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Brush with history

Ooi Kok Chuen

"THEY (old buildings) have history. You cannot buy history. You cannot recreate history."

They are, as A.L. Rowse once said, history arrested in stone.

Obviously.

One look at just a few of the 150-over watercolour paintings and sketches on Kuala Lumpur buildings by Chin Kon Yit is enough to transport you into a bygone era, imbuing you with the exotic cocktail of colonial chic and local inventiveness (some say idiosyncrasy).

Some buildings like the Straits eclectic mansions and shophouses are a shade tacky even, but somehow so in character with the time and people then.

True to detail and with a meticulous eye and true craftsman's patience, Chin portrays the old architecture superbly in their present ambience, amidst and against the trappings of modern amenities and conditions.

This excellent oeuvre done over two years is documented in the lush coffee-table book, Kuala Lumpur: A Sketchbook.

It's Chin's labour of love. As a self-taught, full-time artist, he had to forego income in the interim and even skip a great chance to go on a painting expedition of Sweden last year.

But it is worth all the sacrifices, as the reams of charming architectural vignettes show. His only regret, as an afterthought, is that he did not do more of the interiors.

Chin has outdone himself in this historical survey of Kuala Lumpur buildings, better fortified no doubt by the interesting input of architect-cum-conservation activist Chen Voon Fee, with whom he collaborated on the book.

The paintings are remarkable for the draughtsmanship, the eye for detail, the judicious mix of colours and the dexterous playing on tonality, the contrasting device of unpainted drawn areas and the overall composition.

Chen, who gave the book its structure and storyline together with interesting notations, is the one who gave the opening quotes in this article.

The 96-page book, published by Editions Didier Millet, together with an exhibition of Chin's paintings were launched by AIDS activist Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir at GaleriWan in Kuala Lumpur last Friday. The exhibition, Chin's fourth solo, at 33 Jalan Yap Kwan Seng ends on Nov 9.

The book is a "down-memory-lane" trip of the city's popular tourist sites from majestic relics to well-beaten backstreets and "souped-up" colonial-type shophouses.

Another section on the lively street scenes shows how some old ways don't change - vendors pushing carts, an itinerant barber at work, a teh-tarik hawker, and old pals having a tete-a-tete at the kopitiam.

The Kuala Lumpur story begins at Dataran Merdeka, the former Kuala Lumpur Padang which was the civic heart of the original tin-mining enclave more than a century ago.

There's the "Spotted Dog" Royal Selangor Club (completed in 1884), and the Muhammadan or Neo-Saracenic Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (1894-7); the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station, with the quaint chatry; and Masjid Jamek with the traceried horseshoe-shaped windows.

Religious landmarks such as the Sri Mahamariamman Temple with its

intricate gopuram, the Sze Yeh Temple, the Sri Ganesan Temple, the St Mary's Cathedral and the Buddhist Maha Vihara are also given the romantic veneer of Chin's brushes.

"It's not just a coffee-table book," says Chen. "There is a subtext. It's a good vehicle to promote and make the public more aware of the issues of conservation. It is also important as a historical and cultural link to our past.

"It's not just architecture. It's the story behind the buildings with the most up-to-date research."

The narrative is not a linear one, leaning towards an eclectic style that includes Gothic (Church of the Holy Rosary), Art Deco (the Rubber Research Institute building, Central Market, the old Harrison and Crossfields "ocean steamer" Building), mock-Tudor (Royal Selangor Club), Neo-Renaissance (National Art Gallery, which is the former Majestic Hotel) and Neo-Classica (Le Coq D'or Restaurant, better known as Bok House).

The NAG, Central Market and Central Square are the "jewels" in Chen's pursuit of buildings subjected to "adaptive re-use."

The architectural repertoire includes the Commercial Press Building, the Coliseum Cafe, the Industrial Court, the Chan Sze Shuyuan, Carcosa Seri Negara, Istana Negara and Wisma Loke.

The book is priced at RM99.50 each.

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