

The Contemporary Islamic Art in Malaysia: The Pskk Styles (1985-2009)

Sallehuddin Mohamed, Mumtaz Moktar, D'zul Haimi Md Zain

Faculty of Art & Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

mumtazmikaeil@gmail.com, dzul@uitm.edu.my

Abstract —The establishment of the National Islamic Calligraphy Art Association in 1985 also known as Persatuan Seni Khat Kebangsaan (PSKK) was to bring back the usage of the Islamic calligraphy and educate the general public the correct method of writing according to the order of the classical Islamic calligraphy. It also has contributed styles in contemporary of Islamic art in Malaysia. Four basic components of PSKK styles compose of idea, tools, form and content which are inter-related. The styles and content manifested by the PSKK artists were well received by the general public. It is undeniable to state that the PSKK's contributions to the development of Contemporary Islamic Art in Malaysia is of utmost importance. It reflects the identity of Malaysia forms and meaning in Islamic culture as a whole.

Keywords - Association; contemporary; Islamic art; calligraphy; styles.

1. Introduction

Initial readings on the literature of Islamic art in Malaysia, shows that there is a pattern or trends on the historical development of PSKK (*Persatuan Seni Khat Kebangsaan*) and their artworks. (In English, 'PSKK' means 'National Islamic Calligraphy Art Association') which was established in 1985. The researcher has identified some potential important familiarization of the methods used to measure the trend or pattern of Islamic art. Some possible explanations gathered from readings, observations, personal experiences and friendly contact with PSKK members. The researcher had adopted an exploratory method for data collection both primary and secondary. This method gave a better understanding of the subject and object of research. Systematic observation of contemporary Islamic art.

2. Literature Review

Most of the Islamic art researcher will include "The National Cultural Congress in 1971" to address some cultural problems or issues in the country. The basis of this congress is based on Islam and culture without neglecting other religion in the country. The resurgence of Islam was felt by local artists and the government. This, generated interest as most of the Muslims artists were delving in Islamic visual art activities in Malaysia. Thus, the Islamic art lovers and artists initiated the formation of an association. Therefore, in 1985, PSKK was established and the most dominant objectives of the PSKK (Undang-Undang Pertubuhan (Pindaan Tahun 2000), Persatuan Seni Khat Kebangsaan, p.2.) are: 1) to prioritize the art of calligraphy which has Islamic personality as core of the Islamic art, and 2) to preserve and develop Islamic Calligraphy as a national cultural heritage. The society had jointly- organized Islamic calligraphy art classes and workshops with the higher institutions and government agencies. In an article 'Art & Cosmology Exhibition', Zainol Abidin (1996) suggested Islamic calligraphy must be extensively explored and used in traditional art than in contemporary art. It seems natural by emphasizing on calligraphy would lead to emphasizing traditional art (Shariff., Art & Cosmology Exhibition (p.10)., 1996). Sulaiman Esa said that the driving force behind the rapid and dynamic growth of *Seni Khat* (Islamic calligraphy) in Malay traditional arts is an expression of this desire to achieve spiritual purification as well as creating a physical and psychological ambience where the signs of God and His omnipresence are manifested everywhere (Sulaiman Esa, 1993) Moreover, the Qur'an mentioned the significance of the script, in the verses 96:3-4, Allah is clarified as the Compassionate, the Merciful and "Who taught by the Pen." Traditionally, pen is an essential traditional tool in classical Islamic calligraphy. Nevertheless, there are many other tools and media are also used in contemporary Islamic art. The traditional tools and contemporary techniques developed the individual artistic creativity in contemporary art. The artists' work within the established frameworks of Islamic calligraphy and contemporary art.

3. Objectives

- a) To investigate the styles of PSKK in the context of Malaysian Contemporary Islamic Art.
- b) To establish the form and iconographical content of the works produced by the PSKK members.

4. Methodology

The researcher has identified some potential important qualitative methods and familiarization of the methods used to measure the trend or pattern. Some possible explanations gathered from readings, observations, personal experiences and friendly contact with PSKK members. The researcher had adopted an exploratory method for data collection: traditional, classical and modern. This method gave a better understanding of the subject and object of research of systematic observation of contemporary Islamic art as shown in Fig. 1. The artworks in form of traditional, classical and modern are used in the context of *Dzikr*, *Doa*, *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, Malay Literature and Abstract.

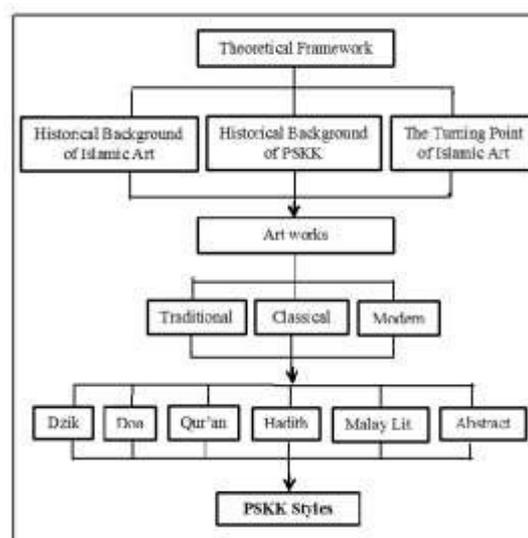


Fig. 1. Theoretical Framework

The traditional Islamic calligraphy styles had long been in existence with the pioneers before the establishment of PSKK in 1985. The pioneer members of PSKK are Middle East educated and possess Arab Islamic literature background and have a great influence on the styles. Among them are Mohammed Yusof Abu Bakar, Syed Mohthar Al- Shahab, Margelan Hj. Abd. Rahman (Margelan Harb), Idris Salam, Mahmood Awang and Omar Basaree. Their artworks are those of the classic style in terms of penmanship, craft and paintings. The pioneers are categorized as the first wave of the PSKK styles. They are among those who consistently introduce the traditional style of calligraphy. Their creative process started by writing the traditional calligraphy on a piece of paper before transferring to other media to form an artwork. This method was introduced in the PSKK classes along with other theoretical input about the traditional calligraphy. It is through theory and practice that the new members slowly assimilate the feeling of traditional writing and it is one of the PSKK styles.

Style is to do with the distinctive appearance of works of art. Specific features of a work can be individually seen or, more usually, in combination, so that altogether they are classified as a particular style (Whitham, 2003)

The second wave of PSKK style started in 1996, when both the pioneering groups together with the new members participated in the invitation show organized by the patron. The second wave members of PSKK are committed to learn the traditional Islamic calligraphy from the pioneers and international calligraphers in supporting the preservation of the Islamic calligraphy heritage as well as presented seminar papers, participated

in art exhibitions and seminars and cooperated with other members to achieve the objectives of the PSKK in Islamic art education activities. In this second wave, beside the pioneers, the artist/calligraphers comprises of Halias Abu Bakar, Muhammad Asrak Osman, Pie Ahmad, Nik Abd. Rahman Zaki Nik Abd Kadir, Zainurrahman Afandi, Aris Atan, Jainal Sakiban and others. They can be said as active artists and Islamic calligraphy educators (in Islamic calligraphy) who produced artworks, participated in art exhibitions and contributed ideas with the pioneers in developing PSKK. It is through wanting to achieve the objectives of the PSKK that brought about the style of PSKK.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE STYLES

There are two streams of movement in the in the usage of the calligraphy in contemporary Islamic art Malaysia as shown in Fig. 2. The first streamline is the calligraphy which followed the strict order of high quality traditional Islamic calligraphy (classical Islamic calligraphy) in their penmanship, craft and mixed media. The styles dominated by the members possess Arabic culture background from local religious schools or middle-east educated. The second (modern): 1) Contemporary Traditional and 2) the usage of Islamic calligraphy are manifested in the contemporary Islamic art which not necessarily following the strict order of the traditional calligraphy. The non-Arabic educated styles assimilated the Islamic calligraphy with modern techniques in contemporary art. Non-Arabic background artists are local national schools educated and western educated artists. These members with different education background share the intellectual knowledge and participated in art exhibitions. The traditional Islamic Calligraphy is the mixed of calligraphy and craft or calligraphy and painting. The PSKK's idea and style is more to the classical Islamic calligraphy which emphasizes the penmanship, mixed craft and painting. The calligraphy follow the order of the traditional Islamic calligraphy in form of painting or crafting. The artwork is crafted, designed and composed by using traditional pen on paper before transferring it to canvas, ceramic, copper wood or any flat surface for painting or crafting. The knowledge is traditionally handed down or custom from one generation to another. In terms of technique, the traditional Islamic calligraphy artwork used the traditional Islamic calligraphy pen or two pencils tied together to form a pen-like tool or marker pen shaped into traditional tool to construct calligraphy forms on paper or flat material such as canvas, wood, glass or ceramic. This technique is subjected to the artist choice and creativity in creating an artwork. As for the two- dimensional craft artworks (ceramic, wood, metal carving and canvas) are some materials commonly used. Modern Islamic art was absorbed in the second wave of PSKK ("Second Wave" means the period after 1994) shows the usage of Islamic calligraphy in the contemporary Islamic art. In 2003, an art exhibition "*Fomalisma Seni Khat dalam Seni Tampak Malaysia: Tema Keamanan dan Keharmonian Kehidupan*", was held at Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka organized by *Persatuan Seni Khat Kebangsaan (PSKK)*, National Art Gallery and Universiti Teknologi MARA on the 15th – 31st December 2003. This exhibition exhibited traditional Islamic calligraphy and the modern Islamic art. In this exhibition's catalogue D'zul Haimi Md Zain stated that:

"Gambaran abstrak yang asasnya dari alam jua adalah manifestasi penghayatan ke atas syahadah yang dilafazkan oleh pengkarya Islam. Akhirnya lahirlah corak- corak Islami yang berbagai rupa dan menyatakan kesejagatan makna dan penghayatan kepada Allah S.W.T. Pencipta sekalian alam."
(D'zul Haimi Md. Zain, 2003.)

Translations:

"An overview of abstracts essentially from the natural form is a manifestation of appreciation over the "Shahadah" utterances by Islamic artist. Finally, Islamic patterns that a variety of appearance and shape, colour and structure, in and the universality of meaning and appreciation to God the creator of all the worlds is existed. "

According to D'zul Haimi Md. Zain, the abstract images in Islamic art are basically from nature created by Allah. The proclamation of "*syahadah*" by the Muslim artists should also reflect in their works.

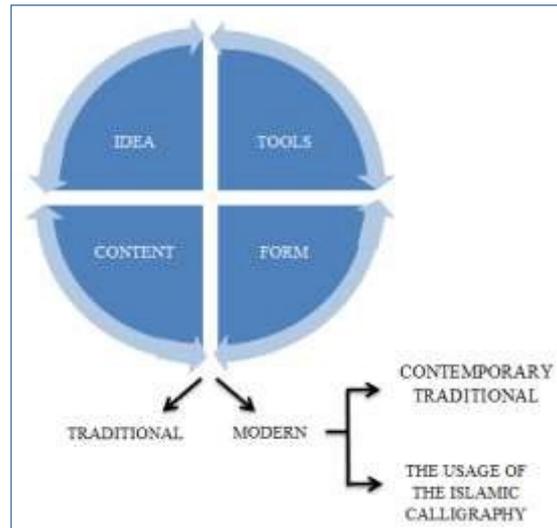


Fig. 2. PSKK Styles

6. The Findings: Pskk Styles

Hence, the Islamic design with multi shape and form, colour and structure emerged in the expression of meaning and appreciation of the Almighty Allah the creator of the universe. Some of the members explored the usage of Islamic calligraphy or spontaneous idea in imitating traditional calligraphy to form traditional and modern styles. Thus, the attributes of the styles are Idea, tools, form and content.

6.1 Idea

Idea is also a *fitrah* gifted by Allah S.W.T. to the calligrapher or artist. In abstract or semi-abstract works, the subject may be somewhat perceivable, the subject is the idea behind the form of the work, and it communicates with those who can read the language of form. Whether recognized or not, the subject (idea) is important only to the degree that the artist or calligrapher is motivated by it. According Nor Azlin Nor Azlin Hamidon, (2012). Phd. Thesis: Calligraphy in Contemporary Art of Malaysia. UiTM, Shah Alam.) the idea of the observer is observed from the form of artworks but the artists' or calligraphers' idea started from *tawhid* within themselves. Thus, subject (idea) is just a starting point; the way it is presented or formed to give it expression is the important consideration (Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone and Cayton, 2001). This can be seen in the style of PSKK where the subject matter is in the depiction of fauna, flora, landscape, atmosphere and calligraphy which stand on the concept of *tawhid*.

6.2 Tools

According to Ali Akbar, there are two main streams in Islamic calligraphy. The first stream is traditional Islamic calligraphy which follows the order of the classical Islamic calligraphy writing (Ali Akbar, 1995). He quoted that:

“Calligraphy is handwriting as an art. To some calligraphy will mean formal penmanship. Distinguished from writing only by its excellent quality” (Fairbank, 1949).

The tools are the gadgets used to shape form to describe the content and meaning on the flat surface material. Tools are important in shaping the form. The artists and the calligraphers undulated, stretched, bended, inclined, tendered in straight, broken, angular, or cursive design, decorated, and floriated into rosettes, geometrical or other patterns, making the writing and arabesque as beautiful as any other decoration (Dr. Isma'il Faruqi, 2005) by using the tools. But, not all the tools can be used to form Islamic art. The Islamic concept of *halal*, *haram*, *makruh* and *harus* are being considered in choosing the tools by the artists or calligraphers and it is the way of the PSKK style to follow Islamic rules. Therefore, tools or brushers made of non- slaughtered animal hair and pig hair or *non-halal* tools cannot be used in Islamic art. To have the broad line stroke in writing the calligraphy,

the members have a self-made pen. The significance of the tool is to create the forms to expose the meaning of the artworks. Precisely, tools are used to shape form.

6.3 Form

Stylization is the simplification of a form to emphasize its design quality (Majorie Elliot Bevin, 1984) Form means the organization or inventive arrangement of all the visual elements according to the principles that will develop unity in the artwork. In other words it means the total appearance or organization of the artwork (Ocvirk, 2001) According to Wucius Wong:

Form is everything that can be seen – everything with shape, size, colour, and texture that occupies space, marks position, and indicates direction. A created form can be based on reality – recognizable – or abstract – unrecognizable. A form might be created to convey a meaning or message, or it could be merely decorative. It might be simple or complex, harmonious or discordant. (Wucius Wong, 1988)

The term form is used in various ways when referring to art objects and subjects. When applied to paintings, form refers to the total organization or composition. Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) defined artistic style as ‘constant form - and sometimes the constant elements, qualities and expressions - in the art of an individual or a group’. (Anne D’Allena, 2006) The artists or calligraphers used forms to describe the content.

6.4 Content/Meaning

Some styles are individual and unique, while classical and traditional Islamic calligraphy have been adopted by generations of artists. Regardless of styles and time or place of its creation, modern Islamic art was produced because an artist has wanted to say something and has chosen a particular context and content to manifest it. Content is the substance of a work of art, including its emotional, intellectual, symbolic, thematic, and narrative connotations (Bevin, 1984.). The intellectual message of an artwork is its content, a statement, expression, or mood read into the work by the observer, ideally synchronized with the artist’s intentions. This is obviously self-limiting to have similar experiences. A much broader and, ultimately, more meaningful content are not utterly reliant on calligraphy but reinforced by combinations of forms and colours created by the artist.

7. CONCLUSION

The PSKK style in composes the idea, tools, form and content which are inter-related. Figure 3 shows the clockwise and the anti-clockwise movement in appreciating their works. The artist or calligrapher is in control of the choice of media; penmanship, craft or painting. Each media has a different tool. Tools are used to shape forms. Form is used to describe content. The content visualizes the artist’s or the calligrapher’s idea. On the other side, the anti- clockwise arrows show the artist or calligrapher has an idea to share the content. The content is described by form. Form is shaped by tools. Tools are used to compose the idea.

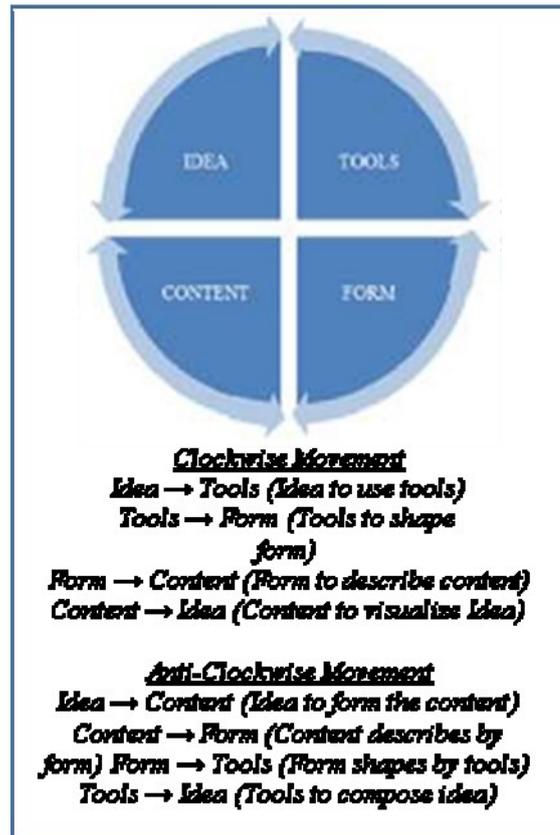


Fig. 3. The Attributes of the PSKK Styles

References

- Ali Akbar. (1995). Kaidah Menulis dan Karya- karya Master Kaligrafi Islam. (p.165). Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus.
- Anne D'Allena. (2006). How to Write Art History. (p. 66). Unted Kingdom: Laurence King Publishing.
- Bevlin, M. E. (1984.). Design Through Discovery. (p. 410). New York: CBS College Publishing.
- Dr. Isma'il Faruqi. (2005). Dr. Isma'il Faruqi, (2005). Islam. (p.95). Singapore:: The Muslim Converts Association of Singapore (Darul Arqam Singapore).
- Majorie Elliot Bevlin. (1984). Design Through Discovery. (p. 414) . New York: CBS College Publishing.
- Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone and Cayton. (2001). Arts Fundamentals Theory and Practice. (p.16). . New York: McGraw Hill.
- Ocvirk, S. W. (2001). Arts Fundamentals Theory and Practice. (p. 338). . New York: McGraw Hill.
- Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone and Cayton. (2001). Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone and Cayton. Arts Fundamentals Theory and Practice. (p.16). . New York: McGraw Hill
- Shariff., Z. A. (1996.). Art & Cosmology Exhibition (p.10). Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara.
- Sulaiman Esa. (1993, 5 Julai – 15 Ogos). The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art. The Manifestation of Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Balai Seni Lukis Negara.
- Wucius Wong. (1988). Principles of Two- Dimensional Form. (p. 2). New York: Wucius Wong. (1988). Principles of Two-Dimensional Form. (p. 2). New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.
- Zain, D. H. (15 – 31 Desember 2003.).
- Fomalisma Seni Khat dalam Seni Tampak Malaysia: Tema Keamanan dan Keharmonian Kehidupan. (p.9). Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Seni Khat Kebangsaan.

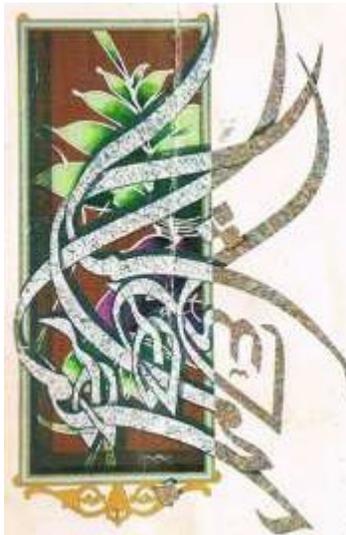
Appendix



Artist: Mohammed Yusof Hj Abu Bakar, Title: "LIDAH: Batu yang keras air pelekuknya, Hati yang keras lidah pelembutnya", Media: Acrylic,, Dimension: 89 x 93 cm. Year: 1412H / 1991



Artist: Syed Mohthar Al-Shahab, Title: Allah, Media: Mixed, Year: 1982



Artist: Abdul Wafaf Abdul Ghani, Title: *Al-Basmallah*., Media: Acrylic on board, Dimension: 39 x 29 cm., Year: 2004



Artist: Zainurrahman Afandi & Moonair Nazir, Title: *Keesaan tuhan kepelbagaian bentuk-Huruf Alif (Abstract)*,
Media: Acrylic on canvas, Dimension: 42 x 31 cm., Year: 2007