

# Conservation of Living Religious Heritage





The preservation and management of religious heritage is dealt with at both ontological and technical levels in this paper. By ontological we mean understanding the core of the religion and the power that distinguishes a sacred object from other similar artefacts. A sacred object for a man of faith transcends its physical appearance and transforms the faithful to a state of spiritual presence. This relation by itself is an essential aspect of religious heritage.

This paper – presented in the format of a case study – will focus on *shariah* concepts of 'ritual pollution/purification' and 'unclean substances' as well as the distinction between the realms of 'religious', 'sacred' and 'secular' for Islamic objects as important principles in setting up guidelines for the management of Islamic collections. Following this, the particular guidelines established in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia illustrate the process of handling objects in the collections as valuable items of religious importance.

AMIR H. ZEKRGOO AND MANDANA BARKESHLI

## Collection management of Islamic heritage in accordance with the worldview and Shari'ah of Islam

**B**efore proceeding to the issue of management of a religious heritage, one must understand what 'religious heritage' is all about, and why and in what way it shall be preserved. Religious heritage includes not only tangible items, but also covers, in a wider and deeper sense, the intangible reality from which the artefacts and the whole religious culture issue. The intangible religious reality is the powerful force that lives in a religious person, gives meaning to his life, signifies his place in the universe, and defines the relationship of the universal element to him and to another in accordance with divine law. The many layers of religious cultures that have developed so colourfully since time immemorial until the present age, and have produced exquisite artefacts, all emanate from that single source; the divine source or the unseen universal reality, without which the whole world of religious culture would be but a facade, a

body without a soul. We shall also bear in mind that religious heritage cannot be understood or preserved without understanding its people, and viewing the monuments, the artefacts and the whole culture from the viewpoint of the people who have produced it.

In this paper we will introduce concisely the components of Islamic tradition and give a brief description of *shari'ah* or the Islamic law. We will also deal with the question of 'ritual pollution' and 'ritual purification' since they can help in setting guidelines for the management of Islamic collections. In this respect 'unclean substances' are introduced.

To be able to maintain the sacred boundaries one must be able to distinguish between the realms of 'religious', 'sacred' and 'secular' within the Islamic culture this is another issue of discussion in this paper. In the last section we intend to share with the reader some practical guidelines that we have been following in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

These guidelines were set out as steps towards a reform (however minor) of our process of handling objects so that they should be in accordance with the aforesaid Islamic conventions. In the past few years we have gained valuable information and experience, especially from those visitors who viewed our collection not as objects of mere aesthetic value, but rather as valuable items of religious importance. Inspired by them and taking into consideration the guidelines of Shari'ah, we took small steps towards the establishment of a collection managed according to Islamic values. Such steps will be presented in the format of a case study.

### ISLAMIC TRADITION

A religious view is tightly connected with a 'tradition'. Any belief or practice of a 'traditional nature' is:

- 1) received from the hands, lips, or examples of others rather than through discovery or invention;
- 2) received on the assumption that the authors and transmitters are reliable and therefore the tradition valid; and
- 3) received with the express command and intention of future transmission without substantial change. Therefore the source and the path are both considered authentic, reliable, and must be respected.

Hence, as a source of knowledge, tradition is to be distinguished from rumour and fashion. Rumour and fashion, although received from others, cannot necessarily be assumed to be reliable or be accepted as transmission without alteration; on the contrary, they invite speculation and elaboration. Tradition, however, purports to embody a fixed truth from an authoritative source (see Valliere in Eliade 1987: Vol. 15, 1-15).

Religious traditions inform us about the origin and destiny of things. Sometimes they tell of a golden age of the past or anticipate a glorious future, and often they address both past and future as if they are addressing their audience from a timeless status. 'Remember' is the first commandment of a sacred tradition, reminding people of the rules and realities presented to them from pre-eternal times.

In Islam, the formal concepts of tradition, the *Sunnah* 'custom' or 'example' of the prophet, were compiled in the third to fourth centuries AH (ninth to tenth centuries AD) in the six books of genuine *hadiths*. The Islamic faith is based on 'believing the unseen'. It is stated clearly in the Qur'an that the 'divine guidance' provided by the 'Book' would only guide 'those who have faith in the Unseen...' (2:3).

The first and the most fundamental rule therefore is believing in an unseen source, the presence of the

creator who is 'the knower of the unseen and the manifest' (*al-a'lim al-ghaib wa al-shahadah*). This view explains the universe at two levels of 'concealed' or 'inner' dimension (*al-batin*) and the manifest or tangible dimension (*al-zahir*). The seeker of the two is the one who walks the path, moving from the realm of the manifest to the realm of the concealed. This spiritual path is governed by *shari'ah*. *Shari'ah* is an Arabic term used to designate Islamic law. The word occurs once in the Qur'an, at 45: 18 ('We have set you on a *shari'ah* of command, so follow it'), where it designates a way or path divinely appointed. By following the *shari'ah* a believer may follow the spiritual path (*tariqa*) that leads him ultimately to the realm of Absolute, or the Truth (*Haqiqa*). In other words Islam consists of a divine law (*al-shari'ah*), a spiritual path (*al-Tariqah*) and the truth (*al-Haqiqah*), which is the origin of both the Law and the Way (see Nasr 1985 and 1987).

### RITUAL POLLUTION AND PRESCRIBED PURIFICATION

Virtually all aspects of life may be surrounded by the notion of pollution. The concept of pollution and purity are found in all the religious and spiritual orders of the world. Here, pollution and purity are seen from both internal as well as external points of views. The two concepts may not be studied as separate phenomena as they are two separate aspects of one reality; like light that could not be understood without darkness, the very meaning of purification is essentially connected to our understanding of pollution.

The word pure in itself indicates simplicity and originality, cleanness, a substance that is free from any different inferior contaminating material. It has its connection with truth as it carries with it the meaning of absolute, utter, sheer, without any discordant qualities.

Purification in its religious senses is staying or becoming clean and clear from religious pollution. The purification of religious pollution is a major religious theme because it forges a path of healing, renewal, transcendence and reintegration, establishing harmonious triangular links with the individual, the cosmos, and the social structure.

There are wide ranges of human activities that may be connected to the issue of pollution. Such activities may be divided into three general categories, namely bodily function, social bounding, and the maintenance of sacred boundaries (see Preston in Eliade 1987: Vol. 12, 91-99).

Our main concern in this paper is aimed at the bodily function, such as handling objects of religious reverence in a museum, which relates



directly to touching and presenting such objects. Setting guidelines for the handling of such objects will also contribute to the preservation of the core and essence of religious reality that is the maintenance of sacred boundaries. In this respect one of the major issues for a curator, keeper, conservator and restorer is to determine what substances or conditions are considered impure by the authority of a religion.

Ideas about purity and impurity are linked to complex symbolic systems in virtually every society. One of the most widespread concepts of pollution is associated with excretions from the human body. Urine and faeces are particularly impure. Other body secretions, such as saliva, vomit, menstrual blood, and afterbirth, are also considered to have polluting qualities. Sperm is also considered polluting outside the sanctified context of marriage.

All these bodily excretions have social significance. They are usually surrounded with heavy ritualization to ensure that they will be contained with a specific religious, cultural, temporal, or spatial context (Preston *ibid.*).

The Islamic term for impurity is *nijisa* and the impure subjects are defined as *najis*. All major Islamic schools (*Hanbali*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Jafari* and *Shafii*) consider the following as ritually impure: dog, pig, corpse, blood, semen, human urine and excrement, and liquid intoxicants. People may also be regarded as impure (*najis*) if they do not have faith in the true God. 'O you who believe truly the pagans are unclean' (Qur'an 9:28).

The leaders of all the Islamic schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) have considered prescribed purity (*taharah*) to be a basic condition for the validity of worship (*ibadah*). It is not an exaggeration to say no other religion has given such importance to prescribed purity as Islam.

*Taharah* literally means 'purity'. In the terminology of the jurisprudence it implies the removal of physical impurities such as blood and excrement (*khabath*). To attain the state of prescribed purity from a ritual impure state, one should first remove the 'unclean substance' or its traces off the concerned area of the body. A state of prescribed purity may be attained by the removal of impurities and, in some cases, by the performance of ablution (*wudhu*), bath lustration (*ghusl*) or dry purification (*tayammum*) (Bakhtiar 1996: 3–4).

Pure water must be used for the performance of ablution (*wudhu*) and bath lustration (*ghusl*). Dry purification does not concern the subject of this paper. For Muslims, water represents the 'purified example of purity', and for the mystics it is a symbol of the highest ecstasy and spirituality.

Ablution is the ceremonial washing of the human body, or specific parts of it. Ablution is a symbolic action meant not to create only physical 'cleanness' but to remove ritual uncleanness or pollution. Ablution is performed to correct a condition of ritual impurity, and to restore the impure to a state of ritual purity. The ritually impure (or unclean) person is prohibited from performing certain functions and participating in certain rites (Drijvers in Eliade 1997: Vol. 1,



FIGURE 1 Pages of the Qur'an. Iran. 1684 CE. 30 x 6.5 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

FIGURE 2 Pages of the Qur'an. Malay Peninsula, Terengganu. Late 18th century CE. 43 x 28 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.



9–13). Among such functions is the touching of the Holy Scriptures. The most holy object for a Moslem is the Holy Qur'an, which is the embodiment of the divine words (Fig.1 and Fig. 2). Handling a copy of the Qur'an with respect is a religious duty.

### THE MAINTENANCE OF SACRED BOUNDARIES

The divine words embodied in the holy Qur'an are considered most sacred by the Muslim community. It is important, therefore, to note here that the items inscribed with Qur'anic verses must be treated in a special manner.

Although a wide variety of artefacts may be listed under the general category of Islamic art, not all of these are considered sacred. This is because 'sacred' and 'religious' do not necessarily refer to the same thing. The term 'religious art' may be applied to any form of art related to the manifested body of religion, be it a painted depiction of an event in the history of religion, or a visual description of a religious subject. This subject may be of an earthly

nature, such as a painting of a religious ceremony, or it may have emanated from the supernatural and metaphysical realm referred to in the holy scriptures, such as scenes of creation, paradise, the day of judgement, etc. Objects of ritual importance such as prayer carpets, prayer screens (Fig. 3), portable *mihhrabs* (Fig. 4), robes, belt, swords, and portraits of the saints, also fall under 'religious art'.

Not every example of religious art is also sacred art, so the latter may be considered a branch of the former. Sacredness is a quality that transcends the material domain of religion, and associates itself with the divine. Its function is not of a descriptive nature, but of a transforming one. Religious icons such as Christian icons, or statues of certain deities in the Hindu sphere, are considered sacred, as they possess a distinct quality by which the worshipper is transformed to a state of transcendence.

This may confuse, and has confused many western and especially non-Moslem scholars in their study of Islamic art. They look for Islamic elements in, say, a Persian carpet or a Mughul jewellery



FIGURE 3 Prayer screen. Indonesia, Jambi. Late 19th century CE. 143.5c. x 95 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

FIGURE 4 Mosque portiere. Turkey or Syria. 19th century CE. 176 x 294 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

FIGURE 5 Turban ornament. India. 18-19th century CE. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

FIGURE 6 Candle-stick. Egypt or Syria. 1293-1341 CE. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.



piece (Fig. 5), something that may not be found. It is important to note that for a Muslim anything accomplished with sincerity and good intention is a step towards performing his duty to his Creator and is therefore Islamic. This applies to art as well. An exquisite piece of Mamluk candlestick metalwork (Fig. 6), a fine piece of Iznik Ottoman dish (Fig. 7), an ornamented *keris* – the traditional weapon of the Malay Archipelago (Fig. 8), and a fine piece of calligraphy of Persian poetry (Fig. 9) are all equally recognized as Islamic art.

Such pieces are neither religious nor sacred, yet they are all representative of Islamic art. Technical treatment of such items need not be different from other artefacts. However, if any of the above items carry Qur'anic verses on them (and there are quite a few such examples) then the treatment and handling is different (Figs. 10a-b). The illustrated Ottoman linen tunic, for example, is inscribed with Qur'anic verses and numerals in black and red ink (Fig. 10b). Such tunics were worn under armour and were believed to protect wearers from harm during battle.

Copies of the Qur'an above all else require special treatment, as they are considered to be manifestations of divine wisdom and command. This is because Qur'anic verses carry with them the essence of the sacred. Verses of the Qur'an are not

only important because of the divine message they carry; the script carrying it is considered sacred in itself. Therefore an impure substance, or a person in a state of ritual impurity, shall not come in contact with the scripture: 'That this is indeed a Qur'an most honourable, in a Book well-guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean' (Qur'an 56:77, 78, 79).

The above verse appears on the cover of many copies of the Qur'an. Fig. 11 shows a Chinese manuscript of the Qur'an with the verse in *Sini* style on its cover.

## Collection management

Every museum has its own culture. Culture in this sense is defined as the 'total of the inherited ideas, beliefs and knowledge which constitute the shared basis of social action' and 'the total range of ideas and activities of a group of people with shared traditions which are transmitted by members of the group'. An understanding of museum culture and its collections helps the collection managers to communicate purpose and commitment in their museum. However, to fully comprehend the impact of culture one must understand its symbols, language, ideology, beliefs, rituals and myths. The importance of culture to museums and galleries has only recently received



FIGURE 7 Iznik dish. Turkey. 1575-1580 CE. 6.5 x 32 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

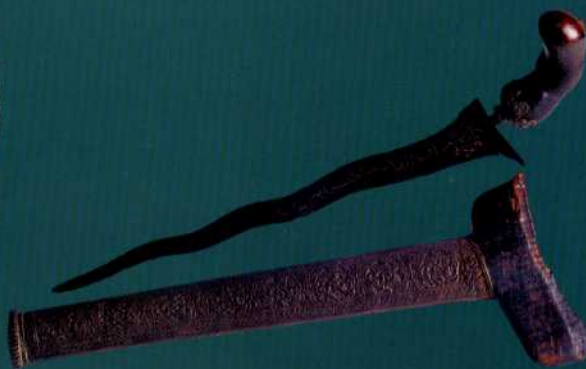


FIGURE 8 Keris. Indonesia, Riau. 1717 CE. 14 x 41cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

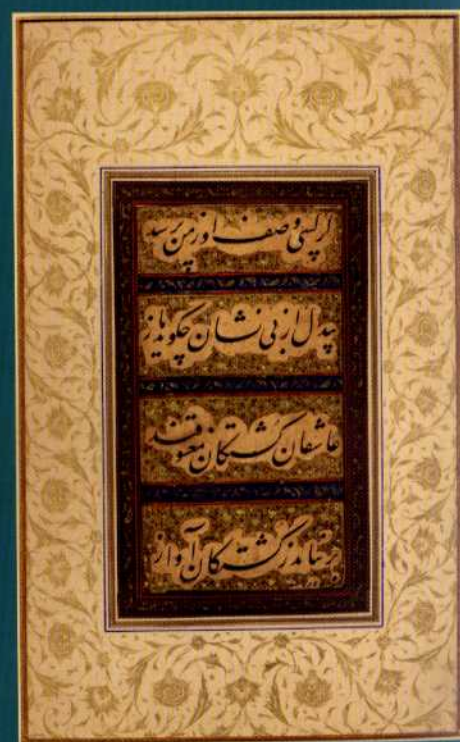


FIGURE 9 A folio of Persian poetry. Nastaliq style. 17th century CE. 15.2 x 8.6 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.



the attention it deserves (Flopp 1997: 161–178).

A collection management policy is a comprehensive statement based on museum culture that sets forth the goals of a museum and explains how these goals are pursued through collection activities. One of the main functions of the policy is to give guidance to the staff members in carrying out their responsibilities related to the museum collection (Fahy 1995: 13).

Managing the Islamic heritage based on Islamic culture and worldview is a new concept and a challenging task. A curator, conservator or restorer must keep in mind the importance of the rules set by the *shari'ah* of Islam, alongside the general knowledge on collection care based upon scientific analysis and museum standards.

The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) located in Kuala Lumpur is a young museum with a commitment to becoming the custodian, preserver, conservator and educator of Islamic art heritage for future generations (Fig. 12) (Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia 2002). As a specialized museum in Islamic arts, we feel that it is our duty to take steps, however small and modest, to give this museum its 'Islamic identity', and to align our moves and acts in the course of collection care as much as possible in accordance with Islamic teachings.

To ensure respect for religious prescriptions and religious expectations in the curatorial department of the museum, we developed an internal manual describing the policy and procedures of the curatorial department to present to the museum management and then the staff. A small part of the manual is a procedure for the handling of manuscripts of the Qur'an in accordance with Islamic values. As mentioned earlier, all Islamic schools concur that it is prohibited to touch the Qur'an without prescribed purity, but they differ regarding the permissibility of someone in a state of minor impurity of blood and



12



FIGURE 10a Talismanic tunic. Turkey. 16th century CE. Shoulder to shoulder: 90 cm; collar to hem: 74 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia,

FIGURE 10b Detail of Fig. 10a showing the Quranic verses.

FIGURE 11 Qur'an. China. 17th century CE. 27x 19.5 cm. Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

FIGURE 12 Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia: The Ceramic Gallery overlooking the Qur'an and Manuscript Gallery.



FIGURE 13  
Handling the  
Qur'an.

FIGURE 14 At  
the exhibition of  
'Fakhr Al-Suyuf-  
The Glorious  
Swords', August  
2002. Islamic Arts  
Museum Malaysia.



excrement writing a Qur'an, touching it through an intervening medium, and wearing it as an amulet (Bakhtiar 1996). According to the Ja'afari School, it is forbidden to touch the Arabic script of the Qur'an without an intervening medium, irrespective of whether the script is in the Qur'an itself or somewhere else. It is also forbidden to touch the glorious name, Allah, for a person even in a state of only minor impurity (ibid).

This small section quoted below may be considered as a tiny step and modest move towards the preservation and the maintenance of sacred boundaries related to the museum collection management. The following statements are under section 6.3 entitled 'Handling procedures for Qur'ans'.

- The Qur'an is a holy book of the Islamic religion, and therefore should be treated with the same respect accorded to holy books and objects of other religions.
- Given the cross-cultural nature of the people employed with the museum, all staff (Muslims and non-Muslims) should be mindful of the special handling considerations associated with the Qur'ans contained within the IAMM collection.
- Muslims are reminded they should wash their hands according to the prayer wudhu rituals prior to handling the Qur'an.

- Non-Muslims should always wear gloves when handling Qur'ans (Fig. 13).
- The Qur'an should never touch the floor. If a Qur'an is accidentally, or inadvertently, placed on the floor, no-one should cross, or step over the Qur'an.
- The Qur'an should always be carried, placed or stored in a position that is higher than waist level.
- Be mindful that the curatorial affairs staff will be subject to scrutiny from people both within the museum, and from people outside the museum. Therefore, strict observance of this procedure must be followed when handling Qur'ans in the galleries, or when assessing Qur'ans for donation, loan or purchase in front of potential depositors.

Here a note must also be added about the impure or unclean substances that must not come in contact with the sacred scripture. As mentioned earlier, pig and dog are two animals considered impure (*najis*) by the Islamic faith. This impurity, according to many schools, applies to the saliva, blood and other secretions of parts of the body of the said animals. This means that, if a certain kind of adhesive is developed from such material, it will be banned from use in the restoration and the conservation of the holy texts.

For a curator and a conservator of Islamic art, the knowledge of the nature of the material used in the process of conservation and restoration is therefore of utmost importance.

The hair and fur of the said animals when moist or wet can also transfer impurities through touch. Brushes made of pig hair are widely used nowadays. They are used in painting as well as in the restoration and conservation of artefacts. One must ensure that such brushes are not used in retouching a holy text, and other restoration works. As general advice, brushes made of such materials should be substituted with other materials in conservation laboratories and workshops that deal with Islamic artefacts.

In this regard, in the curatorial department of the museum we developed an internal procedure concerning tools such as brushes to be used on Islamic art objects. The small sections quoted below may also be considered as a tiny step and modest move towards the preservation and the maintenance of sacred boundaries. Part of section 1.23 under labelling or marking system reads:

- Brushes made of pig bristle and dog hair shall not be used as tools for labelling or marking Islamic art objects.

Also the following statement in section 4.3 under minimum conservation standard is worth mentioning:



- Tools such as brushes made of pig bristle and dog hair shall not be used for fillings, retouches and other conservation and restoration works of Islamic art objects. Also adhesives and solutions used in the conservation and the restoration of Islamic art objects should be free of ritually impure substances extracted from pigs and dogs.

The exposition of objects, and visitor reactions to displayed artefacts of a sacred nature, is another issue that can be noted here. The Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has organized with the collaboration of different Eastern and Western countries several national and international exhibitions, which contained significant historical works of Islamic art. Among such exhibitions are: *The Light of Qur'an* (1999), *Dress for the Body, Body for the Dress* (2000), *The Sacred Art of Marriage – Persian Marriage Certificate of the Qajar Dynasty* (2000), *Six Centuries of the Islamic Art of China* (2001), *Islamic Art of India* (2002), *Beyond Boundaries – Tents of the Islamic World* (2002) and *Between Eden and Earth: Garden of Islamic world* (2003).

On 1 August 2002, the management of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia decided to present a special display to the Malaysian public entitled '*Fakhr Al-Suyuf – The Glorious Swords*' from the museum collection. This exhibition featured fourteen replicas of the swords of the Prophet, the *Khulafa Rashedin* and his companions, revered for their contribution to the Islamic faith. The highlight of the exhibition was a replica of the famed *Zulfakar*, the sword of Prophet Muhammad that was handed to the fourth Righteous Caliph, Saidina Ali ibn Talib, after his death (Fig. 14).

According to our monthly comparative study on the museum temporary exhibitions from 1999 to 2002, surprisingly the number of visitors has increased tremendously. Of course the media exposure contributed to this popularity. However, the important aspect that we believe interested the public – men, women, children and the elderly – was the content of the exhibit and the way these swords were connected to their glorious heritage. The idea that these items were carried by the most holy people, those who were the pioneers of the religion, suggested a halo of sacredness around them – something that people could relate to. This is an aspect usually hidden from the eye of 'technical' people, curators and scholars alike – for them, the historical authenticity of the work has primacy.

The point that we would like to make here is that the managers of religious heritage have to extend their vision beyond the mere historical and technical aspects of the artefacts to the realm of the spirit of the religion itself. They must gain an understanding

of the thinking of the faithful people who produced their work.

## Conclusion

What we have presented in this paper is nothing new. We have only tried to present a traditional view of the preservation of a tradition – something that the peoples of Islamic faith were doing in a very natural manner as a minor religious duty. The preservation and the maintenance of any heritage will best be achieved if the public are involved. The valuable religious heritage, which we have in our hands today, has survived only through the actions of those responsible communities that have guarded them until now.

In this paper, we have touched only the surface of a vast and deep ocean. But water – even a drop of it – may introduce in its humble way the nature of a great ocean. Speaking of the worldview and *shari'ah* of Islam in such a short paper as this one, setting guidelines for the maintenance of sacred boundaries, and preparing management plans, are definitely beyond the scope of this brief introduction. But then the longest journeys begin with a single step.

## Bibliography

- Bakhtiar, L. (1996), *Encyclopedia of Islamic law: a compendium of the views of the major schools* (Chicago, IL: ABC International Group).
- Burckhardt, T. (1976), *Art of Islam: language and meaning* (London: World of Islam Festival Pub. Co.).
- Drijvers, Hans J. W. (1987), 'Ablution' in Eliade, Vol. 1, 9-13.
- Eliade, M. (editor in chief) (1987), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company).
- Encyclopedia of Islam*, New edition, 11 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1960).
- Fahy, A. (ed.) (1995), *Collections Management* (London: Routledge).
- Flopp, M.A. (1997), *Managing Museums and Galleries*, (London: Routledge).
- Gleave, R. and Kermeli, E. (eds.) (1997), *Islamic law, theory and practice* (London: I. B. Tauris).
- Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia*, Vol 1 (2002) (Kuala Lumpur: IAMM Publications).
- Malaro, M. (1995), 'Collection Management Policies', in Fahy 1995, 13.
- Nasr, H.S., (1985), *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin).
- Nasr, H.S., (1987), *Islamic art and spirituality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Preston, James P. (1987), 'Purification' in Eliade, Vol. 12, 91-99.
- Valliere, P. (1987), 'Tradition' in Eliade, Vol 15: 1-15.



