

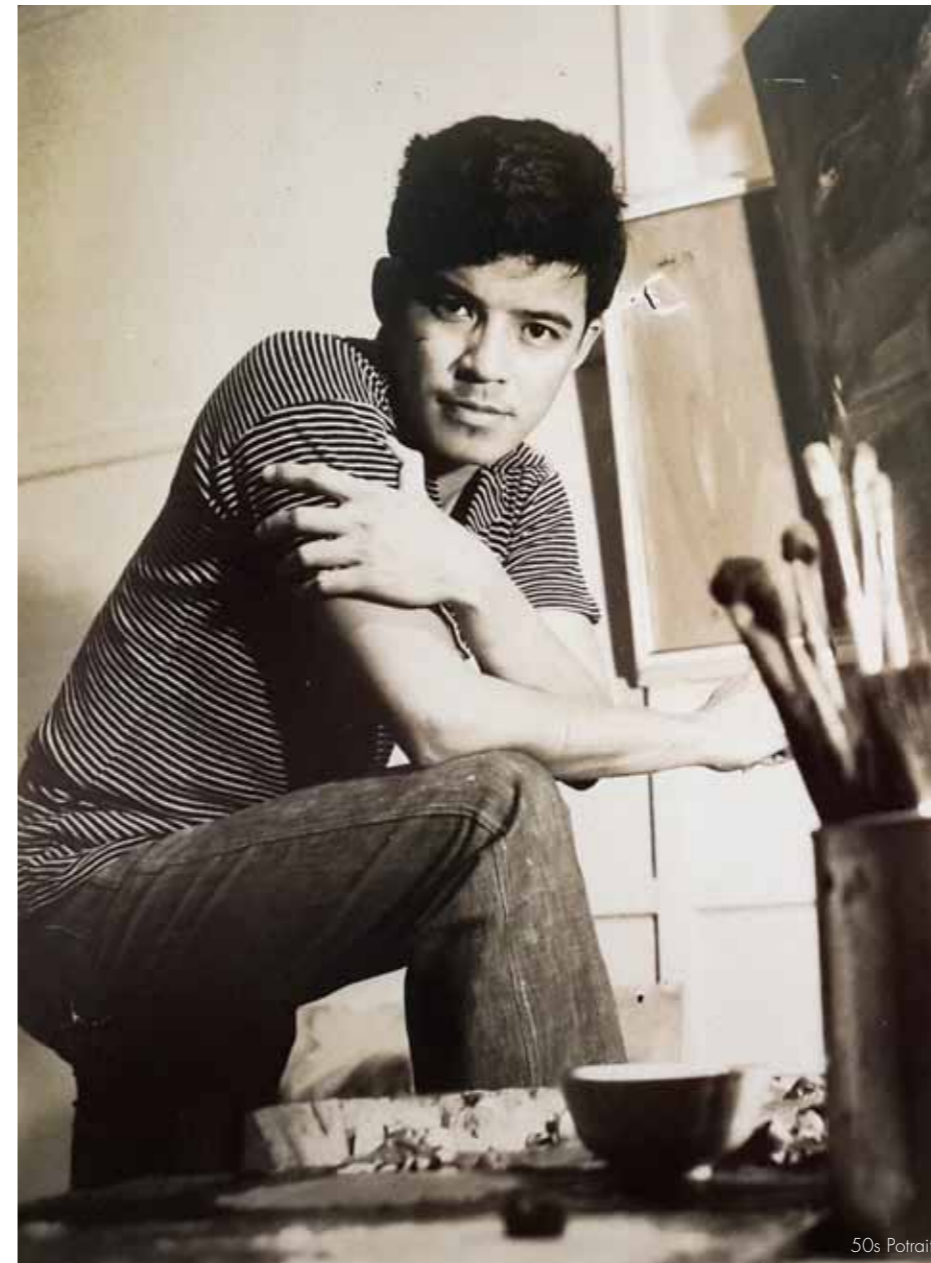


Abstract
1969 Oil on board 119.5 x 81.5cm

CHEONG LAI TONG

The Living National Treasure

By Kathlyn Ursula D'Souza



50s Portrait

It has been 60 years since artist Cheong Lai Tong first contributed artistically to Malaysia. What he began around the time of Malaysia's independence has now become cherished and historic in terms of both talent and contribution. The biggest asset in all this is essentially Cheong Lai Tong himself, who, after six decades of art, is still moving forward. Still inventing, still composing.

Born in China in the year 1932, he came to Malaya in 1938 with his mother and two sisters to join his father, who was running a business in Kuala Lumpur.

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not any art schools or movements or anyone I knew having to do with art. That was until I received an American scholarship and subsequently also studied art in London – I accidentally happen to be an artist today."

Claim to Fame

Very early in his career, Cheong Lai Tong won the commission (and, consequently, became part of Malaysian art history) in 1962 for the 115-foot mural that is presently at the National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. Made from Venetian glass mosaics, this particular work of his centre around Malaysian life and culture. It remains until today, as good as new and one of the most unforgettable and adored public artworks. Seven years later, he won the prestigious Salon Malaysia's Major Prize with his abstract works.

Style

After returning from studying overseas, Laitong began immersing and familiarising himself with the trends and art movements from the West. With that, Laitong began to tailor his own art style – a portion of abstract expressionism mixed with a healthy dose of Malaysia's principles and outlook. Teaming this artistic philosophy with his constant journey to venture into the world's and his own psyche to progress towards a better future, his works unquestionably played a vital role in the growth of Malaysian art.

With stimulating new ideas and a passion to see the country's artistic language grow, Laitong and his peers were keen to create art that would not only engage the viewer because of its visual beauty, but also convey the meaning and gravitas of art in society. Through art, Laitong induced deep reflections and timeless consciousness.

Photo by Poskod.my



Mural at the National Muzium Negara

There is an East-meets-West approach in his works, as his layering, contrasts of colours, markings and subsequent masterpieces make it possible for the viewer to interpret them at so many different levels.

He is also said to be an artist that goes by instinct, and his canvases are the result of the expression of his emotions.

"The paintings will tell an artist what colour to put, and as you keep painting, it will lead you. Most abstract artists would agree with me, that the paintings will direct an artist. If it doesn't, it merely means one is not mature enough as an artist," said Laitong.

He added, "I like to be inside a painting. When you walk into a painting, you have the feeling of being with the painting, and vibrating with the painting."

Laitong produces about 20 to 30 paintings for every series for an exhibition. Although his works are never titled, they are numbered according to the year and exhibition it was made for. He paints in his studio in the evenings, with classical music in the background, and he is often surrounded by nature.

In the 50's

One of Laitong's initial abstract works is a small oil-on-board piece painted in 1957. The inspiration for this piece came about when he visited Batu Caves. Droplets of water went into his eyes and something sparked from within him. Once he was back at the studio, he painted a series of two – depictions of a dark blue background with white and red circular ripples. It was an expression of his experience that day.

Laitong is also a fine draughtsman. He was accustomed to sketching and painting the human figure in his earlier works. As most artists would agree, the exploration and study of the human form is imperative to study the human behaviour, values, perceptions and habits. These figures, although considered to be part of his transitional period, developed and became more stylised in appearance before he completely converted into abstraction.

60's

In the 1960s, Laitong's paintings were more gestural. There are backgrounds of painted planes of solid, strong colours and calligraphic black lines would govern the



1950s - Experimenting with sculpturing at the barn studio, 1955



1950s - Wednesday Art Group

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- Cheong Lai Tong



60s - With fellow student artist in Florence, 1962

entire picture. These writing-like lines show Laitong's prowess with the brushstroke as he demonstrates the force of movement and control of form.

It was around this time that artists began forming their own communities, as Laitong was also one of the founding members of the Wednesday Art Group. Weekly meetings were organised to draw, paint and share ideas with other artists. There was not a singular and standardised ideal and concept, but it was more of a casual evening of meeting up and practising their art.

The 1960s also saw Laitong joining Rothman's as its creative director, and he held the post from 1963 to 1992. During his time here, the firm won a myriad of awards for design and marketing. These works are kept in the Permanent Collection of the National Art Gallery. He both worked and pursued his passion for art. Although the art scene was not as huge as it is today, Laitong had supporters who were also his friends. Apart from the National Art Gallery, there were Dr Ronnie McCoy, Zain Azahari and the late Datuk Kington Loo and Dolores D. Wharton (her collection of Malaysian

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80s - Cheong Lai Tong talking to Dato' Syed Ahmad Jamal at his 1981 solo exhibition



His winning piece at the Salon Malaysia '79

artworks included an abstract piece by Laitong which is now exhibited at the Southeast Asian section of Herbert F. Johnson, Cornell University).

70's

Laitong began employing acrylic in his paintings, as art materials became more accessible this time around. He also worked on larger canvases, and this proved most advantageous, especially for his abstracts.

His paintings around this time were the result of his study of the relationship between forms and the effects of colours on one's consciousness.

His paintings from this era would examine the relationship between forms and the effects of colouration on the human mind, soul and spirit. They are also more structured in appearance as Laitong used colour blocking within painted lines, giving the viewer so much more to experience when viewing colours due to the presence of an assortment of shades and pitch. As a result, his works were inundated with grace and refinement – almost romantic – which gave way to a more lyrical form of abstraction.

80's

Malaysia experienced quick development and modernisation. Laitong's works reflected this change, in a way acting as a response to his surroundings then. His works this time were softer with more of a textural feel as interlacing of black lines were present to segregate the layering of colours. 'Almost like batik' was the phrase often used to describe his works in this decade.

His works also hinted at the Indonesian archipelago (Nusantara), where the exoticism, spirituality, charm and atmosphere of the region and its ancient cultures were highlighted.

90's - present

Laitong retired and held his solo exhibition at GaleriWan in Jalan Binjai, Kuala Lumpur, in 1995. His works, themed "Voices of Nature", were the result of imposing negatives of images he had taken in the jungle and painted upon afterwards.

This exhibition then became the determining

factor in Laitong's decision to look at his art and life, and to begin an introspective journey.

On average, Laitong paints 20 paintings per year.

In his free time, Laitong loves travelling, each time returning with new ideas for exhibitions. For instance, in 1998, his presentation of Shan-Hur, Mountains and Rivers, was motivated by stunning landscapes.

Today, Laitong spends his days painting with no specific projects in mind yet.



Family Photo, Laitong and his sisters, 1940s

BACKGROUND

1932 Guangzhou, China and moved to Malaya when he was a child with mother and his two sisters to avoid the Japanese occupation in China. His father was running a business here in Kuala Lumpur back then. Laitong enrolled into a Chinese school before the Japanese occupation of Malaysia, but lessons were not conducted during the occupation. He started learning the English language when he was 18 years old.

EDUCATION

Skowhagen School of Printing and Sculpture in Maine, USA (USIS Exchange Scholarship) 1961 | London County Council Central Art School, London

POSTS

- Served as creative director of Rothmans of Pall Mall (Malaysia) from 1963-1992
- Regional creative director of Rothmans International for the Asia Pacific region from 1992-1995

HONOURS/AWARDS

1958 - Mural for the new palace of Sultan of Selangor (winner of competition), Kuala Lumpur.

1962 - Mural for the National Museum, Kuala Lumpur (winner of competition), Kuala Lumpur.

1962 - Mural for Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Kuala Lumpur.

1969 - 1st Salon Malaysia 1st prize in the oil and acrylic section.

1979 - 2nd Salon Malaysia 1st prize in the oil and acrylic section.

Short Q & A

Tell us about your early years.

I was born in China in 1932. I came to Malaya in 1938 with my mother and two sisters to join my father who was running a business here in Kuala Lumpur. To avoid the Japanese invasion in China, I enrolled into a Chinese school before the Japanese occupation here. There were no lessons conducted during the Japanese occupation and I started learning the English language when I was 18 years old.

What exactly inspired you to become an artist? Was it by accident, or did you always know that you wanted to be one?

I presume I was born with the ability to draw. I remember when I was a child; whenever I was free I liked to draw on paper or on the wall. But back then, I didn't know what an artist was, because during that era there weren't any art schools or movements or anyone I knew that had something to do with art. That was until I received an American scholarship and subsequently studied art in London. Hence I accidentally happen to be the artist that I am today.

Tell us about your art. How would you describe your art? What are your preferred techniques and medium?

I could not describe my art. I believe in painting freely with feelings. Either with oil or acrylic.

Do you have a mentor, or anyone you have always looked up to or referred to in art?

I do not have a mentor. But I used to admire some of the French masters when I was much younger.

What is your most prized art piece or accomplishments?

I'm proud to be the winner of the mural for the National Museum in 1961. Also, being the winner of the two Salon Malaysia art competitions - Oil Category 1969 and 1979 respectively.

Are you currently working on project? Tell us about it.

I'm spending my days painting at this moment. No specific project.

In essence, what is the message you would like to send out through your paintings?

What do you hope to achieve from your art pieces?

To paint good paintings and to be proud to have my signature on it. To show the difference between what is art and what is craft.