

An Artist, Redrawn

By Favian Ee

Sometime in December 2011 while visiting Pulau Ubin, I ran into a curious group of people. They were scattered about the area near the jetty, with their drawing paraphernalia, sketching what they saw. I had heard about these urban sketchers before, but seeing them live was fascinating. Being an artist myself, I resolved to join them on their next outing and since then, have become a regular sketcher.

So who are the Urban Sketchers? This worldwide community describes itself as “a non-profit organisation dedicated to fostering the art of on-location drawing”. The Singapore group organises monthly official sketch-walks, where a location is selected and after a short briefing, we disperse to sketch the area for about three hours before gathering again for a sharing session of our works.



Sketch of Orchard 22

In the two years before joining the group, I rarely went out to draw. Work got the better of me and there was scant motivation to venture out, despite having enjoyed it in my youth. I figured the regular outdoor group sketching meet-ups would get me back in the rhythm – and was proved right. In time, I found myself not only drawing more and better, but also increasingly appreciating my surroundings. I was not the only one with this experience. There were

others who, having not drawn anything in over a decade, could not stop after joining the group.

One of my first sketch-walks in early 2012 was held in Siglap. Looking around then, I wondered if there was anything at all of interest to sketch. Everything seemed so humdrum; not much stood out for me. Then I watched the other sketchers pick a spot, sit down and get to work. It didn't take long before a perfectly ordinary scene was made into a work of art. That was when I began to realise that beauty could be found anywhere, if one knew how to



Sketchers at Gardens by the Bay



Sketch of the National Museum

Sketch Walk 2nd Jan '12
NATIONAL MUSEUM of SINGAPORE

I picked a spot in the lobby and stayed there for the next 2+ hours. This is the view from one of the arches circling the lobby on the ground floor. I used the arch and ledge as the frame. The frame was inked using a Japanese calligraphy brush pen and the rest was inked with the 20k Copic black pen. Both (or at least the 20k) are water-soluble, hence the use of pencils for application of tones. A Tashiro Mono-Orange 402 and a Faber-Castell Reddiplex 200 were used. Colours in the shaded glass panels were added with Faber-Castell and Staedtler student colour pencils of home. I left out the details of the works on the 2nd floor tier since it is too far to give the eye some rest space.

written using HERO pen

look. Through their art, the sketchers were sharing their perspective of something – a scene that one might not normally give a second look at – whatever caught their eye. Banal subjects turned into snippets of loveliness.

The Urban Sketchers in Singapore are a friendly bunch. From the day I joined, it was apparent that some were professional or expert artists, while others had barely begun sketching. Despite the wide range of proficiency, everyone was welcome. There was no elitism and none of the discrimination one might have expected to encounter. Every effort at drawing – even the most unpolished scrawl – was appreciated and given plenty of encouragement. A total beginner could sketch next to an established watercolourist without feeling embarrassed. In fact, one would probably glean some tips and be given a free demo. The generosity of the members is something that I believe keeps many going back.

Becoming part of the group has led me to visit places in Singapore that I would otherwise not have taken time off

to explore, as well as to travel overseas on sketching trips. An eye-opening experience for me was the ‘Sketching George Town’ event, organised by the Penang Urban Sketchers as part of the George Town Festival in 2012. In the four days there, we were given lodging, taken around the UNESCO World Heritage Site to sketch the local sights, and fed the famous food of Penang. Representatives from Malaysia, Bangkok and Taiwan were also there, all united by a love of travel and on-location sketching. Thereafter, I have not gone on a vacation without a sketchbook in hand and a determination to keep a sketch journal of my travels.

Joining the Urban Sketchers was one



Sketchers at Wessex Estate

of the best decisions I have ever made. It helped me find beauty in the mundane, and appreciate our country's unique architectural landscape and rich multicultural heritage, which we too often take for granted. It presented many opportunities to put my work out there – in several art exhibitions, within a series of books in collaboration with a local publisher, and in the local papers. And finally, it encouraged me to share little bits of my life, country, experiences and travels, with others – one drawing at a time.

For that, I will always be grateful. I create most of my sketches, apart from my pencil works, with ink and watercolours. I usually do the line work using a Hero fountain pen or a brush-pen. Often, I block in the larger shapes with a pencil first, but not always. If I decide to colour the sketch, I will add a wash of watercolours after the ink has dried. Sometimes I use markers instead, depending on my mood and the situation. Urban Sketchers Singapore is part of the global Urban Sketchers community founded by Seattle-based journalist, Gabi Campanario. They can be found on Facebook at www.fb.com/usksq, or view their sketches at www.blog.usk.sg

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All photos courtesy of the author

Devotion through Printing: Empress Shotoku's Prayer

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

In the early days of Buddhism, devout practitioners could show their piety in a number of ways. They could become monks or nuns, or remain householders and contribute towards worthy communal religious projects or bestow gifts that would reflect their devotion. In gift-giving, historian Craig Clunas (*Art in China*, p. 109) notes that "preciousness of materials was one way [of showing commitment]. Another was by massive multiplication of the number of sacred texts or images put into circulation... This led to one of the most important technical developments... in world civilization, namely the invention of printing."

An example of such an act of devotion was the printing of a Buddhist text executed between 764 and 770 by the Empress Shotoku-Tenno (r. 765-769) in Japan. It would be another 100 years before longer texts, such as books, were printed. The oldest extant complete printed book is the *Diamond Sutra*, dated to 868, found in the Dunhuang Caves in 1907 by Sir Aurel Stein (today in the British Library in London). Empress Shotoku's text is a prayer of thanksgiving to the Buddha for an imperial victory when the pious empress' court was threatened by a rebellious faction challenging Buddhism's influence. It is known in history as the Emi Rebellion by Fujiwara no Nakamoro.



Empress Shotoku's Buddhist text and stupa-shaped container

Despite a print-run of reportedly 1,000,000 copies (900,000 were distributed to temples around the country, with the remaining 100,000 given to each of the ten great monasteries in the Kansai region), fewer than a dozen probably survive today – five in the British Museum, one in the British Library (catalogued as one of "The Million Charms of Empress Shotoku"), a few scattered in other museums, and the remaining in private collections (one is in Singapore). The prayer, which was probably printed from a carved wooden plate, consists of 31 columns

of characters, five characters to a column, and measures 45 cm in length. Four different texts were printed, all from the 'Pure Light' (Sanskrit: *Vimalairbhasa*) Sutra.

The iconic turned wooden stupa that holds the printed prayer is made of cypress, and has three cylindrical storeys topped by a knob finial (19 cm high, 10.3 cm in diameter). Such ceramic and wooden stupas were traditionally made to hold the remains of pious monks, religious texts or charms.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch is an art historian and frequent contributor to *PASSAGE*.

Photo courtesy of the author