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Capturing Paradise

Exhibition Reading Material

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Capturing Paradise Paintings of Bali by Singaporean Artists

Introduction

A Hindu-dominant island in Indonesia, Bali possesses a distinctive iconography that proves to be a draw for many artists in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Apart from its luxuriant flora and fauna, Bali is remarkable for its deep spirituality and decorative ritual arts. Temples, shrines, statues and monuments marked its vibrant landscape and the daily village life is one that is colourful yet simplistic in nature.

Having eluded the radar of modern urbanisation, the beauty and tranquillity of this sun-soaked isle has led many to regard it as an idyllic landscape where the unique and flavourful indigenous way of life remains relatively unscarred by modernity. Over the years, many Singaporean artists, young and old, have flocked to Bali in search of fresh visual references and returned deeply enthralled by the rustic charms and cultural richness of the island.

Bali and the development of *Nanyang* style

Since the time of Singapore's first-generation artists, Bali has often been sought after as an exotic paradise, perhaps no less than how the island of Tahiti might have stood in the eyes of the visionary Post-Impressionist artist, Paul Gauguin.

The landmark trip to Bali in 1952 that inspired Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang to redefine their aesthetic approaches and reinvent a series of groundbreaking pictorial compositions culminating to the *Nanyang* art style has been widely acknowledged as a 'watershed' moment in the development of modern art in Singapore.

As underlined by Singapore's art historian, Mr. Kwok Kian Chow, "During and after the trip, images of Bali provided both the inspiration and visual resources which enabled the artists to crystallise their aesthetic explorations in the context of a cultural, ethnic and artistic identity."¹

Indeed, in these pioneer artists' common quest to realise some genuine pictorial representations of the diverse topographies and cultures that constitute the *Nanyang* region, images of Bali also became deeply encapsulated within their aesthetic oeuvres. The village folks, landmarks and commonplace activities captured in their paintings over the years mostly valorise the colourful and simplistic nature of Balinese cultures and traditions. Reminiscing in retrospect, Liu Kang specifically described Bali as possessing 'a certain dream-like quality...genuine innocence and simplicity in the people, although they are not at all primitive.'²

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to view these pioneer artists' reflections of Bali as mere reproductions of the captivating sights and sounds experienced on the island. For them, Bali afforded an engaging subject through which they could constantly explore and push the boundaries for forms, colours and motifs, as they sought to forge a new aesthetic frontier in representing the unique blends of cultures and peoples inhabiting the tropical islands of Southeast Asia.

Shortly after the 1952 trip, the group held an exhibition that showcased their earliest Bali-themed paintings, many of which were worked from the original plein-air sketches they had individually amassed during the sojourn. Their final paintings turned out to be particularly noteworthy for the bold incorporations of both Western oil and Chinese ink painting techniques and elements in depicting a seemingly traditional and realist subject. Although these artists were formally trained in both the traditional Chinese and Western school of painting, their attempts at a new pictorial language based on a synthesis of their East-West influences was still considered a largely unconventional approach at that time.

In fact, the wealth of visual sources that came out of Bali would go on to fascinate and inspire these pioneer artists following their maiden visit in 1952. Even into the 1970s, Bali remained a significant aesthetic haven among these first-generation artists and images of the island featured prominently in their evolving oeuvres.

As revealed by Cheong Soo Pieng, "(I) experimented a good deal in colour technique, and when I had evolved a technique which pleased me I tried it upon studies of the human form. I went to Bali on a sketching trip...and discovered that Balinese women are the ideal subject for me, and I made a good number of paintings modern in feeling and to my own liking many of which I do not wish to sell."³



Fig. 1 Cheong Soo Pieng. Balinese Woman. 1952. 55 x 33 cm

Bali After the Pioneer Artists

Just as the Bali-themed works of Jean Le Mayeur (1880-1958) might have impressed upon the first-generation Singaporean artists and spurred their interests to forage the island for inspirations, the Bali-inspired works of these pioneer artists would also have exerted a considerable impact upon many of the second and third generation of Singaporean artists.⁴

However, it is important to note that many of the first-generation Singaporean artists emerged from rather similar origins and art traditions. For instance, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi were all steeped in their Chinese migrant identity, and were deeply influenced by the formal art education they had received in China

and Shanghai prior to settling down in Singapore. On the other hand, the subsequent generations of Singaporean artists came from very different backgrounds and took on varied styles and influences in their own art practices. Therefore, while Bali continues to be a massive source of influence for the latter, their aesthetic concerns and directions prove to be even more individuated and diverse.

In addition, with the rapid onslaught of urban modernisation in Singapore between the 1960s and 1980s, many local artists lamented over the disappearance of the old kampung communities and street scenes that used to characterise the local landscape. In the last two decades, Singapore has also evolved into an increasingly modern and fast-paced society. For many of the subsequent generations of Singaporean artists, Bali remains an accessible paradise that offers reprieve, as well as rich natural beauty and flavourful traditional references to be appropriated in their art practices.

Ong Kim Seng is a second-generation artist who excels in painting landscapes and cityscapes in watercolour. Having travelled extensively around the globe, Bali is still considered one of his favourite aesthetic destinations. For the watercolour maestro, the serenity, tropical hues and natural scenery of Bali make every painting expedition to the island an enjoyable and fruitful one.

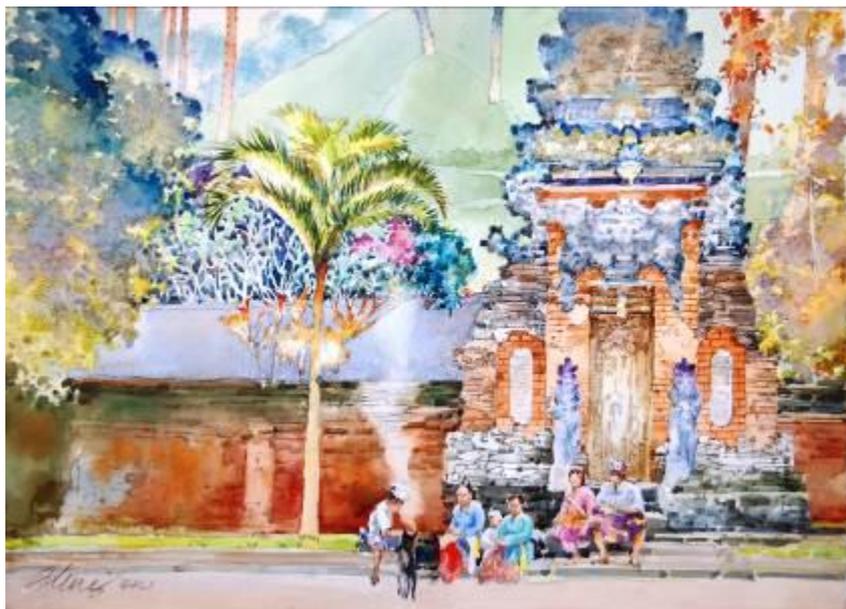


Fig.2 Ong Kim Seng. Tempaksiring Holy Spring, Bali. 2011. 53 x 74 cm

Ong's watercolour rendition of the traditional architecture and local folks of Bali exudes much splendour and poetic charm. In *Tempaksiring Holy Spring, Bali* (Fig. 2), the artist employs his signature blends of warm and cold colours of different intensities to amplify the tropical atmosphere of the setting. The spatial layering is also clearly delineated and the harmonious arrangement of details and colours help to direct the viewer's eye. The almost-conical area of white on the stone wall in the middle of the composition is strategic in leading us to his intended focal point where the little boy can be seen interacting with the dog. Although the scene is exuberant and colourful, the artist's brilliant control and efficiency of details prevent the composition from erupting into an explosion of details.

Another renowned second-generation artist, Tay Bak Koi (b. 1939 – d. 2005) was a formal student of Cheong Soo Pieng. Tay was also a keen admirer of the pioneer artist, who is widely revered for his experiments in brush techniques and the amalgamation of East-West elements in painting. While Tay eventually evolved a distinct visual language that is markedly different from his teacher, his painting style exhibits the same inventive spirit and bold experiment with forms.

In Fig. 3 & 4, his portraits of Balinese women were constructed in a vivid and stylised manner. Apart from employing strong colours and decorative motifs, the close-up angles also allow for the intimacy of a peering gaze. The female figures in these oil compositions spot acute linework and elongated necks. Relying on the simplicity of forms, their appearances are almost reminiscent of traditional wood-carved models and evoke a sense of mysticism.



Fig. 3 Tay Bak Koi. Balinese Woman. Undated. 66 x 66 cm



Fig. 4 Tay Bak Koi. Balinese Woman with Flowers. Undated. 66 x 66 cm

One of the most prominent second-generation artists, Tan Choh Tee has constantly impressed critics and collectors with his captivating visions and innovative use of colours. Known for his remarkable persistence in plein-air painting, Tan is firmly grounded in his endeavour to bring to life in his paintings, “the fleeting moments with their changing moods”, as experienced and lived through by the artist.⁵ Tan’s aesthetic approach has often been compared to the French Impressionists, who were determined to capture the shifting properties of forms and shapes, light and colours, as perceived by the eye and experienced on the spot.

In Fig. 5, Tan’s portrayal of the semi-nude Balinese lady is entrancing and pulsating to behold. Laid out in an orchestra of colours, her robust and athletic physique is emphasised through deft and decisive brushwork. In addition, the colour scheme employed in this painting is clearly inspired by the warm tropics of Bali. The broad, interlocking strokes are decked out in varied hues of colours; this reflects the shifting condition of light and gives the piece an atmospheric texture, as if the mist in the air has been caught in motion on the canvas.



Fig. 5 Tan Choh Tee. Sarong Nude. 1997. 30 x 40 cm

Hong Sek Chern is a third-generation artist who has established a unique pictorial style. Well known for her unconventional depictions of landscapes and cityscapes in traditional Chinese ink, her paintings usually reflect a masterful interplay of architectural lines, and are infused with angles that sometimes collapse into one another. Fig. 6 is the artist’s appropriation of a landscape captured in Bali. Apart from her signature construction lines in ink, the juxtaposing strips of blocks and structures in bright shades contribute a varying perspective, perhaps reinforcing the colourful blend of cultures and architecture that characterise the landscape.



Fig. 6 Hong Sek Chern. Where The Sky Meets The Sea. 2012. 160 x 90 cm

This collage-painting interweaves different elements such as the natural sky and the structure of a temple, although most of the forms have been deliberately abstracted and superimposed upon one another to create intriguing patterns of details where perspectives, time and space appear to merge and break at different angles.

Ho Sou Ping is an emerging third-generation artist who has begun to explore Bali as a subject matter in the last couple of years. Fig. 7 is an example that illustrates the artist's unique interpretation of a rural scene in Bali through the use of an unconventional compositional layout and strong colours. The lush, radiant scene of the natural landscape is depicted in a semi-abstract manner. For instance, the composition appears to have been split into three corresponding parts, and the assembly of yellow, orange, gold and violet that had been etched upon the canvas in broad, thick strokes evoke the feel of a collage. The painting presents a scene where men labour spiritedly and are at peace with their natural environment. To achieve this, the artist focuses mainly on colour usage rather than lines to draw emphasis to the forms of objects. In addition, the harmonising palette conveys the brightness and vibrancy of the atmosphere.



Fig. 7 Ho Sou Ping. Symphony of Yellow. 2012. Oil on Canvas. 90 x 119cm

In conclusion, Bali has certainly been a tremendous source of inspiration for many Singaporean artists. Over the years, the island and its wealth of visual sources have been constantly defined and redefined through the varied perspectives and aesthetic approaches of the different generations of Singaporean artists. As noted by Indonesian artist and art-critic, Agus Dermawan T., “Bali is an inexhaustible artistic fount: Bali entices anyone and everyone to engage with it, and to form varied interpretations of it.”⁶

¹ Kwok Kian Chow. *From Ritual to Romance: Paintings Inspired by Bali, “Images of the South Seas –Bali as a Visual Source in Singapore”*, Singapore Art Museum, 1994, p 39.

² Kwok Kian Chow. *From Ritual to Romance: Paintings Inspired by Bali, “Images of the South Seas –Bali as a Visual Source in Singapore”*, Singapore Art Museum, 1994, p 42.

³ Kwok Kian Chow. *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*, Singapore Art Museum, 1996, p 43.

⁴ Kwok Kian Chow. *From Ritual to Romance: Paintings Inspired by Bali, “Images of the South Seas –Bali as a Visual Source in Singapore”*, Singapore Art Museum, 1994, p 40.

⁵ Choy Weng Yan. *Review –The Oil Painting of Tan Choh Tee*, Tanoto Foundation Centre for Southeast Asian Arts at Nafa, 1985.

⁶ T., Agus Dermawan. *From Ritual to Romance: Paintings Inspired by Bali, “Bali, the Font of Art”*, Singapore Art Museum, 1994, p 29.