ASEAN ART: FIVE DECADES OF DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

'Corporate', or at least 'executive' responsibility as patron and protector of art and culture heritage in this region has existed since the times of its early empires. During the glorious rule of Malay sultanates in the nasa tenggara, such as Malacca in the 14th century under the rule of Sultan Alauddin Riwayat Shah, the ruler would invite experts to participate in interior decoration for the palace. Through employment within the palace, we see the beginning of the role of the ruling elite or the corporate figures of today in conserving the national heritage to be enjoyed from generation to generation. Prior to that, if we explore the early Siamese and Indo-Chinese empires, such as Champa, Annam, Ayudha, Java, Majapahit, Mataram and Srivijaya, these were based on Hindu and Buddhist beliefs before the emergence of Islam in the region. The discovery of Dong Son drums indicates early metal-based craftsmanship which was patronized by the ruling class for ceremonial items.

The protection policy of weaker states by stronger and more powerful states, such as China, required the weaker party to pay 'jizya' or gifts such as money trees plated in gold as a guarantee for protection from external threats. This would certainly have required superior artisans for crafting items of high value and prestige. Only the palace would have had the authority and resources, from tax collection, to become the patron of such craftsmen. Some of this legacy remains extant in royal and museum collections.

ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations was established in 1967 as a movement inspired by regional cooperation, comprising five nations: Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. This could also be considered the oldest international association in the world to have existed before the likes of the European Union and the Arab League. ASEAN was established not only to enhance economic, social and cultural cooperation, but also to ensure regional stability and the safety of member countries from the threat of nuclear weapons and to prevent the advance of communism.

In this writer's opinion, any discussion of ASEAN art does not necessarily entail discussion of South East Asian art. It is possible to examine South East Asian art from northern Myanmar to southern Timor Leste without restriction, and yet to bring together ASEAN you would have to see it from a government to government perspective, entailing the scope of external relationships and the dynamics of regional cooperation. In other words, if we want to see what ASEAN art is, we need to see it from a more formal, exclusive perspective, reflecting an official government to government relationship in the field of art. Although the bond through art has long existed, there still has not been an effort to review its development or to reassess the development efforts in the modern world, with ASEAN as the platform.
Early cooperation in ASEAN art was established prior to the 1970s, a year after its establishment. In 1968 the 1st ASEAN exhibition, or the ASEAN Regional Art Exhibition, was held in Jakarta. However, Thailand did not participate. In 1972, for the first time, all the original member countries joined the 'ASEAN Exposition of Painting and Photography' in Singapore. As it became more important to nurture and enhance understanding among member countries, the '1st ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Painting and Photography' was held in 1974 at Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur. From 6 to 8 March 1978, an official meeting was held for the group to plan the development programme for art and for the first time the 'ASEAN Working Group of Culture' was held in Jogjakarta.

The ASEAN Art Conference for the first time planned the establishment of an art fund. As there was a dire need then to protect and promote art and culture among ASEAN countries to implement development plans after its establishment, the ASEAN Cultural Fund was established at the conference. With the collection of funds from the original five ASEAN member countries, cultural programmes such as visual art and performance art was initiated. With the establishment of the ASEAN Cultural Fund a special art programmes. COCI had its first conference from 4 to 6 October in Manila. Also in 1978, this organisation succeeded in holding an exhibition outside the region, in Sydney, with the ASEAN Trade Exhibition. A year later in 1979, for the first time a directory of museums in ASEAN countries was released at the '1st Meeting of ASEAN Museum Directors' during the 'Meeting of ASEAN Cultural Experts' in Manila.

In formulating solidarity through art among the member countries at the ASEAN COCI meeting, the second meeting held in Jakarta in January 1980 approved the ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium project, recommended by Singapore to build a public sculpture garden as a milestone to reflect ASEAN solidarity. Hence the '1st ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium' was held in Singapore at the Singapore Polytechnic in 1981. Five sculptures were installed at Ford Canning Park by Ariffin Ismail (Malaysia), Ng Eng Teng (Singapore), Vichai Sithirat (Thailand), But Muchtar (Indonesia), Napoleon Anleva (Philippines). Ariffin Ismail's fibre-optic sculpture, titled 'Tanung Sari', was reported damaged and was replaced by Anthony Lau's sculpture while the sculpture from Brunei by Osman bin Mohamad was installed in 1988.

In 1983 the 2nd ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium was held in Bangkok, Thailand, at Universiti Chulalongkorn. A total of five sculptures were selected for installation at Chatuchak Park, among which were Chamaraung Vichienket (Thailand), Zarkaria Awang (Malaysia), Mon Mudijian (Indonesia), Solomon Arevalo (Philippines) and Tan Teng Kee (Singapore). The sixth sculpture was installed in 1987, represented by Pengiran Sabri Pengiran Mohamad from

Brunei. The '3rd ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium' was held at Taman Ismail Marzuki in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1984. An important detail was the official participation of a new ASEAN member from Brunei in the same year that Brunei obtained its independence. Public sculptures were installed at Taman Suropati, among which was Sunaryo (Indonesia), Lee Kian Seng (Malaysia), Luis E. Yee Jr. (Philippines), Wee Beng Chong (Singapore), Nonthivathana (Thailand) and Awang Aspar (Brunei).

Bandar Seri Bagawan, Brunei was selected to organise the '4th ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium' in 1986. With the theme 'Harmony in Diversity', the sculptures were installed at the Daman Recreational Park, close to the Palace. The works were created by Haji Marsidi Haji Akip (Brunei), Latiff Mohinidin (Malaysia), Husna (Indonesia), Eduardo Catrillo (Philippines), Michael Ong Chu Keng (Singapore) and Saravudh Duangjampa (Thailand).

Malaysia hosted the '5th ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium' in 1987, close to the National Monument, Kuala Lumpur. The location of the sculpture garden named 'Laman Asean' is situated not far from the Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery and remains a popular and very visible attraction to this day. The artists involved were Syed Ahmad Jamal (Malaysia), Dokorosa Sinaga (Indonesia), Han Sai Por (Singapore), Jerusalino V. Arnaos (Philippines), Itthi Khongkham (Thailand) and Abu Bakar Abdul Rahman (Brunei).

The '6th ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium' was held in Manila, in 1989. The Symposium was held at the Philippines Cultural Centre near the 'Liwasang ASEAN' Roxas Boulevard. Six ASEAN sculptors were selected to display their works: Ramon G. Orlna (Philippines), Redza Piyadasa (Malaysia), Brother Joseph McNally (Singapore), Gregorius Sidharta Soejojo (Indonesia), Kamol Phoovasadin (Thailand) and Awang Sitai (Brunei). During the 1980s, although the development programmes planned in the 1970s were still being conducted, the ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium became more prominent as it involved a permanent site where the creations can still be enjoyed today. This inculcated a feeling of oneness (mahibbah) although they live with much diversity.

1990s

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an awareness among ASEAN members of enhancing togetherness by working beyond external relationships established only through the physical aspects of visits, exhibitions and art workshops. Bureaucrats and artists began to realise that philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics and regional identity could be mutually shared by the ASEAN partners. To celebrate the oneness, a more serious conference was held to elaborate on the theme at the '1st ASEAN Symposium of Aesthetics' at Bakai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur in 1989. The lectures and collection of working papers by representatives of participating member countries comprised artists, curators, critics, writers and art administrators, such as Ismail Zain, T.K. Sabapathy, Redza Piyadasa, Jim Supangat and Apinan Poshimanda. In 1993 the '2nd ASEAN Symposium of Aesthetics' was held in Manila and the '3rd ASEAN Symposium of Aesthetics' was in Singapore. After this, the initiative was discontinued.

2000s

The active participation of the private sector in supporting the development of the arts in this region through financial aid can be seen from the official cooperation with ASEAN bodies such as art museums, and higher-learning institutions, which began in the 1990s. The tobacco company Philip Morris Group, with the support of the ASEAN Secretariat based in Jakarta, organised a competition and art award that were very popular at the time, the 'ASEAN Art Awards' for artists based in ASEAN countries beginning in 1994. The 'ASEAN Art Awards' were organised in two phases, the first of which was the national level competition with five main prize winners selected to compete again at the 'ASEAN Art Awards Finals', bringing together all the winners from ASEAN countries such as Singapore (1994),

After the end of the communist threat in Indochina, the ASEAN countries that had been French colonies, such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, along with Myanmar, were invited to join ASEAN to reinforce the organisation during the ASEAN Summit in November 1997 in Kuala Lumpur. To celebrate this initiative a special exhibition entitled “12 ASEAN Artists” was held at the National Art Gallery which was curated by Valentine Willie, who brought together artists from this region such as Affandi, Heri Dono (Indonesia), Latif Mohidin; Jailani Abu Hassan (Malaysia), Georgette Chen, Jimmy Ong (Singapore), Montien Boonma, Thawan Duchanee (Thailand), Aniru Magaysay-Ho, Elmer Borlongan (Philippines), Bai Xuan Phai (Vietnam) and MPP Yei Myint (Myanmar). Although there were no artists from Laos, this exhibition reflected the cooperation among government art institutions with ten major works loaned by the National Art Gallery from the Singapore Art Museum, Neka Museum Bali and the Metropolitan Museum of Manila.

2010s

The advent of technology took the world by storm towards the end of the 1990s, with the introduction of internet-based communication. People are now living in a global village and the communication system has become easier, faster and affordable. In 1999, one art project was initiated using electronic applications called ‘E-Art ASEAN Online’. This project is an online database gathering Internet Art in South East Asia by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), where Hasnul Jamal Saidun and Nirajan Rajah were the pioneers in this initiative for South East Asia.

Subsequent to the establishment of the database, one exhibition called the ‘1st Electronic Art Show’ was held at the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in 2000. Beyond that, the influence of electronic art or the new media art with the use of computers, video, television was substantial in regional artistic creation. In 2005 the COCI Secretariat via the ASEAN Working Group on Visual and Performing Arts held the ‘New Media Arts Competition and Exhibition’ in Jakarta. In 2009 it was held once again in Jakarta, entitled ‘Research and Mapping of ASEAN New Media Art’. This seminar had really seen it all after development of almost a decade in this region.

The emergence of South East Asia as a vigorous economic market in the new millennium entailed broader cooperation extending beyond the borders of ASEAN member countries to East Asia and the Asia Pacific nations. Relationships beyond the ASEAN countries were manifested in pacts such as ASEAN+3, ASEAN-China, ASEAN-Japan and ASEAN-South Korea. ASEAN+3 is a pact that enhanced the cooperation between East Asian nations in economy, finance, social development and human resources, scientific and technical development, information, infrastructure and i-culture. It is seen as competition to the United States in the Asia Pacific region. This integration in art was translated through an exhibition called ‘The Origin of Beauty’ at the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit 2014.

This special exhibition, which celebrated the 25-year relationship between ASEAN and South Korea, was held at the Busan Museum of Art (BMA) in conjunction with the ASEAN Summit - Republic Korea in December 2014. It featured over 100 works which were loaned from the collections of ASEAN government institutions, such as Malaysia’s National Art Gallery and Petronas Gallery; Singapore Art Museum; Museum Negara Indonesia; Museum of Contemporary Art, Bangkok; National Museum of Cambodia; and the Lao National Museum.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

It is important to have a research centre for the study of South East Asian cultures which can be used as an activity centre for exhibitions, workshops, lectures and other initiatives.
In 1990, in Tokyo, the Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Centre Gallery was built in conjunction with ‘Narrative Visions in Contemporary ASEAN Art’, an exhibition featuring the Fukuoka Art Museum art collection. During the 2014 ASEAN-Republic of Korea Summit in Busan, which was attended by heads of government, one more ASEAN Culture Centre was opened in Seoul. Having realized that two cultural centres had been opened outside South East Asia, in 2015 another ASEAN Culture Centre was opened in Bangkok, becoming the official venue for cultural programmes.

The programmes organised by COCI in the 1980s, such as the ASEAN Square Sculpture Symposium, should not have stopped in 1989 at the final nation to be admitted as the sixth ASEAN member then. With the inclusion of four new members in the association in the late 1990s, it was recommended that this event be revived and held every two years in cities such as Yangon, Phnom Penh, Ho Chi Minh City and Vientiane. This programme could then be rotated to the original ASEAN countries. In this regard, it would have been good for each nation to have its own contemporary art biennale, with one event reactivating other COCI programmes before this, such as the ASEAN Sculpture Square Symposium, ASEAN Exhibition of Painting and Photography, ASEAN Symposium of Aesthetics, ASEAN Youth Painting Workshop and Exhibition, ASEAN Exhibition of Children’s Art and ASEAN Photo Competition. This could be a programme held simultaneously under the umbrella of the ASEAN biennale.

Subsequent to this recommendation, every country that wished to organise the ASEAN Biennale should be given a resource allocation by COCI in the country. The placement of the venue could take after the Giardini model during the Venice Biennale or the local model like the Mini Malaysia Park and Mini ASEAN Park located in Air Keros, Melaka, comprising houses reflecting a cultural village. For the ASEAN Biennale, there should be a permanent exhibition and seminar venue based on the traditional culture of member countries in an area in or near Kuala Lumpur which would be one of the tourism cultural products for Malaysia and the capitals of the host country. It was thought that this place could be called the ASEAN Cultural Village or ASEAN Cultural Park, with the programmes not only limited to exhibitions, symposiums and art workshops but also to be alternated with other genres such as performing arts, dance, music and film.

Since the 2000s, or even earlier, the ASEAN member countries have been seen to organise their own biennales, ON THE PRINCIPLE OF COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF ART, ESTABLISHED FOR ALMOST 50 YEARS, NOW IS THE TIME THAT THE COCI ADMINISTRATION PLANTS THE ASEAN PAVILLION FLAGS DURING THE VENICE BIENNALE IN FUTURE IN PROMOTING AND HIGHLIGHTING THE ARTISTS OF EACH MEMBER COUNTRY TO A HIGHER LEVEL.

such as the Jakarta Biennale, Jogja Biennale, Singapore Biennale and of late the SEA Triennale. Other countries, such as Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, are some of the member countries that participated in and placed their national pavilion in the Arsenale and elsewhere during the Venice Biennale. On the principle of cooperation in the field of art, established for almost 50 years, now is the time that the COCI administration plants the ASEAN Pavilion flags during the Venice Biennale in future in promoting and highlighting the artists of each member country to a higher level.