

***Seni Moden* as an Evolving Term and Practice in Malaysian Art**

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One must begin, as Carolyn Dean did in her paper “The Trouble with (the Term) Art,” with a sensible contemplation: “Much of what is today called art was not made as art.”¹ However, perhaps this would be more fittingly phrased as, “Much of what is today called art was not made as *fine* art.” This makes more sense with regard to the established narrative of “traditional art” in Southeast Asia in general, and in Malaysia in particular. There, prior to the introduction of modern art as we know it today, art was neither premodern nor primitive.² Many items are still being made for rituals, regalia, utilitarian products, and even commodities such as tourist products.

In Malaysia, arts in the form of applied arts, better known as traditional arts or crafts, are mostly recognized in their utilitarian forms—infused with the aesthetics and symbolic values of the Malay world. Materials, techniques, and design elements of these “crafts” emerged from extensive interactions between Nusantara and other civilizations such as China and India in the early centuries, as well as the strong influence of Islam that came to the Malay Peninsula in later centuries. Such influences could be seen, for instance, in pottery and earthenware, basketware, textiles and embroideries, woodcarvings, metal weapons, metalwork, regalia, and jewelry making.

The British colonials along with the inadvertently mass-settled Chinese in Malaya during the late nineteenth century could be seen as pioneers in advancing “modern art,” or *seni moden*, in the country. The concept of art as a modern invention inadvertently includes a demarcation of arts and crafts.³ This changing view, which emerged in Europe at the end of the eighteenth

century, was a view under which modern arts in Malaya were introduced. The formal introduction of modern art in Malay only occurred in the early twentieth century, although the British had interfered with Malaya since the late eighteenth century,⁴ about the same time that modern art concepts were evolving in Europe, where new concepts of fine arts, artists, and aesthetic were flourishing.⁵

In the Malay language, *seni*, or “art,” is a very loose term, including craftsmanship, choreography, music, and poetry:

1. *halus, kecil, elok*—fine, small, nicely presented
2. *karya daripada satu ciptaan*—an artistic invention or product
3. *kebolehan mencipta sesuatu*—ability to create something

The term *seni halus*, as noted by Zakaria Ali, is an awkward term, as *seni* itself connotes *halus* or fine (see number 1 in the list above).⁶ The term “fine arts,” at least in Malaysia, is dynamic—indicated by a range of varying terms that are used interchangeably, for example, *seni tampak*, *seni rupa*, and *seni visual*. The search for the right term is best displayed by the evolution of the name of the Malaysian National Art Gallery: from Balai Seni Lukis Negara, to Balai Seni Visual Negara, to the current one, Balai Seni Negara.

Thus, the term *seni* here abides by the meaning of “the art of”—making objects, images, music, and so on that are beautiful or expressive. It can appear with another term, allowing it to be used in describing other artistic categories as well. Thus, the term *seni* is not restricted to traditional art but is also used to describe modern art and more.

Despite the fluidity of the terminology, a demarcation separates arts and crafts. The earliest documented occurrence was R.O. Winstedt's *Malay Industries: Arts and Craft* (1909). He listed handiworks such as carpentry, boat making, mat and basket weaving, embroidery, pottery, and metalwork as comprising Malaya's arts and crafts. This view persisted in Tony Beamish's *The Art of Malaya*, in which he refers to Malayan art as "crafts" and highlights the indifference toward the arts displayed by the majority of Malaysians.⁷

Herein lies the problem. I believe what Beamish is referring to is art in the context of Western tradition. Nevertheless, a fairer documentation could be observed in Marco Hsu's inclusive perspective on arts in Malaya, that is the premodern arts, influences of the Chinese and the Indian, and the transmission of Western cultures. Almost half of the book is dedicated to discussing early-modern art practices and activities. Hsu goes as far as to state that, "Malaya has no painting tradition,"⁸ while stressing, "The only form of art which can be appreciated by all races in Malaya thus far is western painting."⁹ He discusses modern art in Malay at great length—from discussions on paintings, to artists, sculptors, artworks, art societies, art schools, and galleries.¹⁰ Inadvertently, the term *seni moden* has been used loosely in Malaysia through the present time to differentiate between arts produced from contemplation rooted in fine arts practice and art that is rooted in the utilitarian-based Malay tradition (*seni kraf tradisi*). The first Malaysian book on modern art, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, is grounded in the Western art perspective. The use of the term "modernity" or the root word "modern" by Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa in this book is based on the fact the these "modern artists" totally relied on visual data derived from observing the world before transcribing them into images.¹¹

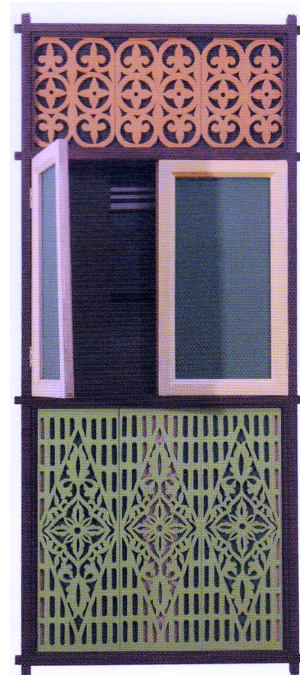
However, the artistic landscape has changed since the National Culture Congress in 1971. Considerable impact could be observed among Malaysian (especially Malay) artists who

mostly, through self-reflection, have taken a postcolonial attitude toward the notion of modern art. Malay artists were called upon to address this disparity between modern art practices and traditional arts. Sulaiman Esa argued that “by marginalizing the political and economic hegemony of the Malay Sultans, the British had severed the Malay craftsmen from the economic umbilical cord—viz. [t]he patronage which traditionally had contributed to the flourishing of the traditional Malay arts. Furthermore, through the creation of plural [sic] society, the British effectively destroyed the social and cultural dominance of the indigenous Malays and subsequently displaced the centrality, relevancy and viability of their spiritually-oriented traditional arts.”¹²

The implementation of National Culture Policy and later Islamization policies has influenced the modern art practices of Malay/Muslim artists. We see here Mad Anuar Ismail’s



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1 Mad Anuar Ismail, *Rebab Player*, 1991, carved wood, 157 x 94 ½ x 39 3/8 in. (400 x 240 x 100 cm). *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2002)

2 Ruzaiika Omar Basaree, *Dungun Series*, 1979. *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994)

word-carved sculpture of the rebab player (Fig. 1) and the fishermen in his “Stormrider Series,” Ruzaika Omar Basaree’s “Dungun Series” (Fig. 2), inspired by Malay traditional house windows, and Hashim Hassan’s acrylic batiklike paintings (Fig. 3).



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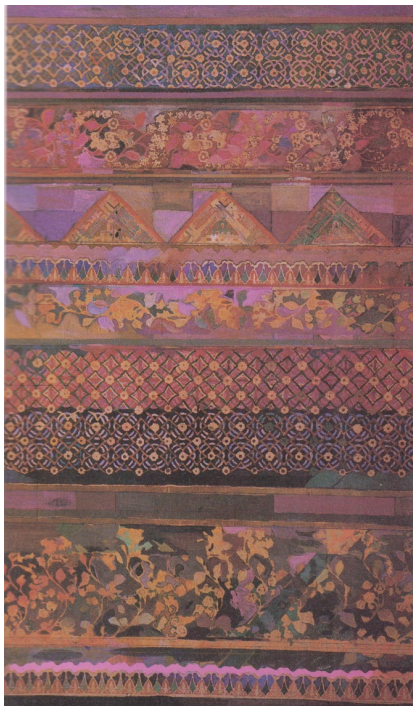
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3 Hashim Hassan, *Intruder*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 56 3/8 x 56 3/8 in. (143 x 143 cm). *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994)

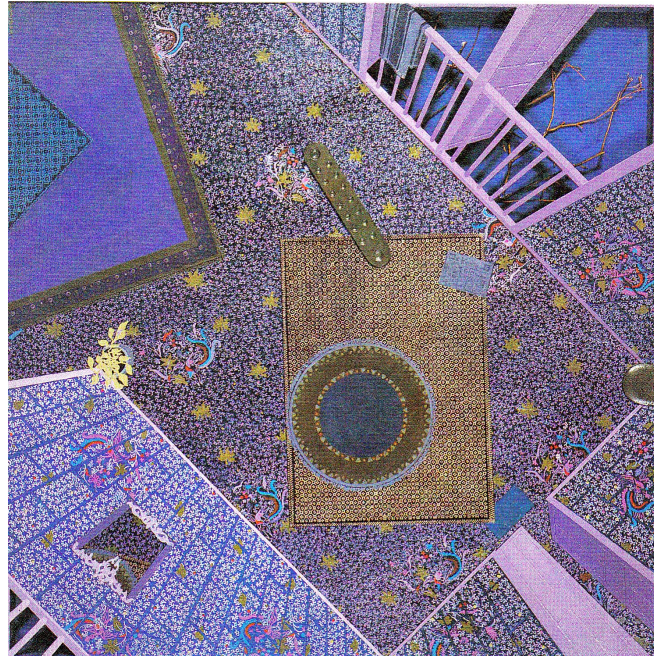
4 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tumpal*, 1975, songket weaving, 80 3/4 x 40 9/16 in. (205 X 103 cm). *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2002)

Artists like Syed Ahmad Jamal use the *songket* (textile made from golden thread) approach in their artwork (Fig. 4). The batik paintings or the allusion to batik paintings such as in the works of Khatijah Sanusi (Fig. 5), Fatimah Chik, Syed Shaharudin Bakeri, and Muhammad Najib Dawa and in Mastura Abdul Rahman’s paintings (Fig. 6) indicate the interplay of arts

and crafts with which crafts (or at least reference to crafts), such as wood carving, and textile techniques, such as batik and songket, were made.



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5 Khatijah Sanusi, *Anugerah II*, 1995, mixed media, 64 x 41 3/8 in. (162.5 x 105cm).

Art Spirituality: Kesenian dan Kerohanian (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995)

6 Mastura Abdul Rahman, *Interior No 29*, 1987, mixed media, 45 1/2 x 45 9/16 in. (115.6 x 115.8 cm) *Rupa Malaysia: Meninjau Seni Lukis Modern Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 2000)

These works were presented in a gallery and appraised as artworks rather than utilitarian objects that we wear or use every day, thus introducing crafts as modern art.

Notes

¹ Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble with (The Term) Art," *Art Journal* 65, no. 2 (2006): 25.

² Although the term "primitivisme" or *primitif* was used by Siti Zainon Ismail, my sense is that the categorization of her term was informed by the Western use of primitivism and discussion of objects from certain cultures that have been judged socially or technologically "primitive" by Western academia. See Siti Zainon Ismail, "Primitivisme," in *Getaran Jalur Dan Warna* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Penerbit Fajar Bakti, 1985).

³ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 75, 143–45.

⁴ In fact it was a known fact that the British were never interested in introducing or developing education among the locals.

⁵ Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, 75.

⁶ Zakaria Ali, *Seni Dan Seniman: Esei-Esei Seni Halus* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1989), 3.

⁷ Tony Beamish, *The Arts of Malaya* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1954), 12.

⁸ Marco C.F. Hsu, *A Brief History of Malayan Art*, ed. Lai Chee Kien (Singapore: Millenium Books, 1999), 63–64.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sulaiman Esa, “The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art,” in *Pameran Manifestasi Jiwa Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1993), unpaginated.

¹¹ T.K. Sabapathy, “Introduction,” in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983), 3–4.

¹² Esa, “The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art,” unpaginated.