

# The Basis of Art Appreciation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study revolves around identification of ways to observe or appreciate art since an artwork possesses its own aesthetic values which are related to a philosophy or an artist's cognitive style in conveying the meaning behind an artistic piece. According to Kamus Dewan Edisi Ke-4 (2007), aesthetic is one of the branches of philosophy that deals with the nature of beauty and taste, as well as the philosophy of art. In this research, the two main parts involved are the definition of terms and an analysis on artwork. Three components in definition of terms are describing art and style, art and idea, as well as art and context.

Art criticism theory, introduced by Edmund Burke Feldman (1994) to interpret the meaning and context conveyed by an artist, is the method chosen for this study. Barret (1994) stated that art criticism is a response towards meaning and making a critical judgement on artworks. A piece of art has no value unless meaning is given to it (Ahmad Suhaimi & Jamilah, 2008).

### 1.1. Definition of Terms

Definition deals with describing terms such as style, idea, and context from a general perspective, through the prism of art. Firstly, what is art in general? According to Kamus Dewan Edisi Ketiga (1997), art refers to finesse which signifies something small, fine, thin, and delicate, a beautiful voice and petite body. Art also refers to poems, paintings, music, and others which are created based on skills or efficiency and it can originate from an invention. Malaysian Encyclopaedia (1996) stated that art is a term which is used for something beautiful in human eyes or to their ears. A book written by M.A.J. Beg entitled 'Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization' (1981) quoted an Islamic philosopher, Imam al-Ghazali: "art is beautiful through the perspective of beauty and exquisiteness, it comes from oneself and not from the others".

"Art: The production of something beautiful: skill or ability in such work. Works such as paintings or sculptures produced by skills".  
(The Oxford Paperback Dictionary, 1989)

This means, art is arbitrary and can be widely defined if it involves human skills. Nevertheless, not all skills can be taken as artworks if they cannot be appreciated or lack emotional influence. In this modern era, the researchers posit that art has developed to the point of having no boundaries and not all artwork is appreciated due to its beauty. Neither does it have to contain emotional values: an artwork rather depends on an individual's acceptance. Hence, art can be anything around us depending on the way a person thinks.

## 1.2. Art and Style

Etymologically, the word “style” comes from a Latin word: *Stylos* or *Stylus* which initially explained an individual’s writing style. Such understanding was later interpreted as an individual’s writing credibility. Dewan Edisi Keempat (2007) defined style as the way a person writes or speaks, the way to produce something, especially one that characterizes an era or an individual. A style also provides an understanding on meaning and appears as a distinctive form in a task. It is a method to identify the origin of an artwork’s development. Therefore, style has its own place while an artwork is a complete shape which exudes the style used. Kamus Umum Indonesia (1976) defined style as “a specific pattern (appearance, shape and others), a variety, method, behaviour, ways and technique and rhythm (sound, speech and others)”. Style is also known as an approach on an art creation technique.

Based on these definitions, style is a method used to summarize something. It could be something specific or common for every individual. However, that definition of “style” is from a general perspective. In art, “style” is considered as an all-encompassing definition. From the perspective of a visual art, “style” can be divided into two definitions. Both definitions originate from valid sources of style in art:

*“Style is a distinctive manner which permits the grouping of works into related categories.”*  
(Ferne, 2005)




*” Style is any distinctive, and therefore recognizable, way in which an act is performed of an artefact made or ought to be performed and made.”*  
(Gombrich, 1968)

Ferne and Gombrich’s definitions of style in art have similarities even though both are not based on personal perspectives. According to them, a distinct style in production of work is recognized through its product category. In other words, style is how one categorizes art by referring to the way it is produced. Hence, art can be categorized depending on the decision on how it is made. The researcher suggests that, art and style become a method to produce artwork through materials, technique, or image products. Mulyadi (2004) stated that art style has a wide range of definition from naturalistic and realistic for partially and fully abstract visual image. Relatively, abstract depends on how an artist visually portrays his artwork. For instance, a landscape painting is not categorized through format or the image painted, but it is achieved by how and what is presented by the artist. An artwork style, therefore, can be shown by anyone through his or her belief but the reality comes only from the artist himself or herself.

## 1.3. Art and Idea

Idea is a manifestation of human’s cognitive ability. Naturally, humans are able to think and generate ideas from their thoughts. Ideas cannot be seen, touched, tasted, and felt - it is abstract. Through interpretation of various ideas, artworks are produced. Stout and Baldwin (1901) stated that idea is a reproduction of roughly, an object’s image that is not really present to the senses. Moreover, there are three types of idea reproduction; namely, single, abstract, and complex ideas. Single idea is produced solely based on general thoughts while abstract idea is reproduced indirectly based on visual experience, and complex idea is a reproduction of a combination of objects. Examples of ideas are listed in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Visuals which are related to type of ideas produced.

Type of Ideas	Idea	Image reproduction
Single Idea		 <p><b>Figure 1:</b> Chair I</p>
Abstract Idea	Chair	 <p><b>Figure 2:</b> Chair II</p>
Complex Idea		 <p><b>Figure 3:</b> Chair III</p>

In Table 1, images that are produced depend on types of ideas used. For instance, if a group of people are asked to come out with a chair based on their mental images, the outcome will definitely differ from one to another. From the images produced, one is able to interpret the kind of idea these individuals use. In art, this is known as an approach or art “isms” which is utilized by the artist himself. According to Moholy-Nagy (1926), “isms” is an effort to overcome traditional forms and make way for functional designs to explain the fundamental means of expressions. It indicates the presence of latent tension relationship within oneself. Based on his statement, ideas expressed through “isms” summarizes visuals which relate to one’s inner feelings. The researcher suggests that “isms” are principles of ideas which an artist uses to express their feeling in visual form. For instance, Pop Art idea, is generally to celebrate a popular culture, then. Hence, an artist who interprets his artwork as Pop Art did it to honour the popular culture of his time. By doing so, the artist expresses his feelings through the principles of idea in an art known as “Isms”.

#### 1.4. Art and Context

Referring to Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat (2007), context means a sentence which determines or indicates the meaning of words it carries or the entire situation or specific background which is related to or can be linked to something. In other words, context is a situation which forms the setting of an event, statement or idea, and the term can be completely understood. So, in general, context is condition for event, idea or statement which depends on surrounding words or situations.

In art, context is different because it does not depend on surrounding words but more on the situation at that time, location, and space. Dey (1998) believed that context is the user’s emotion, focal point, location, and orientation, date and time, things, and people in the user’s surrounding. Moreover, Belton

(1996) found that context in art means different situations in which work of art is produced or interpreted. This means, in art, context depends on time, location and space of the state in which the artwork is produced. Context is a variable for the content which is relative to the way an artist presents their artwork: such context is based on an established or intended idea to be conveyed. Therefore, there are two contexts to define artwork namely the reason it is produced and its content. In art, context plays a major role in interpreting an artwork as the interpretation is established based on the content itself.

## 2. ICONOGRAPHY IN ART

The purpose of iconography is to describe, identify, classify, and explain visual objects which are related to the effort to comprehend meaning in religious research which is not familiar with the use of symbolic expressions. It is a theory used to unravel the meaning of images which contain distance/time – more on historical perspective. According to Erwin Panofsky (1955) in his book entitled *Meaning in the Visual Art*, iconography is description and classification, while iconology is an introduction.

Iconography is also an issue of icon which deals with object and meaning. In the beginning, Panofsky explained the relationship between an object and meaning when he shared an incident in which his friend greeted him by lifting his hat. With that gesture, his friend indicated that there are objects and meaning involved. Lifting one's hat has a deeper meaning which entails respect, greeting, and being friendly, or courteous. It can be also be taken as an implicit or in-depth meaning that is not acceptable elsewhere.

Panofsky also introduced three levels of meanings in describing an artwork. Firstly, pre-iconography which is to capture the primary meaning of an artwork by identifying the original elements such as lines, appearance, form, texture, and colours: all of which represent natural objects. Secondly, iconography analysis is involved in investigating meanings by using rules approved by the art enthusiasts. This refers to an analysis which explains the meaning of an artwork from literature sources. Such analysis focuses on meanings related to the image, history, and similes. Thirdly, the interpretation of iconology is a way to understand an artwork through the establishment of meaning of its content by exposing the principles it has. This meaning is related to basic cultural mentality which clarifies other culture (science, religion, philosophy ideology) because art refers to the current situation. Iconology, according to Gombrich (1972), involves the re-construction of the whole program, that concerns more than one text. It is found in a context that encompasses culture and established art.

*“The iconographic approach to works of art primarily considers the meaning of subject matter.”*  
(Schneider-Adams, 1996)

As for the term iconology, it means "interpreted iconography" using the same materials as found in the source of literary meanings: both icon and literary meanings are interwoven. Even though both are significant, the understood content and focus given on cultural documentation in retrospective approach does not come with direct interaction. Neither does it make sense in the course of analysis (Panofsky method (1955), focus is given on art which "balances naturalism and idealism" in a broad narrative for literature subject, according to Italian Renaissance and Dutch paintings in 15<sup>th</sup> century), iconology does not state the actual text support. It innovates by combining historical data and creative and intuitive intellectual understanding of significant narratives in culture with the rediscovery of human existence. Iconology transcends iconographic articulation and it is not the basis of analysis by the same way iconography conveys imperfect data (although it underlies the process of recreating historical objects), but it is not at the last level. The process only directs direction and identifies the paradigmatic relationship between art and literature.

## 2.1. Narrative

According to Kamus Dewan Edisi Ke-4 (2007), narrative means story or incidents of an event, experiences such as short stories, fiction and others that are part of linguistic performance outcomes. Narrative can also be defined as something which narrates (narration): the style resembles common essays or poems which tell something.

When there is a relationship between two or more elements which develop a story, that piece is considered a narrative. Elements which are required in a narrative are events, characters, composition (space), plot (time) and perspective. All of them can be compared in parallel with elements found in literature (poems and sonnets) since the term narrative itself, at the beginning, is in the realm of literary discipline. Nevertheless, narrative in art can be referred to as symbolic narration, which has a story that is developed through relationships among elements of art. Narratives in artwork are also more implicitly constructed or developed by the audience after they have seen the work (after image).

*“narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed, narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narratives; all classes, all human groups have their stories....”*  
(Barthes, 1975)

*“Stories can openly declare themselves as stories, or they can be hidden. When we choose to be in the company of a story by reading a novel or seeing a film, the narrative sets itself off as a narrative, not as a part of our lives; we stand in relation to it as audience to its “performance” as an aesthetic work. However, the storytelling we experience as an event in life can lose its appearance as narrative by virtue of its integration in life.”*  
(Young & Saver, 2001)

## 2.2. Metaphor

Metaphor is defined as the use of words to express meaning or a meaning which is different from the norm or the actual meaning of a word (as comparison or figurative speech) (Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat, 2007). Metaphor is the concept of planning which reveals or identifies the relationship between abstract and the real things (tangible). Real forms are processed and combined with one's imagination.

The word metaphor comes from a Greek word *metapherein*. ‘Meta’ means ‘above’ and ‘*pherein*’ means ‘lifted’. Metaphor refers to a set of linguistic process where some characters of a subject “are lifted” or moved to another object. Hence, if the second object is mentioned or used, it must not be at the same place as the first object. Metaphor is the use of words which creates meaning that is different from the actual meaning. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provided a huge impact into the studies of cognitive semantic, specifically in metaphor. They emphasized that metaphor existed in the human daily life through language, thoughts and action.

Metaphor portrays meaning which is different from the expression that is mentioned. It is generally a figurative speech that is used to draw a concept with intertwining characteristics. Hence, the first object can be explained denotatively, while the underlying meaning of the second object is used to enhance the explanation for the first object. In literature, metaphor is applied especially in poems in which words are limited and emotion as well as relationship among objects can be established.

In addition, metaphor has long become part of the aspect of beauty. It does not only represent, but also carries with it an aesthetic nature that concerns the beauty of content, meaning and taste as a whole. Indirectly, it could liven up the atmosphere, feelings, situation and widen taste, sensitivity in meaning and significance. It is an effective way to convey something. The use of metaphor is closely related to the society's belief, attitude, and values. Its acceptance is related to linguistic experience and relative in

nature. Moreover, metaphor portrays the society's subtlety of language and courteousness in which advises are carefully conveyed to avoid others from being offended. Until today, metaphoric language style is still being practiced by the Malay communities in general.

### 2.3. Semiotics

Semiotics comes from the Greek word “*semeion*” which means sign. A sign conveys an information until it carries the nature of communication, able to replace a thought or imagination (Broadbent, 1980). Semiotic is knowledge which studies the sign system or theories regarding signs giving. Semiotic is usually defined as a general philosophical theory regarding the production of signs and symbols as part of a code system used to communicate information. It encompasses visual and verbal signs.

The term semiotic is often used by American researchers while the European researchers use the term semiology. Semiotic is a branch of knowledge that deals with the study of signs and everything that is related to signs such as the sign system and processes involved for signs (Van Zoest, 1993). A. Teew (1984) also defined semiotic as a communication act and later it is perfected as a literature model which is responsible on all factors and essential aspects to comprehension of literary field as a specific communication tool in the community.

At the beginning, the term semiotic (*semeion*) was used by the Greeks to refer to the science of studying the system of logos and sign in human life. From this word, semiotic was formed: a scientific literary study which analyses signs that are related to impressions in an artwork. Semiotic is not limited to language system, but it also encompasses paintings, carving, photography, or others which are visual in nature.

## 3. SELECTED ARTWORK

All artworks will be carefully analysed using the method created by Edmund Burke Feldman known as Art Criticism. This method includes Description, Analysis, Interpretation, and Judgement. Through this method, one could classify and explain issues in several aspects such as style, idea and contexts.

### 3.1. Artwork 1



**Figure 4:** Samsudin Wahab “*Powerless*”, 2008,  
Mix Media on Canvas,  
83 cm x 152 cm.

In reading an artwork, the application of Edmund Feldman theory is one of the methods for the best visual image reading. Referring to the artwork entitled “*Powerless*”, in the method of art description, the artist uses word image “*POWERLESS*” as the background, as well as two monkeys from the chimpanzee species which are playing seven “*juggles*”. The artist portrays the chimpanzees in formal

suits and places them at the centre of the artwork. Lastly, the artist applies images of grey clouds as the objects at the forefront.

The next step is to analyse an artwork by taking into consideration the elements and principles of art. In this visual image, the elements of arts applied come in the form of adaptation of lines. For instance, “horizontal line’ becomes part of the special effects on the artwork “calligraphic line’ where the word “POWERLESS” was formed. Another aspect not to be left behind was ‘lyrical line’ which is found on images of cloud and chimpanzee. The use of appearance in this artwork is presented through organic images such as the cloud and geometric images that can be found in the word “POWERLESS”. Element of form is used in the play of values and colour tones which are adapted on each image in the artwork. Some cool colours selected are dark brown, grey, and black: these colours are balanced with the application of contrasting value by putting red as part of the background. When it comes to balance, this artwork achieves balance by object composition. The object is placed almost accurately between left and right in the artwork.

The next step is to interpret the artwork by considering the metaphor behind object choice and placement. The word “POWERLESS” which is central to this artwork provides a definition of strength and power. Two chimpanzees in formal attire support these values as the clothes are common among those who are authoritative or in higher positions. Nevertheless, other than formal attire, the two chimpanzees are portrayed as though they are throwing ‘juggle’; this action is part of the game ‘juggle’ which is common in circus performances. Upon analysis, the combination of these images signifies an opinion, or a situation related to the world of politics. The chimpanzees play the role of individuals with an important position but act as though they are in circus. It depicts the current political climate which is volatile. At times, the concept of ‘one day policy’ is applied where there seems to be new rules, new increase rate and ministers who lack authoritative in handling the country. These images portray the life of the common people who appear to be performing circus acts, don’t they? And doesn’t it appear to all that the ruling and administration of current government seems to be in the hands of ill-advised people, and they lack seriousness in championing the public’s issues?

Based on the analysis carried out, the artwork applied “Pop Surrealism” style. “Pop Surrealism” style is apparent in the emphasis given to chimpanzee images as the main characters. However, the meaning of this artwork is not revealed to the public in general. In addition, for analysis on idea, there is a combination of image in this artwork which signifies an opinion or a situation regarding the political world. High ranking officers acting like a circus performer are depicted by the chimpanzees: it is an image which is suggestive of the current ever-changing political climate. The approach used in this artwork is “Pop Surrealism” and abstract idea. In the context of artwork, both written review and perspective on this work are related to being cynical towards politics and the composition is matched with the layout of classic propaganda poster.

### 3.2. Artwork 2



**Figure 5:** Juhari Said, Katak Hendak Jadi Lembu (*Proverb series*), 1997.  
Block Print on Paper,  
73 cm X 54 cm.

Figure 5 is a printed artwork which was produced by a well-known artist in Malaysia, Juhari Said. The image of frog is put together with an image of a cow's head. Another distinct feature was a fish tail which is fused with the frog's tail. He presented this artwork in black and white only: he used block prints as the medium.

An art element that is prominent in this artwork is the use of lines. The artist utilized 'structured line' and it is visibly seen on the subject's legs. Effects of 'structured line' might be spontaneously produced during the process of carving since block printing technique was applied on the artwork. Moreover, 'lyrical line' is another type of lines widely used to form the main subject.

The element of appearance used in the production of this artwork resembles more of an organic type. Emphasis in this visual image is limited due to the placement of the only object in the middle. Use of colours is also limited to black and white since the focus of this artwork is only on a single object. Therefore, the layout of this artwork is supported by symmetrical balance on both left and right sides.

For interpretation of this artwork, it is apparent that Juhari Said tried to convey the meaning for a Malay proverb "*katak hendak jadi lembu*". His artwork is cynical as the meaning of this proverb is the act of imitating others (the wealthy and powerful) as depicted in the visual of a frog which resembles a cow. When both figures of a frog and cow are merged together, another figure is formed, and this is clearly portrayed in the visual image that he presented.

It is challenging to find a specific style in this artwork since the form portrayed appears to be half abstract based on the main image. Hence, to conclude, the style of this artwork is "*Surrealism*" since the visual image depicts two research subjects that become one. The artist, in his artwork, brings forth the meaning of a Malay proverb "*Katak hendak Jadi lembu*" which means the act of imitating (the acts) those who are wealthy, powerful, and influential. The approach used in this artwork is "*Surrealism*" and complex ideas. It is an artwork which focuses on the use of a proverb to represent a visual image and the meaning is clearly presented through the use of the main image.

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