In the Islamic world, where reading and literacy have always been highly prized for the access they provide to the word of God and the world of knowledge, books were objects of both utility and beauty. Some of the most beautiful, in their calligraphy, illustration and binding, formed part of great collections assembled by the rich or learned for their own use or as endowments for mosques or religious foundations. Over time, these collections grew or shrunk, flourished or were dispersed, but one of the finest and most extensive of them remains a treasure-house today.

The riches of such a great library rouse the "Oh, look!" instinct in most of us: the urge to show and share the visual and intellectual delights we've discovered. No doubt that impulse is even stronger for the fortunate few who know the history, the interconnections, and the secret stories of the collection: for them its greatest treasures are not matters of delighted discovery but of daily or weekly rediscovery and steadily deepening understanding.

In this issue of Aramco World, we are lucky to be able to present a few of the jewels of the Topkapi Palace Library in Istanbul, one of the greatest collections of its kind in the world, and to share in the roles of both discoverer and initiated expert. Dr. Filiz Çağman, curator of the Topkapi Palace Library, provides the authoritative historical and background narrative, and selected some of the collection’s greatest treasures for Turkish photographer Ergun Çağatay’s painstaking attention. To these contributions, Barry Hoberman, a student of Islamic and Central Asian history, has added an introductory article on earlier libraries of the Middle East, and contributing editor John Lawton has written about another great collection of Islamic manuscripts and miniatures – in Dublin. That collection provided an exquisite illustrated manuscript for the exhibition “The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent,” which will visit Washington, Chicago and New York during 1987.

– The Editors
little more than 5,000 years ago, businessmen in ancient Sumer, in what is now Iraq, found they were having trouble keeping track of their various commercial transactions: for example, how many oxen one of them had sold to the fellow in the next village, and in exchange for what. To make things easier, they developed—gradually, over generations—an efficient way to record these transactions in some detail, by making tiny wedge-shaped, or cuneiform, marks on palm-sized clay tablets.

Then as now, though, new solutions bred new problems. Soon everybody had to find a way to keep track not of the transactions but, now, of all the little clay tablets being used for record keeping throughout the entire region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Someone had the idea of organizing a kind of central repository—it might have been simply a few shelves in a storeroom of the royal palace—where commercial documents could be stored in an orderly manner. That way, if a merchant ever claimed he had not received the proper, previously agreed upon payment for those oxen he had handed over to Mr. Nimbarzab of Kish, the original written agreement, now a matter of public record, could be consulted by the government official charged with settling the dispute.

Before long, all sorts of documents were being kept in centralized collections at a number of locations across Mesopotamia—not only those of economic import, but also cuneiform texts dealing with religion, kingship, administration, law, history, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, natural history, technology, and food and drink, not to mention compositions of a purely literary nature.

Separately, some 700 miles (1,100 km) away in Egypt, a similar set of events had occurred, probably on a more restricted scale. There, instead of making wedge-shaped impressions on clay tablets, people were writing on sheets of plant pith—papyrus—in a picturesque, pictographic script that we call hieroglyphic Egyptian. Though we do not know who invented the card catalogue, or when and where the first overdue notice was sent, we do know that libraries—organized collections of written materials—were born in the Middle East, where writing was invented more or less simultaneously by two civilizations.

In time, the clay-tablet archives of the Sumerians and other peoples of the ancient Near East gave way to the classical libraries of the Greco-Roman Orient—the most famous of these was the Great Library at Alexandria—and these were succeeded in turn by the libraries of Byzantium and Sassanid Persia. Thus, when the Arab conquests of the seventh century carried Islam to virtually every corner of the Middle East and North Africa, the religion took root and its sacred book was studied in lands where repositories of the written word had already been part of the cultural landscape for perhaps three and a half millennia.

We know next to nothing about the libraries of the very early decades of Islam and of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750). Books in Arabic do not seem to have been very common during this period. Korans were written on parchment, which was expensive and difficult to prepare. Most other documents were written on papyrus, which had to be obtained from Egypt and which had a relatively short shelf life in humid climates.
The much more extensive library collections of the Abbasid era (750-1258) were made possible by an Arab military victory that took place deep in Central Asia, far from the heartlands of Islam. In July 751, on the Talas River near the site of present-day Dzhabul (in the southern Kazakh S.S.R.), Abbasid forces under the leadership of Ziyad ibn Salih defeated a Chinese army commanded by the Korean general Kao Hsien-chih (See Aramco World, September-October 1982).

The political importance of the Battle of Talas – the only time in history that Arab and Chinese armies have ever clashed – was that the Chinese were driven permanently out of what is known today as Soviet Central Asia. But the battle had an even greater impact on the cultural and intellectual history of the times, because it marked the crucial link in the westward transmission of the ancient Chinese craft of papermaking. The author al-Tha'alibi (961-38) explains how this occurred, in his Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik (“The Book of Pathways and Kingdoms”) [“The Book of Pathways and Kingdoms”] relates that amongst the Chinese prisoners of war captured by Ziyad ibn Salih and brought to Samarkand were some artisans who manufactured paper in Samarkand; then it was manufactured on a wide scale and passed into general use, until it became an important export commodity for the people of Samarkand. Its value was universally recognized and people everywhere used it.

Exactly how paper made its way further westward from Samarkand is not known. By 794, however, there was a paper mill in Baghdad, and similar factories could soon be found in every Muslim country. Papyrus swiftly fell into oblivion. Paper became more supple, is more easily handled and is more convenient for writing on. It is only made in Samarkand and China. The author of the Kitab al-Masalik wal-Mamalik (“The Book of Pathways and Kingdoms”) relates that amongst the Chinese prisoners of war captured by Ziyad ibn Salih and brought to Samarkand were some artisans who manufactured paper in Samarkand; then it was manufactured on a wide scale and passed into general use, until it became an important export commodity for the people of Samarkand.

Christian Europe, meanwhile, did not have an important center of papermaking until the middle of the 12th century, a key reason why even the important monastic libraries in Western Europe possessed collections numbering only in the hundreds of books at a time when the great Muslim libraries could boast of having tens or hundreds of thousands – and why no European equivalent of the Mosul manuscript is ever likely to be found.

At the House of Wisdom, scholars of many nationalities and religions translated into Arabic, Greek, Persian and Indian works on mathematics, logic, astronomy, philosophy and the exact sciences, and wrote commentaries on those texts as well as original works of their own. In addition to those scientific works, the institute’s library would have housed Korans and collections of Hadith; books on Islamic jurisprudence and theology; collections of poetry; works on genealogy, history, geography and grammar; reference works; and books of proverbs, fables, anecdotes, witticisms and the like. With some differences of emphasis, books on these subjects formed the core of all the great library collections of the medieval Islamic world.

The library of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad was, moreover, a public library; it was apparently open to anyone who had the education to use it. Many, though not all, of the important libraries of the Abbasid realm followed this example set by the House of Wisdom, with the result that in Muslim lands learning and scholarship were disseminated across a wider cross section of society than anywhere in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages.

The library of the House of Wisdom served as a model in other ways, too, for large libraries throughout the Islamic world. Much of what we know about them comes from incidental asides in the writings of Arab and Persian historians and geographers of the time, so we do not have a comprehensive picture, but it is clear that in dozens of cities from Spain to Asia, bibliophiles had much to be grateful for.

In Muslim Spain, the most celebrated library was that of Cordova; it was the pride and joy of Caliph al-Hakam II al-Mustansir (961-976), himself a scholar of no small reputation. Al-Hakam sent bookbuyers to Alexandria, Damascus and Baghdad, and employed large numbers of scribes, calligraphers and bookbinders. His library is said to have contained more than 400,000 books, whose titles filled a 44-volume catalogue. In comparison, the royal library of Fatimid Cairo, founded by Caliph al’Aziz (975-996), is supposed to have housed some 200,000 volumes, including some 2400 illuminated Korans and an autograph copy of al-Tabari’s History of the Messengers and Kings. This library was later incorporated into a House of Wisdom established in Cairo by al’Aziz’s successor, al-Hakim (996-1021). According to the historian al-Maqrizi, the collection of the House of Wisdom of Fatimid Cairo was...
open “to everyone, without distinction of rank, who wished to read or consult any of the books.”

Cordova, incidentally, was widely known as a city of bibliophiles. As the following story from [al-Maqqari] (translated by Philip Hitti) shows, however, some were more dedicated to learning than others.

When living in Cordova I frequented its book market, looking for a book in which I was especially interested. At last a copy of good calligraphy and handsome binding fell into my hands. Full of joy, I began to bid for it but was time after time outbid by another, until the price offered far exceeded the proper limit. I then said to the auctioneer, “Show me this rival bidder who has raised the price beyond the worth of the book.” Accordingly he took me to a man attired in distinguished garb. Approaching him, I said, “May God keep our lord the faqih strong! If you have a special object in acquiring this book I will let it go, for the bidding has already exceeded the limit.” His answer was: “I am not a faqih, nor am I aware of the contents of the book. But I have just established a library and made much of it in order to pride myself among the notables of my town. There is still an empty space there which this book will just fill up. Seeing that it was in [an] elegant hand and good cover, I liked it and cared not how much I paid for it; for, thank God, I am a man of means.”

The Muslim East too had its great libraries. The historian al-Maqdisi describes the library founded in Shiraz by the Buyid ruler ‘Adud al-Dawla (976-983), where the books were shelved according to subject in huge decorated bookcases. “There is no book written up to this time, in any branch of science, that the prince has not acquired a copy of,” writes al-Maqdisi. Important libraries also existed in Basra, Mosul and Rayy, but perhaps the most influential one in the eastern Islamic world at this time was the one in Bukhara, in what is now the Uzbek S.S.R. The brilliant scholar Ibn Sina, later known in Western Europe as Avicenna, lived in Bukhara during the reign of the Samanid amir Nuh ibn Mansur (976-997). Ibn Sina wrote that the library there had many rooms, each room being set aside for books in a given discipline. “I saw in this collection books of which few people have heard even the names, and which I myself have never seen either before or since,” he recalled.

Two centuries later, the libraries of Merv (in what is today the Turkmen S.S.R.) and Khwarizm (the Oxus delta district, south of the Aral Sea) were among the most impressive in the Islamic East — until, that is, they were incinerated by the invading Mongols, who, at that stage in their history, had precious little interest in books.

The Mongols and, in the Muslim West, the Berbers destroyed more than a few libraries; others were reduced to ashes by other invaders or sometimes by purely internal strife. But new ones sprang up to take their places all across the widening Islamic world — in Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey, for example. Istanbul, in fact, became the main gathering place of Islamic manuscripts, its libraries amassing, in peace and war, unmatched collections of Turkish, Persian and Arabic texts. Foremost among the collections in the Ottoman capital was that of the Topkapi Palace library, some of whose riches are displayed in this issue of Aramco World.

Today, new libraries continue to flower throughout the world of Islam, not only in North Africa, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Middle East, but increasingly also in countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia. Everywhere, the newest generation of Houses of Wisdom is thriving, eleven and a half centuries after their magnificent prototype was unveiled.

Barry Hoberman, former managing editor of Biblical Archaeologist, holds history degrees from Harvard and Indiana Universities and now free-lances from Boston.
For nearly 400 years before it became a museum, in 1924, Topkapi Palace was the residence of the Ottoman sultans, administrative hub of a far-flung empire, and the center from which Ottoman arts radiated throughout the world.

Begun on the orders of Sultan Mehmet II between 1472 and 1478, following his conquest of Constantinople in 1453, Topkapi was later expanded by his successors as the needs of their day demanded. Perched atop a high peninsula, flanked on one side by the beautiful Sea of Marmara, and, on the other, by the bustling Golden Horn, it enjoys dramatic views up the Bosporus and, today, is one of Istanbul’s top tourist attractions.

Due to its several functions, the palace had a unique architecture. It consisted of a number of courts built adjacent to each other — each with its own porticos, pavilions, baths, kitchens and women’s quarters — making it a huge and complex building.

The Ottomans were meticulous record keepers, and, from time to time, the Sultans were obliged to make a complete inventory of their treasury. This meant everything they owned: from iron tools for making fine swords to precious stones and tapestries. And books constituted a good part of their treasury.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman empire and abolition of the sultanate, Topkapi was converted into a museum by decree of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey. The books that had formerly been in the sultan’s treasury and in different pavilions and reading rooms in the palace were relocated in the Mosque of the Ağa (senior officials) in the Enderun, or inner, court. Formerly the most important and secluded part of the palace under the personal administration of the sultan, the Enderun contained the eunuchs, harem and special schools for women and future state officials.

This unique collection of books was named “The New Library.” It contains more than 20,000 manuscripts — both Islamic and non-Islamic — and extremely rare and valuable maps, as well as copies of the first printed books from the West and the East. The number of Islamic miniatures alone exceeds 15,000.

Preceding pages: A mid-19th-century engraving of Topkapi Palace, and this page, Topkapi as it is today. Far left: The main entrance to Topkapi Palace, and left, the former library of Ahmet III.
In the New Library books were classified according to their former location in the palace. The Library of the Treasury collection, for example, is so-called because it was formerly located in the sultan’s treasury, and contains 2,999 rare books, mostly volumes of literature and history. In the same collection are 194 albums containing some of the finest examples of calligraphy and miniatures in the Islamic world.

The Trust Library collection owes its name to the fact that some of the most sacred relics of Islam were kept in the Throne Room - one of the rooms of the sovereign’s private quarters - which, in the latter part of the Empire, were called “The Rooms of the Sacred Trust.” The number of books found there total 3118, mostly Korans copied as early as the eighth and ninth century in Kufic script and extending to the finest 19th-century Ottoman calligraphy.

Some 2,500 books - mainly manuscripts containing fine miniatures - were found in the Baghdad and Revan pavilions to which they had been transferred from the Treasury by different sultans.

Books found in the other parts of the palace, in the storerooms, larder, and in the artisans’ and cooks’ quarters were collected in “The Library of the Wards.” This collection contains 1040 books, consisting mostly of Korans and books on Islamic sciences.

The New Library also includes the Medina Collection - books brought from Medina, in Saudi Arabia, during World War I. Two other important collections are the personal libraries of Sultan Mehmet V and of Lady Triyal, the consort of Sultan Mahmud II, which consist, for the most part, of 18th- and 19th-century printed Ottoman books.

In the years following Topkapi’s conversion into a museum, several private collections were donated to the New Library, among which the collections of lawyer Halil Ethem Arda and former Finance Minister Ahmed Muhter Itisami are the most important.

Finally in 1970, books belonging to the library of Sultan Ahmet III, who reigned from 1703 to 1730, were transferred to the New Library. Sultan Ahmet III built a library in the outer court of the palace for the palace school, and 4787 manuscripts plus 182 early printed books moved from the treasury to his new library.
The Ottoman sultans attributed more value to their books than to their jewels or famous collections of Chinese porcelain, and the manuscripts, maps and rare printed books in Topkapi Museum are by far the most valuable items they collected.

The records of the Topkapi treasury date back to the 15th century and always began with an inventory of the sultan’s books—a tradition not changed until the last days of the Ottoman dynasty. The passion of the Ottoman sultans for book-collecting can also be judged by the number of other Istanbul libraries which they either funded or contributed to. The Süleymaniye Library, which houses the largest number of manuscripts, has, for instance, more than 130 separate collections, while the total number of manuscripts in the country as a whole is close to a quarter of a million.

The appetite of Sultan Mehmet II, The Conqueror, for books and art had no limits. During his reign (1451-1481) he had many important contemporary books rewritten by his palace calligraphers. These books, mostly concerning science, art, geography and history in the Islamic world, were copied from Arabic, Persian and Turkish originals in a style that later became established as the Ottoman palace tradition: the books were illustrated on almost every page, and the margins decorated and embellished.

In later years, Mehmet II extended his collection not only of Islamic books but Christian ones as well, and, as his interest in books became known to the outside world, a great flood of manuscripts poured into his court—sent by other sovereigns, writers or anybody else seeking to gain his favor. Mehmet II even collected books written in classical Greek—works on history, religion and science—that are still among the collections of the Topkapi Palace Library.

Mehmet, furthermore, invited artists and artisans to come and work in the palace workshops, and painters like Gentile Bellini and Constanzo de Ferraro made long stays in Topkapi, where they introduced the styles of Renaissance painting.

The number of books he commissioned to be written in classical Greek, Arabic, Persian and Turkish added up to such great quantities that the next generation of
sovereigns had to give them away to various libraries in Istanbul to make way for new ones.

Sultan Mehmet’s successor, Sultan Beyazıt II, had almost as much interest in books as his father and collected more than 600 manuscripts. During his reign (1481-1512), the first glories of Ottoman calligraphy manifested themselves.

As a prince ruling in the provincial capital of Amasya, Beyazıt had begun the study of calligraphy under a local teacher, Shaikh Hamdullah, later one of the great masters of Ottoman calligraphy. Upon assuming the sultanate, Beyazıt invited his former teacher to Istanbul and gave him a work space in the palace. Legend has it that the sultan frequently sat for hours holding Hamdullah’s inkstand as he wrote. It was during these years that Seyh Hamdullah introduced a completely new style of writing, a new departure in Ottoman calligraphy that would last until the 18th century.

Sultan Selim I (1512-1520), who succeeded Beyazıt, undertook two military campaigns which had particularly important consequences for the Topkapi book collection. The two great campaigns of Selim I, one against the Safavid dynasty of Persia, the second against the Mamluks of Egypt, enabled him to gather the most valuable paintings and books written in the Islamic world between the beginning of the 14th and 16th centuries.

Sultan Suleyman I, the longest reigning sultan of the Ottoman Empire (1520-1566), was known as Kanuni (The Legislator) in the East and as Süleyman the Magnificent in the West. His reign of 46 years brought the Ottoman Empire to its peak, and artists, specialized in decorative drawings used for royal albums, created and produced their best for his library. Again during these years great efforts were made to conserve the old books. Old books of value were sought out all over the Empire, bought, rebound and conserved for future generations.

An accomplished poet, Sultan Suleyman instigated a new institution which was called şahnameâlik – the craft of writing royal chronicles and personally appointed the first chronicler, whose job it was to write, in epic form, the life story of Suleyman and his predecessors – their
Α' όμως Κων. τος Κύριου μεταβαίνει έδοξε στὴν Βίβλο. Τὸ δὲ Μήττιον
καθερέως τοιούτων Καυτού τῆς οὐρανῆς ὑποκείμενος Καρποτοῦ Νίκην. Καὶ ὁ κύριος ὁ Θεὸς
προσευχόμενος τῶν Κυρίων Καρποτοῦ Νίκην ἐπὶ τὴν τοιοῦτον Κυρίων Νίκην, ἀνετὸν ἐκὸς Στράτην ἐργάζεται. Καὶ οὖσα αὐτὸς ἦν ἡ ἐν τοῖς προσευχομένοις ἄφεν τὸ πρὸς τὸν Κυρίων Νίκην.
deeds, conquests, wars, victories and the important events that occurred during their lifetimes. Decorated and painted by the court artists and copied by the master calligraphers, these books, as well as being important documentations of Ottoman history, are masterpieces of the art of book making.

The very subject matter of Ottoman painting indicates that the art of the painter was almost exclusively a court art. From the 16th century onwards it becomes not only an instrument for the glorification of the ruling dynasty, but also serves as a visual record of contemporary events. During the same period, however, some books written on the campaigns of Sultan Süleyman I embodied a new departure. Instead of using illustrations and miniatures of war scenes, marching armies and soldiers, artists used landscapes and cities to illustrate the countries Sultan Süleyman and his army passed through.

It was after the death of Sultan Süleyman, however, that the art of miniature reached its apogee. In the latter part of the 16th century, during the reign of Selim II (1566-1574) and Sultan Murat III (1574-1595) and finally Sultan Mehmet III (1595-1603), the palace miniaturists had their finest years, creating the classics of Turkish painting. During these same years the chroniclers of the court began to record important social events, such as royal circumcision ceremonies, parades and the receiving of ambassadors, while the court artists illustrated them.

In the 17th century, Sultan Ahmet I (1603-1617) and Sultan Osman II (1618-1622) both showed an interest in books, but it was not until the 18th century – during the reign of Sultan Ahmet III (1703-1730) – that steps were taken to establish a library in the modern sense of the word. Thus the library in the Enderun court was built for the use of palace officials and students.

It was also at this time that a general interest in printed books began, both European and those printed by the Christian and Jewish communities in Istanbul. The sultan gave his permission for the establishment of the first printing houses in Istanbul, an act which aroused the fury of the calligraphers. Printing was finally introduced into Ottoman society, but did not affect calligraphy as much as anticipated.
The 18th and 19th centuries were increasingly chaotic years for the Ottoman Empire, especially the second half of the 19th century when the Empire started to disintegrate. But even in the middle of the 19th century, when Ottoman sultans lavishly squandered the state treasury on new palaces, they never forgot their books. Through royal foundations new libraries were formed, while some of the books in private palaces were transferred to public libraries. Meanwhile, with the completion of Dolmabahçe Palace on the European shore of the Bosporus, most of the dynasty moved out of Topkapi. But although the palace lost some of its functions and importance, most of the books and the palace library remained there until the reign of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909).

Abdulhamid II had a cunning mind as well as a paranoiac character. Fearful of being assassinated, he secluded himself in Yıldız Palace on the Beşiktaş hills overlooking the Bosporus, and ordered everything—including his books—brought to him. He ordered a library built in the Yıldız Palace and a large number of books were transferred there from Topkapi. He also changed the cover of the books—all were rebound in identical red bindings bearing his imperial seal. After his abdication, most of the books were returned to Topkapi Palace, but some ended up in the Istanbul University Library, which today has the largest collection outside of Topkapi.

As an extension of the Ottoman tradition of calligraphy, the Topkapi Museum Library has a great number of albums, manuscripts and framed inscriptions, and a wide collection of writing instruments such as reed pens, special types of knives to sharpen the pens, scribes' tables, inkpots and other essential tools.

Almost all Ottoman sultans had a keen interest in calligraphy and under their patronage calligraphers perfected their styles over the centuries. Ottoman calligraphy reached its zenith, strangely enough, in the late 19th century—at a time when the Empire was collapsing, and the influence of Topkapi was coming to an end.
The uniqueness and richness of the library stems from the fact that it was the personal collection of the sultans. It is without question one of the richest collections in the world of manuscripts with miniatures and illustrations—especially of Islamic and Oriental design.

There are over 600 manuscripts with miniatures, and the total number of miniatures in these books is over 15,000. In all other collections and libraries around the world a special number is given to each miniature. Topkapı is the only library that has numbered the books and not the miniatures due to their sheer quantity. The figure 15,000 includes only miniatures in books of Islamic origin. If those in non-Islamic books are added, the total exceeds 21,000. The most precious books in the library are those produced in the courts of the Ilkhanids—descendants of the Mongols—and their dynasties in 13th- and 14th-century Iran, and the beautiful examples of book production from the Timurid court in Herat in today’s Afghanistan. Books dating from the Safavid period—the 16th and 17th centuries—are among the finest of Persian manuscripts.

The books in the Topkapı collection today number more than 18,000. The original nucleus dates back to the early Turkic empires and states, such as the Seljuks, who ruled a vast area of Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the 13th and 14th centuries and were the principal opponents of the Crusaders. This original collection was then augmented by books commissioned or collected by the Ottoman sultans.

Among the major factors that contributed to the steady growth of the Topkapı book collection were gifts, wars, and a system known as muhallefat—under which the wealth of disgraced or deceased aristocrats reverted to the sultans. Contemporary sovereigns regularly included books among tributes they sent to Topkapı as tokens of their good will toward the Ottoman sultan. Persian ambassadors frequently brought books, not only to the sultan, but also to the other important members of the palace such as crown princes and certain court ladies who had influence over the sovereign and his officials. Over the years, books included among the gifts sent by various Persian rulers have added up to a considerable
number in the Topkapi collection, some of them extremely rare and valuable. A šah-nāma containing more than 250 miniatures was among the books sent by Shah Tahmasp to Selim II on the occasion of Selim’s ascent to the Ottoman throne: today the same book is in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

In the Ottoman Empire, merit overrode rank and heredity. The Ottomans sought to get rid of the old aristocracy as efficiently as they created a new one. Graduates of the palace school, who risked their lives for magnificent stakes, power and transient splendors, always lived with the danger of losing everything. A failure during a military campaign was sufficient reason to lose the grace of the sultan. The accumulated wealth of disgraced officials returned to the state. Even death carried similar penalties and envoys from the court were ever-present observers in the mansions of aristocrats in the days following their funerals; they could claim anything and everything on behalf of the sultan. Through this system of muhallefat, a great quantity of books is known to have entered the treasury.

War, of course, was another great contributor to the enlargement of the Topkapi collection. The defeat of the Mamluks in 1517 opened the doors of Cairo to Selim and the treasures of the Mamluks found a new home in Topkapi. The Egyptian campaign not only filled Selim’s treasury with Mamluk gold, but also gave him the chance to own the most precious Islamic manuscripts and relics in existence. Selim I needed several ships to transport his spoils to Istanbul, prompting him to declare: “Whoever again fills this treasury with gold coins exceeding mine,... let it then be sealed with his monogram, otherwise, until the arrival of that day my seal will be used.” The tradition, from that day on, of closing and sealing the doors of the Topkapi treasury with the monogram seal or tugra of Sultan Selim I lasted until the final day of the Ottoman Empire.

Wars in the following years also contributed a considerable amount. Through other conquests books like the unique Koran of ’Uthman – the second Caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad – were brought from Makkah and Medina. Almost all the books of Byzantine origin came through conquests. The most decisive factor though, was the relentless efforts of bibliophile sultans for 700 years.

Right, above and below: Miniature and detail of a hunting scene from the Hast Bahist, dated 1496. By Behzad, leading artist at the Timurid court in Herat. Far right: A Hunt in the Snow. From the Fatih Album, but by the painter Ahmet Musa.
The book collections of the Ottoman sultans were always kept—along with everything that the sultans valued, such as jewelry and precious stones, rare artifacts and textiles, furniture and the keys of captured castles—in the heavily guarded storerooms of the treasury under the watchful eye of the chief treasurer. The office of chief treasurer was first established during the reign of Murat II, at his palace in Edime, the capital of the Ottoman Empire before Istanbul. His son Mehmet II, brought in tight and precise rules and regulations concerning the running of the treasury. The office of the chief treasurer, which employed several ranking officials of the palace, was viewed as a post of considerable importance.

Supervision and control of the Ehli Hiref, an organization which included all artists and artisans, was also among the duties of the chief treasurer. In later years, during the reign of Selim I, two new positions, chief calligrapher and kethuda of the treasury, were added to the office of the chief treasurer. It was the duty of these two officials to register every book that entered the treasury and keep a record of every book that was taken out. In 1783, four new positions were added to the office of the chief treasurer, and a new set of rules for the handling of the books introduced. Usually selected from among the calligraphers, the responsibilities of the four new officials focused primarily on protecting and mending the books.

It was only upon the order of the sultan himself that a book could be taken out of the treasury. Sovereigns, according to their desire and interests, had books brought either to their royal apartments or to the harem or other quarters of the palace they favored. It is also known that books were sometimes sent to the provinces for a prince acting as the governor of the region, while in some cases books were given as part of the dowry of a princess. Throughout the centuries, books taken out of the treasury and kept in different parts of the palaces were always, in the end, returned to the treasury. This long tradition was broken by Ahmet III in 1719; he ordered construction of a library in the outer court of the palace and offered his ancestors' formidable book collection for the use of the Palace School.

His intention was to enlighten future civil servants of the Empire; and he did this with such profound sincerity that he used his grandfather's pick to lay the founda-
tion of the library – the same one Ahmet I had used to lay the foundations of the great mosque – Istanbul’s Blue Mosque – constructed in his name.

Within six months of the laying of its cornerstone, the library was completed. To save the books from humidity, the reading room was constructed on a higher level over a basement floor, to which one ascends by two stairways on either side of the building. Climbing the stairways, one first reaches a porch before entering the building. The building itself is faced with marble and represents a typical example of early 18th-century Ottoman architecture. The doors and windows are fine examples of carpentry, inlaid with mother-of-pearl. In the section facing the entrance is the reading space reserved for Sultan Ahmet III. Above this section hangs a framed inscription written by Ahmet III himself, who was a master calligrapher. The use of ivory, in the decoration of interior window shutters and bookshelves, blends almost perfectly with some of the best examples of 16th-century Ottoman tiles that cover the walls. Bookshelves were designed to permit air circulation around the books; they were protected by grids of silver wire, forming a decorative mesh that also protects the books.

On the occasion of the opening of the library, a royal decree was issued establishing a foundation to administer it. In the highly decorated foundation book, a set of reasons is given for the opening of the Enderun library and its objectives. The same book lists the books and their subject matter, followed by explanatory notes on the origins of each, recorded in a separate royal catalogue. In the section that outlines the regulations for use of the library, it is stated that the library will open on Mondays and Thursdays and that no books would be allowed to be taken outside the palace grounds. The foundation book also describes in detail the merits of lecturers and the qualifications required of candidates for the appointment as librarians and their assisting staff, service staff – janitors, porters and others – their pay and the sources of income covering the expenses of the library.

All books in the library were stamped with the foundation seal of Sultan Ahmet III. Most of the book titles in the library concern the Koranic sciences and history and are written in Arabic, Persian and Turkish.
In later years new donations from Abdulhamid I and Selim III made the En­
derun library richer in contents, and a new catalog had to be arranged and written in 1815. Today, the books of Ahmet III have been transferred to the New Library in the palace, keeping the very same order they had on their original shelves. The building itself is open to visitors to Topkapi Palace.

During the reign of Mahmut I (1730-1754), successor of Ahmet III, a number of new libraries were formed and run by the foundation. Among these, one inside Hagia Sophia (today a museum) is the most important.

It was founded by donations from the Royal Treasury of Topkapi Palace. Others, located in the pavilions around the imperial quarters, grew out of the concept of giving the palace staff the liberty of benefiting from the book collection. Sultan Mahmut I in 1733 started a library consisting mostly of books illustrated with miniatures from the Revan pavilion. A major part of the books were taken from the royal collections of the treasury, and more contributions in later years came from Osman III and Mustafa III. Another attempt to form a library at the Baghdad pavilion was made by Abdulhamid I and Selim III. In 1791, in response to a request made by the chief arms bearer Seyid Abdullah Ağa, a set of new regulations were introduced by the sultan to the royal apartment libraries, Revan and Baghdad.

These regulations covered personnel who were to benefit from the libraries. But in spite of all the regulations and precautions taken over the centuries, a good part of the Topkapi collection was dispersed to different libraries in Istanbul and to various collections outside Turkey.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the years following the reign of Abdul­
hamid II, books were removed to other palaces and even sold to Western collectors. Today, the most important collection in the West is at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, donated by Sir Alfred Chester Beatty, the mining millionaire who built up an admirable collection of Turkish and Persian manuscripts.

But in spite of all the losses, Topkapi today still has the most important collection of books on Ottoman and Islamic arts and sciences in the world.

Dr. Filiz Çağman is curator of the Topkapi Palace Museum Library and an acknowledged expert on Islamic art.
Sir Alfred Chester Beatty's great gift to the world of art came with a sting attached—his name. Beatty, an American-born mining millionaire, was one of the first westerners to recognize the importance of Middle Eastern manuscripts as art. Over the course of half a century, he used his wealth and his familiarity with the Middle East to amass a collection of illuminated Islamic manuscripts rivaled in quality and scope only by the Topkapi collection itself. When he died in 1968, he bequeathed his collection to the Irish nation, which today maintains it as Beatty wished: in his name.

The manuscripts could have gone to the British Museum: Beatty settled in London in 1913 and became a naturalized British citizen in 1933. But he "sought immortality through his collection," says an official of the Chester Beatty Library. "He didn't leave it to the British Museum because they didn't believe in a 'Chester Beatty Room,'" insisting instead that Beatty's collection be anonymously incorporated into their own.

Or, as many hoped, the collection could have at least have remained in England—but Beatty quarreled with Britain's postwar Labour government and moved to Ireland in 1950. As one of his biographers explains, Beatty "had a supreme contempt for every kind of socialist bureaucracy," and was especially upset by the government's refusal to let him transfer funds out of Britain to buy more manuscripts.

The Irish gave Beatty what the British refused him. They made him the first-ever honorary Irish citizen, gave him an unprecedented state funeral, and today perpetuate his name by maintaining the Chester Beatty Library with an annual grant from the prime minister's office.

Which is why, incongruous as it seems, one of the world's finest collections of Korans—produced in almost every century in countries from Spain to China—can be found today in a leafy backwater of Dublin, capital of one of the most Catholic of all countries.

"We are a bit out of the way," admits librarian Pat Donlon, "but then, we don't have problems with the pollution," which threatens manuscripts in some big-city collections. The library does not have many visitors, either: only 8,000 to 9,000 people go there each year, say the custodians, and most of those are locals. "It's one of the country's greatest undeveloped..."
assets," complains David James, the library's Islamic curator, who applied for a job there after reading about the library in Aramco World magazine (See Aramco World, March-April 1965).

"It's a great pity the library is not utilized more," says James. The 2,000 volumes of medieval Arabic manuscripts which make up the bulk of the Chester Beatty collection cover every conceivable subject," he says, "and therefore are of outstanding importance for understanding the Arab and Islamic contribution to human history."

Much of the library's Islamic material does, however, travel widely. For example, one of its most remarkable Turkish volumes an illustrated history of the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, dated 1579 is part of a highly successful exhibition now touring the United States. ("The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent" will be at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., until May 17; at the Art Institute of Chicago June 13 to September 7; and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from October 4 to January 17, 1988.)

Ironically, the exhibition reunites the Chester Beatty volume with other treasures from Topkapi Palace, for that, says James, is undoubtedly where the manuscript originally came from. It was in the bazaars of Cairo where many of the manuscripts missing from imperial Islamic libraries reappeared for sale that Chester Beatty purchased his first Koran, a seed that was to grow into the greatest collection of Middle Eastern manuscripts ever assembled by one man.

Beatty was born in 1875 in a New York neighborhood that is now the site of Rockefeller Center. Even as a small boy, he was an avid collector - and a person who knew what he wanted. He made his first major salesroom killing at the age of 10. "At one auction," he recounted, "I fell in love with a beautiful [mineral] specimen of pink calcite. I was sitting in the front row [with my father] and bid 10 cents. The auctioneer was disgusted and all the men laughed, ... [but] not a single one would bid against me." The auctioneer finally had to knock down the prize specimen to young Beatty.

Beatty pursued his childhood interest in minerals at Columbia University's School of Mines and graduated as a mining engineer. Spurning an allowance from his wealthy stockbroker father, he bought a one-way ticket west. In Colorado, Beatty began his career with the only job available as a "mucker," shoveling rock 10 hours a day for 25 cents an hour in Boulder's Kekionga Gold Mine. Years later he was to give that name to his yacht.

In three years Beatty worked his way up from mucker to manager of the mine, and in another two to assistant general manager of the Guggenheim Exploration Company, helping acquire and develop many of the company's richest mines. The extraordinary feature of Beatty's work in these territories is that, as far as is known, he never actually visited any of them - sending out instead teams of geologists and mining engineers with very specific instructions where to explore. His judgment seldom proved wrong.

In search of new purchases for his library, however, Beatty did continue to travel extensively, exploring the book shops and salesrooms of Europe and dealing firsthand with sources in the Middle East. To confuse competitors, Beatty often sent coded telegrams to contacts, using mining terms such as "three shafts" for "third century" when discussing manuscripts.

During World War II, Beatty helped Britain obtain vital mineral supplies - a service for which he was later knighted and converted his London home into a hospital for American officers.

But it was to Ireland, home of his father's parents, that Beatty made his greatest gift: his collection, with his name attached. To some, the donation might seem self-seeking, but the gesture was not out of character. "Although much of his collection was purchased with the advice of the outstanding authorities of the time," says a brief biography available at the library. "Beatty always had the last word." @

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