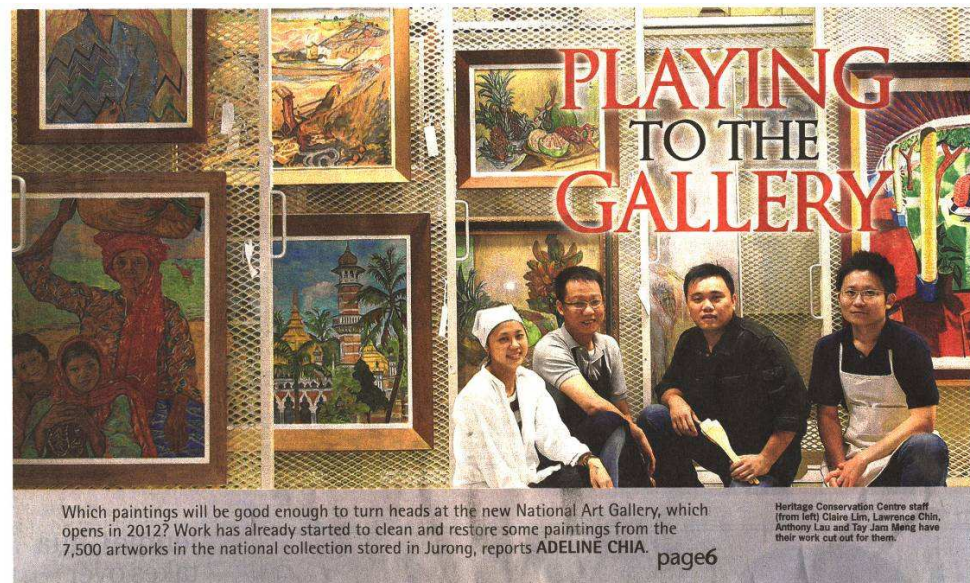


**Publication:** The Straits Times Life!  
**Date:** Mar 29 2007  
**Headline:** Playing to the gallery



Which paintings will be good enough to turn heads at the new National Art Gallery, which opens in 2012? Work has already started to clean and restore some paintings from the 7,500 artworks in the national collection stored in Jurong, reports ADELINE CHIA. page 6

Heritage Conservation Centre staff (from left) Claire Lim, Lawrence Chin, Anthony Lau and Tay Jam Meng have their work cut out for them.

### The best

Life takes a sneak peak at the top five works in the national art collection. They are now worth more than \$100,000 each, and might well be displayed in the new National Art Gallery when it opens in 2012. Can't wait till then? They are on show at the Singapore Art Museum in Bras Basah Road.



**1 What Herons, 1990**  
 What: Chen Wen Hsi  
 Acquired: 1991

Master painter Chen is credited as one of the key icons of the Nanyang school of painting, which blended diverse artistic influences to create an identity for local art. This ink-and-colour work on paper, completed a year before his death at the age of 87 in 1991, shows the artist departing from the traditions of Chinese painting to create a nearly abstract work, which results in flat, geometric diamond shapes to depict a dense flock of birds.



**2 What Artist & Model, 1954**  
 What: Liu Kang  
 Acquired: 1989

Pioneer painter Liu went on a seminal expedition to Bali with fellow artists Cheong Sui Ping, Chen Wen Hsi and Chen Chong Swee in 1952, and this is the most famous painting from that trip. The oil-on-canvas work shows Chen Wen Hsi painting a Balinese sitter. It is revolutionary in its use of bright, flat colours which recall French artist Henri Matisse's works, and the white outlines are reminiscent of batik paintings. Liu died in 2004 at the age of 93.



**3 What Drying Salted Fish, 1978**  
 What: Cheong Sui Ping  
 Acquired: 1991

This work by yet another iconic painter may look familiar, as it can be found on the back of the \$50 note. The Chinese ink-and-colour on cloth work combines meticulous Chinese ink-brook techniques with local subject matter. The fishing folk depicted in this painting were a common sight along the coast of West Malaysia, which Cheong frequented on his painting trips. He died in 1983 at age 66.



**4 What National Language Class, 1959**  
 What: Chia Mui Tee  
 Acquired: In the 1960s or 1970s

Renowned for his realistic depiction of Chinatown and the Singapore River, Chia, 76, believed that paintings can also serve as historical documents. This oil-on-canvas depicts a group of Chinese students learning Malay, the newly designated national language of Singapore in 1959, the same year Singapore attained self-governance.



**5 What Humming Birds, 1983**  
 What: Tan Swee Han  
 Acquired: 1984

Multi-disciplinary artist Tan, 63, translates the joyful abandon of the hummingbird, which is his personal symbol of the free artist, into his graceful ink-and-colour work. The artist, who is a master of calligraphy, literature, painting and sculpture, translated the D.H. Lawrence poem of the same title into Chinese at the top of the work. Below is a work with deftly executed dab of colour to show the ever-changing form of the bird.

But the collection includes rare

# IN CONSERVATION

It's five years before crunch time, but folks at the Heritage Conservation Centre are already deep into restoration work on paintings and artefacts - getting ready for the National Art Gallery's opening in 2012



PAINTSTAKING: Laying out a painting to be restored are (clockwise from bottom left) senior conservator Lawrence Chin, conservation officer Anthony Lau, assistant paintings conservator Claire Lim and conservation officer Tay Jam Meng.



Adeline Chia  
 ARTS REPORTER

ON THE outside, the Heritage Conservation Centre in Jurong Port Road may not seem like much. The nondescript four-storey steel-and-glass building looks right at home in the neighbourhood of factories and warehouses there.

But what treasures are stored inside. It houses artworks and artefacts for Singapore's three national museums.

At the top floor, three painting conservators are busy making educated guesses. They are trying to figure out which art works are likely to go on display at the National Art Gallery when it opens in 2012.

The idea is to identify the paintings early so they can be restored. And because a gallery director has not yet been appointed to decide what works go into the gallery, they have started on their own.

The team is banking on paintings from Singapore's pioneering artists, such as Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Sui Ping, George Tan and Liu Ping, who depicted local subject matter with a blend of Chinese and Western influences.

Other choices include the works of prominent multi-disciplinary artist Tan Swee Han and painter Thomas Yeo, known for his distinctive abstract style.

Mr Lawrence Chin, 39, a senior conservator of paintings at the centre, says of the choices so far: "They have been widely exhibited and featured in publications. Most people will agree that they are key artists of their generation."

He is one of 19 conservation laboratory staff who clean and touch up paintings and artefacts at the centre.

Whether they get a full room or half a room in the gallery is up to the curator, but they will definitely feature in the new gallery," he adds.

The centre houses over 100,000 artefacts that make up the collections of the Asian Civilisations Museum, the National Museum of Singapore and the Singapore Art Museum.

Among these, 7,500 are artworks in Singapore's national art collection. They include sculptures, installation works and paintings.

About half of the collection are by Singaporean artists and the rest are from South-east Asian countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia.

The bulk of the collection was bought from auction houses and exhibitions worldwide over the last 70 years, as donated by patrons. About 50 to 100 works are acquired each year.

Other works are on loan from individuals, corporations or museum collections. So far, there is no pricing on the collection as there has been no systematic attempt to value it.

But the collection includes rare

paintings from the colonial era. There is a portrait of the Straits Settlements governor-general, Sir Frank Swettenham, by famous portraitist John Singer Sargent; over 300 works worth \$18 million by pioneer artist Liu Kang, donated by his family; and a nude statue of the war heroine Elizabeth Choy.

Some may say the conservators are starting too early. The gallery, which will house the national collection of Singaporean and South-east Asian art, will open only in 2012, five years away.

Renovation work for its home, the former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings, hasn't even started. Even the interior design for the huge space - measuring 40,000 sq m to 50,000 sq m and four times the size of the Singapore Art Museum - isn't fixed yet.

But Mr Chin says that "it's never too early to start".

After all, he has worked on the relaunch of the National Museum and the opening of the Singapore Art Museum last year and in 1996 respectively.

He says: "There is always the fear that even if we have a five-year lead time, there will still be a mad rush at the end. Experience tells us that the details of the shows only come in one or two years before the opening."

So the team is working towards stepping up on its usual restoration rate of 50 paintings a year. A senior conservator has just left, so it will try to maintain the rate while training new team members.

Although it is a developed discipline overseas, there are no art conservation courses in Singapore. Most conservators here, who come from backgrounds as diverse as fine art and science, learn on the job from their more senior colleagues.

Their work includes painstakingly removing layers of old varnish - without touching the paint underneath - which discolours with age.

They then brush on a new clear layer.

They also carefully fill in areas where the old paint has flaked off to make old paintings as good as new.

Their hard work should pay off. After all, this is a blockbuster new museum in the making. The \$200-million to \$400-million project aims to make the gallery a landmark in the Civic District.

Preliminary projections target one million visitors a year.

Interest in its interior design is also strong. About 800 architects - local and overseas - registered online for the first stage of an architecture competition launched last month to find the best design for the buildings. The winning design will be selected at the end of the year.

"If we can get over 100 entries submitted and not just registered, it would be a resounding success," says Singapore Art Museum director Koh Siew Chuan, who is deputy chairman of the National Art Gallery Steering Committee.

When the design competition for the Esplanade arts centre was launched in 1992, there were 48 entries submitted.

A worldwide hunt for a gallery director to set the general direction of exhibitions was also launched recently.

Mr Koh, 67, says the committee is looking for a creative and inspiring individual with more than 12 years of experience in arts management. A headhunting firm has been tasked to find the right person for the job.

He added that the gallery will focus on Singapore and South-east Asian art as the Republic's core collection is made up of works from the region. But there will also be temporary shows of international art to supplement the permanent collection.

"It's quite simple and logical to concentrate on our strength," he says. "We are only starting to collect international art now, and there are so many galleries in the world with phenomenal collections. There's no way we can match them."

He adds that when the National Art Gallery is up and running, the Singapore Art Museum will continue exhibiting work from the national collection and generating interest in the visual arts.

Mr Low Sze Wee, assistant director of collections development at the museum, reckons that its current focus on modern art, works from the late 19th century until the 1970s, will eventually shift to contemporary art, which usually refers to work done in the last 30 years.

He says: "It's a trend in the world that as the arts scene grows, there will be more museums specialised in their own fields."

On his vision for the National Art Gallery, Mr Koh says: "Hopefully it will be a focal point in the heart of the Civic District and become a world-renowned centre for South-east Asian art."

3 chiaht@spah.com.sg

### The quirky

The national art collection of 7,500 works has some unusual, hidden gems. Here's a look at five of them.

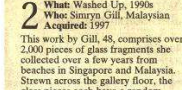
**1 What: The Treasure Of Being, Crying, Dying And Eating, 1993**  
 What: Mostien Boonma, Thai  
 Acquired: 1996

This installation piece by the well-regarded contemporary artist, who died of cancer at age 47 in 2000, features more than 100 bowls stacked to form a cylinder. The Buddhist artist often used bowls and earthenware to signal the transience of life which, like clay, will crumble and decay.



**2 What: Washed Up, 1990s**  
 What: Whae Simyng Gill, Malaysian  
 Acquired: 1997

This work by Gill, 48, comprises over 2,000 pieces of glass fragments she collected over a few years from beaches in Singapore and Malaysia. Straws across the gallery floor, the glass pieces each have a random English word engraved on it, such as "stern" and "singing". The work explores how the meanings of words change when they leave one place and wash up at another.



**3 What: Money Suit, 1992**  
 What: Vincent Leeuw, Singaporean  
 Acquired: 1993

This suit, made of fake US dollar bills, was worn by the artist during a 1992 performance that made playful jibes at society's obsession with materialism. Leeuw, 46, was infamous for his



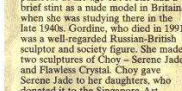
**4 What: Serene Jade, 1949**  
 What: Dora Gordine, British  
 Acquired: Donated by war heroine Elizabeth Choy in 1997

This bronze statue is based on Choy, who died last year from cancer of the pancreas at the age of 96. She had a brief stint as a model in Britain when she was studying there in the late 1940s. Gordine, who died in 1991, was a well-regarded Russian-British sculptor and society figure. She made two sculptures of Choy - Serene Jade and Flawless Crystal. Choy gave Serene Jade to her daughters, who donated it to the Singapore Art Museum. Flawless Crystal sits in an art gallery in Leicester, Britain.



**5 What: Wedding Cake, 1960s**  
 What: Shit Ye Shit Fung, Singaporean  
 Acquired: Commissioned by Singapore Art Museum last year

This installation work sits on the ground floor spiral staircase at the Singapore Art Museum. It features a fake wedding cake with 350 plastic figurines of brides and grooms. Ye, 36, is interested in trying to make audiences see the humble cake as an object of artistic value.



**3 What: Money Suit, 1992**  
 What: Vincent Leeuw, Singaporean  
 Acquired: 1993

This suit, made of fake US dollar bills, was worn by the artist during a 1992 performance that made playful jibes at society's obsession with materialism. Leeuw, 46, was infamous for his



**4 What: Serene Jade, 1949**  
 What: Dora Gordine, British  
 Acquired: Donated by war heroine Elizabeth Choy in 1997

This bronze statue is based on Choy, who died last year from cancer of the pancreas at the age of 96. She had a brief stint as a model in Britain when she was studying there in the late 1940s. Gordine, who died in 1991, was a well-regarded Russian-British sculptor and society figure. She made two sculptures of Choy - Serene Jade and Flawless Crystal. Choy gave Serene Jade to her daughters, who donated it to the Singapore Art Museum. Flawless Crystal sits in an art gallery in Leicester, Britain.



**5 What: Wedding Cake, 1960s**  
 What: Shit Ye Shit Fung, Singaporean  
 Acquired: Commissioned by Singapore Art Museum last year

This installation work sits on the ground floor spiral staircase at the Singapore Art Museum. It features a fake wedding cake with 350 plastic figurines of brides and grooms. Ye, 36, is interested in trying to make audiences see the humble cake as an object of artistic value.