

A God-given Gift

Hilal Kazan, a contemporary female master of the pen, combines classical learning with modern education.

BY VALERIE BEHIERY



Hilal Kazan with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his wife at the calligraphy exhibit which was a part of the international symposium on women calligraphers held in Istanbul in June 2010.

HILAL KAZAN LIVES IN KARTAL, a busy suburb of Istanbul overlooking the Marmara Sea but grew up in Istanbul. On a class trip with her school to the Suleymaniye Mosque, the young Kazan looked up at the ceiling of its majestic dome. Smitten by what she saw, the teenager was of course unaware of how this upward glance presaged the course of her life. It was not the architectural prowess of the dome that impressed her but the beauty of the cursive calligraphy adorning it. Kazan was in effect captivated by the monumental radiating gold letters measuring up to 68 centimeters each.

“How did the craftsmen manage to write the inscription?” the inquisitive student asked.

The teacher was undoubtedly aware, as are all Istanbulites, that the second largest mosque in Istanbul had been built in the 16th century by the master architect Sinan for the sultan at the time, Suleiman the Magnificent. However, he did not seem to know that the inscriptions had been designed by famous Ottoman calligrapher Ahmed Karahisari and his student Hasan Çelebi, or how these had

been executed. He told Kazan that a court calligrapher had managed to pen the Quranic verse so beautifully by dipping a large pen into an even larger bowl of ink and writing the text freehand with utmost spontaneity. The answer, although erroneous, only further left the young girl awestruck. The image allowed the future master calligrapher’s imagination to take flight and triggered a lifelong interest in the art of *khatt*, or calligraphy.

Hilal Kazan, having trained in both modern academic and traditional apprenticeship systems of education, is unique in the world.

Kazan finished high school and went on to obtain a bachelor’s degree in Turkish language and literature from the University of Istanbul. Recognizing her ability to write a comely Ottoman hand, her friends, family, and professors — particularly Dr. Ali Alparslan—encouraged her to undertake, in addition to her university studies, training in calligraphy. They also found Kazan her first teacher: Musharraf Çelebi, the great granddaughter of well-known calligrapher Ahmed Kutsi Efendi. Having studied with master calligrapher Mustafa Halim Ozyazici, Çelebi went on to become a specialist and teacher of the *naskh* script in her own right.

Seasoned and well respected, she gave Kazan the encouragement she so needed. It was not only Çelebi’s mastery of *khatt* and pleasant manner that inspired the hundreds of students that flocked to her door, but also the example of how she lived her life. Kazan’s first mentor was known for being a very pious woman. When her first child died while only a month old, Çelebi was inspired to commit the entire Quran to memory to outwit the unbearable sadness. Within three years, she became, by sleeping little and praying much, a *hafiza*, receiving her diploma at the Suleymaniye Mosque, the same mosque that had so impressed Kazan as a young girl.

Çelebi, who actively read and studied the holy text in addition to her practice of calligraphy, opened up the young woman’s eyes to the fact that calligraphy was a vocation more than a job and effectively a lifelong quest. It was not only about fashioning beautiful, well-proportioned and regular letters but also about cultivating the necessary personality traits like humility, patience and perseverance that begot them and allowed them to flourish. And as any student who has not been able to resist the attractive but daunting challenge of the art knows, mastering the self requires as much ardor as mastering the pen.

Armed with this knowledge and witnessing the failing health of Musharraf Çelebi, Kazan presented herself to Hasan Çelebi in spring 1994. In order to understand the courage she had to muster up for such a meeting, one needs to know that Hasan Çelebi was a nationally celebrated Turkish calligrapher, and a master and teacher of many scripts. Çelebi garnered attention beyond Turkey throughout the whole of the Muslim world in 1983 with his successful restoration of the calligraphic inscriptions at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. More than 20 years later, his reputation had become international; the

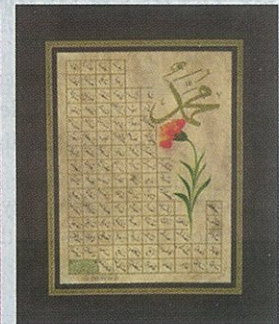
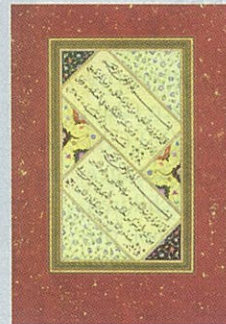
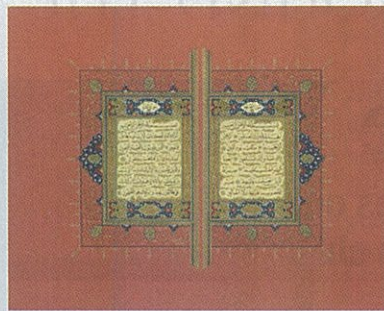
Top left: Hilal Kazan, 2010, Opening pages of the Quran (al- Fatiha and beginning of *Surah al-Baqarah*), 60 X 40 cm.

Top right: Hilal Kazan, 2010, Last verses of *Surah al-Qalam* (68:51-52), 28 X 32 cm.

Bottom left: Hilal Kazan, 2010, *Asma' Allah al-Husna*, 45 X 60 cm.

Bottom center: Hilal Kazan, 2010, *Surah al-Falaq* and *Surah al-Nas*, 28 X 35 cm.

Bottom right: Hilal Kazan, 2011, *The Names of Mohammed [Asma' Muhammad]*, 45 X 60 cm.



British Museum devoted an entire exhibition to him in 2005. "Making of the Master: The Art of Arabic Calligraphy," as the title indicates, focused on the transmission of calligraphic knowledge and therefore works by his students, including one by Kazan and one by Ali bin Nayef of Jordan formed part of the show. Çelebi is however best known here in North America as the teacher of Mohammad Zakariya, the American Muslim calligrapher behind the beautiful Eid stamp of 2001. Though Kazan's two instructors carry the same last name, the two Çelebis are unrelated.)

To this day, Kazan considers having been accepted as one of Çelebi's students a real honor. Known for being a rigorous and effective teacher, her training with him, as with all his students, meant starting the learning process over again from square one. Often bearing the phrase of encouragement "You have done well," the many corrections in red ink testify to the golden patience necessary to mastering the Islamic art of *khatt*. Çelebi imparts to his students that they must practice 30 hours a day, but he also tells them that "the first requirement is to love the art" and that this "love comes before skill."

In 2000, after six years of study, Kazan received a diploma in the *thuluth* and *naskh* scripts. She is one of only three out of approximately 300 female students to have obtained a diploma from the modern Turkish master. The stunning work that earned her professional certification displays the 99 names of God. The diploma not only constitutes an approbation of a calligrapher's worth and degree of skill but also allows calligraphers to sign their work and take on students of their own, thus continuing a tradition now dating

back over a thousand years. In this particular case, it also places Kazan into a long lineage of illustrious calligraphers.

Hasan Çelebi was Kazan's mentor in more ways than one. It was he who encouraged her to pursue graduate studies in a related field, and Kazan effectively finished her Ph.D thesis on Ottoman court patronage in 2007. That she has been trained in both modern academic and traditional apprenticeship systems of education makes her, as David Simonowitz observes in the only scholarly English article devoted to Kazan, unique in the world. Since graduating from the University of Marmara,

the calligrapher continues to practice her art as well as pursue her research, author works, and present papers at international conferences. In June 2010, she organized an international symposium on women calligraphers in Istanbul. The pioneering event included workshops, a ceremony for 26 new female master calligraphers, as well as an exhibit of the work of 45 women calligraphers from Turkey, Iran, Spain, England, Syria and the U.A.E.

Kazan also wrote the accompanying book "Female Calligraphers Past and Present" published by the Istanbul Culture Foundation. The bilingual Turkish and English illustrated publication forms a modern version of a bibliographical dictionary, compiling a history of female calligraphers. While some women named in Islamic historical sources are missing, the book fills an important gap in scholarship on both historical and contemporary Muslim women calligraphers.

The most moving historical female calligrapher is, however, no doubt Bi-dest. Born in 12th century Egypt without hands, she created instead calligraphic masterpieces with her foot. After her celebrated skills were ascertained by the vizier, she was offered a position which both granted her public honor and ensured her financial independence.

As a woman, Kazan, who considers her skill a gift from God, is also a part of this original and talented female lineage. We can only look forward to seeing more of her art as well as that of other contemporary female masters of the pen, all of whom constitute vital links in this open-ended chain of transmission. ■



Top: Hilal Kazan (right) with Mr. Kadir Topbash, the Mayor of Istanbul. **Bottom:** Hilal Kazan presenting her book to the Prince of Medina.

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