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Reconstructing Bouguereau in Indonesia: Technical deconstruction through reconstructive practice in cross-cultural art education

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Abstract
This practice-based research explores the reconstruction of Bouguereau's academic painting technique (*Head of a Young Girl*, 1898) within Indonesian studio conditions. Rather than replication, reconstruction serves as technical deconstruction, exposing cultural assumptions embedded within supposedly universal artistic methods. Through systematic documentation of material adaptations, environmental modifications, and anatomical translations required for Indonesian contexts, this research reveals how artistic knowledge transforms through cross-cultural transmission. Conducted in Yogyakarta's hybrid art education system, the research findings contribute to cross-cultural art education and the theoretical understanding of how artistic techniques function as culturally situated knowledge systems rather than neutral technical skills.

Keywords: Practice-based research; reconstruction; deconstruction; pedagogy

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1.0 Introduction

The transmission of artistic knowledge across cultural and temporal boundaries involves fundamentally more than replication. It requires processes of translation, adaptation, and epistemological reconfiguration that transform the very nature of knowledge itself. The pedagogical tradition of learning from "old masters", a cornerstone of Western academic art education rooted in École des Beaux-Arts methodology (Carlhian, 1979), continues to shape global studio practices through techniques such as grisaille underpainting, glazing, and sfumato modelling. However, when these methods encounter non-Western contexts, they do not transfer neutrally but interact dynamically with local histories, climates, materials, and pedagogies, generating hybrid knowledge forms that challenge assumptions about the universality of artistic technique.

This study examines how reconstructing William Adolphe Bouguereau's academic techniques, specifically through *'Head of a Young Girl'* (1898), functions as a technical deconstruction through reconstructive practice, revealing the cultural embeddedness of supposedly neutral artistic methods. Bouguereau's work (see Fig. 1), characterised by anatomical precision, layered luminosity, glazing technique, and idealised beauty, represents the technical pinnacle of 19th-century academic painting, making it an optimal case study for analysing how European techniques perform under Indonesian studio conditions (Bouguereau et al., 1984).

Yogyakarta's unique position as Indonesia's cultural capital provides crucial legitimacy for this investigation. Since the 1950s, the city has developed distinct art education infrastructures that blend formal academic training (ASRI, now FSRD ISI Yogyakarta) with

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traditional *sanggar* (artist community) systems emphasising communal learning, material improvisation, and socio-cultural responsiveness (Burhan, 2008, pp. 24–25; Spanjaard, 2018, pp. 30–32). This dual educational heritage, formal European-influenced curricula alongside indigenous collective learning traditions, positions Yogyakarta practitioners as active cultural translators rather than passive recipients of Western artistic knowledge.

Fig. 1: William Adolphe Bouguereau's academic techniques, specifically through 'Head of a Young Girl' (1898)
(Source: www.artchive.com)

This research addresses critical questions: How do Yogyakarta's material and environmental conditions expose the cultural specificity embedded within European academic techniques? What new pedagogical knowledge emerges when systematic

reconstruction becomes a tool for cultural analysis? By positioning reconstruction as an analytical methodology rather than reverent copying, this study demonstrates how cross-cultural technical translation generates genuinely new epistemological insights about both historical methods and contemporary art education possibilities. This study aim t**o explore** cross-cultural artistic knowledge production through the systematic reconstruction of Bouguereau's academic techniques in Yogyakarta's hybrid art education context.

2.0 Literature Review

Quaife (2024) advocates for "oscillating pedagogy", which moves between diverse approaches rather than prioritising a single method. His critique of contemporary tutorial systems' over-reliance on oral-dialogical modes supports the need for diverse pedagogical approaches that include direct encounters with material and various modes of engaging theory and practice together. This framework provides crucial support for reconstruction-based learning that prioritises embodied knowledge production over purely discursive analysis. Susanto (2024) shows that curating landscape paintings can reshape environmental awareness and cultural perception through exhibition framing. This parallels “Reconstructing Bouguereau in Indonesia”, where deconstructing and reinterpreting Western painting techniques becomes a pedagogical act, using reframing as a method to build critical cross-cultural art understanding.

Murwanti's (2017) comprehensive analysis of practice-based research in Indonesia reveals both opportunities and limitations within current academic contexts. Critical weaknesses in Indonesian academic art practice include over-reliance on social science methodologies and instrumental approaches where practice merely serves predetermined theoretical frameworks. The Finnish tradition of practice-based research, as documented by Mäkelä and Nimkulrat (2018), offers critical methodological insights through its emphasis on documentation as conscious and in-action reflection, providing a more nuanced framework than the simple adoption of European techniques within Indonesian contexts. However, their case studies reveal persistent challenges; even ostensibly decolonial practice-based research often reproduces Western academic structures. To avoid falling into what they term "documentation of making" rather than documentation for making, this study treats technique as both an object of research and a tool for cultural investigation, a process of technical deconstruction through reconstructive practice. Wang's (2024) analysis of cross-cultural art provides crucial theoretical grounding through concepts of hybrid aesthetics and bridging narratives, offering alternatives to current models that rely on a European foundation and Indonesian adaptation. Wang's concept of symbolism and universality suggests that symbols gain meaning through cultural dialogue rather than inherent properties, indicating that Bouguereau's techniques contain no universal elements; they become meaningful through cross-cultural engagement.

Carlyle's HART (Historically Accurate Reconstruction Techniques) (2007) model represents a paradigmatic shift in the approach to art reconstruction. Developed in the early 2000s, HART describes a specific approach to investigating artists' material choices, including their preparations (using formulas) and application in the act of making oil paintings. This approach fundamentally differs from traditional reproduction methods by prioritising material-level historical accuracy over surface appearance. The model relies on using period-appropriate materials formulas with the goal of producing historical models at the material level, not just in terms of surface appearance. This distinction proves crucial because it addresses fundamental questions about what constitutes historical accuracy in reconstruction practice. However, as Carlyle acknowledges, the concept of historical accuracy in reconstruction is inherently relative and complex. The pursuit of historically appropriate materials for replicating or reconstructing formulas leads directly to practical dead ends, as it remains impossible to recreate the past completely. These limitations do not diminish the endeavour’s value, as the effort itself proves highly constructive. Research reveals significant differences between historical and modern materials, exposing the importance of material authenticity in reconstruction work. The complexity of sourcing appropriate materials exemplifies the challenges in the reconstruction process.

This research positions cross-cultural technical reconstruction as knowledge production that exposes cultural assumptions within supposedly universal artistic methods. Drawing on Walter Mignolo's epistemic disobedience and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2011) decolonial epistemology, this study demonstrates that Indonesian reconstruction of European techniques constitutes genuine knowledge creation rather than cultural mimicry. Cultural distance functions as an analytical advantage: when Bouguereau's techniques encounter Indonesian conditions, tropical humidity, Southeast Asian physiognomy, local materials, and *sanggar*-influenced pedagogies, they reveal embedded cultural specificity rather than universal principles. Adaptations forced by Indonesian conditions, including modified drying times, adjusted colour temperatures, and anatomical translations, constitute new technical knowledge unavailable within European contexts.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs a practice-led research methodology centred on systematic technical reconstruction, which functions as both an investigative method and analytical framework for examining cross-cultural artistic knowledge production. Technical reconstruction involves the deliberate replication and adaptation of European oil painting techniques within Indonesian cultural and environmental contexts, generating empirical data about the cultural specificity of supposedly universal artistic methods.

Through this process, the research demonstrates how creative practice can produce new knowledge (Nelson, 2013, p. 161; Sullivan, 2010, pp. 24–25) rather than merely illustrate existing theory, as adaptations necessitated by tropical humidity, local materials, and Southeast Asian physiognomy reveal embedded cultural assumptions within European techniques while generating hybrid methodologies unavailable within single cultural contexts. This approach positions Indonesian practitioners as co-creators of artistic knowledge rather than recipients of European methods, establishing practice-led research as a legitimate form of academic inquiry that meets established criteria for knowledge production while expanding understanding of how cultural intersection generates technical innovation in contemporary art practice.

Practice-led research in this context operates through three interconnected principles:

- **Material Interrogation:** Physical engagement with techniques under various cultural conditions reveals knowledge that is unavailable through theoretical study.
- **Contextual Adaptation Analysis:** Indonesian conditions, a tropical climate, Southeast Asian physiognomy, and locally available materials serve as analytical tools that systematically challenge assumptions about European techniques. Failures and adaptations become data rather than problems.
- **Embodied Analysis:** Knowledge emerges through sustained physical practice rather than theoretical speculation. Timing decisions, pressure variations, and viscosity relationships resist verbal transmission and require experiential learning within specific cultural contexts.

The research unfolds through three integrated phases designed to maximize analytical depth while maintaining practical applicability:

- **Phase 1: Technical Analysis of the Bouguereau Method.** This phase involves a systematic visual and structural study of Head of a Young Girl (1898) through high-resolution digital reproduction, with a focus on shape construction, layering sequence, and surface modulation. Direct access to the original paintings was not possible, so the use of digital magnification and tonal mapping allowed a detailed understanding of Bouguereau's academic logic. Systematic visual analysis of *Head of a Young Girl* through high-resolution digital reproduction, focusing on layering sequences, surface modulation, and compositional logic. This phase establishes a baseline understanding of Bouguereau's systematic approach, identifying elements that require cultural translation.
- **Phase 2: Studio-Based Reconstruction**. This phase involves studio-based reconstruction under Indonesian conditions, documenting material behaviours, environmental adaptations, and technical innovations. It treats reconstruction failures as analytical data rather than methodological problems.
- **Phase 3: Pedagogical Integration**. Integration of developed hybrid techniques into the advanced undergraduate curriculum at FSRD ISI Yogyakarta, generating data about knowledge transmission, cultural adaptation, and student learning outcomes within Indonesian art education contexts.

Data collection operates through four documentation modalities designed to capture both technical processes and cultural translations:

- **Visual Documentation:** High-resolution photography of each reconstruction stage, coded for comparative analysis between original techniques and Indonesian adaptations.
- **Material Journaling:** Detailed records of environmental conditions, material substitutions, timing modifications, and technical innovations forced by Indonesian conditions.
- **Reflective Analysis:** Systematic documentation of decision-making processes, interpretive challenges, and knowledge discoveries emerging through physical practice.
- **Collaborative Dialogue:** Integration of peer critique and group learning processes reflecting Yogyakarta's *sanggar* traditions, revealing how technical knowledge transmits through cultural frameworks.

The analysis uses a triangulation framework that combines visual comparative study between the reconstruction results and Bouguereau's original method, thematic coding of the journal of material to track repetitive patterns in adaptation strategies, and critical discourse analysis. The focus remains not on achieving visually identical replicas, but rather on identifying where and how meaning shifts through technical translation, particularly about material behaviour, anatomical construction (adapted for Southeast Asian physiognomy), and the effects of luminosity under tropical lighting conditions.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Findings

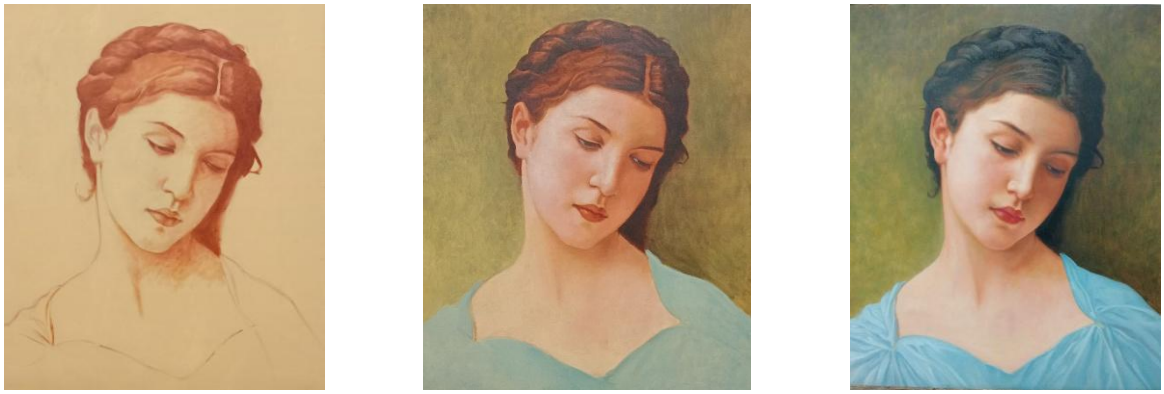
Systematic studio-based research on Bouguereau's painting The Young Girl's Head, through high-resolution digital reproduction, revealed a sophisticated coating system, characterized by its mature technique. The work demonstrates a mastery of the academic method, featuring monochromatic underpainting that shapes the volume and distribution of light, followed by the application of colour to the characters of leather, fabric, and hair in objects and finished glaze to achieve a transparent colour with a reddish and greenish tone. Careful visual analysis identifies specific technical elements required in reconstruction, such as smooth sfumato transitions in face modelling, precise boundaries between objects, including the eye and nose structures, and complex highlights and shadows. The adaptation of Bouguereau's material to studio conditions in Indonesia requires significant initial research. High humidity (75-85%) and consistent temperatures (26-30°C) in tropical climates fundamentally alter the drying time and behaviour of paints compared to temperate European conditions. The high humidity prevents oil paint from drying well, so the outer layer dries while the inner layer stays wet. This led to the decision to avoid using additional oils, except for paint, in this reconstruction. The paint materials selected include Zinc White, Yellow Ochre, Naples Yellow, Quinacridone Rose, Burnt Sienna, Cerulean Blue, and Viridian Green, which are widely available in Indonesia. The pre-practice stage establishes the basic protocols for documentation, including standard lighting. The condition of the studio in Indonesia immediately reveals challenges that are not found in practice in Europe. Long drying times necessitate modified scheduling, with each layer requiring 48-72 hours, rather than the usual 24-hour intervals. This requires a reduction in several stages of painting, including not working on the grisaille stage.

The requirement to source materials that are easy to access, such as Zinc White, Yellow Ochre, Naples Yellow, Quinocridone Rose, Indian Red, Burnt Sienna, Cobalt Blue, and Viridian, forced a systematic comparison between Indonesian and European material properties. This constraint functioned as an analytical methodology, exposing how European techniques embed assumptions about specific material behaviours unavailable globally.

Stage 1 (Fig.2 (a))**:** Underpainting Development. Underpainting is a fundamental oil painting technique in which a monochromatic base layer is created before the application of color. This early stage typically employs soil colors, such as burnt sienna, to establish an overall value structure and framework of composition and volume. Underpainting serves as a tonal roadmap, allowing artists to define light-dark relationships, shape volume, and resolve compositional problems before selecting color choices. This base coat provides a solid foundation behind all subsequent paint applications, ensuring the final painting maintains the right tonal balance and structural integrity. By setting values first, artists can focus on color relationships later without being distracted by value considerations, ultimately creating a more cohesive and visually appealing piece of art. Documentation during this stage records the technical adaptations that develop directly. The research journal notes that brush control is affected by changes in paint consistency during a painting session in a single day, demonstrating how tropical conditions impact working methods in ways that are theoretically impossible to predict.

Stage 2 (Fig.2 (b)): Skin Tone Development. Bouguereau's skin color glazing technique proved to be the most challenging to reconstruct accurately. His systematic approach to warm and cool color temperatures in skin tones requires precise color mixing, which is complicated due to Indonesian lighting conditions. The intensity of tropical natural light creates a different color perception compared to lighting in northern Europe. The reconstruction process reveals knowledge that is not accessible through theoretical studies, such as the specific brush pressure and application direction required for smooth mixing, the optimal timing for applying the glaze while the layer underneath remains slightly tacky, and the critical wetness level necessary for a successful sfumato transition.

Stage 3 (Fig.2 (c))**:** Detail Resolution and Background Space Effects, the final phase of the reconstruction focused on Bouguereau's precise details and the treatment of the object's background. The light-dark border around the eyes and nose requires special attention to detail and precision. Indonesian luminosity necessitates modifications to value relationships and adjustments to color temperature to preserve the subtle spatial depth that characterizes Bouguereau's work. Throughout the reconstruction process, technical challenges resulted in innovative solutions.



(a) (b) (c)

Fig. 2: Systematic technical reconstruction stages
(Source: Tunnikmah et al., 2025)

The reconstruction demonstrates that Bouguereau's technique operates through universal optical principles separable from specific material contexts. The sfumato effect depends on systematic coating logic rather than precise material composition, enabling successful recreation using readily available Indonesian materials. However, critical technical knowledge emerges only through embodied practice: paint consistency requirements, humidity-sensitive glaze timing, and controlled edge transitions resist verbal transmission and demand experiential learning. While Bouguereau's systematic shape modelling translates directly across cultures, his colour temperature relationships require substantial adjustment for Indonesian lighting conditions. Material innovation under tropical constraints necessitated developing alternative approaches: fresh versus 24-hour dried paint produces fundamentally different working properties. In contrast, modified glaze media from local materials prove more stable than traditional European formulations. These adaptations generated documented technical innovations, including modified surface preparation and adapted brush techniques.

The researcher's Southeast Asian physiognomy naturally guided the adaptation of European facial construction principles, revealing technical flexibility unavailable within single cultural contexts. This process produced new approaches to eye, nose, and skin colour construction that maintain optical effectiveness while addressing different anatomical references. The systematic documentation reveals how supposedly universal academic principles embed cultural assumptions, with modification patterns that expand rather than merely translate established techniques.

4.2 Analysis

The integration of reconstruction techniques into the advanced undergraduate curriculum at the FSRD ISI Yogyakarta revealed that knowledge transmission within the Indonesian educational context occurs through active cultural translation, rather than passive absorption. An embodied dimension of knowledge emerges that fundamentally resists verbal or written transmission, requiring sustained physical practice where technical nuances prove impossible to communicate through demonstration alone. Colour temperature relationships, variations in brush pressure, and timing decisions demand individual, experiential learning within a guided framework. This approach naturally aligns with the studio tradition of practice-based community learning.

The development of innovative working methods in studio practice combines a European systematic approach with Indonesian pedagogical traditions. Group critique sessions transform into collaborative problem-solving that reflects the studio's collective learning while retaining a European technical framework. This synthesis yields a teaching methodology unavailable through purely European or Indonesian educational approaches.

Cultural intersections generated radically new technical knowledge through several documented innovations:

- Moisture-Adjusted Glaze Systems: Modified medium formulations using local materials demonstrate how environmental adaptation can enhance, rather than compromise, technical effectiveness.
- Hybrid Colour Constructions: A systematically documented optimal mixing sequence combines European logical structures with Indonesian experiential knowledge to produce a broader tonal range unavailable through either approach alone.
- Anatomically Responsive Modelling: A method that maintains European optical principles while accommodating Southeast Asian facial structures, expanding the cultural applicability of academic techniques.

These innovations challenge the hierarchical adaptation model that positions European methods as superior originals requiring local modification. Instead, they demonstrate how cultural intersections generate new technical possibilities that independently exceed the capabilities of any single source tradition. This demonstrates the importance of practice-based research's capacity to generate knowledge through embodied cultural synthesis.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Technical Deconstruction as Knowledge Production

This research demonstrates that cross-cultural technical reconstruction constitutes active knowledge production rather than passive adaptation, with Indonesian modifications to European techniques revealing genuine epistemological contributions exceeding either tradition's independent capabilities. When tropical humidity demands altered glazing media or Southeast Asian anatomy requires different modeling strategies, these represent revelations of technique's cultural specificity rather than distortions of European ideals. Cultural distance functions as an analytical advantage; Indonesian practitioners reveal European techniques' cultural contingency while developing enhanced alternatives through humidity-adapted glazing systems, anatomically responsive modeling, and hybrid color construction technical advances unavailable within single cultural contexts. This challenges hierarchical models, positioning European methods as superior originals, instead positioning Indonesian practitioners as co-creators generating new knowledge through cultural intersection, where hybrid techniques constitute Indonesian contributions to global artistic knowledge rather than adaptations of European heritage. The research reframes cross-cultural practice as bilateral knowledge exchange, producing innovations that transcend source traditions, establishing practice-led research as a methodology for creating rather than translating artistic knowledge across cultural boundaries.

5.2 Pedagogical Transformation

The integration of reconstruction techniques into fine art education at ISI Yogyakarta demonstrates how European academic methodologies can effectively complement Indonesia's communal sanggar learning traditions. The reconstruction methodology validates this embodied approach while providing systematic technical frameworks that enhance rather than constrain creative exploration. By positioning reconstruction as an analytical tool rather than a reverential exercise, the approach enables critical engagement with

European artistic heritage while maintaining Indonesian cultural agency. This methodology resolves the false dichotomy between preserving historical knowledge and promoting cultural innovation, demonstrating how systematic technical analysis generates new understanding while respecting traditional achievements. The findings prove relevant for postcolonial educational contexts, where arts curricula must navigate between global traditions and local cultural specificities. Rather than forcing a choice between technical rigor and cultural authenticity, this practice-led reconstruction establishes a methodology for producing, not merely consuming, artistic knowledge across cultural boundaries. The research ultimately demonstrates that rigorous technical education and cultural innovation constitute complementary educational goals, offering a model for engaging artistic heritage that avoids both uncritical adoption and defensive rejection of historical methods.

6.0 Conclusion

One limitation of this study lies in the pedagogical integration phase. While the reconstruction techniques were introduced into the advanced undergraduate curriculum at FSRD ISI Yogyakarta, the extent of student involvement remained limited. Future research should incorporate more intensive student participation throughout the reconstruction process, tracking individual learning trajectories and documenting how students independently adapt techniques to their own cultural and anatomical contextsIn addition, studies that track how hybrid techniques developed through reconstruction affect subsequent artistic production can provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of cross-cultural technical education. The main contribution of this research lies not in the success of reconstructing Bouguereau's techniques, but in documenting how the effort to do so in different cultural conditions reveals the cultural attachment of all artistic knowledge and the creative potential inherent in the process of cultural translation.

This practice-based research shows that reconstructing European academic painting techniques in the Indonesian context results in real new knowledge about historical and contemporary methods for cross-cultural art education. Systematic documentation of adaptation, innovation, and failure reveals artistic technique as a culturally insightful knowledge system, rather than a neutral technical skill. This research contributes to a practice-based research methodology by showing how systematic reconstruction functions as a technical deconstruction, revealing hidden assumptions in artistic techniques through cultural translation. For cross-cultural arts education, this research provides models for engaging with artistic heritage that do not adopt European methods uncritically or defensively but actively transform them through local cultural conditions and frameworks.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the study of visual arts, art history, and fine art.

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