

The Conservation and Restoration of a 19th Century Calligraphy of a Baha'i Text in Arabic

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INTRODUCTION

The calligraphy entitled the *Station of this Day* was penned by Mishkin Qalam in 1897 in the city of Akka during the Ottoman Empire (now Israel). The text is 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 13 lines and 12 border cartouches. Each line and cartouche is written in black ink using the six principal calligraphic styles that were practiced in Ottoman Turkey. The illumination consists of a broad gold line outlined 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 dimensions of the calligraphy on heavy weight brown paper are 32cm (width) by 43cm (height) (Fig. 1).

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).

THE BAHAI FAITH

The Baha'i faith is an independent world religion the followers of which are striving for world unity based on the principle of the oneness of humanity. Baha'is are followers of the teachings of Baha'u'llah (1817-92), who, like Christ, Muhammad, and others before him, brought God's teachings to humanity. The world's approximately five million Baha'is are of many ethnic and racial backgrounds and



Fig. 1 : *Station of this Day* by Mishkin Qalam

Fig. 2: Mishkin Qalam aged around 50.

they live in nearly every country in the world. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Baha'i Faith, the youngest of the world religions, is the second-most geographically widespread religion, after Christianity.

Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i faith, was born in Persia on 12th November, 1817, in one of the great patrician families. From an early age Baha'u'llah turned his back on the material wealth and the position of the court and to the advantages his family held, preferring to dedicate himself to a range of philanthropies which had, by the early 1840s, made him renowned as the "Father of the Poor"¹.

In 1863, he announced himself as the manifestation of God for this day and age. Following this proclamation, religious leaders of Persia at the time, fearing that Baha'u'llah's influence was getting too strong, causing the loss of their own power and wealth, sentenced him to imprisonment, torture, and a series of banishments starting from Baghdad to Constantinople, to Adrianople, and finally to Akka, in the northern part of what is today Israel. On the 29th of May 1892 he passed away at Bahji, just north of Akka, and is buried there. The shrine at Bahji remains the most sacred spot for Baha'is and every year thousands of Baha'is, from around the world, visit Akka and Haifa as pilgrims.

LIFE OF MISHKIN QALAM

Mishkin Qalam was born as Mirza Husayn Isfahani in 1826 of a merchant family (Fig. 2). Little information is available about his childhood, but it is known that he received primary education in Isfahan, Persia (Iran) and from an early age he showed great interest in different styles of calligraphy and painting. By the age of twenty-five his artistry was well known in Persia and he was invited to the royal court to be presented to Nasiri'd-Din Shah, the ruler of Iran. The Shah, recognizing the extraordinary talent of this young artist, gave him the title of "Mishkin Qalam", which means the musk scented pen, and appointed him as a tutor to the crown prince and other members of the royal family².

During his time as a court tutor, Mishkin Qalam met a Baha'i, Siyyid Mihdi, who told him about the Baha'i faith. The impact of this meeting on him was so great that without informing the court or his family, he abandoned his post and travelled to meet Baha'u'llah, who at the time was under house arrest in Adrianople. Upon meeting Baha'u'llah, Mishkin Qalam became an ardent believer. Because of his talent as a calligrapher, he became a scribe to serve Baha'u'llah³. His dedication and servitude to Baha'u'llah was rewarded by being named as one of the 19 apostles of Baha'u'llah.

As the result of the 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 from 1868 to 1877 he was exiled to Famagusta, Cyprus. When Cyprus came under British rule in mid 1878, Mishkin Qalam was freed and in 1886 he was finally able to rejoin Baha'u'llah in Akka⁴.

During his years in Akka, Mishkin Qalam devoted himself to transcribing the Baha'i writings and to creating magnificent works of art until he passed away on the 6th of December 1912 in Akka.

Mishkin Qalam and calligraphy

Mishkin Qalam excelled in every style of calligraphy prevalent in his day. He produced many 'tughras' (elaborate and fancy signatures used by Ottoman sultans⁵), calligraphies in the form of human faces and animals (roosters, doves, peacocks and others), and invocations to God ('*bismillah*') in the shape of the human face, and in other calligraphic styles.

Evidence of his mastery in traditional calligraphic styles is visible in this work, *Station of this Day* where he has written the verses of Baha'u'llah's letter to a believer in the six principal calligraphic styles of the day: *shikaste*, *taliq*, *divani*, *naskhi*, *nastaliq*, and *thuluth*. In this masterpiece he has demonstrated the highest level of calligraphic skill⁶.

The collection

The Baha'i World Centre has a large collection of Mishkin Qalam's works. Many have been on permanent display in Baha'i historic houses in the cities of Akka and Haifa. The *Station of this Day* was on permanent display for over 50 years in the house of Abbud, Akka.

During the 1970s most of the calligraphies and other works of art on paper on display in the historic houses underwent reframing. This piece was reframed in 1978 and during the reframing it was damaged. How the damage occurred was not known, as no records were kept.

Since the early 1990s the Conservation Office has been preserving many of the important tablets, calligraphies, and other works of art on paper displayed in these historic houses. Permanent display is not a viable option since the environment of the location of the historic houses is inclement, due to their close proximity to the Mediterranean. An ongoing project to preserve the documents and calligraphies on display consists of removing the original works and replacing them with high quality facsimiles. This process preserves both the ambiance of the historic houses and the original works of art. The original works are then moved to the Conservation Office for examination, conservation and storage. In November 2001 the *Station of this Day*, was removed from the house of Abbud and set aside for conservation treatment. The following is the case study on the conservation and restoration of this piece.

CONDITION

Since the *Station of this Day* was on permanent display for a long time, 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 inks hazing was visible. The work had been reframed, and this had entailed mounting onto a 4-ply museum board with a synthetic heat sensitive mounting tissue called Fotoflat, 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 gallery during the mid 1970s.

The most noticeable damage was a long line of surface losses along a diagonal area through the first (i lines in the top left quadrant (Fig. 3). A large portion of the border was also missing at the top right corner and small losses were visible throughout the object. Silverfish damage was also visible in the lower right hand corner. On the verso, remnants from paper backed adhesive tape and adhesive



Fig. 3: (above left) Close up of the skinned area at the top left corner

Fig. 4 (above top right): *Arabic Verses* by unknown calligrapher penned in 1901.

Fig. 5 (bottom right): Skinned pieces stuck on the Fotoflat from the verso of the above calligraphy.

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.

During the treatment of another calligraphy entitled *Arabic Verses* by an unknown calligrapher penned in 1901 (Fig. 4), the backing board was removed after full immersion of the item in toluene. During this process many small pieces of paper were found stuck onto the Fotoflat. What was curious about this finding was that the pieces were stuck between the Fotoflat and backing board (Fig. 5). After the Fotoflat was removed from the mat board, it could be seen that the pieces were thin and fragile and were skinned pieces from another calligraphy. Fortuitously, the image of these skinned pieces (black ink and gold paint) was in good condition and remained intact. After careful examination it became apparent that these pieces belonged to the *Station of this Day*.

This discovery led us to propose that the damage occurred while the calligraphies and photographs on display in the historic houses were being reframed in mid 1970s. Apparently, the framer was working on these two calligraphies at the same time. During the reframing, the framer had accidentally put a piece of Foto-flat cut for the *Arabic Verses* calligraphy on the surface of the *Station of this Day*. When the framer picked up the Fotoflat it skinned the surface. Instead of recording this unfortunate accident, 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 fortunate that this piece of Fotoflat was used as intended and not discarded, and that we were lucky to find these skinned pieces and recognize their origin.

TREATMENT

Solubility of Fotoflat

A major challenge of treating this calligraphy was developing a safe method of removing the skinned pieces from the Fotoflat without damaging the black inks and gold illumination, 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'. To mount with Fotoflat a heat press had to be heated to between 82° and 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 assessed by placing a square, measuring approximately 2.25cm², of an unused Fotoflat sheet in 20ml of an organic solvent for 10, 20, 30, and 50 minutes. The four reagent grade organic solvents used were di-chloromethane, toluene, tetrahydrofuran (THF) and xylene. Fig. (i) shows the result of the soluble fraction of the adhesive on the Fotoflat for the control sample. After 10 minutes, toluene, xylene, and hexane were able to extract close to 50% of the adhesive from the Fotoflat. THF, however, was able to extract close to 60% of the adhesive, and dichloromethane removed the least, approximately 28% of the adhesive. Although THF was able to remove more adhesive, it caused condensation when it evaporated, which could be dangerous to highly water-sensitive inks.

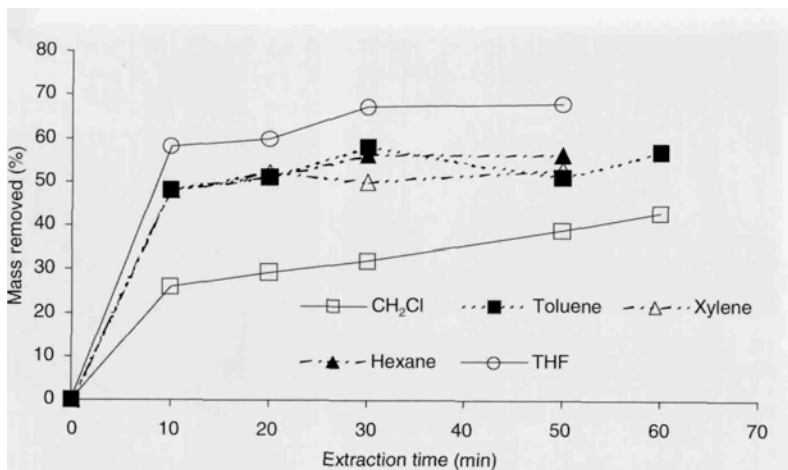


Fig. 6: Solubility of the unaged Fotoflat in various organic solvents.

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 original piece, then the corresponding lost piece was located on the Fotoflat and cut out. The cut out piece was placed on Reemay (random-spunbonded 100% polyester) and immersed in a small amount of toluene in a watch glass under a fume hood (Fig. 7). The immersion lasted for approximately 5 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 10 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 Klucel G in ethanol (100%, reagent grade) 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 (Fig. 8). The area

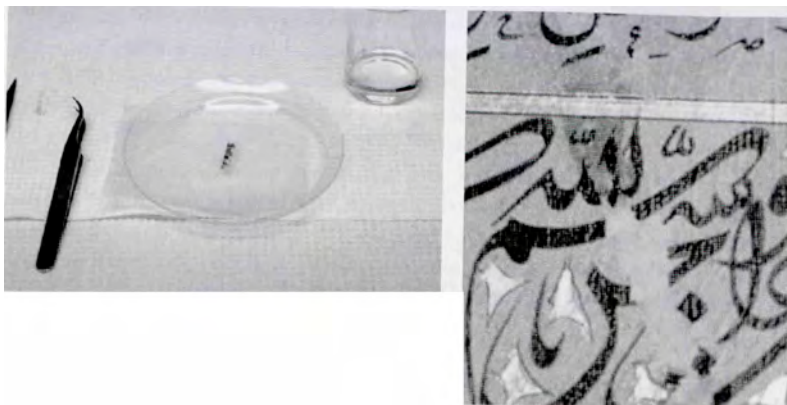


Fig. 7: Set up in the fume hood with **small** skinned piece immersed in toluene.

Fig. 8: Area of calligraphy repaired with Klucel G.

was lightly pressed with a spatula while excess Klucel G was removed. A small sheet of non-woven polyester and blotting paper was placed on top and weighted with a small piece of glass. This process was repeated for each skinned piece until all the skinned pieces that were large enough to identify their location of origin had been re-adhered onto the original. Fig. 9 shows the overall image of the calligraphy after treatment. Fig. 10 shows the close up images of before and after treatment of the skinned area. Klucel G worked very well in this case, providing enough adhesion as well as allowing enough drying time for the pieces to be successfully aligned. However, the areas repaired with Klucel G appear slightly darker when compared to the rest of the calligraphy. This discolouration could have been the result of Klucel G residues. However, it could have been caused by Foto-flat adhesive residues left because the fragility of the skinned pieces only allowed a short immersion time in the toluene.

CONCLUSION

The *Station of this Day* is one of Mishkin Qalam's masterpieces. It is important to Baha'is for its content and historical significance, and it is also significant as it is a demonstration of supreme calligraphic skill by one of the finest calligraphers at the turn of the century. Unfortunately, however, in 1978 it was damaged while it was being reframed. It was displayed for a further 22 years before it was scheduled for conservation treatment.



Fig. 9: After **treatment** image of the *Station of this Day*.



Fig. 10: Close up views of the skinned area before and after treatment

Allocating ample time for background research and study of the problem allowed for the serendipitous finding of the skinned pieces behind another calligraphy. Because the skinned areas in the original calligraphy were untouched and had not been inpainted, and since we were able to safely remove these skinned pieces from Fotoflat, we were able to restore this calligraphy close to its former glory. Immersing the Fotoflat with the skinned pieces attached to it in toluene enabled them to be detached without damaging the ink or the thin paper layer. Klucel G was successfully

used as an adhesive for the restoration of this calligraphy. 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 discovery could not have been taken had irreversible conservation treatment already been implemented. This report highlights the fact that meticulous and thorough examination of the object and all related items may lead to unexpected discoveries that, if accurately identified, can contribute to a satisfactory outcome.

S. Ishikawa and P. Ravines would like to express their gratitude to the following for their support and encouragement: The Universal House of Justice, governing body of the Baha'i World Community; Edward Broomhall and Robert Tansik; and our families.

ANNEXE: 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 watercolour papers, fabrics and other 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 conditions of high humidity.

- Toluene (reagent grade) manufactured by MERCK (Frankfurter Str. 250, 64293 Darmsadt Germany)
- Klucel G (hydroxy propyl cellulose) is alcohol soluble cellulose adhesives manufactured by Hercules Incorporated (500 Hercules Rd., Research Center, Building 8145, Wilmington, DE 19808)
- Reemay is a spun bonded 100% Polyester manufactured by Reemay, Incorporated (70 Old Hickory Boulevard, Old Hickory, Tennessee 37138-3651)

SUMMARIES

The conservation and restoration of a 19th century calligraphy of a Baha'i text in Arabic

Mirza Husayn Isfahani, also known as Mishkin Qalam, was a renowned Persian Baha'i calligrapher of the 19th century Ottoman Empire. He produced scores of calligraphic renderings of verses from the Baha'i texts in various sizes and designs, including one of his masterpieces titled *Station of this Day*. This work was penned in Akka in 1897 and consists of 13 lines and 12 border cartouches. Each of the calligraphic lines has been written in several styles. The work has been on permanent display for over 50 years and was damaged during reframing in 1978. Although various methods of treatment were considered, options for the treatment of skinning losses were limited. In early 2003,

during the treatment of a different calligraphy that had been mounted with a dry mounting tissue, almost all of the skinned pieces were miraculously discovered adhered to the verso. This allowed us to repair the skinned areas without the need for inpainting and to restore the calligraphy to its former glory.

Conservation et restauration d'une calligraphie Baha'i en caractères arabes datant du 19^e siècle

Mirza Husayn Isfahani, aussi connu sous le nom de Mishkin Qalam, était au 19^e un célèbre calligraphe Baha'i en Perse, qui, à l'époque faisait partie de l'Empire ottoman. Il a effectué de nombreuses compositions calligraphiques de vers de textes Baha'i variant les dimensions et les styles, parmi ses calligraphies son chef-d'œuvre "*Les Heures du Jour*" créé en 1897 à Akka : 13 lignes et 12 enluminures en début ou en fin de texte, plusieurs styles d'écriture ont été employés. Cette œuvre avait été exposée pendant une période de plus de .50 ans et endommagée en 1978 lors d'une réfection de l'encadrement. On a évoqué plusieurs méthodes de restauration, les possibilités de traiter les fissures étant toutefois limitées. Au début de l'année 2003 au cours du traitement d'une autre calligraphie qui était encadrée sur une toile sèche on a pu - véritable miracle - détecter au verso presque tous les éléments fissurés. On a donc pu restituer sa splendeur d'origine à l'œuvre "*Les Heures du Jour*" sans avoir à procéder à une 19^e retouche.

Konservierung und Restaurierung einer Baha'i-Kalligraphie in arabischer Schrift aus dem 19. Jahrhundert

Mirza Husayn Isfahani, auch bekannt als Mishkin Qalam, war im 19. Jh. ein berühmter Kalligraph der Baha'i in Persien, damals Teil des Osmanischen Reiches. Er schuf zahlreiche kalligraphische Blätter von Versen aus Baha'i-Texten in verschiedenen Größen und Stilrichtungen, darunter als eines seiner Meisterwerke die "Tageszeiten". Es entstand 1897 in Akka und ist komponiert aus 13 zu Gruppen geordneten Zeilen, die in verschiedenen Stilrichtungen gehalten sind, einige davon mit Ornamenten am Anfang und am Ende (insgesamt 12). Das Werk war über mehr als 50 Jahre hin ausgestellt und hatte bei einer Erneuerung der Rahmung im Jahre 1978 Schaden genommen. Es wurden verschiedene Restauriermaßnahmen erwogen, die Möglichkeiten zur Behebung von Abspaltungen sind jedoch begrenzt. Anfang 2003, bei der Bearbeitung einer anderen Kalligraphie, die mittels eines Materials zur nichtwäßtigen Verarbeitung" montiert war, fanden sich - ein kleines Wunder - nahezu alle der abgespaltenen Stücke auf deren Rückseite. Es war möglich, die "Tageszeiten" in altem Glanz zu restaurieren ohne zur Retusche greifen zu müssen.

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