

Book Review

Adeline Ooi, Beverly Yong, Hasnul J. Saidon, Nur Hanim Khairuddin and Rachel Ng (Eds). (2012). *Exploring An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art*. Kuala Lumpur: RougeArt.

by Asilatul Hanaa Abdullah¹

Malaysian art is a dynamic and complex field that reflects the nation's rich cultural heritage, social dynamics, and evolving identity. *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art* is an ambitious and comprehensive book that documents the history, movements, and practices of Malaysian art. Published as part of the *Narratives in Malaysian Art* project in 2012, this guide serves as an essential resource for anyone interested in understanding the development of Malaysian visual art. Through its wide-ranging content, the book explores the intersections of tradition and modernity, art and identity, and individual expression and community engagement. This essay offers a critical review of the book, analysing its structure, strengths, and limitations. It will also highlight its contribution to the discourse on Malaysian art and its potential to inspire further exploration of this vibrant cultural landscape.

The early chapters of *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art* provide an in-depth exploration of Malaysia's art history, beginning with the advent of modern art. The establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore in 1938 marked a turning point in formal art education in the region, fostering a generation of artists who would later shape Malaysia's visual culture. The influence of students returning from Europe in the 1950s and 60s introduced international modernist styles to Malaysia. Artists such as Tay Hooi Keat and Syed Ahmad Jamal spearheaded the fusion of these styles with local elements, creating works that reflected a unique Malaysian identity. The book also emphasises the role of institutions and collectives in nurturing artistic talent and fostering dialogue. For example, the Angkatan Pelukis SeMalaysia (APS) played a crucial role in promoting Malay cultural themes in art. Simultaneously, alternative spaces like Rumah Air Panas encouraged experimental and interdisciplinary practices, reflecting the diversity of Malaysia's art scene.

A significant focus of the guide is the evolution of artistic practices in Malaysia. One of the highlights is the incorporation of batik as a fine art medium by Chuah Thean Teng in the 1950s. Initially celebrated for its romantic depiction of Malaysian life, batik art evolved to include modernist techniques and Islamic themes by the 1980s. Artists like Fatimah Chik pushed the boundaries of this traditional medium, merging it with contemporary concepts. The guide also documents the rise of artist collectives, such as Anak Alam, which promoted multicultural collaboration and experimental art. These groups created platforms for artists to explore new ideas and challenge conventional practices, paving the way for Malaysia's diverse and dynamic art landscape.

The intersection of art and identity is a recurring theme in the book. Malaysian art has long grappled with questions of nationalism, tradition, and modernity. Movements such as the

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National Cultural Congress in 1971 sought to define a national identity through art by integrating traditional Malay motifs and Islamic aesthetics into contemporary practices. This cultural shift gave rise to works that balanced global influences with local heritage, offering a nuanced portrayal of Malaysia's identity. The guide also highlights the evolution of figurative art, from early social realism to contemporary works addressing modern challenges. Artists used figurative representation to explore themes such as identity, social inequality, and cultural heritage, reflecting the complexities of Malaysian society. Another recurring theme is education where the work emphasises its importance in shaping future generations of artists and audiences. *The Malaysian Art Book for Children*, launched in 2011, addresses the gap in art education by introducing children to significant Malaysian artworks and cultural heritage. This initiative exemplifies the book's broader mission of fostering art appreciation and critical thinking.

Community engagement is a cornerstone of Malaysian art, and the guide sheds light on various initiatives that bring art closer to the public. Projects such as *Let Arts Move You* and *Bangun Penang!* demonstrate how artists engage with diverse communities through public art. These initiatives not only make art accessible but also foster dialogue and understanding across cultural and social divides. Also noteworthy is the role of institutions in supporting the art scene. Corporate collections, such as those maintained by Petronas and Bank Negara, have been instrumental in promoting Malaysian artists. These collections, along with national galleries and art competitions like the Young Contemporaries Competition, provide platforms for emerging artists and contribute to a vibrant art ecosystem. Moreover, art festivals and residencies also play a crucial role in the development of Malaysian art. Events like Urbanscapes, and the Melaka Art and Performance Festival provide platforms for artists to showcase their work and engage with the public. Residencies, such as those at Rimbun Dahan, offer opportunities for collaboration and experimentation, enriching the cultural landscape.

The period following Malaysia's independence in 1957 was marked by a surge in nationalistic fervor, which significantly influenced the country's art. Artists began exploring themes of cultural identity, tradition, and modernity, seeking to define what it meant to be Malaysian. One of the pivotal moments in this era was the return of Malaysian students who had studied art in Europe and the United States. Figures like Syed Ahmad Jamal and Tay Hooi Keat brought back modernist influences, which they combined with local motifs and themes. Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Gunung Ledang* is a prime example of this synthesis, blending abstract forms with references to Malaysian folklore. The establishment of artist collectives also played a crucial role in this period. The Angkatan Pelukis SeMalaysia (APS) emerged as a platform for Malay artists to explore their cultural heritage through naturalistic portraiture and landscape painting. The collective's works were characterised by their emphasis on Malay cultural motifs, reflecting the broader push toward creating a cohesive national identity.

The 1960s and 1970s were transformative decades for Malaysian art, marked by the rise of modernist movements. Artists began experimenting with abstraction and other contemporary styles, moving away from the traditional realism that had dominated earlier periods. This era was characterised by a growing sense of artistic freedom and exploration. Chuah Thean Teng's introduction of batik as a fine art medium was one of the most significant developments of this period. By elevating a traditional craft form into the realm of fine art, Chuah not only challenged the boundaries of artistic practice but also created a new visual language that was distinctly Malaysian. His works, such as *Two Sisters*, combined the vibrant colors and patterns of batik with modernist sensibilities. The influence of modernism was further bolstered by the establishment of art institutions like the School of Art & Design at Institut Teknologi MARA in 1967. These institutions provided a platform for artists to experiment with new ideas and techniques, fostering a vibrant and dynamic art scene.

Meanwhile, the late 20th century saw the emergence of conceptual art and a heightened focus on socio-political critique. This period was shaped by significant events in Malaysia's history, such as the May 13 riots in 1969 and the National Cultural Congress in 1971. These events prompted artists to reflect on issues of race, identity, and cultural cohesion. The *Towards a Mystical Reality* exhibition in 1974, curated by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, marked a turning point in Malaysian art. The exhibition challenged traditional notions of art by focusing on ideas and concepts rather than aesthetics. It introduced a new era of conceptualism, encouraging artists to engage with contemporary issues in their work. Figurative art also gained prominence during this period as a means of addressing socio-political themes. Artists like Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam and Wong Hoy Cheong used their work to comment on issues such as human rights, social inequality, and political corruption. Their art became a tool for activism, reflecting the changing role of artists in Malaysian society.

The 1990s ushered in a new era of cross-disciplinary practices and global engagement in Malaysian art. Artists began incorporating elements from theatre, dance, and music into their visual art, reflecting a broader trend of interdisciplinary collaboration. Collectives like the Five Arts Centre played a pivotal role in fostering these practices, creating a space for experimentation and dialogue. Technological advancements also had a profound impact on contemporary art practices. Video art emerged as a significant medium, with artists like Liew Kungyu exploring themes of identity and memory through innovative techniques. The younger generation of artists embraced these new tools, creating works that were playful, satirical, and deeply engaged with contemporary issues. Community engagement became a central theme during this period, with artists using public art to connect with diverse audiences. Projects like *Let Arts Move You* and festivals such as *Urbanscapes* provided platforms for artists to interact with the public, breaking down barriers between art and everyday life.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its comprehensive coverage. It provides a detailed account of Malaysian art's history, movements, and key figures, offering readers a holistic understanding of the field. Its inclusion of diverse perspectives - from artists and curators to academics - enriches the narrative and encourages critical engagement. The book's integration of art and identity is another notable strength. By connecting artistic practices to socio-political events and cultural heritage, it highlights the role of art as both a reflection of and a commentary on Malaysian society. This approach not only deepens readers' appreciation of Malaysian art but also underscores its relevance in a global context.

Despite its strengths, the book has some limitations. The lack of visual content is a significant drawback, as it limits readers' ability to fully appreciate the artworks discussed. Including more images would enhance the book's educational and aesthetic appeal. The depth of coverage is also inconsistent. While some topics, such as modernism, are explored in detail, others, like the Islamic art movement, receive comparatively less attention. This imbalance may leave readers wanting more comprehensive insights into certain aspects of Malaysian art. Potential bias is another concern. The book's emphasis on corporate-sponsored initiatives might overshadow contributions from independent or marginalised artists, presenting a skewed view of the art scene. Additionally, the book's 2012 publication date means some information may be outdated, particularly in the rapidly evolving contemporary art world.

Despite these limitations, *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art* makes a significant contribution to the discourse on Malaysian art. By documenting the history and evolution of artistic practices, the book provides a valuable resource for scholars, educators, and enthusiasts. Its focus on community engagement, cultural identity, and interdisciplinary practices reflects the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Malaysian art. The book also serves as a call to action, inspiring readers to explore and contribute to the field. Its emphasis on education and accessibility ensures that the knowledge it offers can be passed on to future generations, fostering a deeper appreciation of Malaysian art and culture.

The historical development of Malaysian art, as outlined in *An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art*, is a testament to the resilience and creativity of its artists. From its traditional roots to the modernist movements of the mid-20th century and the interdisciplinary practices of today, Malaysian art has continually evolved in response to changing cultural, social, and political contexts. By documenting this rich history, the guide provides a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of Malaysian art. It highlights the role of art as a reflection of society, a medium for critique, and a tool for cultural preservation. As Malaysian art continues to grow and adapt, its history serves as both a foundation and a source of inspiration for future generations.

An A-Z Guide to Malaysian Art is a landmark publication that offers a comprehensive and insightful exploration of Malaysia's art scene. By tracing the intersections of tradition and modernity, art and identity, and individual and community, the book paints a vivid picture of a nation's artistic journey. While it has some limitations, its strengths far outweigh them, making it an indispensable resource for anyone interested in Malaysian art. Through its detailed narrative and emphasis on education, the book not only documents the past but also shapes the future of Malaysian art. It stands as a testament to the richness and resilience of Malaysian culture, reminding readers of the transformative power of art in shaping and reflecting society.