Original Malay Compositions

The third category of Malay manuscripts contain original works created by the indigenous population of the Malay world, such as literary and historical works, including adaptation into Malay of Persian and Indian epics. Some prominent examples include *Hikayat Jasbir Manikam* (Persian), *Hikayat Seri Rama* (Indian) and *Hikayat Shab Kobad* (Persian-Indian). Other typical subjects are related to traditional beliefs, traditional medicine and local law. Earlier influences from Hindu and animist belief were still in evidence among some Malays. Islamic elements and practices were added as an adjustment to existing traditions when these did not contradict Islamic teaching.

A ubiquitous example would be talismanic items featuring charms that start with the words *bismillahi rab'ir raabim* (‘in the name of Allah the most gracious, the most merciful’). Islam encourages Muslims to start any endeavour with the name of God. This is evident in traditional healing books whose authors end their remedies by saying *wa allaah a'llam* (Allah who knows everything) or with a sentence such as *berkat doa laillaba illa Allah Muhammad rasulullah* (‘the blessing of the shahadah’). Among traditional charms with Islamic influence is this example:

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*Tauwar Allah, tauwar Muhammad, tauwar baginda Rasulullah*  
Allah's cure, Muhammad's cure  
Segala yang besar tauwar segala yang tajam  
Every large object cures all the sharp

*Segala yang tajam tauwar segala yang tumpit*  
Every sharpness cures all the blunt  

*Angin pulang pada Angin*  
Wind goes back to wind

*Tanab pulang pada tanab*  
Earth goes back to earth

*Api pulang pada api*  
Fire goes back to fire

*Berkat doa Laillaba illa Allah Muhammad Rasulullah*  
With the blessing of the words *laillaba illa Allah Muhammad rasulullah*

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Another group of Malay manuscripts is unbound documents, including letters and *khutbah* (sermon). Those letters in the custody of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia are all personal and written in Malay in Jawi.
scripts. They start with a few lines of prayer for the recipient and continue with subjects relevant to daily life, such as marriage, studies, loans and family matters. Since the collection originates from the East Coast of Malaysia, the letters are mainly addressed to areas of Patani and Kelantan. These were probably written by the royal family, judging by the titles used in the letters. In addition, there is a letter addressed to the Sultan of Pontianak in Borneo. The example illustrated here shows a letter from a ruler of Kota Bharu, Kelantan.

A ruler from Kota Bharu made a list of his wealth, which was probably distributed to his son and daughter. The daughter received jewellery, while the son received jewellery and an estimated five elephants, of which four had the names Enche’ Mek, Anak Keling, Mek Embun and Awan Danun.

A letter from a ruler of Kota Bahru about the distribution of his wealth dated 1340 AH
Adding Local Colour

"Allah is beautiful and loves beauty"
(Hadith narrated by Abdullah Ibnu Massod)

Decoration is not essential to Malay manuscripts, but its presence is often useful in determining their age and origin. Southeast Asian Islamic manuscripts incorporate a variety of decorative techniques for the adornment of the Qur’an and other religious and non-religious works, written in Jawi or Arabic. These manuscripts are ornate and inventive in term of design and colour. Above all, they show the creativity of the region’s Muslims in creating Islamic motifs from their surroundings.

In line with Islamic teaching’s discouragement of the depiction of living beings, the illumination and decorative styles of Malay manuscripts
usually take the form of ornamental patterns based on floral, geometric and calligraphic motifs. These elements were taken and thoughtfully selected from a variety of plants, architectural structures such as domes and arches, and other items such as elaborate hairpins (*cucuk sanggul*), *bunga pabar* and decorative collars (*sitar layang*).

As the Malay Archipelago was heavily influenced by other religions and civilisations before the arrival of Islam, much of the region’s art included decorative devices with a specific significance for these pre-Islamic beliefs. For this reason, the region’s Muslims reused some earlier content that they had inherited, investing it with new meaning. A prominent example would be the arch shape known as *gunungan* and the *banji* swastika, originally associated with Buddhism and Hinduism. As *gunungan* were also reminiscent of the mountains that are part of the landscape of Java, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, the use of this device continued into the Islamic era, being used widely in Malay art, including manuscript decoration. *Banji* is a local name given to the swastika. In Buddhism it is a powerful symbol of eternal change, whereas for the regional audience *banji* means ‘plenty of good luck’.

*Architecture incorporated into manuscript design*
Many types of decorative techniques can be seen in Malay manuscripts, ranging from the simplest to the most profuse. Among the more rudimentary approaches was the beautification of individual letters. Usually these letters would be at the end of certain words, elongated by the writer who would also make stylised knots to complete a sentence or paragraph. Artists also liked to highlight a few words or sentences in their manuscripts. This served the practical purpose of helping the reader to identify the important points within the text as well as showing the start of a new sentence, since most Malay manuscripts did not use any marks for full stops. In addition, this technique was used to differentiate between Jawi and Arabic scripts. The indirect result was to create more colour on the written page.

The use of different inks and colours gave a greater elegance and luxuriance to Malay manuscripts. Decoration with gold and silver, known universally as ‘illumination’, was used mainly at the royal court, especially for Qur’ans. The colour yellow has long been dedicated to ruling families.
Arabic text was usually written in red

Yellow and gold were used exclusively for royalty in the past
in the Malay world. This practice was formalised in a Muslim context by the first Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Muhammad Shah. In *Stulatut as Salatin*, it is stated, “Syubidan bagindalab orang pertama meletakkan kekuningan gerangan tidak dapat dipakai oleh orang keluaran” (“the sultan was the first one who ordered yellow as a royal colour, and it cannot be used by commoners.”)

Frank Swettenham’s writings mention that in several of the more important states of Sumatra, including Aceh, black garments were the special privilege of the raja class. In addition to clothing, black was also used on objects such as wood carvings for houses and palaces in Sumatra, as well as in manuscript illumination, especially for the Qur’an. This colour seems to have acquired a different significance among Sumatra’s various societies. In Bukit Tinggi in West Sumatra, for example, black symbolised durability; in Riau it was associated with strength and earnestness; and in Kota Padang, it represented wisdom. Within regional textile study, black has also been seen as an emblem of femaleness. Among the manuscripts in the I.A.M.M, there are Qur’ans finely decorated in black and gold, from either Sumatra or Java.

*Black was used as a principal colour in Qur’ans from Sumatra and Java*
Red and black were the most commonly used colours for Malay manuscripts and letters. A combination of three colours, such as red, black and white, formed a unity of the cosmos and of the conflicting forces it encompasses. Colours were produced from nature, utilising flowers, roots and fruits; ink was derived from soot, coal and squids. Different areas had different sources. In Kelantan, for example, yellow came from turmeric; red from brazil wood; and black from charcoal. These could be the same dyes that were used in other Malay arts, such as textiles and mat weaving, as well as in food.

In general, decoration in Malay manuscripts can be divided into two: Qur’anic and non-Qur’anic. The decoration of a copy of the Qur’an is highly selective, in accordance with the book’s sacred status. The ink and colours should be from pure sources. These would include plants and minerals such as gold and gemstones. Another influential factor in the design of a Qur’an was the social status of the owner. The more elevated the position of the patron, the more ornate the decoration would be. Paper, gold and semi-precious stones all came at a price.

The form of Qur’anic decoration indicates the origin of a work. Artists used the differences in culture of the various Islamic kingdoms of the Malay world to create a geographical identity. Islamic realms such as Aceh, Riau, Sulawesi, Patani, Kelantan and Terengganu created distinctive styles of decoration, which were developed over time. Colophons, which are very useful for identifying a manuscript’s origins, are extremely rare in this region. According to the heritage specialist Mubin Sheppard, out of respect for their patrons, Malay artists preferred not to put their name on their work.

There are several broad styles of decoration that exist in Qur’ans of the Malay world. These are generally categorised as being in the style of Aceh, Patani, Sulawesi, Kelantan or Terengganu. Although the main motif used is a scrolling tendril, there were considerable differences in treatment. The element they tend to have in common is a single source or starting point. According to the eminent Malaysian wood carver Wan Su Othman, who was awarded the title of ‘National Artist’ in 1997, the creation of tendrils or branches from one starting point illustrates the existence of man. He
adds that the young should be thankful to the old for giving them life. Followers have a duty to respect their leaders for ensuring balance and harmony in their life.

The opening pages of a typical Malay Qur'an are dominated by floral and foliate motifs, wavy frame borders and pointed arches. A significant difference between these and the better-known works of Ottoman and Safavid illuminators is that the Malay Qur'ans sometimes have decorated central pages. This is a feature shared by Qur'ans from Uzbekistan and Kashmir, which might indicate the influence of those regions on Southeast Asia. Not all of the central pages of Malay Qur'ans are fully illuminated. They range from highly ornamental double leaves to one leaf, or even a single word. An exception to this rule are Qur'ans from Patani, which rarely make a feature of the central pages. It would seem that the Qur'anic tradition in Patani was susceptible to different influences than other parts of the Malay world.

Non-Qur'anic Malay manuscripts were decorated in a different manner. Just as the subject matter varied widely, so did the types of decoration. This might include figural images, where appropriate, which was mostly in non-religious manuscripts relating to culture and popular superstition. Illustrations were sometimes also used to embellish works of astronomy and astrology.

Qur'anic decoration was used on some other religious manuscripts, such as the Dalal al Khayrat. This collection of prayers of the Prophet was written by the sufi Muhammad al-Jazuli in the 15th century and is practised by Muslims around the world. In the manuscript shown overleaf, there are three illuminated sections: first opening page, central pages and special pages on Mecca and Medina. The first opening page and the central pages took the form of Malay Qur'anic decoration, while
Illustrations from astrology and astronomy manuscripts

the special pages on the two Holy Cities have illustration of the Ka’aba and the Prophet’s Mosque. The text and arrangement were copied from an Ottoman original, while the decoration consists of local motifs and designs arranged in the same way as the opening page of a Malay Qur’an.

The decoration in Malay manuscripts went beyond illumination and illustration. The artist used anything he could afford to beautify his work.
Whether or not they were intended for a royal patron, considerable attention was paid to giving aesthetic pleasure. In addition to the quality of calligraphy, there was the useful device of text arrangement. The writing of text in specific shapes sometimes entailed creating a design from two languages, Arabic and Malay. Malay would serve as a translation or explanation of the Arabic text, with the Malay words arranged neatly around the Arabic in the form of a geometric swastika.

The swastika shape was among the motifs inherited from the region’s earlier religions or could be the influence of Chinese merchants or Chinese artworks imported into Southeast Asia. In China the motif has associations with well-being and good fortune. Another form of text arrangement involves a wavy shape, created by writing the Arabic text in bold while the Malay translation was written in a less emphatic script. Where there was no special arrangement, the text was usually arranged in a justified paragraph with the same number of words per line and lines per page on every page of the manuscript.

Proportion and balance are essential to Malay manuscript design. Typically, the text box, illumination and motifs are placed centrally on the page, but with larger outer vertical margin than inner margin When
readers chose to add their comments and notes, the desired proportion and balance of the page could easily be disturbed. Some readers, however, tried their best to maintain the original integrity of the design by writing their notes in the side margins.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Malay aesthetics was the concept of the pair. Decoration and illumination were mainly created in sets of two, whether in the Qur'an or other manuscripts. In most of these, the opening and closing pages are double pages or paired. It seems likely that this principle is connected to the Qur'anic verse:

"Glory to God, Who created in pairs all things that the earth produces, as well as their own (human) kind and (other) things of which they have no knowledge."

(Surah Yasin: verse 36).
A New Leaf

The need to transmit knowledge through the written word has resulted in a wide range of solutions. Materials have included everything from stone and wood tablets to tree bark, leaves, animal skin, papyrus and paper. Before paper was introduced into Southeast Asia, the inhabitants of the region used a varied selection of natural resources.

China produced paper five centuries before the advent of Islam. It is believed that Chinese craftsmen introduced paper into the Islamic empire in 751 AD, after being taken prisoner by Muslim forces who defeated the Tang army in Central Asia. These prisoners were used to set up a paper mill in Samarkand, which later led to the development of the papermaking industry in other parts of the Islamic world, including Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus.
The Moorish occupation of Spain and Sicily facilitated the spread of papermaking techniques in Europe. Initially, paper was viewed with some disfavour within Christendom, being regarded as a manifestation of Muslim culture. The 13th century Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, sent out a decree banning paper and invalidating all official documents written on it. However, attitudes in Europe changed as the world about it moved ahead with new technology and innovations. The introduction of the printing press in the middle of the 15th century also made a difference to the Christian world's perception of paper. The art of papermaking soon spread to France, Italy, Germany and Holland.

In Italy, the Arab papermaking techniques were improved with advances in the harnessing of water power and the use of wire nets for the paper moulds. European manufacturers also started to use watermarks, which may have been intended as a way to distinguish between Arab and European-made paper. Southeast Asia was not a major producer of this commodity, but it was a consumer. The colonial presence from the 16th to the 20th century increased the importance of paper as a writing material in the region. The Dutch came to Southeast Asia not only to monopolise the produce of lands rich with herbs and spices, but they also brought with them the technology of Europe. Books and printing were two of their most significant imports. The demand for paper was high, and paper from China, and possibly also from the Arab world and India, started to enter the local market to fulfil this need.

Most manuscripts from the Malay world were written on paper, of which there are two main types: with and without watermarks. Both types of paper can be thick or thin, also with a smooth or coarse texture, and both usually start with a cream colour and later turn to yellow. The watermarked paper found in the Malay world was mostly imported from Europe. It is considerably harder to trace the origins of non-watermarked paper.

A more distinctively regional type of material that was used for writing was the palm leaf. Of all manuscript materials, this is among the most fragile; careful handling is required as the palm leaves become brittle and easily broken. Tree bark, raw hides and wood boards were also used as manuscript media. These materials were procured locally, and in bulk, while paper needed to be imported. Tree bark paper, known as duwang, was widely used in Java, and was made with varying degrees of proficiency. In many manuscripts, the fibres of the bark can still be seen. The correct preparation of these materials is essential, not only for their effectiveness as a writing medium, but also for their preservation. Without this they are more exposed to fungus and insects.
From left: writing on wood boards and tree bark

From left: writing on dluwang and goat-skin
Paper's Hidden History

A watermark is defined as an image or pattern on paper that is visible when put up to the light. This image usually comes together with the name or initials of the manufacturer and often features some indication of the place of origin. Watermarks are sometimes accompanied by the date or year that the paper was produced. Paper can be appreciated not only for its contents but also for the material itself. Watermarks provide a wealth of information; a tradition that has continued up to the present day.

The purpose of watermarks was to provide a trademark or signature for paper mills. From the 18th century onwards, watermarks have been widely used on banknotes to prevent counterfeiting. In Europe during the 12th to 17th centuries, before the invention of a mechanical device, watermarks were produced by manual techniques. Wires were used to