

# MIRRORS *of* BEAUTY



ISLAMIC  
ARTS  
MUSEUM  
MALAYSIA  
*Guide*



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ISLAMIC ARTS MUSEUM MALAYSIA  
*Guide*







*Children of Adam are members of the same body,  
created from one essence.  
If fate brings suffering to one member,  
others cannot stay at rest.*

SA'DI (606–690/1210–1291)  
in *Gulistan* ('the Rose Garden')



This publication is specially authored to commemorate the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia's two decade-long commitment to developing, collecting and curating Islamic art. A year-long 20th anniversary celebration commenced on 12 December 2018, and was officiated by the seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia, Yang Amat Berhormat Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

### **Mirrors of Beauty: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia Guide**

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# Preface

*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

Museums are places that invite us to think. A museum's collection — its soul — mediates currents of thought, idea and inspiration. A museum's atmosphere is full with chances of encounter, interaction and connection. Stories are strung together to help bring tiers of human complexities to life, drawing objects that are otherwise distant in time and space a step closer to the visitor. The way a museum designs and organises its exhibitions and programmes intends to evoke one's senses, create memory and promote inquiry. Galleries and displays are a sanctuary for contemplation and meditation — a compelling site to observe, appreciate and celebrate humanity's enduring imagination and creativity.

For the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM), such has been at the heart of its practice since 1998, when the doors of the Museum were first opened to the public. In the subsequent twenty years of its history, the Museum has, true to its namesake, gradually built an Islamic art collection that is illustriously diverse. The same diversity has certainly shaped the Museum's central character as it continues to collect, house and care for various Islamic art forms for years to come. In encouraging a broader understanding and appreciation of Islamic art in both local and global audiences, a refreshed perspective — and voice — of the art through continued research and interpretation of the collection remains key to the Museum's pursuit.

What is categorised as 'Islamic art' truly represents an enormous cross section of humankind. By the year 2020, the global population of Muslims alone had already crossed the two billion mark — a figure that is in no way small. Beyond sheer statistics, Islamic cultures have been none but innumerable, and their creative impulse can therefore only be as immense. For the last fourteen hundred years or so, wherever and whenever the faith was embraced, the fabric of Islam has consistently taken on the colour and flavour of the locale. Given the different periods and cultures, the fullest range of Islamic art is thereby a reflection of countless human lives, memories and experiences, whose homes, communities and societies are rooted in many different parts of the world. Indeed, the art may not only speak of Muslims, but also of the numerous strands of traditions, milieus and belief systems which Muslims across time and space have come to interact with. A great deal of Islamic art bears the fruits of interconnected traditions, cosmopolitan overlays as well as far-reaching circulations of people, languages and things. The panorama of Islamic art, neither isolated nor monotonous, is without doubt a polychromatic one.

This guidebook illustrates these layers and interconnections through select objects of various types, medium and scale from the Museum's collection. Instead of being told chronologically or geographically, a sequence of distinct yet interrelated thematic chapters illuminates a broader context of the production and possession of these objects, which explore and offer new viewpoints and possibilities for the reader in understanding and appreciating the collection. Organised across seven chapters, these narratives are accompanied by a good number of newly acquired objects as well as some of those never published before.

The chapters significantly open with the artistic expressions linked to the Qur'an — the revealed Scripture to finalise all others. These are underlined by various works of calligraphy, often regarded as the *pièce de résistance* of Islamic art, which anchor not only the first chapter but also proliferate throughout the guidebook, inscribed onto objects of architectural culture as well as bespoke household items. Chapter 2 looks into the role of the artists and ateliers as well as the commonly used design vocabularies across Islamic cultures. This flows into Chapter 3, which focuses on travelling not merely as the movement of people but also of ideas and objects within and beyond the Islamic world. The use of these objects in domestic and leisurely settings are further explored in Chapter 4; this may then be viewed in contrast to Chapter 5, which otherwise considers objects in times of war and conflict. Architecture, ever quintessential to Islamic art, is touched on in Chapter 6 through an array of objects that represent architectural culture and spatial practice in Islamic societies, from miniature paintings to tiles. The Islamic aesthetics of the Malay world, in all of its varieties, is given a special focus towards the end of the guidebook, forming the seventh and final chapter. The seldom-highlighted Islamic arts of China and the Indian subcontinent are also given much space and can be gauged in various chapters. The time frame covered in the guidebook is as broad-ranging: the dramatic 'Blue Qur'an', for example, hails from no later than the 4th/10th century, while a *sitara* (cover) made for the Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina was commissioned towards the beginning of the 14th/20th century under the reign of the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1293–1327/1876–1909).

The works of art of the Museum collection — and in this guidebook — are essentially aspiring acts of creativity through time. The objects mirror the sight and insight of many artists, designers and thinkers that stretch over a millennium and a half. They echo the understanding and competence of societies, communities and individuals. They represent the artistic journey that has been taken by so many, marking changes, turbulences and achievements across time and space. Inarguably, the journey is in fact an ongoing one. Undeniably, it is a story of our past crucial to our understanding of the present. Ultimately, it forms a necessary bridge to our futures.

SYED MOHAMAD ALBUKHARY  
*Director, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia*





## Introduction to the Museum

OPPOSITE PAGE

### Main Dome

A composite piece of art: clad in the Persian *haft-rang* ('seven-colour') tilework, buds and blossoms of the *bunga raya* (*Hibiscus rosa sinensis*) — Malaysia's national flower — spring out of the bifurcating arabesque tendrils. Lining the dome's drum is a *thuluth* inscription of the 'Verse of Light', verse 35 of *sura* 24 (*al-Nur*, 'the Light'), an emotive allegory to divine beauty.

BELOW

### Main Entrance

Framed by an elaborately tiled *pishtaq* ('portal'), a visitor's arrival is first greeted with verse 20 of *sura* 29 (*al-Ankabut*, 'the Spider'), which alludes to travelling and pondering upon God's creations.

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) was established in December 1998, and is home to the largest collection of Islamic art in Malaysia as well as Southeast Asia. The Museum has up to fifteen thousand works of art in its collection, drawn from places and cultures stretching from Spain to China, and ranging in time from the 2nd/8th century to the present day. The collection of the Museum represents the greatly diverse artistic expressions of the Islamic world, varying from the arts of the book and portable items to multiple objects of architectural culture. Ever since the Museum's first acquisition — a set of a thirty-volume Qur'an copy, inscribed and compiled in China under the Qing dynasty — the IAMM collection has grown to include Islamic art objects across a broad spectrum of forms, scale and media. The Museum's holdings are also enriched by a large collection of Malay world artefacts and manuscripts entrusted by Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), a government body in charge of Islamic affairs in Malaysia.



BELOW

**Malay World Gallery**

The collection of the Malay World Gallery is dedicated to displaying art-objects that are linked to the history of Islam in the Malay world. Works of material culture in the gallery, be they manuscripts, coinage, textiles, arms or architectural pieces, altogether provide a signpost to the wider ideas and practices of Muslim communities and sultanates of the Malay Archipelago. The contents of the gallery are supplemented with ongoing curatorial research and findings on Malay world history.

The Museum's two-decade-long history in being a custodian, collector, preserver and educator of Islamic art has been coloured by a stream of exhibitions, educational programmes and tiers of local and international collaborations. Its establishment in the region also marks one of the major turning points in the longer history of Islam in Southeast Asia. Long considered as peripheral to the broader discourse of Islamic art, Southeast Asia is home to a large and diverse population of Muslims, whose distinct facets of Islamic culture remain lived and practiced among the region's highly cosmopolitan societies. Such a reality is especially reflected in the Museum's collection, through which the Islamic arts of the Malay world and the proximate cultures of the Indian subcontinent and China acquire a particular gravity.

The objects on display range from the smallest pieces of coins and jewellery to the scale architectural models of mosques and buildings of importance from around the world. Spread across four floors of exhibition space, up to two thousand objects are on display at the permanent galleries at any given time. The permanent collection is displayed across twelve Permanent Galleries located on the first and second floors of the Museum





ABOVE

### Architecture Gallery

The Museum's permanent collection officially opens with the Architecture Gallery. The extensive purview of Islamic architecture, an indispensable constituent of Islamic art, is introduced through select architectural models of mosques, mausoleums and other structures from various parts of the world, from China to the United States of America. Paired with artefacts, drawings, images and replicas of architectural elements, the collection of the Architecture Gallery is on the whole a simulation of the spatial practice and built environment as lived by communities and dynasties associated with Islam.

building. There also exist two Special Galleries on the lower ground and ground floors for temporary and specially themed exhibitions. Additionally, photography exhibitions are regularly held in another space on the ground floor called the Open Space Gallery, located by the multifunctional Inverted Dome Pavilion. On the first floor, the permanent galleries consist of the Architecture Gallery, the Qur'an and Manuscript Gallery, the China Gallery, the India Gallery and the Malay World Gallery. Second-floor permanent galleries, on the other hand, are mainly organised along equally important object types: the Ceramics Gallery, the Metalwork Gallery, the Coins and Seals Gallery, the Arms and Armour Gallery, the Textile Gallery and the Living With Wood Gallery, which includes the Lifestyle cases.

Apart from the permanent exhibits, the Museum plays an active host to themed special and travelling exhibitions, educational programmes and a vigour of cultural activities all-year round. Dialogue and understanding on Islamic art are actively fostered and pursued through inter-institutional collaborations; the 2018 opening of the Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World at the British Museum, for one, marked a further milestone.



*Mirrors of Beauty: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia Guide* offers a luminous starting point to approach, enjoy and contemplate the wide-ranging collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. An illustrious selection of up to 150 outstanding objects, covering works of calligraphy, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, architectural elements and many others, draws together an enticing close-up of the continually diverse and interconnected cultures of Islamic societies across time, space and media. Elucidated across seven chapters of distinct yet interdependent themes, the lived spectrum of artistic practice, technical fluency and creative vision in various traditions of Islamic art are presented and contextualised through a range of introductory essays and full colour images, supplemented by comprehensive timelines and maps. This publication provides an inviting and accessible accompaniment to the riches of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia collection.

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