

A BRIEF SURVEY OF MALAYSIAN ART

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Jutting into the sea, the Malay Peninsular divides it in two, the Malacca Straits to the west, and the South China Sea to the east. Since Ptolemaic times, traders have found it convenient to stop at any number of estuaries along the coast to rest, exchange goods, refurbish fresh water, anywhere from the Merbok River in the north, the Malacca River in the centre and at the Singapore River in the South. From May to October, the Southwest monsoon winds blows in the southwesterly directions, bringing ships from India and the Middle East; from November to April, the winds blows in the northeasterly directions, bringing ships from China. Over time, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and later European cultures left their marks on these riverside kingdoms, whose art we shall survey, in what follows.

Of the many Indian artifacts dug or discovered is the "Jalong Bronze". With this work, the art historian A. B. Griswold is better able to compare it with works from Indonesia, Thailand and Kampuchia (A. B. Griswold, "The Jalong Bronze," *FMJ*, Vol. VII, (1962), pp.64-66). In terms of iconography, the beard, the tresses of hair, the bulging abdomen and the *upavita* can be compared to the figures in Plate 41 of A. J. Bernet Kempers' *Ancient Indonesian Art*, Cambridge, 1959 (A. J. Bernet Kempers, *Ancient Indonesian Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959). The way the *upavita*, short-waist cloth, pointed beards, long ear lobes, no jewel are depicted is reminiscent of the figure in Plate XXVII in Dupont's *La Statuaire perangkoriennne*, Ascona, 1954. A Brahmin without a *jatamukuta* in Plate 61 in Boisselier's *La Statuaire Khmère et son evolution*, Saigon, 1955. The bronze, the anatomical forms, the treatment of fingers and projected heels, the lack of jewel, the short waist cloth match with figures in Plates XIX and XX of Dupont *op cit*. Locks of hair falling over his shoulders are also found in Plates 12, 14, 15, 17 of Coedes' *Les collections archeologiques du Musee National de Bangkok*, Paris, 1928. Similar figures can also be found in Figures 40 and

44 in Reginald le May's *Buddhist Art in Siam*, Cambridge, 1938 (Reginald le May, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1938).).

A.B.Griswold's 1962 interpretation has withstood the test of time. First, he says this is an idealized portrait of a Brahmin, well known in the neighborhood for his saintliness. Second, the facial features have no parallel in the works marshaled above for iconographic affinities. Third, the artist has inserted something of the personality of the pious man. The realism of the water flask hints at a Malay origin of the work, made perhaps not very far from where it was dug out. "... but it is hard to date with any precision. As the simplicity of the iconography provides but meager clues..." (A.B. Griswold, "The *Jalong* Bronze..."p.64.) but sufficient enough to infer the date to the 9th century.

Chinese influence is best seen in the design, the composition, and the choice of subject matter on the minbar at the three Malacca mosques; Masjid Trengkera, Masjid Pengkalan Rama, and Masjid Kampung Hulu, all completed around 1728. Under the Dutch, Malacca attracted wealthy Chinese Muslim traders who were probably of the Hanafiah persuasion. They most likely financed the construction on these mosques with their elaborate minbars whose designs bear witness to a feeling of 'Chineseness', maintained over the years by having pink reapplied to the background. Even a winter vignette of cherry blossom is included on the gateway at Kampung Hulu; a similar scene at the Pengkalan Rama and at Trengkera, a perfect still-life, showing a vase from which stems, stalk sheaths, leaves and flowers emerge. Next to it is a small bowl of fruits, both of which sit on a table of right-angled fret design. Also, the sleek curl in the outer border at the front feet using continuous vine that meanders from the bottom up, giving an elegant dragon-tail profile. At the bottom panel is the '*bunga berbaring*' thickly carved and appropriately positioned at the base, upon which two other panels with thinner, thus 'lighter' motifs, are stacked.

In all the three minbars the ends of the *tulang perabung* or ridges swirl dramatically skywards, called *pemeles* that resemble the eave corners found on the roofs of Chinese temples. At the Masjid Kampung Hulu and at the Masjid Pengkalan Rama, the motif is either the 'bunga ketumbi' or the mangosteen corolla, while it is the lotus at Trengkera. Such ostentatious display of the designer's skills and, by extension, of the patron's wealth runs counter to the deep austerity of Shafie school that permeates Malay Islam. Perhaps this explains why minbar in the 19th and the 20th centuries were rigorously simplified, largely unadorned, minimally decorated.

The 19th century British journeymen watercolorist is keen, curious, an exploratory. He collects data, evaluate and classify them. The reports he submits are scrupulously written,

down to the finest details, according to standards set by his superiors. Literary texts, archeological artifacts, stuffed animals, weapons, mental works, costumes, and other valuables are shipped to the libraries and museums in London or Leiden where they are catalogued, exhibited, and studied. He is proud to contribute to the body of knowledge that is observable, opened to disputes, reinterpreted in any number of ways.

The visual materials include a few oils, sketches, and watercolors done largely by amateurs. John Turnbull Thomson in the 1840s, painted many scenes of ships anchored at the port of Pulau Pinang, the old St. George's Church., Penang Hill, Bukit Tambun; he depicted Melaka town from St. Paul's Mount, the estuary of the Melaka River from the deck of his ship, and other scenes in Singapore and Johor. While Thomson is no great talent, he leaves some invaluable records of our early sea towns and villages, vignettes of tropical luxuriance recorded as though in the cool hues of late autumn.

About 40 years later in the 1880s, Frank Swettenham and George Gills took a river trip from Kuala Bernam on the West Coast to Kuala Lipis. They then trekked down the Pahang River to Pekan, on the East Coast, doing lots of watercolors of the scenes and people they encountered. Overwhelmed by the almost impenetrable jungle infested with snakes and tigers, they could no more than do brief studies of essentials. The faces of his Malay boatmen, two Sikhs wrestling, mist covered mountain slopes, the calm and placid river. Social hierarchy is inadvertently inserted in a picture of two white men sitting at the breakfast table in the garden, while natives squat beneath the trees and watch; a view of a mosque from a window across the river; Mount Pondok painted from the Residency in Kuala Kangsar. These attempts to understand the exotic flavor of the Orient define the white man's sense of who he is in relation to the faceless mass of brown natives.

These works are sketchy, meant to be a visual diary, hastily done with little care for the fine points of technique. The link between the artists and their subject matter is superficial, very much like a modern tourist snapping pictures from the window of a bus, whizzing through some remote village. From these works we see that the imagination of the colonialist is pretty ordinary; give an equally talented native the same means, he would paint just about the same way.

Peter Harris, an art superintendent formed the Wednesday Art Group in 1952 mainly for teachers interested in art to work together in the spirit of learning. He disseminated the notion of "free expression" by which his students dabbled and dabbled, to express the delights of discovery.

Using borrowed spaces in canteens and school halls, Harris set up his still life, or a model for his students to copy. Often, too, they took painting trips to the country or the

beaches. His series on the Tanjung Bidara in Melaka reveal an approach to teaching that dispenses with the use of perspective, figure drawing and color gradation. Instead, he smeared primary colors with a palette knife resulting in fudged lines, rough textures, and accentuating forms. Traces of Peter Harris can be seen in the works of Ismail Mustam and Syed Ahmad Jamal who at various times participated in his classes.

Returning from the Camberwell Art School in London in 1952, Tay Hooi Keat demonstrated in his works that the imagination was expressed in figure drawing. Many of his charcoal and pencil drawings in the 1950s were of nudes handled with such mastery that conservative local viewers were offended by their alleged lewdness. Had the works been by an Englishman, people couldn't care less. By applying the right proportion and foreshortening, Tay Hooi Keat concealed his origin but showed instead that his talent reflected the teaching adopted in the beaux-arts (bu-zarts) tradition. And his biblical subjects such as "Jesus Washing Peter's Feet" (1951) and "Noah's Ark" (1952), blur the distinctions between the aesthetics of the ruler and the ruled. When he started to do less figurative works from the 1960s onward, it became even clearer that styles, too, failed to suggest an imagination attributable to a region or a historical time block.

Syed Ahmad Jamal, graduated from the Chelsea School of Art in London in 1955, asserts that "Truth and sincerity above anything else. It does not matter if people say an artist is too Western or not enough Malay. These are artificial boundaries. The artist must look at true values. "These are hard to come by. Reacting to a pressure asserted later in his career that, in fact, there is a native imagination as opposed to a foreign one, Syed Ahmad Jamal in his "Penang Series", partially shuns the equation of Malay imagination with any one symbol. Identity can be inferred from a symbol, of course; the betel tree on the flag is of state Penang. Identity in art is an exercise in perception, an evocation of consciousness and its objects, as Mortimer J. Adler puts it: What is the object that the mind must be conscious of, and that the eyes must perceive?

Syed Ahmad Jamal finds the triangle as a motif with which something of the Malaysian imagination may be visualized. I see the apex as a description of what it means to be together, to agree on a point, to compromise, to feel secure, to appreciate hierarchy, to respect inherited and elected authority. The two sidelines mark the limits of consciousness. The several base lines hark back to Malay culture, which itself is in a state of flux, recipient of numerous influences from diverse sources since at least the 15th century. As such, there may be a Malay imagination but expressed on canvas, it simply dissipates. Having subscribed to the visual hegemony of expressionism for over three decades, Syed Ahmad Jamal finds it hard to draw the line, dividing the pre and post of the stretch of his imagination.

Since the 1970s a medley of ideas associated with the post modernist fracturing of forms, the muddying of content, the mixing of painting and theater, the drawing of inspiration from literary sources, has helped widen the definition of art.

Taking their clues from the Futurists in Milan of the 1920s, Piyadasa and Suleiman Esa teamed up and published a manifesto *Towards a Mystical Reality* in 1974. In it they stress that to conceptualize reality, the artist must perceive it in its mystical light, a term denoting the dimensionality of absences that defines the essence of an object, or a situation as a given time and place. A chair, a mosquito coil, used tins of paint, a discarded rain coat, a sample of human hair are some of the examples given to reassert the plurality of visual experiences.

From early on, patterned cloth has been associated with folks regardless of their status. The royalty would have the means to have the sarong and the batik made in the palace atelier, or have them ordered from elsewhere. In the 15th century chronicle, the *Sejarah Melayu*, the sultan of Malacca is so taken in by the designs on the cloths from the lands of the Kalinga, that he orders his trusted aid Hang Nadim to India, to bring home a shipload, numerically tempered by the chronicler in the name of propriety, to forty varieties of cloth and 40 lengths of each variety, and each length had to have 40 varieties of floral motifs (C.C. Brown (ed.), "Sejarah Melayu or The Malay Annals", *Journal of the Malayan Branch of Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. XXV, Parts 2 and 3, October 1952, p. 140.) The chronicler inserts his sub-text concerning the inferiority of the Kalinga designs that come nowhere near those drawn in Malacca. He records how Hang Nadim rejects all the preliminary sketches the Indian designers show him, until they are simply exasperated and demand that he designs what he wants himself. The examples he shows them are so exquisite that the Indians copy them right away on the bulk of cloth all rolled up for the purpose.

The international ambience of the port of Malacca provides the means and ideas that the Malays readily utilize. The white cotton cloth is largely Indian; the blue and green dyes, Persian; black and red, Chinese. Yellows, pinks, violets, greens are local, derivatives of turmeric, *kundang* seeds, *keluduk* fruits, green shoots, soot. Very early on standards are set: colors that last are superior to those that fade after a wash or two. And with royal patronage the Javanese craftsmen excel unimpeded, exporting their batik to various port cities, including Malacca. The Javanese batik proves to be the most durable.

Malay Muslim traditional designs found in panels of houses and palaces, carved on pulpit (minbar) in mosques, weaved into mats, engraved upon keris and machete handle, printed on batik cloth are largely floral and geometrical, and the combination of the two. The underlying design principles employed are a set of motifs susceptible to repetition, elaboration and distortion, stylized in curvilinear scrolls and convolutions. These resulted

in a rugged surface unity that at times is baroque and overwhelming, transforming an archway in the Istana Ampang Tinggi Seremban (1865), for instance, into a celestial guardian portal. Yet other floral design, interwoven in a continuous coiling spiral of leaves, such as the one on the pillar at the Istana Lama Sri Menanti, Kuala Pilah (1908) is smooth and uncluttered, emitting a cool classicism imitated by countless designers in the decades that followed.

In the 1950s there was the Penang Teachers' Art Circle established in 1952 led by Tay Hooi Keat and Abdullah Ariff, bitter enemies over who got the scholarship to study art in London. In Kuala Lumpur, there was the Arts Council registered on the 15 April 1952 organized by the expatriate Mubin Sheppard who was to be the first Director of the National Art Gallery. The Chinese educated artists formed the Penang Art Society on 28 April 1953, led by Kuo Ju Ping. Not to be sidelined, Mohd Noor bin Ahmad registered the Malay Teachers' Union that organized the group exhibition from the 21th to the 29th of April 1954.

The art scene attracted the attention of colonial officials, one of whom, Tony Beamish, wrote a book, *The Arts of Malaya*, published in 1954, the second of its kind to discuss modern art in Malaya. The first was the *Malay Industries: Part I. Arts and Crafts* by R.O. Winstedt, published in 1909 that discusses carpentry, building boats, pottery, metalworks, weavings, cord-making, embroidery and lace.

The Malay Arts Council or the Majlis Kesenian Melayu changed its name on the 15th of April 1958 to the Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung / The Frontline Artists of the Peninsular envisioned by Mohd Hoessein Enas, whose slogan was "Seni dan Masyarakat/ Art and Society" adopting the more politically oriented Malay writers' group, the ASAS 50, whose slogan was "Seni untuk Masyarakat/Art for Society". The artists were tamed compared to the virulent anti-British writings of the ASAS 50. Political pressure finally bore fruits: the National Art Gallery was instituted in 1958.

Exhibited in the National Art Gallery were the Mah Meri, as well as those from Sabah and Sarawak. Their carvings depicted the characters in their legends and myths that bonded their communities together. By exhibiting side by side with the works of Syed Ahmad Jamal and other modernists, these carvings were finally conferred the status of art, which otherwise they would not have.

In 1968 the School of Art and Design was established at the Mara Institute of Technology, offering diploma courses in Fine Arts. Soon, the Universiti Sains Malaysia offered degree-level courses in Fine Arts. From these two institutions, the graduates

went on to become leading artists such as Amron Omar, as can be seen from his self-portrait. Amron's is more than just a face, frontal or profile, the mug shot inherited from the Renaissance. His is seen from above, mostly the forehead and hard-ridged nose, part of an eye, and the mouth barely. The left shoulder bulged with the arm resting on the knee raised leaning on the side rest. The chest muscle is stretched out, revealing that the collarbones are stressed a little to the fore but too much to the back. The folds of the sarong add to the character of the sitter, one who admires simplicity and despises pretensions, delights in puncturing hollow claims but making some himself. The sarong is light, airy, easy to fold, hugging the shape of the buttocks, the thighs and the knees, a cover ideal in the heat of the tropics.

The design of the sarong reinforces the diagonal composition, with the gray bands slanting sideways, much like the series of the shadows on the floor that partially covers the sitter. The lighted part suggests the theme of duality: the sitter and his rocking chair; the seated figure and the empty room; the seen in the scene and the unseen outside the scene. By extension, the sitter embodies the gentle and the violent, the self-effacing and the rude, the placid and the amuck, precariously balanced, each on edge. The rocking chair, too, is similarly positioned, allowing the muted light to illuminate the pleats of the sarong, the right chest, the fingers, and the up-raised toe. The dark blurring on the light on the floor is the sarong pattern magnified, another way of aligning space division, of unifying the story with an open-ending note.

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