

Islamic Manuscript Conservation and Its Vocabulary

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Written documentation of the condition of manuscripts before and after conservation treatment is a primary responsibility for the conservator. Ethically, this makes absolutely clear any changes made to the manuscript by the conservator. And practically, this makes future treatment of the manuscript easier and safer since all the materials and techniques used previously are specified and reversible.

The idea of producing a lexicon of conservation vocabulary for conservators of Islamic manuscripts originated in a project involving the movement of a huge number of manuscripts to a new storage site. Quite sensibly, as part of this move, the condition of the manuscripts was to be surveyed at the same time. However, the many people involved in making this survey would have very different levels of education and experience in conservation, and speak different languages. So without a common vocabulary and approach to written documentation, condition reports generated during this survey might ultimately be of little use.

In order to produce a lexicon of conservation vocabulary, I tried to generate a list of all the terms that I use regularly in my own reports as a conservator specializing in the treatment of Islamic manuscripts. Subsequently, definitions were written for these terms. And finally the list has been, for the most part, translated into Turkish, as a first attempt to see how such a lexicon works in another language and the difficulties raised by translation.

Already in this process, some interesting points have been raised. For example, in a condition problem familiar to scholars of Islamic manuscripts, the green paint used in the framing lines around the text or miniatures in numerous Islamic manuscripts causes breaks and losses in the support below the paint. Such green paint is often referred to as Verdigris (Jengar or Zengar) in conservation reports. This designation seems to be a carry-over from the conservation of Western manuscripts, since verdigris is a green paint used in miniatures in these manuscripts where it causes the described damage. Moreover, the manufacture of verdigris is also described in Western primary sources, so its use in the West is well documented. Accordingly, it must have seemed logical to assume that damaging green paint in Islamic manuscripts was also verdigris. However, verdigris is the name given to paint made specifically from copper acetate. In the past 15 years or so, analysis of paint has become much more sophisticated and informed and many green paints have been found that do contain copper and do cause damage to the support but are not necessarily copper acetate. A piece of copper buried in camel dung over which vinegar is poured would undergo complex chemical reactions different from copper treated with yoghurt. Yet these are two recipes for preparing the green pigment used in Islamic manuscripts listed in primary sources. Consequently, in writing condition reports, the impulse to give a definite name to some material should be resisted unless analysis has actually been carried out to warrant the use of that name. It is more accurate and consistent with what is known at present to say that a copper-containing green pigment caused the damage observed in a manuscript than that this green paint is necessarily verdigris.

On the other hand, green paints are found in Islamic manuscripts which do not damage the support. Does that mean that these paints do not contain copper? As Mandana Barkashli

has shown in her research on such Islamic manuscripts, at least in one period in Iran, manuscript painters were able to buffer their copper-containing green pigments so as to prevent the damage these green paints usually cause. (Barkeshli, Mandana. "The presence of saffron in Persian miniature paintings and its use as an inhibitor for the destructive effect of verdigris." 12th Triennial Meeting, Lyon, 29 August-3 September 1999: International Council of Museums (ICOM), Preprints. Vol 2. London: James & James Ltdl, 1999. 489-494.) Consequently, green paints cannot be characterized as lacking copper only because the expected damage is not present. And thus the vocabulary of conservators and their descriptions of manuscripts should reflect the real state of our knowledge.

In another situation in which the vocabulary we use can distort our perception of the manuscripts we are looking at, consider three quite common words: paint, ink and dye. These words are used all the time in written conservation documentation, but what exactly do we mean by them?

Is the black "ink" used to write a text different in some material way from the black "paint" used in an illumination? From the primary sources it is known that distinctions were made by Islamic scribes and illuminators in their recipes for ink and paint. But is this distinction relevant to the actual materials found on the manuscripts themselves? For example, does the difference in ink and paint reside in the binder used in the media or in the amount of water it contains? Or is the difference one of technique: ink is written with a pen while paint is applied with a brush? Unfortunately, not enough research has been carried out to answer these questions. Indeed, the only distinction that can be readily observed at present is that of technique. Ink is applied with a pen and paint with a brush. But now consider a colored paper, which would ordinarily be characterized as having been dyed. If paint is defined by its application with a brush, then how is a dye differentiated from a paint? Often the colorant used on a "dyed" paper was applied to the surface of the paper with a brush. In common usage, the word "dye" implies a deeper penetration of the media into the support because the colorant is dispersed in a greater amount of water, but then how does this differ materially from washes of paint or ink? At this time, I can only raise these questions and solicit input from The Islamic Manuscript Association (TIMA) members in wrestling with them. TIMA will be a useful forum in which to come up with conventions and definitions that we can use in communicating effectively with each other about the manuscripts we all study.

Translation provides a different set of issues in creating this conservation lexicon. In many types of Islamic illumination, decorative marks appear to radiate from the edges of the illuminated field. In Turkish these marks are known as *tığ*. As there is no corresponding word in English for these marks, I refer to them in my reports as *tığ* since that is the only word I am familiar with and I certainly don't want to have to describe them at length every time I need to reference them. But there may well be another word in Arabic and Farsi for these marks. In my reports in English, if I call these marks *tığ* but another English-speaking conservator calls them by their Arabic name, effective communication is impaired. This is not a trivial problem. As TIMA itself shows, manuscript studies are international in scope. In compiling this lexicon with my Turkish partner, we have found how rich Turkish is in its vocabulary for describing manuscripts. Consider only the different techniques used for decorating the leather inlays in some Islamic bindings. There can be a piece of plain leather

stamped with a design, or a stamped leather design against a gilded background, or a stamped leather design in which the design is gilded and the background left the plain color of the leather, or finally a stamped leather design in which the entire inlay is gilded. All of these techniques have a different and relatively simple name in Turkish. Since the terms are very specific and functional, should we advocate the use of these names in reports written in English or other languages? I can testify to how very unwieldy and awkward it is to write out a description of a technique every time it is observed. Are there established conventions for which language to borrow from and in what context? At the very least, a lexicon defining such terms in a variety of languages would allow for more secure translation.

Finally, another type of problem: what word to use to describe the area of text within the ruled frame on a manuscript page and what word to use to describe the bulk of the written codex lying between the covers of the manuscript? Conservators, binders and codicologists call the latter the “textblock”. But many art historians refer to the area of text on a single page also as a “textblock”. This results in puzzling interchanges between these different disciplines. While I would suggest that “text panel” might be used to describe the text on a single page, TIMA is potentially an excellent forum in which to thrash out such interdisciplinary issues in vocabulary.

Ultimately, it is hoped that this project will provide a useful tool for those engaged in the conservation of Islamic manuscripts. It will also help promote clearer and more effective communication about these manuscripts across different languages and different disciplines. The lexicon is at a very early stage yet. Once it is developed further, it needs input and feedback from TIMA members. And finally when it is thoroughly reviewed and polished, then TIMA can consider how best to encourage its dissemination and promote its use.