

Comments

Finding an entirely new and immediately convincing method of pictorial expression is a rare occurrence. The last I can think of was the invention of lithography between 1796 and 1798. Now come another.
(Pierre Jenneret, London Daily Mail art critic, 1959)

The unusual art of batik painting owes its development to a remarkable and industrious artist, Chuah Thean Teng of Penang. Throughout the art world he is known simply by the name he signs - Teng.

It is astonishing to think that although making batik has been common for hundreds of years, no one before Teng ever thought of adapting this age-old craft as a medium for fine art. Teng, and Teng alone, is responsible for this most original contribution to the whole world of art. As an artist in this old and new medium, Teng is the unquestioned master.

Painting by the batik method germinated from Teng's own idea and determination. The possibilities of batik painting as a fine art were a revelation, but equally remarkable was the revolution which occurred in Teng's own approach to art.

His draftsmanship acquired sweep and rhythm; colors flared from his canvas. His themes opened up new vistas of Malaysian life, not only the scene but the people and all their daily activities. Women feeding chickens, children playing, farmers gathering the harvest - all warm human, simple and everyday subjects no other Malaysian artists seemed to have tackled with such relish before.

His productivity in batik painting is enormous, but even more incredible is the high standard and quality of his work. Never satisfied, he is always experimenting, seeking to give new depth and range to his batik art. Realism, impressionism, abstracts - he changes about and essays them all. No matter what style he chooses, the result in batik is always indelibly and individually Teng.

His art is always in touch with the people, his own smiling happiness frequently bubbling out in sly touches of humors, but always and at all times he is an artist in love with life. (Frank Sullivan- Former Hon. Secretary of National Art Gallery, Malaysia in Teng - Master of Batik Painting, The Sunday Mail, 17-11-1963)

I cannot tell you adequately how great was the enthusiasm over the batiks. News of them has evidently spread by word of mouth because we are still receiving enquiries from people who have either seen them in the possession of someone else, or have been told about them.

On behalf of the galleries, extend most hearty congratulations upon your work and take occasion to express my own personal satisfaction upon the enthusiasm with which your batiks were received - quite the most successful exhibition since I have been connected with the Pomeroy Galleries.

(Frances Styles, Secretary to the Pomeroy Galleries, San Francisco, California, U.S.A. 1964)

"He is blessed with a sense of line which coils as sinuously and voluptuously as a snake, and color range which is beyond the range of a great many western artists. Even when he is being purely decorative, it is such rich and many layered decoration that the sensuous surfaces draw you in.

He has a delicate vein of eroticism which Matisse might envy, and his combination of a flat decorative design with perspective is so skilled that at times you marvel. If you study the detail, the richness and intricacy of his color patterning is almost staggering.

With all this traditionalism, Teng is recognizably a modern artist, and the most daring tackiest might learn from his color in his more liquid moments- especially those vague weeping blues." B. P. F. Irish News (29. 5. 65)

Teng is the batik master. He is venerated for developing the ancient technique of batik as a medium for painting contemporary rural Malaysia. Teng's ingenuity, poetic style and color exploration are responsible for the

prominence it holds in Malaysia today. Teng's batiks were received with raised eyebrows before but his skill and devotion triumphed and today batik is looked upon as a national art form. (Dolores D. Wharton in Contemporary Artists of Malaysia, 1971)

He is the virtual creator of an art form that has its roots in a popular decorative craft native to his adopted country, Malaysia. But he has taken the practice of batik dyeing and elevated it to a form of fine art having elements in common with the greatest exponents of classical "pure" art, be they realists, expressionists, impressionists - or Picasso.

The literal union of pure color with its ground produces brilliant jewel-like pictures unobtainable in any other medium, except perhaps in stained glass.

Teng is a tireless worker and experiments endlessly with his new medium. Besides purely pictorial images, such as those he produces for UNICEF greeting card, he experiments with expressionists ideas, pointilistic technique and abstractions reminiscent of Mondriaan and Picasso. (Ms. Anne Phillips for Teng's exhibition at The Gallery, Palm Springs, California, U. S. A. 1972)

Chuah Thean Teng is one of Malaysia's most distinguished artists: his adaptation of the traditional batik process of dyeing cloth to the art of painting has been widely acclaimed and influential. (Commonwealth Institute catalog for "Commonwealth Artists of Fame 1952 -1977" exhibition.)

Throughout the art world he is simply known by the name with which he signs his paintings - Teng. Yet, to Chuah Thean Teng - to give him his full honorific belong the credit for developing the fascinating medium of batik as a fine art form. Although dyeing of cloth by the batik technique had been known for hundreds of years, it was only when Teng was inspired to adapt this ancient craft as a medium for fine art that batik entered the realm of the artist beyond that of the artisan. (Marcus Brooke, Orientations, November 1977)

It is important to bear in mind that in the history of art, Chuah Thean Teng's innovation of batik as a fine art form ranks on par with Alexander Calder's mobiles or the Cubism of Braque and Picasso. His pioneering work in the batik medium has spawned a whole school of batik artists around the globe and his imitators are legion. Nonetheless, Teng continues to give us batik paintings of a high caliber executed in his own distinctive, inimitable style. (Cecil Rajendra, Art critic, Star Publications, 1979)

The influence of Picasso, Gauguin and Matisse has been strong in Teng's art. In his paintings he shares with them the same vitality, detailed observation, color and life. But above all, it is his love of people, his concern with humanity that makes the strongest impression when you look at his works. .. It was humanity, harmony and happiness brought to life. (Julia Wilkinson, The Asia Magazine, 1982)

Critical opinion on the accomplishment of Teng is generally agreed in honoring him with a premier status in relation to modern art activity in Malaysia. Such recognition is based on his adaptation of the traditional technique of batik and converting it into a medium suitable for the practice of painting. The acceptance of batik painting as a distinct type of painting is usually attributed to Teng's efforts. (T.K. Sabapathy, Modern Artists of Malaysia, 1983)

His themes are centered around genre situations; domestic, occupational and leisure activities are recorded with a keen eye and sense of the aesthetic. In his efforts, his calculated poses and improvised actions are skillfully woven into complex figurative compositions. His love for detail, vigorous sense of design and color and sensitivity in exploiting the unique features of batik put him in a class of his own. (Teng Chok Dee, Art critic of Star Publications, 1985)

The mother and child themes recur like a soothing lullaby of the wind. Myriad scenes of rustic life - the kampongs, rivers, trees, farmers, rubber tappers and kampong folks at work or in plain idleness. Grotesque Gauguinesque figures with thick sensuous lips - an aesthetic blend of grace and crudity. The eyes, either turned away or staring straight out of the "canvas" like a pair of tiger eyes in the jungle dark, partly startled, partly expressionless, and partly challenging - so enigma at ic.

Delicate silhouettes and interplay of colors and the exquisite batik designs. Vivid, vibrant colors here and

deliberate drabness there. All these hallmarks of the works of Chuah Thean Teng. Or as he is more popularly known, Teng, the cachet of quality on his richly textured batik paintings.

Old and new, Teng's works are still homogeneous in style and form - the placid and tranquil quality permeating like a leit motif throughout. But Teng has come a long way since he succeeded in 1955 with a pointillist self portrait after two years of synthesis and experimenting. The legend who has fused traditional batik craftsmanship with the techniques of modern oil painting has already carved himself a niche in Malaysian art, nay, world art even.

His paintings depict the simple life, the simple things in life - just like the man, with his Gandhian obsession for happiness. It is remarkable that after all these years, his latest works still contain the essence of the joy of life. If Teng's works were to be condensed into a single word, it would be "humaneness". The humanity in his subjects and treatment can only come from one who is thoroughly at peace with himself in a changing world of turbulence. His paintings are, like the famous lines from Coleridge's poem, "as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean". (Ooi Kok Chuen, Art Editor of New Straits Times, 18. 8. 1985)

Chuah Thean Teng is one of the few artists who can claim to have discovered a new method of pictorial expression - batik painting, a synthesis of the techniques of easel painting and the ancient Asian craft of batik, or wax-dyeing cloth. His colourful images of the Malaysian countryside have received international acclaim, and his works hang in major galleries, museums and private collections around the world. He admires the simplicity and honesty of the kampong (village) folk and portrays them with warmth and humour. His keen eyes sees grace and dignity in everyday activities - children playing, women, men at work. (Kathy C. Stockwin, Editor-in-chief of Reader's Digest, October 1987)

".....I found myself standing in astonishment in front of "Two Of A Kind". It was twenty years ago, but I remembered. So strong was the impression the Unicef-card made on me at the time: two Malaysian mothers, carrying their babies, facing each other. A peaceful image of an idyllic world, caught in the most wonderful blues. And to my amazement I Was stepping right into the home of Chuah Thean Teng, Malaysians most celebrated batik artist. It was written all over the wall: this is the real thing; this is what you get when a Chinese genuine painter emigrates to Malaysia and starts experimenting with batik as a fine art. Of course it takes a gifted painter, in fact it takes Teng.

Again I was struck with the tranquil happiness which was radiating from these walls. And I was astonished at the feast of reds and greens and blues. It seemed to me that Teng just invented a blue-er shade of blue. I was amazed at the richness of his whole range of colours and fell in love with the paintings. (Diana Wynants-Freys in Hollandse Club Monthly Magazine, September 1988, Singapore)

After 21 years, batik master Chuah Thean Teng will again have one of his works featured on the Unicef (United Nations International Children's Fund) greeting cards for the 1989 series. But, even more meaningful to him than this honour, is that two of Seow Keng's works have also been chosen to be featured on the greeting cards next spring. Seow Keng is his son. In 1967, his "two of A Kind" made art folklore when it was selected for the Unicef greeting cards. This time, it is a 1986 work, "Tell You A Secret". "Tell You A Secret" is still vintage Teng, as the maestro is fondly Called in art circles, locally and abroad. There is that unmistakable charm, that reassuring childlike humour in his simple interpretation of two kampung women engrossed in gossip. (Ooi Kok Chuen, Art Editor, New Straits Times in "Double Success" New Sunday Times, 18-12-1988)

He can be placed among the great modern artists. He combines the simplicity of line of the traditionalIn oriental artists with the avant garde feeling of the great abstract painters. His works for me bring light and life into a room.(Mrs. Anna Bazell, Owner of Lower Gallery, London, England)

His works to me evokes Malaya. As you will note in the enclosed catalogs, he depicts local scences using an indigenous medium. In fact, I think he speaks for South East Asia per se: the people at work, play, at the everyday tasks of their lives. To me, he was an exciting discovery and it was one of the highlights of the trip, I also want to mention that when the paintings are hung with back-lighting, the jewelstones light up like stained glass. (Helen Hector, Associate Editor- The Reader's Digest)

In Tsai Tien-Teng (Chuah Thean Teng) Malaya claims to have found her first national painter. In recent years he

conceived the idea of making pictures in batik - not just decorative design, but large and frequently complex figure compositions. This laborious technique which may require as many as fifteen separate dyeings for a single painting, is enlivened by his fine sense of design and a gay and humorous view of the everyday life of the kampongs. Being native in technique as well as in theme, his work is now heralded as the New Malayan Art, and is being imitated not always successfully, by the other leading Chinese artists in Malaya. (Dr. Michael Sullivan, Art Professor at Stamford University, California, U.S.A. in his book "Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century")

Chuah Thean Teng is one of the most distinguished artists in Malaysia today, a position his fellow artists will not begrudge him, by virtue of his mature style and technique and his valuable adaptation of the batik process of dyeing cloth to the art of painting. (Donald Bowen, Assistant Art Curator, Commonwealth Institute, London, England)

Batik printing is an ancient artform yet it took an artist trained in traditional Chinese brush strokes to recognise batik as a potential major medium of artistic expression uniting the techniques of western easel painting and Malaysia's wax-dyeing cloth. The result is art that is unique, unusual and spans the rainbow. Today batik painting is permanently in vogue yet its genesis is traceable barely a generation ago to Teng.

Chuah Thean Teng was born in China in 1914 and attended the Amoy Art Institute in Fukien province. At 18 he emigrated to Malaysia where his father had trading links. He settled on the Pearl of the Orient where he found his pot of gold. During World War II, he moved to Indonesia and worked in his uncle's batik factory. Eventually, he returned to Penang and started his own batik business. It was an ill-fated venture as he could not compete with cheap Indonesian imports and was forced to close down after one year. Every cloud has a silver lining, however. There were large stocks of pigments left unused so he started to experiment his skills as a painter on batik. Chuah Thean Teng literally worked from scratch as there were no role models.

The process was long and tedious. Instead of traditional canvas, he used cotton which was also left in abundance from his failed sarong factory. Instead of oils, watercolours or paints, it was wax and dye. In lieu of a brush, a tjanting (copper, pen-shaped instrument) was required to apply the hot wax. The drawing is done by pencil or charcoal on the fabric before deciding on the colours. The dyes, beginning with the lightest, are slowly applied. Only one colour is applied each time. The parts to be coloured differently are waxed so the dye could not affect them. When the dye is dry, the wax would be removed. The dyed section and others not yet coloured are then waxed, leaving the next section to be dyed free of wax. Naturally, painstaking care was needed and it was often touch-and-go and most attempts 'went'! After two years he was on the verge of surrendering again when a small, pointillist self-portrait turned out in full glory!

The year was 1955 and he was already 41. It was rebirth for a man who had been a shopkeeper, baker, umbrella-maker, paper manufacturer, import/export trader, fabric designer, sarong-maker and school teacher. Chuah Thean Teng showed his work to Patricia Lim of the Penang Library who was so impressed she organised a one-man show for him that September. It was an immediate success. He took Singapore by storm with a hundred of his works, presented by the Art Society, at that time the leading art group in Malaya. There was no turning back as more shows and accolades piled up. He signed all his works simply 'Teng' and that was to be the name acknowledged worldwide. In 1962, the National Art Gallery of Malaysia honoured Teng with a rare, oneman exhibition, followed immediately by an European tour. His works were exhibited at the Commonwealth Institute of Art in England in 1959, 1965 and 1977. Instead of carrying on a classical Chinese style, Teng captured the vibrant, brilliant colours of the Malay culture of his adopted country. His best and most exciting works all feature kampung life, vignettes of daily life painted for posterity in vivid hues. The simplest act becomes art. His perceptive mind and keen eye sees the extraordinary in the ordinary. Everyday events suddenly take on a new dimension and emotion; children playing, women toiling in the padi fields, farm creatures, picturesque fishing villages, men at work, all sorts of homely scenes. His lines are bold and sure. His figures are sometimes flat and one-dimensional, sometimes awashed in mystical gradations. Teng's people go about their daily occupations, simple, honest, no pretensions of grandeur. Besides purely pictorial images, Teng experiments with expressionist ideas, pointillist techniques and abstractions not dissimilar to Mondrian or Picasso. His dioramas run the gamut from playful, touching, dramatic, personal and intimate. He hardly strays from his beloved kampung scenes where he spent so many happy hours and languid afternoons. His empathy and affection clearly show.

Teng's mastery of the techniques still means he needs up to 15 separate waxings and dyeings for a single painting. One mistake or oversight in waxing a certain patch can herald the end of that painting which can take six days to complete though one presumes Teng does not sit and watch the grass grow while waiting for dyes to dry but might continue painting other pieces. He hit the international bigtime in 1967 when his sensitivity in encapsulating the charm and pleasure of rural, kampung life in turn caught the eye of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). His "Two of A Kind" depicting two young mothers each holding her child caught in stylised profile was selected to grace the cover of its greeting cards. Teng made art folklore and became the first Malaysian to be honoured and his painting received worldwide coverage though he was not paid as it was for charity. In 1988 UNICEF repeated the honour when it chose "Tell You a Secret" a candid and beguiling piece of a kampung lady whispering conspiratorially into the ear of another carrying a baby while in the background, a girl tries to eavesdrop! "I actually saw this gossip being enacted at a fishing village near Batu Ferringhi. The scene of one whispering a secret struck me as being so typical. Everybody has secrets and I thought it would make an interesting motif," chuckles the Grand Old Man of Batik Painting, now a sprightly 79 but looks twenty years younger.

1988 was a spectacular double honour year for father and son Chuah Seow Keng for not only was "Tell You a Secret" selected but also two paintings by Seow Keng. It was an unprecedented accolade in the Rural Life annals of UNICEF to publish works of a father and son team in the same year. Seow Keng, 45, recalls, Mine were 'Rural Life' and 'Fish'. 'Rural Life' was done in 1986 and shows a typical yet endearing kampung scene. 'Fish' was finished in 1983 after I saw some carp in the river. I tried to capture their languid movements, so free of worry and peaceful.' Seow Keng has created more than a thousand pieces. He won a scholarship to Sueddeutsche Kunst-Zentrum in Würzburg, Germany for two years where he specialised in fibreglass sculpture. His works have been displayed at international shows in West Germany, Japan, Switzerland and United States. The then national carrier Malaysia-Singapore Airlines (MSA) commissioned him to do fibre glass sculptures for their Ipoh and Penang offices in 1970 and 1971. In 1989 he received the Certificate of Excellence for Outstanding Achievement at the Artitudes 7th International Art Competition in New York. Chuah Siew Teng, 46, the eldest son, followed in daddy's footsteps by winning art contests hands and brushes down during his early formative years from 1961 to 1965. "In 1965 I went to Ravensburne College of Art followed by the City & Guild Art School. Over in England I improved my batik painting and exhibited batik works at the Royal Exchange of London, Ravensburne College Of Art, Lower Gallery in London and since then I have showed my batik paintings in USA, Japan, Australia, Switzerland and Canada." His "The Monkey" was also selected by UNICEF for their greeting cards collection.

The Chuahs seem to have come to an impromptu 'territorial' agreement regarding subject matter. Teng himself has a propensity for human illustrations, especially the eternal mother-and-child syndrome. Siew Teng enjoys contemporary scenes and lyrical abstracts. Seow Keng goes for mixed media and is keen on sculpture. The baby of the boys, Siew Kek, specialises in flowers and scenery. Siew Kek is quite obsessed with Malaysian flora. His cottons and silks blossom with exquisite orchids, ferns, hibiscus, trees and even more flowers. Teng's two daughters are not professional painters but treat it as a hobby. Both are now residing in the United States. One runs an art gallery in San Diego and the other lives in Miami.

"It's tough having a father so well known," notes Siew Teng as the other two nod in concord. "Our works get compared all the time with Father's. If we follow our father's style, we get accused of being mere copy-cats. If we stray dramatically away, people ask why don't we emulate our father's work which is so universally acclaimed! But of course we had the best teacher as our father taught us all he knew and encouraged us to do our own thing always." The entire Chuah clan, including the third generation, all live in the white-washed Yahong Art Gallery opposite Casuarina Hotel and Eden Seafood Village, along Batu Ferringhi's golden strip of sand and sea. The spacious, five-storey building was completed in 1976 with 8000 sq ft of showplace of which 2000 sq ft are devoted to their art gallery. Taking pride of place here are all the original UNICEF paintings. The sheer size easily makes Yahong the largest gallery in Malaysia, home to a vast storehouse of jewellery, jade carvings, bronze, wooden and ceramic statuettes, Selangor pewter, paintings, decorative items and of course a dazzling array of bewitching batik of all genres. The basement resembles a cavern grotto where serene Goddesses of Mercy, Buddhas in various stances, laohans, Thai deities, burmese angels, Tibetan warrior gods and Chinese temple guardians repose. Browsing in Yahong is a veritable tour of all parts of Malaysia and Asia in miniature. Even the most nonplussed will want a small, amusing knick-knack and the serious collector may have to be dragged out. Teng was recently forced to sell a beloved painting under duress. Explains the friendly, courteous and ever-smiling Teng: "A Korean came in and saw my batik painting. I told him it was not for sale. I was too fond of it as nowadays I don't paint so much. He loved it so much he insisted I name him a price. Without thinking, I quoted an exorbitant sum, hoping it would deter him.

He said "O.K." immediately and I couldn't go back on my word!" The 9' by 3' batik painting was aptly called "The Joy of Living". (By Edmund Wee, Wings of Gold, The Inflight Magazine of Malaysia Airlines, June 1992)