

# Review

## Symposium on the care and conservation of Middle-Eastern manuscripts

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From 26 to 28 November 2007 the University's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation hosted a symposium on the care and conservation of Middle-Eastern manuscripts. The main themes covered were the materials and techniques of production, history and traditions, and cultural issues related to holding and caring for this type of material. Australian and international experts presented a series of lectures over the three days. Day one provided a general overview of the symposium's three themes, while days two and three covered the themes of cultural context and materials and techniques in more detail. The symposium opened with a welcome by the Wurundjeri Elder, Mrs Joy Wandin Murphy.

Dr Adrian Gully, Senior Lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne, discussed the historic role of manuscripts as written records in pre-modern Islamic society and the development from oral traditions to oral/writing traditions.

Pam Pryde, Curator of Special Collections, University of Melbourne, spoke about the University's own collection of Middle-Eastern manuscripts, initiated by Professor John Bowman in the 1950s to provide his students with original primary

sources for their studies. Ms Pryde described the collection and discussed its past and present management including cataloguing and conservation.

Professor Dr Amir H. Zekrgoo, Professor of Islamic and Oriental Arts at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, International Islamic University of Malaysia, in Kuala Lumpur, presented three papers on cultural context. The first introduced the different concepts of 'religious', 'sacred', and 'non-religious' in Islamic arts, which any person handling Islamic art should understand in order to 'know the nature of the work he deals with'. People also need to respect the religious restrictions on handling sacred Islamic art, in particular the issues of religious 'pollution and purification'. Professor Zekrgoo's second paper elaborated on the sacred art of Islam, of which the Koranic art of calligraphy is the most sacred form. He showed examples of Persian marriage contracts, explaining their artistic, symbolic, legal and sacred significance. He emphasised their ornamental and poetic text, from which he recited a beautiful passage. The professor's final paper elaborated on a non-religious example of Islamic art, a renowned 10th century manuscript titled *Shahnamah*, or *The*

*book of kings*, a monumental epic renowned for its length, script, illustrations, adornments and layout.

Dr Mandana Barkeshli, Founder-Director of Art and Identity, Kuala Lumpur, and Head of the Conservation Subcommittee of the Islamic Manuscript Association, also presented three papers. The first focussed on the preservation and management of Islamic heritage. She described how the Islamic Arts Museum of Malaysia has developed guidelines based on Shari'ah (Islamic law) to manage its collection. The Museum achieved this by understanding the difference between 'religious', 'sacred' and 'other' Islamic artifacts, and also by respecting the dictates of 'ritual pollution' and 'ritual purification'. For example during conservation or cleaning 'unclean substances' such as brush bristles and glue made with pork products should not be used. She discussed the need for institutions managing Islamic collections to communicate with each other and to establish collection management guidelines. Dr Barkeshli then discussed the materials and techniques used by the masters of Persian manuscripts and miniature paintings from the 13th to the 19th centuries in order to prevent chemical and biological damage to their art. She focussed on two dyes: henna,

whose anti-microbial property resists a common fungus that attacks paper, and saffron, which buffers against the destructive effects on paper of green verdigris pigment. Dr Barkeshli's final paper described her study of the materials of Iranian illuminated manuscripts and miniature paintings. To support her findings she referred to historical documents such as traditional recipes for pigments, as well as to current scientific analytical methods.

David Jacobs, Senior Conservation Officer in the British Library, presented his first paper on the structure, materials and decoration of Islamic bookmaking. He discussed the origins and development of Islamic bookbinding both geographically and chronologically. He described the craftsmanship of the leather bindings and embossed designs, using examples he had made himself due to the very small number of historical examples that have survived unaltered. He also described colours and embellishments such as filigree, gold paint, and painted lacquer. In his second paper Jacobs described the characteristically light or impermanent structure of Middle-Eastern bindings, and the signs and problems of deterioration. He discussed conservation practices at the

British Library, including pigment consolidation and paper repairs, and the dilemma of whether or not to totally rebind a book so that it can be used as a research object, in contrast to a museum exhibition object.

Mike Wheeler, Senior Paper Conservator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, focussed on a comprehensive research project now in its tenth year, which explores the analysis, conservation and display of Mughal and Islamic manuscripts. A highlight was his discussion of the infamous pigment Indian yellow, originally produced from the urine of cows fed exclusively on mango leaves. This diet led to a painful death for the cows and the pigment was eventually banned.

Shingo Ishikawa, paper conservator, described the conservation of a masterpiece produced by Mishkin Qalam, a renowned 19th century Persian calligrapher. Past reframing had caused some skinning (removal) of the surface, but during the conservation treatment the lost pieces were fortunately found and re-attached.

Anita Chowdry, a British painter and illustrator who incorporates traditional techniques and materials in her work, presented a paper on the studio practices of artists and craftsmen in the royal ateliers of India



in the 16th and 17th centuries. Her research methodology included the study of contemporary journals, treatises on painting materials and studio practice, bequests of the descendants of court painters, oral histories, and analysing pigments, tools and techniques. She also described the hierarchy of labour within the studio.

Cheryl Porter, Director of the Montefiascone Project, London, and Senior Conservator and Coordinator of Preservation/Conservation with the Ghesaurus Islamicus Foundation, discussed pigments and organic colours used in 14th to 17th century Armenian and Egyptian manuscripts.

Symposium participants inspecting the University of Melbourne's collection of Middle-Eastern manuscripts in the Rare Book Room, Special Collections, Baillieu Library.  
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The highlight of her paper was learning of her quest to collect the cochineal insect by hand from the fields of the Ararat valley in eastern Turkey, and her subsequent attempts to reproduce the traditional red pigment.

Caroline Checkley-Scott, Senior Conservator with the Wellcome Trust, London, discussed her 15-year study of the history and conservation of early Christian manuscripts and books, particularly Syrian texts. She described traditional bookbinding techniques, structural weaknesses and problems of deterioration, and advised on conservation measures.

Sophie Lewincamp, Paper Conservator at the Australian War Memorial, presented a paper co-authored with Yasmeen Khan, Senior Book Conservator at the Library of Congress, on an extensive study and analysis of fragments from early Korans at the Library of Congress. The study involved identifying scripts, analysing materials, techniques and equipment such as pens and inks, embellishments, pigments, and parchments, and also the use of SEM-EDX sampling.

Karin Scheper, Book Conservator at the University Library in Leiden, described a conservation assessment project which involved setting up a database to record and monitor the

condition of items in the University's Arabic manuscript collection.

Associate Professor Robyn Sloggett, Director of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, spoke about the University of Melbourne's Middle-Eastern manuscript collection. Although Professor Bowman initiated the collection to provide material for the study of language and texts, the collection today is also valued for providing 'a wealth of information about the production of such manuscripts'. She discussed the conservation assessment of the collection, and the use of RAMAN spectroscopy to analyse pigments *in situ*.

Two workshops were also offered. A two-day master class for conservators and bookbinders, led by David Jacobs, covered the traditional methods, techniques and materials for preventive conservation of Islamic manuscripts, while Anita Chowdry led a workshop on Indo-Persian painting.

The symposium, which was sponsored by Archival Survival, was well attended and included delegates from the United Kingdom, USA and India. It created an environment for increasing knowledge and understanding of Middle-Eastern manuscripts, by exposing the research

and practical work of academics, conservators, craftspeople and collection managers. The event also created an opportunity for future communication and exchange of information and ideas. The University of Melbourne had a special interest in organising the symposium due to its holding of a significant collection, which attendees had the opportunity to view closely in a special viewing session hosted by the University Library.

One outcome of the symposium is some discussion of employing a conservation binder to work on the University's collection in the future. The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation also plans to create a website for the symposium, enhanced by images of items from the University's collection. This will provide international experts access to the collection and also the opportunity to add information online.

Claire Patullo is currently undertaking a Master of Arts (Cultural Materials Conservation) degree at the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. She also holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree Conversion (Graphic Design) and works as a Project Officer Australiana (Preservation) in the Special Collections of the Baillieu Library.