

The Chester Beatty Library:

Home Of Islamic And Far Eastern Artefacts

> By Elizabeth Hutcheson
 Photos by © The Trustees of the
 Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
 The Da Vinci note book photos by Seth
 Joel © Corbis

The Chester Beatty Library in Dublin is home to one of the most significant collections of Islamic and Far Eastern artefacts in the Western world and a destination no visitor to Ireland's capital should miss. The Library was named Irish Museum of the Year in 2000 and awarded the title European Museum of the Year in 2002.

A library and art museum, the Chester Beatty is located in the secluded gardens of Dublin Castle and houses a treasure-trove of rare and valuable artefacts amassed by its founder the American mining engineer, Sir Alfred Chester Beatty.

Beatty, a connoisseur with a flawless eye, spent sixty years collecting Islamic manuscripts and art from many different cultures and periods all over the world, which he left in trust to the Irish State after his death in 1968.

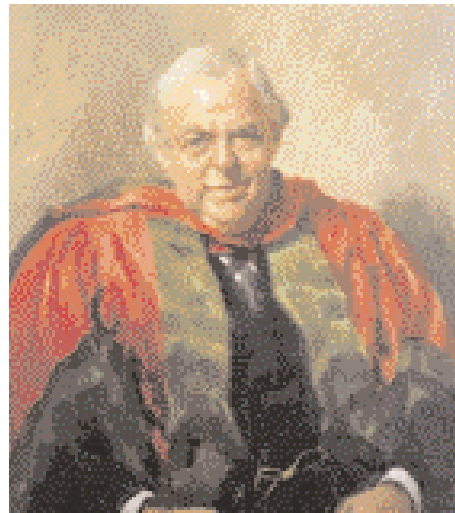
Derived primarily from the Arab world, Iran, Turkey, Japan and India, the collections include outstanding illuminated copies of the Holy Qur'an, the Bible and European medieval and renaissance manuscripts dating from the eighth century to the early years of the twentieth century.

Of particular note is the Islamic Collection which includes more than 260 illuminated copies of the Holy Qur'an and manuscript fragments dating from the 9th to the 19th century AD. This collection marks the library as one of the main centres for the study of Islamic culture and the arts. It is the only permanent exhibition in the western hemisphere devoted to the beliefs of Islam.

The real gem of this collection is, of course, the splendid Holy Qur'an copied in Baghdad in the year 1001 by Ibn al-Bawwab, the celebrated medieval Islamic calligrapher.

Ibn al-Bawwab was not just a calligrapher but also a talented artist. He gave writing a new elegance of free flow and beauty having mastered a number of styles. He is thought to have completed sixty four copies of the Holy Qur'an, of which only this one miraculously survives.

Other priceless exhibits on display in the galleries are ancient papyri, including the



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famous Egyptian love poems of around 1100 BC and some of the very earliest Gospel and other New Testament texts, dating to c. 200 AD.

The diversity and range of this dazzling collection superbly captures and celebrates the richness of religious and cultural artistic creativity from about 2700 BC to the present day.

Organised around exhibition galleries and reading rooms the collections are displayed in two permanent exhibitions—'Sacred Traditions' and 'Artistic Traditions'.

The Galleries

Visitors enter the Chester Beatty Library via the garden at Dublin Castle and are greeted with a glass-roofed entrance hall that links the 18th

Century Clock Tower building with a new, purpose-built exhibition gallery. On this level visitors can learn all about the fascinating life of Sir Alfred Chester Beatty by watching an audio-visual presentation as well as visiting the restaurant and book shop.

The Artistic Traditions Gallery on the first floor exhibits primarily works of art on paper, techniques of print-making, binding and paper-making and the art of miniature painting. Here visitors can view one of the finest collections of Chinese jade books in the world or study the intricate detail on Japanese inro, the tiny boxes used to store seals and medicines. Other highlights include miniature paintings from the courts of the Mughal Emperors of India, illuminated Persian manuscripts; fine European printed books, bindings and drawings, as well as exquisite calligraphy from across the world.

Displayed also are documents and memorabilia telling of Chester Beatty's achievements during his life-time as well as audio-visual programmes that explain the techniques of print-making, paper-making and book-production.

The Sacred Traditions Gallery on the second floor is devoted to sacred texts, illuminated manuscripts and miniature paintings from the Islamic, Christian and Buddhist religions. The gallery also contains smaller displays on Confucianism, Daoism, Sikhism and Jainism. Audio-visual programmes explore the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, the lives of Christ and the Buddha, and rites of passage – birth, marriage and death – in different cultures.

Visiting Exhibitions are regularly hosted at the ▶

Library. One upcoming exhibition scheduled for next summer that is sure to prove immensely popular is a display of work by Leonardo da Vinci.

The Codex Leicester, a da Vinci notebook, was bought by Bill Gates of Microsoft for \$30m (£16m) in 1994. Apart from the extra security such as visitor searches demanded by the Microsoft Chairman's team, The Codex has to be shown in certain atmospheric conditions, such as lower lighting levels and room temperatures, all of which the Chester Beatty is equipped to cater for.

This visiting exhibition perfectly complements the scientific and intellectual manuscripts already held in the Islamic Collection, including

those of Al-Jazari, a medieval Arab scientist and engineer. Among his inventions were the combination lock and the crank-shaft.

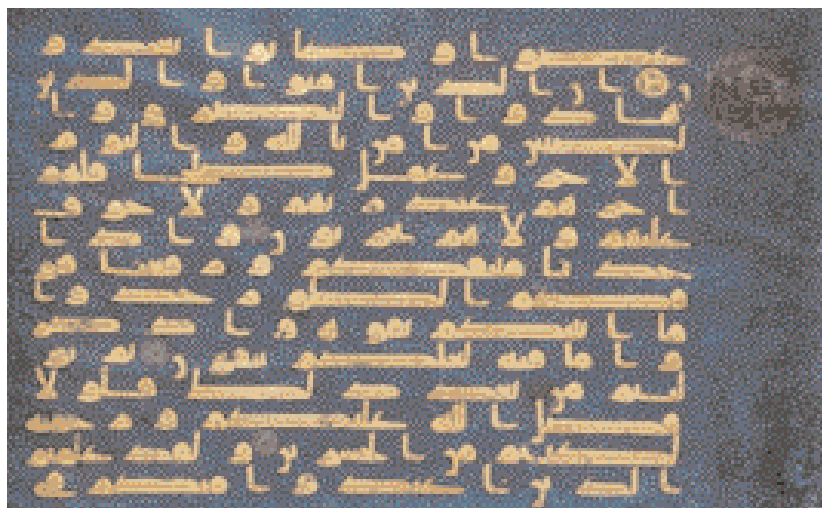
The Reference Library is a beautiful reading room on the first floor of the original Clock Tower building and incorporates a fine lacquered ceiling in Chinese style that Chester Beatty had originally created for his London home. The mahogany bookcases are home to a growing collection of reference books and researchers are welcome to use the reference collection by appointment, which can be made by contacting the library directly.

Catalogues for the Reference Library and Rare Books are available online from the Library's website at www.cbl.ie.

The Reference Library is normally open Monday to Friday, 10am to 1pm and 2.15pm to 5pm. Access is strictly by appointment only.

Education Services and activities at the library include lectures, monthly children's workshops and demonstrations in techniques represented in the collections such as calligraphy, painting, printing and other crafts. Information on the library's public programmes and visiting exhibitions can be found at the library's website www.cbl.ie.

Special Guided Tours of the Exhibition Galleries can be booked by contacting the Education Services at the Library. At least one month's notice is required when requesting tours, as this service is subject to ▶



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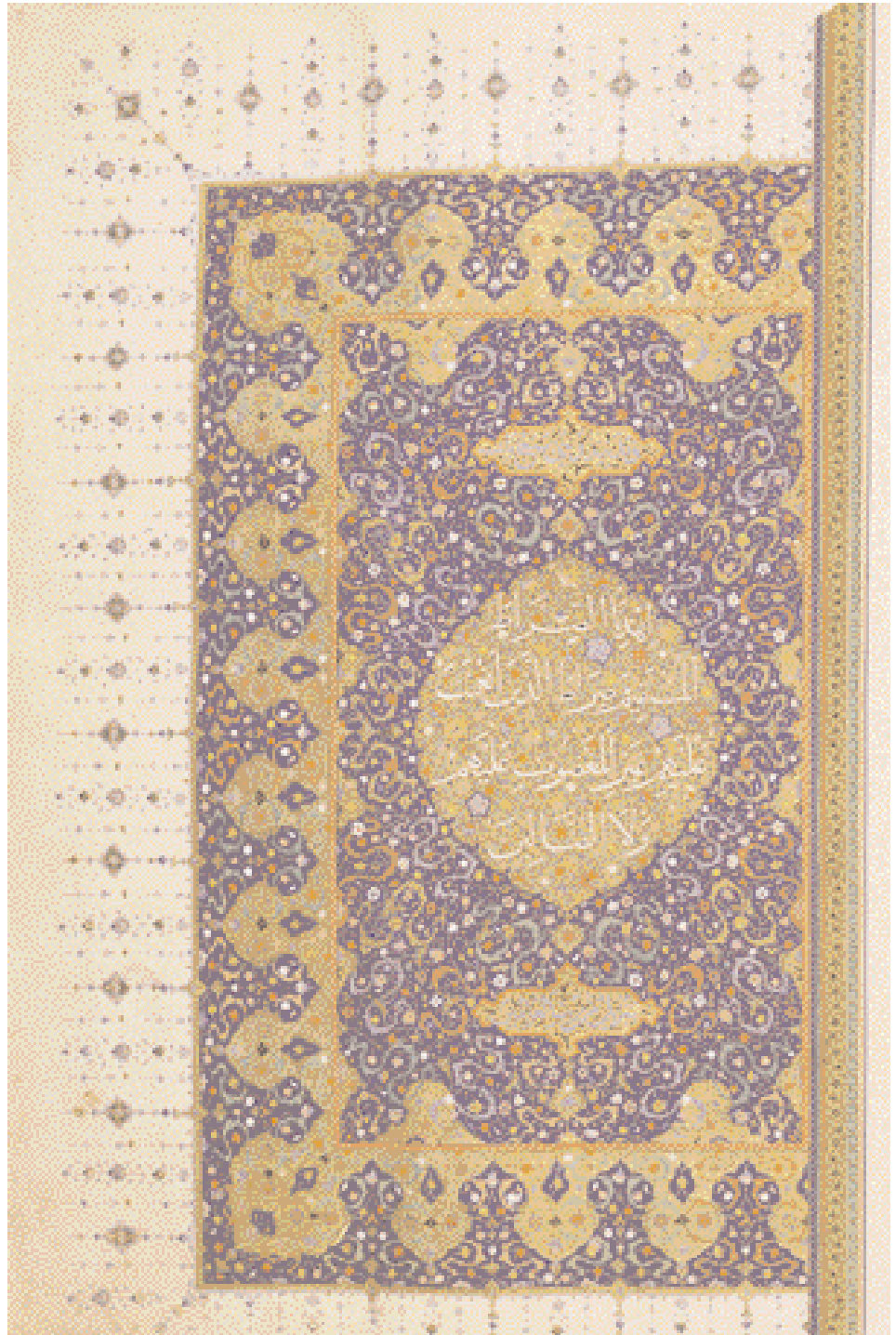


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the availability of volunteer guides.
The Roof Garden situated above the exhibition galleries is a tranquil garden which has been landscaped and designed in a style reflective of the ambience of the library below.
The Gift Shop sells a vast array of gifts and books inspired by the arts on show in the library. The full range of Chester Beatty Library publications are available to browse online.
Silk Road Café on the ground floor has as its theme Middle Eastern and Mediterranean traditional fare as well as vegetarian dishes. Prices are reasonable and children are especially welcome.
Admission is free as are all public tours, demonstrations, talks and workshops organised through the library. ■

Who was Sir Alfred Chester Beatty?

Sir Alfred Chester Beatty (1875 – 1968) was born in New York City and graduated from Columbia University as a mining engineer. He made his fortune mining in Colorado and other mining concerns mainly in Africa and Eastern Europe. A collector from an early age, Beatty had by the 1940s built up an impressive collection of Oriental, Islamic and Western artefacts. He paid several visits to Egypt and the Far East before finally settling in Ireland, his ancestral homeland, where he found his famous library in Dublin in 1950. Beatty was made an honorary citizen of Ireland in 1957 and on his death in 1968 was accorded a state funeral—the only private citizen in Irish history to receive such an honour. Individually and collectively the contents of the library are priceless and we owe much to the memory of Sir Alfred Chester Beatty.



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Opening Dates and Times:

Monday-Friday 10am-5pm (May to September)
Tuesday-Friday 10am-5pm (October to April)
Saturday 11am-5pm
Sunday 1pm-5pm
The Library is closed on Bank Holiday

Mondays, Good Friday, December 24-26 and January 1.
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