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The art of the Qur’an in Southeast Asia

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The Islamic world of maritime Southeast Asia encompasses the present-day territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, as well as the southern parts of Thailand and the Philippines and the Cham enclaves of Cambodia and Vietnam. Although hundreds of different ethnic groups and languages are found in this region, it is often referred to broadly as ‘the Malay world’ in recognition of widespread cultural affinities rooted in the shared faith of Islam and the historic use of the Malay language as a lingua franca for purposes of trade, diplomacy and religious propagation.

Little attention has yet been paid to the distinctive, exuberant and culturally self-confident examples of illumination found in Islamic manuscripts from Southeast Asia. The neglect is twofold, from Islamic art historians in general, whose horizons have rarely stretched eastwards past India, and from scholars of and from Southeast Asia itself. In the former case, this is probably largely due to the scarcity of published reproductions of fine illuminated manuscripts from the Malay world and their limited presence in Western collections; the best examples are held in Southeast Asian institutions, and many of these have only been acquired within the last two decades. In the latter case, the study of manuscripts from the Malay world has traditionally been dominated by philologists, who focus on the text rather than its physical vehicle – the manuscript. Scholars have always been more drawn to original compositions in Southeast Asian languages than to theological works in Arabic disseminated in multiple copies throughout the archipelago, and thus manuscripts of the Qur’an, with its enduring and unchanging text, have rarely attracted interest.

Over 200 illuminated Qur’ans or Qur’an fragments from Southeast Asia have been documented to date, most held in public collections in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Netherlands as well as in a few other locations; there are doubtless many more still in private hands or in the libraries of mosques or religious educational establishments. The regional origin of these manuscripts is not evenly spread through the Malay archipelago; their distribution reflects the dominance of a few vibrant centres of manuscript production, each with their own distinctive style of illumination. Prominent centres include Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra; the East Coast states of Patani, Kelantan and Terengganu on the Malay
Peninsula; the Brunei–Southern Philippines zone; and multiple centres in Java. In addition, a few important illuminated Qur’ans have been traced from places as diverse as Penang, Selangor, Riau, Pontianak, Ambon and south Sulawesi.

The provenance of a Qur’an manuscript is most readily revealed in the richly illuminated decorated frames that usually surround the opening pages and other key sections of the text. However, further examination reveals that regional identity is reflected at almost any place in the manuscript where artistic choice can be exercised. This study therefore starts with the smallest possible opportunities for embellishment available to the manuscript artist, the āya markers, and then moves through all the other types of graphic devices used to indicate text divisions in the Qur’an, from sura headings to juz’ markers and other marginal devices, and finally arrives at the ornamental double-page frames which are the greatest glory of illuminated Qur’an manuscripts.

It should be stressed, however, that this is not, and cannot be, a history of Qur’anic illumination in the Malay world. We may assume that the production of Qur’ans in Southeast Asia dates from at least the late thirteenth century, when Pasai, on the northeast tip of Sumatra, became the first of many port-kingsdoms of the archipelago to adopt Islam formally through the conversion of its ruler. However, manuscripts on paper from Islamic Southeast Asia only begin to survive from the sixteenth century onwards, and the vast majority of manuscripts from the Malay world extant today date from the nineteenth century. The only complete illuminated Qur’an yet known from the seventeenth century raises many more questions than it can answer, and relatively few others can be dated to the eighteenth century. The remarks below, therefore, only really serve to paint a picture of the art of the Qur’an in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century.

Āya markers

Verse markers in Southeast Asian Qur’ans are almost invariably round, and are usually perfect circles, which were probably drawn with a stencil. They are either hollow circles outlined in red or black ink, or roundels with coloured interiors. In nearly half of all manuscripts inspected the verse markers are yellow roundels, mostly outlined in black, but sometimes in red; these are strongly associated with Aceh, but are also found elsewhere. Just as common are red circles, particularly in manuscripts from the East Coast and from Java, but red roundels are relatively rare. Although gold is often used in manuscript illumination, sometimes in abundance, relatively few Qur’ans have gold āya markers.
Only a few manuscripts have more elaborate verse markers. In a unique nineteenth-century Qur’an from Penang, the āya markers are little red flower-shaped eight-petalled circles with a red cross through the middle, while in two exceptionally fine eighteenth-century Qur’ans from the royal library of Banten in west Java, the yellow or gold roundels are rendered floral by petal-like dots of alternating red and green ink. In a number of Qur’ans possibly from the Brunei-Philippines zone, including one from Sabah, the floral āya markers have been stamped in black ink and the petals then coloured by hand. But in general, the rosettes and whorls so common in Ottoman, Persian, Indian and Chinese Qur’ans are hardly found in the Malay world. It is also worth noting that in Malay Qur’ans groups of five and ten āya are almost never marked, save in a few manuscripts from the Philippines.

**Sura headings**

In nearly all manuscripts the Qur’anic text is in black ink with the sura headings in red, and even in finely illuminated Qur’ans the headings are usually set in relatively austere, plain rectangular ruled frames. In a few lavish Qur’ans though, particularly from the East Coast, the sura heading may be reserved in white or gold against a background of coloured bands (Fig. 11.1), while uniquely in Philippine Qur’ans we sometimes find
decorated sura headings with palmettes which extend horizontally into the margin.

In about half of all Qur’ans seen, sura headings may be arranged around the final words of the last āya of the preceding sura. The most common layout is for the sura heading to flank the final word(s) of the āya in the middle of the rectangular cartouche. As the Qur’anic text is written in black and the sura heading is in red, this gives a striking red-black-red effect in the cartouche. Alternatively, the final words of the text may instead flank the sura heading, producing a colour scheme of black-red-black text, or the sura heading may simply follow on after the completion of the āya on the same line. This feature is not limited to a particular region but is found throughout the archipelago, having been noted in Qur’ans from Aceh, the East Coast, Java, the southern Philippines and Bone in south Sulawesi.

**Marginal ornaments**

Of the standard Qur’anic marginal ornaments, most common in the Malay world are juz’ markers indicating the division of the text into thirty parts of equal length. Also encountered are further divisions labelled nisf (half), rub’ (quarter) and thumm (eighth), but very often these are not marked consistently throughout the manuscript. It should be noted that in Southeast Asian Qur’ans these fractional indicators invariably indicate parts of a juz’ and not of a hizb (sixtieth part of a Qur’an) as is common in some other Islamic manuscript cultures. Thus although a nisf marker in a Malay Qur’an does in fact indicate a sixtieth part of the Qur’an, the term hizb itself is rarely found. There are considerable regional differences in the form of these text markers. But a striking feature of Southeast Asian Qur’ans is that even in manuscripts where every single juz’ is marked with a graphic device these are hardly ever identical, bearing witness to the Malay artist’s delight in infinite variation on an ornamental theme.

In most Qur’ans from Aceh, text divisions are indicated in the margin with simple inscriptions in red ink, but in some cases the juz’ divisions are written calligraphically in a bold and decorative jāli diwānī-style script in a triangular shape infilled and embellished with dots and carets.³ In some Acehese-style Qur’ans which appear to originate from areas bordering on the Minangkabau sphere of influence, juz’ and other divisions are marked in the margin by a circle or petalled medallion bearing the appropriate label. In all of these manuscripts, in addition to the marginal ornament the first words or first line of the juz’ are usually highlighted in red ink in the text. A jāli diwānī-style script is also used in
Banten manuscripts, producing rectangular-shaped juz’ markers, sometimes in gold ink. Qur’ans more firmly in the Javanese cultural sphere exhibit a very distinctive style of juz’ divisions, with symmetrical, usually semi-circular, cartouches in the centre of the vertical outer text frames of the two facing pages: that on the right-hand page bears the word al-juz’ and that on the left contains the number of the juz’. In addition, the start of a new juz’ is usually highlighted in red ink in the text.

Some of the most exquisite manifestations of artistry in Southeast Asian Qur’ans are the marginal ornaments found in manuscripts from the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula. Juz’ markers in these manuscripts are usually composed of a circle from which elaborate floral and foliate motifs extend vertically upwards and downwards, tapering to a fine point at each end (Fig. 11.1). Throughout the archipelago, in deluxe Qur’an manuscripts each juz’ may be heralded by full decorative double-page frames, a feature noted in certain manuscripts from Aceh, the East Coast, Java, Penang and Pontianak.4

Other marginal ornaments found in some Southeast Asian Qur’ans include sajda (prostration) markers and ‘ayn marks. The marginal ‘ayn marks – some quite elaborate – indicating ruku’ (standing–prostration) divisions are particularly associated with Qur’ans from Javanese cultural areas. Illuminated maqra’ marks in the margins, indicating text divisions selected for recitation, appear to be unique to the Malay world and are most prominent on the East Coast, though also encountered in Qur’ans from Sumatra, Banten and Pontianak.5

Text frames

A standard feature of Southeast Asian Qur’ans of this period is that on each page the text is enclosed within a series of ruled frames. Here, too, strong regional preferences can be noted. In Qur’ans from Aceh, the page frames are almost always in one of two colour schemes: red-black-red-black (here and henceforth the colours are given from the innermost towards the outermost frame) or, less commonly, red-red-black. In East Coast Qur’ans there are also two basic page-frame templates to which nearly all manuscripts conform: a simpler version of black-black-red and a more elaborate version of (black/red-)black-thick yellow-black-black-red (Fig. 11.1). Javanese Qur’ans have relatively simpler frames; these are often monochrome, double- or triple-ruled red or black frames, but some have two pairs of frames in red and black. In only a few Qur’ans – including one from Banten and another from Terengganu – do we find gold used, although the use of a thick yellow line in many East Coast Qur’ans particularly may be understood as perhaps emulating or being
inspired by the gold borders often found in illuminated Qur’ans from other Islamic traditions.

Mise-en-page

Throughout the archipelago the preferred writing material for Qur’ans is European laid paper, although in Java and its environs daluang, the beaten bark of the mulberry tree, is often used. The evidence of a few unfinished or partially finished Qur’ans enables us to reconstruct the order of work. After the pages were ruled with a mistara (a stringed ruling device), the entire text of the Qur’an was written in black ink, the end of each āya usually being indicated with a black dot. Only afterwards were round coloured āya markers added; in a large number of Qur’ans, the original black dot can still be discerned in the middle of a circle or roundel. At this later stage sura headings were written in red ink – flanking the final words of the previous sura as necessary – and the text frames and sura heading frames ruled in.

A characteristic feature of Qur’ans from the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula is their adoption of the ‘optimally calibrated’ text layout perfected in Ottoman Qur’ans of the early eighteenth century, in which each juz’ occupied a quire of 10 leaves, and each page of 15 lines ended with a complete āya. Thus in East Coast Qur’ans, the juz’ markers are situated at the top right corner of a right-hand page exactly every 10 folios, and, unlike in other Southeast Asian Qur’ans, there is no need to highlight the start of the juz’ in the text by the use of red ink or with any other device, as each juz’ starts precisely at the top of the page.

Decorated frames: architecture and palette

As in most illuminated Qur’ans from throughout the Islamic world, the prime canvas for decoration in Southeast Asian Qur’ans is the margin surrounding the text at certain conventional and significant stages, which can be filled with beautiful frames filled with vegetal and geometric motifs. It is in the architecture, palette and ornamental detail of these decorated frames that the regional identity of these Qur’ans is most loudly proclaimed.

In most Qur’ans from the Malay world the only major examples of illumination are decorated double-frames, as single or double headpieces are rarely found in Qur’an manuscripts, although fine triangular tailpieces are sometimes found in Qur’ans from Aceh. One of the most recognizable regional styles of decorated double-frames is from Aceh (Fig. 11.2). The vertical borders which flank the text block on each page are extended upwards and downwards, sloping inwards at top and bottom. On the
three outer sides of the text block, arches or anses project into the margin, that on the vertical side being flanked by two small 'wings', which may range in form from delicate tendrils to more substantial projections. The ornamental rectangular border around the text block is often filled with a looped vine reserved in white, and a plaited border may form part of the decoration. These decorated double-frames from Aceh are characterised by a strong but limited palette, centring on red, yellow/ochre and black. Equally prominent use is made of the reserved white backdrop of the paper, which is manipulated as a fourth basic colour, and which is charged with carrying the main ornamental motif.⁹

Qur’ans from the northeast coast of the Malay Peninsula are also fairly distinctive, although the salient features of East Coast decorated frames are less easy to define categorically. In general, though, these are the finest, most delicate and most technically and artistically accomplished of all illuminated Malay Qur’ans.¹⁰ Within the East Coast school, two distinct variants can be discerned, associated respectively with the states of Terengganu to the south and Patani in the north. In manuscripts illuminated in the 'Terengganu style', the arches on the three outer sides of the text block are linked, forming a continuous, sinuous, outline. Whereas,
in the 'Patani style', the three arches tend to be discrete entities, emerging out of, or resting on, the rectangular borders around the text block, and are sometimes formed by two ‘interlocking waves’ surmounted by an ogival dome. In both styles, the arches are often topped with a series of tiny ‘wavelets’ or ‘petals’ (Fig. 11.3).

Perhaps most striking is a group of Terengganu Qur’ans with decorated frames on two facing pages, which are also adorned with an illuminated border hugging the outer edges of the paper. From this outer border numerous small rays or tendrils project inwards, reaching down as if to meet the ‘wavelets’ rising up from the arches, invoking a ‘stalagmite-stalactite’ effect. When these rays and wavelets are gilded, the overall effect is that of a brilliant golden shower (Fig. 11.4a–b). The palette of East Coast frames is broader than found in Aceh manuscripts, encompassing pastel colours such as blue and green in addition to stronger and more vibrant shades, and the use of gold is more pronounced.

No single ‘Javanese’ style of Qur’an illumination can be defined, although the use of a strong indigo blue is more apparent here than elsewhere; instead, certain distinctive features can be associated with different locations. Thus Qur’ans from the culturally mixed region around Cirebon on the north coast often incorporate a fine diaper or swastika pattern.
made from a mosaic-like grid of tiny black-and-white squares (Fig. 11.5), while a ‘cropped mirrored hemiform rhombus style’ from the court of Yogyakarta has recently been analysed in some detail. In this variant, the ornamental text frame extends to the outer edges of each page, with arched motifs on the three outer sides of the text block superimposed on a series of concentric ruled rectangular borders. One notable feature of some illuminated Qur’ans from Java and Madura is that on each page the decorated frames tend to have substantial decoration only on the three outer sides of each page, and are therefore only symmetrical about the gutter of the book.

Decorated frames: location

All over the Islamic world, the most consistently illuminated site in Qur’ans is the double-page opening containing the beginning of the Book. In Southeast Asian Qur’ans we usually find the whole of the Sūrat al-Fātiha on the right-hand page and the beginning of the Sūrat al-Baqara on the left (Fig. 11.5). On both pages the text block, conventionally of seven lines, is smaller than found elsewhere in the manuscript, consequently yielding a much wider margin all around which can then be filled with a decorative frame. Only in the Brunei—Philippines zone is a different layout sometimes encountered, with the whole of the Sūrat al-Fātiha spread across the first two facing pages, surrounded by an illuminated frame.

In some Qur’ans from the Malay world, the decorated double-frames at the beginning may be the only substantial illumination in the volume, but often they indicate the presence of similar decorated frames at the end. There is less consistency in the arrangement of the text at the end than at the beginning. Sometimes only the two final suras, Sūrat al-Falaq and Sūrat al-Nūs, are each presented on facing pages; in such cases the text block is again smaller than found in the rest of the volume and the margins commensurately larger. In other Qur’ans, the text block on the final pages may be the conventional size, in which case any decorated frames are proportionately slimmer.

It is relatively common to find Southeast Asian Qur’ans with three pairs of decorated double-frames: at the beginning, at the end and in the middle of the text. However, there are considerable and consistent regional differences over the siting of middle decorated frames. In Qur’ans from Aceh, the middle frames are always placed at the exact midpoint of the Qur’anic text, at the beginning of the sixteenth juz’, in the middle of the Sūrat al-Kahf (Q. 18:75) (Fig. 11.2). In East Coast Qur’ans,
on the other hand, the frames are usually sited at the beginning of the fifteenth juz' and the Sūrat al-İsrā' (Q. 17:1) (Fig. 11.4a–b). In Qur’āns from Java the middle frames are nearly always found at the beginning of the Sūrat al-Kahf (Q. 18:1). There are of course exceptions to every rule, and one fine Patani Qur’ān in the British Library has four pairs of decorated frames: at the beginning and the end, and at the start of the Sūrat al-Kahf and of the Sūrat Yā Sin (Q. 36). An equally fine small Terengganu Qur’ān has three pairs of frames: at the beginning, at the start of the Sūrat al-İsrā’ and at the start of the Sūrat Yā Sin. The major mid-point illuminated feature in two Qur’āns from the southern Philippines is not a double-frame but a decorated horizontal panel at the start of the Sūrat Maryam (Q. 19:1).

Finally, it should be noted that in a number of Malay Qur’āns, the small text blocks at the beginning and end are surrounded by wide margins which are not adorned with decorated frames but are left blank. While

Fig. 11.5
Illuminated frames at the beginning of a Qur’ān, probably from the North Coast of Java, 19th c. Leiden University Library, cod. or. 2098, ff. 1v–2r.
this may not seem to merit discussion in a study of illumination, there is a strong sense that what we are seeing is not simply an absence of decoration but rather a positive artistic choice rooted in the Malay aesthetic of restraint and balance, and these wide white spaces, which serve to enhance the text of the revelation in their midst, should perhaps, therefore, be seen as an art form in themselves.

Conclusion

There is tremendous variety in Qur’anic illumination from the Malay world, with a number of distinctive artistic schools identifiable, most notably in Aceh, on the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula, and in Java. At the same time, there are also many other illuminated Southeast Asian Qur’ans which do not at present fit into any known scheme, but may at some later date be recognised as representatives of equally coherent regional traditions.  

Despite this variety, the art of the Qur’an in Southeast Asia is also characterised by a robust sense of regional identity which immediately allows us to identify as such any Qur’an from the Malay world, whatever its precise origin. Throughout the Malay Archipelago there is a strong appreciation of the visual impact of an arched and finialed, densely decorated, double-page text frame starkly outlined against the calm white or cream backdrop of the paper page. Everywhere we find a vibrant palette dominated by red, with strong representation from yellow and black, but relatively less use of gold than might otherwise be expected from its occasional lavish use.

Most intriguing, though, is a fault-line running through the Malay Archipelago which marks off the Brunei–Southern Philippines zone as a distinct artistic region. This hints at a different orientation and source of Islamic cultural influence – perhaps from China or Central Asia in the north – from that which arrived in the Malay world from the west through the Indian Ocean, and which probably had the greatest impact in shaping the material legacy of Islam in Southeast Asia.

NOTES

1 For further details see Annabel Teh Gallop, ‘Is there a “Penang Style” of Malay Manuscript Illumination? Some Preliminary Comments on the Art of the Malay Book, with Special Reference to Manuscripts in the Muzium Negeri Pulau Pinang’ (paper presented at ‘The Penang Story International Conference’, Penang, 18–21 April 2002). For a revised version of this chapter, translated into Indonesian, see Annabel Teh Gallop, ‘Seni mushaf di Asia

2 Leiden University Library, cod. or. 1945, is a large Qur’an with interlinear Malay translation, from Pulau Manipa, near Ambon in the Moluccas, which bears a presentation inscription of 1694. The initial decorated double-frames show strong European influence, but the frames at the end include distinctively Malukan motifs. See Annabel Teh Gallop, ‘*Een Koran uit Manipa*’ in Hans Straver, Chris van Fraassen, and Jan van der Putten, *Ridjali Historie van Htu. Een Ambonese Geschiedenis uit de Zeventiende Eeuw* (Utrecht, 2004), pp. 26–7.

3 This terminology is adopted and adapted from the description of jali diwānī script in Yasin Hamid Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy* (London, 1978), p. 30. Jali diwānī (Turkish celi divani) is another form of the Ottoman diwānī script developed in the royal chancery. Jali diwānī is a hanging script that densely incorporates vocalization signs, reading signs and decoration around the letters.


5 For assistance in ascertaining the significance of these magra’ markers I am indebted to Izzat Soubra, Sheikh Saleh al Refai, Hafiz Firdaus and Efim Rezvan, and for confirmation that these markers have not been encountered in Qur’ans outside Southeast Asia I am grateful to François Déroche, Tim Stanley, Mike Laffan, Muhammad Isa Waley and Colin Baker (personal e-mail communications, 14–24 November 2003).

6 A description of how daluang is made is given in Kumar and McGlynn, eds., *Illuminations*, pp. 116–17.


12 British Library, or. 15227.

13 Private collection, London.