

# Cultural and Symbolic Meanings in the Paintings of Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari: A Visual Narrative of Childhood Expression in Indonesian Art

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study aims to explore the cultural and symbolic meanings embedded in the paintings of Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari, an Indonesian child artist, and to interpret how her visual expressions reflect childhood imagination, social values, and cultural identity in Indonesian art.

**Method:** Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this research analyzes six representative paintings through art criticism and visual interpretation. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, with data validation ensured through triangulation techniques involving the artist, her parents, and art educators. The analytical framework draws from semiotic and cultural approaches to visual arts to interpret themes, forms, and meanings in Vivi's works.

**Findings:** The analysis reveals that Vivi's paintings depict recurring cultural themes such as nature, community life, national identity, and moral values. Her use of bright colors, naïve forms, and spontaneous brushstrokes illustrates both emotional honesty and cultural symbolism. The artworks not only represent personal imagination but also visualize collective Indonesian experiences—agricultural life, celebration, cooperation, and pride in national identity.

**Significance:** This study highlights how children's visual narratives serve as a cultural lens to understand socialization, value formation, and identity construction in Indonesian childhood. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on the intersection of visual art, culture, and education, suggesting that children's art can function as a medium of cultural communication and symbolic representation of national ethos.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years, research on children's visual expressions has gained attention in the fields of art education and cultural studies because children's drawings are not merely decorative works but rich media of cultural communication (Luo et al., 2022). Children make use of visual semiotic resources to convey meanings related to their identity and social environment. For example, Monteiro, Monteiro et al. (2024) and Taylor & Leung (2020) found that young children invoked culturally mediated visual semiotic resources to communicate meaning in classroom drawings. This underscores that children's drawings reflect not only stages of motor or cognitive development but also internalised culture and social values. Therefore, children's art becomes a valuable object of analysis to understand how culture and identity are shaped and expressed visually. In the Indonesian context, this

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study seeks to fill a gap in explicitly linking children's paintings with national cultural identity formation.

Understanding children's paintings as visual narratives demands a comprehension of the language of art as a communication system that carries structure and meaning in its own right (Pantaleo, 2025; Williams, 2019). Visual literacy explains how lines-shapes-colours in children's paintings can be read as a "language" conveying cultural, social, and emotional messages. In this respect, the paintings made by Indonesian child-artist Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari should be analysed not simply as individual creative outcomes but also as representations of collective culture. A semiotic approach allows us to trace how visual symbols in children's paintings indicate the values, norms, and experiences they live through. Hence, this study utilises semiotic and cultural frameworks to reveal the symbolic meanings embedded in Vivi's works. The focus is on how her paintings can be read as cultural discourse and identity.

Indonesia as a culturally plural nation, with its numerous ethnicities, languages, and traditions, offers a unique space for children's visual expressions to reflect such diversity. Children's paintings in Indonesia may incorporate local symbols such as nature, communal work, gotong-royong (mutual help) and national identity specificities. However, the international literature still lacks extensive exploration of children's paintings in developing countries and how local cultural values are expressed through them. Consequently, this research offers a unique contribution: investigating children's paintings in Indonesia through a symbolic and cultural lens. The study examines not merely the formal aspects of the painting (lines, colour, shape) but also the cultural meanings underlying them. By focusing on Vivi's work, the research has potential to broaden the global discourse on children as visual communicators of culture.

The methodology adopted in this study follows the tradition of descriptive qualitative research combined with visual art analysis (Luo et al., 2022). Data were collected via observation of selected paintings, interviews with the child-artist and her guardian or teacher, and documentation, and then analysed through the lens of semiotics and culture. The semiotic analysis aids in identifying visual signs, their referents and the interpretants generated from children's paintings (Schielke, 2019). The cultural framework situates the child's painting in the socio-cultural context of Indonesia and considers how identity, values, and local experience influence visual expression. The combined approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how children's paintings reflect and produce cultural meaning. Thus, the findings may offer new insight into children's paintings as a medium of cultural communication.

Initial findings indicate that children's paintings such as Vivi's encompass themes such as nature, community, national identity and moral values, expressed through bright colours, naïve forms, and spontaneous strokes. Previous studies show that children tending to draw direct objects and cause-effect relationships often, while symbolism becomes more common as children gain stronger semiotic resources (Luo et al., 2022). In the case of Vivi's works, the use of symbol can be seen as part of internalised collective culture and local identity experienced at an early age. Thus, children's paintings become visual representation of cultural awareness and value socialisation during childhood. The research finds that children are not only producing privately but also co-participating in a

broader cultural narrative. These findings underscore that children's paintings can be interpreted as cultural artefacts and not just ordinary aesthetic activity.

Finally, this study carries important significance for the fields of art education, cultural studies and children's visual art. By viewing children's paintings as visual discourse of culture, the study broadens our understanding of how identity and social values are formed and expressed from an early age. It also provides practical implications for art education in schools, especially in developing children's visual literacy and cultural awareness. Additionally, its theoretical contribution lies in integrating semiotics, culture and art education in the study of children's visual expression. Hence, this article aligns with the focus of *Language, Culture and Art*, namely the interplay of language/communication, culture and art as media of transformation and identity. The research is expected to open interdisciplinary dialogue among visual art, education and cultural studies.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using an art-based interpretative approach. The aim was to explore the cultural and symbolic meanings in the paintings of child artist Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari, by interpreting visual elements through a semiotic and cultural framework. This design was chosen because it allows researchers to understand artworks as cultural texts that convey identity, emotion, and collective experience rather than as mere aesthetic objects. The qualitative paradigm enabled a flexible exploration of contextual meaning through observation, interview, and documentation. The research was conducted in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, an area known for its strong artistic and cultural traditions that influenced the participant's creative development. The findings were interpreted inductively to capture themes emerging from the artworks and related narratives.

### **Participant**

The participant of this study was Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari, an Indonesian child artist recognized for her expressive and award-winning paintings created between the ages of 6 to 15. Vivi's works were selected due to their consistency in representing social, national, and moral values within childlike expressions. In total, six representative paintings were purposefully chosen for in-depth analysis based on thematic diversity, visual richness, and narrative potential. Additional information was gathered from her parents and art instructors to provide contextual insight into Vivi's learning environment and cultural background. This triangulated perspective strengthened the interpretation of meaning behind each artwork. Ethical consent was obtained from the participant's guardian prior to data collection.

### **Instrument**

The main research instrument was the researcher herself, functioning as the primary tool for data collection, interpretation, and validation, consistent with qualitative inquiry principles. Supporting instruments included:

1. Observation Sheet – to document visual details of lines, colors, figures, and symbols appearing in each artwork.

2. Interview Guide – containing open-ended questions addressed to Vivi, her parents, and her art teachers regarding creative process, themes, and emotional intentions.
3. Documentation Protocol – for collecting photographs, exhibition records, and competition archives of Vivi’s artworks.

All instruments were validated through expert judgment by two senior art education lecturers to ensure the questions’ cultural relevance and interpretative adequacy.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis followed Miles & Huberman (1994) interactive model consisting of three cyclical stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Visual semiotic analysis was applied to decode signs (signifier–signified) in the artworks, focusing on color symbolism, compositional balance, and figurative elements representing Indonesian cultural motifs. The cultural interpretation phase examined how these signs reflected collective values such as cooperation, nature respect, and national identity. To ensure credibility, data triangulation was performed by cross-checking observational notes with interview transcripts and secondary documentation. Thematic coding was used to categorize emergent meanings into domains of social, national, and moral symbolism. The process was iterative, allowing patterns of meaning to evolve until analytical saturation was achieved.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

The results of this study are presented in four main parts: (1) the general characteristics of Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari’s paintings, (2) thematic classification of her works, (3) symbolic and visual elements identified through semiotic analysis, and (4) cultural values emerging from visual representations. A total of six representative paintings were analyzed: *Aku Bangga Menjadi Petani*, *Susu Bendera*, *Merah Putih*, *Keramaian Pasar*, *Gebyar Budaya*, and *Pemandangan Alam Seindah Impianku*. Each painting was examined according to its form, color, composition, and narrative content. The observations were triangulated with interview data from Vivi, her parents, and her art teacher. The analysis yielded consistent visual patterns and thematic tendencies that reflect a unique blend of spontaneity, cultural awareness, and emotional sincerity.

#### **1. General Characteristics of Vivi’s Paintings**

The overall visual character of Vivi’s paintings demonstrates a naïve artistic style typical of child art, yet marked by remarkable control of composition and color. Her brushstrokes are spontaneous and confident, revealing a direct expression of feeling rather than formal imitation of nature. All six paintings exhibit a dominance of bright, saturated hues such as red, yellow, blue, and green, which convey joy, energy, and optimism. Human figures are stylized, often disproportionate, with enlarged heads and simple geometric body forms, yet they convey strong gestures and emotions. Backgrounds are filled with dense details (houses, clouds, trees, flags, or animals), showing her preference for visual completeness and narrative density. These characteristics indicate that Vivi’s creative process is driven by emotional intuition and imaginative observation rather than technical realism.

## 2. Thematic Classification of the Artworks

The thematic analysis identified six recurring narrative clusters that form the conceptual backbone of Vivi's artistic production.

Table 1. Thematic Classification of Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari's Paintings

Painting Title	Dominant Theme	Central Motif	Emotional Tone
Aku Bangga Menjadi Petani	Rural life & social pride	Farmer, rice field, sunlight	Joy, respect for labor
Susu Bendera	Public health & social message	Children drinking milk	Cheerful, hopeful
Merah Putih	Nationalism & independence	Flag, parade, children	Proud, patriotic
Keramaian Pasar	Community & economic life	Market scene, traders	Lively, dynamic
Gebyar Budaya	Cultural diversity	Dancers, costumes, instruments	Festive, inclusive
Pemandangan Alam Seindah Impianku	Nature & imagination	Mountain, sun, rainbow	Peaceful, imaginative

Across these paintings, Vivi consistently centers collective human activities—working, celebrating, or cooperating, rather than individual portraits. The repeated presence of the sun, flags, and natural landscapes underscores her fascination with light, life, and harmony. This thematic coherence reveals an early sensitivity to community values and national identity.

## 3. Symbolic and Visual Elements

Through semiotic reading, several visual symbols appeared consistently across the paintings:

1. The Sun — symbolizing energy, life, and divine benevolence; it appears in nearly every composition, sometimes at the center, sometimes at the corner, radiating over the scene.
2. The Flag (Red and White) — serving as a national emblem, evoking pride and collective identity, particularly in *Merah Putih* and *Gebyar Budaya*.
3. Hands and Gestures — open arms and raised hands denote joy, greeting, or togetherness; these gestures visually communicate social inclusion and optimism.
4. Repetitive Circular Forms — used to represent faces, fruits, or the sun; this repetition indicates her visual comfort with rounded shapes as symbols of unity and balance.
5. Color Harmony — Vivi's color palette follows an intuitive but balanced pattern: warm tones dominate central figures, while cool tones fill the background, creating contrast and emotional warmth.

These symbols collectively function as semiotic codes expressing both personal feeling and shared cultural meaning. The childlike visual syntax, simplified forms, rhythmic repetition, and dense coloring, reveals an internal logic that aligns emotion, imagination, and sociocultural reference.

## 4. Cultural and Value-Based Patterns

From the six paintings, four dominant value orientations were identified:

- Respect for Nature: Reflected in *Pemandangan Alam Seindah Impianku*, where the interplay of trees, mountains, and sunlight symbolizes balance between human and environment.
- Community Solidarity: Expressed through *Keramaian Pasar* and *Gebyar Budaya*, showing cooperative human interactions, typical of Indonesian communal life (*gotong royong*).
- National Identity: Seen in *Merah Putih*, where the flag and collective celebration articulate belonging and pride in the homeland.
- Moral Positivity: Illustrated in *Susu Bendera* and *Aku Bangga Menjadi Petani*, both reinforcing messages of health, productivity, and ethical appreciation of work.

Each of these values appears not as abstract ideology but as visual storytelling told through color, gesture, and symbol. The vibrancy of Vivi's imagery reflects a worldview grounded in optimism, cultural rootedness, and moral clarity, elements that naturally emerge from a young artist growing within a culturally rich Indonesian environment.

### 5. Summary of Visual Findings

The integration of observational, interview, and documentation data revealed a coherent relationship between theme, form, and meaning across Vivi's paintings. Her visual narratives merge childlike spontaneity with cultural representation, producing artworks that are simultaneously innocent and symbolic. The data suggest that even without formal training in semiotics or theory, children possess intuitive awareness of visual culture, constructing meaning through shared social imagery. Vivi's recurring motifs of light, flags, community, and rural landscape become visual metaphors for Indonesian identity. These descriptive findings establish the foundation for deeper interpretative discussion in the next section.

### Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari's paintings consistently represent cultural values and collective identity, supporting the notion that children's drawings operate as semiotic systems of meaning rather than simple aesthetic activities (Catalani, 2021). The repeated appearance of the sun, flags, and circular motifs can be understood as "semiotic resources" children acquire within their cultural environments (Monteira et al., 2024). This aligns with the view that children are not passive receivers of culture but active meaning-makers who visually construct their social realities (Gowers, 2022). Vivi's artworks thus function as a form of visual communication that bridges individual expression and communal values. Within Indonesia's collectivist culture, her emphasis on communal activities and national symbols underscores the internalization of shared identity over personal narratives. These results provide empirical support for the argument that children's art conveys cultural narratives through visual representation (Cohn, 2020). Therefore, Vivi's paintings should be regarded as valuable cultural artifacts for understanding visual culture in early development.

The identified themes of rural life, cooperation, cultural celebration, and natural beauty reinforce the view that children's art mirrors lived experience and social environment (Gultekin & May, 2020). Through a semiotic lens, Vivi's recurring motifs can be interpreted as manifestations of a "cultural grammar" she intuitively employs to make

meaning (Zelenka, 2020). The presence of community and national identity motifs confirms that social and cultural contexts guide children's visual choices (Dekel-Dachs & Moorlock, 2020). The use of bright colors and naïve yet dynamic forms supports Lloyd (2025) conclusion that child art is inherently expressive and communicative. These patterns validate that visual literacy among children extends beyond formal technique to encompass cultural and moral context. Accordingly, art education must integrate children's cultural and identity contexts when developing their visual literacy. In this sense, Vivi's art functions not only as an aesthetic product but as a visual language of social communication and identity formation.

The semiotic analysis of Vivi's recurring symbols, such as the sun, open hands, and circular shapes, demonstrates that children employ culturally learned conventions in visual expression, consistent with the framework of social semiotics. The open-hand motif, for instance, visually communicates social inclusion and collective joy characteristic of Indonesian communal life. The tendency to portray group activities and nature parallels findings by Berti & Cigala (2022) and Gomez et al. (2019) that environmental experience significantly shapes children's visual representations. This suggests that visual expression among children is situated within, and simultaneously reinforces, local identity (Streelasky, 2020). Vivi's use of a naïve, spontaneous, and vividly colored style supports the view that children's paintings are rich semiotic texts rather than technical imitations. Consequently, her artwork represents a dynamic interplay between childhood imagination and cultural semiotic resources. The implication is that art education should nurture children's exploration of local visual symbols in ways that respect identity and cultural sensitivity.

Indonesia's plural cultural landscape provides a critical backdrop for understanding Vivi's paintings, illustrating that children's identity and values emerge through interaction with both local and national cultures. Her depiction of community cooperation and national pride exemplifies how children visually explore belonging within a larger social group, as noted by Hamilton et al. (2019) in studies on childhood identity and visual arts. Similarly, research by Zhang-Yu et al. (2021) found that children's artwork often serves as a site for negotiating ethnic and cultural identity. In this study, the representation of farmers, markets, and cultural parades reflects not only social life but also moral dimensions such as diligence, balance, and gratitude, values embedded in Indonesian educational and religious frameworks. These findings emphasize that children's art is not limited to creativity but functions as moral and cultural education in practice (Kinsella, 2018). As a result, children's paintings can be seen as dialogic interactions between the self and collective culture. Hence, Vivi's works embody the dual function of child art: personal expression and cultural continuity.

From an educational standpoint, these results highlight the significance of culturally responsive visual-arts curricula that foster both creativity and identity awareness. As Vivi demonstrates the ability to use cultural visual symbols to communicate meaning, educators should provide environments that encourage exploration of local imagery without suppressing naïve or expressive style (Monteira et al., 2024). Art education that connects personal experience to cultural traditions enhances both self-expression and cultural literacy (Die & Li, 2023). Recognizing that children's art serves as a medium of

cultural communication implies that evaluation should consider socio-cultural meanings rather than aesthetics alone. Teachers therefore need professional development to interpret children's visual symbols within their cultural contexts. Theoretically, this study contributes to global discourse on children's visual culture, which remains underexplored in non-Western contexts. Thus, integrating visual semiotics into art education offers a strategic means to strengthen national identity and cultural empathy through creative practice.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Vivi Kurnia Kumalasari's paintings embody a rich intersection between imagination, culture, and identity, revealing that children's art functions as a visual language of meaning rather than mere aesthetic play. Through recurring symbols such as the sun, national flags, and scenes of community life, Vivi expresses values of cooperation, harmony, and national pride rooted in Indonesian cultural experience. The findings demonstrate that children intuitively use semiotic resources to communicate moral and social understanding, making their artworks valuable cultural texts. The study contributes to visual culture and art education discourse by showing how children's visual expression reflects collective identity and cultural continuity. Practically, it emphasizes the need for culturally responsive art education that honors local imagery, fosters identity awareness, and strengthens creative literacy. Ultimately, Vivi's visual narratives illustrate how art in childhood becomes a bridge between individual imagination and the shared cultural spirit of a nation, affirming the role of children as active participants in sustaining cultural meaning through artistic expression.

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