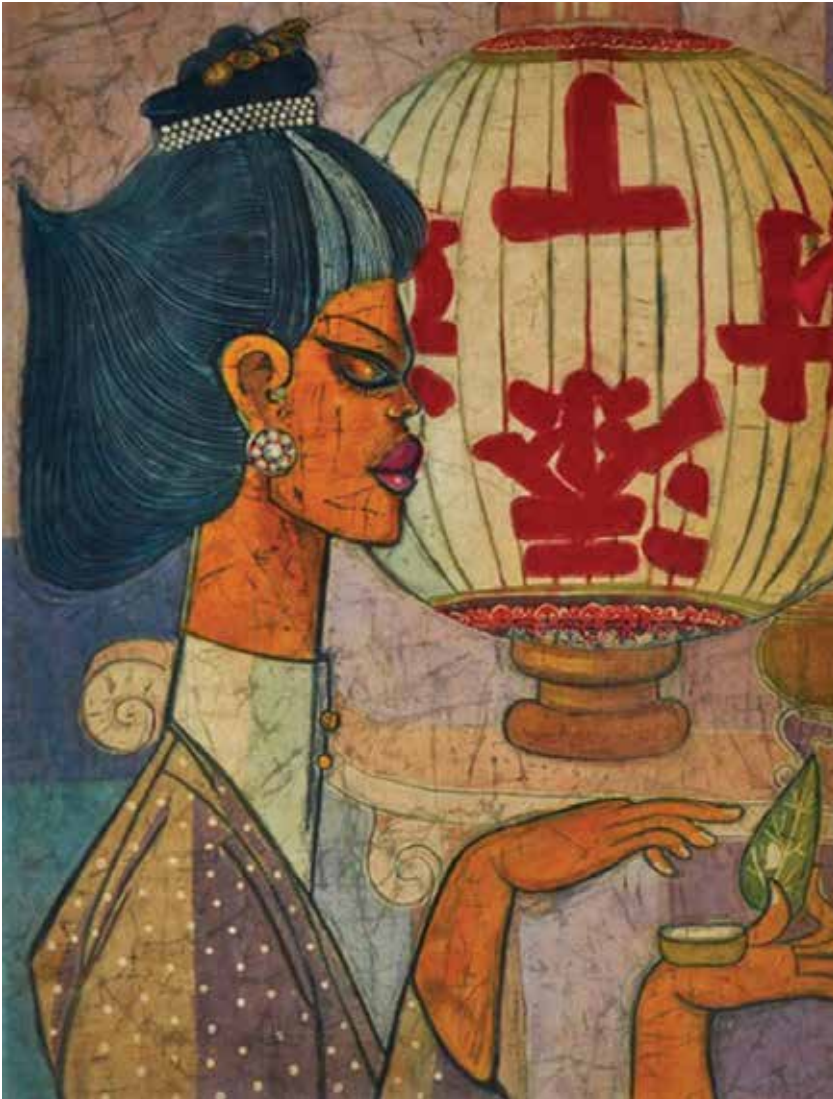


ECHOES OF THE PAST

A TWO MAN SHOW @ KLAS BY CHUAH THEAN TENG & KWAN CHIN

BY HIRANMAYI AWLI MOHANAN



Girl With a Lantern, 1970s
Batik 58 x 43 cm
KLAS Art Auction 8 November 2015

BATIK MEDIUM

Batik is an art form of its own. While the exact origin of batik is unknown, it is widely common on the island of Java, Indonesia. It is believed that when the art of batik was first practised in Java,

it only belonged to royal families and the wealthy. Batik traces back to the Middle East, Central Asia and India, to over 2,000 years ago. The notion of decorating fabric with a dye-resistant

compound such as wax, resin or rice paper, according to archeological findings points to Egypt and the Middle East during the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. It is possible that these areas developed independently, without the influence of trade or cultural exchanges. However, it is more likely that the craft spread from Asia to the islands of the Malay Archipelago and west to the Middle East along the caravan trading route.

ECHOES OF THE PAST

In Malaysia, the batik tradition had been mainly rooted in traditional sarongs, identified with the East Coast. Documentation of batik production in Kelantan dates back to the 1920's, with hints of Javanese influence. By the 1950's, when Malaysia developed its own batik identity, it was embraced across all cultural backgrounds.

KLAS will proudly be highlighting the works by two prominent Malaysian batik maestros — the late Datuk Chuah Thean Teng and Kwan Chin. Both artists, while differing in generation and approach to batik, have a penchant for capturing Malaysia's rural scenes. Their works are the embodiment of nostalgia and the simple life. Through their works, the artists unveiled the treasure trove of the dying art techniques and the laborious traditional method of producing batik art.

CHUAH THEAN TENG

Teng came from an artistic family (his mother designed shoes) and studied art at the Amoy Art Institute in Fukien Province, China. At the age of 18, he emigrated to Malaysia with his tradesman father and settled in the Pearl of the Orient. From helping his mother design dainty shoes

for Chinese women with bound feet to becoming a pioneer of Malaysian batik painting, Teng has left quite the legacy in batik painting. His interest in art and craft was certainly owed to his mother.

During World War II, the artist moved to Indonesia to work at his uncle's batik factory. Burning with enthusiasm, he eventually returned to Penang and started his own batik business. It was an ill-fated venture as he could not compete with cheap Indonesian imports and was forced to close down after one year. Teng became interested in batik while teaching art in the 1930's.

While he had established himself as a painter, his enduring spirit propelled him to develop an artistic discipline that was distinctively Malaysian. Though trained in Chinese art, brush painting was too oriental, while the watercolour and oils were too Western for the artist. Therefore, with the large and unused stock of pigments, Teng started to experiment with this material and adapted this age-old craft as a medium for fine art. A pioneer in this medium, he had to literally work from scratch — the process was long and tedious.

Teng's pursuit of his passion in art was mainly self-taught, and he drew inspiration from the local rustic scenes of colonial Malaya, capturing them in woodcut prints. He signed his artwork, which comprised sketches, cartoons, comic strips, oil paintings, watercolours, Chinese brush paintings and even pastels, with the pseudonym Choo Ting.

Although batik painting has been around for hundreds of years, it is remarkable that no one in Malaysia before Teng had ever thought of adapting this age-old craft as a medium of fine art. His artistic proclivities include landscapes, people and even animals, often a cultural education of the way of life in a particular community, their relationships and beliefs.

TENG'S EARLY BATIK WORKS

Instead of carrying on a classical Chinese style, Chuah captured the vibrant, brilliant colours of the Malay culture of his adopted country.



The Paddy Farmer, 1980
Batik 68 X 41 cm
KLAS Art Auction 12 July 2020

Known as the Father of Batik Painting in Malaysia, Teng earned his stripes from his use of batik as a medium of fine art since 1953. The artist was at the helm of batik renaissance in Malaysia — a new approach to a timeless medium. Painting by the batik method germinated from his own idea and determination. The possibilities of batik painting as a fine art were a revelation, but equally remarkable was the revolution which occurred in Teng's own approach to art. His style of painting was very much influenced by Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin and that translated onto his works.

An exceptional and distinctive quality of Teng's works was that he filled every space and surface with layers of registers or lines upon which the images are standing, sitting or carefully arranged with symbols. These pieces are uniquely stylised and symbolic, hence their allure. The artist had conceived the idea of making pictures in batik — not just decorative designs, but large and frequently complex figure compositions. Some of Teng's early batik works embodied cork colours that also acted as an embalming shadow with figures all around etched out by lines that dovetail the batik cracking technique.

His productivity in batik painting was enormous, but even more incredible is the high standard and quality of his work. Never satisfied, he was always experimenting, seeking to give new depth and range to his batik art. Cubism, realism, impressionism, abstracts — he changed about and essayed them all. No matter what style he chose, the result in batik was always indelibly and individually Teng.

The year was 1955 when Teng showed his work to Patricia Lim of the Penang Library who was so impressed that she organised a one-man show for him that September at the premises of the Penang Art Council. It was a raging success. He took Singapore by storm with a hundred of his works, presented by the Art Society — the leading art group in Malaya at the time. There was no turning back for the artist as more exhibitions and accolades were lined up. He signed all his works with simply 'Teng' and that was to be the name acknowledged worldwide.

"Through his receptive eyes and masterly hands, Teng can show a rich vision of Malaysia to the world in his unique medium of batik art." — Frank Sullivan

It was 1956, when Frank Sullivan asked Teng how he managed to work out the concept and method of batik art. He answered that one day, in 1953, he was reflecting on a time when he had once worked in a batik factory in Indonesia. "Suddenly I thought to myself, as an artist, I can paint like this (gesturing with this right hand), as a batik craftsman, I can do good work like that. Then I asked myself, why can't I do both of them at once?", said Teng. That simple question was the beginning of a two year struggle to match his prowess as an artist with his skill as a batik maker.

In 1962, the National Art Gallery of Malaysia bestowed Teng with a rare, one-man exhibition, followed immediately by an European tour. His works were exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute of Art in England in 1959, 1965 and 1977.

TENG'S LANDSCAPES

When it comes to the artist's landscape works, there is an undeniable charm. His perceptive mind and keen eye saw the extraordinary in the ordinary which he translated brilliantly onto batik.

Everyday events that others are jaded with suddenly take on a new dimension and emotion; children playing, women toiling in the paddy fields, farm creatures, picturesque fishing villages, men at work, all sorts of homely scenes. His lines are bold and sure, his figures sometimes flat and one-dimensional and flooded with mystical graduations. Teng's landscape illustrations are simple, honest with no pretensions of grandeur and exhibit the subjects' daily antics.

His draftsmanship acquired sweep and rhythm; colours flared from his artwork. His themes opened up new vistas of Malaysian life, not only the scene but the people and all their daily activities. Women feeding chickens, children playing, farmers gathering the harvest — all warm human, simple and everyday subjects no other Malaysian artists seemed to have tackled with such relish before.

His paintings run the gamut from playful, touching, dramatic to personal and intimate. He hardly strayed from his beloved kampung scenes where he

spent so many happy hours and languid afternoons. It takes a true master to reflect affection, perception and empathy on his medium. Through his paintings depicting rustic scenes of Malaysian folks going about their simple way of life, Teng's works helped put Malaysian batik in the annals of batik history that could be traced as far back to the 8th century.

Some of Teng's artworks weaved elements that were truly Malaya, such as the Malay craft tradition and designs into his narrative with intimacy and camaraderie, which also highlights the beauty of the traditional Malay house. He hit the international limelight in 1967 when his penchant for capturing the charm and pleasure of rural, kampung life caught the eye of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

MOTHER AND CHILD

Mothers have always made wonderful subjects for artists, and each rendition beautifully depicts the bond between a mother and her child. Teng's Mother and Child series is a classic, universal motif and one that he adopted and perfected. Despite the expressions on the mother and child subjects, there is an endearing quality to the renditions, each executed in style that is distinctively Teng. The artist employed a myriad of soothing tones to the works to symbolise the transcending quality of a mother's love. The subjects portrayed differ with each artwork,



Malay Ladies in a Village, 1980s
Batik 91 x 63 cm
KLAS Art Auction 24 February 2019

mostly in a loving embrace and filled with warmth. The crackling effect in the background was the result of Teng's tie-dye technique with waxed cloth. He allowed the wax to crack and for the dye to seep through to obtain the crackling effect which set off against the figures well.

Armed with an artist's sensitivity, Chuah became fascinated by the sight of the locals clad in a sarong and the designs — something not seen in his homeland.



Village Scene
Batik 45 x 119 cm
KLAS Art Auction 6 September 2020



Mother and Children, 1990's
Batik 92 x 61
KLAS Art Auction 18 November 2020

He was also inspired to try painting in the style that would eventually be his lifelong passion. He was famed and credited for finding an entirely new and immediately convincing method of pictorial expression — a rare methodology. This birthed batik works that were distinctively his.

“Art is the vision of the artist, his creation, imagination and expressions reflecting the artist’s many degrees of feeling. It is an interplay of both emotional and visual expressions where the illusions created convey the statements across. And through the different modes of expression, we are compelled to seek some standard of value to enable us to distinguish between them. This distinction is called the transformation of things.” – Datuk Chuah Thean Teng.

Teng passed away on Nov 25 2008, a few months before the opening of his retrospective at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. His paintings are treasured and coveted to this very day, as it captures and records a moment in time, above and beyond the sense of nostalgia with distinctive scenes of pastoral kampung life and its people about their day.



A woman in love, 1998
Batik 74 x 74 cm

KWAN CHIN

Born in 1946, in Kepong, Kwan Chin studied at the prestigious Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. Upon his return to the then Malaya, a stint as a commercial artist in an advertising firm followed. But a brief introduction to batik by his good friend and Singaporean artist Tien Soong sparked his interest and he quickly turned to batik art, which he became very famous for.

BATIK WORKS

Kwan Chin is one of the remaining few Malaysian artists who produced batik masterpieces in the traditional methods to depict life in the villages of Malaysia and immerses in the subject and its beauty on canvas. The artist’s oeuvre was using a bright atmosphere with excellent contrast

of colours. Through his works, the artist unveils the treasure trove of dying arts and techniques used, from the beautiful strokes in bringing abstract figures to life to the laborious traditional methods of producing batik art.



Going Home, 2011
Batik 45 x 54 cm
KLAS Art Auction 23 October 2016



Market Scene, 1970s
 Batik 53.5 x 152.5 cm
 KLAS Art Auction 30 September 2012

Kwan Chin's paintings possess a strong cultural identity, employing various batik techniques using tjanting, wax and dyes to create dots, floral motifs and his signature crackling effect as the background. The 'crackled' effect in the artist's backgrounds was achieved by wrinkling the waxed fabric, allowing the dye to seep into intricate patterns along the cracks. While purist batik artists immersed their wax paintings completely in dye baths, Kwan Chin opted to apply dye with a brush, to achieve greater technical control.

Armed with knowledge in the use of charcoal, oil and watercolour from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, the artist uses a batik-upon-batik method — a repeated process of waxing and dyeing. The result is a see-through effect with a conspicuous background and overlapping colours. The colours of his artworks are well contained within the outline he draws, leaving no space for smudges. Vividly-coloured batik paintings that depict scenes of Malaysian life were his specialty, and collectors all over the world typically have a copy of Kwan Chin's artworks.



Playing, 1970s
 Batik 65 x 48 cm
 KLAS Art Auction 23 October 2016



A Family, 2011
Batik 26 x 27.5 cm



Working Day - Blue Series, 2012
Batik 76 x 76 cm
KLAS Art Auction 7 April 2013

His themes are forthright and uncomplicated, no intricacies or hidden messages behind this — stunningly executed and a visual treat. The only complication in his technique is executing it, from the laborious task of producing batik material from scratch to the detailing of the figures and scenery to the colours painted on them. Before Kwan Chin's 'Rubber Tapper' thrust him and his works to fame in the 1970's, his works were popular among tourists in Kuala Lumpur, where he began to exhibit in 1969. He seemed to have an understanding of what art aficionados were looking for in an art piece — he offered them with highly decorative paintings, combining commendable artistic prowess with a great sense of Malaysian life as it was during that period.

KWAN CHIN'S LANDSCAPES

Kwan Chin had a penchant for the Malaysian country life, settings and people. He captured scenes such as wayang kulit (puppet shows), activities of the Malaysian wet markets, the shoreline with the fishermen, the farmers with fruits, family lives and the likes. He reflected a true Malaysian artist who applied cubism and geometric forms in some of the figures.

Kwan Chin gave a different dimension to art in applying broken lines on canvas to give an impression of batik art. The lines and details of the batik are very clear and evident, proving to the viewers how much of an expert Kwan Chin was with his detailing when it came to batik. The lovely display of colours that becomes a batik work sets a cheerful, charming, nostalgic and tranquil mood for the viewer, at the same time showcasing the complexity of batik-making.

"Yes, I have won some awards for my work but I have no dreams that my paintings will hang in museums after my death. I am content to make a reasonable living doing something I enjoy," Kwan Chin said in the Asia Magazine, April 17, 1977 issue.

In contrast to his statement in 1977, Kwan Chin's batik paintings have been exhibited locally and internationally, and can be seen in the permanent collections of Bank Negara Malaysia, National Art Gallery Malaysia, Penang Batik Painting Museum, other major private institutions as well as private collectors both in Malaysia and Singapore.

In 2013, Kwan Chin's artworks were included in Matrade's London exhibition as part of its music and food promotions, and a Malaysian exhibition on the fringe of Art Basel Miami in the United States in 2013.

Art aficionados can look forward to a special two-man exhibition entitled, 'Echoes of the Past' that will feature masterpieces by the pioneer of batik painting, Datuk Chuah Thean Teng and maestro Kwan Chin. This exhibition will be held at KL Lifestyle Art Space (KLAS) in June 2021.

Venue : KLAS located at 31, Jalan Utara, Petaling Jaya, 47300 Selangor