

Note on Mishkín Qalam

Every visitor who comes to the Sackler Museum of Art at the Harvard University is attracted by a beautiful calligraphic picture showing a golden rooster on a radiant blue background -- one of the few items in the Near Eastern Galleries whose reproduction as a greetings card is available in the Museum Shop.

We are often asked about the rooster's provenience and its meaning, and try to explain its importance to our visitors: throughout Iranian history the rooster was a bird connected with light, the herald of the true morning and, in the Islamic tradition, of the time for dawn prayer -- hence a bird whose picture evokes thoughts of clarity and splendor, *bahá*. It is, therefore, not surprising that the leading Bahá'í calligrapher, Mishkín Qalam, has devoted some of his calligraphic paintings to the representation of this bird of light, made up from religious formulas.

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

This is certainly a sad statement, for there is no doubt that Mishkín Qalam (he with the musk black, fragrant pen) is one of the finest calligraphers at the turn of this century. He wrote in different styles, especially in *nasta'liq*, and his crisp, clear hand immediately proves that he grew up in the tradition of Mír 'Imád (assassinated 1615), the leading master of Safavid Iran, about whom the Mughal Emperor Jahangir said: "If Shah 'Abbás had sent him to me I would have paid his weight in pearls."

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

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

A firm hand, a flawless technique in shaping the letters, a vast imaginative power and a deep love for calligraphy as a means of expressing religious feelings, these are the qualities of Mishkín Qalam, a truly great master whose influence--beyond the Golden Rooster--can be detected in the works of the masters in our century.