

## Conserving the legacy of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian Baha'i calligrapher: The restoration of *Station of this Day*: A foremost masterpiece of Arabic calligraphy

Shingo Ishikawa

Conservator, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

### Abstract

*Mishkin Qalam* (1826-1912), was a renowned Persian calligrapher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire. He produced scores of calligraphic renderings of verses in various sizes and designs. One of his masterpieces '*Station of this Day*' was penned in 'Akka in 1897 and consists of thirteen lines in six classical styles of calligraphy with twelve border cartouches. The work which had been on permanent display for over 50 years and was damaged during reframing in 1978. Although various methods of treatment were considered, the options for the treatment of skinned losses were limited. In early 2003, during the treatment of a different calligraphy, almost all of the skinned fragments were serendipitously discovered. This allowed the repair of the damaged areas without the need for inpainting thereby restoring the calligraphy to its former glory.

This paper briefly discusses the history of the work, the unique discovery of the lost pieces and the treatment implemented to re-adhere them to the original.

### Introduction

#### Arabic calligraphy

Calligraphy, the art of writing has been highly revered among Islamic arts as a way to preserve holy texts, including the Qur'an, and to provide a link between the people and the Word of God. With the prohibition of the use of figurative art, calligraphy became the highest form of artistic expression. The diverse efforts made to beautify the Word of God were often accompanied by detailed illuminations with lavish gold leaf and rich colours. The practice of writing the Word of God in calligraphic form, to beautify it in the highest artistic manner, became not only a form of art but an act of worship. Throughout the years, the use of calligraphy has come to express religious sentiment, as well as many other aspects of personal and cultural life.

#### Life of Mishkin Qalam

Mirza Husayn Isfahani (Figure 1) was an Iranian calligrapher born in 1826 to a merchant family in Isfahan, Persia. Given the title '*Mishkin Qalam*', literally, musk-scented or jet-black pen by the Shah of Persia, Nasir'id-Din Shah. One of his masterpieces '*Station of this Day*', the subject of this paper.

Although little information is available about Mishkin Qalam's childhood, it is known that he received a primary education and from an early age showed great interest in different styles of calligraphy and painting. By twenty-five his artistry was well-known in Persia and he was invited to the royal court, where the Shah recognized his extraordinary talent, bestowed his title, and secured his appointment as a tutor to the crown prince and other members of the royal family (Persian Letters & Arts Society 1992).



Figure 1 Mishkin Qalam

During his time as a tutor in the royal court, Mishkin Qalam met a Baha'i, Siyyid Mihdi, who told him about the Baha'i Faith. The impact of this meeting was apparently so great that without informing the court or his family, he abandoned his post and travelled to meet Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, who at the time was under house arrest in Adrianople (now Edirne). Upon meeting Baha'u'llah, Mishkin Qalam became an ardent believer. Because of his talent as a calligrapher, he became a scribe in direct service to Baha'u'llah (Badiee J & Badiee H 1990). His dedication and service to Baha'u'llah was recognized by his being named as one of the Nineteen Apostles of Baha'u'llah – a rare distinction.

As a result of machinations of the enemies of Baha'u'llah and the Baha'i Faith, Mishkin Qalam was exiled from

Adrianople to Gallipoli, within the Ottoman Empire, and later to Famagusta, Cyprus. When Cyprus came under British rule in 1878 Mishkin Qalam was freed, and in 1886 he was finally able to rejoin Baha'u'llah in exile in 'Akka (Nakhjavani 1983). During his years in 'Akka, Mishkin Qalam devoted himself to transcribing the Baha'i writings and created magnificent works of calligraphic art until he passed away on 6 December 1912.

#### Mishkin Qalam and calligraphy

Mishkin Qalam excelled in every style of calligraphy prevalent in his day. He produced many '*tughras*', elaborate signatures used by Ottoman sultans (Khatibi & Sijelmassi 1996), calligraphies in the form of animals including roosters, doves, peacocks and others, and invocations '*bismillah*' to God in the shape of a human face as well as other calligraphic styles.

Evidence of his mastery in traditional calligraphic styles is visible in '*Station of this Day*' (Figure 2), where he has written verses from one of Baha'u'llah's letters to an individual believer in six of the principal calligraphic styles of the day; *shikaste*, *taliq*, *divani*, *naskhi*, *nastaliq*, and *thuluth*—demonstrating the highest level of calligraphic skill and rendering '*Station of this Day*' a masterpiece (Persian Letters & Arts Society 1992).

Throughout his life, Mishkin Qalam continued to produce many great works inspired by the prayers and writings of Baha'u'llah. Many of these works are on permanent display in the historic buildings of the Baha'i Faith in Haifa and 'Akka, Israel and are holy sites for Baha'i pilgrims.



Figure 2 '*Station of this Day*'.

#### The Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i Faith is an independent religion with millions of followers world-wide. Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, was born in Persia on 12 November 1817 into one of the great patrician families. From an early age Baha'u'llah turned His back on the material wealth and political advantages his family held, including a position within the royal court. Instead, He dedicated himself to a range of philanthropies which had, by the early 1840s, earned Him widespread renown as the '*Father of the Poor*' (Hofman 1992).

The Baha'i community has always been the subject of persecution, which continues to this day, with the systematic denial of basic human rights to the Baha'is of Iran. Baha'u'llah's claim to have brought a new religion was met with his imprisonment and torture, and then followed by a series of banishments from Persia to Baghdad to Constantinople (now Istanbul), to Adrianople, and finally to the prison-city of 'Akka, in the northern part of Israel. On the 29 May 1892, He passed away at Bahji, just north of 'Akka and is buried in the shrine there. This remains the most sacred spot for Baha'is, with thousands of them visiting 'Akka as well as Haifa (the city where the Baha'i World Centre is located today) every year from around the world, as pilgrims. This is also the point to which the Baha'i turn to in their daily obligatory prayer.

#### Station of this Day

#### The Baha'i World Centre Mishkin Qalam collection

The Baha'i World Centre has one of the largest collections of Mishkin Qalam's works including '*Station of this Day*' which was on permanent display for over 50 years in the House of 'Abbud, 'Akka (Figure 3). During the 1970s most of the calligraphies and other works of art on paper displayed in these sacred buildings were reframed, including this piece in 1978. It then remained undisturbed for almost thirty years without attention to the damage it had sustained.

Since the early 1990s the Conservation Office at the Baha'i World Centre has been charged with the care and preservation of the important '*tablets*' or sacred literature, calligraphies, and other works of art on paper displayed on the premises of the holy sites. Owing to the inclement environment and the proximity of these sites to the Mediterranean Sea, permanent display of these works was not considered a viable option. An on-going project to preserve the documents and calligraphy consists of removing the original works and replacing them with high quality facsimiles. This process preserves both the ambiance of the historic houses as well as the original works of art, which are then moved to the Conservation Office for examination, conservation and storage in an archives facility. In November 2001, '*Station of this Day*', was removed from its position in the House of 'Abbud and set aside for

conservation treatment. The following case study outlines the conservation and restoration of this piece.



Figure 3 House of Abbud in Akka, Israel where 'Station of this Day' was displayed.

#### Detail of the calligraphy

The calligraphy 'Station of this Day' is the text from a letter of Baha'u'llah in Arabic addressed to a follower of the Baha'i Faith about the religious revival of the times. The calligraphy consists of thirteen lines and twelve border cartouches. Each line and cartouche is written in black ink in six of the principal calligraphic styles that were practiced in Ottoman Turkey. The illumination consists of a broad gold line bounded by two thin black lines. The broad gold line frames the calligraphy by creating a border, and gold lines separate each calligraphic style and surround the cartouches. The calligraphy is executed on heavy brown paper and measures 32cm by 43cm. The lowest cartouche on the right side acts as a colophon, a record of the artist, which includes a note, his signature and the date the work was executed. In this case, Mishkin Qalam's note, in shikaste style, states that this calligraphy was written while he was suffering from extreme loneliness at the age of 73 in 'Akka; his signature 'Servant at the gate of Baha, Mishkin Qalam', and the date of '1315 (AH)'.

#### Condition

As 'Station of this Day' was on permanent display for an extended period in an uncontrolled environment, it was expected that it would be in poor condition. The examination revealed that the surface of the paper was slightly brittle and in many areas of the paper, surface and ink hazing was visible. When the work had been reframed, it was mounted onto 4-ply museum board with a synthetic heat sensitive mounting tissue called Fotoflat®, which has a wax-rubber based heat-set adhesive. Fotoflat® and another mounting tissue, MT5 - both manufactured by Seal Products Inc., - were used to mount almost all of the calligraphies and photographs displayed in the historic houses and galleries during the mid 1970s.

The mounting process had caused damage. The most noticeable of which was a long line of surface losses along a diagonal area through the first 6 lines on the top left

quadrant (Figure 4). A large portion of the border was missing at the top right corner and small losses were visible throughout the object. Silverfish damage was also visible on the lower right hand corner. On the verso remnants from paper backed adhesive tape and adhesive stains were visible around the edges.

While many treatment options were considered, it was decided that more time was needed to carry out background research on this calligraphy and to understand how the damage had occurred. Hence, it was set aside temporarily while other calligraphies from the House of 'Abbud were treated.

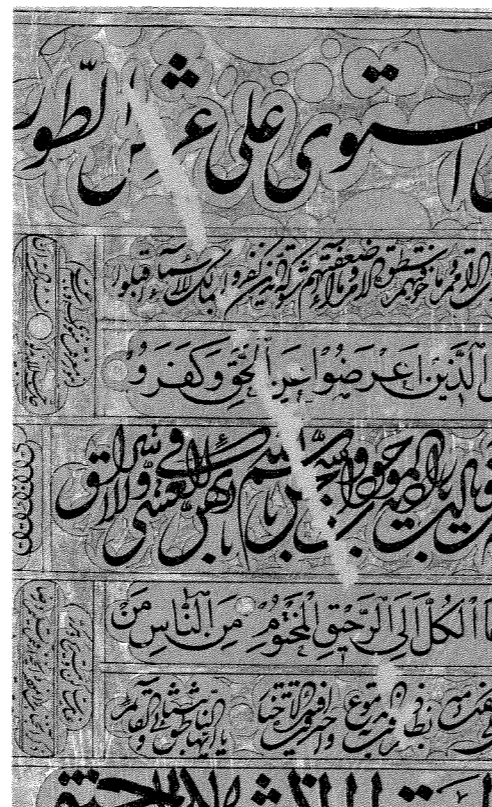


Figure 4 Close up of the damaged upper left corner.

During the treatment of another calligraphy 'Arabic Verses' penned in 1901 by an unknown calligrapher, the backing board was removed after full immersion of the item in toluene. It was then discovered that many small pieces of paper were stuck onto the Fotoflat®. What was curious about this discovery was that the pieces were adhered between the Fotoflat® and backing board (Figure 5). After the Fotoflat® was removed from the mat board, it became evident that the pieces which were thin and fragile, were skinned from another calligraphy. Fortunately, the media of these skinned pieces, black ink and gold paint, were in good condition and remained intact. After careful examination it became apparent that these pieces belonged to 'Station of this Day'. This discovery led us to propose that the damage occurred while the calligraphies and photographs were being reframed. Presumably, the framer was working on the two calligraphies at the same time. During the reframing, the framer had accidentally put a piece of Fotoflat® cut for the 'Arabic Verses' calligraphy on the surface of 'Station of this

Day'. When the framer picked up the Fotoflat it skinned the surface. Instead of recording this unfortunate incident, the damaged work was returned to its location and the Fotoflat with its skinned pieces was used to mount the 'Arabic Verses'. Considering how the damage occurred, it was fortuitous that this piece of Fotoflat was used as intended and not discarded and that we were not only able to find these skinned pieces but also recognize their origin.

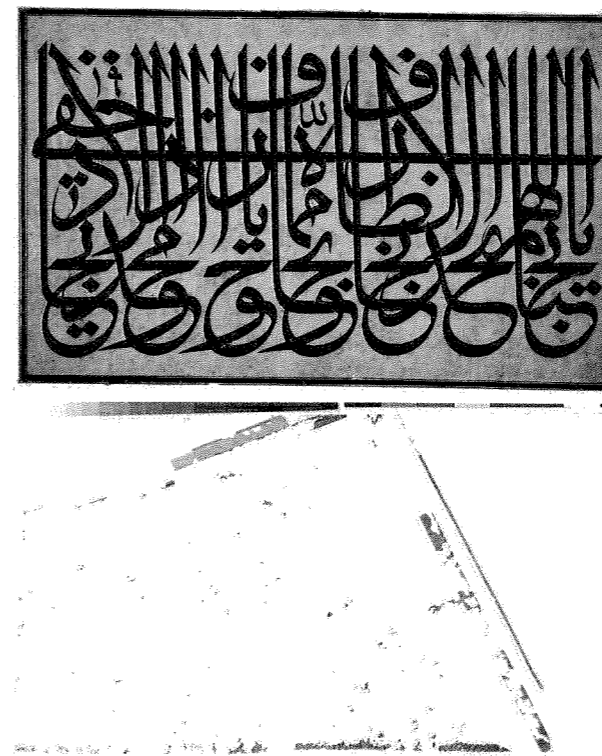


Figure 5 Calligraphy titled 'Arabic Verses' where small pieces of skinned papers were attached.

#### Treatment and preservation of 'Station of this Day'.

##### Solubility of Fotoflat®

A major challenge of treating this calligraphy involved developing a safe method to remove the skinned pieces from the Fotoflat® without damaging the media or destroying the fragile paper. To further these aims, the solubility of Fotoflat® was investigated.

Fotoflat®, as mentioned earlier, is a synthetic heat sensitive mounting tissue manufactured by Seal Products Inc, Connecticut, USA. Fotoflat® was marketed as a low-temperature, wax-based dry-mounting tissue that is easily removable when heated (Wilhelm 1993). For the mounting with Fotoflat® the work was heated and pressed at temperatures between 82° to 107°C. At the time of the reframing Seal was the largest producer of dry-mount materials in the world.

The solubility of Fotoflat® was measured by placing a square of approximately 2.25cm<sup>2</sup> unused Fotoflat® sheet in 20ml of an organic solvent for 10, 20, 30, and 50 minutes. The four reagent grade organic solvents used were dichloromethane,

toluene, tetrahydrofuran (THF) and xylene. Figure 6 shows the soluble fraction of the adhesive on the Fotoflat® samples. After 10 minutes, toluene, xylene, and hexane were able to extract close to 50% of the adhesive from Fotoflat®. Tetrahydrofuran (THF) however, was able to extract close to 60% of the adhesive. Dichloromethane removed the least, approximately 28% of the adhesive. Although THF was able to remove more adhesive, it causes condensation when it evaporates, which can be dangerous to highly water sensitive inks.

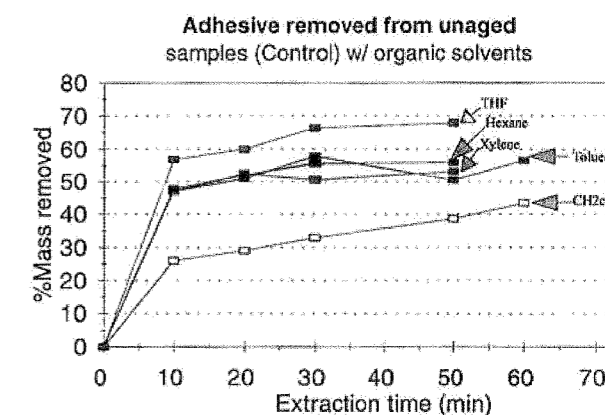


Figure 6 Solubility chart of Fotoflat with different organic solvents.

##### Removal of attached skinned paper pieces

A small section on the upper right hand corner where the loss of the black ink was not as visible as in other areas was treated first. The damaged areas to be treated were selected on the object, and the corresponding lost piece was located on the Fotoflat® and cut out. The cut-out piece was placed on Reemay and immersed in a small amount of toluene in a watch glass. The immersion lasted for approximately five minutes until the bond was loose enough for the skinned paper to be detached from the Fotoflat® using a scalpel blade. If the piece was soaked for more than ten minutes it tended to break down into smaller pieces. Once the piece was free, the Fotoflat® was removed from the mini-bath, the fragile skinned paper piece was lifted with the Reemay, and it was dried in a fume hood between Reemay and blotting paper.

##### Reattachment of skinned paper pieces

A 5% w/v solution of Klucel G® in 100% reagent grade ethanol, was used to reattach the skinned pieces to the calligraphy. A small amount of Klucel G® was applied onto the skinned area using a brush. The detached piece was picked up and placed onto the target area while aligning and matching it with the image (Figure 7). The area was lightly pressed with a spatula while excess Klucel G® was removed. A small sheet of non-woven paper and blotting paper was placed on top with a small weight. This process was repeated for each skinned piece until all the fragments that were large enough to have their location of origin identified, were re-adhered to the original. Figure 8 shows the close up images of before

and after the treatment of the skinned area. Klucel G® worked very well in this case, providing good adhesion as well as allowing enough working time for the pieces to be successfully aligned. However, the areas mended with Klucel G® appeared slightly darker when compared to the rest of the calligraphy. This discolouration is likely the result of the Klucel G® residues, or perhaps the result of the Fotoflat® adhesive residues that were left due to the short immersion time in the toluene required by the fragility of these skinned pieces.



Figure 7 Close up of the damaged upper left corner during treatment.



BEFORE



AFTER

Figure 8 Before and after image of damaged upper left corner.

## Conclusion

The 'Station of this Day' is unquestionably one of Mishkin Qalam's masterpieces. It is an important contribution to the body of Middle Eastern calligraphy as a demonstration of supreme skill by one of the finest calligraphers at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is also of great significance to the followers of the Baha'i Faith for its content and historical significance especially as the Baha'i Community remains to this day persecuted in Iran. Unfortunately, however, in 1978 this piece was damaged while it was being reframed. It was displayed for a further twenty-two years before it was scheduled for conservation treatment.

Allocating ample time for background research and the study of the problem allowed for the serendipitous finding of the skinned pieces behind another calligraphic piece. Because the skinned areas in the original calligraphy were untouched and had not been inpainted, and since it was possible to safely remove these skinned pieces from Fotoflat®, it was possible to restore this calligraphy close to its former glory. Immersing the Fotoflat® with the skinned pieces in toluene enabled the pieces to detach without damaging the ink or the thin paper layer, while Klucel G® was successfully used as an adhesive for the restoration aside from a slight darkening. Such complete restoration is rare considering the length of time between the damage and the treatment.

Without the fortuitous discovery of the skinned pieces, the treatment option taken would have been different and the final result would have been less complete. If the treatment of this calligraphy had been hastily performed, the finding of the lost pieces may not have yielded the best possible conservation and restoration treatment of the damaged area. Additionally, full advantage of this fortunate finding could not have been taken had an irreversible conservation treatment already been implemented. This report highlights the fact that meticulous and thorough examination of an object and all related items may lead to unexpected discoveries which, if accurately identified, can contribute to a satisfactory outcome.

## References

- BADIEE, J & BADIEE, H. The calligraphy of Mishkin-Qalam. *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, 3(4), pp 1-22.
- HOFMAN, D (1992). *Baha'u'llah the Prince of peace*, Oxford: George Ronald, pp 41- 47.
- KHATIBI, A & SIJELMASSI, M (1996). *The splendour of Islamic calligraphy*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. p 152.
- NAKHJAVANI, B (1983). *Four on an island*. Oxford: George Ronald. pp 21-26.
- PERSIAN LETTERS & ARTS SOCIETY (1992). *Mishkin*

*Qalam*. Germany: Reyhani Publishing, p 5-10.

WILHELM, H (1993). *The permanence and care of colour photographs*. Grinnel, IA: Preservation Publishing.

## Suppliers of Materials

Fotoflat and MT5 - manufactured by Seal Products Inc (500-T Spring St. Naugatuck, CT 06770-0596)

Fotoflat is a porous tissue coated on both sides with a low temperature adhesive. The adhesive melts at 180°F to 225°F (82° to 107°C) and bonds as it cools at about 150°F (66°C), and is removable when reheated. Fotoflat's thick adhesive coating makes it excellent for mounting coarse or heat sensitive materials such as watercolor papers, fabrics and leaves.

MT5, according to the manufacturer, is a thin, glassine tissue coated on both sides with adhesive. It is an economical, permanent and non-porous adhesive that adheres at a low temperature and provides even bonding of porous papers and other smooth, breathable materials, like lithographs, fiber-based photographs and construction paper. It is not recommended for use with non-porous materials or in high humidity conditions.

Toluene (reagent grade) purchased MERCK (Frankfurter Str. 250, 64293 Darmsadt Germany).

Klucel G® (hydroxy propyl cellulose) is an alcohol soluble cellulose adhesive manufactured by Hercules Incorporated (500 Hercules Rd., Research Center, Building 8145, Wilmington, DE 19808).

## Author Biography

Shingo Ishikawa completed a degree in visual arts majoring in printmaking and painting prior to completing Bachelor of Applied Science, Conservation of Cultural Materials, majoring in paper conservation from University of Canberra in Australia. Upon graduating in 2001, he moved to Haifa, Israel to work as a paper conservator at the Baha'i World Centre. In Israel he undertook examination and treatment of hundreds of manuscripts originating from Persia and other Middle Eastern regions. He has enjoyed this opportunity to work closely with such artistically and religiously significant pieces and to learn and work with much calligraphy rendered by Mishkin Qalam.