

The *Pendok* of the Surakarta *Keris* of Paku Buwono X: Art, Symbolism, and Social Status

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ABSTRACT

The *Pendok* of the *Keris* constitutes an essential component of *Keris* material culture, particularly during the reign of Paku Buwono X in Surakarta. As an integral element of the *Keris* ensemble, the *Pendok* serves not merely as a protective cover for the *gandar* (scabbard body) but also embodies a symbolic role representing the aesthetics, social status, and spiritual values of the Javanese nobility. The presence of the *Pendok* reflects refined artistic sensibility and functions as part of the identity-marker system within the social structure of royal court society. This article employs a qualitative approach utilizing literature study methods to analyze the role, function, and meaning of the *Keris Pendok* within the cultural context of the Surakarta royal court, particularly during the golden era of art and metal craftsmanship under the reign of Paku Buwono X. This study demonstrates that the *Keris Pendok* should not be understood merely as visual ornamentation but rather as a medium of cultural communication rich in symbolism, life philosophy, and the social identity of its owner within traditional Javanese society. This research contributes to the limited academic discourse on Javanese metalcraft by revealing the sociocultural meanings embedded in Surakarta's *Pendok* during the modernization of the royal era.

Keywords: *Pendok, Keris, Surakarta, and Paku Buwono X*

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INTRODUCTION

The *Keris* is a highly significant cultural artifact in Javanese society. The *Keris* are not only known as a traditional weapon but also as a symbol of identity, spirituality, and power (Pomare et al., 2022; Suliman et al., 2021). The *Keris* do not function merely as a weapon for killing like other weapons; rather, it has been elevated to a higher status in the values of the Nusantara society's life (Yusof et al., 2022). In the cultural context of the Surakarta royal court, the *Keris* holds a central role as part of the symbolic structure of the palace. According to Harsrinuksmo (2004), the *Keris* is not only seen as a sharp object but also as a cultural creation rich in meaning, closely related to the worldview of the Javanese people. This means that the *Keris* holds an important role in the life of Javanese society because of its philosophical values. The *Keris* is an art object created using metallurgical technology; moreover, it is a work imbued with artistic touches, high artistic quality, and possessing great aesthetic value (Ramadhan, 2019).

The artistic value of the *Keris* lies in various supporting elements, including the carved shape, *Warangka* (hilt and sheath), ornaments or carvings, and the intricate details on the blade known as *Pamor* (metallic pattern). This means that the appearance of a *Keris* is considered to have perfect aesthetic and artistic value when all its parts, the blade with its *Pamor*, the carving or hilt, and the *Warangka* form a harmonious and unified whole. One of these elements is the *Pendok*. The *Pendok* is one of the furniture elements of the *Keris* that is always attached to the *Warangka* or *Keris* sheath, meaning that the *Pendok* and the *Warangka*, besides being types of traditional

adornments (*sandang walekat*), have become an inseparable unity. Therefore, the presence of the *Pendok* in the overall appearance of the *Warangka* plays a significant role according to its function (Wasi Darmojo, 2024).

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Harsrinuksmo (2004) emphasizes that the *Pendok* on the *Keris* not only functions as a protector of the *Warangka* but also as a work of art with high symbolic value. Every carved detail and the materials used on the *Pendok* reflect the refinement of culture and the social status of its owner. The *Keris* sheath/*Pendok* is usually made of metal, intricately carved as beautifully as possible, and coated with shining gold as a source of pride for its owner. Therefore, the *Keris* possesses aesthetics not only in its physical form but also contains philosophical meanings within (Nurnaningsih, 2020). Furthermore, Soekmono (1992) describes that the *Pendok* of the Surakarta *Keris* is often carved with motifs depicting nature and Javanese spiritual life, as a manifestation of the harmony between humans and their surrounding environment. These motifs reflect the values highly upheld among the Javanese nobility. In other words, the *Pendok* is not merely a physical protector but also a cultural representation containing deeper meanings.

Besides its function as a protector and ornament, the *Pendok* also plays an important role in the social and spiritual life of the Javanese community. This indicates that the *Pendok* is a symbol of social status, possessed only by certain groups within society, especially the nobility. This is reflected in the activities of court life, which remain a central tradition deeply ingrained to this day, including the culture within the Surakarta Hadiningrat Palace.

According to historical records, the Kasunanan Surakarta Hadiningrat Palace was established in 1745 by Paku Buwono II and continues to exist to this day (Suharto, 1994). Various sources state that the golden era of Surakarta was reached during the reign of Kasunanan Pakubuwono X, which lasted 46 years from the beginning of his rule in 1893 to 1939 AD (Miskiyah & Rohmah, 2023). During this period, culture experienced a golden age, especially in the field of *Keris* culture. As a result, the production and use of *Keris Pendok* developed rapidly, reflecting the symbolic complexity inherent in this object. Therefore, through this series of manuscripts, the discussion of the Surakarta *Keris Pendok* becomes more comprehensive, combining the physical, symbolic, and aesthetic functions of the *Pendok* as an important part of the Surakarta royal court culture.

The study of *Pendok* is crucial in the contemporary context, particularly amid the challenges of heritage preservation in the face of modernization and globalization. As traditional metalcraft knowledge diminishes and younger generations become increasingly distant from palace cultural practices, systematic documentation and analysis of the *Pendok* become imperative to ensure cultural continuity.

Unlike previous studies that predominantly focus on motif classification and typological description, this research integrates artistic symbolism and sociopolitical function within the specific historical context of Paku Buwono X's reign. By examining the *Pendok* through multiple analytical lenses—esthetic, symbolic, and social—this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how metalcraft artifacts functioned as instruments of cultural expression and social stratification in the Surakarta royal court. This integrated approach reveals not only the technical and artistic sophistication of *Pendok* craftsmanship but also illuminates the complex interplay between material culture, identity formation, and power relations during a pivotal period of Javanese history.

This study aims to reveal the esthetic, symbolic, and social functions of the *Pendok* as both an artistic expression and a sociocultural identity marker. By analyzing the *Pendok* within its historical and cultural context, this research contributes to cultural heritage preservation efforts and enriches the field of Javanese studies, particularly in understanding the material culture of the Surakarta royal court during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in cultural history. The qualitative-historical method was particularly appropriate for this study because it enabled systematic investigation of cultural artifacts within their sociohistorical contexts, allowing for interpretation of symbolic meanings, esthetic values, and social functions embedded in material culture. This approach facilitated the reconstruction of past cultural practices through examination of historical sources while maintaining sensitivity to the relationships between objects, meanings, and social structures.

The reign of Paku Buwono X was chosen as the temporal focus because it represented the height of artistic refinement and sociopolitical symbolism in Javanese court culture. The 46-year period (1893–1939) witnessed significant cultural development, particularly in metalcraft, while negotiating the tensions between traditional courtly values and emerging modernization influences. This era provided an ideal framework for examining the *pendok* as both the culmination of long-established artistic traditions and a reflection of evolving social dynamics within the royal court.

The stages of research included topic selection, source collection, verification, interpretation, and writing. Data were collected through literature review of primary and secondary sources and visual observation of documentation related to *keris pendok* from the reign of Paku Buwono X. Further observations were conducted on *keris* collections from various collectors, accompanied by interviews with experts, practitioners, and stakeholders.

Data validation was ensured through triangulation, integrating evidence from textual analysis of historical documents and scholarly works, visual examination of physical artifacts in museum and private collections, and expert interviews with *keris* specialists, metalcraft practitioners, and cultural historians. Analysis employed semiotic and historical approaches to interpret the symbolic and social meanings of the Surakarta *pendok* from the era of Paku Buwono X.

Results and Discussion

General Characteristics of the Surakarta *Keris Pendok*

The *Surakarta Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) is renowned for its fine craftsmanship and variety of forms. The shape of the *Surakarta-style Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) is highly varied—some are plain without ornamentation, while others are decorated with intricate designs. In terms of workmanship, most are crafted neatly and adorned with delicately engraved ornamental motifs, and at times even embellished with diamonds or other precious stones (Wasi Darmojo, 2018). Based on the basic structural form, there are three main types or models of the *Surakarta-style Keris* sheath (*Pendok*):

- (1) *Pendok Buntun* – ‘*Buntun*’ derives from the word ‘*buntu*’ meaning ‘closed’; this type of sheath fully covers the entire *gandar* (scabbard).
- (2) *Pendok Blewah* – ‘*Blewah*’ is the name of a fruit, symbolizing the split or slitted nature of the design; this sheath features an open section running lengthwise along the front side, from the tip to the top.
- (3) *Pendok Topengan* – This type also has a lengthwise open section on the front side, extending to the top, like the *blewah* style but often with different ornamental emphasis (Wasi Darmojo, 2019)..

In addition to having a plain surface, some *Surakarta-style Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) are also adorned with ornamental designs on their surface. Engraved *Pendoks* feature a variety of decorative forms with diverse motifs, including *alas-alasan*, *semen*, *taman sari*, and others (Wasi Darmojo, 2019). In general, these ornaments are arranged in an orderly manner following the concepts of repetition and symmetry according to the surface area of the *Pendok*, resulting in a neat and intricate appearance that reflects the character of the ornamentation. In other words, the base of the *Surakarta-style Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) features decorative patterns with various variants classified as traditional classical motifs.

Surakarta-style Keris sheaths (*Pendok*) are generally made from metal sheets or plates consisting of copper, silver, gold, *suasa* (a gold-copper alloy), brass, bronze, and sometimes even from *saton*—a material made from *Keris Pamor*. The choice of material depends on economic capability, and those who can afford it usually use gold combined with gemstones (diamonds, rubies, and emeralds), arranged according to the ornamental motif patterns (Haryoguritno, 2006). Thus concludes the discussion related to the existence of the *Surakarta Pendok Keris*’s it can be said that the *Surakarta Keris*’ sheath (*Pendok*) possesses unique characteristics evident in its intricate and delicate carving techniques, reflecting the high skill of the artisans.



Figure 1. Left: plain *Pendok* blewah; right: carved *Pendok* buntun
(scan and repro: Kuntadi WD 2024)



Figure 2. Left: carved *Pendok* blewah; right: carved *Pendok* topengan (scan and repro: Kuntadi WD 2024)

Motifs and Symbolism in the *Pendok*

Common motifs found on *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) include *lung-lungan* (vine patterns), flora, mythical animals, and cosmological symbols such as the *gunungan*. Furthermore, Guntur (2018) states that on the *Pendok bunton*, the motifs commonly found are variations of *lung* (plant) forms, including *kembang setaman* which symbolizes the harmony of a flower garden, *sari kretarta*, *widasari*, and palace motifs that represent the kraton (royal palace). Meanwhile, on the *Pendok blewah*, the motifs used are also dominated by variations of *lung* patterns, such as grapevine, bougainvillea, torch ginger (*Etilingera elatior*), *wajik* (diamond-shaped motif), *budha*, *kenanga ginubah* (a transformed form of *kenanga* flower), *modang*, and *plisiran* (Yunus, 2012). In general, there are four main motifs or their variants commonly found on *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*), namely: the *lung/lung-lungan* motif representing plants; *alas-alasan*, depicting forests along with the animals within; geometric shapes such as *wajik*, *nganam kepeng*, *anam gedeg*; and motifs of the *garuda* or other mythological creatures (Guntur, 2018). This illustrates the complexity of the decorative variety applied to the *Surakarta Keris* sheath (*Pendok*).

Haryoguritno (2006) states that there are several decorative patterns on the *Surakarta*-style *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*), including various *lung-lungan* motifs such as *lung kembang setaman*, *lung keraton*, *lung patran sewu*, *lung anggur*, *lung kemarogan*, *lung anggrek*, *lung kanthet*, *lung pakis*, *lung buda*, *srimulyo*, *modang*, *bonang sarenteng*, *menyan kobar*, *grinsing*, *sembagen*, *parang*, *ganam kepeng*, *tirta teja*, *kemalo abang*, and *alas kobong*. These motifs are not merely decorative but reflect Javanese philosophy, such as harmony with nature, spirituality, and Kejawen values. This aligns with what Haryoguritno (2006) stated—that besides aesthetic purposes, the decorative patterns on *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) are often created with symbolic intentions. For example, they serve as social markers, chronograms (*surya candra sengkala*), and indicators of ownership. This is often seen on *Pendoks* whose back surfaces bear certain marks, such as royal palace emblems, stylized Javanese or Latin letters, or year numbers. In other words, almost every decorative pattern displayed on the surface of the *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) not only enhances its beauty but is also rich in philosophical meaning.



Figure 3. Various examples of motifs applied to the Surakarta *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*), sourced from the book *Keris Jawa: Antara Mistik dan Nalar* by Haryono Haryoguritno (Scan and repro: Kuntadi WD 2024)

Aesthetics and Artistic Taste in the Era of *Paku Buwono X*

As previously explained, during the reign of *Pakubuwono X*, the *Surakarta* palace experienced significant progress, particularly in the field of culture. This situation influenced the process of modernization as it began to enter the *Surakarta* palace environment; however, the presence of modern elements did not immediately erase the deeply rooted traditions within the palace culture. On the contrary, modernization encouraged the development of artistic styles in various cultural objects, one of which is the *Pendok Keris*. During this period, the design of the *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) underwent a transformation by combining traditional craftsmanship techniques passed down through generations with the influence of modern artistic tastes that emerged at the time. This indicates that the *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) not only functions as a protective cover for the blade but also serves as a medium of aesthetic expression and a symbol of the owner's social status and power. The fundamental concept of the *Pendok* is not only to protect the *Warangka* (scabbard) but also to enhance the overall aesthetic appearance of the *Keris*, including its blade and fittings (Wasi Darmojo, 2019). Based on this concept, the presence of the *Pendok* is generally complemented by various decorative motifs, including flora, fauna, chronograms, *wayang* figures, and other specific characters.

As an ornament to enhance its beauty, the *Pendok Keris* is often made from precious metals and frequently adorned with decorative elements combined with gemstones, such as diamonds (Wasi Darmojo, 2024). As emphasized by Gunawan (2009), the design of the *Pendok* not only reflects the aesthetic taste of its owner and maker but also serves as a visual representation of authority and the legitimacy of power within the palace environment. Through motifs, carving techniques, material selection, and ornament arrangement, the *Pendok* becomes an important element in displaying the relationship between cultural values, social status, and the ruler's aesthetic taste. Thus, the *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) can be seen not only as a complementary element within the *Keris* structure but also as a cultural artifact reflecting the dynamic artistic changes within the palace, especially during the transitional period between tradition and modernity.



Figure 4. Various types of Surakarta *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) applied to the *Keris* scabbards (*Warangka*) enhance their aesthetic value. (Scan and repro: Kuntadi WD 2024)

Social and Political Functions of the *Keris* Sheath (*Pendok*)

One important element accompanying the *Keris* fittings is the *Pendok*, which is the outer sheath typically made of metals such as silver, gold, or brass, and is often adorned with beautiful decorative patterns. The *Pendok* not only serves as an aesthetic complement to ceremonial attire but also carries deep social meaning. The presence of the *Pendok* in a *Keris* serves as a marker of the owner's status within the social hierarchy, especially within the palace environment. Additionally, the *Pendok* functions as a symbolic communication tool that reflects a person's position, authority, and legitimacy within the social structure of Javanese society. In the context of official palace ceremonies, the selection and use of the *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) are inseparable from strict customary regulations. In the past, the *kemalo Pendok* was only worn (*agem*) by nobles within the palace environment during specific ceremonies (Haryoguritno, 2006). Thus, the color of the *Pendok* can determine a person's position within the social structure of the community. The red (*abrit*) *kemalo Pendok* is specifically designated for the king and his relatives, down to at least the level of regent; the green (*ijem*) *kemalo Pendok* is for *bekel* and equivalent ranks; while the black (*cemeng*) *kemalo Pendok* is for subordinate palace servants (*abdi dalem*) or commoners (Haryoguritno, 2006).

The *Pendok* is not merely a visual accessory but also a representational medium that signifies the dignity and authority of a nobleman or official. As noted by Voorhoeve (2024) in his study on Javanese culture, during the reign of the Surakarta kings, the *Keris* and its *Pendok* became part of the ceremonial regalia used in important rituals—not only as protective tools but also as markers of dignity and honor within the palace realm. This statement reinforces the understanding that the *Keris* and all its accessories, including the *Pendok*, have become an integral part of the symbolic system of Javanese nobility, laden with rules and values preserved through generations. Thus, the *Pendok* functions not only as an accessory but also as a symbol of prestige, a tool of social communication, and a reflection of the living cultural norms within Javanese society, especially in the aristocratic palace environment. The choice of material, motif, and form of the *Pendok* reflects the status, position, and even the character of the *Keris* owner within the hierarchical social order.



Figure 5. Various Sungging Surakarta scabbards with kemalo-type *Keris* sheaths to indicate social strata

(Scan and repro: Kuntadi WD 2024)

Surakarta *Keris* Sheath (*Pendok*) in the Era of Paku Buwono X: Cultural Heritage and Expressions of Metalcraft Art

During the reign of Paku Buwono X (1893–1939), the forms and decorative styles of the *Keris* sheath (*Pendok*) developed very distinctively, reflecting the artistic tastes of the Surakarta nobility while also recording the living socio-cultural dynamics within the palace environment. As noted by Harsrinuksmo (2004), the development of *Pendok* styles and *Keris*' ornamentation during this period not only reflects the aesthetics of nobility but also serves as living evidence of the flexibility of Javanese metalcraft art in responding to changing social tastes within the palace environment and Javanese urban society. To this day, *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) from the era of Paku Buwono X can still be found in museum collections as well as in the private collections of *Keris* enthusiasts, both domestically and internationally. The existence of these *Pendoks* is not only a visual artifact of past grandeur but also an important part of preserving metalcraft art and the intangible cultural heritage of the Nusantara. As emphasized by UNESCO (2005), the *Keris*, including its *Pendok*, is recognized as a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity,' signifying acknowledgment of the high cultural value and philosophy embedded within it.

According to Soedarmadji (1995), *Keris* and its accessories, including the *Pendok*, are manifestations of a blend of aesthetic, spiritual, and social elements, making the *Keris* a cultural work with high philosophical value. Furthermore, Harsrinuksmo (2004) notes that the diversity of forms and craftsmanship techniques in *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) reflects the high skill of metal artisans (*empu*) in expressing Javanese cultural values through elegant craft art. The industrial implications of this heritage extend beyond historical preservation to contemporary applications. The sophisticated metalworking techniques developed during the Paku Buwono X era offer valuable insights for modern artisan communities seeking to revitalize traditional crafts while

maintaining cultural authenticity. Moreover, the symbolic systems encoded in *Pendok* designs provide frameworks for understanding Javanese material culture that remain relevant for cultural tourism development, museum curation, and heritage education programs. Thus, the preservation of Surakarta *Keris* sheaths (*Pendok*) from the era of Paku Buwono X is not merely an effort to conserve historical artifacts but also a step toward nurturing cultural identity, enriching the study of metalcraft art, and safeguarding the continuity of Javanese intangible cultural heritage amid the currents of global modernization.

CONCLUSION

The *pendok* of the *keris* from the era of Paku Buwono X served as a manifestation of Javanese nobility's cultural values, artistic mastery, and social identity, where every element—from form and material to decorative motifs—embodied both aesthetic refinement and symbolic meaning within the Surakarta palace. As a medium that conveyed the worldview and philosophy of Javanese society, the *pendok* revealed the integration of artistry and social symbolism characteristic of royal culture. Future research could explore comparative analyses of *pendok* design evolution across different Javanese courts to deepen understanding of regional variations in symbolic representation and craftsmanship.

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