Foreword

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CALLIGRAPHY CAN BE DEFINED as the art of fusing words and images using prescribed techniques and practices that are embedded in a set of cultural beliefs and values. Its uniqueness rests on its formal, social, and cultural characteristics, and despite its erasure by industrialization, globalization, and the adoption of Latin alphabets in most of Europe, it continues to be ubiquitous throughout Asia. The origins of different systems and schools of calligraphy are often closely associated with the inscription of religious beliefs and teachings. Vedic Sanskrit, Arabic, Latin, and Hebrew are all sacred languages through which divinity becomes manifest. The development of Sanskrit is entwined with the Vedas and the *Mahābhārata*; Arabic script with the Qur'an; and the Persian Avestan alphabet with the holy book of Zarathustra, the Avesta. Elsewhere, civilizations including the Sumerians and Semites attributed creation to the word of God; Egyptians believed in a god of the word; and the Greek doctrine of *logos* postulated that the essence of things resided in their names.[1] While many schools of calligraphy have close religious and metaphysical associations, their influence has also had a much broader impact on the material and visual culture of the near and far east.

Calligraphy is fundamental to Persian and Islamic architecture and, in some cases, garden design: script embellishes wooden doors, porcelain, earthenware, ceramic tiles, glass, and metalwork. Across Asia, calligraphy appears as decorative elements in carpet weaving and bookbinding. Locally, calligraphy's varied techniques, styles, and notations define an array of written media, while globally, it provides the signatures of international brands such as Al Jazeera and the Emirates airline.

Non-alphabetical writing systems have long been underestimated and undervalued in Western thought, and despite their present-day familiarity, they continue to be inadequately appreciated. The philosopher Rousseau, in his 1781 *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, divided languages into three categories, which he correlated with different stages of civilization. Notably, he distinguished oral cultures with their underdeveloped or non-existent notational systems from those cultures that had developed writing systems, which he believed were the mark of civilized society.[2] However, one must not disregard oral cultures as having been fundamental to the development of many written cultures in Asia, as discussed by Alain George (chapter 3) and Adheesh Sathaye (chapter 4). Neither oral nor written cultures can be attributed greater value than the other.

In formal terms, calligraphy is unable to privilege either its linguistic or its pictorial function. This is not to say that the relationship between meaning and form is identical in all calligraphic systems.

◀ **YUGAMI HISAO**
***Seiʻi* (Back)** 2008
Sumi ink on Kent paper
29.5 × 21 cm
MOA COLLECTION, 31186/1

Calligraphy functions both linguistically as a refined notational system and potentially as an abstract composition—and in doing so, it constantly tests the limits of legibility and formal abstraction. This ambiguity gives calligraphy its poetic freedom, which more than denoting a specific state or condition, evokes and presages it, enabling it to take on a life of its own. In extreme cases calligraphy's communicative quality can even dissolve, as exemplified by the interactive digital calligraphy work by teamLab.

The indeterminacy and ambiguity generated by calligraphy provide the creative locus through which meaning is potentially transformed and propagated. This can mean experimenting with inscription's formal composition and application. Contemporary Afghan, Tibetan, Thai, Japanese, and Chinese artists—such as Shamsia Hassani, Nortse, Phaptawan Suwannakudt, Yugami Hisao, the members of teamLab, and Song Dong (discussed in this book)—have exploited this openness by combining calligraphy with sculpture, performance, installation art, and digital media. The incessant flicker between form and content, abstraction and intelligibility, and earthly existence and divinity makes calligraphy a way to generate a vision of a reality radically different from the one made up of dualisms, classificatory logic, and the logocentrism inherent to Western phonetic writing. For the philosopher Jacques Derrida, graphic forms like calligraphy can never be understood from their "intention of signification or of denotation, but of style and connotation."[3] This and the articulation of substances (inks, paints, minerals) and instruments (pens, brushes) with the fixity and sense of style are crucial in appreciating its uniqueness.

Calligraphy is also a socially embedded practice. In China and elsewhere, calligraphers follow culturally specific rules for comportment and audience engagement. Its technical procedures are strictly codified, and protocols govern the distribution, presentation, and reading of texts. Moreover, how calligraphic practices are institutionalized, whether by a religious institution or by institutions connected to art or commercial markets, further marks calligraphy's social specificity. Efficacy and agency are also factors in the bodily performance and technical manipulations of the calligrapher. A practitioner's state of consciousness and heightened

awareness, the carefully modulated movement and speed of the brush strokes, the delicate changes in the pressure exerted on the flow of ink, and the handling of the instrument—sometimes considered as an extension of their body—infuse a human essence into the body of their work.

For Derrida, this type of "non-phonetic writing breaks the noun apart. It describes relations, not appellations. The noun and the word, these unities of breath and concept are effaced within pure writing."[4] To presuppose the existence of the pure word, independent of its means of inscription, endows the writing with life and lends it a transcendental reality; in the Islamic tradition, writing is conjugated with the perfection of ideograms, geometry, and algebra that allude to divinity. Derrida does not deny that pictograms can also be endowed with phonetic, sound-making qualities but agrees that such qualities never efface their pictographic references. The signifier is broken into a system of differences where the thing is part of a chain of things, while sound is inscribed into a chain of sounds. Graphic systems encourage metaphor, which, unlike Western writing, supposedly allows civilizations to grow outside of logocentrisms.[5]

Critiquing the privileged position of Western alphabetical writing, Derrida characterizes it as "the carrier of death" because it always signifies the absence of the speaker.[6] In place of the speaker is the logos, a transcendentally constituted reason derived from language; calligraphy and graphic languages escape these numbing constraints. Alphabetical writing opens the field of history, which is then projected back on itself to create its own logocentric self-imagination. Calligraphy, in contrast, free of the need for fidelity to phonetics, alludes to eternity. Certain Buddhist texts are themselves holy objects that can transmit virtue and offer protection. The radical difference between writing and calligraphy calls into question the supposed universality of a large body of logocentric assumptions, which have long structured and stabilized modern Western consciousness: language and speech; intelligence and nonsense; cosmos and chaos; divinity and secularism; spiritual embodiment and materialism; passivity and agency; and history and eternity. *Traces of Words: Art and Calligraphy from Asia* introduces works and techniques from different periods and places that offer a different lens through which to imagine the world.