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| **Nanyang Style** |
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| The ‘Nanyang Style’ was a popular term associated with the paintings of a group of émigré Chinese artists working in British Malaya (present-day Singapore and Malaysia) around the period of the 1930s-1950s. It referred particularly to works that possessed the following characteristics: an experimental and syncretic approach to pictorial representation; the deployment of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, and Cubist elements with Chinese ink and brush compositional and pictorial techniques; and the depiction of local subject matter such as indigenous peoples and their environments. The key proponents of this style included Chen Chong Swee, Georgette Chen, Liu Kang, Chen Wen Hsi, and Cheong Soo Pieng. These artists — who were also collectively called the ‘Nanyang artists’ — were associated with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) either as teachers or associates of teachers. The cultural identity of the artists as ethnically Chinese sojourners was frequently used to substantiate the originality of the Nanyang Style. This term generally described an approach to painting that reflected considerations unique to a group of Chinese artists attempting to arrive at types of modern art production that were linked to the place itself.  Nanyang Style was attributed to the conscious efforts of émigré artists in search of an artistic and cultural identity defined in relation to the Chinese conception of the South Seas region; the four ‘Nanyang masters’ painting trip to Bali in 1952 is often interpreted as a watershed moment that crystallised this search. The term was commonly associated with the guiding vision of Lim Hak Tai, who advocated the cultivation of a Nanyang style of art as early as 1950.  File: Chen\_Chong\_Swee\_Balinese\_Women\_1952.jpg  Figure : Chen Chong Swee, *Balinese Women* (1952). Oil. National Heritage Board Collection, Singapore [Permissions to be obtained].  This term ‘Nanyang Style’ continued to incite much debate after the 1979 retrospective exhibition entitled *Pameran Retrospektif Pelukis-Pelukis Nanyang,* sponsored by the National Museum of Art (Malaysia). It marked the first extant study on the members of the Academy as ‘Nanyang artists,’ their influence on the modernist art discourses of Singapore and Malaysia, and on the explication of the Nanyang Style as a local, modern phenomenon. The ensuing debate revolved around its definition and usage, as individuals from the art communities of both Singapore and Malaysia applied the term to works by artists with no connection to NAFA but which displayed similar characteristics — or, on the contrary, to any work by a NAFA graduate with little adherence to the described characteristics.  As the developments of NAFA was a pivotal part of the shared art history of Singapore and Malaysia, recent scholarly work on this subject has continued to assess its historical significance in light of nationally prescribed narratives of modern art in both countries. The term ‘Nanyang Style’ continued to be used in favour of the more politicised and culturally irrelevant term, ‘Malayan Style,’ which was prevalent in early vernacular writings discussing the above works at least until the separation of Singapore from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. The Nanyang Style as a historical movement also represented a modality of diasporic Chinese modernity beyond Singapore and Malaysia, as some scholars have argued. Nanyang Style continues to be deployed in contemporary art practice by practitioners associated with NAFA or art schools started by NAFA alumni under the rubric of a wider artistic movement: ‘Nanyangism,’ as coined by the school. |
| Further reading:  (Hsu)  (Kwok)  (Low)  (Mashadi)  (Ong)  (Ooi)  (Piyadasa and Sabapathy)  (Tan)  (Zhong) |