UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

A FORMAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF PORTRAIT PAINTINGS IN THE MALAYSIAN NATIONAL ART GALLERY COLLECTION

ROSLIZA BINTI ABDUL RAHIM

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ABSTRACT

This research establishes a comprehensive understanding of Malaysian portrait painting by examining its historical evolution, aesthetic transitions, and conceptual foundations within the National Art Gallery (MNAG) Permanent Collection from 1885 to 2009. While modern Malaysian art has received substantial scholarly attention, a significant gap remains regarding local-centred interpretations, Islamic aesthetic perspectives, and rigorous inquiry into institutional archives. Adopting a qualitative historical art research approach, the study utilizes a three-stage design: foundational identification, chronological data collection across three historical eras, and multi-layered data analysis. The analytical framework integrates Ocvirk's formal analysis of organic unity, Panofsky's iconography and iconology, and Vasari's biographical model to connect visual form, symbolic content, and cultural context. Key findings reveal that Malaysian portraiture transitioned from colonial Western practices introduced before independence to a sophisticated medium reflecting national identity. The research identifies three critical eras: the Phase I - Early Phase (1885–1959), the After-Independence Era (1960–1989), and the Phase III - Pluralism Era (1990–2009). A pivotal shift occurred following the 1971 National Cultural Congress, which established principles emphasizing indigenous traditions and Islam as core components of national culture, encouraging artists to integrate Malay aesthetics, such as symbolism, fineness, and cultural motifs into their work. The study introduces a foundational categorical framework classifying Malaysian portraiture into four distinct groups: Traditional (C1) focusing on conventional representation; Application (C2) using portraits to emphasize patriotic values and national customs; Conceptual Ideas or Metaphors (C3) employing the portrait as a tool for symbolic communication; and Religious Symbols (C4) functioning as expressions of spirituality. Furthermore, the research addresses the theological tension between Islamic jurisprudence regarding the depiction of living beings and the spiritual philosophies of artists, repositioning portraiture for Malay-Muslim artists as a pedagogical tool intended to educate society through symbolic content. By highlighting the impact of pioneer artists like Hoessein Enas alongside later artists including Amron Omar, Hasnul Jamal, and Ahmad Fuad, the study traces a transition from two-dimensional illusionism toward interdisciplinary and digital practices. Ultimately, this study provides systematic documentation of Malaysian portraiture as a significant social and cultural artifact, offering an informed basis for government agencies to refine national creative policies and providing the MNAG with recommendations to improve collection management.

Keywords: Malaysian Portrait, Portrait Painting, National Art Gallery (MNAG), Formal and Contextual Analysis

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This thesis delves deeply into a comprehensive study entitled *A Formal and Contextual Analysis of the Portraiture in the Malaysian National Art Gallery Collection*. The study begins by defining the form and issues pertaining to the depiction of form or imagery which served as the inspiration for the aims and objectives of this research. This subject had inspired many local artists and had developed in various types of art, media and approaches. It had constantly adapted to the changing timeline and sensibility of each painter. Predicated upon some keywords, this research will explore the understanding of the topic before establishing a comprehensive foundation for Malaysian portrait paintings.

1.2 Background of Study

Portrait painting had originated in western culture and was introduced into Malaysia long before independence by foreign artists. It bloomed during the colonial era when British officers and artists, Chinese immigrants and other foreigners started to depict images using this genre. The western artists introduced their art styles, while Chinese artists introduced theirs, albeit with some western influences.

The study will examine the issues related to the development of Malaysian portrait painting, which was the kickstart for modern Malaysian art. Prior to this, Malaysian art was more of functional art.

1.3 A Brief on Malaysian Art

The field of visual art in Malaysia encompasses a diverse range of genres like painting, printmaking and sculpture; they are further divided into sub-genres like landscape painting, portrait painting and still-life painting. Local communities focus their painting exploration on portraiture, employing a variety of techniques like abstract, semi-abstract and symbolic presentations to portray patterns and imagery. According to