

AWANG DAMIT AHMAD

MARISTA — REMINISCENCE OF THE PAST

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Awang Damit Ahmad B. Sabah, 1956
Marista Series, 1996
Mixed media on canvas 135 x 120 cm
RM 40,000 - RM 75,000

Marista Series

The bold and strong oeuvre of Awang Damit makes a reappearance in this piece from his celebrated Marista series, this time taking a resilient, symbolic form. This rendition of Marista employs darker and earthy tones overlain by shapes. Those familiar with Awang Damit's works are provided with the knowledge that his works are inspired by his memories, most of which are scattered, symbolic and garlanded with numerous emotions. The theme Marista, is defined as "to talk about the past" in Brunei's Malay language. It is a retrospective work, painting out mirages and emotions in abstract form, gathered from his hometown and his travels around Sabah when he was younger. Awang Damit admitted that after having studied the Marista series in context, he found it to be a journey of self-discovery as well as a search for a developing positive culture. This painting is both controlled yet expressive, inciting both abstract and figurative forms.

Born in Kuala Penyu, Sabah, Awang Damit Ahmad is one of the most renowned and well-established artists in Malaysia. In 1975, when he was 21, he moved to Selangor to become a technician with Telekom Malaysia. While working as a technician, he cultivated a love for the arts intently and eventually quit Telekom in 1979 to join Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in mid-1979. He pursued his Diploma in Fine Arts at UiTM during which he did his practical in Melaka and developed his skills by learning with the best at St. Paul Hills, Melaka. He topped his class in UiTM, graduating in 1983. For two years, he became a full-time artist and completed his first series, Essence of Culture.

Awang Damit eventually became a tutor at UiTM and pursued his master's degree in Fine Arts at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, United States in 1989. During this time he joined art collectives, the Arlington Art Group and The Capitol Hill, with expressionist Professor Tom Nakashima being his main influence. The artist became exposed to various aspects of art, earning pocket money and travelling across America.

PETRONAS Gallery acquired a few of his artworks and one of his paintings, Nyanyian Petani Gunung, won the 1991 Salon Malaysia Award – one of the most prestigious art awards in Malaysia. He was a lecturer at his alma mater, UiTM where he was appointed as Associate Professor at the faculty in 2000. Before that, he had also undertaken other positions including being the head of the Fine Arts Department. Despite being involved in academics, Awang Damit has been actively involved with the development of the Malaysian art scene.

Awang Damit has held various solo and group exhibitions both in groups and solo including the Intipati Budaya-Satu Sintesis Show at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in 1995, with the artworks also shown at Shenn's Fine Art in Singapore a year earlier. The group exhibitions he was involved in included the Bentuk Dan Makna – Galeri Seni FSSR, UiTM Shah Alam, while shows abroad included the 15th Asia International Art Exhibition in Taipei, Taiwan, Perception and Perspective: A Malaysian Eye View, Hotbath and Pittville Art Gallery, London, 14th Asia International Art Exhibition, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan and Contemporary Malaysian Artist, Beijing Art Museum, Beijing, China. Armed with techniques he picked up in the US, Awang Damit completed the lauded series Marista (2002) and Iraga (2011).

DATUK TAY MO LEONG

CREATING WONDERS WITH WATERCOLOUR

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Legong Dancers

Tay creates this arresting vision of two Legong dancers, majestically clad in traditional outfits. It is a spectacle of gentle hues that is both charming and exquisite, engaging viewers for long moments before they comprehend that this piece is an encapsulation of the charm of the rustics. Executed in the medium of watercolour, the artist cleverly combines the elements of space, form and colour to work magnetically with one another, as he captures a dancer holding a paper fan while the other is gazing into the distance, portraying her side profile. The work is a demonstration of the artist's adeptness in the delicate medium that is watercolour. It is certainly a poetic piece.

Tay Mo Leong, Dato' B. Penang, 1938
Legong Dancers
Watercolour on paper 76 x 57 cm

Datuk Tay Mo Leong was born in 1939, in Sungai Bakap, Penang. He is one of Malaysia's most recognisable and celebrated figures in the Malaysian art industry. Tay started his career as a watercolourist and evolved into a batik artist in the early 1960's. His maturity in style and skill in his watercolour paintings was well known in the art scene but his passion towards batik painting had superseded and made him a batik artist.

His name is synonymous with the development and evolution of batik in the country. Tay pursued an education in art at the Provincial Taipei Normal College (Fine Art) from 1957 to 1960. It was in Taiwan where Tay was introduced to the batik medium. Upon his

return, Tay mastered the medium itself through visits to Kelantan and experimentations. In 1965, he was confident enough to stage his first batik art exhibition at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur. In 1970, he studied at the Art Centre in Florida, USA.

He was given the Foreign Minister's Award and exhibited at the Nippon Modern Art Association, Osaka, Japan in 1997, and the Osaka Government Award in Japan in 2003. He travelled extensively to study batik techniques and materials and invented a new technique which he termed 'double-resist'. The artist is known for being one of the foremost Malaysian artists to employ the batik medium. His works are frequently described as abstract, experimental, daring and free. He was the

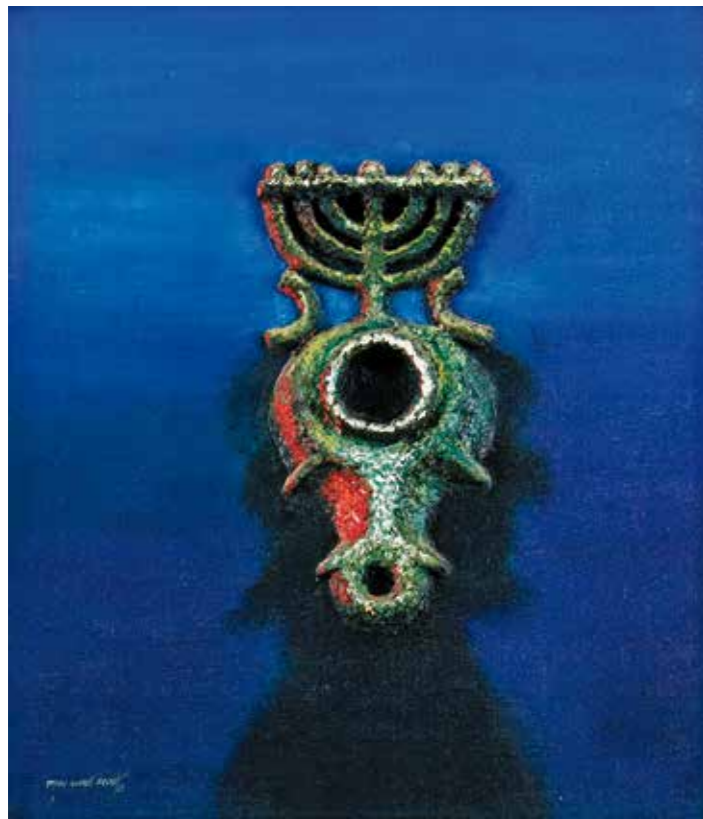
chairman of the Art Gallery Committee of Penang, a member of the State Museum Board and the president of the Penang Watercolour Society since 1985. Tay was conferred a Datukship by the Penang State Government in 2009 and that same year, Penang State Museum Art Gallery honoured him with a retrospective exhibition.

Tay's watercolour artworks are as striking as his batik works, executed with the same finesse and creative eye. The subjects of the artist's watercolour paintings primarily revolve around landscapes, inundated by faceless figures and intricate attention to detail. Vivid colours splashed across the canvas, guided by an emotive expression of beauty that Tay experienced.

MIN WAE AUNG

PAINTER OF SPIRITUALITY

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Min Wae Aung B. Burma, 1960
Abstract Symbol in Blue
Acrylic on canvas with relief object 58 x 50 cm

Symbol in Blue

Min's work represents all of those people who are out on their feet for themselves and their families. His subjects are often sun-drenched, moving figures across parched earthen roads, their postures revealing inner burdens and weariness. There are also glimpses of flower sellers, market folk and random groups of people traversing through their daily rituals. His uncompromising attention to details of their individual movements is remarkable and form the highlight of his works. Min elevates the spirituality and enigma of the monks walking with their backs turned in a shimmering but largely empty landscape — a brilliant Buddhist narrative.

'Symbol in Blue', however, is a stunning work that departs from Min's signature of Burmese monks clad in yellow or red robes in motion towards their destination. Still encapsulating the tranquillity that becomes the artist's works, here, a striking ombre of electric blue sweeps across the canvas, with an intriguing relief symbol or object at the heart of the artwork. While the significance behind the painting is unbeknown, one might assume that it is associated with Burmese culture or the Buddhist philosophy (Min Wae Aung's belief).

There is a distinctive serenity that comes with Min Wae Aung's works. He is a contemporary Burmese artist whose works are characterised by their strong association to Burmese culture and Buddhist philosophy. Born in 1960 in Danubyu in present-day Myanmar, Wae Aung studied at the State School of Fine Arts, Yangon before working as a commercial graphic artist and ultimately developing his signature aesthetics after a visit to the United States in 1993.

The artist captures the very essence of Burma, its spiritual and magical dimension, creating iconic characters, which perpetuate age-old traditions. Monks and nuns in burnt-orange and maroon robes against striking gold backgrounds, with dramatic effects

of light and shade, are the hallmark of his works. Almost exclusively composed of representational acrylic and watercolour paintings of multiple robed figures, his work features centrally located people, primarily of monks in solid-colour space of yellows, oranges and reds.

It can be discerned that outlines of the brightly coloured, subtly shaded figures are clearly delineated in black, against a background often executed in a contrasting pointillist manner. It is also evident that an intentional shimmering background seems to create an aura around the figures, which are thrown into greater focus, giving them an intense and luminous quality. They seem larger than life. Min's subjects' faces are rarely shown, as he

desires to emphasise the monks' movement. In his eyes, their anonymity helps convey how they are leaving humanity behind and going to a peaceful place, such as Nirvana.

Min Wae Aung's paintings can be found in private and corporate collections across the globe, and he has held more than 50 international exhibitions to date. His works are held by the Singapore Art Museum Standard Chartered Bank in Hong Kong, National Museum in Myanmar and Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan. His works are also collected by galleries and institutes in Singapore, Malaysia, the Netherlands, USA and UK, and are regularly showcased at art fairs.

NGUYEN THANH BINH

PORTRAYING PURITY

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

Renowned contemporary Vietnamese artist, Nguyen Thanh Binh's elegant paintings are poetry etched in colour, on paper. The artist was born in 1954 in Hanoi, Vietnam. He went on to study at Hanoi College of Fine Arts and graduated in 1972. Later, Thanh Binh attended the Gia Dinh Na College of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City, where he specialised in oil painting. The artist's niche, much like Min Wae Aung's monks, is portraying his subjects, predominantly women, as dreamlike, abstract figures. The empty spaces created in the painting gives the

appearance of being suspended in mid-air, rendering an angelic quality to his subjects.

Thanh Binh evidently has a high regard for women and does not just see females for their physical forms but is instead, inspired by the sense of each woman — that elusive feminine mystery that can change like the wind. He is intrigued by the sense of movement each woman has when she sits, stands, or lies down, whether dancing or playing sport, tells a story about who she is as an individual as well as other stories when she is with other people. Although

Thanh Binh has been greatly influenced by Western art and its aesthetics, his art falls well within the philosophical and aesthetic sphere of Asia.

The artist often conceals the faces of the women in his works, creating a surrealist, amorphous effect. Having faced myriad trials of mind and body, Thanh Binh seeks refuge in his paintings by striving to portray beauty, purity and innocence. Naturally, his muse is femininity, one that embodies an ideal purity.



Nguyen Thanh Binh B. Vietnamese, 1954
Two Sisters, 1980s
Oil on canvas laid on board 63 x 78 cm

Two Sisters, 1980s

In this nude-painting, contemporary Asian artist, Thanh Binh does not overload the composition with details, rather, inclining towards a concise manner instead, accentuating the subject's relaxed pose. Painted with white garments, the subjects exude an innocence and angelic quality to them. The painting perfectly encapsulates tranquillity and the simplicity of the piece is what makes it truly attractive. Each of Thanh Binh's paintings tells a tale of its own, garnering loyal following and aficionados. The works of this celebrated artist had been featured in Sothebys and sold for HKD 36,000 as well as Christie's Hong Kong.

LACQUER PAINTING IN VIETNAM

LAYERS OF PERFECTED BEAUTY

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

Lacquer, coined from Tan Hung varnish, was introduced in Vietnam, in the 1940's. In prewar Vietnam, significant quantities of varnish used to be exported from Phu Tho province to China and Japan. Before 1931, the usage of varnish in Vietnam was to coat a myriad of furnishings, from household articles to instruments of worship.

In 1925, the École Supérieure de Beaux Arts d'Indochine was established in Hanoi by the initiative of French artist Victor Tardieu and Joseph Inguimberty. Together with local talent Nguyen Van Tho, they embarked on a mission civilisatrice to educate promising artisans. While students were instructed in European style paintings, students were encouraged to experiment in lacquer. This environment ushered in changes to the ancient tradition

of lacquer handicrafts. New techniques, colours, production processes and ideas about the use of space brought changes in perception that also opened a window to the possibilities lacquer offered as a medium for the artist.

Ever since the International Paris Colonial Exposition in 1931, many Vietnamese artists starting shifting their attention to lacquer. From a decorative medium, it has morphed into an artistic means of expression in its own right, employed by countless names artist such as To Ngoc Van and Truong Van Thanh. From 1935, lacquer as a medium had proven its merits and created an avenue for interpretations of nature as well as intimate lives of artists, that put the medium on par with Chinese watercolours and modern oil paintings.

Apart from a relatively small circle of connoisseurs, the genre that is lacquer wasn't celebrated outside Vietnam. Lacquer paintings has evolved with time, fusing it with French techniques and positioning it as fine art. Lacquer art form is laborious, involving the technique of applying various layers of measured colours and textures onto a plywood board. These layers comprise paint, clear lacquer and also precious metals such gold and silver. No matter the material, each layer requires drying and polishing, with specific layers polished more than others to make them stand out. Fine sandpaper and a mix of human hair and charcoal are used to reach the desired colour/layer, but the artist must keep track of each since rubbing too hard can irretrievably ruin the artwork.



Truong Van Thanh Vietnamese, 20th Century
Chùa Một Cột - The One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi
Lacquer on board 41 x 61 cm

Truong Van Thanh

Truong Van Thanh is a 20th century artist and one of Vietnam's celebrated talents, whose oeuvre is lacquer painting. As with many artists, their surroundings and experiences proved as their muse. For Truong, the iconic landmark, The One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi, served as his, in this work. The arresting painting of the beautiful pagoda, meant to symbolise a lotus flower (the

Buddhist symbol of purity) growing out of the water is a spectacle of brilliant colours. The pagoda is depicted as is, tall and majestic, balanced on one pillar. Foliage envelops the pagoda, portraying an almost Eden-like scene.

This revered temple was built on the command of Emperor Ly Thai Tong in 1049 as a means of thanksgiving dedicated to Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara for being bestowed with a son. The One Pillar Pagoda, built from wood and on a single stone pillar of 1.25 metres in diameter and 4 metres in height was also where the annual Vesak by the monarch (birthday of Buddha) took place. In 1105, Emperor Ly Nhan Tong commanded for the One Pillar Pagoda to be renovated and for a bell reflecting one of four of Vietnam's capital works to be installed in the temple. In 1954, forces from the French Union maliciously destroyed the pagoda before exiting Vietnam after the first Indochina War. The One Pillar was rebuilt soon after.

Truong, whose body of work predominantly consists of landscapes, has been sold in Sothebys Hong Kong on April 1 2019 for HKD 175,000.

LAXMAN PAI

STORYTELLER OF THE INDIAN HERITAGE

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Laxman Pai B. India, 1926
Untitled, 1972
Acrylic on canvas 84 x 125 cm

Laxman Pandharinath Pai is a contemporary Indian artist whose passion has been driven by Indian traditional designs, music, landscapes and beautiful beaches of his hometown, Goa. He is the recipient of several awards, including the Lalit Kala National Award. He was honoured by the government of Goa for his contributions in 1987 with the Nehru Award and Gomant Vibhushan in 2016, followed by the Padma Shri in 1985 by the government of India and Padma Bhushan in 2018.

The artist was born in Margao, Goa in 1926. Growing up in the lush landscape of Goa, the artist naturally gravitated to fine arts at a very early age and a recurring theme seen in his works. Pai started indulging in art at the age of 11, by colouring black and white photographs at his uncle, Mauzo's photo studio. The artist then moved to Mumbai, where he completed a formal art education

at the famed J.J. School of Art, where he was awarded the prestigious Mayo medal.

Soon after, Pai travelled to Paris where he studied etching and fresco alongside his contemporaries – F.N. Souza, Raza and Gaitonde. The artist's time in Paris shaped his artistic style. He spent a fruitful decade in Paris, evident by the multiple critically-appreciated exhibitions which were well-received by the international art community. He was inspired by Paul Klee, Joan Miro and Mark Chagall, and his style incorporated elements like angular simplification, flatness of pictorial surface and the use of expressive, rhythmical lines. Passionate attachment to his motherland prompted him to return to India and head the Goa College of Art (1977 to 1987). Pai also served on the executive board of Lalit Kala Academy and was a member of the Sangeet Natak Academy.

ARTISTIC STYLE

Pai's art is firmly rooted in Indian heritage, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, J. Krishnamurti, landscape, music, and Indian scriptures — Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita. As a nod to his constant muses, Indian classical music and the scriptures, the artist had devoted a series to each segment, respectively. Pai's art is characterised by graphic impressions of mundane themes and his life experiences, free from any commentary. His works are based on chance encounters or experiences that have impacted his life. His canvases are densely populated with nature in every aspect, along with human figures which are part of the environment. His works illustrate a juxtaposition of the traditional and modern. His earlier paintings were inspired by Egyptian sculptures, and Indian folk art. With time, the figures became more rounded with less geometry. By the sixties, his style had developed into semi-abstract forms, with a structural use of lines and painted in bold, vibrant colours. His paintings brought the spirit of the native into the modern Indian art realm.

EXHIBITIONS

Another accomplishment that Pai adds to his belt is the one-man shows that he has conducted over the globe, amounting to more than 110 shows. His solo exhibitions have been held in New York, San Francisco, London, Paris, Munich, Stuttgart, Hannover, Bremen, Singapore, New Delhi, Mumbai and Panaji to name a few. He has also participated in numerous biennials in Paris, Tokyo and Sao Paulo. The artist's works have garnered liking and following, subsequently making their way to the halls of various public and private collections, including Museum of Modern Art in Paris, New York Public Library, Berlin Museum, Ben and Abbey Grey Foundation (USA), and National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Nagpur.