Inside the secret library where East meets West

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Alastair Hamilton
THE ARCADIAN LIBRARY
Western appreciation of Arab and Islamic civilization
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The Caliph Harun al-Rashid enjoyed disguising himself in order to roam the streets of his capital, Baghdad, listen in on the doings of his subjects, and discover their unguarded thoughts and feelings. In several of the stories in the Arabian Nights, fantastic revelations of romance and misadventure require the Caliph to drop his cover in order to dispense justice and mercy and put the world to rights. The collector who has created the Arcadian Library is likewise incognito, and although his identity is known to some members of a very small circle, the secret is well kept, and so far he has not felt the need to reveal himself (he was present at the opening of the exhibition inspired by the Library, The Bridge of Knowledge, held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London earlier this year, but invisible to the company). With the help of the bibliophile Robert Jones and of Alastair Hamilton, the author of this sumptuous survey, this secret collector has assembled one of the most princely of contemporary private libraries, and what must also count as one of the finest dedicated collections of books ever made about Western entanglement with the Middle East.

The Library’s purpose is “to represent through books the relationship and the ties that have bound European culture for so many centuries to the neighbouring Arab and Islamic world”, and Hamilton’s account testifies to underexplored dimensions of exchange and cross-fertilization, much of them far more appreciative and therefore fruitful than the current perspective common ignorance perpetuates, and certainly far surpassing the assumptions of most of our political leaders.

The earliest items are medieval manuscripts, but there are also many incunables, translations of Avicenna and Arabic originals, printed in Venice and Padua; the more recent items include de luxe editions of the Arabian Nights, such as the white vellum, gold-tooled presentation volumes illustrated in luscious colour by Edmund Dulac. The books rise floor to ceiling in two lofty rooms, with a custom-made emerald carpet woven with lily-of-the-valley posies, the colophon of the Library, and a tribute to the flower that grew under the cedars of Lebanon. The volumes’ beautiful bindings glow in the penumbra protecting them from light damage; a panorama of Cairo, printed in Venice in 1549, and one of the two impressions still extant, is hung off the main reading room (it is the subject of Nicholas Warner’s fascinating study The True Description of Cairo, published in three volumes earlier in the same series, “Studies in the Arcadian Library”). Visiting the Library is by introduction; it is free. Its location is not advertised and indeed, can’t be discovered from the publication details of this book or of any others in the series (the most recent is Robert Irwin’s treasure trove about the
illustrators of the Arabian Nights, Visions of the Jinn, 2010); it does not reveal its whereabouts on the internet. As a private library, it’s unusual because it has its own independent premises and is not established in the collector’s house.

Reviewing this book, I must declare an interest – that I have worked at the Library and received generous help with reproductions of the holdings. The experience returns one to a scholar-king’s cabinet – to the palace of one of the cultivated Enlightenment rulers, for instance. It is appropriate that some of the books came from William Beckford’s library. But the atmosphere is closer to a shrine, a grail chapel, and you feel, when you are there, usually alone with the books and the library staff, that you have been admitted by Lady Fortune to one of her favourites’ secret sanctums where wisdom is truly to be revealed.

Alastair Hamilton is a leading Arabist and scholar of other Oriental languages; he recently returned from the Netherlands to the Warburg Institute, London, and has a rare range, having been Professor of the History of Ideas at the University of Leiden and of the History of the Radical Reformation at the University of Amsterdam; he’s written a history of the Copts in Egypt, has worked on the Qur’an and its translations, and recently brought out, again for the Arcadian Library, an unprecedented exploration of the architecture of Oman. The Arcadian Library takes the form of a guide to the collections, not a bibliographical catalogue, although fascinating detail abounds; Hamilton’s lucid, graceful commentary and proofing also seem to belong to an age of exactitude and elegance that are luxuries beyond most of our reach today.

Above all, like its forerunners in the series, this large-format volume is illustrated with full-colour plates even when the original material is monochrome, so that the ridges of the paper in the original book, the uneven impress of the type, the pressure of the burin, the wear and shading on the page, are all subtly and richly revealed. Especially magnificent are the gatefold sections, which make it possible to disclose in immaculate detail such rarely exhibited works as Melchior Lorck’s idiosyncratic records (dating from the mid-sixteenth century) of Ottoman uniforms and customs, Anton Ignaz Melling’s absorbed record of “The Sultan processing on the feast of Bairam” in Istanbul, 1819, and the delicate, almost gemütlich portraits of Ottoman grandees by Louis Dupré, six years later.

It is difficult to convey how unusually beautiful the books in the Arcadian Library series are, how they reproduce and communicate a neglected history of contact in numerous spheres of activity, and how they testify to the collection’s commitment to the tradition of book-making as a historical art, the equal of any other. In this respect as well as in others, the library honours the tradition of the Middle East, where scriptural artefacts command special honour and shape aesthetics more generally: architecture becomes calligraphy, clothing comprises documents, jewellery is inscribed with texts: the world aspires to the condition of a book, preferably finely bound.

In a poignant and lyrical film, The Dove’s Lost Necklace (1992), the Sufi-inspired Tunisian-French filmmaker and storyteller Nacer Khemir lovingly dramatized the life of a bookshop and bookseller, of scribes and poets, in an Arab town in some undefined historical period; he filmed in Sousse and other parts of his country, including the ravishing oases of the desert, and as the story unfolds, an unnamed band of fanatical marauders smashes this cultured society. The film is an allegory that foreshadows the vision of the Arab Spring and its fears of sabotage by enemies, both indigenous and foreign. The Arcadian Library also stands up for a historical Islamic civilization from a similar historical perspective: in his introduction, Robert Jones reveals that the collector had a Sufi grandmother “who advised that one should always live one’s life in pursuit of dynamic cultural variety”.

Hamilton has organized his account thematically, beginning with the Library’s strength in travel writings – by pilgrims to the Holy Land, merchants (real-life counterparts of Sinbad and Maruf the Cobbler), archaeologists, journeyman artists, diplomats like the celebrated Augier Ghislain de Busbecq (he doubts the tradition that Busbecq brought the first tulips to Europe, but does allow him to have introduced sedge and lilac) – and the many women who found the Orient irresistible. But the encounter did not only transport them to the wilder shores of love, as the late Lesley Blanch put it. British history on many fronts was shaped by these encounters in an underexamined process of reverse colonization: Lady Anne Blunt (Byron’s daughter) became an expert in breeding Arabian horses and brought the stock to the racing stables of England.
Hamilton also explores the imperial enterprise in the region: Gertrude Bell was “one of the architects of modern Iraq”, and Curzon also makes an appearance – en route to India, he gave a speech at Sharja in 1903 to the rulers of the Trucial States (present-day Oman and the UAE), reminding them of the benefits of friendship with Britain (the Library has the translation into Arabic).

After the travellers and their reports, visual and written, the next section focuses on “Turcica”, or materials from or about the Ottoman Empire: this opens with a papal indulgence, printed in 1482, remitting the sins of donors to the war against the Turks. It is a sobering fact that the earliest printed presses were devoted not to mass-producing works of learning to enlighten the populace, but to marketing vast quantities of such propaganda. The rich cross-correspondences in science and medicine form the focus of the central, third section, which ranges from the copyists of Baghdad and Granada who preserved, in Arabic, so much of the precious knowledge of antiquity, to the original herbalists, doctors, astronomers of Andalusia and the Maghreb – the Library has very rare copies of the pioneering surgical work of the twelfth century composed by Avenzohar (Abu Malik 'abd al-Malik ibn Zuhr) at the request of Averroes, and a worn, immensely evocative tenth-century manuscript of the famous astrological treatise by Albumasar (whose name has survived, deformed, in the panto villain of Aladdin, Abu Maza the African magician).

When Hamilton turns to Islam, he is on territory where he is uniquely knowledgeable, and the story of encounter becomes more complex, with fluctuations in relations, from rank and inflammatory denunciations of the Prophet and his followers to “considerable respect for its practitioners”. Inter-Christian hostilities sparked different views of Islamic Scripture. The story of the Qur’an in translation involves unexpected appearances – of both Luther and Melanchthon on the title page of translations, for example. They supported a German version of the Qur’an, the better to criticize it, and wrote forewords in which they seized the chance to denounce Catholicism for its alleged resemblances to Islam. Catholics in turn levelled a similar charge against Protestants. The business became so fraught, especially after translators kept dying young, that a legend grew up of a curse visited on “Christians meddling with the Qur’an”. The history, Hamilton writes, remains a bibliographer’s nightmare.

The Arcadian collection of editions of the Arabian Nights is one of the most multitudinous in the world, in keeping with the tales themselves. They were the reason for my visiting the Library in the first place, and the sight of the towering bookcase, dedicated to this accumulation of volumes from the first translation (1704–21) by Antoine Galland onwards, in differently coloured fine bindings, made me gasp like a seeker in one of the stories discovering the egg of the giant roc in its nest. The Arcadian Library does not need to expand on these holdings; it does, however, reproduce some of the illustrations on another glorious gatefold, and it pictures a scattering of pages from a bundle of seventeenth-century manuscript notebooks in which stories of the Nights are told. These have been annotated with exclamations and invocations of the owner, and survive between battered boards, the pages’ edges carefully patched here and there to preserve them. Perhaps they belonged to an itinerant storyteller, a hakawati, as Nacer Khemir calls himself; they have been lovingly read to bits.

With this lavish study of the Arcadian Library, it is to be hoped that a similar process has begun. As readers discover the knowledge assembled in the collection, it can start to flow and spread through our consciousness, altering many received ideas about the relations between East and West.

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