



CHUA MIA TEE

SINGAPORE'S VENERABLE REALIST PAINTER

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

Chua Mia Tee, one of Singapore's venerable realist painters, was born on Nov 25, 1931 in Shantou, Guangdong, China. This highly sought-after portrait artist had produced works of prominent businessmen and politicians in Singapore. He is also widely recognised for his works in oil that illustrate Singapore's vanishing traditional urban landscape. The "National Language Class" (1959) and "Workers in the Canteen" (1974) are two of his off-discussed works.

EARLY LIFE

Chua was only six years old when he and his family fled from the Sino-Japanese war that took place in China and landed in Singapore in 1937. He enrolled in Shuqun Primary School and later, Tuan Mong School. In 1947, the artist enrolled in Chung Cheng High School but left the school mid-term to pursue formal education in art at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA).

EDUCATION IN ART

As a young boy, Chua displayed a budding interest in art, dabbling in painting and sketching. His interest was well-received and supported by his father, who was also an artist. At NAFA, Chua's artistic talent was nurtured and developed as he received training in drawing, sketching with watercolour and painting in various mediums including oil on canvas, Chinese ink and colours

on paper. He studied under the tutelage of the academy's director, Lim Hak Tai himself as well as celebrated artists Cheong Soo Pieng, Koh Tong Leong and See Hiang To. This was also where Chua experimented with modelling using plasticine and plaster of Paris in his own time. He graduated from NAFA in 1952.

CAREER

Chua's inherent talent for art was recognised early on. While studying in NAFA, he was asked to teach part-time at the school, where he continued to teach as a full-time staff after graduation. In 1954, Chua went back to Chung Cheng High School to complete his secondary education. And thereafter, returned to his alma mater, NAFA to teach from 1956 to 1957.

Between 1957 and 1974, Chua practised his skills in the field of commercial art starting with his first job at the Shanghai Book Company where he worked as a book illustrator (1957–60). Following that stint, he worked with Grant Advertising International as a designer and illustrator, creating figure drawings for advertisements and comic strips from 1960 to 1965. He returned to book illustration in 1965 when Times Organisation's Federal Publication hired him as an illustrator and designer of books. He stayed with Times until 1974.

The year 1974 was a turning point for Chua's artistic career. At the age of 43, he staged his maiden exhibition at the Rising Gallery on Telok Ayer Street, which saw tremendous success and this gave him the confidence to become a full-time artist.

HIS OEUVRE

Chua's muse and subjects for his paintings came from his surroundings. Having spent his childhood in Chinatown and along Singapore River, it was natural that many of Chua's early works feature the traditional landscapes and life in Singapore that were disappearing as a result of urban redevelopment. He had a way of capturing the heart of these

places, but also the unbeatable spirit of the people living and working there. Chua once said that, as an artist, he saw the urgency to document these scenes before they vanished from Singapore's cityscape.

A handful of Chua's early paintings also depict the nationalistic concerns of the people in Singapore during the 1950's and '60s. Paintings like "Epic Poem of Malaya" (1955) and "National Language Class" (1959) conveyed the heightened sense of political and social awareness prevalent during those times. The artist brilliantly chronicled Singapore's significant and historic moments, including the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's return from London after the Merdeka talks; the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong; and Singapore's ministers and members of parliament during the parliamentary sessions. His portrait of the late President Yusof Ishak also appeared on Singapore portrait-series currency notes. Noted for his portraits, Chua had also been called upon to paint illustrious personalities such as former Chief Justice Wee Chong Jin, former deputy Chairman of Singapore Airlines Lim Chin Beng and Singaporean billionaire Wee Cho Yaw.

Chua's oeuvre is one that captures realism because he believes it reflects life. His works showcase his keen eye for details and an understanding of light and shadows. To Chua, realistic art is not merely about transferring what the artist sees onto canvas, but also the artist's ability to sublimate the essence of a subject and present its beauty — what he refers to as "an organic combination of its universal characters, and a blending of reality with art". He has cited Xu Beihong, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt as artists who inspired him.

The artist's preferred medium is oil, which he described as the most competent and perfect medium for capturing details on canvas. Although he paints en plein air, most of his pieces are actually refined and completed in the studio. He also paints from his memories of local places and people. Occasionally, Chua uses photographic aids to recall details or as substitutes for clients who are unable to turn

ARTWORK REFERENCES:

- Christie's 20th Century & Contemporary Art Live Auction, 26 May 2019, Hong Kong**
Chua Mia Tee
Temple Street (Singapore Chinatown)
Estimate: 120,000 - 180,000 HKD
Sold: 162,500 HKD
- Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, 4 April 2016, Hong Kong**
Chua Mia Tee
Wall Carving
Estimate: 40,000 - 60,000 HKD
Sold: 31,250 HKD

up for portrait sittings. Besides oil, Chua also employs various mediums including acrylic, mixed media, watercolour, bronze and relief. One of his best-known sculptures is a portrait bust of Zubir Said, who gained recognition as the composer of the Singapore national anthem.

Since the late 1970's, Chua travelled the world over including Hong Kong, Bali, Java, Spain and Italy to paint and draw. These trips helped him gain fresh insight to improve his practice. Chua exhibited in Singapore and internationally, in countries such as Belgium, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia and Thailand. Besides that, Chua has taken on roles such as professional consultant to the NAFA Alumni Association and chairman of the Editorial Board of Nanyang Arts magazine. He is a life member of the Singapore Arts Society and the NAFA Alumni Association.

In 2015, Chua was conferred the Cultural Medallion, a national honour that recognises his artistic contributions to Singapore. The National Gallery's inaugural exhibition, "Siapa Nama Kamu?", derived its title from Chua Mia Tee's iconic painting, "National Language Class". In 2018, a book entitled, 'The Art Of Chua Mia Tee: A Portrait Of A Life's Work' was launched by the National Gallery Singapore, where more than 300 of his works were featured in the comprehensive book, highlighting the artist's oeuvre.