

## Mishkín Qalam

Mírzá Husayn, known as Mishkín Qalam (Musk-Scented Pen), was a renowned Persian calligrapher, painter and poet. He was the son of Fátimih and Hájí Muḥammad 'Alíy-i-Iṣfahání, who were born of merchant families originally from Shíráz, Iran. Born in Iṣfahán, Iran, in 1241 or 1242 AH [1826 A.D.], Mishkín Qalam passed away on 25 Dhu'l-Hijjih 1330 AH [6 December 1912] in 'Akká.

Little information is available about the childhood of Mishkín Qalam, but it is known that he received his primary education in Iṣfahán, and that from his childhood he showed a great deal of interest in different styles of calligraphy and painting. Mishkín Qalam married, in Iṣfahán, Ághá Bigum who gave birth to a daughter, Sháh Bigum, and a son, Mírzá 'Alí-Akbar.

When Mishkín Qalam was about twenty-five years old, his father passed away during a business trip to Tihrán. Mi shkín Qalam hastened to Tihrán to attend to his father's affairs. While there, Mishkín Qalam visited a friend who was a shopkeeper. As he sat in the friend's shop, the Grand Vizir passed by. A skilled artist even in his youth, Mishkín Qalam was inspired to sketch a portrait of the Vizir with the mere impression of his finger nail on paper, a technique which he had perfected. He presented the portrait to the shopkeeper and left. Later, when the Vizir passed by once again, the shopkeeper showed him the portrait Mishkín Qalam had created. The Vizir was delighted and insisted on meeting such a brilliant artist. The shopkeeper with great difficulty located Mishkín Qalam and arranged the meeting. The Vizir invited Mishkín Qalam to the royal court to be presented to Násirí'd-Dín Sháh, the ruler of Iran. The Sháh, recognizing the extraordinary talent of the young artist, gave him the title of "Mishkín Qalam" and appointed him as a tutor to his Crown Prince who was in Tabríz.

Mishkín Qalam lived in Tabríz for several years as a teacher of the Crown Prince and other members of the royal family. During those years he made

a trip to Iṣfahán to visit his family. On the way back to Tihrán, he met a certain Bahá'í by the name of Siyyid Mihdí who told him about the Bahá'í Faith. The impact of this meeting on Mishkín Qalam was so great that, without informing the court or his family, he decided to visit Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, who was residing in Adrianople (Edirne) at the time.

En route to Adrianople Mishkín Qalam stopped at Aleppo where he was hired by Jawdat Páshá, the governor of that city, as a tutor for his children. While he was in Aleppo, Nabil Zarandí, the great Bahá'í teacher and historian of the Bahá'í Faith, arrived in the city. He met Mishkín Qalam and brought him to a full recognition of the station of Bahá'u'lláh, Prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith.

Mishkín Qalam then travelled to Adrianople, where he attained the presence of Bahá'u'lláh and became one of his scribes. At this time the use of the invocation "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá" (O, Thou glory of the Most Glorious) became prevalent among the Bahá'í. Mishkín Qalam, deeply moved by the implications of that invocation known as the Greatest Name, arranged it in the beautiful form in which it is generally represented today.

Mishkín Qalam later settled in Constantinople (Istanbul) where he came into contact, through his art, with many distinguished Persians and Turks. His stay there, however, was brief. As a result of the machinations of the enemies of the Bahá'í Faith he was arrested and sent to Gallipoli. Together with some other Bahá'ís, he arrived there on 16 August 1868. Bahá'u'lláh and his companions arrived a day later on their way to exile in 'Akká, Palestine. Shortly afterwards Mishkín Qalam and the other prisoners who were brought from Constantinople were put on board ship with Bahá'u'lláh and His companions bound for 'Akká. On arrival in Haifa, however, Mishkín Qalam and three other Bahá'ís were sent to Cyprus while Bahá'u'lláh and most of his followers were taken to 'Akká. From 1868 to 1877 Mishkín Qalam was in exile in Famagusta, Cyprus. When Cyprus came under British rule the Ottoman prisoners were set free. In 1886 Mishkín Qalam was finally able to go to 'Akká and join the entourage of Bahá'u'lláh.

During his years in 'Akká Mishkín Qalam devoted himself to transcribing the Bahá'í writings and to creating magnificent works of art. He produced many calligraphic copies of Bahá'í writings, including two volumes of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, which he completed in 1892 and had printed in Bombay. A copy of Bahá'u'lláh's *Hidden Words* in the handwriting of Mishkín Qalam was published recently (1983) in Germany.

After the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, Mishkín Qalam continued to render devoted services to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's son and His appointed successor as the leader of the Bahá'í community. In 1893 he transcribed 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Treatise on Politics*, which was published in Bombay the same year.

In 1905 Mishkín Qalam was directed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to go to India to assist with Bahá'í publications. He continued his services there until he fell ill and, at the invitation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, returned to the Holy Land where he resided until the end of his life. One of his last services was to design the calligraphic inscriptions carved on the sarcophagus presented by the Bahá'ís of Burma to hold the remains of the Báb, founder of the Bábí Faith.

Not only was Mishkín Qalam a distinguished calligrapher and artist, he also composed poetry. Yet his enduring fame is due to his penmanship, which is characterized by elegance in a wide range of different styles of Persian and Arabic scripts. Bahá'í historians have described Mishkín Qalam as a pleasant man with a keen sense of humor who was always ready to offer a witty response in conversation.

A full study and thorough evaluation of the work of Mishkín Qalam remains to be undertaken by experts. But without doubt, Mishkín Qalam's most outstanding contribution is that he was the first Bahá'í artist to have used the art of calligraphy and painting to express profoundly his religious convictions and mystical experiences. The concept of combining epigraph and images in a figural calligraphy was well established in Islamic culture,

but Mishkín Qalam's main source of inspiration was the Bahá'í writings. Bird imagery, which appears so frequently in Mishkín Qalam's calligraphic renderings, is a powerful expression of the theme of the "Nightingale of Paradise" or the "Cockerel of the Throne" announcing the dawn of the new Faith and the bringing of a heavenly message to the mortal world.

Besides his transcriptions of the Bahá'í writings, Mishkín Qalam produced scores of calligraphic renderings of verses from the Bahá'í texts, and of invocations such as "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá," "Yá 'Alíu'l-A'lá," (O, Thou Exalted, the Most Exalted) and "Yá 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (O, 'Abdu'l-Bahá) in various sizes and designs of exquisite beauty, proportion, and originality. Mishkín Qalam had mastered the traditional styles of calligraphy such as Nast'liq, Naskh, and Shikastih, in addition to his own unique "bird script," and he often incorporated several styles in one piece. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of examples of his artistry are preserved in Bahá'í archives or displayed in Bahá'í Centers or Holy Places or in the homes of some Bahá'ís around the world. Some pieces even are in prominent museums such as Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University.

Mishkín Qalam usually signed his works as "Servant at the gate of Bahá', Mishkín Qalam." The story of this signature dates back to his days in Aleppo. When he had finished one of his pieces, he asked Nabíl to write a verse to be put on the work. Nabíl inscribed the following verse:

Dar diyár-i khatt shah-i sáhib 'alam,  
Bandy-i báb-i Bahá, Mishkín Qalam.

[In the realm of calligraphy  
the King who possesses the Banner  
is the Servant at the gate of Bahá',  
Mishkín Qalam.]

Or in Marzieh Gail's translation,

"Lord of calligraphy, my banner goes before;  
But to Bahá'u'lláh, a bondsman at the door,  
Naught else am I,  
Mishkín Qalam"<sup>2</sup>

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1. Dr. Mehrdad Meshkin as well as the late Gol Aidun report the year of Mishkín Qalam's birth as 1810.

2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*, English translation by Marzieh Gail, p. 99n.