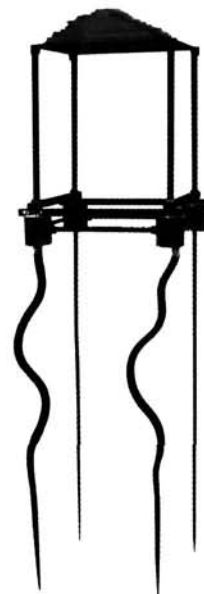


# Contemporary Art and Design Malaysia

*Mohamad Khalil Amran, Co-ordinator of Liberal Studies Department, Universiti Teknologi Mara, reports on the development of art and design in Malaysia*



*Ramlan Abdullah, 'Minaret III', Steel & Glass*

## Artistic Tradition and Orientation

Discussion of artistic tradition in Malaysia always begins with the cave paintings of Tambun, in Ipoh, Perak and in Niah, Sarawak. Like those from other parts of the world, Malaysian petroglyphs consist of magical symbols which are related to shamanism as well as the prehistoric way of life.



*Zulkifli Yusof, 'The Power I' (1991)*



*Abdullah Ariff, 'Coconut Plantation - Dawn', watercolor (1948)*

eight hands) in bronze from Bidor, Perak; the standing Buddha statues from Jalong and Pengkalan Pegoh; and pots found at Tanjong Rawa, Kuala Selinsing (Md Zain,

1991). Such artifacts are similar to those created in India, China, Thailand and Indonesia.

These cartoon-like, stylized human and animal figurative images represent the social activities and beliefs of prehistoric society. In that context, the paintings and few artifacts recovered from the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods are universal in form and content (Mahamood, 1992).

Examples gathered from the Hinduist-Buddhist period include the statue of Buddha Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (with

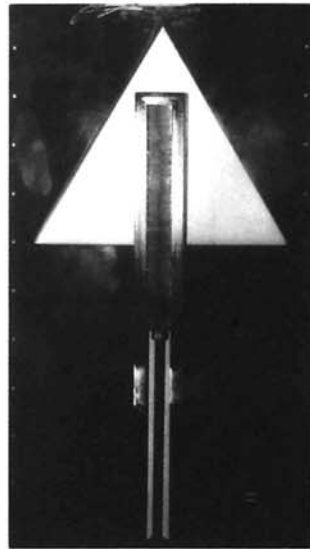
With the coming of Islam in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the iconoclastic beliefs, traditional arts such as wood carvings, calligraphy and textiles, which are considered as crafts in other countries, have been regarded as a form of art in Malaysia (Mahamood, 1992).

The shift to Islam, after more than a thousand years of Hinduism, marked a post-Hindu Malay world-view in cultural and artistic aspects. The Malay world-view

underwent a major shift from being primarily mythological-animistic to being rational and philosophical in nature (Tun Uda and Al Ahmadi, 1997). Muslim craftsman, in this context, are guided by Islamic principles and 'tawhidic welthans-chaung' (Esa, 1993). According to Tun Uda and Al Ahmadi (ibid):



Ruzaika Omar  
*Basaree, Siri  
Dungun' (1981)*



Ramlan Abdullah, *Level  
Picture Composition,  
Metal & Glass (1994)*

*For the craftsman, he crafts in total submission applying his creative energy and knowledge to the utmost in the pursuit of excellence. And, at the end of the process, he leaves no signature, no name to exalt his creation. For to him this is an act of devotion.*

*Tawhid or The Oneness of Allah is the core of consciousness, the unshakable aqidah (faith). In practice, everything that the true Muslim (artist or craftsman) does is in full awareness of this consciousness (Faruqi, 1984).*

To uphold the purity of the faith, neither representation of Allah in any visual forms nor realistic representation of living beings, human or animal, is allowed. Alternatively, Muslim craftsmen focus on Islamic calligraphy known as *Khat*, vegetal motifs and geometric (arabesque) designs. As for the Malay Muslim craftsman, Sheppard (1978) in *Living Crafts of Malaysia* observes:

*They have replaced the exquisite curves of Arabic lettering with the curvilinear charm of branches, leaves, and flower, which represented the natural background of the craftsman's daily lives – the forest – with emphasis on its beauty, simplicity and majesty. The Islamic cultural tradition has been practiced more positively in another way; as in other Muslim communities, the Malay craftsmen did not attempt to design monuments to (glorify) God, and did not strive to achieve a unique masterpiece. They preferred to provide their patrons and general public with work that could be understood and enjoyed by everyone.*



Yong Mun Sen, *'Kek Lok Si Temple' (1953), watercolour*

According to Beg (1980), the concepts of 'denaturalization' and 'dematerialization' are the basis of Islamic art, and more preference is therefore an abstraction (Md Zain, 1991). In Islamic tradition, artists and craftsmen have been guided by specific principles in their creative activities.

These characteristics appear clearly in Malay crafts such as wood carving, calligraphy, woven cloth, silverware and brassware. Due to strict adherence of Malays to the teachings of Islam, all the vegetal motifs are geometrically denaturalized, and calligraphy is often incorporated as an element of traditional art. For instance, traditional Malay houses, palaces and mosques feature wood carvings, combining calligraphy with geometrical vegetal patterns.

However, under British colonisation, some subtle changes in art took place. The western mode of expression gained its popularity, and thus probably because of the British educational system being introduced in Malaya at that time, artists began to use different idioms, from traditional art (which was craft-based) to easel painting. Towards the end of World War II, artists in Malaysia began to look to the west for direction in their approach to art (Md Zain, 1991).

The emergence of the Western easel painting tradition and the spread of Western cultural values caused traditional art to be considered merely as craft. The British colonisation of the Malay Peninsula in the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the birth of modern Malaysian art which engendered the dislocation and subsequently, the marginalization of traditional Malay art (Esa, 1993).

For Esa (1993), modern Malaysian art was "founded on a secularistic world-view, and advocates various philosophies and theories which directly conflicted with the



*Yong Mun Sen, 'Waterfall Garden' (1948), watercolour*



*Ramlan Abdullah, 'Form & Dispersion', acrylic sheet, fibre optics, Twin Tower Sculpture Garden (1997)*

religio-mystical world-view of traditional Malay art.”

Western art tradition dominated the Malaysian art scene from the nineteen thirties until the seventies when the National Cultural Congress (1971) and the Seminar on Indigenous Roots (1979) were held in order to answer questions regarding cultural identity, indigenous art and Islam.

The creation of a Malaysian national culture, using Malay culture as the foundation, was considered to be vital to the attainment of national integration (Seong Chee, 1981). More importantly, the impact of the National Cultural Congress (NCC) on contemporary art has been the challenge for Malaysian artists to consider the over-riding significance of such issues as national

identity, origins and traditional norms and values as central to artistic creativity (Esa, 1993).

The NCC established three criteria for the creation of a Malaysian national culture. Firstly, that national culture should be based on the cultures of the indigenous communities in Malaysia; secondly, that cultural elements from other cultures could be incorporated provided they are considered to be appropriate; and finally, that the religion of Islam should be a basic element in the national culture.

Today, this legacy has been carried on by several exhibitions and seminars such as Rupa and Jiwa (Form and Soul) 1979; Seminar of the Roots of the Indigenous Arts, 1979, Form and Soul; the Continuity of



*Cheong Soo-Pieng, 'Kehidupan Tropika' (1959), watercolor*



Traditional Arts in Malaysian Contemporary Arts, 1992; as well as the Seminar and Exhibition of the Unity of Science and Islamic Traditional Arts, 1993. Apart from the National Art Gallery (as an important art institution in Malaysia), several artists and historians who have been directly involved in this effort, including Syed Ahmad Jamal, Sulaiman Esa, Osman Bakar, D'zul Haimi Md Zain, Mulyadi Mahamood and Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman. International scholars such as the late Ismail Faruqi and Syed Hoessin Nasr were invited to some of those events. All these efforts were successful in creating awareness among Malay artists of the traditional values and aesthetics in their creative process.

#### **Art and Design Education in Malaysia**

In traditional Malay society, to serve the ruler was an honour for the artist-craftsman and thus most of the major crafts centred around the court of the raja or sultan (ruler). Royal artist-craftsmen were given elite status resulting from royal patronage. According to Sheppard (1978), a nineteenth-century Malay raja rewarded his craftsmen with nothing more than their daily food and clothing and the special status of a royal artist-craftsman.

Other than precious metal work other crafts like pottery, screw-pine mat plaiting, kite making etc. were more or less a village industry. However, it seems possible to consider the local craftsmen as the originators of the country's art and design activities (Bajuri, 1988). They were artist-craftsmen (Sheppard, 1978) whose works embodied the principles of Malay aesthetics; namely finesse, usefulness, unity, contrast and symbolism (Ali, 1989).

They also designed their own specialised tools (Bajuri, 1988), but would later have them made to order (Sheppard, 1978).

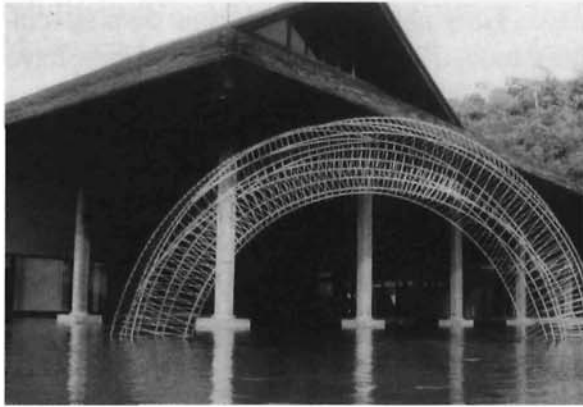
With colonisation and introduction of secular education (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), came the rise of Malay intelligentsia and English-educated professionals, administrators and government servants. It also awakened the Malays to their common cultural past, and eventually Malay nationalism (Boon Kheng, 1988).

With the establishment of the first English school in 1815 (Penang Free School), the teaching of art and design (formerly known as art and craft) had been based on a purely western approach (Md. Zain et al, 1982) and was formalised 20 years later.

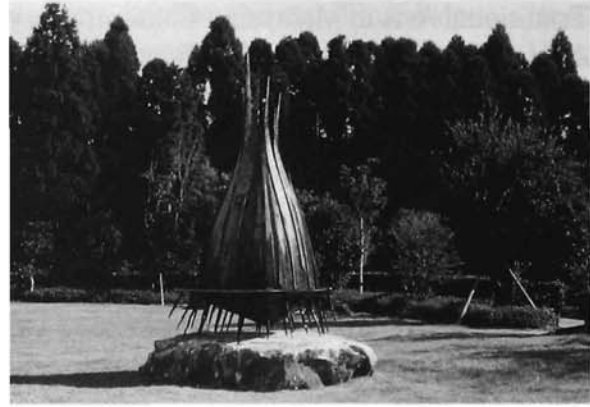
The kind of craft-making taught was more skill-oriented, with emphasis on English crafts. A short-lived attempt to teach superficial Malay handicrafts with ambiguous objectives was made in 1853 but was not incorporated into the curriculum until well into this century (Zain, 1982).



*Nik Zainal Abidin,  
'Bangau' (1962)*



Ramlan Abdullah, *Form & Soul*, Stainless steel, Sheraton Perdana Hotel (1997)



Ramlan Abdullah, *'Growth'*, brass, mild steel, marble (1995)

Appreciation of Malay cultural values increased after independence in 1957. Apart from the call for revival of indigenous traditional culture for national unity in the early 70's, this was basically a starting point towards preservation of cultural heritage and values in art, design and everyday life (Mohamed, 1978, Sheppard, 1978) amidst the rapid industrialisation of the country in the 70's and 80's (Bajuri, 1988).

In terms of art and design education, the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) was the first institution to offer modern art and design education. It is also the first institution to attend to the problems concerning indigenous art and traditional culture. Notable efforts have been made by the Faculty to revise and incorporate indigenous art and design in theory and studio subjects since they hosted the Seminar of the Roots of the Indigenous Arts in 1979 (Hassan, 1980).

In the early years, art and design education in UiTM placed emphasis on the practical, having students involved with design exercises but with little time devoted to design theory and other related subjects. Bajuri (1988) recollects the way industrial design was taught, as a student during the early years of industrial design education in UiTM:



Yusof Hj. Abdullah, *'Wayang Kulit'*, oil (1960), Kolesi BSLN (APS)

*"Instead of giving the student design projects that could have used locally available materials and indigenous processes, most of the projects were plastic- and metal-based, involving processes seemingly very foreign to students.*

*Among the project being set were designing a plastic liquid dispenser, a fork and a spoon, a condiment set and a plastic light fitting. Since there were no facilities for prototype building, etc., all the projects ended up being assessed and marked on drawing and visual presentations, rather than on the actual tested models. It might be due to this fact that most of the*

*students' design seemed to be more 'aesthetic oriented' rather than encompassing aspects of functionalism, etc.. However, despite this, the students seemed happy and pleased with their projects, probably having the impression that they were being westernised, a trend which was much favoured during that time. Their general idea and impression of industrial design was basically working in the city, and designing for the rich through the use of modern material like plastic. etc.. Using local material and applying indigenous processes*

and 2000 students, offering major Art and design courses at Diploma and B.A Hons. Levels, including Fine Art, Graphic Design, Textile Design, Fine Metal, Industrial Design, Ceramic Design, Fashion Design, Photography, Printing Technology and Art Teachers' Diploma. At post-graduate level, the school offers M.A. and PhD in Art and Design.

Other institutions of higher learning and private or commercial art institutions offering courses in art and /or design are the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia



Coconut grater, Malaysia

*in their design, according to them, did not make them designers, but would instead turned them into craftsmen, like those seen in the rural areas."*

Since the late 80's, UiTM grads have played important roles in the design and manufacture of PROTON, Malaysia's national car. Today, the Faculty of Art and Design, UiTM is the biggest art and design school in the country with more than 135 teaching staff

(UTM), Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA), Limkokwing Institute of Creative Technology (LICT), the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris (UPSI) and Universiti Malaya (UM).

"[Malay] ideals are encrusted with the debris of earlier beliefs, and are being transformed"

- Winstedt

**Case study: Ramlan Abdullah, sculptor and an academic staff of the Faculty of Art and Design, UiTM.** In terms of reputation and credibility, Ramlan has been awarded numerous important commissioned works at national and international levels. He won the Grand Award of the

tional and unconventional materials, techniques and concepts he has applied reflect in a major way contemporary sculpture in Malaysia.

Born in 1960 in the state of Perak, Malaysia, Ramlan received his first degree in Fine Art from the Faculty of Art and



*Ramlan Abdullah, besides his  
Minaret Series (2000)*



*Ramlan Abdullah, copper/polyester/resin/glass, Apec  
Sculpture Garden, Philippines (1996)*

prestigious Oita Asia Sculpture Competition, Japan (1995), and the Best APEC Sculpture Award, Manila, The Philippines (1995). According to Finely (Asia-Pacific sculpture News, summer 1996), "Ramlan Abdullah is one of the best young sculptors working in Malaysia today." The varieties of conven-

Design, UiTM (1982). This was followed by another BFA from Wartburg College, Iowa (1987) and a Post Baccalaureate degree from the Art Institute of Chicago before pursuing a MFA course at the Pratt Institute, New York. He is currently the Programme Leader and Senior lecturer of the Fine Art



Department, the Faculty of Art and Design, UiTM, Shah Alam, Malaysia.

Ramlan is well known for his exploration of materials, techniques and concept in the context of contemporary sculpture in Malaysia. He has worked with timber, steel, rock, resin, glass acrylic sheet and fibre optics in a very effective and inspirational manner, with simplicity and overtones of abstraction the hallmark of his sculptures. Most importantly, Ramlan's combination of materials were directed towards unity, strength, tension and dynamism. This is seen in the consistent use of columns with pointed base resting on a firm or rather solid base or structure.

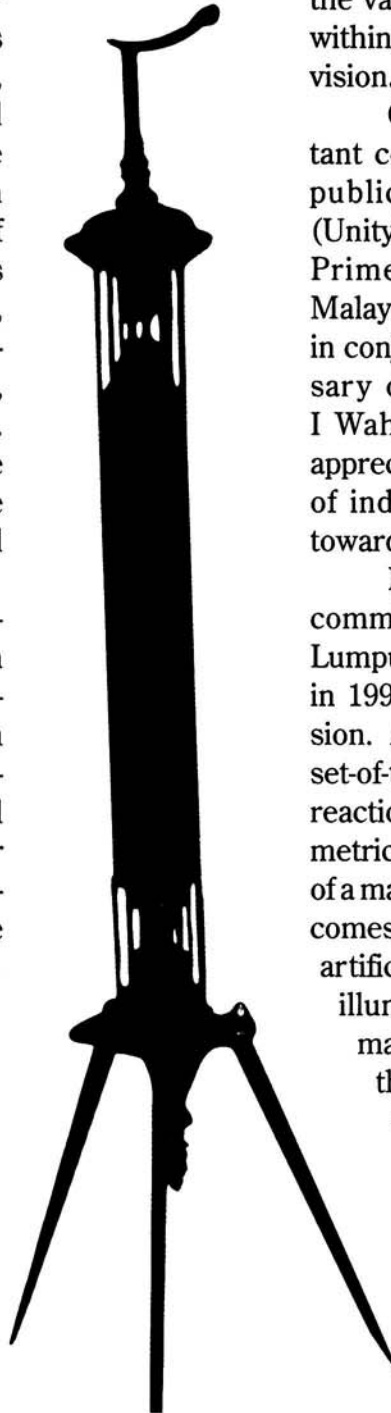
Monumenta 1999, for example, was constructed with steel and glass, while The Generation of Raw 1993 presented an interesting combination of timber, concrete, cable wire and steel. His outdoor sculpture for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Sculpture Garden at the Philippine International Convention Centre, Manila was titled VC (1995). It features a three-legged structure, which form a triangular base upon which a solid pyramid made from polyester resin and glass crowns the construction. According to Ramlan, this work focused on the idea of protection or shelter, the structure having

being derived from indigenous Asian architecture. From the formalistic point of view, this sculpture is about mass, form and structure, reflecting the APEC community, the various dynamic cultures found within the group, its activity, role and vision.

One of Ramlan's most important commissioned works was the public sculpture called Wahdah (Unity) 1997. The patron was the Prime Minister Department of Malaysia. This project was launched in conjunction with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Malaysian independence. I Wahdah symbolised a token of appreciation for the people, the value of independence and the journey towards Vision 2020 for Malaysia.

Ramlan's *locus classicus* was the commissioned work for the Kuala Lumpur Twin Tower Sculpture Park in 1997, entitled Form and Dispersion. As suggested by the title, this set-of-three sculpture dealt with the reactions of light on a series of geometric forms installed at the surface of a man-made lake. In this case, light comes from two sources, natural and artificial. During daytime, sun rays illuminate the transparent forms made from hundreds of one-inch thick acrylic sheets, resulting in a spectrum of colours with the fascinating reflection bathing the whole area. By night, fibre optics were employed to illuminate the 'floating' geometric forms.

The essence of Form and Dis-



Ramlan Abdullah, Minaret XII, Steel & Glass (1999)

person is its transparent and crystal clear quality, together with the play of spectrum and reflection. According to Ramlan, these were used as metaphors to represent the quality of cleanliness and purity, honesty and trust; apart from the revolutionary materials

used in this work which was a landmark in contemporary sculpture in Malaysia. As a whole, Ramlan's works can be considered an exemplar of a well-balanced abstraction and simplicity, technical skills and imaginative visual configuration.

### **Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia**

*Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia* introduces many traditional forms of theatre that are not widely known outside their countries of origin. Edited by Dr Chua Soo Pong, Currently the Director of the Chinese Opera Institute in Singapore, the book discusses how traditional forms of theatre should be revitalised in the rapidly changing socio-economic environments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

*Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia* (US\$ 10 excluding postage cost) can be obtained from:

Regional Centre for Archaeology  
and Fine Arts  
SPAFA  
81/1 Sri Ayutthaya Road  
Samsen, Theves  
Bangkok 10300, Thailand  
Tel : (66-2) 2804022-9  
Fax : (66-2) 2804030  
Email : [spafa@ksc.th.com](mailto:spafa@ksc.th.com)

