

MYSTERIES OF SQUARE KUFU CALIGRAPHY

The apparent simplicity of this geometric style of Arabic calligraphy belies the enormous skill of the craftsman, reveals calligraphy expert Mamoun Sakkal

Arabs and Muslims revere calligraphy as the highest form of visual art. They also love mathematics, and their contributions to its advancement in the Middle Ages have become well known. One form of art that combines these two fascinating and diverse fields of human skill is Square Kufi calligraphy. The artist has to have the talent of the calligrapher, together with the ability of the mathematician, in order to create designs that are aesthetically pleasing and properly computed to occupy the allotted space.

Muslims artisans executed an intriguing example of this style of Arabic calligraphy for King Pedro I in his palace Alcazar in Seville, Spain, in 1364. This palace was originally constructed two centuries earlier. Rather than redesigning the palace using architectural concepts associated with his Christian faith, Pedro I sought to preserve and to reinterpret the Islamic design of the original. To carry out his plans, he brought in craftsmen and materials from Muslim Granada.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of the Alcazar palace is the main two-storey façade of the entrance

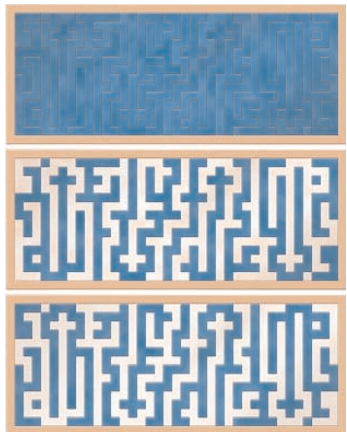
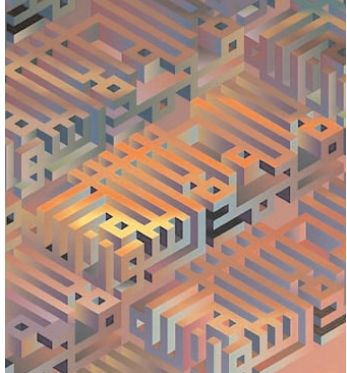
to the courtyard. Below the eaves of this façade is a horizontal panel in blue and white glazed tiles that looks like a maze and contains the shapes of several crosses. Although the geometric panel contained many crosses (pictured right), which must have pleased the Christian patron, it was in fact composed of the phrase ‘There is no victor but God’, the slogan of the Nasrid rulers of Granada at the time. It is still not clear to what degree Pedro I was aware that his Muslim artisans worked Islamic messages into the backgrounds of their creations. The phrase was written twice and mirror-reflected to form four repetitions. This panel has other mysteries as well. If the viewer turned his head upside down as if looking down from a balcony, he would still read, ‘There is no victor but God’ – only this time written with the white tiles that formed the space between the lines of the blue calligraphy.

The mysterious panel is the earliest example of Square Kufi to survive from Spain. Through the years, Kufi has demonstrated its position as one of those rare styles of art that continue to dazzle, puzzle and delight the eyes and minds of viewers. Despite its simple forms,



Clockwise from left: The impressive façade of Bibi Khanum Mosque in Samarkand soars to more than 130 feet, and is completely covered with Square Kufi calligraphy; A Square Kufi panel from Qaratawiah Madrasa in Tripoli, Lebanon, built by the Mamluk Amir Qaratay in 1316-26 AD; Square Kufi band from Alkazar in Seville, 1346 AD.





Top left: Steps and Shadows II, modern Cubic Kufi by Mamoun Sakkal. Left: Analysis of the band design at Alkazar palace showing how the calligraphy can be read in both blue and white. Above: The mausoleum of the astronomer Ghazi-Zade Rumi in Samarkand, built in 1437 AD

Arabic calligraphy in Seville

The Arab Islamic heritage of Spain is evident in the southern region of Andalusia. However, it also continued for several hundred years in regions that came under Christian control between the 11th and 15th centuries. Common architectural features that continued in use include star-ribbed domes, coffered ceilings in wood joinery known in Spanish as *artesonado*, the use of glazed ceramic tiles known in Spanish as *azulejo*, and Arabic inscriptions on walls and objects. These inscriptions are usually executed in the Kufi style, named after the city of Kufa in Iraq and can be found in many churches and palaces.

During one period in its history, the Spanish city of Seville enjoyed a reputation in the arts and sciences that rivaled that of Cordoba. Its refined artistic accomplishments are reflected in the few exquisite Islamic buildings that remain today, and their decoration using Kufi-style Arabic script.

Seville is also important because it demonstrated the hold that Islamic architectural style exercised on the entire population – including the Christian rulers who took control in 1248. In fact, Islamic art and architecture flourished in Seville for 200 years under Christian regimes including those of Alfonso X and Pedro I (1350-69).

Square Kufi requires tremendous skill since the artisan has to fit the calligraphy within defined borders in such a way that all letters fit next to one another in a uniform manner. There can't be any gaps or overlaps. Because of the uniformity of the shapes used in Square Kufi (only straight lines and right angles are allowed), its compositions can be easily mistaken for interesting decorative patterns, and the calligraphic content completely obscured from those not already familiar with its beauty – and this must be what happened with Pedro I. He saw an angular geometric pattern. Yet Arabic readers could discern the Nasrid slogan.

The story of Square Kufi starts on the other side of the Islamic world, most likely in Iraq or Iran, about one hundred and fifty years before the panel of Alcazar was created. Square Kufi is unique among the styles of Arabic calligraphy because it developed on the walls of buildings rather than on paper. It is executed in mosaic faience, decorative glazed facing tiles, or simple bricks, rather than with reed pens and ink. The first still standing, fully developed Square Kufi example is found on the Tomb of Abdallah in Radkan near the city of Mashhad in Iran, known as Mil-i-Radkan, and dated 1205-06 AD. Other early examples include Turbe of Kykavus in Sivas and Karataya Madrasa in Konia, both in Asia Minor built in the first half of the 13th century. In the Sultan Qalawun complex in Cairo built in 1284 AD, a wall panel of Square Kufi incorporates the name 'Muhammad' rotated four times, where the white space between these names forms the name 'Ali'. The same ingenious concept was used in Alcazar 80 years later to write the Nasrid slogan in blue lines as well as in the white space between the lines.

For the next several centuries, the use of Square Kufi

continued to expand and develop as the architectural surface decoration of choice for luxurious buildings. Designers and builders covered larger and larger surfaces, used different colour combinations, used a wide variety of materials, and attempted more complex and elaborate compositions. As Persia and the Levant recovered from the devastation of Tamerlane's invasions of the mid-14th century, complete buildings were covered with Square Kufi designs, which included phrases of praise and gratitude to God, like magnificent amulets that embraced the building lovingly, providing divine protection and delightful decoration. Although it is possible to find examples of architectural monuments with extensive use of calligraphic surface decorations, it is only with the widespread use of Square Kufi in the Islamic world during the 15th century that we find complete buildings covered with calligraphic patterns and designs, a practice unique to Islamic architecture among world cultures. Some of the best examples are those found in Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia, especially in Samarqand.

The practice of covering the total surface of a building with Square Kufi calligraphy was a very expensive affair and did not last very long. With the Safavids of the 16th century, the designs became smaller and gradually lost their purity. The style went out of favour in the 18th century, and was not widely used after that. However, Square Kufi seems to be enjoying a revival over the last few decades. Designers, calligraphers and architects use it increasingly in art, graphic design and architecture. This writer has moved the long tradition of Square Kufi a step into the future by designing 'Cubic Kufi', where the calligraphy is written on all sides of three-dimensional space. ■