Arabic calligraphy was born out of the period when the dawn of Islam was rising from the lands of Arabia. As the religion of Islam developed in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, divine revelations were being written down in place of oral transmission. Noting the Quran as the guiding centre of a Muslim’s life and the spirit of Islamic culture, Arabic calligraphy as it developed to preserve the Holy Book became the most venerated of Islamic art, a premier of visual expression across the Muslim world.

The primacy of Arabic calligraphy in the realm of Islamic art lies in its inextricable link to the history of Islam. During the Battle of Badr in 624 CE, the Meccans taken captive by the Muslims did not have the money to pay their ransom. However, they were a literate people and the Prophet Muhammad made a deal requiring them to each teach ten Muslim children to read and write in exchange for their freedom. One of those children was Zayd ibn Thabit, who became a translator and scribe for the Prophet Muhammad, writing down the revelations as they came.

During the reign of the first caliph Abu Bakr, the loss of many of the Prophet’s companions in battle led to the need to collect the memorized verses of the Quran and compile it in book form.


The young scribe Zayd, who had both memorized the whole Quran and written its parts, was designated this tremendous and honourable task with the help of the second caliph, Umar bin al-Khattab. The Quran is known to be the earliest book written in Arabic.

Writing was crucial to the early years of Islam’s evolution. Calligraphic practice hence flourished with the spread of the religion, with each script linked to a period and people in Islamic history. The absence of figurative art in Islam also accentuates the distinctive place of calligraphy by emphasizing the sovereignty of words in worship and the pursuit of knowledge that characterized early Muslim dynasties.

The standard form of Arabic script was first used on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built in the late seventh century by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwân. It is the oldest existing Islamic monument standing. The first inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock are written in the first calligraphic style called the Kufic, named after the city of Kufa (currently in Iraq). Kufic was used to inscribe Quranic manuscripts on parchment, producing the earliest copies of the Quran till the 10th century. Kufic was also the style used on the first coins minted for the

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caliphs that succeeded the Prophet Muhammad, proclaiming Islam as the new monotheistic faith in Arabia.

A writer who used to write books in Kufic narrated a scene with the fourth caliph Ali ibn Abi Talib. Once, the caliph saw him writing and said, “Try to write boldly and in a prominent manner, also try to make your pen beautiful.” Abu Hakima hence cut his pen and began writing again. Ali remained watching by his side and then said “use the best ink with the writing pen and make the writing beautiful just as Allah has revealed his beautiful message.” 4

The quality of the writing materials used - the ink, the reed, the parchment - as well as the technique of the calligrapher also lays to the uniqueness of Arabic calligraphy in the sphere of visual art. Since calligraphy was borne out of the preservation of the Qu’ran, only the best of creative tools and minds were employed to craft a mode of visual expression that was worthy of the word of God. Aspects such as the cut of the reed and the blending of the inks as well as the meditative patience of the artist all fused to produce beautiful bodies of work. It was also supposedly believed that the quality of the calligraphy exposed the calligrapher’s character and paid homage to his merit.

4 Ibid
Bearing in mind the light shone on the calligrapher’s moral fibre, the artist was among those held in high esteem within Islamic societies. Calligraphers trained many years with masters of the art, studying as apprentices and copying models provided by their teachers. Only when the pupil had mastered the principles could he or she then become a master and produce his own work. This resulted in a literary tradition that traced long chains of transmission between the masters of calligraphy and their pupils.5

During the period of Abbasid rule, the city of Baghdad ruled as an Islamic centre rich in the arts and sciences. Owing to its role in enhancing communication and knowledge, calligraphy became a fine art and rose in prominence as a craft and science in itself. Its status granted its masters a most respected place in society and calligraphy thrived, adorning the walls of palaces and woven into silk.

When Abbasid caliph Al-Ma-mun (who reigned from 813 to 833 C.E.) restored the Dome of the Rock, he added a narrow belt of Quranic inscription in a style that was gaining ground in calligraphy - the impressive Thuluth (meaning one-third in Arabic) script. Thuluth is regarded as the king of calligraphy styles.6 The strength in its execution lends to its use in titles or epigrams, and Thuluth calligraphy can mostly be found on architectural monuments and buildings.

5 “Calligraphy and Islamic Art,” Victoria and Albert Museum, http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/c/calligraphy-in-islamic-art/

Thuluth calligraphic script on the first entrance of the Topkapi Palace in Turkey.  
Ma'mun's vizier Umar ibn Musida was reported to have once said of Arabic calligraphy: “The scripts are like a garden of the sciences. They are a picture whose spirit is elucidation. The body is swiftness. The feet are regularity. Its limbs are skill in the details of knowledge. Its composition is like the composition of musical notes and melodies.”

Hailing from the city of Istahbanat in Iran, Sayed Jafar Kashfi, a master calligrapher of today was drawn to Thuluth calligraphy when his father sent him to the diverse city of Najaf. There, he got acquainted with a noble scholar who introduced him to “The Rules of Arabic Calligraphy” by Mohammad Hashem Baghdadi, a book he follows to this day. Baghdadi, born in Baghdad in 1917, has his work embellished on famous mosques in Iraq and had plans before his death to write a text of the Quran in his authentic style.

Islamic calligraphy turned divine script into an art, relaying the message of the religion in an exquisite and elegant form. The melody of Quranic recitation and the harmony of God’s creation as encapsulated in the Quran is enfolded by the art itself. Sayed Jafar Kashfi noted that: “Writing the components is one thing but the composition is very important. Not only should the calligrapher write these components beautifully, composing the words is also very important. When you look at this there’s a rhythm. It’s eye-catching. You feel a spiritual pleasure.”

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9 The Epitome – Islamic Calligraphy, September 24, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9uuNagb4po&t=2230s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9uuNagb4po&t=2230s)
Single-volume Qur’an from Iran, dated 1101 AH (1689–90 AD) copied by Muhammad Riza al-Shirazi (main text) and Ibn Muhammad Amin Muhammad Hadi Shirazi (supplementary texts) probably for the Safavid ruler, Shah Sulayman.

(Source: http://guity-novin.blogspot.sg/2010/02/chapter-4-islamic-calligraphy.html)