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ISLAMIC MASTERPIECES
of
The Chester Beatty Library

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Dublin

Leighton House Gallery
The Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea
London

World of Islam Festival Trust
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Foreword

The Chester Beatty Library has no wish to remain an isolated cultural unit, jealously guarding its collections, but rather to co-operate with similar bodies and institutions that have the common aim of wanting to make known the contents of their collections.

Fortunately, the Islamic collection is fully catalogued and so, to some extent, scholars are aware of its richness despite the relatively small number who have seen the collection. Recently the whole collection has been copied in microfilm and colour slides, a project made possible through the assistance of Kuwait University. Accordingly, copies of any manuscript may now be obtained by order as required.

The Library is fortunate, too, in having a fruitful friendship with the World of Islam Festival Trust. This has resulted in, among other projects, the successful staging of the colourful Facsimile Exhibition of Qur’ans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library. The exhibition now arranged at Leighton House by the Trust may be regarded as a sequel to it, but in this case a selection of the best and rarest of actual Islamic manuscripts is on loan from the Library. The catalogue, again compiled by Mr David James, Islamic Curator, will do much to enlighten and instruct all who visit the exhibition and will ensure that this exhibition survives as something more than a memory.

The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library regard themselves as custodians of the collections not just for the Irish nation, but for the whole civilised world. It is in this context that I wish to acknowledge the co-operation and assistance of the World of Islam Festival Trust and, in particular, its Director, Mr Alistair Duncan.

P. Henchy,
Librarian.
Sir Alfred Chester Beatty and his Islamic Collection

Alfred Chester Beatty (1875-1968) was one of the great collectors of all time. His primary, though not exclusive, interest lay in the art of the book from its invention in the 2nd century AD down to the present day, and before that in the history of writing through the papyrus scroll back to the clay tablet at the very dawn of recorded history.

Although the Chester Beatty collection is fundamentally an Islamic one, it is by no means confined to Islamic manuscripts and works of art. Almost every culture which has existed in written form is represented in the Library. In some cases the representation is only a token one; in most others it is extensive — even all-embracing. The history of the Japanese print, for example, could undoubtedly be written without recourse to any items outside the Library’s collection. It would need only a few additional examples from outside to do the same for the history of the manuscript art of Armenia, Burma and Thailand.

Nevertheless, it is the Islamic material which has established the Chester Beatty Library’s reputation. It is difficult to imagine any book being written on Islamic manuscript art without recourse to the Library’s holdings. Almost all the great documents of Islamic art are there, in whole or in part: the ‘Demotte’ Shah-Nama, the Baysunqur Gulistan, the Shah ‘Abbas ‘Coronation’ Shah-Nama, the Akbar-Nama, the albums of Jahangir and Shah-Jahan, the History of Sulayman The Magnificent and the Zubdat al-Tawarikh. This exhibition is an attempt to show the astonishing range of the Islamic collection.

Chester Beatty acquired the bulk of this material between 1920 and 1965: a period in which a large quantity of Islamic and Indian manuscripts appeared on the art market. Quite probably Chester Beatty, more than anyone else, was responsible for this sudden profusion of material. Before 1920 most Islamic manuscripts and works of art lay hidden in the royal libraries of Iran and Turkey, or were in the hands of private individuals. From 1920 onwards the latter began to appear for sale, while the imperial collections were explored by Western and then local scholars of Islamic art. Chester Beatty’s activities as a collector meant that dealers and individuals brought him manuscripts in vast numbers, once his reputation and generosity had become established.

His collection, however, is no mere ‘Aladdin’s cave’. He acquired his manuscripts as scientifically as circumstances would permit. In each area — Iran, Turkey, Mughal India, etc. — he aspired to illustrate the full range of painting, illumination, calligraphy and binding, continually refining his collection, replacing items of lesser importance with finer ones as soon as he could obtain them. By the time of his death he had succeeded in making a collection, which for quality and consistency is one of the finest in existence.

This is true of both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ manuscripts alike. His Qur’an collection embraces the entire Islamic world from the 9th century onwards and includes items from every country where the Islamic faith is to be found. Among these manuscripts are the earliest Qur’an on paper, the earliest example of the Nashk script used for the transcription of the Qur’an, the only authentic example of the hand of Ibn al-Bawwab, one of the three classic masters of Arabic calligraphy, and perhaps the earliest Qur’an known to have been copied in Anatolia (modern Turkey).

Chester Beatty did not confine himself to manuscripts of great beauty. He acquired them also for the importance of their texts. This was especially true of the 2,700 Arabic manuscripts which deal with every conceivable subject. In collecting these he deliberately avoided works of a purely theological character since his aim was to show all sides of Islamic civilisation. The result is a microcosm of Islamic thought on history, geography, science, linguistics, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, etc. There is no doubt that here Beatty performed an outstanding service to scholarship, since had he not obtained them, the chances are that they would have disappeared, perhaps even have been destroyed.
Were it not for him we could only speculate on the present location of Al-Jumahi’s History of Arabic Poetry, the oldest known copy; Ibn Khalawayh’s book on variant readings of the Qur’an and Al-Ma’alqi’s biographies of famous Arab women, both of which are unique; or Al-Husayn’s work on falconry, the most ancient Arabic manuscript on that subject.

In addition to collecting the manuscripts and paintings, Chester Beatty was always anxious to make his material available to scholars: first, by means of beautifully produced catalogues which were major academic works in their own right. The Turkish catalogue, for example, published in 1958, was until very recently regarded as the most important work on the history of Turkish miniature painting. Secondly, the Library was always open to researchers, scholars and students who were able to incorporate their work on the Chester Beatty collections in their published studies. Thirdly, Chester Beatty loaned his manuscripts to almost every major exhibition of Islamic art from the Burlington House exhibition in 1931 onwards. Thus by the time the Library moved to Dublin it had become one of the most widely known and appreciated anywhere in the world.

At this point it may be appropriate to say something about Chester Beatty himself. Alfred Chester Beatty was born in New York in 1875, the son of a banker. In 1896 he graduated from the Columbia School of Mines and went almost immediately to Colorado, the centre of the mining industry in the United States. Between then and 1911 he established his reputation as one of the country’s outstanding mining engineers. Following the death of his wife in 1911 he came to London, ostensibly for a long recuperative holiday. However, he soon resumed his profession and set up as a mining consultant in London. One of his associates at this time was Herbert (Later President) Hoover and together they went to Russia to reorganise the Kyshtim Mine in the Urals.

In 1913 he married Miss Edith Dunn of New York and bought Baroda House in Kensington Palace Gardens where his collection was kept until 1950. In 1914 he established the Selection Trust but the outbreak of the First World War prevented its operations from getting underway. At the end of the war the Trust commenced its activities and within a decade surged forward on a massive scale. Its aim was to find mines anywhere in the world which were likely to be profitable and to reorganise and finance them. The Selection Trust eventually grew to a group of companies whose aggregate market value exceeded 130 million pounds. Chester Beatty was the driving force behind the Trust’s operations and he remained its Chairman until 1960.

Such, briefly, was the business career of Alfred Chester Beatty. His life as a collector commenced as a child when he began to acquire mineral specimens from the Cruton aqueduct which was then under construction near his school at Dobb’s Ferry. By early manhood he had obtained a substantial collection of printed books and a number of Western manuscripts which he brought with him to London in 1911. His interest in things oriental began at least as early as 1906 when we know he was purchasing Chinese snuff-bottles on a large scale. It was his visits to Cairo, however, that really stimulated his appetite for oriental works of art. Between the two world wars Beatty spent every winter in Egypt and it was there that he came in contact with his first Islamic manuscripts. Whether it was the extensive use of mineral-based pigments in these manuscripts that initially attracted him is not certain, though it is apparent that it was the widespread employment of minerals and semi-precious stones in the manufacture of snuff-bottles that drew him to this field at the outset. Whatever the reason, his training and experience in the quest for minerals all over the world was now applied with equal success to the discovery of treasures of oriental art. In 1950, after 30 years of collecting and constantly refining his collection, Beatty moved to Dublin, and it was
between Ireland and the South of France that he spent the last 18 years of his life. Throughout his life Chester Beatty had been an exceptionally generous man. His public charities such as the Chester Beatty Cancer Research Institute are well-known. At the end of his life, his final and perhaps most impressive act of generosity was to leave his collection, the labour of many decades, as a gift to the people of Ireland.

The Library is today housed on the site chosen for it by Beatty in a complex of buildings erected between 1950 and 1956. It was extended in 1974 at the expense of the Irish Government which is now entirely responsible for the maintenance of the Library by means of an annual grant-in-aid.

Apart from showing some of the great masterpieces of Islamic art this exhibition illustrates the course of development of the Islamic book down to the 19th century; this may be said to be the secondary theme behind the selection of material. On this the catalogue entries will speak for themselves. In the preparation of these entries I am indebted to the published writings and in some cases the private communications of many scholars. In particular I should mention Professor A. J. Arberry, Sir Thomas Arnold, Professor Nurhan Atasoy, Milo Beach, Filiz Cagman, Basil Gray, Professor V. Minorsky, Basil Robinson, Robert Skelton, Norah Titley, J. V. S. Wilkinson, Anthony Welch and Professor Stuart Cary Welch. Nevertheless, with each item, however well-known, I have tried to include some new information. Sometimes this has been extensive enough to necessitate the complete reclassification of the item, as in the case of the ‘Ghazan’ and ‘Öljajü’ Qur’an pages; on other occasions it may only be the revision of a date, the translation of an inscription or verse of poetry, or the discovery of a signature. Several of the exhibits displayed are published here for the first time while a small number are entirely unknown.

I would particularly like to thank Robert Skelton, Keeper of the Indian Section at the Victoria and Albert Museum, for reading the entries on the Mughal items in the catalogue. Thanks are also due to Muhammad Isa Waley of the British Library for his translation of the Turkish verses on No. 43 and to Basil Robinson, Keeper Emeritus, Victoria and Albert Museum, for his comments on Nos. 24 and 25.

Since the idea of this exhibition was originally conceived by Alistair Duncan it has had the constant support and encouragement of Dr Patrick Henchy, Librarian of the Chester Beatty Library. On behalf of all concerned I would like to extend our thanks to Dr Henchy.

There has only been one previous Chester Beatty exhibition: that in Princeton, United States, in 1967. This is the first to have occurred in Europe and the first to be entirely devoted to the Islamic collection. The organisation of such an exhibition has involved months of preparation and consultation both written and verbal in London and Dublin. Throughout this period I have worked in close co-operation with Daif Jones, editor of the catalogue, and Ross Feller, overall designer of the exhibition. It is a pleasant task to acknowledge the help, suggestions and, above all, patience afforded by them over the past 18 months.

All photographic work, as on previous occasions, has been carried out by David Davison and Louis Pieters of PDI Ltd, Dublin, to their customary high standard. The manuscript has been typed with systematic accuracy by Miss C. Heffernan of the Chester Beatty Library. To all three my thanks are due.

It is largely due to the efforts of Alistair Duncan, Director of the World of Islam Festival Trust, that this exhibition has been realised. To him, and to his hard-working staff, David Slaughter and Tessa Clarke, a sincere word of thanks is extended.

David James, Dublin, 1981.
Qur’anic Calligraphy and Illumination

For Muslims the Holy Qur’an is the literal Word of God, revealed to mankind through the agency of the Prophet Muhammad at the beginning of the 7th century. The sacred text had always to be written out as clearly and as beautifully as possible. This perhaps more than anything else gave the impetus to the development of calligraphy throughout the world of Islam.

Although many different forms of Arabic script exist only a limited number of these were used to copy the Qur’an: Kufic, Naskh, Muhaqqiq, Thulth, Rayhan and Maghribi. These terms were often used in a general sense to describe several related sub-types. Initially copies of the Qur’an were undecorated. Gradually symbols were introduced to help the reader find his way through the text. Rosettes indicated the end of each ‘aya’ or verse; pear- or circular-shaped motifs in the margin marked the passage of each fifth or tenth verse. Other devices marked the various sections into which the text could be divided. Each ‘sura’ or chapter began with a band of decoration, which later came to include the number of verses and title and whether the chapter was revealed by the Prophet in Mecca or Medina.

The text could be divided into two, four, seven or more usually, thirty equal sections and these were often bound in separate volumes called ‘aiza’ (sing. juz’). When copied out and bound as volumes the beginning of each juz’ was frequently illuminated.

Single volume copies of the Qur’an were illuminated not only on their opening pages, but also on their final ones. In early times, and especially under the Mamluks and Ilkhanids, both single and multiple-volume copies often had magnificent double opening-pages of full-illumination. Many of these are superb works of art: masterpieces of colour and design. Like all Qur’anic illumination they are entirely non-representational in character, consisting of geometric patterns, stylised floral and vegetal motifs, and in later times semi-naturalistic flora.

Although these pages are, sometimes considered as merely decorative it can be argued that they have an important spiritual - even metaphysical - character and deserve to be considered as major works of religious art.

Mamluk and Early Manuscripts

Prior to the Mongol invasion of the Islamic world in the early 13th century the greater part of that area was theoretically under the suzerainty of the ‘Abbasid caliph of Baghdad (750-1258). The caliph was temporal successor to the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) as head of the Islamic state. Muhammad was followed by the Orthodox caliphs (632-661) and the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus (661-750). Illustrated and illuminated manuscripts survive only from the ‘Abbasid period. There are numerous examples of beautifully written and illuminated Qur’ans from many parts of the Islamic world from the 8th century onwards, but illustrated manuscripts are found only at the very end of the ‘Abbasid caliphate. No doubt there were earlier ones, though never in the quantities that occur after the beginning of the 14th century.

The conquest of Iran and Iraq by the Mongols in the first half of the 13th century effectively split the world of Islam. From then onwards powerful dynasties controlled its disparate parts and around these dynasties arose important sub-civilisations - though all united by allegiance to their common faith. Egypt and Syria were controlled by the Mamluks, slave-soldiers brought initially from Asia Minor and the Caucasus by the Ayyubids, descendents of Salah al-Din (Saladin). The two Mamluk dynasties (Bahri 1250-1390 and Burji 1382-1517) were important patrons of the illuminated manuscript. Superb Qur’ans were made for them in Cairo for endowment to the many mosques and madrasas (theological colleges) founded by the sultans and their officers. A number of books were also illustrated for them, especially works on military matters.
1 Qur'an quarter (Rub'i), 1st of 4
Scribe: 'Ali bin Sadan al-Razi
Iran, 361/971-2
Ms. 1434; fols. 1v-2r; 26 x 17.8 cm

These are the opening pages of the first quarter of the Qur'an (I—VI, 165). The central medallions originally contained inscriptions in white Kufic giving the number of verses, letters, etc. in the Qur'an, on a green and gold ground. This Qur'an is one of the oldest vertical format manuscripts, but in colour (mainly gold, sepia and blue) and design the frontispiece has many similarities with early horizontal format Qur'ans. There is another rub'i in the Ardabil Shrine and a further one in Istanbul University Library (A 6778). The latter contains the date and the name of the scribe. His kunya, 'Al-Razi', implies some connection with the Iranian town of Ray. This manuscript is also the first dated Qur'an on paper, all earlier copies being on parchment. The text is in Eastern Kufic, 10 lines to the page. The binding, if not original, must be almost contemporary. It is divided into a repeat diamond pattern with circles at the top and bottom of each diamond. Every circle contains the complete text of Sura CXII(AI-ikhlas, Purity) in beautifully sculpted Eastern Kufic.

Exhibited: Metropolitan, 1933. Published: Arberry No. 35, Lewis, p. 156; James, 1960, nos. 13,14.

2 Qur'an
Scribe/illuminator: (Abu'l-Hasan) 'Ali bin Hilal, called Ibn al-Bawwab
Baghdad, 391/1000-1
Ms. 1431; fols. 184v-5r; 17.7 x 13.7 cm

Closing folios of illumination. Interlocking circles in gold are surrounded by a strapwork frame. In the centre of the circles are confronted brown floral, sometimes called 'tree of life', motifs but, as with most Islamic vegetal fillers', adapted from a limited traditional repertoire of designs to fill a specific space. In the triangular interstices are grey lotus blossoms on blue. Other interstices have delicately painted patterns. Unlike most contemporary work, gold is used very sparingly and is almost confined to the marginal palmettes. This is perhaps the most famous Qur'an in existence, being the only authentic example of the hand of Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022), one of the three great masters of medieval Arabic calligraphy. Ibn al-Bawwab, who was a painter before taking up calligraphy, was almost certainly responsible for this illumination. The text of the manuscript is in Naskh, 17 lines to a page. It is the earliest example of a Qur'an in this script, which was used for most Qur'ans in later centuries.

Exhibited: Baroda House, 1939, no. 17. Published: Rice, 1955, pl. IV; Ettinghausen, 1961, p. 171; Arberry, no. 41, pl. 26; Club du Livre, 1972; James, 1974, 21; Lewis, p. 157; Lings, 22; James, 1980, nos. 19, 20.
3 Mamluk knight exercising in the hippodrome

*Nihayat al-Sul wa-Ummiya fi Ta’llum A’mal al-Furusiyya* (The Goal of Aspiration to acquire the Works of Equitation) by ʿIzz al-Din Muhammad al-Aqsaraʾi (d. 1348)

Scribe: ʿUmar bin ʿAbdallah al-Shafiʾi

Painter: ʿAli

Egypt, Jumada 1 767/January 1366

Ms. Additional; fol. 146v; 33 x 26 cm

This boldly painted scene of a Mamluk knight in full gallop comes from one of the most popular Arabic works on horsemanship. It belongs to the category of 'technical diagram' rather than miniature painting, but is nevertheless a good example of the rather formal style of Mamluk illustration. The horseman wears a gown (sallar) over his tunic (qabr) and white leather or felt boots (khuff) with gold spurs. Armour is not necessary as the manoeuvre takes place in the hippodrome. The 2 lines of text at right angles to the page are the scribe's instructions to the painter ʿAli, one of the few Mamluk illustrators whose name we know. The manuscript is the first of several copies coinciding with the last 'crusade', launched by the Lusignan kings of Cyprus in 1365. These manuscripts are among the last examples of technically competent Mamluk painting. After the 1370s miniature painting deteriorated, though high quality works were later produced for Mamluk patrons by foreign artists. The binding is green silk over boards, with red spine and centre-sunk medallions.

Published: James, 1974 (ii), fig. 1.

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4 Portion of a Qurʾan

Egypt, c. 1400

Ms. 1628, 74 x 49 cm

The final folios of a splendid Qurʾan copied and illuminated in Cairo in the last quarter of the 14th century. It contains Suras CXIII (Al-Falaq, The Dawn) on the right and CXIV (Al-Nas, Mankind) opposite. The text is in superb black Muhaqqiq with several orthographic peculiarities, on a cross-hatched ground with a green treble-dot motif. Between some of the lines are elaborate Chinese fireclouds. These, like the intricately petalled medallions, can be traced back to Iranian Ilkhanid illumination earlier in the century. Above and below the text are decorated panels bearing inscriptions in complex though rather mediocre Kufic. At the top are the sura titles and verse-counts, and at the bottom Sura VI (Al-Aʿram, Cattle), 31, often symbolically written at the end of the text of the Qurʾan. This page has distinct similarities with some of the fine Qurʾans produced for Sultan Shaʿban (1363–76), particularly Cairo National Library no. 7. Apart from 3 other folios in the Chester Beatty Library (Ms. 1627 and Ms. Additional) the bulk of the Qurʾan is in the John Rylands University Library, Manchester (Ms. Arab 42). The Qurʾan was exhibited in 1877 in the Exposition Universelle, Paris, before being broken up.

Exhibited: Paris, 1877. Published: d'Avennes, 1877; Arberry, nos. 93–4, pl. 41; Lings, 61; James, 1977; James, 1980, no. 34.