

THE LIFE OF YONG MUN SEN

The Father of Malaysian Painting

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

It's quite impossible not to be immensely captivated by Yong Mun Sen's artworks. They possess a certain quality to them that draws the viewers in and envelope them in the nostalgic landscapes, seascapes and figures that were his habitual subjects. Dubbed as the Father of Malaysian painting, the late Yong Mun Sen, born on Jan 10, 1896 was one of Malaysia's pioneer artists. The country's art scene is as vibrant and diverse as it is today due to his pertinent contributions. As one of the innovating self-taught artist, Yong left a strong legacy of watercolour and oils.

The artist was born in a coconut estate in Kuching, Sarawak with the forename of Yen Lang. He could have settled for a life of ease, taking over the family business as a wealthy planter but he chose to answer the call of art. Knowing full well that an artist's fate was a journey of toil, challenges and frustration for which there could never be real compensation, he bravely accepted his destiny. In 1901, he travelled to Taipu, in the Guangdong Province of China to attain a formal education in the proper use of brush and calligraphy. Armed with knowledge in the arts, he returned to his hometown in 1910.

EARLY YEARS

In 1910, Yong's talent and interest in art piqued when he chanced upon a Japanese artist painting using watercolours while treading his family's coconut and pepper plantation and thenceforth, he became enamoured with that medium. Seeing Yong's interest, at that opportune time, a neighbouring Dutchman presented him with a set of watercolours which allowed him to experiment with the medium.

In 1914, Yong went back to China and painted majestic pictures of lions and tigers which were subjects much loved by the warlords of the time. Two years later, he married 16-year-old Lam Sek Foong who bore five children. The artist returned to Sarawak in 1917. A year later, he was employed by a bookshop in Singapore and served at a school bookshop counter. Living in Singapore sparked a fondness and appreciation for its urban scene which he later illustrated in numerous watercolours.

Back then, being an artist didn't rake in enough money, hence, to supplement his income, Yong worked at a bookshop and subsequently opened a photography studio in Penang and most importantly, he became a self-taught artist who dabbled in oil painting. He used these spaces to showcase his works to the public.



Yong Mun Sen's Gallery was located at 436, Chulia Street on Penang Island in the 60's till early 70's



Resting, 1947
Watercolour on paper 26 x 37 cm
Private Collection

In 1920, Yong was transferred to the branch in Carnarvon Street, Penang. It was his first time in Penang; he saw the lovely island for what it was and was captivated by its beauty and charm. It was in 1922 when he decided to change his name from Yen Lang to Yong Mun Sen and subsequently set up Tai Koon Art Studio in Chulia Street, which was probably the first photographic studio in Penang. He took up photography seriously, using a Leica and Rolleiflex and executed some plaster-of-paris sculptures. Yong used the bookshop as well as the photography studio to showcase his works to the public. Eight years later, he moved his studio from Chulia Street to Penang Road and renamed it Mun Sen Studio which soon became a favourite meeting place for fellow artist-friends namely, Tay Hooi Keat, Kuo Ju Ping, Khaw Sia, Lee Cheng Yong, Abdullah Ariff and other pioneering Malaysian artists. He initiated the formation of the Singapore Chinese Art Club the same year.

Unfortunately, despite his innate talent and beautiful works, his career in art and photography did not gain him any success which later prompted him to open an additional studio housed in an old mansion in Northam Road. During this time, Yong, with burning passion familiarised himself with the works of prominent European artists through books, particularly those of Van Gogh and Gauguin. Gauguin and his works spoke to Yong, which explains the strong European influence on the development of his style, especially in his oil paintings.

Around 1936, several celebrated Penang artists congregated and in fruition, formed their brainchild, the Penang Chinese Art Club, with Yong as the vice-president and Lee Cheng Yong as president, Quah Kuan Sin secretary, Tay Hooi Keat treasurer and the committee members being Kuo Juping, Tan Seng Aun, Tan Gek Khean and Wan Fee. He became the president the following year. The artist was also an integral part of the formation of Singapore Chinese Art Club the same year. With the onset of the Second World War in 1939, the Penang Chinese Art Club was disbanded, never to be formed again. When the Japanese occupied Malaya from 1941 to 1945, for Yong, this was the most fruitless period of his life. He had to resort to farming for the sake of survival but even then, the love for art never wavered.

The streak of misfortune continued when his wife died in 1941. Soon after, he remarried to the beautiful Yao Chew Mooi, the daughter of Yao Swee Lum from Ipoh (a descendant of Kapitan China, Yap Ah Loy). She eventually gave birth to four sons and two daughters. Post-war, Yong got back on his feet and delved into the art scene actively and soon after, opened a photography studio in Penang Road in 1943.



Penang Seascape with Kedah Peak, Undated
Oil on canvas 55 x 64 cm
Private Collection



Figure on a Bridge over a River amongst Trees, 1947
Watercolour on paper 26.5 x 37 cm
Private Collection



Woodland, 1947
Watercolour on paper 27.5 x 37.5 cm
Private Collection

ARTISTIC PROWESS

Despite being Yong's forte and heart were landscapes in watercolour. With Western impressionism, complemented by Chinese calligraphy aesthetics, Yong garnered aficionados from the US, Australia and the UK. When Yong came across a scene that spoke to his soul, he would swiftly set up his easel and camp stool, equipped with a brush in hand to relay it on the canvas. He did make frequent sallies into oil and Chinese traditional brush painting with success but in the watercolour medium, he excelled.

Yong's identification of his subjects' struggles, including fishermen in seaside villagers, farmers in paddy fields and labourers in plantations, historic architecture, tin mines took centre stage. A smaller number of paintings dealt with figurative subjects. The artist's works reflected conscious attempts to integrate the Chinese artistic spirit. The influence of Chinese art resulted in his compositions being airier and more generalised in treatment, revealing a concern for linear properties and surface design.



Village by the River, 1947
Watercolour on paper 26.5 x 36.5 cm
Private Collection



Crossing the River, undated
Watercolour on paper 36 x 52.5 cm
Private Collection



Fishing Village, 1948
Watercolour on paper 36.5 x 54 cm
Private Collection

PORTRAIT OF A NYONYA PERANAKAN 1943

The studio that Yong Mun Sen opened up in Penang Road was popularly patronised for studio photographs. In those days, enlarged photographs needed a lot of delicate touching up and Mun Sen's artistic skills aided him greatly. The artist would frequently paint portraits in a photo with army personnel and the affluent, Penang Baba and Nyonyas as his subjects. His works were deemed true to life and exclusive. An example of one Yong Mun Sen's portraiture works is the highly-coveted and rarely seen in public, 'Portrait of a Nyonya Lady', a hand-painted photograph taken at the artist's photography studio which was established in 1922. This painting is a historical testament to this watercolour artist's profession as a proficient commercial photographer and his prowess. In this painting, Yong brilliantly gives his audience a peek into the clientele he received during that period, such as this lady, looking great in her Sunday best and jewellery, as well as his keen eye in capturing the tones and contours of her face. Henceforth, his works gained him popularity and he became well known through his exhibitions in Malaya and Singapore and also through foreign contacts in Britain, USA and Australia.

In a posthumous retrospective exhibition in 1999 entitled 'The Life of Yong Mun Sen', the guest curator then, Dr Tan Chong Guan emphasised on Yong's career as a painter as well as a photographer. He further elaborated that photography was relatively new in Penang at the time and the artist picked up the art of photography for its commercial potential. That said, it was undeniable that Mun Sen's true love remained in painting. However far he strayed from the medium, he eventually returned to it.



Portrait of a Nyonya Peranakan, 1943
Hand-painted photography / portrait 26 x 19 cm
Private Collection



Harbour scene, 1948
Watercolour on paper 25.5 x 35.5 cm
Private Collection



Beach Hut, 1949
Watercolour on paper 25.5 x 35.5 cm
Private Collection



Untitled, 1949
Watercolour on paper 38 x 56 cm
Private Collection

His conveyance grants viewers with an immaculate escape, a breath of fresh air or to remind people to break away from the bustling life. It is also evident in his landscape paintings that Yong did not depict the details that made up a landscape, rather, through watercolour, he illustrated light, harmonious colours, fluidity and a carefree rhythm. The words serene and tranquil come to mind when viewing Yong's paintings. One can't help but feel sombre at the same time as he artistically captures the hardships and strife that he subject's experience. It was during the mid-thirties that the artist began producing some of the most exceptional oil paintings of his lifetime. The international contemporary art trend towards expressionism finally caught up with him in 1949 and the subsequent exhilaration bore fruition to a series of abstract watercolours with surrealist undertone.

LATER YEARS

In 1955, a solo exhibition of Yong Mun Sen's paintings were showcased in aid of the Poay Cheng Public School Building Fund. The following year, he suffered from the first of several strokes. Undeterred by his physical infirmity, he struggled on to paint. Although Yong was touted as the first known painter and artist in Malaysian modern art, his life in the later years was burdened with poverty, illness, depression and despair. He died on Sept 29, 1962 from stomach cancer. Both local and foreign patrons collected Mun Sen's watercolours, including Malcolm MacDonal, the governor-general of British Malaya. Penang Museum and Art Gallery honoured the 'Father of Malaysian Art' with a posthumous Retrospective exhibition in 1999. In 1972, the National Art Gallery of Kuala Lumpur organised a Mun Sen Memorial Art Exhibition, which was then succeeded by the Penang Museum and State Art Gallery. 1998 was the year in which an exhibition remembering Yong Mun Sen was held, titled, 'Father of Malaysian Paintings' at the Art Gallery in Penang. Next,



Chinese Temple - Penang, 1949
Watercolour on paper 48 x 36 cm
Private Collection



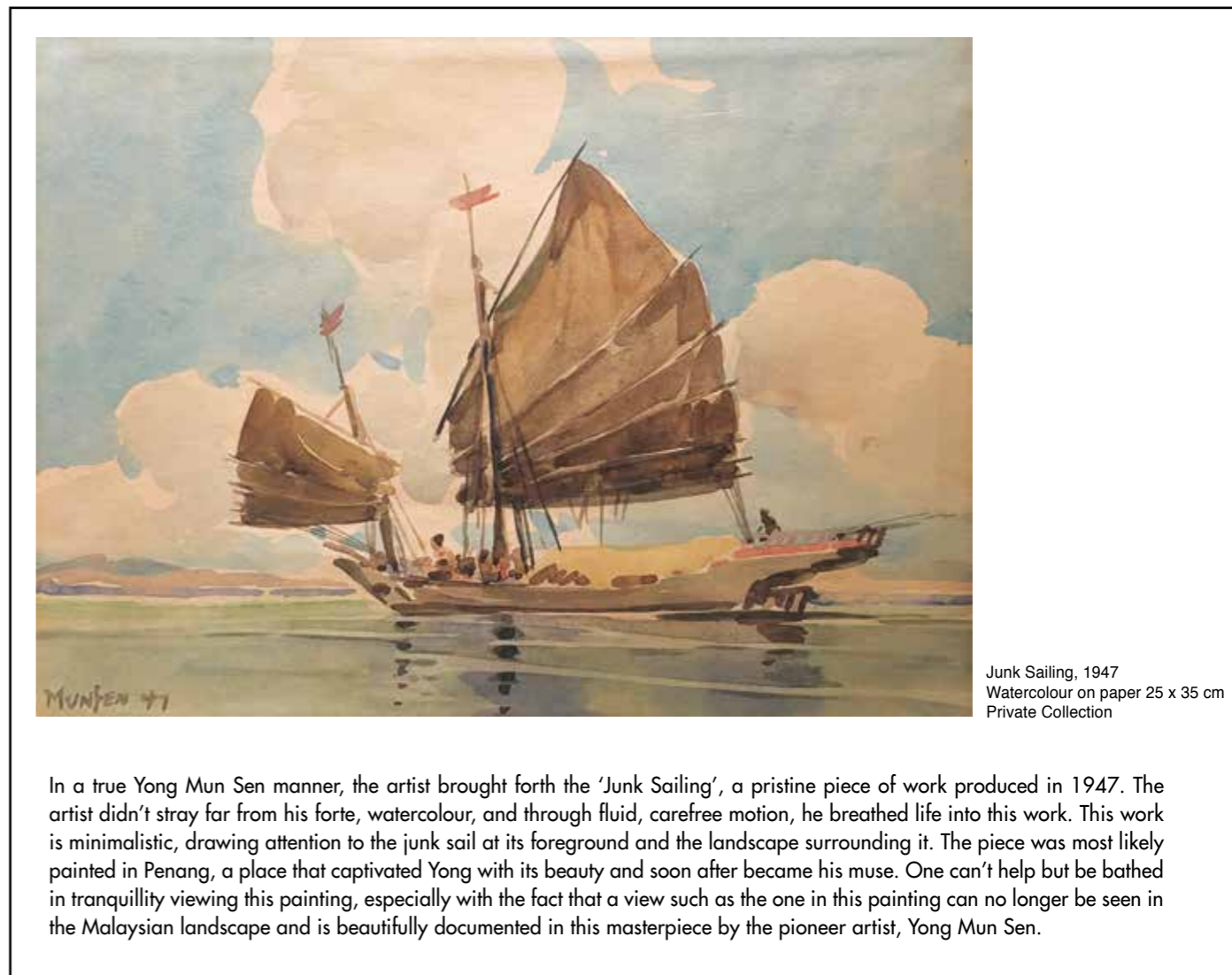
Untitled, 1951
Watercolour on paper 37 x 54.5 cm
Private Collection

a retrospective exhibition was held at the Penang State Art Gallery in 1999. Yong's works will always hold a distinguished place in Malaysian art, as they rightfully deserve. His works are collected by Australia's Launceston Gallery, the American Cleveland University and John D. Rockefeller University among others.

Yong Mun Sen left behind a remnant of history for the present and future art enthusiasts to remember him by. The great Xu Bei-hong (1895 - 1953), one of the four pioneers of Chinese modern art described Mun Sen as "the most outstanding figure in Malaysian art and one of the few top artists in the tropics."



Landscape with Bridge, 1953
Watercolour on paper 36 x 55 cm
Private Collection



Junk Sailing, 1947
Watercolour on paper 25 x 35 cm
Private Collection

In a true Yong Mun Sen manner, the artist brought forth the 'Junk Sailing', a pristine piece of work produced in 1947. The artist didn't stray far from his forte, watercolour, and through fluid, carefree motion, he breathed life into this work. This work is minimalistic, drawing attention to the junk sail at its foreground and the landscape surrounding it. The piece was most likely painted in Penang, a place that captivated Yong with its beauty and soon after became his muse. One can't help but be bathed in tranquillity viewing this painting, especially with the fact that a view such as the one in this painting can no longer be seen in the Malaysian landscape and is beautifully documented in this masterpiece by the pioneer artist, Yong Mun Sen.