

CHEN WEN HSI

THE NANYANG STYLE PIONEER

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Three Koi Fish
Ink on paper 33 x 43 cm

Soft in sight with graceful subtlety, Chen Wen Hsi brings forth his depiction of what seems to be Japanese carps sauntering through its natural habitat, enclosed by foliage, as depicted in the foreground. Using Chinese ink and watercolour on paper for this masterpiece, the artist illustrated his Nanyang-style forte with immaculate brushstrokes.

Born in 1906 in Guangdong, China, Chen Wen Hsi was renowned for his avant-garde Chinese paintings. Regarded as a first-generation artist, Chen was in the forefront of the Chinese avant-garde movement in Singapore during the 1950's. He was a member of a group of five prominent artists that founded the Nanyang style, a landmark in the art history of Southeast Asia. Chen was a highly esteemed painter and art educator who played a significant role in developing the art community in Singapore.

The artist was heavily influenced by traditional Chinese paintings, early Cubist works of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, paving the way for Chen's own repertoire and identity, which he later trademarked. In the span of 1923 to 1992, Chen had conducted 38 one-man exhibitions within Singapore and other countries such as China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

In 1926, the artist moved to Shanghai to enrol in the Shanghai College of Fine Arts. Due to growing dissatisfaction with the quality of education at the college, Chen along with a few others transferred to Xinhua College of Art where he studied under the tutelage of renowned artists such as Pan Tianshou. It was also at Xinhua that he met his fellow peers, Chen Hen Hao, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang who all later became Singapore's Nanyang pioneer artists and art educationists.

In 1929, Chen graduated from Xinhua College of Art and returned to his hometown, Baigong. For approximately a decade, Chen taught art to students in primary and secondary schools in both Shantou and Jieyang, China. It was also in 1929, when Chen went to Swatow at the age of 21 and displayed his works for exhibitions in Shanghai (1931 and 1933) and Guangzhou (1932, 1936). It was not until 1937 that he was acknowledged for his talent and received praise from Chinese painter, Xu Beihong, at the second Chinese National Art Exhibition in Nanjing. He was even elected as one of China's contemporary 10 greatest artists by an English art magazine in that same year.

Seeking a new adventure and fortune, the artist planned a three-month trip to Nanyang. Then, in 1948, together with his



Two Herons
Ink on paper 65 x 68 cm

In this masterpiece, Chen Wen Hsi portrayed his abstract mastery using ink on paper, but in a muted tone. This flock of geese is portrayed in a flurry, looking for food in the wilderness. Here, a medley of Western and Nanyang influences are discerned, evidence of his flawless technique.

paintings, Chen journeyed from China to Cholon, Vietnam via an oil tanker, to start what became a tour of exhibitions spanning across Asia — Hong Kong (1949), Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur (1949), and Bangkok, Singapore (1950). Chen arrived in Singapore in 1950 without any intention of staying. However, the expiry of his visa and with the coaxing of fellow artist Liu Kang, and then Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald, the artist stayed. At the invitation of its then principal Cheng Anlun, Chen Wen Hsi started teaching at the Chinese High School in Singapore, where he remained as a teacher until

1968. Learning of Chen's growing name and talent, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA)'s then principal Lim Hak Tai, invited the artist to teach at its hallowed grounds. He remained a teacher at NAFA until 1959.

Together with a group of fellow artists, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang, they embarked on a painting trip to Indonesia in 1952. They visited Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta and Bali. Not only did this trip produce prolific works, it would later introduce the 'Nanyang' style of painting into Singapore's art culture. The same group of four later showcased



Two Gibbons, Undated
Ink and colour on paper 152 x 42 cm
SOLD RM 36,960.00
KLAS Art Auction 22 March 2015
Sale XIV



Fishes
Ink and colour on paper
65 x 43 cm
SOLD RM 47,342.40
KLAS Art Auction 31 January 2016
Sale XIX

their paintings from the Indonesian trip in a group exhibition. The exhibition was held at the British Council Gallery and saw each artist contributing about 20 works for the show. It was an important moment in the Singaporean art scene, heralding the introduction of the 'Nanyang' style of painting.

1964 was the year that Chen was awarded the great honour of Public Service Star of Singapore. In 1968, the artist retired from active teaching to concentrate primarily on painting. Some years later, Chen opened his first gallery at Tanglin Shopping Centre and was named, the 'Old and New Gallery' which remained open until 1993. It was a momentous occasion for the artist in 1972, when his painting, 'Gibbons' was used on the \$1 stamp as one of four local artists' works featured in Singapore's postage stamp issue, 'Contemporary Art Series'.

Chen passed away at the age of 85 on Dec 17, 1991. He had been suffering from an abdominal tumour and died within a year of being diagnosed. He was survived by his wife, Huang Jingzhuang and three sons, Chen Siew Yui, Chen Siew Min and Chen Siew Hong.

ARTISTIC PROWESS

Chen was adept at both traditional Chinese ink and Western oil painting. His Western-style works in the early 1950's were realistic depictions infused with post-impressionism and expressionistic elements. He experimented with various styles and techniques ranging from Fauvism to Cubism as well as acrylic, viscous paints and sand on canvas. His art evolved over time and transformed from simplified forms and strong colours to cubism, and later abstraction.

He had great interest in human figures and perceived them in the simplest of manner by merely depicting them as a pattern of images. He was also keen on nature and animals. Other than human figures, his other subjects included landscapes, figures, birds and other animals, still life studies and abstract compositions. His attention to detail and sensitive transcription of illustrating his subjects to canvas, especially his work on the gibbon paintings where he was inspired by Mu Xi's works, were highly noted by art experts and aficionados in his time.

For his contributions to fine arts in Singapore, Chen was awarded the Public Service Star in 1964 by President Yusof Ishak. He received an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the then President Benjamin Sheares in 1975 and was the first Singaporean artist to be awarded with the Golden Chapter gold medal award by the National Museum of History in Taiwan. In 1987, he was the first recipient of the ASEAN Cultural and Communications Award as outstanding artist. Even after his passing in 1991, he was posthumously awarded a Meritorious Service Medal for his artistic legacy. Today, many of his works are preserved and cherished in the collection of the Singapore Art Museum.



Herons
Watercolour on paper 43 x 29 cm
SOLD RM 29,680
KLAS Art Auction 24 February 2019
Sale XXXV

ONG KIM SENG'S NEPAL AND SINGAPORE RIVER SERIES

MAESTRO OF EN-PLEIN-AIR PAINTING

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Market Kathmandu, 1991
Acrylic on canvas
58 x 72 cm

Entitled 'Market Kathmandu, 1991', this work is as humble as it is beautiful. Ong with his mastery, depicts a daily scene in Kathmandu, in presumably, a market. An earthy palette becomes the painting, with meticulous portrayal of details. Pails and basins are seen strewn about the left of the shop, some holding vegetables. What looks like a hole in the wall shop is manned by a Nepalese lady dressed in a vibrant saree, tending to two modest, female customers. There is a simplistic beauty to this work.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Singaporean artist, Ong Kim Seng came from humble beginnings, a village in Tiong Bahru, Singapore and has been a full-time artist since 1985. He has participated in both group and solo exhibitions in Singapore and around the world including the United States, China, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, Belgium, Germany, France, the Middle East, Taiwan, Hong Kong and ASEAN countries.

This watercolourist studied at Radin Mas Primary School from 1959 and later at Pasir

Panjang Secondary School. Ong had innate interest in art since he was young, but his mother had envisioned him having an office job, being either a clerk or teacher as it was a ludicrous thought for her son to become an artist. Not paying heed to his mother's dissatisfaction with his interest, Ong began experimenting with painting, beginning with pastels and oil and moving on to watercolour painting earnestly since 1960. It was during this period that he became a regular participant in a painting group at the Singapore River led by artist, writer and lecturer, Chia Wai Hon.

In 1962, Ong left school to join an advertising agency where he worked as a bill collector. He left the agency after four years and found his next job as a policeman at the British Naval Base in Sembawang. He lost his job in 1971 when the British withdrew their troops from Singapore. He subsequently worked as a welder at Pulau Bukom, a line technician at an electronics firm, National Semiconductor, and then as an audio-visual/graphic technician at the Colombo Plan Staff College for Technician Education.



Raffles Landing Site - Singapore River, 1979
Watercolour on paper 36.2 x 53.3 cm

ACCOLADES

This talented artist has garnered many accolades, including being the first and only Singaporean to have won six awards from the prestigious 138-year-old American Watercolor Society (AWS), of which he was conferred membership in 1992. He is also the only Asian artist outside the US to be admitted into AWS. Ong's collectors include Queen Elizabeth II of England, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China, Secretary-General of the United Nations, President of the Republic of Korea, Prime Minister of Thailand, President of the Philippines, Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister of India, the Governor of Hokkaido, Singapore Arts Museum, Maritime Museum, Agung Rai Museum and Neka Museum in Bali, Indonesia, and Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, foreign missions and embassies.

ONG KIM SENG'S ARTISTIC STYLE

Ong's style is described as being naturalist cum impressionistic and a combination of post-Impressionism colour and outlook of the American realist masters. He paints en plein air and has stated that in order for him to paint a place, he has to feel it first. "I believe that inspiration comes naturally when there's a link between the artist and his subject," said Ong.

The subjects of his works revolve around inanimate objects, architectural forms, masonry, foliage and landscapes. He seems to have a way in materialising exactly what he sees on canvas, capturing the complexities and minute details of the buildings and the realistic play of light

and shadow. Ong's exemplary use of watercolour and the balance between subject and space truly make his work a gem.

The images contained in his art does not convey extreme emotions, they simply play on the nuances of natural light, exacerbating the ordinary into visual splendor and capturing texture and luminescence with layers of pigment. The skill in his art is indelible, and his aesthetic eye even more so. Merging concepts with finesse of execution, the artist presents representative images which are also ethereal in their beauty and flawless in their elemental flow and appropriation of light.



Singapore River, Singapore, 1991
Watercolour on paper
27 x 36 cm
SOLD - RM 7,890.40
KLAS Art Auction 8 November 2015
Sale XVIII



Singapore River, 1979
Watercolour on paper 71 x 51 cm
SOLD RM 37,670.00
KLAS Art Auction 24 May 2015
Sale XV

THE SINGAPORE RIVER SERIES

There must have been something about the Singapore River that spoke to the artist. For a masterpiece to come alive, there has to be a special connection between the artist and the subject. In this breathtaking painting of the Singapore River, Ong captures the depth, contours, shadows and beauty that is the natural scenery of the world. It is stunning, and although simple in its execution, it shows the meticulous and methodical use of fine brush strokes and skills. Through the power of observation, the artist captures the scene of yesteryear, one that is highly uncommon in this modern age. Ong has produced numerous renditions of the Singapore River, each with its own distinctive quality. With a number of works collected by The National Heritage Board of Singapore, these highly coveted series have gone on to fetch incredible prices at the KL Lifestyle Art Space (KLAS) Art Auction.



Heart of Kathmandu, 1994
Acrylic on canvas 130 x 180 cm
SOLD RM 168,000
KLAS Art Auction 24 November 2019
Sale XXXVIII



Himalayan Panorama, 1982
Watercolour on paper 77.5 x 113 cm
SOLD RM 56,000.00
KLAS Art Auction 28 September 2014
Sale XI

ONG KIM SENG'S KATHMANDU SERIES

The Himalayas has always been a source of inspiration and a great challenge to venerable artist, Ong. He trekked up to Everest Basecamp to paint its scenery in 1978 to test himself. "I wanted to see if I could work in conditions that were a lot harsher than those in Singapore, and I am very glad that I passed the test," said Ong. The artist's well-received Himalayan Trek Exhibition in 1979 was a testimony of this fact.

But more than that, Ong was captivated by the mountain range as well as the people of Kathmandu, which inspired another trip in



Man with Opera Masks, 1985
Watercolour on paper 52 x 72 cm
SOLD RM 29,120.00
KLAS Art Auction 10 August 2014
Sale X

1981. On the other side of the Himalayan mountain range, lies Tibet, which throughout the years, posed a mysterious lure for the artist. "It represented my greatest challenge yet. By a stroke of fortune, I found myself in Tibet in 1986 when China first opened it to the world. It was a dream come true, although the conditions then didn't allow me to paint as much as I had wanted to," the artist lamented. Some of Ong's earliest works showcased in KL Lifestyle Art Space (KLAS) were on the Nepal series – each work is more beautiful than the other, illustrating the underrated beauty of Kathmandu.