Charting Thoughts

Flores, Patrick D., Low, Sze Wee

Published by National Gallery Singapore

Flores, Patrick and Sze Wee Low.
Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/109964

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3340269
In 1938, Katharine Sim, a newly wed artist who accompanied her husband, Stuart Sim, from England to Parit Buntar, wrote:

The Malays were good to paint. The men have that little-boy look which is so attractive, and the women bashfully droop their heads, shy and demure. I could not offend the modesty of Moslem Malay women by asking them to pose in the nude; but it was a disappointment not to be able to do any studies of Malay nudes.¹

In thinking about the relationship between colonial women artists and their subjects, and the kinds of roles they might play in the colony, there are various things observable in this brief autobiographical description. First, the Malays made “good” painting subjects to the colonial painters; second, qualities of deference in the colonised (“that little-boy look”; “shy and demure”) appeared to appeal to colonial subjectivity and taste; and third, the “disappointment” of not being able to do nude studies tellingly placed the author among the pedigree of academically trained artists.

Katharine Sim belonged to a long history of colonial women artists who painted the tropics during their intermittent stay in the British Colony, no less due to their privileged status as the spouse of colonial expatriates and officials. What perhaps set Sim apart from the others was her deep fascination and love for Malayan peoples and the Malayan culture which germinated during an initial three-year stay (what she called her “three youthful, glib years”) that ultimately led to her making a conscious and concerted effort to embrace the different cultures in Malaya upon her subsequent return following the end of the war.²

Colonial women and men formed the precursors of Singapore’s history of self-modernisation.³ Yet their histories were often excluded in nationalistic discourses of art. The work and

¹ Katharine Sim, *Malayan Landscape* [with an introduction by Sir Richard Winstedt] (London: Michael Joseph, 1946), 28. Published in 1946, *Malayan Landscape* is presented as a recollection of Sim’s experience in Malaya, that was in all likelihood originally penned as private correspondence. We are reminded by the author that much of the content of the book, from which this excerpt was taken, was derived from the notes and letters sent during the period 1938 to 1942 to close friends or relatives.

² See her foreword in the second edition of *Malayan Landscape* published in 1969 (Singapore: Donald Moore for Asia Pacific Press), 6–8. Sim went on to pursue deeper knowledge of the Malay language (and culture) and became one of very few British women who wrote about pantuns. For more on this subject, see Krishnavanie Shanmugam, “Pantun Translations into English in Women’s Writings in Twentieth Century British Malaya,” *Journal of Modern Languages* 20 (2010): 80–93.

³ If we accept the view that colonisation was not primarily concerned with transposing cultural values...
contribution of privileged colonial women artists, such as Katharine Sim, belonged to a no man’s land—as part of the colonial community, they were distanced from their own community where they belonged, and marginalised in anti-colonial histories in spite of how many may well have acknowledged the colony to be their second home.4

This essay discusses the cultural institutions that were in place during colonial rule and the significant roles colonial women played. By tracing the long process of cultural remodelling in Malaya, it is possible to observe how cultural institutions such as social art clubs were later inherited and continued by post-Independent Malaya, opening up participation within them to various excluded groups. Far from a homogenous or an undistinguished mass, “colonial artists” themselves comprised professional, official and amateur artists, who also operated under uniquely colonial conditions. They introduced not merely a new form of visual representation, but a secular artist-spectator system that made the production and reception of modern visual representations comprehensible as a professional or amateur art practice.

The Little-Known Singapore Art Club and the Very Social World of Art

Postcolonial discourses of art were problematically devoid of colonial references. Where colonial influence, if any, was believed to have taken place, it could be traced to the rise of formal art education in public schools and later to the appointment of an Art Superintendent, Richard Walker, in 1928. This explicit occlusion of colonial influence is most markedly discernable in the canonical text, Channels and Confluences: A History of Singapore Art, in which the author chose to begin the narrative with the Amateur Drawing Association founded by the Straits Chinese community. Here, Kwok Kian Chow wrote:

Although there is some scanty information on an art club established in Singapore around 1882, a good starting point for a survey of twentieth-century Singapore art history is 1909—the year when the Amateur Drawing Association was established.5

The opening chapter paid little attention to the wider cultural contexts of the Amateur Drawing Association, its historical precedents or the relations of its members within the nascent art world. Instead, it drew exclusive attention to the association’s existence as the evidence for local agency as seen in the works of a few members, the much celebrated “Low brothers” for example. However, the “scanty information” of this art club does in fact reveal an earlier history.6 As records of this art club and artworks produced by the artists may have been

---

4 This essay discusses the cultural institutions that were in place during colonial rule and the significant roles colonial women played. By tracing the long process of cultural remodelling in Malaya, it is possible to observe how cultural institutions such as social art clubs were later inherited and continued by post-Independent Malaya, opening up participation within them to various excluded groups. Far from a homogenous or an undistinguished mass, “colonial artists” themselves comprised professional, official and amateur artists, who also operated under uniquely colonial conditions. They introduced not merely a new form of visual representation, but a secular artist-spectator system that made the production and reception of modern visual representations comprehensible as a professional or amateur art practice.


6 In taking a revisionist approach to fill a gap in history, the author of this essay is aware that advances in technology have increased accessibility to sources and improved the speed at which information is obtained. In this instance, the digitisation of newspapers by the Singapore National Library Board has significantly enhanced the research process for present researchers.
destroyed during World War II, I was unable to successfully find any catalogues or reproductions of exhibited artworks. Instead, I found over 200 articles of varying length and quality describing the activities, exhibitions and artworks published in a number of local daily newspapers between 1883 and 1941. These have yet to be referred to in any way by writers or scholars on this subject. These articles have since been maintained by the National Library Board of Singapore as archival material, and are publicly available.

The Art Club, which was also sometimes called the Singapore Art Club to differentiate from art clubs in neighbouring states, was purportedly started in the early 1880s by “a few ladies and gentlemen having a turn for drawing and painting” with the aim of encouraging amateur painting and sketching. Reports of the club and its activities in the form of announcements and reviews were mostly written by committee members, newspaper correspondents or by members of the public addressing the editors.

In the absence of any visual evidence, such reports provide critical insights to the early art developments of British Malaya. They provide some clues as to how local art societies such as the Amateur Drawing Association came to be, and the social conditions in which the art of the Low brothers was produced and received. In the unravelling of this forgotten art club, the many “hidden” roles that women played in the nascent art world of British Malaya as patrons, artists, committee club members and the viewing public, also came to light.

The Singapore Art Club was initially a private club, but it eventually grew in size and reputation, becoming somewhat public from 1883 onwards. Its activities were undertaken seriously and the members were careful not “to neglect the interests of a society so eminently calculated to promote the cultivation of all that is ennobling and purifying.” The club appeared to have lasted for 60 years in spite of long periods of inactivity before it finally ceased operation during the Japanese Occupation. Although the leadership of the club was inconsistent and information about the club from secondary sources is scarce, throughout this period it was not by any means a low-profile club, for it was well-patronised by personalities belonging to the upper classes of colonial society.

The club gained prominence around the region and frequently enlisted participation from neighbouring states such as Perak and Penang, until they too started their own clubs. By 1883, the club had about “fifty active members” based in settlements across the Straits, a small running subcommittee of 12 in charge of organising the club’s activities, including the publishing of regular announcements and reports of their activities in the local daily news-

---

8 “Art Critics,” Straits Times Weekly Issue, 18 October 1884, 8.
9 For example, Guido, “The Art Club,” The Straits Times, 12 January 1884, 3.
10 See for example the following published in The Straits Times: “Singapore Art Club,” 5 March 1883, 2; Nemo, “The Art Club Exhibitions,” 6 September 1883, 2; “Untitled,” 29 February 1884, 2.
11 “Singapore Art Club,” The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (1884–1942), 22 May 1914, 7. In “Singapore Art Club: Exhibition at the Memorial Hall,” The Straits Times, 27 May 1914, 9, there was mention of “Mr Ben Brown,” a member of the Singapore Art Club who resided at Rangoon and had also participated in the Rangoon Art Club exhibition.
initially, when their seasonal exhibitions were held at the Upper Room in the Town Hall, they were well-attended by people in society and the ruling elite, for example, the Governor and his family, who were also amateur painters who would participate in the exhibitions.

The Singapore Art Club must have enjoyed much publicity and stature, for news regarding its activities, reputation and success spread to other colonies. In its later years, the club was able to garner entries regularly from the Federated Malay States (FMS) as well as from Rangoon and Ceylon. One 1884 report discussed the “art club model” as ideal. It described Singapore as taking “the lead” in the matter of Art Club exhibitions in the “Far East,” with even Shanghai, its “elder and more aspiring settlement,” following its example for having also “produced an Art Club, which exhibits, at stated seasons, a fair collection of sketches in crayon and water colours, and even more ambitious efforts.”

The writer went on to propose that the Art Club “might advance a step further in the direction of popularising art” by “constitut[ing] themselves a sort of academy,” drawing as an example the Simla Fine Art Society in Calcutta. It was the “liberality of the members” that the article drew specific reference to as worthy of modelling after, in which prizes and medals within sections were offered to the amateurs divided into categories: the native artist, warrant and non-commissioned officer and the commissioned officer.

This unfortunately did not materialise. The Singapore Art Club kept to its original structure and remained generally closed to non-European members, though it did conduct regular non-member competitions and on a few occasions invited non-European members to exhibit and compete, for example members of the Amateur Drawing Association including Low Kway Song. There were also rare occasions when locals participated in the exhibitions, such as students of the Kuala Kangsar Malay Art School and the “little Chinese boy” by the name of Fam Seh Goha, who was commended for his picture, *Battle of Trafalgar*, painted in a technique he had invented, using a piece of bamboo bitten at the end and dipped in ink.

To boost diversity and stimulate interest and motivation within the community, the Singapore Art Club reached out to fellow European members in art clubs from the region. For instance, members of the FMS art clubs (namely in Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan) and the Penang Impressionists Art Club were regularly invited to take part in their annual exhibition, sometimes competing for prizes, and vice versa. Their support was especially crucial when key members of the club were absent and participation in the exhibitions dipped.
Given the social limitations in a foreign environment such as the tropics, it was to be expected that the European community attended events for mostly social reasons with only a small group dedicated to advancing artistic developments. Descriptions of the club’s activities and reception conformed with accounts of the general way of life in colonial circles, where men and women partook in tennis parties, picnics, balls and evenings at the club.

This seemed especially the case in the early days of the club when its meetings and exhibitions turned out to be massive social affairs with some exhibitions initially held at the Town Hall, and later at the Government House or Victoria Memorial Hall (and elsewhere). At these exhibitions, apart from the display of paintings and art objects for competition (sometimes open to non-members), there was also the display of works on loan, which aimed to showcase artworks by famous artists or noteworthy craft and antiques.

The viewing of works was often conducted to the accompaniment of refreshments and music. There was usually a miscellaneous concert that included vocal and instrumental music. The events became increasingly sophisticated in later years and the club catered from Hotel de l’Europe Syndicate, and hired the services of music groups such as the Band of the Sherwood Foresters.

Norman Edwards reminds us that the European population consisted not only of members from suburban England, but also the British settlers in India. It was from the ranks of the new English middle-class suburbanites that most of the colonial officials sent out to manage affairs in India were drawn. This latter group, he argues, went from being part of a socially mobile class aspiring to the norms of a landed aristocracy to being a minority but elite group in a less advanced foreign world, on the fringe of a rural-based agricultural economy. They were on the one hand wary of “going native” and on the other, experienced the pressure to interact with the native community in order to adapt in a foreign environment. Both British India and Malaya witnessed an interchange of ideas between the local and British communities—much more than in other British colonies; the fear of losing their identity and social position did much to justify their need for conservatism, order and conformity.

As the ruling minority in a foreign settlement, the European community was a close-knit one and settling into the colony required learning how to live within such a community. The club, which was usually exclusively European in membership, has been described by Saunders as the “centre of European activity”; it was a place where the Europeans could relax among their fellows and for many women (usually wives or relatives), who were typically provided domestic help and found time heavy on their hands, club activities formed a critical component of their social and everyday life.}

One 1883 annual report revealed that social life and entertainment in Singapore con-
sisted of balls, club events, including exhibitions organised by the Teutonia Club and Art Club, cricket and lawn tennis tournaments, and various forms of dramatics such as English opera, minstrels, circuses—all of which were "fairly well patronised." Although rare, upwardly mobile “natives” who were sufficiently naturalised as British subjects were rewarded membership to such clubs, but even so, the distinction between the European and non-European fractions was kept consistent. A good example was how Haji Abdul Majid, the first Malay assistant inspector of schools, was himself a member of the Ellerton Club in Kuala Kangsar, a club organised for “lower-ranking colonial officials and clerks from various ethnic groups.”

Beginning in 1887, both James Miller and Major Manners Kerr were remembered for leading and driving the Singapore Art Club during the early period. Then there was W.F. Nutt and W.R. Collyer who avidly supported the club by serving as its President during the first decade of the 20th century. They were well-supported by Mrs Evatt. Sir Frank Swettenham, then Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements, supported the club as a keen competitor and patron, offering as well the Government House as the venue for several successful exhibitions. The subsequent decade reached a new milestone in terms of the quality and scale of the exhibitions under a predominantly female-led committee. News about the club’s success was frequently reported, such as the following:

In fact there were more exhibits and onlookers than there was space for either […] the guests gathered together and trod on each other’s toes with the utmost affability and variously praised and criticised the exhibits—in intelligently and otherwise—as is the happy and praiseworthy fashion at all such assemblages […] and the demand for catalogues demonstrated the excellence of the show.

Under the leadership of Lady Evelyn Young, from 1912, the club underwent a period of success. Reports were glowing with accolades with regard to both the quality and quantity of the exhibits:

The current exhibition, which opened yesterday afternoon in the Tanglin Club premises and extends over today, surpasses all previous events of the kind, and, apart from the fact that it contains twice as many exhibits as last year’s, the standard of work is distinctly better all over.

Lady Evelyn Young served as the President from 1912 till possibly 1915 and was assisted by an all-female committee team in 1912. These members were known only by their last names, and they included Mrs Owen, Mrs W.L. Watkins, Mrs Darby, Mrs F.M. Elliot, Mrs Money and the honorary Secretary and treasurer, Mrs Felkin. Young was herself very competent in the category of Applied Arts and submitted a Limerick lace collar for exhibition,
among other items. In 1919, the Governor and Lady Young completed their service and left the colony.

It was a good decade before more news of the freshly revived Singapore Art Club appeared, with reportage of its founding to have taken place in January 1929. This final incarnation of the Singapore Art Club before the Japanese Occupation was led by Denis Santry, who appeared popular and was elected president of the club consecutively for several years. Santry was also the co-author of a colourful book entitled *Salubrious Singapore*, in which many samples of his ink drawings and satirical cartoons (figs. 7.1 and 7.2) of the European community based in Singapore were printed. Figure 1 shows a black and white caricature of Mr F.S. James, then Colonial Secretary of Singapore, whose dress sense became the subject of Santry’s mockery. In these cartoons of what were scenes observed by the artist, women were very much part of the social milieu of the time. Black and white ink drawings of such type was one of several categories in which members could contribute their works to for the exhibitions. A member, Mr W. Stirling, was particularly adept in this medium; his works were given special mention and reproduced in the local papers (fig. 7.3).

Under the leadership of Santry, the overall conduct of the club remained generally similar to its previous incarnations, which saw the club making attempts to organise monthly exhibitions, art appreciation sessions, and weekly drawing sessions. Like previously, the vast majority of the club’s members were amateurs, with only a handful who were professional artists. Nonetheless, the quality of the exhibits, which spanned oils, watercolours, black and white drawings, etchings and bas-relief modelling, was praised by a writer to have reached a “high amateur standard.”

This period also saw the active participation of the prominent Government Art Superintendent, Richard Walker, whose works, especially in watercolours, were frequently mentioned for their excellent execution and the high price they commanded. A poor reproduction of his rendition of a young fisherman heading back to his *rumah panggung* (house on stilts) was published in the *Malayan Saturday Post* (fig. 7.4). In particular, the annual exhibition of 1932 was noted for its “high standard” and saw the participation of neighbouring clubs from Penang and Kuala Lumpur, including artists such as the famed watercolourist, Abdullah Ariff.

Under the relatively short-lived leadership of Santry, arrangements were also made for the circulation of art magazines amongst members
and to develop the drawing skills of its members, an aspect that Santry emphasised as leader of the club. Whilst the club already offered weekly life drawing classes, Santry, an amateur sculptor himself, was keen to develop the activities of the club pedagogically in a broad range of art forms. Plans were made to acquire plaster casts, photographs of posed models, and a skeleton. There were few reports after 1932 and though attempts were made to revive the club in 1937, it never regained its past glory, and was almost unheard of after the end of World War II.

It is clear from this brief illustration that the Amateur Drawing Association did not emerge from a vacuum, but was in fact part of an existing art world circuit made up of predominantly colonial artists (amateur and professional), patrons, and an English-speaking viewing and reading public. Though he was not a member of the Singapore Art Club, Low Kway Soo himself had participated occasionally in the Singapore and F.M.S. Art Club exhibitions and, like other members of the Amateur Drawing Association, was part of a nascent art world and art market that was modelled after the social art clubs of the colonial world. His portrait of Mr Loke Chow Thye shown at the 1913 F.M.S. Art Club exhibition was described as showing “much promise.” Whether the Low brothers were indeed, as some records have it, the first locally born artists or otherwise is likely a matter of definition and technicality. They were certainly among the first in the Malaya region to have made the individual work of an artist an aspired and professional vocation that was modelled after a European one.

Singapore in the early 20th century was fast becoming an important city and trading port. It became the world’s seventh largest port, and by 1914 its trade had multiplied by a factor of eight, further securing its position as an important Southeast Asian entrepôt for the import of Western manufactured goods and the export of raw materials. This indicated a burgeoning economy that was becoming increasingly affluent and likely more receptive to such activities of high culture. Low Kway Song, for example, could have found himself a publishing firm that would employ his artistic skills, but he must have been relatively reassured by contemporary conditions to have considered making a living as a professional artist. He consequently took the advice of Mr Philip, his former school principal, and opened a studio, which he called the Raffles Art Studio, along Bras Basah Road in the heart of the Singapore metropolis.

The “studio” as an integral component of an artist’s practice finds roots in a well-established European tradition, as a space for the artist to develop and gain mastery of his or her artistic
experience. It was a bold commitment on the part of Low Kway Song but one which despite a difficult start eventually paid off.39

Amateurism and the “Accomplished Women” of the Early Art Clubs

The Penang Impressionists appeared to be the only known colonial art club and is often described in postcolonial narratives as being made up of mostly “English housewives.”40 None of them, save for one other non-European member of the group, the wife of a Chinese millionaire, Mrs Lim Cheng Kung, was identified, together with the instructor, Abdullah Ariff. Nor was there significant interest given to research the type of works produced by the members.41

The marked absence of female participation in the historical treatise, Channels and Confluences, was also telling. Brief mention was made of an early exhibition, organised by the Young Women’s Christian Association in 1931, which the author claimed was “probably the first all-women art and craft exhibition in Singapore.”42 This was also the only instance where he made any mention of women artists outside of a chapter that he had dedicated to women artists.43

This 1931 exhibition was further taken up by Bridget Tracy Tan, author of Women Artists in Singapore, as a starting point to survey exhibitions of women artists “between 1931 and 1991” and as the point of beginning for discussing the legacy of women artists in Singapore.44

It is clear in both examples that the purpose of staging these historical events—of amateur beginnings—served to open up a dialogue about the present: to set the stage for the modern art world of professional artists. Such historical delineations serve to reify the amateur–professional divide by tracking its course of development chronologically and by privileging a discourse that mapped the ideological progress of a nation’s art and the progress of women, respectively. Whereas in fact, there is little correlation between the two.

The colonial art clubs, as discussed, developed out of circumstances that were unique to the colonial social life and were generally distinct in the form, structure and intent of hobby classes. Though there is a tendency to view art club members, in the present-day context, as “Sunday painters,” it seems more likely that most of the Singapore Art Club members were amateurs that grew from an important and distinct European tradition.45
From as early as the 18th century, drawing was deemed “a noble art, a signature of artistic genius, and a mode of mental and moral improvement for gentlemen and ladies.” It gained gradual but widespread acceptance as a skill that needed to be developed in one’s formative education so much so that by the 19th century, it was viewed as “a useful art” for it was the “basis of sound military reconnaissance and engineering, scientific description and classification, and the design of superior manufactured goods, from silks and lace to pottery and furniture.”

Kim Sloan’s essay discusses the historical significance of these terms to show that, at least in the 17th century, attitudes toward amateur artists and professional artists were the reverse of the present understanding that amateur work did not meet professional standards. Professional artists were frequently described as “mere artificers” whilst the amateurs were “gentlemen” and “ladies.”

Nonetheless, “amateur artist” as a descriptive term generally referred to a person who loved and practised one or more of the arts without expectation of payment and this seems closest to how the members of the Singapore Art Club were described in the many reports and announcements. Viewed in this context, though “amateurs,” the members of the Singapore and FMS art clubs appeared to be skillful in a range of arts, which they would readily apply in various social (including charitable) occasions. It did not appear that they were pursuing art-making with the intensity of a professional artist which often required them to expend energy in the promotion and sale of their art.

At the art clubs, at least a handful of the women members so impressed their audience with their fine craftsmanship in the applied and domestic arts that they were mentioned in the exhibition reviews. One lady, Mrs Romenij, gained a reputation for excelling in a rare and difficult art form, repoussé in brass and silver. She was an active member of the Singapore Art Club during her residence in the early 1900s, and competed frequently in the categories of Oils and Applied Arts. The latter was not unusually dominated by female participants, and because it represented an extensive range, judging was reported to have been difficult. In one instance, four ladies were all given “equal firsts” for their works which included a “smock frock,” a “berthe of Point Renaissance,” a “metal box,” a “leather box” and a “painted gauze.”
The “traditional vague perception” that most amateurs were solely women, as Sloan has shown in the first London exhibition on amateur artists, is not true; there were, she affirmed, as many, if not more, male amateur artists than female.\(^{50}\) Here at the colonies’ art clubs, women did seem more active than men as participants. One suspects, even without the availability of full members’ records, that female members far outnumbered their male counterparts in representation in most of the clubs. This can be inferred from the names published in regular reports of the participants’ works, the committee members of the clubs and lists of judges and winners. At the 1901 year-end exhibition, for example, of the 100 exhibits on display, with the exception of a handful submitted by two male members, the exhibits were predominantly by women.\(^{51}\)

Caroline Jordan’s study on Australian colonial women demonstrated that women sketched whenever they had the opportunity in the colony, and speculated it was likely they needed to do that more than ever in the new country:

Sketching was a way to learn about the flora and fauna, to record their colonial dwellings and children for their distant families, to ward off ennui and depression when they felt isolated, to cling to the things that defined a “lady” in a rough-and-ready society that seemed to many to care little for the arts, even to make a little money on the side.\(^{52}\)

One does get a similar sense of the “ennui” that is shared by women who have accompanied their husbands to the tropical colonies of Malaya in travel and biographical descriptions. Isabella Bird was among a handful of European women who left behind written records of their travels and experience of colonial Southeast Asia and Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Her books *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880) and *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* (1883) helped establish her reputation and contributed to her election as the first woman fellow of the prestigious Royal Geographical Society.

Graham Saunders shrewdly pointed out that it was to the womenfolk of colonial society, who were unemployed and “burdened with lonely domesticity,” to whom we are now indebted for insightful accounts of colonial life.\(^{53}\) It seemed that many women did write to alleviate the monotony in the tropical colonies—as attested by Bird, who made the following observation:

It is a dreary, aimless life for them—scarcely life, only existence. The greatest sign of vitality in Singapore Europeans that I can
see is the furious hurry in writing for the mail. To all sorts of claims and invitations, the reply is, “But it’s mail day, you know,” […] The hurry is desperate, and even the feeble Englishwomen exert themselves for “friends at home.”

By the end of the 19th century, the European population, though still a minority, had grown significantly and was no longer confined to the Straits Settlements. In particular, the opening of the Suez Canal also significantly reduced the travelling time and improved the development of infrastructure in the colonies so that as a consequence, more European women were able to travel to and reside safely in parts of the colony.

With the increase in female presence and overall population, the gap between the European community and the local Asian communities actually widened. The differences in social behaviour of women in the communities was marked—whilst European women accompanied their husbands in social settings, Asian wives rarely did so. The European community itself was still very much governed by notions of proper conduct among the social classes. Harriette McDougall’s letters for example, described her inability to mix with other European women in Sarawak because they were of a lower social class. If that were the case, there would be even less mingling between the female European and the more inferior “native” classes.

Certainly, the woman’s role in establishing familiarity in a place was heightened by the central role she already played in middle-class Western societies as the mistress of the house and the overseer of domestic stability. In recreating what was familiar to their social world, they introduced what would necessitate the conduct of proper behaviour across the social classes and across the genders. In this regard, the art and culture that was introduced, instituted and displayed did more than help the gentlemen and especially the ladies pass their time or “adjust to life” in the tropics. How they conducted themselves around these objects of culture did much to reinforce their cultural identity and social position.

In the occasional descriptive accounts of the Singapore Art Club exhibitions, it is evident that members of the club travelled regularly and sought out scenic locations in and around Malaya to paint and sketch. Common subject matter for their sketches, watercolours and oils included seascapes, inland scenes, and genre scenes in and across Malaya. This can be discerned from the titles given to the exhibited paintings deemed exemplary: for example, Silver Sea from Malaya by Miss Abel, Pasir Panjang by Mrs Barnard, Kuala Kangsar by Mrs Stephenson, and Hadji’s Home and Perak River by Mrs Hargeaves.
Given their prominence in the colonial artistic circuit, it was not entirely unlikely that some of them may well have contributed as illustrators to the many publications on the Malay States for the print industry back home. For example, an example of a fine watercolour depicting the abandoned mining pits by Mary Barnard (fig. 7.5) was reproduced in Cuthbert Woodville Harrison’s *An Illustrated Guide to the Federated Malay States* (1923).

Similarly, two other fine watercolours (figs. 7.6 and 7.7) depicting the everyday street scenes of Kuala Lumpur by Dorothea Aldworth were published in Philip Coote’s *Peeps at Many Lands: The Malay States* (1923). Both “Mrs Barnard” and “Mrs Aldworth,” as they were represented in the local dailies, were after all active during that period and had won prizes for their watercolour contributions to the Singapore Art Club exhibitions.

Praise and accolades published in the daily newspapers were awarded not only to particularly talented individuals, but also to cooperative or conscientious members as well. For example, Mrs Aldworth was singled out for submitting pastel drawings, a seemingly “unpopular” medium; they were described as “excellent and conscientious specimens” and it was hoped that her success in the use of this medium would “induce others to take up pastel work.” She did not excel in merely pastels, but also in watercolours and oils, which showed her versatility and talent. Similarly, women who participated in the Applied Arts category were frequently mentioned for their “dainty” and “exquisite” work. The famed Mrs Watkins also impressed her audience with her repoussé copper work which was unanimously viewed as a “difficult branch of art.” Neither was it uncommon for articles to express a general appreciation of exquisitely executed works by professional artists. For instance, the miniatures by Miss Eva Ward were accorded the “highest praise” by one writer.

Committee members who performed exceptionally in the area of public relations, administration and management at exhibitions deemed successful were similarly given public recognition. Mrs Evatt, who held the role of Secretary for several years, and her team (“the other ladies”) were frequently commended for having “so ably worked to make the exhibition the success it proved to be.” The complexity of her work and responsibilities were variously...
noted. It was she who handled the submissions, prepared the catalogue and oversaw the hanging of the works at the designated venue, a task that was described as “far from simple work” for it required the “discrimination and a sense of artistic balance and harmony.” Mrs Evatt did so whilst continuing to be an active competitor whose oil paintings were commended on several occasions. There are of course many other examples of female participants holding similar such positions, such as Mrs Felkin in 1912, Mrs Tomlin in 1915 and Mrs M.A. Bateman in 1917—all variously given credit and public acknowledgement.

Of the clubs affiliated to the Singapore Art Club, the Penang Impressionists and the Perak branch generally recorded the best results and most activity. The former submitted 30 exhibits for competition in 1905, mostly by the following members known only by their last names—Mr Neubronner, Mrs J.A. Brown, Mrs McIntyre and Mrs Wolferstan, all of whom were regular competitors during that period.

The Perak Art Club too invited neighbouring clubs to compete. The vibrancy of the club depended on the leadership and management committee; in this case, the club thrived with the assistance of a lady identified as “Mrs Bird,” their Honorary Secretary who was credited for increasing the club’s activities during the early years of the 20th century. The club held two exhibitions annually, one at Ipoh and another at Taiping. They too invited neighbouring clubs to compete, and in one year, offered a Satsuma jar as prize for the best painting shown by the members of the Selangor, Singapore and Penang art clubs. This was awarded to James Millar, then ex-president of the Singapore Art Club, for “a very good watercolour,” New Harbour, Singapore (1900). The structure of the Perak Art Club and categories for competition were similar to the Singapore Art Club, with prizes offered in the following subjects: oil, watercolour, photograph and needlework.

The media’s role in bringing out the best of these colonial women during their brief residency in the colony was particularly significant during times of crisis. Stories of women participating actively in fund-raising events and charities were readily spotlighted by local newspapers, especially during World War I and in the lead-up to World War II, when distant colonial societies were co-opted to show their political allegiance and provide support ideologically and materially in the form of remittance and resources.
This need to show political solidarity was exemplified in all facets of social outlets and for the elite womenfolk who did not work—unlike the men who were able to obtain gratification or demonstrate responsibility vis-à-vis their rank and employment, this was a rare opportunity for the women to display their patriotism and their social worth. A typical social gathering of bridge and mahjong was transformed into a fund-raising event by a group of French women who pooled their contacts and resources together to raise over 300 dollars for the Free French Forces in Britain.

The Singapore Art Club with its large female membership held numerous successful exhibitions with similar objectives. The participants were given the option to put up their works for sale, with either a portion or all of the proceeds going to charities. Depending on the gravity of the situation at home, local organisations in the colony would respond accordingly. The mid-year exhibition in 1916 for example was configured for such a purpose; there were no prizes or judging of works, and proceeds obtained from the admission went to the charity. Participation was particularly strong, with over 400 artworks submitted to help raise funds for war charities such as the Red Cross, Star and Garter, as well as King Albert Civilian Hospital Funds.

These anecdotal accounts of colonial women artists based in Malaya nonetheless corroborate the views offered by Caroline Jordan in her study of colonial women artists based in Australia in the 19th century, many of whom had an ornamental education to equip them with a set of accomplishments consisting of music, drawing, dancing, fancy work, recitation, Roman languages and taste in dress. She further showed that out of necessity, the women’s ability to do this had depended largely on the skills and resources they had already developed elsewhere. Thus, what and how they came to paint in colonial Australia was in fact grounded in their British drawing education and experiences.

Such accounts also provide insightful glimpses into the kinds of gender-based restrictions colonial women artists encountered in British Malaya. Along with the privileges that they shared with the class of the men they married came social obligations of a different nature from the working class (for example, social work). Most of the women discussed here were not professional artists. They did not “work” as professional artists, but their fine art works were...
very much a part of the wider exhibitory circuit of the upper-class colonial public.

**Brief Concluding Remarks**

Toward the end of the British Empire, a paradigm shift took place and one of the many strategies undertaken by the transiting state was to perform a narrative of nationalist history, of oppression to emancipation. In particular the impetus to set up the Singapore Art Society (SAS) grew out of this intention to establish a non-discriminatory art society aimed at fostering the practice and appreciation of art in Singapore, for the common man and woman. The urgency to recognise the skills and significance of the role of an artist was augmented by the call to see in the work of the “Malayan” painters an answer to the imminent question, “What is Malayan culture?”

Art historian Michael Sullivan argued that it was in the minds and imaginations of the Malayan people—artists, writers, and musicians—that the Malayan culture was created; this, he stressed, was a recent phenomenon that had occurred in the “ten years since Liberation.” As he traced the history of artistic development in Singapore, he highlighted only the founding of the Society of Chinese Artists in 1936, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1938 and more recently (after the war) the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) Art Club and the Chinese YMCA Art Club for developing the art scene and “awakening” an interest in the visual arts in Singapore.

Eager to elevate the position of the artist to a useful profession, Sullivan’s account sought to locate the role and importance of the professional artist historically. Not unlike other constructions of Singaporean art histories, it was chronological, primarily focused on the achievements of those perceived to have contributed to a progressive history of art. Artists, styles, genres and possibly types of art (for example, needlework) that had not contributed to this progress of the arts were inevitably excluded. There was no mention of the Singapore Art Club, nor the many “amateur” artistic activities that had taken place before the war, such as the St Andrews Sketching Club, started by Francis Thomas in 1936.

Generally, attention given to colonial art has inevitably focused on individuals who held some kind of official position in the region (not wives!), and this was most certainly occupied by men. In taking a gender perspective, I have shown that colonial women artists clearly contributed to the rich colonial cultural infrastructure. Relatedly, in the course of recovering their histories, it has also become clear that the social art world of the colonial community preceded later artistic developments in the ex-colony, and may well have served as a model in which subsequent clubs and societies could be structured after.

Whilst this is a subject open to future research, there is no denying that at least two old and quite prominent members of the then defunct Singapore Art Club, Richard Walker and C.G. Jackson, played central roles in developing the post-war local art scene. Both were key members of the prominent SAS. To what extent the SAS was modelled after the Singapore Art Club remains to be examined, suffice to say here that its precedence in already establishing a nascent art world and art market for local artists such as Low Kway Song and Low Kway Soo cannot be ignored.

This essay has brought to the fore a much forgotten past of Singapore’s early cultural developments. It seeks to ask how artistic practices carried out by the colonials and wives of officials have impacted local developments, and to question the oversimplification of their role in the scripting of later post-independent narratives. In the course of discussing the conditions and relations critical for artistic production and reception within the community, this essay has also recovered the histories of many colonial women artists based briefly in British Malaya.
7.1  Denis Santry  
**Untitled**  
Undated  
Pen and ink  
As published in *Salubrious Singapore*  
(Singapore: Kelly and Walsh, 1920).

7.2  Denis Santry  
**Untitled**  
Undated  
Pen and ink  
As published in ibid.
7.3 W. Stirling
Teochew Boy Actor
1929
Ink
© W. Stirling
As published in “Pictures from the Recent Singapore Art Club Exhibition,” Malayan Saturday Post, 7 December 1929.
Image courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore

7.4 Richard Walker
Full Tide
1929
Watercolour
© Richard Walker
As published in ibid.
Image courtesy of National Library Board, Singapore
7.5  Mary Barnard  
*Untitled*  
c. 1910  
Watercolour

7.6  Dorothea Aldworth  
*Untitled*  
c. 1910  
Watercolour  

7.7  Dorothea Aldworth  
*Untitled*  
c. 1910  
Watercolour  
As published in ibid.
A “Forgotten” Art World