

Publication: Newsweek

Date: Oct 15 2007

Headline: An Emergency in Art

Culture

# An Emergency in Art

An exhibit in Singapore reveals the different ways paintings can be used to promote a political cause.

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**T**HE MALAYAN EMERGENCY, A term used by the British colonial government to describe its guerrilla war with the Malayan Communist Party in the 1950s, is a dark, rather neglected period of Singapore's history. Indeed, it's hard to imagine that today's city of orderly streets, where a permit is required for more than five people to assemble, was once a hotbed of political and social upheaval with regular worker strikes, student protests and race riots.

During those tumultuous times, the two sides shared one common goal: the "Malayanization" of art and culture. The British colonial powers thought that promoting indigenous culture would win the hearts and minds of the local population in its anti-communist war—the first step toward greater cohesion among the region's diverse ethnic communities. At the same time, the left-wing youths they were fighting supported Malay culture as the path toward independence.

Art was a powerful propaganda tool for both sides. Works produced by two significant art societies aligned with those opposing sides are now on display in "From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency" at the Singapore Art Museum (through Oct. 31). Works by the British-backed Singapore Art Society depict a gentle life in the tropics, where fishermen and farmers go about their tasks peacefully; across the gallery the social-realist Equator Art Society's paintings reflect the much grittier experiences of the local population.

The exhibition presents videos of several of the artists from both sides recalling their memories of the period. In one, Ho Kok Hoe, who headed the Singapore Art Society in the '30s, recounts how its members included famous local artists like Chen Wen Hsi, Georgette Chen and Liu Kang, who all played an important role in developing the Nanyang style, a fusion of Eastern philosophy and subject matter with Western esthetics, style and composition.



DUELING BRUSHES: Cheong Soo Pieng's peaceful 'Chinese Girl' (top), Chua's 'Epic Poem of Malaya'

The Singapore Art Society's paintings depict romanticized scenes of everyday life, far removed from the turmoil in the streets. Cheong Soo Pieng's "Seaside," painted in 1951, is a calm rendition of fishermen, while Liu's "The Padang" shows a lone figure maintaining the grass in front of the Supreme Court and city hall—a symbol of

the British authority's orderliness, explains the show's curator, Seng Yu Jin. "While there is scant evidence of a direct British control on the subjects or style the Nanyang artists adopted, this does not exclude the possibility of them having an influence through their patronage," says Seng. "Artists could have been encouraged to paint certain subjects because they knew that such works would sell well with expatriates."

By contrast, the Equator Art Society wanted to use art, theater, literature and music to awaken a Malayan consciousness in the hope of forging independence. It also aimed to critically portray the living conditions of the working classes. "We were all very idealistic," recalls artist Koeh Sai Yong, who was part of the group. "Political groups and art groups fought for the same things: to pave a smoother route for Malaya at the time."

The most famous painting to embody that spirit is Chua Mia Tee's "National Language Class," which depicts a group of Chinese students learning the Malay language Bahasa Melayu. Scribbled on the chalkboard behind them, the phrases "What is your name?" and "Where do you live?" go beyond a simple language lesson and touch on the core issue of cultural identity. In "Epic Poem of Malaya" (1959), Chua depicts a group of students listening earnestly to a man reading nationalistic poems about Malaya. A hint of light in the dark clouds signals better days ahead with the arrival of independence, suggests Seng.

Singapore and Malaysia were briefly united following independence, but the countries separated in 1965, putting an end to the Malayanization ideal. Still, the issue of art as a propaganda tool remains current; maintaining social harmony in Singapore's multiracial society is one of the key issues dictating the government's censorship of the arts today. ■