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Under the Hammer: Trafficking, Trading, and Salvaging the Middle Eastern and North African Written Heritage

Panel II-12, 2023 Annual Meeting
On Thursday, November 2 at 5:30 pm

PANEL DESCRIPTION

The trade in written artifacts of Middle Eastern and North African origin is flourishing and its dimensions are growing particularly in areas experiencing military conflict and/or extreme poverty. Yemen is one such area: given the ongoing war,

manuscripts are being clandestinely taken out of the country. Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya are similarly affected. Islamic, Christian, and Jewish manuscripts originating in the MENASA region are regularly offered for sale by Western auction houses, and many thus end up in private hands. The provenance of the objects sold often remains obscure or is at least not mentioned in the relevant sales catalogs. Additionally, artifacts of Middle Eastern origin are increasingly being offered and sold through social media, for the most part clandestinely. Such transactions not only are frequently illegal but also deprive the people living in conflict-ridden regions of their cultural heritage. Moreover, experts have made the case that the illegal trafficking of artifacts may be related to a variety of criminal activities that affect war-zones or regions experiencing instability due to armed conflict. Finally, scholarship, too, is impacted, since artifacts that are purchased by private collectors generally become inaccessible to scholars. While recent military conflicts and the pandemic appear to have exacerbated the situation, there are also many initiatives and actors who are involved in protecting and salvaging MENA's cultural heritage on the ground. Our panel showcases the fate of individual manuscripts or written artifacts, and entire collections of such materials, that have been auctioned or otherwise sold during recent decades. The contributions address both problems and concrete initiatives aimed at preventing the phenomenon, creating awareness of the artifacts' cultural value among policy makers, customs and police authorities, and auctioneers, and at providing appropriate training to stop illegal trafficking. Moreover, we consider the question of survival and accessibility of written artifacts from the MENASA region, which is connected to the thorny issue of the possible restitution of written artifacts.

DISCIPLINES

Archaeology
Art/Art History
History
International Relations/Affairs
Law
Library Science
Other

PARTICIPANTS

- [Prof. Nasser O. Rabbat](#) -- Discussant
- [Dr. Josh Mugler](#) -- Presenter
- [Prof. Sabine Schmidtke](#) -- Organizer, Presenter, Chair
- [Prof. Valentina Sagaria Rossi](#) -- Presenter
- [Cecilia Palombo](#) -- Organizer, Presenter
- [Ms. Luise Loges](#) -- Presenter

PRESENTATIONS

- [Cecilia Palombo](#)

[Quranic Manuscripts in the Art Market and in Scholarship: A Symbiotic Relationship](#)

In recent decades much innovative and impactful scholarship on the Quran's history has been lifted by the appearance of scattered Quranic manuscript folios on the art market. These fragments are often unprovenanced. In some cases, it has been possible to connect them to library collections, suggesting they were subtracted from the holding institution; in other cases, simply not enough information is available about the objects' finding and ownership chain. By incorporating unprovenanced folios into their research, experts in Islamic studies have been able to create new knowledge and insights about Quranic history and codicology, fueling discussions about the text's transmission and codification. The art market, thus, has provided scholars in Islamic studies with important source materials. At the same time, the circulation and sale of such folios is also incentivized by the interest of experts, for whom rare manuscripts represent an opening onto complex debates. In the case of the Quran, the relationship between those two worlds has also fed sensationalist discourses around the history of the text. The art market ensures the perceived rarity of such specimens, while scholarship on the Quran develops research questions around that very rarity. Moreover, media coverage shows that there is broad interest in Quranic manuscripts as objects of study, going beyond as well as attracting the attention of individual collectors. This contribution proposes to trace the symbiotic relationship between the contemporary art market and recent scholarship on the Quran. It considers various methods employed by scholars to access scattered folios and draws from three case-studies: the "Sana'a' palimpsest", a Coptic-Arabic palimpsest, and Quranic folios in the so-called "Afghan Genizah". It argues that the field's research questions and methods have been influenced in important ways by its relationship not only with the art market, but also with the illicit trade in ancient manuscripts. In some ways this relationship might continue to be beneficial to both worlds (i.e., scholarship and art market) in the future. However, it is important to highlight how it operates to understand its implication for, on the one hand, research methods and agendas and, on the other hand, concrete attempts at curbing the illicit trade affecting the Middle East's documentary and manuscript cultures.

- [Prof. Valentina Sagaria Rossi](#)

[Different Sources, Shared Fortunes: The Collection of Folios from Arabic and Persian Manuscripts in the National Museum of Oriental Art \(Rome\)](#)

In 2007 the Museo Nazionale di Arte Orientale "Giuseppe Tucci" (MNAO) in Rome acquired from a private collector seventy-two folios and one binding drawn from

an almost equal number of Islamic manuscripts originating from Persia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. The seller was a renowned Italian historian of art who purchased them from antiquarians (or through other channels...) starting from the late 1960s and would in turn resell them at auction. Once acquired, he placed them one by one in wooden frames and protected by glass, as if they were paintings destined to be hung on the walls of the owner's personal art gallery. However, the National Museum of Oriental Art came across the sale and started negotiations with the owner, requiring my expertise to evaluate the material at the fairest price. When the purchase was finalized on the most favorable terms, I focused on their study, recovery, and digitization. These disjecta membra belonged to valuable Arabic manuscripts (11th-17th centuries), including a 10th-11th century parchment Koran, and Persian manuscripts, richly illuminated and decorated. Through examining their contents, textual layouts and physical features (papers, inks, pigments), an endeavor has been made to trace them back to their primal codicological dimension, as well as to their provenance and origin. The practice of dissecting and dismembering codices with a powerful visual impact highlights the unscrupulous exploitation carried out by antique dealers and collectors over the past decades. Focusing on this practice, which has also made its way into the large pool of Middle Eastern book production, might shed light on the historical-artistic and aesthetic trends which have influenced the tastes of Western collectors. Not always knowledgeable about the content and origin of the purchased materials, they chose according to mere aesthetic criteria, which often played a part in devaluing the intrinsic and unitary value of the manuscript as a whole. Treating single illuminated pages of Middle Eastern codices as if they were stand-alone paintings, right to be exhibited in an art gallery, implies a conception which is ideologically based on the complacency of owning an object of exquisite workmanship and exotic provenance, without going beyond these outward connotations and betraying the intrinsic unity of the whole of which they were indispensable parts.

- [Dr. Josh Mugler](#)
[Manuscript Collection and Digitization in Post-ISIS Mosul](#)

The Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) has digitized thousands of manuscripts from northern Iraq, including collections from areas that were later hard hit by the invasion of ISIS in 2014. Some of these manuscripts are now undoubtedly damaged or lost, while others were preserved through the invasion by the use of various strategies. For example, manuscripts at the Mar Behnam Monastery were hidden in barrels and walled into a secret room; other collections were hastily smuggled away from Mosul in the trunks of cars. The vast majority of these items have been digitized in partnership with the Centre Numérique des Manuscrits Orientaux (CNMO) under the leadership of Father Najeeb Michael, OP,

now Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Mosul. Since ISIS was expelled from these regions in 2017, Father Najeeb has been a major part of attempts to reestablish a somewhat normal life for the Christian community of the area. Newly digitized and cataloged manuscripts in HMML's Reading Room also testify that Father Najeeb has been acquiring new manuscripts in recent years for the collection of his order, the Dominican Friars of Mosul. Many of these new acquisitions bear notes in Father Najeeb's hand, including valuable information on the state of manuscript collections in post-ISIS Mosul. He often provides data such as prices, sellers, aspects of provenance that are known to him, and more general comments on the sufferings of Christians and other communities in recent years. In this presentation, I will examine Father Najeeb's notes and other aspects of the new acquisitions of the Dominican Friars in order to shed some light on the circulation of manuscript heritage in post-ISIS Iraq. Father Najeeb's efforts to acquire local manuscripts, then to digitize them in partnership with HMML, provide an example of a significant project to keep these items in the local community while making them available digitally to scholars and interested parties worldwide, instead of allowing them to be smuggled out and sold to foreign collectors.

- [Prof. Sabine Schmidtke](#)
[Lost Treasures: Medieval Arabic Manuscripts of Iraqi Provenance in Private Hands](#)

Over the past few decades, there have been repeated cases of deliberate destruction of Islamic manuscripts. For example, a large portion of the manuscript holdings of the libraries of Iraq was either destroyed or looted in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and again in March 2003, following the invasion of Iraq by American and British troops. It is also worrying that Islamic manuscripts of uncertain provenance continue to be auctioned off into private hands, many among them apparently of Iraqi provenance. The lecture will showcase some recent examples of particularly precious Arabic manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth century in the realm of Islamic philosophy, logic and exegesis that surfaced on the market in recent years and have vanished since.

- [Ms. Luise Loges](#)
[Studying Cuneiform in Times of Conflict - A Scholar's Dilemma](#)

Few ancient artefacts are as sought-after by antiquities collectors as text documents written in cuneiform, one of the oldest writing systems known to humankind. The script was invented in Southern Iraq, some 5000 years ago. The area was densely populated before and during the first literate periods, with the first cities and territorial states. In fact, there are so many archaeological sites in the region, that a large part of them has never been scientifically excavated, despite being widely visible in the landscape. This same area has been subjected to intense archaeological looting, first, under the international sanctions against Iraq

following the 1991 Gulf War, then, during and after the American-led invasion of 2003. Often, the looters were after cuneiform texts, inscribed on clay tablets. Many such documents have since surfaced in private collections without provenance, an ownership history tying them to a legal origin. They have most likely been looted in the aftermath of recent wars. One example of collectors who bought loot is the American Green family, owners of Hobby Lobby and the Museum of the Bible. Unlike other archaeological finds, which are generally seen as having little historical and scientific value without provenance, text finds have often been argued to still hold scholarly value and grant historical insight even when they were stripped of their archaeological context. Some scholars argue for the study and publication of cuneiform tablets found on the antiquities market even if, or especially when, they are likely to come from conflict zones. The rationale of this argument is that the history of a site otherwise destroyed by conflict and looting, can be partly recovered through the study and publication of its written history. However, studies of the global trade in illicit antiquities show that the demand of the market fuels looting in source countries, and that the publication of illicit texts held in private collections leads to a scholarly endorsement of these practices. Additionally, the publication of texts from Iraq by non-Iraqi scholars at Western institutions can be seen as a form of modern-day academic colonialism. In my contribution to this panel, I will weigh these arguments, and highlight the ethical dilemma of cuneiform researchers faced with the decision to "publish or perish". I will also discuss potential ways forward, and lessons from this debate for the study of written documents from other eras and areas.



Middle East Studies Association
of North America, Inc.
3542 N. Geronimo Avenue
Tucson, AZ 85705

520 333-2577 phone
520 207-3166 fax
secretariat@mesana.org
mesana.org

