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By OOI KOK CHUEN

In just 10 years, the Singapore Art Museum has amassed the largest collection of 20th century South-East Asian art by a public institution and it plans to make it even bigger and better.

BY the year 2012, Singapore will have three institutional art museums to house, preserve, promote and research its growing art treasures.

To be provisionally called the National Art Gallery, the present Singapore Art Museum (SAM) will be turned into a contemporary art space, while the other two spaces will be converted from the City Hall and former Supreme Court buildings.

“The first phase of competition to select the architectural designs has been completed,” said National Heritage Board chairman Professor Tommy Koh in an interview in Singapore.

In the first phase of competition from Feb 23 to April 12, five entries were shortlisted from an international field of 111. Under the second phase, not more than three winners will be selected, to demonstrate their concepts and feasibility.

In its 10 years of existence, SAM has amassed an impressive collection of more than 7,000 artworks.

It boasts of the largest collection of 20th century South-East Asian art by a public institution and that includes 400 significant works by Malaysian artists.

But its present building at Bras Basah Road, converted from an adaptive re-use restoration of the former 19th century St Joseph’s Institution building, has outgrown its usefulness with its ever burgeoning collection and modern demands in terms of space, storage, conservation and exhibitions.

It has been actively running back-to-back exhibitions at its 14 full climate-controlled galleries. The exhibitions include collaborations with major art museums such as Leonardo da Vinci: Scientist, Inventor and Artist; German Art 1960s to 1970s; The Origins of Modern Art in France: Monet to Moore: Millennium Gift of the Sara Lee Corporation; and Botero.

Its current attraction is the Engraving The World exhibition (until July 22) featuring 135 engravings from the calcography collection of the Louvre Museum in Paris, dating from the Sun King Louis XIV to the present.

“SAM has played a critical role in laying the foundation for the visual arts in Singapore, and will continue to play a prominent role with its years of experience working with artists and their Asian connections,” said Koh. “However, there is a need for more spaces to display the growing collection and to cater to a more diversified art scene.”



»The rationale is to provide a regional context within which to interpret Singapore art«
KWOK KIAN CHOW

The SAM building has an exhibition space of 10,000 sq m. In the 1990s, SAM had seemingly deep pockets to buy what the director, Kwok Kian Chow, described as “representative pieces by major artists who have contributed significantly to the development of South-east Asian art history and contemporary practice.”

“The rationale is to provide a regional context within which to interpret Singapore art,” he said.



Zulkifli Yusoff's award-winning installation, *The Power 1*, is now in the Singapore Art Museum collection.

SAM and the Fukuoka Art Museum in Japan snapped up significant award-winning works by Malaysia's then emerging artists like Zulkifli Yusoff, Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Tan Chin Kuan in the 1990s.

Also in the SAM collection are works by China's great artists like Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), Qi Baishi (1863-1957), Liu Haisu (1896-1994) and Wu Guanzhong (born 1919), besides some 1,000 works from the Tyler Art Collection.

When asked to put a price tag on its entire collection, Kwok said: “The total value rests in its art historical significance as cultural heritage

“As the works were acquired at various times, it is difficult to put a current figure on the entire collection.”

Funding comes from the museum's own acquisition funds, donations and sponsorships.

Kwok added that SAM is looking to expand its permanent collection and exhibitions to focus on modern and contemporary Asian art while maintaining its focus and strength in Southeast Asian art.

It is helping its artists to take part in major international shows like the Venice Biennale in 2001 (Chen Kezhen, Salleh Japar, Matthew Ngui and Suzann Victor) and 2003 (Tan Swie Hian, Heman Chong and Francis Ng).

More than creating a presence of Singapore art, all these international efforts are also to entrench as well as to locate, contextualise and amplify Singapore role in the greater Asian art history and schema.

With more than 100 art galleries besides an array of auction houses and a state-of-the-art performing arts infrastructure like the Esplanade, Singapore truly deserves its self-proclaimed tag of global city of the arts.

- For details, check out <http://www.singart.com>.