

# Visual Arts Tourism in Malaysia: A Literature Review

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**Abstract.** This article documented the development of visual arts tourism as a new field of Malaysia's tourism. Since the new millennium, the union of visual arts and tourism has been celebrated by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture as a marketing strategy to promote Malaysia as a top-of-the-mind destination art tourism destination. The research result has shown that currently there are three significant visual arts programs which are known as (1) One Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism, (2) Art Expo Malaysia, and (3) Kuala Lumpur Biennale has been developed along with the government's strategies for partnership between visual arts, tourism and economic development. It is hoped that this paper will provide insights into an understanding of the tourism industry in Malaysia, particularly for visual arts tourism development.

**Keyword:** *Malaysia's Tourism, Visual Arts, Visual Arts Tourism, Cultural Industries.*

Received 02 June 2020 | Revised 26 October 2020 | Accepted 30 October 2020

## 1 Introduction

According to Carlos David Perea Kihien [1] the concept of art(s) tourism might sound new, however "Art in Tourism" is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Since the long-time many societies had already devoted much appreciation for the arts and culture in the tourism industry. Karolina Buczkowska and Magdalena Banaszkiwicz [2] also mentioned that "the relationship between arts and tourism has been close since ancient times..... arts tourists, as recipients of various arts-related products, participate in art tourism." In the context of art tourism, the arts, including various art forms such as theatre and dance, music, and the visual arts are acknowledged as an important part of tourism to a destination [3]. The pairing of arts and culture with tourism can lead to economic development by bringing visitors to the area, while also contributing to community wellbeing by vital local areas through creative practice [4]. Arts and cultural activities participation are, therefore, be considered to be an important factor for tourism and community development. For instance, visiting museums and art galleries, participating in arts festivals, and home-staying at the traditional handicraft villages have become customary art tourism events. In brief, art tourism comprises a substantial segment of the global tourism industry nowadays, as

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arts and cultural activities engagement are becoming popular programs to travellers across the world.

As a win-win collaborative partnership, the collaboration between the tourism and art industries brings along social, cultural and economic importance for those who involved. For instance, in Asia, the South Korean government recognizes the dynamic collaboration between the arts, culture and the tourism industry. It has made a coordinated approach to market Korean arts and culture as the nation's tourism highlight. In Japan, a series of biennales and triennials such as Nakanajo Biennale, Setouchi Triennale, Yokohama Triennale, and Echigo-Tsumari Triennale has become outstanding art fairs that received much attention from domestic and international visitors. In Singapore, with a choice of broad-spectrum arts venues, the lion city is one of the top destinations for art lovers in Southeast Asia. In 2015, the number of museum visitors in Singapore hit a record of 3.7 million [5]. In 2016, the National Gallery Singapore was awarded the breakthrough award by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) to recognize its contribution as an attraction for Singapore's tourism landscape [6]. Today, the National Gallery of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, SAM-8Q, ArtScience Museum, Gillman Barracks, Artspace@Helutrans, KULT Gallery, etc. are highly recognized as must-visit destinations by the arts and cultural tourists. Meanwhile, art events such as the Singapore International Festival of Arts, Singapore Art Week, the Art Stage, Affordable Art Fair, the Singapore Biennale and many other arts festivals are also playing a crucial role in boosting art tourism in Singapore. As said by Carlos David Perea Kihien [7], "a city or town with diverse cultural options and attractions are attractive not only to their residents but for visitors because tourists can discover more and have memorable experiences."

In the context of the experience economy, the consumers' search for emotions and memorable experiences through consumption [8]. As such, travelling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people become key elements in the positive development of a tourist destination. While, the experience economy has a real effect on the tourism industry, to engage tourists with memorable experiences has become a crucial factor for destinations' success. Art tourism or arts-based tourism has become a worldwide sensation that celebrates the arts as a product and a unique selling point for tourism development. By and large, through the arts, a customer acquires experience and takes home the memories. The real art tourism product is the experience. Therefore, to further enhance a nation's competitive advantage in the tourism industry. It is crucial to recognize the significant role that arts play in positive tourism development.

## **2 Method**

For this research, the qualitative research method is employed to obtain a picture of visual arts tourism development in Malaysia. Data collection was mainly collected through secondary sources which covered academic journals, government document, and newspaper articles related to visual arts tourism in Malaysia. The data collection process has been undertaken through online platforms. Key sources were then be identified and discussed to obtain a deeper and wider scope of understanding of the research subject.

## **3 Results and Discussion**

Datuk Seri Najib Razak (the 6th Prime Minister of Malaysia, 2009 -2018) points out that, "the culture and arts industry has become an impactful sector with high returns for the people and the nation..... I can see the culture and arts industry as a component with the potential to be developed to an optimum level" [9]. Recognizing the high potential of the creative and cultural industries, Malaysia is setting up to follow on the steps of nations that have managed to develop into the cultural industries as one of the economies driven forces. Consequently, the arts and cultural sectors are now playing a more important role in promoting Malaysia as an art and cultural destination in Southeast Asia.

To employ the arts as a strategy for revitalizing, Malaysia's tourism industry has been a policy and practice for years. Back in the year 2010, the government has strategically developed a public and private partnership between the arts and tourism industry to foster Malaysia as an art tourism destination, particularly in developing "Visual Arts Tourism". According to Dato' Seri Dr. Ng Yen Yen (Minister of Tourism Malaysia, 2009-2013), "we are positioning Malay-sian art as a tourism product" [10]. Since then, several "art tourism" oriented mega-projects have been organized to push Malaysia as a destination for contemporary art in the region. As stated by Dato' Seri Dr. Ng Yen Yen in her "2013 - 1 Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism" opening speech, "we want to promote Malaysia as a tourist destination for visual arts. Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board's vision was to develop Malaysia as one of the destinations for culture and heritage tourism with a focus on contemporary visual arts" [11].

Currently, following the concept of "Malaysia, Your New Art Tourism Destination", there are three major art tourism projects managed under the public-private partnership, namely (1) One Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism, (2) Art Expo Malaysia, and (3) Kuala Lumpur Biennale. In addition to these three highly publicized visual arts events, there are many other art festivals such as KL International Arts Festival, George Town Festival, Yayasan Sime Darby Arts Festival, Comic Art Festival Kuala Lumpur, Borneo Arts Festival, and Sibu Street Art Festival that also involves visual arts as an attraction.

#### 4 The Visual Arts Tourism in Malaysia

At present, the visual arts tourism in Malaysia has a particular focus on a mega event-based creative art experience to attract tourists with fairs and exhibitions. Since the 2000s, the top three major art tourism projects are (1) One Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism, (2) Art Expo Malaysia, and (3) Kuala Lumpur Biennale. Through these events, *tourists' experiences* include but not limited to museums and art galleries visits, curator-led tours, cultural seminars, *artist's studios' visits*, workshops, etc.

#### 5 One Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism (1MCA) (2010 – present)

In June 2010, Dato' Sri Dr. Ng Yen Yen officially announced the "1 Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism 2010 (1MCAT 2010) as an innovative tourism product to promote Malaysia as an art destination for more high-yield tourists." According to the Minister, the first-ever "1MCAT 2010" was an effort to stimulate the development of Malaysia's contemporary art scene, and the event will be an annual celebration (from July to September) to showcase the masterpieces produced by internationally-acclaimed Malaysian-born artists, along with exhibitions and nationwide seminars [12].

As said by Dato' Sri Dr. Ng Yen Yen, "with rising interest and demand for contemporary creative works, I hope that this event will serve as a meeting point for art enthusiasts, gallery owners, artists as well as a new generation of collectors from all over the world in forging a business alliance, acquiring new contemporary artworks, sharing ideas and exchanging information.....Of course, to discover and learn about the new contemporary Malaysia." [13]. In brief, 1MCAT 2010 was the Ministry's strategy to explore and develop the potential of art tourism as a new product for the nation's tourism industry.

Figure 1. 1MCA logo (2010) and 1MCA logo (2012)

Throughout the festival, the first 1MCAT 2010 has successfully recorded 42,000 visitors and generated RM14 million (USD 3.3 million) in art sales with a highlight of the success of the Henry Butcher Art Auction (recorded sales of RM1.7 million, and 90% of the works sold in a single

afternoon) [14]. Therefore, in July 2011, with positive responses of MCAT 2010, "Malaysia, Your New Art Tourism Destination" was selected as the theme of the "1Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism 2011" (1MCAT 2011) Festival. Compared to the 1MCAT 2010, the 1MCAT 2011 involved a total of 17 events (doubled of 2010). Eight shopping complexes have participated, and over 100 galleries and 300 artists from Malaysia have participated in the festival. The festival also expanded beyond Kuala Lumpur and became a nationwide festival that attended by four states from West Malaysia (Johor, Kedah, Melaka, Pahang, and Penang) and two states from East Malaysia (Sabah, and Sarawak). Once again, the event has positioned Malaysia as an exciting destination for art tourism in the region [15]. Meanwhile, in 2011, the Henry Butcher Art Auction has achieved another success with total sales of over RM3 million [16].

In 2012, get into its third year, 1MCAT 2012 was once again become a highlight and talk of the town. As reported by Dato' Sri Dr. Ng Yen Yen, "1MCAT Festival, which is into its third year in 2012, is proof that Malaysian art can be sold' as a tourist attraction...meanwhile, for the first time, selected homestay premises are also participating in the 1MCAT 2012. Tourists will be able to experience home-staying in traditional kampung houses and engaging in art activities held at the village" [17]. Once again, with expanded networks and programming, the 1MCAT 2012 was another accomplishment of art tourism in Malaysia. For instance, the Henry Butcher Art Auction recorded total sales of RM4.1 million. This success provided proof of a growing interest in collecting Malaysian artworks and the rise of the secondary art market for Malaysian artworks in the region. [18].

In 2013, the 1MCAT 2013 is back for another edition. In its fourth year, the festival was continued under the new leadership of Dato' Sri Mohamed Nazri bin Abdul Aziz (Minister of Tourism and Culture, 2013 – 2018). Once again, the festival was a huge success with exhibitions nationwide featuring Malaysia's artists' talents and their creative outputs. As stated by the Minister, "art galleries have mushroomed in Kuala Lumpur, it is good news for the art industry..... the art trade is booming in the region, and Malaysia has not been left behind, 1MCAT 2013 was successfully positioned the nation as art destination" [19]. In 2014, come to its fifth year, the 1MCAT 2014 was a nationwide arts festival with a joint effort between the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and National Visual Arts Gallery. In the launching of 1MCAT 2014, Datuk Tee Siew Kiong (State Tourism, Domestic Trade and Consumerism Committee chairman) mentioned that "1MCAT is a win-win situation for all as the festival will draw visitors to the shopping mall and artists will have a platform to showcase and sell their works" [20].

Continue with previous programs, in addition to art exhibitions, the fifth's year edition has expanded to art book festivals, creative bazaars, art auctions, drawing competitions and forums. Datuk Mahadzir Lokman (National Visual Arts Development Board chairman) said that "in 2014, the festival involves 106 arts programs across all 13 states and the Federal Territories.... 1MCAT hopes to offer an avenue to foreign tourists to experience the country and understand Malaysian culture better." Meanwhile, in terms of its economic importance, Dato' Sri Mohamed Nazri bin

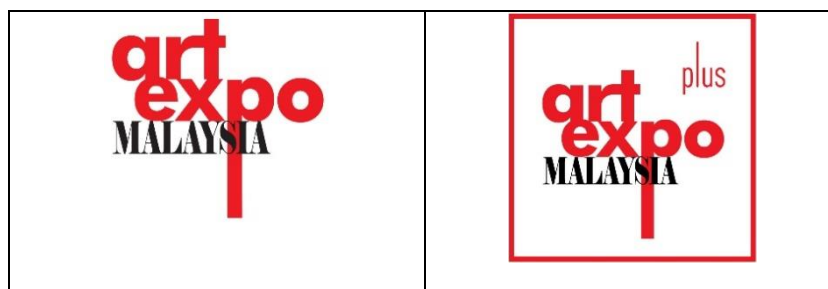
Abdul Aziz stated that "since we launched IMCAT, RM61million (USD14.6 million) in sales have been generated from auctions. We hope this year, we will be able to raise more than last year's sales of RM19.3 million" [21].

In brief, after five consecutive years of development, IMCAT has become a platform to support the Malaysian art scene. At the same time, an annual event that attracted more visitors to come to Malaysia. Based on its objective of growing the local art industry and attracting high-yield tourists over to Malaysia. From 2015 to 2018, another 4 editions of the IMCAT festival have organized accordingly. In total, eight editions of IMCAT have been successfully organized to support the nation's art tourism, and the IMCAT series has become an interesting part of the events that Tourism Malaysia employed to lure more visitors to visit Malaysia.

## **6 Art Expo Malaysia (AEM) (2007 – present)**

In 2007, the 1<sup>st</sup> International Art Expo Malaysia 2007 (AEM 2007) was organized and launched by the Art Expo Malaysia Sdn Bhd at the Matrade Exhibition and Convention Centre in Kuala Lumpur. Altogether, more than 200 artists and 5,000 art pieces from 17 countries have been featured in the event. Meanwhile, to manifest of the "Malaysia Boleh" (Malaysia can) spirit, a 50% discount in conjunction with the nation's 50th anniversary of independence was also offered to stimulate the involvement of local artists. According to Datuk Wong Kam Hoong (Deputy Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage), "the art expo can attract up to 40,000 to 50,000 people with the overwhelming response from artists". Vincent Sim (art collector and City Art Gallery's operator) also stated that "AEM is a cultural exchange and a boost for the local tourism industry.....It will also spark off a spiral effect, and more artists will learn about us shortly" [22]. As the first and the largest ever event in local art history, the Deputy Tourism Minister Dato Donald Lim also see the expo as a much-awaited event which would able to help boost tourism, particularly the new field of art tourism, which usually involved better-heeled visitors with greater spending power [23]. With the success of AEM 2007, the "2nd International Art Expo Malaysia 2008: Bringing the Diversity and Trends of World Arts to Asia" was launched in 2008 to continue this emerging art fair in the region. From 2009 to 2019, 10 editions of AEM have been successfully organized and become Malaysia's premier art event in supporting the nation's art tourism.

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**Figure 2.** AEM logo (2010) and AEM Plus logo (2015)

In 2010, at its fourth edition, the expo showcased outstanding artists from reputable art galleries from a total of 19 countries and received more than 12,000 visitors [24]. In 2011 and 2012, the fifth and sixth editions of AEM have attracted more than 60 participating art galleries and organizations from 20 countries. Furthermore, in 2013, AEM 2013 has successfully generated RM19.3 million (USD 4.6 million) in sales and attracted a total of 20,000 visitors. In 2014, the eighth edition of AEM featured 70 established and reputable art galleries from 31 countries, showcasing 2,000 pieces of artwork which including paintings, sculptures, digital art, installations, and photography. Datuk Mahadzir Lokman (Chairman of National Visual Arts Development Board of Malaysia), "as the major part of 1Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism (1MCAT) events, AEM is the biggest of all 1MCAT activities." Meanwhile, the event has made its way into the "Malaysia Book of Records" as the longest-running art expo with the largest number of participants [25]. The AEM 2014 was another great success with a record of 22,500 visitors and generated RM 20.1million (USD 4.6 million) in sales [26].

In 2015, the "AEM Plus 2015" was launched to signify the improvements of the event in various aspects. According to Sim Polenn, (Art Expo Malaysia Plus Project Director), "the ninth edition of AEM is enhancing the selection of art galleries, the quality of the artwork, the artists represented, and the visitor experience, as well as the overall presentation and the printing of artbooks" [27]. In total, AEM Plus 2015 reached RM 16.9 million (USD 4 million) sales of artworks and a visitorship of 24,200 people [28]. In 2016, the 10th edition of this annual art event has once again named "AEM Plus 2016" to further promote the event as AEM's series has reached a record as the longest-running international art fair in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the Expo brings together more than 2,000 works from some 400 artists featured by 60 art galleries from 30 countries. Altogether the event reached sales worth RM17 million and 25,000 visitors in 2106 [29].

According to Dato Seri Ong Ka Chuan (International Trade and Industry Minister II), "in 2016, Malaysia's art exports was RM 3.3 million as compared to RM 1.8 million in 2012.... arts and culture including production and trade of art pieces have been recognized as the new source of income for the country, and the government is committed to developing this industry commercially", Meanwhile, Sim Polenn, (Art Expo Malaysia Plus Project Director), also mentioned that "AEM series have educates the public about art appreciation and investment,

which helps strengthen Kuala Lumpur as an important art hub in the region that's active in art commerce and development." [30]. In 2017, returns for its 11th edition, the AEM Plus 2017 was proved to be another milestone as the event has attracted almost 30,000 visitors. As said by Dato Seri Ong Ka, "the art industry holds tremendous potential as the world is witnessing increasing demands for stylish and lifestyle products and services, especially in many rapidly emerging markets and growing middle classes such as China, South-East Asia, and West Asia." Meanwhile, the Minister believed that Malaysia has lots to offer in the arts and culture sector, yet it has yet to reach the optimal performance level [31].

With a new tagline "The Best Edition Ever!", AEM returns for its 12th edition in 2018. As Southeast Asia's longest-running international art event, the 2018 edition featured 1,500 artworks under 65 reputable galleries from 22 countries. The event was once again received positive supports from the art industry and audiences with almost 30,000 visitors' participation. In 2019, "AEM 2019: The Best Edition Ever!", hopefully, will continue its legendary journey and growth the event to reach a new horizon. Since 2007, AEM has become one of the most prestigious art events in Southeast Asia, the expo has been a catalyzer in boosting the art industry, particularly on Malaysian contemporary arts, and defining standards and quality of art fair in the region.

#### **7 Kuala Lumpur Biennale (KL Biennale) (2017 -present)**

In 2017, with the theme of "BELAS or Be Loved" that "recognizes, embraces and echoes societal values, the 1<sup>st</sup> Kuala Lumpur Biennial (KL Biennale) was organized by the National Art Development Board (an agency under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia) as another a mega-scale international contemporary art event to promote the nation's contemporary art industry and Malaysia as a destination for art tourism. The event was a five months multiple sites exhibition scheduled from November 1, 2017 to March 31, 2018 in Kuala Lumpur [32]. According to Dato Seri Nazri Abdul Aziz (Minister of Tourism and Culture), "KL Biennale is an event that illustrates cultural development and allows local artists to go international. Moreover, as a part of cultural tourism that celebrates the cultural life of a city, and attract domestic and international visitors, the visual arts industry has the potential to contribute to the nation's development" [33].

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**Figure 3.** KL Biennale logo (2017) and KL Biennale poster (2017)

Altogether, the KL Biennale involved 114 artists from China, South Korea, Japan, India, Southeast Asia and 103 artists Malaysia. The event was aimed to attract 250,000 domestic and international visitors over a period of five months [34]. Currently, the National Visual Art Gallery (NVAG) is working on the road map for the second KL Biennale in 2020. As said by Muhammad Bakhtiar Wan Chik (Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture), "in conjunction with the 2020 Visit Malaysia Year, the organization of KL Biennale at the National Visual Art Gallery was set to attract local and foreign visitors and indirectly turn the art event into one of the tourism events" [35]. Meanwhile, under the tagline "Route to KL Biennale 2020", the NVAG has developed a series of promotional activities and events to ensure the biennale a significant part of "Visit Malaysia Year 2020". For instance, in northern Malaysia, Marble Art Workshop in Langkawi was organized in August, in the centre region, the Ipoh International Art Festival will take place from November to December. In the south, Johor will host art with community events in November, Borneo Art Festival at East Malaysia in September, etc [36]. In brief, the organization of KL Biennale 2020 is a strategic plan in line with the objective of the Ministry to develop art tourism in the nation's tourism industry.

## 8 Conclusion

Recently, apart from the governmental initiated mega-visual arts events, the government also encourage more private art galleries to take an active role in participating in visual arts tourism. Muhammad Bakhtiar Wan Chik (Deputy Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture), *"the government encouraged the setting up of more private art galleries to create awareness among Malaysians, especially children and to attract more tourists and art enthusiasts to come to Malaysia"* [37]. Followed the vision of "Malaysia, Your New Art Tourism Destination", visual arts tourism has been strategically highlighted by the tourism authority as a distinctive tourism product to boost the nation's tourism industry. By and large, over the years, visual arts tourism in Malaysia have generated revenue for local economies directly when tourists spend money in hotels, cultural venues and art spaces. It also supports the arts and cultural sector directly when tourists purchase arts, locally made arts, and crafts.

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