

Conservation for digitisation: Islamic Manuscripts at the BLQFP



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Since 2012, The British Library Qatar Foundation Partnership (BLQFP) digitised collection items from the British Library's collections related to the history of the Gulf as well as scientific Islamic manuscripts. The programme uploads the images on a free bilingual online portal: qdl.qa. To ensure the physical integrity of the items through the digitisation process, the BLQFP programme hosts a team of three conservators. Conservators make sure items are safe to be handled and legible for digitisation. The conservation studio sits with the rest of the team, in the middle of the workflow. This is a great advantage as conservators can offer support at any moment to team members, especially to the imaging and cataloguing teams who handle collection items every day.

Decision Making for Conservation Treatments

In accordance with conservation ethics established by ICON, all conservation decisions and treatments within the BLQFP project apply the twin principles of minimal intervention and re-treatability. Fit-for-purpose is used within Conservation for Digitisation at the British Library to emphasise the principle of minimal intervention in the context of a research library. Fit-for-purpose denotes only such treatment as is sufficient to enable an object to function in its current role. In the case of conservation treatments within digitisation projects, the aims are to stabilise objects for digitisation and to ensure good quality digital surrogates can be achieved, while minimising risks to the collection. Trying to ensure suitable long-term housing and storage solutions for the objects is also part of the conservation action.

Conservation for digitisation applied to Islamic Manuscripts

Three groups of manuscripts have been identified showing different preservation conditions. Here are examples of each group and the conservation for digitisation treatments we applied to each of them.

1. Rare examples of collection items that have kept their Islamic binding features and marks of use from before being acquired by the British Library - Or 14372

2. Examples of hybrid collection items that have received a rebacking treatment and although the original sewing is lost, the boards are original - Add MS 9596

Look at the digitised book here

3. One of the numerous examples of items that have been rebound in western style by the British Museum, the text-block is original - Add MS 23603

Conclusion

Interventive conservation treatment is understandable in a research library like the British Library, as the aim is to provide access to the text to a wide audience and future generations. Digitisation offers the option of applying minimal intervention on these types of collection items to preserve their original features and history as much as possible, since the content can be browsed on the web. BLQFP imaging team is going even further by digitising the binding of each collection item in scope for the programme. Combining digitisation and minimal intervention is allowing researchers interested in the manufacture of the book to examine untouched information as much as possible and contribute to building knowledge around these types of documents and the history of bookbinding.

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