

Asia: Body Mind Spirit



Whenever I travel in Asia it always surprises me how integrated health, exercise and religion are into everyday life. Walking through parks in China in the early morning there are groups of men and women practicing T'ai Chi, in Thailand groups of women gossip as they massage their babies and in Japan many houses have a shrine where offerings are made daily. This holistic approach to life advocates a balanced relationship between the body, mind and spirit. It is an integral feature of Asian culture.

Asia House and the Wellcome Trust explore Asian wellbeing in a major exhibition of Asian treasures entitled *Asia: Body Mind Spirit*. Discover how health is inseparable from the cultural and spiritual life of Asia. The exhibition takes visitors on a journey from the lands of the Mediterranean in the West to those of the Pacific in the East to show the interchange and transmission of medical knowledge.

The exhibits include annotated acupuncture scrolls, Chinese diagnostic dolls for women (demonstrating the location of their symptoms without undressing for a male doctor), a rare 14th century Persian horoscope showing the influence of planets on health, a dramatic Japanese wood-block print showing the excision of a cancerous growth from a woman's breast in 1804 (the first in the world to be conducted under a general anaesthetic) and an outstanding Jain *Kalpa Sutra* dated 1503 depicting Mahavira, founder of the Jain religion, preaching to the Universe.

These exquisite manuscripts, texts and artefacts are drawn from the Wellcome Library's rich and rarely seen Asian collections. The collector, Henry Solomon Wellcome (1853-1936) was a businessman, philanthropist, patron of science and pioneer of aerial photography, who saw the entire compass of human culture and history through medical eyes. Born on a farm in the American Midwest in 1853, Wellcome trained as a pharmacist before joining his fellow student Silas Burroughs in London to set up a pharmaceutical firm. Compressed tablets had only recently been invented in America and the company set out to market them in Europe. With the success of the company, Wellcome's passion for collecting increased and by 1930 his collection was five times larger than that of the Louvre.

Images courtesy of Wellcome Library, London

- * Medicine Buddha, Tibet; c. late 18th century.
- ** The Life of the Buddha, Burmese; c.19th century.
- *** Kali, India; c.19th century.
- **** Street Gamblers, Canton; John Thomson, 1869



Islamic Medicine

The history of medicine and science shows what can be achieved when men and women work together out of mutual respect for each other's cultures and traditions.

In the Near East, Islam developed in a region deeply influenced by the culture and philosophy of ancient Greece, a region that had been under Greek rule from the time of Alexander the Great until the rise of Rome. The corpus of Greek medicine was much admired by the Arabs and others in the Islamic world. They preserved this heritage, translated and transmitted it, added commentary to it and developed it, particularly in the area of *materia medica*, medical substances. This process continued until the West was sufficiently settled to receive it back and further advance it into the medical knowledge from which we benefit today.

Texts of the three greatest Islamic medical writers are displayed in the exhibition, *Asia: Body Mind Spirit*. Rhazes (865-925) was born near Tehran and he became chief physician in Baghdad. He was the most celebrated medical teacher of his time. A physician and physicist as well as an alchemist, he cited in his work Greek and Indian authors but also made observations of his own all exemplified in his great medical compendium *Kitab al-Hawi*. A copy of this text transcribed in 1363 is on view. Slightly later than Rhazes, 'Ali ibn Abbas al-Majusi (d. 994) composed a medical encyclopaedia which included among other topics, *materia medica* and therapeutics based on the writings of Dioscorides, the first-century Greek physician noted for his use of medicinal plants. A copy of this work bearing the date 1434 is exhibited. Avicenna (980-1037) is the most famous of all Islamic physicians. His great work, *al-Qanun*, served as the standard work of medical instruction in both the East and the West for several centuries. It encompassed all medical knowledge available at the time. A very fine example of this work dated 1632 is displayed. It was copied in Isfahan and bound in exquisite papier mâché covers, one of which depicts a physician taking a girl's pulse and diagnosing her disorder as love sickness, an incident described by Avicenna who lifted it out of an earlier account by the celebrated Graeco-Roman physician Galen.

A set of anatomical drawings promulgated by the medieval Persian anatomist Mansur ibn Muhammad Ilyas corresponds exactly to the subject of five works by Galen on the same anatomical subjects and are generally attributed to him. Since the Muslims did not perform dissection, these drawings were, for centuries, the sole means for anatomical instruction in the Islamic world. The horse was the most highly prized of all animals in Islamic society. Similar drawings of the anatomy of the horse were recently acquired by the Wellcome Library. Both human and equine anatomical drawings are on display showing again the respect of one culture for the other and the benefits this respect brought.

Dr. Nigel Allan

Exhibition Co-Curator of *Asia: Body Mind Spirit*

Cultural Patrons

In the spring of this year, Somerset House hosted the exhibition *Heaven on Earth: Art from Islamic Lands*. The Qur'an's, textiles, goldsmiths' work, metalwork and paintings from the State Hermitage Museum and the Khalili Collection, provided a small but exquisite sample of two very important collections of Islamic art. Professor N. D. Khalili kindly joined us for a tour by Professor Michael Rogers who entertained the Cultural Patrons with interesting anecdotes about the background of some of the pieces.

In May, the British Library Patrons invited us to join them for an evening reception and tour of their spectacular exhibition, *Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War & Faith*. Susan Whitfield, exhibition curator, and several specialists from the Library, were on hand to give us their insights into the discoveries.

Our spring season ended with a wonderful evening of Thai culture including food and entertainment in the garden of the Thai Ambassador's residence, hosted by HE Mr Koompirochana, his wife and staff.

The spring season also marked a change in the Chairmanship of the Patrons. April Gow has stepped down after two very successful years and we are sad to lose her. We are delighted that Nazli Jafferjee has agreed to become Chair and we look forward to her expanding upon the good work that has already been done.



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Front Cover:

- * 'Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia delivers his keynote speech for Asia House. Credit: Vipul Sangoi, Raindesign.
 - ** Credit: Vipul Sangoi, Raindesign.
 - *** Professor Tommy Koh entertains guests with the success story of multiculturalism in Singapore. Credit: Vipul Sangoi, Raindesign.
 - **** Dancers at the Thai Ambassador's residence. Credit: Helen Whiteoak.
- All other images courtesy of Singapore Tourist Board.

This page:

- * Mrs April Gow, former Chair of Cultural Patrons (left) with Mrs Nazli Jafferjee, new Chair of Cultural Patrons (right). Credit: Helen Whiteoak.
- ** Prof. N.D. Khalili with Dr Leng Tan & Mr Simon Ray at Heaven on Earth, Somerset House.
- *** Asia House staff at the launch of our new branding. Credit: Jeanette Gausi.

Editor: Helen Reid.

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