Liu Kang

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1969 was the year that art in Singapore took a turn for the better. To celebrate National Day, the Ministry of Culture collaborated with various fine arts organisations to organise a national fine art exhibition. First, this served to showcase our local artistic talents to the world, letting them know that this tiny country is ready to shine. Second, it also showed genuine cooperation between the government and its people in the joint promotion of art. As an aside, this exhibition also helped the entire community of artists to realise their unity. Owing to the overwhelming response to and incessant compliments from that exhibition, the National Day Art Exhibition has been held annually since then.

The rise and fall of a country’s culture and the quality of its character are usually related to its artistic standards and its people’s ability to appreciate art. There is no lack of examples in history to prove this. No one would dare disagree that art is the spirit and soul of a country’s people.

It is generally thought that commercial prosperity and economic progress make for an affluent and happy society. That is but one side of the story, one that represents only material gains. A society is only complete when the other side of the story — its culture and spirit — is addressed. This is achieved through abundant artistic creation and a passionate love for beauty.

Singapore is a multi-racial country. If the various diverse cultures are not integrated, creating a unique artistic style for our country would be an extremely difficult task. It may take several decades, centuries even, before one can smell the blossoms and taste the fruits of success. However, in aggregating the works of various ethnic groups and factions, the National Day Art Exhibition is a good start in this direction.

In the creation of art, different schools have different insights. Generally, however, it is undisputed that imagery is subordinate to spirit and intelligence, and that technique arises from awareness. If one desires to reach a higher realm and to display a vivid character in one’s works, one must engage in deep learning and cultivation, and keep an open mind. If one is also endowed with the spirit of the times and the traits of one’s locality, one would be able to reach the peak of perfection. Although no miracles have

ENDNOTES

1 The book referred to here is most likely Chua Soo Pong’s 《世界艺坛巡礼》 (A Survey of the Global Art Scene), which was published in July 1980.
appeared in past exhibitions, the works have been robust and lively. It can be seen that the artists have given of their best and are determined to build a cultural haven. Exceptionally precious is the fact that for a long time, we have taken the position of giving every artist the freedom to express himself. It is, after all, an interesting experience for one to see different kinds of artwork.

In Western fine art, oil painting is known for its strong expressive quality and style. Singapore is not lacking in such oil painters; their styles range from the conservative to the uninhibited. Oil paintings have made for a good portion of works in the past exhibitions, which is very heartening. Unfortunately, in recent years, the situation has taken a turn for the worse, with gradually fewer works. It is not known if this is because the materials are expensive or the production process, labourious. This is an ailment that requires a cure.

On the other hand, watercolour painting is on the rise, and is entering the mainstream. Its subject matter is usually dominated by local scenes and landscapes. The majority of the paintings are realistic and emotionally expressive, forming a suitable contrast to oil painting.

Batik art is a specialty of Singapore artists. Although its quantity has not increased, its quality has improved.

More and more people are taking up Chinese ink painting. This is due to the fact that the local Chinese have a deep-seated affiliation with it. Moreover, China’s international standing has risen in recent years, with people becoming fond of Oriental cultural artefacts. This is a gratifying phenomenon. Among the works on display are traditional free-style and modern realistic works. Each has its merits.

Calligraphy and seal inscription are techniques that are easy to learn but difficult to master. Although there are initiators, these art forms are still regarded as perilous undertakings. Thus, there are few participants.

At one time, pottery was thriving and excited many people. Unfortunately, this interest did not last, and pottery was soon neglected. What a pity!

When the wheels of a huge organisation and a great enterprise begin to turn, it is inevitable that they will encounter some grit and potholes, causing the journey to be obstructed, making it difficult to continue. As long as these obstacles can be avoided or eliminated, the future will be bright and smooth sailing.

I wish the National Day Art Exhibition every success!

This article was written by Liu Kang in his capacity as Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Visual Arts, which was set up by the Ministry of Culture. He held this position from 1978 to 1981.
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