

ANALYZING MALAYNESS IN WOMEN'S PAINTINGS USING PANOFSKY'S ICONOGRAPHY THEORY

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Abstract. This study aims to examine Malaysian women's identities in art using Erwin Panofsky's iconography analysis, which has three levels: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconographical interpretation. The Malay artists' fight in 1958 to meet the need for identity searching inspired modern women revivalists to go on this quest. This was caused by the severe identity problem that Malaysian women painters went through from the 1950s to the 1970s. So, by rethinking what it means to be "Malay" and its cultural aspect, Malaysian women artists try to show an identity that goes along with Malay arts. This paper examines the Malay identity in Malaysian women's paintings using the art appreciation description method to examine the form and content of Malaysian women's images. To reach the goals listed above, visual content analysis is used. The conclusion of this paper will show how Malaysian women's paintings from the 1970s to the 1990s show the rise of Malay arts and cultural heritage ideals. Using the field of heritage arts, this piece will show what it means to be "Malay" by looking at the shape and content of each painting.

Keywords: *identity, Malayness, Malay arts and cultural heritage, Erwin Panofsky*

Introduction

There were problems for the Malays in Malaysia from 1956 until their freedom (Noh et al., 2014). People were right to be worried that Western influences could make Malay cultural history less valuable since these influences already impact the Malay visual arts (Piyadasa, 2002). The Malays led the way in the fight for a clearer sense of who they were. Malay visual arts clearly showed that people disagreed with the Malay cum Islamic outlook (Ismail, 2012). On the other hand, Malay art began to show secular and commercial elements (Ismail, 2012). In this case, it could mean that Malay culture and the arts did not have a well-planned creative wave. Malay values were ignored, artists did not understand who they were, and ideas were stifled. From the 1930s to the late 1960s, Malay artists had a soul conflict that made them unsure of who they were. This made them start an identity search in the 1970s. The National Cultural Congress was started in 1971 by the Sports and Youth Ministry of Malaya University. That ministry also made this project possible (Mahamood, 2007). The business had pushed the artists to use Malay themes in their work without meaning. The congress's goals were to try something new and focus on building a national culture that includes people of different ethnic groups (Mahamood, 2007). It was able to carry out three essential ideas that were necessary to create a Malaysian national culture.

Theoretical concepts

First, the Malaysian national culture must be the local regional culture. Second, the Malaysian national culture must be a mixture of both. Second, appropriate components

of foreign cultures may be assimilated into the national culture. The nation's primary cultural component is Islam (Mahamood, 2007).

Malayness

These ideas served as the foundation for Malay artists' analysis and synthesis of the Malay arts and cultural history, which inadvertently helped to create a new aesthetic movement (Ismail, 2012). This represented a struggle to maintain one's identity and preserve cultural heritage. Even without "a Malayan school of painting" (D'zul, 2006), Wharton noted that the Malay creative wave was visible between 1958 and 1964. This valiant endeavor was also globally traceable at the Contemporary World Art. The "Akar-Akar Peribumi (Heritage Roots) Seminar," which took place in 1979 at the Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM), Shah Alam, also saw the birth of a cultural aesthetic identity from revivalist Malay artists who saw the necessity for an identity in Malay visual arts (Piyadasa, 2002). A new visual arts depiction was started by Malay revivalist artists, the bulk of whom had ITM training. They did this by making references to Malay aesthetic components, including "songket" and "batik" motives, tales and legends, and Malay societal themes from literary works (Mahamood, 2007). By incorporating Islamic Aesthetics into their work, these revivalists also broadened their creative philosophy. They could express their spirits as Muslim artists thanks to the addition of Islamic ideals to their identities (Hasan, 2010).

Malaysian women artists

The pivotal role of female Malay revivalist artists in shaping the national artistic identity cannot be overstated. Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Khatijah Sanusi, Fatimah Chik, and Mastura Abdul Rahman, among others, made immeasurable contributions to portraying the national cultural identity. Their creative vision was not born out of exhaustion but from the brilliance and elegance of Malay female artists. Their works represent the epitome of Malay art, offering an aesthetic perspective on the critical aspects of environment, culture, and religion, which were deeply ingrained in their minds and emotions. The artwork produced by these talented painters is heavily influenced by traditional Malay motifs, such as wood carving, batik, and weaving, as well as Arab imagery from Islamic art. This further underscores the intricate strokes of the female Malay artists, whose focus was on delicacy, technique, and the message conveyed.

Problem statement

Noh et al. (2014) study reveals that Western aesthetics have heavily impacted local artists for over 55 years, leading to a loss of their regional identity. In the 1970s, a growing awareness of national arts emerged, and Malay imagery emerged. However, due to a lack of documentation on this shift, it received little attention. Additionally, D'zul (2006) observation notes that the trend of new-generation painters toward global styles contributed to the decline in the use of Malay art symbols and cultural history.

Objectives

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how Malay identity is portrayed in paintings created by Malaysian women. This will involve analyzing both the style and

content of the paintings. Additionally, the study aims to verify that the paintings chosen for analysis are a factual representation of Malaysian national culture, as per existing theories.

Materials and Methods

This research utilizes an observational approach, focusing on content analysis of selected paintings. As Bin Hasan and Hitam (2015) states, "Careful gazing is one of the two essential tools of art history." As such, our researchers employed organized, methodical, and careful observation techniques to extract artistic data from Malay pictures. This approach allows for extensive observation and study of visual arts, enabling a descriptive strategy for appreciating the arts. Visual content analysis is then performed, with the aforementioned theoretical ideas serving as the foundation for codes. For this research, three paintings by Malay women artists were selected as examples. These pieces were taken from the National Visual Arts' publication of the permanent national "Warisan Seni Tampak (Visible Arts Heritage)" inventory collection from 1958 to 2003. The photos within this data sheet showcase Malay culture, with the artist, work, year, title, and Malay pictures serving as sample criteria. The article primarily emphasizes Malay arts and cultural heritage values on female arts from the 1970s to the 1990s. A descriptor based on the art history discipline will identify the Malay arts and cultural legacy that female revivalists raised in their presentations. According to Bin Hasan and Hitam (2015), the study of art history includes art appreciation as a core component. The arts and enjoyment of the arts must work together to make art meaningful. Without art appreciation, there can be no art history, and vice versa. The foundation of art history lies in the study of the emergence, evolution, transformation, and demise of artistic movements.

Analyzing data

In discussing Malay arts and culture imagery, the art appreciation approach, as described by Ragans (2005), is utilized to uncover the identity of Malay artists. The three fundamental components of an art form-theme, composition, and meaning-are crucial in appreciating the form and content. According to Ocvirk (1968), evaluating an artwork involves considering its topic, form, and meaning. An art evaluation methodology will evaluate the artistic creations of four avant-garde Malay revivalist women: Mastura Abd Rahman, Fatimah Chik, Khatijah Sanusi, and Ruzaiika Omar Basaree. These artists were among the first revivalists who fought to preserve arts and cultural heritage, as noted by Noh et al. (2018). Their works often depict Malay themes and motifs, making them essential figures in Malay arts and culture 6.0.

Results and Discussion

Since establishing the National Cultural Congress in 1971 (Geng et al., 2023), local artists have played a significant role in reviving Malay arts and culture. One such artist is Ruzaiika Omar Basaree, a female painter who has gained domestic and international recognition. She has introduced a new method in regional art and has shown a keen interest in utilizing arts and cultural heritage to define the Western perception of Malay in her early works from the 1970s. Her pieces "Siri Dungun-Jendela Terbuka," "Siri

Dungun-Jendela III," and "Siri Dungun" from 1978 are excellent examples of her accomplishment in this regard. Ruzaika's artwork, as showcased in *Figure 1*, draws inspiration from traditional Malay architecture and incorporates "kerawang" carving themes from Terengganu. Her unique approach captures the essence of her artistry, utilizing a two-dimensional color arrangement represented in three dimensions. Ruzaika's innovative perspective on paintings, particularly from a three-dimensional angle, has set her apart as the first Malay woman to do so, as per theoretical notion 2. Her allusions to Malay carving philosophy, especially the "awan larat" notion with its Islamic aesthetic standards, enabled her to explore Islamic aesthetic principles in great detail, corresponding to theoretical idea number three. Ruzaika's admiration of nature and Malay architecture, and her understanding of Tawheed and aqidah, staying faithful to Allah's commandments, is evident in her Malay perspective on the arts, which links them to culture and religion. Her symbolic paintings convey form and meaning aesthetically, making her a prominent Malay female painter. According to Syed Ahmad Jamal, Rozaika Omar Basseri's "Window Within Window" from the Dungun Series is ingrained in Malaysian vision. Ruzaika's "Siri Dungun" is a prime example of her skillful blending of traditional aspects to create a distinctly Malaysian piece, making it an impressive Malaysian art, as stated in Kanansky's 1988 publication.



Figure 1. Omar Ruzaika Basaree Series of Dungun.
Source: Basaree (2016).

The accomplished painter Mastura Abdul Rahman is on the agenda, hailing from the younger generation and starting her career in the 1980s. She obtained her fine arts degree from ITM and is now a faculty member at Multimedia University. Mastura is heavily involved in the revivalist movement, which has prompted her to reflect on her identity and the Malay worldview that has influenced her artwork. This has resulted in most of her works being heavily influenced by Malay culture and Islamic themes in the ornamental arts category. During her academic career, she was introduced to Western theories, which inspired her to incorporate Western concepts such as aerial perspective in her paintings, creating an unconventional aesthetic image of space (*Figure 2*). Mastura's artwork, including the large-scale piece titled "3," combines various creative

elements in a sophisticated manner. She interprets the Malay worldview from a female perspective, highlighting connection and beauty. Her paintings reflect the reality of women using traditional batik and songket themes to depict nature while incorporating vibrant, contrasting hues that create a pleasing setting for the painted motifs. Mastura also uses diagonally formed lines to convey an aerial viewpoint and portray the interior design of a traditional Malay home. This approach contributes to the distinctiveness and power of her work. Mastura's art is noteworthy because she combines symbols of Malay culture, such as the Malay infant cradle, newspaper, sarong, congkak, and labu sayung. These objects allude to her appreciation of Malay culture and correlate with theoretical idea 1. Additionally, she incorporates Islamic characteristics such as a prayer mat and the Quran, which are placed in the sculpture on top of a traditional wooden beam and palm-woven mat. This inclusion represents her public display of Islamic principles, which is appropriate for theoretic notion 3. In conclusion, Mastura effectively demonstrates the beauty of Malay cultural decorations infused with Islamic ideas and beliefs. Her work aligns with theoretical idea 2 as she depicts female creative works with Malay traits, categorizing her work as gynocritics. As Piyadasa (2002) notes, "incorporating the Malay-Islamic aspect was crucial and essential to establishing a harmonious and tranquil living style."



Figure 2. Mastura Abdul Rahman *Flower House*, *Harmony House*.
Source: Abdul Rahman (2020).

The next artist is Khadijah Sanusi, whose works first appeared in the 1970s and continued to create until the 1990s. *Figure 3* displays a piece from her September Series. She received local and international training, adding to her motivation for Malay Islam. She incorporated floral motives adapted from Malay flower motives and Islamic geometrical patterns while presenting global themes in her September Series II. This has captured her identity as a Malay Muslim and her physique. These facts relate to ideas 1 and 3 in theory. The National Culture Congress served as Khadijah Sanusi's inspiration for exploring the national identity issue, which also caused internal turmoil in the 1980s and 1990s. She was motivated to create by the well-known Malay batik traditional art mediums and methods. She did this as a realization of her struggle to use art to establish a sense of national identity. Her endeavor to represent her recollection of September

peacefully using Malay and Islamic aesthetics had succeeded. Her artistic endeavors were described as abstract pieces with ornamental and symbolist overtones.



*Figure 3. Khatijah Sanusi. September Series II.
Source: Mohammad Noh et al. (2019).*

Conclusion

The aforementioned sample amply demonstrated the Malay and Islamic aesthetics practiced by female painters from Malaysia. By shifting their creative emphasis to Malayness based on Islamic principles, Malaysian women artists have been given a framework thanks to the National Arts and Cultural Congress 1971. The floral adoption is descriptive of all the specified works of art. The geometric forms of Islamic aesthetics have been neutralized and dematerialized, while the pictures are loaded with Malay components. These left behind ornamental remnants. The above examples have undergone several rejuvenation processes and new methods implemented from technical and media viewpoints. Therefore, they are not stationary. Therefore, it is clear that the intellectual ideals and sophisticated sensitivity of these Malay women artists are present in their spirit and forms, which are refined following the needs of the Malay world. These support the necessity for a contemporary art form. The artists' clever picture choices, including Malay and Islamic themes, revealed their intellectual capacity to combine Western and traditional techniques in their presentations. These have moreover shown their extraordinary capacity to fuse Islamic and modern aspects. The studied samples have complied with the theoretical requirements of Malay arts, and secondly, it reveal various criteria introduced to Malay arts by feminine touches. These are the main conclusions of the current research, in conclusion. The famed Malay female softness, such as tediousness, subtleties, and politeness, has been demonstrated using feminine elements in the arts. Their dedication to their work is apparent. Therefore, this case shows that conceptions of national art culture have been realized and that Malayness has evolved into the identity of Malay women artists. This led to the goals and issues that are the focus of the current investigation. This study aims to validate the theoretical principles of Malaysian national culture in the context of female Malay arts.

Additionally, it sheds light on the various standards incorporated into Malay arts due to female influences. Future research could delve into the feminine qualities of tenderness, refinement, and politeness. Other parameters, such as the characteristics of contemporary modern Malay, liberal Malay, or new Malay that contribute to gender bias, could also be explored. Documentation of these criteria is crucial for research, preservation, and revitalization purposes.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest about the research, authorship, and publication of this paper. Each author brings a unique area of expertise to this study, including theoretical and philosophical perspectives in art, the history of art, liberal studies, and the fields of art and design. These complementary strengths have enabled a multidisciplinary approach to the subject matter, ensuring that the analysis and conclusions are based on rigorous academic inquiry and free from personal, financial, or institutional biases. The authors confirm that the research aligns with their shared academic interests and that no external influences have impacted the objectivity or integrity of this work.

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