

Georgette Chen: A global artist who found a home in Singapore



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For *The Straits Times*

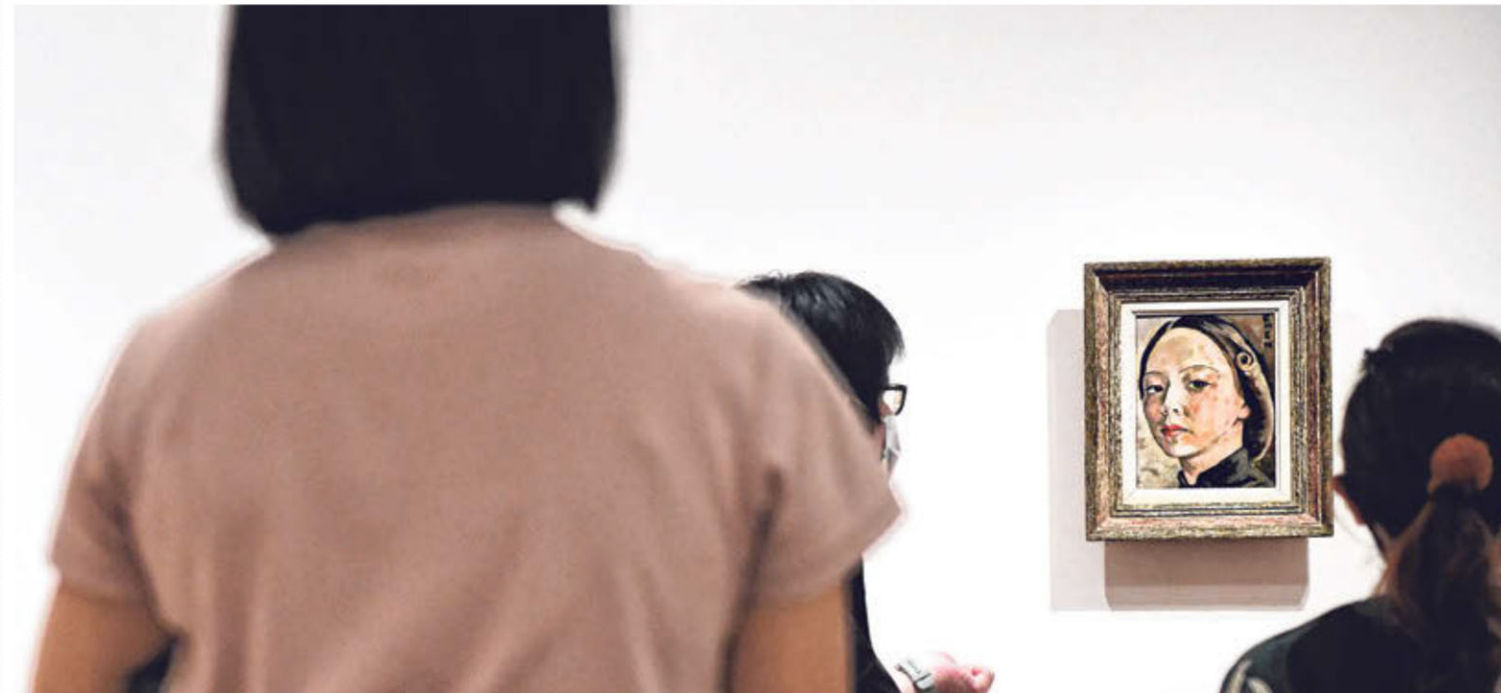
I was a friend of the pioneer artist, Georgette Chen. As a supporter of art and artists, I came to know her when she was teaching at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (Nafa). She lived alone in a small bungalow in Siglap Plain. She was very independent and drove around in a Morris Minor.

On a few occasions, she invited me home for dinner and served me very delicious French cuisine, which she had learnt to cook during her student days in Paris. An elegant and sophisticated lady, she was always well dressed and had her hair neatly combed.

I remember that around 1974, when I went to see her and asked whether she could sell to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs two paintings, which were destined for our diplomatic offices in New York and Washington, she said no. She said that her paintings were her children, and her children were not for sale.

In response, I asked whether I could adopt two of her children, promising to look after them well. She agreed on that condition. The two still life paintings are of her favourite fruit, the rambutan. One painting is still at our Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York. The other has been brought back to Singapore and is at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The National Gallery Singapore is holding a major retrospective of her paintings which I recently viewed. It is a beautiful, joyful and inspiring exhibition. I hope that



The National Gallery Singapore's major retrospective of Georgette Chen's paintings is on till Sept 26 next year. The writer, who knew the late artist, describes the exhibition as beautiful, joyful and inspiring. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

many art-loving Singaporeans, residents and visitors will visit the show before it ends in September next year.

GEORGETTE CHEN'S BACKGROUND

Georgette Chen or Chang Li Ying was born in 1906, in China. Her father was a wealthy antique dealer with businesses in London, New York and Paris. Unusually, for Chinese girls of that generation, Georgette went to a private school in Shanghai. She then attended high school in New York and studied art at two art colleges in Paris.

As a result of her education, she was fluent in Chinese, English and French. From a young age, she decided to become an artist, rebelling against the wishes of her father. Georgette achieved success at a young age. In 1930, when she was 24, one of her paintings was accepted for exhibition by the prestigious Salon d'Automne in Paris.

Before she left France in 1930, to return to China, she was already recognised as an outstanding artist

and her paintings were regularly accepted by various French salon exhibitions.

GEORGETTE'S LOVE LIFE

When Georgette was an art student in Paris, she met and fell in love with a man who was 12 years older than she. His name was Eugene Chen, a son of Trinidad and Tobago but a Chinese nationalist.

Eugene was a supporter of Dr Sun Yat Sen's mission to overthrow the Manchu Qing Dynasty and to establish the Republic of China. When Sun became the first president of the Republic, Eugene served as his acting foreign minister.

After Eugene's death in 1944 in Shanghai, Georgette married his best friend, Ho Yung Chi, in 1947. In 1949, she decided to leave China, because she was unsure whether there was a place for artists in the new China.

The couple moved to Penang in 1951. The marriage was an unhappy one, and ended in divorce.

FROM NEW YORK TO PENANG AND SINGAPORE

Because of the war and the revolution in China, Georgette was poor and had to find employment. In 1951, a Chinese school in Penang, Han Chiang High School, hired her to teach art and her husband to teach the Chinese language.

Having lived all her life in temperate countries, she was experiencing the tropics for the first time. She loved it.

After the couple divorced, Georgette left Penang in 1953 to teach at Nafa in Singapore. And, as they say, the rest is history. She loved Singapore and Nafa.

To assimilate, she learnt to speak Malay and she developed a special affinity for the Malay community. There are many paintings of Malays in the exhibition. Georgette, the daughter of the Chinese, American and French civilisations, became a Singaporean and embraced our multiculturalism. Destiny had brought her to Singapore.

GEORGETTE'S ART

Because of her training in Paris, Georgette's artistic style was very much influenced by the French Impressionists. Her brush strokes and the vibrant colours are very Impressionist.

However, she developed her own distinctive style. Her paintings, whether landscape, still life or portrait, are recognisably works by Georgette Chen. A good artist succeeds in injecting her personality and spirit into all her creations.

Her paintings show us that she respected people of all races and social class. Her striking portraits are of ordinary people. She loved the colours, people, culture, flora and fauna of Malaya and Singapore. No one has painted our humble fruit with so much love and beauty.

MY FAVOURITE PAINTINGS

There are so many beautiful and outstanding paintings in the exhibition that it is almost impossible to pick my three

favourites. For portraits, my favourite is Satay Boy, shown grilling satay by a beach for a mother and her son. This painting is special because it combines portraiture with landscape.

My favourite landscape is Lotus Symphony, her painting of lotus flowers dancing in the breeze. My favourite still life is her large beautiful painting of tropical fruit, including her favourite, the rambutan.

GEORGETTE'S FRIENDS

Georgette had many friends. One of her oldest friends was Soong Ching Ling, who was married to Sun. Georgette addressed her by her Christian name, Rosamund. Georgette also befriended Malaysia's first prime minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman, who was one of her patrons and officiated at the opening of her exhibition in Kuala Lumpur in 1956.

In Singapore, she became a good friend of Lee Seng Gee, the then chairman of the Lee Foundation, Singapore's largest private charitable foundation.

However, not all her friends were famous people. One of her best friends was Rohani Ismail, one of her students at Nafa.

She had a knack for making friends, and had many friends, of all races and social classes.

Georgette was a world-class artist in search of a home. She could have settled in Paris or New York, where she had studied. To our great fortune, she chose Singapore as her home.

She taught many of our second-generation artists.

She was the only woman in the exalted group of pioneer artists, consisting of Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Liu Kang and Chen Chong Swee.

When she died in 1993, at the age of 86, she left us a very rich and beautiful legacy.

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