

THE CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF A 19th CENTURY CALLIGRAPHY OF A BAHAI WRITING IN ARABIC

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Introduction

Mirza Husayn Isfahani also known as Mishkin Qalam, »the musk scented pen«, was a renowned Persian Baha'i calligrapher and poet of the 19th century Ottoman Empire. He was born in Isfahan, Iran, in 1826 and passed away on 6 December 1912 in Akka, north of Haifa, Israel. He created calligraphic renderings of verses and invocations from the Baha'i writings of exquisite beauty and originality in various designs and sizes¹. His Arabic and Persian calligraphies are in museums and collections throughout the world. The Baha'i World Centre holds hundreds of examples.

The Calligraphy - background

The calligraphy (Figure 1) is a fine example of Mishkin Qalam's mastery of the art. The text is from a tablet (letter) of Baha'u'llah, founder of the Baha'i Faith, addressed to Ahmad Yazdi. The original tablet is written in Arabic in the hand of his scribe, Mirza Aqa Jan Khadimullah. The work was penned in Akka in 1897 and consists of 13 lines and 12 border cartouches (6 on each side of the item). Each of the lines has been written in a different calligraphic style. The work was on permanent display and was reframed in the 1978. In November 2001 it was scheduled for treatment. The most noticeable damage is skinning along a diagonal area through the first 6 lines in the top left quadrant. However, small skinnings can also be seen throughout the surface and on the borders. Solubility test indicated that black ink is readily water-soluble and gold ink is slightly water-soluble.

Treatment

Examination

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 (unknown calligrapher) that had been

mounted with a dry mounting tissue (Fotoflat), several loose pieces of paper were found adhered on the verso of the Fotoflat (Figure 2). After the removal of the Fotoflat from the mounting board and careful examination of the attached pieces of paper, it became apparent that these pieces of paper were actually the lost pieces from Mishkin Qalam's calligraphy. This indicates that the skinning damage on this calligraphy occurred during the reframing done in 1978.

Removal of skinned pieces from Fotoflat

A major challenge with treating this object was the removal of the skinned pieces from the Fotoflat without damaging the black and gold inks. Each skinned piece was cut out, and its location identified on the actual calligraphy. It was then placed on Reemay and immersed in a small amount of toluene in a watch glass. The watch glass proved to be an ideal shape and size for the placement of the Reemay sheet while still allowing enough depth for the detached piece to be fully immersed in the solvent. Toluene was used as it did not affect paper or inks and dissolved the Fotoflat adhesive faster than other organic solvents. This enabled removal of pieces from the Fotoflat with ease. After approximately 4 to 5 minutes, the bond became loose enough for the skinned piece to detach from the Fotoflat with minor mechanical assistance. The remaining sheet of Fotoflat was removed from the Toluene. The fragile skinned piece was then lifted with the Reemay and dried between sheets of Reemay and blotting papers in the fume hood. This procedure yielded intact skinned pieces ready to reattach.

Reattaching the skinned pieces

To reattach the salvaged skinned pieces to the calligraphy, 5% w/v Klucel-G in 100% EtOH was used. A small amount of Klucel-G was applied onto the skinned area using a fine sable brush. The detached piece was picked up with a brush and placed onto the target area while aligning and matching it with the image. The area was lightly pressed with a septum elevator, while excess Klucel G was removed with a sable brush. A small sheet of non-woven and blotting paper was placed with a small weight on top. The above process was repeated until all the loose pieces were reattached.

Final results

Accidental recovery of the lost pieces and successful removal from Fotoflat and subsequent reattachment made it possible to restore this calligraphy to its almost original condition. Figure 3 shows close ups of the mended area before and after treatment, and Figure 4 shows the entire calligraphy after treatment

Conclusion

Because the skinned area was untouched, and we found and recognized the lost pieces, we were able to restore the calligraphy closer to its former glory. This would not have been possible with any other treatment methods. This case study highlights the importance of thorough background research of the calligraphy and careful consideration of all the treatment options that would lead to a better result. If the treatment of this piece was hastily decided and poor options taken, finding of the lost pieces may not have resulted in safe restoration of the lost area.

References

1. Persian Letters and Arts Society, *Mishkin Qalam*, Reyhani Publishing, Darmstadt, Germany, 1992, 5-10.



Figure 1: Calligraphy Before Treatment.



Figure 4: Calligraphy After Treatment.

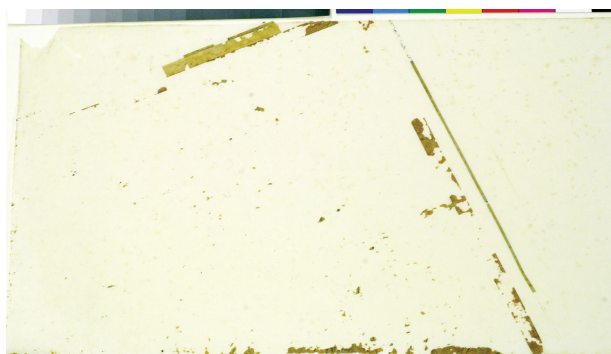


Figure 2: Fotoflat with adhered loose paper pieces.



Figure 3: Close up of the skinned area before treatment (left) and after treatment (right).