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The Conservation of the Islamic Book Bindings of the Department of Islamic Art, Musée du Louvre

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Abstract

The reopening of the Islamic Art section of the Louvre Museum in Paris in 2012 was the perfect occasion for a thorough conservation project of the collections. Thirty Islamic bindings were the object of that conservation work. The present article touches upon the general principles of conservation and treats the application of these on the Islamic bindings in the collections, and more in particular for the purpose intended: display in a museum. During the conservation process, three main goals were always kept in mind: the integrity of the object had to be respected, the structure had to be returned to its original shape, and the losses had to be reintegrated aesthetically. That reintegration was also a predominant requirement for museum display. Finally, some after-treatment strategies are discussed. A number of illustrations add a visual dimension to the theoretical treatment of the subject.

Keywords

Islamic book binding – Louvre – conservation – leather – Japanese paper – reconstitution – retouching

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Introduction

In September 2012 the galleries of the Department of Islamic Art, Musée du Louvre, reopened to the public. The monumental display of more than 3000 objects set into the newly restored façade of the Richelieu wing, combined with the innovative architecture of Rudy Ricciotti and Mario Bellini, emphasizes the art of three continents and more than 1300 years of history. Prior to this opening, three years were spent on conserving whole collections, including more than thirty book bindings. This current collection is the result of a union of two different collections: the first one was initially part of the Louvre collections,¹ while the second was a donation from l'Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs (UCAD)² in the 1990s. The items belonging to the first group were part of the former royal collections, enriched later by auction purchases from the 1980s onwards. The UCAD book bindings had been received as donations or bequests between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1930s. Some of the donors were well known, such as Gaston Migeon,³ Jules Maciet and Charles Piet-Lataudrie. The conservation project was not only an opportunity to perform high-level treatments and contribute to the longevity of these items, but it was also a great occasion to rediscover and highlight the creativity of the arts of the Islamic bindings.⁴ Indeed the book bindings owned by the Louvre emphasize the great diversity of the art of the Islamic Book as they come from places as far apart as Egypt and Iran, and range from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Hence, the Mamluk period is well represented as well as the Iranian filigree techniques. There are also remarkable examples of lacquered Persian bindings from the Qajar period.

General Principles of Leather Conservation

The leathers used for the bindings were usually made of goat, sheep, buffalo or camel skins, or, more rarely, calf and Morocco skins for the most luxury

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- 1 The inventory numbers for the initial Louvre collection start with MAO, or Musée des Antiquités Orientales, as these items belonged first to the departments of Oriental Antiquities while those donated by l'Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs start with UCAD.
 - 2 Formerly the Musée des Arts Décoratifs.
 - 3 Gaston Migeon was a curator at the Louvre until 1923. He was considered to be the pioneer of the history of Islamic art in France.
 - 4 The two reference books describing the techniques and decorations of Islamic bindings are Bosch and Haldane's publications. See the select bibliography at the end.

books. Leather is mechanically very resistant but chemically weak as it does not bear, over time, climatic fluctuations, extreme heat or drought, or excessive humidity. This is why it becomes much degraded by the harsh climate of the Islamic lands. The chemical deterioration affects its physical properties and its strength. The desiccated leathers tend to become mechanically fragile, brittle and even pulverulent. The ageing process also depends on the techniques and materials used for the skin manufacturing such as the tanning process and the finishing. The leathers of the Persian and Ottoman bindings were particularly well finished. They were deeply dyed, coated with diverse natural materials such as egg white or oils and then highly polished; this is one reason for their good condition today. In the past, when a binding was too damaged to provide the manuscript with protection, it was simply cut off, discarded and replaced with a new or used cover. As a result of a lack of knowledge and a loss of technical abilities, most of the books kept in Western libraries and museums were either rebound with recycled Islamic bindings that were not original or they were restored using Western techniques, often involving inappropriate sewing and binding methods.

Most of the Louvre bindings did not really suffer from chemical degradation but had been mechanically highly damaged. Several parts had been completely pulled out and many of them had been previously repaired with unsympathetic patches. Some of them showed severe degradation due to previous insect infestations: there were holes and large channels all the way through the boards. Some items still bore the traces of the dismantling of the books. In auction sales in the last decades, for instance, folios from Qur'ans as well as from illustrated books were pulled out from the bindings and sold separately for more financial profit. Hence, the Louvre collection today owns bindings, which were detached from their original text blocks.

Conservation Purposes for Museum Objects

The aim of this project was to conserve these objects for display in the brand new exhibition galleries and above all to contribute to their further preservation. For a long time Islamic bindings were not considered to be as important as the manuscript itself; the content was more valued than the cover. Therefore, the purpose of this conservation project was to consider the bindings as museums objects at the same level as illustrated or illuminated folios.

After discussions with the curators of the Islamic department, Gwenaëlle Fellinger and Sophie Makariou, it was decided that these book bindings should be considered to be museum objects rather than library materials. It followed

that the conservation process had to respect fundamental ethical standards and include a high level of aesthetical treatments in accordance with museum requirements. Each binding was treated and conserved as an entity in its own right, taking into consideration its technical features and specificities. Several bindings had already been restored in the 1980s at the Bibliothèque nationale de France using intensive conservation treatment including the systematic use of leather to replace all the missing and degraded parts. For that project, the curator wanted to find a different conservation treatment from those used in the past. Nowadays, Western book conservators tend to use reversible techniques as much as possible. For that reason, Japanese or Western papers⁵ are favoured over poor quality leather to conserve leather bindings. These techniques are often controversial: many restorers or bookbinders are reluctant to mend leather with paper out of historical and technological concerns. But today the quality and stability of modern manufactured leather are very uncertain. Consequently, the museum curators and the conservators look favourably on new options for ethical and conservation reasons. The use of Japanese paper in conjunction with wheat starch paste, a strong and neutral adhesive,⁶ is fully and easily reversible. The mechanical properties of Japanese paper are well known. With its long fibers, it is very flexible, resistant and chemically very stable.⁷ Japanese paper is used to mend and reconstitute the various missing parts of the bindings: the corners, edges, spine, and so on. After consolidation, the Japanese paper is retouched using acrylic paints that perfectly match the original leather texture and colour.

Respecting the Integrity of the Binding

During the conservation process, three main goals were always kept in mind: the integrity of the object, which bears evidence of all the visible technological parts of the binding, had to be respected; the structure had to be returned to its original shape; and the losses had to be reintegrated aesthetically to make the object suitable to be displayed in a museum.

5 For that conservation work, Japanese papers were supplied by Paper Nao® (Atlantis France), references: RK from 17g/m² to 60g/m². Western papers came from “Le moulin du Verger”, 16400 Puymoyen, France, www.moulinduverger.com.

6 Wheat starch paste is commonly used by book and paper conservators. The best quality is the Zin-Shofu paste supplied by Atlantis France.

7 The Japanese papers used for the conservation of book bindings are made with fibers of Kozo (Japanese Mulberry tree bark, or *Broussonetia papyrifera*).

For some particular bindings, it was decided that all the technical details should remain visible as technological evidence. Examples include the threads of the end band cores, the fabric used as text block backing and the papers used for board lamination. Hence the missing parts that would reveal the history of the object to museum visitors were not reintegrated. The museum wanted these objects to have an educational value: they could help to explain how Islamic books were made in the past.

One example of a binding that was left with technical details visible is the fourteenth-century Mamluk single board, UCAD 23763. The binding decoration shows on the exterior a central circular device filled with two squares interlaced with a height-pointed star, all of which was executed with blind tooling and small gilt dots. The doublure displays a repetitive floral motive made with block-pressed leather. Along the lower edge a large area of leather was completely missing [figs. 1 and 2]. This reveals the core of the board, which had been made with a lamination of used handwritten papers. In the bottom right corner, some residues of a coarse fabric highlight the presence of a previous text block backing. In order to keep these elements visible, it was decided not to reintegrate the missing parts of leather and to preserve the object as it was. Only the losses that had been due to a past insect infestation were filled in by using Western handmade paper [fig. 3], and then retouched with acrylic paints [fig. 4].

In the case of the other typical Mamluk binding, MAO 1209, which features two boards, a fore edge and a flap, the technological details were also left untouched, apart from the unstable parts being mended [fig. 5]. On the interior, the leather losses resulting either from the skin defects or from the paring process were left as they were (that is, at the extremity of the flap and in the bottom right corner of the front doublure) [fig. 6]. The backing made with recycled handwritten paper as well as the remaining white threads used to stitch the primary supports of the end bands were left as technical evidence. These materials were, however, secured and conserved: the tears in the lining paper were mended and the threads were untangled and reattached. Even though the interiors of these bindings will probably never be displayed to the public, they needed to be preserved and recorded as part of the history of the objects in order to contribute to their study.

Restituting the Structure of the Bindings

The second objective of the project was to reconstitute the objects to their original shape in order to regain their integrity. Since most of the bindings of this collec-

tion were incomplete, it was essential to reconstitute the items and to exhibit the complete structures of the bindings to the public. Some of them also had large areas that had been repaired using poor quality materials: fabric, leather, and so on. Those unsuitable repairs were systematically removed for conservation and aesthetic reasons and were replaced by stable and sympathetic mending.

With regard to the fourteenth-century Iranian complete binding, UCAD 20072, the exterior faced with burgundy leather was decorated with stamped and gilded central mandorlas terminated with pendants and surrounded with corner pieces and bandeaux. The interior shows black leather simply ornamented with gold-painted almond-shape devices. The two boards were separated when the text block was dismantled [fig. 7]. The leather of the fore edge flap had been restored with poor-quality leather, which had significantly deteriorated with the passage of time. On the interior, the leather along the edges had been completely pulled out, leaving the boards visible underneath [fig. 8]. During the conservation treatment, the leather hinges of the fore edge flap were reintegrated by using thick Japanese paper toned with acrylic paints and the flap was reconnected to the rest of the binding [fig. 9]. The two boards were reattached together and the spine was reconstituted: a stiff core was made with conservation card and lined with a final layer of Japanese paper toned with acrylic paint. As for the spine, since its width corresponded to the width of the fore edge flap, it could be rebuilt easily [fig. 10]. After conservation, the integrity of the item was restored and the whole binding remained flexible; it could be opened and closed like a real book.⁸

Advanced Reintegration Techniques

Aesthetical coloured reintegration was also a predominant requirement for museum display. Retouching was carried out using various methods and media. As these bindings were aesthetically and historically valuable, it was decided that advanced retouching treatments should be undertaken. This was also a reason why the losses were filled in with paper rather than leather as the retouching is easier to do on paper. The technique of retouching could be compared with the canvas painting retouching process: it is undertaken by

8 For conservation treatment, either wheat starch or Evacon® mixed with methylcellulose in 50/50 proportions is used. The latter provides more flexibility to the structure and enables the binding to be opened.

superposing many layers of media or by using the pointillist technique. Most of the time, retouching is done using acrylic paints⁹ that perfectly match the leather texture. However, depending on the original aspect, hues or types of leather, other media are employed such as watercolour with varnish, which provides a slight gloss, retouching pigments for canvas paintings,¹⁰ or pencils, and so on.

A significant example is the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Iranian single board UCAD 150 b. Before restoration the leather of this item had been damaged by infestations of insects [fig. 11]. The inlays made with Japanese paper were gradually retouched with acrylic paints. The gilded lines were also reconstituted with gold acrylic paint [fig. 12]. In order to reproduce the gilding, pure gold paint was not used because the correct tone is easier to reproduce by mixing acrylic gold paint with other different shades such as ochre, sienna, brown, black, and so on.

The Iranian single board UCAD 8733 is a key item of the collection due to the figurative scene heightened with two different gold shades. The exterior board made with black leather features a landscape habited with foxes, deer, rabbit and birds [fig. 13]. The doublure faced with red Morocco leather displays a central panel made of gold leather filigree pasted onto coloured paper grounds surrounded by black leather filigree cartouches and quatrefoils onto white and gold paper grounds [fig. 14]. Unfortunately, the second board and maybe the flap are now missing. On the doublure side, the leather was torn out all along the right-hand edge, unveiling the paper board underneath. This damage probably occurred while the manuscript was being dismantled. Consequently, it was decided that the missing edge should be reintegrated. The damaged part was filled in with several layers of paper pulp¹¹ to fill the gap and then a final layer of Western handmade paper. The retouching was done with acrylic paints. The missing edges of the cartouches were reconstituted with Japanese paper strips toned in black [fig. 15].

9 Liquitex® acrylic paints are used for their good light fastness. They are often mixed with the acrylic emulsion Lascaux HV 498® to add some glossiness to the retouching coating.

10 Gamblin® colours for retouching are used because they provide transparency and gloss, which match the leather aspects. They are supplied by CTS France.

11 This pulp is made from pure acid-free cotton rag paper pulp.

Conclusion

After the conservation treatment, each binding or manuscript was stored in custom-made conservation boxes. The way in which bindings are handled after their conservation is critical: it is essential for the curator to be able to open and handle them as they would books; the adhesive and the material used for the reconstitution must be flexible. Most of the objects conserved during this project can now be opened and closed, with caution. That is the reason why all the techniques described above can be applied to bindings that still contain text blocks. Regarding the great value of these objects, it is also important to point out that each binding is a unique case and the conservation treatment is decided upon by taking every aspect of the individual object into consideration.

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FIGURE 1

A Mamluk single board (MS UCAD 23763), the exterior, before conservation treatment.



FIGURE 2

A Mamluk single board (MS UCAD 23763), doublure, before conservation treatment, large area of leather loss in the lower part of the board.



FIGURE 3

A Mamluk single board (MS UCAD 23763). During conservation the leather losses were in filled with western paper whereas the bottom part was left untouched.



FIGURE 4

A Mamluk single board (MS UCAD 23763), after conservation and retouching of the paper inlays.

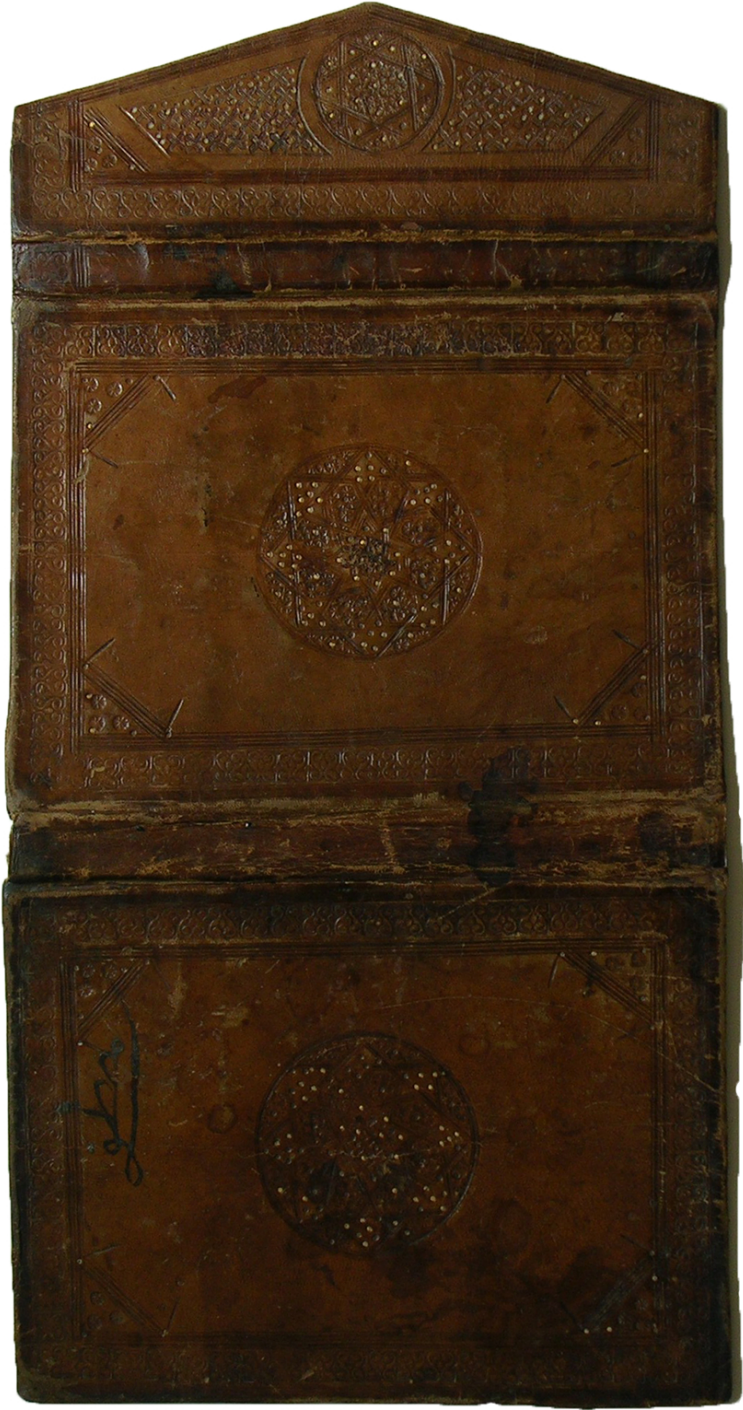


FIGURE 5 A complete Mamluk binding (MS MAO 1209), the exterior, after conservation treatment.



FIGURE 6 A complete Mamluk binding (MS MAO 1209), the interior, after conservation treatment.



FIGURE 7 *A complete Iranian binding (MS UCAD 20072), the exterior, before conservation treatment.*



FIGURE 8 *A complete Iranian binding (MS UCAD 20072), the interior, before conservation treatment.*



FIGURE 9 *A complete Iranian binding (MS UCAD 20072), the exterior, after conservation treatment.*



FIGURE 10 *A complete Iranian binding (MS UCAD 20072), the interior, after conservation treatment.*



FIGURE 11

An Iranian single board (MS UCAD 150 b), before conservation treatment. The cover is made of stamped and gilt tan leather. The top right corner shows a large area of missing leather.



FIGURE 12

An Iranian single board (MS UCAD 150 b), after conservation treatment. The missing area in the top right corner was filled with western paper and then retouched, the gilded ruled lines were redrawn with gold acrylic paint.



FIGURE 13 *An Iranian single board (MS UCAD 8733), the exterior, before conservation treatment.*



FIGURE 14

An Iranian single board (MS UCAD 8733), double, before conservation treatment. The leather was pulled out all along the right hand edge.



FIGURE 15

Iranian single board (MS UCAD 8733), double, after conservation treatment and reintegration of the right hand edge.