



**Foreign manuscripts
from Willard Fiske's Library**

One of the most loyal supporters of the National Library was the American tycoon and librarian Willard Fiske (1831–1904). During his lifetime, he gave the library over 1,500 books, and then bequeathed a large part of his books to the library in his will, over 2,500 volumes, many of which are valuable and rare. The books arrived at the library soon after his death, but were not unpacked from boxes until after the library's move to a new building in 1908. Recently, it was discovered that among the books the library received from Fiske's collection were four foreign manuscripts, all of which are unique.

One of these manuscripts, Lbs 5336 8vo, contains a book of hours, written on parchment, probably in the 15th or 16th century. The manuscript contains the Hours of the Cross and the Hours of the Virgin Mary in Latin. The hours are: ad Laudes, Primam, Tertiam, Sextam, Nonam, Vesperis, Completorium. The manuscript is 69 leaves long, 18.6 x 12.5 cm in size. It is beautifully decorated and gilded, with decorated initials and at the beginning of each hour there are ornamental benches and full-page illuminations, seven in all. It is obvious that a lot of effort has gone into the making of this book. It is bound in a leather binding that probably dates from around 1900, but embedded in it is printed decorative leather from an older binding. There is gilding on the leaves of the manuscript, which was probably done at the same time as the manuscript was rebound. Nothing is known about the provenance of the manuscript, its writer or owners, other than Willard Fiske. In all likelihood, however, it has its origins in Europe, since books of hours were mainly written in the area around the Netherlands. Many of them were written for women and it was common for them to receive such books as wedding gifts from their husbands. A number of books of hours are preserved in libraries and museums abroad, but no other complete book of hours is known in Iceland.

Two of the manuscripts are in Ottoman Turkish / Persian and belong to the literary tradition of the Ottoman Turks. They are written in Arabic script and therefore read from right to left. One of them, Lbs 5337 8vo, contains the "Diwan" (collection of poems) of Mûnirî Amâsî (d. 1520) and was probably written in the 16th or 17th century. On page 146r, at the beginning of the text, there is a decoration in gold, blue, green and red. In addition, there are golden frames around the text of the manuscript. The manuscript has 146 leaves, 16.9 x 11.4 cm in size. According to our

sources, only three other manuscripts containing the collection of poems are known. One of them is in the Vatican Library, another in the National library in Vienna and the third in the University library in Istanbul.

The other manuscript, Lbs 5338 8vo, contains an Ottoman Turkish-Persian dictionary entitled “Tuhfe-i Şâhidî” (Gift of Şâhidî) and was composed in 1514–1515 by the scholar İbrahim Şâhidî (1470–1550). “Tuhfe-i Şâhidî” is a well-known text, preserved in many manuscripts around the world. It is a kind of poetry dictionary, and was used as a textbook. The text is based on the poem “Mathnavi-ye Ma’anavi” written by the 13th century poet Mevlana Celalüddin Rûmî. The manuscript is believed to have been written in the 17th century.

Its text is written in black and red ink and surrounded by golden borders. Outside the borders is a commentary to the main text. On sheet 28r, which is the first page of the manuscript, there are decorations in gold, blue, red, yellow and pink. There are 28 leaves, 20.4 x 12.4 cm.

The paper in these two manuscripts has a texture that is very different from that of Icelandic (and Western) paper manuscripts. Starch has been applied to the paper which is then polished with a smooth stone or other tool. In this way, the paper gets an even and smooth surface, which means that the color used in the decorations does not sink into it, as is common in Icelandic paper manuscripts. The decorations are refined and elaborate and obviously done with great skill.

The fourth manuscript, Lbs 5339 8vo, is a Gospel book in Armenian. The manuscript was finished in 1682, written by two scribes and is richly decorated. The main part of the manuscript, up to leaf 135v, is written by Petros Dpir, who died in the middle of his work and another scribe, the priest Kirakos, finished the book. Four full-page illuminations of the evangelists precede each Gospel, and ornamental benches at their beginnings.





In many places in the manuscript, the initials are decorated with drawings of birds colored with pink. The manuscript is bound in a blind tooled leather binding that bears all the main characteristics of Armenian bookmaking. Holes can be identified on the binding, but they are the remains of silver ornaments that have been attached to it, as was common in Armenian manuscripts. The manuscript is 182 leaves long, 16.7 x 14 cm in size.

It is not known where or when Willard Fiske came across these manuscripts, whether he bought them or received them as a gift. However, it is known that in addition to being a great book collector, Fiske was interested in Egypt and Egyptian culture and traveled there often. During his travels there, he came across various antiquities which he bequeathed to the National Museum of Iceland. It may be that Fiske acquired the manuscripts, except perhaps the book of hours, during such trips. Why Fiske bequeathed these exotic manuscripts to the National Library is another mystery, but it is safe to say that they stand out from the library's other collection.

All the manuscripts have been digitized and are available on handrit.is. In the next few days, they can also be seen on display in the foyer of the National collection on the library's 1st floor.