

09/12/1997

Asean's best for rare art show

Ooi Kok Chuen

A RARE art feast comprising US\$5 million worth of masterpieces from all the Asean countries will go on display, twice, in Kuala Lumpur soon.

The works are culled from various art museums, collectors and the artists themselves.

One of the highlights must be Raden Saleh Syarif Bustaman's (1807-1880) oil on canvas entitled Head of A Lion, on loan from the Lippo Art Foundation.

Another, Datuk Ibrahim Hussein's My Father and The Astronaut (acrylic on canvas and printage, 1970), was last seen in public in his 1986 Retrospective given by the National Art Gallery (NAG). It is a wry commentary on tradition and values vis a vis the 'giant leap for mankind' when Neil Armstrong made that small step on the moon's surface.

Dubbed Asean Masterworks, half of the selection of 60 works will first be unveiled in a guests-only exhibition at the Mines Resort in Kuala Lumpur on Dec 14-16.

Held to mark the informal 30th Asean Summit there, it will be officiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Dec 15.

The exhibition is also to mark Asean's 30th anniversary celebrations which run until August next year.

The 'half' exhibition should be the hors d'oeuvre for the full sumptuous spread for general public viewing scheduled at the NAG from Jan 15-30.

In the first exhibition, the resort would not be able to accommodate all the works, some of which - such as Hendra Gunawan's - are more than two metres long.

Curator Valentine Willie has avoided a staid nation-by-nation focus with its schisms of geography, and instead opted for themes of common destiny, diversity and disparity.

There will be six works each from the member countries except Malaysia, which will feature 12 works by as many artists.

The collections do not necessarily originate from the artist's country of birth; some are even cross-border or even cross-national.

Two of the works by Singaporean artists - those of Georgette Chen Liying (Mother and Child) and Cheong Soo-pieng (Tropical Life) - come from the NAG's permanent collection.

The selection is an eclectic mix of artistic styles, subjects and media, and gender and generation.

The region's young vanguards include Panya Vijnthanasarn (Thailand), Wong Hoy Cheong, Kungyu Liew (Malaysia), Goh Ee Choo (Singapore), Min Wae Aung (Myanmar), Hong Viet Dung (Vietnam) and Kan Hu Sikounnavong (Laos).

Raden Saleh's Head of A Lion (1843) shares 'lineage' with A Lion and a Snake Fighting, which had a hammer price of S\$1.9 million at Singapore Christie's auction.

Head of A Lion, done during the artist's sojourn in Germany, was also from the same auction in March 1996 when it fetched S\$108,250.

Raden Saleh's fame as an artist of portraits and landscapes won him the title of 'king's painter' from Willem III, king of the Netherlands. His Deer Hunt set a world record (S\$3.083 million) for the artist at the same auction.

Karim Raslan, who helped source some of the works and is the writer for the commemorative book expected out in June, said that four works in the Vietnamese section are from Nguyen Van Lam, a cafe owner in Hanoi who was

paid by paintings by the artists in the early days in exchange for food and drinks.

As relatively little is known of the art development in Laos, much of the sourcing is by way of helpful introductions.

Among the Malaysian works, poet laurette-sculptor-painter Latiff Mohidin's Malam Merah (1968), actually a melancholic Blue Pago-Pago, has been 'lost' from public view since it was bought by collector Zain Azahari Zainal Abidin.

Patrick Ng (1932-89) will be represented by his celebrated Spirit Of Earth, Water and Air (1958), which 'travelled' to Japan recently for the Birth of Modern Art in South-east Asia exhibition and was last year shown in the Singapore Art Museum at the launch of the Modernity and Beyond: Themes of South-east Asian Art exhibition.

Both Latiff's Pago-Pago series and Patrick Ng's Spirit are outstanding examples of paintings synthesising the motifs, belief systems and cultural transformations in the region.

There are also Kungyu's Cheng Beng Festival '96 (photo-montage mixed media); Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal's Energy Mat (acrylic on canvas, 1981), Ismail Zain's The Marriage of Sultan Mansur Shah (acrylic on canvas), Redza Piyadasa's Baba Family (silkscreen on mounting board), Dzulkipli Buyong's Hantu (oil on canvas, 1948), Wong Hoy Cheong's Fear of Falling, Joy of Flying (oil on canvas, 1985) and Nirmala Shanmugalingam's Vietnam II (acrylic on canvas, 1980).

Hoessein's Harvesting Tobacco (1962) is done in the same vein as the Philippines' Fernando Amorsolo, who is noted for his sensuous ideal of the dalagang bukid (rustic beauties), and Hoessein with his nubile gadis Melayu.

Sulaiman Esa's Garden of Mystery (acrylic and yarn, 1992) is imbued with subliminal religious sentiments as, say, Montien Boonma's Black Stupa or Thawan Duchanee's Buddha, and Myanmar's Yei Myint with his Buddha and His Son II.

Mother and Child (oil on canvas, 1960) revealed the already matured style of figuratives (and still-lives) of the Paris-born Georgette Chen, who settled in Singapore in 1954 until her death after a protracted illness in 1993.

The other Malaysian-owned Singaporean work, Cheong Soo-pieng's Tropical Life (1959), an ink-and-gouache on paper work, reveals the figurative standard and cell-like pictorial technique set for artists on both sides of the Causeway until even today.

Affandi (1907-1990)'s Man with Fighting Cock (oil on canvas, 1980) revels in his squeezed tube and paint-mixed-with-sweat routine in Abstract Expressionism fashion, while his fellow Kelompok Lima member - the artist activist Hendra Gunawan (1918-1983) - has a 1952 oil on canvas work titled Guerilla in the Marketplace.

Other Indonesian giants featured are S. Sudjojono (1914-1986), Srihadi Soedarsono (1931) and Balinese I. Wayan Bendi.

The Philippines section also has second-generation modernists - Vincente Manansala (1913-81), Anita Magsaysay-Ho, Arturo Luz and Ang Kiukok (with his dehumanising caricatures).

In the Thai section, there is a portrait of Silpa Bhirasri (the former Corrado Feroci), dubbed the Father of Modern Thai Art, from the hands of his favourite student Fua Haripitak (1910-93).

All the works from Brunei, which is led by Awang Sitai, are sourced from the artists themselves.

The Myanmar collection comes from the National Museum in Yangon and Singapore's private art gallery Art-2, with an outstanding self-portrait by U Ba Nyan (1887-1946, oil on canvas).

There is no Le Pho in the Vietnamese collection, but the other masters - Bai Xuan Phai (1921-88), Nguyen Sang (1923-88) and Nguyen Gia Tri (a typically Vietnamese lacquer painting) - are represented.

The oldest work in the Laotian section is a 1959 oil on board on Buddha by Kham Tuan (1925-97).

Besides the NAG and the National Museum of Yangon, the other institutions loaning works are the Lippo Art Foundation (Museum Universitas Harapan in Jakarta), Suteja Neka's Neka Museum in Bali, Silpa Bhirasri Memorial Museum in Bangkok, and the Singapore Art Museum.

The exhibition has the support of the Asean Secretariat and Wisma Putra and is sponsored by the Yayasan Al Bukhary.

A Press conference was held at Wisma Putra recently to announce the exhibition. Present were Tan Sri Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, special envoy of the Prime Minister; Datuk Ajit Singh, Asean secretary-general; and Rohana Mahmood of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre. Ahmad Kamil and Ajit are both special advisers in the exhibition committee, while Rohana is an executive consultant.

(END)