



## Building blocks

'Creative industries' and 'innovation' are but two labels lent meaning by art institutions. What now for once pioneering Malaysia?



WHAT DOES IT mean for a nation, or a city to have an art institution? Would Paris be the same without the Louvre, or Madrid without the Prado? Where would art and our appreciation of it be today without the Tate, the MoMA and the Guggenheim?

The art museum might have started off as a convenient and democratic use of former royal palaces and stately homes, opening up the pleasures of their once exclusive art collections to the masses, but they have by now proven to be an essential part of the cultural fabric and identity of major nations and famous cities.

Art institutions have traditionally been repositories of cultural heritage, building important collections, helping to define and broaden our understanding of art history and its relevance to our society and beyond. Through collections and exhibitions, art in





*The Bait*, 1959, Syed Ahmad Jamal  
**Opposite page** *Kapitan Cina*, 1994, Redza Piyadasa

the institution can educate, enlighten, and enrich successive generations in a community – be this local, national, or global.

Today the art institution has taken on many guises, adapting to changes in the social agenda, to stay relevant, and funded. Institutions might also now focus on experimentation and development, or function as community centres. Art has also come to be seen as another form of entertainment and spectacle, having to present itself in ever louder and more innovative ways. The so-called ‘democratisation’ of art has also demanded more interactive engagement within the institutional setting, letting audiences play a larger role in their experience of art.

In our part of the world, art institutions are a pretty recent phenomenon. Australia and Japan take them very seriously, plotting

art centres across states and prefectures as creative nodes for communities. In the fast-developing nations of Asean, where cultural literacy seems to have taken something of a back seat in the social agenda, art institutions are either non-existent or almost invisible for lack of funding or vision, except in the always exceptional Singapore, which has been pouring money into the development of art infrastructure. Does the art institution have a future for us here in Malaysia?

#### **High hopes**

Art infrastructure in Malaysia got off to a rather good start, all things considered.

As early as 1955, Universiti Malaya set up the University Art Museum, starting the first institutional collection of local art in the country as part of a larger study collection of Southeast Asian cultural

artefacts, which would be later divided between UM and the National University of Singapore. A second outstanding university collection of Malaysian art was begun in 1972 by Universiti Sains Malaysia. Such initiatives show that modern art in Malaysia was recognised early on as an important aspect of culture and education.

The idea of a national gallery was first mooted in 1956 to Tunku Abdul Rahman by the Malayan Arts Council (an independent body founded in 1952). On August 27, 1958, just under a year from Independence the National Art Gallery (NAG) was launched, a two-storey building at 109 Jalan Ampang with four paintings in its collection, making it the first dedicated national art institution in Southeast Asia.

The project’s ambitions were straightforward and well-meaning. ‘Art expresses and reflects the spirit and personality of the people who make a nation. Malaya has many artists whom she may be justly proud of, but it is only in an Art Gallery that the public can see and enjoy their works, and unless the best works of our artists are purchased for a National Collection, they can rarely be exhibited. The foundation of independence has been well-laid, and it is the responsibility of the present generation of Malaysians to build on them a nation which will gain some of the inspiration from a fine collection of works of art, worthily housed and accessible to all.’ (Inaugural exhibition catalogue, NAG 1958, from Redza Piyadasa, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery*, NAG 2002.)

Commentators have regarded the NAG’s inception as a project of national importance. Redza Piyadasa: ‘It was officially realised that art could play a useful function in the construction of national culture consciousness as well as enhancing the reputation of the nation internationally, the Gallery’s formation had also marked a significant development, vital for this nation’s new sense of confidence.’ (as above). Krishen Jit: ‘The opening of the Gallery was a self-conscious declaration that the notion of the modern in the visual arts had arisen in the national consciousness.’ (Introduction, *Vision and Idea - Re-looking Modern Malaysian Art*, NAG 1994).

The NAG’s first Working Committee included such leading figures of the independence years as Mubin Sheppard, Frank Sullivan, Runme Shaw, Ghazali Shafie, Puan PG Lim, and Ungku Abdul Aziz and Ikmal Hisham Albakri, artists Peter Harris and Mohamad Hoessein Enas, and Yong Peng Seng, and S Nayagam. With the help of donations and other public and private support, the NAG would go on to build a substantial benchmark collection of Malaysian art and support local artists through patronage, its programme of exhibitions, and sponsorship. In its first





**Above** *Haji Family*, 1990, Redza Piyadasa  
**Right** *May 13*, 1969, 1970, Redza Piyadasa



decades it was led by such passionate and dynamic figures as Frank Sullivan, and artists Ismail Zain and Syed Ahmad Jamal, who oversaw the Gallery's move to 1, Jalan Hishamuddin (the former Majestic Hotel) in 1984 where it remained until it moved to its current premises off Jln Tun Razak in 1998.

### **The Malaysian art institution today**

*We fast-forward to our 53rd year of Independence*

The field of art in Malaysia has certainly developed and expanded manifold (as was graphically mapped out in *OTE* June, 2009), with no small thanks to the early efforts of such institutions as the National Art Gallery. Artistic production is thriving, art is as relevant and outspoken as ever in the Malaysian experience. Yet across the art community there are grumblings of discontent.

Do our art institutions today enhance our reputation internationally? Do they enhance our sense of confidence, provide us with inspiration? To be frank, our art institutions figure, at best, on the outermost periphery of 'national consciousness' – just get in a taxi and see if the driver knows how to get to the NAG.

Malaysians are in fact quite lucky among regional neighbours to have access to a good handful of government and corporate-funded art institutions. We just don't seem to make enough use of them.

There have been fits and starts, some all-out failures, and the rare gargantuan effort in the story of our art institutions. The University of Malaya Art Museum, later renamed the Asian Art Museum, is today barely heard of even on the UM campus. USM Museum and Art Gallery, now Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, has reinvented itself on a diet of sheer DIY resolve led by its current director, Hasnul J Saidon. An art and science museum with a busy programme of exhibitions, workshops, talks and screenings, it makes the most out of its fine collection of modern Malaysian art, cultural artefacts and scientific exhibits through interactive displays and imaginative outreach

programmes. Looking ahead of the game, it also focuses part of its collection strategy on new media (eg digital/electronic art), a growing area where key art works are still affordable and not sought after by private collectors. It actively cultivates younger generations of Malaysians, especially schoolchildren, who respond particularly well to contemporary art. Penang also has the most active state art gallery, Penang Museum and Art Gallery, which aside from having its own collection, holds regular exhibitions of artists, especially but not only those who hail from Penang.

In the boom years, a number of responsible corporate citizens attempted to initiate art spaces and collections. Most of these faded away during the Asian economic crisis, with two notable exceptions. Galeri Petronas (est 1993) moved into Suria KLCC in 1998, promising a new level of public engagement, professionalism and programming. It rapidly built on its existing collection to include major pioneer and contemporary Malaysian art works. Over the past three years in particular, it has emerged as a strong institutional pillar, putting a big budget to good use on a number of important exhibitions and publications. A recent management change, however, has put the art community on tenterhooks, and we wait to see if there will be a change in policy direction as well. We can also look forward to a brand new, state of the art Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery at Sasana Kijang in Bukit Perdana, slated to open in January 2010. Although the art gallery is only one of the six galleries in the museum, it houses 1,400 art works from the Bank's strong art collection, and certainly looks to broaden and upgrade public awareness of local and regional art.

Meanwhile, for many in the art community and beyond, the National Art Gallery (NAG), or Balai Seni Lukis Negara, seems to have lost its sense of purpose in the past several years. Its low visibility, a leaking roof, bizarre renovations, uproar about inventory slip-ups, a recent high turnover of leadership, and a seemingly

muddled exhibition programme among other things, have cast it in an unfortunate light. The blame has been put on a number of factors – bureaucratic impasse, mismanagement, policy issues, even the greed of private collectors and galleries who have made it difficult for the NAG to acquire the best contemporary works. The new NAG was arguably compromised from the start with a building constructed 'through a privatising process between the Malaysian Government and Yeoh Tiong Lay (YTL) Company', which is essentially unsuited to the purposes of an art institution. Its status as an independent statutory body has also been increasingly encroached upon by ministerial oversight and agenda. The current management under director-general, Dr Mohd Najib Ahmad Dawa, acknowledges that there are issues and its solution seems to be to 're-brand' the institution, engaging artists through efforts such as an art materials shop and an art café, upgrading its newsletter to a magazine and, perhaps paradoxically, engaging private galleries through support programmes and collaborations. The problem however surely lies deeper than such measures alone can hope to reach – growing disillusionment from within and without the institution has steadily eroded the passion, optimism and hope of its early years. As much as the management itself, the stakeholders in the NAG – not so much private galleries in particular who have their own agendas, but artists, and any member of the art community or the general public who cares about our cultural heritage and development, need to find a way to engage with it, to provide feedback and revive a sense of ownership and pride in this somewhat maligned institution. The NAG still has the best and most comprehensive historical collection of Malaysian art in the country, worth the regular visit. A first step would be to instruct that taxi driver how to get there. ■

Next month: Good neighbours

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