The Arabian nights

The classic story of *The Arabian nights*, or *The thousand and one nights* (*Alf layla wa layla* in Arabic), owes its origins to three distinct cultural areas: India, Persia and Arabia (or, more precisely, the Arab world). Although the origins of the story are unknown, *The Arabian nights* first appeared in its Arabic form in 850. Like many folk tales, *The Arabian nights* may have originated from a number of different sources and was embellished over time. The tales feature several themes: powerful demons, talismans (where a magical object protects and guides the hero), quests and transformations. The stories were circulated for centuries, until they were written down in a definite form during the late thirteenth century, either in Syria or Egypt.

The story of Shahriyar and Shahrazad is the first and main story in *The Arabian nights*. The reader is introduced to the mythical king Shahriyar who, having executed an unfaithful wife, attempts to avoid further sexual betrayal by marrying virgins whom he takes to his bed for a single night and has beheaded the following morning. Because the king’s murderous actions threaten the lives of all the girls in the kingdom, Shahrazad volunteers herself to be the king’s next wife. She strikes a bargain with the king, who promises he will not put her to death until she has told him a story. Her story, which is interwoven with many other tales such as that of Sinbad the Sailor, lasted for two years and 271 days (1001 nights). Shahrazad’s continuous story-telling captivates the king and his interest is sustained with the fantastic and mysterious tales, vivid descriptions and breathtaking heroism. Shahrazad’s story-telling is in itself a heroic and life-saving device, which finally forces Shahriyar to spare the wise and courageous girl’s life.
The development of Arabic script and the role of the calligrapher

A distinctive feature of Arabic script is its flexibility and fluidity, which allowed it to be written in a myriad of ways. This led over centuries to continuous creativity on the part of calligraphers, who perfected, embellished and re-invented the script and developed new styles. The establishment of Arabic as the language and script of the administration of the Muslim empire coincided with the need to write the Qur’an in the most beautiful script possible. Thus, a series of scripts that were principally used for copying the Qur’an was developed, but soon these were employed in other contexts and media including secular texts.

Pre-eminent among the early scripts is *kufic*, named after the town of Kufa in Iraq, which was one of a number of centres where the art of calligraphy began to develop at the end of the seventh century. The *kufic* script is characterized by elegant angular forms that were later to vary widely in relation to the time and place of their production. By the tenth century, at least twenty different cursive styles of script had been developed.

Each of the six calligraphic styles (*naskh, thuluth, nastaliq, muhaqqaq, rayhan, tawqi’ and riga*) developed for copying the Qur’an had particular characteristics and uses. For example, the small-scale and neat *naskh* was often used for the copying of documents as well as Qur’ans, while the larger scale and more formal *thuluth* was favoured by the Mamluk sultans of Egypt for its monumental and decorative qualities. Another great contribution to calligraphy was *nastaliq* (the ‘hanging script’), which was supposedly perfected by the Persian calligrapher Mir Ali of Tabriz (died 1446). *Nastaliq* was suitable for writing Persian, since the structure of this poetic language lends itself to being written decoratively. The *nastaliq* script dominated from the sixteenth century in Iran and was also popular in Muslim India, where it was even used by British officials.
Conserving ancient manuscripts in the twenty-first century

Manuscripts are structurally complex documents, valuable for their form, materials and content. Balancing the requirements of preservation and access is often challenging, requiring research across a range of cultural and material issues. As well as studying manufacturing techniques, it is also necessary to integrate traditional knowledge about the care of manuscripts with current conservation practices.

Working with international experts in the field and Muslim community groups, the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation has developed protocols for handling, display and storage of the Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection. The collection is stored in a pristine, environmentally controlled environment, and Qur’ans are stored physically above secular texts.

During conservation, scientific analysis can help with dating as well as providing information about provenance and composition. For instance, the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation and the School of Physics have undertaken Raman analysis (a non-destructive chemical analysis) of the pigments of key manuscripts. This has revealed information about their molecular structure, enabling identification of inorganic and organic pigments as well as binding media and varnishes.

Advances in information technology have improved access to important manuscript collections. Bernard Muir, professor of medieval language and literature in the Department of English at the University of Melbourne, is an international expert in hagiography, palaeography and codicology, and a specialist in the digital analysis and presentation of texts preserved in manuscript form. Over the past decade, Professor Muir and his team of technicians and programmers have produced a number of world-class publications, illustrating the enormous potential of the digital analysis of medieval manuscripts.

The Middle Eastern manuscripts on display here present a special set of problems and challenges. They are mostly written on paper rather than parchment, and paper deteriorates more rapidly; in addition, many of these books were ‘functional’ and so were subject to heavy use and wear. They are written in a number of languages no longer taught at the university, and so expert external advice is required for the proper analysis of the texts themselves.

With thanks to staff of the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, the University of Melbourne
Manuscripts and illumination

Before the invention of printing, all books had to be handwritten. In fact, the term 'manuscript' comes from the Latin for 'handwritten', *documenta manuscripta*. Although paper was used in southern Europe from the twelfth century, it did not become widespread until the late Middle Ages, with the invention of the mechanical printing press with movable type. Before this time, parchment or vellum (stretched and treated animal skins) were most commonly used; in an earlier period papyrus was the preferred material from which to make rolls for recording texts and other written records.

An illuminated manuscript is a text that is supplemented by the addition of decorations or illustrations, such as initials, borders and miniatures. The term 'illuminated' comes from the Latin *illuminare* (to brighten, to light up) and refers to the use of bright colours and gold to embellish initial letters or to portray entire scenes. Illuminations, which were added after the main text had been transcribed, could be purely decorative, but they were also used to signal important passages as well as enhancing or clarifying a text's meaning.

Illumination, because it is labour-intensive and uses precious materials, was a complex and frequently costly process. This meant that the art of illumination was usually reserved for special books. Art historians and codicologists (specialists in the study of manuscripts) classify manuscripts into their historic periods and types based on the analysis of illumination and styles of script.

The Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection features a diverse range of examples of the art of the illuminator. Intricate designs and patterns are hand-painted on parchment, paper and leather using gold and silver leaf as well as coloured pigments. The different styles and techniques used indicate the artists' talent and the extensive range that is indicative of the illuminated Middle Eastern manuscript tradition. The bindings of manuscripts are also of interest. There were many different techniques used in binding books, often associated with particular countries and periods of time.

With thanks to Professor Bernard Muir, Department of English, the University of Melbourne
The Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection

The Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection is largely comprised of single-bound texts, as well as volume sets, unbound or incomplete textual material, and an ornate book cover. Most items date from around the nineteenth century, although the earliest text dates from approximately the fifteenth century. Much of the collection consists of Islamic religious texts and associated theory, but the collection also includes important poetic works, educational primers, and texts on astrology and weaponry.

Apart from the collection’s academic and historical value, numerous manuscripts are also significant for their bibliographical or artistic content. Many of the manuscripts are unusual because they contain extensive marginalia and other notations in Middle Eastern languages and in English. Other interesting features include inserted items, early labels, dealers’ inscriptions and book-plates.

Although many works have undergone restoration over the years, the collection includes some outstanding examples of original binding. Boards covered with embossed and tooled leather are further decorated with inlaid medallions, paint and gold leaf. There are numerous decorative headbands and leather doublures. Other materials used in binding include lacquer, velvet and wood, while many manuscript covers are made up of pasteboard from old manuscript leaves.

Fine examples of Islamic illustration and decoration are visible in the text-blocks (sections of printing inside margins) of numerous manuscripts in the collection. Many have highly decorative unwans (decorative frontispieces) illuminated with gouache and gold and silver leaf. Some texts are accompanied by illuminations, miniatures and diagrams. The paper in many works is highly burnished, dyed, flecked with gold, inlaid with gold-beaters skin or other papers, and decorated in the margins.

In many works, more than one hand can be identified. Most of the manuscripts are written in Arabic or Persian, although there are also examples in Turkish, Urdu, Ethiopic, Syriac, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Pushtu, Prakrit, Mongol and Malmud.

With thanks to staff of the Information Division, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, the University of Melbourne
The origins of Arabic script

Until the sixth century, Arabic was a spoken language only. It was the language of the tribal kingdoms that had established themselves in central Arabia, southern Iraq and Syria two centuries previously. A sophisticated tradition of oral poetry grew up at their courts, handed down over several hundred years but only written down from about the sixth century. The poets of the pre-Islamic era conjure up images of nomadic life in the desert, evoking themes of love, warfare and hunting. The alphabet used to write Arabic from the sixth century to the present day is a form of Aramaic script that belongs to the family of Semitic scripts, whose ultimate origins may go back to Egyptian hieroglyphs. Aramaic had been used by the Persians as the official language of the western part of their empire between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE in north-west and eastern Arabia. With Alexander the Great’s conquest of the region in the fourth century BCE, Greek became the language of government, but Aramaic continued to be spoken and written in everyday life. It is still spoken in some parts of Syria today.

The Nabateans (whose powerful kingdom flourished from about 100 BCE to 106 CE from southern Syria to north-west Arabia) wrote in Aramaic. The version of the script they developed came to be widely used throughout the region. Following the fall of the Nabatean kingdom, the Arabs in Syria and Jordan gradually started using the Nabatean Aramaic script to write their spoken language—Arabic.

It was the development of Islam in the seventh century that dramatically changed the role of Arabic script. Arabic spread with Islam, and the Arabic language was often learnt alongside local languages. The Arabic alphabet, which often displaced local scripts, has been employed by a whole variety of other languages such as Persian (Iran), Urdu (India), Dari (Afghanistan), Ottoman Turkish (until the reforms of Ataturk in 1928, when it was displaced by the Roman alphabet), and, until recently, the languages of Indonesia and Malaysia. After the Roman alphabet, Arabic is the most commonly written script in the world.
Persian miniatures

Persia (now Iran) developed one of the great traditions of painting miniatures on paper to illustrate manuscripts. Set in stylized landscapes, this style of miniature painting tends to portray historical or romantic scenes, where the figures engage in battle or courtship. The earliest miniatures were produced in Persia in the fourteenth century. The Mongols had a strong presence in the area at this time, and it is possible that Chinese landscape painting influenced the development of the Persian miniature.

Tabriz, a city located on the international trade route, was the first specialist centre for this art. Tabriz artists depicted scenes from Persian legend and history in a distinctive and colourful style. Although Tabriz was taken by the great Tartar conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) in 1392, his descendants (the Timurids) also supported the art of miniature painting. During the fifteenth century, the city of Herat replaced Tabriz as the centre of Persian painting. Baisunqur Mirza, Timur's grandson, established a library and school for calligraphers and painters to produce illustrated manuscripts.

In the fifteenth century, the artist Kamal-ud-din Bihzad introduced a new sense of movement to Persian miniatures, making the figures more lifelike as well as exploring ideas of space, line and colour. By the sixteenth century, Bihzad and his followers had established the artistic style of the powerful new Safavid dynasty. By the mid-sixteenth century, Bihzad's pupils were employed to teach painting to artists in northern India, which had been conquered by the Timurids. Employed in the studios of the Moghul emperors, the work of the Indian artists soon rivalled the Persian style. The themes of miniatures became more limited and by the seventeenth century they mainly featured love scenes and portraits, while some artists began to copy European pictures. By the eighteenth century there appeared a new genre of flowers and birds.
The Reverend John Bowman, a professor in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Melbourne from 1959 to 1973, died in May 2006, four days short of his ninetieth birthday. The father of seven surviving children, he was married to Margaret Stanton for sixty-two years. His long life began in Ayr, Scotland, the son of Matthew and Sarah Bowman. A bright and adept student with an affinity for languages, he completed the secondary Classical Greek syllabus in one year. Bowman’s interest in biblical studies was supported by his family because they held the belief, common in the Victorian period, that the British were one of the twelve lost tribes of Israel. After studying at the University of Glasgow, where he won a number of awards including the orientalist prize, he continued his studies at Balliol College, University of Oxford, completing his doctorate in 1945.

In 1959 Professor Bowman was appointed to the chair of Semitic studies at the University of Melbourne. In the days when air travel was limited and expensive and international communications were restricted, he was interviewed by a delegate at the Commonwealth secretariat in London. Moving seven children, an extensive library and a house full of furniture to Australia was a major undertaking. His love of Australia prompted him to apply for citizenship in 1961.

Professor Bowman recognized the need for the development of teaching of Middle Eastern languages and a broad curriculum on comparative religion. He put together a remarkable Semitic studies department, featuring scholars from Australia, Finland, England, Iran, Pakistan and Syria. Professor Bowman had broad scholarly interests, and his publications include works on Syriac and Eastern Christianity (particularly the Samaritans). Residence in Australia did not restrict his involvement in the wider international community of scholars, and he attended the international conference of orientalists in Moscow in 1961 as well as spending an extended period in Iran on a UNESCO fellowship in 1964–65. It was during this time that he collected many of the Persian manuscripts in the present collection. After retiring in 1975, he continued to pursue his interest in research and scholarship.

Professor Bowman’s Middle Eastern Manuscripts Collection is considered among the treasures of the university’s cultural collections. The collection is now held by the Information Division, Special Collections, in the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne.

With special thanks to the Bowman family