

# The Development of Modern Paintings in Borneo during Post-War Era (1945-1960) in Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei

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**Abstract:** *This study describes the development of modern art in Borneo particularly in Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei, from after the Second World War until the 1960s. This was the period where British Colonial governance dictated their education system, which consequentially inculcates art education particularly visual art among local community in Borneo. British influence within the state governance, social and education system designed with Western ideology, created not only westernized society and mind-set, but at the same time generates artistic opportunities for emerging local painters to be involved in the initiation of Modern Art in Borneo. Historically the existence of colonial government departments, museums and colleges and other polity based organization within their vicinity contribute significantly to artistic development, correspond in similar structure that binds artistic affirmation in these regions homogeneously. Their understanding of easel painting and unique interpretation of culture once distanced from traditional art, resulting in a new visual images that transcend their ethnicity and identity through new medium and tools. These meticulous intervention modestly visualized in each paintings presented in this paper and hopefully will enhance deeper understanding and appreciation history of modern art in Borneo.*

**Keywords:** Sarawak Art, Brunei Art, Sabah Art, Asian Art, Borneo Art, Colonial Paintings, Post-War Paintings.

## 1. Introduction

Development of Modern Art in Malaysia have always been looked at from a regional point of view. Most studies concentrates first and foremost on paintings activities accruing before Malaysia Day by focusing on Penang and Singapore, while Sabah and Sarawak situated geographically outside of the Peninsular, barely make it into the equations. Studies and research on history of modern paintings in Borneo have always been look at according to their geographical boundaries, which are art in Brunei, art in Sabah and art in Sarawak. And most of the time focused exclusively on crafts and cultural artefacts which comes in an abundance of types and variety from ethnic group from all over Borneo including Kalimantan (Kerlogue, 2004). Until recently, very little information on paintings, traditional or modern have been documented in Borneo, and henceforth difficulties arises in identifying and establishing a collection of modern paintings or its progression from non-existence to its humble development since colonialization (RH Hasan, 2002). This development although minimal and dawdling in nature, succeeded in catapulted itself, generally through education policies and system sanctioned by the British Colonial Government throughout these three divisions.

In this paper the researcher will try to expose facts which will illustrate how modern art in Borneo can and have been developing homogeneously due to gravitating circumstances in accordance with political and educational background of the post-war era (1945 to 1960). Furthermore Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak are three regions linked together historically and culturally for hundreds of years (Gin, 1990). Inter-connected through many aspects, historically and politically, many corresponding events brought them to their maturity and subsequently became independence states that they are today. During colonialism and imperialism era, 'modernization' was a process that affects most countries in Southeast Asia and such artistic development are

one of many aspects of social changes that most countries associated with colonialization and social change (Kerlogue, 2004). In order to survive the changing political and social interventions local community of various ethnic groups in Borneo have no choice but to be aware of the changing mind-set and accept different perspective of changes that took place in global scenario, in both industrialization and Westernization through means such as education and economic affiliations.

## **2. Advancements of Art Education in Borneo**

Colonialism and education system are two main components which constitute the history of Modern Art in Malaysia. Names such as Redza Piyadasa, and T. K. Sabapaty are among some that congregate a chronological and fundamental history of modern art from both points until current development. On that note it is only fair to also consider Borneo from the same points in order to create a similar background study and time line which can be analysed parallel to other development of modern art from Southeast Asia. According to Ooi Keat Gin, education system was designed by the colonial government, for local community in Borneo. Among some of their reasons are, preparation for providing the colonial government offices with lower levels officers to help them in governance matters.

“However the premium the indigenous people and the Chinese of Sarawak placed on white collar employment in the government civil service or in European commercial establishments overrode all other consideration in their attitudes towards the type of education they sought” (Gin, 1990, p. 12)

From early development of organized education system in Borneo, the subject of art was included in their syllabus, even though its importance was not priority at this point such as in Brunei where art subject particularly, only gained significance in 1960s (Abdul Gani, 2001) Realizing this, colonial government intended to ensure that syllabus and instructions are not bias to Western education only, and strict intention should be given to the existing content. As a result curriculum was revised in the 60s in order to inculcate more cultural and ethnic values that would hopefully attract more indigenous and Muslims students to attend vernacular schools. Earlier on since after the Second World War ended, Sarawak and Sabah primary and secondary schools syllabus includes art and craft and other related activities which emphasis on enhancing appreciation and skills for local art and crafts. This was implemented by the colonial government because concerned were expressed over the importance of providing initiatives which will promote preservation of craft and increase craft production locally (Sarawak Annual Report, 1950). In time, the colonial government hoped to be able to reinitiate interest in craft making, which had already decreases considerably during economic recession and the booming of rubber and paper price particularly in Sarawak in 1949.

Many painters in Borneo had their first artistic exposure in teachers training Colleges, learning about art and craft and how to teach it to schools pupils. Teachers Training College in Batu Lintang, Kuching, the first College of its kind in Borneo, opened in 1948, recruited students not just form Sarawak but also from Sabah and Brunei (Sarawak Annual Report For 1950, 1951) At this early stage, its syllabus stress more on artistry skills rather than theoretical framework of art history that are important for further development in critical and analytical aptitude. The course consist of a two years duration, designed to improve academic standards of all students where considerable emphasis was also laid on the need to maintain and develops traditional skills and indigenous craftsmanship. The establishment of Kent College in 1952 in Sabah initiated by the government was to recruits locals students and teachers such as Murshidi Nambi, as teacher for the newly established College. He was once a teacher in the Malay Training College in Kuching, right after finishing his training as teacher in Sultan Idris Teachers Training Collage in Tanjung Malim, majoring in art and craft (Ismail, 2005). During late 40s and the 50s in Sabah, Murshidi Nambi, Simone C. Yew and K. Bali are teachers as well as a skillful painters in oil paints and water colors. Their accomplishments and passion for art had inspired many of their students to paint and draw, in addition the impact of their art works set the standards for paintings produced in this period.

While in Brunei although art education in schools was given little attentions, most schools encompassed art subject in their syllabus in the form of craftsmanship and basic skill for drawing. Aware of the advantage of art, teachers were exposed to art education and artistic methodology, during training in college. In the Federation of Malaya particularly art education started since as early as 1919, then in Sarawak and Sabah since after the Second World War (Abdul Ghani, 1999). Art was one of the subjects offered for trainees and it was compulsory in their training to understand various techniques and basic skills of art that will enable them to draw and paint sufficiently. In the early development of art in schools in Brunei, teachers and students was pro-active in perusing their interest by joining small exhibitions organized by staff of education department during the 60s (Abdul Gani, 2001).

In Sabah, experienced painters and art teachers from Britain such as Lucille Plunkett, Tina Rimmer, and Peter Harris (Art Superintendent in the Federation of Malaya and one of the founder of the Wednesday Art Group, in 1952) were a big influence in the post-war period. Through colonial education system they penetrate local artistic ambience and instigated painters movement in Sabah into a full scale movement in 1950s (Ismail, 2005). At the same time, in Sarawak Susi Heines an educator, and Lucy Morrison a government officer working during the colonial era in Kuching contributed significantly to artistic development and establishment of Kuching Art Club since 1946 (RH Hasan, 2002). Their work and support in improving art education in Sabah and Sarawak increased interest among school pupils and fellow teachers and at the same time encouraged participation of locals schools graduate in artistic activities such as classes, exhibition, and art clubs and other related conducts.

Kent Teachers Training College Tuaran build in 1953 took students from all over Sabah and Brunei. In 1958 training in speed teaching courses were introduced in order to fulfil urgent needs for more school teachers in North Borneo (Mohd.Nor, 1978). Although this institution were not involve directly with the formation of Art Club in Sabah, some of its students and teachers did in moderation of involvement and interest instigate artistic activities and organized exhibitions (Ismail, 2005). Since its existence, Kent Training College and later Gaya Training College (1962) had provided lesson for visual art, music, craft making and handiworks in its syllabus. This was to promote cultural conservation and instil artistic knowledge for the continuation of craft production and artistic understanding with Western orientation. Teachers such as K. Bali who was also one of the earliest novelists in Borneo, and Murshidi Nambi encourage painters to develop their skills and participate in small scale art exhibitions organized locally. Their active involvement and delicate art works marked the early movement of water colourist and landscape painters in Sabah. Government bodies such as British Council and Museums Departments gave their support by organizing and providing venues for exhibitions, in conjunction with other exhibitions such as photography, sculptures and crafts throughout Borneo (See Figure 1)

<b>SARAWAK</b>	<b>SABAH</b>	<b>BRUNEI</b>
<b>1891</b> -Sarawak Museum	<b>1946</b> -British Council Jesselton	<b>1956</b> -Brunei Teachers Training College
<b>1930</b> -Malay Training College Kuching	<b>1952</b> -Kent Teachers Training College	<b>1962</b> -Brunei Literature Bureau
<b>1946</b> -British Council Kuching <b>1948</b> -Batu Lintang Teachers Training College	<b>1963</b> -Gaya Teachers Training College <b>1965</b> -Sabah Museum	<b>1965</b> -Brunei Museum
<b>2006</b> -Sarawak Art Museum	<b>1984</b> -Sabah Art Gallery	<b>2003</b> -Art Gallery

Fig. 1: Chronology of Development

## 2.1. Artistic Influence and Affiliation

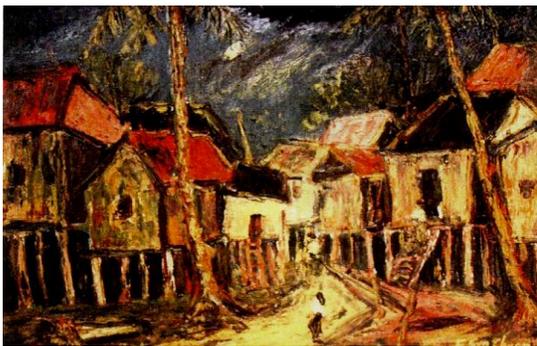
After the Second World War, formally educated artists form China, Singapore and Malaya which progressed ahead in the development of modern art, gave significant exposure in term of painting's subjects, styles and techniques to local artists in Borneo. Prominent artist form Singapore such as Cheong Soo Pieng and other fellow artists such as Yong Mun Sen, visited places of interest in Sarawak and inspired them to create

many paintings based on indigenous subject and images, dedicated to their unique culture and colourful ethnicity (RH Hasan, 2002). Concurrently Peter Harris (one of the founder of The Wednesday Art Group in Malaya), after being dispatched to Sabah, extended his enthusiastic charms and love for art, resulting in constant artistic activities in schools and local community halls. He also encouraged and facilitate a local student, Mohd. Yaman Ahmad Mus, (one of his pupil and later become the co-founder of Sabah Art Club) to further his studies and become the first student form Sabah to study art overseas in 1963. Most importantly, Mohd. Yaman Ahmad Mus established the Sabah Art Club in Kota Kinabalu in 1958, while he was still in All Saints Secondary School Sabah, together with another teacher, Oliver Beaven, a ‘Teaching Service Volunteer’ form England (Ismail, 2005). Earlier on, in Sarawak, Lucy Morrison a colonial officer stationed in Kuching got together fellow artists residing in Kuching and established the Kuching Art Club, in 1949. The club survived until today under a new name called the Sarawak Fine Art Society (See Figure 2)

SARAWAK	SABAH	BRUNEI
<b>1949</b> Kuching Art Club	<b>1930s to 40s</b> Individual Painters/Private Art Class	<b>1940s</b> Prints, Sketch and Drawing
<b>1968</b> Sarawak Fine Art Society	<b>1958</b> Sabah Art Club	<b>1962</b> Art Section: Brunei Literature Bureau
<b>1985</b> Sarawak Artists Society	<b>1960</b> Sabah Art Society	<b>1977</b> Brunei Artist Association

Fig. 2: Artistic Associations in Borneo

While most self-taught local artist in Borneo were struggling with improving skills and mastering medium and other technical inadequacy, Chinese artists that graduated from various art schools in mainland China such as Simon Yew from Sabah and Chin Kee from Kuching already a master in Chinese scroll and calligraphy, currently striving for individual style and to objectively imitate contemporary movement practiced by Gauguin, Cézanne or Picasso. One of Sarawak painter already in the proses of shifting form traditional painting towards a liberated self-expressing style such as fauvism and abstract expressionism was Foo Syn Choon, an oil painter from Sarawak who had formal training in Bath Academy of Art, England from 1965 to 1967, beneficiaries of the Colonial Government scholarship. In contrast to Morshidi Nambi a teacher who had limited exposure in art education in teachers training college but well acquainted and skilful with oil paint very much prefer the sincere style of realism to his landscape paintings. (See Plate 1 & 2).



(Plate 1) Foo Syn Choon, *Village*. Oil paint, 1965 (Sarawak)



(Plate 2) Morshidi Nambi, *Flowering Shrub by the Sea*. Oil paint, 1966 (Sabah)

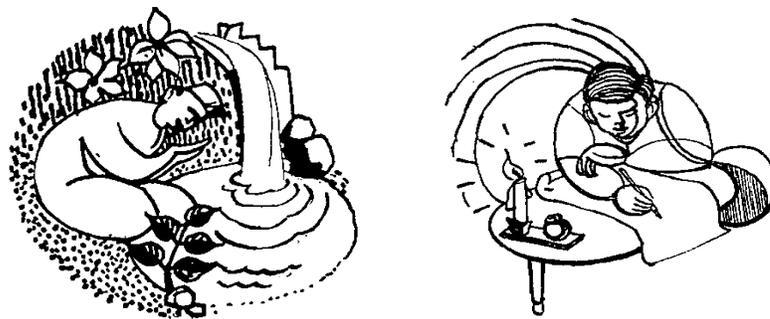
Despite early exposure on artistic education received in Sabah and Sarawak, teachers form Brunei remained anonymous because of their small scale activity since after the war, due to the difficulties of gaining art materials form local market (Abdul Gani, 2001). Thus, their works were not many and not collected by any leading organizations. None of the sketch and drawings by skillful artists were documented resulting in difficulty on

pin-pointing their starting point. As a result the commencement of artistic activity in Brunei mostly recorded from where formal education in art were given to the first batch of art students during the early 70s.

“The main impetus for the development came from a number of western trained Bruneian artists, who, on completion of their art education and training in the United Kingdom, returned to Brunei in the early 1970s, and began producing and exhibiting easel type painting which bore some elements of art nouveau and avant-garde of western art (abstract expressionism, hard edge, op art, pop art which gained popularity and followings in Europe and America in the 50s and 60s) (Abdul Gani, 2001, p. 6)”

Nevertheless Brunei has been very active in putting itself at par with its neighbours and since the existence of Brunei museum department in 1995 the total collections of local and foreign paintings accumulated to 497 pieces (1966 until 2001). The museum is also a place where Brunei Artists Association held their annual exhibitions. Until 1990 the Brunei museum had organized 27 art exhibitions, independently or in collaboration with foreign organizations such as UNESCO and other art museums outside Brunei (*Muzium Brunei 25 Tahun*; 1965-1990, 1990).

Another senior supporters of the arts in Brunei was the Brunei Literature Bureau (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*)–DBP. Established since 1961, their main focus was to preserve and sustain the stateliness of Malay language as a national language in Brunei through the preservation of Malay language and literature (Souvenir Programme; *Pembukaan Rasmi Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei*, 1968). DBP were also responsible for publication of books, journals, and periodicals which requires artists to provide visuals and illustrations. This initially created a new section in the department. Some of the artists whose works can be found regularly in DBP’s early publications were Hamid Asmat, Awang Sitai, later became the most established painter in Southeast Asia, Rabaee Sabli and Zakaria Hamid and Batik painter Pengiran Omar bin Pengiran Md. Salleh. Together with Pengiran Asmalee and Pengiran Muhammad their works very much transcends the development of the artistic dimension in Brunei through creative interpretation of their myths, folklore and everyday ritual in the life of Bruneians (See Plate 3 & 4). With their own distinctive and humble style and understanding of modern art their creative works, illustration, paintings and comics embodied Brunei Modern Art which eventually multiplies into a bigger scale and avant-garde establishments.



(Plate 3 & 4). 2 Illustrations for BAHANA magazine; Vol.9/DBP1/1966. (Brunei)

### 3. Conclusion

The relentless efforts for education and similarity of political affiliation and socio-economic conditions seems very much co-relates to the study of modern art in Borneo, consequently this facilitate art historian to justify the realm of Bornean art history which hitherto have been overlooked in main stream discourse. Education system assisted by its unique political connexion and structure actually provide significant platforms which inculcate modern art with its own distinctive definition, created in moderation of their understanding of modern art, an avoidable progression required by the fast developing modern society effected by global change. The loyalty to their passions and gratification for venerating nature and their surroundings define and justify the

artistic styles of early painters in Borneo, which seemingly impassive towards controversial issues and ideologies that obviously threatened many in Southeast Asia.

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