

Islamic Art in Southeast Asia: The Significance of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

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Introduction

The ideas about Islamic art have been developed in the West based on the art historical method and subsequently leading museums in the collection of Islamic art objects, such as the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, the Musée du Louvre, the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art located in Europe and the United States⁽¹⁾. While there are a few museums in Asia that hold Islamic art collections which are equal in scale to those of the above museums, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (hereinafter IAMM) has continued to expand its collections to become one of the most important collections of Islamic art in Southeast Asia. The author had a chance to visit the IAMM in July 2011. This paper reports the characteristics of the collection and its significance.

1. The Foundation of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

A modern white building designed by an Italian architect, Roberto Monsani, stands in the green area of Lake Garden in Kuala Lumpur⁽²⁾. The facade at the main entrance is decorated with a traditional floral-design tile mosaic produced by Iranian craftsmen (fig. 1). On the roof top are domes inspired by those of Safavid Iran. The museum has a courtyard with a fountain garden which is another characteristic element of Islamic architecture⁽³⁾. A variety of Islamic art objects are displayed in the spacious thematic galleries which are connected to each other via corridors containing exhibits (fig. 2). Since its foundation in December 1998 by the Albukhary Foundation, the IAMM has continued its acquisition program and by 2009 had about 2,400 objects in its collection⁽⁴⁾. The objective of the museum is clearly described on its website as “to create a collection that is truly represen-

tative of the Islamic world.”⁽⁵⁾ The Scholar’s Library established in 2004 currently holds more than 10,000 books and manuscripts related to Islamic art and serves as a great resource for researchers. Another facility deserving special attention is the Conservation Center, also established in 2004, which is the only institution in Malaysia for the repair and preservation of works of art. The IAMM’s education department offers various workshops to help visitors to understand and enjoy the art works⁽⁶⁾. Thus, the IAMM is equipped with facilities so that it can function as an advanced research and educational institution.

2. Characteristics of the Display

A. Permanent Galleries

The IAMM has 12 permanent galleries for: Architecture, the Qur’an and Manuscripts, India, China, the Malay World, Jewelry, Textile, Arms and Armor, Ceramics and Glass, Living with Wood, Coins and Seals, and Metalwork⁽⁷⁾. As is the case with other museums with substantial Islamic art collections in the West, the objects in each gallery are displayed in accordance with period and region. The most important to and a characteristic of the IAMM is the Malay World gallery. Muslim traders were reported to have come to Southeast Asia as early as the mid 8th century and the gravestones found in the Malay archipelago are evidence of a Muslim presence in 10th century and later⁽⁸⁾. At the beginning of the 15th century, Malacca established itself as an Islamic kingdom and flourished as an *entrepôt* between China and the Middle East. This gallery displays art objects such as textiles, manuscripts and metal works made for Muslims in the Malay world which then encompassed the Malay peninsula and archipelago, the Indonesian archipelago, Patani (Southern Thailand), Borneo and the southern Philippines⁽⁹⁾.

The China gallery is another important section

unique to this museum in that among the objects in this gallery are Chinese wares with Arabic inscriptions made for export to overseas Muslim users or for domestic Chinese Muslims, Qur'an manuscripts and calligraphic scrolls made in China for Chinese Muslims, and cast bronze or cloisonné-decorated incense burners used in Chinese Muslim culture⁽¹⁰⁾.

The Architecture gallery features a display of elaborate models of important buildings such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, Taj Mahal in Agra and other major buildings which represent each region and time period of the Islamic world. Next to them are models of the mosques of Southeast Asia which bear elements derived from the Hindu or Buddhist heritage of the region⁽¹¹⁾. Thus this gallery is designed to provide visitors with a survey of Islamic architecture and help them to understand the variety and transition of styles in architecture from a comparative viewpoint.

B. Special Exhibitions

Special exhibitions are organized at regular intervals which enable visitors to see Islamic art objects from overseas institutions such as the Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait and the National Museum New Delhi⁽¹²⁾. Some of these exhibitions are unique to this museum. For instance, in a collaboration with the Museum of Cultural Palace of Nationalities, Beijing and the Northwest Minorities University, Lanzhou, China, the 2001 exhibition of "Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China" highlighted the cultures of the Muslims in China⁽¹³⁾. As far as the author is aware, such an exhibition has not been planned in any other major museums with substantial Islamic art collections in the West.

3. Publications

A variety of catalogues in connection with exhibitions has been published⁽¹⁴⁾, but their academic significance varies. Especially important are those about Islamic art in Southeast Asia which have been rarely published elsewhere. Based on the comprehensive collection of the IAMM, *The Message and the Monsoon: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia* published by the museum in 2005 introduces Islamic art objects such as manuscripts, textiles, weapons, woodwork, jewelry, seals and coins from Southeast Asia to illustrate the history and culture of the Malay world in detail⁽¹⁵⁾. A small cat-

alogue entitled *Malay Manuscripts: An Introduction* concisely explains the various aspects of the Malay manuscript such as types of script, styles of illumination, paper and binding⁽¹⁶⁾. Compared with exhibition catalogues from major collections of Islamic art in the West, the IAMM catalogues pay more attention to the content of the Arabic and Persian inscriptions attached to art objects. For instance, the catalogue for the exhibition *Al-Kalima*, which means the word of God, carefully explains the content of the inscription on each art object whether of ceramic, textile, metalwork and or woodwork in relation to corresponding sections in the Qur'an⁽¹⁷⁾. Similarly, *Rhythm and Verses: Masterpieces of Persian Calligraphy*, which focuses on Persian single-folio calligraphies of the 16-19th century, provides rich information about the calligraphers and their signatures, the content of the text and its source, and the style of calligraphy for each work⁽¹⁸⁾. Some other catalogues reflect issues recently discussed in the field of Islamic art; the catalogue of *Beyond Orientalism: How the West was Won Over by Islamic Art* published in 2008 is one such example⁽¹⁹⁾. Through juxtaposition of Islamic art objects and the Western artifacts they inspired such as the objects produced by Tiffany and the silverware of Christofle, the catalogue demonstrates how 19th-century artists in the West were inspired by Islamic art. This kind of interaction in the 18-19th century has been the focus of a recent study⁽²⁰⁾. Also, two-volume catalogues have been published on the permanent collection of the IAMM⁽²¹⁾.

4. The significance of the Islamic Art Museum Malaysia

Since its establishment, the IAMM has played an important role as the major Islamic art museum in Southeast Asia. First, through its frequent exhibitions, various publications and educational activities, the IAMM provides people with the fruits of research in the field of Islamic art history which was initially developed in the West. In fact, since 1999, by inviting prominent scholars from all over the world, the IAMM continuously holds frequent seminars to offer people the chance of learning about recent issues in the field. The captions of the art objects are written in detail in Malay, English and Arabic so that not only local Malays, but also overseas visitors can understand the historical and cultural background of the objects. In this way, the museum introduces Islamic art to wider

audience. Second, through unique galleries for Islamic art in Malay world and China which have been overlooked in the West, the IAMM presents a picture of the diversity of artworks developed in the Islamic world. Since many surveys of Islamic art and university curricula tend to pay little attention to Islamic art in Southeast Asia and China⁽²²⁾, the IAMM's emphasis on these neglected fields is especially important. Continuous exhibitions and accompanying publications about Islamic art in Southeast Asia and China will not only supplement knowledge of Islamic art history in general, but also enrich this field of research.



fig. 1 Exterior of the IAMM (©Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia)



fig. 2 Gallery of the IAMM (©Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia)

NOTE

- (1) For the formation of Islamic art, see Vernoit (2000).
- (2) Malaysia (2002), p. 23.
- (3) For the building and interior design, see Malaysia (2002), pp. 22-49.

- (4) Malaysia (2009), p. 15.
- (5) See the official website of the IAMM. Available at http://www.iamm.org.my/i_ex/
- (6) For these facilities and activities, see Malaysia (2009), pp. 21, 34-57.
- (7) For the museum galleries and display, see Malaysia (2009), pp. 58-63.
- (8) Yatim (1988), p. 61; Zakaria and Latif (2008), p. 10.
- (9) Malaysia (2002), p. 173.
- (10) See Malaysia (2002), pp. 161-171. For similar objects in the Muzium Negara (National Museum), see Yatim (1981).
- (11) For the architecture gallery, see Malaysia (2002), pp. 103-121.
- (12) For previous special exhibitions, see Malaysia (2002), pp. 276-277 and Malaysia (2009), p. 16 and pp. 372-388.
- (13) Malaysia (2002), p. 277. For the catalogue of the exhibition, see Malaysia (2001).
- (14) For the list of publications, see Malaysia (2009), pp. 372-388.
- (15) Malaysia (2005). Bennett (2005) is another rare publication covering this area. This catalogue is based on an exhibition of Islamic art in Southeast Asia held at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide and the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra in 2005-2006.
- (16) Zakaria and Latif (2008). Gallop (1994) is a more detailed and comprehensive work in this field. For a list of Malay manuscripts in the IAMM, see Malaysia (2010).
- (17) Barakat (2003).
- (18) Barakat (2004). This exhibition was held both at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum, Singapore and at the IAMM in 2005.
- (19) Guise (2008).
- (20) For instance, Behrens-Abouseif and Vernoit (2006) and Bates (2008).
- (21) Malaysia (2002) and Malaysia (2009).
- (22) For instance, the most basic survey of Islamic art such as those by Blair and Bloom (1994) and Ettinghausen, Galabar and Jenkins-Madina (2001) rarely mention Islamic art in Southeast Asia and China.

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