THE MESSAGE & THE MONSOON

ISLAMIC ART OF SOUTHEAST ASIA
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Marco Polo may not have been the most reliable of travel writers, but one of his accounts is beyond doubt: “It takes ships from China a whole year for the voyage to Southeast Asia, going in winter and returning in summer. For in that sea there are but two winds that blow, the one that carries them outward and the other that brings them homeward; and the one of these winds blows all winter, and the other all the summer.”

The monsoon winds were of vital importance in the age of sail. The adjacent map, from the 18th century, has arrows to indicate which months were suitable for travel in which direction. These winds brought with them more than just traders from China, India and Arabia. They also introduced Islam into Southeast Asia. The region became part of the most important mercantile network the world had ever seen until the 20th century. As a result, there has been an astonishing accumulation of wealth and art. From Aceh in the west of the Malay Archipelago to Mindanao in the east, there has been a steady exchange of commerce and culture. Most of all there is the influence of Islam.

The Message & The Monsoon examines the evolution of a unique culture, concentrating on those artefacts that embody the Muslim contribution to the region. For the first time, a comprehensive selection of Islamic artefacts from the Malay world has been assembled to bring alive the history and heritage of a region that has received little exposure.

Cover: Detail of an early 20th century calligraphic batik from Java
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Al-Fatihah

Dedicated to the people of Aceh.
The tsunami of 26th December 2004 caused catastrophic loss of human life and heritage. Despite this, the spirit of the 'Verandah of Mecca' lives on in the beauty of its culture.
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The Monsoon
Islamic Art of Southeast Asia

FROM
THE COLLECTION OF THE ISLAMIC ARTS MUSEUM MALAYSIA
This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition “The Message & the Monsoon”, held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia from the 5th July 2005.

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Publisher:
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Editor:
Lucien de Guise

Project management:
Ros Maltwati Ahmad Zakaria and Adline Abdul Ghani

Research and editorial team:
Lucien de Guise, Dr Badrane Benlabcene, Nicola Kuok Su Shan, Ros Maltwati Ahmad Zakaria, Adline Abdul Ghani, Nurul Iman Rusli, Asma Shurfa Shukry and Zahir Tzarb Sutarwala – Curatorial Affairs Department

Guest writers:
Dr Dzul Haimi Bin Md Zain and Dr Efuddin Rasdi

Design:
Aniza Ashaari, Alnurmarida Alias, Mohd Azman Zainal and Widiana Ali – Graphic Unit IAMM

Exhibition design:
Nisreen Moustafa – Display Unit IAMM

Photography by:
Syed Nasib Albar Syed Hamid and Mohd Faizal Zahari – Photo Lab IAMM

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Contents

Message from Datuk Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim 7
Foreword 9
Director's Introduction 10

Art of Nusantara: The Southeast Frontier of Islam 16
Dzal Haini Md Zain

Architecture: Transformation of Form and Culture 24
Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Raafi

The Message in the Malay World: The Arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia 34
Badrane Benlahcene

Catalogue

1. Manuscripts: The Word Made Manifest 40
   Post Script: Seals and their Applications
   Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria

2. Textiles: Virtue from Necessity 84
   Adline Abdul Ghani
   Jewellery: Accoutrements as Art
   Zahir Turab Sutarwala

3. Arms: The Mythic Status of Steel 154
   Lucien de Guise

4. Woodwork: Sacred Carves 172
   Asma Shufa Shukry

5. Metalwork: Strength in Diversity 186
   Nicola Kuok

   Nuri Iman Rusli

Notes 224
Bibliography 228
Glossary 233
A 16th century European impression of Southeast Asia
MESSAGE

Our praise to Almighty Allah and the Prophet Rasulullah s.a.w.

In recent years, international attention has been directed increasingly at Asia. The continent’s economic growth has created interest around the world, and with this has come a deeper awareness of the cultures that lie behind this new prosperity. Scholars and collectors have stepped up their appreciation of Asia’s heritage, and a global art market exists now on a scale that would have been unthinkable two decades ago.

Southeast Asia has by no means been left out of this fascination with the East. Although the contemporary art and antiques of the region generate considerable enthusiasm, little of this output is regarded as being part of the Islamic tradition. Islam’s contribution to the artistic development of Southeast Asia is essential and yet remains generally ignored. It is gratifying to see the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia trying to rectify this situation. The Message & The Mansion: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia is an example of how Malaysia can lead the way in originality of thought. This nation now has the resources and the resourcefulness to make an essential contribution to the field.

The museum intends this exhibition to be an introduction to an area of scholarship that deserves wider exposure. The Malay world has been a fertile source of decorative and devotional art for centuries. The beauty of the objects on display will surely be an inspiration for those who have not seen such an assembly before. Since the exhibition will be travelling overseas, it should also emphasise to a wider audience that modern Malaysia continues to live up to its reputation as a nation in which Islam and creativity can both flourish.

YB Datuk Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim
Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage Malaysia
"Truly, the religion with Allah is Islam" The Qur'an (3:19)
"Peace shall be the word spoken by a Merciful God" The Qur'an (36:58)
Foreword

"Enter ye here in Peace and Security"

The Qur'an
(15:46)

The Word of God was welcomed within the Malay Archipelago in a peaceful and enthusiastic manner. Merchants, travellers and Sufis introduced the essence of Allah's commands and presented a profoundly spiritual understanding of the world. Islam within Southeast Asia developed in a unique fashion, creating a cosmopolitan civilisation. Incorporating elements from past eras and adjacent societies, the art of this new culture became a unique form of expression.

Throughout The Message & The Monsoon: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia we encounter the development of a distinctive Malay identity, along with the maturing of decorative ideas. This is achieved with refinement, and without the need for extravagant display. Every object becomes an indicator of wealth and status and yet remains true to its original function. These items fulfil the urge of human beings to surround themselves with beauty, while still keeping in mind the message of Islam.

This exhibition comprises an exceptional collection of artefacts. They come from every corner of a diverse region and are the result of many different influences. Despite this, there is one immutable force that binds them together. In some cases, this is exposed for the world to see; in others it is implicit. Whatever the object, the inspiration is the Word of God.

Syed Mokhtar Albukhary
Executive Chairman
Director’s Introduction

"There is
in their stories
instruction for men
endued with understanding.
It is not a tale invented
But a confirmation of what went before it
A detailed exposition of all things
And a guide and a mercy to any
Such as believe."

*The Qur'an*
(12:111)

Heritage shapes our identity. To preserve and present this resource is the mission of our museum, bringing the world together through the understanding of different cultures and a shared past.

The Message & The Monsoon: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia explores the diversity and creativity of the Malay heritage. Encompassing five centuries of artistic accomplishment, this exhibition and publication present a selection of more than 150 works from the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. These artefacts include manuscripts, textiles, weapons, woodwork, jewellery, seals and coins. This is an assemblage that reflects the Malay identity, its history, and above all its faith.

The Message & The Monsoon reveals a number of common themes within the collection. The artefacts draw upon the principles of Islam while incorporating elements of the region’s earlier cultures. A profound identification with the natural world is the third element that characterises their unmistakable decorative repertoire.

With the arrival of Islam to Southeast Asia, and its fusion with indigenous customs, a new blend of Islamic culture unique to the Malay world was shaped. Arabic calligraphy played a vital role in creating this Islamic identity. Calligraphy became a decisive decorative element. The silk weavings of Sumatra, the cotton batiks of Java and the woodcarvings of the Malay Peninsula became canvases for the sublime beauty of Arabic scripts. Their power is tangible, whether they are part of the divine message or mere ornamental devices with no intelligible meaning. The exhibition is rich in objects that display the richness of calligraphy; these go beyond Arabic and Jawi to include languages such as Champa and Buginese.
Director's Introduction

"There is
in their stories
instruction for men
endued with understanding.
It is not a tale invented
But a confirmation of what went before it
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The shaping of Southeast Asia's Islamic decorative repertoire evolved from the meeting of
long-standing indigenous cultures and Muslim innovations. This incorporated elements from the two
main trading powers of the time: China and India. The Message & The Monsoon collection reveals
the continuation and development of designs, especially on textiles, that reflect the influences of
maritime trade. The cosmopolitanism of the Malay Archipelago was also a consequence of the
Western colonial presence. The influence of the Dutch, Portuguese and the British is visible not only
in the decorative arts but also in architecture.

Above all, it is perhaps nature that has been the most decisive influence and the element that
unites the collection on display at this exhibition. Synthesis with the environment is central to the
art of the Malay world. In the case of many buildings, nature determined the need for elevation on
stilts to prevent seasonal flood damage. It also created a portability that could be extremely valuable,
enabling an historic structure such as the Kampung Laut Mosque to be dismantled and reassembled
at another, safer location.

Nature, whose bounty surrounded the Malay artisan, acted as a decorative template. The
sinuous arabesque was transformed in Southeast Asia, asserting itself on a more conspicuous scale
than ever before. Vegetal motifs became a prominent feature of manuscript decoration. A distinctive
Malay aesthetic emerged. An earthly paradise of fruits and vegetables was incorporated into every
medium, from minute jewellery to monumental woodwork.

The art of the Malay world was esteemed by more than the Malays themselves. The accounts
of numerous visitors draw an impressive picture of the sultanes that existed in the region. Among
those who expressed the greatest admiration were Ibn Batutta, the 14th century Moroccan traveller,
Ralph Fitch the English merchant (d. 1611) and Tome Pires, the Portuguese apothecary. In 1511,
Pires wrote of Melaka that it was a city “of such importance and profit that it seems to me it has no
equal in the world.” The highly organised administrative system of the port guaranteed that
merchants would smoothly accomplish the process of buying and selling in time to catch the
monsoon winds back home.

Melaka was, however, more than a mercantile melting pot. In common with many of the
region's trading entrepots, it was a centre of learning, culture and art. Rarely in the history of the
world has there been such a vigorous meeting of different threads to create such a sumptuous cloth.
A combination of maritime trade partners, colonial incursions and sophisticated pre-existing cultures
came together with Islam, the most powerful force of all. The legacy is still alive today in works of
elegance and devotion that are once again becoming the subject of universal admiration.

Syed Mohamad Albukhary
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Mr Lucien de Guise, Dr Badrane Benlahcene, Ms Nicola Kuok, Puan Adline Abdul Ghani, Puan Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria, Mrs Rekha Verma, Puan Asma Sharfa Shukry, Cik Nurul Iman Rusli, Encik Md Reazd Adnan, Encik Muhd Edehah Muhd Razali and Mr Zahir Turab Suterwa.

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