

# The art of perseverance

He was poor and his art failed to sell at first, but now artist Lim Tze Peng is renowned



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**H**is fingers are smudged with green and blue ink, and there are spots of paint on the front of his grey pants. A button is missing from his beige shirt. A grin cracks his lined face.

Artist and Cultural Medallion recipient Lim Tze Peng greets me at the door of his three-storey semi-detached house in Telok Kurau with a firm handshake.

"Come in, sit, have some tea," says the 89-year-old in Hokkien-accented but fluent Mandarin. His wife, the diminutive Madam Soh Siew Lay, 85, is sitting on the steps of the front porch wearing a huge smile. Next to her are stacks of canvases and easels propped up against the wall.

As the oldest living second-generation Singapore pioneer artist, Lim is remarkably spry for his age, I discover on my first visit last Monday.

He shuffles unassisted up the stairs to the first-floor living room where afternoon tea awaits. His gnarled but steady hands lift the heavy teapot as he pours the tea into traditional Chinese teacups.

Despite their age, he and his wife manage their household without external domestic help - Madam Soh feels that she is still very capable as a housekeeper. Their six children, who visit them every week, are in their 40s to 60s. The couple have more than 20 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Lim has been married to Madam Soh for 65 years but still seems slightly in awe of her: "She always said, 'Art is your first wife, I'm just your second wife'."

Madam Soh appears stoic about this. "His destiny was very clear: He loved art and was absorbed in it. If an artist does not sacrifice himself and his family, he cannot have success."

And there has been much success in recent years. Such is Lim's worldwide renown that the home-grown artist, who received the Cultural Medallion in 2003, had more than 50 of his works exhibited at China's prestigious National Art Museum last year.

Life! is having tea with this living national treasure of Singapore's art scene just a few days before the opening of his latest solo exhibition. My Kampong, My Home consists of about 50 of his early works depicting long-gone villages, known by the Malay word "kampong".

The show opened last Wednesday evening at the Singapore Management University Gallery and runs till Friday.

The paintings, done in Chinese ink, are among thousands of artworks including ink paintings, calligraphy and oils done by Lim over several decades, many of which are in Singapore's museums and in private collections.

But seeing the blue and green ink on his hands while he poured tea, I realise that even amid the bustle of setting up a show, he is still painting new works.

One of the reasons behind his prolific output, Lim says from behind huge glasses perched on his nose: "When I have that energy, that emotion, I can finish a painting very quickly. The faster I paint, the better the painting is. If I paint slowly, the painting will be poor."

As a second-generation artist, he follows the first generation of Singapore pioneer artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Liu Kang and Georgette Chen. These first-generation artists are recognised for their ability to articulate South-east Asian perspectives in their works through a blend of Eastern and Western painting techniques and elements.

Seen at first hand by this reporter in Lim's living room, the first thing about his Chinese ink paintings that strikes me is the weight of nostalgia and history they carry: He has painted landscapes I am



Best supporting star: Artist Lim Tze Peng credits his wife of 65 years, Madam Soh Siew Lay, for the success he has today. ST PHOTO: LENNE CHAI

entirely unfamiliar with.

Delicate monochromatic washes are interrupted by splashes of colour in the form of ripe bunches of fruit or rows of patterned sarongs. Twisted trees shelter working women in the shade, their facial features obscured. Lim's painstaking care in documenting the past is evident in his delicate and precise linework.

He may be among the ranks of Singapore's pioneer artists but there is a difference: He is a local boy, born and bred. The first generation, on the other hand, was born in China in the early 20th century, later moving to pre-war South-east Asia.

Lim was born in 1921 in a kampung in Pasir Ris, the eldest of seven children. His parents, immigrants from China, were farmers who tapped reared pigs and chickens.

Even after living through Singapore's transformation

from Third World to First, he is still a kampung boy at heart and bemoans the passing of old Singapore. "These days, I still think of painting kampungs. When I sleep, I sometimes dream about kampungs that have long gone."

He is also known for his vivid paintings of the Singapore River and Chinatown in the early 1980s, and with his brush, he has captured a slice of Singapore that has all but disappeared.

These days, his paintings can go for between \$20,000 and \$60,000.

His passion for art began early. Educated in Chinese-medium schools, he took quickly to calligraphy while studying at Guangyang Primary School. He attributes his skill at painting to his foundation in Chinese calligraphy. He recalls: "We were so poor that I had to practise calligraphy on old newspapers."

Despite the lack of materials to work on, by the time he was in Chung Cheng High School, the teenage Lim had started on Chinese ink painting and was winning prizes in school art and calligraphy competitions.

The self-taught artist relied mostly on art books and basic art lessons in school.

His parents could not afford to send him to a specialised art school, so upon his graduation from secondary school, he became a teacher in 1948 at the now-defunct Xin Min School.

By then, he was married to Madam Soh. They got hitched during World War II and their first child was born soon after.

They met during the Japanese Occupation when she fled to a house near his village. Their marriage was an arranged one, brokered by Madam Soh's older sister.

Lim juggled his teaching career with his love of art and calligraphy, eking out time to paint on weekends and during the school holidays.

He says with a laugh: "I would buy art books in secret. I didn't dare tell my wife

because she would say, 'Our family is so poor, why are books for?' I would take them out only when she was away."

It must have been difficult for his growing - and hungry - brood to understand the needs of their artistic dad.

Lim recalls that when they were younger, his children would run away and hide whenever they knew he was about to write his calligraphy because they did not want to help him grind the ink.

With a hint of wistfulness in his voice, he notes that none of his children have the same "artistic genes" as he has. They hold jobs in sales and shopkeeping.

Artist or not, as sole breadwinner of the family and school principal, Lim's duties extended to menial tasks such as sweeping the floors and washing the toilets of Xin Min School.

He says: "I had to do everything. Once, someone in the village died. They asked me to write a funeral oration but I couldn't. Then someone got married, they told me to write something nice but I couldn't. So they started to say, this principal, he is lying, he doesn't really have an education."

"But finally during Chinese New Year, they asked me to write couplets on red paper. I was so happy because I knew I could write calligraphy. And they were all

happy, too, because they felt the words I wrote were beautiful."

He retired from teaching in 1981. Xin Min School started out with about 60 students and blossomed to more than 800 under his stewardship.

His painting career mirrored the same initial hiccups and eventual success.

A roadblock that he met was the use of colour - or the lack thereof - in his work. An art gallery once asked him to paint with more colours hoping that the brighter hues would help sell his paintings.

He says: "I wanted the money, so I painted many paintings with colours. But I felt so troubled and uncomfortable. I painted for two weeks but was still dissatisfied."

"In the end, I thought, forget it. This isn't what I like and it isn't my style. If I can't sell, then I can't sell."

Till today, he is still insistent that in order to sell their works.

His struggles were not for naught. In 1977, he joined the Commonwealth Art Exhibition in England at the urging of pioneer artist and good friend Cheong. They had met while showcasing their works in the same exhibitions.

Lim later found out that his entry, a tropical Balinese scene in muted colours, had won a special prize at the exhibition.

"Till then," he says, "I had doubted myself. No one said I was good and my paintings did not do well. But after I got the prize, I had renewed confidence and I knew that I could walk this road."

He and Cheong went on many trips to Bali together in the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes spending up to two months there to paint. Once, Madam Soh had rushed to Bali after being teased by a friend that Lim had another home there.

Lim laughs as he recalls: "She couldn't take it. She asked, 'Don't you feel hot, painting under the sun?'. And then there was a dog dying, so the stink was incredible, and there was the strong smell of pigs and ducks. She said she couldn't take it and went back to Singapore. She told me that I was crazy."

They may sound like harsh words but during the interview, while Lim has to cajole his wife to sit in front of the camera for the photoshoot, they are affectionate, holding hands and beaming.

He brims with pride when he speaks about her, saying: "Without her, I would never have had the success I have today."

## No end to learning

On my second visit, I take oranges and apples as a gift. Lim again greets me at the door, peers into the bag and says: "Aiyah, thank you so much. Why are you giving me these for? I should be honoured that you are writing about me, and here you are giving me fruits when I didn't give you anything."

Madam Soh takes out the apples and then pushes the bag of oranges back to me, saying that she has kept the apples, so I should keep the oranges.

Oh well. But as before, her artist husband has ink on his shirt. Painting and calligraphy is all that the octogenarian has time for. He says he has no other hobby. studio on he cannot sleep, he goes to his paint at four or five in the morning. At seven, he goes downstairs for breakfast.

One wall of the room is lined with rice paper. A street scene and boats emerge from his detailed brushstrokes, next to columns of sweeping calligraphy written with a firm hand.

Hefty Chinese brushes hang from a tack outside the bathroom, and a table covered with a paint-spattered cloth completes the room.

A devoted collector of Lim's works is Mr Koh Seow Chuan, 71, chairman of the National Art Gallery. He first met Lim in the late 1980s through a gallery owner. He and his wife liked his works so much that their first purchase was a group of about 50 paintings.

Mr Koh says: "He paints in a unique Chinese ink style like no other Chinese ink painter I knew at the time. My wife and I took to his work like ducks to water."

Mr Wang Zineng, 28, curator of the kampung exhibition, adds: "Lim has come to be recognised as one of the most thorough artist-documenters of the landscape of yesteryear Singapore. He was also occupied with perfecting the fundamentals of painting and forging an individual style in painting and calligraphy."

Lim himself counts his most memorable success as having been invited to exhibit his works in China last year, which he considered "a huge honour", ranking that slightly above receiving the Cultural Medallion.

All the same, he wept with both joy and regret when he received the medalion because he felt that he had to apologise to his family for not being there when they needed him, such as helping his children with schoolwork or taking his family out on weekends.

He says: "There are no short cuts on this artistic journey. You need to make sacrifices, big sacrifices."

He pauses, then adds: "Till now, I still feel that I don't paint too well. The road I am walking is endless. There is no end to learning. So I will just keep walking slowly straight ahead."

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