

---

# YASIN HAMID SAFADI

---

(1934–2006)

---

Yasin Hamid Safadi, who died in London on 7 May 2006 aged 71, was for many years head of the Arabic section at the British Library, and was widely respected for his profound knowledge of classical Arabic literature and bibliography. He was also author of the one of the first books on Islamic calligraphy which appealed to both a scholarly and a general audience.

Yasin Safadi was born in Damascus, Syria on 8 September 1934. He was educated at the Ibn Khaldun College in Damascus, the American University of Beirut, and the University of Damascus before moving to the UK in 1956. In 1963 he graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, with a first class honours degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Following graduation Yasin stayed on at SOAS and began working on a Ph.D. thesis on the Arabic writer Ibn Nubata al-Sa'di, but his doctoral studies were interrupted when he moved to Kuala Lumpur to take up a post as lecturer in Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Malaya. This was followed in 1965 by a lectureship in Islamic studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, until 1969 when he joined the British Museum as Research Assistant for Arabic in the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books (OMPB). He was soon promoted to Assistant Keeper, and with other staff in the British Museum Library he moved to the newly-formed British Library in 1973.

When Yasin joined the British Museum it was an exciting time for Islamic arts, leading up to the first World of Islam Festival in London in 1976, with a host of events at major London institutions. One of the most significant was the British Library's exhibition of Qur'an manuscripts, on which Yasin worked with Martin Lings, Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books from 1970 until his retirement in 1974. On display in the King's Library of the British Museum building were over 160 Qur'an manuscripts, representing almost every style of the Qur'anic art of calligraphy, illumination and binding. Qur'ans from the British Library's collection were accompanied by highly significant loans, notably from Cairo, Tunis and Mashhad, including an extraordinary number of rarities. Although the accompanying catalogue is small and somewhat visually 'dry' by current standards of lavish full colour publications, it was a ground-breaking work and is still cited widely today. Yasin often paid tribute to the guidance and support of Martin Lings, who he regarded as a great mentor.

Other significant bibliographical achievements arising from Yasin's work in the Arabic section were the publication in 1977 with Martin Lings of the *Third Supplementary Catalogue of Arabic printed books in the British Library* in four volumes, and, in the same year, with Paul Auchterlonie of the *Union Catalogue of Arabic serials and newspapers in British libraries*.

Yasin's most enduring legacy, however, was his book *Islamic calligraphy*, published in London by Thames and Hudson in 1978, which traces the development of Arabic script from the earliest days of Islam and discusses all the main calligraphic styles, as well as introducing less common forms of ornamental scripts and modern developments. Although the categorisation of calligraphic styles and even their nomenclature has never been an uncontested field, Yasin's concise and elegantly-composed text, accompanied by a wide and discerning range of photographic examples, has proved to be of abiding interest and value both to a general audience and to specialists. In a review of this book for the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, A. D. H. Bivar singled out for praise the author's "unequalled command of the literary sources for Arabic calligraphy, as his text and bibliography leave no doubt."

The same year also saw a French version issued in Paris, while the original English edition was reprinted in the United States in 1979 and again in 1987. In 1986, the book was handsomely published in Jakarta as *Kaligrafi Islam*, in an Indonesian translation by the renowned Sufi poet and writer Abdul Hadi WM (though the first Yasin knew of this entrepreneurial endeavour was when I brought a copy back from Jakarta for him in 1987). On hearing of Yasin's death in 2006, a young Indonesian scholar and prize-winning calligrapher, Ali Akbar, described this book as "the handbook for an entire generation of Indonesian Islamic calligraphers".

The Arabic collections in the British Library are rich not only in manuscripts but also in early and rare printed books, and in 1979 Yasin organised an important exhibition on 'Early Arabic printing' in the King's Library, accompanied by a leaflet. The 34 items on display included treasures such as the earliest known example of printing in Arabic characters in Europe, in the form of a woodcut Arabic alphabet printed by Erhard Reuwich in Mainz in 1486 (IB.8606); the first Arabic book printed from movable type, the *Kitāb salāt al-sawā'it* printed at Fano, Italy, by Gregorio de Gregoriis in 1514 (Or.70.aa.12); and the earliest known printed copy of the Qur'an, printed in Hamburg in 1694 (14507.b.40); as well as examples of early Arabic printing from Leiden and Oxford in the seventeenth century, and the Bulaq press in Egypt in the early nineteenth century. Yasin had a great reverence for his predecessors, the founding fathers of the Library's Arabic collections, and in 1986 organised jointly with Julian Reade of the British Museum a bicentennial exhibition dedicated to Claudius James Rich, whose collection of nearly four hundred Arabic manuscripts was acquired by the British Museum in 1825. (The portrait of Rich by Thomas Phillips R. A., which now hangs at the entrance of the Asian and African Studies Reading Room at St Pancras, for many years graced Yasin's office.)

In 1991 Yasin curated a small exhibition on 'Arabic calligraphy' for the British Museum. In the intervening years since the publication of *Islamic calligraphy* in 1978, and with the emergence of some new manuscripts, he had a heightened appreciation for Eastern Kufic, which he now described as "arguably the most elegant of the ornamental scripts". This exhibition was an opportunity to display some of the Library's recent acquisitions, of which the most important was an illustrated copy dating from around 1300 of the *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt*, 'The wonders of creation', composed by the Baghdad author al-Qazwīnī in the late thirteenth century (Or.14140), acquired in 1983. Yasin was increasingly interested in manuscripts from less well-researched parts of the Islamic world, and also on show in this

exhibition were two examples of Sub-Saharan calligraphy, in the form of folios from a copy of the prayer book *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* (Or.14648) and from a Qur'an (Or.14649).

Other significant Arabic manuscripts acquired for the British Library during this period included the *I jāz al-ta'rif fī 'ilm al-tasrīf*, a treatise on accidentence in Arabic grammar by Ibn Malik, with the author's autograph, written in Damascus in 1254 (Or.14153), and two folios from a very rare late-12th century Qur'an made in Jerusalem during the sultanate of Saladin (Salah al-Dīn al-Ayyubī), in gold *naskhī* script (Or.14462), as well as three wooden Qur'an stands (Or.14617). Yasin was also responsible for ensuring that the British Library was one of the first western institutions to acquire a volume of a Chinese Qur'an (Or.14758) when these distinctive manuscripts started emerging on the Islamic art market in the early 1990s. (His 1978 book on calligraphy included on p.29 one of the first published descriptions of the ornamental *Sīmī* script especially associated with Chinese ceramic and enamel wares.)

From 1980 to 1984 Yasin was seconded from the British Library to UNESCO, to work as project co-ordinator for the King Faisal Foundation in the planning and construction of a cultural centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He enjoyed the myriad challenges of this project: administrative, structural and technical as well as curatorial. In February 1984 the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies was officially opened by His Majesty King Fahd, and soon afterwards Yasin returned to his post at the British Library.

The close ties Yasin had established with the King Faisal Research Centre very soon bore fruit for the British Library in a remarkably ambitious project, for in 1985 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Library and the Centre to microfiche the complete collection of Arabic manuscripts in the British Library. The filming of some 15,000 manuscript volumes, including both the old British Museum and the India Office collections, was finally completed in 1998.

During his long career at the British Museum and the British Library Yasin took on many other senior management roles. From 1984 to 1988 he served as Exhibitions and Loans Officer for the Oriental Collections of the British Library, during a busy period with numerous small specialised temporary exhibitions in the two dedicated 'oriental' cases in the King's Library, as well as a number of important external loans to high-profile exhibitions in the U.S.A. and Europe. In addition to occasionally deputising for the Director of Oriental Collections he was at different times Publications Officer and Binding and Preservation Coordinator for the Oriental and India Office Collections. For a few years from 1988, under the auspices of the British Library Consultancy Services, he spent several months working on the Islamic manuscripts in the Nour Collection, then housed in Zurich.

In 1995 Yasin took early retirement from the British Library. He relished the extra time available to continue his work on Islamic manuscripts, and also acted as a consultant on Islamic art, especially for the London auction house Bonhams. He spent extended periods of each year in Syria, and took immense enjoyment in cooking, gardening and DIY work at his house in Muswell Hill. His work was cut short by the onset of cancer in 2005; he died the following year and is buried in Damascus. He is survived by five children and two granddaughters, and his second wife Hala. He was especially proud that his eldest son, Sammi, followed in his footsteps by studying Arabic at SOAS.

### Yasin Hamid Safadi: Bibliography

#### Books (sole author)

- 1978 *Islamic calligraphy*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 1979 *Islamic calligraphy*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala. [Reprint]
- 1978 *Calligraphie islamique*. Traduit de l'anglais par Michel Garel. Paris: Chêne. [French translation of *Islamic calligraphy*.]
- 1978 *Hashem al-Khattat*. London : Iraqi Cultural Centre. [Catalogue of an exhibition of modern Arabic calligraphy by Hashem al-Khattat (1917–1973) held at the Iraqi Cultural Centre Gallery in London, 11 October – 2 November 1978.]
- 1979 *Select Arabic manuscripts: descriptive and illustrated catalogue of a collection of Arabic manuscripts*. London: Islamic Information Services. [Catalogue of 27 manuscripts from a previously unpublished private collection.]
- 1986 *Kaligrafi Islam*. Diterjemahkan oleh Abdul Hadi WM. Jakarta: Pantja Simpati. [Indonesian translation of *Islamic calligraphy*.]

#### Books and Reference Works (collaborative)

- 1976 *The Qur'ān: catalogue of an exhibition of Qur'ān manuscripts at the British Library, 3 April-15 August 1976*. Martin Lings and Yasin Hamid Safadi. London: published for the British Library by the World of Islam Publishing Company.
- 1977 *Arab Islamic bibliography: The Middle East Library Committee Guide, based on Giuseppe Gabrieli's Manuale di bibliografia musulmana*. Edited by Diana Grimwood-Jones, Derek Hopwood and J. D. Pearson, with the assistance of J. P. C. Auchterlonie, J. D. Latham and Yasin Safadi. Hassocks: Harvester.
- 1977 *Union catalogue of Arabic serials and newspapers in British libraries/al-Fihris al-shāmil lil-dawriyāt wa al-ṣuḥuf al-'arabīyah fī al-maktabāt al-barītanīyah*. Middle East Libraries Committee. Edited by Paul Auchterlonie and Yasin H. Safadi. London: Mansell, under the auspices of the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Lancaster.
- 1977 *Third supplementary catalogue of Arabic printed books in the British Library, 1958–1969*. Compiled by Martin Lings and Yasin Hamid Safadi. London: British Museum Publications. 4 volumes.
- 1984 *1400 years of Islamic art: a descriptive catalogue*. Géza Fehérvári & Yasin H. Safadi. London: Khalili Gallery.

#### Journal Articles and Chapters in Books

- 1977 Arabic printing and book production. In: *Arab Islamic bibliography: The Middle East Library Committee Guide, based on Giuseppe Gabrieli's Manuale di bibliografia musulmana*. Edited by Diana Grimwood-Jones, Derek Hopwood and J. D. Pearson, with the assistance of J. P. C. Auchterlonie, J. D. Latham and Yasin Safadi. Hassocks: Harvester, pp. 221–234.
- 1978 The British Library Qur'ān exhibition. *Museum*, vol.30, no.1, 1978, pp. 12–17.

- 1978 Le Coran : exposition organisée par la British Library. *Museum*, vol.30, no.1, 1978, pp. 12–17. [Translation of the above in the parallel French edition of the UNESCO journal.]
- 1978 The development of Arabic calligraphy. *Ur*, no.2 (Nov-Dec 1978), pp. 8–14. [Written as an introduction to the exhibition of Hashem al-Khattat's work at the Iraqi Cultural Centre, London, October 1978.]
- 1980 Printing in Arabic. *The Monotype recorder*, New series, no. 2 (Sept. 1980), pp. 2–7.

### Exhibition notes

- 1979 *Early Arabic printing, from the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century*. An exhibition in the British Library, 27 August to December 1979. London: British Library.
- 1986 *Claudius James Rich: diplomat, archaeologist and collector*. Yasin Safadi & Julian Reade. A bicentennial exhibition organised by the British Library and the British Museum, 9 October 1986 to 29 March 1987. London: British Library.
- 1991 *Arabic calligraphy*. A British Library exhibition at the British Museum, 2 December 1991 – 3 May 1992. London: British Museum Education Service.

### Privately printed works

- 1976 *A select annotated bibliography on falconry*. Compiled by Yasin H. Safadi on the occasion of the International Conference on Falconry and Conservation to be held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, 10–18 December 1976. London.
- 1997 *Islamic art in China and Southeast Asia: the collection of H.E. Sheikh Hasan Al Thani*. With brief catalogue descriptions and specifications by Yasin Hamid Safadi. London.

### Reviews of books by Yasin Hamid Safadi

- 1979 Bivar, A. D. H. Review of: *Islamic calligraphy*. Yasin Hamid Safadi. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 564–565.

ANNABEL TEH GALLOP

*The British Library and The Royal Asiatic Society*



Fig. 1. Yasin Hamid Safadi showing a Qur'an manuscript to Prince Hassan of Jordan during a visit to the British Library on 2 June 1992.



Fig. 2. The Basmalah in ornamental *Sinī* script, calligraphed by Yasin Safadi, from his book *Islamic calligraphy* (1978), p. 29.



Fig. 3. An illuminated folio from a manuscript of the *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt* from Sub-Saharan Africa, copied before 1175 AH (1761/62 AD), which was displayed in the exhibition on Arabic calligraphy at the British Museum, 1991. British Library, Or. 14649