

Title of the Project

Muthanna/Mirror Writing in Islamic Art: History, Aesthetics, and Meaning

Context

Muthanna, also known as mirror writing, is a compelling style of Islamic calligraphy composed of a source text and its mirrored image placed symmetrically on a horizontal or vertical axis. It is a style of calligraphy that elaborates on various scripts such as *kufi*, *naskh*, and *muhaqqaq* through such compositional arrangements as doubling, superimposing, and stacking (Figs. 1 and 2). *Muthanna* is found in diverse media, ranging from architecture, textiles, and tiles to paper, metalwork, and woodwork (Fig. 3). Previous scholars have traced the origins of *muthanna*, albeit erroneously, to fifteenth-century Iran from whence, they argued, it spread to other parts of the Islamic world.

Previous Scholarship on *muthanna*

Despite *muthanna*'s centuries-old history, distinctive aesthetic idiom and its popularity in different geographical regions of the Islamic world, from Iran to Spain, scholarship on mirror writing is limited and flawed. Modern studies by artists, art historians, scholars of religion, and experts on the Qur'an have placed mirror writing within parochial realms that harbor eccentric, nationalistic, bigoted, and even racist sentiments. Deliberately shifting attention from the art form itself and disseminating inaccurate information, these past inquiries have been feeding a chain of misguided assumptions surrounding *muthanna*, obfuscating its transcultural contexts, past and present.

Arguments and Goals

Mirror writing defies any attempt to identify its moment of birth and place of origin, which, in and of itself, is a testimony to the fact that, rather than belonging to a singular realm, it comes out of and points back to syncretic and dynamic intellectual milieus, life styles, religious beliefs, and aesthetic practices that characterized pre- and early-modern Islamic societies and their contemporaries. To date, *muthanna* has been appropriated readily as the quintessential product of Muslim creativity. Yet, to my knowledge,

no previous research has considered non-Islamic and pluralist contexts for mirror writing. Adopting an alternative position, my monograph pays particular attention to the unmistakable marks of transcultural elements manifest in the tangible examples of mirror writing by prioritizing the deliberate choices that Muslim artists made in order to enable transitions and transpositions between Islamic calligraphy and various forms of modified writing (specifically uni-directionally reversed and repeated texts) that preceded *muthanna*.

The chronological alignment and similarities among form, function, and meaning of pre-Islamic reversed and repeated inscriptions and *muthanna* found in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Near East suggest that these texts operated not within a singular, exclusive, or divisive aesthetic, cultural, or religious landscape as some have purported. Rather, this study perceives mirror writing as the culmination of centuries-old human experiments with the technical demands, practical requisites, and aesthetic potentialities of writing. In the absence of written evidence that would account for the “genesis” of mirror writing, attribution of this art form to a specific group of people who lived within a fixed place at a fixed historical time becomes even more irrelevant. In pursuit of a more art-historical and scientific framework, my study offers analyses of *muthanna* through the lens of a process of translation to help move toward a clearer understanding of mirror writing as an aesthetic expression that transcends the cultural horizons of any single community.

Methodologies

My research is informed by theories of intertextuality, as represented by such scholars as Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Roland Barthes, and theories of cultural translation and transculturation, pioneered by James Clifford, and more recently, Hayrettin Yücesoy and Finbarr B. Flood. Taking a stance against essentialist art historicisms, my study distances itself from theories of “origin” that seek the genesis of artistic ideas and practices within fixed temporal, geographical, or cultural territories, and looks beyond the linear art histories that previous scholarship has prescribed for *muthanna*. To this

end, my work points toward the networks of artists, commissioners, scholars, and philosophers, Muslim and non-Muslim, within which *muthanna*'s forms and meanings were fashioned and reframed over centuries. Using *muthanna*'s visual principles as analogies, my work operates within multilateral, interconnected, and co-dependent frameworks. When so resituated, the works of art that my research investigates bring seemingly distant and incompatible Islamic and non-Islamic (specifically, pagan, Judaic and Christian) aesthetic practices and conceptual realms into proximity. This immediacy, while it reveals the shared elements in the arts of Muslim and non-Muslim communities of the pre-modern era, also serves to accentuate their distinctive elements.

Content and Structure

The primary goal of my monograph is to construct the linguistic and conceptual tools of a dynamic and dialectical framework within which the aesthetics of *muthanna* can be explored. *Muthanna*'s chronology attests to a journey that is more ancient than scholarship had hitherto assumed. The earliest surviving works in mirror writing reveal that, in its thirteenth centuries of history, while mirror writing's conceptual sources, references, and functions varied among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, its structural components remained unchanged. For this reason, my monograph begins with a discussion of *muthanna*'s formal principle (symmetrical reflection), aesthetic variances (composition, orientation, and color), and the techniques used in its creation. This discussion is followed by an investigation of *muthanna*'s relationship to modified forms of writing that preceded it in Judaic and Christian contexts, such as inverted and repeated inscriptions. This cross-cultural section leads to a detailed discussion of the specifically Islamic contexts within which symmetrically mirrored compositions reached full fruition in and around the eighth century, when, I contend, they were assigned new meanings and were transformed into more complex visual forms, called "*muthanna*." At the center of these investigations within Islamic contexts is a consideration of the relationship between *muthanna*'s aesthetic components and the literary, anthropological, philosophical, and religious contexts to which *muthanna* refers the beholder by serving as a calligraphic index of a subject-object

(artwork-viewer) relationship. My study elaborates on this relationship through a discussion of the vital importance of the intrinsic links in Islamic calligraphy between outward form and inner meaning. In the final analysis, it offers commentaries on *muthanna* in contemporary art, such as prints and video installations, and *muthanna*'s constantly shifting meanings in Islamic art, at home and in diaspora.

Audience

The primary audience for my study includes scholars and students of Islamic and non-Islamic art, cultural studies, language, anthropology, philosophy, literature, and theology. Because its content balances discussions of practice and theory, my monograph will also be of interest to practicing artists, museum curators, and art collectors in the field of Islamic, Byzantine, Greek, and Coptic studies.

Contributions to Scholarship

This monograph will be the first book-length study on *muthanna* composed in its nearly thirteen centuries of history. While drawing attention to this sophisticated form of calligraphy, my work reconstructs the history of *muthanna* by establishing much-needed connections with Christian, Judaic, and Islamic art history, culture, literature, philosophy, and theology. With its comprehensive yet focused approach, my work also helps better integrate Islamic art into the larger field of art history, highlighting the globally shared and locally distinct social, cultural, linguistic, philosophical, and religious factors that have shaped various traditions of calligraphy.

Estimated Date of Completion

Adopting the stylistic principle of *muthanna*—symmetrical reflection—my manuscript consists of two parts. Part I includes a review of previous scholarship, an introduction to the practice of mirror writing, and a history of writing styles (such as uni-directional inversions and repeated inscriptions) that I believe played a role in the creation of *muthanna*. Examples of works of art in Part I come from non-Islamic and multi-cultural contexts, and include discussions of reversed and repeated texts inscribed bilingually in Greek-Arabic, Armenian-Arabic, and Syrian-Arabic. Muslim expressions of faith inscribed

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in Arabic that accompany pagan imagery found on textile fragments produced in Coptic (Christian) workshops in Egypt under the patronage of Muslim rulers provide a point of transition to Part II that examines *muthanna* in exclusively Islamic contexts. Analyses of artworks in this section explore how Muslim calligraphers transformed mirror writing into expressions of their various religious beliefs and philosophical discourses. As it delineates Muslim contributions to this art form, Part II continues to highlight the interconnectedness of intellectual and visual traditions among pre-modern societies.

I have completed Part I of my manuscript. Having already conducted extensive research, I no longer need to travel abroad. I request an ACLS fellowship to facilitate a reduced teaching and service load so as to be able to complete Part II. Brill Academic Publishers and Indiana University Press have expressed interest in my manuscript and requested the completed work, which I aim to submit by the end of 2017.

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‘Such a Qur’an No Individual Might Own’: A 15th-century Mamluk Qur’an from Ottoman Jerusalem.” *The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, Vol. 48 (July, 2016): 229-268.

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Works in Progress

Books

Muthanna/Mirror Writing in Islamic and Ottoman Calligraphy: History, Aesthetics, Meaning. Expected date of completion: December, 2017. In communication with Brill Academic Publishers and Indiana University Press.

An Album of Muthanna: Fourteenth to Twentieth centuries. Expected date of completion: 2018.

Reconstructing Ottoman Art-historiography: Sources, Authors, and Patrons (verbal agreement with Edinburgh University Press, Ottoman Studies Series). Expected date of completion: Fall 2019.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3