



Singapore Stories: Pathways and Detours in Art

This exhibition is an act of storytelling. It is built upon the journeys undertaken by artists as they sought to make sense of the shifting social conditions in and beyond Singapore since the 19th century through art. These stories, told through different perspectives, offer us ways to relook at how Singapore's art history has been written and what has been left out.

The exhibition acknowledges our diverse and cosmopolitan identities. We explore how artists considered questions of aesthetics and engaged with broader social and national concerns like colonialism, urban change and globalisation—forging alternate pathways and strategies in both medium and expression. It embraces an expanded view of Singapore's art, offering entry points to explore issues of gender, class and labour, and touching on other disciplines and visual cultures.

As we move through this exhibition, we are encouraged to ask:
Whose story is this? Who is looking? What is art for?

Market of the Tropics

In the 19th century, Singapore was considered a place of opportunity by merchants and labourers who had travelled here to seek their fortunes, and by the British colonial enterprise, which established a trading port on the island in 1819. Visual depictions of Singapore in print, paintings and photographs from that period emphasised its economic viability. At the same time, these depictions romanticised the island as a place with the timeless charm of a sleepy fishing village. These early impressions also marketed the exotic appeal of the diverse communities who had lived there for generations.

Although this colonial vision dominated the way Singapore was portrayed, early examples of artistic exchange offer a glimpse into the many ways in which Singapore was imagined, experienced and circulated.

John Turnbull Thomson
(b. 1821, United Kingdom; d. 1884, New Zealand)

The Esplanade from Scandal Point

1851
Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. F.G. Hall-Jones
Collection of National Museum of Singapore
HP-0054

This busy public square is known as the Padang (Malay for “field”). Located just outside National Gallery Singapore, it used to border Singapore’s original shoreline. John Turnbull Thomson references Scandal Point—a small grassy knoll where socialising and gossip often took place.

As Singapore's first government surveyor (1841–1853), Thomson also produced maps that gathered knowledge for colonial control. The painting's orderly layout, prominent colonial buildings and cataloguing of discrete racial and ethnic groups present an ideal image of British imperial power.

1. Artist unknown

Sin Heng & Co. Pineapple Factory

1938

Postcard

2. Adolphe Willette

(b. 1857, France; d. 1926, France)

Le Meilleur des Ananas de Singapore, Marque Opter
(The Best Pineapples from Singapore, "Opter" Brand)

c. 1890s

Postcard

3. G.R. Lambert & Co.

(active 1867–1890s, Singapore)

Pineapple Plantation

1890

Postcard

4. Edgar Ainsworth
(b. 1905, unknown; d. 1975, United Kingdom)

Empire Marketing Board Poster: The Market Garden of the Tropics—Malayan Pineapples

1931
Lithograph

5. Artist unknown

Empire Marketing Board Poster: Buy Singapore Pineapples in Tins

Early to mid-20th century
Lithograph

6. Artist unknown

Pineapple, Nanas (Ananas comosus) from William Farquhar's
Collection of Natural History Drawings

c. 1803–1818
Watercolour on paper

Gift of Mr. G.K. Goh

7. Artist unknown
Pineapple, Nanas (Ananas comosus) from William Farquhar's
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Watercolour on paper

Gift of Mr. G.K. Goh
Collection of National Museum of Singapore

2008-05815 | 2011-02818 | 1995-03510 |
 2017-00872 | 2014-00118 | 1995-03136 |
 1995-03138

Throughout the 19th and into the early 20th centuries, visual representations like these depicted Singapore as an exotic outpost. This process began with efforts to systematically catalogue the flora and fauna of the Straits Settlements. Local painters—whose identities remain unknown to this day—were hired to create detailed illustrations, which were then compiled in collections such as William Farquhar's (Resident of Malacca, 1803–1818). By the 1920s, the Empire Marketing Board (established in 1926) commissioned European artists to design attractive posters, while postcards of plantations and industrial developments became popular souvenirs.

Marianne James (née Reeves)
 (b. unknown, United Kingdom; d. 1842, United Kingdom)

View from Government Hill

1828

Watercolour on paper

Collection of National Museum of Singapore
 1992-00199

A skilled amateur watercolourist, Marianne James (née Reeves) painted this view of Singapore during her return journey to Britain from Calcutta, where her husband served as a bishop. Her watercolours offer a romantic, picturesque view of the vibrant port city, conforming to popular depictions of the colonies. James produced an album of artworks painted from her travels, which was remarkable for a woman of her time.

Moving Images

While the first public screenings of foreign films took place in Singapore as early as the late 1890s, the 1930s marked the rise of locally made films. These early moving images portrayed relatable stories of moral struggles, the search for identity and the drama of everyday life in a cosmopolitan Singapore. This made cinema an influential part of entertainment as well as an important form of cultural expression. The visual elements of film production—set design, posters, movie titles and framing—and the incorporation of music played a crucial role in shaping narratives that could speak to diverse audiences.

B.N. Rao
(b. 1908, India; d. 1998, India)

Excerpts from *Laila Majnun*
1962

Film, 35mm, standard definition video, single-channel, 4:3 aspect ratio, black-and-white and sound (mono), 13 min 23 sec

Produced in Singapore
In Malay, with English subtitles

Courtesy of © Cathay-Keris Films Pte. Ltd.
Source: Asian Film Archive
This set is shown on a continuous loop.

Laila Majnun adapts the classic Arab love story between Laila and Qais, her *majnun* (mad) lover, whose reason is overcome by longing for an unattainable love. It is a remake of renowned Indian director B.S. Rajhans's *Laila Majnun* that premiered at Marlborough Theatre on Beach Road on 27 March 1934, commonly believed to be the first Malay-language feature-length film produced locally.

Unfortunately, like many early films of the region, it is now considered lost, with no known surviving copies.

B.N. Rao's 1962 version presents his lavish visual style, which blends pseudo-Arabic sets and dances with Indian influences, set to a soundtrack of Malay songs. The incorporation of a wide range of cultural references suggests that there was a demand for global culture interpreted through Singapore's multicultural lens.

P. Ramlee
(b. 1929, Malaysia; d. 1973, Malaysia)

Excerpt from *Penarek Becha* (Trishaw Puller)

1955
8 min 53 sec

Two excerpts from *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (The Bachelor Warriors)

1959
4 min 15 sec and 6 min 11 sec

Excerpt from *Ibu Mertua-ku* (My Mother-In-Law)

1962
14 min 54 sec

Excerpt from *Madu Tiga* (Three Wives)

1964
15 min 49 sec

Courtesy of The Shaw Organisation Pte. Ltd.

All films: standard definition video, single-channel, 5:4 aspect ratio, black-and-white and sound (stereo). Produced in Singapore. In Malay, with English subtitles, except *Penarek Becha*, which is in Malay and English, with English subtitles. This 55-minute set loops hourly.

P. Ramlee was an actor, filmmaker, singer and songwriter whose work left an indelible mark on the entertainment industry in Malaysia and Singapore. The multitalented artist made significant contributions to what is referred to as the Golden Age of Malay Cinema during the 1950s to 1970s. He directed and starred in over 60 films, and gained widespread acclaim for his versatility in various genres, ranging from comedies to melodramas. Some of his most iconic films include *Bujang Lapok* (1957) and *Ibu Mertua-ku* (1962). He also composed over 250 songs, many of which featured in his movies and became classics in the Malay music repertoire. Ramlee's ability to connect with audiences through his stories of everyday life, humour and social issues elevated him to icon status in Southeast Asia.

Community and Self

By the early 20th century, new possibilities for representing the communities and individuals in Singapore were emerging. Local artists combined elements of painting and photography to produce expressive portraits for a diverse range of clients, capturing both everyday people and prominent figures. These images rapidly gained popularity as mediums for self-representation and remembrance. At the same time, artists from around the world were drawn to Singapore; many came to teach art and create commissions for public spaces, reflecting the island's varied communities in their work.

In the 1930s, full-length motion picture films became another exciting space where directors, set and graphic designers, actors and musicians could come together to tell stories about the communities. During this period, diverse textual and calligraphic art and design also enriched Singapore's material culture. Together, these multiple perspectives and forms of cultural expression created a multifaceted and vibrant artistic scene here.

Low Kway Song (刘溪松)
(b. 1889, Singapore; d. 1982, Singapore)

Portrait of a Couple with Two Dogs

20th century
Oil and pastel on photograph

Gift of Hall of Phoenix and Peony
Collection of Peranakan Museum
2018-00365

Sultan in His Chambers

c. 1930s

Oil and pastel on gelatin silver print on paper

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2020-00350

Painting of a Woman

20th century

Pastel on canvas

Gift of Hall of Phoenix and Peony

Collection of Peranakan Museum

2018-00344

The first artwork in this group of portraits depicts a couple with their two dogs. It shows an awareness of self-representation as well as an emerging preference for a casual, relaxed style of portraiture that was distinct from more formal poses.

Low Kway Song's portraits capture a cross-section of early 20th-century Singapore society, from state figures to everyday people. He often used oil pastels and paint to add colour to photographs, a technique derived from the 19th-century practice of hand-colouring black-and-white photographs.

Low Kway Song was a key figure in the development of Singapore's artistic scene. In 1911, he founded Raffles Art Studio, which later became Empire Studio on Orchard Road in 1920. The popular studio offered photography, portrait painting, picture postcards of Singapore and even set scenery painting.

Alongside his brothers Kway Soo and Kway Koh, Low was active in the Amateur Drawing Association, which was established in 1909. He became the association's honorary art instructor in 1911. His recognition in the art community and his various artistic pursuits led to many prestigious commissions, including a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II which was presented to the Malacca Government on Coronation Day in 1953.

Artist unknown

Portrait of Reverend James Arumugam Supramaniam

c. 1916

Hand-coloured gelatin silver print on paper

Portrait of Harriet Navamani Supramaniam (née Joseph)

c. 1916

Hand-coloured gelatin silver print on paper

Gift of Dato Paul Supramaniam, James Timothy Supramaniam and Matthew Supramaniam

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

These hand-coloured photographs of a Tamil-Christian couple are an example of the popular use of photography by diverse communities in Singapore and were likely used as objects of remembrance by their family. Reverend Supramaniam was born in 1880 in Jaffna, Ceylon, and was descended from the Jaffna Royal Family. After arriving in Singapore in 1892, he became a prominent figure in the community, and was known for his roles as a Methodist minister, headmaster and district superintendent of schools across Malaya. Together with his wife, Harriet Supramaniam (née Joseph), they often visited the sick and needy in their parish.

Soo Pun Ting (苏彬庭)

(b. unknown; d. unknown, Singapore)

Portrait of Seet Hoot Kee

1917

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Soo Pun Ting's presence in Singapore's early art scene is largely known through newspaper advertisements for drawing and painting lessons at his studio, which were placed as early as 1906. Here, he commemorates Malacca-born Seet Hoot Kee (薛佛记, 1793–1847), a notable Hokkien community leader and philanthropist in Singapore. In the painting, Seet is depicted in the style of a Chinese literary scholar while holding a fan, which is a symbol of learning and prestige. Seet helped to found the Heng San Teng cemetery temple, which prefigured the Hokkien clan association.

"I am enthralled by the East, fascinated by its movement, cannot help deploring the western influences which tend to kill its natural beauty."

Dora Gordine, "In Sculpture in Attap Studio," *The Straits Times*, 1930.

Dora Gordine was renowned for her figurative bronze works, paintings and drawings. A self-taught artist, she received recognition early in her career, exhibiting in the British Pavilion at the 1925 *International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts* in Paris. In 1930, Gordine was invited by colonial adviser Roland Braddell to visit British Malaya, and eventually set up her studio in Johor Bahru. She received a commission the year

after to produce sculptures for the Municipal Building in Singapore (later named City Hall, and today part of National Gallery Singapore), creating a series of three busts: *Indian Head*, *Malay Head* and *Chinese Head*. Today, these busts are displayed in the present Parliament House.

Dora Gordine excelled in painting, drawing and sculpture. *Chinese Head* demonstrates the detailed contouring and unique patinas that are characteristic of her sculptures. The features of the bust reflect widely held stereotypes of Asian physiognomy at the time. Such presentations of generalised ethnographic types also reflect an exoticised view of local residents that was often adopted by European artists and writers. This work is similar to a group of ethnically categorised busts that Gordine produced for Singapore's Municipal Building in 1931.

Richard Walker
(b. 1896, United Kingdom; d. 1989, United Kingdom)

Jakis, The Peddler of Sarongs

Undated
Oil on board

Gift of an anonymous donor
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2011-01731

This detailed portrait depicts Jakis, a sarong seller, as he gazes into the distance. Richard Walker captures the material qualities of his sarong and headwrap while also presenting Jakis's likeness with realistic detail. As the first art master of local Government English schools and Art Superintendent, Walker provided students with strong fundamentals in oil and watercolour painting.

Gao Junbai (高俊百)
(b. unknown; d. unknown)

Wooden Signboard dedicated to Ng Sen Choy

1939
Wood

Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum
W-0276-E

The calligraphic script on this signboard celebrates Ng Sen Choy (伍榮才), a local businessman whose contributions earned him a medal of commendation from the British government in 1938. Continuing a practice that was common in China, Chinese business owners and community leaders often hired skilled artists to write on wooden panels or signboards for businesses, shops and temples.

Lim Chu Suan (林子瑄)
(b. 1907, China; d. 1966, Singapore)

Aspiration

1939
Chinese ink on paper

Collection of the artist's family

Lim Chu Suan uses Chinese calligraphy to pen a reflective record of her personal journey from youth to maturity.

Wong Jai Ling (黄载灵)

(b. 1895, China; d. 1973, Singapore)

White Plum Blossoms (with colophons)

1945–1955

Ink and colour on rice paper

Gift of Mrs. Ng-Lim Chong Quek

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2004-00531

This painting of plum blossoms features 21 poetic colophons that were added over the course of a decade.

Chern Yet Siew (陈月秀)

(b. 1911, China; d. 2002, Singapore)

Couplet in Running Script

1938

Chinese ink on paper

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05080

This work is Chern Yet Siew's attempt at cursive calligraphy, or caoshu (草书), which is known for its loose, flowing strokes. The prose describes a serene home surrounded by blooming flowers. She was an accomplished calligrapher and painter who also promoted arts education in Singapore. She was one of the first members of the Singapore Society of Chinese Artists and taught at various schools, including Nanyang Girls' High School.

Imagining Nation

What does art from Singapore look like?

Once part of the Johor Sultanate, Singapore was included in the Chinese concept of Nanyang (meaning "South Seas") along with maritime Southeast Asia. Later, it was incorporated into British Malaya and briefly became part of Malaysia in 1963 before gaining independence in 1965. Throughout these transitions, artists continued to portray the unique features of its people, landscape and cultures, as well as their own sense of belonging to this place.

The 1930s saw the establishment of specialised schools like the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, which offered formal lessons for aspiring artists. Art societies emerged as crucial spaces for learning, mentoring and, most importantly, for exhibiting and selling work. Alongside this growing infrastructure was an urgent need to define the role of art in a rapidly changing society. As Singapore grappled with questions of identity and self-determination, artists not only expressed their individual visions but also contributed to the search for a national identity that resonated both locally and regionally.

The Liu Kang Gallery commemorates the artist Liu Kang and his role in the development of modern art in Singapore. In May 2003, Liu Kang (1911–2004) and his wife, Chen Jen Pin (1913–2009), donated over 1,000 works to Singapore's National Collection, marking the largest donation of an artist's work ever made to the country.

Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿)

(b. 1895, China; d. 1953, China)

Portrait of Lim Loh

1927

Oil on canvas

Gift of Lim Family in memory of Lim Loh

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2008-06607

This portrait depicts Lim Chee Gee—also known as Lim Loh—a successful businessman from Singapore and the father of Singaporean war hero Lim Bo Seng (1909–1944).

Xu Beihong is considered one of the most important artists of modern Chinese art in the 20th century and one of the earliest Chinese artists who trained in Europe. Xu's portraits reflect the influential patrons and social circles that supported his artistic pursuits during his visit to Malaya in the late 1930s.

Tchang Ju Chi (张汝器)

(b. 1904, China; d. 1942, Singapore)

Indian Boy

1939

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2021-00081

This work reflects Tchang Ju Chi's interest in depicting the diverse cultural fabric of Singapore. Tchang served as Vice President of the

Society of Chinese Artists, playing a pivotal role in shaping the artistic landscape of Malaya. The Society organised Xu Beihong's exhibition during Xu's visit to Singapore in 1939. In the same year, Xu created a portrait of Tchang's wife and their daughter.

Lee Cheng Yong (李清庸)
(b. 1913, Malaysia; d. 1974, Malaysia)

Self Portrait

1939

Oil on canvas laid on board

Collection of Linda Neo and Albert Lim

Yong Mun Sen (杨曼生)
(b. 1896, Malaysia; d. 1962, Malaysia)

At Chess

1936

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2021-00078

These artworks showcase the diverse ways in which artists working in Malaya translated local narratives onto canvas. Lee Cheong Yong and Yong Mun Sen were instrumental in fostering vibrant art communities through societies such as the Yin Ying Art Society and the Society of Chinese Artists. These groups engaged with the people and landscapes of Southeast Asia, welcoming both self-taught and institutionally trained artists.

Georgette Chen (张荔英)
(b. 1906, China; d. 1993, Singapore)

Family Portrait

c. 1954–1955
Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist's estate
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
1994-04123

Family Portrait is the largest work Georgette Chen completed following her arrival in Malaya in 1951. Serving as an intimate celebration of dear friends, the portrait also reflects Chen's interest in portraying everyday people in her art—presenting a relatable image of a close-knit, modern family.

Georgette Chen (张荔英)
(b. 1906, China; d. 1993, Singapore)

Self Portrait

c. 1946
Oil on canvas

Gift of Lee Foundation
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
P-0817

Painted in Paris after the Second World War, Georgette Chen's *Self Portrait* demonstrates her dedication to her artistic career. Her piercing gaze meets the viewer directly, presenting herself as a modern, self-assured artist.

Chen moved to Penang in 1951 and finally settled in Singapore in 1954. She dedicated the rest of her life to teaching and mentoring young artists, and developing her artistic practice, which drew from her training in France and the United States.

Liu Kang (刘抗)
(b. 1911, China; d. 2004, Singapore)

Working at the Brick Factory

1954
Oil on canvas

After the Fire II

1951
Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist's family
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2003-03255 | 2003-03336

These works reflect Liu Kang's interest in post-Second World War reconstruction in the 1950s, particularly through subjects of industry and labour. In *Working at the Brick Factory*, smoking factories in the distance indicate the scale of production, while Liu brings the viewer's attention to the workers in the foreground. *After the Fire II* appears to reference the devastating fire at Aik Hoe Rubber Factory in 1950.

“本来，艺术的感应力是没有国界的。艺术是一个人向着人类心灵的未知世界所探讨而创造出来的作品。它的最高成就便是全人类的共同的心声。”

“The force of art knows no national boundaries. Art is the product of a person’s exploration of the unknown world of the soul. Its highest achievement is to represent the common sentiment of all humanity.”

Liu Kang, I, 2011.

Liu Kang studied art in Shanghai and Paris before settling in Singapore in 1937. This foundation in post-impressionism shaped Liu’s style, which features bold colours, simplified forms and real-world subjects. Liu’s Southeast Asian travels informed his incorporation of cultural motifs and rural subjects.

Mohammed Salehuddin
(b. 1914, Malaysia; d. 1982, Malaysia)

Malay House, Malacca

c. 1960

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2014-01431

Mohammed Salehuddin was a founding member of Persekutuan Pelukis Melayu Malaya (Society of Malay Artists, Malaya) in 1949. The society paved the way for future initiatives that supported and nurtured younger generations of Malay artists.

Presenting a scene where man and environment exist in harmony, Mohammed Salehuddin expresses a romantic view of rural life. He records the unique features of a grand Malaccan-style house, with its characteristically elaborate front steps decorated with imported ceramic tiles.

S. Mahdar
(b. 1934, Singapore; d. unknown)

Still Life – Vase, Turnips and Tomato

1947
Oil on canvas

Perjuangan di Malaya (Struggle in Malaya)

1951
Pencil on paper

Son of Sail

1957
Pencil on paper

Gift of Loke Wan Tho
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
P-0034 | P-0063 | P-0054

“Tetapi, siapa kerja keras-keras, siapa rajin menggambar, dia akan menjadi pelukis atau artist.”
(He who works hard, who diligently draws, will become a painter or an artist.)

S. Mahdar, “Tunas selukis ‘60,” *eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee*, 1960.

S. Mahdar’s talent was evident from an early age. In 1953, at just nine years old, his work was featured in an exhibition for young artists organised by Persekutuan Pelukis Melayu Malaya (Society of Malay Artists, Malaya). Mahdar soon became known for the sense of empathy and naturalism he brought to his paintings.

By the 1950s and 1960s, Mahdar was an established figure in the artistic community. He also played a pivotal role as a mentor to young Malay artists, teaching in various settings. He became the mentor for Tunas '60 (Budding Artists '60), a community for young Malay artists.

These works showcase S. Mahdar's artistic accomplishments in both drawing and painting. *Son of Sail*, an introspective portrait, was exhibited at the 8th *Exhibition of Works by Local Artists*, which was organised by the Singapore Art Society in 1957. The portrait highlights Mahdar's technical skills through his effective use of shading and clarity of line. Alongside scenes of everyday life and people, the allegorical drawing *Perjuangan di Malaya* (Struggle in Malaya) shows Mahdar's belief in art as a means to reflect the concerns of society.

Lim Hak Tai (林学大)
(b. 1893, China; d. 1963, Singapore)

Indian Workers Clearing the Jungle

1955

Oil on board

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
P-0968

In this piece, Lim Hak Tai portrays labourers clearing dense jungle. His focus on labour and industry reflects a broader interest in capturing the realities of life in Malaya, beyond idyllic tropical scenes.

Lim was the founding principal of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, wrote an essay in 1955 asserting that art should reflect society's needs and capture the unique aspects of Malayan life and

culture. Other leading figures at the Academy—such as Georgette Chen and Chen Wen Hsi— embraced these ideals and passed them down to a new generation of Singaporean artists. Together, the diverse styles and vibrant expressions of these artists and their students eventually became known as Nanyang art.

Tay Boon Pin (郑文彬)

(b. 1936, Indonesia; d. 2020, Singapore)

Workers Resting

Undated

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2012-00277

A member of the Equator Art Society, Tay Boon Pin's works reflect the group's commitment to highlighting the everyday lives of ordinary people. In *Workers Resting*, he captures a quiet scene, depicting labourers during a moment of rest. Tay used a subdued palette to depict the clearly defined expressions of the workers, which are a reflection of their individual experiences.

Chua Mia Tee (蔡名智)

(b. 1931, China)

National Language Class

1959

Oil on canvas

Gift of Equator Art Society

Epic Poem of Malaya

1955

Oil on canvas

This work has been collectively adopted by [Adopt Now] supporters.

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

P-0145 | 2006-01219

“寻找题材，是画家借以表达思想感情的过程。找什么题材？这就要看看作者在社会中，熟悉和深入哪一些生活。换句话说，哪一些生活曾经牵动过作者的思想感情，感动过作者的，那就是好的、有意义的、值得一画的题材。”

(What subject matter to look out for? What to settle on depends on what facets of life the artist is familiar with and has delved deeply into in his or her social engagements. In other words, what the artist has found to be intellectually and emotionally moving in life would be a subject matter that is good, meaningful and worth painting.)

Chua Mia Tee, *Chua Mia Tee* exhibition, 1958/2015.

Chua Mia Tee emerged as a leading figure in the post-Second World War generation of artists in Singapore. Chua advocated for a more direct purpose of art. Believing that art could improve society, Chua co-founded the Equator Art Society. As the Society's leading figure, he wrote extensively about the need to highlight working-class conditions through social realism. His art embodied this vision through realistic depictions which expressed empathy for overlooked segments of society like labourers. Although the group was dissolved in 1974, Chua's work reflects a period when artists came together to address social and political concerns, alongside

Singapore's search for identity following independence from the British, and subsequently, from Malaya.

National Language Class depicts a group of students and their teacher during a Malay language class. The words on the blackboard, "Siapa nama kamu?" ("What is your name?" in Malay), highlight how language helps to shape identity. In the wake of attaining independence from colonial rule, fostering a "Malayan culture" was seen as a way to unify society.

Meanwhile, *Epic Poem of Malaya* is charged with political significance, depicting a young man reading nationalistic poems to a group of fellow students. This takes place against a backdrop of gathering storm clouds, which heightens the sense of tension and impending change.

Lee Boon Wang (李文苑)
(b. 1934, China; d. 2016, Singapore)

Potong Pasir Dairy Farmer

1958
Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2014-01441

With its dark background, strikingly realistic detail and close framing of the subject, *Potong Pasir Dairy Farmer* by Lee Boon Wang invites us to reflect on the quiet dignity of his subject while recognising the physical and emotional toll of manual labour. The portrait evokes the style of early 19th-century portraits conventionally reserved for wealthy patrons.

Koeh Sia Yong (许锡勇)
(b. 1938, Singapore)

Studying at Equator

1966
Oil on canvas

Orchestra in Equator Art Society

1968
Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2010-00391 | 2009-01620

Koeh Sia Yong's works offer a glimpse into the activities of the Equator Art Society, of which he was a member. The group believed in the role of art to reflect society and uplift the disenfranchised, and it had active wings for music, literature and theatre.

Annaratnam Gunaratnam
(b. 1913, Malaysia; d. 2008, Switzerland)

Mavis

1953
Bronze

Gift of Sadhonadevi Gunaratnam
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2017-00952

Annaratnam Gunaratnam's keen eye for detail and strong technique bring the sculpture *Mavis* to life, from the delicate folds of the subject's clothes to her subtly expressive facial features. One of Singapore's earliest women sculptors, Gunaratnam graduated from the College of Arts and Crafts in Madras before coming to Malaya, where she held her first solo exhibition in 1939.

Lim Cheng Hoe (林清河)
(b. 1912, China; d. 1979, Singapore)

The Athlete

1953

Pastel on paper

Concentration

c. 1955–1960

Pastel on paper

The Red Scarf also known as *Sadagopan*

1960

Watercolour on paper

Gift of Mr. Michael Lim Hock Ann
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
P-0777 | P-0775 | P-0766

Lim Cheng Hoe is well-known for his expressive watercolours of idyllic landscapes, but his portraits show that he was also skilled in capturing the lifelike detail and nuanced expressions of his subjects. An active figure in defining the importance of the watercolour medium in Singapore's vibrant art scene in the 1960s, Lim co-founded the Singapore Watercolour Society in 1969. *The Red*

Scarf—featuring a subject who has been identified as a young man named Sadagopan—was exhibited in the Society’s inaugural exhibition in 1972.

Sun Yee (沈雁)
(b. 1919, China; d. 2010, Singapore)

Ronggeng (Malay Dance)

1961
Ink on paper

Indian Dance

1960
Ink on paper

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2014-01321 | 2014-01320

Sun Yee’s fine, precise lines—a hallmark of the Chinese plain drawing (or *baimiao*, 白描) technique—elegantly portray the fluid movements of the dancers. Sun was formally trained in Shanghai and Tokyo and was adept in both ink and oil painting. Her celebration of local culture in this set of works reflects a deep engagement with her adopted home.

Sun founded the Singapore Academy of Arts in the 1950s and served as its principal for two decades. The Academy offered specialisations in visual arts, music, theatre, literature, photography and film. Despite her contributions, Sun remains a lesser-known artist.

Yip Cheong Fun (叶畅芬)

(b. 1903, Hong Kong; d. 1989, Singapore)

Eleven Customers

c. 1950s

Gelatin silver print on paper

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

2021-00255

Lee Sow Lim (李少林)

(b. 1930, Malaysia)

Devotees at the Temple

1961

Gelatin silver print on paper

Christmas Eve

1960

Gelatin silver print on paper

Collection of National Museum of Singapore

2006-00093 | 2006-00095

These photographs by Lee Sow Lim and Yip Cheong Fun underscore the important role of photography in recording and interpreting the rich diversity of daily life in Singapore.

In *Eleven Customers*, Yip's aerial view presents a dynamic composition where customers gather around a street hawker.

Meanwhile, Lee manipulates exposure to create an exaggerated impression of light and atmosphere. In *Devotees at the Temple*, the heavy plumes of smoke evoke the feel and scent of incense. This surreal effect heightens the spiritual subject matter of *Christmas Eve*, where the lit candles of worshippers create a dreamlike quality.

Seeking Connections

Even as they called Singapore home, artists frequently travelled to find new sources of inspiration for their work. These journeys proved pivotal for many, serving as key reference points in the development of their personal styles. While this fascination with other cultures sometimes led to romanticised representations, a desire to connect with regional cultures—explored by informal collectives like the Ten Men Group—led to a rich combination of forms, subjects and mediums. This reflects not only the mobility of artists but also how Singapore was deeply embedded in the broader Southeast Asian region.

By the 1960s, artists once again found new ways to explore Singapore's identity and its place within the region. They began to experiment more boldly, particularly with abstraction, drawing inspiration beyond conventional boundaries of both medium and representation.

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希)
(b. 1906, China; d. 1991, Singapore)

Balinese Woman

c. 1953
Oil on canvas

Collection of Singapore Chinese High School Board of Directors

In this work, Chen Wen Hsi expresses his fascination with the architecture, people and rituals of Bali. Popularly known as a paradise on Earth since the early 20th century, the idea of an

untouched Bali captured the attention of artists who sought inspiration and an escape from modern life.

In 1952, Chen and fellow artists Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee and Cheong Soo Pieng travelled to Indonesia in search of exotic and unfamiliar sights that could ignite their imaginations. By placing the woman and the sculpted stone guardian (or *bedogol*) side by side in this tight composition, Chen suggests that spirituality and ritual are integral to life in Bali.

Cheong Soo Pieng (钟泗滨)
(b. 1917, China; d. 1983, Singapore)

Balinese Maidens

1954

Gouache on board

Collection of Angie and Ong Yew Huat

The use of orange and black to depict the skin tones in this painting suggests that Cheong prioritised artistic expression over a precise reflection of reality. Following his travels to Indonesia, Cheong produced different versions of this composition throughout his lifetime—featuring two women whose elongated limbs and flat profiles that reference the form of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets). This stylisation became his signature shorthand for representing the cultures of Southeast Asia.

Liu Kang (刘抗)
(b. 1911, China; d. 2004, Singapore)

Batik Workers

1954

Oil on canvas
 Gift of Loke Wan Tho
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore
 P-0197

In 1952, Liu Kang travelled through Indonesia with fellow artists Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi, learning about the diverse peoples and cultures of the archipelago. During their journey, they visited a batik factory in Jakarta, where Liu produced numerous studies and sketches that formed the basis of this painting.

Liu Kang (刘抗)
 (b. 1911, China; d. 2004, Singapore)

Artist and Model

1954
 Oil on canvas

Gift of Shell Group of Companies, Singapore
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore
 P-1070

In this painting, Liu Kang depicts fellow artist Chen Wen Hsi sketching a model during their time in Indonesia. The relaxed, controlled setting, combined with the juxtaposition of the partially clothed woman with the observing artist, offers a unique opportunity to consider the process of artistic creation. How are subjects staged, and do they have a say in their portrayal? How are artworks shaped by the artist's gaze and interpretation?

Chen Cheng Mei (陈城梅)
(b. 1927, Singapore; d. 2020, Singapore)

Balinese Girl

1962
Oil on canvas

Gift of an anonymous donor

Mending Fishing Nets

1960
Oil on canvas

Gift of an anonymous donor

Angkor Wat Detail II

1962
Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist

Market Scene, Sri Lanka

1975
Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2008-06702 | 2008-06715 | 2008-06613 |
2021-00004

“A knowledge of colours and tones is necessary to produce beauty in artwork, whilst much practice in sketching and calligraphy is required to draw good lines.”

Chen Cheng Mei, “Expressing Life,” *Lasting Impressions*, 2004.

Chen Cheng Mei, who trained at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, was an integral member of the Ten Men Group. Defying societal expectations of women at the time, she travelled extensively and took trips by herself to places such as Mexico, Papua New Guinea and Kenya. Her travels informed the varied subjects and playful exploration of motifs and colours in her work.

Chen used a range of materials to create texture and dimension in her work. Her interest in clean shapes and distinct sections of colour also reflects her skills as a printmaker, which she picked up at the influential Atelier 17 in Paris 1969.

Drawing from her travels across Southeast Asia, these paintings by Chen radiate the vibrant energy of the people and places she encountered. She even took special care to express the material and cultural specificities of the global cultures she encountered.

Market Scene, Sri Lanka displays her skill in distilling the essence of daily life. Chen uses warm browns and golden yellows to depict the central figures and their baskets, which stand in contrast to the light blue background.

Yeh Chi Wei (叶之威)
(b. 1913, China; d. 1981, Malaysia)

Bust of Angkor

1963
Oil on canvas

Gift of Loke Wan Tho

Untitled (Cockfighting)

Undated
Oil on canvas

Lake Toba

c. 1970
Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
P-0185 | P-0752 | 2000-00128

Yeh Chi Wei spent his childhood in Sibu, in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, before returning to China to pursue art in 1925. Yeh is regarded as the leader of the Ten Men Group, an informal collective of artists who organised trips across Southeast Asia in the 1960s. During these trips, they sketched and observed the architecture, environment and everyday life of local communities. Believing that artists could foster a shared identity within the region by exploring the diverse cultures of Southeast Asia in their work, Yeh established the Southeast Asian Art Association in 1970.

Yeh's works began to receive more attention in the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite this, by the late 1970s, Yeh had retreated from the art scene and moved to Malaysia, where he passed away in 1981.

As a keen observer of Southeast Asian material culture and a collector of diverse objects from his travels, Yeh Chi Wei incorporated elements from indigenous textiles and carvings into his work. Evoking a sense of timelessness and deep history, these approaches allowed Yeh to express his fascination with the region's ancient monuments and extensive cultures.

Yeh's *Lake Toba* shows his ability to capture large landscapes in this unique panoramic format. He defines the sweeping terrain through overlapping shapes and colours, clearly expressing the topographical contours of the landscape.

Lim Tze Peng (林子平)
(b. 1921, Singapore; d. 2025, Singapore)

Rocky Landscape

c. 1950s–1960s
Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
1999-00009

Widely recognised for his expressive and finely detailed ink paintings, centenarian artist Lim Tze Peng also explored the medium of oil painting during the early 1950s and 1960s. Here, he captures the imposing presence of rocky formations. Lim creates a sense of a single, massive structure by grouping the various rocks together. This compositional choice highlights the grandeur of the landscape.

Lim accompanied the informal artist collective, the Ten Men Group, on several of their regional travels in the 1960s and 1970s, producing works in both oil and ink that reflected his observations and experiences.

Lee Man Fong (李曼峰)
(b. 1913, China; d. 1988, Indonesia)

Pelukis Melukis

1957

Oil on board

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2005-01288

款式：一九五七年十月，偕独峰、德贵、曼雄又作峇里游，寫
画中人作悬崖古奇 曼峰

Inscription:

In October 1957, I travelled to Bali again with Dufeng, Degui and Manxiong, and depicted the people who painted the ancient and wonderful cliffs. Man Fong.

Lai Foong Moi (赖凤美)
(b. 1931, Malaysia; d. 1995, Singapore)

[Not titled] (*Fishing Village*)

1961

Oil on canvas

Private collection

This detailed work is characteristic of Lai Foong Moi's confident use of colour and her ability to simplify form to express the essence of her subjects. It was painted following her trip to Malaysia in 1961 with the Ten Men Group. Trained at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore and the prestigious National School of Fine Arts in Paris, Lai returned to Singapore in 1954, where she dedicated her artistic practice to depicting scenes of everyday life.

Shui Tit Sing (许铁生)
(b. 1914, China; d. 1997, Singapore)

Longhouse

1980
Teak

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
ASB-0035

Shui Tit Sing accompanied the informal artist collective, the Ten Men Group, on several of their regional travels in the 1960s and 1970s. These experiences shaped much of his practice, as he expressed a nostalgia for the simplicity and community of rural life in Southeast Asia through his preferred medium of teak sculpture.

The intricate details of *Longhouse* invite viewers to explore the varied aspects of village life. Shui balances playfulness and thoughtfulness, using vertical and horizontal planes to create depth and a sense of movement. By carefully carving openings within the solid wood, he achieves a harmonious interplay between the material's weight and a sense of lightness.

Yan Fook Luen (甄福暖)
(b. unknown; d. unknown, Singapore)

Dawn of Spring

1955

Gelatin silver print on paper

Gift of Lee Sow Lim in honour of Yan Fook Leun
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2018-01088

These photographs reflect the influence of Pictorialism—a photographic movement that emphasised aesthetic effect over the documentation of reality. Pictorialist ideas became popular in Singapore in the 1950s, offering an alternative to the use of photography as a recording tool. Some of these works integrate elements from Chinese painting, such as vertical layouts and the use of negative space. These careful stagings of subject, composition and framing create evocative and romanticised scenes of Singapore.

Cheong Soo Pieng (钟泗宾)
(b. 1917, China; d. 1983, Singapore)

Drying Salted Fish

1978

Chinese ink and watercolour on silk

Gift of Trans Island Bus Services Ltd.
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
1991-00343

Cheong Soo Pieng expertly controlled the dilution of ink and watercolour in this work to depict this scene. The fine lines and dense foliage evoke the style of classical Chinese ink painting, while the subject matter is distinctly Southeast Asian.

This work is featured on the back of Singapore's \$50 banknote.

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希)
(b. 1906, China; d. 1991, Singapore)

Two Gibbons Amidst Vines

c. 1980s

Chinese ink and colour on paper

Gift of Dr. Earl Lu
Collection of National Gallery Singapore
1993-00989

To achieve the lifelike portrayal of gibbons in this painting, Chen Wen Hsi closely studied the gibbons that he kept in his home garden. The inscription in the painting compares the gibbons' movements to the strokes of elegant Chinese calligraphy.

This work is featured on the back of Singapore's \$50 banknote.

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希)
(b. 1906, China; d. 1991, Singapore)

Swans

1987

Chinese ink and colour on paper

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
P-1056

With Chen Wen Hsi's fluid brushstrokes, a group of swans is distilled into simplified shapes, distinguished only by overlapping layers of colour. Their forms seem to jostle against each other, as if suspended in space. This is emphasised by the white background of the paper, which has been intentionally left blank—a concept in Chinese ink painting known as *liubai* (留白), meaning “left white”.

款式：文希南洋作

Inscription: Wen Hsi's Nanyang painting

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希)
(b. 1906, China; d. 1991, Singapore)

Gibbons

1977

Ink and colour on paper

Collection of National Gallery Singapore
2015-00455

Conservation of this artwork was generously funded by the Bank of America Art Conservation Project.

Within Chen Wen Hsi's many works on various subjects, his gibbon paintings are possibly his most well-known. *Gibbons* is the largest known ink painting made by Chen, and was commissioned by the Central Provident Fund to inaugurate its new building at 79 Robinson Road in the 1970s.

"我所画的东西并不单独描写物体，还要有'空气'在里面。"

"What I paint goes beyond mere representation. There has to be 'spirit' in it."

Chen Wen Hsi, in *CONVERGENCES: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition*, 2006.

Chen Wen Hsi studied art in China before moving to Singapore in 1949. Chen's artistic range spanned both representational and abstract styles, and across a wide range of materials.

His energetic paintings of gibbons and animals became his most distinctive and celebrated works, and were influenced by the bold, expressive Lingnan style of Chinese painting. Chen taught art at various institutions. After retiring from teaching in 1968, he focused solely on his art and his work continued to evolve throughout his lifetime.