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An Analysis of the Aesthetic Components of the Calligraphic Muraqqaʿ of Sultan Ali al-Katib (Preserved at the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha)[1]

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Abstract

Calligraphic muraqqaʿs are important examples of Iranian-Islamic book arts, in which calligraphy, illumination, color, and page composition interact to create a unified visual experience. This study examines the principal aesthetic components of the muraqqaʿ known as Sultan Ali al-Katib, preserved at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha[1], and investigates how they are manifested in its calligraphic arrangements and decorative features. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted, combining documentary research with direct visual observation of high-quality images of the muraqqaʿ's pages. To examine its attribution, the calligraphic features were also compared with recognized examples of Sultan Ali Mashhadi's work. The aesthetic analysis focused on compositional proportion and balance, symmetry, color harmony, visual rhythm, and the relationship between calligraphy and illumination. The findings indicate that the muraqqaʿ's visual coherence derives from the consistent use of calligraphy, restrained illumination, harmonious color relationships, and varied arrangements of written pieces. Calligraphy remains the dominant visual element, while decorative features enhance its prominence without overwhelming the written text. These findings demonstrate how the integration of calligraphy, illumination, and page design contributes to the aesthetic character of Safavid-period calligraphic muraqqaʿs.

Keywords: Muraqqaʿ of Sultan Ali al-Katib, aesthetics, muraqqaʿ-making, Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Safavid period

1-Introduction

The term *muraqqaʿ* has several meanings in the vocabulary of book arts,[2] and it is also connected with the patched woolen garment of the Sufis. In the usage of traditional book artists and craftsmen, it refers to "pieces (*riqʿas* and *qitʿas*) of calligraphy and images that are joined together in a particular manner and placed between two covers, such that when opened all the pieces are visible in one orderly row, and when folded they resemble a book" (Mayel Heravi 1993: 785). Reliable sources give no precise or clear information on the origins of muraqqaʿ-making in the history of Iranian art; yet, given the flourishing of calligraphy, collecting and presenting specimens of writing for educational purposes was customary. With the flourishing of painting from the seventh century AH, the importance of training in painting and, more importantly, the patronage of the court and the artistic enthusiasm of the rulers of the time, muraqqaʿ-making also came to life and attracted the attention of the royal artistic workshops (Ajand 2019: 55).

[1] The Persian version of this paper, under the following title, is also published in this issue of HSA:
بازشناسی مولفه های زیباشناسانه مرقع خوشنویسی سلطان علی الکاتب (محفوظ در موزهٔ هنرهای اسلامی دوحه)

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Muraqqaʿs were made not only for educational purposes but also to honor works of calligraphy and painting, at times also *ebri* (cloud-marbled) work, and to match the standing of their audience, who were mostly courtiers and rulers. On the basis of the available documents, the oldest known muraqqaʿs, namely the muraqqaʿ of Abd al-Qadir, the muraqqaʿ of the Seven Masters (Haft Ustad), and the muraqqaʿ of Amir Alishir Navai, are attributed to the Timurid period (Raeisi 2025: 36), and it appears that the tradition of producing anthologies (*golchin*) and muraqqaʿs took shape in emulation of Jalayirid art (Raeisi 2025: 38). Because most muraqqaʿs, as examples of the finest art of their time, were presented by kings and rulers to ambassadors and associates, they have been dispersed among private collections and various museums. Against this background, the calligraphic muraqqaʿ known as Sultan Ali al-Katib, preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha,[23] is an outstanding example of the Safavid period, calligraphed in *nastaʿliq khafi* and *mashq* scripts in a large folio format, and is examined here in terms of the authenticity of its scribe and its aesthetic components and compared with similar examples. Identifying and introducing such examples, with correct attribution to their artists, can help researchers of the history of Iranian calligraphy and painting to find the forgotten links of Iranian art. Muraqqaʿs are written and visual historical documents that help us better understand historical periods and artistic developments in different schools (Raeisi 2025: 36), and each of their pieces can serve as an identifying document for artists whose names are not mentioned in illustrated manuscripts or biographical anthologies (Raeisi 2025: 39). After such examples have been identified and introduced, examining the aesthetic components of muraqqaʿs by comparing the examples of a particular period with those of other periods is of great importance for formulating the visual principles of Iranian-Islamic art.

2-Research Background

Because of the scarcity of sources and researchers' lack of direct access to muraqqaʿs, only a few, though valuable, articles have been written on muraqqaʿ-making. Among them one may mention Najib Mayel Heravi (1974), "Muraqqaʿ-making in the Timurid Period," which introduces the muraqqaʿ of Mir Alishir Navai and its preface, written by Abdullah Morvarid in his *Sharafnāma*. Parisa Shad-Qazvini's (2007) "A Study of Iranian Manuscripts and Muraqqaʿs of the Eighth to Tenth Centuries AH in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul" is devoted to introducing and examining the examples in that museum, which were collected by the Ottoman sultans.

Likewise, Shirin Malek Esmaʿili and Abdolmajid Hosseini Rad (2009), in an article titled "Muraqqaʿ-making and Its Fate in the Qajar Era," address the replacement of muraqqaʿs by photograph albums and examine the reasons for the decline of muraqqaʿ-making in the Qajar period. Mehrangiz Moradi (2015), in an article titled "A Study of the Differences and Similarities between Safavid and Ottoman Muraqqaʿs," discusses the outward features of muraqqaʿs, including the difference in format between Iranian and Turkish muraqqaʿs.

Iman Raeisi (2025), in an article titled "The Preface of Shahqoli Khalifa Mohrdar in the Shah Tahmasp Muraqqaʿ," noting the paucity of research on Safavid muraqqaʿs, introduced and examined the Shah Tahmasp muraqqaʿ (Istanbul University Library, no. nekfy01422). Through study of its preface and pieces, he dated the production of the muraqqaʿ to after Shah Tahmasp's repentance and to between 936 and 965 AH (or between 945 and 965 AH), and identified in it works by 33 calligraphers and 2 painters. The focus of that study is on introducing the muraqqaʿ and its preface; it does not include an aesthetic analysis of the pieces.

Most researchers of the history of Iranian art have stressed the importance of muraqqaʿs in this field and have reminded us of the need to study them; nevertheless, no comprehensive research

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has been carried out on determining authenticity, stylistic analysis, or the study of aesthetic components on the basis of the features shared by the works in muraqqaʿs. Moreover, the muraqqaʿ in question, kept in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, has not so far been introduced or studied.

3-Research Methodology

The present research is qualitative in nature and uses a descriptive-analytical method. Information was gathered in two ways: documentary (library) research and direct observation. In the first step, written sources on the history of muraqqaʿ-making, on the theoretical foundations of the aesthetics of Iranian and Islamic book arts, and on the life and works of Sultan Ali Mashhadi were collected and compiled. In the second step, the visual data were obtained through direct access to high-quality images of all the pages of the Sultan Ali al-Katib muraqqaʿ, provided in cooperation with the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, and these became the basis of the visual and comparative analysis. To verify the attribution of the work, the calligraphy of the muraqqaʿ under study was compared with authenticated and well-known specimens of Sultan Ali Mashhadi's hand (such as the *Maqālāt* of Khwaja Abdullah Ansari preserved in the Museum of Decorative Arts) in terms of pen handling, writing angle, *kursi-chini*, and elongations (*maddāt* and *keshidehs*). In analyzing the aesthetic components, a theoretical framework based on the recognized principles of the aesthetics of Timurid–Safavid book arts and illumination was used, including criteria such as proportion and balance of composition, symmetry (*ham-ārāstegi*), color harmony, and visual rhythm (the cadence of the arrangement of the pieces). These criteria, drawn from the views of scholars such as Kashefi (1985), Gray (2006), and Lings (1998) on the aesthetics of painting, illumination, and color in Islamic art, form the basis for classifying and analyzing the data of this research along two axes: calligraphy, and illumination and piece-making (*qitʿa-sāzi*).

4-Literature Review

Muraqqaʿ Production and Muraqqaʿ-making in the Era of Shah Tahmasp Safavid

The young Tahmasp's interest in art, especially painting, under the guidance of the outstanding artists of his time such as Behzad, Sultan Muhammad Naqqash, and Aqa Mirak, together with his familiarity with the aesthetic manifestations of the Herat school, led the shah, as a great patron of artists in the early years of his rule, to promote the illustration of books, manuscripts, and artistic muraqqaʿs (Ajand 2005: 93). The great Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp, produced in 942 AH with 258 paintings and more than 700 pages, which displayed the skill of the artists and the artistic splendor of the court, was one of the results of his royal workshop. The establishment of numerous local workshops and the production of works and illustrated manuscripts in Tabriz, Qazvin, Mashhad, and Shiraz boosted the commissioning and sale of artworks by merchants to India, Bukhara, and the Ottoman lands, and consequently the spread of art over a wide area, which in turn brought economic prosperity to this field. Besides painting, Shah Tahmasp also had a special interest in and regard for calligraphy, and the presence of first-rank calligraphers such as Shah Mahmud Neyshaburi, Rustam Ali Heravi, and Mawlana Abdi Neyshaburi in his royal workshop indicates his patronage of this art (Raeisi 2025: 41); he himself also learned *nastaʿliq* script from these masters (Raeisi 2025: 42).

Painting, moving away from epic and ideal themes, received in its own right the attention and favor of Shah Tahmasp and other local rulers. The spread of various kinds of muraqqaʿs was a result of this worldview and new attitude toward the art of painting and illustration in Iran. Once muraqqaʿs had become widespread and artists were receiving commissions from other artistic centers, the artist's standing as the creator of a work of art rose. Among the people, a muraqqaʿ

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was more valuable if it contained work by one or more eminent masters. The spread of muraqqaʿs in the time of Shah Tahmasp, especially in the second half of his rule, increased. Thus the muraqqaʿs of Bahram Mirza (951 AH), Qutb al-Din Muhammad Qissakhwan (964 AH), Shahqoli Khalifa Mohrdar (965 AH), Amir Hosayn Beyg (968 AH), and Shams al-Din Muhammad Vasfi (984 AH) were all produced after Shah Tahmasp's repentance in 939 AH and his turning away from forbidden pleasures and entertainments (Raeisi 2025: 40). Researchers regard several factors as important in this: (1) the decline of court patronage of art, especially by Shah Tahmasp (Welch 2006: 228), owing to a change of attitude, which, however, did not mean the shah's complete abandonment of art; rather, his attention to producing voluminous and costly manuscripts diminished, and muraqqaʿ-making and single-page painting replaced large-scale court works (Raeisi 2025: 40); (2) the growth of the merchant class and the nobility, a result of Shah Tahmasp's direct policy of removing taxes from this class; and (3) the relatively long and continuous peace and calm during Shah Tahmasp's rule (cited in Garoosi 2022: 70).

Introducing the Calligraphic Muraqqaʿ Known as Sultan Ali al-Katib

The calligraphic muraqqaʿ known as Sultan Ali al-Katib, preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, consists of six leaves written on both sides (twelve pages) and two covers of fine, decorated cloth. It was written in *nastaʿliq khafi* and *mashq* scripts on colored, gold-sprinkled papers, with illumination and *tashʿir* (gold-line decoration), between 926 and 946 AH (1520 and 1540 CE), contemporary with the reign of Shah Tahmasp Safavid in Tabriz. It is in large folio format ("sultani" or Timurid), vertical in orientation, and bears the signature "Sultan Ali al-Katib."[4]

The muraqqaʿ opens with ghazals by Kamal Khujandi,[5] one of the Persian-speaking mystics and poets of the eighth century AH, in the form of four horizontal pieces placed side by side. Another page of the muraqqaʿ takes a different form: four narrow vertical pieces with ghazals by Jami, the poet of the ninth century AH, calligraphed and illuminated in ten-line *chalipa* (diagonal cross-layout). The third page, in the same format, contains poems by Riyazi Samarqandi. The fourth page again has poems by Jami in ten-line *chalipa*, and the fifth page, unlike the other pages, is written in the form of a notebook (*daftar*) containing texts by Khwaja Abdullah Ansari. The sixth and seventh pages are in the format of the second, third, and fourth pages, calligraphed with poems by Amir Shahi Sabzavari. The ten-line *chalipa* of the eighth page is again devoted to poems by Kamal Khujandi. The same format recurs on the ninth page, but with poems by Amir Khusraw Dehlavi. The tenth page repeats the format with poems by Jami. The final page, differing from the others, consists of three rectangular pieces, two vertical and one horizontal, containing sentences from a book of counsel (*andarznāma*); in the horizontal piece the calligrapher's signature appears as follows: "*Tamma al-risāla al-sharīfa ʿalā hādhā al-ʿabd al-mudhnib Sulṭān ʿAlī al-Kātib ghafara dhunūbahu*" ("This noble treatise was completed by this sinful servant, Sultan Ali al-Katib, may his sins be forgiven") (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1 Sultan Ali, colophon (*anjāma*) of the muraqqaʿ, in *nastaʿliq* script on colored paper. Source: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.

Sultan Ali Mashhadi

Sultan Ali ibn Muhammad was born in Tus in 841 AH. By his own account in the treatise *Ṣirāṭ al-suṭūr*, from about the age of twenty he developed an inclination toward writing and the practice of calligraphy; in those years he received instruction from Azhar Tabrizi (d. 880 AH) or from one of his pupils (Mayel Heravi 1993: 45). At the height of his fame he was invited to Herat by Sultan Husayn Bayqara and, in the words of Qazi Ahmad Qomi, "he is given a place in the private library and is engaged in copying for the private establishment of the exalted court, and in manuscripts records his name as *al-Kātib al-Sulṭānī*" (Qomi 2004: 60). After the fall of Sultan Husayn Bayqara's rule he returned to Mashhad and chose seclusion. Despite illness, in 920 AH he versified *Ṣirāṭ al-suṭūr*, and the following year he copied Jami's *Tuḥfat al-aḥrār* (Bayani 1984: 250).

Authentication of the Muraqqaʿ

Muraqqaʿs were made for various purposes, and most were collections of scattered manuscripts by different artists working in different crafts; in a sense, muraqqaʿs represented the practice of different arts in a single volume. Hence identifying those pieces of a muraqqaʿ that lack the artist's signature or mark is difficult, and the attribution of such pieces has always involved conjecture; however, muraqqaʿ-making led some artists to record their names beneath their works (Raeisi 2025: 39). Regarding the muraqqaʿ under study, whose final page bears the signature of Sultan Ali al-Katib, some ambiguity may also exist, because the final page differs from the other pages in content, calligraphic format, and pen size (*dāng-e qalam*). In addition, three calligraphers named Sultan Ali are recorded in the early Safavid period. Therefore, to verify the attribution of the muraqqaʿ to Sultan Ali Mashhadi, the writing of this muraqqaʿ was compared with specimens of the calligrapher's other writings, both chosen from the *Maqālāt* of Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, taking into account that the style and ability of calligraphers show ups and downs over their artistic lives. This notebook-format piece (Fig. 2) comes from the calligrapher's period of maturity (perfection) and was compared with its counterpart in the muraqqaʿ. Comparing the writing of this muraqqaʿ with similar examples in terms of pen handling, the angle of the *chalipa* writing, manner of composition, elongations and extensions (*maddāt* and *keshidehs*), especially of the letter *b* (ب), the circles (bowls), *kursi-chini*, and the cadence of the lines, it can be said that the Sultan Ali al-Katib meant here is the famous Sultan Ali

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Mashhadi (d. 926 AH/1520 CE),[6] whose pieces were mounted, joined (*vaṣṣāli*), and arranged by the muraqqaʿ-maker. In addition, most of the calligraphed texts are poems by Jami. Jami was one of Sultan Ali Mashhadi's favorite poets, and in the last years of his life the calligrapher was also engaged in copying this poet's *Arbaʿīn* and *Tuḥfat al-aḥrār*.



Fig. 2 (left) Sultan Ali Mashhadi, *Maqālāt* of Khwaja Abdullah, in *nastaʿliq* script on colored paper, notebook format. Source: catalogue of the Museum of Decorative Arts.
Fig. 3 (right) Sultan Ali al-Katib, *Maqālāt* of Khwaja Abdullah, in *nastaʿliq* script on colored paper, notebook format, page 5 of the muraqqaʿ. Source: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.

5-Aesthetic Components of the Muraqqaʿ

Given the arrangement of the pieces, especially on the final page, it can be said that the muraqqaʿ-maker applied his own judgment to the calligraphic pieces for the sake of beauty in composition, to the extent that he did not consider the direction in which the script is read and, for aesthetic reasons, changed the orientation of the piece (Fig. 4). Hence it can be said that the muraqqaʿ-maker's aim was not merely to collect pieces; rather, he made and finished this muraqqaʿ on the basis of an aesthetic sense. On this basis, the features employed in this muraqqaʿ can be classified and analyzed in two categories, calligraphy and illumination:

A. Calligraphy

- One of the important features of the Sultan Ali al-Katib muraqqaʿ is that it is devoted to the works of a single calligrapher. Hence a comprehensive and distinct outlook governs the whole collection, and the variety and diversity of works by different artists is avoided. In other words, the calligraphy of the muraqqaʿ enjoys a fairly complete unity and harmony. In the eight-fold typology of muraqqaʿs by content, muraqqaʿs that belong exclusively to the works of a single calligrapher or painter constitute a distinct type (Raeisi 2025: 38); by contrast, the Shah Tahmasp muraqqaʿ (Istanbul University Library) contains works by 33 calligraphers and 2 painters from different periods (Raeisi 2025: 41).

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- The calligrapher used formats that are common and suitable for writing poetry, namely *chalipa* and the notebook line (*satr-e daftari*), and for variety sometimes combined the two. The use of the *nastaʿliq chalipa* format is also seen in contemporary muraqqaʿs; thus in the Shah Tahmasp muraqqaʿ there appear a *chalipa* quatrain attributed to Shah Tahmasp (Raeisi 2025: 42) and a ghazal of Hafez in *chalipa* form in the hand of Rustam Ali Shahi, dated 945 AH (Raeisi 2025: 41). In addition, by lightly writing some words in color, the calligrapher distinguished prose text from verse and prevented monotony in the lines.
- To maintain the visual balance of the lines, besides varying the spaces between letters, the calligrapher, as far as possible and on the basis of personal experience, made use of varied elongations (*keshidehs*), so that the lines are pleasing to the eye and the beginnings and ends of the lines fall on a common axis.
- The calligraphic pieces have different values relative to one another according to the quality of the script (*ʿiyār-e khatt*), such that the middle pieces show more maturity and perfection than the opening ones. Although the compilation of the muraqqaʿ took place in the period of the development of *nastaʿliq*, it nevertheless seems to relate to the calligrapher's period of peak achievement.

B. Illumination and Piece-making

- The main field of the muraqqaʿ is a rectangle measuring 49.6 × 33.5 cm, which in the usage of bookbinders is called large folio, *sultani*, or Timurid format. The leaf size of the Shah Tahmasp muraqqaʿ, kept in the Istanbul University Library, is likewise reported as 47.6 × 34 cm (Raeisi 2025: 41), and in this respect is comparable to the format of the present muraqqaʿ. The placement of the text frames is consistent with the page-design traditions of the Timurid and Safavid periods, which are related to golden, sacred, or spiritual proportions.
- Symmetry (*ham-ārāstegi*) is among the aesthetic components, and the main body, of Islamic art (Abbas and Salman 2004: 10); in the muraqqaʿ in question it can be observed in various forms. The facing of the spandrels (*lachak*) in the illuminations is symmetrical. Only the colophon page differs from the rest of the muraqqaʿ, and the muraqqaʿ-maker has distinguished it from the other pages in illumination and piece arrangement, whether for emphasis or for innovation (Fig. 4).
- Since most of the pieces in this collection are in the ten-line *chalipa* format, the muraqqaʿ-maker, while preserving the wholeness of the muraqqaʿ, changed the arrangement of pieces on several pages in order to create an alternating rhythm. After repeated *chalipa* formats he places a page of notebook lines, or begins the opening of the muraqqaʿ with a four-piece notebook arrangement (*chahār-pāra*) (Fig. 5). In addition, he used vertical and horizontal formats together to vary the visual rhythm of the collection.
- To maintain visual harmony among the pages, gold-sprinkled paper was used for the frame (border) of all the pieces; this establishes harmony with the ground color, the pen-work of some of the headpieces (*sarlowh*) of the notebook pieces, and the illumination of the pages. The decoration of leaf borders in the *ebri* (cloud) and gold-sprinkled manner is also seen in the Shah Tahmasp muraqqaʿ (Raeisi 2025: 41).
- The use of limited colors in the illumination, despite the colorfulness of the works of this age and the influence of the Herat school on Tabriz, is another aesthetic component employed in the crafts of illumination and *tashʿir*. In order to avoid mere imitation of nature, to join the spiritual world, and to stress the unreal character of the space of the work, illuminators used limited colors and their meanings (Kashefi 1985: 29). In this

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muraqqaʿ too the illuminator sought, by employing adjacent and limited colors, to establish visual calm on the page so that the text would be better and more prominently displayed.

- The balance of the colors of the papers, ground, and illumination is among the important features of this muraqqaʿ. Lightness of color is a feature of this era (Gray 2006: 115). To preserve the identity of the script, the muraqqaʿ-maker used light color tones. Moreover, to make the lines stand out, where lapis lazuli or turquoise (verdigris blue) was used among the illuminations and ground ornaments in the border chain[7] as a complement to the warm colors of the ground of the lines and of the paper, he tried to reduce its extent and intensity with golden illumination and to provide visual calm for the calligraphed text (Fig. 5).
- The illuminations are chosen to match the calligraphic formats. For example, for the *chalipa* format, which is diagonal and creates two empty, triangle-like spaces at the upper right and lower left, he adorned and decorated these spaces with spandrels (*lachak*, corners). The illuminator tried as far as possible not to approach the script and not to make it vanish among heavy ornaments, since the general aim of illumination is "to recall a higher or deeper dimension of the text" (Lings 1998: 76). Hence, with small round gold markers in the empty spaces, he also gave voice to the tradition of avoiding the void (*horror vacui*) found in Iranian painting (Figs. 6 and 7).

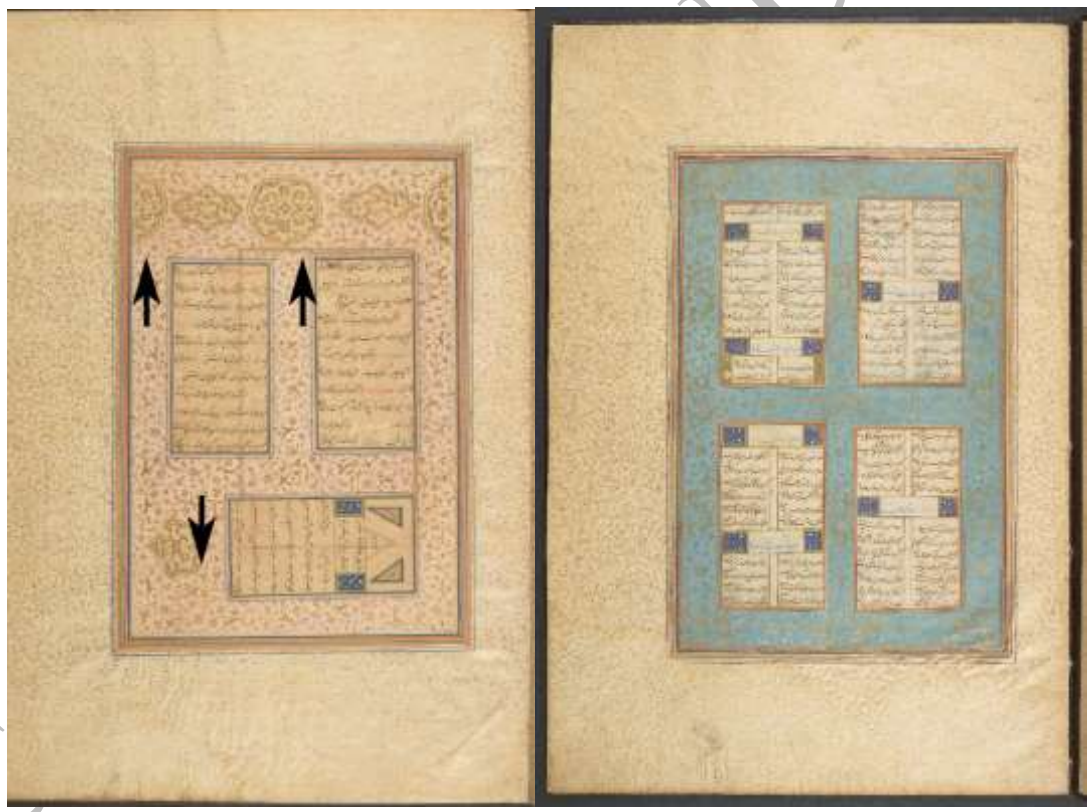


Fig. 4 (left) Sultan Ali al-Katib, colophon of the muraqqaʿ and the orientations of the arrangement of the pieces; *nastaʿliq* script on colored paper in notebook format, page 11 of the muraqqaʿ. Source: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.

Fig. 5 (right) Sultan Ali al-Katib, opening of the muraqqaʿ. Four notebook-format pieces in *nastaʿliq* script on colored paper, page 1 of the muraqqaʿ. Source: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.

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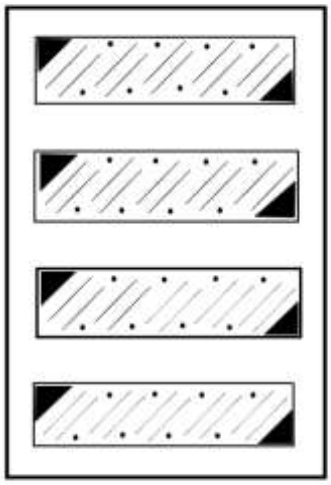


Fig. 6 (left) Sultan Ali al-Katib. Four ten-line *chalipa* pieces in *nastaʿliq* script on colored paper. Source: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.
Fig. 7 (right) Sultan Ali al-Katib, linear analysis of four ten-line *chalipa* pieces of the muraqqaʿ. Source: the author.

Table 1: Aesthetic Components of the Sultan Ali al-Katib Muraqqaʿ Based on Theoretical Foundations

Theoretical component	**Theoretical basis / aesthetic criterion**	**Manifestation in the Sultan Ali al-Katib muraqqaʿ**
Proportion and balance of composition	Golden and sacred proportions in Timurid–Safavid page design (Abbas and Salman 2004: 10)	Harmony between the dimensions of the main field of the muraqqaʿ (49.6 × 33.5 cm, *sultani*/Timurid format) and the frames of the writing
Symmetry (*ham-ārāstegi*)	The principle of *ham-ārāstegi* as the main body of Islamic art (Abbas and Salman 2004: 10)	Symmetrical facing of the spandrels in the illumination of the *chalipa* pages
Color harmony	Lightness and restraint of color in Safavid illumination (Gray 2006: 115; Kashefi 1985: 29)	Use of adjacent, limited color tones; use of lapis lazuli and turquoise beside the golden ground
Visual rhythm (cadence of arrangement)	Varied and purposeful sequence of page-design formats	Alternation of *chalipa* and *daftari* formats and the change of the piece's orientation on the final page
Visual hierarchy of script and illumination	"Recalling the deeper dimension of the text" as the aim of illumination (Lings 1998: 76)	Simple, light illumination in comparison with muraqqaʿs contemporary with Shah Tahmasp; emphasis on the legibility and prominence of the script

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6-Conclusion

In the second half of Shah Tahmasp's rule, Safavid muraqqaʿ-making flourished, and a new visual coherence took shape between calligraphy and the other crafts and techniques of book arts. The calligraphic muraqqaʿ of Sultan Ali al-Katib is among the muraqqaʿs of this era; given the arrangement of the lines on its pages, the superiority of visual beauty over the reading of the text is evident. Although this muraqqaʿ possesses aesthetic values in terms of the techniques and crafts of book arts, in comparison with its contemporaries (the era of Shah Tahmasp), which are full of complex, dazzling geometric ornaments and colorful headpieces, it is more simply and plainly illuminated, so that the importance and prominence of calligraphy over illumination is evident. In other words, calligraphy is the most important visual factor on the pages of this muraqqaʿ. Moreover, since three pages (Figs. 3, 4, and 5) of the whole muraqqaʿ differ from the other pieces in subject and content, in the ups and downs of the quality of the script, and in outward structure, it seems that the calligraphy and the illumination of the muraqqaʿ were not contemporaneous in time, and that the importance and fame of the calligrapher were more likely what led to the illumination and formation of this muraqqaʿ. The calligraphic pieces throughout the muraqqaʿ have differing values, such that the middle pieces show more maturity and perfection than the opening ones and seem to relate to the calligrapher's period of peak achievement. Hence it can be concluded that another purpose in forming this muraqqaʿ may have been to collect the calligrapher's pieces in order to preserve them or to use them for educational purposes.

By attending to the *tashʿir* and pen-work of the margins, one can see that the illuminator of the margins was the muraqqaʿ-maker himself, who, without a geometric or mathematical preliminary design, relying on the skill of his own hand, executed improvised designs of arabesque (*eslimi*) motifs and decorative ornaments with the brush; hence the assumption that this muraqqaʿ was made in the royal workshop and for the shah himself is less likely. In addition, in view of the tradition of writing prefaces for muraqqaʿs in this period, the muraqqaʿ in question has neither a preface nor a descriptive account, whereas muraqqaʿs commissioned by kings, princes, and courtiers generally had a dedicated preface (Raeisi 2025: 38); for this reason the above results gain greater strength. In fact, muraqqaʿ-making in the era of Shah Tahmasp was regarded as one of the most important ways of preserving artistic pieces and preventing their dispersal.

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Declaration of Competing Interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Data Availability

The raw data are retained by the author and are available upon request by correspondence.

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ENDNOTE

[1]Museum of Islamic Art (MIA).

[2]A letter written in the *riqāʿ* script has also been called a muraqqaʿ.

[3]This muraqqaʿ is preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, under no. 115087. At the author's request, and with the cooperation of Dr. Moneeh Shakhab Abu Dhia, images of all its pages were provided and examined; the moral rights to the images used therefore belong to this museum.

[4]Taken from the catalogue record of the muraqqaʿ in the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.

[5]Opening of the ghazal: *In che majles, che behesht, in che maqām ast injā* / *ʿOmr-e bāqi rokh-e sāqi lab-e jām ast injā* ("What an assembly, what a paradise, what a station this is here; the remainder of life is the cupbearer's face and the rim of the cup, here").

[6]In comparing the writing of Sultan Ali Mashhadi, the theoretical guidance of Master Shams al-Din Abulvafa Hosseini was also drawn upon.

[7]In the usage of muraqqaʿ-makers and manuscript decorators, the term refers to the decorative, colored border produced by the treatment of the text and the margin (Heravi 1994: 670).

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