



Painting Styles of Malaysian Chinese Artists in the 1960s under the Influence of Abstract Expressionism

Wenyan Geng,¹ Wan Samiati Andriana Wan Mohamad Daud^{1*},
Azian Tahir²

¹ College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

² College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak, Malaysia

samiati@uitm.edu.my

Abstract. The prevalence of Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s also influenced the Malaysian art scene to a large extent. Malaysian Chinese artists, as part of modern art, are inevitably influenced by the local human environment. This study employs an observation approach to content analysis of works in the permanent collection of Penang State Art Gallery to aims to summarize the major styles of Chinese painting in the 1960s and to enrich the study of Malaysian visual arts. The results show that Abstract Expressionism did have an impact on the work of Chinese artists.

Keywords: Abstract Expressionism, Painting style, Malaysian Chinese, Modern art

1 Introduction

Modern art in Malaysia can be traced back to the early 19th century when the British colonized Penang, spreading Western art styles and techniques through the education system. By the time the country declared independence in 1957, the increasing stability of the political and social environment made education the center of life, and local enrolment increased rapidly, with a growing demand for teachers of modern studies. As a result, the Government set up the Specialized Teacher Training Institute (STTI) in Kuala Lumpur in 1960 to re-train teachers as professionals. Some of its graduates were selected and sent to the United Kingdom for further training [1]. These included Chinese Yeoh Jin Leng and Malay Syed Ahmad Jamal.

Western painting styles influenced this group of artists who studied abroad to varying degrees. Abstract Expressionism was influential in the Western art world during the 1960s. As reference [2] puts it, Abstract Expressionism was an international style, perhaps the most pervasive and widespread style to emerge in this century. It was an art movement centered in New York after World War II, also known as the New York School, and can be seen as a style of art that expresses subjective ideas through colors and shapes rather than depicting real things.

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Reference [3] suggested that the nature of both material and spiritual civilization depends on three major factors: race, environment and era, and art is no exception. There is now much evidence that the influence of Abstract Expressionism on Malaysian modern art in the 1960s was profound. Artists were influenced by the art trends of the times, and the techniques and concepts often favored Western painting genres. Artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, and Hossein Enas were Abstract Expressionists, and S.A. Jamal as described the "immediacy and mystery" of Abstract Expressionism as "particularly suited to the Malaysian ethos and cultural heritage" [4].

Reference [5] proposes that in Malaysia, a person has both cultural and ethnic identities. As the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia, the Chinese, while better preserving their native culture and education, are also influenced by the local environment. As a result, in the Malaysian art scene, which is enveloped by Western painting styles, Chinese artists have also spawned a diverse range of expressive styles, and apart from the familiar Nanyang style, a distinctive Abstract Expressionist style has also emerged in some of their works.

Therefore, this study aims to understand the extent to which the Abstract Expressionist style influenced the paintings of Malaysian Chinese artists in the context of the same era. It also analyses the paintings of Chinese artists in the 1960s, utilizing observation to understand the themes and forms of the paintings and to compare whether they are associated with Abstract Expressionism or not to summarize the main styles of Chinese paintings in the 1960s. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to enriching the study of modern art in Malaysia, bringing more attention to the group of Chinese artists and expanding their impact on contemporary art.

2 Literature Review

Chinese art in Malaysia can be traced back to the early 19th century when the first Chinese immigrants landed in Singapore, and reference [6] state that the migration of Chinese artists to Nanyang "proved to be influential in the development of the contemporary painting movement in the island ports of Penang and Singapore, and eventually in British Malaya. These early Malayan modernists were concerned with "issues of cultural identity, content and relevance, and picture composition", and they addressed the "synthesis of East and West" through passion and honesty [7]. Reference [1] points out that early modern Malayan art was led by Chinese painters who did not hesitate to face the issue head-on, seeing it as an ally rather than a source of anxiety. Thus, Chinese artists are also an essential part of modern Malaysian art.

At that time, the Western education system implemented by the British colonial Government in Malaysia and the local artistic activities of some water colorists became the origin of modern art in Malaysia. By 1960, the Government established the Professional Teachers' Training Institute in Kuala Lumpur's Cheras, intending to enhance the subject specialization of the existing teachers, of whom there was a shortage of art teachers. As a result, a group of students completed their training and were sent to England for more specialized studies. Not only graduates but almost every Malaysian artist in the 1960s had studied in Europe or the United States.

These people who had received Western art studies became propagators, bringing the world's popular painting styles or art concepts back to Malaysia. As reference [8] summarizes, the roots of Malaysian art movements such as Naturalism in the 1940s, Expressionism in the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s, Constructivism and Pop Art in the 1970s and Minimalist and Conceptual Art in the late 1970s originated in the capitals of Western art.

Reference [9] has also summarized Malaysian modern art by arguing that two conditions contributed to the birth of Malaysian contemporary art: a complete separation from the past due to the lack of logical a priori and clear priorities - there were no traditional concepts to follow, and the dominant positioning of Malaysian art internationally, the Firstly, Western European values and later the New York School.

The New York School of Painting, also known as Abstract Expressionist Art, began in New York in the 1940s, giving it its name and was the first modern art movement in the U.S. It synthesized the styles of several vital schools, including Cubism, Surrealism, and the influence of Oriental Calligraphy. In a way, painting ruled New York when Abstract Expressionism was at its zenith [10]. In 1953, John Ferren stated in *Art Digest* that "Abstraction has given our age fresh and malleable truths. Abstract Expressionism offers a new scope for dealing with the whole "existential" human sensibility. Its humanism is implicit rather than explicit. "

Reference [11], on the other hand, argued that the paintings known as Abstract Expressionism are both abstract and painterly

Abstract Expressionism - or as I prefer to call it, Painterly Abstraction - is primarily an art and is rooted in an artistic past. Reference [2] summarized the essence of Abstract Expressionism: 1. elimination of concrete subject matter in favor of spontaneous, impulsive qualities of experience. 2. uninhibited brushwork - loose, improvisational techniques - movement, motor organization, and active surfaces. Consequently, Abstract Expressionist paintings focus on the artist's subjective feelings, emphasizing self-expression and purely visual forms in art rather than depicting things in the natural world. Although the artists had different styles and themes, they all favored non-figurative forms to express their inner emotions, and usually, the artwork is of a larger size. Reference [12] proposed that looking at abstract art in Malaysia, artists such as Ibrahim Hussein, Suzlee Ibrahim, and Latiff Mohidin (later series) made significant contributions to the development of Malaysian art by frequently experimenting with line and movement in their works. These painters were all practitioners of Abstract Expressionism.

From the beginning of its germination, modern art in Malaysia has inherited the aesthetic ideas of Western humanism and the modernist concept of art for art's sake and has sought to find its creative direction through studying Western arts. Reference [8] argues that this infinite admiration for Western art and the awakening of traditional art has made many Malay artists become Western artists' artistic ideas and concepts of the "experts" rather than their artistic ideas and concepts.

In his analysis of paintings with environmental themes, reference [13] mentions that the reproduction of Malaysian environments and landscapes usually persisted in abstract or expressionist forms during the early years of independence (the 1950s and 1960s), especially after Malaysian artists returned from overseas studies.

As for the artistic expression of Chinese artists in the 1960s, most scholars categorize it within the Nanyang style. Nanyang describes a region or an imagined migratory network of overseas Chinese business, society and culture [14]. Thus, the Nanyang style is a genre of art that is primarily Chinese. Initially originating from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts founded by Lim Hak Tai in 1938, this group of teachers not only received training in traditional Chinese painting techniques but also had experience studying in the West, and as a result, their works often blended Chinese and Western aesthetics and were dedicated to depicting local customs. Trained as modern artists, they employ modern solutions to painting composition, combining the power of traditional and contemporary elements to create their style and identity [15].

However, although the Nanyang style influenced most Chinese artists at the time, it was mainly in the form of ink paintings. The graphic styles of those artists dominated by the Western medium were not influenced much, so categorizing Chinese art as Nanyang style is one-sided and one-dimensional. As part of Malaysia, Chinese artists were also influenced by the local Western art scene, including the Abstract Expressionism that Malay artists were so passionate about, which is reflected in their images.

As reference [1] mentioned, both Jamal and Yeoh's interest in Abstract Expressionism is based on their belief in the relevance of New York painting to their local experience. For Yeoh, Robert Motherwell's and Mark Tobey's encounters with Oriental calligraphy "combine Western expression with Eastern contemplation" to achieve "calligraphic works of magnified dimensions".

Reference [16] also wrote in his book that Yeoh Jin Leng is of native Chinese origin but is known for his abstract expressionist works. He developed his practice based on abstraction of form, space and expression, forming the foundation of modern art's early principles and concerns.

Hence, the painting styles of Chinese artists in the 1960s were diverse, and it is possible to explore the stylistic genres that influenced their visual characteristics through their artworks and to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive insight into the Chinese art styles of the time, rather than directly categorizing them as Nanyang styles. This is the part that this study focuses on.

3 Methodology

This study is qualitative research; qualitative research refers to the meaning, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and descriptions of things [17]. There is a tendency to use words, images and depictions to assess the object of study by giving some meaning to the event or thing. The observation method was used to analyze the works of Chinese artists in the permanent Penang State Art Gallery collection. The observation method is commonly used in qualitative research, where the researcher can collect essential data and information by observing the sample.

The data for this study is image-based, utilizing purposive sampling to select the study sample, with the criteria of artist, year and title, which were obtained from the Penang State Art Gallery Permanent Collection 1965-2011 book published by the

Penang State Art Gallery, with a total of 17 paintings by Chinese artists from 1960-1969. The focus is on analyzing the themes and images of the paintings to understand their stylistic characteristics and whether Abstract Expressionism influences them.

According to reference [3], the nature and appearance of both material and spiritual civilizations depend on three major factors: race, environment, and era, and thus, artworks are no exception. Race originates from the heredity of birth and is influenced by language, religion, culture and philosophy. However, the characteristics of race are created by the environment. This involves the natural environment of geographic climate, and the human environment of social concepts and cultural trends. The style of the artist is also related to the social atmosphere. Finally, it will also be influenced by the time's spirit, culture, and system.

Therefore, this study will analyze the content of the samples based on Taine's three-element theory, in conjunction with the art movements of the era and the Malaysian human environment, to verify whether the paintings of Chinese artists were influenced by these factors, especially one of the styles of Abstract Expression, which was prevalent at the time in both the West and Malaysia.

4 Findings

The sample of this study consists of 18 paintings from the Penang State Art Gallery Permanent Collection 1965-2011, all created by Chinese artists from 1960-1969. Specific information is as follows:

Table 1. Paintings by Malaysian Chinese Artists 1960 – 1969

No	Year	Title	Artist	Media	Size
1	1962	Keeping Nets	Ho Khay Beng	Oil on Canvas	59 x 80 cm
2	1964	At the Park	Tan Choon Ghee	Watercolor	24 x 35 cm
3	1965	Pilgrimage	Foo Hong Tatt	Oil on Canvas	120 x 81 cm
4	1965	My View of Woman	Lee Joo For	Oil on Canvas	66 x 74 cm
5	1965	Nuclear Beauty	Lee Joo For	Oil on Canvas	81 x 112 cm
6	1965	Weaving Atap	Tay Mo-Leong	Batik	91 x 61 cm
7	1966	Portrait of Datuk Peh Seng Koon, Ipoh	Khaw Sia	Oil on Canvas	74 x 54 cm
8	1966	Portrait of Datin (wife of Datuk Peh Peng Koon), Ipoh	Khaw Sia	Oil on Canvas	74 x 54 cm

9	1967	Nets	Tan Tin Kok	Oil on Canvas	74 x 54 cm
10	1967	Picking Coconut	Toya, Lim Khoo Hock	Batik	90 x 63 cm
11	1967	Bathing	Cheung Pooi Yip	Oil on Canvas	66 x 104 cm
12	1967	Tree by the Sunset	Khoo Sui Hoe	Oil on Canvas	76 x 76 cm
13	1967	The Little Wedding	Khoo Sui Hoe	Oil on Canvas	96 x 96 cm
14	1968	Orchid Malaysian Beauty x Best Girl	Khaw Sia	Watercolor	17 x 25 cm
15	1968	River Rocks	Lee Joo For	Ink on Paper	35 x 31 cm
16	1969	Sunrise Sunset	Khoo Sui Hoe	Oil on Canvas	104 x 98 cm
17	1969	Two with A Little Bird	Khoo Sui Hoe	Oil on Canvas	80 x 119 cm

Of this sample, 12 are oil paintings, two watercolors, two batik paintings, and one ink painting. In terms of medium, the artists mostly used Western painting mediums, and only one artist chose to paint in Chinese.

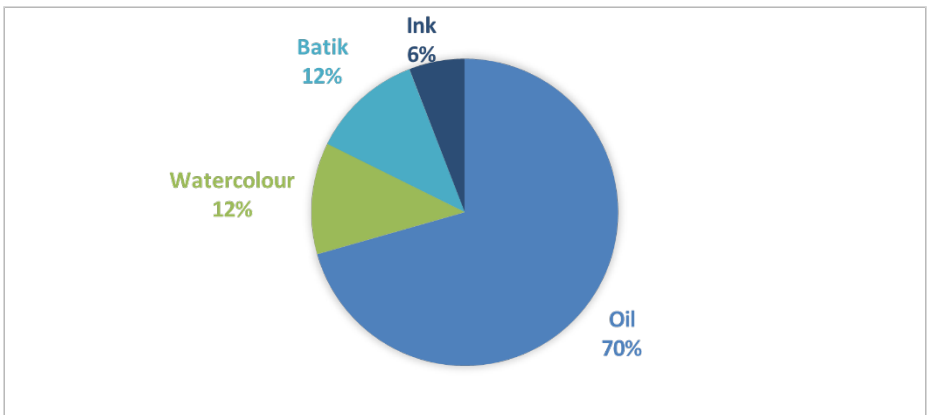


Fig. 1. Media distribution of the sample

Regarding image themes, there are six figurative subjects, including portraits, life scenes, and botanical sketches, and twelve non-figurative subjects, primarily abstract or semi-abstract representations.

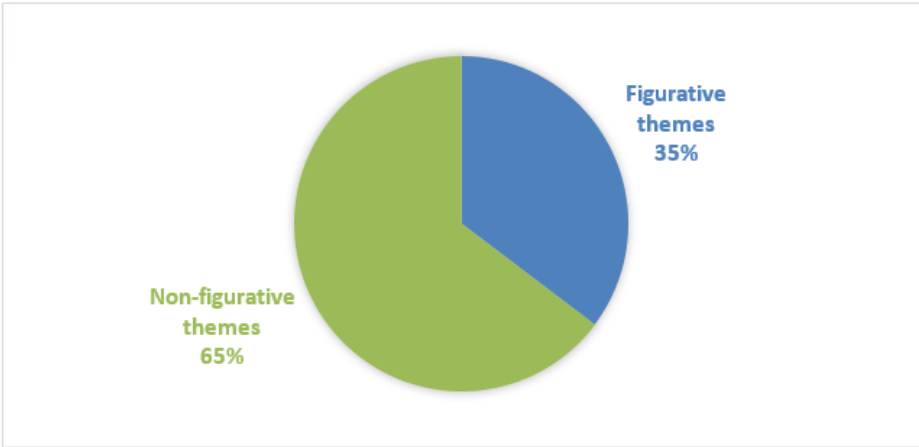


Fig. 2. Themes distribution of the sample

According to artistic style, four paintings are influenced by the Abstract Expressionist style, five works in the Expressionist style, and six in Realism. In addition to this, there is a Chinese pictorial work and a pointillist work.

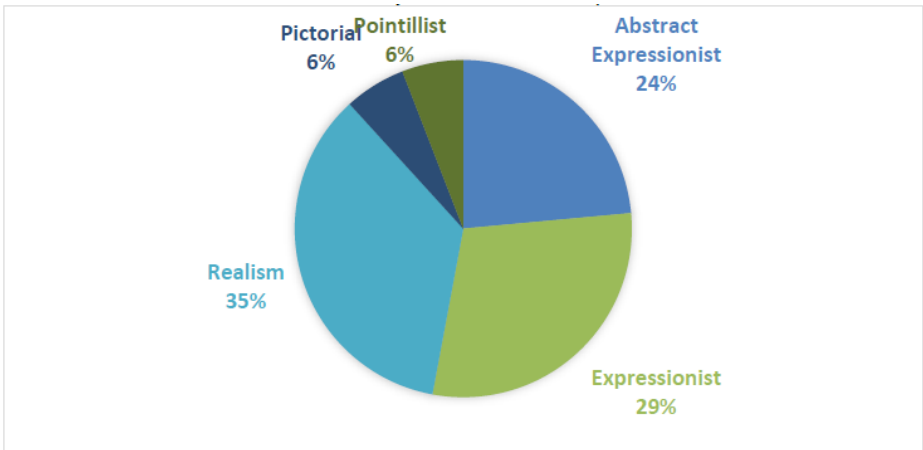


Fig. 3. Style distribution of the sample

Based on the above graphs, it can be seen that among the 17 works of Chinese artists, the abstract form of painting style occupies most of the works, and the artists favor non-figurative forms to express the content of the images. Nevertheless, in terms of artistic style, only four are directly influenced by Abstract Expressionism. Still, Expressionism affects five works; among them, the most significant number of paintings is Realism, which is six.

5 Discussion

Based on the above findings, preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, from the point of view of artistic media, Chinese artists mainly adopt Western painting methods and techniques and are less influenced by their native racial culture. Secondly, from the point of view of image creation, most artists choose non-figurative ways of expression, and the themes are divided into two kinds: the things that exist in reality and the product of inner imagination. So, in terms of artistic style, in addition to Abstract Expressionism, Expressionism was also adopted. Compared to the former, a purely visual product mainly depicting the artist's subjective feelings, Expressionism is based on existing things and ignores the reduction of the image of things while focusing on expressing inner emotions. As a result, expressionist paintings are often characterized by distortion and partial abstraction.

Besides these non-figurative expressions, some artists in this period continued the painting style of Realism and devoted themselves to restoring the real world. This may be due to the influence of the artistic trends of the time. Realism originated in France in the 19th century and spread rapidly in Italy, Milan and other European countries in the 1960s. Realist painters were committed to breaking the ideological program with Realism.

Art movements are diverse, and as modern art continues to evolve, artists are gradually seeking new ways and means of expression to break away from existing art forms. Therefore, Malaysian Chinese artists who studied in Western countries such as Europe and the United States were deeply influenced by the art environment of the time and brought these art movements back to their homeland. In their works, one can see the prevalent Western styles, genres, and ways of expression. On the contrary, the local Nanyang and traditional Chinese painting styles did not profoundly impact their images.

6 Conclusion & Recommendations

The study results show that in the 1960s, Abstract Expressionism was prevalent in the Malaysian art scene and also primarily influenced the ways of expression of Chinese Malaysian artists. Indeed, besides the Nanyang style and the Abstract Expressionist style mentioned by previous scholars, Chinese artists also often adopted the Realist style at that time. Their various regions of study may have caused this difference in style.

As Taine argues, visual art depends on the creator's ethnic culture, social environment, and zeitgeist. This principle is evidenced in the works of Chinese artists. However, it is worth noting that ethnicity has relatively little influence on their paintings, as they do not favor Chinese aesthetic characteristics because of their race but rather are influenced by the local Western art scene and respond to the artistic wave of the times to create a series of works.

Overall, the exploration of Malaysian Chinese art needs more input; for now, focusing on this area of research is not enough. Chinese art is part of modern Malaysian

art, and studying Chinese art can also enrich Malaysian art history and visual forms. This study aims to analyze the works in the permanent collection to explore whether the artist's style, particularly Abstract Expressionism, which has had a profound impact on Malay artists, has had a similarly profound effect on Chinese artists.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study. This study contributes to the stylistic research of Malaysian Chinese paintings in the 1960s to understand the extent of the influence of Abstract Expressionism, and the results of the study can enrich the history of Chinese art and modern Malaysian art for the researchers who come after us.

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