

Chua Mia Tee (b. 1931) was born in Shantou, Guangdong Province, China and moved to Singapore with his family during the Sino-Japanese War. At the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), he studied sketching and painting in different media under the guidance of Lim Hak Tai, then Director of NAFA, and artists Cheong Soo Pieng and Koh Tong Leong.

As a highly accomplished realist artist, Chua is renowned for his oil paintings of scenes of traditional life and significant events in Singapore's history. Well-known pieces such as *Workers in a Canteen* (1974) and *Singapore River* (1983) emerged out of an urgent desire to capture the physical and social landscape of Singapore before the onslaught of urban modernisation. Works such as *Epic Poem of Malaya* (1955) and *National Language Class* (1959) also demonstrate his subtlety as a historical commentator. Chua's work is informed by the belief that producing realist art involves interpreting and rendering any given subject in an accessible manner which helps viewers understand, appreciate, and identify with the work of art.

Chua has created many iconic works which have become embedded in the visual landscape of everyday life in Singapore. These include a portrait of the late President Yusof bin Ishak on Singapore's currency notes, as well as a picture of the late Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first Prime Minister, proclaiming 'Merdeka!' on the fifty dollar commemorative note produced to celebrate the country's 50th year of independence. Chua's works have also garnered attention in the international art scene, having been exhibited in countries such as Australia, Brunei, Belgium, Germany, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Thailand.

Chua's contributions to the local arts community began from the earliest years of his practice. He served as a teacher at NAFA while still a student and after he graduated. With other members of the Equator Art Society, he constantly sought a breakthrough in art to cultivate a national artistic identity in the true spirit of a modernist. He has shared his expertise with younger generations of visual artists and arts management professionals in various capacities, including that of professional consultant to and life member of the NAFA Alumni Association, and life member of the Singapore Arts Society.

CULTURAL
MEDALLION
— 2015 —

CHUA MIA TEE

2



National Language Class: The Art of Chua Mia Tee

By Chow Yian Ping

**“Every situation-
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every moment-
is of infinite worth;
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When Chua Mia Tee, at the age of eighty-four, receives the Cultural Medallion on Singapore's fiftieth year of independence, it is especially befitting. For many of Chua's works have become familiar to whole generations of Singaporeans: he has been painting Singapore and her people for some sixty-five years, dating from 1950 when he started his formal art education at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA).

Chua's commitment to realism started early and would become life-long. He was the founding President of the Equator Arts Society set up in June 1956 and which was closely associated with promoting social realist art and literature in the 1960s. Chua says that his NAFA teacher Cheong Soo Pieng would sometimes dub him a traitor for leading students away from the pursuit of



Epic Poem of Malaya (1955)



National Language Class (1959)

the Nanyang style and into social realism. Chua's body of work rendered in the realist tradition is a reflection of life and societal changes in Singapore, as well as sentiments of the times the artist himself lived through. He paints both the common people and the country's elite, capturing a myriad of the societal spectrum.

Those were tumultuous albeit hopeful times for Singapore. Racial riots, student demonstrations, juxtaposed with debates on the possibility of self-governance, were prevailing affairs of the day. With a strong sense of social consciousness, Chua the young artist focused on the stark realities of contemporary life. He sympathised with the students and the working-class. Oil paintings in the national collection such as *Epic of Life in Malaya (1955)*, *National Language Class (1959)* were created during this period. Chua continued painting in this vein even in the 1970s, as demonstrated by another well-known piece, *Workers in the Canteen (1974)*.

To Chua, the realist painter is a screenwriter, director and actor all rolled into one. He is free to create whatever image of the figure that he is painting. By highlighting key details, the realist painter has the wherewithal to make his work more moving to the audience and easier for them to appreciate, to serve the end of leaving behind an everlasting impression¹.

While many artists of his times have moved on to other styles and schools of painting, Chua found great satisfaction expressing and experimenting within the realm of realist painting. He wrote:

“There is innovation and breakthrough as we move from one school of painting to the next, but these innovations and breakthroughs are a result of changes in forms. The new forms are not for presenting content, and definitely not for presenting meaningful content. The audience's reaction and understanding of these works is not their (the artists') concern. They even consider works that are readily understandable or recognizable as copies and not original creations, that these are not modern art of our times.”²

Hence, Chua regards realism as being key to a work, and the key that renders a painting readable, casting light on the meaning of its content, opening the avenue for deep and sensitive exchanges between artist, artwork and viewer.

Chua became a full-time artist after a successful solo exhibition in 1974. Since then, his works have been synonymous with the development of Singapore. He painted many scenes of Singapore's changing and vanishing landscapes; his works constantly searching for permanence in the ephemeral. Local sceneries captured by Chua during the 1970s through the 1990s included the Singapore River, Chinatown, Boat Quay and the Central Business District.

¹ Chua Mia Tee, “Portraiture and Figure Painting” 肖像与人物画(1977), originally published in Nanyang Meishu Portraiture and Figure Painting Issue 南洋美术肖像与人物专辑, included in Chua Mia Tee 蔡名智画集, Chua Mia Tee, 1986.

² Chua Mia Tee, “The Art of Painting” 绘画艺术创作(1979), originally published in Nanyang Shangbao 南洋商报, included in Chua Mia Tee 蔡名智画集, Chua Mia Tee, 1986.



Chua Mia Tee with his wife, Lee Boon Ngan.
Photo courtesy of Dr Chua Yang



Photo courtesy of Dr Chua Yang

One can read Chua's painting of old Singapore like an unfolding story. One's attention is immediately drawn to a highlighted object or figure, and from there on, slowly trace the painting in its entirety, savoring each and every little detail and surprise that the artist has prepared for the viewer. In his depiction of Singapore's changing landscape, scenes that seem overtly complicated or cluttered never daunted Chua. In *A Crowded Market Place* (1983) which shows a hundred people thronging a narrow street in Chinatown, Chua painted the houses, awnings and umbrellas on the spot, then added the figures in his studio, using the sketches and studies he had made earlier³. The result is a vivid portrayal of a Chinatown street market in the 1980s forever etched into our collective memory.

Ever the master in perfecting compositional beauty and balance, Chua is also at ease with works that are almost stark in their simplicity. In *Self Portrait* (1988), the viewer encounters the artist directly against a dark background. The subtle clues suggesting his vocation are in the figure's raised arm as if ready to paint, and the back of a canvas boldly placed, dividing the painting vertically across.

While realism has characterised Chua's work with a sense of directness, it is in the subtlety and compositional details that one is enchanted with. In many of his works, Chua also demonstrates his grasp of chiaroscuro, using dramatic lighting to transform even mundane subjects at shipyards, classrooms and marketplaces, from being a simple illustration to a scene of pathos.

Chua is one of the very few artists in Singapore to excel not only in landscape but also in figure painting. To Chua, landscape painting can reflect society, but it is a less effective means of reflecting reality compared to figure painting. Chua became one of Singapore's most sought after portrait painters from the late 1970s. In 1979, Chua was commissioned by the government to make sketches of the Ministers and Members of the Parliament during parliamentary sittings. In that same year, he also painted an oil painting of the founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in a historical setting of his returning to Singapore from London after the Merdeka talks and speaking to supporters of his success. In 1996, the Istana commissioned Chua to paint a series of the Nation's past and present Presidents, each with his team of cabinet members. Other eminent individuals who are subjects of Chua's portraits include Ministers, Chief Justices, top businessmen and diplomats.

Chua is a master of portraiture technique, the human anatomy and the three-dimensional form. The feeling of weight and substance is always evident in Chua's portraits, and on the canvas, he was able to bring his subjects to life through absolute technical command. While Chua portrays his subjects with respect, this does not mean that the artist is devoid of perceptive observation. Chua studies his sitter in relation to his social position and the larger environment. He believes that a successful portrait is equivalent to a biography, allowing the viewer to visually take in the character, disposition and background of the painted figure. In *Portrait of Mr Ong Chay Tong* (1985) and *Portrait of Dr. Ma Man Kei* (1986), one seems even to be able to sense the sitter's reaction to a particular situation. Nonetheless, some

of Chua's best portraits are those of his wife Lee Boon Ngan, whom he painted with great sensitivity and deep feelings. In *Portrait of Lee Boon Ngan* (1957) and *My Wife* (1980), the viewer encounters Lee, twenty-three years apart, yet with the same defiant, intense look in her eyes, lovingly portrayed by the artist. With a sustained sense of purpose in the realist aesthetics, and through his portrayal of the lives and characters of a range of individuals, Chua has captured the spirit of the age and shaped how we identify with the personages of his times.

If looking at Chua's oil paintings is like reading chapters from an epic novel about Singapore, then his sketches are like short proses that eternalise a fleeting moment in everyday life. According to Chua, he has made more than a thousand sketches throughout his painting career, especially in the 1980s when he felt a strong urge to document Singapore's changing landscape and fast disappearing scenes. While Chua's oil paintings are carefully designed compositions, there is refreshing spontaneity in his charcoal sketches on cardboards. One marvels at the fluidity and accuracy in the lines of these drawings done outdoors. The artist's careful observations have retained in his sketches such compelling physicality and an authenticity of vision. A large portion of these sketches has not yet been recreated as oil paintings. They remain an important and convincing documentation of a bygone era seen uniquely through an artist's eyes.

One needs immense patience and persistence to be a realist painter. Chua has dedicated his entire artistic life to this cause. He produces his works slowly and with care. They are the result of close and detailed study, based on many preliminary sketches. Indeed, each and every brushstroke on a painted canvas can be seen as personal 'hand-writings' of the artist's; intense individual marks put together to make the whole. The landscapes and figures in Chua's paintings communicate directly to our senses, and connect us to a specific time in history. When we see his realist paintings, we are immediately within - drawn into, and we live therein.

Chua has truly demonstrated an artist's way to connect with his country and his people through art. In the words of Goethe,

"Every situation- nay, every moment- is of infinite worth; for it is the representative of a whole eternity."

For in Chua Mia Tee's oeuvre, one instances the epic of a nation, language and a community in the making. When viewed in its full scope it is a national language class for all.

About the writer

Ms Chow Yian Ping is the current Art Editor at *Lianhe Zaobao*, Singapore Press Holdings.

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

"I am grateful to the National Arts Council and National Gallery Singapore for being instrumental in my receiving of the Cultural Medallion. I wish to thank everyone who has helped me in my career, especially those who aided in my exhibitions' logistics and writing in various publications for their tireless hard work."

My heartfelt gratitude goes to my wife and children. My wife, Boon Ngan, who is an amazing artist in her own right, has shown such meticulous care and concern for our family and for my well-being day to day. My son, Professor Chua Hong, manages to call me every few days despite his busy schedule as Dean at the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong. My daughter, Dr. Chua Yang, a private gynaecologist, has kept me in such good health despite my age. I am immensely blessed for all their unwavering love."

³ Chua Mia Tee 1988, National Museum Singapore, 1988.