

From Oriental Languages to Area Studies: Collecting Islamic books in Columbia Libraries between 1865 and 1959

The 150th anniversary of the birth of the Columbia professors Richard Gottheil (1862–1936) and A. V. W. Jackson (1862–1937) in 2012 offers the opportunity to reflect on the transition from research in “Oriental languages” to “Area Studies,” exploring its lessons for humanities research in the twenty-first century.

Near Eastern Studies at Columbia

The history of Near Eastern studies at Columbia University begins in the late 1880s when Gottheil and Jackson, two alumni of Columbia College with German graduate training, were hired to teach Semitic and Indo-Iranian languages, respectively. In the 1890s, Columbia became one of the first American universities to grant advanced degrees in Near Eastern studies. Gottheil and Jackson remained at Columbia throughout their distinguished careers, which spanned about half a century. Today Gottheil’s name is inseparably linked to the history of Zionism in North America, and Jackson’s path-breaking contribution to Avesta scholarship has secured him an entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Yet in Robert McCaughey’s 2003 history of Columbia University since 1754 (*Stand, Columbia*, New York 2003), both men are merely mentioned in passing, and Columbia’s contribution to Near Eastern studies in North America begins with the emergence of Area Studies programs after World War II. Columbia Libraries, however, remembers Gottheil’s central role in establishing its important collection of Hebrew manuscripts and printed books (Kenneth Lohf in *The Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University: Collections and Treasures*, 1985, p. 15)

Oriental Languages and Islamic Studies at Columbia

Since Gottheil and Jackson were philologists who specialized in Oriental languages, the advent of Islamic studies at Columbia is usually dated to the tenure of Arthur Jeffery (1938–1959) and to the foundation of the Department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALaC) in the mid 1950s. Yet in 1915 Gottheil’s student Philip K. Hitti, who later became an influential professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University (1926–1954), defended his dissertation on ninth-century Arab-Islamic historiography at Columbia. Both Gottheil and Jackson also published on matters such as Islamic art, Arab independence movements after 1918, and Persian poetry, suggesting a broad vision of Near Eastern societies, characterized by linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity.

The Islamic Book

To focus a memorial exhibition for Gottheil and Jackson on the Islamic book allows for an analytical view from the edge on the interdependency between scholarship, book production, and book collecting. While Islam is one of the major religions in the Near East, the Islamic book can be made by and for non-Muslims because the adjective “Islamic” refers to a civilization and is not limited to the faith itself. Until the 1950s, Islamic books entered Columbia Libraries as texts written in Oriental languages. They were collected because of their content, considering the educational needs of the university. But they were not collected primarily because of their format as printed book or manuscript, since not every text was yet available as printed book. It was only in the nineteenth century that Islamic book production in the Near East moved from manuscript workshops into printing houses, while in Europe, where printers had experimented with Arabic typefaces since the sixteenth century, presses already had sufficient technical expertise in the early nineteenth century to issue large and beautiful editions of fundamental works of Islamic literature. Consequently, scholarly bibliographies such as Carl Brockelmann’s *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (5 vols., Leiden 1898–1943) and C. A. Storey’s *Persian Literature* (Vol. I-, London 1927-) did not separate manuscripts from printed books, nor books printed in Europe from those printed in the Near East.

Sample exhibits

The exhibition will open with a section on Islam and the Near East in nineteenth-century America to illustrate the larger context in which Islamic books first entered Columbia Libraries. It will include Joseph Cogswell's *Catalogue of Books in the Astor Library Relating to the Languages and Literature of Asia, Africa, and the Oceanic Islands* (lithographed, New York 1854). This catalogue was an important reference work for American librarians, because the Astor Library held the most important American collection of Near Eastern studies books until the foundation of the NYPL in 1895. The lithograph presents the text in Cogswell's longhand since no American printer could handle the typesetting of the large variety of non-Latin fonts needed for the catalogue.

One of the items to explore the question of how Columbia Libraries would organize its Oriental holdings is Gottheil's letter to Columbia's president Nicholas Murray Butler (1902–1945), which was preserved among the Gottheil papers in Columbia University Archives. In the letter Gottheil vigorously objects to the plan of breaking up the Oriental collection by setting up separate study rooms for Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Near East. He pointed to the well-working integrative model of the NYPL's Oriental Division, for which he himself had been responsible since its inception in 1895.

Two previously unexhibited manuscripts will reflect different collecting goals

The collection of about 500 Islamic manuscripts in RBML can be divided into useful texts and beautiful books. An example of an important scholarly resource is the only known copy of an anonymous Arabic translation of the *Historiae adversus paganos* by Orosius (fl. late 4th century CE). This manuscript belongs to the first forty-eight Islamic manuscripts that Columbia Libraries had acquired by 1929, when Nicholas N. Martinovitch (1883–1954), a Tsarist diplomat and Turkologist, published a handlist on the "Arabic, Persian and Turkish Manuscripts in the Columbia University Library" (*Journal of the American Oriental Society (JAOS)* 49, 1929, pp. 219–233). The undated manuscript was probably written in North Africa, in the thirteenth or fourteenth century; unfortunately its provenance cannot be established. When Martinovitch recognized its significance, he published a short follow-up notice (*JAOS* 51, 1931, pp. 171–172), and today the text is available in two different editions (ed. A. Baydawi, Beirut 1982; ed. M. Penelas, Madrid 2001).

In the 1930s Columbia Libraries received collections relating to the history of mathematics and the history of education from David E. Smith (1860–1944) and George A. Plimpton (1855–1936), and these collections included a significant number of Islamic manuscripts, although neither collection focused on Islamic books. In addition to mathematical and astronomical manuscripts, Smith delighted in beautiful Qurans, and among his Islamic manuscripts is a small Quran from Iran. In 1855, the important Qajar book artist Lutf-Ali Khan Shirazi (fl. 1840–1870) made a floral lacquer binding for this late eighteenth-century Quran manuscript. The text holds no surprise for the philologist, but the cover is a gem to behold.