

# TAY BAK KOI

Timeless and Tranquil Masterpieces

BY CHEE SUE ANNE &  
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**Boats with Village Scene, 1993**  
Gouache on paper 93 x 45 cm  
**SOLD RM 24,798.40**  
KLAS Art Auction 4 September 2016  
Edition XXII

A second generation Singaporean artist by the name of Tay Bak Koi is fondly reminisced for his illustrations of urban landscapes, fishing villages and 'kampungs'. He was born in Singapore in 1939. His artistic beginnings initiated with a God-given talent and potential, later recognised by his father's friend who then enrolled him in the prestigious Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1957. To Tay's dismay, his father did not approve of his enrolment in NAFA and did not garner his support as he was expected to help out with the family business and eventually take over it. Despite his ordeal and isolation, Tay remained adamant and resolute in his pursuit and was determined to thrive as an artist with a unique personal style.

Tay, a rebellious teen at NAFA soon disliked the establishment for being structurally rigid and he refused to conform. Instead, he spent much of his three-year course selling crabs at his father's market stall whilst experimenting with oils and watercolours which later became his forte. Tay knew that his career and life thenceforth would involve the arts, specifically as an artist.

It was also at NAFA where Tay was fortunate to be the disciple of the late Cheong Soo Pieng, one of the founding fathers of the Nanyang-style of paintings and widely revered for his experiments in brush techniques and the amalgamation of East-West elements in painting. Cheong greatly influenced Tay's works. In fact, many artworks produced during the early stages of his artistic career in the 1960's resembled the mark of his former teacher's style. While it would take him several years, Tay, known for his dedication to perfecting pictorial techniques and developing his own range of stylised images, eventually broke from the mould and found his own voice.

Persisting on despite the tremendous difficulty for the first and second generation artists to make a living in Singapore, Tay gained his first commercial breakthrough in the late 1970's when the prestigious Hilton Hotel recognised his talent and commissioned him to create 300 paintings to line the walls of the hotel. This would mark the beginning of an illustrious art career for Tay. To date, his works have been featured in numerous exhibitions around the world, including Hong Kong, Australia, Germany, Japan and the United States.

One will be able to observe a distinct evolution as Tay progressed through his artistic career. When he began in 1964, there was a strong lean towards mimicking the manner of his mentor, Cheong Soo Pieng. His emulation lay apparent in his watercolour piece, *Abstract 6* (1964), a synergy of cold and warm colours, fabricating a composition that is vivid and vibrant, heavily reflecting the Nanyang-Cubist style, widely practised by pioneering artists, his teacher included.



**Under The Tree, Undated**  
Acrylic on rice paper 30 x 30 cm  
**SOLD RM 9,040.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 8 November 2014  
Edition XII



**By The Stream, Undated**  
Acrylic on rice paper 30 x 30 cm  
**SOLD RM 7,326.80**  
KLAS Art Auction 13 September 2015  
Edition XVII



**Boats, Undated**  
Acrylic on rice paper 13 x 22 cm  
**SOLD RM 4,734.24**  
KLAS Art Auction 13 September 2015  
Edition XVII

As Tay grew in experience and experimentation, we see his art starting to come to life in a unique way. His paintings *Fishing Point* and *Boats*, and *Warehouses* by the Singapore River thrived on a palette dominated by cool colours, mainly blue and green. Their complexity and richness both in texture and form far surpasses those of his earlier paintings. Turning from the bold and abstract, Tay's work now took on a dreamlike quality, often blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, emitting a sense of tranquillity, and even timelessness.

Tay continued his tinkering on canvas for six years before he fashioned his own unique visual interpretation of buffaloes, which would become

a distinctive mark in many of his paintings. The animals, depicted in an askew geometrical form, are highly stylised, with comically massive bodies supported on two pairs of inverted V-shaped legs, and with small heads and sharp humps.

In the 1990's, Tay began incorporating warmer colours into his palette, his works transforming to become more grounded, real and ornamental. During this period, Singapore was modernising rapidly and Tay worked on capturing the nostalgia and recollection of the country's familiar landmarks and favourite haunts. It was then he painted an oeuvre of urban landscapes that included the Singapore

River, as well as Chinatown with its bustling vendors and colourful makeshift tents.

Another one of his noteworthy creations depicts the captivating battle of two fighting cocks in Kelantan. The intensity of the scene was so beautifully captured by Tay, you could feel the energy reverberating off the painting. Dominated by hues of red and orange, the use of swift, forceful one-directional brush strokes convey the aggressive motion of the cocks, in the heat of skirmish, their wings flapping frantically and feathers splitting as the fray goes on.

From fresh art graduate in the 1960's to confident master by the 1980's, able to command his own visual poetry, it is a delight to witness the journey of the great Tay Bak Koi through his paintings. It is a sad fact that Tay had created his final art piece. Even then, his extraordinary work, though usually depicting life's most ordinary moments, still to this day, remain exquisite and lyrical to the eye.

Tay's illustrious career came to a soaring end when he passed away in 2005. Two years after his passing, a solo exhibition of Tay's works was hosted by the Stamford House of Singapore, a tribute to the artist entitled, 'Reminiscences of Tay Bak Koi'. In 2013, a group comprising art collectors celebrated the legacy of the late artist by presenting an exhibition, 'Reminiscing Tay Bak Koi'. A form of mini retrospective, the showcase unveiled over 40 of Tay's works, some dating back to his juvenescence as an artist. However, what took prominence during the showcase was a two-metre, mammoth of oil composition of buffaloes accomplished by Tay in the 80s.