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The maestro of portrait painting

Cheah Phaik Kin

WET sarongs cling firmly to the bodies of the Iban girls who take their daily bath in a river amid the stillness of the morning mist.

The weak rays of the morning sun shine through the mist while the girls' gentle movements create soft harmonious motions in the calm river waters.

With their hair neatly tied up, they are engrossed in their peaceful morning activity, oblivious to the stare of a stranger.

"I feel like touching their soggy sarongs, then again they might just turn and slap me," says The Art Gallery director Dr Tan Chee Khuan.

"Morning Mist 3" is one of the late Datuk Mohammad Hoessein Enas' many works, whose magnetism brings the onlooker "into" the picture.

It all seems so real.

It is real - in oil on canvas.

That, and the artist's insight of human nature are part of the reasons Dr Tan wrote a book in memory of this renowned artist, whose works are treasured until today.

The Life and Art of Dato' M. Hoessein Enas features a collection of his works, gleaned from every decade of his life.

An interesting part of this book is the insight into the personality and thoughts of this artist in his autobiography, written in Bahasa Indonesia with an authorised English translation by Tan Chien Li.

"I was touched by the sincerity, hospitality and graciousness," says Dr Tan, whose favourite painting is the "Morning Mist 3" which he proudly displays in his home.

"Known as the Father of Malaysian Portrait Painting, he was a mentor to many local portrait artists, whose talents he had nurtured," Dr Tan adds.

More fondly known as Pak Hoessein, the Indonesian-born artist made a name for himself in portrait painting.

His portraits incorporate elements of compassion, individualism, uniqueness and the model's personality.

He once said: "I am interested in people - people as human beings - and I try to capture the innermost feelings of those who impress me."

His portraits include those of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, the country's first Prime Minister the late Tunku Abdul Rahman, one of Penang's pioneer artists the late Abdullah Ariff and Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud.

Hoessein is well-known for his paintings of women.

He manages to capture the serenity, femininity and graciousness of women from all walks of life, even those of women labourers in his piece "Hidden Beauties" (dulang washers) (1965).

The attention to details is immense.

The fine hair on a woman's forehead, the drops of perspiration of a Malay fighter, the bulging veins of an artist's strong hands, and the texture and reflection of people on disturbed waters are not spared.

Every painting deserves close scrutiny.

The skilful hands of this gifted artist produce nothing less than what Tan describes as "enchanted" pictures, which perhaps explained the good sales of his paintings at international auction houses and art galleries where he held his exhibitions.

And to think that all these achievements started with an eight-year-old boy scribbling on the walls of his house with charcoal.

Hoessein led a colourful life.

He went through difficult times in his younger days, experiencing the effects of the war during Indonesia's fight for independence.

He even separated from his family and wife who was carrying their fourth child, to flee from the Dutch.

It was not until he came to Penang in 1948 that his talent was recognised. Meeting Malaysian pioneer artists Yong Mun Sen and Abdullah Ariff helped nurture the talent of young Hoessein, then 24 years old.

He then began to exhibit his works in Kuala Lumpur with the help and support from Malaya Tribune reporter Frank Sullivan and tycoon Abdullah Hussein, who owned Gordoba Trading, an import-export trading company.

A joint exhibition with Rosemary Sheppard was a soaring success.

In his autobiography, he said that despite selling all 21 pieces of work, he did not receive a single sen as his manager Abdul Ghani (who later became director of Brunei's Road Transport Department) absconded with the money after the exhibition.

Despite that, he was motivated to do even better than before.

From then on, there was no stopping him until he died of respiratory complications on July 14, 1995.

Although he is physically gone, fond memories of this great artist, father and friend remain in the hearts of many who were touched by him and his works.

* Dr Tan's book will be launched during the opening of the retrospective exhibition of Hoessein's works at The Art Gallery on July 11 at 11am in conjunction with the fourth anniversary of the artist's death. The works will be on display between 11am and 6pm daily except Mondays until July 31. For enquiries, call 04-2298219.

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