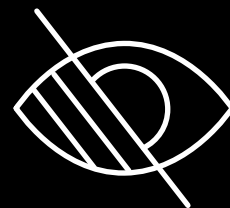


Collection Encounters

Manuscript



UNSW Library
Special Collections & Exhibitions

Large print display guide

PLEASE RETURN FOR OTHERS TO USE

By Abdullah M.I. Syed



The Moon binds us all, transcending time and disciplines. Through *Collection Encounters: Moonscapes*, I explored rare books on astronomy and cosmology from UNSW Library's Special Collections, linking lunar scholarship with science, mysticism, philosophy, law, finance, and the politics of colonisation. By integrating my fascination with the Moon across Islamic, South Asian (Vedas), and Western traditions, I reveal it as a scientific body, financial symbol, spiritual guide, and artistic muse.

I discovered that while Western scholars are often credited with lunar scholarship, Islamic polymaths like al-Bīrūnī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Bāttanī, and al-Sufi made groundbreaking contributions to mapping the heavens. Their work has a substantial influence on Greek and Western scholarship and aligns with the Vedas, emphasising the Moon's significance in South Asian and Islamic cultures.

My interest stems from childhood memories in Pakistan, where the Moon symbolised maternal bonds. My ancestral collection includes texts on Vedic medicine, astronomy, and astrology, which interweave cosmic energies, star charts, and numerical matrices to encode divine attributes. While astronomy is respected in Islam, divination is taboo; however, such knowledge persists in esoteric traditions, influencing my exploration of cosmic knowledge as the Divine *Nūr* (light). Using the Moon as my muse, I translate these narratives into visual art forms using the circle (unity) and the dot (conscious awareness).

In *Moonscapes*, I decode the Moon through objects of memory and domesticity, including silver coins, palm date stalks, bread, and personal memorabilia. Preserved as a celestial Cabinet of Curiosities, these items create a poetic, visual archive of the Moon and its cosmic influence. By blending academic and cultural analysis with personal mythologies, I invite viewers to engage with *Moonscapes* as 'moving museums,' fostering connections to the Moon, our shared eternal witness.



Commissioned by UNSW Library, *Collection Encounters* transforms the Library's Special Collections into a source of active, creative inspiration. By inviting artists to engage with the collection, the program highlights its interdisciplinary relevance and offers new narratives and modern interpretations, demonstrating its continued cultural and scholarly value in the digital age.

For *Collection Encounters: Moonscapes*, artist Abdullah M.I. Syed responded to a selection of rare and valuable texts on astronomy and cosmology from UNSW Library's Special Collections.

Globus caelestis Cufico-Arabicus Veliterni Musei Borgiani a Simone Assemano, 1790

By Simone Assemani (1687-1768)

Printed in Pataviï (Padua) by Typis Seminarii.

UNSW Library Special Collections. KQ 522.41/1

The description and use of the globes and the orrery, 1740

By Joseph Harris (1704-1764)

Printed in London by Thomas Wright and William Wyeth, and E.Cushee

UNSW Library Special Collections. K 522.78/2

The moon: considered as a planet, a world, and a satellite, 2nd edition, 1874

By James Nasmyth (1808-1890)

& James Carpenter (1840-1899)

Printed in London by J. Murray.

UNSW Library Special Collections. KQ 523.3/1

Easy star lessons, 1881

By Richard A. Proctor (1837-1888)

Printed in London by Chatto & Windus.

UNSW Library Special Collections. K 523/2

"Fancy made pictures of these unchangeable spots: untutored gazers in them the indications of a human countenance, and perhaps the earliest map of the moon was a rough reproduction of a man's face, the eyes, nose and mouth representing the more salient spots discernible upon the lunar disc."

"Our illustration of the full moon (Plate III.) is derived from an actual photograph; the relative intensities of light and shade are hence somewhat exaggerated; otherwise it represents the full moon very nearly as the naked eye sees it, and by gazing at the plate from a short distance, the well-known features will manifest themselves, while they who choose may amuse themselves by arranging the markings in their imagination till they conform to the other appearances alluded to."

"We may remark in passing that by one set of ancient writers the moon was supposed to be a kind of mirror, receiving the image of the earth and reflecting it back to terrestrial spectators."

"'What we see in the moon,' said the Persian, 'is ourselves; it is the map of our earth.'"

Quotes by James Nasmyth & James Carpenter, *The moon: considered as a planet, a world, and a satellite* (1874)

The following pages feature reproductions of pages 51 and 52.



CHAPTER VI.

THE GENERAL ASPECT OF THE LUNAR SURFACE.

WE have now reached that stage of our subject at which it behoves us to repair to the telescope for the purpose of examining and familiarising ourselves with the various classes of detail that the lunar surface presents to our view.

That the moon is not a smooth sphere of matter is a fact that manifested itself to the earliest observers. The naked eye perceives on her face spots exhibiting marked differences of illumination. These variations of light and shade, long before the invention of the telescope, induced the belief that she possessed surface irregularities like those that diversify the face of the earth, and from analogy it was inferred that seas and continents alternated upon the lunar globe. It was evident, from the persistence and invariability of the dusky markings, that they were not due to atmospheric peculiarities, but were veritable variations in the character or disposition of the surface material. Fancy made pictures of these unchangeable spots: untutored gazers detected in them the indications of a human countenance, and perhaps the earliest map of the moon was a rough reproduction of a man's face, the eyes, nose and mouth representing the more salient spots discernible upon the lunar disc. Others recognised in these spots the configuration of a human form, head, arms and legs complete, which a French superstition that lingers to the present day held to be the image of Judas Iscariot transported to the moon in punishment for his treason. Again, an Indian notion connects the lunar spots with a representation of a roebuck or a hare, and hence the Sanskrit names for the moon, *mrigadhara*, a roebuck-bearer, and *'sa'sabhr̥it*, a hare-bearer. Of these similitudes the

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one which has the best pretensions to a rude accuracy is that first mentioned; for the resemblance of the full moon to a human countenance, wearing a painful or lugubrious expression, is very striking. Our illustration of the full moon (Plate III.) is derived from an actual photograph;* the relative intensities of light and shade are hence somewhat exaggerated; otherwise it represents the full moon very nearly as the naked eye sees it, and by gazing at the plate from a short distance,† the well-known features will manifest themselves, while they who choose may amuse themselves by arranging the markings in their imagination till they conform to the other appearances alluded to.

We may remark in passing that by one sect of ancient writers the moon was supposed to be a kind of mirror, receiving the image of the earth and reflecting it back to terrestrial spectators. Humboldt affirmed that this opinion had been preserved to his day as a popular belief among the people of Asia Minor. He says, "I was once very much astonished to hear a very well educated Persian from Ispahan, who certainly had never read a Greek book, mention when I showed him the moon's spots in a large telescope in Paris, this hypothesis as a widely diffused belief in his country: 'What we see in the moon,' said the Persian, 'is ourselves; it is the map of our earth.'" Quite as extravagant an idea, though perhaps a more excusable one, was that held by some ancient philosophers, to the effect that the spots on the moon were the shadows of opaque bodies floating in space between it and the sun.

An observer watching the forms and positions of the lunar face-marks, from night to night and from lunation to lunation, cannot fail to notice the circumstance that they undergo no easily perceptible change of position with respect to the circular outline of the disc; that in fact the face of the moon presented to our view is always the same, or very nearly so. If the moon had no orbital motion we should be led from the above phenomenon to conclude that she had no axial motion, no movement of

* For the original photograph from which this plate was produced, and for permission to reproduce it, we owe our acknowledgments to Warren De la Rue and Joseph Beck, Esquires.

† The proper distance for realising the conditions under which the moon itself is seen will be that at which our disc is just covered by a wafer about a quarter of an inch in diameter, held at arm's length. This will subtend an angle of about half a degree, which is nearly the angular diameter of the moon.

Abdullah M.I. Syed

Born 1974, Pakistan

*Moonscape I: Puzzle of Waxing Mind
and Waning Heart, 2026*

fine silver, gauche and acrylic ink on found moon puzzle,
artist's Electrocardiogram, memorabilia, digital print, paper
cuts, metal, graphite, ink, tape, glue and sketch book

Commissioned by UNSW Library as part
of *Collection Encounters*.

Courtesy the Artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, Sydney.

I view the central gilded moon puzzle as a psychological mystery that reflects the human mind and heart. Our brains naturally detect patterns, called pareidolia, which explains why we often see faces on the Moon. The unique silver pattern on puzzle pieces is shaped and imbued with meaning by the observer and their connection to the Moon. Mind, heart, and moon are inextricably linked, influencing emotions, sleep, and fertility. Neuroscience suggests the brain's patterns may reflect lunar cycles, while heart rhythms align with tidal movements, impacting behaviour and creativity. My ECG, recorded after my son's birth, combines my heartbeat data with lunar phases, illustrating the synchrony of parenthood. Accompanied by star charts and zodiac diagrams, *Moonscape I* serves as a symbolic navigational map of intuition and emotion, integrating neuroscience, art, astronomy, astrology, and philosophy.



Abdullah M.I. Syed

Born 1974, Pakistan

Moonscape II: Ledger of Silver Dust, 2026

Lunar meteorite dust in glass vile, various silver antique and new coins, silver platter, lunar registry and citizenship document prints, child's chewed education card, fine silver and banknote collage on digital print, found objects, memorabilia, metal, graphite, ink, tape, glue and sketch book

Commissioned by UNSW Library as part of *Collection Encounters*.

Courtesy the Artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, Sydney.

A luminous moon motif of silver coins symbolises wealth, trade, and domesticity. The coin's symbols reflect the Moon's poetic value, while their stacked arrangement mimics its surface. A vial containing lunar meteorite dust connects the Moon to Earth, once symbolising ambition, now representing future conflicts of sovereignty under space settlement, resource extraction, and colonisation. A hand-cut banknote depicting lunar terrain juxtaposed with a print of a money plant leaf from my mother's garden in Pakistan reflects my aspiration to provide a home for my family as a migrant. Addressing Australia's housing crisis, I acquired symbolic lunar land and citizenship for my son, seeking security and a celestial identity. *Moonscape II* is a ledger of silver dust, inviting contemplation on value, security, and ownership.



Abdullah M.I. Syed

Born 1974, Pakistan

Moonscape III: Cipher of Fasting and Feasting, 2026

paint and gilding on found objects, plastic, silicon, glass, metal, digital print, paper cuts, silver amulet, metal, graphite, ink, tape, glue and sketch book

Commissioned by UNSW Library as part of *Collection Encounters*.

Courtesy the Artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, Sydney.

Moonscape III interprets the Islamic depiction of the Moon and its phases, portraying it as a timekeeper, symbol of divine mercy, and mystical cipher of consumption. It connects celestial food to earthly sustenance, aligning with Islamic rituals of feasting and fasting guided by the lunar calendar. The artwork features bread as the Moon's surface and a date palm symbolising its cycle, as described in the Holy Qur'an [Surah Yaseen (36:39)]. Milk provides spiritual and maternal nourishment, while water flows as a moonlight river within the human body, affecting emotional tides. Referencing historical Persian and Mughal miniatures, this collection merges theology, cosmology, and ritual into a reflection on how the lunar sphere links the divine, natural world, protection, healing, and personal nourishment.



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