

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**MAJOR EXHIBITION ON INFLUENTIAL ARTIST AND EDUCATOR GEORGETTE CHEN  
SHINES SPOTLIGHT ON SINGAPORE ART HISTORY**

*Visitors to get up close and personal with Chen through her most significant artworks and rare archival materials in a special exhibition for National Gallery Singapore's 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary*



**Singapore, 20 November 2020** – National Gallery Singapore is proud to present its latest exhibition *Georgette Chen: At Home in the World*, a large-scale survey featuring 69 prominent works and 74 archival materials of one of Singapore's most celebrated modern artists. Launching on 27 November, the first major retrospective of Georgette Chen's work in two decades will shed light on her less well-known yet critical contributions to the development of Singapore's then-nascent artistic community. In conjunction with the Gallery's 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration and its theme of inspiring inclusiveness, the exhibition will also highlight Chen's sensitivity towards the nuances of Singapore's diverse culture, in which she paid particular attention to the importance of language in understanding culture. There will also be a range of complementary programmes to engage audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

Visitors will get the rare opportunity to encounter Chen's prolific body of work, which spans the breadth of her practice from her time in China, France, the USA, Malaysia and Singapore. From seldom-seen works from her early period in France, to her exemplary still-life paintings, the exhibition will trace the development of her artistic techniques and style throughout her career. Alongside her works, newly-discovered archival materials from the National Collection,

and other public and private collections in Singapore and China will also be displayed for the first time, including newspaper articles and family photographs that give visitors a rare glimpse into Chen's life including her childhood years. The contextualisation of her works through the archival materials provides greater insights into Chen's growth as a professional artist, as well as her contributions to Singapore and Southeast Asian art and art history.



Chen first met Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1931 when she and Eugene Chen were travelling from Europe to Shanghai via Malaya. After she settled in Singapore, the Tunku, who became the first Prime Minister of Malaya, commissioned her to paint his portrait. In 1956, Chen had a solo exhibition at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur under the patronage of the Tunku. This image shows Chen greeting the Tunku and his wife Tun Sharifah Rodziah Barakbah, at the exhibition.

As an artist, Chen believed her role was to represent not only the times she was living in, but also life's multiple perspectives. Visitors will gain an intimate understanding of the way Chen saw the world through her art, in the paintings she made of the landscapes she travelled in, and the portraits of the people around her. Chen's personal observations of the world around her, captured in her diary entries and letters to friends, will also be on display for visitors to read. These archival materials reveal the remarkable influence of her travels in providing inspiration for her art.

The exhibition will also spotlight Chen's significant contributions to the Singapore artistic community as an artist, educator, mentor and arts administrator. Key works and personal documents from pivotal exhibitions that established her reputation as an artist will be on display, such as selected paintings and the catalogue from her first solo exhibition in Singapore in 1953. Beyond her career as an artist, visitors will also discover Chen's extensive involvement in the development of Singapore's art scene. Documents from her time as a teacher at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) and her work as an administrator with

the Lee Foundation Fund evoke newfound appreciation of Chen for her invaluable support of local artists and art societies as a champion of Singapore art.



Georgette Chen was employed at NAFA from 1954 to 1980 where she taught part-time while continuing her art practice. She imparted foundational techniques to her students based on her training in Paris and New York, while encouraging them to develop individual artistic styles.

Collection of Mrs. Sik-Khoon Lee.

Dr. Eugene Tan, Director of National Gallery Singapore said, “Georgette Chen holds a very special place in Singapore’s art history. Being the first female artist to have achieved such international acclaim, the impact she has had on the development of visual arts in Singapore continues to influence generations of local artists. As one of the largest custodians of Chen’s works, we are gratified to have been able to mount this latest retrospective on one of Singapore’s foremost modern artists. We hope Chen’s dedicated pursuit of a creative existence will inspire visitors to better understand our society, culture and the world we live in through art.”

### ***Georgette Chen: At Home in the World* exhibition highlights**

Organised across nine thematic sections, the exhibition will take visitors on an immersive journey through Chen’s life and artistic practice, featuring her most significant paintings accompanied by five showcases featuring letters, photographs, documents and newspaper articles that will offer visitors a deeper appreciation of her works. A comprehensive timeline of Chen’s life and career milestones will also be displayed at Level 4 City Hall Foyer, to help visitors understand how her artistic practice was impacted and influenced by key events in world history and her personal life.

### Arrival in Malaya

Chen's move to Malaya in 1951 was initially meant to be temporary, but she found fertile inspiration in Penang's tropical climate, lush greenery and immense variety of brightly coloured fruits. She filled her artworks with the people, landscapes and motifs of her surroundings in Malaya, fondly describing the region as a "land of perpetual summer" that allowed her to thrive creatively. The artworks Chen painted during this period demonstrate the refinement of her artistic technique, and signify a period of creative growth and inspiration.



Georgette Chen. *Malay Wedding*. 1962. Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm.  
Collection of National Museum of Singapore.

### Travelling and Painting

Travel was an important part of Chen's artistic process, which she frequently undertook in order to find inspiration. A special section focuses on the artworks produced during Chen's month-long road trip to the east coast of Malaysia in 1960. The paintings mark an important shift in her compositional approach, which saw her experimenting with combining portraiture and *en plein air* (outdoor) landscape painting, and illustrates Chen's lifelong commitment to improving her craft.



Georgette Chen. *East Coast Vendor*. 1960. Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

### Elevating the Everyday

Chen considered everyday subjects that were otherwise considered unremarkable to hold a sense of dynamism and novelty, and sought to capture this unique energy through her art. This section features artworks that exemplify her artistic vision of finding beauty in everyday life, such as her still-life paintings of tropical fruits, moon cakes and other local foods that were indicative of the geographical location and time period she was living in.



Georgette Chen. *Hakka Family*. 1939. Oil on Canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Private Collection.

Despite challenging times, Chen continued to paint and focused her attention on subjects available to her while working indoors, highlighting her persistent dedication to her art even during a period of upheaval and conflict. Visitors will also have the exceptional opportunity to view Chen's monumental *Hakka Family*, which will be exhibited for the first time in public since 1997.

### **Engaging experiences for audiences of all ages and backgrounds**

Having lived and worked in many countries, Chen was particularly sensitive to the importance of language in order to understand a culture. Her proficiency in English, French, Mandarin and conversational Malay was instrumental in her forming close relationships with the artistic community in Singapore, and in hosting international guests on behalf of various institutions such as NAFA. In the spirit of the Gallery's 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary theme of bridging divides and finding common ground through art, the Gallery will be launching a new immersive multilingual audio tour in conjunction with the exhibition for audiences with different mother tongues to better understand the exhibition and gain a deeper appreciation of her works. Audio tours will be available in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil and can be accessed on the Gallery Explorer app and SoundCloud.

In addition to the main exhibition, a series of complementary public programmes will be held to deepen audiences' appreciation of Chen's artmaking. Visitors inspired by Chen can try their hand at sketching and learn more about composition, scale and colour at the Education Station located at the Level 4 Historical Lobby.

For those interested in broadening their knowledge of Chen and access exclusive behind-the-scenes secret stories, the Gallery will be launching an Artificial Intelligence chatbot, Arthena, on Facebook Messenger, which they can access before, during and after their visit. Visitors may also sign up for free English and Mandarin docent-led tours from 10 December 2020 for a comprehensive experience of the exhibition.

Parents can also facilitate their children's understanding of Chen's artworks through family tours and storytelling sessions, *Stories in Art*, tailored for families with children aged four to 12 in December 2020. Families can also immerse themselves in the interactive physical installation entitled *An Artist's Tropical Landscape*, inspired by Chen's famous *Tropical Fruits* painting. The installation is available until 28 March 2021 at Level 1 City Hall Wing. More public programmes will be launched in 2021.

Jointly curated by Lim Shujuan, Sam I-shan and Teo Hui Min, with research support from Cai Heng, *Georgette Chen: At Home in the World* will be on show at the Level 4 Gallery and Wu Guanzhong Gallery from 27 November 2020 until 26 September 2021.

*Georgette Chen: At Home in the World* is made possible with the support of Strategic Partner Cultural Matching Fund. For more information, please refer to the attached annexes or [nationalgallery.sg/georgettechen](https://nationalgallery.sg/georgettechen) for the latest updates on the exhibition. Media assets can be accessed via this [link](#).

- [Annex A](#): Biography of Georgette Chen
- [Annex B](#): *Georgette Chen: At Home in the World* Exhibition Highlights

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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: Biography of Georgette Chen**

Georgette Chen (1906 – 1993) is regarded as a key figure in the development of modern art in Singapore, and is often discussed in relation to the emergence of a distinct regional style that is most clearly characterised by a synthesis of Eastern and Western painting techniques and methods.




Chen’s early pursuit of formal art education at academies in Paris and New York was supported by her father Zhang Jing Jiang (the chief financier of Sun Yat Sen’s Xin Hai Revolution of 1911), and expressed through her development of a Post-Impressionist style focused on subjects of still life, landscapes and portraits. Her marriage to Eugene Chen (the first foreign minister of Sun Yat Sen’s government) extended her peripatetic lifestyle that allowed for the opportunity to capture landscapes across France and China in her art.

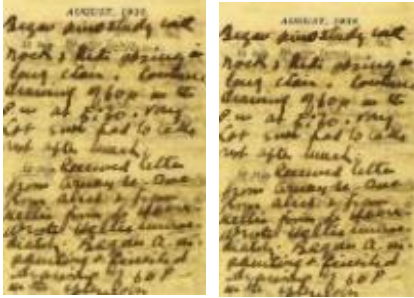


Following the struggles of WWII, Chen’s subsequent relocation to Penang (1951) and Singapore (1953) marked a new chapter in her life that was reflected in the shift in subject matter and incorporation of tropical colour into her art. She began teaching at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts where she passed on her academic training, and became a notable figure in the Singapore art scene, performing the role of judge, translator, mentor, host, but most importantly, that of the Modern Artist.



**Annex B: Georgette Chen: At Home in the World Exhibition Highlights**

<p><b>Malay Wedding</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Malay Wedding</i>. 1962. Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.</p>	<p><i>Malay Wedding</i> exemplifies the fresh, lively atmosphere of the everyday scenes that Chen captured following her arrival in this region in 1951. In this painting, wedding guests mingle under tents, dressed boldly for the occasion. Chen demonstrates her sensitive and confident use of colour by harmonising the disparately vibrant tones of their clothing.</p>
<p><b>Rohani</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Rohani</i>. 1963. Oil on canvas, 66.0 x 55.0 cm. Gift of the artist's estate. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>Apart from commissioned portraits, Chen also depicted her friends and took care to capture their likeness and personalities. An active member of the art society Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya (APAD), Rohani Ismail studied under Chen at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, and they became lifelong friends beyond the classroom. Chen was nicknamed "Chendana", meaning sandalwood, and frequently corresponded with Rohani and other Malay friends and artists under this name in letters written in Bahasa Melayu.</p>
<p><b>Georgette Chen with Tunku Abdul Rahman</b></p>		<p>Chen first met Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1931 when she and Eugene Chen were travelling from Europe to Shanghai via Malaya. After she settled in Singapore, the Tunku, who became the first Prime Minister of Malaya, commissioned her to paint his portrait. In 1956, Chen had a solo exhibition at the British Council in Kuala Lumpur under the patronage of the Tunku. This image shows Chen greeting the Tunku and his wife Tun Sharifah Rodziah Barakbah, at the exhibition.</p>

<p><b>Lotus Symphony</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Lotus Symphony</i>. 1962 Oil on canvas, 55 x 144 cm. Collection of Long Museum.</p>	<p>Combining Chen's technical proficiency in painting still life with her sensitivity toward capturing light and colour in <i>en plein air</i> landscape painting, this is the only work Chen completed in this unique panoramic format. To capture the essence of her subject, Chen spent three weeks in her friend's garden, observing and painting the forms of lotuses in their varying stages of bloom.</p>
<p><b>East Coast Vendor</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>East Coast Vendor</i>. 1960. Oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>This painting transposes Chen's mastery in portrait painting into an outdoor landscape, and was painted during a trip she made to the East Coast of Malaysia in 1960. The scene encapsulates Chen's favoured theme of the mother and child and expresses the warmth of familial bonds. Her detailed patterning of batik clothes and headscarves reference their tropical locale and Chen's appreciation of material culture.</p>
<p><b>Coast of Brittany</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Coast of Brittany</i>. c.1930. Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm. Gift of Lee Foundation. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>Influenced by her training in art academies in France, Chen was particularly drawn to painting landscapes <i>en plein air</i>. This coastal vista encapsulates Chen's observation of the effects of light at different times of the day. Chen's application of a muted blend of colours in this painting when compared to the more vibrant tones of her later works reflects the temperate climate of Europe during this formative period of her artistic career.</p>

<p><b>1935 Diary</b></p>	 <p>Entries from Georgette Chen's diary, 11 to 14 August 1935. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library &amp; Archive. Gift of Lee Foundation.</p>	<p>Chen kept diaries or daybooks throughout her life, of which 15 survive. These entries from her 1935 diary, which she kept while based in France, are dated 11 to 14 August 1935. They contain details about a painting trip that she took to Aix-en-Provence, where she did studies of trees and rocks, and worked on drawings and paintings of the rural landscape. As she was likely working <i>en plein air</i>, she also remarks on the cold, rainy and thunderous weather.</p>
<p><b>Vegetables and Claypot</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Vegetables and Claypot</i>. c. 1940-1945. Oil on canvas, 73 x 60 cm. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>This painting was likely completed during World War II when Chen and her husband Eugene Chen were placed under house arrest in Hong Kong, and then under surveillance in Shanghai by the Japanese. Despite the difficulties of this time, Chen continued to paint, focusing her attention on subjects available to her while working indoors. In this whimsical arrangement of gourds and melons, Chen studies the diversity of their natural forms and varying textures.</p>
<p><b>Hakka Family</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Hakka Family</i>. 1939. Oil on Canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Private Collection.</p>	<p><i>Hakka Family</i> is the largest of Chen's works painted prior to her arrival in Malaya in 1951. It took pride of place in every one of her subsequent solo exhibitions. The work meditates on the theme of familial relations and is rich in symbolism. This, together with its monumental scale, demonstrates Chen's early confidence and ambition as an artist.</p>

<p><b>Georgette with Soochow Bridge of Sighs</b></p>	 <p>Detail of Invitation Card to <i>Exhibition of Georgette Liying Chen's Oil Paintings of Contemporary Chinese Scenes and People</i>, 1949. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library &amp; Archive. Gift of Lee Foundation.</p>	<p>This image was featured on the brochures for Chen's solo exhibitions in Paris and New York. Highlighting her identity as a practicing artist, it shows her posing with her paint palette next to her work <i>Soochow's Arched Bridge of Sighs</i> (c.1946). This painting, as well as archival materials related to Chen's extensive exhibition history, are on view in the exhibition.</p>
<p><b>Self Portrait</b></p>	 <p>Georgette Chen. <i>Self-Portrait</i>. c. 1934. Oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm. Gift of Lee Foundation. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.</p>	<p>This painting, the earliest self-portrait of Chen in the National Collection, captures a time when she began to gain prominence and success as an artist in France. The intimate scale and distinct blend of complementary colours result in a work that is both restrained in its simplicity of composition whilst vibrating with intensity.</p>
<p><b>Teaching a class at NAFA</b></p>		<p>Georgette Chen was employed at NAFA from 1954 to 1980 where she taught part-time while continuing her art practice. She imparted foundational techniques to her students based on her training in Paris and New York, while encouraging them to develop individual artistic styles.</p> <p>Collection of Mrs. Sik-Khoon Lee.</p>