Abū Ṭayyib al-Washshāʾ and the Poetics of Inscribed Objects

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In *Kitāb al-Muwashshā*, a unique work on good manners and high-culture etiquette, al-Washshāʾ (ca. 255–325/869–937) recorded the practices of a group of courtiers and other members of the elite in Abbasid society known as the *ẓurafāʾ* ("the refined ones"). This group conducted itself according to a strict etiquette (*ẓarf*) governing dress, posture, speech, and even smell. One of the most interesting practices associated with the *ẓurafāʾ* is their inscribing of poetry on a variety of objects, from garments, rings, musical instruments, and wine vessels to apples and citron, even on their bodies. This paper examines the practice of inscribing poetry on objects as a unique way of "performing" poetry. In this "refined" practice, poetry was not recited aloud, but rather given a voice by virtue of its physical display in space.

Kitāb al-Muwashshā (The Book of Brocade), also known as *al-Ẓarf wa-l-ẓurafāʾ* (On Refinement and Refined People), is a fascinating handbook on good manners and court etiquette written by the Baghdadi litterateur and grammarian Abū Ṭayyib al-Washshāʾ (255–325/869–937).[1] In his *Muwashshā*, al-Washshāʾ recorded practices of a group of courtiers and other members of the elite of his time, known as the *ẓurafāʾ* (the "refined ones," or the "elegants").[2] The *ẓurafāʾ* (sg. *ẓarīf*) included members of the Abbasid royal family, secretaries (*kuttāb*), scholars (including religious scholars), and musicians, men and women, free and enslaved.[3] They conducted themselves according to a strict etiquette, known as *ẓarf*, that governed their dress, posture, speech, and even smell. This etiquette provided members of the emerging urban elite with a way to distinguish themselves from the rest of society, and helped create an elite class that was based not on genealogy or wealth but on mastery of a cultural repertoire. Although the court seems to have been a center for *ẓurafāʾ*, *ẓarf* etiquette was not practiced only there; rather, it became a model with which many of the urban population wished to be associated. Since the Abbasid court became an example for emerging

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1. On al-Washshāʾ, see L. A. Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1971), 13–14. The *Muwashshā* appeared in several editions, notably *Kitāb al-Muwashshā*, ed. R. E. Brünnow (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1886); *Kitāb al-Muwashshā aw al-Ẓarf wa-l-ẓurafāʾ*, ed. K. Muṣṭafā (Miṣr: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1953); *al-Muwashshā aw al-Ẓarf wa-l-ẓurafāʾ* (Beirut: Dār Ṣadr, 1965); *al-Ẓarf wa-l-ẓurafāʾ,* ed. F. Saʿd (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1985). Henceforth I provide references for Leiden 1886 and Beirut 1965. Translations of *al-Muwashshā* are available in French (partial), German, and Spanish. See *Le livre de brocart, ou, La société raffinée de Bagdad au Xe siècle*, tr. S. Bouhlal (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); *Das Buch des buntbestickten Kleides*, tr. D. Bellmann, 3 vols. (Leipzig: G. Kiepenheuer, 1984); *El libro del brocado*, tr. T. Garulo (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1990).

2. On the *ẓurafāʾ*, see M. F. Ghazi, "Un groupe social: Les raffinés (*ẓurafāʾ*)," *Studia Islamica* 11 (1959): 39–71; Z. Szombathy, "On Wit and Elegance: The Arabic Concept of *Ẓarf*," in *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam*, ed B. Michalak-Pikulska and A. Pikulski (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 101–20.

3. Mohammed Ghazi traces the *ẓarf* of ninth- and tenth-century Baghdad back to earlier influences of the eighth-century *ẓurafāʾ* from Medina, as well as to the etiquette of the Sasanian court. Byzantine models should also be taken into consideration among early influences. See Ghazi, "Un groupe social," 40–44.

dynasties throughout the Islamic world, from Samarqand to Aleppo to al-Andalus, *ẓarf* etiquette was replicated and practiced over a large region and a long period of time.

Many of the obligations of conduct that the *ẓurafāʾ* took upon themselves were related to communication and speech. They were expected to be eloquent and witty. Special value was accorded to the ability to express oneself in poetry, and to retort in verse to a challenge by a fellow *ẓarīf*. Some of these retorts would have been improvised, others prepared in advance.

This essay is dedicated to one of the most intriguing ways in which *ẓurafāʾ* used refined speech for self-expression and communication: they would inscribe maxims of wisdom and verses of poetry on a variety of mundane objects that they would either use themselves or present as gifts to fellow *ẓurafāʾ*. We find records of such inscriptions on garments (sleeves, hats, handkerchiefs, sandals, and shoes), fruits (apples, citrons, and watermelons), tools and instruments (drinking cups, writing and musical instruments), and buildings (doors, porches, or walls). *Ẓurafāʾ* also inscribed verses of poetry on their own bodies (notably on cheeks and forehead, but also on the heels of their feet). We learn about this practice primarily from contemporary literary works that record such inscriptions as examples of refined speech, at times providing background information about the context in which these inscribed objects were used. Although *Kitāb al-Muwashshā* is not the only source that provides evidence of this practice, the number of examples it documents is without parallel among other contemporary sources.

I propose to investigate this practice of inscribing poetry on objects as a unique way of "performing" poetry. In this "refined" practice, poetry was not recited aloud or read in private from a book, but instead was given voice by virtue of its physical display in space. I would like to argue that this is a third, unique way of experiencing poetry that is very different from the aforementioned more common ways of "consuming" poetry, namely, recitation and silent reading on one's own. I wish to examine the intricate ways in which poems interact with the objects on which they are inscribed and the situations in which they are displayed. The practice is intriguing both for its implication for understanding *ẓarf* culture of the ninth and tenth centuries and for its implications regarding the way poetry is experienced in this unusual medium.

My discussion will target the following questions: How does "experiencing" poetry through the medium of inscribed objects differ from experiencing it through recitation or reading? How do the verse, object, context, poet, and owner of the object interact? What effect does the object have on the interpretation of the verse and vice versa? How does the context in which the object is displayed contribute to the reading of the verse? In which contexts and for what functions were inscribed objects used? Lastly, why is this practice so fitting to *ẓarf* etiquette? I will address these questions through a close reading of reports of inscribed objects, mostly recorded by al-Washshāʾ in his *Muwashshā*. The case studies chosen for this analysis reflect a wide range of objects—some perishable, like apples, others enduring, like buildings; some intended for private use, others made for public display.

Many of the poems that will be presented here address the theme of love and are part of the genre of courtly love poetry (*shiʿr al-ghazal al-raqīq*). In this genre, a vulnerable lover-poet depicts himself in a state of weakness, fragility, and humiliation. The beloved often ignores him or treats him with pride and dismissiveness. The poet spends his days and nights wishing for a (re)union that likely will never happen.[4]

4. See J. ʿAbd al-Ghānī, "Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi wa-shiʿr al-ghazal al-raqīq," *al-Karmil: Abḥāth fī l-lugha wa-l-adab* 30 (2009): 11–31. See also T. Bauer, *Liebe und Liebesdichtung in der arabischen Welt des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts: Eine Literatur- und Mentalitätsgeschichtliche Studie des arabischen Ġazal* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998).

RING STONES

Among the most intriguing objects *ẓurafāʾ* would inscribe upon were ring stones. Al-Washshāʾ recorded a large number of such inscriptions that he either saw himself or heard about from a third party. These inscriptions were usually very short maxims, dictated by the confining medium of a ring stone,[5] but al-Washshāʾ also included a few examples of verses of poetry. Among them is a fascinating "public fight" between two lovers, who conducted their spat by exchanging defamatory verses about each other inscribed on their ring stones. The two were Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Malik al-Zayyāt, the Abbasid litterateur and vizier, and an unidentified female slave singer. Al-Washshāʾ recounted that at some point al-Zayyāt began to ignore and avoid his lover. The angry singer decided to berate him in public by attacking him in a verse she inscribed on her ring stone. Al-Zayyāt was informed and responded with a verse of his own, inscribing it on his signet ring (*khātam*). When the singer heard about his response she retorted with a new verse, and thus began a series of retorts by the two ex-lovers. The entire exchange was later recorded by al-Zayyāt in a poem he transmitted in a more traditional fashion, recording it, luckily for us, on paper:

كَتَبَتْ عَلَى فَصٍّ لِخاتِمِها   مَنْ مَلَّ مِنْ أَحْبابِهِ رَقَدا
فَكَتَبْتُ فِي فَصِّي لِيَبْلُغَها: مَنْ نامَ لَمْ يَشْعُرْ بِمَنْ سَهِدا
فَمَحَتْهُ وَاكْتَتَبَتْ لِيَبْلُغَنِي: مَا نامَ مَنْ يَهْوَى وَلا هَجَدا
فَمَحَوْتُهُ ثُمَّ اكْتَتَبْتُ: أَنا   وَاللّٰهِ أَوَّلُ مَيِّتٍ كَمَدا
قالَتْ: يُعارِضُنِي بِخاتَمِهِ   وَاللّٰهِ لا كَلَّمْتُهُ أَبَدا

She wrote on her ring stone:
"Whoever becomes uninterested in his beloved one is dormant!"
Then I wrote on my ring stone, expecting it to reach her:
"Whoever sleeps does not notice the sleepless ones!"
Then she erased it and wrote on it, expecting it to reach me:
"Whoever loves neither sleeps nor dozes!"
Then I erased that, and wrote: "I,
by God, will be the first to die from heartbreak!"
She said: "He who confronts me with his ring,
by God, I will never speak to him again!"[6]

The interaction in the anecdote is telling. None of this verbal exchange is conducted in the actual presence of the other. The choice of rings as the medium for this exchange agrees

5. For a comparison of similar short maxim inscriptions written on gems or rings with extant artifacts, see L. Kalus and F. Soudan, "Les sceaux dévoilent leurs propriétaires: "soufi raffiné," "homme de résolution" ou "homme de passion"? *L'adab* au service de la sigillographie. Extraits du *Kitāb Al-Muwaššā* d'al-Waššāʾ," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* n.s. 2 (2007): 157–80.

6. Ed. Leiden 1886, 165; ed. Beirut 1965, 248. This poem was ascribed to Abū Nuwās, which is probably false, by Jaʿfar ibn Aḥmad al-Sarrāj (*Maṣāriʿ al-ʿushshāq*, ed. M. Ḥ. Ismāʿīl and A. R. Shaḥḥāta [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998], 342) and to al-Zayyāt by Ibn Dāwūd al-Iṣfahānī (*Kitāb al-Zahra*, ed. I. al-Sāmarrāʾī [al-Zarqāʾ: Maktabat al-Manār, 1985], 390).

well with the *ẓarf* etiquette. Because of their small size, rings are not the ideal medium for displaying text, especially poetry, and few people would expect it. As a result, these verses would probably go unnoticed by most people. But for the *ẓarīf* this is exactly what makes the ring such a splendid medium. The sharp observer—a fellow *ẓarīf*—would, unlike most people, pick that up. After noticing the inscription and struggling to decipher the small script, the *ẓarīf* faces another challenge: he or she must figure out what the context is to which the poem refers. Thus, the *ẓarīf* must be au courant with the latest gossip about one's fellow *ẓurafāʾ*. Lastly, the very limited inscription space on a ring was a constraint that made it extremely challenging for the writer, who had to express him or herself extremely succinctly.[7]

Since al-Zayyāt recorded the entire exchange, we also learn about the techniques used: after an initial verse, each participant in the exchange responds, using elements from the opponent's previous verse. Here the slave girl set the tone with the format of conditional sentences. She initiated the exchange and she was also the one who concluded it, ending her last verse with the word "never" (*abadan*). She also established the theme of sleep and sleeplessness in the exchange, scolding al-Zayyāt for being a bad lover (who sleeps, unlike a real lover, awake all night). Sleeplessness is, of course, an essential part of love, and being in love was a necessary requirement for being a true *ẓarīf*. By accusing al-Zayyāt of sleeping, and clearly not a true lover, she also implied that he was not a true *ẓarīf*. If we can trust al-Zayyāt to have recorded the exchange verbatim, it follows that the poetic meter—*al-kāmil*—was also set from the first verse.[8]

GARMENTS

Shoes, belts, scarfs, hats, shirts, and cloaks were among the most popular objects to be inscribed by *ẓurafāʾ*. Many of these inscriptions were woven into the fabric in decorative bands on the sleeves and the hems, in what came to be known as *ṭirāz* (embroidery).[9] Such decorative fabrics can be seen in miniatures in luxurious manuscripts, especially from the thirteenth century onward.[10] From the inscriptions of poetry recorded by al-Washshāʾ and other contemporary writers we learn that courtiers used their clothes to make statements about themselves in clever and often subtle ways.

The following inscription recorded by al-Washshāʾ is an example of such a personal statement, in which the (unidentified) *ẓarīf* relies on his fellow *ẓurafāʾ*'s acquaintance with Arabic poetry. The two verses were allegedly inscribed on his silk cloak:

7. Writing on a ring stone, which was often used as a medium for statements about oneself, was actually widespread beyond *ẓarf* culture. The Prophet himself is reported to have inscribed his signet ring with the words *Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*, and various caliphs are said to have inscribed their signet rings with different phrases, usually expressing their submission to God. See Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf fī l-aḥādīth wa-l-āthār*, ed. K. Y. al-Ḥūt (Beirut: Dār al-Tāj, 1989), 5: 190; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, ed. ʿA.-Q. and M. Arnāʾūṭ (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1986), 1: 336. Ibn Abī Uṣaybiʿa, quoting Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq (*ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ*, ed. N. Riḍā [Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayā, 1965], 49), reported that Hippocrates had inscribed on his ring stone, "I prefer the sick one who desires (*yashtahī*) to the healthy one who does not" (probably referring to the two main "desires": appetite and sex; my thanks to the *JAOS* reviewer for pointing this out).

8. Of course, it is possible that al-Zayyāt modified the exchange to fit the meter of his own poem.

9. On *ṭirāz* and the institution by that name, see Y. K. and N. A. Stillman, *Arab Dress: A Short History. From the Dawn of Islam to Modern Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 40–41, 120ff.

10. For a well-known example, see al-Wāsiṭī's illuminated manuscript of al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt* (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms arabe 5847).

وَهَبَّتْ شِمالٌ آخِرَ اللَّيْلِ قَرَّةٌ   وَلا ثَوْبَ إلاَّ بُرْدُها وَرِدائِيا
فَما زالَ ثَوْبِي طَيِّبًا مِنْ نَسِيمِها   إلى الْحَوْلِ حَتَّى أَنْهَجَ الثَّوْبُ بالِيا

A cold northern wind was blowing toward the end of the night.
We had no clothes except for her cloak and my robe.
My garment preserved the fragrance of her breeze[11]
until a year later, when it was worn out.[12]

The two verses depict two lovers, naked, covered only by their outer robes, in the late, cold hours of the night. Inscribing these verses specifically on the *ẓarīf*'s cloak invites a comparison between the cloak in the poem and the one it is inscribed on, and perhaps, by extension, between the lover in the poem and the *ẓarīf* wearing the cloak.

The verses evoke the pleasant fragrance the mysterious woman left—both in the cloak in the poem and, by extension, the actual embroidered garment—appealing to our sense of smell. The erotic situation in the verses projects itself onto physical reality. But there is more: The well-educated *ẓarīf* of the time would have probably recognized the two verses as taken from the famous *yāʾiyya* of the *mukhaḍram* poet Suḥaym ʿAbd Banī l-Ḥasḥās. Suḥaym is known for his love poetry, which included bold and graphic descriptions of nightly adventures with female partners. In this famous *qaṣīda*, Suḥaym, a slave of the Banū l-Ḥasḥās, boasts about his seduction of his master's daughter, ʿUmayra, and describes their night tryst.[13] According to the historical anecdotes (*akhbār*), the poem, which was not the first in which Suḥaym recounted such adventures and amorous explorations with the women of his tribe, cost Suḥaym his life at the hand of his tribesmen.[14] Notwithstanding the (unappreciated) reception of his work by his tribesmen, the history of Arabic poetry preserved a place of honor for Suḥaym as one of the *aghribat al-ʿarab* (Ravens of the Arabs), a group of highly respected poets of black slave origin, as an important innovator of Arabic love poetry, and as one of the very early examples of composers of licentious and obscene poetry.[15]

The inscribed cloak provides an interesting "performance" of Suḥaym's *qaṣīda*. It is a public one, without a voiced recitation or even the entire physical text in written form. The "cloak" tells Suḥaym's story and its silent "recitation" occurs when the *ẓarīf* wears it for fellow *ẓurafāʾ* to see and recognize the verses. Although only two verses are visible, for the well-versed *ẓarīf-adīb* they evoke the entire *qaṣīda*. The two verses become a "hyper-link" to the entire poem and summon its imagery, as well as the anecdotes surrounding it.

11. Ed. Beirut 1965, 225; some later sources—Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-nisāʾ*, ed. Ī. Karīm (Beirut: Dār al-Nadīm, 1991), 1, 81; idem, *al-Muntaẓam* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1939), 5: 142; Dāʾud al-Anṭāqī, *Tazyīn al-aswāq bi-tafṣīl ashwāq al-ʿushshāq*, ed. M. al-Tūnjī (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1993), 2: 13—use *nasīmihā* instead of *thiyābihā*, which is recorded in ed. Leiden 1886, 169, and the editions of Muṣṭafā (p. 221) and Saʿd (p. 320). The meaning is not changed significantly, but *nasīmihā*, which is probably a later "corruption" of the original, is perhaps more poetic.

12. Ed. Leiden 1886, 169; ed. Beirut 1965, 255.

13. For the full poem, see Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Marzūqī, *Āmālī al-Marzūqī*, ed. Y. Jubūrī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1995), 389–99.

14. For a biography of Suḥaym, including the accounts of his alleged tragic end, see Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, ed. ʿA. Muhannā and S. Jābir (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr li l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr), 22: 305ff.

15. See A. Arazi, "Suḥaym," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004), 9: 776–77.

By inscribing the famous verses from Suḥaym's poem, the *ẓarīf* connected his own cloak with that of Suḥaym, and by extension, the cloak transferred to the *ẓarīf* Suḥaym's reputation as a scandalous, innovative, witty poet who had his way with women, and was fearless and willing to risk his own life for the things he cherished most, namely, women and poetry.

Another garment inscribed to interact with a *ẓarīf*'s surroundings is found in an anecdote recorded by al-Washshāʾ from the Baghdadi poet ʿAlī b. al-Jahm (d. 249/863). Ibn al-Jahm recounted that while he was attending a congregation of one of the *ẓurafāʾ*, a slave girl "as beautiful as a statue" appeared, wearing a headscarf (*ʿiṣāba*), whose two ends, inscribed with the following verses, hung on her chest:

مَنْ يَكُنْ صَبًّا وَفِيًّا   فَزِمامي في يَدَيْه
خُذْ مَلِيكِي بِعِناني   لا أُنازِعْكَ عَلَيْه

A loyal and ardent lover
shall have my bridle in his hands.
Take my rein, O master,
I will not resist! [16]

Upon seeing the verses Ibn Jahm jumped up and grabbed the two ends of the scarf, saying, "By God, I am an ardent lover and the most loyal one among God's creation!" To this, she replied, "A rider must have a whip!" Upon hearing this, Ibn Jahm called out, "Servant (*ghulām*), bring me a whip!" But the slave girl added immediately, "How preposterous! This is a whip for beasts! A whip [suitable] for the likes of me should be made of silver and its grip wrapped in a golden thong!" Of course, Ibn al-Jahm had "misread" the situation. The slave girl was only flirting with her audience. The verses she inscribed on her scarf, which rested on her bosom and contained the reference to her "reins" and the invitation to grab them, misled the men in front of her to understand that they could have her, provided they were true lovers.

Grabbing the two ends of the garment entails physically grabbing the verses of invitation. For a moment, the border between the poetic realm and reality is blurred, but the slave girl, recognizing her admirer's excitement, quickly brought Ibn al-Jahm down to earth; she remained in the discourse of the poetic realm, building on the metaphor of the rider (*fāris*) holding the reins of a horse, rejecting him by implying that he did not fully grasp the subtle meanings of the verses. She spurned Ibn al-Jahm without spoiling the poetic game.

This anecdote is an excellent example of the interaction between poetry and objects in context. By itself, the verse is almost a banal expression of the most common topoi of love: the beloved wishes only for someone who would love and be loyal to her. But when displayed in the context described, the verse receives a new meaning and is interpreted differently than it would have been outside of that context. The game the slave girl is playing with her male audience is not just a game of literary topoi about love and loyalty. As Gadi Algazi and Rina Drory have argued, the main purpose in the courtly games of love was practicing restraint at the court in a controlled training ground. [17]

Inscriptions on garments allow for communication between lovers, including those who normally would not be able to communicate with each other. In another anecdote al-Washshāʾ

16. Ed. Leiden 1886, 171; ed. Beirut 1965, 258.

17. On the role of the game of love as a controlled training ground for the courtier, see G. Algazi and R. Drory, "L'amour à la cour des Abbassides: Un code de compétence sociale," *Annales* 55.6 (2000): 1255–82.

recorded an inscription in which a female courtier addressed her lover by inscribing the following verse on her waistband:

أَلَيْسَ عَجِيبًا أَنَّ بَيْتًا يَضُمُّنِي   وَإِيّاكَ لا نَخْلُو وَلا نَتَكَلَّمُ

Isn't it strange that a house unites me
and you, [and yet] we are never alone or talk [to each other]?[18]

By inscribing the verse on her waistband, the woman is able to address her beloved, with whom she cannot be alone or talk to directly, by taking advantage of their sharing the same physical space at court; this allows her to play the game of love with her beloved without actually addressing him, which could put the two in danger. This verse speaks for her. By using the double meaning of the word *bayt* ('house', 'verse') the lines suggest two possible readings. In the first, the woman complains that although the two of them inhabit the same space, they will never be able to form a more intimate relationship. In the second reading, the two can unite only in the poetic sphere, in the verse, never in real life. The waistband that connects the two parts of the woman's garment might further emphasize that the verse is a point of encounter of the two lovers. Since the woman is addressing a lover she has never been alone with, it is very possible that her beloved is unaware of her love for him. In that case, the inscription and its display in public might attract the attention of other men, all wondering whether the verse might be addressing them.

The verse was taken from a poem of four verses by Abū Tammām:

يُتَرْجِمُ طَرْفِي عَنْ لِسانِي بِسِرِّهِ   فَيُظْهِرُ مِنْ وَجْدِي الَّذِي كُنْتُ أَكْتُمُ
أَلَيْسَ عَجِيبًا أَنَّ بَيْتًا يَضُمُّنِي   وَإِيّاكَ لا نَخْلُو وَلا نَتَكَلَّمُ ؟
إِشارَةُ أَفْواهٍ وَغَمْزُ حَواجِبَ   وَتَكْسِيرُ أَبْصارٍ وَطَرْفٌ يُسَلِّمُ
وَأَلْسُنُنا مَمْنُوعَةٌ مِنْ مُرادِنا   وَأَبْصارُنا عَنّا تُجِيبُ وَتُفْهِمُ

My gaze translates the secrets of my tongue,
and exposes my excitement, which I have concealed.
Isn't it strange that a house unites me
and you, [and yet] we are never alone or talk [to each other]?
The sign of mouths, the beckoning of the eyebrows,
the broken looks, and the submissive gaze,
Our tongues are forbidden from our object of desire,
and our gazes answer us, and make us understood.[19]

18. Lit. a house in which both of us are never alone or speak [to each other]. Ed. Leiden 1886, 173; ed. Beirut 1965, 261.

19. Al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī, *Sharḥ dīwān Abī Tammām*, ed. R. al-Asmar (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1994), 2: 297.

A reader of the waistband verse might not be aware of the other three verses of the poem; they do not change an understanding of the inscribed verse significantly, but do add another dimension to its meanings. Abū Tammām's poem asserts that the lover's gaze serves as a translator to the tongue's secrets. The glances of lovers reveal their excitement, not expressed because of their inability to verbally communicate. Inscribed on a waistband, the written verse, and perhaps also those omitted, receive a silent reading by the audience. The gaze of the audience is that which reveals the emotions of the lover without recourse to speech.

Sometimes we find that the inscribed object serves as a messenger, addressing the beloved on behalf of the admirer. Al-Washshāʾ recorded a number of such messages. The first is an inscribed handkerchief, perfumed with musk, that was sent by a female *ẓarīfa* to her beloved as a gift. On the handkerchief she inscribed the following:

أَنا مَبْعُوثٌ إِلَيْكِ   أُنْسُ مَوْلاتي لَدَيْكِ
صَنَعَتْني بِيَدَيْها   فَامْسَحِي بي شَفَتَيْكِ

I am a messenger to you,
My mistress's intimate contact with you.
She created me with her hands,
so wipe your lips with [me].[20]

A similar message is recorded on another inscribed handkerchief sent by a lover to his female beloved:

أَنا مِنْدِيلُ مُحِبٍّ لَمْ يَزَلْ   ثُمَّ أَهْدانِي إلى مَحْبُوبةٍ
نَاشِفًا بي مِنْ دُمُوعٍ مُقْلَتَيْه   تَمْسَحُ الْقَهْوَةَ بي مِنْ شَفَتَيْه

I am a handkerchief of a lover,
who used me to wipe the tears from his eyes.
Then he gave me to his beloved,
who wipes wine from her lips with me.[21]

In both examples the handkerchief functions as a communicating medium. It is a functional object to be carried by the recipient of the gift, but it also stands in for physical communication with the beloved. In the first poem, the handkerchief is able to reach the beloved's mouth. This puts the handkerchief in a position to represent the lover, and because of the verses she inscribed on it, the handkerchief is able to declare itself as her words. As her words, it constantly reminds him of her love, and coming out of her mouth as they do, they reach the beloved's mouth, an additional implied form of touch.

20. The Leiden edition, with some others, ends the first hemistich in *ilaykum*, while others, such as Beirut 1965 (Dār Ṣadr), have *ilayka*. The latter reading is preferred because of the *aaba* rhyming. See Leiden 1886, 175; Beirut 1965, 263.

21. Ed. Leiden 1886, 175; ed. Beirut 1965, 263.

The second poem echoes the reaching of the beloved's physical proximity through the inscribed object. Although there is no physical access to the beloved, the tears he has shed over her physically touch her face by the mediation of the handkerchief. The tears are not shed in vain, they eventually reach the beloved's desired lips. The verses make use of the common image of the lover tormented by the oblivious beloved. They record contrasting "snapshots": the lover shedding tears, the beloved partying and drinking wine.

As an object carried and used in public, a handkerchief is also a way for the beloved to gently display his or her participation in the courtly game of love, and perhaps even publicize the fact that an admirer has sent a present.

Inscribed garments often make personal statements about those who wear them. Al-Washshāʾ recorded an inscription written by a slave girl on her headdress (*karzān*):

الشَّمْسُ تَطْلُعُ لِلْمَغِيبِ وَلا أَرَى   شَوْقِي إِلَيْكَ عَلى الزَّمانِ يَغِيبُ

The sun rises only to set [again], [but] I cannot imagine that
my desire for you will ever set.[22]

In this verse the slave girl promises her beloved her everlasting love. She is cleverly comparing herself to the sun, the paragon of beauty and a common figure of speech to portray a beautiful woman. The sun is a loyal lover because it rises each and every day. But, the verse argues, by setting in the evening the sun also betrays her beloved daily, which the slave girl will never do.[23] The inscribed band on the slave girl's head also implies that she is more beautiful than the sun.

A similar use of the tropes of the sun and the moon in a verse inscribed on a headdress can be observed in the following verse, inscribed on a headband (*ʿiṣāba*). The verse was recorded by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi in his *ʿIqd al-farīd*:

أَلَا بِاللّٰهِ قُولوا يا رِجالُ   أَشَمْسٌ في الْعِصابَةِ أَمْ هِلالُ

By God, why won't you tell me, O men:
Is it a sun in the scarf or a crescent moon?[24]

Once again, we have a woman inscribing a verse on her headdress, serving as a billboard extolling her beauty. The verse, which seems to have been written especially for the headband, addresses a group of men directly, calling their attention to the beauty of the headband wearer.

The following complete poem was inscribed by a slave girl of al-Ḥasan b. Qārin, an Abbasid general, on the decorated borders of a piece of cloth (*ʿalam*):

22. Ed. Leiden 1886, 170; ed. Beirut 1965, 257.

23. The word for slave girl, *jāriya*, also has the meaning of sun. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1990), 14: 141.

24. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1999), 6: 431.

أَحْسَنُ ما قَدْ خَلَقَ الـ ... لّٰهُ وَما لَمْ يَخْلُقُهْ
شَكْوَى فَتاةٍ وَفَتًى ... يَعْشَقُها وَتَعْشَقُهْ
نارُ الْهَوَى دانِيَةٌ ... تُحْرِقُها وتُحْرِقُه
يا حَبَّذا الْحُبُّ إذا ... دامَ وَدامَتْ حُرَقُهْ

The most beautiful of what God has created
    and of what he has not [yet created]
is the suffering of a young couple,
    he in love with her and she with him.
The fire of passion is close,
    burning both her and him.
How wonderful love is while
    it lasts, along with its pain![25]

Garments can also carry explicit sexual invitations, or at least serve as a medium to present an image of wantonness and libertinism. Al-Washshāʾ recorded the following poem inscribed on the trouser cord (*tikka*) of "a licentious woman" (*baʿḍ al-mawājin*):

اِقْطَعِ التِّكَّةَ حَتَّى ... تَذْهَبَ التِّكَّةُ أَصْلًا
ثُمَّ قُلْ لِلرِّدْفِ أَهْلًا ... بِكَ يا رِدْفُ وَسَهْلا

Tear the belt until
    it will vanish!
Then say to the behind: Welcome
    to you, O behind! Welcome![26]

Since being a *ẓarīf* required being in love, everyone in the court participated in the game of love, including the caliph himself. A courtly game of love involving the caliph was recorded by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi in his *ʿIqd al-farīd*. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi's informer reported that he came before the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd once and noticed beautiful slave girls next to the caliph, each wearing a headband (*ʿiṣāba*). On one of these bands he saw the following verse, written in gold and embedded with pearls and rubies:

ظَلَمْتَني في الْحُبِّ يا ظالِمُ ... وَاللّٰهُ فِيما بَيْنَنا حاكِمُ

You have done me wrong in [your] love, O oppressor,
    God will be the judge between us.[27]

25. Ed. Leiden 1886, 168; ed. Beirut 1965, 254. *Ḥurqa* ("pain") can also mean "burning, torment, agony."
26. Ed. Leiden 1886, 174; ed. Beirut 1965, 262.
27. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *ʿIqd al-farīd*, 6: 430.

The slave girl is using the inscription to scold her lover, who must be the caliph himself. In the courtly game of love the slave girl took the part of the tormented lover, accusing the caliph of treating her unjustly. Such a complaint is imaginable only as part of the game. By adding that only God will judge between them, the slave girl emphasizes that in the courtly game of love all participants are equal and social distinctions between lover and beloved are suspended.

In another inscription on a headband recorded by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, a slave girl addresses her beloved, who has broken her heart:

يا رامِيًا لَيْسَ يَدْرِي ما الَّذِي فَعَلا عَلَيْكَ عَقْلِي فَإنَّ السَّهْمَ قَدْ قَتَلا

أَجْرَيْتَهُ في مَجارِي الرُّوحِ مِنْ بَدَنِي فَالنَّفْسُ في تَعَبٍ وَالْقَلْبُ قَدْ شُغِلا

O shooter, unaware of his actions,
 you have to pay the blood-money, for the arrow has killed!
You released it into the inner courses of my soul,
 the soul is tired, and the heart is occupied.[28]

The "shooter," the object of the slave girl's love, is a distant object of desire who kills with his gaze and has broken her heart without knowing of her love for him. Although people were meant to see the verses on the headband, the beloved was not identified by name, conforming to the norms of courtly love. On a poetic level, the omission of the addressee's name opens up other potential identifications; he could be anyone who sees the inscription. Therefore, the verses serve not only as a cry of an unrequited love, but possibly also as a way for the slave girl to flirt with men who lay eyes on her. This last is only possible once the verses have been inscribed on the headband and displayed in public.

Many of the anecdotes about *ẓurafāʾ* wearing inscribed garments involve a dramatic entrance, when all eyes are centered on the person entering, who is often a beautiful slave girl making the most of her moment of attention. Ibn al-Jahm reported being present at the entrance of a beautiful slave girl by the name of ʿĀlij, known for being one of the wanton women (*mujjān*) of Baghdad and for her knowledge of music. When ʿĀlij came into the room, all of the men noticed her slim figure and gait. They also noticed the following verses, which were written in *ghāliya* perfume on the decorated edge of an overgarment (*ṭurra*)[29]:

يا هِلالاً مِنَ الْقُصُورِ تَجَلَّى صامَ طَرْفي لِمُقْلَتَيْكِ وَصَلَّى

لَسْتُ أَدْرِي أَطالَ لَيْلِيَ أَمْ لا كَيْفَ يَدْرِي بِذاكَ مَنْ يَتَقَلَّى

لَوْ تَفَرَّغْتُ لِاستطالةِ لَيْلِي ولِرَعْيِ النُّجومِ كُنْتُ مُخِلّا

O crescent moon, revealing itself from the palaces.
 My glance[30] worships your eyes, fasts and prays.

28. Ibid., 431. Here the poem is attributed, probably incorrectly, to Abū Nuwās, but it is not found in his *Dīwān*. Ewald Wagner listed it in *Abū Nuwās in der Nebenüberlieferung: Dem Dichter zugeschriebene Gedichte und Verse* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 167. A variant of this short poem is quoted by al-Washshāʾ (ed. Leiden 1886, 168; ed. Beirut 1965, 253) and Ibn Dāwūd (*Kitāb al-Zahra*, ed. al-Sāmarrāʾī, 443).

29. According to *Lisān al-ʿarab* (4: 499), *ṭurrat al-thawb* is decoration sewn onto the edge of the robe.

30. Instead of "my glance" (*ṭarfī*) the edition *al-ʿIqd al-farīd* of Aḥmad Amīn et al. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1949, 6: 425) has "my heart" (*qalbī*).

I am oblivious as to whether my night has been long or not.
  How would he who turns in bed awake all night know such a thing?
Had I devoted myself to thinking of the length of the night
  and to watching the stars, I would have failed to fulfill my obligation.[31]

ʿĀlij is using the common topos of a beautiful woman appearing out of her quarters to orchestrate her own appearance in front of the courtiers. While the "crescent" in the poem is unidentified,[32] when inscribed on ʿĀlij's garment it becomes an index, in the semiotics sense, pointing to her. She becomes the beautiful crescent moon, appearing out of her quarters, the darkness, having all eyes fixed on her, evoking an almost religious admiration. Through the inscribed verses the courtesan is captioning her entrance. The inscription establishes roles for both the courtesan and the men present. The latter are assigned the role of lovers who cannot, and should not, take their eyes off her, as she shines over all other women (stars).

These verses seem to be combined from two different sources: the first verse is unknown, except for this inscription, while the others are well known and often quoted in medieval Arabic works on poetics in discussions of the trope of the lover's sleepless nights—they are ascribed to different poets, among whom are Khālid b. Yazīd al-Kātib,[33] Ibn al-Muʿtazz,[34] Abū Tammām al-Ṭāʾī,[35] Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī,[36] and Abū Nuwās.[37] Sufi writers even gave these two verses mystical interpretations as describing the mystic's state of ecstasy (*wajd*).[38] It seems that ʿĀlij added the first line to the existing verses as an introduction that would make the inscription more powerful and fitting for the occasion of its use.

Sandals were another medium on which *ẓurafāʾ* would inscribe verses, for personal use or to be given as presents to a fellow *ẓarīf*. These sandals conveyed a fashionable statement of love and loyalty either to an unknown beloved or to the recipient of the gift. Al-Washshāʾ recorded a number of such fashionable statements made by slave girls, such as the following, written in gold by Mulk, a slave girl of Ibn ʿĀṣim:

وَإِنِّي لِإِشْفاقِي عَلَيْكَ وَصَبْوَتِي إِلَيْكَ كَأَنِّي فِي الْمَنامِ أَراكا
تُحَدِّثُنِي نَفْسِي إِذا غِبْتَ ساعَةً بِأَنَّ لِقاءَ الْمَوْتِ دُونَ لِقاكا

31. The last two verses appear also in al-Washshāʾ (ed. Leiden 1886, 173; ed. Beirut 1965, 261), who reported them inscribed on a *zunnār* of Wājid al-Kūfiyya. For the translation of *yataqallā* as "turn in bed at night," see *Lisān al-ʿarab*, q.v.

32. The use of the accusative in the vocative *yā hilālan* indicates an unidentified subject, "O, *some* crescent." See W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 2: 85.

33. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ wa-muḥāwarāt al-shuʿarāʾ wa-l-bulaghāʾ*, ed. ʿU. al-Ṭabbāʿ (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, 1999), 2: 104; al-ʿAskarī, *Dīwān al-maʿānī*, ed. A. Ḥ. Basaj (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1994), 338.

34. Abū l-Faraj ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mud'hish*, ed. M. Qabbānī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1985), 222.

35. Ibn Dāwūd, *al-Zahra*, 1: 382.

36. Yāqūt ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ, aw irshād al-arīb ilā maʿrifat al-adīb*, ed. A. Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1991), 2: 564.

37. Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī, *al-ʿUmda fī maḥāsin al-shiʿr wa-ādābihi wa-naqdih*, ed. M. M. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1981), 243.

38. Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt*, ed. ʿA. L. Ḥ. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000), 2: 151; Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Azdī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. M. ʿA. Q. ʿAṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998), 266.

Out of my concern for you and desire,
  it is as though I see you in my sleep.
When you are away for a while, my soul tells me
  that death is better than not meeting you.[39]

Al-Washshāʾ recorded another inscription of verses on a sandal, allegedly written in gold by a slave girl of the musician courtier al-Māriqī. The verses are well known, composed by the poet al-ʿAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf:

لَمْ أَلْقَ ذا شَجَنٍ يَبُوحُ بِحُبِّهِ   إِلَّا حَسِبْتُكَ ذٰلِكَ الْمَحْبُوبا
حَذَرًا عَلَيْكَ وَإِنَّنِي بِكَ وَاثِقٌ   أَنْ لا يَنالَ سِوايَ مِنْكَ نَصِيبا

Whenever I encounter a tormented person revealing his love,
  I consider you that beloved.
Beware! For I trust in you
  that none but I will get a part of you![40]

As transmitted by Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, al-Ḥasan b. Wahb observed that Shaʿb wrote the same verses on the hat (*qalansuwa*) of her slave girl Shakl.[41] It seems that slave girls were used as a kind of billboard on which their masters could display various statements.

Sandals given as presents by courtiers convey a message of loyalty, courage, and admiration on the part of the sender. The secretary and poet Saʿīd b. Ḥumayd is reported to have given a pair to a friend, on which he inscribed the following:

نَعْلٌ بَعَثْتُ بِها لِتَلْبَسَها   قَدَمٌ بِها تَسْعَى إِلَى الْمَجْدِ
لَوْ كانَ يَصْلُحُ أَنْ أُشَرِّكَها   خَدِّي جَعَلْتُ شِراكَها خَدِّي

I send you this sandal so that it would be worn by
  a foot that will head with it for glory.
If it were possible for me to tie my cheek to it
  I would have made my cheek its laces.[42]

39. Ed. Leiden 1886, 181; ed. Beirut 1965, 273.

40. Ed. Leiden 1886, 180; ed. Beirut 1965, 279. For al-ʿAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf's poem, see Ibn Dāwūd, *al-Zahra*, 137; Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣāʾir wa-l-dhakhāʾir*, ed. W. al-Qāḍī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1988), 1: 36; al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī,* 22: 54.

41. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 6: 432.

42. Ed. Leiden 1886, 181; ed. Beirut 1965, 273. These verses are ascribed to Abū l-ʿAtāhiya (d. 210/825); see Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 6: 299. Al-Jāḥiẓ (*al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, ed. F. ʿAṭawī [Beirut: Dār Ṣaʿb, 1968], 1: 446) notes that Abū l-ʿAtāhiya allegedly sent them to the caliph al-Maʾmūn, while Ibn Ḥamdūn (*al-Tadhkira al-Ḥamdūniyya*, ed. B. ʿAbbās et al. [Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1996], 5: 24) maintains that Abū l-ʿAtāhiya dedicated the inscribed poem to the vizier Faḍl b. al-Rabīʿ, when he returned from Mecca. With "laces," my understanding is a sandal that laces up the leg.

FURNITURE

Not every inscription of a verse on an object was intended for public viewing. Some were inscribed in places that had no public exposure, for example, pillows:

لَمْ أذُقْ يا سُولَ قَلْبِي   لِلْكَرَى مُذْ غِبْتَ طُعْمًا
تَرَكَ الدَّمْعُ عَلى خَدَّ   يَّ لَمّا فاضَ رَسْمًا

O desire of my heart, since your departure
  I haven't tasted the food of sleep.
The flood of tears left
  a mark on my cheeks.[43]

The first verse presents a typical image of a tormented lover, unable to eat or sleep. The two privations are combined into one image. The image in the second verse of the face scarred by tears brings up the image of the scarred landscape of the abandoned encampment in the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*, in which the elements left their mark on what used to be the camp of the beloved now gone. By inscribing these verses on a pillow, a new dimension of meaning is added: the tears leave their marks on the cheeks, and those marks leave their own mark on the pillow in the form of the inscribed verses.[44] The pillow comes to represent the cheek of the lover in the chambers of the beloved.

Al-Washshāʾ records a number of verses inscribed on furniture and accessories in bedrooms. With these the male *ẓarīf* could boast of his adventures with women. The following is from a *ẓarīf* who saw it on the dais (*minaṣṣa*) of "one of the debauchees" (*baʿḍ al-mujjān*):

تَقُولُ وَقَدْ جَرَّدْتُها مِنْ ثِيابِها   أَلَسْتَ تَخافُ الْيَوْمَ أَهْلَكَ أَوْ أَهْلِي؟
فَقُلْتُ: كِلانا خائِفٌ بِمَكانِهِ   فَهَلْ هُوَ إلَّا قَتْلُكِ الْيَوْمَ أَوْ قَتْلِي؟

She said, after I undressed her,
  "Are you not afraid now of your family or mine?"
I said, "Both of us are afraid, each from his position.
  What more could they do other than kill you or me?"[45]

The image of the two lovers presented in these verses is far from *ʿudhrī*—that which governs the courtly love etiquette and requires that the love is never consummated. Here, little is left to the imagination. The two lovers are together, well aware of what they are doing, challenging the constraints of society. Was the poem composed by the owner of the dais, or did he simply choose these verses to associate himself with the debauched poet? All interpretations are open, for us as well as for whomever happened upon the inscribed verses in the *ẓarīf*'s room.

43. Ed. Leiden 1886, 176; ed. Beirut 1965, 266.
44. The Arabic word for pillow, *mikhadda*, means literally an "instrument" of the cheeks (in the *mifʿala* form).
45. Ed. Leiden 1886, 177; ed. Beirut 1965, 267.

The following inscription, inscribed on a mosquito net (*killa*) made of blue silk with gold (*ḥarīr āsmānjūnī bi-l-dhahab*) and witnessed by al-Washshāʾ himself, contains similar boasting about nightly adventures:

سَهِرْتُ وَعانَقْتُها لَيْلَةً　　عَلى مِثْلِها يَحْسُدُ الْحاسِدُ
كَأَنّا جَمِيعًا وَثَوْبُ الدُّجَى　　عَلَيْنا لِمُبْصِرِنا واحِدُ

I stayed up all night, embracing her.
For this kind [of night, or woman] the envious envies.
For the observer, it was as though the two of us—
covered by the garment of darkness—were one.[46]

As in the previous example, the owner of the mosquito net immortalizes (and boasts of) the passing moment with a lover by "embedding" it in a poem. The image in the poem of the two lovers lying under the dark (*dujā*) sky receives a visual reinforcement by the mosquito net's blue fabric (sky) and gold strands (stars).

Another inscription on a *ẓarīf*'s bed contained the following poem:

وَمَجْدُولَةٍ أَمّا مَجالُ وِشاحِها　　فَغُصْنٌ وَأَمّا رِدْفُها فَكَثِيبُ
لَها الْقَمَرُ السّارِي شَقِيقٌ وَإِنَّها　　تَطَلَّعُ أَحْيانًا لَهُ فَيَغِيبُ
أَقُولُ لَها وَاللَّيْلُ مُرْخٍ سُدُولَهُ　　عَلَيْنا: بِكِ الْعَيْشُ الْخَسِيسُ يَطِيبُ
فَقالَتْ: نَعَمْ إِنْ لَمْ يَكُنْ لَكَ غَيْرُنا　　بِبَغْدادَ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُصُورِ حَبِيبُ

A slender woman, her waist
a branch, her behind a sand hill.
The nocturnal wandering moon is her brother.
At times, she glances toward him and he sets.
I tell her, as the night sets its curtains
over us, "You make the ignoble existence pleasant."
She replies, "Indeed, if you do not have other than us,
in Baghdad, a lover from among the people of the palace."[47]

This poem, which describes a night the poet had with a beautiful courtier, again identifies the beloved with the sun and presents her as superior to the moon, which sets at the sight of her. The poem ends with a playful dialogue in which the *ẓarīf* focuses on the enjoyment of the moment, and his companion responds by reminding him of his obligation to remain loyal to her.

The following is a telling example of the importance of the game of love in the court. ʿAlī b. al-Jahm reported seeing these verses inscribed on a screen (*sitr*, used to hide women from

46. Ed. Leiden 1886, 178; ed. Beirut 1965, 267.
47. Ed. Leiden 1886, 178–79; ed. Beirut 1965, 269.

being seen by visitors) belonging to one of the caliph al-Maʾmūn's concubines who bore him a child (*umm walad*):

هَجَرْتِنِي كَيْ أُجارِيكُمْ بِفِعْلِكُمُ   لا تَهْجُرِينِي فَإِنِّي لا أُجارِيكِ
قَلْبِي مُحِبٌّ لَكُمْ راضٍ بِفِعْلِكُمُ   أَسْتَرْزِقُ اللّٰهَ قَلْبٌ لا يُجانِيكِ
أَصْبَحْتُ عَبْدًا لِأَدْنَى أَهْلِ دارِكُمُ   وَكُنْتُ فِيما مَضَى مَوْلَى مَوالِيكِ

You left me so that I would emulate you in your act.
Don't leave me, for I shall not compete with you.
My heart, a heart that does not find fault with you,
is in love with you, content with your action. I seek God's support.
I became a slave of the lowest person of your house,
while in the past I was the master of your masters.[48]

Although she is a woman of high status in the court, having borne the caliph's child, it seems that at the time of courtship described in the poem, the *umm walad* was still a slave girl. The inscribed verses were presented to her by a lover, presumably al-Maʾmūn himself. The latter is presented as a tormented lover, who is ignored by the one he loves. Like any other courtier, al-Maʾmūn is participating in the courtly game of love. In order to play the game, social status is pushed aside, even that of the caliph himself, who is being tormented by a slave girl he owns. The last verse mentions the power relations between the two, but only in order to emphasize that the social gap between them belongs to the "past." In the present, i.e., in the game of love, the master-slave relationship is reversed. The poem is constructed as a riddle, in which the identity of the poet is insinuated by a clue in the last hemistich.

ARCHITECTURE

Unlike the semi-private inscriptions by *ẓurafāʾ* in their private chambers, on pillows and above beds, architectural inscriptions are by their nature displayed in public spaces, intended to be read by all who visit or pass by. Al-Washshāʾ dedicated a whole chapter to such public inscriptions, written on walls, gates, and domes of assembly halls (*majālis*) and buildings.

One inscription was inscribed on the portal to an assembly of the caliph al-Maʾmūn, whose choice to inscribe a poem praising the love of the flesh at the entrance of his *majlis* seems to have been a message to all who attended that it was a place celebrating the beauty of love, and strict puritanical morals were to be kept outside. Whoever did not approve should not enter. The verses in the alleged inscription were by an anonymous poet (al-Maʾmūn himself?). With the exception of the second verse, they are not quoted in any contemporary poetry anthology,[49] but do appear in *The Thousand and One Nights*, as the first three and the sixth verses of a longer poem of seven verses:

48. Ed. Leiden 1886, 176; ed. Beirut 1965, 265.

49. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ*, 2: 129, where it is ascribed to al-ʿAbbās b. al-Aḥnaf (d. ca. 92/807).

صِلْ مَن هَوِيتَ وَدَعْ مَقالَةَ حاسِدِ   لَيْسَ الْحَسُودُ عَلى الْهَوَى بِمُساعِدِ
لَمْ يَخلُقِ الرَّحْمٰنُ أَحْسَنَ مَنْظَرا   مِنْ عاشِقَيْنِ عَلى فِراشٍ واحِدِ
مُتَعانِقَيْنِ عَلَيْهِما أُزُرُ الْهَوى   مُتَوَسِّدَيْنَ بِمِعْصَمٍ وَبِساعِدِ
وَإذا صَفا لَكَ مِن زَمانِكَ واحِدٌ   فَهُوَ الْمُرادُ وَعِشْ بِذٰلِكَ الْواحِدِ
وإذا تَأَلَّفَتِ الْقُلُوبُ عَلى الْهَوى   فَالنَّاسُ تَضْرِبُ في حَدِيدٍ بارِدِ
يا مَنْ يَلُومُ عَلى الْهَوَى أَهْلَ الْهَوى   هَلْ تَسْتَطِيعُ صَلاحَ قَلْبٍ فاسِدِ
يا رَبِّ يا رَحْمٰنُ تُحْسِنُ خَتْمَنا   قَبْلَ الْمَماتِ وَلَوْ بِيَوْمٍ واحِدِ

Unite with the one you love, and ignore what the envious say.
The envious ones are not helpful for love.
God has not created a sight more beautiful than
two lovers in one bed,
Embracing each other, covered [only] by the loincloths of passion
resting one's head over the other's wrist and forearm.
If ever someone has become completely devoted to you—
he is the desired one. Live with that one.
When hearts have united against love,
it is like striking the iron when it is cold [i.e., it is useless to oppose love].
Those of you who blame lovers for their passion,
are you able to repair a broken heart?
O my Lord, O Merciful one, be kind to us
before [our] death, even by a day.[50]

If indeed the poem in the *Nights* was the original, al-Maʾmūn, or whoever decided on the text for the inscription on his palace, omitted three verses from it. This omission alters its meaning. The selected verses focus on the aesthetic beauty of the two lovers in bed, suggesting approval of love's physical consummation. By excluding those that highlight the ideal of loyalty to one's lover (fourth and fifth verses), the poem is breaking away from the image of monogamous courtly love, moving closer to *ibāḥī*, promiscuous love, in which the erotic pleasure of love with many partners is the ideal.

Inscriptions on walls express not only the theme of love but also that of nostalgia or longing for the homeland (*al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān*).[51] Written either as graffiti or as inscriptions by those in residence away from their homes, they were recorded in many sources,

50. *Alf layla wa-layla*, ed. S. J. al-Saḥḥār (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, n.d.), 1: 179–80; ed. Beirut, 270, for the verses (bolded in translation) transmitted by al-Washshāʾ.

51. On this literary genre, see W. al-Qadi, "Expressions of Alienation in Early Arabic Literature," in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*, ed. A. Neuwirth et al. (Beirut: Steiner, 1999), 4–31; S. Enderwitz, "Homesickness and Love in Arabic Poetry," in ibid., 59–70; A. Arazi, "*al-Ḥanīn ilā al-awṭān*: Entre la Ǧāhiliyya et l'Islam. Le Bédouin et le citadin reconciliés," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 143.2 (1993): 287–327.

one of which is the noted tenth-century *Kitāb Adab al-ghurabāʾ*, ascribed to Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī.[52] Al-Washshāʾ transmitted two such inscriptions seen by an acquaintance of his, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd al-Malaṭī, in Malta. The first was allegedly written on a gate of a *majlis*:

لا يَمْنَعَنَّكَ خَفْضَ الْعَيْشِ فِي دَعَةٍ   نُزُوعُ نَفْسٍ إِلى أَهْلٍ وَأَوْطانِ
تَلْقَى بِكُلِّ بِلادٍ إِنْ حَلَلْتَ بِها   أَهْلاً بِأَهْلٍ وَجِيرانًا بِجِيرانِ

The soul's longing for its people and homeland
should not prevent you from enjoying a life of comfort and opulence.
In every place you reside you will find
fellow inhabitants and neighbors, replacing those left behind.[53]

These verses are well known and often quoted in the classical literature in the context of the theme of nostalgia to the homeland. They are part of what Wadad al-Qadi has called "pro-Alienation" literature, which challenges the assumption that there is a "natural" homeland—where one was born—for everyone, suggesting instead that "home" is anywhere one takes to be one's place of residence.[54]

The second was written on the front wall of the *majlis*:

إذا كُنْتَ فِي أَرْضٍ غَرِيبًا فَرَجِّها   وَلا تَكْتَرِثْ فِيها نُزُوعًا إِلى الْوَطَنْ
فَما هِيَ إِلَّا بَلْدَةٌ مِثْلُ بَلْدَةٍ   وَخَيْرُهُما ما كانَ عَوْنًا عَلى الزَّمَنْ

If you are a stranger in [a foreign] land, put your trust in it.
Don't spend your time longing for the homeland.
It is nothing but a dwelling place like any other.
Even the best of them cannot help against [the passing of] time.[55]

The architectural inscriptions that al-Washshāʾ documented include not only inscriptions engraved by patrons on the front of their own property, but also a few graffiti verses inscribed on walls by others, usually of houses where their beloved resided—a cry by the tormented lover to his beloved to notice him and his suffering.[56]

52. On the question of the authorship of this work, see *The Book of Strangers: Mediaeval Arabic Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia*, tr. P. Crone and S. Moreh (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000), 8; H. Kilpatrick, "On the Difficulty of Knowing Medieval Arab Authors: The Case of Abū l-Faraj and Pseudo-Iṣfahānī," in *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Alan Jones*, ed. R. G. Hoyland and P. F. Kennedy (Cambridge: E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 230–42.

53. Ed. Leiden 1886, 180; ed. Beirut 1965, 271. The poet is Ibrāhīm b. al-ʿAbbās al-Ṣūlī; see Abū Tammām, *Dīwān al-hamāsa*, ed. A. Ḥ. Basaj (Beirut: Manshūrāt Muḥammad ʿAlī Bayḍūn, 1998), 51; Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-aʿyān wa-anbāʾ abnāʾ al-zamān*, ed. I. ʿAbbās et al. (Beirut: Dar Ṣādir, 1398), 1: 46; al-Baṣrī, *al-Ḥamāsa al-baṣriyya*, ed. M. D. Aḥmad (Ḥaydarābād al-Dakan: Majlis Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif al-ʿUthmāniyya, 1964), 2: 220. Al-Kutubī (*Fawāt al-wafayāt*, ed. ʿA. Muʿawwaḍ and ʿĀ. ʿA. al-Mawjūd [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2000], 2: 513) identifies the poet as Ṣarīʿ al-Ghawānī, however. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi (*al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 2: 321) quotes the verses in a chapter on the merits of staying in one place or traveling (*fī l-ḥaraka wa-l-sukūn*).

54. Al-Qadi, "Expressions of Alienation," 13ff.

55. Ed. Leiden 1886, 180; ed. Beirut 1965, 271.

56. On the history of the use of graffiti poetry in different cultures in the ancient Middle East, see Crone and Moreh, *Strangers*, 155ff.

One written on the gate of a house in the Hijaz included the verses:

يا دارُ! إنَّ غَزالًا فِيكِ عَذَّبَنِي   لِلّهِ دَرُّكِ ما تَحْوِينَ يا دارُ
الدارُ تَمْلِكُنِي وَيْحِي وَصاحِبُها   قَلْبِي ، مَلِيكانِ: رَبُّ الدَّارِ وَالدَّارُ
يا دارُ لَوْلا غَزالٌ فيكِ تُعْلِقُنِي   ما كانَ لِي فِيكِ إقْبالٌ وَإِدْبارُ

O dwelling place! One of the gazelles within you tormented me.
  How excellent is what you contain, O dwelling place!
The abode and its owner possess me, O my heart.
  Two owners: the owner of the house and the house itself.
O dwelling place, if not for the gazelle in you that made me fall in love
  I would not have been passing by you back and forth.[57]

Another graffiti inscription that al-Washshāʾ read on a house, engraved on gypsum, was:

هَلَّا رَحِمْتُمْ مَوْقِفِي بِفَنائِكُمْ   مُتَعَرِّضًا لِنَسِيمِكُمْ أَتَنَشَّقُ
مُتَّلَدِّدًا أَبْكِي لِما قَدْ حَلَّ بِي   مِثْلَ الْغَرِيقِ بِما يَرَى يَتَعَلَّقُ

Do you not have mercy on my standing in your yard
  Exposed to your breeze, inhaling [its air]?
Perplexed, I weep for that which has befallen me.
  As a drowning man, clinging to whatever he sees.[58]

The poet is ignored by his beloved, standing outside her home, exposed not to the elements but to the breeze of her smell. He is drowning, not in water but from his tears, on account of his misfortune.

One recorded graffiti was engraved in stone by a lover on the gate of a house where his beloved used to reside:

أَرَى الدَّارَ مِنْ بَعْدِ الْحَبِيبِ وَلا أَرَى   حَبِيبِي مَعَ الْباقِينَ فِي عَرْصَةِ الدَّار
فَيا عَجَبًا إِذْ فارَقَ الْجارُ جارَهُ   أَلَيْسَ شَدِيدًا فُرْقَةُ الْجارِ لِلْجارِ

I see the house where my beloved used to live, but I do not see
  my beloved among those left in its yard.
How odd it is when a neighbor forsakes his neighbor!
  Is it not horrible, the separation of a neighbor from his neighbor?[59]

57. Ed. Leiden 1886, 180; ed. Beirut 1965, 272–73.
58. Ed. Leiden 1886, 180; ed. Beirut 1965, 271.
59. Ed. Leiden 1886, 180; ed. Beirut 1965, 272.

Like the pre-Islamic poet observing the traces of the old dwelling place of his beloved, this poet stands in front of the house where his beloved once lived. Although the house is still standing, the poet sees no traces of his beloved. It is instead the poet who leaves a trace, or perhaps even a trace of his beloved, by engraving these verses of poetry on the gate of the house.

WRITING ON THE BODY

Ẓurafāʾ also wrote inscriptions on their bodies. These inscriptions were not tattooed, but were usually written in henna or other substances made from plants or perfumes. They differed from the permanent tattoo in that they allowed for the expression of statements that fit a specific moment and context; they could be erased after a few days and be replaced with new statements.

The following was inscribed in henna on the palm of a slave girl named Shamārīkh, by her mistress al-Māhāniyya:

أَبَى الْحُبُّ إلّا أَنْ أَكُونَ مُعَذَّبًا   وَنِيرانُهُ فِي الصَّدْرِ إلّا تَلَهُّبا
فَوا كَبِدًا حَتَّى مَتَى أَنا واقِفٌ   بِبابِ الْهَوَى أَلْقَى الْهَوانَ وَأَنْصَبا

Love refuses that I be anything but tormented,
 and that its flames in my chest be ablaze!
O liver, until when will I be standing
 at the gate of passion, encountering humiliation and exhaustion?[60]

The red color of henna makes this substance an especially favorable medium to convey the sufferings of lovers and their bleeding hearts. The poem above describes the lover as burning from the inside: the flames within her chest and liver (seat of emotions) have nearly burst out of her body, a description enhanced by the henna used, which would create the impression that the sorrow expressed by the poem has burst out of her body in flames.

It is noteworthy that the body displaying the verses is not that of al-Māhāniyya, who composed or chose the verses. She inscribed them on the body of her slave girl. The latter thus becomes a walking billboard, an extension of al-Māhāniyya's own body, expressing her mistress's emotions.

The text of the poem and the medium on which it is written not only complete and project meanings one upon the other, but also compete. In the following poem, a slave girl by the name of Ḥadāʾiq is reported to have inscribed in henna on her palm the following verse:

لَيْسَ حُسْنُ الْخِضابِ زَيَّنَ كَفِّي   حُسْنُ كَفِّي زَيْنٌ لِكُلِّ خِضابِ

It is not the beauty of the dye that decorates [beautifies] my palm.
 Rather, it is the beauty of my palm that bestows beauty on [decorates] every dye.[61]

60. Ed. Leiden 1886, 183; ed. Beirut 1965, 277.

61. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *al-ʿIqd al-farīd,* 6: 433. The meaning of the verse might be difficult to grasp if we read *zayn* as "beauty, decoration" in its Western understanding, i.e., something that adorns something else. This under-

The poem describes a competition between the decorated palm and the decorating verse. Both possess beauty (the latter on account of both its content and the calligraphy of the script). But which of the two is superior? The inscription admits that its beauty pales in comparison to that of the palm. It is the inscription that is rendered more beautiful by its association with the palm and not the other way around. This is, of course, a clever way by Ḥadāʾiq to highlight and focus attention on her beautiful palms. It can also be read as an insightful comment on the relation between texts and the objects on which they are inscribed—from a poetic point of view, the text is central and it is decorated by its association with a beautiful object, rather than the object gaining by its being decorated by a verse inscribed on it.

As with headwear, the forehead often served as billboards extolling with verse the merits and especially the beauty of slave girls for sale:

إذا حُجِبَتْ لَمْ يَكْفِكَ الْبَدْرُ فَقْدَها   وَتَكْفِيكَ فَقْدَ الْبَدْرِ إنْ حُجِبَ الْبَدْرُ
وَحَسْبُكَ مِنْ خَمْرٍ تَفُوتُكَ رِيقُها   وَواللّٰهِ ما مِنْ رِيقِها حَسْبُكَ الْخَمْرُ

When veiled, even the full moon will not replace her loss,
 but when the moon is veiled, she replaces its absence.
When no more wine, her saliva will suffice you,
 but by God, wine cannot replace her saliva![62]

When these verses are inscribed on the forehead of a slave girl, her face is associated with the beautiful face in the poem, her saliva with the intoxicating taste of wine. Whoever reads this poem is told, as it were, how to "read" the girl's face.

Al-Washshāʾ recorded a fascinating inscription, written in *ghāliya* (a perfume mix of musk, ambergris, camphor, and ben oil), on the forehead of a female slave who was offered for sale:

وَشادِنٍ أَحْسَنِ خَلْقِ اللّٰهِ   فِي كَفِّهِ سَيْفُ رَسُولِ اللّٰهِ
قَدْ كَتَبَ الْحُسْنُ عَلَى وَجْهِهِ   سَطْرَيْنِ بِالْعَنْبَرِ بِاسْمِ اللّٰهِ
عَلَى يَدَيْ رِضْوانَ مَنْسُوجَةٌ   صَنْعَةُ حُسْنٍ فِي طِرازِ اللّٰهِ
أنا غَرِيقٌ فِي بِحارِ الْهَوى   شِبْهُ قَتِيلٍ فِي سَبِيلِ اللّٰهِ

A young gazelle, most beautiful of God's creation.
 In his palm, the sword of the Messenger of God.
Excellence has written on his face
 two lines, in amber, "In the name of God,"

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standing implies that the primary importance is to the object that is "decorated," the "decoration" itself being thus secondary. *Zayyana* should be understood as "rendered beautiful" rather than "decorated."

62. Ed. Leiden 1886, 183; ed. Beirut 1965, 278. See al-Bakrī, *Simṭ al-laʾālī*, ed. ʿA. ʿA. al-Maymanī (Cairo: Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-al-Tarjama wa-al-Nashr, 1936), 1: 469; al-Ibshīhī, *al-Mustaṭraf* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt), 1: 379; al-Sarī al-Raffāʾ, *al-Muḥibb wa-l-maḥbūb wa-l-mashmūm wa-l-mashrūb*, ed. M. Ghalāwinjī and M. Ḥ. Dhahabī (Damascus: Majmaʿ al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya, 1986), 1: 219.

Woven by [the angel] Riḍwān
  a beautiful craft, from the embroidery of God.
I drown in the sea of passion,
  resembling a martyr, dying on behalf of God.[63]

The inscription extols the beauty of a young "gazelle," a male slave. Its praises are transmitted by extension to the female slave. The image of the gazelle conveys both beauty and religiosity—he is God's most beautiful creation as well as an Islamic warrior, [the Prophet's] sword in hand, ready for battle. With the image of the "embroidered" *bismillāh*, the poet makes reference to the Abbasid institution of *dār al-ṭirāz*. Embroideries in this era were a prerogative of the caliph and were produced exclusively in the royal embroidery. By emphasizing that the inscription on the gazelle's face was written by the angel Riḍwān, the guardian of Paradise—produced therefore in the heavenly *dār al-ṭirāz*—the poet is insinuating that the young man is sent from heaven, an image that reflects on the slave girl.

The two-lined inscription cleverly refers to a prophetic tradition in which the Prophet, returning from his nightly journey to heaven (*al-isrāʾ wa-l-miʿrāj*), describes the beautiful maidens (*ḥūr al-ʿayn*) who are given as companions to the faithful in paradise:

> In the night of the *isrāʾ*, I saw a houri whose forehead was [white] as a crescent moon, on her head a hundred tresses, between each tress seventy thousand locks, the latter more radiant than the full moon. Her anklet was inlaid with pearls and other precious stones. On her forehead were two lines written in pearls and precious stones. The first read, "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful," the second, "Whoever desires someone like me, should act in obedience with my Lord." Then [the angel] Jibrīl said to me, "She and the like of her are for your nation."[64]

The two lines on the male slave's forehead are a reference to these houris of heaven.[65] The inscription is thus not only a simple expression of piety but also a suggestion that the gazelle's beauty matches theirs. The last verse expresses the excitement of the poet, and perhaps by extension, the expected reaction of the potential buyer upon seeing the beautiful slave girl. He has fallen utterly in love with her, "drowned in the sea of passion." The second hemistich ties in nicely with the second hemistich of the first verse. The poet/lover presents himself as a martyr who had died in holy war, an image that echoes that of the Prophet's sword above.

Instead of praising the slave girl's beauty directly, the slave merchant uses a poem that praises a male gazelle. It is the inscription within the inscription that draws the parallel between the gazelle and the girl, and thus cleverly transfers the praises of the one to the other. All of the verses end with "Allāh," leaving the sound of the name of God echoing throughout the poem. In addition to reinforcing the poem's piety, they also indirectly praise the slave girl since *Allāh* is a common exclamation of awe and wonder.

63. Ed. Leiden 1886, 183; ed. Beirut 1965, 278.

64. Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Aḥmad al-ʿAynī, *ʿUmdat al-qārī: Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: Idārat al-Ṭibāʿa al-Munayriyya, n.d), 14: 95.

65. Inscribed verses comparing a slave girl to the houris of paradise are found also in other sources. Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi (*al-ʿIqd al-farīd*, 6: 431) published inscriptions on slave girls of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, among which one who wore on her front, or chest (*ṣadr*), a crescent moon (*hilāl*, perhaps a necklace in that shape) inscribed with:

أَفْلَتُّ مِنْ حُورِ الْجِنَانِ   وَخُلِقْتُ فِتْنَةَ مَنْ يَرانِي

I escaped from among the houris of Paradise,
  and I was created as a temptation (*fitna*) to whoever sees me.

APPLES AND CITRONS

Apples, claimed al-Washshāʾ, were held in very high esteem by *ẓurafāʾ*. They were as dear to them as a beloved or friend. They entrusted an apple with their secrets and it helped them soothe their sorrows. No other gift was equal to it. The reason, according to al-Washshāʾ, was because they resemble rosy cheeks and therefore reminded *ẓurafāʾ* of their beloved. When they saw an apple, they rejoiced; when they smelled it, they were filled with longing; when they were overwhelmed by worries and could not sleep, only an apple could bring relief.[66]

Apples appear frequently in Arabic love poetry.[67] They seem to have been a popular gift exchanged between *ẓurafāʾ* as early as the eighth and ninth centuries.[68] Apples given as presents were not meant to be eaten by the recipient. In fact, eating them was greatly frowned upon generally.[69] According to al-Washshāʾ, *ẓurafāʾ* preferred presents of little value.[70] *Ẓurafāʾ* would present each other with a citron, an apple, a watermelon, a branch of basil, a piece of aloeswood, or a box of perfume, for they did not share "the desire of other people for precious objects or presents." In other words, the *ẓurafāʾ* preferred smart and witty presents, which were an indication of the giver's cleverness, whereas expensive presents only indicated the giver's wealth.

The apple is, arguably, the ultimate gift of the *ẓarīf*, who appreciates it because he or she is aware of its symbolic value, having a refined esoteric taste that others lack. Al-Washshāʾ devoted a chapter to apple poems, inscribed occasionally with "gold water" and silver, which were given as gifts.[71]

In several of these poems inscribed on apples, the apple appears as a trustworthy messenger who communicates between lovers. In the following poem, the apple, given a voice, testifies:

أنـا لِـلْأَحْـبـابِ بِـالـسِّـ ـرِّ وَبِـالْـوَصْـلِ رَسُـولٌ
أُتَـهَـادَى فَـأُرِقُّ الـ ـقَـلْـبَ وَالْـقَـلْـبُ مَـلُـولُ

To lovers I am a messenger,
 conveying secrets and meetings.

66. Ed. Leiden 1886, 138–39; ed. Beirut 1965, 207.

67. Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. 456 or 463/1063 or 1071) lists "greeting apples" (*tuffāḥ al-taḥiyyāt*) as one of the most prominent descriptive (*waṣf*) themes of his time (*al-ʿUmda fī maḥāsin al-shiʿr ādābihi wa-naqdih*, ed. M. M. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda, 1981), 295.

68. See J. Sharlet, "Tokens of Resentment: Medieval Arabic Stories about Gift Exchange and Social Conflict," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 11 (2011): 62–100; eadem, "The Thought that Counts in Gift Exchange Poetry by Kushajim, al-Sanawbari, and al-Sari al-Raffa," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 14.3 (2011): 235–70.

69. See A. Schippers, "Hebrew Andalusian and Arabic Poetry: Descriptions of Fruit in the Tradition of the 'Elegants' or *ẓurafāʾ*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988): 223. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (*Muḥāḍarāt al-udabāʾ*, 2: 618) dedicated a chapter to the condemnation of those who eat apples. One of the poems is by Abū l-Qāsim Naṣr b. Aḥmad al-Khubzaʾrzī, who defended himself after he was seen eating an apple:

أَكَـلْـتُ تُـفّـاحـةً فَـعـاتَـبَـنـي فَـتًـى رَآهـا كَـخَـدٍّ مَـعْـشـوقَـةِ
فَـقـاَل: خَـدُّ الْـحَـبِـيـبِ تَـأْكُـلُـهُ؟ فَـقُـلْـتُ: لا بَـلْ أَمُـصُّ مِـنْ رِيـقِـهِ

I ate an apple and was scolded by
 a young man, who saw it as a cheek of a beloved.
He said, "You consume a cheek of the beloved?"
 and I answered, "No, rather I lick her saliva."

70. Ed. Leiden 1886, 150; ed. Beirut 1965, 225.

71. Ed. Leiden 1886, 166; ed. Beirut 1965, 249.

When exchanged as a gift,
  I soften the weary heart.[72]

Another prevalent theme is the comparison of apples with precious stones, whose value is invariably diminished when compared with the apple, as can be seen in the following poem, in which the apple boasts of its superiority. The precious stone and the apple represent the two different tastes of *ẓurafāʾ* and others—refined versus ordinary:

لِي طَراواتٌ وَرِيحٌ ثُمَّ ماءٌ وَنَضارَهْ
لَيْسَ لِلْياقُوتِ فَضْلٌ كُلُّ ياقُوتٍ حِجارهْ

I have freshness and odor,
  as well as moisture and vigor.
A sapphire has no merit.
  It is nothing but a stone.[73]

In another poem, the poet argues that the apple embarrasses the precious stone, perhaps even turning the gem red in response:

حَيَّاكِ إِنْسانٌ لَهُ رَوْنَقٌ نُوَّارَةً دانِيَةً تَزْهَرُ
تُفّاحَةً حَمْراءَ مَنْقُوشَةٌ يَخْجُلُ مِنْ حُمْرَتِها الْجَوْهَرُ

A man with splendor greets you,
  O white, tender blooming flower.
A red apple inscribed,
  gems are embarrassed by its redness.[74]

Slices of fruit were also presented as gifts. A slave girl musician *ẓarīfa* (one of the *mutaẓarrifāt al-qiyān*) wrote a poem on a slice of an apple that she sent as a present to a *ẓarīf* secretary (*kātib ẓarīf*):

لَيْسَ تُفّاحَةٌ بِأَطْيَبَ طِيبًا مِنْ حَبِيبٍ مُعانِقٍ لِحَبِيبٍ

There is no apple more fragrant than
  a lover embracing his beloved.[75]

On a citron (*utrujja*) slice a *ẓarīf* wrote, comparing the smile of the beloved to a crescent moon:

72. Ed. Leiden 1886, 166; ed. Beirut 1965, 249.
73. Ed. Leiden 1886, 166; ed. Beirut 1965, 250.
74. Ed. Leiden 1886, 167; ed. Beirut 1965, 251.
75. Ed. Leiden 1886, 185; ed. Beirut 1965, 281.

أَهْدَى هِلالٌ لِكُلِّ يَوْمٍ   إذا بَدا الثَّغَر

When the smile reveals [the teeth],
A crescent moon is being given for every day.

A crescent is a common figure of speech denoting a beautiful woman, but here the image has an additional layer of meaning. The poem is written on a slice of citron, which is itself in the shape of a crescent. The smile of the beloved, the citron with its pleasant odor, and the moon all share the same shape.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Musical instruments decorated with poetic verses were a popular gift presented to female musicians, who would also inscribe verses on their own instruments. Among these instruments we find the *ʿūd* (short-necked lute), *ṭunbūr* (long-necked lute), *miḍrāb* (a plectrum), and *nāy* (end-blown reed flute). Al-Washshāʾ related that a secretary (*kātib*) presented an *ʿūd* as a gift to a female slave musician (*qayna*) with whom he was in love. He inscribed on it:

مَنْ ذا يُبَلِّغُ نَحْلَةً عَنْ عَبْدِها   أَنِّي إِلَيْكِ وَإِنْ بَعُدْتِ قَرِيبُ
تَسْتَنْطِقِينَ بِحُسْنِ صَوْتِكِ أَعْجَمًا   يَدْعُو بِذاكَ صَوابَهُ فَيُجِيبُ
فَالْعُودُ يَشْهَدُ وَالْغِناءُ بِأَنَّهُ   لَوْلاكِ لَمْ يَكُ فِي الْأَنامِ مُصِيبُ

Who will tell Naḥla about her worshiper?
I am close to you, although you are faraway.
Your beautiful voice makes the mute speak,
With it, it addresses its intellect, and the latter replies.
The *ʿūd*'s playing and the singing testify that
if not for you, no one would have found the right expression.[76]

The secretary confesses his admiration for the *qayna* and flatters her singing by complimenting her on "making the mute speak," which is connected to a known motif in Abbasid poetry, *waṣf* poetry in particular, in which the relationship between a musician and her instrument is presented as a dialogue between two human beings. The singer's beautiful voice is credited for making a mute object come to life, explaining the mystery of how a mute object like a musical instrument has such a strong effect on listeners.[77]

The inscribed instrument is a message from the lover to his beloved, but unlike a letter, which is usually read in private and known to sender and recipient only, a message on an instrument that will be played in public publicizes the message. When the singer plays her *ʿūd*, the poem is not only visible but by depicting a performance of a musician playing her *ʿūd*, the verses become a gloss of the actual performance, commenting on it. For her part, the musician playing her inscribed *ʿūd* proves the poet's claim.

76. Ed. Leiden 1886, 190; ed. Beirut 1965, 288–89.

77. See Y. Klein, "Musical Instruments as Objects of Meaning in Classical Arabic Poetry and Philosophy" (PhD diss., Harvard Univ., 2009), 38ff.

Another musical instrument that was often inscribed with poetry and gifted to female musicians was the *miḍrāb*, the *ʿūd*'s plectrum, predecessor of the modern-day *rīsha*. Al-Washshāʾ recorded the following verses inscribed on a plectrum, presented to a musician by an admirer:

يا ذا الَّذِي أَنْكَرَنِي طَرْفُهُ   إِذْ ذابَ جِسْمِي وَعَلانِي شُحُوبْ
ما مَسَّنِي ضُرٌّ وَلٰكِنَّنِي   جَفَوْتُ نَفْسِي إِذْ جَفانِي الطَّبِيبْ

O one whose gaze has been ignoring me,
 when my body became emaciated and I became lean,
I was not inflicted with a disease, but rather
 I treated myself badly when the physician mistreated me.[78]

The poet-lover informs his beloved, the musician, of his feelings toward her. His love for her subsumes and torments him to such an extent that he lost weight and became ill (losing weight is almost a requirement for anyone who wishes to be considered a true lover). The poet chose to write his poem on an *ʿūd*'s plectrum, which itself is narrow and thin. Unlike the lover, the plectrum achieves physical proximity to the beloved and is able to address her directly. It blames her for its emaciated shape, ascribing it to its lovesick torment on account of her ignoring it, but, of course, it speaks for the poet. The beloved is a "physician" who mistreats her patients, a known motif for the beloved, who is the only one who can cure her lover's "disease."

As with other musical instruments, the *miḍrāb* can produce sound—it has a voice—in a way that other physical objects, such as rings or apples, do not. In a sense, when the inscribed plectrum plays the *ʿūd*, the poem inscribed on it is set to music, without being actually sung. The suffering of the poet inscribed on the plectrum is transformed into the medium of music through the sounds of the *ʿūd*.[79]

A different use of an *ʿūd* plectrum as an agent in the interaction between the musician and her admirers can be seen in the following verse, written by the poet Abū Ghālib al-Dhahlī (d. 507/1113) on a *miḍrāb*:

أنا في كَفِّ مَهاةٍ   ذاتِ دلٍّ وَجَمال
أَبَداً أَسْلُبُ بِالتَّحْـ   ـرِيكِ أَلْبابَ الرِّجال

I am in the palm of a beautiful woman (lit. wild cow),
 coquettish and beautiful.
By moving, I constantly
 steal the hearts of men.[80]

78. Ed. Leiden 1886, 191; ed. Beirut 1965, 289.

79. One should note that the plectrum of that era was significantly larger than the modern *rīsha*, so that only parts of it would have been seen by the audience—part of the poem might have been concealed by the hand, which would have made the audience's curiosity regarding what was hidden even stronger.

80. Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi-l-wafayāt* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 2000), 16: 66.

Rather than representing the tormented lover, the plectrum in this poem is serving its master, the musician, who uses it to enchant her male audience. The movements of the plectrum move their hearts directly.

The following poem was written on a *ṭunbūr*:

يا أَوَّلَ الْحُسْنِ يا مَنْ لا نَظِيرَ لَهُ   هَلَّتْ سَحائِبَ عَيْنِي نَغْمَةُ الزِّيرِ
وَأَيُّ مُزْنَةِ غَرْبٍ لا تَسُحُّ دَمًّا   مِنْ عاشِقٍ عِنْدَ نَغَماتِ الطَّنابِيرِ

O source of all beauty, O unique one,
  the sound of the treble string has summoned the clouds of my eye.
What rain clouds from the west would not shed the blood
  of a lover, when listening to *ṭunbūr*s?[81]

Here the poet addresses the musician playing the *ṭunbūr* as "the source of all beauty," referring to himself as a tormented lover. The musician torments the poet by playing him her *ṭunbūr*, to the point that she "sheds his blood." The poem describes a moment experienced by the poet in the past, but by inscribing it on an instrument the words become relevant for every future performance of the *ṭunbūr*. The poem becomes a musical commentary, combining elements that in today's (Western) classical music culture would be found both in program notes and the post-concert review. When the musician plays her inscribed *ṭunbūr*, the absent lover-poet is replaced by the listener attending the performance. Now it is the listener who sheds tears when hearing the musician play. In this context, the listener is not only made aware of the poet's love for the musician, but is also indirectly instructed how to look at both the musician and her instrument, as the source of all beauty and that which makes lovers shed tears respectively.

CONCLUSION

In this study I have argued that inscribing poetry on mundane objects, as practiced by the *ẓurafāʾ* of Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries, created a unique way to perform and experience poetry, different from the more common recitation and silent reading. The inscribed verses interact with the object on which they are written, with the context in which the object is displayed, with the person using it, and with the poet, if other than the user of the object. When inscribed on objects worn or used in a context, the verses become indexical, pointing at whoever wears or uses them. This complex web of connections allows intricate reading options beyond those available when the verses are recited aloud or read in silence.

The verses on the various objects inscribed by the *ẓurafāʾ* would either be their own compositions, often to fit a specific object and its display in a particular situation, or verses taken from larger poems by well-known poets. The act of choosing and extracting specific verses from larger poems is itself an act of authorship. By choosing certain verses, omitting or skipping others, *ẓurafāʾ* often reshaped their meaning and conveyed a message that was different from the one received by reading the full original poem. As I have suggested, at other times the selection of verses from larger known poems would be used as an intertextual reference,

81. Ed. Leiden 1886, 191–92; ed. Beirut 1965, 290.

pointing to the larger poem, and evoking images appearing in verses that were not included in the inscribed selection.

When written on the body or on garments, the *ẓurafāʾ* were able to indirectly praise themselves and highlight favorably their characteristics and bodily features. The inscribed verses become captions extolling the bearer of the inscribed verses. Often inscriptions on the body or on garments provided a medium for the *ẓarīf* or *ẓarīfa* to display internal feelings and emotions. Feelings felt inside the body would receive verbal expression on its surface. As we have seen, the *ẓurafāʾ* would not only inscribe verses on their own bodies and garments, but also on those of their slave girls. In these cases, the slave girl's body became a signboard for the feelings of the patron or mistress, and thus, an extension of the latter's body.

The *ẓurafāʾ* of Baghdad were an elite social group. Unlike other elite groups, they were not defined by pedigree or economic status, but by mastery of a body of knowledge, a shared cultural repertoire, and adherence to a unique etiquette. Objects inscribed with verses were a medium that suited *ẓarf* culture perfectly—a sophisticated medium of expression that provided a subtle display of wit, using refined language and displaying a mastery of Arabic literature, poetry in particular. Whether in the context of gift exchange or for personal use, the objects would normally be inexpensive. The value of the *ẓarīf* object was determined by the thought put into its preparation. By inscribing it with verses of poetry—either of their own composition or borrowed from known poets—and cleverly using that object in context, the *ẓurafāʾ* were showing how sophisticated and culturally astute they were. These mundane objects of inexpensive or even ephemeral material, such as shirts, belts, or apples—objects that were then "customized" to fit a specific occasion by the inscribed verses—represented the ideal of *ẓarf* culture.