

DIPLOMACY  
AND DESIRE:  
BASOEKI ABDULLAH  
IN SINGAPORE

This exhibition features the artworks of Indonesian artist Basoeki Abdullah (1915–1993). Once described as “the Rembrandt of the East,” Basoeki is renowned for his paintings of attractive women and stalwart statesmen. Focusing on the artist-led diplomacy implied in the circulation of and the desirable aesthetics of Basoeki’s art, *Diplomacy and Desire* considers his roles as a high-society painter and a cultural producer attuned to the geopoetic agency of his work.

Basoeki lived in Singapore from 1958 to 1960, a period marked by the island achieving self-government in 1959. This exhibition foregrounds his relationship to Singapore and its art scene. The exhibition’s centrepieces are two large oil paintings that Basoeki gifted to the state: *Labour*, presented to the City Council of Singapore in 1959, and *Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People*, donated to the National Museum Art Gallery in 1981. The layout of the exhibition recalls his studio in Singapore. Located at One Tree Hill, it included a picture gallery and a backroom featuring portraits of international beauties.

Basoeki is an exceptional Southeast Asian artist, and his artworks are found in numerous national collections. His patrons included the Indonesian Presidents Soekarno and Soeharto, the Philippine President and First Lady, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit of Thailand, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia and Sultan Bolkiah of Brunei.



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# DALAM SOUTHEAST ASIA

by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

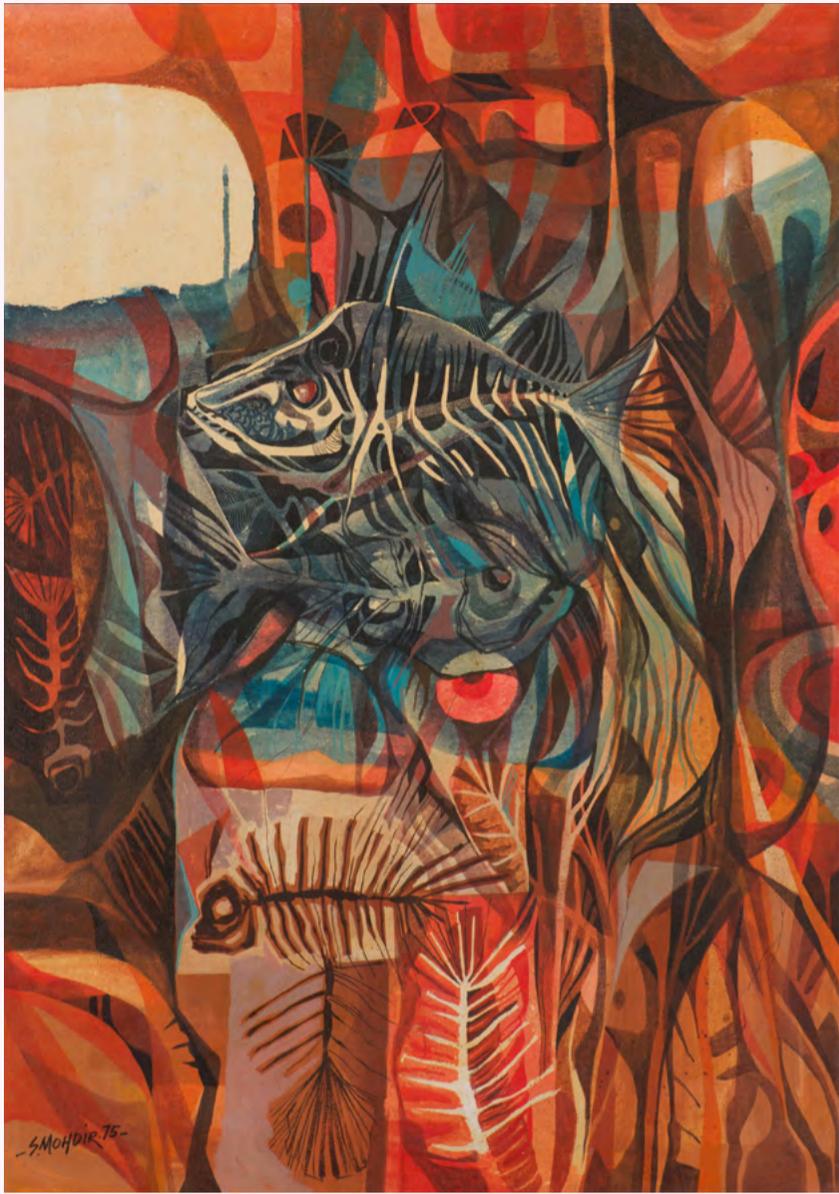
## PREFACE

Originally authored on 15 July 2021, additional notes are added each time a new project is initiated at Dalam Southeast Asia; these notes are dated accordingly.

It has become almost clichéd to introduce yet another “project space” within the confines of the modern art museum, considering how the model has proliferated globally in the past decade.<sup>1</sup> How did we, in such a short period of time, reach this point of self-referential superabundance? What do these “project spaces” offer? What concerns do they speak to? Several claim to offer insights into lesser studied or suppressed stories within the experience of modern art; or at least begin to acknowledge the silences inhabiting exhibitionary projects due to social prejudice, caused by historical and contemporary biases. Many “project spaces” seek to generate narratives through case studies gathered under a shared curatorial thematic. Some even push the envelope of the modern by resuscitating non-Western cultural objects, which are often bereft of “authorship” (at least in terms of how traditionalist streams of art history register the creator), in innovative ways. Many of these objects had entered museum collections in the former metropolises and colonies via the insults of colonialism. Another approach emphasises engaging contemporary artists who are at the forefront of innovations in their field. These contemporary artists investigate museum collections as a means of bridging the silences of the past with the urgencies of the present. As museums become more willing to interrogate themselves on aesthetic and political grounds, some have even begun to facilitate “takeovers” of their “project spaces” by constituents linked to social justice movements.

No matter the approach, the resulting exhibits are positioned within the modern museum's ongoing attempts at remaining agile in its programming. They also harness the recent upsurge in decolonising narratives, staking a claim for the legitimacy of subaltern knowledge systems. The impulse appears to be the same across varied contexts: curators and museum professionals around the world are no longer able to shy away from addressing inequalities, including that of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and are beginning to recognise the need to be more open to self-critique. Just as the "white cube" proliferated across the world as a method for display in the modern museum of the 1960s and 1970s, the "project space" now replicates on a planetary level. It is part of our collective moment, wherein artists, curators, publics, and other museum constituents are putting forward a set of shared ethical paradigms for a knowledge base that seeks to guarantee shared access and exposure. The "project space" is a node in this constellation of change.

The aim of *Dalam Southeast Asia* (National Gallery Singapore's "project space" located within its long-term display, *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*) is to contribute to this moment of self-reflexivity from the vantage point of territorial Southeast Asia. By inviting curators at the Gallery to devise questions and then develop strategies to address them, *Dalam Southeast Asia* argues for lesser-known narratives. By directly questioning the ways in which the modern art of Southeast Asia is displayed and written about, *Dalam Southeast Asia* aspires to recalibrate what a long-term collections-based display is, and what it may seek to achieve.



S. Mohdir  
 DALAM  
 1975  
 Acrylic on canvas,  
 92 x 66 cm  
 Collection of National  
 Gallery Singapore

“*Dalam*” is a Malay word meaning “inside.” It is used in everyday parlance to invite someone to enter a place or room. The word also carries esoteric undertones suggesting the “deep,” “within” or “interior,” pointing towards that aspect of the Self which is perceptible but also yet to be revealed. The word has been adopted by several artists. Simryn Gill’s celebrated suite of 260 photographs depicting the interiors of Malaysian homes, titled *Dalam* (2001), offers insights into the visual phenomenon that is the contemporary living room—a place where one seeks refuge from the vagaries of everyday life, but which is also built up part by part as an expression of one’s relationship with popular culture. Likewise, “*Dalam*” is the title of a painting from 1975 by S. Mohdir that surveys the depths of the ocean. The work is a

description of perception, whether directed outwards or inwards, as it announces the indelible realisation that modern man is merely a speck in the universe. Gill and Mohdir remind us that art is not separate from reflexivity, and reflexivity is not separate from art.

Since its inauguration in 2015, *Between Declarations and Dreams* has been an attempt at generating an ideal sort of “provincialism” that refuses to submit to the homogenising effects of the Euro-American master narrative of art. The long-term exhibition features almost 400 works of Southeast Asian art ranging from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and an evolving curatorium has been systematically “rotating” over 100 works every year.<sup>2</sup> In this pursuit, the display has sought to develop its own distinctive capacities (drawing on crucial primary research and fieldwork conducted by the curatorium across Asia, Western

Europe, the United States, and elsewhere) for shaping what is now a shared story of global modernism. In this way, *Between Declarations and Dreams* lays claim to the Euro-American canon and its futures. Curating from this vantage point allow us to strive for decolonising modernism's structures; as a result, allowing for multiple anachronistic worlds to thrive.

The idea of a project space at National Gallery Singapore has been with me for some time. It emerged from three key concerns, discerned from years of sustaining a unique long-term display that focuses on the geographical region of Southeast Asia. Although the concerns I outline below are specific to the Gallery, they may apply to any major collecting institution with a focus on the non-West.

Firstly, we have too often relied on art history to establish the legitimacy of narratives before including them in *Between Declarations and Dreams*. Whilst it may be wiser for curators to follow the art historians hypothesising as a prelude to display, *Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to present works in a format that is first and foremost “contingent on display,” i.e., presenting bodies of work that have not received sustained art historical attention, so that the exhibition becomes a realm for generating perspectives on artistic processes and their relationship with burgeoning concerns in society. In this way, the modern in Southeast Asia registers its relevance to the present, and our collective efforts to forge a future art history that is diverse. This potential is unlocked by suggesting that the process of display—alongside public dialogues, careful captioning, and copious compilations of curatorial notes—is an extension of the didactic role of the museum. *Dalam Southeast Asia* is thus a

rehearsal for a forthcoming art history, and those that experience the exhibition are its first readers.

Secondly, we need to begin challenging the very narratives we have set up since 2015 within the galleries that make up the chronological display of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, and actively resist the singularising effects of such a canon-building venture. By exploring dilemmas and silences that have governed the ability of curators to narrate stories within modern museums, *Dalam Southeast Asia* seeks to contribute to a more inclusive but “uneven” narrative of modern Southeast Asian art, one which remains a work in progress. In this way, *Dalam Southeast Asia* aspires to enable our publics to recognise that the stories we offer ought to be understood as contingent and open to revision with the passage of time. This process will need to be undertaken with care, because we also do not want to be seen as turning to the margins as a convenient way to access narratives without fully unravelling the problems of the centre. After all, it is the task of each new generation to revise the narratives that have been handed down by actively addressing the exclusionary practices of the past.

Thirdly, it has become increasingly important to stand outside the vending machine of art. This is a demand being made not by curators and museum professionals, but by publics around the world: that museums become responsive to and reflect the concerns of the communities they seek to serve. Increasingly, museums are being challenged to represent diverse voices, reduce carbon footprints, adopt digital interfaces, and claim a place for themselves as providing essential goods for everyday consumption. As a result, it has become imperative to produce an interior space (*dalam*) that talks about how curated

projects can engage with this trajectory. What does “curating” collections-based displays mean today? In this pursuit, Dalam Southeast Asia prototypes the small format exhibition that testbeds speculative approaches to curatorial research and exhibition design. For instance, the curators developing the various exhibitions have not only engaged artists or artist’s estates in conversations but also consulted a range of constituents to fill gaps in the production of cultural meaning. Curators must actively ask how their work in the field should and must have broader implications. With each exhibition, the hope is to devise more responsive approaches for the display of modern art within the museum.

To reiterate: The inauguration of Dalam Southeast Asia marks a significant turning point in the Gallery’s curatorial efforts to display, acquire and stimulate public dialogues around the dilemmas confronting the modern art of Southeast Asia. By locating Dalam Southeast Asia strategically within the framework of *Between Declarations and Dreams*, we seek to balance the familiar vocabularies with the lesser known, generate public and semi-public conversations, and perhaps create new values around the growing awareness that whatever power museums have is granted to them by the constituents they depend on to do their work.

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

National Gallery Singapore

15 July 2021

## NOTES

- 1 Examples of “project spaces” located within major European and American museums includes the following: (i) Stedelijk Turns, which is a room within the Dutch museum’s collections display (commonly known as Stedelijk Base). Stedelijk Turns features “new discoveries, commissions, and acquisitions” that have a direct impact on the museum’s collection. (ii) Salle Focus, which the Musée National d’Art Moderne maintains within the Centre Pompidou’s long-term displays. It is meant to present lesser-studied figures within the story of modernism and host contemporary art interventions. (iii) *Minor Histories*, an exhibitionary and discursive programme by the Van Abbe Museum, which features “pieces from the collection that have received less attention over the years, as well as recent acquisitions that uniquely represent the times, we live in.”

In Singapore, the NUS Museum hosts *preproom | things that may or may not happen*, an experimental project platform that features artworks, cultural objects, and archives as they are being accessioned, reworked or revised in relation to the museum’s extensive historical collections of art. The Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, which does not maintain an extensive collection, has hosted MAM Projects, a gallery that attracts similar inquiries. The NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore carved out The Lab, the Centre’s “space for introducing research in process and as an open studio for activation.”

Another recent shift in this genre of space building is the “experimental project lab,” which attempts to bridge visual art with debates in advanced technologies. The LACMA runs The Art + Technology Lab, a joint initiative with Hyundai, YouTube, SNAP Inc and SpaceX for exploring the convergence of art and technology. Similarly, MoMA’s Creativity Lab hosts The People’s Studio, where “visitors can learn about and experiment with artists’ strategies that rely on exchange, shared reflection, and collaboration.”

- 2 The inaugural hang in 2015 of *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* was developed by Cheng Jia Yun, Clarissa Chikiamco, Horikawa Lisa, Phoebe Scott, Syed Muhammad Hafiz, and Adele Tan. Since 2016, the curatorium has also included Goh Sze Ying, Qinyi Lim, Shujuan Lim, Anisha Menon, Roger Nelson, Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, Melinda Susanto, and Charmaine Toh. Alongside extensive efforts at surveying the Southeast Asian collections and developing detailed captions, the curatorium has actively sought key long-term loans from institutional and private lenders to address gaps in the chronological displays. For instance, a highlighted gap has been the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century displays, which has benefited from generous loans of works by Raden Saleh and Juan Luna from the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Lopez Memorial Museum respectively.

# CURATORIAL POSTSCRIPTS

## Postscript 1, 15 July 2022—On Curatorial Responsibility by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa



Exhibition view of *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, 2021.

It has been a year since we launched Dalam Southeast Asia. During this time, the project space has enabled the curatorium at the Gallery to engage with the challenges that were identified at the outset, ranging from the ability to develop newer sets of ethical paradigms that enable more inclusive measures for accessing art, to allowing the “curatorial” to act as a space for hypothesising an art history that is yet to come. The inaugural exhibition, *The Tailors and the Mannequins: Chen Cheng Mei and You Khin*, which ran from 29 October 2021 to 12 June 2022, generated turns that paid homage to the incredible lives both artists led and the array of materials and objects they left behind. *The Tailors and the Mannequins* re-emphasised the role modern art museums must (and will continue to) play in facilitating the circulation of stories that have yet to receive sustained art historical attention. This was achieved through the tireless work of Roger Nelson—my colleague and curator of the show—in engaging the artists and their estates alongside a series of specialists in a number of wide-ranging conversations that not only enabled gaps to be filled in a meaningful manner but also initiated the public into a vast realm of associated histories that pertain to forced migration and the ability of the Southeast Asian artist to display their art in environments where infrastructure was still in the midst of being formed.

Moreover, the exhibition pointed to the manifold lateral links between Southeast Asia and other regions across the decolonising world (collectively known as the Global South), including in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond. As this process unfolded in the lead up to and during the exhibition via a series of public conversations, it became possible to reflect upon the sovereignty that curators (and by extension public art institutions) continue to exercise over the artworks they display especially when curatorial enchantment actively seeks meaning within the painting’s subject matter but also beyond the boundaries of the artwork, whereby circulation and distribution is seen as an endearing facet of how one may consume the work of art today, in our time. This means that the authorial agendas of the artwork may be sublimated into a demonstration of contemporaneity, whereby the curator acts as an agent who resides within and at the edge of the culture that delivers the subject matter and context for the art. As the different Dalam Southeast Asia projects unfold, it will be pertinent to maintain notes on how this phenomenon unfolds and the techniques each curator develops to enhance accountability for the way artworks, materials, archival traces, and most importantly the stories we are entrusted with are used.

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To access the exhibition catalogue for *The Tailors and the Mannequins*, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/sg/en/learn-about-art/our-publications/exhibition-catalogues/tailors-and-mannequins.html>

## Postscript 2, 15 July 2023—On Curatorial Transmission by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa



Exhibition view of *Familiar Others*, 2022, showing Rocky Cajigan’s response printed alongside a photograph by Eduardo Masferré titled *Young Man* (1953).

The second exhibition at Dalam Southeast Asia raised a range of questions on “curatorial transmissions,” especially in relation to the presentation of Southeast Asian modern art. With *Familiar Others: Emiria Sunassa, Eduardo Masferré and Yeh Chi Wei, 1940s–1970s*, curated by my colleague Phoebe Scott, the thorny issue of “Otherness” and who can carry the burden of its representation in light of postcolonial thought came to the fore. As part of the exhibitionary form and narrative, Scott engaged a range of interlocutor-respondents from communities said to be represented in the artworks to respond to the paintings, photographs and archival matter on display. Common practice suggests that these messages—highlighting “potential issues” that have emerged in relation to modes of representation as ethical, philosophical and social conventions have shifted over time—be included in the catalogue, discussed in public programmes, or relegated to the bottom of artwork labels. Instead, *Familiar Others* placed these messages—often critical and working in tandem—front and centre alongside the artworks, suggesting that the didactic and educative function of the art institution be challenged by an overstaging of concerns that can now, potentially, reveal a range of issues related to the messaging of modern Southeast Asian art. I would like to speak to one such pressing matter: the “collectivism” suggested through such an experience of modern art.

From the outset, the curatorial intent of Dalam Southeast Asia has been about challenging the prevalent modes of presentation within the art institution. This concern has emerged from a movement taking place across museums as they seek to convert their largely white cube-led narratives (which emphasise the autonomy of the modern artwork) into sites of active public engagement. In this new mode, quiet contemplation is an option but not necessarily the norm—so much so that the beholder is now assumedly a talkative agent, socially engaged and culturally conscious. The underlying curatorial assumption is to generate an exhibitionary mode that offers a critical insight into the historical and present conditions from which pictures emerge. For *Familiar Others*, the artworks are immersed into such a collective ethos of introspection through a range of poetic and essay fragments generated by external agents other than the curators, effectively calling into question any suggestion of the museum as an impartial mediator of perspectives. How such an awareness can be sustained, enhanced and made productive remains to be seen. For the moment, I offer this observation: We seem to be moving towards a curatorial constructivism whereby the museum’s transcendental promise is being carefully reconstituted by the urge for an inclusive social order promoting collective interaction and a sense of community. This constructivism is premised upon a growing public awareness, at times driven by forces beyond museum workers, that the art institution and its narratives, no matter how naturalistic and certain they appear, are merely historical constructions. It is now, as the saying goes, a matter of time.

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To access the exhibition catalogue for *Familiar Others*, please visit:  
<https://www.nationalgallery.sg/sg/en/learn-about-art/our-publications/exhibition-catalogues/familiar-others.html>

### Postscript 3, 15 January 2024—On Curatorial Openings by Shabbir Hussain Mustafa



Exhibition view of *The Neglected Dimension*, 2023.

In its third iteration, Dalam Southeast Asia ventured into a domain that has been on the edge of debates on modern art: abstraction and its experimentations with spirituality. Titled *The Neglected Dimension* and curated by my colleague and art historian Anissa Rahadiningtyas, the project set out to survey the interlinked practices of Ahmad Sadali, A.D. Pirous, Haryadi Suadi and Arahmaiani that emerged from the art school under Institut Teknologi Bandung—a site of major experimentations in abstraction from the 1950s until the 1990s. Set across three generations, the project borrowed its title from a 1987 essay by art critic Sanento Yuliman, who reiterated Ahmad Sadali’s argument for the artistic and material manifestations of religion and religiosity (in the Indonesian case, Islam and Islamicity) to be considered when assessing the development of modern art in Indonesia. In the curatorial text accompanying the exhibition, Rahadiningtyas argues that Yuliman’s celebration of Islamic aesthetics was a response to the agitations accompanying the dismantling of two centuries of European colonial rule and the search for autonomous metaphors in abstract painting in Indonesia. The exhibition at National Gallery Singapore studied how the potentials of Arabic and Jawi script were reimagined through an approach called “calligraphic modernism”—an expression Rahadiningtyas borrowed from art historian Iftikhar Dadi and his surveys on similar and parallel developments in West Asia, North Africa and South Asia. The aim of *The Neglected Dimension*, if it may be surmised, was to extend the geographical scope of “calligraphic modernism” to Southeast Asia. In fact, the project of “modernising” Islamic aesthetics extended across the Global South from Bandung to Tunis, from Baghdad to Dhaka. In light of the exhibition and its accompanying public programmes, I would like to reflect on one matter: the curatorial “opening” that emerged as a result of this project.

One of the aims of Dalam Southeast Asia has been to draw attention to aspects of the region’s art that require exhibitionary attention, as well as enable a kind of simultaneous thinking/rethinking and assimilation/metamorphosis of the bases through which we think about artistic practices and movements in Southeast Asia. “Calligraphic modernism” might just offer an incredible, and even outrageous, opening into ongoing decolonial debates on difference and the Other. What I mean is this: calligraphic abstraction is unique in its potential to craft out an attitude that can disrupt the coherence of abstraction as a dialogic exchange between non-Western artists and their peers in New York and Paris (such has been the case around Constructivism, Cubism, Futurism and even non-objective abstraction). This movement—if it can be constituted as such—did not just emerge in the Global South but was also unique to it. Although Rahadiningtyas did not fully develop this argument, she has left us with this opening with an entry/fragment featured in the timeline that appears in the exhibition catalogue: the Konferensi Islam Asia Afrika (KIAA, or the Islamic Asia-Africa Conference), which was held in Bandung, exactly a decade after the Asia-Africa Conference. It is likely that A.D. Pirous, Ahmad Sadali, Haryadi Suadi and a number of their peers were informed

of this significant event, which sought to build similarities across the Islamicate world. The question then arises: Can we now build a constellation of encounters between these artists and their peers across the formerly-colonised/Islamicate worlds...? A broader curatorial investment into this topic is gently requested.

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To access the exhibition catalogue for *The Neglected Dimension*, please visit: <https://www.nationalgallery.sg/sg/en/learn-about-art/our-publications/exhibition-catalogues/dalam-southeast-asia-the-neglected-dimension.html>

### Postscript 4, 8 May 2025—On Curatorial Desire by Patrick Flores



Exhibition view of *Figuring a Scene*, 2024.

Dalam is a trope of introspection and speculation—and depth. The notion of the “internal” proposes an interrogation and an inquiry, not an indulgence of curatorial territory or property. The internal may also be regarded as a kind of immanence, that is, a gesture towards an integrity, a state of becoming rather than a critique of a previous identity that has been constructed so tendentiously, if not so deterministically, and yet so irresistibly in the same breath.

This idea of the interior resurfaces in the iteration *Diplomacy and Desire: Basoeki Abdullah in Singapore*. Here, the exhibition turns into a drawing room, as it were, in which the domus of art meets the demos of a nation-state. Diplomacy and desire begin at home.

Dalam is proposed as a hospitable space within the institution. Whether to deepen or clarify, expand or experiment, it is viewed as a generative space for possibility as evidenced in the previous exhibitions presented in the premises. The efforts ran the range, from research to investigation, from recovering to constellating. Dalam tends to be reflexive, critical of disciplines and norms because of their omissions and discriminations, and is expectedly poised to initiate critical institutionality rather than the typical institutional critique. That is: the authority of the museum is reconstructed through strategic and practical initiations from within that inclines towards and extends into but may not totally assimilate the “outside.”

The preceding iteration that I curated was titled *Figuring a Scene*. It was an attempt to offer ways to tell the story of art in ways that are not too bound, or beholden, to art history and the custodianship of objects in a collection. It activated tropes that spoke to the sensitivities of a broad public sphere and tried not to steer the narrative to the self-fulfilling prophecies of art history. The exhibition moved around episodes in the staging of a situation, where the signs did not derive from the academic lexicon but from general phenomena and where facts of history were translated to sensible data: shadow or fruit, for instance, instead of modernisation or realism. In other words, the exhibition heightened the attitude of a sensing body responding to charismatic material. To enhance the possibility of this curatorial model, a different scenography and style were intimated to converse with the poetics of the curatorial project and its discursive climate.

That said, as *Figuring a Scene* tarried with the sensuous particularity of materials in the interactive curatorial space, so did it enhance the thoughtfulness of the percipient towards the possible, though not inevitable, narratives that may inform a kind of knowing or feeling such as art history, visual culture, the everyday life of images, the memory of persons, the morphing of a city, the origin of the conscious self. To a certain extent, the curatorial is signified by the process of “figuring a scene.” To curate is not to exhibit, explain, conclude; it is to figure, not

figure out, a scene, to be intriguingly instructive. To inhabit the curatorial space, to experience the exhibition, is to do the same.

The current exhibition follows through the foregoing curatorial ethos as it foregrounds the desirous aspects of diplomacy through alluring and enigmatic paintings as well as the intriguing biography of the artist. While it does not elide the stature of Basoeki as an exemplar in Indonesian modernism, it also does not sustain the privileges of that persona and the affordances of his art in the canon as well as the encroachments of the proverbial male gaze. In the same vein, while the approach to the exhibition is monographic, it does not overly individuate or mystify Basoeki. In fact, the exhibition releases him from certain distinctions or confinements in the historiography. From master or virtuoso, a cosmopolitan painter of many patrons across Southeast Asia, he is rather more productively regarded as a symptom, vulnerable to curatorial diagnosis and restoration.

Basoeki as a cipher is nested within a world of financiers and socialites. He finds or positions himself within the contact zone of the local capitalist elite and the ruling political class in which the stagecraft of a modern and international, civilisational and contemporary government is generated. Such an enterprise signals a shift from the state patronage of the arts to the aesthetic state, which is fostered by the “ideology of the aesthetic” and the political utterance it elicits. I am reminded of a picture of Basoeki and Philippine First Lady Imelda Marcos standing beside the imposing Imelda portrait where the beauteous subject seems to be rehearsing a pose, if not altogether repainting the portrait in her mind for the contracted portraitist to dutifully mimic the vanity.

The setting of the exhibition facilitates a discursive circulation while alluding to an ambience of a salon, the site of leisure and study that opens up the material to the analysis of objectification (whether of art or body of woman) and the allegorisation of progress within a developmentalist nation-state. That said, it slackens the habitus of interpreting museological and exhibitionary material, it invites the viewer to sit down, to peruse the archive as periodical without pressure, only with the attentiveness of a close, unhurried reading of what appears to be the news of the day. This complicates the virtues of urgency, as the engagement becomes responsive, if not punctual, even if it delays decisions but potentially protracts its effects because it stretches the tenure in the trouble.

Reflecting on this curatorial direction, I am led to the work of Miguel de Beistegui, *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject*. I am struck by the coming together of the terms government and desire and how the liberal subject, which is the agent of art in modernity, is rendered with volition though compromised by a series of constraints. This theorisation inflects the curatorial intentions of the curator, Kathleen Ditzig, who carves out a locus for Basoeki and the trajectories of desire and diplomacy in reimagining Southeast Asian modernity. De Beistegui turns to Michel Foucault to delineate government as an “art,” a “technique” and to point out that the western civilisation is the “civilization of desire.”<sup>1</sup>

In De Beistegui's explication, desire is "a key assemblage of knowledge and power through which we are constituted as subjects and through which we learn to recognize and govern ourselves."<sup>2</sup> In the formation of the liberal subject, it may be parsed in economic, sexual and symbolic terms. Across the work of Basoeki, we glean this in conjuring an imaginary in the vein of either the romantic sublime or the expressionist utopia, at once archaeological and futuristic, realist and surrealist. The woman fleshes out the sexual potency as her body is liberally depicted, exposing her delicate parts as well enhancing her attractiveness through stylisations of hair, skin, lips and élan to accentuate her affinities with wealth and social standing. In this regard, the modality of the portrait is salient as it announces the self and renders it both as a biographical reference and an ornament, an accoutrement of society. The symbolic capital of desire is the painting itself, the technology of portraiture and allegory in which human action is meshed with ecology and technology, fantasy and a futuristic industry.

For De Beistegui, the force of government is the technique of normalisation, in other words of naturalisation so that consent to or affirmation of the order is deemed natural or in the preordained order of things. This is one part of the constitution. The other is the desire to refuse this nature and to augur an alterity. Consider some of the means: "Laziness and idleness, indifference and flight...renewed eroticism...a new voluptuousness, another way of being with one another."<sup>3</sup> Production, recognition, autonomy, representation and identity may give way to a more inchoate sovereignty. In one of Basoeki's paintings, labour is evoked by a phantasmagoria that intersperses the realism of manufacture and the ether of a spectral dominion. In another, democracy and the rights of the people condense in a mythical and erotic mermaid suspended under water and mingling with marine life. We might want to recall that portraiture and allegory were foundational moments of modern subjectivity in Southeast Asia. The oeuvre of the Filipino Juan Luna and the Indonesian Raden Saleh testifies to this, alongside the antecedent tradition embodied by the work of Simon Flores and Khrua in Khong from the Philippines and Thailand. The portraiture of the former anticipates photography and genre; and the allegory of the latter traces its genealogy to Buddhist mural painting. A seminal articulation that melds the two tendencies might be Juan Luna's *España y Filipinas* (Spain and Philippines, 1886 and 1888) that is at once a portrait and an allegory, specifically a *ruckenfigur* (the back of the subject turned to the viewer) as in the well-known painting of Caspar David Friedrich's, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). In Philippine art, the allegorical portrait or the portrait that assumes allegorical dimension because it frames the ethical personage of the subject through class or ethnic distinction may be embodied in Galo Ocampo's *Brown Madonna* (1938) and Vicente Manansala's *Madonna of the Slums* (1950). In these paintings, the woman, who is also a Marian figure, references the qualities of racialised skin and a politicised, class-continuous, milieu. Speaking of Ocampo, his affinity with Basoeki is actually striking, as can be observed in his surrealistic landscapes consisting of flagellants in a wasteland or the theatre of war. He also painted the United Nations building being swept into an ethereal landscape against a bleak sky and amid fighter jets, bursting from the ground, borne by a gargantuan shell, suspended in

mid-air by dense though shrivelled nature and age-old rocks from what seems like a seabed that is also a barren planet, and finally hoisted by muscled bondsmen.

The exhibition, in fact, implies some of these options as it pushes the Basoeki narrative to the realm of high-society excess to the point of kitsch or camp. The latter, if construed not as the binary opposite of the avant-garde and its attendant formalisms, could be an entry point into another way of annotating the historical and aesthetic life of the modern form in Southeast Asia, one that is intertwined with the common culture, the pleasures of the popular commodity and the enchanting promise of the good life in luxury. We may find amid this opulence not the critique of its political economy but the necessary limit of art history so that the Basoeki aesthetic of beauty and power can be the point of a conversation around recognisable objects of desire and not the culmination of an ideological dismissal of their possible decadence.

The exhibition *Diplomacy and Desire* stages this process of recognition of the subject, which is at the heart of the liberal project: the subject of the art, the producer of the art and the public of the art. That the art is gifted to the government of Singapore marks a moment of traction with inter-state diplomacy and regional desire; and the fact that Basoeki stayed in Singapore at a nascent time of its self-determination is a productive convergence of interests. In this relay, we can tease out nodes of the diplomatic gesture: relationality, gift exchange, negotiation and reciprocal appropriation of cultural capital to adumbrate a national style. Such a national style in the colonial era underwent some kind of feminisation through a very masculine art history exemplified by the father of Basoeki himself, Abdullah Suriosubroto, who nurtured the visual rhetoric of the idealised and picturesque tropics, orientalised for extraction but also honoured for its distinct fertility.

This political desire for a diplomatic relationship, if not a polyamory or a multilaterality, speaks to the condition of the curatorial itself. The curatorial is a vector of diplomacy, complicit in and constitutive of the possibility of recognition, appearance, communication, reciprocal obligation, agreement, negotiation, nothing less than the ethos and eros of intercourse. More than a geopolitical device, the diplomatic that is also the curatorial is a geopoetic, tropic invitation. It is propositional and performative, situated in an environment of ties, stimuli, pleasures and reflexes. And because this diplomatic embodiment is seductive and libidinal, it reinforces the democratic talent of the state, together with its coercive power and its collective enchantment. It has been claimed, after all, that “democracy may be...the queerest form of government yet invented.”<sup>4</sup>

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To access the exhibition catalogue for *Figuring a Scene*, please visit:  
<https://www.nationalgallery.sg/sg/en/learn-about-art/our-publications/exhibition-catalogues/figuring-a-scene.html>

NOTES

- 1 Miguel De Beistegui, *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject* (University of Chicago Press: 2018), 12.
- 2 De Beistegui, 8.
- 3 De Beistegui, 27.
- 4 Samuel Clowes Huneke, *A Queer Theory of the State* (Floating Opera Press: 2023).



# BASOEKI ABDULLAH: AN INDONESIAN PERSPECTIVE

by Bayu Genia Krishbie

Basoeki Abdullah occupies a prominent position as one of the most celebrated figures in Indonesian art history. His influence on the development of modern Indonesian art is both profound and multifaceted, yet his legacy is marked by considerable complexity. On one hand, he is widely recognised for his exceptional mastery of realism and naturalism, with his skill exceeding mere technical virtuosity. Basoeki is often lauded as a prodigiously talented painter who played a pivotal role in elevating Indonesian art to international prominence. On the other hand, his work has been persistently critiqued by fellow Indonesian artists and art critics, particularly for its perceived elitism, bourgeois sensibilities, and an alleged lack of robust nationalist sentiment. These criticisms first emerged during the fervent period of national struggle in the 1930s and 1940s and continued to shape perceptions of his work in subsequent decades.<sup>1</sup> This duality in his legacy invites a deeper interrogation of his role within the broader narrative of Indonesian art and cultural identity.

The rise of social realism within Indonesian art during the 1950s–1960s presented a striking contrast to Basoeki’s artistic approach. Social realism, with its emphasis on portraying the everyday realities, social struggles and hardships faced by the working class, resonated deeply with the ethos of the independence movement and the aspirations of the broader populace. In this context, Basoeki’s oeuvre, characterised by its focus on idealised beauty and depictions of high society, was frequently critiqued for its perceived lack of social relevance. His inclination toward

accepting commissions from elite patrons and his predilection for mythological and romantic themes further distanced his work from the central tenets of the people's aesthetic. Consequently, this alienation has played a significant role in shaping the critical discourse surrounding his legacy.

However, recent scholarly inquiries into Basoeki Abdullah's oeuvre have increasingly adopted a more comprehensive and contextualised approach. Current discourses endeavour to situate his works within the socio-cultural and historical milieu of his era while also examining his contributions to the development of Indonesian art. This includes analysing his role in cultural diplomacy, his influence on subsequent generations of artists, and the broader historical and political dynamics that shaped his artistic trajectory. Hence, a critical question emerges: Can Basoeki Abdullah be accorded a more fitting and nuanced position within the historiography of modern Indonesian art? Furthermore, how might his legacy and narrative be re-evaluated and recontextualised to reflect his multifaceted impact on Indonesia's artistic and cultural landscape?

## **The Formative Years**

Basoeki Abdullah was born on January 27, 1915, in Surakarta, Indonesia, into an aristocratic family deeply embedded in the artistic and intellectual spheres. His father, Abdullah Suriosubroto, was a distinguished painter and his older brother, Sudjono Abdullah followed in his footsteps. His younger sister, Trijoto Abdullah, gained recognition as a sculptor, having studied under prominent figures such as Prof. Tierfelder and Prof. Wolff Schoemaker at the Technische Hogeschool Bandung (now the Bandung Institute of Technology).<sup>2</sup> His grandfather, Dr. Wahidin Soedirohoesodo, was a seminal figure in the establishment of Boedi Oetomo on May 20, 1908, which marked the emergence of national consciousness among intellectuals and activists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Growing up in such an environment, Basoeki was immersed in art from an early age. His artistic talents became evident during his formative years, and his education in the

arts was formalised when he enrolled at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Koninklijke Academie voor Beeldende Kunsten) in The Hague, the Netherlands. Initially enrolled as a non-matriculated student in 1933, he was subsequently admitted as a formal student in 1935.<sup>3</sup> He was awarded a scholarship to pursue formal art education and refined his skills in classical European painting techniques during his time at the academy. This period profoundly influenced his artistic style, which came to be characterised by its realism and romanticism.

Basoeki completed his academic programme in two years. Following the culmination of his formal education in The Hague, the Netherlands, he engaged in a series of comparative studies at prominent art institutions in Paris and Rome, further enriching his artistic perspective and technical expertise. In 1939, he initiated a comprehensive touring exhibition across Indonesia, presenting his works to a broader domestic audience. The exhibition was strategically organised in key urban centres, including Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Bandung and Medan, thereby facilitating a wider engagement with Indonesian society.

During the Japanese occupation period, Basoeki Abdullah became a member of Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA, or Centre for People's Power), an organisation established by the Japanese administration on March 9, 1943, where he was assigned to teach painting. Among his notable students were Kusnadi, who later gained recognition as an art critic, and Zaini, a prominent painter.<sup>4</sup> Beyond his involvement in PUTERA, Basoeki also played an active role in Keimin Bunka Shidosho (Japanese Cultural Centre), collaborating with other distinguished artists of the time, including Affandi, S. Sudjojono, Otto Djaja and Basoeki Resobowo. During this time, Basoeki also cultivated a close relationship with Soekarno, who would later become the first President of the Republic of Indonesia.

Basoeki resided in Europe with his then-wife, Maya Michel, during the revolution for Indonesian independence (1945–1949), where he actively engaged in a series of exhibitions across the continent, notably in the Netherlands and England. These exhibitions included venues such as the Merdag Museum Nederland (1945), Bristol (1946), Apeldoorn, Amersfoort and the Maritime Museum (1947), as well as the

Nieuwe Muziek School–Zeist (1948) and Scheveningen’s Victoria Hotel (1949). In 1949, he produced portraits of key political figures, including Bung Hatta, Ibu Rahmi Hatta, Mr. M. Roem and Sultan Hamid II, commissioned for the Round Table Conference in The Hague.<sup>5</sup>

Among his most distinguished achievements was his victory in a prestigious painting competition commemorating the coronation of Queen Juliana on 6 September 1948, held at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. His triumph over 87 European painters was widely regarded as a remarkable feat, garnering significant attention and acclaim from the European audience at the time. However, this accomplishment was perceived as deeply ironic as it coincided with the Indonesian people’s intense physical and political struggle against Dutch colonial rule during the period of revolution. The stigma associated with his victory in the competition to paint Queen Juliana’s coronation portrait persisted as a significant aspect of Basoeki’s legacy, shaping public perception of his work and allegiances in Indonesian society at large for years to come.<sup>6</sup>

Basoeki’s early works demonstrated an exceptional command of realism, a style that prioritises detailed and lifelike representations of subjects. Realism became his hallmark, setting him apart from many of his contemporaries, who often gravitated toward expressionism or, in the terminology of S. Sudjojono, “*jiwa ketok*” (visible soul).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Basoeki was profoundly fascinated with Javanese traditional culture and the mythological narratives of the *wayang* (shadow puppet) tradition, which enriches the symbolic depth of his artistic works. This distinctive approach not only solidified his reputation as a master of realism but also underscored his ability to bridge cultural and artistic traditions, thereby contributing to the evolving narrative of modern Indonesian art.

## [ Cultural Diplomacy ]

One of Basoeki Abdullah’s most profound contributions to Indonesian history lay in his role as a cultural ambassador. His artistic endeavours served as a vital medium through which

Indonesia articulated and projected its national identity on the global stage. During a pivotal era when Indonesia was establishing its status as an independent nation, Basoeki's works played a crucial role in presenting modern Indonesian culture to international audiences, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the nation's rich cultural heritage and contemporary artistic expressions.

Basoeki's unwavering commitment to art was exemplified through his prestigious commissions to portray royalty and heads of state, as well as his participation in numerous international exhibitions. These exhibitions spanned Singapore (1951), Italy (1955), Portugal and England (1956), Singapore (1958), Tokyo, Japan (1959), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (1959), Thailand (1960), Cambodia (1963), Thailand (1973), Singapore (1981) and Brunei Darussalam (1984).<sup>8</sup> He once held a highly esteemed position as a royal court painter for the Kingdom of Thailand, a testament to his exceptional talent and international acclaim. This significant relationship commenced in 1958, during his exhibition in Singapore, when King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) extended an invitation to Basoeki to visit Thailand to paint the royal family via Surathun Bunnad, a member of Queen Sirikit's family.<sup>9</sup> Upon his arrival in Thailand, Basoeki was greeted warmly by King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit.

Basoeki's contributions to the Kingdom of Thailand were so significant that he was awarded the prestigious Poporo Honorary Star by King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) of Thailand in 1969. This honour represents the highest royal distinction bestowed upon a royal court artist, recognising their extraordinary service and dedication to both the government and the royal court. During his tenure in Thailand which lasted almost 15 years, Basoeki not only fulfilled his commission to paint the royal family but was also afforded the privilege of organising a solo exhibition in Bangkok. During this period, Basoeki further responded to an invitation extended by Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia to assume the role of court painter, subsequently organising an exhibition in Phnom Penh in 1963.<sup>10</sup>

Upon returning from his period of residence in Thailand, Basoeki was formally appointed by President Soeharto as the court painter of the Merdeka Palace in 1974.<sup>11</sup> His association with President Soeharto began when he was summoned to

return to Jakarta from Bangkok to create a portrait of the President-elect, who was poised for inauguration in 1967.<sup>12</sup> During his tenure as the official court painter under President Soeharto (1974–1993), Basoeki created portraits of numerous state guests and distinguished international figures, including Pope John Paul II and Singapore’s then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Among his most significant commissions from President Soeharto was a monumental 7-metre-long group portrait featuring 41 heads of state from the Non-Aligned Movement, crafted to commemorate Indonesia’s hosting of the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in 1992.

Basoeki assumed the role of court painter for both the Philippines (1977) and Brunei Darussalam (1983), having been extended invitations by their respective heads of state, Ferdinand Marcos and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.<sup>13</sup> Such an accolade not only underscores Basoeki’s artistic mastery but also highlights his role as a cultural bridge between Indonesia and neighbouring countries, solidifying his legacy as a figure of immense importance in the realm of Southeast Asian art and diplomacy.

### **Criticism and Paradox: Position in Modern Indonesian Art History**

Basoeki Abdullah is undoubtedly one of the most popular painters in Indonesia, attaining the legendary status of Raden Saleh, Affandi and S. Sudjojono, who are enshrined in the annals of Indonesian art history. The memory of thousands flocking to Basoeki’s 1984 exhibition at Taman Ismail Marzuki remains vivid to the Indonesian art public. Earlier that same year, art enthusiasts gathered at the Jakarta Hilton Hotel, despite a Rp. 1,000 entrance fee that was donated to charity. This was the first time an entrance fee was charged for a painting exhibition in the history of independent Indonesia, echoing W.S. Rendra’s pioneering use of admission fees for poetry events. The exhibition also featured reproductions of Basoeki’s paintings, selling thousands of copies.<sup>14</sup>

However, despite his extraordinary popularity, Basoeki has not been fully embraced within the “elite” circles of

Indonesian art over the past few decades. This exclusion stems from several extrinsic factors that have placed him in a problematic position, which have impacted his reputation over at least 40 years.<sup>15</sup> He faced at least five major criticisms that shaped his controversial legacy: lacking nationalist sentiment due to his stance during the 1930–1940 independence movement, being perceived as bourgeois because of his aristocratic background and apparent elitism, being criticised for prioritising superficial aesthetics over profound artistic depth, being labelled as a “commission artist” for creating works driven more by client demands than personal creativity, and being regarded as outdated for clinging to traditional styles in a nation increasingly embracing artistic innovation.

Emerging critical discourses have offered a more nuanced evaluation of these stigmas. Eddy Soetriyono, curator and art critic, contends that the characterisation of Basoeki Abdullah as “overly Westernised” is an exaggeration, noting that contemporaries such as S. Sudjojono, Affandi and Hendra Gunawan were similarly influenced by the broader historical context of Western style modernisation imposed on a colonised society.<sup>16</sup> Soetriyono examines Basoeki’s painting, *Maria Assumpta* (1935), which was recently uncovered in the storage facility of the Aqua Viva nursing home, operated by the Jesuit Order in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He raises the critical question: “How could a Roman Catholic, frequently characterised as ‘Westernised,’ produce a portrayal of the Virgin Mary adorned in a kebaya and batik sarong featuring the *parang rusak* motif, depicted soaring above Mount Merapi, set against a backdrop of rice fields and swaying coconut palms?”<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, the profound influence of Javanese culture is prominently reflected in Basoeki’s oeuvre, which frequently draws from Javanese folklore and legends such as *Pertarungan Gatotkaca dan Antasena*, *Kisah Jaka Tarub*, and *Kanjeng Kidul*. Wagiono Sunarto, artist and academic, observes that Basoeki, immersed in Javanese traditions and educated in European artistic techniques, articulated themes deeply rooted in his cultural heritage through a Western artistic framework. Wagiono contends that Basoeki’s Javanese upbringing prevented him from portraying beauty in a simplistic or naive manner, distinguishing his work from the orientalist inclinations often seen in Western artists.<sup>18</sup>

This perspective is affirmed by Mikke Susanto, curator and academic, who characterises Basoeki as an artistic extension of President Soekarno—with Soekarno himself serving as the interpretive framework for Indonesia’s artistic expression. A hallmark of Basoeki’s oeuvre lies in its pronounced nationalist themes, encompassing portraits of national heroes and depictions of Javanese mythology. These thematic elements significantly supported Soekarno in constructing and disseminating a cohesive national imagery, particularly crucial for a nation in its early stages of independence.<sup>19</sup>

In response to critiques labelling his paintings as salon-like, sweet, glamorous and grounded in romantic realism, Basoeki found a defender in writer and critic Agus Dermawan T. He argued that Basoeki did not overlook themes addressing the struggles of the people or the suffering, pain and hardships of the world. On the contrary, many of his works portrayed these realities with remarkable depth and sensitivity. His oeuvre included depictions of children affected by the Vietnam War, homeless girls in Pejompongan and orphaned children cradled by Mother Teresa.<sup>20</sup> “Yet, the efforts of nationalists in advocating for the people and the vulnerable everywhere have always been a source of inspiration for me,” Basoeki remarked. In his writing, Agus included remarks from critic Sanento Yuliman who lauded these thematic works in his article *Sisi Lain Basoeki Abdullah* (The Other Side of Basoeki Abdullah):

There is no beauty. No flat, bright colours.  
Not even *trompe-l’oeil*, or visual trickery...  
His brushstrokes are bold throughout the  
painting, reinforcing a heavy atmosphere and  
imagery of poverty and suffering.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Eddy Soetriyono strategically juxtaposed paradoxical realities within the context of the 2006 Jakarta Biennale. In the “Milestones” segment of the biennale, hosted at the National Gallery of Indonesia and the Museum of Fine Arts and Ceramics, he curated an exhibition that placed Basoeki’s 1976 work *Pelabuhan/Kapal* (Harbour/Ship), characterised by a people’s aesthetic evocative of

S. Sudjojono, in direct dialogue with a landscape painting by S. Sudjojono.<sup>22</sup> The latter piece, conversely, embodied an idealised beauty traditionally associated with Basoeki's artistic approach.

This deliberate pairing highlighted the interplay of contrasting artistic ideologies and visual vocabularies, challenging conventional categorisations within Indonesian art history.

Consequently, the critique that Basoeki was merely a salon painter is not entirely valid. As Agus argues, while his preference for salon-like styles and themes can be contextualised within the historical framework of his time, it is crucial to acknowledge that his artistic trajectory was deeply influenced by the dynamic tension between two contrasting cultural forces.<sup>23</sup> First, the artistic pole grounded in classical romanticism, inherited from 19<sup>th</sup>-century European artists and fellow Indonesian painter Raden Saleh—a domain reflecting a life of tranquillity, comfort, security and the structured order of the Dutch colonial period. Second, the artistic pole that called for modernisation in both conceptualisation and expression was influenced by the burgeoning modernist movement in the West. Concurrently, there existed the pole of national life, which demanded that every action of the nation's people embody the ethos of a formerly colonised society, one characterised by a revolutionary spirit and a readiness to sacrifice.

However, despite the controversy, this divergence sparked debates within the Indonesian art public about the purpose and direction of art. While some critics viewed Basoeki's work as overly decorative or detached from social realities, others appreciated his commitment to preserving traditional values and aesthetic principles. These discussions enriched Indonesia's artistic discourse, highlighting the diversity of approaches within its modern art development.

## Legacy and Commemoration

Basoeki Abdullah met a tragic end on November 5, 1993, when he was fatally attacked at his residence in Cilandak, South Jakarta, by assailants seeking to steal his money and

valuable watch collection. Investigations later uncovered that his former gardener orchestrated the robbery. On November 7, his remains were transported from Jakarta to Yogyakarta aboard a Pelita Air Service aircraft, PK-PJN Lengguru, which was graciously provided by President Soeharto's family, for interment at the family burial site in Mlati, Yogyakarta.

In alignment with the provisions outlined in Basoeki's will, his legal heirs—Saraswati Kovenhoven, his eldest daughter from his first (former) wife, Josephine; Nataya Nareerat, his spouse; and Cecilia Sidhawati, his daughter from Nataya—bequeathed his residence, a selection of his paintings and an assortment of art objects and memorabilia to the Government of the Republic of Indonesia. The property, a two-storey residence encompassing a 600 sqm structure situated on a 450-sqm plot of land, underwent extensive renovation and was subsequently inaugurated as the Basoeki Abdullah Museum in 2001, thereby establishing a public institution dedicated to preserving and showcasing his artistic legacy.

The artistic works of Basoeki Abdullah are not only extensively held in private collections but are also distributed across a diverse array of museums, embassies and governmental institutions spanning more than 22 countries globally.<sup>24</sup> His legacy has been enshrined through the establishment of the Basoeki Abdullah Art Award, the only national platform for emerging artists organised and endorsed by the Indonesian government since 2013.

The passing of Basoeki Abdullah left a profound sense of grief among the people of Indonesia. Even Mochtar Lubis, a renowned journalist and novelist who did not particularly admire Basoeki's paintings, remarked, "He was one of the few finest Indonesian painters with an international reputation. Thus, the death of Basoeki Abdullah represents a significant loss for the Indonesian nation."<sup>25</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 S. Sudjojono, “Basoeki Abdullah dan Kesenian Melukis,” in *Seni Lukis, Kesenian, dan Seniman*, eds. Eka Kurniawan et al. (Yayasan Aksara Indonesia, 2000), 19–27.
- 2 Suratmin, et al., *R. Basoeki Abdullah: Sebuah Biografi dan Pengabdianannya dalam Bidang Seni Lukis* (Museum Basoeki Abdullah, 2006), 6.
- 3 Agus Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan* (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2023), xii.
- 4 Joko Madsono and Mikke Susanto, “Riwayat Hidup dan Ragam Karya Basoeki Abdullah” in *Basoeki Abdullah: Fakta dan Fiksi*, eds. Rose Gan et al. (Museum Basoeki Abdullah, 2009), 9.
- 5 Joko Madsono and Mikke Susanto, “Riwayat Hidup dan Ragam Karya Basoeki Abdullah.”
- 6 Agus Dermawan, “Menguak Tirai Panggung Basoeki Abdullah,” in *Basoeki Abdullah: Fakta dan Fiksi*, eds. Rose Gan et al. (Museum Basoeki Abdullah, 2009), 24.
- 7 S. Sudjojono, “Kesenian, Seniman, dan Masyarakat” in *Seni Lukis, Kesenian, dan Seniman*, eds. Eka Kurniawan et al. (Yayasan Aksara Indonesia, 2000), 92.
- 8 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, xii–xv.
- 9 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 117–118.
- 10 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, xiv.
- 11 Indah Tjahjawulan, *Kajian Koleksi dan Program Publik Museum Basoeki Abdullah* (Direktorat Jenderal Sejarah dan Purbakala, 2011), 2.
- 12 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 64.
- 13 Agus Aris Munandar, *Lukisan Basoeki Abdullah Tema Perjuangan, Sosial, dan Kemanusiaan* (Museum Basoeki Abdullah, 2016), 15–16.
- 14 Dermawan, “Menguak Tirai Panggung Basoeki Abdullah,” 23–24.
- 15 Dermawan, “Menguak Tirai Panggung Basoeki Abdullah,” 23.
- 16 “Basoeki Abdullah di Balik Berbagai Stigma,” *Sarasvati*, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://sarasvati.co.id/events/09/basoeki-abdullah-di-balik-berbagai-stigma/>.
- 17 “Basoeki Abdullah di Balik Berbagai Stigma,” *Sarasvati*.
- 18 “Basoeki Abdullah di Balik Berbagai Stigma,” *Sarasvati*.
- 19 “Basoeki Abdullah di Balik Berbagai Stigma,” *Sarasvati*.
- 20 Dermawan, “Menguak Tirai Panggung Basoeki Abdullah,” 26.
- 21 Sanento Yuliman, “Sisi Lain Basoeki Abdullah (The Other Side of Basoeki Abdullah),” *Tempo*, August 27, 1988. Cited in Dermawan, “Menguak Tirai Panggung Basoeki Abdullah,” 27.
- 22 Eddy Soetriono, *Membaca Ulang Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia in Museum Basoeki Abdullah: Seni Rupa Modern dan Tradisional, Basoeki Abdullah dan Karya Lukisnya*, ed. Joko Madsono (Museum Basoeki Abdullah, 2010), 23.
- 23 Dermawan, “Menguak Tirai Panggung Basoeki Abdullah,” 27.

- 24** The 22 countries that collected Basoeki Abdullah's paintings are the United States of America, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Belgium, France, Spain, Switzerland, Portugal, Italy, Iraq, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Cambodia, Egypt and Indonesia; *Pameran Besar Karya R. Basoeki Abdullah RA.*, exh. cat. (Taman Ismail Marzuki, 1984).
- 25** Agus Dermawan, "Basoeki Abdullah: Elegi 30 Tahun Lalu," *Borobudur Writers*, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://borobudurwriters.id/sahabat-museum-dan-galeri/basoeki-abdullah-elegi-30-tahun-lalu/>.

# BASOEKI ABDULLAH'S GIFTS TO SINGAPORE

by Kathleen Ditzig



Small informational text block on the left side of the gallery wall, partially obscured by the painting's frame.

LABOUR  
1959  
Oil on canvas,  
195 × 293 cm  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

## *Labour* (1959)

On 13 November 1959, then Minister for Culture, S. Rajaratnam,<sup>1</sup> wrote to the Indonesian artist Basoeki Abdullah at his home and studio in Singapore to thank him for the gift of the painting *Labour* (1959).<sup>2</sup> *Labour*, which has also been attributed the title *Building of the New World*, is a speculative landscape of monuments that recall Egyptian pyramids, a *shikhara* from a Hindu temple, Ottoman mosques, Roman aqueducts and the

ninth-century Mahayana Buddhist temple Borobudur.<sup>3</sup> It was the first painting that Basoeki Abdullah gave to Singapore, shortly after the island had attained self-government. Basoeki, years later, shared with the Singaporean press that the painting depicted his vision of the future of Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

*Labour* is a speculative landscape of monuments. In the painting, most of the architectural features are out of proportion, if not altogether physically impossible. The Egyptian pyramids in the background with its twin sculptures of Egyptian royalty recall Abu Simbel temples. Carved in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE as a lasting tribute to Ramses II and his queen, Nefertari, Abu Simbel is not only an icon of ancient Egypt but also a symbol of Egyptian modernity, owing to its role in the creation of the Aswan High Dam project.<sup>5</sup> Crowning Basoeki's vision is an oversized airplane, fitted with seemingly two jet engines. This detail of the jet engines is important. The mid-1950s to the early 1960s was a period in which international commercial air travel boomed, in part driven by the innovations from the Space Race.<sup>6</sup> The four-engined airliner, associated with military aircraft and commercial aviation, was a symbol of long-distance travel and a shrinking international world. In the foreground, figures labour to erect monumental neoclassical architecture with Doric-like columns and winding highways that connect with the futuristic background of civilisational monuments and international travel.

Reflective of Basoeki's aesthetic of world-building and affinity for the late 18<sup>th</sup> century art movement, Romanticism, the composition of the painting recalls John Martin's infamous *The Fall of Babylon* (1819). The original dramatic scene depicts the biblical story of King Belshazzar's feast and the subsequent fall of Babylon to the Persians under Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE. While Basoeki's interest was most likely formalistic in this reference, Martin's painting has become the template for imagining disaster for mankind and perhaps, can be read to reference the frenzy and peril of decolonisation efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Basoeki's painting was made around the time Singapore achieved internal self-government, with the swearing-in of its first legislative assembly in May 1959 and the appointment of Lee Kuan Yew, leader of the People's Action Party, as the first Prime Minister of Singapore. Rajaratnam's letter to the artist

was written just a week after the Minister had presented the Legislative Assembly with Singapore's first national symbols: its flag, state crest and national anthem, "*Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore)."<sup>8</sup> Rajaratnam led the Ministry of Culture, the Singapore government's publicity arm, coordinating media coverage to promote nation-building, as well as intercultural and racial understanding among the four official races of Singapore. Rajaratnam's ready acceptance of Basoeki's gift is significant and through its provenance, *Labour* is a symbolic image of world-building following the attainment of Singapore's self-government. *Labour* imagines the building of a post-imperial international order<sup>9</sup> based on travel, development and cultural civilisation exchange.

*Labour* was displayed at Singapore's City Hall, the seat of government, where it shared the artist's vision of Singapore's future with generations of policy makers and world-builders.<sup>10</sup>

The painting served as an interface for speculative futures of regionalism and diplomatic representation. In 1989, speaking to the artist's political connections and the diplomatic currency of the painting, Basoeki returned to Singapore in search of *Labour*, enlisting the help of then Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Communications and Information), Mr. Ho Kah Leong. The artist's revisiting of the painting was commemorated by a viewing of the painting attended by Ho and the Indonesian Ambassador to Singapore, Mr. Tuk Setyohadi—a diplomatic event in itself.

In 2015, the painting was presented in *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, National Gallery Singapore's inaugural exhibition.<sup>11</sup> During Singapore's circuit breaker, a response to COVID-19, a Reddit discussion group emerged. With the museum closed and the painting no longer on display, an informal community, haunted by its memory, began speculating on its meaning. One forum user, u/malayshallriseagain, described it as a "bleak and dark futuristic city." Another user called it "Borobudur on steroids," another referenced Lovecraft, and one declared that it was a "bright shining future" for postcolonial Asia.<sup>12</sup>

When not exhibited at National Gallery Singapore, the painting is displayed at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, perhaps, an inspiration for the possibilities of world-building that define the art of international relations.



STRUGGLE FOR THE  
RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF  
THE DEMOCRACY AND THE  
RIGHT FOR THE PEOPLE  
1981

Oil on canvas,  
200 × 490 cm  
Gift of the artist  
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

*Struggle for the Re-establishment of the  
Democracy and the Right for the People (1981)*

In 1981, Basoeki gifted *Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People (1981)* to the National Museum Art Gallery—a predecessor of National Gallery Singapore. It was officially accepted by then Minister of Parliament, Mr. Wan Hussin Zoohari. The gift followed Basoeki's exhibition of artworks in Singapore. The exhibition's catalogue included a message from Adam Malik, then Vice-President of the Republic of Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> Held in conjunction with the second anniversary of Isetan, Basoeki's exhibition was staged for three days at the Hilton Grand Ballroom, from 27 to 29 September 1981. The exhibition was opened by Mr. Sudjatmiko, Ambassador of Indonesia to Singapore, and was met with considerable fanfare in the local press, which celebrated Basoeki as a "painter of world leaders"<sup>14</sup> and a doyen of Indonesian painting.<sup>15</sup>

In reviewing the exhibition, local art critic Chin Oi Tow commented on the painting: “The personification of democracy as a siren-like mermaid happily perched on a mount of coral and delighting in the spectacle of some air bubbles (which look more like Christmas tree baubles) seems very much at variance with one’s concept of ‘struggle’...” While lauding his ability, she observed that “such theatrical pieces may be small chinks in his armour.”<sup>16</sup> Her comments point to Basoeki’s painting being perceived as a type of kitsch. Kitsch is typically associated with the popular and commercial—art that had mass appeal and was associated with the “rear garde” rather than the avant garde.<sup>17</sup>

Writing about the painting in *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, Agus Dermawan T. recounts the painting being inspired by the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and its promise of bringing countries together for regional peace. The painting represents the five founding nations of ASEAN—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines as pearls, which the artist compared to gems formed by the discomfort of oysters. This might be an allusion to each nation’s struggle for independence. The title, the artist claimed, was given by politicians—though he did not elaborate on who exactly named the painting.

When Agus asked Basoeki about the mermaid in the painting, he responded, “maybe it is Nyai Roro Kidul.”<sup>18</sup> This ambiguity is particularly poignant.<sup>19</sup> Nyai Roro Kidul, the mythical Queen of the Southern Sea in Javanese folklore is a consort for kings. Scholar Karen Strassler surmises that prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nyai Roro Kidul did not have a visual iconography and only acquired one through the emergence of Indonesian nationalism.<sup>20</sup> Her representation could thus speak to a spiritual mediation of real-world politics with the goddess watching over the five founding nations of ASEAN.<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, or S. Rajaratnam, was a Singaporean statesman (1915–2006). He was a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and of the People’s Action Party with Lee Kuan Yew. He envisioned Singapore as a multiracial global city. He served as Minister for Culture in 1959, Minister for Foreign Affairs between 1965 and 1980, Minister for Labour between 1968 and 1971, Deputy Prime Minister between 1980 and 1985, and Senior Minister between 1985 and 1988.
- 2 Reproduction of letter printed in Solichin Salam, *Biografi R. Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Maestro* (Keluarga Basoeki Abdullah, 1994), 110.
- 3 “Kah Leong helps Indonesian artist track down prized S’pore painting,” *The Straits Times*, December 16, 1989, 3.
- 4 “Kah Leong helps Indonesian artist track down prized S’pore painting.”
- 5 Following the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, the building of a high dam became a priority of Egypt’s new government and was integral to its plans to modernise and industrialise Egypt. To preserve Egypt’s sites of antiquity namely the temple complex of Abu Simbel, the building of the dam called for an ambitious engineering feat—the relocation of Abu Simbel in 1964 to higher ground. In addition, the creation of the dam had other ramifications. At a projected cost of a billion dollars, the then Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal to raise the necessary capital for the project. This was done at the ire of the British and French who were the principal stakeholders of the Suez Canal and lent to the Suez Crisis in 1956. It is important at this point to note that the Suez Canal and the Suez Crisis were relevant not just to history in the Middle East but also to that of Southeast Asia. The Suez Canal was especially important to growth of Singapore as a trading hub. When it opened in 1869, it shortened the path between the East and West and trade in Singapore boomed and lent to the development of Keppel Harbour in Tanjong Pagar. The Suez Crisis (1956–1957) was an important moment in the Cold War and histories of decolonisation. Britain and France, once imperial empires and world powers, found their international influence in decline. Nasser in turn became a powerful hero of the Arab and Egyptian nationalist movements. He was a key figure in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and with the Suez Crisis, became a prominent figure associated with resisting imperial control. See “*Opening of the Suez Canal*,” National Library Board, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=15fcae20-2e3d-4eec-b5ab-2384f1aac2b9#:~:text=The%20Suez%20Canal%2C%20which%20opened,Sea%20and%20the%20Red%20Sea;and%20the%20Suez%20Crisis,1956,US%20Department%20of%20State%20Archive,https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/97179.htm#:~:text=On%20July%2026%2C%201956%2C%20Egyptian,that%20operated%20the%20Suez%20Canal.>

- 6 “Commercial Aviation at Mid-Century, 1941–1958,” *National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian*, <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/commercial-aviation-mid-century>.
- 7 “John Martin’s apocalyptic paintings at Tate Britain,” *Times of Malta*, April 23, 2011, <https://timesofmalta.com/article/John-Martin-s-apocalyptic-paintings-at-Tate-Britain.361807>.
- 8 “Forging a Singapore Identity,” *National Archives of Singapore*, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/sphpcard10#:~:text=On%207%20November%201959,%20the,Singapore>.
- 9 The post-World War II years from the 1940s to the 1970s were a period of reconstituting a new world order centred on the right to self-determination that helped lay the groundwork for the contemporary international and multilateral order. See Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).
- 10 When City Hall underwent renovations in December 1987, the painting was moved to and stored at the National Museum of Singapore. More recently, the painting has been displayed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) offices. It was known to be particularly significant for the late Singapore president S. R. Nathan (1924–2016), who served at the MFA from 1966 to 1971 and from 1979 to 1982. He was later appointed High Commissioner to Malaysia and Ambassador to the United States.
- 11 The wall label associated with this painting at National Gallery Singapore at the time read: “In this painting...Basoeki Abdullah depicted his aspirations for the Third World at a time when much of Southeast Asia was contemplating a postcolonial era driven by the labours of the common people... It is an emblem of the strong diplomatic and cultural relations between Indonesia and Singapore.”
- 12 “*Labour* by Basoeki Abdullah (1950s) - a painting from the Singapore National Gallery by an Indonesian Artist,” Reddit, 2020, accessed April 24, 2025, [https://www.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/gclwzm/labour\\_by\\_basoeki\\_abdullah\\_1950s\\_a\\_painting\\_from/?rdt=52324](https://www.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/gclwzm/labour_by_basoeki_abdullah_1950s_a_painting_from/?rdt=52324).
- 13 The message incorrectly references the exhibition as the second and not the third exhibition that Basoeki Abdullah had in Singapore.
- 14 “Painter of world leaders to hold exhibition,” *The Straits Times*, September 23, 1981, 8.
- 15 Chin Oi Tow, “Basoeki’s vivid images,” *The Straits Times*, October 5, 1981, 5.
- 16 Chin Oi Tow, “Basoeki’s vivid images.”
- 17 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *A History of the Western Art Market: A Sourcebook of Writings on Artists, Dealers, and Markets*, ed. Titia Hulst (University of California Press, 2023), 24–27.

- 18** Agus Dermawan T., *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Kerpuustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2015), 138.
- 19** Basoeki's early paintings of Nyai Roro Kidul were based on live models. However, later in his career, his paintings were said to be the result of visions of the goddess. These claims align with Javanese mysticism, which holds that spirituals and political leaders could form a direct connection to the goddess. Perhaps Basoeki's own mobilisation of Nyai Roro Kidul with the five pearls, speaks to the divine intermediary role.
- 20** Karen Strassler, "Seeing the Unseen in Indonesia's Public Sphere: Photographic Appearances of a Spirit Queen," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56, no. 1 (2014): 98–130.
- 21** However, according to Islamic art specialist, Anissa Rahadiningtyas, it is unlikely that a Javanese painter would depict Nyai Roro Kidul as a mermaid.

By Invitation

# My new love: South-east Asia

History has come full circle. Now, Europe represents the past, South-east Asia the future.



**Kishore Mahbubani**

For The Straits Times

I am in love again.

Yes, I have found a new love. When I was young and dreamt of travels overseas, I had no doubt in my mind where I wanted to go if I could ever afford it. I would take off to London and Paris, New York and San Francisco. All four cities were great beacons beckoning me. Looking back at my early life, it is not surprising that I was in love with these Western cities.

I spent the first 15 years of my life, from 1948 to 1963, in a British colony. Like many in my generation, we were both politically and mentally colonised. None of us questioned this deeply ingrained assumption: The West was best. I will never forget a conversation with a primary school classmate, Morgan. I asked him where he would like to go when he grew up. He replied: "London." I asked: "Why London?" He replied: "Because in London, the streets are paved with gold."

The corollary of this mental colonisation was that we also believed that we Singaporeans were unfortunate, as we were trapped in a poor, backward region. Europe represented the future. South-east Asia represented the past. Now history has come full circle. Europe represents the past. South-east Asia represents the future. This should be an obvious point. Yet, I am prepared to take a bet that most of my fellow Singaporeans would disagree. Given a choice, they would rather visit London or Paris, not Jakarta or Ho Chi Minh City.

To understand the larger metaphysical importance of South-east Asia, one must first understand where we stand in world history. As I have now documented in several books, we are now reaching the end of a 200-year cycle of Western domination of world history. Economic historian Angus Maddison has told us that the two largest economies of the world from the year one to year 1820 were China and India. It was only in the past 200 years that Europe and America took off. But against the backdrop of the past 2,000 years, the past 200 years have been a major historical aberration. All

aberrations come to a natural end. Hence, the resurgence of Asia is a perfectly natural phenomenon. The 21st century will undoubtedly be the Asian century.

## LABORATORY OF WORLD CULTURES

The best place to watch this Asian century unfold is South-east Asia. Why South-east Asia? South-east Asia is the most special place on planet earth. It is the only place on planet earth that has experienced the impact of four major world civilisations: Indian, Chinese, Muslim and Western. Hence, as the world moves on from a mono-civilisational world dominated by the West to a multi-civilisational world of many thriving civilisations, we need to look for a multi-civilisational laboratory that will reveal what a multi-civilisational world will look like.

There is only one multi-civilisational laboratory in the world: South-east Asia. This is why when you visit London and Paris and send postcards, you are sending postcards from a once-glorious past. However, if you visit Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City, or Yangon or Bangkok, you are sending postcards from the future. South-east Asia is the go-to place to understand the new 21st century world. This is also why Dr Jeffery Sng and I decided to devote an entire chapter of our recent book, *The Asean Miracle*, to the four waves of history that have swept through South-east Asia over the past 2,000 years.

Some may think that this history is dead and buried. Indeed, the first dominant wave to hit South-east Asia, the Indian wave, lasted a thousand years and petered out about a thousand years ago. When the Indian rulers became preoccupied with the overland invasions from the north-west, they lost their maritime connections with South-east Asia. However, the Indian wave remains deeply embedded in the South-east Asian psyche. President Suharto was a Muslim ruling the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia. Yet, when he wanted to make a statement on how well Indonesia was progressing, he chose to erect an enormous statue of the Mahabharata warrior, Arjuna, in the heart of Jakarta in 1987. How did a civilisational wave that disappeared a thousand years ago continue to exercise a magical influence on Indonesian minds?

Thailand is a deeply Buddhist country. It reveres its king. However, if you observe Thai court rituals closely, you will notice that many are conducted by Hindu Brahmin priests. One great mystery



**The big question for the 21st century is whether South-east Asia will resume its traditional role of being a bridge between Chinese and Indian civilisations. And will it take on a new historical role of becoming a bridge between Islam and the West? One fact that is little known is that the two Muslim-majority countries which have done the best in meeting the challenge of modernising and retaining their cultural identities are Indonesia and Malaysia. The time has come for the Arab societies to learn lessons from South-east Asia.**

of South-east Asian history is that, despite the fact that China is geographically closer, nine out of the 10 South-east Asian societies have an Indian cultural sub-structure rather than a Chinese one. Jeffery and I will try to solve this mystery in our next book on these four waves of history.

Even more remarkably, the Indianised kingdoms of South-east Asia used to pay tribute to China, not to India. In short, South-east Asia has had close links with China and India for thousands of years. This may also explain why many of the links between China and South Asia went through South-east Asia. The famous Chinese monk, Yijing, travelled to India via South-east Asia, spending six months with the Srivijayan kingdom and passing through Malayu (Jambi) and Kedah. South-east Asia gave him a chance to get immersed in Indian culture before going to India.

The big question for the 21st century is whether South-east Asia will resume its traditional role of being a bridge between Chinese and Indian civilisations. And will it take on a new historical role of becoming a bridge between Islam and the West? One fact that is little known is that the two Muslim-majority countries which have done the best in meeting the challenge of modernising and retaining their cultural identities are Indonesia and Malaysia. The

time has come for the Arab societies to learn lessons from South-east Asia.

## NO BETTER PLACE

This is why I have fallen in love with South-east Asia all over again. As a child, I used to believe that I was unfortunate in being born on the wrong side of the world. Now, at the age of 68, I realise there is no better place in the world to be than in South-east Asia. We will see amazing historical turns all around us for at least the next hundred years.

All this, of course, makes the extraordinary ignorance of Singaporeans about South-east Asia very depressing. Can you imagine sitting on the doorstep of heaven and not realising that you are there? What a wasted opportunity. When Jeffery and I launched our book on Asean last month, we were shocked to discover that so few Singaporeans knew that Asean was the most successful regional organisation in the world after the European Union. And if the EU breaks up, as it is likely to do, more and more regional organisations will come to Asean to learn from it. Singaporeans will not even be aware that this is happening.

Such ignorance is very dangerous. Geography is destiny. Ultimately, Singapore's fate will be determined by developments in South-east Asia. We ignore South-east Asia at our peril. At the same time, there are rich opportunities in Asean. The Committee on the Future Economy was right to highlight that the Asean Economic Community and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership could boost Singapore's economic growth significantly.

All this means that we need to make a national effort to ramp up the knowledge and understanding of South-east Asia among Singaporeans. One good place to start is the new National Gallery of Singapore. It is probably one of the most beautiful museums in the world. And it has "the world's largest public display of modern South-east Asian art", including pieces such as Raden Saleh's *Wounded Lion* (1839), U Ba Nyan's *Rangoon Harbour* (c. 1930s), Nguyen Phan Chanh's *The Singers In The Countryside* (1932), Fernando Cueto Amorsolo's *Marketplace During The Occupation* (1942), Chua Mia Tee's *National Language Class* (1959), Latiff Mohidin's *Pagodas II* (1964) and Pratuang Emjaroen's *Red Morning Glory And Rotten Gun* (1976). The best way to understand the souls of countries is through their art. The extraordinary cultural diversity of South-east Asia, a diversity that no other region can match, surfaces in the art of the region. And many Singaporeans have still not set foot in the National Gallery.

If you fall in love with South-east Asia, you will also experience a new joy in your life. And you will wake up every morning saying: "How lucky I am to be living in the heart of my new love!"

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**"MY NEW LOVE:  
SOUTH-EAST ASIA,"**

Kishore Mahbubani,

*The Straits Times*, April 15, 2017.

# ON DIPLOMACY AND DESIRE— THE GEOPOETIC AGENCY OF BASOEKI ABDULLAH’S ARTWORKS

by Kathleen Ditzig

*Labour* (1959) is a speculative landscape of monuments. It was the first of two gifts that the Indonesian painter gave to Singapore. The second, *Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People* (1981), is an expansive seascape of a mermaid with five pearls. The two paintings offer political imaginations of Singapore and Southeast Asia as part of an international order. *Labour* was a gift made during Singapore’s decolonisation. The painting imagines Singapore’s future as part of a post-imperial world order promised by the aspirations of the Bandung Conference (1955). *Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People* is a fantastical imagination of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in which Singapore is symbolised as one of five founding nations of ASEAN represented by pearls and tended to by a South Sea mermaid. The two paintings comparatively chart an evolution of a visual “geopolitical” imagination, or what Patrick Flores has termed “geopoetics.”<sup>1</sup> This essay and the exhibition *Diplomacy and Desire* argue that Basoeki Abdullah’s practice exemplifies a geopoetic strategy of world-building, where artist-led diplomacy and aesthetics do not just intersect but are entangled in shaping postcolonial Southeast Asian imaginaries.

Patrick Flores advances a definition of geopoetics as a framework that responds to “a need to hold out...possibility” to resist the calcification of power and the cementing of imagination around Southeast Asia through the idioms of defence and marketplaces, as outlined by the founding of

ASEAN in 1967. For Flores, this was “a restrictive geopolitical imaginary...that must be transcended because the geopolitical is one thing; but the geopoetics, the mediation of the earth through the aesthetic and the aesthetically mediated initiations to gather, is another.”<sup>2</sup> Geopoetics prioritises relational links forged through communities and intersections that surpass the mandates and parameters of state-led diplomacy, opening up a more radical, collective and lived understanding of the geopolitical and, in turn, its intellectual malleability through art. Where the geopolitical finds form through tariffs, decrees and boots on soil, geopoetics is a speculative, intellectual and imaginative horizon of ideas necessary for building the world to come. For this essay, the geopolitical is defined by *realpolitik*, concerned with hard power, territory and strategy and engages specifically with state actors. The geopoetic instead focuses on the soft power of aesthetics and the affective to construct political imaginations. As a framework, geopoetics offers us a lens through which to view the agency found in Basoeki’s postcolonial art production in Southeast Asia.

Implicit in this conceit is that poetics are inherently powerful and able to “change the world.” This premise is an inheritance from the developmentalist state, wherein the construction of cultural heritage and modern art were strategies to assert the right to self-determination on a global stage. It is also indebted to the progressive conceit of neoliberalism in the post-Cold War age of peak globalisation.<sup>3</sup> These two historical periods define how we write and frame Southeast Asian modern art and contextualise Basoeki’s gifted paintings to Singapore. *Diplomacy and Desire: Basoeki Abdullah in Singapore*, as an exhibition, takes the artist’s two gifted paintings and a selection of drawings from Singapore’s National Collection, which are part of a formative donation made in 1994 by art collector and Chinese Financier Lok Bok Sim<sup>4</sup> to develop Singapore Art Museum’s Southeast Asian art collection,<sup>5</sup> to consider an aesthetics of power that can be read into Basoeki’s artworks through the agencies that he exercised as both artist and “unofficial” cultural diplomat. Lok’s collection included 27 pastel drawings inclusive of portraits of notable individuals made in the 1940s and 1950s. While most of the drawings do not have clear indications of

who their subjects are—some have years, signatures of their sitters and the country they were made in—Lok was buying works that bear a resemblance to notable models from Singapore and figures that Basoeki sought to commemorate. These characteristics point to Basoeki's appeal to collectors, and that the implicit geopolitical imaginations in his practice were important to collectors.

In examining the possible meanings and gesturing at the appeal of Basoeki Abdullah's aesthetics, *Diplomacy and Desire* drills into a critical premise about the agencies of art in imagining and inspiring world orders. Beyond assuming that art is inherently an empowered space, the exhibition lays out a social context and milieu for which the visitor can read into Basoeki's aesthetics a historical convergence between "state" or government power and "desire" as personified by Basoeki's pursuit of an ideal of *natural* beauty in his depiction of alluring women and that informed his appeal among Southeast Asian monarchs and elites. Desire, here can be understood through Lyotard's definition of desire as an abstract and affective force that animates economics and politics.<sup>6</sup>

*Diplomacy and Desire* is thus a study of power in postcolonial Southeast Asian modernism, one that points to its representational strategies and the individuals who navigated them. Focusing on the artist's relationship with Singapore and the time he lived in Singapore (1958–1960), during the years of its decolonisation, the exhibition evidences Singapore as a node in an emergent regional network for the artist and profiles Basoeki as an inherently Southeast Asian artist. Through defining Basoeki's aesthetics as the region's national and moneyed aesthetics, the exhibition offers a historical account of the geopoetics that can contribute to a reinterpretation of the neoliberal conceit that art can change the world.

## An Artist-Led Diplomacy

While diplomacy is traditionally defined as state-led action that manages international relations, recent scholarship has broadly defined diplomacy as “whenever someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of people or a cause or successfully claims to mediate between others engaging in such representations and negotiations.”<sup>7</sup> Basoeki’s early engagement with Singapore can be read through the lens of postcolonial world-building and diplomacy. In 1955, Basoeki sought out the then Chief Minister, David Marshall.<sup>8</sup> Speaking to the press, Basoeki stated, “I had heard so much about Mr. Marshall’s popularity on his recent Indonesian tour that I was determined to see him when I came to Singapore.”<sup>9</sup> *The Straits Times* celebrated this drawing, noting that Basoeki intended to present it on “a tour of the continent,” where Marshall’s face would be seen in “Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, England and Holland.”<sup>10</sup> In October 1955, Marshall was advocating for the Federation of Malaya’s self-government, and the circulation of his face in Europe would have publicised this cause. Basoeki’s decision to seek out Marshall as a subject and then present his drawing across Europe and, in particular, in London in 1956, can be read as a form of diplomacy, in that it promoted the Federation of Malaya’s case for self-government. In September 1959, Basoeki approached the Federation of Malaya Prime Minister’s Office for support to paint a portrait of the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong of the Federation of Malaya, Tuanku Abdul Rahman (1957–1960). By November, Basoeki had presented the painting in the British Council Hall in Kuala Lumpur. The office of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong was created upon the Federation’s independence from the United Kingdom in 1957; therefore, this stately portrait may also be read as commemorating Malaya’s process of decolonisation.

Basoeki also mobilised the portraits of notable figures of society like Miss Singapore 1958, Marion Willis, who was the winner of the first Miss Universe Singapore pageant and the second to represent Malaya. Willis as a beauty queen can be interpreted as a representation of Malaya as a modern state in competing in an international beauty competition.<sup>11</sup>

Basoeki's representations of Miss Willis were written about in local newspapers. When Basoeki gifted the portrait of Miss Singapore to Indonesian President Soekarno in 1959, it was reported in *The Straits Times*.<sup>12</sup> In this light, Basoeki emerges as a particularly potent figure of postwar regionalism in Southeast Asia, whose marshalling of his artistic practice including producing media events that underscored his support for decolonisation through symbolic exchanges between newly independent "modern" states.

Basoeki's support of Singapore's independence was part of a historical milieu (1950–1965) that Brigitta Isabella has identified as critical to the establishment of "cultural links between Indonesia and the international community," wherein "Indonesian artists were not only creating what they imagined to be modern art, but they were also searching for the best way to convey an image of their own national culture to the rest of the world."<sup>13</sup> Isabella identifies the period of 1950–1957 as coinciding with "Indonesia's constitutional democracy and a degree of political freedom: a spirit of decolonisation" as epitomised in the organisation of the Asian–African Conference or Bandung Conference in April 1955 that reimagined the international world order through Asian and African state allyship based on self-determinism and not siding with either ideological bloc of the Cold War. The Indonesian government in the 1950s sent many artists abroad including to India, Japan, Italy, Thailand, Mexico and the Middle East to comparatively study cultures and develop national frameworks for art. In addition, Isabella highlights an example of exhibitionary geopolitics: The Visual Arts Section, a part of the Office for the Arts in Yogyakarta acquired Indonesian art works to present at the 1953 Sao Paulo Art Biennale before travelling the exhibition to Victoria Hall, Singapore in 1956.<sup>14</sup> These study trips and forms of cultural exchange were forms of networking and world building, where cultural ties were being used to build a postcolonial world order. Basoeki's support of Singapore's decolonisation can be read as exemplary of this historical milieu of postcolonial world-building. However, what is distinct is that the artist undertook his "diplomacy" on his own. This sometimes involved navigating his associations with Indonesian national projects but in 1955 and 1959, Basoeki, based on the available sources seems to have taken on an art-led diplomacy of his own initiative.

## Basoeki Abdullah in Singapore: Regional Artistic Communities across Ideological Difference

Basoeki also seems to have proactively chosen Singapore as a base from which to travel within the region, seeking out exhibitions in Manila and exhibiting in Tokyo in June 1959, in Kuala Lumpur in November 1959 and finally in Thailand in January 1960, before becoming court painter to the Thai royal family and relocating to Thailand. In 1957, *The Straits Times* reported that Basoeki had visited Singapore in search of an exhibition venue and had made the comment that Singapore girls possessed beautiful figures and would make ideal models.<sup>15</sup> Beyond offering Basoeki models for his pursuit of aesthetic beauty, Singapore provided a staging post for the artist to engage with the region and art across ideological differences.

Basoeki lived in Singapore from 1958 to 1960. The precise dates are difficult to account for. What we do know is that Frank Sullivan, in his essay written for the Singapore Art Society's *Exhibition of Paintings by Raden Basoeki Abdullah*,<sup>16</sup> held in October, noted that the artist had arrived from Jakarta only eight months prior. Upon his arrival in February 1958, the Malay Language Association of the University of Malaya, the China Art Society and the Cultural Education Committee of the Singapore Council for Adult Education organised a five-day exhibition of his work. Not long after the opening of the exhibition on February 7, a well-known collector of Chinese art in Singapore, Dr. Tan Tsze Chor commissioned Basoeki for a portrait. Basoeki painted the portrait on February 14. During this first exhibition in Singapore, he also received an invitation to the Thai Court, where he would become a court painter. Basoeki's first exhibition in Singapore was lauded as evidence that Singapore was not a "cultural desert."<sup>17</sup> The comment was a pertinent one because anxieties around Singapore being a cultural desert defined art discourses in 1959 amidst the urgency to craft a Malayan cultural identity. Basoeki's presence as an Indonesian artist living in Singapore symbolically addressed a long-standing desire to make the island a "cultural and arts centre for South East Asia."<sup>18</sup>

However, the framing of Southeast Asia in Singapore

between 1958 and 1960 was a geopolitically imbricated issue that wove the project of decolonisation with the Cold War consolidation of Southeast Asia. The period in which Basoeki lived in Singapore was the tail end of the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960). A term crafted by the British colonial government to describe a guerrilla war between the Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan government, the Malayan Emergency was a political emergency that Singaporean art historian, Seng Yu Jin, in his seminal exhibition *From Words to Picture: Art during the Emergency* (2007), describes as a battle for the hearts and minds of Malaysians wherein the British sought “to create a multiracial government that is anti-communist and friendly to them.”<sup>19</sup> Seng notes that sources from the period interpolated Southeast Asian regionalism with a Malayan cultural identity, observing that:

Tony Beamish...in his book *The Arts of Malaya* (1954) employs the “search for unity” as a topic to highlight the need to harness “the youth and racial diversity of Malaya” given that “the change is here for the cultures of the Far East, India, and the West to learn from each other and to merge and fuse into a Malayan national form”. The need to synthesise Eastern and Western art forms and to somehow fuse the cultures of the various ethnic groups to create a Malayan school of painting echoed the ideas of Nanyang style to fuse the cultures of the different races, which proponents of the Nanyang style can be seen as expressing world views of the Nanyang Chinese in which Southeast Asia was visualised.<sup>20</sup>

According to Seng’s exhibition, the ideological division of the Malayan Emergency played out through the Singapore Art Society (established in 1949)<sup>21</sup> and the Equator Art Society (established in 1956). Both societies engaged with Basoeki while he was in Singapore. Frank Sullivan, who was based in Singapore from 1947 to 1957 and served as the vice-president of the Singapore Art Society, wrote the essay for the catalogue of Basoeki’s second exhibition in Singapore.<sup>22</sup> Held in October 1958, the exhibition organised by

the Singapore Art Society was a roaring success with 6,000 viewers reported to have visited the exhibition.<sup>23</sup> It led to a commission for a pastel portrait of Malcolm MacDonald,<sup>24</sup> a souvenir before he left Singapore to take on the role of British High Commissioner to New Delhi. In November 1958, the Embassy of the Federation of Malaya also bought Basoeki's work for its office in Thailand. This regional sale of Basoeki's work was brokered by the Singapore Art Society and its president, Ho Kok Hoe.<sup>25</sup> Photographs taken by Ho of Basoeki looking at artwork alongside Singapore Art Society members also suggest a discursive relationship between Basoeki and the artists of the Singapore Art Society.

The Equator Art Society saw “art as vehicle for social change, to awaken a Malayan consciousness towards the path of independence and to portray such conditions in the ideology of Social Realism.”<sup>26</sup> The society stood in ideological opposition to the Singapore Art Society which included artists who sought different stylistic directions. The Equator Art Society offered art lessons, advanced exhibitions for its members, and conducted art theory research and study seminars. Portraiture, as a genre, dominated the Equator Art Society's first exhibition in 1958—which might explain the appeal of Basoeki's work for the artists. According to members at the time, Basoeki participated in their classes. He also contributed the foreword to their second exhibition in 1960, in which he stated:

We hope that this exposition will succeed in providing a sufficiently representative impression, while at the same time providing the stimulus for the Singapore artist to seek more of his subjects and scenes on this island, so that through inspired artistry, an enhanced fame may be achieved.<sup>27</sup>

Basoeki's comments of encouraging a focus on Singapore subjects and scenes, while seemingly benign, were radical considering that social realism at the time was perceived as possibly subversive. The depiction of social realities, such as poverty and hardship, was perceived as antagonistic to the British colonial government's efforts. This contributed to the censorship of the first show of the Equator Art Society.

Seng notes that the Equator Art Society sought to focus on the realities of the working class. While the Singapore Art Society aligned more closely with a project of regional aesthetics which fit into the “Grand Design” which was a British post-war plan to regionally bring together the British territories of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Basoeki’s benign, even banal, comments read in context, are perhaps pointed and doublespeak, pointing to his ability to work across ideological divides during the Malayan Emergency.

Basoeki’s acclaim as an artist afforded him a visible role in the regional world-building that informed cultural production in Singapore in 1959. That year saw Singapore attaining self-government and the election of its first legislative assembly, which brought the People’s Action Party (PAP) into power. In turn, it precipitated the formation of the Ministry of Culture in 1959, instituting a government agency that was “vested with the responsibility of formulating the policies needed to create a common Malayan culture.”<sup>29</sup> The artist had drawn or painted important public figures and could be described as part of the production of Malayan culture in his capturing of important cultural figures like David Marshall, Marion Willis and others. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce organised the Singapore Constitution Exposition, the first regional trade exposition of Southeast Asia in early 1959.<sup>30</sup> Basoeki participated in the festivities associated with this regional event. He performed in cultural programmes, was a judge for its beauty contest “Pearl of the Orient,” a contest that mobilised a beauty queen as a travelling ambassador for the exposition to the region and was commissioned to produce a portrait of the exposition’s honoured guest, the late Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. During the same event, the Japanese cosmetic company Shiseido commissioned Basoeki to draw two of their beauticians in a bid to promote their products. Basoeki’s participation in Singapore Constitution Exposition spoke to his role as an artist and public figure in the regional imagination that Singapore’s decolonisation project engendered.

Throughout his career, Basoeki took on an informal but culturally strategic role in diplomacy. The late King of Thailand King Bhumibol Adulyadej was reported to say that he “admired Indonesia through Basoeki Abdullah, the painter who became

a cultural envoy in my palace.”<sup>31</sup> The king developed an affinity for Southeast Asian art, prompting him to support the annual ASEAN awards for culture and art because of the artist.<sup>32</sup> Non-state diplomatic practices, such as Basoeki’s, offer a more nuanced perspective on the postcolonial construction of the international order and statehood in Southeast Asia—and specifically, the geopolitical role of the artist.

### [ Romantic Realism: An Aesthetics of Power? ]

Basoeki’s international acclaim as a painter<sup>33</sup> enabled him to interact with world leaders and monarchs, as they mutually sought each other out. Beyond Basoeki’s acts of informal regional diplomacy, can we consider his style as inherently empowered to act geopoetically? His artworks were sought after by wealthy members of the overseas Chinese community and high-society figures across the region. Commissioned by governments across Southeast Asia as a state portraitist, his aesthetic embodied an idiom of “established” power and, to a degree, populism in that his artworks were meant to be accessible, legible and essentially popular with the widest demographic possible. The Lions Club of Bangkok introduced his practice as one that did not “shock with unusual abstract painting, but rather to fascinate with expression of beauty.”<sup>34</sup>

Basoeki described his style as “Romantic Realism,” distinguishing it from the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century to mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century art movement Romanticism, which emerged after the French Revolution and emphasised individualism and emotion as opposed to the Enlightenment’s advancement of rationalism.<sup>35</sup> Romanticism celebrated abstract values of beauty and the sublime as central to culture and human life. The movement idealised the past and has affinities with colonial-era cultural production in the form of picturesque representations of ruins<sup>36</sup> and *Mooi Indie* (Beautiful Indies) painting, with which Basoeki and his family were associated. Romanticism is also associated with the work of Raden Saleh, pointing to the movement’s relevance in a Southeast Asian context tied to a genealogy of courtly power and navigation

of the imperial international order.<sup>37</sup> While a proponent of romanticism and realism as styles, Basoeki, like many of his peers sought to capture the realities of postcolonial life, to capture life directly. The artist, in that regard, stated, “I am always moved and inspired by the struggle of nationalism to defend citizens and provide support for helpless mankind.”<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, secreted within his paintings and drawings was a *political* realism of postcolonial Southeast Asia. Some of his drawings he made of politically significant subjects are now historical documents. One example, included in *Diplomacy and Desire*, is a portrait of Sutan Sjahrir (1909–1966), a revolutionary leader and the first Prime Minister of Indonesia, who also advocated for Indonesia’s sovereignty at the United Nations. The drawing is marked with the sitter’s signature.

Writing about diplomacy in Asia, Matthew Phillips and Naoko Shimazu have noted that:

During the colonial period, diplomacy in Asia was linked inexorably to legitimising the supremacy of Europe in the minds of colonial regimes... The collapse of the European empires from the end of the Second World War transformed the geopolitical context but diplomacy in the era the followed remained tied to discourses of civilisation...In this context colonial-era architecture may have provided spectacular backdrops, but they also showcased contradiction in an era of independence. Alternatively, once maligned sites of traditional power such as temples or palaces were reconsidered into postcolonial sources of national pride and identity. Overall, postcolonial politics imbued national spaces with new meanings that contested the European-derived order and could be activated through diplomatic exchange.<sup>39</sup>

The logic of Basoeki’s Romantic Realism was, to an extent, no different. Based on Western academic painting, and at times directly incorporating specific popular romantic paintings, such as John Martin’s work,<sup>40</sup> his work mobilised an

established logic of symbolic power. Idioms of monumentality and history fit perfectly within such an established framework of power. The logic behind his famous painting *Bila Tuhan Murka* (1950), held in the presidential collection in Bogor, is based on John Martin's *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1853).<sup>41</sup> Speaking about the referential nature of his composition, Basoeki noted: "My paintings are not just imitations. I prefer to call them the results of my reminiscences. These influences appear as I am overcome by all the achievements of others."<sup>42</sup> Basoeki's adherence to Western academic painting more generally, may be read as a conservative idiom of power. On the one hand, it aligns him with the genealogy of Raden Saleh; on the other, it confers upon his sitters the dressings of power associated with Western symbols of power. His work thus performed diplomatic post-imperial world building<sup>43</sup> by renovating the symbolism associated with pre-existing forms of power tied to imperialism.

In "Style in Southeast Asia: A Political History," Flores, marshalling Meyer Schapiro, defines style as a "constant form" that is "a common ground against which innovations and the individuality of particular works may be measured," and which is based on a particular and "complex lineage about the nature of depiction."<sup>44</sup> Flores' interrogation of realism as a "rift between idealism and naturalism, an ethical principle and a political obligation"<sup>45</sup> is fecund for considering Basoeki's artworks and worldview as an alternative understanding of realism as a resistance to the idealisation of country as colony and then nation. Basoeki clearly had political beliefs and supported a postcolonial world order and he did travel the region documenting this process through elite circles. His artworks are historical documents and constructed as media events for a wide audience. They were uncomplicated representations of his reality—the people he met but also his commissioners' self-image in an international world order. Easily read and enjoyed, his artworks can perhaps also be appreciated as a radical form of realism of what power in postcolonial Southeast Asia looked like.

## Desire, Ideals of Beauty and Modern State Power

Basoeki's aesthetics also speak to the construction of a modern and "desirable" (neo)liberal subject, wherein the aesthetic fashioning of the self or the female figure aligns with the idiom of aspirational power. This is embodied in the most iconic painting he produced while in Singapore, *Nanyang* (1958), featured on the cover of the catalogue of Singapore Art Society's 1958 exhibition of his work. The painting depicts three Singaporean beauties, Mrs. Azah Aziz, Air India hostess Miss Joyce Good and Miss Hwang.<sup>46</sup> The title *Nanyang* refers to "South Seas" in Chinese. In turn, the painting can be read as an idealistic representation of the diasporic and multicultural communities of Malaya that were being crystallised into a national imagination of Singapore as a cultural gateway to Southeast Asia.

The entanglement of desire and power in Basoeki's work is a libidinal economy that produces the modern state. Nowhere in Southeast Asia is this more epitomised than in the policies of First Lady of the Philippines Imelda Marcos (1965–1986). Patrick Flores describes the Office of the First Lady as investing in "ornament of governmentality" and her aesthetic labour as absorbing the diplomatic.<sup>47</sup> Flores, quoting Alfred Gell, notes that "art is the idealised form of production" and that "attractiveness and attraction are the dynamics at play... the idealisation collects at the stem of women and gender."<sup>48</sup>

Desire in this form is fundamental and generative, producing meaning, value, institutions, relations and subjectivities. Moreover, in Basoeki's artwork it legitimises the modern and its economies. The logic of capitalist society that was advanced as part of the US-aligned Free World order of the Cold War was based on moving from a needs-based economy to a desire-based economy. Speaking to this is "A Traveller's Report: Women and Careers," an article published in the Feminine Forum of *The Straits Times*, a column by Susan Barrie who also featured Basoeki Abdullah in her column, offers an American career woman as an example of the modern for its Malayan audience.<sup>49</sup> The modern American woman was an example of a working woman, who while married, presented herself in the public sphere and engaged in commerce. Her fashion choices were integral to and were

highlighted as part of this representation. Reading this article alongside Basoeki's fame as an artist who depicted alluring women points to an important aspect of post-imperial world building—that of the economy of the attractiveness and its constitution of a liberated desirable and desiring subject in the form of a woman of a modern state who was a productive partner, worker and consumer.

By 1973, Basoeki ran his artistic practice like a business. He employed a secretary, a financial manager and marketing and sales staff. He charged based on the size of the paintings and modelled himself after high-society painters like John Singer Sargent and Thomas Gainsborough, whose practices were defined by commercial commissions.<sup>50</sup> His commercial success in Singapore was based on his depictions of attractive women. Agus Dermawan T. notes that when living in Singapore and Thailand (1958–1974), Basoeki created many pastel portraits of women. Some were full-body nudes, while others represented the upper body of the woman. They were noted for their flawless skin such that when the Japanese brand Shiseido visited Singapore in 1959 to peddle their products to the modern Malayan woman, they commissioned Basoeki to draw two of their beauticians. Basoeki's sensual works were very popular at the time with collectors in Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand and the artist commented that he was known in Singapore and Thailand for being the only one able to paint this theme “perfectly,” and that, in Indonesia, he was the only painter willing to do so openly.<sup>51</sup>

This period in his oeuvre, from the 1950s to the 1960s, is perceived, as Agus points out, as Basoeki's sensual or erotic art period.<sup>52</sup> While the artist did not publicise this work in Indonesia, it did attract the ire of contemporary critics. Agus notes that the painter S. Sudjojono critiqued Basoeki's work as relapses into his pre-independence work, which he had criticised in the 1940s as “Hollywood indecency...[escaping] onto Malay canvases.”<sup>53</sup> In *Seni Lukis Jakarta Dalam Sorotan* (1974), the art critic Sudarmadji critiqued Basoeki's work as “the art of lust.”<sup>54</sup>

However, Basoeki's sensual paintings were as much a romantic-philosophical stance on the relationship between nature and beauty as they were political statements about the modern woman. Agus notes that the artist often quoted

the Greek thinker Palladas, stating: “Everyone is born into the world naked. God gives nudity as beauty.”<sup>55</sup> Basoeki is reported to have said that his paintings supported the most understandable form of communication, and following the Javanese philosophical concept of *kagunan*.<sup>56</sup> Jim Supangkat has defined *kagunan* as an “intelligence,” “constructive endeavour,” or an “outpouring of sense which produces beauty.”<sup>57</sup> The conceptual framework of *kagunan* resonates with Basoeki’s own idealistic pursuit of beauty in the female form, which itself can be understood through the framework of desire.

Desire, here, is informed by Basoeki’s own conceptual constellation of ideas from Western and Javanese thought. This in turn takes form in his aesthetics that produce desire. His artworks are objects of desire as much as they produce subjects of desire. This desire, however, is a specific one tied to the postcolonial politics that he engaged with, and thus, enabled him to act geopolitically. For Basoeki, the attractive model was a historical form of the sublime, and thus, it was a marker of a developed and modern society, that the female form was not morally policed by dogma.<sup>58</sup>

His models were notable as modern women who achieved fame not only for their beauty but also for their achievements. They were abstractions of a desirable modernity, often depicted adorned in fashion and jewellery. From ballerinas like Margot Fonteyn, actresses like Silvana Mangano to the dancer and choreographer, Rose Eberwein, these women were also interlocutors. Rose Eberwein, who is of Filipino and Spanish descent, was born in Singapore and raised in Thailand. She studied dance in London before returning to Singapore in 1958, where she quickly became Basoeki’s model. He taught her Javanese dance and introduced her to King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit of Thailand. She would perform for them in 1960.<sup>59</sup> Like Basoeki, she travelled internationally and sought to build regional ties through dance.

Basoeki’s subjects and his aesthetic pursuit of capturing “beauty” enabled him to move through high society across Southeast Asia. Through the network he built, like with the example of Rose Eberwein, his artistic production can be read as consolidating a regional aesthetics of “power.” The geopoetic agency of his work and more generally

his practice was inseparable from his representations of attractive women. They were as much an idiom of commercial popularity and political power as his state portraits. From the 1950s–1980s, the *political realism* and Basoeki's success in circulating within high society were based on the desirability of his artworks and, more generally, on his aesthetics.

By the 1980s, Basoeki's aesthetics of attractive women began to take on new aesthetic meaning. His second gift to Singapore, *Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People* is a fantastical painting of a mermaid, seemingly dissonant with its politically inflected title. Responding to this flight of fancy, local art critic Chin Oi Tow wrote: "The personification of democracy as a siren-like mermaid happily perched on a mount of coral and delighting in the spectacle of some air bubbles (which look more like Christmas tree baubles) seems very much at variance with one's concept of 'struggle'..." While lauding his ability, she observed that "such theatrical pieces may be small chinks in his armour but they could be the initial points of corrosion."<sup>60</sup> Basoeki's alluring aesthetics of a beautiful mermaid had become kitsch.<sup>61</sup> This was to a certain extent a product of its time. The affective ideals of romanticism through the lens of 1980s commercialism were kitsch—sentimental and mercantile. Basoeki's 1981 exhibition in Singapore was held at the Hilton Hotel on the occasion of the second anniversary in Singapore of the Japanese department store, Isetan. Basoeki's post-imperial aesthetics of power constellated in the 1980s through business and industry as new sites of power. In the prosperous neoliberal years of the Asian Miracle, exhibitionary sites for producing the modern emerged in hotels, banks and other sites of commerce.<sup>62</sup> Desire and power were thus constellated through consumption.

Yet this was the rearguard, avant-garde world-making aesthetics of the 1970s with conceptual, installation and performance practices, brought art to the street. These art forms and their aesthetics were fundamentally critical of the established power that built an international world order associated with the Free World and the free-market trade imagination that informed the Asian Miracle.<sup>63</sup> The critiques of Imelda Marcos' excesses by the People Power

Movement and the Marcos' subsequent exile were exemplary of these concerns.

Moreover, the right to self-determinism by the 1980s was under scrutiny, just as the United States abandoned the United Nations and other institutions of multilateral institutions of postwar international order. Regional organisations, like ASEAN, solidified around the national to maintain the state and regional marketplaces. Adom Getachew explicates this:

Self-determination as worldmaking and nation-building and the postcolonial state imagined as the agent of international and domestic transformation were central to building a world after empire. As the conditions that had made these commitments viable dissipated, their political purchase also declined.<sup>64</sup>

Basoeki's aesthetic slide to kitsch is perhaps an indication of shifts in taste making and hierarchies of political power in the region, namely a popular distrust of elite nationalists. In turn, his work captures the historical contingencies of geopoetic agencies.

## [ Geopoetics in a Multipolar World ]

In 2017, diplomat and intellectual Kishore Mahbubani published "My New Love: South-east Asia," an opinion piece in *The Straits Times*. An affective appeal for Singaporeans to connect with and fall in love with the region, the essay followed a book that celebrated the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the most successful regional organisation in the world after the European Union. For Mahbubani, Southeast Asia represented the future for the world and a necessary emergent global framework: "As the world moves on from a mono-civilisation world dominated by the West to a multi-civilisational world of many thriving civilisation, we need to look for a multi-civilisational laboratory that will reveal what a multi-civilisational world will

look like.”<sup>65</sup> To this end, Mahbubani found, in the artworks at National Gallery Singapore, a means to “fall in love” with the region—stating that the “best way to understand the souls of countries is through their art.”<sup>66</sup> Mahbubani’s words would not be ill-placed in Basoeki’s own explication of his work.

The belief in art to speak, to virtues and the ideal in moments of geopolitical tectonic shifts is recurrent through history. Art as space and practice allows for a holding of complex perspectives and fluid allegiances. “Beauty will save the world,” proclaimed Prince Myshkin, the central figure in Dostoyevsky’s 1869 novel, *The Idiot*. Set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Czarist Russia amid social, political and religious upheaval, the story contemplates beauty as a shield against darkness and political corruption. Why in the face of world-order change do we turn to art? What does this tendency to turn to art tell us about the potentiality of geopoetics and how do we then assess Basoeki Abdullah’s legacy in Singapore and Southeast Asia today?

Tracing Basoeki Abdullah’s artistic engagements with Singapore, this essay has argued for his geopoetic role in advancing a visual and symbolic language of Southeast Asian and power. His artworks—at once sensual, and politically referential—offered representations that participated in geopolitical world-building at the level of regional imagination. His mobility, portraits and gift economies and his aesthetic pursuit of beauty formed part of a cultural labour that built a post-imperial world order not wholly defined by the nation but by a libidinal economy built on desire. Yet, the limits of this aesthetics of desire are also historically visible. By the 1980s, Basoeki’s idiom began to register as decorative and perhaps, even kitsch. This shift registers broader changes in taste, legitimacy and the perceived authority of elite cultural agents in Southeast Asia.

Patrick Flores has most recently refined his definition of geopoetics in relation to how contemporary art engages with the histories of the Cold War:

[Geopoetics] is not marked or advanced as a binary opposite of geopolitics, but rather as another mode of understanding how the world plays out beyond the ideological theater.

Geopoetics when broadly conceived is the relationship between world-making and form-making in which geography, and also geology, and art co-produce a distinct sensible and sensitive agency and material. While geopolitics relies largely on socio-economic and political interventions, the sensibility of geopoetic action gives art the chance to equivalently shape the planetary place, which is assumed to shape the art in reciprocity, and inevitably transform what socio-economic and political interventions may mean as experiments of form in themselves. It is a more relational and dialogic method, rather than a determinist technique of defining an ultimately programmatic object such as politics or art. And this form is embedded in or emerges from the nature of threatened worlds suffering from a historical continuum of wars, nature being the character and the ecology of precariousness.<sup>67</sup>

Through Basoeki's artworks that he gifted to Singapore and his relationship to Singapore during its decolonisation, we find a geopoetic agency to build an international order grounded in the libidinal economy of his aesthetics. This geopoetic agency in turn enabled Basoeki to operate geopolitically as an artist. The artwork, and attendant aspirational desires enabled and empowered Basoeki to move through societies, bridge ideological difference and essentially consolidate networks of a postcolonial Southeast Asia. This regionalism is one still constructed through the generative framework of *desire*, such that in 2017 Mahbubani reminded us to look to art to fall in love with Southeast Asia. Maybe all we need to change the world is love—or in other words—*desire*.<sup>71</sup> In a world trending away from multilateralism of the internationalism advanced by the Bandung Conference (1955), Basoeki's artwork may yet offer the diplomacy and desire we need to build a better world.<sup>68</sup>

- 1 There are multiple mediums and projects through which Flores has expanded the discourse of geopoetics in artistic and curatorial production. This project takes up his discourse to render the historical agencies of art in the period of decolonisation and region-building. The references in this essay mobilise different texts that Flores has produced on the subject. However, in opening this essay, the author returns to Flores' earliest use of the term. In ending the essay, the author mobilises Flores' most recent articulation of the term.
- 2 Patrick Flores, "Address of Art: Vicinity of Region, Horizon of History," in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia* (National Gallery Singapore, 2018), 18.
- 3 Mi You, *Art in a Multipolar World* (Documenta Institute and Hate Cantz, 2024), 8.
- 4 "S'pore finance company to expand," *The Straits Times*, December 16, 1966, 31. Lok Bok Sim through the 1960s and 1970s led a local finance company with regional interests that provided services like fixed deposits, savings, hire-purchase agreements of various forms and local industry and home-ownership finance.
- 5 "Museum gets 27 Basoeki Paintings," *The Straits Times*, October 19, 1994, 4.
- 6 He states, "Desire is not a lack, not a relation, not a mediation, not a dialectic. It is a flux, a pure and simple discharge, a torrent without origin or end." See Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, translated by Iain Hamilton Grant (Indiana University Press, 1993), 111.
- 7 Thomas Jackson, "Paradiplomacy and political geography: The geopolitics of substate regional diplomacy," *Geography Compass* 12, no. 2 (2018): e12357, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12357>.
- 8 "Marshall's artistic profile for Europe," *The Straits Times*, October 27, 1955.
- 9 "Marshall's artistic profile for Europe."
- 10 "Marshall's artistic profile for Europe."
- 11 Anne Kukuczka and Claudia Liebelt, "Aesthetic citizenship, beauty politics and the state: an introduction," *Citizenship Studies* 28, no. 1 (2024): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2024.2363623>.
- 12 "Miss Singapore Portrait for Sukarno," *The Singapore Free Press*, June 22, 1959.
- 13 Brigitta Isabella, "The Politics of Friendship: Modern Art in Indonesia's Cultural Diplomacy," in *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art, 1945-1990*, eds. Stephen H. Whiteman, Sarena Abdullah, Yvonne Low and Phoebe Scott (Power Publications and National Gallery Singapore, 2018), 85.
- 14 It is possible that this exhibition was facilitated by the Singapore Art Society, which also supported Basoeki Abdullah's exhibition in 1958.
- 15 "Singapore's girls impress 'realist,'" *The Singapore Free Press*, September 17, 1957, 3.

- 16** The Singapore Art Society sponsored and organised the exhibition that ran from 17–22 October 1958. It was held at the Victoria Memorial Hall and was opened by Ko Teck Kin, the then-President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. This speaks to Basoeki's circulation within Singapore's Chinese community.
- 17** "Pertunjokan dari pelukis Indonesia yg. mashhor di-beri sambutan meriah di-Singapura," *Berita Harian*, February 18, 1958, 4.
- 18** An early iteration of this was articulated in 1949 with plans for an annual arts festival. See "Plan for annual Arts Festival," *The Straits Times*, July 17, 1949.
- 19** Seng Yu Jin, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, (Singapore Art Museum, 2007), 7. As Seng notes in his catalogue essay, in 1945 the British envisioned "the Grand Design (or Greater Malaysia) in the form of a long-term plan for the region which was to be realised first by the merger of the Federation of Malaya with Singapore, followed by the union of Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo and finally the amalgamation of the two regional entities into a supra-national political bloc." (pg.10) Regionalism was a form of containment for British policymakers who were contending with decolonisation in Southeast Asia and the Cold War anxiety that the nation would fall to communism. To facilitate this territorial merger, a shared cultural and multiracial identity had to be created.
- 20** Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, 14.
- 21** "The Singapore Art Society (SAS) was a milestone in the development of art institutions in Singapore and brought together the British Council, Society of Chinese Artists, Persekutuan Pelukis Melayu Malaya, Indian Fine Arts Society, YMCA Arts Club, Singapore Camera Club, Singapore Institute of Architects, University of Singapore, Teachers' Training College, NAFA, China Society and the Friends of Singapore. It was a 'national' platform for the promotion of culture in Singapore and Malaya. The SAS sought to stimulate a national art market and promoted art to the public. It also facilitated artistic exchange with the region. The close association of British administrators with the SAS is noted by Seng in the fact that SAS was championed as the leading art society in Singapore in the 1951 Singapore Annual Report." Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, 10–11.
- 22** Frank Sullivan, "The Art of Basoeki Abdullah," in *Exhibition of Paintings by Raden Basoeki Abdullah* (Singapore Art Society, 1958). A reproduction can be found in exhibition. Sullivan's text was later quoted and reproduced in Thailand in a 1960 exhibition by The Lions Club of Bangkok.
- 23** "6,000 viewers," *The Straits Times*, October 23, 1958, 5. Ho Kok Hoe later reported that close to 10,000 people attended the exhibition in a letter.

- 24** He was the British Governor-General of the Malayan Union (May 1946–1948) and later Commissioner-General for Southeast Asia from 1948 to 1955. He served as the first Chancellor of the University of Malaya from 1949 to 1961. MacDonald was accompanied by Christina Loke to visit the exhibition. Her pastel portrait is also presented in the exhibition. See “Admirer of Art,” *The Straits Times*, October 23, 1958, 5.
- 25** Artefact in the exhibition, *Letters between the Embassy of the Federation of Malaya in Thailand and the Singapore Art Society*, Accession no. 2007-53457.
- 26** Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, 52.
- 27** *Pertunjukan Hasil Kesenian Yang Ke-2* (Singapore: Equator Art Society, 1960), [Unpaginated].
- 28** Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, 10–15.
- 29** Seng, *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency*, 50.
- 30** A celebration of Singapore attaining self-government, the exposition which included art exhibitions and beauty pageants framed Singapore as being at the crossroads of Southeast Asia. A politically fraught project, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce had negotiated with the British Administration to present the exposition as Southeast Asian as opposed to an international trade fair. Intelligence documents from the time account that this shift was important to prevent communist China from dominating the framing of the region as part of an international alignment. See National Archives Singapore, “Memo to colonial office,” July 16, 1958, CO1030/883.
- 31** Agus Dermawan T., “Art affairs between the king & painter,” *The Jakarta Post*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/11/09/art-affairs-between-king-painter.html>.
- 32** Dermawan, “Art affairs between the king & painter.”
- 33** Basoeki won international acclaim when he won a competition commemorating the coronation of Dutch Queen Juliana in 1948 over 87 European painters.
- 34** *Exhibition of Paintings by Raden Basoeki Abdullah*, sponsored by the Lions Club of Bangkok (Singapore Art Society: 1960).
- 35** Agus Dermawan T., “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” in *Basoeki Abdullah: Fakta and Fiksi* (Museum Basoeki Abdullah, 2009), 20.
- 36** Sarah Tiffin, *Southeast Asia in Ruins, Art and Empire in the Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (NUS Press, 2016).
- 37** Dermawan, “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 20–21.
- 38** Dermawan, “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 26.
- 39** Matthew Phillips and Naoko Shimazu, eds. *Cold War Asia: A Visual History of Global Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 8.
- 40** John Martin (1789–1854) was an English romantic painter celebrated for his fantastical compositions and vast landscapes. He was a key figure in the romantic movement which sought to capture the sublime through portraying man’s relationship with

- nature. He profited from and achieved international popularity when began producing mezzotint engravings of his paintings to sell to the public in the 1820s. Thomas Eitel Stucke, “John Martin,” *Illustration History*, accessed April 15, 2025, <https://www.illustrationhistory.org/artists/john-martin>
- 41 Agus Dermawan T., *Basoeki Abdullah Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2015), 84.
  - 42 Dermawan, “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 29.
  - 43 Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).
  - 44 Patrick Flores, “Style in Southeast Asia: A Political History” in *Realism in Asia: Volume One*, ed. Yeo Wei Wei (The National Art Gallery, Singapore, 2010), 30.
  - 45 Patrick Flores, “Style in Southeast Asia,” 31.
  - 46 “In Search of Beauty,” *The Straits Times*, September 18, 1958, 14.
  - 47 Patrick Flores, “The Surrogate Diplomacy of Imelda in Cold War Asia: A Visual history of Global Diplomacy,” in *A Visual History of Global Diplomacy*, eds. Matthew Phillips and Naoko Shimazu (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 50–51.
  - 48 Flores, “The Surrogate Diplomacy of Imelda in Cold War Asia,” 50–51.
  - 49 “Women and Careers,” *The Straits Times*, December 9, 1958, 9.
  - 50 Dermawan, “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 27; Frans Leidelmeijer and Chris Vellinga, *Basoeki Abdullah in Den Haag* (Cyperus, 2019), 47.
  - 51 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 117.
  - 52 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 117.
  - 53 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 117.
  - 54 Dermawan, “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 29.
  - 55 Dermawan, “Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 118.
  - 56 Dermawan, *Basoeki Abdullah: Sang Hanoman Kelayongan*, 12.
  - 57 Jim Supangkat and Sanento Yuliman, “Every Day Art (Practices) against Elitism,” in *Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi*, exh. cat. (Taman Ismail Marzuki, 1987), [https://archive.ivaa-online.org/files/uploads/texts/1987\\_Pasaraya%20Dunia%20Fantasi\\_Catalogue\\_Everyday%20Art%20Against%20Elitism\\_ENG.pdf](https://archive.ivaa-online.org/files/uploads/texts/1987_Pasaraya%20Dunia%20Fantasi_Catalogue_Everyday%20Art%20Against%20Elitism_ENG.pdf).
  - 58 Parting the Stage Curtain on Basoeki Abdullah,” 118.
  - 59 “Letter from Bangkok describes a dance ‘miracle,’” *The Straits Times*, February 28, 1960, 6.
  - 60 “Letter from Bangkok describes a dance ‘miracle.’”
  - 61 Stefan A. Ortlieb and Claus-Christian Carbon. “Kitsch and Perception: Towards a New ‘Aesthetic from Below,’” *Art & Perception* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134913-00001091>.
  - 62 Anissa Rahadiningtyas, “Islam and Art in the Makings of the Modern in Indonesia,” (Dissertation, Cornell University, 2021).
  - 63 Seng Yu Jin, “Cultural Wars in Southeast Asia: The Birth of the Critical Exhibition in the 1970s,” in *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia* (National Gallery Singapore, 2018), 214–230.

- 64** Getachew, 180.
- 65** Kishore Mahbubani, “My New Love: South-east Asia,” *The Straits Times*, April 15, 2017.
- 66** Kishore Mahbubani, “My New Love: South-east Asia.”
- 67** Lecture by Patrick Flores, BACC, 2025.
- 68** One of the premises guiding National Gallery Singapore’s strategy is the belief that art can change the world, and that Southeast Asia has an important function in (re)worlding and providing new intellectual horizons around which to collectivise, as the world tends toward deglobalisation and social fracture. Evidence pointing to the international world order moving away from multilateralism is evident in Trump’s tariffs of 2025. See “President Trump Lays Ruin to the Post-War Multilateral Global Trading System,” *Fraser Institute*, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/commentary/president-trump-lays-ruin-post-war-multilateral-global-trading-system>.

## “A TRAVELLER REPORTS: WOMEN AND CAREERS”

Susan Barrie,  
The Straits Times,  
December 9, 1958.



SUSAN BARRIE'S

# Feminine Forum

A TRAVELLER REPORTS

## WOMEN AND CAREERS

SO much publicity has recently been given to the dominant American woman, who is said to wear the pants, hold the purse-strings, and keep the American male very much under her thumb, that I asked an interesting American woman, Mrs. Charles Moore, for her point of view.

Blonde and elegant Mrs. Moore, a former fashion editor and advertising executive, is visiting Singapore in the course of a Far-Eastern tour with her husband, a geophysicist and vice-president of a prominent firm.

She laughed when I asked if she agreed that women were the head of the family in America.

"We always laugh at those articles and comic strips that imply it," she said. "My husband is amused by it, too. You see, most American women put their men first, and the men do the same for us. It's a mutual arrangement."

"Of course, we do believe in women having university training and taking up professions. Most of us want to, even if we give up when we marry and have children. But a woman who has done a job outside the home is much more understanding about her husband's business problems. The husband finds her more interesting, too.

"Besides, the more education and training a woman has, the better. What if she loses her husband? She may need the training to take care of her children."

Mrs. Moore, who met her husband when they were both university students in Texas, is a graduate in journalism and advertising from the Texas Women's University, and was formerly fashion editor of the Dallas Morning News. Later she became advertising manager for two furniture stores in Dallas.

### Travels

In the course of her trip Mrs. Moore has visited London, Vienna, Beirut, Karachi, Dakar, and Calcutta.

She was particularly impressed with the active part Indian women are taking in public life and the professions.

She was especially interested in Mrs. Lakshmi Pandit, and expressed warm admiration for the part she plays in civic affairs.

Her first impression of Singapore is that the people are among the most

courteous in the world and that the city is beautifully clean.

### Fashions

Mrs. Moore wore smokey-blue nylons and pointed blue shoes with her delphinium blue silk shirtmaker dress. I asked her whether American women had completely rejected the sack and chemise line.

"It has just about gone now," she said. "That's another way in which we are influenced by our husbands. They didn't like it, so the women went back to fitted dresses."

"The Empire line is very popular, and much more becoming. Sometimes the dress is belted in high under the bustline but hangs out loosely at the back."

Mrs. Moore predicts a return to longer skirts next season.

"They're so short now in the States that I think they have gone about as far as they can go. I'm afraid there will be a lot of creased hemlines when they begin letting them down again."

### Hostel

Mrs. Sherry Hatcher of Penang's Y.W.C.A., tells me that the modern three-storey hostel for women offers some of Malaya's best and cheapest accommodation.

It offers rooms for 33 women of all races, religions, and ages from 16 onwards, and the tariff for a single room with breakfast is only \$6.00 a night.

Meals, which may be ordered on the same day, offer European and Asian food, including Muslim food, and transient guests may go out every evening until 1.00 a.m. by arranging for a late pass.

The brochure for the hostel says "if you wish you can do your own laundry or if you are too lazy, you can get it done for a small extra charge."

### Beauty business

Malayan women are obviously becoming more and more beauty conscious, and it is not only in Singapore that they have facilities for facial and slimming treatments.

In Johore Bahru, where there are so many formal Royal receptions, there is a big demand for expert make-up, grooming, and beauty care.

Mrs. Melinda Callow, who holds a distinction certificate in Swedish massage and has studied beauty techniques in Europe



AMERICAN VIEW. American visitor Mrs. Charles Moore, who does not agree that her countrywomen dominate their husbands. She says that women put their menfolk first, and it is a mutual arrangement. She also thinks women should be trained for a profession or career and have the opportunity for a university education.

and with a Singapore expert, is meeting the demand by opening her own salon.

"It is very important for a beauty specialist to have a high standard of anatomical knowledge," she said. "Manipulation of the subcutaneous tissue, which is often neglected, forms an important part of the treatment to chase away unwanted wrinkles."

In addition to running her own salon, Mrs. Callow is also conducting beauty culture courses for women who want to do their own make-up and skin treatment.

These are held at the Johore Bahru Voluntary Organisation Centre, and part of the proceeds go to Johore children's charities.

### In capital

Kuala Lumpur is keeping up its increased interest in fashion, and a Straits Times correspondent reports that the Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman and his wife, Puan Sharifah Rodziah gave their patronage to a dress parade at the weekend.

The clothes by local designer Elias, were all Western styles made up in handpicked Asian materials, including pina cloth made of pineapple fibre from the Philippines, saris from Kashmir, and Malayan batiks.

The collection consisted of 24 dresses, ranging from formal evening wear to casual clothes and beach wear.

Proceeds aided the nursing division of the Selangor St. John's Ambulance Brigade.

### Control

Women who are worried about the unbecoming bulges that are apt to develop during the Christmas party season, may take a tip from dancer Rose Eberwein, who has one of

the neatest figures in Malaya.

Rose tells me that one of the secrets of keeping in good shape is to wear a theatrical belt especially made for giving tummy control to dancers.

This is much lighter and cooler than the average girdle—just a light front and back panel of firm satin with elastic side-pieces hugging the hips.

"This is now required at Phyllis Beddell's and other leading dancing schools in Britain," Rose told me. "It is medically desirable for all dancers, and I also insist on my pupils wearing them so as not to strain internal organs."

"But they're excellent to wear here under all clothes—very light and cool, but the best tummy flattener I know."

### Auditions

Parents who have children with dramatic talent will be interested to know that Joan Pillay of Radio Malaya is on the lookout for boys and girls to take part in a new serial listed for 1959.

Joan is holding auditions for children between nine and 15, at Radio Malaya on Sundays between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m., and on Thursday afternoons at the same time.

She is particularly anxious to hear from Asian children, and those who would like an audition should telephone her at 52.201, extension 18.

Previous radio or stage experience is not necessary, but of course fairly fluent English is



INNOVATION. Home dressmakers will welcome this new fastener, shown in Paris at the Spring and Summer collections. The fastener, which may replace the current slide fastener, consists of two nylon ribbons, one of which is strengthened with hooks inside against the other ribbon, coiled with nylon velvet. The ribbons are detached as required and replaced one against the other. Here the fastener is seen in use on a supple leather jacket.

# Artworks and Archival Materials



## INDONESIAN ARTIST FINDS INSPIRATION IN CHIEF MINISTER'S FACE



MR. BASOEKI ABDULLAH is seen here putting the finishing touches to the sketch of Mr. Marshall.—Straits Times picture.

## Marshall's 'artistic profile' for Europe

**T**HE face of Singapore's Chief Minister, Mr. David Marshall, will soon be seen in Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, England and Holland.

An Indonesian painter, Mr. Basoeqi Abdullah, who is on his way to Europe, yesterday visited Mr. Marshall at his office—and left half an hour later with three sketches of the Chief Minister.

"I had heard so much about Mr. Marshall's popularity on his recent Indonesian tour that I was determined to see him when I came to Singapore and, if possible, sketch him," Mr. Basoeqi explained.

### A tour of the continent

Mr. Basoeqi who will exhibit about 100 paintings on the Continent and in Britain said he would include one of the sketches of Mr. Marshall in the exhibition.

He will pass through Singapore on his way home in six months and hopes then to do a large oil portrait of Mr. Marshall.

"Mr. Marshall has an artistic profile and his mobile face is inspirational for an artist," Mr. Basoeqi said enthusiastically.

Mr. Basoeqi has spent 17 years in Europe studying art and in 1949 he was commissioned by Queen Juliana of the Netherlands to paint her portrait.

A year later when he returned to Indonesia, President Soekarno had his State portrait painted by him.

Mr. Basoeqi plans to hold an exhibition in Singapore on his return from Europe.

**"MARSHALL'S  
'ARTISTIC PROFILE'  
FOR EUROPE,"**

*The Straits Times,*  
October 27, 1995.



**LABOUR**

1959

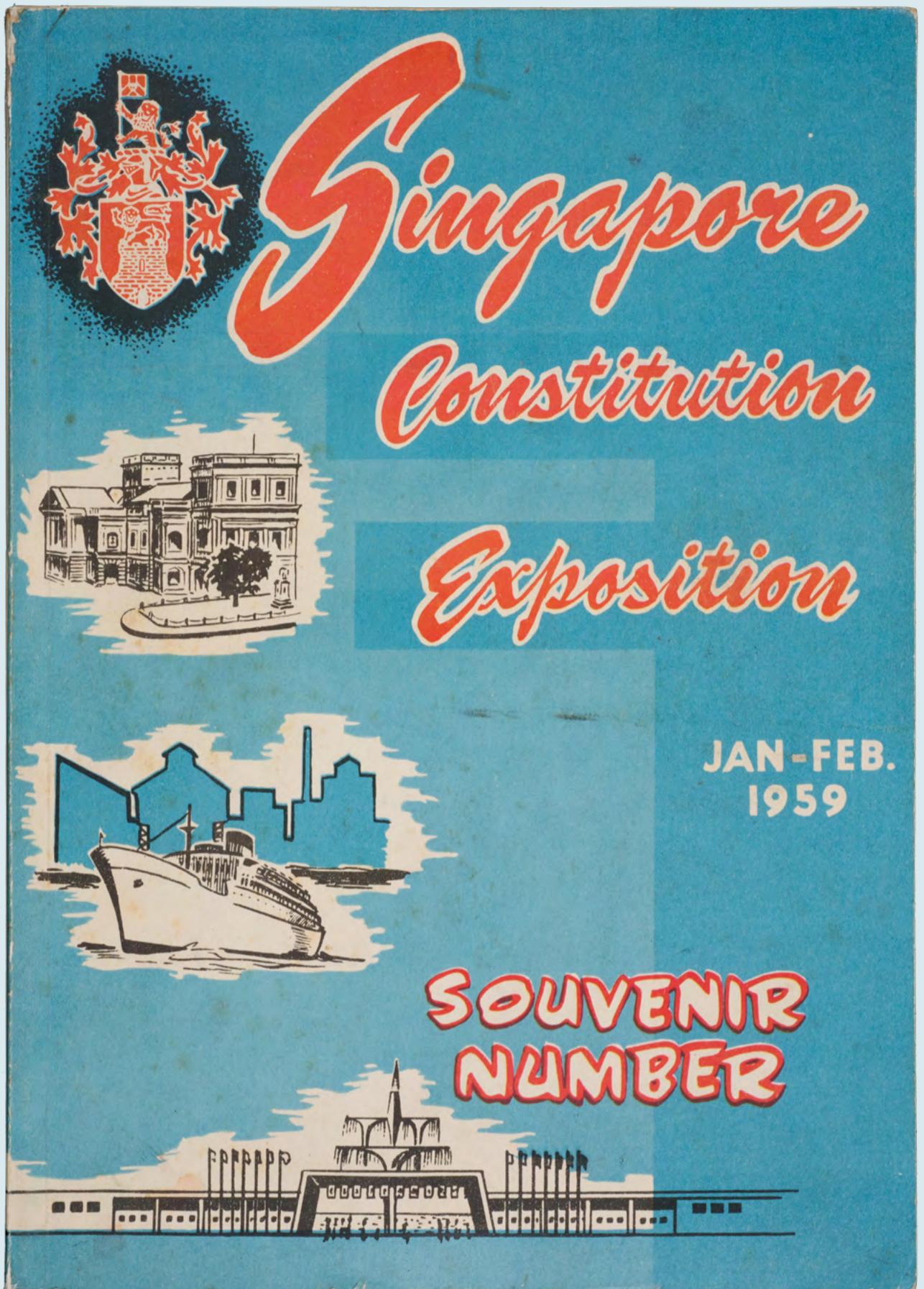
Oil on canvas,  
195 × 293 cm

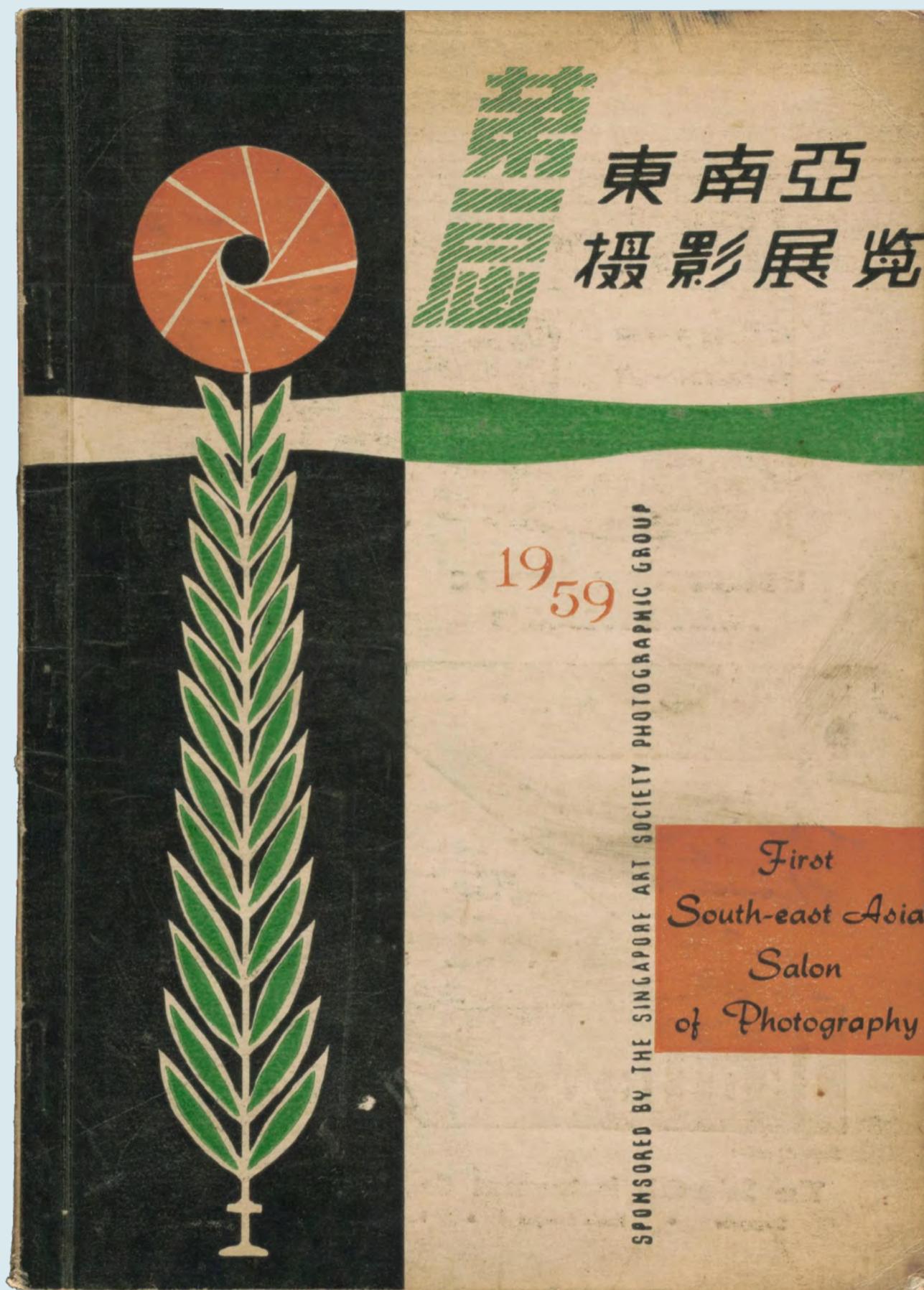
Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

SINGAPORE  
CONSTITUTION  
EXPOSITION

1959

Collection of the National  
Museum of Singapore,  
National Heritage Board  
Ministry of Digital  
Development and Information





CATALOGUE FOR  
THE FIRST SOUTH-  
EAST ASIA SALON  
OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
EXHIBITION

1959

Collection of the National  
Museum of Singapore,  
National Heritage Board  
© Singapore Art Society



**STRUGGLE FOR THE  
RE-ESTABLISHMENT  
OF THE DEMOCRACY  
AND THE RIGHT FOR  
THE PEOPLE**

1981

Oil on canvas,  
200 × 490 cm

Gift of the artist

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

**UNTITLED (MAN  
IN WHITE SHIRT)**

Undated

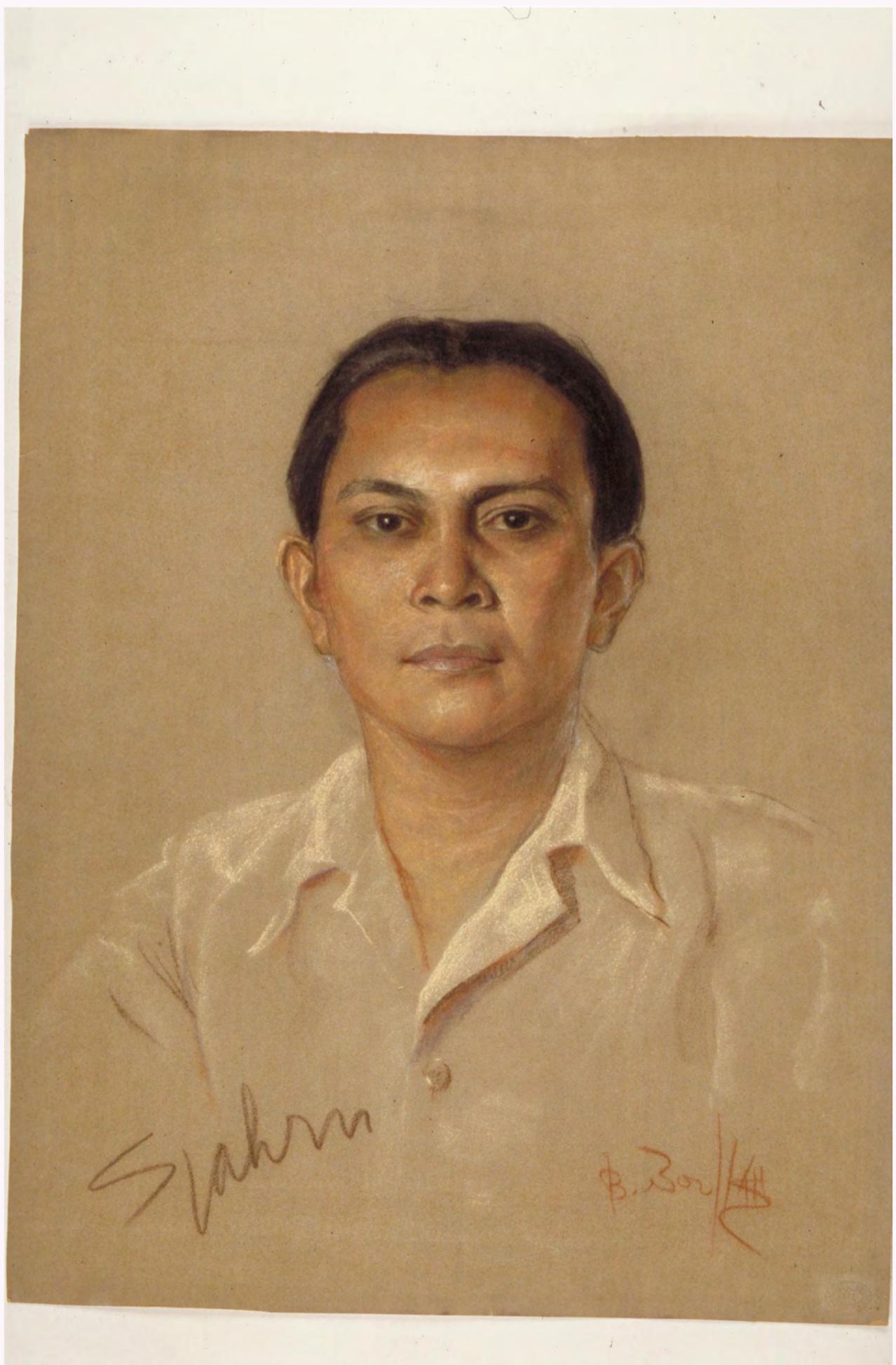
Pastel on paper,

64.2 × 48.6 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National

Gallery Singapore



# PHOTO BOARD PANEL OF EXHIBITION IN ROME, ITALY 1955; EXHIBITION IN PORTUGAL 1956; EXHIBITION IN ENGLAND 1956; EXHIBITION IN SINGAPORE 1958

1985

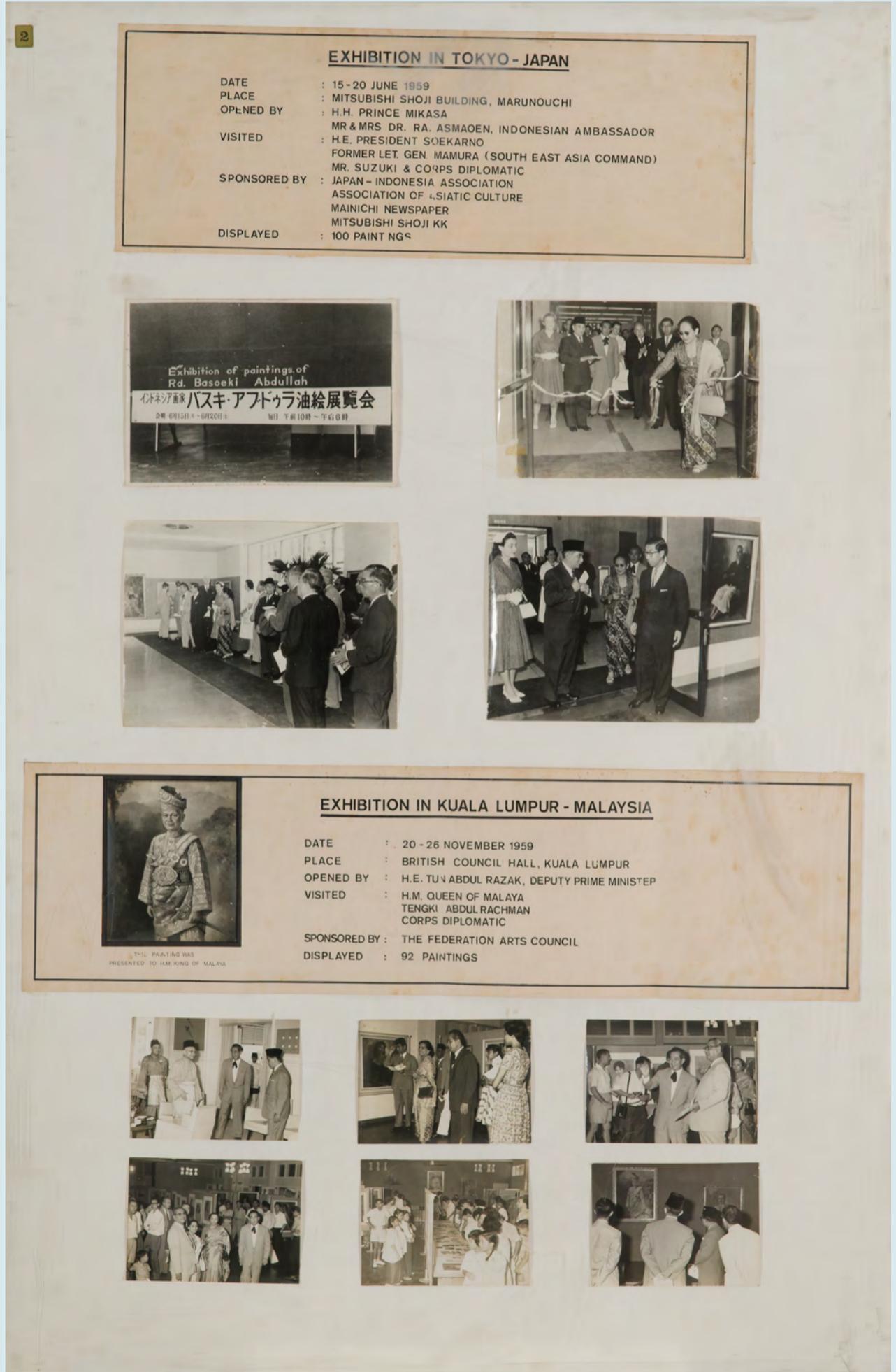
Basoeki Abdullah Museum,  
Indonesian Heritage Agency,  
Ministry of Culture of the  
Republic of Indonesia



# PHOTO BOARD PANEL OF EXHIBITION IN TOKYO 1959; AND EXHIBITION IN KUALA LUMPUR 1959

1985

Basoeki Abdullah Museum,  
Indonesian Heritage Agency,  
Ministry of Culture of the  
Republic of Indonesia



**PHOTO BOARD PANEL  
OF EXHIBITION IN  
BANGKOK, THAILAND  
1960 AND 1973**

1985

Basoeki Abdullah Museum,  
Indonesian Heritage Agency,  
Ministry of Culture of the  
Republic of Indonesia

3

**EXHIBITION IN BANGKOK - THAILAND**



|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| DATE         | : 15 - 21 JANUARY 1960   |
| PLACE        | : GYMNASIUM OF THE NATIONAL STADIUM, BANGKOK   |
| OPENED BY    | : THEIR MAJESTIES KING BHUMIBOL & QUEEN SIRIKIT<br>H.E. MR ICKSAN, THE INDONESIAN AMBASSADOR<br>MR SURATHUN BUNNAQ |
| VISITED      | : ROYAL FAMILY<br>ROYAL HOUSEHOLD<br>THAI GOVERNMENT<br>MEMBER OF LIONS CLUB                                       |
| SPONSORED BY | : LIONS CLUB   |
| DISPLAYED    | : 80 PAINTINGS   |

note: the painting of t.m. king & queen was presented on the exhibition








**EXHIBITION IN BANGKOK - THAILAND**



|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| DATE         | : 3 - 9 DECEMBER 1973  |
| PLACE        | : DUSIT THANI HOTEL  |
| OPENED BY    | : H.M. KING BHUMIBOL ADULYADEJ<br>H.M. QUEEN RAMBAI RAMA VII   |
| VISITED      | : MR. SOETARTO SIGIT, INDONESIAN AMBASSADOR<br>PROF. M.C. SUBHADRADIS DISKUL<br>DR. KALYA ISRASENA NA AYUDHYA, LORD CHAMBERLEIN<br>DR. TANATH KHOMAN, FOREIGN MINISTER |
| SPONSORED BY | : COMMERCIAL BANK  |
| DISPLAYED    | : 230 PAINTINGS  |

note: the painting of t.m. king & queen of Thailand was presented on the exhibition





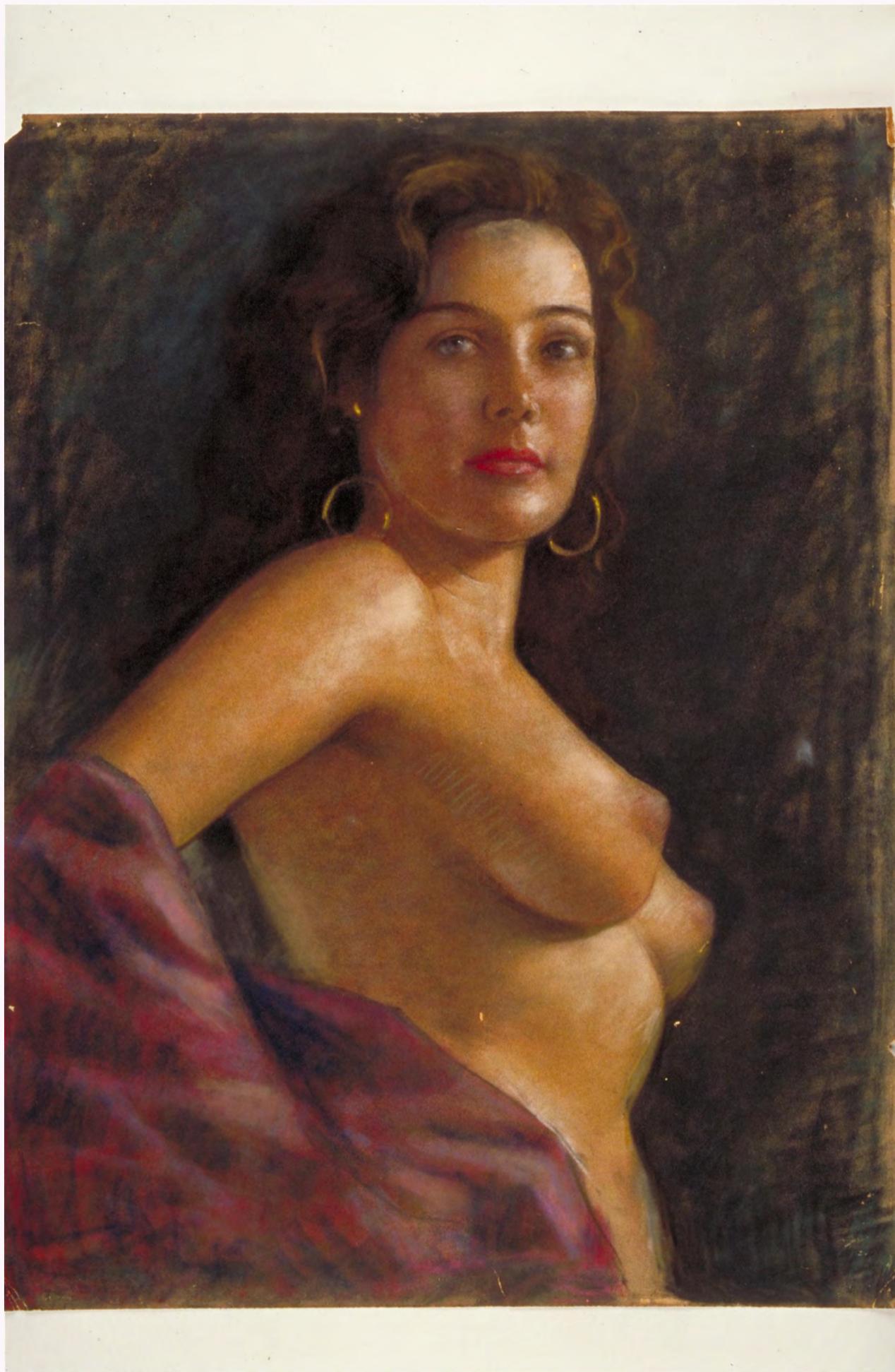




PHOTO BOARD PANEL  
OF EXHIBITION IN  
SINGAPORE 1981;  
EXHIBITION IN  
JAKARTA 1984  
1985

Basoeki Abdullah Museum,  
Indonesian Heritage Agency,  
Ministry of Culture of the  
Republic of Indonesia





**UNTITLED (NUDE –  
FRONTAL POSE)**

Undated

Pastel on paper,

65.1 × 49.9 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



**MR. HO KOK HOE**

Undated

Pastel on paper,

60.6 × 47.2 cm

Collection of Ho Kok Hoe



**MRS. HO KOK HOE**  
1958  
Oil on canvas,  
78 × 58 cm  
Collection of Ho Kok Hoe

LETTER FROM THE  
SINGAPORE ART  
SOCIETY TO THE  
EMBASSY OF THE  
FEDERATION OF  
MALAYA IN THAILAND

1958

Collection of the National  
Museum of Singapore,  
National Heritage Board  
© Singapore Art Society

601 Kong Hoa Building,  
2 George Street,  
Singapore 1.

24th Nov. 1958

Your Ref: 41/57/100

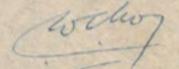
The Chancery,  
Embassy of the Federation of  
Malaya in Thailand,  
Bangkok.

Dear Sir,

I acknowledge with thanks receipt of your letter of  
the 11th instant regarding the oil colour work of Raden  
Basoeki Abdullah entitled "Landscape (near Kuala Lumpur)  
Malaya at \$500/-.

I have tried to contact Mr. Basoeki but was informed  
that he is at present in Japan and will be back in Singapore  
by the end of this month. As soon as I have contacted him I  
will notify you in due course.

Yours faithfully,

  
Secretary.

比蘇基亞都拉畫展

新加坡藝術協會主辦



"NANYANG"



EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS BY  
**RADEN BASOEKI ABDULLAH**

SINGAPORE ART SOCIETY

CATALOGUE FOR  
AN EXHIBITION OF  
PAINTINGS BY RADEN  
BASOEKI ABDULLAH

c. 1950s–1960s

Collection of the National  
Museum of Singapore,  
National Heritage Board  
© Singapore Art Society

**UNTITLED**

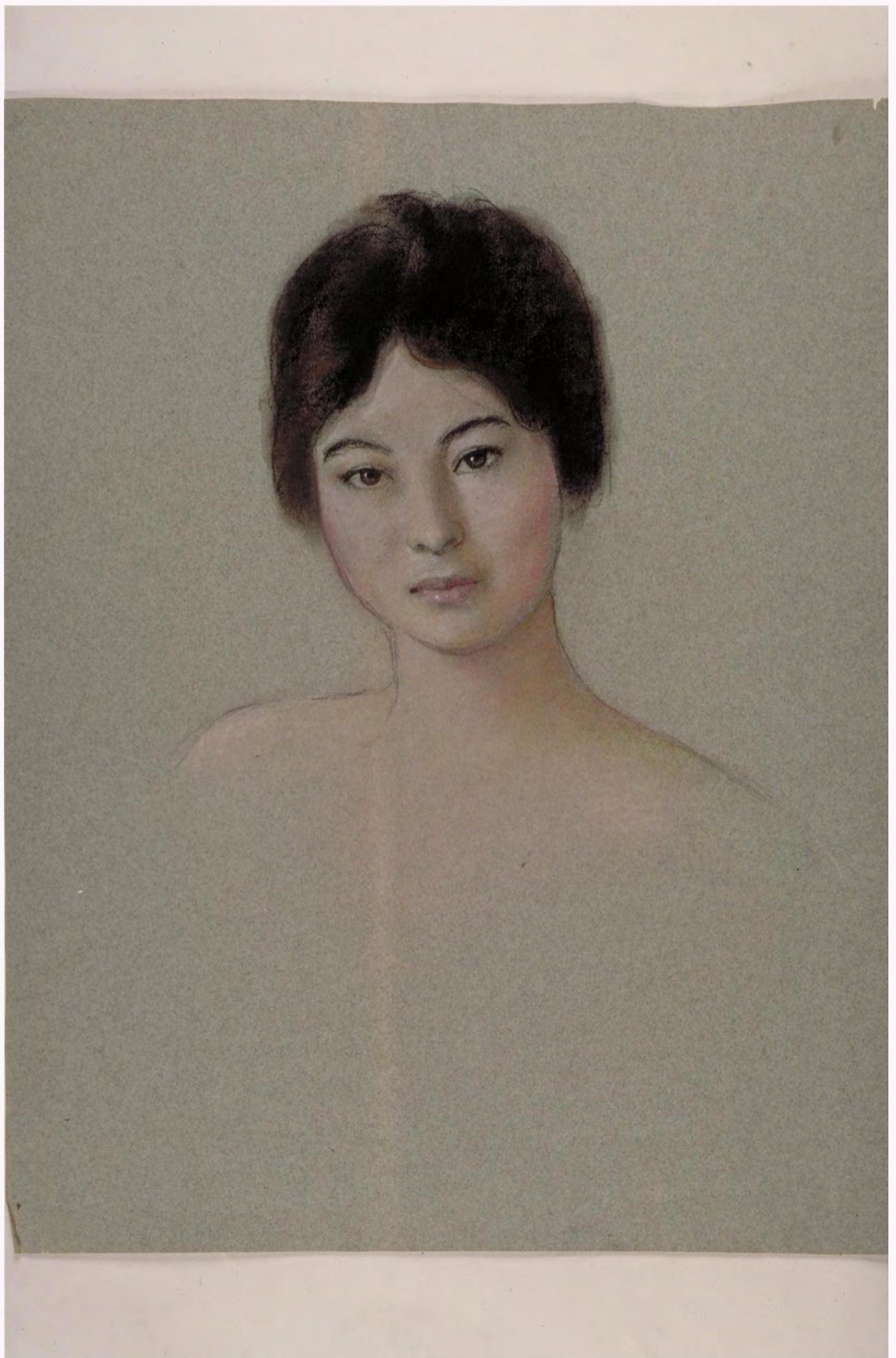
Undated

Pastel on paper,

63.5 × 49.5 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



**UNTITLED  
(CHINESE WOMAN  
WITH RED LIPS)**

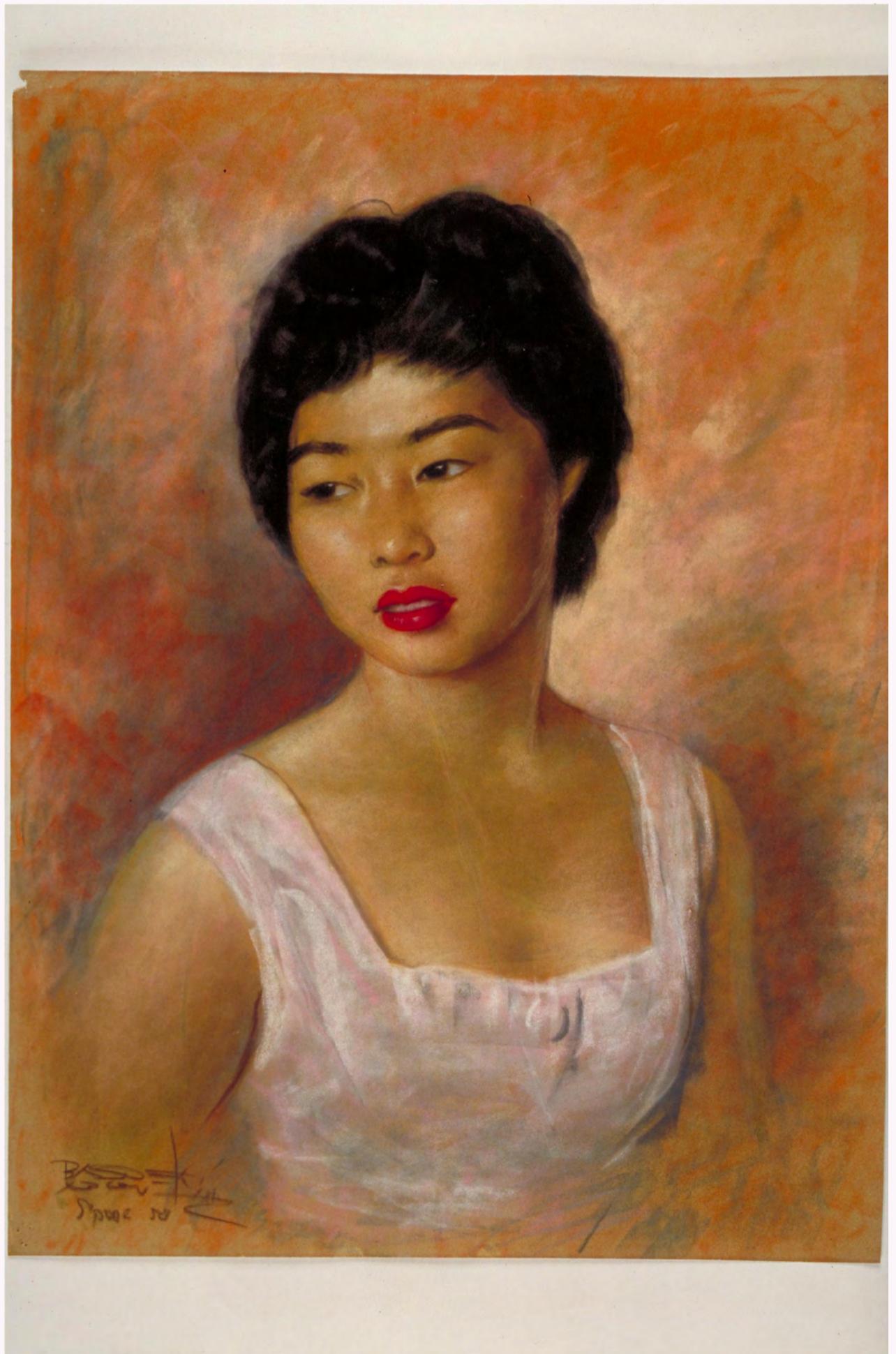
1958

Pastel on paper,

65.3 × 50.3 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore





**UNTITLED (WOMAN  
LOOKING UPWARDS)**

Undated

Pastel on paper,

65.1 × 50.2 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

**UNTITLED  
(CHINESE WOMAN  
IN PINK-SITTING)**

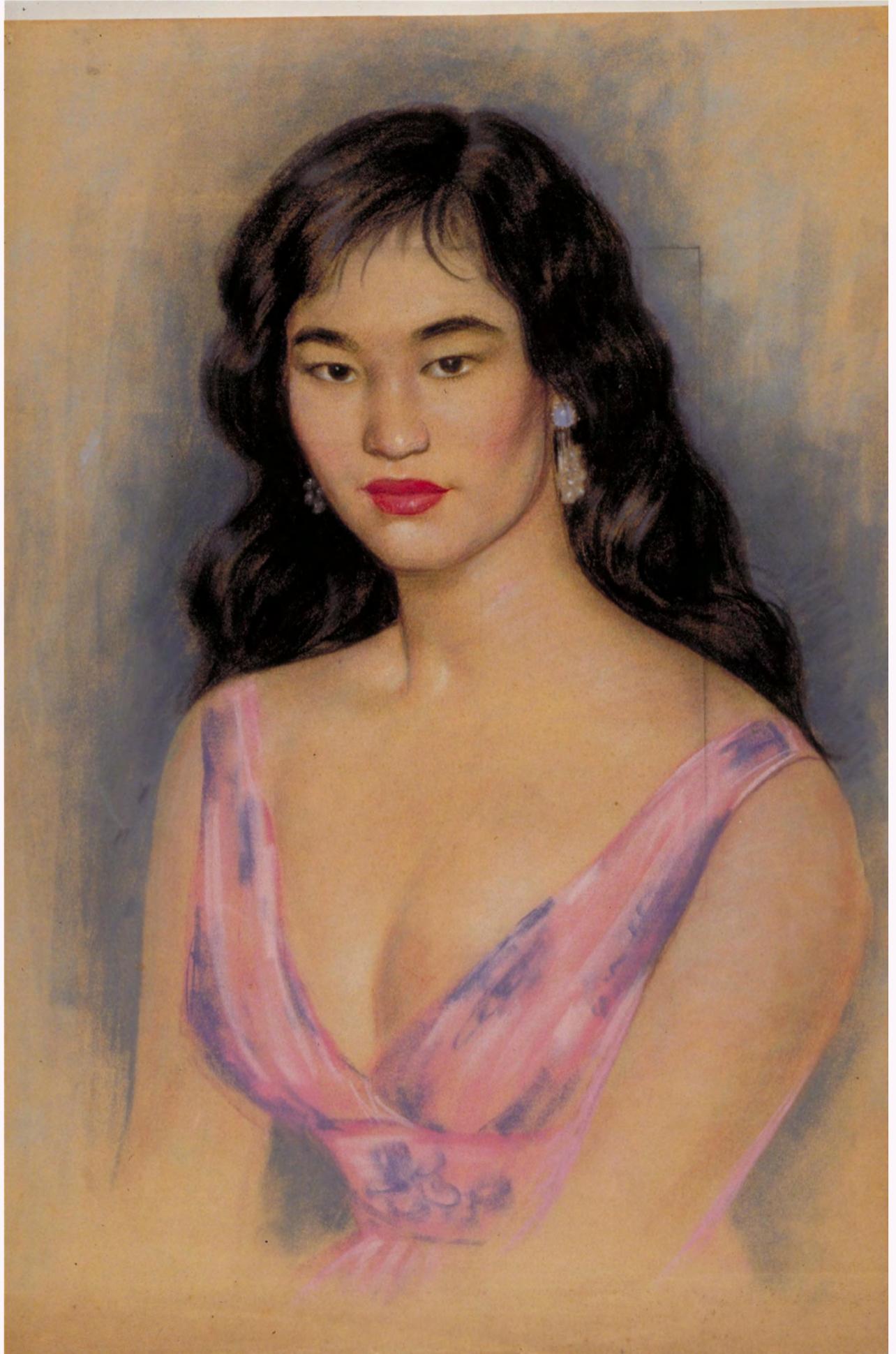
Undated

Pastel on paper,

75.6 × 52.7 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore





**UNTITLED  
(LADY IN WHITE)**

1958

Pastel on paper,

65 × 50.1 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



**UNTITLED  
(CHINESE WOMAN  
WITH LONG NECK)**

1957

Pastel on paper,

65.2 × 50.2 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



**UNTITLED  
(SIDEVIEW-WOMAN/  
BLACK HAIR)**

1952

Pastel on paper,

65.1 × 49.9 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore

**UNTITLED  
(CHINESE WOMAN  
WITH LONG HAIR)**

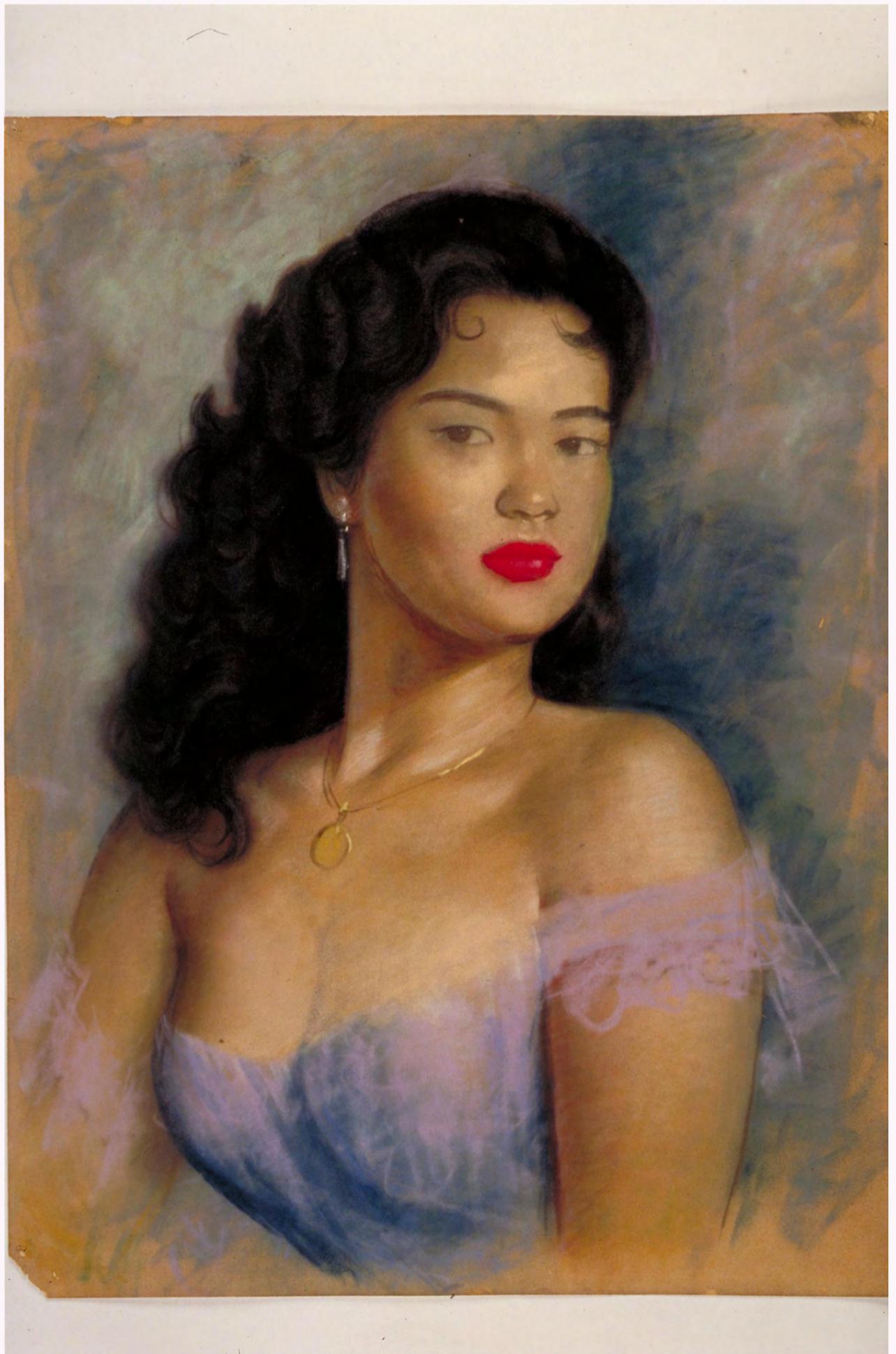
Undated

Pastel on paper,

65 × 50.1 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore





**UNTITLED  
(CHINESE WOMAN IN  
WHITE CHEONGSAM)**

Undated

Pastel on paper,

65.1 × 50.2 cm

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National  
Gallery Singapore



**PORTRAIT OF  
DR. TAN TSZE CHOR**

1958

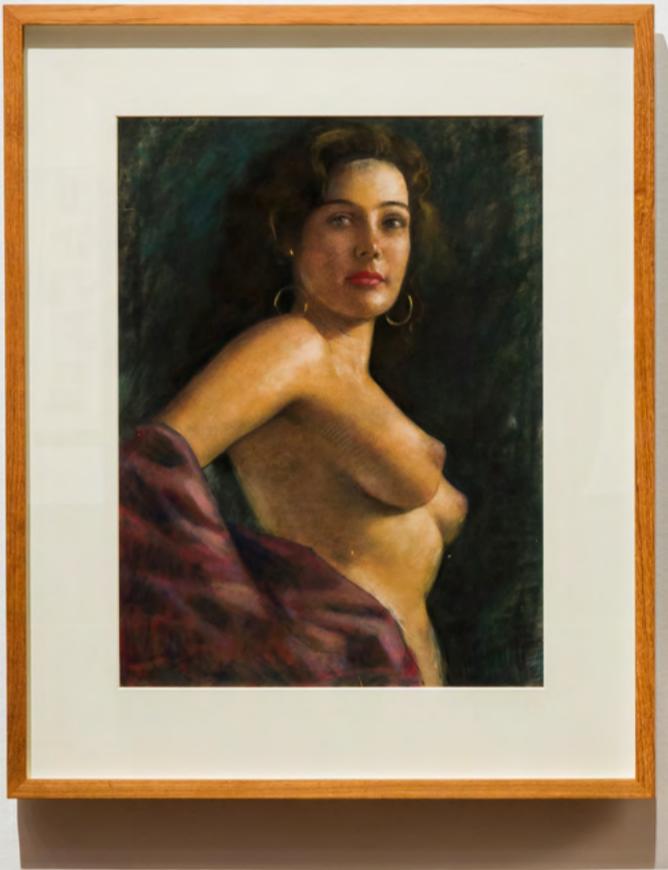
Oil on canvas,

140.5 × 92 cm

From the Xiang Xue Zhuang  
Collection in memory of  
Dr. Tan Tsze Chor

Collection of Asian  
Civilisations Museum





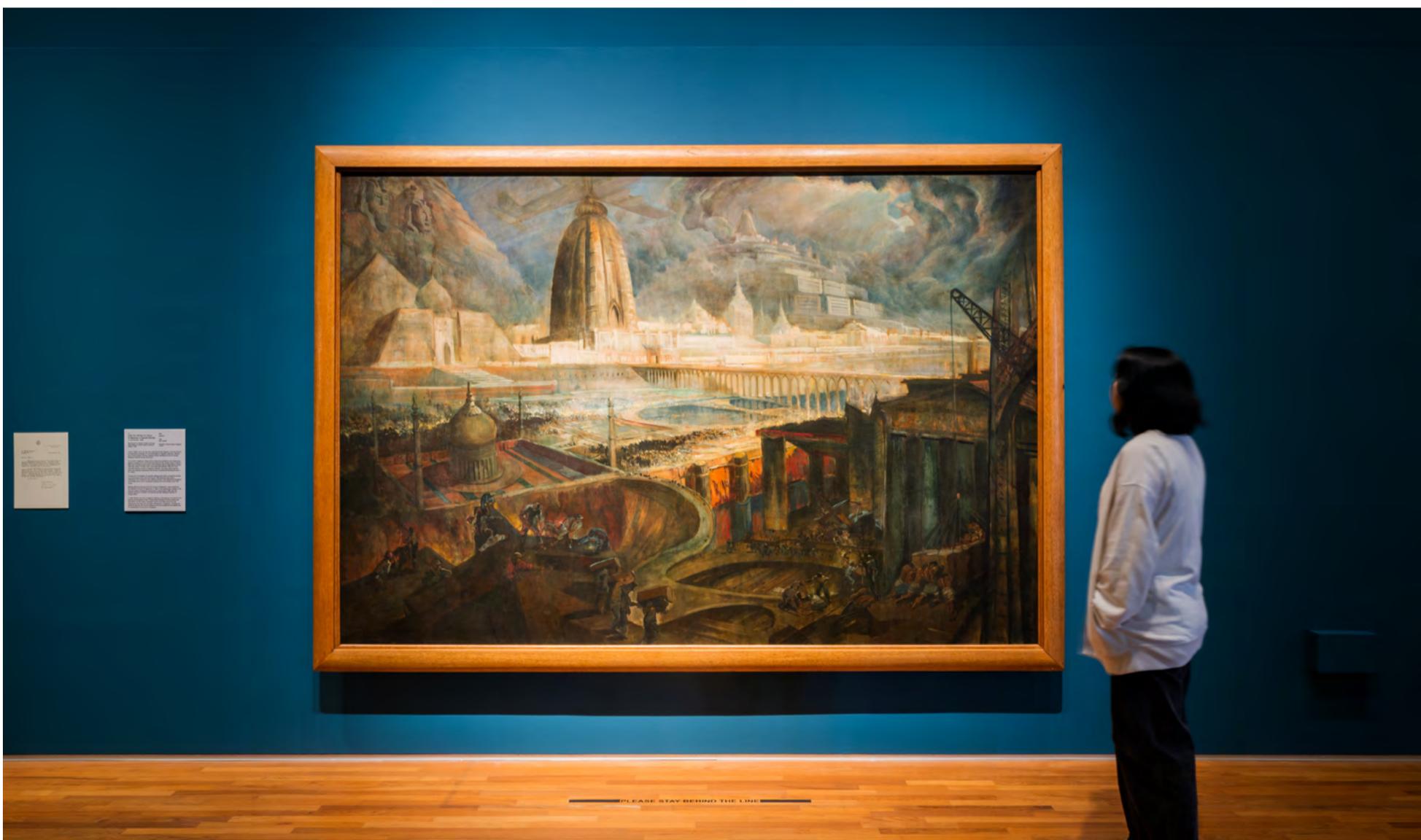
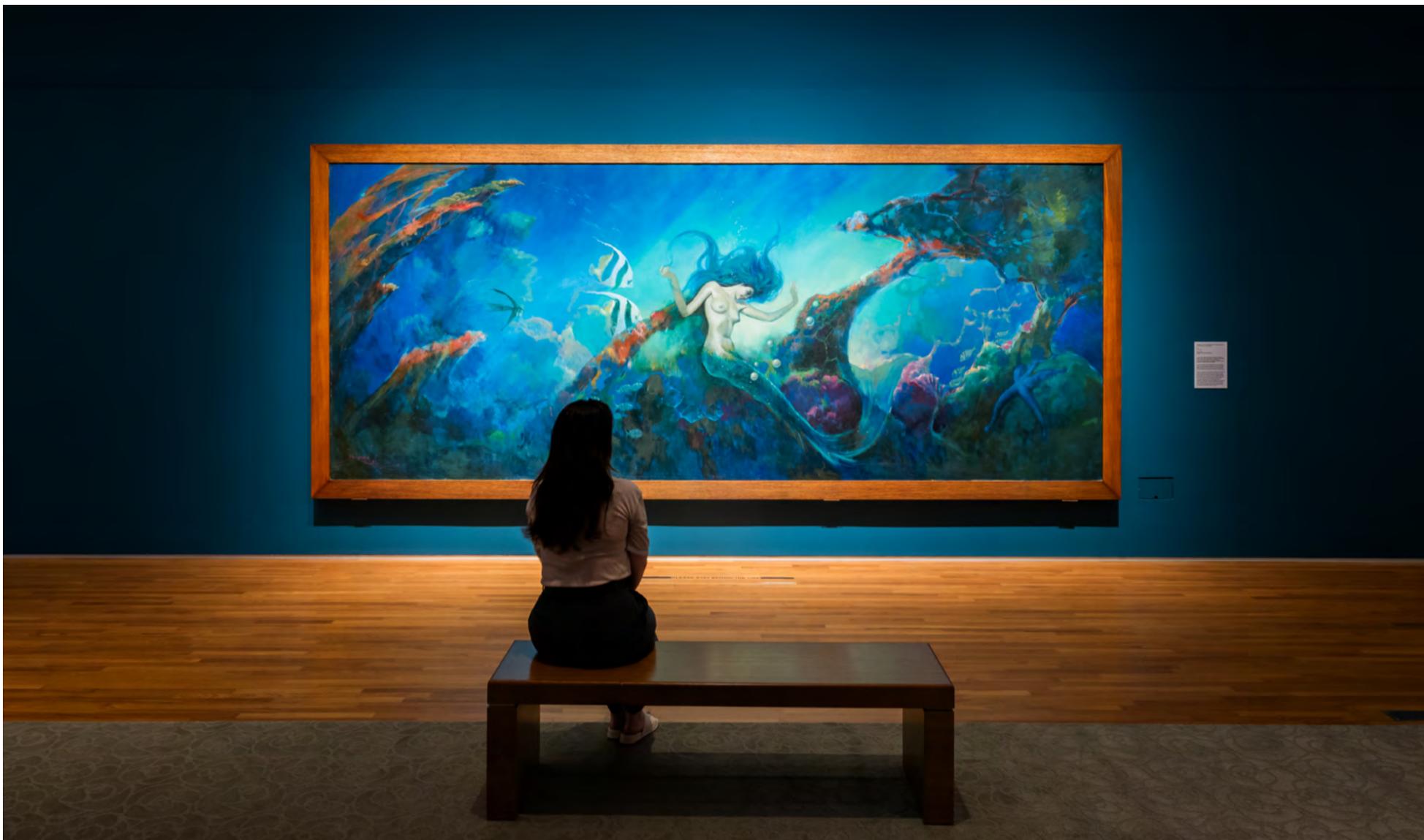
Untitled (Study-Female Figure)  
 Oil on canvas  
 1959, 1960  
 Collection of National Gallery Singapore  
 NG 000000

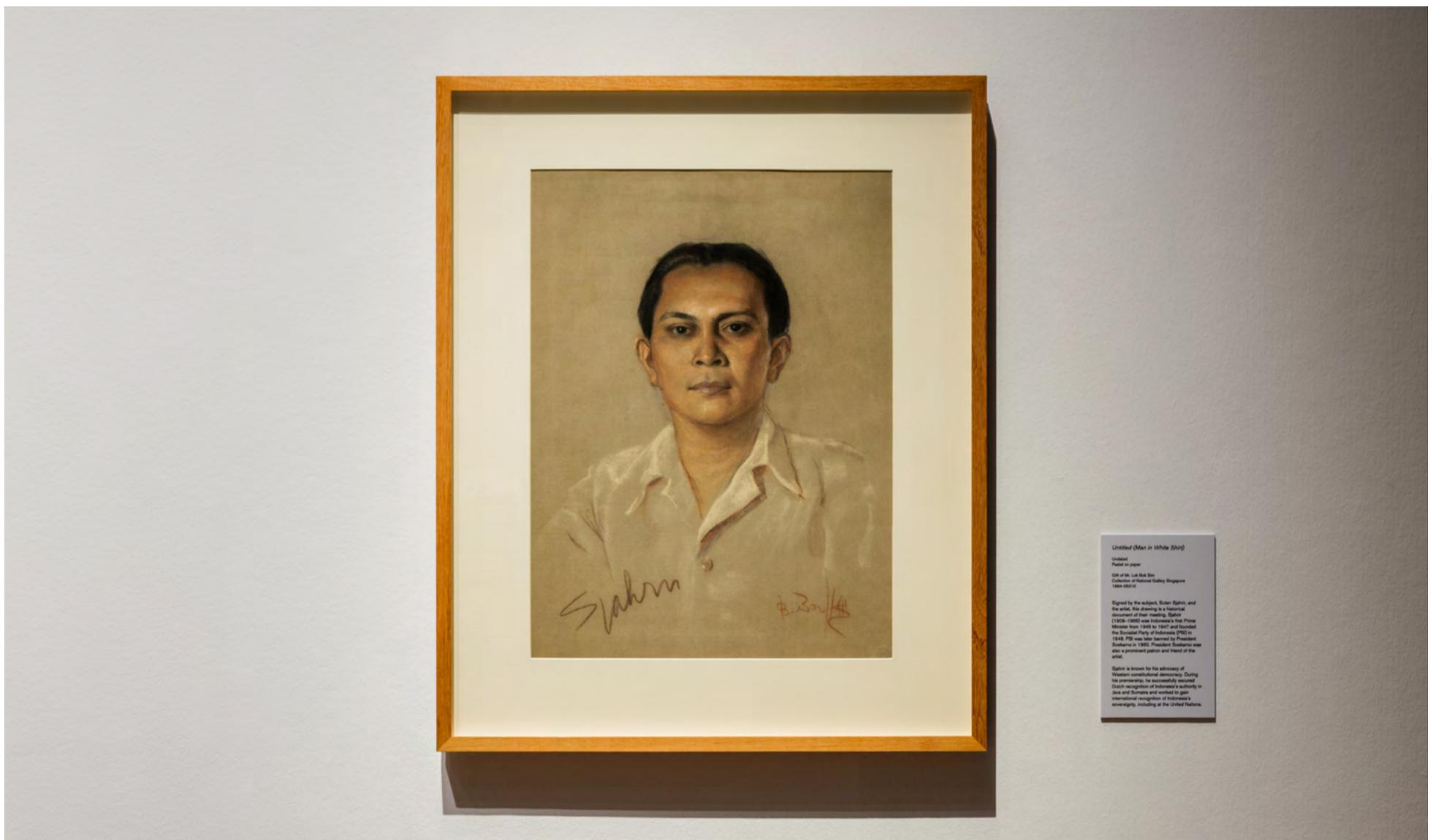
This exhibition features the artworks of Indonesian artist Basoeki Abdullah (1915–1993). Once described as “the Rembrandt of the East,” Basoeki is renowned for his paintings of attractive women and stalwart statesmen. Focusing on the artist-led diplomacy implied in the circulation of and the desirable aesthetics of Basoeki’s art, *Diplomacy and Desire* considers his roles as a high-society painter and a cultural producer attuned to the geopoetic agency of his work.

Basoeki lived in Singapore from 1958 to 1960, a period marked by the island achieving self-government in 1959. This exhibition foregrounds his relationship to Singapore and its art scene. The exhibition’s centrepieces are two large oil paintings that Basoeki gifted to the state: *Labour*, presented to the City Council of Singapore in 1959, and *Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People*, donated to the National Museum Art Gallery in 1981. The layout of the exhibition recalls his studio in Singapore. Located at One Tree Hill, it included a picture gallery and a backroom featuring portraits of international beauties.

Basoeki is an exceptional Southeast Asian artist, and his works are found in numerous national collections. His subjects included the Indonesian Presidents Soekarno and Sukarno, the Philippine President and First Lady, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, Sirikit of Thailand, Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, and Sultan Bolkiah of Brunei.





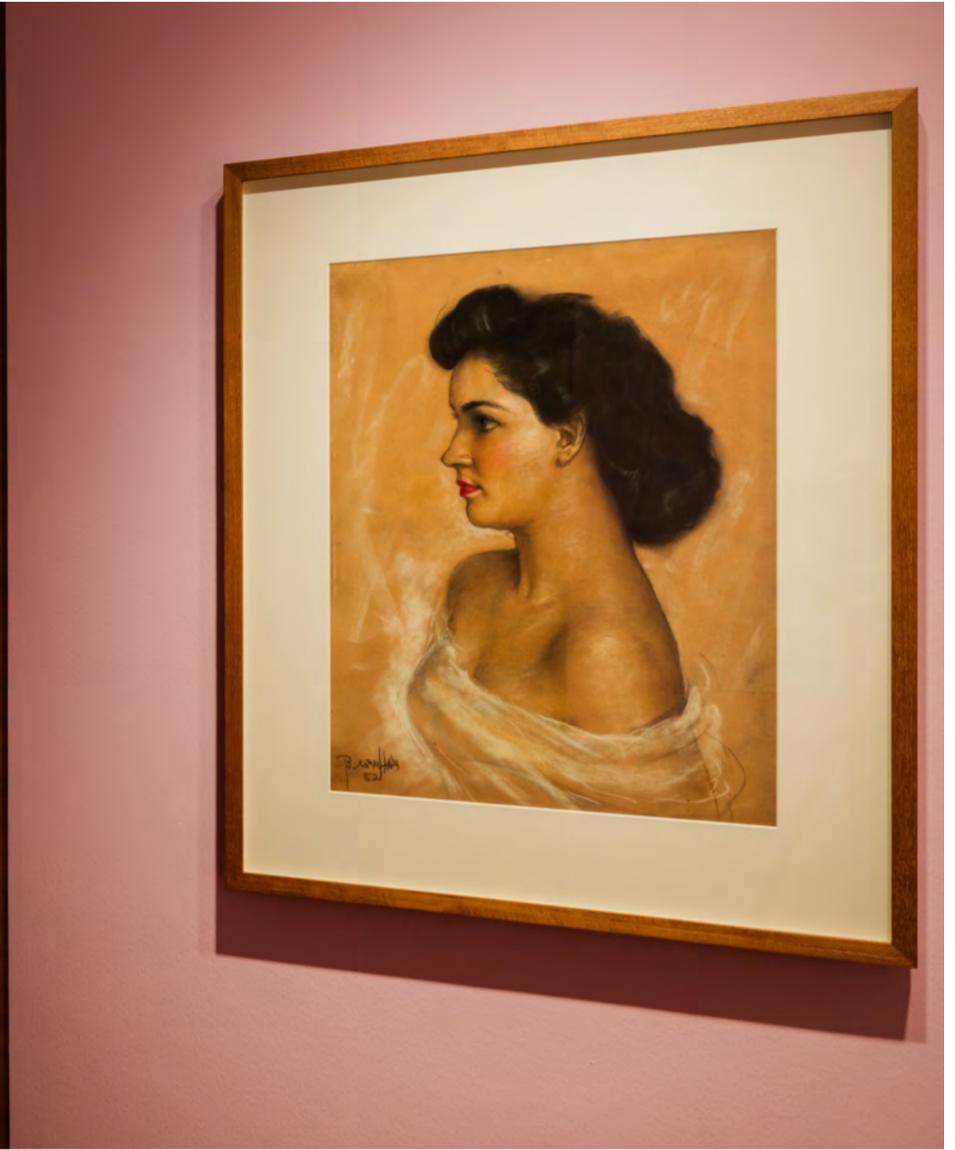


**Untitled (Man in White Shirt)**  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Mr. Luk Suk Sin  
Collection of National Gallery Singapore  
1989 (NG19)

Signed by the subject, Sultan Sultan, and the artist, this drawing is a historical document of their meeting. Sultan (1906-1988) was Indonesia's first Prime Minister from 1945 to 1947 and founded the Socialist Party of Indonesia (SPI) in 1948. SPI was later banned by President Sukarno in 1953. President Sukarno was also a prominent patron and friend of the artist.

Suharn is known for his advocacy of Western constitutional democracy. During his presidency, he successfully secured Dutch recognition of Indonesia's authority in Java and Sumatra and worked to gain international recognition of Indonesia's sovereignty, including at the United Nations.







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