Islamic history is filled with an abundance of dynasties. Some are still celebrated, while others have disappeared into the mists of time. The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia aims to bring history to life by presenting the glories of bygone eras and providing visitors with an entry into this diverse and highly decorative world.

‘The Beauty of Oneness’

Any eye filled with the vision of this world cannot see the attributes of the Hereafter. Any eye filled with the attributes of the Hereafter would be deprived of the Beauty of Divine Oneness.

Sheikh Ansari – Kashi al-Israr
The Kufi square that is found within this guide book is also visible throughout the museum. The name of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has been written in Arabic and then rotated in an arrangement that embodies the unity, harmony and dynamism of Islamic art itself.
The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is one of the world's youngest museums. As such, it is invested with vigour and a strong sense of purpose. There are few institutions in Asia committed to giving this level of exposure to different Islamic cultures. I.A.M.M is in a constant state of renewal: the collection keeps growing and our displays try to keep pace with this expansion. The look of the galleries has been changing and will no doubt continue to do so, until we have achieved the unachievable - a setting that truly does justice to some of mankind's finest and most diverse works of art.

Syed Mohamad Albukhary
Director
Islamic art is a field that has grown enormously in recent years. From being a subject of marginal interest, it is now sought after by a wide range of collectors and institutions. Much of this interest comes from the Islamic world. In December 1998, Malaysia became home to Southeast Asia’s largest museum of Islamic art.

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is large in more than just the size of its collection. The building itself is a massive 30,000 square metres. Situated amid the leafy surroundings of central Kuala Lumpur’s Lake Gardens, the location is a breath of fresh air in many ways. The architectural style is quietly modern, with an Islamic feel created by the details rather than by the structure itself.

Iranian tile workers transformed the iwan-style entrance into a ceramic tapestry that frames a welcoming verse from the Qur’an. On the roof, these artisans turned the dome-construction traditions of Central Asia into the building’s crowning glory. The turquoise-coloured domes are now a landmark on the Kuala Lumpur skyline.

Inside the building, the angularity of 21st century design is contrasted with the soft, rounded forms of the five domes that dominate the museum’s interior. Laboured over by craftsmen from Uzbekistan, these imposing features help form an ambience that is both airy and harmonious. The seamless continuity of light and space is maintained throughout the galleries and into other areas of the museum, such as the library and the restaurant.
The Collection

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia houses almost eight thousand artefacts. These range from the tiniest pieces of jewellery to one of the world’s largest scale models of the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca. The aim is to have a collection that is truly representative of the Islamic world. This is by no means an ambition shared by every museum of Islamic art, where collecting works from the heartlands of Persia and the Middle East is the usual policy. At IAMM there is, not surprisingly, an emphasis on Asia. China and Southeast Asia are especially well represented. The third component of the Malaysian melting pot is India, which is also given special status.

India, China and the Malay world are in an exceptional category. Other parts of the collection are displayed according to type rather than geographical origins. This guidebook is intended to give an overall impression of what the museum has to offer. The following 10 pages show objects from the collection that are on permanent display. Each of them makes a unique statement, whether it is the unmistakable energy of an 8th century Qur’an leaf, or the more personalised charm of a perfumed beard comb. The remainder of the guidebook takes the visitor through the museum’s 12 galleries, with illustrations that represent the major themes within each gallery. It is a journey of many lifetimes and locations.
Astrolabe
17th century

The astrolabe is central to a civilisation that has always looked heavenwards - both literally and metaphorically. The times of prayers and the direction of Mecca are just two of the services provided by this two-dimensional model of the universe. The astrolabe was the pocket watch and calculator of its time, opening unparalleled opportunities for astronomers, astrologers and navigators. In common with the finest astrolabes from Maghrib, it combines restrained elegance with technical accomplishment.

Jug
14th century

The art of the metalworker was highly regarded in medieval Islam. Although much of their work was destroyed by later scavengers looking for precious-metal inlays, objects such as this jug show the level of their ability. The globular shape is distinctive of the Timurid era (1378-1506) and also appears in jade and ceramics. The Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), which succeeded the Timurids in Iran, adopted the same form and continued to use the dragon-shaped handles that were so admired by their predecessors.
Lacquered Fan
1883-4

The Qajar dynasty (1779-1925) of Iran made its greatest mark on Islamic art with lacquerware. Qajar craftsmen lavished considerable attention on the detail of their work, and lacquerers were no less committed. Foreign influences are found everywhere in 19th century Persian art. These are usually European, with occasional excursions into China. Confirming its origins, this work in lacquered papier-mâché has an inscription: “written in the capital Tehran 1301 AH”.

Leaf from the Shahnameh
1565

Persian manuscript paintings reached their peak between the 14th and 16th centuries. These sublime works illustrated the epics of Persian literature, paying particular attention to the Shahnameh (Book of Kings), one of the longest poems ever written. Among its 60,000 lines is the scene depicted here, which shows the meeting of the Iranian Siyavush and his Turanian counterpart Afrasiyah. With astonishing clarity and an unequalled sense of order, Timurid and Safavid artists created miniature paintings of outstanding worth.
Beard Comb
17th-18th century

The Mughal love of luxury was ceaseless and all-embracing. This gilded-silver comb is more than a creative _tour de force_ in miniature. At only 7.5 centimetres in length it conceals a dual purpose of considerable ingenuity. Between the two delightfully defined parrots is a stopper which can be removed to allow the comb to be filled with rosewater. Grooming the imperial beard was an elegant and sensuous activity.

Rifle
18th century

On a larger scale, the Mughals were also able to transform objects of everyday utility into accomplished feats of aesthetics. Hunting rifles were important to a dynasty which cherished its warrior ancestry. The example here is almost identical to one held by the Emperor Jahangir in a painting from the 17th century, reproduced in the Arms & Armour Gallery. Its grandiose use of gold and lacquer matches the emperor’s image of standing in domination over all he surveys.
Qur'an Leaf
8th century

The austere majesty of early Arabic calligraphy is evident in this Qur'an from North Africa or the Middle East. It is written on vellum, before the use of paper became widespread in the Islamic world, and displays the minimum of decoration. The calligrapher has instead mastered the use of space and bold horizontals. The vigour of the message is unmistakable.

Cradle
18th century

Muslim craftsmen beautified all that surrounded them. Woodworkers were adept at maximising the use of a material that was relatively scarce and highly esteemed. Their artistry is apparent in this Ottoman rocking cradle. The carving is bold, with a carefully ordered balance of floral motifs. Gilding lends a precious touch to a domestic item that is both highly impressive and also of undoubted personal significance.
Iznik ceramics are among the most universally admired works of Ottoman art. They were decorated in a wide variety of styles, most of which were of floral inspiration. Many Iznik wares depend on a vivid display of different colours to make an impression. This dish from the early 16th century relies instead on a simple cobalt-blue palette and a design that is ingeniously dynamic.

**Cotton Batik**

**Late 19th - early 20th century**

Malay artisans perfected a variety of textile arts. Most were intended to be worn, rather than displayed, and the Islamic societies of Southeast Asia were renowned for their spectacular dressing. Batik is primarily from Java and is a less ostentatious form of cloth than the gold songket weaves that were created in Java and the Malay Peninsula. This batik sarong was lent an additional dimension of luxury with the use of gold leaf applied to certain areas in a technique known as 'telepuk' or 'perada'.

The Collection
Architecture was the earliest expression of Islamic ‘art’, and it has retained its superiority ever since. Within the category of architecture, mosques are the highest manifestation of all. Since the time of the first mosque at Medina, they have been centres of prayer. As communal worship every Friday is incumbent on male Muslims, the mosque is about community as well as devotion. The same is true of Islam’s holiest site. At a level higher than art, the Ka’ba in Mecca is the most fundamental shape that a building can be, and yet the power of its simplicity is felt around the world. No other major religion looks to a building as determinedly as Islam looks to its most sacred shrine.
The sweeping majesty of Islamic architecture provides a display challenge for any museum. The solution at IAMM is a comprehensive collection of scale models. Conveying the splendour of the originals, they provide an overview of the Islamic world’s most significant buildings. These include the colossal grandeur of the holiest mosque in Islam – Mecca’s Masjid al-Haram – and the more desolate beauty of Central Asian mausoleums dedicated to Timur and Amir Al Bukhari.

Every corner of Islam is covered in miniature, starting with the mosques of the Malay world. These are notably different from other structures, proving the adaptability of the religion to diverse environments. In contrast to the simple structures of Southeast Asia are India’s most imposing monuments. Some of these, like the Taj Mahal, have become such universal symbols, it is easy to overlook their religious purpose. Alongside the model of the Taj Mahal is a less recognisable mosque in Xian, a reminder of China’s Islamic heritage. Lending an extra dimension of atmosphere is the recitation of the Qur’an, which provides an inspiring aural backdrop to the gallery.

THE STANDARD CHARTERED OTTOMAN ROOM

Secular Islamic architecture also has its moments of greatness. Although sacred structures are integral to Islam, domestic architecture has a perfection of its own. The Orientalist image of enclosed, inward-looking worlds is largely accurate. At the palatial end of the spectrum is the Standard Chartered Ottoman Room. Constructed in 1235 AH (1820-21 AD) it typifies a life of luxury in Ottoman Syria. Windows were clearly a low priority. The focus is on an internal paradise, sumptuously decorated on every surface. The ceiling is as lavish as the walls. Red, green and gold predominate in a rococo wonderland that shows some of the European influence that reached the Ottoman empire during the 19th century. An impression of opulence is as visible at close range as it is from a distance, with a profusion of painted flowers, fruits and architectural scenes. Hospitality has always been central to the Muslim way of life; a room such as this would have been intended for entertaining honoured guests.
The written word is glorified in Islam, and at its summit is the Qur'an. Venerated as the word of God, this creates a huge responsibility for those who commit it to writing. The earliest existing examples of Arabic calligraphy are from the Qur'an, inscribed in a script that has come to be called Kufic. This evolved into an abundance of different scripts that give Arabic its rich artistic diversity. Scribes were honoured members of Islamic societies, and rulers were also prone to displaying their calligraphic prowess. This encompassed more than sacred texts. Poetry and scholarship were also given enormous respect, and sought after for reasons other than their appearance. Despite this, the emphasis on penmanship kept the level of artistry high. The printed word never acquired the same status in the Islamic world.
The oldest fragments of the Qur'an are from the 8th century. Their origins are often unclear, but they are usually attributed to North Africa or the Middle East. The power of their simplicity is self-evident. From around the 11th century onwards, paper took over from the original vellum. Decoration went from the minimalism of early Kufic to later examples adorned with enough gold and colour to overwhelm the words completely. The degree of ornamentation was generally dictated by a patron’s budget and geographical location. While India, Persia and the Ottoman empire placed a high value on embellishment, at the western end of the Islamic world, some of the original starkness remained.

The Qur’an was supplemented by other works with a religious theme. Books of hadith and prayers, genealogies of the Prophet Muhammad, and treatises on Islamic law were important genres. These were occasionally illuminated with views of the Holy Cities and written in indigenous languages. In Southeast Asia these included Malay, Javanese and Buginese. Elsewhere it was Persian, Turkish and Urdu that predominated.

Illumination was rare on works of science and philosophy. The Islamic world’s contribution in these areas was valued universally for its substance rather than its appearance. Works of astronomy, mathematics and medicine looked less spectacular than religious texts but they led the world in scholarship, ending up in libraries throughout the known world of that time. Although few of these fundamental works remain in their original form, the tradition of making copies by hand has ensured the survival of later versions.

A quite different tradition existed in the form of miniature paintings. Figural art continued to thrive in some Islamic lands, long after their incorporation into Islam. The epics of Persian literature depended heavily on the art of the painter to convey their message of love and heroism. For most manuscripts, however, it is a combination of the written word and non-figural details that raises them to the sublime. From the profundity of a poem to the mere formal requirements of a marriage certificate, calligraphy lends a visual dimension which is clear to those who cannot read a single word of their contents.
The history of Islamic India goes back three centuries before the Mughal era (1526-1828). A variety of Muslim dynasties had ruled in northern India, bringing mainly Persian influences to the Subcontinent. With the arrival of Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, the stage was set for the most brilliant flowering of Islamic art in India. The ruling family was of Turkic and Mongol descent, and its most lasting contribution was a synthesis of Central Asian culture with that of India. The Mughals' achievements were all-embracing. Every aspect of court life was beautified without restraint. They took as much interest in fashion as jewellery, and their architectural achievements remain unrivalled. The India Gallery provides a glimpse into the public and private worlds of the Mughals.
There are many features of Mughal art that diverge from the Islamic mainstream. The most obvious of these is a delight in portraiture. As well as revelling in figural representations, this dynasty pioneered a new approach to detail. The enduring fascination with these miniature paintings is partly due to their elegance, and also to the insights they provide into life as it was lived in those lavish times. Miniatures from this era are filled with images of rulers, courtiers and horses, along with useful vignettes of fashion and interior design.

As jewel-like as their paintings are, Mughal arms and armour took the theme one stage further. Rarely have weapons seen the sort of embellishment that came so effortlessly to the Mughals. In keeping with their Central Asian ancestry, they had a special affection for jade. This was used on countless dagger hilts, often with a liberal application of gems and gold inlay.

Jade had uses other than for weapons. Much of the finest Mughal jewellery was made from one variety of this semi-precious stone, known to science as nephrite. This comes in many shades, from luminous white to the densest spinach green. For jewellery, a pale green tone was popular. The same shade was also favoured for a variety of domestic items that matched the imperial lifestyle.

Court life demanded an impressive array of vessels and other types of tableware. Instead of ceramics, the Islamic tradition of metalworking was taken to an unmatched level of opulence. Gilded silver, brass, enamels and jewel-inlaid gold were commonly used for objects that in other parts of the Islamic world might have been treated to no more than a little silver inlay on brass. At a less extravagant level, there was the 16th-century Indian invention known as bidriware. This inlay of silver into a base-metal alloy embodies the Mughal tradition of flamboyance with a solid core of quality.
There is a long association between Islam and China. According to Chinese records, Muslim emissaries visited the Tang emperor within a few decades of the Caliphate being established. The message of Islam was welcomed most enthusiastically in major trading centres, such as Xian and Guangdong, and later in China’s western provinces. By the Song dynasty (960-1279), there were mosques throughout China. The high point of Islam in the Middle Kingdom was during the Ming era (1368-1644), when Muslims acquired unprecedented political influence. This gradual meeting of the world’s two greatest powers produced a far-reaching interchange of culture and technology. Whether intended for domestic use or for the huge export market, Islamic art in China has a clear identity. This unique contribution, which had been widely ignored by art historians until recently, is now beginning to receive the attention it deserves.
Calligraphy has always been a revered art form in China. This coincides with the Islamic ideal, although the results are often very different from the calligraphic works of other parts of Islam. Qur'ans from China follow a universal pattern, albeit using the special 'Sini' script. More distinctive are the calligraphic scrolls that take a traditional, Chinese approach. These wall hangings feature the bold sweep of the brush, rather than the precision of the typically Islamic reed pen.

The written word is found in many other Chinese Islamic media. Among the most visible of these are the cloisonné wares that China started to create in quantity during the 15th century. The rich colours of the enamels make a vivid contrast to plain calligraphic cartouches with statements of Islamic belief. The Shahadah (affirmation of faith) and praises to God are the most typical additions to vases and incense burners which might otherwise have ended up on Taoist or Confucian altars. The same blending of cultures is evident in bronze altar vessels, adapted to suit the tastes of Muslim patrons.

One important area of Chinese art in which calligraphy plays a comparatively small part is ceramics. Objects made for the domestic market rarely put much emphasis on the written word, in Chinese or any other language. Among the exceptions are highly prized Ming dynasty blue-and-white wares with Islamic inscriptions.

For the export market, China created a range of products to suit all tastes. From the Ming period onwards, shapes that were alien to Chinese tradition, such as penboxes, were created to meet demand from overseas. Export wares were commissioned by Muslims in locations as diverse as Anatolia and East Africa. In Southeast Asia and Persia, vessels enamelled with religious inscriptions and talismanic devices were especially popular. Other types of Chinese ceramics were altered to local needs, rather than being made to order. In the case of rosewater sprinklers, which were used throughout the Islamic world, it was common practice to adapt forms based on porcelain flower vases to a new purpose by adding a perforated silver mount to the neck.
The Malay world extends in an arc from southern Thailand, through the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, and on to Java, Sulawesi and the southern Philippines. This archipelago has been the most easterly frontier of Islam for the past 500 years. Lush as the tropical land itself, the art of the region is a synthesis of many traditions. For centuries, Southeast Asia was part of the greatest trading route the world had ever seen, surpassing the Silk Road for quantity and variety. It was a meeting place for different Asian empires, as well as the new trading powers that emerged from the West. Central to these global influences was Islam, guiding a culture of restrained opulence which, like the Islamic art of China, is only now being explored by art historians.
Natural forms abound in the Islamic art of Southeast Asia. Subjects such as stylised plants, fruits and clouds are found in a wide variety of media. On textiles, these are often taken to a degree of abstraction that puts them in the realm of pure geometry. Parallel with this is the use of calligraphy, to give an even more visible expression of religious belief. The material from which these cloths were made gives them an added grandeur. Gold thread and elaborately tie-dyed silk reflect the esteem in which they were originally held.

An art of Southeast Asia which receives less attention than textiles is Qur'anic manuscripts. These are immediately identifiable by their vegetal scrolls, trailing tendrils and other floral motifs, showing once again the regional debt to nature. The palette is also exceptional, resonating with a contrast of red, yellow and black, embellished with gold on manuscripts for the royal courts. The collection at IAMM is exceptionally well represented by Qur'ans from the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula, an area distinguished in the past for its Islamic scholarship and calligraphic expertise.

Craftsmanship in wood and metal is another tradition for which the Malay world was once renowned. The world of nature provided inspiration to beautify objects as mundane as a child's 'modesty plate', or as hallowed as a wooden prayer screen or Qur'an box. Liveliness of concept and quality of execution were very much part of Malay artisanship. This was especially true for objects of hospitality, often expressed in the form of exquisite silver betelnut sets or elegantly proportioned brass trays.

Metalworkers of the highest ability were involved in the production of weapons that ranged in size from ladies' daggers of miniscule proportions to massive throwing spears. Most venerated of all is the kris. These daggers with a distinctively wavy blade symbolise the warrior spirit of Southeast Asia. Whether intended for ceremonial or practical use, they have always been regarded with awe. Astonishing feats are still attributed to kris, which are believed capable of everything from weeping tears to flying unaided to kill their victims. Beyond doubt is the quality of their manufacture. In addition to blades crafted with devotion are superbly executed hilts and sheaths.
Just as many of the world's finest jewels come from Islamic lands, so does much of the finest jewellery. With early examples, the efforts of art historians have been hampered by the Islamic practice of not burying funerary goods with the dead. In addition, countless pieces from every era have been melted down, particularly at times of instability. Gold has always been the main ingredient, worked in a multitude of techniques, from filigree to repoussé. Crowning this achievement are gemstones. The elite of various Islamic societies have favoured diamonds, emeralds and rubies, along with pearls and a host of semi-precious stones. The ways that they were worked, and the uses that they were put to, often differed greatly from their European counterparts. Nose and toe rings are two types of personal adornment more commonly found in the Islamic world.
Islamic jewellery falls into two broad categories: the exclusive and the 'ethnic'. Examples of the latter exist among tribal groupings from Morocco to Xinjiang. The IAMM collection is especially rich in the jewellery of Central Asia. The Turkoman tradition is substantial yet graceful, usually crafted from silver and set with agates, carnelians or red glass. Gold is extremely rare, although brass and gold plating are common. Turkoman jewellery makes effective use of incised lines and dangling chains to give a dramatic sense of movement. Most imposing of all are amulet holders that hang from the chest.

While Turkoman jewellery is among the most sophisticated in Central Asia, other tribal groupings have their own distinctions. In common with the Turkmans, Uzbek jewellers favour bold concepts. These can also be extremely elaborate, with a profusion of coral, turquoise and pearls. Many items were used solely for rites of passage, including bridal crowns that beguilingly follow the shape of the wearer's eyebrows.

At the more opulent end of the scale, there is little to rival the magnificence of Indian jewellery. The Subcontinent is not only the source of a large variety of gemstones, it is also where they were turned into the most fabulous creations. The Mughal court was a leader in the field, and enthusiasm was not limited to the ladies of the court. At a time in history when Europe's kings sported jaunty drop pearl earrings, the Mughals would not be outshone. Their love of ornament encompassed everything from plain stones to some of the largest and most elaborate ensembles ever created, usually incorporating diamonds, emeralds and rubies.

Precious stones were less conspicuous in other Islamic jewellery traditions. These still managed to be lavish, and Qajar Iran made particularly impressive use of enamels. Gold was sought after throughout the Islamic world, and many of the designs have their origins in the pre-Islamic past. Among the finest work in gold is from the Fatimid era (969-1171) in Egypt and Syria, where jewellers made exquisite use of filigree and granulation.