

Interview:

HASAN ÇELEBI By Soraya Syed

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It was not long after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, that Islam was removed as the state-religion and the Arabic alphabet was abandoned for a modified Latin one. This had tremendous consequences on the art of Islamic calligraphy and its practitioners. As the old masters left the world and interest in Islamic calligraphy declined, it seemed the art would be lost forever. Born in 1937, Hasan Çelebi has played an instrumental role in the revival of the art in the last century. Despite his humble beginnings in a small village in Erzurum, in north-east Turkey, his calligraphy now adorns the walls of the holy mosques in Medina as well as other magnificent monuments around the world. At a young age, Hasan Çelebi left his hometown for Istanbul in order to study the Qur'an where he committed it to memory and worked as an Imam. Today he continues to teach calligraphy in Uskudar, Istanbul where students travel from all over the globe to seek his valuable instruction.

SORAYA SYED **What led you to study Islamic calligraphy?**

HASAN ÇELEBI | From childhood, I was always fascinated by pen and paper. I had no idea where this love would take me. In essence, it was this love that threw me into the desert of Islamic Calligraphy.

SORAYA SYED | What are your fondest memories of training to become a calligrapher?

HASAN ÇELEBI | What more could a student of calligraphy want from his master, but that he approves the student's mesk? My happiest times were when my teacher showed a liking for my homework. But my master wasn't easy to please; he was quite reserved. He would correct my mesk, but never comment whether I could pass and go onto the next lesson or not. This made me sad, so I had to work out a method for myself. I decided that if there were three corrections or less, then I would pass. If there were four or more, I would repeat the lesson again. So I continued my classes in that way. Usually, I would pass on to another lesson in one or two weeks. But I wrote the letter sin for two months without passing. Out of respect for my teacher, I dared not question him. In our tradition, we only ask elders something when they speak to us first. But after a while, I felt obliged to ask my Hoca, so he gave me some advice and passed me the following week. That is a happy memory.

SORAYA SYED | What memories do you have of your calligraphy master, the renowned Khattat Hamid Aytec?

HASAN ÇELEBI | I was asked to restore a piece of calligraphy in a mosque written by Mustafa Rakim Efendi. This was very difficult for me, since I didn't have the 'ijaza yet, I spent a whole week worrying about how to repair the piece. While I was wondering whether I was able to do it or not, I had a dream. Both Khattat Hamid and Rakim Efendi were there and they were examining a piece of calligraphy together. Rakim Efendi was wearing a turban. He was short and stocky like a wrestler. Rakim, becoming aware of my presence, turned to me and said, "Son, you will do it, you can do it!" I can't forget this dream or how happy it made my teacher and I. When I told Hattat Hamid my dream, he started to weep profusely. That memory will stay with me; I can't forget it.

SORAYA SYED | How did your own master influence the way that you teach?

HASAN ÇELEBI | My teacher has had little influence on my teaching methods. Hamid Bey didn't pay much attention to his method of teaching. I think there are two reasons for this: Firstly, I started taking lessons from him when he was old. When I started, he was around the age I am now. I find it tough teaching at 67, so perhaps he felt the same way too. Secondly, Hamid Hoca didn't come from the tradition of meşk himself. He was largely self taught. He learnt mainly by examining the works of previous masters. I learnt from him by watching and looking at his hand. Initially he didn't want to teach me, it was only because I insisted that he agreed. I cannot deny his favour though, and will always remember him with compassion.

SORAYA SYED | Was your journey from beginner to master calligrapher a transformative experience?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Of course it has been very helpful. In fact I can't remember much of my life before I started training. But at the same time I was also working as an Imam for various mosques. Both were serious responsibilities. It is hard to say which had the greatest influence. However, I acknowledge that calligraphy gives something to the soul; it calms you down and changes your attitude towards the people around you.

SORAYA SYED | What is required to become a master calligrapher?

HASAN ÇELEBI | The first requirement is to love the art. Love comes before skill. If someone doesn't desire Islamic Calligraphy they will not succeed. Today, I can't write the Latin alphabet as my hand shakes too much. When I try to read a book, I can't read more than 15 pages without falling asleep. But with Islamic Calligraphy, my hand stays steady and there are times where I

can study the art ten hours or more without lifting my head, because I love it. It is also necessary to have patience, to have a good teacher and a good working environment. It is important to be writing every day, especially when you're a beginner. I tell my students they must put in 30 hours a day!

SORAYA SYED | What is the significance of being a link in the Ottoman chain of master calligraphers?

HASAN ÇELEBI | It is as a result of the system of learning calligraphy established by the Ottomans that Islamic Calligraphy has reached the heights you see today. So it is an honour to be connected to this tradition and to be able to serve it. I hope that the art continues to maintain the high moral and aesthetic rarefied standards, or reach even higher.

SORAYA SYED | What makes the relationship between master and student so special?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Generally, a person can't become a calligrapher without following the mesk system. A student may be talented, but he will be unable to reach the highest levels without a teacher. Our system of measurement in Islamic Calligraphy is so detailed; it's microscopic. [To a trained eye] a big coarse detail may be only as big as the leg of a mosquito – but the tiny but crucial area, if it deviates from the proper form even as much as the size of a flea's liver, it will be ugly. Someone who is talented will be able to copy a calligraphic composition just by looking at it. But when he misses that detail small as a flea's liver, then the beauty of the writing is lost. The teacher is there to point out such minute, but necessary details. It may be possible to learn these intricacies on one's own, but it would take a very long time. There is a saying in Turkish, "Calligraphy is like an iron chickpea [is really hard to learn]. The teacher's explanation softens it like wax."

SORAYA SYED | What role has Islamic calligraphy played in preserving the traditional arts in Turkey?

HASAN ÇELEBI | The role of Islamic Calligraphy in preserving the traditional arts is primary. When Turkey revolutionized the alphabet most of the arts suffered. The art of illumination is linked to the art of the pen, the two go together. Islamic Calligraphy is like a naked body; it is made even more noble and beautiful when clothed by illumination. When Islamic Calligraphy declined, illumination deteriorated. When both these arts improved, others such as ceramics and marbling grew also. Twenty years ago, it was almost impossible to find any coverage in the media on the traditional arts. Special requests had to be made. Today, it isn't necessary. The arts are strong and vibrant enough to speak for themselves.

SORAYA SYED | Do you prefer to translate “Khatt” as “Islamic” or “Arabic” calligraphy?

HASAN ÇELEBI | “Khatt” is a general term. Writing stems from a single dot. From the dot you get a line and from the curve of the line you get shapes of letters. This is called khatt.

It is better to use “Islamic” rather than “Arabic calligraphy”. But the Arabs disagree; when we get together, they don't accept this title. I tell them we should say “al-khattu al-Islami” because “al-khattu al-'Arabi” is like saying that no other people apart from the Arabs have served this art; Pakistanis, Afghanis, Iranians, Turks and Moroccans, none of them are Arabs. We shouldn't deny their service. “Islamic calligraphy” is more appropriate as it embraces all these nationalities.

SORAYA SYED | How is the Ottoman-Turkish style distinguished from the Arab style of calligraphy?

HASAN ÇELEBI | There is a difference between the Turkish and Arab appreciation of Islamic calligraphy. The Ottomans strove to develop Qur'an and Hadith texts into an art form and this

endeavour continues. But for Arabs, the main concern is to implement these texts into their everyday lives. Even though there is talent among them, there isn't the same seriousness and devotion toward the art.

SORAYA SYED | Is it important to adhere to traditional tools and materials in calligraphy?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Yes, it is important. No other tool can replace the pleasure of writing with a traditional reed pen. Nor can any other type of pen write as beautifully. The nib of a reed pen is flexible, it allows the ink to flow and is very comfortable to use. A pen with an iron nib does not have the same qualities. Even the ink we use is special, since it allows corrections to be made later on. The inks in Europe do not possess this characteristic. They contain certain chemicals that when they thicken after a time, they are difficult to thin out and the letters look 'heavy' as a result. The ink that we use, allows it to be thinned with water after it dries up. You can wipe a mistake off the paper, and make a correction.

SORAYA SYED | Is calligraphy a form of worship?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Yes, it is worship. In fact it is something that goes beyond worship. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: 'To escape from sin is a worship'. Somebody who is engaged in khatt will work on Islamic texts such as verses from the Qur'an or texts from Hadith. Perhaps, if the person weren't preoccupied with this, they would waste time doing something else. It's a sin to waste free time, so working on Islamic Calligraphy is a form of worship.

SORAYA SYED | Islamic Calligraphy is very strict and disciplined, is there room for creativity and individual expression?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Islamic Calligraphy involves strict rules, but it is because of these rules that the beauty of the art has been preserved. The nature and aesthetics of Islamic Calligraphy allows

people to be innovative, so there is no need to look elsewhere. It is possible for a composition to take on any form you want it to.

SORAYA SYED | What do you think about “contemporary” artists who use calligraphy in their work?

HASAN ÇELEBI | I think calligraphy in contemporary art is a passing trend and that artists tend to employ it in their work without the same seriousness that is found in traditional works of Islamic Calligraphy.

SORAYA SYED | Is Istanbul the centre of calligraphy today and if so, why?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Yes. Istanbul is the centre of Islamic Calligraphy today; as a result of the love Turkish calligraphers have for the art and its relationship to worship. Also, they adhere to the rules and discipline that Islamic Calligraphy requires in order to serve the art rather than themselves. There are many artists in certain countries that are readily accepted as calligraphers even though their work has mistakes. Turkish calligraphers come first in terms of respecting the rules and discipline of Islamic Calligraphy.

SORAYA SYED | How is traditional Islamic Calligraphy relevant today and is there a demand for it in Turkey?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Yes there is great demand, perhaps more than any other country. Especially in Istanbul. Islamic Calligraphy doesn't really exist outside of this city. Islamic calligraphy is important because it encourages the other arts to develop. It is used in all sorts of places.

SORAYA SYED | What changes have you noticed in the art and its practitioners over the last 50 years?

HASAN ÇELEBI | A significant change has been the increase in income for the people involved in the art. But in terms of any

major developments, that is very difficult to achieve. Anybody who is seriously engaged in the art does not have time to be concerned with change. How is it possible if you are already trying to work 30 hours in a 24-hour day?

SORAYA SYED | It seems that more women are taking lessons in the art than men, why do you think this is so?

HASAN ÇELEBI | Historically, there aren't many successful women calligraphers. In my opinion, this is not because they are not talented enough, rather, they are too busy to find the time to study. Usually it is school-leavers and single young women that take up the art, but as soon as they get married and have children, they stop. The calligrapher Kamil Efendi died at the age of 93 and even at that age he regretted not having fully learnt the art Hamid Bey was 95 when he passed away and he said shortly before his death that you need 100 years to learn Islamic calligraphy. So if a woman, after three to five years of studying Islamic Calligraphy, gets married and has to take care of children how can she be expected to advance?

SORAYA SYED | What is the role of the calligrapher in traditional Islamic society and has this role changed?

HASAN ÇELEBI | There has been no change. A calligrapher's role is similar to that of an Islamic Scholar in the way that it serves a community and receives attention from people.

SORAYA SYED | What are the most important compositions you have done?

HASAN ÇELEBI | A composition is like a child. If you have children, you can't prefer one above the other. I can't say this one is better or worse. If you ask me, which is my best composition of Islamic Calligraphy, it's the one I haven't written yet. I am not satisfied with what I have written so far and am still searching I hope that day will come and I will see it

SORAYA SYED | What are your hopes and fears for the future of Islamic calligraphy and where do you see it heading?

HASAN ÇELEBI | I have no fears for the art It is heading in a very positive direction. Calligraphers have a good standard now and their finances are secure. This will continue as long as there isn't an increase in the number of calligraphers to the extent that envy and corruption arises and they start to employ tricks and deception. So long as this does not happen, then it will continue to prosper. There was a time in Turkey where Islamic Calligraphy was prohibited for 70 years. Despite this ban, it managed to regain the same strength that it once had.

SORAYA SYED | How would you like to be remembered?

HASAN ÇELEBI | As someone who has served his nation and Islam.

