Opening the treasure chest

The finest Qur’ān manuscripts in the Malay peninsula were created in the northeastern states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Patani, and it was Terengganu that reigned supreme. It is from Terengganu that we find the most brilliant illuminated Qur’āns in the whole of Southeast Asia, exuding a jewel-like radiance, with truly virtuosic decorative details, painted in rich hues and adorned with copious amounts of gold, executed with precision and finesse (1). The quality of the workmanship is unparalleled throughout the archipelago, and Terengganu Qur’āns were highly sought-after in other Malay kingdoms. To this day, Qur’ān manuscripts from Terengganu can be found in royal collections in Palembang in Sumatra, Pontianak in West Kalimantan, and as far away as Bima on the island of Sumbawa.

Surprisingly, these glorious artworks have remained hidden for centuries, being totally ignored in foreign writings on the Malay world and surveys of Malay arts. From the very earliest scholarly publications, starting with William Marsden’s *History of Sumatra* first published in 1783, through to the writings of the manuscript experts Richard Winstedt and R.J. Wilkinson in the early 20th century, and numerous specialist articles in the *Journal of the Malayana Research of the Royal Asiatic Society* and its predecessors, not one commented on, let alone discusses, illuminated Malay Qur’ān manuscripts. Nor is manuscript illumination adduced in a comparative sense in the studies of Malay silverware by Henry Ling Roth, or of Malay patterns by Ivor Evans. Even when the focus is on the East Coast—as in Hugh Clifford’s first-hand account of the weaving, silver and woodwork industries in Terengganu in 1895, and *Toman Inten: A Royal Malay Pleasure Ground* (1972), Muhin Shippard’s detailed and nuanced account of Malay arts and pastimes with a special focus on Kelantan, Patani and Terengganu—the art of the book is wholly neglected.

Why should this be? Perhaps at the very core is the lack of interest in and even antipathy to Islam evident in the writings of many early British scholars of the Malay world, and their commensurate preference for the artistic legacy of the pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist, past, manifested in Indic epics and legends, and the great stone temples of Java. The important collections of Malay manuscripts formed by British scholar-administrators during their various postings in Java, Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, and now held in British libraries, contain very few Islamic works, compared to the dozens of literary, historical and legal texts. Even more glaring is the absence of Qur’ān manuscripts: not a single Malay Qur’ān is found in the voluminous manuscript collections of Thomas Stamford Raffles, William Farquhar, Colin Mackenzie, William Maxwell or R.J. Wilkinson.

It is easy to imagine how disinterest on the one hand was matched by deliberate concealment on the other. As the sacred text of Islam, with ritual prescriptions for its handling, it is quite understandable that a precious Qur’ān manuscript would have been well guarded and kept shielded from the gaze of kafir foreigners (though this would not have applied to the Irish-born Tan Seri Dato’ Haji Mubin Sleppard, who converted to Islam and lived out his life amongst Malays). Thus until very recently illuminated Malay Qur’ān manuscripts were a well-kept secret, which may have escaped scrutiny as much by design as by accident.

The turning point appears to have come in the early 1980s when, coinciding with an economic boom in Southeast Asia, national and regional institutions in Malaysia began to build up their manuscript collections. The two key players in the field were initially the Islamic Centre of the Religious Affairs department in the Prime Minister’s Office (JAKIM) in the early 1980s and, from its founding in 1985 onwards, the Malay Manuscripts Centre of the National Library of Malaysia. Nonetheless it is remarkable to note, even today, the limited distribution of Malay Qur’āns. Apart from those held in scattered royal collections in Indonesia, until recently, no fine Qur’ān manuscripts from the Malay peninsula were held in any major museums or libraries outside Malaysia.

Probably the first person to position manuscript illumination on an equal footing with other Malay art forms was the Malay artist and intellectual Syed Ahmad Jamal. While illuminated manuscripts did not feature in *Rupa dan Jiwa* (Form and Soul), his 1979 exhibition and catalogue of Malay arts, in the glossy second edition of the book published in 1992 he reproduced images of a breathtakingly beautiful illuminated Islamic manuscript from Malaysia: a royal Qur’ān from Terengganu, at the time held by the Islamic Centre. And what a magnificent Qur’ān it was! Exceptionally rich in illumination and calligraphy, it is a superb example of the genre. Since that time there have been a number of other studies and publications of Malay Qur’ān manuscripts (some of which are listed in the references at the end of this article), notably by the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM), current custodian of the JAKIM collection, which since its founding in 1998 has always had a fine selection of illuminated Malay Qur’āns on permanent display.
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In the early boom in institutions in the 1980s and, notably the Islamic Institute in the Malay Manuk, Ultras. None the less those held in the peninsula were outside the world of illuminated script illumination. The art forms had Jamal. Rupa dan catalogue of the book in a breathy script from the time of a magnificent illumination and calligraphy. Since that time, and publishers who are e.g., notably f) current issues: its foundation illuminated...
Illuminated Terengganu Qur’ans

The Qur’an published by Syed Ahmad Jamal, now held in the Iamm, is a prime example of the extraordinary school of royal illuminated Terengganu Qur’ans, but it is not the only one. So far, around five other large Terengganu Qur’ans of this calibre are known, all of which must have been produced for royal patrons. In addition to the Iamm manuscript there is a fine Qur’an in the Muzium Negara (1), with others in the Melaka Qur’an Museum, the Terengganu State Museum, and in a private collection in Terengganu (2).

The greatest focus for artistry in these Qur’ans is the double decorated frames that adorn two facing pages, for the double-page spread had a central artistic unity in all Islamic book cultures. In royal illuminated Terengganu Qur’ans we normally find two or three pairs of double decorated frames. The initial pair of frames adorns the first two pages of the Qur’an, with the Surat al-Fatiha on the right-hand page and the opening verses of the Surat al-Baqarah on the left-hand page (1). Illuminated frames at the end of the book enclose the final surahs (2); and if there are frames in the middle, these will invariably mark the start of the 17th surah, al-Isra’ (3).

The double frames in Terengganu Qur’ans are composed according to a conventional pattern. The text is set in two small rectangular (or occasionally oval) panels on each of two facing pages. Around the text is a series of frames filled with abundant flowing floral and foliate motifs, usually picked out in gold but sometimes in yellow, against a ground of rich mineral hues in deep red, dark blue, yellow, black or green. Above and below the text are panels which give the title of the surah, whether it was revealed in Mecca or Medinah, and the number of verses, all in calligraphy so dashing and stylised that it is barely distinguishable from the surrounding vegetal ornamentation (4, 5). The text frames are then surrounded by a series of continuous undulating arches on the three outer sides. The whole double-page spread also has a second, outer frame which hugs the edges of the pages, usually rounded at the corners. Projecting inwards from this outer frame, and also outwards from the inner arched frame around the text, are a series of small leaf-like tendrils or finials, which may almost meet in the middle, with the overall effect of a dazzling golden mesh or shower.

Apart from these two or three sets of double illuminated frames, all the other pages of the Qur’an, by convention, are left essentially unadorned (6). This is a defining feature of the Malay aesthetic, which greatly values qualities of understatement, restraint and balance; in fact the unadorned pages serve to heighten the astonishing impact of turning a leaf of the book and chance upon...
panels on a series of foliate motives in yellow, red, dark brown and green. The text area is comprised of 27 verses, and it is barely visible within the frame, by a series of borders and finials.

8 Pages from a small Terengganu Qur'an, with an illuminated marginal ornament marking the start of the 29th juz' at Surat al-Mulk. Private collection, London.
One of the few fully illuminated openings, shimmering with gold. In this sense Malay Qur'an manuscripts are in marked contrast with some of the more elaborate contemporaneous Ottoman or Indian Qur’ans, where every single page may be lavishly illuminated with gold and colours.

While it is true to say that the interior pages of a Malay Qur’an are relatively unadorned, that does not mean that they are completely devoid of decoration. In fact, many pages will bear small marginal ornaments with a fundamentally practical function: each ornament is inscribed with a label indicating a certain division of the Qur’anic text, in order to help the reader find his place in the Holy Book. Qur’an manuscripts do not have page numbers and, unlike modern printed Qur’ans, nor were the surahs (chapters) or ayahs (verses) numbered. Instead, the Qur’an is traditionally divided into thirty equal parts or juz’, which helps to structure the reading or recitation of the complete text in one month. Each juz’ could furthermore be divided into halves (nisf), quarters (rub’), or eighths (thum), and in some Qur’ans manuscripts we find all these sub-divisions marked. In Malay Qur’ans we also often find the marginal inscription makaat’, indicating a portion of the text selected for recitation. In Qur’ans from other parts of the Islamic world, including Southeast Asia, it is also common to find inscribed in the margin sida’, marking places for prostrations, and the Arabic letter ‘aay, indicating places where the reader should bow (ruk’ah), but these are rarely found in Terengganu Qur’ans.

These ornaments which herald all the divisions of the Qur’anic text are of more than marginal interest: some are miniature masterpieces, and among the most exquisite Malay artworks on paper ever produced. In Terengganu Qur’ans, all marginal ornaments start from the same basic structure of two concentric double-ruled circles. The centre of the circle is inscribed with the name of the division—whether al-juz’, or nisf, or makaat’—while the border formed by the two concentric circles is usually compartmentalised into segments, often by means of a small oval placed at the four cardinal points. The eye is then drawn upwards and downwards by decorative floral and foliate motifs and scrolls, which always end with a quintessentially Terengganu feature: emanating from a small almond-shaped bead is a tendril, drawn freehand in black ink, starting with a “squiggle” and ending in a thinly tapered line. Deceptively simple, extraordinary artistry must have been needed to produce so faultlessly this tapered Terengganu tendril, which sets off the glittering body of the ornament perfectly by trailing away delicately, almost as if into thin air (7).

The remarkable skill of Terengganu illuminators was matched by that of the calligraphers. When the famous Malay writer Munshi Abdullah visited Terengganu in 1837, he noted: “Some of them are fine scribes, and write an excellent Arabic hand in Qur’ans and other religious texts though they rarely write in Malay, and Terengganu Qur’ans are highly sought-after in other states” (Sweeney, 2005, p. 110). When Hugh Clifford visited in 1895, he commented on the high levels of Qur’anic literacy in Terengganu, compared to the neighbouring states, which he attributed partly to the personal interest of the long-reigning Sultan Baginda Omar (1839–1876). When the Qur’an began to be printed by Muslim-owned lithographic presses in Singapore in the 1870s, it was often specified that the scribe was from Terengganu.

Apart from the handful of de luxe Qur’an manuscripts specified above, there is a clearly definable “second tier” of Terengganu Qur’ans, of which about ten examples are known. These are also made with great skill, but lack the lavishness of the former group. In size they tend to be slightly compared to our manuscripts than gold, ornamental markers in and with small wards do impress an appearance to a set for copper could be coined on a more commission artisans.

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be slightly smaller, with page sizes of around 32 × 21 cm (compared with around 43 × 28 cm for the most sumptuous manuscripts), and often use yellow pigment rather than gold. The two commonly found types of marginal ornaments are conventionalised hierarchically, with jaz markers in the classic Trengganu style described above, and with smaller nisf markers which are not elongated upwards or downwards (8). While these Qur’ans are still very impressive technically, if one was to search for a criticism, it could be said that some have a rather cool and clinical appearance, almost as if they had been produced to order, to a set formula, albeit executed with considerable skill. It could be conjectured that these Qur’ans were produced on a more commercial basis, whereas the finer ones were commissioned by individual royal patrons known to the artisans.

Sadly, many of the Terengganu Qur’ans have a timebomb ticking away at their very core: the iron gall ink with which the text was written. Over a period of time, the iron components of this acidic ink oxidise and begin to corrode through the paper. It is heartbreaking to find in some manuscripts illuminated frames and ornaments in perfect condition, but the text itself disintegrating and crumbling away (9).

The exquisite craftsmanship, technical expertise, and rich materials of the Terengganu Qur’ans all point towards the palace as a centre of production. It is difficult to know how to interpret the total absence of any references to a class of skilled painters and illuminators in any descriptive accounts of the East Coast. Might illumination have been the domain of women, taking place out of sight in the secluded female quarters of the palace? Another possible explanation is that the illuminators were multi-skilled artisans, who also worked more visibly as woodcarvers or goldsmiths. What does seem to have happened is that by the beginning of the 20th century this artform had died out, soon followed by the demise of the artists, and so too the secrets of their craft. Thus everything we know about how the illuminators worked has to be gleaned from a close study of the manuscripts themselves. There was certainly some use of mechanical implements: the base circles of the marginal ornaments were drawn with a compass, and a semicircle motif commonly found around the outer frames may have been stencilled. In one manuscript in which the decoration has not been coloured in, on the marginal ornament is a faintly discernible dry-ruled vertical line bisecting the circle at the centre; in other words, the scribe scored the paper with a sharpened instrument to help the symmetrical ordering of the floral scrolls above and below the central circle, and to guide the final tapered tendril (10). As an indication of technical mastery, there is never any evidence of preparatory pencil drawings being made; in general the patterns are drawn directly in black ink (11), which was also used to outline areas of definition and to provide extra detail on a bed of gold or colour.
The legacy of Langkasuka

Qur’ān manuscripts from Terengganu are indeed the finest in the Malay world, but it is not possible to study these in a cultural vacuum without also considering Qur’āns from Patani and Kelantan, for the whole region forms a cultural continuum, allowing us to talk of an “East Coast” style. In his study of Malay arts, Muhin Sheppard cast the spotlight on this northeastern corner of the Malay peninsula, site of the ancient kingdom of Langkasuka, which was known to the Chinese in as early as the 6th century AD. Although in the 19th century the kingdom of Patani was finally subjugated by Thai influence, until that time it had been one of the longest-lasting centres of Malay courtly culture, where the performing arts—such as weaving, woodcarving and metalwork—had all flourished. In 1910 the last Raja of Patani was driven into exile in Kelantan, and it is only in Kelantan and Terengganu that the final vestiges of ancient art forms that reached their finest flowering under royal patronage in Patani can still be found.

Illuminated Qur’āns from Patani, mostly dating from the 19th century, form a distinct artistic genre (12). Like those from Terengganu they are written on European laid paper, but are smaller, in quarto format, with page sizes of around 21 × 16 cm. The double decorated frames at the start of the book are often the only major illumination in a manuscript, and generally sit proudly against a background of plain white paper, without the outer illuminated frame found in Terengganu manuscripts. The arches on the three outer sides of the text block are discrete entities, and may include a distinctive “interlocking wave” arch on the outer vertical sides. Another characteristic Patani feature is a repeating “chilli pepper” or small seed-like motif within rectangular frames. Floral and foliate forms are more organic and naturalistic, and less densely repetitive than in Terengganu manuscripts. Gold is less frequently encountered here, and the palette is paler, perhaps deriving from vegetable rather than mineral pigments (although this conjecture has yet to be investigated scientifically). Marginal ornaments are constructed on the same basic foundation of two concentric circles, but the elongated decorative scrolls often end in a definite dot or teardrop, in contrast to the tapered Terengganu tendril (13). More than thirty Patani-style illuminated Qur’āns have been documented, all held in Malaysian collections.

In general Patani Qur’āns do not match the technical heights of Terengganu production, but there is a commensurate payoff, with a clear gain in terms of individuality and creativity. There are a few exquisite Patani-style illuminated Qur’ān manuscripts enhanced with gold, which perhaps were produced through royal patronage, but even in these the calligraphy rarely matches even the more mainstream Terengganu standards, and the overall impression is still of lampong rather than court. This gives us a hint of the probable social context of production of Patani Qur’ān manuscripts, for from at least the 17th or 18th century onwards Patani was renowned as a centre for Islamic learning. Many Patani families had strong links to Mecca, where scholars often spent many years living and studying; the most famous Patani scholar, Syaikh Daud bin Abdullah—whose works are still studied in religious schools today—lived in Mecca for most of his life, until he died in Arabia in around 1847. It appears to have been in Patani that the networks of religious schools known as ponoked were founded, and it was only in the late 19th century that this phenomenon spread southwards to Kelantan and Terengganu. Thus it is highly likely that the large numbers of Patani Qur’āns that survive today (including many undecorated copies) were copied in and around these ponoked by religious students.

The East Coast style: fusing Terengganu and Patani influences

Such a detailed analysis and categorisation of regional artistic styles on the basis of defining precise shapes and forms of motifs of course rings rather hollow in the face of the reality of social life and movement, with a regular stream of students from Terengganu moving to Patani to study in the ponoked, and the finest craftsmen from Patani and Kelantan gravitating to Terengganu to the patronage of the royal court. And so it is that when we can discern in certain manuscripts a melding of the Terengganu tradition of technical excellence with the Patani streak of creativity, we come face to face with what are probably the finest manuscripts of all.

One of the loveliest of all East Coast Qur’ān manuscripts is held in the National Museum (Muzium Negara) in Kuala Lumpur. At first glance, this is a typical luxury Terengganu manuscript, in view of its large page size,
ars to have been schools of Islamic arts in the late 19th century. It is likely that the skillful artists of that time are the same as those who are still active today.

and

Regional art-habits and styles are also reflected in the face of the book. A regular and fine Patani script is often used, with patronage often discern in the script. The script may have been created by theor Patani manuscript specialists who combined the regional styles of the East Coast (Qur'an manuscripts from Terengganu and Patani) with the western style. This combination of styles is evident in the illumination of the Qur'an manuscripts from this region.

13 Marginal juz' markers in the Patani style, all with finials ending in a dot or a bead, from four different Qur'an manuscripts. PNM MSS 1358; IAMM 1998.1.3564; IAMM 1998.1.3523; IAMM 1998.1.3501

14 One of the finest East Coast Qur'ans, mingling Terengganu and Patani influences in the illumination of its initial pages. MN 1881.1973.U1.6
lavish use of gold and a rich dark palette, and the architecture of its double frames, with an outer border and extended finials projecting inwards (14, 16). Yet almost immediately equally noticeable is a hint of softness in the flowing lines, calligraphic panels which do not quite match the peerless Terengganu productions, and foliate finials that end in a teardrop rather than a tapered tendril (15). Within the “ordinary” pages of the manuscript, surah headings are densely illuminated to astonishingly dramatic effect (18), and the marginal ornaments are possibly the finest ever seen (17). This manuscript gives the impression of having been created with technical know-how which can only have come from the court of Terengganu, but by an artist with the individuality and flair of Patani in his blood.

At the other end of the spectrum is a small Qur’an now in the British Library (acquired at auction in London at Christie’s in 1996, this is the only known Qur’an from the Malay peninsula in a Western public collection). The size, cloth binding and end papers of black Thai paper speak of a Patani manuscript produced in a village or panduk context, and the illumination too is at first glance typically Patani, with interlocking wave arches and chilli-pepper motifs, and without outer borders around the edges of the paper. But the exquisite neatness of the illumination suggests an injection of Terengganu rigour and discipline into a Patani product, and despite the absence of gold this is a rarified example of East Coast artistry (19).

A third Qur’an, in the National Library of Malaysia (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia), can be described as essentially Patani in its quirky, lively and highly individual designs; yet the artist was able to draw on the ornamental repertoire of the whole East Coast, mixing and matching motifs with joyous impunity. Thus Terengganu tapered tendrils rub shoulders with Patani beads and droplets, and stylised Terengganu M-W motifs are painted in the paler palette associated with Patani. This Qur’an has a particularly rich array of marginal ornaments marking all the standard divisions of the text; astonishingly, every single ornament is unique (20, 21). This recalls the admiration expressed by foreign observers for Malay silversmiths, who worked without using any set patterns or models, but were able to improvise and create infinite variations on simple themes of scroll borders, floral meander vines and open lotus blossoms.

When Sheppard’s *Taman Indra* was first published in
1972, there was a clear acknowledgement that the heyday of traditional Malay arts had passed. So far, so depressingly familiar: a tale of woe oft-told in many other parts of the world, a reminder that centuries-old traditions could be wiped out within the space of two generations, as much due to the enemy within—a lack of interest, and changing tastes—as to any external threat. It is therefore all the more remarkable, if at the same time inexplicable, that an exceptional Malay art form—illuminated Qur’an manuscripts from the East Coast of the peninsula (22, 23)—should not only somehow have escaped notice for centuries, but that a considerable number of exquisite examples should have survived to the present day.
21 Fourteen marginal ornaments which combine Terengganu and Patani elements. PNM MSS 3237


Selected readings:
- Ahmad Jar, Dewan Bal and Soul, Ko-Baker, Col
- Barkeshli, keshli; co-a sein Zekry
- Dzul Hain, Melayu, Ku
- Farish A. N, Art of Malg
tan, Terengg
- Gallop, An Illuminator peninsula”, (96), pp. 11
- Gallop, An Southeast A Art Gallery,
- Gallop, An
Selected references


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Malay Silverware

THE ART OF THE MALAY QUR'AN • A WORLD BETWEEN THE TRADE WINDS • HORNBILL CARVINGS
IKAT: THE MORIBUND DYER'S ART OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA • MALAY BRASSWARE
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