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Press Release

Xu Beihong in Nanyang 徐悲鸿在南洋

5 April 2008 to 13 July 2008



(25 March 2008) Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and Xu Beihong Museum are proud to present *Xu Beihong in Nanyang*, a solo exhibition on one of the most seminal figures in the history of modern Chinese painting. Featuring 90 works, selected from both public and private collections from around the world, this exhibition serves as an unprecedented opportunity to examine many of Xu's most important works completed in Southeast Asia and India, a number of which have never been exhibited publicly before.

The exhibition opening will be officiated by Guest of Honour, Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, on 4th April 2008, Friday, 6.30pm, at the Glass Hall, Singapore Art Museum. Media preview led by the curators will be held on the same day at 11am at the Glass Hall.

Apart from his larger than life persona and dramatic life story spanning continents and wars, Xu was one of the first to articulate the need for artistic expressions that reflected a new modern China at the beginning of the 20th century. He was also regarded as one of the first to create monumental oil paintings with epic Chinese themes, thereby demonstrating his proficiency in a medium and category of art that was essentially Western in origin.

Says Mr Kwok Kian Chow, SAM Director, "Xu Beihong is one of the first names to be mentioned when we consider the topic of realism in Asian modern art. His connections with Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Indonesia (through his friendship with Lee Man Fong), India (at the invitation of Rabindranath Tagore) and his earlier education and travels in Europe (1919-1927) point to a network of historical narratives, exchanges and influences of aesthetics and ideas. More significantly, in the case of this exhibition, there are points of parallels and indirect connectivity which we have yet to explore in the writing of modern art history of Asia."

However, in the story of Xu's contribution to the development of modern Chinese painting, there is an important Nanyang chapter that is located in Singapore, Malaya and India. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, these were the places that proved to be his sanctuaries, where he was able to seek inspiration and nourishment.

Between 1939 and 1941, he held one show in Singapore, two in India and three in Malaya (Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh). The exhibitions were always well-supported and helped Xu to raise funds for the war relief effort in China. In his travels to India, he met luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, as well as gathered source materials for his iconic paintings such as *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains*, a 4.21m wide painting featured in this exhibition. Many of his most significant works such as *After a Poem of the Six Dynasties*, *Portrait of Ms Jenny* and *Put Down Your Whip* were also created during his sojourns in Southeast Asia.

Says Ms Liao Jingwen, Director of Xu Beihong Museum and wife of late Xu Beihong, "This exhibition is an extension of Xu Beihong's efforts to build friendships and promote cultural exchange between China and Singapore. We believe that this exhibition will evoke fond memories from Singaporeans of those times, and they will derive great enjoyment from the beauty of these works."

Xu Beihong in Nanyang opens to public on 5th April and ends on 13th July 2008.

Please refer to the following Annexes for more information:

Annex A	Biography of Xu Beihong
Annex B	Public Programmes in conjunction with <i>Xu Beihong in Nanyang</i>
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Annex A

Biographical information of Xu Beihong

Born in Yixing, Jiangsu Province, Xu grew up in a painter's family where his father was a local painter, skilled in seal carving, calligraphy and poetry. Xu's childhood was spent sketching birds and animals around his village. Apart from learning from his father, Xu also started, at the age of nine, copying the figurative paintings by the late Qing artist Wu Jiayou (also known as Wu Youru), as well as Wu's illustrations in the weekly Dianshi Studio Illustrated (Dianshizhai huabao). He was also fond of copying realistic Western-style animals that were printed on cigarette packs made by foreign factories in Shanghai. At the age of ten, the precocious Xu was already composing poetry and writing couplets.

Whilst in his teens, Xu joined his father as itinerant portrait painters. After his father's death, Xu left for Shanghai in 1914 and again in 1915 to seek a living. He was not successful despite earning praise from the Gao brothers (Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng) for his painting of a horse.

He then enrolled in the Universite Aurore (Zhendan University) where he learnt French. During this period, he might have also learnt some Western painting and drawing from the Jesuit fathers at Siccawei.

In Shanghai, Xu met the scholar and political reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927), who later became Xu's mentor and allowed the latter access to his collection of calligraphic rubbings. This helped Xu to build a solid understanding of the different calligraphic styles through the ages. Xu was especially struck by the former's recommendation of using Song dynasty paintings as models, and his promotion of "an integration of Chinese and Western art to create a new era of painting".

In 1917, Xu left for Japan with his wife Jiang Biwei to study Western painting for a year. He spent most of his time, visiting art galleries and art bookshops.

After returning from Japan, Xu was hired by the chancellor of the Beijing University, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) to teach art at the Society for the Research of Chinese Painting at the Beijing University (Beijing daxue huafayanjihui).

In 1919, Xu was sponsored by the Chinese government to travel to France to study art. With his wife, he reached France by ocean liner via England, and had the opportunity to see the Parthenon marble artefacts at the British Museum.

In Paris, he first spent some months to improve his French. He then enrolled at the private art school Académie Julian for two months and later at the government-run École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (National School of Fine Arts) where he studied under Francois Flameng (1856-1923).

In 1920, Xu became a student of Pascal Adolphe Jean Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929) and often went to the latter's studio to seek advice on painting and meet fellow artists.

Although hampered by a lack of steady funding, Xu persisted in Paris for eight years, completing close to a thousand sketches. However, the dire financial straits meant that Xu and his wife often had little to eat and suffered from the cold winters with little protection. This eventually led to Xu developing severe gastric problems.

When his scholarship funds ran out, he was forced to move to Berlin for about 20 months where his francs went further in the black market due to Berlin's post-war inflation. Whilst there, he worked under the artist Arthur Kampf (1864-1950). In Germany, he admired the works of Durer, Holbein and Mezel, and often visited its museums, copying paintings by Rembrandt. He also spent time at the Berlin Zoo, observing and drawing the lions.

In 1923, he returned to Paris and continued with his studies at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. His oil painting The Old Woman was selected for the National Art Exhibition for the first time.

In 1925, Xu met Huang Menggui in Paris. Upon realising Xu's financial difficulties, Huang gave an introduction letter to Xu, and asked the latter to approach his younger brother Huang Manshi in Singapore for help.

In 1925, leaving his wife still in Paris, Xu returned to China via Singapore where he met Huang Manshi. The latter agreed to help, and assisted Xu to secure portrait commissions for personalities in Singapore such as Tan Kah Kee.

In April 1927, Xu stayed with Huang Manshi's family in Singapore at their residence "Jiangxiatang" for a few months before reaching France.

In Europe, Xu visited Paris, Italy, Brussels, Antwerp and Switzerland. The Xus were still so poor that Jiang Biwei had to make embroidery for five francs per piece to make ends meet. In 1927, Xu managed to exhibit nine paintings in the official National Art Exhibition in Paris.

In 1927, Xu returned to China. He co-founded and taught at South China Art Academy (Nanguo yishu xueyuan) in Shanghai, and was director of the art department at the Central University in Nanjing (Nanjing zhongyang daxue yishu xi) from 1929 to 1936.

In 1928, he became President of the Beiping Art College (Beiping yishu xueyuan)

By 1930, his marriage with Jiang Biwei was beginning to fall apart, though they would only divorce in 1943.

In 1931, Xu's paintings were exhibited in Lyons and Brussels.

In 1933, he returned to Europe with a collection of modern Chinese painting by various artists that he exhibited in Paris and Milan. The exhibition in Paris was a success which drew 3000 guests to the opening. The show had to be extended by 15 days and the catalogue was reprinted thrice in order to meet the high demand. The French government purchased 12 paintings from the show. Xu also held a personal show in Brussels.

In 1934, Xu held a solo show in Berlin. He held another modern Chinese painting show in Moscow and Leningrad before returning to China.

In 1935, Xu helped to arrange for a show of Soviet prints in Nanjing and Shanghai.

After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) in 1937, Xu travelled to Southeast Asia to raise funds for the resistance movement, through the sale of his paintings.

In January 1939, Xu brought works to Singapore to raise funds. The show, which Huang Manshi helped to arrange, was held at Victoria Memorial Hall and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. It was a success with many distinguished guests attending the opening. 171 works comprising oils, ink paintings and sketches were shown, and a sum of \$15,398 was raised and donated to the families of the fallen soldiers of the Fifth Army in Guangxi.

Apart from his exhibition, Xu also gave talks to schools and art societies in Singapore, and painted numerous works including the portrait of Sir Thomas Shenton, Governor of Singapore.

In late 1939, Xu received an invitation from Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), President of the Sino-Indian Cultural Society, to hold exhibitions in India and give talks. Xu left for India and held his first show at Tagore's university Visva Bharati in Santiniketan in December 1939.

In February 1940, Xu held a solo show in Calcutta. Tagore greatly admired Xu's works, and Xu completed more than ten portraits of Tagore in oils and sketches. Through Tagore's introduction, Xu also met Mahatma Gandhi and did a portrait sketch of the latter. During his stay in Darjeeling, Xu completed many landscape paintings of the mountains in oils and ink. He also created two versions of The Foolish Old Man Who Removes the Mountains – one in oil, and the other in ink.

Xu stayed in India for nearly one year, returning to Singapore only in December 1940. At the fifth annual exhibition of the Society of Chinese Artists in Singapore, four of Xu's works including The

Portrait of Tagore (completed in India) were exhibited.

From January to July 1941, Xu gave talks at schools, and held three fund-raising exhibitions in Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang respectively. Upon his return to Singapore in August, he gave a memorial speech in honour of Tagore (who had passed away in August 1941) on Radio Television Singapore.

In September 1941, Xu was preparing for a show in United States of America but the plans were cancelled after the Pearl Harbour attack.

In December 1941, Xu left Singapore on two ships, carrying his works and art collection. One ship was destroyed by the Japanese, whilst Xu and some of his works on the second ship managed to return to China via Myanmar unscathed by the summer of 1942. As Xu could not bring all his paintings back with him (due to limited storage space in the two ships), his friends in Singapore helped him to hide the works, specifically inside an old well by a school, and also buried in the rambutan orchard of his good friend Han Wai Toon (Han Huaizhun). These included some 40 oil paintings.

In 1943, Xu married his student Liao Jingwen .

In 1944, Xu was diagnosed with hypertension and kidney problems.

In 1946, he was appointed the president of the Beiping Art Academy (Beiping yishu zhuanke xuexiao) (known as the Beijing National Art College or National Central Academy of Fine Arts from 1950).

In 1949, he became the president of the Central Institute of Fine Arts (Zhongyang meishu xueyuan) and chairman of the Association of Chinese Art Workers (Quanguo meishu gongzuozhe xiehui).

In 1949, he attended the First World Congress of Defenders of Peace (Diyijie baowei shijie heping dahui) held in Prague.

Prior to his death in 1953, despite poor health, Xu continued writing, sketching, painting and giving lectures.

He passed away in 1953 due to a cerebral haemorrhage. A posthumous exhibition was held several months after his demise. In accordance with his last wishes, his family donated his collection of paintings, books and rubbings to the nation.

In 1954, Xu's former residence was designated as the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum. The museum moved to new premises in 1983.

Annex B

Public Programmes in conjunction with *Xu Beihong in Nanyang*

Xu Beihong in Nanyang Art Talk

Academics and personal friends of the Xu Beihong family will share anecdotes on this illustrious artist and offer insight into the father of 20th century Chinese modern art.

5 Apr (Sat) • 2.00pm • SAM Auditorium • Free • Registration required

Curatours

Get the stories behind the pictures in our blockbuster exhibition *Beihong in Nanyang* with Low Sze Wee and Chow Yian Ping.

11 Apr

Low Sze Wee is the Deputy Director of Curation & Collection, he has curated *Embracing Infinity: Works by Tan Swie Hian and Convergences – Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* (2006).

25 Apr, 27 Jun (In Mandarin)

Chow Yian Ping was involved in the curation of *5th International Ink Biennale of Shenzhen-Singapore Modern Ink* (2006) and *Zeng Fanzhi: Idealism* (2007).

11 Apr (Fri) • 7.30pm – 9.00pm • Meeting Point: SAM Lobby • Free • Registration required

25 Apr, 27 Jun (Fri) • 7.30pm – 9.00pm • In Mandarin • Meeting Point: SAM Lobby • Free • Registration required

Hundred-Fan Studio

Join Han Tan Juan as he brings us on a nostalgic walk and retrace the steps of Xu Beihong in Nanyang. Visit his studio on the second storey of Jiang Xia Tang in Geylang and be enthralled by the colourful stories retold.

Han Tan Juan is born in 1942 in Kulai, Johor, he settled in Singapore in 1946. After completing secondary education in 1962, he became the Editor of *Zhi Shi Bao* (a student newsletter), Editor of *Min Bao*, Acting Editor for the *Lianhe Wanbao Supplement*, and Executive Editor cum Executive Reporter of the *Lianhe Zaobao*, serving until his retirement in 2004.

14 June (Sat) • 1.30pm – 4.00pm • In Mandarin • Meeting Point: SAM Lobby • \$15 • Registration required

Shui Mo Hua (Chinese Painting) workshop

Shui Mo Hua (Chinese Painting) made easy for children. Workshop held in conjunction with upcoming exhibition to highlight the mastery of Chinese artists and their art, Shui Mo Hua workshop sessions are great introductory workshops for children to the wonders of Chinese Art. Lessons conducted in mandarin only. Recommended for ages 4-12.*

Workshop fees \$28 / child (Workshop fees inclusive of materials and facilitators)

Group size 20 min - 50 max per workshop.

Booking of workshops subject to availability *

**For bookings or more information please call 6332 3220 or email santha_anthony@nhb.gov.sg
(*Activities vary according to age group)**

Annex C

About Singapore Art Museum

Opened in January 1996, the mission of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) is to preserve and present the art histories and contemporary art practices of Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. To date, SAM has amassed the world's largest public collection of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian artworks with a growing component in international contemporary art. The museum has presented shows covering both local and international art practices, traditional and cutting edge art expressions. Through strategic alliances with international arts and cultural institutions, SAM has been facilitating visual arts education, exchange, research and development within the region and internationally. Through forging collaborative partnerships and staging innovative programmes to engage different audiences, SAM aims to contribute to an enlarged role in the regional visual arts community and Asian art museology, as well as facilitating developments in art as well as the art sector in Singapore.

Annex D

About Xu Beihong Museum

Xu Beihong (1895-1953) was an outstanding Chinese painter and art educator. In his early years, he went to study in France. Later when he returned, he held various posts such as the Chairman of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the President of the Chinese Artist' Association. His works express a rich national flavour while demonstrating a high level of technique. He is lauded as the founder of china's realistic art education and the father of China's modern painting. Spanning a total area of 3,700m sq, the Xu Beihong Museum was set up in Beijing by the Chinese government. It has seven exhibit halls, where his traditional Chinese paintings, oil paintings, sketches, rough sketches and other collections are on display all yaer round. When lingering on before these priceless creations, visitors are impressed by the painter's scintillating brush and are reminded of Xu Beihong's unswerving determination, industry and noble patriotic sentiments which were infused in his works. All of them are placed on the list of the national important cultural relics. His picture albums and replica of his works are sold in the museum. There is also a Xu Beihong studio, which enrolls students for advanced studies from both home and abroad, which are taught by professors from the Central Academy of fine Arts.

Open from Tuesday to Sunday:

9:00 – 12:00

13:00 – 17:00

Present Chief: Ms Liao Jingwen

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