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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Internationalising Arts, Gaining Visibility: Internationalisation of the National Art Gallery through the Promulgation of the Malayan Identity and Commonwealth Ideals

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Abstract

The early history of the Malaysian National Art Gallery has been thoroughly elucidated through many different sources but its role as promoter of Malaysia's art in the first ten years of its early formation have never been critically examined. This paper will trace the transnational relationship of the National Art Gallery through its exhibitions co-organised with the Commonwealth Institute in London within the larger context of the post-World War II period and the British decolonisation in Malaya. This paper will situate and contextualise its research on Malaya's early exhibition history on multiculturalism and the Malayan identity framework, and later draw the link and connection between the Commonwealth Institute and the context of its establishment in Britain and the establishment of the National Art Gallery in Malaya. Subsequently, this paper will trace and demonstrate the importance of these early exhibitions to be understood in the larger context of (a) the need to exert international visibility during the period of Confrontation and (b) the exhibition as a platform that mooted the Malayan identity that aligns with the core values and principles of the Commonwealth. As such, this paper demonstrates that the transnational relations between the National Art Gallery and the Commonwealth Institute in the realm of Malaysia's exhibition history must be analysed in tandem with the issues that are faced by a new British Commonwealth country, i.e., Malaysia during the immediate post-war period.

Keywords: National Art Gallery Malaysia; Commonwealth Institute; Malayan Identity; multiculturalism

Introduction

The establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG) two years after Malaya's independence suggests the importance of this national institution in the context of post-independence Malaya. The NAG was officially opened by Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, on 27 August 1958.

The late author, playwright, theatre director and critic Krishen Jit (1994), writing about the need to examine the institutional history of the National Art Gallery, asserted,

> "… The modernist impulse in Malaysian painting and sculpture has a pedigree much older than that signalled by the launching of the Gallery in 1958. Even so, it could be argued that the history of the "hot centre" of modern Malaysian art very neatly corresponds with the history of the gallery. *Indeed, the opening of the Gallery was a self-conscious declaration that the notion of the modern in the visual arts had arisen in the national consciousness*. This view is enforced by the fact that many of the seminal achievements legitimizing modern Malaysian art, both at home and abroad, have occurred mainly during the lifetime of the Gallery." (5, my emphasis)

In regards to institutional history, Jit (1994) further explained that,

> "… The impact of the National Art Gallery can be dramatically justified by the simple fact that a significant and articulate portion of the history of modern Malaysian art can be recovered by

investigating the origins and development of that institution. In other words, *the records and documentation created and deposited by the Gallery are indispensable in the construction of the history of modern art in Malaysia*. However, an institutional approach to art history can expose serious gaps in the narrative." (10, my emphasis)

An examination of the institution and exhibition history of the NAG would reveal that in the first 20 years of its existence, the NAG organised a significant number of international art exhibitions, including the Picasso Exhibition (1962), the Australian Art Exhibition (1963), New Zealand: Contemporary Paintings and Ceramics (1964), Exhibition to Celebrate Picasso's 85th Birthday (1966), Rembrandt: Master of Light (1968), Rodin and his Contemporaries (1969), France–Contemporary Graphics (1970), the Picasso Graphic Art Exhibition (1974) and Contemporary French Paintings (1975). Although most of these exhibitions were based on the reproduction of these artworks, it can be argued that they allowed knowledge of art to permute the local art scene in Kuala Lumpur.

These exhibitions were usually organised through the collaboration of various high commissioners, cultural ministries, foundations and even national councils, indirectly reflecting Krishen Jit's (1994) observation that "the notion of the modern in the visual arts had arisen in the national consciousness" (5). As such, the NAG's exhibitions of Malaysian arts were interspersed with international exhibitions, denoting Malaysia's international standing.

Linking to the early history of Malaysia, this paper seeks to expand the limited investigation and discussion of Malaysia's modern art and exhibition histories, especially in the context of Commonwealth-supported exhibition histories. Focusing on the post-war period, this paper will trace the transnational activities of the NAG through its exhibitions co-organised with the Commonwealth Institute in London. These transnational relationships, as this paper will demonstrate, were not mere international exhibitions, but rather can be read within the larger context of (a) the need to exert international visibility during the period of Confrontation and (b) the exhibition as a platform that mooted a Malayan identity that aligns with the core values and principles of the Commonwealth. By reading through these connections between the Commonwealth Institute, the context of its establishment in Britain and the establishment of the National Art Gallery in Malaya within the larger context of transnational postcolonial relations, I will argue that the internationalisation of these exhibitions was a soft-power play by Malaysia as a new member of the Commonwealth.

To provide a deeper background, the next section will discuss this research within Malaya's early exhibition history. This will be followed by an examination of the history of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Institute and the establishment of the NAG. Subsequently, this paper will delve into the multifaceted early exhibition history of Commonwealth-supported art exhibitions in regards to early Malaysia-UK relations within the context of postcolonial relations. Accordingly, the exhibition itself can be observed as a platform that mooted the Malayan identity, which is in alignment with Commonwealth ideals of multiculturalism.

Malaya's Post-War Art Scene: Multiculturalism and Malayan Identity

There is limited literature on modern art in Malaysia. For example, Ong and Ahmad (2015) have examined hybridity in the works of selected Malayan artists. Other art historical investigation on the works of the first half of the twenty-first century include the examination of alternative modernities (Chuah *et al.* 2011), cosmopolitan identity (Abdullah 2018, 2019a), the Nanyang identity (Low 2012) and even the lack of Malaysian identity (Abdullah 2010). However, none of these studies deal with exhibitions or artists' networks.

This lack of research is unsurprising: exhibition history as a subset of art history in Southeast Asia is a relatively new area of study. In Southeast Asia, the history of exhibitions has contributed to national art history and even some of the regional imaginings that can be seen in exhibitions, workshops and publications by the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (Scott *et al.* 2018). However, it is only in the last twenty years that there have been investigations and studies of exhibition history, as well as the diverse networks and infrastructures that are sustaining contemporary Southeast Asia. The exhibition history of Malaysian art is still an under-researched area. Thus, this paper will elucidate and examine the early exhibitions organised by the NAG and the Commonwealth Institute to provide insight into the objective, motivation and underlying context that allowed for the internationalisation of the National Art Gallery. This study will be based on the social history of art history or the 'new art history' approach.

In addressing British colonial rule in Malaya, Abdul Rahman Embong (2002) noted that the changes brought about by the British resulted in the change of Malaya's political system, specifically, an overhaul or a significant economic transformation from a feudal agricultural and trading economy to a colonial dual economy. These economic changes resulted in an abrupt shift of Malaya's demography due to the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants to meet the labour demands of the colonial economy. On top of that, the Malayan Civil Service was also introduced to replace the feudal administrative framework and ensure the effective functioning of the colonial political entity and economy in the Federated Malay States. In the Unfederated Malay States, the colonial administrative structure had operated in parallel with the courts of Malay rulers. Academically, the British had introduced a common education system. Ironically, only an English education provided opportunities for children of the various ethnic groups to learn together. Of course, this was only an option for the children of the rich or those who received state financial assistance. Moreover, Embong (2002) noted that English education mostly taught the students from the perspective of Western civilisation through the introduction of a Western lifestyle, philosophy, logic, science and even art (46–47).

The transitional period spanning from the dissolution of British colonialism and the establishment of Singapore and Malaya provided unique conditions for the development of local art and local art education (Low 2015: 463). Low (2015) highlighted that the "widening public sphere allowed for the organisation of an informal institutional base with the setting up of new art societies, which in turn spurred the growth of exhibition platforms" (465). Selected students were even sent overseas to study art in order to learn how to contribute and manage this newly established cultural infrastructure (Low 2015: 463, 464, 484). During the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of a common 'Malayan' culture and identity were being constructed. However, it must be noted that the upholding of national ideals during the 1950s and 60s in Malaya had been limited to the readings of the artworks that were produced, the establishment of art societies, art councils and the NAG, and various other national projects (Piyadasa 1994: 46).

This paper attempts to expand the understanding and analysis of art's actual social functions by discussing these exhibitions within the context of a Malayan identity that draws from the Commonwealth ideals of multiculturalism. In the post-war period, Gerald Templer, the High Commissioner of Malaya, had envisioned a cultural renaissance under British patronage in his effort to win the hearts and minds of the people during the Malayan Emergency. Indeed, Harper (1999) concluded that this was the time when the 'Malayan ideal' was projected, especially abroad (276). The espoused Malayan identity included elements of the North East, India and the West, promoting the idea of learning from each other and merging or fusing these elements into a 'Malayan' identity in art, music, architecture and fashion.

The post-war movement within the British Empire and Commonwealth countries produced a degree of commonality across member states and has resulted in various trajectories of multiculturalism (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019: 3). Ashcroft and Bevir (2019) have pointed out that "the Commonwealth provides a perspective from which to view both the nation-states and the cross-vantage points central to multiculturalism. It also facilitates comparison across time and geographic locale, bridging the relevant short, medium, and national movement central to multiculturalism" (7). They further argue,

> "Given the direct connection of multiculturalism to imperialism, however, it cannot be understood purely as a domestic phenomenon. The intra- and international elements of multiculturalism are ineradicable, and thoughtful analysis requires an awareness of both. The Commonwealth foregrounds this dualism, forming a common context within which states have negotiated multiculturalism, and bringing about demographic, political, and cultural (including philosophical) connections between member countries." (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019: 7)

As such, the exhibitions and exhibition making that will be discussed here are part of these transnational movements and networks of ideas that form or contribute to the intra- and international elements of multiculturalism. Moreover, the exhibitions that will be discussed here can be seen as a site facilitating transnational connections. Thus, this exhibition attempted to project the image of Malaya as belonging to all citizens, not through the accentuation of an integrated society, but by showing a pluralistic and

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multicultural Malaya aligned with the positive and celebratory Commonwealth multiculturalism agenda that was pertinent even when read in the context of the socio-political situation in Southeast Asia, especially in regards to the period of Konfrontasi or confrontation with Indonesia.

The National Art Gallery and Malaysia-Commonwealth Relations

The transnational postcolonial relations of Britain and London with Malaya/Malaysia were almost typical in the context of post-independence Malaya. Newly independent nation states once colonised by the British often looked to England as their 'mother country'. As such, it was unsurprising that Malaysia's relationship with England in the first 20 years post-independence was positive. The pro-British *Perikatan* or Alliance resulted in more positive and pragmatic relations between Kuala Lumpur and London. Different relationship dynamics could have transpired if the more aggressive Independence of Malaya Party and later Parti Negara had shaped Malaya's path to independence (see Fernando 2009; Vasil 1971).[1]

The root of the Commonwealth goes back to the British Empire when some countries were ruled directly or indirectly by Britain. In the early twentieth century, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa formed the British Commonwealth of Nations, and these former British dominions continued to meet after World War I through the Imperial Conference. After World War II, all the other British colonies (except Burma and Aden) chose to join the Commonwealth, and these conferences became the platform for informal contacts, reference points and discussions amongst the Commonwealth members (Baral 1981: 14–15).

In regards to Malaysia–Commonwealth relations, Winks (1964) observes that Malaysia's condition could be seen as parallel to the Commonwealth due to its plural societies, thus enabling Malaysia to respond sympathetically to the multi-racial ideals espoused through the Commonwealth (379–380). Since Malaysia was wealthier economically than other Afro-Asian members of the Commonwealth (except for Singapore), Malaysia was considered less likely to resent the influence of 'old' Commonwealth members.

This positive relationship was also solidified by Malaysia's participation in various exhibitions organised by the Commonwealth Institute such as Commonwealth Arts Today 1962, the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow in 1965, the Malaysian Art exhibition in 1966 and the exhibition of Malaysian Art 1965–1978 (Abdullah 2019b). The immediate international undertakings of the National Art Gallery can be traced to the history of its establishment. Among the people involved with the formation of the NAG were Frank Sullivan, the Press Secretary to the Malaysian Prime Minister, and Mubin Sheppard, the Irish-born Malaysian academician and historian. Others included the architect, Kington Loo; the former vice chancellor of University Malaya, Ungku Abdul Aziz; the first female lawyer in independent Malaya, P.G. Lim; and the British art educator Peter Harris. These figures served as the first Board of Trustees of the Federation Arts Council, whose early experiences were documented by Mubin Sheppard (1979: 221–222). Such figures brought with them not only their own rapport and support, but most importantly, their personal networks, which enabled the NAG to work at an international level even though it was a new establishment at that time. One of the earliest series of international exhibitions organised by the NAG abroad was at the Commonwealth Institute in London.

The Commonwealth Institute, initially established as the Imperial Institute in 1888, moved to its own building on Kensington High Street in 1962. The new building consisted of two exhibition spaces—exhibitions of the Commonwealth nations, designed to inform the public about "how the rest of the Commonwealth lives," and an art gallery. The Commemorative Handbook for the opening stated that the Institute's purpose was "to foster the interests of the Commonwealth by information and education services designed to promote among all its people a wider knowledge of one another and a greater understanding of the Commonwealth itself" (Commonwealth Institute 1962: 43).

As the Commonwealth Institute emerged from the Imperial Institute, there was a great deal of scepticism about this new concept of the 'Commonwealth' (Porter 2008: 432). Craggs (2011), for example, highlighted the context in which the Commonwealth Institute was established: the Commonwealth "was always constructed and understood in relation to ideas about the Empire and its endings," so during

[1] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to research by Fernando (2009) and Vasil (1971).

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the 1950s and 60s, "[o]ptimistic stories were articulated against negative ideas about colonial hypocrisy and violence, imperial decline, and racialized stories that focused on the threat of immigration from the 'new' (black) Commonwealth" (249).

Typically, the establishment of the institute has always been articulated as apolitical. Kenneth Bradley (1963b), the Director of the Institute, highlighted that,

> "The importance of the new Institute for the Commonwealth lies in the fact that it represents a co-operative effort by every Commonwealth government, as well as by many other public bodies and firms, to create a physical expression in London of all that is most constructive in the Commonwealth association. The Institute is not concerned with politics or trade relations, nor with propaganda of any kind, but with the human values in which the real strength of the Commonwealth lies." (4)

Indeed, the Commonwealth Handbook published in 1969 states that the purpose of the Institute is to promote the interest of the Commonwealth countries through information and education (Commonwealth Institute1969: 6–7). As such, the Institute was to become a cultural centre that communicated the Commonwealth nations' cultural heritages while acknowledging and celebrating these nations' differences by way of general exhibitions and programs by the education centre. The new galleries at the Institute became great attractions for the London public, and the fine art gallery also began to organise international shows by Commonwealth artists, which were often the artists' first international exhibitions (Porter 2008: 432–434). In alignment with the ideal of the Commonwealth Institute itself, the policy of the art gallery and Director Kenneth Bradley "was to give promising, as well as better known, artists, in other parts of the Commonwealth opportunities for showing their work in England at a minimum cost to themselves, and to make the Institute gallery the natural home for Commonwealth art in London" (Bradley 1963a: 7).

Nevertheless, the ostensibly benevolent intention in the establishment of the Institute can and should be problematised. Ruth Craggs (2011), for example, highlights that the Commonwealth served as an "anaesthetizing rhetoric" for a country attempting to come to terms with losing its role in the world (249). She argues that the Institute could be seen as trying to reposition the legacies of the Empire positively because this institution was established when London was facing various stories of its own colonial hypocrisy and violence, its declining imperial influence, and the threat of immigration, especially from the New Commonwealth.

This paper, however, would like to further problematise and delve into the deeper complexity of transnational art exchanges and postcolonial relations. Thus, this research will argue that the National Art Gallery and its transnational role represents significant positioning in the pursuit of a national image essential for public diplomacy in the context of the post-war period, Malaya's Independence in 1957 and Malaysia's formation in 1963. Such an argument can be made by unpacking and examining the connections and context of the establishment of the NAG as well as the role it plays in the larger sociopolitical milieu of Malaysia's postcolonial circumstance.

Exhibitions by the Commonwealth Institute

First, I will trace a few international exhibitions by the National Art Gallery. There were at least four international exhibitions organised by the Commonwealth Institute in which Malaysian artists participated that were facilitated and coordinated by the National Art Gallery: Commonwealth Arts Today in 1962, The Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow in 1965, The Malaysian Art Exhibition in 1966 and the Exhibition of Malaysian Art from 1965–1978. These do not include exhibitions for individual Malaysian artists such as two for Chuah Thean Teng and one for Abdul Latiff Mohiddin that the Commonwealth Institute also organised. Except for the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow, these exhibitions were held at the Commonwealth Institute in London.

Commonwealth Art Today, held between 16 September and 2 October 1962, was Malaysia's first exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute. The works in this exhibition were selected by National Galleries, Arts Councils and similar bodies from more than 20 participating Commonwealth countries (Bradley 1963b: 410).

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The exhibition was intended to display the best works that contemporary Commonwealth artists could produce. In fact, the variety of the exhibition materials reflected the racial characteristics and cultural traditions of these Commonwealth countries that in turn defied artistic unity (Newton 1962: 9). For the Malaysia section of the exhibit, there were a total of 180 pictures and 50 sculptures assembled in the 95-ft.-by-44-ft. gallery area. Among the artists whose works were selected were Cheong Lai Tong, Chung Chen Sun, Ho Kai Peng, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jehan Chan, Lu Chon Min, Nik Zainal Abidin, Patrick Ng and Chuah Thean Teng. The Malaysia section of the catalogue was written by Frank Sullivan himself.

Malaysia's initial inclusion in this exhibit was later followed by its participation in the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, which not only focused on the visual arts but also included various other art forms such as music, dance, poetry and literature. The festival was held between 16 September and 2 October 1965 in four major cities—Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff and London. In line with the Commonwealth ideals, the festival's objectives were to build mutual respect and show the cultures of different countries through the exchange of ideas by way of performances, paintings and other artistic output (Hunter 1965: 606).

Like Craggs' position of the establishment of the Commonwealth Institute, the re-reading of the festival highlights several criticisms. Low (2013), for example, noted that the initial working title of the festival was "The Commonwealth At Home", which can be read as the intention to bring together various forms of art planned for this festival and still connected by the legacy of the empire (106–109).

Despite the grand scheme of the festival, Malaysia's participation in the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival was limited to the exhibition of visual arts. According to the Director-General of the Commonwealth Arts Festival, this was because Malaysia was unable to send any other kind of artists or performers due to the violent Confrontation conflict in Malaysia (Hunter 1965: 608). As such, Malaysia's visual arts exhibition was held at the Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery from 18 September to 2 October with an attendance of 39,000 people. After its time in Glasgow, the exhibition moved to London. Re-titled the Malaysian Art Exhibition, it was on display at the Commonwealth Institute from 26 January to 14 March 1966.

The National Art Gallery and the Malaya Arts Council established a Special Joint Committee (SJC) to select works to be sent out as part of this exhibition. In fact, Sullivan's report to the NAG Board of Trustees indicated the significance of this exhibition as "… the debut of Malaysian Art in the Western world, in which the National Art Gallery played the principal organizing role" ("Report of the Board of Trustees" 1966: 4).

The excitement of Malaysia in sending these works abroad can be seen in the efforts taken in the SJC's selection process. The selected artworks were from the National Art Gallery, private collections and even loans from the artists themselves. The SJC viewed works from at least twelve exhibitions in four pre-selection meetings before making their final decisions. In total, 500 paintings and 90 sculptures were viewed, but only 100 paintings and 23 sculptures were selected based on the "aim of giving a truly representative 'picture' of Malaysian art." The financial expenditure for the packing and freight of the exhibition was borne by Malaysia's Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport ("Report of the Board of Trustees" 1966: 4–5).

The 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival is significant in the context of British history as it was organised in the wake of the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 and the 1965 white paper on immigration from the Commonwealth (Hansen 2000: 110). The idea for the festival had already been circulated through leaflets produced in 1957 that proposed a triennial festival of the arts across the Commonwealth tentatively titled "The British Commonwealth at Home" (Low 2013: 98). Low (2013) argues that the new immigration laws were widely seen as racializing immigration, especially from the new Commonwealth. By doing so, Britain denied accountability for her colonial legacy by excluding any migrant who did not have a British (or British-born) parent or grandparent (Low 2013: 106).

The impact of the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival must also be noted. Due to the festival, many contemporary local and national magazine publications were dedicated to Commonwealth literature, including the *New Statesman*, *English*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Magazine* and *Young Commonwealth Poets '65*, as well as the inaugural publication of *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* in 1965. Low (2013) noted that despite the opportunism driving such publications, the festival's staging, significance and content offered useful insights on how Britain imagined and managed its colonial past and legacy (99).

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Despite this criticism, I would argue that the Commonwealth Arts Festival was the impetus of Malaysia's artistic and cultural visibility in the international realm. Indeed, this exhibition was even highlighted and reported by critics in newspapers such as *The Scotsman*, *The Glasgow Herald* and the *New York Herald Tribune* (Jamal 1988). Even more interestingly, what was initially participation in two exhibitions—the first in Glasgow as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival and the later Malaysian Art Exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute itself—soon became an international two-year touring exhibition administered by Frank Sullivan, who coordinated the exhibition's journey from the UK to the Republic of Ireland, France, Germany and Italy. During this time, these works also received invitations from other places made primarily through various diplomatic missions.[2] As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed to bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, Donald Bowen, the curator of the Commonwealth Institute, also played an essential role in introducing the artists of the Commonwealth to the London public.

Over the course of these exhibitions, the works were periodically accompanied by a few artists for logistical arrangements. Among these were Anthony Lau, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Lee Joo For, Yeoh Jin Leng, Mohd Hoessein Enas and Cheong Laitong. Although Sullivan later planned to bring the exhibition through North America and the Far East, this did not happen due to unsatisfactory tour arrangements in both regions (Manton 2008: 57–60). The return of the collection to Malaysia was welcomed in another exhibition entitled, "Welcome Home Exhibition of Malaysian Art" from 21 July to 6 August 1967, two years after these collections had gone abroad.

The internationalisation of the National Art Gallery in the very early years of independence can be examined in the larger context of Malaysia's need to exert an international visibility during the post-war period, which was crucial not only because of Malaysia's formation as an independent nation but also due to the Confrontation, a violent conflict that lasted from 1963 to 1966 and stemmed from Indonesia's opposition to the creation of Malaysia. In this context, the exhibition itself became a platform that mooted a Malayan identity that aligned with the Commonwealth ideals.

Internationalisation as a Post-War Soft Power Agenda

According to Nye (2004), soft power rests in the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others to align with its own interests through attraction rather than coercion. Nye identifies three potential sources of soft power in international relations: (a) culture, (b) political ideals and (c) foreign policies. In the context of Asia, the exertion of soft power has persisted since the post-war period: the United States invested heavily in promoting liberal democratic values in Japan after World War II; the Soviet Union used public diplomacy to promote Communism; and India and Indonesia used public diplomacy and propaganda to pursue anticolonial agendas to spread ideas intended to undermine European influence. Moreover, the British, French and Dutch all sought to retain influence over their former colonies by nurturing cultural and educational exchanges using a soft power agenda through public diplomacy in Asia during the Cold War (Hall and Smith 2013: 2–3).

As explored in the previous section, the National Art Gallery and the Commonwealth Institute exhibitions can be investigated within the larger context of Commonwealth relations. Indeed, the internationalisation of these exhibitions can be understood as an attempted soft-power play by Malaysia. Culture and the arts, as Nye (2004) pointed out, are a form of potential soft power. As this section will argue, participation and investments in these exhibitions can be read as Malaysia's attempt at international visibility while playing its role as a Commonwealth member. Such a reading is possible from an examination of the close relationship between Tunku Abdul Rahman and Frank Sullivan in addition to an investigation of Malaysia's participation in Commonwealth Arts Today in 1962, the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow in 1965 and the Malaysian Art Exhibition in 1966 during the period of Konfrontasi (1963–1966).

[2]The exhibition later traveled to these locations: The Building Center, Dublin, from 22 November to 17 December 1965; Cologne, Berlin and Hamburg, Germany, in 1966; the Museum of Art & Industry, St Etienne, Italy, from 1 February to 5 March 1967; Musée Galliera, Paris, France, from 21 March to 24 April 1967.

The NAG's connection to Malaysia's participation in the exhibitions by the Commonwealth Institute is apparent from the fact that Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister, played a large role in the establishment of the NAG. This role and the persistence of the Anglo-Malayan relationship that the Anglophile Tunku Abdul Rahman maintained is especially pertinent when considering Malaysia's political situation within the context of the 1963–1966 period of the Confrontation with Indonesia, when Tunku had to enlist Commonwealth support.

The establishment of the National Art Gallery in 1958, a year after Malaya's independence, and the NAG's connection with Tunku Abdul Rahman illuminate why Malaysia put so much effort and government backing into participating in the Commonwealth exhibitions. This courting of internationalisation can be seen as an indirect soft-power play by Malaysia to establish its position as a sovereign country; that is, its participation in large associations and networks such as the Commonwealth through the arts would enhance its position as a sovereign nation. Thus, by asserting its position in the international arena through various international exhibitions post-independence, Malaysia was initiated into the international realm of the arts in the context of the post-war, despite its infancy as a nation.

The establishment of the NAG as Malaysia's 'modern' entity is consistent with the personality of Tunku Abdul Rahman, who maintained Anglo-Malayan and Commonwealth relations after Malaysia's independence. Of course, the establishment of the NAG relied heavily on Frank Sullivan's[3] networks and connections, as well as those of the board of directors. The Australian Sullivan was the Press Secretary to the Malaysian Prime Minister and later became the Secretary of the first Working Committee and a member of the NAG Board of Trustees, a position that he held until 1970.[4]

However, Frank Sullivan's and Mubin Sheppard's ability to pursue their interest in the arts through the NAG could not be sustained without the support of Tunku Abdul Rahman, for whom Sullivan had worked closely, continuing to write speeches for both Tunku and his successor (Manton 2008: 32). Sullivan viewed his relationship with Tunku positively, calling it "… the hardest and yet the happiest years of my life" (Manton 2008, 31). As Tunku's former secretary, Sullivan travelled with the prime minister to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences in London several times, and he was also included in state visits to Brunei, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, West Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, Canada, the United States, Pakistan and India. He even accompanied the second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak, to Thailand and the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (the Paramount Ruler) to India, Pakistan, Thailand and Japan (Manton 2008: 31–32). Indeed, the exhibition of Frank Sullivan's collection, entitled The Sullivan Art Collection, was officiated by Tunku in April 1965.

In addition to the personal influence of figures like Sullivan, Malaysia's political situation at the time of the establishment of the NAG is also significant. The Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (1963–1966) was a conflict pursued by Indonesia in opposition to the creation of the Federation of Malaysia. The breakdown in political, economic and social relations between Malaysia and Indonesia led to invasions, bombings, and acts of subversion and destabilisation that ultimately culminated in Indonesia conducting a series of cross-border raids into Malaysian territory in early 1963. This Konfrontasi period eventually involved other Commonwealth countries including Australia and New Zealand (Dennis and Grey 1996; Edwards 1999; Gurr 2010; Pugsley 2003; Sutter 1966). In their investigation of Malaysia's challenges in the Commonwealth, Boyce and Davis (1965) argue that Malaysia's pleas for support from the Commonwealth represented the nation "merely seeking public assurances that the new Malaysia has a right to exist" (59). Boyce and Davis (1965) also highlight the fact that "[s]ince all Commonwealth governments have readily accepted Malaysia's membership of the 'club', it is perhaps implied that any challenge to Malaysia's formation will be disapproved by the Commonwealth collectively" (59).

As such, being and being seen as part of the Commonwealth became a very important agenda for Malaysia. Tunku himself had to enlist Commonwealth support during Konfrontasi, as noted by various scholars. Moreover, Boyce (1971) argues that personal friendships seemed to strengthen Australian–Malayan relations during this period (71) . Indeed, Australia's prime minister, Robert Menzies, and Tunku Abdul Rahman had allowed various cross-cultural experiences between their Commonwealth

[3]For an examination of Malaysian and Australian artistic connections, visit http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/international-relations/60-years-australia-in-malaysia/chapter4-a-vibrant-tradition-of-artistic-exchange.html.

[4]http://www.artgallery.gov.my/?page_id=3740&lang=en

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countries. For example, Malayan students were welcomed in Australia (Oakman 2010), Australian forces and technical personnel were stationed in Malaysia, and some British expatriates who once lived in Malaya later retired to Australia (Twomey *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, Boyce (1971) highlighted that many of the official discussions about Australian links with Malaysia–Singapore emphasised the shared experience within the Commonwealth of Nations (71). Halvorson (2019) also noted that Australia's deep involvement in Southeast Asian decolonisation was aligned with Cold War security interests due to Britain's post-war constraints and sentiments of responsibility to the British Commonwealth (44).

In the immediate post-independence years, the shaping of Malaya's foreign policy and external relations was essentially dictated by Tunku through his capacity both as prime minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Liow (2005) notes that Tunku conducted his own realpolitik readings of Malayan geopolitical circumstances (88). Therefore, the internationalisation of the NAG through its exhibitions, programming and events can be framed as an indirect method of political manoeuvring when contextualised with regard to Malaysia's political situation during the 1963 to 1966 period of Confrontation with Indonesia, especially in regards to Tunku's support of the NAG's internationalisation.

The new government that Tunku headed sought international help through the support of Commonwealth nations in asserting its right to exist because Tunku Abdul Rahman had always taken the Commonwealth membership very seriously (Boyce and Davis 1965: 59–60). As such, I argue that this concern was why participation in exhibitions organised by the Commonwealth Institute were taken seriously by the Malaysian government at that time. Prior to the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, the SJC also had the selected works exhibited at the National Art Gallery, officiated by Tun Abdul Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister.

Exhibition participation's role in internationalisation is further supported by the positive relationship between Malaysia and Britain in terms of art education. The Malaysia-Britain relationship was demonstrated by the number of Malaysian artist-teachers who were sent to England under the Malayan Government Scholarship to attain their art education, including Tay Hooi Keat, Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Lau, Ismail Zain, Khalil Ibrahim, Ahmad Khalid Yusoff, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Redza Piyadasa, Ibrahim Hussein, Lee Joo For and many others. Low (2015) observed that, "This upsurge of cultural activity in Kuala Lumpur is attributable to the Federation's concerted effort to raise the general educational levels as part of the preparations for independence" (476).

Malayan Identity and Commonwealth Ideals as Exhibition Content

Prior to independence, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) nationalists worked out an inter-racial cooperation between the races in the country by agreeing to a "social contract" with the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Association (MIC), two major non-Malay parties. In this "bargain," the UMNO accepted easier access to Malayan citizenship and federal public service, in which all people in Malaya could qualify as citizens either by birth or by fulfilling requirements of residence, language and an oath of loyalty, in return for the guarantee of Malay special rights and constitutional recognition as the *bumiputeras,* or the "sons/daughters of the soil". The Alliance coalition (consisting of the UMNO, MCA and MIC) won the first general election in 1955.

Although UMNO nationalists had obtained terms for the future from the British government, an armed communist insurgency broke out in 1948, and the British government had to fight the insurgents as part of the Cold War against international communism. Thus, Britain was forced to decolonise rapidly, but the British imposed an important condition for Malaya's independence: an inter-racial cooperation and unity among the various races (see King 1957; Ongkili 1974; Pluvier 1967/68). As a result of this condition, the constitutional arrangement or "social contract" among the Alliance coalition resulted in the dilution of Malay nationalism, allowing for the growth of a wider, multi-ethnic nationalism or "Malayan nationalism" (Cheah 2002: 3–6). As such, Cheah (2002) argues that Malayan nationalism is actually Malay nationalism transformed into a more inclusive "Malayan" multi-ethnic force and movement, a form of negotiation necessary to achieve complete self-government and independence, led by UMNO leaders (10).

It must be noted that the extent of Malaya's decolonisation and the creation of Malaysia also suggest neo-colonialism at work. It was suspected that Tunku Abdul Rahman had reached an "unwritten accord" with British officials to protect British business interests in order to achieve rapid independence (Halvorson 2019). Stockwell (1998) asserted that independence and the formation of Malaysia was seen as a sham; he alleged that Britain maintained its hegemony in Malaya/Malaysia "not by formal rule or coercion, but by an unequal military alliance, the management of market forces, and *cultural infiltration*" (138–139, my emphasis). The link to this 'cultural infiltration' was also highlighted by Harper (1999), who argued that the British promoted the idea of the 'Malayan' by introducing coercive collaboration through culture and by promoting the ideology of citizenship.

The success of the colonial policy rested on the idea of fostering a national culture or multi-racial politics in Malaya, which was initially a "cultural desert" (Beamish 1954). However, Gerald Templer, the High Commissioner of Malaya, sought cultural rejuvenation in captivating the Malayans through an espoused identity that included elements from China, India and the West in addition to the regional culture. Therefore, the establishment of the National Art Gallery by the Malayan Arts Council as an instance of 'cultural infiltration' as suggested by Stockwell (1998) and the idea of fostering a multi-racial Malayan culture as highlighted by Harper (1999) is well supported. As such, the selection of artworks for this exhibition aimed to display a pluralistic and multicultural Malaya aligned with the positive and celebratory Commonwealth agenda.

Hence, the Commonwealth Institute, through its major exhibitions and the Commonwealth Arts Festival, became a space to represent the Commonwealth positively. After all,

> "The aim of the festival is to stress that there is strength and unity in the Commonwealth in its diversity of thought and culture, even though differences on other matters may exist among its members. The festival will endeavour to demonstrate the underlying unity in our search for true values in the unbalanced and changing world today. By bringing together artists, teachers and scholars who are representative of the old and new countries of the Commonwealth, it will help to build up a mutual understanding and respect without thought of colour, race or creed." (Commonwealth Arts Festival (proposal), n.d.: 2)

In events such as the Commonwealth festivals and exhibition platforms provided by the Commonwealth Institute, such pluralism and multiculturalism were highlighted, celebrated and brought forth, celebrating the British colonisation that brought significant changes to Malaya's demographic and social construction.

The promotion of pluralism and multiculturalism was also aligned with Tunku's approach to nation building:

> "The main features of a 'Malay nation-state' were framed, legally and constitutionally, just before the Independence of Malaya. However, in the next 12 years after Independence the Tunku Abdul Rahman's administration moved away from this framework. He delayed the full implementation of the 'Malay nation-state' project by building a more 'pluralistic' and 'multi-cultural Malaya' in order to fulfill the immediate priority – national unity. He paid less attention to national identity or nationality and used citizenship instead as the basis of nation-building. … Only after the formation of Malaysia in 1963 did he attempt to define and develop a 'Malaysian' nationality. To him, it seemed logical that a strong citizenship could be laid and strengthened before developing a nationality. The nation-state that he strove to establish during this early period was based on pluralism, particularly 'multi-lingualism' and 'multi-culturalism.'" (Cheah 2002: 76–77)

These Commonwealth events became the platform on which Malaysia's existence aligned with the Commonwealth's ideals to become an indirect soft-power play. This is especially true when considering Malaysia's need to gain the support of other Commonwealth nations during the Confrontation years, which added urgency to this form of international visibility.

Britain provided the opportunity for educational training and, consequently, art education to a few Malayans. A few self-taught Straits Chinese artists, Nanyang artists, and Peter Harris, an art educator from the United Kingdom who established the Wednesday Art Group, were among the many early sources of modern art knowledge in Malaya. The mid-twentieth century also witnessed the establishment of art associations such as the Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung, which included Hoessein Enas and Mazli Mat Som among its early founders and members (Soon 2016). The late 1940s and the 1950s saw a significant number of artists being sent to the UK to attain their arts education.

A few artists attended teachers' training colleges in the UK such as the Malayan Teachers' Training College, Kirkby, Liverpool (1952–1962) and the Malaysian Teacher Training College (MTTC), Brinsford Lodge, Wolverhampton (1955–1964). These teachers' training colleges were established to meet the requirements of the English medium schools in Malaya (Kandasamy and Santhiram 1998: 300–301). Such schools did offer art, though it mostly dealt with craft-based activities at a rudimentary level such as book-binding, weaving, pattern-making, drawing and painting. Nevertheless, several students began to draw and paint, not to fulfil academic requirements but out of their own interest (Sabapathy 1995: 14).

MTTCs also played an important cultural role:

> "The most striking thing about Kirkby and Brinsford, perhaps, is that they are the most effective instruments of 'Malayanization' — not, as might be thought, of the inculcation of English ideas and ways of thought. In the surroundings of English life — which, with its calm, practical, unself-centred habits, has great value for young people coming from the unstable environment of an embryonic society — the students are given a better grounding in the new Malayan ethos than they could get anywhere in their own country. Indians, Malays, Singhalese, Eurasians, Chinese, Punjabis — they come back to Malaya thinking and talking remarkably like Malayans; and the prestige of their professional training is, so far at any rate, so high as to silence any suspicions among their more traditionalist or 'nationalistic' communal compatriots." (J.B.P.R 1956: 383–384)

By its very nature, Britain's 'Malayanisation' policy, as seen in its full force in the context of the MTTC, formed an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983: 6–7) over the discourse surrounding the Malayan identity; the MTTC became a site in which the alternative vision of the Malayan nation could be framed. This ethos, was inculcated in the English life and land itself as noted above. The espoused Malayan identity could be seen in various annual cultural programs such as the musical *Malayan Medley* as demonstrated by reports and photographs of this event in *Panduan*, the annual student magazine. The performances were often enmeshed with Malayan cultural ethnic identity including the various types of dance that were performed, such as the Radha Krishna Dance, Tari Piring, Gypsy dance and Snake Charmers dance. However, the set or backdrop of these performances demonstrated the English influence: neoclassical architecture such as the adaptation of Greek pillars with ionic order to suggest an English interior. As such, the MTTC became the educational and training context that emphasised the promulgation of the multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural characteristics that were essential to interracial integration.

The uniqueness of the MTTC was remembered by the literary giant K.S. Maniam (1994):

> "The Brinsford Lodge society was a truly Malaysian society in that everyone, irrespective of his or her race and culture, shared a common spirit of living together. There was hardly any racial prejudice or cultural intolerance. For a would-be writer this experience was not only necessary but vital for it allowed him entry into other personalities, cultures and languages." (6)

As such, Malaya's identity, or at least the espoused Malayan culture, was a pluralistic culture with English language, English ideas and even an English environment at its core, furthering or strengthening the initial impetus of a Malayan ideal at that time, at least in the context of these two institutions. Yeoh Jin Leng, Anthony Lau, Ismail Zain Khalil Ibrahim and later Ahmad Khalid Yusoff were amongst the students at Kirkby, and Syed Ahmad Jamal ultimately became a lecturer there. Redza Piyadasa, on the other hand, attended Brinsford Lodge.

As such, it is not surprising that the artists and the works selected for the Commonwealth Institute exhibitions reflected the espoused Malayan identity, which can be observed through the artworks' subject matters and mediums. For example, the exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute portrayed a selection of artworks by all-male artists including Cheong Lai Tong, Chun Chen Sun, Jehan Chan, Ho Kai Peng,

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Syed Ahmad Jamal, Lu Chon Min, Nik Zainal Abidin, Patrick Ng Kah On and Malaysia pioneer batik artist Chuah Thean Teng. In this exhibition, the medium ranged from ink, oil and watercolour paintings to batik paintings, and the subject matter included local fishing villages, fishing boats and huts, rubber trees, and paddy fields. There was even a painting by Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh that portrays characters from the Ramayana epic and an abstract work by Syed Ahmad Jamal entitled "Exuberance".

Malaysia's participation in the Commonwealth Arts Festival allowed for the selection of more works, including abstractions by Abdul Latiff Mohidin, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jolly Koh and Khoo Sui Hoe; landscapes by Chang Nai Tong, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng; explorations by Lee Joo For, Ismail Mustam and Long Thien Shih; realist works by Mazli Mat Som and Hoessein Enas; and locally and regionally influenced works by Nik Zainal Abidin and Patrick Ng Kah Onn.

The selected works ranged from oil paintings; pastels; batik; mixed media; and prints such as lithographs, linocuts and etchings by Lee Joo For to sculptural works by Anthony Lau, Lim Nan Seng, Chan Teck Heng and Michael Muthu that used metal and cement fondu as an early exploration of cheap materials in sculpture. Wood sculptures by artists Alan Choo Peng Lock and Aziz Tapa were also included. The exhibition also contained wooden 'sculptures' as 'modern art' by indigenous 'artists' such Lingam Said, Long Hitam, Puteh, Semi, Ahmad Montel, Pion Bumbun and Kassim. These wood carvings were manifestations of their primitive beliefs of the supernatural world but in this exhibition it was positioned as sculptures and modern art.

As the Malaysian art scene was still relatively small, it was inevitable that such selections included most active artists at that time, reflecting the nation's plural and multicultural background. Even the themes, genres and media were wide-ranging, from works that portray the Malayan scenes such as village scenery, *kampung* lives, buffalo, paddy fields and fishing boats to genres and media such as realist portraits, abstracts and semi-abstracts, prints, sculptures, and batik — a method of producing textiles through dye resistance.

Significantly, Sullivan and Donald Bowen had taken a liking to the batik paintings of Chuah Thean Teng. Sullivan (1962) emphasised the unique multicultural influences on Malaysian art:

> "The stream of influence in art from East and West converge in Malaya, and slowly but surely the artists of Malaya are building a bridge between two worlds, both in technique and ideas. In Chinese-style painting, this is particularly clear. The brush is still used in the ancient way, but the traditional conventions of subject are being discarded; artists using this form are depicting directly the Malayan scene. Even more interesting is the adaptation of the centuries-old method of making batik cloth as a medium of painting. This is no longer an experiment but a fact, a painstaking but richly colourful alliance of old methods and new outlook." (83–84)

Indeed, the Commonwealth Institute singled out Chuah Thean Teng's batik as a pertinent example of this endorsement by organising two solo exhibitions for him at the Commonwealth Institute in 1959 and 1965, although Chuah Thean Teng had never attained any formal art education in Britain. Bowen's fascination with Chuah Thean Teng's batik was apparent:

> "It is astonishing to think that although making batik has been common for hundreds of years, no one before Teng ever thought of adapting this age-old craft as a medium for fine art. Teng, and Teng alone, is responsible for this most original contribution to the whole world of art." (Bowen 1965)

Bowen, in his capacity as curator of the gallery had even in a few written correspondences suggested and recommended Chuah Thean Teng's works to those who had inquired about Malayan artists.

The interests of Bowen and Sullivan in works such as batik and the differences in the selections of the works in the various exhibitions was noted by Ong and Ahmad (2012), who argue that the works of the artists during that time came from a different perspective, that is, "one that discards essentialist conceptions of Malayan identity—and it is within this premise that they must be read" (7). These artists, they argue, focused on differences rather than the common Malayan identity, and this resulted in what they see as the hybridity that became the strategy of Malayan nationalism.

Although there is truth to this argument, such a heralded approach towards Malayan identity fits well with the Commonwealth ideals. It must be noted that the divergent multiracialisms in Malaysia have deep origins in the intertwining of race and economic development in colonial Malaya and under British rule, particularly in the provision of migrant labour for the important tin-mining and rubber plantation export sectors. Even before the mid-nineteenth century, British interests in the region were predominantly economic. For example, tin-mining and rubber farming became their main economic interest. These industries required a large labour force, but the British did not regard the Malays as reliable workers. Consequently, the British facilitated the immigration of Tamils from South India to Malaya to fulfil the plantations' labour needs. On top of that, the mines attracted a flood of immigrant workers from southern China. As such, the diverse group of races that make up Malaysia was ultimately the result of the British "intervention" in Malaya. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Malayan identity had to be constructed based on otherness rather than on similarities.

Conclusion

Despite this paper's focus on soft power at play, it must be noted that even Nye (2004) admits that soft power resources are slower, more diffuse and more cumbersome to wield than hard power resources. As this paper traced the historical significance of the internationalisation of Malayan/Malaysian art exhibitions, it posited that they either directly or indirectly exuded Malaysian soft power, considering the Konfrontasi and the Malaysian efforts to gain the support of other Commonwealth members. Though many assume that art should be apolitical, this paper has traced and narrated the political reading of a presumably representative international art exhibition by taking a broader view of the institutional and exhibition history of the National Art Gallery as well as the Commonwealth Institute during the formation of a new nation. Specifically, this research has demonstrated how art institutions such as the National Art Gallery and the Commonwealth Institute played a significant role in solidifying a young nation's standing in the international realm during the 1950s and 1960s by tracing, illustrating and examining these exhibitions in the context of the transnational relations of both Malaysia and Britain as well as the Commonwealth at large.

These exhibitions can be read as a two-pronged approach of soft power at play: in asserting Malaysia's internationalisation, especially among the Commonwealth countries, this art heightened and asserted Commonwealth ideals of multiculturalism through an idealised 'Malayan' identity. This paper has also deepened scholars' understanding of international art exhibitions that have been organised and co-organised by the Commonwealth Institute by examining the post-war period and the British decolonisation process.

The aspirational Malayan culture espoused by the British and their local allies, which reflects the multiculturalism of Malayan society, developed in tandem with the ideology of citizenship it wished to instil. These exhibitions and the presentation of the artworks at Commonwealth events were aligned with the British and Commonwealth visions of a fused plural society, an important agenda even after Malaysia's independence, especially during the Konfrontasi period. Further research would reveal that the establishment of Malayan culture attempted by the British and Tunku Abdul Rahman's support for these transnational relations was inherently linked to British economic interests in Malaya through Malaya's national, regional and international affairs. Thus, this research provides essential context to better understand the underlying forces that influenced the cultural trajectories of the Malayan people and their reasons for portraying the espoused multiculturalism.

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