

Erwin Panofsky's Iconological Study of the Illustrations of Serat Selarasa (1804): A method of art conservation

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Abstract

Serat Selarasa (1804) is one of the essential manuscripts in the Javanese cultural heritage, containing noble values. It consists of 296 pages, 163 of which are coloured illustrations, the rest of which are texts in Javanese letters, and is the collection of the Yogyakarta Palace Scriptorium. The impetus is due to the threat of extinction and the lack of these studies. The aim is to reveal the history, culture, symbolic meaning, and philosophy behind the illustrations through Panofsky's approach. Research shows the importance of a comprehensive aesthetic historical method before the art conservators conduct material analysis and art preservation actions.

Keywords: aesthetic historical method; iconology Panofsky; illustration; serat selarasa

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1.0 Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines art conservation in the context of cultural heritage, including fine arts, as part of protecting, preserving, and transmitting cultural values between generations. Art conservation includes all actions aimed at ensuring the longevity of cultural heritage and its accessibility to the public while respecting its historical, artistic, and physical integrity (UNESCO, 2003; Ratnaningtyas et al., 2024). In line with this, Indonesia has enacted law on the Advancement of Culture No. 5 of 2017 to advance Indonesian National Culture amidst world civilisation and make it an investment to build the nation's future. Article 5 states that there are 10 objects of cultural advancement, including oral traditions, manuscripts, customs, rites, traditional knowledge, technology, art, language, folk games and sports. This law also underlines four strategic steps in advancing culture: protection, development, utilisation, and application. The legal umbrella from the Indonesian government has been wide open for research, security, or development of the archipelago's cultural heritage. However, ironically, research data regarding the archipelago's cultural heritage is still relatively minimal in quantity.

Likewise, research on art and cultural conservation in Indonesia in the 2008-2025 period shows a low figure of only 6% compared to other humanities research (94%). Seeing the vast amount of cultural wealth in the archipelago but not many studies that examine art

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and cultural conservation, this is quite ironic and triggers the author's concern to explore one of the Indonesian manuscripts, namely *Serat Selarasa* (1804), through a historical aesthetic approach, namely Panofsky's iconology, as part of the stages of the art conservation method. This study departs from concerns about the scarcity of cultural heritage research and the importance of the historical aesthetic approach as a strong foundation in the art conservation method to preserve cultural heritage.

The *Serat Selarasa* (MSS Jav. 28) is the most beautiful and essential Javanese manuscript, created in 1804, making it the oldest known fine-patterned Javanese manuscript. This manuscript tells the story of Selarasa, son of Champa, and his two brothers, Selaswara and Selaganda, who were forced to leave their kingdom after their elder brother Selangkara became king and treated them with contempt. Selarasa and his brothers then experienced many adventures and trials during their forced wanderings. The manuscript is one of the essential cultural heritages from Java, which is currently stored in the British Library with the code MSS Jav 28 (Gallop, 2021: 3). This manuscript not only stores stories but also presents visual richness through its 163-page illustrations. According to law No. 43 of 2007, ancient manuscripts are all written documents that are not printed or reproduced in any other way, either domestically or abroad, owned by libraries in the territory of the Republic of Indonesia. Although *Serat Selarasa* is in the British Library in England, the manuscript is a collection of the Scriptorium of the Yogyakarta Palace, which the British looted during the Geger Sepehi incident in Yogyakarta in 1812. The manuscript is an Indonesian cultural object regarding ownership and cultural inheritance rights. It deserves to be preserved in line with the law on the Advancement of Culture of the Republic of Indonesia No. 5 of 2017. The manuscript data has also been digitised and published by the British through the British Library since 2012 that is why the visual study research, can obtain optimal data. However, before analysing in more detail, it is necessary to provide an overview of the stages of art conservation methods from various experts, as follows in Fig. 1:

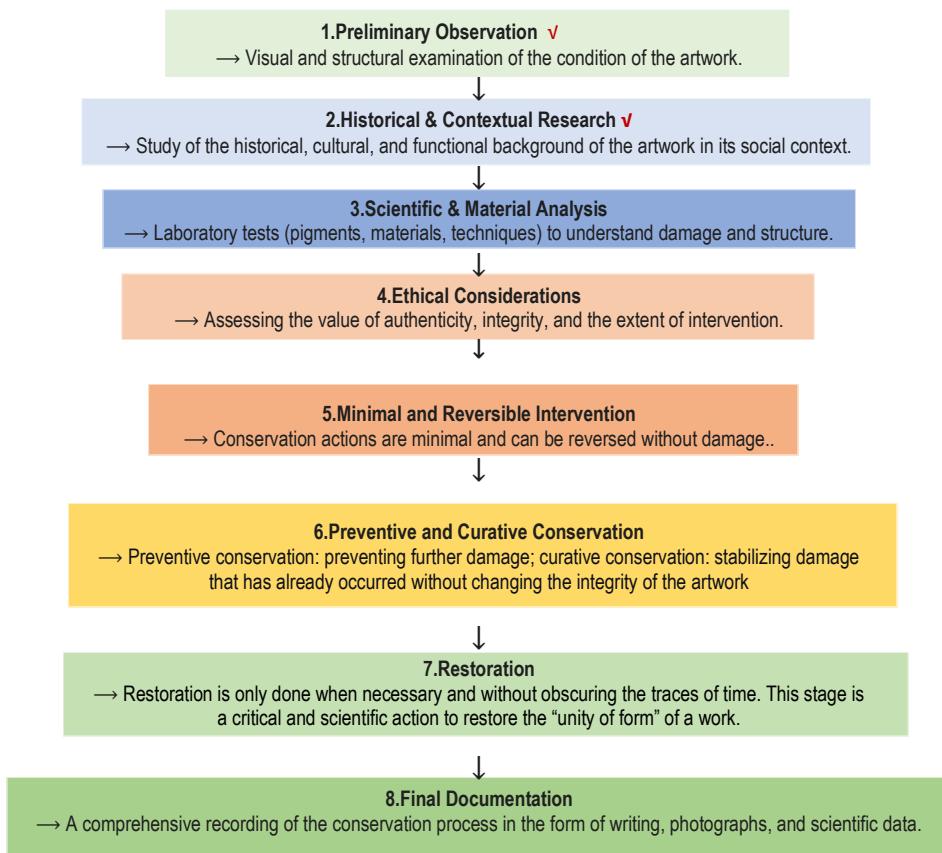


Fig. 1: Stages of Art Conservation
(source: Cesare Brandi, 2005)

The scope discussed in this study includes two substances of the art conservation stages: initial observation and historical and contextual research. This is a very basic before an art conservator carries out the scientific and material analysis stage. Therefore, aesthetic-historical and contextual studies related to cultural heritage objects, namely the *Serat Selarasa* Illustration with Panofsky's comprehensive iconology theory, are essential. The advantages of Panofsky's iconology theory include:

1. Providing a systematic structure for understanding art (aesthetics).
2. Emphasizing the cultural and historical context so that it is very suitable for the study of traditional art
3. Combining the humanities and art history
4. Paving the way for deeper interpretations, not stopping at form but exploring hidden messages.

This study answers the need for a detailed and contextual historical aesthetic method for art conservators in the early stages of art conservation methods. Cesare Brandi stated that the historical analysis of a work of art is an essential and inseparable part of the conservation process. For Brandi, conservation is not just a technical action but also an intellectual activity that must consider the

historical and aesthetic value of the work of art (Brandi, 2005).Therefore, this study will show the application of Panofsky's iconology theory as one of the comprehensive historical aesthetic studies in a part of the art conservation method in the *Serat Selarasa* illustration.The goal is to find the meaning of the form, symbol, and philosophy behind the *Serat Selarasa* illustrations.

2.0 Literature Review

The author provides a several of literature reviews related to research on Indonesian illustrations in Table 1 below:

Table 1.Literature Review

Title and Author	Substance of Journal Content	Library Sources
Variety and Elements of Spirituality in Illustrations of <i>Nusantara</i> Manuscripts from the 1800s–1900s, Nuning Damayanti & Haryadi Suadi	Examining the spiritual function of <i>Nusantara</i> (Java–Bali) illustrations up to the early 20th Century through visual hermeneutic methods, highlighting the primitive and spiritual communication values of traditional illustrations.(journals.itb.ac.id).	Damayanti, Nuning, and Haryadi Suadi, "Variety and Elements of Spirituality in Illustrations of <i>Nusantara</i> Manuscripts from the 1800s–1900s," <i>Journal of Visual Art and Design</i> , vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 66–84.
<i>Visual Meaning in the Illustrations of the Banten Historical Manuscript</i> , Savitri P. Ramadina	Analysing the semiotics of object composition (ships, buildings, flags) in a Banten History manuscript without figures; using Peirce's theory to understand the representation of historical activities.	Ramadina, Savitri Putri. "Visual Meaning in the Illustrations of the Banten Historical Manuscript." <i>Panggung</i> , vol. 31, no. 3, 2021.
Animals in Javanese manuscript illustrations, Dick van der Meij	Focusing on the visual study of animal objects in several Javanese illustrations and chronicles, not specifically examining the visual or aesthetics in the interweaving of meaning, symbols, and philosophy in one of the manuscripts.Meij found the characteristics of animal types in various Javanese illustrated manuscripts, which are fictional narratives: <i>Serat Selarasa</i> , <i>Serat Panji Jayakusuma</i> , <i>Serat Asmarasupi</i> , <i>Serat Jayalengkara Wulang</i> , and <i>Serat Damar Wulan</i> , as well as the (pseudo) historical <i>babad</i> poem, the <i>Babad Demak</i> War.From the illustrations in the manuscripts discussed, it is clear that in narrative poetry, the <i>wayang</i> style and depiction of animals are prioritised, in contrast to <i>Babad</i> , whose illustrations do not use the <i>wayang</i> style but are more "realistic".(Meij 2022: 131)	Dick van der Meij, <i>Jurnal Wacana Volume 2023 No. 1 (2022)</i> , <i>Humaniora Journal of Indonesia</i>

(Source: author's data processing, 2025)

The difference from the authors who studied Indonesian or archipelago illustrations above is that this study focuses on Panofsky's iconology in *Serat Selarasa* illustrations as an art conservation method.This research offers a comprehensive historical aesthetic study for art conservators in the study of cultural objects.

3.0 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative analysis method with Erwin Panofsky's iconology approach (1970:40-41).The three main stages used are:

3.1 Pre-iconography

Observation of visual forms and objects descriptively.This is the first level, where art objects or images are described descriptively without context or more profound meaning. The focus is on what is visible, such as shape, colour, and composition.

3.2 Iconography

Recognising symbols, figures, and attributes in illustrations.At this level, the analysis continues to identify the themes, symbols, and meanings contained in the artworks.

3.3 Iconology

Interpretation of the philosophical meaning and cultural values contained.This is the highest level of analysis, where deeper meanings are explored in historical, social, and cultural contexts.Panofsky sees iconology as a way to understand how cultural ideas and values influence artwork.

Visual data is taken from the British Library's digitisation of the *Serat Selarasa* manuscript.The author also uses primary and secondary literature references on Wayang Purwa (*Shadow Puppets*) and Javanese aesthetics (Soebadio, 1976; Sedyawati, 1991).Meanwhile, this qualitative data analysis method uses purposive sampling to select illustrations according to their theme and visual style related to symbolic meaning.

4.0 Findings

Before delving into Panofsky's iconology, it is helpful to provide some historical and cultural background to the era in which the *Serat Selarasa* illustrations were created (see Table 2).This is crucial for art conservators in understanding the cultural context of cultural objects produced during this era.

Table 2. Chronological Development of Javanese Wayang Purwa from the Majapahit Era to the 19th Century

Periods	Characteristic	Wayang Development	Social Function
Majapahit (13–15 AD)	Hindu-Buddhist, great royal power	Local adaptations of Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata in the form of Kakawin	Legitimacy of royal power, ritual performances, and entertainment of the nobility
Demak–Pajang (16 AD)	Early Islamization in Java	Early Islamization in Java integration of <i>Punakawan</i> figures and Islamic messages by <i>Wali Songo</i>	Islamic preaching tool, Hindu-Islamic cultural bridge
Matarlam Islam (17 AD)	Syncretistic Islam, the great kingdom of Central Java	With the birth of the standard and <i>carangan</i> system, a dramatic structure began to be established	Moral and spiritual education is a symbol of royal power
Surakarta & Yogyakarta (18 AD)	The palace is divided; art is a symbol of status	Visual style standardization: Solo (subtle), Yogyo (firm); Inheritance of palace values, formation of cultural identity	
Dutch Colonization (19 AD)	Foreign cultural interference, recording of local culture	The emergence of illustrative manuscripts such as <i>Serat Selarasa</i> and <i>Serat Rama</i>	Hidden social criticism, documentation of Javanese culture

(Source: author's documentation, 2025)

In the early 19th Century, Central Java, especially Yogyakarta, experienced rapid development of palace culture. *Wayang Purwa*, a performing art based on the Mahabharata and Ramayana narratives, became the dominant media in conveying moral teachings, character education, and aesthetic expressions of the nobility (Holt, 1967). Related to the visual style of the *Serat Selarasa* illustrations, in the early 19th Century, the development of fine arts in Java had been greatly influenced by the *Wayang Purwa* style, which was not only a folk performance but also part of the expression of palace culture.

As a comparison and explanation of how, in the same era, at the end of the 18th Century and the beginning of the 19th Century, similar manuscript illustrations were produced, which were centred in the Javanese palaces, especially Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Such as *Serat Damar Wulan* (collected by the British Library with the code MSS.Jav.89) and *Serat Jayalengkara Wulang* (collected by the British Library with the code MSS JAV 24) on Fig. 2 as follows:



Fig. 2: (a) *Serat Damar Wulan* on page 71 (crop) is recorded as being made in 1800-1855
(Source: <https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/everyday-life-in-java-in-the-late-18th-century-serat-damar-wulan/>, downloaded on June 11th, 2025, at 5.30 pm);

(b) *Serat Jayalengkara Wulang* on page 258 (Javanese script). Made in 1803 at the Yogyakarta Palace
(Source: [https://jv.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Barkas:Serat_Jaya_Lengkara_Wulang_\(1803\)_-_BL_MSS_Jav_24.pdf&page=281](https://jv.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Barkas:Serat_Jaya_Lengkara_Wulang_(1803)_-_BL_MSS_Jav_24.pdf&page=281), downloaded on June 11th, 2025, at 6.30 pm)

Written and visual culture, especially in the form of manuscripts (serat), became part of the palace's cultural politics (Florida, 1995). Illustrations in the sermons became a new medium for conveying values that were previously only conveyed orally and through performances.

Iconological analysis of several illustrated pages of *Serat Selarasa* shows a strong influence from *Wayang Purwa* figures, especially in depicting faces, hand positions (mudras), and costumes. Characters such as the main character Selarasa are depicted with slender bodies, sharp narrow eyes, and a high nose like Arjuna in wayang. In addition, the use of colour also refers to the symbolic system of *Wayang Purwa*: white for purity (protagonist), red for anger or passion (aggressive characters), and black for spiritual strength. Table 3 below shows it:

Table 3. Visual Analysis Table of Illustration of the Serat Selarasa

The Character of Wayang Purwa	The Character of Serat Selarasa	Aesthetic Characteristics of Wayang Purwa	Philosophical Meaning
		Arjuna-like posture, narrow eyes, fine lurik batik costume	Purity and wisdom
		Red color, glaring eyes, sharp gaze	Symbol of worldly lust and power
		Crowned, white face, slanted nose, neatly dressed	Motherhood, ancestral blessings
		Long hair, white robe, turban	Symbol of knowledge and serenity

(Source: author's documentation, 2025)

5.0 Discussion

The following are four examples of Serat Selarasa illustrations based on the strength of the theme (see Fig. 3), where there are several symbolic and philosophical meanings behind the visuals.





Fig. 3.(a) Illustration on page 123, showing the social hierarchical structure, the figure of *Selarasa* with *Ni Rumsari* and *Ken Jumena* or the accompanying servants; (b) Illustration on page 151: *Selarasa*, with his brothers *Selaganda* and *Selasyara*, set out to face *King Atashulu*: (c) Illustration on page 267, *Selarasa* facing the enemies or challenges facing the troops of *Sindu Mahpul* and the troops of *Jin Prabu Kalithi*: (d) Illustration on page 277, showing the journey of *Selarasa*, *Ni Rumsari*, and *Selaganda* back to the Champa kingdom using Dutch-flagged sea transportation.

(Source: https://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/asian-and-african/2014/12/javanese-manuscript-art-serat-selarasa.html?_ga=2.189138089.360839345.1530819842768445457.1421359745, downloaded on June 12th, 2025, at 0.00 pm).

Table 4 shows the visual study of Serat Selarasa Illustrations by the Panofsky Aesthetic Analysis:

Visual Elements	Wayang Purwa Characteristic	Findings in Serat Selarasa (1804)	Aesthetic Analysis (Panofsky)
Lines and Silhouettes	Strong lines, flat and symmetrical silhouette shapes	The figures are depicted in fine contour lines and submissive postures.	Level 1 (pre-iconography): description of an external form of visual objects
Body Proportions	Longer arms, smaller head	Extended limbs on the main character	Level 2 (iconography): symbols of virtue and humility
Views and Positions	Sideways, eyes lowered as a sign of politeness	Viewing position of the characters looking down at each other	Level 3 (iconology): expression of values of politeness and social harmony
Ornaments and Accessories	Crown, keris, parang batik, symbols of social status	The main character wears a <i>keris</i> and <i>batik</i> costumes	Level 2: classical Javanese social status iconography
Composition	Empty background, characters arranged horizontally	Flat composition, focus on one or two main characters	Levels 1 and 3: static and meditative narrative forms
Colour	Symbolic colors: gold (noble), white (holy), black (strong)	Gold and white colors are dominant in noble figures	Level 3: moral and spiritual symbols of the characters
Facial expressions	Minimal expression, neutral	Flat face, closed mouth, dull gaze	Representation of the values of patience and inner peace

(Source: author's documentation, 2025)

5.1 Pre-iconography:

- *Serat Selarasa*'s visual style imitates the slender body shapes of *Wayang Purwa*, profile faces, and costume details such as woven fabrics and *batik*.
- The colouring style in the illustrations also adopts symbolic conventions: white for the main characters, black for strength, and red for the antagonists.
- An example is seen in the image on page 123, where the three main figures appear with stiff bodies, broken elbows typical of shadow puppets, and clothing with gold ornaments and batik motifs resembling the *wayang* characters *Arjuna*, *Srikandi*, and The *Punakawan*.

5.2 Iconography:

- The *Selarasa* figure shares attributes with *Arjuna*: weapons, clothing, and gestures that convey composure and intellectualism.
- The hand and body positions in various illustrations represent *wayang* body language as a symbol of emotion and social status.
- The image on page 277 shows how *wayang* figures are located on land and appear in the context of voyages and interactions with European ships. The presence of large sailing ships and the open sea demonstrates an awareness of the geopolitical dynamics of the time, including contact with colonial powers and the expansion of the geographical imagination in Javanese culture. The ships depicted with tall sails and foreign ornamentation signify the visual influence of colonial voyages and symbolise social transformation, spiritual journeys, and transcultural connections.

5.3 Iconology:

- The illustrations in *Serat Selarasa* do not simply imitate the form of *Wayang Purwa* but rather internalise their philosophical values. For example, *Selarasa* is depicted in scenes fighting against arrogance or evil, a tyranny that reflects the concept of "eling lan waspada" (mindfulness and vigilance) in Javanese philosophy.

- The use of symbols and colours is aesthetic and rich in meaning: white not only signifies purity but also symbolises spiritual wisdom.
- The symbol of the ship in the illustration can be interpreted as an allegory of the main character's inner journey and external dynamics. In Javanese culture, sailing is physical and spiritual, depicting asceticism, the journey in search of truth, and the connection between the microcosm and the macrocosm.
- The sea and the ship represent the challenging external world and a meeting place between Javanese culture, colonial powers, and foreign influences. This symbol emphasises that *Serat Selarasa* contains a cultural narrative that is not only local but also global, which is reconstructed through a visual medium.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Entering the 19th Century, Javanese *wayang* developed and was influenced by Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic, palace culture, and the arrival of colonialism in the archipelago. The form and function of *wayang* also changed, from its function as a means of cultural education and royal power to the spread of religion and the arrival of colonialism in the archipelago. Written culture and visual illustration in manuscripts also developed due to access to trade and the influx of paper from colonial cultures. *Serat Selarasa*'s visual style imitates slender body shapes, facial profiles, and costume details such as woven fabrics and batik. The symbols of sailing ships and travel indicate an awareness of the geopolitical dynamics of the time, including contact with colonial powers and the expansion of geographical imagination in Javanese culture. These illustrations are allegories of the main character's inner journey and outer dynamics. In the context of Javanese culture, sailing is physical and spiritual, depicting asceticism, the journey in search of truth, and the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. This research reveals that the illustrations do not simply replicate the visual form of *Wayang Purwa* but rather represent an aesthetic and epistemological transformation of Javanese culture within the medium of the manuscript. Using Panofsky's iconological approach, it was discovered that visual styles such as slender body shapes, mudra hand gestures, and symbolic colours result from the internalisation of the cosmological, spiritual, and moral values typical of *Wayang Purwa*. This research provides evidence that Panofsky's iconology can express not only aesthetics and history but also deeper aspects of cultural and philosophical values. This study demonstrates the importance of Panofsky's iconological method as a knowledge foundation that should be done by art conservators before proceeding with conserving cultural heritage objects.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the study of the aesthetic historical method of the traditional arts or cultural heritage objects for developing art conservation.

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