

CHEN WEN HSI

LIVELY DEPICTIONS OF NATURE AND ANIMALS

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Chen Wen Hsi B. Singapore 1906-1991
Herons
Ink on Paper 64 x 75 cm

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

Heavily influenced by traditional Chinese paintings and early Cubist works of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, Chen created his own repertoire and identity, which later became his trademark. In the span of 1923 to 1992, Chen had conducted 38 one-man exhibitions within Singapore and in 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 and 1936). It was not until 1937 that he was acknowledged for his talent and received praises 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 paintings, Chen journeyed from China to Cholon, Vietnam via an oil tanker, to start what became a tour of exhibitions 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 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 taught 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 in Singapore's art culture. This group of four later showcased 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 Singapore's art scene, heralding the introduction of the 'Nanyang' style of painting.

In 1964, Chen was honoured with the award, Public Service Star of Singapore. In



Chen Wen Hsi B. Singapore 1906-1991
Gold Fish
Ink on paper 43 cm

The 'Circular Painting with Fish' and 'Herons in Weeds' are lively depictions captured from Chen's life studies of these animals' movements and behaviours. The herons are coloured ever so delicately, framed by weeds and a body of water indicates yet again, the eloquence of the maestro's technique. The angularity of the herons' bodies and necks allude to their agile movements and elegance. Indeed Chen's ability to configure these overlapping shapes of broad strokes point to the artist's early interest in Cubism.

The circular painting depicting goldfish is a classic representation of Chinese classical painting. The employment of a subtle palette promotes elegance and charm to it. One can easily get lost in these stunning works. Chen's works are no stranger to reputable auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's and have fetched astounding prices.

1968, the artist retires from active teaching to concentrate primarily on painting. Some years later, Chen opened his first gallery at the 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 dies at the age of 85 on Dec 17, 1991. He had been suffering from an abdominal tumour and passed away within a year of being diagnosed. He was survived by his wife Huang Jingzhuang and three sons, Chen Siew Yui, Chen Siew Mins and Chen Siew Hong.

ARTISTIC PROWESS

Chen, who was adept at both traditional Chinese ink and Western oil painting translated his niche onto canvas. His Western-style works in the early 1950's were realistic depictions infused with post-impressionistic 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. Hence, his other popular subjects included landscapes, figures, herons, gibbons, goldfish 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.

Chen received an honorary Doctor of Letters from then President Benjamin Sheares in 1975 and was the first Singaporean artist to be awarded with the Golden Chapter gold medal 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.

ARTWORK REFERENCES:

1. Christie's 20th Century & Contemporary Art, 26 May 2019

Chen Wen Hsi
Herons in the Reed
Ink and colour on paper
57cm x 67 cm
Estimate: HKD 150,000 - 250,000
(RM84,398 - RM140,663)
Sold For: HKD 275,000 (RM154,718)

2. Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, 1 April 2019

Chen Wen Hsi
Herons
Ink and colour on paper
113cm x 57 cm
Estimate HKD 160,000 - 250,000
(RM90,009 - RM140,648)
Sold For: HKD 250,000 (RM140,648)

3. Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art – Day Sale, 1 October 2017

Chen Wen Hsi
Goldfish
Ink and colour on paper
67cm x 43cm
Estimate: HKD 100,000 - 150,000
(RM56,261 - RM84,396)
Sold For: HKD 125,000 (RM70,330)

DATUK SHARIFAH FATIMAH SYED ZUBIR

VIBRANT AND VIVACIOUS PAINTINGS

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, Dato' B. Kedah, 1958
Song of Songs 2, 1998
Acrylic on canvas 136 x 120 cm
SOLD RM 64,960
KLAS Art Auction 1 March 2020

There's much exuberance and vibrance emitted by Datuk Sharifah Fatimah's works. Born in Alor Setar in 1948, Sharifah Fatimah is an important second-generation artist alongside Latiff Mohidin, Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal and Dr Choong Kam Kow. Her love affair with nature started at the tender age of five, which became a revolving theme in most of her artworks.

Sharifah Fatimah pursued an education in fine arts at the Mara Institute of Technology (now UiTM), under the tutelage of Dr Jolly Koh and Dr Choong Kam Kow. Thereafter, she continued her education for the Bachelor of Fine Arts at Reading University in England from 1973 to 1976, followed by a masters degree in Fine Arts at Pratt Institute in New York from 1976 to 1978, under the John D. Rockefeller III Fund.

HER MUSES

Besides the wondrous muse that is nature, Sharifah Fatimah also found inspiration through many artists that she met throughout her career, such as National Art Laureate Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal and her closest peer, German fine graphic artist Ilse Noor. Her travels and the serendipitous encounter with things off the beaten track and new experiences invigorated the artist. She has always sought out the quiet romance of Europe and revelled in its vibrant energy which she would translate onto canvas.

HER ACCOLADES

Sharifah Fatimah has numerous awards under her belt, including the Minor Award in the Malaysian Landscape competition (1972), Major Award in the Young Contemporary Artists (1981), Major Award in the Salon Malaysia (1979), and 3rd Prize in the Islamic World Biennial in Tehran, Iran (2003). She was conferred Datukship by the Sultan of Kedah in 2006 — the first woman to be awarded for her contributions to visual arts and received the Women of Excellence Award Malaysia for outstanding achievements in Arts, Culture and Entertainment in 2014. Sharifah Fatimah's first official solo exhibition was at Singapore's Alpha Gallery in 1972,

while her last major exhibition, 'Song of Eucalyptus' was at the Sugars Art Centre in Kuala Lumpur, from Sept 5 to Oct 31, 2017.

HER ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER AND EXPERIENCE

The artist took on a museum management course at the University of London in 1987 to diversify her skills. Sharifah Fatimah forayed into this realm while holding the position of curator-coordinator at the National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur (National Visual Arts Gallery now) from 1982 to 1990. During her stint at the gallery, she curated Ibrahim Hussein's exhibition, 'A Retrospective'. This however, diverted her from her destiny — art. She followed her passion, bid adieu to the office profession to become a full time artist and art consultant. She went on to become a writer, delegate, judge, external examiner and curator in numerous high-profile exhibitions at home and abroad.

The paintings of Sharifah Fatimah and her stature were formidably established when the pieces were hung on the hallowed walls of renowned institutions and museums including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Jordan National Art Gallery of Fine Arts; Museum of Contemporary Art, Croatia; Sharjah Art Museum, United Arab Emirates; and Singapore Art Museum. The artist's fervour for the craft and hard work was given due recognition in 2013 when the National Art Gallery held an exhibition in her honour entitled, 'Pancawarna Karya Pilihan 1990-2012 Selected Artworks', illustrating 100 works from five of her main series, namely Touch the Earth (1992-1996), Mindscape (1991-1993), Joy is the Theme (1997-2003), Garden of the Heart (2005-2011) and Celebration (2010-2012).

HER ARTWORKS

Sharifah Fatimah's works exhibit contagious energy. As she relishes in various inspirations, she brilliantly puts it across her paintings. She exhibits the true matters of the heart, mind and soul, how the thought processes are never muted



Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, Dato' B. Kedah, 1958
Mindscape - The Link, 1993
Acrylic on canvas 123 x 123 cm
SOLD RM 40,579.20
KLAS Art Auction 26 June 2016

and never silent, always showing their garish colours deep within. Each piece varies in terms of aesthetics, but shares a similar foundation that resonates vibrancy, liveliness and vivacity. It is executed in her typical exaggerated, loud and contrasting colours, featuring daring streaks, blocks and lines to beautifully frame the bold-coloured fragments and shapes. The differing elements and hues in her pieces are discourses between man and nature, representing the elements that make up flora and fauna, her eternal muse. Not one to shy away from colours, the artist's works are often described as lyrically symbolic featuring a myriad of colours.

ARTWORK REFERENCES

1. Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, 1 April 2019

Sharifah Fatimah
Standing Forms
Acrylic on canvas 120 x 100 cm
Estimate: HKD 60,000 - 90,000
Sold For: HKD, 75,000

2. Henry Butcher's Malaysian and Southeast Asian Art, 29 April 2018

Sharifah Fatimah
Celebration 3, 1997
Acrylic on canvas 84 x 71 cm
Estimate: RM 16,000 - RM 30,000
Sold for: RM44,800

RAFIEE GHANI

A GARDEN OF NOSTALGIA

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Rafiee Ghani B. Kedah, 1962
Wetlands I, 1995
Oil on canvas 129.5 x 138 cm
SOLD RM 20,064.16
KLAS Art Auction 26 June 2016

Rafiee Ghani's artworks are as colourful as he is. Born in Kulim, Kedah in 1962, Rafiee Ghani is one of Malaysia's most prominent artists. He began his education in art at the prestigious De Virge Academie Voor Bildeende Kunst at the Hague in the Netherlands before continuing his studies at the Institut Teknologi MARA in Dungun. Much of his muse and

exposure to art began in Europe, where he visited all the great art spaces and museums. Consequently, Rafiee drew his inspirations through old masters like Vincent Van Gogh and Henri Matisse and their works.

Rafiee has been actively involved in shows in both private and public galleries and art spaces around the world. His works have

been collected by major corporations both within and outside of Malaysia that include Bank Negara Malaysia, Petronas Gallery, Dynasty Hotel, Bank Utama, Malaysian Tobacco Company as well as Oriental Bank. His works are also in the collection of Mr Albert Rene, the President of the Seychelles and several private collections in the United States, Europe and Asia.



Rafiee Ghani B. Kedah, 1962
Blue Chair and Blue Table, 1995
Mixed media on canvas 129 x 138 cm
SOLD RM 19,800
KLAS Art Auction 7 April 2013



Rafiee Ghani B. Kedah, 1962
The Garden Outside
Oil on canvas 132 x 97 cm
SOLD RM 14,560
KLAS Art Auction 18 November 2018

Rafiee Ghani B. Kedah, 1962
Dream, 1996
Oil on canvas 100.5 x 138.5 cm
SOLD RM 16,908.00
KLAS Art Auction 24 April 2016

ARTISTIC PROWESS

Rafiee is known in the local fine arts sphere for his lyrical abstract and contemporary paintings, notably his oil paintings. His artworks aren't easy to miss for its loud, dynamic use of colours and strokes that make his style particularly distinctive and emotive. For Rafiee, aesthetics is an important part of his paintings — this is where balance and compositions are utilised to their fullest potential, often producing artworks that are artistic and pleasing for the eyes.

The artist was formally trained in the arts and techniques of print-making but it is his mastery in oil painting which sets him apart from other artists. He is known to fully utilise the limited use of colours known in printmaking techniques. The artist also creates an imaginary illusion of objects and images by overlaying them with colours which are vibrantly mixed and integrated.

Rafiee's Garden series, is brilliant and every artwork from the series is a bold and vivid

spectacle of colours. The inspiration for this series is derived from the artist's hometown in Kelantan — his favourite place to be in as a child. This included swimming in the river with other children after school. Instimism remains prominent throughout his pieces. The bold strokes of colour was his way of conveying the brilliance of the local forest filled with natural colours to delight and excite. Rafiee's garden works evoke nostalgia, longing, tranquility and optimism.