

The Calligraphy of Mishkín-Qalam¹

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Abstract

This article will consider the life and work of Áqá Ḥusayn-i-Işfahání, called Mishkín-Qalam. Known for his outstanding ability at calligraphy, Mishkín-Qalam was invited to work at the court of the Qájár ruler Náşiri'd-Dín Sháh during the late 1850s. In the 1860s the artist became caught up in the events surrounding the birth of the Bahá'í Revelation and he moved to Edirne to be near its exiled founder Bahá'u'lláh. Intrigues at the court of the Ottoman Sultan led to the arrest of Mishkín-Qalam and to his subsequent imprisonment in the fortress of Famagusta on the island of Cyprus. The discussion will center on the calligraphic compositions created by Mishkín-Qalam during his stay in Famagusta and also on those done during his last years where he rejoined Bahá'u'lláh in the city of 'Akká. The roots of his artistic expression in Islamic calligraphic traditions will be considered as well as the extent to which his forms were adapted to proclaim the message of the Bahá'í Faith.

Résumé²

Cet article présente la vie et l'œuvre de Áqá Ḥusayn-i-Işfahání, connu aussi sous le nom de Mishkín-Qalam. Célèbre pour son extraordinaire talent du calligraphe, Mishkín-Qalam a été invité à travailler à la cour du souverain Qâdjars, le Sháh Náşiri'd-Dín, vers la fin des années 1850. Vers 1860, l'artiste s'est trouvé impliqué dans les événements qui ont entouré la création de mouvement bahá'ie, et il s'est établi à Edirne pour être à proximité du fondateur, Bahá'u'lláh, en exil. Des intrigues fomentées à la cour du Sultan ottoman amenèrent l'arrestation de Mishkín-Qalam et, par la suite, son emprisonnement dans la forteresse de Famagusta dans l'île de Chypre. La discussion aura pour le sujet les compositions calligraphiques créés par Mishkín-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 quelle point ses formes étaient adaptés à proclamer le message de la bahá'ie.

Resumen³

Este artículo considera la vida y obra de Áqá Husayn-i-Işfahání, llamado Mishkín-Qalam. Conocido por su excelente caligrafía, Mishkín-Qalam fue invitado a trabajar en la corte del monarca Qájár el Sháh Náşiri'd-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 fundador exiliado Bahá'u'lláh. Las intrigas en la corte del sultán otomano resultaron en el encarcelamiento de Mishkín-Qalam

¹ A version of this material was presented to the North American Historians of Islamic Art in a meeting of the College Art Association at the Metropolitan Museum of Art held in February, 1990. The authors would like to acknowledge materials sent to them by Gol Aidun, whose own research on Mishkín-Qalam was cut short by her tragic death while in India in 1987. This article is dedicated to her memory.

² French translation provided by Colette Henriette.

³ Spanish translation provided by Isabel Valiela

en la fortaleza de Famagusta en la isla de Chipre. La discusión se centrará sobre las composiciones caligráficas creadas por Mishkín-Qalam durante su estadía en Famagusta y también aquellas que hizo durante sus últimos años, cuando volvió a encontrarse con Bahá'u'lláh en la ciudad de Akká. Las raíces de su expresión artística en la tradición 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 Ḥusayn-i-Iṣfahání, 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 Shah, Mishkín-Qalam chose to use his artistic talents for service to the Bahá'í 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

Áqá Ḥusayn-i-Iṣfahání came from a well-known merchant family of Iṣfahán 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 Bahá'is during his famous “year amongst the Persians.” It was in February 1888 that the English Orientalist first spoke to a relative of Mishkín-Qalam, the merchant Mírza Javád who, at some risk to himself, confided to Browne, “I AM A BĀBĪ.” 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 Ḥusayn-i-Iṣfahání 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'án, 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 Tabríz in 1777 illustrates this point:

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'u'lláh.

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. Qáđí Aḥmad in his seventeenth-

century treatise on calligraphers and painters wrote that a certain Mauláná Maḥmud Chapnivís 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 ‘Alí) or a bird, often a parrot, usually made up of the letters forming the quranic invocation *bismi’lláh al-rahmán al-rahím* (in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) (figure 2). Miškín-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 Bahá’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.

Miškín-Qalam’s Early Years

When Áqá Ḥusayn-i-Işfahání was about twenty-five years old, he set out for Mashhad to settle the business accounts of his late father. The first leg of his 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 Náşiri’-d-Dín Sháh’s Prime Minister as he walked through the bazaar.



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 Baha'u'llah*. The calligraphy is by Mishkín-Qalam and is in the *nasta'liq*, *naskh*, and *shikastih* styles. 1881—82. Reprinted from Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* 161

According to the accounts of this event, Mishkín-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 Áqá Ḥusayn-i-Işfahání as tutor to the Crown Prince. His work became known in the court, and Náşiri'd-Dín Sháh himself was said to have given the artist the title Mishkín-Qalam (Ishraq-Khávarí, *Núrayn* 72-83).

The central event in Mishkín-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 Sháh's court when Mishkín-Qalam was returning to Işfahán to visit his family. On the way he met Siyyid Mihdí, 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 Faizí recounted the story of Mishkín-Qalam's acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith:

...before Mishkín-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 Mishkín-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. Mishkín-Qalam replied, “Of course.” The stranger replied, “No, for you must know the Prophet of your time to know God.” The stranger then told Mishkín-Qalam all about Bahá'u'lláh, and by dawn the latter accepted the Bahá'í Faith and the next day accompanied the stranger on his journey towards Baghdad and eventually came into the presence of Bahá'u'lláh in Adrianople. (Aidun, “Mishkín-Qalam” 25)

In the unpublished second volume of his history, Nabíl gives the account of how he found Mishkín-Qalam quite ill in the city of Aleppo. It was here that Mishkín-Qalam became truly confirmed in his new Faith (Nakhjavání, *Four on an Island* 22). 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that Mishkín-Qalam “crossed the great distances, measured out the miles, climbing mountains, passing over deserts and over the sea, until at last he came to Adrianople” (present-day Edirne) (*Memorials* 98). Here he found Bahá'u'lláh and became one of a group of devoted disciples

happily willing to share Bahá'u'lláh's exile. In a photograph taken during this time period (figure 4), Mishkín-Qalam appears in the center of the back row of a group of Bahá'ís residing in Edirne (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 242). Characteristically, he seems to be holding writing materials. After a time, however, apparently on the order of Bahá'u'lláh, Mishkín-Qalam went to nearby Istanbul where he created several specimens of calligraphy for the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdu'l-Aziz (Momen, *Accounts* 311). Unfortunately, Mishkín-Qalam had an enemy at court in the Persian ambassador who spoke out against him, and Mishkín-Qalam was ultimately jailed in 1867 for his association with the Bahá'ís (Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís* 271). Mishkín-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 writing material he needed, which greatly pacified him" (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 252).

The Exile to Cyprus

However, greater calamities were to come. In 1868, it was decided that Bahá'u'lláh would be exiled to the prison-city of 'Akká in Palestine. His half-brother Mírzá-Yahyá, unsuccessful claimant to the leadership of the Bahá'í 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 Bahá'u'lláh to 'Akká and four followers of Bahá'u'lláh with Mírzá-Yahyá to Cyprus (Nakhjavání, *Four on an Island*). Mishkín-Qalam was one of the four sent to Cyprus. For a devoted follower of Bahá'u'lláh, 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).



Figure 4. Mishkín-Qalam with the companions of Bahá'u'lláh in Edirne. Reprinted from Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory* 242.

Mishkín-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 Mishkín-Qalam's captivity. The calligraphy is of the letters contained in the name Ḥusayn-'Alí, the given name of Bahá'u'lláh,



Figure 5. Calligraphic design with the name of Ḥusayn-'Alí in the "mirror style." Created by Mishkín-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 *'aynalí*, 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). Mishkín-Qalam could have developed his proficiency in the style during his stay at the Ottoman Court. The use of the given name for Bahá'u'lláh may have served as a kind of personal announcement on the part of Mishkín-Qalam that his faith in Bahá'u'lláh 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, Mishkín-Qalam in the year 1295" (A.D. 1878). This distinctive signature appears in all of the major compositions of Mishkín-Qalam and includes within it references both to the Báb (the Gate) and Bahá'u'lláh.

An interesting development in this work is what appears to be a kind of *découpage* design in which Mishkín-Qalam has decorated the piece with cut-out and pasted floral designs. This type of design echoes similar elements in Qájár period lacquer works and enamels, which have naturalistic floral decoration much like that which appears in the plumage of Mishkín-Qalam's birds. The addition of the pointing finger in the neck of each bird is a more unusual element

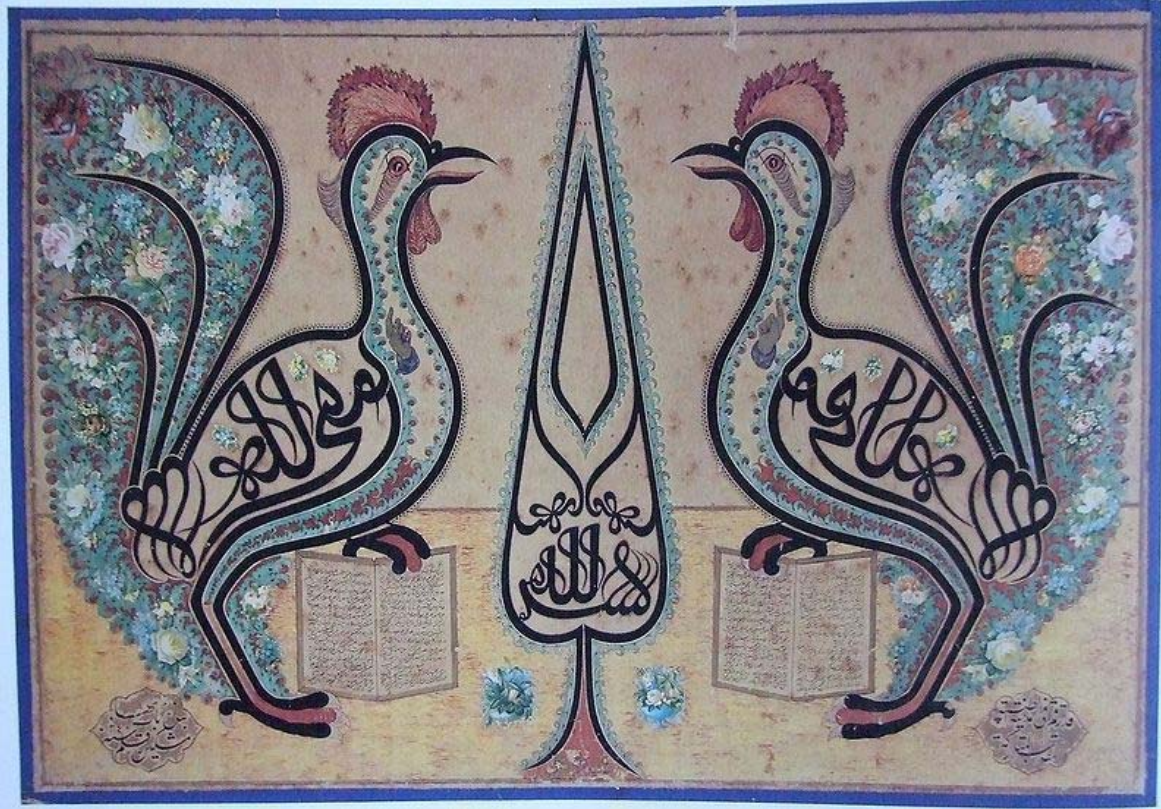


Figure 6. Composition by Mishkín-Qalam. Famagusta. Cyprus, 1878. Courtesy of the National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois

It directs the viewer's attention to the mouth of the bird from which the words *alláh 'u' abhá* (God is most Glorious) are issuing. It was about this time that the Muslim invocation *alláh 'u' akbar* (God is most Great) was replaced by the Bahá'ís with *alláh 'u' abhá* (God is most Glorious) (Balyuzi, *King of Glory* 250).

The Meaning of Mishkín-Qalam's Birds

Although Mishkín-Qalam's depiction of his calligraphic birds was clearly rooted in the Islamic tradition, the context in which they were created was quite different from that of the orthodox Muslim context. Parrots were the most common type of birds depicted in the Islamic calligraphic tradition. According to interpretation, this was a reference to the function of the parrot in Persian mystical poetry in which the bird, when repeating without understanding what it is told, was like a human being who reiterates the words of Alláh, but with imperfect comprehension. However, it is through this very repetition, as in a prayer, that a being is able to rise above the limitations placed upon it by earthly form (Welch, *Calligraphy* 164). The image of a bird is one which appears in many of Mishkín-Qalam's works, but he often portrays not a parrot but a rooster with a comb and a long, feathered tail. It is likely that the double roosters appearing in Mishkín-Qalam's depictions are symbols of the proclaimers of the dawn of the "New Day" believed to have been ushered in with the advent of the new religion. The rooster may have been chosen as a symbol, as its crowing announces the rising of the Sun of Truth over the horizon of darkness. A

description available from the Bahá'í National Center in Wilmette interprets the image in the following way:

In mystic terminology the proclamation of the Divine Will is likened to the crowing of the Celestial Rooster which, when it crows in Heaven, receptive hearts in this world are awakened from the slumber of ignorance and filled with the joy of the dawning of a New Day. . . (Translation from a Persian description, Bahá'í National Center, Wilmette)

This image of a celestial rooster has strong roots in Iranian religious traditions. In the accounts of the *Mir'aj-namih*, Muḥammad encountered a celestial cock on Muḥammad's mystical journey through the seven levels of the heavens. This creature was in charge of counting the hours of the day and night and of awakening the faithful to prayer. The rooster who calls the Muslim to morning prayer appears also in the imagery of that most famous of Persian mystic poets, Jaláli'd-Din-i-Rúmi. In one of his *ghazals* Rúmi describes how "that rooster which invites you toward God, may be in the shape of a bird, but it, in reality, is an angel..." (Schimmel, *Sun* 121).

Such an image was probably originally derived from pre-Islamic sources of the bird as a solar image. It is mentioned in the Zoroastrian holy book, *The Zend-Avesta*; in ancient Central Asian traditions the rooster is a symbol of resurrection and eternal life. According to other ancient mythological traditions of this region the bird is a creature who announces a new beginning. Its appearance often serves as an announcement of the alteration of the cosmic structure, or the founding of a people, dynasty, or nation (*Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "birds" 225).

More specific connections to the Bahá'í Faith can be seen in the depiction of the celestial birds of Mishkín-Qalam. Here in a similar composition two mirror-image birds carry books open to the pages of *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, one of Bahá'u'lláh's most powerful works (figure 8). Indeed, the symbol of the celestial bird abounds in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, and He uses the Bird as a symbol for Himself as God's Messenger for this Day. Bahá'u'lláh writes: "By God! This Bird of Heaven, now dwelling upon the dust, can, besides these melodies, utter a myriad songs, and is able, apart from these utterances, to unfold innumerable mysteries" (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* 175). In the *Lawḥ-i-Hikmat*, Bahá'u'lláh describes his sufferings in the prison at 'Akká and the failure of the people to recognize his mission: ". . . how can the Celestial Bird soar into the atmosphere of divine mysteries when its wings have been battered with the stones of idle fancy and bitter hatred, and it is cast into a prison built of unyielding stone?" (*Tablets* 139-40).



Figure 7. Composition with double birds and books open to pages from *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, Israel

The Release from Cyprus

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

Maskin Kalam. From Korassom [*Khurásán*]. 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 8. Photograph of Mishkín-Qalam.

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)

Mishkín-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 Mishkín-Qalam was allowed to leave Cyprus and to join Bahá’u’lláh. 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’ís: “O thou divine Mishkín! A thousand praises



Figure 9. Mishkín-Qalam (top row, third from right) with the companions of Bahá'u'lláh 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 Nakhjavání, *Four on an Island* 51).

It was soon after his reunion with Bahá'u'lláh and the community of the Bahá'ís that Mishkín-Qalam painted this beautiful bird (figure 11) now in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum at Harvard University.



Figure 10. Rooster made up of the letters spelling out “In the name of God, the Most Glorious of the Glorious.” By Mishkín-Qalam, Bahjí, 1887-88. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University. Gift of John Goelet.

The body of the bird is composed of the letters making up the phrase *bismi'lláh al-bahíyyu'l-abhá* (in the name of God the Most Glorious of the Glorious), an invocation common among the Bahá'ís. 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 Dīa 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 Dīa, 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 Mishkín-Qalam's distinctive signature "The servant at the Gate of Bahá, Mishkín-Qalam, year 1305" (A.D. 1887-88).

Some Unusual Works by Mishkín-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, Mishkín-Qalam was a Sufi, a member of the Ni'matu'lláhí order (Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís* 270). Therefore, it would not be surprising that Mishkín-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 Faḍlu'lláh of Astarábád. Among other ideas Faḍlu'lláh stressed the importance of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and their numerical values. Those who followed these ideas were called Ḥurúfís (the name derives from the Arabic *ḥarf* (singular)/ *ḥurúf* (plural) meaning "letters" (*Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Ḥurúfī" 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 Bahá'u'lláh used this system, as it made



Figure 11. Calligraphic design in the shape of a human face.
By Mishkín-Qalam, 1890.
Courtesy of the National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, Illinois

their writings more accessible to those trained in the ancient traditions. The Ḥurúfis 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 Ḥurúfí 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.]

The Ḥurúfī ideas spread into India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A poet in the eighteenth century wrote:

Your face is like a Qur’án 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, *Mishkín-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 ‘alí ul-‘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-ḥaqq* (O Son of Truth).⁴

The use of the number nine in the eye area reflects the importance of this number in Bábí 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 *Bahá* and thus a symbol for Bahá’u’lláh. Therefore as the poem suggests, the name *Bahá* is written upon the human face.

Above the head we can see a calligraphic arrangement, which the Bahá’ís 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’ís the sacred character of the Greatest Name of God, “*Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá*” 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 *Mishkín-Qalam*, we can see in another work

⁴ 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 *ḥaqq* (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-ḥaqq* (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’lláhi. With the advent of the Bahá’í Revelation, a number of prominent leaders of this group became ardent followers of Bahá’u’lláh; one composed a book in which he pointed out the prophecies of their ancient texts that had all been fulfilled in the coining of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. Šidq-’Alí, a dervish from this background, met Bahá’u’lláh in the mountains of Sulimaniyyih and became such a devoted follower that while Bahá’u’lláh was in the barracks of ‘Akká He set aside a special night each year that would be dedicated to the dervish Šidq-’Alí (Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’ís* 314—21). Perhaps further research on this topic will establish a link between *Mishkín-Qalam*’s use of the word *ḥaqq* in his calligraphic face and the tradition of these devoted followers of Bahá’u’lláh.

(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'u'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'u'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’án 55:26—27) is made manifest” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 37). (Readers 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 Bahá'í traditions).

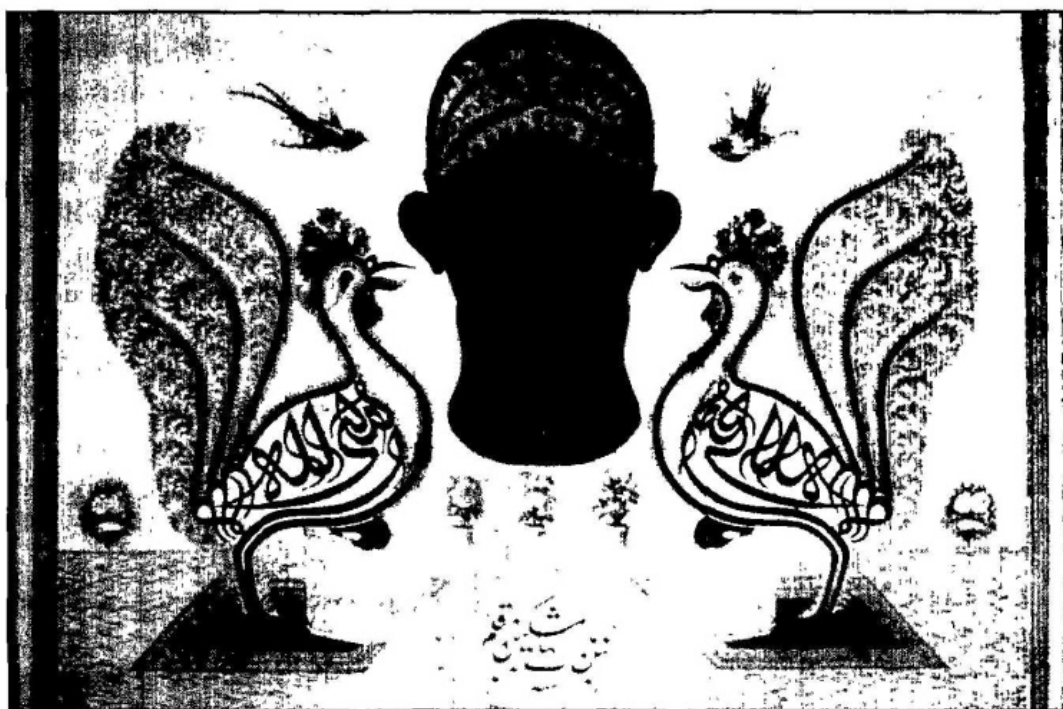


Figure 12. Double birds and a human face. Courtesy of the Audio-Visual Department of the Bahá'í World Centre, Haifa, Israel.

In looking at the work of Mishkín-Qalam, we may have an interesting glimpse of the development of imagery in the early stages of a religion. The Bahá'í 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 Mishkín-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 Qá'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).

Mishkín-Qalam's Last Years

In the later years of his life, Mishkín-Qalam travelled to Egypt, Damascus, and India where he became involved in the first publications of the Bahá'í Faith in that land. He wrote the words of the Bahá'í Revelation in his beautiful hand so that they could be mass printed for others to read (Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'í's* 121). Mishkín-Qalam also continued his figural 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 Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words*; Mishkín-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 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'u'lláh, xiii). The calligraphic page brings to mind the following passage from Bahá'u'lláh's *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*:

O Shaykh! 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 down in the Books and Tablets, and the things spoken by My Forerunner [the Báb], Who laid down His life for this Great Announcement. . . (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 140-41)



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

It was only at the very end of his life that Mishkín-Qalam returned once again to Bahjí (figure 15). Hearing that the calligrapher was old and weak, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá requested that Mishkín-Qalam return to ‘Akká in the year 1905. One of Mishkín-Qalam’s last services to the Bahá’í Faith was to design the calligraphic inscriptions carved on the marble sarcophagus given by the Bahá’ís 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-Bahá on the slopes of Mount Carmel. The signature of Mishkín-Qalam appears on the sarcophagus; indeed, his first wish had been to sign himself as the servant of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. But, at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s order, the signature was changed to the characteristic “servant at the Gate (Báb) of Bahá” (Mooghen, “*Khoshnevisán-i-Bahá’í*” 147). Mishkín-Qalam was cared for at Bahjí until his death in 1912. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá 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 Mishkín-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’lilláh! 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)⁵

⁵ Excerpts from this novel are reprinted in *World Order* 4.3 (Spring, 1970): 28—52.

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