

INHERITED & SALVAGED

Family Portraits from the Straits Chinese Collection



Introduction



Artist Unknown
Portrait of Lady in Chinese Blouse and Skirt
c. 1900, Indonesia (Java)
Oil on Canvas, 92.3 x 58.7 cm
Gift of Agnes Tan Kim Lwi



Artist Unknown
Portrait of Man in Mandarin Collar Jacket and White Trousers
c. 1900, Indonesia (Java)
Oil on Canvas, 92.3 x 58.7 cm
Gift of Agnes Tan Kim Lwi

This exhibition presents over fifty portraits of Peranakan Chinese individuals and couples dating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The collection represents the vision, passion and effort of one individual – Peter Lee, honorary curator of NUS Baba House – who, over a period of several years, actively sought and collected oil and photographic portraits from sources in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The Baba House (157 Neil Road), a project conceived to raise public awareness of the Peranakan culture and heritage provided an initial impetus, but focus soon evolved to develop a body of artifacts that significantly formed part of a Peranakan home at the turn of the twentieth century. Their acquisition and use, while not unique to the Peranakan community, serve as important records of familial relations and social networks, changing conventions and tastes, and expressions of cultural outlook and projections of status.

The subjects of the portraits vary from individuals to

couples, from known to unidentified personalities. A coherent grouping of portraits can be attributed to the Wee family, consisting of Wee Boon Teck, his grandson Wee Eng Cheng who owned 157 Neil Road, and Wee Eng Cheng's mother Goh Boh Tan. Identities of the subjects depicted are generally confirmed through the acquisition sources. However, many of the subjects depicted will likely remain unidentifiable. Among these is a pair of portraits of a couple (*Portrait of Lady in Chinese Blouse and Skirt* and *Portrait of Man in Mandarin Collar Jacket and White Trousers*) likely to have originated from Java and painted at the turn of the twentieth century.

Where names of the sitters and families could not be identified, their association to the Peranakan communities can be inferred by way of costumes and ornamentations, in particular the traditional *baju kurung* and *baju panjang* of the female subjects. While some portraits are readily identifiable to the Peranakan communities, others are open



Low Kway Soo & Co.
Portrait of Wee Boon Teck
1902, Singapore, Graphite on Paper, 66.5 x 44 cm
Gift of Wee Lin



Low Kway Song
Portrait of Man in Three Piece Suit with Orchid on Lapel
1917, Malaysia (Penang), Oil on Photograph, 49 x 33 cm
Gift of Agnes Tan Kim Lwi

to speculations. Nevertheless, they are indicative of the range of materials and pictorial conventions – from oils to inks, photographs and coloured photographs – providing potential insights into their production and use. For the sitters and families that commissioned these works, the emergence of photography and western-style painting studios provided newer choices. Devices such as bodily and head postures, depth of field, light contrasts and paraphernalia were mobilized to contextualize the status of the sitters in relation to their cosmopolitan affluence, although not ignoring the Chinese tradition of ancestor portraits. It forms a dialogue between traditional conventions and newer approaches to likeness and personalized identities. The outcomes illustrate the changing status of the studio artist as well as the evolving and expanding trend among their clients to regard the commissioning of portraits as a significant aspect of image making, to affirm self-regard or as social projections. Among the best known studio artists were the Low Brothers and two portraits within the collection are attributable to them – *Portrait of*

Wee Boon Teck by Low Kway Soo & Co. and Low Kway Song's *Portrait of Man in Three Piece suit with Orchid on Lapel*.

Put together for its potential in expanding the comprehension of Peranakan material history, the collection can also be studied in relation to the domestic spaces in which portraits were set, inviting speculations into their roles and purpose. Without adequate documentation, opportunities to restage their displays at family altars or rooms are limited. However, a cluster of paintings, some maintained inclined in their original wooden stands, offer a setting in which the paintings are to be regarded in a typical home. Many of the portraits were restored prior to the exhibition. Nonetheless, they are in varying conditions and solicit deliberations and discussions into their changing status over time as they are kept or eventually displaced, and the museum's role in the prospects of these valued inheritance and salvaged artifacts.

Behind the Scenes:

The Portrait Studio

Daphne Ang

The turn of the twentieth-century heralded new techniques and technologies in photography, supplying the growing patronage of portraiture amongst the rising class of the nouveau riche. However it is not to say that photography totally replaced the expensive hand-made luxuries of painted portraits with cheaper 'mechanical imitations'.¹

A large majority of the portraits of prominent Straits Chinese were commissioned posthumously, indicating that the portrait was either painted with a photographic reference or purely from imagination. While the identities of the persons depicted in the portraits that were inherited directly from family sources are clear, many images salvaged from secondary sources provide little or no provenance.

One of the major problems that arise from dealing with late nineteenth early twentieth century portraiture in these migrant settlements is the issue of anonymity. The need to ascertain the origins of a portrait is vital as images are shaped only through the context in which they are produced and seen. Crucial enquires are often left to conjecture – concerns such as who was the artist or photographer, who commissioned them, and where and how they were displayed. Often problematic to ascertain if not found on the portrait itself is the knowledge of who the subject(s) was, when it was commissioned and for what occasion and purpose.



Artist Unknown

Portrait of Lady in Baju Kurung and Cirebon Batik Sarong

c. 1890, Indonesia (Java), Oil on Canvas, 58 x 42.5 cm

Gift of Agnes Tan Kim Lwi

Portrait of Lady in Baju Kurung and Cirebon Batik Sarong with Black Designs presents this problem. The sheer lack of provenance renders the portrait meaningless if seen on its own. However despite the ensuing frustration in dealing with the anonymity of this portrait, there are ways of attributing meaning to the portrait of Jane Doe. A walk around the exhibition will show other portraits executed in a similar manner, almost as if following a template. The subjects are also depicted dressed in long black tunics and monochrome batik sarongs characteristic of the textiles created in the north coast of Java (*Pasisir*). Many portraits show subjects seated next to an ornamental table displaying a standard range of symbolic objects including porcelain teacups, a vase of fresh flowers, antique objects and the

occasional ornamental clock to complete a contemporary setting. This portrait seen in context with others of similar studio aesthetic indicates a normative convention.

This standard setting was first seen in China in the 1850s where it became codified as a formulaic style after portraitists started to use the same, repetitive arrangement in studio paraphernalia. Many travellers have noted the factory-line operations of portrait studios during these periods.ⁱⁱ This was because ‘copying’ was a common artistic practice in China and was also considered a way of ‘learning’ from old masters.

A 1856 article in *Chinese Commercial Guide* reveals workshops in Canton, Whampoa and Hong Kong, where ‘maps and charts are copied, and a few where portraits are well taken...’ As many nineteenth century Chinese photographers were also (and originally) miniature painting artists, a typical portrait studio would provide photographic services, options for hand-coloured photographs and painted portraits copied from photographs. The practice of replicating images was also a standard service provided by portrait studios in the early Southeast Asian Chinese settlements. Since these replicated images comprise the bulk of the production, they are helpful in profiling the average standards of portrait production.

The more visually noticeable portraits, for reasons of high artistic merit or the prestige of the individual depicted (*Portrait of Tan Jiak Kim* for example), is likely be of the highest standard of production and therefore cannot be used as a benchmark of the artistic standards of the time. Hence a basis for comparison can only be made by contrasting images of the iconic with images of the anonymous.

The NUS Museum collection comprises portraits that represent not only the Peranakan Chinese communities in British Malaya but also the communities in the Dutch East Indies, thus providing a comprehensive view of the various levels of production and patronage in both the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Nusantara.

Hence, the collection can be fully engaged to investigate issues pertaining to the industry of portrait making, photographic practices and patronage, as well as



G R Lambert & Co.
Portrait of Tan Jiak Kim
c. 1900, Singapore, Photograph, 71.8 x 46.6 cm
Gift of Winson Tan in memory of Edward Tan Tian Leong

museological issues concerning acquisition, collecting and display. Since portraits are defined by the context in which they are produced and seen, its display must allow for these ‘relics’ to project meaning. The museum is now entrusted with the task of salvaging and excavating the more emblematic fragments.

Daphne Ang, is a PhD candidate in the department of History of Art and Archaeology at SOAS, University of London. Her doctoral research investigates the production of portraiture under the patronage of the Straits Chinese society in pre-independence Singapore.

ⁱ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representations: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Palgrave Macmillan (1998), p. 39

ⁱⁱ In 1872, John Thompson contributed two articles to the *British Journal of Photography* recounting the production-line style in Hong Kong’s painting workshops where ‘one artist sketches, another paints the face, a third does the hands, and a fourth fills in the costume and accessories.’

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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 8,000 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 Baba House at 157 Neil Road.

NUS MUSEUM

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Opening Hours:

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

The texts in this brochure are excerpts from a catalogue to be published in conjunction with the exhibition.

Cover image: *Portrait of Couple, Man in Mandarin Robe and Lady in Baju Kurung and Sarong with Stylized Luk Cuan Motif* (detail)
Collection of NUS Museum



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