his eyes; the *lām-elif*s settled, and appeared in the middle of the composition. Aytaç immediately awoke with excitement, lit his lamp, and completed the composition. As Aytaç explains further, the writing is composed of three sections: at the lowest level of the composition in the centre, the calligraphy resembles the tall felt hat (*sikke*) of Mevlana Rumi (section one). Further above, the calligraphy resembles a human being with a nose (section two) and two eyes (section three).[27]

As the anecdote makes clear, and indeed as is revealed through an inspection of the final composition, certainly Hamid Aytaç aspired to specific aesthetic values, and perhaps even the inclusion of particular symbolic elements (although whether these were intentional or incidental is unclear from the anecdote) in the *istif*. However, the fact that the sequence of words is so logical in its progression and that Aytaç was completely unwilling to sacrifice legibility (hence, the struggle over the appropriate placement of the two *lām*s) leads to the conclusion that the Aytaç's primary objective was not just to develop a beautiful composition, but to create an *istif* that also ensured the readability of the sequence of words that composed the text. With inspiration, Hamid Aytaç was able to develop a composition that both respected the original text, and also embodied the aesthetic values of balance and harmony.

In recognition of the difficulties of developing a composition that satisfied the requisites of readability, the prescriptions of form, and harmonious balance, Ottoman calligraphers underwent a strenuous series of planning phases before alighting on a final design. First, calligraphers made brief sketches of the composition and experimented with different permutations and arrangements of the text (figs. 8, 9, 13). Next, they practiced the individual letter-forms, and then wrote out the composition with a reed pen (figs. 8, 9, 11, 12, 13). After many trials, the calligrapher would settle upon a final design and transfer the composition to a large sheet of paper or board in order to both facilitate reproduction and allow for minor adjustments over time (figs. 4, 5, 6, 10).

[27] Özeren, Murtaza M.: "Hattat Hâmid Aytaç'ın hastanede verdiği son röportaj". *Dünyabizim,* 03.03.2019: https://www.dunyabizim.com/alinti/hattat-hmid-aytac-in-hastanede-verdigi-son-roportaj-h23792.html (last viewed 06.03.2020).

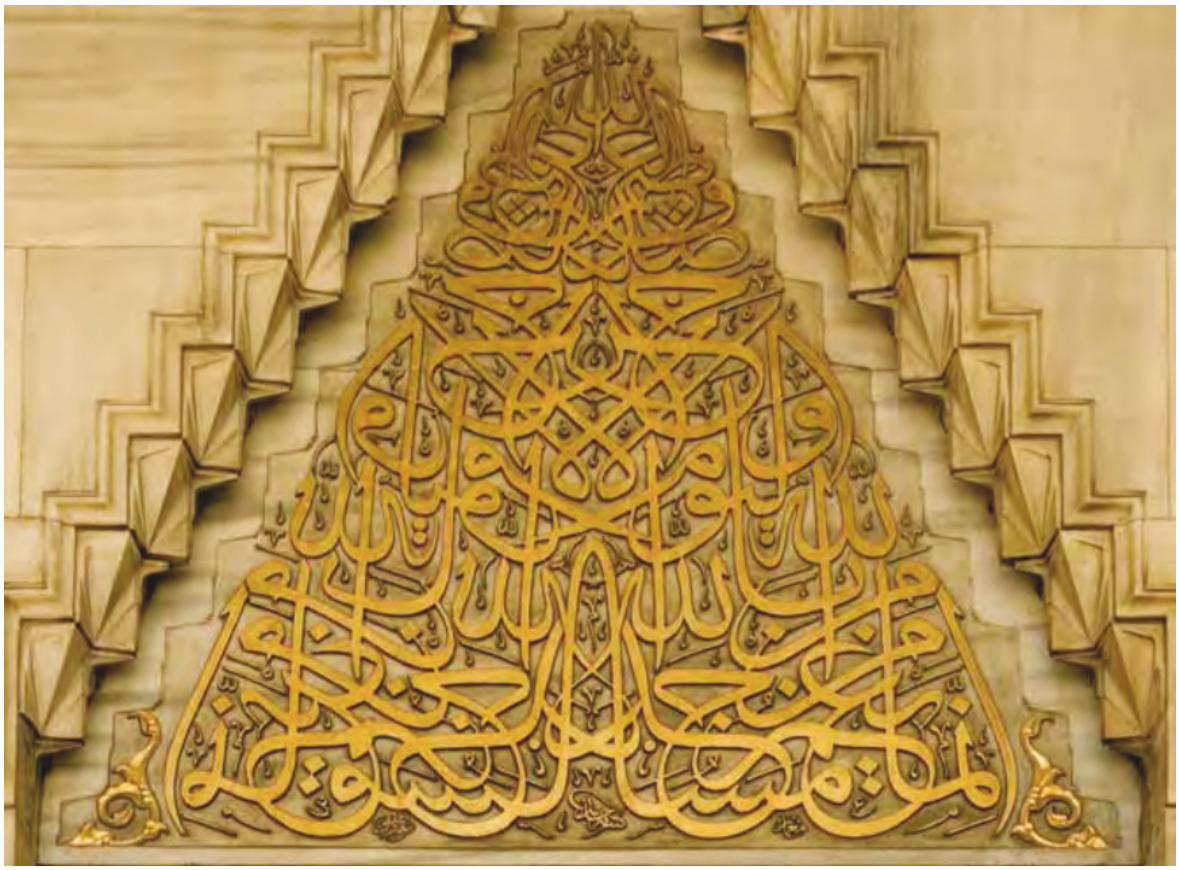

Fig. 14: Hamid Aytac's *celi sülüs müsenna* (mirror) *istif* for the Şişli Mosque, Istanbul: *Innamā yaʿmuru masājid Allāh man āmana bi-Llāhi wa l-yawmi l-ākhir,* 'He only shall tend Allah's sanctuaries who believeth in Allah and the Last Day' (Qurʾan 9:18). Photograph printed with permission from Süleyman Berk.

To summarise thus far, a brief examination of the diversity of aesthetic attributes that calligraphers had to navigate through when developing a composition reveals, by definition, that design and other artistic categories were of paramount importance. However, a study of existing works also demonstrates that calligraphers singled out legibility amongst the broad spectrum of visual attributes and aesthetic values as the most essential requisite, and identified this as the template to which the whole must conform.

Legibility versus Design: A Contemporary Case Study

In order to understand further the dynamic processes of negotiation that calligraphers underwent when developing a composition, this final section offers two contemporary examples from my own experience. Specifically, these examples chart the progress of two compositions (one *satır* (line) based composition (also known as '*düzyazı*'), and one *istif)* from start to finish through a series of interactions with my own master, calligrapher Efdaluddin Kılıç. As an instructive device, a study of the corrections administered by a master calligrapher (*hoca* or *ustâd*) on his student's work facilitates a more conscientious appreciation of how calligra-

phy should look. Although an annotated study of the development of a composition by a master from beginning to end could serve the same purpose, the advantage of analysing the corrective processes undergone by an amateur calligrapher (myself), contributes towards a clearer idea of the negotiations of legibility versus design by virtue of the prodigious mistakes (and subsequent corrections) made by an amateur along the way, giving clarity to both how calligraphy *should* look (i. e. through a study of the master's examples), as well as how calligraphy should look through the apprehension of how it *shouldn't* (i. e. a study of the master's corrections of the student's mistakes).[28] Prior to the following, however, I would like to preface this section with a few words on the propriety of using a contemporary example from a methodological perspective.

The Problem

Surviving documentary sources on pedagogy in Ottoman calligraphy furnish an understanding of the various stages of the Ottoman apprenticeship, as well as a partial record of the interactions that transpired between master calligraphers and their disciples.[29] Of these interactions, artistic evidence that offers an index of how calligraphers developed compositions with the aid of their masters no longer exist, and documents providing a complete record of the master's artistic journey from sketch to completed composition are few. Yet, it is known that calligraphers would continue to show their completed works to their masters after they graduated, a practice that still maintains a relevance for master calligraphers today.[30] For art historians, this twin absence in the historical record represents a tragic loss, as evidence of such pedagogical interactions could help us to understand how a composition was developed in the Ottoman period, and which aesthetic values were prized over others. In response, this paper offers a contemporary example of the interactions between master and student during the development of a composition, both as a visual record of how the negotiation between legibility

[28] For an example of a study that explores the development of a composition by a contemporary master calligrapher, cf. Berk, Süleyman: "Celî Sülüs Bir Hat Levhasının Meydana Getiriliş Safhaları". *IX. Eyüpsultan Sempozyumu Tebliğler*. 13–15 Mayıs 2005. Istanbul: Eyüp Belediyesi, 2005, pp. 422–431.

[29] Cf., for example, the biographies of calligraphers contained within the Ottoman biographical dictionaries, which on occasion include descriptions and anecdotes pertaining to the interactions that transpired between master calligraphers and their disciples. Cf. 'Âlî, Mustafa: *The Epic Deeds of Artists*; Nefeszâde, İbrahim: *Gülzâr-ı Savâb*. Ed. Kilisli Muallim Rifat. Istanbul: Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi Neşriyatı, 1938. Suyolcuzâde, Mehmed Necîb: *Devhatü'l-Küttâb*. Prepared by Kilisli Muallim Rıfat. Istanbul: Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi Neşriyatı, no. 16,1942; Müstakimzâde, Süleyman Sa'deddin Efendi: *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn*. Prepared by Mustafa Koç. Istanbul: Klasik, 2011; Habîb, Mirza: *Hat ve Hattâtân*. Istanbul: Matbaa-i Ebüzziya, 1305; İnal, İbnülemin Mahmûd Kemâl: *Son Hattatlar*. Istanbul: Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı Devlet Kitapları, 1955.

[30] Mehmed Şevki Efendi, for example, stated that he would continue to show his works to his teacher even after he graduated. Ünver, Suheyl: *Hattat Mehmed Sevki*. Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul, Suheyl Ünver Dosya, No. 8, 80, 841.

versus design unfolds in the present day, as well to serve as a potential recreation of historical pedagogical and artistic methods.

History and Method

Many of the styles, techniques, ethics, and pedagogical practices that developed and evolved during the Ottoman period did not disappear with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, but remained concentrated in the hands of several calligraphers such as Hamid Aytaç (1891–1982), Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı (1898–1964), and Necmeddin Okyay (1883–1976), whose lifetimes spanned the chronological divide between the Ottoman Empire and the contemporary Turkish Republic.[31] In spite of the damaging consequences of the 1928 Turkish alphabet reforms for some of those practitioners, significant remnants of the Ottoman calligraphic tradition have survived into the present day due to the transmission of their calligraphic knowledge via the traditional Ottoman apprenticeship to their students, a number of whom are alive and continue to practice and teach traditional Ottoman calligraphy in Istanbul today (hence the designation of the type of calligraphy practiced by these contemporary calligraphers as 'Ottoman' rather than 'Turkish' or 'contemporary').[32] Chief amongst these master calligraphers is master Hasan Çelebi (born 1937), whose undisputed authority as the living embodiment of the Ottoman calligraphic tradition is reflected in his bestowed title of '*Re'îs-ül Hattâtîn,*' the 'Chief of the Calligraphers.' Hasan Çelebi was a student of Hamid Aytaç and Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı (whose artistic lineages stretch back through a chain of master calligraphers to Şeyh Hamdullah [d. 926/1520], the eponymous founder of the Ottoman calligraphic tradition), and Çelebi has dedicated his life to preserving traditional Ottoman methods of pedagogy and practice by transmitting his accumulated knowledge to apprentices.[33] To study under

[31] For biographies of Hamid Aytaç, Mustafa Halîm Ozyazıcı and Necmeddin Okyay cf. Eriş, Muin: *Hat Sanatında Vazifeli Bir Hattat Hamid Aytaç*. Istanbul: İBB Kültür A.Ş. Yayınları, 2011; Berk, Süleyman (ed.): *Vefatının 35 Yılında Hattat Necmeddin Okyay*. Istanbul: Büyükşehir Belediyesi, 2011; Alparslan, Ali: *Osmanlı Hat Sanatı Tarihi*. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999, pp. 99–100; Berk, Süleyman: "Hattat Halim Mustafa Özyazıcı ve Tuttuğu Talebe Kayıt Defterleri". In: *Yalova Üniversitesi İslami İlimler Fakültesi Hakemli Dergisi*. Eds. Fatma Kızıl – Yasin Beyaz, 1/1 (2015), pp. 10–54.

[32] For a discussion of the 1928 alphabet reforms in the context of the traditional arts, cf. Gündüz, Hüseyin: "Atatürk ve Geleneksel Türk Sanatları". In: *M. Uğur Derman 65 Yaş Armağanı*. Ed. İrvin Cemil Schick. Istanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2000, pp. 341–346. For Hasan Çelebi's *silsile* (calligraphic genealogy), cf. Kazan, Hilal: *Hasan Çelebi*. Istanbul: İstanbul Ticaret Odası, 2013, p. 95 and pp. 360–61.

[33] Derman, M. Uğur: *Hattın Çelebisi*, prepared by Tarih ve Tabiat Vakfı. Istanbul: TATAV, 2003, p. 14; and İhsanoğlu, Ekmeleddin: "A Quarter of a Century with Hasan Çelebi; the Power of Tradition, Estimable Loyalty, and Conformity to the Age in Calligraphy". In: *Hattın Çelebisi*, prepared Tarih ve Tabiat Vakfı for Hasan Çelebi. Istanbul: TATAV, 2003, pp. 15–17, p. 15. A comprehensive list of students that Hasan Çelebi has personally taught and licensed as calligraphers can be found in Kazan, *Hasan Çelebi*, pp. 360–361.

Hasan Çelebi or one of his many students, therefore, is to be connected to a historical tradition that reaches back to the fifteenth century and beyond.

As part of my doctoral study on pedagogy in Ottoman calligraphy I undertook a traditional apprenticeship in Istanbul, anticipating that a study of contemporary pedagogical methods in calligraphy would reveal fascinating insights into the quantitative and qualitative aspects of teaching, and also provide an opportunity to reflect on the structure and functioning of Ottoman calligraphy in relation to the practitioners that supported it in the past as well as today. From January 2013 I began a traditional apprenticeship with one of Hasan Çelebi's students, Master (*ustâd*) Efdaluddin Kılıç. For over seven years I trained alongside apprentices and calligraphers, both amateur and professional, at a rate of one to two lessons a week, finally receiving my *icâzet* in Ramadan 2017. For the duration of a year I would also visit Master Hasan Çelebi's classes on a weekly basis to observe his methods of teaching and also, on several occasions, to receive comments, criticism, and corrections for my work.

The undertaking of a traditional apprenticeship under master calligrapher Efdaluddin Kılıç afforded me the opportunity to engage with the contemporary practice of a historical tradition that still upholds an apposite aesthetic and spiritual relevance to contemporary calligraphers. It also afforded the opportunity to recapture the 'ways of seeing' of a particular artistic and cultural tradition, and combine the aesthetic, as well as non-aesthetic ideologies of contemporary calligraphers with that of the researcher. Moreover, the process of studying under a master calligrapher permitted the transmission, reception, and eventual embodiment of a highly ritualised, coded, and embodied form of knowledge from master to the researcher-apprentice, bringing into view particularities that reflected the religious, cultural, and aesthetic particularities that were either marginalised, or not yet discovered by conventional source-based art historical approaches.

It should be mentioned in bold, however, that the following examples and images are not intended as a retrospective commentary on the Ottoman past, for in reality a clear distinction must be made between how the tradition of calligraphy is practised in contemporary Turkey, and how it was practised in the Ottoman period. That is to say, a distinction must be enforced between the subjectivity of contemporary experience, and the objective event of discussing the history of Ottoman calligraphy. Nevertheless, it is obvious that certain principles, aesthetic values, and techniques have been developed through the Ottoman period which crossed chronological boundaries, and the intention of the following descriptions and images is to shed light on key concepts pertaining to how the negotiations between legibility and design most likely played out for Ottoman calligraphers, in the light of how such deliberations are mediated today.

Contemporary Examples

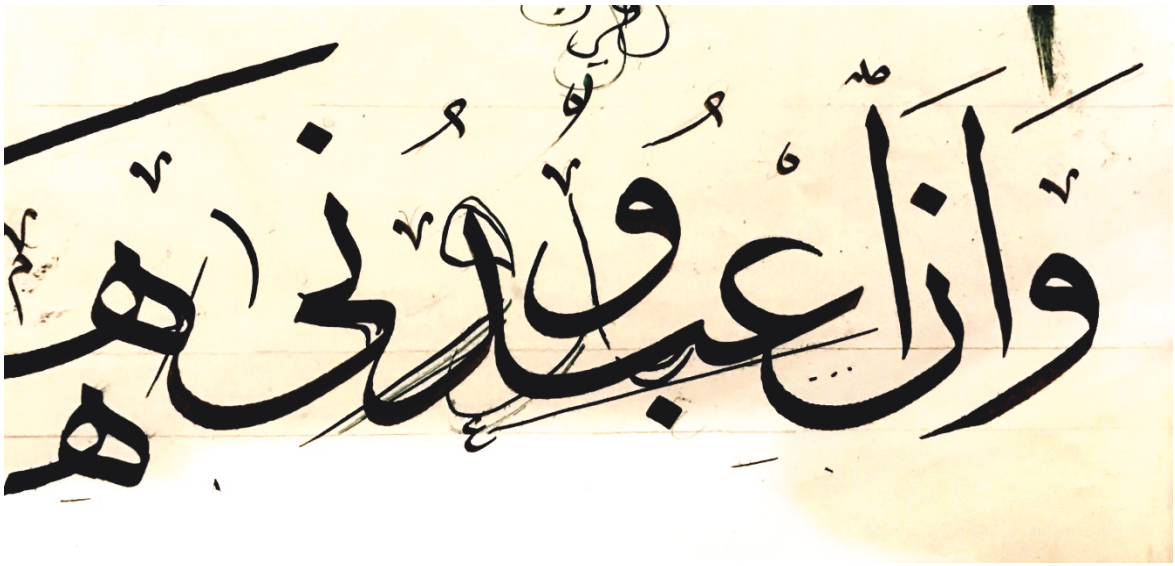

Fig. 15: Detail of first attempt at writing the Qurʾanic verse 36:61 in the *sülüs* script: *wa-ʾani-ʿbudūnī hadhā ṣirāṭun mustaqīm,* 'But that ye worship Me? That was the right path'. The *ustâd's* suggested alternative is sketched over the letter unit.

The first composition under examination dates to 03. 02. 2016, the third year of my apprenticeship. The exercise set by the *ustâd* was to write the entire *Sūrat Yā-Sīn* (the 36th chapter of the Qur'an) in alternating lines of *sülüs* and *nesih*. In my first attempt at writing verse 61 (fig. 15): "But that ye worship Me? That was the right path,"[34] I initially extended the *bā'* of *'abd* using a *keşîde* (elongated stroke), and placed the *wāw* in the resulting opening above the extension, thus producing a more compact word unit which I felt contributed positively to the originality and

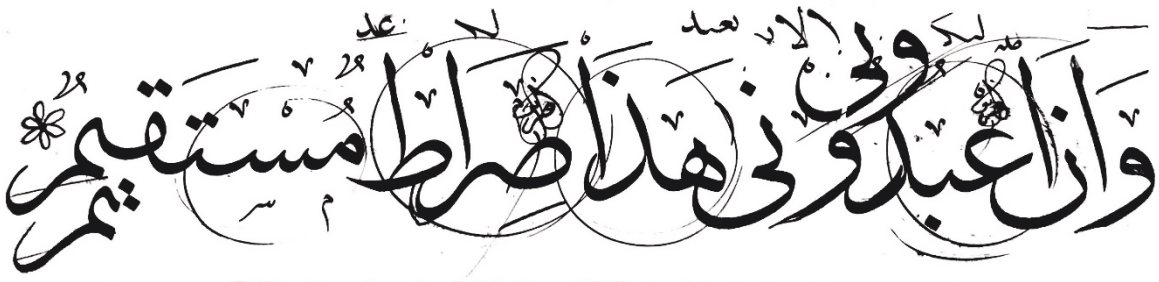

Fig. 16: Repeated attempt at writing the Qurʾanic verse 36:61 after incorporating the *ustâd's* corrections.

balance of the line. During corrections, the *ustâd*, Efdaluddin Kılıç, acknowledged the novelty and aesthetic value of my addition, but was undisguisedly critical of the disruption this caused to the overall readability of the line. As he explained,

[34] All translations of Qur'anic verses follow Mohammad M. Pickthall (Pickthall, Mohammad M.: *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*. Maryland: Amana Publications, 1996).

this readability was particularly imperative considering the fact that I was transcribing the Qur'an. As corrective feedback, the *ustâd* sketched an alternative on top of my attempt in which he shortened the *keşîde* to its normal size, and also placed the *wāw* after '*abd*, thus increasing the legibility of the verse. I was then instructed to repeat the lesson to incorporate this correction. As fig. 16 makes clear, I repeated the exercise a further time, addressing a number of other corrective additions. However, as made evident by my first major attempt at an *istif* several years later following my graduation, I did not manage to fully internalise this early valuable lesson that legibility takes precedence over design.

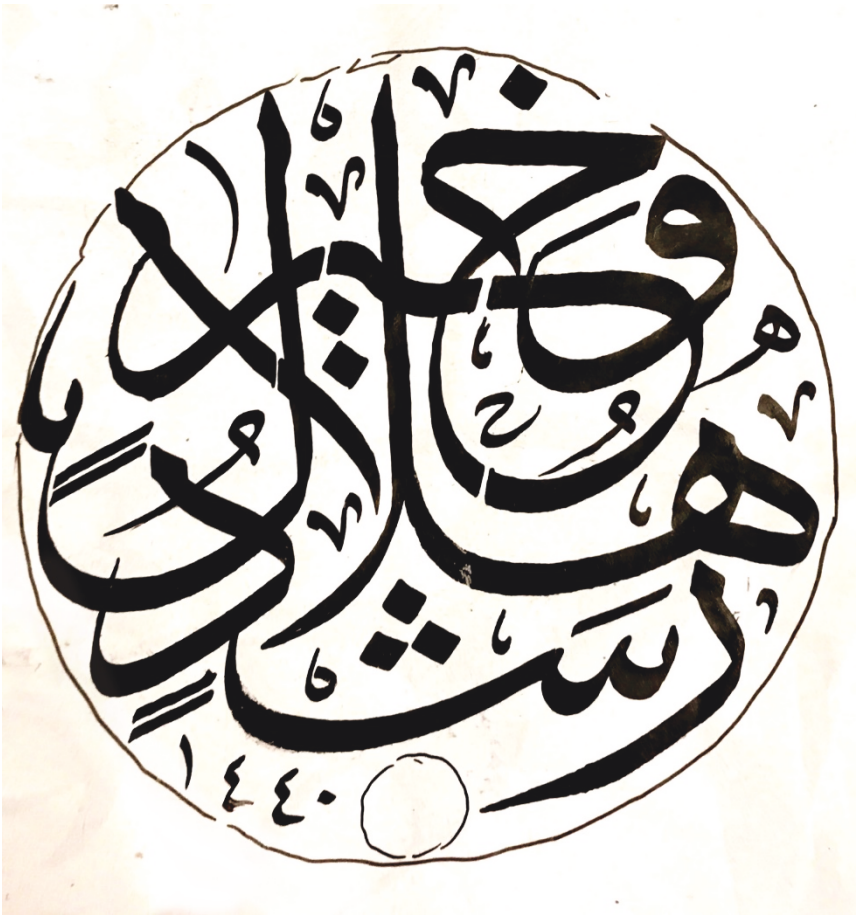

Fig. 17: First attempt at developing a *celi sülüs* composition for the text: *hilālu rushdin wa khayrin,* '[May] this moon [bring] guidance and good'.

The second composition under examination responds to a commission from the founder of *The New Crescent Moon Society*,[35] Imad Ahmad, who asked for the following Arabic text to be written in a circle in the *sülüs* script for the society logo: *hilālu rushdin wa khairin* ('May this moon bring guidance and good'). Dating to 14.04.2019, my first attempts at designing the composition were sketched in pen, and then later using a reed pen with a 3mm nib. As fig. 17 makes clear, I once

[35] Founded in 2016, The New Crescent Moon Society describes itself as "An organisation dedicated to the revival of the traditional practice of observing celestial bodies and celebrating the relationship between Islam, astronomy and faith." Personal communication, 12.04.2019.

again privileged design over legibility. Rather than following the traditional arrangement of a text from the lower to the upper register, I chose to start at point 1 in the middle, continue with point 2 below, and then finish with point 3 above. This artistic decision was a result of my inability to find a solution in which the word '*hilāl*' could fit in the lower register without also breaking free of the circular compositional form as requested by Mr. Ahmed. When I showed it the *ustâd*, he was immediately critical of my arrangement of the text, and sketched a solution that increased the overall readability of the composition (fig. 18). I then followed the *ustâd's* sketch in my subsequent attempts at a composition, showing the *ustâd* my design several times before a final version was approved. During these latter interactions, other aspects of the design were taken into consideration, such as the correct dimensions of the letters, the overall balance and harmony of the composition, and the appropriate distribution of diacritical marks to ensure both balance and readability (fig. 19).

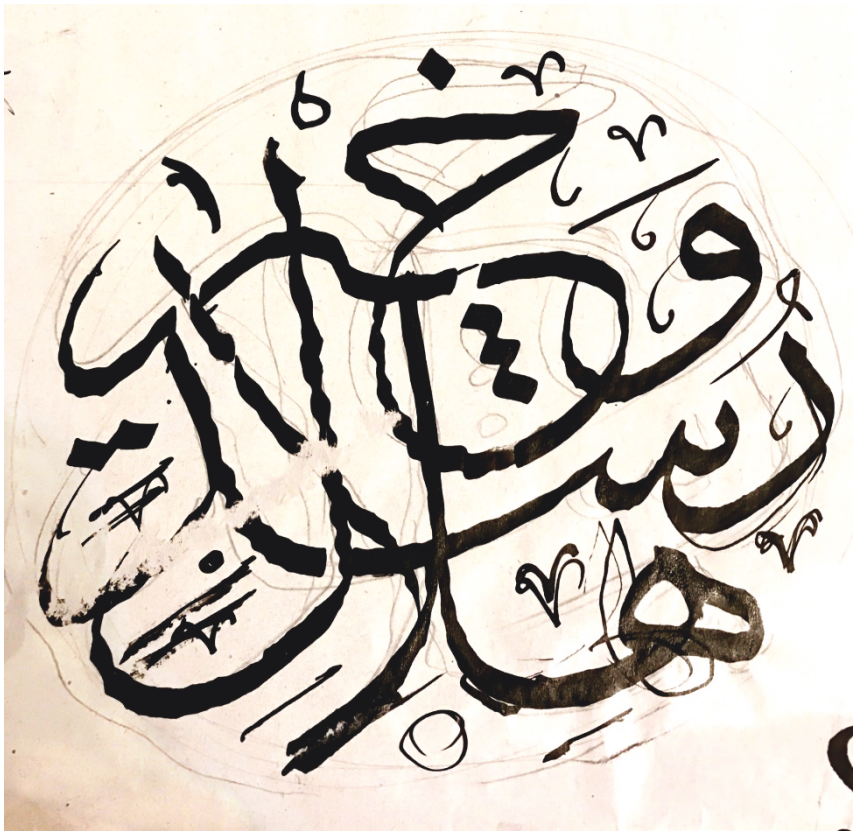

Fig. 18: The *ustâd's* alternative arrangement of letter units and words

The previous examples from my own work must certainly be taken as no more than suggestions towards the elucidation of a broader issue that requires much more investigation on the historical side. Nevertheless, what is relatively certain is that historical and contemporary masters of Ottoman calligraphy adopt an unambiguous stance on the question of legibility versus design, giving precedence

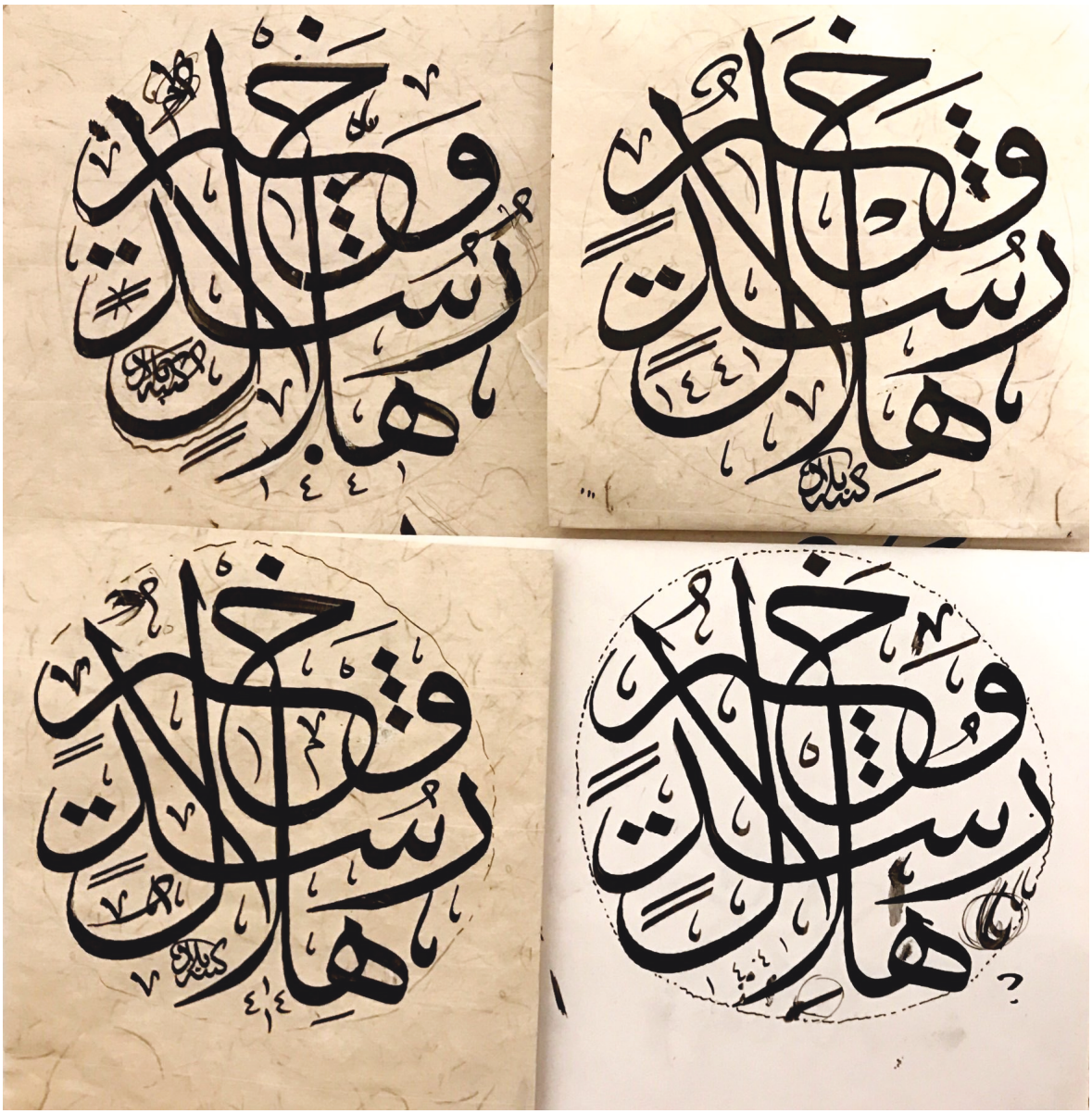

Fig. 19: Repeated attempts at developing the composition after following the *ustâd's* suggestions. The final draft is at the bottom right.

to the former in the development of the latter. Yet, the question of legibility versus design also establishes a false dichotomy that sets apart readability versus aesthetic value, as if legibility somehow detracts from a composition's overall design. If aesthetic value can be defined as the features of a work that contribute to its success, and the attributes upon which its beauty supervenes, then should legibility or readability not also be included as fundamental elements constitutive of that category? Indeed, as the examples of Hamid Aytaç and *ustâd* Efdaluddin Kılıç demonstrate, the success of the composition is measured in large part by finding complex solutions to a commission through an artistic journey that culminates in a finished piece that not only showcases a seamless harmony of legibility and design, but also illustrates the genius and inspiration of the artist. In such works, the conceptual and aesthetic registers of the legible and the beautiful dissolve into

each other in a synthesis that problematises the binary categories of readability versus design. That is to say, the very mutual imbrication of these values as defining principles of a composition frustrates such a modern distinction. Furthermore, if aesthetic experience can be measured (at least as it is in the Ottoman tradition) by a heightening of the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual responses evoked by the artwork in the viewer, then surely legibility should be understood as an aesthetic value in and of itself. On this note, it is rather pertinent to conclude with the poetic imagery invoked by one of greatest masters of calligraphy of the Ottoman period, who uttered the following in recognition of the aesthetic experiences evoked by a legible composition: "To read beautiful calligraphy," Kadıasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d. 1293/1876) noted, "is like smelling the aroma of a tulip."[36]

Sources of Illustrations

Fig. 1–2: ©Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı — Fig. 3: ©Istanbul Üniversitesi Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi — Fig. 4–8: Reproduced with permission from the Süleyman Berk Collection — Fig. 9, 11, 12,13: Reproduced with permission from the the Abdullah Rüştü Collection — Fig. 10: Reproduced with permission from the Abdurrahman Depeler Collection — Fig. 14: Photograph printed with permission from Süleyman Berk. — Fig. 15–19: Photographed by Bilal Badat

[36] As quoted from Derman, M. Uğur: *Masterpieces of Ottoman Calligraphy from the Sakıp Sabancı Museum*. Istanbul: Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi, 2004.