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Manuscripts from Library to Museum: Malek National Library and Museum Institution

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the library and museum of Malek institute (MNLMI), a cultural institution in Tehran, Iran, that preserves and displays a rich collection of manuscripts and historical artworks. The article explores how the MNLMI combines the perspectives and functions of libraries and museums to create a comprehensive and dynamic cultural space. The article also discusses the types and features of manuscripts, such as legal, liturgical, encyclopedic, and literary manuscripts, and how they reflect the Iranian heritage and civilization. The article analyzes the challenges and opportunities of the MNLMI in terms of conservation, digitization, publication, and outreach. The article concludes with some suggestions and recommendations for improving the situation and performance of the MNLMI, and for enhancing the cultural awareness and appreciation of its visitors.

Keywords: Manuscripts, Library, Museum, Malek Institute, Iranian culture

INTRODUCTION

Malek National Library and Museum Institution (MNLMI) is both the first private and dedicated museum of Iran, Tehran, and one of the 6 large libraries holding the exquisite manuscripts. The MNLMI collection is a rich trove of the best manuscripts and historic Iranian artwork.

MNLMI started as a library, but as visitors read books and came across an object, they wanted to see that object, so founder Haj Hossein Agha Malek developed an object collection, forming the Malek Museum during his residence in 1937. Due to space constraints, it moved to Tehran's National Garden in 1944. Besides printed books and historical documents, Malek National Library possesses 19,000 rare manuscripts. Malek National Museum also stewards a collection of Iranian artworks from the first millennium BCE to the present; together, the historical works of Malek National Library and Museum are displayed in 11 halls and a gallery.

Mohsen Haqgu, head of the library department, notes that "every year, 20 to 30 manuscripts are donated to the collection, and according to the deed of endowment, 5 percent of the library's

annual budget is used to purchase resources: 20 percent to printed copies and 80 percent to museum works and manuscripts” (personal communication, 2023).

TYPES OF MANUSCRIPTS IN THE MNLMI

Manuscripts are handwritten documents classified by content, material, or function. They form part of a nation's cultural heritage, symbolizing cultural richness and expressing the people's efforts to preserve the intellectual, scientific, and historical achievements of that land. Manuscripts play an important historical, literary, religious, cultural, and ethnic studies role (AQR-LibJournal Manuscripts, n.d.).

As Peyman Samandari, the head of research and education at MNLMI, notes, “there are two types of manuscripts: single treatise and multi-treatise versions. The single treatise means that the manuscripts just discuss and explain issues, but multi-treatise explicates a few or many issues” (personal communication, 2023). Types of manuscripts include:

- *Legal manuscripts*: manuscripts that contain laws or legal texts in the vernacular language.
- *Liturgical manuscripts*: manuscripts of religious texts, such as prayers, hymns, psalms, or liturgical calendars, used for worship or religious ceremonies.
- *Encyclopedic and learned manuscripts*: manuscripts that contain knowledge on a range of topics, such as medicine, geography, astronomy, or philosophy, often written by scholars or experts in a field.
- *Literary manuscripts*: manuscripts that contain stories, poems, or other forms of literature, written for entertainment or artistic expression.
- *Case studies*: These are manuscripts that report on a single case or example of a phenomenon, such as a person, an event, or a situation, written to illustrate a theory, a problem, or a solution.
- *Methods papers*: manuscripts that describe a new or improved method, technique, or procedure for conducting research or analysis, often written to share best practices, innovations, or standards with other researchers or practitioners (Manuscript Types, 2023).

As Samandari described it, manuscripts are sources of historical, cultural, and scientific knowledge, as well as works of art:

“The manuscripts of the Malek library are mostly multi-treatises, which means they cover different issues. The stories include religious stories, Iranian mythology, and folk stories. Sciences like medical sciences and the background of various sciences. most of the manuscripts are in the field of Islamic Iranian sciences, including jurisprudential sources and original literary sources.” (Samandari, personal communication, 2023).

Samandari goes on to note that MNLMI allows researchers to listen to audio files of manuscript stories as well as see manuscript images in a reconstructed form (personal communication, 2023). Manuscripts thus bridge libraries and museums, preserving history as primary historical documents, and serving as unique objects. They also serve as educational tools, helping us to understand history, artistic styles, and cultural practices, through both research and exhibition.

MANUSCRIPTS SERVICES: HELPING RESEARCHERS

Manuscript services play a crucial role in aiding researchers at museums in several ways:

- *Access to Rare Documents*: Digitizing manuscripts allows researchers to view rare or fragile documents with less risk of physical handling and deterioration.
- *Enhanced Research Tools*: Virtual manuscript museums and interactive tools let researchers examine documents in detail, facilitating a deeper understanding of the content, context, and subtleties.
- *Collaborative Opportunities*: platforms for collaboration let researchers from around the world share insights and contribute to collective knowledge (Cauchard et al., 2006).
- *Preservation of Context*: manuscript services ensure that the historical context of the manuscripts is preserved, providing researchers with essential background information.
- *Educational Resources*: educational materials help researchers learn about the best practices for manuscript handling, conservation, and analysis (Scientific study of the British Museum collection, 2024).

By offering these manuscript services, museums not only protect their collections but also support the academic community in conducting responsible research. As M. Haqgu notes in our context, manuscripts and historical artwork may be used together at MNLMI:

The library is one of the first cultural collections that digitized all the manuscripts. There are parts of manuscripts on the institute's website, but the number of pages is not complete, and usually, for long versions, parts of the beginning, middle, and end are left off. However, Haqgu notes that researchers can email their requests from anywhere in the world, and a PDF of the manuscripts will be provided to them. If the researcher wants to study the manuscripts from an artistic point of view, they can request a higher quality file copy of the file.

Visitors can see manuscripts in the museum as well as through electronic versions in the library and researcher's hall. Also, access to the original copy for physical examination is possible with the presence of the trustee of the property and the head of the library. People come to MNLMI to compare copies of manuscripts from many fields, including literature, engineering, medical, and scientific studies.

USING MANUSCRIPTS WITHIN THE MUSEUM SIDE

Using manuscripts through exhibitions creates a narrative that showcases artifacts and tells the story of the cultures and civilizations to which they belong. Through the display of manuscripts, visitors connect with the past in a more intimate and informed way, gaining insights into the historical context and significance of each piece. Such manuscript curation enriches the educational value of museums and serves as a vital link between displayed objects and the historical narratives they embody. Exhibitions that incorporate manuscripts provide visitors with context that enriches their understanding of the artifacts, allowing visitors to engage with the period, cultural significance, or the stories behind the objects. Such an interdisciplinary approach, which weaves together literature, history, and art, not only enhances visitor engagement but ensures that the knowledge contained within the manuscripts is shared and preserved. Manuscripts thus become not just ancillary elements but central to the storytelling aspect of museum exhibitions, making history accessible to the public.

As M. Haqgu notes, “The connection between objects and books is made through the exhibition. Two types of permanent and temporary exhibitions are held in the Malek museum. For example, with the support of the Malek Library, the Hall of HezarDastan¹ and the Science Exhibition are permanent exhibits. The Hall of a Thousand Stories includes fantasy, religious, educational, and mythological stories, and the science exhibition displays scientific manuscripts in medicine and astronomy. The Hall of Science showcases historical and scientific concepts” using manuscripts (personal communication, 2023).

In addition to these permanent halls, MNLMI hosts temporary exhibitions on a single work or theme, exhibiting manuscripts as items in themselves or related to other artifacts.

EXHIBITIONS: COMBINING THE PERSPECTIVES OF LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS

The MNLMI combines the perspectives of libraries and museums in preserving, displaying, and publishing for the public and for researchers, organizing exhibitions, events, and educational programs that showcase the connection between manuscripts and artifacts. In this way, the MNLMI embodies the collaborative spirit by merging the archival prowess of the library with the curatorial expertise of museum. It’s a place where manuscripts are not merely stored but are brought to life through exhibitions that tell the stories of civilizations, both local and global. As M. Haqgu notes, “the library and the museum cooperate in providing manuscript services in exhibition and other research work... the museum exhibition expert considers a set of activities, and it is proposed and approved by the cultural council.” (personal communication, 2023).

The cultural council is comprised of a manager, the heads of the library and museum, and the cultural information department; together, they shape exhibitions as a harmonious blend of text and artifact. After the approval in the cultural council, the exhibition begins. Librarians, with their intimate knowledge of manuscripts, contribute to the narrative, suggesting themes and stories that the manuscripts can tell. Meanwhile, the restoration and maintenance department preserve the physical integrity of both books and artifacts. Content production becomes a joint venture, with the library and museum creating a dialogue. This partnership extends beyond the walls of the MNLMI, reaching out to outsource poster creation and advertising, thus engaging a larger community in the institution’s mission.

Sometimes, a librarian suggests the museum hold an exhibition on a specific topic using their manuscripts, as P. Samandari notes (personal communication, 2023). In this case, exhibits again combine library and museum perspectives. The resulting exhibition is more than a collection of objects, as every item on display is part of a larger story. It’s a place where visitors can traverse time, from the ancient world to the present day, and space, from the heart of Iran to the far reaches of the earth. The MNLMI, by combining library and museum work, is a conduit between Iranian culture and the global community, ensuring that the stories contained within its walls continue to inspire and educate, now and for generations to come.

¹ . in Farsi this name means: Thousand Stories—revise, this is not consistent with APA guidelines

MUSEUM AND LIBRARY CO-MANAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In some institutional contexts, the library serves the museum, or a museum or exhibit space serves a library—but in MNLMI neither is a subset of the other. As M. Haqgu notes, “the advantage of running a museum and a library together is that the museum makes the general audience familiar with manuscripts and the desire to use library resources. The existence of a rich library allows the museum to display many copies in a specific area, while other museums may only display one manuscript” (personal communication, 2023).

Co-managing a library and museum, as described in the context of the MNLMI, involves a partnership where both entities operate on equal footing, neither serving as a subset of the other. This unique arrangement offers a competitive advantage by allowing researchers and the public to engage with manuscripts in a multifaceted way—through both scholarly study and curated exhibitions.

One challenge here is a lack of integration between management teams, which can lead to conflicting perspectives or decisions; with museum and library as co-equals managers must work to reach a common understanding. Conflicts in this co-management structure can arise from a lack of integrated management. The variety of tasks, from paper restoration to managing diverse collections like coins and carpets, requires a distribution of energy and resources across activities, including digital documentation and preservation efforts:

“Another problem is the variety of work in such a collection. In the library alone, paper restoration was enough, but when the museum and the library are together, it causes the energy to be directed to different works, such as coins, carpets, etc., as well as digital photography and preparing a birth certificate to be documented. It is faced with a huge amount of work and documents” (M. Haqgu, personal communication, 2023).

Specialization is another area of potential conflict, with the need to balance the priorities of librarianship and museology. However, the MNLMI has largely controlled this issue, suggesting that a well-defined structure and clear roles can mitigate such challenges. Opportunities for cross-institutional learning, workshops, and trainings can enhance the collaboration between library and museum staff, leading to a more cohesive operation.

Whether to unite library and museum management or separate them is another challenge in integrated institutions. At MNLMI, we have found it helpful to have a “macro” manager supervise both departments, while specialized managers separately manage the library and museum within this larger structure. Adopting a macro-management leadership style can include delegating authority and responsibilities, while the line manager focuses their attention on developing and executing the overall strategy for the team (Hayes, 2022).

MNLMI is a cultural group that conducts workshops and training, so we use a general manager to provide funding, human resources, and a suitable working platform for both collection (M. Haqgu, personal communication, 2023), within that, specialist managers manage the museum and library in a more focused way.

Another challenge is the tensions around the exhibition itself, as when the museum believes that the copies should be exhibited, but the library prioritizes keeping manuscripts protected. Ownership disputes, such as whether certain works belong to the library or the museum, can also arise. These are resolved by establishing clear guidelines and agreements on the management and

display of collections. This co-management of a library and museum is a dynamic process that requires ongoing communication, shared goals, and a commitment to both preserving and showcasing cultural heritage. Resolving such contradictions often requires a collaborative approach, considering the interests and responsibilities of both institutions. Here are some steps that could be taken for joint library-museums:

- *Establish Clear Ownership:* Determine the legal ownership of the works through documentation or agreements. Ownership dictates the primary responsibility for the care and use of the works.
- *Define Roles and Responsibilities:* Clearly outline what each institution's role is regarding the works. This includes exhibition, conservation, and access to the public.
- *Develop a Joint Policy:* Create a policy that addresses the exhibition and conservation needs in a way that respects both the museum's mission to display and the library's priority to preserve.
- *Compromise and Collaborate:* Find a middle ground where copies can be exhibited for certain periods or under specific conditions that ensure their protection.
- *Public Interest:* Consider the public interest and educational value of displaying the works versus keeping them in special protection.
- *Replication:* If the original works are too fragile, consider creating high-quality replicas for exhibition purposes.
- *Regular Communication:* Maintain open lines of communication between the museum and library to address any future contradictions or concerns.

By working together, the museum and library can find a balanced approach that serves both the need to preserve and the desire to share with the public. Digitization is one way to preserve collections while making them accessible, sparking access through virtual tours, online exhibitions, and digital libraries. In this way, original manuscripts are preserved while the public gains new access. To make the most of opportunities, effective communication, mutual understanding, and a shared vision are key. Establishing clear goals and objectives for collaborative projects can contribute to successful outcomes for both museums and libraries.

SIMILAR INSTITUTIONS

Another noted museum in Iran is the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts, which has a specialized library at the end of the slope of the road that leads to the administrative and art departments, including nearly 5000 Persian and non-Persian books, classified using the LC system, about architecture, painting, design, visual communication, photography, and cinema. Membership is required to use this art museum library; members are primarily art students and art researchers (Shahzade Aran, 1999). There are also museums embedded within university libraries, as with the central library of Tehran University and the central library in Shahid Beheshti University, which work separately from each other but in one building.

Another institute like the Malek National Library and Museum Institution (MNLMI) is the library and museum of Astan Quds Razavi. This is part of a large complex at the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS), the eighth Shia Imam, located in Mashhad, the capital of Razavi Khorasan province.

The library of Astan Quds Razavi is one of the oldest libraries in Iran and the Islamic world, established before 1457 AD, with over 1 million volumes in Islamic sciences and culture, including manuscripts, lithographic prints, and other documents. As of 2003, the library had 30,250 manuscripts, 25,000 earlier lithographic books, and 17,240 other handwritten materials for 72,490 volumes in total. (Library of Astan Quds Razavi, n.d.).

Alongside the library, the museum of Astan Quds Razavi, designed by architect Dariush Borbor, has 11 different sections that display precious objects, artworks, and historical artifacts related to the history of Islam and Iran, along with displaying manuscripts donated to the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS) over the past millennium. The Museum of Qur'an and Precious Objects section showcases copies of the Qur'an alongside unique items from Islamic history such as the sword of Imam Ali (AS) and the cloak of Imam Reza (AS) (Astan Quds Razavi Central Museum, n.d.). Like MNLMI, Astan Quds Razavi is a non-governmental, non-profit cultural institution, based on a letter of endowment.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored the significance of manuscripts in the library and museum of Malek institute (MNLMI), a cultural institution in Tehran, Iran, including a description of manuscript types and the challenges and opportunities of preserving, displaying, and publishing these valuable resources for the public and the researchers.

The MNLMI is a unique example of how a library and a museum can combine perspectives and functions to create a dynamic cultural space, showcasing historical and artistic achievements of Iran, as well as fostering cultural awareness among visitors. We believe that the Malek National Library and Museum Institution (MNLMI) represents a microcosm of the broader challenges and opportunities faced by complex cultural heritage institutions. The MNLMI's journey from a library to a museum and its dual role as both a library and a museum necessitate a nuanced approach to management that balances preservation of manuscripts with the need for public engagement through exhibitions. The MNLMI's commitment to digitization and accessibility allows it to serve a wide audience, from local scholars to international researchers, while protecting collections.

We note that effective macro-management is crucial for the MNLMI to navigate the complexities of its operations across two "houses." By delegating responsibilities and focusing on strategic development, the institution can attract broad funding, allowing specialized managers to concentrate on their respective areas, fostering an environment where both library and museum goals are met with expertise and care.

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