Carlos Museum traces Islamic calligraphy

By Catherine Fox
For the AJC

A video image of a pair of hands is projected on the entrance wall of the temporary exhibition galleries at the Michael C. Carlos Museum. One hand dunks the tip in black ink and purposefully plants it on a piece of paper. Then, as gracefully as an Olympic skater making a figure-eight, the hand moves the pen to create a fluid line, one that shifts seamlessly from thick to thin as it rounds the curving form. Like that skater nailing her move, the man behind the pen has completed an Arabic letter.

What better way to introduce "Writing the World of God" and "Traces of the Calligrapher," two beautiful exhibitions devoted to the history and practice of Islamic calligraphy?

Calligraphy is art of the highest order in Islamic culture because of its association with the Quran, the word of God. Conveying The Word is a holy practice, one requiring extensive training, discipline and moral fiber. (Similarly, Nepalese artists, whose work is on view at Kennesaw State University, see the act of creating Paubha paintings as a religious practice.)

Rare artifacts dating from the sixth century forward chart the evolution of scripts in countries across the Middle East, Africa and Spain, and the development of scripts for secular functions, including royal and commercial communication.

Calligraphers also created sheets that were not part of books. Some, like our samplers, were proverbs, which private collectors hung in their homes. Others had no meaning — lettering for the sake of aesthetic pleasure.

Because beauty and truth are one, calligraphers paid utmost attention to the aesthetic quality and character of the script, down to the proportions of the marks that comprise, and its presentation on the page.

For those who can't read Arabic, the visual effect will be the primary experience. Unlike the Paubha painters, calligraphers were allowed considerable latitude in presentation. One artist laid script over an ornate ground of flora and vines, for instance, while another painted tiny flowers within the letters themselves.

The exhibition encompasses the arts that developed in conjunction with calligraphy. Examples of imaginatively wrought tools of the trade include knives used to sharpen reeds, scissors used to cut the paper and containers for ink and implements.

Artisans used mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, pearls, ivory, coral and other luxury materials. They carved intricate floral imagery, created abstract patterns and otherwise ornamented the utilitarian objects to signify their ceremonial importance. (Human nature being what it is, these objects also signified the wealth of the owner.)

It's interesting to see how calligraphy generated a web of industries, many of them creative-trade and material suppliers, tool-making, bookbinding, artist education and training. And a bit sad: A show about book arts and handwriting inevitably stokes nostalgia for crafts that seem likely to disappear except as luxury objects.

Lectures about the art and history of calligraphy, a musical performance, demonstrations and a tour of the Al-Farooq Masjid of Atlanta are among the complementary programs. Check the website for details.

Catherine Fox is chief visual arts critic of ArtsCriticATL.com.

Gallery review
"Writing the World of God: Calligraphy and the Qur'an" and "Traces of the Calligrapher: Islamic Calligraphy In Practice, c.1600-1900."

Through Dec. 5. $8; $6 students, seniors and children 6-17. Free for Emory community and members. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; noon-4 p.m. Sundays. The Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, 571 S. Kilgo Circle, 404-727-4282. www.carlos.emory.edu.

Bottom line: Two beautiful exhibits about the exalted practice of Islamic calligraphy.

This calligrapher's storage box, which bears a Quranic inscription, is made of wood inlaid with tortoiseshell (over gold leaf), ivory, brass, mother-of-pearl and bone.

This Iranian calligraphy exercise is opaque pigment and gold on paper. For those unable to read it, the primary impact is visual. Photos courtesy of Michael C. Carlos Museum.