Influence of Local Culture on the Identity of Malaysian Portrait Painting

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Abstract

This study focuses on the chronology of local cultural themes that were selected from Malaysian portrait paintings. All the artworks were chosen from the permanent Kuala Lumpur National Art Gallery collection. The process was supported with visits and observations, where the process of record was identified and followed with the categorization of themes. All the artworks shared individual, economic, social, and family themes, which became the priorities of the painters. The whole theme from this classification represented the cultural identity and became the most important theme for local painters in this country after it achieved independence.

Keywords: Local Culture; Identity; Malaysian Portraiture.

1.0 Introduction
The Malaysian portraiture painting was discovered by recognising selected artwork from Kuala Lumpur National Art Gallery collection. The collection that was preserved and sustained in this visit actually included various types of works that included how the work represented its characters via different kinds of media or mediums. One that reflected and encouraged enhancement was the need for the study of portraiture painting, which I highlighted. The visit revealed 500 National Art Collections of portraiture in various categories such as Traditional, Application, Concept of Metaphor, and Religious Symbol.

Sarena (2019) stated, Since Malaysia is a multiracial, religious, and multicultural community, discussion of the question of identity is crucial, especially in the process of nation-state building. Any artistic activity that maintains identity, racial harmony, and national stability is relevant and significant enough to be maintained in the present and beyond.

The National Art Gallery's collection consists of portraits, demonstrating that portraiture is an essential subject worth emphasizing. It is shown that every piece has its own story that must be analysed and considered in depth; thus, the younger generation may truly appreciate their cultural heritage. The implications of local culture on Malaysian portrait painting are significant, as they shape the artwork's style, subject matter, and themes. The study of national heritage aims to strengthen the cultural identity worth of portrait painting in Malaysia. Therefore, this research aims to create an understanding of local cultural identity through themes according to the time based on the 1940s–1950s decade.

This study's details were clearly stated, where the literature was linked to and directed the appropriate methodology. Of course, the results and discussion expressed the local culture formation within the context and represented the work's identity.

2.0 Literature Review
Rosliza claims that in 2020, portrait painting, in brief, is a noun that refers to an image or picture. A portrait is a verb that refers to a production method and an adjective that refers to an end product, such as painting, drawing, printmaking, or photography. Portrait painting is an amalgamation of two words: portrait and painting. A portrait is defined as a human figure derived from the real subject of the human body. Nonetheless, the portrait can be interpreted conceptually as representing anything that could be a sign that portrays a person's character or appearance.

On the other hand, painting is a type of visual artwork that incorporates several art elements and principles. The arrangement of elements and principles conveys specific meanings and messages. As a result, the approach to portrait painting should incorporate both the term portrait and the concept of painting.

Richard Brilliant emphasises a cultural construct connecting a subject, a creature, and an audience in Portraiture (2013). He investigates the genre as a phenomenon in Western art that is particularly sensitive to changes in the perception of the individual's nature in society. He also offers a convincing thematic analysis of the relationships between portrait

subject matter and viewer response, the viewer's reaction to the image itself and the person it represents. Portraiture's extraordinary longevity and resilience as a genre attest to the strength of this imaginative exchange between the subject, artist, and viewer.

Painting is an integral part of the history of modern arts in Malaysia as well as the country's cultural legacy. A painting by Hussein Enas titled "*Minah*" and an artwork by Syed Ahmad Jamal titled "Mandi Laut" were declared part of the national heritage on February 14, 2009. Similarly, the martial art of 'Petarungan' by Amron Omar was described in the book 'Selection of Work Collection Bank Negara Malaysia' and regarded as a manifestation of cultural identity. The aforementioned portraiture artwork declaration appears to be equivalent to the usual 'excellent value' of cultural identity.

According to Rohidi (2000), bicultural organisms are the result of the interaction of biological and cultural influences and cannot be isolated from their biological existence. Portrait painting in Malaysia may differ from the Western perspective, as it most likely incorporates local conventions, traditions, and the artist's life. On this basis, the requirement for specific analysis and comprehensive interpretation of local portraiture works in Malaysia should be determined by the cultural environment of Malaysia.

All the above sources acknowledged that portraiture is an essential topic with certain meanings that influence our local culture. Piyadasa (1994), Mohamed Ali (2000), Muliyadi (2007), and Zakaria (2008) Timeline recognised aestheticism in portrait paintings through simple art appreciation. In addition, he stated that portraits are a treasure trove of meaning that is crucial for scholars, as the meaning itself explores social, political, and cultural themes that can help illuminate the era in which the portraits were painted.

Beginning in the Pre-Independence Period of Malaysian portraiture (1885–1959), Chinese and Indian immigration is explained by this historical fact. Andaya B.W. and Andaya L.Y. (1983) cite the economic crisis and the Taiping uprising in China as major factors in Chinese immigration to Malaysia (1850–1864). Indians were mostly migrants during economic crises due to the exclusivity of the high-rated "Kasta" position. A. Aziz Deraman (2003, p. 211) states that most Indian migrants to Malaysia come from "Kasta Sundra" (labourers). They have better prospects under the British colonial authority. O Don Peris painted a portrait of his wife wearing a bridal gown influenced by western tradition in 1933. The 1940s saw the emergence of increasingly prominent figures such as Yong Mun Seng, A.B. Ibrahim, and Katherine Sim. Artists like Mohamad Hoessein Enas and others started showing their work publicly in the 1950s, a full decade before the country attained independence.

In the 1940s, Malaysia witnessed the emergence of a new generation of artists interested in portraiture. People were familiar with names like A. B. Ibrahim and Yong Mun Sen in the early 1940s. People were aware of Cheong Soo Pieng in the mid-1940s, and by the end of the decade, Katherine Sim and Mohamad Hoessein Enas, who focused on capturing the daily lives of the local communities through portraiture, were well-known. His paintings often feature indigenous people and their cultural practices, such as individual daily activities, traditional dances, and ceremonies. By highlighting the unique cultural identity of these communities, Hoessein's work helps to raise awareness of the importance

of preserving and respecting local traditions. His portraits often depict individuals and groups from the Malay community, focusing on their customs, such as their occupations in daily routines.

Artistic portraits can be identified by the appearance of a portrait of a group of people engaged in a common activity. The activity had national cultural value. According to Hamid (1988), understanding a group or society is critical to understanding culture. According to Anwar Koentjaraningrat (2002), each culture can be distinguished from other societies through their respective cultural concepts, such as the society of the Malays themselves, who have a prior concept of culture derived from the notion of culture in the context of Western society (Rashid, 2005; Tamrin, 2001), while the concept of Malay culture is referred to as a custom that covers various aspects of life, whether in the political, economic, or social spheres. Since traditional times before Islam arrived in Malaya, the custom has been at the heart of Malay civilization. Taylor (1871), In its broad ethnographic sense, culture or civilization refers to the complex whole of habits acquired by man as a member of society. However, Attas (2001) and S. M. Naquib Al-Attas note, "culture is also driven by religion and becomes an umbrella for the culture that simultaneously shelters it. As a result, religion takes precedence over culture.

In contrast to Western culture, which prioritises materiality over non-materiality, the importance of development and balance has become the core of Islamic culture. The size of the material is physical, material, or scale, whereas the non-material is more spiritual and abstract. In Islamic culture, the purpose of life and the afterlife are more straightforward. It differs from Western culture, where life's purpose is undefined and ambiguous. Because religion creates culture, this combination differs from Western thinking and views. On the other hand, religion is not created by culture because it is a revelation from God to develop human faith.

According to Deraman (1987), there is a critical need to increase public understanding of culture's role in shaping and progressing nations. History has demonstrated and taught us that culture is essential to human civilization. It is because extraordinary cultural life will always be required for political, economic, and social progress. Social structures, art symbols, language and customs, ideas, and thoughts all contribute to the personality or image that serves as a nation's face. (Sabri, 1998). Creating emblems or material images in the form of physical infrastructure highlights the country's image and personality. Unity can be embedded through the spiritual aspect that originates in the culture. It can also help to raise the country's socio-economic and political standards by instilling pure, universal values that do not contradict Malaysian society's religion, culture, and norms. Similarly, Ali (2000), in Modern Malaysian Art: Manifestation of Malay Form and Content, describes local painters when the search for creative identity began to attract attention in the visual arts. This situation arose due to the National Cultural Congress held in Kuala Lumpur in 1971. He believed that visual art in Malaysia should be linked to different types of visual art and that artefacts, architecture, and other traditional arts should not be separated.

3.0 Methodology

The qualitative research method was chosen for this study, specifically the descriptive study. According to Kim Sefcik and Bradway (2017), descriptive research generates data that provides subjective insight into questions. Doyle et al. (2020) and Ritchie et al. (2013) support this statement by adding that the results are consistent with research based on the study's objectives and context. The information gathered came from a written and visual literature review related to this study. Nurul Syifa, Elis, Issarezal Ismail, and Ida are mentioned in this method (2022).

A review of literature from the National Art Gallery Permanent Collection between the 1940s -1950s. The selection of the work theme within this decade and the main focus in the categorization of themes is the artist's approach to painting the medium that segregates the categories according to time. Figure 1 shows this research's method.

Problem Statement

Literature Review

Portrait Painting Category

| Category Traditional | Category Application | Category Metaphor | Category Symbol |

Cultural Theme

Individual   Economic
Cultural   Social
Profession   Family
Relationship   Icon
Political

Figure 1: Research Method

4.0 Analysis

From the National Art Gallery collection, it was shown that Portrait painting emerged as a result of the western art movement and eastern influence following the independence period. Malaysian Portrait Painting's history was synchronized with Modern Malaysian art. The analysis in this research is based on categories of Malaysian portraiture. The study, according to categorization on portrait painting, is divided into four categories, namely:

I.   Pictorial representation –normally traditionally understood as the representation of images or portraits of individual characters or likenesses, usually known as the Traditional category.
II. Portrait Application portrait is generally not directly or specifically referring to a person and is only specifically purposely applied, such as depicting local cultural activities and cultural events.
III. Portrait representation of idea or concept or Metaphor (representation of a metaphor means subject or object as an idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.
IV. Portrait representation of symbols (specifically for religious uses in symbols)

Each category I, II, III, and IV is identified using the classification of themes, but not all cultural themes can be identified in every category.
Works from each subgenre of portrait painting that are organised thematically according to their subject matter. The following is a split into more specific categories of the themes that affect cultural identity.

Table 1: Local cultural identity theme

Theme	Description
Individual	A person identity
Economic	Involve any daily activity related to the source of employment income.
Cultural	It is a tradition that is passed down from generation to generation.
Social	Relating to society
Political	Relating to the government or public affairs of a country.
Profession	Occupation
Family	A group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit.
Relationship	How two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected.
Icon	A person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration

Table 2 shows the work counts for these paintings based on the years they were created.

Table 2: Work counts of portrait paintings between 1885-1959

	1885	1890	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940
Artwork	5	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953
Artwork	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	2	2	2	0	3
	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959							
Artwork	1	1	2	5	7	12							
Total	49												

Table 3 shows the Malaysian Portrait Painting Artis, approach, theme and medium based on Phase I-Before Independence Era 1890 -1959.

Table 3: List of Malaysian Portrait Panting Artists, Approached, Themes and Mediums

Artist	Year	Approach	Theme	Medium

	A. B. Ibrahim @ Ibrahim Abu Bakar				
1	*Potret Ibu Tua*	1940	Naturalism	Family	Watercolour
2	*Portrait Perempuan*	1950	Naturalism	individual	Watercolour
	Ahmad Hassan				
3	*Kasih Sayang*	1959	Naturalism	Relationship	Oil Paint
4	*Memujuk*	1957	Impressionism	Family	Oil Paint
5	*Batik Dyeing*	1958	Chinese & Realism	Economic	Oil Paint
	Chong Sing Kwai				
6	*Pekebun Getah Kecil*	1959	Impressionism	Economic	Oil Paint
	Cheong Soo Pieng				
7		1945	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
8	*Gadis Bali Dua Beradik*	1956	Fauvism	Family	Oil Paint
9	*Tropical Life*	1959	Chinese & Persian	Economic, Cultural, Social	Ink
	Dr Jolly Koh				
10	*Penjaja*	1959	Chinese & Persian	Economic	Ink
	Harun Haji Abu Bakar				
11	*Gendang Hari Kebesaran*	1959	Realism	Cultural, Social	Oil Paint
	Harold Speed				
12	*Sir Henry Gurney K. L. M. G.*	1953	Realism	Iconoclasm	Oil Paint
	Hussein Enas				
13	*Orang Tua Cina*	1950	Naturalism	Cultural	Pastel
14	*Self Portrait*	1954	Chinese & Realism	Individual	Oil Paint
15	*Minah*	1958	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
16	*Gadis Menumbuk Padi*	1959	Naturalism	Economic, Cultural, Social	Pastel
	George Giles				
17	*Che Ali*	1885	Impressionism		Watercolour
	Howard Barron				
18	*Potret H. N. Ridley*	1958	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
	Ismail Bukhary				
19	*Buka Pangung*	1956	Realism	Cultural	Oil Paint
20	*Puja Umur*	1958	Impressionism	Cultural	Oil Paint
	J. T. Thomson				
21	*Juru Ukur*	1848			

	Katherine Sim				
21	*Salmah*	1949	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
22	*Hang Tuah*	1953	Naturalism	Iconoclasm	Gouache
	Lee Joo For				
23	*Bahang Senja*	1959	Impressionism	Relationship	Watercolour
24	*Bertiga Di Tepi Laut*	1959	Impressionism	Relationship	Oil Paint
	Lim Mu Hue				
25	*Sekarang Dan Akan Datang*	1957	Batik	Social	Oil Paint
	Lim Yew Kuan				
26	*The Arrest (Penangkapan)*	1954	Impressionism	Individual	Oil Paint
	Lee Boon Wong				
27	*Pekerja-pekerja – Worker*	1955	Impressionism	Economic	Oil Paint
	Maria Graham				
28	*Ibrahim A Malay Monshee*	1810	Impressionism	Individual	Watercolour
	Mohd. Sallehuddin				
29	*Village Shopping*	1959	Realism	Economic, Cultural, Social	Oil Paint
	Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh				
30	*Puja Pantai*	1958	Naturalism	Cultural	Oil Paint
31	*Seni Melayu*	1959	Realism	Cultural, Social	Oil Paint
	O Don Peris				
32	*My Wife Wedding Dress*	1933	Naturalism	Individual	Watercolour
	Peter Harris				
33	*Tanjung Bidara*	1957	Expressionism	Cultural	Oil Paint
	Patrik Ng Kah				
34	*Self Portrait*	1958	Expressionism & Symbolism	Individual	Oil Paint
	Raden Basoeki Abdullah				
35	*Kanak-Kanak*	1958	Naturalism	Family	Oil Paint
	Reginald Lewis				
36	*Loke Yew*	1959	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
	Rev. Wipulasara				
37	*Raja Yang Baik Menyelamatkan Permaisuri*	1958	Surrealism	Iconoclasm	Watercolour
	Tsai Horng Chung				
38	*Self Portrait*	1951	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint

	Syed Ahmad Jamal				
39	*Mandi Laut*	1957	Expressionism	Cultural	Oil Paint
40	*Payong Biru*	1957	Expressionism & Symbolism	Social	Oil Paint
	William Samwell				
41	*Potret Raja Telubin Semasa Muda*	1890		Individual	
42	*Prospecting for gold & Diamonds Inn the Creek on the 'Landak'.*	1890		Individual	
	Yew Kuan				
43	*Self Portrait*	1951	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
	Yong Mun Sen				
44	*Self Portrait*	1941	Naturalism	Cultural	Watercolour
	Yong Poh Sang				
45	*Milking Time*	1959	Impressionism	Cultural & Social	Oil Paint

4.1 Result

Table 4 is the result of the categorization of portraiture.

Table 4: Category of Portrait Painting between 1940-1949

Category 1: Traditional (1940-1949)					
Painter	Year	Artwork Title	Approach	Theme	Medium
A. B. Ibrahim	1940	*Ibu Tua*	Naturalism	Individual	Watercolour
Yong Mun Seng	1941	*Self Portrait*	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
Katherine Sim	1949	*Salmah*	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
Hoessein Enas	1949	*Potret Frank Sullivan*	Naturalism	Individual	Oil Paint
Category 2: Application (1940-1949)					
Painter	Year	Artwork Title	Approach	Theme	Medium
Cheong Soo Pieng	1945	*Dua Wanita Di Tepi Pantai*	Chinese, Realism	Family	Oil Paint
Yong Mun Seng	1946	*Portrait*	Chinese, Realism	Individual	Oil Paint
Tsai Horng Chung	1948	*Bidayuh Lady*	Chinese, Realism	Individual	Oil Paint
Category 3: Concept of Idea or Metaphor (1885-1890)					
Painter	Year	Artwork Title	Approach	Theme	Medium
Nil	Nil	*Nil*	Nil	Nil	Nil
Category 4: Symbol (1940-1949)					
Painter	Year	Artwork Title	Approach	Theme	Medium
Nil	Nil	*Nil*	Nil	Nil	Nil

The table above that follows contains a count of the number of portrait paintings that were found to have been created during the 1940s. Seven pieces of artwork were obtained between the years 1940 and 1949. In this decade, Malaysia saw the emergence of a new generation of artists who were interested in creating portraiture

In the 1940s majority of portrait paintings which foreign artists were created from outside of the country, and only two were created by artists from the region. In the 1940s, Malaysia saw the emergence of a new generation of artists who were interested in creating portraiture.

During the early part of the 1940s, people were familiar with names like A. B. Ibrahim painted a portrait titled *Potret Ibu Tua* His paintings feature individuals dressed in traditional Malay *Baju Kurung Kedah* with floral motifs highlight the influence of Siam Patani (Sothern Thai) motif was value as the importance of preserving and promoting Malay cultural heritage and national history. Katherine Sim created a portrait of *Salmah* and a portrait of *Hang Tuah* in traditional costume. Those interested in regional art are usually concerned with the state of the economy and working to ensure their survival. The state of the country, which was in chaos due to the transition of Japanese power in Malaya (the Peninsula) (1941-1945), was difficult for many Chinese immigrants and the Malay community during this period. It demonstrates how the data collection's passive period, during which only seven artworks were discovered, influenced the development of Modern Art. There were only seven artworks in the collection at the time. During this time, the collection contained only seven different works of art. Medium oil paint became the choice for painters in this decade.
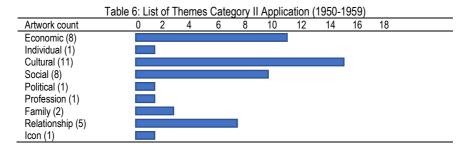
5.0 Discussion

5.1 Categorization of theme 1950-1959
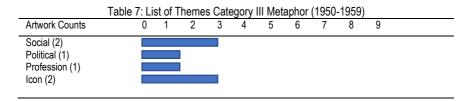The following table 5 shows the list of themes for category I 1950-1959

Table 5: List of Themes category1 Traditional 1950-1959

Artwork count	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Individual (8)									

This time-honoured category comprises a total of eight important works. Apart from the one Malay artist, Hoessein Enas, all of the works were produced by foreigners from other countries who travelled to Malaya. The theme for this decade portrays individual identity as their subject. This theme depicts the individual identity as their subject; three of them, such as Tsai Horng Chung, Yew Kuan, and Patrik Ng Kah Onn, painted self-portraits. In the year that aimed to encourage the preservation of national cultural heritage, the portrait painting *Minah*, created by Hoessein Enas, was designated as a national heritage piece. Medium: For seven artworks, the painter uses oil paint, and one uses oil pastel.

For the decade 1950–1959, for the traditional category, it was found that there were two works in 1957, one work in 1953, and one in 1954. No works became a collection from 1955 until 1958 (3 paintings) and one at the end of 1957. All the works in the traditional category use themes about individual identity. Oil paint is the most popular material. Of 7 works using this material, oil paint was 87.5%, and none using watercolour-Pastel 1 was 12.5%.

Table 6: List of Themes Category II Application (1950-1959)

Artwork count	0	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18
Economic (8)	▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬									
Individual (1)	▬									
Cultural (11)	▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬									
Social (8)	▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬									
Political (1)	▬									
Profession (1)	▬									
Family (2)	▬▬									
Relationship (5)	▬▬▬▬▬									
Icon (1)	▬									

Portrait application contents 38 of portrait painting consists of several breakdowns of themes related to cultural identity. Frankly, cultural works have dominated the whole theme. A total of 8 works, followed by social themes and relationships found in the Collection of the National Art Gallery.

Table 7: List of Themes Category III Metaphor (1950-1959)

Artwork Counts	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Social (2)	▬▬▬									
Political (1)	▬▬									
Profession (1)	▬▬									
Icon (2)	▬▬▬									

Category III Metaphor—There are not many works in the metaphor category, starting in 1953 with as many as 2, 1954 one, 1955 also one, and in 1957 there was also one work. The entire work consists of five works. They show the theme through a style that requires skill and observation. The theme for the metaphor category is more towards social activity, with three total works, followed by the individual with two and the socio-economic activity theme with only one work. Oil Paint 4 80%Watercolour 1 20%Pastel 0 -. Mixed Media 0 - Total overall 5.

When compared to the previous category, the number of works on the topic of cultural identity is significantly lower. Artists that work with the idea of metaphor typically avoid presenting the portrait image *directly* to the viewer of their work. Artists - At this time, painters started travelling to other countries to further their knowledge and applied the metaphor technique to their artistic practice. This generation of artists gave rise to a new wave of artists who were inspired to create more elusive and stylized paintings to continue

the tradition of expressive portraiture. These paintings' themes, approaches, and subjects reflected changes in Malaysian demographics, particularly the rise of the Malaysian middle class. The mainstream Malay Islamic accent in art production from the late 1970s gave rise to several themes, including culture and identity, which were also an indirect effect of this nuance.

Table 8: List of Themes Category IV Symbol (1950-1959)

No	Title	Painter	Year	Medium	Approach	Theme
-	-	-	NONE/ NIL	-	-	-

No work was produced to meet the category of symbol in portrait painting as well as the theme.

6.0 Conclusion

The clear and transparent portrait paintings serve to record events and local aboriginal people at the time. Their works document the situation and conditions at the time and place they were created. British colonization introduced their traditional painting to local people. Medium watercolour and oil paint are mediums used within this decade. Malaysian Portrait Painting's history was synchronized with Modern Malaysian art and emerged due to the western art movement. The local cultural identity was found before the independent era created by foreigners and expatriates.

Local Malaysian culture, Identity theme. In conclusion, Malaysian portrait painting is deeply influenced by local culture, and artists often use their work to promote and celebrate the cultural identity of their communities. Through the depiction of traditional attire, cultural practices, and everyday life, these artworks help preserve and promote Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage. A Malaysian portrait represents a person or group of people from Malaysia in the form of a painting, photograph, or other art forms. Ethnicity is an important aspect of Malaysian culture, and many portraits will depict the subject's ethnic identity. Some common ethnic groups in Malaysia include Malay, Chinese, and Indian, each with distinct cultural practices, traditions, and physical characteristics. A Malaysian portrait may also include elements of the subject's traditional clothing, jewellery, and other cultural symbols.

Suggestion for future research is to further research on the local cultural identity through fashion and jewellery that had influenced the living culture of the people that was seen continuously until this day.

Acknowledgement

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