

The Elements of Malaysian Culture Based on Seah Kim Joo Painting Using Erwin Panofsky's Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the identification and analysing of the element of Malaysian culture within the selected paintings of Seah Kim Joo's titled 'Malay Kampong' and 'Market Scene'. This study employed a qualitative literature review to gather secondary data on cultural characteristics and elements, with a particular focus on identifying features and influences distinctive to the Malaysian context. The study applies Erwin Panofsky's theory of iconography to identify and analyse elements of Malaysian culture, emphasizing the interpretation of meaning beyond the surface subject matter. Panofsky's framework consists of three key levels: pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconographical interpretation, which together provide a structured way to finding the deeper cultural value hidden in visual representations. Seah Kim Joo's artworks effectively showcase important cultural elements, highlighting their connection to Malaysian culture. The components of culture are categorised into two categories: material culture, which is tangible, and non-material culture, which is intangible. The analysis shows that the two selected artworks include aspects of material culture, such as art, clothing, food, and pastimes, as well as non-material culture, like norms and social institutions. These findings indicate that the artworks accurately capture the essence of Malaysian culture, exhibiting their cultural value and authenticity.

Keywords: Malaysian Culture, Material Culture, Non-Material Culture



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1 INTRODUCTION

As a multicultural nation shaped by centuries of migration, trade and colonisation, Shamsuddeen & Andriana (2021) highlight that Malaysia is known as a highly diverse nation, encompassing individuals from many ethnicities, languages, and faiths, all of whom actively preserve their ancestral cultural customs. Other than that, Muhamad et al. (2023) added that the diversity of Malaysia's cultures is a result of the combination of external cultures during the nation's formation and ongoing development. Furthermore, Azman et al. (2020) also mention that Malaysia is recognised as a distinctive nation due to its multiracial population and its citizens' peaceful coexistence. This shows that even though Malaysia has many different cultures, the country still stays united and lives peacefully together. In terms of visual art, Wenyan et al. (2023) added that the multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity of Malaysia have influenced its art forms, leading to a diverse artistic community characterised by a complicated mix of identities and cultural clashes. The National Cultural Congress that was established in 1971 was highlight by Wenyan et al. (2023) as the first formal initiative to encourage artists to include Malay themes into their artworks, with the aim of shaping a diverse Malaysian culture. This encouraged artist to explore themes and symbols related to the Malaysian culture. The Malaysian culture can be divided into two elements. A study by Muhamad et al. (2023) introduced the Malaysian Cultural Element Framework, which was produced after an in-depth examination of cultural elements. This framework

by Muhamad et al. (2023) divides the Malaysian culture into two elements which are material culture and non-material culture. This shows that elements of culture can be described in both physical and non-physical forms. These elements influence how people live, interact, and express their identities in a society.

Seah Kim Joo's life story reflects how his artistic path was shaped by his cultural and personal experiences, as indicated by Mohanan (2017). Seah Kim Joo, who was raised in Terengganu, gained early exposure to the ancient art of batik-making. In 1959, he subsequently enrolled in the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts for further education, and eventually returned to Terengganu. Furthermore, this artist copied the visual style of Chuah Thean Teng's batik art to show modern ideas through a traditional medium. Although this artist mainly uses batik art, this article will feature two types of paintings: batik art and oil painting. Seah's artworks frequently centre on daily human socioeconomic activities as stated by Mohanan (2017), and these selected artworks reflect this theme. Furthermore, these artworks will assist in exploring how elements of Malaysian culture are reflected.

The objective of this study is to identify and analyse the elements of Malaysian culture reflected in the selected paintings of Seah Kim Joo. The elements of Malaysian culture will be analysed using Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory. Three main levels of iconographic theory will be used throughout this study. This was highlighted by Panofsky (1972) which this theory consisted of pre-iconographical description, Iconographical analysis and Iconographical interpretation. This study focuses more on the subject matter and meaning rather than the visual style. Moreover, the goal of this study is to focus on what and how the artworks portray material and non-material elements of Malaysian culture in the visual art.

This research contributes to both the visual arts and cultural studies by highlighting how Malaysian culture is expressed through art. It explores and emphasizes cultural elements found in visual artworks, helping to celebrate and preserve Malaysian identity. By showing how traditional and modern cultural values are adapted into visual forms, this study also supports a deeper understanding of culture in art, which is important for strengthening national identity.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Culture

Different researchers have different views and interpretations of culture. This study will highlight a few viewpoints from the researchers regarding how they defined the culture. Brinkmann (2017) describes culture as the combination of internal beliefs and values that are expressed through external behaviours and symbols with both aspects influencing one another. In contrast, Louise (2021) takes a broader view, explaining that culture encompasses all aspects of our way of life, including our behaviour, beliefs, values, ethics, customs, traditions, religion, politics, economy, and other social activities. Meanwhile, Kim et al. (2022) highlight that culture are deeply rooted patterns of general beliefs, assumptions, values, and norms shared among its members. However, Rangel (2022) defined culture as something that is acquired and made up of various traits, including beliefs, habits, values, art, music, language, rituals, and knowledge. In addition, Omar et al. (2024) further emphasize that culture encompasses complex elements, including religion, political systems, customs, language, tools, clothing, architecture, and artistic expressions. Although the researchers present different viewpoints on the definition of culture, they ultimately share a common understanding. These researchers view cultures as a significant force that influences human thought, behaviour, and social relationships through symbols, shared values, daily practices, and acquired traditions.

Culture is not something people are born with, but rather something they acquire through learning and interaction. Mahadi & Jafari (2012) also highlight that culture is learned and shared within social groups, and it is transmitted through non-genetic means such as language, traditions, and social interactions. Moreover, Louise (2021) added that culture is characterised as being learned, shared,

passed down through generations, continuous and cumulative, consistent and integrated, as well as dynamic and adaptable. This means that culture is always changing and growing as people learn from each other and adapt to new situations in society. Understanding culture as a learnt and evolving process is critical for examining how it influences identity, behaviour, and creative expression.

2.2 Malaysian Culture

There are two types of Malaysian culture which are known as material cultures and non-material cultures. Ismail et al. (2014) and Muhamad et al. (2023) highlight that in Malaysian culture can be categorise into two elements which are material which also known as tangible, and non-material also known as intangible. Ismail et al. (2014), Idris (2017) and Muhamad et al. (2023) highlight both of this element's culture in their articles. Ismail et al. (2014) stated that tangible culture can be found in the form of building or artefacts while intangible culture was in terms of people's values, attitudes, and way of life. Moreover, Idris (2017) defines material culture as tangible objects created by a community, including items such as *keris*, *sayong* gourds, spears, carvings on homes, garments, and musical instruments while non-material culture refers to abstract concepts created by a group, such as ideas, customs, and values. Likewise, Muhamad et al. (2023) highlight that material culture encompasses tangible objects such as houses, boats, and weapons, whereas non-material culture encompasses intangible aspects such as beliefs, customs, and laws. Although these researchers use different examples and approaches to describe material and non-material culture, they all share the same understanding that culture is made up of physical objects as well as abstract values that reflect a community's identity and practices.

Muhamad et al. (2023) suggested the utilisation of the Malaysian Cultural Element Framework in visual art, which was developed through an in-depth study of cultural components. The framework was divided into two categories which is material culture and non-material culture. The material culture consists of 6 elements which are art, architecture, archaeological artefacts, clothing and outfit, pastime and food. As for non-material culture, it consists of 8 elements which are norms, symbols, knowledge, ceremonies, festivals, language, social structure, and social institutions. Both of these elements which are material and non-material will be identify in the selected artworks by Seah Kim Joo using Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory.

3 RESEARCH METHOD AND THEORY

A qualitative literature review method was employed to gather secondary data on the characteristics and elements of culture, including cultural traits and factors specific to the Malaysian context. This helped develop a clear and complete understanding about element that represented the Malaysian culture. This study utilises Erwin Panofsky's iconographic theory to identify and analyse the elements of material culture and non-material culture that represent Malaysian culture in Seah Kim Joo's paintings.

Malay Kampong (1962) and Market Scene (undated) are the selected paintings that was chosen because they depict daily human socio-economic activities, which align with the recurring themes often explored by the artist. These artworks were specifically selected as they offer rich visual representations of everyday life in Malaysia, making them suitable for analysing Malaysian cultural elements through iconographical interpretation. Panofsky (1972) created a theory of iconography that consists of three primary levels: pre-iconographical description, Iconographical analysis, and Iconographical interpretation.

Table 1 Theory of Iconography

Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic Theory	Description
Pre-iconographical description	Observing objects or subjects seen externally
Iconographical analysis	Translate things and subjects with a specific meaning or message into the form of representations.
Iconographical interpretation	Interpreting and relating the subject using knowledge of the cultural, historical, or social context.

Panofsky (1972) describe the pre-iconographical description focused on description uses lines, colours, and volumes to describe items and facts that make up the theme area. Iconography analysis, on the other hand, is the study of secondary or conventional topics, such as pictures, particular themes, or concepts conveyed in fables and stories, as opposed to primary or classic works. Lastly, the iconographic interpretation prioritizes the content and intrinsic meaning of the artwork. This is achieved by identifying the core concepts that reveal the underlying beliefs of individuals, a specific time period, a social class, and a religion.

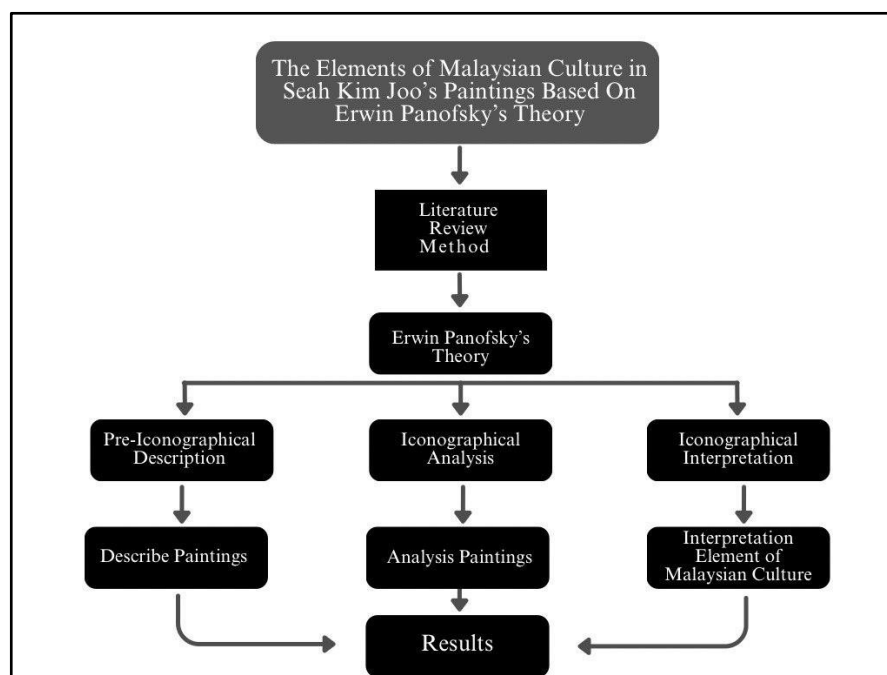


Figure 1 The Research Process

As outlined in the research process, the pre-iconographical description will involve identifying basic visual elements in the paintings, such as the subject matter, titles, medium, and dimensions. The iconographical analysis will focus on examining the subjects depicted in the artworks and their cultural significance. Finally, the iconological interpretation will involve analysing how these subjects reflect elements of Malaysian culture, whether material or non-material

3 DISCUSSION OF THE SELECTED PAINTING

3.1 Malay Kampong



Figure 2 Malay Kampong, 1962 (Source: MutualArt, n.d.)

3.1.1 Pre-Iconographical

Seah Kim Joo's painting, titled "Malay Kampong," was created using oil paint on a canvas measuring 60.7 x 91.5 cm. The painting, created in 1962, portrays a variety of subjects presenting the Malaysian culture. The piece features nine individuals, which a few of them depicted in traditional attire such as *baju kurung* and *kain batik*. Additionally, the painting includes elements like a chicken, a bird, and three goats, alongside objects such as cages, Chinese umbrellas, books, and a loom. These details collectively illustrate various pastimes, arts, and cultural norms, offering a vivid representation of Malaysian culture.

3.1.2 Iconographical Analysis



Figure 3 Two individuals seated on a wooden *wakaf*

Two individuals are seen seated on a wooden *wakaf* positioned at the lower left corner of the paintings. Both figures can be potentially identified as women due to their updo hairstyles. The hairstyles depicted in the artwork reflect the traditional practices of Malay villagers, specifically the *sanggul*, a classic hairstyle in the Malay community. The *sanggul*, or traditional bun, was widely favoured by Malay women. It involved twisting and securing the hair into a neat bun at the back of the head, often adorned with flowers or decorative pins for added elegance. Isnin et al. (2022) that the original function of the *cucuk sanggul* among Malay women was to secure their hair buns, as their naturally silky hair required curling or knotting to hold the bun in place.

One of the figures appears to be wearing a *baju kurung Kedah* in orange colour and a *kain batik*. She is facing downwards, reading a book. The reason it was shown wearing *baju kurung Kedah* is due to the garment's short-sleeved design. Compared to the traditional long-sleeved *baju kurung*, the *baju kurung Kedah* has shorter sleeves, making it more useful for daily chores like housework. Short sleeves are a distinguishing feature of the *baju kurung Kedah*. Furthermore, the top is generally worn with *kain batik* or *kain sarong* and has been tailored to reach only the hips, emphasising its simplicity and

functionality. The other figure, dressed in darker clothing, is positioned behind the first figure. The second woman is looking upwards, presumably observing other female figures who are playing with a bird in a cage that is opposite to her.

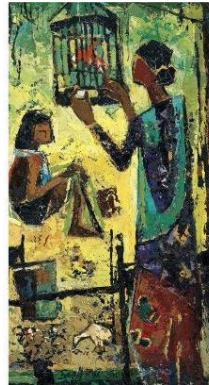


Figure 4 A female in traditional *baju kurung* and *kain batik*

Other than that, a figure portrayed as a female standing in the lower right corner of the artwork. The figures are adorned in traditional attire called *baju kurung* and *kain batik*. Additionally, there is a garment suspended from each of her shoulders. The traditional Malay outfits in Malaysian villages mainly featured *baju kurung*, *kain batik*, and scarves draped over the shoulders, expressing the cultural belief of their clothing style. The figures adorn their hair in an updo while engaging with a caged bird hanging in front of them. The cage represented in the artwork represents a popular interest and hobby among Malaysians: keeping animals as pets. In the present artwork, the cage focusses on birds as pets held by villagers. Bird-keeping became a popular pastime, showing their cultural love for avian life and the joy it offered to their daily lives.



Figure 5 A figure engaged in the act of weaving fabric

Within the middle composition, a distinct character is portrayed, each assuming different stances. The initial depiction portrays a figure seated on a bench, engaged in the act of weaving fabric with the loom tool positioned before her. The weaving tools appears to be of a traditional kind and noticeably larger in size compared to the figure. The other figure can potentially be interpreted as a female due to her long hair ending on her shoulder, she sits facing the previous figure who is standing and interacting with the birds.



Figure 6 A lady in *kain batik* and a yellow Chinese umbrella

Additionally, there are two creatures that can be recognised as goats playing behind her. A figure is positioned near the goats, appearing to be moving away from them. The figure can be interpreted as a lady due to her outfit, which includes a *kain batik* and a yellow Chinese umbrella. The clothing was portrayed in an hourglass form, similar to most *kebaya*, and fell above the hipline. While the artworks are titled after the Malay village, they nonetheless contain characteristics of Chinese culture. The Chinese umbrella, while rooted in Chinese culture, was adopted by various Malaysian communities, including Malays, especially during festivals and outdoor events.



Figure 7 A figure dressed in blue attire holding a bag in front of her

Furthermore, there is another figure dressed in blue attire, representing a woman, who is holding a bag in front of her. The figure is observed to be carrying an object on her head, shown the traditional practice of women in the village who used to balance items on their heads, known as *junjung*, while walking. This practice is deeply ingrained in Malay villagers and represents a traditional way of life. It emphasises the villagers' resourcefulness and adaptability while navigating their daily routines. Additionally, there is a chicken-like figure depicted on the left side of the painting.



Figure 8 An individual and an animal

Other than that, the painting features one individual and an animal in the background. The initial figure can be perceived as a male due to its portrayal of holding two buckets that are attached to the poles on his shoulder. This behaviour is commonly observed among the villagers, who consistently

engage in the practice of fetching water from the river and transporting it home using a bucket. Fetching water with buckets and poles was an essential activity for male villagers, demonstrating the practical skills and cultural traditions that defined rural life at the time. There exists a certain animal form that may be recognised as a goat engaged in the act of eating the grass.

The painting employs both warm and cool colours, as reflected in the use of various elements and principles. Warm colours such as yellow, orange, and red are prominent, with yellow tones highlighting the evening lighting of the village. In contrast, cool colours like violet, blue, and green are used, particularly in the depiction of the forest's shadow that envelops the village, which is rendered in shades of green in the upper background. The oil medium on canvas allows the texture of the brushstrokes to be clearly visible throughout the painting. The artist's intent to portray life in a Malay village is clearly conveyed through these visual choices, capturing the essence of Malaysian rural life.

3.1.3 Iconographical Interpretation

The cultural element of Malaysian culture is visually represented in the painting titled “Malay Kampong” (1962). Cultural elements that have been identified include:

i) Art

The painting features a representation of a weaving instrument such as looms used for manufacturing cloth like *songket*. Modern weaving instruments are used to create traditional garments suitable for weddings and royal occasions. Ngo et al. (2010) mentioned that *songket* is recognised as a traditional Malay textile, known for its cultural significance and intricate craftsmanship. Furthermore, the author also stated that weaving is primarily carried out in Malay villages (kampungs), particularly in areas like Terengganu. When weaving is done at home, the loom is typically placed on the verandah, inside the house, or underneath it, as traditional Malay houses are usually built on stilts. These weaving practices reflected the rich textile heritage of the Malay community, utilising tools and techniques handed down through generations. Furthermore, the depiction of the Chinese umbrella in the painting reflects elements of Chinese culture within the broader Malaysian cultural context. According to Mandarin Factory (2020), this umbrella, known as the Chinese paper umbrella, is also popular in several other Asian countries, including Malaysia. Zulkefli et al. (2019) further noted that it is one of the traditional crafts produced by the Baba and Nyonya community.

ii) Clothing and Outfit

The painting vividly depicts various traditional Malaysian attire, emphasising the Malay community's cultural diversity and heritage. One prominent figure is a woman dressed in a *baju kurung Kedah*, distinguished by its shorter sleeves, and paired with a *kain batik*, reflecting practical and traditional village attire. This was described by Team (2024) that the sleeves of the *baju kurung Kedah* are typically three-quarter in length and wider at the cuffs compared to other types of *baju kurung*. Furthermore, Yusof (2025) added that the *baju kurung Kedah* is characterised by its shorter blouse, which typically ends at the hips, and is often paired with a *kain batik*, highlighting its comfort and ease of movement. Other women are dressed in *kebaya* with *kain batik*, displaying hourglass silhouettes with slightly accentuated hiplines, and accessorised with Chinese umbrellas, symbolising a fusion of cultural influences in Malaysian traditions. Zulkefli et al. (2019) noted that the *baju kebaya pendek*, often adorned with embroidery featuring flora and fauna motifs, is recognised as the traditional attire of the Baba and Nyonya community. The author further explained that this clothing is typically paired with a *kain sarung*. Another figure wears a *baju kurung*, which has a knee-length top and is paired with a batik sarong, emphasising Malay attire's modest and functional design. Furthermore, garments draped over shoulders emphasise the practical yet culturally significant aspects of traditional clothing. This was mentioned by Aris (2014) that Malay women traditionally wore long blouses, such as *baju kurung* or *baju belah*, paired with a *sarong* as Malay traditional costumes. The author also noted that in contemporary times, headscarves or long shawls draped over one shoulder are commonly used as head coverings.

iii) Pastime

The painting subtly reflects Malaysia's pastime by depicting a standing figure on the right interacting with birds, symbolising the close bond between humans and their pets. Keeping pets like cats, dogs, and birds has long been a popular practice among Malaysians, providing companionship and psychological comfort in everyday life. The depiction of caged birds emphasises a popular cultural pastime in which the beauty and melodious songs of birds are highly valued. This tradition includes community gatherings and competitions in which bird owners demonstrate their pets' vocal abilities, fostering social connections and celebrating a shared appreciation for nature. According to Marshall et al. (2021) and Amar-Singh et al. (2024), the practice of keeping birds is considered a traditional leisure activity rooted in a long historical tradition. These elements represent the cultural values and communal spirit of Malaysian village life.

iv) Norms

This painting depicts daily life in a Malay village, highlighting the cultural customs and traditions that define Malaysian identity. One scene depicts a woman seated on a wooden *wakaf*, engrossed in reading a book, a gesture that represents intellectual curiosity and exemplary behaviour in the community. Samsuddin & Mohd Khalid (2021) stated that reading is a fundamental skill a person must possess to remain competent in daily life. In Malaysia culture, reading is traditionally associated with stillness and focus, as reading while walking or standing is considered impolite. Such behaviour is thought to negatively affect one's ability to recognise and respect others in their environment, reflecting the cultural emphasis on mindfulness and social etiquette. Furthermore, Kaur et al. (2022) added that a positive reading attitude is associated with higher levels of subjective well-being, greater self-esteem, and better resilience in facing challenges. This portrayal emphasises the values of respect and education that define Malaysian village life.

v) Social Institutions

The paintings also emphasise the role of men in fulfilling familial responsibilities, as evidenced by the depiction of a figure in the background performing domestic tasks such as fetching water from the river and carrying it back in buckets. This reflects Malay men's traditional role as household heads, responsible for meeting their families' basic needs. Such activities were not only practical, but also represented the values of diligence, resourcefulness, and family commitment. Hamdan & Radzi (2014) noted that leadership within the Malay community, whether formal or informal, often rests on the shoulders of men. The artwork depicts an important element of Malaysia's cultural identity, emphasising the collective effort and interdependence that support village life.

3.2 MARKET SCENE

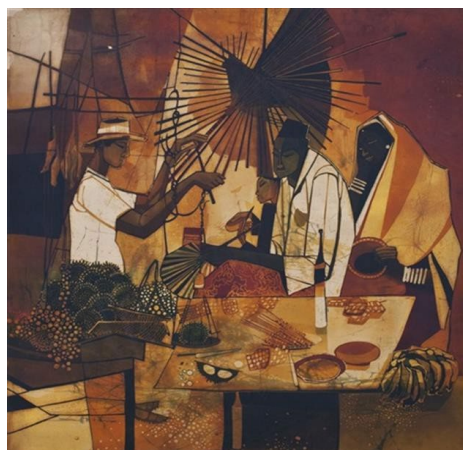


Figure 9 Market Scene, Undated (Artnet.com, n.d.)

3.2.1 Pre-Iconographical

Seah Kim Joo's painting, *Market Scene* (undated), has been created using Batik painting technique on plywood, with dimensions of 76 cm x 76 cm. The artwork portrayed four characters together with each character distinguished with each other. The composition features four distinct characters, each uniquely represented to emphasise individuality. The painting highlights Indian cultural elements, including traditional clothing and accessories associated with the Indian community in Malaysia. Additionally, it portrays popular Malaysian foods such as satay, as well as an assortment of local fruits like durians, longan, and bananas, vividly capturing the essence of a bustling Malaysian market.

3.2.2 Iconographical Analysis



Figure 10 Durians, longans, and a banana

Several fruits, including durians and longans, are visible on the left side of the painting while on right side depicted a banana. Durian, also known as the "King of Fruits," is renowned for its strong aroma and creamy, custard-like flesh, which ranges in flavour from sweet to savoury. Despite its at odds odour, it is a popular fruit in Malaysia, whether eaten fresh or in dessert. Longan, also known as *mata kucing* ("cat's eye"), is a juicy, translucent fruit with thin brown skin that is typically harvested between June and August and enjoyed fresh or in desserts. Bananas are widely consumed in Malaysia and come in a variety of forms, with *pisang raja* being particularly popular. They are versatile, and can be eaten fresh, cooked, or fried. Together, these fruits represent Malaysia's rich agricultural heritage and vibrant food culture.



Figure 11

A table is situated to the right of the painting, and it is adorned with durian fruits, a knife, a plate, a container, and satay. Furthermore, satay is a cherished dish in Malaysia, celebrated for its rich, aromatic flavours and cultural significance. This skewered meat delicacy has become an integral part of the country's culinary heritage, enjoyed by people from diverse cultural backgrounds and communities.



Figure 12 A man in white short sleeves shirt, a hat and spectacles are weighing the durians

using a scale

The initial figures on the left side effectively showed a man, wearing a white shirt sleeves shirt and a hat, also spectacles are weighing the durians using a scale before selling to customers. Weighing fruits before sale is a fundamental practice in markets like Pasar Tani, where farmers sell their produce directly to consumers. Among Malaysian community, accurate measurements are essential for determining fair pricing, especially for bulk sales of high-demand fruits like durian, longan, and bananas. This practice ensures transparency, upholds fair trade principles, and supports quality control within the fruit supply chain.



Figure 13 An Indian Man with a white dot between his eyebrows showing his insignia of belonging to Hindu religion

A man that is potentially shown as an Indian Man which has a white dot between his eyebrows showing his insignia of belonging to Hindu religion. The Indian man is seen holding a fan that portrays him as a satay seller, with satay dishes placed on the table next to him. The depiction of an Indian man with a white dot, known as a bindi, between his brows represents his Hindu faith. The bindi has deep cultural and spiritual significance, representing insight, auspiciousness, and a connection to higher consciousness. In addition to the Indian man, there are other figures positioned behind him, characterised by a softer facial expression compared to the Indian man. These images portray a woman wearing black attire. The woman dressed in black seemed to be holding a fruit as she skilfully peeled it with a long knife.



Figure 14 An Indian woman in Indian women's clothing

The last figure, positioned on the right side of the painting, effectively portrayed an Indian woman through the accurate depiction of her attire, which is characteristic of Indian women's clothing. The garments were referred to as Indian Saree because of the elongated measurement of the fabric. The Indian woman adorns her wrists with a few bangles and wears earrings, as well as a headpiece as part of her jewellery. The depiction of an Indian woman in traditional attire, such as a saree, vividly demonstrates the cultural richness and diversity of the Indian community. The saree, a long piece of fabric elegantly draped around the body, is usually worn with a blouse (choli) and is known for its versatility, with different draping styles. Indian women in Malaysia frequently accessorise their sarees with intricate jewellery such as bangles, earrings, and a headpiece known as a maang teeka, enhancing the overall elegance of their ensemble. This representation emphasises the cultural significance of clothing and adornments as identity symbols in Malaysia's Indian community.

Warm colours, such as brown, are prominently featured in the artwork. The scene depicted reflects a market setting typically open during sundown, with lighter shades of brown used on the subjects' shirts, suggesting the effect of light present in the market at that time. The artist's intent to capture the essence of Malaysian life in a market scene is clearly conveyed through these visual elements, emphasising the dynamic atmosphere of the market during sundown.

3.2.3 ICONOGRAPHICAL INTERPRETATION

i) Clothing and Outfit

The Indian woman wearing traditional attire, the Indian saree, represents cultural heritage and values. The saree, a long length of silk elegantly draped around her body, is more than just a garment. Furthermore, Deepam (2024) stated that saree is a symbol of grace, modesty, and respect, and it is frequently worn to honour elders and maintain family traditions. The numerous bangles adorning her wrists are part of Indian culture, particularly as a symbol of marital status, and stem from wedding traditions. Furthermore, the maang teeka, a piece of jewellery worn on the forehead, represents the sacred bond of marriage and is thought to strengthen spiritual, emotional, and physical ties. Aside from that, Patel (2024) also added that the maang teeka also serves to protect the bride from negative energies. The intricate details of the saree and jewellery highlight the significance of clothing and accessories in maintaining and expressing cultural and familial ties within the Indian community, particularly in Malaysia.

ii) Food

The painting depicts a variety of iconic foods, including durian, longan, bananas, and satay, all of which are deeply embedded in Malaysian culinary culture. Durian, longan, bananas, and satay are central to Malaysia's rich and diverse food culture, each offering a unique reflection of local tastes and traditions. Known as the "King of Fruits," Siti Afiah (2020) stated that the durian is characterised by its large size, strong odour, and thorn-covered rind. Furthermore, Khong (2023) added that Malaysian durians are renowned for their rich, intense flavour, creamy texture, and slightly bittersweet taste. Longan, known with its sweet and juicy flesh, is commonly enjoyed fresh or used in traditional desserts.

This was mentioned by Umami (2025) that Longan often consumed fresh, or can be an addition to beverages, fruits salads and desserts. Bananas, especially local varieties like *pisang raja*, are widely consumed in various forms from fresh to fried or cooked in dishes. *Satay*, a popular street food, features skewered meat served with peanut sauce and is loved for its flavourful blend of savoury and sweet. Furthermore, Zainal Arifen et al. (2025) observed that satay is among the most widely enjoyed snacks in Malaysia. Together, these foods highlight Malaysia's rich agricultural diversity and its vibrant food culture, which blends local traditions and flavours.

iii) Norms

This painting captures the vibrant social dynamics of a Malaysian market, a key cultural hub where locals gather to purchase affordable food and goods while fostering a sense of community. Markets, often held on weekends, reflect Malaysia's cultural norms of togetherness and mutual support, serving as spaces where people from various ethnic backgrounds interact. The depiction of two Indian individuals highlights the country's multicultural identity. Furthermore, the Indian man's dot (bindi) on his forehead symbolises his Hindu faith, representing spiritual insight and religious devotion. Zelazko (2025) highlighted that the bindi continues to be closely linked to religious traditions. These elements, integrated into the bustling market scene, underscore Malaysia's cultural norms of inclusivity, respect for diversity, and the celebration of ethnic heritage within everyday life.

4 FINDING AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Seah Kim Joo's paintings successfully highlight the diversity of Malaysian cultural characteristics, reflecting influences from the country's three major communities: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Rather than emphasising a single cultural heritage, her work incorporates components from these various groups and examines their visual characteristics and deeper meanings. The analysis reveals that the two selected artworks incorporate elements of material culture, including art, clothing, food, and pastimes, alongside non-material aspects such as norms and social institutions. These findings demonstrate that the artworks effectively capture the essence of Malaysian culture, showcasing their cultural significance and authenticity.

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All authors played equal contributions towards the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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