

「DALAM
SOUTHEAST ASIA」

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.

Aesthetics of Power?

“Basoeki, exceptionally competent in technique, was Indonesia’s master of academic style. A realist in observation and a romantic by nature, he believed strongly, and still does, that beauty and art are synonymous, and should be depicted directly. Whatever others might say or do, for him a beautiful woman is still the finest handiwork of Nature.”

Frank Sullivan, *The Art of Basoeki Abdullah*, 1958 as quoted in The Lions Club of Bangkok, *Catalogue for Exhibition of Paintings by Raden Basoeki Abdullah*, 1960

The pastel drawings in this room are testament to the aesthetics and virtuosity that made Basoeki popular as a portraitist. Only a handful of drawings are annotated with dates, places or even signatures of the sitters, making it difficult to identify all the subjects with certainty. Nevertheless, these portraits of attractive models and public figures in Singapore, such as art patrons Christina Loke and Tan Tsze Chor, represent an ideal of beauty and the aesthetics of “power.”

Basoeki described his style as “Romantic Realism.” This term brings together “Romanticism,” the late 18th-century European art movement that emphasised individualism and emotion over rationalism, and the artist’s personal desire to evoke the realities of postcolonial movements. He actively sought out subjects for his paintings, including David Marshall, Singapore’s first elected Chief Minister. Many of his models were also celebrated for being painted or drawn by him. In turn, we can consider Basoeki’s agency as a regional cultural producer who was keenly aware of the “power” of art in postcolonial Southeast Asia.

Untitled (Nude–Frontal Pose)

Undated

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05303

Mr. Ho Kok Hoe

Undated

Pastel on paper

Collection of Ho Kah Keh

This portrait depicts Ho Kok Hoe, a Singaporean architect and artist who served two terms as president of the Singapore Art Society (1954–1967 and 1981–1983). Under Ho's leadership, the Society organised exhibitions and facilitated the sale of Basoeki's artwork in Singapore and across Southeast Asia.

Mrs. Ho Kok Hoe

1958

Oil on canvas

Collection of Ho Kah Keh

Mrs. Ho Kok Hoe was one of 12 models who attended the opening of Singapore Art Society's exhibition of Basoeki's paintings at Victoria Memorial Hall (present-day Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall) in 1958. Mr. Ho Kok Hoe displayed this painting prominently in his living room. In a 1961 newspaper article, which featured this painting, Ho expounded on the virtues of painting as having both historical and educational value. He emphasised the importance of encouraging children to cultivate "an eye for beauty."

Left

Letter from Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam to Basoeki Abdullah, 13 November 1959

Reproduced from *Biografi R. Basoeki Abdullah Sang, Maestro* by Solichin Salam, published in Jakarta in 1993

Right

Labour

1959

Oil on canvas

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

P-0545

Labour (1959), which has also been attributed the title “Building of the New World,” is a speculative landscape of monuments based on Egyptian pyramids, a shikhara from a Hindu temple, Ottoman mosques, Roman aqueducts and the 9th-century Mahayana Buddhist temple, Borobudur.

It is a futurist imagination. People strive to build new architecture and infrastructure against a background of monuments that include the Abu Simbel temple complex in Egypt that was later moved as part of then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Aswan High Dam project. The dam, which was constructed between 1960 and 1970, eventually became a symbol of Egyptian modernity. A jet engine plane depicted above the buildings is associated with the rise of commercial international travel in the 1950s.

Through such iconography, the popular reading is that *Labour* conveys the promise of an international world order following the 1955 Bandung Asian-African Conference. The Conference was a defining moment in the postcolonial emergence of the Global South and is recognised for giving rise to the concept of the Third World.

Basoeki gifted the painting to the City Council of Singapore. It was accepted by then-Minister of Culture S. Rajaratnam in 1959. It was subsequently installed in City Hall, the nucleus of Singapore’s government. It was moved in 1987 when the building underwent renovation. The painting has been exhibited at Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 1989, Basoeki returned to Singapore seeking out this painting. The search for the painting was facilitated by Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Communications and Information) Ho Kah Leong. Newspaper reports at the time account how the Parliamentary Secretary and Indonesian Ambassador to Singapore, Tuk Setyohadi visited the painting with the artist. Basoeki at the time recalled that the painting was his representation of the future of Singapore.

Struggle for the Re-establishment of the Democracy and the Right for the People

1981

Oil on canvas

Gift of the artist

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

P-0518

In 1981, Isetan Orchard sponsored an exhibition of Basoeki's artworks at the Hilton Grand Ballroom in Singapore. This painting made its debut at the exhibition, featuring prominently in promotional materials. Following the exhibition, Basoeki gifted the painting to the National Museum Art Gallery.

Local art critic Chin Oi Tow described this work as a “theatrical piece” in which democracy is represented as a mermaid. Another possible reading of the painting is that the mermaid is Nyai Roro Kidul, the mythical Queen of the Southern Sea in Javanese and Sundanese folklore whom Basoeki has depicted in other paintings.

The title of the painting, which puzzled journalists at the time of the gift, was according to the artist, provided by politicians. He had instead wanted to title the work Duyung Laut Selatan, meaning South Sea Mermaid, a reference in part to the Global South that Southeast Asia was part of as well as speculatively to Nyai Roro Kidul. The mermaid in the painting looks at five pearls which supposedly represented the five founding nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). According to art historian Agus Dermawan T, Basoeki had likened the nations to pearls-valuable gems produced by oysters to lessen their pain. The painting was supposedly inspired by the artist's perception that ASEAN brought nations together in peace.

Documentation of Exhibitions in Italy, Portugal, England and Singapore (1955–1958)

Documentation of Exhibitions in Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur (1959)

Documentation of Exhibitions in Thailand (1960–1973)

Documentation of Exhibitions in Singapore and Jakarta (1981 and 1984)

c. 1980s

Photo board panel

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

Displayed here is a selection of panels that Basoeki supposedly assembled for a retrospective exhibition. These four panels provide a provenance of some of the artworks included in this exhibition, and feature exhibitions held in Singapore, Italy, Portugal, England, Thailand, Japan and Malaysia. His exhibitions in 1959 were particularly significant with royalty in Thailand, Japan and Malaysia attending the exhibition of his artwork.

The panels represent an effort by the artist to historicise and record the international circulation of his artworks. Notably, there is an error on one of the panels. In 1958, Lee Siow Mong was president of China Society (1950–1989). Ho Kok Hoe served as president of Singapore Art Society in 1959.

Untitled (Man in White Shirt)

Undated

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05310

Signed by the subject, Sutan Sjahrir, and the artist, this drawing is a historical document of their meeting. Sjahrir (1909–1966) was Indonesia's first Prime Minister from 1945 to 1947 and founded the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI) in 1948. PSI was later banned by President Soekarno in 1960. President Soekarno was also a prominent patron and friend of the artist.

Sjahrir is known for his advocacy of Western constitutional democracy. During his premiership, 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.

Portrait of Dr. Tan Tsze Chor

1958

Oil on canvas

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

Collection of Asian Civilisations Museum

2013-00744

Dr. Tan Tsze Chor (1911–1983), known as the “Pepper King,” built a commercial empire that spanned Southeast Asia, Europe and America. A well-known Singaporean art collector of Teochew descent, he built the Xiang Xue Zhuang Collection, the first comprehensive collection of Chinese art in Singapore. Basoeki was commissioned to paint this portrait on 14 February 1958 at Tan's mansion.

Untitled

c. 1958

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05314

Featured in newspaper articles by Abdul Ghani Hamid in 1958 and 1959, this portrait is possibly of Singaporean dancer and choreographer Rose Eberwein. In 1958, Eberwein began modelling for Basoeki. During this period, he taught her about Indonesian art forms, influencing her own dance practice. Like Basoeki, she was a regional cultural producer who travelled internationally. After Basoeki brought Eberwein to the attention of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit of Thailand, she was invited to perform a Balinese dance for the royal couple in 1960. Basoeki and Eberwein's relationship exemplifies the cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary exchanges that define Southeast Asian modern art.

Untitled (Chinese Woman in White Cheongsam)

Undated

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05316

The subject of this pastel drawing is believed to be Christina Lee (1923–2009), an icon and art patron. In the 1950s, she was married to the cinema magnate, Loke Wan Tho.

Lee was an accomplished photographer, and a friend of the British Commissioner-General in Southeast Asia (1948–1955), Malcolm MacDonald. She facilitated the painting of MacDonald's portrait by Basoeki in 1958. In 1959, she organised the beauty pageant "An Evening with Eve" as part of the Singapore Constitution Exposition, which showcased the national costumes of 17 countries.

Untitled (Sideview–Woman/Black Hair)

1952

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05319

This is likely a drawing of Maya Michel, the artist's second wife, whom he married in 1944. A mezzo-soprano opera singer, Michel was his muse and partner, co-hosting his parties and featuring in his paintings and drawings. She was a public figure in Singapore in her own right and was featured in news reports of the time.

The couple's marriage ended during Basoeki's stay in Singapore. In July 1959, The Straits Times reported that she had returned to the Netherlands. This drawing was also presented in an exhibition of the artist's work in Rome in 1955.

1

Untitled (Chinese Woman with Long Neck)

1957

Pastel on paper

2

Untitled (Lady in White)

1958

Pastel on paper

3

Untitled (Chinese Woman in Pink–Sitting)

Undated

Pastel on paper

4

Untitled (Woman Looking Upwards)

Undated

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05322 | 1994-05304 | 1994-05325 | 1994-05324

5

Untitled (Chinese Woman with Red Lips)

1958

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05302

Drawn in Singapore in 1958, this portrait bears a resemblance to local beauty queen Daisy Szeto. Szeto was an award-winning bikini model who participated in fashion and film events in the 1950s. In 1959, Szeto was crowned “The Pearl of the Orient” at the Singapore Constitution Exposition’s beauty pageant and given the opportunity to travel across Southeast Asia as an ambassador for the event. Basoeki was one of the judges who selected her as a winner.

6

Untitled

Undated

Pastel on paper

Gift of Mr. Lok Bok Sim

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

1994-05318

As part of the celebrations for the 1959 Singapore Constitution Exposition, two Japanese beauticians, Yoshiko Miyamoto and Nagayo Ishihara, travelled to Singapore on behalf of the cosmetics company Shiseido. The women posed for Basoeki as part of a promotional campaign for Shiseido beauty products. While the subject is unidentified, it resembles Nagayo Ishihara.