



## Image of Islamic Symbols: Modern Malaysian Islamic art exhibition theme

**Wan Samiati Andriana Wan Mohamad Daud\*, Mumtaz Mokhtar, Nik Syahida Sabri**

\*Corresponding Author

College of Creative Arts,  
Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

samiati@uitm.edu.my\*, mumtaz059h@uitm.edu.my, niksyahida@uitm.edu.my  
Tel \*: +60122750539

### Abstract

Symbols can be incorporated into many art forms, including sculpture, photography, and painting. The exhibition is an activity to display a piece of art in the form of goods, services, or achievements to the public. This paper aims to gather information on sculpture that representing Islamic images in Islamic exhibitions from 1957 to 1999. The observation method is used where the artworks have been considered and recorded accordingly, such as the artwork's title, dimension or size, media, and techniques used in producing the artwork. 13 artworks have been identified as artworks that can represent Islamic symbols.

Keywords: symbols, exhibition, Islamic art, theme.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9iS17.5422>

### 1.0 Introduction

Malaysian Islamic Visual Art constitutes a mosaic of cultural expressions, reflecting the diverse narratives and spiritual underpinnings inherent in Islamic heritage. The study aims to unearth the symbology embedded within these artworks, unveiling the intricate fusion of artistic vision with Islamic themes. By examining ninety-five curated pieces across various mediums, the research illuminates the resonance between Malaysian artistic creation and Islamic symbolism. The methodology adopted a comprehensive approach, integrating national policies, scholarly discourse, and firsthand exploration of exhibitions to distill key elements within these artworks. The subsequent analysis discerned thirteen exemplary pieces that encapsulate quintessential Islamic symbols.

The National Cultural Policy is considered significant in Malaysia as a developing country with a multi-ethnic population. This policy is a guideline for designing, creating, and maintaining national identity internationally. The nurtured culture will characterize the properties of the equation based on the boundaries of ethnicity and shows the national identity of Malaysia itself as an independent and dignified country.

From the context of art, the National Cultural Congress has had a significant impact, in which the appearance of Malaysian artworks after that started to show the story of sociocultural history and mythology of the country that is so deep and gives more focus on the Malaysian. This paper objective is to gather the Islamic images sculpture for the Islamic exhibition from 1957 to 1999..

The series, *Towards the Mystical Reality* (1972) or *Ke Arah Hakikat Mistik* is a collaboration between Sulaiman Esa and his friend Redza Piyadasa, which was held at Sudut Penulis at Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka in 1972. This work instigated debate among activists of art and literature. The exhibition affords an argument and a question about space, material, and time in the usefulness of daily objects and text as a mental experience. It suggests space, time, and transformation as new ideas in Malaysian art.

It was a reaction generated by the Cultural Congress, not only as a firm action in turning away from Western art theory but also as a manifestation of freeing the Malaysian artist from Western influences. They have assimilated Eastern and Western cultures in a new position, as scientific research from mental, meditative, and mystical views contained in Asian philosophies with the philosophical practice of Taoism and Zen.

Mohamad Ali Abdul Rahman (2000) has stated that there are three key principles outlined by the congress, which included Islam as the religion as a basis in the development of National culture, Malaysian culture must be based on the culture of the indigenous people in the region and other elements from the cultures that are reasonable and in line with the above can be accepted as part of National culture.

Muliyadi Mahamood (2001), stated that Islamic art in Malaysia was initiated by two important factors; in which the first factor was the National Cultural Congress that was set by the National Cultural Policy (*Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*) in 1971. The second factor was the global Islamic revival.

Islamic art has put an emphasis on floral motifs, patterns, and non-object-related art. A decorative writing style is sometimes used within these pictures showing elaborate Arabic letters or words. Shapes such as squares, triangles, oblongs, and circles are also used as an alternative to living beings to create an abstract and geometric pattern. However, Sulaiman Esa (1992) has pointed out that according to many critics, the weakness of some artworks containing Islamic elements is due to the lack of a strong philosophy on principles of philosophy and metaphysics, which form the foundation of Islamic artwork. He raised the question of whether the Islamic approach only focused on images and elements describing Islam, like mosques, calligraphy, and motifs. In truth, awareness of beauty is a significant factor in Islam. Among the other important ingredients in the art are fact, originality, purity, honesty, and all of these have been established in the psyche of Muslims. Art has become the substance that ties the creator's soul with another soul, the appreciator or observer.

## 2.0 Literature Review

In the process leading to the creation of artwork, the artist takes many different steps to determine the approach of the idea. All approaches are made to collect information data that is expected to support the process of understanding or enlightenment. In short, the pattern of thinking activity of the human mind is an element of information received by the senses that later are processed and leads to an interpretation of individuals. Art, by Suzanne K. Langer (1957), is a symbolic form of human feeling who faces a transformation from a universal experience and not just from a specific experience.

A symbol image is a powerful tool for the artist. An artist can take various images and merge them into one scene as desired. Artworks that incorporate symbols often aim at attracting a viewer to any exhibition platform.

An exhibition is an organized presentation and display of a selection of items. Exhibitions have a main function as a communication platform between art creators and observers of art. Exhibition activity is a vehicle to develop society's appreciation and take action against art. Exhibitions range from extraordinarily large events to small one-artist solo shows or a display of just one item. Curators are sometimes involved as the people who select the items or theme of an exhibition. Writers and editors are sometimes needed to write the text, labels, and accompanying printed materials such as catalogues and books.

Art exhibitions may focus on one artist, group, genre, theme, or collection, or may be organized by curators, selected by juries, or show any artwork submitted. Art exhibition can be defined as the activities performed by the artist to disseminate ideas through the medium of art.

One of the articles documented in the catalogue of an exhibition titled *Manifestasi Jiwa Islam dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman*, written by Muliyadi Mahamood (1993), states that Ismail Zain loudly criticized and questioned the understanding of local artists who glorify the Western idiom and ideology. Ismail also questioned the values of modern art and suggested they should be reviewed as, for him, modern art promotes a sense of individuality, anti-socialness, and the concept of 'art for art'.

The traditional visual arts were claimed to consist of elements, which combined the original local tradition or practice, such as animism and others, which are considered to have been outside the rule of Islamic law. This tradition then spread into the local arts. The same thing happened when modern art began to be accepted by local artists. Even though Islam is the main ideology of belief in terms of religion and life, other ideologies or other thoughts sometimes not aligned with the will of Islam may be the core finding highlighted by many local artists.

Islam has its own philosophy. The main concern is faith, without neglecting the role of ethics and law in producing art. Though aesthetics and beauty are accepted as a natural passion of man, the 'truth' is the basic element, therefore, Islamic art must include the values of beauty (al-Jamal) and truth (al-Haqq) at the same time. Islamic artists should support Islamic philosophy, and art must be upheld for the sake of Allah and mankind and not art for art. The philosophy of art for art does not bring benefit to mankind, even to religion.

According to Mohamed Anwar Omar Din, Islamic art differs from the art of other religions and beliefs, including Western secular art. As a matter of fact, it is also different from Eastern art. Islamic art takes into account several things in the process of producing an artwork, such as intention, method or way used in creating, materials, motive, appreciation, behaviour, guidance, practices, interpretation, image, messages and goals, philosophy, thought and theory, which is something unfamiliar in the modern Western world.

In addition, says Dzul Haimi Md. Zain (2008), when the former recommended that Islamic art is formed from two words which are "Islam" and "Art", defines Islamic art as an art or art object developed or launched by a Muslim.

Nevertheless, according to Zakaria Ali (2013), in his writings on Islamic impressions in Malaysian contemporary art exhibitions, most of the existing Islamic art artists are already well-known and established. He also added that Malaysians have been influenced by western culture, which has been introduced and developed through technology and education. Living in the modern world with many constraints, including time, finance, and space, has meant that many Malaysian Muslims have slowly forgotten Malaysian art and Islamic culture or Islamic art.

Osman Bakar (1995) mentioned that Islamic art is actually referring to the manifestation of Islam. When we speak about the manifestation of Islam in art, it actually refers to Islamic art. Islamic art is a continuation of the art of an early age that produced and projected the concept of the Unity of God (Tawhid) which is Allah S.W.T.

In short, any kind of art can be regarded as Islamic art as long as its 'content' and 'form' align with Islam's views and teachings. Also, these artworks must be created by a Muslim, and a Muslim artist should base and refer to both Al-Quran and Al-Hadith in their attempt to prepare the artwork.

### 3.0 Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative research framework, this study employed an extensive data collection methodology encompassing academic literature, exhibition catalogues, and digital repositories. A deliberate selection process identified ninety-five artworks exclusively aligned with Islamic themes by Muslim artists. These artworks underwent meticulous documentation, cataloging critical details encompassing artist identity, exhibition particulars, thematic categorization, title, dimensions, media employed, and artistic techniques. Subsequently, a rigorous analysis unfolded across seven thematic dimensions, elucidating the symbolic essence within each piece.

The historical findings in the development of Malaysian Islamic art from 1957 to 1999. As 95 artworks have been identified in this study, which consisting of paintings, prints, sculptures, and mixed media such as montages, assemblages, digital prints, textile work, and two-dimensional constructions exhibited in Islamic art exhibitions held in Malaysia from the years 1957 to 1999. This artworks are put under 7 categories images with images of abstract, calligraphic, culture, cosmos or nature, expression, symbol, and humanity.

An analytical observation was used to reveal the content of the work. Images of the artists artworks were collected from exhibition catalogues sold at the National Art Gallery, in private galleries, and in bookstores. It is important to note that these works are chosen from among those created by Muslim artists in Malaysia who showed only themes of Islamic art. These artworks' primary roots are drawn from the exhibition catalogues and records.

Five (5) main exhibitions have been taken as the sample in this research, including *Pameran seni Lukis & Seni Khat* (1984), *Identiti Islam dalam Seni Rupa Malaysia: Pencapaian dan Cabaran* (1992), *Manifestasi Jiwa Islam dalam Seni Rupa Malaysia* (1993), *Art and Spirituality* (1995) and *Kesenian Islam: Suatu Perspektif Malaysia* (1995). They all carry the same theme, which is the Islamic theme.





### 4.0 Findings

Analyzing a work of art is, in fact, a practice of criticizing or assessing a work of art. In an art critique, artistic taste is indeed relative. Certain characteristics of an artwork can be assessed as a means of measuring the artist's success in conveying the intended message or meaning of the artwork.

A work of art takes a long look and uses the elements and principles of art as a guideline. Many works of art convey more subtle messages, filled with layers of sense. Some artworks are intentionally subjective, which means that artists expect us to infuse meaning into the work from our own experiences; subjective artworks are often mirrors of the person who looks at them. The content also deals with the study of the object of the work and its significance or message. Symbolism or iconography is viewed within the context of contemporary culture (the particular time and place in which it was created) and the individual artist.

A symbol is an object that represents, represents, or suggests an idea, a visual image, a conviction, an act, or a physical entity. In art, a symbol is generally something solid and recognizable, like an animal, a plant, or an object. A symbol or emblem serves as a display of other things. The symbol within the symbol does not have the same purpose. It has the meaning or intent of the shape origin or a deeper meaning. For example, red no longer means blood but may symbolize bravery, agility, and anger.

Table 4.1: List of Symbol artwork images, the media, year of production, and dimension.

| No | Exhibition / Year   | Artist              | Titles                         | Media            | Year | Dimension             | Artwork   |
|----|---|---------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|------|-----------------------|---|
| 1  | Pameran Seni Lukis & Seni Khat<br>1984                                  | Syed Ahmad Jamal    | 'Jambatan Emas/Jambatan Perak' | Songket          | 1979 | 203cm X 106cm         |  |
| 2  | Identiti Islam dalam Seni Rupa Malaysia: Pencapaian dan Cabaran<br>1992 | Ariffin Mohd Ismail | Kelantan Indah                 | Wood             | 1990 | 38cm X 38cm X 26cm    |  |
|    |   | Ramlan Abdullah     | Mediation / Discussion         | Mix / Wood       | 1991 | 250cm X 250cm X 120cm |  |
| 3  | Manifestasi Jiwa Islam dalam Seni Rupa Malaysia                         | Wan Ahmad Mohamed   | 'Siri Khat No.1'               | Crested Wood Sea | 1991 | 60cm X 60cm X 13cm    |  |

|   |  |      |                              |                               |                            |      |                       |   |
|---|--|------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|------|-----------------------|---|
|   |  | 1993 | Mat Anuar Ismail             | 'Kentung Kentung'             | Wood                       | 1993 | 102cm X 102cm X 210cm |    |
|   |  |      | Ismail Zain                  | There Was This Garden         | Acrylic                    | 1993 | 120cm X 140cm         |    |
| 4 | Art and Spirituality 1995                      |      | Ariffin Ismail               | Circle of Time                | Stainless Steel            | 1993 | 610cm X 488cm         |    |
|   |  |      | Ramlan Abdullah              | Green Monumenta IV            | Glass, Metal and Oil Paint | 1995 | 155cm X 32cm X 33cm   |    |
|   |  |      | Awang Damit Ahmad            | 'Dari Fajar ke Maghrib'       | Mix Media                  | 1995 | 183cm X 153cm         |    |
|   |  |      | Romli Mahmud                 | Tasbih from the Sea           | Mix Media                  | 1995 | 137.5cm X 142.5cm     |    |
|   |  |      | Raja Zahabuddin              | 'Warna Suasana Harmoni'       | Photo montage              | 1995 | 95.5cm X 75.5cm       |   |
|   |  |      | Rizlan Ismail                | Pintu Gerbang                 | Yarn and dye               | 1995 | 230cm X 86cm          |  |
| 5 | Kesenian Islam: Suatu Perspektif Malaysia 1995 |      | Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin | Talisman Series: Protector VI | Mix Media                  | 1995 | 170cm X 145cm         |  |

Table 4.1 shows 13 symbol artworks in cooperation with Islamic Art by the media, year of production, and dimension. Artworks such as Kelantan Indah by Ariffin Mohd Ismail, 'Mediation/Discussion' by Ramlan Abdullah, Siri Khat No.1 by Wan Ahmad Mohamed, Kentung Kentung by Mat Anuar Ismail, 'Circle of Time' by Ariffin Ismail, 'Green Monumenta IV' by Ramlan Abdullah, Pintu Gerbang by Rizlan Ismail, 'Talisman Series: Protector VI' by Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin, can be looked as installation art. Installation art is an art form that changes the perception of visual space. Art installation refers to artists in a particular time, space, and environment. In short, an art installation is public emotional material integrated with performance art. Above all, installation art is a place to make the audience experience three-dimensional "natural surroundings" this "natural" state refers to both inner and outer environments, but mostly inside buildings. Installation art artists create their work according to the particular location inside and outside the exhibition location or distinctive space to form a creation of art as a whole.

Artworks like 'There Was This Garden' by Ismail Zain, Dari Fajar ke Maghrib by Awang Damit Ahmad, and 'Tasbih' from the Sea' by Romli Mahmud, can be considered representational paintings. Representational art includes all imagery, which presents an identifiable object or series of objects. Representational art is important first because it supplies a criterion by which artistic merit can be evaluated. Representational art describes reality's physical, visual aspect, also called objective art and figurative artwork.

Warna Suasana Harmoni by Raja Zahabuddin is a photography artwork. Image photography can also represent the truth and reality compared with words (text). In daily life, this will result in the development of technology, society, and culture being passed down from one generation to another. The photographic image also acts to communicate meaning. It has a much deeper meaning and can be understood regardless of differences. Many people are fond of using the word to say a picture is worth a thousand words. Image photography has the role of preserving cultural and social-cultural elements with documentation. Photographic images could influence the feelings of people who view them, as well as is capable.

In appearance, three forms, namely images, a symbol, and a sign, are important characteristics for an artist in the creation of his image producing a work of art. The existence of this is founded on the ability to create, to organize imagination, as well as emotional and intellectual experiences. No doubt, things that are asserted in the field of the production of visual art are creative activities involving objects that can be touched, seen, and imagined to encourage the development of perception and intuition. To encourage an understanding of the real and the abstract in art, philosophy can be adjusted, and the culture of interest in the visual arts can be

developed. The history and appreciation of the visual arts focus on the experience of art in daily life and in national culture. Comparison with art and culture from outside are also encouraged to expose the balance the exposure in the field of the visual arts to recognize the visual arts in the cultural evolution of nationalities.

## 5.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

Art exhibitions stress the aspects of appreciation, interpretation, evaluation, context, experience, knowledge, recognition, and the public's response. In some works of art that have been analyzed, their identities remain unclear as to whether they are works of Islamic art, even though the exhibition's theme was Islamic. Artwork means something and requires interpretation. However, the evaluator must be wise in making the decision because of the statement above - rather than say that the artwork was produced by Muslims, it is the work of Islam. Art is a matter of values, where the values are the fundamental issues found in the field of ethics (good), truth (logic), and aesthetics (beauty), along with justice, happiness, and joy. At the same time, it is concerned with objectiveness and subjectivism concerning the particular cultural, contextual, and universal essence.

In the future, more studies may focus on the impact of Islamic art on the development and influence of spiritual elements in Malaysian visual arts. Strictly, to label artwork as Islamic art, it means that every individual facet of the production, bulging from the idea, the process, until the final product, must be followed so as not to go against Islamic theology, laws and rules. Most artists have adopted the approach of experience, where there is something never experienced or events that have passed through a certain period. In this case, an experience has a beginning and end but can create a unified whole. An experience has a great role in forming its character and paradigm, as well as in its action and appreciating works of art. In this case, there is a wise saying that states experience is the best teacher. However, it is hoped that through visual arts, generations of Malaysians will be literate in culture, have high aesthetic values, critical, creative, imaginative, innovative, and inventive, as well as explore thought, exploration, and design in a wide range of visual arts to allow the development of ideas and self-expression.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, Malaysia, for the funding, and support for the writing workshop and ReNeU UiTM, for the publication incentive provided through Program MEE 3.0.

## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The analysis of the ninety-five artworks revealed a nuanced spectrum of Islamic symbolism, encapsulating abstract, calligraphic, cultural, cosmic/natural, expressive, symbolic, and humanistic representations. Thirteen artworks emerged as emblematic in encapsulating profound Islamic symbols, exhibiting a convergence of artistic prowess and spiritual resonance. This study serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of Malaysian Islamic Visual Art, uncovering the intricate tapestry of symbolic elements woven into these artistic expressions. The identified thirteen artworks stand as exemplars, portraying the synthesis of artistic ingenuity with profound Islamic symbolism. Such revelations not only enrich the discourse on Islamic art but also underscore the cultural significance and depth of Malaysian artistic heritage.

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