

Singapore Art Museum: A Retrospect

THE SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM (SAM) was officially opened on 20 January 1996 by Singapore's Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong. The museum is the first of a series of museums to be developed by the National Heritage Board in the new Arts and Heritage precinct. It looks back on two years of art policy of a museum that is devoted to the study and preservation of the contemporary art of the Southeast Asian region.

The building that houses the SAM is a carefully restored National Monument. The former Saint Joseph's Institute (1867), a school for Roman Catholic boys, was designed by a French priest and architect, Father Charles Benedict Nain. Restoration and construction work on the baroque-style classical buildings of the institution started in 1993 and was completed in 1995. The newly restored building has thirteen exhibition galleries of varying sizes located in the central Building, and the newly added Queen Street Wing.

The mission of the SAM is to preserve and present the art histories and contemporary art practices of Singapore and the Southeast Asian region so as to facilitate visual arts education, exchange, research, and development. However, according to Dr Earl Lu, the Singapore Art Museum Chairman, the exhibition programme is by no means to be confined to Singapore and Southeast Asian art. 'We have the whole world in our view and in our mind. As the first international standard art museum in Southeast Asia, we should be bringing in exhibitions which Southeast Asians would otherwise have to go to other countries to see'.

As the national art gallery, the SAM houses the national collection and research and presents Singapore's heritage and contemporary culture. The SAM collection includes 3,000 works, the core of which originated in Singapore and Malaysia. According to the SAM Director Mr Kwok Kian Chow, the first goal of the museum is to foster and facilitate curatorial and artwork exchanges with institutions and organizations in other countries and promote cross-cultural dialogue in the visual arts.

The highlight of the inauguration of 1996 was the exhibition 'Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art' (21 January 1996-21 April 1996).

The show investigated and made sense of the development of modern art in Southeast Asia from the perspective of insiders. In contrast to existing writings by Southeast Asians it proposed to cross national boundaries by employing themes to the region either historically or culturally, by discussing the art of each country against these themes, drawing similarities or differences, and thereby arriving a step towards defining or discovering a regional identity. The countries under scrutiny were Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The intention was to point out the variety that exists within each country, within each artist. This exhibition was the first of a series that aimed at broadening the appreciation of art and artists in Southeast Asia.

1997 exhibitions

The year 1997 brought two interesting exhibitions: 'Masterpieces from the Guggenheim Museum' (until 10 February 1997) and 'Tryst with destiny-Art from Modern India 1947-1997' (24 October 1997-1 February 1998). The first consisted of 58 masterpieces from the collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, which appeared for the first time in Southeast Asia. They covered the development of the modern art from Post-impressionism to Abstract Expressionism.

For the exhibition 'Tryst with Destiny' the Singapore Art Museum worked closely together with the Centre of International Modern Art, Calcutta, and the national Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. It portrayed the experimentation that evolved during the last five decades and illustrated emergent trends of Indian Contemporary art against the backdrop of the art historical perspective of post-Independent India.

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