

Impressions of a *Murakkaa*

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Many years ago, wandering through the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I came across a little book displayed in a glass vitrine in the Islamic Art section. It seemed to be calling me. I knew it was a *murakkaa* – a small album containing examples of calligraphy, Islamic style. Time was short, and as the book was open, I could examine only two pages. I was struck by the unusual treatments of marbled paper – something different from the known styles of Turkish *ebru*. Great waves and swashes, colors deep and rich, many picked out in pecky little irregularities – the effect was rather like a squirrel burying nuts and marking the locations with his secret nut-GPS. I pinned my eyes on this micro-vista, memorizing it for later use.

The calligrapher of this work was Seyh Hamdullah (1436–1520), the godfather of the Turkish/Ottoman trend in this art – a trend that swept away the others like an ocean wave.

In 1984, I spent a month in Istanbul working with two of the great master artists and transmitters of the lore there. Hasan Celebi, my guide into this art, and Dr. Ali Alparslan, my guide into the little understood script of *talik*. With Hasan Celebi, I visited the vast cemetery of Karaca-Ahmed and saw the grave of Seyh Hamdullah. I returned many times over the years, just to be there and be silent.

Eventually I found a few more albums by the Seyh in American collections, and I was able not just to see them but to hold a few of them, feel their texture, heft their springy stability, inhale the age of the many hands that had posthumously assembled and studied them. Some work begs to be made into a *murakkaa*. I decided to make one, and then another.

Seyh Hamdullah

So, who was this Seyh? (I use the Turkish word, not Shaykh – it’s easier to say and fits English better.) He was born in Amasya, a town full of illustrious calligraphers. His father, Mustafa Dede, was a Sufi Seyh, so Hamdullah signed many of his works “son of the Seyh.” Prince

Beyazid (1450-1512) befriended him and took calligraphy lessons from him. When he became sultan in 1481, Beyazid invited Hamdullah to Constantinople, where he became the top professional calligrapher of the Ottoman Empire.

Known as Seyh because he was the leading figure in the archery lodge, Hamdullah followed other interests in addition to calligraphy. He was a record-setting archer well into his later years, as well as a cook, a tailor, and a swimmer – clearly a fit athlete all his life.

Seyh Hamdullah taught a huge number of students. He is thought to have copied 47 *mushafs* (copies of the Kuran), as well as a large number of smaller books, scrolls, individual *kit'as* (pieces), and *murakkaas*. In addition, he filled many mosques with magnificent permanent inscriptions in architectural settings. These are in large *jeli sulus* or *jeli muhakkak* scripts. Nevertheless, his true calligraphic legacy is, I believe, his development of the *nesih* script, changing it from a practical, utilitarian script for copying texts into a script of power and elegance – what should be called the international style of writing *nesih*. It is the style most calligraphers following him would depend on in their work.

Many of Seyh Hamdullah's *murakkaas* were assembled using special ebru papers, some, we believe, made by the greatest ebru marbler of all time, Mehmed Hattib (d. 1773).

Koltuks (geometric spaces on the right and left of the text) often are elaborately decorated, but many in the Seyh's works are left elegantly blank. In addition, they are usually more square in shape. The square *koltuks* sometimes required a smaller version of the *nesih* text. As time passed, it became more common to make *koltuks* more rectangular, or even triangular, and soon these spaces became more standardized.

There is about Seyh Hamdullah's albums, even if highly decorated, a powerful simplicity, which provides a strong artistic look.

Taklid

Students and connoisseurs collected some of the Seyh's smaller works found on single sheets of paper. These were pasted together in ways that look random, thus confusing students, scholars, and curators, as there is no textual follow-through on some of them. Among these pieces were favored texts that he also taught his students. His albums could be thought of as private exhibitions. Students could take an album home to study, as the album's shape and layout allowed for easy set up and use. Teachers must have loaned such works to advanced students so they could make *taklids* of them.

Taklid is an ancient Arabic word that has, as usual, a bewildering quantity of possible meanings: to twist a string or rope, to string beads, to put a necklace on someone, to invest someone with an important office or dignity, and on and on. At worst, the word took on the pejorative sense of to copy blindly or to allow a practice to become traditional. Among calligraphers, however, *taklid* took on a special meaning: to try to copy another work as an homage or, by copying, to learn the inner strategy of how the work was produced.

To do this, the calligrapher has to figure out the cut of the original pen (that is, reverse-engineer the pen), duplicate the original ink, and try to hold the pen in the same way as the original calligrapher did. The goal is to reproduce a copy of the original so close that it is almost a photographic copy. Such works were never to be called forgeries, although forgery was known. Some master calligraphers specialized in making *taklids*. Two come to mind: Omer Vasfi, who once made so close a copy of a piece by Sami Efendi that it cannot be distinguished from the original; and his brother, Neyzen Emin Efendi, who was also a master of the large reed flute, or *ney*.

The Murakkaa

A *murakkaa* can take one of several forms, such as the simple album, or the book *murakkaa*, which opens page by page like a book, or the bellows *murakkaa*, in which the pages are bound edge to edge and can be viewed one or two at a time or, if stretched out, all at once. In either format, all the pages are edged in thin-skived leather. On older albums, sometimes the leather would rot and the album fall apart. The individual pages of the damaged album would then

generally be added to other collections, or the original album could be, as deserved, completely restored.

The individual pages of an album are called *kit'as*. Various layouts were possible. Albums consisting of a series of *hadises* (or *hadiths*, Maxims of the Prophet), were called *hadis murakkaasi*. Collections of *kit'as* by different calligraphers were called *toplama murakkaasi*. There were also sequential albums made up of *kit'as* in a particular order. These were very specific works: one would read all the lines in *sulus* script, *kit'a* by *kit'a*, and then go back and read all the lines in *nesih* script.

Albums were widely used and clearly played a large part in raising the quality of calligraphy being produced and in developing calligraphers who were experts in learning their masters' style. One *murakkaa* by the Seyh has passed through generations and was still being copied in the late 19th century, namely, the *Kisra Anushirvan* text, used by Seyh Hamdullah and copied by others, finally by Hasan Riza (d. 1920). It remains a work worthy of study.

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A note on accents:

Seyh – S with cedilla

Omer Vasfi – O with umlaut

Celebi – C with cedilla

kit'a – apostrophe before the a