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Published by National Gallery Singapore

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Gravel of the River — Nurturing New Life

In terms of the human life span, 50 years, or half a century, is not considered short. To measure it in terms of history, however, 50 years is a short time. If we use this time frame to assess paintings in Singapore and Malaya, it would seem very insignificant.

The roots of art in China, India, Europe and the Americas are deeply entrenched. The rich legacies and mighty traditions of past generations have already paved an orderly path of change and shaped a unique archetype. Hence, all developments regarding cultural artefacts and artistic talent in the last several thousand years have been clearly set forth for our understanding. Today, the information seems complete and accurate. With meticulous organisation effected through scientific methods, all information has been simplified and clarified.

During the colonial period, the governance of Singapore and Malaya was premised on these territories’ economic value to Britain. The objective of the education policy in Singapore and Malaya was to produce white-collar workers to serve the British empire, and this was prioritised over other developments. Cultural activities almost came to a halt and existed in a state of paralysis. Painting, as an art, hardly had a chance to grow.

The historical evidence [of cultural activity] that we can produce at this point in time is like gravel in the rivers, floating and sinking with the waves; a moment of carelessness and it will be swept into the vast ocean by turbulent waves, never to be found.

Indeed, Singapore and Malaya are multi-racial states. Each ethnic group has its own culture. Merging the characteristics of all races to create a Malayan culture is our final aim. However, time has proven a fact: in the field of painting, the Chinese have contributed more than other races. This could be due to the fact that the Chinese have long occupied a leading position in the world of art, and that their descendants have the impetus for art in their blood.

Our Indian kinsmen have outstanding achievements in the art of dance, and our Malay kinsmen are skilled in crafts. However, they pale in comparison when it comes to painting.

Thus, when it comes to painting and drawing in Singapore and Malaya, we have to take Chinese artists as the backbone of our discussion.

Generally, these 50 years may be divided into two phases. The first 25 years were a chaotic period. Painting as an activity had not even taken on a promising shape and was hazy, like the vagueness of outer space. The next 25 years were a period of nurturing. There was a rough core and a boundary. Many foreign talents arrived and many others ventured abroad. Those who arrived were armed with the responsibility to teach, and those who left sought further studies.

Art groups that promote art

Every movement requires collective strength to produce outstanding results. There is no exception for the fine arts. For example, Europe’s Impressionist, Fauvist and Cubist paintings were embodiments of brand new styles that were created by like-minded artists who gathered, day and night, to observe and learn from each other. 25 years ago, a group of young artists arrived from China and formed the Society of Chinese Artists (中华美術研究会) to promote art. The society is located in Singapore, but its members can be found in Malaya, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Thailand and Vietnam, among other locations. Their common goal is to transform the barren wilderness into a beautiful garden, grow in it exotic flowers and plants, and compete with the rest of the world. Over the years, besides learning together and immersing itself in creative work, the society has also organised art exhibitions to display members’ works, or to admire the works of past and current masters. This is the concrete expression of its aim. Half of the members paint in oil while the other half paint in Chinese ink, in both traditional and modern styles, which is hard to come by. It is also because of this comprehensive scope that we have been able to achieve a complete and well-rounded body of knowledge. In terms of establishing the art of our nation, this is an encouraging phenomenon. From Tchang Ju Chi (张汝器) before the war to Cheong Soo Pieng (钟泗滨) after it, there has been an uninterrupted supply of talent, as if the old generation is bringing forth the new generation with increasing momentum. Now, the time has come for this momentum to be carried forward.
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Another influential art organisation is the Singapore Art Society (新加坡艺术协会), which has been in existence for 11 years. The only difference between the Singapore Art Society and the Society of Chinese Artists is that the former comprises different races, while the latter consists of Chinese artists. The Singapore Art Society organises different kinds of exhibitions every year, the largest being painting exhibitions. It attracts the participation of many local artists; important works often make their debut during these exhibitions, enlivening the art scene.

Both societies often organise exhibitions by foreign artists to help raise local artistic standards. Chinese paintings by Huang Binhong (黄宾虹), Chang Daichien (张大千), Chao Shao-An (赵少昂), Guan Shanyue (关山月) and Zheng Manqian (郑曼倩), and Western paintings by Chen Shou Soo (陈学书) and Basoeki Abdullah, among others — all artists with strong skills, profound artistic concepts, skilful techniques and refreshing compositions — are all admired by lovers of fine arts.

The Singapore Equator Art Society (星洲赤道艺术研究会) was established by a group of dynamic young artists who are very passionate. Its membership has been increasing in the past few years and it is becoming a modern force. Their view of art is more practical; their subject matter is drawn from various real social events. Their method of expression is sober and realistic. At a time when modern art can be found all over Singapore and Malaya, the Equator Art Society has adopted a fearless stance and come to the fore. Indeed, it has caught the attention of many.

Within the Federation, artistic activities are most energetic in Penang, the Garden of the East. The Penang Arts Society (槟城艺术协会), under the able leadership of Loh Cheng Chuan (骆清泉), has grown rapidly over the years. Its primary objective is to encourage older artists to continue creating art, while its secondary objective is to nurture the younger generation to assume the mantle of artistic struggle. The society was immensely prosperous for a while. It absorbed as much as possible the essences of Eastern and Western art from all the exhibitions it organised, and in turn, spread these to the entire island and other countries, enhancing the beautiful “garden” with a stronger fragrance.

Independently, Kuala Lumpur and Muar, among others, have also formed their respective art societies and are all vigorously promoting art. It is expected that their future prospects will be bright.

Art organisations in schools

Nanyang University (南洋大学), the highest institution of learning in Singapore and Malaya, recently established an art society. This is a matter worthy of celebration. Allowing university students to study art will produce more notable results. It is hoped that the society will gradually develop into an official department of art within the Faculty of Humanities: for the handling of university education, this would make for a greater sense of completeness; for the creation of national culture, this would augur glory and grandeur.

In fact, 23 years ago, Lim Hak Tai (林学大) had already established the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (南洋美术专科学校) with the pure intention of grooming artistic talent. Unfortunately, owing to insufficient financial resources, the establishment of its campus, facilities, and teaching faculty has been far from ideal. Despite operating under such difficult circumstances over a prolonged period, there have been brilliant achievements. Every year, graduates serve society and the education sector, leaving people with a good impression. Many others go to Europe and the United States for further studies and most have not disappointed their teachers and friends, only returning upon having achieved success. This has enabled the local art circle to gain a new and potent creative force.

The art classes established by the China Society (中国学会) and the Young Men’s Christian Association (中西青年会) provide a practical opportunity for people who love to paint. Even if they are unable to nurture experts, these organisations contribute greatly by merely teaching art techniques and imparting some awareness of aesthetics.

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famous Eastern and Western sculptures, whether half-bodied or full-bodied. This has well surpassed average standards. Even countries where the fine arts are well developed, such as China, France and Japan, do not have such amenities. In truth, this is something that the people of Singapore and Malaya should be proud of. If they so desire, they could be like the fine arts departments in Singapore’s Chung Cheng High School（中正中学）and Chinese High School（华侨中学），and become fully equipped art schools overnight. In recent years, many fine arts talents have been directly selected from secondary schools and, after undergoing strict training, have produced outstanding results. Lu Chon Min（吕聪敏）and Chia Yu Chian（谢玉谦），among others, are obvious examples.

Collectors and friends of artists
In both the East and the West, the popularity of painting and the success of artists are usually attributed to the support of art lovers. Some provide material support; others, spiritual encouragement. Ancient royalty and nobility, religious leaders, scholars and critics, and more recently the rich and famous, are all intricately related in the creation of outstanding works. In fact, without their commitment, certain artworks wouldn’t have been created. An example is the works that the great master Michelangelo produced during the Renaissance, which include the huge fresco in the Sistine Chapel, The Last Judgement（1541）, along with numerous other frescoes and marble sculptures. Had it not been for the Pope’s personal patronage, these awe-inspiring works would never be seen in this world.

Undeniably, there is no lack of similar examples in the history of art. In Paris and New York, business-minded art dealers often promote new talents, providing financial support and accommodation so that artists can focus on their work and produce outstanding art. In reality, they have fulfilled the noble mission of promoting art. Singapore and Malaya lack such businesspeople, perhaps because of the slow pace of development here. However, this is not the only reason. Some think that the art profession is noble and should not be associated with money. This is only a partial view and is not necessarily right. Artists are mortals who also need clothing, food and entertainment. When they purchase painting materials, no one would think that they need not pay for them. Surely they should not be expected to tighten their belts and paint on walls? As for those who gain fame through deception or exploit art for profit, they will not escape the discerning and will naturally earn themselves a bad name.

To return to the main point, there are two friends of artists in Singapore and Malaya who have extended enormous assistance to all artists. The Wong of the south and Loh of the north, as they are known, are Wong Man See（黄曼士）of Singapore and Loh Cheng Chuan of Penang. Both have a deep knowledge of and love for art, and are sympathetic to the situation of artists. Hence they have always used witty strategies to find buyers for the artists’ works as a form of rewarding and promoting them.

All this time, we have yet to establish an art museum; ordinary people lack a distinguished place to visit and are starved for spiritual nutrition. Inevitably, vulgar culture is given the opportunity to flourish. Artists do not have the opportunity to appreciate the works of past and current masters, and that has greatly hampered improvement in technique. Fortunately there are a few collectors in Singapore and Malaya, like Tan Tsze Chor（陈之初）, Wong Man See, Tan Kia Keng（陈佳景）, Guo Musong（郭木松）and Cao Shu Ming（曹树铭）of Singapore, and Lee Kah Yeow（李家耀）of Kuala Lumpur, who have collected many precious treasures that can be studied by the arts community. Among them, Tan Tsze Chor has the largest collection of about 700 works. This voluminous collection is a wondrous sight in Southeast Asia. It would not pale in comparison with collections in other parts of the world. Tan Tsze Chor twice selected old masterpieces to be exhibited publicly, stirring the interest of all races in Chinese culture. More specifically, some archaeologists, poets and artists took to this collection like fish to water, swimming leisurely in the sea of paintings, immersed in a world of brush and ink, forgetting to sleep and eat, unaware that the world has entered the nuclear age. Tan Tsze Chor supports Ren Bonian（任伯年）and has more than a hundred of the latter’s paintings, the largest collection in the world so far.

Tsze Chor wanted to share the pleasure of Ren’s works with people with the same taste. Hence, he published Selections of Calligraphy and Painting from Xiang Xue Zhuang（香雪莊书画选辑）, The Tan Tsze Chor Collection of Ren Yi’s Paintings（任伯年画集）, and Seal Collect-
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It is a pity that the interests of the above-mentioned collectors are concentrated in Chinese calligraphy and painting. The acquisition of works by well-known Western artists is almost non-existent. This is a major disappointment for those who study Western art. If one has no opportunity to travel abroad to see the original works, his only recourse is to study copies. That is akin to falling in love with the person in a photograph; it accomplishes nothing. In view of prevailing trends, the prices of European oil paintings are indeed too high. Works that are above average cost more than a million dollars and are beyond the reach of many governments, let alone individuals. Presently, countries that can afford to bargain at international market prices are few and far between. Occasionally, countries such as the United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom and France compete and spend a few million dollars on a few paintings.

Difficulties of building a fine arts museum

Recently, the governments of Singapore and Malaya seem to have taken an interest in culture and the arts, and have expressed the intention of building a fine arts museum. This is a very exciting matter. However, the construction of the museum is one matter; the acquisition of its contents is another. The estimated cost of construction is capped at two to three million dollars. No matter what, this amount has to be raised. But the challenge lies in the source of funds for purchasing a selection of fine works that would include paintings and sculptures by renowned artists from the East and the West. Going by the government's budget, it is not easy to raise the funds for a modest collection of appropriate standard. Stepping back to reassess the situation, perhaps we could approach governments or collectors to donate works of art. Through gradual accumulation, the collection will naturally grow. In fact, there are many famous fine arts museums that started by showing the collections of a few collectors. As time passed, the collection grew to an impressive scale. Not long ago, Tokyo completed the building of a modern art museum. Displayed in its interior are countless works by modern artists and important sculptures by Auguste Rodin. All the works were donated by the late chairman of a Japanese shipping company, whose uniquely astute eye and generous bequest awed even renowned collectors in Europe and the United States. Who can predict if the standing of this museum might pale in comparison to the Louvre in Paris? Destiny is in our hands. As long as the government sets the direction by taking the lead in building a fine arts museum, the time will come when some enthusiasts will voluntarily underwrite all that is required.

Renowned artists sojourning in Singapore-Malaya

In the last 25 years, while the number of artists sojourning in Singapore and Malaya has not been big, the scene has nevertheless been vibrant. After the war, in particular, there were more artists heading to Singapore and Malaya from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. Their influence on art in Singapore is substantial and should not be overlooked. Here are the more notable ones.

Xu Beihong is a household name in Singapore and Malaya as his sojourn was longer. A man of great achievement, he was personable, pleasant and left a deep impression on many people. His ink paintings reflect a deep artistic foundation in Western painting, the charm of Chinese calligraphy, and a relaxed and succinct conception of art. He was highly accomplished in drawing people and landscapes and in painting chickens, ducks, horses and cows. He created a unique style which, throughout Singapore and Malaya, was emulated by countless followers. His oil portraits were painted with firm and precise brushstrokes to depict the subjects' personalities. He used magnificent and complicated colours to decorate the picture realistically and expressively. His superior technique was comparable to that of renowned Western artists. Thus, he earned praise from every level of society in Singapore and Malaya. The rich would each have a portrait done, such that through the art of Beihong, their visage could be passed down to their descendents. Once this trend started, people flocked to Beihong to have their portraits painted.
tion from Xiang Zue Zhuang (香雪莊藏印), among others, bringing the gems of Chinese art to foreign shores and leaving a lasting legacy. This is a great contribution to art.

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Unfortunately, the bombing of Singapore by the Japanese drove Beihong away, and the fate of portrait painting faced its wane.

Liu Haisu (刘海粟) is the principal of the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校), whose alumni are scattered in every town and city in the south. Consequently, his tour of the south resembled a visit to his alma mater. When he meets strangers, his attitude appears somewhat haughty, almost as if he were a sacred being. However, once he is better acquainted with them, he becomes innocent and unaffected, conversing animatedly all day long. Haisu's paintings are representations of his personality. Their magnificent composition and imposing manner represent his firmness; the uninhibited ink, with its elegant and mellow appeal, represents his tenderness. He adores Vincent van Gogh because van Gogh loved to paint the sun and sunflowers, which symbolise his fiery intensity. He admires Paul Cézanne because Cézanne always painted apples and white cloth, hinting at a solemn quietness. Haisu's detached and self-sufficient character is the product of the merging of these two contrasting traits. There is a reason why people refer to him as a master.

After the death of the brothers Gao Qifeng (高奇峰) and Gao Jianfu (高剑父), Chao Shao-An came to the south as leader of the Lingnan School (岭南画派) to publicise its art. As publicity was good, the sale of their works was brisk, surpassing Hong Kong's Cantonese artists. Chao's art is influenced by the Japanese style and emphasises the portrayal of images through the rendering of colours, carefree and lively compositions, and clever and forthright brushstrokes that can be appreciated by both the schooled and unschooled. Flowers and birds, insects and fish, morning dew and twilight, rain in spring and the moon in autumn are the most appropriate subjects to be expressed through this approach. However, in terms of artistic value, depth and skill, they are no match for the experts from the north.

Guan Shanyue is also a member of the Lingnan School, but his paintings of still life are more energetic than Shao-An's because of his travels. He paints where he finds his themes: tropical scenes of banana and coconut trees, or the sarong and cheongsam that give viewers a sense of genial warmth. Some paintings have the strong flavour of water-colours, while others are comparable to landscapes by artists of the northern school. In short, Shanyue's paintings are like waterfalls and streams, the flows of which are urgent and rapid, but not vast enough.

Huang Binhong and Chang Dai-Chien are two elders in the art circle. Although they have yet to set foot in Singapore, their works have been exhibited by the Art Society. We cannot help but rub our eyes and look again at the products of their spirit radiating powerfully before us.

Take a look at Huang Binhong's landscapes and you will be shocked upon seeing the mess of darkness. It is as if you were lost in a barren mountain, unable to see the light and detached from your family, thoroughly depressed. Yet, stop for a while! If you are a little more patient and restrained, you will realise that you are already in a faraway fairy-land of trickling waters and strange rock formations, pavilions and thatched houses, unusual pines and rare crickets, drifting mists and floating clouds, and advancing troops of men and horses; one by one, these appear within your view. The brush technique that outlines these images feels ancient and vigorous, clever and simple, and is completely untouched by this world. The breadth of the ink is vigorous, moist, thick, and surpasses divine creation. Every dot and line is not whimsical but natural. Where it is sparse, the strokes are few; where it is dense, they are heavily layered. However deliberate his intentions, Binhong's works do not appear contrived. His profundity lies in the expression of practised skills in a casual manner which forces you to take a second and third look at the work. The more you look, the more you understand the meaning within, and the more you cannot let go. Huang Binhong's work is always an important milestone in an appraisal of Chinese landscape paintings, be it retrospective or prospective. He has accumulated the merits of past masters to open roads to the future. We must have earned several lifetimes of good karma to be able to benefit from his teachings from outside China.

Chang Dai-Chien has an eccentricity. Regardless of where an exhibition of his work is held, he must leave the exhibition before it can be declared open. He fears being criticised for peddling his talents and losing his status as a great artist. Although he often engages
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Ssu-Tu Chiao (司徒乔) stayed briefly in Singapore before the Japanese Army advanced south. His wife, Feng Yimei (冯伊湄), was famous for her verse compositions. They were always seen together in the Chinese community and were regarded as an ideal couple. Ssu-Tu's oil paintings of figures employ heavy impastos, austere tones and choppy brushwork, and are simple in their composition and use of colour. In order to complement the overseas Chinese movement in aid of the resistance war in China, Ssu-Tu created a huge work based on the street drama Put Down Your Whip (放下你的鞭子), which was performed by Jin Sha (金沙) and Wang Ying (王莹). This, in effect, was a contribution of both money and sweat.

Prior to 1951, Chen Shou Soo sold his house in Italy and held an exhibition in Singapore. This exhibition showed his stability and maturity of expression, and an artistic standard that was above average. Unfortunately, Chen’s art has a strong European feel and does not show any Oriental soul. His style is also overly dated and unable to keep pace with the 20th century. I once wrote an essay, “Ethnicity and Epoch” (民族性与时代性), on this issue in order to provide creative principles for reference by fellow artists.

The pros and cons of portrait painting

Two years ago, a remarkable artist arrived from neighbouring Indonesia: Basoeki Abdullah.

Basoeki’s outstanding ability at portrait painting took the Singapore-Malayan scene by storm and caused excitement for awhile. His portraits have attained perfection, and as a result, many local businessmen and renowned politicians commissioned him to paint them in oil. A trend that had been dormant for some time has finally been revived. This phenomenon in the development of the art has had both positive and negative consequences. On the good side, it arouses people’s interest in paintings, and in developing the habit of hanging paintings in the halls of their homes, people begin to revere art. The negative consequence, however, is that people might wrongly think that only realistic paintings can be regarded as possessing the highest standards of art, and might disregard those with a unique creative spirit and different styles.

Portraits can be divided into two kinds: those which serve a practical function, and those which fulfil an artistic one. The former is commemorative by nature. It captures the style and appearance of a particular period of time, and enables those from another period to differentiate and appreciate it. Hence, it emphasises realistic techniques and greater objectivity. This was tradition for all European royalty and nobility, and in a typical lifetime a person might have his portrait painted up to eight times from childhood to old age. Hence, court painters were in demand and portrait painting became an independent genre.

The second function exists when the human subject becomes a tool for the expression of an artist’s temperament and conviction, and a subjective point of view. So, the main elements presented in such a portrait are concept, colour, brush technique and rhythm; Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Modigliani, among others, created many such masterpieces.

Basoeki is deeply influenced by the French, Dutch, and Italian masters. He most admires Rembrandt and Rubens. As a result, his paintings consciously or subconsciously reveal the traits of these two masters in their lively shaping and beautifying of all the shapes and colours of the natural world. However, this is where the problem lies! When evaluating his art from an Oriental or Indonesian perspective, one inevitably feels that he has lost the soul of his people! In emphasising this idea of cultural specificity, we are no doubt trying to make it clear that Orientals have a long history, fine traditions, and
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an enormous creative force. As long as we can respect and value ourselves, our cultures will be preserved. As long as we persevere, our cultures will flourish. It would be meaningless if we continue to follow others.

A unique creative direction for local artists

Of course, there are more foreign artists than those I have listed. These foreign artists would, in some way, excite and inspire the artists here, such that they would not feel lonely and neglect to paint. As for local artists, it is estimated from previously held fine art exhibitions that about 200 to 300 people attend local exhibitions. This appears meagre when compared to the art scenes in developed countries. Yet, there are developments we can be proud of. We have preserved a distinct living environment and a multi-racial culture from which we have obtained unique creative trajectories and a good harvest. These fruits definitely cannot be harvested from other regions; Paris, the art capital of Western Europe; Beijing, the holy land of Oriental art; Rome, the indestructible city to which all roads lead; and Tokyo, the youthful and energetic cultural capital, would not be able to produce the art created by Singapore and Malayan artists. This is the Malayan culture we wish to boast of and show to the world.

The following is a selection of national artists. They represent to the world our consciousness, values and creative techniques.

The most outstanding and symbolic of the modern styles of the Federation would have to be the batik paintings of Penang's Chuah Thean Teng (蔡天定). Thean Teng employs traditional batik craft and techniques used in sarong-making to paint all matters under the sun. It can be said that this is a creative endeavour in which the applied arts has crossed over to the fine arts. As he had personally managed a sarong production industry, Thean Teng has an in-depth understanding of the unique characteristics of wax and dye, and his techniques have matured after a long period of practice. Hence, all his works have outstanding effects. We see the rush of effect of bold, unrestrained lines and strong, shimmering colours woven into a forceful and unconstrained painting. It is like a majestic symphony of sonorous music and soul-stirring rhythm, revitalising our spirits. In addition, he sources his subject matter from the people and environment around him — the harvests in the fields, fishing boats at sea, fruits in the forest, boats on the river, cockerels crowing and dogs barking, couchant cows and bounding goats. They exude intimacy and skill and look natural and lifelike, fully portraying the innocent and rustic ambience of the tropical region. The “equatorial style” coveted by many artists has already been claimed by Thean Teng.

In 1954, Thean Teng held a solo exhibition in Singapore and officially introduced this new genre of art to the audience. He won rapturous praise and critical acclaim. Singapore’s Cheong Soo Pieng and Tay Wee Koh (郑伟高) followed suit with this waxing technique and created many good works. Through the infusion of colours and spaces between lines, they were able to give full play to their individual styles. It is a pity that there have been no sustained efforts in this direction. It is not known if this is due to the hindering of inspiration by a laborious creative process or the poor quality of materials, which would render long-term preservation unfeasible. Either cause would greatly limit the development of this artistic technique. A year ago, the British Council specially transported the entire collection of Thean Teng’s batik paintings to London for exhibition. For people who have long been immersed in European civilisation, the opportunity to see art bearing the flavour of a distant country is like the lifting of a heavy fog in deep winter, and feeling joy from the warmth of a gentle sun. Eastern and Western art have their respective characteristics and archetypes; this is proof again that they need to interact with each other.

Cheong Soo Pieng is established as a modern artist in the Singapore-Malaya art community. His style is new and bold, and is filled with abundant vitality and an emotive and sentimental appeal. While our eyes pick up astonishing images, our souls feel waves of gentle contemplation. In other words, Soo Pieng’s works leverage on the Western drive for progress for his outward expression, and Oriental leisure and serenity as the basis for creation, borrowing from both to shape a wholesome form. Whether in oil or ink painting, Soo Pieng is able to use tricks that seem magical, ingeniously blending the two disciplines. He works on canvas just as he does on Chinese paper, erecting on it a house for a Malay family, giving them water, air, sunlight, boats, carriages, cow, sheep
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and other miscellaneous items, letting them work and rest there. This is not simply a record of living, but a creation of life.

Soo Pieng uses ink as if he is using oil paint, applying and outlining wilfully. Nevertheless, he is orderly, rigorous, deliberate, and produces a host of firm and strong images. Chinese artists train their brushwork to look mellow and ancient when practising calligraphy, but Soo Pieng understands the beauty and liveliness of lines from the arduous practice of sketching. In the past, Western artists considered sketching a tool in foundational training prior to creating. A purely objective and analytical sketch is mechanical and raw; however, contemporary artists have given new life to sketching and developed it into an independent art form. Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Raoul Dufy and André Derain, among others, are all experts and have published their works, which are also greatly valued by art commentators.

Soo Pieng’s sketches are fresh, elegant, meaningful, steadfast and confident. It would be interesting if a portion were selected for an exhibition. He is hardworking and incomparable in Singapore-Malaya. It is rare to see Soo Pieng separated from his brushes, or his brush separated from the canvas. He lives for painting, and painting is his life. He is so familiar with painting that he can fashion shapes at will like modelling clay. Soo Pieng does not take two or three years to present a new style. Sometimes, he metamorphosises within a year. But no matter how he changes, the intrinsic Cheong Soo Pieng is not lost. At this point, we have to mention Picasso again. He is famed for his changes: the Blue Period, Red Period, the period of Primitivism, Classicism, moving into Cubism and Surrealism — such range is indeed exciting. Yet, regardless of the remarkable differences in form, his intrinsic traits have remained intact, and Picasso is still Picasso. Soo Pieng probably has the same tacit understanding.

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希) came to the south after the war but this does not mean that his contribution to art in Singapore and Malaya is any less significant. He gives one an impression of heroism, straightforwardness and gallantry. With his support, many younger talents were given the opportunity to express their ability. Wen Hsi’s paintings are a manifestation of his self. They are magnificent, natural and unrestrained, showing the traits of a master. He started mainly with ink painting but included oil painting after he arrived, helping to form another pillar of the modern art movement. It can be seen that he is keen and adept at advancing his art. However, the core of his artistic achievement remains in ink painting, which, based on the present situation in Singapore and Malaya, no one comes close to. Previously, Wen Hsi loved to apply white chalk on coloured paper and coat it with a Japanese sensibility. Those who understood it loved it. Later, it was probably from having seen Ba Da Shan Ren (八大山人) and Shi Tao, or from the knowledge gained from his diligent painting in oil, that Wen Hsi overcame his several shortcomings and returned to his roots. Look: the green pines, the male eagle and playful monkeys, that dried vine on a precipice, the fishes swimming in the waters, the herons in the swamps! Every painting leaps onto paper with life, eliciting endless cheer and admiration from its viewers.

If I had to give an example of traditional Chinese art as being also suitable for expressing all subject matter outside China, then the ink paintings of tropical scenes by Chen Chong Swee (陈宗瑞) would be the most obvious. He is the only artist who uses the composition of Chinese landscape paintings to depict Malayan scenery. Luscious banana leaves and coconut trees, clusters of village houses, the clear blue waves of the sea, and traversing fishing boats are his favourite subjects. Sometimes, children herding ducks and naked women bathing appear. Although the content of Chong Swee’s works is full of the flavours of the south, his methodology, brushwork, and ink and water density retain the appearance of traditional Chinese painting. His paintings are magnificent and harmonised, as if those tools were tailor-made to only depict local conditions and social customs. This is proof of the appropriate blending of the artist’s techniques. He adheres strictly to the noblest ideal of Chinese painting, the Six Principles (六法论). The variety of treatments applied to a picture has a basis and is not something any amateur can attempt.

Georgette Chen (张荔英) is an outstanding female artist in Singapore. Her use of colours is brilliant and out of the ordinary. Her leisurely but controlled brushwork is testament to many years of hard work. Her paintings of portraits, landscapes and still life all sport a consistent style, one which says that she does not like to play tricks. All her figures are sincere and loyal, akin to portraits of herself. Her landscape paintings
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Soo Pieng uses ink as if he is using oil paint, applying and outlining wilfully. Nevertheless, he is orderly, rigorous, deliberate, and produces a host of firm and strong images. Chinese artists train their brushwork to look mellow and ancient when practising calligraphy, but Soo Pieng understands the beauty and liveliness of lines from the arduous practice of sketching. In the past, Western artists considered sketching a tool in foundational training prior to creating. A purely objective and analytical sketch is mechanical and raw; however, contemporary artists have given new life to sketching and developed it into an independent art form. Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Raoul Dufy and André Derain, among others, are all experts and have published their works, which are also greatly valued by art commentators.

Soo Pieng's sketches are fresh, elegant, meaningful, steadfast and confident. It would be interesting if a portion were selected for an exhibition. He is hardworking and incomparable in Singapore-Malaya. It is rare to see Soo Pieng separated from his brushes, or his brush separated from the canvas. He lives for painting, and painting is his life. He is so familiar with painting that he can fashion shapes at will like modelling clay. Soo Pieng does not take two or three years to present a new style. Sometimes, he metamorphosises within a year. But no matter how he changes, the intrinsic Cheong Soo Pieng is not lost. At this point, we have to mention Picasso again. He is famed for his changes: the Blue Period, Red Period, the period of Primitivism, Classicism, moving into Cubism and Surrealism — such range is indeed exciting. Yet, regardless of the remarkable differences in form, his intrinsic traits have remained intact, and Picasso is still Picasso. Soo Pieng probably has the same tacit understanding.

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希) came to the south after the war but this does not mean that his contribution to art in Singapore and Malaya is any less significant. He gives one an impression of heroism, straightforwardness and gallantry. With his support, many younger talents were given the opportunity to express their ability. Wen Hsi's paintings are a manifestation of his self. They are magnificent, natural and unrestrained, showing the traits of a master. He started mainly with ink painting but included oil painting after he arrived, helping to form another pillar of the modern art movement. It can be seen that he is keen and adept at advancing his art. However, the core of his artistic achievement remains in ink painting, which, based on the present situation in Singapore and Malaya, no one comes close to. Previously, Hsi loved to apply white chalk on coloured paper and coat it with a Japanese sensibility. Those who understood it loved it. Later, it was probably from having seen Ba Da Shan Ren (八大山人) and Shi Tao, or from the knowledge gained from his diligent painting in oil, that Hsi overcame his several shortcomings and returned to his roots. Look: the green pines, the male eagle and playful monkeys, that dried vine on a precipice, the fishes swimming in the waters, the herons in the swamps! Every painting leaps onto paper with life, eliciting endless cheer and admiration from its viewers.

If I had to give an example of traditional Chinese art as being also suitable for expressing all subject matter outside China, then the ink paintings of tropical scenes by Chen Chong Swee (陈宗瑞) would be the most obvious. He is the only artist who uses the composition of Chinese landscape paintings to depict Malayan scenery. Luscious banana leaves and coconut trees, clusters of village houses, the clear blue waves of the sea, and traversing fishing boats are his favourite subjects. Sometimes, children herding ducks and naked women bathing appear. Although the content of Chong Swee's works is full of the flavours of the south, his methodology, brushwork, and ink and water density retain the appearance of traditional Chinese painting. His paintings are magnificent and harmonised, as if those tools were tailor-made to only depict local conditions and social customs. This is proof of the appropriate blending of the artist's techniques. He adheres strictly to the noblest ideal of Chinese painting, the Six Principles (六法论). The variety of treatments applied to a picture has a basis and is not something any amateur can attempt.

Georgette Chen (张荔英) is an outstanding female artist in Singapore. Her use of colours is brilliant and out of the ordinary. Her leisurely but controlled brushwork is testament to many years of hard work. Her paintings of portraits, landscapes and still life all sport a consistent style, one which says that she does not like to play tricks. All her figures are sincere and loyal, akin to portraits of herself. Her landscape paintings
appear detached from this world, revealing the purity of her nature. The most outstanding is her painting of rambutans. Each fruit seems to have just been plucked from the tree; fiery red, succulent, and sweet as honey, which one cannot help but crave for.

Despite his young age, Lu Chon Min, who has just returned from France, already possesses the traits of a master. His oil paintings have an inexplicable allure that is not easy to deny. If we have to analyse this force of attraction, it may be enumerated as simplicity in creation, a powerful brush technique, and the use of rich colours. Honestly, the materials for painting are nothing more than a few brushes, a few cans of oil paint, and a piece of canvas — simple! However, to be able to make them work and make them ingenious requires a lifetime of labour and a multiplicity of talents. Indeed, Chon Min’s future is bright.

Singapore and Malaya also possess several outstanding watercolourists like Penang’s Khaw Sia (许西亚) and Yong Mun Sen (杨曼生). One is delicate and gentle while the other is passionate and wild. As for Singapore’s Tang Youchu (汤由础) and Lim Cheng Hoe (林清河), the former is steadfast and firm while the latter is refreshing and lively. Each of them is able to express the local scenery and the life of the people with their skilful techniques, winning the hearts of lovers of Eastern and Western art. In the coming year, Sia and Youchu will be leaving Malaya for elsewhere. Mun Sen is presently plagued by sickness. They leave just Cheng Hoe to outshine the others.

We now need to digress and talk about Tchang Ju Chi, who perished during the war. Among artists in the whole of Malaya, he was the finest exponent of the realist style, and was a match for Beihong and Basoeki. No one can surpass the charming and elegant demeanour of his paintings. His figures are lifelike and have reached a soul-captivating realm. When the invading Japanese Army saw Tchang’s paintings which depicted their atrocities, they had him killed. It was the gravest and most grievous event for the art community in the south.

Whether it be due to their circumstances or interests, some Singapore and Malayan artists have changed their course and moved to other professions like teaching or managing businesses, just to name a few. In the eyes of society, they are still contributing. However, this is a great loss to art. Developing an artist requires resources from the community at large, the accumulation of knowledge, the force of inspiration, and much effort in many other areas. Once abandoned halfway, what was invested is lost. Surely, this is a true shame!

Fortunately, like-minded young talents are quickly following on their heels. Some are halfway up the mountain, others are by the sea; some are still young, others have grown beards. They are like the clear streams that flow high in the mountains, eventually converging to become an unstoppable force, a mighty river flowing into the ocean.

Since Singapore and Malaya declared self-autonomy and independence, the government and its people have expressed interest in building a culture that is truly their own. Art is an important part of culture; encouraging and promoting art is a matter that should not be neglected. Recently, the voices calling for the creation of a Malayan culture have risen in strength. Some have proposed for this culture to be built in a short period of time. Their lofty ambitions and motivation are commendable. In fact, there is already a deep Malayan awareness in the field of painting. It marches forth and forms a strong pillar of the cultural fortress. As for the laying of the cornerstone, we can only wait for the combined initiative of a wise government and a fervent public. Any success would not only be fortuitous for us, but would also be a cultural asset for the whole world.
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ESSAYS FROM

1961

to

1980