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Build the Higher-Level Art Discipline from Malaysia Inherent Aesthetic Resource

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Abstract: This paper explores the strategic construction of a higher-level art discipline in Malaysia, grounded in the country's rich and diverse inherent aesthetic resources. Drawing upon the multi-cultural heritage of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous traditions, the study examines key art forms such as batik, wood carving, and traditional dance, analyzing their symbolic languages, aesthetic systems, and pedagogical potential. It argues that these local forms are not merely cultural artifacts, but sophisticated visual and performative epistemologies capable of informing contemporary art education and theory. Through critical analysis of current limitations — including the marginalization of art in higher education, blurred disciplinary boundaries, and the lack of international frameworks for expressing indigenous aesthetics — the paper highlights the urgency of reform. It proposes multi-dimensional strategies: reconstructing theory with a balance between localization and globalization, integrating ethnic aesthetics into curricula, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and promoting practice-based research. Policy recommendations are also offered, emphasizing institutional reform, increased funding, and cultural partnerships. Ultimately, the paper asserts that a Malaysian-centered art discipline, rooted in local aesthetic philosophies yet responsive to global discourse, can serve as both an academic and cultural project. It envisions a future in which Malaysia's art education not only preserves heritage but also contributes critically to international artistic and intellectual conversations.

Keywords: Malaysia; inherent aesthetics; indigenous art forms; art education reform; localized art theory; cultural policy

Published: 10 June 2025



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1. Introduction

Malaysia, as a multicultural nation enriched by a tapestry of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous cultures, offers a diverse reservoir of aesthetic traditions. From traditional batik and wood carving to performing arts like wayang kulit and mak yong, Malaysian art is imbued with a deep-rooted cultural identity. Despite this rich heritage, the academic development of art disciplines in Malaysia has yet to fully capitalize on these inherent resources. Many aspects of local aesthetic value remain underrepresented in higher education curricula, research frameworks, and policy strategies. Moreover, Malaysian art education often leans heavily on Western paradigms, which can obscure or marginalize local knowledge systems and aesthetic sensibilities.

The urgency to develop a higher-level, Malaysian-rooted art discipline has grown in tandem with regional and global conversations around decolonizing knowledge and embracing indigenous epistemologies. The postcolonial context of Malaysia necessitates an approach that not only acknowledges but also prioritizes local cultural expressions in the formal structure of academic art education. Establishing a strong, locally grounded art discipline is not only crucial for preserving cultural heritage, but also for fostering national

identity, promoting creative industries, and contributing to international dialogues on cultural pluralism.

This review article aims to explore how Malaysia's inherent aesthetic resources can be systematically mobilized to construct a more robust and contextually relevant art discipline at the tertiary level. It addresses three key questions:

- 1) What are the core aesthetic resources embedded in Malaysian traditional and contemporary art?
- 2) What limitations currently hinder the integration of these resources into the national art education framework?
- 3) What strategic pathways can be proposed to elevate Malaysia's art discipline in both local and global academic landscapes?

The methodological approach of this review is interdisciplinary and qualitative in nature. It involves critical analysis of existing literature, government cultural policies, art education curricula, and selected case studies from both Malaysia and comparative international contexts. The review also draws on theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, indigenous epistemology, and postcolonial theory to assess how knowledge production in the arts can be more inclusive of Malaysia's cultural assets.

Through this exploration, the article seeks to bridge the gap between traditional aesthetic practices and contemporary academic structures, contributing to the vision of an art discipline that is intellectually rigorous, culturally grounded, and globally resonant.

2. Understanding Malaysia's Inherent Aesthetic Resources

Malaysia's aesthetic landscape is deeply intertwined with its multiethnic and multi-cultural identity. As a postcolonial Southeast Asian nation shaped by centuries of cultural interaction, its visual and performative traditions represent a synthesis of indigenous, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and colonial influences. This pluralism not only offers a wealth of artistic forms and philosophies, but also defines the nation's unique aesthetic logic — one that is fluid, hybrid, and deeply rooted in community narratives [1].

2.1. Cultural Diversity as a Foundation for Aesthetic Identity

The confluence of ethnic traditions in Malaysia forms the foundation of its inherent aesthetic richness. The Malay majority contributes not only Islamic-inspired motifs and decorative forms but also performative rituals such as *mak yong* and *dikir barat*. The Chinese community brings influences in calligraphy, paper cutting, opera costumes, and symbolic color systems. Indian aesthetics, especially through *Bharatanatyam* and *Kolam*, introduce another layer of ornamental richness and gestural expression. Indigenous groups such as the *Orang Asli* and *Dayak* contribute animistic motifs, natural symbolism, and tactile expressions in beadwork, weaving, and carving.

Rather than existing in isolation, these cultural traditions often intersect, leading to hybrid art forms that reflect Malaysia's lived reality. This pluralistic nature of Malaysian aesthetics is not merely demographic — it forms a foundational principle that should guide curriculum design, institutional priorities, and research in the country's art disciplines.

2.2. Indigenous Art Forms and Their Symbolic Significance

2.2.1. Batik: Textile as Symbolic Surface

Batik is one of Malaysia's most iconic art forms, characterized by wax-resist dyeing on fabric to produce intricate patterns. While often compared with Indonesian batik, Malaysian batik places greater emphasis on floral and geometric motifs rather than figurative elements, aligning with Islamic decorative traditions [2]. The use of color in batik is highly symbolic: indigo represents strength and spiritual depth, while yellow is traditionally reserved for royalty. In many rural contexts, batik also functions as a storytelling medium, preserving oral histories and community narratives [3].

This complexity in visual language and cultural symbolism is clearly reflected in traditional Malay batik patterns, as illustrated in Figure 1. Batik's integration into contemporary design education and fashion is increasing, yet its full semiotic and historical depth remains underutilized in academic discourse. An expanded study of batik can serve as a key entry point for constructing a Malaysian-centered art theory.



Figure 1. Traditional Malay Batik Patterns Featuring Floral and Geometric Motifs, Typically Created Using Wax-Resist Dyeing Techniques.

2.2.2. Wood Carving: Crafting the Sacred and the Everyday

Wood carving is another vital aesthetic resource, especially prevalent in Malay and indigenous architecture. From mosque pulpits (mimbar) to keris (ceremonial daggers) handles, carved wood is both functional and expressive. The motifs — such as awan larat (cloud pattern), flora, and Arabic calligraphy — carry metaphysical meanings and reflect Islamic, animist, and ancestral worldviews.

These symbolic patterns and their intricate execution are prominently featured in traditional Malay architectural panels, as shown in Figure 2. Unlike Western sculpture, which emphasizes volume and form, Malaysian wood carving is often two-dimensional, designed to interact with light and space, such as in latticework and ventilation panels [3,4]. Its pedagogical potential in art education lies in its fusion of geometry, spiritual symbolism, and spatial logic.



Figure 2. Traditional Malay Wood Carving on a House Panel, Showcasing the Use of Floral Motifs and the "Awan Larat" Pattern Common in Islamic-Malay Architecture.

2.2.3. Traditional Dance: Embodied Aesthetics and Cultural Memory

Dance in Malaysia is not only an artistic expression but also an embodiment of cultural history and cosmology. Traditional dances such as Zapin, Joget, Bharatanatyam, and Chinese lion dance are deeply ritualistic and often narrate mythologies, moral tales, or communal events.

The cultural significance and performative detail of these dances — especially Malay forms like Zapin — are exemplified in Figure 3, which captures a moment of symbolic gesture and traditional costuming. Malay dance is marked by controlled hand gestures, fluid torso movement, and symbolic costume. These elements encode gender roles, spiritual principles, and communal values. Furthermore, dance is inherently interdisciplinary — blending music, costume design, narrative structure, and kinesthetic intelligence — making it a valuable tool for higher-level, practice-based art education [5].



Figure 3. A Live Performance of the Classical Malay Dance Zapin, Demonstrating Traditional Dress, Choreo-Graphic Structure, and Symbolic Hand Gestures.

2.3. Visual Language and Aesthetic Symbolism

The visual language of Malaysian art is defined by a preference for stylization, repetition, and abstraction. Traditional patterns found in textiles, architecture, and ceramics often employ symmetrical and rhythmic designs that carry both aesthetic and symbolic weight. For instance, the lotus motif represents purity, while the crescent moon denotes spiritual guidance.

Color usage also holds culturally specific meanings. In Malay culture, green signifies peace and prosperity, while red is auspicious in Chinese tradition and saffron holds religious connotations in Hindu practice. These culturally embedded semiotics provide a foundational grammar for visual communication in Malaysian art, offering immense value for the development of design theory and visual literacy curricula.

2.4. Regional and Historical Dimensions of Aesthetic Concepts

Malaysia's aesthetic traditions are also shaped by regional geography and historical processes. Coastal areas with trading ports like Malacca and Penang exhibit stronger cross-cultural artistic synthesis due to historical contact with Arab, Chinese, and European traders. Inland regions often retain more localized, ritualistic, and animistic art forms [6].

Moreover, colonial histories have affected the valuation of artistic practices, with Western fine arts often elevated above indigenous craft traditions in institutional hierarchies. Revisiting and revalidating these neglected forms are essential for rebalancing the epistemology of art in Malaysia [6].

3. Current Limitations in Malaysia's Art Discipline Development

While Malaysia possesses a rich reservoir of aesthetic resources, the development of its higher-level art discipline faces several entrenched structural and conceptual limitations. These challenges not only hinder the advancement of national art education but also prevent Malaysia from effectively contributing to global art discourses from a distinctively local perspective. This section examines four core areas of limitation: the academic

system's structural weaknesses, the marginalization of art in higher education, the disconnect between theoretical research and indigenous art practices, and the lack of internationally legible frameworks for Malaysian aesthetic expression.

3.1. Structural Limitations and Disciplinary Ambiguity

One of the primary challenges facing Malaysia's art discipline is the unclear delineation of disciplinary boundaries within academic institutions. In many universities, art programs are embedded within broader faculties — such as "Creative Industries", "Design and Multimedia", or "Cultural Studies" — which often prioritize applied skills and industry relevance over theoretical or critical inquiry.

This disciplinary ambiguity leads to several consequences:

- 1) A lack of consensus on what constitutes "art" in the Malaysian academic context.
- 2) An overemphasis on technical training (e.g., graphic design, product design) rather than critical or philosophical approaches to aesthetics.
- 3) Limited development of art theory, criticism, or philosophy rooted in Malaysian cultural experiences.

As a result, students and faculty members often face difficulties in articulating research questions or constructing curricula that reflect both local realities and global standards [7].

3.2. Marginalization of Art within Higher Education

Despite governmental policies promoting cultural development, art education continues to occupy a peripheral status within Malaysia's higher education framework. Funding allocations, institutional recognition, and research prioritization overwhelmingly favor STEM disciplines or economically strategic sectors.

This marginalization manifests in:

- 1) Fewer research grants and institutional support for art-based projects.
- 2) Limited full-time academic positions for practicing artists or art theorists.
- 3) Low publication output in internationally indexed journals.

Furthermore, the arts are often evaluated using performance metrics suited for sciences or business, such as citation counts or patent output, which do not adequately capture artistic value or impact. This structural inequality reinforces the perception of art as non-essential, further weakening its institutional standing [8].

3.3. Theoretical-Local Disconnect in Art Research

Another key limitation lies in the disconnect between academic research and the lived practices of local artists, artisans, and cultural communities [9]. Much of the current scholarship on Malaysian art relies heavily on Western theoretical frameworks, which — while valuable — often fail to capture the ontological and symbolic richness of indigenous forms such as batik, mak yong, or keris carving.

This results in:

- 1) A top-down approach to research that marginalizes traditional knowledge systems.
- 2) A lack of intellectual reciprocity between universities and local art communities.
- 3) Insufficient theorization of uniquely Malaysian aesthetic concepts, such as halus (refinement), seni (artfulness), or adat (customary law).

In effect, theoretical inquiry becomes detached from cultural roots, limiting the capacity of Malaysian art disciplines to generate knowledge that is both locally grounded and globally relevant.

3.4. Lack of Internationally Legible Aesthetic Frameworks

Finally, Malaysia's aesthetic vocabulary lacks internationally legible mechanisms for articulation and exchange. Unlike Japanese wabi-sabi, Indian rasa, or Chinese qi yun

sheng dong, Malaysia has not yet systematized or exported its indigenous aesthetic values to the international academic or curatorial arenas.

Key problems include:

- 1) No widely recognized conceptual equivalents for traditional terms in global art discourse.
- 2) A scarcity of translated literature that explains Malaysian art philosophy to non-local audiences.
- 3) Minimal presence in global exhibitions, journals, and conferences that shape international understanding of non-Western aesthetics.

To contribute to global aesthetic theory, Malaysia must cultivate a bilingual or translingual research culture that can express local values — such as communal harmony, natural rhythm, or symbolic depth — in conceptually rigorous and internationally communicable forms.

To better illustrate these challenges, Table 1 summarizes the key limitations affecting Malaysia's art discipline development, outlining their core issues and resulting consequences.

Table 1. Summary of Key Limitations in Malaysia's Art Discipline Development.

Category	Key Issues	Consequences
Structural and Disciplinary Issues	Lack of clear art discipline identity; emphasis on applied design	Theoretical stagnation; weak critical discourse
Marginalization in Higher Education	Low funding and institutional status	Limited research output; few academic career paths
Theory-Practice Disconnection	Dominance of Western frameworks; minimal engagement with traditional forms	Cultural misrepresentation; lack of local aesthetic theorization
Global Communication Challenges	No established Malaysian aesthetic lexicon; limited international presence	Poor global recognition; exclusion from art theory discourse

In summary, the limitations in Malaysia's current art discipline development are not simply issues of resource allocation or policy design — they are deeply rooted in epistemological imbalances and structural hierarchies that must be critically addressed. The next section will explore strategies and policy recommendations to overcome these challenges, focusing on localized knowledge production, institutional reform, and internationalization mechanisms.

4. Strategic Pathways to Build a Higher-Level Art Discipline

Addressing the current limitations in Malaysia's art discipline requires a multi-faceted strategic approach that balances the dual imperatives of localization and internationalization. The goal is to cultivate an academic and creative environment where indigenous aesthetics are recognized and theorized rigorously, while simultaneously engaging with global art discourses on equal footing. This section outlines several strategic pathways to achieve this transformation, focusing on theoretical system building, curriculum reform, interdisciplinary collaboration, the reinforcement of local artistic practice, and the adoption of a "counter-modernity" mindset.

4.1. Establishing a Localized and Internationalized Theoretical Framework

The cornerstone of any robust art discipline is a coherent theoretical system that articulates its unique values and methodologies. For Malaysia, this entails developing a theoretical framework that is deeply rooted in indigenous aesthetic principles yet conversant with global art philosophies.

This dual approach encourages scholars to draw from traditional concepts — such as *halus* (refinement), *adat* (customary law), and *seni* (artfulness) — and translate these into critical frameworks that can be shared internationally. By doing so, Malaysian art theory

would not only reclaim cultural specificity but also contribute novel perspectives to global debates on aesthetics and art practice.

The creation of bilingual or multilingual academic publications and conferences dedicated to Malaysian aesthetics can further support this theoretical maturation.

4.2. Reconstructing Art Education Curriculum through Ethnic Aesthetics

Art education curricula in Malaysian universities must be redesigned to reflect the country's multicultural heritage and the diverse artistic practices that emerge from it. Incorporating ethnic aesthetics as foundational knowledge will help students understand the cultural logic behind local art forms rather than viewing them solely as craft or folklore.

Such curriculum reform involves:

- 1) Embedding courses on Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous art histories and philosophies.
- 2) Integrating practical training in traditional techniques alongside critical theory.
- 3) Encouraging community engagement projects that connect students with local artists and cultural bearers.

This culturally responsive curriculum ensures that future artists and scholars can ground their work in authentic local contexts while maintaining critical awareness of global art trends.

4.3. Promoting Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Art, Technology, Design, and Philosophy

The complexity of contemporary art demands collaboration beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. Malaysia's art discipline should foster interdisciplinary research that bridges art with fields such as technology, design, and philosophy.

For example:

- 1) Exploring digital media and new technologies as tools to reinterpret traditional forms like batik or wayang kulit (shadow puppetry).
- 2) Collaborating with design faculties to innovate sustainable craft practices that align with local ecological and social values.
- 3) Engaging with philosophy departments to theorize Malaysian concepts of aesthetics and spirituality in dialogue with global thought.

Such cross-pollination enhances creativity, broadens research horizons, and prepares students to participate in diverse professional environments.

4.4. Reinforcing the Central Role of Local Artistic Practice in Teaching and Research

To counter the theoretical-local disconnect described earlier, local artistic practice must be central to both pedagogy and scholarship. This includes:

- 1) Involving practicing artists and cultural practitioners as educators and mentors.
- 2) Establishing research centers that focus on documentation, preservation, and innovation of indigenous art forms.
- 3) Encouraging practice-based research methodologies where creation and reflection are equally valued.

This emphasis on practice nurtures a living, dynamic relationship between academic knowledge and community heritage, empowering both.

4.5. Introducing a "Counter-Modernity" Perspective: Decentering Western Art Hegemony

Finally, Malaysia can adopt a "counter-modernity" or "reverse modernity" approach, which critically challenges Western art-centric paradigms by privileging local epistemologies and experiences. This involves:

- 1) Deconstructing Western art history narratives that marginalize or exoticize Malaysian art.
- 2) Developing alternative historiographies that place Malaysian artistic trajectories within their own temporal and cultural logics.

- 3) Advocating for pluralism in global art discourse, where Malaysia's unique contributions are recognized not as derivative but as autonomous.
- 4) By embracing this intellectual stance, Malaysian art discipline can resist cultural imperialism and foster genuine intellectual sovereignty.

In conclusion, the strategic pathways outlined above collectively aim to transform Malaysia's art discipline into a vibrant, critically engaged, and culturally grounded field. Through theory-building, curriculum innovation, interdisciplinary synergy, rooted practice, and epistemic reorientation, Malaysia can build a higher-level art discipline that honors its inherent aesthetic resources while actively shaping the global art landscape.

5. Policy Recommendations and Institutional Support

5.1. Elevating Art in National Policy and Funding Priorities

The advancement of Malaysia's higher-level art discipline necessitates a comprehensive and nuanced approach that intertwines strategic policy formulation with robust institutional support. At the national level, it is imperative that art is repositioned from being a marginal cultural activity to a cornerstone of Malaysia's socio-cultural identity and intellectual capital. This repositioning requires not only increased financial investment but also the design of a coherent national arts strategy that explicitly foregrounds the cultivation and dissemination of Malaysia's unique aesthetic heritage. Such a strategy would ideally include the establishment of dedicated research institutes specializing in indigenous art histories, aesthetics, and contemporary practices, thereby creating institutional nodes that serve both scholarly inquiry and public engagement. Moreover, sustained governmental support should extend to programs fostering international exchanges, artist residencies, and cross-cultural collaborations, which are critical in situating Malaysian art within broader global conversations without compromising its cultural specificity.

5.2. Reforming Higher Education Policies and Curricula

Concurrently, systemic reforms within the higher education sector are indispensable. Art disciplines must be accorded parity with STEM and social sciences in terms of academic recognition, funding, and policy priority. This involves a paradigmatic shift in curricular design, wherein Malaysia's pluralistic cultural aesthetics and artistic practices are embedded not as ancillary subjects but as fundamental components of the academic canon. The integration of multidisciplinary pedagogies that meld art with technology, design, philosophy, and cultural studies can empower students to navigate and contribute to increasingly complex creative and intellectual terrains. Additionally, professional development for educators must emphasize culturally responsive teaching methodologies and foster theoretical frameworks rooted in local epistemologies. A critical dimension of this reform is the institutional validation of practice-based research as a legitimate scholarly endeavor — one that recognizes creative production alongside textual analysis as vital knowledge production within the academy.

5.3. Strengthening Collaboration among Cultural Institutions, Museums, and Universities

Furthermore, fostering symbiotic collaborations between universities, cultural institutions, and museums is paramount for a vibrant and sustainable art ecosystem. These entities collectively possess rich repositories of expertise, artifacts, and community networks that, when strategically linked, can amplify the visibility and vitality of Malaysia's artistic heritage. Collaborative initiatives — ranging from co-curated exhibitions and interdisciplinary research projects to community outreach and educational programs — can facilitate knowledge exchange and democratize access to cultural resources. The creation of shared digital archives and documentation platforms will not only preserve endangered art forms and intangible cultural heritage but also facilitate scholarly research and public dissemination on a wider scale. These institutional partnerships, supported by pol-

icy incentives and funding mechanisms, are essential for nurturing innovation in curatorial practice, art education, and cultural tourism, thereby reinforcing the centrality of art within Malaysia's cultural and economic development agendas.

5.4. Conclusion: Towards an Integrated Policy Framework

In sum, the successful cultivation of Malaysia's higher-level art discipline hinges upon a concerted policy framework that harmonizes financial investment, academic reform, and inter-institutional collaboration. This multifaceted approach demands visionary leadership and sustained commitment across governmental, academic, and cultural sectors. Only through such integrated efforts can Malaysia fully harness its inherent aesthetic resources, articulating and projecting a distinct artistic identity that resonates both locally and globally, thereby asserting its rightful place within the international art discourse.

6. Conclusion and Future Outlook

In summary, Malaysia's inherent aesthetic resources constitute the indispensable foundation upon which a distinctive and robust higher-level art discipline can be constructed. The rich plurality of its cultural heritage — from Malay batik and wood carving to traditional dance — embodies unique visual languages and philosophies that not only enrich Malaysia's artistic landscape but also offer critical insights for rethinking global art discourses from a non-Western perspective. This study has highlighted the urgent need to bridge the gap between academic theory and local artistic practices, to reform educational frameworks, and to foster institutional collaborations that collectively affirm the value of indigenous aesthetics in contemporary art scholarship and pedagogy.

Looking forward, future research should continue to deepen interdisciplinary inquiry that combines ethnographic, historical, and theoretical approaches to better understand Malaysia's diverse art forms in their socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, there is a pressing need to develop localized art theories and methodologies that speak authentically to Malaysia's plural identities and histories, moving beyond mere adaptation of Western paradigms. On the practical front, integrating community-based art practices with higher education and professional platforms can empower local artists and preserve intangible heritage while fostering innovation.

Policy-makers, educators, and cultural institutions must collaborate to create sustainable ecosystems that support both artistic creation and critical scholarship, thus ensuring that Malaysia's art discipline grows not only in academic stature but also in social relevance. Embracing the principle of "reverse modernity", whereby indigenous experiences challenge dominant Western narratives, will position Malaysia as a vital interlocutor in the global art arena.

Ultimately, the construction of a higher-level art discipline grounded in Malaysia's inherent aesthetic resources promises not only to enrich the nation's cultural identity but also to contribute significantly to the diversification and democratization of global art knowledge.

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