Food container
Terengganu
19th century AD / 13th century AH
24 x 39 cm
1998.14362

A circular container made to contain a simple meal for a fisherman while at sea. Metal eyelets near the base allow the container to be securely tied together. This container is carved in low relief with foliate tendrils, the base is also adorned with cloud-scroll motifs.
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Calligraphic panel
19th century AD / 13th century AH
Malay Peninsula
67 x 50 cm
1998.14324

Based on the inscription, this panel would have been used in a mosque. It includes the
Arabic words which teach Muslims to make their intention purely to worship Allah in the
mosque "nawasus ikhafs sunaitan lillahi li'alaa". On every corner there are roundels with
the names "Allah", "Muhammad", "Ayub" and "Salman". The roundels around the
central medallion include the names of the four Companions of the Prophet
Calligraphic panel
Malay Peninsula
19th - 20th century AD / 13th - 14th century AH
25 x 81 cm
1998.1.4351

The border is inscribed with calligraphic roundels set against a foliate ground. The two calligraphic roundels at the upper centre of the panel are inscribed "Abdullah" and "Aminah", the names of the Prophet Muhammad’s parents. The two roundels at the lower centre are inscribed "Muhammad" and "Allah". The corner roundels bear the names of "Fatimah", "Ali", "Hassan" and "Hussein"
AD / 13th - 14th century AH

This panel was relief carved with the Shahada (declaration of faith). Cut from the cross section of a tree-trunk, it was originally used to ornament the main doorway of a house. The carving is inscribed with the date “1863” and is finished with red lacquer.
METALWORK
"Offered to them will be golden trays and cups, and they will find everything the hearts desire and the eyes wish for."

The Qur'an (Chapter 43, Verse 71)

Metalwork
STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY

The durability of metal has not been matched by the endurance of Malay metalwork. This is by no means an uncommon phenomenon; centuries of English silverware went into the melting pot to support King Charles I's war against republicanism. It is the very recyclable nature of metal, especially the more precious forms, that has made its art history so difficult to record objectively. In the Malay world as well, the range of pieces found is not representative. Countless items have been recycled with changing tastes and trends, or during times of war or economic depression. The Japanese Imperial Army's occupation of Southeast Asia during the Second World War is a fairly recent example of wholesale destruction.

The region's metalwork survivors suggest that their spiritual status was lower than in the arts of other parts of the Islamic world. Whilst metal was afforded a special privilege as a canvas for Islamic art elsewhere, this was not as much the case in the Malay world. Bronze inkwells from Khorasan, in present-day Iran, were one of many types of vessels that were inscribed with benedictory wishes and Qur'anic verses.
Inlaid and gilded candlestands, braziers and incense burners were worthy items to be given as gifts to mosques in the Middle East. Ornate openwork standards (alam) bearing religious inscriptions were used as banners in ceremonial processions. All these artefacts point to societies that viewed metal as a material both beautiful and lasting, suitable for conveying messages of faith. In Islamic Southeast Asia, however, metal appears to have been viewed more as a material for everyday utensils. Characteristically pure in its beauty, most Malay metalwork tends to be less ostentatiously ornamented; made of copper, brass or bronze, it is utilitarian in nature.

Throughout the ages and across the globe, mankind has had a natural propensity to create glittering displays in a sumptuous show of worship. Despite the appeal of precious metals, and their abundance in Southeast Asia, there are few Islamic devotional items in Southeast Asia made of gold or silver. Islam is a religion of understated elegance and simplicity of worship. It places relatively little store by conspicuous splendour of material objects in prayer. Another possible reason for its absence in the Malay world stems from the region's pre-Islamic tradition of using gold and silver in worship. Reliquaries from the 8th to 12th centuries in Kedah and Sarawak reveal human and animal representations in gold and silver foil. As early as the birth of Islam in the 7th century, accounts by Chinese envoys to the Malay Peninsula describe the intricate items made of precious metal in religious proceedings and courtly ceremony. As in all cultures, with the arrival and establishment of a new religion and regime, there is a tendency to create a unique identity by dissociation from the religious and royal practices of its predecessors. It may therefore have been a contributory factor that the newly established Muslim communities intended to distance themselves from the ostentatious, and adopt a more visually austere approach to worship.

Techniques

Traditional metalwork of the Islamic world is often incomplete, having lost much of its precious-metal content, scavenged during periods of economic upheaval. This is a fate that has largely escaped items of Malay metalwork, due to the scarcity of gold and silver inlay. However, the inlay that did occur in Southeast Asia was more prevalent in Muslim areas, suggesting that this technique of decoration was brought to the region by traders from the Middle East. The infrequency of this decorative approach would be natural in a region that is rich in gold and silver. Inlay with precious metals occurred in areas where they were not widely available and therefore needed to be used sparingly. In Southeast Asia, luxury items tend to have been made entirely of precious metal or at least fully plated. Niello, engraving, repousse and openwork were other techniques executed with technical skill in the region. These are comparable to the approaches found elsewhere in the Islamic world, but cannot be attributed to those who joined the Ummah earlier.

The metalwork output of the Malay world was not as extensive as in many parts of Islam. Although damaged and obsolete objects made of base metal were melted down and recycled over
time, decorative and luxury items, usually made of silver or gold, were kept intact and treasured. The finest craftsmanship was reserved for these items. Patronage from Malay royalty encouraged metalwork production of sumptuous ceremonial regalia, jewellery and weapons.

The Islamic element

Although there was an established tradition of metalworking in pre-Islamic Southeast Asia, the arrival of Islam in the region exerted a lasting influence on motifs and decorative techniques. This is considerably less apparent in the structure and function of metalwork items. With the advent of the new religion, there was no drastic change to the lifestyle, ceremonial traditions and artistic style of the region. This was largely because the principles of the religion tended to blend harmoniously with the personal values and the way of life of the indigenous peoples.

Whether Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or animistic, every society possesses its own spiritual heritage and a belief in a hierarchy of good and evil. With that comes a perceived need for protection against ill fortune and evil spirits. Amulets and talismans have long existed in both the Islamic world and in Southeast Asia. Another concept that crosses cultural divides is that of modesty. The need to preserve propriety has always been an adult concern. In Southeast Asia, children were unencumbered by such preoccupations and were generally free to wear nothing but occasional pieces of jewellery and amulets. The *kapong* or ‘modesty plate’, however, is a distinctive decorated metal plate that hung from the waist of, mainly, Muslim children in Southeast Asia, as a symbol of modesty.
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Hospitality is central to the Southeast Asian and the Islamic ways of life. Items to honour the
presence of a guest were extremely important, and as a result, great care was taken in their
embellishment and appearance. Betelnut chewing was a habit greatly relished across Asia, from India
to the Malay world and beyond. Even with the establishment of the Islamic sultanates in the region,
betelnut was adopted by every level of society from king to commoner. It was a necessary courtesy
to offer it to visitors, and hence the metal containers in which the ingredients were stored and
presented were often highly decorated in a manner befitting an honoured guest. Predominantly made
of silver, brass or gold, various forms of betelnut receptacles emerged; from the cenkul (individual
globular containers) to full caskets with compartments.

Regional legacy
Despite the growing influence of Islam in Southeast Asia, not every aspect of its art was affected.
Islamic metalwork demonstrates the continuation of a distinctive regional style. From the kingdoms
of Siam and Java, to the sultanates of the Malay Peninsula, ceremonial items such as water sprinklers,
pouring vessels and pedestal trays retained their original form and decorative motifs over the
centuries and are still produced today. Their function and the ceremonies for which they were
produced remained unchanged.

What lasting impact did the establishment of Islam in the region have upon the artistic
traditions of Malay metalwork? In the non-Muslim areas, the use of figural and iconic imagery is
widespread. In the Muslim parts of Southeast Asia, there was a gradual shift away from this as a
growing demand developed for items adorned with geometric and vegetal motifs. The shining
surfaces of Malay metalwork blossomed with gardens of scrolling vines and flowers. Local abstracted
patterns such as bamboo shoots, cloud scrolls, star anise and gooseberries found favour in the Islamic
design repertoire. The Malay metalwork craftsman has a controlled and refined sense of artistry. The
metalwork of Islamic Southeast Asia is not ornamented with a visually congested surface of intricate
patterns; instead it features a charming and restrained balance of decorative elements. Nowhere is this
more eloquently and aptly expressed than by H. Ling Roth (1993:3):

"He knows how to combine dissimilar patterns so their antagonism melts in one delightfully harmonious
design. He allows no excess of embellishment. Every detail is suitably placed and its removal would leave
an obvious and inartistic blank."

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The central medallion features a calligraphic inscription in Jawi that reads: "Tengku Khadijah Binti Sri Maharaja Sultan Abdul Jalil Rau". Above the inscription is a royal crest – a pair of kris and a spear. It is inscribed with the Arabic numerals indicating the date 1127 AH (1715 AD)
Tortoiseshell betelnut box  
Dutch East Indies  
18th - 19th century AD / 12th - 13th century AH  
18 x 13 cm  
2004.13.20

The habit of betel chewing transcended all levels of society from king to commoner. Betelnut boxes took a variety of forms and utilised diverse materials depending on the wealth and status of the owner. Popular materials included gold, silver, wood or woven fabric. The use of tortoiseshell and the addition of an in-built lock are uncommon in the Malay world, making this set an unusual and highly desirable item.
Silver container
Malay Archipelago
18th century AD / 12th century AH
24 x 13 cm
2005.2.3

This large container was used for storing the ingredients required for betel nut chewing. Malay silver wares are not crowded with motifs, nor are they over-embellished. The appearance is distinctly simple and pleasing to the eye. Decoration and form are proportionately balanced, with blank spaces serving to emphasise the patterned areas.
Silver flask
Malay Archipelago
18th century AD / 12th century AH
31.5 x 14.5 cm
2005.2.2

A water container made of sheet silver and decorated with a repoussé motif of scrolling leafy vines. The shape of this container is a variation of the Malay labu, a gourd-like ceramic water container. Malay craftsmen seldom worked from models; they composed unique designs for each vessel, creating variations where necessary to complement its shape and size.
9th century AH

Vase of sheet silver and decorated with chasing leafy vines. The shape of this type of the Malay labu, a gourd-like ceramic vessel, was commonly used for storage and transportation of food and water. The craftsmen would work from models, carving designs for each vessel, creating a unique piece to complement its shape and size.

Silver ewer
Malay Archipelago
18th century AD / 12th century AH
34.5 x 18 cm
2005.2.5

Owing to the malleability of their material, Malay silversmiths were adept at repoussé decoration. The scrolling leaf designs on this vessel are reminiscent of motifs popularly used in Malay woodcarving. The handle suggests that it was used as a pouring vessel – probably for drinks during kenduri (feasts) or for washing the hands after eating.