

The Spirit and Elements of Malaysian Multiculturalism in Chuah Thean Teng's Batik Paintings

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the batik paintings of Chinese artist Chuah Thean Teng in the context of Malaysia's multicultural society. Batik, an ancient traditional craft in Malaysia, was initially produced on textiles through wax and dyes and is often applied to daily clothing and objects. As such, the motifs and elements of batik paintings are closely related to the local culture and have a high symbolic value. Chuah Thean Teng has improved and developed the batik process into a work of art with aesthetic value. This paper aims to understand the social and cultural climate of the time through a generalised analysis of the results of Chuah Thean Teng to evaluate the artistic elements embedded in the batik works. The paper adopts an art historical research approach, which consists mainly of form and context analysis. The study is descriptive, with data in the form of text and images, including the artworks themselves, publications, books, journals, and other official records. Chuah Thean Teng, a Chinese artist, has inherited and evolved the traditional Malaysian batik art by seeking artistic inspiration in a culturally diverse environment. His work is a hybrid expression, reflecting the exchange and borrowing between cultures. This is in keeping with the historical context of the time and also conveys modern Malaysian art's inclusiveness, diversity, and richness. As an essential part of contemporary Malaysian art, batik painting is itself a sign of modernity. It is hoped that this study will help to enrich the research and analysis of Malaysian batik painting and, through it, generate interest in batik painting and provide knowledge and methods of interpreting the content of the artwork.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; Chuah Thean Teng; Batik paintings; Malaysian Chinese Artists; Iconography;



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1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia was greatly affected by the racialisation of the colonial era, which resulted in the establishment of numerous hierarchies based on the four basic racial categories cultural, economic, political, and cognitive. (Gabriel, 2021). According to Wan Samiati Andriana et al. (2017), Malaysia's multiculturalism and Multi-ethnic have affected its art. As Western art historians have long recognised, any fascinating civilisation should have its art form. As a result, in the early years of independence, Malaysia's artistic community was characterised by a confusion of identities and a clash of cultures.

Since 1965, Malaysian artists have been committed to finding cultural recognition and have searched for their own identity. Particularly in the 1970s and the years that followed, local artists began to emerge with an awareness of national art (Noh et al., 2018). The establishment of the National Cultural Congress at the University of Malaya's Department of Sports and Youth in 1971 was the first official

advocacy for artists to incorporate Malay themes into their artworks to shape a multi-racial Malaysian culture. It was a wave of artistic thinking to find identity, strengthen recognition and preserve culture.

Batik, a technique of fixing different colours of batik dye on fabric, is an ancient Malaysian craft. In their early years, most Malaysian artists were heavily influenced by Western art styles and therefore had fewer elements reflecting their local identity. According to Shazani & Wan Samiati Andriana (2021), After the racial riots of 1969, the subject matter of Malaysian batik painting significantly diverged from other art forms, and many artists were motivated to revive traditional art forms like batik and its motifs as a basis for modern reading and usage.

Chuah Thean Teng, a Malaysian Chinese, is widely appreciated for developing the batik craft as a painting technique. He was born in Fujian and moved to Penang with his parents at 14. He studied at the Amoy Art Institute and thus acquired the skills and methods of Chinese painting. After the Second World War, he opened a batik workshop in Penang, which failed because of poor business practices. Still, he used the remaining materials to turn the traditional batik floral motifs into figurative designs. The community well received this improvement, and, after many attempts, he eventually elevated batik from a craft to an artistic medium, for which Chuah Thean Teng is widely recognised as the 'father of batik art' in Malaysia.

Therefore, based on Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory, this paper will examine the batik paintings of Chuah Thean Teng from different decades of the twentieth century. Through the analysis of the visual content and artistic elements of the works, the intrinsic cultural significance and value of the results are explored, and how the artists paid attention to the local creative details and embedded them in their artistic creations, ultimately shaping the cultural foundations of a pluralistic society through the artworks. The significance of this study is that it serves as a preliminary record of the analysis of the batik paintings of Cheah Thean Teng, which will help to raise public awareness of batik painting and will be a reference for future research on batik painting.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Malaysian Batik

Malaysian batik production first started in the 1920s and is closely related to the Javanese of adjacent Indonesia. (Wah ed et al., 2022). Originally used as an everyday garment, the batik was preferred by Malaysian women and is highly associated with Malaysian society and culture. Batik is regarded as a cherished national heritage art of Malaysia. According to the World Asia-Pacific Craft Council, Batik from Malaysia is one of the most well-known indigenous crafts in the world. (Hartini.M. et al., 2021). There is currently a wide range of scholarly opinions on the definition of batik.

The term "batik" From Steelyana (2012), has Javanese origins. It is thought that the term "ambatik", which means "a cloth with little dots," is where the word "batik" first appeared. The suffix "tik" means little dot, drop, point, or to make dots.

According to Wahed et al. (2022), the word batik's suffix, "tik," means "to make small dots."When the batik artisan creates the desired pattern, wax is applied to the fabric in a dripping or dropping motion.

As seen by Shazani & Wan Samiati Andriana (2021), the word "batik" is of Indonesian origin and means 'to write.' Batik, therefore, means 'to write dots,' in this case in the form of dots themselves, but also the form of flowers and other small designs on the surface of white cloth.

Thus, we can provide a simple definition of batik. This technique originated in Java, Indonesia, and is an ancient art form that is usually painted on fabric using wax-resistant dyes, including cotton, beeswax, and natural dyes derived from different plants. Although batik is not as revered as the national flag, like other cultural icons, it is integrated with the national narrative and history (Ramlan, 2019).

Batik is a form of art that has evolved and is closely associated with Malay culture. Many Malaysians today recognise batik as a representation of nationality or citizenship since it shows the integration of the multi-racial society in the area (Zarlina, 2017). Batik also serves as a reflection of social relationships, and wearing batik during some community social events has significant social life patterns. (Steelyana, 2012).

Influenced by race, religion, and community, Malaysian batik presents different design styles, with pattern and colour preferences linked to the artist's identity. It reflects the cultural heritage of the artist and has symbolic value.

2.2 Multiculturalism in Malaysia

Multiculturalism, as the name implies, encompasses a wide range of different cultural groups. The political, legal, and philosophical approaches that arose after World War II to accommodate this newly discovered societal diversity are typically referred to as "multiculturalism" (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2019).

Dolce (1973) defines multiculturalism as the reflection of a value system that emphasises accepting behavioural variants resulting from many cultural systems and actively promotes the right for such variations to exist. Tip et al. (2012) argue that multiculturalism is a policy that values and supports a varied society.

Modern Malaysian art is empirical evidence of a multicultural society. Noraini M & Hoong Leongb(2013) suggest that with preferential power sharing and some degree of cultural preservation, Malaysia can be described as an environment of separation or cohabitation under segregation: Intergroup relations are discussed in Malaysia under the assumption that there are finite resources that must be apportioned in a way that benefits the dominant Malay at the detriment of other ethnic groupings.

Therefore, apart from encouraging Malay and Islamic cultures, the Malaysian government has adopted a policy of symbiosis and protection for the cultures of other ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. This can be seen in the second point of the National cultural policy, namely that other elements of culture that are reasonable and compatible with Islamic culture may also be accepted as national culture.

To interpret multiculturalism, one needs to understand the colonial history of Malaysia. Sulaiman (1997) contends that the British "divide and rule" approach caused a powerful sense of alienation and isolation amongst newly arrived non-Malays and Malays. International cultural values and norms were introduced due to the influx of foreign immigration.

Although some publications offer a personal perspective on racial relations, Giacchino-Baker (2000) asserts that few Malaysians have sought to describe the implications of cultural diversity on the future of this multicultural society. On the other hand, Hoffstaedter (2009) contends that Malaysia's aim to internalise racial homogeneity and essentialism while exhibiting the ideal of variety outside has significantly impacted the country's cultural scene.

The artwork serves as a visual material that documents the influence of the social context on the artist in a multicultural context. Each region has distinctive qualities since batik is impacted by the sociocultural context and physical surroundings (Supana & Sudardi, 2018). Malaysia's geographic location, historical background, and cultural diversity all impact batik. The significance of batik in art and culture is linked to the country's need for cultural development (Rafeah, 2012). When analysing batik paintings, placing them in a multicultural context is necessary.

2.3 Chuah Thean Teng's batik paintings

According to Zakaria & Aziz (2022), a particular artist concentrates on and incorporates the perception of national identity into their artistic creation. Batik is an alternative to the region's search

for a modern artistic identity. The artwork simultaneously communicates national emblems, expresses unity through the chosen object, and shares cultural values through its context and content.

The region's yearning for a contemporary aesthetic identity has an alternative in the form of batik. Batik's painting exhibits a healthy and severe evolution in terms of style, formal treatment, and subject matter, dispelling the idea of technical and aesthetic laziness (Harozila, 2007). Chuah Thean Teng, a pioneer of batik painting in Malaysia, believes that Malaysian deserves its style of painting; China, Japan, and Western countries have their styles of artwork, and Malaysia should not be an exception.

With a multicultural environment and a growing perception of national identity, Chuah Thean Teng has chosen the subject matter that best fits the theme of modern Malaysian art, namely the depiction of scenes from daily Malaysian life through batik.

Ali (2005) advances that with the image painting that has been included in the mainstream of modern Malaysian painting, the tradition has been given additional diversity by referencing the forms, techniques, meanings, and themes of traditional and indigenous art. Chuah Thean Teng has achieved this through painting in the conventional batik style, primarily using traditional patterns for embellishment and incorporating aspects of Malay culture into his expressive topics.

Shazani & Wan Samiati Andriana (2021) assert that the artists reflect Malay culture, especially regarding customs and way of life. The Malay cultural features portrayed in their artwork, such as the traditional Malay house interiors, way of life, and clothing, imply that batik has evolved beyond its traditional world into a contemporary artistic context.

Due to Sullivan (1968), batik paintings are pieces of art that, depending on the artist, can reflect any subject matter they choose while concentrating on batik motifs. Therefore, attention should be placed on analysing the patterns while interpreting batik artworks. Wahed et al. (2022) say that design patterns in Malaysia have historically evolved to suit the country's demands. On the other hand, traditional design elements remain distinctive because each motif has its visual components and aesthetic meaning.

Traditional batik motifs have a symbolic value and can be utilised to express ideas at the time and recognise social stratification (Maziyah et al., 2016). Following Chuah Thean Teng's initiative, batik painting in Malaysia has seen several advances and changes in techniques, ideas, and ways of producing batik painting artworks. Some Malaysian artists have also employed batik painting as secondary media. (Wan Samiati Andriana & Shazani, 2021).

Besides, Malaysia's abundant tropical flora and fauna also provided him with various motifs. Through the arrangement of these patterns and the design of colours, he incorporated indigenous artistic elements into his works. Malaysian batik motifs are ethnic motifs consisting of botanical imagery such as bamboo shoot motifs, a thousand flowers, and tears of love for flowers, and animal motifs such as scorpion motifs, butterfly motifs, bird motifs, and even chicken motifs (Harozila, 2007).

Sullivan (1959) notes that Chuah Thean Teng developed the concept of painting with a batik, which included extensive and intricate figure compositions and decorative patterns. Motherhood was his most frequently used figure subject, which owed its influence to traditional Chinese painting concepts. Figure painting is the oldest discipline in Chinese painting. It uses the objective figure as an object of observation and a source of creation, which is the most significant difference from the creative thing of Islamic art.

Therefore, Chuah Thean Teng's batik paintings are influenced to varying degrees by multicultural concepts in terms of subject matter, form, and medium, with a predominance of local traditional and Chinese art.

3 METHOD

This paper will use both qualitative and historical methods. The qualitative approach is descriptive, with data including text and images, and the collection method is primarily observation, meaning that the artworks are first observed to collect primary data. In contrast, secondary data includes images, exhibition catalogues, journals, academic papers, monographs, etc. The data analysis in the study used content analysis methods to explore the artworks' themes, forms, and meanings.

Secondly, this study will use Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory to interpret Chuah Thean Teng's four artworks. These four works selected using purposeful sampling techniques are all works that have been shown in public or that have received honours. They are more representative in their subject matter, picking the mother and child motif, which the artist most frequently represents.

According to Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory, this study can be divided into pre-iconographical description, Iconography, and Iconology. This is an example of interpretive art that exposes the work's unconscious attitude rather than the meaning it conveys (Elsner & Lorenz, 2012).

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION
I <i>Primary or natural</i> subject matter—(A) factual, (B) expressional—constituting the world of artistic motifs.	<i>Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis).</i>
II <i>Secondary or conventional</i> subject matter, constituting the world of <i>images, stories and allegories.</i>	<i>Iconographical analysis.</i>
III <i>Intrinsic meaning or content,</i> constituting the world of " <i>symbolical</i> " values.	<i>Iconological interpretation.</i>

Figure 1 Panofsky's Meaning in the visual arts (p40)

As seen from the figure, the pre-iconographical description section is primarily concerned with identifying objects and facts, represented by lines, colours, and volumes, which constitute the thematic domain based on our practical experience (Panofsky, 1996). On the other hand, Iconography refers to the field of secondary or traditional themes, i.e., the world of images, specific themes or concepts expressed in stories and fables, rather than the realm of primary or classic pieces. Nature themes are expressed in motifs (Panofsky, 1996). Finally, the Iconology section focuses on intrinsic meaning or content. It is learned by identifying those basic principles that reveal the underlying attitudes of a people, a period, a class, a religion, or a philosophical idea (Panofsky, 1996).

In the iconographic analysis of works of art, we need to focus on their subject matter or meaning rather than their form. And to interpret what is observed concerning information about the period in which the artist created it, his national identity, cultural perceptions, social status, etc.

The following is the exact process of this study.

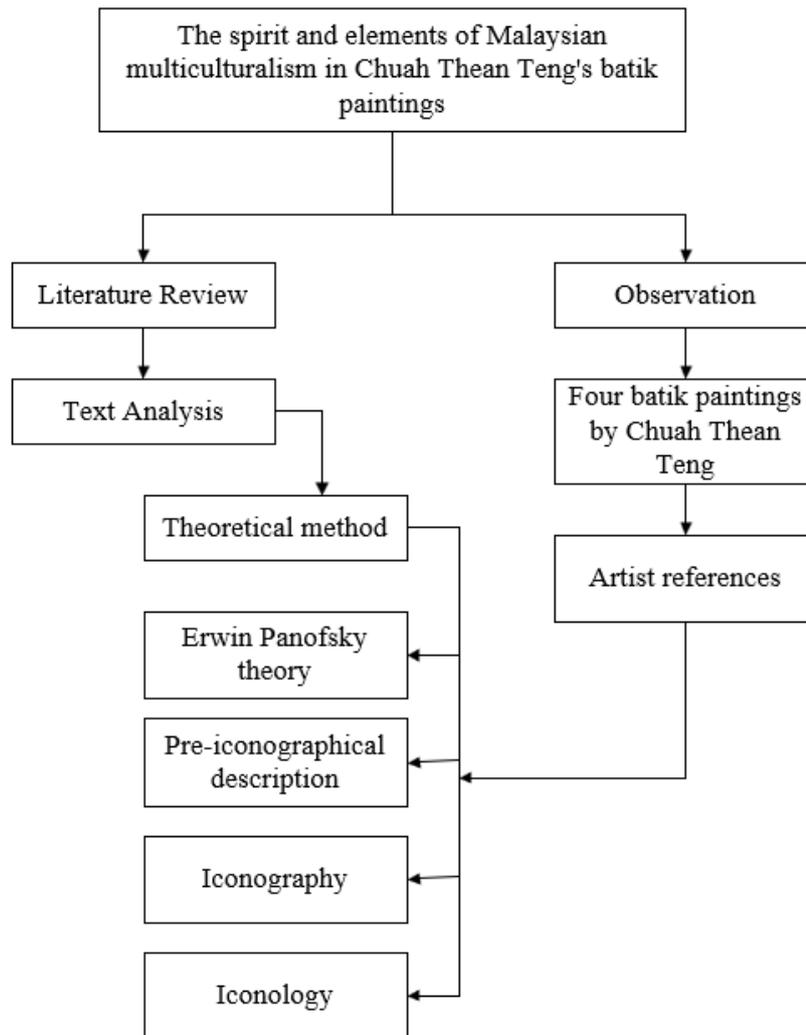
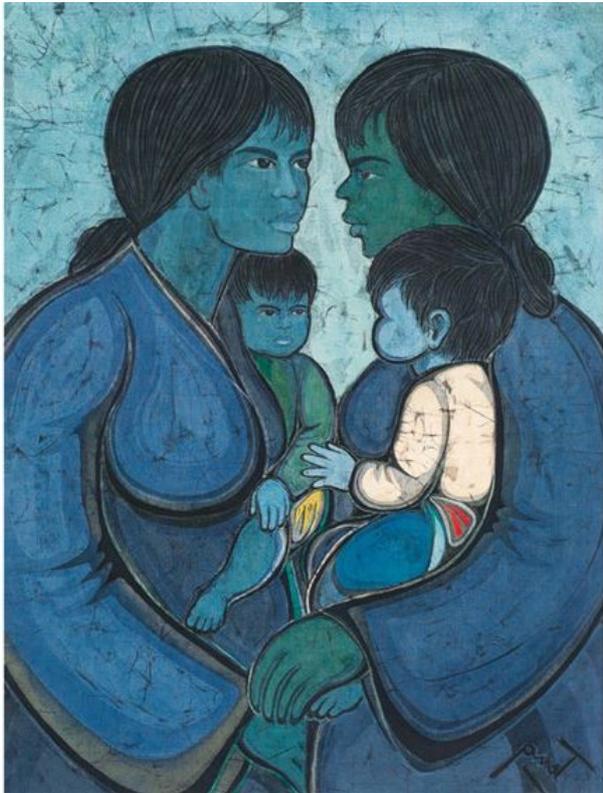


Figure 2 The research process

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study will analyse four works by Chuah Thean Teng, using Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory to analyse their compositional approach and pictorial meaning. The artworks will be interpreted to understand the different forms, motifs, and symbols used by the artist to convey the essence of a pluralistic cultural spirit and identity.

Table 1 Analysis *Two of A Kind* Painting

Batik Painting	Edwin Panofsky Iconographical Analysis
	<p>Pre- Iconographical Description</p> <p>The mother and child in the painting are virtually symmetrically positioned on the left and right sides of the picture, respectively, and both hold their children in their arms. The primary body of the image is composed of these four people. The shape and structure of the figures are made simpler by employing direct lines to delineate the design. The two mothers' clothing is the most prominent colour block in the painting and has a blue tone throughout. The mother on the right has the same light blue complexion as the two children, while the mother on the left has the same green complexion as the children's clothes on the right.</p> <p>Iconographical Analysis</p> <p>This mother and child portrait depicts a pleasant family atmosphere, and the background's calming blue gives the painting a serene, tranquil feel. The foundation of traditional Chinese culture, the beginning of the conventional Chinese ethical system, and the first of the moral virtues, filial piety, is a central theme in ancient Chinese philosophy. This idea was advocated in numerous ancient artworks, with mothers and children as a common portrayal motif. It is a cultural icon with distinctly Chinese qualities that symbolises the warmth of the family and the tenderness of maternal love.</p> <p>Iconological Interpretation</p> <p>The mother's full breasts and chubby figure are reflected in the painting's exaggerated modelling, and the face is given a more regional rural woman's features. This is inconsistent with traditional Chinese aesthetics, which typically desire to portray the softness and slenderness of women. Chuah Thean Teng, on the other hand, avoids such depictions and, as a result of years spent there, focuses on scenes of everyday life.</p>

Two Of A Kind
1968s
59 x 44cm

Table 2 Analysis *Mothers and Children* Painting

Batik Painting	Edwin Panofsky Iconographical Analysis
	<p>Pre- Iconographical Description</p> <p>The painting is composed in a square outside and round inside, a traditional Chinese composition. Two attractive young mothers are the main subjects, their heads down as they sew on the fabric, while their two short-haired daughters stand in the front and back and observe. The lines are kept simple, with curved lines predominating. The overall piece is colourful, with a fair complexion, dark hair, blue eye shadow, and green clothing.</p> <p>Iconographical Analysis</p> <p>The painting depicts images from typical Malaysian family days and also has a motherhood-related subject. The predominant colour is green, which is more in keeping with the Malaysian regional aesthetic and is also the colour most treasured by Muslims in Malay culture, much like red is for Chinese people. Green is a symbol of peace, life, and justice. Second, many traditional Malay batik patterns are shown in the photographs, which also strongly reflect the region's culture.</p> <p>Iconological Interpretation</p> <p>During this time, Malaysia had recently conducted its National Cultural Congress, which gave the artist's work a new direction. Chuah Thean Teng incorporates regional components to capture the spirit of Malaysia. Therefore, his medium, colours, and symbols tend to have a more regional expression. However, in terms of characterisation, there is a tendency towards the traditional Chinese aesthetic. The artist deftly combines local painting aspects with the Chinese style of painting.</p>

Mothers And Children
late 1970s - early 1980s
89cm x 89cm

Table 3 Analysis *Mother and Children* Painting

Batik Painting	Edwin Panofsky Iconographical Analysis
	<p data-bbox="845 280 1386 313">Pre- Iconographical Description</p> <p data-bbox="845 313 1386 750">A mother and her two children are seen in the artwork, with the mother sitting on her knees and embracing a young, naked boy while the somewhat older daughter hides behind her mother and pulls at her arm with what appears to be a speaking look. The entire composition lowers the lines' presence and emphasises the interaction of light and shadow, especially in the little boy. The boy's legs and buttocks are depicted with a strong sense of volume. The mother's sarong skirt has geometric designs painted all over it.</p> <p data-bbox="845 851 1386 884">Iconographical Analysis</p> <p data-bbox="845 884 1386 1220">This batik depiction of a mother and child's life has a Malaysian flair. The artist portrays the mother using exaggeration and distortion based on the texture of the fabric. The mother appears dependable and robust, and the infant is dependent on and near to the mother, as evidenced by the sumptuous breasts, powerful thighs, and supporting arms that occupy the centre of the image like a door.</p> <p data-bbox="845 1321 1386 1355">Iconological Interpretation</p> <p data-bbox="845 1355 1386 1803">With a concentration on sketching relationships and colour, the entire work is done in a Western painting style. Many painters started pursuing expressionism and abstraction during this time, while modern Malaysian art was still in its infancy, under the influence of the Western art movement. Chuah Thean Teng is not an exception, and the exaggerated forms of the people in this painting are typical of Expressionist art, which places a greater focus on expressing interior feelings than on the replication of external objects.</p>

Mother And Children
circa the 1980s
60 x 62cm

Table 4 Analysis *Mother and Children* Painting

Batik Painting	Edwin Panofsky Iconographical Analysis
<div data-bbox="226 286 810 1169" data-label="Image"> </div> <div data-bbox="384 1205 641 1301" data-label="Caption"> <p><i>Mother And Children</i> 1990's 92 x 61 cm</p> </div>	<p>Pre- Iconographical Description A mother is shown nursing a little infant in the painting's rectangular arrangement while another slightly older girl stands and looks at the youngster in her arms. Long lines dominate the picture; large regions of red are present in the colours, which are vivid and pure. The mother and the young girl are both wearing red clothing, and the child in her arms dons a hat with white and green horizontal stripes. The mother's sarong skirt is painted with botanical motifs and filled with a small amount of blue.</p> <p>Iconographical Analysis The first is red, a traditional Chinese colour that has long served as a spiritual anchor and a cultural emblem. The usage of crimson by Chuah Thean Teng in the portrait of his mother reflects his deeply ingrained native culture. China is his "motherland," and even if he holds Malaysian citizenship, China is the country where all overseas Chinese people are from. Intriguingly, the Malaysian national flag is red, white, and blue. This also expresses the artist's national identity and connection to Malaysia.</p> <p>Iconological Interpretation The 1990 opening of Malaysia to China grew cultural exchanges between the two nations, and the rise of China's stature internationally increased the cultural self-assurance of Chinese immigrants living abroad. However, they remained dedicated to inter-ethnic cultural integration and continued to employ local themes or the spirit of Malaysia as the main subject of their work.</p>

All of the paintings mentioned above incorporate aspects from Chinese, Malaysian, and Western cultures. They illustrate how Chuah Thean Teng's philosophy evolved in various social circumstances, focusing on Chinese artistic elements and gradually shifting to Malaysian traits. His artwork reflects the aesthetics of diverse ethnic groups due to the varied ways he has adapted and innovated patterns, colours, and techniques from traditional art.

5 CONCLUSION

Chuah Thean Teng's works contain a variety of cultural elements. They are influenced by Chinese, Western, and indigenous Malaysian art forms, resulting in batik works that are mixed and diverse in style, according to this study's examination of the artworks and analysis of their pictorial facts and intrinsic meanings. His emphasis on cultural identity and how it is depicted in his paintings have contributed to national culture and identity development.

The traditional cultural symbol of batik, which can both emphasise national identity and depict the population's cultural diversity, symbolises Malaysia's aesthetic, historical, and artistic qualities. Therefore, in the framework of the National Cultural Congress strategy, Chuah Thean Teng's paintings are an excellent example of how a Chinese artist may actively seek out an artistic language that reveals their country's identity and represents their national identity with Malaysia.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interests.

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