

CHUAH THEAN TENG - PIONEER OF BATIK PAINTING

Chuah Thean Teng (or simply Teng as he signs his works) is Malaysia's foremost artist in batik painting. Teng adapted the traditional and very ancient craft of dyeing on cloth - known as batik - and pioneered the use of the batik medium as a new form of fine art. His mastery of this novel art form has enabled Teng to express the spirit and feeling of this beautiful country in South East Asia and the daily life of her people.

Teng is recognized as the pioneer and premier exponent of batik painting and is venerated for his contribution of this new means of pictorial expression. The draftsmanship of Teng is that of a master with his bold sweeping lines which flow with a sense of rhythm. His painting glows with a radiance showing a mastery of colors' in his batiks and communicating joy in life.

Teng's creativity is evident in the batik works that he has produces. With his receptive eyes and the sureness of an artist's hand, he has captured the elegance of Malaysian life, predominantly using rural villages and their people as his subjects: villagers attending their daily chores; children playing; and folk at leisure. Teng's themes are warm and simple, and his art in the batik medium gives fresh flavor and quality to the unique local scene.

Born in Fukien, China, in the year 1914, Teng is the son of an importing and exporting tradesman. His interest in art began when he was just a young child and he was encouraged by his parents to express himself artistically. Teng has happy recollections of his childhood and these memories are often reflected in his works.

Teng's formal art education was gained at the Amoy Art Institute. At the age of 18, he moved to Malaysia with his parents to help his father in his trading company.

He has led a varied life but throughout the kaleidoscopic years he has always been an artist. Times were hard for an unknown artist and became even harder during the World War II when all artistic talents were temporarily sup- pressed. When the World War II was over, Teng operated a batik factory but it did not flourish.

With all the leftover materials, Teng began innovating in the batik medium. However, it was only through years of experimentation and hard- ship in developing this new form of fine art that he learnt how to incorporated his abilities both as an artist and as a batik craftsman.

His first successful batik painting was a self-portrait executed in pointillist technique, using red, green yellow and black dyes on white cloth. This vital experiment was the turning point and from then on Teng launched himself into the earnest endeavor of elevating batik painting into a new form of fine art.

At small collection of artworks in the new medium was soon assembled. He showed his batik paintings to the art enthusiasts, Dr. Lim Kee Liang and his wife, Patricia Lim, of the Penang Library. In September 1955, Mrs. Lim together with Mr. Wilfred P]umbe (University of Singapore) and Mr. James Mandy (Regional Director of British Council) presented Teng' first one-man exhibition, organized by the Penang Arts Council at the Penang Library.

The exhibition was an immediate success and was well received by an enthusiastic public. It was truly a memorable and rewarding achievement for Teng who had struggled hard for many years against all odds to elevate batik painting as a form of fine art.

Teng is an artist who enjoys exaggeration in his art: heads titled to a right angle; small heads set on big and muscular bodies with distorted limbs and elongated bodies writhing in movement. His colors blend perfectly into the compositions, bathing the figures in exotic hues. Yet, he executes these exaggerated figures with a style distinctively his own, enticing the viewer to escape into his world of imagination.

The reverberation of Teng's success in batik painting spread far and wide. In 1956, he was awarded another one-man show of nearly 100 works at the Singapore Art Society which was the leading art group in Malaya at that time. Needless to say, it was another successful exhibition.

Teng's first international exhibition was held in 1959 at the Commonwealth Institute of Art in London, England. This exhibition was sponsored by the Federal Government at the request of the Arts Council. It was the first time that the Government has sponsored an overseas exhibition by any Malayan artist.

His debut in the West was impressive, the viewing public was enthusiastic about his art and most of his works were sold on the opening day. The British Council granted Teng a "Fellowship" and he spent a few months in the United Kingdom attending to exhibitions of his work held in England and Ireland.

In the same year, the Federal Government commissioned a mural on "Malaysian Life" for its new High Commission in Canberra, Australia. In 1960, Malayan Tobacco Company commissioned a mural entitled "Malayan Products"; and he also won an open competition organized by the University of Malaya with the theme "Malayan Agriculture".

Teng was awarded the Diploma of Merit in 1962 when representative works by him were shown at the First International Art Exhibition in Saigon, Vietnam.

The following year in April 1963, the Arts Council sponsored a one-man show, Siew Keng's paintings to be included in their greeting card selection. The works that were chosen were entitled "Tell You A Secret" by Teng, and "Fish" and "Rural Life" by Siew Keng.

The following year in April 1963, the Arts Council sponsored a one-man exhibition of Teng's works at the British Council Centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The exhibition was an overwhelming success with many distinguished guests including Her Majesty, The Permaisuri Agung (The Queen of Malaysia), the British High Commissioner and representatives from National Art Gallery and University of Malaya buying for their collections, along with other art collectors. Among the crowd that visited the exhibition were the famous author Han Suyin, university academicians, foreign ambassadors and other dignitaries.

In February 1965, the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur presented one-man show Teng's paintings prior to his exhibitions in Europe. In their catalogue for this exhibition, the National Art Gallery announced: -

"This is only the second time that the National Art Gallery has given an artist in Malaysia the honour of a one-man exhibition, and this display provides an opportunity to pay tribute to Teng as the creator of batik painting as a fine art."

Teng was again invited by the Commonwealth Institute in 1965 to hold another exhibition. The Commonwealth Institute also acquired two of Teng's batik paintings entitled "Making Batik" and "Picking Sireh Leaves" for their art collection.

In 1977, the Commonwealth Institute honored Teng when he was invited as Malaysia's only representative to the "Commonwealth Artists of Fame" held in London, England. This exhibition was organized by the Art Gallery of the Commonwealth Institute to mark the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation.

When he was exhibiting in Europe in 1965, the United Nations' International Children's Fund (UNICEF) selected his batik painting "Two of a Kind", depicting children in their mother's arms, as their greeting card. He is the first Malaysian to be so honored.

The UNICEF repeated the honors again 1988 when they chose both Teng's and his son, Seow Keng's paintings to be included in their greeting card selection. The works that were chosen were entitled "Tell You A Secret" by Teng, and "Fish" and "Rural Life" by Siew Keng.

In "Tell You a Secret", Teng depicts a woman. Whispering a secret into the ear of another while a young girl tries to eavesdrop in the background, partly hidden behind a curtain. The "secret" will always remain a mystery as intended by the artist.

Besides batik painting, Teng also works in different media, including oil, mixed media, gouache, woodcuts and sculptures.

His paintings express his delight in natural, unsophisticated beauty, his compassion for humanity being presented in a style that is both distinctively his own and yet at the same time reflecting the vibrant spirit of the country - Malaysia. Dominant in his works are his paintings of mothers and children. Especially notable is the exquisite sensitivity he possesses in portraying the love and tenderness between a mother and her children.

The international recognition of his work is deservedly Teng's who has done so much in elevating the batik painting as a form of fine art. His reputation as the "Father and Master of Batik Painting" is an accolade well bestowed.

Today, the dozen of batik painting has his own gallery in Penang where works by him and his sons, Siew Teng, Seow Keng and Siew Kek are on display.