



# Islamic art and civilisation of Southeast Asia

Muslim sea voyages into Southeast Asia over one thousand years ago set in motion cultural transformations of great significance. From the Arabian peninsula, Persia, Turkey and, later, Mughal India and even southern China, traders and wandering teachers, often adherents of Sufi mystical practices, introduced Islam to mainland and island Southeast Asia where the new religion spread amongst the royal courts and maritime societies of the region.

The revelations of the Prophet Muhammad (570–633) emphasised a spiritual code that encouraged a holistic view of life including art. Islam permeated all elements of life, inspiring the creation of beautiful objects for both religious and decorative purposes. Throughout the Islamic world, however, regional aesthetic styles

remained evident across different artistic media including manuscripts, stone and wood carving, metalwork, ceramics and textiles. Both believers and non-believers created art for Muslim communities, contributing to a unique and vital Southeast Asian Islamic heritage, which reflected the multiculturalism and diverse local histories of the region.

Today Southeast Asia supports around one quarter of Islam's global community. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, the majority of the population is Muslim, while in Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma (Myanmar) and East Timor there are significant Muslim minorities with their own distinct art and cultural identities.

(image)

Indonesia

Riau-Lingga, Sumatra

**Ritual fan** 19th century

gold, silver, precious stones

Collection: National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta

The Malay inscription in Arabic script, known as *jawi*, evokes the blessings of Allah while declaring the illustrious rulers of Johor to be direct descendants of Alexander the Great (Sultan Iskandar Zulkarnaen). While the form of the fan mirrors the everyday fans woven from palm leaf, the shape may also relate to a legend that says that Alexander the Great was named after a type of leaf which was said to have miraculously healed his mother.

## Activities:

- Using a map of the world, follow the path of Islam from the Arabian peninsula to Southeast Asia. Along with Islam, what else was brought to Southeast Asia from the Middle East? (The image on the front of this card will give you a hint)
- Why would the people of Johor want to be associated with Alexander the Great?
- Compare and contrast the materials, decoration, uses and significance of this ritual fan with fans from Europe, Japan, China, and the Pacific Islands.



# 'God's shadow on earth'

The rulers and aristocratic elite who were among the first Southeast Asians to adopt Islam created an elegant cultural heritage still evident today throughout the region. Royal patronage ensured that the most lavish art was produced for court circles. Fabulous displays gave visual expression to the Islamic notion of the sacred role of kingship.

The spectacular regalia and costume worn in court ritual was intended to emphasise the sultan's power and promote the allegiance of his or her followers. Moreover, the validity of a ruler's mandate over the principality depended on the possession of ancestral

heirlooms, known as *pusaka*, in the form of ceremonial weapons, textiles and other objects.

Gold, with its rich symbolism and high worldly value, was the preferred medium for royal regalia. The colour was compared to the sun whose orb was a metaphor for the universal monarch and whose radiance was seen as akin to the light of God's blessing. Gold objects became symbols of the prestige and wealth of the court throughout Southeast Asia while the use of yellow coloured silks was the exclusive right of ruling families.

(image)

Indonesia

Riau-Lingga, Sumatra

**Keris** 19th century

gold, iron, gemstones, wood

Collection: National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta

The lavish adornment of this sheath was intended to contain the potentially dangerous supernatural forces within the blade of this royal heirloom. The owner's power and wealth was displayed through the use of the most expensive materials and best craftsmanship available. *Keris* blades are never straight and the blade of this *keris* has seven curves.

## Activities:

- What is a symbol?
- Think about the properties of gold. Write a list of six things that gold could represent and compare your list with others.
- *Keris* (pronounced 'kris') are symbols of power and authority. What symbols of power and authority are you familiar with?
- Look at the decoration – the artist has used metal to represent twine binding, cord, cloth wrapping (behind the diamond and ruby rosette) and fern leaves. These symbolise aspects of Sumatran power that bestow happiness and strength on their owner. Design your own *keris* and sheath. Think carefully of each element of decoration and its meaning for you.
- Research *keris* protocols and find out how, when, where and by whom they could be used.



# Art and pageant

For centuries Muslim societies have celebrated public events and royal rites of passage, such as coronations, marriages, circumcisions and visits from foreign embassies, with spectacular processions on land and water. Giant carriages and boats, often in the form of legendary creatures, accompanied these parades that were made festive with the unfurling of banners and the sound of ceremonial cannon fire. These were often occasions when communal identification with Islam

was made evident in the ornamentation of fine objects with Arabic calligraphy.

The colourful art made for such customary occasions was, however, often ephemeral and few such objects have survived. Nevertheless those that do testify to the rich legacy of Islamic civilisation in Southeast Asia and to widespread forms of popular art that have now vanished.

(image)

Malaysia

probably Sarawak

**Makara** early 20th century

wood, traces of pigment

Collection: Department of Museums and Antiquities, Kuala Lumpur

Muslim principalities established in the 16th century along the coast and rivers of west Borneo resulted in a close interaction between Malays and inland non-Muslim people. This imposing sculpture probably formed the prow for a boat. It depicts the legendary *makara*, a water monster of Indian origin with a distinctive trunk popular in Malay arts, especially those of the maritime kingdoms.

The decoration of boats with fantastic creatures was widespread throughout Southeast Asia and especially among the Muslim courts. According to Tomes Pires, a Portuguese official based in Melaka (Malacca) in the early 16th century, Malay boats were 'carved in a thousand and one ways, with figures of serpents'.

## Activities:

- The *makara* has been described as a legendary sea monster that had a 'trunk of an elephant, the horns of a goat, the tusks of a wild boar, the body of a crocodile and the tail of a fish'. (FA Noor quoted in *Crescent Moon* catalogue, 2005, p. 283)

This is the traditional Malay riddle about the *makara*:

It has a trunk, but is not an elephant  
It has a crown, but is not a king  
It is scaly but is not a fish  
What is it?

- Design your own monster made up of different animal parts. Write a riddle to match.
- What other creatures are used to decorate boats? What type of boats do they decorate?



# The draped universe of Islam

Many of the most sumptuous textiles produced in Southeast Asia were closely associated with the Islamic courts of the region. Garments and ceremonial hangings were created in a variety of techniques, including brocade and tapestry weaving, embroidery, intricate tie-dyeing, finely waxed batik, and gold-leaf embossing, often from imported luxury threads of silk and gold. Among the most elegant are the *songket* floating weft brocades, most closely associated with the Malay sultanates.

The richly decorated textiles, almost invariably made by women, display a variety of auspicious motifs drawn from indigenous and foreign sources. A prominent feature of palace ceremony and rites of passage, including birth, circumcision, marriage and funeral ceremonies, their display symbolised the pivotal position of the sultan between the older world of local ancestral tradition and the lively sphere of international maritime exchange.

(image)

Indonesia

Aceh, Sumatra

**Ceremonial hanging** early 20th century  
cotton, wool, silk, gold thread, sequins, glass beads, lace, mica, appliqué, couching, embroidery  
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

This elaborately decorated panel was hung around the bed or nuptial throne at Acehese circumcision and wedding ceremonies. It includes a pair of *bouraq*, the fabulous animal that the Prophet Muhammad rode on His miraculous night journey to Heaven. The *bouraq* is a hybrid creature with the face and voice of a human, the ears of an ass, the body of a horse, and the wings and tail of a peacock. It is associated with blessing and joy.

## Activities:

- This *bouraq* is part of a larger symmetrically designed textile (you are seeing a photograph of only one half of the textile). Draw the other half to complete the design.
- Look at the symbols of good fortune in this textile: the *bouraq*, Malay inscriptions in Arabic script upon each *bouraq* wishing good fortune and happiness in marriage, and a number of swastikas. The swastika is an important symbol in a range of cultures and religions, but in the West it has sometimes been reversed and then has an entirely different meaning. What symbols of good fortune can you think of?
- Research the story of the Prophet Muhammad's life and find out how the *bouraq* assisted Him.



# Sculpture and Islam

The uncertainties of time and the tropical elements have not favoured the survival of wooden objects in Southeast Asia, yet wood was the most popular material for male artists in Islamic societies. Carved wood was used to ornament mosques and palaces, as well as to create utilitarian objects whose decoration drew inspiration from the natural world.

Many aspects of the development of early Islamic art in the region are not yet well understood. However, it is clear that Islamic architecture and ornamentation grew out of and absorbed numerous elements of previous

Hindu-Buddhist styles, as did other art forms such as drama and puppet theatre.

Fortunately a small and unique collection of 16th century wooden carvings has survived in the Kasepuhan palace (Kraton) in Cirebon, west Java, Indonesia: some of these important cultural treasures have been generously loaned to this exhibition. Established by the Muslim saint Sunan Gunung Jati, the Cirebon *kraton* is the oldest continuously occupied Islamic palace in Southeast Asia. It provides intriguing insights into the history of Islamic civilisation in the region.

(image)

Indonesia

Yogyakarta, central Java

## **Bedoyo dancer** 1935

wood with pigment, cotton, velvet, rayon, metal, plaster, semi-precious stones, seeds, gold thread, buffalo horn

Collection: Museum Sonobudoyo, Yogyakarta

According to Javanese court tradition, the great Sultan Agung of Mataram invented the *bedoyo* dance in 1643 following a mystical vision of the Muslim saint Sunan Kalijaga who gave his blessing to its creation. This is the most sacred of all palace ritual dances and is usually presented by an ensemble of nine royal women. Until the reign of Sultan Hamengku Buwana VII (1877–1921), however, the *bedoyo* was performed by adolescent boys dressed as women.

This figure by a local traditional wood carver was commissioned for the opening of the new Museum Sonobudoyo in Yogyakarta in 1935.

## **Activities:**

- Why do you think wood was the most popular material for making sculptures in Southeast Asia? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of using wood?
- Performing the *bedoyo* dance was intended to increase the kingdom's peace and prosperity while also protecting it from evil. Everything worn by the figure on the front of this card attests to this. Look closely at the following:
  - \* the breast cloth (depicting the design *bangun tulak* 'to build obstacles against evil')
  - \* the waist sash (which is a Javanese version of an Indian *patola* trade cloth)
  - \* and the batik skirt cloth (which depicts *parang rusak* 'broken knife' and is a reminder that the *bedoyo* dancers represent female warriors)
- Research other Indonesian dances, learn some dances and have a performance!



# Trade winds and the international identity of Islam.

Southeast Asia was a key player in a dynamic network of cultural exchange extending from China to the Middle East and eventually to Europe. Indian textiles and Chinese ceramics were popular products in the vigorous spice trade across all of the communities of Southeast Asia regardless of religious orientation. However, many designs and styles on these imported luxury items were created specifically for Muslim clients and became integral to the history of Islamic art in Southeast Asia.

Brightly dyed Indian silk and cotton cloths were especially popular in the sultanate courts and their

patterns inspired local textile designs and motifs. The early production of Chinese export porcelain was a direct response to the fashionable tastes of the Muslim world: their presence in Southeast Asia documents the region's active participation in the international culture of Islam.

Many of these exotic items acquired status as ancestral heirlooms in both court and village and have been passed down over generations by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Their preservation and survival can be attributed to their value as items of ancestral heritage.

(image)

China/Indonesia

Jingdezhen; found in Bukittinggi, west Sumatra

**Kendi** 15th century (Ming dynasty 1368–1644)  
porcelain, underglaze blue decoration, silver  
Collection: National Museum of Indonesia, Jakarta

The elegant shape of this pouring vessel imitates the bronze water containers of Persia and Mughal India. The Indian metal versions originally derived from animal hide drinking flasks that reflected the Mughals' nomadic heritage.

In the context of its ceremonial use in Islamic west Sumatran society, the crescent moon form of this *kendi* would have had great symbolic appeal.

## Activities:

- Research the various shapes of other *kendi*. How is this *kendi* different?
- A *kendi* of this shape is unusual. It may represent a crescent moon, the roof of a Minangkabau house (shaped like buffalo horns to symbolise victory) or the Arab-Persian *dhow* (note the waves painted at its base). What does it remind you of?
- How would this pouring vessel work? What is the *kendi* missing (compared to other pouring vessels you may use)?



# Marege

Prior to white settlement in Australia in 1788, Makassan and Buginese people from south Sulawesi, Indonesia regularly visited the northern shores of this continent which they called Marege. Sailing vessels (*prahu*) from these Muslim communities – the most renowned seamen of Southeast Asia – arrived each year with the monsoon to catch *trepan* (sea cucumbers). In the process they established close relationships with

the Indigenous Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

The commemoration of Makassan visits was incorporated into Yolngu art and ceremonial life, and the introduction of new materials, such as iron tools suitable for wood carving, had a lasting impact on northern Australia's Indigenous cultures.

(image)

Australia

**Munggarawuy Yunupingu** c.1905–1979

north-east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

**Malay women weaving** 1948

natural pigments and synthetic colour on green card

Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957

Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

In the late 19th century the artist's father, Damalatja, visited Makassar in south Sulawesi, Indonesia. On his return he recounted seeing women making cloth by inserting two lengths of bamboo into the ground and stringing cotton thread between them. According to Damalatja, the women shook the bamboo, creating a hammering sound, and the fabric was produced. This painting depicts scenes from his visit. In the upper area a bandit is shown setting fire to the house of a weaver. When he saw this happen in Sulawesi, Damalatja wondered if it was the noise of the weaving that had driven the vandal to it.

## Activities:

- Find out some more about *trepan*. What is it? How can you eat it? What is it used for in different countries?
- Research the development of trade between the Makassan and Australian Indigenous peoples.
- Investigate weaving techniques and make your own cloth. Start with weaving two different colours of paper before trying different materials and techniques.
- Look at the image on the front of this card. Can you identify the characters from the story? What are they doing? Write a story about why you think the vandal set fire to the house.



Handwritten marginal notes in Arabic script, including the word "الحمد لله" (Praise be to God) and other religious phrases.

سورة التوبة

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم  
الحمد لله الذي هدانا لهذا  
هذا الذي كنا لنهتدي لولا  
هدانا الله لولاه لولاه  
لولا هدانا الله لولاه

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# The Word

Calligraphy is the noblest of all arts in Islam and, as the word of God recorded in the Qur'an can only be written by a pious believer, the calligrapher is the quintessential Muslim artist.

In Southeast Asia, as in other parts of the Islamic world, the decoration of sacred texts, especially the Qur'an, demonstrated the believer's deep faith and reverence. Rulers and religious institutions sponsored the production of illuminated manuscripts in local ornamental styles and sometimes in regional languages, such as Bahasa Indonesia and Malay,

which were transcribed in an Arabic-based script.

The Arabic language became the central symbol of Islam. Verses from the Qur'an, pious injunctions and prayers, and talismanic grids filled with Arabic numerals intended to evoke divine protection and blessings were inscribed on objects in every conceivable medium. The decoration of objects with Arabic calligraphy also signalled to the wider community the devoutness of the creator, owner or wearer.

Arabic scripts are read from right to left.

(image)

**Indonesia**

probably Ternate, North Maluku

***Qur'an*** February 1731

European paper, pigments

Collection: National Library of Indonesia, Jakarta

This is among the oldest surviving Qur'an from Southeast Asia. Due to the humid tropical climate, most extant manuscripts date from the 19th century or later. The writing in the margins of this Qur'an is in a different hand from that in the centre and may have been added by a reader and reciter of the text.

## Activities:

- Research the Qur'an and its importance to Islam.
- Look at the image on the front of this card and describe the style of decoration and design. How does this Qur'an incorporate typical Islamic design principles?
- Explore the historic use of text in other cultures (for example, Chinese scrolls and European illuminated manuscripts). How does the text relate to any imagery that may be present and how does it enhance the message for the viewer?
- The written word is intended to provide information, but can also be visually exciting. Investigate the incorporation of text into contemporary works of art and its use in society.
- Look up a dictionary of Arabic script and practise writing your name.



# Glossary of terms

**Allah** is the one God of Islam.

**Islam** is a monotheistic religion which focuses on the belief in Allah as the one God. It is one of the world's largest religions. Followers of Islam are known as Muslims. Muslims believe that God revealed His divine word directly to people through many prophets and that Muhammad was the final prophet of Islam.

**Mecca** The city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia is the holiest site of Islam. A pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam, required at least once in a lifetime of all able-bodied Muslims who can afford to go.

**Mosque** is the main place of worship and prayer for Muslims.

**Muhammad** (c. 570–632), also **Mohammad**, **Mohammed**, **Muhammed**, and sometimes **Mahomet**, is believed by Muslims to be God's final prophet sent to guide all humans with the message of Islam.

(image)

Indonesia

Jejaya, central Java; for Kalimantan

**Ornamental panel with doors** late 19th century  
wood, red pigment, gold leaf  
Collection: Sarawak Museum Department, Kuching

This pair of large doors once formed a partition in a royal mansion and marked the division between an outer reception space and the private domestic domain. The inscriptions on the panel are taken from the Qur'an. The quotation on the central doors reads:

In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful,  
The revelation of the Book is from God  
The Exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom.  
We created not the Heavens and the Earth  
And all between them but for just ends, and for a term  
appointed ...

Chapter al-Ahqaf (46: 1–10)

**Muslim** (sometimes also spelled *Moslem*) is the name given to the followers of the religion of Islam.

**Qur'an** literally 'the recitation' (sometimes also spelled **Quran**, **Quoran** or **Koran**) is the holiest book of Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal word of God in Arabic and the culmination of God's revelation to humankind, revealed to Muhammad over a period of 23 years through the angel Jibreel (Gabriel).

There are a number of schools or denominations of Islam, each of which has significant theological and legal differences from the other but possesses essentially identical beliefs. The major schools of thought are Sunni and Shi'a, while Sufism is a mystical inflection of Islam:

**Shi'ite** is the anglicised form of the Arabic word *Shi'i* meaning a member of the *Shi'a* branch of Islam. The *Shi'a* give special status to the family of the Prophet in the succession of the caliph (*khalif*) or head of the Islamic community.

**Sufism** is a spiritual practice followed by both Sunni and Shi'a which focuses on the more mystical aspects of Islam

**Sunni** (Arabic) is one who adheres to the customary practices or *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad. The word is used to designate a major branch of Islam.

Further information can be obtained from the exhibition catalogue







