

# ANALISIS FORMAL CIRI VISUAL SENI MURAL DI MASJID LAMA KEDAI MULONG, KELANTAN

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## Abstrak

Mural merupakan seni visual dua dimensi yang banyak digunakan sebagai elemen hiasan di dalam bangunan lama di seluruh dunia. Namun begitu penggunaan elemen mural sebagai ragam hias di dalam dunia seni bina Melayu adalah sesuatu yang jarang ditemui, tidak seperti seni ukiran tiga dimensi yang telah digunakan dengan meluas. Justeru, penemuan mural di Masjid Lama Kedai Mulong (KMOM) semasa kerja-kerja pemuliharaan pada tahun 2009 telah meletakkan asas pengetahuan baharu tentang penggunaan seni mural sebagai elemen hiasan dalam seni bina tradisional Melayu. KMOM telah dibina pada pertengahan abad ke-19 sebagai Balai Rongseri (dewan perhimpunan diraja) sebelum ditukar oleh masyarakat Kedai Mulong menjadi masjid pada tahun 1958. Sebagai sebahagian daripada kompleks diraja yang asal, seni mural di KMOM telah mempamerkan kehalusan dan kekayaan elemen hiasan dalaman yang penting kepada kajian seni bina dan seni budaya Melayu. Artikel ini bertujuan membincangkan ciri-ciri visual rekaan mural yang terdapat pada KMOM sebagai asas penting di dalam memahami rekaan mural yang telah digunakan di dalam seni bina Melayu tradisional khususnya di wilayah Pantai Timur Malaysia. Kajian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan dua fasa pelaksanaan iaitu pendokumentasian di fasa pertama dan analisis visual bagi fasa ke dua. Kaedah formal visual analisis telah digunakan di dalam membuat analisis ciri-ciri visual mural dengan melihat kepada dua aspek utama iaitu elemen dan prinsip rekaan. Kajian mendapati elemen visual pada mural adalah terdiri dari elemen warna, bentuk, garisan dan motif, sementara bagi prinsipal pula adalah keseimbangan, penonjolan, corak dan penyatuan.

**Kata Kunci:** Analisis formal, Elemen seni, Masjid Lama Kedai Mulong, Mural, Prinsip rekaan



# FORMAL ANALYSIS OF VISUAL CHARACTERISTIC IN MURAL ARTS AT KEDAI MULONG OLD MOSQUE, KELANTAN

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## Abstract

*A mural is a two-dimensional visual art form that has long been utilized as a decorative element in many buildings worldwide. However, the use of mural art as a decorative element in traditional Malay architecture is seldom encountered, unlike the three-dimensional carving arts or seni ukiran. The discovery of murals at Kedai Mulong Old Mosque (KMOM) during conservation works in 2009 has laid the foundation for new knowledge regarding the utilization of mural art as a decorative element in traditional Malay architecture. KMOM was initially constructed in the mid-19th century as a Balairong Seri (Royal Assembly Hall) before being converted into a mosque by Kedai Mulong's community in 1958. Originally part of a royal complex, the mural arts in KMOM exhibit the finesse and richness of interior decorative elements, contributing significantly to the study of Malay cultural art and architecture. This article aims to discuss the visual features of mural design found in KMOM as a crucial basis for understanding the mural designs used in traditional Malay architecture, especially in the East Coast Region of Malaysia. The study employs a qualitative approach with two phases of implementation: documentation in the first phase and visual analysis for the second phase. The formal method of visual analysis has been applied to analyse the visual characteristics of murals, focusing on two main aspects: the elements and principles of design. The study reveals that the visual elements on the mural include colour, shape, lines, and motifs, while the principles encompass balance, prominence, pattern, and unification.*

**Keywords:** Design Principle, Element of Art, Formal Analysis, Kedai Mulong Old Mosque, Mural

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## 1.0 Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the results of the analysis on the visual characteristics of mural art found on the interior walls of Kedai Mulong Old Mosque (KMOM) using the Formal Analysis method. Formal analysis is an approach or analytical method conducted through the utilization of a formal or structural framework to comprehend and assess a creative outcome, particularly visual art forms such as paintings, sculptures, and architectural works. It is primarily carried out by experts in the field, such as connoisseurs, who provide a detailed analysis of the artwork by describing its visual features. Formal analysis involves presenting an argument based on the observer's own visual evidence, taking a stance, and creating an interesting interpretation of the artwork. Hence, formal analysis is crucial in understanding artworks as it provides a systematic approach to examining the visual elements and principles of design. This, in turn, facilitates a deeper appreciation of the artwork's meaning and context.

A mural is defined as any artwork painted or applied directly onto a wall, ceiling, or fixed surface, whether situated within the interior or exterior of a building (Escorteganha et al., 2013). In the context of modern Western art history in the 20th century, the term "mural painting" has been specifically associated with artworks created on walls during the mural revolution in Mexico (Campbell, 2003). The production of murals typically involves the application of sketches and colors directly onto a wall surface, often in association with the architectural and environmental context (J Chakrabarti et al., 1995). Murals linked to architecture possess the ability to evoke a sense of space by harmonizing and aligning with the architectural character of the building (Wallace S. Baldinger et al., 1960). Beyond their role as decorative elements on buildings, murals hold cultural significance that necessitates exploration and preservation. The importance of murals lies in the wealth of cultural expression they encapsulate, their aesthetic accomplishments, and the diverse techniques and materials employed throughout history (ICOMOS, 2003).

The discovery of mural elements on the panelled wall at KMOM during conservation works conducted by the National Heritage Department (NHD) in 2009 has unveiled a new perspective on the utilization of 2D visual art, specifically murals, as decorative elements in Malay architectural works, traditionally dominated by the 3D art of carving. This discovery gains added significance when considering its association with the original function of the mosque building as the *Balairong Seri* or Royal Court Hall, a high-status structure in the Malay community. Currently, limited knowledge exists regarding the use of 2D visual arts, particularly murals, in decorating the interiors of traditional Malay architectural forms, especially those of high-status buildings. As a recent revelation in the realm of decorative arts within a culturally significant building exhibiting traditional Malay architecture, a comprehensive understanding of the visual character of this newfound mural becomes imperative. Consequently, this paper aims to examine the visual characteristics of the murals discovered at KMOM, with a specific focus on two primary aspects: design elements and principles.

## 2.0 Background of Study

The mural at Kedai Mulong Old Mosque (KMOM) was discovered in 2009 during the conservation process of this heritage mosque carried out by the National Heritage Department (NHD). The existence of mural elements on the wooden panelled wall, locally



known as *Dinding Janda Berhias*, had never been mentioned by any party, indicating that it was previously unknown to the current generation and is, therefore, considered a new discovery. The revelation of mural art as decorative elements in KMOM occurred accidentally during the process of scraping off the wall paint layer, one of the scopes of work within the conservation project in 2009. This project aimed to remove the paint layer, considered not part of the mosque's original paint, and after the discovery, conservation work on the mosque continued. However, attention to the conservation of the mural was not prioritized initially, though the contractor was instructed to exercise caution in scraping the wall paint layer to minimize potential damage to the mural (JWN, 2009). The reason for not conducting conservation work on the mural at this time is that it falls outside the scopes of work for the conservation contractor and requires specialists in the field of mural conservation.

There are 60 mural panels on the walls of KMOM, varying in size based on the panel size of the wall. The largest mural panel was discovered at the door head of the mosque's entrance, featuring intricate and elaborative calligraphy motifs. While most murals are found on wall panels inside the mosque, this decorative painting art has also been identified on the *buah buton*, one of the decorative elements located on the timber roof structure. The creation of murals, as seen in KMOM, is believed to enhance the interior of the building and serves as a decorative element alongside the carving elements. These murals are assumed to have been produced concurrently with the construction of the building structure and not added in a later era. The use of murals or paintings as decorative elements on traditional Malay buildings in Malaysia is considered unique, as such ornamentation is rarely found. Traditional Malay buildings typically feature carvings in the building components of houses, mosques, and palaces, with only occasional painted carvings, such as those found on the Istana Seri Menanti in Negeri Sembilan and Istana Kenangan in Kuala Kangsar, differing from the murals at KMOM.

The use of murals as decorative elements in KMOM is linked to the building's original function as a *Balairong Seri*, signifying its high-status in the Malay community. Presently located in Kedai Mulong subdistrict, approximately 11 km from Kota Bharu, KMOM was constructed around 1900, during the reign of Sultan Muhamad IV. Originally a *Balairong Seri* belonging to Raja Dewa, Tuan Zainal Abidin, one of the sons of Sultan Muhammad III and the biological brother of Sultan Muhammad IV, the building was initially situated in the Kelantan royal village in Kota Bharu, near Istana Jahar, Istana Balai Besar, and the Muhammadi Mosque. After World War II, the building was abandoned and underutilized until 1958 when the residents of Kampung Kedai Mulong purchased and relocated the *Balairong Seri* structure for RM1000, converting it into a mosque. The structure of KMOM exemplifies the high value of traditional Malay craftsmanship, reflecting its original function as *Balairong Seri*, and showcases the beauty and richness of traditional Malay architecture on the east coast of the Peninsular Malaysia, commonly associated with the influence of the old kingdoms of Langkasuka and Patani (Mohamed Som S et al., 2020).

### 3.0 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach involving two phases of execution: the first phase, Documentation, and the second phase, Visual Analysis. In the initial phase, comprehensive and systematic documentation was conducted on the murals located on the panelled wall of KMOM using the Scaled Photography method. Scaled Photography is a non-metric image-based documentation method that integrates a digital camera and



Computer-Aided Design (CAD) software capable of manipulating images to a specific scale, such as AutoCAD. The purpose of utilizing Scaled Photography is to produce a clear and accurate documentation of each mural, including its size. The production of quality, clear, and accurate information is integral to the cultural heritage documentation process (Divay Gupta, 2007). The results of this documentation reveal that a significant portion of the images or designs in the mural has become blurred, and some are nearly lost. Therefore, the use of Photoshop software has aided in reviving the almost-lost images to facilitate more effective analysis.

In the second phase, the images of all the recorded murals were analysed using Formal Analysis, focusing on two aspects: elements and principles. A notable figure in the development of Formal Analysis is Roger Fry (1866-1934), an English art critic who proposed a scientific approach in analysing artwork, explaining what the viewer sees independently from the subject or emotional impact of a work. Formal Analysis is a specific method used to explain visual artwork, not meant to evoke the reader's thoughts on the work but to elucidate its visual structure, how certain visual elements are arranged and function within its composition (Munsterberg, 2009, J Paul Getty, 2011). According to Glatstein J (2009), the elements in Formal Analysis can be likened to building components that can be combined to form a larger structure. Meanwhile, the principle explains how these components are combined with each other. The elements on the mural that have been analysed include line, value, shape, form, space, colour, and texture. The analysis related to principles focused on aspects of balance, contrast, movement, emphasis, pattern, proportion, and unity.






Visual Characteristic is a term derived from the combination of two basic words, namely visual and characteristic. According to the dictionary of Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka, visual means something observable based on sight. Meanwhile, the word characteristic refers to the feature or prominent attribute found in an entity. Therefore, the term visual characteristic describes the characteristics of a thing, whether living or non-living, understood or evaluated through vision or its observable external features. According to Pallavi (2016), Visual Characteristic can be defined as any properties or characteristics visually identified in all living and non-living things. Therefore, Formal Analysis is closely related to the visual characteristics of an artwork, serving as a method of examining and interpreting these characteristics to understand how they contribute to the overall design and meaning of the work. It also provides a detailed understanding of the visual elements comprising the mural and how these elements collaborate to create a cohesive and meaningful composition.

#### **4.0 The Analysis of Mural Visual Characteristics**

There are 60 mural panels in KMOM, categorized into 5 main types based on their size, shape, and placement: Door Head Panels, Main Wall Panels, Medium Wall Panels, Small Wall Panels 1, and Small Wall Panels 2. The murals are predominantly unrestored, with some in severely dilapidated condition where the image or motif design is entirely obscured. The process of removing the paint that covered them during the conservation work, coupled with natural degradation factors, has led to damage to the murals. However, despite the challenges, most of the images and motif designs on the mural panels, which are over 100 years old, are still visible. This visibility has facilitated the analysis conducted in this study.



**Table 1: 5 main types of mural's panel**

		
<p><b>Type 1: Door Header Panels</b> Size: 930mm x 290mm No: 1 panel</p>	<p><b>Type 2: Main Wall Panels</b> Size: 523mm x 212mm No: 47 panels</p>	<p><b>Type 3: Medium Wall Panels</b> Size: 210mm x 185mm No: 8 panels</p>
		
<p><b>Type 4: Small Wall Panel 1</b> Size: 50mm x 523mm No: 2 panels</p>	<p><b>Type 5: Small Wall Panel 2</b> Size: 210mm x 50mm No: 2 panels</p>	

Generally, the murals found in KMOM have been produced according to the size of the wooden wall panels where each image and pattern design is drawn in the middle of each panel where there is a frame in the form of an embossed line that is the same size as the inflated part of the wall panel. Not all of these decorated wall panels have murals, instead murals are only painted on panels of a certain size with alternating positions to form a modular pattern on the entire wall.

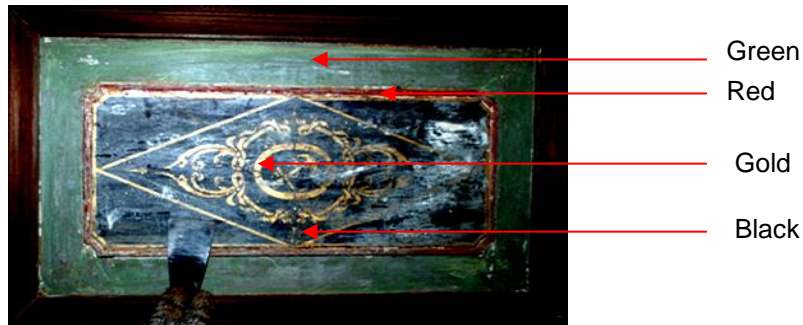
### **Element of Design**

#### *Color*

There are four main colours used in the production of murals at KMOM which are green, gold, black and red. Green and black colours are highlighted as background colours for each mural panel where green is used as the background for the outer part of the panel while black is used as the background colour for the middle part of the mural which is the center of attention for each panel. Gold colour has been used as the main colour for the decorative motif painting which is the most prominent element of the mural. Decorative motif paintings produced using the colour gold become more prominent with the use of black as the background colour. The heart red colour has been used to frame the black square in the middle and to be the border between the green colour in the outer square

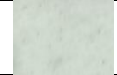

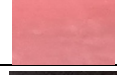

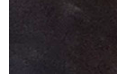



and the black square in the middle.



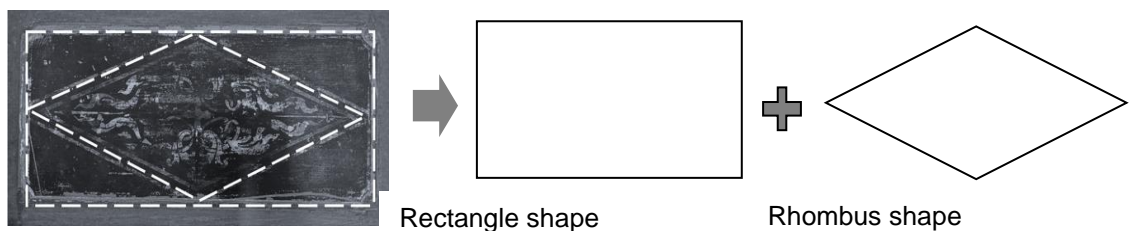
Picture 1: The colors found on the mural panel (source: author, 2021)

Table 2: Name of color based on local name and Munsell chart

Color	Name	Color	Color code from Chart Munsell
	Emerald Green		2.5G 7/2
	Heart Red		5R 5/12
	Black		Munsell True Black N 0.5

### Shape

There are few shapes used in the mural of KMOM. The use of repeated shapes is found in most of mural panels on the main wall. There are two prominent geometric shapes that are highlighted in the main wall, namely the shape of rectangle and the shape known as rhombus. The rectangle shape has been accentuated using gold and red heart colours that follow the shape of the wooden piece of panels where the mural is located. While the rhombus shape that also uses the colour of gold fills the middle of the rectangular panel where each corner of the rhombus is touching the boundary line of the rectangle. Meanwhile the middle part of the rhombus is filled and decorated with various motifs and free forms, whether they are plant motif base such as flowers and foliges, entangled moving clouds locally known as *Awan Larat*, abstract form as well as specific iconographic item such as ship's anchor and some other things that have not yet been identified.



Picture 2: Extraction of shape from panel of mural (source: author, 2021)

### *Lines*

Line is seen as the most prominent elements in the KMOM mural. The use of straight lines is a continuation or reflection of the geometric shape of the wooden panel, which is rectangular shape where the murals are placed. Lines have been highlighted as an important element to produce the main geometrical shapes of the mural which are rectangles and rhombus shapes using gold colour paint over the black background. There are also lines that are used in multiples to produce a rhombus shape by stacking each one and forming two rhombus shapes of different sizes in the middle. The use of lines can also be seen in the motifs of one of the mural panels where the lines have been used repeatedly to form a square loop in the middle of the mural and decorated with circular plant motifs.

### *Motif*

There are various motifs can be seen at each mural panel which gives the impression that the highlighted motifs are the focal point for each mural panel. From the observation, it was found that there are 4 types of motifs that are highlighted, namely motifs based on plants, equipment, clouds, and geometric shapes. Motifs based on plants are the most motifs discovered in KMOM mural. Among the motifs that can be identified are Lotus plant and flowers (*Nelumbo nucifera*), Peony flowers (*Paeonia lactiflora*) and bamboo trees (*Bambusoideae*). The motif that displays equipment as subject of iconography in KMOM mural is ships anchor which located on the left side of interior wall. However, there are also other elements that are highlighted as motifs in the mural but have not been ascertained accurately and require further investigation due to its poor condition. The cloud motif is also seen to have been used as a motif in the middle of the mural alongside geometric motifs surrounded by winding and leafy plants.



**Picture 3:** Creeping plant  
(source: author, 2021)



**Picture 4:** Lotus plant and  
flowers (*Nelumbo  
nucifera*)  
(source: author. 2021)



**Picture 5:** Peony flowers  
(*Paeonia lactiflora*)  
(source: author, 2021)

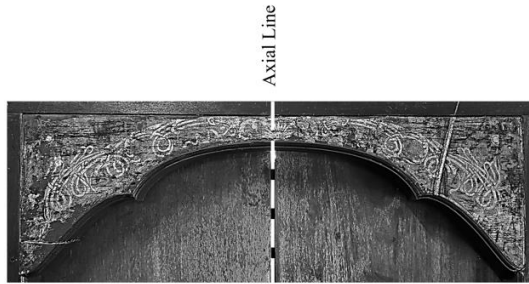
### Principle

#### *Balance*

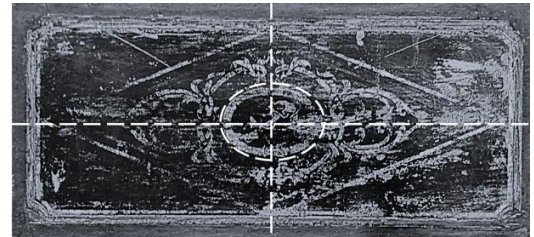
Balance is the most used principle in this mural. Most of the murals found show the principle of balance through the design of patterns and motifs that are symmetrical either on the vertical axis or horizontal axis. The most prominent principle of balance is found at the header frame of the door where the motif painting on the left side is a literal reflection to the motif painting on the right side. The shadow of the central axis of symmetry can clearly be observed at the centre of the door header which is marked by



a sun-like iconography. The principle of balance is also very clearly present in almost all the murals on the main wall panels. The shapes of rectangles and rhombuses that are widely used are symmetrical shapes, thus giving balance to the mural painting. The various motifs that are drawn and fill the space in the shape of a rhombus are also found to apply a clear principle of balance where the motif on the left side is a reflection of the motif on the right side, while the same motif is also reflected on the horizontal line and produces a reflection of the same motif on the bottom. The central space which is the centre of the mural is painted with a specific motif and become the centre of balance to the mural on each panel.



**Picture 6:** Mural at door header with axial line (source: author, 2021)



**Picture 7:** vertical line and horizontal line highlight the balance principle in the mural (source: author, 2021)

### *Emphasis*

Emphasis is a principle in design that aims to attract viewer attention to focus on particular part of the design. There are several approaches are used by artists or designers in applying this principle such as the use of colours, sizes, shapes and patterns that aim to make certain parts stand out or get more attention than others (J P Getty, 2011). The use of emphasis as design principle in the mural art at KMOM can be identified through the use of colour, where the colour of gold is used vastly in the main shapes and motifs of the mural. The emphasis of the gold colour becomes stronger with the use of contrasting black background. The principle of emphasis is also applied in the composition of the motif painting where symbols or motifs that carry important meaning are placed in the middle of the mural and surrounded by motifs of *Awan Larat* or entwined plants that frame it. As a whole, the murals in KMOM have apply the principle of emphasis using two approaches which are firstly through the use of prominent colours scheme and secondly through various pattern designs that are contrast to the background colour and therefore attracts attention of those who see it.

### *Pattern*

The existence of patterns as a principle in the design of artworks can be traced through the use of repeated symbols or objects. In the KMOM's mural, patterns are not used as a design principle for each mural individually. However, patterns can be seen to exist in the entire mural panels of the mosques walls where there is repetition of the use of shapes and colours with consistent arrangement of mural panels. Although the pattern is not used as a design principle on individual mural, it exists on the larger part of internal surface of KMOM panelled wall because the repetition use of shape, size and colour in



individual mural panels.



**Picture 8:** Repetition and consistent arrangement of murals on the wall have created pattern (source: author, 2021)

### *Unity*

Unity or unification is a pattern design principle that produces a sense of harmony to the entire elements in the mural and produces a feeling of completeness. In the KMOM's mural, the principle of unity is very clear to be used in every mural panel. The use of frames arranged in stages according to the size hierarchy that organizes from the outer parameters towards the centre of the panel has created harmony and a clear unifying principle. There are no elements or motifs that are opposed to each other such as overlapping or opposing. Ideally, all elements and motifs should be arranged in their respective places with positions that complement each other. For example, in the middle of the main wall panel mural, floral motif elements are arranged to fill the space in a rhombus shape without touching the lines. While the arrangement of flora motifs also provides appropriate space for important elements to be highlighted in the middle of the mural without overlapping or contradicting. The arrangement and relationship that exists between each element of this pattern design has created a very strong principle of unity for this mural.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

This paper aims to discuss the fundamental visual characteristics of the murals located on the internal walls of KMOM in Kelantan, originally a *Balairong Seri* owned by Raja Dewa. This discovery holds significant importance as evidence of the use of mural arts as decorative elements in Malay architectural heritage in Malaysia, which is traditionally associated with the use of wood carving. Studying the visual characteristics of these murals can contribute to the development of further research, particularly concerning the influence and origin of the mural techniques. There are four predominant colours employed in the murals: green, red, black, and gold, observed as background, borderline, and motif elements in the murals. The murals feature two main shapes – a square and a rhombus – as design elements, complemented by the use of line elements on individual panels and in the layout of entire murals on the building's walls. The motif, serving as the focal element, is extensively used in the mural, highlighted in gold and centrally positioned on each panel.

Four main design principles govern these murals: balance, prominence, pattern, and



unification. The principle of balance is evident in most mural designs through symmetrical axis compositions, either on the vertical or horizontal plane. The use of square and rhombus shapes on the primary mural panel further reinforces the principle of balance in pattern design. Moreover, the principle of emphasis is demonstrated through the use of a prominent colour, specifically gold, in painting motifs, contrasting with a black background. Although the principle of pattern was not explicitly identified on individual panels, the use of repeated shapes, colours, and sizes of mural panels in a particular order suggests the application of this principle. Finally, the principle of unification is clearly observed in nearly every single mural through the arrangement of mural borders and motifs, complementing each other to form a cohesive and complete design combination.

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