



Abdul Latiff Mohidin

THE WHISPER OF HOME AND THE BIRTH OF *PAGO PAGO*

"Of all these plants, so few do I know by name or of their uses and lore. Perhaps one day a book will be written on our herbal traditions. But for now what matters most is to draw, to capture their rhythm and architecture before the memory fades." — Abdul Latiff Mohidin

The *rumbia* palm, with its rustling fronds and graceful sway held profound meaning for a young Abdul Latiff Mohidin. Each time he sketched the palm, memories of his childhood in Lenggeng, Negeri Sembilan, resurfaced with vivid clarity with the sound of water flowing behind a simple hut with the distant call to prayer from the mosque, and the quiet hum of life immersed in nature. For Latiff, the *rumbia* was more than a plant. It became a symbol of home, embodying the landscapes that nurtured his earliest sensibilities. This intimate connection inspired the *Rumbia* series, one of the most celebrated bodies of work in his career, frequently exhibited and widely recognised as a cornerstone of his practice.

Revisiting his sketches, Latiff rediscovered his fascination with the vegetation surrounding his childhood village. He reflected: This urgency to preserve not just form but spirit became the driving force of his creative pursuit.

The painting *Rumbia* emerged from this deep dialogue between memory and observation. Latiff sought to capture the vibration of the palm leaves, their shifting rhythm as sunlight danced upon them. His process was dynamic, adding and erasing, thinning and thickening his strokes, always searching for the elusive balance where motion and stillness coexisted.

More than a botanical study, *Rumbia* became a vessel of longing, a way of listening to the quiet voice of Lenggeng carried across time like the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze. Today, the series remains an anchor of Southeast Asian modern art, demonstrating Latiff's rare gift for merging memory, place, and abstraction into a timeless visual language.



Rumbia, Lenggeng 1964
Ink on paper
19 x 13 cm

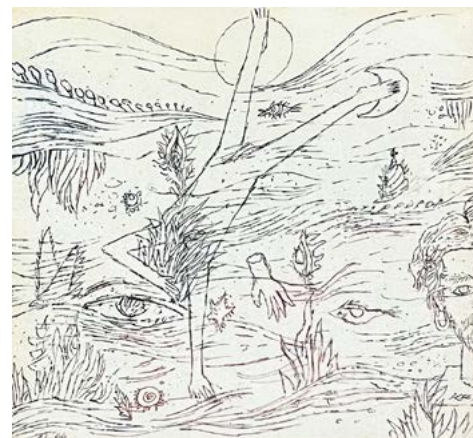
The Birth of Pago Pago

These explorations laid the foundation for Latiff's most iconic body of work, the *Pago Pago* series. This marked the beginning of an artistic voyage across the Southeast Asian archipelago, with Bangkok becoming a frequent destination.

Latiff's many visits to the city are recorded in numerous sketches, including one in which he depicted himself swimming in its rivers, surrounded by shells, aquatic plants, and riverine growth.

Several *Pago Pago* works now housed in the National Gallery Singapore were painted during a visit to the home of Thailand's maestro Thawan Duchanee, where Latiff painted alongside his new friend.

He also held a dedicated exhibition of the series in Bangkok during this period. Other important *Pago Pago* works were produced in Angkor Wat, Cambodia, and in other parts of Southeast Asia.



Siri Pago Pago 1966, Bangkok Pen on paper
15 x 15 cm



Pago-Pago Forms, Bangkok 1964 Ink on paper
9 x 10 cm

COVER STORY

Rumbia, Lenggeng 1965
Mixed media on paper
16 x 10 cm





The late Syed Ahmad Jamal with the treasured Pogo Pogo

The First Pogo Pogo in Berlin

Latiff's earliest known Pogo Pogo sketch, Nipah from 1962, was created in Berlin and is now held in the collection of the late Zain Azahari. His first Pogo Pogo canvas and painted in Berlin in 1963, became one of the most treasured works of the late Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, who proudly displayed it in his living room for decades. Latiff had presented the work as a gift during their two man exhibition at the Selangor Club in 1970, a gesture of gratitude in lieu of exhibition costs. When KL Lifestyle visited Syed Ahmad Jamal's home in 2011, the painting still occupied a place of pride, testament to its enduring significance. Today, this seminal canvas resides in the private collection of Gary Thanasan, marking its continued importance as one of Latiff's most iconic works.

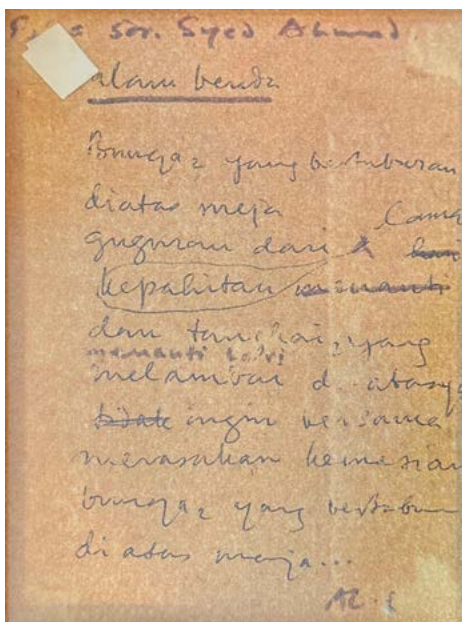


Siri Pogo Pogo, Bangkok, 1964

Mixed media on paper

14 x 10 cm

Formerly in the collection of Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal



Saudara Syed Ahmad Jamal
(Poem by Latiff Mohidin on verso)

Pen on paper

14 x 10 cm



Rumbia Series, 1968

Linocut on paper

45.5 x 30 cm

Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy

The Irish Connection

Latiff's art also forged friendships that carried his work beyond Malaysia. In 1966, Patrick Murphy, who had come to Malaysia to work for Guinness Brewery in Petaling Jaya, was introduced to the local art world through Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard. At the Festival of Southeast Asian Arts in 1969 and through Zain Azraai and his wife Dawn, Murphy visited Galeri II, where he encountered Latiff's work for the first time.



Siri Pogo Pogo, 1966

Pen on paper

15 x 10.5 cm

Formerly in the collection of Patrick J Murphy

Murphy recalled being immediately struck by Latiff's art, recognising in it the soul of Malaysia, painted by what he described as a true poet.

In spring 1969, he purchased his first Pogo Pogo canvas, *Pogo Pogo Debris*, inspired by a chaotic rubbish dump in Bangkok that Latiff transformed into a work of transcendent beauty. Murphy described it as a glorious painting, full of emotion, a work that continued to adorn his home for fifty years.

Latiff and Murphy's friendship deepened over the years. Latiff often left his record player and music collection with the Murphys during his travels, and on his way to study at the Pratt Institute in New York, he stopped over in Dublin at Murphy's invitation.

Over the years, Murphy collected around ten works by Latiff, describing them as a constant source of joy.



Pogo-Pago, 1971

Watercolour on paper

26 x 36 cm

Formerly in the collection of Dr. Brian Aylward

HOMAGE TO PAGO-PAGO

A PRIVATE COLLECTION SHOWCASE

2 - 18 MAY 2016 | KLAS @ 31 JALAN UTARA



Abdul Latiff Mohidin *Pago-Pago Series*, 1963 Oil on canvas 87 x 78 cm
(Formerly in the Private Collection of Dato Syed Ahmad Jamal)

SPECIAL PREVIEW RECEPTION
SATURDAY 14 MAY 2016 | 3.00 PM - 7.00 PM

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Homage to the Pago Pago Series

In May 2016, KLAS at Jalan Utara staged an exhibition devoted entirely to the *Pago Pago* series. The series is widely considered one of the most important achievements in Asian modern art, firmly establishing Latiff as a pioneering figure.



Blue Pago-Pago - New York 1969
Mixed media on paper
16 x 16 cm

Long Thien Shih, a contemporary and close friend, once remarked: "He is very special. There are people who are gifted with words, some are gifted with the ability to express themselves in drawings and pictures. Latiff Mohidin is gifted with both."

The *Pago Pago* works are significant not only for their striking forms but also for the way they reflect Latiff's sensitivity to the environment and his deep respect for nature.

The paintings carry an inquisitive spirit, embodying both the physical and spiritual dimensions of Southeast Asia. Some resemble totems, rooted in the traditions of the Indonesian archipelago. In these works, nature became both subject and teacher, nurturing Latiff's evolving language of abstraction.

The series brought Latiff widespread acclaim, establishing him as one of Malaysia and Southeast Asia's most important modern artists.

His mastery of diverse techniques including pen, ink, charcoal, pencil, and etching allowed him to continually reinvent the landscapes he encountered. His drawings went beyond replication, instead interpreting the atmosphere and energy of the world around him. Sketching outside the studio was, for him, an emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experience.

Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin, former chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Art Gallery, once owned more than six *Pago Pago* works. He was drawn not only to their spiritual aura but also to Latiff's fascination with *Pago Pago* itself, a distant land in American Samoa.

Latiff, inspired by images of Easter Island's colossal stone figures, looked eastward, exploring the cultural wealth of Southeast Asia. Tragically, in 1980, five of Kamarul Ariffin's *Pago Pago* paintings were destroyed in a fire at his Kuala Lumpur office, a devastating loss for Malaysian art history.

Latiff later recalled that during his time in Berlin in the early 1960s, his sketches already contained the foreshadowing of bamboo clumps, pandanus leaves, fishing boats, mosque minarets, pagodas, yam leaves, river pebbles, shells, and domes.



Siri Pago Pago, 1966
Oil on board
46 x 44 cm

'Voyage' New York, 1969
Etching on paper Edition 6/13
31.5 x 21 cm



Pago Pago Series 1964
Pen on paper
14 x 8 cm
(and Verso)

These natural and cultural forms became central to the vocabulary of *Pago Pago*, where interlocking geometries and organic curves captured not just appearances but the very energy of structures. Though his *Pago Pago* works bear the influence of German Expressionism with its loose, dynamic brushstrokes, Latiff's vision remained deeply rooted in Southeast Asia. He absorbed inspiration from Paul Klee, Fernand Leger, Edvard Munch, Bauhaus principles, and the ancient arts of Asia, alongside the primitive art of Polynesia, the traditions of Mexican Indians, and the symbolic motifs of the region. He was also shaped by Arshile Gorky's abstract forms and Joan Miro's playful surrealism. These diverse influences merged into a singular idiom, modernist yet unmistakably Southeast Asian.

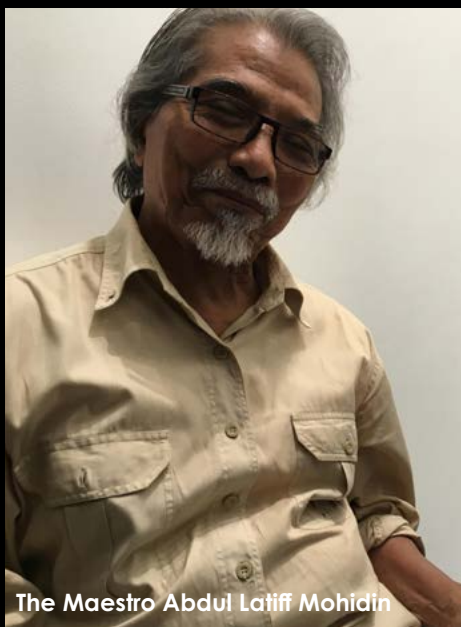


Global Recognition and Market Impact

The importance of the *Pago Pago* series was further elevated in 2018, when the National Gallery Singapore selected Abdul Latiff Mohidin to represent Southeast Asia at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Despite controversy in Singapore, where many local artists expressed dismay that Latiff, a Malaysian artist, was chosen, his inclusion was a clear recognition of the transnational power of his vision. The exhibition positioned *Pago Pago* at the centre of Southeast Asia's contribution to global modernism, solidifying Latiff's legacy on the world stage. Following this landmark exhibition, a *Pago Pago* canvas was sold at Lyon and Turnbull in London for an extraordinary GBP 246,000. This record setting auction underscored the rarity and prestige of the series, which is now regarded as a trophy for major Southeast Asian collections.

Legacy and Beyond

The *Pago Pago* series stands today as the cornerstone of Abdul Latiff Mohidin's artistic legacy. It represents the transformative moment when he evolved from a promising painter into one of Southeast Asia's most significant voices. Through these works, he created a visual language that continues to inspire artists, scholars, and audiences across the region and beyond. Latiff's spirit of exploration never ceased. Following his iconic *Gelombang* exhibition in Singapore, he embarked on travels to Samarkand, Bukhara, and Guilin in 1990. These journeys inspired the *Rimba* series of the 1990s and later the *Voyage* series of 2005. Each new body of work extended the inquiries of *Pago Pago*, reaffirming Latiff's place as a maestro of modern Southeast Asian art whose vision has always been rooted in travel, memory, and the timeless rhythms of nature.



The Maestro Abdul Latiff Mohidin



Guilin, 1990
Ink on paper
23 x 24 cm

A Monumental Return to Ink Landscape

Drawing has always been central to Latiff Mohidin's artistic journey. From the earliest years of his prodigious career, his exceptional gift for draftsmanship stood out for its elegance, rhythm, and emotional depth. For Latiff, drawing has never been a mere preliminary exercise. Each line is an end in itself, a complete thought and a distilled vision. His drawings carry the same gravitas as his paintings and poetry, offering an intimate glimpse into his creative and philosophical universe.

Among the most remarkable and contemplative bodies of work in Latiff's oeuvre is the *Guilin Series*, created in the early 1990s during a period of travel and rediscovery.

This decade marked an important phase in the artist's life, as he journeyed through Guilin in China, as well as the ancient Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan.

These travels nourished his imagination and broadened the visual and historical references that would appear in his later works.

It was in *Guilin*, however, that Latiff found a visual and emotional landscape so resonant that it led to a dedicated suite of ink drawings, rendered with clarity, contemplation, and reverence. This suite of drawings marks a powerful return to ink, a medium Latiff first explored in his early years in Berlin.

But in *Guilin*, the application is different: bolder, freer, and deeply personal. His brushwork is immediate and unforced, drawing from memory, intuition, and the spiritual presence of place.

A Return to Ink with A New Landscape

The *Guilin* works are not traditional landscapes, nor are they straightforward travel sketches. They are lyrical notations, visual poems, and philosophical meditations distilled onto paper. *Guilin's* dramatic limestone peaks and meandering river inspired Latiff to reengage with the visual language of ink, but through his own lens. Each mountain is rendered not as a geological feature, but as a monumental form, a solitary presence that invites contemplation and reverence.

Unlike classical Chinese scroll paintings, which often depict interlinked ranges unfolding in narrative sequences, Latiff's renderings are focused and immediate. His mountains rise individually, each bearing its own visual rhythm. Through ink washes, gestural lines, and negative space, Latiff captures both the physical majesty and spiritual aura of the *Guilin* landscape. These drawings feel at once timeless and immediate, deeply rooted in history yet intensely personal.

A Dialogue Across Decades and Places

At first glance, the *Guilin* drawings may appear to stand apart from Latiff's earlier work. But a closer look reveals a deep thematic thread linking them to his iconic *Pago Pago Series* of the 1960s. In both, the mountain emerges as a central form, not just as a landscape motif, but as a spiritual and symbolic structure.



Guilin, 1990
Ink on paper
23 x 24 cm

COVER STORY

In *Pago Pago*, Latiff synthesized influences from ancient Southeast Asian architecture, particularly the temple mountains of Angkor Wat and Bayon, to explore the cosmic mountain as a metaphor for harmony and order.

In *Guilin*, this exploration takes a different form. The peaks are natural rather than constructed, carved over millennia by time and elemental forces.

Yet they serve the same metaphysical function, anchoring the universe, holding memory and meaning. *The Guilin Series* can thus be seen as a continuum in Latiff's long engagement with the mountain as both image and idea.



Guilin, 1990,
Ink on paper
23 x 24 cm

Entering the Chinese Pictorial Tradition

With the *Guilin* drawings, Latiff steps into a conversation with the Chinese literati painting tradition. He does so not as a follower, but as an independent modernist who engages with history through observation, empathy, and innovation. Ink and brush are not merely aesthetic choices, they are conceptual tools that align him with the philosophy of Chinese painting, where ink is often regarded as the root of all form and spirit. Latiff's visual response is never imitative. Instead, he filters this tradition through his own practice, developed over decades in Southeast Asia and Europe.

His approach is deeply intuitive, guided by feeling and structure rather than academic convention. The result is a body of work that resonates with the gravitas of tradition while remaining unmistakably his own.

Ink, Gesture, and Narratives

Revisiting the ink medium in the 1990s, after nearly three decades, marks an important turning point for Latiff. In *Guilin*, ink becomes the perfect vehicle for a mature expression, spontaneous yet deliberate, fluid yet structured.

The drawings show his mastery in achieving depth, density, and nuance through controlled movement.

This return also follows his *Gelombang Series*, a group of paintings that explored fluidity, wave motion, and inner states of movement.

In *Guilin*, the visual language shifts from the undulating to the monumental, from flow to form, yet both series reflect Latiff's ongoing meditation on nature and spirit.

Contribution to S.E.Asian Modernism

Today, the significance of the *Guilin Series* continues to grow. Over 18 drawings from the series are housed in the permanent collections of the National Gallery Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum, a powerful endorsement of their cultural and historical value.

These works capture Latiff Mohidin at a moment of quiet clarity, where decades of experience converge into a singular body of work.

The *Guilin Series* not only affirms his stature as one of Southeast Asia's leading modernists, but also adds a poetic, contemplative chapter to his career, one where brush, ink, and mountain become unified in vision and form.

Voyage Series

The *Voyage Series*, contrary to what it indicates, was created in Latiff Mohidin's studio. When he wasn't travelling, the artist continued to explore the world through his imagination.

The essence of *Voyage* is the recurrent element of a stylised boat whose origin can be traced to one of the earliest drawings of the *Pago Pago* series, entitled, *Solitude*, Bangkok, 1964.

Nearly 40 years later, Latiff embarks on a study of the boat as the main element of the composition, developing the first shapes in a preliminary sketch executed in 2003.



Gelombang, 1994
Mixed media on paper
17 x 25.5 cm

The boat has become a symbol of the artist's imaginary travels. Gestural like from the *Gelombang Series*, it reveals more ruminative impinges and with more glacial strokes. *Voyage* signifies passages of time and space, one not inhibited by time or geography, but maybe lodged in nature or evoking a time or place long, long past.

Memory of Loyang I (Voyage Series), 2005
Oil on canvas
137 x 162 cm



Marshland, 1993
Mixed media on paper
25 x 17 cm



COVER STORY

So, it's invariably given to symbols or signs or even recondite shapes, lacking in forms or even meanings, which are evident in the artist's works. While pictorial designs in each of his series are distinct and distinguishable, it is not exclusively advanced and thereby set apart.

In conjunction with Malaysia's 50th Merdeka celebration in 2007, Petronas Gallery hosted a landmark exhibition by Latiff Mohidin featuring 50 works created between 2002 and 2005.

Titled *Voyage*, this body of work marked a significant chapter following the *Rimba* series, reflecting Latiff's continued quest to reimagine the world through an intensely personal and poetic lens.

At least four key series emerged from this period; *Voyage*, *Wetlands*, *Gita*, and *Ibe Wells*. The remaining works, including *Teluk Kumbang* and *Wu Shan*, along with several untitled landscapes, could be loosely grouped around themes of kinship, geography, and reflection. Particularly striking are the *Wetlands* and marshland compositions, in which Latiff explores the visual and symbolic language of soggy earth and watery terrain.



Marshland II, 2005
Oil on canvas
137 x 162 cm

These works evoke a powerful ambiguity between land and water, stillness and movement, suggesting the notion of both physical and metaphysical passage. The exhibition title, *Voyage*, resonated on multiple levels. It was inspired in part by Latiff's deep engagement with the poetry of Charles Baudelaire (*Le Voyage*, from *Les Fleurs du Mal*) and Arthur Rimbaud, whose writings traverse strange, fragmented worlds filled with beauty, conflict, and transformation. Their vision of voyaging, restless, uncertain, yet revelatory, mirrored Latiff's own life of movement, both real and imagined.

Samarkhand, 1990 ►
Mixed media on paper
28 x 27 cm



Bukhara, 1990
Mixed media on paper
41 x 29 cm

Among the most contemplative bodies of work in Latiff's oeuvre is *The Guilin Series*, created in the early 1990s during a period of travel and rediscovery.

This decade marked an important phase in the artist's life as he journeyed through the majestic limestone mountains of Guilin in China, and onward to the ancient Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan. These travels nourished his visual memory and expanded the spiritual and historical references that would echo throughout his later work.

In Guilin, Latiff discovered a landscape so resonant in form and feeling that it inspired a suite of ink drawings rendered with great clarity and reverence, each a poetic response to nature's quiet grandeur.



These encounters with nature and culture have not only deepened his understanding of place but also infused his work with a sense of timelessness and universality.

Though Latiff no longer travelled physically during the years leading to *Voyage*, his imagination remained boundless. As seen in the seminal *Pago Pago* works of the 1960s, drawn from journeys across Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia, travel for Latiff has always been a spiritual and intellectual act, one of searching, seeing, and becoming. In Malay tradition, *merantau* captures this idea of purposeful wandering, of departing in order to return transformed.

Voyage reaffirmed Latiff Mohidin's place as one of Southeast Asia's most visionary modernists, an artist who paints not only with his eyes and hands, but also with memory, spirit, and thought. The exhibition invited viewers not merely to observe his inner landscape but to journey through it: to pass through wetlands and rivers, to drift between continents, to stand inside the charged stillness of storm and silence.

Indeed, travel has long played a foundational role in shaping Latiff's identity and his approach to artmaking. From the rainforests of Southeast Asia to the deserts of Central Asia and the rivers of China, the artist has absorbed the world through direct observation of its flora, fauna, textures, colors, light, and spiritual atmospheres thus leaving a lasting impression on his aesthetic and emotional imagination.