

FELIX DE WELDON

IMMORTALISING HISTORY THROUGH MONUMENTAL ART

Throughout history, art has served as a medium to express human emotions, commemorate significant events, and immortalise the legacies of remarkable individuals. One such artistic luminary was Tan Sri Felix De Weldon, a gifted sculptor renowned for his masterpieces, including the iconic United States Marine Corps War Memorial and the stately Malaysian National Monument. This six-page article will delve into the life, achievements, and artistic brilliance of Felix De Weldon, shedding light on the profound impact of his sculptures on national identities and historical memory.



Felix De Weldon with President Harry S Truman in 1949

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Tan Sri Felix De Weldon was born on April 12, 1907, in Vienna, Austria, to a family with a rich artistic heritage. His father, Leopold De Weldon, was a well-known portrait and landscape painter, and his mother, Bertha Weihs, came from a family of prominent musicians and artists. It was within this creative environment that Felix’s artistic inclinations first began to take shape. At a very young age, Felix De Weldon displayed an innate talent for sculpting. He often spent hours moulding clay and experimenting with various materials to bring his artistic visions to life. Recognising their son’s exceptional talent and passion for art, his parents encouraged and supported his creative pursuits.

At the age of seventeen, Felix De Weldon’s artistic journey took a significant turn when he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The prestigious academy had a long-standing reputation for nurturing some of the world’s finest artists, and it was there that De Weldon’s skills as a sculptor began to flourish under the guidance of eminent mentors. During his time at the academy, De Weldon immersed himself in the study of classical and contemporary art forms. He gained valuable insights into the techniques of sculpture and developed a keen eye for detail, precision, and aesthetics. His dedication to perfection and a strong work ethic set the foundation for his future success as a sculptor.

However, the world around Felix De Weldon was undergoing significant changes during his early adulthood. As political tensions escalated in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, it became increasingly difficult for artists to thrive in a region plagued by instability and conflict. In 1927, seeking greater opportunities and artistic freedom, De Weldon made a momentous decision to leave his native Austria and set sail for the United States.

Arriving in the bustling artistic hub of New York City, Felix De Weldon sought to establish himself as a sculptor in the competitive American art scene. Despite facing initial challenges and financial constraints, his perseverance, talent, and dedication soon garnered attention from influential figures in the art community. In pursuit of his passion for sculpting, De Weldon attended the prestigious Beaux-Arts Institute of Design in New York. The institute provided him with further training and exposure to a diverse range of artistic styles, shaping him into a versatile and skilled artist.



Tunku Abdul Rahman’s Bust by Felix de Weldon, 1962

THE ASCENT OF A MASTER SCULPTOR

Felix De Weldon’s journey to prominence began with his arrival in the United States in 1927. Armed with an unwavering passion for sculpting, he sought to establish himself in the thriving artistic landscape of New York City. Despite facing initial challenges, his relentless dedication and artistic prowess soon caught the attention of influential figures in the art world.

THE TURNING POINT: UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS WAR MEMORIAL

De Weldon’s magnum opus, the United States Marine Corps War Memorial, remains an iconic symbol of American pride and valour. Inspired by the historic photograph of the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II, De Weldon embarked on a monumental task – capturing the essence of bravery and camaraderie exhibited by the U.S. Marines in his sculpture.

The creation of the memorial was a labor of love for De Weldon. His attention to detail and commitment to historical accuracy led him to study photographs, testimonies, and the geography of Iwo Jima meticulously. After years of meticulous work, the memorial was unveiled on November 10, 1954, on the 179th birthday of the Marine Corps. Its immense size and emotional power have made it an enduring symbol of sacrifice and heroism, drawing millions of visitors each year.

Felix de Weldon with United States Marine Corps Memorial, 1951

THE MALAYSIAN NATIONAL MONUMENT: A TRIBUTE TO SACRIFICE

In addition to his impact on American history, Felix De Weldon left an indelible mark on Malaysia’s national identity with his masterpiece, the Malaysian National Monument. Commissioned to commemorate the fallen soldiers who perished in the fight for Malaysia’s independence, De Weldon’s sculptural masterpiece stands as a testament to the nation’s struggle for freedom.

The monument, which was completed in 1966, is a striking portrayal of seven soldiers representing the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Sikh, Dayak, and Iban communities, standing united against adversity. De Weldon’s artistry successfully captured the collective spirit and diversity of Malaysia, symbolising the strength of unity in the face of adversity and oppression.

FELIX DE WELDON’S CONNECTION TO MALAYSIA

Felix De Weldon’s path to sculpting The Malaysian National Monument was serendipitous. Having gained international acclaim for his monumental work, the United States Marine Corps War Memorial in the United States, De Weldon’s reputation as a master sculptor reached beyond borders. In 1950, De Weldon was invited to Malaysia by the country’s first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to undertake a special commission – the creation of a national monument that would commemorate the sacrifices made during the war and the fight for independence. Recognising the significance of this opportunity, De Weldon embraced the project with enthusiasm and a deep sense of responsibility.

THE CREATION PROCESS

De Weldon’s approach to creating The Malaysian National Monument was characterised by meticulous research and dedication to historical accuracy. He delved into the country’s history, studying the struggles, triumphs, and cultural diversity that shaped Malaysia’s identity. The monument’s design draws inspiration from the Cenotaph in London, but with distinctly Malaysian elements. It features seven life-size bronze figures, representing the major ethnic groups in Malaysia. These figures stand united, clad in traditional attire, and exhibit solemn reverence, symbolising the unity and diversity that define Malaysia’s strength. The sculpting process was a labour of love for De Weldon. He spent long hours working tirelessly to capture the essence of sacrifice and honour in each figure. His attention to detail and commitment to accurately represent the various ethnicities showcased his profound respect for the nation he was sculpting. De Weldon was later conferred with the title Tan Sri, the Malaysian equivalent of a high-ranking knighthood.

LEGACY AND IMPACT ON HISTORICAL MEMORY

Felix De Weldon’s artistic genius extended beyond sculpting; it encompassed a profound understanding of history’s significance in shaping national identity. His monumental sculptures have left an enduring legacy, forging emotional connections with past events and inspiring generations to remember the sacrifices made for freedom and justice.

The United States Marine Corps War Memorial continues to evoke profound emotions and pride among Americans, serving as a reminder of the sacrifices made by servicemen and women to safeguard their country’s freedom. It has become a pilgrimage site for veterans, families, and citizens, fostering a sense of collective memory and national pride.

Similarly, the Malaysian National Monument serves as a poignant reminder of Malaysia’s struggle for independence and the diverse communities that came together to achieve a common goal. It stands as a symbol of unity and the need to remember the past to shape a better future.

Felix De Weldon’s sculptural masterpieces transcend the realm of art, becoming powerful symbols of national identity and historical memory. Through his work, he immortalised the bravery, sacrifice, and unity displayed by the people of two nations in their respective historical contexts. The United States Marine Corps War Memorial and the Malaysian National Monument stand as testament to De Weldon’s exceptional skill as a sculptor and his profound understanding of the human spirit. These monuments will continue to inspire and evoke emotions, reminding us of the importance of remembrance and the enduring power of art to shape our collective consciousness.

PERJUANGAN SERIES BY FUJI ANGGARA

AN EXHIBITION CELEBRATING NATIONHOOD

15 AUGUST - 16 SEPTEMBER 2023



Fuji Anggara Perjuangan, 2023 Acrylic on canvas 168 x 244 cm

Noorfuji Anggara, who is affectionately known as Fuji, is a young, emerging artist who was born in Kuala Selangor and currently resides in Klang. The artist graduated and holds a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from UiTM, in January 2019. Upon his graduation, Fuji has been catapulted into the Malaysian art industry, full steam ahead, by participating in numerous exhibitions and competitions. He juggles between multiple bodies of work almost simultaneously, exploring a variety of styles and forms that expresses his thoughts about all things nature through the means of pop figuration, semi abstract and semi expressionism.

Two years after his graduation, in 2021, Fuji started working at KL Lifestyle Art Space (KLAS) as an gallery assistant which catapulted him deeper into the world of art in a way he had never experienced before and exposed him to great Malaysian maestros. Through the role he served at KLAS, the artist was granted first hand knowledge of the trends as met patrons and art aficionados who walked through the door. Later, in 2022, Fuji was given the privilege of an inaugural solo exhibition entitled 'Margatulus' at KLAS, which served as an entry to him being the gallery's young, resident artist.



Fuji painting Perjuangan II at KLAS

With the nation's Independence Day looming close, the young Fuji Anggara came across the bust of Tunku Abdul Rahman, created by sculptor Felix De Weldon and like a bolt of lightning, he was inspired to create, and so he did — thus was the birth of the Perjuangan Series. Translated into struggle, this series serves as an ode to the love for his country and the forefathers, as well as notable individuals who laid the foundation and strove for freedom from the colonial power. Fuji's Perjuangan Series comprises two paintings, each similar but distinct, sharing bold brushstrokes and vivid colours of the Malaysian flag, executed in his flair.

Like clouds of colours, the paintings are instantly captivating and intriguing, inviting closer inspection, which reveals subtly shaped-figures depicted in some sort of a struggle, which can be assumed as Fuji's rendition of the struggle to independence. The figures are illustrated in motion, like a dance. When crafting the paintings, the artist was ruminating on all the challenges that we face on a daily basis — the struggle to make ends meet, to raise children, to achieve success and etc. This also led him to travel in time and picture how the country's first premier and his associates strove to be great and fight for sovereignty, and reach independence as the result. These paintings are swathed in meaning and message — that of nationhood.



Fuji painting Perjuangan at KLAS



Fuji Anggara Perjuangan II, 2023 Acrylic on canvas 170 x 170 cm