

Choong Soo Pieng

One of the criticisms sometimes levelled, quite unjustly, against modern Oriental art is that it is not Oriental. Why it is asked, do Chinese artists paint in oils instead of in their own fluid and sensitive medium? Why paint figure subjects, street scenes, still lifes, when they have behind them the great Chinese tradition of idealised landscape and flower painting? The answer is that no art that is alive can stand still; it must be a direct expression of the times. As Asian civilisations have been reborn in the last half-century, so must Asian artists reflect, and inspire, this rebirth. New things must be said, and a new pictorial language found in which to say them. If the work of Choong Soo Pieng sometimes looks more Western than Oriental, more modern than traditional, that is because it is a true reflection of the feelings and aspirations of the community to which he belongs.

But Choong Soo Pieng's strength is that while deeply influenced by Western art, — particularly by Picasso and Gauguin, — he is no mere imitator. He has carved out for himself a remarkably consistent style, so that on entering a room one can pick out a Soo Pieng at once, by its combination of a fine sense of design, firm, angular forms, and a colour-scheme that is never less than bold and is often arresting. His preoccupation with design leaves nothing to chance. Line, form and colour are bent to the creation of a wholly satisfying composition, as fully integrated as a piece of architecture. At the same time, he has not removed himself into a world of pure abstraction; like other leading

artists in Singapore, he derives his themes directly from the life around him.

Soo Pieng's influence on the younger painters of Singapore has been powerful and direct, — perhaps too direct. His angular figures, formalised portraits and expressionistic use of colour are the mark of a highly sophisticated painter the very consistency of whose style has given rise to a school of young painters who copy his forms and colours just as the painters of Paris have copied Picasso and Braque. He is at his best when he allies these qualities with an unexpected sensitivity of handling, as in some of his water-colours, or with an apparently spontaneous harmony of colours quickly set down, which make the canvas positively sing.

The paintings reproduced in these pages are modern and international in technique, Chinese in feeling, and Malayan in subject. Nothing could express, and symbolise, the spirit of modern Malaya more fittingly. Soo Pieng is to be congratulated on his inspiring example to all Malayan painters, and on revealing to us so vividly the rich texture of Malayan life.

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