



CULTURAL MEDALLION 2024

SIEW HOCK MENG

SIEW HOCK MENG (b. 1942) is highly regarded as a second-generation Nanyang artist who excels at pastel compositions, oil portraits and allegorical artworks imbued with nuanced sensuality and subtextual impact.

Born in Johor and educated in Singapore, the aspiring painter joined the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts as a student of pioneer artist Cheong Soo Pieng. After one year, Hock Meng became more interested in the meaning and purpose of art and life rather than simply learning painting techniques. Abandoning art, the erstwhile student became a rubber tapper in Malaya so that there would be more time to read about aesthetics and philosophy.



Cloves
2007
140cm x 210cm
Oil on canvas

In 1975, Hock Meng returned to Singapore to run an art gallery and devoted time and energy to portraiture, which led to a growing reputation and strong patronage in Indonesia and Taiwan. The artist then explored other subjects and themes, such as human figures and the lives and cultures of Asia which was a favourite destination over the years. With an observational eye, Hock Meng painted Singapore's landscapes, as well as places in the region, such as Bali, Myanmar, India, and Cambodia, which have significantly influenced the artist's Realist approach.

Hock Meng shared personal thoughts on art and civilisation in a fully illustrated book 'The Key to Human Civilisation: The History of Pictorial Language.' The author has also published five coffee-table books which showcase a substantial and sustained body of works over six decades.

Besides being active in the Equator Art Society, the aficionado was a core committee member at several art societies including the Singapore Watercolour Society.

Hock Meng was also awarded the National Day Medal for Fine Arts in 1971, and the award for Visual Arts Creation, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Alumni Association Singapore, in 1981 and 1984.



WHAT DRAWING CAN TEACH ALL OF US

BY TEO HAN WUE

These days, Siew Hock Meng looks back on his life with great amusement, amazed at how richly colourful it has been.

He was born in Johor, Malaysia in 1942 to parents who emigrated from Meixian, Guangdong, in China to British Malaya to work in a rubber plantation.

In 1951, he moved to Singapore and went to Yeung Ching Primary School where his gift was noticed by his teacher Liu Xiande, a leading pioneer artist, who encouraged him to pursue his interest in art. He went on to Chung Cheng High School in 1955 but quit after the second year.

“I wasn’t good at my studies, especially English, a subject I failed probably because I hated it,” Hock Meng explains. He then joined the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) where he learnt painting for a year.

In frequent discussions about art with his teacher and pioneer artist Cheong Soo Pieng, he wondered about the meaning and purpose of art. Eager to find out how art could contribute to society, he quit the academy after one year to read up on why man created art. In 1959, he returned to Johor to work in a rubber plantation. “A rubber tapper worked for only a few hours a day tapping rubber trees from dawn,” says Hock Meng, “which meant I would get to spend the rest of the day reading my books.”



Siew Hock Meng with a Buddhist Study Tour Group from South Korea at the top of Nalanda University in Bihar, India, 1992.

He met friends who introduced him to socialist literature which dealt with historical materialism. He was struck by how accessible these books were – “they made more sense in relation to what I was trying to understand about art.”

He got interested in politics and joined Parti Buruh Malaya (Labour Party of Malaya). He relocated to Kemaman in Terengganu where he did jobs such as rubber-tapping, mining and prospecting from 1960. He also sold eggs, painted posters and shop signs, and bred tropical fish. After returning to Singapore in 1975, he started a gallery making portraits for clients and selling his paintings and those by artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng.

Since first visiting Taiwan in 1979 for commissioned work, he had gone there periodically between 1980 and 1988 to hold exhibitions to critical acclaim.

He visited Bali for the first time in 1982 and became fascinated with Balinese music and dance, which he incorporated into his paintings. After visiting India, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia to explore the Indian cultural influence, he painted a series of works and realise how deeply Singapore is steeped in the cultural traditions of this region.

Reflecting his Realist aesthetics, Hock Meng, while representing faithfully what he sees, goes deeper to examine issues of culture and history. The images he paints are more about what he thinks and what he has to say than merely scenes of beauty.

In ‘The Dawn of An Era,’ one of his most important works, he interrogates the legend which is entrenched among the Chinese in Singapore – the story of Chow Ah Chey, a carpenter on board Sir Stamford Raffles’ ship Indiana. Chow has been hailed as a hero for playing a role in Raffles’ landing in Singapore.

“I take a completely different view of the founding legend,” says Hock Meng. “If he existed at all, Chow should have felt shame for helping the British colonise Singapore. Instead, he has been praised for his supposed meritorious contribution to the founding of Singapore.”

According to the records of two clan associations — the House of Cao Clan (曹家馆) and Ning Yeung Wui Kuan (宁阳会馆) for the Cantonese from Taishan 台山 (Toi San) – Chow is regarded as their founder who assisted Raffles in his landing operation in 1819.

Because of the lack of verifiable evidence, the story has often been disputed since it emerged in 1949. Nevertheless, the account and the existence of the protagonist himself have been debated, inspiring articles as well as artworks based on the narrative.

Taking two decades to complete, this 3m x 2m painting in oil on canvas is the largest artwork Hock Meng has ever done. First exhibited at the



Dawn of An Era
2000
210cm x 280cm
Oil on canvas

Singapore Art Museum in 2001, it was immediately collected by Kwee Swie Teng, an Indonesian collector who owns Art Retreat, a private museum in Ubi Techpark.

Hock Meng's interpretation of the popular legend has remained as provocative, drawing strong reactions.

The painting shows a scene seen from Raffles' ship before landing. On the left, a bare-bodied Chinese sports a queue and holds up a Union Jack fastened on a branch from a tree. On the right, an Indian man in Sepoy uniform gives directions via flag signals. Between them squats a Malay man in traditional attire complete with a *tanjak* (head band), arms folded across his chest clutching a *keris*, a symbol of power, in his right hand.

Another painting of note is 'Cloves,' which depicts local people in Maluku sunning harvested cloves in the sun and intrigued by a scruffy European visitor squatting down to sniff at the spice. It questions if both the Indonesians and the Europeans understand the implication of such an encounter in the historical context of the spice trade.

As Hock Meng explains: "Most people have forgotten that the Europeans were drawn to this part of the world by the allure of the spices. This was how the Dutch and the Portuguese ended up fighting over control of the spice trade, which led to local lives being sacrificed."

Nearer home, Hock Meng avoided familiar landscapes such as Singapore River and Kreta Ayer. Instead, he portrayed scenes of the MacRitchie Reservoir as a place people go to for various leisure activities.

In these idyllic scenes showing people enjoying the tranquil environment, there is a hint of danger or a threat lurking nearby, in the form of, say, a chameleon perched on a stump behind a man relaxing on a bench. It is as if he is insinuating at the precarious position we are in, exposing vulnerabilities such as the shortage of Singapore's water supply.

Low Sze Wee, group director (museums) of National Heritage Board, says: "Though realism is his artistic language, his artworks are seldom straightforward depictions of the physical environment. Rather, they are proof of how the artist observes the world around him, both past and present, with great clarity, empathy, and sensitivity."

Eminent watercolourist Ong Kim Seng concurs: "Hock Meng is a highly accomplished painter who, through his excellent depictions of life and landscape of Singapore as well as many countries in the region, raises awareness of their cultural, social, historical and political reality."

Hock Meng has gone from strength to strength. With generous support of an Indonesian patron, he held 'Siew Hock Meng: Paintings/Tellings,' his first ever solo exhibition in Singapore at Art Retreat in 2004, and published his first collection of paintings that year.



Siew Hock Meng at Red Fort in Delhi, India.

In the same year, the show was staged at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, and its rich, tropical colours and South-east Asian themes proved to be a draw. In 2008, he had an exhibition at the Artrium of the then Ministry of Information and the Arts, and designed a special device for measuring perspective and proportion as an aid for drawing and obtained the patent for purposes of teaching. In 2010, he held a show at the National Dr Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall in Taipei.

Today Hock Meng continues to paint regularly in his five-room HDB flat in Yishun. He does much of his small-scale work (such as sketching) and painting nude models in a cosy study, and his larger full-scale work in his living room. It is indeed surprising that he has been able to complete paintings as large as 'The Dawn of An Era' in a rather cramped space at home.

With a distinguished record, Hock Meng singles out 'The Key to Human Civilisation: History of Pictorial Language,' a book he published in Chinese and English for a limited circulation in 2016 as his proudest achievement.

"I feel I have found an answer to the question, 'What is drawing?', something very few people have answered satisfactorily."

As he sees it, drawing is a means by which an image from human's perception and learning can be recorded, documented and transmitted.

"When our ancestors lived in caves they knew how to depict wild game on rock surfaces. This was how the young learnt to hunt and avoid danger. They would then attain the best advantage, survive the competition and rise to the top in the hierarchy of living things."

He elaborates: "Since ancient times, various inventions and constructions in human civilisations could not have been possible without drawing as a way to articulate their plans. Only through drawing can the image of what the brain intends to create be made visible."

"All technology today has been accomplished as a result of drawing. In fact, it is the greatest invention of mankind," stresses Hock Meng. Viewing it as a matter of great importance, he exhorts Ministry of Education to get all students in schools to pay greater attention to drawing. "Start them young on honing their perceptive and cognitive capability. Only in this way can we become a strong, creative nation," he says.

—
Teo Han Wue was a journalist at 'The Straits Times.' He later became the director of Art Retreat incorporating the Wu Guanzhong Gallery and is now an art writer and curator.



The Busy Agricultural Season
1996
110cm x 169cm
Oil on canvas



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

感谢新加坡艺术理事会给我颁发2024年度文化奖; 作为新加坡画家的我, 深感光荣! 这是国家对我的绘画事业表示肯定! 同时, 要感谢南洋美术学院艺术理事会的多次盛情推荐!

画了几十年的画, 接触了不少事物, 我深信绘画是一种对事物的“观察”; 有观察才有发现/创造! 画家达芬奇是个好例子。我的绘画来自小学写生课, 它极早给我做了“观察”的基本训练! 我的心存感激!

感谢南洋美专/钟四宾老师, 他导至我去思考绘画与美学的真谛! 我已八十二岁—永远思念父母养育之恩!

再三鞠躬—谢谢!

I would like to thank National Arts Council for awarding me the 2024 Cultural Medallion. As a Singaporean artist, I am deeply honoured! This is a recognition from my country for my career in painting. I am also grateful to Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) for their repeated and enthusiastic nominations.

Having painted for decades and gained diverse experiences, I firmly believe that painting is a form of “observation,” and only through observation can there be discovery and creation! Leonardo Da Vinci is a good example. My interest in drawing stemmed from primary school sketching classes, which provided me with foundational training of my “observation” skills at a very young age! I am truly grateful for that.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my teacher Mr Cheong Soo Pieng from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA); he guided me to contemplate the true essence of painting and aesthetics.

I am already 82 years old — I will always cherish my parents for nurturing me!

Bowing once again to express my gratitude — thank you!