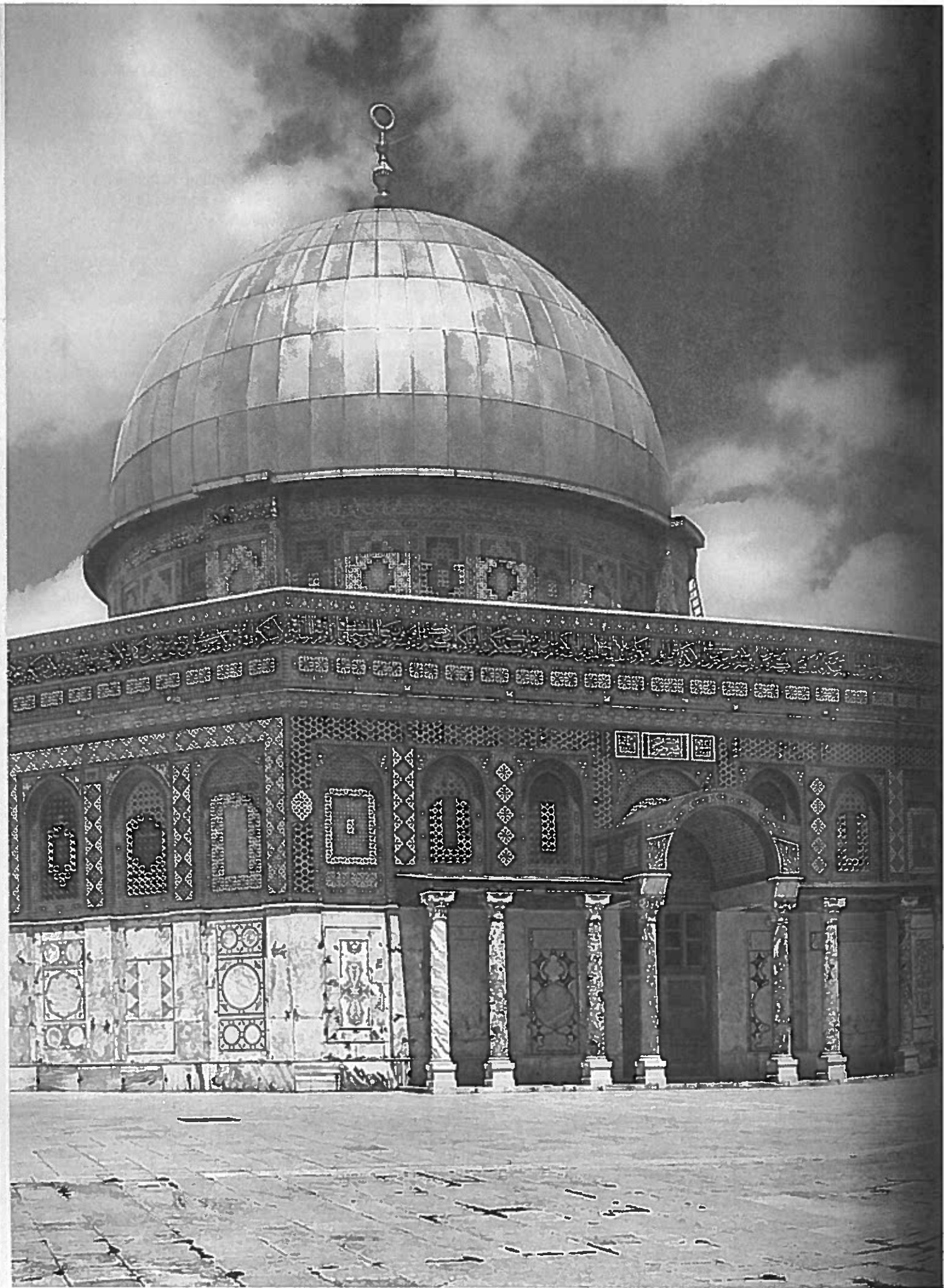




9

The Rise and Spread
of Islam

A New Religion



THINKING AHEAD

What was the message of the Prophet Muhammad?

Why did Islam spread so rapidly?

How did Islam come to Africa and Spain?

What place do the arts hold in the Islamic world?

The Dome of the Rock (Fig. 9.1) stands atop the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, on the site where, in Jewish tradition, Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac. The Jewish Temple of Solomon originally stood here, and the site is further associated—by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—with God's creation of Adam. The Second Temple of Jerusalem also stood on this spot until it was destroyed by Roman soldiers when they sacked the city in 70 CE to put down a Jewish revolt (see Fig. 6.21). Only the Wailing Wall remains, part of the original retaining wall for the platform supporting the Temple Mount and for Jews the most sacred site in Jerusalem. To this day, the plaza in front of the wall functions as an open-air synagogue where daily prayers are recited and other Jewish rituals are performed. On Tisha B'Av, the ninth day of the month of Av, which occurs either in July or August, a fast is held commemorating the destruction of the successive temples on this site, and people sit on the ground before the wall reciting the Book of Lamentations.

One of the earliest examples of Muslim architecture, built in the 680s, the Dome's ambulatory—its circular, colonnaded walkway—encloses a projecting rock that lies directly

beneath its golden dome. By the sixteenth century, Islamic faithful claimed that the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven from this spot, on a winged horse named Buraq, but there is no evidence that this story was in circulation when the Dome was originally built. Others thought that it represents the ascendancy of Islam over Christianity in the Holy Land. Still others believed the rock is the center of the world, or that it could refer to the Temple of Solomon, the importance of which is fully acknowledged by Muslims, who consider Solomon a founding father of their own faith. All of this suggests that the Dome was meant to proselytize, or convert, both Jews and Christians to the Muslim faith.

The sanctity of this spot, then, at the heart of Jerusalem, is recognized equally by the three great faiths of the Western world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—but it is the rise of Islam that is the subject of this chapter, and if the Dome of the Rock is one of Islam's most venerated sites, its holiest city is Mecca, located 760 miles to the south, about 50 miles inland from the Red Sea in modern Saudi Arabia (Map 9.1). Its natural spring originally made it an important stopping point for nomadic Arabs, known as Bedouins, who traded along caravan routes across the arid peninsula.

Fig. 9.1 The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. Late 680s–691. The golden dome of the building, one of the earliest Muslim constructions, rises above a projecting rock that is surrounded by an ambulatory. The building's function remains unclear. It is not a mosque, although it is certainly some kind of religious memorial. Inscriptions from the Qur'an decorate its interior. These are the oldest excerpts from the text to have survived.

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Until the seventh century CE, they worshiped more than one god. They stored images of those gods in a square structure in the center of the city that came to be known as the *Kaaba* [KAAH-buh], literally “cube” (Fig. 9.2). Scholars believe that the original Kaaba was linked to the astronomical year, containing an array of 360 idols, each associated with seasonal rituals and the passing of the days and months. Built with a bluish-gray stone from the hills surrounding Mecca, it is now usually covered with a black curtain. The Kaaba also held a sacred Black Stone, probably a meteorite, which reportedly “fell from heaven.” Legend has it that when workers who had been rebuilding the Kaaba were ready to place the sacred stone inside, a quarrel broke out among the principal Arab tribes regarding who would have the privilege of laying the stone. Everyone agreed that the first passerby would do the honor. That passerby turned out to be the Muslim prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632), who placed the stone on his cloak and then gave a corner of the cloak to the head of each tribe to carry into the building (Fig. 9.3). The story establishes Muhammad as a political as well as spiritual leader, and, perhaps more important, as a prophet capable of uniting the diverse elements of Arab culture.

Today, practitioners of the Muslim faith from all over the world face toward the Kaaba when they pray. They believe it is their place of origin, the site of the first “house of God,” built at God’s command by the biblical Abraham and his son Ismael, the ancestors of all Muslims, on the spot where, in Muslim tradition, Abraham prepared to sacrifice Ismael (not Isaac, as in the Jewish tradition, at the Dome of the Rock). Thus, walking around the Kaaba is a key ritual in the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, for the cube represents the physical center of the planet and the universe. It is the physical center of Muslim life, around which all things turn and to which all things in the universe are connected, symbolic of the cosmos itself. The Islamic transformation of Middle Eastern and Western culture, which began in Mecca in the seventh century and spread outward from that city, is the subject of this chapter.



Map 9.1 The Muslim world, ca. 700 CE.

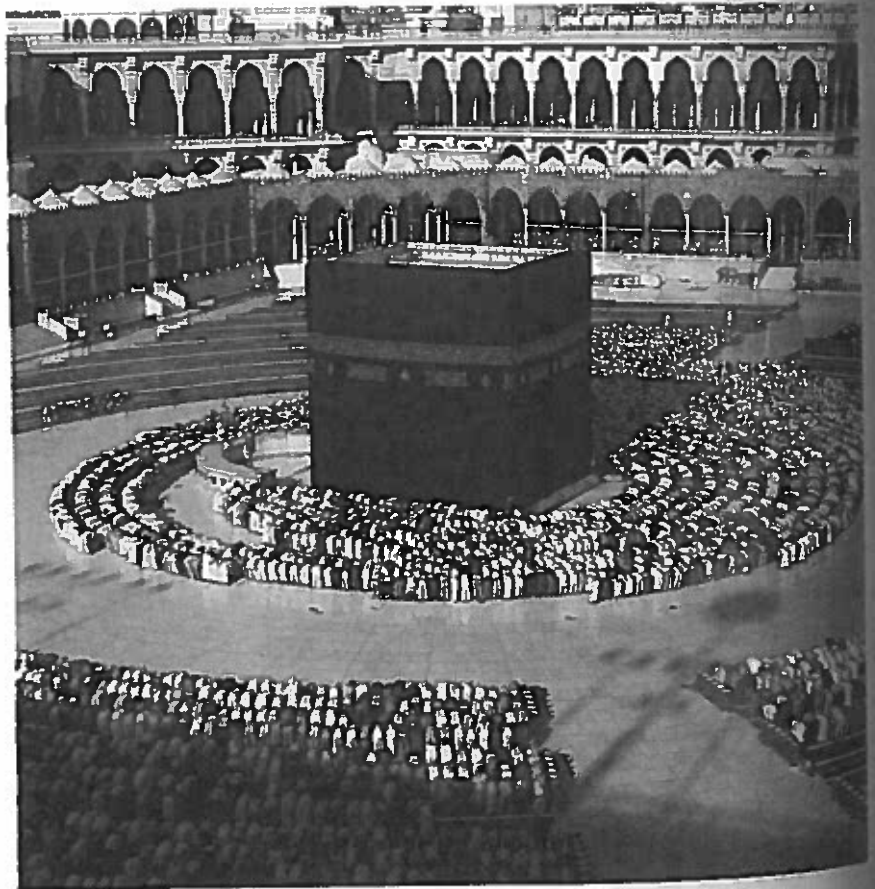


Fig. 9.2 The Kaaba, center of the Haram Mosque, Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Traditionally, all Muslims must make a pilgrimage to Mecca, in Syria, at least once in their lives. Once there, they must walk around the Kaaba seven times. The Kaaba has been rebuilt many times over the years, the last time in 1631.



Fig. 9.3 Muhammad Placing the Black Stone on His Cloak, from Rashid al-Din's *Jami al-Tawarikh* (*Universal History*), copied and illustrated at Tabriz, Iran, 1315. $5\frac{1}{8}'' \times 10\frac{1}{4}''$. University Library, Edinburgh.

Notice that the figures in back of the central section are lifting a veil that covers the Kaaba. Today, the veil, the meaning of which is obscure, is black, with quotations from the Qur'an woven across it in gold thread.

Just as Muslims physically turn toward Mecca when they pray, they turn their thoughts toward the teachings of their prophet Muhammad. Wherever Muslims found themselves—and Islam rapidly spread across the Middle East, North Africa, and even into Spain—they built places of worship modeled on Muhammad's home in Medina, the city on the Arabian peninsula where Muhammad moved when he was driven from Mecca (see Map 9.1). And, as individuals, they submitted themselves to the authority of their faith, so much so that the Muslim religion quickly became synonymous with the Islamic state itself. Because Arabic, as the language of divine revelation, was believed to have a sacred nature, writing too was revered, and calligraphy developed into the preeminent form of visual art in Islam, creating an almost wholly abstract standard of beauty devoid of figurative elements. As a faith that considered sensory satisfaction, love, luxury, sensuality, and enjoyment to be manifestations of divine grace, the Muslim religion enveloped Islamic culture, its art, music, and literature, in the pursuit of beauty.

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Born in Mecca in about 570 to a prominent family that traced its ancestry back to Ismael, son of Abraham, Muhammad was orphaned at age six and received little formal education. He worked in the desert caravan trade, first as a camel driver for his uncle, and then, after marry-

ing a wealthy widow 15 years his senior, as head of his wife's flourishing caravan firm. At the age of 40, in 610, he heard a voice in Arabic—the Archangel Gabriel's, as the story goes—urging him, "Recite!" He responded, "What shall I recite?" And for the next 22 years, he claimed to receive messages, or "recitations," from God through the agency of Gabriel. These he memorized and dictated to scribes, who collected them to form the scriptures of Islam, the *Qur'an* [kuh-RAN] (or Koran), which means "recitations." Muhammad also claimed that Gabriel commanded him to declare himself the "Seal of the Prophets," that is, the messenger of the one and only Allah (the Arab word for God) and the final prophet in a series of prophets extending from Abraham and Moses to Jesus.

At the core of Muhammad's revelations is the concept of submission to God—the word *Islam*, in fact, means "submission" or "surrender." God, or Allah, is all-powerful, all-seeing, all-merciful. Because the universe is his creation, it is necessarily good and beautiful, and the natural world reflects Allah's own goodness and beauty. To immerse oneself in nature is thus to be at one with God. But the most beautiful creation of Allah is humankind, which God made in his own image. Like Christians, Muslims believe that human beings possess immortal souls and that they can live eternally in heaven if they surrender to Allah and accept him as the one and only God.

CLOSER LOOK

The *bismillah* consists of the phrase "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, Ever-Merciful." Every pious Muslim begins any statement or activity with it, and it inaugurates each chapter of the Qur'an. For Arab calligraphers, to write the *bismillah* in as beautiful a form as possible brings the scribe forgiveness for sins, and the phrase appears in the Islamic world in many different forms—even in the shape of a parrot. From the time that Abd al-Malik took control of the Umayyad family in 692, it became an important part of architectural practice as well. It first appears in written form on a band of mosaic script around the interior walls and above the entrance of Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (see Fig. 9.1). On the next page, the fourteenth-century ceramic tile decoration on a mihrab niche, a design feature in all Islamic mosques commemorating the spot at Medina where Mohammad planted his lance to indicate the direction in which people should pray, gives some indication of how the calligraphic script could blend with floral motifs and geometric designs to create an elaborate ornamental surface.



Ahmed Karahisari. Calligraphic Qur'an frontispiece, from Istanbul, ca. 1550. Ink, gold, and color on paper, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ " $\times$ 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, Istanbul. Karahisari (1469–1560) was the most famous calligrapher of his day. He placed the *bismillah* in black script between two square scripts. On top, the words "Praise God" are repeated four times. The bottom block contains the entire text of *Surah* 112 of the Qur'an: "Say: 'He is Allah, the only one [that is, indivisible]. Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable to Him.'"

The importance of writing in spreading the new faith suggests one reason that Muslim calligraphers were held in such high esteem. Most Westerners think of handwriting as a form of self-expression. But the Muslim calligrapher's style has a much more important role to play: to attract the attention of the reader, eliciting admiration for the beauty of the script, and in turn reflecting the beauty of the Muslim faith. The Muslim calligrapher is considered the medium through which Allah expresses himself. The more beautiful the calligraphic script, the more fully Allah's beauty is realized. Hence, over time, many styles of elaborate cursive script developed, as illustrated on the next page. At the same time, everyday affairs required the development of simpler, less artistic forms, and the *riq'a* script is an example.

Mastering the art of calligraphy was, in this sense, a form of prayer, and it was practiced with total dedication. A famous story about an incident that happened in the city of Tabriz, in northern Iran, during the great earthquake of 1776–77, illustrates this. The quake struck in the middle of the night and buried many in the rubble. Survivors stumbled through the



Bismillah in the form of a parrot, from Iran. 1834–35. Ink on paper under wax coating. Cincinnati Art Museum, Franny Bryce Lehmer Fund. 1977.65. The parrot reads right to left, beginning over the large dot beneath its tail. The word *Allah* appears at the back of its head. The parrot is to humankind as humankind is to Allah. That is, it mimics human language without understanding it, just as humans recite the words of Allah without fully understanding them.

SEE MORE for a Closer Look at the *bismillah* in the Dome of the Rock, go to www.myartslab.com

The Bismillah and the Art of Calligraphy

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Naskh

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Thuluth

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Muhaqqaq

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Nastaliq

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Riq'a

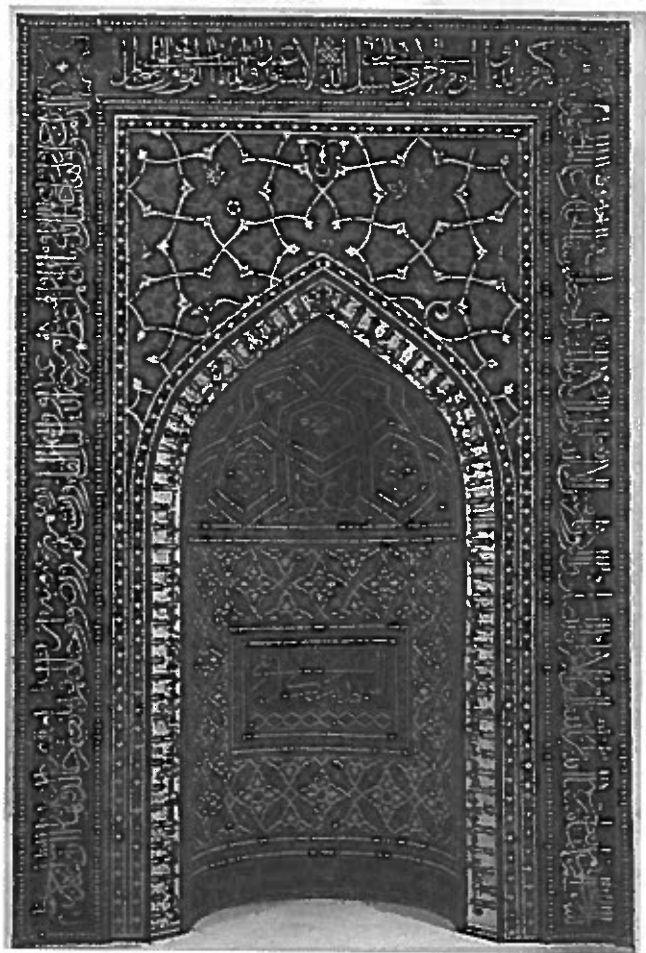
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debris looking for signs of life. In the basement of a ruined house, rescuers discovered a man sitting on the floor absolutely absorbed in his work. He did not respond to their yells for him to hurry out before an aftershock buried him. Finally, he looked up and complained that they were disturbing him. They told him that thousands had been killed in an earthquake, and if he did not hurry up, he would be next. "What is all that to me?" he replied. "After many thousands of attempts I have finally made a perfect 'waw' [meaning 'and']." He showed them the letter, indeed a very difficult letter to make. "Such a perfect letter," he exclaimed, "is worth more than the whole city!"

Something to Think About . . .

How might modern technologies—from type to the Internet—pose a challenge to the calligraphic tradition in Islam?

Five examples of the *bismillah* in different Islamic cursive scripts. *Naskh*, literally "copying," was developed in the tenth century, and refined into a fine art form in Turkey in the sixteenth century. *Thuluth* evolved over the centuries into a more impressive, stately calligraphic style, often used for titles or epigrams rather than lengthy texts, and often found in many variations on architectural monuments, as well as on glass, metalwork, textiles, and wood. It is the script employed on the mihrab niche below. *Muhaqqaq* emerged in the eleventh century in the art of making manuscripts of the Qur'an. *Nastaliq* developed in Iran in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is the most fluid and expressive of the scripts presented here, and is used extensively in copying romantic and mystical epics in Persian. *Riq'a*, the simpler style of everyday writing, is very economical and easy to write.



Mihrab niche, Isfahan, Iran, ca. 1354–55. Mosaic of polychrome-glazed cut tiles on fritware body, set into plaster, $135\frac{1}{16}'' \times 113\frac{1}{16}''$. ©1982 The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1939. 39.20. The *bismillah* is contained in the rectangle in the center of the niche. The verses surrounding the niche are from the Qur'an, *Surah* 9: 18–22, beginning with this exhortation: "The mosques of Allah shall be visited and maintained by such as believe in Allah."