

ABDULLAH ARIFF: A COSMOPOLITAN ARTIST OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY MALAYA

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Abstract

Abdullah Ariff (1904-1960) is one of the earliest Penang artist active in producing illustrations and art works during the early 20th century Malaya. He was a self-taught artist and subsequently an art teacher at the local Anglo-Chinese School, Penang. He was one of the earliest local members of the Penang Impressionist, an art groups consisting of mostly wives of English officers and expatriates. As one of the early Malayan painter who had exhibited in the United States, United Kingdom and France during the 1950s, Abdullah Ariff was accorded the title 'Father of Modern Art in Malaysia' by Zakaria Ali through an exhibition held at that National Arts Gallery under the same title. Working as both illustrator and artist, this paper will examine the cosmopolitanism of Abdullah Ariff through his background and works he produced.

Keywords: Abdullah Ariff, cosmopolitanism, illustrations, watercolour painting, Malaysian art

Introduction

Abdullah Ariff, born June 15, 1904, at 92, Kedah Road in Georgetown, Penang, is one of the earliest 'Malay' artists in Malaya. He was also known to be one of the local members of the Penang Impressionists (besides Mrs Lim Cheng Kung, the wife of the manager of Straits Echo (Tan Chee Khuan, 2013, p. 30), an art club consisting of mostly wives of expatriates established in 1898 in Penang. A self-taught artist, Abdullah Ariff subsequently worked as an art teacher at the local Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), Penang after graduating from the same school. In

2006, an exhibition and art catalogue entitled *Father of Modern Art in Malaysia* by Zakaria Ali was held and published by the National Arts Gallery (NAG). Abdullah Ariff was accorded as one of the important early 20th century artists in Malaysia by the same exhibition. Such exhibition was important in reappraising his works 56 years after his death in 1960. This paper hopes that it could further our understanding of Abdullah Ariff's role and contributions in the early years of modern art in Malaysia especially in regards to the larger framework of cosmopolitanism.

As this paper will discuss, the cosmopolitanism of Abdullah Ariff is portrayed by his personality as well as some of his illustrations, caricatures, and selected works. Discussion in this paper will be based on Abdullah Ariff's personality and background, including his worldly exposure to foreign knowledge and ideas. Cosmopolitanism scholarship, according to Kant (2007), is built on the idea of the existence of a "world citizen" that, despite different cultural and/or religious roots, share and abide to universal values or conceptions of the world. This is further reinstated by Appiah that as part of the "citizens of the world", cosmopolitan community presumes that each, though separated by modern national boundaries, forms a relationship of mutual respect that could be seen in the two strands of cosmopolitan thinking – the first strand is an emphasis on global obligations, while the other strand is the celebration of local differences – in order to reduce the tension of preserving local values and communities and yet at the same time, seeking universal standards (Appiah 2006). Thus, deriving on Appiah's approach, this paper explores the cosmopolitan persona of Abdullah Ariff reflected in his works—his illustrations and caricatures reflected his attune to the global or worldly concerns, while yet, his watercolours also celebrate local differences.

Abdullah Ariff as a Cosmopolite

The three port cities in Malaya, i.e. Malacca, Penang, and Singapore were the earliest cosmopolitan, urban setting in Malaya. These port-cities became part of the Straits Settlement in 1826 and later "elevated" as a Crown Colony under direct British rule in 1867. Penang flourished as a hub for trade and commerce. It became the center for civilizational exchanges as it is situated in the intersection between the East and West. Traders and merchants from inside and outside the region flocked the city, hence culminating in a diverse urban society (Wazir Jahan Karim, 2009; Wiryomartono, 2012). Thus, in describing the early 20th century Penang that Abdullah Ariff grew up with, Zakaria Ali (2004) writes:

... By the beginning of the 20th century, the international character of Penang was assured, as evident in the street names: Anson Road, Armenian Street, Rangoon Road, Hong Long Road, Carnarvon Street, Malabar Street, Buckingham Street, Chin Ho Square, Duke Street, Acheen Street, Ceylon Lane, Yahudi Road. (pp. 18–19)

Zakaria Ali (2004) further states that:

Abdullah Ariff grew up thinking himself a pure Penangite, a breed far removed from the Malays with whom he identified but with ambivalence; he was of them, yet in many ways, he was not. His father Mohamed Ariff and his mother Che Chik were of Turkish descent. (p. 18)

His surroundings and upbringing itself are important in reflecting his cosmopolitan background. Despite having a 'Malay' background and his young age, Abdullah Ariff was accepted in the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) in Penang when he was nine years old and managed to pass his Senior Cambridge in 1925. Due to his education background and enthusiasm in arts, he was accepted by Reverend G. F. Pickett to be hired as an art teacher at the ACS, where he graduated (Zakaria Ali, 2004, pp. 23–25). He was later promoted to Supervisor of Art until the Japanese Occupation in 1941 (Tan Chee Khuan, 2013, p. 30).

Abdullah Ariff participated in the exhibition with ACS for six years before he was invited to join the Penang Impressionist. Abdullah Ariff's participation in the Penang Impressionists was deemed as important as the Penang Impressionist was the earliest art club founded in Penang in 1898. The members were the wives of Europeans and a few local members such as Mrs. Lim Cheng Kung, who was accepted due to her patronage. Perhaps it is not too farfetched to suggest that Abdullah Ariff's 'flawless English' (Zakaria Ali, 2004, p. 25) and cosmopolitan identity, apart from his skills can be one of the reasons as to why he was easily accepted into the group. As noted by Lim Cheng Tju:

By the 1930s, Abdullah was making a name for himself as a Western style painter in the annual art shows organized by the 'Penang Impressionists.' This is no easy feat as Western education was not easily available to non-aristocratic Malays and art education was not encouraged by the British in Malaya as such

training did not fulfil their administrative needs in the running of the colony. Most Malays were also not willing to accept Western education because of their fear and suspicion of Western culture, especially Christianity. It did not help that many of the early English schools were run by Christian missionaries and Malay parents were afraid that their children would lose their Islamic faith if they were sent to English schools. (Lim Cheng Tju, 2009)

While maintaining his 'Westernized' identity through his connection with the Penang Impressionists (amongst others), Abdullah Ariff also portrayed his concern with the plight of local Malays that could be observed through his involvement with *Dewasa* (1931-1932) in which he had produced several illustrations for the magazine published by Mercantile Press and later by Persama Press in Penang (Hamed Mohd. Adnan 2015, p. 60). During the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), Abdullah Ariff was seen as receptive towards the idea of "Greater Asia" promoted by the Japanese. Such inclination could be observed in a range of pro-Japanese and anti-West satirical cartoons in *Penang Daily News*, an English newspaper issued by the Japanese forces around 1941 to 1942. He even produced a series of cartoons in a book entitled *Perang Pada Pandangan Juru-Lukis Kita (The War As Our Cartoonist Sees It)* (Lim Cheng Tju, 2009). The motivation for these submissions was not clear; nevertheless, it must be noted that these were times that one might have to fabricate their loyalty just for the sake of survival. When the British came back after the end of World War 2, Abdullah Ariff was arrested under the allegation of a collaborator to the Japanese; he, however, was released after five days of detention due to lack of provision in law that stated his action of submitting cartoons for the newspaper is a criminal offence (Tan Chee Khuan, 2013, p. 30)

In 1945, he worked as a cartoonist (under the name Shap) for *The Straits Echo* in Kuala Lumpur. After an unsuccessful application for a government scholarship in 1947, he became active in politics and was a committee member of UMNO and also the Chairman of the Penang Teachers Union. Despite his role in UMNO and other engagements, his career in the arts flourished. In 1954, he managed to have his exhibition at Ownbey Fellowship Hall and Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, NY. In 1955, he exhibited in a group show with the 'United Society of Artists' at the Royal Society of British art in London and later to be the first Malayan to receive the Fellowship of the Royal Society of Art England (FRSA) (Tan Chee Khuan, 2013, pp. 30-31). This honor was an important one to him. Since then, we could find the signature of Abdullah Ariff with the acronym FRSA on paintings.

The cosmopolitanism and internationalization of Abdullah Ariff were further espoused as he was invited to exhibit in “Le Salon” of the Society of French Artist in 1956 at Grand Palai des Champ-Elyses, France (Lim Cheng Tju, 2009). Three years late in 1959, his paintings were also displayed in Malayan Embassy Washington, United States of America (USA), followed by his successful exhibition in Charlotte, NY and the United States Department that eventually sponsored him a five-month trip around the world from April 1959 until 18 August 1959 – from Japan, Hong Kong, Honolulu, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Istanbul and to Cairo. Due to his hectic itinerary and limited halal-diet, his diabetes worsened and he caught influenza that later turned pneumonic and eventually led to his demise on 4 November 1960. His was mourned by thousands of Penangites during his funeral and one month later, the Penang City Council approved two roads to be named after him Jalan Abdullah Ariff and Lintang Abdullah Ariff (Tan Chee Khuan, 2013, p. 31).

Despite the fact that Abdullah Ariff was a self-taught artist, his earlier works reflected his ‘worldly’ knowledge in terms of technique and medium as well as the subject matter of his works that renders his knowledge as cosmopolitan. As Appiah notes, “..., as forms of culture disappear, new forms are created, and they are created locally, which means they have exactly the regional inflections that the cosmopolitan celebrates” (Appiah, 1997, p. 619). In this case, Abdullah Ariff was very familiar with printing techniques such as linocut and he also produces illustrations, caricatures, and even poster and was actively involved with the ‘illustrative and graphic design’ industry to the extent that he even established the Ariff Advertising Agency in 1955 (Tan Chee Khuan, 2013, p. 31). His multifaceted ability in the usage of various medium, for example, could be seen in several of his earliest works—the linocut that he produced with the students of ACS for the school magazine (Figures 1-4), the design of masthead and logo of *Dewasa* (Figure 5) and various vignettes for “Suara Malaysia”. Later Abdullah Ariff produced caricatures for both *Penang Daily News* and *Straits Echo*. In 1935, Abdullah Ariff had also produced the poster “Penang Glorious Holidays Abroad” (Figure 6) using the silk-screen technique. The typeface used is attuned to the Art Deco style that was popular in Penang during that time – the image of the red train going up Penang Hill, in contrast with the yellow, blue, green and black background.



Figure 1: ACS Magazine, November 1936, 23.6 x 17.2 cm
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)



Figure 2: ACS Magazine, November 1937, 11 x 16 cm
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)



Figure 3: Abdullah Ariff, "Dewasa Logo", *Dewasa*, 15 February 1932
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)

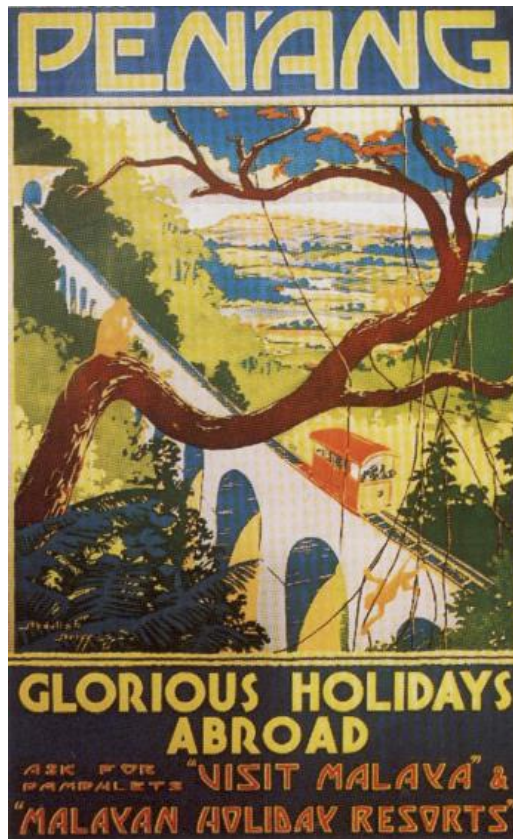


Figure 4: Abdullah Ariff, "Penang Glorious Holidays Abroad", 1935, Graphic
Poster, Silkscreen, 120 x 66 cm
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)

Illustrations produced by Abdullah Ariff reflect the artist's cosmopolitan engagement and knowledge. *Dewasa*, published twice a week, basically was published with the purpose to provide light readings to those who have just learned how to read (Hamed Mohd. Adnan, 2015, p. 60). Thus, illustrations that he did for the section "Perkhabaran Dunia Islam" for example, tend to be very detailed and literal – he rendered a castle or mosque with dome roof and turrets, the pyramid and sphinx, a man wearing a turban reading, silhouettes of people on the camel. For "Perkhabaran Dunia Alam", the image of two Saturn planets were positioned as mirroring to each other, symmetrical, a plane in the centre, and a big ship in front of the skyscraper on the right, the mosque on the left, communication symbols such letters and gramophone can be seen in front, in the foreground, electrical conduits were positioned on the left and right. Perhaps in parallel with the spirit and concern of the reformist group Kaum Muda that was reiterated in many other Malay newspapers such as *Al-Imam*, *Pengasoh* and others (Khoo Kay Kim, 2011, pp. 191–92) that these images were done, to illustrate the 'technology,' 'modernity' and such.



Figure 5: Abdullah Ariff, "Perkhabaran Dunia Islam", *Dewasa*, 15 February 1932
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)



Figure 6: Abdullah Ariff, "Perkhabaran Dunia Alam", *Dewasa*, 15 February 1932
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)

The vignettes he produced for *Suara Malaysia* are interesting as well. His rendition for “Perpustakaan” (Figure 7) for example, portrays a boy reading newspaper while facing arrays of books with the library in the background. On the left of the image is a typewriter with papers slotted in, reading to be typed. The association of knowledge to the idea of worldliness seems to be persistent in such works – be it reading books, communication symbols that could be seen in the rendition of letters and typewriter, transportations like airplanes and ship – the work of Abdullah Ariff also testifies that he is a knowledgeable person and who profess his worldliness.



Figure 7: Abdullah Ariff, “Perpustakaan”, *Suara Malaysia*, 1 Jun 1939
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)



Figure 8: Abdullah Ariff, “Anglo-Saxon Imperialism”, *Penang Daily News*, 9 September 1942
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)

On top of that, the various caricatures that he did for *Penang Daily News* also reflected his worldly knowledge of international politics. For example, in “Anglo Saxon Imperialism” (Figure 8), characters such as Uncle Sam and Winston Churchill are seated on a carriage, carried by local figures, the man wearing the *songkok*, and the man wearing *sarong* and turban were carrying the carriage reflecting the imperialist ideas. Thus, as these works were for *the Penang Daily News*, the anti-Western stances are overt as could be seen in “No Way to Escape” (Figure 9). The Americans through the image of Abraham Lincoln as Uncle Sam, that is about to be stabbed by German and Japan bayonets. Perhaps similarly, Abdullah Ariff seems to reiterate Appiah’s observation that “..., the cosmopolitan patriot can entertain the possibility of a world in which everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, with its cultural peculiarities, but taking pleasure of the presence of others, different places that are home to others, different places that are home to other different people” (Appiah 1997, p. 618) that he produced these images in local newspapers.



Figure 9: “No Way to Escape”, *Penang Daily News*, 9 October 1942
(Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)

Despite Abdullah Ariff's worldly renditions, his watercolours were more intimate in capturing the local scenes. The usage of watercolour was quite common by the early 20th century artist in Malaya as it is a very good and fast medium in capturing the changing landscape and surrounding views. The fact that he mastered such technical aspects of watercolour had allowed him to be a part of the Penang Impressionist in the first place as highlighted in the earlier part of this paper. Unlike his illustrations and caricatures, Abdullah Ariff was still bonded with his impressions of local people (Figures 10 and 11) and landscapes (Figure 12) that could be seen in most of his watercolour works.

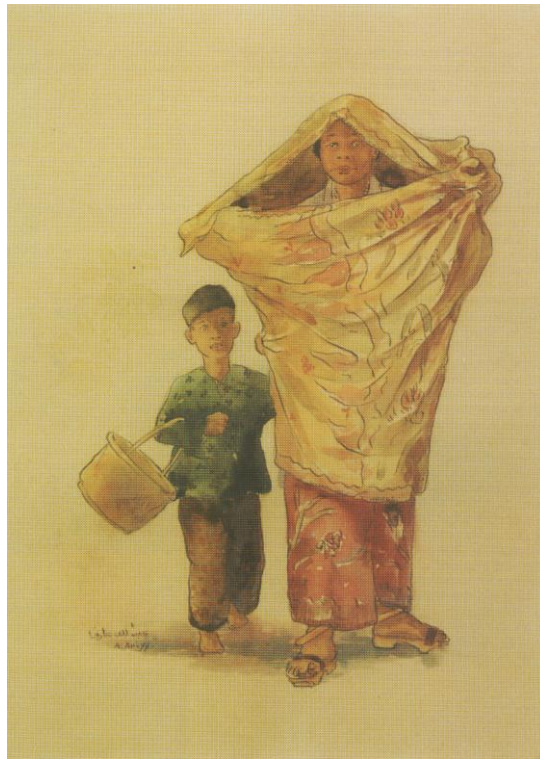


Figure 10: Abdullah Ariff, "Mother and Child" (c. the 1930s), watercolour, 28 x 20.7 cm
(Source: Tan Chee Khuan [2013].)



Figure 11: Abdullah Ariff, “Two Chinese Women” (c. the 1930s), watercolour, 28 x 20.7 cm

(Source: Tan Chee Khuan [2013].)

Both of the paintings above recorded local people in their day to day activities that seem to fascinate him– the mother and his son, perhaps going to the market. The mother is portrayed as wearing her batik *sarong* and covers herself with another piece of *sarong* while the boy was carrying a basket with him – a normal scene at the turn of the century. In “Two Chinese Women”, two women were portrayed as wearing a large brimmed bamboo hat – one woman is carrying her boy at her back, and another was leaning to the front carrying a heavy bundle at her back. Despite the cosmopolitanism and worldliness of Abdullah Ariff’s illustrations and caricatures, these works evinced that cosmopolitan can be patriots that as a cosmopolite, Abdullah Ariff’s loyalty and keen observation on his local surrounding can be seen in these works. This is further reinstated in Figure 12, a significant work produced in 1960, which captures the scene of tin mines in Malaya mid-20th century.



Figure 12: Abdullah Ariff, “Bumi Yang Bahagia Lombong Bijih Timah Malaya” (1960), watercolour on paper, 60.0cm x 75.5 cm (Source: Zakaria Ali [2004].)

The tin industry was the major pillar of the Malaysian economy during the late colonial to early independence period. The scene of tin mine is captured with warm colour scheme with the schematic of the foreground, middle ground and background created a recessive form of depth and space. With the angle perspective that the artist applied in this painting, it gives a wide and magnificent feel to the viewer that could also be seen as an artistic documentation of the economic activities of the country and yet the precision of Abdullah Ariff’s rendition came to the extent that the image of the three workers was drawn at the bottom left of the painting.

Conclusion

From the discussion of this paper, it can be argued that Abdullah Ariff can and should be read as the ‘Malay’ cosmopolite artist of the early 20th century. From his multifaceted practices, his worldliness and yet attuned or local sensitivities in his watercolours – these attest to what Appiah writes:

The fundamental thought of the cosmopolitanism I defend is that the freedom to create oneself—the freedom that liberalism celebrates—requires a range of socially transmitted options from

which to invent what we have to come to call our identities. Our families and schools, our churches and temples, our professional associations and clubs, provide two essential elements in the tool-kit of self-creation: first they provide ready-made identities whose shapes are constituted by norms and expectations, stereotypes and demands, rights and obligation; second, they gave us in language in which to think of these identities and with which we may shape new ones. (Appiah, 1997, p. 625)

The cosmopolitanism in which Abdullah Ariff look up to—reflected by his views on the global trend as well as his taste and style—seems still to be rooted in his observation on the local surrounding of Malaya. What makes him a cosmopolite, depicted by his range of works, is the aesthetic portrayal of his persona and worldview of an individual living in the interconnected—big yet small— the world of his age.

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