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Figurative Calligraphy: Artistic, Magic, and Religious Aspect of the Cirebon Glass Painting

Agung Zainal Muttakin Raden*¹,
Mochamad Sjafei Andrijanto²,
Wirawan Soekarwo³

Departement of Visual Communication Design,
Universitas Indraprasta PGRI^{2,3}

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to:
Agung Zainal Muttakin Raden, agung.zainalmr@gmail.com,

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Figurative Calligraphy: Artistic, Magic, and Religious Aspect of the Cirebon Glass Painting

Agung Zainal Muttakin Raden¹, Mochamad Sjafei Andrijanto²,
Wirawan Soekarwo³

Departement of Visual Communication Design, Universitas Indraprasta
PGRI¹²³

Abstract. Cirebon glass painting is a particularly famous artwork related to the Islamic art in Indonesia. Aside of its aesthetic values, Cirebon glass painting also contained symbol and message behind its ornaments. Figurative calligraphy with arabic script is frequently used by glass painting artisans to make Cirebon glass painting. The resulted figurative calligraphy can took form resembling those of human figure, plants, animals, wayang, and imaginary entity or particular symbols. As it is, Cirebon is one of the busiest port city in Java island. Therefore, many cultural exchanges happened by the interaction of many nationalities visiting Cirebon which later on assimilated to the local culture. This makes Cirebon glass painting unique since it was influenced by a mixture of cultures. This research focused on the elements that are contained on the Cirebon glass painting based on artistic, magic, and religious aspect. The result in this research has an implication to expose the symbols, message and meaning behind Cirebon glass painting and its synergy with artistic, magic, and religious aspect that makes Cirebon glass painting survived and still doing well in Cirebon society nowadays.

Keywords: Figurative Calligraphy, Cirebon Glass Painting, Artistic Aspect, Magic Aspect, Religious Aspect

Correspondence author: Agung Zainal Muttakin Raden, agung.zainalmr@gmail.com, Jakarta, Indonesia



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Introduction

Cirebon glass painting is one of the traditional artworks that are growing in Cirebon area. Formerly, Cirebon glass painting is seen as something that has no

commercial values. Glass painting is sold on the carts and sometimes is sold alongside grocery items. However, Cirebon glass painting began to be known as having a high commercial value. Cirebon glass painting is different from European glass painting. The art of Cirebon glass painting is indeed unique and complicated because of its reverse painting method from the back side of the glass, not the front. In addition, in the process of painting, special skills are needed such as accuracy, precision, and patience ([Zaman et al.](#)). The media used to create glass paintings currently vary. Not only in paint and glass, glass painting artists experiment with other materials such as ropes, grain, glue, and sand.

Cirebon glass painting is one of traditional arts among other traditional Cirebon fine arts. The Cirebon community represents art as a form of gratitude to God, so it is often accompanied by ritual processions before the process of glass painting took place. The many culture found in Cirebon is largely based on the religion and beliefs of the people, which in turn presents a unique and distinctive form of art ([Waluyo 64](#)). Cirebon Glass Painting has a deep connection between form and meaning so that every figure that is painted, in addition to creating a beautiful form, also has meaning in life.

Methods

This paper employs visual methodologies to analyze visual elements found in Cirebon glass painting using aesthetic and cultural approach. Every work is completed using formal aspects. This paper employs visual methodologies to analyze visual elements found in Cirebon glass painting using aesthetic and cultural approach. Every work is completed using formal aspects.

Result and Discussion

Calligraphy

Calligraphy is a form of technique related to beautiful handwriting. The writing style of calligraphy is usually influenced by the tools used by the calligrapher. The term calligraphy was based on Latin language consisting of words kalios which means beauty and graph which means writing. Therefore, calligraphy literally means beautiful writings. Calligraphies and illuminations in ancient manuscripts were used to express the aesthetic quality of the manuscripts, and the status of the writers and the kingdom they represent ([Azmi et al.](#)). In Arabic language, the term calligraphy is known as khat. Khat which means lines or beautiful writing was taken from the word khaththul istiwa which literally means equatorial lines, referring to the line beautifully divides the earth into two equal parts ([Sirajuddin AR 2](#)). Arabic calligraphy and Latin calligraphy is naturally different, considering the difference in script used in the writings. Calligraphy is one of the rich expressions found in Islamic arts. Arabic calligraphy is rooted from the Qur'an. Aside of its artistic form, Arabic calligraphy found in Qur'an also has religious

meaning since it was used to convey the words of God ([Rispu](#)). Besides the more common form of Arabic calligraphy such as Tsuluts, Naskhi, Farisi, Diwani, Diwani jali, Koufi, Riq'ah, and Ijazah style, there is also another style known as figurative calligraphy. Figurative calligraphy is a calligraphy style that was used to form a decorative illustration using many forms of composition. Arabic calligraphy is a fascinating art form giving rise to expressions that combine spiritual meaning with aesthetic beauty ([Moustapha and Krishnamurti](#)).

Figurative calligraphy consists of many styles and forms. Some of the forms of figurative calligraphy include: (1) Anthropomorphic calligraphy, where human is made to be the object in calligraphy; (2) Zoomorphic Calligraphy, where animal is made to be the object in calligraphy; (3) Botanical Calligraphy, where plants are made to be the object in calligraphy; (4) Architectonic Calligraphy, where buildings and human made objects are made to be the object in calligraphy; (5) Landscape Calligraphy, where earth, mountains, and ocean are made to be the object in calligraphy; (6) Projectual Calligraphy, where manufacture products and instruments are made to be the object in calligraphy, and; (7) Arabesque Calligraphy, where geometric elements and asymmetrical forms are made to be the object in calligraphy. Cirebon glass paintings usually employ these styles of figurative calligraphy. Some of the result include the paintings of Macan Ali, Semar, and Buraq.

Art Aspect

Islam as a religion rooted in realism, always concerned about the attitude and the need of human, both physical and spiritual in the form of feelings and senses in accordance to a balance human need. If sports were the physical way to fulfill the need, worship is a spiritual way to fulfill the need. Knowledge is there to fulfill logical need, while art is there to fulfill the intuition need. The art referred here is not the art that can plunge the human into depravity, but the art that can raise the status and the dignity of human ([Safliana](#)). The beauty found in this universe created by God, prove that Allah as the God love beautiful things.

The Qur'an as a revelation from God to the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) demand the human to know the value, understand the meaning, and to practice the Qur'an in their everyday life, including in the field of art. Art is usually related to the concept of beauty. Even more so than human who love the concept of beauty, Allah also love beautiful things ([Rispu](#)).

Glass painting has a high artistic value, although at the beginning of its appearance glass painting is considered a normal thing. Glass painting's status begins to elevate, having aesthetically and economically high value when it is introduced to the public through galleries, considering that previously glass paintings were normal everyday items that had little value. One of the productive glass painters at that time was Rastika. Most of Rastika's glass paintings featured the theme of puppets, srabad, and Islamic calligraphy ([Hasyim](#)). Rastika's work was first exhibited at the Sumardja Gallery ITB in Bandung. Many people appreciated Rastika's works and many of his artworks were

valued and sold. Rastika's works can be enjoyed by collectors, so that other glass painting figures emerge. Since that time, glass painting has become a work of art that has very high economic value.

Pre-Islamic elements and elements of Islam are combined in Cirebon glass painting. Besides the presence of these elements, a mixture of cultures from other nations also contributes to a unique and distinctive form of glass paintings.



Fig. 1 Sayidina Ali Glass Painting

Figure 1 above illustrates a figure of Sayidina Ali riding a horse with a two-pronged sword and a flag bearing the words "Allah". This work has good artistic value. The composition of the figure of Sayidina Ali is placed in the middle, leaving empty spaces on the left and right. Mega Mendung illustration run over it while the wadhasan are palced under the figure of Sayidina Ali. Mega Mendung and wadhasan are influenced by Chinese cultures while the harmony effect in coloring and the existence of bright dark fields are the characteristic found in European culture. The Arabic element is shown in the figure of Sayidina Ali and Islamic calligraphy.

In addition to describing Islamic figures, glass paintings also describe imaginary creatures, where these creatures are usually a combination of various cultures, as shown in Figure 2 below. The image below is a description of a creature which is a combination of giant creatures in the world of puppet with turtle which is an animal found in the Cirebon region precisely in the area of Belawa.



Fig. 2 Bulus

The Giants wear crowns representing the wayang world. Usually in wayang stories, besides kings of knights there also exist the kings of giants. Bulus, also known as a turtle or softshelled turtle comes from the Belawa region of Cirebon. With a soft shell forming a shape like human cartilage, the myth developed in the Cirebon community regarding softshell turtles or labi-labi that made this creature safe from poaching, so the population survives to this day. For the people of Cirebon, they call bullus as "KuYa" meaning "Kudu Yakin" which literally translates into need to be faithful. Bulus's picture is in the middle, above there is a mega cloud and below there is a Wadhasan. The symbol of the giant's crowned face depicts greed, strength, power, and evil, while the bullet shells something strong but soft, with calligraphy the words tawhid. Mega mendung was illustrated above and wadhasan was illustrated below. Just like glass paintings featuring Sayidina Ali, this glass painting also has an artistic characteristic in the form of dark colors in the field. The composition is influenced by European art styles.

The picture above can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the perspective we see. The giant wears a crown with a bullet inscribed with the words Tawhid, this can be interpreted as an ugly and creepy face but still has faith to believe in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The pictures show high artistic value. The placement of Cirebon ornaments is a distinctive feature, namely mega mendung and wadhasan and the depiction of figures that are stylized from various forms of plants, animals, puppets, to imaginary creatures. The visual elements in glass painting must be viewed from various scientific perspectives. The formulation of the elements in realizing the form of fine arts requires law or principle of preparation, to avoid monotony and chaos. Understanding aesthetics actually examines the forms of art that are then called design structures; which consist of design elements, and design principles (Dharsono 69).

The design principle of glass painting can be seen in its shape. The shape can be divided into two forms: (a) shape resembles a natural form (figure); and (b) shapes that do not at all resemble natural form (non-figures). Both will occur according to the artist's

ability to process objects. In object processing, there will be changes in form according to the taste and background of the artist. Changes in form include: stylization, distortion, transformation, and disinformation ([Dharsono 71](#)).

In general, glass painting takes natural elements like figures or puppet characters by not forgetting the *mega mendung* and *wadhasan* forms. Usually, these forms experience changes in the form either by stylization, distortion, transformation, and disinformation all of which depend on the taste and imagination of glass painters.

Another design element that can be observed is in the form of lines, which is a meeting of two points. Lines can describe emotions. Formal lines give a rigid impression that is geometric, while non-formal or non-geometric lines describe a more dynamic line. The line present can be interpreted as a separator, can function as a medium to reinforce the visual appearance, make the field has more weight or reduce the field in a visual display. Patterns or ornaments contained in glass paintings are formed because of the artist's own creation, then these patterns form a very beautiful shape. Emphasis or emphasis, in glass painting, is used as a focus or center of interest so that it can attract attention to those who observe it. The proportion serves to show good visual quality, are arranged so that the balance and harmony can be felt by the viewer. The visual form and quality produced from Cirebon glass painting can be seen based on wake, color, texture, patterns and ornaments and other elements that play a role in providing balance in the form of Cirebon glass painting. Painting is a blend of harmonization between artists and glass media. The work produced is Painting glass or glass amazing, various aspects of the reality of life can be symbolized in the presence of glass paintings ([Al Akhyar 515-516](#)).

Magic Aspect

A *Jimat* that has Arabic root words, *azimah*, is a cultural product of the Cirebon people before the coming and development of Islamic teachings. Trust in talismans begins with the trust of local people in sacred and supra-natural objects which are also part of the cultural daily life in Cirebon. In the era of Hindu power influence, sacred objects appeared in various forms and were part of the religious property that was inseparable from many official worship rituals. In addition, there are also many sacred objects that exist and are autonomous in the midst of the people who then form their own communities. Even these sacred objects are very diverse, ranging from cultural artifacts such as weapons and jewelry to natural contours such as mountains, trees, and rivers.

These sacred objects have many functions and values of spirituality that are difficult to map one by one. However, the common thread that unites the sacred objects is their function which becomes the medium between the real world and metaphysics. From there developed many beliefs about the symbolic function and utility of each of these sacred objects. The code for reading and interpreting these sacred objects is usually authorized by a spiritual figure recognized by the local community. Communities that believe and believe in the magical aspects possessed by these sacred objects then form more complex cultural activities in the form of special rituals that are under the control

of traditional leaders. In turn, trust in these sacred objects is standardized through the process of cultural regeneration and inheritance into a cultural code that is unique to the Cirebon user community.

In addition to aspects of art, glass painting has a magical aspect, namely how glass painting can influence those who possess it. Magic is the action or spells that are intended to influence or control of someone or something force in order to achieve something mean, for example, that something strength does not interfere with the trip was going to do, for the rains to fall so as not disturbing the people who need it, or that an animal that hunts could not gallop and could eventually be captured ([Soedarso 34](#)).

Traditional communities living in villages have harmony with nature. In the Cirebon community, a growing mystical life is a symbol of art and culture which is expressed through language, visuals, writing, traditional arts, and rituals. These mystics come from a combination of Hindu-Buddhist, Islamic and Chinese, intangible Hindu-Buddhist mysticism in wayang, Islamic mysticism gives birth to izim-izim or wafaq while China gives rise to myth in the form of Yin and Yang.

Cirebon glass painting in its early appearance was a means of preaching and wall decoration. Besides that, the presence of glass paintings at home can be taught as a function of magic which is believed by the owner to provide peace in the house. Some owners of glass paintings make it a talisman. Cirebon glass paintings in the form of calligraphy and bearing sentences from the Qur'an are often used as amulets by homeowners, amulet forms disguised in the form of glass paintings so that people who see and observe them do not expect the glass painting to be a talisman (Safari, interview, Mei 11, 2018). Aside from being a decoration, the appearance of a glass painting is able to dispel the negative energy that comes in or is aimed at the homeowner. The mystical and magic functions contained in these kinds of ornaments can be compared to the rajahan paper talisman which contains sentences written in Arabic script ([Waluyo](#)).

Although it is closely related to magical elements, some practices of using amulets in the community reveal a relationship with belief in Islam. This is seen in the use of the verses of the Qur'an in objects that are considered as the talisman. For example, a verse of a chair written on a piece of cloth in a certain way, if hanging above the door of the house can counteract the entry of negative influences ([Mujahidin](#)). Many Indonesians still believe in the existence of Amulets, both from the Qur'an and from ancestral records that have been passed down from generation to generation. Society's need for spirituality which is usually channeled through the meaning of sacred objects develops further into a talisman. Sacred objects usually have many special requirements and restrictions for use by just anyone. Sacred objects are also usually very elitist and authorized by competent cultural figures or figures. Communities at the grassroots level in the spirituality hierarchy cannot freely access these sacred objects for personal and individual interests. On the other hand, the need to gain inner peace and spirituality in the midst of society cannot wait for customary rituals that are specific and depend on the authority of traditional leaders. From there then came the sacred objects that are portable and practically used by many people. Magical values from these sacred objects can be carried everywhere or installed in various places. Thus, the efficacy and magical

nature are believed to be more felt. These sacred objects are still licensed by traditional leaders who simultaneously supervise their use strictly. These objects are then called talismans. When Islam began to develop on the coast of Cirebon, acculturation of spiritual values took place between Islamic teachings on the one hand and local belief in sacred objects on the other. Islam has rigid rules related to belief in the supernatural (metaphysics). All matters relating to requests to other than Allah are categorized into shirk activities which are very big sins. On the other hand, the local tradition of the Cirebon community forms the habit of making sacred objects as intermediaries or mediating links between human needs and the giver of life.

As is the case in other parts of the archipelago, Islam comes not with violence but a trade and humanitarian approach. The religious ethos contained in Islamic teachings became the antithesis of the concept of closed social stratification in the pre-Islamic community caste system. People who have been shackled in the Hindu tradition by a racist caste system, begin to see Islam as a way out to achieve a better and more reasonable life. That's where the appeal of Islam comes from.

The entry of massive Islamization in Java including the coast of Cirebon began. The result is the equality of meaning and interpretation of Islamic laws throughout the world. The centers of Islamic civilization such as Mecca, Medina, Baghdad, and Damascus are the goals of Islamic and Arabic learning for prospective preachers throughout the world, including the archipelago scholars. They deliberately extended their pilgrimage to learn Arabic, which in turn would make them as core scholars of Arabic language teaching in the archipelago.

Teaching Arabic in relation to the process of Islamization is not a simple matter. There are many fundamental differences grammatically and morphologically related to Arabic language and script compared to Javanese and Pallawa characters. In certain cases, there was cultural acculturation which made modified Arabic characters into new characters which were considered to facilitate the ongoing Islamization process. One of them is Pegon script which is the most widely used script model in the classic books used in Cirebon palace. Aksara Pegon is a series of Arabic letters that use the Javanese or Sundanese language reading code. This type of script is also the most widely used in Cirebon talismans.



Fig. 3 Semaar

Figure 3 above is an example of one of the mysteries created by Hindu-Buddhist mysticism in the form of Semaar puppets, and Islamic mysticism in the form of calligraphic sentences from monotheism. In the puppet world Semaar is identical with the guiding figure and also the mediator. Semaar has always been an option for glass painters.

Semaar comes from the word *mismarun* which means nail. *Paku* itself is a tool to make things stand tall and not shake. This is the task of Semaar who always brings people around him, both Pandawa's and the audience remains upright and firm in embracing Islam and continue to walk in the way of Allah. Another name for Semaar is *Ismaya* which comes from my asthma word which is a symbol of determination and stability that there is no God but Allah (Zaman et al.). In Cirebon, Semaar is pictured with round body and an even rounder face. If Semaar wore a clothing covering his whole lower body, in Cirebon Semaar was differently pictured as he doesn't wear a clothing covering his whole lower body (Zaman et al.). The development of wayang in Cirebon has had a significant influence, especially in wayang mysticism in Java. Cirebon glass painting with the theme of Semaar and calligraphy turned out to be a synergy between the two forces of the teachings of social and theological ethics of morality, namely the visual vehicle in the form of puppet and calligraphic aspects as a non-figurative aesthetic expression (Waluyo). A glass painting with a picture of Semaar with the calligraphy of the tawhid sentence is believed to have power if this painting is placed in a house.

Religion Aspect

The attitude and response of Muslim societies to the Qur'an in the reality of everyday life according to the cultural context and social interaction is an act of groups not individuals who want to understand or interpret the Qur'an (Mujahidin). The concept of divinity embraced by the people of Cirebon comes from Al Qur'an. The role

of pesantren in Cirebon is very large, especially in terms of Islamic teachings and studies. The pesantren is the oldest Islamic education institution in Indonesia. The pesantren, therefore, has had a great involvement in empowering Indonesians' education ([Gazali and Malik](#)). Glass painting contains religious elements because it is presented calligraphy which contains the words tawhid, which presents a sense of manunggaling kawula gusti or the merging of human and God. Some glass painting artists follow the tarekat teachings that developed in Cirebon. In their work, they usually unite themselves and cleanse themselves and their souls before painting by doing the practice of tirakat. In human art expresses his ideas, beauty experiences or aesthetics. The human soul that vibrates, the human soul is moved by the birth of art ([Soedarso](#)).

In a culture, the religious system is one of the main elements that shape the culture itself. There is no culture that does not have a religious system in its community. Especially for the Cirebon people, a religious transformation took place massively and made Islam the main feature of Cirebon culture. In this area also emerged a major figure of the Islamization of the archipelago, namely Sunan Gunung Jati whose name and greatness were well documented to date.

Although Dutch colonialism succeeded in dividing the Cirebon palace, the aspect of Islamic religiosity was not shifted towards the Protestantism brought by the Dutch. The divisions in the members of the Keraton family do not have an impact on the degradation of Islamic values which have been practiced customarily. Moreover, Islamic values are precisely used as a source of strength to fight against colonial power.

Islam brings Arabic language and script in one cultural package. Although Islamic teachings are not devoted to Arab (universal) society, the Arab cultural region was chosen to be the area of decline in the teachings of this religion. Islam makes Arabic the language chosen to bring down the revelation from Allah to Prophet Muhammad. This has been confirmed in the Quran verse and its interpretation. Arabic became the main language in the bookkeeping of the Quran and translated into hundreds of other languages in the world. In addition, all ritual activities that are ritual in Islam use Arabic as a communication tool. One of the advantages of Arabic is that it is very consistent in grammar. This consistency then facilitates the legal interpretation of the editorial of the Quran verses to be actualized by Muslims. In addition, Arabic is also a language rich in vocabulary and analogies so that the religious laws contained in the Koran can be delivered in poetic and beautiful form.

Islamic civilization in the early era has codified and standardized the procedures for writing and reading Arabic script to be disseminated outside the Arab community. The number of glass paintings with the theme of tasawuf calligraphy. One of the glass painting artists who is also a murshid from the Syattariyah Order is Aruna Martaningrat or known as Mama Aruna. Aruna Martaningrat's many glass paintings are inspired by syattariyah tarekat texts. The Syattariyah tarekat text has illuminations and texts. Illumination is an ornament or illustration that has a function as an illustration or analogy of the tauhid lesson. Illumination that adorns Syattariyah tarekat texts has a high artistic value. This is what underlies murshid to pour illumination of syattariyah texts into glass paintings. Tarekat Syattariyah in Keraton has the main reference in the

form of old manuscripts. The Syattariyah Tarekat text is one of the text genres of manuscripts in the Keraton ([Mahrus](#)).

Islam prohibits drawing living things, this encourages glass painting artists to create living things by changing their shape through stylization. Media and pictures of glass paintings are means and media of da'wah. One of them is the depiction of tiger or tiger figures, this mythic creature is believed by the Cirebon people as a tiger or tiger of the Pajajaran empire that guarded the Pajajaran kingdom which was later adopted into Islam. Tawhid sentences are engraved on the body of this tiger.

Conclusion

Glass painting can be seen from various perspectives. The art aspect of glass painting is seen from various kinds of cultural integration. Rastika managed to lift the art of glass painting into works of art that have value. The art of glass painting is a traditional art that developed in the Cirebon community with distinctive and unique characteristics, which is a combination of various cultures. Wadhasan and mega mendung are elements from China. Calligraphy which fills figures is the element of Arabic culture. Dark colors and gradations are elements of European culture, while puppet forms are elements of Hindu-Buddhist culture.

Magic perspective, the representation of some Indonesian people who still believe in mysticism and magic, has glass paintings believed to be able to. counteract the negative values that enter the house, in addition to the presence of glass paintings makes the house calm.

Religious Perspectives, glass paintings are closely related to Sufism. Glass painting works have a transcendent meaning, related to human relations with God. Some of the artists are mursyd from the teachings of Syattariyah tarekat. The Syattariyah Order in Cirebon grew up among Keraton and Pesantren. The beauty of illumination on the texts of the Syattariyah Tarekat became the inspiration of the mursyd to pour it in the form of glass paintings.

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