DIR ECTOR’S REMARKS

Assalamualaikum,

Welcome to the first issue of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia’s e-Newsletter.

We are pleased to introduce this e-newsletter as a communication tool to introduce IAMM to other museums, scholars and institutions involved in the world of Islamic Arts. Throughout the newsletter you will be introduced to key happenings at the museum, its latest exhibitions, publications, talks, new acquisitions and promotional items from our museum shop. We also are keen to introduce you to the upcoming events, and we look forward to your participation. We hope this will become a forum for the exchange of news and a platform for enthusiasts of Islamic Art. This newsletter is set to be produced on a quarterly basis, thus we encourage you to visit our website and download it.

Syed Mohamad Albukhary

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Lasting Impressions
Seals from the Islamic World

LAUNCHED BY HRH SULTAN SHARAFUDDIN IDRIS SHAH AL HAJ, THE SULTAN OF SELANGOR, on 27 September 2012, this exhibition is held in association with the British Library and the British Museum. Showcasing more than 80 seal matrices and manuscripts bearing seal impressions from the collection of the IAMM, the exhibition reveals the beauty and significance of the art of the seal in the Islamic world. To support the exhibition, the IAMM has also published a scholarly book authored by two renowned experts in the field, Dr Annabel Gallop of the British Library and Dr Venetia Porter of the British Museum. Lasting Impressions will be on display at Special Gallery 2 from 27 September 2012 to 27 January 2013.

Formation Of A Nation: A Photographic Flashback

THE EXHIBITION is held in celebration of Malaysia’s 55th Merdeka and 49th Malaysia Day. It features 55 rarely-seen black and white photos from the collection of the National Archives of Malaysia. Accompanying the exhibition is a 132-page catalogue enhanced by quotes from all six of Malaysia’s prime ministers. Formation of A Nation will be displayed in Special Gallery 1 from 29 August to 29 November 2012.
The story beyond the artefact

KITAB SIYAR-I NABI (SAW) In 1376 AD the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt and Syria celebrated his coming to power by commissioning the compilation and translation of the history of Prophet Muhammad (saw). Several sultans have attempted this work, yet their products were lacking elegance and accuracy. Sultan Banqûq ordered the renowned Mustafa bin Yusuf bin Umar al Mevlevi al Erzerumi, known as al Dharir (the blind), to author the history of the Prophet known as Siyar -I Nabi (saw). He believed that when recalling the Prophet’s encounters (siyar) every detail matters. The Mamluk sultan could not read Arabic and the translation was to be in Ottoman Turkish, the language of the ancestors of the Mamluk Sultans. Unfortunately Sultan Banqûq died before the manuscript was completed, and the manuscript was completed only 12 years later.

Two hundred years later, in 1594-95, the celebrated text was copied by the royal scribe Mustafa bin Vali in Istanbûl. The manuscript was a royal commission, where in every other page the scribe would leave space for a miniature, a small drawing illustrating the narrated encounter. The completed six volumes, depicting 814 miniatures, were presented to the Ottoman Sultan Murad II in 1595.

Today, the Topkapi Saray, the former Ottoman Sultan’s palace and library has three of the six volumes. The other three found their way to the Public Library of New York, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin and the last volume is still missing! The Chester Beatty volume on the other hand, was in the possession of an Ottoman Princess in the first quarter of the 20th century. She offered the manuscript for sale in Cairo, Egypt. The price was too high and the dealers suggested offering some detached folios for sale to private collectors. Among the collectors was Major R.G. Gayer-Anderson Pasha, who resided next to the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, Egypt and was an avid collector or art. Major Gayer-Anderson bought several folios (almost 53 folios), before Alfred Chester Beatty acquired the remainder of the volume (490 folios, 136 miniatures and the colophon).

The 53 folios of Gayer-Anderson were soon dispersed to different collectors and libraries around the world. Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen and Kuala Lumpur are just among the few cities that today are proud to have acquired folios of the manuscript.
Islamic seals were the namecards of their day. In early Islamic societies a seal presented the image a person wished to project to the world, yet often conveyed much more than was written or perhaps intended. A seal inscribed simply with the name of the owner and a pious phrase might also reveal when and where that person lived, their social status and aspirations, and their religious beliefs. While the calligraphy and design of a seal reflected the artistic spirit of its time and place, it could also be shaped by personal taste, whether cutting-edge or conservative.

Presented in this book are over 300 Islamic seals, dating from the earliest days of Islam through to the modern era. They include both matrices made of precious stone and metal, and impressions stamped on manuscript documents and books, mainly from the collections of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, the British Library and the British Museum. Unlike European seals which are primarily pictorial, in Islamic seals the inscription takes centre stage. It is this focus on writing, in the sacred Arabic script, which links seals from all parts of the Muslim world, from Morocco to Malaysia, and from Iran to India and Indonesia.

Masterworks in miniature, each of these seals leaves lasting impressions of the people who commissioned and used them, and the Islamic worlds in which they were created.

Annabel Teh Gallop is curator for Maritime Southeast Asia at the British Library. Her Ph.D. was on Malay seal inscriptions: a study in Islamic epigraphy from Southeast Asia (2002), and she has written widely on Malay seals, letters and documents, and on the art of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia.

Venetia Porter is curator of Islamic and Modern Middle Eastern Art at the British Museum. Her publications include Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum (2011) and Word into Art (2006), and, as editor, Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam (2012).

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