

KHALIL IBRAHIM'S EARLY WORKS

THE INIMITABLE MAESTRO

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Sunrise (Pahang River Series), 1950's
Oil on board 34 x 46cm



Sunset (Pahang River Series), 1950's
Oil on board 35 x 45cm

Khalil Ibrahim was a multifaceted artist who forayed into many art mediums and excelled in each, proving his legendary status. Aptly named as a multifaceted maestro, Khalil was born in 1934 in Kubang Krian, Kelantan. He was one of the earliest Malaysians to receive a full scholarship to study art at the prestigious Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London. Throughout his long career, Khalil had held a number of solo and group exhibitions in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Switzerland.

His masterful skills in drawing, watercolour and acrylic, are styles that move from the almost real to the almost abstract. Owning a piece of his artwork is truly a gift of beauty through the artist's eyes. Khalil's preference for the human figure and his deep affection for the East Coast had led him to create iconic images of men and women in the East Coast Malay fishing villages against

stark backgrounds of blues and greens and watercolour landscape of villages.

PRIMORDIAL DAYS

Khalil's rich Malay cultural background in the East Coast and the discipline of Islamic values that he learnt at the Pondok school shaped his primordial artistic journey. These values stuck by him which then merged with the freedom of expression that he encountered later on through his formal education at St. Martins in London. Though he did not receive any formal education during the early years in Kelantan, Khalil's awareness of modern art was cultivated through a period of colonialism and the experiences of pioneering artists from the Nanyang Academy.

With an innate passion for making wayang kulit, his artistic talent flourished. He would make the wayang kulit by drawing on a big leaf with the addition of a cardboard,

which would then be used to play with his friends. Khalil took this newfound interest and competed in events and shows held almost every month. Unfortunately, his mother disapproved of his interest while his father urged him to become a teacher. Despite his parents' disapproval, Khalil remained steadfast to his passion.

LANDSCAPE WORKS

Khalil formal education in art began when he would attend art classes every Sunday in Kota Bharu under the tutelage of art inspector, Nik Mahmud Idris who had a formal art education in Singapore between 1945 and 1947. Together with artists Yusoff Sulaiman and the late Nik Zainal Abidin, Khalil learnt the fundamentals of painting — drawing and painting first in watercolours and later in oils. The revolving theme in this class was the pastoral setting of kampungs and it was through this experience that Khalil enhanced his ability of capturing nature in all its glory. Now equipped with

the techniques he learnt in art classes, the artist allowed his creativity to blossom, which resulted in scenic landscapes of the Malaysian East Coast in his works, such as the undulating hills and the padi fields. Evident in most of the artist's East Coast landscapes, he possessed the ability to transform a humble rural scene to a sweeping visions of beauty using a display of colours and showcased his established precision.

Khalil Ibrahim's landscapes and their meticulous detailing is a celebration of nature. Besides European masters, it could also be presumed that Khalil was influenced by English landscape painter, John Constable, known for revolutionising landscape painting and whose works are sold for millions of pounds. In the 1950s, the self-taught painted regularly while working as a primary school teacher in Kelantan and Pahang, before he was awarded a Pahang state scholarship to study art in England. Seeing this, army officers and civil servants became interested and went on to purchase many of Khalil's early works. The artist's early genre of paintings such as 'Sunrise, 1950's' and 'Sunset, 1950's' emphasised much of his Kelantanese heritage and depicted the influence of traditional mid twentieth style of realist painting at the time. These works also became a representation of Khalil's response to traditional art concepts while highlighting Kelantan's cultural environment.

EARLY STYLE

Khalil was sponsored by the Pahang state government to continue his studies at the prestigious Central St. Martin's School of Art and Design in London and in the same year, the infamous art critic Clement Greenberg visited London and Cornwall, to check out contemporary works of art. The next year, British pop artist Peter Blake joined St. Martin's and lectured in the school at the same time Khalil was studying there. David Hockney used to drop by to give the budding art students lectures, and Khalil attended some of those sessions. Students at St. Martin's were encouraged to visit museums and art galleries which were experiences that not only intrigued Khalil, but allowed him to study the works of great European masters.

Khalil's 'English' or post St Martin artworks reveals a comparatively different style from his earlier landscapes and portraits. Influenced by his peers, lecturers, and his foreign surroundings, the early 1960's saw him experimenting with abstraction in works



Sawah Padi Series, 1956
Oil on Board 30cm x 45.5cm



Grand Palace of Kota Bharu (Kampung Home of Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah) - Kota Bharu (5.12.1956)
Oil on canvas 34cm x 50cm



Pahang River Boathouses, 1957
Oil on canvas 35 x 61 cm



Kota Bharu Boathouses (Rumah Rakit Kota Bharu), 1960
Oil on canvas 40.5cm x 61cm

like Destruction and Destruction II and Abstract I. The artist would experiment with abstract forms drawn into his sketch book and demonstrating his attempt at bringing portraiture and concepts of abstraction together. Khalil's art works were still in flux as he sought styles and methods which spoke of his own unique journey. Like many aspiring artists, Khalil participated in numerous group exhibitions organised by St. Martin's as well with the Malayan Art Circle and at Malaysia Hall.

With Khalil Ibrahim's legendary status and sheer talent, his works across all mediums are highly valued till today. More importantly, his landscape works of the 1950's are beauty captured on canvas and a rarity. Only a limited number of artworks were produced by the artist and remains highly coveted by art collectors and institutions alike.



Bachok, 1957
Oil on canvas 32 cm X 52 cm