Many cultures have put considerable effort into beautifying the arts of war, but in the Islamic world there is a spiritual dimension as well. Religious inscriptions abound. While Japanese and European armours were also adept at making a dramatic impression, their Muslim counterparts used the written word to unparalleled effect. In addition to sophisticated acid-etching techniques and inlays in precious metals, the superb quality of steel with a high-carbon blend was allowed to shine through. Collected for centuries as weapons, and much respected by their opponents in warfare, these objects stand out as works with a sculptural quality. Whether used for practical or ceremonial purposes, they are an enduring reminder of the armurer’s advanced sense of aesthetics and commitment to his craft.
As with the rest of the world, there are two major
categories of Islamic arms: firearms and edged weapons.
Blades have, of course, a much longer history than barrels.
The greatest advance in metalworking was the
development of watered steel, associated with Damascus
and used throughout the Islamic world. Flexible and yet
able to take the sharpest edge, it was ideal for the highest-
quality swords, daggers, axes, maces and spears. There is a
wide variety of regional weapon types. The most easily
recognisable of these are short, curved daggers and long,
curved scimitars.

With the arrival of firearms, aesthetics remained a priority
and the imagination of the Islamic gunsmith soared. Rifles
and pistols were ornamented in spectacular fashion.
Typical decoration would include inlays of gold, silver,
ivory or mother-of-pearl on the lock, stock and barrel.
Similar attention was given to the accessories that
accompanied these weapons. In an age of complicated
black-powder weaponry, it was essential to have powder
horns, primers and strikers. The firing mechanism was
usually based on 17th century matchlock prototypes,
which remained in use as late as the 20th century.

Islamic armour has always been noted for its lightness and
flexibility. The most typical example is chain mail, often
combined with steel plates. Equally characteristic are the
pointed helmets that were so widely used in Iran and
India. Inspiring fear, as well as admiration, was the
objective. Helmets which incorporated horns or the faces
of ferocious animals must have made the right impression,
and horses were also equipped with awe-inspiring headgear. Islamic warriors favoured armour that matched
their weapons for decorative effect. This might feature
gilding, inlay, damascening or being set with gems.

Armies, as well as individuals, had their own
accoutrements. Military standards have a universal value,
although in the Islamic world they were usually made
from metal rather than cloth. Steel 'alam were used in
most of Islam's empires. They tend not to be as elaborately
ornamented as weapons and armour, although they
usually included inscriptions from the Qur'an and details
of the ruler to whom they belonged. Each of these groups
of objects was often signed by their maker, which puts
them in an important and fairly exclusive category of
Islamic art works.
In recent decades, the significance of Islamic textiles has been examined in greater depth. These are objects that conveyed status, wealth and religious allegiance. They were avidly pursued beyond the borders of Islam, while at home they were an influence on many other creative media. The finest of these cloths were considered to be the very definition of luxury. Not even serious upheavals put a stop to a trade in wares that aroused universal admiration. 'Tiraz' cloths with Arabic inscriptions can be seen in settings as unlikely as a 15th century painting by Andrea Mantegna of a Madonna and child. Islamic silks, in particular, exist in collections from all over the medieval world. This international mastery reached its peak later, with cloths from India which dominated the world during the 19th century.
Early Islamic textiles are usually found in fragmentary form. The IAMM collection comprises later, more complete examples. Most of these are from the eastern end of Islam, which took over the Arab world's position as the leading producer of superior cloths. The Mughals were responsible for some of the greatest advances in the field. Elaborate woven silks and brilliant colourfast dyes for cottons were hugely popular. Above all, the intricate plant motifs developed in Kashmir made their mark on the world, most notably as the shawls that were later copied by the workshops of Paisley in Scotland.

Indian expertise at weaving and printing was matched by embroidery. Inspiration from Iran is visible in much of India's textile tradition, including Kashmir shawls, and the introduction of woven silk and velvet brocades by Emperor Akbar (1543-1605) can be directly attributed to Persian inspiration. Once mastered in India, they became among the Subcontinent's most dazzling achievements. Similarly, embroidery was a skill at which Iran and the Ottoman Empire had demonstrated special expertise. This later became a significant part of the Indo-Persian culture at the Mughal court.

Central Asia has an easily identifiable textile style that differs from India and Iran in its bold designs and striking colours. Although embroidery was used extensively, it is the ikat weaves of the region that have left the most eye-catching legacy. Bukhara and Samarkand were the main production centres for clothing and wall hangings of almost psychedelic impact, executed in vivid colours. Woven in silk, or cotton and silk, these ikats pulsate with an energy that makes them look entirely modern. For other Central Asian peoples, such as the Turkomans, a more sober and delicate approach was preferred.

Textiles were used for decorative as well as sartorial purposes. With the nomadic origins of so many of Islam's ruling dynasties, it was inevitable that they would continue to value the portability of textiles as well as their luxury. For the rest of society, nostalgia played a smaller part than practicality. With a general scarcity of wood, woven products were the obvious choice for wall and floor coverings. While carpet making has continued into the 21st century, other weaving traditions are more likely to be found in a museum.
Carving, in various media, has always been a much-admired form of decoration throughout the Islamic world. Craftsmen lavished special care on wood, which in many areas was very scarce. In addition to a shortage of timber, woodworkers have often operated in climates that cause warping and shrinkage. They developed an unrivalled expertise, combining different types of wood with other precious materials, including ivory and mother-of-pearl. While in most cultures wood has been used for sculptural works, in Islam it is a canvas for two-dimensional creativity. Craftsmen rendered geometric and calligraphic forms with the same sophistication that they brought to manuscript illumination or tile making. Wood also provided a physical core for the unrelated art of lacquerware, taken to exceptional levels of artistry in Iran.
Boxes were an essential storage item in the centuries before hanging wardrobes were widely used. In the Islamic world, they served many purposes and came in a wide variety of forms. The IAMM collection includes examples from different regions, all of which share the Muslim woodworker's profound understanding of the materials that he hewed. Intricacy of design is a common feature, although each region had its own special characteristics. Ottoman craftsmen were masters of inlay in mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell; in India, it was more likely to be ivory that provided the finishing touch.

Wood also served a vital purpose in the construction and ornamentation of buildings. Some of the most outstanding features of a mosque are derived from wood. The minbar is one of the larger items, along with the mashrabiya wooden screens found in private dwellings as well as mosques. Qur'an boxes are another essential type of Islamic woodwork, along with one of the most distinctive of all woodwork shapes: the rehal. These Qur'an stands are the embodiment of Islamic design, being practical and yet decorative in an understated manner.

The virtuosity of Muslim woodcarvers created a legacy that was prized in more than just the Islamic world. Their skills were sought by European princes and Popes. Centuries after Spain had ceased to be a part of Islam, Spanish craftsmen were reproducing the designs of a bygone Islamic era. Once again, it was boxes that were the main preoccupation. These continued to use the intricate patterns of the Islamic past and frequently went so far as to include inscriptions such as "There is no god but Allah".

Closely related to woodwork is ivory. This was not only incorporated into wood, but also acted as a base material in its own right. Some of the finest extant carvings are from Moorish Spain, although ivory was used throughout the Islamic world. Boxes once again make a prominent showing - on a somewhat smaller scale than artefacts from the woodworker's atelier. The same applies to lacquerware, which became one of the great arts of Iran. During the Safavid and Qajar periods, miniature paintings with a lacquer finish found their highest expression, usually applied to book covers, mirror cases and, of course, boxes.
The smallest objects often provide the most information. Coins and seals are invaluable to the art historian, as well as having an aesthetic dimension of their own. Up to the modern age, coins throughout the Islamic world shared a certain identity. They were highly calligraphic, usually with religious inscriptions and details of rulers. Pictorial images have been avoided since early in the development of Islam, although exceptions do exist. As an empire with a keen interest in trade, coins of the Caliphate were distributed around the world. They were imitated as far away as Anglo-Saxon England, and discoveries of Umayyad and Abbasid coin hoards happen regularly in Sweden and Russia. The study of seals is not as advanced as that of coins, although a lot of work is currently being put into the subject.
Initially, Islamic coins maintained the basic appearance of the Byzantine and Sassanian denominations already in circulation. Crosses on the Byzantine denarius were the first motif to be dispensed with. Portraiture, however, was maintained for a few decades. Under the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik (685-705), radical changes took place. Towards the end of the 7th century, he reformed the coinage and removed all images. From this point onwards, a distinctively Islamic look emerged. The focal point became the proclamation of faith and verses from the Qur'an.

Such was the power of the original Umayyad designs, they remained unchanged for centuries. The Abbasids altered little more than the script, and even the Fatimids resisted the temptation to add the figurative motifs that they relished elsewhere, although they did include some Shi'a messages. Further east in the Islamic world, calligraphic inscriptions prevailed. Occasionally, animal and human figures appeared, especially on the coins of the Seljuk and Urtuqid dynasties. The Safavids brought their own distinctive stamp to Iranian mints by adding couplets of poetry in Persian.

By the 19th century, coinage of the Islamic world had begun to acquire an 'international' outlook. Gone were the proclamations of faith and irregular hand-struck shapes that had previously been favoured. Coins with milled edges made by machines exist for the sake of uniformity and to prevent counterfeiting. This was the direction in which all countries headed during the 19th and 20th centuries, although independent nations like Ottoman Turkey held on to symbols such as the Tughra, the imperial signature of the sultans.

The IAMM has a wide-ranging collection of seals that date back many centuries. Pre-Islamic seals go back a few millennia earlier. Throughout Islam, these were used for either personal or official purposes and frequently contain religious inscriptions. The most common materials are jade, agate, chalcedony and carnelian. Metal was also used extensively. Seal-like objects that are not carved in reverse were used as amulets. Seals, like coins, can be admired as intricate works of art in miniature whilst sometimes offering a glimpse into the past, especially when they have a date inscribed.
Metalwork ranks high in the hierarchy of the Islamic arts. Although most of what has survived is made of base alloys, it is clear that these were items of great importance in their own time. Almost no gold or silver vessels exist. This is due to many factors, including religious disapproval and the destruction that comes with political upheavals and economic crises. Works in brass and bronze reveal a picture of metalworkers gifted with enormous ingenuity and technical ability. Many pieces were signed by their makers, suggesting that they were objects of considerable prestige in their own time. The impression that they made was immense, influencing other media such as ceramics. Among the metalworker’s greatest accomplishments were exquisite inlays in gold, silver and copper.
During the early Islamic period, Iran produced some of the finest metalwork the world has ever seen. Continuing a Susian tradition, metalworkers newly converted to Islam created vessels of great sophistication. They developed a new aesthetic while persisting with animal motifs and other relics from the pre-Islamic past. Ewers, basins and incense burners were cast in bronze and frequently inlaid with precious metals. Even without these inlays, they are shapes with undeniable presence. Sturdy and yet elegant, they show the ability of craftsmen in the Islamic world to transform basic items of utility into refined works of art.

Metalwork with inlay continued to develop during the 9th and 10th centuries and reached its summit in the centuries after that. Iran remained the leader in the field, using the figural motifs that were characteristic of the eastern end of Islam. Calligraphic inscriptions and scenes of daily life fill the surface of objects from cauldrons to inkwells, creating a tapestry of tones and colours. They are in many ways more spectacular than vessels made from gold and silver. The dazzling inlays of precious metals and copper against a sombre bronze background provided a look unique to Islamic art.

Outside Iran, there were other achievements in the field of metalwork. During the 13th century, a school emerged in Mosul that rivalled the expertise of Iran. The Mongol invasion of Mesopotamia drove these artisans westwards, where the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and Syria became great patrons of their craft. Inscriptions and heraldic badges became the central features, containing useful information about the patrons who commissioned these lavish items. Large numbers of ewers, basins, penboxes and, above all, candlestands were created. As with inlaid metalwork from other parts of the Islamic world, much of the precious-metal content was prised out long ago.

The art of inlaying began to decline in the 14th century, although some fine later work was created in Iran. In Egypt and Syria, the late 19th century was a time for Mamluk revival wares. Different types of metalwork evolved throughout the Islamic world. India produced large quantities of bidriware inlaid vessels and works in copper alloys, often with a gilded finish. In China, copper alloys were supplemented by cloisonné enamels. While Safavid Iran emphasised steel and copper, often with a tin finish, the Ottoman contribution relied heavily on large expanses of gilded copper.
Ceramics are among the Islamic world's most colourful artistic triumphs. At various times and places, Muslim potters created wares of outstanding originality. Influences came from many directions, mainly China, but the results are unique to the cultures that produced them. From the austerity of Nishapur calligraphic bowls to the richness of Kashan lustrewares, there is an unmistakable vigour that puts these works in a special creative category. The absence of kaolin clay in the Islamic world was a source of concern to potters who admired the lightness and translucency of Chinese porcelain. In the end this did nothing to hamper their resourcefulness. By trying to reproduce elements of other ceramic traditions they created new forms, which were in turn copied outside the Islamic world.
Potters during the early Islamic era continued to use many of the techniques that had existed long before. In Mesopotamia, there was a re-discovery of the ancient technique of combining tin oxide with a clear lead glaze. When applied to an earthenware body, the results came pleasingly close to the look of porcelain. Another advance in 9th century Mesopotamia was the development of lustreware, a shimmering metallic effect which went through a number of revivals in other regions. From the decorative viewpoint, the most striking achievement of this formative era was the addition of Arabic calligraphy. Entirely Islamic in spirit, this simple device turned ceramic vessels into elegant declarations of faith.

The inventiveness of Muslim potters was unrelenting. Calligraphic inscriptions were used to enormous effect in a number of different techniques. There is a long aesthetic leap from the monochrome precision of 10th-11th century Nishapur to the textured, turquoise-glazed wares that developed in Iran over the following centuries. Technical innovations allowed for new body types, many of which depended on the composite material known as ‘frit’. The pursuit of ever more colourful products led to the introduction of overglaze painting such as Mina'i wares. By this stage, ceramics had become as much an art of the painter as the potter.

Lustreware continued to reassert itself in the 13th century, with densely decorated calligraphic tiles being a speciality of Kashan. While bowls and dishes comprise the bulk of earlier ceramics, tiles became increasingly significant after the Central Asian migrations of the 12th century. Chinese influence also became more apparent. Instead of being inspired by shapes from the Far East, Muslim potters took a closer look at the motifs. A magnificent hybrid art emerged, still uniquely Islamic with its prominent use of Arabic and Persian calligraphy.

The emphasis was very different in the Ottoman Empire, whose contribution will be remembered mainly for Iznik ceramics. These relied little on calligraphy and a lot on bold floral designs. After the early blue-and-white decoration of the 15th century, the next two hundred years saw the arrival of flowers and other motifs in vivid colours, painted with a liberated hand. Tiles were once again an important feature, with buildings throughout the empire decorated in stunning patterns created from tiles that were either repeats or formed part of a larger pattern. After the decline of Iznik in the 17th century, it was Iran that maintained the Islamic world's superiority in the production of ceramics.
Facilities

CONSERVATION CENTRE

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia plays an important role as a conservator. Since 2004, the IAMM Conservation Centre has been one of the region's pioneers in the field, providing a comprehensive preservation and conservation service. This applies to privately owned objects as well as museum artefacts. With five laboratories occupying more than 1,000 square metres, the museum's mission is clear. The quality of the equipment used is matched by the conservation team, trained by experienced and prominent professionals.

EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

As part of its commitment to the community, IAMM aims to stimulate interest in the arts through a range of education programmes. These include children's activities, guided tours, gallery programmes, workshops and seminars. Participants of all ages are encouraged to share the experience offered by the museum. Special emphasis is placed on developing the interest of young visitors. With this audience in mind, the museum has created a series of popular gallery workbooks.

LIBRARIES

Research into Islamic art has received an important stimulus with the creation of the IAMM Scholar's Library. The aim is to turn this into Malaysia's foremost facility for the study of Islamic art. Students and other enthusiasts of the subject are invited to make use of the extensive collection and to enjoy the ambience of learning combined with elegance and serenity.

For younger scholars, there is the Children's Library. This fun and friendly resource houses a wide selection of works aimed at junior readers. Picture and story books predominate, with a collection of folk legends and fairytales from many different cultures. This is backed up by a large number of volumes on art, science, history, handicrafts and religion.

MUSEUM SHOP

The Islamic Arts Museum Shop is a repository of wonders from around the world. Spanning the globe from the Atlantic Ocean to the Far East, this is a treasure house of exotica with a unifying theme. The creative glory of Islam is still alive; prospering in a wide variety of crafts. Whether it is bold Southeast Asian woodwork for the home, or intricate Middle Eastern jewellery for personal adornment, this outlet supports artisans with a gift for beautification. Feeding the mind as well as the soul is an exceptional selection of books and cards.
AUDITORIUM

With seating for around 250 people, supplemented by the latest in presentation technology, the IAMM Auditorium is a venue that suits many purposes. In addition to being used for a number of museum seminars, it is ideal for lectures and conferences by external organisations and has also proved its worth for award ceremonies and corporate events. Easy access and ample parking make this a unique facility in Kuala Lumpur.

MUSEUM RESTAURANT

Middle Eastern cuisine is the speciality of this refined restaurant, with decor that matches the understated luxury of the museum itself. The range of dishes includes specialities from the Maghrib to the Levant, stylishly presented in a setting of considerable serenity.

DISABILITY ACCESS

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is a firm supporter of disability-friendliness. For visitors in wheelchairs, there are ramps and lifts with dedicated control panels. For the visually impaired, efforts have been made to provide Braille captions and tactile pictures and personalised tours for temporary exhibitions. There is continuing liaison between the museum and organisations that represent people with disabilities. Out of this it is hoped that yet more progress can be made.