

SEAH KIM JOO

The Batik Master

BY SITI WAJIAH KHOLIL



Abstract, 1963
Oil on board 46 x 46 cm
RM 6,000 - RM 12,000
KLAS Art Auction July 2018
Sale XXXII

Born in 1939 and raised in Terengganu, Seah Kim Joo was very much exposed to the art of traditional batik-making during the early stages of his artistic career. As Terengganu is known for being the biggest producer of batik in the country, it is no wonder that batik-painting has been a major influence on his craft. It was initially the environment of his hometown that introduced him to the concept of batik.

In the 1950's, Penang-based artist Chuah Thean Teng was the first to introduce the batik-painting medium to the art fraternity. His works drew Seah's interest into the niche which resulted in Seah being an avid follower of the late Chuah as well as his works, since the manifestation of contemporary themes in a traditional medium was regarded as a direct expression of Nanyang regionalism. Chuah's influence on Seah's works proved

to be evident as later, Seah's works caricatured the pictorial characteristics of Chuah's batik painting back to the oil medium in the 1960's.

In order to expand his knowledge of the arts, a young Seah enrolled at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Singapore in 1959. Six years post his studies, he returned back to Malaysia to enhance his batik skills and master



Chinatown Singapore, 1970s
Batik 89 x 50 cm
SOLD RM 20,289.60
KLAS Art Auction 31 January 2016
Edition XIX

the craft of batik-painting by taking the opportunity to travel around the East Coast. His education and travels proved to be worthy of his time as Seah soon gained major recognition for his batik-painting works, ever since his first-prize win at the Malayan Federation Open Art Competition. He trounced other artists and was placed first consecutively for two years. His win as well as his unique works soared his name to great heights and Seah began to be popularly known for his use of the dye-and-resist technique in batik. His popularity was



Singapore River
Batik 51.5 x 79.5 cm
SOLD RM 19,726.00
KLAS Art Auction 24 April 2016
Edition XX



Farmers and Cockerels, 1970s
Batik 73 x 98 cm
SOLD RM 16,344.40
KLAS Art Auction 24 April 2016
Edition XX

even more evident as his murals adorned the Singapore Pavilion, and one of his paintings was even selected for Singapore's commemorative stamp series.

One would observe that most of Seah's art masterpieces, his batik-painting illustrations portray a lot of the environment, mainly nature and people. His 1960's piece, 'Stilt Houses' and the 'Buffalo Tender' (undated), for instance, clearly depict the milieu of local culture. Apart from his occasional abstract

pieces, the subject of his artworks focuses a lot specifically on a person or people. It is most likely due to his cultural background as well as the influence of his hometown and being a Terengganu-born that his subject matter revolves around the local folk. It is apparent that he has immense talent in illustrating the daily routines and activities of his chosen subject, in which he does immaculately. Albeit Seah predominantly dabbling in batik, his skills also vary as he does have artworks that apply the medium of watercolour, such as the 'Fishing Net'



Grooming 1970s
Batik 60 x 44cm
SOLD RM 9,017.60
KLAS Art Auction 30 July 2017
Edition XXVIII

Villagers
Batik 84 x 55 cm
SOLD RM 11,272.00
KLAS Art Auction 28 January 2018
Sale XXX



Two Women with Dove, 1970s
Batik 60 x 47 cm
SOLD RM 8,454.00
KLAS Art Auction 14 May 2017
Edition XXVII

(1963) and 'Floating Market', (1963) that were featured in KL Lifestyle Art Space's auction, Edition VI.

Seah's biggest and most prominent artwork is the 'Untitled (Malayan Life)', 1968 which is proudly residing in the National Gallery of Singapore. The 'Untitled' is a batik piece comprising five panels showcased together to form a larger image. The mural is a magnificent masterpiece which portrays the daily lives of the Malayan people (thus its namesake) in the olden days as well as their behaviours and antics. Initially, the mural was commissioned for the lobby of Hotel Malaysia, later renamed as Omni

Marco Polo Hotel, for its grand opening in 1968. Guests who make their way to the hotel is greeted in a manner which incorporates the essence of Malaysia as they are warmly welcomed by the view of the stunning mural located at the hotel lobby.

It is clear that his works have advanced from traditional to functional purposes. However, Seah has demonstrated remarkable skills and his impressive ability to adapt the techniques of a traditional craft to display modern works of art and his rendition of art. Thus, crowning him as one of the nation's prominent batik-painting artists worthy of respect.