

Dagmar A. Riedel – 3 October 2020

Image used for the poster of the brick-and-mortar exhibition

Jane R. Siegel and I chose a monumental Mamluk Qur'an with seven lines of text per page (14th century CE; cropped, w = ca. 30 cm, see ruler in scanned double-page below) because this large luxury manuscript is rare among the Islamic manuscripts held by the Columbia Libraries. Despite the cropped, disbound, and incomplete textblock, the damaged fragment showcases the high standards of Mamluk calligraphy in a bibliophilic codex. At the same time, the disbound textblock facilitated digital scanning with minimal negative impact on the material artefact itself.

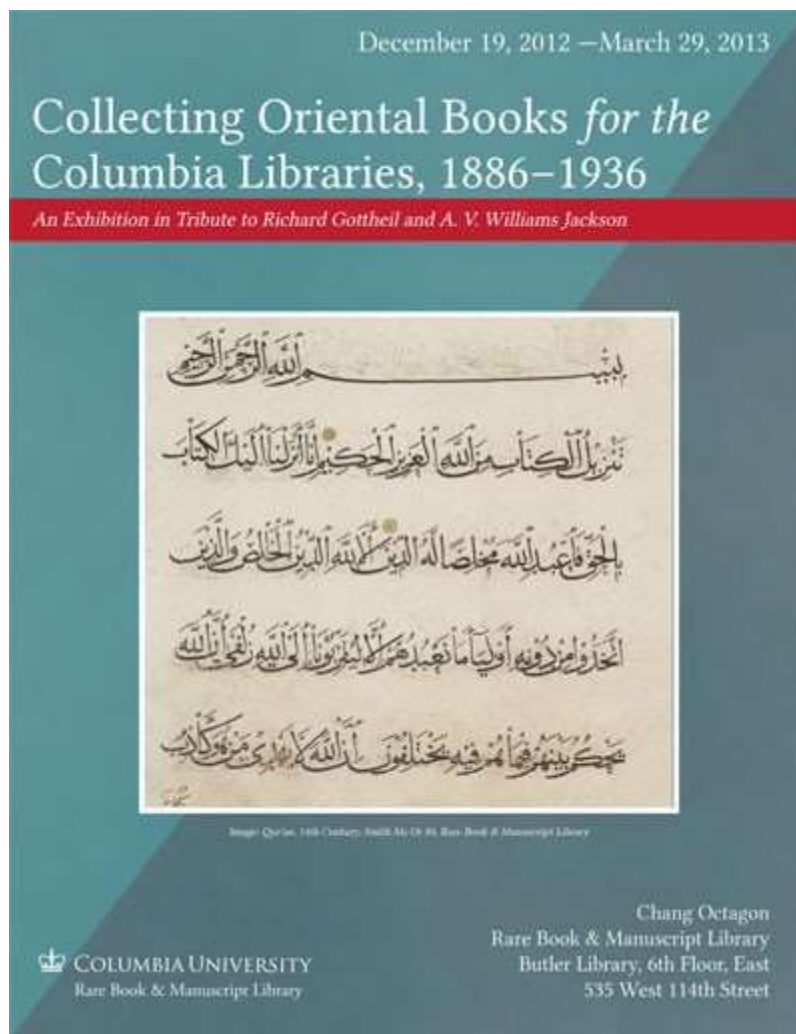
We used this double-page, which shows the last verses of Sūrat al-Ṣāffāt and the beginning of Sūrat Ṣād (37:174-38:10), in a square case outside the Chang Octagon as visual invitation to enter the exhibition space because of the chrysographed heading of Sūrat Ṣād in line five on the right side.



A twentieth-century English note, written in long hand on a separate piece of paper and kept with the fragment, states that David Eugene Smith (1860–1944), a professor of mathematics at Teachers College (1901–1925), purchased the fragment in Damascus in 1933. The enclosure's information is plausible, as a short memoir by Smith's niece Helen E. McAleer confirms that in the spring of 1933 Smith visited Damascus when he was travelling by car from Istanbul to Tehran ("A Family Portrait of 'U.D.'," *Columbia Library Columns* 10, no. 3, May 1961, pp. 29–30). The fragment seems to have entered Columbia University's just established Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML), when Smith made his second gift of manuscripts and artefacts in 1935 (*ibid.*, p. 19). The manuscript received the call number MS Smith

Or 84; in 2016, in connection with the Muslim World Manuscripts (MWM) project, its call number was changed to MS Or 84. However, the fragment only received a call number, it was neither foliated nor catalogued; there is merely an estimated count of 170 folios. Between 1958 and 1959, when A. Süheyl Ünver (1898– 1986) was visiting professor at Columbia University, he compiled a handlist with the title “Smith/Plimpton MSS Oriental,” organized as a card file in the order of call numbers (see his “Islamic Manuscripts in the Columbia Libraries,” *Columbia Library Columns* 8, no. 3, May 1959, pp. 31–35). At that time, Smith MS Or 84 was missing on the shelf, a fact that was properly recorded on the empty cataloguing card. In the summer of 2005, when I became a reader in RBML, I was very surprised that I nonetheless received a manuscript when I requested Smith MS Or 84 for the Reading Room; I had not indicated on the order form, though, that the manuscript was marked as missing in the card catalogue. In 2012 when I was working on the exhibition, the disbound fragment was kept in large paper wrappers.

The exhibition poster was designed and approved by staff of Columbia University Libraries in December 2012; they selected a detail from a different folio for the poster, which shows the beginning of Sūrat al-Zumar (39:1-3) without including header or margins.



This damaged fragment of a monumental Mamluk Quran from the fourteenth century was not digitized as part of RBML’s contribution to the MWM project; for a listing of RBML’s digitized manuscripts from the Islamic lands, see: <https://openn.library.upenn.edu/html/0032.html>.