

# A Centenarian's Life of Art

Text and photos by Dr Ng Chew Lip

Mr Lim Tze Peng turned 100 in September 2020. A celebrated Singaporean artist and calligrapher, Mr Lim was awarded the Cultural Medallion Award in 2003 and the Meritorious Service Medal in 2016 for his outstanding contributions to Singapore's arts and cultural scene. He is one of the most well-known Singaporean Chinese ink painters today, known especially for painting the Singapore River and Chinatown, and for his unique style of Chinese calligraphy. One of Mr Lim's most iconic and celebrated themes in his artwork is the scene of shophouses and bumboats along the Singapore River, a record of a bygone era in Singapore.

I acquired one of Mr Lim's paintings from Mr Terence Teo, owner of the Cape of Good Hope Gallery at Bras Basah. An accomplished artist and President of the Singapore Art Society, Mr Teo has been a friend of Mr Lim's for many years, and his gallery has represented Mr Lim for decades. Having heard and read about Mr Lim, I was inspired by the master's dedication to his craft and asked if Mr Teo could help arrange for an interview with Mr Lim, which he kindly agreed to. I visited Mr Lim at his home studio for this interview.

## Into the artist's studio

A studio is a special place to an artist, much like the operating theatre is to a surgeon. It is the place where the magic happens, where plain canvases transform into beautiful works of art. Mr Lim's home studio is a large room in his house. He paints on large pieces of Xuan paper clipped up on walls. His collection of brushes range from little to massive ones that measure almost a metre in length. His cabinets are stacked with rolls of completed works. Mr Lim shares that he keeps many of his best paintings and calligraphy as he cannot bear to part with them.



The first impression of Mr Lim was that of a friendly, elderly gentleman with a kindly smile. He strode into the studio with a surprisingly sprightly gait for a centenarian. He had some friends over that day and after some banter, we launched into the interview, which was conducted in Mandarin.

## Portrait of the artist as a young man

**Dr Ng Chew Lip (NCL):** Can you tell us about your youth and how you became an artist?

**Mr Lim Tze Peng (LTP):** I have loved drawing since I was a child. From the age of ten, I would walk around the kampong with a notebook in hand whenever I had time, drawing plants, animals, birds, people and houses. I loved the colours of the freshly laundered sarongs which my neighbours hung out to dry and often painted those! I also loved to paint scenes like houses and people going about their daily lives. My teachers recognised my early talent and were very encouraging.

When I was 15, I painted a portrait of one of my neighbours, an elderly Malay lady who doted on me. She stood by the wall while I painted

for 20 minutes. She loved the portrait! After she passed away, her children framed and hung the portrait up in memory of her. In those days, ordinary folks did not take photographs. That portrait became something her family could remember her by. After that, I started doing more portraits.

I also began painting by the Singapore River when I was schooling. I liked the scenes of the shophouses, and the hustle and bustle of the area. Today I still paint the Singapore River of my teenhood, much of it from memory.

Aside from painting, I enjoyed and was good at calligraphy. We had a calligraphy competition in school every year. The school would invite external calligraphy experts to judge the submissions, and I won the first prize every year. That gave me tremendous encouragement and affirmation. To me, calligraphy is the core and essence of the Chinese art form. Chinese characters are essentially drawings, because they were derived from graphical depictions of physical objects, like mountain (山), bird (鳥) and horse (馬).

## Living a long and fulfilling life

**NCL:** You have lived for a century. Not many artists have that time to mature and evolve in their techniques. How have your techniques and approaches in art changed over the decades?



**LTP:** It changes every day! I try to do something new and different each day. I get very excited by my work in art, and I never get tired of it! I have tried different media and styles over the years and have developed my own style since.

**NCL:** As the readers of this interview are mostly doctors, could you share your secrets to longevity? We would love to share your secrets with our patients!

**LTP:** That's a tough one but let me share what I think may help people live a good life. As artists, we are constantly looking at beautiful things. Our perception of beauty is different from non-artists. I see beauty everywhere! There was once my wife asked why I kept staring at an old tree stump. That's because I thought it was beautiful! I see beauty in the cracks of old walls, foot prints on the pavement, even dirt and litter in the alleyway.

There is so much beauty in the world that we can't paint them all! I don't see the ugliness in things. That is why I am so happy!

One other factor is calligraphy – calligraphers have long lifespans. That's because when we write, we are mobilising our *qi*, and not merely moving our arms or using our strength (写字是写气, 不是写力).

**NCL:** So you are transferring your *qi* onto the paper when you are writing?

**LTP:** Yes, essentially! The words must have dynamism and life force in them, so they evoke emotions in people. The words cannot be dead.

**NCL:** Could you share your dietary habits and physical activities with us? Do you think these contributed to your longevity?



**LTP:** I think so. I couldn't tolerate fatty meat since childhood. I eat plainly, in moderation, and I don't have a big appetite. In fact, I seldom eat till I am full. I exercise daily through painting. By moving my brushes all over the paper, my whole body shifts vigorously as I paint and often, I am drenched in sweat after a painting session. My mind and body are kept active, and I have something to endeavour towards daily.

### Notes for the next generation

**NCL:** What advice do you have for younger artists?

**LTP:** Learn to be a good person with good morals. Be dedicated to your work, and be diligent. There are no shortcuts in art and life.

**NCL:** As a former educator, what lessons do you have for medical educators?

**LTP:** Educators must have a loving heart. If students do badly, or make mistakes, we have to guide them patiently and with love. There is no point in criticising them harshly. They have to feel your love and concern before they will listen to you. I still keep in contact with my students and they invite me to a gathering once a year.

**NCL:** Thank you for your time today and for sharing your insights with our readers.

### Concluding thoughts

I was privileged to hear in person Mr Lim's thoughts on his journey through art and life, and was inspired by his dedication and passion for his work and his positive outlook on life. We are very fortunate to have passionate and talented artists in Singapore.

As the arts scene continues to improve, I believe we can expect to see more talented Singaporeans taking on art as a profession, and perhaps more collaborations between art and medicine. One such collaboration is the National University of Singapore's new Mind Art Experiential Lab at Alexandra Hospital, which aims to explore the link between the arts and the human mind, and explores mindfulness and art therapy by immersing visitors and patients in the various forms of art. Mr Lim's longevity certainly seems to suggest an association between art and health! Let us take a leaf from the centenarian's book and see the beauty in everyday life. You may just live longer and healthier. ♦

For more anecdotes and wisdom from Mr Lim as well as Dr Ng's thoughts, read the full transcript at <https://bit.ly/3qaeLR3>.

### Legend

1. An iconic masterpiece of shophouses by the Singapore River by Mr Lim, his masterful use of Chinese ink in full display with the contrast and overlap of tones
2. Array of really big brushes
3. Bowls containing an assortment of paint that Mr Lim uses
4. Author and Mr Lim in his studio

Dr Ng is an ENT consultant in public service. After a day of doctoring and cajoling his two princesses at home to finish their food, his idea of relaxation is watching a drama serial with his lovely wife and occasionally throwing some paint on a canvas.

