

# A TRIBUTE TO THE FALLEN ARTISTS IN 2019

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2019 saw the passing of three legendary artists, Choo Keng Kwang, Raphael Scott Ahbeng and Jeihan Sukmantoro – an immense loss to the art industry. These artists were incredible, each with distinct artistic prowess. KL Lifestyle Art Space (KLAS) pays tribute to these three legends by revisiting their stunning masterpieces and illustrious career.



Singapore Skyline, 1976  
Oil on canvas 54 x 90 cm  
**SOLD RM 59,178.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 30 July 2017  
Sale XXVIII

## CHOO KENG KWANG THE PAINTER OF DOVES AND PIGEONS

First-generation Singaporean artist, Choo Keng Kwang was born in 1931 in Singapore and gained his well-deserved and exceptional reputation through extraordinary traditional oil paintings of landscape, animals and nature-inspired, mostly from his travels and exposure. A highly accomplished painter, a committed educationist and a generous supporter of social charities, his contributions

and efforts since the 1950's has made him a cherished icon in the world of art.

Choo was the son of a Teochew diamond trader, Choo Kim Kye, and his talent was apparent from a young age. During his school years, he not only attended the Catholic High School, he also enrolled for art courses at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). Despite facing criticism and disapproval from his teachers, due to his unwavering dedication in both his regular studies and art classes, he successfully graduated from both schools in

1953. Although Choo showed interest in art during his school years, it was not until after he graduated that he delved into the field. He chose to be an educator and started teaching first, which eventually led to Choo being the principal of Sin Hua School.

During his early years as an artist, Choo had good friends within the art circle such as Lee Man Fong, Georgette Chen, Liu Kang and Cheong Soo Pieng. Even though they shared a close friendship, their art styles vary and differ from each other. For instance, his

dear friend Lee Man Fong featured pigeons perched on big brown stones while Choo's pigeons in his paintings stand on pine and bougainvillea trees.

While Lee used the Linan style, Choo's pigeon and dove artworks combined two different styles of Western impressionism and rules of perspective with traditional Chinese brushwork. Often, his bird paintings featured them descending in a spectacular vision, amidst swirling mists, to nest in foliage. His artistic signature touch in his bird paintings also exudes a romantic and atmospheric visual that carry powerful symbolic values with technical virtuosity, which is why he is well-known as the Painter of Doves and Pigeons.

### Choo's life in academia

Although Choo is mainly known as an artist, he had spent more than 30 years in academia. He was known for his involvement as a teacher and later promoted as the school principal of Sin Hua School. Throughout his career in the arena of education, Choo sought to improve the teaching of the arts. So, in 1982, the Ministry of Education started a two- and four-year Art in Education diploma course in order to raise the standards of secondary school art teachers. Choo oversaw the program and became the main lecturer.

In 1984, he was promoted as a senior lecturer and later became head of the Art Education Department at the leading art school in the region, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), until his retirement. Choo not only left a mark as an artist, but as an academician too.

### The benevolent philanthropist

Choo was active in charitable work in support of youth, education and the less fortunate. He produced paintings for charitable causes besides aiding community services, institutions, associations and scholarships for the performing arts such as the education of young musicians, and at schools and community centres.

His generosity included contributing all earnings from his painting to St. Andrew's Mission Hospital and Touch Community Services. Another example was the artist's participation in the President's Charity Art Exhibition – Choo Keng Kwang: An Artistic Path of His Own, where he successfully raised S\$160,000 for charity. In 1997, he donated oil paintings to the President's Star Charity Show. There were even phone cards of Choo's artwork reproduced by the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) for fund-raising campaigns.



Doves I, 1987  
Oil on board  
82 x 122 cm  
**SOLD RM 50,400**  
KLAS Art Auction 24 February 2019  
Sale XXXV



Three Cockatoos, 1982  
Oil on masonite board 80 x 122 cm  
**SOLD RM 49,596.80**  
KLAS Art Auction 28 January 2018  
Sale XXX

### Artistic Prowess

Choo Keng Kwang was famed for painting his favourite subjects, doves, cockatoos, old Chinatown in Singapore as well as a special piece on the Angkor Wat, enthused by his travels to Cambodia. The artist's oil paintings exude a sense of romanticism and

beauty at first glance, with a strong nostalgic vitality that appeals to its viewers. Besides Choo's beloved muses, his works feature a diverse array of subjects spanning various countries, made in woodcuts, oil and batik-style painting.

**JEIHAN SUKMANTORO**  
**INDONESIAN MAESTRO OF**  
**EXPRESSIONISM**

The late eminent painter was born on September 26, 1938 near Solo (Central Java). His Javanese-Hindu heritage had the most significant influence on Jeihan as a child and became his source of inspiration later in life.

Wayang kulit embodies the philosophy of Javanese culture and paves the way to further comprehend its literature, music and classical theatre. The wayang kulit played its part in moulding the artist that he was. Jeihan not only painted, but he was also active in literature and participated in Indonesian theatre.

**Education**

At the tender age of six, an accident left Jeihan with brain damage and epilepsy. He did not attend school for the next eight years and spent that time doing only one thing: drawing. Figures and landscapes became his playmates until he returned to school.

Fortunately, the artist's injuries didn't deter him from excelling in school. In fact, his intelligence improved because he successfully completed junior high school and was accepted into a senior high school that focused on art. Soon after, Jeihan received a class promotion for conducting a solo exhibition of 30 watercolours.



Jeihan Sukmantoro painting a portrait of Dato' Gary Thanasan's daughter.

Jeihan eventually enrolled at the School of Fine Art and Design of the Bandung Institute of Technology, which gave him the perception that he was on track to be a professional artist. Then, seeds of rebellion were sown when he found out that the school was set up to produce teachers of art instead of professional painters – the rules and regulations were not supportive of students wishing to embark on a professional career. For instance, students were prohibited from holding exhibitions outside campus. A carefree spirit that Jeihan was, he often broke the rules, justifying it on the grounds that they served as opportunities to gain him wider experience and knowledge.

**Artistic Style**

For Jeihan, it was more than just knowledge and experience – he wanted freedom to be independent and develop his character. This seemed to have been the fuel to his trailblazing works. Works from the artist's early days were judged to have deviated from educational

rules, and he was ridiculed, criticised and even accused of blasphemy.

Jeihan's paintings were that of figurative, incongruous with his school's adoption of Cubism and abstract styles, though his works do seem to slant towards the abstract field. In the mid 1960's, during the artist's final semester, he decided to quit due to boredom.

An early work of the Indonesian artist that created quite a stir was an installation piece at an exhibition in the Balai Budaya Building in Jakarta in 1968. What did he do? He cut his Torso art piece into three separate ones. In the uproar, an art critic deemed Jeihan's artworks rape. Unfortunately, Jeihan's ideas were too dynamic and way ahead of its time.

This changed by the 1980's. The decade later saw more progressive thinking into



Fatimah, 2010  
 Oil on canvas  
 70 x 70 cm  
**SOLD RM 8,454.00**  
 KLAS Art Auction 28 January 2018  
 Sale XXX

Sore di Pelabuhan Ratu, Bandung, 1976  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 60 x 70 cm  
**SOLD - RM 16,500.00**  
 KLAS Art Auction 10 November 2013  
 Sale VI



Yanti, 2008  
 Oil on canvas  
 70 x 70 cm  
**SOLD RM 13,750.00**  
 KLAS Art Auction 7 July 2013  
 Sale IV



Gadis, 1998  
 Oil on canvas  
 45 x 45 cm  
**SOLD RM 11,550.00**  
 KLAS Art Auction 7 July 2013  
 Sale IV

accepting unconventional ideas. It worked in Jeihan's favour – his ideas gained traction and maturing style was easier to comprehend.

Jeihan's status as a professional artist and his success in breaking into the market were evident by the billing received on a poster advertising a joint exhibition with a senior artist in 1985, which was organised by the Board of Art of Jakarta. The headline read, "The encounter of 2 eminent expressionists."

Demand for Jeihan's paintings soared, sparking a boom in demand for Indonesian paintings. The following years were particularly good for the Indonesian overseas fine art market.

The hallmark of Jeihan Sukmantoro's artworks is his subject's blank eyes. He deliberately lost the eyes with flat black paint. The effect can be unsettling but the peculiarity and air of mystery surrounding it draws viewers in.

Perhaps, it was the artist commentary on not conforming to standards.

Women were the artist's preferred subject of choice, seeing a uniqueness in them, exuding mystery and character. The manner in which the subjects were painted against a vibrant space devoid of things, bringing focus to the physical and non-physical reality of things. Jeihan regarded his subjects as spiritual beings and draws attention to it indirectly through facial expressions and body gestures.

Flatness discerns in some of the artist's works, reminiscent of wayang kulit and similarly the way in which the subject matter is positioned in a side profile away from the painter is akin to the angle the dalang (puppet master) holds his puppets. It is done with an intellectual awareness. Again, Jeihan's Javanese heritage peeks through.

From 1997 onwards, Jeihan evolved towards a certain spiritual tranquillity, reflected in a more minimalistic style of painting. His subjects took a more playful and relaxed light, but their figures expressed distortion and less being. Decades later, aficionados are still clamouring for his modern artworks and will continue to do so.



Tegora, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
114 x 174 cm  
**SOLD RM 25,300.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 30 September 2012  
Sale I



### RAPHAEL SCOTT AHBENG PAINTER OF THE BORNEAN LANDSCAPE

KL Lifestyle Art Space looks back at Raphael Scott AhBeng's illustrious career and riveting artworks.

Ahbeng, a Bidayuh, hailed from Sarawak and was one of the most prominent Borneo artists and dubbed the master of Sarawak's landscapes. He attended Bath Academy of Art in the United Kingdom, where he studied Art and Photography from 1964 to 1967. He returned to the UK in 1973, under the British Council Grant to study English and Drama at the British Drama League in London. He also studied broadcasting at the BBC in 1990 under a joint Sarawak/British Council Grant.

Road to Singai, 2011  
Oil on canvas  
67 x 38 cm  
**SOLD RM 16,500.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 7 April 2013  
Sale III



The Glory Of Morning, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
182 x 243 cm  
**SOLD RM 23,100.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 19 January 2014  
Sale VII



Woods, 2008  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 243 cm  
**SOLD RM 15,950.00**  
KLAS Art Auction 10 November 2013  
Sale VI

### Accolades

His many accomplishments reveal a spirited character, with an unquenchable thirst for learning various subjects. His works which address the spiritual, social and economic concerns of the Malay Archipelago were exhibited at Convergence held at Petronas Gallery in 2013. His solo exhibition, Legend: A Borneo Artist, showcased the complete oeuvre of Raphael's 60 years of work.

From his secluded studio in Bau, Sarawak, Raphael Scott AhBeng painted on a variety of subjects and styles, with his métier being abstract. Given his first solo in 1954, he took up an Art and Photography course at the Bath Academy of Fine Art in England (1964-1967). He also took up Drama in London in 1973 under a Sarawak Government scholarship. His awards included the 1st Prize in the Sarawak Shell Open (1959, 1982, 1983), and 3rd Prize in the Natural Malaysia art competition in Kuala Lumpur in 1991.

### Artistic Prowess

It is known to whoever is familiar with Raphael Scott AhBeng's works that his interpretation of nature strayed far away from the rest of his contemporaries. They had been modified into something that was purely AhBeng's style – atypical and fantastical. The artist's renditions of his favourite subject, the Borneon forest, were often depicted engulfed in various shapes, colours and shades.

Struck with visual wonder, the audience is left to discover more and more hues as they explore the canvas, each colour special and diverse, as trees and floras are in the forests. Ahbeng had produced countless variations of nature that naturally draw viewers in, coaxing them to take a longer look, as there is an underlying message or mystery to discover and to get acquainted with. Perhaps this was how Raphael Scott AhBeng saw plants, leaves and flowers collectively – he saw them as having their own aura, their own colour and own shapes despite their intrinsic and natural façade.