



Illuminated Qur'an manuscript from Kelantan or Patani, 19th century.
British Library, Or.15227, ff.30v4v-305r

The Art of Qur'an Manuscripts in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The Islamic world of maritime Southeast Asia covers the present-day territories of Indonesia (home to more Muslims than any other country in the world), Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, as well as the southern parts of Thailand and the Philippines, and Cham enclaves in southern Vietnam and Cambodia. Although hundreds of different ethnic groups and languages are found in this region, it is often referred to as the 'Malay world' due to cultural affinities rooted in the shared faith of Islam and the use of the Malay language as a *lingua franca*.

Little scholarly attention has yet been paid to the distinctive and culturally self-confident examples of illumination found in Islamic manuscripts from Southeast Asia, pre-eminently in Qur'an manuscripts. The geographical origin of an illuminated Qur'an manuscript can be readily detected from the structure, motifs and colours of the decorated double frames, while regional identity is also reflected in a host of other 'internal' features, including the shape and colour of verse markers, and the selection and composition of marginal ornaments.

This preliminary study of the art of Qur'an manuscripts in Southeast Asia therefore focusses not only on the sumptuous illuminated frames which mark the beginning of the Holy Book, but also pays attention to many other smaller decorative elements. The collation of the results of this survey has led to the identification of certain clearly-defined regional artistic schools: in Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra, in the states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Patani on the north-east coast of the Malay peninsula, and associated with Sulawesi diaspora groups throughout the archipelago.



Detail of an illuminated *juz'* (section) marker, from a Qur'an manuscript from Kelantan or Patani.
British Library, Or.15227, f.163v