

TAY BAK KOI

Mesmerising Viewers With His Distinct Style

BY HIRANMAYII AVULI MOHANAN



AT THE ESTUARY (1989)
In this piece, Tay created what looks like a dreamlike landscape of an estuary. It can be witnessed here that earthy tones came into play in this painting, bringing life to trees and the mountain range in the backdrop. Using a stylised and askew geometrical form, Tay pulled his viewers in, into his fantastical world.

At the Estuary, 1989
Gouache on paper 76 x 71 cm
RM 8,000 - RM 18,000
KLAS Art Auction September 2018
Sale XXXIII



CROSSING THE RIVER
In Tay's archetypal manner, he brought forth 'Crossing the River', resonating warmer hues that instantly captivates the eye of its beholder. Tay had cleverly captured the landscape of the river and two figures on a boat, one rowing and one as a passenger, in his distinct manner. The two figures are dressed in vibrant and contrasting colours to the background, immediately making them the highlight of the painting.

Crossing The River
Watercolour on board 21 x 12 cm
RM 2,500 - RM 5,000
KLAS Art Auction September 2018
Sale XXXIII

Second-generation Singaporean artist, Tay Bak Koi is fondly known for his illustrations of urban landscapes, fishing villages and 'kampung'. He was born in 1939. His artistic beginnings came from an innate talent and potential, which was later recognised by his father's friend, who subsequently enrolled him in

the prestigious Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 1957. However, Tay's father wasn't supportive of this decision as he expected Tay to help out with the family business and eventually take over it. Despite his ordeal and isolation, Tay remained 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 while 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 at NAFA where Tay befriended and soon after became the disciple of the late Cheong Soo Pieng, one of the founding fathers of the Nanyang-style of paintings. Cheong is widely revered for his experiments in brush techniques and the amalgamation of East-West elements in his paintings. Cheong had a great influence on Tay's works. In fact, many artworks produced during the primordial days of his

artistic career in the 1960's resemble the mark of his former teacher's style. While it took 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 niche.

Despite the arduous challenge faced by first and second-generation artists to make a

living in Singapore, Tay persisted. He 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 marked 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.



Misty Morning, 1970s
 Watercolour on paper 60 x 98 cm
SOLD RM 27,052.80
 KLAS Art Auction 15 April 2018
 Sale XXXI

ARTISTIC STYLE PROGRESSION

One can discern that Tay's artistic career has gone through a distinct evolution. When he began in 1964, his works emanated a strong resemblance to his mentor, Cheong Soo Pieng's. Then, as Tay gained experience and grew in experimentation, his art started to come to life in a unique way.

Tay's paintings of the landscapes in Singapore thrive on a palette dominated by cool colours. Their complexity and richness both in texture and form far surpass those of his earlier paintings. Progressing from the bold and abstract, Tay's works subsequently embodied a dreamlike quality, often blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, emitting a sense of tranquillity, and even timelessness.

The artist 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.

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 conveys the aggressive motion of the cocks, in the heat of skirmish, their wings flapping frantically and feathers splitting as the fray goes on.

Tay's illustrious career came to a soaring end when he passed away in 2005. Two years after his death, 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 1980's.