[Media Release] Rediscover Singaporeâ??s leading artist Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer at National Gallery

Description

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Step into a fascinating world of stories within leading Singaporean artist Cheong Soo Piengâ??s artworks with National Gallery Singaporeâ??s new exhibition Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer. Opening on 5 April, this free exhibition is Southeast Asiaâ??s first to use in-depth material analysis, through tools such as x-ray scans and infrared photography to reveal fresh insights into Cheongâ??s artistic processes and innovative use of materials. Layer by Layer breaks down Cheongâ??s practice for visitors of all ages through an engaging exhibition experience. Through interactive stations that bring the science of studying paintings to life, visitors will gain a deeper understanding of Cheongâ??s trailblazing practice through discovery, investigation, and play.

Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer is the first in the Singapore Artist series, comprising four special solo exhibitions spotlighting Singaporean artists namely Teo Eng Seng, Kim Lim, and Lim Tze Peng at the National Gallery Singapore in 2024. Together they set the stage for the Gallery to build upon its longstanding commitment to Singaporean artists and create new experiences for its visitors while advancing and enriching the appreciation of our local arts and cultural heritage.

Layer by Layer presents over 30 paintings by Cheong from the 1950s to the 1980s. The exhibition extends across three sections that explore fundamental questions about the creative process: â??What makes a painting?â?•, â??When is a painting complete?â?•, and â??What is painting?â?•. Exhibition curator Teo Hui Min collaborated with Dr Diana Tay, conservator and founder of BARC Labs who provided her expertise on material analysis and worked with conservators from the Heritage Conservation Centre to conduct the analyses presented in this unique exhibition. The team also worked with radiographers from the Singapore General Hospital who provided access to the hospitalâ??s equipment for the X-ray scanning of selected artworks.

Cheong Soo Pieng. Young Girl. 1948. Oil on plywood, 55 Ã? 65.5 Ã? 2.5 cm. Gift of Singapore Total
Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

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Cheong Soo Pieng. Life in Longhouse. 1978. Oil on canvas, 93 Ã? 122 Ã? 3 cm. Collection of Nation
Singapore.

Dr Patrick Flores, Deputy Director at National Gallery Singapore, says, â??Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer draws the arts and sciences together to uncover the stories hidden within the works and delve deeper into the artistic practice of one of Singaporeâ??s leading artists. As part of the Galleryâ??s commitment to art education, we hope for the interactive elements in this exhibition to bring to light the unseen process of art creation and conservation and foster art appreciation. We hope that visitors of all ages gain a fresh understanding of Singaporeâ??s modern art and of Cheong as one of the nationâ??s leading artists, sparking a deeper appreciation for painting and rethinking art histories.â?•

Cheong Soo Pieng, artist, and innovator

Cheong Soo Pieng boasts a mastery over a wide range of mediums and his work is underscored by his unwavering spirit of continual innovation and imagination. Exhibiting widely throughout his life, Cheong worked tirelessly across painting, sculpture, batik, and printmaking, reworking, and translating favoured motifs across mediums. Even seemingly conventional paintings like Cheongâ??s Drying Salted Fish (1978) â?? featured on the back of Singaporeâ??s 50-dollar banknote â?? demonstrate the dynamism inherent in Cheongâ??s practice as research uncovered his integration of different types of liquid ink within this iconic painting on silk.

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Cheong Soo Pieng painting in his studio at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, c. 1950. Digitised by the National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Cheong Leng Guat

Unveiling the foundations of â??What makes a painting?â?•

Visitors will understand the process behind creating an artwork with the exhibitionâ??s first section, which revolves around the question â??What makes a painting?â?•. Visitors can expect to be treated to an engaging introduction to Cheongâ??s artistic process through a step-by-step journey from sketching, his choice of materials, to the application of paint.

Cheong Soo Pieng. Indian Men with Two Cows. 1949. Oil on canvas, 75.3 Ã? 104.5 cm. Gift of the L
Tho Collection. Collection of National Gallery Singapore

Transmitted infrared image of Indian Men with Two Cows. Image courtesy of BARC Labs, the Herita
Conservation Centre (a division of the National Heritage Board, Singapore) and National Gallery Sin

An early work, Indian Men with Two Cows (1949) offers an exciting example of how material analysis uncovered Cheongâ??s process. Infrared photography revealed Cheongâ??s confident application of paint without preliminary sketching. This section also highlights Cheongâ??s approach of layering, known as marouflage. This practice of affixing flexible supports (such as paper or canvas) to another (such as wood hardboard) allowed Cheong to transform finished works into formats that could be more easily stored and framed while enabling him to achieve a wide range of textures and effects in his paintings depending on his choice of support.

Installation view, Cheong Soo Pieng_ Layer by Layer, National Gallery Singapore, 2024

Visitors will also encounter artworks suspended on a freestanding structure, providing a unique opportunity to discover fascinating details on the back of a painting. From a close appreciation of Cheongâ??s choice of canvas to exhibition labels, the artistâ??s signature, and clues about an artworkâ??s past owner, visitors are encouraged to see beyond the painted image.

Questioning â??When is a painting complete?â?•

Installation view, Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Centering on the question of composition â?? or how an artist organises elements in an artwork â?? the next section asks, â??When is a painting complete?â?• Follow the investigative work that curators and conservators undertook to understand how two seemingly different versions of the monumental painting In a Balinese Village were exhibited at different points in time. Cheong reworked the initial version of the painting, which was completed in 1953, a decade later in 1964. Visitors travel back in time to unravel the paintingâ??s journey, tracing archival material complemented by technical tools like infrared photography and x-ray scans.

(Left) Cheong Soo Pieng. In a Balinese Village. 1953, 1952â??-64. Oil on canvas, marouflaged on h
195 Ã? 131 cm. Private Collection. Â© Family of Cheong Soo Pieng. (Right) X-ray image of In a Bali
Image courtesy of Singapore General Hospital, BARC Labs, Mr Koh Seow Chuan and National Galle
Singapore.

Redefining â??What is painting?â?•

Installation view, Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

Finally, visitors are invited to consider â??What is painting?â?• in the exhibitionâ??s concluding section. This section focuses on Cheongâ??s integration of a wide range of materials into his art from the 1960s onwards, including everyday and industrial materials â?? from metal wires and resin to rattan and straw. Laboratory analysis and close observation allowed for the precise identification of materials in artworks formerly described as â??mixed mediaâ?• such as the copper strips and epoxy resin used in Singapore Scenery (1970). The meticulous process Cheong used to compose this detailed work followed the step-by-step approach of composing his paintings â?? from the preparation of the wooden support to the outlines made of copper strips, and the infilling of epoxy for the surface of the artwork.

Cheongâ??s fascinating use of unconventional materials such as jute, gunny sack, and straw is another highlight within this section, demonstrating how his consistent engagement with distinctively Southeast Asian subject matter extended to a desire to overlay various cultural sources within his art. In this way, visitors are invited to expand their conception of painting as a medium, and the notion that a painting is solely limited to the application of colour onto a two-dimensional surface.

Interactive experiences for all

Installation view, Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer, National Gallery Singapore, 2024.

The exhibition includes hands-on experiences that will incite curiosity for all ages. Ranging from opportunities to encounter the different types of materials Cheong incorporated in his art, to microscope stations that will allow visitors to identify the difference between cotton and linen canvases and even explore the shifts in Cheongâ??s style and material choices over time.

Melding the exhibitionâ??s dual emphases on learning through discovery and play, the Gallery has developed a game available both on-site and online that invites visitors to explore Cheongâ??s painting techniques while matching cross-sections (a minuscule sample that provides a layered view of a paintingâ??s structure) with paintings featured in the exhibition. Visitors can download exclusive wallpapers that showcase the aesthetic dimension of scientific research while consolidating their learning.

The exhibition also introduces the latest edition of At the Conservatorâ??s Bench | Cheong Soo Pieng: Layer by Layer, delving into an enriching material analysis of the artistâ??s renowned works. Through conservation science, the video series offers insights into Cheong Soo Piengâ??s versatile practice and innovative techniques. Please view the trailer here.

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