Above (A) The seal of the 4th Yang Dipertuan Muda of Johor, Raja Haji (c.1777–1784), with a three-masted sailing ship in the middle, inscribed: al-walid bi'llah Serr Sultan Berham Syah ibn Haji Ali Syah, son of Haji Ali Syah, etc. (187), 18 mm, impressed on a letter to Admiral J.P. van Braam, sent in 1784 shortly before the naval battle in the Straits of Malacca in which Raja Haji lost his life. National Archives, The Hague, 1.03.11.05, no. 17(1).

Above (B) Seal of the Yang Dipertuan Tun of Johor with a three-masted sailing ship in the middle, inscribed: al-walid bi'llah Serr Sultan Berham Syah ibn Haji Lampong, 'He who trusts in God, Seri Sultan Berham Syah, son of the ruler of Lampong' (4339), 45 mm, impressed on a letter dated 1508 (1799–1800), at which time the Raja Tun was Emir Andak, son of Daging Menumpuk, the first Yang Dipertuan Tun (c.1722–1735). School of Oriental and African Studies, MES 4202/7, E40.

Left The ship emblem of the VOC, as it appears printed mirror-wise in The six voyages of John Baptist Tavernier (London, 1678), BM.W.3394.
The defining feature of Islamic seals is the central presence of an inscription in Arabic script. European seals differ fundamentally in having as their prime focus an image or design at the centre, with any inscription or legend usually relegated to the perimeter. These pictorial images were often heraldic, derived from patterns originally used on shields of royalty or noble families to identify them in battle, but which later evolved into emblems or symbols of institutions as well as individuals.

Up till the early modern era there is little evidence of influence from European sigilligraphic practice on seals in the central Islamic lands, but in certain parts of Southeast Asia, where the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries coincided with and in some cases predated the Islamisation of kingdoms, we can see from the earliest days the evolution of an Islamic seal culture which took cognizance of the way European seals were designed and used. These factors help to explain the form of a royal seal from Gowa in Sulawesi (3.8), and the presence of a sailing ship on the seals of the viceroy of Biau (3.9).

A distinction should be drawn between the seals of Islamic states like Gowa which drew freely on a wide range of design sources. There were also, on the other hand, seals incorporating European elements used by Islamic kingdoms in Southeast Asia already shackled into an unequal relationship with a European power. A good example of this latter scenario is an early eighteenth-century seal of the sultan of Tidore in the Moluccas, which bears an image of ‘clasped hands’ - a symbol of fealty and love in Europe since Roman times - purportedly depicting the friendship between Tidore and the Dutch, but perhaps more accurately reflecting the Dutch stronghold on his kingdom (A). As the Dutch grip on the East Indies tightened, this is reflected in the seals of subervient kingdoms, notably through the use of roman script, until by the second half of the nineteenth century many Indonesian vassals were issued with seals with the Dutch coat of arms at the centre and the Arabic script legend consigned to a secondary position (B).

With the general ‘globalisation’ of seal culture, by the early twentieth century, many Islamic states and government departments had created institutional seals bearing symbolic pictorial representations of their official functions similar to heraldic ‘arms’ (C).
In Iran and India, the creeping European influence noted in various Islamic art forms manifests itself on seals in the adoption and adaptation of heraldic devices. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Afsharid ruler of Iran Nadir Shah introduced the use of a seal depicting the state emblem of the lion and the rising sun. Under the Qajars, a most unusual seal was introduced, imprinted in the top right corner of a document, apparently functioning as a ‘countersel’ to validate the main royal seal, incorporating not only the lion and sun but also cherubs and winged angels. A firman issued by Nasir al-Din Shah (r.1848 – 1896) in 1283/1866 – 7 bears his nisbah seal in the usual position at the top of the document, but with the new seal, dated 1282/1865 – 6 and engraved in relief, stamped in the top right corner (D). Two other firmans of the same ruler in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia collection appear to have manifestations of a similar seal in the top right corner, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that these are not actual seal impressions stamped in ink, but pseudo-seals: hand-drawn emblems emulating a seal. As one is dated 1278 (E) and the other 1280 (F), the implication is that under Nasir al-Din it had become the custom to validate a firman by inscribing this emblem in the top corner, until the practice became so entrenched that a seal was engraved in the same style.1

1Robino di Bergomale 1954: 284.
2For further examples of seals in this style see Qaim Maqsodi 1971: 215, 218.
European influence noted in various
If on seals in the adoption and
In the mid-eighteenth century.
Shah introduced the use of a seal
he lion and the rising sun. Under the
introduced, imprinted in the top
rently functioning as a 'counterseal'
orporating not only the lion and
d angels. 1 A firman issued by Nasir
1283/1866 – 7 bears his mamluk seal
of the document, but with the new
graved in relief, stamped in the top
right corner (D). Two other firmans of the same ruler in the Islamic
Arts Museum Malaysia collection appear to have manifestations
of a similar seal in the top right corner, but on closer inspection it
becomes clear that these are not actual seal impressions stamped in
ink, but pseudo-seals: hand-drawn emblems emulating a seal. As one
is dated 1278 (E) and the other 1280 (F), the implication is that
under Nasir al-Din it had become the custom to validate a firman by
inscribing this emblem in the top corner, until the practice became so
enrenched that a seal was engraved in the same style. 2

1 Rabino di Bergomu 1953: 304.
2 For further examples of seals in this style see Qura'n-Majani 1971: 215, 218.

Far left (D) Seal inscribed: al-malik li-laham firman-i hamayan
al-mu'ayyad 1280. "The
kingdom belongs to God, the
royal edict of the blessed king
1282/1866 – 76; 49 mm, on
a firman of Nasir al-Din Shah
appointing Baba Khan Musuh
as secretary for the drawing
up of military orders,
1283/1866 – 7. BL 13195, 538.

Left centre (E) Pseudo-seal
inscribed: Fauo Allah firmam-i
dashin. 1278. "He is the God,
the king's edict, 1278/1861 – 5;
on a firman of Nasir al-Din
Shah bestowing the title of 'Jas
al-Asfal on his brother Samad
Khan. I.AMM 3001.1.87.

Left and right (F) Pseudo-seal
inscribed: al-malik li-laham firman-i
hamayan al-mu'ayyad 1280. "The
kingdom belongs to God, the
royal edict of the blessed king,
1280/1865 – 6; 4 mm a firmam issued
by Muzaffar al-Din Mirza, shown
on this page. IAMM 2012.11.9.
Below left: Seal of Amjad Ali Shah, inscribed in the centre with his name and titles, and a plea for God to prolong his kingdom: Abu al-Mumur Nasta al-Din Sikandar Jah Padshah Adil Qadir Zaman Sultan Amjad Ali Shah Padshah Avad khullada Allah mulka lub 1258/1843, and in the border: Burmahil al-nubman al-ridan nasebin Allah wa-jah garib, 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, help from God and a speedy victory' (Qur'an 61:13). 206 mm. BL MS. Add. 3875 f. 188 g.

Below right: Seal of Wajid Ali Shah, inscribed in the centre with his name and titles, and a plea for God to prolong his kingdom: Abu al-Mumur Nasta al-Din Sikandar Jah Padshah Adil Qadir Zaman Sultan Amjad Ali Shah Padshah Avad khullada Allah mulka lub 1258/1843 - 7, and around the edge: 'That is the Grace of Allah, which He bestows on whom He pleases; and Allah is the Lord of Grace Abounding' (Qur'an 57:21). 207 mm. Stamped in red ink on an order granting certain jewellery to Sultan Jahan Begum. BL MSS. Add. 3875 f. 188 a.
The long decline of Moghal power gave space to other Indian princely states to move into the limelight. Foremost was the court of the Nawabs of Awadh (1722–1856), which has been described as 'the richest in superlatives: the most brilliant, the most cultivated, the most cosmopolitan, the most luxurious, the most lavish in patronage and the longest to enjoy the limelight.' Such a stellar assessment is fully reflected in the seals of the later Nawabs, which are probably the most flamboyant and ornate Islamic seals ever created. Like many other works of art commissioned at the court of Awadh, the most distinctive feature of these seals is their incorporation of the royal arms: a conspicuous fish symbol, a pair of swords and banners, and the crown and parasaol. This art form reached its apogee during the reign of the last three rulers. Muhammad Ali Shah (1837–1842) used a large octagonal seal topped with a pair of fish, the crown and parasaol, with his name in the middle and in a series of small circles around the edge the names of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Shi'i imams, in a clear riposte to the Sunni Moghals with their genealogical seal (4.6). Amjad Ali Shah (1842–1847), who was apparently renowned for his piety even if not for his restraint, had an unique double seal as well as his large seal of state. The last ruler Wajid Ali Shah (1847–1856) created what may be the largest Islamic seal ever seen, reaching over 20 cm in height, where the royal fish of Awadh has evolved into a pair of mermaids and a peacock sits atop the crown.

1Murphy 1990: 180.
2Sinclair 1992: 408.
3Murphy 1990: 164.