

# LETTERING AND ILLUMINATION

Seminar in Lahore

Many many thousands of years ago, soon after the Ice age, first matured man Pithecanthropus appeared, who, it is said, developed the awareness to use stone tools. Then in the Middle Paleolithic or the Stone age, the Anthropologists tell us of a major development in the human species and call him The Neanderthal Man and he was the first one to have improved upon the use of stone tools and get the awareness to control his vocal chords to produce sensible sounds, it was then, I suspect, Man first engraved. Many famous paintings and engravings of Altamira in Spain and the caves of Lascaux in France date back as far as 35000 years. It was then, I believe, that man first made an attempt to represent his thoughts and sounds he made into imagery, on to a surface.

By 5000 B. C. the Sumerians, in the Mesopotamian valley, had already established communities, domesticated animals, discovered the wheel and agriculture, and designed the first boats and buildings, obviously this could have only been possible due to the existence of a sophisticated language and a script (or Pictograms). All surviving specimens of Pictograms and Hieroglyphs which re-present coded message and other communications clearly indicated that Man developed an urge for written record, which is also one of the basic reasons for the progress and the prosperity of the mankind.

Prophet Moses brought us the Commandments which start with an amazing revelation “In the beginning there was The Word” I dare say that all the world needed was a Designer who could represent it and cherish it. Ever since the Sumerians the spoken word has taken form in the hands of craftsmen and which has evolved to various standards of sophistication to this day in different parts of the world and we call this Lettering.

Illumination refers to all the decorations done along with the text in the written book and all the illuminations (and Miniatures) which were incorporated later with it. Its History can be traced along with the development of the book, the invention of Paper and Printing.

Early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B. C. Ts'ai Lun a Mandarin at the Imperial court of china, announced the invention of paper, which was made out of old rags and fishing nets, worn out hamper sandals and the inner bark of the trees, mixed with water, pounded and spread out on a board to dry. Mass production of paper followed throughout the Chinese Empire. Some 4 to 5 centuries after the invention of paper, printing was also invented in China. Inked seals were already used as a form of signature or ratification on a document. This principal of impression from a relief surface was extended to produce the first printed book from carved wooden blocks. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century B. C. movable types baked in clay were also used for the first time in China, as it became extremely difficult to carve same characters of great intricacy again and again.

Europe at that time, as some put it, was in its Dark Ages, and the Muslims were conquering the world, soon the craft of paper making, printing and book designing became a beloved art with the Muslims, slowly it was given away to Europe which started with manual printing from wooden blocks in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A. D. and 15<sup>th</sup> century brought the movable type. The first famous printed Bible was by Gutenberg in Germany. As far as illuminations are concerned, in 1980 B. C. the first ones appear in the famous “The book of the Dead” written on papyrus roll. The design was simple with the illustrations below the text and sometimes an illustrated frieze above the text. Many versions of the same book survive to this day perhaps because they were buried with the nobles and the preservative qualities of the Egyptian sand. The design of the Egyptian roll book was stagnant for centuries and no developments took place.

Let us briefly look at the development of lettering. Letters, as we know are essentially signs for sounds and its evolutionary descent can be traced from the Pictographs (when the picture tells the

story), Ideographs (when picture become a symbol to represent an idea or thought) and Phonetic (when picture becomes the Phonogram or sign represented by a particular sound. Phonetics could be further divided into three groups i.e. when signs represent words, when signs represent syllables and finally alphabetic signs that stood for elementary sounds.

The evolution of the alphabet from syllabic and others systems is hidden in antiquity. The earliest known alphabetic characters, according to some historians, derived from the pictorial script of the Egyptians, and arranged roughly in vertical lines, were scratched on sandstone by Semitic miners, working in Egyptian captivity. Since they relied entirely on consonants for meaning and only later used vowel marks as an aid to reading, the letter represented consonants only. There were other radical differences between the earliest alphabets and the Roman alphabets in use today. There was one alphabet only, for instance, instead a mixture of capital and small letters, there was no space between words nor any punctuation, the direction of writing vertical at first, changed to horizontal, to read not only from left but sometimes from right and at some stages alternately from right and from left.

As the alphabet descended from its ancestors of Jewish exile, Hugh Williamson writes in his book "Book Design", its development was influenced by the needs and the methods of those who used it, although the Hebrew alphabet to this day follows its ancient pattern, reading from right to left and without different small letters or letters representing vowels. The Greeks to whom vowels was an essential part of the world transformed some of the characters to vowels, eventually standardized the direction of writing, to read from left to right and introduced simple systems of punctuation. The Latin began to separate words, and to shape the letters now familiar as Roman capitals. The Roman capitals incised on the Trajan column are still considered as ideal standards.

The use of lettering tools other than the knife such as the pen, and of comparatively smooth surfaces such as the papyrus and parchment, and was instead of stone accelerated the development of Roman letter forms. Curves began to replace the rigid lines of the earlier styles, in the less formal and more rapid scripts, strokes began to flow above and below the even alignment of the older letters, and small letters of varying formality and cursive ness appeared to supplement the capitals. Under the authority of Charlemagne the Roman alphabet took on something of the form in which it is known today, but this was only one of the innumerable styles of the period which differed radically from each other. In the hands of professional scribes of the monasteries, and under the influence of high cost of parchment the Roman letters developed into decorative and economical styles, heavy narrow and angular, known today by such names as Black Letter (Old English). These styles are not easy nor do they lend themselves to the practice of the amateurs or the rapid writing. The Renaissance and the spreading use of paper aroused a demand for more and clearer books and willing, and revived interest in the arts of earlier centuries, professional scribes and humanist scholars began to turn away from the styles of the Black Letters, contemptuously termed Gothic or barbaric, towards a new form of the rapid, clear and open alphabet of Charlemagne, the Roman capitals and the carline minuscule. The famous Italic was invented. Another major change came with the Modern art when the decorative Serifs were removed and the thickness of the strokes was made constant and throughout. Today we have with us, as far as western lettering is concerned, many dozens of styles but all of them derived from the basic Roman, Text, Italic and Gothic.

Now, coming back to book design, we are told that Alexandria was the book center written of the ancient world and in the Golden Greek times many hundreds of books were written but unfortunately none survive to give us any indication of decisive development. Second century was one of the most momentous times for Codex or paged book was invented. Some of the superb examples of Roman books like The Milan Iliad and the Vatican Virgil which were ingeniously illustrated still survive.

Freedom for the Christians from Roman oppression and the discovery of Parnomen the 4<sup>th</sup> century was extremely crucial for the Christens were busy writing the Bible in order to spread the word of

God. All imagery was forbidden for fear of idolatry but in the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century Pope Gregory was the first one to encourage representational art, even imagery, in order to illustrate Biblical sole and to convey the message to the illiterate. Here in the middle of the Dark Age lies the foundation of one of the most fascination arts of book illumination. It was in 330 when Constantinople became the capital of the Roman empire began long strange history of Byzantine illumination. It was a new blending of Greek, Roman, and oriental elements which was also a turning point for book design when illustration was ousted by the illumination (the object of which is to beautify the text and decorate).

By 7<sup>th</sup> century Islamic conquerors reached Europe opening the door to the orient the civilized east. As we know the art of paper making reached the Muslim world from China and until 1150 when the first European mill was started in Spain all the suppliers of the west came from the Arabs.

The oldest surviving illuminated book “The book of Durrone” comes from England (probably written and designed by Irish monks). Goldsmiths played a vital part in the design of illumination. It is said, that there were times when many craftsmen and technicians were employed for the production of a single illuminated book, as many as eight or more, i.e. the painter, the leaf outer, the guilder, the draughtsman, the binder, the preparer of the gold sprinkled paper, the designer of borders and the man who supervised the whole. The super vision might have been done, as in China by the Calligrapher, the most highly esteemed of them all. One of the most famous western illuminated books called the “Lindesfarne Gospels” was written in fine black ink and was rich in Celtic ornamentation, another masterpiece by Irish monks; the famous “Book of Kella” is still remembered for its vigor and intricate designs. Some enquirer calculated 158 interlacements in the space of one square inch and pointed out that all can be followed none of them breaking or leading to an impossible knot. History of western illumination saw many schools and rich periods like the Dutch, Flemish, French, German and the English but as soon as the printed book appeared, illumination slowly disappeared.

As far as eastern illumination is concerned it began when the Muslims conquered Constantinople, though it is believed that other eastern countries specially Persia had its own history of illumination long before that. The Muslims were the leaders of the civilized world in scientific thought and culture during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that some of their Libraries contained more than 100,000 books; unfortunately not many survive from the Mongol invasion and the downfall of Spain, which are thoroughly illustrated or illuminated. The main reason for least illustration, as we know, was religious, opposition to all representational art. However all the creative faculties of the Muslim craftsmen were focused on Architecture, Design and decoration in general, Calligraphy and book illumination. Hence the world now owns one of the most exquisite and fascinating Architecture including pattern designs of amazing geometry and foliage. Symmetrical designs in general and decorative borders in consistent repetition were introduced for the first time to the art of illumination. It is thought that the intricate designs used in illumination may have been derived from the carpet designs of the east, particularly Persia.

Calligraphy received utmost importance and the copying of the Holy Quran was an act of merit and reverence. The amount of wealth of armament and design it was given is still unsurpassed. Some of the basic Islamic lettering styles can be mentioned here. It is said that Prophet Ismail was the first one to have written Arabic and his sons actually invented proper Arabic script giving the name Khat-e-Nabti. Hameer bin Saban Yamni modified it to call it Khat-e-Hameeri, and the people of Kufa modified it to call it Khat-e-Heera (old name of Kufa) but it was not until Prophet Muhammad that the true importance of the Arabic language and its writing was realized. He was to become the first patron and promoter of the language. Surviving documents of that era contain Khat-e-Heera in its crude form. It was again from Kufa that a most elegant lettering style appeared. It is today known as Kufic and consists of most sophisticated geometry and also has reflections of typical Islamic Architecture and Design.

In the hands of one of the greatest masters of all times Ibn-e-Muqla (272 Hij. In Bagdad) flowed many delicious styles e.g. Thulth, Tauqee, Ruq'aa, Taleeq. (Some of them are still extensively used in the Arab world). They also gave the final shape to Naksh, which was invented by Qatabatul-Muharrar during the Ommayyad Dynasty. It was further improved by Ibn-al-Sawab and eventually became extremely popular.

The other script to achieve greatest popularity, Nastaleeq, was invented by Ameer Ali Tabraizi with the Amalgamation of two major scripts i.e. Naksh and Talwwq. In comparison to Naksh it received more circular cursiveness, occupied less space and was further simplified, perhaps that is one of the reasons it became a standard in Eastern Islamic States like Persia and India. (Even the introduction of movable type could not snatch away our sentimental belonging, a great tradition of tedious writing of Nastaleeq.)

It is known that the turn of the century brought Modern Art which changed the traditions of Arts and Crafts throughout the world and I believe it also inspired the Artists of our country to introduce new art elements into lettering and produce new Calligraphic art. Though it has taken many strange directions, at many instances, it is becoming exceedingly difficult to appreciate the difference between the definitions of Lettering and Calligraphy. I would to take this opportunity to try and establish some basic facts about that state of our lettering and Calligraphy and introduce clarity between Kitabat and Khattati. Lettering or Kitabat (as I put it) from Arabic Kitab, used in books and general communications, requires a degree of speed, is done on traditional standards and proportions. The first criteria being Legibility. It also most commonly, restricts itself to writing with and Italic (nib) pointer as I call it Parallel point sweep writing.

Calligraphy or Khattaati (as I put it) differs from Kitaabat by virtue of its unusual composition, deviation from the parallel point sweep, employment of various mediums and a complete involvement with Tone, Texture and Colour. Beautification being the first criteria.

Considering the mentioned facts I suggest that we should try to redefine the realms of lettering and Calligraphy, accepting the fact the fact lettering is basically a craft and may be learnt as an essential, while calligraphy a pure art, an emotion but dependant on the knowledge of lettering.

As far as illumination is concerned it has almost completely disappeared after the popularity of the printed book and the illustration has simply taken its place. Many important books still receive designs, decorative borders and other embellishment but in the printed form.

In the end I would like to suggest that the art of writing, designing, illumination and binding your own book should be taken up with full sincerity and devotion, even the manufacture of your own paper is recommended here. Perhaps that could relieve the Arts in these trivial times.

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