

YONG MUN SEN

The Father of Malaysian Painting

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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 fantastic landscapes and seascapes that were his habitual subjects.

The late Yong Mun Sen, born on Jan 10, 1896 was one of Malaysia's pioneer artists. The country's art scene wouldn't be what it is today if it wasn't for his contributions. The artist was born in a coconut estate in Kuching, Sarawak with the forename of Yen Lang. In 1901, he travelled to Tai-Pu, in the Kwangtung Province of China to attain a formal education in the use of brush and calligraphy. He returned to his hometown in 1910.

It was a Japanese artist using watercolours that changed his perspective and thenceforth became enamoured with that medium. In 1914, Mun Sen went back to China and painted majestic pictures of lions and tigers, which were beloved subjects of the warlords of the time. Two years later, he married 16-year-old Lam Sek Foong who bore five children which subsequently prompted his return to Sarawak in 1917. A year later, he started his career at a bookshop in Singapore and served at a school bookshop counter. Yong realised that Singapore sparked a fondness and appreciation for its urban scene which he later illustrated in numerous watercolours.

In 1920, he was transferred to the Penang branch of the bookshop in Carnarvon Street. Being the artist's first time in Penang, he saw the lovely island for what it was and was naturally captivated by its beauty and charm. The year was 1922 when he decided to change his name to Yong Mun Sen and subsequently set up Tai Koon Art Studio in Chulia Street. He took up photography seriously and executed some plaster-of-paris sculptures. Eight years later, he moved his studio from Chulia Street to Penang Road and renamed it Mun Sen Studio. Unfortunately, his career did not gain him any success which later prompted him to open an additional studio housed at an old mansion in Northam Road. During this time, Yong familiarised himself with the works of prominent European artists through books, particularly those of Van Gogh and Gauguin. Gauguin and his works spoke to Mun Sen, which explains the strong influence on the development of his style, especially in his oil paintings.



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



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



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



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



Untitled, 1949
Watercolour on paper 47.5 x 35.5 cm
Private Collection

Around 1936, several Penang artists convened and as a result, their brainchild, the Penang Chinese Art Club was formed with Yong as the vice-president. He became the president the following year. With the onset of the Second World War in 1939, the Penang Chinese Art Club was disbanded and 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.

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 track and delved into the art scene actively and soon after, he became well known through his exhibitions in Malaya and Singapore and also through foreign contacts in Britain, USA and Australia.

Mun Sen's forte and heart was landscape in watercolour. Although he did frolic into oil and Chinese traditional brush painting with success, eventually he steered back to the watercolour medium, in which he excelled. One can observe that his works assimilated the Chinese artistic spirit. 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 fluidity and a carefree rhythm.

In 1956, he had the first of several strokes. Undeterred by his physical infirmity, he struggled on to paint. Things really took a toll on him when his illness lingered and financial hardship eventually led to a morose man. He died on Sept 29, 1962.

A decade later, in 1972, the National Art Gallery organised a Mun Sen Memorial Art Exhibition. Yong Mun Sen's works will always hold a distinguished place in Malaysian art, as they rightfully deserve.



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



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



Untitled, 1947
Watercolour on paper 26.5 x 36.5 cm
Private Collection



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



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



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