The Islamic Manuscript Tradition

TEN CENTURIES of BOOK ARTS
as INDIANA UNIVERSITY COLLECTIONS

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For Renata Holod
Scholar and Mentor Extraordinaire

From her student,
and her student's students
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The importance of books in Islamic culture and history is a well-established fact. It is also well established that, almost from the beginning in the seventh century when the first books appeared, books whose fragments are preserved in libraries and museums all over the world, there also appeared an art of the book. What is meant by the "art of the book" is not always clear. In a nutshell, it consists of a series of ways of enhancing the appearance and visual impact of the book. This was achieved through the thought-out composition of the page, through calligraphy (the art of writing attractive letters and words), through illumination (the addition of ornamental motifs on pages of text), through illustration (the making of pictures inspired by text), through binding in luxury materials, and through any combination of these techniques. All of them required considerable training of artisans or artists and deep knowledge of rules of all sorts. Some of these techniques, in particular illustrations, have become an independent field of study that has come to be known under the name of "painting." And only too often scholars and students forget that these paintings were only one aspect of the making of books. It is especially refreshing to see that, in this particular volume, all aspects of what in my student days was called Buchwesen, "the essence of books," are brought together and examined as a collective whole.

There are two other features particular to a book; a book is read, or at least can be read, and a book is collected, in a library or as a personal treasure. These aspects of books are little studied in scholarship dealing with Islamic art. The first one, reading, does not play an important part in the pages that follow, because it is a separate field of inquiry. Its investigation requires deciphering all sorts of marginalia, including the traces of use that can be detected through the wear and tear of pages, as well as information from contemporary memories that are rare or poorly known in traditional Muslim societies. The study of reading, which has developed so significantly in the historiography of western culture and art, is still in its infancy in dealing with the thousands of books produced and preserved in the Muslim world.

On the other hand, much is known about the collecting of books. It is in this area that this volume is particularly original. First, we have the striking phenomenon of so many documents, none of which can be considered major masterpieces of artistic creativity, gathered by American collectors—who are not themselves patrons of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or of the Art Institute in Chicago—and given to Indiana University in Bloomington. Their reasons for collecting are many and varied, and they are not always expressed in words. In the
case of Ruth E. Adomeit, her passion for a fascinating subset of books, the highly miniaturized ones, has preserved a category of artifacts that are not usually mentioned. In this fashion her energy and her investments illustrate a very special facet of literate creativity. Furthermore, this volume also stands out for the fact that, except for Qur'ans whose holy function makes them ubiquitous in scholarship, most of the manuscripts discussed here deal with non-qur'anic texts. Here, then, is an impressive illustration of the range of reading materials that existed in the Islamic world, from illustrated prayer books to abridgments of classics such as Firdawsī’s Shāhnāma. We are thus provided with a particularly wide sense of the tastes and of the interests of the reading public, succinctly encapsulated and beautifully illustrated by the holdings of Islamic art in Indiana University’s collections.

The study of artifacts and of the writing of books acts in this way as a sort of social science that introduces us to all levels of culture, and not just to its masterpieces. In this sense, it is a sort of archaeology of a type of document, comparable to the archaeology of sites and of other disciplinary areas that have formed the primary fields of investigation of Professor Renata Holod, to whom this work is dedicated.

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This volume emerged from a hands-on graduate seminar entitled “From Pen to Paper: Islamic Codicology and Paleography,” which I offered at Indiana University in fall 2006. In this seminar, graduate students and I worked with a number of materials and discovered that the various museum collections and libraries at Indiana University—including the Indiana University Art Museum, the Lilly Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, and the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction—hold a substantial collection of Islamic book arts. The collections are quite vast and varied, and include writing implements (such as pens, pen cases, inks, and papers), Qur’ans, classical Persian and Mughal illustrated manuscripts, Ottoman illustrated devotional works, Ottoman incunabula, Islamic erotica, and modern Turkish calligraphies and marbled papers. After the conclusion of the seminar, it became our wish to make the collections of Islamic book arts at Indiana University available to a general audience through an exhibition and the publication of a selection of items held in repositories on the Bloomington campus. Thanks to a generous grant provided by Indiana University’s New Frontiers in the Arts and Humanities Program, we were able to do as we had hoped. From March 6 to May 11, 2009, the Indiana University Art Museum hosted the exhibition “From Pen to Printing Press: Ten Centuries of Islamic Book Arts,” which included a symposium on Islamic book arts held on March 7, 2009 (this symposium was supported by a grant offered by the College of Art & Humanities Institute at Indiana University). Although the exhibition and this volume present a considerable selection of Islamic manuscripts, paintings, and rare books, we also wished to create a permanent and easily accessible record of all book arts in Bloomington. As a result, Yasemin Gencer, a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of the History of Art and the Assistant Curator of the spring 2009 exhibition, created a web catalogue of Indiana University’s Islamic book arts. The permanent web module can be accessed at www.artmuseum.iu.edu.

With this volume, our aim was not to create an exhaustive catalogue or checklist, which we felt could be better achieved through an online exhibition. Rather, we wished to provide a series of scholarly studies whose themes are prompted by particularly intriguing materials or sets of objects held in Indiana University collections. These theme-specific essays therefore tackle a wide range of topics. These include, for example, a discussion by Janet Rauscher of Ruth E. Adomeit, whose collection of miniature books is one of the largest in the world. Although Adomeit
is not well known as a collector of Islamic materials, we felt that a discussion of her professional biography was necessary to understand her contribution to the field of miniature books and, more specifically, to miniature Islamic books—a theme covered by Heather Coffey in her contribution to this volume. These preliminary chapters thus discuss the implications of book miniaturization in both Islamic and non-Islamic contexts.

Subsequent chapters discuss either one manuscript or a corpus of materials in order to highlight a number of themes that have not been subject to in-depth scholarly study. For example, the Lilly Library owns a nineteenth-century Ottoman devotional manuscript that contains a number of beautifully executed paintings of the Prophet Muhammad’s relics and other relics. The ways in which prayer manuals were used in religious practices during the late Ottoman period remains poorly understood. Based on the Lilly manuscript and other relevant sources, however, we now can stipulate that some of these illustrated works were used in order to help readers activate pious recitation, engage in a visual contemplation of holy figures and places, and seek succor from a manuscript that fashioned itself as a portable cure-all.

The Lilly Library is the sole repository in North America that houses the complete set of seventeen printed works issued by the Müteferrika press during the 1710s and 1720s. Ibrahim Müteferrika, after much religious debate and contention, established the first “Islamic” printing press in Istanbul under royal auspices in 1725. To date, there has been no systematic study in English of Müteferrika, his motivations, and his press. Yasemin Gencer fills this lacuna by drawing upon a number of primary and secondary sources, and, most importantly, by providing an in-depth analysis of Indiana University’s rich collection of Ottoman incunabula. In 1732 the printing press established by Müteferrika produced its eleventh work: the Kitab Chahniima (Book of the View of the World), a copy of which is held in the Lilly Library. The Chahniima presents Ottoman geographical knowledge of its time, spanning from Anatolia to the frontiers of the New World and East Asia. Emily Zoss provides an examination of this work, as well as other examples of Ottoman mapmaking, to present and untaunt the various cartographical contexts of this particular illustrated book.

The last two chapters in this volume address Islamic book arts in further geographical contexts, namely in India under Sikh rule (1759–1856) and in sub-Saharan Africa during the modern period. Brittany Payeur provides us with a study of the Lilly Library’s lavishly illustrated Sikh copy of the Shahshir Khani, an abridgment of Ferdowsi’s Shahnamah (Book of Kings), to show us not only how it functioned within the world of gift giving but also how it may expand our discussions of “Islamic” painting within non-Islamic contexts. Finally, Kitty Johnson examines a manuscript of al-Jazuli’s Dala’il al-Khayrat (Proofs of Good Deeds), a devotional text that was popular in Islamic sub-Saharan Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By analyzing the patterns on the manuscript’s leather pouch and on its folios, she reveals how certain decorative motifs seem to have been purposefully selected in order to maximize the work’s perceived apotropaic power.

The chapters presented here attest to the development of Islamic book arts over more than ten centuries—namely, from the ninth to the twentieth century—in various areas of the world. They also pay tribute to the richness of the written heritage of Islam as it is represented by Indiana University collections. We hope that this volume will be useful to students and scholars of Islamic book arts while also appealing to a broader audience interested in Islamic artistic traditions.
Acknowledgments

This volume of collected articles was made possible through the close collaboration between students and staff at Indiana University.

First, as editor of this volume, I wish to thank the graduate students who enrolled in the hands-on seminar "From Pen to Paper: Islamic Codicology and Paleography" (fall 2006). These students researched the objects in Indiana University's collections and, over the course of two years, gradually (and tirelessly) transformed their research papers into chapters for this volume. Big thanks go to Christine Bentley, Heather Colley, Yasemin Gencer, Kitty Johnson, Brittany Payeur, Janet Rauscher, Sheida Riahi, and Emily Zoss for their excellent contributions. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Yasemin Gencer, who helped in various ways to bring this volume and the spring 2009 exhibition to fruition, and to Janet Rauscher, who also provided preliminary copyediting of the chapters.

At Indiana University, I wish to thank staff members who so generously allowed us to view and work with primary sources at the Indiana University Art Museum, the Lilly Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, and the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. A special thanks goes to Heidi Gealt, Director, and Judy Stubbs, Pamela Buell Curator of Asian Art, at the Art Museum for their support of this and other projects on Islamic art. At the Lilly Library, we wish to thank Sue Fresnell and other librarians who helped us locate and access the collections of Islamic manuscripts and rare books. At the Mathers Museum, we thank Ellen Sieber, Curator of Collections; and at the Kinsey Institute, we are grateful to Curator Catherine Johnson-Rochr for her help in viewing the institute's rare collection of Persian erotic paintings and drawings.

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been possible without Indiana University's time-honored commitment to the arts.

Finally, I personally wish to dedicate this publication to Dr. Renata Holod, Professor of Islamic Art History at the University of Pennsylvania. With this volume, we wish to honor—in but a small way—her unwavering dedication to teaching and mentoring several generations of students in the field of Islamic art.

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