



ONG KIM SENG

Capturing Life through Watercolour

BY HIRANMAYI AWLI MOHANAN

Ong Kim Seng came from humble beginnings, growing up in a village in Tiong Bahru, Singapore and has been a full-time artist since 1985. He has participated in both group and solo exhibitions in Singapore and around the world including, the United States, China, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Belgium, Germany, France, Middle East, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and ASEAN countries.

This watercolourist enrolled at Radin Mas Primary School in 1959 and later on at Pasir Panjang Secondary School. Ong had innate interest in art since he was young but his mother had envisioned him having an office job, being either a clerk or teacher;

it was a ludicrous thought for her son to become an artist. Not paying heed to his mother's dissatisfaction with his interest, Ong began experimenting with painting, beginning with pastels and oil and moving on to watercolour painting earnestly since 1960. It was during this period when he became a regular participant in a painting group at the Singapore River led by artist, writer and lecturer, Chia Wai Hon.

In 1962, Ong left school to join an advertising agency where he worked as a bill collector. He left the agency after four years and found his next job as a policeman at the British Naval Base in Sembawang. He lost his job in 1971 when the British withdrew their troops from Singapore. He subsequently worked as a

welder in Pulau Bukom, a line technician at an electronics firm, National Semiconductor, and an audio-visual/graphic technician at the Colombo Plan Staff College for Technician Education.

While undertaking many stints in his working life, he had never stopped painting. In 1974, lady luck was on Ong's shoulders when he was presented with the opportunity to present his watercolour works at a group show with fellow artists Wan Soon Kam and Tan Jeuy Lee at Meyer Gallery. When the Colombo Plan Staff College relocated to Manila in 1986, Ong made the bold decision of becoming a full-time professional artist in spite of having to care for an elderly mother, and being married with three children.



Himalayan Panorama, 1982
Watercolour on paper 77.5 x 113 cm
Sold RM 56,000.00
Klas Art Auction 28 September 2014
Edition XI

The subjects of his works revolve around inanimate objects, architectural forms, masonry, foliage and landscapes. He seems to have a way in materialising exactly what he sees on canvas, capturing the complexities and minute details of the buildings and the realistic play of light and shadow. Ong's exemplary use of watercolour and the balance between subject and space truly make his work a gem.



Man With Opera Masks, 1985
Watercolour on paper 52 x 72 cm
Sold RM 29,120.00
Klas Art Auction 10 August 2014
Edition X

Accolades

This talented artist has seen many accolades, being the first and only Singaporean to have won six awards from the prestigious 138-year-old American Watercolor Society (AWS), of which he was conferred membership in 1992. He is also the only Asian artist outside the US to be admitted into AWS. Ong's collectors include Queen Elizabeth II of England, the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China, Secretary-General of the United Nations, President of the Republic of Korea, Prime Minister of Thailand, the President of the Philippines, Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister of India, the Governor of Hokkaido, Singapore

Arts Museum, Singapore Maritime Museum, Agung Rai Museum and Neka Museum in Bali, Indonesia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters and foreign missions and embassies of the Republic of Singapore.

Ong's Style

Ong Kim Seng's style is described as being "naturalist-cum-impressionistic" and "a combination of post-impressionist colour and the outlook of the American realist masters". He paints en plein air and has stated that in order for him to paint a place, he has to feel it first. "I believe that inspiration comes naturally when there's a link between the artist and his subject," he said.

For a masterpiece to come alive, there has to be a special connection between the artist and the subject. In his breath-taking painting of street scenes, Ong Kim Seng captures the depth, the contours, the shadows and the beauty that is the architectural scenery. It is stunning, and although simple in its execution, it shows the meticulous and methodical use of fine brush strokes and skills. Ong said, "I have to feel a place before I paint it. If I have good feelings for a scene - just as I may have good feelings for someone I meet - I know I'll have the will to paint it well. For me, and for all painters, I believe, inspiration comes naturally when there's a link between the artist and his subject."

ONG KIM SENG IN KLAS ART AUCTION XXXII

'Old Bridge' 1990

Merging concepts with finesse of execution, Ong presents representative images which are also ethereal in their beauty, flawless in their elemental flow and appropriation of light. This is evident in 'Old Bridge' 1990 where his masterful strokes are in full display, portraying his grasp of shadows and light. In addition, as seen in this painting, the artist's use of hues of green captures the serenity of the rural landscape.

'Chinatown' 1979

In his usual prowess, Ong brings forth the exquisite rendition of Chinatown and the immaculate detailing from the clothes hung outside the window to the antics of people walking about. As a plein-air realist painter, he stays true to his subject matter, but continues to add an element of intrigue to it by varying the vantage points of his paintings.