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# Early Singapore Art: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation Singapore Artists Watercolour Exhibition



*Lim Cheng Hoe in his artistic environment*

Exhibition write up on the Sunday Group, 1930s to 1970s

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## 1. Sunday Group and the Development of Watercolour Art in Early Singapore

Almost three decades prior to the official formation of the Singapore Watercolour Society in 1969, a group of vibrant and spontaneous art enthusiasts would regularly meet up on Sundays to embark on plein-air painting trips together. Principally led by Lim Cheng Hoe, a 1st generation pioneer artist most famed for his watercolour works, this group would come to be known as the Sunday Group. From the 1930s to 1960s, the Sunday Group saw artists and amateurs from diverse backgrounds who shared a common passion for watercolour art.

Some iconic locales that were among the group's favourite haunts included the Singapore River, the Merdeka Bridge, the Chinatown scenes and sub-urban landscapes. The Sunday Group painters were also fond of capturing kampungs on stilts as well as scenes of the Changi Beach during low tides.

When examining the history of Singapore art, many seem to have overlooked the Sunday Group and its instrumental role in nurturing new artists and cultivating the early Singapore art scene. In fact, several of Singapore's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation artists such as Lim Cheng Hoe, Chen Chong Swee, Chia Wai Hon, T.y. Choy, Choy Weng Yang, Ong Chye Cho, Thomas Yeo, Gog Sing Hooi, Ong Kim Seng and Loy Chye Chuan had been Sunday Group painters at different points of their artistic pursuits.

## 2. Watercolour Art in Early Singapore

Although the Singapore Watercolour Society only came into existence in 1969, the watercolour traditions took roots in the history of Singapore art in as early as 1920s while Singapore was still a port city under the British colonial reins. Before the outbreak of WWII in the 1940s, the watercolourists made up one of the three main groups of art practitioners within the local art scene. The other two dominant practices centred on the Traditional Chinese and the Nanyang style of art. These divergent inclinations towards different aesthetic influences

among the local art practitioners could be traced to the different education models and art trainings that were undergone. For instance, artists who favoured the watercolour medium were usually the products of the British colonial education system. Apart from the English language, they were also exposed to British-influenced culture and trends. Watercolour, charcoal and pastel were taught as key mediums in their art classes.

After 1945, with the end of WWII, Singapore once again saw peace and a growing economy. However, this did not foster a climate in which art could flourish and artists could eke out a living off their works. In fact, a commercial art market did not exist till the 1950s and even then, the prospects for aspiring artists continued to be seemingly bleak.

Following Singapore's independence in 1965, arts and culture acquired an increasingly significant status and the local art scene was invigorated by the presence of new art circles and established art societies, including the Singapore Watercolour Society in 1969. Among the founders and members of the Singapore Watercolour Society, several had been notable participants of the Sunday Group. Although it was much more informal and smaller in size, the Sunday Group could be seen as a precursor to the Singapore Watercolour Society and had contributed immensely to the growth of watercolour art in early Singapore.

### 3. The Beginnings and Developments of the Sunday Group

The Sunday Group took off incidentally as a cradle for a number of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Singapore artists, particularly the watercolourists. Interestingly, before the Sunday Group evolved to become such an important avenue for these local artists, it was actually a routine borne out of Lim Cheng Hoe's personal artistic endeavour and an ardent passion as a Sunday painter.

The beginnings of the Sunday Group could be traced back to the 1930s when Lim Cheng Hoe would spend most of his free time, particularly Sundays immersing in

painting. As a young boy, Lim cultivated a strong passion for drawings and watercolour art during his education at the Raffles Institution. In school, Lim was noted for his extraordinary talent in art and received guidance from Richard Walker, the then Art Superintendent of Singapore Schools. In fact, Walker was so impressed by Lim that he proposed to draft a reference letter for him to enter the Royal College of Art in London to further his art education in the 1930s. However, Lim did not accept the offer as overseas art education was beyond the means of his family. He eventually embarked on a stable profession at the Public Utilities Board.

Despite having chosen a civil occupation, Lim remained an avid watercolourist and continued to receive art instructions from Walker over the weekends in the initial years. Throughout this period, Lim devoted most of his free time to painting and furthering his techniques. Sundays were especially sacred as he was afforded the time to paint outdoors with Walker and a few other like-minded colonial artists. Lim also painted on public holidays occasionally. 1930s thus marked the beginnings of the Sunday Group till the interruption by the Second World War in the early 40s.

After the war, the Sunday Group underwent a remarkable transition. For a few of the first generation Singapore artists, this *second period* from around 1947 to 1953 marked a critical juncture in their early artistic attempts. In addition to T. Y. Choy, Chia Wai Hon and Dr Kwan Sai Kheong (the then Director of Education), Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Chong Swee were among those who would sometimes join Lim Cheng Hoe for plein-air painting on Sundays.

Together with Lim Cheng Hoe, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Chong Swee were members of the Singapore Art Society which was established in 1935. Hailed as the pioneers of the Nanyang style of art, Cheong and Chen were highly versatile artists who could paint in more than just Western oil and Chinese ink. From the 1940s to 1950s, the two experimented fervently with the watercolour medium and took part in the Sunday Group painting trips. Although most notable for his Chinese ink works, Chen Chong Swee was in fact very fond of the watercolour

medium and was one of the founders who established the Singapore Watercolour Society in 1969.

During this *second period*, the Sunday Group comprised around five to six members. Quite often, part of the group's Sunday routine began with a morning gathering at Lim Cheng Hoe's house at Amoy Street where they would enjoy a simple breakfast prepared by Lim's wife before setting off for their plein-air painting.

The line-up of the Sunday Group was neither fixed nor rigid and unlike a formal art society, the doors were opened to both seasoned painters and amateurs alike. Over the years, the group saw new members as some of the older ones gradually dropped out from the scene or took to some other modes of painting. Some members were more regular than others, and not all chose or persisted with the watercolour medium even as they continued to venture outdoors and paint as a group. In fact, the Sunday Group never restricted their members to a specific medium. Apart from watercolour, it was also very common to see members who employed oil or Chinese ink. Some would prefer to engage themselves in pen-sketches or ink and wash mediums.

Even as the years progressed on, the group continued to embrace several self-taught artists or art enthusiasts who could only dabble in painting as a sidelined passion. Participating in the Sunday Group afforded them an instrumental platform to socialise, explore and exchange ideas with each other.

1953 saw the Sunday Group enter its *third period* of development with the injection of new members from the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation. During this period, artists such as Ong Chye Cho, Thomas Yeo, Gog Sing Hooi and Ong Kim Seng started to spend considerable amount of time advancing their skills with the Sunday Group. Lim Yew Kuan was also an occasional participant. Among the 1st generation members, Lim Cheng Hoe remained a constant and central figure who managed to sustain the momentum of the Sunday Group.

From 1953 to the mid 1960s, the Sunday Group expanded to about eight to ten members, occasionally having more. The Singapore River continued to be one of the group's favoured locales for on-site painting. They would meet at the river scene or at the Red House cafe at Bras Basah where they would pool in money for tea/coffee breaks or lunch prior to venturing into a new painting spot on Sundays.

1960s to 1970s marked the *4<sup>th</sup> period*. By this time, the dynamics of the group were significantly different although it continued to serve as an important avenue where artists, in particular the watercolour enthusiasts could mingle and learn from each other. Artists who were introduced to the group during this *4<sup>th</sup> period* include Goh Sing Hooi and Loy Chye Chuan and Ong Kim Seng. Along with Chen Chong Swee and Lim Cheng Hoe, both Goh Sing Hooi and Loy Chye Chuan were among those who founded the Singapore Watercolour Society in 1969.

In 1973, Lim Cheng Hoe was diagnosed with stomach cancer. While he never wavered in his passion for watercolour painting, he gradually dwindled from the Sunday Group scene as he began spending more time with his family and tried to recover from the illness. While Lim Cheng Hoe never saw himself as a formal mentor to anyone, the younger generation of artists who subsequently joined the Sunday Group remembered him fondly for his guidance, humour, open-mindedness and humility. Although a seasoned watercolourist, Lim would often invite his peers to critique his works so as to understand their views and perception of his works. In addition, he would always dish out advices and encouragements to help or motivate his fellow artists. Many of the Sunday Group painters regarded Lim Cheng Hoe as an important figure and the unofficial leader who had held the Sunday Group together.

#### 4. Conclusion

As noted, the different periods that marked the Sunday Group served as crucial learning platforms for many of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Singapore artists. The Sunday Group was a precursor to the Singapore Watercolour Society and played

a remarkable role in cradling and nurturing several of the local artists who went on to achieve fame and recognition for their artistic endeavours.

*Note: We have tried our best to ensure accuracy in our data, but due to various limitations there might be room for improvements. Any feedbacks are welcome, please email to [souping@artcommune.com.sg](mailto:souping@artcommune.com.sg). Thank you.*