



Arts & Culture

A rendezvous with art at the National Gallery Singapore

April 4, 2020

I started 2020 with a visit to **The National Gallery Singapore**. This was my first visit to any art gallery and I immediately fell in love with the place. What was initially supposed to be only an hour's worth of stoppage in my solo-art and culture tour in

Singapore, ended up being the greatest experience for me. I ended up spending more than four hours taking in the vibrant, exciting and almost-alive art around me.

The National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution which oversees the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art.

Singapore is a country of both a rich and traumatic history, from a fishing village of Singapura to being a crown colony of the British and surviving the Japanese Syonan, Singapore has now established it as a modern economic and cultural giant and the National Gallery truly embodies this spirit.

The beautiful exterior of the building is the first thing that catches your eye. Situated in the Civic District, the National Gallery is housed in two national monuments – City Hall and former Supreme Court – that have been beautifully restored and transformed into a spectacular venue spread over 64,000 square metres.

Visiting the National Gallery, Singapore:

Check for any ongoing special exhibitions

During the time of my visit, a number of special exhibitions were ongoing including one called *'Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969-89)*. As soon as I purchased my student-discounted entry ticket, this was the first exhibition I laid my eyes on. The artwork from this exhibition reflected rapid modernization in the region during the given period, where artists articulated new approaches to freely reinvent international art movements such as abstraction, realism and conceptual art focusing on folk traditions across Southeast Asia.

I saw some remarkable pieces of art in that gallery including Khoo Sui Hoe's *Children of the Sun*, Pacita Abad's *Fight to Freedom* (which captured the plight of Cambodian refugees who sought to cross the border into Thailand during Vietnam invasion) and Goh Beng Kwan's *Urban Renewal*.



Insanity by Prasong Leumuang



Flight to Freedom by Pacita Abad | [Source](#)

Take a Guided Tour

After exploring this exhibition on my own, I enrolled myself into a walking tour of other exhibitions in the gallery. Lin, our tour guide took us into the Supreme Court building where **'Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th century'** was displayed in all its glory.



The Courtroom setting in the building was intact, thus providing an interesting insight into the judicial fabric of the country. With monochromatic, checkered-tiled floors and gigantic soundproof walls, colonial columns, wooden acoustic ceilings and arched gateways, the gallery's display of artwork attained a magnetic royal charm.

This exhibition of over 300 artworks navigates the art history of Southeast Asia portraying how the region's artists continuously engaged with global artistic

concerns, also demonstrating that art is inseparably linked to the region's tumultuous social and political history. For me, each artwork in this section felt familiar, the range of emotions it evoked in me reminded me of home: India's history and struggle with independence, her present remorse, pride, challenges and celebrations.

My Art Highlights

I found some of the artworks absolutely mind-blowing:



España y Filipinas by Juan Luna [different versions by the same]

artist] | Source : National Gallery, Singapore

España y Filipinas (Spain and the Philippines) (1884) by Juan Luna embodies the true colonial spirit where the Imperial power (Spain) in the form of an angel leads the Colony (Philippines) into the path of light, disguising the sheer exploitation as mutual admiration and guidance.

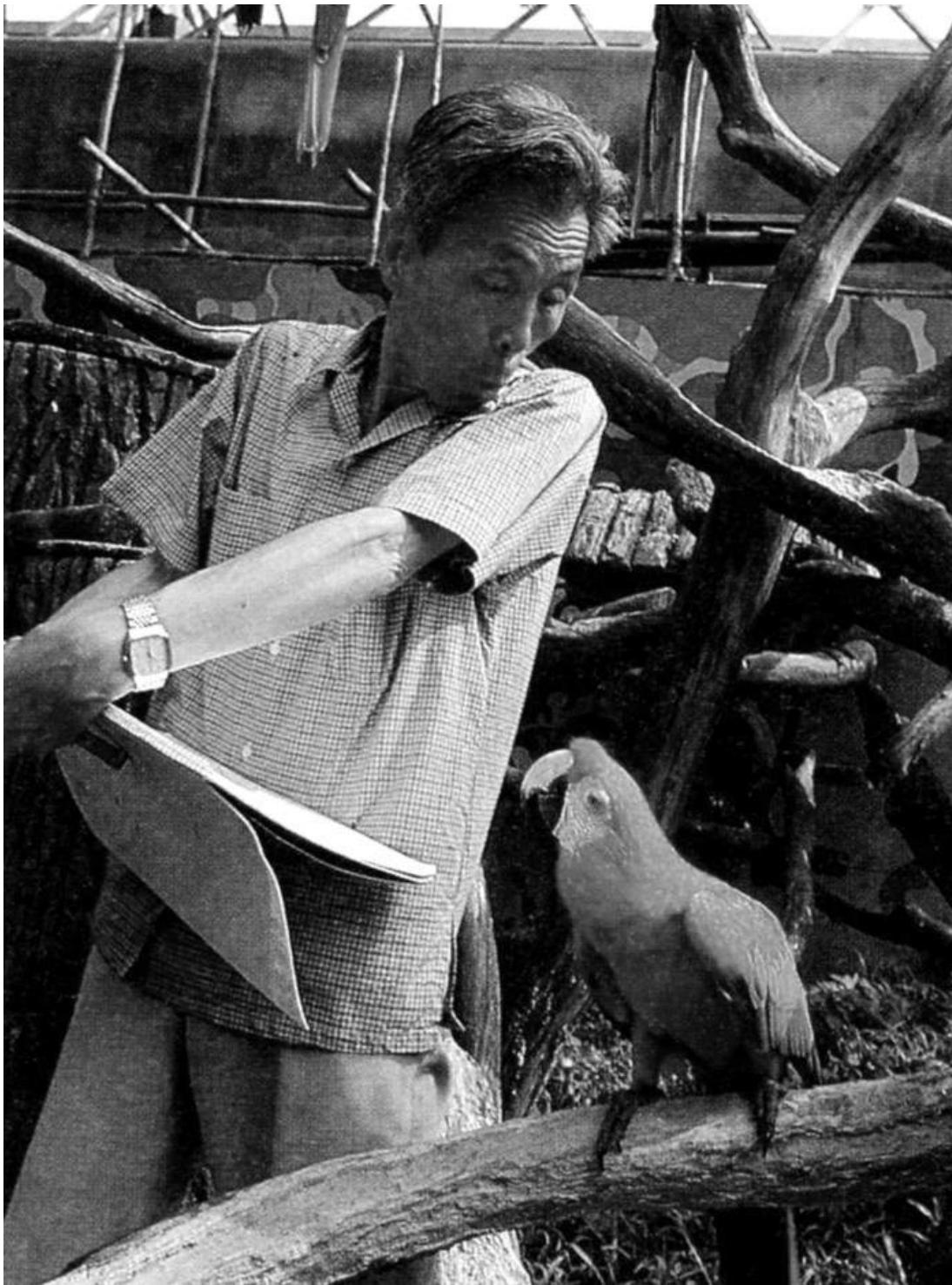
Landscape of Vietnam (1940) by Nguyen Gia Tri was one of the first paintings executed in Lacquer. This experiment, however precise and tedious as a process created astonishing results.

Dancing Mutants by Hernando R. Ocampo (1965) is a reaction to the horrors of the atomic bomb. This was one of my favourites!



In addition to these, portraits of Thailand's King Chulalongkorn and the majestic Boschbrand (Forest Fire) are also displayed.

Other exhibitions displayed at the Gallery include Lim Cheng Hoe's watercolour painting collection called '**Painting Singapore**' and the legendary photographer Chua Soo Bin's '**Truths and Legends: Stories, Portraits, Photography**'. The latter traces the evolution of Chua's practice over six decades; the highlight is Chua's renowned series Legends.



'Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th century' (means "What is your name?" in Malay) was another wonderful exhibition on display. The exhibition focused on portraying art as related to the issues of self and community and what it meant to look at Singapore through its art. It was a collection of 250 works, each reflecting the complexities of life.



CHUA MIA TEE, *National Language Class*

After spending four hours, walking through and in between this art-filled heaven I only felt appreciation to have experienced one of the most beautiful art galleries in the world. I was in awe at the power of visual art to make one feel so many emotions all at once. I think that art is the most polished yet the rawest medium of expression. I learned a lot in this one visit to an art gallery, it's like being exposed to the bare realities of civilizations all over the world, a passing history as one moves from one artwork to another. I believe that art is universal, requiring no language



to be understood, it's above all distinctions made by man. Art is the most human thing possible.

On your next visit to Singapore, make sure you visit the National Gallery. It's absolutely worth it!

Open daily from 10am to 7pm
Free entry for Singaporean residents.

Standard ticket for non-Singaporeans: \$20.
Concessions available.

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