



Anthony Poon - Sense Surround 3,
2006, at The St Regis

Cultivating Culture via Sculpture

A look at the development of outdoor art in Singapore

By Lynn Biondi & Loredana Paracciani



Lim Leong Seng - Indian Settlers of
Telok Ayer, at Telok Ayer Green

Strolling through Singapore one notices many attractive and captivating sculptures, now ubiquitous in our urban landscape. But the widespread patronage of local talent, particularly the more contemporary and abstract works, is a relatively recent phenomenon that began in the 1990s with the creation of a Cabinet Minister for the Arts and the National Arts Council. Though in truth, the trend was also nurtured by such institutions as the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and the LaSalle College of the Arts. With the rapidly expanding economy providing the means, the city-state readily embraced the concept that commerce and culture walk hand-in-hand.

Much earlier in Singapore's history (from the 19th century until World War II), the art scene was quite different. Singapore's government was British, its sculpture was primarily architectural or commemorative, its style classical and figurative and its sculptors Western. For an example of an early commemorative piece, look for the Dalhousie Obelisk at Empress Place, designed by John Turnbull Thomson in honour of the 1850 visit of India's Governor General. Even more prominent is Thomas Woolner's imposing commemorative bronze statue of Sir Stamford Raffles outside the Victoria Theatre, created for the 1887 Queen Victoria Jubilee. (A replica of this statue, cast in white poly-marble, stands at North Boat Quay in the area referred to as 'Raffles Landing Site'.)

Other well-known early works include six figurative bronzes produced in the 1920s by Russian artist Dora Gordine for the old Town Hall and the marble and granite works of Rudolfo Nolli, an Italian sculptor who arrived in Singapore in the late 1930s after spending several years working in Thailand for the King of Siam. The *Allegory of Justice* on the tympanum of the Old Supreme Court Building and reliefs on the Elgin Bridge are examples of his work.

During the early years of Singapore's independence in the late 1960s, while investment focused on establishing infrastructure and a sustainable economy for the new nation, government arts funding focused on creating a national identity. The visually iconic Merlion was created in 1972 to serve as a logo and symbol of the new nation. Designed by Lim Nang Seng, the sculpture combines the strength of the lion (*Singapura* derives from the Sanskrit word meaning 'Lion City') and the prosperous symbolism of the fish.

The economic successes of the 1970s and 1980s spurred the development of the Esplanade Performing Arts Complex, the Arts House, the establishment of major museums (the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Singapore Art Museum and the Peranakan Museum) and the annual Festival of the Arts. Additionally, the government increased support for art education institutions and made aesthetic improvements to public parks, government buildings and transportation hubs, including MRT stations and Changi Airport.

In 1981 Singapore hosted the first ASEAN Sculpture Symposium. Each participating country donated an artwork that today can be seen in the ASEAN Sculpture Garden in Fort Canning Park. The private sector also became more visible in its support of public art.

In addition to public art by Asian artists, works by Western sculptors were installed, thanks primarily to corporate subsidies. Among the best-known Western works are Fernando Botero's *Bird* (beside the Singapore River at UOB Plaza), sculptures by Henry Moore and Salvador Dali (near the Singapore River) and Roy Lichtenstein's vivid *Singapore Brushstrokes* (Millenia Walk). The privately funded collection at the new St Regis Singapore includes more than 40 original paintings and sculptures, mostly by Singaporean and other Asian artists.

A leader of the movement to make sculpture more abstract, Singaporean-born Ng Eng Teng (1934-2001), referred to as the 'Grandfather of Singapore Sculpture', was an early graduate of NAFA. Although his principal source of inspiration was the human figure, his work became less representational and more abstract in form as his career progressed. Mentored by British sculptress Jean Bullock, who lived in Singapore from 1959-63, and French-born artist Georgette Chen, who taught at NAFA until her retirement in 1981, Ng's work clearly reflects a Western perspective, as does the work of several contemporaries who studied in the West as well as at NAFA or LaSalle.

Singapore's richly mixed heritage, and refreshingly, a strong mix of both genders.

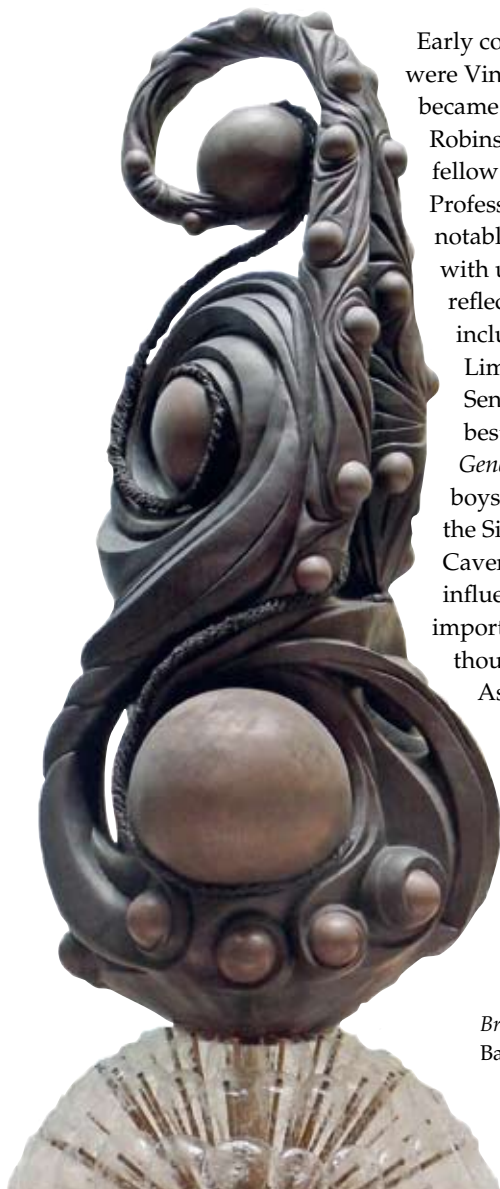
Following in the increasingly abstract footsteps of Ng came a second wave of Singaporean sculptors that includes Sun Yu-Li, Anthony Poon, Han Sai Por, Elsie Yu, Jessie Lim and Kumari Nahappan. Anthony Poon, a NAFA-educated abstract painter and sculptor, works in a meticulous, analytical and geometrically precise style — as can be seen in *Sense Surround 3* at the St Regis Singapore. In comparison, the sculpture of Kumari Nahappan emphasises organic forms and is strongly influenced by the rich colours and sensuality



Kumari Nahappan - Nutmeg & Mace, 2009, at ION Orchard



Ng Eng Teng - The Climb, 1987, at HDB Hub, Toa Payoh



Early contemporaries of Ng were Vincent Hoi Sington who became the resident artist for Robinsons and John Little, and fellow Nanyang graduate and Professor Aw Tee Hong*. Other notable figurative sculptors with urban installations that reflect Singapore's heritage include Chong Fah Cheong, Lim Leong Seng, Lim Nang Seng and Liu Jilin. Chong's best-known work is *First Generation*, the bronze boys leaping joyously into the Singapore River by the Cavenagh Bridge. Another influential sculptor and important artistic presence, though technically not Asian, was Irish-born Brother Joseph McNally, founder of LaSalle College of the Arts, who spent 37 years teaching in Malaysia and Singapore.

As a group, these pioneer sculptors reflect

Brother Joseph McNally – Big Bang, 2000, at MICA Building

of Hinduism. Her *Nutmeg & Mace*, installed outside the Ion Orchard, is a tribute to the nutmeg plantations that once stood where shopping centres now thrive along Orchard Road.

The emphasis on public sculpture over the past two decades has made Singapore's urban landscape a feast for the eyes. With an increased emphasis on art education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, more viewers will come to appreciate not only the artworks themselves but the important reflection of Singapore's heritage that these sculptures represent.



Sun Yu Li - Abundance III, 1995, at Suntec City

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Editor's Note: For a more personal view of sculptor Aw Tee Hong read Connie Kirker's 'Between Friends' on page 13. For a chart of Singapore outdoor sculpture, see page 10.

Photos by Lynn Biondi

A Quick Reference Guide to Outdoor Sculpture in Singapore

Area	Location	Artists	Sculpture
Historical & Governmental Area 	The Padang Area Esplanade Park Colonial Buildings Parliament House MICA Building	Rudolfo Nolli Multiple Thomas Woolner Kumari Nahappan Chem Lian Shan Dora Gordine Brother Joseph McNally	<i>Tympanum</i> Obelisk Sir Stamford Raffles Statues <i>Golden Grain Exposed</i> <i>Chettiar to Financiers</i> Bronze Figures <i>Big Bang</i>
Commercial District 	Raffles Square UOB Plaza OCBC Bank Maybank Tower Fullerton	Aw Tee Hong Salvadore Dali Fernando Botero Henry Moore Aw Tee Hong Chong Fah Cheong	<i>Pioneering Spirit, Struggle</i> <i>Homage to Newton</i> <i>Bird</i> <i>Reclining Figure</i> <i>River Merchants</i> <i>First Generation</i>
Orchard Area 	St. Regis Singapore Far East Shopping Orchard MRT Ngee Ann City Paragon ION Centre Four Seasons	Fernando Botero Anthony Poon Li Chen Ng Eng Teng Han Sai Por Liu Ji Lin Sun Yu-Li Kumari Nahappan Sun Yu-Li	<i>Dancing Nude Couple</i> <i>Sense Surround #3</i> <i>Dragon-Riding Bodhisattva</i> <i>Mother and Child</i> <i>Happy Princess</i> <i>Harmony I & II</i> <i>Celebration, Endearment...</i> <i>Nutmeg & Mace</i> <i>Vitality</i>
Bras Basah Fort Canning 	ASEAN Sculpture Garden – Fort Canning Singapore Art Museum National Museum of Singapore	Ng Eng Teng and Multiple ASEAN artists Chong Fah Cheong Jessie Lim Kumari Nahappan Ju Ming Han Sai Por	<i>Balance, Unity, Together</i> <i>Fredesoinda, Concentration</i> <i>Another Day – Coolies</i> Multiple works in museum <i>Pedas Pedas</i> <i>Taichi Boxing Pair</i> <i>Seeds</i>
Housing Development Board 	Toa Payoh	Anthony Poon Ng Eng Teng Chong Fah Cheong	<i>Infinity</i> <i>The Climb</i> <i>Mama's Precious One</i>
NUS	Multiple Buildings	Sun Yu-Li Ng Eng Teng	<i>Striving</i> <i>Wealth, Contentment</i>
Suntec City Millenia Walk 		Sun Yu-Li Han Sai Por Roy Lichtenstein	<i>Abundance</i> <i>Chinese Zodiac Medallions</i> <i>Singapore Paintbrushes</i>
Changi Airport		Han Sai Por	<i>Flora Inspiration, Garden City</i>
Botanic Gardens		Sydney Harpley	<i>Girl on Swing, Girl on Bicycle</i>
URA Centre 	Maxwell Street	Sun Yu-Li Professor Liu Jilin	<i>Celestial Earth</i> <i>Samsui Women</i>
Telok Ayer Green		Lim Leong Seng	<i>Indian Settlers</i> <i>Chinese Procession</i>