

Introduction: Chuah Thean Teng - Artist of Malaysia
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To know his art is to know a friend. Although my personal acquaintance with Chuah Thean Teng spans hardly a decade, because I have been able to study so many of his works, I feel I know Teng better than many of my other friends. I am delighted and I consider myself privileged to be able to put down a few words in this brief introduction to Teng's book about his batek art. Some people may assert that pictures need no words and good art needs no introduction. However, even the greatest artists known to man, have been the subjects of written and spoken appreciation. Therefore, within our modest scale some introduction should not be considered out of place.

I will try to answer two questions. Who is Teng? And, why does he deserve the accolade: Malaysia's Leading Artist?

Teng's life is for a biographer to write. Or, better still, some day it is for Teng to write his autobiography.

He is a creative personality. His experience is deep. He has a craftsman's knowledge and skill of his tools and his media.

He has a fine appreciation of the whole reality that makes up the Malaysian environment. He has a special eye for the rural scene which as an economist whose main interest is poverty and rural development, I find most appealing.

Teng also has a well-developed capacity to tune into the international wave-lengths in the currents of modern art.

Combining these three talents (and the list is by no means exhaustive) we find a Malaysian who can be a modern artist and whose works of art are permeated by a truly native atmosphere.

Such is the artist: **Teng.**

The second question concerns our evaluation of Teng. Let me be clear-I have neither the ambition to be, nor the illusion that I am, an amateur art critic. I enjoy appreciating works of art, I am keenly interested in art. I believe that until the people of Malaysia receive works of art that they can understand and enjoy, neither the people's taste for culture nor the art itself will develop on a national scale. I also believe that sensibility for fine art must be deepened in the upper echelons of our society. With these thoughts I have contributed some time and energy to the Board of Trustees of the National Art Gallery and to the Fine Arts Committee of the University of Malaya.

Now, art criticism is a subjective matter. It is highly personal. There are none of the absolute propositions of mathematics or chemistry. Notwithstanding the absence of hard laws for artists and their critics to abide by, from time to time, certain critics have become acknowledged and their works have been accepted sufficiently widely, socially and historically, that we can with a measure of confidence, refer to them as measuring rods for the performance of any particular artist.

While I am fully conscious of the perils of transferring systems of measurement from one context to another, I would suggest that what I am about to present below is not entirely outrageous or incongruous, if everything is taken into account in its totality and if I am given the benefit of the customary licence that is freely allowed to authors, poets and artists.

In China about 1500 years ago, there lived a man who is thought by some to have written the most influential piece ever written about the art of Chinese Paintings. This man was Hsieh Ho and his great book was (Notes on the Classification of Old Paintings).

Hsieh Ho has laid down six techniques for evaluating paintings. Unfortunately for those of us who are not well acquainted with the ideographs of written Chinese, the six techniques are impossible to translate satisfactorily. We must accept this as being a natural consequence of having a system of ideographic script.

However for the interest of the readers of this foreword, I will embolden myself to contribute a few suggestions as to how these six techniques can be interpreted in our terms. And later, to make some remarks as to the extent to which Teng's merits meet the stringent requirements of these criteria. Hsieh Ho's techniques are:

1. Tone corresponds to real life.
2. Brush strokes construct the anatomy.
3. Shapes are according to nature.
4. Coloring is appropriate to the species.
5. Composition follows a plan.
6. Guidance is accepted from the old masters.

I would suggest that a thorough study of hundreds of Teng's batik paintings will enable a serious student of art to conclude that in his own way, in our time and in our country, Teng fulfills the requirements of the six principles of Hsieh Ho - as we say in university language, "with Honors".

His tone, his coloring and his forms correspond to our life and light. His composition and his 'strokes' seem just right. In many a painting he has experimented with the modes of modern masters -to name one (my personal favorite): Picasso. Let us therefore enjoy reading this book of Teng's. Let him be in his terms, a model for others to follow.

Teng, Master Of Batik (By Frank Sullivan, Kuala Lumpur, 24th September, 1963)

With the astonishing effervescence of art in Malaya during her six years of independence, one question is frequently asked, "Is there a Malayan School of Art?" There are those who say it is evolving; others contend a Malayan outlook in art is here already.

Now that Malaya is part of the wider concept of Malaysia, debate on this issue must take in wider horizons; only the passing years will bring the answer.

There is no doubt, however, that there is one form of fine art uniquely Malayan in origin which fits naturally into the pattern of the way of life in Malaysia.

This is the unusual art of batik painting which owes its development to a remarkable and industrious artist, 49-year old Chuah Thean Teng, of Penang. Throughout the art world in South-East Asia he is known simply by the name he signs Teng.

The craft of making batik cloth for everyday wear has been known and used for centuries past throughout South-East Asia. This loose wrap-around garment, known simply as *kain* in Malaya but more familiarly throughout the world as the sarong, is worn by millions in the Asian tropics.

In various forms it appears throughout Indonesia, South India, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaya, Borneo and the Southern Philippines. In fact, some commentators refer to these areas as the "sarong belt".

Sarongs may be printed or woven of cotton or silk, but among Malaysians and Indonesians it is the indigenous batik form that is popularly loved. First brought to perfection in Java, batik-making is a complicated process of wax-dyeing, producing local motifs in vivid and lasting colours.

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 are the unquestioned mas.

The evolution of batik painting did not come easily to Teng but it is a natural result of a wandering and varied life. He came to Malaya 27 years ago from Amoy. He has trundled a stall as a hawker, manufactured paper, planted tapioca. He has been a shopkeeper, a baker, an umbrella maker, a cook, an import and export trader, a designer of cloth, a maker of sarongs, and is now a school teacher. Throughout all these adaptable years of his life he has always been an artist.

As an artist Teng says he first started to draw when he was only a few years old. He acquired his own formal training at the Amoy Art School which he left at the age of 17 to immigrate to Malaya with his parents.

Although trained in the Chinese tradition he came to prefer Western styles. His early work as a part-time painter reflected sound draftsmanship, and this was his chief asset. Teng as a painter in oils was not outstanding, but his works, usually in watercolor, were always acceptable in any exhibition.

Painting by the batik method germinated from Teng's own idea and determination. In 1956 I asked him how he managed to work out the concept and method of batik art. He told me that one day in 1953 he was reflecting.

"Suddenly I thought to myself", said Teng, gesturing with his left hand, "as an artist I can paint like this", and gesturing with his right hand, "as a batik craftsman I can do good work like that." "Then I suddenly asked myself why can't I do them both at once?" and as he spoke he brought both his hands together in a clap.

That simple question was the beginning of two years of personal struggle to match his talents as an artist with his skill as a batik-maker.

Time and again he tried and was on the verge of giving up hope. Then he decided to work out his idea once again in a small self-portrait, executed in pointilliste technique, using red green, yellow and black dyes on white cloth. To Teng's great relief this key experiment was a success.

As he told me later, "I sat back, my eyes wet with joy, thinking that if I could do this in batik I could do anything." That was the beginning of batik painting, and from that night forward Teng has never looked back.

Now that he had wrested the secret from nights of patient toil he plunged into a flurry of activity trying various types of wax and dyes, producing one painting after another until he had assembled a small collection of works in the new medium.

He showed his batik paintings to Miss Patricia Lim of the Penang Library and other art-lovers with the result that Miss Lim presented his first show of batik art at her Library in September, 1955. The

exhibition was an immediate success.

The news spread rapidly to Singapore, where the Art Society, at that time the leading art group in Malaya, decided to give Teng a full one-man show of nearly 100 works. This exhibition, a triumph for Teng, astonished the artists in Singapore and proved very popular with the viewing and buying public.

The possibilities of batik painting as a fine art was a revelation, but equally remarkable was the revolution which occurred in Teng's own approach to art.

At the age of 41 after twenty-one years of painting he was suddenly born again. The batik medium seemed to release all his latent abilities in a sudden flowering of maturity.

His draftsmanship acquired sweep and rhythm; colors flared from his canvas. His themes opened up new vistas of Malayan 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 Malayan artist seemed to have tackled with such relish before.

In the space of a few months Teng, a quiet simple man of endless industry, emerged in the top ranks of Malayan art as a happy philosopher of the human condition, embracing all Malaya and her people of many races.

Following up his Singapore triumph, Teng presented another exhibition of 103 works in various media in Kuala Lumpur in April 1957, sixty-two paintings being in batik.

Glowing with life and colour and vitality, these batik paintings revealed the incredible range of his observations of a life-time.

The titles alone evoked the variety of the Malayan way of life—"Shoeing a Cow", "Making Pottery", "Baking Pulot Rice", "Bersilat", "Shadow Show", "Road Under Repair", "Attap Weaving", "Orchestra", "Plucking Coconuts", "Reading Aloud", "Worshipping", "Under Construction", "Setting Sail", and "Sleep".

No scene, large or small, no activity or emotion, escaped his roving eye, his adept *cheanta* (the wax pen) or his ready brush and pencil. Needless to say the Kuala Lumpur exhibition was another great success.

Now a top Malayan master artist, his works selling well, Teng looked further a field. In 1959 the Federation Government, at the request of the Arts Council, financed the presentation of Teng's first one-man show in London, held at the Royal Commonwealth Institute in June. His original colorful exhibition was an impressive debut in the West; in the first half hour 25 works were sold.

Unfortunately, Teng could not be present himself, but the London Exhibition was a great honor for him. It was the first time (and still remains so) that the Federation Government had sponsored abroad an exhibition by any Malayan artist.

Teng, while continuing to show his works in every available Malayan exhibition, made a new mark for himself as a top painter in murals. The Federation Government commissioned a mural on "Malayan Life" for its new High Commission in Canberra in 1959.

In 1960 Teng executed a mural on "Malayan Products" for the Malayan Tobacco Company, the same year he won an open competition on the theme of "Malayan Agriculture" for the newly established Faculty of Agriculture in the University of Malaya.

It is given to few men to lead a life so full of creative activity as Teng does in Penang. His energy and industry are quite amazing. Not only is he a full-time art teacher, but he also owns and runs a shop for artists' supplies. When and where he finds time to paint seems a mystery; I doubt if he ever sleeps more than a few hours a night.

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 humour, but always and at all times he is an artist in love with life.

Teng seems to say. "There is grace and beauty all around you if you only have the eyes to see, as an artist I must try and put down all the fascination of God's creatures and nature's moods while I can, for life is too short, there is not a moment to spare."

The heart and mind and spirit of Teng breathe the very soul of Malaya. Soon I have no doubt that Teng, footloose and eager, sketch book to hand, will be travelling all over Malaysia absorbing fresh inspiration from this new destination in Asia to transmute all its life and variety into his glowing batiks.

He will do so not only because the inner compulsion of being truly a gifted artist drives him on, but because he has a new goal to reach, having been promised a second one-man show by the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1965.

Through his receptive eyes and masterly hands, Teng can show a rich vision of Malaysia to the world in his medium of batik art.