The Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu
Historic City of Islamic Africa
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Photography by Joseph Hunwick

For centuries, camel caravans made epic journeys across the Sahara to reach the markets of the legendary city of Timbuktu, where they traded salt, gold, slaves, textiles – and books. By the mid-fifteenth century, Timbuktu had become a major centre of Islamic literary culture and scholarship, attracting scholars from as far away as the Arabian Peninsula. Students came from all over West Africa to learn at the feet of Timbuktu’s masters of law, literature and the sciences. The city’s libraries were repositories of all the world’s learning, housing not only works by Arab and Islamic writers but also volumes from the classical Greek and Roman worlds and studies by contemporary scholars.

The astonishing manuscripts of Timbuktu form the lavish visual heart of this book. Beautifully graphic, occasionally decorated, these exquisite artifacts reveal great craftsmanship as well as learning. Their unbound sheets were often protected by a loose leather cover tied with a leather lace. All were written in the Arabic script, but not all in Arabic, for they also feature a range of local African languages.

Aside from scholarly works, surviving manuscripts include a wealth of correspondence between rulers, advisers and merchants on subjects as various as taxation, commerce, marriage, divorce, adoption, breastfeeding and prostitution, providing a vivid insight into the ordinary life and values of the day.

Timbuktu today is a World Heritage Site, its mud-brick architecture deservedly famous the world over. But its scholarship traditions are still being rediscovered. As this remarkable book reveals, the manuscripts of Timbuktu are an extraordinary treasure: invaluable historical documents; objects of tremendous beauty; and a testament to a great centre of learning and civilization at the heart of Africa.

With 193 colour illustrations.

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