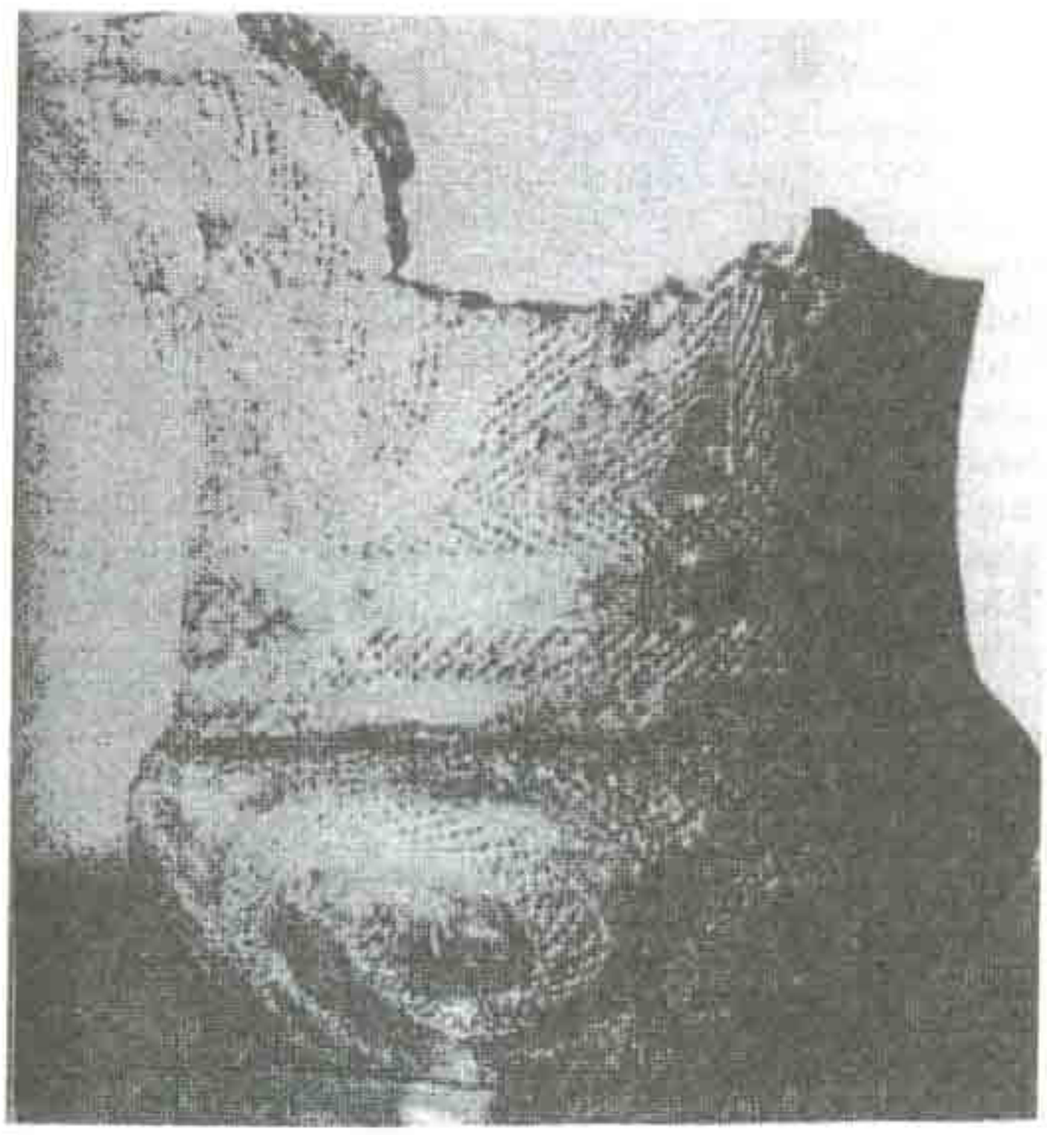
Thoughts on the Aesthetics of Malay Artifacts

Zakaria Ali
Universiti Sains Malaysia

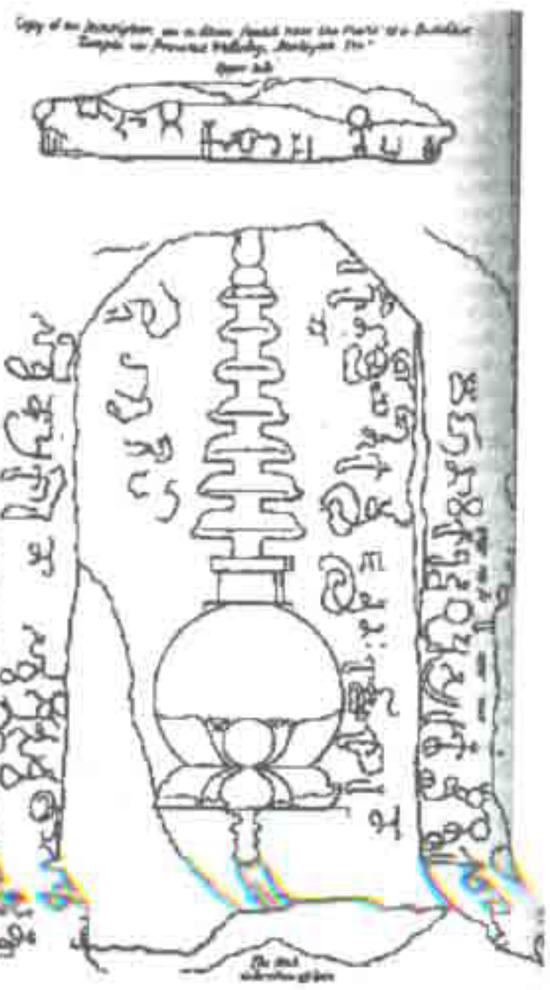
Artifacts are old things, often kept in the museums, cataloged, analyzed, debated, regularly served to illustrate the impact of styles in art history treatises, and promote divergent viewpoints in archeological reports. George Kubler insists that artifacts and works of arts are included in the history of things, in which a series of replicas and unique examples, both tools and expressions create a shape of time, from which a collective identity of a tribe, class, or nation emerges. "This self-image reflected in things is a guide and a point of reference to the group for the future, and it eventually becomes the portrait given to posterity" (Kubler 1976: 9).

The portrait is crude indeed when we flip over the pages of any number of past issues of the *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museum* or *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in which fragments of iron works (Picture 1), pottery (Picture 2), inscriptions (Picture 3), carvings (Picture 4), and texts (Picture 5) have been marshalled to make points that remain pretty much authoritative and uncontested. As such the image of our past is delineated in tentative renderings, dark crosshatchings of sure dating at one corner, and light summaries of unknown provenance, at another.

Picture 1 Iron Implement. Malaysian Metal Age. L: 105 cm



Picture 2 Neolithic pottery from Gua Cha. H: 20.8 cm



Picture 3 Buddhist Inscription. Ca 400 A.D. Sebrang Perai, Penang

Picture 4 Tombstone of Sultan Muhammad Shah, Pahang, 1474

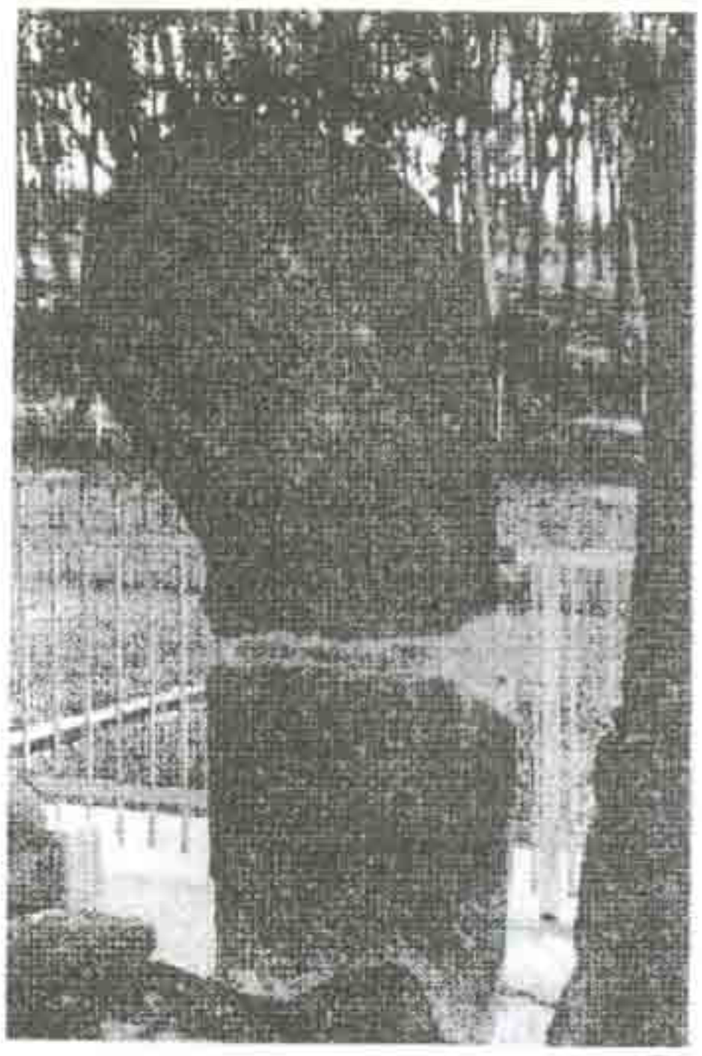
We begin with Ivor H.N. Evans (1921: 155–173) who splashes the highly detailed photographs of a group of three sculptured megaliths at Pengkalan Kempas, calling one of them, rather dramatically "The Sword of the Saint" (Picture 6). The word "Allah" (Picture 7) is carved in relief right smack in the center. Its shape resembles a conventionalized phallus, or the *lingam* while the other piece the "Sudu" (Picture 8) or spoon is a partial *yoni*, the female counterpart. The third is the *kemudi* or rudder (Picture 9).

In this same *keramat,* or shrine complex, there stands a quadrilateral pillar (Picture 10), inscribed on all four sides. The two sides are in the Malay jawi script (Picture 11, Picture 12), and the other two in ancient Kawi script (Picture 13, Picture 14), begin with the invocation of the "Bismillah" and speak of one Ahmad Majanu who was slain in battle.

Picture 5 Terengganu Inscription. 1303. H: 84 cm

Picture 6 "TheSword of the Saint". Pengkalan Kempas

Picture 7 "Allah" in relief



Picture 8 "Spoon". Pengkalan Kempas

Picture 9 "Rudder". Pengkalan Kempas

Picture 10 Quadrilateral Pillar. Pengkalan Kempas

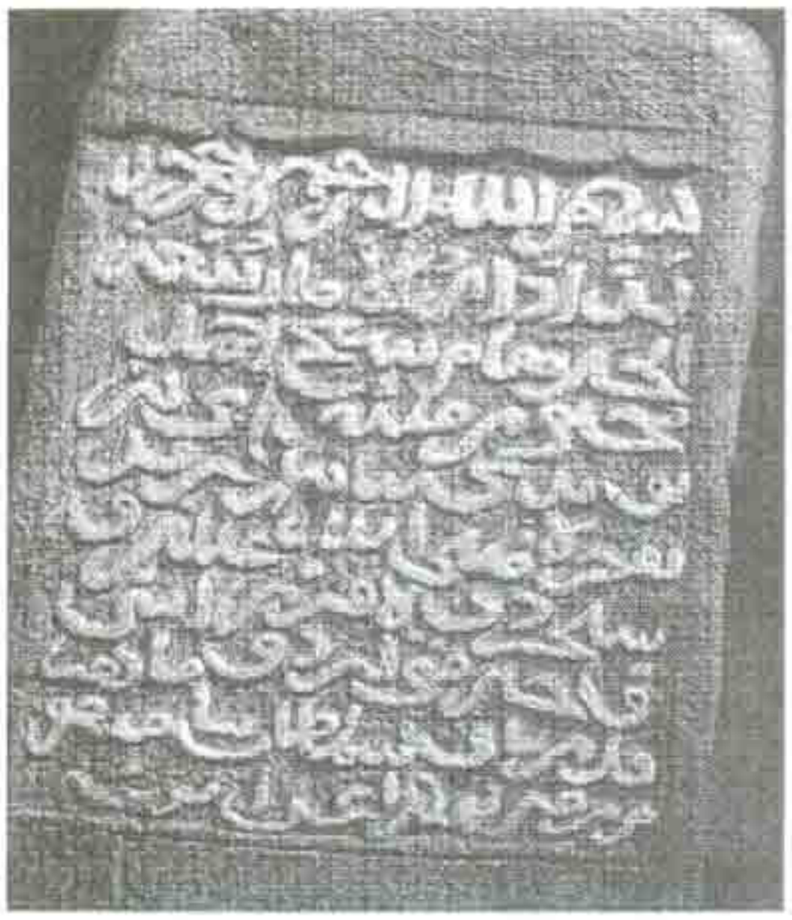
Picture 11 Jawi Inscription. East side. Pengkalan Kempas. 1468

The Kawi script is dated 1385 Saka (Javanese dating), which is around 1464, and the Jawi script 872 Hijrah, which is 1468. Scholars have given one explanation or another over the discrepancy (Kloss 1931; Callenfels 1927; Wilkinson 1931). My guess is that the two groups of people remembering the Ahmad Majanu's heroism or betrayal (both seem possible as the text is compressed, cryptic even) are swayed by different notions of time. The Hijrah group is linear and history-conscious over who, where, what and when. The Saka is cyclic and commemorative, fixing the date upon some event of cosmic proportions that have occurred in the past in the constellation of dates tied to an array of personages.

From an aesthetic point of view how are we going to judge the script as a conveyer of meaning? Take clarity, for instance, as a feature of beauty, and we are, perforce, to rely on the paleographer J. G. de Casparis's reading of the Kawi, over which he makes hesitant guesses, as erosion has blurred some of the words of a language now no longer in use, but has morphed into the localized scripts in the lands of the Batak, Rejang and Lampung (Casparis 1980). By comparing and questioning an earlier reading by Van Stein Callenfels, J. G de Casparis gives an alternate if rounded sense of what had happened.

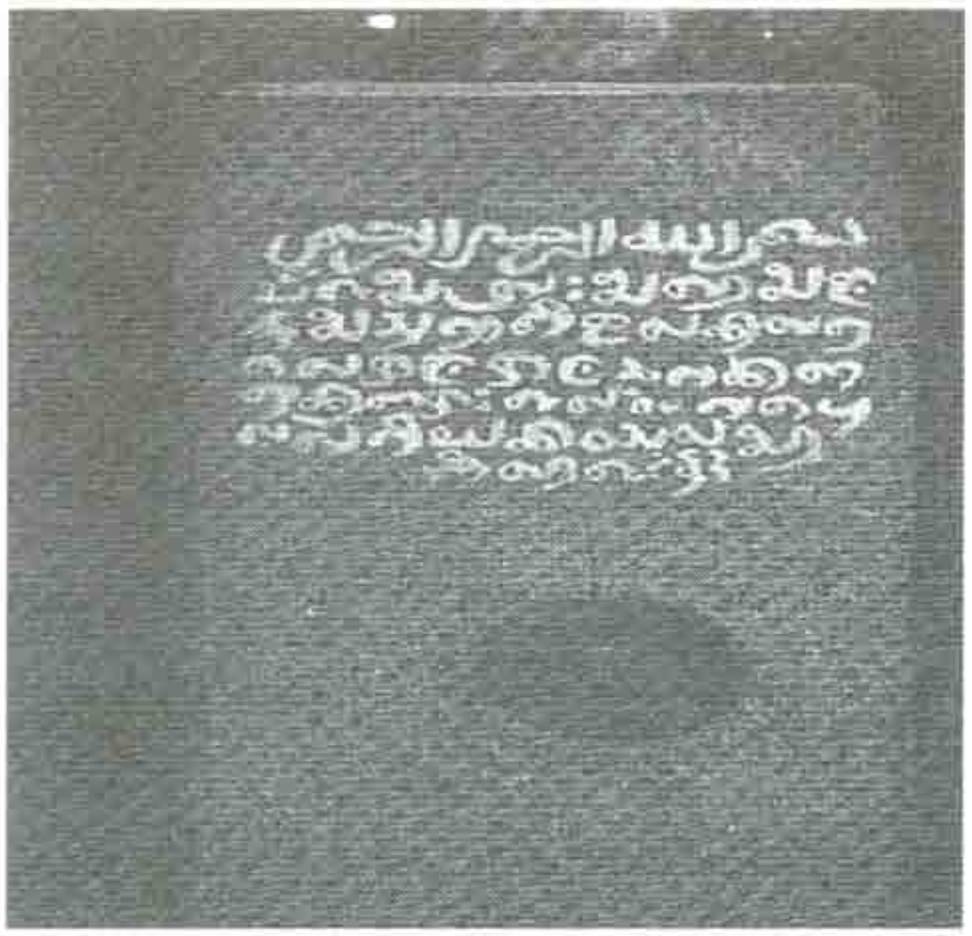
In the Jawi script, Ahmad Majanu is elevated to the status of *Sheikh* or saint, fallen during the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah (1459-1477). In terms of composition the Jawi carver limits himself, after the invocation, to ten lines, and the Kawi carver allows himself seven lines on the north face, and six on the south, constraint by the hole gouged beneath the last lines for purpose of transportation, for the pillar is a sandstone not available locally and has to be imported from elsewhere. Allusions and hints are factors the carvers consider in presenting their works, whose beauty, then, is in the magical act of mentioning names and dates, salvaging them from the blistering whoosh of oblivion, leaving us five hundred years later to play an exciting if endless game of reconstruction.

In dealing with Malay pottery, Ivor H. N. Evans (1922: 259–261) provides some fine examples he describes in ways intelligible to esthetes and non-esthetes alike. Foremost among his concerns



Picture 12 Jawi Inscription. West side.
Pengkalan Kempas 1468

Picture 13 Kawi Inscription. North side.
Pengkalan Kempas 1464



Picture 14 Kawi Inscription. South side.
Pengkalan Kempas 1464

is bringing into circulation a list of terms that have otherwise been in use largely among the makers of artistic or useable objects. *belanga* or earthen cooking bowl, *labu tanah* (water-gourd), *periuk* (cooking pot), *terenang, buah delima,* or *bangking* (wide-mouthed water vessels) are a craft whose tools include *pencak* (bat-like wooden implement), *pendedak* (knife-shaped sliver of bamboo), *penggangsar* (pebble of quartz for polishing), *pendedak* (tool to score perpendicular lines on the body of vessel), and *pengukut* (implement to scrap away superfluous clay).

Exploring the subject of Malay patterns and designs, Ivor H. N. Evans (1929: 163–167) ushers in yet another list of terms novel in 1929 but now commonplace in Malay handicrafts. He divides the patterns into three classes: geometric, floral, and fauna, found on metal works and pottery such as *pucuk rebung* (bamboo sprouts), *siku keluang* (flying-fox elbow), *bunga cengkeh* (the clover flower), *tampok manggis* (the mangosteen calyx), *sagi belimbing* (star fruit), *tapak Sulaiman* (Solomon's seal), *bunga banji* (swastika), *daun bodi* (the Bo-tree leaf), *bunga kundur* (gourd-vine flower), *awan kalok paku* (fern curves pattern), *awan Java* (Javanese pattern), *awan Belanda* (Dutch pattern), *sukur bakong* (shoot of the lotus). As a result we are now better equipped to describe this earthenware (Picture 15) and its the patterns in the discourse on Malay aesthetics.

Picture 15 Decorated gourd. H: 38 cm

Having laid such a foundation, Ivor H. N. Evans inaugurates a more in-depth study such as the one by Siti Zainon Ismail (1986: 61–116), who with a quasi-historicist bent of mind, divides Neolithic designs into three stages, based on the idea that the crude presumably progresses on to the refine; a model derived from the histories of Greek sculpture; and of Renaissance painting. Her Neolithic I consists of simple crude scratched chevron and lattice ornament, mat circles, oval and elliptical shapes, and continuous swag decoration. Her Neolithic II is a little more complex, in which several designs are etched onto the surface of one vessel. Bamboo sprouts, double bands, and meanderings decorated the mouth, the neck and the body respectively. Her Neolithic III (Siti Zainon 1986: 100–103) consists of shards uncovered during the Wilhelm G. Solheim excavations of Johor Lama, in which the designs are more varied, including the ribbed pattern, fishbone and concentric diamond, parallel straight and wavy lines, chevron and ribbed, triangles, and ovals. However, W. G. Solheim (1965: 75) concludes in his report that the pottery has been brought probably from South China in Han times (206 BC to 221 AD), way past the Neolithic.

Such misclassification perhaps suggests that under the pressure to cluster designs into a particular time sequence, we forget to double check. Still, the idea of sequence is most attractive, corresponding, as it were, to the duration of living things, to the image of time Kubler (1976: 122) describes as "fibrous bundles" which means that each fiber lasts as long as the design prevails. Only then would an art object make sense, situated at any given center, with a series of objects before it, and another series after. Siti Zainon recognises a certain kind of link between one pattern and the next, though in this case, the series of sequential fibers would have led to any number of directions. Perhaps the Kublerian biological metaphors would have worked, had she had more recent examples of dated and dateable specimens, such as the ones offered by the Tang (600) – Sung (960–1280) – Yuan (1280–1370) – Ming (13709–1659) – Ching (1650–1912) axis.

The man-made things themselves – the description of Sultan Mansur Shah's 15th century *istana,* a 1712 piece of betel or *sireh* set, a modern relief carving of the Bismillah, a 1968 *pago-*

pago painting by Abdul Latiff Mohidin, and a 2005 painting by Zakaria Ali embody a certain sense of form invested with meaning that is most likely absent in the works of a John Bigley in Texas, or a Balakhrisna in Mumbai, or a Shih Huang Ti in Beijing. Each of these has his own way of articulating visual information in the tradition he has inherited, forged, or broken away from.

Reigning till 1477, Sultan Mansur Shah erects a remarkable palace described in the *Sejarah Melayu* in some detail. Evidently the palace personifies a set of raw power, embodying self-indulgence as an all-consuming privilege. The sultan orders this palace built after Hang Kasturi is cowardly slain in the now famous *silat* scene in the old palace, after which his corpse is dragged to the sea, and his wife and children executed. With an eye for proportion, the chronicler of the *Sejarah Melayu* describes the palace as having 17 bays, 18 feet between pillars, each pillar the size of arms encircled, the roof has seven tiers, each studded with windowed cupolas (Brown 1952: 87). The cross-beams are 18 inches thick and 9 inches wide; the door sills are 3 feet wide, and 18 inches thick; 40 cross-bars all gilded. The decoration includes carved flying crockets, and trelliswork with pendent pyramidal patterns. The spires are gilded with gold and red glass, the walls inserted with Chinese mirrors "that flashed in the sun like lightning dazzling the sight.... So fine was the workmanship of this palace that not another palace in the world at that time could compare with it. It was given the name of *mahligai*, and its roof was of copper and zinc shingles" (Brown 1952: 87).

Clearly, monumentality, ostentatiousness, and things Chinese inform its conceptualization in which rooms are designed for specific purposes: the royal chambers for nocturnal bliss; the audience hall, or inner sanctum, for the king to pretend to listen to his advisers and ministers; the guestrooms, the corridors, and the kitchen. Upon completion, the palace, I feel, must have radiated a glow of artificiality induced by the remoteness with which the royals treat their subjects, from whom any signs of disloyalty is tantamount to treason, punishable by death. When it is struck by lightning and melts to the ground, the people release a huge sigh of relief, attributing it to divine retribution.

the Malay society pretty much together through the ages. Using a hammer, scissors, moon stamps, and file, the craftsman forges the plate into shape, adding the floral design by cutting, punching and indenting. He shows the veins of the outstretched leaves composed in roundels on the bulbous body of container that holds the betel leaves. The repoussé ovary is in a perfect circle, while the edges of the wavy leaves are delineated by stamping off a series of half-circles. At the lower band of the lid is a line of inscription: *Hijrah 1124 Puteri Kamariah binti Sri Maharaja Sultan Abdul Jalil, Riau.* Flowers, shoots, and curlicues dominate the composition in which the top part portrays a set of lotus leaves. The handle is a pair of goblet, the lower larger than the upper, for easy lifting. The waist is left undecorated, while the border of the base is adorned with the creeping leaves and clove head patterns.

The three smaller containers are for the areca nut, chalk and cloves respectively, decorated in similar ways. Having to reduce the patterns in size the metalworker introduces more intricate details, resulting in the pieces looking snugly baroque, to complement the larger piece. Peasants and princesses indulge in betel chewing that transcends social barriers, bonding relationships that place high premium on transparency. Such expectation is insinuated in the perforated gaps that keep the betel leaves fresh, whose pleasurable taste is akin to the reaffirmation of trust.

Malay aesthetics is embodied in this 1989 relief of the *Bismillah* carved by Affandi Awang (Picture 17). This work displays the surface contrast that is visually most pleasing, between the smooth and the rough, between the clear and the cluttered. The two renditions of the *Bismillah* articulate this principle of disparity. The one above has the pristine starkness befitting its singular status as a prelude to the surahs of the al-Quran. However, the middle *mim* in *Rahman* is absent, an omission that has never ceased to puzzle me, the owner of this piece. In the *Bismillah*, Affandi Awang shows his virtuosity in converging the letters into a compacted bundle, an act of obscuring without intending to, like what may have happened to the *mim*

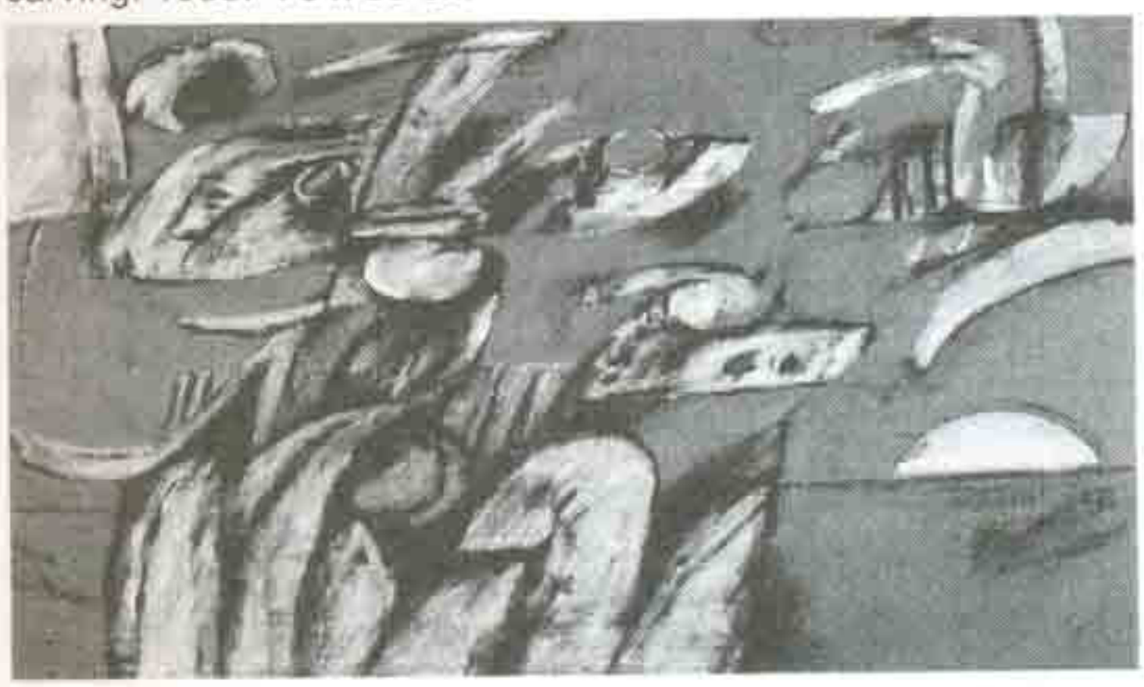
above. The clues of the initial *ba* and *sin*, and at the end the *ha, ya*, are clear though the *mim* is rendered by a casual upward unjointed loop.

The invocation is positioned in the center with a plain background, surrounded by floral ornaments of stylized lotus bud, leaves, stems, one half replicating the other to ensure perfect balance. Given the top-heavy shape of the hard wood (*merbau, cengal?*) with a lean waist, and a smaller bottom, Affandi Awang highlights the inscriptions with a coat of gold paint. The rest is stained in deep burnt sienna that helps resonate the beauty so pleasing to the Malays.

Malam Merah or "The Red Night" (Picture 18) is one in the *Pago-Pago* (read: pagoda in the plural) series Abdul Latiff Mohidin painted in 1968, to celebrate the tall tapering roofs of the Buddhist temples he marvelled in Thailand, Laos and Kampuchea through which he travelled in search of enlightenment. Deeply influenced by the expressionists in Germany where he studied, Abdul Latiff Mohidin asserts the centrality of fragmentation as his artistic credo. In here, we see sharp pointed things resembling *pandan* leaves, fish heads, shells scattered without a center to hold. These circles, half-circles and partial-square, however, coalesce in the jell of pink, sustaining the irony that in denying a focal point in the painting, the painting itself becomes one. The disorderly shapes cause unsettling disorientation most people experience regardless of who, what or where they are. In another irony, in transcending the issue of Malayness by adopting a western idiom, the work confirms it, because it is signed and dated by a Lenggeng-born Minang Malay named Abdul Latiff bin Mohidin.

Another Minang Malay Rembau-born is Zakaria Ali who sources the *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay Annals*) in zeroing upon the theme of the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago. The passage: "And when it was the hour of *'asar*, a ship arrived from Jeddah and proceeded to anchor. And from this ship a *Makhdum* disembarked, Saiyid 'Abdul 'Aziz by name, and then prayed on the shore. And all who saw him were astounded at his behavior and said, "What means this bobbing up and down?" And there was a general scramble to see him, the people crowding together..." (Brown 1952: 53).

Picture 17 Affandi Awang. "Bismillah". Relief carving. 1989. 76 x 60 cm



Picture 18 Abdul Latiff Mohidin, "Malam Merah –The Red Night". Oil on canvas. 1968. 79 x 99 cm

Picture 19 Zakaria Ali, "The Visitors", 2005. Oil on canvas. 68 x 148 cm

Assigning myself to the role of 'Abdul 'Aziz, I then gathered a few of my students who were choreographed to act surprised, defensive, curious, no different from the bunch of scavenging monkeys eyeing for a quick steal, in this work called "The Visitors" (Picture 19). Transposing an *'asar* prayer performed in Malacca probably in 1422 during the reign of Raja Tengah, I reset the scene to one partially overcast day in 2005. I have been fixated with the idea of a pure-faced holy man prostrating on the beach that must have inspired fear and reverence. These shells encrusted expanse of rocks suggest the hard days ahead for the *Makhdum* in spreading the Good Word that has preceded him in the form of a dream that haunts the bewildered Raja Tengah, who upon waking up, sees he has been miraculously circumcised and mutters the profession of faith.

I spent the long semester break of three months on "The Visitors", tinkling the visual possibilities provided by one pivotal event in our history. I want to tell the story on my own terms by engaging the human figures in dramatic poses, allowing for the distribution of shades and shadows, illuminated by contours of light to direct the viewer toward the act of prostrating, the inherent humility in submitting to the Will of God.

Much of the satisfaction gained lies in my being able to get the colors just right, albeit after numerous layers of blunders. The figures, too, have to be adjusted time and again to the ever shifting perspectives, from the ground viewing up, to, from on high viewing down, and ending somewhere in between. No fan of numerology, I shan't be able to tell you what it means to have two temporarily defenseless figures deep in prayer as opposed to the seven startled even violent-prone residents who are closing in on them. Or why the equally startled seven monkeys are distracted from their daily routine to focus on two humans bowing seemingly at them, a reversal that tickles their curiosity. Or whether there is a connection between this March 24th, 2005 issue of *The New York Review of Books,* which headlines the menace of the evangelicals and the horrors of the Tsunami on the one hand, and on the other, the appearance of Makhdum 'Abdul 'Aziz of Jeddah in 1422. Or why only one boat anchored at an otherwise congested pirate-filled port city of Malacca?

After signing "The Visitor" I experience an elated catharsis though I wonder if this is what Aristotle means. Nor am I sure if my work can pull the viewer into untangling the sub-text or hidden narrative and then retreat five feet away, becoming, as a result, more informed, satisfied and all the wiser. Likewise he may feel cheated by my freewheeling handling of so sober a theme that by recreating it thus, I have inadvertently falsified it. He could argue that the least I could have done was to have my students wear headbands, loin clothes, long hair, put on a fake ferocity, spears poised to pierce. I reply: see my next painting.

Putting the works under discussion in the Kublerian setting I say that even though each can choose a precursor – the Pengkalan Kempas Kawi inscription of 1464 to the Kayuwangi inscription of 896; the Pengkalan Kempas Jawi inscription of 1468 to the inscription on the tombstone of Malikut Tahir of 1326; Siti Zainon's flawed classifications to an earlier stages of the Neolithic age; the mahligai of Sultan Mansur Shah to the palaces of his father and grandfather; the 1712 betel set of Riau to the sets in 15th century Malacca; the *Malam Merah* of Abdul Latiff Mohidin to the "Nightwatch" of Max Beckmann; "The Visitors" of Zakaria Ali to

the book illustrations of N. C. Wyeth, the intrusion of nationalistic fervor of identifying beauty to a race, compels me to put on my schoolteacher armor: the craftsman has made his piece with love and knowledge; now it is the viewer's turn to articulate his wonder with caution and respect, falling back on the first lesson in primary school: keep looking until you find the answer. Plato, in insisting that beauty is the Good, the Beneficial, the Reasonable, the Appropriate, the Balance, the Pleasant, and the Handsome, forgets to add: the Fleeting. Beauty is brief, spanning barely between the cool of shade of nature and the warm touch of sensuality, as in:

Apa kena padiku ini
Sini sangkut sana pun goyang
Apa kena hatiku ini
Sini sangkut sana pun sayang.

What ails my field of rice so fine
Here entwined, there on the move?
Whatever ails this heart of mine,
Entangled here, elsewhere in love?

Di mana kuang bertelur?
Di atas lata, di ruang batu.
Di mana abang nak tidur?
Di atas dada, di ruang susu.

Where does the Argus pheasant nest?
Above the falls, in rocky clefts.
Where does your lover seek his rest?
Upon your bosom, between your breasts.

Bibliography

Brown, C. C. 1952. Sejarah Melayu or the Malay Annals. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25(2 & 3): 87.

Callenfels, V. Van Stein. 1927. The Pengkalan Kempas Saint. *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museum* 12: 107–110.

de Casparis, J. G. 1980. Ahmat Majanu's Tombstone in Pengkalan Kempas and Its Kawi Inscription. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 53(1): 1–22.

Evans, I. H. N. 1921. A Grave and Megaliths. *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museum* 9: 155–173.

Evans, I. H. N. 1922. The Potting Industry at Kuala Tembeling. *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museum* 9: 259–261.

Evans, I. H. N. 1929. Some Malay Pattern and Design. *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museum* 15: 163–167.

George, Kubler. 1976. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 9.

Kloss, C. Boden. 1931. Notes on the Pengkalan Kempas Tombstone. *Journal of the Federated Malay States Museum* 16: 184–189.

Siti Zainon Ismail. 1986. *Reka Bentuk Kraftangan Melayu Tradisi*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 61–116.

Wilheim, G. Solheim II and Ernestene Green. 1965. Johore Lama Excavations, 1960. *Federation Museums Journal* 10: 75.

Wilkinson, R. J. 1931. The Pengkalan Kempas Saint. *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 9: 134.

We are tempted to see Mansur Shah's *mahligai* as a 15th century version of post-modernism, in which the process of reflection and deflection of the shingles demolish the dominance of any one meaning of the seat of *daulah*. In the audience hall lined with mirrors the sultan sees but fragments of his image, confusing him as well as his ministers, many of whom suspicious of palatial intrigues, sullied over the years by the opulence of distributing pouches of gold to friends, consorts, and concubines. Cruelty, compassion, devotion and debauchery are the order of the day, beckoning us to conjure an image of a fractured sumptuousness replicated down to the present.

This 18th century silver betel or *sireh* set (Picture 16) summarizes much of what most Malays think of beauty. It has order, shape, is light, utilitarian, unobtrusive, principles that have kept

Picture 16 Betel Set. Silver. 1712. H: 20.5 cm