



## Traditional Wood Carving Legacy With Reference To Works Of Master Craftsman, Allahyarham Wan Mustafa Wan Su

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**Abstract:** *The art and craft of traditional Malay woodcarving may be forgotten by modern generation and consequently would gradually become one of an extinct craft in Malaysia if lack of effort in saving its legacy. This paper aims to uncover the art and craft heritage of traditional woodcarving and its visual attributes and craftsmanship in the works of a master craftsman, Allahyarham Wan Mustafa Wan Su, who was actively involved in the craft industry before he passed away in 2019. Traditional Malay wood carving is synonymous with the Malay heritage, especially in the Northern Eastern states of Peninsula Malaysia. Safeguarding of this intangible heritage is crucial after the departure of the master craftsman, who had contributed a lot in the woodcarving industry. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to analyse his works in relation to his crafts and styles of craftsmanship. His works and opinions that served as inferential evidences were obtained through face-to-face interviews that was conducted within an informal setting. The interviews focused on the aspect of craft and craftsmanship of woodcarving with particular emphasis on the visual attributes and technique use. Observation and photographic documentation of his works were necessary measures to complement the interviews. Hence, examination on the works produced by the master, which exemplifies his distinctive craftsmanship is also addressed in this paper. The research finds that additional values including artistic and design skills further enrich the products of the master carver, which not only provide stimulus for admiration but also serve as valuable references for the present and future generation of woodcarvers. Thus, from this research, the knowledge about the woodcarving could spread for further research to ensure the future survival of the craft heritage.*

**Keywords:** Wood carving, craft, heritage, Adiguru kraf, Wan Mustafa Wan Su

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### 1. Introduction

Wan Mustafa Wan Su was one of the prominent Malay craftsmen and the government of Malaysia has recognized him as Adiguru kraf Ukiran Kayu (master craftsman of woodcarving) in the year 2007. He has crafted wood carvings with a range of visual qualities in the carvings. It is customary that the works of Malay master craftsmen become sources of admiration as a result of his works, which have intrinsic features manifested through skillfulness and craftsmanship. Application of skills and material-based knowledge influence the credibility of craftsmanship (Adamson, 2009). The ways of carving are distinctive in characters that are inextricably bound to their individual taste and air tangan (skillfulness). This has given advantage for local industrial production of wood craft and has given some positive impact on the market value for Malaysian traditional craft. However, the art and craft of traditional Malay wood carving may be forgotten by modern generation and consequently would gradually

become one of an extinct craft in Malaysia if lack of effort in saving its legacy. This paper aims to uncover the art and craft heritage of traditional wood carving and its visual attributes and craftsmanship in the works of master craftsman, Allayarham Wan Mustafa Wan Su, who was actively involved in the craft industry before he passed away in 2019. Traditional Malay wood carving is synonymous with the Malay heritage, especially in the Northern Eastern states of Peninsula Malaysia. Safeguarding of this intangible heritage is crucial before the retirement or departure of the master craftsman. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to analyse his works in relation to his crafts and styles of craftsmanship. Examination on his works would reveal his legacy in safeguarding the heritage of wood craft and the outcome of this research would serve as valuable references for the related parties.

## 2. Literature Review

### Traditional Malay Wood Carving

The wood carving is a form of handicraft that has long existed in parallel with the Malay design. Craft is an application of skills and material-based knowledge to relatively small-scale production (Adamson, 2009). The craft of traditional Malay wood carving is an expression of Malay creativity found in various categories, namely, weapons, daily utensils, transportation, traditional games, architectural components and agricultural tools. As noted by Syed Ahmad Jamal (2007), the use of wood in Malay culture is extensive that from a kris hilt, sail boats and congkak (a traditional game) to wall screens which are all made for accessories of daily uses and living. Its legacy reflects on its unique craftsmanship of traditional Malay craftsmen. In the art of wood carving, craftsmanship refers to the aptitude, skill or quality workmanship in the use of carving tools and hardwood timber species especially chengal, red balau, merbau and sena (Ismail, 2005). The skills of transforming a solid plank or block into a relief and non-relief components are learned through process of apprenticeship. Meanwhile, Wilbur (2008) posits that skillfulness in carving is accumulated over years of practice, thorough knowledge of the wood carving and woodworking trades, and by mastering technique.

In Malaysia, the traditional wood carving is one of art forms that has been in long existence and the exact date that marks the origin of making this art form is unknown. The precise date or age of wooden artefacts still existing today cannot be established with certainty due to lack of accurate written records because most of them were for daily application. However, the art of stone carving among Malays has already been endured by the people of the older generations in 15th century (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2007). Hard stones are known to have been carved for utilitarian and ornamental purposes in the South East Asia since the ancient civilization, and despite the Hinduism tradition of carving that began centuries before the Islamic Era, it was not until the Islamic period which began in the 14th century that the technology and practice of the Malay wood carving achieved its highest and most extensive development. Later, highly developed techniques of wood carving have been used over the centuries for a variety of functional use and ornamental themes. The development of the art of Malay wood carving has been attributed to the roles of patrons that consequently caused the expansion of the creativity and growth of this wood craft. Also, Ismail (2005) states that the strength of the wood carving lies in a form of artistic dimension and assisted by the abundance of natural resources that stimulate the development of the craftsmen's creativity. The long survival of the wood carving is due to abundance of timber and plant species in the natural environment of Malays apart from well-off imagination and skills of the craftsman and continuous patronage by the wealthy and aristocratic Malays.

The above literatures suggest that the wood carving remains as long-established and long inherited wood craft and it had inspired the craftsmen of past generations to produce not only the functional wares but intricate carvings. Consequently, it has contributed to the development of the art of Malay wood carving in the Malay Peninsula.

### **3. Methods of Research**

This study entailed exploratory research that involved analysis of photographic documentation and collection of information from the past semi-structured interviews with the master craftsman. Allahyarham Wan Mustafa Wan Su was from Besut in Terengganu and ran his business at Balai Seni Wanpo, located in Alur Lintang, Besut, in north Terengganu. At the age of late 70s, he was still an active woodcarver and still at the forefront in the carving industry thus, making him as one of the renowned craftsmen not only from Besut, in the north part of Terengganu but also in the nation, especially due to his status as Adiguru Kraf. The term Adiguru Kraf literally means master craftsman, who receives the award of best craftsman and recognition from Malaysian government as a master craftsman once they have fulfilled the specified criteria. Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia (PKKM) states that the criteria are: 1) possess high knowledge and skill in the field of craft, 2) his expertise or specialization in the art of craftsmanship, design, product making and production of craft works of Malaysian heritage, 3) play significant roles in the conservation and preservation of heritage craft, 4) serious in the transmission of skillfulness to the apprentice to ensure the continuity of the heritage craft, 5) creative and innovative in ensuring the advancement and increase of quality craft products. These criteria have become drives for local craftsmen to achieve the prestige recognition by the Malaysian government. Many local craftsmen have fulfilled the criteria that put him or her as one of the prominent craftsmen, thus recognized him or her as Adiguru kraf.

Many people know him for his carvings on decorative components of Masjid Jertih, Terengganu. He has strong backgrounds with more than 40 years experiences and contributed immensely in this craft industry. His reputations in the wood carving industry are highly known especially in the North eastern region of Peninsular Malaysia. Hence, he was an expert who possessed vast knowledge about traditional wood carving, which were vital for discovery through interpreting and clarifying concepts and ideas related to the subjects of investigation. The special strength of qualitative inquiry is that it gives an opportunity to learn about what cannot be seen and to explore alternative explanations of what is seen (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

### **4. Analysis, Findings and Discussion**

The main objective of this research is to analyse the works of Adiguru kraf Wan Mustafa Wan Su in relation to his wood carving crafts and styles of craftsmanship. The research determined the master craftsman's methods of sustaining the wood carving for industrial craft production through qualitative research. The study found that most of the profound works produced by the master craftsman have strong adherence to the traditional roots and philosophy of Malay woodcarving. Wan Mustafa preferred producing wood carvings, that were inspired and derived from local plants such as herbs, weeds and climbing legume or creepers. This suggests his fondness to the application of plant-based motif as design elements in the wood carving. He had preferably responded to the visual quality of the plants by preserving it in forms of wood carving with the best way whenever he can. He used two methods of crafting carving motif: (1) close imitation of natural plants from immediate surroundings, and (2) transformation of the

plant motifs that barely resemble their real-life image. Table 1 shows the results of the visual analysis done on his carvings which have been selected from the primary and secondary data.

**Table 1: Selected carvings in relation to the styles of motif depiction and craft methods**

<b>Sample carvings</b>	<b>Styles of motif depiction</b>	<b>Techniques of carving</b>	<b>Craft methods</b>
Table top panel	Awan larat of flower design	Semi-pierced with relief carving	Imitation of natural plants in stylized form
Window panel	Awan larat of flower design	Perforated with relief carving	Imitation of natural plants in stylized form
<i>Mimbar</i> (pulpit)	Awan larat of flower design	Perforated with relief carving	Imitation of natural plants in stylized form
Mihrab wall	Abstraction of natural elements	Semi-pierced with relief carving	transformation of the plant motifs
Lighting panel	Abstraction of natural elements	Perforated carving	transformation of the plant motifs
Vertical wall panel	Awan larat of flower design	Perforated with relief carving	Imitation of natural plants in stylized form
Horizontal ventilation panel	Awan larat of floral design	Perforated with relief carving	transformation of the plant motifs
Decorative panel	Abstraction of natural elements	Semi-pierced with relief carving	transformation of the plant motifs
Window ventilation panel	Awan larat of flower design	Perforated with relief carving	Imitation of natural plants in stylized form
Wall partition	Awan larat of flower design	Semi-pierced with relief carving	Imitation of natural plants in stylized form

The analysis of Wan Mustafa's works shows that awan larat of flower design had become his favourite choice for his various types of woodcrafts. Depiction of natural plant elements had appeared in different form of wood carvings including table top panel, window panel, mimbar (pulpit), mihrab wall, lighting panel, vertical wall panel, horizontal wall panel, decorative panel, window ventilation panel and wall partition. This method of application of plant elements as carving motifs was not arbitrary and it was done with careful selection and for intended purposes. The styles of depiction represent compositional meaning, for example the depiction of motif in upward growth of a natural plant conforms to explicit and implicit rules that were long established in the past centuries. He was very keen in safeguarding the rules and had been proliferated in his career under this trademark. The following paragraphs discuss his approaches or methods in crafting carving motifs for the selected wood carvings.

### **Crafting of Floral Motif Via Close Imitation**

Wan Mustafa who was popularly known as Wan Po noted that Allah's existence and His attributes may be partly understood through observation of His creation. Nature provides beautiful and attractive floral elements which trigger woodcarvers' attention. They may subsequently think about and be inspired by this beauty in nature, resulting to a generation of carvings with exclusive forms. This is achieved through close imitation of natural plants that invite their attention. The essential characters of a real-life plant were taken into account. Sometimes the shapes of a flower or leaf are modified or shortened to accommodate the space or surface of carving. The flower is used as a central and focal element that serves as an identifying feature for the specific carved panel. The application of flower that serves as a principal element and identifying feature is to differentiate between several motifs. Perhaps due to this function, the flower of bunga emas (*Wedelia trilobata*) as shown in Figure 1 is depicted as a central element in the carving of Wan Mustafa. Bunga Emas is a non-native plant brought

to this country sometimes 30 years ago. Hence, this motif was not popular among the past generation of carvers because they had not seen it. Even though bunga emas is considered as a new motif but its depiction in growth of a natural plant conforms to explicit and implicit rules of traditional carving.



**Figure 1: Bunga emas is depicted in a semi-pierced carving**

According to Wan Mustafa, a flower is a focal element in Malay carving because of its beauty. Carvers denote carving style as *bunga* (a flower), thus it is logical that flower becomes a central element in a carving panel. Thus, their inspirations are pivoted in their natural surroundings. For example, *bunga melur* (*Gardenia jasminoides* also known as *Gardenia augusta*) as shown in Figure 2a is a fragrant flowering and evergreen tropical plant which are available in many areas including house yards, gardens or landscapes. The plant has outstanding ornamental features especially its white blossoms and glossy foliage that are appealing. Hence these properties of the shrub draw woodcarver’s attention and inspire him to carve its beauty on wood, for example as apparent in the carved panel shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: A carved panel depicting a motif of bunga melur**

Wan Mustafa explained, “woodcarvers are most attracted to the shape of a particular flower. The flower’s physical character becomes the most appealing to them regardless of its colour. Unlike paintings, the craft of wood carvings does not require the use of colour in its composition. In the craft of wood carving, the main emphasis is given on the form of silat (style of carving)”. Thus, only plants with beautiful features of blossoms trigger woodcarver’s attention and become their creative inspiration. Furthermore, he emphasized that the

woodcarver should be creative in deploying the carving elements like plant motifs and using them in many ways to develop carving as their individual expression.

The study also found that apart from creative inspiration from nature, there are two additional values in the making of carving: (1) artistic value, for example, by carving detailed features, and (2) design value, for example, representation of design concept in carvings as evident in Wan Mustafa's works (Figures 1). This is an example of product with artistic value because to form such carving character demands skilfulness and creativity. It also has design value which is reflected on the compositional elements that represent a concept of growth as in the awan larat pattern. Hence, the flow of the carving has reason apart from its tangible and intangible meanings. In short, carving motif appears in many different forms as observed in the selected wood carving products of Wan Mustafa, ranging from single motifs to extended and complicated pattern. This shows a lively work in woodcraft in both single and complicated design and usually contains recognisable forms although in some cases the types of carving motifs are hardly identified.

### **Crafting of floral motif via imagination and transformation**

Transformation of the plant motifs that barely resemble their real-life image is another method of carving used by Wan Mustafa. For example, a drawing done by him as shown in Figure 3 illustrates an example of awan larat with a motif of bunga khayalan (imaginative motif) in the traditional method of carving pattern. This type of motif is based on his artistic imagination without copying any plant but the principal character of living plant is maintained. This carving begins from a source hidden in the flower vase. This is one type of awan larat which used the method of sorok punca (hidden source). The carving begins from a source in form of kepala kala (a source) where other plant elements emerge.



**Figure 3: Wan Mustafa illustrates a freehand design of awan larat**

Wan Mustafa had always cherished the traditional concept of the awan larat and he always retained the concept in his woodcraft. According to him, every flow of the carving elements in this pattern has compositional meaning such as intertwining and gentle movements of stems and leaves are well regulated. In this type of pattern, motifs of plants were represented as identifying elements for the carved panels in two-dimensional format. For example, the use of cempaka (*michelia campaca*) and melor (*gardenia jasminoides*), garden herbs with fragrant

flowers and glossy leaves (Figure 2) are common as the main motif. From the innumerable images of natural plants, a tradition of creative designs has evolved incorporating flowers, leaves, leave-shoots, branches and flower buds. The elements of a beautiful flower and leaves, for example, became the central or focal objects and were transformed into images with endless forms and patterns. In short, motifs of plants are dominant in his carving products. Nasr (1987) postulates that the works of Muslim artists reveal inspiration they derive from their environment and their strict adherence to the teachings of the Islamic faith.

### **Styles of Craftsmanship: Wan Mustafa's Design Approach for Carved Panels of Pulpit in Masjid Jertih**

Wan Mustafa Wan Su was a renowned and master woodcarver who has produced a vast collection of woodcarvings, which expresses typical Malay designs with a high quality of craftsmanship. His skilfulness in carving are not only limited to fabricating old traditional Malay woodcarving but also producing woodworks with fresh ideas and concepts, for example, as apparent in the underlying design of the carvings and its motifs at the mimbar (pulpit) of Masjid Jertih, Terengganu. This work is considered as his new dimension in producing wood carving but still maintaining the traditional concept of *awan larat* that is translated in a new version of composition with Islamic theme. This piece of art work is considered as Wan Mustafa's step forward in his career as a woodcarver. He believed that craftsmanship in the craft of carving should grow and could be developed further. Hence, in this work, he considered producing carved components that have meanings and convey messages to viewers apart from generating a beautiful carving which is appropriate for a praying hall in the mosque. These attributes are evident in the wood carvings found at the mimbar of Masjid Jertih as shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4: The front view of the pulpit and a carved panel with calligraphy motif at the mihrab**

Wan Mustafa has chosen bunga kenanga (*Cananga Odorata*) for panels of pulpit for two reasons. First, this flower was chosen due to its long petal which is suitable to represent the concept intended for the carving. According to Wan Mustafa, the representation of intended meaning and composition would not be fulfilled if other types of flower were chosen as carving motifs. The long petals of kenanga could be manipulated easily according to the design and shape of the panel. Second, bunga kenanga was formally recognized as a state flower of Terengganu. In terms of the layout and orientation of the carving, the motif begins from a flower seed to represent the source which is positioned at the central base of the panel and

flows in upward direction with intertwining movements. This is one type of carving, which applied motif of a natural flower as a central theme with an abstract representation.



**Figure 5: Carved panels showing carvings of awan larat in a new version**

Carving technique applied in a specific panel was not only for visual aesthetic but also to indicate individual style of carving by woodcarvers. For example, the carving techniques shown in Figure 5 represent a gentle character of the floral motifs. This portion of flower petal is folded up to create a gentle character of the plant element which is distinctive in character. This is because beauty in awan larat is achieved through the regulated and gentle shapes of elements from various natural plants. The carving was done with skilful and artistic quality which represents Wan Mustafa's personal approach, identity and style in making this type of woodwork. This quality is required to produce an outstanding piece of woodwork as reflected in his many masterpieces. He liked to produce carvings that look different from those produced by other Malay woodcarvers because he like to be different and that is why many types of his carved panels exhibit distinct characteristics. Both panels are delicate in character, which testify his craftsmanship quality in making beautiful carvings with different techniques and compositions but with strong adherence to the Malay wood carving philosophy.

Wan Mustafa also used his artistic imagination to craft several pieces of carvings in different technique, for example, as shown in Figure 6. The motif that was depicted in perforated with relief carving was produced based on his creative idea without imitating living plant. In this panel, the expression of plant elements like leaves, flowers and stems reflect the ones in living plants although the design of motif and its composition is imaginative in nature. It has an artistic value to show that Wan Mustafa has been exploring the possibilities of foliated patterns within lawful expression as guided by his craftsmanship principles.



**Figure 6: Perforated carving with artistic imaginative motif in excellent craftsmanship**



It is apparent that in Wan Mustafa's wood carvings, the elements of composition are classified into two types which include direct imitation and transformation of living plants as based motif. In order to ensure the sustainability of the traditional carving, the physical characters for each composition were formed according to the specified rules in the formation of carving motifs and patterns. As Wan Mustafa noted, "I can use my creativity and imagination with no limit, however, the traditional concept of wood carving is strongly maintained in most of my works. I still keep this value and applied faithfully in my works as prescribed by the previous generation of woodcarvers. I learned a lot about this from my experience and previous apprenticeship". The traditions in craftsmanship could be sustained by continuing the artistic achievements of past glories from the past generations of woodcarvers (Farish and Eddin, 2003).

This paper examines different types of carved components that portray Wan Mustafa's skilfulness and creativity in the craft of wood carving. His main approach was to produce carved components that have traditional meanings and convey messages to the viewers apart from designing carvings for aesthetic purpose. Traditional concept of wood carving including design methods and techniques were applied in most of his works with novel and innovative sense. The plant-based designs found in most of his carvings are particularly distinctive. In fact, all woodcarvers developed wood carvings with distinct characteristics and branding of their own for industrial craft production. He seems to have had an endless and ingenious appetite for exploring the huge range of design possibilities offered by the variety of timber resources and beauty in plant life. He had excelled in visual expression of his woodworks through a wide variety of artistic means according to local taste and demands. This suggests the dominant character and trends of making carved components from the north eastern region of Malay Peninsula as noted from the works produced by Wan Mustafa. These trends of carving perhaps serve as 'a model for imitation' (archetypes) but of course according to the woodcarver's craftsmanship including discretion, skilfulness, ingenuity and creativity. This has become his legacy in the wood carving industry.

## **Conclusion**

The study found that floral motifs entailed a bigger recognition in Wan Mustafa's woodcarvings as compared to the other types of motifs like geometry and calligraphy. In many cases as evident in many carvings produced by him, the use of awan larat with flower design has culminated into character that is alluring to behold. The plants have pristine beauty apart from its useful properties and medicinal values that evoked a strong character in the woodcarver's eyes. They felt visually triggered by such inviting elements like flowers and leaves in the plants. These elements inspired them to fabricate the panels with creative and innovative design with nearly inexhaustible possibilities of ideas in the carving composition. Successful depiction of plant-based motifs includes both simple and complex compositions depends greatly on the technical ability possessed by the woodcarver. Numerous elements from nature provide an avenue for the craftsman to produce inexhaustible ideas of carving motif, techniques and pattern. It is indeed up to their skilfulness, ingenuity and creativity to produce carvings in this artistic approach whereby the sky is the limit. The works carry not only tangible value of expression but also intangible meanings that is closely related to his craftsmanship. Although widely diverse in his individual inclinations or taste, Wan Mustafa had shared an interest in preserving and protecting the pre-eminence of traditional craftsmanship. Traditions in craftsmanship should be further developed by the younger generation of woodcarvers by referring to the artistic achievements from their counterparts of



older generations. Thus, further research is recommended to study on woodcarvings of other master woodcarvers and discover their legacy in the woodcraft industry. Findings from this type of study would benefit the younger generations of woodcarvers for sustainable development of craft industry. Any innovative ideas in the art of wood carving should be encouraged or promoted but need to be carefully guided by the master woodcarvers in order to sustain its heritage value. Only then they can be considered as a legacy of heirloom of traditions and innovations with native and creative design ideas as evident in most of Wan Mustafa's woodcarvings.

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