

THE TRANSITIONS OF SOO PIENG AS MAN AND ARTIST

by

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The presentation of a one-man show is an important event at any time in the life of an artist, but the current exhibition by Cheong Soo Pieng, the Singapore master, deserves exceptional attention.

This exhibition is a revelation of Soo Pieng's artistic development in several ways, but its prime significance lies in the fact that he has just returned home to Malaysia after an absence of two years on a voyage of discovery in Europe.

What was the impact of the West on the eye and mind of this artist from the East? How did he react? Is his art richer or poorer for his journey? Where will his future path lead from here? These are significant questions, and Soo Pieng shows beguiling answers.

The career of a dedicated artist is always, or certainly should be, a process of transition. As his experience and knowledge grow, so should his technique and latent powers expand. These qualities are certainly true of Soo Pieng, whose artistic life falls naturally into three distinct phases.

First, there is Soo Pieng the unknown, groping and immature, conscious of his goal and exploring the way in the Art Academies of Shanghai and Amoy. In South China he learned the simplicity of form and line and the subtleties of using space, so characteristic of the best in Chinese art. In his youth and early manhood, too, he gained his first acquaintance with the alien mysteries of Western art.

The Orient and the Occident became entangled in his brush for the first time. The external pull of the wider world beyond the horizon of China drew strongly like a magnet, so in 1945, the year the War ended, Soo Pieng at the age of 28, began his first journey, living and working in Hong Kong and Formosa. At this time his paintings were comparatively raw in colour and hard in texture, but revealed an elemental force and lively observation.

No true artist is ever really satisfied, so Soo Pieng yearned to go further afield. So the second phase began. Like so many of his fellow country-men, he took ship to Singapore, where he settled down and made his home in 1946.

Soo Pieng, always a man of quiet and unruffled disposition, soon became a major force and influence in art in Singapore, where he was destined to live and teach for the next fifteen years.

For Soo Pieng, his years in Singapore were a period of ever growing maturity. Responsive to atmosphere, the tropical light slowly mellowed his colour and tone, bringing new delicacy of line. In the bustling and cosmopolitan city as he captured the people and the passing scene his art was tranquil and calm.

Although these years were full of energy and industry as Soo Pieng taught and painted tirelessly by day and night, he was not an artist in a hurry. Ten years were to pass by before he held his first one-man show.

Working always in two media alternately, oils or ink and wash he constantly essayed new forms. Roundness and realism gradually gave way to an interest in the pattern and elemental shapes and planes in landscape and figure studies. By this time he had completely surrendered to the nuances and possibilities of Western style painting. Gone were the conventional subjects of the Chinese artists; his brush and pen deliberately evoked the Malayan scene.

(Continued on page 16)

(Continued from page 4)

Almost unconsciously he was building his own bridge between two worlds, combining the delicacy and draftsmanship of the East with the techniques and outlook of the West.

The year 1952 was an important event for Soo Pieng, as he spent five creative months being entranced by the charm of Bali. Up to this stage of his career the people Soo Pieng painted were invariably Chinese. In Bali he discovered the Malay people, realising a sense of shock that there must have been a film over his eyes for not having studied them closely before. He could hardly wait to return to Singapore and Malaya, there to reawaken his vision of the Malayan people and the countryside.

His first one-man show, held in Singapore in 1956, revealed that Soo Pieng's art was a two-sided mirror. In one style always with decorative grace, he reflected the people. In the other he experimented vigorously with the patterns and planes as basic elements of any scene.

This first one-man show, followed up by two more in Kuala Lumpur and Penang in the following year, established Soo Pieng as one of the top-ranking artists in Malayan art. It was not surprising, so popular was his work, that many students followed in his wake. The styles of Soo Pieng flowered everywhere, so widespread was his influence.

Although Soo Pieng assiduously studied publications in Western art, he did not feel himself ready for any further great change in his life. He was happy as he was. Wishing to broaden his local horizon, he visited and worked in Sarawak in 1959 and later Sabah in 1961. By doing so, although not by design, he became in effect and before his time the first Malaysian artist.

Soo Pieng is now apparently at the height of his career. A successful teacher, his influence spreading and operating a prosperous studio, Soo Pieng could have remained if he so wished content with his achievement. However, that divine dissatisfaction which is the hallmark of the true artist was pulling strongly against. Soo Pieng felt there was still much to learn, and so began the third significant phase of his career. He decided to go to Europe.

In 1961 he left Singapore, spending almost two years exploring Europe, and during that time holding two one-man shows in London and another in Munich. This third transition has produced the current work of Soo Pieng today, and the change was radical. Soo Pieng has returned to Singapore an artist of even higher level fully in tune with the world stream of art.

Throughout all his work in this exhibition there is a remarkable feeling for atmosphere, almost tangible to the eye. The control of colour, although still under-stated in contrast to many of his contemporaries, and his harmony of tones show even richer delicacy and texture. To put it simply his technique is masterly.

This comes as no surprise to anyone who appreciates the art of Soo Pieng. What will probably be a shock to art lovers in Malaya is the extent and change of his themes. The geometry of abstract art has captured Soo Pieng, but he has not wholly made up his mind. Some of his landscapes, in contrast to the past, are impressions half-glimpsed and blurred but nevertheless real.

In the modern world a quiet struggle is going on between figurative and non-figurative art, the former being artists of all levels of directness, the latter the abstractionists. As this exhibition reveals, Soo Pieng is still in transition, probably the most important process of change in his whole career. He stands half-way across the bridge, looking first in one direction and then the other.

Soo Pieng in effect has come back from Europe, no longer a Malaysian artist only but a citizen of the whole world of modern art. Whether the fashion of art abroad is too advanced for Malaysia remains to be seen. Certainly there will need to be a great effort at understanding. No one is better qualified than Soo Pieng to explain and demonstrate to Malaysia what is going on elsewhere today. Bearing in mind his past influence, his future impact will be intriguing.