

## The Malay Pottery in Malaysia

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Malay art is visual expression of a particular culture, like tapestry which extends through time. The concept of Malay visual art is as that of a museum without walls. Malay visual art is a metamorphosis of objects from the natural world to a form which gives shape to the soul of the creator. The art works, which are realized from the environment vision and imagination, are the creation of the soul transformed from dream, reflecting the harmonious relationship between man and nature.

**Syed Ahmad Jamal- Malaysian Fine Art Artist.**

The Malays of the past are synonym with the nature in their every day life; they rely on natural resources as a material and inspirations in producing art works. The basic materials used in making handicrafts were obtained from surroundings closest to their homes or from the beluga (secondary forest) or from the jungle. Diligence and creativity combined to create objects needed for daily use.

They use natural resources like panda screw-pine leaves, bemoan, bamboo, rattan and clay to create a quality and creative handicraft such as pottery, plaiting, weaving, embroidery, clothing, woodcarving and weapons.

Most of these creative creations made by past artist are functional and aesthetically pleasing. Everyday earthenware's found in Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand have certain features in common. Even the earliest pieces reflect a combined utilitarian and aesthetic appeal, a characteristic often found in other arts and crafts of the region.

The Malays artist used plant motifs as a decoration of their art works. Syed Ahmad Jamal, one of the prominent Malaysian's artists wrote, "The plant motif is one of the elements which demonstrate uniqueness of Islamic visual art. The motif goes through changes in form at several levels. The original source is the grape-vine, with its twisting tendrils replaced by bean runners, giving local identity".

Pottery is one of the earliest handicrafts which were created by the human civilization.

Primitive Malay pottery was first discovered in caves and excavation sites throughout Malaysia. Examples are the fragments of pottery found in Tembeling, Pahang; Bukit Wang Pisang, Bukit Tengku Lembu, Perlis and Bukit Cuping in Gua Ca, Kelantan.

Functional aspects of pottery and abundant of clay resources where people lived, leads to the history of pottery making. Much of the indigenous pottery was made by craftspeople who worked in slack periods of the agricultural season using local materials to produce wares for everyday use. The region is abundant in the natural elements required for making pottery. Clay can be found by the river beds, paddy fields and foothills, men are responsible in collecting of clay meanwhile women are the artists. Quality clay is a must in pottery production, an artist should know the plasticity, drying and firing shrinkage of clay in order to produce excellence pottery products. An artist should be well verse in selecting clay accordingly to the technique of pottery making.

The presence of external influences, especially from China since the year 1100 A.D., did not in the least influence the local potter. One reason was that the creative techniques of the Malays were still in the primitive stage. Their tools were simple and their pottery was fired at ordinary temperature without any form of control.

Cottage industry pottery is still in existence in Malaysia today and the technique and materials remain basically unchanged. This is due to the lack of knowledge and skill in high firing technique and quality materials such as porcelain, bone china and stoneware.

The Malay pottery can be found in Pahang, Kelantan, Perlis, Melaka, Perak and Kedah. The most popular Malays pottery is from Sayong, Perak. Labu<sup>1</sup> Sayong is a trademark for pottery handicraft of Perak. This village is the production center of the fame labu Sayong, it's a remarkable gourd-shaped earthenware, black and glossy surface with impressed and relief decorations. There are about five villages which actively produce labu Sayong namely Kepala Bendang, Bukit Lada, Sayong Masjid, Sayong Ulu and Kuala Sayong Ulu.

Besides that, pottery products are used for cooking, steaming and religious ritual. In present times some of pottery products are not for utilitarian purposes, but for display on the shelves or as a gift items. These products are vases, pitcher jugs, egg baskets, potpourri pots and garden decoration forms.

The potters use earthenware clay from river beds, foothills and paddy fields in making their pottery.

The colors of the clay are grayish white and brownish, generally good quality clay is brownish for making labu Sayong. There are few types of labu Sayong, namely labu Awok, labu Tela, labu Pucung, labu Gelugor, geluk and buyung.

Historically labu Sayong was used by the Malay for storing drinking water. The form and decorations of labu Sayong remains but the production technique has changed. Old generation of Malay potters prefer to use coiling technique and wood firing in pottery making. Most of the new generation of Sayong potters use casting and throwing wheel techniques in

order to speed up their production and these techniques enables the pottery to be sold at a lower price. Most of the buyers don't bother about the techniques used by the potters, as long as they can purchase the item at a low price.

The Making of Labu Sayong

### Motifs on Sayong Pottery

The aesthetics of labu Sayong in terms of form and decoration were created by the creative Sayong Malay women. Most of the Malay people are Muslim, so the motifs they use for decorations on pottery are inspired from plants around their habitat. Since Islam rejects the portrayal of figures, natural elements are depicted in two forms and styles that are geometric and organic. However the geometric characteristics of Malay decoration are not inspired by Islamic geometric concept. Islamic geometry is based on mathematic and astronomy which they obtained from the Romans.

Motifs which derived from plants are carved, impressed or paste on to the pottery form, most of the motifs have been simplified compared with wood carving or silver works. The geometric style existed during the pre-historic age. It is termed proto-geometric or early geometric. In this motif, lines combine without any specific or particular form. The motifs are simply made from simple elements such as dots, broken lines and straight lines which are made by scratching pottery surface.

There are a few names of plants for these motifs like bunga<sup>1</sup> tanjung, bunga padi, bunga kedudut, bunga pecah empat, susur kelapa, bunga lawang, bunga cakar ayam, pucuk rebung bunga cengkih, siku keluang, s and x shape.

### Motifs of Labu Sayong

The tradition of using natural motifs in Malay pottery is the root to my creative works in contemporary ceramic as a contemporary ceramic artist.

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