

Batik in Visual Art

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Abstract. Art is being relished by many individuals for a lot of purposes. Irrespective of the reasons, one aspect that art does is the broadening of human communal visual languages. The earliest artistic purpose was possibly ceremonial or as a medium for religious rituals. Art can also act as a memorialisation of momentous events. Besides being gratifying to the eyes as a creation of something beautiful and that expresses deep emotions, art can be a method of documenting visual information and telling stories. As such, batik which has been a traditional art has now become a part of the modern Malaysian art scene that gives different inspirations in painter's soul and art lover. Batik in visual art has the potential to be one of the elements that represents Malaysia. Thus this paper's aims is to explore the development of Malaysian batik in visual art using the theory of the five principles aesthetic philosophy that is proposed by Zakaria Ali.

Keywords: Batik, batik painting, painting batik, visual art, theory of Malay aesthetics.

1 Introduction

The foundation of modern art that encourages the exploration of materials and the expression of new visuals enable batik to exist in modern Malaysian art¹. Batik which originally has been a garment is worn by people of all ages. This shows that culture has a very close relationship with society in Malaysia. Although Malaysia wasn't the only nation in the region that manufactures batik, the design and final product of Malaysian batik is dissimilar from the others. Malaysian batik is well-known both locally and internationally. In Malaysia, batik is by far the most favoured traditional craft product among individual buyers. Meanwhile, it ranks third in demand among corporate buyers². This Malaysian traditional textile is being loved by locals and tourists due to its aesthetic designs. Malaysian batik motifs were mostly influenced by the environment and nature which had been transformed into an attractive pattern based on Islamic preferences. These motifs were adapted from four types of sources which are flora, fauna, geometry and abstract.

¹ Mulyadi, M. (2011). *Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia: Era Perintis hingga Era Pluralis (1930-1990)*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications.

² Rohaida, N., & Siti, A. B. A. (2012). Malaysian Batik Industry: Protecting Local Batik Design by Copyright and Industrial Design Laws. *International Journal of Business and Society*, Vol. 13 No. 2, 117–132. <http://www.ijbs.unimas.my/repository/pdf/Vol13No2-paper3.pdf>.

The dramatic process of producing batik with the effect of white dot or lines is due to the wax, performing an intricate design and then being immersed in colorful dye pigments, have contributed to inspire modern Malaysian artists to transform batik as canvas size paintings or scroll and presented it in the context of visual art³. In an exhibition catalogue by Petronas Gallery titled *Batik Painting and Painting Batik*, it explained about the transformation of batik as a masterpiece that was started off by Chuah Thean Teng in the 1950s⁴. Teng owned and managed a batik factory after WWII, but somehow it did not bloom. He then began experimenting with the batik dyes from the remaining materials. He eventually managed to learn how to combine his skills as an artist and a batik craftsman. This happened only after going through years of trial and dedication in an effort to develop this new art form⁵. Not only did he have the knowledge and expertise in craftsmanship, he was also well versed in the understanding of the whole truth that constituted the Malaysian background, which was then being portrayed in his batik artworks.

Batik Malaysia has grown to become a magnum opus of Malaysian art-scene and has evolved from its original purpose of its creation as a garment. This also shows that batik Malaysia has grown beyond its world through the process of modernising concepts, techniques and philosophies, as has been stated by D'zul Haimi Md.Zain (1984)⁶.

Ini menunjukkan batik Malaysia telah berkembang melampaui dunianya melalui proses pemodenan konsep, teknik dan falsafah.

Malay traditional arts such as batik have gained attention among artists especially since the organisation of the National Cultural Congress in 1971. The goal of the National Cultural Congress is to encourage artists to project in their work the sense of national pride and identity. Since 1956 till Malaysia has gained its independence, the Malays have been trying to find the cultural identity. As such, the formation of the National Cultural Congress by the Ministry of Youth and Sports has further ignited the attempt⁷. In the 1960s, Malaysian artists who had obtained their training overseas returned to the country with western ideas and started a high experimental period. This resulted in various kinds of artworks being produced and most of the artworks had no clear reference point to traditional elements, thus detaching them from any attempt at promoting a national image. After that, the Malay sentiment was resurrected in the mid-1970s after the racial strife that erupted in 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, where violent clashes between ethnic groups took place. Due to the incident, the national culture then influences the minds of the artists with the strong sense of direction as is outlined in the Congress⁸.

³ Yunus, N. A. (2014). *Malaysian Batik: Reinventing a Tradition*. Clarendon: Tuttle.

⁴ Zakaria, A. M. (2005). *Catalog Exhibition: Batik, Batik Painting & Painting Batik*. Kuala Lumpur: Galleri Petronas. 8 – 9.

⁵ CHUAH THEAN TENG - PIONEER OF BATIK PAINTING. (n.d.).

<http://www.yahongart.com/pdf/Pioneer%20of%20Batik%20Painting.pdf>.

⁶ D'zul, M. H. (1984, March). Batik Dalam Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia. *Majalah Dewan Budaya*, 47.

⁷ Liza, N. M., Abdul, R. R., Nurkhaliza, I., Tengku, S. I., & Khairunnisa, G. M. (2018). The Malay Identity in Malaysian Women's Paintings. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(10), 63–72. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v8-i10/4712>

⁸ AzianTahir. (2009, April 08). National Culture Congress, The Impact to the Malaysian Artist

Since then, awareness of national art began to emerge among local artists. There was an aware change in the subject of Malaysian batik art, together with other forms of arts, with the seismic enlightenment and argument of post-colonial Malay-ness following the race riots incident that happened in 1969. Numerous artists were inspired to re-look at traditional forms of art such as batik and its motif as starting points for contemporary reading and use⁹. However, it didn't get much publicity because no serious work was done to record the development. Besides that, the propensity of new artists to adopt universal styles has led to the negligence rather than an emphasis of Malay art and cultural heritage images in the production of their artwork¹⁰. These days, quite a number of Malaysian artists use batik techniques in the production of their masterpiece as an alternative media. Unfortunately, it is not as highly preferred as other techniques such as drawing and painting. Moreover, in comparison to the other type of media, this batik method has not been properly practised and implemented¹¹.

2 Literature Review

Batik is a work of art that is produced from the effect of wax through the technique of dotting or other insulating materials that can be a barrier for fabric dye to permeate on the fabric surface. It also refers to the patterns and theme that create a particular design on the surface of the fabric. As stated by Tay Mo Leong (2005)¹².

Penghasilan batik itu adalah merupakan satu proses menghalang warna bagi menghasilkan reka corak pada permukaan kain.

The archaeological evidence suggests that batik got its start from the Malay Archipelago. The initial idea of creating batik came from the world's leading civilisations, namely Egypt, even though the term 'batik' showed up from the Nusantara. Meanwhile, Abdullah Mohamed or normally known as Nakula (1990)¹³, has once stated that the term 'batik' apparently arises from Indonesia, and has been taken from the Malay word for 'titik' and the Javanese word 'mba' which indicates 'writing'. Therefore, batik means "to write the dots", intended here either in the form of points itself or in the form of flowers and other small motifs on the surface of the white cloth. Then, the technique for creating those motifs depends on the era and space in making batik.

After the shift of batik as clothing to batik as painting, which was initiated by Chuah

Artwork. Retrieved October 14, 2020, from

<http://penulisansenihalus.blogspot.com/2009/04/national-culture-congress-impact-to.html>

⁹ Nur, K. H., Beverly, Y., & T., S. K. (2015). *Narratives in Malaysian Art*. Kuala Lumpur:RogueArt.

¹⁰ D'zul, M. H. (2006). *Seni Kontemporari Malaysia dalam Pembentukan Sejarah Tradisi. Suatu Penilaian Bentuk dan Makna*. Persidangan Seni Budaya & Warisan.Pendidikan SeniBudaya & Warisan di Abad 21: Teori dan Praktis. Anjuran Kementerian Kebudayaan Kesenian dan Warisan. 203-211.

¹¹ Mohd Fauzi, A. E., Ghazali, N. H., & Ahmad, N. H. (2016). Malaysian Batik Painting From 1950 to 2010: A Study on Style. *3rd ISME International Colloquium 2016*, 3, 145–150.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/154828783.pdf>.

¹² Leong, T. M. (2005). *My Approach in Batik painting*. Article Karyawan Tamu PetronasGallery, 14 December 2005, Petronas Gallery Kuala Lumpur.

¹³ Abdullah, M. (1990). *Batik Kita: Falsafah Motif-motif dan Sejarahanya dalam WarisanKelantan IX*. Perbadanan Muzium Negeri Kelantan.

Thean Teng, batik painting in Malaysia has undergone several developments and changes over the years in terms of techniques, ideas, and ways to create batik painting work of art. Some Malaysian artists have turned to batik painting as an additional medium¹⁴. Batik in visual art is divided into two art forms, namely batik painting and painting batik. 'Batik Painting' and 'Painting Batik' sound the same but they actually have significant differences.

Batik painting is a painting that is made using the techniques being used in the production of traditional batik cloth; this statement is supported by Frank Sullivan (1968). According to him, some artists have covered the whole white cloth with wax, and then the cloth is being crumpled so that the wax on the surface is cracked. After that the cracks is painted with colors to create random crack that specially can be found on batik cloth. The wax was removed by using wax paper. Next, they draw a line on the fabric with a maker pen and the pattern is coloured with Indian ink. The result of this painting do not have a special name, but it is also called a batik painting¹⁵. The pioneers of modern Malaysian batik paintings are Chuah Thean Teng, Khalil Ibrahim, Tay Mo Leong and Patrick Ng Kah Onn.

On the other hand, painting batik is a painting that is painted with batik motifs and patterns, however, the material and process vary from the traditional batik. This statement was supported by Frank Sullivan (1968) in a book entitled *Teng-Master Of Batik*; painting batik are artworks that portrays particular or any desired themes depending on the artists but focusing on the batik motifs in producing the work. In terms of media usage, it can be anything in the fine art medium such as oil paint, watercolor and etcetera¹⁶. The renowned artists who have produced painting batik artworks are Hashim Hassan, Mohamed Najib Ahmad Dawa and Mastura Abdul Rahman.

3 Methodology

To decipher the content analysis on the chosen artwork samples, an observation method was chosen for this paper. This study analysed batik in the visual art artwork from four different artists. Three artworks were selected from each of them where two artist produced batik painting artwork and another two artists had painted batik in their painting. The two artists who produced batik painting artworks are Chuah Thean Teng and Fatimah Chik, while the two artists who produced painting batik artworks are Hashim Hassan and also Mastura Abdul Rahman. They are the prominent artists of batik in visual art. The selection is made based on two features:

- i) The artists are artists who are based in Malaysia
- ii) The artworks must be batik in visual art artworks

In analysing the samples, the researcher has observed and considered two important factors, they are the form and the content of each artwork. The researcher has employed the

¹⁴ Mohd Fauzi, A. E., Ghazali, N. H., & Ahmad, N. H. (2016). *Malaysian Batik Painting From 1950 to 2010: A Study on Style*. 3rd ISME International Colloquium 2016, 3, 145–150. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/154828783.pdf>.

¹⁵ Teng, & Sullivan, F. (1963). *Teng: Master of Batik*. Penang, Malaysia.

¹⁶ Teng, & Sullivan, F. (1963). *Teng: Master of Batik*. Penang, Malaysia.

Malay concept of aesthetic values that are developed by Zakaria Ali as a framework through five fundamental formulations, consisting of finesse (berhalus), usefulness (berguna), unity (bersatu), contrast (berlawan) and symbolism, (berlambang).

Theories of art are intended to apprehend the ‘essence’ of art in terms of a single key concept, such as ‘expression’ or ‘representation’. Art criticism and visual analysis are taught in schools and institutions for students to understand the concept of art appreciation. The Malay aesthetic theory of beauty that is designed by Zakaria Ali seems perfect in analysing batik in the context of visual art as it coincides with the Malay ideology. Thus, it gives a deeper appreciation and understanding on the selected artworks.

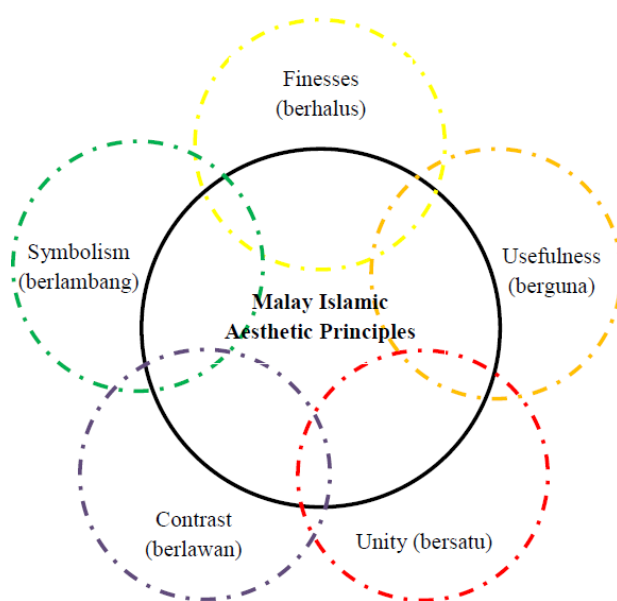


Figure 1 Malay Islamic aesthetic principles: Zakaria Ali, Thoughts on the aesthetics of Malay Artefacts, *Wacana Seni, Journal of Arts Discourse*, Ji., Vol. 5, 2006¹⁷

4 Result and Discussion

As in the Malay aesthetic theory of beauty that is designed by Zakaria Ali, the first principle is finesses (berhalus), which expresses the delicacy of the art of objects and the chosen media. The inspirations originate from the nature that embraces the formation of the material of the work of art. The result of this implementation characterised artistry's refinement¹⁸. As we all know, Malay traditional batik has mainly been inspired by nature

¹⁷ Zakaria, A. (2016). Thoughts on the Aesthetics of Malay Artefacts. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse*, 5.

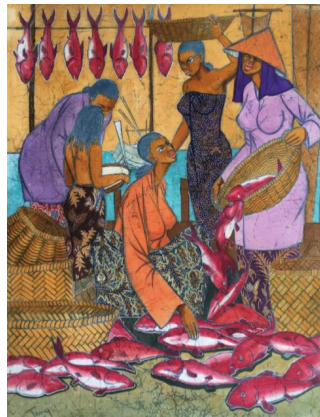
¹⁸ Sabariah, K. A. (2016). Allegorical Narratives: Redefining the Evolution of Ornamented Aesthetic Principles of Langkasukan Art of the Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art*, 159. doi:10.2495/iha160011.

where through the Islamic process of stylisation becomes an intricate and beautiful pattern as can be seen in Mastura Abdul Rahman's artwork. This is because, she uses the real batik cloth with the patterns of the flora in the production of her artworks for example 'Let's Play'.



Figure 2 Mastura Abdul Rahman. Let's Play. Mixed Media, 50 cm x 60 cm, 1989, Artist Collection

The second principle is usefulness (berguna) which pertains to the object's usability in art designed to suffice utilitarian purposes with aesthetic characteristics¹⁹. This principle also shows the quality of the sharing practices in the Malay community. In one of the works of art by Chuah Thean Teng entitled 'Drying Salted Fish', he illustrated the rattan baskets that were used by the Malay community in the production process of salted fish. This shows that the Malay traditional art such as the rattan baskets are not only made for the purpose of pleasure or beauty alone but are also useful to serve a specific function in the everyday life of the Malays.



¹⁹ Sabariah, K. A. (2016). Allegorical Narratives: Redefining the Evolution of Ornamented Aesthetic Principles of Langkasukan Art of the Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art*, 159. doi:10.2495/iha160011.

Figure 3 Chuah Thean Teng. Drying Salted Fish, Batik, 86 cm x 66 cm, 1970s

The third principle is unity (*bersatu*) which refers to the assimilation and unification of the form and content. The implementation of this fundamental allows the composition to be conveyed and construct distinctly²⁰. In Malay heritage, the principle of unity signifies the complexity and sophistication of motifs and patterns design in traditional Malay arts. We can see the unity that has been created in Fatimah Chik's artwork titled, 'Rentak Nusantara' where there is a repetition of intricate motifs throughout the artwork.



Figure 4 Fatimah Chik. Rentak Nusantara, Batik, 207 cm x 72 cm, 198

The fourth principle is contrast (*berlawan*) which refers to the harmonious feature of contrast. Two differences that complement each other, resulting in flexibility, harmony and balance in design. The use of mediums, contrasting colors, forms and textual implications illustrates and enlivens the art's aesthetic standard²¹. This contrasts in color is mainly red and green and contrasting geometric form of triangle and rectangle can be seen in Fatimah Chik artwork entitled 'Gunungan Series'.

²⁰ Sabariah, K. A. (2016). Allegorical Narratives: Redefining the Evolution of Ornamented Aesthetic Principles of Langkasukan Art of the Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art*, 159. doi:10.2495/iha160011.

²¹ Sabariah, K. A. (2016). Allegorical Narratives: Redefining the Evolution of Ornamented Aesthetic Principles of Langkasukan Art of the Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art*, 159. doi:10.2495/iha160011.



Figure 5 Fatimah Chik. Gunungan Series, Batik, 89 cm x 65 cm, 1999

The fifth principle is the symbolism (*berlambang*) that is used to find the integration and unification between form and content. This principle reveals the symbolic meaning that is associated with Malays' history, tradition, belief, roots and so on²². A number of the batik artists' works not only uplift and illustrate the Nusantara heritage's socio-cultural features, but also visualise the Islamic influences in their works, as seen in Hashim Hassan's artwork, where he frequently incorporates symbols of the cosmos, such as the stars, moon and planets as in his 'Sulur Bayur' artwork.



²² Sabariah, K. A. (2016). Allegorical Narratives: Redefining the Evolution of Ornamented Aesthetic Principles of Langkasukan Art of the Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. *Islamic Heritage Architecture and Art*, 159. doi:10.2495/iha160011.

Figure 6 Hashim Hassan. Sular Bayur, Acrylic On Canvas, 127 cm x 97 cm, 2003, Artist Collection

All of the selected artwork draws together the perspective of Malay tradition and culture. The artists have used representation to symbolise the Malay culture itself, especially in terms of tradition and the life of the Malays. The elements of the Malay culture that are illustrated in their paintings, for example the traditional house interior, lifestyle and the clothing of the Malays, show that batik has grown beyond its traditional world into a modern art context. To some extent, this is a reflection of the National Cultural Congress Policy where the goal has been to promote the artists, to exemplify the sense of national pride and identity in producing their artwork.

5 Conclusion

The batik medium was embraced and reinvented by generations of artists, as they attempted to respond to different national imaginaries and contexts across the successive periods in our post-war history. Batik can be considered as a uniquely Malaysian story, considering the broader entanglements in the search for a localised artistic and creative vision, the desire for national selfhood, as well as the transformation of traditional art forms to reflect modern aspirations.

6 Recommendation

This study aims to look at the development of batik in the context of visual art based on the theory of five principles aesthetic philosophy by Zakaria Ali. Through this study a reflection of the National Cultural Congress Policy with the prominence of the national identity is shown. This is shown in the works of selected artists in addition to the occurrence of additions and variations that have highlighted variations in terms of techniques, methods, materials and style. Future studies may include studies that uncover the work of new artists who produce batik paintings.

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