VISUAL EXPLORATION OF HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN SEMARANG'S OLD TOWN IN WATERCOLOR DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION ART

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Abstract. Semarang, the capital of Central Java Province, boasts a rich history embodied in its cultural heritage dating back to the colonial era. The Old Town area, home to numerous historic buildings, served as inspiration for this creation, exploring the historical value of its aesthetic architecture. Besides attracting tourists, this area holds profound meanings that deserve appreciation. Using digital watercolor illustration techniques, this design seeks to revive the community's collective memories and strengthen appreciation for their cultural heritage. Through an emotional and illustrative approach, this artwork serves as both a visual representation and an educational medium, raising awareness of the preservation of historic buildings amidst the tide of modernization. The required tools are an iPad Pro 11, Apple Pencil, and Procreate software. The materials used are ivory paper. The techniques used involve digital media; the process of creating, coloring, and arranging images is carried out using digital devices and applications such as the iPad and Procreate. The creative process for this study project included pre-production, production, and post-production. The resulting design is a digital illustration artwork featuring the Blenduk Church and the Marba Building. This work demonstrates that digital illustration can be an effective tool for preserving local historical and cultural values.

1. Introduction

Semarang, the capital of Central Java Province, Indonesia, has a long and rich history with deep historical roots. Within a colonial context, Semarang flourished in the 19th century as a center of trade and economy, driven by its strategic position on the north coast of Java. Dutch influence is evident in the city's architecture, with many historic buildings adopting European styles, creating an area known as Kota Lama (Old Town). This area is renowned for its iconic buildings exemplifying neoclassical architecture, as well as several commercial buildings that still stand majestically today (Amin et al. 2020).

The historical heritage found in Semarang's Old Town, particularly its historic buildings, holds a rich history and memories that contribute to the city's identity. However, with the passage of time and the ever-changing economy, many of the values embedded in these buildings have begun to fade. The government has been revitalizing the Kota Lama area since 2017, with the aim of restoring its historical splendor and making it an attractive tourist destination for both domestic and international travelers (Amin et al. 2020). However, significant challenges remain, including the need for public awareness to protect this cultural heritage from the potential erosion of historical values over time (Al-Faruq, Nuraini, and Aufan 2022).

Semarang's Old Town is a fascinating historical area with The charm of distinctive

European colonial architecture. Historic buildings in this area, such as the Blenduk Church and the Marba Building, not only reflect architectural aesthetics but also serve as rich historical and cultural icons, chronicling the region's long history since the colonial era (Prabowo et al. 2020; Supriyadi 2022). Furthermore, the Old City was once an important trading center, where buildings like the MARBA building served as vital economic structures, creating a complex social dimension, and serving as social spaces for the community (Amin et al. 2020) (Sumastuti, Prabowo, and Violinda 2021). The diversity of architectural styles, from neoclassical to Indische architecture, creates a captivating visual experience, reflecting the cultural richness inherited from colonial policies (Widaningsih et al. 2023; Jannah, Paninggiran, and Imanina 2023). The beauty of the old buildings in Semarang's Old Town lies not only in their physical appearance, but also in their historical, social, and cultural values, which are an integral part of the area.

Furthermore, Semarang's Old Town as a historic district continues to attract many visitors, especially visitors who mostly come to take photos in front of the old buildings without truly understanding or appreciating their historical and architectural value. This phenomenon demonstrates a tendency among visitors to focus solely on the visual aspect, seeking to capture moments to share on social media, especially Instagram (Amin et al. 2020). Despite the abundance of cultural and historical attractions, visitors often neglect the experience of learning and understanding the historical context of the area, using the historic buildings as mere backdrops for photos uploaded to their digital platforms (Widaningsih et al. 2023).

In this context, the importance of artwork that expresses nostalgia for these historic buildings by bringing their stories to life through visual expression is crucial. By utilizing digital illustrations, the experience becomes an emotional visual narrative. Digital watercolor illustrations are expected to add an artistic dimension to images of historic buildings, creating works that not only reproduce visuals but also convey stories and evoke nostalgia among viewers (Mandaka and Ikaputra 2021).

This illustration technique offers a new way to evoke memories and the historical context of these buildings. Thus, the design of illustrations can be used to depict and express nostalgia for the historic buildings of Semarang's Old Town and impact public perception of this cultural heritage (Diliawan et al. 2025; Thania and Purwantiasning 2020). By utilizing digital technology, these illustrations are expected to explore the unique aesthetics of existing architecture and tell the stories and meanings behind each building (Turtiainen, Anttila, and Väänänen 2020).

The author conducted a comparative study of this theme through an analysis of three relevant works: "Documentation of Historic Buildings in Surabaya Through Vector Illustrations" (Dirgantara 2022), "Illustration of Renjana Siahaan's Short Story in the Analisa newspaper" (Tinambunan, Triyanto, and Azis 2021), and "Designing an Illustrated Book as an Educational Medium to Introduce Ronggeng Gunungdance to the Younger Generation: An Effort to Preserve Traditional Dance" (Moenib and Sondara 2023). These three articles tend to utilize a representational and informative approach, whether in the form of vector illustrations emphasizing precise form, educational digital painting, or functional illustrations for workplace safety communications. Meanwhile, the watercolor illustrations I developed focus more on exploring visual expression, emotional atmosphere, and artistic interpretation of historic buildings, utilizing transparent color strokes, soft textures, and a poetic compositional approach to create a more aesthetic and imaginative visual experience.

The goal of the creations is to revive the community's collective memories. This project focuses on the Greja Blenduk and Gedung Marba buildings. They aim not only to symbolize nostalgia for a culturally rich era but also to serve as educational tools for younger generations about the importance of preserving cultural heritage (Sheppard 2023; Liu 2025). Each work produced will reflect the community's perspective on the presence of historic buildings and their impact on local cultural identity, while evoking historical memories that can strengthen the community's emotional bond with their cultural environment (Sharma et al. 2024).

These works play a vital role in supporting preservation campaigns, which can raise public awareness of the importance of preserving and maintaining cultural heritage. With increasing attention to cultural values and support from various segments of society, opportunities for the conservation and restoration of historic buildings are becoming increasingly available and feasible.

The creation of digital illustrations of historic buildings in Semarang's Old Town uses an emotional and descriptive approach. The emotional approach seeks to create an emotional experience for the public that can trigger a sense of nostalgia (Hidayat et al. 2024). Digital illustration technology allows for broader and more efficient visual exploration than photography, which is limited to capturing reality. This makes digital watercolor more flexible and expressive, enabling the creation of works with high artistic value (Li 2020). This visual effect evokes a sense of nostalgia that is difficult to achieve with photography, which focuses more on sharpness and realism. The retro aesthetic of digital watercolor creates emotional depth and warmth, bringing it closer to a vintage style (Tian and Tirakoat 2024). The descriptive approach allows for detailed depiction of the visual form, architectural character, and historical atmosphere of the building. The primary tools required include an iPad Pro 11, an Apple Pencil, and Procreate digital illustration software. The materials used are ivory paper. The technique employed involves digital media, where the process of creating, coloring, and arranging images is carried out using digital-based devices and applications such as the iPad and Procreate. The project was divided into three stages: pre-production, production, and post-production. During the pre-production stage, research was conducted on the historic buildings of Semarang's Old Town to understand their historical context, architecture, and cultural value. This literature review was conducted to ensure accurate and up-to-date information. According to Diliawan et al. (2025), Semarang's Old Town is a fortified city built in the 16th century. It is a historical area, a legacy of the Dutch colonial era, featuring European-style architecture. The rarity and historical value of the Old Town area, with its colonial-style buildings, are a major draw for tourists. The visual concept was then developed through the selection of appropriate color schemes and techniques.

After the pre-production stage, the project progressed to the production phase. Here, the author began creating illustrations using digital watercolor techniques, using digital design tools and software such as the iPad and Procreate. Digital watercolor techniques allow for variations in color and texture expression, bringing the illustrations to life, creating a more immersive experience for the audience. The illustrations are rendered in a realistic style. The use of a yellowish color palette in illustrations, such as watercolor techniques, often creates a bygone feel and evokes nostalgia. This is because yellow creates a warm and soft visual impression, indirectly reminiscent of antique materials like worn paper or old photographs. In the context of color psychology and memory (Putra & Purwaningtyas 2018), colors like bright yellow, orange, and brick red are strategically used to add visual dimension and create focal points in a room. They are often used in decorative elements such as wall hangings and other small elements to provide a cheerful and dynamic touch without compromising visual comfort, creating a comfortable feel (Puteri, Listiyani, and Saputri 2024). The use of soft brushstrokes in watercolor illustrations is key to creating subtle textures and nuances that lend depth and dimension to the work, allowing for harmonious color gradation effects that bring architectural elements to life in a captivating way.

The final stage, post-production, is a crucial final step in the project, focusing on refining the resulting work. During this stage, the artist conducts a thorough evaluation of the created illustration, including correcting any unsatisfactory details and refining the visual elements to enhance their appropriateness.

2. Results and Discussion

Two decorative illustrations have been created. These illustrations serve as room decorations, but they can also be used for calendars, postcards, and other purposes. The primary purpose of these works is to decorate a room, depicting detailed building descriptions while conveying a classic feel. The works fully depict the building against a backdrop of clouds and a landscaped road.

Work 1
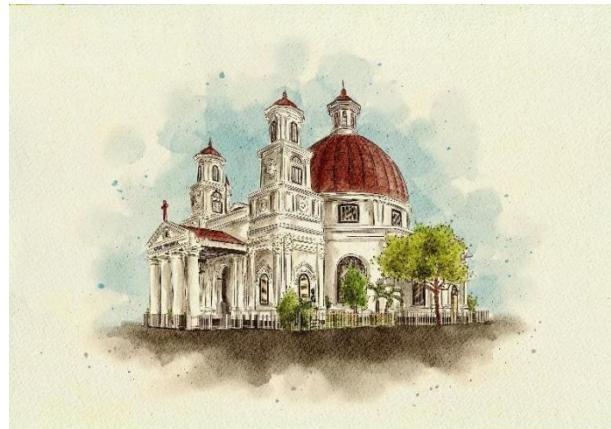
Figure 1: Blenduk Church
Source: Author

Title   : Blenduk Church
Name   : Fakhrudin
Size   : 29.7 cm x 42.0 cm
Technique : Digital
Media   : Print on paper
Year   : 2025

Work Description

This digital illustration depicts the Blenduk Church, complete with its majestic white facade and rounded, brick-red dome. The church's surroundings are adorned with lush greenery, while a large, leafy tree stands beside the church. The color palette is dominated by a soft combination of greens, browns, and pastel blues. The use of watercolor techniques creates a transparent effect that enhances the clarity of the building's three-dimensional structure.

Formal Analysis

To provide a more structured overview and facilitate understanding of the formal analysis conducted, the following table contains a description of the visual elements and compositional principles.

Table 1. Visual Element Analysis

Visual Elements	
Aspect	**Analysis**
Line	Lines are used to outline the building's contours, such as the arches of domes, the edges of towers, and window frames. The lines in the illustrations tend to be smooth and fluid due to the watercolor effect.
Shape	The main forms are geometric shapes such as circles on the dome, rectangles on the walls, and arches on the windows, which create a sturdy and historic impression.
Color	The dominant colors are white on the walls, brick red on the dome and roof, and light blue on the sky. This combination creates a bright, warm, and clean impression.

Texture	The watercolor texture is evident through the uneven digital brushstrokes, creating a soft and artistic feel, adding an emotional nuance to the building.
Space	Space is created by the differences in size and placement of objects: the main building is in the foreground with clear details, while the background sky and trees provide depth of perspective.
Light-Dark	Light-dark contrasts are used to emphasize the building's volume, such as the shadows cast on pillars and towers, and the difference between sunlit and shaded areas.

Source: Author

Table 2: Analysis of Composition Principles

Principles of Composition	
Aspect	**Analysis**
Balance	The illustration's composition appears symmetrically balanced; the main building is centered, with the left and right elements relatively similar in visual weight.
Unity	All the elements of line, shape, color, and texture come together to create a unified impression, so the illustration feels harmonious and unbroken.
Rhythm	The repetition of window shapes, pillars, and roof arches creates a regular visual rhythm, allowing the eye to follow the building's flow.
Proportion	The proportions between the building's components are proportional; the domes, towers, and walls are rendered to their original scale, maintaining a realistic appearance.
Emphasis	The focal point is placed on the red dome, which contrasts sharply with the white walls, drawing the viewer's eye directly to it.
Harmony	The harmonious color scheme (white, brick red, and sky blue) and soft watercolor strokes create a peaceful and unified impression.

Source: Author

Based on the table above, we can outline the application of visual elements and compositional principles, allowing for a deeper understanding of each visual aspect analyzed.

An analysis of the principles of art in the illustration depicting the Blenduk Church reveals several important aspects, including harmony, contrast, balance, proportion, and rhythm. First, the harmony in this work is reflected in the integration of each architectural element, from the large brick-red dome to the Dutch colonial-style pillars. These elements complement each other, forming a harmonious composition.

Second, contrast is evident in the use of color in this illustration. The brick-red dome, which serves as the center of attention, contrasts with the light blue background, creating visual interest that focuses on the upper part of the building. Furthermore, the white color of the church walls, combined with the green elements of the surrounding trees, enriches the natural feel and creates a harmonious impression.

Furthermore, the image is displayed from a three-quarter perspective. The placement of architectural elements such as the twin towers and pillars creates a balanced and symmetrical composition, creating a strong monumental impression.

Proportion is also an important aspect in the illustration. The size and shape of the architectural elements are depicted precisely and true to their original character. The dome, tower, and pillars demonstrate a mutually reinforcing relationship of size, creating an impressive and majestic impression.

Finally, the rhythm in this work is evident through the eye's movement, enabled by the use of flowing lines and shapes from the bottom of the illustration to the top of the dome. Color gradations

contribute to a dynamic visual experience, through the details of this illustration. The principles of fine art are used to integrate these elements into an effective and aesthetic composition, creating a work that conveys the meaning and beauty of the Blenduk Church.

Meaning

This digital illustration depicts Blenduk Church as a significant icon in Semarang, highlighting Dutch colonial influence through its distinctive architectural design. The watercolor technique used brings out the building's physical beauty. The fine lines that define the architectural details lend a sense of elegance to the illustration. The exterior and interior walls of Blenduk Church are predominantly white to create an atmosphere of purity and simplicity, while emphasizing the visual harmony of its neo-classical structure. In contrast, the copper-brown dome stands out visually, serving as a focal point, illustrating the stability and identity of Semarang's old city landmark. The choice of white is also seen as a neutral element that reinforces the symmetrical architectural design and geometric proportions, highlighting the octagonal shape and the Renaissance theory of "perfect form" as a symbol of Christ's presence. While the dome's warm color signifies religious affiliation and elegant European colonial aesthetics (Tanjungsari, Antariksa, and Suryasari 2016). The soft, flowing color palette in this painting creates a nostalgic and warm atmosphere. In the modern era, digital illustration serves more than just a visual aspect; it also serves as a means of cultural empowerment and heritage preservation, creating a connection between the current generation and history. Through this work, art lovers not only see the visual aesthetics but also engage in a profound cultural dialogue. Therefore, the hoped-for message is to encourage the public to appreciate historic buildings even more and not forget their historical aspects.

Work 2

Figure 2: Marba Building
Source: Author

Title	: Marba Building
Name	: Fakhrudin
Size	: 29.7 cm x 42.0 cm
Technique	: Digital
Media	: Print on paper
Year	: 2025

Work Description

This digital illustration depicts the Marba Building. The building's dark brown brick facade is adorned with large windows. It features a slightly curved flat roof and ornamental details around the top. The use of watercolor techniques creates a soft and cohesive effect, with flowing color gradations that enhance the building's three-dimensional structure.

Formal Analysis

To provide a more structured overview and facilitate understanding of the formal analysis conducted, the following table contains a description of the visual elements and compositional principles.

Table 3: Analysis of Visual Elements

Visual Elements	
Aspect	**Analysis**
Line	Bold lines are used to define building contours and architectural details (windows, frames, ornaments). Thin lines in shading add depth and texture.
Shape	Bold lines are used to define building contours and architectural details (windows, frames, ornaments). Thin lines in shading add depth and texture.
Color	Dominated by brick red, white, and wood brown, combined with pale blue nuances in the background and soft watercolor effects.
Texture	The watercolor effect gives the impression of textured paper and uneven paint strokes, reinforcing the artistic and nostalgic impression.
Space	Two-point perspective creates the illusion of depth, the building appears to recede to the right side of the image.
Light-Dark	The use of shading on the left and bottom sides of the building emphasizes the dimensions and direction of the light coming from the front right.

Source: Author

Table 4: Analysis of Composition Principles

Principles of Composition	
Aspect	**Analysis**
Balance	Visual symmetry between the left and right sides of the building, although perspective makes one side longer.
Unity	A consistent color palette (red, white, brown, pale blue) ties the entire illustration together.
Rhythm	The repetition of window shapes, pillars, and ornaments creates a harmonious visual rhythm.
Proportion	The proportions of the building are realistic in accordance with colonial architecture, the ornamental details are made in proportion to the size of the facade.
Emphasis	The focal point is on the front of the building which has the words "MARBA" written on it with prominent curved ornaments.
Harmony	The combination of warm and cool colors creates a balanced impression between the elegance of the colonial building and the relaxed atmosphere of the watercolor.

Source: Author

Based on the table above, we can describe the application of visual elements and compositional principles, allowing for a deeper understanding of each visual aspect analyzed.

The digital illustration depicting the Marba Building effectively utilizes various principles of fine art, creating a visual representation that is not only engaging but also conveys the historical character and aesthetic value of the historic building. Some of the principles of fine art applied include harmony, contrast, balance, proportion, and rhythm. Harmony is demonstrated through the

combination of warm colors used in the illustration, such as the dark brown on the building's facade combined with the golden-cream ornamental details on the building's roof. This color combination creates a visual harmony that conveys the elegance of colonial architecture and the classic feel inherent to the Marba Building. In addition to color, the choice of shapes and textures also demonstrates the harmony between the visual elements in the work.

Contrast is another prominent principle in this work. The building's facade, dominated by a strong dark brown, provides a contrasting backdrop to the large, brightly colored windows. This visual clash of light and dark elements not only gives the illustration depth and dimension but also draws the viewer's attention to specific details such as the arched windows, wooden frames, and natural lighting. This contrast reinforces the visual narrative of how the Marba Building, as a colonial heritage, retains an aura of elegance despite the vicissitudes of time.

Visual balance in this work is achieved through the symmetrical placement of elements. The illustration depicts the building from the front, emphasizing the Marba Building's symmetry. The uniform size and position of the windows on both sides of the facade, along with the alignment of other architectural elements, create a sense of stability and serenity. This symmetry also conveys a neat and orderly architectural style, reflecting the European design principles that influenced the building's form.

Proportion is crucial in depicting the relationship between the building's parts. The illustrator carefully adjusted the sizes of the windows, doors, and building height to maintain the Marba Building's original form. This harmony of dimensions not only creates a realistic illustration but also conveys the solid and majestic feel that characterizes the original building. Proper proportions also help the viewer perceive the building's scale and magnitude relative to its surroundings or any characters that might be included in the work.

Finally, the illustration's visual rhythm is created through the repetition of elements such as the vertical lines on the windows and the ornamental patterns on the roof. This rhythm allows the viewer's eye to move from one section to the next, enjoying each detail in a rhythmic manner. The colors used also have a regular intensity, creating a subtle, yet subtle, dynamic. This visual rhythm is crucial in building an emotional narrative, making the viewing experience more enjoyable and meaningful. Overall, the application of fine art principles in the illustration of the Marba Building not only makes the work aesthetically pleasing but also reinforces the educational and documentary value of this historic building. Through a thoughtful and thoughtful visual approach, this work successfully conveys the essence of the Marba Building as a vital part of Semarang's Old Town identity.

Meaning

This digital watercolor illustration depicting the Marba Building contains a profound meaning reflected through its aesthetic elements. This is a reflection of Indonesia, especially Semarang (Hindis Architecture). The Marba Building was deliberately painted brick red as the dominant wall to create a strong visual contrast compared to the surrounding white buildings, thus emphasizing the building's identity as a landmark in Semarang's Old Town area, distinguishing it from other facades. Meanwhile, white ornaments and frames were chosen to emphasize the symmetrical, rhythmic structure influenced by the tropical neoclassical style of the Dutch East Indies, while also highlighting the window and door openings as functional and aesthetic elements. This red-and-white color combination is not only aesthetic but also a symbolic representation of the historical identity of the transition of colonial architecture that adapted to the local tropical climate, while also providing a solid and elegant impression for the visual observer of the Old Town area (Setiawan et al. 2020).

Overall, this work is not only a visual representation but also a tribute to the cultural and historical heritage of the Marba Building. Thus, the Marba Building becomes more than just a building, but also a symbol of the passage of time and the richness of cultural heritage that must be preserved.

This work invites you to feel the beauty and depth of meaning behind the attractive visuals, as well as connecting with emotional aspects and creating a nostalgic feel.

3. Conclusion

This illustration successfully depicts iconic buildings in Semarang's Old Town, the Blenduk Church and the Marba Building, as visual representations of the historical, architectural, and cultural values of the region. Through an emotional and illustrative approach, this work not only conveys the aesthetic beauty of colonial architecture but also evokes the community's collective memories of the city's past. The digital watercolor technique was chosen for its ability to convey nostalgic nuances in a subtle and expressive manner, strengthening the emotional connection between the viewer and the historical objects depicted. This work serves not only as a visual product but also as an educational medium and a campaign for cultural heritage preservation. In this fast-paced digital era, this illustration connects the younger generation with history in a relevant and touching way.

It is hoped that through its powerful and touching artistic visualization, this work will raise public awareness of the importance of preserving and preserving historic buildings as part of their identity and cultural richness. This illustration successfully captures and represents two iconic buildings in Semarang's Old Town area: the Blenduk Church and the Marba Building. Both were chosen not only for their unique architectural forms but also for their deep historical and symbolic significance. Through a visual approach that emphasizes emotional and illustrative elements, this work brings the colonial atmosphere of the past to life in a modern and communicative way. The Blenduk Church, with its distinctive large dome, and the Marba Building, with its bold facade and classical ornamental details, are depicted in detail and poetically, transporting the viewer to a visual experience that transcends mere sight and feeling.

This emotional approach is realized through the use of digital watercolor techniques, which are soft, fluid, and nuanced. This technique allows for the depiction of atmosphere with a transparent color effect and subtle gradations, creating a warm and melancholic impression. Thus, this work is not only pleasing to the eye but also emotionally engaging, creating an emotional connection between the historical object and the current generation, who may have never experienced the atmosphere of the colonial era firsthand. Beyond being a work of visual art, this illustration also serves a strong educational function. Amidst the massive flow of globalization and modernization, an increasing number of young people are unfamiliar with the history of their own city. Therefore, this work serves as a bridge connecting the past and the present, conveying historical information in a visual form that is easily accessible and enjoyable for the wider public. Through a strong visual narrative and compelling aesthetics, this work conveys cultural values indirectly yet profoundly.

This makes digital illustration not only a medium of expression but also an effective tool for historical and cultural communication. This work also serves as part of a campaign to preserve local cultural heritage. In the context of preserving historic buildings, visualization has a powerful role in building public awareness. Touching illustrations can spark a sense of ownership and concern for architectural heritage that is being displaced by modern development. The visualization of Blenduk Church and Marba Building in the form of artwork serves as a symbol of resistance against forgetting, as well as a call to preservation. Overall, this work serves not only as visual documentation but also as a powerful artistic statement about the importance of preserving history and cultural identity. By combining aesthetic value, expressive illustration techniques, and profound meaning, this work makes a real contribution to strengthening the community's connection to their cultural heritage. It is hoped that this work will not be merely a fleeting visual experience but will leave a lasting impression and foster collective awareness of the importance of preserving the historical traces that surround us.

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