

30 Years of Friendship:

The Tan Cheng Gay Collection of Tan Choh Tee's Paintings

3 – 18 March 2018



Roast Meat Stalls, 1983, Oil on canvas, 50 x 63 cm

The Artist and his Patron

By Ho Sou Ping, Founder of artcommune gallery

artcommune gallery is pleased to present *30 Years of Friendship: The Tan Cheng Gay Collection of Tan Choh Tee's Paintings*. Unlike our previous exhibitions, which typically focussed on the artist's oeuvre, this show seeks to illuminate as well, the close friendship that binds an artist and his collector.

In the world of art, it is often the artist who commands the lime light and the significant role of the patron is easily overlooked. Many a times, the patron is an individual who has offered the Artist sustained support by acquiring his work over a long period of time without consideration for financial gains. Most successful artists, whether in the past or present, would probably have a patron from whom they could seek solace and support, both financially and emotionally. By virtue of his support, the patron may directly or indirectly influence the artist in one or more ways, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and thus play a part in shaping the artist's career. Through this exhibition we hope to highlight the interesting dynamics behind one such example of an artist-patron relationship.



Left to right: Tan Choh Tee and Tan Cheng Gay

Mr. Tan Cheng Gay (b. 1947) had experiences in fund management and holds many public and charitable portfolios. Additionally, he is office bearers to some important civil societies, e.g. Panel Member, Requisition of Resources, Compensation Board (Undertakings) at MINDEF, and is a Senior Honorary Council Member for Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCCI); a member of the Board of Trustees at Chinese Development Assistance Council; a director of Business China and Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre; a member of Singapore-Shandong Business Council; a Council Member of Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan; and a member of Tampines Junior College CAC.

Tan Choh Tee (b. 1942) is among the greatest Singapore artists of his generation. His unique impressionistic treatment of landscapes is widely recognised in the region as a supreme example of figurative oils. He is shy and reserved, seldom making public appearances; yet through his art he has earned the admiration from many art lovers in Asia.

We had the privilege of speaking to Mr. Tan Cheng Gay over a few sessions. Below is a presentation of what we gathered from the conversations.

The beginning of a friendship

Mr. Tan Cheng Gay first started collecting art in the 1970s. The first Singaporean artist whose work he collected was watercolourist, Leng Joon Wong (凌运凰). He became friends with Leng, through whom he was introduced to Tan Choh Tee's art. While flipping through a publication one day, Mr. Tan was captivated by a landscape painting of a back lane scene by Tan Choh Tee (Fig. 1). In the painting, an unassuming and spontaneous old lady is seen sewing on the steps to a doorway entry. Immediately struck by its profound rustic charm and impressionistic style, he decided to approach the artist to learn more about his art. It was also in the 1970s that he collected his first Tan Choh Tee's painting.



Fig. 1 Concentration, 1976, Oil on Canvas, 74 x 56 cm

The artist, shy by nature, was not the easiest to befriend. Nevertheless, Mr. Tan was able to strike up a friendship with the artist because they shared certain common interests. Both of them love classical music, and would call each other out to attend classical concerts together at the Victoria Concert Hall and later the Esplanade. They would also meet to chat about art, amongst other things, while enjoying Chinese wine and tea (in the subsequent years they also partake in red and white wine over conversations). 'Makan' sessions, during which they savour good food together at various eateries, constitute another of their favourite hang-out routines. According to Mr. Tan, the 'makan' sessions were very important to his art-collecting enterprise. After Tan Choh Tee returned from his overseas painting trips, Mr. Tan would often visit the artist's studio before a meal to have some tea or a good chat. It was also during such sessions that he could sieve through the artist's latest paintings and pick up the pieces he liked. As a result, some of Tan Choh Tee's best works never made it to the market as Mr. Tan would have acquired them before anyone else.

The two friends had also travelled overseas together. Mr. Tan recounted an episode of having persuaded the artist to join him in Washington, D.C. to admire the autumn leaves. They also once met up in Paris and went around the city together to visit local galleries and enjoy French cuisine.

Over the years the friendship between them grew, so much so that the spouses and children of both families also came to know each other.

A family's tradition for collecting

Mr. Tan, who has consistently bought Tan Choh Tee's work since the 1970s, has accumulated almost 100 paintings to date. He bought the paintings simply because he liked them and never once gave any thought to selling them for a profit. As a young boy growing up, he observed how his father, the late Mr. Tan Kiam Toen collected Chinese brush paintings and ceramics in the 50s and 60s, including artworks by Xu Beihong, Li Keran and Qi Baishi. His father also gave him a Yashica camera at a young age and brought him to the Botanic Garden and various parts of the island to take photographs. These experiences had a profound impact on him and steered his early interest toward visual arts.

Mr. Tan feels that his taste in art, like many Singapore artists, is somewhat a mixture of East and West, as he was educated in both English- and Chinese-medium schools. He also spent a few years in Europe during his tertiary education and the immediacy of Western culture certainly exerted an influence on his taste. When it comes to painting, his preference for Western oil is without a doubt. He is attracted to oil painting for its mass and texture – qualities that other mediums such as watercolour could not express. Over the years he has created a theory of his own, that one's taste in painting is perhaps related to his taste in music – people who like classical symphonic music tend to like figurative oils, whereas lovers of pop music tend to prefer acrylic, watercolour or abstract works.

Mr. Tan's interest in art collecting is wide and he practically collects what appeals to him. One can see in his house works by a variety of artists, including Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur, Xu Beihong, Lim Tze Peng and some European artists. Two artists in particular earned his unequivocal affection and he amassed a sizeable collection of each of this artist's work. Mr. Tan started collecting Tan Choh Tee's work in the 70s, and in the 80s started collecting Chinese artist Jia You Fu's (贾又福, b. 1942) modern ink work. Jia You Fu's work is special amongst his

collection because he generally did not like Chinese ink, especially traditional Chinese ink paintings. In Jia's art, however, black is beauty; his expression is rich in both innovation and passion. This was the reason why Mr. Tan started collecting Jia's work extensively.

The Singapore art market and Tan Choh Tee's art career

According to Mr. Tan, choices for local art collectors were limited back in the 1970s when Singapore was not so cosmopolitan like today. The market mainly offered works in traditional Chinese ink or Indonesian oil paintings, with the latter being the only choice for a collector like Mr. Tan who loves the oil medium. Amongst Singapore art collectors there was a general lack of confidence in Singapore artists, thus the notion that it was better to buy works by foreign artists (this prejudice still holds true to a large degree today). In such an environment it was a struggle for Singapore artists. In fact, when Mr. Tan first collected Tan Choh Tee's work, it invited criticism and mockery from his father who classified works by Singapore artists as sub-standard.

Tan Choh Tee became a full-time artist in 1976. Needless to say, it was a struggle trying to survive as a full-time artist while also setting up a family during this period of his life. Mr. Tan believes that Tan Choh Tee survived this challenging period because he was always confident of his own art and possessed an iron determination to pursue art regardless of difficulty. Mr. Tan was a witness to how hard Tan Choh Tee worked. For example, in the 1980s, he would spend about 4 days a week outdoors for plein-air painting. Plein-air painting is a difficult task as one is exposed to inclement weather, heat and rain, which often drains the artist's energy. After a session of plein-air painting, Choh Tee would return to his studio, which was practically a small and simple room in his house where lighting was never sufficient. It was under such gruelling conditions that the artist started his professional career.

It was this formula of hard work and extreme determination that eventually cemented his status as one of the most established oil painters of his generation.

In the very early years (1970s – 80s), Mr. Tan acquired Tan Choh Tee's paintings at a significantly low price, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars; the amount he paid for a painting rarely exceeded five thousand dollars. He readily accepted any price put forth by the artist, believing in the artist's judgement to charge him a fair and reasonable price. Mr. Tan faced little competition from other collectors in these early years and was able to acquire some of Tan Choh Tee's masterpieces from the period.

Although life for a full-time artist in Singapore was tough, Tan Choh Tee persevered in his endeavour and ultimately won over the hearts of collectors, both locally and internationally. Over the years he has accumulated a large collectors' base. Apart from expatriates in Singapore, a few Japanese multinational corporations also collected his works in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2006, Tan Choh Tee finally earned formal recognition when Singapore conferred him the Cultural Medallion, after which the demand for his paintings steadily soared. In fact, there was a brief period around 2015 when the artist almost ran out of paintings available for sale. It was also around this time that Mr. Tan encountered competition for the artist's work, though he was glad that the artist finally received the recognition he deserved.

The 'meditation chamber'

When asked why he collected art, Mr. Tan responded that he collected the paintings simply because he liked them. He has a room where some paintings are hung on the wall, and when things get tough and he needs space for contemplation, he chooses a quiet time to spend about 2 hours in this private little enclosure, staring at the paintings over a glass of wine or cup of tea. During times like this, the paintings seem to converse with him. This soothes his spirit and helps him think through problems, and he emerges from the room at the end of the session feeling rejuvenated. He calls it the "free medicine".

The future ahead for Tan Choh Tee?

Despite the fact that the artist is now in the zenith of his mastery of oil painting, Mr. Tan believes that Tan Choh Tee still has room to further develop and elevate his art to a new level. Mr. Tan hopes that the artist could be more open and imaginative, and would continue to make new attempts to further his current achievements. He sees that the artist is in constant search of new inspirations and some significant breakthroughs are already evident in Tan Choh Tee's still life paintings over the years. For instance, his still life work has transited from a formerly three-dimensional treatment to a flat and masterful handling of canvas space in the recent decade. Mr. Tan certainly hopes to see more of such breakthroughs by the artist.



When asked about the advice he would dish out for younger collectors, who by now have to pay a much higher price for the artist's work, Mr. Tan's response was that just as location makes a key factor in property investment, the key factor in an artist's future lies in his artistic accomplishment as well as the market in which the artist is based. From a technical point of view, Tan Choh Tee has risen to be one of the region's best figurative painters; market wise, Singapore will continue to grow as an arts hub of the region. Therefore, Mr. Tan has confidence in the future of Tan Choh Tee's art.

"We are just temporary guardians of the artworks"

As we were wrapping up the interview with Mr. Tan, he suddenly commented that, "There are a few paintings in my collection which I had to try very hard to convince Choh Tee to part with. Sometimes, he would think really long and if I were lucky, he would tell me that since I liked it so much, he would allow me to be the temporary guardian of the work. Therefore, I feel the heavy responsibility of making sure that the paintings are properly passed down from me to my successor, as none of us can outlive the life span of the paintings."

This remark is engraved deeply in my heart, as it rightly embodies and demonstrates the relationship between the artist and his patron. We truly hope to see more collectors who sincerely love and support Singapore artists from the bottoms of their hearts, just like Mr. Tan.

Note: The material for this essay was extracted from an interview made by the author with Mr. Tan Cheng Gay on 11th February 2018.