

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Improving Islamic Junior High Students' Writing Abilities through the Art of Calligraphy: A Study on *Tahsin Al-Khat*

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Abstract

This study examines Qur'anic calligraphy as a lived expression of the Qur'an within mosque spaces, focusing on its aesthetic reception, educational function, and socio-religious significance. Employing a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, this study is framed within the Living Qur'an perspective, which emphasizes the manifestation of the Qur'an in social and cultural practices beyond textual interpretation. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews with mosque administrators, religious teachers, calligraphers, and congregants, as well as visual documentation of calligraphic inscriptions. The findings reveal that Qur'anic calligraphy functions not merely as decorative art, but as a symbolic medium that reinforces religious identity, enhances spiritual experience, and serves as an informal tool of religious education. The selection of calligraphic styles and Qur'anic verses reflects a balance between aesthetic beauty, readability, and theological intent. Furthermore, calligraphy mediates the relationship between sacred text and social life, allowing the Qur'an to be experienced visually, emotionally, and communally. This study contributes to Living Qur'an scholarship by demonstrating how Islamic art operates as a dynamic form of religious engagement within contemporary Muslim communities.

Key words: Calligraphy writing competence; Islamic junior high school; *Tahsin Al-Khat*

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INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an occupies a foundational position in Islamic civilization, functioning not only as a source of theological doctrine and legal guidance but also as a profound inspiration for cultural, artistic, and educational expressions. Throughout Islamic history, the Qur'an has been engaged through multiple modes of reception, ranging from textual interpretation (*tafsir*) and recitation (*tilawah*) to embodied social practices and aesthetic manifestations. One of the most distinctive forms of Qur'anic reception is Islamic calligraphy, which represents the visual articulation of sacred text and serves as a central element of Islamic art and culture (Akbar, 1995; Sirojuddin, 1985).

Islamic calligraphy emerges from the deep reverence for the Qur'an as the literal word of God. In Islamic artistic philosophy, the prohibition or limitation of figural representation in sacred spaces encouraged the development of calligraphy as a primary medium for aesthetic creativity. Consequently, calligraphy evolved not merely as a decorative art but as a spiritually charged practice that integrates beauty, devotion, and intellectual discipline (Israr, 1985; Al-Faruqi, 2001). The written Qur'anic text, when transformed into calligraphic form, becomes a bridge between the divine message and human sensory perception.

Within mosque spaces, Qur'anic calligraphy plays a particularly significant role. Mosques are not only sites of ritual worship but also centers of education, cultural transmission, and moral formation. The presence of Qur'anic verses on mosque walls, domes, mihrabs, and entrances functions as a continuous visual reminder of divine guidance and ethical values. Calligraphy thus contributes to shaping the spiritual atmosphere of mosques and influences how worshippers experience religious space (Sirojuddin, 2007; Masyhuri, 2011).

In the Indonesian context, Islamic calligraphy has developed through a long process of cultural interaction between Islamic teachings and local traditions. The diversity of calligraphic styles found in Indonesian mosques reflects both adherence to classical Arabic scripts and creative adaptations influenced by regional aesthetics and educational institutions. Islamic boarding schools, calligraphy studios, and formal educational settings have played an important role in preserving and disseminating calligraphic knowledge (Amrullah, 2017; Salim, 2009). As a result, calligraphy in Indonesian mosques cannot be understood solely as an imported artistic tradition but must be examined as a locally embedded religious practice.

Recent scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the concept of *Living Qur'an*, which emphasizes how the Qur'an is lived, practiced, and experienced in everyday Muslim life beyond formal textual interpretation. This approach highlights the dynamic relationship between sacred text and social reality, recognizing that the Qur'an functions as a living presence manifested through rituals, symbols, educational practices, and artistic expressions. Qur'anic calligraphy represents a prominent example of this living engagement, as it materializes the Qur'an in visual form within communal spaces (Mulyana, 2003; Creswell, 2015).

Despite the centrality of calligraphy in Islamic culture, studies on Qur'anic calligraphy have often emphasized technical, historical, or stylistic aspects, such as script development and aesthetic classification. While these studies are valuable, they tend to overlook the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of calligraphy as

perceived by contemporary Muslim communities. In particular, limited attention has been given to how mosque congregants interpret and respond to Qur'anic calligraphy as part of their lived religious experience. Understanding these perceptions is crucial, as the meanings of calligraphy are not fixed solely by artistic conventions but are continually negotiated through social interaction and individual consciousness.

From an educational perspective, Qur'anic calligraphy also intersects with character formation and religious learning. Several studies have demonstrated that learning and practicing calligraphy can foster discipline, patience, spiritual sensitivity, and appreciation of Islamic values (Hasanah, 2017; Mubarokah, 2017). When displayed in mosques, calligraphy extends this educational function to the broader community, subtly reinforcing moral messages and religious identity. In this sense, calligraphy functions not only as art but also as a pedagogical medium embedded within sacred architecture.

This study focuses on Qur'anic calligraphy as displayed in mosque spaces and examines it as a form of aesthetic and sociocultural reception of the Qur'an. The research is situated within the broader discourse of Islamic art, religious education, and Living Qur'an studies. By analyzing calligraphic forms, verse selection, and congregational responses, this study seeks to uncover how Qur'anic calligraphy operates as a medium of meaning-making in contemporary Muslim society.

The research is conducted in selected mosques that represent active religious and educational centers. These mosques are characterized by the prominent use of Qur'anic calligraphy as part of their interior design and religious symbolism. The choice of mosque spaces as research sites is based on the understanding that mosques serve as intersections between theology, art, education, and social life. As such, they provide a rich context for examining how sacred texts are visually represented and socially experienced.

The central questions guiding this research are as follows: (1) What types and styles of Qur'anic calligraphy are used in mosque spaces, and what considerations underlie their selection? (2) What Qur'anic verses are chosen for calligraphic display, and what thematic meanings do they convey? (3) How do mosque congregants perceive, interpret, and respond to Qur'anic calligraphy in relation to their religious experience? Addressing these questions allows for a comprehensive analysis of calligraphy as both an artistic and social phenomenon.

Theoretically, this study draws upon sociocultural and educational perspectives that view meaning as constructed through interaction between individuals, symbols, and institutional contexts. Qur'anic calligraphy is approached as a symbolic form that mediates religious values and collective identity. By integrating insights from Islamic aesthetics, qualitative research methodology, and educational theory, this study aims to contribute to interdisciplinary discussions on religion and art in Muslim societies (Budiningsih, 2012; Majid, 2016).

Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that Qur'anic calligraphy in mosque spaces is not merely ornamental but constitutes an integral component of lived Islam. Through its visual presence, calligraphy embodies theological principles, reinforces moral values, and shapes the spiritual experience of worshippers. By examining this phenomenon within the framework of Living Qur'an studies, the

research highlights the continuing relevance of the Qur'an as a dynamic source of meaning in contemporary religious life.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the meanings, perceptions, and lived experiences associated with Qur'anic calligraphy in mosque spaces. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating phenomena that involve subjective interpretation, symbolic meaning, and sociocultural context (Creswell, 2015; Mulyana, 2003). Rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses, this approach seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning through interaction with religious symbols embedded in everyday life.

The research is guided by a phenomenological approach, which focuses on uncovering the essence of human experience as it is lived and perceived by individuals. Phenomenology allows the researcher to examine how mosque congregants experience Qur'anic calligraphy visually, emotionally, and spiritually, and how these experiences shape their understanding of religious space (Budiningsih, 2012). This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing aesthetic and spiritual phenomena, where meaning often emerges through perception and reflection rather than explicit doctrinal reasoning.

In addition, this study is framed within the perspective of *Living Qur'an* studies. The Living Qur'an approach emphasizes the manifestation of the Qur'an in social practices, cultural expressions, and educational activities beyond textual interpretation. Qur'anic calligraphy, as a visual and artistic representation of sacred text, constitutes a form of lived engagement with the Qur'an that reflects both individual devotion and collective religious culture (Amrullah, 2017).

The research was conducted in selected mosque spaces that actively utilize Qur'anic calligraphy as part of their interior design and religious symbolism. These mosques were chosen purposively based on several criteria: (1) the prominence of Qur'anic calligraphy in mosque interiors, (2) their function as centers of worship and religious education, and (3) their accessibility to congregants with diverse educational and social backgrounds. Mosque spaces provide an ideal setting for this study, as they represent intersections of theology, art, education, and community life.

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of observations, interviews, and visual documentation conducted within the mosque environments. Participants included mosque administrators (*takmir*), religious teachers, calligraphy practitioners, and regular congregants. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and insight into the use and meaning of Qur'anic calligraphy.

Secondary data were obtained from books, academic journals, educational guidelines, and previous research related to Islamic calligraphy, religious education, and qualitative methodology (Akbar, 1995; Sirojuddin, 2016; Creswell, 2015). These sources provided conceptual and contextual support for interpreting empirical findings.

Three main data collection techniques were employed in this study. First, non-participant observation was used to examine the physical characteristics and spatial

placement of Qur'anic calligraphy within mosque interiors. Observations focused on calligraphic styles, verse selection, color composition, and their relationship with architectural elements. This method allowed the researcher to document how calligraphy functions as part of the visual and symbolic environment of the mosque.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions and interpretations of Qur'anic calligraphy. Interview questions addressed participants' understanding of the verses displayed, their aesthetic appreciation, and their views on the role of calligraphy in enhancing religious experience. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency across interviews (Sugiyono, 2009).

Third, documentation involved collecting photographs of calligraphic inscriptions and relevant written materials, such as mosque profiles, educational brochures, and institutional guidelines. Visual documentation served as an important analytical resource for identifying patterns in calligraphic representation and thematic emphasis.

Data analysis was conducted through an iterative and interpretive process. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and visual data were systematically organized and coded to identify recurring themes related to aesthetic perception, religious meaning, and educational function. Thematic analysis was employed to categorize and interpret patterns of meaning emerging from the data (Miles & Huberman, as cited in Sugiyono, 2012).

To enhance analytical depth, the findings were interpreted through a phenomenological lens, emphasizing participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings. This involved identifying essential themes that capture the core of participants' engagement with Qur'anic calligraphy. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis to minimize researcher bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in empirical data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, several strategies were employed, including data triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation, thereby enhancing credibility (Arikunto, 2006). Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and respecting the sacred nature of mosque spaces during data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms and Visual Characteristics of Qur'anic Calligraphy in Mosque Spaces

The findings indicate that Qur'anic calligraphy constitutes a dominant visual element in the interior design of the mosques under study. Calligraphic inscriptions are commonly positioned on central architectural components, such as the mihrab wall, the dome interior, and the main prayer hall walls. These placements signify the symbolic centrality of the Qur'an within the sacred spatial hierarchy of the mosque.



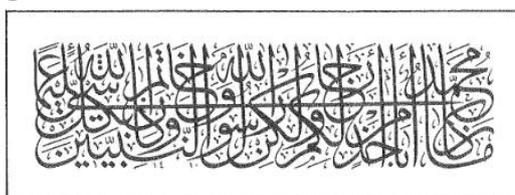
Figure 1. Main mihrab calligraphy

The most frequently employed scripts are *Khat Tsuluth* and *Khat Naskhi*. *Tsuluth* is predominantly used in monumental areas, particularly the mihrab and dome, due to its elongated strokes and majestic appearance. This style visually reinforces the sacred authority of the Qur'anic text and aligns with the architectural emphasis of the prayer direction (*qiblah*). In contrast, *Naskhi* is commonly found on side walls or educational panels, where legibility and readability are prioritized.

This finding is consistent with classical calligraphic theory, which suggests that *Tsuluth* functions symbolically and ceremonially, while *Naskhi* serves pedagogical and textual purposes (Akbar, 1995; Sirojuddin, 2016). The selection of scripts reflects a conscious negotiation between aesthetic beauty and functional readability.

Selection of Qur'anic Verses and Thematic Emphasis

The Qur'anic verses chosen for calligraphic display largely revolve around themes of monotheism (*tawhid*), devotion, discipline in worship, and moral conduct. Frequently displayed verses include exhortations to establish prayer, remember God, and maintain humility. These themes correspond directly to the core religious functions of mosque spaces.



لوحة بخط الجلي الثالث للأستاذ داود بكتاش

Figure 2. Calligraphy featuring verses on prayer and remembrance

Interviews with mosque administrators reveal that verse selection is often motivated by normative religious considerations rather than detailed exegetical planning. One mosque administrator explained:

"The verses are chosen because they remind worshippers of their obligations and strengthen their faith. Even if people do not read them word by word, the presence of the Qur'an itself already brings blessing."

(Interview with Mosque Administrator, 2023)

This perspective illustrates how the Qur'an is engaged symbolically within mosque environments. In the context of Living Qur'an studies, such engagement reflects a mode of reception in which the Qur'an functions as a moral and spiritual presence embedded in everyday religious life, rather than solely as a text for intellectual interpretation (Amrullah, 2017).

Aesthetic Reception Among Congregants

Congregational responses to Qur'anic calligraphy demonstrate varying levels of aesthetic and cognitive engagement. Many congregants reported that the visual presence of calligraphy enhances their sense of tranquility and spiritual focus during prayer. A regular worshipper noted:

"When I see the calligraphy before praying, I feel calmer and more focused. Even if I do not fully understand the verse, it reminds me that I am standing before God."

(Interview with Congregant, 2023)

This response highlights the affective dimension of aesthetic reception, where visual beauty stimulates emotional and spiritual awareness. Such findings support educational and psychological perspectives suggesting that visual stimuli play a significant role in shaping religious experience and concentration (Budiningsih, 2012; Islamuddin, 2014).

However, congregants with formal religious or Arabic education tend to engage more deeply with the textual content of the verses. They reported reflecting on the meanings of the verses and connecting them to personal religious practice. This divergence indicates that aesthetic reception operates at multiple levels, shaped by educational background and religious literacy.

Educational and Moral Functions of Calligraphy

Beyond its aesthetic appeal, Qur'anic calligraphy in mosque spaces also functions as an informal educational medium. The continuous visual exposure to Qur'anic verses reinforces moral values and religious norms. Several participants emphasized that calligraphy serves as a silent form of religious instruction (*dakwah bil hal*).

"Calligraphy teaches without speaking. Children and adults see the verses every day, and slowly the meanings become part of their mindset."

(Interview with Religious Teacher, 2023)

This finding aligns with studies on religious education that emphasize the importance of environmental learning and symbolic reinforcement in character formation (Hasanah, 2017; Mubarakah, 2017). The mosque environment, enriched by Qur'anic calligraphy, thus becomes an extended classroom where learning occurs through observation and reflection.

Despite general appreciation, some participants expressed concern regarding excessive ornamentation. A small number of congregants felt that overly elaborate designs could distract worshippers, especially if the calligraphy is difficult to read. This concern reflects a broader tension within Islamic thought regarding the balance between aesthetic beauty and spiritual focus.

Nevertheless, mosque administrators emphasized that design decisions are carefully considered to maintain reverence and modesty. The goal is not artistic exhibitionism but spiritual enhancement. This balance resonates with Islamic aesthetic philosophy, which views beauty as an expression of divine harmony when aligned with ethical and spiritual purpose (Al-Faruqi, 2001; Israr, 1985).

Calligraphy as Living Qur'an Practice

From the Living Qur'an perspective, Qur'anic calligraphy exemplifies how the Qur'an is lived and experienced in everyday religious settings. The Qur'an, through calligraphy, becomes a visible and spatial presence that continuously interacts with worshippers. Its meanings are not confined to verbal explanation but are conveyed through form, placement, and repetition.

The findings demonstrate that calligraphy mediates the relationship between sacred text and social reality. It transforms the Qur'an into a cultural artifact that shapes religious identity, communal memory, and moral orientation. This transformation does not diminish the sanctity of the Qur'an; rather, it extends its influence into sensory and social dimensions of Muslim life.

In this sense, Qur'anic calligraphy functions as both text and symbol – anchored in divine revelation yet interpreted through human creativity and social context. Such duality underscores the relevance of Living Qur'an studies in understanding contemporary Islamic practice.

Qur'anic Calligraphy as a Medium of Religious Identity Formation

One of the most significant findings of this study is the role of Qur'anic calligraphy in shaping and reinforcing Islamic religious identity within mosque communities. Calligraphy functions not merely as decoration, but as a symbolic marker that visually affirms the sacredness of the space and the centrality of the Qur'an in Muslim life. The presence of Qur'anic verses inscribed on mosque walls continuously reminds worshippers of their religious commitments and collective identity as members of the Muslim ummah.

From a sociological perspective, religious symbols play a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and transmitting shared values. Qur'anic calligraphy, as a visible and enduring symbol, contributes to the construction of a collective religious consciousness (Gazalba, 1987). This symbolic function is particularly evident in mosque spaces, where calligraphy frames communal rituals such as congregational prayer, religious instruction, and social gatherings.

Interview data reveal that many congregants perceive calligraphy as an essential element of mosque identity. A mosque administrator stated:

"Without Qur'anic calligraphy, a mosque feels incomplete. The calligraphy shows that this is a place of worship, not just an ordinary building."

(Interview with Mosque Administrator, 2023)

This statement underscores how calligraphy operates as a visual declaration of religious identity, distinguishing mosque spaces from secular environments.

Beyond individual spiritual experience, Qur'anic calligraphy reflects broader social and cultural dynamics. The style, language, and placement of calligraphy often correspond to local aesthetic preferences and historical influences. While adhering to classical calligraphic rules, local calligraphers frequently incorporate regional artistic sensibilities, resulting in distinctive visual expressions of Islamic art.

This phenomenon demonstrates that Qur'anic calligraphy serves as a bridge between universal Islamic teachings and local cultural contexts. Such cultural adaptation aligns with Al-Faruqi's (2001) assertion that Islamic art embodies unity in diversity, maintaining theological consistency while allowing artistic variation.

Through calligraphy, the Qur'an becomes both universally sacred and locally meaningful.

Furthermore, calligraphy production often involves community participation, whether through commissioning local artists, fundraising, or collective decision-making regarding design. These processes reinforce communal bonds and foster a shared sense of ownership over the mosque space.

Calligraphy and Informal Religious Education

The findings also highlight the educational potential of Qur'anic calligraphy as an informal learning medium. Unlike formal religious instruction delivered through sermons or classes, calligraphy provides continuous, passive exposure to Qur'anic text. This exposure contributes to religious socialization, particularly among children and adolescents.

A religious teacher explained:

"Students may forget lessons from the classroom, but the verses they see every day on the mosque walls stay in their memory."
(Interview with Religious Teacher, 2023)

This observation supports educational theories emphasizing environmental learning and visual reinforcement as effective pedagogical tools (Arsyad, 2015; Majid, 2016). Qur'anic calligraphy thus complements formal Islamic education by embedding religious messages within the physical environment.

An important aspect discussed by participants concerns the ethical dimension of Islamic aesthetics. While beauty is valued in Islamic tradition, it must not compromise humility and devotion. Excessive ornamentation or overly complex calligraphy may risk shifting attention away from worship toward visual admiration. This ethical concern reflects classical Islamic discourse on aesthetics, which emphasizes moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and intentionality (*niyyah*) in artistic expression (Israr, 1985). Mosque administrators reported efforts to balance artistic beauty with spiritual focus by selecting readable scripts, harmonious colors, and appropriate placement.

Such considerations demonstrate that Qur'anic calligraphy is governed not only by artistic standards but also by ethical and theological principles. The Living Qur'an framework provides a comprehensive lens for interpreting these findings. Qur'anic calligraphy represents a form of lived engagement with the Qur'an, where sacred text is transformed into visual culture and social practice. Rather than engaging with the Qur'an solely through recitation or interpretation, worshippers encounter it spatially and aesthetically.

This form of engagement allows the Qur'an to permeate everyday religious life, shaping emotions, behaviors, and social interactions. Calligraphy becomes a medium through which the Qur'an "lives" within the community, influencing religious consciousness in subtle yet enduring ways (Amrullah, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Qur'anic calligraphy in mosque spaces functions as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing aesthetic, educational, social, and spiritual dimensions. Through qualitative analysis grounded in phenomenological and Living Qur'an perspectives, the research reveals that

calligraphy is not merely ornamental but plays a vital role in shaping religious experience and identity.

The findings indicate that the selection of calligraphic styles and Qur'anic verses reflects a deliberate effort to balance beauty, readability, and theological meaning. Calligraphy enhances spiritual focus, reinforces moral values, and contributes to informal religious education. At the social level, it serves as a marker of Islamic identity and a bridge between universal religious teachings and local cultural expression.

From the Living Qur'an perspective, Qur'anic calligraphy exemplifies how the Qur'an is lived and experienced beyond textual interpretation. It transforms sacred text into a visual and spatial presence that continuously interacts with worshippers. This interaction fosters emotional engagement, ethical reflection, and communal cohesion.

In conclusion, Qur'anic calligraphy represents a dynamic form of religious expression that integrates art, faith, and social life. Its continued presence in mosque spaces underscores the enduring relevance of Islamic aesthetics as a medium for transmitting religious values and nurturing spiritual awareness in contemporary Muslim communities.

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