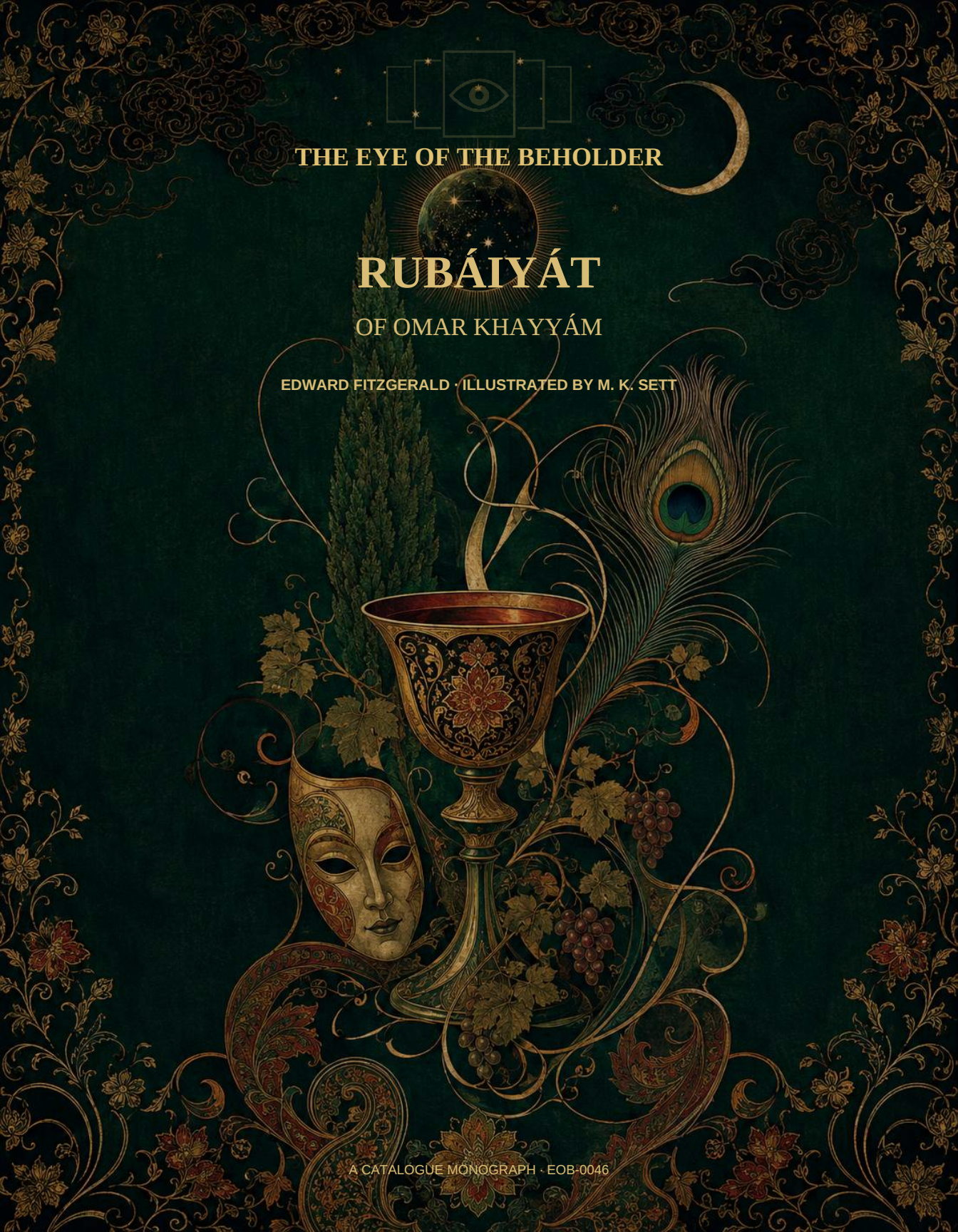




THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

RUBÁIYÁT
OF OMAR KHAYYÁM

EDWARD FITZGERALD · ILLUSTRATED BY M. K. SETT

A CATALOGUE MONOGRAPH · EOB-0046



CONTENTS

- 3 The Rubáiyát and the invention of a world classic
- 4 Omar Khayyám: astronomer, mathematician, poet
- 5 Edward FitzGerald and the English Rubáiyát
- 6 India inside FitzGerald's poem
- 7 The Rubáiyát in India
- 8 Indian-language afterlives
- 9 A Bombay book-object
- 10 Mera Ben Kavas Sett
- 11 A Parsi imagination
- 12 The making of Sett's Rubáiyát
- 13 The portfolio as performance
- 14 Calligraphy as image
- 15 The red-and-green sheets
- 16 The black-and-white plates
- 17 An art of masks and metamorphosis
- 18 Wine, garden, moon and mortality
- 19 The erotic and the metaphysical
- 20 Beardsley—and beyond Beardsley
- 21 Indian modernism before the canon
- 22 Tagore, Dhurandhar and Sett
- 23 Date and bibliographical identity
- 24 The undocumented scarcity
- 25 The present copy
- 26 Condition and preservation
- 27 Collector's assessment
- 28 Catalogue description and collation
- 29 Select bibliography



THE RUBÁIYÁT AND THE INVENTION OF A WORLD CLASSIC

WHY THIS POEM MATTERS

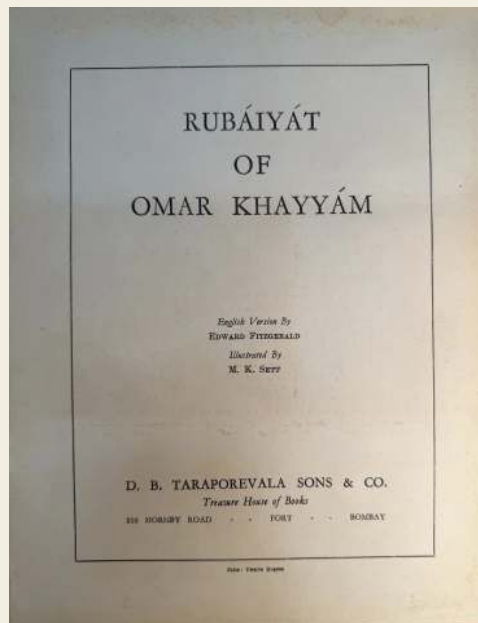
Few works of translated poetry have enjoyed an afterlife as strange, extensive or visually fertile as the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Edward FitzGerald's little pamphlet of 1859 began almost invisibly. Its unsold copies famously migrated to the penny box outside Bernard Quaritch's London shop; within a generation the same text had become a cultural phenomenon. It inspired clubs, fine press editions, musical settings, paintings, theatrical works, philosophical argument and an almost inexhaustible succession of illustrated books.

Its appeal lies partly in its doubleness. The poem can be read as an invitation to earthly pleasure—a loaf, a cup, a companion and the wilderness—but also as a meditation on time, contingency and the limits of knowledge. Wine may be wine, mystical illumination or the intoxicating present. The beloved may be human, divine or the imaginative faculty itself. The potter's clay remembers vanished kings; the turning heavens remain indifferent; the moving finger cannot be recalled. FitzGerald's sequence made these images into one of the great portable philosophies of modern life.

The result was not simply a Persian classic transmitted into English. It was a new, composite work created across languages, manuscripts and empires. That hybridity made the poem especially productive in India, where Persian literary culture, English education, indigenous book arts and new print technologies met with unusual intensity. M. K. Sett's portfolio belongs to this history—but it does more than illustrate it. It turns the *Rubáiyát* into a suite of independent graphic revelations, poised between poem, print, drawing and private cosmology.

OMAR KHAYYÁM

ASTRONOMER · MATHEMATICIAN · POET



Ghiyāth al-Dīn Abū al-Fatḥ Umar ibn Ibrāhīm al-Khayyām was born at Nishapur in 1048 and died there in 1131. In his lifetime his strongest claim to distinction lay not in lyric poetry but in mathematics and astronomy. His treatise on algebra offered a sophisticated classification of cubic equations and geometric methods for their solution. Under the Seljuq ruler Malik-Shah, he participated in the astronomical work associated with reform of the calendar, traditionally linked with the Jalālī era.

The poetic Khayyám is harder to secure. Hundreds of quatrains have gathered around his name, while the historical attribution of individual verses remains contested. This uncertainty is not a defect in the Rubáiyát tradition; it is part of its character. The “Omar” encountered by later readers is at once a historical scholar, a legendary sceptic, a philosophical mask and the imagined speaker of a dispersed body of verse.

The Persian *rubáiy* is a compact quatrain, often rhyming aaba. Its brevity encourages compression and reversal: a garden opens onto extinction; a drinking cup becomes clay; a moment of delight exposes the cruelty of time. Sett understood this visual potential. His plates do not narrate a continuous story. Like quatrains, they are self-contained chambers of thought—intense, emblematic and capable of being rearranged in the mind.



EDWARD FITZGERALD AND THE ENGLISH RUBÁIYÁT

TRANSLATION AS RE-CREATION

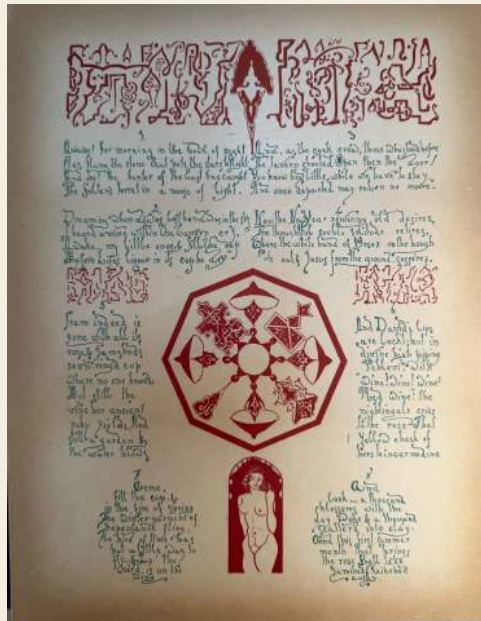
FitzGerald did not approach translation as an exercise in literal equivalence. Working from Persian materials supplied by his friend Edward Byles Cowell—most importantly a Bodleian manuscript and a transcript of a manuscript in Calcutta—he selected, combined and reordered quatrains, forging them into an English sequence with a persuasive emotional arc. The first edition of 1859 contained seventy-five quatrains; later versions revised the language and expanded the sequence.

His famous method was transformative. Images from separate Persian quatrains could be brought together; repetitions were shaped into motifs; the voice was given the melancholy music of Victorian English. Modern scholarship has therefore treated FitzGerald's poem as both translation and original creation: a “transfusion” in which Persian fragments were made to live through the rhythms, doubts and sensibility of another writer.

That freedom helps explain the work's immense visual afterlife. Illustrators were not constrained to record a stable narrative or an authoritative sequence of scenes. They could interpret moods—awakening, desire, fatalism, rebellion, intoxication—or construct an entire symbolic vocabulary around the poem. Sett's response is among the most radical because he treats FitzGerald's calligraphic text as part of the image. Word, figure and ornament occupy one psychic field. The poetry is not captioned by the illustration; it is absorbed into it.

INDIA INSIDE FITZGERALD'S POEM

A CALCUTTA MANUSCRIPT IN A GLOBAL CLASSIC



The genealogy of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* already passes through India. Cowell, who taught in Calcutta, located a Persian manuscript in the library of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and sent FitzGerald a transcript. Alongside the Bodleian manuscript, this Calcutta witness contributed to the textual field from which the English poem emerged.

This fact complicates any simple east-to-west story. The poem's English formation belonged to the scholarly and imperial networks joining Britain and India; its later Indian reception returned a transformed Persian text to a region where Persian had long functioned as a language of court, administration, scholarship and refined literary culture. India was thus neither a belated consumer nor merely a picturesque setting. It was embedded in the material history of the translation and became a major arena of its reinvention.

By the early twentieth century, the *Rubáiyát* could be encountered in Indian classrooms, commercial presses, artists' studios and multilingual literary circles. It offered Indian artists an unusual triangulation: a Persianate inheritance, an internationally famous English poem, and a flexible field for modern image-making. In Sett's hands, that triangle becomes more complex still, because Parsi identity brought an ancestral relationship to Iran into the cosmopolitan life of Bombay.



THE RUBÁIYÁT IN INDIA

A TEXT THAT CROSSED COMMUNITIES

The extraordinary popularity of the Rubáiyát in India cannot be reduced to colonial education. FitzGerald's English certainly circulated through schools and the book trade, but the poem also entered landscapes already formed by Persianate lyric, Sufi metaphor, Urdu poetry and vernacular experiments with the quatrain. Its wine, tavern, garden and beloved were recognizable yet unstable signs. Readers could approach them as sensual, mystical, philosophical, agnostic or theatrical.

Publishers understood the Rubáiyát as an ideal illustrated gift book. Indian editions ranged from inexpensive popular printings to ambitious artist-led projects. Bombay, Calcutta, Allahabad, Madras and other centres supplied distinct cultural ecologies: commercial lithography, nationalist art, Parsi patronage, modern advertising, elite collecting and experiments in typography. The poem's brevity allowed it to migrate between these worlds.

The most important Indian engagements did not merely add local colour to an English classic. They tested what "Indian illustration" might mean in a modern, international book. Abanindranath Tagore drew upon a subtle, lyrical, Mughal-inflected pictorial language. M. V. Dhurandhar brought academic draughtsmanship and a richly observed decorative imagination. Sett created an altogether more private, angular and transgressive symbolic theatre. Taken together, these editions form an overlooked chapter in both Rubáiyát collecting and the history of Indian modernism.



INDIAN-LANGUAGE AFTERLIVES

TRANSLATION, ADAPTATION, RE-CREATION

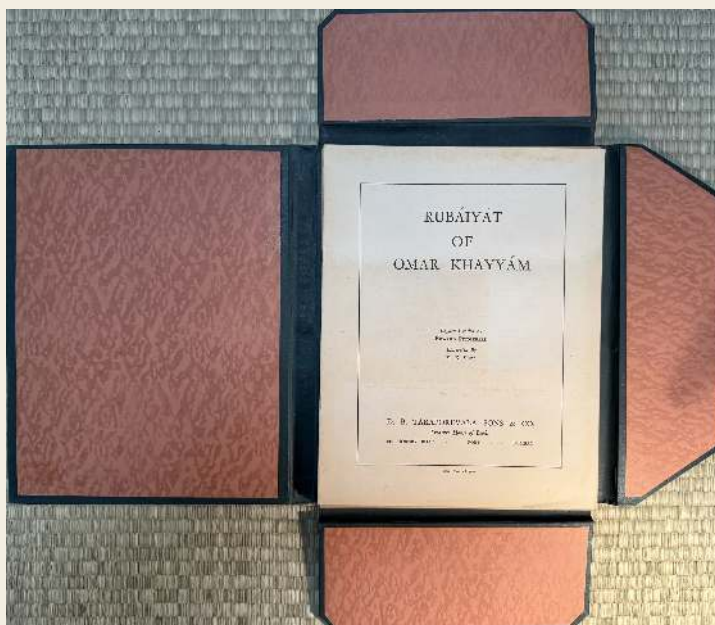
The Rubáiyát travelled through India in many languages and by many routes. Bengali readers encountered versions associated with Satyendranath Dutta, Kanti Chandra Ghosh, Muhammad Shahidullah, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Hemendra Kumar Roy and, later, Shakti Chattopadhyay. Telugu literary culture produced notable engagements, including Duvvuri Ramireddi and the multilingual scholarship of Adibhatla Narayana Das, who worked across Persian, Sanskrit and Telugu. Urdu, Hindi and other Indian languages generated further translations, selections and poetic responses.

Perhaps the most culturally resonant Hindi afterlife lies not in a literal translation but in Harivansh Rai Bachchan's *Madhushala* (1935). Its tavern, cup, wine and cup-bearer are mobilized into a new philosophical and social poem whose public recitation became legendary. Bachchan's work demonstrates how thoroughly the Omani repertoire could be Indianized: inherited motifs became vehicles for modern Hindi poetics, humanism and a challenge to sectarian boundaries.

These translations and transformations matter for Sett because they show the Rubáiyát as a living Indian modern text, not a foreign classic decorated in Bombay. The portfolio emerged from a culture in which Persian inheritance, FitzGerald's English and vernacular creativity were already intertwined. Sett chose to retain FitzGerald, but his visual translation is emphatically Indian—cosmopolitan, Parsi, urban and self-consciously modern.

A BOMBAY BOOK-OBJECT

D. B. TARAPOREVALA SONS & CO.



Bombay was the right city for this object. A port of capital, migration and print, it sustained Parsi entrepreneurship, English-language publishing, theatre, photography, academic art and networks extending across the Indian Ocean and the British Empire. D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co. became associated with ambitious illustrated books, art publications and works designed for a cosmopolitan Indian readership.

The present Rubáiyát rejects the ordinary codex. Its contents are protected by a dark-green cloth four-flap portfolio, the title blocked in gilt. Within lie the introductory booklet and two visually distinct suites: sixteen sheets printed in red and green on substantial stock and fifteen full-page black-and-white symbolic plates. The ensemble asks to be opened, unfolded, sorted and contemplated.

This is more than packaging. The portfolio brings the work close to a collector's suite of prints or an artist's dossier. Each sheet can be viewed independently, yet the enclosure restores the group to a single work. Its survival therefore depends upon an act of custodianship: sheets must remain together, flaps must continue to perform their protective purpose, and the modest booklet must not be separated from the spectacular images it explains.



MEERA BEN KAVAS SETT

AN UNCLASSIFIABLE INDIAN ARTIST

Mera Ben Kavass Sett—usually identified in print as M. K. Sett—was born into a Parsi family in Bombay in 1888. He travelled to Britain and trained for the law, but his enduring historical interest lies in a fiercely individual body of visual and literary work. His *Rubáiyát* was conceived in the years before the First World War and first reached print in Cambridge in 1914, when its strange intensity already set it apart from conventional gift-book illustration.

Sett was not easily absorbed into the institutions or stylistic genealogies through which twentieth-century Indian art has usually been narrated. He was neither simply an academic realist nor a Bengal School revivalist. His line could be decorative and grotesque, erotic and philosophical, comic and hieratic. Figures mutate into signs; eyes, masks, birds and vegetal tendrils form psychological architectures. The page becomes a stage on which desire, vanity, mortality and cosmic indifference perform together.

The portfolio under consideration is a mature recasting of that lifelong project. Sett's introductory reference to two global wars gives the work a retrospective gravity. A meditation first formed before 1914 was revisited after civilizations had twice enacted industrial destruction. The *Rubáiyát*'s insistence on transience, pleasure and the irreversible stroke of time could scarcely have been more apt.

A PARSI IMAGINATION

PERSIA REMEMBERED FROM BOMBAY

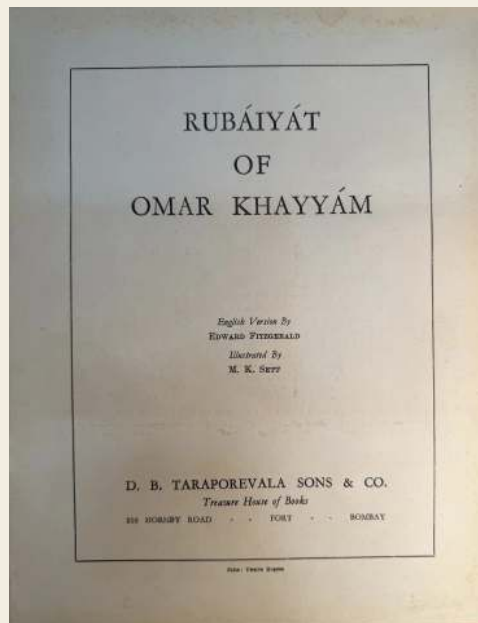
Sett's Parsi background should be approached as historical context rather than a key that mechanically explains every symbol. Yet it adds an important resonance. Bombay's Parsis, descendants of Zoroastrian communities from Iran, became central to the city's commercial, philanthropic and cultural life. Their modernity was outward-looking and urban, while memory of Persia remained embedded in communal history.

For a Parsi artist to illustrate Omar Khayyám was therefore not simply for an Indian to picture a Persian poet translated by an Englishman. It was an encounter across an ancestral geography, colonial education and Bombay cosmopolitanism. Sett's images are not antiquarian reconstructions of medieval Persia. They are products of a modern subject who could inhabit several cultural inheritances without resolving them into a single stable style.

Fire, light, celestial bodies, garden forms and ritualized vessels inevitably acquire additional suggestiveness in this context, although they should not be reduced to doctrinal Zoroastrian emblems. Sett's visual language thrives on multiplicity. The same cup can belong to Omar's tavern, to Art Nouveau decadence, to an artist's still life and to a meditation on matter. The same sun may be astronomical, mystical and theatrical at once.

THE MAKING OF SETT'S RUBÁIYÁT

FROM CALLIGRAPHIC MANUSCRIPT TO PRINT



Sett conceived illustration and lettering together. The earlier form of his project was photolithographed from an artist's manuscript, preserving the pressure and eccentricity of a hand-drawn page. That origin remains essential to understanding the portfolio. Even where modern reproduction technologies intervene, the work insists upon the authority of the artist's line.

The sheets do not behave like pages designed by a compositor and subsequently embellished. FitzGerald's verse bends around bodies, enters frames, changes scale and becomes ornament. The artist's hand creates a total environment in which reading and looking cannot be cleanly separated. One must negotiate the page, following the poem through pictorial incident.

This quality distinguishes the portfolio from deluxe editions whose illustrations, however beautiful, remain autonomous plates facing conventionally printed text. Sett's method is closer to illumination, poster design, private notation and the artist's book. It also anticipates later modernist experiments in which typography becomes image. The result is laborious, personal and resistant to standardization—precisely the qualities that make this Bombay issue such an arresting book-object.



THE PORTFOLIO AS PERFORMANCE

A BOOK THAT MUST BE OPENED

A bound book fixes sequence and pace. Sett's four-flap portfolio introduces ceremony and freedom. The enclosure opens in stages, revealing a nested body of paper; the booklet establishes an interpretive threshold; the sheets can then be lifted one by one. Handling becomes performance.

The format also intensifies the quatrain's autonomy. A rub■■■■ is compact enough to hold a world; a loose sheet grants that world temporary completeness. The viewer may dwell on one design, compare motifs across the suite, or juxtapose colour and monochrome. Such freedom is intellectually appropriate to a poem whose unity was itself constructed from independent verses.

Yet the format carries danger. Loose sheets invite display and dispersal. A striking plate may be framed without its companions; a booklet may be discarded as secondary; an enclosure may split at a hinge and be replaced. The very structure that gives this Rubáiyát its theatrical power makes complete copies vulnerable. In the present example, the survival of portfolio, flaps, booklet and both suites is therefore part of the work's meaning as well as its bibliographical value.

CALLIGRAPHY AS IMAGE

THE POEM ENTERS THE DESIGN



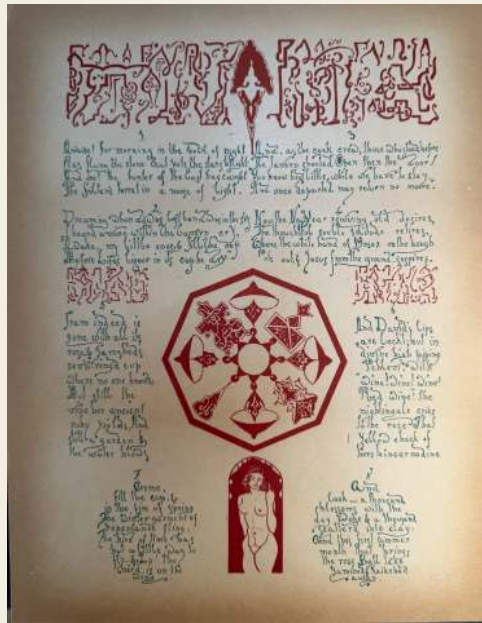
Sett's handwriting refuses the neutrality of type. Letters enlarge, compress and turn; lines of verse participate in the architecture of the sheet. The text is legible, but reading becomes embodied: the eye moves across curves, interruptions and ornamental pressure.

This approach recalls manuscript traditions without imitating a single historical script. It also belongs to the world of the poster, the illustrated periodical and Art Nouveau, where lettering could carry mood as strongly as figures. Sett's calligraphy is a form of interpretation. Its cadence gives FitzGerald's poem another voice—less polished than movable type, more immediate and psychologically charged.

In the colour sheet reproduced here, red and green do not merely decorate black text. They divide, bind and animate the field. The page acquires the presence of a broadside or independent print. It is this fusion of verbal and visual invention that makes the portfolio difficult to categorize and particularly desirable: one is collecting not just an illustrated poem, but a sustained act of graphic authorship.

THE RED-AND-GREEN SHEETS

SIXTEEN CALLIGRAPHIC COMPOSITIONS



The sixteen red-and-green sheets form the chromatic heart of the portfolio. Printed on heavy stock, they carry FitzGerald's poetry in Sett's calligraphic hand amid an extraordinary repertoire of bodies, tendrils, eyes, birds, frames and symbolic incidents.

The restricted palette is one of the suite's strengths. Red can suggest wine, blood, desire, flesh, danger or decorative emphasis; green invokes garden, renewal, Islamicate ornament, peacock colour and the dark cloth of the enclosure. Their interaction produces a visual intensity quite unlike four-colour commercial illustration. Limitation becomes style.

Because each sheet combines text and image, none is merely a plate in the conventional sense. The designs must be read at close range, and small details reward repeated examination. Their large format gives the line room to breathe while retaining the intimacy of handwriting. Complete survival of all sixteen sheets is fundamental to the copy's integrity.



THE BLACK-AND-WHITE PLATES

FIFTEEN SYMBOLIC IMAGES

The fifteen monochrome plates occupy another register. Freed from the immediate presence of coloured calligraphy, Sett's line becomes starker and more enigmatic. Black and white intensify silhouette, contour and psychological contrast; they invite comparison with fin-de-siècle graphic art while retaining an unmistakably personal iconography.

These images do not simply illustrate fifteen identifiable moments in FitzGerald. They extend the poem into a private symbolic universe. Human forms coexist with masks, animals, plants and abstract devices. Scale is unstable. Decorative borders can become cages; bodies merge with ornament; comedy shades into unease.

The monochrome suite gives the portfolio depth. Without it, the work might be understood primarily as an experiment in calligraphic colour printing. With it, one sees the range of Sett's project: text-image synthesis on the one hand, autonomous symbolic print on the other. Their conjunction within the same enclosure is one reason the complete portfolio is so much more significant than a scattered group of attractive sheets.



AN ART OF MASKS AND METAMORPHOSIS

SETT'S PRIVATE THEATRE

Masks recur in Sett's imaginative world because they condense several of the Rubáiyát's concerns. The social self is temporary; beauty conceals decay; piety may disguise appetite; the speaker tries on scepticism, melancholy and revelry. A mask can be theatrical, ritual, comic or terrifying without settling into one meaning.

Metamorphosis is equally central. Plant, animal, body and ornament flow into one another. This instability visualizes the poem's material philosophy: kings return as clay; the cup speaks; the garden flourishes from vanished lives. Boundaries between animate and inanimate are provisional.

Sett's eccentricity should not be sanitized. The designs are genuinely strange—sometimes alluring, sometimes grotesque, often “freakish” in the productive historical sense of resisting accepted categories. Their queerness of form is precisely what differentiates the portfolio from the countless decorous Rubáiyáts produced for the gift market. It is a rarity of imagination before it is a rarity of survival.



WINE, GARDEN, MOON AND MORTALITY

THE GREAT OMARIAN EMBLEMS

The enduring visual power of the Rubáiyát rests upon a small constellation of emblems. Wine promises pleasure and rebellion, but also annihilation of the calculating self. The garden offers spring, companionship and sensuous abundance while reminding us that blossom falls. The moon returns after every human witness has disappeared. Clay preserves the anonymous matter of emperors and lovers.

Sett does not assign these emblems fixed meanings. He makes them interact. The cup can be an eye, a vessel, a stage or a wound; the vine can ornament the page or bind a figure; celestial forms can illuminate and oppress. This refusal of simple allegory is faithful to the poem's ambiguity.

The visual world of the portfolio is therefore not an exotic Persia assembled from costumes and architecture. It is an inward landscape of appetite, anxiety and time. Its theatricality allows Sett to move between humor and dread, qualities often separated in more reverential illustrations of the Rubáiyát.



THE EROTIC AND THE METAPHYSICAL

DESIRE AS A MODE OF KNOWLEDGE

FitzGerald's poem repeatedly places bodily pleasure against abstract promises. Better the present cup and companion than an uncertain paradise; better the rose now than doctrine about eternity. Sett responds with a graphic language in which erotic energy is not an optional embellishment but a method of thought.

Bodies bend into lettering and decoration. Looking itself becomes charged. Yet the erotic is rarely serene: it is shadowed by masks, distortion and the certainty that the moment will pass. Desire proves life's intensity and its brevity at the same time.

This combination helps explain why Sett's work feels modern. It refuses the tidy division between sacred and profane, intellect and appetite, East and West. The metaphysical argument occurs through bodies, surfaces and gestures. His *Rubáiyát* is not an illustrated sermon on *carpe diem*; it is a visual experiment in how pleasure, fear and knowledge inhabit the same moment.

BEARDSLEY—AND BEYOND BEARDSLEY

INFLUENCE, AFFINITY, DIFFERENCE

Sett's black-and-white drawings have often been compared with Aubrey Beardsley, the great graphic artist of British Aestheticism and decadence. The comparison is understandable: both exploit elastic line, silhouette, erotic suggestion, masks and a cultivated tension between beauty and grotesquerie.

But influence should not become dismissal. Sett protested that his encounter with Beardsley came late, and the differences are as important as the affinities. His colour calligraphy, Indian and Persianate decorative resources, Parsi cultural position and sustained engagement with the Rubáiyát create a visual system that cannot be reduced to provincial imitation. Cosmopolitan artists do not cease to be original because their work participates in international style.

Indeed, Sett's importance lies in the way he metabolized disparate languages into something difficult to name. Art Nouveau curvature, manuscript-like integration of word and image, Bombay print culture and private symbolism meet without losing their friction. The portfolio's strangeness is produced by that collision.



INDIAN MODERNISM BEFORE THE CANON

WHY SETT DESERVES RECOVERY

Histories of Indian modern art have understandably concentrated on institutions and movements with large surviving archives: the Bengal School, Bombay's art schools, Santiniketan, the Progressive Artists' Group. Artist-books and commercial illustrated editions often fell between categories, especially when their makers were eccentric or institutionally peripheral.

Sett's *Rubáiyát* asks us to enlarge that canon. It demonstrates that Indian modernism could be graphic, literary, reproducible and intimate; that it could emerge through a Persian poem remade in English; that Bombay's Parsi cosmopolitanism generated forms distinct from both academic realism and revivalist nationalism.

The portfolio also complicates the hierarchy between "fine art" and illustration. These are not subordinate pictures explaining a prior text. They constitute a coherent artistic project, distributed through sheets whose total design is inseparable from their meaning. In the international history of the artist's book, Sett deserves far more attention than he has received.



TAGORE, DHURANDHAR AND SETT

THREE INDIAN RUBÁIYÁTS

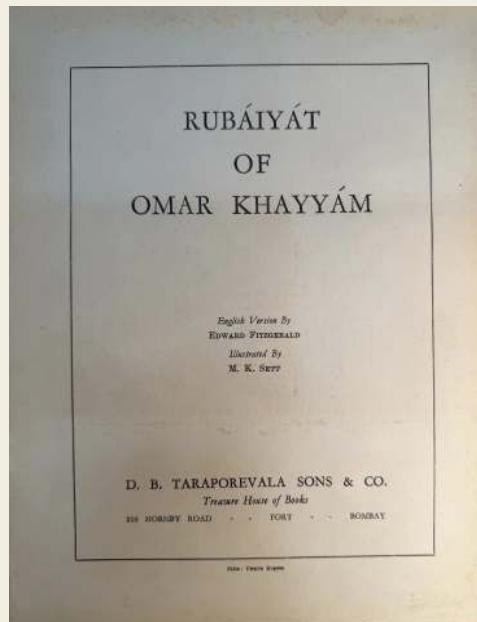
A productive way to understand Sett is beside two other major Indian interpreters of the Rubáiyát: Abanindranath Tagore and M. V. Dhurandhar. Modern scholarship and the DAG discussion of the “three Indian illustrators” have brought this constellation into view.

Abanindranath’s lyrical watercolours translate the poem through atmosphere, suggestion and a modern recovery of Mughal-inflected pictorial refinement. Dhurandhar’s compositions display formidable draughtsmanship, narrative clarity and decorative richness, reflecting the academic and commercial worlds of Bombay. Sett is the outlier: calligraphic, symbolist, erotic, psychologically unstable.

These differences are not a ranking but evidence of the poem’s extraordinary adaptability. Each artist made the Rubáiyát answer a different question about Indian modernity. Sett’s answer is perhaps the rarest in temperament—a private vision reproduced as a public portfolio, simultaneously literary artifact and suite of works on paper.

DATE AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL IDENTITY

BOMBAY · CIRCA 1946



The portfolio is undated. Its internal evidence, however, places it after the Second World War: Sett's introduction looks back upon "two global wars." The publisher's imprint, D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., and the subsequent change in the firm's corporate style support a date around 1946.

It should be described positively and accurately as the scarce Bombay portfolio issue, circa 1946. That language recognizes the object on its own terms. The earlier Cambridge manifestation of Sett's project, privately published through Galloway & Porter in 1914 in a stated limitation of 250 copies, was a differently constructed book. The Bombay portfolio is not merely that object repeated. It reorganizes the work as loose sheets, introduces the booklet and establishes a new encounter between colour calligraphy, monochrome plates and four-flap enclosure.

Bibliographical studies have associated this Sett project with Coumans 104 and Paas 4220. Any limitation of 250 copies belongs to the 1914 Cambridge publication and should not be transferred to this undated Bombay portfolio unless an independent limitation statement is physically present.



THE UNDOCUMENTED SCARCITY

RARE BY STRUCTURE, RARER BY COMPLETENESS

Scarcity is sometimes obvious because an edition was numbered. Here it is more elusive—and in practical terms more compelling. No dependable print-run has been established for the Bombay portfolio, institutional descriptions are inconsistent, and market appearances are infrequent. Its rarity is therefore under-documented rather than imaginary.

The format predicts loss. Thirty-one loose sheets invite separation; visually powerful plates are natural candidates for framing; a twelve-page booklet can be overlooked; four cloth flaps endure repeated flexing. Even when the portfolio survives, completeness may not. Copies described casually as “plates” can conceal missing components or confusion about collation.

A complete example in its original enclosure is thus a materially exceptional survival. Its desirability rests not on a borrowed limitation statement but on the conjunction of documented completeness, outstanding visual character, Indian art-historical significance and a market in which replacement is uncertain. For a serious collection of the Rubáiyát, Indian illustrated books, Parsi culture or Bombay print, this is precisely the kind of object whose importance exceeds its present bibliographical fame.

COMPLETE · PRISTINE · IN THE ORIGINAL FOUR-FLAP PORTFOLIO



The photographs reproduced in this monograph show the closed gilt portfolio, the enclosure opened to reveal its architecture, the title sheet and a representative red-and-green calligraphic design. Together they demonstrate not merely condition but objecthood: this is a portfolio to be opened and handled, not a conventional volume to be judged only by its spine.



CONDITION AND PRESERVATION

A DEALER-STANDARD AND SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENT

Dealer-standard statement. Complete in the original dark-green cloth four-flap portfolio, retaining the twelve-page introductory booklet, all sixteen red-and-green calligraphic sheets and all fifteen full-page black-and-white symbolic plates. A pristine, exceptionally well-preserved copy; the portfolio, flaps, booklet and loose sheets remain fresh and complete, with strong colour and crisp monochrome printing.

Scholarly assessment. The chief condition virtue is structural integrity. Loose-leaf illustrated publications are routinely compromised by dispersal, and the continued association of enclosure, booklet and both suites is fundamental. The four flaps remain an original preservation system and should not be removed or replaced merely to modernize presentation.

Future custody should prioritize stable humidity, darkness and flat support. Sheets should be handled with clean dry hands or appropriate gloves according to conservator advice, never laminated, and never mounted with pressure-sensitive tape. If displayed, facsimiles or short rotations are preferable to prolonged exposure. A custom archival box may be made to house the original portfolio without altering it.



COLLECTOR'S ASSESSMENT

WHY THIS COPY BELONGS IN A SERIOUS COLLECTION

This is one of those books whose market category understates its cultural reach. It is simultaneously a Rubáiyát, a Parsi work, a Bombay publication, an artist's portfolio, a calligraphic experiment and an important survival of Indian Symbolism. Few objects connect Persia, India and Britain with comparable visual force.

For the Rubáiyát collector, it offers a genuinely distinctive interpretation rather than another decorative variant. For the collector of Indian modernism, it recovers a graphic and literary path too often excluded from painting-centred narratives. For the collector of Parsi heritage, it embodies Bombay cosmopolitanism and an ancestral conversation with Iran. For the bibliophile, its complete portfolio structure provides the fascination of a book that behaves like a print suite.

The present copy occupies the most desirable state in which the object can now be encountered: complete, pristine, and retaining the easily lost booklet, every loose sheet and the original four-flap enclosure. Its rarity is not theatrical sales language. It is the predictable consequence of an undocumented edition built from separable parts—and the improbable survival of all of them together.

CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION AND COLLATION

EOB-0046

OMAR KHAYYĀM. *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. English version by Edward FitzGerald. Illustrated and calligraphed by Mera Ben Kavas Sett (M. K. Sett). Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co., [circa 1946].

Large loose-leaf portfolio (approximately 292 × 230 mm, subject to confirmation from the object). Original dark-green cloth four-flap publisher's portfolio, title blocked in gilt. Comprising a twelve-page introductory booklet; sixteen loose sheets printed in red and green on heavy stock, including the title sheet; and fifteen loose full-page black-and-white symbolic plates. Thirty-one loose sheets in all, plus booklet. Complete as issued.

An extraordinary Indian interpretation of FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát* by the Bombay Parsi artist M. K. Sett. The calligraphic colour sheets integrate FitzGerald's verse with an intensely personal Symbolist vocabulary of masks, bodies, peacocks, vines and metamorphic ornament; the monochrome suite expands this private theatre in a starker graphic register. The format transforms the book into a portfolio of independent works on paper.

Undated, but Sett's retrospective reference to two global wars establishes post-1945 publication; the publisher's imprint supports circa 1946. A pristine, complete survival in the original enclosure. Exceptionally scarce in this state, loose portfolio productions being inherently vulnerable to dispersal. A major Indian *Rubáiyát* and an under-recognized document of Bombay modernism.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

DAG, “The Three Indian Illustrators of the Rubaiyat” and catalogue page for *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, illustrated by M. K. Sett*.

HathiTrust catalogue record, *Omar Khayyam / illustrated by Mera K. Sett*, Cambridge: Galloway & Porter, 1914.

Martin, William H., and Sandra Mason, *Edward FitzGerald’s Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám: A Famous Poem and Its Influence*.

Martin, William H., and Sandra Mason, *The Art of Omar Khayyam: Illustrating FitzGerald’s Rubaiyat*.

Paas, John Roger, bibliographical work on illustrated editions of FitzGerald’s Rubáiyát (entry associated with 4220).

Potter / Coumans bibliographical tradition, entry associated with Sett’s Rubáiyát (104).

Pirages, Phillip J., dealer catalogue description of the Bombay portfolio: twelve-page booklet, sixteen red-and-green cards and fifteen black-and-white plates.

The Omar Khayyam Rubaiyat bibliographical research site, studies of Mera K. Sett, the 1914 publication and the Bombay portfolio.

Cataloguing note. Dating and collation follow the physical evidence supplied for the present complete copy and the specialist description of the Taraporevala portfolio. The circa-1946 date is reasoned rather than printed in the work. The limitation of 250 copies is not applied to this Bombay portfolio.



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

INDOPHILES · BIBLIOPHILES · ICONOPHILES

An international antiquarian maison devoted to rare books, Indian miniatures, prints and maps through which the intellectual and visual inheritance of the Indian subcontinent may be collected, studied and preserved.



EYEOFTHEBEHOLDER.CH