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***Whither the Fine Arts?*¹**

Introduction

Many people have a very fixed concept of what art should be. They would like to see a highly realistic art form retained for all time. They would prefer a retention or revival of an academic art form that dates back to pre-Impressionism. For these people any change away from realism is anathema. In all other things, cars, furniture, interior decor, fashion, electronic goods, etc., they would demand the latest in design, but not for the fine arts. Will this nostalgia for realism be perpetuated and carried into the year 2000? In it lies the answer to the direction the fine arts will take. Singaporeans are hard-headed pragmatists who swear by graphs and charts. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that the form and contents of the fine arts would reflect this down-to-earth outlook. Art for art's sake could only be an artistic dream. The visionary would remain a stranger in the Singapore art world.

Painting has been the dominating art activity in the past just as it is today and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. My discussion will therefore be concentrated around this area with mention of the other art forms as and when there is occasion to call attention to them. On a non-participatory level, and for purpose of investment, ceramics, especially Chinese pottery and porcelain, may outstrip painting as the favourite item for collectors. Sculpture, despite a crying need for this to enhance our public buildings and parks, is still very much neglected although I can see a bright future for it. Commercial graphics have made tremendous advancement since the days of slick cinema posters. It has now permeated every facet of the commercial and advertising world. Packaging design has become a way of life as manufacturers fight for survival to come up with attractive wrappings to lure consumers to buy their goods. Prints are actively promoted though printmaking is hardly practised.

Early Beginnings

The future starts with the present, and one cannot talk about the present without bringing up the past. So before we can begin to speculate on what the future portends for the fine arts, we need to take stock of what has happened in the past and what is happening now, and to deduce from this the shape of things to come.

The art history of Singapore is of recent origin. In the absence of records, I would place the awakening of interest in the fine arts at around 1935, the year the Society of Chinese Artists was founded. Except for the war years, 1942–45, this Society has been active ever since. In 1938, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts was started by Lim Hak Tai. It was, and still is, the only art school in Singapore that provides a foundation for the practice of the fine arts. Most of our painters today have, at one time or another, been associated with the School, either as a teacher or a student. During these early years scattered interest in the fine arts was maintained by occasional exhibitions at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce or the Victoria Memorial Hall. The highlight of the pre-war years was the big retrospective exhibition of Xu Bei-Hong, the very well known Chinese painter of horses. The postwar years were memorable for the water colours of the Penang artist, Yong Mun Sen. I mention these to show that even at this early stage, there was an appetite for the fine arts especially amongst the Chinese-speaking community. Other ethnic-based art societies like the Malay Art Society and the Indian Fine Arts Society were also active promoting their own culture. The organization of exhibitions by artists

¹This article was adapted from a paper presented at a seminar on "Singapore toward the Year 2000" on December 21 1979 at the Singapore Science Centre.

from Hong Kong and China was mainly undertaken by the Society of Chinese Artists and sponsored by Chinese businessmen. Government support was non-existent.

In 1949, Dr Gibson-Hill, who was then in charge of the Raffles Museum and Library, met with Richard Walker, the Superintendent of Art for Singapore schools, and a few others to form the Singapore Art Society. The aim was to encourage and foster the practice and appreciation of the arts in Singapore. Founder members also included representatives from the various ethnic-based cultural bodies. Membership of the Society was open to all regardless of race or creed. This multi-racial art society was soon looked upon as representing the interests of the Singapore and Malayan artists. There was free intermingling of artists in the two countries, and Frank Sullivan was their unofficial spokesman. The Singapore Art Society was truly performing the duties presently taken over by the National Museum Art Gallery.

In the schools a start at organized art training was begun as early as 1923 with the appointment of Richard Walker as the art master for government English schools. He was in sole charge of the art programmes for all schools until his retirement around 1950. His dedicated service to art has inspired many of his students to take up the subject as a life-long study or hobby. The Chinese schools were well looked after where art was concerned by a group of professional artists which included Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Chong Swee. The same group was responsible for the art training at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. Cheong Soo Pieng in particular was the idol of many art students. His style of painting was closely followed and imitated by young aspiring artists on both sides of the Causeway. In 1968, the Baharuddin Vocational Institute was started to provide training in the Applied Arts.

At the tertiary level, the University of Malaya Art Museum was established in 1955. This was meant to be a teaching museum for students taking courses on the history of art. The Museum Collection provided the students with "an opportunity for direct contact with original works of art and to form the nucleus of a centre for the study of art and archaeology of Southeast Asia".¹ The University of Malaya ceased to function in the Bukit Timah campus in 1962. The Museum Collection was accordingly divided equally between the University of Singapore and the University of Malaya. Lack of student enrolment for the history of art course at the University of Singapore

forced it to close in 1973. The Singapore share of the Museum Collection was transferred to the National Museum.

Art in the 70s

There were stepped-up art activities in the early 70s. The Ministry of Culture took the lead in organizing exhibitions not for the favoured few but for the masses. Its "Art For Everyone" series went the rounds of the community centres to give exposure to those who would not normally visit art exhibitions. It was hoped that this would generate enough interest for them to want to take up art as a worthwhile hobby. The exhibitions were primarily aimed at youngsters to help keep them off the streets and their minds off drugs. It was a praiseworthy effort that had the backing of the various art societies. The Ministry further consolidated its efforts to bring art to the people by presenting annually its National Day Art Exhibitions. The more experienced and knowledgeable members of the artist community may find this somewhat trite, but there is no denying that the exhibitions did serve the purpose for which they were intended – to provide for an art form that could be appreciated by the uninitiated. It was the base that needed building up. The more aesthetically inclined could find their own way to strengthen areas of weaknesses as they could motivate themselves. Admittedly they were equally deserving of government support and sponsorship, but those who had less were more deserving of whatever limited funds there were then available. So it was that much criticism was levelled at governmental quarters for their lethargy and lack of support of the fine arts.

Left to their own devices our artists showed initiative in promoting what they really believed in. Youthful impatience with accepted art concepts combined with enthusiasm for what was new resulted in the formation of the Modern Art Society in 1964. The Society believed in a revolutionary approach to painting as expounded by the Western Abstract and Action painters. Not for them the photographic realism of the camera, the picturesque postcard views of the Singapore River, nor idyllic kampong scenes. The members were for an art of the spirit, of spontaneous reaction to felt phenomena expressed in terms of the materials

¹National Museum Art Gallery Official Opening Catalogue.

that one is using. Whatever may be its shortcomings, the Modern Art Society had the conviction of its belief behind it. Annually its members presented that which they believed to be the significant art forms for a modern society. The fact that these were not usually accepted did not deter them. Just as the Modern Art Society was throwing overboard accepted art values, the Singapore Water Colour Society was committed to a back to Nature call. Started in 1970, the Society's aim was to stop the swing to abstraction and non-figurative work, and to uphold the traditional time tested approach. Its members believed that water colour was the most suitable medium for the Eastern artist because of its affinity with Chinese brush painting. To its credit, the Singapore Water Colour Society has produced some very skilful water colourists today.

The Alpha Gallery is a well-run private art gallery that promotes the works of established masters, both local and foreign, as well as the young avant garde. It held its Inaugural Exhibition in October 1971. It is a gallery managed by artists for artists. Exhibitions are but a part of its activities. It has a core of its own regular exhibiting artists who share a common studio a few doors away, and who are prepared to meet any one wishing to discuss art. The Alpha group holds regular talk-in sessions with visiting artists. Its list of past shows reads like a Who's Who in the Singapore art world. Its policy is to promote whatever is worth promoting. An example is the work of the primitive painters of Bali.

The highlight of the 70s was the opening of the long awaited National Museum Art Gallery in August 1976. This ushered in a new era. The fine arts were finally given their proper status and accorded the respectability which was long their due. Exhibitions increased in frequency and variety. Besides paintings, there were exhibitions of French, Australian and local photography, ceramics and sculpture of America, art and crafts from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and graphic art shows from Holland, Finland, Switzerland and Germany. This cosmopolitan outlook on the visual arts continues to be a feature of current art shows at the Museum Art Gallery.

Of great importance towards shaping the accepted role of the National Museum Art Gallery as "a vital centre for the enjoyment and understanding of the art of the region"¹ was the work of the Museum Education Services. This unit was, and still is, responsible for a hive of activities that catered to the very young right through to the school leavers. Its Young People's Gallery shared

equal responsibility with its adult counterpart in developing the aesthetic sensibilities of young minds towards an appreciation of the arts.

Toward the Year 2000

As can be seen from what has been discussed, the build-up over the years had been very slow. Singapore, as it moves toward the year 2000, will not see any dramatic changes in the fine arts. The slow tempo started in the early years will be maintained and accelerated. However, there will be none of the rapid and spectacular changes that are daily transforming the city into the dynamic metropolis of the 21st century. Despite all that has happened since 1935, the fine arts in Singapore are just getting off the ground. The 70s was a period of consolidation. The establishment of the National Museum Art Gallery marked the beginning of a new era. The making of the Singaporean as a man of culture has begun.

With the modest start achieved since its formation, the National Museum Art Gallery should have no difficulty in building on this foundation. The Gallery stands as an affirmation of the faith that the government places in the fine arts. This is reassuring to local artists who have for years lamented the lack of interest of those in authority. They can now concentrate on their creative activities without having to worry too much about getting a place to show their work. There is also the incentive for them to work much harder to improve in order to qualify for the privilege to show in such a prestigious place. It would not be amiss therefore to expect much more high quality work in the near future than what is available today. A greater variety of styles and media could also be in the offering if the Museum Gallery could live up to its role as a catalyst for the fine arts.

Presently in its permanent collection, the Museum Gallery has 115 paintings donated by the late Dato Loke Wan Tho, 45 oil portraits of former Governors of Singapore and other historical personalities, 29 paintings and 4 sculptures by Singapore, Malaysian, Indonesian and other artists, and about 80 Chinese paintings. A very modest beginning indeed! It is on an urgent basis that the Gallery will have to build up its permanent collection. Its programme to promote and disseminate knowledge on the work of promising and talented artists in the region will come to nought

¹ National Museum Art Gallery Official Opening Catalogue.

if the pictures are not forthcoming. There is an acquisition vote but this is far from adequate especially when prices of art work have escalated so rapidly in the last few years. Like museums everywhere there will have to be dependence on donations and bequests to expand the collection. In the Singapore situation this may not work so well because collectors of pictures are rare. We do have collectors of Chinese paintings and artefacts, but we lack the big timers like the Guggenheims, the Rockefellers, or Amro Bank of Amsterdam. How then can we add on to what we have? Appealing to artists for donations is the present practice. Understandably there is a limit to what one can get from this. The artist who has given once will not be too ready to part with his work a second time even though it may be a great honour to be asked again. The artists rightly expect the Museum Gallery to give its support by buying their work. The Museum with its very limited vote can do that much and no more. It is the big corporations and industrialists who can channel some of their profits towards the acquisition of art work. The government can encourage this practice by granting tax exemptions on art gifts to the Museum Gallery just as it gave tax concessions to companies that set up pioneer industries in Jurong some years back.

With the increase in wealth and leisure the buying public for art work will be proportionately increased. The Museum and private art galleries can help generate interest in private ownership of works of art by co-operating with artists to offer picture loan services whereby pictures/art objects are rented out for a fee. If the borrower likes a picture so much that he wants to keep it, he can pay the difference in the paid-up loan fees and the actual price of the painting to gain outright possession. This practice is known to be successful in the United States and is worth a try here. Given proper guidance and encouragement this can well be the trend in art collecting in the decades ahead.

But before this can come about, there must be back-ups to guide the viewers in art appreciation. Research programmes must be instituted. The Museum Gallery is presently busy documenting its collection and preparing information sheets on local artists and their work. The press is bravely struggling to provide some form of art criticism and is devoting more and more space to the fine arts when before there was hardly any. Radio and T.V. are giving good coverage to art programmes. The artistic climate has never been so conducive to growth as it is today. If this can be properly

nurtured and maintained, the future for the fine arts is assured. Before the year 2000 the revamped Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts should attain the status of a national art school, and there would be a need to revive the faculty of fine arts in the University of Singapore.

Public interest in the fine arts has picked up considerably but the same cannot be said of the schools. This is in contradiction to the fine showing of our school children in overseas exhibitions and competitions, and the enthusiastic attendance at Singapore Youth Festival Exhibitions. The talented few nurtured by enthusiastic art teachers do not give a true picture of what is actually happening in the schools' art programme. Far too many schools treat the subject as peripheral and look upon it with benign disinterest. The pressure from other more "important" subjects also helps to push it further away from the core of compulsory subjects needed for the all-round development of the child. The new education system does provide the underachievers in academic subjects with opportunities to pursue an art course at the Baharuddin Vocational Institute if they are so inclined. The high flyers can only have a nodding acquaintance with the subject no matter how passionately they may feel about it. Thus the task of the art educator in the next decade or so will be to seek out ways and means to correlate art with the other subjects on the curriculum. Art on its own will not have the relevance that it would have for the schools if it were to be related with the sciences, literature or the technical subjects. Integration will enhance its usefulness as a school subject. I believe principals will be more ready to allot it the time it deserves if they can see its supportive role and its link with the other subjects on the curriculum. This attempt at marrying the fine arts with the sciences and the humanities should occupy the attention of art teachers in the years ahead. It has to be this way to stop the practice that has started with some schools doing away with the subject at upper secondary level and cutting down on art time for the lower secondary classes.

The practising Singapore artist may not need to consider the utility aspect of art but he certainly has to be more alive to his environment. His art forms should belong more to this age than what was in vogue a century ago. Harping back to a nostalgic past and delving into one's own culture for inspiration is both inevitable and highly desirable. However, in the context of the present and the future, this would be more appropriate if he could translate his feelings and

observations in terms of modern advancement made in science and technology. There is a whole new world of modern equipment and materials to be explored. Each of these is capable of imagery hitherto unattainable with the conventional paint and brush method. Our artists, if they claim to be sensitive individuals, which they are, should be adventurous enough to take up the challenge. Already there are signs that a few of the younger set are beginning to make tentative probes with plastic, acrylic paints, cement fondu, metaform and other mixed media. This spirit of enquiry is what is needed to revitalise the fine arts. More, I predict, will follow in their footsteps. When concentration on subject matter is thoroughly fused with the inner conflict of the mind and the media and tools of self-expression, then can we say that we have arrived in the modern age, artistically speaking so to say. Retention of old values and concepts in art may have sentimental associations for many, but it will retard growth in creative thinking. A dynamic nation needs a dynamic art form that reflects its aspirations. Hanging on to past achievements is not that preferred art form.

All along the government has adopted an open door policy where the fine arts are concerned. There is no restriction as to what an artist can or cannot paint. Although a Singapore identity has been encouraged from time to time, there is no attempt to lay down rules. It has been acknow-

ledged that it will take time to establish a distinct Singapore identity. Any attempt to push this will only result in superficiality of artistic expression. Given time and a conducive atmosphere, and the freedom to be themselves, our artists will come up with a style that will be distinctly Singaporean. Right now, and into the next decade or so, is the period of gestation. In twenty years' time it is possible that characteristics attributable to a Singapore identity may be traced in the work of our artists.

Singapore has kept abreast with the latest in scientific and technological know-how. In the field of commerce and high finance, the most sophisticated of modern equipment and techniques are used in conducting business. As a modern state it has all the trappings that make it tick. It is forward looking in all fields except in the fine arts where ideas generated half a century ago are still very much the norm by which painting is being judged. With constant exposure to more modern art forms, a change in attitude will come sooner or later. By the year 2000, the 50-year gap in viewing habit should be considerably reduced.

This has not been a rosy picture. Neither has it been discouraging. If expectations as spelt out can in any way help to resolve some of the problems, this crystal ball gazing would have been worth the effort. 