He meant that his poems for the cover inscription had lent a new air to it.

The matters remained in the inscriptions on a binding were probably based on the arrangement of the first folio(s) of the manuscript, usually inside faqih, and/or letters which are found on the recto side or on a double frontispiece. The contents included the title of the book, the name of the author or that of the owner, the treasury of a king or prince, etc. Inscriptions are sometimes so mixed with arabi-

The geographical distribution of this kind of binding within the Islamic world. In which regions book covers with inscrip-

tions were commonly found? What kind of cultural connec-
tion was involved?

I. Afsar, Inscriptions on the Covers of Islamic Manuscripts

Inscriptions on outer and/or inner covers were not re-
stricted to decorative aspects. Sometimes the binder ex-

gtressed his art. For instance, two rabi’s (couples) have been

written for the cover of a copy of Bayz’s Masnavi, then mean-
ing is primarily related with the cover rather than with

the text itself.

This cover is that of a piece of the Garden of Eden. It

is the magic mirror of Cosmicoramic for the seen-sight-

If you open it, it is [cause of] the loss of the eyes.

[And if you close it, it is the deposit of pearls and jewels.

This cover which is abundant with many kinds of pleasure / Is serene, scenic and lit like the sun and moon /

Those who see in fine lines of verses will comment that

It is a tumult room with ten thousand hours from paradise.

Another Persian leather binding of the same century in the Vever collection contains the following dishe in two panels:

This manuscript is that of a paradise of another kind / Its handwriting is like [lit] flowers and herbs of other kinds.

It was common to compare the covers with the paradise (riqua) or indulgence) since they included many colourful plants, animals and birds. Saraf al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi wrote a poem for a new lost book cover, incorporating the date of its com-

pilation as a chronogram:

[He] said as the date of [making] this paradise, O Firdaws, peace be upon thee.

Firdaws’ alam is a chronogram the value of which is

841 (1437–38). ‘Ali Yazdi has another line for it:

The third point, which should be investigated, is the functional relationship between the cover inscriptions and the text of the manuscript itself.

The material used for inscribed covers is usually either (i) stamped or tooled leather or (ii) lacquer. As far as we can

judge from the evidence presently available, inscriptions on leather appear in the early 8th–10th century. The dating of leather bindings of the period relies mostly on external clues such as the covers themselves and the date of the manu-

script — if we can confidently state that the covers are con-
temporary with the date of the copy. The case of inscribed lacquer covers is different: many of them bear the date of pro-
duction, an innovation that became fashionable among book-
binders because providing inscriptions for lacquer covers was easier. It may however be argued that the date is often of that of the copy rather than of the covers themselves.

The information of cover inscriptions

Cover inscriptions provide some useful and interesting pieces of information, which will be listed here.

I. Artistic evaluation of the book cover

The deer and birds refer to the actual figures on the book cover.

In one of the inscriptions on the cover of the book, it is said:

In the same breath, it is said:

This cover is unique in its beauty / It is a manifest error to compare it with the painting from China // It is exactly befitted to the stature of the beloved of speech just the same as the ceramic gold clothes of idols.

In an inscription on a manuscript of the Qur’an, the Prophet’s seal and the word ‘kutub’ are mentioned.

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It should be noted that both Ḳalhun and Findalun mean paradise, the former being an Arabic word and the latter a Persian one. Ḳalhun is also the name of the angel guarding the gate of Paradise.

2. Exaltation of the book in general

Writing poems suitable for cover inscriptions was regarded as a special art. Bookbinders inscribed sometimes poems which were devoted exclusively to the importance of art and manuscripts in general, such as the famous poems of Jami about books. Here are samples of poems found on the cover of the Amir Ḥusrav’s Ḥusama in the Vever collection, which has already been mentioned:

No more the song of love and sorrow is heard, just the sound of the seagull— ==========================================================================

There is no comparison in the world better than a book. // There is no sympathy in this sorrow-stricken abode and time but a book // Every moment in the corner of solitude, it provides you [much] comfort without any harm.

3. The title of the book

The titles of the books in some cover inscriptions are either clearly stated or implied. Bookbinders usually preferred implication to direct statement of the title, because they considered that allusions gave more importance to the inscriptions. Here are some examples for both ways; on all the bindings mentioned below, the inscription is located on the fore-edge flap.

A. Clear statement of the title (listed according to the chronological order):

1. A leather cover of the Ḥusama of Amir Ḥusrav Dhibvil, copied dated 867/1462–3 in Bagdad (Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, R. 1021) [8]. The two distiches in nasta’ālīq are inscribed within two panels too gilded. The title is in the first line: Fung Gung-san Ḥusama-yew Ḥusrav. In the second line: Ḥusrav san-da Liang-si Aṣrsi-lu Nymu.

2. A leather cover of a Kūth al-Tayrād, copied in 874/1469–70 in Egypt or Syria, now in the Chester Beatty Library, No. 357 [9]. The tooled inscription in gold is placed in a panel with a small foliated panel on each side. It reads: Al-Ṭanin min al-Tayrād il-Qudrāt wālī manhahib Ahl Ḥusnā. A leather cover of the Muhavvīn of Rūmī, copied in 887/1482 for Salāḥ Husayn Basyira in Herat (Istanbul, Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, 1905) [10]. Its lacquered inscription in nushūsh is found in four panels in an armet pattern; it says:

If you want to treat the form of the Doomsday / You will not sense the scent of meaning / It exalted a moment by my holy breath enjoying peace of mind / For I am indeed the angel guarding the gate of paradise.

B. Implicit title

It can usually be found in the verses or phrases of cover inscriptions, as shown in some of the instances mentioned above, e.g. the name of Jami on the cover of his Divān, Amir Ḥusrav on the cover of his Prophet Gung, and Qohlit on the cover of his Kūth al-Tayrād. Two other examples could be added:

4. The name of the author

It is customary to include interesting poems or phrases expressing the subject matter or status of the book. Here are some examples:

5. Allusions and relevance to the text

It was customary to include interesting poems or phrases expressing the subject matter or status of the book. Here are some examples:

6. A lacquer cover of a copy of Jami’s Hamse, completed in 951/1544–5 by Muḥammad Dargānīn (Vienna, National Library, FA 66) [13]. Two distiches in nasta’ālīq can be read in four panels in an armet pattern. The inscription has been damaged and its reading is difficult.

7. A gilt leather cover of Firdawṣ’s Šāhnāma, copied in 931/1524–5 by Muḥammad Ḥusayn (Saint-Petersburg, IO, D 184) which according to an inscription was produced in Tabriz [14]. The cover inscription in nasta’ālīq has two lines placed in two panels in an armet pattern.

8. A gilt leather cover of Kalīyudr of Sa’dī, copied in 975/1565 (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Suppl. Pers. S 141) [11]. Two distiches in ḥaššūsh are inscribed on the upper and lower panels of the front cover:

Go and be a Sa’di-like gleaner / In order to gather the crop of Knowledge.

In order to be interested in the speech of Sa’di’s / In order to have good ears for [Sa’di-like] advice, benefiting from it.

9. A loose leather cover of Jami’s Divan preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Suppl. Pers. S 2050 A [16] which has already referred to (see No. 4). Apart from the verse mentioned above, two other distiches can be found:

This is the book of Jami full of love songs / I took it with me to present it to my aching King.

In order to be interested in the speech of Sa’di’s / In order to have good ears for [Sa’di-like] advice, benefiting from it.

10. A leather cover of Firdawṣ’s Shāhnāma from the 1171st century (Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 358–1885) [18]. Two distiches in nasta’īq are inscribed on the fore-edge flap, denoting the relationship between the cover and Firdawṣ’s poem:

11. A leather cover of the same work, copied in 932/1525–6 (Saint-Petersburg, IO, D 184) [19]. The spine of the flap and back cover has two armet panels housing a distich in nasta’īq:

12. A binding from 19th century with a depiction on both covers of the battle between Naḥīr Saḥr Aṣṣaf and Muḥammad Saḥ in India at Karal (Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 1827–1828) [20]. The 10 distiches found on the front and back covers are the same in both cases, though the battle scenes are different.
It was also customary to include the best passages of a poet’s works on the cover of his Divan, as is the case with many manuscripts of the Divan of Hafiz for instance.


14. A loose leather cover from 1179/1767 century, certain from Kazvin (Brau, Fehling’s collection) [22]. There are six distiches in nasta’liq from a distich by Hafiz with these opening lines:

شجر مهر زمستان بهم گذره سر بر دو نگاه دو هم‌دروی از خان دو نگاهی دو هم‌دروی از خان دو نگاهی
O judge, what will the pen of your power do
The musals that suit the government of the world.

15. A loose lacquer cover of a Divan of Hafiz with a miniature from Isfahan (Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 1785—1960) [23]. Five distiches in poor nasta’liq from a gazel with the following opening lines are inscribed in the compartments of the border:

6. Reverence for the book and the manuscript

Qu’ranic verses, holy traditions, and the Divine Attributes were inscribed on Qur’ an covers as a way of revering them. It was the case with the magnificent bindings of prayer books such as Sahlīya—ṣajjāydiyya. Inscriptions on Qur’ an covers are more varied; they include short Qu’ranic verses, especially the Āṣāṣū al-kurṣī, but very often the following quotation from the sura Āṣāṣū al-kurṣī:

لَا تُكَلَّسْ عَلَيْهِمْ بِمَا كَانَ مِنْ فَتْحٍ (9:100)
In a book that is protected. None but the purified shall touch it (Qur’an LVI. 77—79).

On many bindings, the last verse is found alone on the fore-edge flap. Traditions from the Prophet, Imām ʿībār or Ṣafīkh, the names of the twelve Imāms, the prayer to be recited after reading the Holy Qur’ an or supplication formulas (Yā Subhā al-ʿazīz, Ṣaṭūrāt al-siqāya, ʿImān Muḥammad Biṣrūr, etc.) are inscribed on the bindings of some Qu’ran manuscripts made in Šīrāz. ninya. The covers of a Qu’ran made in 1308 have a portrait of the Prophet, with some information about his figure; the Throne Verse, the sūrah al-Baqarah (CXXI), the names of the twelve Imāms and the prayer which is to be said when seeing the crescent have also been inscribed [24]. Further examples can also be mentioned:

16. A loose leather cover with the Throne Verse inscribed in gilded inside the 10 armlet panels on its borders, certainly from a Qu’ran manuscript, now in the Islamic Museum in Berlin (No. I. 839 [25]. It is said to have been produced in Egypt of Syria during the 8th/14th century.

17. گذشته‌ای از هفته، دختری از دل و سر به آرامش و سلیمان (1307)
A loose tooled leather cover from a Qu’ran manuscript made in Egypt or Syria and dated to the 8th/14th century has Qu’ran LVI. 79 in gilt on its fore-edge flap (Chicago Oriental Institute, No. A. 1212) [26].

18. Short sentences were apparently tooled on Qu’ran covers for reverence and as a blessing in Arabic. A Qu’ran cover from the 9th century has Haddānīs —Praise belongs to Allah—and Allāhū ʿazza—God is enough for me —tooled on both covers (Chicago Oriental, No. A. 1212) [27].

19. A loose leather cover made in Egypt during the 9th/15th century has the Beautiful Names such as al-Mawṣūd, al-Gaffar, and al-Qādir in Kufi letters in the compartments of its border (Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 10708—1869) [28].

7. Prayers for good health and long life

Inscriptions in Arabic similar to those found on earthworks or in buildings, wishing good health and long life to the owner, are seldom used for book covers.

A leather cover of Rūmī’s Mathnawī, copied in 849/1445—6 in Shiraz, has an formula of this kind inscribed in nasta’liq in the upper and lower rectangular panels (Istanbul, Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, 1906) [29].

8. The name of the owner

The name of the owner was sometimes inscribed on the bindings, much like ex-libris on European books. Two cases can be found: (i) the name is that of the person who ordered the manuscript and its binding; (ii) The name is that of the person for whom the manuscript has been prepared and bound as a gift; for example such as Bismī Hāfez, (for the treasury of...) are usually found in this case. A few bindings illustrate this:

20. A leather cover of the Ḥaḍīth al-din copied in 925/1519 century has an inscription in a nīṣṭā’liq hand (Leiden University Library, Or. 4085) [30]. It has been inscribed by heating the leather and piercing it, not by tooling.

21. A lacquer cover of a Qur’ an copied in 1293—1776 bound in 1294—1777, with an inscription in nasta’liq (Toledo, Gothenburg collection, No. 643 [31].

حکم آمیزی حکم بیدر با کتاب حکم بیدر لیست 1294
By the (noble) order of his excellency Ṣuyūtī al-Āṣīb in the month of Muḥarram of the year 1294.

22. A lacquer binding sold at Sotheby’s, on 22 April 1980. The inscription reads:

9. The name of the binder

The names of bookbinders hardly ever appear on the bindings. Their anonymity is similar to that of illuminators and miniaturists. The scribes usually have their names on the manuscripts; illuminators’ names are occasionally found, but those of the bookbinders as well as the painters are rare.

33. As far as I know, the earliest binding with the name of a binder is that of Qur’ an, dated 706/1306—7 (Ancient Iran Museum) [39]. Mehlī Bahārī believes he could not find any earlier manuscript with the name of a bookbinder stamped on it, the binding being almost contemporary with the copy. The reproduction of the cover gives the name of the binder as Abū al-Rāzīq Ḍabāḥ [40]. According to the colophon, the tooled-leather cover is from Tabriz.

34. Bosch gives four examples of covers made in South Arabia, preserved in the Göteborg collection, three from the 8th/14th century with the signature: Amāla Amin (made by Amin) [41] and one from the 9th/15th century with: Amāla Rāzīq [42].

For the treasury of Bāyāzīd. It is followed by a prayer for Bāyāzīd: tawwala Allāhu ‘un-nāhu (May Allah prolong his lifetime)—in a small panel on the flap.

26. A leather cover of the Divān of Kūmil ʿAlī Hājī, copied in 856/1452 in Herat (Istanbul, Topkapsı Saray, H. 781) [34]. A tooled inscription in gilt on the fore-edge flap reads:

For the treasury of ʿAlī Bābā Bādur. For the book translation of the sultane the most high honour of the sultane, government and faith, Abū al-Qāsim Bādur, may God perpetuate his reign and kingdom.

27. The leather cover of an anthology of Tāriḵ al-vinnea, National Library, N. F. 140, strophe poems gathered for Abū al-Qāsim Bādur (853—861) [36]. Its small-scale inscription on the fore-edge flap has been tooled between two lines of long festoons:

For the treasury of the sultane most high Abū al-Qāsim Bādur Bādur, may God perpetuate his reign.

28. The leather cover of a manuscript copied in 863/1458—9 in Sīrāz (Istanbul, Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, No. 1553) [37], for the treasury of the Qārī Qaṣṣyūna ʿAbd al-Farr Bādur (1458). A leather cover bears the name of the owner, Mīrāz Mahdī; it consists of eight distichs in armlet panels. Some words are illegible.

30. A leather cover of a moraqqa’, with a long inscription in nasta’liq on its borders dated 1147—1744, and with another date in 1151—1738—9 on the back cover (Saint-Petersburg, IOS, E. 14) [38].

For the treasury of the great supporter, the supporter of the religi and State, ʿAbd al-Malik, May Allah continue his kingdom.

For the treasury of the sultane most high Abū al-Qāsim Bādur Bādur, may God perpetuate his reign.

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I. AFSHAR. Inscriptions on the Covers of Islamic Manuscripts

The use of dated stamps for book covers was widespread in Transoxiana from the 13th/19th century onwards. Oddly enough, binders were sometimes still using the earlier stamps, so that the dates refer to the time when the tool was produced rather than to the actual time when the book was bound. Forged dates are also found on covers; for example, the date of the placing in 1276/1859—60 on a lacquer binding made by Illı (Ab) Al-Rużāq of Ispahan has been changed into 1857. (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, No. 1829—1922) [50].

12. The place of production

No place name has been found on leather covers; when such a piece of information appears in catalogues and bibliographies, it relies on conjectures and comparison with the style of the ornamentation, mostly on place where the manuscript was written. In the case of lacquer covers, the place of production of the binding is also rarely stated; the cover of a manuscript made by Ağır Mirzâ Muhammad Hasan (London, Victoria and Albert Museum No. 1788—1960) has a versified inscription in a poor hand, with the name of the binder and the place of production in armlet panels alternating with small circles.

It was completed in the capital Ispahan in the workshop of His Honor Ağır Mirzâ Muhammad Hasan, the painter.

Technical and graphic aspects

1. The location of the inscriptions

The inscriptions on book covers are located: (i) on the fore-edge flap, either on its inner face or on the outer one. The inscriptions were never placed on the spine, for they would soon have been damaged; (ii) on both back and front covers, sometimes only on front covers; (iii) on the inner face of either of the two covers; (iv) on the flap. The inscription here was usually the same as that of the front cover, because it could be read when the flap rested on the front cover.

2. The panels for inscriptions

(i) Inscriptions were usually located in a compartment in order to make them discernible. The panels were circular, rectangular, star-like, armlet-like, etc. Long texts such as Qur’anic verses, passages of poems especially gazals, were placed along the edges of the covers. They normally began from the left upper corner, but sometimes from the left lower one. Inscriptions were rarely repeated on both covers; (ii) šarman (rosettes), tārūjūn (medallions) and sa ṣa tārūjū (pendants) were considered the most appropriate places for short inscriptions.

3. The calligraphic hands

The writing used for inscriptions was often calligraphic, for the bindings were produced for noble and wealthy patrons; a calligrapher was asked to write the text to be used for inscriptions. Kiğt, ḫoḡt, muḥāb, tārūjū and nāṣa ṭay have been used; I have even seen the following distich inscribed in qalāb hand (literally: dust, meaning here: minute hand) on a cover made by Surṯār for a manuscript in the Vesāl family’s collection:

4. A typology of inscribed book covers

Because it dealt so much with the genreology of the best of people it was named The Rubies of Genealogies.

(ii) A brass inscription on the cover of the Travel Book of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shīr Qājār which was sent as a gift to the Austrian emperor, François Joseph (Vienna, National Library Cod. mixt. 1462). The name of the king was cut from brass and attached on the velvet cover.
5. Miscellaneous remarks

(i) Binders mostly paid attention to the decorative and graphic values of the inscriptions they made on the covers; (ii) inscriptions on leather covers are raised because they are tooled with stamps; (iii) no name of bookbinder has been found in colophons so far; (iv) metal and brass plates for inscriptions are naturally suitable for some covers, not applicable to others; (v) tools or plates with the name of the binder have been used in Transoxiana and in areas where Arabic was spoken, but their use was not restricted to the original owner of the tool/plate; (vi) on leather covers, inscriptions were usually tooled directly on the covers. In some cases, they were stamped on separate pieces of leather, then set into the place prepared for them on the covers; (vii) lacquer bindings, the scribes used to write the inscriptions in various colors such as white lead, lazure, chrome green, etc., then the illuminators worked on the finishing; (viii) classic cover inscriptions were part of a group of elements aiming at a consistent decorative composition for the bindings, but nowadays bookbinders like Muhammad Huseyn Ilhami use inscriptions merely for the decoration of bookcovers.

Notes


7. Tärza, a city in Turkestan, was well known for its very beautiful girls and handsome boys.


10. Aspana, op. cit., p. 69.


16. Ibid., p. 102.


22. Girard, op. cit., pl. 800.


25. Bosco, Carwell and Petherbridge, op. cit., p. 112.

26. Ibid., p. 111; another binding with the same verse from the 9th/15th century has been reproduced on p. 207.

27. Ibid., pp. 130—3.


29. Aspana, op. cit., p. 82.


31. Ābūlīyā, op. cit., p. 166.

32. Aspana, op. cit., p. 77.

33. Ibid., p. 80.

34. Ibid., p. 83.

35. Ibid., p. 84.

36. Duda, op. cit., pp. 71 and pl. 16.

37. Girard, op. cit., p. 1991, No. 21; it was first published by Afs Ortu.

38. Petrovskii, op. cit., p. 276.

39. M. Balch, Iran, an art, Treasures from the Imperial Collections and Museums of Iran (New York, 1949), p. 61; bibliographical and codicological descriptions in Part II, pp. 26—7.

40. Ibid., p. 31.
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