

# Syed Ahmad Jamal

THE BIRTH OF REFORMASI



## Childhood

Born in Bandar Maharani, Muar, Johor on Sept 19, 1929, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal grew up in the countryside surrounded by nature and had a carefree childhood where he spent a lot of his time observing his surroundings and developing a lasting appreciation for nature's beauty.

When he attended an English primary school at age nine, he saw textbooks with colourful images for the first time. This was pivotal in developing his interest in reading and motivating him to study hard and excel academically, eventually leading him to achieve success and receive a scholarship from the Johor government the Yayasan Sultan Ibrahim Scholarship to study at the Birmingham School of Architecture, England in 1950.

## From Architecture to Art

Not long after his classes commenced, he quickly realised that architecture simply was not his calling. During his studies, the moments he looked forward to the most when the class went out to sketch or visit art galleries. At the urging of his teacher Mr Jones, who was greatly impressed by his sketches, he transferred to Chelsea School of Art, where he honed his craft, and spent weekends at art galleries and his holidays touring Europe, gathering inspiration from the great beauty surrounding him wherever he went.

Upon his return to Malaysia after his studies, he became a teacher at Batu Pahat High School in Johore from 1956 to 1957.

Then in 1957, he taught as a lecturer at the Day Teachers' Training College of Kuala Lumpur (now Seri Kota Teachers' College). Afterwards, he went on to teach at the Malayan Teachers' College in Kirby, Lancs, England for two years in 1958 to 1959. He led the Wednesday Art Group and the Malaysian Art Council in the early 1960s, serving as the Director of the Cultural Centre at the University of Malaya from 1979 to 1982, and held the position of Director of the National Art Gallery from 1983 to 1991.



Datuk Gary Thanasan and Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal posing with the artwork "Nur Tenaga". This was the final painting completed by him in 2010.

## Art Style

Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's travels and time abroad informed his art style, leading him to pioneer the abstract style of expression in Malaysia. Around the time, the local art scene was largely dominated by conventional style, realism, and direct impressions and expressions.

When we think of venerable artists in Malaysia, there is no one more suited to the title than Datuk Syed Ahmad bin Jamal Sahil (1929–2011). The late artist is a man who has achieved a great many feats in his illustrious life, including but not limited to: a pioneer of the abstract expressionist movement in Malaysia, the creator of the National Visual Arts Gallery's logo, as well the logo for the political party People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat). For all his invaluable contributions to the local development of arts and culture, he is the first artist to receive the title National Laureate.

## 2.9.98

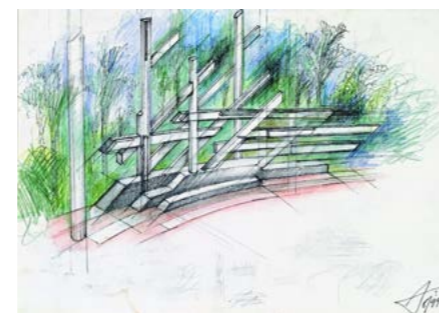
Acrylic on canvas  
127 x 175.5 cm

He was considered the first painter in Malaysia to explore non-objective painting through a work entitled "Umpan" (The Bait), a masterpiece produced in 1959.

Whether on paper or canvas, his lines are very precise. His strokes are vivid, as if the image of what he had a clear vision of what he wanted to paint clearly in his mind, and executed without hesitation and without wavering.

The use of color in most of his abstract works is quite fierce, bright and quite clear.

This shows his concentration and consistency in depicting his ideas on canvas. His ability to maintain his abstract expression and harmonious compositions even when creating pieces that depict tragedy is a testament to his talents and adherence to his core tenets of belief, that even in difficult topics, art need not be deprived of its beauty.



**Study for Public Sculpture, June 1999**  
Ink and colour on paper  
28.5 x 40 cm



## Involvement in Politics

Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal had lived through unprecedented and monumental moments in history. He was born during the British occupation of Malaya, lived through the invasion and occupation of Japan, witnessed the declaration of Independence in 1957, and lived through the 13 May incident, the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim just to name a few. All of these incidents would inspire him to create art -27 pieces to be exact- to depict particular historical events or significant social issues. Living through tumultuous parts of history had led him and many other artists in this period to be actively involved in politics.

One such instance of his involvement was the Reformasi 98. Syed and his family were staunch supporters of Anwar Ibrahim, then Deputy Prime Minister.

After Anwar's unceremonious removal from his positions in the government and UMNO, he was inspired to paint many artworks about the situation, documenting various moments in history. He would later design the logo for the party Social Justice Movement (Pergerakan Keadilan Sosial, abbr. Keadilan).



The logo represents the black eye that former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was spotted with during his detention as he stood for trial, but it also signifies that the injury inflicted upon the body could be transmuted into a penetrating vision. Even after Anwar was sentenced to jail, Syed Ahmad Jamal would continue to visit him and give him support and keep the spirit of Reformasi alive.

## 2.9.98

2.9.98, is one such piece that is of significance to his body of socio-political art. The name of the painting commemorates the date Anwar Ibrahim was sacked and the birth of Reformasi. This painting was completed in 1999 and was first unveiled at an exhibition at Petronas Gallery. Upon first glance, one would be easily mistaken that the piece was a celebratory piece.

Bright yellow dominates most of the canvas, imbuing the viewer with a sense of hope. Perhaps that was his intention: to inspire hope and ignite the spark for the reformation movement.

On the right side of the painting, there are two columns of yellow, forming the base for the art piece and beneath it and imposed on the front are three smaller red and green pillars.

he yellow light seems to hint at the existing political structure, whilst the red and green could be a symbolism of emerging structures of resistance or political identity.

## Picnic at Sonning, 2006

Acrylic on canvas  
76 x 163 cm

Shooting out from the two columns of light are four more beams of light tilted at an angle. It feels like falling light, with the white swirls surging upwards, as if supporting the falling columns, could be interpreted as the people's support of Anwar Ibrahim and upholding his ideas of a democratic nation.

Interestingly, different shades of blue are employed around the painting; dark blue at the edges, and a lighter blue in the centre of the painting.

This could be thought of as the different stages of grief and despair of the nation, as well as the various forms of Anwar's struggle and suffering during his court trials, imprisonment and the abuse he faced while incarcerated.



## City By Night, 2006

Acrylic on Canvas  
107 x 183 cm

### Personal connection and Birth of KLAS Art Space

Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's contributions to the Malaysian artistic community have been innumerable and well documented. However, one lesser known contribution of his would be his encouragement in the opening of Dato' Gary Thanasan's KLAS Art Space and Auction.

It was a stroke of fate that brought the two together at Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's official retrospective event at the National Art Gallery.

Dato' would be seated next to the man of the hour, despite having never met previously. Dato' Gary initially mistook Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal as Ungku Abdul Aziz, both men possessing a debonair and gentlemanly air about them.

After making their introductions, the two men bonded throughout the event, and it was then that Dato' Gary Thanasan floated the idea of opening an art gallery and auction house, driven by his desire to properly platform local artists and accord them the recognition they so rightfully deserve.

He strongly believed that local artists were as talented as their international peers and sought to elevate the Malaysian art market, creating a platform that showcased talent and promoted recognition both locally and globally. However, being new to the local art scene, Dato' Gary Thanasan was daunted by how little he knew of the art landscape and was unsure where to begin.



**Berenang - Swimming, 1965**  
Oil on canvas  
122 x 76 cm  
**SOLD RM 218,400**



**Hijrah/Hegira, 1999**  
Acrylic on canvas  
122 x 213 cm  
**SOLD RM 414,400**

Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal was receptive about the idea, and without any prompting, he became Dato' Gary's advisor. Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal gave him a crash course on the Malaysian art scene, the history of local art and how to navigate the art business. Throughout their time together, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal was an unwavering pillar of support, and saw the progression of the gallery until its opening in 2011. He went above and beyond in his support, even offering to consign two of his pieces to be sold at the first auction: Picnic at Sonning and City by Night, both acrylic on canvas.

The very first auction proved successful, attracting a keen audience and lively bidding on the featured pieces. However, both of Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's pieces, which were valuable and costly, would go unsold this time. Datuk Syed Ahmad took this in stride and very kindly offered Dato' Gary a long installment scheme to pay off the paintings, inadvertently making Dato' Gary Thanasan the proud owner of two legendary Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal pieces.



**Nur Tenaga, 2010**  
Acrylic on canvas  
153 x 152 cm  
**SOLD RM 490,332**

Even though Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal passed away in 2011, his contributions to the development of the local art continues to be remembered, and his art pieces remain incredibly influential and valuable.



**KMJSN, 2009**  
Acrylic on canvas  
91 x 122 cm  
**SOLD RM 280,000**

The Malaysian art scene continues its upward momentum as KL Art Space prepares to usher in an exciting new chapter with its relocation to Jalan Utara. The new gallery—significantly larger and thoughtfully reimagined—marks a strategic expansion that reflects the growing appetite for contemporary and eclectic art in Kuala Lumpur.

Designed to accommodate a more diverse range of works, the space will showcase an even broader spectrum of artistic voices, from emerging local talents to established names, offering visitors a richer and more immersive cultural experience.

## KLAS Art Auction

### SHOWCASING DISTINGUISHED ART FOR COLLECTORS AND CONNOISSEURS

KLAS Art Auction marks an important moment in Malaysia's art calendar, held at the new KLAS gallery at 31, Jalan Utara, Petaling Jaya. The inaugural auction reflects the gallery's growing role in strengthening the local art ecosystem while connecting it to the wider regional and international art market. The auction features an exceptional selection of Malaysian masters including Abdul Latiff Mohidin, Yusof Ghani, Khalil Ibrahim, Ahmad Zakii Anwar, Awang Damit Ahmad, Dato' Chuah Thean Teng, and Lee Man Fong, alongside international artists Nguyen Trung, U Lun Gywe, Yayoi Kusama, and Takashi Murakami. Together, these works present a compelling dialogue between local heritage and global contemporary art, making the KLAS Art Auction a significant event for collectors and art enthusiasts alike.



Abdul Latiff Mohidin's Tao Landscape (Homage to Lao Tzu) is part of his Post-Rimba series, a body of work that marks a shift from his earlier, nature-based imagery toward a more philosophical and introspective mode of abstraction. The painting is deeply informed by the Tao Te Ching and the Taoist concept of wu-wei, or non-action—an idea that emphasises natural flow, spontaneity, and harmony with the forces of the universe. In this work, swirling, calligraphic lines move across the surface in an organic, rhythmic manner, recalling the tangled forms of mangrove roots and creeping vegetation. These gestures feel instinctive rather than controlled, mirroring the Taoist ideal of action that arises effortlessly, without force or resistance. The composition resists rigid structure, allowing forms to emerge and dissolve fluidly, as though guided by an unseen natural order.

**ABDUL LATIFF MOHIDIN**  
Tao Landscape (Homage To Lao Tzu), (Post Rimba Series), 1999  
Oil on canvas 92 x 92 cm  
**RM 250,000 - 450,000**

A leading figure in Malaysian abstraction, Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir is known for her dynamic exploration of movement, colour and spatial energy. In Dancing Light, vibrant planes of blue, red and green animate a darkened ground, creating a powerful sense of rhythm and motion. Executed during a mature phase of her career, this work exemplifies the artist's signature approach to abstraction, where colour and form interact with musicality and controlled spontaneity. Dancing Light stands as a strong and desirable example of Sharifah Fatimah's abstract practice, underscoring her enduring appeal among collectors of Southeast Asian contemporary art. Dato' Sharifah was a former student of UiTM (Universiti Teknologi MARA), Malaysia, Reading University in England and Pratt Institute in the United States respectively. Whilst curating at the National Art Gallery in 1982 for seven years, she was awarded the Salon Malaysia Competition's Major Award and the Minor Award in the Young Contemporary Artists Competition as well.

**SHARIFAH FATIMAH SYED ZUBIR, DATO'**  
Dancing Light, 2008  
Acrylic on canvas 120 x 137 cm  
**RM 60,000 - 110,000**



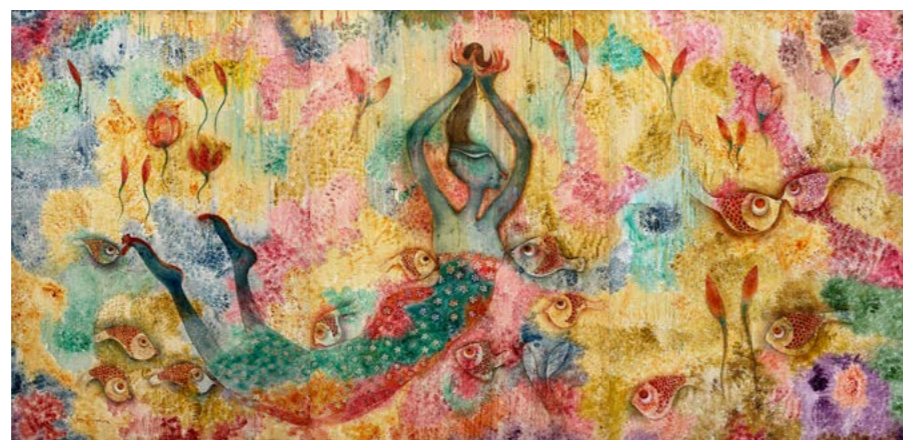
**YUSOF GHANI**

Biring Series - Study #7, 2009  
Oil on canvas 100 x 50 cm  
**RM 55,000 - 75,000**

'Pago Pago' is a term coined by Malaysian artist-poet Latiff Mohidin during the late 1950s to describe the cosmopolitan yet regionally rooted spirit with which he made art. Pago-Pago traces a formative period of Latiff's practice as he journeyed across Europe and Southeast Asia. The historical backdrop of the series started in the early 1960s, when Latiff began his formal art education at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in West Berlin. "Pago-Pago" emerged from the word "pagoden", which was the source of his inspiration when he encountered a series of Thai and Khmer relics resembling pagoda forms at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, located in Dahlem, in 1961. This piece is strong, dramatic, orderly and precise in terms of brushwork and composition. This series explores the relationship between shapes, figures, colours, balance, perception and the mind of the artist. The resulting abstract art is the representation of the artist's contemplating and dedication to this piece of art. Latiff's works bear a distinctively cosmopolitan outlook in terms of the successful development of a modern abstract visual language and a sustained exploration of world art and literature. An avid traveller, the artist's travels, specifically to Ubud, Bali inspired this unique monochrome watercolour piece, executed meticulously.

**ABDUL LATIFF MOHIDIN**

Siri Pago Pago 'Ubud', 1967  
Monochrome watercolour  
on paper 16.4 x 9.8 cm  
**RM 65,000 - 75,000**

**SYED THAJUDEEN**

Lightness of Being, 1999  
Oil on canvas 136 x 273 cm (Triptych)  
**RM 60,000 - 110,000**

Syed Thajudeen was born in 1943 in India. He is well-known for his large scale mural paintings of epic proportions set in period landscapes. Though born in India, Syed Thajudeen spent his life in Penang, Malaysia, before pursuing an art education at the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Madras, India. He then graduated with a post diploma in Fine Arts in 1974 and returned to Malaysia to be a lecturer in Fine Arts at Institut Teknologi MARA. It is evident from Syed's paintings that more than 40 years as an artist has given Syed the subtlety and reach, indicative of a master painter and has further enhanced the reputation of his works as an integral element of Malaysian art. Syed Thajudeen's works decorate the walls of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, Singapore Art Museum, corporate buildings and many private homes in Malaysia and abroad. In this particular oil on canvas triptych piece, Syed Thajudeen uses various tones and hues of colour to depict a woman surrounded by marine life and floral beings, exuding a sense of tranquility.

Yusof Ghani's 'Biring' series strays away from his other series that feature the human form, masks and nature. His most coveted works are from the rare, 'Protest' series while the artists' most recognised and collected artworks are part of the 'Tari' series. The 'Biring' series is the artist's rendition of a cock fight, symbolising the heroism and strife between mankind. The use of vibrant hues and expressive brush strokes makes it an inundating artwork. Instead of Yusof's usual vibrant colours of blue, he employed an earthy palette with this work, paired with Yusof's innate prowess, he creates swirls of colours that finally take the form of roosters at the centre of the artwork. The roosters depicted in his painting seem to be in motion, wings flapping about as they fight for their lives. 'Biring' is definitely one of Yusof Ghani's most enlightened body of works, for not only have the works been painted with wild abandon and freedom, but more importantly demonstrate the artist's ability to leave the comfort of the familiar.



Yusof Ghani is a prominent Malaysian artist known for his expressive abstract works that often embrace themes of identity, culture, and the human experience. His series "Siri Segerak" (or "The Segerak Series") typically explores the movement and energy inherent in the human form, often through dynamic brushwork and vivid colours. "Nightwalkers II," created in 2005, is part of this thematic exploration. The painting generally encapsulates the essence of movement and rhythm, reflecting the artist's interest in the way humans interact with their surroundings, particularly at night. The use of colour and form in this work likely aims to evoke a sense of emotional depth and connection to the experiences of walking and the narratives that emerge in nocturnal settings.

**YUSOF GHANI**

Nightwalkers II, 2006  
Chalk and charcoal on paper 120 x 110.5 cm  
**RM 70,000 - 130,000**

Lee Man Fong stands as one of the most culturally significant and visually poetic artists to emerge from Southeast Asia in the twentieth century. Born in Guangzhou in 1913 and later becoming a central artistic figure in the Malay Archipelago, his life and work reveal an extraordinary synthesis of influences that crossed continents and traditions. The present masterpiece reveals this depth of understanding with exceptional clarity. The rooster stands confidently upon a textured stone, its body angled in a proud, upward movement, while its head is lifted toward an unseen horizon as if caught mid call. The composition captures a moment that is both energetic and serene. The gesture of the bird is poised between stillness and motion, and its expressive posture suggests the first call of morning and the promise of awakening. The tail feathers are rendered with sweeping arcs that echo classical Chinese ink calligraphy, yet the body possesses the fullness and weight of European realism.

**LEE MAN FONG**

Rooster, 1960's  
Mixed media on paper 42 x 29 cm  
**RM 80,000 - 120,000**

Nguyen Trung, a prominent Vietnamese artist, is known for his evocative works that merge lyrical abstraction with figurative storytelling. Trung's Message painted in 1995 is a powerful exploration of texture, form, and atmosphere. Executed in mixed media with heavy impasto, the work's deep, almost black palette creates a dramatic, contemplative mood, drawing viewers into its layered, tactile surface.

**NGUYEN TRUNG**

Message, 1995  
Mixed media on canvas with impasto 100 x 100 cm  
**RM 150,000 - 280,000**