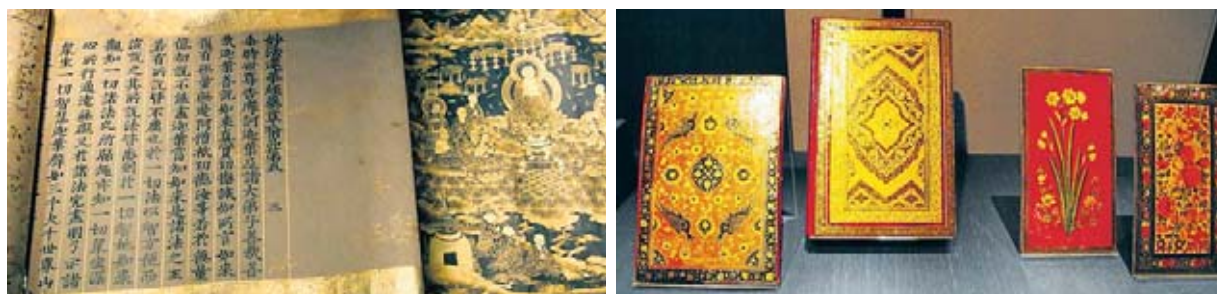


# Shrine for books

Escape into the world of hardbounds and historical texts at one of Dublin's most celebrated museums, the Chester Beatty Library. Passionate about books, **KALPANA SUNDER** sifts through the rich exhibits



**BOOK PARADISE** (Clockwise) The Chester Beatty Library; book bindings; Asian manuscripts. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



The comforting sound of rustling pages, the smell of musty libraries, the beauty of hardbounds and the golden founts of old editions, my love affair with books started when I was just a child. I am at a loss for words when I realise that here is the precious collection of a man who loved books, even more than me, and then gave it away for posterity, to be enjoyed by the masses. This was a man who believed in the preservation of ancient manuscripts and texts for future generations. The Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland, is actually an art museum — one of the finest that I have ever seen; a treasure trove of historically significant texts and manuscripts, culled from various cultures and religions. The museum is located on the grounds of the Dublin Museum, just next to Dublin Gardens, where the city started life as Dubh Linh, or the Black Pool.

## Art of bibliography

Who was Chester Beatty? He was an American-born mining engineer and millionaire with Irish ancestry. He had a love for collecting stamps, gem stones, snuff bottles and other rarities, even as a young boy; in later years, he travelled to Asia, Egypt and many other places around the world and bought rare manuscripts and books as well as other collectibles. In the Second World War, he was knighted for his efforts. In 1950, he moved to Dublin and was made an honorary citizen in 1957. When he died, he bequeathed his collection to the state for public viewing and enjoyment. Today, the Chester Beatty Museum is also a place of research for

students and scholars from across the world.

The first floor is dedicated to the exhibition called the 'Arts of the Book'. Showcased in dimly lit rooms that show reverence and spotlight the works of exceptional beauty, as well as add to the mystique, are books from the ancient world. I am torn between spending time on seven stanzas of lyrical Egyptian love poems — *Chester Beatty Papyrus No. 1*, written in 1160 BC in Thebes, during the reign of Ramses V, on tattered papyrus, or looking at thin, smooth jade books with delicate calligraphy and illustrations etched in glittering gold. I see the art of book production showcased, from print making and binding to images and illustrations. I am lost in the richness of the cursive strokes of Islamic calligraphy and illustrations as well as rich binding techniques.

I admire Ethiopian binding with tunnel stitching and Persian lacquer binding, which used linseed oil to give it that magical lustre. There are Japanese picture scrolls depicting fables and legends and woodblock prints. Realising my time here is limited, I wonder if I should see the rhinoceros horn cups or the folded accordion books called *Parabaiks* from Burma

and Siam — folk tales with coloured drawings like ancient cartoon strips on mulberry leaf paper? There are papyrus parchments — delicate, falling apart, some rescued from dumps in the Egyptian desert, miniature paintings and calligraphies commissioned by Mughal emperors like Jahangir and Shah Jahan, filled with images of saints and mystics, courtiers and allies, affording a snapshot view of life in that era. Today, they are all tangible links with the beginnings of civilisation and cultures. There are also exhibits like Samurai robes, delicate snuff bottles and netsuke carvings.

## Sacred space

The exhibition called 'Sacred Traditions' is the story of faith, as it explores sacred texts of various religions, the rites of passage in various cultures, and has illuminated manuscripts and texts in chronological order. There are more than a hundred Sumerian and Babylonian clay tablets with ancient cuneiform writing. History has a whole new meaning at the library — there are the famous Pauline letters, written by St Paul to keep in touch with the Christian community. The Four Gospels occupy the central part of the Christian exhibition — I look reverentially

at a papyrus fragment of St John's Gospel, taken from the oldest New Testament in existence, from 250 AD.

I peek at the one harmonious rendering of the four Gospels written by a 4th century Syrian scholar. I see the evolution from simple papyrus to medieval Gospel books with gold on vellum and Flemish illustrations and then lavish tomes. I gaze at gold on purple vellum and the Walsingham Bible with burn holes from candles, feeling a deep connection to people from different ages and cultures.

One of the library's greatest draw cards is 260 copies of the Koran spanning more than one thousand years. Some of the most exquisite were made in Persia, where the Korans are infused with a delicate perfection of drawing, colouring and meticulous binding. The most beautiful one is the one copied in Baghdad by Ibn Al Bawwab, a celebrated Islamic calligrapher, who gave a new flow and beauty to writing. Christian documents from the times of Roman persecution, medieval manuscripts, and Greek texts on papyri from the second and third centuries — this is really a feast for the senses.

From texts by unknown authors to famous texts, these books traverse geography, political borders, time and religion and show the love for written communication. I love the audio visual displays of the rites of passage in many faiths. What amazes me is the refinement, the attention to minute details, and the striking illustrations — I salute the brilliant craftsmen who created these beauties. In a generation that tweets in 140 words, it's easy to forget how beautiful the written word actually is.

“ I SEE THE ART OF BOOK PRODUCTION SHOWCASED IN THE MUSEUM, FROM PRINT MAKING AND BINDING TO IMAGES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.