

AIC ANNUAL MEETING: MAY 1990

ISLAMIC BOOK CONSERVATION

Scott H. Husby

In 1986 the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Smithsonian Institution acquired the much rumored and acclaimed Henri Vever Collection. Vever, a Paris jeweler of the Art Nouveau era, had assembled a remarkable collection of several hundred items which reflected his passionate interest in the arts of Islamic bookmaking. Among these are many fine examples of bookbinding, painting, calligraphy, and illumination. There are several hundred single pages of manuscript text and book illustrations. And there are about forty bound manuscripts and a similar number of detached bindings and book covers.

Naturally there was a keen and immediate interest at the Sackler in putting together an exhibition of this important collection, and a representative selection was made for a planned exhibit called "A Jeweler's Eye" which opened in November of 1988. I was asked to participate in the conservation effort to prepare the material for the exhibit, specifically to treat nine or ten bound manuscripts. As a group these books had two obvious problems: they were either falling apart or they wouldn't open. These volumes, primarily from fifteenth and sixteenth century Iran and Egypt, and their condition before treatment reflected these two most common problems in books from this time and area.

First, in some cases the very weak sewing structure so typical of traditional Islamic bookbinding had broken down. With loose pages falling from the textblock there was usually extensive fracturing and abrasion suffered by the protruding page edges.

Secondly, many of these books would not open adequately. Because many had been rebound in inappropriate structures or repaired crudely and carelessly the opening was so restricted that these volumes could not be handled or exhibited without inflicting damage to the pages. While an arched opening may be fine for a western book it can be very problematic for an Islamic manuscript, to say nothing of the potential disaster with an opening which functions more like a cheap paperback.

Because of the way these pages are constructed, with a calligraphic panel or painting mounted into a window in a surrounding border sheet of plain or decorated paper, a restriction of the opening can cause a fracture to occur along the join of these two pieces of paper, especially along the side of the panel closest to the gutter of the page. This problem is even more likely if green or some gold pigments have been used in the ruling lines and verdigris has eaten through the paper. If this fracturing has occurred in several adjoining sheets the pages can begin to interlock with each other when the book is opened. The result is often losses along the edge of the panel or painting. Furthermore, if the restriction occurs at an opening of a painting, and the adjoining pages are forced apart to see the illustration, occasionally this can mean paint will flake off the surface of the page. This restriction of the opening can be due to several factors. The book may have been rebound using an inappropriate structure, as is the case with this nineteenth century English trade binding complete with five raised bands, heavy rounding and backing, and an overly lined spine. It may be due to hardening of the old adhesive, which was often liberally applied and seeped down between the pages at the spine. Or in some cases previous spine-fold mends have been done with unsuitable and now stiffened material, such as with this book repaired with strips of rose-colored cloth

The first step in treating these problems was to free the text blocks from their bindings. Often the removal of the old spine leather would allow the folios of the text to be opened enough to cut any remaining sewing threads. The folios, or single leaves, were separated. And if the old spine fold mends were weak, stiff, or unsympathetic they were removed, mechanically when possible (such as this example, where this strip of cloth could be carefully peeled from the page surface) or with a brief application of methyl cellulose as needed to remove these guard strips of white paper.

With the text block disbound Martha Smith went ahead with necessary page repair as she will describe briefly, and then I guarded the spine folds with an appropriate Japanese paper applied with paste. Kizukishi was a paper I used often. If the border sheets of the text block were a variety of colors, once the guards were dry Martha toned them with pastels and lightly sized them with

methyl cellulose. In general I used two different sewing structures. In some cases I used a long-stitch sewn through a laminated support of airplane linen and Japanese paper. On others I used a link stitch which is close to the traditional method by which these books have been sewn, but I made one compromise in that I sewed along the entire length of each section fold rather than only at one or two areas nearer the center. In most books I incorporated a concertina guard of toned Japanese paper, but I am not sure this is really necessary and I have eliminated the concertina from several recent resewings.

Traditional Islamic headbands, while very attractive, are something I have not been replicating in these books. In order for the chevron pattern to really show, these headbands need to be fairly wide which contributes to restricting the opening a bit and creates a point of vulnerability at the head and tail folios where the pages must flex around the tie down threads. And with the flat storage of these books the need for strengthening the endcaps with endbands is much reduced.

We had available a small supply of Barcham Green paper and it proved to serve quite nicely for endpapers. These papers were toned with watercolor to create a sympathetic opening with the adjoining paper of the manuscript and were burnished with a bone folder to a bit of the polished character of traditional Islamic book papers. The endpaper constructions incorporated leather or linen joints and were sewn in at the beginning and end of the text block.

If a link stitch sewing method was used the spines were lined, usually with a layer or two of Japanese paper such as Okawara applied with paste, just enough to somewhat consolidate the spine and protect the sewing threads. This lining was followed by a final lining of airplane linen. The spines have been left flat with no rounding or backing.

The boards were attached to the extensions of the linen sewing support or spine lining in a split-board fashion. Traditionally there is little or no square allowed for in the size of the boards of Islamic book covers. I tried to honor

that tradition but felt a very minimal square was necessary to protect the edge of the text block.

When possible and appropriate the existing binding was repaired and reused. However, several of the books needed rebinding and for this full leather bindings of goatskin were made. In some instances I pared the leather fairly thin in the spine area and adhered it to the spine lining as a tight back. The resulting binding had a fairly pleasing opening, In some cases, I used a baggy-back structure which I like for its flexibility and durability.

The decoration on the rebound volumes has been very simple; just a few blind lines to suggest the Islamic origins of the book and to give a bit of finish to the binding. At the request of the curator we had a stamp made of Vever's signature which is used to emboss the top board. Also in discussions with the curator we have decided to eliminate the traditional envelop flap from the rebinding, and for good reason. These flaps are awkward for the user, they often damage the first few pages of a text block, and they serve no real purpose as protection since these manuscripts are now housed in boxes in a museum rather than being carried around in saddlebag on a camel.

Any fragments saved during the treatment process are housed in a portfolio along with the previous binding if it is not being reused. These, along with the rebound manuscript, are housed in clamshell boxes. The boxes are labeled to encourage flat storage. The spine label is placed horizontally and a second label is mounted on the top of the box for easy identification in a storage drawer and to place the user in the proper non-Western, left-to-right orientation of these books.

A group of cradles of several sizes has been constructed, covered in a linen cloth similar to that used to box the collection. The art handlers at the gallery serve a user with a cradle with each book. While one would like to see a book used with a cradle every time it is examined it is likely that from time-to-time these books will be laid flat on a surface and the most flexible opening possible should be achieved in order to minimize page damage in the future.

Since the completion of the work on the manuscripts for the exhibition we are proceeding with the conservation treatment of other books in the collection as well as manuscripts in the nearby Freer Gallery of Art. I hope at least that Mr. Vever would look with approval on what has been done so far.