

## The Museum Istiqlal

### The Case of an Indonesian Islamic Museum

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Artikel ini membahas permasalahan di sekitar pendirian Museum Istiqlal, sejarah perolehan koleksi, dan kedudukan lembaga ini di antara museum lain di Indonesia. Tulisan ini menekankan baik perkembangan positif yang berlangsung, maupun masalah-masalah yang dihadapi lembaga ini. Lebih jauh, tulisan ini menyoroti peran museum pada awal tujuan pendiriannya untuk melayani masyarakat muslim Indonesia, dan potensi pentingnya yang harus diemban oleh museum secara lebih baik di tingkat nasional dan internasional. Singkatnya, artikel ini menekankan bahwa dalam konteks rencana empat tahun pemerintah Indonesia menggiatkan sektor museum, problem dan kesempatan yang dihadapi Museum Istiqlal merupakan wujud dari tantangan nasional baik untuk sektor museum maupun pendidikan.

Kata kunci: Museum Istiqlal, museum, Islam, Indonesia, sejarah.

*This article describes the conflicted genesis of the Museum Istiqlal, the history of the creation of the collection, and the state of the institution relative to other Indonesian museums. It emphasizes both positive developments underway and the historical problems facing the institution. Above all, it focuses on the role the museum was originally intended to serve for the Indonesian Muslim public sphere and the significant potential the museum has to better serve that mission in the national and international sphere. In short, the article emphasizes that in the context of the Government of Indonesia's current four year plan to revive the museum sector, the problems and opportunities presented at the Museum Istiqlal are symptomatic of endemic national challenges for both the museum and the education sector.*

*Keyword: Museum Istiqlal, museum, Islam, Indonesia, history.*

The museum's mission is to promote Islamic learning and knowledge. Its purpose is to spread tolerance and open-mindedness and to serve as a medium for national unification ... Before you enter the building you should say *Bismillah* so that you can begin the experience with an appropriate religious spirit.”

*(Dimiyati 2010, p. 263, trans. mine).*

### Introduction

To date, besides the work by Uka Tjandrasmita (2008) and my recent article “An Anthropological Reflection on the Museum Istiqlal “ in *Suhuf* (Zilberg 2010) there is little to be found on the Museum Istiqlal in the anthropological and historical literature, especially outside of Indonesia. There is however some discussion of the Bayt Al-Qur’an as a site for recitation and education (see Gada 2004) and the importance of the original intended role of the Museum Istiqlal in promoting a national Islamic identity in the post-New Order period (see George 1998, 2009 and 2010). In contrast, there is a substantial anthropological discussion of Indonesia’s national theme park in Jakarta, the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII) complex built in 1987 to which the Museum Istiqlal (MI) and Bayt Al-Qur’an (BQ) were added in 1997. In contrast to what follows below on Islamic identity politics and the potential thereof, that literature on TMII has focused exclusively on the expression and experience of Indonesian identity at the complex in terms of ethnicity and the politics of nationalism (See Adams 1998, Bruner 2005, Errington 1998, Hitchcock 1998, Pemberton 1994, Picard 1993 and Wood 1997).<sup>1</sup>

Though the Museum Istiqlal and the Bayt Al-Qur’an are linked functionally and historically this article focuses almost exclusively on the Museum Istiqlal though much of the information which follows below naturally pertains to the Bayt Al-Qur’an. To start with, both these museums owe their genesis to the Festival Istiqlal held in 1991 and 1995 at the Istiqlal Mosque. The event, as with the

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<sup>1</sup> This is largely due to the fact that these two museums were only built in 1997, after the above-cited ethnographic research on TMII had been conducted and published. There is however still a significant lag in the museum anthropology literature at this point and with the rising importance and interest in political Islam, this absence of research on what constitutes the national Islamic museum is a critical research gap that this paper works towards addressing. I thank Ali Akbar, Annabel Teh Gallop, M Atho Mudzhar, Azyumardi Azra, Lies Marcoes and Suhaili Osman for their comments and assistance. I thank the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kementerian Agama RI, Badan Litbang dan Diklat) for the opportunity to have engaged educators in museums and Islamic universities through workshops and presentations designed to stimulate Islamic universities to become aware of the Museum Istiqlal and realize its collections’ pedagogical potential. Lastly, I thank the graduate school Sekolah Pascasarjana Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta for the research affiliation supporting this ongoing applied research.

mosque itself, became the nation's most central modern symbolic event and structure of New Order Islam. The mosque had been planned by President Soekarno and was subsequently built and completed by President Soeharto.

Fortunately, there is one significant anthropological account of the Festival Istiqlal, the *mushaf* and the Islamic public sphere in the late New Order (see George 1998). Naturally, that work establishes the foundation for all subsequent research that will follow on the anthropology of art, festivals and Islam in Indonesia (see George 2009, 2010). In addition, as will be detailed below, there were detailed accounts of the festival in the media and a special supplement of *Arts & the Islamic World*. There is also a collection of useful accounts about both museums in the Islamic magazine *Ummat* and an all important article on the museum itself by Uka Tjandrasasmita (2008) all of which will be discussed below in addition to other relevant materials.

Islam in Indonesia is a cultural force of paramount pan-ethnic historical importance being effectively much of the nation's dominant religion for the last 500 years. Today 90% of the 229 million Indonesians are Muslims (according to the 2010 national census) making this the largest Muslim population in the world. It needs little mention that the depth of incorporation of Indonesia and the rest of Southeast Asia into the larger Muslim world is a subject of a significant literature (see Casale 2010, Kadi, Gallop and Peacock 2009, Peacock 2009 for recent instances). This larger relation was of special relevance for the original version of this article for a conference which took place in Turkey keeping in mind the historical connections between Aceh and the Ottoman Empire and the fascinating museum specimens that speak to this history (see Akbar n.d., Akbar 2008). This relevance was added to by the revived relations in the context of Turkish reconstruction and educational aid after the tsunami and the fact that the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was in Ankara for a state visit in 2010 (Budiono 2010, Benthall 2009). This state visit thus added a timely political dimension to the potential relevance of these two museums to Indonesia and the larger Muslim world. It remains to be seen if any future bilateral museum initiatives between this and other museums in the Muslim world ever eventuate never mind a greater national awareness of the

pedagogical potential that the museum might have to play for national Islamic education.

In all then, this article originally had larger goals in mind beyond introducing the Museum Istiqlal and its mandate, history, contents and challenges to both the Indonesian and the international museum community. It proposed that one way of improving the Museum Istiqlal was through bilateral museum projects with museums, in Turkey and elsewhere, which have an interest in Islamic material culture. At this point, it proposes instead that what is needed first is a national awareness of the value of this museum as a resource for Islamic education. The museum's collections can play an important role in stimulating pedagogical reform emphasizing active learning, critical thinking, research, written and presentation skills. In this, it emphasizes that in the context of the Government of Indonesia's four year plan to revive the museum sector, the problems and opportunities presented at the Museum Istiqlal are symptomatic of endemic national challenges for the education sector.

### **The Creation of the Museum and the Nature of its Contents and Problems**

Professor A.D. Pirous related in the magazine *Ummat* in 1997 that the Indonesian Islamic museum project was originally inspired by the Bayt Al-Qur'an built in Bahrain in 1982. Towards creating something along those lines for Indonesian Islam, the plan had been to create a new Islamic museum to house the collection which had been gathered together for the consecutive festivals in Jakarta in 1991 and 1995. Pirous also related that the problem was not going to be funding as the funds were to come directly from the Haji fund. The problem was going to be how to use the museum to stimulate engagement and intellectual activity as well as for building national pride in Indonesia's Islamic heritage.

In that same edition of *Ummat*, there were several illustrated feature articles describing the new Museum Istiqlal and the Bayt Al-Qur'an. Yet outside of those articles in the media, except for the recent articles by Uka Tjandrasasmita "Peran Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal bagi Pembangunan Bangsa Indonesia" in *Suhuf* (Vol. 1, No. 1, 2008) and "Aspek Rasm, Tanda Baca dan Kaligrafi pada Mushaf-Mushaf Kuno Koleksi Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum

Istiqlal Jakarta” also in the same volume, there are no other descriptions of the Museum Istiqlal (MI) in academia either in Indonesia or elsewhere. This media-oriented literature is all that we currently have available for describing the history of the genesis of the museum. It clearly shows that the ultimate intention was towards building a museum that would generate a sense of national Islamic identity. Thus just as anthropologists have argued that the state built the theme park Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII) to use culture in order foster a sense of unity in diversity, that is, as a platform for promoting the national ideology of *Pancasila*, the conjoined museums have a similar but somewhat different function, that is a narrower one.

In the first article in that issue of *Arts & the Islamic World*, Yustiono described the Festival Istiqlal as “an attempt of the Indonesian Muslim to recognize their own identity ...”, “... as proof of the disappearance of the government suspicion of the Muslims ...” and as evidence that an Islamic “cultural consciousness is indeed awakening” (1991: 34). Yustiono ended by noting that during the closing ceremony, the Vice-President, Mr. Soedharmono SH, stated that “there was the possibility of establishing an Islamic Cultural Museum” and that “Insha’Allah, if the museum is realized, the Festival Istiqlal may be held periodically” (*ibid.*). Next A.D. Pirous and his colleagues provided a detailed description of the festival noting that one outcome was the planning of a formal Indonesian Qur’an, an enormous version of which is on display in the BQ. Then Machmud Buchari described the history, art and displays of Indonesian and other Qur’ans and the plans for the national *mushaf* in more detail. To be called the *Mushaf Istiqlal*, it was to be an “attempt to create a specific Indonesian art which is rooted in the various regional kinds of art” (*ibid.*:45).

As regards regional Islamic culture, each of these and the following articles provided broad-ranging, accessible and scholarly discussions of different aspects of Islamic cultural heritage presented at the festival. In focusing on the entire range of materials which came to be housed permanently in the Museum Istiqlal and Bayt Al-Qur’an, they effectively constitute a deeply informative catalog for both museums. These articles, Hasanuddin’s contribution “The Diversity of Traditions in Indonesian Crafts-

manship”, Yuswadi Saliya’s “Mosque Architecture in Indonesia: Variations on a Theme” and K.M. Saini’s “Islamic Inspiration in Indonesian Performing Arts” are effectively key documents pertaining to the collection added to which are a number of catalogs produced for each category (see Zilberg 2010).

The Islamic journal *Ummat* documents the official opening of the Museum Istiqlal and Bayt Al-Qur’an by President Soeharto on Sunday, April 20, 1997. In the first of the anonymous series of articles “Museum Istiqlal dan Bayt Al-Qur’an: Hadiah untuk Indonesia dan Dunia” (MI dan BQ: Gift from Indonesia to the World) (all being anonymous except for the contribution by Pirous), the author notes that the intention behind creating the museum was to represent Indonesia as an important part of the Islamic world. Most pertinent to the purposes of my own research is the second article, “Wajah Islam yang Pantas Dilirik” (The Face of Islam which deserves to be observed) which proclaimed the museum as a safe place for protecting Indonesia’s Islamic heritage. It called on Indonesians to donate their old manuscripts and Qur’ans to the museum for safekeeping as the President had done and described how this would help to strengthen the nation and Islam itself. In addition, it detailed the patronage provided by the President’s wife, Ibu Tien, who provided the land. It also introduced the curator Azyumardi Azra and his wishes for the museum’s future function (1997:51). As Azra is quoted there, the idea was not simply to build a museum to exhibit Islamic “bibles” and manuscripts and other materials.

The crux of the matter was how to make the museums a place for reflecting upon the history of Indonesia and Islamic culture towards stimulating creativity. The next article, “Liku-liku Pencarian ‘Benda Keramat’”, (In the Search for Ancient Sacred Things) described how these two linked museums emerged from the Festival Istiqlal and included a prominent photograph of President Soeharto and dignitaries inspecting the Mushaf Istiqlal. The express idea in all this was thus that the museum would stimulate future creativity, a topic Pirous followed up on in the next article “Tempat Kita Bercermin Diri” (A Place of Reflection).

The following article “Monumen Dunia dan Akhirat” (Monument of the World and Heaven) described the museum’s architecture and its contents highlighting the fact that it also

included a space for future contemporary exhibitions (*Ummat*: 54-55). For the opening itself, works by Yusuf Affendi, A.D. Pirous and Taqim (Nur Mustaqim) were on show. As the article concluded, it was then and still is unusual for a museum to exhibit contemporary art anywhere in the world but that it was important to do so to show how Islam has stimulated the creative spirit (see George 2009, 2010). In fact, recently an exhibition was held to honor the memory of the late former President and Muslim leader Gus Dur who passed away in late 2009 (see Susanto 2010). The last *Ummat* article “Inilah Wujud dari Sebuah Mimpi” (This is a Thing of Dreams) was an interview with Professor Dr. Hasan Muarif Ambary, then Director of the Center of National Archaeological Research (Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional). The most pertinent issue related to this paper concerns his comment that building the museum was not the problem but that how to maintain it and conserve the collection would be the problem. No indication is given here of the problems brewing at the time over which government ministry would control the museum, an important issue returned to further below.

### **Recent Developments at the Museum Istiqlal**

As Atho Mudzhar, former Head of the Center for Research, Development and Training of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Badan Litbang dan Diklat, Kementerian Agama RI), described it (pers. com), the problem was one of leadership and management changes. Towards better management, the system was restructured in 2007. The Badan Litbang dan Diklat created three divisions with separate functions. The first is responsible for research and for checking all *mushaf* printed in Indonesia for errors. The second is responsible for interpretation of the Qur'an (*tasfir*) and the third division is responsible for both museums and their documentation. Atho expressly notes that preservation and education programs are insufficient and need improvement, that management was not even allowed to organize programs previously and that the museums' biggest problems are human resources. It is accordingly with a clear sense of frustration that certain critics approach the Indonesian

museum world.<sup>2</sup> And though the late Dr. Uka Tjandrasasmita formerly of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah himself related that one simply has to be patient it can also be argued that excessive patience is the problem in and of itself (2008: 163). For instance, as early as 1985, Dr. Tjandrasasmita had presented a paper “A Glimpse of the Maintenance of the Remains of the Islamic Cultural Objects in Indonesia” at the Second International Seminar on Islamic Arts in the UK. As regards collection management and the museum experience, little has changed since then except that the collection has visibly degraded.

Revisiting this subject in the last years of his life, Dr. Tjandrasasmita suggested seven ways of improving the function of the Museum Istiqlal, most of which simply recount the original plans as recounted in the articles in *Ummat* mentioned above. These are: (1) to sponsor competitions for reading the Qur'an; (2) to support translations and understanding of the Qur'an; (3) to sponsor writing competitions about the collection; (4) to provide a venue for Islamic performances; (5) to publicize the museum and its activities; (6) to promote the study of Islamic calligraphy; and finally (7) to build relationships with national, regional and international parties. Tjandrasasmita emphasized that the original intention for the museum had been to promote nation building within Indonesia and to promote the country on the international stage. While for the last four years, the MI has held Qu'ranic reading and Islamic calligraphy competitions especially for children, a great deal more has to be done in order to make good on the late Dr. Tjandrasasmita's suggestions.

The long history of these problems also allows for potentially cynical interpretations as to the potential offered by 2010-2014 national development plans towards addressing the state of Indonesian museums. Nevertheless, the fact is that there is a concerted effort underway to improve such museums as part of the government's 2010-2014 development plan.<sup>3</sup> However judging

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<sup>2</sup> It is nevertheless mainly European expatriates living in Indonesia who harbor these critiques. For a history of museums in Indonesia, see Pratomeng Kusumo (1989).

<sup>3</sup> See *Tahun Kujung Museum 2010 dan Gerakan Nasional Cinta Museum (GNCM) 2010-2014* (Direktorat Museum, Direktorat Jenderal Sejarah dan Purbakala, Kementerian Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, 2010). Also see *Rencana*



from the activities held in 2010 at this date, things are not progressing well. Many of the celebratory museum events have been poorly attended and of very limited effect (Krisnantari 2010). Yet some have proven to be exceptional.

There have recently however been some outstanding successes stories. Consider for instance, the revival of the Textile Museum in Tanah Abang, Jakarta, the recent Batik Summit and the all important sudden replacement of the Director of the National Museum thanks to intervention from the Palace. The government is thus critically engaged in the process of assessing where Indonesian museums are, where they might be going and what can be done in terms of better connecting them into the educational system. The Government even has a detailed line item plan for modernizing the BQ and MI which shows careful attention to what is required to solve the current display's problems particularly towards the need for adding multi-media displays.

But first recall Dr. Tjandrasasmita's elephantine patience. It took many years to build the new addition to the National Museum itself and in the end the results were extremely impressive despite the inability to sustain and implement the opportunities presented (see Miksic 2009). It is thus possible that at some point in the future, the Museum Istiqlal will experience a significant transformation in the spirit of the planners' original intentions. However it is more likely that structural issues will be taken care of instead. For instance, the museum has been closed from September through December 2011 for repairing the air conditioning system. The lesson in my view is that the mistake is to focus exclusively on infrastructure rather than on programs and community engagement including a national presence through the mass media and school and university curriculum.

As regards intellectual production, both the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the linked BQ/MI are achieving remarkable success. For instance, the academic production being stimulated through the Ministry far exceeds the expectations that one would have based on the state of social science research and publication in Indonesian universities and museums today. In terms of my

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*Pengembangan Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal* (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur'an, Badan Litbang dan Diklat, Kementerian Agama RI, 2010). Also see Akbar (2009).

personal interests in ancient written Islamic manuscripts and marginalia in the Museum Istiqlal, this is particularly interesting because the local intellectual engagement is occurring at a time when the field of study of Malay manuscripts in the West has experienced a major decline (see van der Meij 2010). In contrast, there is in fact a strong interest in this field in Indonesia, particularly in terms of the study of Islamic manuscripts.<sup>4</sup> Thus we have the all important Indonesian text book by Dr. Tjandrasmita *Kajian Naskah-Naskah Klasik dan Penerapannya bagi Kajian Sejarah Islam di Indonesia* (2006). The quality of the research being published in journals such as *Suhuf* and *Lektur* points to a relatively healthy situation as regards intellectual production in the knowledge sector. This is especially significant for this paper as one would not have expected this to be the case from a superficial visit to either museum. Moreover this is a recognized problem at a national level for all universities and all subjects as well as in Indonesian museums themselves.<sup>5</sup>

### **Whither the Museum Istiqlal?**

On entering the museum, I was initially overcome with feelings reminiscent of those recounted by James Boon in his article “Why Museums Make Me Sad” (1985, see Zilberg 2010). In even greater contrast to Boon’s melancholia, in time I even realized that my own initial sadness was contextually inappropriate. Why? It is simply a matter of standards. One should approach an Indonesian museum as an ordinary Indonesian visitor would. One simply cannot approach such museums by international standards as mandated by the International Council of the Museum (ICOM) or by international cosmopolitan experience. Judging from the state of almost all Indonesian public institutions, facilities and any regular non-elite context, there is nothing out of the ordinary about this museum, its management or the state of its contents. Nevertheless, the Government recognition of the problem and its willingness to share these concerns is an important development towards change. Most importantly, the museums’ contribution to the Indonesian knowledge sector is vital considering the current state of the entire

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<sup>4</sup> See Jones (1999), Riddell (2004) and van der Meij (2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Nielsen (2010) and Sherlock (2010).

Indonesian university and museum system in regard to academic publications.<sup>6</sup>

To return however to the unsettled question as to what had been the original problem at these two museums, and thus the reason for its state today, Kenneth George's article "Ethics, Iconoclasm, and Qur'anic Art in Indonesia" in *Cultural Anthropology* (2009) provides the answer. There George relates that there had been a conflict over the administration of the BQ between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the (former) Ministry of Education and Culture, with the former been given the responsibility. As the article describes it, Professor Pirous, "prominent advocate and founding figure" and several administrators, curators and artists were not in favor of the decision and resigned their positions and withdrew their art works (2009: 612). George adroitly interprets this as an example of a "skirmish in the conflict over how to represent the Qur'an in its eye-catching materiality ..." in which "artists and others have made little headway in establishing themselves as a new sort of authority in aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Qur'anic visual culture" (*ibid.*). This conflict speaks to a larger and all important development in Indonesian history as George describes it albeit referring specifically to art.

The same could be applied to any discussion of Islamic material culture exhibited in the Museum Istiqlal to some degree. As he writes:

Discussion about Islamic culture in Indonesia is not a restricted discourse but an acute and widespread one, especially since the early 1990's, when the Soeharto regime began to actively promote popular religious awareness and piety. Liberalization of the Indonesian Islamic public sphere after the collapse of the Soeharto regime in 1998 only accelerated debate and difference within the *ummat* on matters of cultural and political experience. It is precisely in moments of panic, crises, debate, and censorship that we may glimpse the tensions and attachments of Indonesia's Muslim art public as its artists and authorities sort out some of the cultural and ethical dimensions of Islamic art.

With this context in mind, the very same problems apply to the reactions conservative guardians may have to the representation and exhibition of the contents of the museum as a whole. Yet while

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<sup>6</sup> Again, see Nielsen (2010) and Sherlock (2010).

these museums present potentially dangerous contexts for the most conservative members of Indonesian Islamic society, they also offer the state the perfect space and material for potentially bringing a better understanding of the history of a peaceful and plural Indonesian Islam into the public eye as originally intended.

Nevertheless one should perhaps keep foremost in mind the problems facing artists such as Pirous himself as George relates (2000, 2005, 2009, 2010, George and Mamannor 2002). The very same problems will face any curators and administrators at the Museum Istiqlal should any item, interpretation or event attract the disapproval of religious authorities, mass faith movements, the Council of Ulama (MUI) or self-appointed guardians of the faith. There “[S]omehow, Indonesian Muslims have never been able to formulate a workable politics of culture’ nor been able to ‘overcome the fragmentation and uncertainty within the Muslim community’” (Maier 1987:10 in George 2009:592). Just as Pirous has willingly turned to “custodial orthodoxy” in order to avoid problems with religious authorities and hard-liners and ultimately perfect his art (George 2009: 612), the exact same issues could surface in any attempts to improve the museum. It is possible in this light therefore that the Government’s tactical decision has been to do nothing. By letting the museum slip out of public view and consciousness, it does not excite any potential problems. On the other hand, inaction may have been a combination of lack of funding, human resources and institutional lassitude.

Future research would be needed to more closely examine this underlying conflict over material culture and religion and the events that followed at the museum over the years. In short however, the necessary decision of the original curators, administrators and artists to abandon the museum had unavoidable negative long term results. Yet precisely because of the hyper-symbolic cultural value of Islam in Indonesia, the Museum Istiqlal still has an unparalleled chance of success because the original curators had the kind of expertise and professional competence and commitment that is simply not found in any other museum.

### **Conclusion**

The primordial facts of the scale and diversity of the Indonesian Muslim experience and the rising sense of Indonesian Islamic nationalism in the post-Soeharto era makes these two

particular museums important both to the nation and to the anthropological and museological literature. Though the visitor numbers are high at approximately five thousand visitors a month, and the condition of the museum leaves much to be desired, there is much of value to be found in the Museum Istiqlal both for the ordinary visitor and the specialist. And despite the obvious problems, it turns out that at least in the case of the analysis of Islamic textual materials including archaeological inscriptions, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and both museums are engaged in an extremely vibrant case of national knowledge production. The basic fact remains then that the visitor numbers are high though it is not difficult to generate such sustained numbers through routine school visits. The more important issue is how effective these visits are in achieving the mission of the museums and the schools and universities.

The Museum Istiqlal has spectacular potential in that it has a great collection which has been expertly exhibited. In important ways, the museum is moving forward. In 2010, a visual catalog of the collection has finally been published and individuals within the museum are conducting and publishing significant research (see Gallop and Akbar 2006). To conclude then, the purpose of this paper has been to make available to the Indonesian and international museum community knowledge about the Museum Istiqlal and its history. What we need is for Indonesian educators in schools and universities to build the museum into their curriculum.[]

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*A school visit to the Bayt Al-Qur'an.*



*The contemporary painted calligraphy gallery.*