

Tan Lye Hoe's *Hut at the Vale of Tempe* 1963*Kampung and Mother and Child* by the late batik master Chuah Thean Teng.

Prodigy Chew Teng Beng, then 24, showing the Yang di-Pertuan Agong his artistic style in 1964.

Freedom and art

BY HIMANSHU BHATT

WHILE the theme of Merdeka has long been associated with that of liberty, one of the key areas where the freedom of spirit has found its natural manifestation has been in art. It is in art that the nation's soul has found an honest expression – fused by various cultural influences that make up the Malaysian potpourri, even as it transcends the barriers of ethnicity and other mundane differences.

In particular it was in the years before and immediately after Merdeka in 1957, that the pioneering wave of modern artists rose in the country. Even as their works reflected on the spirit and sensibility of the early years, they also shone with a creative spirit engendered from a certain unadulterated environment and earnest, heartfelt values of that time.

The artists who emerged during this period include the likes of legends like Datuk Chuah Thean Teng (regarded as the father of batik art), Abdullah Ariff, Hoessein Enas and Yong Mun Sen. These artists are part the very fraternity that has been hailed by international institutions, including the Singapore Art Museum, as being pivotal in the development of modern art in the region at large. Fertile, innovative and pulsing with creativity, this early era left a tradition of fine artistry largely overlooked over the years.

The works were not just inspired, but reflected a rich heritage of extreme talent and expertise in diverse styles.

Chew Teng Beng, who grew up in his native Terengganu of the idyllic 40s and 50s, is a product of such inspiring environment and values. He was taught by his father, an artist and a teacher, to manually grind Chinese ink out of blocks of solid black dye. He was taught to make paintbrushes himself and wash them, and to scrape signboards for painting. He went on outings with his father, sketching the landscapes and people he saw. As he grew older, he would go out to sketch with his two younger brothers, Kiat Seng and Kiat Lim, all carrying easels on bicycles. Like a magical spell, the unspoiled landscape and virtual isolation of Terengganu generated a deep awareness of nature and the living world. "There were no libraries,

no references, no books, no academia," he once said. "We only inspired each other."

Chew is today a respected authority who served, among others, on the National Advisory Council on Culture. He headed the country's first ever fine arts department at university level.

Like Chew, the late Chuah Thean Teng's works were also grounded on the very fundamentals of hard work and imagination nurtured in his childhood. When Chuah held his earliest exhibition in 1955, at age 43, it caused a bit of a stir in global art circles. It was the first ever viewing of art paintings made in batik. His works were shipped to the UK for a solo exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute of Arts, and he was honoured by Unicef who adopted many of his images for its cards.

The *Daily Mail* in the UK went as far as to hail him as a revolutionary in world art. "Finding an entirely new and immediately convincing method of pictorial expression is a rare occurrence," wrote its critic Pierre Jeanneret. "The last I can think of was the invention of lithography between 1796 and 1798. Now comes another."

Chuah's images have become icons of an unadulterated Asian rustic charm, packed with robust geometric outlines and vivid colours.

While not many of the old masters are known to dabble in batik, they are revered today for their simple oil, pastel and watercolour brush strokes, depicting images of everyday living in scenes such as villages, streets, farms and nature. The era was characterised by the use of gentle colours and stirring delineations that are quite evocative, and almost always arouse a tender but vibrant indulgence in the beauty of living.

In fact, living culture is a distinctive subject among many of the works. There is a celebratory mood of capturing and recording the mystery of the human condition in the living environment.

Art collector Datuk Dr Tan Chee Kuan is known for having meticulously recorded the histories and accomplishments of the pioneers. "These artists became involved in the arts before many others," he said. "They forged new ground in their works." Certainly, the pre-1960s had a tradition of fine artistry that was looked upon as a pulse of the nation's art scene.

The late Tan Lye Hoe, 65, who was deeply influenced to paint during this era once said of the artistic fraternity



Mohd Hoessein Enas at the Cochrane Road Studio, Kuala Lumpur, 1954. Picture courtesy of Datuk Dr Tan Chee Kuan (Pioneers of Malaysian Art)

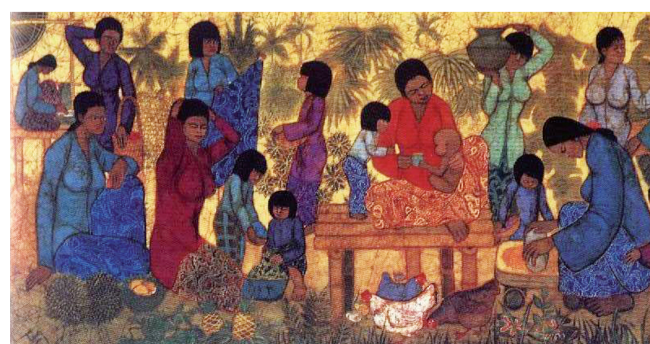
during that period: "There was no particular vision. The idea then was to keep having activities and it was good enough." He was also pushed to paint – and innovate – by his association with a youthful circle that included the likes of Tay Mo Leong, KK Low and Khoo Sui Ho.

Earnest and excited, they would get together for heavy discussion and painting at the top floor of the now defunct Galeri De May, owned by Tay, along Kimberly Street. As the youngsters could not always afford art canvas, they often bought masonite boards to paint on. "We sometimes even bought deck chairs and removed their canvas for painting," Tan Lye Hoe recalled.

Amid this, a significant influence was Nanyang Academy of art in Singapore, which nurtured a number of masters from the period. Khoo Sui Hoe, who chose to study at the academy in 1959, said: "Once I was there a world opened up to me." He studied under the guidance of masters like Cheong Su Pieng and Georgette Chen, and became enamoured with the imaginative vistas that appeared before him through formal art.

There were others as well; for example, Khaw Sia was known for his watercolours, and the fiery legend Lee Joo For for his impulsive and compelling pieces from the 60s and early 70s. Hoessein Enas, who is said to have ridden trishas in Penang in his early years, grew in stature and later became known for his portraits of royalty and top diplomats, and was once appointed as royal artist by the late Sultan of Selangor.

Times have changed now, they say. The new generations today have been described as moving very fast, daring to change, to break away from traditions. But the works of the old masters will certainly inspire as well as remind us of the original values and spirit that drove this nation to creatively blossom in the early years.

Khoo Sui Hoe with his *Children of the Sun* (1965, oil on canvas)*Ladang Kelapa* by Abdullah Ariff (watercolour on paper). Picture courtesy of Datuk Dr Tan Chee Kuan (Pioneers of Malaysian Art)*Joy of Living* by batik master Chuah Thean Teng