

Illumination in Persian manuscripts

Reference: 2019-19-SIM

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| Supervisor | Ursula Sims-Williams, Lead Persian Curator |
| Department, Location | Asia and African Collections - St Pancras, London |
| Start date/timeframe | Any time from May 2019. To be negotiated with the successful candidate. |
| Duration | 3 months (or part-time equivalent). For a part-time placement, the student would be required to spend a minimum of 3 days/week on site at the Library. |
| Remote-working | For the majority of the placement the student would need to be onsite to have access to the collection, although some of the initial scoping activity might be done remotely, if required. |
| Context for placement | |
| <p>The Library has a collection of ca 11,000 Persian manuscripts acquired mostly as individual collections of East India Company and other officials. These are divided into several catalogues: the major ones by Rieu (2961) and Ethe (3076). They range in time from handwritten documents of the 10th to the 20th centuries and include numerous rare texts on literature, history, religion, science and other subjects besides some of the finest examples of Islamic arts of the book.</p> <p>A sizeable proportion contain illuminated headings, marginal decorations and other decorative features. While many of these are dated, many are not. Although the majority have been described as decorated in printed catalogues, it is usually in minimal terms such as 'fine illumination'! Moreover there is no list of illuminated manuscripts as such.</p> <p>There is a unique opportunity here for a PhD student firstly to establish a list of which manuscripts are illuminated, and then, especially on the basis of examination of a sample, to establish a typology. Whereas there are several studies of the more deluxe examples, the more mundane cases have never been recorded and this would be an ideal opportunity for providing a more nuanced interpretation of the subject as a whole. In this way, the project might provide a case study for similar projects focused on other manuscripts in the Library's collection that are either undated or lack full provenance details.</p> <p>This placement would be in the Persian Section of Asian and African Collections. The lead curator would be primarily responsible but since the whole section is very interested in illumination in general we would expect to engage in a lively exchange of ideas.</p> | |
| Expected tasks and outcomes | |
| <p>The focus of this project would be to work on a limited sample, e.g. the Rieu catalogue which contains 393 illuminated volumes. The student would initially create a list on the basis of the printed catalogue and then examine more closely a sample of the actual manuscripts, e.g. those that are dated or originate from a particular area.</p> <p>The student would record findings according to a template which will be drawn up in collaboration with colleagues at the Courtauld Institute of Art and the University of St Andrews and which would include adding study-quality photographs. The student would record the type of illumination e.g. <i>sarlawh</i>, chapter headings, marginal decoration, frames, calligraphy, and colours used.</p> <p>Depending on timings, progress and staff capacity within the British Library Centre for Conservation there might be the possibility of attempting a limited pigment analysis of a small sample.</p> <p>Alongside this activity, the student would be expected to contribute to the Library's Asian & African Studies blog. We would also encourage the student to explore opportunities to present on the subject at internal Library talks and/or relevant external conference presentations or equivalent.</p> | |

Training and experience expected to be gained by student through the placement

The student would work largely with the Persian curators but also with other curators across Asian and African Collections. There would also be scope for collaboration with British Library Centre for Conservation in terms of pigment analysis and multispectral imaging.

Initially the student would receive the same induction that new members of staff receive. They would be shown how to use the catalogue, and how to extract the relevant information such as illumination, date and place of copying from the catalogue. As indicated above, when it comes to examination of the manuscripts themselves the student will work with a template that will be drawn up by collaborative discussion with colleagues at the Library and at other institutions (e.g. the Courtauld).

This placement offers an opportunity for the student to understand the role of research in a large cultural institution. Through the application of hands-on experience and a methodology requiring meticulous attention to detail, the student will acquire practical skills invaluable as a basis for more theoretical research. Working with full access to the collections provides a unique opportunity to explore the materials and gain insights into their research potential and significance. This experience would be invaluable both in the context of future research in an academic environment and also if the student is thinking of working professionally in libraries, archives or museums.

The student will also benefit from the opportunity to communicate research to professional colleagues and additionally to a wider public by contributing to the departmental blog with the possibility of presenting in one of the Library Research Seminars.

The student will be invited to departmental and section meetings in order to gain a wider understanding of the work of the department. The student would also be encouraged to attend relevant staff training events such as the in-house Digital Scholarship Training Programme and the regular staff talks given as part of the Library's 21st Century Curators series. Throughout the placement, there will be opportunities for the student to meet other research fellows, placement students and collaborative doctoral researchers based at the Library.

Required knowledge and skills

This placement would be suitable for an art historian with a particular interest in Islamic art. A knowledge of Persian would be beneficial but is by no means essential

This is a training and development opportunity open to current PhD students only. It is not intended to lead to a permanent post at the Library. Please note that the Library is unable to provide a stipend for PhD research placements. Applicants must obtain the support of their PhD supervisor in advance and, as part of their process, consult their HEI to ascertain what funding is available to support them.

Application deadline: 5pm on Monday, **18 February 2019**. Information on how to apply is available on our website: <https://www.bl.uk/news/2019/january/phd-research-placements-2019>