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Media Release

National Gallery Singapore Introduces Professor Edwin Thumboo as Next Personality in the My Masterpiece Series

*A lifelong passion for teaching gives Professor Thumboo deep appreciation for
Chua Mia Tee's National Language Class*

Singapore, 11 March 2015 – “Our painters were the first to capture Singapore life and traditions, so that they can be recorded in art and shared with future generations. Although traditions take time to build, I do believe that there is already a distinct Singapore art tradition growing, and institutions like the National Gallery Singapore are helping to consolidate and extend this tradition.”

These are some of the thoughts of Professor Edwin Thumboo, one of Singapore’s most esteemed literary talents, on the significance of art, and the role it plays in the evolution of Singapore as a nation.

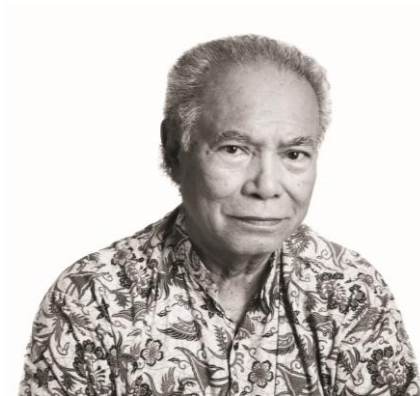
“A powerful painting helps you create the language you need to understand it, and you take away from art what you bring to it. And I believe that Singapore paintings are powerful enough to allow people to get a better understanding of art.”

Professor Thumboo also offered his thoughts on Singaporean artist Chua Mia Tee’s most recognisable works, “*National Language Class*”, as part of the Gallery’s *My Masterpiece* series. According to Professor Thumboo, *National Language Class* touches on a part of history when Singapore wanted to be a part of Malaya but its significance goes beyond that.

In Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class*, nine students learn Malay in a small classroom, all seated around a single round table. Behind the teacher, there is a blackboard. Written on it are the words *Siapa nama kamu?* and *Di mana awak tinggal?*, which translated from Malay, reads *What is your name?* and *Where do you live?*

“I find the painting intriguing not only for the history, but also because I come from a family of teachers. And teaching is important because it is the best way to learn. And learning is something essential. We must always have the spirit of being open, of updating ourselves. And this is why I think this painting goes beyond the particular historical moment.”

My Masterpiece showcases a different artwork every month throughout 2015, with the campaign having already unveiled popular MediaCorp artiste Joanne Peh and celebrity chef Willin Low and their favourite artworks from the Gallery. The collection of works encompasses diverse periods marking key moments in the art histories of Singapore and Southeast Asia. They will be introduced to the public by well-known personalities from all walks of life, and will be featured in its permanent galleries when the Gallery opens to the public.



Professor Edwin Thumboo



Chua Mia Tee. *National Language Class*. 1959.
Oil on canvas, 112 x 153 cm. Collection of National Gallery
Singapore. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.

In the period following the end of World War II, during the 1950s and 1960s, artworks produced in Singapore were largely characterised by the dynamism of the emerging social realist art movement. For these artists, their need to establish a local art discourse was very much shaped by their direct experience derived from the immediate reality of the raging Malayan Emergency. This reality was penetrated by the social-political turbulence and a quest for independence.

A group of significant artworks were produced within this socio-historical context, embodying critical representation of the social condition and the strong aspirations for freedom and independence. Among this group of works, *National Language Class* is inarguably seminal both in terms of its contextual significance and formalistic structure, standing as a prominent example of social realist art.

“Just like how *National Language Class* was symbolic of a specific moment in Singapore’s history, other Singapore artists and artworks tell a story about our nation’s evolution,” said Professor Thumboo. “This is why we definitely need to educate Singaporeans to appreciate art, but most importantly, teach them how to be curious about the way our art reflects our lives.”

Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class* will be exhibited in the DBS Singapore Gallery when the Gallery opens in November this year. You can view Professor Thumboo’s video and find more information about Chua Mia Tee’s *National Language Class* on the Gallery’s Facebook page [here](#).

Educating and Inspiring Singaporeans

My Masterpiece is the first of an exciting lineup of initiatives and activities that will bring Singaporeans closer to their arts heritage. There will be numerous opportunities for the public to get sneak previews of the facilities and artworks on display before the Gallery opens.

The Gallery aims to capture the artistic spirit of Singapore and Southeast Asia. By sharing stories of our region’s distinctive art within the global context, we seek to be a leading visual arts institution that inspires and engages our people and our neighbours, creating a dialogue between the art of Singapore, Southeast Asia and the world. We also seek to encourage a deeper appreciation of art, and foster a greater sense of national and cultural pride.

About Professor Edwin Thumboo

Edwin Nadason Thumboo is one of Singapore’s most distinguished poets. An Emeritus Professor (1997), he was the founding Director of The Centre for the Arts (1993 – 2005), at the National University of Singapore where he was appointed Professor of English in January 1979, Head of the Department of English Language and Literature (1977 - 1993),

the first Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (1980 - 1991) and Professorial Fellow (1995 -).

Professor Thumboo has contributed to the Singapore Arts scene chiefly in the area of literature. He has published six collections of poems and also received various awards in a career spanning more than four decades, including the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Award for Poetry in English (1978, 1980 and 1994), the Southeast Asia Write Award (1979), the Singapore Cultural Medallion (1980), the ASEAN Cultural and Communication Award in Literature (1987), the Public Service Star (BBM) and Bar in August 1981 and 1991 respectively.

In October 2002, he presented the Keynote Address at the Biennial meeting of the International Association of World Englishes, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he received the Raja Rao Award for his contributions to the literature of the Indian Diaspora. He received the Sunthorn Phu Award for poetry in 2013.

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ABOUT NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE

National Gallery Singapore is a new visual arts institution which oversees the largest public collection of modern art in Singapore and Southeast Asia. The Gallery is dedicated to collaborative research, education and exhibitions, highlighting the importance of modern art in Southeast Asia in a global context. The Gallery also provides a unique visitor experience through its outstanding collections and innovative programming, positioning Singapore as a regional and international hub for the visual arts.

Situated in the heart of the Civic District, the Gallery is housed in the City Hall and adjacent former Supreme Court building – two important heritage buildings symbolic of Singapore's nationhood. Opening in November this year, the Gallery will be a leading civic and cultural destination established for the enrichment, enjoyment and engagement of Singapore residents and visitors from all over the world. Information on the National Gallery is available at www.nationalgallery.sg.

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