

The Chester Beatty Library Dublin Ireland

By Jane Standertskjold



A Chinese dragon robe, a rare ninth century Qur'an fragment, a bark divination book from Sumatra – who would believe that you could find all these – and thousands of other precious manuscripts, paintings and artefacts – tucked away in a restored 18th century clock tower behind Dublin Castle? For an ex-ACM docent recently departed from Singapore, it was like coming home. And amazingly, I stumbled upon it by accident. My aim was the coffee shop, but upon entering what appeared to be an old research library, I found myself in a modern glass-domed atrium facing a Burmese standing Buddha and the Silk Road Restaurant, which served great Middle Eastern and Asian food.

Apparently I had arrived at the world-renowned Chester Beatty Library – but who was Chester Beatty? The Irish-American mining engineer, entrepreneur and benefactor, Sir Alfred Chester Beatty (1875-1968), was born in New York and educated at Princeton and Columbia Universities. A millionaire by the age of 30, he started collecting minerals and stamps, and later Chinese snuff bottles. Moving to Britain in 1911, and then to Ireland in 1949, he collected until the 1960s. Over his lifetime he obtained exceptional Islamic, East Asian and biblical manuscripts as well as western printed books, Old Master prints and Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Ethiopian and Armenian holdings. He provided in his will for the continuance of his library as a public charitable trust supported by the state.

Pieces from the collection are displayed in Western, Islamic and East Asian sections of the museum. From his earliest days, Chester Beatty only collected the best quality items and some of his finds were important historical discoveries. The publication of his New Testament papyri caused a sensation in 1931, as they were at least 100 years older than the most important parchment codices in existence at that time.

Chester Beatty developed his interest in Islamic

manuscripts during 25 winters spent in Cairo for health reasons (he suffered from silicosis, the result of years of working in mines). The Islamic collection comprises over 4,000 manuscripts, single-page paintings and calligraphies, including Persian, Turkish and Mughal-era Indian material. The splendid painting *Emperor Awrangzib Receives Prince Mu'azzam* (c.1707-12) graces the catalogue cover.

The East Asian Collection started with Chester Beatty's childhood fascination with minerals, which attracted him to Chinese snuff bottles carved from precious stones. He acquired over 900 snuff bottles. During a trip to East Asia in 1917 he became interested in Chinese and Japanese painting and decorative arts and later collected manuscripts, paintings, printed material and decorative arts from Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar) and Indonesia.

He was particularly fond of jade and other natural materials and there are 17 rare, carved jade books and over 200 carved rhinoceros-horn cups in the collection. Visitors can also see a range of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu works, Thai folding books telling the story of the famous monk Phra Malai and even a Sumatran 19th century divination book made of bark, *The Oracle with a Cock under a Basket*.

The Chester Beatty Library (www.cbl.ie) was awarded the title

European Museum of the Year in 2002. It is a gem – well designed, with sophisticated displays. If you are heading to Ireland, don't miss it.

Jane Standertskjold is a former Australian diplomat and marketing manager, who has lived in many countries and was an FOM docent at ACM for three years before moving to Brussels in early 2011.

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Emperor Awrangzib Receives Prince Mu'azzam

Top left: Illuminated folio of Guide to Happiness

Bottom right: Mandala of Mahamay, the Great Illusion

