

# SYED AHMAD JAMAL

Life as colourful as his paintings

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI

*The late Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal treaded the path of art which led to a colourful adventure, a story told through his paintings which reverberate vibrant, energetic hues.*

## PRIMORDIAL DAYS

He was born to fit this artistic role. Born in Bandar Maharani, Muar, Johor on Sept 19, 1929, Syed Ahmad Jamal had a carefree childhood. Even at a very young age, he had a deep sense of observation and appreciation for the natural milieu of his environment. His family lived in a small community where rubber plantations were abundant. Evidence of his keen eye of observation, Syed Ahmad used to find himself gazing at the clouds and sky in fascination and speculated that perhaps God lay amongst those clouds. He was also an inquisitive and eager-to-learn young lad. He relished simple things in life like playing

with his siblings while also spending a lot of time on his own, thinking.

It was much later when he realised that the early discoveries and awareness developed as a young boy sharpened his sense of sight and hearing, which played a pivotal role in his artistry. Syed Ahmad noted that he might not have cultivated the sensitivity to his surroundings had he stayed in Kuala Lumpur. An incident that jolted Syed Ahmad's young life was the death of his grandfather - his first encounter with the harsh reality of the impermanence of life. That black mark triggered a curiosity on the subject of life and death.



National Art Laureate, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal posing with the artwork "Nur Tenaga" in his Gombak residence. This was the final painting completed by him in 2010.

Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal passed away in 2011, a month before the official launch of his Special Retrospective Exhibition at KL Lifestyle Art Space.

(Photo circa 2010)



City By Night, 2006  
Acrylic on Canvas 107 x 183 cm

### SCHOOLING DAYS

At the age of six, Syed Ahmad was enrolled into a Malay school, Sekolah Melayu Tambatan in Johor Bahru as it was the closest to home. At this school, he learned to write Jawi, an adapted Arabic alphabet for writing the Malay language, in his early days. His primordial days in school were made a challenge by his teacher who once gave him 12 lashes on his calf for not being able to read a sentence in Jawi.

Things took an ugly turn when Syed Ahmad's father, Syed Jamal reprimanded the teacher. As an act of revenge, the teacher failed Syed Ahmad in his Standard One examinations, which hindered him from progressing to the next standard. Nevertheless, it did not deter him from re-sitting and passing the examination six months later. On hindsight, this unpleasant experience motivated him to work hard and excel academically and be competitive in class.

After three years at the Malay school, he shifted to an English primary school at nine years old, where he was welcomed with books with coloured pictures which subsequently sparked a genuine interest in reading. This, he had proudly said, was the main reason he did exceptionally well in his studies and often achieved high scores in almost every subject.

It was during this time that he decided he wanted to become an artist. He related, "Every day after coming back from school and finishing my homework, I would start drawing. There was no single incident that sparked my interest to become an artist.

I just felt that I wanted to draw every day and was very happy doing it." Apparently, Syed Ahmad projected his interest in art even before he started schooling, by sketching on the wooden walls of his house. His forbearing and empathetic parents not once scolded him for his mischievous deed, rather, bought him crayons and watercolours. His father was very encouraging. This flourished his interest in becoming an artist and it became a starting point for his adventure in art.

In 1941, during Syed Ahmad's school holidays, World War II broke out in Malaya. Whenever there was an attack, his family would hide in a special shelter. There was this incident where the house of an engineer was looted. Venturing to the site later, Syed Ahmad saw a lot of books scattered around the place.

Among all the books that were strewn about, he was drawn to one about art. Intrigued by it, he took it home with him and could not take his eyes off it. From the book, he read about famous artists such as Turner, Constable, Corot, Rossetti, etc and marvelled at their paintings. These artists, whose works he became accustomed with, became his inspiration.

After the war ended, Syed Ahmad's father's health took a toll for the worse and he eventually passed away in January, 1947. His family was provided with 75 dollars a month by the State Social Welfare Department. Syed Ahmad used the money for provisions which he had to carry all the way back from town. The arduous life, however, never broke his spirit, it was just part of life.



Study for Public Sculpture, 1999  
Ink and colour on paper 28 x 40 cm

### CROSSROADS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND ART

As the eldest of his family, with six younger brothers and sisters to look after, a higher education seemed out of reach to Syed Ahmad. Despite his predicament, his achievement in school garnered the Yayasan Sultan Ibrahim Scholarship to study at the Birmingham School of Architecture, England in 1950. Naturally, he leapt at this opportunity. However, the induction of architecture made him realise that it wasn't his cup of tea. The only time he awaited eagerly for was when his class would head outdoors or to art galleries to sketch as he could whip out his favourite apparatus, his pencils.

Syed Ahmad's dexterity for drawing caught the eye of his principal, Mr Jones who acknowledged that his sketches were the best among all his classmates. His principal told him, "You are too good an artist to be an architect."

Intending to aid Syed Ahmad to trail his true calling, Mr Jones wrote to the Johor government and informed them that he should discontinue his studies in architecture and enrol in art school instead. The first letter Mr Jones sent was unfortunately rejected but he persisted and wrote an appeal letter which the Johor government responded favourably and Syed Ahmad was soon on his way to the Chelsea School of Art in London. Finally, his dream came true. "At that time, it felt like a dream. If it weren't for Mr Jones, I probably won't be an artist now," Syed Ahmad noted.

When he arrived at the Chelsea School of Art, Syed Ahmad had to work harder to catch up with his peers as classes had commenced. But efforts, coupled with his extraordinary talent, paid off. He did very well and soon won various competitions and awards. He related that studying in Chelsea was the best four years of his life. "I enjoyed myself immensely. Chelsea was to me, the world," he enthused. It was a ritual for him to visit both private and public art galleries every Saturday. Sundays were for a different regime - it would be museums of various sorts, like the science museum, natural history museum, geological museum, etc. where he intended to learn and absorb as much as he could. To him, visiting these places was part of the education. Needless to say, he strived to make the most of his time while in England and made sure to gain the best that England could offer.



Nipah, 1992  
Mixed media on paper  
39.5 x 28 cm

### ART MAKETH THE MAN

Throughout his career, Syed Ahmad's artistic style had been through various changes. His landscape and (early) portrait paintings were stamped with his personal input and style, with traces of analytical Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, before his art matured into Symbolism.

During the roaring 1960's and 70's, his style leaned towards abstracts, while in the 2000s, his paintings became more spiritual. His Abstracts were marked sometimes by Jawi and later, Naskh calligraphic strokes and gestures (Naskh is a cursive Arabic script).

Syed Ahmad depicted the starting point of his life as an artist in Britain (Birmingham School of Architecture and Chelsea School of Art) through three notable works, all done in 1956, namely 'Battersea Park I and II' and 'Duel in the Snow' (inspired by the epic battle between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat on morality and justice).

It is evident that to him, it was the landscapes and happenings around him that gave him his 'topics'. In later years, he delved into socio-political issues, like anti-nuclearism, the environment, Palestine and Bosnia, in which he expressed his thoughts through Symbolism. Syed Ahmad's art resonated with the spirit of the age and marked historic events in the country. Despite his reputation then, Syed Ahmad Jamal remained a true artist, one who created art neither for recognition nor wealth, but merely as a form of self-expression.

When he first decided to become an artist, he faced naysayers questioning whether this path could be fruitful. But he paid no heed to them as he wasn't in it for money. He desired to follow his passion and that was what he did. In fact, during his first exhibition, his most expensive work sold for a mere 300 dollars. "The ultimate thing I want to achieve as an artist is the beauty of the artwork in its own existence," he said - his paintings being the testament to this statement.

Six years after returning from England, his first artifice was the Pohon Nipah (1957), produced for the profound effect the nipah palms had on him on several levels. He recalled the sturdy topography



Lencana Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1984  
Copper 106 x 145 cm

of nipah palms standing in the soft mangrove mud like scaffolds against soil erosion, with their fern-like palms outstretched, glistening warrior-like in the sunlight. The nipah palms were common milieu during his commune between Johor Bahru and Batu Pahat High School, where he was teaching then.

"It was a milieu contrasting to that of the mild, mellowed, cultivated civilised landscape or garden countryside of England. The palms stood firmly, as they were enjoining the earth, space and the while the serrated blades of the palms shot up, as if in response to the invisible rays of the sun. The sheer bout of energy was catalytic, echoing and re-echoing again years later in the 'Gunung Ledang' and 'Between Heaven and Earth series'. In 1957, Syed Ahmad produced Mandi Laut.

"It ties up my academic knowledge and training in the West with the local tropical ambience. I transposed and transmuted the Western figurative format (a la the Madonna and the Rock) into a Malaysian setting. Besides, the act of posing (of the figures) is also a Western thing," he said.

Syed Ahmad's decorated belt of achievements included designing an emblem for the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. The stylised human eye in the emblem represents vision of the artist while the rectangular shape represents the visual arts. The long oval shape that circles the eye and the rectangular shape represents inner content.

**NUR TENAGA**

A special piece entitled, 'Nur Tenaga' is the final artwork produced by Syed Ahmad before he passed on in 2011. This painting is the highlight of KLAS's upcoming Art Auction Sale XXIX. Defined as light and energy, the late artist depicted these elements through his forte, colours. Nur Tenaga portrays a radiating energy of light at the focal point of the painting while surrounded by hues of green, blue and red.

The solo show in Croatia that made waves in Europe National laureate Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal legacy lives on through his paintings. The prominent artist who passed away in 2011 at 81 years old, was celebrated this year with a posthumous exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Craft in Zagreb, Croatia from June 3 to 29. The show, aptly referred him as the 'Guru of Colour', the perfect representation of the artist.

Three prominent galleries in Malaysia, namely Galeri Petronas, Bank Negara Malaysia's Museum and Art Gallery and National Visual Arts Gallery played a part in the exhibition by loaning works by the artist. Nurlihaq, Syed Ahmad's son curated his father's works for the show which included, 'Ruang Qiblat', 'Sireh Pinang', 'Keris', 'Saturday Night', 'Self Portrait', 'Nuraini', 'Warna Merdeka', 'Basmallah' and 'Energy East'.

**THE UNREAL DEAL EXHIBITION**



Nur Tenaga, 2010  
Acrylic on canvas 153 x 152 cm  
RM 350,000 - RM 600,000  
KLAS Art Auction 15 October 2017  
Sale XXIX

Marking the 60th anniversary of Merdeka, 'The Unreal Deal: Six Decades of Malaysian Abstract Art' exhibition sheds light on the emergence and development of the Abstract genre in Malaysia over six decades. This exhibition emphasises the cultural legacy of prominent artists including the late Syed Ahmad Jamal. It showcases the masters' influence in shaping the local art scene, paving the way for Abstract artists of today. The Unreal Deal puts the spotlight back on a field that is at the heart of Malaysia's 60-year creative history. It is the nation's abstract artists who monopolise the aesthetic hall of fame. The exhibition is a meeting place of young and old, where every generation is represented on canvas.

Malaysia's leading exponents of the genre gathered at Bank Negara Malaysia's Museum and Art Gallery to provide what is probably the largest ever display of abstract art in the country. Half a century ago, artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ibrahim Hussein, Latiff Mohidin, Yeoh Jin Leng and Jolly Koh could never have imagined they would revolutionise the way art is seen in their homeland. They dragged a young nation into the modern world. The paintings in the exhibition show the continuity of abstraction.

The artists have rejected realism in favour of something that challenges viewers, if they want to be challenged. As the title of the exhibition suggests, the unreal can be as significant as anything else. The appearance of abstract art is removed from reality but it has substance. Six decades on, it also has longevity. "The Unreal Deal: Six Decades of Malaysian Abstract Art" Exhibition at Bank Negara Malaysia's Museum and Art Gallery is on from Aug 30, 2017 to Jan 21, 2018.



Left:  
Photograph of newly framed Pago-Pago: The newly reframed Pago-Pago artwork which is currently in the private collection of KLAS'S CEO, Datuk Gary Thanasan.

Right:  
A photograph taken in the living room of the late Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's residence with the Pago-Pago gifted to him by Abdul Latiff Mohidin.

**A TWO-MAN SHOW WITH LATIFF MOHIDIN**

In an interview with KL Lifestyle in 2011 that touched on Pago-Pago, Syed Ahmad revealed that the '1963 Pago-Pago' was one of his most treasured possessions. He also elucidated that he took part in a two-man show with Latiff Mohidin at the Royal Selangor Club in 1967. In the exhibition, Syed Ahmad had sold almost all of his artworks while Latiff was not able to sell his works. As a result, at the end of the exhibition, Latiff gifted possibly the earliest Pago-Pago ever produced by him on canvas in 1963 to Syed Ahmad in lieu of cost of putting up the exhibition. The artwork was once enshrined in Syed Ahmad's living room amid his early masterpieces and is now in the private collection of KLAS's CEO, Datuk Gary Thanasan.