



Cock Fight, 1967  
Oil on canvas 54 x 72.5 cm  
**SOLD - RM 36,300.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 19 January 2014  
Edition VII

# CHOO KENG KWANG

The artist, educator and philanthropist

BY SITI WAJIIHAH KHOLIL

**B**orn in 1931 in Singapore, Choo Keng Kwang is a beloved first generation artist and is the pride jewel of his country in the field of art. Choo gained his well-deserved and exceptional reputation through his extraordinary traditional oil paintings of landscapes, animals and nature. His contribution to art, education and the public sphere since the 1950's has made him an icon in the world of art.

Choo was the son of a Teochew diamond trader, Choo Kim Kye, and his interest in fine art was rooted from his favourite comics and printed cartoons. During his school years, he not only attended Catholic High School, he also enrolled for art courses at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Despite facing criticism and disapproval from his teachers, due to his unwavering dedication to both his regular studies and art classes, his hard work

paid off in 1953 when he graduated with two certificates, one from Catholic High School and one from NAFA. Although Choo showed interest in art during his school years, it was not until after he graduated that he delved into the field. He chose to be an educator and started teaching, which eventually led to Choo being the principal of Sin Hua School.

During his early years as an artist, Choo had good friends within the art circle such as Lee Man Fong, Georgette Chen, Liu Kang and Cheong Soo Pieng. He once mentioned, "Liu Kang visited me at least once a month and we got together at my home. As for Lee Man Fong, we saw each other quite frequently when Lee was alive". However, although they share a close friendship, their art styles differ from each other. For instance, Lee was the first artist to paint pigeons. While Lee's pigeons perch on big brown stones, Choo's pigeons in his paintings stand on pine and bougainvillea trees. While Lee used the Linan style, Choo's pigeon artworks combined two different styles of western and eastern. "One can tell the difference between a Choo Keng Kwang pigeon and a Lee Man Fong one without looking at the signature of the artist based on these differences," Choo said.

## CHOO'S LIFE IN ACADEMIA

Although Choo is mainly known as an artist, he had spent more than 30 years in academia. He was a devoted academician known for his involvement as a teacher and later promoted as the school principal of Sin Hua School. Throughout his career in education, Choo sought to improve the teaching of the arts. So in 1982, the Ministry of Education started a two- and four-year Art in Education diploma course in order to raise the standards of secondary school art teachers. Choo oversaw the programme and became the main lecturer.

In 1984, he was promoted as senior lecturer and later became the head of the Art Education Department at the leading art school in the region, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), until his retirement. So not only is Choo leaving behind his mark as an artist, he also descended his knowledge through education, where the coming generation of artists are able to carry on his teachings and expand his legacy.

## ARTISTIC TRIUMPHS

Choo's outstanding reputation as a first generation artist of Singapore and as an artistic icon of his time has led to his artworks being commissioned by royalty, dignitaries and governments. The Singapore government commissioned his paintings as state gifts to foreign dignitaries such as the late president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat and China's chairman Mao Tse-Tung.

In 1976, Choo was conferred the Public Service Medal (PBM) and the Long Service



Singapore Skyline, 1976  
Oil on canvas 54 x 90 cm  
**SOLD RM 59,178.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 30 July 2017  
Sale XXVIII



Winter Birds, 1983  
Oil on board 80 x 120.5 cm  
**SOLD - RM 49,560.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 24 May 2015  
Edition XV

Award (PBS) in 1986. In 1989, his artwork was featured on the first day cover postage stamps for the Singapore Telecommunications Authority. The four original oil paintings of Chinatown were eventually donated to the Singapore National Museum, becoming one of its permanent collections.

Choo also had the privilege of holding and participating in various solo and group art exhibitions in Singapore and countries afar. His works have toured Southeast Asia, Japan, Europe and the United States. In November 1990, he became the first ever Singaporean artist to participate in a cultural exchange exhibition in Jakarta. More impressively, he was even invited to exhibit his paintings in Brunei to commemorate the Sultan of Brunei's 47th birthday in July 1993. Therefore, it is no surprise that many of his masterpieces have been sold at notable auctions such as Christie's and Sotheby's.

In 2008, the prolific artist received homage and acknowledgement from the Organising Committee for the Olympic Fine Art 2008, which was a joint effort with the IOC, the Ministry of Culture, China and the Organising Committee of the XXIX Olympiad at the China International Exhibition Centre. He received the recognition because of his immense success in art as well as his influence in the art scene.

Choo also received an honorary certificate for his contribution to the Creative Cities Collection – Fine Art Exhibition in London that was held in August, 2012 at the Barbican Centre. His World Peace artwork was selected for the exhibition. The China International Culture Association, China Society for the Promotion of Culture and Art Development and the Beijing Association for the Promotion of Olympics-related Culture organised the exhibition.



Houseboats Along the River, 1970s  
Oil on canvas 61 x 101 cm  
**SOLD - RM 47,040.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 8 November 2014  
Edition XII

### THE BENEVOLENT PHILANTHROPIST

Choo was also praised for his charitable work in his support for the youth, education and the less fortunate. He produced his paintings for the benefit of the community for charitable causes aiding community services, institutions, associations and scholarships for the performing arts such as the education of young musicians, schools and community centres.

One of his many generous efforts for instance was when all the sales earnings of his paintings were donated to St. Andrew's Mission Hospital and Touch Community Services. Another example was his participation in the President's Charity Art Exhibition – Choo Keng Kwang: An Artistic Path of His Own where he successfully raised S\$160,000 for charity. In 1997, he donated oil paintings to the President's Star Charity Show. There were even phone cards of Choo's artwork reproduced by the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) for fund-raising campaigns.

### THE LEGACY CONTINUES

In March 2013, Choo held a solo exhibition at the Malaysia Brand Outlet at the Vertex in Singapore. His World Peace1, a 100cm by 200cm painting of doves was the most expensive work to be shown at the exhibition which was priced at \$280,000. The rest of the artworks he produced were tagged at \$28,000 and above. This was without a doubt a major difference from what he earned 50 years ago, where his paintings back then were sold for just \$150 each at the night markets.

While now his larger canvases can easily command six-figure sums, the price is not the artist's main priority. Choo's struggles during his earlier years developed his sense of humility and appreciation in the value of hard work. As a contemporary of the late Liu Kang and Georgette Chen, Choo is still a favourite amongst avid art collectors for his technique of combining Western impressionism and rules of perspective with traditional Chinese brushwork.

### THE ANGKOR SERIES OF THE 1960S

Choo's Angkor series features a range of his exceptional artworks which many collectors deem to be his best period, which was during the 1960's. This artwork, in particular, brought forth pure abstractions of the faces of the Angkor monoliths, depicting nostalgic elements of his inaugural trip to Angkor Wat in 1964.

Many of his artworks were displayed for sale at Hotel Singapore, known today as Singapore Hilton on Orchard Road. His pieces were mostly acquired by various bankers, local corporate collectors, business guests and expatriates who have stayed at the hotel. This masterpiece, in particular, was also one of his notable works displayed at Hotel Singapore and was later acquired as part of the collection of the Chase Manhattan Bank New York since 1964. However, it has made its way back to Kuala Lumpur carrying the inventory number on the verso of the painting and is set to be sold at the upcoming KLAS auction.