



VOL. 05  
SEPTEMBER 2024

ART  
8  
INTEGRATED  
MEDIA

PART 2

**ARTe: Art & Expression**

Presents

# ART 8 INTEGRATED MEDIA

## PART II

Volume 5  
Published: September 2024

Published by:  
© Unit Penerbitan UiTM Perak

**eISSN 2805-5071**



Cawangan Perak



galeri  
al biruni



Art and Expression



PROGRAM SENI HALUS  
KOLEJ PENGAJIAN SENI KREATIF  
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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia

## Cataloguing in Publication Data

No eISSN: 2805-5071

Cover Design: Nur Muhammad Amin Hashim Amir  
Typesetting : Nur Muhammad Amin Hashim Amir<sup>1</sup>  
Mohd Nafis Saad<sup>2</sup>

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# THE MALAY WORLD VIEW ON THE SERIES LOK BY MALAYSIAN SCULPTOR RAJA SHAHRIMAN RAJA AZIDDIN

a chapter by

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introduced him to metal sculptures.

## Introduction

Raja Shahriman Raja Aziddin is a highly skilled Malaysian sculptor whose artwork is both technically meticulous and profoundly spiritual. Raja Shahriman has been acknowledged as an outstanding sculptor in the national visual art field, showcasing his great skill. He at present lives in Kuala Kangsar, Perak as a full-time sculptor, working from a workshop located in his home (Faizal, 2020).

Raja Shahriman is renowned for his unique metal sculptures. The sculpture's significance is intricately linked to the representation of Malay Islam, presented in a contemporary style that reflects the unique artistic tradition of Malaysia, characterised by incorporating elements of Malay culture into this particular artwork.

Three distinct phases can be identified in his sculptures: the early and late 1990s, which showcased the force of energy flow in pieces like Killing Tools (1994), Gerak Tempur 1 (1996), and Api, Bayang dan Kemenyan (1998). The decade from 2000 to the end of 2009 was one of change, exemplified by the series Semangat Besi (2001), Nafas (2004), Gerak Langkah (2006) and Rentak Abad ke 21 (2009). The Kemelut Zaman series (2012), Gembala (2014), and Lok (2019) are the most recent works from the decade of strengthening from 2010 to 2019 (Faizal, 2020, Idrina, 2020).

## Metal As The Foundational Material For The Creation Of Sculpture

Raja had always been fascinated by weapons since young. He studied fine arts in ITM and developed an interest in metalwork's when the course

The aesthetic features that are present in metal led to its selection as the main material of choice. He was enamoured with the look of metal and worked with it to create sculptures in addition to swords and daggers. Wood, on the other hand, has the opposite character, requiring shaping and hollowing down before it can be turned into a sculpture. He claims that bronze metal is both artistic and extremely fragile.

Furthermore, he finds the unique characteristics of discarded metal at junk yards to be fascinating. He claims that he can search for appropriate ferrous metal by walking up and down the junk pile for three to four hours every day. These pieces are highly pleasant and come in a variety of forms, including square, convex, spinning, circular, and curved. Moreover, he can reconfigure without cutting and wasting time.

## Artistic Style of Raja Shahriman Sculpture

Raja Shahriman was inspired by the dynamic and dramatic sculptural style of contemporary art that he saw throughout his academic pursuits. Subsequently, he merged his fascination with collecting kris. His works are widely appreciated globally due to their outstanding artistry and enticing designs. This is because he is among the selected few sculptors in the art industry that use metal as a medium. Raja Shahriman was awarded the Asia Pacific Golden Award for his outstanding skill in 1999.

His early pieces, like as the "Killing Tool" series, tended to be semi-figurative; later, they evolved into more realistic pieces that resembled the human body. He then ceased creation and returned to semi-abstract sculpture. According to Wong (1996), the artist's fascination with the component

of machine and scrap metal characters served as an inspiration for his creation of human limb bones. This creative fascination persisted to this day, pushing him to include figures in his works. Raja Shahriman claims that during his study of fine art, this was his favourite topic (Raja Shahriman, 2020).

His aesthetically pleasing method for sculpting a metal sculpture mainly concentrates on showcasing the anatomical attributes of the body, including the fingers, legs, hips, and skeletal structure while giving comparatively less prominence to the face. Some individuals see his works of art as including elements of fiction due to the characters' likeness to science fiction figures. Additionally, they consider his art style to be very sensual and sexual art form (Abdullah, 2016).

With regard to understanding the meaning associated to oneself, culture, and religion, the thoughts and influences began to evolve, changing his sculpting style to a semi-figurative shape. He began to developed the art of figuristic sculpture, which strays from the qualities of realism, as a result of his internal conflict and confused thoughts towards the creation of figures that are opposed to religion (Sarah, 2016).

His *Semangat Besi* and *Lok* collections are a great example of this deep introspection as Zainuddin (2018) stated Raja's style is unique and instantly recognizable. According to Abdullah (2020), renowned art collector Pakharudin Sulaiman defined Raja Shahriman's most recent works (the Lok Series) as an attempt to get past the controversy surrounding the creation of statues, which is forbidden by Islam. His style is a response to the prohibition of figurative sculptures in Islam. Interestingly, Raja Shahriman's sculpture art form connects Malay and Islamic aesthetics by using the western style of Torso. This circumstance resulted in western and local assimilation in his work. Some argue that his art features Surrealist elements.

According to Raja Shahriman (2020), the human body, or torso, has been a popular subject for sculptors in the West and Europe from antiquity to the present. However, from the perspective of

Malay artists, the use of the human body as the primary subject in sculpture is a response to God's greatest creation, which is man. The artwork he creates is therefore regarded as incorporating elements of eastern and western traditions.

This Lok Series is significant because it demonstrates Raja Shahriman's creative practice's comprehension of the "mystical process that accompanies the transformation of metal through blacksmithing" (Sarah, 2020).

### **Lok Series- Raja Shahriman Raja Aziddin**

Lok is one of the series of sculpture initiated by Raja Shahriman through the Lok exhibition held at the National Art Gallery in 2020. The term "Lok" refers to a weapon that is akin to a dagger and is derived from the words "kelok" or "liku" (Idarina, 2020). In the thirty years that he has been doing metal sculpture, the Lok exhibition is his ninth show. This exhibition showcases a selection of Lok sculptures that represent the use of artistic elements like as articulation, balance, orientation, ratio, and scale.

Lok's sculptures showcase his profound interest in the human figure and the dagger. These two components are integral to his artistic expression. The body's shape has resemblance to a sculpted torso, while the kris is a weapon-like artefact of Malay culture that signifies social standing and carries unique symbolic meaning.

He devoted all of his energy in Lok series, on dealing with the metal element in sculpting the body and dagger. Lok Series typically have 3 parts - a keris, a torso and a base. The keris is his main subject matter, and it can signify man or values. He works with different types of metals to create textures and composition. Over the Lok series, he has grown a different torso as a result of the discovery.

Every work I produced has its continuity, it relates from every little to another. As for the Lok Series I want to give an appreciation to the subject matter of my work. The figures and weapons have been my choices and favourite as the main focus and

subject of my work. Therefore, for the Lok Series, I want to portray the figure as the subject that is really focusing on the body torso (An Interview, Faizal with Raja Shahriman, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019).

Lok is based on the curved shape of the dagger as a representation of the hardships that individuals face in their daily lives and the obstacles that come in many shapes and sizes. The foundation keeps things together, while the torso represents our body as an avenue for our spirit and life (Faizal, 2020).

Lok's work includes 25 torso sculptures that are incorporated in designs in various positions. The work is significant because Raja Shahriman succeeded in portraying and interpreting the spiritual significance of Islam via the development of sculptural inspired by the keris. A human body shape is then shown, extending from the shoulders to the waist, with dagger blades imposed on its forehead (Abdullah, 2020).

This article focuses on a few of Lok's series of works, including Lok 3 Menjulang Kerawang and Lok Pohon 99, which is an overview of 24 Lok sculptures. This Lok series presents 13 keris blades with different types of lok that are related to the pillars of Islam and the Pillars of Faith and Ehsan (Charity).

### **Malay And Islamic World Manifestations In The Lok Series**

Malay worldviews are often influenced by a combination of cultural, religious, and historical factors. Islam plays a significant role in shaping the worldview of Malay communities, and it is common to find elements of Islamic teachings, values, and ethics in their literature and artistic expressions (Nur ain Nazurah & Mashitah, 2022). Raja Shahriman's migration to his hometown from Kuala Lumpur to Kuala Kangsar has led him to approach Islam. He who has become part of the village community in Kuala Kangsar has brought acquaintances and close relationships with his friends who live in his hometown (Author's interview with Raja Shahriman, on 18<sup>th</sup> Jan 2023).

They spend time together conversing and thinking

over issues related to religion and the soul. He was inspired by this circumstance to get more familiar with Islamic principles, which served as a guidance for him over his internal struggle.

Religion has a significant role in regulating the behaviour of an emotionally unstable individual that is always in conversation with its emotions. To him, there are many terrifying things in the human mind. The ability to rationalise and determine the best course of action in a variety of situations belongs to the thought process (Wong, 1996). As a result, the Malay Islamic perspective had an effect on him and applied to his sculpting, offering as a guide and inspiration for him.

Interestingly, he acquired knowledge of martial arts from his rural acquaintance, who happened to be a blacksmith. Furthermore, he gained the expertise in metal welding from senior blacksmiths, the most of whom have retired, while a few of them are still living.

The Islamic value of Malayness that developed as a result of the influences in his environment greatly inspired him and gave him the desire to further the Islamic truth, which forms the foundation of Malay culture. He acquired knowledge of Islam by active participation in religious classes and engaging in insightful discussions with religious figures. Furthermore, his close association with the art of sculpting motivated him to establish a connection between the spiritual realm of Islam and the act of carving. Hence, a sculpture was built to represent the profound spirituality of Malay Islam (Author's interview with Raja Shahriman, on 18<sup>th</sup> Jan 2023).

This can be associated with the 'Lok 99: Pohon Lok' series (Fig.1), which symbolizes the divine power by depicting an upright dagger at the top. The dagger represents the 99 monotheistic beliefs of Asma Al Husna, the one God, as well as the fundamental principles of Islam, Faith, and Ehsan (Charity), which are the pillars of the Muslim community (Faizal, 2020).

However, he asserts that in order to maintain this fundamental principle, it is inevitable that some individuals would collapse, since humans possess

various weaknesses and shortcomings despite their capacity to uphold the principles of Islam. He elucidates this concept via words of poetry as an introduction to the Lok Series in the following manner.

*Like a River the water flows  
Moving along the bends and curves  
Upstream to downstream it goes  
Flowing constantly, it rapidly moves  
Life is a test till end of line  
Be it easy or hard or bitter times  
Carved like the luk and curves so fine*

The second piece is titled 'Lok 3: Menjulang Kerawang.' (Fig. 2). Lok 3 Menjulang Kerawang explores the notion of *keawang-awangan*, which refers to elevated locations associated with monotheism and the adoration of God. King Shahriman encourages individuals to attain a state of monotheism inside their own selves, from a philosophical standpoint. Sidi Gazalba (1977) argues that all aspects of human existence should adhere to the idea of monotheism, including thoughts, actions, and the cultivation of heartfelt beliefs. The tenet of monotheism (La ilaha ill'Allah) in Islam does not differentiate between spiritual and material aspects of existence. Hence, art has significance due to being able to strengthen monotheism throughout the ummah, in order strengthening the truth of religion.



Figure 1: Lok 99: Pohon Lok (2019)  
(Sources: Lembaga Pembangunan Seni Visual Negara (2020))

Raja Shahriman's decision to include 'Kerawang' is suitable manner to associate with the concept of monotheistic. 'Kerawang' is a prominent theme in Malay art, serving as a symbol within the Malay community. The term 'Kerawang' refers to the intricate and delicate design of plants that are intentionally trained to wrap around and rise up.



Figure 2: *Lok 3: Menjulang Kerawang* (2017)  
(Sources: Lembaga Pembangunan Seni Visual Negara  
(2020))

## Conclusion

Raja Shahriman's Lok series is an outstanding and very significant contribution to the Malay and Islamic culture, as well as the realm of Contemporary Malaysian art. Siri Lok explores the iconography of Islamic and Malay ideas, which serves as the foundation for the development of contemporary Malay art.

The inner conflict encountered by the artists who undergo transformation into the Lok series is a clear expression of the Islamic influence that has shaped the Malay spirit, characterised by a strong inclination towards rationality, individuality, and internationalism.

This scenario demonstrates the integration of Islamic ideology with Malay culture in an innovative manner via artistic expression, resulting in the emergence of a distinct Malay art civilization in today's world, distinct from previous types of Malay Islamic civilization.

Raja Shahriman's entire collection of work emphasizes the socio-cultural contributions of his people. The interest he has in Malay culture indicates the profound philosophical nature of the Malay mindset and customs. While the western tradition often prioritises the human figure while creating sculptures, Raja Shahriman deviates from this norm by favouring the keris as a main subject and object of his artistic endeavours. Raja Shahriman states that his use of the keris as the main emphasis of his sculpture is not an indication of racism. Rather, the keris symbolizes a philosophy that interconnects the identity and dignity of the Malays.

The keris serves as a symbolic depiction of society and culture. The curved form of the keris symbolises the evolution of keris culture, adapting to the changing social and cultural landscape throughout the era of globalisation and its challenges. Therefore, Raja Shahriman's sculptures demonstrate his ethical and intellectual understanding of Malay culture, which faces many obstacles in its preservation.

Conclusion, Lok is a curved, crooked and twisted Malay weapon that symbolises life in a word full of

challenges, and the elasticity and flexibility that each being on earth needs to possess in order to reach their goals in life. Every person will need this flexibility on order to overcome the differing hardships in each individual's life, whether with ease or difficulty (Raja Shahriman, 2020).

Hence, Lok may be seen as a masterpiece that undergoes a transformation phase, using the Lok symbol engraved on a dagger's blade as a representation of evolving eras and a more demanding society.

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# ART & INTEGRATED MEDIA PART 2

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Art and Expression

eISSN 2805-5071

