

Robert Rauschenberg is considered one of the most influential and innovative artists of the 20th century. His use of everyday, found objects and mass-media images in his works often blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture. He wanted to find new ways of creating and seeing art, and he believed very strongly that art could inspire social change. Rauschenberg's enthusiasm for travelling and learning about new cultures from across the world often led to him collaborating with local artists and artisans, and incorporating the different techniques and materials he encountered on his travels, into his work.

Reflect

- a. In your opinion, do you think art can foster mutual understanding between different cultures? If yes, how so? If not, why?

- b. Rauschenberg often used ordinary materials in his art. How does including everyday objects change the way you think about what counts as "art"?

- c. Based on your own experiences, what does artistic collaboration mean to you? Consider if it is something you practice in your day-to-day.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Truth (from 7 Characters)*, 1982

Silk, ribbon, paper, paper-pulp relief, ink, and gold leaf on handmade *Xuan* paper, with mirror, framed in a Plexiglas box, 109.2 × 78.7 × 6.4 cm.

From an edition of 70 unique variations, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Image courtesy of Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

This work by Rauschenberg is a part of his *7 Characters* series. This series was created at what is considered the world's oldest paper mill, in Jing County, Anhui province in China. The series encompasses seven editions of seventy collages, with each edition based on a selected Chinese character chosen for its meaning as well as its shape.

Rauschenberg worked with local papermakers at the mill to mould each character from paper pulp. This was pressed onto a base of thirty-ply *xuan* paper, to which Rauschenberg had also added cutouts from Shanghai posters, a sheet of translucent silk, and a ribbon from which he hung a silk medallion.

During the process of creating these works, Rauschenberg was inspired to launch a bold, self-funded journey across the globe, aimed at sparking dialogue on intercultural creativity. By collaborating with local artists, materials, and methods, he set in motion the monumental Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI). Between 1984 and 1990, the project toured to Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, Japan, Cuba, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Germany, and Malaysia.

Fun fact

ROCI, pronounced as "Rocky", is also the name of Rauschenberg's pet turtle!

Let's journey with Rauschenberg on his travels in Asia!

Tibet

In Tibet, Rauschenberg was driven to capture the Tibetans' "total respect for all things...there is no hierarchy in materials". Inspired by their relationship with materiality, his works reflect an understanding of spirituality intermingling within the everyday; weaving Tibetan sensibilities into his own experimental practice to show how traditions can meet and transform one another.

Did you know?

Rauschenberg pioneered hybrid works that mixed painting, sculpture, and found objects, calling them Combines (1954-64). Examples from ROCI TIBET continue this exploration.

Look

Can you identify the materials and objects Rauschenberg has used? Based on your observation, describe how he has used them in these artworks.

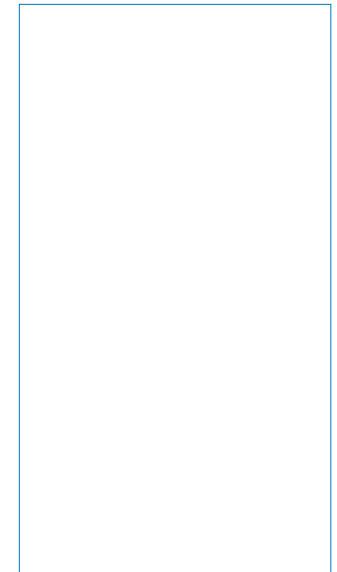
Ideate

If you were to create a Combine using three items from your backpack, bedroom or the space you are currently in right now, what would they be? Don't forget to think about what story they would tell together. List out the items below and your elaboration:

- ①
- ②
- ③

Conceptualise

Thinking about your materials and their story. How would you organise these items to convey your intended message? Roughly sketch out your idea below:



Reflect

If you treated every object in your daily life as equally meaningful, how would that change the way you see your surroundings? How can 'junk' objects be given meaning through art?



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT
Robert Rauschenberg, Tibetan Garden Song / ROCI TIBET, 1986
 Cello, chrome-plated wash tub, glycerin, Chinese scrollmaker's brush, mirrored Plexiglas, 109.2 x 46.4 cm diameter.
 From an edition of 25, published by Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa. Only 20 editions were realised
 © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.
 Photo: Will Lytch. Image courtesy of Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa

Robert Rauschenberg, Magnetic Script / ROCI TIBET, 1985
 Construction with chairs and typewriter
 110.5 x 77.8 x 58.6 cm
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Rauschenberg's engagement with Japan and Japanese printmaking and design techniques began in 1964 when the artist was touring with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as its set and costume designer. It was in Japan where the artist was taught that 'there's no duality'; that one can be neither right nor wrong underlining both the complexity and yet, simplicity that comes with art and life.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Bamhue / ROCI JAPAN*, 1987
bamboo with neon lights, electrical timer, and metal fixtures, 228.6 × 10.2 × 27.3 cm
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Look

Bamhue features a long, square-molded bamboo pole fitted with neon lights and a timer, casting different gradient of colours every few seconds. The piece is leaned on a wall and connected to an electrical outlet.

a. What do you think each of the materials represent?

b. Based on your answer above, what message is the artist trying to convey?



Robert Rauschenberg, *Kyoto XI*, 1983
solvent transfer, watercolour, and gouache on Japanese dedication board, 40.6 × 31.8 cm
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Photo: Ron Amstutz
Image courtesy of Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Look

Here is another mixed media work by Rauschenberg from his earlier sojourns to Japan! He made solvent transfers using images from local Japanese magazines, watercolour and gouache on a Japanese dedication board.

Japanese dedication boards known as Ema are used to write prayers on and can be found in various temples and shrines across Japan.

Reflect

a. The solvent transfers, a mechanical technique and form, and the use of gouache and watercolour, more abstract mediums, are used within the same artwork. Do you think this blending of techniques creates harmony or tension? Why?

b. How does the coexistence of mechanical and abstract elements reflect ideas about modern life, technology, and tradition?

LEARNING WITH ILHAM

Solvent transfer is a technique whereby a printed image is soaked in a solvent ranging from water, turpentine or lighter fluid. The image is then placed face down on paper onto which its image is transferred by rubbing its back. Rauschenberg created a series of hatch marks created by rubbing a dry pen nib across the back of the image.

LOOK

a. What images can you see transferred onto the work?

b. Do you think art allows you to better understand different cultures? How so?

CREATE

Make your own solvent transfer using tape!

MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Heavy-duty packing tape
2. Images (from newspaper, magazines, printed images)
3. A bowl of warm water
4. A cloth
5. A burnisher, can be a spoon or a ruler
6. Paper or cardstock

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Prepare your desired image. You can source these from any newspaper, magazine or print your own!
2. Apply the packing tape over the image.
3. Apply pressure on the tape by rubbing it firmly (you can use a spoon or a ruler). This is to ensure the ink transfers to the tape adhesive.
4. Cut around the image to your desired shape and size.

5. Using a cloth dipped in warm water, dampen the back of the taped image to soften the paper.
6. Gently rub the paper backing until it starts to dissolve or deteriorate leaving behind the ink.
7. Let the tape transfer dry and use it in your artwork!

Show us how you utilise these tape transfers in your art and share it with us on our Instagram! @ilhamgallerykl

Malaysia

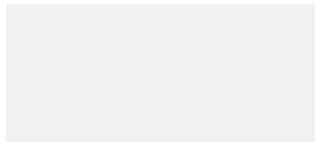
Malaysia was Rauschenberg's final ROCI destination. In 1989, he travelled across the country, visiting Sarawak where he met with indigenous communities, and heard of their plight in the face of rapid deforestation.

Fun fact
ROCI MALAYSIA exhibited at the National Art Gallery (Balai Seni Lukis Negara) in 1990 at the invitation of artist Syed Ahmad Jamal who was director of Balai at the time.

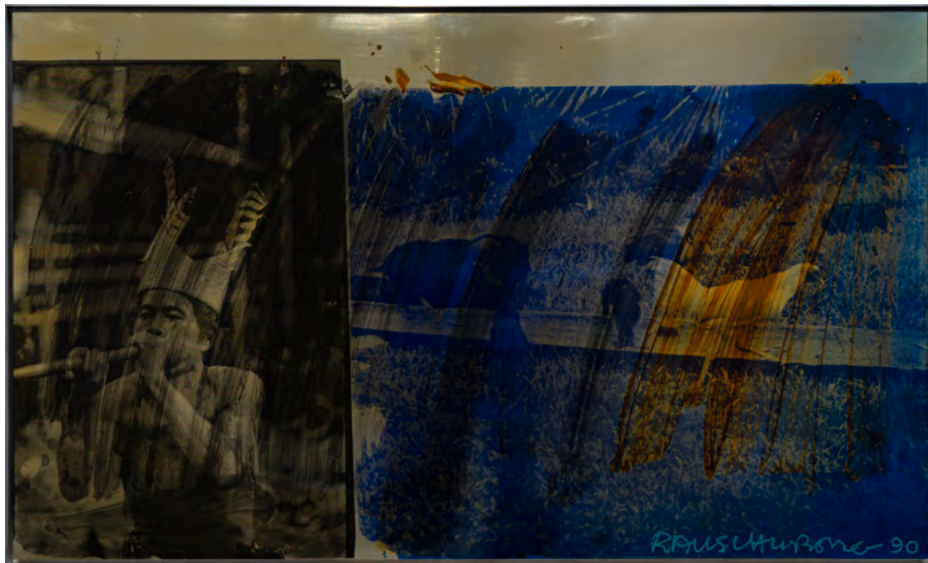
This silkscreen painting on tin-plated steel featuring an image of an Iban community leader with a blowpipe is one of the works he produced for ROCI MALAYSIA.

Look

How would you describe this work?



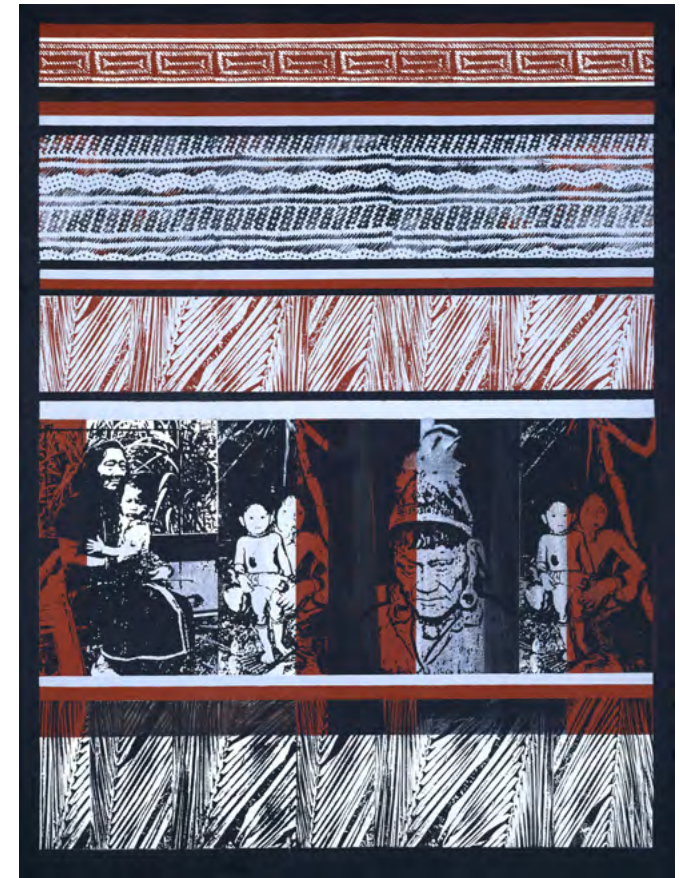
Robert Rauschenberg, *Iban Parade (Perarakan Iban)* / ROCI MALAYSIA, 1990
silkscreen ink and acrylic on tin-plated steel, 75 × 124.5 cm
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Rauschenberg was a major artistic influence for Malaysian artist Nirmala Dutt, whose works often centred around social issues in Malaysia including the environment, as well as the displacement of indigenous communities in Sarawak due to mega development projects such as the Bakun hydroelectric dam. Let's see how these artists are similar and/or different in style, theme and purpose.

The bright red colour which Dutt uses in this work is made from *mengkudu*, a plant used by the Indigenous Penan community as pigment in traditional, natural dye. The artist therefore comments on how nature can be utilised in creative art forms, and how inspiration can come from the natural world. However, it is these very natural sources which are being threatened by logging and deforestation, and faced with the potential of complete destruction.

- a. Compare and contrast Nirmala Dutt's *Membalak Jangan Sebarang Nanti Ditimpa Balak - Rumbia* and Rauschenberg's *Iban Parade*. Consider its their mediums, subjects, forms, and messages.



Nirmala Dutt, *Membalak Jangan Sebarang Nanti Ditimpa Balak - Rumbia*, 1990
acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 122 × 92 cm. Collection of the Estate of Nirmala Dutt

Conceptualise

If you could travel the world like the artist for the purpose of fostering mutual understanding between cultures through art, where would you go? Map out your journey with the map below:



- a. Do any of your chosen countries overlap with Rauschenberg's ROCI destinations? If yes, re-search what his main takeaways were from local collaboration with those countries. If not, conduct further research on how their culture might inspire your own creative work.

This education resource is produced by ILHAM in conjunction with the exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg and Asia*, organised by M+ in collaboration with ILHAM Gallery.

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