

For Immediate Release

An artist's odyssey to forge a Southeast Asian identity in art

The return of National Gallery Singapore's travelling exhibition on the life and work of artist Latiff Mohidin sheds light on his artistic development during his early years in Singapore

Singapore, 19 March 2020 -- Two years after it inaugurated in Paris, National Gallery Singapore's first travelling exhibition of Southeast Asian art, ***Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago***, will return to the Gallery from 27 March to 27 September 2020. Visitors will be able to discover the life and practice of Malaysia's leading artist-poet and how his travels across Europe and Southeast Asia informed his work, which defined a place for this region in modern art.

Featuring more than 80 artworks and writings alongside rare photographs and films drawn from private and public collections in Singapore and Malaysia, the Gallery's exhibition follows a ground-breaking debut at Centre Pompidou in Paris and a successful showing at ILHAM Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in 2018. Its journey from Southeast Asia to Europe and back parallels Latiff Mohidin's own experiences as a young artist from 1949 to 1969, when he embarked on numerous life-changing journeys across British Malaya as a young boy, and then across Europe and Southeast Asia as a student and aspiring artist. With the intention of challenging Western modernism, Latiff Mohidin often asks himself, "how does one advance the mediums of painting, drawing and writing to suit local milieus outside Europe and America?" In telling his story, the exhibition will also feature a new section showcasing early works made during his formative years in Singapore, alongside resurfaced works once deemed lost.

Dr Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore said, "Situating Southeast Asia within global art history is a core focus for the Gallery, and Latiff Mohidin's Pago Pago works are exemplary of a major contribution to this debate. As one of the first artists of the region to imagine 'Southeast Asia' as a distinct aesthetic realm, Latiff Mohidin's practice lends a unique perspective to understand the values and ideals represented in Southeast Asian art and how it engages in dialogue with global art movements."

Revealing Latiff Mohidin's first forays into art in Singapore

In 1949, Latiff Mohidin arrived in Singapore from Kampong Lenggeng, a village in Negeri Sembilan with his mother Hajjah Noor. A cosmopolitan centre for trade and cultural exchange, Singapore was a major transit point to Mecca for pilgrims from across the Malay world, and

Kampong Glam was the city's centre for literary and cultural activity driven by these communities. Latiff Mohidin lived in the Kampong Glam area, where his father Haji Mohidin owned and operated a lodging house for Hajj pilgrims. It was in the urban climate of Singapore that Latiff Mohidin was discovered as an artistic prodigy, hailed in the press as a “boy wonder” with “the gift in his hands”. He was mentored by leading painters and writers of the period, including Suri Mohyani, Abdul Ghani Hamid, Liu Kang and Ho Kok Hoe.

In 1953, at the age of 12, he held his first solo exhibition at Kota Raja Malay School. This early chapter of Latiff Mohidin's life is presented exclusively for this exhibition in Singapore.

Through the display of some of his earliest paintings, alongside photographs and newspaper clippings that trace Latiff Mohidin's earliest encounters with art, visitors will be able to see first-hand how his childhood experiences in Singapore geared him for a life of travel and art in the decades to follow. Indeed, one of the key approaches that Latiff Mohidin adopted from 1949-1969 was *merantau*, a sensibility instilled in his Minangkabau upbringing and heritage, that encourages the community to travel outside of their homeland to seek knowledge and experience from the world.



Kampong Gelam 1949-1954

The exhibition will also feature a hand drawn map of Kampong Glam made by the artist exclusively for this exhibition, which highlights the complex layers of the neighborhood as he remembers it from the 1950s. The Gallery is also collaborating with the artist to publish a special booklet titled *Half Art Half Craft*, which recalls Latiff Mohidin's interactions with personalities in the world of art and literature in Singapore during the 1950s. A series of public programmes are also being planned in conjunction with the exhibition.

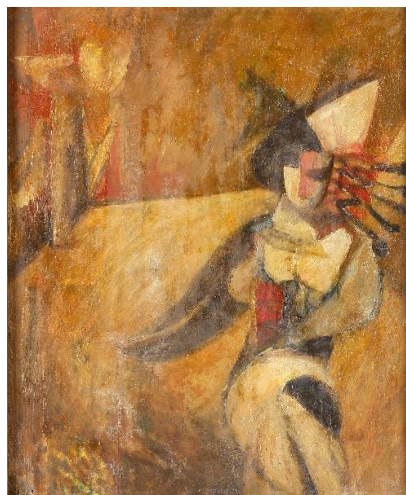
Developing a distinct Southeast Asian aesthetic

Following Latiff Mohidin's early life in Singapore, the other three sections of the exhibition follow the travels which left a lasting impact on the artist and his work.

It was in Germany where Latiff Mohidin took a less-travelled path (many of his peers travelled to Britain) to continue his formal art education at Hochschule für Bildende Künste in 1960. Studying in Berlin, he was exposed to modernist movements such as Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism, as well as the worlds of drama, music, experimental film, cabaret, and jazz. At the same time, the city enabled him to examine links between his own ancestral imaginary and these progressive ideas.

In 1961, Latiff Mohidin encountered Thai and Khmer objects in the Berlin's extensive ethnological museums, which led to the horns and serrated edges typical of his Pago Pago paintings. The artist recalls, "Pagoda in German may be called "pagoden," and the word stuck. Later, I took out the suffix "den;" Pago remained. To evoke it colloquially in the Malay language, I began to repeat the word for rhythmic effect — Pago Pago. I also began to recall that the traditional Minangkabau and Batak homes in western Sumatra have shamanic carvings within the four cornered roofs and fences, which are called Pagar Pagar. In my ancestral village in east Sumatra, Pagar Pagar is pronounced Pago Pago."

Pago Pago eventually became a way of thinking that Latiff Mohidin manifested in a constellation of paintings, sculptures, prints, poetry and writings. All these different elements are represented in the exhibition.



Circus Dancer, 1963.

The distinctive aesthetic of Latiff Mohidin's Pago Pago series was further developed when he returned to Southeast Asia in 1964. Travelling across the region to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia, he began to explore specific regional phenomena in his paintings and writings. From the temples of Angkor to Balinese dance, the ginger root to bamboo rhizome. The poetry of his Pago Pago period is in free verse form, while the paintings are composed of thick outlines, controlled brush strokes, and jagged or curvilinear shapes.



(From left) *Pago Pago II*, *PROVOKE*

From 1964-1969, he not only travelled extensively but actively engaged with peers who self-identified as the “avant-garde” of Southeast Asia, including the writer Goenawan Mohamad in Jakarta, the painters Thawan Duchanee and Damrong Wong-Upharaj in Bangkok, and the poets Salleh Ben Joned and Usman Awang in Kuala Lumpur. Together, they aimed to foster a position for the region as a source of new ideas for modern art and literature. In tracing the networks Latiff Mohidin formed from 1949-1969 and how Pago Pago marked a turning point in Southeast Asian art, the exhibition will feature a detailed timeline of events surrounding his life during the period.

Reflecting on his journey, Latiff Mohidin has said, “It was difficult for me to identify as an “Asian” in the 1960s when there were no familiar cultural anchors within global art dialogues. The consciousness evoked in Pago Pago was my response to this inner struggle, and it offered me a way to put onto canvas the images and ink the words that made up this complex and fascinating region we call Southeast Asia. It is humbling to see these pieces together again, and it is a moving reminder of how far Southeast Asian art has come.”

Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago is conceived by the curators Shabbir Hussain Mustafa of National Gallery Singapore and Catherine David of Centre Pompidou. This exhibition premiered at the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2018 under the title *Latiff Mohidin: Pago Pago (1960–1969)*. It then travelled to ILHAM Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in late 2018.

It will be held at the Level 4 Gallery of National Gallery Singapore and will feature bilingual Malay and English exhibition texts. For more information about the exhibition, please visit: nationalgallery.sg/pagopago

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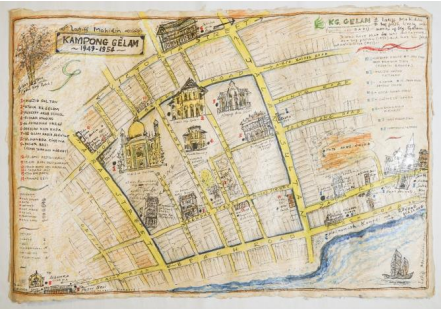


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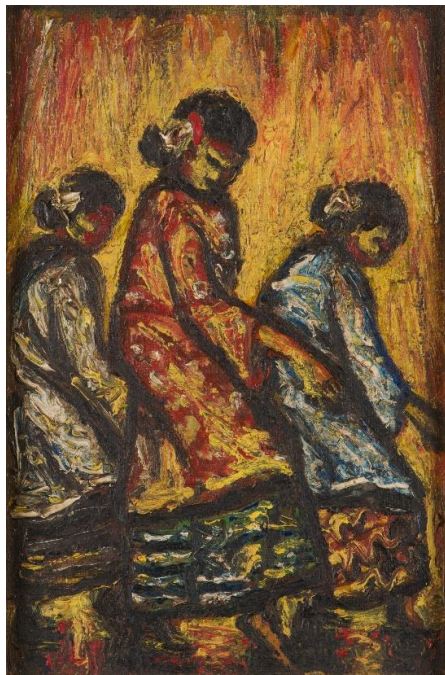
About National Gallery Singapore

National Gallery Singapore is a leading visual arts institution which oversees the world's largest public collection of Singapore and Southeast Asian modern art. Situated at the birthplace of modern Singapore, in the heart of the Civic District, the Gallery is housed in two national monuments - City Hall and former Supreme Court - that have been beautifully restored and transformed into this exciting 64,000 square metre venue. Reflecting Singapore's unique heritage and geographical location, the Gallery aims to be a progressive museum that creates dialogues between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world to foster and inspire a creative and inclusive society. This is reflected in our collaborative research, education, long-term and special exhibitions, and innovative programming. The Gallery also works with international museums such as Centre Pompidou, Musée d'Orsay, Tate Britain, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT) and National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA), to jointly present Southeast Asian art in the global context, positioning Singapore as a key node in the global visual arts scene.

In 2019, the Gallery was the only museum in Southeast Asia that received a ranking in The Art Newspaper's annual global survey of attendance at art museums, taking 32nd place. It was the first museum in Asia to receive the Children in Museums Award by the European Museum Academy and Hands On! International Association of Children in Museums in 2018. The Gallery also won the awards for "Best Theme Attraction" at TTG Travel Awards 2017, "Best Attraction Experience", "Breakthrough Contribution to Tourism" and "Best Customer Service (Attractions)" at the prestigious Singapore Tourism Awards in 2016 for its role in adding to the vibrancy of Singapore's tourism landscape.

Annex A: Exhibition Highlights

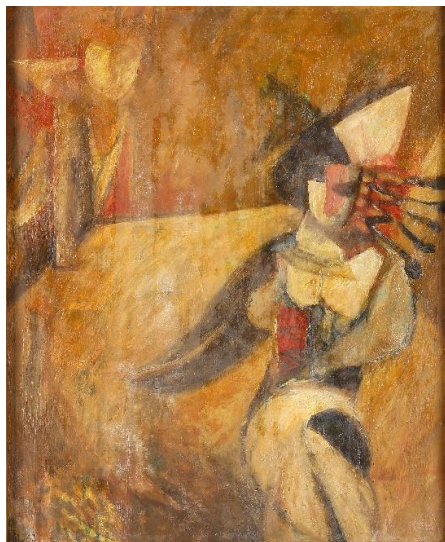
	<p><i>Kampong Gelam 1949-1954</i></p> <p>2020 Pen and pencil on Tibetan paper Collection of the artist.</p> <p>Specially created for this exhibition, Latiff Mohidin details landmarks, literary sites of gathering, and cuisines of the Malay world that made up Kampong Glam in the 1950s.</p>
	<p><i>Kampung I</i></p> <p>1951 Oil on board Gift of Binjai Tree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew</p> <p>Latiff Mohidin painted this depiction of a fishing village when he was just 10 years old. It was displayed at his first solo show, held at Kota Raja Malay School in Singapore.</p>
	<p><i>Aku</i></p> <p>1958 Oil on board Collection of National Gallery Singapore</p> <p>Latiff Mohidin greatly admired the Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar. This portrait of the poet is a rare example of his early figurative paintings. The title of the work is taken from one of the poet's most celebrated pieces of writing.</p>



Joget

1960
Oil on board
Gift of BinjaiTree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew

Latiff Mohidin took figure drawing lessons from leading Singapore artists such as Liu Kang and Ho Kok Hoe at the British Council when he lived in Singapore from 1949 to 1954. Their influence on colour and techniques can be seen in this painting of *joget* dancers.



Circus Dancer

1963
Oil on masonite board
Collection of Ismail Mustam

Latiff Mohidin was exposed to a range of performance cultures while studying at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Berlin, ranging from Japanese *kabuki* to Spanish flamenco. This work integrates these varied influences.



Pagoda II

1964
Oil on canvas
Gift of BinjaiTree in memory of Chia Yew Kay and Tan Kim Siew

One of the earliest Pago Pago works, Latiff Mohidin made this painting while living in Thai artist Thawan Duchanee's studio in Bangkok. The jagged edges in the work highlight a key motif of the Pago Pago form.



PROVOKE

1965
Oil on board
Collection of the artist

Throughout the 1960s, Latiff Mohidin navigated tremendous upheavals in Europe and Southeast Asia. A key work of the Pago Pago series, *PROVOKE* reflects the artist's struggle to chart an inner consciousness.



Pago Pago II

1965
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Each Pago Pago image bears a black contour and is composed like an architectural object. The artist was often asked: Is it round? Is it a triangle? Is it long? Every form in the series was first imagined in the artist's mind.



Pago Pago

1966
Ink and wash on paper
Collection of the artist

Latiff Mohidin would make three to five sketches everyday as he travelled across Southeast Asia. These sketches reveal glimpses of his creative process. Here, like other works in the Pago Pago series, the forms depicted grow skywards from the ground. They also synthesise natural forms like shells with the cultural forms of temples that Latiff Mohidin encountered in Thailand and Cambodia.