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Wong's brush of eloquence

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HE'S one of the best trilinguists, exceptionally fluent in spoken and written English, Mandarin and Bahasa Malaysia. Yet, for many years, Dr Wong Seng Tong has found the brush mightier and more meaningful than the pen.

Some would remember having seen Wong acting as interpreter during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's historic 1993 visit of China.

In art circles, Wong, 64, is highly respected as an excellent organiser of art events for the Malaysian Watercolour Organisation, but this does not detract from him being an accomplished watercolourist.

A comparative late-starter, Wong has made astonishing progress, combining verve and dextrous handling of the highly elusive medium, in the two decades since he made his debut in the Rasa '82 multidisciplinary exhibition.

He was doing panoramic landscapes in acrylic-cum-watercolours with his wet-on-wet technique, in the 1982 group exhibition held at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia where he was teaching.

This initiation motivated the self-taught artist to further concentrate on exploring the wonders of brushworks, mixing colours and keeping a fluid balance.

Proof of his growing maturity lies in the colourful daubs and lines.

Whether they were the rarefied vistas of Cameron Highlands or the windswept coasts of Pangkor or Bachok in Kelantan, Wong has captured the essence of these landscapes with aplomb, evoking the moods and changing colours.

And in the last decade, Wong has also honed his portraiture skills, especially through the MWO's painting expeditions abroad - in Sweden, India and Brazil - where he diligently sketched the vignettes of people he met there - in restaurants, rest-stops and at receptions.

This ritual of experiencing firsthand the fleeting images, nuances of light and the infinite spectrum of colours of street scenes has had a profound effect on his oeuvre.

"I have loved painting since my primary school days. I wanted to be an artist," he said.

This ambition was nurtured during his secondary school days in Teluk Intan where he was encouraged by an art teacher Mr Lee. Like most aspiring artists in the early 1960s, he had wanted to pursue his ambition at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore.

But when his elder brother died suddenly at a very young age, he became responsible for the family, and so, a career in art was out of the question as it was considered something precarious then.

So Wong sat for his Higher School Certificate examination, trained at the Language Institute, got a double degree in Malay studies at University of Malaya (1967-69) and later his master's in Malay literature (1972-73), taught briefly in his birthplace, Kampar, and Sekolah Datuk Abdul Razak in Tanjung Malim, before he joined UKM as a lecturer.

But Wong kept on painting and drawing whenever he could.

When he was studying for his PhD in comparative literature specialising in East Asian literature at the University of Wisconsin, in the US, in 1975-78, he took up several art courses and spent copious hours poring over art manuals and books in the university's library, and visiting exhibitions.

Wong infused the Malaysian Watercolour Society with a new sense of direction and purpose when he was elected its secretary in 1983. He brought in a host of new sponsors like Selangor Pewter, Standard Chartered and MBf, which helped defray the organising costs of its hugely successful annual exhibition.

It was when the Australian High Commission lent its foyer space in Kuala Lumpur to the annual show.

"These exhibitions had a positive effect on Malaysian art as more people started to collect them," recalled Wong.

"We also started having competitions among the members by giving out awards. But painting for a competition had a negative effect and we decided to scrap it after a few years."

Under his stewardship, the MWS also took part in the Asian Watercolourists Confederation exhibition in Taipeh, Taiwan, in 1987, and even hosted the AWC show in 1988.

Wong was AWC secretary-general for two terms, in 1989-91 and 1994-96.

There was a fallout among some members after the 1987 MWS show, and the MWS folded in 1990. One group later formed the Contemporary Malaysian Watercolorists Association.

In 1992, Wong's group formed the MWO, with Wong as chairman.

Asked how the MWO is so well-organised, Wong says he believes in teamwork and that everyone has to pull his weight.

Wong took optional retirement in 1993, and became a senior research fellow at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore in 1993-96.

He also helped draft the mental arithmetic and art curriculum for his wife's Academie Inspire in Petaling Jaya.

It was around this time that Wong pioneered exhibitions cum painting expeditions abroad starting with the 1997 Malaysian Landscapes exhibition at the Malmo Kunstmuseet in Malmo in Sweden, which was followed by a south-to-north painting odyssey from Vik to Uppsala.

The expedition was greatly facilitated by a MWO member and friend, Datuk S.K. Choo, who was the ambassador in Sweden.

In 2001, MWO members took on the sights of India, with an itinerary encompassing New Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Joelikot/Nainital. Again, Choo helped with the groundwork for the trip to this fascinating country.

And last year, the MWO staged an exhibition in Sao Paulo, Brazil, but with only two members, including Wong, attending because of the prohibitive costs involved.

Wong is again heading a delegation of five MWO members in this year's overseas show dubbed Colours of Malaysia: Amman 2003, at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts from Sept 17, where 65 works from 19 members will be shown.

Wong's works for the Amman show are based on his trips to Kelantan and Terengganu where he captured the lifestyles and pastimes of the fisherfolk, and the quaint perahu of Bachok.

The exhibition was originally scheduled for April, but had to be postponed because of the war on Iraq.

Joining the Jordanian painting expedition this time around are Mansor Ghazalli, Cheah Yew Saik, Cheung Pooi Yip and Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri. Mansor and Cheah were in the India expedition, while Zuriah joined only the Malmo sector of the Swedish painting marathon.