THE ART AND CRAFT OF MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION

For centuries the Persians have been renowned for their skills in calligraphy, illumination and miniature painting techniques, in the Islamic world, they were the acknowledged masters of the art and craft of manuscript production. The creation of an illuminated manuscript involved numerous artisans, not necessarily working in the same workshop or at the same time, and considerable planning was therefore required. The artists, though often not known by name, were highly regarded and their skills were prized quite separately from the merits of the texts on which they were working. Such artists could command the very best in the tools of their trade: the paper and paint. Many Persian manuscripts are recognized for the extremely high quality of their paper. At the end of the production method, such paper was finished with size (a type of glue) and burnished by polishing with stones to produce a fine, non-absorbent surface to take the ink and paint.

The paints were produced from materials such as cochineal (pink), verdigris (green), lapis lazuli or indigo (blue), ochre (yellow) and cinnabar (red). Gold leaf was applied liberally to pictures and borders and gold was also used to decorate incised patterns on both the front and back covers. The inside covers of the binding (koutjama) were frequently decorated. Fine leather was used in the bindings.

A VISUAL FEAST

Paintings in manuscript volumes are described as ‘miniaatures’, and this became an art form in itself, demanding great skill and artistic creativity. It first became significant in the 13th century, developing during the Mongol and Timurid periods of Persian history, and reached its zenith in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The texts of such manuscripts were so full of mythological and historical stories that they lent themselves to visual interpretation: unlike Qur’an texts, the poetry texts allowed the depiction of the human form and when this and mythical beings, buildings, clothing and jewelry were added to illustrations of plants, animals and landscapes, the outcome was a visual feast. The beginning of the text may be prefaced by a decorative heading or ‘tawwsh, or with initial pages bearing a decorated circular motif or shamsah.

A miniature painting may share a page with some text, but more often occupies a whole page. Like the text, the paintings are constrained within a ruled border but sometimes elements of the picture break through the border, making an effective and dramatic impact. The illustrations relate to some particular happening within the text, but they are always limited by particular accepted conventions and include a complex symbolism peculiar to this tradition.

The style of the text used is called ta’liq or nasta’liq; sometimes it is spaced by the use of cha’alis, diagonal script in square sections, in order to make a section or chapter of script fit the page, or when reaching the point in the text where a picture is inserted.

Miniatures were never intended as public art: only the owners and their circle would see these manuscripts, for this reason they have often survived intact and in good condition, with the ancient colours still close to their original vibrant state.

Right Page showing cha’alis, decorative spacing of the text. (Add.3139)

Decorative shamsah from the opening pages of a volume of Sirdi’s poetry, presented by the East India Company in 1806. (Add.276)

Decorative ‘tawmsh from the start of a copy of the Bostan of Sanâ‘i. From the Browne collection. (Y.16)

Left: Two illuminated pages from a fine copy of the Shihâbind of Firdawsi. The first shows Gunay executing Siyâvûsh; the second Rostam rescuing Bitham from the pit. This copy was presented to the Library in 1806 by the East India Company and contains numerous beautiful miniature paintings. Copied in the 16th or early 17th century. (Add.269)
PERSIAN POETS DOWN THE CENTURIES

What miraculous worlds roll within the vast, the all-embracing ocean of the mind?

Rûmî. tr. R. A. Nicholson

The Persians have always been passionate about poetry: they are proud of their poets, and justify so. A love and aptitude for poetry writing throughout the centuries is so ingrained that verse is encountered in almost every classical work, whether from literature, science or philosophy. In the past, developing the ability to write in verse form was a pre-requisite for any would-be scholar. At first, poets were supported by court patronage and this gave rise to the epic style of verse written in a metrical pattern known as the quasita.

Perhaps the best-known exponent of the epic—and indeed among the most famous of the many illustrious Persian poets—is Firdawsî, born in Tus in 935.

It took 33 years for Firdawsî to write the epic Shatânâmil (The Book of kings). Probably the longest poem ever written, it was intended to be recited in front of an audience. The Shâtînâmah is a work on an epic scale. Beginning with an account of the creation of the universe, it tells the story of Iran’s pre-Islamic past, encompassing legendary and historical ages, as it describes the royal rulers over the centuries, finishing with the last of the Sassanid dynasty at the time of the Arab conquest of Iran in the mid 7th century. Into this grand narrative, Firdawsî interweaves a host of stories and legends. Some of these have migrated into European literature, such as the exploits of the great folk hero Rustam and his horse Râkîsh, as well as the exploits of other heroes like Shihu’d, Bishân and Faridun. The background theme which runs throughout is the history of the Iranian people, embroiled with the subsidiary themes of the continual conflict between good and evil, and the significance of the loyalty of the common man to the sovereign.

Firdawsî began writing the Shâtînâmah in 977 and completed it around 1010. It is said that the completed poem was not well received by his patron who refused to pay him the agreed reward for his labours. Firdawsî was forced to flee to his native Tus where he later died. Legend has it that recognition and riches came only as he was being buried, but he set a model of the epic tradition that was to be followed by a host of other poets.

Later centuries marked the rise of mystical poetry in the Sufi tradition; in which some among the Islamic believers sought divine love and knowledge through the search for direct personal experience of God, rather than through an outward show of beliefs and practices. Without doubt the most eminent Sufi poet was Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (1207–73). His Mânavî or ‘Spiritual Couplets’ ranks among the great poems of all time.

The prelude to the Mânavî—often known as ‘The song of the rose’—was translated by E. H. Palmer; the rose made of sand is the instrument used to accompany the whirling of the Sufi dervishes, performed to achieve religious ecstasy. (The name of the Mevlevi order of dervishes in Turkey derives from Rûmî’s common title; and he is buried in their spiritual centre in Konya.) The Mânavî could almost be described as a compendium of Sufism and includes discussions of the problems of existence, clearly illustrated through familiar stories and legends. The renowned Cambridge Professor of Arabic, R. A. Nicholson (1858–1945) spent a significant part of his working life studying and translating this work, and his critical edition of the Mânavî did much to make the poem more accessible and foster a greater understanding of the poet and his work.

That remains for thee; to know Things above, as things below,
How the planets roll;
How the sun his light displays,
How the moon darts forth her rays;
How the nights succeed the days,
What the secret cause betrays,
And who directs the Whole?

Shâtînâmah: tr. James Atkinson, 1832

The poet Sa’dî (1184–1260) was a native of Shiraz but lived an eventful life and was widely travelled. His best-known works are Rûz-i Sin (The garden) completed in 1257, and Gulistan (The rose garden) in 1258. Sa’dî wrote in a form of verse called the ghazal, a metrical form that has rhyming couplets and a refrain, and he explores, with the use of metaphor, the experience of love as inward emotion. His language is graceful and simple and his verses are also in the Sufi tradition. Sa’dî explores and describes a deep awareness of some of the contradictions of human life and discusses the vagaries of fate experienced by those immersed in the swiftly changing world of political life. This is contrasted with the delight of the individual freedoms experienced by the Sufis.

If there is a book of poetry to be found in a Persian home it is most likely to be the poems of Hâfiz (1315–90). Hâfiz is perhaps the most popular of Persian poets and the most famous writer of ghazals in his poems the experience of earthly and heavenly love is intertwined. He was also born in Shiraz and his poetry received early recognition; he later fell out of favour with his patron, although he did eventually regain his position at court. His poetry is well-known to this day and modern Iranians recite his verses and use his sayings in everyday life.

His works were translated so many times, and spread so widely, that he became familiar to European writers on whom he had an important influence. Translated into German in the early nineteenth century his influence is clearly seen in Goethe’s “Westöstlicher Divan” and in the poetry of Schubert.

The Library has over 200 examples of Persian poetry manuscripts. Some are complete works, others only fragments, but together they illustrate the historical progression of literary style and include writings of all the major poets from the classical period.

Hâfîz, the secret of God’s dread task
No man knowseth, in youth or prime
Or in weariest age: of sebons would’st thou ask?
What has befallen the wheels of Time?
tr. Gertrude Bell, 1897
THE GREATEST ROMANTIC.

Nizami Ganjavi (1140-1209) is considered by many to be the greatest romantic epic poet in Persian literature; he introduced a colloquial and realistic style to poetry. Although he enjoyed the patronage of rulers and princes, he is thought to have lived rather a secluded life. Nizami's best-known work is his Khamsah, (Quintet), a collection of five long narrative poems. He was not a court poet, though he wrote for royal patrons, as he was wary of the artistic restrictions such a position would impose on his artistic freedom.

Nizami was a master of the romantic epic; his emphasis is on the human rather than the superhuman or heroic aspects of his characters, and his poems are also filled with details of the lives of common people, including artisans, and imagery taken from the natural world. The plots of the Khamsah stories are relatively simple and derived from familiar legends except for the first poem, Maktaban as-sunur (Treasury of secrets), which is a mystical poem dealing with esoteric subjects which became a model for many later imitations. The second story, Khosrow and Shirin, recounts, with many twists and turns, the story of the courtship of the resourceful Princess Shirin by King Khosrow 2nd, and the vanquishing of his love-rival, Fardad. The third poem is a well-known romantic tale of Arab origin: Layla and Majnun. Based on a popular legend from the Arab world, it tells of ill-starred lovers who endure separation and suffering in circumstances beyond their control, and when later reunited, find they are unable to re-kindle their love. The fourth and most intricate poem, Hafiz Paykar (The seven beauties), relates how Bahram Gur, the Sassanian king, falls in love with seven beautiful princesses whom he invites to his palace and who entertain him with stories, these representing seven aspects of human destiny. The final and longest poem is the Ikkandnamah (Story of Alexander), based on the Islamic version of the life of Alexander the Great, who rose to the status of a national hero in Persia. It narrates the three stages of Alexander’s life: first, as the conqueror of the world; then as a liberator of the oppressed and seeker after knowledge, and finally as a prophet, journeying once again across the world, from west to east, and south to north, to proclaim his beliefs and to collect volumes to create a great library.

These stories are all well known – several have been mentioned by Firdawsi in the Shahnahmah – but Nizami is known for his own skill at the dramatic plot, the drawing of complex characters and his masterly use of language.

The Cambridge scholar and professor of Arabic, A.J. Aberry, wrote of the Khamsah poems: “Besides being excellent reading in themselves, they shared with the Shahnahmah the honour of supplying Persian miniature painters with rich material for the exercise of their craft: the conjunction of glittering verse with brilliant art gave birth to some of the world’s most splendid books.”

The Library holds several manuscripts of the complete text of Nizami’s Khamsah and other copies of sections of it.

Illustration of Majnun in the desert from the margin of a copy of the Khamsah of Nizami, (Ox.6.11).

This particular manuscript has the text written in pages of four columns in nasta’liq script; each story is prefaced by a page with an illuminated ‘awwal. Two stories contain the date 1594. There are 15 miniature paintings spread throughout the text and a double-page miniature painting on the first and last pages. There are also, unusually, four examples of paintings down the outside margins of the text pages. Despite their age, the paintings have retained their original vibrant colours and bring a vivid imagery to the text.
MEADOWS OF GOLD AND MINES OF GEMS

To delve into the Library's fascinating manuscript collections of historical writing on the Middle East, it is to encounter a rich seam of hard fact, semi-fiction and—on occasion—pure fantasy.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HISTORIES

The growth of early historical writing in the Middle East was closely associated with, and to some degree grew out of, the tradition of the recording of the Prophet's life and sayings. The verification of such events and the development of an accepted chronology for early Islam led to the growth of an historical methodology from around the 7th century; the recording of chronological history in the Islamic world was fully developed by the 10th century.

However, many Middle Eastern writings scour the rigid boundaries of the strictly 'historical' in the European sense. While manuscript texts clearly relate particular events such as battles and the complicated chronologies and intrigues of ruling dynasties, they also encompass extensive biographical and genealogical details, and may venture into the realms of cosmography and even astrology. Some include descriptions of times before recorded events, and these can be fanciful or mythological in character.

An interesting example of an historical work detailing such early origins is a manuscript (by al-Mawjūdī) with a title which translates as Knowledge of beginnings: a compendium of interesting and curious information. This copy is from the Burckhardt collection and dated 1663, through copied from a much earlier version of the same text.

EMINENT HISTORIANS

Writing descriptions of past events, people and situations has always been important in the cultures of the Middle East and this tradition created many eminent historians. The scope of their work is vast—and, indeed, on occasions nothing less than the history of their world.

Yaqubi, who died around 890, wrote both historical and geographical works and travelled widely in the Middle East, India and North Africa. The collection contains a copy of his history in which he gives an account of pre-Islamic and non-Islamic peoples, followed in the second part by an account of Islamic history up to 872.

One of the earliest and most prominent Persian historians was al-Tabari (839–923), who wrote history, theology and antiquities on the Qur'an. His most famous work is the Tārīkh al-Tabar (History of the prophets and kings). Originally written in Arabic, and later translated into other languages such as Persian and Turkish, it is a universal history from the time of creation to 915, and renowned for its detail and accuracy on Middle Eastern history.

Al-Masudi (896–956), the eminent Arab historian and geographer, was also known as the 'Hierocles of the Arabs.' His world history—Mu'jam al-ghadab wa-nazādat al-jahān (The meadows of gold and mines of gems)—is said to have filled 30 volumes in its original form. It contains descriptive observations regarding the origins of the world and information of a historical nature on non-Islamic peoples. Later volumes include a history of Islam beginning with the Prophet and another of the Caliphs down to al-Masudi's own time.

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), an eminent polymath born in North Africa, was considered a forerunner in many disciplines but he was famous for his historical writings and for the development of historical method. His Muqaddima (Pre-elegement) is an introduction to a planned history of the world. His own life was itself highly eventful and ironically he completed his great work during a period when he was out of political favour.

A renowned Persian historian is Miskawayh (1343–96) who from an early age devoted himself to historical and literary studies. His most famous work is the Biwat al-safar (Great universal history) in seven large volumes plus a geographical appendix. The first three volumes cover the period from the creation of the world to the end of the Abbasid Dynasty, while the fourth and fifth volumes of the work cover the historical period up to 1360; volumes six and seven cover later periods of history and geographical information.

The Library's collection contains a number of copies of the various volumes of the work.

PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS

In contrast to such all-encompassing writings, some works document the story of one particular region, city, person or event. For instance, Ibn Khaldun's contemporary, the Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi (1364–1442) wrote many works on history, biography and topography, although perhaps his most famous work is his history of Egypt. A lengthy manuscript attributed to al-Maqrizi contains a history of Egypt and an account of the topography of Cairo. Many years later, in 1484 Abu al-Fath ibn al-Majli al-Sarqawi completed his own account of the rulers of Egypt from earliest times down to the time of Selim 3rd (1801) which is also in the collection.

Other manuscripts describe historical events familiar in European history but recounted from the Arabic viewpoint. One, dated from the early 14th century, contains a full account of the Crusades; another manuscript by an unknown author, dated 1810, describes the Egyptian campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte (1798–1801).

One intriguing manuscript, from the Erpenius collection, contains the well-known general history of Sadiq Ibn Raziq, better known by his Latin name Eutychius, Patriarch of Alexandria. This fills most of the volume, but the so-called unique account of Sicily is also bound with it. This unique text is of unknown authorship but describes the history of Sicily from the time of the first Islamic invasion in 827 to 965.

The Library is privileged to hold copies or parts of many of the most significant historical manuscripts thanks to the gifts to the collections of Erpenius, Burckhardt, Browne and Lewis.
A MASTER OF DISGUISES
John Lewis Burckhardt (1798–1817)

I have seen among Bedouins some of the happiest days of my life, but I have likewise passed among them some of the most irksome and tedious, when impatiently watched the sun's disk piercing through the tent from its rising to its setting, for I knew that in the evening some songs and a dance would relieve me from my drought-playing companions.

The merchant Sheikh Ibrahim Ibn 'Abd Allah' was a convenient pseudonym that the scholar and explorer J. L. Burckhardt used to disguise his European origins when he travelled in the Near East, Egypt and Arabia during the years 1809 to 1817. He was born in Basel into a wealthy Swiss family, but a professional career held few attractions for a man of such restless spirits. A meeting in London with Sir Joseph Banks, the President of the Africa Association, led to a commission to cross the African continent from Cairo to the Niger, with the aim of discovering the river's source. The adventure appealed.

Burckhardt was sent to Cambridge to learn Arabic as a preparation for his later explorations and then, in 1809, he travelled to Aleppo. He stayed there for three years perfecting his Arabic and 'going native' by adopting local dress and customs, before departing on his mission to Egypt. Passing himself off as a merchant to avoid suspicion, Burckhardt travelled alone or with groups of native travellers. On his way south he took the opportunity to re-discover the long-forgotten ruins of Petra: he was the first European since the 13th century to see the 'rose red city, half as old as time', as one poet described it. Arriving in Egypt he decided to explore Upper Egypt, a short detour which lasted three years, and during which he studied the caravan routes and also visited the unique Abu Simbel temples.

At this time most Europeans knew little about life in Arab countries, Burckhardt was a keen observer of local populations, gaining information from the Islamic pilgrims and merchants whom he met on his journeys. The Bedouins held a particular fascination for him; his Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys was published in 1830. He eventually converted to Islam and was one of the first Europeans to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. His descriptions of these holy places and the religious ceremonies greatly helped to make Islam better understood in Europe.

Burckhardt returned to Cairo, where, with the help of Henry Salt, the British Consul, he arranged to commission the Italian, Giovanni Belzoni, to remove the enormous stone head of Ramses II from Thebes and to transport it to the British Museum in London.

'Sheikh Ibrahim Ibn 'Abd Allah' never did carry out his original plan to cross the desert from the Nile to the Niger, as he fell ill with food poisoning and died in October 1817. He was buried in Cairo. However, the Africa Association published the texts of his notes and diaries to much acclaim. Travels in Nubia (1819), Travels in Syria and the Holy Land (1822) and Travels in Arabia (1829) ascertain the reader with their clarity, reliability and detail. In his fieldwork, Burckhardt was entirely dependent on his own resources and on his natural talent for observation and judgement. On his travels he followed his own interests and his researches on native peoples, and his works could be regarded as the first ethno-geographic studies of the Arab nomad tribes.

We crossed the plains at sunrise, and the fresh air of the morning was extremely agreeable. There is nothing so much compensated for the miseries of travelling in the Arabian deserts, as the pleasure of enjoying every morning the sublime spectacle of the break of day and of the rising of the sun, which is always accompanied, even in the hottest season, with a refreshing breeze.'

Burckhardt was an avid but selective manuscript collector. During his explorations, he acquired original source material, often concerning the history, topography and geography of Upper Egypt, Nubia and Sudan. He bequeathed his collection of more than 300 Arabic manuscripts, along with some of his own documents and letters, to the Library in recognition of his days in Cambridge as a student of Arabic.

The Burckhardt collection contains many of the earliest Arabic manuscripts, both dated and undated, with important historical, literary and philological texts. Few are illuminated but there are examples of beautiful and elegant script. The manuscripts include some of the finest works of Arabic literature such as the famous epic of the poet Antarab ibn Shaddad and an early anthology of Arabic poetry. Ironically — since the explorer died relatively young — it also contains the ancient Kalb al-Mu'min (Book of the long-lived) of Abu Hurayim al-Sijistani, dated 1026.

Opening page from a work on letter-writing by Ahmad ibn 'Ali Qalaqishardi. From the Burckhardt collection. (Oq. 46)

Copy of the Diwān al-Ḥamra, collection of old Arabian poetry, dated 1200. (Oq. 211)

Colophon from a copy of the Muqaddimah (Stories in rhymed prose) of 'al-Hamadānī, dated 1596. (Oq. 118)
THE FATHERS OF MODERN MEDICINE

In Islamic tradition, the origins of medical thought can be traced back to the time of the Prophet; many sayings about health and medical matters are attributed to him, and authors of early Islamic medical texts were usually both clerics and physicians. During the Abbasid period (750-1258) translations were made of important Greek and Sanskrit medical texts into Arabic by specialist in the subject. Consequently Galen and Hippocrates were revered as pre-eminent authorities on medical matters, as well as some early Indian physicians. Islamic medical practitioners then incorporated some of the ideas from these traditions into their own body of knowledge to make advances both in the theory and practice of medicine, particularly in the fields of anatomy, ophthalmology, physiology, psychology, surgery, and the pharmacological sciences. Many of the ensuing Arabic medical texts were in turn translated into Latin and other European languages, and had a significant influence on medical thinking in Europe. Examples of early influential texts in the collection include medical works in Arabic, including texts and notes on the works of Galen and Hippocrates and an Arabic translation of Galen’s Anatomy dated 1568.

Islamic doctors were innovators; they set up hospitals, establishments where the sick were cared for by qualified staff, and subsequent developments included the first public and psychiatric hospitals, and universities granting degrees in medical practice. Against a background of a high standard of medical ethics, hospitals in the Islamic world initiated the introduction of proper medical standards for doctors and regulations for drug purity. Other advances were made in surgical instruments and procedures, experimentation, clinical trials, dissections, autopsies, drug testing, and isolation wards for people with contagious diseases.
BOOKS OF HEALING

Over the centuries, Islamic scholars made many outstanding written contributions to medical ideas, theories and practices and the manuscripts collection contains a rich variety of such works. These include the earliest encyclopedic work on medicine in Arabic, the Fidaws al-Makru’ (Paradise of wisdom) written around 860 by Abu ‘Abd al-Malik b. al-Harith. Another example of a rare text by al-Razi contains a chapter on smallpox and measles and an account of lepers.

Also typical of the large encyclopedic works produced by Islamic medical specialists is a copy of Dárkhân-i Khwāszamsháh (Khwazamshah Treasury) compiled by al-Nadi‘ al-‘Ali al-Mawdhibi (1042–1136). Copied in the 15th century, it contains a complete collection of medical information and a supplement about the use of drugs. The collection contains five other copies of various parts of this compendious work. There are also examples of types of medical dictionary with lists of diseases with symptoms and
treatments, such as two medical treatises in Persian. Other works describe drugs and their preparation, for instance the Matn al-madārīb by Hājjī Zayn al-‘Arab al-Dār al-Shirazi who lived in Shiraz in the second half of the 12th century.

The 10th century in particular saw an exceptional flowering of Islamic medical knowledge. Great scholars and physicians included Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (865–925), also known by his Latin name of Rhazes, who introduced the use of the controlled experiment and clinical observation methods into the field of medicine, and rejected theories from Galen that were unverified by experimentation. He wrote the Khatib al-hawālī al-fā’il (The comprehensive book of medicine), in which he recorded clinical cases of his own experience and provided very useful descriptions of various illnesses and contagious diseases. This work was subsequently very influential in Europe.

One rare and interesting manuscript is a comprehensive work on medicine, of which the great part is a text by al-Razi that includes a number of treatments by him and one by Ibn Sina copied in the 13th or 14th century. The first part of the manuscript deals with diseases of the chest and lungs and the latter part with food and diet. Another example of a rare text by al-Razi contains a chapter on smallpox and measles and an account of lepers.

Ibn Sīnā (980–1037) also known by his Latin name as Avicenna, was a very influential figure in the areas of both philosophy and medicine. He is frequently regarded as the father of modern medicine and one of the greatest medical scholars in history. His medical encyclopedia, Al-Qānūn fī al-tibb (The canon of medicine), written around 1015, was translated into Latin and remained a standard textbook in Europe for centuries; his Khatib al-shīrī (The book of healing), a more general encyclopedia of science and philosophy, was equally well respected.

Abū al-‘Aṣim al-Zahrawi (936–1013), known as Alcòniz, is often regarded as the father of modern surgery. He made a significant contribution to the discipline of surgery with his Khatib al-tawfiq (Method of medicine); this was written in 1000 and later translated into Latin and used in European medical schools for centuries. The 30-volume medical encyclopedia includes the description of over 200 surgical instruments, many of which had never been used before.

Ophthalmology was a topic in which medieval Islamic medical specialists made considerable advances. Early in the 9th century, both Ibn Masawiyah and his student Hunayn ibn Ishaq wrote important works on the subject. A near contemporary was ‘Amrūr al-Mawṣil, who was originally from Iraq but later lived in Egypt. His work, a treatise on eye diseases, contains interesting clinical cases and a claim to have designed a hollow needle for the removal of cataracts from the eye by suction. A text by the notable physician ‘Alī ibn ‘Isa (a celebrated oculist who flourished in Baghdad around 961) entitled the ‘Oculists’ reminder’ can be found in the collection.

Some two centuries later (Ibn al-Nafīs, 1217–1288) wrote Al-Shīrī’s Al-jibb (The comprehensive book on medicine), a voluminous medical encyclopedia that was originally planned to comprise 300 volumes. Incomplete at the time of his death, the book is still one of the most all-inclusive medical encyclopedias in history. Ibn al-Nafīs is now best-known for being the first to describe the pulmonary circulation of the blood long before this was understood in Europe, and as an early proponent for many aspects of experimental medicine including autopsies and dissection from which much was learned. He is highly regarded as one of the greatest medical thinkers, some referring to him as the second ‘Abū Sīnā’ and others considering him even greater.

Many of the valuable and intriguing medical texts in the library were collected by E. G. Browne, himself a qualified doctor, who gave up his medical career to study Persian, and who appreciated and acknowledged the great advances made by the Islamic medical scholars.