Ottoman
seal culture

The Ottoman empire was the greatest power in the Middle East for five hundred years. Ottoman art and tastes consequently wielded enormous influence over a very wide area, and through the conduit of Ottoman bureaucracy had a normative impact on seals from the Maghrib to Egypt, and from the Balkans through Syria down to Yemen. From 1517, Ottoman custodianship of the two holy cities and regulation of the hajj pilgrimage and centres of Islamic study also led to a dissemination of Ottoman styles and fashions in seals throughout the Islamic world (see 4.5).

In Ottoman Turkey, seal engraving was a well-established and highly regulated profession. Seal engravers belonged to professional guilds, and had to adhere to a strict code of practice, designed to prevent the fraudulent use of seals. In the early seventeenth century there were separate guilds for engravers who worked in semi-precious stones such as carnelians and jade, those who produced seals for the officials of the state, and those who worked in silver, producing talismans as well as seals. These seal makers would keep albums with impressions of all the seals they had carved from which clients could choose a design, whereupon the seal makers would engrave the client’s name in the chosen style. In exceptional cases, a client might insist on commissioning a design from a renowned calligrapher, and then have this design made up by a seal engraver.1 From the late eighteenth century and into the early twentieth century some Istanbul sealmakers engraved their pseudonymous signature in tiny letters on the face of the seal, and small stamps were also used by some other silversmiths to sign their wares.

Until the seventeenth century, most imperial Ottoman seals were in the form of rings, but from a later period many seals survive with small elaborately-carved open metalwork handles, which could sometimes be folded for greater portability. Such seals could either be suspended from a chain, or were carried in small bags of rich materials. Some Ottoman seals from the royal household had fixed handles of very precious materials such as gold, ivory, platinum and diamonds.2 At the other end of the social scale, common seals in the nineteenth and twentieth century were made of brass in a standard oval shape with a small handle, usually with a pierced hole in it.

Left Ottoman brass and silver seals, 19th century, Private collection.

Right A page of Impressions of mostly Ottoman seals, from one of the earliest studies of Islamic seals. Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall, Abhandlung über die Siegel der Araber, Perser und Türken (Vienna, 1850), bl. v. 1700.

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Ottoman seal culture

was the greatest power in the Middle East at the time. Ottoman art and taste consequently influenced over a very wide area, and the bureaucracy had a normative impact on Egypt, and from the Balkans through to the Mughal Empire in India. Ottoman custodianship of the two holy pilgrimage centres and centres of Islamic culture exerted a profound influence on Ottoman styles and fashions in seals (see 4.5).

Engraving was a well-established craft. Seal engravers belonged to a professional guild, subject to strict codes of practice, designed to ensure quality. In the early seventeenth century, seal engravers were employed in semi-precious hardstones, those who produced seals for those who worked in silver, producing seals for the Ottoman court. Seal engravers would keep albums of the seals they had carved from which clients could choose a design, from which the seal maker would engrave the client's name in the chosen style. In exceptional cases, a client might insist on commissioning a design from a renowned calligrapher, and then have this design made up by a seal engraver. From the late sixteenth century and into the early seventeenth century some Istanbul sealmakers engraved their pseudonymous signature in tiny letters on the face of the seal, and small stamps were also used by some other sealmakers to sign their wares.

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Left: Ottoman brass and silver seals, 19th century. Private collection.

Right: A page of impressions of mostly Ottoman seals, from von Hammer-Purgstall, Abhandlung über die Siegel der Araber, Perser und Türken (Vienna, 1850). BL V 6799.
Above (B) Seal of Sultan Alauddin Riaut Syah of Aceh: al-Sultan Alauddin bin Firman Syah // al-sa‘ith bi al-Malik izhahat sayyid al-mansurik wa-iradah salma Allah raza bi wa-nazr liwa'yah. "The Sultan Alauddin, son of Firman Syah // be who trusts in the King, who has chosen him to possess kingdom and be pleased with him; may God perpetuate his glory and great victory to his banner" (1604), 55 mm, on a trading permit in Malay issued to Sir Henry Muddiman, [1607]. Bodleian Library, MS Douce Or.44

Above (C) Seal of Sultan Alauddin Riaut Syah of Pahang: al-Sultan Alauddin Riaut Syah bin Abdul Ghaffar Syah // al-walibhi bi al-Malik // la ilahe illa Allah // in qur'anih // zah pati. "The Sultan Alauddin Riaut Syah, son of Abdul Ghaffar Syah // be who trusts in the King, there is no god but God...be who is steadfast through God ... and may God preserve his realm and dominion..." (1677), from a peace treaty in Portuguese between the King of Pahang (El Rey de Pão) and Diego de Mendonça Portino, Capitão-mor of the Southern Seas, 16 Airport 1674. Biblioteca Nacional, Lisbon, Est. Portizador, Cod.597, fol.51v

Left (A) Ottoman seal engraved in the centre in relief: al-faqir Suleyman bin 'Abd Allah, 'the poor Suleyman, son of 'Abd Allah', and in the border in intaglio: 'Ifthah in-na ifthah bab-i rahmatat / Hz-Muhammad Khattim e mahhi-i murvavat, 'Open for Us, any God, the door of Your Compassion' by [Your love for / the supreme rank of] Muhammad, the Seal of the Signet of Prophethood', in a copy of Kitab-I firaun-namah, 903/1555–6. (With thanks to M.I.Walley for this reading and translation.) 88.9x68.1, 167v
Islamic seals were traditionally carved in intaglio, where the letters are incised with a chisel into the surface of the seal. This gives a white inscription against a coloured background when the seal is stamped in ink. Until recent times only a few seals were carved in relief, where the background of the seal face is cut away to leave the letters raised; this gives a coloured inscription when the seal is impressed on paper.

The preference for intaglio carving is a logical choice as incising a hard surface such as a gemstone or metal with the flowing lines of Arabic letters and their various diacritical marks is certainly easier than carving away the ground around the inscription. Another explanation adduced for this preference is that impressions from seals carved in intaglio, producing a white inscription against a coloured ground, were very much harder to forge or tamper with than relief impressions. A major change only takes place towards the end of the nineteenth century, when relief engraving became the new norm.

For a brief period in the late sixteenth century, there was a fashion in Ottoman circles for seals carved in both intaglio and relief, yielding seal impressions with white lettering on a black ground in part of the seal, and black lettering against a white background in another section (A). Only two such Islamic seals from Southeast Asia are known and both date from around this period, clear evidence of the long reach of Ottoman influence across the Indian Ocean. In the seal of Sultan Alauddin Riazyat Syah of Aceh (c.1589–1604) (B), Ottoman taste can be seen not only in its use of both intaglio and relief carving, but also in a characteristic knot motif. Very similar in appearance but slightly less refined in its carving is the earliest known seal from present-day Malaysia, of Sultan Alauddin Riazyat Syah of Pahang (c.1614–15) (C).

Diplomatic links between Aceh and the Ottoman empire are well attested in the sixteenth century, but Pahang probably looked to Aceh rather than directly to Turkey as a model for its seal, as hinted at by the name of the ruler. This is an extremely important seal as it is the only primary historical source for the name of this sultan of Pahang, who came to the throne in 1614 after killing his father and brother.

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3 Unuvarzah 1969: 4,13,46,41.
Munsiy Abdulllah
as seal designer

Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsiy (1796 – 1854) was one of the most important Malay writers of the nineteenth century. He was born in Melaka into a family of scribes, and for most of his life he worked for Europeans, initially as a junior clerk, but later also as printer, secretary, translator and teacher of Malay. He is best known for his autobiography, Hikayat Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsiy, lithographed in Singapore in 1849.

Recent studies have warned against taking Abdullah’s words simply at face value: he wrote in full knowledge that his first readers would be his European missionary patrons, with their low opinion of many aspects of Malay tradition and their antipathy to Islam. Nonetheless, his reporting of ‘scenes from daily life’ means that in many cases we owe to him our only pre-modern written Malay accounts of certain scenarios, and the attendant specialist vocabulary. A unique written account of the commissioning of a Malay seal is found in the Hikayat Abdullah, and is hence worth quoting in full, both in the original Malay and in translation.

The upwardly-mobile Abdul Kadir, a confidante of Sultan Hussein Syah of Singapore (c.1819 – 1835), had just been enabled with the title of ‘Tengku Muda’ and married to the sultan’s daughter, and his airs had earned him the derision of the people of Melaka. One day in 1834 or 1835, Abdullah was summoned by Abdul Kadir:

Munzy Abdullah as seal designer

Munzy Abdullah (1798 – 1834) was one of the Malay writers of the nineteenth century. He was one of the first Malay writers to be published in the West, with his works appearing in English and translated into Malay. He was a prolific writer and translator, and his works were influential in shaping the modern Malay literary tradition.

The upwardly-mobile Abdul Kadir, a confidante of Sultan Hussein Syah of Singapore (1819 – 1835), had just been ennobled with the title of 'Tengku Muda' and married to the sultan's daughter, his status was now on the rise. One day in 1834 or 1835, Abdul Kadir was summoned to a meeting with the sultan. The meeting was held in the sultan's palace, and the sultan asked Abdul Kadir to explain his reasons for accepting the title of 'Tengku Muda'.

Abdul Kadir thanked the sultan for the honor, but he also explained that he had been offered other positions with higher titles and benefits. The sultan was impressed by Abdul Kadir’s loyalty and dedication, and he rewarded him with a large sum of money and other gifts. Abdul Kadir was overjoyed and thanked the sultan for his kindness.

In the meantime, Abdul Kadir was also working as a translator and interpreter for Europeans in the region. He was well-versed in the English language and was able to communicate with them effectively. He was also a skilled diplomat and was able to help resolve conflicts between the different groups in the region.

Abdul Kadir was a respected figure in the region and was often sought after by the sultan and the Europeans for his knowledge and expertise. He was a true patriot and a dedicated servant of the sultan.

This anecdote is a rich seam which can be mined for all sorts of information on Malay seal culture. The most immediate value of the vignette is its step-by-step account of the process of production of a Malay seal: the client approached a professional scribe, who was commissioned to write out the inscription according to the conventions for royal seals, and then a goldsmith made up the seal (in silver) according to the scribe's design.

In the Hikayat Abdullah, Abdul Kadir is described as a man of great learning and a respected figure in the region. He was also a skilled diplomat and was able to help resolve conflicts between the different groups in the region.

Munzy Abdullah is a prime example of the fact that in traditional Malay society, the use of seals was strictly speaking a royal prerogative. Despite his professional status, Abdullah did not have a seal himself, and as can probably be judged categorically by the fact that his own will – drawn up in Singapore just before he embarked on the pilgrimage – was signed but not sealed. Abdullah then sailed for the Holy Land, and died soon after achieving his ambition of reaching Mecca in 1854.

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3. This translation is based on Hill (1979: 271 – 4), with some changes by the present writer.

View of Mecca, by James Whale, drawn in 1811 (Whale 1814 facing p.158). HLV 1849
Seal designers of Aceh and Kedah

In many parts of the Islamic world where a seal was a necessity for all business and legal transactions, seal engravers were kept busy by the steady market demand. In Afghanistan, right into the 1970s, seal makers would ply their trade from roadside stalls using simple ready-cut seal bases of brass. A very different situation prevailed in Southeast Asia, where the use of seals was essentially restricted to the court hierarchy, and it would not have been economically viable to sustain a livelihood as a dedicated seal engraver. Instead, as we know from the account of Munshi Abdullah (2.5), those who had been conferred with an official position by the sultan, and with it the right to use a seal, would get the inscription written by a professional scribe, and the design then made up by a goldsmith. In a few cases where a reasonable corpus of seals has survived from a particular court at a particular time, a small number of seals are evidently from the same hand. Two such seal designers from Aceh and Kedah can be identified.

One seal designer from Aceh was responsible for at least 15 seals, 10 of which are dated between 1854 and 1861. He is identified by his confident and cursive hand and certain characteristic words and letter forms. In particular, the letter sin, most evident in the word Sultan, is always written as a single, strong, diagonal line without the usual two initial 'teeth'. Another very distinctive feature is that in five of the 11 dated seals, the numeral '7' is half the height of the other numerals, the resulting space underneath usually being filled by a flower. Among the seals attributed to this designer are two seals of Sultan Alauddin Mansur Syah (c.1836–1870), while nine of the remaining 13 seals identify the sealholders as khadijs Sultan Aceh or some such similar term denoting a vassal of the sultan of Aceh, their abodes ranging from Rantau Panjang in the southwest to Nalabi, Serdang and Langkat on the east coast. Historical studies of Aceh frequently mention the practice of the conferring of letters of appointment.

Seal engravers, described as 'niglah-anazan', from an album of Indian occupations, drawn in the Punjab style, ca.1800. BL Add.Or.1473
Seal designers of Aceh and Kedah

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Another state where enough seals have survived to enable a search to be made for the products of an individual craftsman is Kedah, where approximately 90 seals are available from a brief period of about two decades at the end of the eighteenth century in the Malay correspondence of Francis Light, founder of the British settlement at Penang. One seal designer is distinguished in seven seals by his rather square and squat style, and in particular by his jim/juk/ka/kha basic letter-forms as can be most easily seen in the word raja. The engraver of these seals can be identified by the consistent 1 mm thickness of his chisel, without regard to variation in the width of pen-strokes, and the double-ruled borders which edge his seals, whether these be circles, octagons or petalled circles.
Three seals designed by the same hand in Aceh:

*Above* Alauat Pengulu Siddik Usaha Dikhoar wuzir Sultan Aceh di dalam bandar negeri Nelaba 1275, "The sign of Pengulu Siddik Usaha Dikhoar, vizier of the Sultan of Aceh in the port of the state of Nelaba, 1275/1858–9 (1871), stamped on a blank sheet of paper. Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, MS 447.

*Above* Tiuku Bung Kusala ibn Tiuku Kota Baru khdum Sultan Aceh 1273, Tiuku Bung Kusala, son of Tiuku Kota Baru, servant of the Sultan of Aceh, 1273/1856–7 (1871), 43 mm, on a letter to Raja Muda Nyak Sawrang and Jia-eh Hayyim in bandar negeri Pulau Kepri, 1275/1858–9. KITLV, Leiden, Or. 134, no. 11.

*Above* Seal of the Sultan of Serdang: Sultan Bayaruddin Saiful Alam wuzir Sultan Aceh 1277, Sultan Bayaruddin Saiful Alam, vizier of the Sultan of Aceh, 1271/1854–5 (1794), 50 mm. The flower at the top of the seal has been transformed into a butterfly by the simple addition of two antennae. Flowering seal collection. NL, MSS 99.G.58/I, f. 180m.

Three seals designed by the same hand in Kedah:

*Below* Seal of the King's Merchant: Orang Kaya Saundagar Raja, the year 1187/1773–4 (1663), 50 mm, on a letter to H. Light, late 18th c. School of Oriental and African Studies, MS #119/9, f. 11.

*Below* Seal of Paduka Seri Wengsa: al-waathiq wa-‘un Allah Paduka Seri Wengsa, the year 1187/1773–4 (1663), 50 mm, on a letter, late 18th c. School of Oriental and African Studies, MS 40126/9, f. 9.

*Below* Seal of the Harbourmaster: Syahbandar Seri Pekarna Raja di negeri Kedah dar al-aman samut 1195, Syahbandar Seri Pekarna Raja, in the state of Kedah, abode of security, the year 1195/1780–1 (2195), 40 mm, on an affidavit of C' Syaid, late 18th c. School of Oriental and African Studies, MS 40125/7, f. 6.