Between Here and Nanyang

Marco Hsu's Brief History of Malayan Art

By Chang Yueh Siang

Indian New Year, *1957, Liu Kang*

In August 1963, Singapore joined Malaya to form the new nation state of Malaysia, effectively marking the beginning of independence from Britain and the end of colonial rule. The years leading up to the merger had seen social dissension in the form of communist activism (ranging from the Malayan Emergency to unionist activities such as the Hock Lee Bus riots) and communal riots (arising from the Maria Hertogh affair). With these recent historical events fresh in people's memories the question of a national and cultural identity for the new nation was on the minds not only of the politicians on both sides of the causeway, but also of the various cultural commentators. One of these commentators was a member of the Chinese intelligentsia, Koh Cheng Foo, who wrote articles on art and culture, frequently under the pseudonym Marco Hsu (for which he became better known).

Flowers and Peacock, *1960, Sunyee*

Between 1961 and 1963, as an already established author of books and articles on the cultural history of the *Nanyang* (the Southern Seas, a catch-all term for the overseas Chinese community, referring to the Southeast Asian region), Marco Hsu (or Ma Ge, in Mandarin) was invited by the arts editor of the Chinese-language *Nanyang Evening News* to become a regular columnist with a remit to write about the history of art in Malaya. The same month that Singapore merged with Malaya to form Malaysia, these serialised articles were compiled and published as, *A Brief History of Malayan Art*. On the 50th anniversary of the book's publication, NUS Museum presents the exhibition *Between Here and Nanyang: Marco Hsu's Brief History of Malayan Art*.

Plum Blossoms, *20th century, Liu Haisu*

The exhibition showcases the strength of the NUS Museum collection: Marco Hsu traces the history of maritime and colonial Malaya to the contemporary developments in the early 1960s. The NUS Museum's collections are broad enough to contain many of the artefacts and artists mentioned by Hsu, from Indian temple sculptures dating to 300 CE, Chinese ceramics from the 14th century, ink paintings, batik textiles from Malaysia, to modern paintings by emerging Singaporean artists.

Emerging artists

The beginnings of the museum (in the form of the University of Malaya Art Museum) and its collection were contemporary to Hsu's art commentary and many of the 'modern-day' artists collected for the museum by its first curator, Michael Sullivan, were the young contemporary

Motherly Love, *1956, Cheong Soo Pieng*

artists identified in Hsu's book. For instance, Hsu points to the 1952 Bali expedition undertaken by Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee and Chen Wen Hsi as an important moment when a discernible 'local flavour' was being shaped in the history of modern art in Singapore. NUS Museum's South and Southeast Asian collection includes paintings from the four artists' 1953 exhibition, or purchased shortly after, such as Liu Kang's *Indian New Year* (1953) and Cheong Soo Ping's *Motherly Love* (1956). Many other paintings in the collection were gifts to the museum from the artists themselves.

Fledgling institutions and 'seed' collections

Marco Hsu opened his discussion of Malaya with a question, "Malaya is often called a cultural desert; is it that bad in reality?" By the end of his series, however, he concludes that it is "unfortunate that Malaya is brandished as a 'cultural desert' at the *commencement* of her cultural artistic development." One of the signs that he takes as evidence of a maturing artistic environment is the increasing number of galleries and museums, private and public, that he witnessed opening around him. He cites the efforts of the University of Malaya in building a collection of contemporary artists and notes that the then Nanyang University was already receiving paintings from artists even though it had not yet built a gallery. One of the private collections he names is the Xiang Xue Zhuang collection, one of the most important collections of Chinese art in Singapore by the 1960s, built up by the late Dr Tan Sze Chor. Some of the objects from the Xiang Xue Zhuang collection were donated by Dr Tan to the Lee Kong Chian Gallery of Chinese Art in the 1970s. These collections may be likened in imagery to botanical seed collections, waiting to germinate and grow, in Hsu's words, into "beautiful, limitless plantations, and fruit orchards of never ending yield." Visitors to *Between Here and Nanyang* can view paintings from these collections.

Street Scenes, *1960, Choo Keng Kwang*

Chang Yueh Siang *is a curator of the* Lee Kong Chian Collection of Chinese Art *at the NUS Museum.*

All photos courtesy of the National University of Singapore Museum

Indian Jewellery

By Tanja M Sadow

The history of Indian jewellery is fascinating: no other culture has such intense reverence for jewellery. From the great maharajas of the Mughal period to today's wedding extravaganzas, India's treasure trove of jewels has been well-preserved. Perhaps the most fascinating of the varied styles and techniques developed by Indian craftsmen over centuries, is that of *kundan*-style setting. Invented long before the introduction of prong-setting, virtually all gems in early Indian jewellery were '*kundan*-set'.

The process begins with the designer who produces ideas from rubbings of popular finished pieces, often closely guarded within the goldsmith's family. Details specific to the shapes and sizes of the gems provided by the client make each design unique. Fabrication requires the creation of hollow metal moulded units which are filled with lac (the dark, sticky secretion of an insect found in India) and later engraved and embedded with gems. The goldsmith crafts this mould, carefully following the drawing, while accommodating the stones' shapes and other details.

Kundan-*style bracelet with diamonds and rubies*

Once ready, the gem-setter (*kundansaz*) sets each gemstone, expertly compressing narrow ribbons of pure gold (*kundan*), layer upon layer, to form a solid wedge around each stone. The most amazing feature of this style is that *no soldering is required* as pure gold is malleable in a cold state.

Integral to this jewellery style is the backing of gems with foil of a thinly beaten silver sheet which helps to maximise the brilliance of the gems, since most stones lack the reflection found in present-day cutting styles. Most Mughal jewellery had this combination of *kundan*-set gems on the front and, to complement the design, extraordinarily detailed enamel pigments on the back.

Kundan-*style earrings with diamonds, rubies and pearls*

Both modern and traditional jewellery fabrication methods provide fascinating insights into different cultures and understanding these disciplines helps one truly appreciate and enjoy the jewels that are part of our daily lives.

Tanja M Sadow *is the dean and founder of the Jewellery Design and Management International School.*

Photos courtesy of The Jewel Box (www.thejewelbox.com)