

Motifs in Islamic Art Painting Based on the Islamic Aesthetics Theory

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Abstract:

This critical analysis is about the study of motifs through Islamic aesthetic theory on the art of Islamic painting in Malaysia which is the work of Sulaiman Esa, especially in Mahsuri 2 which was produced in 1983. This painting was chosen as the medium to be analyzed because Sulaiman Esa was deeply involved in pioneering the Islamic art painting movement in Malaysia with the excellent use of motifs from Malay cultural elements in his painting. He can be considered as one of the earliest Malaysian painters of the 1970s era who is skilled in using Malay-Islamic symbolism motifs through intrinsic meaning in his paintings. This study uses two main methods which are the library research method and the field research method. The problem that arises is the lack of studies directed at the Islamic aesthetic theory in looking at the use of motifs worked by artists in the works of painting that tend to possess the concept of unity, symbolism, refinement, symmetrical, flexibility and useful. The findings of the study show that Mahsuri 2 has applied motifs in line with the Islamic aesthetic theory that displays the beauty of the artist thinking in the production of Islamic art.

Keywords — Motifs, Islamic Aesthetic Theory, Paintings, Islamic Art

I. INTRODUCTION

Painting is defined as a two-dimensional work of art that is processed with materials, techniques, themes and ideas by the artists. In Malaysia, the development of visual art has a long history of art and culture. Mahsuri 2 is one of the most significant works to show the development of Islamic art painting in Malaysia. Mahsuri 2 produced by Sulaiman Esa in 1983, took inspiration from Malaysian sarong batik as inspiration. Batik art or craft is one of the traditional textile products of the

Malay community in Malaysia which is very valuable and popular apart from weaving, embroidery and songket. The art of batik has been around for a long time and is well known especially in the east coast states such as Kelantan and Terengganu (Hamdan Lias et. al, 2021).

Since time immemorial, nature has often been an inspiration for designers and artists. They process what they see around them and express it in the form of motifs, whether organic or geometric (Siti Zaiton Ismail, 1986). Motif is an element or pattern that repeats and functions as an important visual feature

in a work and is often used by artists as a symbol to convey a meaning. The ubiquitous decorative motifs and symbols on utilitarian objects in the Malaysian society everyday life activities are but meaningful visual reminders deeply entrenched with their spiritual and religious beliefs.

The concept of Malay beauty is based on the philosophy of understanding Malay wood carving which is associated with truth and goodness. This concept also conforms to Lois Lamya al-Faruqi understanding of beauty, which refers to aspects of external and internal beauty. In other words, the sense of beauty is not only through the senses, but its appreciation goes beyond feelings, thoughts and psychology.

Islamic aesthetics is the appreciation of something beautiful with a meaning of philosophy that explains the rules and principles of beauty, then delving into what drives the muslim to label something as beautiful. Islamic art emphasizes something or an atmosphere that emphasizes the aspect of beauty but not the practical aspect (Jamal, 1992). Art in the context of visual art can be related to two main aspects, the first is the physical element, where materials and forms are inspired and the second aspect is the aesthetic value which is the explicit and implicit value of art.

Overall, this research was carried out to see and make an appreciation of art using Islamic aesthetic theory introduced by Lois Lamya al-Faruqi. In order to understand the principles and philosophy of Mahsuri 2's artwork, the motifs found in this work are analyzed and translated based on Islamic aesthetic principles. Proof of the height and fineness of traditional Malay art motifs from the creativity of the Malay-Muslims is comparable to the greatness of the art of the Islamic civilization of the past.

II. ISLAMIC AESTHETIC THEORY BY LOIS LAMYA AL-FARUQI

Islamic aesthetic theory by Lois Lamya al-Faruqi outlines two levels of content in Islamic art based on the following principles:

A. Content

The message of Islamic monotheism permeates the content and form in Islamic art. This art tends to be abstract because Allah (SWT) is different from nature, which avoids the representation of

humans and animals. Muslim artists focused more on geometric designs, calligraphy, abstracts and denaturalized figures. When using animal motifs, they are reshaped to convey the idea that Allah (SWT) is transcendent and cannot be expressed in natural terms. Content in Islamic art means clear surface content. This refers to the meaning and message contained in the artwork. In the context of Islamic art, content is often related to spiritual and moral values that reflect Islamic teachings, such as tauhid (oneness of Allah), ethics, and appreciation of divine beauty. This content serves to educate and inspire viewers, connecting them with the principles of Islam.

B. Form

The symbolism used in the artwork is influenced by Sufi symbols, especially the sacred and absolute ones that function as a remembrance of the creatures to the creator (Allah SWT). This refers to the visual means and techniques used in artwork. In Islamic art, forms tend to use elements such as calligraphy, geometry, and abstract motifs, which avoid figurative representation. This form is not only for aesthetic purposes but also to convey deep content, reflecting the beauty and regularity that is considered to reflect the attributes of God. In other words, the content gives meaning to the form, while the form reinforces and strengthens the content. The balance between the two is the key to achieving aesthetic beauty and spiritual depth in Islamic art (Lois Lamya Al-Faruqi, 1985).

III. METHODOLOGY

The design of this study is to use a qualitative approach with a content analysis case study design on the paintings to analysed the motifs found in the paintings of Mahsuri 2 section methods used, namely observation and documentation analysis to obtain information about subject, form and content.

IV. DESCRIPTION

Mahsuri 2 was produced in 1983 and is in the collection of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan. Sulaiman Esa uses mixed media from handmade paper, silver thread, bamboo and acrylic. The use of

materials from nature as an alternative in producing works to avoid dependence on western techniques (Wan Soliana Wan Md Zain et. al, 2020). The square work measures 182 centimeters high and 251.5 centimeters wide with one panel of horizontal format displayed hanging on the wall. This work is inspired by batik sarong fabric that displays the head of the fabric as the main design. There are a variety of geometric motifs in the work above such as triangular polygons, squares, rectangles, trapeziums, broken flowers and stars.

He applied the principles of Malay and Islamic aesthetics such as perfection, structural balance, symbolism and function. The work is decorated with bamboo shoot motifs, attractive colors and colorful pattern designs giving a real impression of sarong cloth which is the clothing of Muslim Malays.

Mahsuri is a legendary queen in Langkawi, Malaysia. This sarong cloth symbolizes the resurrection of the legendary queen through the variety of decorations on the batik cloth. This work is considered a masterpiece that uses traditional Asian culture. The principles of Malay aesthetics are applied as the core of spiritual expression which is shown in the final form of the work. The unification of symbols and sophisticated pattern design shows that Sulaiman Esa is an artist who has the ability to expand the limits of the flexible work surface to elevate Malay craft into a unique art of visual expression.

The transformation of crafts into works is an art done by Sulaiman Esa to improve traditional Malay art for the better. He is so committed to using Malay motifs that prioritize iconographic expression as a superior form of art. Sulaiman Esa uses the tradition of traditional Malay aesthetics to convey the spiritual meaning that includes Islamic ideology in the external characteristics of traditional Malay art forms; whether in geometry, arabesques and calligraphy. All elements are intrinsically pleasing, enhanced by the use of eye-catching colors.

The painting below highlights the Malay-Islamic cultural style that applies geometric motifs (Ruzaika Omar Basaree, 2016). This work is presented in a symmetrical manner with a method of repetition according to the principles of Islamic aesthetics that give literal and implied meaning.

The combination of several geometric motifs not only forms the identity of a work, but it shows the creativity of the artist. A geometric motif is a sketch that features a circle-shaped line pattern, octagonal flower or rhombus quadrilateral. Symmetry is also seen underlying the painting below by featuring an axis line in the middle of the motif that is vertical, horizontal, semi-circular or circular. These motifs have been categorized to be identified and analyzed as geometric elements through subject, form and meaning in Mahsuri 2.



Fig. 1 Mahsuri 2 (1983) by Sulaiman Esa.

Mixed media. Physical Dimension 182 x 251.5cm. Source: Collection of Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan.

1) Refinement: This principle refers to the evaluation of works of art based on the method of manufacture and honesty in materials and medium. It refers to the subtlety of handwork in handling materials or mediums that involve the selection of forms and elements taken from the environment. Sulaiman Esa is intelligent and skilled in solving the nature of natural materials such as bamboo, metal thread, handmade paper and acrylic to achieve a good unity in his paintings. This shows the success of subtle principles in his work. The subtlety of the creation of the work is due to the adjustment between ideas and materials. Sulaiman Esa's ability to combine materials from nature to form ideas that are successfully translated shows the subtlety of the process and his high patience in producing the paint.

2) Flexibility: Sulaiman Esa shows the process and work approach of producing works of art as well as artistic and psychological sensibility towards his paintings. The subtlety and softness of Mahsuri 2's creation can be seen in the processing of flat surfaces with the precision of the use of the grid system, geometric motifs such as four squares, trapeziums, triangles and diamond shapes through the use of bright colors. The beauty and softness of this painting lies in the arrangement of geometric motifs that are dominant in the paint. The use of dark colors in the middle of the painting gives a focal point to the vision. The middle part of the painting is the position of the cloth head in Malaysian sarong batik. The comfort of eye focus makes the sense of softness and not harshness present in the psychological sense of observation.

The softness of combining natural and conventional materials in one surface that forms a unity between the medium and the medium reflects the high patience in the nature of the painter. High patience is a characteristic of a Malay-Muslim. Malay-Muslims in Malaysia are known for their gentleness. They interpret tenderness will lead to love.

3) Symmetrical: The balanced principle is evident in this painting where the idea of symmetry intended by Sulaiman Esa such as order, harmony and unity are closely related to each other. The goal of the principle of balance is achieved when the elements of softness, harmony and tranquility are united in the work. In order to achieve the meaning of balance in a work of art, symmetry is an important element that forms the basis of the principles of Malay art.

To get this effect, the motif of bamboo shoots or triangles that are planned have been composed so that they are orderly and balanced in one axis. Motifs have been composed in the same direction with the same size repeatedly.

4) Unity: Unity is the effort to integrate and unify all elements such as motifs, pattern designs and colors and turn them into an orderly composition with a sense of wholeness and integrity. The principle of unity shows that there is a relationship between the units of a motif. To explain this principle,

it can first be seen on the work about the combination of the use of medium and media is very good. The artist combines materials such as bamboo, thread, handmade paper and a mixture of acrylic colors into a combination that creates a good union. The combination of these materials succeeded in developing geometric motifs and arabesques through polygons such as squares, rectangles, triangles, trapeziums and rhombuses. The painter chooses and plans to give a focal point or focus to the center of the work in a vertical composition. This shows that there is a connection between the motif that is the focal point and the motif around the space in the work.

The processing of the use of good colors in this painting makes this work form a good unity and a high position. According to Aimi Atikah Roslan and Syed Alwi Syed Abu Bakar (2019), color is an important element in the production of works of art and works of art are valued for their color style. This is because a good color union affects human emotions before they can understand a symbol, pattern and image.

5) Useful: Sulaiman Esa applies the symbolism of Malaysian sarong batik through the arrangement of motifs and designs in Mahsuri 2 reminiscent of the traditional dress code. A sarong or a sarung is a large tube or length of fabric, often wrapped around the waist, worn in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Western Asia, Northern Africa, East Africa, West Africa, and on many Pacific islands. The fabric often employs woven plaid or checkered patterns or may be brightly colored by means of batik or ikat dyeing. Many modern sarongs have printed designs, often depicting animals or plants. Different types of sarongs are worn in different places in the world, notably the lungi in the Indian subcontinent and the izaar in the Arabian Peninsula (Wan Soliana Wan Md Zain et. al, 2024).

6) Symbolism: Symbols or symbols in works of art refer to the artist's attempt to express pride in nature and admiration for an identity. According to Bachtiar (1982), a symbol can be interpreted as a symbol that is used as a sender or a communicator of a belief tract that is adhered to and has a specific

meaning. In fact, this emblem or symbol is a conventional sign built by a certain community or individual that is recognized and used by most of the community.

Artists can build symbolism in various ways where symbols work to convey a message in a work. However, visual language is limited and not as free as spoken language. So painters need to be smart and creative to create new symbols so as to produce symbols that are personal. The symbols used in this painting are in accordance with the aesthetics of Malay culture such as reflection, religion, belief, ethics and so on. The symbolic principle emphasizes the unity between content and form. Malays rich in thought and philosophy see this as a responsibility in continuing to contribute to something beneficial while reminding each other about this life.

V. CONCLUSION

The use of motifs and symbols used show the value of beauty and the painter's philosophy of thought full of Islamic aesthetic values and Malay-Islamic philosophy. The painting that uses geometric motifs as a whole looks rather static, able to make the work seem to breathe with its own style when added aesthetic value and translated through Malay aesthetic theory. Motifs from flora and cosmos elements that are used such as four-pointed flowers, rhombus, eight-pointed flowers, eight-pointed stars and rhombuses carry important symbols that are closely related to nature and the life of the Malay community. Not only that, the names of the fauna motifs used such as the siku keluang motif show a symbol of the Malay community's attachment to nature.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the artist's creativity in applying geometric motifs in Mahsuri 2, turns out to be able to highlight the elements of delicacy and beauty that are seen based on Islamic

and Malay aesthetic approaches. It is hoped that the results of this research can encourage the community to appreciate the beauty of painting artwork from a different perspective. It does not just give external aesthetic value but has many symbolic meanings that symbolize obedience to Allah SWT as well as the spiritual strength of Islam.

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