

Forgotten Things: Pen-Boxes and their Stories.

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Prologue

Roland Barthes maintained that writing is not merely a technological process but also a physical, sensory experience.ⁱ It involves the pleasure of sitting in front of a blank page made of good quality paper, of choosing a pen from a pen-case, holding it, dipping the nib in ink and following the movement of the hand as it shapes the letters, the words and the sentences. Much has changed since Barthes wrote the preface of *La civilisation de l'écriture*, and most writers whether academics or not type their texts sitting in front of a screen. Still, PCs, Macs, tablets and I pads do not seem to fill an inexpressible absence and most of us keep at hand a clutter of pens, pencils and other writing paraphernalia. Some objects pertaining to writing activities keep a certain sensory attraction; they trigger memories and remind us of other ways of doing things in a not so far away past. Old pen-boxes are among these outdated objects. It is a pleasure for me to offer this brief essay about material accessories to writing, their thingness and their polyphonic short stories to my long-standing friend and colleague, Gunvor Mejdell.

Writing material, inventory cards and musealia

Scholars within the fields of archaeology, material culture and visual culture have in recent years shown an increased interest in exploring the materiality of writing.ⁱⁱ Writing is seen as a material practice. Great attention is given to body postures and movements, to the formations and forms of various scripts, to the myriad of surfaces, tools and technologies that have been used in different historical periods and cultural contexts. Much of the material that has served to write on, to write with, to save writing instruments in as well as the texts produced through the ages are now in museums. Some items are exhibited but the majority are kept in the safety of the storerooms.

Most storerooms in today's museums are full of forgotten things that at some time in history were purchased in order to expand and complete the collections, donated or exchanged with other objects. The artefacts I present here are small objects of the kind usually classified as minor arts or applied arts such as ceramics, porcelain, furniture, miniatures, illuminated manuscripts and calligraphy. The objects in question consist of five polychrome Persian pen-boxes or *qalamdan* in lacquered papier-mâché, tucked into a drawer of the storerooms of the Museum of Cultural History (MCH) in Oslo. I study them from a biographical and historical stance and follow their stories as they are succinctly conveyed by the museum's entry catalogue and the individual inventory cards.ⁱⁱⁱ I then probe the materiality of writing by concentrating on the qalamdans and the narratives imparted by the paintings covering them. In my use of the term, materiality refers to what Bjørnar Olsen calls the 'thingly component of things' that is, their physical material properties, the stuff they are made of, their size, age and texture. Materiality also points to the intangible dimension of things, their changing meanings, to the relations things have to people and to the material side of social life.^{iv}

The usual procedure in museums is to assign every object with a unique number or registration number at its arrival. This number is recorded in the entry catalogue of the museum and on an individual inventory card. It identifies the object and situates it in the history of the museum's collection. Once it is registered as part of the collection, the item becomes a museum object or *musealia*. In museums of cultural history and their archaeological and ethnographic collections, it means that the object is a 'real authentic thing' that has been taken out of its original context and is transformed into an object of knowledge that may be used as a primary source to scientific research.^v As such, it is often considered as part of a national and in some cases transnational cultural heritage. It stands as a witness of the different temporalities it belongs to since it was made, the various places it has journeyed across, the successive persons who have had it in their hands and the developments in the institution that owns it. The individual inventory card holds information about the material properties of the object, its age, size, the provenance and the method of acquisition. Drawings, photographs, results of research and references to published material on the object supplement this basic information and are also part of the documentation system of most museums. I consider these concise entries to be very short narratives that summarise the main facets of the artefacts' materiality and biographies and follow their trajectories across time, space, societies and cultures. For instance, the inventory numbers of

the qalamdans at the MCH tell us that two of them, UEM 425 (a and b), were purchased around 1863 when Ludvig Kr. Daa (1809-1877) was the director of the newly established Ethnographic Museum at the University of Oslo.^{vi} Daa took upon himself to systematize the existing collection, to set up its first catalogue and to find fitting rooms to exhibit the various items according to a geographic model. He undertook to increase it and to this purpose contacted colleagues abroad, general consuls representing Norway in various parts of the world, sea captains and various other organizations. In 1863, he travelled to Gothenburg and Copenhagen in order to buy and exchange objects for the growing ethnographic collection in Oslo, and he brought back artefacts from America, Greenland, China, Japan, Turkey, Iran, India, Borneo and Africa.^{vii} Two other qalamdans, UEM 3350 (1- 4), were donated to the museum at the end of Daa's leadership in 1876.^{viii} All these transactions were made when the Ethnographic Museum was still situated in the loft of the Domus Media or 'museums' building', that is, before the art nouveau building of the actual museum designed by Henrik Bull (1864 -1953) was erected. The fifth qalamdan UEM 44628, is a much later gift. It was donated to the museum in 1973, at a time when the museum was going through a change of paradigm and trying out novel museological approaches with less artefacts exhibited in the showcases and more attention given to cultural contexts and social relations.^{ix}

The qalamdan

The word qalamdan is composed of the Arabic *qalam* meaning pen and the Persian ending *dan* denoting a box or container. Thus, a qalamdan is a "pen box". The five qalamdans at the MCH are originally from Iran and have been dated to the Qajar period (1785-1925). The production of lacquer artefacts blossomed during this period. They were much sought-after commodities and status symbols that royal and elite patrons commissioned. Lacquerwares were also sold as luxury articles in bazars, and exported abroad. The Persian appellation *naqqash* (pl. *naqqashan*) designates a variety of artists and craftsmen among them lacquer painters who were involved in the making of these artefacts. During the Qajar period, the naqqashan were organized in guilds and a number of them worked for the market. The most renowned artists signed and dated their works; some of their creations could fetch high prices.^x It took several months to make a lacquer qalamdan in papier-mâché. First, the artist prepared the papier-mâché and formed the pen-box. The usual shape was either a thin oblong box with rounded ends and sliding tray or a rectangular box with fitting lid. Once the papier-mâché dried, he covered it with a thin layer of plaster, and when the plaster dried painted the qalamdan and decorated it with different polychrome designs and motives. The finished

work was then sealed with a coat of transparent lacquer made of a kind of resin. When choosing figurative art as their mode of expression the naqqashan applied the principles of miniatures. Accordingly, humans and things are shown from different angles at the same time. The lighting is even and perspective is rendered by placing the more distant items higher up. The main characters are larger than other figures; great care is given to the details of clothes and jewellery. The background landscapes are often hilly and animals, especially horses, are shown sideways.^{xi}

The qalamdans at the MCH were probably made for the market. They all show signs of wear and tear. Nevertheless, the colours are well preserved. I have organized them according to their designs and motives. The first is an inscribed qalamdan stating the agency of the pen. The four other qalamdans show that the general avoidance to represent the human figure in Islamic visual arts did not mean a complete ban. This is especially true regarding the arts of the book and miniatures during the Safavid and Qajar periods in Iran and the Ottoman period in Turkey. The paintings on two of the qalamdans depict forms of cultural encounters in art while those on the two last ones picture moments of entertainment, leisure time and life on the estates of the wealthy.

The agency of the pen

Inventory number UEM 425b (fig. 1) is a qalamdan with rounded ends and a sliding tray. It is 23, 3 cm long, 4 cm wide and 3, 2 cm high. The provenance is unknown. It was acquired by Ludvig Kr. Daa through the intermediary of C. J. Thomsen in Copenhagen. Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788-1865) was a well-known Danish archaeologist and museum curator who established the first ethnographic museum in Copenhagen in 1841.

The plaster and paint on the pen-box are chipped off in different places. The enveloping box is green with gold floral and vegetal motives. The tray is red and covered with green and gold floral motives and there is a small inkwell at each end inside it. The enveloping box is decorated with three cartouches with inscriptions in gold on a red-pink background.^{xii} A floral composition consisting of a rose and a blue and white iris separates the cartouches from each other.

The central cartouche bears the inscription: *insha qalamqt 'ayān kardih nahān ay riḏa*, meaning: “The essay (written by) your pen discloses what is hidden ô Reza!”

This inscription directly addresses the long-standing debate about the notion of agency regarding material culture, and whether things have their own agency.^{xiii} Christopher Tilley remarked that things are not merely reflections of values, ideas, societies, cultures or worldviews. They are, according to him, ‘the very medium through which these values, ideas and social distinctions are constantly reproduced and legitimized, or transformed.’^{xiv} In a number of cultures, some things are perceived as having agency.^{xv} In the Islamic worldview, the pen is such a thing. It is the tool that helped recording and disseminating the sacred word^{xvi}; it is the instrument used by religious masters to express their ideas. Hence, the pen has been endowed with intentionality and great symbolic value. It may be that Reza is the name of the original owner of our qalamdan. However, the name may also refer to the eighth imam, Ali ibn Musa al-Reza (765-818). In Shi’a Islam, he is considered the imam of Sufism and of knowledge. The sentence on the qalamdan makes it clear that the pen is perceived to be the medium by which unexpressed thoughts and hidden knowledge are articulated.

The cartouche to the left of the central cartouche reads: 1177 *Zanjan*, probably this is the date and location of the workshop where the artefact was made. The date 1177 of the *hijra* corresponds to 1763 C.E., that is, during the reign of the founder of the Qajar dynasty in Iran, Agha Mohamed Khan (1742-1797 C.E.). Zanjan is a town in north-west Iran.

The cartouche to the right of the central cartouche bears probably the signature of the naqqash and may be read *khattat*, which means ‘calligrapher’ in Persian.



Fig. 1: By the pen..., UEM 425 b; copyright Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

While the decoration of this qalamdan consists of interlaced vegetal and floral designs and calligraphy, that on those presented in the next section are figurative and visualize forms of cultural encounters in arts.

Picturing cultural encounters

The paintings of UEM 425a (fig. 2) and UEM 44628 (fig. 3) remind us of the long and varied forms of cultural and trade contacts and exchanges between Europe and Persia. The “fashion for the foreigner” to use Peter Burke’s phrase goes far back in time and takes many forms.^{xvii} During the 17th and 18th centuries, European artists and craftsmen travelled to Persia while Persian artists and artisans came to Europe and were inspired by each other’s art and technologies. The Persian artists incorporated European baroque models in an overall Persian frame and style; in Europe the taste for oriental motives in various art forms such as architecture, painting and music spread.^{xviii} Willem Floor observed that in addition to serving

political ends to the glory of monarchs and other powerful characters, visual figurative art in the Qajar period served to please the senses. Among the dominant themes of what he designates as 'sensual art' there are birds, flowers, mountainous landscapes, pastoral sceneries with buildings in the background, young women in European low-cut dresses and foreign young men also in European costumes and broad-rim hats. Another dominant theme according to Floor is erotica and representations of naked, half-naked or very lightly clothed women.^{xix}

UEM 425 (a; fig. 2) is a qalamdan with rounded ends and a sliding tray. It is 23, 3 cm long; 4 cm wide and 3, 2 cm high. Its provenance is unknown. As the other qalamdan bearing the same entry number, it was acquired by Ludvig Kr. Daa through the intermediary of Christian Jürgensen Thomsen in Copenhagen. The inner tray is painted red with golden floral motives. Part of the enveloping box is broken and the plaster and paint have flaked off in a few places. The decorations on both long sides mirror each other. The theme of the painting pertains to Floor's sensual art showing young women wearing dresses with deep cleavages, enjoying a day outdoors. The groomed landscape with buildings is visibly inspired from European examples. The central scene shows a woman accompanied by her attendant sitting in the park of a palace that one distinguishes in the background. She holds a child on her knees. On the left side, we see an elderly bearded man in traditional Persian outfit sitting under a tree and watching the scene while on the right side of the scene there is a young man wearing a turban sleeping under a tree. A cartouche on each side of this central scene shows a mother and child motive; the mother has flowers in her hair and on her bodice. The tray depicts a scene of three women and a young girl in the park of a palace or big manor. The cartouche on the right portrays a young man in European outfit wearing a broad-rim hat and the one on the left a woman also in European clothes. The two seem to be looking at each other.

One rounded end of the tray shows a young man in Persian clothes walking among buildings of the estate; at the other end, we see the walls of a castle.



Fig. 2: Mother and child, UEM 425b; copyright Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

UEM 44628 (fig. 3) is a qalamdan with rounded ends and sliding tray. It is 23 cm long; 3, 5 cm wide and 3,5cm high. It is well preserved with few slight chips to the plaster and paint. The decorations on both long sides mirror each other. The texts in the entry catalogue of MCH and on the inventory card of this artefact give more detailed information about it than those documenting the other four qalamdans. They mention that it comes originally from Isnha (*sic!*) in the centre of Iran. This is probably a misspelling for Isfahan, which was the centre of lacquered qalamdans during the Qajar period.^{xx} The artefact is dated to the 18th-19th centuries. It was donated to the museum in 1973 by the Norwegian General Consul in Teheran, Karl J. Olsen, who had been living 30 years in Iran. In addition to this basic data, the inventory card displays a drawing of the artefact made by the museum's artist, Marie Krekling Johannessen (1907-1998).

The theme on this qalamdan also belongs to what Floor describes as sensuous and erotica. It represents lightly dressed and half-naked young women being watched by men of different

ages.^{xxi} The backdrop view is set in a luxuriant landscape where the different scenes and portraits of women in European dress and large décolletés are separated by cartouches framed with floral ornaments. The main scenes on this qalamdan recall different moments of the biblical story of Susanna and the elders and draw upon an array of European paintings from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, for instance the *Susanna and the elders* by Rembrandt, Rubens, Guido Reni, Artemisia Gentileschi and Jean-Baptiste Santerre, and Antonio María Esquivel y Suárez de Urbina.^{xxii}

The interior of the tray is decorated with flower motives in gold on a black background.



Fig. 3: Susanna and the elders, UEM 44628; copyright Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Adapting European themes to Persian taste in arts did not entail the abandonment of the local. The scenes painted on the two qalamdans in the following section show activities taking place in the homes and on the estates of the wealthy during the Qajar period.

Leisure, entertainment and life on the estate

The two last qalamdans of the collection at MCH are rectangular boxes standing on short square legs in each corner, and detached fitting lids. Their provenance is unknown. The

inventory cards tell us that they were collected by the Danish sailor, Kjerulf and then donated to the museum by the widow of Commander Falsen, Mrs. Cathinka Falsen in 1875 or 1876. Ludvig Kr. Daa was still the director of the museum at the time.

UEM 3350 (1-2; fig. 4), is 28 cm long, 8 cm wide and 6 cm high. There are minor chips, the paint and plaster have flaked off in some places on the box and lid. The scene on the lid is set in a wealthy interior. It shows a couple holding each other and sitting at a large dining table covered with a red and green tablecloth and laden with food and drinks. Five musicians, four women and a man entertain them. A young male servant stands in front of the table holding a tray on which there is a bottle. Another bottle is placed on a stand beside him. All characters are dressed in Persian costumes of their time. The floor is covered with a dark red carpet with floral design. Round reddish coloured fruits, probably pomegranates are spread on the carpet.

The sides of the box depict another kind of leisure activity, namely hunting and shows horsemen with bows and arrows set in a pastoral landscape pursuing what looks like gazelles.



Fig. 4: Couple dining and wining, UEM 3350 (1-2); copyright Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

UEM 3350 (3-4; fig. 5) is 28 cm long, 7, 2 cm wide and 6 cm high. The paint and plaster have flacked off in several places on the box and the lid; one of the square feet is broken. Here too the lid shows a wealthy interior where a couple is sitting comfortably at a small round table covered with a green and red tablecloth; the table is bare. They are being entertained by three female musicians and two dancers, also women. The floor is covered with a red carpet with floral design. All figures are wearing the local costumes of their time. The box is decorated with a rural scene inspired perhaps from the daily activities on the owner's estate. Two women are busy with their usual chores. One is milking a goat while the other one shakes the goatskin where she has poured the milk to curd. A man carrying a heavy load approaches the village. The shorter sides of the box show a man sleeping in the fields.



Fig. 5: Couple dining and wining, UEM 3350 (3-4); copyright Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

Concluding thoughts

Modest objects of applied arts like the five qalamdars at the MCH remind us that humans and things have always been linked. These accessories to the practice and pleasure of writing have a power of evocation and of triggering memories about ways objects were made, used and also disposed of and forgotten. The qalamdars, however, go on living. They belong to a multiplicity of times from when they were made to the present. Their function and usage have changed from elegant and delicately crafted commodities to musealia and transnational heritage. Despite the many gaps that will remain open, putting together the bits of narratives gathered from the qalamdars' registration numbers, inventory cards and their materiality brings about new insights about the history of the MCH and the people involved in establishing the ethnographic collection of the University of Oslo. We learn about methods of making the artefacts and the significance of the designs and motives they display. We may

never find out who were the artists and artisans who made these pieces, who were their original owners, whether they were commissioned or made for the market. Nevertheless, these outdated and discarded objects that were meant for daily use and to please the eye of the beholder have kept a certain charm and sensory appeal. They tell us alternative stories about practices pertaining to writing, about pens, their agency and, perhaps, their relation to Sufi practice, about cultural contacts, ways of entertainment and activities on the estates of the patrons. They also give us insights into the fluctuating trends of taste, types of consumer goods and collectibles.

It may be time to take them out of oblivion and the storerooms of the museum and give them a new life. We may, perhaps see them in special exhibitions that probe the history of writing and literacy in different cultures, rituals and performances, notions of personhood or behaviour and ethics across time and space.

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ⁱ Barthes, 1976.

ⁱⁱ Piquette and Whitehouse, 2013; Meier, Ott and Sauer, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ All documentation regarding the Ethnographic collection is now digitized and can be consulted online; <http://www.khm.uio.no/english/research/collections/>.

^{iv} Ingold, 2007, 9-14; Olsen, 2003; 2010; Naguib and Rogan, 2011; Tilley, 2006, 2007.

^v Mairesse and Deloche, 2006, p. 398-405.

^{vi} The University of Oslo was founded in 1813 and inaugurated in 1851. The site chosen for the campus is situated between the Parliament and the royal palace. The space was designed on a tripartite basis with three buildings arranged around a rectangular square. The central building, Domus Media also known as the “museums' building” (museums bygning), hosted the different University museums of natural sciences and from 1854 also the Ethnographic Museum; Naguib, 2007, p. 150-151.

^{vii} The objects received numbers going from 390-451; Nielsen 1907, p. 32; Bouquet, 1996, p. 36-40; Bergstøl & al., 2004, p. 74-81.

^{viii} Nielsen 1907, p. 44, 46.

^{ix} Naguib, 2007, p. 155.

^x Floor, 1999.

^{xi} Grabar, 2001.

^{xii} I am thankful to Farideh Faramazi, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo for helping reading and translating the inscriptions.

^{xiii} For an overview of the debate regarding material culture and agency see: Rogan, 2011, p. 351-363.

^{xiv} Tilley, 2006, p. 61

^{xv} Gell, 1998.

^{xvi} Qur'an, surah 68:1, *al-qalam*; sura 96: 4-5, *al-'alaq*.

^{xvii} Burke, 2009, p. 79-82.

^{xviii} Floor, 1999, p. 131; Langer 2014.

^{xix} Floor, 1999, p. 137-138.

^{xx} Farideh Faramazi, peronal communication; Floor, 1999, p. 126.

^{xxi} Floor, 1999, p. 137-139.

^{xxii} https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings_of_Susanna_and_the_Elders (retrieved 1.10.2016)