

Batik as Becoming: Khalil Ibrahim and the Evolution of Artistic Identity

Professor Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra DSG* **

(sganendra@gmail.com)

*First author, **Corresponding author

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Abstract

Khalil Ibrahim's engagement with batik can be understood as one of the most revealing expressions of his evolution as a cosmopolitan artist. Beginning in the late 1960s, his turn to the medium marked neither a retreat into tradition nor a straightforward embrace of Malaysian cultural identity, but an intensely personal search for equilibrium between the worlds that had shaped him: his Kelantanese origins, his experiences across Southeast Asia, and his encounters with European art and modernism. Over the course of his batik practice, these influences were continually absorbed, tested and transformed, producing a body of work that is as much a record of artistic self-discovery as it is an important chapter in the development of Malaysian modern art.

Khalil's batik reveals an artist negotiating instinctively between inherited visual traditions and new aesthetic possibilities. His experimentation with the medium, colour, abstraction, figuration and design demonstrates a willingness to allow his practice to evolve through experience rather than conform to a prescribed artistic or national identity. The resulting works are neither simply traditional nor modernist, Malaysian nor European; rather, they reflect Khalil's individual process of finding a balance between origin and experience, belonging and exploration. In this sense, batik became central to his artistic development—not merely as a medium, but as a vehicle through which he could discover and articulate his own visual language.

By tracing this evolution, the study seeks to reposition Khalil's batik practice within the history of Malaysian modern art and to address its relative neglect in scholarship. It proposes that the significance of these works lies precisely in their deeply individual character: they offer a view of modernism not as an imposed style or ideological position, but as a lived and evolving artistic journey. Khalil's batik therefore provides an important lens through which to reconsider the formation of the modern Malaysian artist, and the freedom of artistic practice to negotiate multiple experiences without resolving them into a single, restricting identity.

Key words: Khalil Ibrahim; Malaysian Art; Cosmopolitan Modernism; Batik; Identity

Introduction

Khalil Ibrahim's batik works serve as a prime example of hybridisation and thus, as an exemplar of cosmopolitan modernism, a concept credited to academic, Kober Mercer. This paper shows how Ibrahim, through his innovative use of batik, bridged cultural boundaries, fusing traditional Malaysian techniques with global modernist trends. Partha Mitter's concept of hybridisation has useful application here as it underscores this ongoing flow of ideas across cultures, which Ibrahim embodies through his reinvention of the batik medium (Mitter 2005, 28). Ibrahim's batik pieces are not only technically sophisticated but also reflect a personal artistic vision that transcends cultural hierarchies. They reveal how non-Western artists can negotiate the complex terrain of global modernism while asserting their unique identities.

Cosmopolitan modernism has emerged as an important concept in understanding the intersection of global cultural exchange and modernist artistic practices. It reflects a dynamic engagement with both local and international influences, transcending traditional boundaries of nationality and colonial legacy. In recent decades, cosmopolitan modernism has gained significant scholarly attention, particularly in relation to non-Western artists whose work challenges Western-centric narratives of modernism. Kober Mercer's seminal work *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (2005) encapsulates this shift, noting a surge in interest toward the artistic contributions of non-Western artists and the growing recognition of diverse identities within the contemporary art world. This broader acknowledgment, Mercer argues, has reinvigorated the discourse around art reception and critique, expanding the scope of what is considered 'modern' in the global context (Mercer, 2005).

This study positions Khalil Ibrahim's early batik works, which have been largely understated in critical discourse, as central to understanding Malaysian cosmopolitan modernism. By analysing Ibrahim's batik practice which highlights a diligent, technically advanced creative discourse between local tradition and modernist experimentation, this study illustrates how his work engages with global artistic movements while contributing to a distinctive Malaysian artistic identity. Despite Ibrahim's extensive participation in local and international exhibitions, his contributions have often been understated in scholarship, particularly in the context of Malaysia's post-independence art history. Through an exploration of his early batik works from the 1960s and 1970s, this study seeks to illuminate his innovative integration of traditional Malaysian craft with modernist sensibilities, challenging rigid national and colonial frameworks.

The post-colonial debates on Malaysian identity during the 1970s and 1980s, often dominated by the intellectual discourse surrounding "Malay identity," overlooked the multifaceted identities of artists like Ibrahim, who prioritized personal exploration over ideological

conformity. Ibrahim's batik works represent a subtle but clear example of *cosmopolitan modernism*, a concept that resonates deeply with his artistic practice. His approach to art was defined less by the political ideologies of the time and more by a commitment to personal expression and creative freedom.

Ultimately, this study positions Khalil Ibrahim as a pivotal figure in Malaysian modernism, advocating for a broader appreciation of his role in shaping the country's art history. His personal exploration of identity through batik serves as a powerful challenge to the artificial dichotomies of "Malay" versus "Malaysian" identity in post-independence discourse. By focusing on Ibrahim's batik works, this paper reaffirms the importance of artistic practice as a truer reflection of the evolving cultural identity of a nation, and through this artist who exemplified independent and syncretic experiences, thought processes and aesthetic.

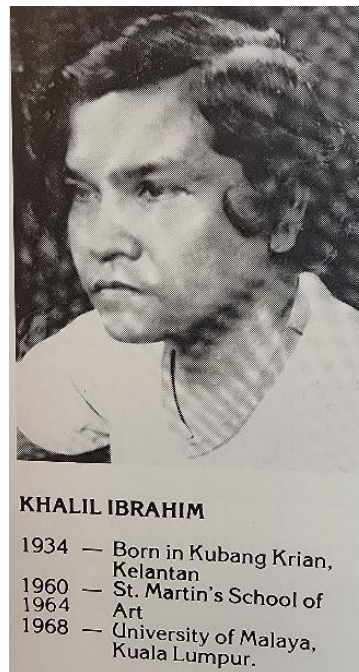


Figure 1: Khalil Ibrahim Feature in Commonwealth Institute, 'Malaysian Art, 1965-1978. Exhibition Catalogue', 1978.

Understanding Khalil Ibrahim's Artistic Development: A Historical Context

To fully appreciate the cultural and creative contexts that influenced Khalil Ibrahim's early interest in art, it is useful to examine the historical developments in art practice within the Malaysian region during the 20th century. This examination, informed by the writings of contemporary commentators and practitioners, provides a useful framework against which to situate Ibrahim's own artistic trajectory.

Khalil Ibrahim (1934 – 2018) was born in Kubang, Krian, Kelantan. His formal art training began with participation in Saturday art classes from 1945 to 1947, under the tutelage of Nik Mahmud Idris, a Malay school art inspector who had returned to Kelantan after studying in Singapore (Naziree, 2015). Notably, during this period, there were no formal art institutions in Malaya. The casual instructions focused primarily on basic painting techniques, with an emphasis on landscapes and pastoral scenes, dominant themes of the times, showing the natural views that were available to artists, as can be seen also in Ibrahim's early sketches.

In those early years, Ibrahim faced tensions between his family's aspirations for him to become a teacher and his personal ambition to pursue a career as a full-time artist. In his exploration, we find an indomitable spirit to pursue the arts, and also to inform himself of what was happening in the wider world, which to start with, needed to extend beyond his home state, Kelantan. With the support of Idris, he began selling his works to local civil servants and British Army officers stationed in Kota Bharu. Ibrahim also participated in the annual Malaysia Agriculture, Horticulture & Agrotourism Show (MAHA) in Kuala Lumpur, which attracted artisans and agriculturists from across the region, and this participation provides another early example of his explorative character that sought to expand his experiences.

Ibrahim's breakthrough came when his work caught the attention of Claude Gibb Ferguson, a district officer in Temerloh, who would later play a significant role in his career. Ferguson facilitated Ibrahim's early sales, recommending him for a commission in 1957 to paint a portrait of the Sultan of Pahang, Sultan Abu Bakar Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mu'adzam Shah. This commission marked a pivotal moment in Ibrahim's artistic trajectory, significantly enhancing his reputation. Ferguson subsequently suggested that Ibrahim pursue further studies in England, although Ibrahim had expressed a preference for studying in Indonesia, where he felt a stronger cultural connection to artists such as Radin and Affandi (Naziree, 2004, 11).

The Dynamics of Art Culture in Malaya/ Malaysia

As mentioned, in the 1930s, British Malaya lacked public art schools, and formal artistic training was virtually non-existent. Artists typically learned through informal channels, such as exhibitions, framing shops, postal courses, art magazines, and a few private institutions. The prevailing artistic themes during this period were predominantly landscape-based, (Abdullah & Lee, 2025) with less focus on figurative art. As artist and critic Syed Ahmad Jamal observed, there was, in the early days, "no serious inquiry into the dialectics of aesthetics (*Malaysian Art, 1965-1978. Exhibition Catalogue*, 1978)," and the human figure was often secondary to the depiction of nature. A survey of artworks from this period evidences this trend, with many works showcasing pastoral scenes, paddy fields, and other natural landscapes (*Malaysian Art, 1965-1978. Exhibition Catalogue*, 1978).

In this context, artist and academic, Redza Piyadasa, opined on the importance of landscapes as an expression of identity, claiming that artists used these scenes reflect their own

experiences and reactions to their surroundings (Piyadasa, 2015, 4). In this way, the focus on landscape could also be seen as another form of artistic self-assertion, participating in the transition from a colonized to an independent nation. Even the early work by Ibrahim, dating from the 1950s and well before his travels abroad, show such verdant landscapes of tropical pastures and hills, most of which would have been his lived views and an identity in that sense (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Khalil Ibrahim, London Sketchbook, Early Sketch of Rural Scene , 42cm x 30cm. Private Collection.

Notwithstanding the absence of educational formalities, modern art in Malaysia began to emerge more distinctly in the early 20th century, notably with the rise of the Nanyang movement, which began in 1938 with the establishment of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. The Nanyang movement, led by Chinese artists who migrated to Malaya during the Chinese Communist Revolution, blended Eastern and Western artistic styles with local subject matter. This movement, epitomized by figures like Georgette Chen, laid a foundation for modern art in Malaysia, creating a unique legacy of fusion between the local and global artistic sensibilities (Mahmood, 2007, 14-15). In terms of the broader development of modern art in Malaysia, the Nanyang movement played a foundational role.

However, it was also the post-war period, particularly the 1950s and 1960s, that saw significant growth in the Malaysian art scene, including through the development of batik textile practise for fashion and wear. The popularity of batik only grew in Malaya after World War II. Before

then, Indonesia dominated the world batik industry, and it was only after the war, with the failing industry in Java, that the East Coast Malaysia would “fill the vacuum” (Sheppard, 2011, 139). The technical process followed in Malaya was different from that of Java, as were the designs and colors. In Java, the decorations were symbolic and represented the various local identities of the Javanese people (Lee, 2007, 21), and the colors tended towards deep brown ochres and dark blues (Sheppard, 2011, 139).

The East Coast, on the other hand, including Ibrahim’s home state of Kelantan, had no sociological framework for designs and colors, which were mainly light red, yellow, light green and light blue there (Sheppard, 2011, 139). Ibrahim’s early color palette also reflects this color range. That color palette further illustrates the cosmopolitan sensibilities that were developing in his practice in the 1960s and 1970s, that combined familiar Eastern and growing Western sensibilities, in addition to his exploration of representational and abstract styles. Khalil would return to Malaysia to extend the application of batik techniques through the introduction of silk screen, imprint transfer and collage, successfully bringing to fruition these experimental constructs because he was so technically conversant in batik. We will see that Ibrahim’s batik figurative works, an example of which shows here (See Figure 3), influenced his later paintings, including the highly popular ‘East Coast Series’, that mimicked the forms and colors of these works on cloth.



Figure 3: *Untitled*, Khalil Ibrahim, (circa 1968- 1970), Batik on cloth, 89cm x 107cm. Private collection.

The end of the Japanese occupation in 1946 and the subsequent return of British colonial rule brought both relief and challenges to the local community. Yeoh Jin Leng notes that the post-war period sparked a renewed spirit of optimism and a desire for individual expression (Wong and Yeoh, 1996, 4). However, growing racial tensions tempered this positivity, complicated also by the British import of Indian and Chinese labourers to work on plantations and in tin mines, and their presence threatened Malay dominance (Zakaria Ali, 2007, 6). These tensions would later erupt into the 1969 racial riots, with extensive and far reaching ramifications on Malaysian society, the details of which go beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that this socio-political climate provided the backdrop against which Malaysian modern art evolved.

Contemporaneously, the establishment of institutions such as the Arts Council of Malaya in 1952 aimed to elevate the status of artists and promote a distinct Malaysian artistic identity. The country's independence in 1957 provided further momentum for artistic expression, with many artists feeling a renewed sense of creative freedom and national pride. Syed Ahmad Jamal aptly described this period as one of creative eruption, akin to a dormant volcano whose latent energy surfaced with the birth of the nation (Jamal, 1988). The establishment of the National Gallery in 1958 was another manifestation of this energy, showing that "[a]rt expresses and reflects the spirit and personality of the peoples who make a nation" (Zakaria Ali, 2007, 25). The Gallery's first chairman, Mubin Sheppard, wrote at the time that:

"The foundations of Independence have been well laid, and it is the responsibility of the present generation of Malaysians to build on them, a nation which will gain some of its inspiration from a fine collection of works of art, worthily housed and accessible to all" (Zakaria Ali, 2007, p. 27).

The overarching theme was one of unity, with the hope that by making art accessible to all citizens, communities would come together to celebrate and build a new nation in unison. The education policy at the time also mirrored such sentiments to be "a unifying factor for nationhood" (Zakaria Ali, 2007, 31). Add to this time of coming together, the mix of the returning artists who had travelled, studied and lived abroad, with an array of exposure to western movements, including Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism. The local art ecosystem grew stronger, including through art patronage with a growing number of corporate, public, and private persons starting to collect art. This patronage supported artists and art making became a viable, albeit always remaining a challenging livelihood for most artists. Some notable collectors during this time were: the Prime Minister's Department; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Electricity Board, University of Malaya, and the National Bank. There were also periodic purchases by ESSO, Shell, Nestlé, Malaysian Tobacco and Maybank (Wong and Yeoh, 1996, 6). From 1964, the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport was the main government body that managed art.

The Influence of Artistic Collectives and Communities

The 1950s and 1960s also witnessed the formation of several important art collectives, which played a key role in shaping the development of modern Malaysian art and shaped the environment in which Ibrahim operated. One of the most significant was the Wednesday Art Group, founded in 1952 by Peter Harris, an English art educator. The group, which included a diverse array of artists such as Patrick Ng, Cheong Laitong, and Dzulkifli Buyong, provided a forum for artistic experimentation and self-expression. The group met regularly in Kuala Lumpur, holding annual exhibitions at the British Council until its disbandment in 1967 soon after Harris's return to Britain (Wong and Yeoh, 1996, 11).

While Ibrahim was not a formal member of the Wednesday Art Group, his active involvement in the Kuala Lumpur art scene from 1965 onwards after returning from England, meant that he would have likely attended their exhibitions and known of the group's well known spirit of experimentation. It has been written that in London, Ibrahim had joined the Malayan Art Circle founded by Lee Jhoo For (another iconic Malaysian artist who was then studying at the Royal Academy). This group included artists such as Ismail Zain and Syed Adam (Ooi, 2002, 21). However, Ibrahim's wife, who was with him during this time, has no recollection of such participation (J. Hurzeler, personal communication, January 6, 2025). Other groups that launched after the Wednesday Art Group included: the Thengor Arts Society, 1954 with leading members: Chong Hooi Far, Fung Yow Chork, Yong Peng Seng, Zakariah Noor, A. Anthony, Chong Sing Kwai and Syed Zainal Rashid (Mahmood, 2007, p. 12).

In 1956, famed portrait artist, Hoessein Enas, started Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung, which espoused as a central tenet that art was a medium of cultural expression. Those members focussed on portraiture but also incorporated traditional elements like batik into their work (Mahmood, 2007, 7). Interestingly, these artists also brought batik into the mix and opened up a "new dimension in the visual expression of traditional art" (Mahmood, 2007, 14). Opposing focus on portraiture, artists Mustapha Ibrahim and Abdul Latiff Mohidin formed Anak Alam (Spirit of the Land), with members who included: Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, Prof Madya Siti Zainon Ismail, Ghaffar Ibrahim, K. Thangarajoo, Yusof Gajah Ismail, Ali Rahamad and Yusof Othman. Artist Ali Rahamad, a close friend of Ibrahim's throughout his life starting from the early 1970s recalls Ibrahim working with the group from time to time and Rahamad recalls painting with Ibrahim in his Petaling Jaya house, an Edenic sanctuary, at a time that few artist's could claim to own homes (A. Rahamad, personal communication, August 21, 2024).

The sprouting of these collectives reflects the dynamics of the post-war period in Malaysia and its complex interplay of hope, anxiety and identity. Collectives offered support in numbers and louder voice through them. The existence of these collectives in reference to Ibrahim is also important because his absence of participation shows his consistently independent dynamic, a trait he reflected throughout his life.

The thinking around the previously discussed ‘national identity’ resurfaced through The National Culture Congress of 1971, which sought to articulate policies to crystallize the concept by “... [bringing] to light some aspects of origin, identity, norms and values. A new spirit of nationalism resulting in new directions in awareness of involvement encompass a broader understanding of identity – associated with the region” (Balai Seni Lukis Negara (Malaysia) & Pertubuhan Malaysia-British, 1986). The Congress espoused three ideas, namely that:

- a. National culture of Malaysia should be based on the original culture of the region;
- b. Elements of other cultures that are suitable can be incorporated into the national culture; and
- c. Islam is the main element of national culture. (Mahmood, 2007, 15).

Debate continues to this day around the actual impact of this Congress’s manifesto, and a detailed review of these arguments is beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it is this writer’s view that these ideas attributed to a national identity are so vague and broad as to become relatively meaningless. For example, what does “original culture of the region” mean, except in fact, that of the indigenous communities also known as the Orang Asli in Malaysia. Terms like “suitable” invite problematic discretion. It is not surprising, then, that the notion of an aesthetic ‘national identity’ that this Congress contemplated did not take on traction.

Art historian Sarena Abdullah goes further to say that the Congress in fact failed to import the Congress’ Islamic focus into the education system for proper development and practise of ‘identity’. Nowhere in the educational curriculum did the teaching of Malay traditional arts such as songket-making, metalwork, batik, and weaving, ever become core subjects in the arts and design institutions. Abdullah convincingly asserts that the abstract expressionism that surfaced at the time should not be seen as aligning with an Islamic identity. It served a different purpose, which was to show aesthetic experimentation and not to reflect Islamic or Malay identity (Abdullah, 2020, 3- 29). Syed Ahmad Jamal asserted that it was this lack of traditional strength that in fact freed the Malaysian art practitioners to develop contemporary practises, “..untethered by age-old traditions. [Rather], the manifestation of the spirit and imagination are realized with a unifying inner fabric of the influence of the many-layered and multi-faceted aspects of Regional Culture, Malay, Indian, Islam, Chinese, and Western-oriented sensitivity, reflecting the polarization of the national ethos (Jamal, 1988).”

In any event, by shifting focus from “art for art’s sake” to “art for society’s sake,” the Congress did affect some art practice. We see during this time an increasing number of contemporary artists, introducing elements of local traditions such as batik and wood carving to their modern practices, even though the curriculums did not. This revised focus on traditional crafts, not all necessarily Malay or Islamic, should be seen as a celebration of confluence in creativity on identity, rather than a polarized ‘only’ Malay one. In fact, noting the contested and scholarly debated scope of the terms ‘Malay’ and ‘Malay world, an important distinction to bear in mind here also is the difference between Malaysian and Malay, with “Malaysian” signifying the

union of all ethnic groups and “Malay” representing the Islamic segment. The discourse on identity often confuses the two and uses these terms interchangeably. A fair read of the National Congress is that it was really trying to equate Malaysian identity with ‘Malay identity’ as the central precept, and the lack of clarity around the latter undermined development of the former under its auspices. In this regard also, we see Ibrahim, with his consistent focus on the figurative in his batik practise, was at odds with Islamic aesthetics. In this way also, his practise sidestepped the National Culture Congress precepts of an Islam centric aesthetic, bringing his batik practise into the diversity of a Malaysian framework.

This idea of an ‘identity’ continued to surface, with all its ambiguities, in the post-colonial discourse on the practice, function, and delivery of art in Malaya (now Malaysia). During the 1970s and 1980s, the discussions on identity feeding into the theme of identity politics in Malaysia were at their zenith. The Malaysian community was reflecting the global sensibilities of the time, which, as writer Kobena Mercer in the context of modernism, noted: “For the first sixty to seventy years of the last century, reality was agreed upon and governed by a monocultural consensus which has given way over the last thirty years to a world in which multiculturalism is increasingly held to be the social norm, even if the post-modern condition of permanent argument and dissensus comes with it as an inevitable corollary (Mercer, 2005).” The notion of a national art identity, or at least an aspiration to have one, might have made sense in such a monocultural backdrop, but seems particularly unacceptable as an idea now given the celebration of diversity as mark of sophistication and value, and ofcourse, a marker of cosmopolitanism.

The Development of Art in Post-War Malaya as a background to Khalil Ibrahim’s community interface

After Hooi Keat’s publicized entry and experience at Camberwell Art School, UK, interest in Western education grew. Khalil Ibrahim was a member of the second generation of artists to travel abroad for further education. (Others included Ismail Zain, Sulaiman Esa, Lim Eng Hooi, Choong Kam Kow, Patrick Ng, Lee Joo-for, Jolly Koh, and Grace Selvanayagam.) Ibrahim benefitted from the shift in experience that this second generation of artists had in the UK, in contrast to their 1950s predecessors. The learning of art had become more complex and now involved interdisciplinary awareness. As Piyadasa observes: “Art activity was no longer viewed as solely a means of expressing emotional feelings through the manipulation of vitalistic gestures but rather there was now a new emphasis on investigations into perceptual modes of cognition. A new involvement with the problematics of visual design was stimulated and with it, an awareness of the nature of the mass-media and mass communications... [consideration of social history, philosophy, literature, history of ideas...]” (Wong and Yeoh, 1996, 6).

Ibrahim's foundational study at St. Martin's marked a critical turning point in his aesthetic development because there he moved away from landscapes to the human form. "The anatomy of the human form became a recurring form in his artistic discussion and its expansion in formation of groups emphasized with the dynamic equilibrium of horizontal lines started to define the touching quality of his personal expression. A different quality to his painting was revealed. He relished the vibrant light and colours of the tropics that he had temporarily left and his use of the colours became more luminous and chromatic (Naziree, 2004, 11). " He drew with live models, actively visited exhibitions and museums, as well as receiving critique of his work.

In London, Khalil "adapted a cubist style with the ability to simplify three-dimensional complexities into two dimensional art (Naziree, 2004, 11)." His abstract sketches done at St. Martins, were "inner images" that would later translate into independent works (Naziree, 2015, 36). They were "fleeting moments, playful formal explorations for its own sake, complete in itself" from the memory of which he drew on to create many of his abstracts (Naziree, 2015, 36).

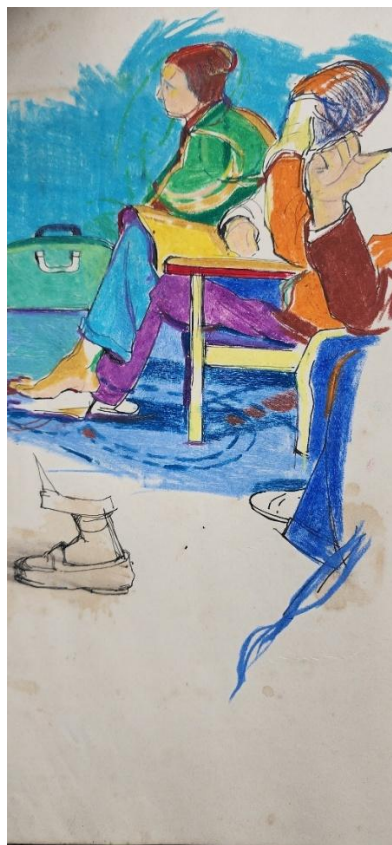


Figure 5: Khalil Ibrahim, Sketchbook, London (1960 – 64). 18cm x 21cm. Private collection.

There, also, Ibrahim met his life partner and wife, Swiss national, Judith Hurzeler, at an English language course. The two of them found each other in this foreign country, both united also through adventurous spirit. They married in 1964. Judith contributed significantly to Ibrahim's

expanding cosmopolitan sensibilities, being herself a product of travel, curiosity and adventurous spirit, and coming from a somewhat cultural different, albeit also provincial background. She would become his best ally; manager; exhibition coordinator and was Ibrahim's confidante and sounding board. Between them, they covered East and Western sensibilities in the best way possible informing the cosmopolitan practise that Ibrahim evolved (J. Hurzeler (Khalil), personal communication, Series of Discussions over 2022-2023).

The scant material that survives from his time in London includes a few sketchbooks, all of which provide important visual insight and influence. These are filled with life and landscape studies, presumably executed at drawing classes at St. Martins, colourful pastel compositions and whimsical sketches of faces, figures, scenes and objects. We see in them the use of bold and brights pastels and shapes of colour, which were renowned characteristics of his batiks and paintings. His training in the figurative, drawing and painting, as well as the illustrious academic qualification from St. Martin's and dedicated explorations of galleries in London, gave him the tools, confidence to develop mastery over a variety of creative techniques, after his return to Malaysia.

When Ibrahim returned to Malaysia in 1966, he moved to Kuala Lumpur to find a similar cosmopolitan oeuvre to that he had enjoyed in London. Ibrahim took up batik painting only after his return from London, in the 1966 and was introduced to the practice by artists in his home state of Kelantan (J. Hurzeler, personal communication, 2023 2022). It was through this re-introduction to a traditional craft that he developed a distinctive modern language. This period of return marked the start of his dedicated exploration and experimentation with batik, "which gave him another direction to express himself and more importantly to assert his rich Kelantanese heritage (Naziree, 2004, 12)." During this time, he met Frank Sullivan, who was the director of the National Art Gallery, and operated a commercial gallery, the Samat Gallery. Sullivan recognised and encouraged Ibrahim's talent by showing his batik work in Samat and collecting it for the National Gallery. Writing on Ibrahim in *The Straits Times Annual 1970*, Sullivan noted that Ibrahim was an "...established painter before starting work in the batik medium after studying overseas. He was fascinated by its development and set about mastering the use of dyes and wax (Sullivan, 1970, 58)." Ibrahim went on to produce batik art well into the 1980s.

Though for decades Khalil Ibrahim's works featured in local and international exhibitions from the 1960s, (starting with feature of his work in the National Gallery and Frank Sullivan's famed Samat Gallery in the 1960s), there was little academic discussion about his work beyond short and very general comments by Malaysian commentators in various publications surveying Malaysian art. It was only Frank Sullivan, writing in 1970 about Ibrahim's batik practise, who recognised the importance of his mastery, pursuit and talent, in contrast to most artists who encountered "comfortless despair" with batik's complications. Ibrahim on the other hand, was undaunted by batik and revelled in the challenge, becoming a true master (Sullivan, 1970, 56). He mastered the trick of 'cracking', which cracks the wax that has already set, so that the dye can seep through the cracks, and requires an expert degree of control and

intentionality, to get desired results. Personal archival materials show that Ibrahim exhibited batiks in 1975 in Melbourne at the Raya Gallery and with Sullivan's gallery (National Archives Malaysia, Khalil Ibrahim).



Figure 4: Khalil Ibrahim showing batik series at Raya Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, May 28, 1975. Silver Gelatin. Private Collection.

Sullivan was masterly influential in Ibrahim's early art practise, and through his introduction, Ibrahim would meet Indonesian artists, including Sabtohodoyo, the son-in-law of the iconic Indonesian modernist, Affandi, and grow his strong relationship with Bali and the artists in Yogyakarta, sharing of creative ideas, making regular visits there starting in 1968. Ibrahim felt particularly welcomed and supported in Bali. Artists like the Sumatran Rusli Hakim encouraged his art and enabled him to further "mined the colourful land and seascapes of Kelantan and Terengganu for spiritual and artistic wealth (Naziree, 2004, 12)". However, he had become frustrated with Malaysia and wanted to live abroad again. In 1971, the couple travelled to Switzerland with the intention of spending two years there to try out life there. However, soon after landing, Ibrahim received a major commission for a few batik paintings from Malaysian Airlines and had to return to Malaysia. The commission payment enabled the couple to buy their first and only house (in Petaling Jaya) in 1971 for RM 13,000 cash. Ibrahim had always said that he could never live with monthly house payments hanging over his head, so they paid the full price in cash and cleared that deck. That commission changed his destiny and firmly rooted them in Malaysia (Hurzeler, 2022 and 2024).

Khalil participated in numerous local and international exhibitions, including important group exhibitions, such as “Side by Side: Contemporary British and Malaysian Art 1986.” In that show, the exhibition catalogue and curator, Syed Ahmad Jamal, missed the opportunity to include any meaningful discussion on Ibrahim, and, as later discussed here, made very general reference to Ibrahim’s practise (Jamal, 1988). It was not until 2004, in conjunction with Ibrahim’s retrospective at the Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, that the accompanying catalogue and publication offered the first real scholarly engagement with his practise, through the commendable research and writing of curator, the late Shireen Naziree (Naziree, 2004). Naziree compiled a later publication on Ibrahim that provides much needed quality details on Ibrahim’s life, perspectives and art practise (Naziree, 2015). Malaysian commentators had woefully neglected proper analysis of Ibrahim’s career, let alone his batik practise, until Naziree’s deep dive.

Ibrahim’s canvases of figurative colour, known as the ‘East Coast Series’ paintings (in oil and acrylic), are what he became popularly known for and were commercially saleable. It was these paintings, watercolours and sketches, rather than the batik works, that travelled the world through various exhibitions. Could this have been because the Malaysian curators themselves felt more comfortable showing works that used western mediums, to attract foreign buyers? Ironically, it could be said that this way of thinking short changed Ibrahim’s batik practise with international, and even local audiences.

The exhibition mentioned before, “Side by Side, Contemporary British and Malaysian Art 1986,” curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal (who was then the Director of the National Art Gallery) featured 28 artists from Malaysia who studied in Britain, paired with artists from Britain. In that exhibition, Ibrahim’s acrylic abstract painting was paired with John McLean’s abstract “Spring Tide (1986),” (Balai Seni Lukis Negara (Malaysia) & Pertubuhan Malaysia-British, 1986). Syed Ahmad Jamal explained that contemporary art was “about contemporary life and contemporary man’s responses to events, situations and conditions – manifesting his spirit, giving shape to it.” He used Ibrahim’s work as an example of the shift from the pioneering spirit of the 1950s, to a “new state of consciousness of the eighties.”

Elaborating on Ibrahim’s work, Jamal wrote that Khalil: “... identifies himself regionally... [concentrating] on two areas, the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia and Bali. Ibrahim controls the linear plasticity into areas of flat ,fields. He continues the tradition of figurative pictorial art into the area of abstraction treating the human figure in a more plastic formal context” (Balai Seni Lukis Negara (Malaysia) & Pertubuhan Malaysia-British, 1986; Jamal, 1988). There is no reference, unfortunately, to any aspect of Ibrahim’s batik practise and its interface with his painting.

But it was the batik that really set Khalil apart as an exceptional Malaysian Modernist, and served as an exemplar of the search for new materials, techniques as some of the “defining characteristics of modern art activity... employed with formal and symbolic features to continually test the limits of existing values governing art activity” (Sabapathy and Piyadasa,

1983, 7). Ibrahim exemplified this “modernism” dynamic in his pursuit of batik/cloth art. As is evident from the examples shown here, his designs explore abstract forms with colourist sensibilities. His colour palette was unrestricted. Ibrahim experimented with the abstract forms at the start of his batik art development because he found that designing easier to study the techniques (Peris, 1970; Sullivan, 1970), and would later advance to sophisticated renditions of detailed figurative. He was the first Malaysian artist to do portraits in batik, so advanced was his level of skill (Peris, 1970) (See Figure 6). In this way, Ibrahim’s batik/cloth practice shows experimentation that let to mastery, and even influenced other artists in their batik practices, including fellow Kelantanese, Ismail Mat Hussin (J. Hurzeler, personal communication, 2023 2022; A. Rahamad, personal communication, July 27, 2024).

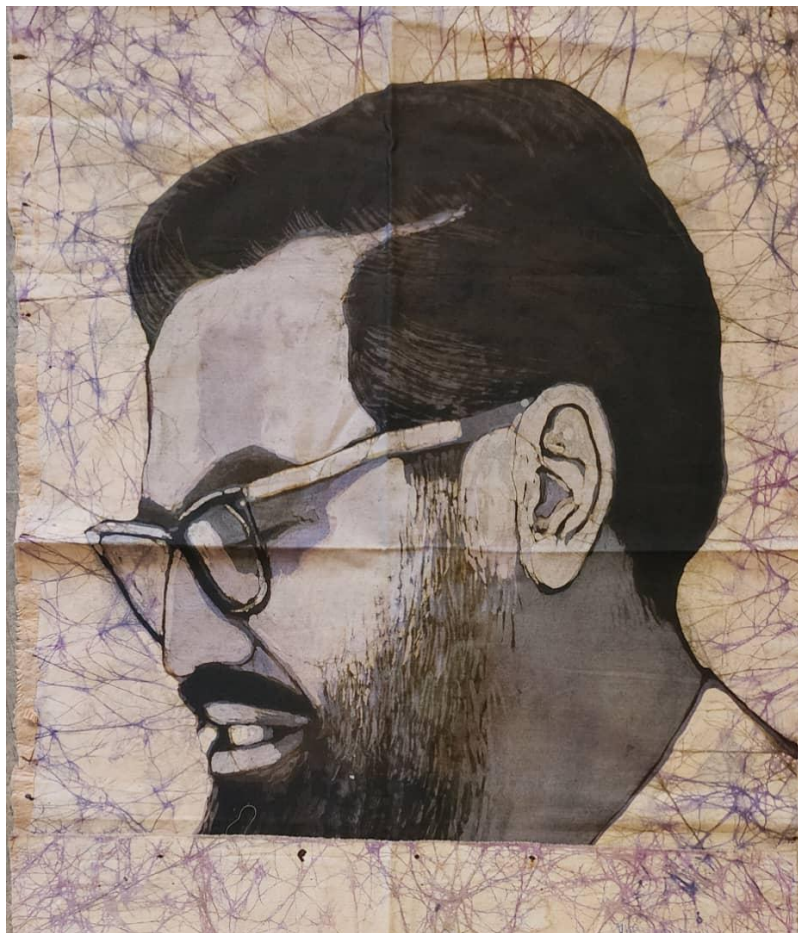


Figure 6: *Portrait of Ungku Aziz*, Khalil Ibrahim, (circa late 1960s /early 1970s), Batik on cloth, 59cm x 45cm.
Private Collection



Figure 7: *Abstract I*, Khalil Ibrahim, 1970, Batik on cloth, 78cm x 97cm. Private collection.

Ibrahim's early engagement with batik not only signalled a critical juncture in his practice but also served as a foundational force that influenced his later work in more conventional Western media. While he eventually shifted towards oil and acrylic on canvas, as well as watercolour and ink on paper, his approach to these mediums continued to build on the formal and conceptual insights he developed through batik. The layering, textural sensitivity, colour palette, and rhythmic abstraction that characterise his paintings reflect their origins in his batik innovations. This syncretic relationship suggests that batik was not merely a phase in his artistic journey but a catalytic medium that expanded his modernist vocabulary.



Figure 8: *Abstract IV*, Khalil Ibrahim, (circa late 1960s), Batik on Cloth, 90cm x 90cm. Private collection.

Rather than treating batik as just an ethnographic artifact or a nostalgic nod to heritage, Ibrahim elevated it into a dynamic site of artistic inquiry. In doing so, he not only blurred the boundaries between craft and fine art but also interweaved global influences and indigenous forms in a way that was both dialogical and transformative. His work resists categorisation within national or stylistic boundaries, operating instead as a fluid articulation of identity across space and time. In this light, Ibrahim occupies a singular position in the canon of Malaysian modern and contemporary art. His batik-based practice constitutes a self-fashioned language of cosmopolitan modernism, an articulate and original response to the intertwined histories of colonialism, modernity, and cultural hybridity- and importantly one that illuminates through lived experience in these various geographies rather than contrived theoretical reference.

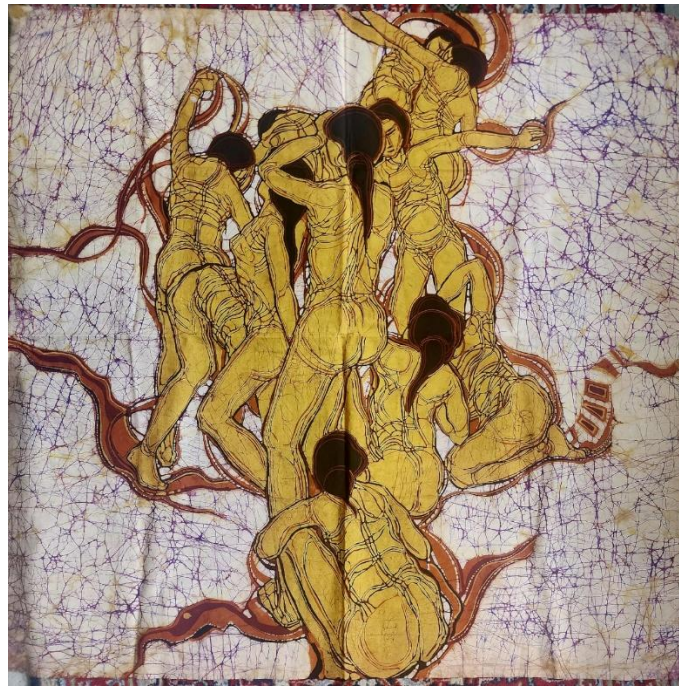


Figure 9: *Untitled*, Khalil Ibrahim, circa 1960s , batik on cloth. Private Collection

Conclusion

Khalil Ibrahim's artistic journey is deeply embedded in the post-independence context of Malaysia, a period marked by complex dialogues around national identity, modernism, and the intersection of tradition and innovation. As Malaysia navigated its newfound independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the establishment of institutions like the National Gallery and the growing interest in modern art reflected a nation's desire to forge a unified identity, transcending colonial legacies. In this climate, Ibrahim's work emerged as a distinct voice, not only reflecting the social and political currents of his time but also contributing to the development of a uniquely Malaysian art that embraced both local and global influences. Ibrahim's artistic evolution, particularly his engagement with batik as a modern medium, exemplifies his ability to bridge the traditional with the contemporary. His mastery of batik allowed him to reimagine a centuries-old craft, transforming it into a means of personal expression and a tool to navigate the complexities of Malaysian identity. By intertwining the vibrancy of his Kelantanese heritage with his broader regional and international experiences, Ibrahim was able to create works that transcended simple regionalism, engaging with universal themes of human existence and cultural memory.

However, as this paper has shown, Ibrahim's relationship with the prevailing discourses on national identity and art in Malaysia was not always straightforward. His work was often dismissed or overshadowed by broader national narratives that sought to define art through rigid, sometimes exclusionary frameworks. Despite the prominence of the National Culture

Congress and its emphasis on Islam and Malay identity as central to the national culture, Ibrahim's approach to art was notably more inclusive. His work did not conform to these ideologies but instead transcended the narrow ethnic associations with Islam and Islamic aesthetics, and celebrated the rich traditions of Southeast Asia. Ibrahim's ability to create art that was simultaneously modern and deeply connected to the local traditions of Malaysia, Indonesia, and beyond, helped redefine what Malaysian art could be. In recent years, academic attention to Ibrahim's work has finally begun to catch up with his influence, yet there remains much to be explored in understanding the full extent of his contribution to both Malaysian and international art history.

His retrospectives, particularly the 2004 exhibition at Petronas Gallery, have provided crucial insights into his multifaceted practice, offering a clearer understanding of his artistic legacy. As scholars continue to engage with his works, there is an opportunity to reassess the role of art in the formation of national identity, particularly in a post-colonial context that embraces complexity, diversity, and pluralism. Khalil Ibrahim's batik paintings, particularly from the late 1960s and 1970s, serve as a powerful example of how personal artistic practice can challenge and reshape cultural narratives. His works do not fit neatly into the frameworks of either nationalism or abstract formalism, but instead engage with the complexities of a post-colonial identity that is inherently fluid and multifaceted. Ibrahim's quiet, yet profound engagement with tradition and modernity through batik underscores the importance of individual artistic agency in the formation of national culture. In doing so, his work challenges the dominant ideologies of identity politics that have often sought to define Malaysian art in narrow, exclusionary terms.

Ultimately, this study asserts that Khalil Ibrahim's batik practice offers vital insights into the evolving relationship between art, identity, and history in post-independence Malaysia. His work, which resists ideological prescription and celebrates the richness of cultural hybridity, provides a more expansive and authentic understanding of Malaysian artistic identity. By foregrounding Ibrahim's contributions to modern art discourse, this research calls for a re-evaluation of his place in Malaysian art history and encourages further exploration of the intersections between creativity, identity, and national culture in the modernist movement. Khalil Ibrahim's art, both through its technical mastery and its deep engagement with the themes of belonging, heritage, and self-expression, remains a powerful testament to the transformative potential of art that side-steps the need for national identity, celebrating instead, the strength of exploration and syncretic influence in the development of a cosmopolitan personal identity.

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