

LEARNING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH ART

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ABSTRACT

An artwork is the manifestation of an artist's utilisation of a variety of approaches, and is closely related to the ideas of the artist, his/her choice of media and techniques employed. The physical manipulation of an artwork is based on the artist's relationship to ideas and media, formalistic approaches, and the surrounding community. Understanding of the artist's cultural identity is relative to the various disciplines in fine art, such as painting, printing and drawing, and new media because of the nature of the context, which is based on the spatial and physical form. The aim of this research is to generate knowledge on learning about cultural identity through visual art. The research explores the forms and the symbolic meanings based on the influence of the local community and social system. This study employs the cultural concept as a system to create an understanding framework to the process of creating artwork. The qualitative approach is used as the methodology framework, which is deemed as suitable to the problem of investigating cultural identity in art. The findings uncover that Malaysian visual art synergise harmoniously the value system with modern expression, through belief, surroundings, needs and social requirements. These findings contribute to the knowledge of art, generally, that can be used in other fields of art in the process of creation and appreciation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Art forms in one main framework, beginning with the sociocultural system, which consists of the concept of value, the environment, needs, the behaviour of artists and the social institutions. All these concepts will influence how an artwork exists and how it is embraced¹.

Art exists, due to the need of humans to express themselves through different media, ideas and experiences. Individuals with a passion for art are those who want to express their inner feelings as a basic human need. Certainly, every work of art has a specific shape and it can be moulded to make its meaning understood (Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi, 2000).

On the other hand, in the context of environmental influence, an individual artist who produces artwork responds according to his reaction to the external environment resulting in artists in a society interpreting their external environment in distinctive ways and subsequently, shaping their own distinct basic concepts.

Art is part of the cultural manifestations that exist in a society, based on the influence of its cultural environment, and thus, shapes its personality. The expression of artwork by an individual artist is the manifestation of the distinct culture of his society. In other words, the art of a society exists within the scope of its society that represents its culture².

1. The term culture has a number of different meanings, all of them are valid for some uses. Sociologists take a much broader view of the term. For them, 'culture' refers to the total lifestyle of a people, including all the ideas, values, knowledge, behaviour and material objects that they share [Geertz, 1973; Kroeber & Kuckhon, 1952].

Because art is in a unified cultural system with its own distinct concepts, thus through the cultural approach, the researcher would like to reveal, understand and explain; form, meaning and the cultural identity of modern art, as produced by Malaysian artists.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to explain and understand the sociocultural system that is manifested visually by artists in modern Malaysian art. In this context; values, beliefs, the environment, needs, social institutions and the behaviour of the artist, as reflected in modern Malaysian art will be identified. The purpose of this research is detailed, as follows:

- 2.1 explain the symbols that are used, and the meaning that is reflected by modern Malaysian art.
- 2.2 explain and understand the function of modern art in Malaysia, i.e. in the context of the sociocultural system of the people in this country.
- 2.3 explain the cultural identity that is manifested by artists in the symbols of modern Malaysian arts.

2. E.B. Taylor defined culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims at understanding cultural identity through modern Malaysian art, based on the theory of culture. It is closely related to the values in belief, the physical sociocultural environment, the need to produce artwork, the role of the artist's behaviour and the social institutions within the community. The researcher used the paradigm qualitative approach and descriptive explanations.

The researcher believes that art-related studies should be guided by an appropriate research methodology, with the view of setting research methods to obtain valid information. In researching the cultural identity of modern Malaysian art, the researcher used an interdisciplinary approach, with the concepts in the theory of culture as the main theory (*Grand Theory*). In addition, the researcher also used the concepts in the theory of structural functionalism in the appreciation of art theory, i.e. to observe the form of modern Malaysian art in the context of Malaysian society, based in its perpetuity and continuity.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity, Art and Culture

"We live in a small world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a fact of contemporary political life."

(Gilroy, 1997 in Woodward, K., 2000)

Generally, identity is the identification of membership, based on individuals and subsequently, represents a group which is the identification to represent certain groups. Mankind exists based on identity groups, whether it is in the category of male or female identity. In life, every human being carries multiple identities. Zakaria Ali (1989) states, that identity is a combination of value, the state of similarity and resemblance.

In the meaning of culture, the issue of identity in the context of art becomes more complex. The cultural approach as a system in understanding identity issues must be consistent, with cultural elements and concepts as the core. Consistency of approach is capable of explaining that meaning, because identity is something that is relatively dependent on the approach and the consistency in the way the concepts used are interpreted.

Identity is closely related to individuals and the social environment of a community. It is also the bond between the members or individuals with the community that tries to introduce the identity of the group. Symbols development and how an artwork is presented will be the major element in teaching and promoting equality and distinctiveness between groups within the community.

Identity is the term used to describe about existence and to place us, who are actively involved, in the explanation of historical events. Among the interpretation of identity is as a culture that is jointly owned and it is like the similarities of multiple selves that are shared by others in the community that has the same history and origin. Therefore, identity often describes the collective experience of historical origins, cultural codes and the way of life that is jointly owned by a group of people who become the main basis for the

community within the framework and meaning of life that does not change and continues (Stuart Hall, 1990).

Identity is also a process that exists in one chain of continuous change. It is a historical display that is formed based on a chain of discontinuity, rather than a chain of continuity. Identity in this sense exists, either in the form of the conservations of the past and as a transformation and change in the future (Mohd. Taib Osman, 1988).

Identity is not simply the views of the past, which is characterised in nature by its heritage. It is also future oriented, one that goes through the process of creativity in the context of cultural change. Identity becomes the subject of the play of history, culture and continuous power that exist in the pattern and the nature of the typical self (Suparlan, 1982).

Based on the concept of identity, it is the process of art in the context of culture and is not free from the influence of the historical development of a race. It is also related to the existence of societal diversity in the context of communal globalisation in Malaysia. Identity involves the issue of influence, change, transformation, interracial interaction, disputes, contradictions and a paradox of identity, which is dynamic, shifting and changing, as a result of a world formed by the strong situation of mutual dependency, strong influence and fierce competition between its elements (Piliang Yasraf Amir, 2002).

The understanding regarding how identity exists, the paradigm that identity is founded upon, ideology in identity and how identity is used is very important for a country to develop its people. The way to develop, observe and use identity as the media

must be present in the development of a people (Koentjaraningrat, 1981; Mohd. Taib Osman, 1988).

When art is considered as one of the elements of culture, it thus includes ways and the aspect of the assignment of meaning, and comprehensive behaviour in expressing. The resultant environmental cultural behaviour and the concept of the need to express, based on the artist's behaviour will demonstrate its distinct identity of art. It will clearly form the element of art that is themed upon existing cultural identity, i.e. based on the existing environment.

The assignment of symbols in artwork illustrates in the context of cultural multiplicity, which will touch on the issue of social and communal systems. This will then symbolically give meaning to works of art. The role of individual reactions in a specific group, based on pattern and social system will form the meaning from the symbolic interactions that lead to the formation of the identity of the group.

Identity of the art is represented by a certain system of symbols, based on its group. Symbolically, it will give meaning to the identity of the artwork, based on its group. The existence of the identity of the art, with the characterisation of a distinctive design requires a mental framework that is consistent and parallel to common understanding.

The thoughts of Sigmund Freud say that at its initial stage, art exists because of individual psychological drive, based on personal norms and values. Onwards, the individual artist's behaviour manifests norms and values in the social and cultural systems. Additionally, the individual system that is based on the social

environment acts individually, till it transcends personal norms and henceforth, a social identity and a bigger communal group that he represents emerge.

The identity of the art that is based on culture and guided by symbols is used in mutually agreed artwork. These artworks give certain meanings that point towards members that represent that community. The projection of these symbols is likely to manifest itself in terms of the occurrence of the process of artwork, based on the same style and moving towards the concept of identity of the community. It gives more exposure to symbols that lead to the identity of the communal group as a whole, as compared to the projection of identity that is based on individual symbols.

When we say that art is the reflection of culture, which represents a community or group, it is thus the pride of the communal group and enhances self-esteem. In order to improve self-esteem in the context of producing artwork, it is the responsibility of the artist to work towards its development and perpetuity, which will lead to the continuity of producing works of art. Although art is produced by individual artists, it represents his people, with its cultural symbols. (Tjetjep Rohendi Rohidi, 2000).

Each work of art appears to have a form and an icon, and does not only depend on factual meaning, which only revolves around formalistic aspects. It is also the result of the artist's expression; the symbolic meaning should also be examined. Studies on this implied meaning is called iconography, which is an approach to understand the symbols in physical artworks.

The combination of the three theories will shape the understanding and explanation of modern Malaysian sculptures,

i.e. scholastically, theoretically, scientifically, and systematically (See Diagram 1.2: The Merger of the Theory of Culture as a System). The concepts that are referred to as a fundamental interdisciplinary study become the main concept; as the early guide that is organised in a theoretical structure, as shown in the diagram below:

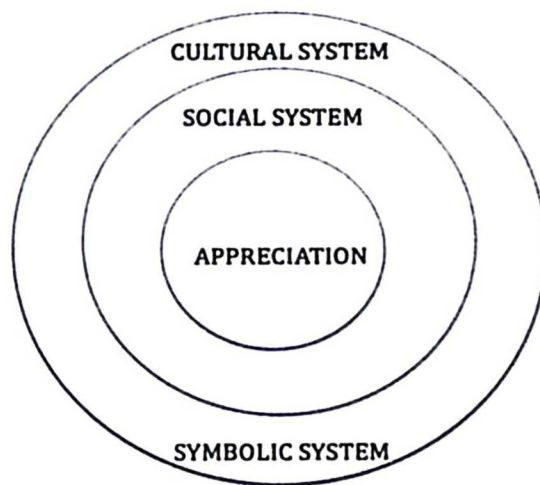


Diagram 1.2: The Merger of the Theory of Culture as a System

5. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Symbols and the Social System

In modern Malaysian art, traditional symbols are used. Traditional symbols in the context of the objects of cultural objects that are used by local communities are used as the symbols in the works of modern Malaysian art. The development of selected symbols is very interesting, i.e. when artists use their knowledge in the use of strong arts language to create the art work with distinct characteristics. Symbols that are traditionally selected assign meaning to their artwork, highlighting the local community's issues and themes.

The influence on the development of local artwork such as the traditional form as a result of national identity issues, play an important role in materialising modern Malaysian art with such forms. The issue of materialising form in representing national identity has been well expressed by artists. As a result of observing the symbols that exist in the works of modern Malaysian art, it demonstrates the individual decisions taken by Malaysian artists. Developing shapes from symbols and local objects has become the trend in the production of modern Malaysian art.

As a result of using local traditional objects, symbols that carry local meanings are created. Much of modern Malaysian art that are studied, are manifestations of cultural issues and phenomenon, way of life and the beauty of the Malaysia.

The materialisation of the shapes of modern Malaysian art is the result of the relationship that is associated with the activity of the social system that is represented by the artists. It has been found that in shaping their artwork, the artists leverage on the issues that exist in the environment of their society. The sensitivity of Malaysian artists in the context of phenomenon and local issues is very strong. They often consider the local community's sociocultural settings in their artwork.

To produce works of art that assign local meanings, the artists have symbolically used local issues and strong knowledge in the development of modern physical art language. The brilliance of the artists in visually connecting local issues and phenomenon is also the result of the education that is gained from existing arts studies institutions.

As an artist, they also have a high sense of responsibility towards the overall development of the artworks. They produce artworks with a sense of responsibility and awareness of the existing social values and cultural system. The concept of the need to express to fulfil personal goals is also in harmony with social needs.

In this context, educational institutions in the field of art play a major role in improving the development of sculpting. Likewise, other social institutions, aside from education, also play a role, such as at the primary and secondary education level.

6. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Cultural Identity of Modern Malaysian Art

The cultural identity of modern Malaysian art can be seen from several perspectives, i.e. through the cultural approach. First is from the values of belief perspective, which brings into being the distinct physical shape and form. It exists as a result of the local community's cultural symbols. Local objects can create distinct characteristics, in which they become the main symbols that will form the visual identity of modern Malaysian art. Based on studies done with regard to the selection of main artworks that are often seen in the catalogues of exhibitions and exhibitions in galleries around Kuala Lumpur, it was found that the selection is based on Malay beliefs. It can be seen in the shape of symbols and objects that do not contradict the basis of Islam for the Malay community and also the identity requirements of the nation, based on the ethics of producing works of art.

In the context of the current development of physical art, ethnic issues recognisable in the appearance of the works of art that are based on the culture of various communities, revive various traditions, and embed the drive and context of local elements into the overall display of the physical artwork. Apart from that, through its relationship with the local community's social system, we can also visually recognise the existence of the identity of modern Malaysian art. It must also be understood that the existence of visual shapes is also the symbolic reaction of the artists, which is subconsciously connected to the behaviour of the artists' immediate social system.

In displaying the existence of a variety of ethnics in Malaysia, the demonstration of symbols and objects within the artwork that were studied was based on the issue of only one group of people. This shows that Malaysian artists are not exposed to and do not adequately observe the culture of other communities that exist in Malaysia. The issue of knowledge and mutual understanding of other cultures that exist, based on the wealth of ethnicity is a loss in the context of the development of Malaysian physical artworks.

In addition, if viewed in the context of the current needs that are based on market requirements or national objectives in the production of artworks; the focus revolves around the identity that can represent the country. To solve this problem, artists take the shapes of traditional objects and the physicality of culture to represent national identity. Because of current needs based on national issues, it can be seen that the form of artwork is the same, in the context of objects and the issue of the production of artwork.

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