

# Malaysian Design (pg. 347-348)

Published in Bloomsbury Encyclopaedia of Design (2016)

Volume 2. Chief in Editor : Clive Edward

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Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states and three territories spread around the South China Sea, in the Malay Peninsula and the north and west of Borneo. Mostly populated by Malay, Chinese, Indian and indigenous peoples, its history and culture, and therefore design, has been infused by multiple ethnic groups, religions and beliefs. On the trading route between China and India, its location has interested many traders, invaders and settlers since the first century.

Little is now clearly identifiable with this rich history, except for buildings like the Minangkabau's Rumah Gadang in Negeri Sembilan or the Hindu Candis in Kedah, as well as artefacts like the kris (dagger) or even ceremonials like the Malay wedding. After hundred years of the Sultanate of Malacca (c. 1400-1511) and the rise of Islam in the region, European colonialism started with the Portuguese in 1511, which was then superceded by the Dutch in 1641. Their influences in urban architecture became widespread. During the nineteenth century, Siam took over the northern sultanates, while the United Kingdom was taking control over the southern ones and those of Borneo. By the early twentieth century, Siam ceded their states to the British Empire.

The main European influence in Malaysia is British. They created modern Malaysia by progressively controlling each state and federating them. From law and government to buildings and education, everything was modelled after the colonial empire. Early print design developed with the need for official emblems, coat of arms, maps and bank notes. Other graphic printed materials such as magazines, comics, print advertisements, books, newsprint, posters and stamps also reflected the imagery of the colonial power. Despite that, the search for local identity began to rise prominently with the emergence of several local groups in the 1920s, such as Malaysian Institute of Architects, the United Malayan Artist and Penang Impressionist Group. There was an attempt to localise some design work including visual arts, graphic arts, and architecture.

Local traditions and the religion of Islam brought some inspiration into the development of design in Malaya until the 1940s. With the British ideas of liberalism, teacher's associations started a movement to govern the Malay culture, which was counter balanced by the rise of women's rights. This can be seen through the several magazines produced by the associations such as *Majalah Guru*, the first women teacher's magazine *Majalah Bulan Melayu*, and *Majalah Lembaga Malaya*.

The rise of a nationalistic discourse that began to transform the British influences towards a new national identity began with independence in 1957. Since then, design in Malaysia has been strongly driven by the search for the country's identity, whilst still being influenced by the various cultures and ethnicities in the country. Early design education in Malaysia in the late 1960s began with courses driven by the international design syllabus derived from the USA and Europe. International advertising firms established branch offices in Malaysia, contributing to the globalization of the country's culture.

In the early 1980s, the Look East Policy and the Islamic revolution shifted Malaysian design inspirations. The establishment of design associations such as Malaysian Invention and Design Society (MINDS), the Graphic Design Association of Malaysia (wREGA), and the Malaysian Design Council (MRM) established in 1993 have all provided assistance in supporting the design community in Malaysia.

Malaysian designers, such as fashion designers Jimmy Choo, Farah Khan, Zang Toi, or Bernard Chandran, design consultants William Herald Wong, and Johan Arif, and graphic designer Joseph Foo, to name a few, have played a significant role in making the Malaysian design scene prominent to other parts of the world.

Since the 2000s, the role of design continues to grow importance in Malaysia, and with this growing maturity, design practices are slowly contributing to national policies, cultural history, heritage, and addressing social and environmental issues.

Reference and further readings:

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