

A Centenarian's Life of Art

Interview 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. Mr Teo shares his experience and knowledge readily and one can learn a lot from him about the artists his gallery represents. 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. That day, I saw a half-completed painting measuring at least two metres on the wall, one which he spent three hours on just that morning. His collection of brushes range from little to massive ones that measure almost a metre in length. Mr Lim is very particular about his inks and paints, and imports cartons of top-grade paints not available locally from Japan. There are chairs around a large table where he rests at, and where friends and collectors gather and chat. 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

[Back to page 1](#)

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).

NCL: Were you self-taught?

LTP: Yes, largely so. I did not attend art school. I started drawing, painting and writing when I was young because I enjoyed it. As I got older, I bought and borrowed books on art and learned about the masters' techniques. Initially, I painted in watercolour, but moved on to ink and oil. I had worked as a teacher and principal of a primary school, and painted during my free time. I became a full-time artist only later on.

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: Medicine is both an art and a science. What do you think medical professionals can learn from artists and what are the similarities between the two?

LTP: I don't think there is much to learn from us! (*laughs*) Doctors save lives, we paint. There are very different things altogether. But perhaps, the dedication (持之以恆) to our work is similar. I am very serious about art, and nothing else excites me. Before I sleep, I think about what I want to paint or write the following day. When I wake up, I paint and write. Very little else occupies my mind.

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 was another time when I was painting in a dirty alley. A passer-by laughed and asked why I was painting such a filthy place when there were many beautiful new buildings just nearby. I just smiled. There was so much character as well as a different form of beauty in that alley. There is so

[Back to page 1](#)

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.

Friendly testimonials

One of Mr Lim's friends Mr Zeng Yuancheng, a retired Chung Cheng High School teacher and author present at the interview added: “仁者寿 (in English: a benevolent and kind man will lead a long life). Mr Lim has only friends and no enemies. He is very easy-going, cares a lot about others and never makes enemies.”

Dr Jimmy Koh, vice-president of the Chung Cheng High School Management Committee, also added: “Mr Lim is someone I highly respect. He has no ill-intent towards anyone, and does not speak ill of anyone. He is passionate about education and charity work and has donated many of his works for fund-raising, such as the Yellow Ribbon Project. He has also donated many excellent works to the Lim Tze Peng Art Gallery at the Chung Cheng High School. It is open to the public. You should come visit!”

Seeing an opportunity, I introduced the SMA Medical Students' Assistance Fund and asked if Mr Lim would donate his works for our fund-raising efforts, and he readily agreed!

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.

[Back to page 1](#)

I remember a student who had been rejected by several schools. His parents came to me in despair and I told them that I would take him. They were delighted and brought me 100 eggs the following day. I couldn't accept the eggs so I rode my bicycle to their house to return them the 100 eggs, but on the way there, I fell off the bicycle and broke all the eggs! I had to buy 30 eggs to return them and told them I accepted 70 eggs (laughs). It was great being a village teacher. We were poor but there was so much warmth back then; we really cared about one another. Parents would bring teachers dumplings during the Dragon Boat Festival, and mooncakes during the Mid-Autumn Festival. It was wonderful.

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. Several Singaporean artists I spoke to lamented that while the local art scene is becoming more vibrant with more interest in the arts and culture now, it is still a work in progress and much more can be done to support Singaporeans in the arts and creative industry.

We are located in a region with a unique blend of cultures, and this soil is fertile for artistic creation. The Nanyang style of art is a delightful mix of East and West, of Northeast Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. The art works produced represent the melting pot that is Southeast Asia, with cultural influences from China, India, Indochina and former colonial powers brought here by migrants. We see a blend of different schools of Chinese art (such as the Shanghai school and the Lingnan school) mixed with Western realist and abstract philosophies and techniques, depicting Southeast Asian architecture, landscapes and ways of life.

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.

[Back to page 1](#)