

# OCEANS THAT SPEAK

Islam and the Emergence of the Malay World



# **Al-Fatihah**

**In Memory of Yang Mulia Professor Diraja Ungku Abdul Aziz bin Ungku Abdul Hamid (1922–2020)  
and Yang Mulia Raja Datin Paduka Fuziah binti Raja Tun Uda (1940–2024) for their lifelong  
contributions to the fields of Islamic knowledge and traditional arts.**

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# OCEANS THAT SPEAK

Islam and the Emergence of the Malay World



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**OCEANS THAT SPEAK: ISLAM AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE MALAY WORLD**

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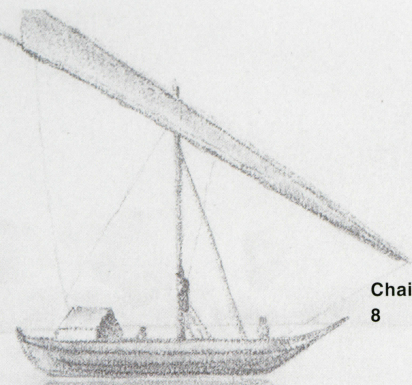
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# CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

*“We have learned that to master the blue oceans, people must engage in commerce and trade, even if their countries are barren... All the lands within the seas are united in one body, and all living things are being nurtured in love; life has never been so affluent in preceding generations as it is today.”*

[Sultan Mansur Shah of Melaka to the King of Ryukyu, 1468]

Oceans that once appeared to have no limits are the lifeblood of the Malay world. In the ebb and flow of the region's history, both *tanah* and *air* have been gateways and pathways. Earth and water have determined maritime Southeast Asia's cultural and economic destiny. Acting as vital trade routes, lands blessed by nature and seas conquered by mariners have provided a link between the Malay world and distant corners of the planet. The Malay world was by no means a backwater. Goods, ideas and cultural practices found new homes and cosmopolitanism flourished then as it does now. This region, filled with bustling hubs and diverse communities, was a natural setting in which Islam could flourish and a material culture would emerge with much in common with other Muslim communities.

*Oceans that Speak: Islam and the Emergence of the Malay World* examines the aesthetic development of a region that is reasserting its place in the wider world. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue include more than 120 artefacts. Each item tells a story of migration, exploration, integration and diplomatic and religious exchanges. Many of the works on display have never been shown before.

The aim of the exhibition and book is for visitors and readers to understand the deep connections that have always existed within our region, and their encounters with the lands that surround us in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, East China Sea and beyond. Many of these associations have continued to tie our history and culture with the broader Islamic world. The Malay world has been much more than a trading partner, and we are excited to share the full extent of this global reach with audiences who have often travelled far to visit our museum.

SYED MOKHTAR ALBUKHARY

## DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

*“China, for all its magnificence, did not please me. I was deeply depressed by the prevalence of infidelity and when I left my lodging I saw many offensive things which distressed me so much that I stayed at home and went out only when it was necessary. When I saw Muslims it was as though I had met my family and relatives.”*

*[Ibn Battuta's impression of China in 1345, after visiting the Muslim communities of the Malay world]*

Southeast Asia has for centuries been home to two of the busiest shipping lanes on the planet. The Malay world provided more than a strategic route between east and west; it also became a trade centre in which port cities of consequence emerged. The presence of Islam in the region grew at the same time, which enriched the regional culture and heritage while incorporating pre-Islamic elements. The integration of Islamic values and practices resulted in a diverse cultural landscape.

Since its inception, more than 25 years ago, the museum has dedicated itself to showcasing and publishing regional themes. The Malay World permanent gallery has been with us from the start, backed up by exhibitions that include *Cultural Treasures: Textiles of the Malay World*, *The Message and the Monsoon: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia*, *Tradition & Continuity: Woven and Decorated Textiles of the Malay Peninsula* and the recent *Keris: Power & Identity*. All of these have generated interest in the subject itself as well as in our museum, with its unique location at the southeastern corner of the Islamic world. Among our achievements in creating the British Museum's Albukhary Gallery of the Islamic World, six years ago, was to give the Malay world the prominence it deserves at this much-visited institution.


Our latest exhibition is the most ambitious so far. *Oceans that Speak: Islam and the Emergence of the Malay World* is a comprehensive and far-reaching contribution to the field. The focus is on the interconnectedness of our sometimes distant neighbours around the Indian Ocean, shedding light on the historical, cultural and creative exchanges that have shaped this vibrant region. Part of these exchanges are the massive demographic developments of the colonial period.

The museum is more committed than ever to ensuring that Southeast Asia's contribution to Islamic art is shown in full. For many years we have been adding a variety of items from the Malay world to the collection, featuring everything from globally admired textiles and weapons to the less exposed field of early photography. The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has especially extensive holdings of Qur'anic and other religious manuscripts that highlight the rich devotional and intellectual history of the region.

My sincere gratitude goes out to all the guest writers who have contributed their scholarship to this publication. There are more than ever before, all experts in their respective areas of study, who have invested a great deal of time to bring new insights to our exhibition. I would also like to thank the other parties and institutions who have contributed to this publication, including the translations and images, and to the museum team from all departments who have made this project a reality. I hope this publication will serve as a useful resource and spark further conversation about the significance of our region within the wider Islamic world.

SYED MOHAMAD ALBUKHARY





The Malay world has for centuries been a crossroads of cultures. Geography has put it at the centre of trade networks between east and west; the monsoon winds made the region a sanctuary for merchants and mariners, bringers of more than trade cargoes. When Islam arrived in the Malay world, the aesthetic landscape changed forever. Not even European colonisation could hold back the tide that came with improved travel and communications between the Muslims of Southeast Asia and the heartlands of South Asia and the Middle East.

This book explores the complex currents of exchange that came with the movement of people, ideas and faith. The creative outcome is highly distinctive and often overlooked. *Oceans that Speak* gives a voice to this heritage, expressed in the writing of pre-eminent scholars in the field and the matchless collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

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