

# TAY CHEE TOH

Diverse and Figurative

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

Second-generation Singapore artist, Tay Chee Toh was born in Johor, in 1941. He is a diverse figurative and abstract artist, whose artworks span from paintings to sculptures and prints, ranging over different mediums and styles. The artist received great recognition in 1985 when he was awarded the highly-coveted, Cultural Medallion. He also went on to win the second and first prizes in the United Overseas Bank (UOB) Painting of the Year competition in 1982 and 1985 respectively.

## EDUCATION

In 1958, Tay moved to Singapore and enrolled at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) for two years, where he studied under the tutelage of Nanyang-style pioneer artist, Cheong Soo Pieng.

## ARTISTIC CAREER

Tay held his first group exhibition, entitled '4-Man Joint Exhibition' at the National Library Board, Singapore in 1960. The show garnered the artist critical attention in the 1963 book, 'A Brief History of Malayan Art'. Following the successful exhibition, was another group show, this time titled, 'Modern Art Exhibition' in 1963. The very same group established the Modern Art Society that year.

The artist's first solo exhibition took place in 1966, at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Kuching, Sarawak. There, he became fascinated with the indigenous Dayaks, studied them and used them as his muse. This then bore a fresh, thematic and stylistic art form, featuring Dayak women with elongated figures and arms. Tay debuted these new artistic expressions in his second solo exhibition at the British Council in Singapore in 1967. He collaborated with Alpha Gallery and held solo and group exhibitions at the gallery in 1972 and 1973. He also participated in several of Alpha Gallery's group shows, including its inaugural exhibition in 1971.

Tay achieved his first accolade when he won the first prize at the Singapore Innovations in Art competition, organised by the then Ministry of Culture and Singapore Airlines in 1981. The following year, the artist bagged second placing at the inaugural UOB Painting of the Year competition. Besides that, his works were highly recognised when UNICEF reproduced one of his paintings on a greeting card in 1969.

1985 was the year Tay was conferred the honorable award, Cultural Medallion in 1985 in recognition of his artistic talent and achievements. He won the first prize in the UOB Painting of the Year competition that same year. 1987 was a fruitful year for

Tay – he debuted his sculptural series in an exhibition, 'Tay Chee Toh's 1st Sculpture Exhibition' at the National Museum Art Gallery and completed the first hanging mobile, 'Flowers In Blossom', for the Orchard Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) station.

Armed with his work 'Rustling', Tay was placed first at the Real Estate Association of Singapore Building Sculpture Competition. In March 2001, his exploration of art led him on a new path, in figurative sculpture, in which he held a retrospective titled 'Body Lines' at the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. Taken from an image in 'Body Lines', it was featured in the Celebrating Singapore Art series of stamps in 2009. By 2012, Tay had held 10 solo shows, the latest of which was an exhibition of woodblock prints on gold and silver fabric. Some of his print works were labour of love, took close to three years to complete, spanned 4.5 m in length, revolving around the theme of the Dayak women.

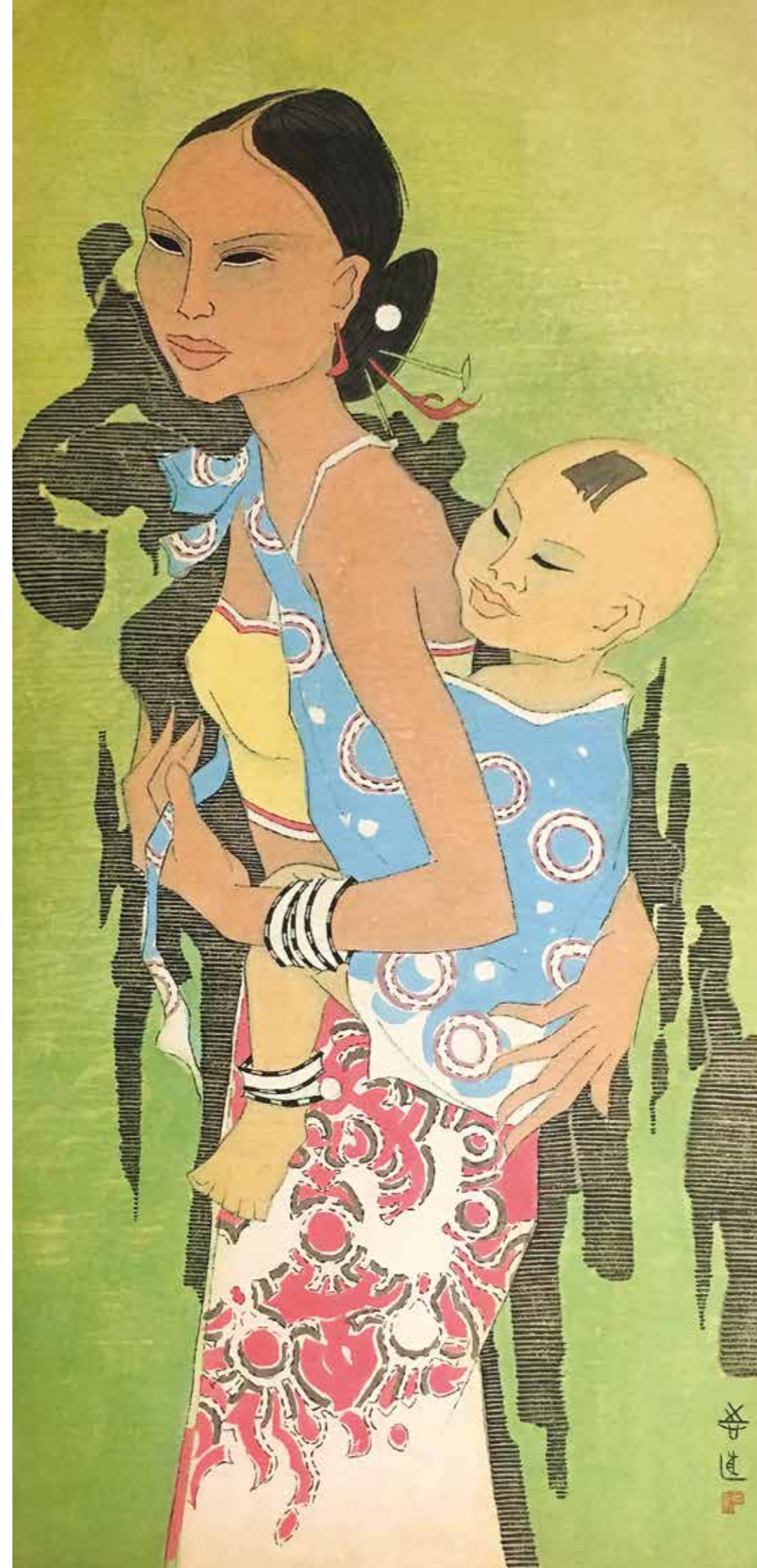
## STYLE AND MEDIUM

Tay's artistic practice has seen various experimentation in choice of media and modes of visual expression. He played a role in establishing the Modern Art Society and paved the way in figuration and abstraction. The artist's output, while embodying formal sensibilities, reveals surreal expressions with a derivation in fantasy.

After an enlightening trip to Sarawak in 1966, Tay brought forth the 'Dayak Women' series. These works portray the union of elongated lines and flattened forms comparable to that of his mentor, Cheong Soo Pieng's. The artist's batik works emerged in the late 1960's, as a result of exploration with the medium and introducing stylisation in his abstract and figurative works.

Then, towards the late 70's, Tay forayed into abstraction, producing the 'Aqua' and 'Windows' series of paintings with a juxtaposition of geometric lines with organic forms that float gracefully in fields of flat and robust colours. Later, advances in abstraction in the 80's saw his initial organic forms progress to become increasingly structured, which Tay attributed to the influence of industrial objects and their physical materiality. This influence soon became apparent in his three-dimensional sculptural works in the 80's, evoking the imagery of floating structures.

The early 2000's saw Tay produce fresh articulations of figurative compositions in paintings and sculptures. Evident in the 'Body Lines' sculptural series, the figures are articulated in fractured and contorted forms, exhibiting curved plains with languid sensuality.



Mother and Child, 1968  
Ink and gouache on paper  
95 x 46 cm  
RM 18,000 - RM 25,000