One of the most significant developments in the history of modern art in Southeast Asia occurred during the post-World War II period. The pre-dominance of “academic Realism” was challenged as the region went through seismic socio-political changes. This laid the foundations for the emergence of genres like Social Realism and Socialist Realism. What were the differences between these Realisms? And how do we even begin to understand the development of these different genres in relation to the history of art in Southeast Asia?

Realism and its Tendencies in Southeast Asia

I have studied, apart from the preconceived system and without biases, the art of the ancients and the moderns. I have no more wished to imitate the one than to copy the other, nor was it my intention, moreover, to attain the useless goal of “art for art’s sake.” No! I simply wanted to draw forth from a complete knowledge of tradition the reasoned and independent understanding of my own individuality.1

As the noted art historian Alice Guillermo observed, “[T]he term realism is largely associated with the School of Courbet of the 1850s, which consciously employed the term to describe its art.”2 Gustave Courbet, a French painter from the 19th century has often been credited for producing the first “Realist Manifesto.” The declaration at the beginning of this section is from the catalogue of his solo exhibition in 1855; it was highly controversial and sparked polemical debates about the definition of the term, from the autonomy of art to the social function of art. More importantly, Courbet’s exhibition, which was titled Realism – Gustave Courbet, came about after his painting The Painter’s Studio was rejected from participation in the 1855 World’s Fair. In response to that, he organised his own pavilion of paintings, near the official location of the fair which inevitably invited a significant amount of criticism from the salon circles.3

While Realism in Europe can be seen as developing in opposition to the prevailing conservatism of the academies or salons, it had a somewhat different development in Southeast Asia. Realism in this region has been closely tied to either the educational institutions
that were established at the turn of the 20th century or certain movements that saw like-minded artists produce art with similar realist tendencies — though perhaps not the same motivations. Examples of the former include what was known as the “Amorsolo School” which was based in the University of the Philippines, and examples of the latter include the Department of Fine Arts, established by the royal court of the Kingdom of Siam (modern-day Kingdom of Thailand).

Dominating the Philippines art scene from the 1930s, artists associated with the “Amorsolo School” had artistic impulses similar to those of Fernando Amorsolo. Guillermo gives us a sense of these impulses when she observes: “He idealised the figures of the peasant folk into stalwart youths and ever-smiling maidens bearing overflowing baskets, cornucopias of tropical abundance.” One will be able to see these elements in Marketplace during the Occupation. Bathed in the brown and golden hues of sunlight, people are seen going about doing their grocery shopping (fig. 1). If not for the title of the painting, we would have read the painting as any other idyllic depiction of the rural located within the region.

The Department of Fine Arts in Siam was established during the reign of King Vajiravudh who, despite having been exposed to a “modern education” in England, was concerned about the state of Siamese arts and crafts at the turn of the 20th century: the Siamese people seemed to him to be merely “aping” European culture and holding European aesthetics in high regard at the expense of Siam’s own rich cultural legacies. As such he pushed for the establishment of the Department of Fine Arts and the Arts and Crafts School in 1912 and 1913 respectively.

One can already see the ways realism had developed in Southeast Asia from these two examples, and the ways it may have diverged from Courbet’s. This essay will further show how on the socio-political context of each country within the region inflected the adoption, adaptation and evolution of realism in multifarious ways.

Like the realists of the “Amorsolo School,” a similar trend had also emerged in Indonesia, which until 1945 was under Dutch administration and called the Dutch East Indies, known as the Mooi Indie (Beautiful Indies) genre. The term was coined in criticism by S. Sudjojono who is commonly known as the “Father of Modern Painting” in Indonesia. Chastising the prevalent painting trend at that time, which he deemed too picturesque and which almost always included the “trimurthi” of mountains, coconut trees and rice fields,” his comments were mostly aimed at the Indonesia-based European artists and local painters like Basoeki Abdullah.

While there was no similar backlash in Malaya (now Singapore and Malaysia), a picturesque strand of realism can also be observed, especially when looking at art developments before the war. The scene included
figures like Abdullah Ariff and Yong Mun Sen, the former more known for his watercolour and the latter, his oil paintings. One of the factors contributing to this tendency could be attributed, according to art historian and artist Redza Piyadasa, to the influence of colonisation by the British of the region:

The country was then under the rule of the British and in the Straits Settlements, at least, exposure to English values and taste was quite pronounced. The introduction of English language schools founded upon Victorian models must in no small way account for subsequent romantic tendencies manifesting themselves amongst Malayans.7

Looking at Abdullah Ariff’s Tin Mining, our attention is directed to the beauty of the vast landscape with the surrounding hills framing the composition (fig. 2). However, two miners in the foreground hint at the arrival of industry and capitalism at the expense of the natural environment.8

These “romantic tendencies” mentioned by Piyadasa contributed to a significant corpus of works representing the beauty of Malaya. Apart from the natural landscape, these paintings also depicted the idyllic rural life in Malaya when it was on the cusp of Merdeka – or Independence – in the 1950s. Subsequently the search for a Malayan identity amidst the optimism of the era saw many works similar to Mohamed Sallehudin’s Malay House in which one observes a harmonious setting, with the house forming the anchor of the composition (fig. 3). A similar sense of harmony symbolised by the idyllic rural setting and kampung houses can also be observed in the works by artists like Lai Foong Moi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Suri Mohyani, amongst others. Hence, one might say that the realist tendencies in Malaya and the Philippines were manifestations of artistic identity aligned with an emerging national identity. The main difference would be that the Philippines went through that development earlier than Malaya, especially with the rise of artists like Victorio Edades in the 1930s and the “Thirteen Moderns” – which included Galo B. Ocampo and Carlos Francisco (Botong) (fig. 4) – a group of modern artists who challenged the pre-dominance enjoyed by artists from the “Amorsolo School.”9

As for Indonesian artists, the manifestation of their artistic identity became more pronounced after Sukarno (the first president) announced her independence upon the end of the Japanese Occupation in 1945 and Indonesia began a protracted war for independence against the returning Dutch forces. Cultural groups – especially literary and visual art movements – became actively involved in the revolutionary war. Artistic tendencies that were seen as legacies of their formal colonial oppressors were deemed un-Indonesian and not suited for depicting the reality of their new socio-political

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1 Fernando Cueto Amorsolo (b. 1892, Philippines; d. 1972, Philippines) Marketplace during the Occupation 1942 Oil on canvas 57 x 82 cm
2 Abdullah Ariff (b. 1904, Malaysia; d. 1960, Malaysia) Tin Mining 1960 Watercolour on paper 55.1 x 37.7 cm
3 Mohamed Sallehudin Malay House, Malacca c.1960 Oil on canvas 59.0 x 79.6 cm
environment. As one of the co-founders of PERSAGI in 1938, Sudjojono’s critique of the Mooi Indie painters encouraged a significant number of Indonesian artists to embody the spirit of jiwa ketok (visible soul) and do away with the aforementioned formulaic “trimurthi,” which was considered as something that perpetuated colonial stereotypes of Indonesia and that pandered to the tourist market.

Social Realism: Everyday Realities

To begin to grasp Sudjojono’s jiwa ketok philosophy, one has to understand that it was more of an internalised spirit rather than an adherence to a particular artistic style vis-à-vis the Realist movement in Europe: “If an artist creates a work of art, then in actuality the piece is none other than the artist’s visible soul. Art is jiwa ketok. Hence art is the soul.”

Considered in conjunction with his opposition to the exoticism of the Mooi Indies artists, it is clear that Sudjojono’s realism, during the immediate post-war period, was inclined towards what is commonly known as Social Realism. Sanento Yuliman, the late Indonesian art historian and critic, observed four painting trends in Indonesia, of which Sudjojono was observed to have incorporated the first two strands. An example of this duality is Perusing a Poster, where one senses an uneasiness amongst the people depicted (fig. 5). Painted around five years after Indonesia’s War of Independence with the Dutch forces, it was seen to symbolise the continuing search for Indonesia’s identity as she grappled with her new-found freedom and competing political ideologies. These political tensions were also memorably depicted in Harijadi Sumadidjaja’s Pemilu which was produced around the same time – it captures the frenzy of political campaigns, with flags of various parties filling up the background of the canvas (fig. 6).

The post-war years proved to be a politically challenging period for most parts of Southeast Asia. While Indonesia was involved in the independence war with the returning Dutch forces, Malaya and the Philippines were re-building their countries after the devastation of the Japanese occupation. Vietnam was involved in both the independence and reunification wars from 1946 to 1975. In a period when the various countries were either fighting for their independence or seeking to articulate their own cultural or artistic identities, it was not surprising that art developments were more “art for society” rather than “art for art’s sake.” Chua Mia Tee’s Epic Poem of Malaya is a work that reflects the former tendency. In his survey of artistic developments in post-war Malaya, Piyadasa notes:

The group called themselves the “Realists,” and were led by a number of younger teachers at the academy
who were employed either on a full-time or a part-time basis. Among these teachers who were Lim Yew Kuan, Chua Mia Tee, Lee Boon Wang and Tan Tee Chie. These four teachers, who were responsible for emphasising a more socially oriented approach toward creativity, based on the depiction of the harsh realities of everyday life devoid of any romantic or sentimental implications. These “Realists” seem to have rejected the kind of works produced by the older teachers, and concentrated in the production of oils and woodcuts which projected images that were clearly geared toward a didactic objective.

The group that Piyadasa referred to was known as the Equator Art Society. Most of its members, like Chua Mia Tee, were graduates of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). In *Epic Poem of Malaya* a man, possibly a teacher or a student leader, is seen rallying his students/peers, clasp[ing] a red book, while the rest sit in rapt attention (fig. 7). In promoting independence from the British and merger with the Federation of Malaya, artists from the Equator Art Society were actively articulating a “new culture of Malaya” through their depiction of the social realities that were affecting the fledgling state of Singapore. These efforts towards a “new Malaya” also had political overtones as mentioned by curator Seng Yu Jin in an exhibition of the society’s works in 2007: “[T]he creation of [a] Malaya which include[d] Singapore and the North Borneo territories [Sarawak and Sabah] would form a supranational state strong enough to defeat the communists militarily while providing a stable environment for economic prosperity.”

In the catalogue for the abovementioned exhibition, Seng also sought to define the difference between “Social Realism” and “Socialist Realism”:

Social Realism is distinguished [from] Socialist Realism in that the latter is based on Soviet doctrine institutionalised by Stalin using the academic techniques of realism to achieve the goals of communism. Social Realism is a much broader movement to represent the lives of the working class to elicit social changes and social justice.

Hence, Socialist Realism tends to be an official policy produced by an existing state, which serves to articulate a vision of the ideal society under Communism, while Social Realism tends to have more of a critical orientation towards existing conditions, and a greater stylistic plurality. We recall a speech by

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Andrei Zhdanov, founder of the Soviet Writers’ Union, an articulation of Socialist Realism doctrine at the Soviet Writers’ Congress of 1934:

Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you? In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as “objective reality,” but to depict reality in its revolutionary development. In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical correctness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in belles lettres and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism.17

Like Indonesia and the Dutch, Vietnam was also involved in an independence war with the returning French forces upon the end of the Japanese Occupation. The First Indochina War lasted from 1946 to 1954; the unexpected French defeat led to Vietnam being temporarily split into North Vietnam and South Vietnam, the former led by Ho Chi Minh and the Communists, and the latter supported by the Americans.18 This war later led to the globally unpopular Second Indochina War which lasted till 1975.19 Due to the North-South division of Vietnam and the successive independence and reunification wars, it is not surprising that the art that developed has been mostly connected to either the social struggles or political propaganda — an anomaly compared to art in the rest of Southeast Asia. As recently as 2005 eminent art historian Masahiro Ushiroshoji observed that “[t]he current scholarship on modern art history (in Vietnam) takes after a Hanoi-oriented historical overview. Because of this, the art history of South Vietnam during the period of division between north and south is yet to be analysed thoroughly.”20

Communist North Vietnam had links with other socialist countries like Soviet Russia. Thus, Socialist Realism was adopted as the preferred style to connect to the masses and also boost the morale of the people. Art critic Bui Nhu Huong observes:

Socialist Realism at the time implied a simple, easy popular realistic style harmoniously combined with a revolutionary content[,] which means: to draw pictures of the cheerful, enthusiastic people engaged in socialist construction and the Resistance war for national independence; to create works extolling the love and confidence in the Party and Uncle Ho (Chi Minh) or praising collective optimism, patriotism and the love of socialism.21
Nguyen Duc Nung’s *Dawn on a Farm* is an example of a Socialist Realist work. With a farmer dominating the composition, he is portrayed as a muscular and heroic figure looking into the horizon where the sun’s golden rays signal a bright and promising future (fig. 8). This figure of the heroic farmer, the worker or the soldier permeates the socialist realist works of artists in North Vietnam where the Communist government was imagining a reunified Vietnam whose foundation was built upon the toil and efforts of the working class.

**Realisms in Southeast Asia**

Despite the various definitions of realism, we have to be mindful that these artists and their works do not always fit neatly into such categories. They are, at best, provisional, in the constantly-evolving understanding of artistic expressions in Southeast Asia. In the exhibition catalogue for *The 4th Asian Art Show Fukuoka* in 1994, Ushiroschi mentioned that artists from this region have always been grappling with the understanding of realism both from Western and non-Western frameworks: “While pursuing the often contradictory goal of establishing a non-West identity while learning from the West itself, Asian artists until the 1980s relied on indigenous Asian traditions as a source of identity or unique expression.”

This is true if one regards Sudjojono’s *jiwa ketok* philosophy as an internalised spirit rather than an artistic style in the strictest sense. His style changed as his socio-political outlook evolved over the years, inviting criticisms from art commentators. Abdullah Ariff’s approach was similarly dynamic. Apart from his usual renditions of what we might call the “beautiful Malay” landscape, he also produced highly nationalistic anti-colonial cartoon illustrations during the Second World War.

Finally, another important aspect to keep in mind is the specific time period under consideration. This is because the pace of political development in the various Southeast Asian countries differed, depending on the colonial policies of the Dutch, French, British and Americans. For example, Social Realist works or “protest art” was only in full swing in the late 1960s to early 1970s in the Philippines. This is in contrast both to Singapore, which had the Equator Art Society – active from 1956 to 1972 – and to Indonesia, where Sudjojono and Hendra Gunawan were producing pro-revolution works as early as the late 1940s. Fundamentally, it is important to understand that “Realism” or “Realistic” tendencies in Southeast Asia developed on a trajectory different from Courbet’s Realism. Hence, in mapping the evolution of such tendencies, many detours are inevitable since individual artworks need to be understood within their own socio-political contexts.


Ibid., 26, note 2.


American support for South Vietnam coincided with their deteriorating relationship with the Communist states, China and the Soviet Union. Perceiving that the threat of Communism loomed over territories like Indonesia and British Malaya, the Americans were keen to stop the “Communist tidal wave” in Vietnam. They thus gave both military and economic support to South Vietnam.


