

SOO PIENG 1983

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## THE ART OF CHEONG SOO PIENG

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For over three decades, Cheong Soo Pieng was a dynamic pacesetter of the Singapore art scene. Though he was not the only driving force of Singapore art, he certainly did more than any other in injecting into Singapore art a sense of innovation. Successive artists watched his exciting development closely as he went through phase after phase of fresh expressions, drawing inspirations from new sources and breaking new grounds.

Arriving in Singapore from China in 1946, he lost no time in shedding conventional styles and approaches — solid as they were — received from art academies in Amoy and Shanghai, in order to forge new pictorial forms which were bold and daring both in pictorial arrangements and in colours. In a span of ten years — short for a serious artist — Soo Pieng had already produced a big bulk of paintings characterised by their inventive spirit. He was quickly recognised as a major artist of influence in Singapore and in the region.

The less imaginative emerging young artists modelled their work on his while the ambitious ones took his style and approach as an artist of the times. Despite the growing number of able artists in the sixties and seventies with the Singapore art scene moving towards international sophistication, Soo Pieng continued calmly to maintain his position as an influential artist who never stagnated.

Soo Pieng was always an artist on the move. As artists today have a tendency to converge and concentrate on few styles, it is likely that Soo Pieng ranks among a small number of exceptional artists in the world who have evolved in one lifetime so many styles exploring an equally wide range of possibilities in the various media of artistic expression. In his search for fresh inspiration and new motive, Soo Pieng's painting expedition to Bali, with his contemporaries Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang, in 1952 turned out to be an important milestone both in Soo Pieng's own art and in the history of Singapore art. Stunned by Bali's exotic beauty and the grace of its people, Soo Pieng was to forge more than one phase of his art from his many sketches of Balinese life. The first of these phases lasted almost a whole decade from 1952 to 1962. During the same period, as was typical of Soo Pieng, the artist was restlessly forging other equally successful pictorial forms. The most striking of these was the series of paintings inspired by the Cubist Movement in Paris.

Cubism in Soo Pieng's works existed only in spirit. For they were sharply different from the works of Picasso, Braque or the other prominent exponents of Cubism. It could not be otherwise. Soo Pieng's background, outlook and exposure as an artist were completely different. His new works convey not the startling intellectualism of the Cubists but his own exhilaration of his own exciting and fresh responses to the exuberance of the tropical Singaporean habitat in contrast to Amoy and even Shanghai.

In 1959, encouraged by his rewarding trip to Bali seven years ago, Soo Pieng took off on another adventurous sketching expedition. Destination this time was a country he had heard much about and had been curious about for years: Borneo. Packed with drawing materials, he headed not for the capital of Sarawak, Kuching but for the wellknown Longhouses steep in the

tropical lush of the Borneo jungles. Completely captivated by the unique life in the longhouses, he decided to extend his stay for over a month. There, he sketched daily the people and their colourful lives and surroundings. These intimate sketches led to the blossoming of another phase which though relatively brief was nevertheless distinctive. Characterising this period is the furthering of enrichment of the tonal play exploiting the spontaneity and fluidity of water-colours.

In 1962 Soo Pieng went to Europe for the first time in his life. He lived and painted in London for a year. In quick succession, he held solo exhibitions in the Frost and Reed Gallery, London; the Gallerie Schoninger, Munich; the Redfern Gallery, London; and another at Oxford. This rare trip abroad gave the artist much more than the opportunity to exhibit in leading London and Munich galleries. It drastically changed his views towards his own art mainly through widened horizons. For the first time, Soo Pieng came to grips with the works of influential European artists: Picasso, Braque, Miro, Chagal, Matisse. At the National Gallery he was charmed by the classical Italian masters: Pier della Francesca, Fra Angelico, Boticelli. He was equally overwhelmed by an unsuspected source of inspiration, the modern sculptors: Moore, Hepworth, Bruncusi. But most of all, he was uplifted by the paintings of Constable and Turner with whose works he found an affinity.

The one year in London and Europe, so packed with fresh insights, was to have a great impact on Soo Pieng's art and, in turn, on the Singapore art scene. After his return to Singapore, he did some soul-searching and immediately plunged himself into yet another distinct phase of his art. The works this time were more abstract, relying greatly on linear and subtle tonal forms to bring life and moods to the paintings. The rare combination of directness and persistent staying power make the best works of this phase among Soo Pieng's most sensitive works of vitality.

The abstract phase immediately after Soo Pieng's European trip also blossomed into yet another phase of abstract art characterised by vigour, diversity and experimentation. More than in any other phase of his development to date, Soo Pieng was focusing on the potential of the materials selected for transformation into works of art. He closely re-examined the paper, canvas, oils, watercolours, ink and paper that go into the making of his art and ingeniously and wittily conveyed fresh images with common materials. It is during this phase, one of his most creative and one rich in ideas, that Soo Pieng made his series of metal abstract reliefs and a numerous abstract works profuse in their exploration of new directions.

Towards the late seventies and into the eighties, Soo Pieng who, in his own way, was exhausting every facet of abstract art was again ready for a sharp change. He decided to visit Bali again. And once again fellow artists, critics and admirers witnessed another Balinese phase. But this phase, which kept Soo Pieng pre-occupied for solid stretches for years, was very different from his first Balinese phase. It was a special effort on the part of this extremely resourceful artist to portray his Balinese experiences in a fresh manner. It was time to rediscover his gifts for the figurative aspect of his painting. It was time to consolidate the many new strengths he had gained since his first painting on Bali. Freed now from the pulls of persuasive movements or even the thrills of new revelations, Soo Pieng now wanted to concentrate on distilling an art form which is very much his own unique creation.