Acknowledgements

Keith Chua
Christopher Lee
Monica Ong
Air Beng Teck
Associate Professor Garry Ong Khim Chye
Patrick Chia
Tiffany Loy
Cheong Yian Ling
Professor Lee Chuan Neng
Clara Voe
David Kh Lee
Kamsani Yakub
Natalie Ong

Kechip SA Ltd. for the donation of Asian Symphony: Tropical Rhapsody: Asian Symphony (preparatory drawings); and sponsorship towards the dismantling, conservation and pre-installation storage of the murals

National University Health System
NUS Design Incubation Centre
The Conservation Studio
Zock SA Ltd
AL Technologies (S) Pte Ltd
NU-Wins (S) Pte Ltd

Staff of NUS Museum and other individuals who have contributed to this project over the past four years.
Foreword

Ahmad Mashadi
Head, NUS Museum

Commissioned by a Singapore hotel, Asian Symphony, a ten-panel wall relief mural was completed by Ng Eng Teng in 1971. With the planned closure of the hotel in 2010, the mural was deinstalled, conserved and reinstalled at the National University of Singapore. This process was both lengthy and critical, involving curators, documenters, conservators, art handlers and logisticians, working in close consultation with hotel management and staff. This exhibition recounts aspects of these processes, highlighting the work of Design Incubation Centre and The Conservation Studio, each contributing respectively to the virtual and material conservation of the mural.

Asian Symphony is also significant in cueing into the nature of NgEng Teng’s practice, in particular his approaches into commissioned works. While the relief mural has been installed at the National University Health System building, shown at the NUS Museum are drawings by Ng Eng Teng that served as initial stencils for the mural. These drawings were recovered from the hotel records, and were themselves conserved in preparation for the exhibition. A maquette for the mural and an ensemble of sculptures donated earlier by the late artist to the Museum are presented alongside the drawings. Collectively, they provide insights into evolving thought processes and ideas of the artist, and establish thematic and formal links between the mural and his broader practice, not merely situated within the contingencies of the commissioned project, but informed by discourses of modern art in Singapore.

As such, the significance of the “tropical” is positioned as a key curatorial inquiry that drives the exhibition. Curator Foo Su Ling locates the commissioning and the production of the mural in relation to the convergence of public and artistic discourses on the Singaporean modernity. Propositions and articulations of the ‘garden city’ as part of a broader political, social and economic project of nation building provide a crucial context that interweaves with artistic predilections that emerged and evolved over significant periods of Singapore’s modern art history, expressed by Ng Eng Teng’s artistic investigations into the figure, forms of abstraction and ornamentation, and the influence of the Nanyang aesthetics of localness and tropicalism. Here, Asian Symphony as a public sculpture may be distinguished by the complexity of dialogues involving artistic agency, the Nanyang legacy, patronage and civic ideals.

The NUS Museum is thankful to Mr Keith Chua, Managing Director of Kechara Pte Ltd, for his important gift to the University. Asian Symphony is not only a valuable addition to the NUS Museum’s Ng Eng Teng collection, but its display at the National University Health System building also demonstrates its quality in transforming the aesthetic experience of public space. Our appreciation to Mr Aw Eng Teck, Director of Global Alumni Network at NUS Business School, for generating awareness of the Museum’s Ng Eng Teng collection which facilitated this donation. For this valuable opportunity to showcase the mural at a well-designed location that can only accentuate the qualities of the sculpture, we are thankful to Professor Lee Chuen Neng of the National University Health System. The range of works undertaken to recover and re-site the mural was extensive, facilitated by the Museum curatorial and collections teams consisting of Karen Lim, Cindy Wong, Devika Murugaya and Donald Lim. We are grateful to staff of the Garden Hotel and National University Health System for contributing to the preparation of various sites. For their professional expertise, technical advice and commitment, we thank Associate Professor Gary Ong Khim Chye of NUS Department of Civil Engineering, Lawrence Chin of The Conservation Studio, Patrick Chia of the Design Incubation Centre and staff of AI Technologies (S) Pte Ltd, Zoox Pte Ltd and Helu-Trans (S) Pte Ltd.
A Mural in the New Nation

Foo Su Ling

Asian Symphony is a low relief mural of figurative forms surrounded by lush foliage and a variety of floral specimens. Made by Singapore sculptor Ng Eng Teng in 1971 for the Garden Hotel, it alludes to the harmonious intermingling of the three main ethnic groups within the peaceful, sunny and green paradise of Singapore. The commissioning of the piece and its theme may be viewed in the context of civic life and nation building in Singapore during the 1960s and 70s. This essay attempts to understand the mural in relation to two prevailing national discourses of the time – transforming Singapore into a picturesque and cultivated society, and fostering a sense of national identity through the arts.

Ng Eng Teng, Asian Symphony, 1971, Oil on canvas, 180 x 514 x 19 cm

The ‘Garden City’

Social discourses have long been catalysts for fascinating artistic innovations. The garden-themed Asian Symphony brings into focus the debates on and efforts toward transforming Singapore into a clean, green and tranquil ‘Garden City’ during the first two decades following independence. The imagery on the mural offers a visual interpretation of the ideals which were popularly associated with the Garden City concept at that time.

Over the century and a half from the founding of modern Singapore, impressive economic growth was experienced and the population expanded. Urban development, however, did not keep pace and on the eve of self-government in 1959, the Central Urban Area spanning both north and south of Singapore River was a scene of decay - congested roads; severe overcrowding in shophouses; slums; insanitary living conditions; widespread diseases and unemployment. The new government’s priority was finding solutions to these problems. To generate a steady stream of jobs, a policy of rapid industrialisation focusing on export-oriented, labour-intensive manufacturing was adopted. Housing shortage was addressed through large-scale public residential projects in suburban neighbourhoods.

Despite these bread-and-butter concerns, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew presented a vision which has since served as a compass for the development of Singapore’s physical landscape – urbanisation would go hand in hand with nature and concerted efforts would be made to nurture green spaces for the benefit of the general public. Mr Lee had laid the foundation for this concept in 1963 with the initiation of Tree Planting Day. He was emphatic about promoting a green environment both to soften the harsh realities of life, and as a mark of a gracious society:

We must restore some of the tranquility and serenity of life in our city... We must bring back that appreciation of nature and beauty, of trees and birds, flowers and fountains. These are the hallmarks of a cultivated society. (The Straits Times, 2 October 1971: 1)

From his speeches in later years, it became apparent that the Prime Minister also saw good landscape planning and maintenance as a strategy to convince potential investors that Singapore was efficient and effective, a place they could trust:

To maintain a garden is a daily effort, and if you can maintain it, it means you are capable of punctuality and systematic work. (The Straits Times, Life section, 1 August 1990: 2)

An early project conceived along the Garden City concept was the Raffles Place Garden. Across the road from Clifford Pier, the landing point for sea passengers, Raffles Place was a commercial, retail and transportation hub.

To alleviate congestion, an underground carpark was opened in 1955, replacing street level parking. Although a significant engineering achievement for its time, it had to compete for media attention with the garden built on its rooftop (The Straits Times, 27 November 1965: 11, 14). In his message marking the occasion, Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker declared that the next stage of development should be an improvement in the general appearance of the city. The garden, featuring a ‘flower clock’, lawns, shrubs, flower beds, paved areas and two fountains, would ‘provide an attractive atmosphere in the heart of an area buzzing with commercial activities’.

Another major initiative towards the greening of Singapore was an islandwide competition amongst community centres for the best kept garden (The Straits Times, 25 August 1967: 7). In 1971, a book entitled ‘Selected plants and planning for a Garden City; forty sinus’ was published, offering advice on suitable botanical species for our climate.

The flourishing plant life depicted on Asian Symphony articulates the thrust in those years to nurture Singapore into a lively, thriving Garden City. On the mural, the island is transformed into a garden replete with flowering and leafy varieties. It is not a simple garden of basic flower beds with rudimentary arrangements. Indeed, the main specimens are underplanted with drifts of creepers or layered with other species of varying heights, and each plot is neat and in full bloom. The assortment of plants masterfully interwoven on the mural represents a city which appreciates beauty and possesses the sophistication.
to manage intricacies. The immaculate and blossoming garden suggests industriousness and a keen attention to detail. On Asian Symphony, the city envisioned by Prime Minister Lee comes to life - efficient and effective, yet sympathetic to the human longing for a tranquil life and harmony with nature.

While the illustration of lush greenery on Asian Symphony relates to ideals of the Garden City, it also reflects a development of the Nanyang style, a Malay art tradition characterised by motifs and subject matter associated with the landscape of Southeast Asia, and the everyday life of its communities. The formulation of this style is traced to a group of émigré artists from China, a few of whom taught at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). An aesthetic scheme where elements from both the Chinese painting traditions and the School of Paris (Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Fauvism) were simultaneously applied, the Nanyang style established a new - modern - convention for art in Malaysia. An early articulation of its elements came from Lim Hak Tai, the first principal of NAFA, who declared that art should reflect ‘the reality of the Southern Seas’, ‘the localness of the place’ (Sabapathy 1983:47) and integrate the essence of Oriental and Western art, ‘taking from them aspects that are most suitable for the Nanyang region’ (Lim 1995).

As a student at NAFA from 1959 to 1961, Ng Eng Teng, like others in his cohort, experimented with the styles defined by his teachers; but Ng also responded with acumen. Art historian T.K. Sabapathy notes that Ng’s works demonstrate ‘significant departures from the prevailing aesthetic drive which was directed towards creating untroubled, idyllic images of nature’ in Eng Teng’s pictures there are intimations of disequilibrium’ (Sabapathy 1998:49). Ramshackled Hut is included here as a sample of Ng’s paintings where the viewer is confronted with the region’s ‘disequilibrium’. His sculptural works, Fright being an example, extend his projection of the volatile landscape through depictions of emotional and psychological tensions afflicting his subjects. In Asian Symphony, Ng attempts to reconcile with viewpoints of tropics privileged by his teachers. By the 1970s, however, Singapore had developed along an industrial roadmap and, relative to the era when Ng was a student at the Academy, the elements defining ‘the localness of the place’ had significantly shifted. Consequently, on Asian Symphony Ng transforms the ‘untroubled’ and ‘idyllic’ kampungs and fishing villages illustrated by his teachers to a flourishing and tranquil urban garden:

The garden city image of the mural gives a feeling of confidence and a sense of meditation (Ng Eng Teng quoted in Tan, 1971).

**A civilised society**

Life without art reduces human beings to a level that is hardly distinguishable from the very lowest forms of life. Art expresses the very highest ideals and thoughts which only human beings are capable of. It satisfies their longing for beauty and expression of their innermost [sic] thoughts and feelings (Acting Minister of Culture Wee Toon Boon, 1960, quoted in Chong, 2010: 136).

The appreciation of art and its civilising influence are topics which enjoy a fair share of deliberation in societies with an emerging middle class. In the mid-nineteenth century, urban centres in Europe and the United States saw a rise in their middle classes as a result of industrialisation. To introduce order within the cities, town planning was instituted and one effect of this exercise was the proliferation of public art. European and American town planners and architects collaborated with sculptors in embellishing the urban landscape, at times with tree-sticking works but on other occasions with relief sculptures that were integrated into the structures for which they were made. The impetus for introducing sculpture varied – giving a distinct identity to place, providing imagery to emphasise otherwise anonymous improvements to infrastructure – but this practice became a defining characteristic of the bourgeois state, setting it apart from less affluent, less developed centres with bare streetscapes, unadorned residential blocks and plain administrative buildings.

With a pattern of sustained economic growth from the late 1960s through to the 1970s, there was a similar clarion call in Singapore for the inclusion of art in public spaces. These initiatives were advocated in terms of the benefits they brought to the city and its populace. Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye declared that art could enhance the city’s image with foreigners:

Strategically positioned, sculptural works would make tourists realise that Singapore is also a civilised city and not merely a country of merchants and traders who are only interested in their money, (The Straits Times, 22 April 1967: 4).

In 1972, President Benjamin Sheares suggested that more sculptures and murals should be installed in public places ‘in keeping with the idea of gracious living for the people’. Referring to improved concepts in planning housing estates, he called for local artists, architects and city planners to collaborate in ‘preserving the natural features of the land and the designing of sculptures and other art works to adorn the common gardens and playgrounds of these new housing estates’ (The Straits Times, 26 May 1972: 8).

There was enthusiastic response from private sector organisations. Hotel commissions during that era...

Garden Hotel's location on a quiet street within walking distance from Singapore's major shopping belt made it an attractive oasis to which guests could retreat after a day in the concrete jungle. The inclusion of *Asian Symphony* provided an additional dimension to the visitor’s experience – here within the hotel grounds, it was possible to bask in rustic tropical greenery and simultaneously enjoy modernity and its artistic manifestation. The striking proportions of the mural and its prominent positioning in the main lobby was also a pronouncement of the hotel’s standing as an institution of means with an appreciation of the aesthetics. In a broader sense, it was a projection of Singapore as a progressive, prosperous and refined society.

For commissioned works, apprehending the client’s aims and needs are important and for this, Ng ‘listen[ed] to the commissioners and [tried] to understand the clients, and their desire for a piece of sculpture’. This was followed by ‘research on a suitable design, to tell a little story and to enhance the site’ (Subaipathy 1988: 170). Commissioned works are therefore sites where the interests of the client and the artist intersect. For the artist, even through making a commissioned piece entails being more circumspect towards the expectations of the client, artistic ideas and pictorial interests explored over time are not compromised; often, they are reconstituted, giving rise to fresh designs and arrangements.

‘Dance’ as a theme demonstrates this process. *Dancing Figure* and *Portrait of an Indian Woman* are back-to-back sketches registering Ng’s studies of ladies from this community, including their dance movements. The posture in *Dancing Figure* is sculpted for the maquettes which was produced to communicate *Asian Symphony*’s conceptual theme. A variety of other dance moves are also presented of which the central figure manoeuvring flowing lengths of fabric was eventually selected and reworked for the final mural.

The floral and vegetal theme on *Asiatic Symphony* is another instance where an earlier, favoured topical interest is revisited. Portraitures executed when he was a student at NAFK reveal Ng’s predilection towards this subject matter. In *Gay Poh Kim*, a string of petal flowers adorning the right fringe of the subject’s hair is contrasted with the single large floral print on her batik dress. *Self Portrait* shows the floral scheme appearing on a Chinese painting which forms the backdrop against which the artist positions himself. These early explorations into floral detail and the weaving, climbing and twining nature of plants are brought into play on *Asian Symphony*.
A multicultural identity

Multiculturalism as a facet of national identity has become ingrained in contemporary Singapore society and accepted as a norm in the political, social and cultural spheres. Markedly different circumstances surrounded newly independent Singapore — with a population that claimed a multiplicity of origins, a common identity had to be constructed and such an exercise entailed frequent and persistent reinforcement. From the outset, the Singapore identity was premised upon a multicultural society with equal representation of three major ethnic groups — Chinese, Malay and Indian. Art was seen to be instrumental in visualising this ideology.

Addressing an audience in 1960, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Culture Lee Khoon Choy called for local artists to create works reflecting a multiracial Malayian public, distinct from prevailing productions which focused on individual communities (The Straits Times, 12 April 1960: 4). Six years later, as the Minister of State for Culture, he again expressed this sentiment, this time encouraging artists to “use their brushes to help build the nation” through paintings projecting a “multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural Singapore” (The Straits Times, 6 August 1966: 8).

Chong Sow Pieng’s 1964 oil painting, Scenes of Singapore, responds to this call. Previously located at the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board’s office at Raffles Place, the current whereabouts of this enormous painting is unknown. A photo of the artwork reveals a marketplace bustling with activity. Despite the variety of ethnic groups and the distinct characteristics of each, peaceful coexistence is realised and an atmosphere of harmony prevails. Ethnic dress, traditional habitats and sites of worship exemplify each group’s uniqueness but a sense of shared identity is also articulated through the secular landmarks of the nation – National Theatre, Kallang Park and Victoria Concert Hall.

Ng Eng Teng’s Asian Symphony adopts a less direct approach towards the multicultural theme. The three female figures allude to the main ethnic groups, but the artist’s thematic and formal interests assert their primacy in the composition. Mother and Child defines a theme with which Ng is frequently associated, and which he explored with intensity throughout the 1970s. The outcome of his experimentation with form-making using the voluminous, globular shape is crystallised in the figures to the extreme right and left of the mural. Sabapathy identifies The Beginning (Sabapathy 1998: 138) as the genesis of this bulbous composition. Indeed, this sculpture provides the basic foundation from which a range of compositional potentials are explored. In the drawing of Mother and Child, the natural shape is stretched to create both a stable base and a protective cushion for the child. Queen of the Orient demonstrates an early use of this form in figurative sculpture; the upper body is reduced and the abdomen amplified to emphasise the steady dignified posture of the queen. These compositions are exaggerated with remarkable effect on Asian Symphony.

Throughout his career, Ng adapted and developed this spherical form for different series of his works. In the 1970s, it appeared in a series depicting figures curled into foetal positions, lost in emotions of fear or fright (example Fear II). This form provided the basis of his experimentation into mobile sculptures, such as Tension, which mobilize in response to human touch. The 1980s and 90s saw Ng adopting more abstract figurative schemes, Drippy Dancer being an example. In these renditions, the figure is reduced to the biomorphic form combined with other fundamental shapes that suggest certain facial features or parts of the anatomy.

Foo Su Ling is a curator at NUS Museum. Her projects include Materializing the Figure (2010), Southeast Asian Ceramics: New Light on Old Pottery (2009); Of Fingerbowls & Hanibles: Chris Yip voyeues through the Baba House (2009); Sculpting Life: The Ng Eng Teng Collection (2008). She currently oversees the NUS Baba House.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Sabapathy, T.K., 2003, Configuring the Body, Form and Text in Ng Eng Teng’s Art, Singapore: NUS Museums.


The Straits Times, various issues.

Tracing Two
Ng Eng Teng Murals

Asian Symphony was commissioned by the Garden Hotel for its lobby in 1971. This novel creation was featured in both The Sunday Mail’s Weekend Magazine and The New Nation where the mural’s creator, Ng Eng Teng, described the theme as being ‘inter-related with life movements of various races in South-East Asia’ (The New Nation, 12 June 1971). A smaller mural, Tropical Rhapsody, was commissioned a year later for the hotel’s lounge.
In August 2009, the National University Health System (NUHS) took up the offer to host the mural. Karen Lim, Assistant Director at NUS Museum who led the evaluation process recalls the project:
Finding a suitable host site was a big challenge. It took about four years and we approached at least five other departments. In the end they declined either because a suitable space could not be found or they could not get the budget to install the mural. We were fortunate to have approached NUHS at the right time. Construction of the building was still in progress and they agreed that incorporating the mural as part of the courtyard would enhance the surroundings. This was a project that brought together professionals from a range of disciplines – besides our museum colleagues, there was our partner from The Conservation Studio, NUS Design Incarnation Centre, NUS Civil Engineering Department, and Zook Pte Ltd which handled the engineering works. It was truly a multidisciplinary collaboration. (Personal communications with Karen Lim, 2010)

While Asian Symphony was being dismantled, a staff who had served in the hotel for years spoke about ‘the smaller mural’ in the café. With the hotel management’s consent, this smaller piece (Tropical Rhapsody) was examined and found to be much easier to dismantle. Tropical Rhapsody was also subsequently donated to NUS Museum and is presently installed in the Museum’s Ng Eng Teng gallery.

Mr. Keith Chua, Managing Director of Kechara Pte Ltd, informed NUS Museum in 2006 of the firm’s intention to donate the mural to the Museum’s Ng Eng Teng collection. Due to its extensive size and the lack of information on how the mural was initially installed, two major factors had to be evaluated before accepting the donation – a place to which the artwork could be relocated, and the least destructive method of dismantling. The new host location had to be selected such that the piece would integrate with its surroundings. This proved to be challenging not only because of the mural’s size but the fact that it was, as described by the sculptor, ‘a piece of work for a definite place’ (The New Nation, 12 June 1971).

In the early 1980s, the hotel was bought over by Kechara Pte Ltd. In 1983, the new owners added a wing and relocated the lobby. The original lobby area was converted to a conference room and the mural became a part of the room. The lounge area was converted to a café. As Tropical Rhapsody did not match the theme of the new café, a false wall was constructed to cover the mural.

Removing the false wall covering Tropical Rhapsody, 2010.

Asian Symphony in the courtyard of National University Health System building, 2010.

Ng Eng Teng, Tropical Rhapsody, 1972. Clintert ondu, 122 x 275 x 11 cm.
Dismantling from Garden Hotel

An endoscope, a tube with a video camera and light, was used to determine how the mural was mounted to the wall.

The investigations showed that the mural was supported by metal anchors which were cemented to both the wall and mural. This matches the markings on the preparatory drawings made by the sculptor.

Before dismantling, the mural was cleaned and a procedure called ‘facing’ carried out.

Facing involves applying a layer of glue followed by overlapping layers of paper to protect the mural’s surface. Tests were conducted to determine the suitability of materials – rice paper with a water-based glue were eventually used.

After the facing procedure, the mural was covered to protect it from falling debris during hacking and dismantling.

Installation at National University Health System Building

The dismantled panels were packed in custom-made handling crates and transported away for storage and repair.

A mounting method was devised which would enable non-destructive removal of the mural in future.

A modified pallet stacker was required to hoist the panels for installation.

After installation, the facing paper was removed and the mural cleaned.
Virtual Conservation

The dismantling of Asian Symphony from its original location at the Garden Hotel was an extensive undertaking involving many variables. In view of the uncertainties, it was decided that the mural would be scanned so that detailed records would be preserved in the event of inadvertent damage to or destruction of the artwork during dismantling. A technique known as ‘3D Scanning and Rapid Prototyping’ was used to digitally capture three-dimensional information of the mural. As a test, a scale model was fabricated from the captured data. The exercise revealed the potential of this technique for virtual conservation and restoration, especially in situations where conservation of the actual artwork is impracticable.
PREPARATION

The equipment comprises a hand-held scanner connected to a computer loaded with the scanning software.

Circular reflective stickers are applied to the mural at 10cm intervals. They serve as physical markers that the scanner detects and uses to measure distances and depth on the mural.

Before scanning, the mural is sprayed with white talcum powder to produce a matte surface. Reflections from glossy surfaces can result in inaccurate readings.

SCANNING

The scanner is moved slowly in order for the dots to be properly mapped. It took one week to scan the 10 panels of the mural.

Voids appear on the images when angles on the object are too acute or abrupt for the scanner to pick up. The voids (light blue patches) are touched up during the post-processing stage.

POST-PROCESSING

Voids on images are patched and the mural is rendered.

To help with visualisation of the final product, the object can be rendered in a range of materials such as plastic, bronze, glass and wood.

PRINTING

The digital images are sent to a 3D printer which works out an optimal placement of the pieces for printing.

The object is printed with liquid photo polymer, a synthetic material similar to plastic. Printing is done in layers, each measuring 16 microns, or 1/125th of a millimetre.

As each layer is sprayed, the printer emits a flash of UV light which ‘cures’ the plastic immediately, causing it to solidify.

The printing of this 1/20th scale model measuring 9 x 46 x 1 cm took approximately 16 hours.
NUS Museum

NUS Museum is a comprehensive museum for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional art and culture, and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections and exhibitions. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks divided across four collections. The Lee Kong Chian Collection consists of a wide representation of Chinese materials from ancient to contemporary art; the South and Southeast Asian Collection holds a range of works from Indian classical sculptures to modern pieces; and the Ng Eng Teng Collection is a donation from the late Singapore sculptor and Cultural Medallion recipient of over 1,000 artworks. A fourth collection, the Straits Chinese Collection, is located at NUS' Bale House at 157 Neil Road.

NUS MUSEUM
University Cultural Centre
50 Kent Ridge Crescent,
National University of Singapore,
Singapore 119279
T: (65) 6516 8817
E: museum@nus.edu.sg
www.nus.edu.sg/museum

Opening Hours:
10am – 7.30pm (Tuesdays – Saturdays)
10am – 6pm (Sundays)
Closed on Mondays & Public Holidays

Getting Around:
SMRT Bus No. 184 from Choa Chu Kang Interchange
SBST Bus No. 96 from Clementi Bus Interchange / No. 111 from Hougang Central Interchange / No. 33 from Bedok Interchange

National University of Singapore