

# Contribution of Artists Through Printing as Visual Communication Medium Among Colonies During the British Era in Malaya

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## ABSTRACT

Art has become a medium of communication since the Palaeolithic era, but the obsession in recording information in scientific form began in the 17th century, where the elites paid the intellectuals and artists to produce records in the texts and visuals to be printed. In the 19th century when printing technology began to expand, the west introduced visual printing activities in the newspapers as democratic communication medium. Newspapers such as The Illustrated London News (ILN) and The Graphic contributed the most news with visuals at that time, including news regarding Malaya. This article aims to identify the role of print media and artists in recording visuals during the British colonial rule. Historical method is used in this discussion through documentation from archive's records, books, journals, and electronic data. Indirectly, printed visual became part of historical documents which recorded local visuals while the professional artists or amateurs had delivered their tasks.

**Keywords:** *Printmaking, Media, Communication, Malaya, Colonial.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Art as communication medium can be traced back to the Palaeolithic era where humans used visuals to record activities, events, atmosphere, and their surrounding nature. That practice was carried on in ensuing civilizations in which visuals were used to record information and used as effective communication tool. For instance, during the Renaissance era, renowned artists created masterpieces that embodied Christianity and today they can be appreciated by the followers and religious art enthusiasts. Moreover, the aristocrats had hired intellectuals including the artist to produce visual records on flora and fauna from all over the world. From these brilliant efforts, records such as encyclopaedia was compiled by the 17th century. Visual printing was widely used in the 19th century when it was not solely used in books: they appeared in the form of newspapers which were more affordable and easily available in Europe, America, and the colonies.

Visual printing technology as medium of communication was no longer limited to the elitist. It was accessible to the members of the public regardless of their background since visual print was democratic in nature. Newspapers such as The Illustrated London News (ILN) and The Graphic (TG) contributed a large number of news with visuals, then. Among them, were news from Malaya that were also featured with visuals.

This article brings forth the historical perspective on the role of artists in producing visuals and using printing technology as communication medium in the colonial era. Most importantly, these printed visuals contain invaluable, important information for a colony. For example, in the case of the assassination of J.W.W. Birch, written report produced by ILN had stored visual information on the British army's frantic hunt for Dato Maharaja Lela who was accused of being the perpetrator.

Based on historical method, the discussion in this article revolves around documentation of history from

archive's records, books, journals, and electronic data. It is also the method used to identify print visual's contribution and the artists' role in recording events, customs, culture, nature, and phenomenon during British rule in Malaya. All these are crucial because historical texts are incomplete without visuals which could offer clearer and compelling, comprehensible images. It is hoped that this article could provide information on artists' contribution and the use of printmaking as communication medium between the ruler and the masses, directly or indirectly. In all, printing activities had played an important role in disseminating the visuals to the public.

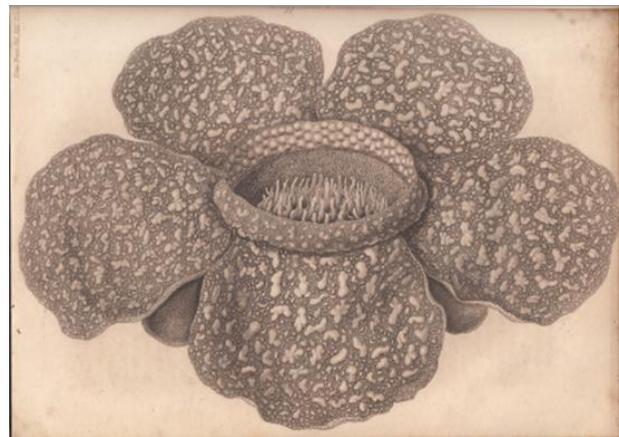
**2. PRINT VISUAL AS SOURCE OF COMMUNICATION**

Each visual produced was an activity between its artist and the viewers. Emily-Jane Hills Orford, if art is accepted as someone's process of expression, hence it will also mean that art is a form of communication since an art informs the viewers about something artistically and historically. This is especially true with the emergence of printing technique in art. It enables an artwork to be produced in the form of sketch, water colour, oil painting, re-printed sculpture and distributed to the public easily at a lower cost. In 1461, this activity gained more momentum when Pfister's produced printed typography texts with visuals [1]. There are two types of print in the world of art namely traditional printing and these prints are distributed in the form of portfolio or pages and prints in the form of special circulation like books, newspaper, and inserts.

Communication occurs via visual when an artist recorded an image; other than the main subject, he also recorded the surrounding. Information of this kind was a narrative between the artist and the viewer since the visual recorded had the ability to influence and evoke the society's emotion at that time. These emotions were exposed to the public through visuals such as war, natural disasters, military strength, wealth, harmony, and beauty. When newspaper industry was introduced, printing activity exploded as part of commercial interest. A number of printed visuals in the 18th century and the end of the 19th century about Malaya are still available and most of them are in British East India Company's collection. It was part of the British East India company's library policy to collect paintings, printed books, and manuscripts about the colonies, around the world. Most paintings and prints could be found in survey, archaeology, and Public Work department archives [2]. In fact, most of the collections are items related to India while there are also others from Asian countries such as Myanmar (Burmese), Malay Archipelago, and China. Items in this collection are not limited to paintings or prints which recorded numerous

victories of the British in its colonies. In fact, the collection encompasses information on culture, history, backgrounds and the wealth of art and architecture. Since 1969, there are about 10,976 items or artwork by professional artists and printmakers that can be obtained from the library (British East India Company).

Other than records from the British East India Company's library, there is a collection of visuals which is kept in the form of encyclopaedia, since at the dawn of the 17th century. Information and record about plants and animals were categorized in the form of caricatures to ease the efforts to learn and study them [3]. Visual record continued to thrive in the 18th century, and it was the catalyst to variations in fields of knowledge, exploration and technical development (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** 'Petimun picanlili' was the original name for 'Rafflesia'. Raffles documented this flower and introduced it to the West. [23]

In the beginning, the efforts put into recording visuals were meant to keep them as personal information but the activities grew until the need for these visuals to be distributed increased [3]. As visual collection and personal articles began to attract public's attention, the desire to own them increased. Hence, the need to mass produce the collection and printing technique was the best method for this task. Printing is unique and it is distinctive from other mediums. Artists relied on this technique since printing was closer to the industrial process. Moreover, printed visuals were affordable artwork and many people could own them [4].

Therefore, artists who produced drawings and paintings would print their own artwork or handed over the printing right for them to be printed on papers in limited numbers. This enabled the artwork to be delivered to more than one owner [5]. In addition, the discovery of new lands and the existing colonies in Asia were something unfamiliar and intriguing to many. In the eyes of the Europeans, the Asian continent had its own character and style from breath-taking sceneries and

landscapes as well as its local, distinguished architecture [6]. (Figure 2)



**Figure 2** Among the sceneries in Penang which were recorded in the form of printed visual by professional artist. [24]

Irene Lim, stated that the interest in printed visual involved admiration of the scenic landscape which also served as a documented record of a location and its people [7]. Between 1766 to 1820, British administration via the British East India Company had recorded the deployment of 60 professional artists to India and Malaya to carry out the task to sketch and draw sceneries and the people. The artist who travelled to places in Asia was given the consent to complete their tasks through the British East India Company [8]. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3** Strait of Malacca: Cape Rachado, 1810. [25]

The British East India Company required artists to map the colonies and carry out ethnographic studies as well as other surveying tasks. Results from these tasks eventually developed to a style of painting known as Indo-European or Company Art which gained fervour in the cities especially in areas under the British rule from the south, north and west India to Nepal, Burmese, Ceylon and Malacca (Malay states) [9]. Artists who served the British empire delivered their tasks meticulously as they produced current, valid sketches and paintings (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** Sketching in China. [26]

### **3. ARTISTS CONTRIBUTED MALAY-THEMED PRINTS**

In the 15th century, the presence of Europeans in Malaya had resulted in economic, political, and socio-cultural changes in the colonies. Amateur and professional artists had grabbed the opportunities to produce sketches and many printed visuals which are still available in the pages of travel journals. Published as books, these journals boasted attractive visuals which won the hearts of British, Dutch, French, Portuguese, and others [10]. Consequently, the production of Malaya-themed prints gained momentum due to the increasing demand in recording new findings, preparing official reports, and producing task reports as newspaper or magazine representatives.

Among all artists and professional printmakers hired by the British under the supervision of the British East India Company for visual recording in the colonies were Daniell brothers namely Thomas Daniell and William Daniell who embarked on a journey in 1786. [10]. They were active professional artists who produced prints and paintings in England. Their project was to record visuals from their travel from India to China [11]. Other than drawing, they had their trusted Abscura camera to capture accurate visuals of sceneries and situations. Outcomes from their professional travel were sold to Governor of the colonies [12]. In addition, the project had produced professional print visual and folio entitled *Oriental Scenery* which was published from 1798 to 1808. These visuals were later exhibited at Royal Academy and The British Institution. Through six volumes of travel records, *Oriental Scenery* was published from 1795 to 1810. Saloni Mathur stated that activities recorded by Daniell brothers were significant since they succeeded in recording visuals for the Europeans to peruse [13].

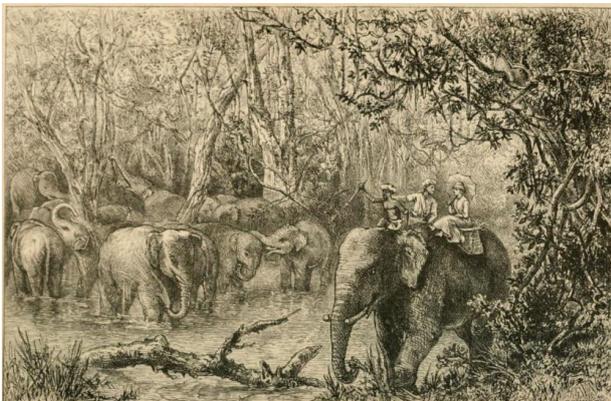
In Malaya, the brothers ventured to Pulau Batu Putih or better known as *Parida Branca* to carry out their tasks. Due to its location that posed a danger for ships travelling to Singapore, it was crucial for the island to be recorded

(Figure 5). Upon the completion of Horsburgh lighthouse in 1851, the island's landscape had changed, and the printed visual was one of the sources of reference before the construction of the lighthouse.



**Figure 5** Perda Branca. [27]

Other than professional artists, there were also travellers who visited Malaya like Isabella Bird (1831-1904). Throughout her journey in Asia, she had managed to write extensively, captured a lot of pictures, and recorded numerous aspects of nature [14]. Visuals from her travels were published in a book entitled *The Golden Chersonese* in 1880, (Figure 6)



**Figure 6** The Author First Ride in Perak. [28]

Bird's travel in Malaya was packed with new information about the previously uncharted territories for her such as Malacca, Penang, and Singapore. Details of her five-week exploration were recorded and delivered to her sisters through letters [15]. She also sketched her own visuals throughout the journey.

Scientists as well as botanists played their own roles in conducting research in Malaya. Other than collecting specimens, they made drawings of the local environment. One of the most prominent figures who went on an expedition in the Malay Archipelago was Alfred Russel Wallace.

Wallace was a humanist, naturalist, geographer as well as a social critic who was well-known for his revolutionary views in science, and the spirituals [16]. In 1854, he had travelled from one place to another by staying at European traders' houses and offices. He also stayed with the locals and built temporary houses when necessary [17]. Wallace carried out research about insects and birds of which results he gathered and sent to London. (Figure 7) Some of the places that he had been to various locations in Singapore, Malacca, and Sarawak. In addition, he had sketched, taken pictures and later paid print artists to print his sketches in London [17]. One of his precious research items which was taken to England was the Bird of Paradise. News about the exotic species of bird was reported and its visual printed and published by *The Illustrated London News* in 1862.



**Figure 7** Birds of Paradise in the Zoological Society's Carens, Hegent's Park, 1862. [29]

To add, military officers and their family members were also part of the efforts in recording visuals in Malaya. Thomas Prinsep, for instance, served as the captain of engineering department had visited Penang between 1824 and 1826 [18]. Other government staff of different positions also contributed their artistic talent to the cause like James Wathen, who travelled from India to China and visited Penang in 1811 [19]. Similarly, John Turnbull Thomson (1821-1884) who was a British surveyor, did not want to miss the opportunity to record various visuals from Malaya as illustrated in Figure 8. [20].



**Figure 8**Horsburgh Lighthouse. [30]

John Turnbull Thomson who was tasked to document landscape, new areas, culture as well as the wealth of local natural resources. From these tasks, Thomson had produced notes and paintings. Some of these visuals became his personal collections and others were for the public viewing. One of the visuals he produced and printed was created when he was assigned to design a lighthouse at Pulau Batu Putih, Singapore. Thomson worked on his painting before and after the building known as Hosburgh lighthouse was constructed and completed.



**Figure 9**Ex-Sultan Abdullah and Chiefs of Perak. [31]

Military officers who were given the task as artists, especially for newspaper such as *The Illustrated London News*, attended trainings to draw and paint at Royal Military Academy training camp [2]. When the technology of photography and camera were introduced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, photography artists brought pictures back to Europe to be printed. This technology made it easy for a group of visuals to be printed and published in books, magazines, and newspapers. For instance, an incident which saw the use of photo technique was the assassination of J.W.W. Birch. As they hunted for Dato' Maharajalela in 1875, the military officers involved recorded as many photos as possible. McNair was sent to Perak in 1876 after JWW Birch was murdered. He recorded a lot of visuals with the help of

photography. His efforts to record visuals of Perak royal families, the elites, and important places were crucial to historical visual records. All of these visuals were published in his book entitled *Perak and the Malays*, 1878 by using Photogravure technique (Figure 9).

In addition, Christian missionaries also played their roles when visiting Singapore, Malacca, and Sarawak. Henriette McDougall, (1817-1886) for example, recorded visuals while stopping in Singapore before continuing her journey to Sarawak. [21]. Many artists had contributed sketches, drawings, paintings, and photographs to be printed for the public to see and some of them came without names. Then, it was considered as unnecessary to put a name to prints for newspapers and magazines. Only visuals produced for fine art printing and professional books carried complete information about the printmaker.

There were also amateur artists among the public such as family members of the military officers who had to serve for a long period of time at a certain post. This enables them to produce more sketches and paintings based on the theme of the location that they were attached to [2]. Since many of them had background in painting from trainings in art, they contributed their talents through by paintings. They realized that the opportunity of living in a foreign land was invaluable. Hence, as token of memories, they used the opportunity to paint as much as possible for private collection of illustrations and some of the collection was sent to England to their relatives.

Nasbahry Couto stated that the artists' activities like in Indonesia, the Dutch had painted landscapes or local environment which contributed to visual documentation [22]. Even though the paintings had characteristics of romanticism, the elements of documentary could still be found in them through the detailed presentation of the scenes with flora and fauna as well as the buildings which they could see.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The contribution of artists in producing visual records and disseminating them via print technology to the public in Europe and the colonies, was crucial. These prints were evidence and historical materials for the countries involved especially those in Malaya. Today, photography has taken over the artist's task in recording local visual. Creating visuals from sketches, drawings and paintings in this era means that one creates artwork in the form of fine art. Such visuals are prestigious and sought after by wealthy individuals. In contrast, at the peak of the artists' activities which was from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 19<sup>th</sup> century, many important visuals were kept at libraries, archives and galleries as collections of drawings and prints from

professional and amateur artists who painted or recorded local visuals at their respective locations. These visuals could be the subjects of research based on the era in which they were printed. Print visuals could be used as reference materials for research in the field of history, archaeology, anthropology, sculpture, painting as well as architecture. Collection of paintings, prints, manuscripts, and other formal resources which are kept at the library and archives such as British East India Company are priceless even though in the beginning, they functioned as one of the visual communication tools.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

AT came out with the idea of study, analysed the data and wrote the paper. ZMZ helped revise the manuscript, NANMA, NED, FHAW & SASAB helped provided information; and AMN provided intellectual support. All authors contributed to manuscript revisions and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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