

Ramadan at Macgeorge House

Letter to a friend

Amir H. Zekrgoo

Dear friend

I am writing to you from Melbourne, where Mandana, Sadra and I have been staying for over a month now, on the Macgeorge Fellowship program, studying the University of Melbourne's collection of historical Middle Eastern manuscripts.¹

We are accommodated in the beautiful and spacious Macgeorge House. In 1910 Norman Macgeorge, an Australian artist and patron of the arts, and his wife, May, commissioned the architect Harold Desbrowe Ansell to design them a home. In this house they lived a vivid life of art, beauty and intellectual engagement with the young artists of their time. And they made sure that their passion for art would endure after their deaths, by bequeathing the house and some funds to the University of Melbourne. With that money the university established the Macgeorge Fellowship for:

the use of the house as residence for distinguished persons in the world of art who then become involved with students in Arts at post-graduate level, give seminars and create focus within the University, and in the house, for the encouragement of the arts.²



The house is decorated with Norman Macgeorge's own paintings and his books are still on the shelves. The home and furniture are in their original shape; the house in Ivanhoe is set on a steep block of some 8,000 square metres, with a river passing by. How fascinating does that sound? Every night we go to sleep in Norman and May's queen-size, Victorian-style, iron-framed bed with silver-plate ornamentation, surrounded by dark wooden walls. And we wake up to the enchanting melody of the dawn wind that travels between the branches, and the songs of birds: kookaburras, magpies and cockatiels. Among these I could hear a strange bird-song that is different from the others: it sounds digital—as if produced by an electronic machine. Despite all efforts I was not able

to actually see this particular bird. The whole thing however feels so pleasantly surreal.

Then there are the varieties of colourful parrots that add to the visual interest of the setting. Among them is one species that has so many different-colour feathers, all on the body of a single bird: red, blue, yellow, green and orange. But despite their cheerful outfit, their faces look so serious—a funny combination. They resemble clowns who want to persuade the audience of their



Previous page: Macgeorge House.
Photographs by Amir H. Zekrgoo.

Mandana and the parrots

Below: The author at Macgeorge House.



seriousness merely through putting on a grim facial expression; how convincing could that be?

Our days are less romantic but just as fulfilling. On weekday mornings, the 15-minute walk to the bus stop is a blessing in disguise. We shiver while breathing the cold, crisp and clean air of Melbourne. It is July, but in the southern hemisphere it is the heart of winter. The chilly weather here is a pleasant contrast to the tropical Malaysian climate where we have been residing for over a decade. I put on my black leather jacket that I bought in Istanbul a few years ago, wear my black beret purchased in Rome, and wrap around my neck a long, soft, warm and colourful

Kashmir shawl that Mandana brought for me from India last year; the colours of the shawl resemble those of the parrots next door.

We catch a bus to the corner of Lygon Street, near the Melbourne General Cemetery, an impressive 43-hectare necropolis which stretches as far as the eye can see. I am always fascinated by cemeteries, or anything that reminds me of death—the greatest of all mysteries, yet the most real fact of life. I love to spend a few peaceful hours of contemplation there, a luxury that the fast pace of life does not allow. I think it is good to have a soothing symbol of death in the middle of a metropolis, to balance the ever-increasing speed of the rat-race that most of us are engaged in. Cemeteries always send this same calming message to me: take it easy; nothing is as permanent as it appears.

From the cemetery, in less than 10 minutes a tram takes us to our destination: the doorstep of the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne. The museum has a minimalist modern grey façade with random broken Greek and Roman statues and pillars projecting out of it—a very contemporary scene (pictured opposite).

Our working place is the conservation laboratory of the museum, which has an entrance at

the rear of the building. This has a modest, traditional red-brick exterior that bears no relation whatsoever to the modern, imposing front. The contrast reminds me of my generation: stuck between old values and new trends, pulled in opposite directions by tradition and modernity, struggling to maintain a degree of balance in between. On the modern façade of the museum the fast pace of life is reflected: fragments of ancient heritage on a plain grey background—a ground with no cultural or historical identity. It displays artefacts that each represent a long and old heritage, detached from their roots and hanging in limbo. Packed together like random bits of data, with no clue of their meaning, relation, direction or message, they make me think of a warehouse of art, a databank of aesthetic references and cultural heritage flashing out to impress the passers-by: a museum in the modern sense of the word.

In order to reach the back entrance we have to go through a narrow passage on the right of the building. There a cosy café stretches alongside the corridor. With its glass portico and grey (aluminium and steel) seats it blends well with the museum's modern façade. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the sight of a few customers—all in their office attire, enjoying their croissants and reading

Façade of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, featuring Christine O'Loughlin, *Cultural rubble* (detail), 1993, reinforced polyester resin. Reg. no. 1993.0019.000.A.000.D, commissioned by the University of Melbourne with funds provided by the Ian Potter Foundation, 1993, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

the morning newspapers before starting their work—is very appealing. This could have been a good beginning for our active days as well, but we cannot. We are both fasting. It is the holy month of Ramadan, and we are not supposed to eat or drink from dawn to dusk. This in itself is a unique experience.

Our daily activities take place in a different world altogether: there, at the conservation lab of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) we experience time-travel. Surrounded by old (16th- to 19th-century) Middle Eastern manuscripts of various types from Special Collections in the Baillieu Library of the University of Melbourne, we are immersed in literature, science and arts produced by extremely knowledgeable, highly talented, yet very modest individuals. A master calligrapher who had completed a manuscript over 300 pages long in superb handwriting, for instance, mentions his name at the end of the text in a most humble manner, using the expression 'God's least worthy servant' (*al-Abd al-Haqir* or *al-Abd Al-Faqir*) before his name. And this is not an isolated case; over the three decades of my research on Islamic manuscripts I have found that whenever an artist puts his name or signature under his work, it is wrapped in sheer modesty. Yes, there was in





fact a period, a golden period, when modesty was a culture: a time when fame was not the ultimate aim.

The manuscripts bring together many skills and talents: papermakers, illuminators, painters, calligraphers, book-binders, each with their distinguished skills, joining hands to bring to life, again and again, outstanding works of prodigy in theology, art, science and literature. Furthermore, they exhibit cross-cultural understanding in a most refined manner. They make us think about our modern state of mind—our degree of appreciating others. The modern person often glorifies himself or herself as being more advanced in understanding, and more tolerant of other cultures. An in-depth study of the collection reveals a different situation: it appears that the creators and users of such works had a higher degree of tolerance towards, and a deeper appreciation of, other cultures than we do today. I came across a 13th-century Persian literary masterpiece, the *Gulistan* of Sa'di, penned in 19th-century India in excellent *Nasta'liq* script, commissioned by an Englishman for his personal use. To me that is cross-cultural understanding in practice.

Studying the collection of old manuscripts—their form, content and the science involved in creating

them—I found many things that are very relevant to our present time; they emphasise the fact that wisdom and knowledge do not have expiry dates. We can learn a great deal from the wisdom of the past.

While I deal with the form and content of the manuscripts, Mandana, a conservation scientist, is fascinated by their scientific secrets. She spends most of her time analysing pigments and paper fibres and seems to be as excited as I am, dealing with the microscopic images, studying the dyes used and assessing the deteriorating aspects of the manuscripts such as ageing factors, chemical and physical decay, cracks and flaking paint.

The day gradually moves towards its end and we get ready to go back

'home'. Home for us in the Ramadan of 2013 is Macgeorge House. We must reach home by the time the sun disappears over the horizon and the darkness absorbs the daylight into its infinite ambiguity. Only then can we break our fast. But first we need to buy some groceries. These often include pita bread, feta cheese, pitted green olives, dates, walnuts, fresh parsley and coriander, spring onions and tomatoes. Luckily on our way back we don't need to change buses; two or three minutes from the lab, we catch the same bus that takes us to the junction of The Boulevard and Heidelberg Road. From there, the 15-minute walk to Macgeorge House has become a daily ritual. Carrying groceries is a bit taxing. By the time



Below: Dr Mandana Barkeshli with Sophie Lewincamp at the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation.

Bottom: Microscopic image of a detail of one of the manuscripts (MUL 17).

we reach home it is almost dark.

Mandana sets the table for the three of us. Sadra, our son, is now 29, a paper conservator by profession. We feel good that he ended up in an academic field related to our expertise—mostly Mandana’s. This has somehow brought us closer to each other; we have more to talk about and this can lead to deeper understanding and affection—I hope. And now, we are experiencing this closeness at a different level, a unique concord of time and place: the month of Ramadan at Macgeorge House.

While Mandana arranges the table I prepare the black tea, a must at our *iftar* table. As far as I can remember, hot tea and dates have been the first items for breaking the fast. It has become a ritual. The dates we bought are imported from Mexico, and we are having it with ‘Australian Breakfast Tea’ that I bought just to try. It tastes fine, though I cannot see any difference from English Breakfast Tea. I do understand, however, the wish to stress one’s nationality to increase sales. Maybe pretty soon there will be ‘Malaysian Breakfast Tea’ or ‘Iranian Breakfast Tea’ on the market, which I am sure will find their own targeted customers.

Nights are peaceful and, to some degree, mystical. The neighbourhood is very quiet. The tall and dense trees



Detail of illuminated page of a manuscript of *Dirwan-e Ahli-e Shirazi. Majmū'ah'i az Mawlānā Ahli Shirāzī*, c. 1850s. Call no. MUL 80 SHIRAZI, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. A digital version is available at <http://cat.lib.unimelb.edu.au/record=b2629278-S6>.





Left: Macgeorge House interiors, day and night.

Below: Reproduction of Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Magnificat*, c. 1485 (original held in the Uffizi, Florence). Macgeorge House Collection, University of Melbourne.

surrounding the house wrap the area in a dreamlike atmosphere and the brown walls of the interior resonate in the dimness. The ambience summons contemplation that stretches deep into the night.

Sometimes I cannot sleep well. The other night I got up at 3 am. Didn't feel like doing anything in particular. So I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV just to kill time. Changing the channels aimlessly in search of something—I did not know what. The channels ended at 30, and from there the radio channels began. I went on and on and, suddenly, on channel 37, I heard a recitation of Persian poetry. It was Rumi's *Mathnawi*, recited in a sweet Afghani accent jointly by a man and a woman in touching, low, modest voices. It felt so unreal: Ramadan, Macgeorge House, Melbourne TV, Persian poetry, Afghani accent, at three o'clock in the morning. It is a different experience altogether.

Norman Macgeorge must have been an interesting fellow. He was probably raised as a Christian. I assume this because of his name and the fact that he was a white man of European descent. He also kept a small painting with a Christian theme at his house (pictured above).

But judging from the types of books Norman read, and I have



seen a number of them stacked on the shelves of his house, he clearly developed an interest in Indian religions: Hinduism and Buddhism in particular. This appreciation was apparently much deeper than mere academic curiosity, for Norman chose to be cremated after he passed away in 1952. And here I am, spending the most holy month of the Islamic faith, fasting and experiencing a unique sense of spirituality in his house. I pray for the souls of Norman and May Macgeorge. Obviously, religious spiritual experience, at its very foundation, is trans-religious and trans-cultural.

It has been a miraculous month for me. I'll carry with me pleasant memories and look forward to returning. Next time I intend to study the manuscripts in more detail and help their body and spirit survive the fast pace of life of our modern age.

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The Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection in Special Collections at the Baillieu Library has been catalogued, with high-quality digital versions available online. Original manuscripts may be available for research upon request: see www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/collections/rarebooks/memss.html.

- 1 The collection of Middle Eastern manuscripts held in Baillieu Library Special Collections at the University of Melbourne comprises 183 works. The core of the collection was 100 manuscripts transferred to the library from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies in 1972. The manuscripts are mostly in Persian and Arabic, with a few in Urdu, Syriac, Turkish and other languages. Most date from the 19th century, but some may date back to the 15th century. There are a number of Qurans, but the collection is not exclusively Islamic: it includes a Maronite Christian prayer book in Arabic and a Syriac Christian commentary on the Gospels. There are also grammars, dictionaries and a few fictional and poetic works.
- 2 Ray Marginson, 'Norman Macgeorge and Macgeorge House'. I found a copy of this paper at the house but later found out that it was published as 'Macgeorge, Norman (1872–1952)' in the *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 10, Melbourne University Press, 1986.