





# Examination of the Book–Decoration Features of Yaqut Musta'simi's Manuscript Quran Preserved in the National Library of Paris

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**Received:** 7 April 2025

**Accepted:** 24 July 2025

**Published:** 22 September 2025

## Abstract

The National Library of Paris holds a valuable collection of Islamic manuscripts, particularly a significant number of manuscript Qurans, among which is a Quranic manuscript signed by Yaqut Musta'simi. Yaqut Musta'simi of Baghdad, nicknamed Qiblat al-Kuttab (the Qibla of Scribes), was a renowned calligrapher of the Ilkhanid period, famous for writing Quranic manuscripts in distinguished script. The present study seeks to answer the question: What type of script and decorations does the Quranic manuscript by Yaqut Musta'simi, preserved in the National Library of France, possess? The aim of the research is to access the execution and decorative methods in Quranic manuscripts during the Ilkhanid era (7th and 8th centuries AH). In this article, library resources and a descriptive-analytical method were used to collect information. Based on the studies conducted, it can be concluded that the use of paired and symmetrical decorative pages with arabesque and vegetal motifs, the symmetrical form of the opening pages in terms of gilding, adornment, and the execution of marginal panels, and markers separating verses in the form of six-petaled golden blossoms (gilded) at the end of each verse, form part of the decorative structure of this manuscript. On the other hand, the accompaniment of Kufic script in the inscriptions of the opening pages of the Quran with the fluid flow of Naskh script in the main text demonstrates Yaqut's artistic ability in Quranic book-decoration.

**Keywords:** Fatihah pages, Manuscript Qurans, Book-decoration, Yaqut Musta'simi.

**Citation:** Yosefiyan, E. (2025). Examination of the Book-decoration Features of Yaqut Musta'simi's Manuscript Quran Preserved in the National Library of Paris. *Zarrin Fām*, 3(4), 107-123 (in Persian).  
<https://doi.org/10.30481/museum.2025.547094.1067>

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## Introduction

After the beginning of the Islamic period in Iran, calligraphy was strengthened through the transcription of divine verses, and the position of manuscripts in the heritage of Islamic civilization flourished. The necessity of transcribing the Quran prompted artists to work in a spiritual atmosphere with firm belief and their highest ability, resulting in the rapid evolution of book production in Islamic countries (Afshar Mohajer, Vol. 1, 2015: 67). Annemarie Schimmel, a prominent Orientalist scholar, believed that Muslims began writing the Quran from the outset in a way that matched its eternal beauty (Schimmel, 2002: 12).

Historical studies have shown that the transcription and adornment of the Quran were common and valued by Muslim artists from the earliest centuries. Also, in *Al-Fihrist*, Ibn Nadim quotes Muhammad ibn Ishaq that Khalid ibn Abi Hayyaj was the first person in early Islam to transcribe the Quran in beautiful script (Kashmiri, 2024: 39). Calligraphers displayed their best art in writing the divine word and made relentless efforts to beautify the script as the carrier of heavenly speech; in such a way that the visual manifestations of the Quran were embodied in the art of calligraphy. "The art of calligraphy is one of the artistic forms whose duty is to preserve and visualize that exalted religious word" (Shahi, 2015: 76).

In other words, calligraphy in transcribing the divine word, usually accompanied by illumination, has been rich in diversity of Quranic writing methods on one hand, and its accompaniment with illumination is considered one of the foundations of book-decoration on the other. Each manuscript corresponds to a historical period and, in addition to providing information about the artists' lives, contains features of book-decoration techniques such as script arrangement and calligraphy, binding, ornamentation, and so on, which attract the attention and study of art historians and researchers. Especially the illumination of opening pages, frontispieces, verse markers, and closing pages of the Quran provide a suitable arena for analyzing and evaluating the stylistic features of Quranic book-decoration.

Based on historical reports and scholars' opinions, the art of book-decoration during the Ilkhanid period witnessed numerous changes and transformations and is recognized as an influential period in the process of manuscript decoration. Among the precious collections of ancient manuscripts, one can refer to the treasury preserved in the National Library of Paris, which, according to researchers, currently holds about 1200 valuable manuscripts, with a significant share dedicated to Quranic manuscripts. Among these manuscripts in the National Library of France, there is a manuscript signed by Yaqut Musta'simi with registration number 6716 in the Arabic manuscripts group.

Jamal al-Din Yaqut, scribe of the last Abbasid caliph al-Musta'sim, is considered one of the great calligraphers of the 7th century AH. During his time, diverse scripts were established in the Islamic world, and the beauty and firmness of Islamic scripts advanced (Hatam, 2009: 13). He transcribed numerous Quranic manuscripts and strived in the evolution and transformation of the six scripts, especially Naskh script; in such a way that the influence of Yaqut's Naskh script was very remarkable in advancing the field of transcription (Rahpeyma, 2024: 180-182).

Currently, valuable manuscripts besides those in Iran are preserved in libraries and museums of other countries worldwide, among which the manuscript section of the National Library of France holds a very valuable collection of manuscripts, especially Islamic ones, which are of great artistic and historical importance. Therefore, the necessity and importance of the research lie in the fact that studying and examining the art of book-decoration and presenting analytical and structured discussions about Quranic manuscripts is one of the essentials of Islamic art studies today. Also, issues such as the history of illumination, execution techniques, artists and their styles, structure of motifs and ornaments, etc., provide the ground for expanding accurate historical and analytical information about manuscript studies. Given that the analysis of decorative elements in this Quran in the field of page decoration during the Ilkhanid period and its influence on the formation of artistic trends in subsequent periods is worthy of discussion and reflection, the present study aims to identify and introduce Yaqut Musta'simi's Quranic manuscript while explaining its visual and aesthetic features of decorations and ornaments. Additionally, this article seeks to answer the main question: What type of script and decorations does Yaqut Musta'simi's Quranic manuscript, preserved in the National Library of France, possess, and what structure do these decorations and ornaments have? Therefore, the illumination, various ornaments, scripts used, and other features of this manuscript will be evaluated and analyzed.

## Research Methodology

The present research falls under descriptive-analytical studies. The research scope includes selected pages from Yaqut Musta'simi's Quran with registration number 6716 in the National Library of France; these pages include the opening (illuminated) pages, middle text pages, and closing pages. The research data were



extracted from library resources and images available on the Academy of Art website. In the study process, after providing a brief description of Yaqut Musta'simi's artistic life, this Quran was examined in terms of book-decoration features and decorative motifs used in it.

## Discussion

### 1. Yaqut Musta'simi's Position in Calligraphy

Jamal al-Din Yaqut, nicknamed Qiblat al-Kuttab, was trained by al-Musta'sim Billah, the last Abbasid caliph; hence he called himself Musta'simi and signed his works with this name. Yaqut Musta'simi created a new style in Naskh script known as "Yaquti Naskh" (Nafisi, 2020: 10). He practiced for a long time from Ibn Bawwab's script. What is noteworthy about this calligrapher is "his productivity and speed in writing and teaching" (Soltani, 1992: 14).

In the treatise Principles and Rules of the Six Scripts by Fathullah Sabzevari about Yaqut, it is stated: "He followed Ibn Bawwab in principles, made some modifications, created a trimmed pen, made the strokes thin, and surpassed Ibn Bawwab" (Qalichkhani, 2016: 230). Qiblat al-Kuttab "perfected the script and incorporated all its rules into one poem; that poem is: ascent and climbing, descent and sending" (Rafiei Mehrabadi, 1966: 80).

He had a great interest in transcribing the Holy Quran; as historians have said, he wrote three hundred and sixty-four Qurans. Also, numerous pieces, albums, and books from his works and handwriting are found in libraries in Iran and the world. It should be recalled that the antiquity of Naskh dates back to the early centuries of Islam's emergence and played the greatest role in transcribing the Holy Quran in historical evolution (Rahpeyma, 2024: 183). On the other hand, this script included a writing system that provided an important basis for ease in reading the Quran (Najarpour Jabari and Qorbaniyan, 2023: 147).

Yaqut's students, known as the Seven Masters, include: Mawlana Mubarak Shah Sayfi, Mubarak Shah Qutb, Mawlana Ahmad Sohrevardi, Mawlana Arghun, Mawlana Abdullah Sayrafi, and Mawlana Yahya Sufi; "each of whom perfected their own art in script and were considered celebrities of their time" (Rafiei Mehrabadi, 1966: 81). After the Mongol invasion of Baghdad, Yaqut came under the protection of Ata Malik Juvayni and remained in Baghdad until the end of his life. His death occurred in 698 AH.

### 2. Examination of Book-decoration Features of Yaqut Musta'simi's Quran Preserved in the National Library of Paris

#### 2.1. General Specifications of the Manuscript

According to experts, calligraphy, illumination, and binding are three fundamental components in the art of Quranic book-decoration, and Ilkhanid Qurans, in addition to their manuscript value, are among the most precious artistic works of the Islamic era due to their page layout and illumination features (Sarikhani et al., 2014: 8-12).

Among the Quranic manuscripts in the National Library of France, there is a manuscript dated 688 AH signed by Yaqut Musta'simi, the famous calligrapher of the late 7th century, with registration number 6716. This manuscript is written in Naskh script on Eastern paper and has 211 folios measuring 191 by 155 millimeters. Except for a few folios, the other pages consist of 16 lines in black ink. The binding and cover of the manuscript have been restored several times over the centuries. The added folios at the beginning of the manuscript, containing notes and colophons with various dates, indicate that the last Iranian owners of this work were Qajar princes.

The type and decorations of the cover of this manuscript include brown leather with toranj and half-toranj motifs, and the cover is bound and restored in the Eastern style.

The exact date of the manuscript is specified based on the calligrapher's colophon. In Yaqut Musta'simi's colophon, the first decade of Muharram 688 AH ("the first ten days of Muharram in the year eight hundred and eighty-eight") is mentioned, but no reference is made to the place of transcription and formation of the manuscript. Based on the colophon, the completion date of this work's transcription was Muharram 688 AH; that is, ten years before Yaqut's death in 698 AH.

#### 2.2. Calligraphy of Yaqut's Quran

According to manuscript experts, this work is of great importance in terms of script and calligraphy, in addition to illumination (gilding), motifs, and page layout; such that examining calligraphy is effective in evaluating the evolutions of Quranic writing. Naskh is one of the six scripts of calligraphy that has been widely used especially in Quranic transcription. Yaqut, by reforming Naskh script, established a special method in transcribing the noble manuscript; in such a way that Quran writing with Naskh flourished



despite Yaqut's efforts in beautifying the six scripts, and his transcription method continued for years (Najarpour Jabari, 2024: 148).

It should be noted that the surviving Qurans from the early centuries of Islam were in Kufic script, and the oldest Quran in a script other than various Kufic styles is the famous Chester Beatty Quran transcribed by Ali ibn Hilal, known as Ibn Bawwab, in 391 AH in Naskh script (Hasheminejad, 2022: 27). The text of Ibn Bawwab's Quran is transcribed in Naskh script; in such a way that words are written very close together, and chapter headings are transcribed in Thulth script (Khazaei, 1999: 72).

It seems that the power of Yaqut's pen in transcribing Naskh in the Quran in the National Library of Paris stems from the special proportion between letters, spacing between letters, words, and lines, to the size of letters, diacritics, and punctuation; these are among the provisions of his script and calligraphy in the page layout of the Ilkhanid manuscript.

On the other hand, the use of Kufic script in inscriptions along with decorations and motifs is also a characteristic of this work. In the inscriptions (frames), the title of the opening pages of Yaqut's Quran uses Kufic script; such that in the first inscription, with white color, the word "Fatihah al-Kitab" and the letter "B" are written in the central inscription. Also, in the oval-shaped inscription on the other side, the phrase "Sab' Ayat" is written. In another inscription on the main Fatihah page, within a rectangular frame, the name of Surah Al-Baqarah and the number of verses are written in dark lapis lazuli.

With this explanation, it can be acknowledged that previously, the visual diversity resulting from the dissimilarity of the Quran text script and inscriptions was also executed in Ibn Bawwab's manuscript; such that the chapter name, unlike the Naskh script of the text, is sometimes written in Thulth or Naskh in the inscription space, and this point itself is a tradition in Quran writing after Ibn Bawwab (Farid, 2022: 41, 43).

### 2.3. Opening Decorative Pages

The two opening pages of the manuscript (initial pages) are adorned with decorative pages. The decorative pages are paired and symmetrical, along with geometric motifs and colors of gold, blue, red, black, and green. Precise geometric divisions with complex and orderly structure, in a rectangular and vertical frame, are among the distinctive features of 7th-century AH manuscripts. It seems that the adjacency of parts of arabesque and vegetal elements with complex geometric structures forms part of the page layout framework of these manuscript pages. This method in the geometric page structure of earlier works was completed by Ilkhanid artists' illumination; such that the middle space of precise geometric divisions has reached moderation with vegetal elements (Kashmiri, 2024: 69).

In the Dar al-Kutub in Cairo, the Uljaytu Quran (713 AH) transcribed and illuminated by "Abdullah ibn Muhammad ibn Mahmud Hamadani" is preserved, whose opening pages illumination style is a more complete example of this method. In the 3rd century, the circle shape played an important role in decorative pages, and in subsequent periods (4th and 5th centuries) it evolved into a more complex and artistic style (Kashmiri, 2024: 50). In the Ilkhanid Yaqut Quran, the division and decoration of pages are based on octagonal shapes, while in the Uljaytu Quran, a six-pointed star in the center along with other hexagonal geometric adornments forms the page structure.

Unlike the design of opening pages in the 5th and 6th centuries, which were mostly based on geometric structures, decorative pages in Ilkhanid works are divided based on geometric patterns and, adjacent to arabesque elements and vegetal motifs, have become one of the distinguishing features of page decoration art. In previous periods, "peripheral frame decorations were only done with regular geometric shapes" (Kashmiri, 2024: 70), but in Yaqut's Quran, delicate vegetal decorations around the page are another outstanding feature of this Ilkhanid work. The black margin with golden flowers demonstrates the illuminator artist's mastery in executing vegetal adornments. The marginal panel of decorative pages is executed similar to the structure of Mesopotamian (Between the Rivers) flowers and abstract decorations.

### 2.4. Frontispiece (Fatihah)

Frontispiece pages, after the title page, are considered the gateway to the Quran, and artists throughout history have strived to execute them in the most beautiful manner (Najarpour Jabari, 2024: 148). In most Ilkhanid Qurans, frontispiece pages are fully illuminated and covered with various geometric, vegetal, and decorative motifs (Sarikhani et al., 2014: 13). These pages, which have the most delicate decorations and layouts, add to the work's prestige.

The 6th and 7th centuries AH are the eras of forming symmetrical Fatihah pages; a tradition that became widespread in Quran decoration from the late 8th centuries onward to today. Therefore, in the 6th and 7th centuries, numerous Qurans with symmetrical Fatihah pages and some with single Fatihah pages are



observed. "In most Qurans, the decorations of the Fatihah page and the opposite page (the page containing the first verses of Surah Al-Baqarah) are among the most elaborate and beautiful pages of the Quran, executed in pairs and symmetrically" (Kashmiri, 2024: 173). In this Quran with a single frontispiece, the first page includes the entire Surah Al-Fatihah and the beginning verses of Surah Al-Baqarah.

Unlike many single-frontispiece Qurans (like the Chester Beatty Quran), the artist in the National Library of France manuscript has also adorned the second page similar to the frontispiece with decorations and created a symmetrical form in the execution of gilding and illumination of the frontispiece pages of this manuscript. However, in terms of verse transcription, this page is different and deviates from the symmetrical form.

In the main frontispiece page of Yaqut's manuscript, although symmetrical upper and lower inscriptions are executed according to the prevalent tradition of this period, a simple inscription is also seen in the middle of the page; this inscription, in the framing method of the first four centuries Islamic manuscripts and simpler than the upper and lower page inscriptions, is executed due to the placement of the beginning of Surah Al-Baqarah in this location.

The title inscriptions (frames) in the frontispiece pages of this manuscript are horizontal and according to the method of 5th and 6th-century manuscripts (Seljuk period), executed with three-part divisions and vegetal background, containing surah information. Thus, two lateral oval inscriptions and a central circular inscription are designed.

## 2.5. Marginal Adornment (Panel)

Adornments and marginal panels in some manuscript pages' side decorations are designed in the Mesopotamian style (Between the Rivers), which are diverse in terms of ornamentation and illumination. Further, it seems that the most decorations in this Quran after chapter headings are held by the marginal panels of the pages.

## 2.6. Verse Markers

Some researchers consider the beginning and introduction of Quranic illumination as efforts to specify verse and surah boundaries (Kashmiri, 2023: 41). End-of-verse markers, aimed at determining the end of each verse, marking the end of every five verses, and displaying the end of every ten verses, are among the most important features distinguishing Quran decoration methods. "Markers initially appeared functionally, but over time, they evolved from simple and functional to more decorative, delicate, and luxurious" (Ghafourifar et al., 2022: 71). In other words, these markers have both numbering utility and aesthetic value (Rafiei, 2023: 39).

These markers in the 1st and 2nd centuries were executed by the calligrapher with a pen during Quran transcription, but afterward, decorating these markers was entrusted to the illuminator artist (Gazikinjad and Sheikhi, 2023: 17). Consequently, with the expansion of page decoration actions, simple and undecorated markers that displayed verse ends gradually became more adorned. In such a way that in this Yaqut manuscript, like all Quranic manuscripts of this era, end markers for adorning verses and surahs and specifying their boundaries are placed beside lines for every five and ten verses; and separation markers are executed in the form of six-petaled golden blossoms with black outlining and lapis lazuli center.

## 2.7. Closing Page (Colophon)

The colophon (closing page) is the final part of the book where the scribe wrote information related to the manuscript's formation, called the colophon. Colophon writing became a widespread tradition in the 5th and 6th centuries AH, forming the end part of the final page in a rectangular shape (Kashmiri, 2024: 66).

The colophon writing method in the Ilkhanid period continued the style of previous periods, and the colophon text, with or without framing, was transcribed in rectangular forms and sometimes adorned with compatible decorations and coloring. In this Yaqut work, the colophon lacks framing, transcribed in a rectangular form in four lines, which at the end has gained a striking appearance with a beautiful and elaborate toranj. Among framed colophon writing examples where the scribe, Ibn Bawwab, mentioned his illumination, one can refer to the Chester Beatty Quran, which according to the colophon was transcribed and illuminated in 391 AH. Also, in the closing page (colophon) of Yaqut's Quran, the last page of this work, which includes the frame (inscription) of Surah An-Nas without internal divisions, has decorations different from other pages.

The title frame of the last surah in Yaqut's manuscript is an adorned inscription with marginal adornment, coloring, and beautiful processing that well displays the creativity and delicacy of the artist of that period.



The title frame of Surah An-Nas, which includes the phrase "Sadaqa Allah...", is designed symmetrically. Despite the difference in length and height of the two phrases written in these frames, the artist has created a symmetrical form by observing color schemes and adornments, and paying attention to the overall division shape of the inscription and the vegetal decorations used (Word count for Discussion: 752).

## Conclusion

Yaqut Musta'simi's noble manuscript in the treasury of the National Library of France is of great importance in terms of illumination, Quran decoration method, and values of script and calligraphy, and examining the transcription and ornaments of this work provides access to the characteristics of decorations and scripts used in Quran transcription during the Ilkhanid era. Despite the lack of access to the original manuscript, the illuminated opening pages, middle text pages, and closing pages available on the Academy of Art website were examined. Also, this research, through analysis and comparison with works from other centuries, revealed the execution methods and decorations in Quranic manuscripts during the Ilkhanid era and its historical position in the context of book-decoration evolutions, which ultimately led to the following results:

Among the provisions of Yaqut's art of script and calligraphy in the page layout of this manuscript is its transcription with Naskh script; a script other than Kufic types that were used in Quran transcription in the early centuries AH. In addition to the Naskh script of the text, the use of Kufic script in the title inscriptions of opening pages is also seen, which has added to the visual appeal of the pages.

A noteworthy feature of the decorative pages of this manuscript is the division and arrangement based on octagonal shapes along with arabesque and vegetal motifs, which have been executed more complexly and artistically compared to previous periods. In addition, the peripheral marginal frame of these pages is adorned with delicate vegetal decorations; whereas in previous centuries, geometric shapes were mostly used for decoration. In this Quran with single frontispiece pages, the artist has adorned the second page similar to the frontispiece and created a symmetrical form in the execution of gilding and illumination of the frontispiece pages.

In this Yaqut work, the initial and simple separation markers of verses in the early centuries have given way to six-petaled golden blossoms at the end of each verse. The execution of adornments and marginal panels similar to Mesopotamian (Between the Rivers) motifs also forms part of the book-decoration art structure of this manuscript. The colophon text is transcribed without framing, and its rectangular shape is decorated with a beautiful toranj.

In conclusion, it is worthy to recall that examining the structure and methods of calligraphy and illumination of manuscripts existing in museums and treasuries worldwide provides a suitable platform for introducing the rich history of book-decoration art in Iran. It is hoped that searching for similar examples and analyzing them can be influential in presenting efficient and innovative patterns in contemporary book-decoration art.