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ART AND IDENTITY: THE REINTERPRETATION OF MALAY ORNAMENTAL PATTERNS IN THE SCULPTURAL SERIES TAUTAN (INTERCONNECTION)

Amirul Izham Shamsor[1], Syed Zamzur Akasah Syed Ahmed Jalaluddin[2], and Rafeah Legino[3]
[1,2,3]Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Art & Design,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
amirulizham796@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines how three selected Malay ornamental motifs, namely awan larat, pucuk rebung, and geometric patterns, can be reinterpreted into three-dimensional sculptural compositions, and how such reinterpretation articulates cultural identity. Existing studies on Malay ornament have largely examined its continuity in architecture, textiles, and two-dimensional artworks, while recent Malaysian sculptural research has reinterpreted joinery techniques and weapon forms rather than ornamental surface motifs. The procedure by which a flat ornamental pattern becomes a free-standing sculptural form therefore remains thinly documented. The study applies a practice-based approach carried out in three iterative stages: visual and literature research, studio exploration through drawings and mock-ups, and fabrication followed by reflective evaluation. Pine wood is used as the primary working material, and tebuk tembus, the pierced carving of traditional Malay building panels, is adapted to articulate the relationship between solid and void. The process produced the sculptural series Tautan (Interconnection), consisting of four works that range from a modular relief panel to vertical openwork columns and a pierced diamond form. The analysis indicates that the reference to tradition is carried less by the outline of the original motifs than by a set of relational principles, namely the continuous flowing line of awan larat, the axial symmetry of pucuk rebung, modular repetition, and the treatment of negative space, all of which survive simplification and the transfer into three dimensions. The study contributes a documented transformation procedure from motif to sculptural form rather than a claim of cultural preservation, and it identifies the openwork void as the principal carrier of ornamental character once the pattern leaves the flat surface.

Keywords: cultural identity; Malay ornament; practice-based research; sculptural practice; tebuk tembus

INTRODUCTION

Ornament occupies a central place in Malay visual culture. Known collectively as *ragam hias*, these patterns appear on house components, boat elements, weapons, textiles, and household objects. They carry social and symbolic functions that exceed surface decoration. Studies of Malay woodcarving have shown that the selection and placement of motifs follow conventions in which the carved surface communicates status, belief, and the relationship between the community and its natural surroundings (Ahmad, Ab. Aziz, & Abd. Aziz, 2024; Abdul Halim Choo, Jamaludin, & Rashid, 2025). In the architecture of the Malay house, carved motifs have also been read as a direct manifestation of cultural identity, that is, as visual forms

through which a community recognises itself and is recognised by others (Ahmad & Ab. Aziz, 2022; Adam Wan & Mohd Fadil, 2022).

Malay ornament developed in close contact with Islamic aesthetic principles. The avoidance of figural representation encouraged the elaboration of vegetal, cloud-like, and geometric forms organised through repetition, rhythm, balance, and the division of surfaces into ordered fields (Wan Md Zain, Ibrahim, Ayob, Ghazali, & Sulaiman, 2024). Geometric construction in particular follows procedures of division, rotation, and tessellation that generate pattern from a small number of rules (Ibrahim, Al Shomely, & Eltarabishi, 2023), and the same vocabulary has been applied both in design studio pedagogy (Akçaova & Sungur, 2024) and at an urban scale in contemporary Malaysian contexts (Baydoun, Alghamdi, & Kamarudin, 2023).

The adaptation of this vocabulary into modern and contemporary practice is well documented, and most of it has taken place on flat surfaces or applied architectural elements. *Awan larat* has been studied for its applicability to contemporary building design (Mohamad Abi Safwan, 2021) and to modern typeface design as a carrier of Malay identity (Adam Wan & Mohd Fadil, 2022). Square Kufic has been reordered within modern Malaysian painting (Abdul Rahim & Hamidon, 2022), *songket* motifs have been developed into geometric Islamic artwork (Wan Mohamad Daud & Zainal Abidin, 2022), and symbolic geometry has been shown to structure the paintings of Sulaiman Esa (Wan Md Zain et al., 2024). Parallel work in other traditions reports the same movement, in which decorative patterns are revitalised through contemporary artistic innovation rather than through replication (Chen, 2025).

Malaysian sculptural research has begun to take up the same concern, but from different starting points. Hilal Mazlan's kinetic sculpture has been analysed as a reinterpretation of *tanggam*, the traditional joinery technique, in which the method of construction rather than the ornament is carried forward (Mohamad Yusoff, Syed Abu Bakar, Tahir, & Omar, 2025). The features of the *keris* blade have been integrated into contemporary abstract sculpture, where an object form is abstracted into sculptural mass (Sharonee, Shamsudin, & Syed Ahmed Jalaluddin, 2025). At a broader level, the search for a Malaysian identity in sculpture has been framed as a design problem of transformation (Abdul Karim, Khidzir, Ibrahim, & Zalay @ Zali, 2024). What has not been examined in comparable detail is the ornamental surface itself: what happens to a carved pattern when it is removed from the panel altogether and made to stand as an independent three-dimensional object, where contour must become volume, drawn line must become void, and the pattern must also satisfy requirements of load, joint, and balance.

Recent reviews of Malaysian contemporary art also show younger practitioners working outward from site, locality, and co-creation rather than from inherited ornament (Mat & Saidon, 2023), which makes the question of how ornament itself can be carried into contemporary form more pressing. The procedure of that transfer, as distinct from its result, is also rarely recorded. This matters for a craft whose transmission is under pressure, since the carving trade has had to seek new product categories and new audiences to remain viable (Isahak, Shahminan, & Ahmad, 2022). This study addresses that gap by documenting the transformation of three selected motifs into a sculptural series, and by examining what remains legible as Malay once the pattern has been simplified, modularised, and set into three dimensions.

Cultural identity is understood in this study not as a fixed essence contained in a motif, but as a relation that is continually renegotiated when inherited forms are placed in new

contexts. Ornament functions as identity only to the extent that a community of viewers can still recognise the reference and accept the new object as belonging to a shared tradition (Adam Wan & Mohd Fadil, 2022; Chen, 2025). This position has two consequences for the present study. First, identity is treated as something the works may claim rather than something they automatically possess. Second, the claim is examined through specific visual evidence, namely which features of the source motifs survive the transformation, rather than through the general presence of repetition or balance, which are shared by many ornamental systems and therefore cannot by themselves mark a work as Malay.

A distinction is also drawn between reproduction and reinterpretation. Reproduction is understood here as the replication of a motif in its received outline, proportion, and position, so that the new object repeats the original. Reinterpretation retains the structural principles of the motif, that is, the way its line moves, the axis on which it is organised, and the rhythm by which its parts recur, while deliberately altering medium, scale, dimension, or function. Three working criteria follow from this distinction and are applied throughout the study: a structural principle of the source motif must be identifiable in the new form; at least one of medium, dimension, or function must be transformed; and the reference to the tradition must remain legible to viewers familiar with it.

The series title, *Tautan*, means link or interconnection in Malay. It refers to three relations that the project sets out to examine: the physical joints that bind the carved modules into a single structure, the link between two-dimensional ornament and three-dimensional form, and the relation between inherited visual culture and religious values, recorded in the design notes of this project as *Harmoni Warisan dan Iman*, the harmony of heritage and faith. The term therefore functions as both a conceptual and a formal premise, since interlocking is at once the subject and the construction method of the works.

Against this background, the research questions are: (1) which visual characteristics of *awan larat*, *pucuk rebung*, and geometric motifs can be carried into three-dimensional form; (2) how are these characteristics transformed into sculptural compositions through drawing, mock-up development, and fabrication; and (3) to what extent do the resulting works retain a legible relationship with the Malay ornamental tradition. The objective of the study is therefore to formulate and document a transformation procedure from ornamental pattern to sculptural form, and to evaluate the outcome of that procedure in the series *Tautan* (Interconnection). The contribution of the study lies in making the studio procedure explicit and reviewable, and in identifying which features of Malay ornament are robust enough to survive the move from surface to volume.

METHOD

This study applies a practice-based approach, in which the artworks and the documented process of making them constitute the principal outcome of the research (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Knowledge in this mode is developed through cycles of making, observing, and reflecting, in which decisions taken in the studio are recorded and examined as evidence rather than treated as private craft routine (Sullivan, 2010). Recent discussions of artistic and art-based research emphasise that such methods must be made explicit if the resulting knowledge is to be assessed by others (Christensen-Scheel, Aure, & Bergaust, 2022; Sporton & Álvarez, 2023), and visual methods, including comparative drawing and the systematic documentation of iterations, follow established guidance for research in art and design (Gray & Malins, 2004).

Four kinds of data were generated. The first consists of visual references for the selected motifs, collected from the literature on Malay woodcarving and ornament. The second consists of drawings, from initial motif studies to measured final line drawings. The third consists of physical mock-ups produced at reduced scale. The fourth consists of process documentation, that is, photographs of each stage of fabrication together with written reflective notes recording the problems encountered and the decisions taken in response. Analysis proceeded by first identifying the structural principles of each motif through visual analysis, then formulating transformation rules from those principles, and finally testing the rules through making and revising them in the light of what the material allowed.

The research was organised in three stages, as summarised in Figure 1. The first stage covered theoretical and visual research into the motifs, Islamic aesthetic principles, and selected artistic precedents. The second stage covered studio exploration through sketches, composition studies, mock-ups, and material testing. The third stage covered fabrication, refinement, and reflective evaluation. Although the diagram presents the stages in sequence, the process was iterative: structural problems identified during mock-up testing returned the work to the drawing stage, and adjustments made during carving in turn modified the proportions established earlier.

Pine wood was selected as the primary material for the series. It is uniform in grain, comparatively soft, and therefore suited to repeated openwork cutting and to the production of several iterations within the duration of the project. It is also readily available and affordable. This choice is a working adaptation rather than a continuation of traditional practice, since Malay carvers conventionally employ dense local hardwoods whose hardness supports deep undercutting and long-term durability. The implications of this substitution for carving depth, edge strength, and surface finish are examined in the results. The principal technique adapted from the tradition is *tebuk tembus*, the pierced carving applied to ventilation panels, fanlights, partitions, and railings in Malay vernacular buildings, in which the ground is cut through so that the motif is read against the space behind it (Nazuki & Kamaruddin, 2017).

The completed works were evaluated against four criteria derived from the research questions: the legibility of the reference to the source motifs; formal quality in terms of rhythm, balance, and proportion; structural stability of the joints and of the pierced areas; and consistency with the conceptual premise of the series. The evaluation was carried out by the researchers through reflective visual analysis of the works and of the process documentation, supported by studio critique within the research team. No assessment by independent carvers, external experts, or general audiences was conducted within the scope of this study. The judgement of legibility reported below is therefore internal to the research team, and verification with viewers familiar with the tradition is identified as necessary further work.

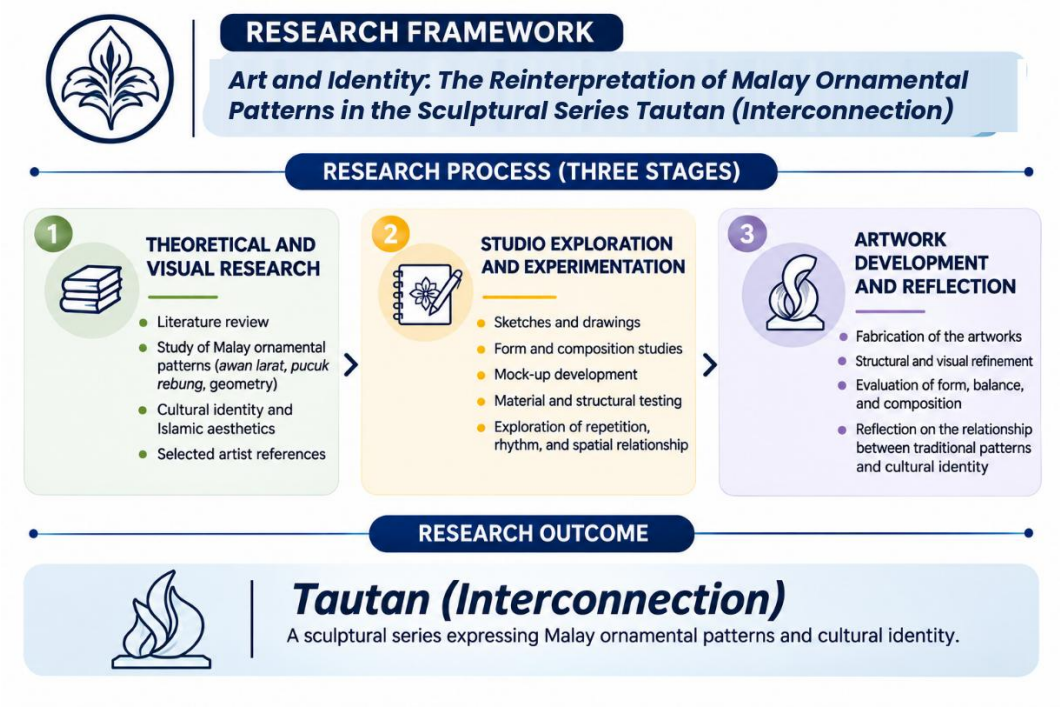


Figure 1. Research framework showing the three stages of the practice-based process (Source: Researchers, 2026)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Visual Characteristics of the Selected Malay Ornamental Motifs

The first stage of analysis established what each selected motif contributes structurally, as distinct from how it appears on a traditional carved panel. *Awan larat* is a continuous scrolling composition whose line grows from a single source and turns back on itself without a fixed terminus, producing an impression of unbroken movement across the field it occupies, and it remains the dominant compositional arrangement in carved house components (Abdul Halim Choo et al., 2025; Mohamad Abi Safwan, 2021). *Pucuk rebung* takes the form of a triangular field derived from the bamboo shoot, organised symmetrically about a vertical axis and graded from a wide base to a narrow apex; it is familiar from carved panels and from the head panel of songket textiles, exists in numerous documented variations built on the same triangular geometry (Zailani, Ramli, & Wan Nordin, 2025), and carries associations of growth and resilience in Malay symbolic usage (Hermandra, 2022). Geometric motifs contribute modularity, that is, a single unit repeated through reflection and rotation to fill a surface according to a constructional rule (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Table 1 summarises the characteristics identified and the element carried forward into the sculptural work.

Table 1. Visual Characteristics of the Selected Motifs and the Elements Carried into Sculptural Form

Motif	Visual characteristics	Compositional principle	Element carried into the sculpture
Awan larat	Continuous scrolling line of cloud and foliate character; growth from a single source; curves of varying thickness; no fixed boundary	Unbroken flow; asymmetrical growth within a bounded field	The profile of the scrolling line, cut as an opening so that the line is read as void
Pucuk rebung	Triangular field derived from the bamboo shoot; bilateral symmetry about a vertical axis; graded infill from base to apex	Axial symmetry; hierarchy from base to apex	The triangular and diamond framing of the composition and the symmetry of the panels
Geometric motifs	Modular units of rhombus and star form; tessellation through reflection and rotation; consistent intervals	Modular repetition governed by a constructional rule	The repeated module, the interval between modules, and the lattice structure of the works

From Motif to Line: Drawing and Idea Development

The transfer from motif to line was carried out through a ten-step drawing procedure, documented in Figure 2. The sequence begins by isolating a leaf-and-wave element from *pucuk rebung* and a cloud element from *awan larat*, then interlocking the two so that a single continuous contour is produced from both sources. This composite element is then placed within a geometric framework, in this case a symmetrically organised diamond, after which curves, line thickness, and the proportion of negative space are refined. The refined drawing is resolved into a final line drawing, checked for symmetry and proportion against a measured square, and transferred to the working medium for cutting. The design notes recorded alongside the drawings state the premises of the exercise in summary form: Malay ornament as nature, flow, and harmony; Islamic art as geometry, unity, and eternity; the triangle as strength, stability, and balance; and negative space as breath and light, under the overall philosophy of *Harmoni Warisan dan Iman*.

Three transformation rules can be stated from this stage. First, contour is simplified: secondary flourishes are removed so that a single continuous line carries the character of the motif, since fine detail is lost once the drawing is cut. Second, composition is modularised: the simplified element is treated as a unit to be repeated, reflected, or rotated within a geometric frame, which allows the two-dimensional pattern to be extended into a structure. Third, figure and ground are inverted: what was drawn as a line becomes the cut opening, so that the motif is carried by the void rather than by the carved relief. This third rule proved to be the decisive one for the whole series, and it is discussed further below.

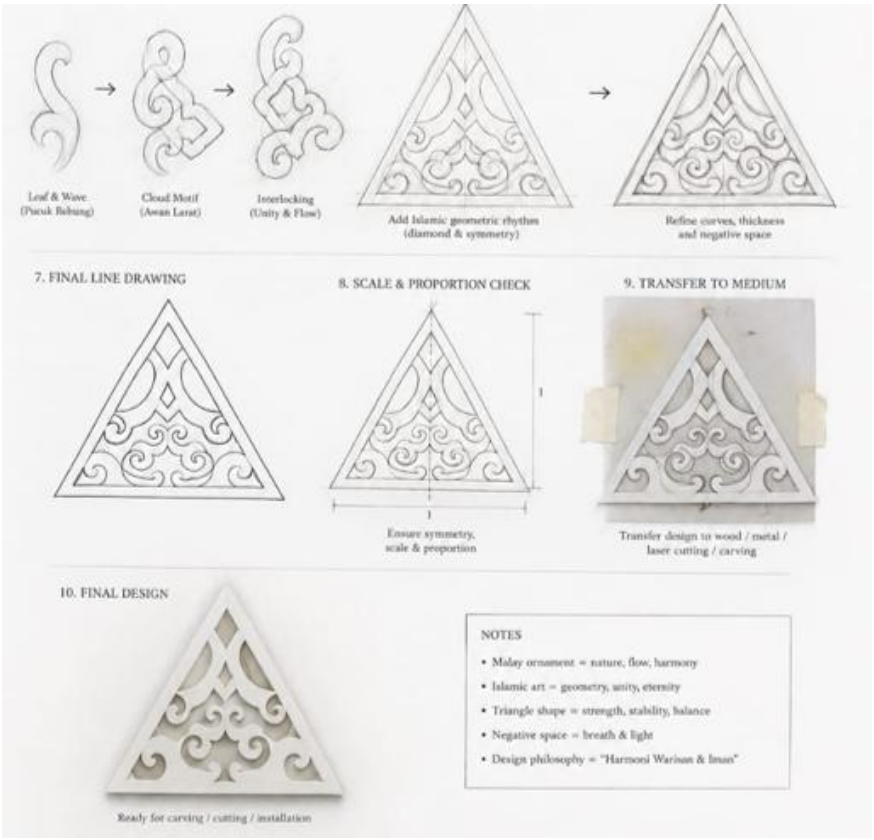


Figure 2. Ten-step drawing development from the source motifs to the final design
(Source: Researchers, 2026)

From Line to Volume: Mock-up Development and Material Testing

Selected designs were then tested as physical mock-ups, documented in Figure 3, through four steps: ornamental study, drawing development, form exploration, and refinement. The mock-ups were used to test proportion, repetition, openwork, and structural stability before committing to the final works, and they produced three findings that the drawings alone could not supply.

The first concerns structure. In a pierced lattice, the narrow webs left between adjacent openings carry the whole load of the panel, and in the softer pine these webs are the first point of failure. Where the openings were enlarged to strengthen the flow of the scrolling line, the webs became too slender and the panel lost rigidity; the proportion of void to solid therefore had to be settled as a structural decision as much as a visual one. The second concerns depth. Carving depth governs the shadow cast within each opening, so that the same drawing reads as a flat silhouette when cut shallow and as a modelled form when the edges are chamfered or raised, as in the pyramidal bosses later used in *Tautan I*. The third concerns orientation. A lattice designed as a flat panel changes character when it is lifted onto a shaft and viewed in the round, because the openings then frame the space behind the work and the composition must resolve on four sides rather than one. The vertical mock-up variants visible in Figure 3 were developed in response to this finding.

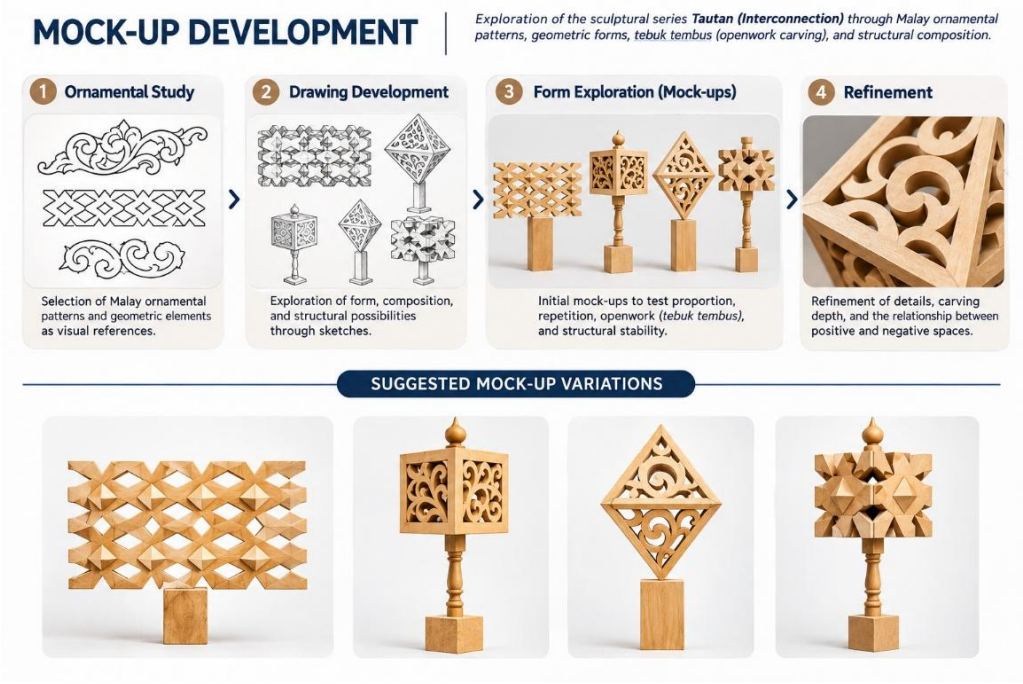


Figure 3. Mock-up development and refinement of openwork, proportion, and structure (Source: Researchers, 2026)

The Sculptural Series Tautan (Interconnection)

The series *Tautan* (Interconnection) comprises four works, summarised in Table 2 and illustrated in Figures 4 to 7. Each work takes up a different relation between the source motifs and the geometric frame, and the four can be read as a progression from a planar lattice towards fully three-dimensional composition.

Table 2. Data on the Four Works in the Series *Tautan* (Interconnection)

Work	Principal motif reference	Form and orientation	Technique	Surface treatment
Tautan I	Geometric module (rhombus lattice)	Horizontal relief panel; frontal	Openwork cutting with raised pyramidal bosses	Dark stain on pine; serrated outer edge
Tautan II	*Awan larat* within a cubic frame	Vertical column with cubic head and finial; in the round	Tebuk tembus on four panels; turned shaft	Dark stain on pine; uniform finish
Tautan III	*Awan larat* within a *pucuk rebung* derived diamond	Diamond plate on a plinth; frontal with depth	Tebuk tembus; mounted on a solid base	Applied colour on the upper half; stained lower half
Tautan IV	Geometric module (star and rhombus)	Vertical column with open block head; in the round	Interlocking modular construction; turned shaft	Dark stain on pine; uniform finish

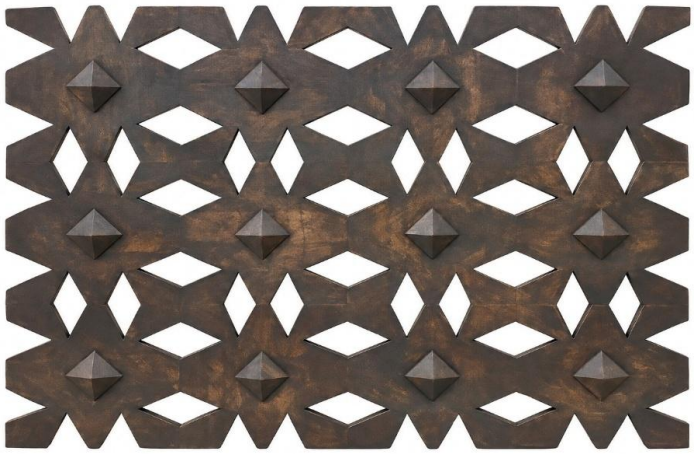


Figure 4. *Tautan I*, modular rhombus lattice with pierced and raised units
(Source: Researchers, 2026)

Tautan I (Figure 4) is the most direct application of the modular rule. A rhombus lattice is repeated across a horizontal field, with pierced diamonds alternating with raised pyramidal bosses so that the surface oscillates between void and relief. The outer edge is left serrated rather than trimmed to a rectangle, which makes the lattice read as a fragment of a pattern that could continue indefinitely, in keeping with the constructional logic of geometric ornament (Ibrahim et al., 2023). The work recalls the function of pierced panels in traditional Malay buildings, where carved screens admit light and air above doors and windows (Nazuki & Kamaruddin, 2017); here, however, the panel carries no architectural function, and the reference is formal rather than structural.



Figure 5. *Tautan II*, cubic openwork head with *awan larat* panels on a turned shaft

(Source: Researchers, 2026)

Tautan II (Figure 5) shifts the same logic into the round. Four openwork panels carrying the scrolling *awan larat* profile form a cubic head mounted on a turned shaft with a finial and a square base. The vertical composition and the turned shaft recall the post and lamp-post typology of traditional Malay building, while the pierced panels allow the interior of the cube to be seen through the carving, so that the motif is read twice, once on the near face and again, reversed, on the far one. This doubling is only available in three dimensions and does not exist in the flat source.



Figure 6. *Tautan III*, pierced diamond plate with partial colour application
(Source: Researchers, 2026)

Tautan III (Figure 6) places an organic scrolling composition inside a diamond frame derived from the triangular geometry of *pucuk rebung*, and mounts the plate on a rectangular plinth so that it is read as a single suspended plane. It is the only work in the series to use applied colour: the upper half is painted while the lower half retains the stained wood surface. The division of the plate into two colour fields across the horizontal axis makes the meeting of the two systems explicit, with the geometric frame and the organic infill held in a single form. The colour also alters the reading of the openings, since the pierced areas appear as dark intervals against the painted field and as light intervals against the stained one.



Figure 7. *Tautan IV*, interlocking star and rhombus modules on a turned shaft
(Source: Researchers, 2026)

Tautan IV (Figure 7) is the most strictly geometric of the four. A block of star and rhombus modules, interlocked without a continuous ground, forms the head of a second vertical column. Because the module repeats on every face, the work has no principal view, and rhythm is produced by the intervals between solids rather than by a drawn line. Read alongside *Tautan II*, the pair demonstrates the two poles of the series: the same column typology carries an organic composition in one case and a modular geometric one in the other, which allows the contribution of each motif family to be compared directly.

Reinterpretation, Cultural Identity, and the Limits of the Claim

Taken together, the four works support a specific claim about what survives the transfer from surface to volume. The scrolling line of *awan larat*, the axial symmetry derived from *pucuk rebung*, and the modular repetition of the geometric motifs all remain identifiable after simplification, whereas the finer characteristics of traditional carving, in particular layered relief, undercutting, and the dense secondary foliage that fills the ground in a carved panel, do not. The reason is material as much as formal: those characteristics depend on depth of cut in a dense hardwood, which the softer pine used here cannot support at small scale. The transfer thus preserves the organising principles of the motifs while suppressing their surface texture.

The second finding concerns the role of negative space. In traditional application the motif is a figure carried by a ground, whether carved in relief or woven into cloth. Once the pattern becomes a free-standing object, the ground is removed, and the opening rather than the carved mass becomes the element that carries the motif. This inversion is what makes *tebuk tembus* the pivotal technique of the series: it is the traditional technique that already treats the void as a formal element (Nazuki & Kamaruddin, 2017), and therefore the one that transfers most readily into sculpture. This observation extends studies that document the continuity of

Malay motifs in applied and two-dimensional contexts (Mohamad Abi Safwan, 2021; Adam Wan & Mohd Fadil, 2022; Wan Mohamad Daud & Zainal Abidin, 2022; Abdul Rahim & Hamidon, 2022), where the ground remains available and the inversion is not required.

It must also be acknowledged that repetition, rhythm, balance, and symmetry are general principles of ornament and are shared with other Islamic and non-Islamic traditions (Ibrahim et al., 2023). They are therefore not sufficient to mark a work as Malay, and a claim of cultural identity cannot rest on them. In this series, the reference is held instead by three more specific features: the particular profile of the *awan larat* scroll as it appears in the cut openings of *Tautan II* and III; the triangular and diamond framing derived from *pucuk rebung*; and the typology of the turned shaft with finial, which locates the vertical works within a local building vocabulary rather than within a generic geometric idiom. Whether these features are in fact recognised as such by viewers familiar with the tradition has not been tested here, and the claim is therefore stated as a design intention supported by visual evidence, not as a demonstrated reception.

Compared with existing work, the contribution of this study is procedural. Studies of symbolic geometry in painting (Wan Md Zain et al., 2024), of *songket* motifs developed into geometric compositions (Wan Mohamad Daud & Zainal Abidin, 2022), and of motif application in building design (Mohamad Abi Safwan, 2021) report the adapted outcome, while recent Malaysian sculptural studies reinterpret a joinery technique (Mohamad Yusoff et al., 2025) or an object form (Sharonee et al., 2025) rather than an ornamental surface. The present study sets out the sequence of decisions by which the adaptation of the ornament itself was produced, together with the constraints that shaped it. The transformation rules stated above, namely simplification of contour, modularisation of composition, and inversion of figure and ground, are offered as a transferable procedure that other practitioners can apply, test, or dispute with other motifs and other materials, and they respond to the wider call for transformation strategies through which a local identity can be articulated in sculptural form (Abdul Karim et al., 2024).

Finally, the relation between this practice and the preservation of heritage should be stated carefully. Reinterpretation is not preservation. The knowledge held by traditional carvers, including the selection of timber, the sequence of cutting, and the conventions governing where a motif may be placed, is not maintained by this project, which produces new objects that refer to that knowledge from outside it. What contemporary sculptural practice can offer is continued visibility and a renewed context for these forms (Chen, 2025), at a time when the carving trade itself is under economic pressure (Isahak et al., 2022), together with a record of how these forms behave when they are moved into new conditions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how *awan larat*, *pucuk rebung*, and geometric motifs can be reinterpreted into three-dimensional sculptural compositions through a practice-based process, and documented that process in the series *Tautan* (Interconnection). In response to the first research question, the characteristics that proved transferable are the continuous scrolling line of *awan larat*, the axial symmetry and triangular framing of *pucuk rebung*, and the modular repetition of geometric motifs, while layered relief and dense secondary detail did not survive the transfer.

In response to the second question, the transformation was carried out through three rules formulated in the drawing stage and tested in the studio: simplification of contour into

a single continuous line, modularisation of the simplified element within a geometric frame, and inversion of figure and ground so that the motif is carried by the cut opening. Mock-up testing established the limits within which these rules operate, in particular the proportion of void to solid that the material will carry, the effect of carving depth on shadow, and the change of reading when a lattice is lifted from a wall plane into the round.

In response to the third question, the works retain a legible relation to the tradition through the profile of the scrolling line, the triangular and diamond framing, and the column typology with turned shaft and finial, rather than through general principles of repetition and balance. This legibility is claimed on the basis of visual analysis by the researchers and has not been verified with external viewers.

The study has three main limitations. The evaluation was internal, with no assessment by carvers, independent experts, or audiences; the series is confined to a single material at a single scale; and the conclusions rest on four works produced within one project. Further research should therefore test the legibility of the reference with viewers familiar with Malay ornament, extend the transformation rules to harder timbers, metal, and larger or site-specific formats, and document the procedure in collaboration with practising carvers so that the relation between contemporary sculptural practice and traditional craft knowledge can be examined directly rather than assumed.

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