



Patrick J Murphy, Antoinette, Jolly Koh, Wanda Koh, and Johnson Kong (KL antiques dealer) in the Revolving Restaurant, Federal Hotel KL, August 1970, before Jolly travelled to USA.

Patrick J Murphy visiting the erotic temples at Khajuraho (9th - 13th century India), while on his way home to Dublin from Malaysia (visit advised by Cheong family)

MALAYSIA IN THE 1960's THROUGH THE EYES OF AN IRISHMAN

An Interview with Patrick J Murphy, a former Guinness brewer who spent the late 1960's working and discovering the beauty that is Malaysia

BY HIRANMAYII AVULI MOHANAN

INTRODUCTION

Patrick J Murphy was born in New Ross, Ireland and his career in brewing took him across the world, including Malaysia. He voyaged from Ireland to Kuala Lumpur at the end of 1968 with his wife and children to brew under the Guinness brand. Murphy fell in love with the Malaysian landscape, food as well as the weather, returning to Kuala Lumpur in the 2000's.

He had attended the CBS Kilkenny School, followed by the Trinity College in Dublin. His business career kicked off in banking and eventually forayed into brewing and malting, where he served twice as the president of the Irish Exporters' Association.

In an enlightening interview, Patrick J Murphy shares about his humble beginnings in Ireland, his experience living in Malaysia during the 1960's, adapting to the local culture and beguiled by the exotic food and rural scene. Pat Murphy tells the story with his characteristic and infectious zest for life.

Your business career was first in banking, then brewing and malting. Could you elaborate on your foray into brewing and what it entailed?

My first job was in the fledgling Central Bank of Ireland. I was very moved by a painting of a beautiful woman (his wife) by Irish artist John Lavery, RA. which hung in the Governor's office. It was reproduced on Irish banknotes and symbolised Ireland, free from English domination,



H.R.H Prince Charles greets Patrick J Murphy prior to a private lunch at Áras an Uachtaráin. (In the background are Marie and Sean Benton, Chairman of Office of Public Works in Ireland.

after centuries of struggle for freedom. I moved to work for Guinness in 1958 because it was the best paying job in Ireland at that time. Simultaneously, I was an evening student at Dublin University (Trinity College). Both establishments had lots of paintings on the walls. Guinness trained me in all aspects of the brewing process and I became a senior manager. In 1968, I moved to London to design a new Guinness brewery for Brazil, accompanied by an engineer. London was a Mecca for art. On completion of the task, I was asked to move to Malaysia as brewmaster, and did so that December with my wife and two young children. It was the start of an exciting adventure.

You moved to Malaysia in 1968 to work at Guinness Malaysia. What was your first impression of Malaysia?

Our first impressions of Malaysia were that it was exotic, beautiful, colourful, very hot and humid, strange. The food, the landscape, the people, the buildings were so different from home. It seemed something of a paradise. We rented a modern bungalow in Petaling Jaya from which we had views of a glorious Thai temple, a lake, and distant tin mines. Our garden was a riot of purple and white orchids, and rainbow-hued butterflies proliferated.

How did you and your family adapt to the local culture and cuisines?

It took almost no time at all for us to adapt to our new surroundings. Our children attended the Alice Smith School while Antoinette studied painting under the tutelage of local artist, Tan Tuck Kan (educated in

the prestigious St. Martin's School of Art) and became proficient. The children wore light apparel and enjoyed the freedom of swimming and running about in the sunshine. Malaysian food was much to our liking, even spicy chillies. We also frequented the evening stalls in Batu Road, Kuala Lumpur where the food was delicious and cheap, and the bustling atmosphere was fun. Thereafter, we became familiarised with the local culture, picked up Bahasa Malaysia and bargained so well it would make a local proud.

Did you travel within Malaysia? If so, where and how did you find it?

Whenever work permitted, I would whisk my family away for travels to discover the lovely cities of Melaka, Penang, Johor Bahru, Seremban and Langkawi. We adored and frequented the Passionate Love beach of Kelantan, fringed with coconut palms. Our final trip was to Terengganu for a weekend where we were the guests of Dr. Narayna, personal physician to the Sultan, and his Irish wife Cecily, and ate delicious hot fish curries. We never got to visit East Malaysia, unfortunately. Also, we spent one memorable weekend in Cameron Highlands where it was cooler, for a change. We encountered mosquitoes and leeches for the first time, and also snakes, as they are foreign to Ireland.

What did you cherish most about living in Malaysia?

I cherished living in an exotic country with gorgeous orchids and bougainvillea blooming in our garden, the colourful dress of Malaysians, the street stalls and cheap but delicious local food and



Patrick J Murphy greeting Mary McAleese, President of Ireland at the Residency. (Patrick J Murphy acted as the President's art advisor for 9 years until his retirement in 2009, aged 70 years old)

learning to bargain in shops and market place – not previously a at home. We also found the mixture of cultures fascinating - Malay, Indian, Chinese, and the interaction with expatriates. Chinese New Year and Lion Dance was an amazing experience. Attending a Malay wedding in the countryside was equally memorable. Besides that, we loved indulging in Indian and Malay curries, Chinese dumplings and Peking duck. We visited Port Swettenham (now Port Klang) for great prawns and satay. Above all, I cherish the sunshine and friendliness of the people and shopping.

What do you often mention in conversations about Malaysia?

I always mention about first and foremost, the Malaysian food, heat, ubiquitous flowers, beautiful countryside, exotic butterflies in a great public park outside KL, tigers, gula Malacca, durian, wayang kulit (shadow puppets), colourful sarongs, travels to interesting regions, etc.

What reason would you give someone to visit Malaysia?

We urged Irish artist, Barrie Cooke to visit the terrain rainforest and paint it, which he did. He also met Latiff Mohidin, Malaysia's young outstanding painter. We also advised others to visit Malaysia for a totally different experience from home – juxtaposition of old and new buildings, sunshine, exotic food and dress, warmth, friendliness and vibrant art scene.

What is your advice on what people should do when they visit Malaysia for the first time?

My advice is for tourists to spend some days in KL to marvel at old and new buildings including mosques, Sultan's palaces, shops, parks, etc. Be sure to wear lightest clothes because it's mostly sunny in Malaysia, put on sun protection cream, shop and be food adventurous. Lastly, buy yourself some batik shirts.



Patrick J Murphy, then Chairman of the Arts Council of Ireland, launching the annual Texaco Children's Art Competitions in Dublin C. 2003

What changes did you witness when you returned to Malaysia in the early 2000's?

When I first came to Malaysia, Merlin Hotel was the biggest then. Then, when I returned to Malaysia in the early 2000's, I realised that it was dwarfed by international chains. We could also no longer find Batu Road or Selangor Emporium with the massive recent developments. During our return, we needed taxis to go round instead of walking about. This was evidence of much new wealth and prosperity of the country.



Patrick J Murphy... "I spent every spare penny on art. I often went without an overcoat to buy my pictures."



Abdul Latiff Mohidin
Siri Pago Pago, 1966
Pen on paper 15 x 10.5 cm
Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy

Poem On Verso by Latiff Mohidin

Graceful, witty, informative, cheerful
What is the past, after all,
but a vast sheet of darkness
in which a few moments pricked
apparently at random, shine?
Patrick J Murphy, Bon Voyage.
Signed 'yours as ever', by Latiff Mohidin on Nov, 1970



Latiff in his Petaling Jaya studio on Oct 1970, taken by Patrick J Murphy



Batik originator (painter) Chua Thean Teng at the door of his shop and studio in Penang, Nov 1970, saying goodbye to Antoinette and Patrick J Murphy. He had a very successful art exhibition at the David Hendriks gallery in Dublin some years earlier.

PASSION FOR ART

"I like a painting that speaks to me," said Patrick Murphy whose fervour for art began as a young boy. He began collecting poetry books and postage stamps as a schoolboy, followed suit by artworks which sees an amassed empire today. The first piece of work that he ever bought was a month after Murphy married his wife, Antoinette in 1963. He bought a 19th century oil painting of ships in harbour by Irish artist, William Sadleir in the manner of Canaletto. This piece of work was kept for years until his taste eventually graduated to modern and contemporary art – which he then traded to his sister.

Murphy had collected a gallery of works that he was forced to move into a bigger house in search of more wall space. After more than half a century of collecting, he ended up with approximately 600 paintings, drawings and sculptures, as well as Ashanti's gold weight miniature sculptures and other artifacts, including Oriental ceramics. Today, the Murphys are in the midst of downsizing and will be donating and selling off a large part of their collection. His next step sees his artworks featured in forthcoming auctions, such as works by Russian artist Leon Zack, in Sothebys Paris and works of William Scott, Albert Irvin, Alan Davie and John Bellamy will be for sale in Sotheby's London.



Latiff and Brian Aylward doing a "Christy Brown" painting, for fun at my request. - Patrick J Murphy, Oct 1970



Chung Chen Sun in his studio painting.



Jolly Koh
Abstract, 1969
Acrylic on Canvas 127 x 152.5 cm
Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy

Tell us about your passion for art and collecting it. How did it start?

I began collecting poetry books and postage stamps as a schoolboy. Classical music was another passion. The visual arts became central when I moved to Dublin at age 16 and became a habitual visitor to the National Gallery of Ireland.

Do you still remember the first piece of artwork you collected?

Yes, it was a month after Antoinette and I married in 1964. I bought a 19th century oil painting of ships in harbour by Irish artist William Sadleir in the manner of Canaletto. We kept it for years until my taste graduated to modern and contemporary art, when I traded it to my sister. It still hangs in her hotel.

Could you also elaborate on your forthcoming auctions in London, Paris, Ireland and what are the highlighted works?

Some of the highlighted works include paintings by Russian artist Leon Zack, which have gone to Sothebys Paris for sale. Works by William Scott, Albert Irvin, Alan Davie, John Bellamy will be featured in Sotheby's London for the September sale. Also, hundreds of modern Irish paintings and sculptures will be sent for the Adams Dublin auction in October, including Barrie Cooke and Mary Swanzy, which are illustrated in my Memoir.

Abdul Latiff Mohidin
Debris (Pago-Pago Series), 1968
Oil on board 89 x 69.5 cm
Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy



Abdul Latiff Mohidin
Pago Pago Series - Rumbia (Singapore), 1968
Linocut on paper Edition 1/3, 45.5 x 30 cm
Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy

PATRICK'S FRIENDSHIP WITH LATIFF MOHIDIN

You speak fondly of the museums and galleries in Malaysia. How were you introduced to them?

Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard introduced me to the vibrant Malaysian art scene. We visited Museum Negara to see artefacts and attended the Festival of SouthEast Asian Arts in 1969. Through an invitation from Zain Azraai and his wife Dawn, I visited Galeri II where we saw a wonderful exhibition of relatively recent paintings by Abdul Latiff Mohidin and met the artist for the first time. We immediately bought two ravishingly beautiful oil paintings and a print titled Rumbia, to decorate our new home. Latiff was close to my own age and his affable nature drew us closer. We became friends and socialised with each other. He left his record player and portable music collection with us when he travelled to the Pratt Institute in New York. I persuaded him to stop over in Dublin en route, and he did so, meeting some young Irish artists that I had known.

We kept in contact for many years afterwards, and we progressively bought more works. I considered Latiff the outstanding painter of Malaysia at that time. He seemed to capture the soul of his homeland, as Armenian painter Arshile Gorky did when he moved to the USA. Besides Latiff's artworks, we also bought works by Arthur Yap, Jolly Koh and Cheong Lai Tong from the Salon Malaysia exhibition that year, and came to know those artists too. Contemporary Malaysian art then was more imaginative than what was happening in Ireland, and it advanced my taste. The incredible landscapes painted by Yeo Jin Leng and the batik paintings of Seah Kim Joo gained our admiration while learning about Ismail Hussein and his influence in the industry, in 1970. I am not



Abdul Latiff Mohidin
Wetlands - Gelombang Series, 1994
Oil on board 43 x 53 cm
Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy

so familiar with the current art scene in KL but I remember during my last visit 20 years ago, that many promising young artists had arrived on the scene.

What drew you to Latiff Mohidin's works?

I loved Latiff's paintings at first sight, from instinct. Here was the soul of Malaysia painted by a true poet! They were simply beautiful, skillful and uniquely imaginative.

One of the first few of Latiff's works that you bought was the Siri Pago Pago-Debris. How would you describe this work?

Siri Pago Pago-Debris was the glorious first painting that I bought in the spring of 1969 from the Galeri II exhibition, and it remains my favourite and has adorned our home for 50 years. Latiff told me the inspiration for it was a chaotic rubbish dump encountered in Bangkok on his travels. Here, the artist has transformed and elevated a banal subject into a sublime work of art, transcending beauty, speaks to the heart, captures the eyes, and smoulders on the mind forever. Truly, a glorious painting, full of emotion.

How was your friendship with Latiff Mohidin forged?

Latiff and I just liked each other from our first meeting and the friendship endured – we socialised. I sent Irish painter Barrie Cooke to meet him and they also became friends and admirers. All three of us read the poems of Irish poet Seamus Heaney who later won a Nobel Prize.

How many of Latiff Mohidin's works have you collected to date?

I think I ended up with about 10 works by Latiff, over the years, including drawings. I intended to buy one every year but circumstances did not result in that happening. His art gives me great joy.

Besides Latiff Mohidin, are there works of other Malaysian artists that you collect?

As mentioned earlier, I only bought works by Seah Kim Joo, Arthur Yap and Jolly Koh, besides Latiff, during my two-year residency in Malaysia in 1968-1970. Thereafter, I only bought a single oil piece by a young Malaysian on a subsequent visit to KL, but noted then an upsurge of local creative talent, and a welcome increase in patronage. One thing I am glad I did was to organise an exhibition of Irish Art at Galeri II to celebrate St. Patrick's Day in the spring of 1970, and thus to initiate a tradition of cultural exchange between our two wonderful countries which are so far apart. I have the fondest memories of exotic Malaysia.