

# Developing Creative Students Who Embrace Malaysian Diverse Cultures: The Case of Learning Art through Wall Mural Activities

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## Abstract

The program called Program Sekolah Penyayang Setia: Alam Semula Jadi, Persekitaran dan Sekolah was an activity-based project that focused on the 'caring for school' concept, the aims of which were to instill the feeling of love and caring, nurture a sense of togetherness, create an awareness of the importance of virtuous values, and develop strong unity among students. In this program, a series of activities called Wall Mural: Integrated Cultural Activity was carried out to create murals by focusing on aspects that would help enhance a sense of strong appreciation and respect of the major races in Malaysian, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians by learning and using relevant cultural symbols of motifs for murals. This study was based on a qualitative approach involving a study sample consisting of several primary school students of the second level. They were briefed of the objectives of this program and were given exposure to the use of various symbols and motifs to help them understand the importance of national integration of diverse cultures of various races of Malaysia. Through this program, these students were able to learn the cultural symbols of design motifs of the diverse cultures of Malaysia and to gain first-hand aesthetical experience in using such symbols in the mural activities. By displaying such artistic works, their teachers and friends would also be able to learn and appreciate the various symbols of motifs and their cultural meanings. In summation, all involved in this creative program, either directly or indirectly, would have learned some cultural aspects of the various races of Malaysia, the appreciation and respect of which could help create a caring, respectable community at the school level.

**Keywords:** Cultures, motifs, national integration, symbols, unity, murals

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## 1. Introduction

Historical accounts show that mural paintings can be traced to the Paleolithic era, such as paintings in Chauvet cave of Ardeche in Southern France (circa 30,000 BC). Likewise, many ancient mural paintings have been found in ancient tombs in Egypt (circa 3150 BC), in Minion palace (in Neopalatial era circa 1600-1700 BC), and in Pompei (in a period between 100 BC and 79 AD).

The San Bartolo murals from the Mayan civilization found in Guatemala are examples of one of the oldest mural art in Mesoamerica dated as far back to 300 BC. In Malaysia, ancient paintings have been found in the Mulu cave in Sarawak and Tempurung cave in Perak. Other archeological sites have also been explored that revealed some evidence of ancient mural activities that were practiced by the ancient people of that era.

Nowadays, murals are painted with a range of techniques using either oils or water-based media. The techniques or styles can create a wide spectrum of murals,

ranging from abstract to *Trompe-loeil* (French: “deceive the eye”). Based on the murals of Graham Rust and Rainer Maria Latzke in the 1980s, trompe-loeil paintings have adorned many private and public buildings in Europe. Over recent years, beautiful, artistic murals have been created using drawing techniques or photography that transfers images onto poster papers or canvases, which are then pasted on walls to produce the effects that are both appealing and realistic. As such, murals can be defined as activities to sketch, draw or visualize beautiful pieces of art on walls, ceilings, or other surfaces in public space, the characteristic of which makes mural drawings an art that differs from others through the combination of the elements of spatial design that are harmoniously infused. Figure 1 shows a mural created by the principal researcher of this study.



Figure 1: Awall mural  
Source: Authors' personal murals

## 2. Background

Malaysia is a multi-racial country consisting of several ethnic groups with a diverse range of living styles encompassing political, social, economic, and linguistic aspects. In Peninsular Malaysia, Malays, Chinese, and Indians are the major races while Kadazan, Iban, Kayan, Bajau, and Bidayuh are the dominant ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Also, several indigenous groups can be found living in remote areas, who together with Malays, are called *Bumiputras*, literally means the sons of the soil. Given the diverse racial makeup, national integration plays an important role in uniting all the races in Malaysia by sharing and embracing common values. Such integration helps forge a strong national identity among Malaysians to live harmoniously.

Like any other aspiring nations, Malaysia aims to become a developed nation by 2020, which is earmarked in Vision 2020, the mission of which is to pave the way for Malaysia to achieve such a status. Surely, its citizens must be united to realize such a mission. To date, the Malaysian government through various agencies have undertaken many initiatives and instituted several policies, such as National Pillars, Educational Policy, National Cultural Policy, New Economic Policy, Vision 2020, and National Development Policy. As such, all Malaysians, irrespective of their racial backgrounds, need to understand, accept, respect, and practice common

values and embrace a common identity to become true citizens that can help make Malaysia a better nation.

Clearly, a strong bond among various ethnic groups is needed in countries with diverse racial demographics, such as Malaysia that has many racial groups. On top of that, Malaysia is blessed with people with many languages and cultures. Further enriching Malaysia's racial backgrounds, each race comprises several sub-ethnic groups. For example, the Malay race consists of several sub-groups, such as Javanese, Bugis, Rawa, and Banjarese, who came from Indonesia. Likewise, the Chinese are made up of several ethnic subgroups, such as Kwangsi, Hakka, Hokkien, Kantonis, Teochew, and Hainan. Similarly, the Indians comprise a number of sub-groups, such as Maruthuvar, Vanniyar, Thevar, Nadar, Yadhavar, and Adhi Dravidar. Invariably, each ethnic sub-group speaks with a unique language and observe a particular living style.

In view of such diversity of races, languages, and living styles, the Malaysian government has taken all necessary measures to unite and integrate all the peoples into a common race. Certainly, such unity and integration can help Malaysia attain high political stability, which can help develop Malaysia into a vibrant nation that is free from sectarian or racial conflicts. Also, the integration of various ethnic groups can produce a strong, dedicated workforce that can help advance Malaysia politically and economically. Undeniably, the progress of nations, especially multi-racial and multi-cultural nations, relies heavily on political stability, which is achieved through the strong integration of all the peoples.

One of the means to help Malaysians appreciate the importance of national integration is through mural art. In this regard, murals are important because they project artistic and cultural values into the public domain. For example, murals can help beautify a city or town through images or objects that carry certain religious, cultural or social themes. Such thematic messages can visually communicate with the masses concerning social issues that prevail in society. In this respect, the creation of murals is in line with the term ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’ that highlights the thinking or worldview of a society.

According to the English language, the word ‘civilization’ relates to the word ‘culture’, which is derived from the Latin word *colere* that means to plant or to work on. From the etymological perspective, the Malay word ‘budaya’ originates from two root words, namely ‘budi’ and ‘daya’. The former carries the meaning of the light or rays resided in an individual’s heart while the latter refers to an individual’s effort to carry out a task based on his or her ‘budi’ (Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah, 1966).

As such, the creation of murals serves as an effective tool in the process of portraying a particular culture. For example, in Kerala, India, the walls of Hindu temples are adorned with exclusive murals that highlight the culture and belief of Hindus in an artistic space. In this context, the existence of murals can be viewed as an expressive

cultural platform that has a close relationship with society. Of late, the emergence of murals dotting the walls of buildings in several towns and cities, such as Georgetown, Bandar Melaka, and Tanjong Malim, reinforces the notion of such murals as an important asset in urban development. The infusion of local cultural elements in murals helps highlight the uniqueness of a particular culture to the general public. Such a contention concurs with the cultural definition made by Aziz Deraman (1975) in that culture refers to a way of life encompassing all living aspects of life.

Based on the aspects discussed above, a program module called *Wall Mural: Integrated Cultural Activity*, which was used in this study, can be regarded as the creation of thinking that emphasizes the spiritual and physical needs of a society, effectively making murals as one of the cultural tools that highlight the wellbeing of society. The creation of murals represents one of the ways of comprehensive thinking of people, the value of which can be shared by all and transformed into creative drawings, sketches, and images. As such, the program called *Wall Mural: Integrated Cultural Activity* was carried out with the following objectives:

- i. To create a sense of understanding and appreciation of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures.
- ii. To understand symbols that can be used as the main motifs to interpret the three dominant cultures.
- iii. To nurture a strong sense of togetherness among students.
- iv. To motivate students in making creative artifacts by integrating the motifs of the three cultures.

### 3. Findings

The following subsections provide detailed accounts of the research findings concerning the various aspects of the research.

#### 3.1 The selection of Symbols and Motifs

In the program, motifs and symbols representing the cultures of the three major races, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians, were used to highlight their aesthetical and philosophical values and to convey their meanings to the local society of each race. Specifically, such symbols were selected to portray the cultural aspects of Malaysian diverse societies. For the Malay society, symbols in the form of ferns, bamboo shoots, arabesque, and *ketupat* (woven palm-leaf pouches) were used to represent their culture. Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4 show several Malay motifs based on bamboo shoots, ferns, and arabesque, respectively.

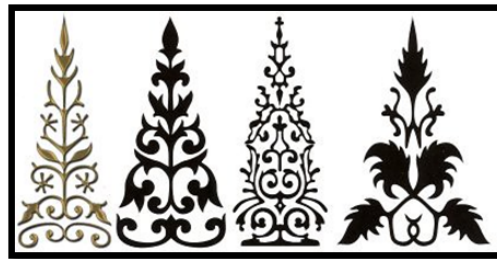


Figure 2: Malay bamboo shoot motifs

Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Pucuk-Rebung-Repro-AI-Mudara-2004\\_fig2\\_305618616](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Pucuk-Rebung-Repro-AI-Mudara-2004_fig2_305618616)



Figure 3: A Malay fern motif

Source: <http://www.tamadunmelayu.info/2011/04/corak-motif-kaluk-pakis-untuk-ukir.html>

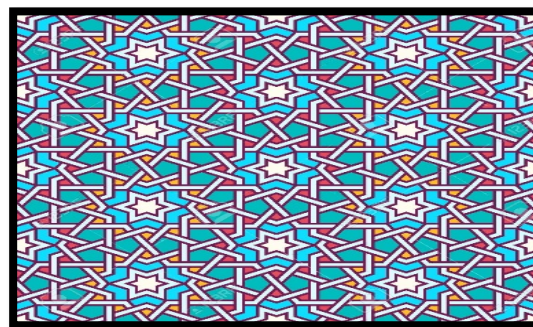


Figure 4: A Malay Arabesque motif

Source: <https://www.republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/khazanah/12/08/09/m8hpdo-jenis-dan-motif-seni-arabes-1>

For Chinese society, symbols depicting dragons, fans, firecrackers, lanterns, and carps were used as the main motifs for the creation of Chinese murals. Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7 show the Chinese dragon, lantern, and fan motifs, respectively.



Figure 5: A Chinese dragon motif

Source: <https://infobatik.id/tingginya-makna-motif-nagadi-batik-lasem/>

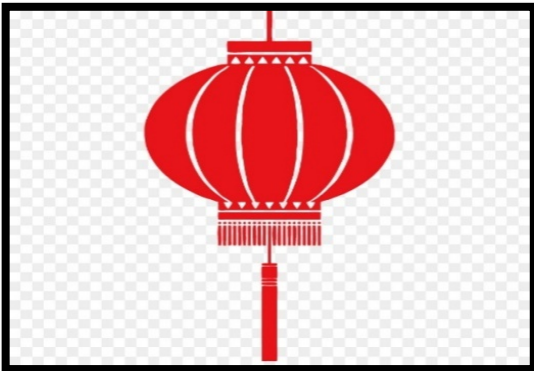


Figure 6: A Chinese lantern motif

Source: <https://my.lovepik.com/image-400354056/lantern-decoration.html>

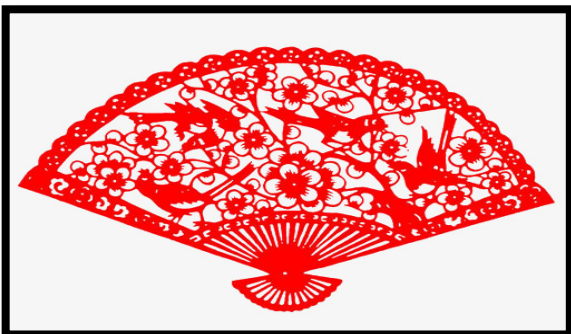


Figure 7: A Chinese fan motif

Source: <https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2018/02/09/kenali-simbolik-warna-dalam-budaya-cina/>

For Indian society, symbols representing lamps, lotus flowers, cows, elephants, henna leaves, and peacocks were used to create murals with Indian cultural elements. Figure 8, Figure 9, and Figure 10 show the Indian peacock, elephant, and lamp motifs, respectively.



Figure 8: An Indian peacock motif

Source: <https://batiktiganegeri.com/2017/07/21/batik-burung-merak-cendrawasih-hong/>

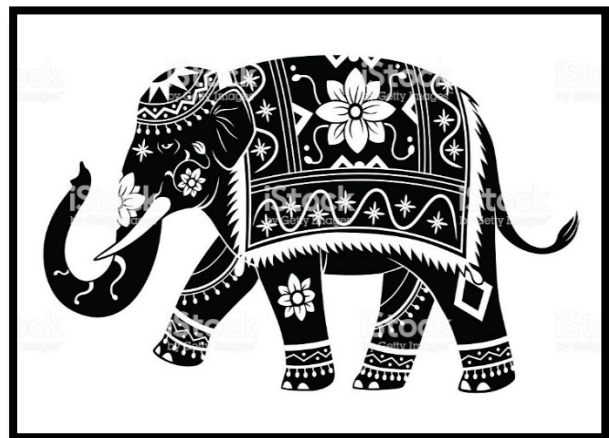


Figure 9: An Indian elephant motif

Source: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/zoo-vector-vectors.html>



Figure 10: An Indian lamp motif

Source: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/diwali-lights-of-india.html?cutout=1>

### 3.2 The Selection of Tools and Materials

The researchers had to select proper tools and materials to ensure the murals would be created as planned according to the research objectives. In this study, the main material used was a piece of plywood measuring 2 by 2 feet. Using this type of wood, it would be easier for students to attach and arrange their mural drawings. The following are the materials used in the wall mural program.

#### i. Plywood

A piece of plywood measuring 2 by 2 feet, with a thickness of 12 mm, was used as the main material.

#### ii. Motif Templates

Motif templates made mounting board were used to help students to draw forms and shapes with ease.

#### iii. Pencils

Pencils were used to make draft sketches and drawings before creating the murals.

#### iv. Facial powder

Facial powder was used to absorb the smell of oil paints.

#### v. Toothbrushes

Various toothbrushes of different sizes were used to draw lines with varying thicknesses.

#### vi. Aprons

Aprons were worn by students to prevent oil paint from making contact with their skins during painting.

#### vii. Towels

Towels were used to wipe out dirt from the drawing surfaces.

#### viii. Oil Paints

Oil Paints were the main wet medium that was used to color the plywood.

#### ix. Heat Gun

A heat gun was used to get rid of moisture from the mural paintings.

### 4. The Implementation of the Program

The program was implemented through four main stages. The following subsections provide detailed accounts of the program implementation.

#### 4.1 Briefing of Murals and Their Impact on Cultural Integration

In this phase, several students of the second level were selected from several national primary schools, namely SJK(C) Aik Hua (Pulau Pinang), SK Meru, Jalan Tap, Klang (Selangor), SJK(T) Tasek Permai (Pulau Pinang), SK Batu Feringghi (Pulau Pinang) and SJK(T) Ladang Vallambrosa (Selangor). Before taking part in the mural painting activities, they were briefed on the aims and objectives of the wall mural program. Then, they were given exposure to the use of various symbols and motifs to help them understand the importance of the integration of various cultures of the major races in Malaysia. Specifically, the objectives of the program are as follows:

- To expose students to the importance of cultural integration in Malaysia.
- To help students learn the symbols and motifs of the major races in Malaysia.

Figure 11 and Figure 12 show the briefing sessions regarding the wall mural program given by research assistants of this study.



Figure 11: Students attending briefing sessions regarding wall mural program.

Source: Authors' personal collection



Figure 12: Students attending briefing sessions regarding wall mural program.

Source: Authors' personal collection

#### 4.2 The Sketching Proses

The students were given exposure to basic sketching that would create quality drawings. Several lecturers and facilitators were appointed to help the students to sketch their preferred motifs. To facilitate the sketching proses, relevant templates of Malay, Chinese, and Indian motifs were given to students, with which they would use and arrange such templates based on their favored configurations with some degree of creativity. The objectives of the second phase of the study are as follows:

- To impart students with the knowledge of selecting appropriate symbols of motifs of the three major races in Malaysia.
- To expose students to basic sketching or drawing.
- To expose students to the creative composition of motifs.

Figure 13 and Figure 14 show the process of sketching and tracing of motifs, respectively.



Figure 13: The motif-sketching process

Source: Authors' personal collection



Figure 14: The tracing process performed on a hard board.  
Source: Authors' personal collection

### 4.3 The Coloring Process

In virtually all artistic works, colors are widely used in creating beautiful artifacts. In principle, colors can be divided into three categories, namely basic, secondary, and tertiary. In the wall mural program of this study, the students were given extensive exposure to the technique of mixing or combining basic colors, such as red, yellow, and blue, to produce amazing secondary and tertiary colors with the help of facilitators. To develop their creativity, the students were allowed to use their preferred colors in such a process that helped them create attractive mural paintings. For the third phase of the study, the objectives to be achieved are as follows:

- (a) To expose students to the technique of selecting appropriate colors for murals.
- (b) To expose students to the coloring concept based on the required design elements and principles, such as the emphasis on colors and contrast of colors, during the coloring process.

Figure 14 shows students coloring several motifs, while Figure 15 shows students carrying out the coloring process with assistance from the facilitators.



Figure 15: Students coloring several motifs  
Source: Authors' personal collection



Figure 16: Students carrying out the coloring process with the help from facilitators  
Source: Authors' personal collection

### 4.4 The Finishing Process

In many works of art, the final process involves finishing an artifact such that it is neat and pleasing to be looked at. This is particularly true for artifacts that are to be displayed in exhibitions where appearance alone that attracts visitors to pay close attention to their designs. As such, in the last phase of this program, the proper technique of drawing murals based on the concept of fine lines was emphasized to help students create murals that had not only high visual impact but also high aesthetical values, which together could merit viewers' admiration. The objectives of the last phase of the study are as follows:

- (a) To teach students the theoretical and practical aspects of refining artifacts.
- (b) To expose students to the characteristics of refining murals.
- (c) To impart knowledge on the importance of refining murals.

Figure 17 shows a student attentively paying close attention into refining a motif using the fine lines technique.



Figure 17: A student using the fine lines technique to refine a motif

Source: Authors' personal collection

#### 4.5 The Handover

Murals created by the students were displayed at their respective schools to showcase their works to school communities. The display of students' mural exhibits helped highlight the cultural aspects of the major races of Malaysia, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Equally important, they could share the experiences and skills gained from the *Wall Mural: Integrated Cultural Activity* program with their friends and teachers. Also, the latter could learn and appreciate the cultures of these three major races. For example, Malay students would be able to look at murals consisting of Chinese motifs to learn some of the Chinese cultural aspects. The same would be true for the Chinese and Indian students when they examined Malay motifs used in the murals. It could be reasonably argued that such exhibition of murals comprising various motifs would serve as one of the means to create a sense of respect and tolerance among diverse communities of Malaysia in the long run. Figure 18 shows the handover ceremony of students' murals at their respective schools.



Figure 18: Students handing over their murals at their respective schools.

#### 5. Conclusion

As demonstrated, *Wall Mural: Integrated Cultural Activity*, a collaborative project between Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) and SP Setia Foundation, had been carried out with success. Essentially, this program was aimed at forging and strengthening strong national unity among primary school students of various races (Malays, Chinese, and Indians). By participating in this program, these students were able to learn the cultural symbols of design motifs of the diverse cultures of Malaysia and to gain first-hand aesthetical experience in using such symbols in the mural activities. By displaying such artistic works, their teachers and friends would also be able to learn and appreciate the various symbols of motifs and their cultural meanings. Overall, those involved in this creative program, either directly or indirectly, would have learned some cultural aspects of the various races of Malaysia, the appreciation and

respect of which could help create a caring, respectable community at the school.

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