

# Identifying the Concept of Space in Paintings with Malay Ornament Design

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## ABSTRACT

Space provides an essential quality in visual art, as it encompasses the arrangement of basic principles of art with other elements of design that transform the idea into creative aesthetic values. Misinterpreted decorative painting composition as flat space has created a misunderstanding of the depth approach in utilizing motifs and patterns. This study was conducted to examine comprehensively the concept of space that emphasized Malay ornament design as well as techniques and approaches. Twenty-eight decorative paintings from National Art Gallery, Malaysia permanent collections have been selected as sampling. Observation and tracing methods were used to further investigate the types of space that were explored in these paintings. As a result, three types of space were identified and shallow space was frequently present in these decorative paintings. Subsequently, this study will increase the understanding and diminish misjudgment of space with decorative painting composition, especially through the application of Malay ornament design.

**Keywords:** *Concept of space, Paintings, Malay ornament design*

## INTRODUCTION

Art practitioners have utilized space as a method for conveying their artistic idea and style in visual art. It provides an essential quality as it encompasses the basic principle with a combination of other elements of design to create aesthetic values. The concept of space is comprehensible to give an impact on the audience's perceptions. The illusion of deep space will give a wider view that invites the audience to interact with visual depth from the details in the foreground, middle ground, and background of the painting. Painters frequently demonstrated depth using the simplest indicator, which is through the arrangement of different sizes (Lauer, 2002). A sense of distance is acquired through the organization of images in the composition; therefore, a row of trees proposed an illusion of deep space according to scale differences. Besides scales, space can be acquired through tonal values, overlapping techniques, vertical

settings, and perspectives. Esaak (2020) explains that to understand the importance of space in art, artwork such as M.C. Escher and Salvador Dali have distorted reality images to convey emotion, movement, or any other concept the artist wishes to portray. The concept of space in art transmitted a huge and powerful meaning that exists in every background of cultural artist tried to capture its essence and presented them in their unique visual context.

While back in the earliest pre-historic period, the used concept of space appeared in ornament design can be traced back to the statement Ocvirk (2013) writes that the earliest cave painting images in southern Europe had discovered overlapping appearances with minimal concern for the illusion of space. However, incomparable to the ancient Near East "a flat and hierarchical order became important and significant events or individuals were emphasized through size variations" (p.225). This also is seen through hieroglyphics images and symbols in pyramids where pharaohs and servants are differentiated through sizes and decorative elements which signifies power and status.

However, there is a misinterpretation associated with decorative paintings in Malaysia. Mohamad Faizuan (2013) describes that the production of visual artworks is merely a presentation of beauty. It is not an in-depth study on content to be delivered to society that creates meaning to artwork, and the presentation of knowledge in artwork solely depends on the artist's statement. These issues need to be addressed so that ornament design in painting can be understood by researchers and art practitioners, through different approaches to developing visual illusion. This paper aims to emphasize the appearance of illusion space in paintings with Malay ornament design through tracing methods which will further explain the existence of other visual spaces in decorative paintings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of space can be defined as an idea that referred to the interval or measurable distance between points or images, which can be actual or an illusion (Ocvirk, 2013, p.223). Ding (2021) describes, "The artistic concept of space has changed from three dimensions to two dimensions and then expanded to multiple dimensions. Space is the foundation of all art products that cannot be ignored" (p.9). Ding's studies stated that technology engagement "has opened the door to a new world for virtual space, and art has achieved a breakthrough through the exploration of the humanistic spirit. The change of space field in art and real space complement each other and constitute the form of today's art" (p.10). Tyler emphasizes the concept of space in the twentieth century involves a deconstruction approach and embracing an eclectic array of space representation styles, from the extreme perspective quality of the super realists through the filmy textural haze where computers display images across spatial boundaries that allows the audience to interact with these images directly (2001). At present, technology has become part of the tools for artists and designers to explore potential creative artwork and it is not impossible for ornament design to be presented from traditional methods to contemporary approaches without changing its cultural aesthetic values.

Ornament is known as a type of decoration that frequently comprises motifs and patterns. It is also considered an aesthetic agent of beautifying surfaces or three-dimensional structures. Grabar (1995) defines, "... ornament is that aspect of decoration which appears not to have another purpose but to enhance its carrier" (p. 5). Nelson (1993) as cited in Cox and Minahan (Jul 2005) suggests, "ornament is a metaphor for dignity and value and also discusses how decoration can also signify the necessary, the functional, and the stable in architectural construction as it celebrates the presence of things" (p.529). Patrick (July 2001) explains the phrase ornament, "... as a complicated decorative patterning device that may exude intense emotion, give pleasure, and enhance beauty". Meyer (1920) further describes the difference between ornaments with decoration as that ornaments are adapted or developed from natural plants, while decoration signifies the art of process of applying various elements to beautify objects. Subsequently, Trilling (2001) describes ornament as "reflecting the interaction and transformation of

cultures through migration, trade, conquest and the spread of religions" (p. 104). Discussion by western scholars reveals that ornament has performed as a beauty agent to enhance an area or object which embodies significant values and meanings. Therefore, Malay ornament design has its concept of beauty as the motifs and patterns are customized in line with the Malay philosophy and cultural values.

Malay philosophy on ornament requires an intricate appreciation of nature. Nakula discusses philosophical aspects of Malay traditional art and craft, as cited in Mohamed Najib (2008), "Malay traditional crafts have their distinctive values either in their designs or philosophy. About their designs, they are the outcome of stylization of objects around them (p.180)". Ismail Saad (2002) writes that five types of wood carving motifs can be recognized in Malay traditional houses namely, flora, fauna, calligraphy, geometric, and cosmos. Siti Zainon (1997) describes that images that decorate traditional Malay visual art forms, are derived from the Malays' natural surroundings and some of these images signify symbols often associated with religious and society concerns and "... developed from their observations, experience as well as their beliefs" (p. 36). These studies represent how ornament is significantly referred to and used to increase the aesthetic values of the object. Malay concepts of ornament are more philosophical (Zakaria, 1991; Siti Zainon, 1997; Sulaiman, 2001; Othman, 2002) which derive from cultural background, beliefs, and natural surroundings.

Innovative exploration with Malay ornament design has evolved from traditional context to contemporary appearances. Malaysian painters have embraced the notion of cultural identity since National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971, emphasizing three main policies that related to indigenous culture, other cultures from the national culture, and Islam as an important component. However, after 50 years the government has reintroduced the NCC 2021 policy that has defined the directions for the country as a developed nation of cultured people based on the five principles of *Keluarga Malaysia* concept: inclusivity, togetherness, sense of pride, openness, and wholeness (Bernama, 2021). Therefore, comprehensive studies and involvement of every sector of the creative art industries in Malaysia should play their role to become in line with the latest National Congress policy. Hence, Malay design derives from the organization of motifs and patterns that relates to the observation of nature as inspiration, knowledge, and beliefs. Mohamed Najib (2008) notes that traditional Malay society has a way of looking at and experiencing things, such as thought, emotions, and spirituality, and achieved through observation, understanding, philosophy, and stylization approach. These studies have justified the essence of aesthetic values in Malay design that will provide valuable knowledge to the young generation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study emphasizes Malay ornament design focusing on paintings from 1970's to 2012 from the National Art Gallery's permanent collection. A total of twenty-eight paintings were identified and analyzed to discover the type of illusion space applied within the composition arrangement. The paintings were clustered through the utilization of Malay ornament design and two main categories were recognized namely traditional Malay design and Islamic design. Tracing methods was able to justify the layout structures of the composition and identified the formalistic aspects of design that were embedded within the paintings. Three paintings were selected to further discuss the concept of space in paintings with Malay ornament design. These paintings are selected based on traditional Malay design categories that have been obtained from the study, which were motif and pattern (Fatimah Chik; Unity in Harmony), and social activities (Noor Ismail Mat Hussin; *Pasar Siti Khadijah* and Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman; *Lenggang Perut*).

## FINDINGS

The study has shown that from twenty-eight paintings; three paintings have explored deep space, twenty-four paintings with shallow space, and two paintings have utilized ambiguous space (Table 1).

**Table 1. Utilization of Space in Paintings with Decorative Elements**

Year	Artist	Title	*Type of Space		
			D	S	A
1979	Ismail Mat Hussin	A Mak Yong Performance	/		
1980	Ismail Mat Hussin	<i>Membuat Sangkar Burung</i>	/		
1981	Ruzaika Omar Basaree	<i>Siri Dungun</i>		/	
1984	Ahmad Khalid Yusuf	Jawi and Nature		/	
1987	Mastura Abdul Rahman	Interior No. 29		/	
1987	Hashim Hassan	<i>Penceroboh</i>		/	
1987	Hashim Hassan	<i>Burung Dajal Mengganas Lagi</i>		/	
1990	Khalil Ibrahim	<i>Pantai Timor</i>	/		
1991	Ismail Mat Hussin	Market Scene		/	
1992	Sulaiman Esa	Garden of Mystery VI		/	
1993	Romli Mahmud	<i>Batik – Monumen Siri</i>		/	
1993	Fatimah Chik	<i>Subuh</i>		/	
1993	Fatimah Chik	Entrance			/
1994	Ahmad Shukri Mohamed	Cabinet IV		/	
1995	Syed Shaharuddin Syed Bakeri	Abstracting Power		/	
1995	Khatijah Sanusi	<i>Anugerah II</i>		/	
1995	Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman	Waiting for My Husband		/	
1995	Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman	<i>Lenggang Perut</i>		/	
1995	Romli Mahmud	<i>Akhirnya ke Kamar Jua</i>		/	
1995	Ismail Mat Hussin	<i>Pasar Siti Khadijah</i>	/		
1996	Fatimah Chik	Unity in Harmony			/
1998	Syed Shaharuddin Syed Bakeri	<i>Wayang Kulit</i>		/	
1999	Mastura Abdul Rahman	House of Flower, House of Harmon		/	

2003	Mohd Najib Mohd Dawa	Luscious		/	
2001	Yeong Seak Ling	<i>Kampung Life</i>		/	
2000	Hashim Hassan	<i>Laluan Masa</i>		/	
2000	Hashim Hassan	<i>Penghijrahan</i>		/	
2007	Mohd Nor Mahmud	<i>Pakai Semutar Kain Lepas</i>		/	

\* Type of Space: D; Deep, S; Shallow, A; Ambiguous

Three paintings were recognized to relate to deep space that focuses on an outdoor setting; Ismail Mat Hussin (*Pasar Siti Khadijah*) and Khalil Ibrahim (*Pantai Timor*) have incorporated this type of space to imitate the Kelantanese group activities. The foreground is justified through the detailed images or decorative design, while the background of the image is less emphasized to create depth in *Pasar Siti Khatijah*. Decreasing the size of figural images developed an illusion of depth, as shown in Figure 1. The differences in the size of the background figural (no. 3) from the foreground figural (no.1) create a deep space composition. The artist applied a batik medium style and handled the tonal values that are not similar to a medium such as acrylic or oil paint.



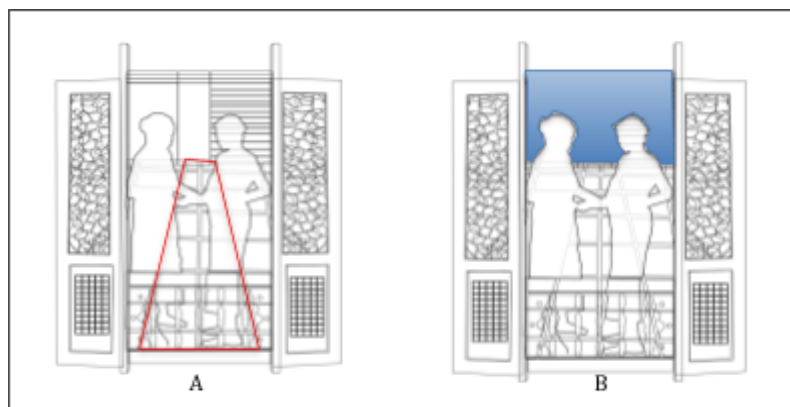
**Figure 1. Decreasing or Increasing Scales through Figurative Images Suggested a Deep Space in *Pasar Siti Khatijah***

(Source: Permanent Collection of National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.)

Shallow space is the second type of depth that was identified in these twenty-four paintings. It is also recognized as limited space as the borders or walls confine it. Ocvirk (2013) states, "the use of shallow space allowed more control of the placement of decorative shapes as purely compositional elements" (p.226) and "decorative art emphasizes the essential flatness of a surface" (p.224) and this style was perceived in the majority of the paintings. From the observation, two categories of shallow space were identified; the first category involves figurative images, and the second category comprises motifs and patterns. Noor Azizan (*Lenggang Perut*) and Yeong Seak Ling (*Kampung Life*) were discovered to apply shallow space composition focusing on figurative images. The setting is involved from an outdoor perspective viewing an enclosed area of the exterior window of a traditional Malay house. The detail of the background is less highlighted; however realistic detailing of batik cloth and decorative wood carving window frame with motifs and patterns in the foreground has reacted as the focal point of the composition. Two approaches were identified in *Lenggang Perut* for defining the limited space. Firstly, the position of diagonal lines that ended in the middle of vertical lines has suggested the boundaries of

walls (Refer to Figure 2A), and finally, the vertical lines behind the figure are proposed as the background limitations (See Figure 2B). Six paintings were identified to adapt shallow space with figurative images; they were Yeong Seak Ling (Kampung Life), Ismail Mat Hussin (The Mak Yong Performance, *Membuat Sangkar Burung* and Market Scene), and Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman (*Lenggang Perut* and Waiting for My Husband). Each painter displayed several materials and techniques to capture the Malay culture in Malaysia.

The second category involved the application of motif and pattern, which have identified eighteenth paintings, which focused on the Malay motifs such as *sulur bayung*, *pucuk rebung*, *bunga padi*, *bunga raya*, and geometrical motifs and patterns located in Sulaiman Esa, Khatijah Sanusi and Ahmad Khalid Yusuf artwork.



**Figure 2. Two Methods to Determine Shallow Space in *Lenggang Perut***

Ambiguous space was discovered in Fatimah Chik's paintings entitled *Unity in Harmony*, which demonstrated the use of triangular shapes and repetition of motifs and patterns in the composition. Mohd Najib (2008) explains that the triangular shape is related to the *pucuk rebung* or bamboo shoot motif, which indicated "the concept of strength, a human attribute radiated by mankind's original nature" (p. 183). However, the artist has integrated local ethnic motifs, which are embedded within the triangular shapes. The shapes were then cut and collaged, and this arrangement creates an overlapping pattern and displays a unique visual texture design (See Figure 3). In comparison with Fatimah Chik's paintings entitled *Entrance*, the artist has explored batik as part of the technique to achieve the ambiguous space. Both paintings portray an innovative approach to achieving the illusion of space by utilizing motifs and patterns.



**Figure 3. Overlapping and Collage Techniques Creates an Ambiguous Space in Artwork Entitled *Unity in Harmony* (1996) by Fatimah Chik**

(Source: Permanent Collection of National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.)

Material and techniques are significantly important that contributed to the appearance of illusion space in these types of paintings. Several artists have utilized silkscreen techniques (Mastura Abd Rahman; Interior No. 29, Fatimah Chik; Unity in Harmony) and collage (Romli Mahmud, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Khatijah Sanusi) as part of exploration techniques to imitate the repetition of motifs and patterns. This process is favored by artists dealing with decorative elements as it involves an arrangement of intricate patterns.

## CONCLUSION

Visual art is transformed using diverse mediums and techniques, which support the artist's idea and context. Frequently, paintings with ornament design presented an intricate decorative element and were explored with multiple techniques. These selected paintings have demonstrated three types of illusion space: deep space, shallow space, and ambiguous. However, shallow space was frequently found which highlighted the usage of complicated elements of motif and pattern in the paintings. Paintings were proven as visual historical evidence of the specific era, place, and community, and this study; will assist the Malaysian to expand and sustain the Malay cultural heritage for the younger generation as well in line with National Cultural Policy 2021.

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