

Exhibition venues

Toxteth Community Library
Liverpool, 13–28 July 2010

Cardiff Central Library
4–18 August 2010

Highfields Community Library
Leicester, 25 August – 29 September 2010

Birmingham Central Library
6–27 October 2010

Lewisham Library
London, 3–17 November 2010

Ancient Iran and India Trust
Cambridge, 24 November – 8 December 2010

The British Museum, John Addis Gallery
London, 15 December 2010–23 February 2011

(Cover image) Seal of Nadir Shah of Iran dated 1148/1735, stamped on an illuminated document of 1740. BL Or.4935, f.16.

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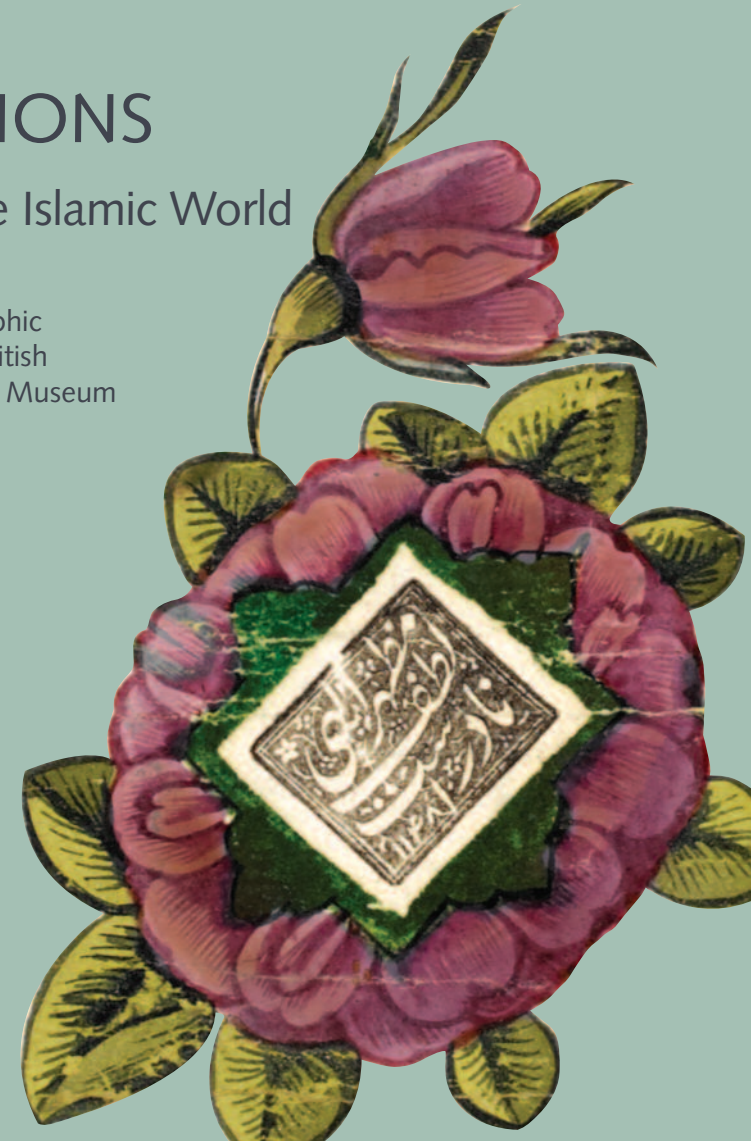
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LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Seals from the Islamic World

A travelling photographic
exhibition from the British
Library and the British Museum



LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Seals from the Islamic World

Like namecards today, a seal presented the image a person wished to project to the world, yet often conveyed much more than was written.

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.

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

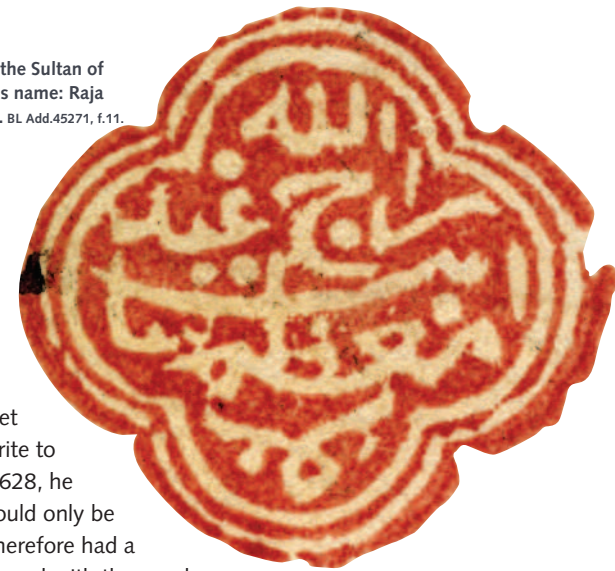
The word seal can mean both the object used for stamping, sometimes called the 'seal matrix', and the seal impression, also called a 'seal stamp' or 'sealing'. Seal matrices are carved in 'negative', so that the inscription reads in 'positive' when stamped. The photographs of seal matrices shown here have been reversed, to enable the inscriptions to be read. When two dates are given, the first is in the hijrah era.

(Right) Rectangular seal impression of Shah Safi of Persia dated 1038/1628, set within an illuminated flame on a letter. BL Or.4935, f.6.



Introduction

(Right) Red ink seal impression of the Sultan of Kedah, Malaysia, inscribed with his name: Raja 'Abd Allah, son of Mu'azzam Shah. BL Add.45271, f.11.



Seals have functioned as symbols of authority from the earliest days of Islam. According to tradition, when the Prophet Muhammad wanted to write to the Byzantine emperor in 628, he was told that the letter would only be read if it bore a seal. He therefore had a seal ring made of silver, carved with the words *Muhammad rasul Allah*, 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God'.

In Islamic seals the inscription takes centre stage, unlike European seals which are primarily pictorial. It is this focus on writing, in the sacred Arabic script, which links seals from all parts of the Islamic world, from Morocco to Turkey, from Iran to India, and from China to Indonesia.

Seal matrices

Islamic seal matrices were made of a wide variety of materials. In the early period, most common were carnelian, jasper, haemetite and agate, as well as rock crystal and lapis lazuli and even precious stones such as garnets and emeralds. From the 14th century onwards chalcedony become popular, and many more metal seals are known, made of brass and silver (the Prophet is said to have disapproved of the use of gold for seals). Seal stones were often set in rings, while other small seals had a looped handle so that they could be hung from a belt or from a chain around the neck. Larger seals might have finely-carved handles of wood, ivory or metal.

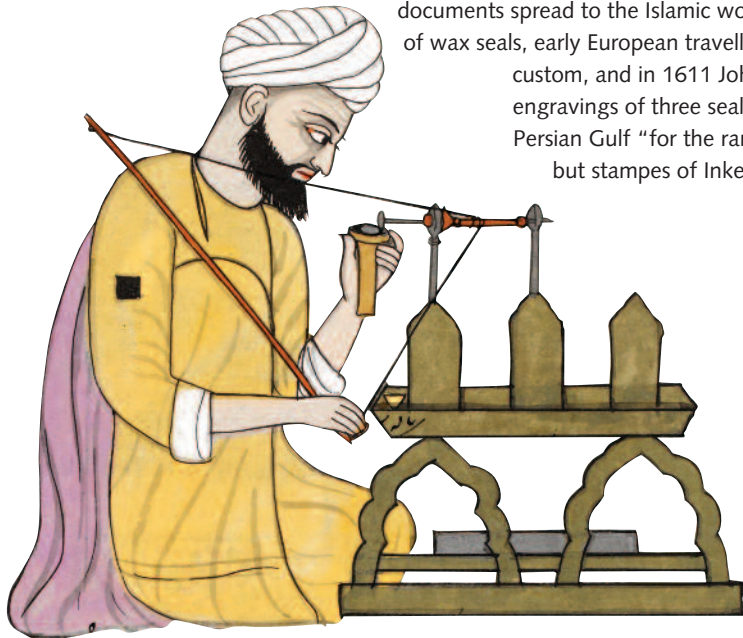
Islamic seals were traditionally carved in intaglio, where the letters are incised with a chisel into the surface of the seal. This gives a white inscription against a coloured background when the seal is stamped in ink. Until recent times only a few seals were carved in relief, where the background is cut away to leave the letters raised; this gives a coloured inscription when the seal is impressed on paper. For a brief period in the 16th century, there was a fashion in the Ottoman empire for seals carved in both intaglio and relief.

Seal engraving was an honourable and highly skilled profession. According to the *Kanz al-ektasab*, a Persian treatise in verse on seals and seal-engraving composed by Rahmati ibn 'Ataullah in Delhi in the 17th century, a professional seal engraver had to be skilled in calligraphy, astrology, the science of numbers and geometry, and should also be familiar with poetry and lead a pious life. In Istanbul seal engravers belonged to professional guilds, and undertook never to engrave identical seals, to prevent forgery. They kept albums of impressions of all the seals they had carved from which new clients could select designs of their choice.

Seal impressions

The materials in which Islamic seals were stamped have changed over time. The earliest surviving Islamic seal impressions, dating from the 7th century, are clay stamps on Arabic documents written on papyrus. Seals were also stamped in lead and bronze, and some early Islamic lead sealings have cloth marks on the reverse, indicating that they may have been used to seal closed sacks containing money or goods. It is also known that lead sealings were worn around the necks of non-Muslims living in Islamic lands to prove that they had paid the poll tax. After about the 11th century, lead and clay sealings seem to fade from use.

From the 13th century onwards the Chinese practice of using ink for sealing paper documents spread to the Islamic world. Coming from a world of wax seals, early European travellers were intrigued by this custom, and in 1611 John Saris published engravings of three seals from Mocha in the Persian Gulf "for the raritie, being not in wax but stamper of Inke".



(Left) A seal engraver, drawn in the Kashmiri style, c.1850. Add.Or.1692.



A selection of early Islamic seal stones, carved in carnelian, dark green jasper, agate, lapis lazuli, sardonyx and garnet. From left: BM 1893 4-26 161; BM 1866 12-29 124; BM OA+ 13485; BM1853 3-28 21; BM 1880-3659; BM OA+ 14289.

In the 1830s, Edward Lane described how seals were used in Egypt: "A little ink is dabbed upon [the seal-ring] with one of the fingers, and it is pressed upon the paper, the person who uses it having first touched his tongue with another finger and moistened the place in the paper where it is to be stamped." From the late 19th century onwards, seal impressions in purple ink herald the spread of the modern ink pad to all parts of the world.

In the Malay states of Southeast Asia, seals were traditionally stamped in lampblack. Large metal seals, made of silver or brass, were held over a candle flame until soot had collected on the surface of the seal. The seal would then be stamped onto paper which had been dampened slightly so that the soot would stick. Lampblack seal impressions could be very striking, with clear white writing against a black background, but could also be quite messy, and sometimes a small paper flap was attached above the seal to prevent smudging.

Seal impressions are found on all sorts of documents, from letters and legal contracts to official permits and marriage certificates, for seals had greater validity than signatures. Artists sealed rather than signed paintings and calligraphic panels, while seals in books functioned as marks of ownership or to indicate that the volume had been read or checked by a librarian. In some Muslim lands, a seal was essential to carry out business. According to Lane, in Egypt in the early 19th century "almost every person who can afford it has a seal-ring, even though he be a servant".

'Trust in God' is the overriding message of the inscription on Islamic seals across continents and through centuries. Most Islamic seals carry a religious expression or the name of the owner, or a combination of both. Many personal names of Muslims are in fact religious in nature. By far the most common Muslim male name is Muhammad, followed by the names of the first four caliphs of Islam – 'Umar, 'Uthman, Abu Bakr and 'Ali – and names composed of 'abd meaning 'servant' and one of the Names of God, such as 'Abd Allah, 'servant of God', and 'Abd al-Rahman, 'servant of the Merciful One'. Popular female names are those of the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and his wives Zaynab and Aysha, but seals of women are much rarer.

The religious associations of personal names meant that many seal inscriptions could have double meanings. A man named Muhammad might have a seal inscribed *In God Muhammad trusts*, both identifying its owner and honouring the Prophet. The eighteenth-century seal of the sultan of Kedah in Malaysia only bears his name *Raja 'Abd Allah, son of Mu'azzam Shah*, but the word *Allah* has been carefully positioned at the top of the seal, transforming the writing of a simple name into an act of piety. Seals from Shi'a communities are characterised by inscriptions honouring the 'fourteen immaculates': the Prophet, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Shi'a imams, the first and most revered being 'Ali, the fourth caliph of Islam and husband of Fatima.

A portrait of a Mughal ruler, likely Shah Jahan, wearing a purple robe and a turban, holding a mace. The portrait is framed by a decorative border with Persian calligraphy.

later Mughal emperors, and the seals got larger and larger as each emperor added another generation to the pedigree. By the end of the Mughal empire, the seal of the last king, Bahadur Shah, had 16 small circles surrounding the central one. The fame of the 'orbital' genealogical Mughal seal spread widely, and inspired the design of royal seals in other parts of India, and even as far away as the sultanate of Aceh in Indonesia.

The early seals, from about the 8th to the 14th century, generally do not bear dates, but from around the 16th century onwards many Islamic seals were dated in the hijrah era. Seals were inscribed in Arabic, or in other languages like Persian, Turkish or Malay. Persian was the official language of Mughal India, and British officials of the East India Company serving in India often used seals engraved in Persian.



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(Right) Genealogical seal of the Mughal emperor Shah 'Alam II (r.1759–1806), with his name in the centre and the names of his ancestors set in 14 smaller circles in the border, from an illuminated royal decree dated 1803. BL IO Islamic 4676 A

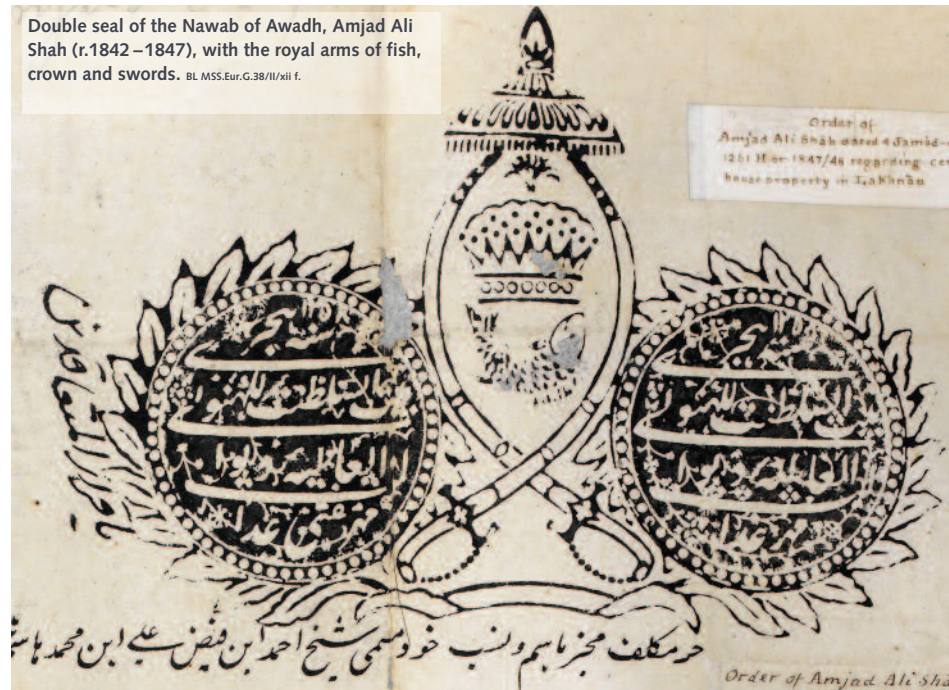
Calligraphy and decoration

Calligraphy or 'fine writing' is esteemed as the highest of all Islamic art forms, because of the special role of the Arabic script in conveying God's word in the Qur'an. The artistic value of Islamic seals is thus judged first and foremost from the beauty and skill of their writing.

Calligraphic styles found on Islamic seals reflect the evolution of Arabic writing in manuscripts and in inscriptions on stone, metal and ceramics. The oldest seals are written in simple angular script, also known as Kufic script. The horizontal lines of letters are sometimes exaggerated for artistic effect, while other letters sprout decorative leafy terminals.



Double seal of the Nawab of Awadh, Amjad Ali Shah (r.1842–1847), with the royal arms of fish, crown and swords. BL MSS.Eur.G.38/II/xii f.



(Above) The royal arms of Awadh. BL Photo 500.

The later development of *naskh* and other cursive scripts can also be traced on seals, with some exquisite examples from Central Asia and Iran in the 14th and 15th centuries. In the 15th century *nasta'liq* script was developed in Iran, and with its sweeping lines and bowl-shaped curves soon became the preferred script for seals from the Indo-Persian world.

The role of decoration in Islamic seals is to support and enhance the inscription; it should never overwhelm it. The earliest Islamic seals were generally quite bare apart from the writing, but some are adorned with simple stars or a crescent, continuing a decorative tradition found in pre-Islamic Sasanian seals from Iran. Later seals often have flowers or arabesques – the scrolling floral vines so characteristic of Islamic art – scattered across the surface. Ornamental motifs were carved with a finer chisel than used for the inscription, so that they appear to recede into the background.

Most Islamic seals are oval, rectangular or round, but in some later seals the shape itself is the main decorative feature. Persian seals often had a headpiece shaped like a *mihrab*, the niche in a mosque wall indicating the direction of Mecca. Malay seals from Southeast Asia usually had beautifully petalled floral shapes, inspired by the lotus blossom. The lotus flower is a symbol of purity in Hinduism and Buddhism, which were the major religions in the Malay archipelago before the coming of Islam. Multiples of four were profoundly significant in Southeast Asia, and floral seals usually had four, eight, twelve or sixteen petals.

By the late 19th century figural and heraldic motifs can be seen on Islamic seals. The state emblem of a lion holding a sword against the rising sun is found on seals from the Qajar dynasty in Iran. The flamboyant rulers of the north Indian state of Awadh commissioned what are probably the largest and most ornate Islamic seals ever created, topped with the royal arms of sword and crown flanked by a pair of fish or mermaids.

Text by Annabel Teh Gallop, British Library and Venetia Porter, British Museum
Designed by Hannah Yates, British Library

Suggestions for further reading

Dominique Collon

7000 years of seals.

London: British Museum Press, 1997.

Derek J Content

Islamic rings and gems: the Benjamin Zucker collection

London: Philip Wilson, 1987.

Annabel Teh Gallop

Malay seal inscriptions: a study in Islamic epigraphy from Southeast Asia.

Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2002. <http://ethos.bl.uk/>

Venetia Porter

Arabic and Persian seals and amulets in the British Museum

London: British Museum Press, 2010 (forthcoming).

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(Above) A document issued from the Sanctuary of the Prophet in Medina, with the seals and tughras or calligraphic symbols of the Shaykh al-Islam, the Deputy Keeper and the Treasurer of the Sanctuary, 1879. The letter is addressed to Baygum Shah Jahan of Bhopal in central India, informing her of the appointment of a new official in charge of pilgrims from her kingdom. BL Or.16742/1.



(Above) Seals from Qajar Iran bearing the state emblem of the lion with the rising sun, and figural elements including a man's head and winged cherubs. Left: BL Or.4925, f.31; Top: BL Or.4935, f.278; Bottom: BM 1992 1-28 13.



Rare examples of seals of women:

(From left) Chalcedony seal inscribed Zaynab.

BM 1866 12-29 104; Seals of two female rulers of Bhopal, India, of Nawab Sikandar Baygum and her daughter Shah Jahan Baygum, both seals dated 1265/1848.

MSS.Eur.G.38/1/11.