

MEMORY OF THE WORLD REGISTER
1 Persian Illustrated and Illuminated Manuscripts

Ref N° 2006-09

PART A – ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

1 SUMMARY

The National Library and Archives of Egypt (Dar al Kotob) is the custodian of a unique collection of Persian illustrated and illuminated manuscripts from different royal ateliers. The collection comprises 71 rare illustrated and illuminated Persian manuscripts that highlight the development of royal ateliers from the 14th century to the 19th century. The collection is unique as it illustrates the history of Persian Islamic Miniature Painting, the development of Persian calligraphic script styles, and the art of Single folios and Album compilation (Muraqqa'). The collection was produced at renowned art centres and royal ateliers that flourished in the vast geographical region: Asia Minor, Central Asia, Persia, and India. The collection includes miniature paintings from the foregone Mosol and Baghdad School which was devastated by the Mongol invasion in 1258, from the Timurid school which flourished in 1368 under Shah Timor, in Iran, Turkistan and Khurasan, and from the Safavid Dynasty (1502 – 1736) as well as from the Mughal Empire of India (15th -18th century). Among the rare manuscripts are a copy of "Khalila wa Dimna" (includes 112 miniatures) inscribed in the 12th century by Abu al Muzafar Bahramshah of Ghaznah, a Shahnameh of Firdawsy (166 miniature) inscribed and illustrate by Mani during the 15th century and a copy of Bustan al Sa'adi al Shirazi inscribed by the famous Sultan Ali al Katib in 1488 and illustrated by the renowned Behzad who proudly signed and dated his miniatures to 1489. The collection is a treasure that will settle many misunderstandings and solve many questions of art historians, historians and language specialists.

2 DETAILS OF THE NOMINATOR

2.1 Name (person or organisation)

Prof. Mohamed Saber Arab

2.2 Relationship to the documentary heritage nominated

The Chairman of the National Library and Archives of Egypt

2.3 Contact person (s)

Dr. Fathi Saleh

Director

Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage

2.4 Contact details (include address, phone, fax, email)

The National Library and Archives of Egypt

Cornish El Nile- Ramlat Boulaq, Cairo-Egypt

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3 IDENTITY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

A Unique Collection of Persian illustrated and illuminated manuscripts at the Egyptian National Library

3.2 Description

The illustrated and illuminated collection of Persian manuscripts comprise 71 bound manuscripts each containing (on average) 100 miniature paintings in exquisite and vibrant colours. The collection recollects the historical and geographical changes that took place in Persia, Khurasan, Central Asia, and India in a span of almost 500 years. Its content (poems, epic stories, anthologies, and aphorisms) are of great interest to linguistics and calligraphers, while the second component of its content (the illuminations and illustrations) is of great significance to art historians, conservators and historians of the region. The carrier ranges from hand made paper of fine quality produced in Samarqand, and lesser quality paper, to European and Chinese paper, beside tooled and gold filigreed book covers, which are of superior quality and world importance. The collection includes anthologies inscribed by some of the most renowned calligraphers of the 16th, 17th and 18th century in the region and dedicated to the Shahs and leaders of key dynasties. It fills an important gap in history and in the relationship between calligraphers and ateliers. The miniatures are of important, not to say vital, significance to the development of Islamic miniature paintings; names found in this collection as Mani and Bihzad are rarely found in other collections around the world. They have influenced the development of painting around the Muslim empires. Bringing this collection to the world would contribute to the rewriting of the history and development of Islamic Miniature Painting.

The collection was integrated into the holdings of the National Library towards the end of the 19th and throughout the first half of the 20th century, when the National library was established (1870) and when it started to accumulate holdings from subsidiary collections. Many private collectors donated their collections to the library, and collections found in mosques and other edifices were sent to the national library. A decree issued in 1911 designated a specific section of the library to Turkish and Persian writings, further encouraging private collectors to place their masterpieces in the custody of the Library.

Among the main catalogues of the illuminated and illustrated Persian collection is the Fihrist written by Nasr Allah Al Tirazy published at Dar al Kotob in 1968. Foreign historians such as: Basil Gray (Persian Miniature Painting), Binyon (Persian Miniature Painting), Stchoukine (Les Manuscrits Illustres Musulmans de la Bibliotheque du Caire-Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1935) and more recently Prof. Dr. Bernard Okane of the American University in Cairo, have recognized and used this valuable collection in their research and publications.

4 JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION/ ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA

4.1 Authenticity

The collection houses 71 manuscripts; all of which had been kept for centuries as the treasures of Private and Royal collectors. Most of them are dated, signed and stamped by a library's seal, indicated the history file of each unit. Their authenticity is beyond doubt established; even when some of the manuscripts are not dated, their stylistic analysis authenticates it.

4.2 World significance, uniqueness and irreplaceability

The collection is of great significance; the manuscripts and the muraqqa' (patch work) albums recollect the history of the region and the history of calligraphy, miniature paintings and the relationship between the artist and the Royal Ateliers. It is irreplaceable because they are not just copies that were produced in few days or months, most of such documents and manuscripts are the joint work of ateliers, where painters, calligraphers, illuminators, paper makers and cover producers jointly worked for years to produce. They are unique as they hold information that will shed light on many questions asked by artists and historians alike.

4.3 Criteria of (a) time (b) place (c) people (d) subject and theme (e) form and style

Time: The collection ranges from the 14th – 19th century, yet much of the content of the muraqqa' manuscripts were compiled at an earlier age. The copying of famous stories of kings as the Shahnameh, or famous poems as that of Sa'adi and Nizami, by famous scribes was a process of safeguarding the original manuscripts from total destruction and disappearance in time.

Place: The manuscripts were produced, illustrated and illuminated in a wide geographical region: From Baghdad and the Mosul area, to Central Asia (Samarqand and Bukhara), to Iran and Afghanistan (Herat, Shiraz and Isfahan) to the Indian Subcontinent. All of these geographical areas considered Persian Language as the literate and refined language to be used by the elite.

People: The collection transcends borders and reflects the struggle to produce beautiful art. It exemplifies the different tastes of the Royal ateliers as guided and dictated by outstanding calligraphers and painters. It reflects the taste of the Mosul, the Timurids, the Safavids, the Shaybanids, the Mughul Empires.

The Subject and Theme:

The collection comprises epic poems (Shahnameh), love poems (quintets and rhyming couplets), mystic poems (Sufi) and religious aphorisms and wise sayings. The manuscripts are illuminated by geometric frontispieces, opening medallions, gold rulings, and illuminated end pages. They are further illustrated with miniature paintings, exquisite, colourful and vibrant. The miniatures range from Royal gatherings in famous courts, depictions of hunting and themes of festivities, anthology of the lover and beloved as in Majnun and Layla, (Nizami's khamsah), astronomical images of angles, images of wise men, plants and animal depictions.

Form and Style:

Aesthetically these miniatures maybe considered the state of the art of Islamic miniature painting. Their styles indicate royal patronage, high quality pigments and superb paper manufacturing centres. It would be a great loss if such miniatures are not made known to the world.

4.4 Issues of rarity, integrity, threat and management

The collection is rare, many of the miniatures and illuminations are unique and as many of them are signed, this makes it indeed rare. They are kept in store with no acid free wrapping, control of humidity nor temperature, which in time will lead to the flaking of the pigment and biological risks. A management plan is envisaged, aiming at documenting and digitizing the collection. A management plan is essential since we fear the loss of this irreplaceable heritage as well as to make sure that their whereabouts will always be known to researchers.

5 ***LEGAL INFORMATION***

5.1. Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

The owner is The National Library and Archives, The Ministry of Culture, Arab Republic of Egypt.

Address: Cornish El Nile- Ramlet Boulac, Cairo-Egypt.

P.O.Box: 11938.

5.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details, if different to owner)

5.3 Legal status:

(a) Category of ownership: National Library and Archives of Egypt

(b) Accessibility: Limited
(to post graduates with prior permission, or via black and white microfilm).

(c) Copyright status: The National Library and Archives of Egypt

(d) Responsible administration: The National Library and Archives of Egypt

(e) Other factors: The whole collection belongs to and is owned by the National Library and Archives of Egypt

6 *MANAGEMENT PLAN*

6.1 A project to document and digitize the collection is currently being envisaged, to help know about the collection, and have access to it and to attain a proper physical environment for its safekeeping.

7 *CONSULTATION*

7.1 Provide details of consultation about this nomination with (a) the owner of the heritage (b) the custodian (c) your national or regional *Memory of the World* committee

PART B – SUBSIDIARY INFORMATION

8 *ASSESSMENT OF RISK*

8.1 Harmful factors exist: Poor human handling, poor storage which allows acidity, moisture and dust in an uncontrolled environment, and biological risks (insects) are unavoidable.

9 *ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVATION*

9.1 Detail the preservation context of the documentary heritage (see 3.3)

PART C - LODGEMENT

This nomination is lodged by:

(Please print name)...Dr. Fathi Saleh.....

(Signature)..... (Date)...March 25th, 2006.....