

Playing a Part for Local Arts

Interview with Dr Wong Tien Hua



We have likely read and heard of the benefits the arts can bring, and how appreciating the arts can be beneficial for one's health and soul. In this interview with Dr Wong Tien Hua, past SMA President and current council member of the National Arts Council (Singapore) (NAC), we find out more about his personal experience with supporting the arts and his thoughts on how the arts truly complement medicine.

Developing an appreciation

Have you always had an appreciation for the arts? When was your first exposure?

I used to sketch and doodle in primary school, but I was not particularly gifted at it. I also played a brass instrument in the school band, and although I was not good at it, being part of a band helped me to appreciate orchestral music.

Later on, my parents sent me for watercolour classes at the studio of the late artist Liu Kang, who was a pioneer Singaporean painter known for developing the "Nanyang Style". I fondly remember Mr Liu's artist shophouse-cum-studio which was situated along Selegie Road past the old Cathay cinema, where several students were taught at a go. He would personally arrange a carefully placed drapery with objects like fruits and ceramics for still-life painting. The light streaming in from the large windows and central air well provided soft illumination to the subject. The old house was filled with dusty art material, yet was always very vibrant with students coming and going.

Which art form are you most intrigued by?

I like photography and have a good eye for subject matter, proportions,

light and form. Visual arts naturally appeal to me. I did a course on Italian Renaissance art before I visited Italy a number of years ago and learnt to appreciate the paintings and sculptures from that period. The collection at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence are a must-see. Impressionism is a favourite of mine, and I could spend the whole day admiring the works at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, France. Some of the postmodern art movements are too abstract for me, but I love large-scale installation artworks that are site specific, especially when they take into account the architecture and history of the venue. These works are often larger than life and they challenge one's perceptions while stimulating introspection. I have also recently been looking out for hyperrealism in painting and sculptures – pieces that create the illusion of reality but often with a provocative twist.

Do you have a favourite piece of art?

It is difficult to name a favourite piece, but you will always remember the impact and emotional resonance when you see a great piece of art – one that strikes you and speaks to you personally. Visiting the large-scale mural painting of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci at the Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan was one such experience. Watching a ballet performance of *Onegin*, to the orchestrations of Tchaikovsky at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, Russia was another.

Volunteering for the arts

Why and when did you decide to join the NAC?

After I stepped down as the President of SMA in 2018, I sought to volunteer in an area unrelated to medicine. As I was interested in contributing my time

to the arts, I approached the Chair of NAC, who interviewed me over a cup of tea. She appreciated my experience as a GP – as someone who works in the community and has a good sense of the needs of the people – and thought that I would be a good addition to the NAC council. As a medical practitioner, I also pitched the benefits of arts with respect to overall wellness and health, not just for individuals but for society as a whole. I was thrilled when she put my name up to the Ministry of Culture, Community, and Youth. I was appointed to the NAC council in September 2019.

What does the NAC do, and how have you contributed to its work?

The NAC is a statutory board responsible for fostering the development of the arts in the country. Its key roles include promoting the arts, supporting artists and arts organisations, and enhancing public access to and appreciation of the arts. Board members at NAC provide governance, strategic direction and oversight to support the council's mission and goals. So far, I have mostly been involved in the NAC technology committee where we guide the NAC's strategy on technology and innovation.

In recent years, we are seeing technology make its impact on art-making, on how audiences interact with art, and on the operations and revenue streams of artists. Needless to say, we are very concerned about the impact of artificial intelligence on the arts and how it can now generate almost all forms of art with only a few strokes on the keyboard.

What is your fondest memory of your experience at the NAC?

The best thing about being involved in the NAC is being keyed in to all the major events in the arts calendar and having the opportunity to see the full spectrum of arts as they are rolled out around the country. I also enjoy meeting people in the industry, such as arts practitioners, and being able to learn of and empathise with their struggles, especially during the pandemic.

One outstanding experience was when I had a chance in 2022 to visit the Venice Biennale exhibition in Italy with my son. The trip was entirely self-funded but Mr Low Eng Teong, deputy chief executive of NAC at the time, linked me up with the gallery minders

at the Singapore pavilion in Venice, who guided us through the biennale exhibits. The Venice Biennale is very much akin to the Olympic Games of the art world, showcasing the very best of art from participating countries. It is held at a historical site in the eastern part of Venice called the Giardini della Biennale; away from the usual tourist spots, it was a chance to see a quieter and more charming part of Venice. There are 30 permanent national pavilions, some of which have been around for more than a century, while countries like Singapore host temporary pavilions in and around the Biennale grounds.

Complementing effects

How do you think appreciation for the arts and/or being involved in the art community can influence one's approach to medical practice?

I believe that every doctor should learn to appreciate the arts, if not already practising some art form, be it visual, music, literary or performance arts.

A doctor who appreciates different art forms and artistic expression is likely better able to understand different perspectives and emotions. This helps the doctor to empathise with patients, improving his/her ability to connect, and thus enhance the doctor-patient relationship. This is particularly important in a multicultural society like Singapore where we live side by side with others from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Art is a gateway to understanding each other's cultures, and can lead to communication that improves patient understanding, compliance with treatment and better outcomes.

It is well known that artistic endeavours allow for inner expression and help relieve stress. Not only can a doctor find in art a good outlet for personal mental wellness, a better understanding of the arts also enables the doctor to recommend such activities to his/her patients.

Where should readers start if they wish to explore local art?

I would like to make a pitch for the NAC's new website called "Catch", for all things arts and culture. Catch.sg is a one-stop online arts and culture portal,

launched in September 2023 as part of NAC's strategic five-year road map titled "Our SG Arts Plan".

On the website, you can find all the current arts activities, and filter based on your own preferences such that the highlighted events are tailored to your interest. The webpage is very well designed and thoughtful as you can search under specified categories for activities that are family friendly, for seniors, for wellness, or even for children. You will be amazed by the massive number of arts activities available in Singapore throughout the year. The arts scene in Singapore is very vibrant and active indeed. ♦



Legend

1. Philip Colbert Exhibition at Whitestone Gallery, at Tanjong Pagar Distripark, as part of SEA Focus / Singapore Art Week 2024
2. Venice Biennale exhibition 2022
3. At the National Gallery with Singaporean artist Ming Wong who represented Singapore at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. His works are on display on the international stage, including the Tate Modern UK