

ECHOES OF THE PAST

A THREE-MAN EXHIBITION BY LATE BATIK MESTROS
DATUK CHUAH THEAN TENG, KWAN CHIN AND KHALIL IBRAHIM

EXHIBITION FROM NOVEMBER 30, 2021 - JANUARY 3, 2022

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 be proudly highlighting the works by three prominent Malaysian batik maestros — the late Datuk Chuah Then Teng Khalil Ibrahim and Kwan Chin. These 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. 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



Chuah Thean Teng
Girl With a Lantern, 1970s
Batik 58 x 43 cm

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. 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. 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.

"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

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 subjects portrayed differ with each artwork, 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.

"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



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

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.

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.

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



Market Scene, 1979
53.5 x 152.5 cm

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.

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 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

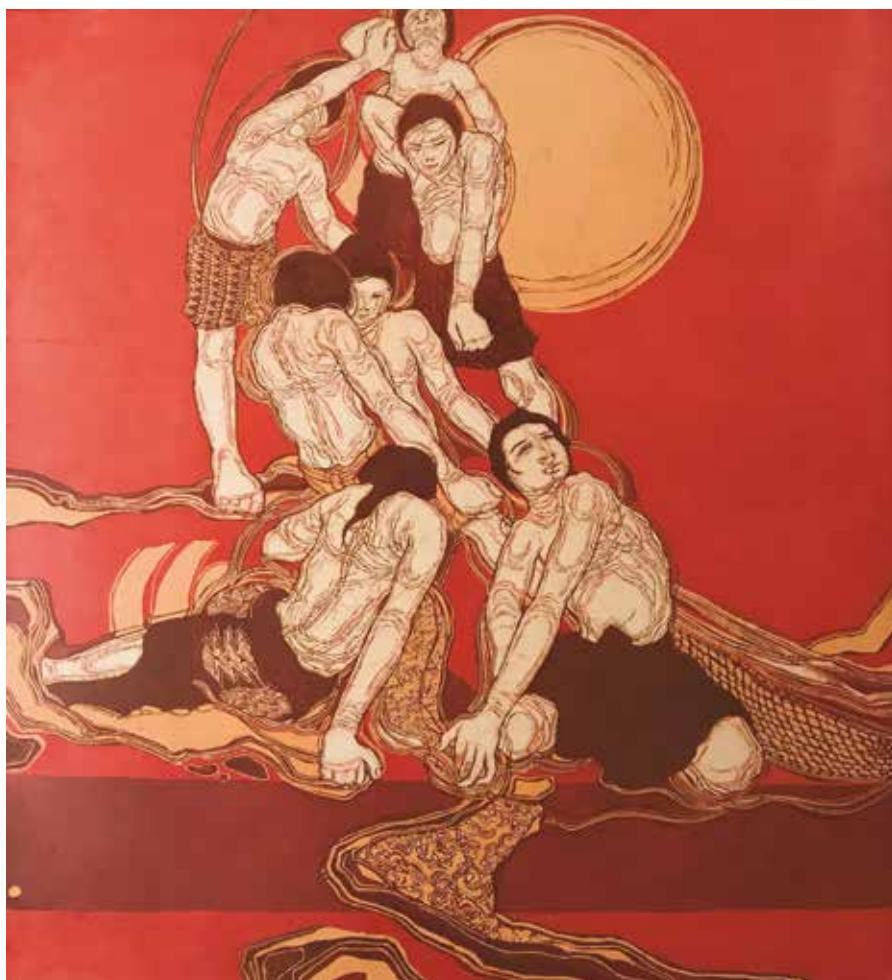


Kwan Chin
A Cattleman I
Batik 76 x 76 cm

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.



Khalil Ibrahim
East Coast Figures - Movement in Red, 1975
Batik 92 x 80 cm

KHALIL IBRAHIM

Described by KLAS as Malaysia's Father of Figurative Painting, the late Khalil Ibrahim was born in 1934 in Kubang Kerian Kelantan. He was one of the earliest Malaysians who receive a full state scholarship in 1960 to study art at the prestigious Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London. His masterful skills in drawing, watercolour and acrylic, were styles that moved from the almost real to the almost abstract. Khalil's rich Malay culture from the East Coast and the discipline of Islamic values that he learnt at the Pondok school shaped his primordial artistic journey. These values stuck by him which then merged with the freedom of expression that he encountered later through his formal art education at St. Martins in London. Though he did not receive any formal art education during the early years in Kelantan, Khalil's awareness to



East Coast Series, 1970's
Batik 87x 70 cm

the modern art was cultivated through the means of colonialism and the experiences of pioneering artists from the Nanyang Academy. Khalil was well known for his amazing watercolour paintings, delicate batiks and intriguing acrylics. His artistic

talent began as a young boy with a passion for making wayang kulit. He would make the wayang kulit by drawing on a big leaf with the addition of a cardboard, which would then be used to play with his friends. He took this new found interest and took part in competitions and shows held almost every month.

KHALIL'S MALAY LIFE

While the late Chuah Thean Teng pioneered this art form in the 1930s, it was only accepted as a medium of artistic expression by the 1960's. Somewhat later, Khalil Ibrahim also depicted Malay life, primarily that of the fisherman fraternity, through the batik technique - in a more real sense. While colour and texture became the primary fascination with Khalil, he remained true to - firstly, the human figure albeit fragmented and secondly his people of the East Coast. Unlike Teng's subjects who reflected a lazy contentment about kampung life, Khalil's interpretation, in a piece such as East Coast (1978) NAG seems somewhat more involved. Even if rather romanticised in gesture and cluster and vibrant colour, they are possessed in their stance - notions that highlight their industriousness.

Despite his formal western art education, Khalil never wavered from his rich Kelantanese cultural heritage and it was natural that he would pursue batik painting upon his return from England in 1966. For Khalil, the material and tools of batik making were no different from the pens and paints used in artwork. It was undeniable that Khalil's understanding of batik was deeply rooted. The manufacture of batik has notably been associated with the East Coast States of Kelantan and Terengganu, having been introduced into Kelantan by Indonesian craftsmen in the very early twentieth century. Renowned for his pictorial style and his fascination with the daily activities of the rural communities of the East Coast, he employed various techniques that included works executed in traditional methods such as dip dye, crackling and the tjanting to imbue delicate lines and details to his paintings. In his abstract batik paintings, he developed techniques by using brush strokes and thus created abstract works that broke through tradition and defied the stereotypes of batik painting.

LEGACY CONTINUES — CHUAH SIEW TENG AND CHUAH SEOW KENG

SCIONS OF THE FATHER OF MALAYSIAN BATIK, DATO' CHUAH THEAN TENG

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

CHUAH SIEW TENG

Known for his excellent prowess in the batik medium, Chuah Siew Teng, is a veteran in the Malaysian art scene, bringing with him a vast range of experience. Siew Teng Siew Teng heralds a reputation for being one of the most brilliant and celebrated artist in the batik segment. The artist was born and raised in Penang, in 1944, where he had long established himself and cemented a place among Malaysian artists. Siew Teng completed his education in 1965 at the Ravensbourne College of Art and City, as well as at the Guild Art School in England.

The artist's passion for art, specifically in the batik medium was handed down by his venerable and skilled father, the late Dato Chuah Thean Teng, who was a master in this art form. Thenceforth, Teng would go on to win the 'Art Prize' in 1961 through to 1963 consecutively. He would also win the 'Certificate of Merit' a year after that, before taking home a prize at the Malaysia Artist Competition a year after. It was only after bagging all the aforementioned prizes and creating a name for himself that Siew Teng graduated from the prestigious Ravensbourne College of Art and City. This goes to show the innate talent that this batik artist was born with. On top of that, Siew Teng is also known to be one of the biggest advocates of the Malaysian batik culture, where he had lectured on batik techniques in London as well as in Australia.



Chuah Seow Keng
Feeding Cockerel
Batik 89.5 x 45 cm



Chuah Seow Keng
Fishing Village - Penang
Batik 90 x 45 cm

S.Teng, as he signs his works to distinguish from his more illustrious father's 'Teng' signature, is very versatile in all types of painting media — drawing, watercolour, oil, acrylic and batik. His batik art is distinguished by the play of light, with

positive-negative elements, and with a stained-glass effect. In 1992, his batik titled The Monkey was selected for the UNICEF Greeting Cards programme. In 1964, his painting, Joy Of Living, was awarded a Certificate of Merit in the

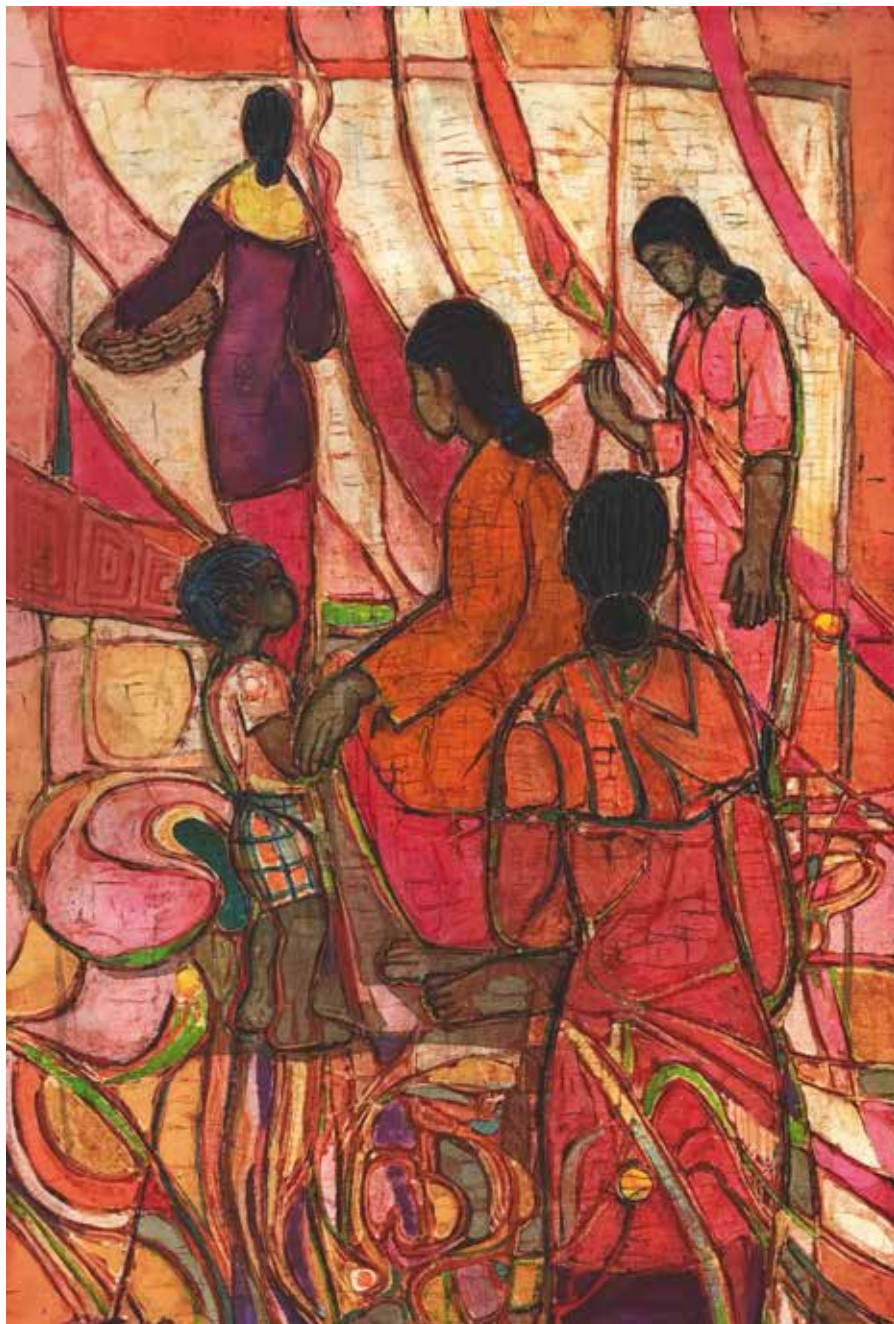
national art competition, and in 1965, he won a prize with his painting, *Outdoor*, in the Malaysian artists competition. His solos were staged in four different continents – Lower Gallery, London, Britain (1967), World Art Associates, United States (1971), Argyle Art Centre, New South Wales, Australia (1972) and Kanda Gallery in Tokyo, Osaka and Okinawa in Japan (1975). That same year, in 1975, he was invited to hold demonstrations at the Fremantle Art Centre in Australia.

CHUAH SEOW KENG

Chuah Seow Keng, one of the trio of scions of the great batik-art founder Dato' Chuah Thean Teng is recognised as one of Malaysia's leading artists and is renowned for his batik and watercolour paintings. Born in 1945 in Kelantan, Seow Keng now calls Penang his home. In 1968, the artist was awarded a scholarship to study at the S ddeutsche Kunststoff Zentrum in W rzburg, Germany. While attending this academy, he specialised in fibreglass sculptures, a difficult, but rewarding art medium.

While being recognised as an accomplished sculptor, Seow Keng is also acknowledged as a masterful batik artist. His abilities as an artist were noticed at a very early age. He was exposed to the art of batik painting by his father, the renowned artist Chuah Thean Teng, who pioneered batik painting as a fine art form. Seow Keng excels in this intricate art technique and was chosen to demonstrate his batik skills at the International Freundschaftsheim in Buckeburg, Germany. In 1974, Germany's Television Channel Zweites-Deutsches-Fernsehen-Trans-Tel made a documentary film on Seow Keng and his brothers proclivity to batik painting for German viewers.

Trained by his father from a very young age, Seow Keng held his first solo of batik painting in Fuchu, Tachikawa and Tokyo in Japan in 1973, followed by Kanda Gallery, Tokyo, Osaka and Okinawa in 1975. He also had solo exhibitions in Europe, Australia and Canada. In 1989, he received a Certificate of



Chuah Seow Teng
Malay Ladies
Batik 45 x 29 cm

Excellence (mixed media) for Outstanding Achievements at the Artitudes 7th International Art Competition in New York.

Two of the artist's batik paintings, *Fish* (1981) and *Rural Life* (1986), were selected for the UNICEF greeting cards in 1988. In 1992, two more of Seow Keng's

works were again selected for the UNICEF greeting cards – *Fish* (a watercolour) and *Sunrise* (batik). He was commissioned to do fibreglass murals, among others, for Malaysia-Singapore Airline offices in Ipoh and Penang, and Bank Negara crest, now in Penang office. He also made a fibreglass replica emblem for the Penang War Memorial and Cenotaph.