

Islamic Art at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore

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1. Introduction

A special exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia: Highlights of the Asian Civilisations Museum” held from July 7, 2012 to January 20, 2013 was, to the author’s knowledge, only the third major exhibition in the world to focus on aspects of Islamic art formed in Southeast Asia⁽¹⁾. Along with the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia⁽²⁾, Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum (hereinafter ACM, fig. 1) is one of a few museums in Southeast Asia which holds a number of high-quality Islamic art objects and has a permanent space to exhibit them⁽³⁾. The significance of these museums cannot be overemphasized because they house collection of Islamic art objects produced in East Asia and Southeast Asia which are rarely found in major Islamic art collections in the US and Europe.

In the study of Islamic art history, which has focused on Islamic art and architecture formed in the

heartland of the Islamic world from Spain to Central Asia, issues related to Islamic art in East Asia and Southeast Asia have tended to be regarded as peripheral. Therefore, the subject of the exhibition “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia: Highlights of the Asian Civilisations Museum” can shed new light on the history of Islamic art and encourage further investigation of this particular aspect. Based on the author’s trip to Singapore in September 2012, this paper aims to describe the characteristics of the Islamic art exhibition at the ACM and to understand the policy and purpose behind it.

2. History of the ACM

While the ACM, which was established in 1997, is a relatively new museum, its collection, especially its Southeast Asian collection, can be traced back to the Raffles Library and Museum⁽⁴⁾. Similar to other British colonial institutions, the Raffles Library and Museum was established in 1887 in an attempt to collect products and specimens of Singapore and the surrounding area to help people understand their history, culture and industry⁽⁵⁾. By 1969, the Raffles Library and Museum had become the National Museum of Singapore, and in 1991 it was divided into three different museums: the Singapore History Museum, the Singapore Art Museum, and the Asian Civilisations Museum. All of three are run by the National Heritage Board which was established in 1993. In accordance with the vision of a Minister for Information and the Arts at that time, Brigadier-General George Yeo, the ACM was expected to promote the understanding of the origins and cultures of the citizens of Singapore⁽⁶⁾. Given the fact that the citizens of Singapore consist of multiple ethnic groups, and their ancestors came from various places in China, Southeast Asia, India and West Asia, as a former director of the ACM, Dr. Kenson Kwok mentions, the ACM



fig. 1 The Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore
Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum

has sought to collect a variety of objects “that could tell the story of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans⁽⁷⁾.”

In 1997, a gallery in Armenian Street became the first home of the ACM and was opened mainly to exhibit Chinese culture and history. Then in 2003, a new home for the ACM was completed at Empress Place to hold galleries for objects from China, India, Southeast Asia and West Asia. By 2008, the gallery in Armenian Street was transformed into the Peranakan Museum to exhibit the history of the eclectic culture of people who had left China, India and parts of Eurasia to settle in Southeast Asia.

3. Islamic gallery

In order to fulfill the abovementioned mission to “highlights the roots of Singapore’s different ethnic groups in the various cultures and civilisations of Asia⁽⁸⁾,” in addition to the Southeast Asian collection which was inherited from the Raffles Library and Museum, the ACM has had to enlarge its collections for the Indian (South Asian) and Islamic (West Asian) gallery with the support of governmental funds and gifts. Long-term loans from other collections have also helped the ACM to complement its gallery contents. For instance, loan collections from the famous Tareq Rajab Museum in Kuwait enabled visitors to see high-quality Islamic manuscripts such as the Qur’an and ceramics from central Islamic lands.

Regarding the direction and policy of the Islamic gallery, Ms. Huism Tan, a former senior curator of the gallery, has stated that the collection should be focused on “areas which would contribute towards the understanding of Islamic culture and history and also the relevance for Southeast Asia and Singapore⁽⁹⁾.” Therefore, as one enters the Islamic gallery, one is introduced to the basics of Islam as a religion and as a way of life with the help of explanatory panels, captions and interactive audio-visual devices. Since the Qur’an is the visualization of God’s word, the entrance of the gallery exhibits manuscripts of the Qur’an and works of calligraphy (fig. 2). This section is followed by displays of ceramics, metalworks, and woodworks. Most of these objects are from central Islamic lands stretching from Islamic Spain to Central Asia, but some of them are unique examples from China and Southeast Asia, such as a 17th-18th century Chinese Qur’an manuscript decorated with motifs of lotus and

chrysanthemum (fig. 3). At the corner of the Islamic gallery is a reconstruction of the interior of a mosque composed of a *minbar*, a carpet, candle stands and screened images of different types of *mihrab*. This is a useful educational device that enables visitors to experience the space in which Muslims pray to God. The rest of the Islamic gallery, which is on the floor above, exhibits several Islamic illustrated manuscripts of scientific and literary works as well as textiles, musical instruments and so forth.



fig. 2 Entrance of the Islamic (West Asian) gallery
Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum



fig. 3 Qur'an, China, 17th-18th century (1997.05216)
Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum

4. South Asian gallery

Several Islamic art objects, especially those from Mughal India can be found in the South Asian gallery⁽¹⁰⁾. Entering the gallery through a north Indian gateway of the post Shah Jahan period (fig. 4)⁽¹¹⁾, one sees a 18th-19th- century embroidered carpet and a tent panel which are often introduced as examples of Mughal textiles⁽¹²⁾. A pair of *jali* screens of the late 17th

century also gives this gallery the air of a Mughal palace⁽¹³⁾. Along with typical Mughal jade objects and Deccani *bidri* wares, objects related to the Parsis are also on display. The Parsis were Zoroastrian, and in order to avoid persecution, they left Muslim Iran as early as the 8th century for India. During the 17th century, in response to an invitation from the English East India Company, many Parsis migrated to Bombay and, by the mid-19th century, they eventually arrived in Singapore as merchants or philanthropists and contributed to the development of the country⁽¹⁴⁾. It is likely that such historical connection between Iran, India and Singapore makes the South Asian gallery more familiar to and significant for Singaporeans.



fig. 4 Gateway, India, late 17th - early 18th century (1995.11097)

Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum

5. Special exhibition: “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia: Highlights of the Asian Civilisations Museum”

The special exhibition “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia: Highlights of the Asian Civilisations Museum” featured many distinctive objects produced in Southeast Asia as a result of the encounter with Islam (fig. 5)⁽¹⁵⁾. Islam is one of important elements in the region because from about the end of the 13th century, Islam spread widely as the number of Muslim merchants coming to Southeast Asia increased, and Malacca on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula and Aceh in north Sumatra became centers of Islam in the region⁽¹⁶⁾. At the beginning of the 15th century, the Malacca Sultanate (1402-1511) was established as a Muslim

dynasty. Around that time, from the 15th century to the 17th century, many port-towns in Southeast Asia prospered as important junctions of maritime trade and bustled with merchants from Europe, West Asia, South Asia and East Asia⁽¹⁷⁾.

Generally, in the history of Islamic art, “Islamic art” has been defined as “art produced in Islamic lands,” or “art produced for Muslims,” or “art produced by Muslims⁽¹⁸⁾.” However, in order to make the exhibition more accessible to the general public, instead of such definition, the exhibition was organized to start with objects related to the Qur’an and religious furnishings, such as a Myanmar Qur’an box,



fig. 5 Gallery for the special exhibition “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia”

Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum



fig. 6 Blade of Keris, Java, perhaps 17th century (xxxx-03981)

Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum

to explain the religion of Islam and its practice. By contrast, the following section showed a variety of objects from the secular sphere, such as a typical Southeast Asian dagger (*keris*) inscribed with a verse from the Qur'an (fig. 6). These objects were employed to tell the visitors how local tradition was Islamicized.

Another important element of the exhibition was the Chinese contribution to Islamic art in Southeast Asia⁽¹⁹⁾. Along with several 16th-17th century Chinese pottery made for Muslim patrons there were cloisonné enamel vessels specially produced for Muslim patrons in China in the 19th century (fig. 7), and some of them were exported to Southeast Asia. In terms of the shape and decoration, these cloisonné enameled vessels are typically Chinese, but their inscriptions praising God in Arabic script developed in China make these objects Islamic.

Southeast Asia is famous for its highly-developed textile production, and among the exhibits there was a variety of textiles with Qur'anic inscriptions or other religious elements, including examples of early 20th-century *ikat* from the Malay Peninsula woven with inscriptions which read "Muhammad is the Messenger of God" and "There is no god, but the God, the King, the Truth that makes all things manifest....."⁽²⁰⁾ Visitors would have been struck by this textile with such minute inscriptions because *ikat* is produced by a time-consuming technique in which the threads of both warp and weft must be dyed before weaving to reproduce a certain pattern. Batik (resist-dyed textile) is another medium through which Islamic elements were dissolved into the material culture of Southeast



fig. 7 Cloisonné enamel vessels, China, 19th century (large vases 2000-08300/1; small vases 2000-08301/3; covered box xxxx-04091)
Photograph by author,
Image © The Asian Civilisations Museum

Asia. Several interesting batiks such as one decorated with a motif of bifurcated swords, which signifies Ali, and one depicting the pilgrimage to Mecca were on display.

6. Past exhibitions and publications

Over the years, the ACM has organized many exhibitions related to Asian civilisations⁽²¹⁾. Among them, the exhibitions related to Islamic art can be divided into three categories: The first category consists of exhibitions that introduce Islamic culture through art. A 1997 exhibition "The Harmony of Letters: Islamic Calligraphy from the Tareq Rajab Museum" provided the first occasion in Singapore to explore the art of Islamic calligraphy. A catalogue published in conjunction with this exhibition contains more than 50 examples of superb calligraphy from manuscripts and documents as well as 30 objects of ceramic, metalworks and textiles to show the rich variety of calligraphic styles used for both documents and daily artifacts⁽²²⁾. Another exhibition of calligraphy "Contemporary Islamic Calligraphy: Tradition and Innovation" was held in 2011⁽²³⁾.

A 2001 photographic exhibition "Spirit of a Community: Mosques of Singapore" offered another educational opportunity for visitors, in this case to learn not only about the types of mosques in Singapore, but also about the basics of Islam. In Singapore, it is easy to find mosques such as Masjid Hajjah Fatimah built in 1846 and the Sultan Mosque built in 1928 near Arab Street (fig. 8). The Masjid Abdul Gafoor in Little India is another well-known example (fig. 9). Along with these mosques, this exhibition featured a variety of Islamic festivals celebrated in Singapore. This topic must have helped non-Muslim Singaporeans to familiarize themselves with the customs of their Muslim neighbors.

A 2004 exhibition "From the Land of the Ottoman Sultans" was organized by the ACM in collaboration with leading museums in Turkey such as the Topkapi Palace Museum. This exhibition and accompanying catalogue illustrated the development of Ottoman art through art objects which were actually used by royal families and courtiers of the empire⁽²⁴⁾.

In 2012, after travelling to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, the exhibition "Treasures of the Aga Khan Museum: Architecture in Islamic Arts" was



fig. 8 The Sultan Mosque (Photograph by author)



fig. 9 The Masjid Abdul Gafoor
(Photograph by author)

held at the ACM and the author was able to see it during her visit. The Aga Khan created the world famous Islamic art collection and this exhibition gave a special opportunity to people in Singapore to see a wide variety of superb art objects from Islamic Spain, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iran and India. The exhibition space was carefully arranged so that visitors could understand and experience the space characteristic to Islamic lands. The accompanying catalogue, which was written by leading scholars in Islamic art, is a great source of information that paves the way for further exploration⁽²⁵⁾.

The second category is related to Indian art. A 1994 exhibition at the ACM “Alamkara: 5000 Years of India” was made possible by 330 art objects loaned from the National Museum, New Delhi. Using *alamkara* (which means decoration) as a key term to

understand Indian art, this exhibition and accompanying catalogue introduced a wide variety of high-quality Indian objects including those from the Mughal period⁽²⁶⁾. In 2010, after traveling to The British Museum, The Louvre, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the ACM became the venue for the exhibition, “Treasury of the World: Jewelled Arts of India in the Age of the Mughals.” This exhibition, organized by The al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait, presented 402 bejeweled Mughal art objects. A 2011 exhibition “Patterns of Trade: Indian Textiles for Export, 1400-1900” featured over 70 Indian trade textiles in the ACM collection to explain the function of these Indian textiles as favored trade goods that were exported all over the world and to illustrate the cultural exchange reflected in their design.

The third category is related to Islamic art in Southeast Asia. A 2010 exhibition “Sumatra: Isle of Gold” focused on the history and culture of Sumatra. Along with influences from India, China, and Europe, Islam also played an important role in the culture of Sumatra because Islamic sultanates were established there from the 13th century onward. The catalogue accompanying this exhibition has a section on art objects that were produced in Sumatra with some Islamic elements⁽²⁷⁾. The 2012-2013 exhibition “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia: Highlights of the Asian Civilisations Museum” described in the preceding section also fits into this category.

7. Exhibiting Islamic art as education: identity of Singapore as a multi-ethnic society

Singapore is a multi-ethnic country. According to 2006 data, 75.2 percent of Singapore citizens were Chinese, 13.6 percent were Malay, 8.8 percent were Indian and 2.4 percent were of other ethnic origins⁽²⁸⁾. Since about 15 percent of Singapore’s population is Muslim⁽²⁹⁾, Islam constitutes an important part of Singapore’s culture and contemporary society.

The ACM has clearly declared that its mission is: “To explore and present the cultures and civilisations of Asia, so as to promote awareness and appreciation of the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans and their links to Southeast Asia and the world⁽³⁰⁾.” In accordance with this mission, permanent and special exhibitions, publications and events are carefully arranged so that visitors, including both Muslim and

non-Muslim Singaporeans, can learn about history and culture of Islam and enjoy viewing high-quality Islamic art objects. The ACM is a great educational institution for foreign visitors to Singapore as well. Hence Singaporeans and visitors from foreign countries are able to learn that multiculturalism and multiracialism are characteristics of the modern Singapore identity and one element of that identity is Islam.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank former director of the ACM, Dr. Kenson Kwok, who kindly introduced me to a former curator, Ms. Hui Tan, and a present curator, Dr. Pedro Moura Carvalho, in charge of Islamic art. I am grateful to both of them who kindly spent time to discuss issues during my visit. This paper is part of the outcome of research performed under a Waseda University Grant for Special Research Project (Project number 2012A-099).

NOTE

- (1) Two preceding exhibitions about the topic were organized in 2005 at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia and at the Islamic Arts Museum, Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. See Bennett (2005) and Guise (2005).
- (2) For the characteristics of this museum, see Kamada (2012).
- (3) Lenzi (2004) is a convenient resource for information about the museums of Southeast Asia. Adahl and Ahlund (2002) list the Brunei Museum, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, and the National Museum of Malaysia as the only museums in Southeast Asia which hold Islamic art collection.
- (4) For a history of the ACM, see Kwok (2002) and ACM (2006), pp. 11-15.
- (5) Kwok (2002), p. 44. Also see Liu (1987) for the transformation of the Raffles Library and Museum into the National Museum of Singapore.
- (6) Kwok (2002), p. 45.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- (8) ACM (2006), p. 13.
- (9) Tan (2002), p. 80.
- (10) These objects were published in Krishnan (2007).
- (11) For this gateway, see ACM (2006), pp. 124-125.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319 and pp. 262-263 respectively.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.
- (14) This information is taken from the explanatory panel at the gallery.
- (15) This exhibition is not accompanied by any catalogue, but a concise 10-page guide provides a historical background of the region and tells the story behind the production of Islamic art objects in this region.
- (16) Hirose (2004), p. 2.
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- (18) For instance, see introduction of Bloom and Blair (1997) for an explanation of the term "Islamic art."
- (19) For the early history of Islam in China and Southeast Asia, see Wade (2012).
- (20) This information is taken from a caption for this textile (acc. no. 2007-53316-001/2).
- (21) For information about past and current exhibitions, see the website of the ACM:
<http://www.acm.org.sg/exhibitions/exhibitions.asp>
- (22) Safwat (1997).
- (23) This exhibition introduced contemporary Islamic art works including one by Koichi Honda.
- (24) Yeo (2004).
- (25) Graves and Junod (2011).
- (26) NHB (1994).
- (27) Tan (2009).
- (28) Nasir, Pereira and Turner (2010), p. 5, Table 1.1
- (29) *Ibid.*, p. 6, Table 1.2
- (30) See the website of the ACM:
http://www.acm.org.sg/the_museum/ethos_vision.asp

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