

Across place and across time: ‘reading’ the Middle Eastern Manuscript Collection in the University of Melbourne.

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Shy, short, quiet and neatly dressed Mr George Dunn (1864-1912), didact and bibliophile, rarely ventured out. When he did, it was to study manuscripts in the British Museum or the Bodleian Library, or visit the London sale rooms. When he passed away on 5 March 1912 he left behind a small group of close friends, and an enormous collection of ‘early printed books, medieval bindings, manuscripts, old silver and old clocks’ (The Times 1912). In order to accommodate the sale of his collection London auction house Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge scheduled four sales from 1913 to 1917 (Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge 1913-1917).

Mr Dunn appears as the exact opposite to the Reverend Professor John Bowman (1916-2006), the gregarious, energetic Chair of Semitic Studies at the University of Melbourne who arrived from Leeds University in 1959 with his wife and seven children. In their passion for collection-building, however, they were identical. By the time he retired in 1975 John Bowman had built an extensive university collection of some 170 Middle Eastern manuscripts (Sagona 2006). The collection includes a volume of Muḥammad Amīr Raḏavī’s poem *Haft band-i Kāshī* (catalogued as MUL 78 RAVZI). The book plate attached to its green, red and yellow marbled end paper reads ‘From the Library of George Dunn of Woolley Hall near Maidenhead’. *Haft band-i Kāshī* is a poem in praise of Alī ibn Abī Tālib, cousin and son in law of Muhammad, fourth of the *rāshidūn* (rightly guided) caliphs and considered the first Shiite Imam. Beautifully illuminated in black and red Nasta’liq script on a gold background, the aesthetic of this manuscript, embodied in the vibrant, floral *sar-lawḥ* (frontespiece) on the *unwān* (opening) page links the religious devotion of Muḥammad Amīr Raḏavī, the passion of George Dunn the collector and the commitment of Professor Bowman the scholar.

John Bowman’s interests, the study of ancient languages, and religion, are reflected across the collection: Qur’ans and commentary on the Qur’an; religious texts ranging from Sufism to a Syriac commentary on the Gospels; books of poetry, histories, educational textbooks, biographies; books about astrology, mathematics, philosophy, weaponry, grammar and more. Scripts, in Arabic and Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Ethiopic, Syriac, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Pushtu, Prakrit and Mongol, are presented in a range of calligraphic styles, including the Kūfī-derived form of Naskh, the Sertā form of Syriac, the north African Maghrebi script and a range of Nasta’liq scripts including the rhythmic *Sīyāh Mashqis*. The inks and pigments used in the calligraphy and the exquisite illuminations evidence hundreds of years of trade and manufacture, in the complex chemistry of black *Murakkabi ṭāvūsī* (Peacock Ink) from Iran; the deep blue lapis lazuli mined in Afghanistan and traded east and west along the Silk Road; and the poisonous, vibrant scarlet of Chinese cinnabar. By the middle of the twentieth century, under the stewardship of Professor Bowman, these volumes and their histories had arrived in Australia.

The *Gulistān*, or ‘The Rose Garden’, written by Persian poet Abū-Muhammad Muslih al-Dīn bin Abdallāh Shīrāzī (1210 – 1292 CE), otherwise known as Sa’dī, is one of the most influential and well-known works of Persian literature. Professor Bowman collected five *Gulistān* manuscripts. *Gulistān* MUL 61, which is annotated with Turkish commentary, has a particularly ornate gilded cover, and rich *unwān* page. Light bounces from the painted gold in the text and along the borders. It bears two bookplates; that of Falkland Warren with a coat of arms bearing the motto ‘Curre ut Vincas’ (run in order to win) and the even more ornate bookplate of E. Denison Ross.

Falkland Warren (1834-1908), a career soldier and colonial officer, collected and dealt in antiquities. He served in India during the 1850s, and in Cyprus where, from 1879 until 1889 he was Chief Secretary. The British Museum acquired material from his collection through sale or donation

in 1888 and 1910 (British Museum). Orientalist and linguist, E Denison Ross (1871-1940) was Professor of Persian at University College London in 1896, then Principal of the Calcutta Madrasah Muslim College from 1901. From 1914 to 1916 he worked in the Prints and Drawings Department of the British Museum, leaving to become the first director of the University of London's School of Oriental Studies. In 1939, he relocated to Istanbul as Head of the British Information Bureau to develop Anglo-Turkish relations, where he died in 1940 (Ross 1943).

Denison Ross' name can also be found as a pencil inscription on a manuscript of Persian poetry, *Rāz va niyāz* (MUL 112). Another manuscript, *Kullīyāt-i Sa'dī* ('Collected works of Sadi', MUL 81) has the inscription. 'To Mr Ross / a present from Fritz Rosen/ in return for help with his/ Persian Colloquial Grammar'. Fritz Rosen (1856-1935) was a German Orientalist and German Foreign Minister in 1921. While the University of Melbourne catalogue refers to 'Ross, Vincent. Former owner.', the 'Mr Ross' referred to in the inscription is most likely E Denison Ross, who Fritz Rosen thanks in his foreword to his book on Persian Grammar '... for the kind assistance he has lent me by reading a great part of the proofsheets while I was in Persia' (Rosen 1897).

One of the most beautiful volumes in the collection *Gulistān* (MUL 59) was, according to the pencil inscription within, commissioned by Charles Marriott Caldecott (1806-1883) from Ahmad Ali in 1836. Caldecott's book plate has the somewhat ambiguous motto 'Utrumour paratus' ('prepared for either'). Charles Marriott was a career civil servant in India. Working from the birthdates of his children, in India and then in England, MUL 59 would have been commissioned prior to Caldecott's return to England with his family, sometime after 1837 and prior to 1841 (<https://caldicott.one-name.net/2018/06/30/abraham-caldecott-lord-of-the-manor-at-rugby-1763-1829/>). This would have been a valuable and time-consuming commission and it is tempting to think that Charles Caldecott organised its production as a significant memento of his time in India

Stories of knowledge, trade and manufacture are also held in the materials of the manuscripts. Raman analysis, by the University's School of Physics, identified a range of pigments (Nugent, Sloggett and Kerry 1999). Lapis lazuli occurs in both the texts that are bound together as MUL 17; the 17th century text *Ṣad kalamih Shāḥ Vilāyat* ('One Hundred Sayings by Ali') and the 16th century text *Manzūmih dar Ḥajj* ('A description of the holy places and description of the Pilgrimage to Mecca, plans & illumination by Nezami'). Lapis lazuli is rich blue mineral, a complex silicate of sodium and aluminium prepared by crushing, heating and mixing with lead white. It was traded from Afghanistan east into Asia and west into Europe. Lapis lazuli was also found in *Hadiqua of Sana I* (MUL 86) a Sufi poem copied in the 16th century by Ali Husaini Imad and in *Dīwān-i Āṣṣaft* (MUL 87) written by 'Alī al-Meshedī and tentatively dated around 1877. Other blue pigments include the deep blue organic indigo, manufactured from the Indigoferra genus that is native to the Indian sub-continent. On the *unwān* of MUL 87 indigo has been added to strengthen the blue of the lapis lazuli. The *unwān* of MUL 17 also contained the violet-blue azurite, a basic copper compound prepared through a process of grinding, washing, levigation and flotation; the same process that produced the bright green copper carbonate malachite, which is also found in this manuscript.

The highly toxic cinnabar, otherwise known as vermilion, and produced by heating mercuric acid and sulphur together to form mercuric sulphide, was found in *Qur'ān* (MUL 3) and in MUL 17. It was also evident in a particularly finely ground state in an orange petal of MUL 87, indicating the high standards of the workshop that provided materials for this manuscript. Other toxic pigments included the arsenic-sulphide pigments; the brilliant red/orange realgar, and the deep yellow orpiment, which were found in the *unwān* of MUL 87 and MUL 17 in *Ṣad kalamih Shāḥ Vilāyat*, and in the buildings, palm leaves, trunks and decorative borders in *Manzūmih dar Ḥajj*. The lead-based pigments included red lead and white lead, and the yellow lead oxide known as massicot. In *Dastūr-i Himmat: qiṣṣah-'i Kāmrūp va Kāmlatā* ('The love story of Kamrup and Kamlata', MUL

134), and in MUL 87, the red haematite, a natural anhydrous ferric oxide (iron ore) was enriched with the addition of both massicot and yellow lead monoxide.

In the past decade the collection has been reactivated as a teaching resource, attracting masters students and doctoral candidates in cultural materials conservation. Leila Allagh (2020) recently completed a PhD using interdisciplinarity approaches to the study the two manuscripts, *Şad kalamih Shāh Vilāyat* and *Manzūmih dar Hājj*, that form MUL 17: and Dr Sadra Zekrgoo (2018) was awarded his PhD for an historical, textural and materials analysis of Peacock Ink.

In 2016 the University Library digitised the Middle Eastern Manuscript Collection (<https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/151>), and today it is possible to explore the manuscripts from anywhere in the world.

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