



Finding Working Women in the Singapore Art Collection: A Conversation

Dr. Eunice Seng, Amelia P. Ee, and Ella L. Wee

This text is the transcript of the conversation between the author Dr. Eunice Seng and two vivacious secondary school students, Amelia Ee and Ella Wee, during their one-day DBS Singapore Art Gallery visit on 24 November 2023. Of the three hundred works displayed, a quarter featured women as main subjects or as part of the scene setting. Of these, almost one-fifth contain women working and performing various forms of labour.

- Seng: That was a quick walk-through! How many works by women artists did you encounter in all three galleries?
- Ee: I saw nine works by women artists in the first gallery, ten in the second and around twelve in the third.
- Seng: What is your impression of the total collection of works that are displayed?
- Ee: I went through so many works by male artists and so my first impression is that almost all the works are by male artists.
- Seng: I'd like us to review our study to understand the proportion of works of art created by men and women.
- Wee: I counted forty-eight art works with women as subjects in Gallery 1. I'm not sure about Gallery 2. But there were four in Gallery 3. I found about eighty works altogether that contain women, including those with women as main subjects, and with elements associated with women, the feminine and the familial.
- Seng: That's over a quarter of all the works displayed. Would you say that's many?
- Wee: Yes. I had expected much less, but surprisingly there were many male artists who portrayed women as their subjects.
- Seng: I see. And you counted 80 altogether. So, we're looking at around thirty some art works with women in Gallery Two.
- Wee: Yeah.
- Seng: Ok. And how many works are created by women artists? Around thirty?
- Ee: Yes. Wait, hold on. I think the count for Gallery Three may be only nine. Because I just cross-checked my notes with the list on the last three works, and these are by male artists.
- Seng: I see. So, there are about twenty-eight works by women artists in the three galleries. Which ones speak most to you?
- Ee: Honestly, I feel that the works in Gallery 3 are the most unique ones in terms of the variety in the depictions of women. In Gallery 2, most of the female artists did abstract work. They were already starting abstract work in Gallery 2. Like Kim Lim, who does sculptures. For these 3D forms, we need to have our own interpretation of her work. And especially like *Echo* (1967), and there is also one called *Irrawaddy* (1979), where there are wooden pieces stacked like dominoes against the wall and on the floor. (see fig. 1)
- Seng: How do you read *Irrawaddy*?

- Ee: I find it hard to read abstract art, because you often can't make heads or tails of it on its own. You have to get its context. Since I don't know this work's context, I can only assume it's more of an exploration of space in an environment, or something to do with the artist's own manifesto.
- Seng: Can you share what struck you most in terms of women at work in an identifiable context, in a Singapore setting?
- Ee: Before we started, I was sure that there wouldn't be any depictions of women working in the collection in Gallery 1.
- Seng: Why would you think that?
- Ee: Because my impression was that women didn't really have an important public presence. Their expected job was home caretaking, and their primary concern would be their children so, I didn't expect to see paintings showing women in the fields and plantations. For example, there was one painting of two women working in a rice paddy field. (see fig. 2) I think it was painted by a male artist. It's in Gallery 1. I guess I was caught off guard, because I had assumed that prior to very recent times, like from the 1990s onwards, a woman's occupation would be domestic.
- Seng: Earlier you mentioned that you noticed how the women's representation in the paintings evolved as we move from Gallery 1 to Gallery 3.
- Ee: I see that change from women in a domestic setting to exploring their own identity by Gallery 3. Their identity is more intertwined with objects that are associated with them, like their children, or scenes of domesticity like the cooking of food or washing of clothes.
- Wee: Yeah, I agree. I think they were mainly portrayed as caretakers. In the earlier work from the 19th and early 20th century, the woman was shown with her husband, I assume, or with her children and she is usually at home. I have noticed that there are many artworks about children and their mothers, for example *Mother and Child* by Yeh Chi Wei. (see fig. 3) Later, from the 1960s, as Singapore develops, the woman in the art and the woman artist starts to have her own identity.
- Seng: Do you see a loop here? At the start of our journey, we discovered in the early nineteenth century, women working in the plantations and fields. This "objective" documentation of women working outdoors took on a different tone in the paintings of those artists who went to Bali. Then we start seeing more technique-driven creations and women settled in stereotypical gender roles. The concern in these was less about issues but more in exploring the painterly techniques of representation.
- Wee: I think the main change is the artistic view of females. I thought there would be less art works with women as the focal point but surprisingly, many of the original drawings and paintings were of women in naturalistic settings with flowers and fruits. There are not many sculptures on display, but the figurative sculptures were of women. I had thought that women would mostly be figures in the background, and that was quite surprising.
- Seng: What period does this occur in?
- Wee: Um, around the 1950s to 1960s. I am referring for example, to the paintings of Balinese women by the male artists. There were many kampong scenes with women in their homes. But there are also quite a few portraits of women with ambient background that are more focused on portraying women in various familial settings. (see fig. 4 and 5)
- Seng: Why does this surprise you? Before our visit, you made a conservative estimate that we may see only ten art works with women on display.
- Wee: That's true. Initially, I thought the 19th century artists, especially the colonial artists, had more important concerns.

- Ee: [chuckles] Like other priorities...
- Wee: Yeah, they had more pragmatic concerns in using their art, like the paintings of plantations and landscapes of the colony for investments, for prospecting. They were part of colonial transactions then. So, I feel they were more about selling the good points of the land, what they had, and what they could yield in those areas. But then there were a few framed portraits of Chinese women. I also feel that the portrait of the woman as one half of a couple (c. 1910s), presumably husband and wife, at the beginning, and the self-portrait of Georgette Chen (1946) at the end of Gallery 1, is quite special. (see fig. 6)
- Seng: How so?
- Wee: These portraits showed women as independent characters.
- Ee: I feel the depiction of women is dependent on what the artist focused on. In Gallery 1, many artists focused on promoting what was in Singapore, the resources, sights, and scenes in the British colony. There were many paintings of landscapes. I feel Georgette Chen is included in Gallery 1 because she is the only woman artist that falls within this earlier period. She was a Nanyang artist, and the manifesto of a Nanyang artist was to create an art style that was unique to Singapore by combining elements from the East and the West. In Gallery 2, I feel that most of the art works focused on depicting Singapore as it was. And women played an integral role in everyday life, so they were included in these scenes. There were many more women in the paintings of the 1950s and 1960s because they were there. Then in Gallery 3, more female artists appeared such as Amanda Heng. I see more performance art.
- Wee: There is a question I have to ask. Why are there so many unclothed women in Gallery 2? Usually when they are part of the background contexts, they are fully clothed, going about their activities – running a hawker business, minding their children, or working at a construction site. But when they are the focus, their top half is usually uncovered.
- Seng: Are you referring specifically to the paintings by the artists who travelled to Bali and elsewhere in the region?
- Wee: Yes. When they are portrayed in the background among their village houses and with their families they are quite conservatively dressed. So why are they naked in a close-up portrait?
- Ee: It's also important to point out there were no nudes or partially undressed women portrayed in paintings of Singapore at that time.
- Seng: This goes back to what we discussed earlier about the artists going out into places in the Southeast Asia region that seemed purer, more closely rooted to the land, in contrast with a rapidly urbanising modern Singapore at the cusp of independence. The vernacular village settings in these neighbouring places, geographically near yet environmentally distant, offered fertile ground for imagination, fresh approaches, and colour palettes. Do you think the Balinese women in the 1950s were dressed like how they are depicted in the paintings? Or are they the artists' imagination? Or an exaggeration of what they see coloured by exoticization?
- Ee: I think the dressing might have been an exaggeration – the artists' impression of Bali.
- Wee: They could have exaggerated the features, like smoothing the facial and body curves as an interpretation of what they saw. I notice similar depiction of the Balinese women by the same artists, like Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng and others, who went to Bali.
- Ee: They saw the Balinese women and kept depicting them the same way. This was their impressions of Bali. That's how we know from these paintings that this is Bali!
- Wee: So, I think that their drawing of the women was an aesthetic style and less an actual depiction – more an interpretation.

- Ee: Yes, there is one painting by Liu Kang that stands out to me – *Artist and Model* of 1954. (see fig.7) He painted the other artist(s) with their easels painting the landscape and the Balinese people.
- Wee: We googled photographs of Balinese women in the 1950s and saw that there were some who were topless, but most were quite covered. I mean there's artistic licence but these paintings portray the Balinese women selectively.
- Seng: At a time when most were not yet travelling abroad, these paintings informed their viewers of what Balinese women looked like and dressed.
- Wee: The artists probably wanted to distinguish their Balinese subjects from us, modern urban folks, with a distinctive feature.
- Seng: That is a thought-provoking perspective. I'm not sure whether the artists were self-conscious or intentional about this.
- Wee: Or perhaps the women in the paintings were based on the same models and the artists simply modified their features in different settings.
- Ee: No, I don't think so.
- Seng: Why would that be necessary though? Since they had travelled there, would they not have simply painted what they saw in the original settings? Why would it be necessary to stage them?
- Wee: Could they not have observed the scenes and painted them afterwards, using their recollection and imagination to depict the subjects?
- Ee: I think the point was more to encourage people to go to Bali. I think the artists depicted the Balinese woman that way because they wanted their viewers to see the Balinese as exotic. That would encourage curiosity.
- Wee: And they thought the women in the lush settings would attract tourists?
- Ee: Yes, yes. That's just a theory though.
- Seng: This is a rather unexpected point. Why would it matter to the artists if more people visit Bali?
- Wee: Maybe they wanted people to visit and to see what they saw.
- Ee: Yes, by accentuating *exoticness*.
- Wee: But it doesn't seem like a main motive for creating the art. Maybe they just wanted to attract more people to their art?
- Ee: The flashy colours would attract the tourists to the exotic.
- Seng: Yes, but that's also a painterly approach of representing the tropics like how Brazilian artists paint their warm and humid environs.
- Wee: Perhaps most people from Singapore didn't know much about the Balinese, how they looked like and their lifestyles?
- Seng: How different do you see this from the colonizers from Britain arriving to tropical Malaya and Singapore where everything was so different – the tropical versus the temperate climate and vegetation of the British empire? Here, I want to bring us back from Bali to Singapore. Can we identify some works depicting women at work within the context of Singapore that when

placed side by side could allow us to understand how the relationships between women and the environment are described across different times?

Wee: Many paintings in the last section of Gallery 1 have the same name and similar settings so they have all kind of blended in my head, especially the ones of kampongs and Malay houses in Malaysia with women in Baju Kurung. (see fig. 8)

Seng: We'll have to go further back into the 19th century to the plantations in colonial Singapore when the urban limits were confined to the southern river mouth.

Wee: How do we consider women in their working contexts? There are many different types of work, like women taking care of their children.

Ee: And if they are coming back from the market, is that also work?

Seng: For our purpose, we'll situate the women within the historical and social contexts, which almost invariably means that the examples you have raised are all women at work. Now when we return to the 19th century and take the journey again to the contemporary, we will surely see a changing Singapore landscape and skyline. What, for example, were the women doing in the watercolour paintings of Choo Keng Kwang's *Temple Street* (1970), Leng Joon Wong's *Hokkien Street* (1978) and Goh Sing Hoi's *Chinatown* (1980)? How do we understand Singapore's urban and industrial history from the lone female construction worker in Tan Lip Seng's *Tough Job* (1968) and Lai Kui Fang's *Construction of Sheares Bridge* (1976)?

When we look across the depictions of Singapore's urban and rural landscapes, there are places and objects that have disappeared – the kampongs and attap houses, and streets and buildings in Chinatown that even though they still stand, no longer exist as they once were.

Ee: There's a painting called *Vanishing Scene* (1982). (see fig. 9) This work is not by a female artist, and it does not depict female subjects, but it's relevant to our study of Singapore's changing landscape through the decades in the works on display. I think the artist was trying to capture fragments of Singapore, like taking snapshots of Singapore's history, before they are gone. The curatorial description of the painting mentions that the artist knew many of Singapore's iconic landscapes were already disappearing at the time. Maybe he painted this to preserve his memories, and enable future generations to visualize what Singapore might have looked like in the past. This is like the Nanyang artist Cheong Soo Pieng's own manifesto.

Seng: Yes, some works offer themselves more directly as archives of the built environment than others. Which of these works are created by women artists? Shall we go find out?

Wee: I'll study the works in Gallery 1.

Ee: And I will study Gallery 3.

Seng: Let's review our observations and notes again after studying the works we have identified more closely.

Notes on three artworks by Ella L. Wee

G.R. Lambert & Co, *A Pineapple Plantation*, c.1880s. (see fig. 10) There is a woman with a man standing at the front of the photo. They are standing in a pineapple plantation and appear to be doing agricultural work. The woman is wearing traditional clothing, with a long skirt, a long sleeve shirt and a large sun hat. The photo is monochromatic and has a view of trees at the back, with plants around them.

Tan Tee Chie, *A Dark Hell*, 1953. (see fig. 11) There are two women as the focus of the painting, with around three women in the background whose features are not identifiable. The two women are

sitting on the ground with their legs spread open. They seem to be prostitutes, as there are men looking at them contemplatively. They are dressed in samfoo. The woman on the right looks downcast, while the woman on the left looks sad. The setting appears to be in an alley, in front of houses. There are men smoking, and females peering out of their houses. The wood block print is monochromatic.

Liu Kang, *Life on Water*, 1956. (see fig. 12) There are around five to six women dressed in sarongs in this art piece. One is taking care of her child, who is on her hip. There are also two women near the front left of the painting who appear to be washing their clothes, and women at the back feeding birds. These women are doing familial work and are portrayed in a homely sense. Some women are dressed in t-shirts and shorts or pants, while others are in dresses. The setting appears to be a kampong, with houses on stilts, and a river flowing through. There is also a platform made from wood that helps people move around. It appears to be daytime with pale blue clouds, though the ground and sky are painted black.

The image shows three pages of handwritten notes on grid paper. The first page on the left contains a list of artworks with their titles, dates, and artists. The middle page continues the list with more entries, some including brief descriptions or notes. The right page contains more notes, including a section titled '2nd floor - gallery?' and another section titled 'Pictorial sight -> watercolor in art schools + National Society'. There are also some diagrams and additional notes scattered throughout the pages.

Gallery notes by Ella L. Wee © November 2023

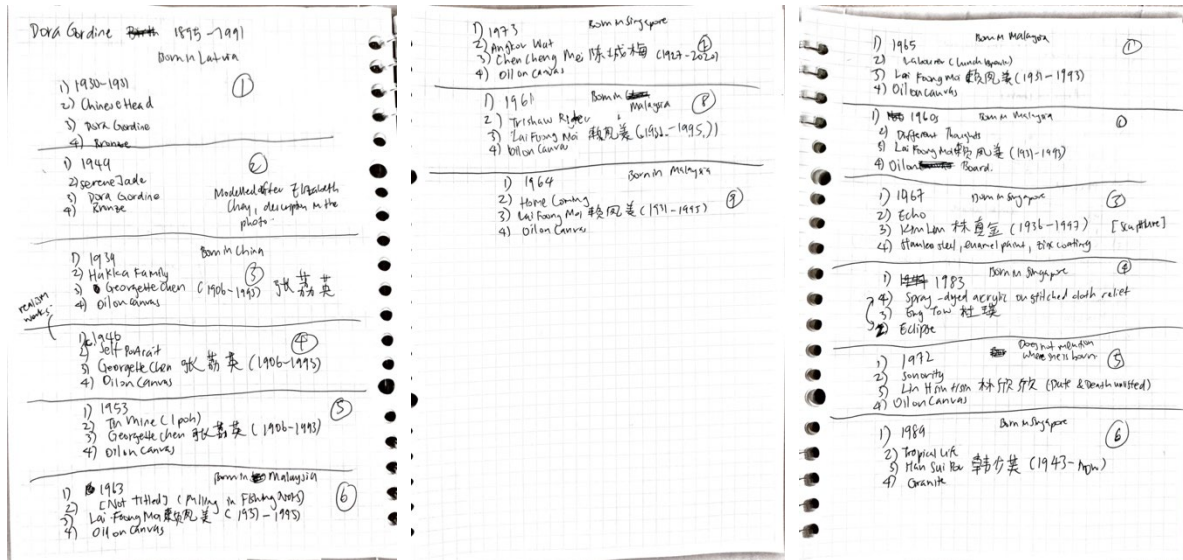
Notes on three artworks by Amelia P. Ee

Lai Fong Moi, *Labourer (Lunch Break)*, 1965. (see fig. 13) There is one Samsui woman in the background of the painting. The two labourers are having a meal. You cannot see her expression as her face is not turned towards the viewer. The setting is not specified, but the woman is a Samsui woman, so it must be in Singapore, from the 1960s to the 1970s. As the woman is eating, I assume the time to be around lunchtime, as it is neither too dark nor too light, suggesting the painting being set in the afternoon, just as the workers are taking a break from work.

Liu Kang, *Life by the River*, 1975. (see fig. 14) There are about thirteen women in the painting. Some people are painted too far away to confirm their gender. The women are doing a variety of different things, some talking to their husbands, some squatting down to talk to each other, walking by the river, feeding the ducks, and washing their clothes in the river. It is a domestic scene, so most of the work they are doing depicts what they do in their daily lives, namely domestic activities. Some are wearing traditional clothing, with dresses, but some are wearing t-shirts and shorts. No expressions can be seen. The painting portrays a quiet scene of life in the 1970s in a kampong village in Singapore, near Pasir Panjang. The timing looks to be in the morning, as you usually wash clothes in the morning so that they can dry in the afternoon sun.

Amanda Heng, *Let's Chat*, 1996. (see fig. 15) There are many women participating in this piece of performance art. They are not literally working but performing and participating in motion by peeling bean sprouts around the table and talking to one another. They are dressed casually, in street

clothes. They have a variety of expressions, as this is a long video. The setting where this is performed is not listed, and from what I know, this art was performed in several locations. I assume this round of *Let's Chat* to be in Singapore, based on the ethnicities of the people participating?



Gallery notes by Amelia P. Ee © November 2023



Figure 1. Kim Lim, *Irrawaddy*, 1979, Wooden Sculpture



Figure 2. Lim Kwong Ling, *Not Titled*, c. 1955-1965, Gelatine silver print on paper



Figure 3. Yeh Chi Wei, *Mother and Child*, 1970, Oil on canvas



Figure 4. Chuah Thean Teng, *Malay Women Grating Two Coconuts*, c. 1950s, Batik



Figure 5. Lee Man Fong, *Balinese Life*, 1960s, Oil on board



Figure 6. Georgette Chen, *Self Portrait*, c.1946, Oil on canvas



Figure 7. Liu Kang, *Artist and Model*, 1954, Oil on canvas



Figure 8. Mohamed Salehuddin, *Malay House, Malacca*, c.1960, Oil on canvas



Figure 9. Leng Joon Wong, *Vanishing Scene*, 1982, Watercolour on paper



Figure 10. G.R. Lambert & Co., *A Pineapple Plantation*, c.1880s, Postcards



Figure 11. Tan Tee Chie, *A Dark Hell*, 1953, Woodblock print on paper



Figure 12. Liu Kang, *Life on Water*, 1956, Oil on board



Figure 13. Lai Foong Moi, *Labourer (Lunch Break)*, 1965, Oil on canvas



Figure 14. Liu Kang, *Life by the River*, 1975, Oil on canvas



Figure 15. Amanda Heng, *Let's Chat*, 1996, A still from the video documentation of performance