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Seeking the real Malay Man

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ARTS REPORTER

THE Singapore Art Museum is looking for a man.

Specifically, it wants to get in touch with a Malay watchman known only as Ali, who worked in the Equator Art Society in 56 Geylang Lorong 32 in the 1950s and 1960s.

Besides guarding the doors of the art society, whose members included pioneer painters such as Chua Mia Tee and Lim Yew Kuan, he also modelled for a few paintings. They are featured in an exhibition, called *From Words To Pictures: Art During The Emergency*, now on at the museum.

The art society lost contact with him after it closed in 1974, but the museum wants to talk to him for research purposes.

They are using three paintings of him – Lee Boon Wang's *Malay Man*, Chua's *National Language Class* and Lai Kui Fang's *Bedok Flood* – and an old photograph for identification.

The exhibition revisits art and social history during the Malayan Emergency, a term used by the British government to describe the war between the Malayan Communist Party and the Commonwealth armed forces between 1948 and 1960.

Curated by Mr Seng Yu Jin,



PHOTO: SINGAPORE ART MUSEUM

MODEL CITIZEN: If you know the man in this portrait by Lee Boon Wang called Malay Man, call the Singapore Art Museum.

the show aims to get visitors thinking about the effects of the Emergency on local art by looking at two active art societies at the time – the Singapore Art Society and Equator Art Society. Seng, 28, says: "From a scholarship point of view, there's a lot of ink spilt on the period, especially on the military aspects. But culturally, it's not well covered."

Hence the look at the cultural and artistic achievements during the period: Some 47 paintings and four sculptures by the two societies are on show.

The divergences in style and content are palpable.

The Singapore Art Society, which is still going strong today, produced works focused on landscapes and still life, and worked on creating a regional aesthetic style. Its members included pioneers such as Liu Kang and Chen Wen-Hsi.

Equator, on the other hand, swung towards more socially conscious themes and a more realist style. Some of the painters' subjects included working folk such as buffalo herders, ship repairmen and snake charmers.

Seng says that while they had differing styles and content, the two societies had the same agenda of creating a common Malay-an culture.

He adds: "Equator did research into the lives of the working classes then and depicted them in art. The Singapore Art Society tried to find a regional aesthetic called the Nanyang style by, for example, using stylisation of the human form."

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> *From Words To Pictures: Art During The Emergency* is on at the Singapore Art Museum until Oct 31. Admission is free until next Monday; admission after that is still to be determined. Opening hours are 10am to 7pm from Mondays to Sundays, with extended hours to 9pm on Fridays.