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In Art Design & Cultural Heritage

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Empowering Local Mind  
In Art Design & Cultural Heritage

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## The Status Quo of Malaysian Printmaking

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**Abstrak**— In Malaysia, Printmaking is not a highly popular art discipline. It has failed to receive the attention that it rightly deserves and is mainly overshadowed by the more popular art disciplines such as painting and sculpture. This is due to the perception that printmaking is insignificant compared to other branches of art during the early development period of Malaysia contemporary art. This study was conducted to identify the key factors on why printmaking in Malaysia is not fully developed. There are two important aspects on printmaking in Malaysia will be covered in this research. As we know, printmaking came into process in the late 1950s and its development continued until the 1990s. The first aspect to be discussed is the background of the study that highlights the printmaking history since Independence, and the questions on whether the development of printmaking after the 1990s have further developed and progressed or on the contrary. There is evidence that show a number of paintings being discovered in an exhibition held in 1958. However, there is no sign of printmaking in Malaysia back then. The study is expected to assist and benefit the printmakers and the enthusiasts of printmaking as well as researchers in studying and finding effective solutions to help develop this discipline of art in the future.

**Author Keywords:** *Printmaking; not highly popular art discipline; printmaking effective solutions*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Printmaking was largely seen as a minor art form its interest restricted to special dealers and collectors. Normally, when we talk about printmaking, it is usually exhibited in the gallery with a limited size and the same style of presentation. Besides, only a certain group of people will come to see and appreciate this kind of art. In Malaysia, articles on the development of printmaking are not as readily available as to articles on painting. Similar to sculpture, printmaking did not receive much attention during the early developmental stage of Malaysian contemporary art; since the development of modern art history is usually viewed in perspective with the history of painting. This is compounded by the fact that printmaking was considered as insignificant especially by the painters during the early developmental stage of the Malaysian contemporary art. An apparent factor that hinders the development of printmaking is the high provision of cost. This particular branch of art requires equipment that can be quite expensive, especially when it comes to providing a workshop as well as various printmaking tools. Thus, unless they are really committed, many artists are initially discouraged by this factor.

According to Jailani Abu Hassan, there is vast potential in printmaking. However in Malaysia, the number of its enthusiasts is relatively small compared to those of painting and sculpture. This is due to a few significant factors such as facilities, discipline and public exposure. In terms of facilities, printmaking requires special equipment and methods. It is not sufficient to simply utilize linocuts. The artist must obtain specific tools as well as possessing the ability to operate them. Secondly, printmaking also requires strict discipline. Quite similar to sculpture, the process of printmaking involves certain methods of etching, woodcutting, and silk screening. In addition, printmaking is less popular compared to other art disciplines because of the notion that art prints possess no originality due to their printed and non-exclusive nature. These three factors are the impetuses that drive artists to shift from printmaking to other art disciplines that are more practical. Apart from these physical factors, printmaking is also crushed by the tendencies of audience and arts institutions that generally favour paintings - in terms of sponsorship, ownership, and the organizing of its activities and exhibitions. At the same time, public understanding of the ethics and concepts of printmaking is still at limitations. As definitions and differences of various fine art disciplines began to blur, the art of printmaking is also becoming detrimental. In addition, the emergence of digital art based on computer technology also challenges the influence of printmaking in Malaysia. Hence, the importance of printmaking is being disputed.

What is happening to printmaking in Malaysia? The most probable reason why printmaking does not progress further in Malaysia is because of its late emergence, i.e. in the 1950s as compared to painting which started to emerge since the 1900s (Keat, T.H., 1987). C.T. Beng 1974). Nowadays, there are more art students taking up printmaking to complement their art studies in colleges that provide its facilities. However, they tend to opt for painting soon after graduation and

avoid printmaking altogether. Long Thien Shih (1993) claimed that, *“A few factors contributed to the dawdling development of local printmaking. Firstly, the fact that the public perceive printmaking as something that should not be considered seriously as it is not thought as a completely aesthetic media and secondly is because the Malaysian public lacks the understanding of printmaking”*.

In regards to printmaking in Malaysia, Ponirin Amin is of the opinion that there are not many artists who are willing enough to practise printmaking. Those who deem printmaking as valuable will certainly continue to search, explore and to innovate printmaking. On the other hand, regardless of their dedication, the situation continues to be the same. As according to Ponirin Amin, *“very few know about it, very few are fond of it, very few understood it and very few nurtured it”* (Grafika, 1996).

Nonetheless, Jamil Mat Isa trusts that printmaking plays an important part in developing visual art in Malaysia. He stated that although the development of printmaking in Malaysia is slow, it has begun since the colonial era and is still growing in these days of digital technology. (The Rhythm of Art in Printmaking: Exhibition Catalogue Shah Alam Gallery, (2004) It is believed that printmaking does have its own history despite its deprived development. This conviction is based from the information obtained from the exhibition catalogue and from observing the movement of printmaking in Malaysia.

Further reference can be made to the Malaysian encyclopaedias whereby no statement is available on the matter of printmaking. Therefore, it can be said that despite all the difficulties, printmaking is still resiliently surviving in the Malaysian art scene. The questions to be asked is whether printmaking is able to continue its survival in Malaysia or not? And whether there is any future in its development?

Hence, the aim of this research is to examine the status quo of printmaking in Malaysia, the problems that it faces and the attempts to discover the reasons behind the setback and the poor progress in the development of Malaysian printmaking. However, the number of studies conducted on printmaking in Malaysia is still relatively small. Finally, by making an observation based on the history of Malaysian printmaking, will discover the development of printmaking as a whole and to be utilized for future research, especially when it comes to improving printmaking in Malaysia.

## 2. METHODS

To create a body of knowledge in this research, three basic steps were conducted, that is, by first identifying the broad problem area to be researched and secondly by conducting a preliminary data gathering through interviews and literature survey, as well as problem definition. In the identification process, the researcher made an observation to the problem area and collected preliminary data through unstructured and also structured interviews and the views of the scholars, academics and artists through literature review which thereafter lead

the research to the problem definition where the gap exists between actual and desired states. The research process was adapted with modification by Uma Sekaran (2003), *Research Methods for Business - A Skill Building Approach*, NJ., John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Flow chart 1. Research Process



The first stage which is the Observation stage; is when certain changes, behaviour, attitudes and feelings are surfacing in one's environment and in this research, in the printmaking in Malaysia. Thus, in this method, the researcher is required to be aware and sensitive to what is happening and have been happening in the printmaking in Malaysia. The second stage is the Preliminary Data Gathering stage where it involves the seeking of information in depth, of what is being observed. This research has been embarking in gathering information of what is happening in the printmaking in Malaysia and why it was done through unstructured interviews and also by distribution of questionnaires. Through these unstructured interviews, the researcher was able to get an idea or a 'feel' for what is transpiring in the situation. Additionally, literature review via library research and obtaining information through other sources will be able to facilitate in identifying how such issues can be tackled (Uma Sekaran, 2003, p. 30). The third stage is the Problem Definition or problem statement stage; is crucial as it is fruitful to define a problem as any situation where a gap exists between the actual and the desired ideal states (Uma Sekaran, 2003, p. 69) - as these problems will then become the focus of this research. Thus, the statement of the issue that is to be investigated must be clear and precise in order to seek the answer or solution. The fourth stage is the Theoretical Framework stage. This is done after the interviews and the literature review have been completed with a well-defined Problem Definition. The relationships among the few significant factors that have been identified as relevant to the problem and how a theory is made are founded on a conceptual framework. Therefore, this research will integrate the results obtained from the interviews and the views obtained from the various artists and

scholars, taking into consideration the boundaries and constraints governing the printmaking in Malaysia (Uma Sekaran, 2003, p. 87). The fifth and the sixth stage, in respect of the Generation of Objective, Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation will finally support the first until the fourth stage on which the entire research is based. Based on the overall result, it is believed further research need to be done in order to respond to the needs of the Malaysian printmaking.

To investigate the status quo of Malaysian Printmaking, a survey based on the research and opinions on the status quo of Malaysian printmaking respondents from the various field of study such as professional, art practise, lecturers and also art students was answer the questionnaire given from researcher. Based on the survey done, a majority of the respondents agreed that in Malaysia the lack of printmaking workshop, lack of support from relevant parties or authorities, printmaking is not a thoroughly aesthetic media compared to other art disciplines, printmaking is not a valuable discipline of art, perception that the students lack of interest towards printmaking, lack of the appreciation towards art prints, lack of printmaking facilities and equipment, the perception on the effect of high provision of cost in printmaking, perception on the possibility that Malaysian printmakers are not serious in creating art prints and also that painting are more favourable compared to art prints among the Malaysian public and art institutions as factors why printmaking in Malaysia is underdeveloped and the status quo cannot be avoided.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

To Improve and elevate the status quo of printmaking in Malaysia a few measures are proposed. Dialogues and forums as well as talks and seminars concerning the development of local printmaking have to be organized. It is possible to invite a representative from the Malaysian Ministry of Arts and Culture, local prominent and established printmakers, academicians, and perhaps the young and struggling generation of Malaysian printmakers – to discuss the direction of printmaking in Malaysia.

In addition, printmaking competitions can also be conducted at the national and international levels to observe and evaluate the skills and drills in producing art prints. Apart from that, tours and expositions on printmaking can be organized throughout Malaysia especially at the schools. Not only students can be introduced to this discipline, but for those who are already interested, they are able to better understand the importance and the functions as well as the potential of printmaking in shaping the civilization of Malaysian fine art.

Fostering the interest in printmaking at the school level is also an effort to develop printmaking. This is to promote and provide early exposures, especially to students. Organizing competitions at school level should also be encouraged, especially by the art educators in schools or higher learning institutions. The authorities such as the Ministry of Culture and Arts, National Art Gallery, as well as private galleries should also provide complete printmaking infrastructure and

facilities, to encourage and expose our local art-enthusiasts and printmakers on the techniques of printmaking. This is important for the growth and development of visual arts in Malaysia, in order to nurture the next generation that will continue this art in the future.

However, if the next generation of Malaysian visual artists are not interested in printmaking, then its art will cease to exist and the development of visual arts in Malaysia will also be affected. Thus, it is imperative that the authorities should establish an organization that consists of visual arts associations, with the help of financing from interested individuals as well as the Ministry of Information, Communications, and Culture. This is to ensure that the development of printmaking in our country will continue to grow in line with the development of other visual arts, such as paintings and sculpture.

To be more precise, facilities such as printmaking workshops should be provided at each state in Malaysia. As we know, to provide a complete printmaking workshop would be costly. In order to obtain the machines and tools for etching and lithography, one has to import them from abroad. For interested individuals especially the printmakers, this is almost impossible. Thus, to help provide the complete facilities for printmaking, all parties have to work hand-in-hand. In turn, printmaking has a shot at being known, favoured and appreciated by all, particularly artists.

According to Jailani Abu Hassan (Artist, April 19, 2011) *“Printmaking has a vast potential, but in Malaysia its devotees are relatively small compared to those of painting and sculpture. This is due to several factors. Among the significant ones for me are the facilities, discipline and public disclosure. In terms of facilities, if it is being done in earnest, one requires special printmaking equipment and learns its detailed techniques. It is not sufficient to use lino. The artist should have specific tools as well as the ability to operate them. Printmaking also requires strict discipline. Its processes follow particular methods of etching, woodblock printing and silkscreening, compared to those of painting and sculpture. In addition, the general public, including some art collectors perceive art prints as unoriginal because of their printed and non-exclusive nature. These three factors are the reasons why artists tend to switch to other practical disciplines.”* In his statement, he mentioned the use of workshops and complete facilities as well as the ability to operate the equipment. This shows that the discipline of printmaking requires patience, early exposure and a profound passion for a printmaker to continuously create. Due to these issues, all parties involved must work together to elevate the status quo of printmaking in our country.

Suzlee Ibrahim (April 20, 2011) state that *“the progress of printmaking in Malaysia is still relatively slow. Many factors contribute to the lack of interest among the printmakers and its enthusiasts. Lack of opportunity and space offered by galleries is one of the causes as well. The process of creating art prints which is time-consuming is also a problem in itself. From carving the block to getting them in print, can be tiring and takes a long time. From start to finish, the process is*

*often lengthy and one requires perseverance and superior technical skills.*

*“Several printmaking techniques require expensive machinery or equipment, such as those of etching and lithography. A printmaking studio must also be in order, neat and clean as a printmaker needs space to store the materials used to avoid them from getting damaged. In creating a print, several editions of it will be produced. This is a reason why some enthusiasts and art collectors are less interested in prints. They are not considered as a masterpiece as they can be produced over and over again. Therefore, the commercial and sale value of a print decrease as it is not considered as exclusive and unique, unlike a masterpiece which is always in demand. If produced in several editions, galleries are less interested because of the high possibility of an artist to display the same work at other galleries simultaneously. The only differences that distinguish these artworks are the numbers of edition. Art collectors also find it unbearable that these prints are not exclusively owned by them, the same works of art might also be owned by other collectors. These result in the decreased value of art prints compared to paintings or sculptures.”*

Based on Pelita Hati Gallery (April 19, 2011) observation, the buying and selling of artworks, the response towards art prints is relatively poor. Among the reasons are: *“Most of the artworks are not monoprints. They are available in several numbers. This makes the work in exclusive. Even though it is stated on the print for example: no. 5/20 (which means total available prints are only 20), the buyers are still not confident that there will only be 20 prints of the same work. Price plays an important role in developing and expanding the public interest. Although creating an art print is difficult, generally it is considered to be easily made and replicated.”* *“This is one of the perceptions and views that is very common. Our initial suggestion is to provide exposure in terms of printmaking demonstration in the form of a video. For example, a video on how Raja Shahrman completed his sculpture have been produced and many find it surprising that in order to create a sculpture, one has to go through a tricky and difficult process. On the other hand, attractive selling price might also interest possible buyers. Another issue is the material used for printing. Almost all art prints such as linocuts, etchings, lithographs and others are printed on paper. For novice collectors, this imposes a problem to them as they are not yet accustomed to caring and handling the prints. Furthermore, the weather in Malaysia also makes it difficult to preserve the artworks that are printed on paper.”*

Generally, local art galleries play a very important role. This is mainly because in order for them to advance, they need to support the development of printmaking in Malaysia. Looking at the development of printmaking in our country, this particular discipline of art is still considerably fragile. Again, this is due to the lack of local committed artists compared to the ones abroad. In particular, printmakers should also be consistent and active in creating and displaying their art. It is better for them to look for an ideal alternative to produce their prints; perhaps by combining traditional printmaking techniques with the latest technology such as offset,

flexography, gravure printing, digital print and others. The organization of annual printmaking exhibition by local printmakers can also boost the development of printmaking discipline in this country.

It is most apparent that few articles and texts are written concerning the discipline of printmaking. Without an exhibition, there would be no literature. Resource and information regarding the discipline are lacking and this leads to the difficulty in obtaining references especially among researchers. Thus, artists in general and printmakers in particular should contribute their ideas and writings to help develop and promote this art. At the same time, the general public is also able to learn more about the unique discipline of printmaking. Finally, where have the young generation of printmakers especially the graduates from UiTM gone? How far goes the involvement of the young trainers who specialize in printmaking? The exposure towards printmaking is critical as it leads towards a huge impact to art, especially in Malaysia.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Printmaking has not been a favourable discipline among the local enthusiasts as they believe that art prints are not exclusive and lack originality. Moreover, the process of printmaking also involves a variety of different methods and a competent printmaker has to well-versed in all of them. In addition, the emergence of digital art based on computer technology has also challenged the influence of printmaking in Malaysia. For these reasons, many of our local artists are discouraged and opt for other art disciplines instead.

When it comes to the current development of Malaysian printmaking, Juhari Said, Ilse Nor and Izan Tahir are three renowned printmakers that have been very consistent and dedicated advocates. Faced with many challenges and having to go through the ups and downs of this field, they have managed to survive and consistently produce art prints. Their efforts in upholding printmaking to international standards have not gone unnoticed and have been duly studied in this research.

The lack of exposure in regards of printmaking also contributes towards its poor progress. To promote this particular discipline of art, the process of printmaking can be demonstrated in the form of video and shown to the public; so that they are able to understand the delicacy and intricacy of producing art prints. Perhaps this can change the general notion that consider printmaking as simple and prints as reproducible. On the other hand, attractive selling price may also play a role in drawing possible buyers. Perhaps with more reasonable prices, art enthusiasts are more likely to invest in buying and collecting prints. For these reasons, local art galleries also play an enormous role in developing the printmaking in Malaysia.

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