

Exhibiting Islamic Art Objects in Museums in Jakarta, Indonesia

Yumiko KAMADA

Introduction

Islamic art in Southeast Asia had not been the focus of studies on Islamic art history for a long while. This lack of attention is exemplified by the absence of a chapter on Southeast Asia in two of the most basic works on Islamic art, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, published in 2001 and *The Art and Architecture on Islam 1250-1800*, published in 1994⁽¹⁾. However, there has been growing interest in the subject in the last decade; in 2005, *Crescent Moon: Islamic Art and Civilisation in Southeast Asia* was published based on an exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia⁽²⁾. In the same year, *The Message and the Monsoon: Islamic Art of Southeast Asia* was published by the Islamic Art Museum Malaysia that frequently organizes Islamic art exhibitions⁽³⁾. More recently, in 2012, the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore held a special exhibition “Islamic Arts from Southeast Asia.” Yet these exhibitions and publications on Islamic art in Southeast Asia do not receive enough attention and therefore recent discussions on how Islamic art objects have been exhibited excludes the case in Southeast Asia. For instance, a recent conference-based book entitled *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century* does not mention how Islamic art objects were collected and exhibited in Southeast Asia⁽⁴⁾.

Over the past few years, the author visited Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Singapore, and Bandar Seri Begawan in Brunei to explore what kind of Islamic art objects were on public display and how they were exhibited⁽⁵⁾. This brief report is based on the author’s visits to an institute, several museums, and mosques in Jakarta in the summer of 2014.

1. The National Museum of Indonesia

1-1 History

A stately neo-classical building, the National Museum in central Jakarta (fig. 1) holds not only objects produced in Indonesia, but also a variety of artifacts brought to the country from overseas such as ceramics. The collection itself was originally formed by Europeans who came to stay in Jakarta during the colonial era. Since its establishment in 1868 by the Dutch-organized Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences (*Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*) founded in 1778, the museum has been expanding its collection and exhibition space continuously⁽⁶⁾. The Society collected coins, manuscripts, musical instruments and so on as “curiosities” in the late 18th century. During the brief period when the British temporarily took control of the region in the early 19th century, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the Lieutenant Governor of Java at that time, collected indigenous objects from various parts of the Indonesian archipelago with enthusiasm. By the 1960s, shortly after the country gained independence from the



Fig. 1 The National Museum of Indonesia
Photograph by the author

Netherlands in 1949, the museum finally came under the control of the Department of Education and Culture of the Indonesian government⁽⁷⁾. In 2007, the new wing was officially opened to provide a huge floor space to hold about 142,000 objects⁽⁸⁾. Currently, the building is divided into areas based on the following collections: ethnography, bronze, prehistory, ceramics, textiles, historical relics, stone sculpture, and treasures. Remarkable among the artifacts is the wide variety of ceramics from China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar that attest the close trade links between Indonesia, China, and India⁽⁹⁾.

A handy guidebook of the museum was published in English in 1998⁽¹⁰⁾, and a Japanese translation was first published in 2004⁽¹¹⁾. A substantial full-color catalogue entitled “Icons of Art: National Museum Jakarta” was published in English in 2006⁽¹²⁾. Another portable guidebook was published in 2008 written in both Indonesian and English⁽¹³⁾, which was followed by a new 5th-edition guidebook published in 2011⁽¹⁴⁾. These are a useful resource for visitors and researchers alike who wish to gain an understanding of the museum’s history, collection, and exhibition policy.

1-2 Islamic art objects in the collection

Several objects are of interest in terms of Islamic art. A replica of a tombstone of Sultan Nahrisyah dated 831 AH (1428 CE) bears Quranic verses and the names of the sultans of Samudera Pasai, one of the earliest Muslim kingdoms in the archipelago founded around the 13th century⁽¹⁵⁾. Among a wide variety of ceramics are several 17th-century Chinese porcelain wares with Arabic inscription, which were made for export to the Southeast Asian market (fig. 2)⁽¹⁶⁾. Similarly, Arabic inscriptions are an important part of the pattern in several textiles; some resist-died textiles known as batik and dating to the 19th and 20th centuries feature Arabic inscriptions in combination with geometric design⁽¹⁷⁾. The museum also holds several other Islamic artifacts such as 16th-century dirham coins from Samudera Pasai⁽¹⁸⁾. Other notable Islamic artifacts collected in the museum include a 19th-century gold state lance with Arabic characters from the kingdom of Riau⁽¹⁹⁾, and a seal from Palembang dating to 1876⁽²⁰⁾.

Also of note is the 19th-century horse-shape wooden statue from Cirebon, West Java (fig. 3). On the back of the Jakarta piece is Nyai Roro Kidul, or



Fig. 2 Plate, China, 17th century, National Museum (acc. no. 1495)
Photograph by the author



Fig. 3 Nogowarno Horse Statue, Cirebon, West Java, 19th century, National Museum (acc. no. 8488)
Photograph by the author

legendary Indonesian Queen of the Southern Sea of Java⁽²¹⁾. This piece seems to have a connection with a wooden statue of Buraq made in Mindanao in the early or mid-20th century that is currently in the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore (acc. no. 2010-00780)⁽²²⁾. The rare wooden sculpture of Buraq in Singapore would have been produced in line with the local tradition of making this sort of horse sculpture in Southeast Asia.

However, all of the above mentioned objects are not shown as “Islamic art” and there is no “Islamic art gallery” in the museum. The accompanying museum catalogues and publications do not contain a section on “Islamic art” either. This does not, however, negate the notion of “Islamic art” because in the introductory

section of the book *Icons of Art*, the director of the National Museum, Retno Sulistianingsih Sitowati writes that “a museum should be a bridge between civilizational differences or conflicts⁽²³⁾” and praises the exhibition of “Crescent Moon: Islamic Art and Civilization in Southeast Asia” held at the National Gallery of Australia in 2005⁽²⁴⁾. Besides, he mentions the mission of the museum is as follows:

“Museums, particularly the Museum Nasional, play a very strategic role in introducing culture, in particular material culture, to society in order to enable them [visitors] to understand cultural dynamics and diversity. The understanding of cultural diversity is greatly needed in Indonesia with its multiethnic nature. Through such understanding, it is hoped that ethnic groups will value and understand the cultures of other ethnic groups with the result that intersocietal or intercultural conflict will be averted⁽²⁵⁾.”

Thus the National Museum aims to emphasize the diversity of culture in Indonesia, and this is probably why it does not focus on a specific culture. This might explain the absence of a dedicated Islamic art gallery in the National Museum.

2. Textile Museum (Museum Tekstil)

In 1976, the Textile Museum was opened by the then president’s wife Ibu Tien Soeharto to collect, conserve, study, and exhibit Indonesian textiles (fig. 4). More than 1,000 pieces of textile from the 18th century are stored in a building that was originally constructed by a French architect in the early 19th century as a pri-



Fig. 4 Interior of the Textile Museum
Photograph by the author

vate house⁽²⁶⁾. When the author visited the museum in August 2014, an exhibition entitled “Islamic Inspirations in Textiles and Dress in Indonesia (*Inspirasi Islam: Pada Wastra dan Busana Indonesia*)” was being held that was showing Indonesian clothes and a number of resist-dyed cotton textiles (batik) with Arabic inscriptions and Islamic motifs such as Buraq and Ali’s sword along with more traditional ones⁽²⁷⁾. To the author’s knowledge, this seems to be one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of its type in the world. Explanatory panels show the connections between Indonesian clothes such as the tunic (*baju kurung*) and cap (*keupiah meukatob*) and their roots in the Middle East or Central Asia.

These textiles could be exhibited as “Islamic textiles,” but similar to the National Museum, the Textile Museum chooses not to apply such a categorization. The director of the Textile Museum, Mis Ari explained that since there are many different ethnic groups living in Indonesia, it would not be appropriate to focus on a certain religion and accordingly there is no curator trained in Islamic art⁽²⁸⁾.

3. House of the Quran (Bayt al-Quran) and Islamic Museum (Museum Istiqlal)

The House of the Quran and Islamic Museum are located next to each other inside the so-called Miniature Park of Indonesia (Taman Mini Indonesia Indah), which was opened in 1975 on the initiative of Ibu Tien Soeharto. This 150-hectare park contains many pavilions and 18 museums to inform visitors on the history and culture of all 33 provinces of Indonesia. In 1997, the House of the Quran and Islamic Museum, which feature objects and manuscripts related to Islam, was opened by President Soeharto⁽²⁹⁾.

The House of the Quran exhibits several historical and modern manuscripts of various kinds including the Quran (fig. 5). In addition to illuminated manuscripts produced in Southeast Asia⁽³⁰⁾, it also features large-size Quranic manuscripts. All captions and explanations are, however, in the Indonesian language and there is no English translation. Given the several brochures available at the House of the Quran, it would appear that these manuscripts are exhibited for special occasions such as the “Islamic Cultural Show and Expo, 2010” in Jakarta.

Adjacent to the House of the Quran is the Islamic



Fig. 5 Interior of the House of the Quran,
Taman Mini Indonesia Indah
Photograph by the author



Fig. 6 Interior of the Islamic Museum,
Taman Mini Indonesia Indah
Photograph by the author



Fig. 7 Replicas of tombstones, Islamic Museum,
Taman Mini Indonesia Indah
Photograph by the author

Museum in which ceramics, metalwork, textiles, manuscripts, calligraphy, replicas of gravestones with Arabic inscription, and photographs of mosques in Indonesia are displayed in a large exhibition space (figs. 6 and 7). Exhibits include several modern objects as well. Some objects in the gallery, however, such as baskets, woodwork and pottery may not be considered as “Islamic art” in general terms because they do not have any particular trait that indicates that they were made by Muslims or for the use of Muslims. Objects related to Islam are displayed roughly by media, but compared with the Islamic art galleries in leading museums in the West, the way in which the objects are exhibited is not particularly organized.

4. Museum al-Quran

The Museum al-Quran was founded in 1971 and is located on the outskirts of Jakarta (fig. 8)⁽³¹⁾. This is more like an institute and library than a museum in the general sense of the word, and it is open to the public by appointment only. According to a brochure, the Museum al-Quran is closely related to a foundation of Quranic education (Yayasan Pendidikan al-Quran) that intends to produce Islamic scholars and leaders. While the museum offers a rich collection of manuscripts for those studying the Quran and Islamic religious science, only a few of them were on exhibition in a small room for visitors.



Fig. 8 Interior of the Museum al-Quran
Photograph by the author

5. Mosques in Jakarta

Among the many mosques in Jakarta, the largest is Mesjid Istiqlal (the Grand Mosque), which was

planned by President Soekarno in 1955 and officially opened in 1978. This gigantic 9.5-hectare mosque designed by F. Silaban, a Christian architect, is an example of Indonesian modern architecture. The five-story domed space can accommodate 100,000 people at one time and serves as a space for prayer and religious events³². In contrast to this modern but somewhat characterless mosque whose size is appropriate for the giant metropolis with a large Muslim populations, several historical mosques dating back to the 18th century nestle in an old crowded residential area.

Mesjid Luar Batang built in 1739 is one such mosque that is located in the lively quarter of Kampung Luar Batang outside the old Jakarta (Batavia) city walls. While this one-story mosque must have been renovated, its roof still maintains the traditional quadrangular pyramidal shape (fig. 9). This mosque contains a tomb of the founder, Al Habib Husein bin Abubakar Alaydrus, a Muslim teacher from Yemen. Since he is believed to be a descendant of Muhammad, people come to this mosque as a pilgrimage to pray for a wish to come true³³. The author was also kindly invited to enter a space reserved for women to pray around the tomb. Mesjid Jami Annawir built in 1760 is another historical mosque with a large minaret that underwent renovation (fig. 10)³⁴. Mesjid Jami Angke, also known as al-Anwar mosque, built in 1761 is also worth mentioning (fig. 11). It is said that this small mosque was built for the Balinese Muslim community in the area by the Chinese who fled to this community after the massacre of Chinese in Batavia in 1740³⁵. These mosques reveal the diversity of the Islamic community and practice in the region.

Conclusion

As this brief exploration has suggested, the museums in Jakarta do not apply the conventional category of “Islamic art” that has been developed in the field of art history in the West. Those who visit the National Museum of Jakarta expecting Islamic art objects produced in Indonesia might be surprised to find that there is no gallery of “Islamic art.” To fully explore this lack of “Islamic art,” more detailed research needs to be done that takes into account not only the policies of these museums, but also the state’s policies on Islam and their peoples’ identities. However, as personal communications with the director and staff of



Fig. 9 Mesjid Luar Batang
Photograph by the author



Fig. 10 Mesjid Jami Annawir
Photograph by the author



Fig. 11 Interior of Mesjid Jami Angke
Photograph by the author

the Textile Museum suggest, it seems that the absence is intentional. Moreover, this intentional absence of the concept of “Islamic art” seems to derive from the Indonesian government’s five official principles known as the Pancasila in which “Belief in the one and only God” and “The unity of Indonesia” are declared. Therefore, even though about 90 percent of the population in Indonesia is Muslim, Islam is not the one and only state religion so it would not be appropriate to emphasize one specific religion. Rather, objects related to Islam are exhibited as an element of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Indonesian society. Similarly, the Islamic museum in Taman Mini also symbolically represents itself as one aspect of Indonesia through its location in a huge park that contains many pavilions and museums dedicated to the different ethnic groups and cultures of the country. Thus museums in Jakarta do not follow the Western approach to categorizing and exhibiting Islamic art objects; rather, Islamic art objects are exhibited in accordance with the Indonesian government’s policy to highlight that Islam is just one element of the long history of multi-ethnic Indonesia and to promote mutual understanding among Indonesians.

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NOTE

- (1) See Ettinghausen, Grabar and Jenkins-Madina (2001) and Blair and Bloom (1994).
- (2) Bennett (2005).
- (3) Guise (2005).
- (4) Junod et al. (2012).
- (5) See Kamada (2012), Kamada (2013) and Kamada (2014).
- (6) For the history of the museum, see Wardiman Djojonegoro, “The Evolution of the National Museum” in Sitowati and Miksic (2006), pp. 37-64 and Lenzi (2004), pp. 44-48.
- (7) Lenzi (2004), pp. 44-45.
- (8) Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 77.
- (9) A large number of ceramics were donated by a Dutch collector E. W. van Orsoy de Flines, who also served as the museum’s curator until 1957. See Lenzi (2004), p. 45.
- (10) MN and IHS (1998)
- (11) MN and IHS (2010)
- (12) Sitowati and Miksic (2006).
- (13) MN (2008).

- (14) MN (2011). This book is also written in both Indonesian and English.
- (15) Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 13.
- (16) See the plate in Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 145, acc. no. 1495.
- (17) For instance see the flag in Sitowati and Miksic (2006), pp. 174-175, acc.no. 5602.
- (18) See Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 88, acc.no. 2210/3039.
- (19) See Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 143, acc. no. E13.
- (20) MN (2011), p. 46, acc. no. 13741.
- (21) It is believed that she is on a winged horse with a dragon head and frying from the south coast to Mount Merapi located in Central Java. See Sitowati and Miksic (2006), pp. 130-131.
- (22) For the wooden statue of Buraq in Singapore, see Kamada (2013), p. 111, fig. 5.
- (23) Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 17.
- (24) *Ibid.*
- (25) Sitowati and Miksic (2006), p. 20.
- (26) IHS (2009), p. 202.
- (27) For a catalogue of this exhibition, see Achjadi and Gratha (2014). I would like to thank the director of the Textile Museum, Mis Ari and also Judi K. Achjadi who kindly provided useful information during my visit to the museum.
- (28) Personal communication with the director Mis Ari on August 10, 2014.
- (29) For general information about the museum and the miniature park, see IHS (2009), pp. 233, 238-239 and IHS (2008), pp. 38-39, 43. Also see Pemberton (1994) for the intention behind the construction of Taman Mini and its educational function. Zilberg (2011) also discusses the purpose of the construction of the House of the Quran and Islamic Museum.
- (30) For manuscripts produced in Indonesia, see Kumar and McGlynn (1996).
- (31) IHS (2008), p. 33.
- (32) IHS (2009), pp. 148-149.
- (33) IHS (2009), pp. 40-41.
- (34) IHS (2009), p. 85.
- (35) IHS (2009), p. 83.

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