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Foreword for the Society of Chinese Artists’ Thirtieth Anniversary Magazine
[excerpt]

With the formation of Malaysia, art circles in various localities have been exceptionally active. Previously, the focus was solely on Singapore. That ceased when Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, caught up with Singapore in establishing a national art gallery, decorating public buildings with large mural art, increasing the number of art exhibitions, and acquiring and collecting artworks. All these factors have contributed to an atmosphere of love for the arts. As for art exchanges, the Malaysians are planning intensively and progressing correspondingly.

It is a great joy to discover that some of the artists in Singapore, after working hard and independently for many years, have begun to establish their unique styles. If they follow this route and press on, it will not be difficult to achieve excellence.

Local artworks are divided into two categories: ink paintings and oil paintings. In the past, ink painting had been dominated by China and oil painting, by Western Europe. Lately, we have had breakthroughs into new paths, as has Malaysia. We have stepped fearlessly into the international arena and grown through friendly competition.

Before waiting for too long, some artists should apply the various sarong-making processes that hail from different parts of Nanyang to create a kind of pure art, and achieve some results in this area. This is worth promoting because the sarong is the representative ethnic costume of the people of Southeast Asia. Its colours and composition have a rich tropical flavour. If we transfer its technique of dyeing to art, we will create an eye-catching effect that is rich in equatorial flavour. It is also something that people in this region can be proud of.

This art society may be little more than a quarter of a century old, but it is considered a senior among similar groups in Malaysia. Several art organisations formed since were either started or conceived of by members of our society. We are all closely related, like one big family. It is a fair statement that art circles are flourishing everywhere because of the members of this society. We do not deny that we have yet to reach an ideal state. But as long as we are devoted to art and remain down-to-earth, it will not be difficult to fulfil our quest for better results.

Young Artists: Wee Kong Chai and Yeo Kim Seng

A warm climate and evergreen vegetation seem to benefit the nurturing of art, but can also be detrimental to its growth, like a child who, growing up in comfort, lacks ambition in life. This is the reason tropical countries have difficulty producing great artists and great works of art.

In recent years, the art scene in Singapore and Malaysia has nurtured innumerable artists. Their quality, however, is a disappointment. The majority of them have not been hardworking enough, yet expect swift success. Few are willing to spend more time studying and practising. Thankfully, there are young and grounded artists. Wee Kong Chai (黄光彩) and Yeo Kim Seng (杨锦成) are classic examples. They are not affluent but are passionate, and invariably possess the drive to take on life and society.

The depth of an artist’s skill can be seen from his sketches. It is the same when we appraise a Chinese ink painting. We are able to assess the artist’s skill by looking at his calligraphy. Kong Chai and Kim Seng have worked hard at their sketching skills. They have made countless sketches, each showing compact structures and accurate and consistent lines, such that their visions, when translated onto paper, are mesmerising. Ever since Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso imbued their sketches with a vivacious and unique character, sketching has become an important art form in its own right, creating an impact in the domain of art today. It may provide the basis of a great work, or it may remain independent. As such, many artists sketch day and night in their attempt to unearth the secrets of the natural world and to showcase their talents. Wee and Yeo have mastered this powerful key to the future and have forged ahead.

A close examination of their oil paintings gives us a clear indication of this. Let us begin with Kong Chai. He loves crowded scenes, especially joyous ones; be it storytelling beneath a lamp or the desolate aftermath of a disaster, he can, using variegated figures and movements as the structure over which he paints masses of disarranged trees and buildings, create realistic scenes that depict the multifarious drama of human existence. It is truly a microcosm of the theatre of life. Just when compositional methods in modern art have gradually become succinct and their themes simplified, the visionary in Kong Chai produces works that are visually more complicated and unsettling.