

The Conservation of Islamic Book Pages

by Martha M. Smith

Most of the Islamic art on paper in the collections of the Freer and Sackler Galleries was once pages in books of religion, history, poetry or albums. Some volumes still exist intact or nearly so, but many illustrations were separated from their texts in the early twentieth century when western collectors and dealers thought of them as individual works of art rather than parts of books.

Islamic book pages, especially the illustrated and decorated ones, are often damaged in some way: dirty, stained, creased, split, torn, chewed. Conservation of this material is limited because the paper is burnished, and the ink, pigments and gold are water soluble and may be flaking. Conservators in the West are further limited by their ethics to change, add and subtract as little as possible and to make changes visible but unobtrusive. In the West we prefer to leave evidence of age and wear; in the Near East the tradition is to renew the painting.

Cleaning is difficult. Erasers can easily disturb the burnished surface of the paper. Water is an excellent solvent for dirt but also moves paint, ink and gold. A swab damp with water or spit and gently rolled over a blank area may diminish the grime but leave the area looking too clean. Tidelines or the red brown stain from betel nut juice hardly moves at all. On the other hand, dirt and staining give information about the use books received.

Tears and losses: Edge tears are common especially on pages in existing books. Tears, splits and losses in the body of the page are the result of the corrosive action of copper-base green pigment, insects, wear, and creasing. Breaks in pages often occur in and around the borders of a center panel, especially the gutter side border, where the page flexes most sharply as it is turned. The narrow overlap of the panel and the page is a potentially weak place. Sometimes the paper has burn holes, possibly from the hot ash of a campfire or a hookah. The paper is often patched. When the patches obscure part of the picture or text or are not functioning, we replace them. Otherwise they are left as historical information.

We remove patches by poulticing them with methylcellulose gel or sometimes wetting them with a mixture of ethanol and water. For new patches over text or decoration, we use a very thin machine-made kozo paper with a pH of about 7.0. We coat the repair paper with heat set adhesive, the Library of Congress formula. The patch is positioned with a tacking iron and brushed with ethanol to secure it. Tears in blank paper, on the edges of pages, for instance, are mended with the same Japanese paper

and methylcellulose gel. Losses, missing corners, and ragged edges are filled with Japanese paper laminated for appropriate thickness and opacity or with Near Eastern paper. The fills are toned with dry pastel powder applied with a dry brush. Sometimes methylcellulose gel is brushed lightly over the pastel to fix it especially on new guards. When it is dry, the fill is burnished with a bone folder. Bad creases and creased soft corners can usually be straightened and strengthened by brushing them with thickish methylcellulose. Brush it on both sides of the paper if possible, blot off the excess, and flatten the creased area between sheets of Hollytex and blotting paper under weights.

Flattening: Flattening Islamic book pages and paintings is a moderate process with the modest goal of reducing some of the cockling to make them easier to sew into a text block or to mat and frame them for exhibition. Some humidification and the weight of a sheet of plate glass is usually enough. The humidification can even be a damp blotter under the page before it is put under weight. If a book press is used, the weight of the platen is usually enough without any more pressure applied by tightening the screw. Occasionally, I have stretched a page on the drying board by humidifying it, pasting strips of Japanese paper around the edges, and pasting the strips to the drying board. The stretch is not very strong and the process can be repeated.

Paint consolidation: Whites and pastels are particularly prone to flaking. Thickly applied paint is often cracked and cupping as well. We use funori, a Japanese seaweed glue, with success. The Japanese have used it for over three hundred years to size textiles, consolidate friable pigments on paintings, and attach facings. The washed and dried seaweed comes in sheets. A piece is broken off, melted in hot or cold water and strained through cheesecloth. The resulting liquid has a low surface tension and leaves no visible trace. We have found that funori melted in hot water is stronger than that melted in cold water. For more strength, mix funori liquid with wheat starch paste. To make funori, melt it in water that is just below a simmer for about an hour or until most of it has dissolved. Strain it through a double layer of cheesecloth. If you use cold water, leave the funori in it overnight. Funori liquid can be made thick or thin and can be thinned with water. It keeps well in a closed container in the refrigerator for about three months. B-72 may also be useful but I have not tried it.