

Expanding the Historical Narrative of Early Visual Modernity in Malaya

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ABSTRACT

The history of Malaysian modern art early in the 20th century is not well-established. Also, the term "modern art" has yet to be extensively discussed locally. Evidently, the term does not refer to the modern art movements that occurred in Euramerica; rather, it frequently refers to a type of art that differs from its traditional counterparts and painting media that were alien to the indigenous people of the Malay Archipelago then. It is presumed that (1) modern art began in Malaysia – or Malaya in this context – just before the 1930s and that (2) visual appreciation of modern art among the Malays was only attained after the widespread adoption of painting media in Malaya. Hence, this paper examines the various sketches in Malay manuscripts and newspaper illustrations as some of these works were the initial forms of visual modernity during the 19th century, thus expanding the credence of the beginning of the history of Malaysian modern art to as early as the late 19th century.

Keywords: *Malay manuscripts, illustrations, visual modernity, modern art, printed media*

INTRODUCTION

A catalogue titled *Abdullah Ariff: Father of Modern Art in Malaysia* (Zakaria 2006) contained several examples of Abdullah Ariff's illustrations that have been published in newspapers. However, Abdullah Ariff's illustrative works in periodicals such as *Dewasa*, *Straits Echo*, and

Penang Daily were not mentioned in the early books of Malaysian art such as *Modern Artists of Malaysia* – a book that consists of selected writings by Sabapathy and Piyadasa (1983). Evidently, this omission was also seen in several writings, which preceded the aforementioned book. The currently-accepted version of history was that modern art in Malaysia was brought about by émigré artists from China, through watercolour practices and other paintings by travelling artists and British officers. However, the abovementioned presence of Abdullah Ariff's illustrations in periodicals, as well as other illustrations in earlier Malay manuscripts and newspapers, could indicate that the locals already had a semblance of understanding of visuality prior to the introduction of modern art to Malaya. In spite of that, decorative elements and other early forms of visual culture like drawings, illustrations, photographs, as well as pictures in printed media have never been examined as factors of the development of modern art in Malaya.

The aim of this paper is to reexamine and recontextualise the early writings on Malaysian modern art, especially in the broader context of visual culture. As a matter of fact, history of modern art is a highly eurocentric field; even this study has adopted a similar approach. Instead of transcending visual representations or analysing in depth the contexts of early forms of visuality, this essay discusses the omission of these early drawings, illustrations, photographs and pictures from manuscripts and printed media in the context of the discussion of fine arts versus crafts.

ARTS VERSUS CRAFTS

In *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner challenged the conventional understanding of arts by completely reconsidering its history. According to him, "fine arts" were modern inventions and that the distinction between arts and crafts came about following the occurrence of key social transformations in Europe during the late 18th century. Evidently, the revolutions were connected in part with the development of a market for arts among the growing middle class. In view of that, fine arts – which were now independent of crafts – were regarded as objects that concerned refined tastes and ideas. Arts and aesthetics subsequently emerged, creating a further distinction from fine arts and thus resulted in the establishment of new art-based institutions such as galleries, museums, concert halls, and libraries that played central roles in the system (Shiner 2001). Likewise, modern arts in Malaya were based on this change in worldview.

Although the British had ruled Malaya since the late 18th century, modern arts were only introduced to the latter in the early 20th century, by which time new concepts of fine arts, artists, and aesthetics had already flourished in Europe (Shiner 2001). Evidently, the art-and-craft dichotomy can be observed in early writings and observations of Malayan arts by British officers. For example, R.O. Winstedt in his book, *Malay Industries: Arts and Craft* (1909), has described handiworks such as carpentry, boat-making, mat- and basket-weaving, embroidery, pottery, as well as metal works, all of which were part of Malaya's arts and crafts. Nevertheless, painting and sculpture-making, among others, were not quoted as part of the arts/ culture premise in the book. Similarly, Tony Beamish's *The Arts of Malaya* (1954) referred Malayan arts to what is presently known as "crafts".

The following excerpt elucidates Tony Beamish's basis of the lack of (visual) arts in Malaya:

...[T]he population itself is very youthful. So rapid has been the national growth during the past fifty years or so, that today Malaya has more citizens under the age of twenty-one than probably any other country of the same size in the world. It is essentially a country at school, learning, among other things, about the arts.

There are other several reasons, too, why there is no distinct national culture yet. The majority of immigrants from China, India, Indonesia, and Europe, who have in recent years swelled the population to its present size, have been either merchants or labourers. Neither class had much concern for the arts, and in any event, the task of pioneering and opening up a new country hardly allowed time for this practice. With a few shining exceptions, these were not the kind of people to bring the arts along in their kits. (Beamish 1954)

In 1963, Marco Hsu reexamined the said perception by questioning the extent to which Malaya was a cultural desert (Hsu 1999). His book contained a perspective that was different from and more inclusive than those of Winstedt and Beamish. The inclusive forms of art that were highlighted in accordance to their stages of development (i.e. pre-modern arts, Chinese and Indian influences, as well as transmission of Western cultures) included music,

dances, and dramas. Practically half the book was dedicated to the detailed discussion of early modern art practices and activities so as to prove that Malaya was not a cultural desert. Nevertheless, Hsu observed that Malaya had no painting traditions, and stressed that Western paintings were the only form of art, which could be appreciated by all ethnicities in Malaya thus far (Hsu 1999). It was also posited that the aforementioned arts were all derived from paintings, which depicted scenes and selected aspects of Malaya. Additionally, Hsu's work has included explanations on the artists, sculptors, as well as art works, societies, schools, and galleries in Malaya at that time. That being said, Hsu's observations on the modern arts in Malaya were still limited to the Western perspective.

A similar view of the subsequent development of modern Malaysian arts was described in Sabapathy and Piyadasa's *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (1983). Both authors – who were art history graduates from Western art institutions – claimed that "modernity" could be read in terms of the artworks produced by Yong Mun Sen, Abdullah Ariff, Lim Cheng Hoe, Tay Hooi Keat and Khaw Sia in the 1930s, in addition to those of the post-World War II artists. As per Sabapathy and Piyadasa (1983), the abovementioned term – or its root word "modern" – referred to the fact that "modern artists" completely relied on visual data to transcribe their observations of the world into watercolour pictures, which comprised a blend of impressions and concrete imageries. Evidently, watercolour was one of the earliest media of art in Malaya. Although the initial forms of such works did not show advancements in any formal or aesthetic directions, the notions that were identifiable with modern arts were enhanced by the institutional grounding of art education and art activities during that time.

Some related excerpts from *Modern Artists of Malaysia* are as follows:

That modern art activities are indeed a totally new type of activity in Malaysia, possessing its own self-defining history. The context for it is to be found primarily in relation to an international tradition rather than a specific historical and national one.

That which exists as an indigenous art tradition does not have sufficient conditions to qualify as a parent tradition for modern arts as such, *and that it is an independent activity observing its own structural requirements and satisfying its own contexts.* (Sabapathy and Piyadasa 1983)

Observations by the abovementioned authors suggested that they were well-informed or already under the influence of the major division between (1) artists and craftspersons, as well as (2) aesthetic concerns and utility/ordinary pleasures (Shiner 2001) that resulted in the establishment of a new system of fine arts in Europe. In fact, the argument on the inability of indigenous art traditions to pioneer the tradition of modern art has not been explicitly discussed in the 1983 book, although Piyadasa did later remark on the ways by which these traditional forms of art were created for religious and utilitarian purposes (Piyadasa 1994). Thus, it could be argued that the selection of artists to be included in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* as well as the writings of Hsu, Winstedt and Beamish reflected the influence or corpus of the Great Division that had taken place in Europe. With reference to this premise, the contexts of the early historical narratives of modern Malaysian arts were affirmed. Fine arts were a source of inspiration and a form of refined pleasure. Meanwhile, crafts were associated with the usage of skills and applied arts. Thus, the established perspective of "modern arts" in the Malaysian context was converted into new forms of aesthetics that were alien to the locals, apart from having no cultural roots in local aesthetics and even the Malay society in general. It should be noted that Piyadasa and Sabapathy were trained in arts and art history in Western institutions, while Hsu was an active figure in art education in Singapore back then. Therefore, it could be posited that the preconceived notions concerning modern/Western arts were based on the authors' experiences and knowledge of the same.

This paper aims to offer a different perspective from the authors discussed above and examines the potential of a conception of modern arts that is rooted and/or derived from local aesthetics. The term "local" here indicates the aesthetics of Nusantara or the Malay World in the Southeast Asia region. Although the said notion has been mentioned by Ahmad Suhaimi (2007), this paper proposes that the analyses of the historical narratives of modern Malaysian arts should take into consideration other branches of visual cultures as well (e.g. print media) so that such narratives are not solely limited to the perspectives of (Western) fine arts. On this account, an important point was made by Sulaiman Esa in his essay, *The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art*, which was written for the exhibition entitled *Pameran Manifestasi Jiwa Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman* (The Manifestation of Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art). In other words, a different perspective of modern art has been postulated, as per the following excerpt:

...The religious and spiritual nature of Malay arts suffered from gradual processes of modernization and secularization in the advent of the British colonial rule in the early 19th century. That the onslaught of British imperialistic rule had violently dislocated traditional Malay societies was an observation shared by many historians. The British incursion had inevitably led to the destruction of political, economic, social, and religious structures which are vital for the survival and continued growth of traditional Malay arts. More specifically, by marginalizing the political and economic hegemony of the Malay Sultans, the British had severed the Malay craftsmen from the economic umbilical cord, viz. the patronage which had traditionally contributed to the flourishing of traditional Malay arts. Furthermore, through the creation of a plural 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. (Sulaiman 1993)

The next section attempts to examine the premise of visual modernity prior to the 1930s, with a primary focus on the early visual illustrations produced by the Malays. It is argued that the Malays already had a grasp on visual literacy by then, which subsequently formed the foundation that enabled the modern arts to flourish, even though these were largely in urban areas such as Pulau Pinang and Singapore. These early visuals comprised sketches, illustrations and motifs found initially in Malay manuscripts and later in various print media. Contrary to the belief that indigenous art traditions did not possess sufficient conditions to qualify themselves as the bedrock on which modern Malayan arts were established, evidences in the print media suggested that the well-established visual modernity enabled the reception and acceptance of modern arts among the Malays.

FROM MANUSCRIPTS TO PRINTING PRESS

Malay manuscripts are one of the important sources of information pertaining to the Malay psyche. They can be defined as handwritten documents in Jawi script which were produced from the early 16th century until the 19th century (Perpustakaan Negara 2002: 14). A wide

range of subjects are covered by such documents, such as the Quran and religion, literature, history, as well as moral and didactic extracts. *Malay Annals*, *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Sejarah Melayu*, *Taj al-Salatin*, *Undang-Undang Melaka* and *Adat Aceh* are among the Malay literary and intellectual heritages prior to the arrival of printing technology in Malaya and Malay Archipelago (Nusantara) in general. Being more than mere historical artifacts, manuscripts serve as collections of the history of knowledge in the said region. Textual analyses of these documents could provide new insights into the dynamics of the Malays in the olden days. This is crucial for enhancing the comprehension of the Malay societies in particular, apart from being subjects for comparative assessments. Some of the manuscripts – especially those that were composed in the late 18th century – contained few illustrations and sketches. Nevertheless, such images could still be considered to be a kind of cultural (and to a certain extent, artistic) development in the Malay historical epoch through the depiction of a network of influences at work. Therefore, the illustrations and sketches that accompanied written texts should be treated as important sources of data for investigations.

Previously, manuscripts were only accessible by privileged groups such as royals, nobles (*bangsawan*), and traditional religious authorities who could read the Jawi scripts. Literacy denotes a person's status in the society and is commonly seen in those who have relations with the court. As Islam started to flourish at the Nusantara in the 16th century, its influence on Malay manuscripts were evident as seen in the increase in moral and religious content. To this point, the kings gradually ceased to be the primary subjects who possessed absolute authority of rule; they were now subjected to the teachings and principles of Islam, including subjection to god. Apart from writing (i.e. language styles, contents, etc.), Islamic influences on Malay manuscripts were manifested in the variety of decorative frontispieces and colophons that infused nature-inspired motifs. The aforementioned religion has also encouraged the search for knowledge. For example, a form of "democratisation" of knowledge seemed to occur, whereby a number of mosques began to become places for teaching; prior to this, only the courts were available for the said purpose (Ali 2008).

The usage of Jawi script in Malay texts was extensive. Being the first system of writing for the Malays, these characters were created with reference to Arabic characters. Islamic teachings, which emphasised on the importance of knowledge, gave rise to the keenness for the promotion of knowledge and literacy amongst its followers. Mosques gradually assumed the role of schools where Islamic principles and knowledge were taught

to the common people, hence extending the reach of education that was hitherto limited to the courts (Ali 2008). Apart from that, the existence of Jawi characters (Asmak, Fatimah and Che Zaharah 2013) initiated the creation of written texts, which replaced the oral literatures (folklores) in the past. As a result, it was no surprise that many Malay manuscripts were written in Jawi characters following the onset of Islamisation in the Malay Peninsula.

Even though Malay manuscripts evolved from the broader context of Islamic traditions (Dzul Haimi 2007), they still retained their distinct Malay flavour. This could be observed in the form of decorative frontispieces and colophons on the texts and royal letters, apart from the colours, motifs, and to some extent, rare figurative representations (Gallop 1991). These decorations and illuminations persisted even though such elements were not compulsory. For example, in the *Taj al-Salatin* – which was copied in Pulau Pinang by a scribe named Muhammad bin Umar Syaikh Farid on 4 Zulhijjah 1239 AH (31 July 1824 AD) (Gallop 2013) – the finely-crafted frontispiece reflected the fact that Malay aesthetics and visual comprehensions have already been important aspects of a scribe's work. Additionally, the initial pages of *Taj al-Salatin* (Figure 1) contained highly elaborate and sophisticated decorative motif frames. In typical Malay texts, floral motives in vivid colours were used as frames in the frontispieces. Hence, in a way, traditional Malay manuscripts reflected those of the Quran, albeit with a local taste, which was based on floral motifs, materials and colours. To be able to produce such decorative frontispieces, it could be argued that premeditated designs in the form of sketches had to be created first. In *Hikayat Parang Puting*, the title page (Figure 2) and text frames contained floral and foliate sketches, parts of which were filled with colour. In a similar sketch-like work, the frontispiece of *Syair Silambari* (Figure 3) was decorated with ink. The techniques and approaches involved in the decoration of these frontispieces as well as opening pages arguably provided opportunities for scribes like Ibrahim to experiment with and practice various methods of planning, designing and sketching. Evidently, these were a form of freehand drawings that were not usually intended to be passed off as finished works, apart from being precursor activities in the production of "modern" paintings.



Figure 1 Initial pages of the *Taj al-Salatin*, copied by a scribe named Muhammad bin Umar Syaikh Farid on 4 Zulhijah 1239 AH (31 July 1824 AD).
Image courtesy of The British Library Board.

In some rare cases, simple sketches illustrated certain parts of the stories in the manuscripts. For example, in *Hikayat Indra Mengindra* (Figure 4), a simple sketch depicted the Prime Minister of the kingdom acquiring help from an astrologer, the latter of whom was wearing a rosary bead and holding a book. Three other men, perhaps the Prime Minister's escorts, flanked both figures. Rendered in a subdued manner, the two aforementioned characters were emphasised in the scene – the Prime Minister as well as the slightly bigger and darkened rendition of the astrologer. Once again, this phenomenon reflected the existence of a comprehension of visual renditions and illustrations in the form of utilisation of visual emphasis – which is one of the principles of art.



Figure 2 The title page of *Hikayat Parang Puting*, decorated within rectangular borders filled with floral and foliate motifs.

Image courtesy of The British Library Board.



Figure 3 The opening pages of *Syair Silambari*. Outlined in red, these opening pages were decorated with floral borders in pen and ink.
Image courtesy of The British Library Board.

In another instance, there were also several simple sketches that were unrelated to the text. These were similar to scribbles, but in a clear form. For example, in *Hikayat Sultan Taburat* by Muhammad Bakri, a simple sketch of a quay (Figure 5) indicated a grasp on the perspectives of distance and depth. Three poles, which were connected by ropes and nets, were drawn in three dimensions. The ship at the corner acted as a marker that accentuated the sense of distance since it laid on the horizon. Meanwhile, the darkened, bluish sea around the poles, in addition to the *sampan*, provided a shadow effect that added depth to the sketch. The size contrast between a ship in the background and the *sampan* revealed visual literacy, or the ability to render a realistic landscape through the manipulation of perspectives.



Figure 4 The astrologer (holding a book) with the Prime Minister in *Hikayat Indra Mengindra*, Singapore, early 1900s.
 Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya.



Figure 5 A sketch of a *bagan* or a quay of *Hikayat Sultan Taburat*.
Source: Chambert-Loir and Kramadibrata (2013).

Simpler illustrations, symbols and diagrams were sported in lesser-known magic as well as divination manuscripts from late 18th to the early 20th centuries (Farouk 2016; Chambert-Loir and Kramadibrata 2013; Gallop 1991). These sketches included talismanic designs (Figure 6), anthropomorphic figures, animals and buildings. Therefore, it was evident that the local indigenous people had sufficient visual comprehension to convey guidance and methods through the figures and images for the purpose of teaching. Nevertheless, in the context of this paper, the aforementioned simple sketches and illustrations denoted the artists' visual knowledge and ability to communicate through the usage of colors, contrast, line qualities, shapes, and forms, depths and spaces, perspectives, etc. For example, the talismanic design in Figure 6 suggested that early forms of illustrations, albeit simple sketches, have existed. Red and black inks were utilised in the illustrations to differentiate the elements in the simple illustrations.

The colonial period in 18th century Malaya witnessed the initial decline in the number of Malay manuscripts produced. This was in light of the emergence of the Western printing technology, which had by then been introduced to the local Malay community. Printing technology was crucial in two main aspects: (1) to preach Christianity to the local community and (2) to publish more reading materials like newspapers so that the colonisers, though far from their native lands, could still be up-to-date on the recent happenings in Malaya and its surrounding regions, in addition to those of their own countries (Md Sidin 1992). Nonetheless, the latter aspect will only be discussed in this study. The involvement of the locals in Western printing technology began when the Europeans appointed them to be assistants at British-owned printing companies. Abdullah bin Abdul al Kadir (1796–1854) who is also better known as Munshi Abdullah was the first person who was responsible to help the British translate reading materials from English to Malay. His autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah* (published in 1849), contained descriptions of his learning to work in the first Malay printing press in Melaka:

Mr Medhurst taught me how to arrange the letters, how to hold the blocks, and how to set the pages so that the printed sheets could be folded properly one after the other. After three or four months of practice in all these steps, I could do the work on my own without his assistance. As time went on, I became more and more conversant with the techniques of printing; I knew how to avoid slips when operating the press or setting the type, as well as avoid using too much or too little ink. (Abdullah 2009)



Figure 6 Talismanic design to ward off evil spirits, Melaka, c. 1845. Image courtesy of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Abdullah was involved in almost every stage of the printing process – from the initial translating of texts into Malay, proofreading of the Malay-translated versions of the missionaries' works, and casting of metal types to the creation of illustrations which were then printed in the missionaries' presses.

Working in publishing companies created an avenue for the locals to learn the art of printing, hence marking the beginning of the publication of Malay newspapers in Malaya. The art of printing has motivated the local writers, typesetters, and publishers to utilise this process instead of relying on handwritten Malay manuscripts. Lithography was the earliest mode of printing to be mastered by the Malays because the scribes, who were brought up in the manuscript tradition, could easily master the simple skills involved in the transcribing of the texts in special ink to be transferred to the stones. Hence, this occurrence could be considered as the advent of prolific Malay publishers in the subsequent decades.

A few scribes even took the liberty to adorn the books with motifs and decorations of that era, as manifested in one of the lithographic works of *Hikayat Abdullah* (Figure 7). In the earlier version of this manuscript, the frontispiece was decorated with figurative sketches of simple red and green floral motifs – which denoted the flowers and leaves – and surrounded by a simple frame. Unlike the initial pages of the *Taj al-Salatin*, *Hikayat Parang Puting* and *Syair Silambari*, the decorative frontispiece of the lithographic edition of *Hikayat Abdullah* was less complex. Perhaps the simplicity in terms of decorative approach was in view of the fact that ornate decorations would not have gone well with lithography. Nevertheless, the three-dimensional property of the motifs was evident; the scripts were darkened to insinuate some forms and shadows, hence giving an embossed effect or a little depth to the illustrations as well as the decorative foliate patterns. Contrary to the talismanic design in Figure 6, which contained simple lines and shapes, the decorations in these *hikayat* reflected the efforts of the illustrators to experiment with different types of more complex and realistic shapes (e.g. flora) as well as manipulate depth and space.



Figure 7 The double decorated frontispiece of the *Hikayat Abdullah*. This autobiography of Munshi Abdullah was lithographed at the Mission Press in Singapore in 1849.

Image courtesy of The British Library Board.

The second illustration of *Syair Indra Sebaha* also managed to create a sense of distance or perspective through the ways by which the timber house, trees, shrubs, bushes, as well as animals (e.g. bird, peacock, and deer) were arranged, even though the sizes of the trees were incorrect with respect to the whole composition. In a *syair* or poem by Na Tien Piet, an illustration of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johor and his fourth wife, Khadijah Khanum, were included, and these were based on their actual photographs (Gallop 1990).

Lithographic printing – which was popular between year 1870 and 1905 – slowly declined from favour in the early 20th century. Despite the high cost of letterpress machinery (since these had to be imported from Europe), printing by letterpresses became more viable. Concurrently, newspaper-publishing developed exponentially in Malaya during the early 20th century, fueled by secular education provided by the British to the locals as well as political consciousness and nationalism among the latter.

EARLY PRINT MEDIA AS A FORM OF VISUAL MODERNITY

While Malay manuscripts had a limited audience, locally-published magazines and newspapers were widely circulated in Malaya. This phenomenon could be argued to be a large-scale event through which visual modernity was introduced to the local readers. In the early versions of newspapers, the front pages contained large mastheads to visually attract the readers. Furthermore, advertisements became another form of visual appeal. Finally, illustrations, photographs and cartoons, which were later introduced acted as visual images and documentation reflecting the changing role of the newspapers at that time.

The *Jawi Peranakan* was published to fulfill the increasing demand and need for reading materials by the locals. It stayed in circulation for almost 20 years (1876–1895), which could be considered as a form of success for a Malay newspaper, especially among those that were published prior to the 1920s. It was published in Singapore, which was not a coincidence since the port city had robust economic growth and was one of the main trading hubs in the region. *Jawi Peranakan* (Figure 8) had a very large masthead whose logo consisted of a *pohon beringin* (banyan tree) frame that contained elaborate mirrored Jawi typography; these were encapsulated by a garland. The masthead was completed by the name of the newspaper, which was spelt horizontally at the bottom part. On another note, the newspaper consisted of four pages sized 11 × 7 inches and was written in Jawi script. Apart from *Jawi Peranakan*, most Malay newspapers of the later years were also published in Singapore, Pulau Pinang and to an extent, Perak, apart from being fully funded as well as operated by the Jawi Peranakan descent (Hamedi 2015).



Figure 8 The masthead of *Jawi Peranakan*, 28 March 1861.

Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut Microforms Collection, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

On the other hand, the masthead of *Bintang Timor* (Figure 9) was simple. It comprised a star at the centre with radiating thin lines, which formed a perfect circle and gave an impression that the star was emitting light (as a side note, the word *bintang* meant "stars"). The logo was flanked by two Jawi words, *Bintang* and *Timor*, which formed the title of the newspaper itself. The words were in leisure Jawi writing, bold and strong in contrast with the paper. At the bottom of the masthead, the words *Bintang Timor* were written in bold uppercase Roman script.



Figure 9 The masthead of *Bintang Timor*.

Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut Microforms Collection, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The logo of *Lengkongan Bulan* (Figure 10) consisted of a fine, complete, and symmetrical crescent. Meanwhile, the Jawi writing within was easily understood. At the centre-top, embraced by the crescent, was a star with peculiar shadow effects which attempted to give a sense of depth and volume.



Figure 10 The masthead of *Lengkonan Bulan*.

Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut Microforms Collection, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Elements such as paddy stalks, stars, and crescents provided a strong flavour of Malay and Islamic traits. Such emblems or logos, as with many other mastheads and logos, were arguably a form of visual modernity that gradually became introduced to a more expansive audience. These visual introductions might well be the easiest and easily-understood form

of visual modernity that penetrated to the masses. It could also be deduced that the usage of typical Islamic adornments in the mastheads was a common feature in the aforementioned Malay newspapers. One of the probable reasons was to attract the interest of local Malay readers, as they were the primary target group. Another objective was to create a sense of familiarity between the newspapers and readers since Islam was regarded as a special trait that has been deeply embedded within the Malay psyche for a long time.

Most Malay newspapers only started to employ advertising services from the 1920s onwards. However, *Chahyah Pulau Pinang* has already been providing advertisements as early as year 1900, which made it the earliest Malay newspaper to publish business-related content (Hamedi 2015). The paper lasted for almost eight years (1900–1908) and it was probably the first Malay newspaper to advertise Western and Chinese goods as well as services (Hamedi 2015), as evidenced by advertisements on Sunlight Soap and Nestle's Milk at the bottom parts of the front pages (Figures 11 and 12). The rendition of the milk was clear and big, while the words "Nestlé's Milk" were displayed in large print to attract the readers. The placement of the advertisement also balanced the big masthead and logo, which were made of well-elaborated and Jawi typography at the top part of the newspaper.

Following the publishing of English presses in Malaya at that time, advertisements have gradually become an important aspect in the business modules of these early Malay newspapers. Visual advertising campaigns in several Malay newspapers like *Idaran Zaman* and *Saudara* heavily depended on illustrations to promote their products. The pictures for adverts were not merely sketches or attempts to produce simple forms and shapes like those in Na Tien Piet's poems. Rather, they were more detailed, varied and more finely executed pieces. For example, an advertisement in *Idaran Zaman* (Figure 13) contained a figure of a running man with a tall *songkok* (skull cap) holding a big signboard. Rendering and shading at the bottom of the figure (i.e. the site at which the shadow was casted upon) indicated the source of light. Small coconut trees were present behind the running man. Meanwhile, the shadow at the bottom of the advert denoted space. The box no longer drawn by free hand; instead, it was meticulously drawn using a ruler, hence resulting in a very well-calculated technical drawing as compared to advertisement of *Cap Tarbus* on the left. The *tarbus*, which was a type of headgear whose shape was a slightly-narrowed cylinder, was still crudely hand-drawn.

CHAHYAH PULAU PENANG.

عدد 47 جان 1914ء - قریب پانچ سو روپے 17 جولائی سنہ 1914ء - PENANG, 30th JULY, 1914 - No. 1

WALTON & Co. Ltd.
مدیر تجارت انگریزی [] بیچ خانہ
پولینیشیا

حقول کھیتی باشتی کے لیے
پھسنگ کھجور، سا، پھسنگ
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے

PRITCHARD & Co.,
قریب پانچ سو روپے 17 جولائی سنہ 1914ء

حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
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"Criterion Press" LIMITED.
کرنیشن پریس پرنٹنگ اور پبلشنگ
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے

HUTTENBACH BROS & Co.,
Proprietors



CHOP-PANONG

Sunlight
سولائٹ
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے
حقول کھجور اور کھجور کے لیے



Soap

Figure 11 Sunlight Soap advertisement adorning the front page of *Chahyah Pulau Pinang*. Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut Microforms Collection, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Advertisement for **CHAHYAH PULAU PENANG**, dated 19 FEBRUARY 1904. The page features a large central title in Arabic calligraphy and a grid of advertisements in Malay and English. The main title is **CHAHYAH PULAU PENANG**. Below it, the date is given as **19 FEBRUARY 1904**. The page is divided into several columns of text, including advertisements for **M. ALISTER & Co.**, **GRAHAM & Co. Limited**, **FRITCHARD & Co.**, and **CADONAU & Co.**. A prominent advertisement for **Nestlé's Milk** is located in the bottom right, featuring an illustration of a milk can with the text **Nestlé's Milk** and **NESTLÉ'S SWISS CONDENSED MILK**. The advertisement includes a small image of the milk can and the text **NESTLÉ'S SWISS CONDENSED MILK** and **Milk**. The overall layout is a typical early 20th-century newspaper advertisement page.

Figure 12 Nestle's Milk advertisement adorning the front page of *Chahyah Pulau Pinang*. Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut Microforms Collection, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

هرکت لنگکان

لد 8 بولين 11.25
6 3.50
10 7.00

سوان دفن بنتجا هورس
سوا لسياران دفن داغ اسبع بوله
زكرا منورز مرگ رانكة ستر شير

علامت فوري
The Store "Idaran Zaman"
17, Bishop Street PENANG.
علامت كاتون
"Idaran Zaman" Penang

هرکت لنگکان

کاشي سوان 20 سين 1.5
1 رانگيتا
11.35
ساتو بولين 1.00
2 بولين 2.00
3 بولين 3.00
ساتو اجيني لد سکاڠي سوان
اور کووان اين دكيرا له
لد 2 اجيني منوره اسرا رانگه
جك بر كهندق سلفه موک انو
له بوله ستا كتر اجني مرگ منوره
بع سفاستين

يلانق 32 21 لوكوسه 1927

دكلوادكن درله بندد قولو فينق قد تيشه 2 هاري خيسين

تاغن بگينگ 18 ستر 1246

PURE

دادن نه املي
الكر سگيتي

APCAR & CO.
PURE JAVA
TEA BUST.

قربنگان بيسر
Kain
Registered
فليكتا
بجفت طر بوش

كابين فليكتا جفت طر بوش بع در بوان درلد بع
نيسر 6 بع برگان دفن چيا دان كابين بوله
نغن لام ملتا بنله كابين فليكتا بع مشهور اتيرو
دنيا دفن بر منجم چورق سوان دنون اوله
اورغ اسلام دنگري انديا سنبولي سوان جانن
لفهدون بع سر باكي قوم اسلام كيه بر تيك بسر

درد لاکو؟
کرد نچوڻ
لاکو استمبول
لاکو مچاڻي

سوا قيريق 2 فني
مياڻي بع بارودان
مشهور

فني 2 مياڻي درلد ارهواين انگريس دان امريکا
هرگان دروه 25 125 50

تيليفون نمبر 144

تيلگرام . بوسينل

THE UNIVERSAL STORE
185 PENANG ROAD, PENANG

Figure 13 Advertisements on the front page of *Idaran Zaman*, 11 August 1927.

Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut Microforms Collection, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Apart from advertisement, the front pages were also illustrated with portraits that were relevant to the main topics. For example, as early as year 1897, the illustration of Sultan Abdullah adorned the front page of the *Jajahan Melayu* newspaper. Similar pictures were seen in *Lengkonan Bulan* (Figure 10) and *Majalah Guru*. The latter, which was published in Seremban in year 1925, had its front page adorned with the photograph of Seri Paduka Yang Maha Mulia Tunku Amaluddin Sani Perkasa Alam Shah Sultan Dali (Figure 14).



Figure 14 The cover of *Majalah Guru*, 1 October 1925 with the photograph of Seri Paduka Yang Maha Mulia Tunku Amaluddin Sani Perkasa Alam Shah Sultan Dali. Image courtesy of Arkib Negara Malaysia.



Figure 15 A photograph of Hasrah Hanım in *Al-Ikhwān*, 16 May 1927.
Image courtesy of Arkib Negara Malaysia.

For instance, in an *Al-Ikhwān* publication dated 16th May 1927 (Figure 15), there was an article titled *Perempuan Islam Mulai Menempuh Medan Kemajuan* (Muslim Ladies Start to Embrace Progress). It concerned a young Muslim girl from Turkey, Hasrah Hanim, who had just acquired her certification as a lawyer. The picture, albeit in black and white, was placed beside the article so as to enable the readers to identify the lady in question. With such illustrations and photographs, the magazine could have attracted more readers since it was not limited to a mere collection of written articles.

Owing to the limited number of literate Malays during that time, visuals were one of the chief aspects of Malay publications. Elements such as drawings, illustrations, and later photography were not the only early visual renditions that might have informed the Malays about the modern perspectives. Most importantly, since the initial appearance of Malay newspapers in 1879, they have acted as (1) a source of news and information, (2) a medium for education and dissemination of information, and most importantly, (3) a catalyst for racial consciousness among the locals. Although these newspapers have initially emphasised on language and literature, they have later shifted their focus to religious matters and subsequently, nationalism in the 1930s. In the fourth and fifth decades of the 20th century, writings in the Malay press started to raise the issue of Malay rights and the future of this community. These were also reflected by the cartoons and caricatures that began to be published in the late 1920s (Mulyadi 2004); they gave rise to a kind of satire that criticised the Malays' attitudes towards progress as well as their continuous inferiority vis-à-vis the colonials and other races. Indirectly, the aforementioned cartoons also introduced the readers to modern visuals through the mass production of newspapers.

Evidently, cartoons and caricatures were accepted as simple and yet effective tools to disseminate important Malay-related messages on subjects like poverty among the Malays. Additionally, they highlighted cultural and attitude issues such as debts, carelessness, laziness and shyness, all of which were denounced as contributory factors to the backwardness of the community in the society. Although the contents of these illustrations were interesting and in line with the editorial tones, the interesting point is that the utilisation of cartoons and caricatures in the newspapers did not only provide indirect criticism of the Malays; they could arguably inform and educate the readers on modern visualities. In *Wak Ketok Dancing with a Foreign Girl in a Cabaret Club* (Figure 16), Ali Sanat depicted Wak Ketok who immersed himself in excessive entertainment activities – presumably a cabaret. In this image, the

foreground, middle ground, and background were clearly defined. In art, depth is created by overlapping parts of the images, and this is usually divided into the three abovementioned types. As exemplified by the caricature, the dancing figures, which were placed at the lower part of the picture or directly in front of the reader (i.e. foreground) were perceived to be the closest to the reader. Specifically, Wak Ketok was portrayed to be so absorbed in dancing despite not knowing how to do so. Similarly, the other dancing figures in the foreground were larger, clearer, and thicker than those "behind" them in terms of line quality. Despite being simple caricatures, the layering of figures gave rise to depth and perspective, whereby other dancers filled the middle ground and musicians the background. The latter appeared less clear, and the lines were less intense than those of the foreground and middle ground.



Figure 16 "Wak Ketok Dancing with a Foreign Girl in a Cabaret Club" in *Utusan Zaman*, 14 January 1940.

Image courtesy of Perpustakaan Tun Seri Lanang, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.



Figure 17 "No Way to Escape" by Abdullah Ariff in *Penang Daily News*, 9 October 1942.
Source: Zakaria (2006).



Figure 18 "Anglo Saxon Imperialism" by Abdullah Ariff in *Penang Daily News*, 9 September 1942.
Source: Zakaria (2006).

Contemporary social and political developments, in addition to international news, were also conveyed to the local readers. This was also true for criticisms of Western culture and modernism. In light of all these occurrences, it could be postulated that the Malays (publishers, writers and artists) have realised the significance and magnitude of the visuals in the dissemination of messages. While written articles were important for addressing issues and providing solutions, they did not attract many readers owing to the sheer number of illiterate Malays during that time. Most of the articles in the papers were recited to the illiterate audience by the few literate ones at coffee shops and other public places. Thus, caricatures with simple dialog boxes proved to be another effective method to provoke thoughts and convey as many messages as written articles to a large audience in view of their simplicity. Thus, caricatures, drawings, and sketches had a highly significant influence on the audience or readers. As mentioned earlier, Abdullah Ariff's work in *Penang Daily News* depicted the anti-Western stances during the Japanese occupation in Malaya. In *No Way to Escape* (Figure 17), indirect visual communication was achieved by means of a simple yet meaningful caricature. Abdullah Ariff portrayed the Americans through the image of Abraham Lincoln as Uncle Sam, who was about to be stabbed by German and Japanese bayonets. Similarly, in *Anglo Saxon Imperialism* (Figure 18), characters such as Uncle Sam and Winston Churchill were seated on a carriage carried by the local people (i.e. a man in a *songkok* as well as another man wearing a *sarong* and *turban*), hence reflecting imperialist ideas. These examples supported the notion that caricatures were a type of visual communication, which not only conveyed messages to an audience; more importantly, the exaggerated drawings indirectly educated the readers on certain aspects of art as well.

Evidently, caricatures were not only produced by those who were affiliated or working with the local newspapers at that time. In *Warta Jenaka*, for example, caricatures that were contributed by the readers were also accepted. These included the works of Muhammad Salleh Sulaiman, Abd Manan, Zakaria Haji Mohd Nor, Ahmad Nor Shukur, Ahmad Murad Nasruddin, Abdullah Omar and M Nor Awang (Mulyadi 2004). Therefore, it could be argued that there existed Malays who had a visual comprehension of drawings and their technicalities, either through formal or self-education. These simple drawings or visual renditions, which were in the form of simple illustrations, advertisements, photographs, as well as caricatures, allowed the dissemination of visual knowledge to the local readers. It could also be suggested that such visual renditions may have indirectly informed the illiterates as well.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction section of this paper, a question has been put forward with regard to the historical narrative of modern art as espoused in the book, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*. Although the book's premise of "modern arts" was based on the perspective of Western arts, this paper postulates that these "modern arts" would not have been well-accepted if not for the prior production of visual renditions and the direct introduction of the same to the locals. This was initially achieved through the circulation of Malay manuscripts, followed by and the dissemination of early types of print media (i.e. newspapers). For instance, as discussed by Hsu as well as Sabapathy and Piyadasa, Abdullah Ariff's works were based on his involvement with the Penang Impressionist group, in addition to the watercolor renditions produced by him as an artist. Nevertheless, his role as a cartoonist and graphic designer for the Straits Echo newspaper during the Japanese Occupation, apart from his designing of the masthead for *Dewasa*, was never mentioned in *Modern Artists of Malaysia*.

The Great Division has provided information of the ways by which Western scholars like Winstedt and Beamish, as well as western-educated local scholars like Sabapathy and Piyadasa have influenced art historiography in Malaysia. Hence, the aforementioned segregation, though not a conscious one, indicated that the history of Malaysian arts was highly influenced by western forms of art education. After all, almost all Malaysian artists have attained formal education from established art institutions. Therefore, the narrative of the history of modern art needs to be explored and expanded. The realm of Malaysian art itself began with artists, whereby the circles of art aficionados came from the upper middle class.

The above mentioned phenomenon was actually the effect of the introduction of visuals to the Malays, although the early versions of these took on simple, basic forms and shapes in addition to perspectives as well as unadorned caricatures. Such renditions have even initiated an early polemic on arts among the locals. This scenario was addressed in the *Al-Ikhwān* by Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, who raised the issue that some parents rejected drawing lessons in Malay schools as pictorialisation was forbidden in Islam. As the owner of Jelutong Press that published *Al-Ikhwān*, Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi argued otherwise – that drawings were important to help individuals visualise the things that were heard. Besides, he also claimed that drawing was an innocent skill as long as the resultant images were not idolised (Ahmad Suhaimi 2007).

As for the artists, the urgent needed to define Malaysian art surfaced during the Seminar Akar-akar Kesenian Peribumi dan Perkembangan Kini (Seminar on the Origins of Indigenous Arts and Latest Developments) in 1979. The 1979 seminar and the *Akar dan Jiwa* exhibition (Syed Ahmad 1979) was curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal. In the mid-1970s, more and more artists began to use Malay and Islamic aesthetics as well as Malay material culture. However, the visual renditions and the drawing abilities of Malay artists that have been discussed in this paper are still an area for active research. In fact, serious scholarship on the topic is needed to correct the common perception that modern Malaysian arts were introduced by artists who were mostly immigrants from China in the early 20th century.

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