ART EDUCATION INTERVIEWS

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS SPEAK

Alumni of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (NAFA), graduating between 1950 and 1969:
Life at NAFA

Excerpts compiled from interviews held in English and Hokkien with Emelia Ong, held between March to December 2004

How were the classes run at NAFA?

Tan Tee Chie (1953): Classes started at 9.00am with oil painting and then in the afternoon we studied Chinese painting, sculpture, watercolour and others. Classes ended at 4.00pm.

Koeh Sia Yong (1958): We had lectures in the mornings and free time or studio in the afternoons.

Loo Foh Sang (1965): Our class hours were 8.00am to 12.00pm. There were no afternoon classes. They were only for part-time students.

How many students were there in a class?

Tan Tee Chie (1953): About 20

Koeh Sia Yong (1958): At first about 10-20 then towards the end many dropped out...so we had about 3-4 of us left. They left mostly because of financial reasons.

Jehan Chan (1960): At that time, there were about 100-200 students in total, with 20 students in one class. Usually it starts off with about 40 students and dwindled down to about 15 or 20.

How much were the school fees?

Tan Tee Chie (1953): About $5.00.

Koeh Sia Yong (1958): About $15.00.

Loo Foh Sang (1965): Our School fees were $8.00 to $10.00 a month. A secretary at that time would maybe get a monthly salary of about $80.

Tell me about some of the teachers who had an impact on you and the subjects they taught

Lim Yew Kuan (1950): I learnt sculpture from Cheong Soo Pieng although he didn’t teach it formally in class. I also liked Chong Pai Mu. Our syllabus included Western painting, watercolour, charcoal drawing, Chinese painting, woodcut, art and craft. My father (Lim Hak Tai) taught Art Appreciation among other subjects.

Tan Tee Chie (1953) : Lim Hak Tai taught charcoal, pencil drawing and Chinese calligraphy. Cheong Soo Pieng watercolour, oil painting, Tan Chong Rui (Chen Chong Swee) Chinese Painting, Chen Wen Hsi Chinese painting, Wu Tsai Yen Chinese Calligraphy. We did not have Art History [as a subject] then, but it was taught within other subjects like Chinese painting.

Every Saturday we would go outdoors to paint: fishing villages, labourers working, nature, boats, kampungs, hillsides, etc.
Koeh Sia Yong (1958): Lim Yew Kuan and Georgette Chen. I like painters who tell a story with their paintings. This is what I like to do with mine as well. Initially I went to NAFA because I wanted to be a graphic designer, but later, as I studied art I begin to realise the potential of art to move people.

Tew Naitong (1958): I did not take Cheong Soo Pieng’s class but i would visit him and talked to him as a friend rather than a student. He had a very strong character and a very Asian style, especially the way he painted his figures. We constantly argued about our work.

Khoo Sui Hoe (1959): Georgette Chen taught us foundational classes. She was a very good teacher. There is a little story about her – she was a very petite lady so when she looked at our paintings she would correct the altogether because she was looking from a different perspective, being so short!

Cheong Soo Pieng was very creative, he didn’t stick to painting realistically all the time. Sometimes he got so carried away with himself that at the end of the day, he painted over my painting as he tried to correct it. He was not political. He was more concerned with how we composed, how we felt about a particular still life and how we expressed it.

Jehan Chan (1960): Soo Pieng influenced me the most but at that time he was not really appreciated by most students. This was because most students were there to learn how to paint realistically. Soo Pieng was very modern in his approach so many could not accept him. Sometimes, in my free time, I helped him sell his paintings since he could not speak English. I would also spend my time in his room which the others keep out. He was quite a private person.

But we were very close to our teachers. We even played basketball with them after school.

Loo Foh Sang (1965): My teachers were Lim Mu Hue, See Cheen Tee, Lai Foong Moi, Georgette Chen, Chen Chong Swee. See Hiang Tuo taught Calligraphy and Seal engraving which I did not really fancy. I prefer the work of Chen Chong Swee.

Art History was taught by part-time artists. Most of the time we bought our own books. Our library was very small with only three shelves of books, and you couldn’t borrow from it. I used to buy Chinese painting books for 18 cents a copy.

Can you tell me a little but about the art scene during your time at NAFA?

Lim Mu Hue (1955): During that time I was close to many artists, but I also used to go around with Frank Sullivan. He was an art collector, writer. He would call in the middle of the night to ask me the name of some artist he had forgotten. Frank was very good at encouraging/pushing art such as ours. Besides him, Michael Sullivan was also a very strong advocate for Eastern art. He is already 95 and residing in the US. I used to help him draw illustrations for his book. We need people like that so that artists can be encouraged and so that other people may know the importance of the kind of art we produce.

Tew Naitong (1958): The "four masters" at that time were Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Wen Hsi, Chen Chong Swee, Liu Kang. Liu Kang was not part of NAFA, but a good friend.

Our class had two groups, one who preferred Chinese painting – they followed Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee; and those who preferred Western painting – followed Cheong Soo Pieng and Liu Kang.

Jehan Chan (1960): At that time, I was close to Tew Naitong, Tay Chee Toh. I remembered there were two groups within our class. Our group liked to paint in a more creative approach, while
the other group preferred to paint real life stories such as beggars on the street and so on. We frequently disagreed with each other on the direction and purpose of art.

At that time, we did not yet have an art market but we did have people from Europe and Japan buying art from Malaysia. They liked creative work but a lot of the artists only knew how to paint realistically. We also had curators, art writers and “judges” like Frank Sullivan, Redza Piyadasa, Ungku Aziz, Yong Peng Seng. They were not biased towards any particular sort of art.

Dr. Khatijah Sanusi, Lecturer and Associate Professor, ITM (later UiTM), 1974-, and Dr. Sulaiman Esa, Lecturer and Associate Professor, ITM (later UiTM), 1970-1996: Shifting approaches – Basic Design, the National Cultural Congress and Islamisation

Interview with Emelia Ong, 28 March 2015.

When did you join the School of Art & Design at ITM?

Sulaiman: There are some written records that you can find but off-the-cuff...I remember the first dean was Hijjas Kasturi. Piyadasa, Jolly Koh, Joseph Tan started in 1968 or 1969. They [School of Art and Design] started with a small shophouse in Seksyen 5 near Jalan Osman roundabout, then later they moved to Seksyen 17. I was working in DBP at that time in ’68 when they asked me to teach part time, so every Saturday I taught printmaking. At that time Tan Teong Eng was there, so was Ibrahim Ismail who was our first Head of School; he was a graduate of Graphic Design.

You see, before [ITM] we had STTI in Cheras which pioneered the education of specialist teachers. Most of the Cheras staff like Jamal, Jinleng, Anthony Lau, Lee Joo For had been to London in the 1950s, and gained the National Diploma in Design. What we got was the DAD which was a Diploma in Art and Design, and Hornsey, where Piyadasa and I went, was the first to start this program. There was a tremendous difference between the two. Unlike the NDD, the stress was on personal development and self-actualisation.

DAD emphasized the Bauhaus system where art is a formal language. The book we used was the Dynamic of Visual Forms which was like our bible. Art is Visual thinking. It is not about 'you'. Art is about investigation, and is scientific. Paul Klee and his book The Thinking Eye talk about the dynamic of lines and space. So when we [Piyadasa and I] came back we brought this new ideology to ITM. We had a show titled Experimentasi ’70 with myself, Piyadasa, Tan Teong Eng, Choong Kam Kow, Tan Tuck Kan... and formed a group called The New Scene artists. Our next show was Dokumentation ’72. Here, I asked questions like: Why must a painting be on a square? We focused on the “why” not the “what?”

We didn’t paint landscape or nature, we asked questions about art. Jamal was our counterpoint. When we taught MARA students, we had this orientation. We taught the colour wheel and art as thinking process.

Khatijah: When I came in to UiTM from overseas in 1974, Haji Ibrahim was the Dean. Ahmad Haji Hashim was the second dean. At that time it was easy to get a job. I called the Director, Arshad Ayub, and immediately got an interview. When I first came in, they used the Sains Gunaan building which had a beautiful courtyard. It was a multicultural environment because we had lecturers from Singapore and Australia. Most of the lecturers were Western-trained.

I was teaching in Foundation and there were not even 20 students in a group; there were three groups. I went in to take over Sulaiman’s place (he had joined in 1970), because he was going to Italy. I taught along with Redza Piyadasa (who joined in 1968/69), Ahmad Khalid, Joseph Tan,
Choong Kam Kow and Ruzaika Omar Basaree who was a young lecturer at that time. In the Foundation year, the students were exposed to the different areas of Fine Art, Interior Design, Textile Design, Industrial Design, Graphic Design, and Photography, and then choose an area of specialty.

**Did the programme undergo any major changes while you were there?**

Yes. In the 70s we were very much into the Bauhaus, the Basic Design course. At that time, it was very Western-centric although later we rejected our own ideas (with Mystical Reality)! In 1971 there was the National Cultural Congress. The political scenario was bad. It was a dark period in our history. The NCC has an immediate impact on [the development of our art] history. Ismail Zain was promoted to Director of Culture and he was our best friend ... The new policy became central to art education. One of the actions taken was to make sure every university like USM or UiTM were given areas of specialisation, for example in USM, Krishen Jit was there with Ghulam-Sarwar, focusing on theatre like Mak Yong and wayang kulit.

The government said we needed to redefine our model so we had to respond. In 1979, MARA hosted a conference called "Akar-akar Pribumi dan Perkembangan Kini" (The Roots of Malay Culture and Current Development). Awang Salleh was the keynote speaker. Ismail Zain spoke on education. There were about seven to eight papers.

And we had like a smaller version of the NCC in MARA where we asked ourselves: How can our education be grounded in Malay culture or aesthetics?

[Before,] we were not bothered with our own culture! Suddenly we had to redefine our direction, ... In Mystical Reality bang! We spoke like we were universal men, quoting Naum Gabo and so on... We were talking about the collective human consciousness, not Malay, Chinese or Indian.

Then there was the pribumi period. I remember that I brought students to Kelantan and Trengganu—the cradle of Malay culture—which I’d never done before, and we visited the master craftsmen.

We were also close to the people from the literary scene, people from Dewan Bahasa Pustaka like Baha Zain. We had a collective exhibition called Manifestasi Dua Seni (and Tiga Seni), where we produced paintings based on poems and vice versa. Working with them intensified our national consciousness.

We no longer took the West as supreme, but instead thought about how to privilege Malay craft and Islamic art as one of the vital components in our art education system.

The next phase is the Islamic resurgence in 1988. After all, the Congress mentioned two components: the first part was Malay or Indigenous art, but the second part was Islamic art. Under Mahathir’s Islamisation programme, [the latter] took a deeper turn. We talked about how the centre of the "Malay" is Islam. There was a natural progression from the outer to the inner. We talked not about the "Malay", but about universal Islam, and we referenced scholars from overseas from Persian or Arab countries.

I studied at Temple University under the late Ismail Al-Faruqi. When I came back we had a committee called Jawatankuasa Penghayatan Seni Islam – there were about 10 to 12 of us. This group was very active and because it was in line with Dr. Mahathir’s program, the Vice-Chancellor, the Dean, and the National Art Gallery all supported our programmes. We started talking about the philosophy behind the arabesque design or the metaphysics of art and so on.
In 1997 we had a big show in UiTM called *Echoes of Infinity* which was a forum on Islamic art. That really cemented our move towards Islamisation.

**Choong Kam Kow, Head of MIA, 1999-2010: Engaging with the demands of the times**

*Interview with Emelia Ong, 25 March 2015.*

**What were some of the objectives you had for MIA when you took over as Vice-President and later President?**

I joined MIA in the mid 90s. Earlier on I was engaged in teaching and art education in UiTM and La Salle in Singapore, and before that, in the United Nations International School in New York. When I came back from La Salle, the board of Directors asked me to bring in new education strategies because they felt that it was time to revamp and re-evaluate the current system.

So i set about to practically revamp every subject and its syllabus (there were seven or eight Diploma programmes) to meet the challenges of the new millenium. Also the new implementation of the Education Policy Act for private institutions came into force in 1996/97. Formally MIA was only registered as an association so we were no longer “valid” as an institution under the new private institution act.

My vision and slogan was to make MIA the centre of creative excellence. Of course this takes time to achieve, and it took a few years to mobilise all the resources available.

I think one of the important emphasis was to engage more lecturers who can communicate in English and Bahasa to change the perception that MIA was only for the Chinese speaking. So the lecturers had no choice but to change to meet the demands of the times.

I also emphasized the study of Art Fundamentals, which is the function of form, colour, line, texture – we need to instill this in every student of art – following the model at UiTM which started in the 60s when I was there. We also introduced a credit system as the evaluation system in order to gain international recognition and to build up our credibility. Also the syllabus introduced had to match LAN requirements (Lembaga Akreditasi Negara), now called MQA. By 2002, all seven courses were fully accredited.

As far as fine art is concerned, besides the understanding of Art Fundamentals, I asked the lecturers to introduce as much as possible Malaysian developments in art. Students need to understand the rationale behind whatever it is they are producing, their techniques and methodology must pull together to realise this rationale. Art is not just about expressing, you need a more intellectual balance... you cannot be just emotional and inspirational but you must open yourself to intellectual processes to gain deeper insights.

Before the year 2000, the government did not allow the colleges to offer degree courses, so I also spent a lot of effort to establish international links with universities in Australia, England, China, New Zealand and Japan to pave the way for continuous study where students would do three years in MIA and then one or two years overseas.

**How many fine art students did you have?**

Sometimes five or 10 students in an intake. We could not make money! But because fine art was an important ingredient in the other courses such as design, it was important to maintain it.

**Can you tell me about some of the teaching approaches employed?**
The teaching approaches have been a mixture of British, American, Australian or Chinese, depending on where the lecturers graduated from. But the syllabus guides the lecturers to move from instilling and imparting knowledge at the first year level to a third year level based on projects and discussion, where the students decide what is most relevant to them. Of course no lecturer will say, you must follow my style. There is no such mentality here, except perhaps in the teaching of Chinese painting where you may need to copy. The learning environment is very open-ended and we don't fix any area of learning.

Were there any major changes during your time there?

I see education as something that is continosuly evolving, as an organic entity, so in that sense there have been no major changes, only a continuous engagement with the demands of the times.

T.K. Sabapathy, Department of Fine Art, Humanities Faculty, Universiti Pulau Pinang (later Universiti Sains Malaysia), 1972-1984: A first art history syllabus

Telephone conversation with Emelia Ong, 26 March 2015.

Did you write the art history programme at USM?

Yes, largely I was the one who wrote the programme. The other person I talked to about it was Robert Crock. It was also assisted by informal conversations with other lecturers like Lim Eng Hooi in Painting, Chew Teng Beng in Printmaking, and Peter Gelenser in Sculpture, who taught in the Fine Art programme, which shaped and consolidated my thinking.

Which subjects did you teach?

I taught Introduction to Art History, which was a survey course in the first year. Then I taught Sculpture from India, Painting from China and Islamic Calligraphy (two lectures each). From there we went on to European Art, which was a survey of all the isms.

In the second year, I taught Aspects of Asian Art – this was similar to what was learnt in the first year (Sculpture, Painting and Calligraphy) but at a deeper level.

And then during the third year, there was Art Historiography which was the history of Art History. This referred to the European tradition, from Vasari to Gombrich I think.

Then there were also interdisciplinary courses, although we did not yet call them that during that time – I taught a course called Poetry and Painting with a lecturer from the Literature Department, and then one more with someone from the Philosophy Department called Aesthetics. These were elective courses and they drew students from other departments like Literature and the Performing Arts.

After that, we had the first course in Modern Malaysian Art! It was the first formal curriculum based course in 1974.

During the 4th year, the students would have to write a thesis which was about 8,000 words long.

This was from 1972 to about 1980. Zakaria Ali joined in 1976 and he began to teach several of the courses.

Would you say it was half European art history and half Asian art history?

If you put all the Asian art subjects together it would probably be about 60% Asian Art and 40% European. This was largely the great Asian tradition, and towards the 3rd year we slipped out of the coherent grand traditions of Europe and Asia to the less coherent narratives of the modern in Modern Malaysian Art!
How many students were taking art history at that time?

Art history courses were mandatory for all fine art students. I think there were about 25 students.

Zabas was one of our students and among all the students we had at that time, Zabas was about the most brilliant of writers to my reckoning. Ismail Hashim too was there. Another student Abdullah later became the photography lecturer and then the Head of Department in USM, and Wan Zakaria also later became the Head of USM museum. Ismail Hashim became the lecturer for printmaking, and Zabas taught art history.

For me, the time spent at USM was an exciting, absorbing and challenging moment in my life and I really cherish it. To a large extent, it has shaped my present profession in art history.

Chung Chen Sun, Founder and President, Malaysian Institute of Art 1967-1999

Interview with Emelia Ong 4 August 2004 and 19 May 2015.

In the beginning of the 1920s, my uncle and my father were educationists in China. When they left China, the Chinese revolution had begun. Your grandparents might have studied in the old system of education based on Confucian principles, but with the May 4th movement, a new system was being introduced into schools. When my uncle came here, they founded the Ara Kuning Primary School in Malacca. Subjects like Mathematics, Science instead of just Chinese studies were taught. Chinese calligraphy and Chinese painting were included in the syllabus. At that time, art was considered as a craft and was termed “handicraft.”

When I went to Secondary School I learned art under Jehan Chan’s father. He gave me encouragement to continue pursuing art... My father said I had potential to be a good artist so he asked me to study at Nanyang Academy of Fine Art. NAFA was modelled after the Xiamen Academy and also the Shanghainese Academies. There were very good Chinese painters from Shanghai. I graduated in 1955

Which teacher impacted you the most?

Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Soo Pieng, [Georgette] Chen Liying, Chen Chong Swee. However my thoughts are influenced by Lim Hak Tai. I was close to him. He was part of the reason I set up Malaysian Institute of Art.

How did he inspire you to set up MIA?

Hak Tai said we should use our lives to contribute to society instead of thinking about money! So I have no money at that time, but I continued teaching. ...Even though at that time, maintaining an art academy is difficult, Lim Hak Tai persevered. He worked in Hwa Chen High School and Chung Chen High School. It was the same for me. I taught in Kuen Cheng High School to support myself. I have followed in his footsteps.

Tell me about how you set up MIA, the courses and the first batch of teachers who joined you.

At that time, in 1967, MIA was the first art school in Malaysia and it was a non-profit organization, which was very different from today's private schools that make money. At that time, as far as I can remember we had Chuang Kim Siew (who had passed away). He taught Drawing and Chinese Painting. Cheong Nai Tong taught oil painting. Tan Bee Har taught Graphic Design—she had graduated from England. Liang Yee Lian*, Fashion Design. And others were Yee Chin Ming* and Liang Chin Ping*.
How many programs did MIA start out with?

We offered the Diploma in Fine Art, Graphic design, Fashion Design and Interior Design.

How did you get enough funds to open the school?

My brother supported me with a little capital and as I mentioned I was teaching at Kuen Ching High School so I used my salary to support myself. And some of the teachers like Chuang Kim Siew were also teaching for free, they were paid transportation allowances.

I also got encouragement from Frank Sullivan whom I was close to. He was also the Advisor for MIA and he supported my work. He even brought Tunku Abdul Rahman's son to study at MIA in 1970!

What were the school fees like?

About 20 dollars a month. But I remembered that about 20% of the students were so poor they couldn't even afford it so they studied for free.

How many students were there?

About 30 at first. But by the 1980s we had about 3000 students.

Where was the school located?

We were in an old wooden bungalow for the first few months. This was right next to Hilton Hotel in KL. (It has been demolished and replaced by the Genting building).

Then we moved to Freeman Road (behind the American Embassy). After the May 13th incident, the place became less safe, so we moved to Bukit Bintang behind the Shell station.

Was MIA modelled after NAFA in terms of the course structure or teaching approaches for the fine art department?

Well, you could say that it was similar in the sense that MIA also brought in the teaching of the multicultural aspects of Malaysia. Besides that, we also taught Chinese ink painting alongside Western painting. For me, Chinese ink painting provides the best training in terms of skills and techniques in brushwork. It is very difficult to control the brush, but with this single brush you can produce a hard or a soft stroke.

What about teaching approaches for Western art?

At NAFA, I also learnt the Western styles, so I was adept at both Eastern and Western approaches. In terms of Western approaches, we did have nature studies and also figure drawing. However in 1969, I was fortunate enough to go for a study tour in Germany, England and America. There were six of us at that time: Nik Zainal Abidin, Jolly Koh, Ismail Zain, Yeoh Jinleng, Grace Selvanyagam and me. It was in Germany that we visited the Berlin Museum and I saw the modern artworks. It was very different than what was being taught in Italy and France. I realised that these artists were also philosophers! There was a similarity between their works, their treatment of space and the Taoist [philosophical] approach to space. Emptiness is not “nothing.” Many Western artists like Johannes Itten and Kandinsky... their ideas were very close to Eastern art although their approaches may be scientific.

I was very influenced by the many ideas of Bauhaus. Art must connect with economy and society. Art education can support the country’s economy...An artist can play his role and be useful to society.
When I came back I started to incorporate these ideas into MIA. I was both teacher and administrator. I was teaching Foundation at that time. In foundation, I emphasized the Bauhaus idea and training of visual perception. Starting from the dot to the line, shape, colour, composition and so on.

Chung Chen Sun giving an opening speech at the ceremony on 29th of June 1967.