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ART



Javanese life, woven into a fantasy world

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SINGAPORE

The world of Haji Widayat (1919-2002), one of most influential Javanese painters of the 20th century, was one of dense jungles, exotic animals and primitive life forms mixed with myths and fantasy.

An exhibition of his works at the Singapore Art Museum, "Widayat Between Worlds: A Retrospective," running until Oct. 28, showcases the late Indonesian master's unique style, described by some art critics as "magical-decorative." Meticulously painted with exquisite detailing, Widayat's paintings are identifiable by his signature flat and simplified representational style, often using repetition, weaving in some modernist and abstract stylizations. Yet Joanna Lee, the curator of this major retrospective, argues that far from being merely decorative, Widayat's works also have deep spirituality and meaning. His fantasy world draws from Javanese legends he had heard as a child as well as from a Judeo-Islamic narrative of human genesis and creation, which are reflected in some of the subject matter that includes images like Adam and Eve and Noah's Ark.

Featuring more than 70 paintings, sculptures and ceramics, the exhibition underlines the broad artistic talent and versatility of the artist, who not only liked to experiment with various media throughout his long career (including oil, acrylic, watercolor, ceramic, print and sculpture), but who also challenged himself with new stylistic approaches even in the twilight of his life.

"Widayat was a very individualistic artist, which cannot really be explained by art historical models," said Kwok Kin Chow, the museum's director. "With this exhibition we want to emphasize how he syncretized the nature of Javanese culture and how his practice celebrates multiculturalism, by embracing both Western and Asian inspirations."

Widayat emerged as an artist in post-independence Indonesia, at a time when artists strived to create a "new art" for Indonesia away from the "Beautiful Indies" style (Mooi-Indië) that had been in favor in colonial times.

"Widayat stood out because he developed his own decorative language, right in the middle of the two main schools of mid-20th century Indonesian art," Kwok said, referring to the



Images from Singapore Art Museum

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Bandung School, which was strongly influenced by Dutch art and stood for Western, abstract works; and the Yogyakarta School, which preached more naturalistic works.

Having first developed a naturalism style closer to the Bandung School, Widayat also took stylistic cues from the Yogyakarta School before developing his own style, mixing indigenous primitive art and decorative elements of batik.

"There were already painters that used a decorative and naïve style. He didn't come out of the blue," said Lee. "There were precedents and a milieu of artists working in a particular way. But Widayat saw and he adapted."

Much of the artist's inspiration was drawn from his childhood and past experiences. Born in Central Java in 1919, Widayat grew up listening to stories of Javanese mythology while watching his mother, a renowned maker of fine batik.

As a teenager, he picked up painting skills from an amateur landscape painter who sold souvenir paintings in the streets of Bandung. "My beginnings as a painter were in the dust of art," Widayat once said of these early years.

In the 1940s, he abandoned his love of painting to seek a career first as a surveyor in the rubber plantations in the dense Sumatran jungles, then as a map-maker for a railway company. Later, many of his paintings, full of plants, exotic birds and wild animals, would draw on these jungle memories.

After independence in 1949, Widayat, then 31, decided to study art seriously, joining the first cohort of the newly created Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts (ASRI) in Yogyakarta. There, under the tutelage of celebrated painters like Hendra

Gunawan, Sudjojono, Kusnadi and Kartono Yudhokusumo, he was encouraged to explore the idea of national identity.

While his early works, like the romanticized landscape of Green Valley (1953), show a naturalistic style still influenced by his earlier experience in Bandung, Widayat quickly started developing a decorative, naïve style that would eventually progress into the more mature and recognizable "magical-decorative" style he established in the 1970s.

By then, Widayat's nature-inspired fantasy themes had taken center stage in his work, Lee said. "His 'magical-decorative' paintings are somber with tightly packed, textured surfaces with minute details and decorative motives, and he showed a preference for muted, earthy colors drawn directly from nature," she said, pointing to paintings like "Flora and Fauna" (1980) and "Birds in the Trees" (1989).

Seated on the floor with his canvas stretched in front of him, the artist would dab little dots and short broken marks on his painting, building up the surface layer. Similar to batik motifs, he often crowded his composition by endlessly repeating fish, birds, foliage or human forms. Yet amid this multitude of subjects, the sense of repetition is often just an illusion as a closer look reveals a uniqueness in each form. Later in life, as the artist's sight deteriorated due to cataract, his brushwork became broader and more expressive, and he moved toward more semi-abstract representations, while also experimenting with graphic art, as evident in the startlingly colorful work titled "Scarecrow" (1998).

Many of Widayat's works also show memories of cherry

The Singapore Museum of Art is showing a major retrospective of Widayat's works until Oct. 28. On display are, from left, "Sakura in Inuyama" (1962), "Self-Portrait" (1962) and "Green Valley" (1953). Many of his works show the influence of his studies of ceramics, printmaking and the decorative arts of landscape gardening and Ikebana flower arrangement.



blossoms and Japanese woodcut prints from his two-year stay in Japan in the early 1960s studying ceramic, printmaking, and the decorative arts of landscape gardening and Ikebana flower arrangement. Such influences can be seen in works like "Sakura in Inuyama" (1962) and "Self-Portrait" (1962).

But while Japanese woodcut prints greatly influenced him, art critics commented that paradoxically, Widayat's painting became more abstract in style after his return from Japan. "His interest was in adapting traditional sources for his own expression as a modern artist," Lee said.

While most of the artist's paintings have a sense of calmness and peace, he did show darker fantasies with his Deep Sea Fish series, where he used prehistoric forms of fish, sometimes looking quite vicious. "Only in this series, do you get a kind of violence and savagery of the natural world," Lee said.

Widayat's endeavor for the simplification and abstraction of reality and nature has had a profound influence on many Indonesian artists. "His influence can even be felt in today's modern contemporary work," said Daniel Komala, head of the Jakarta-based Larasati Auctioneers. "Look at the figurative work of some young artist like Yunizar." He added: "Widayat opened new doors and possibilities to decorative style, most importantly turning it into 'high' art. For this, he was and still is an important figure in Indonesian art."