

Portrait of A Malayan Painter

A CULTURAL bridge between East and West—is that perhaps what Malaya is to be in the world of the future, as it has been the trading rendezvous of East and West since Chinese, Malay and Portuguese merchants met in Malacca in the sixteenth century?

This is no idle question, for Malayan painters can already be said to have developed a characteristic school, distinct from Thai or Indonesian painters for example, and using both the traditional patterns and calligraphic forms of Chinese art, and the idioms of modern Europe. Their paintings are characterised by a bold and arbitrary use of colour, a calligraphic terseness of line, exploitation of textural effects and social realism in subject.

One of the most interesting contemporary Malayan painters is Chong Soo Pieng, particularly as he exerts a strong influence on the younger generation now coming up.

Born in China, Soo Pieng arrived in Singapore in 1946, and became an art instructor at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in St. Thomas Walk—the only school of Art in Malaya. He is also a part-time teacher in a secondary Chinese school.

Soo Pieng received his formal training in China at the Amoy Academy of Fine Arts and the Sin Hwa Fine Art Academy in Shanghai. In both these places, his training in the main followed the modernise school of Paris. He is however also acquainted with the swift, calligraphic style of the Chinese traditional forms, a fact clearly illustrated in his numerous brush and water-colour sketches.

In many ways, Chong Soo Pieng is an artist of the present century, the opening years of which are associated in art with Cubism—a reaction against impressionism. The Cubist theory was made famous by Picasso, Braque and others, who took as its basis a statement by Cezanne that all things in Nature may be expressed as cubes, cones and spheres.

Soo Pieng owes much to Gauguin, Picasso, Modigliani, Vlaminck, and Braque, a group of artists who stand apart from the 'academy' or 'salon' traditions of representational painting.

He has studied the deep feeling for colour found in Gauguin's Tahitian pictures,

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the pictorial qualities of Picasso's 'flat-pattern' Cubist paintings, as well as Vlaminck's great passion for landscape.

To a lesser extent, he is influenced by the calligraphic economy of Dufy and the romanticism of the English painter John Piper.

Soo Pieng's primary concern is with the problems of pictorial structure: as an artist, he uses his medium to express a sensibility towards, and his power to absorb and express, any kind of experience.

"Each picture," he says, "is a voyage of discovery." Small craft along the waterfront, old women striking a bargain on the five-foot-way, a Balinese girl, a corner of a kampung—any of these will provide a theme for his paintings.

And if the viewer thinks that Soo Pieng's paintings distort reality, it is rather because he has failed to grasp a further aspect of reality which the artist is attempting to put across.

What is the technique of Choong Soo Pieng?

Usually, he begins with a water-colour sketch or 'rough,' working in brief colour notes afterwards at the studio. Once he has decided upon the composition, he draws in dark lines on the canvas, giving it a linear basis often easily identified in the finishing painting.

Next, monochrome oil washes are laid into the linear design to establish pictorial balance. This method of underpainting is a variant on the techniques of the European 'great-masters' tradition wherein the whole picture would be developed in monochrome, with colour introduced at a later stage.

It also differs broadly from the 'alla prima' or direct painting on to canvas method which has become widespread since the emergence of the impressionist schools of the nineteenth century.

When Soo Pieng considers that his picture is structurally complete, he may leave the design for some time before applying colour. His colours vary from heavily painted areas to thin glazes, depending on the nature of the monochromatic underpainting.

Choong Soo Pieng favours reds and blacks in his paintings; his blacks in effect are often sombre and intense blue-blacks, red-blacks and so on. Most of his paintings are executed on prepared canvas, but he has carried out a number of paintings using scraperboard as a base.

Scraperboard, much used in commercial illustrative processes has a fine, prepared clay surface which may be inked or painted and then cut into, leaving clean, sharp, white lines. The main defect of this board for oil painting is its lack of flexibility, calling for mounting on a rigid surface when framing, as well as the hygroscopic nature of surface and mount.

The art of Soo Pieng affords an interesting demonstration of the constant interchange of ideas which characterises many present day trends in art in both Europe and the Orient. Gauguin borrows freely from Egyptian tomb-friezes and Modigliani's work is closely related to the West African sculptures. In fact, the whole character of Western art with its spatial constructions based on the laws of visual perspective, has been modified by the formal and arbitrary pictorial organisations of the East, ever since the first Japanese prints startled the Western art world in the late nineteenth century.

Choong Soo Pieng creates space in his pictures by the relationships of colour and areas, or shapes, and here the directing influence of Oriental art turns full circle.

At a time when his art appears to be settling into stylistic mannerisms, Soo Pieng has begun a fresh creative growth. Of his earlier style, the painting of the Balinese girl on the previous page is representative; and examples of his latest progress are the decorative panel, shown on page 28 and of the kerbside bargaining over eggs. The last two examples demonstrate a return to realism and to social comment and Chong Soo Pieng's pictorial style shows itself capable of containing these investigations of his personal visions.