

*artcommune gallery proudly presents*

# **Cheong Soo Pieng**

## **Drawings of Life**



Exhibition Reading Material  
Text written by: Ma Peiyi

*Pls kindly return this after use. Thank you.*

## Cheong Soo Pieng: Drawings of Life

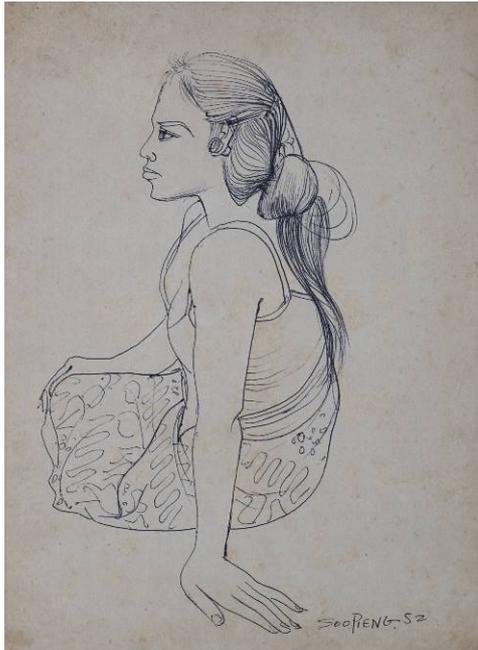
A pioneer of the *Nanyang* art movement and a leading light in the development of art in Singapore, Cheong Soo Pieng (b. 1917 – 1983) is widely regarded as one of the most prolific artists of his generation. During a practice that spanned six decades, the late artist experimented fervently with a diverse range of styles and mediums; his bold pursuit of Modern aesthetics and innovative amalgamation of forms and techniques derived from both the Western and Chinese art traditions have continued to make fascinating study points for critics and collectors today.

Over the years, much has been explored about Soo Pieng's artistic journey. While the fine art education he received in China between the 1920s and 1930s would have been pivotal in exposing him to the traditions and fundamentals of both Western and Chinese art practices up to the period, the cross-cultural influences embedded in his dynamic visual styles stemmed from his unwavering passion and constant search for new modes of expressions that could adequately capture the unique blend of cultures and peoples inhabiting the tropical islands of Southeast Asia.

Soo Pieng was also known to be remarkably adept at composing quick sketches without compromising the accuracy of form. Unsurprisingly, a large volume of sketched scenes and portraits was amassed from his painting expeditions to places such as Bali and Borneo, as well as his captivating portfolio of the everyday encounters in Singapore and Malaysia.

The landmark trip to Bali in 1952 that inspired Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang and Soo Pieng himself to reinvent artworks of groundbreaking pictorial styles culminating to the *Nanyang* art movement has been celebrated as a 'watershed' moment in the development of local art. On this trip alone, Soo Pieng accumulated more than 300 pieces of sketches, many of which continued to provide crucial references for the paintings that he went on to produce several years after the trip.

Deploying clean and refined lines, even a simple sketch that came off Soo Pieng's hands easily impresses with an elegant simplicity and efficiency of detail. For instance, the portrait *Seated Bali Girl* [1] breathes with an effortless charm. The lady, seated in a fairly relaxed posture, is captured from a profile angle. The patterned fabric of her sarong is not neglected and her loosely-secured hair is delineated with density to suggest shade and volume. She appears absorbed in thought as she stares into the distance, surrounded by an air of calm and serenity.



[1] *Seated Bali Girl*, 1952, Ink and pen on paper, 39 x 28 cm

Soo Pieng's travel to Borneo in 1959 is another well-documented sojourn known to have profoundly influenced his visual idiom. Drawn by the unique traits and life on the island, much of his time was spent collecting drawing materials amid the longhouses in jungles resided by native tribes such as the *Dayak*. Once again, no less than a few hundred sketches were accomplished before the artist returned to Singapore to work them into his paintings.



[2] *Village*, 1959, Pen on paper, 36.5 x 27 cm

Fellow artist friends who had embarked on paintings trips with Soo Pieng recounted that it was typical of him to be among the first few to wrap up even while others were

still sketching or exhausting painstaking efforts to depict nature in their preferred realist mode. Unlike most of his peers, the realist style hardly appealed to Soo Pieng.

Even with his quick plein-air sketches, Soo Pieng's artistic inclination was always to process an image through his mind's eye before producing it on paper as an imprint of his personality and interpretation. Whether it was to document an immediate sight or develop a preliminary structure for his painting, his compositional details would usually be organised in the most meticulous fashion. Therefore, most of Soo Pieng's sketches were usually products of elaborate planning and decisive executions. In every sketch, the strokes and lines bespeak purpose, strength and fluidity, attesting to not just his talent and vision but also his discipline as an artist.



[3] *Batik Women III*, 1952, Pen on paper, 54.5 x 35 cm

This also explains why most of Soo Pieng's sketches often look to be finished drawings in themselves. Usually executed with a ballpoint pen, if not a pencil or a fountain pen (depending on which drawing device actually accompanied the artist), the sketches were devised to reflect his desired compositions and were subsequently developed into large-scale oil or ink paintings. It was also not uncommon for Soo Pieng to combine certain elements or details derived from two to three different sketches in the course of producing one final evocative work in oil or ink. This is evident from the extensive series of sketches (and drawings) accumulated by the artist, among which many carry almost exact resemblances to their direct counterparts – the final paintings rendered in colours.



[4] *Mother and Child*, 1959, Pen on paper, 37.5 x 28 cm



[5] *Mother and Child*, Undated, Oil on canvas, 97 x 60 cm

A life-changing sojourn in Europe from 1962 to 1963 broadened Soo Pieng's perspectives and gravitated his experimentation towards abstraction and the mixed media. While in Europe, he enjoyed successful exhibitions in several galleries including solo shows at the Frost & Reed Gallery (London), Redfern Gallery (London), and Galerie Schöninger (Munich) respectively. For the first time in life, he was able to relish face-to-face the splendid range of artworks by several European Masters including Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and J. M. W. Turner, and was no doubt jovially exploring and immersing himself in the artistic climate that characterised the Western landscape during the period.

To a degree, it is telling how these refreshing encounters in Europe had propelled Soo Pieng towards adapting full abstraction as a visual motif. Executed with a felt pen in London, the peculiar compositions in [7] and [8] stem from a series of abstract studies that might have been instrumental in paving way for a new repertoire of abstract oil works that emerged in his oeuvre during the early '60s (e.g. [6]). Evoking the ink-and-wash technique, these works leave no trace of the figurative and reflect a bold pictorial treatment rather unfamiliar to what he previously attempted. At the same time, a number of them are reminiscent of the atmospheric and voluminous rendering of nature so often witnessed in the romantic landscape paintings by 19<sup>th</sup> Century British Master, J. M. W. Turner.



[6] *Vision*, 1963, Oil on canvas, 102 x 147.5 cm



[7] *Abstract Composition I*, 1962, Felt pen on paper, 15 x 22.5 cm



[8] *Abstract Composition IV*, 1962, Felt pen on paper, 15 x 22.5 cm

Revisiting Bali for a second time in 1977, many of the sketches completed by Soo Pieng during this second trip and thereafter appear to be considerably more crisp and elaborate in presentation when placed alongside similar ones produced in the 1950s; perhaps this notable difference reflects the flourishing vision and stylistic maturation in his aesthetic expression over the two decades.

By the time Soo Pieng returned to concentrate on figurative forms in the 1970s, his depictions of the Balinese (or Malay) women would become even more remarkably stylised and decorative. Unsurprisingly, 1970s was also the period that saw him produce one of his most iconic series which includes the painting *Drying Salted Fish* [9]. In this body of work, the human figures are sophisticatedly defined by angular forms and elongated limbs, and are usually accompanied by some hanging plants or framed by a sea of foliage detailed in an intricate and ornamental fashion [10].



[9] *Drying Salted Fish*, 1978, Chinese ink and colour on cloth, 55.5 x 88.5 cm  
Collection of National Heritage Board



[10] *Sister*, 1982, Chinese ink and colour on silk, pasted on jut, 55 x 34 cm

Certainly more than just a process to record the form and essence of a subject, sketching was undertaken by Soo Pieng as an essential routine that sharpened his mind and built the scaffold for his painting; it was integral to almost every piece of work he sought to produce including his abstract oil paintings. Therefore, a close examination of Soo Pieng's sketches would provide an interesting window into the different phases of his journey as an artist.

Just as his paintings, Soo Pieng's sketches and drawings are characterised by his growing forays and creative adaptations of new pictorial forms as his visual language evolved over the years. They distinctly reflect his life as a curious passenger of the

modern world, transiting from one lived moment to another, inhabiting and exploring markedly different environments, ethnicities and characters; constantly interpreting, defining and redefining these spatial and cultural experiences in his own terms. Therefore, each piece exists in its own right as an individual stamp of expression as well as a cultural artifact, and is no less significant than his bigger works of paintings or mixed media works in facilitating crucial entry points into the study and preservation of his beguiling artistic legacy.

\*The above chapter is taken from the publication *Cheong Soo Pieng: Drawings of Life* (Copyright 2014 by Artcommune Gallery Pte Ltd). No part of this article is to be reproduced without the permission of artcommune gallery.