

Asian Treasures : Gems of the Written Word

[Speech at the launch of *Asian Treasures* hosted by the Friends of the National Library of Australia, Conference Room, National Library, Canberra, Tuesday 12 July 2011]

**Andrew Gosling
Former Chief Librarian
Asian Collections
National Library of Australia**



Anne-Marie Schwirtlich, Director-General of the National Library of Australia launching *Asian Treasures* by Andrew Gosling. Photograph courtesy of Marie Sexton.

1. Thanks

First I am most grateful that the new Director-General, Anne-Marie Schwirtlich, has kindly agreed to launch the book today. I had the pleasure of working with Anne-Marie about ten years ago when she was on a short secondment to the National Library.

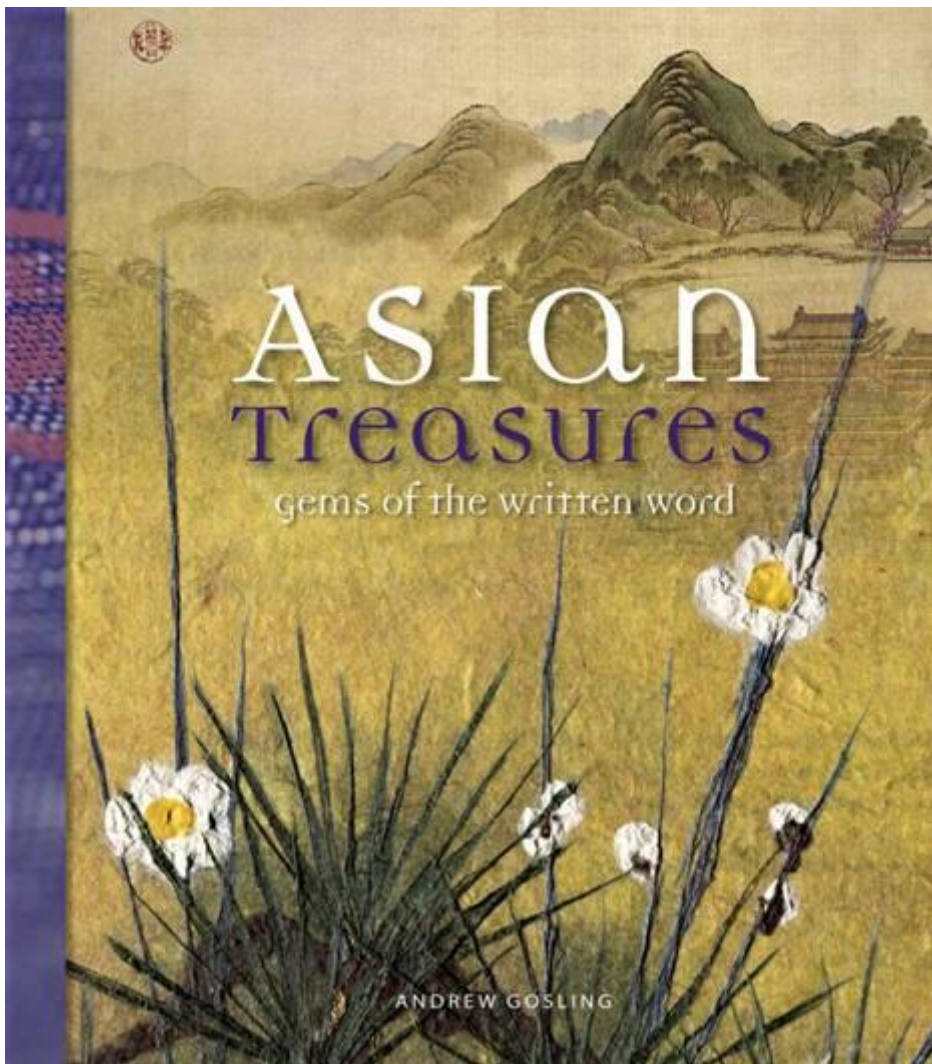
I had wanted to write a book about the Library's Asian Collections for many years, but had to wait until retirement for the time to do so. The result, *Asian Treasures: Gems of the Written Word* is of course a

EAST ASIAN LIBRARY RESOURCES GROUP OF AUSTRALIA

Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)

collaborative effort. The theme, selection criteria and list of items included were the result of extensive discussions. I am most grateful to Paul Hetherington, former head of Publications for supporting the idea of this book, his successor Susan Hall and other Public Programs staff, such as Maureen Brooks and Sally Hopman. I should also thank the publisher's editor Michaela Forster, the designer Noel Wendtman and the photographer Sam Cooper.

A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Asian Collections, its director, Amelia McKenzie; Di Ouyang, Mayumi Shinozaki, Jung-Ok Park, Tieke Atikah, Sophie Viravong, Anya Dettman and all the staff in the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian and Thai units. I am also grateful to other parts of the Library represented in *Asian Treasures*, namely Manuscripts, Pictures, Maps and Rare Books. Many scholars provided advice and comments, most notably Dr Ian Proudfoot and Dr John Caiger, both of whom are here this evening. Finally I should thank the Friends of the National Library, their Chair, Joan Kennedy and their executive officer, Sharyn O'Brien for organising this evening's event.

2. Introduction

Front cover of *Asian Treasures : Gems of the Written Word*. [1]
Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

Asian Treasures is the Library's first full-length book devoted to its acquisitions from the region. 42

EAST ASIAN LIBRARY RESOURCES GROUP OF AUSTRALIA

Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)

precious pieces have been selected on the theme of Asian writing, books and printing. Whether the number 42 has any significance I will leave to fans of Douglas Adams and his *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, which by the way the Library holds in Japanese translation. It was not easy choosing just a few items from the vast collections about Asia. The criteria for inclusion were age, rarity, beauty or historical significance. I have concentrated on Asian writing traditions, thus largely excluding the Library's strong holdings of Western publications about Asia, which could easily be the topic of another volume.

Australia's library collections about Asia are comparatively young. During the 1950s the National Library realized the importance of collecting from and about our northern neighbours. Since then the Library has developed the strongest Asian research holdings in Australia, to meet the needs of scholars and the public.

The book makes no claim to geographical balance within Asia. It reflects the fact that the Library's collecting has long concentrated on East and Southeast Asia. However I have tried to show a variety of interesting pieces from many countries. Hence *Asian Treasures* covers items from Iran to Japan. It includes palm-leaf writings from Sri Lanka and Bali; Indian miniatures based on Hindu tales; Thai and Manchu manuscripts. There are Burmese texts from marble rubbings; an early Thai cremation volume; Korean scriptures printed with original 13th century woodblocks and a huge world map in Chinese on silk. Beautiful works include Kokka, Japan's first art journal and Kogei, on arts and crafts. Incidentally the spine and back of *Asian Treasures* incorporate cover designs from Kogei.

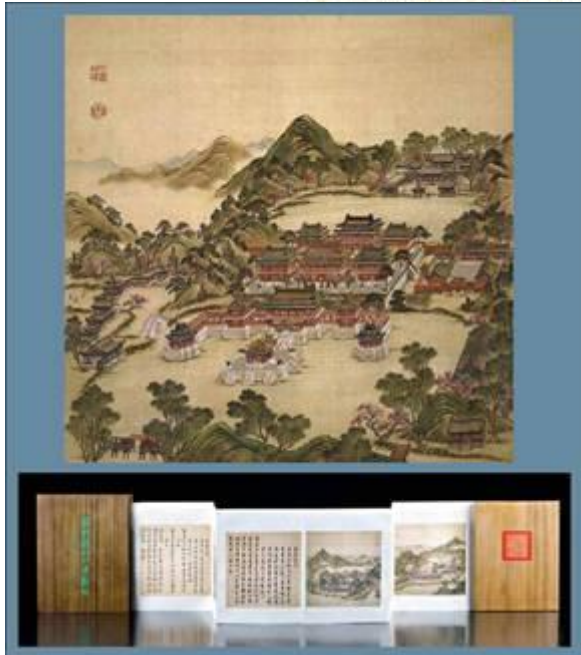
Of course I was not starting from scratch when writing the book. As you will see in the bibliography there were many printed and online sources upon which I was able to draw. One of the earliest by Library staff was published in 1970. "Materials for Asian Studies in the National Library" was written by the Assistant National Librarian, Cliff Burmester and Sidney Wang, my distinguished predecessor and head of what was then called Orientalia. Both men played a major role in developing the collections. Sidney is described in the article as Keeper of Oriental Collections, a splendid title. With such a name I can imagine being in charge of elephants and pandas, not books and periodicals. Unfortunately I was unable to discuss *Asian Treasures* with Sidney, who died in 2004.

I have also been preparing a longer online guide to the Library's Asian treasures, which it is hoped will be made available to the public later. This draft list containing 160 items was useful when choosing a smaller number of precious pieces for the printed book.

3. Highlights from the Book

I thought I might talk briefly about 5 highlights from *Asian Treasures* and will begin with the front cover [1]. Although we are told not to judge a book by its cover, it is hard not to do so. It is fitting that it combines Chinese and Japanese images, as half the items in the book come from these two countries.

Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)



the garden of perfect brightness

When the Manchus ruled China they retained their love of hunting and the outdoors. Their emperors built spacious palace gardens within and beyond the Great Wall. From the early 17th the most important and magnificent of these was the Garden of Perfect Brightness, then just outside the capital, Beijing. It is also known as the Old Summer Palace.

To date the Library received a copy of *Illustrated Odes to the Forty Scenes of the Garden of Perfect Brightness* from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canberra. The Chinese Ambassador, Mr. Baocheng Ma (Ma Sheng), donated this beautiful modern colour facsimile, which is based on a famous work from 1745. The high quality limited edition published in China in 2005 appears to have been specially produced for gift purposes. The volume consists of 42 scenes titled according to style, and is bound in a camellia wood case.

The original *Illustrated Odes to the Forty Scenes* was produced by order of the Qianlong emperor to celebrate his major development of the Garden of Perfect Brightness. This was the main imperial pleasure garden and seat of government for much of the Qing dynasty. It was during Qianlong's long reign (1735 to 1795) that this vast complex of palaces, gardens, lakes and other features attained its greatest glory. The *Illustrated Odes* work is one of several about imperial gardens and related features that appeared during the Qing period. Their combined poems by emperors, in this case by Qianlong himself, the scenes are accompanied by paintings depicting the famous scenes in the gardens.

They were commissioned by the emperor and created by the artist Shen Yuan (active 1746) and Tang Dai (1673-1720).

The Garden of Perfect Brightness suffered a terrible fate. In 1860, after the Second Opium War, British and French troops sacked and partially burnt the palaces and gardens. This was in retaliation for the death of European envoys at the hands of Qing officials. The wood paintings of the 40 scenes were removed and are now held at the Abbaye de Saint-Denis in Paris. The following decade the gardens fell into greater ruin. As the eminent Australian scholar of Chinese studies, Caroline Barnes, has remarked, "indeed it is in the 'Odes to the Forty Scenes...' written by Qianlong that the palace survives".



Illustrated Odes to the Forty Scenes of the Garden of Perfect Brightness, 2005

Illustrated Odes to the Forty Scenes of the Garden of Perfect Brightness [2].
Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

When the Manchus ruled China from 1644 to 1911 they retained their love of the outdoors. Their emperors built spacious palace gardens, such as the Garden of Perfect Brightness, which was the main imperial pleasure garden and seat of government for much of the Manchu period.

In January 2009 the National Library received a copy of *Illustrated Odes* as a gift from the Chinese Embassy in Canberra. It is a beautiful modern colour facsimile, which is based on a famous work from 1745. The original was produced by order of the Qianlong emperor to celebrate the Garden, which attained its greatest glory during his long reign. It contains poems by the emperor himself accompanied by paintings of his favourite garden scenes. *Illustrated Odes* later influenced European landscape garden design. The Garden suffered a terrible fate. In 1860 British and French troops sacked and partially burnt the palaces and gardens in retaliation for the death of European envoys at the hands of Manchu officials.

Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)

MONUMENTAL COLLECTION OF HANDMADE JAPANESE PAPER



While it paper was introduced into Japan through China and Korea, the Japanese later developed papermaking to an extremely high level. The finest writing paper made in Japan dates from 710. The Japanese have used paper for many purposes besides writing and printing. These include window and doorway coverings, walls, sliding doors, lantern-covers, religious objects and even clothing.

Handmade Japanese paper is known, as well, its production requires great skill and immense labour. The main raw material is bark from one of three shrubs that grow naturally in Japan. The bark has to be scraped, soaked, bleached, boiled in lye to remove any fibrous material, washed, graded and then pulped. Two different techniques are used to mould paper from the soup of pulp and water. Accumulation papermaking (suminagashi), which was introduced from China, is basically the same method as found in the West. Discharge papermaking (susuwashi), which is more commonly employed in Japan, is unique to that country. It involves the addition of a vegetable dyeing. A strong alkali advantage this process the fibres from clumping or knotting, causing them to be evenly distributed so that the paper is high quality, strong, firm and glossy. It also lends for many colours.

The Great Collection of Handmade Japanese Paper is a monumental work. Produced by Maruzen Newspapers in 1973-1974, it aimed to include samples of every variety of Japanese handmade paper then being produced, as well as paper that was no longer available but for which the technique was still known. It has been called the most comprehensive collection of handmade paper ever created. Its purpose was to preserve a dying art, then being practised by only about 100 families, mostly in mountain villages. Over hundred years earlier, 60,000 families had been involved in the craft. During the twentieth century it became increasingly difficult for traditional papermakers to compete against much cheaper industrially produced paper. Western style paper is much more common than made in Japan today.

The Library holds the rare original limited edition of the Great Collection of Handmade Japanese Paper. It contains 1000 mounted examples in five massive cases, described and annotated in Japanese and English. Many of these handmade papers are block-printed or feature woodcut designs, some are brightly coloured. Another case holds explanatory booklets in both languages.

Great Collection of Handmade Japanese Paper [3].
Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

The lower half of the front cover is taken from the *Great Collection*. This is a monumental work, produced in 1973-1974, which aimed to include samples of every variety of Japanese hand-made paper being produced. Its purpose was to preserve a dying art, which has struggled to compete against cheaper industrially produced papers.

The Library's rare set of the *Great Collection* contains 1000 mounted examples described and annotated in Japanese and English. Many of the hand-made papers are block-printed or feature woodcut designs. Some are brightly coloured, including the paper flower picture on the cover of *Asian Treasures*.



THE OLDEST PRINTED BOOK IN THE LIBRARY



This oldest printed book in the Library is Chinese and contains a date equivalent to the year 1122. It is an extremely rare, if not unique, volume from a major site of woodblock printing in the Buddhist scriptures. The Library holds volume 42. Another surviving volume of this text is known to exist at the University of California, Los Angeles. Known as the *Country House of the Prefecture of Huanan* (Huanan), its original Indian text is thought to have translated into Chinese by the famous Tang

dynasty pilgrim monk Xuanzang, between 629 and 645 he journeyed through Central Asia to India, bringing back hundreds of Buddhist works, including the text. The text of his life in translating them, his travels were transformed into fiction at Monte, on journey to the West, in which he became the monk Tripitaka, accompanied in India by his faithful companions Shide, Pigeon and Tanzi. The volume dates from the Song dynasty (960-1279), one of China's greatest literary and artistic eras and a golden age for printing, especially of Buddhist texts. This particular version of the Buddhist canon was produced in Fujian,

a major publishing centre on the south-east coast of China. Unlike earlier Chinese printed books, such as the *Shuangjiao* (Double Lotus), which were made up of scrolls, this was the first edition to adopt the water binding, where the scroll was bound like a concertina for easy access to the text. This format was later employed widely for the Buddhist scriptures. Similar binding may also be seen in the Library's illuminated Buddhist manuscript from Thailand about *Phra Maha Janya* (1).

The book is generally in fair condition for its great age, although it is incomplete, with parts of some pages missing. At some stage it has been repaired, while the Library had long known that it was very old and rare. It was only quite recently that experts from China, Australia and Singapore confirmed that it dates back to the Song period. This means that it is centuries older than any other Asian or Western printed work in the Library's collection.

How this rare volume survived for so long and remained in such good condition is a mystery. It was eventually found by the distinguished Sanskritist Chen Yung-fang (Chen Yung), whose Chinese and appears in red ink at the beginning and end of the text. The Library acquired this extraordinary treasure in 1962 together with the rest of Yang's major collection of books about China.



>

EAST ASIAN LIBRARY RESOURCES GROUP OF AUSTRALIA

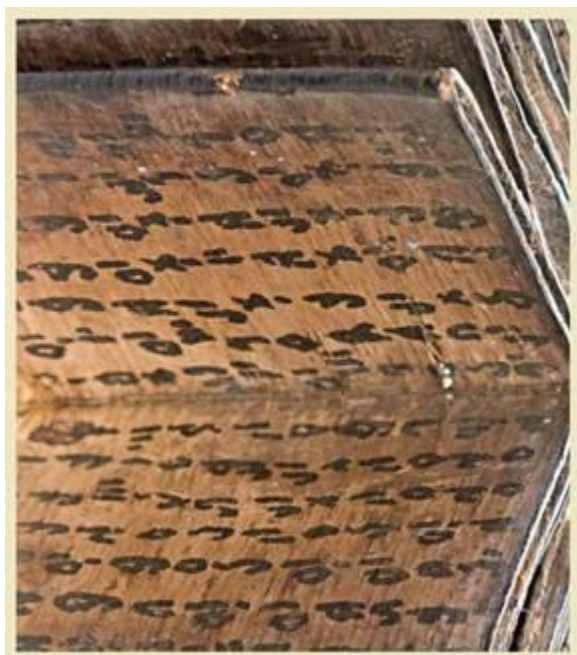
Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)

Sutra of the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom [4].
Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

The oldest printed book in the Library is Chinese and contains a date equivalent to the year 1162. It is an extremely rare if not unique volume from a major set of the Buddhist scriptures woodblock printed in the Song dynasty (960-1279), a golden age for publishing in China.

Its original Indian text was translated into Chinese by the famous 7th century Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang. He journeyed through Central Asia to India, bringing back hundreds of Buddhist works, including this one. He devoted the rest of his life to translating them. His travels were transformed into the 16th century Chinese novel, *Monkey*, or *Journey to the West*, in which he became the monk Tripitaka, accompanied to India by his faithful companions Monkey, Pigsy and Sandy. Many will be familiar with the TV series of *Monkey*, filmed in China and dubbed in idiosyncratic English, which became a cult classic in Australia.

The Library had long known this volume was very old and rare. Experts have confirmed that it really does date back to the Song period. This means that it is centuries older than any other Asian or Western printed work in the collection. The volume survived for eight hundred years, and was eventually found by the distinguished scholar and librarian Fang Zhaoying, whose Chinese seal appears in red ink at the beginning and end of the text.



Batak bark books

The earliest
distinguished
Australian journalist,
writer and oral historian Ray Aitchison donated
two Batak bark manuscripts to the Library, one
of them a manuscript from the 17th century, one
of them a manuscript from the 19th century.

He had collected them
in Sumatra in 1969-1970.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

rather than containing the complete text, they are memory aids for the magician and his disciples to accompany and reconstruct. They are thus impossible to understand fully without an intimate knowledge of those practices. This form of writing, closely linked to traditional beliefs, declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity into the Batak lands during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

At times manuscripts destroyed what they regarded as idolatrous manuscripts.

The Batak also wrote on bamboo as well as the shoulder and ribs bones of water buffalo. Unlike the bark books these were not the work of magicians. They also covered a different range of topics, such as laws, legends, writing exercises and letters, including threatening letters.

The Library also holds an unusual set of photocopied reproductions of Batak manuscripts. They come from the National Library of Indonesia. Mostly acquired in the late nineteenth century, the originals were transferred to 19th century bookbinding paper by a Batak teacher, unknown to the donor.

In recent times there has been a revival of interest in the teaching of Batak script.

Indonesian writing tradition [4]



Batak bark books [5]

Batak Bark Books [5].

Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

In May 2009 the distinguished Australian writer, Ray Aitchison donated two bark manuscripts to the Library. He had collected them in Sumatra in 1969-1970.

The Batak people of Indonesia created manuscripts with strips of flattened bark from the alim tree folded like a concertina and bound between wooden covers. Created by magicians and healers, they contained rituals, oracles and medical recipes. This form of writing declined with the spread of Islam and Christianity during the 19th and 20th centuries.

EAST ASIAN LIBRARY RESOURCES GROUP OF AUSTRALIA

Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)

The Batak people also wrote on bamboo and bone. Unlike the bark books these texts were not only by magicians. They covered different topics and even threatening letters, saying for example “if you do not pay back what you owe me I will burn down your barn.”

The donor, Ray Aitchison tells me that when he was in America he took these manuscripts to a famous scholarly institution to find out more about them. The gentleman to whom he showed the bark books examined them carefully then pronounced “Well sir, they sure ain’t making them any more.”



Qur'an [6].

Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

The Library houses a beautiful Persian manuscript in Arabic. It contains Islam's holy book, the Qur'an (or Koran). The manuscript was probably created during the Qajar dynasty, which ruled Persia or Iran from 1794 to 1925. Bound in floral-patterned lacquer covers, it has opening pages illuminated in blue and gold.

Its most striking feature is a colour picture of Ali and his two sons, who are revered by Shia Muslims as the first three Imams or leaders in the line of succession from the Prophet Muhammad. Ali was the Prophet's son-in-law. Succession through the Prophet's family lies at the heart of the Shia tradition. Paintings of this kind became popular during the Qajar period, but it is extremely unusual if not unique for a Qur'an to contain an image of Ali and his sons.

This manuscript was acquired by the Library in 1975 from Dr Carl Georg von Brandenstein (1909-2005). A German scholar interned in Australia during the Second World War, he later became an expert on Aboriginal languages in Western Australia.

4. Conclusion

I hope that *Asian Treasures* will be more successful than my first experience with publishing. Many years ago as an undergraduate at the Australian National University, I was involved in preparing an Asian studies magazine called *East Wind*. We managed to bring out two issues, which I am pleased to say are held at the Library. In the process we fell into debt. The university bailed us out but on the strict

Newsletter No. 58 (July 2011)

condition that we never produce another issue.

Andrew Gosling
Revised 22 July 2011

REFERENCES:

1. Front cover of *Asian Treasures : Gems of the Written Word*.
2. *Yuan Ming Yuan Si Shi Jing Tu Yong* (Illustrated Odes to the Forty Scenes of the Garden of Perfect Brightness). China, 2005. 圆明园四十景图咏 / [沈源, 唐岱等绘; 乾隆吟诗; 汪由敦代书]. 1 vol. (folded accordion style); colour illustrations; 50 x 38 cm. Chinese. Asian Collections. OCRB 6565 6666
3. *Tesukiwashi Taikan* (Great Collection of Handmade Japanese Paper). Tokyo : Mainichi Newspapers, 1973-1974. 手漉和紙大鑑. 5 cases of samples; colour illustrations; height 55 cm. Japanese and English. Asian Collections. OJ 6293 1312 ef.
4. *Da Ban Ruo Bo Luo Mi Duo Jing* (Greater Sutra of the Perfection of Transcendent Wisdom) translated by Xuanzang, 1162. 大般若波羅蜜多經 / 玄奘奉詔譯. vol. 42 of 600 vols; height 30 cm. Chinese. Asian Collections, OCRB 1818 4343.
5. Batak Bark Books, undated. 8 x 6 x 1 cm. Batak. Manuscripts Collection, MS 3048.
6. Qur'an. Persia, c.1850-1899. handwritten and bound in lacquer covers; colour illustrations; height 16 cm. Arabic. Manuscripts Collection, MS 4949.