

CHEONG SOO PIENG

THE PIONEER OF THE NANYANG ART STYLE

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

Fishing Village

Oil on board

50cm x70cm

RM 250,000 - 420,000

Cheong Soo Pieng was born in Amoy, China in 1917, the youngest of seven children. He is known to many as one of Singapore's pioneer modern artists and a key proponent of the Nanyang style of art.

Early Life

Cheong Soo Pieng started studying art at age 16 at the Xiamen Academy of Fine Art. His parents were indifferent towards Cheong's pursuit of the arts, as they neither encouraged nor discouraged him. At the Xiamen Academy of Fine arts, Cheong studied under Lim Hak Tai whose idea set the ground for the development of the Nanyang style. He always suggested to the staff and to the students that the subject matter in their works should reflect the reality of the South Seas. He emphasised that our work should depict the localness of the place we live in, and these influences are seen in Cheong's works afterwards.

Three years later, after graduating, Cheong moved to Shanghai to further his studies. This time, however, his studies at the Sin Hwa Academy of Fine Art were forced to be put on hold due to the Sino-Japanese war. As a result of the war, the school was destroyed and Cheong returned to Xiamen Academy to teach, where he held his first solo exhibition in 1942.

At that point in time, Cheong only painted in watercolours. He did not have the opportunity to paint with oils, seeing that oil paints were inaccessible. The constant social and political turbulence that swept across China did not stop even after the surrender of the Japanese in 1945. In addition, prior to the Sino-Japanese War, China was already involved in a civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Guomindang, which started in 1927 and continued until 1950. Cheong decided to leave China in 1945 to avoid being conscripted in a civil war for either side, and spent some time in Hong Kong before relocating to Singapore in late 1946. He quickly gained employment at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, teaching for over 20 years there before becoming a full-time artist in his late 40s.

Art Career

Whilst known as a dynamic teacher, Cheong Soo Pieng's first commitment has always been to art-making. His innovative spirit has been recognised as a major influence on Singapore modern art. In a short span of time his works had progressed through several phases: from post-Impressionism to Cubism to abstract, semi-abstract and more. They showcase his versatility as an artist. He was especially fond of early Egyptian and primitive art forms, and liked to paint squirrels.

Most of his early works were woodcut print and sketch drawings, capturing the new reality of everyday life he encountered in Southeast Asia, such as the hawkers, barbers, fishermen mending their nets; people in their leisure activities — resting, playing music; as well as the architecture of Singapore — the houses, buildings, and many others. Cheong continued to explore his training in both Chinese ink painting as well as Western technique and pictorial tradition.

T.K. Sabapathy wrote an article on Cheong Soo Pieng in *The Strait Times*, highlighting Soo Pieng's works that "specifically amalgamated the long tradition of delicacy and craftsmanship of the East, the influence of the West, and most importantly, the locality of Southeast Asia, as seen in the work titled *Malay Fishing Village*, which is now in the collection of the Herbert Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University".

He formulated his distinctive style of painting Malay women after a 1959 trip to the Dayak longhouses of Borneo. Besides painting both in the Eastern

and Western techniques of Chinese ink and oils, Cheong Soo Pieng also sculpted and crafted metal installations. But it is his Nanyang-style paintings in particular that have received much attention. The techniques used are recognised as a creative blend of West and East, and the subject matter was inspired from his Southeast Asian surroundings hence the term Nanyang or South-Seas style. He was one of the first artists to paint in this theme. Inspiration for this stemmed from a Bali trip in 1952, which he embarked with three others: Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee.

Between 1946 and 1961, he held three successful solo shows in Singapore (1956), Kuala Lumpur and Penang (1957). He later travelled to Europe for two years and held exhibitions in London (Frost and Reed Gallery, 1962; Redfern Gallery, 1963), Munich (Galerie Schöninger, 1962) and Oxford (Bear Lane Gallery, 1963). In 1962, he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal by the Government of the State of Singapore. Cheong was the curators' and critics' favourite, as they have called him a pacesetter and a dominant figure in Singapore's modern art scene. In recognition of this, the National Museum Art Gallery organised a retrospective exhibition of his works in 1983.

Unfortunately, four months before the exhibition, Cheong died of heart failure at the age of 66.

KLAS ART AUCTION, JUNE 21, 2014

Water Kampung Night, 1961

Colour on paper

91 x 45 cm

SOLD : RM137,500.00



Early Works and Style

Cheong Soo Pieng's early works and style provide a useful glimpse into the range of paintings Cheong produced after his arrival in Singapore in 1946. They also reflect the types of works that attracted the attention of key patrons like the late Dato Loke Wan Tho and Frank Sullivan, and conceivably other collectors and admirers of the period. The paintings amply demonstrate Cheong's proficiency in both Western and Chinese art traditions. Figurative works predominate feature scenes based on rural life such as Indian men tending cows or a Balinese selling toddy. Others highlight local women (be they Malay, Balinese or Kenyah) in traditional attire. Cheong demonstrated his proficiency with a Western medium, namely oil, and the stylistic features of key Western movements such as Primitivism, Cubism, Fauvism and Expressionism.

The artist was also equally at home with Chinese ink painting, where he used long horizontal format associated with Chinese traditional hand scrolls. Cheong was able to bring together diverse media, techniques and approaches drawn from many art traditions, in order to capture slices of Southeast Asian life. In an era where the modern artist was celebrated for innovation, Cheong was able to assert his identity as a modern Asian artist in several ways. Firstly, his links with Asia were maintained through his foundation in Chinese ink painting tradition. At the same time, he was able to demonstrate his knowledge of international trends, particularly in

Western modern art, both in his oil paintings as well as his innovative Chinese paintings.

Thirdly, his Southeast Asian subjects also reflected his immediate reality, both physical and social, which in turn helped to connect him with his audiences in Singapore. As the art historian Michael Sullivan had succinctly put it in 1960, "His work is modern, yet not beyond the understanding of people of any feeling. It is influenced by modern art, but is by no means an imitation of it. It depicts the Malayan scene and yet does not merely illustrate or record it. It is, in fact, a true expression of the feelings of an artist who is at one with the world he lives in."

It could be presumed that because Cheong Soo Pieng's early style was distinct and celebrated for its East-meets-West artistic employment, many of his paintings of that period shared similarities in style, especially those from the same series. This is evident in 'Fishing Village', an oil on board piece on sale at KLAS Art Auction and the 'Fishing Village' which is part of the National Heritage Board of Singapore's permanent collection.

KLAS ART AUCTION, SEPTEMBER 28, 2014

Fishing Village - Johore, 1961

Ink and colour on paper

91 x 45 cm

SOLD : RM190,400.00



TEW NAI TONG

MALAYSIA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTIST

BY HIRANMAYIL AWLI MOHANAN

Those who have seen and understand Nai Tong's paintings would agree that he was a man who had his own way of art. His first solo show was in Kuala Lumpur back in 1964 and since then, he has perfected his strokes and created a persona for himself and his passion. There are few artists who paint their passion with their own trademark techniques. Nai Tong was truly one of the few who have changed the landscape of Malaysian art. Born in 1936, Klang, Tew Nai Tong started his early education at the Peng Hwa Chinese School at the age of seven. At 18, he decided that he wanted to pursue his dream of being an artist, a proper artist. With his mind set on painting as a means of living, he moved to Singapore and enrolled at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and spent two years there to complete his studies. Focusing on sketching, watercolours and landscape painting during his early years

at NAFA, he, along with his contemporaries, became part of the watercolours movement in Malaysia, promoting the art style to the people.

It was customary for NAFA graduates to further their studies in Paris and following that rule of thumb, Nai Tong spent the next two years studying oil and figurative painting at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure Des Beaux-Arts de Paris. From 1967 to 1968, Tew Nai Tong immersed himself in the kaleidoscope of arts and culture in France and across Europe, visiting museums and art galleries in search of inspiration for new pieces. His time in Paris instilled in him a newfound creative stance, which he fully made use of as he went through an experimental phase on forms, compositions and colours, which shaped his unique art style: an interesting and beautiful combination of Oriental charm and Parisian elegance injected into dreamy

watercolour on canvas, playful collages within oil paintings to geometrical abstracts depicting rural living, local culture and landscapes.

In 2009, Nai Tong was awarded the prestigious Grand Prize Asia Art Award in Seoul, South Korea in recognition of his many contributions to the Malaysian art scene as well as exposing the rich cultural heritage and the Fine Arts of Malaysia to the international community. He is considered by some to be one of the top 10 artists in Malaysia and his works have been auctioned at Christies and Sotheby's as well as through Malaysia's own Malaysian Art Auction presented by KL Lifestyle Art Space. Highly collectible, many of Nai Tong's paintings are in private collections both locals and internationals. Institutions that have acquired his artworks include the National Art Gallery Malaysia, National Art Museum Singapore and the Sarawak Museum in Kuching.



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

Market Scene, 1963

Oil on canvas
13.5 x 17.5 cm

RM 18,000 - 38,000

Market Scene, 1963

Illustrated in this painting is the late artist's penchant for depicting rural settings, scenes from the everyday trade, agricultural activities and depictions of the simple life, evident in 'Market Scene', 1963'. The artist had an exemplary way of perceiving the simple life, enriching the visualisation of villages through his profound, vibrant paintings. The coarseness of colour and texture in his paintings also bring the mind to the countryside and Tew Nai Tong's affection for the countryside is palpable. This piece captures blissful quiescence and peace, and tells of life led with simplicity and being close to the community and nature.

PRAYAT PONGDAM

A STORYTELLER OF THE RURAL THAI LIFE

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

Deemed a National Artist in 1998, Prayat Pongdam was a Thai printmaker. He was recognised for his excellence in printmaking art and for co-working with five other artists in illustrating Mahajanaka — His Majesty the King's literary work depicting the story of one of the previous lives of Lord Buddha. In addition to his contribution to the book, prayat's works included paintings that depicted the atmosphere of the daily Thai life.

The artist was born in Sing Buri on Oct 28, 1934. His upbringing in the countryside inspired some of his most famous works. Prayat travelled to Bangkok to study painting at the Pohchang Academy of Arts and Silpakorn University under the tutelage of Prof. Silpa Bhirasri. Upon his graduation, the artist continued his education at the Academia di Belle Arti di Roma in Italy in 1961. In 1963, Prayat received the Accademico Onorario Classe Incisione (engraving) award from L'Accademia Fiorentina Delle Arti Del Disegno in Italy.

Upon returning to Thailand from Italy, he regularly produced paintings and prints, and was among the first in a group of Thai artists to introduce printmaking techniques to the public. He was declared an artist of distinction for his printmaking in 1981. His artworks explored ideas of nature, ways of life and the Thai rural spirit through simple human and animal symbols expressing themes of warmth, affection, and love.

Usually foregrounding his paintings with animal subjects, his backgrounds consisted of landscapes such as temples, churches, vihara, heritage sites, local villages, fields of rice, gardens, and forests. Prayat harmonised these themes and techniques within the unique character of his woodcut techniques. Using line, colour, and composition, Prayat blended plainness, purity and sincerity with nature, religion, and the folk cultures of rural societies.



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

Untitled

Mixed Media on board
45 x 60cm

RM 5,000 - 12,000



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

Untitled

Acrylic on canvas
20 x 50cm

RM 5,000 - 12,000

Prayat Pongdam, 'Untitled'

The Thai rural spirit is exposed for all its beauty in this work, portraying the artist's flair for colour and composition. Shades of brown sweeps across the canvas, with wooden houses on stilts and thatched roof, a glimpse of a pagoda and people walking about, some shading from the sun with an umbrella. On the foreground, villagers are seen rowing their boats, transporting goods while some docked at the pier, presumably awaiting passengers. There's something nostalgic and vintage about this painting, depicting that Thai everyday life and culture. Through his paintings, Prayat transports viewers to this bygone era and invites them to view the world through his lenses.

KHALIL IBRAHIM

MALAYSIA'S MOST VERSATILE MAESTRO

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN

The late Khalil Ibrahim, artist extraordinaire was versatile and multifaceted. He forayed into many art mediums and excelled in each, proving his legendary status. Aptly named as a multifaceted maestro, Khalil was born in 1934 In Kubang Krian, Kelantan. He was one of the earliest Malaysians to receive a full scholarship to study art at the prestigious Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London. Throughout his long career, Khalil had held a number of solo and group exhibitions in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Switzerland.

His masterful skills in drawing, watercolour and acrylic, are styles that move from the almost real to the almost abstract. Owning a piece of his artwork is truly a gift of beauty through the artist's eyes. Khalil's preference for the human figure and his deep affection for the East Coast had led him to create iconic images of men and women in the East Coast Malay fishing villages against stark backgrounds of blues and greens and watercolour landscape of villages.



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

Abstract, 1998

Ink on paper
45 x 57cm

RM12,000 - 22,000



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022
East Coast Series, 2006

Watercolour on paper
27 x 33.5cm

RM 5,000 - 12,000

Primordial Days

Khalil's rich Malay cultural background in 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 with the freedom of expression that he encountered later on through his formal education at St. Martins in London. Though he did not receive any formal education during the early years in Kelantan, Khalil's awareness of modern art was cultivated through a period of colonialism and the experiences of pioneering artists from the Nanyang Academy.

With an innate passion for making wayang kulit, his artistic talent flourished. 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. Khalil took this newfound interest and competed in events and shows held almost every month. Unfortunately, his mother disapproved of his interest while his father urged him to become a teacher. Despite his parents' disapproval, Khalil remained steadfast to his passion.



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022
East Coast landscape, 1997
 Oil on canvas
 60 x 73cm
RM 35,000 - 70,000



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022
Acrylic on canvas
 Ink on paper
 19 x 19cm
RM 2,800 - 5,500

Landscape Works

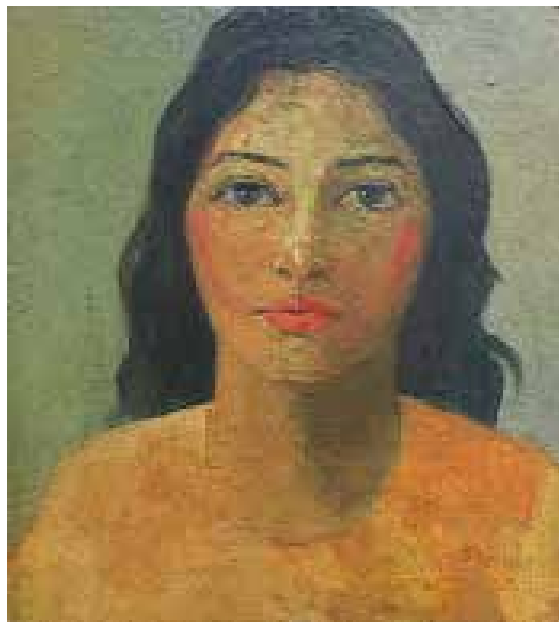
Khalil's formal education in art began when he would attend art classes every Sunday in Kota Bharu under the tutelage of art inspector, Nik Mahmud Idris who had a formal art education in Singapore between 1945 and 1947. Together with artists Yusoff Sulaiman and the late Nik Zainal Abidin, Khalil learnt the fundamentals of painting — drawing and painting first in watercolours and later in oils. The revolving theme in this class was the pastoral setting of kampungs and it was through this experience that Khalil enhanced his ability of capturing nature in all its glory. Now equipped with the techniques he learnt in art classes, the artist allowed his creativity to blossom, which resulted in scenic landscapes of the Malaysian East Coast in his works, such as the undulating hills and the padi fields. Evident in most of the artist's East Coast landscapes, he possessed the ability to transform a humble rural scene to a sweeping vision of beauty using a display of colours and showcased his established precision.

Khalil Ibrahim's landscapes and their meticulous detailing is a celebration of nature. Besides European masters, it could also be presumed that Khalil was influenced by English landscape painter, John Constable, known for revolutionising landscape painting and whose works are sold for millions of pounds. In the 1950s, the self-taught painter regularly worked as a primary school teacher in Kelantan and Pahang, before he was awarded a Pahang state scholarship to study art in England. Seeing this, army officers and civil servants became interested and went on to purchase many of Khalil's early works. The artist's early genre of paintings such as 'Sunrise, 1950's' and 'Sunset, 1950's' emphasised much of his Kelantanese heritage and depicted the influence of traditional mid twentieth style of realist painting at the time. These works also became a representation of Khalil's response to traditional art concepts while highlighting Kelantan's cultural environment.

Early Style

Khalil's 'English' or post St Martin artworks reveals a comparatively different style from his earlier landscapes and portraits. Influenced by his peers, lecturers, and his foreign surroundings, the early 1960's saw him experimenting with abstraction in works like Destruction and Destruction II and Abstract I. The artist would experiment with abstract forms drawn into his sketch book and demonstrating his attempt at bringing portraiture and concepts of abstraction together. Khalil's art works were still in flux as he sought styles and methods which spoke of his own unique journey. Like many aspiring artists, Khalil participated in numerous group exhibitions organised by St. Martin's as well with the Malayan Art Circle and at Malaysia Hall.

With Khalil Ibrahim's legendary status and sheer talent, his works across all mediums are highly valued till today. More importantly, his landscape works of the 1950's are beauty captured on canvas and a rarity. Only a limited number of artworks were produced by the artist and remains highly coveted by art collectors and institutions alike.



KLAS ART AUCTION, FEBRUARY 20, 2022
Portrait of a Lady, 1981
 Mixed Media on board
 20.9 x 18cm
RM 3,000 - 6,000