

AN INSIGHT ON THE CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC ART OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM FROM 1984 TO 2019

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Abstract

As one of the Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, Brunei Darussalam is not new when it comes to the production of contemporary Islamic artworks, with its local artists regularly showcasing their work in both local and international art exhibitions. However, comprehensive academic investigations focusing on the field of Islamic art in Brunei remain noticeably absent. As a result, this study aims to address this gap by examining contemporary Islamic art in Brunei from 1984 to 2019, produced by its local Muslim artists. The year 1984 is selected as this study's starting point due to its historical significance in Brunei's trajectory, coinciding with its Independence Day. Specifically, the purpose of this qualitative study is to obtain an insight into the trends of production, focusing on three aspects of the selected artworks: (1) date of production, (2) art media, and (3) artistic styles. Formal analysis was utilised to scrutinise 384 visual artworks including drawings, paintings, sculptures, mixed media and installations. This method was employed to structure information pertaining to the three specified aspects above. It is hoped that this study will be beneficial as a body of knowledge and serves as a starting point for further research on Islamic art in Brunei Darussalam.

Keywords: *Brunei Darussalam, contemporary Islamic art; formalism; muslim artist; visual art*

Introduction

Islamic art has been recognised worldwide through its artistic characteristic styles according to specific cultural traditions, historical context and artistic sophistication defined by time and location. Generally, the term 'Islamic art' has been associated with the religion of Islam or Islamic civilisation which is predominant in many countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and Southeast Asia. Since the 19th century, Western scholars have studied and discussed the subject of Islamic art and used the Middle East region as their starting point or as an epicentre which reverberates to other peripheral regions where Islam is the predominant religion. It focused specifically on the Arab world, at least

from the time of Prophet Muhammad until the last Caliphate of the Ottoman Empire (*Khalifah Uthmaniyyah*). The works of Oleg Grabar for example, have highlighted important issues associated with Islamic art, which later opened other doors to study the subject through various perspectives globally, including art historians, curators, archaeologists, and more recently expanded to other fields within the social sciences.

For the past 50 years, these scholars have assisted in identifying the works of Islamic art according to several contexts including classifying its locations, types of artworks produced, the styles, and art patrons involved in a particular period and region. These works are

mainly recognised as traditional or classical Islamic art referring to the works which were produced in the past. But the main question is, did Islamic art stop there? What about the status of Islamic artworks that are produced in other parts of the world in contemporary settings?

With the rapid growth of Islam throughout the world, the Islamic religion is not just strongly rooted and practised within the Middle East region or the Arab lands, but it has spread towards every corner of the world. These include countries like Russia, India, Europe, Asia and Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is among the regions with the biggest Muslim population in the world encompassing Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. Moreover, the current settings in which artists are exposed today, have shifted the way they see, think and perceive the world around them impacting the way they produce works of art. Some of these factors include art dialogues, technological advancement, educational system enhancements, diaspora and various cultural backgrounds of the artists.

Brunei Darussalam is no exception when it comes to the production of Islamic artworks. Interestingly, as one of the Islamic countries of the world today, it is not unusual to see these works being produced and exhibited. This is seen through the familiar 'Islamic markers' within the works produced. 'Islamic markers' in the context of this study refers to images or representations that are recognised to carry Islamic elements within the works of art. It does not, however, necessarily contain religious ideas, but the Islamic elements are always there. Ever since Brunei declared Islam as its state religion through its first constitution in 1959 (*Perlembagaan Negeri Brunei*, 1959), the knowledge, understanding and awareness of Islam in the country has increased significantly and has had an impact in strengthening its cultural identity, policies, Islamic governance and cultural practices, including the arts.

Despite the extensive production of Islamic artworks in Brunei, it is unfortunate that studies within this field are yet to be found in the

local context. Therefore, as the first study dedicated to Islamic art in Brunei, it is hoped that this study will contribute as a fundamental resource, laying the groundwork for future investigations. By offering an initial understanding of Islamic art in Brunei, it serves as a key reference for scholars and enthusiasts both locally and internationally, potentially enriching further studies in this field.

Literature Review

Contemporary Islamic art

For the past 50 years, the main differentiation in trying to define the subject lies between 2 major views, the secular views (Western scholars) and the Muslim views. Western scholars (Bloom and Blair, 1997; Grabar, 1973; Shalem, 2012) define Islamic art based on the chronological and geographical locations where Islam became the dominant civilisation, also taking into consideration the whole cultural context of the Muslim societies. However, these scholars disagree with entirely associating Islamic art based solely on the religion of Islam. Shalem (2012) for example disagrees to associate the understanding of Islamic art to the religion itself but rather to include the whole cultural context of Muslim civilisation. Some of the works of the past did not contain religious meanings but were simply based on aesthetics.

On the other hand, Muslim scholars (Aminah, 1995; Daud, Zain and Amin, 2014; Khawaja, 2011; Nasr, 1987) remain firm in associating Islamic art with the religion of Islam focusing on the importance of the religious, spiritual and sacred ideas. Michon (1985), or Ali Abd al-Khaliq (his Muslim name) for example is one of those scholars who suggests viewing the subject of Islamic art from what he calls the "spiritual universe" of Islam.

Due to these various definitions, Islamic art today has experienced changes when it comes to its practice and production. There are various considerations to be taken into account which eventually affects the whole practice of Islamic

art globally. Artists are now exposed to various art approaches, ideas, mediums, materials and technologies, and also come from various cultural backgrounds. Moreover, some of these artists (including the Muslims) have migrated and live in diaspora, within non-Muslim majority countries, where they become agents of cultural negotiation and at the same time reflect on their cultural or religious identities. Other artists studied abroad and adapted (or inspired) Western art cultures and approaches that influenced the production of their works to fit into contemporary trends. According to Lopes et al. (2015), many artists today have decided to eliminate religious and traditional ideas from their works to complement contemporary trends, but ironically, they still persistently revisited the classical elements of Islamic art including the styles, motifs, and even religious meanings. This eventually highlights the significance of unity in Islam beyond cultural diversity.

With the rapid growth of Islam throughout the world, the knowledge and understanding of Islamic teachings have also developed. It is a common practice for artists (especially Muslims) to refer to Islamic teaching as guidelines before producing works containing Islamic elements. This is where knowledge of Islamic schools of thought (*mazhab*) comes into play. When it comes to art, different approaches have been given depending on the schools of thought that are practised in a particular region or specific country. This is not to say that there are various 'types' of Islamic religion, but rather, there are just diverse scholarly (*Imams*) opinions and interpretations of their understanding of Islamic knowledge through the Quran and *Sunnah* (the Prophet Muhammad's example).

Generally, there are four well-known and accepted Islamic schools of thought and their teachings are implemented until the present day. They are, *Hanbali* (named after *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*), *Maliki* (named after *Malik ibn Anas*), *Hanafi* (named after *Nu'man ibn Thabit*) and *Syafi'i* (named after *Muhammad ibn Idris as-syafi'i*), which are mostly implemented in the Southeast Asian region, including Brunei. These

respected schools of thought known as the *ahlussunnah wal-jamaah* better known as *Sunni*, are approved in the Muslim world.

Due to these various schools of thought in understanding and practising Islamic jurisprudence in different parts of the world, it will certainly impact the cultural context of that particular area. Also, the idea of acceptance of certain norms and practices, including the art practice might differ in different countries. For example, countries like Saudi Arabia prohibit the use of figurative representations in works of art following exactly what was told by the prophet through a literal understanding of the *hadith* (the Prophet's sayings). But other places took a slightly lenient approach with limitations such as not portraying an entire figure (incomplete representation) or at least making a 'non-realistic' representation (sometimes distorting the images) just to be cautious of not trying to imitate what Allah has created.

Therefore, the scholars of today process all information available explaining art from an Islamic perspective which affects the way artists produce their works of art. Most of the time it deals with what is permissible and what is prohibited from an Islamic perspective. Today, various productions of Islamic artworks among contemporary artists can be seen using different approaches in an attempt to follow contemporary trends, but the Islamic markers continue to be visible whether through clear usage of representation or through conceptual approaches like abstract works. Moreover, current studies on contemporary Islamic art are not so much focusing on trying to deal with definition but rather focusing on the production of artistic imagery in different parts of the world (Lopes et al. 2015).

Thus, contemporary Islamic art today gains popularity as more art enthusiasts are becoming more interested in the works that are produced by artists that incorporate new ideas, their cultural background, technological approaches, and the usage of various mediums and materials into their works. Today, Islamic art enthusiasts are more interested in its artistic

characteristics as it was not given attention that much (Choudhrey and Bobrowicz, 2016). Lopes et al. (2015) also highlight that special attention is currently given by art curators, art dealers and art collectors to the works of contemporary Islamic art that are produced by artists who are inspired by their cultural roots, use of artistic imagery and also living in a diasporic discourse.

Islamic art practice in Brunei Darussalam

Bruneian Muslim artists have continued working and implementing various approaches in trying to express their ideas in their creative works with the consciousness of their own cultural identity and Islamic faith. The consciousness of producing Islamic art is incorporated into the lifestyle of the Muslims in Brunei, mainly towards the concept of omnipresence (something which is not visible) of the duality between what is allowed (*halal*) and what is not (*haram*).

All art exhibitions that are open to the public on a national level in Brunei has to undergo certain censorship process by the policy-makers or event organisers, as it is required to meet the country's national philosophy, the MIB (abbreviated: *Melayu Islam Beraja*, translated: Malay Islamic Monarchy). For example, the works of Islamic calligraphy that use Quranic verses need to get approval from the Islamic Da'wah Centre, Ministry of Religious Affairs of Brunei, before putting it up for exhibition. Interestingly, most of these local artists have already undergone their own 'self-censorship', before they join any exhibition. This idea of 'self-censorship' is unique among the local Bruneian Muslim artists in trying to execute their knowledge and creativity incorporating their understanding of the religious, cultural and political elements into their works.

This concept of nationalism is related to what had been explained by Benedict Anderson in 1983 on the idea of the "imagined communities". Anderson (1991) describes this context as a nation that is socially constructed by

the community, imagined by its people who perceive themselves as part of the group. Meaning, that there is always an idea at the back of the mind of the people to perceive something whether it is culturally, religiously and socially accepted, or rejected to be part of the community. Similarly, with MIB being the essence of the way of life of Bruneian people, one can agree that they shared the most common perception of what is acceptable as part of their cultural identity or vice versa. In this sense, it is no longer the concept of an "imagined" community, but for Brunei, it is a "reality" because of the country's successful realisation of its national identity.

Generally, several recognised Islamic markers are mutually accepted as elements understood by Bruneian people that represent Islamic connotations, and these markers are commonly found in the majority of Bruneian artworks. Some of these markers include the works of Islamic calligraphy, Islamic geometrical patterns, Islamic vegetal patterns and representation of Islamic architecture, specifically, mosques. These markers are not just known to the Bruneian culture, but they are also recognised throughout the world as standard representations of Islamic elements.

Islamic art gallery in Brunei

The only centre that can be recognised as a permanent space for art activities for contemporary Islamic art in Brunei Darussalam is the Islamic Calligraphy and Arts Studies Centre of Yayasan Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkhiah. This centre began its operation on the 22nd of July 2013 which aims to assist the foundation in transmitting the eminence of Islam by providing a platform for the development of Islamic art education in Brunei Darussalam. Although the centre provides a convenient space, at the moment, it heavily focuses on specific types of Islamic art which are the Islamic calligraphy and decorations.

To date, Brunei has yet to have its national art gallery and thus, it is a challenge for the country and its local artists to help permanently preserve or exhibit works of art.

Initially, Art galleries are crucial for any country's cultural development and identity, which consequently will improve the tourism activities and its economy, and as a form of recognition of its cultural heritage. Art galleries and museums help to connect the artists, artworks and society to help create a harmonious social ambience. Moreover, it is a form of platform for education where people can learn about history, culture, tradition, material culture, prominent figures, important events and other beneficial information.

Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to gain insight into the production and practice of contemporary Islamic art in Brunei Darussalam from 1984 to 2019. This study, therefore, employs a formalism approach that deals with the 'form' of the artworks. By 'form', it implies looking at the way the artwork was made, purely on its physical or visual characteristics as described simply by Getlein (2010), "the way a work of art looks" (p.36). Specifically, it involves analysing all the artworks and categorising them into several themes. These include categorising the types of work, art styles, mediums and materials used, and art techniques, which are later interpreted and discussed. This study focuses on classifying contemporary Islamic artworks into 3 specific categories namely, (1) production years, (2) art media, and (3) artistic styles. One of the rationale for focusing on these selected categories is that it will assist to see an overview trend of what the contemporary Islamic art of Brunei looked like from 1984 to 2019. In other words, it gives an insight into the contemporary Islamic art production in Brunei for the past 35 years since its Independence Day.

FROM 1984 TO 2019:

Insight Into Brunei Darussalam's Contemporary Islamic Art

This study successfully gathered a total number of 425 artworks in digital copies in the

form of photographs and scanned pictures which were obtained through primary and secondary sources including art catalogues and magazines. The study managed to gather information on the artworks as early as 1984 to 2019. Although 425 artworks were identified as containing Islamic markers, some of them had to be discarded due to several factors including the unavailability of the artworks' information such as the artist's name and work title. Therefore, the exact total number of artworks selected for this study is 384 which belongs to 45 Bruneian Muslim artists.

Date of Production

The date of production denotes the period when artworks were produced, usually indicated by their production years. The production of contemporary Islamic art in Brunei can be traced back to the 1980s, with a limited number of pieces primarily documented in secondary sources. Notably, this investigation reveals a substantial growth in the production of contemporary Islamic art since the 21st century. The figures of the selected works are organized by decades, as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Comparison between the total number of contemporary Islamic artworks collected and selected for the study according to decades

Artworks by decades	Total number of gathered artworks	Total number of selected artworks	Percentage of selected samples
1980's	27	20	5%
1990's	60	51	16%
2000's	338	313	79%
	Total: 425	Total: 384	Total: 100%

Table 1 reveals a significant gap in the documentation of artworks over three decades. The 1980s and 1990s saw 87 artworks, while 2000 to 2019 documented 338 artworks. However, these numbers are only based on documented productions found through

secondary sources, not the representation of total production.

This issue of having a smaller number of artworks to be produced and documented in earlier decades extends beyond just Brunei Darussalam as it also affected other neighbouring countries in the Malay world like Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. A recent examination of contemporary Islamic art by Nor Azlin Hamidon and Siti Mastura Md. Ishak (2015) indicates a scarcity of records for Islamic artworks from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The primary cause identified is the lack of documentation, particularly before Malaysia established its National Art Gallery in 1958. Brunei faces a similar situation, with minimal local artist participation in art exhibitions in the 1980s. But, unlike Malaysia, Brunei has yet to establish its own National Art Gallery, which makes the task of keeping records of past artworks even more challenging.

This study reveals that a limited number of local artists, mainly from the first generation born between the late 1940s and 1960s, were actively involved in producing Islamic art for various local and international exhibitions during the 1980s. The evidence for this participation is documented in art catalogues and magazines found in the National Archives of Brunei Darussalam. Among the notable figures from this first generation is Pengiran Dato Paduka Haji Asmalee bin Pg Ahmad, recognised for his substantial contributions to the art and design sector in Brunei. However, the majority of these first-generation artists have stopped producing artwork, primarily due to ageing, with some having passed away.

The production of contemporary Islamic artworks by Bruneian Muslim artists has been active since the 1990s, although the output during that decade is relatively modest compared to the subsequent 2000s. Nevertheless, this suggests that a subsequent generation of local artists began showing interest in creating contemporary Islamic art as part of their creative expression. This shift was facilitated by various factors, including educational initiatives and support

from the government towards local art practices. Consequently, more local artists had the opportunity to explore new approaches to visual arts by participating in modern and contemporary art exhibitions and gaining valuable experience and knowledge from international peers. Some of these artists were even sponsored to pursue further studies in various visual arts fields, such as 3D modelling, fine arts, 3D design, and graphic design. Upon returning, they brought back diverse knowledge and skills, contributing to the enrichment of the local art scene.

The study reveals that local art exhibitions during the 1980s and 1990s lacked specific themes related to Islamic art. Instead, these exhibitions focused on showcasing the skills, ideas, and cultural representations of local artists. The predominant emphasis was on individual quality and personal identity, particularly through two-dimensional works like paintings. During this period, artists commonly depicted Bruneian cultural identity by incorporating familiar subjects, such as mosques, landscapes, *Kampong Ayer* (Water Village), and botanical studies, as important symbols or icons representing Brunei.

In addition, local art exhibitions in Brunei have received sponsorship from international agencies, such as the "Philip Morris ASEAN Art Exhibition" by the Philip Morris Company, aimed at supporting visual art practices. However, this exhibition ceased due to cultural and religious concerns, given that the company is associated with the promotion of tobacco products which is culturally and religiously unacceptable in Brunei, an Islamic country. Despite such challenges, this international sponsorship has stimulated local artists to continue producing works. The period from 2000 to 2019 witnessed a significant increase in contemporary Islamic art production utilising various unique art styles and approaches, with 346 contemporary Islamic artworks identified works, although only 330 were selected due to the aforementioned reasons.

Based on personal experience, consistency emerges as a pivotal issue in local art

exhibitions, underscoring the question of the productivity of the artists. Some artists only engage once, treating the exhibition as a one-time memoir entry rather than an ongoing commitment. Others join for evaluation requirements or as part of community service, lacking genuine interest in continuous artistic production. Some others repeatedly showcase a singular piece, often observed among students fulfilling their educational requirements. While these artists produce, their lack of variety and involvement renders them less productive in the broader artistic context.

Art Media

This study delves into the utilization of art media in Brunei’s contemporary Islamic art produced between 1984 and 2019. In this context, art media refers to the diverse mediums artists employ for their creative expression, including the use of pencil, charcoal, watercolour, acrylic, oil paint and pen. The art media usage is categorized into two primary groups: two-dimensional (2D) works and three-dimensional (3D) works, as detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: *Bruneian contemporary Islamic artwork types from the 1980s to 2019*

	Art media	Total works	Types
1	Painting	225	Two-dimensional media (2D) total: 364 works
2	Mixed-media art	105	
3	Drawing	34	
4	Installation	17	Three-dimensional media (3D) total: 20 works
5	Sculpture	3	
Overall total			384 works

Table 2 above illustrates the favoured art forms chosen by artists engaged in the production

of contemporary Islamic art from the 1980s to 2019. The findings indicate that a significant portion of the artworks examined were generated in the form of 2D art, establishing it as the predominant medium selected by Bruneian Muslim artists for their artworks. This category encompasses painting, mixed media, and drawing as the primary artistic media. Within the 2D realm, painting consistently emerged as the most popular medium chosen by Bruneian Muslim artists since the 1980s, maintaining its preference as the principal art form up to the present.

Through a thorough analysis, this study identifies shifts in the preferred painting mediums across different periods. In the 1980s, the preferred mediums were predominantly oil paints and watercolours, which are evident either through the artworks themselves or the accompanying descriptions. Towards the late 1980s, watercolour gained prominence as the favoured medium, despite the concurrent availability of other mediums like acrylic paints.

While oil paints persisted among veteran artists, their popularity began to decline gradually towards the end of the 1990s. By this time, artists increasingly opted for acrylic paints, citing practical reasons such as ease of use, quick drying properties, and convenience in art stores. Additionally, in Brunei, the cost of high-quality acrylic paints and related materials was more budget-friendly compared to oil paints and watercolours. The adoption of acrylic mediums was further motivated by concerns about health, with the artists perceiving continuous use of oil paints as potentially hazardous. Consequently, the use of acrylic mediums gained traction and continues to be one of the most favoured choices among Brunei artists today.

The application of acrylic paints in mixed-media art became interestingly prevalent from the year 2000 onward. It was not very popular during the previous two decades although there were some indications that some artists had attempted to do so. Bruneian artists began to embrace this approach by combining various traditional and non-traditional art mediums and materials for exploration and experimentation.

Artists started to use a diverse range of materials including fabric, wood, metal sheets, varnish, and prints, showcasing a shift towards a more contemporary and unconventional artistic approach.



Figure 1: *Alif Lam Mim* (2002) by Marol Tajuddin, Mixed media (120cm x 120cm)

Drawing is also found to be one of the mediums utilised by Bruneian artists in their creative expression. However, drawing is generally perceived as preliminary sketchy or unfinished works. While these drawings serve as quick ideas for many artists, the final artworks frequently are manifested into other various art forms. This study examines 34 drawing works that have been exhibited in art exhibitions before.

In contrast, the least favoured category among Bruneian Muslim artists is the 3D artworks, totalling only 20 identified contemporary Islamic art pieces. Most of these works take the form of installations, with sculptures being relatively scarce. While some may view sculptures and installations as similar, distinctions emerge, particularly in terms of spatial considerations and practicality. Sculptural works often do not require site specification and are typically permanent, while installations demand specificity and are typically temporary, mostly documented through photographs and

catalogues. This is the case for the majority of installation works that were found in this study produced since the year 2000 by young artists among undergraduate students for their final year projects in higher institutions.

Concerning 3D works, this study found that religious and cultural contexts can significantly influence an artist’s choices. Sculptural works, especially those incorporating Islamic elements, can be contentious due to their religious connotations. Artists tend to work in their ‘comfort’ zones and avoid controversial issues as much as possible. As an example, it happened to one of the local Muslim artists who produced Islamic calligraphy through sculptural work using stainless steel to represent the word ‘Allah’ (see Figure 2), only to get criticized by fellow artists and audience, despite winning the competition.

It is not to make sweeping generalisations but rather to acknowledge that 3D art, especially sculpture can lead to varied and strong reactions among the audience in Brunei. It appears that there is a degree of caution in utilizing or endorsing artworks featuring Islamic elements, possibly stemming from spiritual considerations. This caution may explain why sculptures produced by Bruneian artists are predominantly located outside the country, such as in Singapore and China.

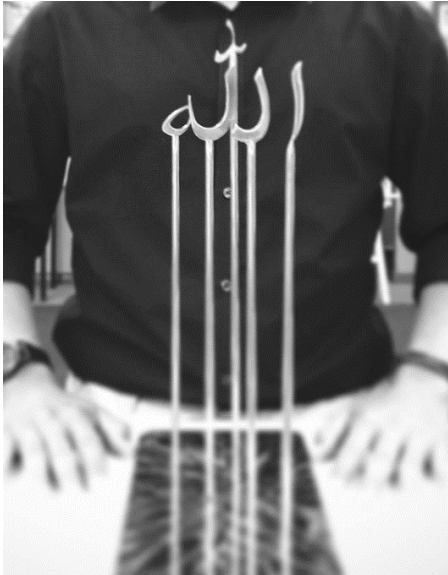


Figure 2: *Devotion* (2001) by Marol Tajuddin, Sculpture work.

6.4 Artistic Styles

Artistic styles are integral to the field of art history, providing a framework for the analysis and interpretation of artworks. However, the definition of art styles is multifaceted, encompassing periodization, artistic movements, formal characteristics, and socio-cultural contexts. Art style is a term that can be referred to as an attempt made by artists to represent their ideas in an artistic expression which helps us to categorise art based on their appearance. It refers to “a characteristic or group of characteristics that we recognize as constant, recurring, or coherent” (Getlein, 2012, p: 32). It is one of the ways that art historians tried to make a distinction and classify works of art. They navigate the complexities and challenges in defining and categorizing art styles to gain a deeper understanding of the evolution of artistic expression.

Art style generally links with the art movement. However, these two terms are not to be confused, although both are closely related especially in the artistic context. An art movement is a term used for historical convenience to associate particular artists or their artworks with a certain philosophical movement for a certain period, and it only makes sense at that time and place. Moreover, art movements were usually driven by certain groups of artists who engaged themselves in a particular art style based on sharing common goals.

In the contemporary context, any works of art can be described as following certain art styles from previous era, if it shares similar visual characteristics. It is not, however, necessarily considered to be part of a particular art movement. For example, when a Bruneian artist makes an artwork based on the idea of ‘nonsense’ or ‘ridiculousness’ can be potentially described as following the ‘Dada art style’, but the artist does not belong to the ‘Dadaism movement’, as the

movement started in Switzerland around 1914, during the World War 1. Therefore, artistic movements generally were based on philosophical ideas during a specific era, but the art style is perpetuated and is still relevant today.

Essentially, it is quite challenging to categorise Islamic art into a particular art style according to the Western scholarship of art history. These are also some of the challenges encountered for this study in trying to discuss Brunei’s contemporary Islamic artworks according to the Western art style. Perhaps this is what Shalem (2012) meant by the ‘problem’ of trying to fit Islamic art into Western art history and perhaps this is also what Nasr (1987) meant by Islamic art being seen as a ‘different category’ of art among the public. For example, some works such as Islamic calligraphy, Islamic patterns or tessellation are difficult to fit into a particular art style such as realistic, abstract or expression. But if we focus on analysing the artworks according to the manner it was produced, it eventually assists the analysis and discussion process. In this study, the majority of Brunei’s contemporary Islamic artworks were produced using approaches that are peculiar to Western art, such as the use of mediums and materials like acrylic, oil paints or canvas in the production of the works. Such usage of materials and art approach is not known to be part of Brunei, or the whole culture of the Malay world. With this situation, we are unable to discard the significance of Western art scholarship in discussing contemporary art in general.

It is also interesting to highlight here that generally, there are two primary categories of Bruneian artists. One group has had the opportunity to pursue formal art education, while some others are self-taught. This study’s analysis reveals that these artists predominantly produce works aligned with the 20th-century art styles. Those with formal education often incorporate well-known art styles and techniques learned during their studies, contributing to the establishment of a local art trend. Self-taught artists on the other hand tend to follow these trends, participating in similar exhibitions

alongside their peers. This is not to disregard the uniqueness of these artists' skills and knowledge, but some of them feel the need to fit into certain artistic styles.

With the given situation of contemporary Islamic art practice in Brunei, this study decided that the art style in the context of this discussion does not refer to different types of "Islamic artworks", but refers to the manner it was produced. It refers to the artistic expression of the artworks based on formal characteristics and their appearances. It is also not referring to some specific art movements, although the writing might use several terms peculiar to some art movements such as realism, impressionism or surrealism for discussion purposes.

For this study, it was very challenging to categorise and discuss contemporary Islamic art of Brunei into one specific artistic style as most of these artworks can be categorized into multiple art styles. It is also a very common issue encountered in Western art scholarship in trying to categorise any works of art into a specific style categorisation. All artworks discussed here are based on the knowledge and understanding of art styles to the best of the researchers' ability. Through this study's analysis, some very distinct artistic styles were found to be heavily used by Bruneian Muslim artists in producing works of contemporary Islamic art, namely, abstract, realistic, expressionist, decorative and impressionist art styles.

The abstract art style is one of the most dominant art styles used in contemporary Islamic art of Brunei. Abstract works in this context also refer to artworks that are semi-abstract, non-representational and non-figurative means. Abstract art according to TATE gallery, is the "art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead used elements of shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect." Abstract art also comes in various forms such as Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, and Minimalism. For example, an artist like Jackson Pollock is known for his emphasis on spontaneity and emotional expression through bold, gestural strokes. Such

art styles rely more on visual elements like colours, shapes, forms and lines to convey meaning and emotion.

This study found various kinds of abstract works including the works of Islamic patterns and also several non-representational artworks. If we analyse some of the characteristics according to the TATE's definition above, works of patterns can be categorized into abstract art styles. It is decided that the majority of Islamic pattern works are under the abstract art category. Nevertheless, some of these pattern works can also be discussed in several other art styles such as in the form of decorative and expressionist art styles.

Interestingly, this study found that the usage of abstract art style among Bruneian Muslim artists was only very popular since the mid-1990s as only four Islamic artworks were to be found produced in the form of abstract works in the 1980s. Since the late 1990s, the style has become very popular since then. The main focus of such non-representational works is basically on the usage of colours and textures, by also utilizing some Islamic calligraphy elements as part of the composition. Below are some examples of such abstract works. In Figure 3 for example, the artists utilized the use of lines and colours to represent the movement of sound for a call to prayer (*azan*) by the person who recites them (*the Muezzins*).



Figure 3: *Azan and the Muezzins* (2018) by Wahab Hassan, Mixed media (70cm x 70cm)

This study also found the realistic art style to be one of the most common artistic styles preferred by Bruneian Muslim artists in producing works of Islamic art. Essentially, realistic art derives from the first ever art movement to be born in the 19th century as a response against both Neoclassicism and Romanticism art approaches, which is known as Realism (Getlein, 2010). The general idea of the Realism movement is to portray a realistic representation of the world. This artistic movement is characterized by the faithful representation of the visual world to capture the everyday aspects of life with remarkable precision. The roots of realism can be traced back to earlier artistic traditions and the societal changes of the time. Some well-known artists of this movement include Gustave Courbet, Jean-Francois Millet and Edouard Manet.

This study found that Bruneian Muslim artists commonly preferred to use a realistic artistic style when working with realistic images in their Islamic artworks. Realistic approaches are considered to be highly valued art in the Brunei context as the audience prefers to see images that can be recognized (Arus, 2013). Moreover, the skills of artists were determined based on how realistic their works were to somehow be 'accepted' or appreciated as proper works of art. Realistic style is the most consistent and dominantly used all the time throughout the years by local artists. It is interpreted that Bruneians still value this style due to its ability to show the 'fine art' capability of the artists in depicting resemblance to the actual subject. Moreover, even art teachers in the majority of Brunei schools still teach and maintain a realistic approach towards artwork production, and this is a part of the syllabus. This study found that the realistic styles approach is mostly utilized by artists who work with realistic subject matters as shown in the example below.



Figure 4: *SOAS Mosque* (2018) by A. Ajihis, Oil on canvas (76cm x 92cm)

The expressionist art style was also among the commonly used styles among Bruneian artists. This style derives from a large art trend in Europe known as Expressionism in the early 20th century. It was based on the belief that the ultimate purpose of creating art was to express artists' intense feelings towards the world (Getlein, 2010). Expressionist artists essentially sought to depict the subjective emotions and responses of a particular subject matter, rather than the physical reality. Meaning, it does not necessarily depict the actual representation of the subject matter, but capturing the emotions, feelings and responses to everything around is fundamental in expressionist art style. Some of the popular expressionist artists throughout history include Edvard Munch, Henri Matisse and Franz Marc. Expressions can be utilised through various artistic techniques such as the stroke of brush or choices of colours to express the particular subject matter.

The utilisation of this art style among the Brunei artists was mostly on works related to Islamic calligraphy and also some Islamic pattern works. Islamic art generally is rich in expressive style known for its intricate beauty and deep symbolism, often exemplified through the medium of Islamic calligraphy. Islamic calligraphy has developed into the art of writing, but it goes far beyond mere words; it is a form of visual expression that conveys spirituality, devotion, and connection to the divine. Through Islamic calligraphy, the subject matters used and

the way it was portrayed inclined more towards the expression of emotional feelings including spiritual and religious attachments. This is because the majority of the artists used sacred subject elements for this kind of work, such as the use of sacred words or verses from the Holy Quran. In the case of Islamic calligraphy, some of the works were utilized using a unique composition. In the sense that some of the artists did not follow specific common calligraphic writing format but rather it was expressed through the use of various techniques such as unique personal writing styles through brush strokes and colour applications.

Figure 5 Below is one example of how the word Allah was written expressively using black ink which creates wonderful textures around the composition. The way the artists manipulate the calligraphy by creating intricate compositions with flowing lines reflects the deep reverence for the written word and the spiritual significance it holds. Many of the calligraphy works in this study were utilized with flowing lines, and graceful curves, which is the primary style of Islamic calligraphy. The choice of script is not arbitrary, but it is rooted in the Islamic tradition. Arabic calligraphy transforms the written word into a work of art, where the form of the letters is as important as the meaning they convey.

In this study, Islamic calligraphy works often, if not always, feature sacred elements such as verses from the Holy Quran, *dzikir*, *shalawat* and simple words that have spiritual meaning. This practice serves a dual purpose, firstly, it highlights the central role of the Holy Quran in Islamic culture, and secondly, it transforms the sacred text into a visual representation of the concept of divine beauty. The careful rendering of these words in calligraphy serves as a way for artists and viewers to connect with their faith and reflect on its teachings. Today, Islamic calligraphy has not remained static as contemporary artists have pushed the boundaries of this art form by experimenting with new materials and techniques while staying true to its core principles. This fusion of tradition and

innovation keeps Islamic calligraphy a vibrant and evolving expressive art form.



Figure 5: *Kalimah Allah* (2018) by Pg Timbang, Ink on paper (59.4cm x 84.1cm)

Not only that this expressionist artistic style found in the works of calligraphy, but it is also present in some works of geometrical and arabesque patterns. Pattern works are characterized by the use of precise geometric shapes such as circles, squares and stars which are often repeated and interwoven. It is not merely decorative, but it also carries symbolic meaning, reflecting Islamic belief in the order and unity of the universe. These patterns are thought to connect the viewer to a higher spiritual realm. Arabesque patterns, on the other hand, are characterized by flowing, intricate vegetal motifs. It is known for its fluidity and lack of a clear beginning or end, symbolizing the concept of infinity and the interconnectedness of all creations. They are also often used to decorate surfaces, adding elegance and beauty to various art forms.

Decorative art style was also found in some of the works of Brunei's contemporary Islamic art. The idea of decorative art concerns with artistic disciplines that involve decoration and ornamentation of items that are usually functional, but do not necessarily have intrinsic aesthetic qualities. Some refer to decorative art as 'craft works', but the phrase usually connotes the idea of traditional works of certain places, such as basketry, weaving or bronze making, which is not part of this study. Decorative art in this context

refers to the decoration or ornamentation works that can be found in either 2D or 3D visual artworks that are meant for decoration purposes. Decorative art is not an art movement although it is recognized as a category in art history. However, it has often been associated with various art movements throughout history including the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements that focus on craftsmanship and aesthetics of decorative art incorporated into various forms of art and design.

Decorative art refers to objects and items that are created with both artistic and functional purposes which includes the works such as ceramic, textile and glassware. This type of art style is very common in the world of Islamic art, which is also best known as ornamentation. In this study, the decorative art style is found mostly in installation works, which are meant for decoration purposes. It is also found in some works of ceramics. Islamic patterns and calligraphy remain the most common elements used by Bruneian Muslim artists for decoration purposes. Figure 6 below is an example of the 3D decorative work found in this study. The artist utilized the works of Islamic patterns and calligraphy onto a white ceramic plate which has been used as the artist's 'canvas'. However, the artist herself did not produce the ceramic work.



Figure 6: *Two Cultures* (2018) by Selinna Asmalee, Ceramic work.

Lastly, there was also some evidence that shows the artists were inspired by the impressionist art style in the works studied. Impressionism essentially refers to the works of art (mainly painting works) that describe the style which captures the essence of painting through careful study and the use of light on the particular subject matter. Impressionist art style challenged traditional artistic convention, emphasising the transient effects of light and colour in capturing the essence of a moment. This particular art style is renowned for its unwavering focus on capturing the ever-changing play of light and colour. Moreover, Rewald (1973) noted that the impressionist artists were fascinated with the immediacy of visual experiences where plein air painting practice became very central, and involved working outdoors rather than in the studio. Impressionist style also experienced some artistic development through the next generation that highly focused on personal direct painting technique and colour theories including Georges Seurat, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Cezanne (Getlein, 2010). Seurat for example, records optical sensation through colour theories which led him to discover and develop the Pointillism technique.

Some of the famous Western artists include that inspired the local artists include Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh and George Seurat. Through this type of art style, the Bruneian artists, although still depicted realistic images of the subject matter, utilised styles that are very common to the impressionist artist style. Figure 7 below is an example of such work using the impressionist art style technique of painting known as pointillism to create colour combinations in capturing colour impressions of the subject matter and its environment. Such a technique is quite similar to *'The Eiffel Tower'* (1889) by Georges Seurat. Through this art style, Bruneian artists continue to use realistic images to achieve realistic representations, however, some of their attempts to experiment with different approach focuses on colours and lighting effects.

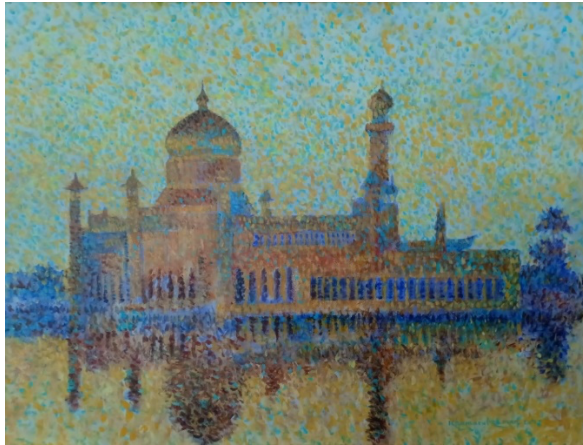


Figure 7: *Gema dari menara* (2013) by Marol Tajuddin, Acrylic on canvas (60cm x 70cm)

Since the year 2000 various styles can be seen in Brunei's contemporary Islamic art. They started to do more experiments and research with various kinds of art mediums and materials, especially among young artists. Experimentations have become the main focus in producing works nowadays. Some artists even integrated the use of digital media with the aid of technological advancement. Nevertheless, the realistic style remains very popular to date among Bruneian artists.

Through this study, it is safe to say that when it comes to the production of contemporary Islamic art in Brunei, there is a great fusion between traditional Islamic artistic elements with modern influences. It often features Islamic art including intricate works of calligraphy, works of patterns and representation of nature, but utilised in various visual art forms including drawing, painting, mixed media and installation. However, the specific characteristics of Bruneian contemporary Islamic art may vary among artists, therefore, it is a dynamic and evolving field that reflects not only on Islamic elements but also the cultural and creative diversity in Brunei Darussalam.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a broad overview of the production and practice of contemporary Islamic

art in Brunei produced by local Muslim artists spanning from 1984 to 2019. The intention is to provide insights into the developments and trends shaping contemporary Islamic art in the country. Since this is the first study to be conducted in the context of Brunei, it is anticipated that this study will serve as a foundational framework and act as a catalyst for more extensive and in-depth investigation, contributing substantially to the understanding of Brunei's contemporary Islamic art. This may involve grasping the essence of Islamic art through the lens of the artists. Alternatively, perhaps a thorough exploration of trying to uncover the significance of Islamic images within contemporary Islamic art.

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