

# ABDULLAH ARIFF

## A PIONEER'S LEGACY

BY AGNES AUI



Mr Abdullah Ariff at his desk at then Anglo-Chinese School



This watercolour on soft board mural was painted in 1951 by the students of the Art Club at Methodist Boys School (MBS). The mural spans up to 7.3 metres long and was conceptualised, sketched and supervised by Malaysia's pioneer artist, Abdullah Ariff.

The inimitable Abdullah Ariff was born on June 15, 1904 in Georgetown, Penang. He was a self-taught artist and an instructor of the Penang Impressionists in 1898 — an exclusive group of expatriate artists. The members of this group were the wives of Europeans and a few local members such as Mrs. Lim Cheng Kung, who was accepted due to her patronage. The artist was a pioneer of watercolour art in Malaysia together with Yong Mun Sen. Renowned for his meticulous and masterful handling of the watercolour medium, Abdullah employed a European technique and approach to his work compared to his contemporary, Yong Mun Sen.

Despite his young age, Abdullah was accepted in the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), Penang at a mere nine years old and managed to pass his Senior Cambridge in 1925. Due to his educational background and enthusiasm in art, he was accepted by Rev. G. F. Pykett and later on hired as an art teacher at the ACS. This was no easy feat as Western education was not easily available to non-aristocratic Malays and art education was not encouraged by the British in Malaya. He was later promoted to Supervisor of Art until the Japanese Occupation in 1941.

By the 1930s, Abdullah was making a name for himself as a Western-style painter in the annual art shows organised by the Penang Impressionists. As an impressionist, he felt obliged to adopt the quick touches of the brush strokes, often squeezing the paint directly from the tube, but the smudges of paint on the canvas and delaying the process of the oil paint discouraged him from using this medium. During this time, he experimented with various mediums like linoleum print, oil paint and watercolour. However, the artist found that the use of water colour suited him most and he earned his international fame in this medium. His

favourite subjects were rural scenes and landscapes as well as plants and human figures.

Abdullah taught art at the Pykett Methodist School in Burmah Road and served as an instructor of the ACS Art Club from 1932 to 1941. In 1945, headed out to Kuala Lumpur where he began working with The Straits Echo as a cartoonist and subsequently became active in politics. He continued to work

on his art where he participated in the 'United Society of Artists' group show in 1955 at the Royal Society of British Artists galleries in London. He passed away in 1962, leaving a legacy of excellent watercolours. Some of his paintings have been duplicated, and some can be seen on the wall behind now SMK (L) Methodist's (MBS) school office. A corner dubbed 'Sudut Abdullah Ariff' was devoted to the artist and his works at the school.

In 2006, an exhibition and art catalogue entitled Father of Modern Art in Malaysia by Zakaria Ali was held and published by the National Art Gallery. Abdullah was accorded as one of the important early 20th century artists in Malaysia at the same exhibition. Such exhibition was important in reappraising his works 56 years after his death. So much was his contribution to society that there is a road in Penang named Jalan Abdullah Ariff.



*This mural depicts the country's traditional professions during that era and aims to instill diversity in the current MBS students. Today, the mural hangs in the school's Heritage Centre and can be viewed by appointment.*



Everflowing Water, 1960  
Watercolour on paper  
30.5 x 25.5 cm  
Private collection of Mr & Mrs Siew Hon Hoong

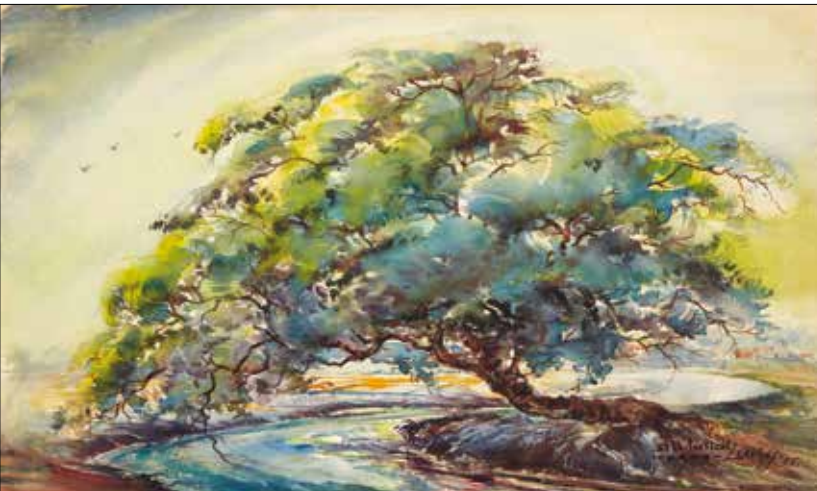
*In 1954, Abdullah befriended Siew Hon Hoong, a first-year general subjects teacher who was given the task to teach Christian religious knowledge. At first, the two regularly argued about having different opinions on religions. But over time, Siew began to understand Islam and soon became best friends with Abdullah. On Siew's wedding day, Abdullah painted the "Everflowing Water" and gifted it to Siew and his wife on March 13, 1960. Till today, the painting hangs in the couple's comfortable home.*



**Abdullah Ariff**  
Misty, 1954  
Watercolour on paper  
34.5 x 52.5 cm  
**SOLD - RM 44,000**



**Abdullah Ariff**  
Destination, 1950  
Watercolour on paper  
34.5 x 52.5 cm  
**SOLD - RM 55,000**



**Abdullah Ariff**  
Tree by a River, 1955  
Watercolour on paper 33 x 56 cm  
**SOLD - RM 57,120**

## MEMORIES OF ABDULLAH ARIFF AT METHODIST BOYS SCHOOL (MBS)

Abdullah was not only known nationwide and throughout the world, but he was also respected at the Methodist Boys School (MBS) in Penang. MBS was once known as Anglo-Chinese School (ACS), which was where Abdullah graduated from and later served there as an art teacher. Many of his students have recollected memories of Abdullah, and said that he was patient and kind when it came to teaching. He also imparted his skills in watercolour painting to many of his students.

During his time as an art teacher at MBS, he supervised the art club and helped students produce many watercolour paintings on soft board - including the famous 7.3m long mural that was produced in 1951, depicting the country's traditional professions during that era. Abdullah Ariff helped conceive, sketch and supervise while students from the art club painted it. He also supervised the art club to produce six pairs of half moon soft board paintings with biblical meanings, proving how the school came together during the time despite race and religion.

With the school's 130th Anniversary set to come in 2021, MBS aims to celebrate diversity - one that could evidently be seen in the friendship of Abdullah and Siew, alongside the diverse mix of students in MBS. In the anniversary celebration next year, Abdullah's duplicated works will be displayed at the Alumni's Art and Photography Exhibition. The murals which he helped supervise will also remain displayed in the school's Heritage Centre. Abdullah had earned the title, 'Father of Watercolour', throughout the school and even throughout Malaysia, but the notable thing about Abdullah was his contribution to the school's diversity for decades. And this memory of Abdullah Ariff in MBS will live for generations to come.