

MALAY SYMBOLS IN MALAYSIAN VISUAL ART FROM 1970 - 2003

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ABSTRACT

A search for national identity in visual art begins from the resolution of National Congress of Culture in 1970s. The congress changed the local artist's attitude and has developed awareness to in-depth study on Malay culture and Malay symbols. Traditional forms of art such as batik, woodcarving, *songket*, tales, legends, literature and Malay architecture has provided visual references to the artist and as a result, various styles have emerged from exploring the Malay culture in the context of form and content, which has later reshaped the Malaysian Art scene. The aim of this study is to investigate the development of Malay symbols in the Malaysian Visual Art from 1970s until 2003 and factors that contribute to it. This paper will establish the transformation of idea on the Malay culture and tradition in visual art as the art movement that was neglected in the development of Malaysian Contemporary Art. Observation will be employed, as well as books, catalogues and articles reviewed as references to investigate the development of visual art. The artwork will be examined from the Permanent Collection Inventory from 1958 to 2003 of the National Visual Art Gallery publication. A total of 298 artworks have been identified and using judgmental sampling methods, 72 artworks has been retrieved. The final data were compiled and analyzed using Minitab version 16.2.1.0. The analyses results of histogram and bar chart as well as pareto chart year are used to summarize the findings. The finding indicates that the decades of 90s has appeared to be the most active period of the resurgence of the Malay symbols in Malaysian Visual Art. However in the year 2000 to 2003, studies indicate a decline on the depiction of idea from Malay symbols by Malaysian artist. This research provides information on the development of visual art specifically on Malay symbols in Malaysian Art History and to persuade young artists to persistently utilize Malay symbols in the work of art as to preserve the national heritage.

Key Words: Malay Symbol, Visual Art, Malaysian Visual Art

INTRODUCTION

The quest for arts identity had started to emerge within the artists in Malaysia since the National Cultural Congress was held, which determined new direction of arts, with the principals concentrating on the formation of national identity. Based on this Congress, three main concepts have been constructed as the foundation for the National Culture. First of all, the Malaysian National Culture must be based on the

native culture of the people in this region. Second of all, other cultural elements considered appropriate and necessary can be accepted as the elements of national culture, and thirdly, Islam becomes an important element in the formation of national culture. The concept has changed the principles of the artists a great deal and it influences visual arts activities in Malaysia during the decade and the decades that follow. Thus, there emerge the stances to get to know the origins of the Malay race, by studying the history of the Malays, their cultural values, myths, legends, the forms of arts and visual arts, the aesthetics, the technique and the sensibility of the paintings (Redza Piyadasa, 2001).

In the searching framework of the arts identity, artists make an attempt to create Malay cultural symbols, especially with regards to the traditional arts. Batik motives, traditional Malay home interior decorations, woodcarving, folks' arts like *wayang kulit*, traditional music, are part of the references that had been introduced by local artists.

What is even more interesting is that aided by several techniques and materials, they translate the Malay cultural symbols into a modern context and further improved demonstrating a diversity of styles. This is explained by Mulyadi Mahamood, (2001) that in the decade of the 1970s, various styles and themes had been exhibited, which referred to the national, community identity and the culture depicted by the artists. In that context, the role of the art community has increasingly grabbed the attention of many.

The existence of the Malay cultural symbols serves to be the effort of the local artists in the search for arts identity. Such pursuit had given birth to a new thinking in artwork and it leans more and more towards ethnic-oriented arts. This stood as the hallmark of the history of arts in Malaysia as it arose after the National Cultural Congress. This transformation must be seen as a new innovation in artworks due to the fluctuating positions of arts, thus, the presence of the Malay cultural symbols can become one of the factors of resolution. This is in tandem with the requirements of the National Culture which elevate the statuses of culture, values and forms of culture of the Malays as the core culture. This indicates that the Malay national sense of aspirations combined with the non-Malay contexts becomes the policy to the cultural practice in this country. The situation gives an impact to the art field and further unravels the issue of arts identity in Malaysia.

The Malay cultural symbol in the artwork is the image that carries the cultural symbol of the Malay race. There is a hidden Malay civilization heritage based on the Malay perspective that centers on religion and the universe. Therefore, this study is important so that the Malay cultural symbols do exist within the consciousness of the people and that for the Malay cultural symbols to be able to be translated into the visual arts masterpieces.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

Since the organizing of the National Cultural Congress in 1971, the Malay cultural arts were brought to life by local artists very actively. For more than 55 years that arts events have been taking place in Malaysia, the existence of arts symbols has witnessed most local artists being influenced greatly by western styles which adopt universal characteristics.

Thus, with the transformation of arts symbols from the Malay culture, it shows that the awareness towards the national arts had started to show among the local artists particularly in the 1970s and the following years. However, it did not receive much attention as there had not been any serious work done to document the transformation. To add, the tendency of new-generation artists towards universal styles had further contributed to the abandonment and less emphasis of the Malay cultural symbols. This should be stressed especially in the context of the history of arts in Malaysia, seeing that they carry our national identity. The transformation can assist the artists especially the new generation in building their own Malay self-identity and making it their own arts identity. Such is a way that the Malay culture gets to be preserved and is always a new, yielded from the new approach that goes in line with the development of arts in the era.

OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this study is to examine the development of the Malay Cultural Symbols in the context of Contemporary Arts in Malaysia since 1970 until 2003. The finding from this study is able to contribute to the preparation of information especially in the field of the History of Arts in Malaysia and raises the awareness among arts lovers and new-generation artists about the effort done by the local artists in transforming the arts symbols based on Malay culture following the Malaysian Cultural Congress event. Then, this study is anticipated to be able to consolidate its existence assisted by the contributing factors and identify the frequency of artists in using Malay cultural symbols from the 1970s to 2003.

METHODOLOGY

This study used the method of observation where focus will be given to Malay cultural symbols detected through an inventory of the permanent collection of visual arts heritage from 1958 to 2003. Feldman's critical arts theory is used by researcher as a platform to detect Malay cultural symbols. Steps such as descriptions, analysis, interpretations and evaluation are done for that purpose.

Sampling

The population comprises of works of art of various kind such as fine arts, graphic arts, photography arts, ceramics including textile arts that have proudly become the collection of the National Visual Arts Gallery. A total of 298 of artworks were selected from 1970s until 2003 through the judgmental sampling method.

By conducting a structured observation and carefully selecting the works, only 72 artworks containing Malay cultural symbols were chosen as the sample. The selection is based on the title and image also the meaning behind the symbols. From the data, the outcome is compiled and analysed using Minitab Version 16.2.1.0.

Data Collection Method

In general, results were gathered from primary data which are data gathered through observation. The observation was done on visual art works either 2D or 3D. A table was formed to classify the samples of Malay cultural symbols according to the year of transformation.

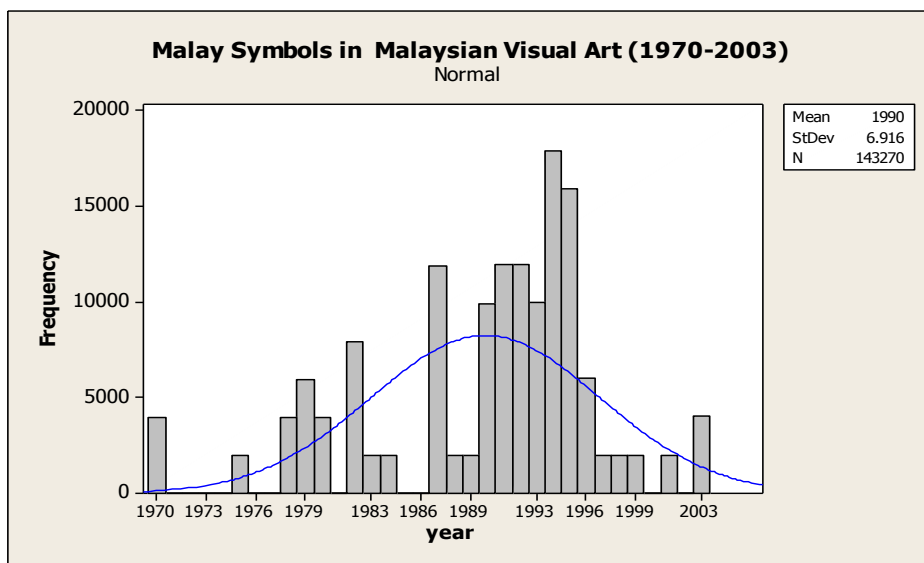
Data Analysis

The judgmental sampling data were obtained using the Minitab Version 16.2.1.0. The descriptive statistics method was used to explain on the information about the development of the symbols. The frequency method was also adopted to calculate the values in the form of frequency table. It is also used to produce a descriptive statistics such as the mean, median, mode also variance. From the method, the statistical graphs like the histogram and the bar chart on the development of the Malay cultural symbols in the 1970s and up to the year 2003 are able to be produced.

RESULTS

From this study, an early analysis looks into the years of transformation of the Malay cultural symbols. Transformation based on the year will determine the emergence and the peak, also the decline of the Malay cultural symbols' development in the context of visual arts in Malaysia.

Data Distribution



a.) Histogram

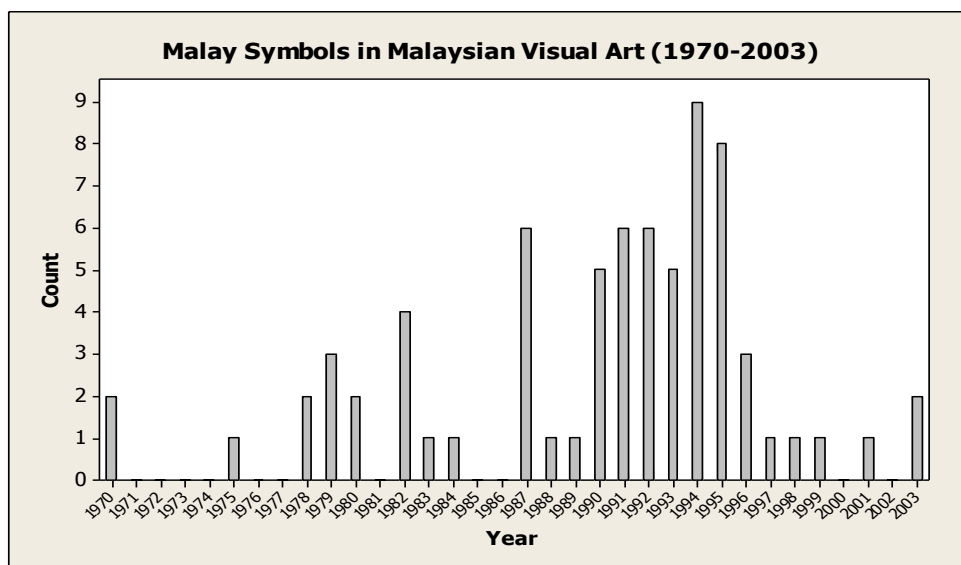


Figure 1.0 Data Distribution Chart

Both the histogram and the bar chart illustrate in Figure 1.0 display of data that are normally distributed, and most of the scores center on the 1990s. It is clear that in that year, it was a peak for active role of the local artists in regard of the Malay culture as an arts symbol. The data gave a picture that the awareness towards national arts had begun to form at the time. The bar chart shows the data distribution table (score) for the year selected. It reports or proposes that the Malay cultural symbols in modern arts progressed in 1970 with little distribution but began to expand late 1970s which was specifically in 1979. However, at the beginning of the 1980s, it had slightly declined and became inconsistent but again showed progress in 1987 until it reached a high score at level 6. In the 1990s, the score did show a remarkably consistent progress as compared to the years 1994 and 1995 (reaching scores 9 and 8). The distribution demonstrates that an exponential development had taken place on the Malay cultural symbol applications among local artists. However, in 2000 a dramatic decline was noted where the score was 1 and in 2003 it only escalated a notch, which was to score 2. From 2000 to 2003, the decline was unstoppable and it reflects the artists' lack of attention on the Malay cultural symbols.

The whole data obtained contribute as additional data as noted by Mulyadi Mahamood through his book entitled *Seni Lukis Modern Malaysia: Era Perintis hingga Era Pluralis* (Malaysia Modern Paintings: The Pioneering Era until the Pluralist Era) (1930-1990) which mentions that only in the 1970s and the 1980s local artists had revisited the traditional arts and surprisingly it had broadened to the 1990s. The histogram and bar chart reports have proven and further solidified the emergence of the Malay cultural symbols in the context of the local visual arts.

Pareto Analysis

The Pareto chart report in Figure 1.1 shows that between the 1980s and the 1990s, the year 1994 is observed to be the most frequent year that the Malay cultural symbols were applied by local artists as compared to that for the year 1997 which saw a reduction in the application. In 1994, 13% of the symbols were applied compared to 1997 where only 1% was applied. Thus, the data had consolidated the fact that the 1990s marked the era of active transformation of the Malay cultural symbols in the context of visual arts in Malaysia.

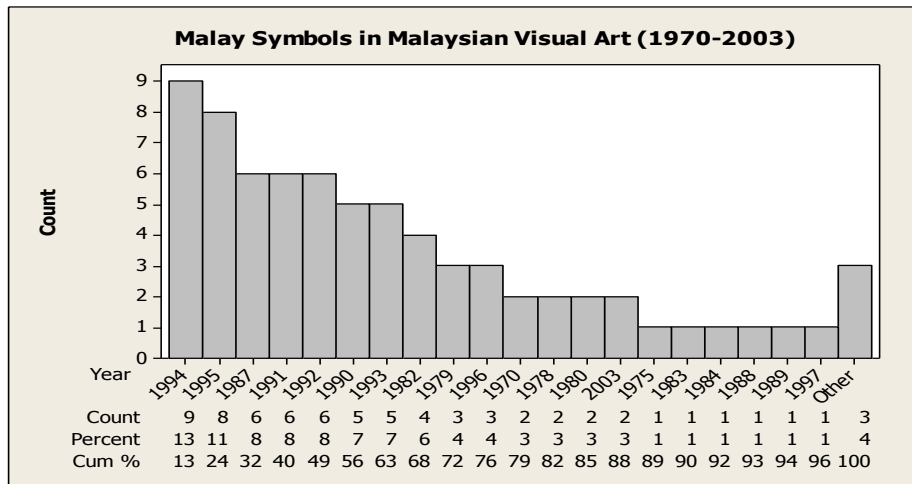


Figure 1.1 Pareto chart of Malay symbols in Malaysian Visual Art (1970-2003)

CONCLUSION

Based on the study outcome, in 1970 local artists began to revisit the traditional arts in fulfilling the aspiration for a search of identity. This was ignited after the National Cultural Congress held in 1971. References and the awareness towards the rich heritage of traditional arts had accumulated after the Native Arts Roots Seminar (Seminar Akar-Akar Peribumi) held in 1979 in the faculty of Arts and Design, MARA Technology Institute. Following that, in the 1980s, the Malay cultural symbols were noted to be increasingly actively applied towards the visual arts. The application peaked in the 1990s as the year was an era of the pluralists where artists adopted various approaches and meanings also styles on arts symbols including the Malay culture. Thus, there was evidence of Malay cultural symbols in the 1990s put together using various approaches, styles and meanings. From the year 2000 until 2003 the frequency of the Malay cultural symbols was seen to have declined. The study finds that in those years, there were still seasoned artists who had still consistently continued using Malay cultural symbols as form and content, except for the new generation who was inclined to use universal arts symbols. Researcher finds that there was an important event or factors that contributed towards fostering Malay cultural symbols. This was of course different from the previous years, when the National Cultural Congress and the native roots served as the main catalysts to driving the efforts to enrich the Malay cultural symbols in the context of the Malaysian modern visual arts.

However, the presence of the Malay cultural symbols can be characterised as national-infused modern arts movement, as was once mentioned by Dolores D. Wharton (in Dzulhaimi, 2007: 205) when she came to visit this country in the 60s.

While one can still not say there is a “Malayan school of painting”, the search for some of identity began during this period.

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