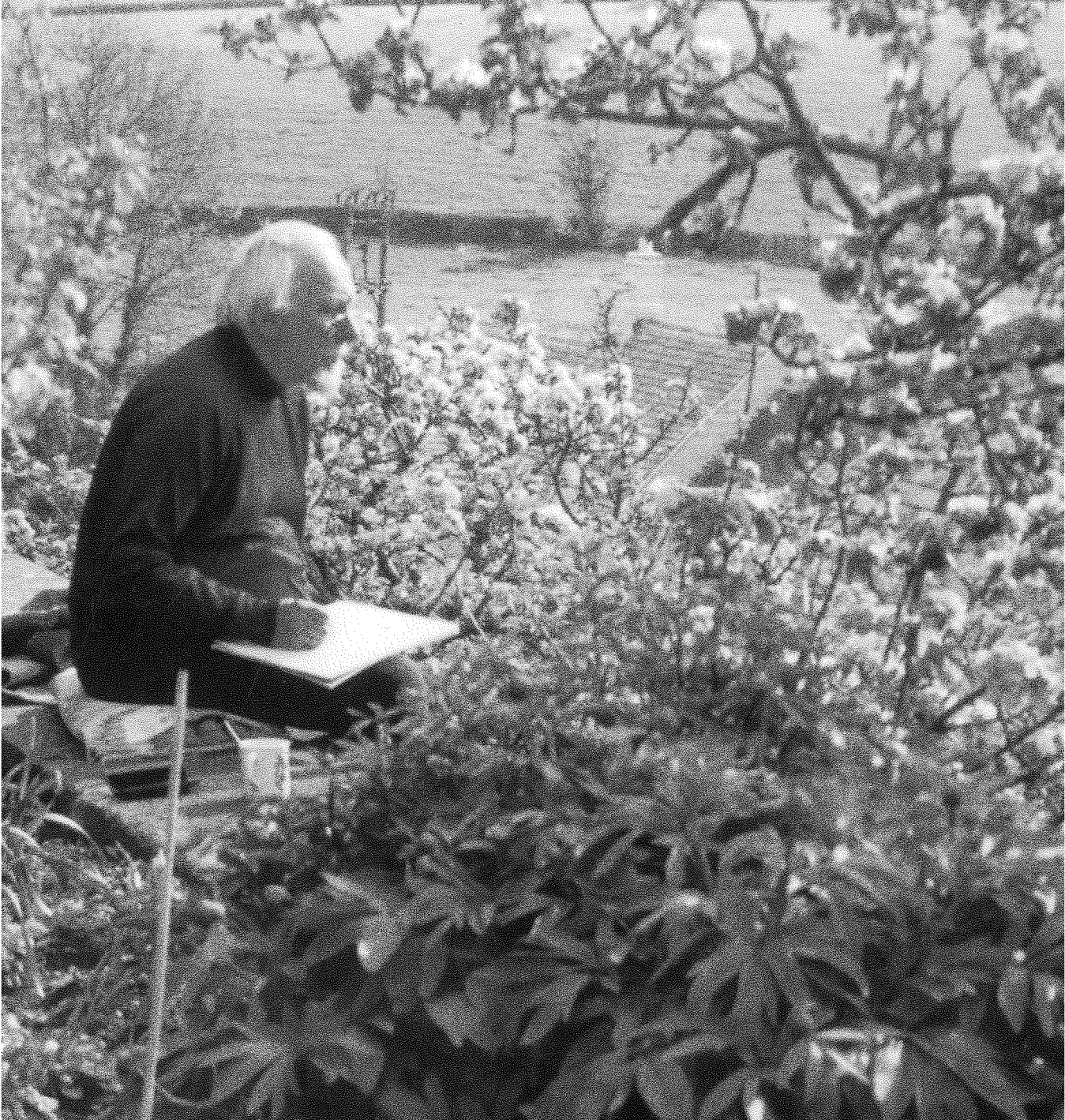


# PETER HARRIS

FOUNDER OF THE WEDNESDAY ART GROUP



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**Note**

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**Cover**

Peter Harris sketching apple blossom, 1995

**Back cover** (insert)

Enchanted Garden, 1995. Watercolour

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**PREFACE**

In the context of Malaysian art, a few artists and art organisations stood out for their outstanding contributions. The earliest art society in Malaysia was the Penang Impressionists formed in 1920 by mostly bored English housewives and their teacher, Abdullah Ariff. The first serious bona fide art club was the Penang Chinese Art Club started in 1936 under the influence of Yong Mun Sen who also had strong ties with the Singapore Society of Chinese Artists. As the vice-president of both societies in 1936, Mun Sen advocated the setting up of an art academy. As a result, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) was established in Singapore in 1938. Lim Hak Tai was appointed its first principal. NAFA was and is still responsible for the training of many Malaysian and Singaporean artists.

In Kuala Lumpur, there was a lack of serious art activity in the early days. There was mention of a Nanyang Society of Calligraphy and Painting, also known as United Artists, Malaysia(sic) registered in 1929 but it was insignificant and soon faded into oblivion.

It was not until 1952 when Peter Harris founded the Wednesday Art Group that art activities started to flourish. Soon in 1954, the Selangor Art Society was formed followed by Hoessein Enas' Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (later known as Angkatan Pelukis Se Malaysia) in 1956.

Peter Harris came to Malaysia in 1951 as the new art superintendant in the Ministry of Education without any proper job description. He quickly started a primary school art curriculum and later, introduced aesthetics and art techniques to young enthusiastic artists.

Those who benefitted from his encouragement included Patrick Ng, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Cheong Lai Tong, Zakariah Noor, Ismail Mustam, Ahmad Hassan, Dzulkifli Buyong, Jolly Koh, Phoon Poh Hoon, Ho Kai Peng, Liu Siat Mooi, Grace Selvanayagam, Renee Kraal, Hajeedar Majid, Sivam Selvaratnam, Lilian Ng, etc.

When he had groomed some successors, Peter decided that it was time to leave Kuala Lumpur. He was given the honour of being the first artist to hold a Retrospective Exhibition at the National Art Gallery in 1960 before his departure. He returned in 1962 to oversee art education in Sabah and witnessed the formation of Malaysia in 1963. He left Sabah in 1967, and as far as he was concerned, that was the end of his involvement with Malaysia.

He was not to know that in the meantime, he had become an icon in the annals of Malaysian art. He was highly respected for his contribution and many artists were grateful to this expatriate who behaved like a common man who did not boss people around like a colonial master. I for one, had for a long time, wondered whether he was alive and if so, where he was.

In 1996, to my pleasant surprise, I received an invitation card from Galeriwan for the "Wednesday Art Group - Then and Now exhibition" which announced that Peter Harris will be there in person. I flew to Kuala Lumpur for the opening ceremony but to my disappointment, all his paintings were snapped up by eager art collectors before the show started. He had underpriced his paintings as he obviously did not realise that there was a



great demand for his works, especially for art historical reasons.

Fortunately, I was told by Wong Mei Wan, the gallery owner that a few more paintings were available. He had left them with Yeoh Jin Leng, his host for the stay. I was ecstatic when I finally laid my hands on two of them. I also bought a rare oil painting by Patrick Ng from Galeriwan.

At the opening ceremony officiated by the late Tan Sri Zain Azraai, I noticed that Peter was a bit overwhelmed by all the fuss over his presence. He was a charming figure who mingled freely with the crowd, posing for photographs in the most pleasant way. Later, I managed to buy a few more of his paintings through my good friend, Ambassador Datuk N. Parameswaran who visited him in Marlesbury, England.

In early 2000, Jin Leng suggested my gallery to host an exhibition for Peter Harris. I was enthusiastic about it and suggested publishing his autobiography. Peter responded positively and sent me a lovely write-up with lots of photographs.

Unfortunately, in September 2000, my wife, Siau Bian who had been the mainstay of the gallery for the past 11 years became very ill with acute myeloid leukemia. I had to recall my daughter, Ee Lene from England and interrupt her Masters of Pharmacy programme at Nottingham University for one year. Several shows were cancelled as the gallery had to close by the end of 2001 to allow her to resume her studies. However, I decided that Peter's exhibition and autobiography was too important to cancel.

The result is this autobiography, put together by me, in between taking care of Siau Bian,

running my psychiatric practice and planning for the gallery's exhibitions and eventual winding-up. In my half-disorientated state, I am afraid it is the best I can do, grammatical mistakes, errors, warts and all. This is probably the second last publication of the The Art Gallery before it ceases to exist. The final project which I hope I have the energy to complete is the "Biodata of Malaysian Artists" (formerly known as "Directory of Malaysian Artists"). But I am weary.

I wish to thank Jin Leng and Peter for making this exhibition and autobiography possible. I am glad that despite his creaky old bones, he was persuaded to fly to Penang ("almost half-dead", he reminds me) to be present.

Finally, I wish to thank the people who will soon try to give Siau Bian a new lease of life, especially my brother-in-law, Siau Hoon who will fly from Melbourne to Singapore to donate his blood stem cells. I am grateful to Dr. Saw Min Hong (Penang), Dr. Ting Wen Chang (Singapore), and Dr. Patrick Tan and his team of doctors and nurses (Singapore) who will attempt the transplant. Words can never express my deepest gratitude. Instead of a few months life expectancy, she now has a chance to live a normal life if the transplant is successful. We shall know the outcome in the next few months but whatever happens, I am grateful for the help and support of friends and relatives who care.



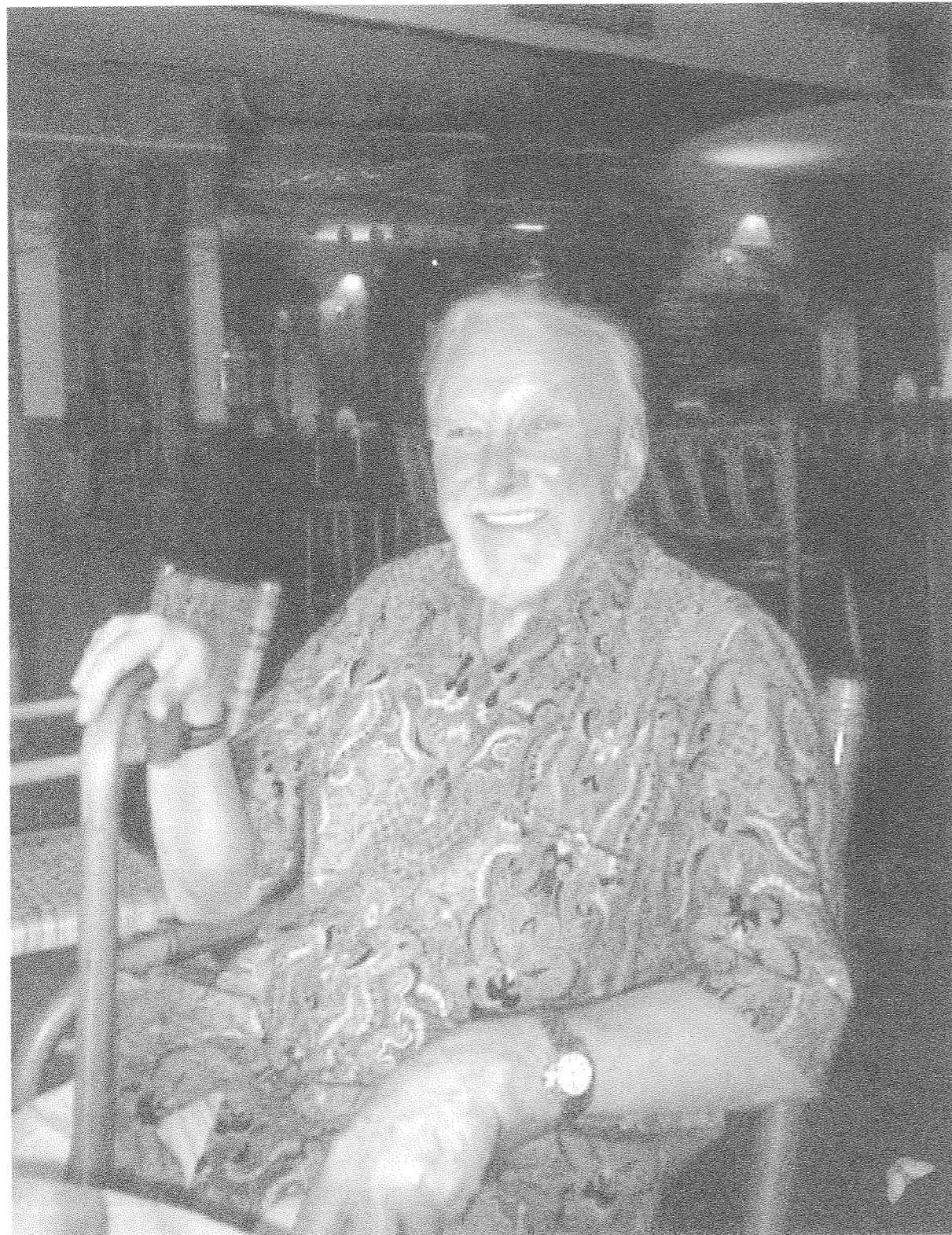
Dr. Tan Chee Khuan  
January 2001

## DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to my beloved wife, Siau Bian who was the Managing Director of The Art Gallery for 11 years until her recent illness. Pictured with her is our daughter, Ee Lene who is now the Managing Director.





*Kuala Lumpur, February 2000*

*Photo by John Tanton*

## PETER HARRIS

- 1923 : Born in Bristol
- 1939 : West of England College of Art
- 1942-45 : Air Force
- 1947 : Lecturer in Arts and Crafts, College Art School Swindon
- 1951-60 : Art Superintendent, Federation of Malaya
- 1952 : Founded Wednesday Art Group
- 1962-67 : Art Superintendent, Sabah, Malaysia
- 1963 : Awarded M.B.E.
- 1976 : Head of Creative Arts Faculty, Sheldon School, Chippenham

### **Exhibitions**

Royal West Academy, National Art Gallery of Malaysia, Swindon, London, Singapore, Sabah, Bristol and many others.

### **Solo Exhibitions**

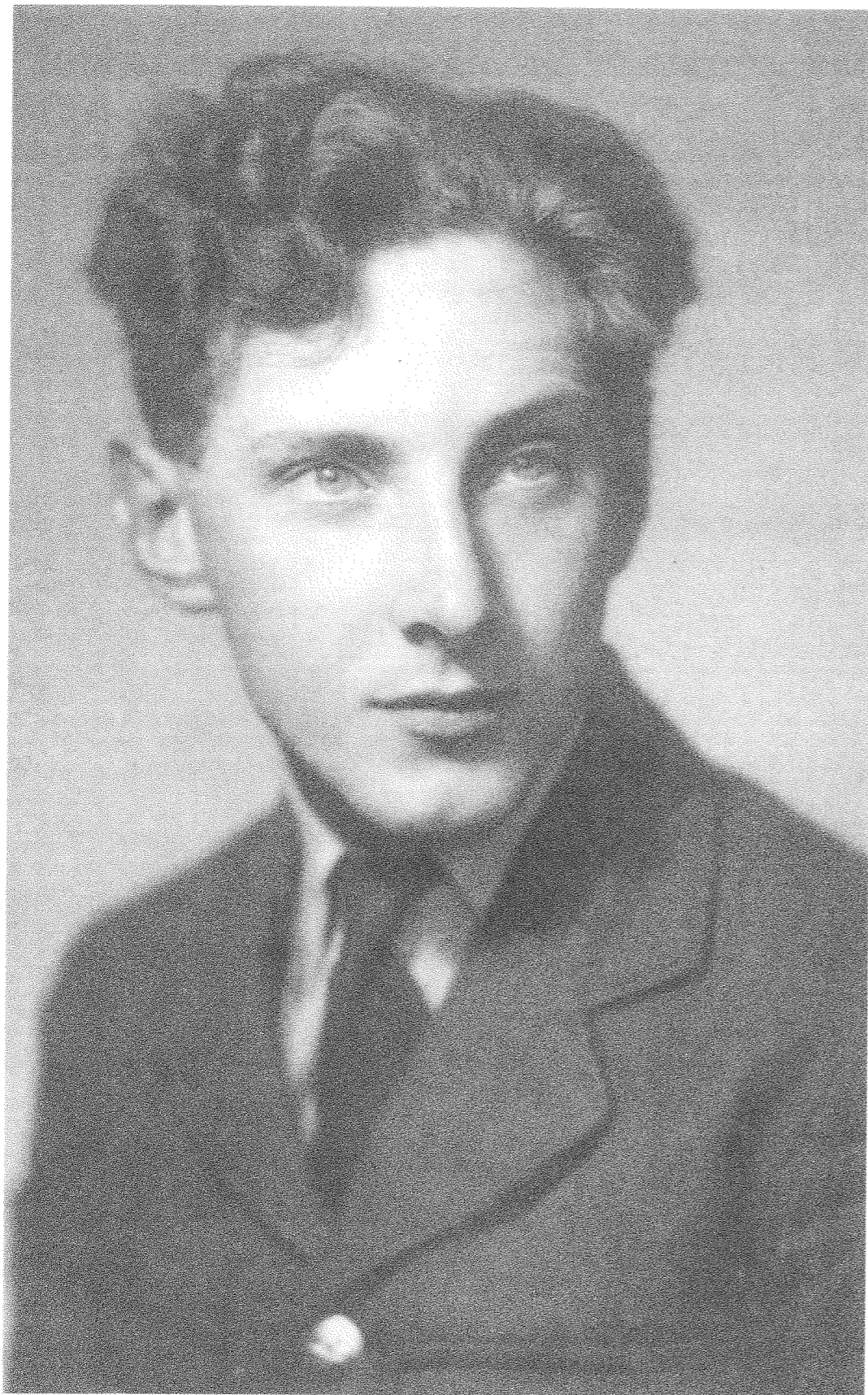
Swindon Arts Centre, Malayan Arts Council, British Council Kuala Lumpur, Bristol University, Woodstock Gallery, Bond Street, London, Retrospective Exhibition, National Art Gallery of Malaysia, Walcot Gallery, Bath.

### **Recent Exhibitions**

- 1996 - The Wednesday Art Group, Then & Now, Galeriwan
- 1997 - Retrospective Exhibition, Galeriwan
- 2000 - Solo Exhibition, Malmesbury Gallery
- 2001 - Solo Exhibition, The Art Gallery, Penang.







*The young air-man, 1942*

## Chapter One

I was born into a very poor family in the East end of Bristol. My father was a watchmaker and jeweller, not a lucrative profession in the depression of the 1920s and thirties. My first drawings were on salvaged pieces of wrapping paper using whatever came along. My mother had great faith in education and hunted out a good primary school. This necessitated a long walk each way but was the basis of a sound education. I remember winning great praise for a drawing of a petunia flower - rather blowsy as I remember it now! However I was, if not very intellectual, a solid worker and won a scholarship to a middling public school known then as Colston's Hospital.

This was residential and, as home life was not always peaceful, was a welcome change. Life was spartan with a great deal of parade ground marching, chapel and homework. It was considered necessary to keep young boys busy and tire them out so that they would not feel inclined to misbehave.

The art teacher was an elderly man with one leg whose idea of art teaching was to issue each boy with a simple line drawing or a card to copy. Although I would now consider this totally destructive activity at least I had satisfactory materials to work with and learnt to control them. The teacher had a nasty accident slipping in the swimming pool and had to retire for a long time. The boys swam in the nude and I got a fair idea of the human anatomy. However over the kitchen garden, a road, a church, another road and another garden lived two old ladies who complained that, if they used binoculars in their attic they could see the naked boys and were shocked. So we had to wear little slippers which were so small that they could not contain all that they were meant to!

The new art teacher was totally different in approach. We were encouraged to develop our own concepts of various subjects, to draw each other, to work from still life arrangements.

Under this regime my work blossomed. I was given an area of wall to make a mural and then the key of the art room so that in any spare time I could retire there to paint. I was lent oil paints and generally encouraged to experiment. I had good results in the end of the course matriculation examinations and also won free admission to the West of England Art Academy.

There was trouble. My paternal grandfather had married a young wife and they had a son Harteric Harris. The boy wanted to be an artist. Grandfather wanted him to make money. His wife stuck up for the boy and so grandfather emigrated to Australia. Harteric continued painting and had some success in water colours, but, being deserted, they lived in poverty and both died of neglect. This was over a hundred years ago when there was little help for the poor but the workhouse.

My mother decided that there was no future in art and that I should be a bank clerk. However I had the scholarship and a small living allowance and went to the art school. There was real trouble and it was the only time that I saw father contradict my mother. "The boy has



*My early art work, 1944*



won his scholarship" he said "and he shall carry on".

The school was at the far end of the city. I had a travel allowance and saved money for materials by walking.

The teaching was very formal and traditional with a great accent on draughtsmanship. We drew from the naked model - carefully chosen to be past their prime - and from still life. We learnt anatomy, history of art, lettering, history of architecture and other formal subjects. Teaching was based on that of Mr. Tonks who was, for many years, the head of the Royal College of Arts, and it was often minimal.

The war had started and as soon as I had won my national diploma of arts, I was called up as an airman. As I was an artist and they did not wish to "put a square peg in a round hole" I was given the choice of trade, either a wireless mechanic or a special policeman. I chose to be a wireless mechanic. Before, we had been bombed nightly in Bristol (which was finally burnt out) but as an airman I had perfect peace, first in Northern Ireland where food was still plentiful, and then in India. I was furious that



*A study in Indian style*



*The young artist, 1953*

my training had been interrupted at first but now I see that it gave me a taste for travel and for the East. True the voyage was dreadful on a troopship, battened below decks and sailing slowly down the Red Sea with the hatches firmly locked to protect us from being observed and sleeping on three levels - on the floor, on the tables, or in hammocks with no doors even to the toilets and sea sickness swilling over the floors. I found, illegitimately, a place on deck beneath a lifeboat where I could not be seen.

Bombay was a revelation. Everything was different, the trees, the light, the people, the dress. Santa Cruz airport was near the coast at Juhu and, with a wage for the first time, I was able to buy paints and sketch and sketch and sketch. I still have a volume of those paintings - I found that a perfect medium for oil painting was the hundred octane fuel which was used by the planes and which made it easy to paint in oils on thin paper. I had a cousin in the Nilgiri hills and a course in Quetta and saw quite a lot of the peaceful side of India.

## Chapter Two

I was there for three years, very fortunate to travel around, from my cousin's house in the Southern Hills to Delhi, Agra, and far north to Quetta. I have often been back since to visit more of that fascinating country with its contrasts of poverty and riches, deserts and woodlands and its rich and varied religions.

As I was training to be a teacher and teachers were in short supply after the war I was demobbed relatively early. The return journey was a great deal easier than the voyage out and I was soon back in the Art College for my diploma years.

With the required certificates and a fairly good reputation I was lucky enough to get a post as a lecturer in the Swindon College of Art and very proud to earn seven pounds a week! The college had struggled to survive through the war with only one grand old man to teach there. There were very few students at that time and the examination results were decidedly poor. With the support of the principal and a good deal of enthusiasm I was able to build a lively group of comparative youngsters. I was really regurgitating the courses that I had myself in Bristol. I had little introduction to the extraordinary developments in the art world at that time and really stopped art history lessons with the Impressionists. We did however manage to try experiments with various materials and in various venues, indoors and out.

The most terrifying experience was evening class. I was assigned twenty one students with age ranges from fifteen to sixty, wanting instruction varying from caricature to wood engraving, oil painting to pencil sketching. I lost many of the potential students in the first week and more in the second but a solid core remained some of whom did very well and some of whom became professional artists. Life drawing on another evening was simpler. Here we kept a full class aided by an ageing but professional model. The modeling lessons

were a bit of a nightmare. Materials were still scarce and cleaning help decidedly limited.

When I started the art classes had a 100% failure rate. After three years we were able to clock up 100% successes in the Art Intermediate examinations after which the students went on to the West of England Art Academy.

Although Swindon is not a pretty town (it is now six times as big and the fastest growing town in Europe) it is surrounded by beautiful country, the Wiltshire Downs and the Thames valley. I cycled round a large area from Oxford to Marlborough over hills and along rivers. But the winters were very drab, cold and in Swindon, ugly and depressing. The college art department was a success and growing. The old principal retired and a new one was appointed. I was not, for which I am now very grateful. I remembered the sunshine and beauty of the tropics and applied for a job illustrating newspaper in Africa to help the illiterate to learn to read. I was not successful. However I had obviously made a good impression since the chairman said "Would you like us to keep your name on our books?" Of course I said "Yes" and one cold grey day a letter arrived asking if I would like work in Malaya as an Art Superintendent. That was an easy one. Of course I said "Yes" again, not knowing in the least what the job entailed. It seemed that nobody else knew either but the Education Department felt the need to revive the teaching of art in schools after the war and for somebody to be responsible for it. There was, of course, a shortage of trained people after the killings of the war but I still like to hope that I had made a good reputation to merit the trust that I was given.

I had little to go on except an instruction that I must learn the Malay language within a year, a list of books that might help, a clothing allowance and a reservation on a liner sailing from London that month.



### Chapter Three

My brief was merely "to be the Art Supervisor, Federation of Malaya". I was told that I must learn the Malay language and that was all. My second voyage to the East was also uncomfortable. True I was on a "luxury" liner and had a decent cabin, but this I had to share with an inquisitive police officer. His wife and babies were in another cabin (space so soon after the war was limited and all transport was totally full). I found that he read my letters and also, to relieve his wife, often brought the baby into the cabin and used my bunk. However I was able to enjoy myself making drawings of the Suez canal, the desert, the ship, Aden, the distant bare mountains, drawings which I still value.

It was my first real look at the Indian ocean. The troop ship had been too crowded to be able to relax and I loved it. But in mid-ocean came the message, "Gurney has been killed". It meant little to me at the time though I soon learned the full import of the news.

On arrival in Penang I was met by an education officer but he had no idea of what my job entailed and after a blissful few days in the E and O hotel I was sent down to Kuala Lumpur. It was slightly disturbing to read a notice in the train "In case of firing lie on the floor".

Again nobody knew what I was supposed to do. However I had a quick look at a few primary schools and soon saw that courses in art education were needed. For this I had to have some money and a room. I was greatly aided by the general primary school supervisor, a very positive lady called Miss Clements. With her help I was allocated a smallish but valuable sum of money and an open area beneath the Malay boys's hostel, next to the Selangor education office. I had some easel tables made and shelves for stores. Then started a series of two week courses in art in primary schools. These were a mixture of lectures in the psychological values of basic art education - very difficult for me with my very incomplete

knowledge of the Malay language and the paucity for words to deal with psychological concepts in the Malay language at that time - the combination being even more difficult for the teachers to understand and practical work, things like paste combing, use of simple materials, modelling in clay, mobiles made from natural materials such as clay, leaves, feathers etc. and experimenting with the riches of the many excellent free materials available in Malaya. The teachers taught me many things; local crafts, local materials, more words and very much laughter, for I am convinced that a good teacher must enjoy the work.

I was able to purchase a store of very cheap materials, Newsprint paper, powder colour, hog hair brushes, scissors and, with the aid of a list of primary schools, their numbers of pupils etc. divide it up as equally as possible and send them out to the schools. On their own the materials were quite inadequate but, with imagination, intelligence, local materials and ingenuity we were able to provide a fairly balanced art period. I had one or two ideas which clearly did not work and we were able to discuss them. The teachers had enough sense to discard them if they did not work. I gradually worked my way round the country giving the courses and distributing materials. It was a very happy time, the roads were free of traffic although they were full of danger. I made a point of not carrying a gun and of travelling a little way behind a convoy. The independence "bandits" would not want to waste time and ammunition on a totally unimportant target. On my journeys I visited secondary schools.



Teachers course group, Makacca

### Chapter Four

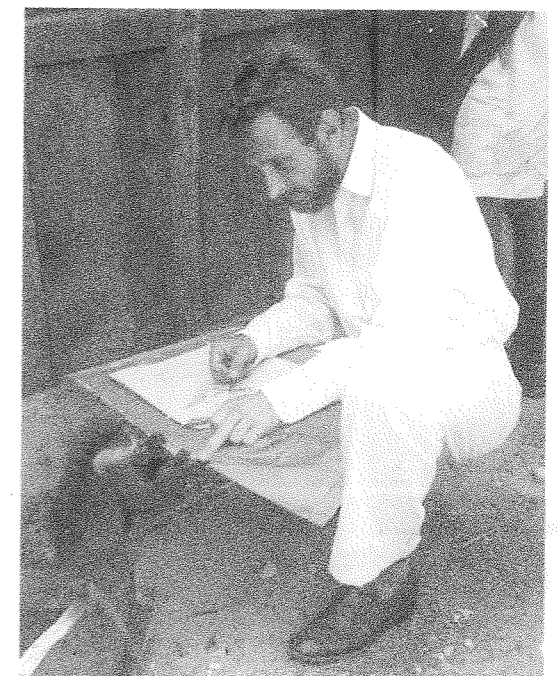
I had many adventures en route. My first foray, shortly after my arrival, was to Raub where I was sent to deliver materials to schools. I was totally unimportant and I was sent over the Gap road, where Sir Henry Gurney, the Governor, had been shot, really to test whether a civilian could get through. I was enchanted with the country and made frequent stops to admire the trees, the birds, the streams - there was one half-way up where I stopped to relieve myself. Immediately hundreds of the most beautiful butterflies came down, to taste the salt, I was told. (I stopped at the same place a few years ago and there were no butterflies this time). I enjoyed the songs and grunts of the jungle. It was difficult to understand why the people in Raub were so excited to see me. It seemed that I was the first to "get through" since the shooting.

Again, at an opening ceremony of the new Teacher Training Centre in Tanjong Malim, it was difficult to concentrate on the ceremony when there was rifle shooting all around the perimeter. By that time I was less green.

The pet shops in Petaling Street were a real trial for me. I was inclined to buy the occasional Bosman's Potto, feed them up and set them free in the jungle (where they were no doubt caught again and perhaps I set the same one free more than once). I acquired a beautiful green grass snake and fed her on eggs. She lived in the warmth above my waist band and slid around my waist. Perhaps this was not very kind but anyway, when I was visiting a Catholic primary school one day, she put her head out of my shirt and had a look round. All the children squealed, the nun was cross and Helen had to return to the rubber. That same group of nuns had the idea that all Europeans drank a great deal and would offer me a gin during the morning break. When I declined they offered me a beer. When I pointed out that I had to have a clear head they thought me a thorough weakling, and gave me a glass of milk.

Driving along the central road one day, close to Tanjong Malim, I came across a line of cars stopped by a tree across the road. Everbody seemed too frightened to get out. I was much more frightened of hanging around there until convey should come around, got out, chivvied the drivers and between us we managed to move the tree. By this time it was getting dark so we stayed the night (in some discomfort) in a nearby army camp. Life was not all fun!

Many of the secondary schools at that time had art teachers trained in China at the Nanyang Art Academy. They were extremely skilful and produced excellent results in the Cambridge "O" levels examinations. They passed on skills in use of materials and observation that were excellent. However I believe that art education in schools is about more than that. It should develop creative ideas, widen the creative thought processes, lead the young to express their personal ideas in as many ways as possible. This leads, of course, to more difficulties for the teacher and more experiment with the creative impulse. It does not lead to better examination results - or rather did not at that time. I am now happily totally free of contact with art examinations.



Making friends all over



At one time, after my return to England I was asked to help with the grading of the entries from South-East Asia. This was most distasteful, laying out hundred of works by the young on the floor and trying to grade them in terms of colour, of design, of skill etc. Once I had a little jewel, obviously from an Indian lad (although we had no inkling of their provenance) which sang with colour. "This," I said, "is the one I would most like to own, to hang on my wall" and I gave it a high mark. I never marked Art again. I wasn't asked to!

I cannot believe that it is possible to grade and mark the artistic output of anybody, let alone children. The different values that need to be

assessed can only mean that the final outcome must of necessity be a neutralised amalgam of impressions. The rich religious paintings of Hindu Southern India would get a hard time. At that period abstract art would have been considered unacceptable. The Indian painting that I had so admired was infused with the colour values and pattern values amongst which the child had probably grown up. The scale was tiny. But I was told that it had to fail.

The wider approach needs, of course, more variety of materials, more preparation, more storage space and more time.



Part of a display for teachers' free materials.

## Chapter Five

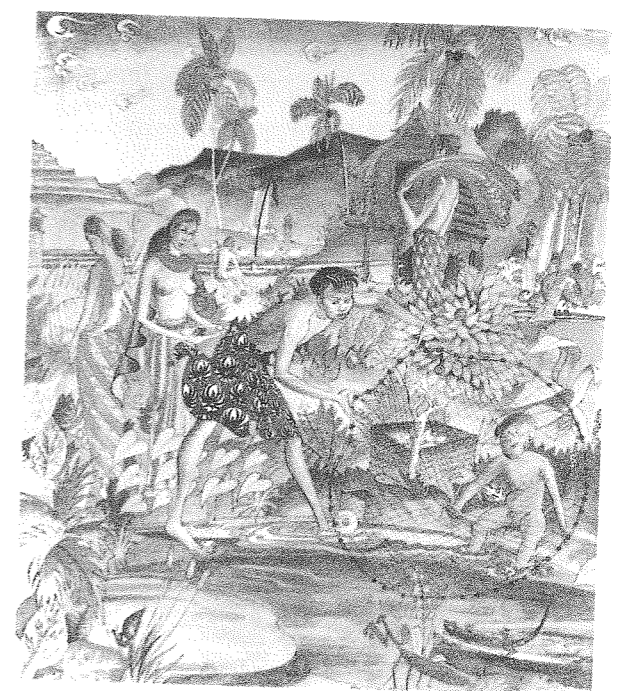
Teaching was complicated at that time by many factors. For instance it was more than a little daunting, when visiting primary schools to find some of the pupils with families and beards in Form one. I soon learnt how much the wars had disorganised the schools system. Many who had been able to get no education were determined to catch up, to get the basic essentials. I have a feeling that during the art classes they studied individually. There was probably little that they could gain from infant school art teaching and they had serious priorities.

The primary school courses seemed to be a great success. I had a basic itinerary with room to deviate if it seemed useful. I made many friends some of whom still remember me but many of whom are now dead. Being young was both a serious drawback when I was lecturing to mature teachers but also an advantage as there was a great desire to discuss what I hoped were the most useful post-war ideas.

The secondary school art teachers were understandably more critical. They were doing well in most cases, satisfying their headmasters and giving the boys skills. I started trying to develop evening classes. Some came at first but the numbers soon dropped off. They were, I remember, clever, often gifted, artists in their own right. I was an unknown from a totally different background and culture. I was aware of the greatness of the background artistic cultures affecting Malaya, as it then was, but their techniques and outlook were completely different. A few understood what I was trying to introduce and we started to meet on Wednesday evenings for discussion and drawing sessions. I appropriated a few of the basic materials and brought in examples of pictures for discussion. I was convinced that knowledge, appreciation and fusion of the rich variety of artistic influences could become one integrating force for the country, it almost became an obsession but I lost that one!

These sessions were fun, exciting, a novel experience and gradually more people started to come in. They were of all races, ages, both sexes and with very varied abilities. I made it a point of drawing with them, using different materials each time and doing my best to relate my work to that of the surroundings. Of course I had no real skill but I could manipulate a Chinese brush. I looked at the thriving artists in Bali and made a painting as near to their manner as I could without plagiarism.

There were other art clubs at the time but they seemed to be mainly for Europeans and an interest for colonial wives, many with talent but mostly painting almost to rules, "Wash your paper first (which means expensive paper) if you want a smooth wash". "Dab a dry sponge on it whilst it is still wet and you will have little white clouds". There was a whole school of excellent artists in water-colour learning from these clubs and from "How to do it" books but they were greatly over-influenced by the English water-colour tradition. Weekly I brought in examples to discuss - Indian, Moghul, Chinese, Indonesian, European, traditional and modern.



A painting in the Balinese style



## Chapter Six

I brought in my own paintings too and asked the members to discuss them pointing out as many faults as I could. I asked them to bring in their own works for discussion. One or two did although they mainly waited for the group to leave before showing them to me. It is one of my beliefs that one teaches best by trying to develop the best, so I always tried to point out the good things in the paintings hoping that the mixture of encouragement and praise would lead them to develop those areas. We went out sketching in the countryside around, (much easier then than now) and I encouraged them to develop their sketches. On Wednesdays, the meetings were always centred on drawing (which I still believe to be an essential basis for artistic output), sometimes from a large still life group which I set up, sometimes one sat in turn in the centre as a model, sometimes I asked them to make a blot or splash and develop from that. There was always a central theme.

There were times when we met in my flat and the members were encouraged to discuss my paintings, or another acquisition which I had brought from Penang or Malacca. And it was not long before most felt bold enough to bring along their works, first of all for me alone to look at and then, after some time, for the group to discuss. We had all developed the ability to pick out the best I believe and destructive criticism never seemed to arise.

Soon the time came when we were ready to share the public the work that we were doing. The British Council very kindly lent us their hall at a very low rate and we had our first public exhibition. We had massive support and, joy of joys, many works were sold. That of course, was a great incentive. They were professional artists! And more people wanted to join.

There were very few rules. Any age could join, any race, clever or starters. Nobody was to mention politics. I had remembered that there

was, certainly at first, no charge. As a government servant I would handle no money and cannot remember ever being encumbered with it. I provided at first basic newsprint paper, powder colours and stiff brushes but very soon the members would bring their own materials getting more and more sophisticated as time went on. I persuaded a local store to stock better materials, better paper, oil paints and above all good brushes. I pointed out how to choose a brush, to rub it between your fingers, lick it and bring it to a point. No point no brush. Very soon the Nanyang book store, which was the first to listen to me, was doing very well, probably charging extortionate interest? But certainly providing a service.

It had been increasingly obvious that one of the great needs was for a National Art Gallery and I lost no opportunity to press for this. An excerpt from the High Commissioner's opening speech. "Thanks to his (P.H.'s) efforts and those of other enthusiastic helpers we can see here today the early flowering of a school of Malayan Art, drawing its inspiration from this country and from the diverse cultures which mingle here. But for such a school of art to continue to flourish the right conditions must be created for it and for that reason I have heard with great interest of the project, sponsored by the Arts Council, to establish a National Picture Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. In many other countries young artists learn valuable lessons and derive inspiration from the public art galleries in the large cities and I am certain that if a National Picture Gallery, - even a small one initially - is established here and provided with pictures of good quality, much benefit to young artists would result. I understand that the Arts Council aim in the first instance, is to collect a nucleus of paintings and that they are anxious to start this collection now. I hope that their appeal will meet with a ready response and I intend before I leave the Federation to present a picture to this collection myself."

## Chapter Seven

I took on voluntary work in the hospitals and encouraged the group to join me. I went alone to Sungei Buloh to help some young students with their examinations but several of the group helped me in the Spina Bifida ward. Here the young patients were forever on their backs. Kind people went to teach them typing etc. so that "when they came out" - and they never were to come out - they could find a job. They were on their backs forever so we painted panels for the ceiling, not great works of art but silly Walt Disneylike towns and a silly little railway to join them up. We told them stories about journeys from town to town. I am a great believer in students of all types taking an interest in helping socially. This also helped to raise interest in my crusade.

An extract from a letter to my mother (she kept all my letters) "Life is getting very hectic now. First I am getting more and more involved with hospitals which takes up more and more of my free time, but very pleasantly. Lady Templer rang me up the other day to ask all about it. (Sensation in the office - very good for the morale-) That is one of the reasons that we are doing it. I must have publicity for art. All the old headmasters and directors think that art education is just a means of giving people a polite accomplishment instead of training their minds. But let them see as Lady Templer has done, how people change when they have a form of expression other than comics and cinemas, let them see the light and life in those patients' faces at the T.B. and Leper Hospitals where before there was just a patient resignation, and they'll see the value."

Quotations from an article in, I think the Malay times or Mail of 1956 by a reporter called Nuraini - "Man with a mission" - "Peter Harris has been working now for four years in the Federation. It must have seemed a colossal task at first, but already the results are encouraging. A beginning has been made. Teachers' courses have been introduced and the primary schools encouraged to work on the right lines - natural

expression for the very young. In his own words Peter goes around "loosening up people," how graphic that is to any artist!

It has been his job to try to simplify, to explain, assist and, where he can, teach. One man can scarcely do more; and it must be obvious to many that what we need now are an art school and one or two fully trained assistant masters. But that will no doubt come in time when Malaya realises how many vital industries require a working knowledge of art - a knowledge which will not only boost them but which is basis of some industries. Design in industry is a big thing."

She continues "This is the third annual exhibition of Malayan artists held under the auspices of the British Council. It is a nicely varied exhibition. Federation painters are now holding their own with Singapore painters. Some very young painters such as Lai Thong, Patrick Ng and Jin are clever and full of promise. Tay Hooi Keat's "After the Catch" is delightful and I liked Hussein's "Hip Saddle" and Tony Beamish's "The Green Shutter".

I quote from another article from which paper and reporter and date I do not know, probably three years later. "Wearing a paint stained smock he surveyed this biggest exhibition of national art and gave his comment. The Malayan school is not just emerging. It is actually here." He said. "Brilliance and freshness of colour is immediately apparent in all these works. Most of them are extremely virile and sensuous in their line and composition, an expression of youth. Nearly all our artists are under forty."

Mr. Kington Loo, ex-officio chairman of the exhibition committee of the Federation Arts Council (it must be remembered that Mr. Loo, together with Miss P. G. Lim were largely instrumental in the foundation of the Federation Arts Council) said that the standard reached by this sixth Malayan Art Exhibition was the best yet. He also stressed the need for a proper art school.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein, who opened the exhibition, said that painting was a facet of the culture of the people. "So much has been said about the growth and development of our culture that one gets the impression sometimes that culture is a new thing introduced into this country by a hand of crusading intellectuals". he said. "Culture is intertwined with the life and development of any community and the degree of its growth depends on the growth and progress of the people themselves".

One of the contributing factors to the higher standard of art exhibited this year was the growing awareness and appreciation of all the workers of good painting. The painting of any country has its own distinctive features and he hoped that Malayan painting also would have its own distinctive features. He looked to the time when Malayan art would depict with

vigour and good sense, the hopes, aspirations and achievements of our people.

I felt very proud. I felt that the Wednesday Art Group, with its mixture of races, wealth, age and ability had really started an appreciation of the values of the arts in Malaya. Many of the group became well known artists, some became rich. Discussion of the arts had become a feature of life in Malaya with its arguments, disagreements, suggestions and jealousies. Exhibitions were a regular feature of the growing cultural side of the nation.

I still feel that many of the members are still my friends. I am very proud of them and very grateful for giving me so much happiness in Malaya, and also to the more powerful people who were responsible for the development of The Arts Council of Malaya and The National Art Gallery.



Wednesday Art Group farewell dinner

## Chapter Eight

As time went by, a solid core of members developed. It would be invidious to pick out a few names but I would like to mention Patrick Ng who died rather young and most of whose work died with him. He was intently interested in integrating and developing such styles as he met from Malaya (as it then was) and the cultures around. His painting "Spirits of the sun, sea and air" is greatly treasured in the National Gallery of Malaysia. Miss Cheong Soo Lan supplied the glamour and went on to lecture in Thailand and Indonesia on fabric design and weaving. I counted them all my friends - indeed I had little contact with European clubs and society. But my job was to develop art in the schools.

Tuan Syed Ahmad Jamal had returned from a full time art training in England, a much better artist than I and more modern in his outlook. His main interest though was not in teaching. Others came back from Kirkby College and gamely assisted in schools but the main emphasis was not on art teaching. It was essential to get scholarships for fully trained leaders in art education - in fact to do myself out of a job! So I set to and bullied as best I could the Education Department to find scholarships for a full art teaching training. At length I was promised one. But then a very gifted science student turned up and I was told that my scholarship would have to wait! I am afraid that I lost my temper and stormed into

the office - and my scholarship came back. However I got a reputation for being bad tempered that stuck on my reports until I left.

There was an obvious candidate in a young man called Yeoh Jin Leng, very positive, intelligent and gifted. He finally got the full works and returned to the North of Malaya a few years later.

By this time a group of important art lovers had started an Arts Council of Malaysia and the National Art Gallery was progressing nicely. The impetus was coming from all around me.

There was a growing body of excellent artists and teachers in Malaysia. With independence there was a very understandable urge to promote Malaysian citizens and to replace the colonial employees. We had, by this time convinced "The powers that be" that it would be more economic and desirable to train teachers in Malaysia itself and to this end an art teacher training centre was opened in Kuala Lumpur. Although I was the first head and organiser my ideas were far too much set in the past and in an European mould. I had realised from the beginning that my job was to do myself out of a job and it was time to leave. It was very sad. We had an enormous farewell party in my flat and an emotional farewell at the station.







*The young Wednesday Art Group*



*At an opening of the Wednesday Art Group exhibition*

## Chapter Nine

Not being very eager for the cold greyness of England I had decided to drift slowly back going East and not West. So I drifted through Penang and up through Thailand, a thorough tourist. To get to Cambodia I had to walk across a wooden bridge to a station at Battenang. We all got onto a train due to arrive at Siem Reap in the afternoon and waited. I had not seen a paper for some days and had no idea that the Cambodian troubles were starting. After a while some soldiers arrived and we all got off the train again. Some time later we got back into the train but there were noticeably less of us and we arrived at the junction for Siem Reap in the dark. The bus which was to have taken us there had gone and there was no hotel. "Ah", I thought "The military will help me as they did in Malaya" so I marched up towards the barracks to be met with a snapping of rifles. So I turned back and finally slept under the counter of the local post office.

The next day the bus lurched on to Siem Reap across gullies where the bridges had been destroyed, round potholes in the road and amidst clouds of dust, and put up at a central Chinese hotel. How lucky I was. There were no other tourists and I hired a tricycle and spent about two weeks taking it in turns with the cyclist to visit almost all the temples of the Angkor complex. The furthest, such as Bantei Serai, had to be reached by jeep. I had no trouble the whole time that I was there. The local food - French inspired - was delicious and my room, though definitely spartan, was quiet, cheap and adequate. It was a magnificent time. I sat alone on the top of Angkor Wat to watch the sun go down and the moon rise casting sinking red light over the breasts of the little Apsaras with blue lights taking over from the moon. I took my Bulbul Tara with me and was strumming away happily and suddenly heard clapping. Behind me was a group of Buddhist monks all in their yellow robes.

I sat on the terrace of the leper king and saw a procession go by, men and women, the men carrying baskets of what looked like money on their heads, the women all offerings of flowers, fruit and artefacts. I was told afterwards that they were offerings in a prayer for peace. Heaven knows how I managed to avoid trouble at that time. I was supremely unaware of trouble and danger and had no time to worry. I swam in the great Tonle Sap amongst buffalo turds and water lilies, I wandered idly amongst the temples and even the weather was sublime!

Phnom Penh was less enjoyable. The city was noticeably empty and I was at last made aware that there was indeed a very nasty war on. I had to go by taxi from Phnom Penh to Saigon and there too the hotel was covered in chicken wire to ward off bombs. Luckily I found a ship going to Hong Kong the next day and finally said farewell in a very smelly ship loaded with live pigs, stacked in tiers, for the celebration of Chinese New Year, being shot at from the shore as we meandered down the river.

I had booked myself in to a Chinese hotel in Hong Kong for the new year festival. That was mistake. The whole hotel was hung with bangers from top to bottom and from side to side. After a happy time, staying with a friend I met there, I voyaged on to Japan where I was lucky enough to visit both Kyoto and Nara and to see snow on the cherry blossom and so through Hawaii, America and the Queen Elizabeth (tourist class) back to England.

For six months I painted, better I think, and I exhibited with the Royal West of England Academy and had a one man show in the Woodstock Gallery off Bond Street in London.

Then I received a letter asking if I would like to go to Borneo to a teacher training college there. Of course, again I said "Yes" quickly.



## Chapter Ten

When I arrived in Borneo I was surprised to find how very different it was from mainland Malaysia. Jesselton, (now Kota Kinabalu), was still a small town on the edge of the South China sea. There was a lively business centre, a small port, an even smaller airport, a delightful market built over the sea where fish were kept alive in baskets below to be fished out wriggling fresh for the cooker and a string of open restaurants strung along the waterside.

I was basically to teach in the Sabah Teachers' Training College and also to develop art education in schools. The college was comparatively informal on the banks of a river, the principal very friendly and the pupils charming. They were from many different backgrounds, Kadazan, Murut, Bajau, Indian, Iban with a few Chinese and many mixtures and religions. Tuition was in English and the graduates were posted to schools basically from their own districts most of which were well out in the jungle. I admired them greatly.

The country, newly part of Malaysia, was changing greatly. They were experiencing a total change of background and taught in a language which was new to many (as, of course, was Malay) and probably better, or perhaps "differently", housed than before. They were all eager to learn which gave one a difficult sense of responsibility. Should one be mainly preparing them for the changes to come? Should one be stressing the value of their indigenous culture? Should one be introducing new materials which they would probably find (and did find) hard to come by?

My opposite number in Sarawak produced an art course for primary schools which was entirely based on jungle crafts. Somehow I felt that these crafts were better learnt in the home. Lovely and very fine as they were, there was no doubt that the outlook was going to be orientated towards a more commercial culture. Too much dependence on kampong crafts could produce a dangerous tourist-orientated

lowering of standards. This has indeed happened. We produced exhibitions of Sabahan craftwork, praised and collected. There was a constant fear of producing bland measures - and indeed quite a lot of the output must have been confused and insecure.

At the same time I was asked to produce an art syllabus and to purchase and distribute materials to the schools which had a trained teacher. Many of the jungle schools were extremely isolated and very small which meant that the amount that I could get to them was totally inadequate. It did mean however that in the college breaks I was able to visit schools and travel through the jungle on various inspection tours. I loved these journeys, walking, climbing, scrambling through the hill jungle.

Ah the lessons that I learned! I had stressed the importance of displaying the children's work on the walls so that they would value it. But many of the schools that I visited had no walls. I took in my pack rolls of newspaper and the meagre supplies of powder paint, heavy but sometimes the teacher would help me to the next school, hours, sometimes a day, away along jungle paths under trees of unbelievable magnificence, through strong spiders webs, up water courses, up steep banks where one had to hold on to the roots of trees.

In one school the teacher had used the newsprint paper to paper his walls. What could I do? I suppose that I could have reported him and got him a bad mark. But I merely shook my head and gave him his new supply, saw the children using it and told him untruthfully that I would be back again soon. In one place I came to a rapidly flowing river (jungle rivers change quickly from a trickle to a rampaging torrent). I had no way to say that I was there but the jungle telegraph was out and the head of the school came straight out and rafted me across.

## Chapter Eleven

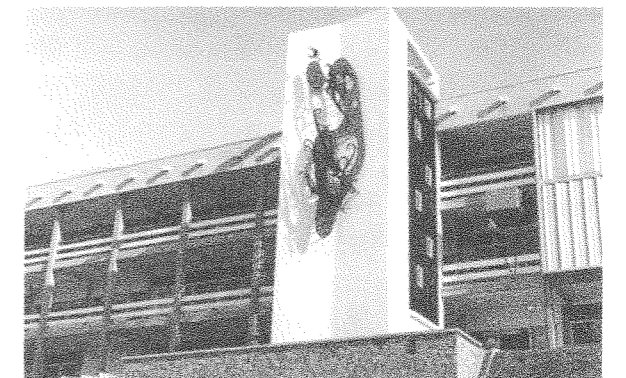
Visiting the jungle villages was a strange and somehow noble experience. The villagers were only one generation, if that, away from head-hunting. I asked once, "Is it not naughty to cut off heads?" The reply was "We do not drop bombs on children that we can not see." Which seemed to be a humbling reply! Head-hunting was denounced somewhere the beginning of the twentieth century. This gave some difficulty as, in the past, a young man was expecting to prove his bravery by getting a head before he could get married. (The lady was expected to prove her skills by producing a very lovely woven hat. These hats are of traditional design special to her village or area. These are very beautiful, made of local fibres, orchid leaf, banana leaf, rotan or split bamboo, closely sewn and woven). There was a slight reprieve. There was Japanese invasion and all at once taking Japanese heads became a good thing. However the Japanese won, so Australian heads were in. Then the Australians came back and so did the value of Japanese heads. Such is our morality!

At the entry to the village is a small house on stilts containing offerings to propitiate the gods, a coconut, an egg, small offerings - and also a skull or two. These are now usually green with age. The houses are, of course on stilts with a grand long house in the centre. Visitors are rare and an excuse for a party. Out came the gongs and the rice wine. This was served in a large jar, sometimes a very valuable Chinese jar from the old trading days and had a leaf floating on top with a bamboo "straw" stuck through it. The wine was over the top of the straw and we all took it in turns to suck it through the straw until it was level with the leaf again. It was then topped from the river and the next one took over. I had to have a clear head the next day so I very early declared myself drunk and settled down to doze. I am sure that they considered me a terrible weakling but at least I woke up feeling fairly sober the next day. The schoolteacher was an important person in the village. He had tales

of travel, knowledge, and a good house. I thought his wage very meagre but as there was no need or use for money except once a year when most of the village traipsed the miles to the nearest town for the annual market, the tamu, he was well off comparatively. What the people wanted most was salt and medicines. I carried salt but was only able to supply a few aspirin tablets.

A new training college was now to be built, much grander, near Jesselton, I was asked what I would like for the art room and the result was a lovely building sited over a slope with one teaching area without walls, one inside and a good store room beneath. The views of the jungle and of Mount Kinabalu were superb. I also designed a mural for the front facade based on the very fine tattoo designs, in three layers of aluminium free from the wall so that as the sun moved round, the shadows would change and interplay. It was, I think, a great success.

By this time I had designed a course utilising both commercial and local materials. We made puppets from clay bound with papier mache (I had to remember that newspapers are rare in the jungle). We made mobiles from clay and feathers or dried leaves, We painted with cheap colours. We made kites and masks. We carved from wood. The whole room was alive with activity and a great buzz which I hoped would last. When I returned recently, the room was a store and art an extra. However roads were going through across the country. Schools became more sophisticated and better stocked.



*The Gaya College mural*



## Chapter Twelve

I made many friends in Kota Kinabalu but did not manage to start an art club. The college and the travels were totally time consuming. I loved the jungle journeys, the diversity of people and the open friendly society, but somehow there was no cohesive force. I was not employed as a supervisor, though that became very much a part of the work, but as a lecturer. I felt too very much a temporary employee. The major impetus at that time was the building of roads, the clearing of areas of jungle and the prospect of tourism.

One day the luxury liner Caronia visited us. There was great excitement at the prospect of all that money coming amongst us. There were great preparations. All the best local crafts were laid out for display. The shops spruced themselves up and the food stores and clubs advertised widely. But all that the tourists wanted to buy were gold and precious stones.

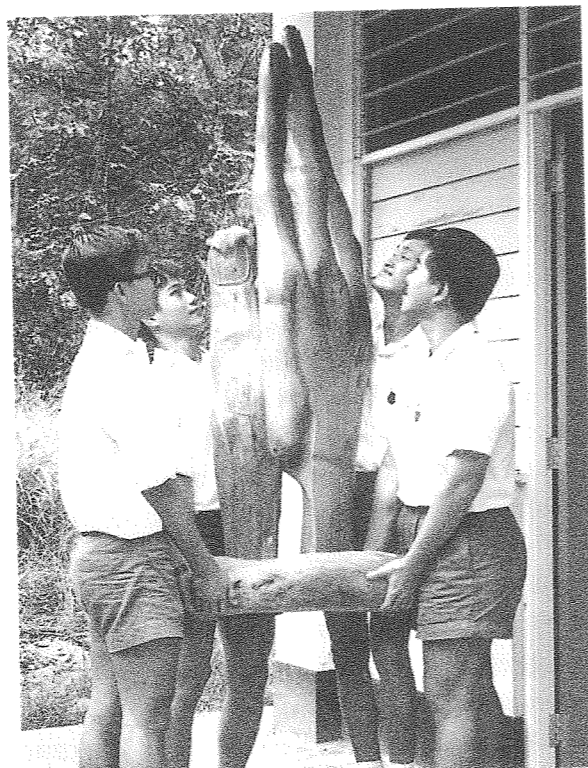
They were a weird bunch. One, a large lady of somewhat uncertain age accompanied assiduously by an handsome young man in a pale pink tropical suit, a portly gentleman with a fascinating hat which had straw bicyclists moving around it, a lady with green hair - very soon the message got through that they were not a financial bet but instead the shopkeepers put out chairs on to the pavements and charged a small sum for any locals to sit down and observe the passing show.

The attitude is now totally different. There are guided (and comfortable) climbs of Kinabalu, "authentic" village fetes and customs full of pretty (but "authentic") tribesmen - and tribesgirls often doing "authentic" Murut or Kadazan, Bajau or Iban dances, exotic -and very expensive - seaside resorts, comfortable roads and all the buzz of a developing country. My little house and garden were near the sea. It is now a four lane highway.

We had farewell dances each year and the first year I had decorated the hall in what to me

was a most glamorous manner using fronds of coconut, and all the beauties of the country. One brave student said very firmly "We don't want to go back to the jungle. We want modern things!" And, of course he was right. Those students were the spearhead of the irresistible modernisation of the country. Though many had to go back to rural schools they were bringing with them the new developments of Malaysia. Somehow it was more greatly accentuated in Borneo than in Kuala Lumpur. For me it was a sadness but for them it was a chance to develop. Television was there and the radio was filled with "modern" music. This was the stage when the old traditions were being discarded - on the surface I hope and believe - traditions which are now valued highly in museums and exhibitions. I am very glad that I mixed the traditional and the new in my lectures. Change was there and the past cannot be set in aspic.

Once again I had a sad farewell though not on the scale of the Kuala Lumpur send off and I was back again in England, a little richer but unemployed.



School boys' carving

## Chapter Thirteen

If one is over forty in England it was, and still is, extremely difficult to start from scratch. I started out with great expectations but obviously my experiences were suspect. I was awarded an M.B.E. for my work in education (and had a voluptuous time collecting it from the Queen in Buckingham palace) but I soon learned to leave that out on my C.V.. I took a drama course and became an associate of the British Drama Society. I finished up with a wadge of certificates - but another year older!

And finally I was able to find work - as a probationary teacher in a very difficult school. A difficult school in Bristol is very difficult. One is being constantly tested by the students. It is not unusual for a student to make physical sexual approaches to you and that is very difficult because, if you annoy them, they are quite capable of accusing you of sexual misbehaviour and that means an automatic discontinuation of employment until a board has thoroughly examined the case. Even if one is found innocent the smear never really goes.

I was fortunate on two accounts. I was never accused and rarely tested and also a very large, heavy and powerful young negress took a protective fancy to me and said "If you annoys our Mr. Arris I'll deal wiv 'e". One day, when a boy was being annoying she picked him up by the scruff of his neck, deposited him on the table and whopped him on both cheeks and gave him a very positive warning. I had to reprimand her of course but life got easier after that! I discovered, after I had left, that I had "got through" to them and life would have become easier anyway. But once in I was able to find work in a very good school near my home in Wiltshire.

I was soon promoted to head of the art department and finished as head of the creative arts department. This was not very pleasant as it included art and craft, dressmaking, woodwork, metalwork, mothercare, drama, and was a collection of very disperse subjects,

of which in some cases I knew nothing, and of very diverse teachers over whom I had little or no real control.

I retired after ten years, leaving great friends with gifts and well-wishing from my tutor group, the department and the school which, of course, I still greatly treasure. I settled down to retire in my small house in the middle of this lovely town, Malmesbury, painting, exhibiting in a small way, having two or three serious operations successfully and prepared to decline into quiet oblivion.



Finishing touches on "Venice", 1990



## Chapter Fourteen

I thought that all my contact with Malaysia had ceased apart from a very few friends with whom I still kept contact. The world had contracted to a very small circle in Malmesbury. I could not afford to keep a car and had little desire to drive. It was, therefore with great astonishment that I received a letter from a man whom I had not known well. Mr. Yeoh Jin Leng had been writing the history of art movements in Malaysia and had lighted on the work of the work of the Wednesday Art Group. Always full of ideas and a man of action he decided to organise an exhibition of the work of that group then and now. He had found my name and address in England and had persuaded the National Art Gallery to fly me out to Kuala Lumpur to take part.

This was a delightful surprise and I was, of course, only too happy to accept the invitation. When I arrived at the airport I was met at the airport by Mr. Yeoh and his wife Diana, Cheong Lai Tong (an old friend from the W.A.G.) and Miss Wong Mei Wan in whose Galeriwan the exhibition was held.

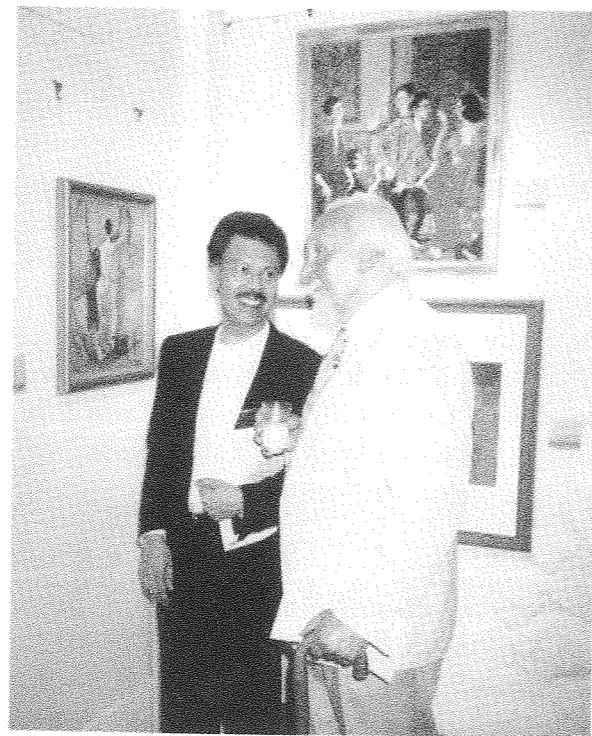
Meeting my old friends at the opening of the exhibition was sheer delight. The excitement was electric. They were of course much older and mostly much richer. Ismail Mustam had produced a very impressive "floater" for the exhibition and he was there as well as Lai Tong, Hajeedar, Ho Kai Peng, Sivam (now) Selveratnam, Renee Kraal and so many of my old friends. There was a wonderful atmosphere and the W.A.G exhibition was a great success.

The press was very kind and Mei Wan suggested that I should have a one man retrospective in her gallery the next year. Once again it was a great success and I met again many loved old friends and made many new ones. Jin Leng was my very generous host both times and I developed a great admiration for him and for his work. There is a brilliance of colour in the work of modern Malaysian artists which seems to be a national trait. Jin Leng

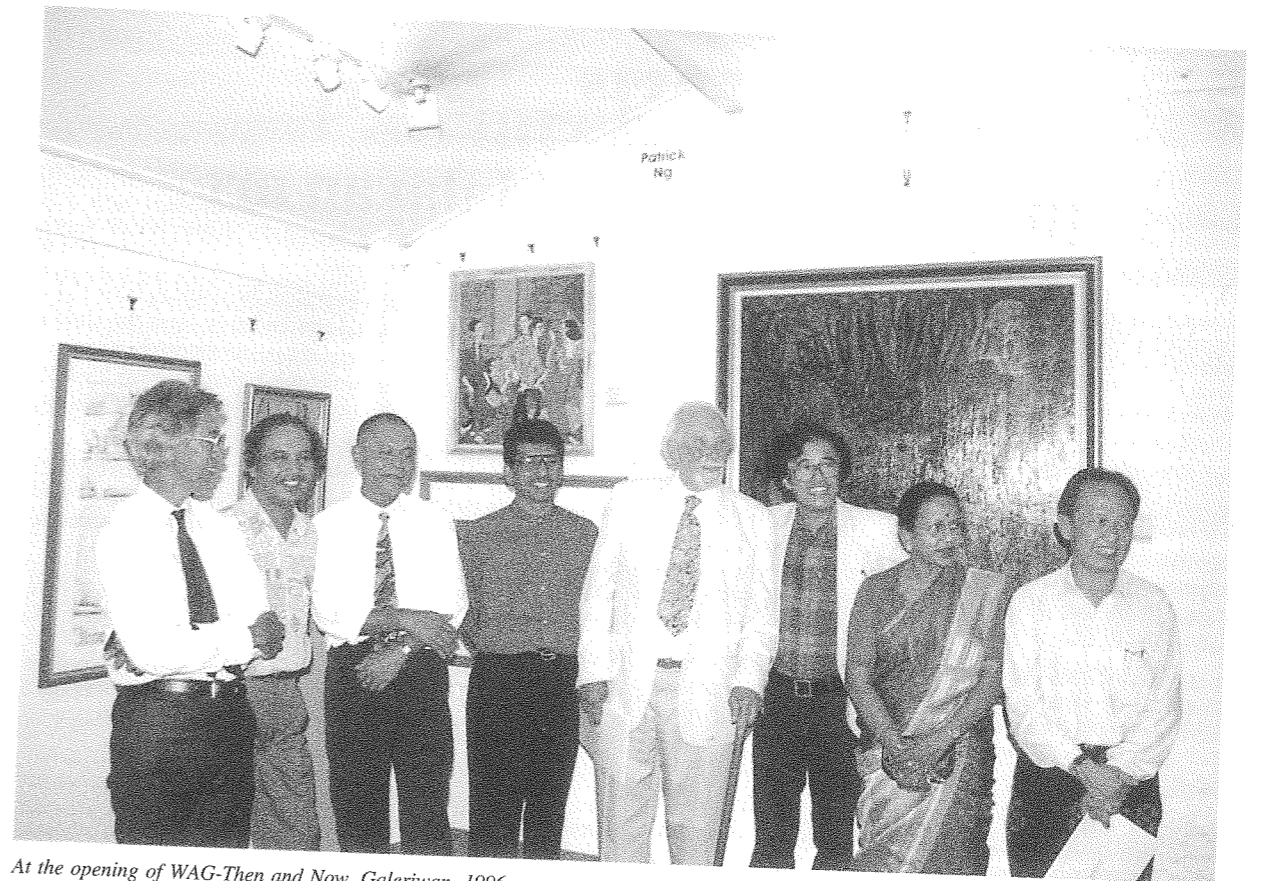
has many of his works hanging in his house which sing with their brilliance. Tuan Syed Ahmad has that brilliant colour sense too and I saw it in the work of Lai Tong and many in the National Art Gallery. It seems to me to be a defining characteristic in Malaysian painting.

I admire greatly too the work of Chuah Thean Teng in Penang. He is consciously making a true use of Malay batik methods, combining them with a very personal style of drawing, developing from the batik tchanting and with the brilliant pure colours of dyes.

My own strengths are in draughtsmanship but I feel that many of Malaysia's modern artists well outstrip me and it is a lovely thing to see that development of skills and experiment. There is, perhaps, too much use of European and American experiments and, in some of the young, a tendency to copy those Western movements. Malaysia is still developing her true identity. I still believe in the great value of the arts in that development. I wish your beautiful country as much happiness as it has given to me.



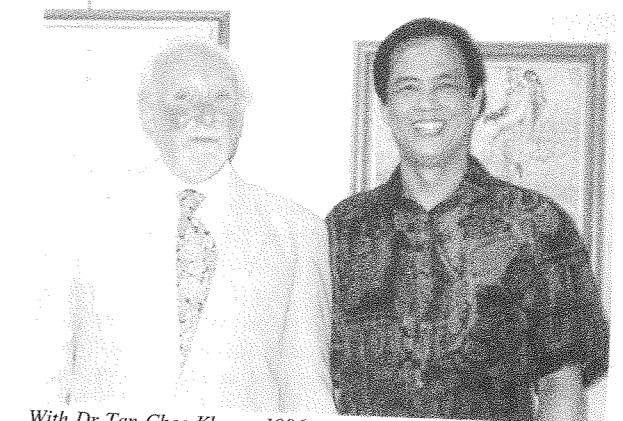
*With Tan Sri Zain Azraai, 1996*



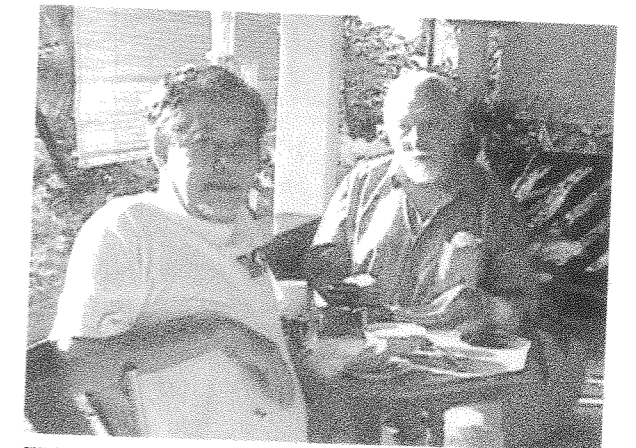
*At the opening of WAG-Then and Now, Galeriwan, 1996*



*At Carcosa, 1998*



*With Dr Tan Chee Khuan, 1996*



*With Yeoh Jin Leng, Feb 2000*



## In the forefront of Malayan art

By J. ANU

Peter Harris loves this country and the time he spent here. Yet, while some acclimatised Europeans stayed on to "help" build independent Malaysia, Harris felt that he had overstayed his welcome and returned to England.

Today - 30 years later - the former Superintendent of Art Education in Malaya has returned to Malaysia to an uproarious welcome that points to the undeniable fact that he has been sorely missed.

At 73, Harris is as flamboyantly charming as his reputation remembers. Mischievous eyes alight, he wields his walking stick with an extravagant flourish, and his memories of his time in Malaya is as sharp as ever.

The young Harris' art education was interrupted when he joined the Communications arm of the Royal Air Force, serving in India during the Second World War.

After the war and graduation, he taught art at a school in Swindon.

"I saw an advertisement in the papers for an illustrator in an African English language daily," but instead received a letter from the foreign office offering him, the job of Superintendent of Art in Malaya!

"I was shoved into new clothes, put on a ship and arrived in Penang. I stayed at the E&O Hotel - very nice - and the next day took a train to Kuala Lumpur."

Asked to describe his first impressions of Malaysia, Harris recalls: "It was 1952, Sir Henry Gurney had just been killed and we were told to lie on the floor of the train if we heard gunfire. I loved it."

Harris, initially unclear as to the scope of his designation as Superintendent of Art, immediately realised that there would be two problems facing him ... the lack of staff and emphasis on the subject in general. "At the time there were very few art teachers in the country. Besides the tutors at the Nanyang Institute in Singapore, there were few art teachers - Penang had two, Ipoh one and the Victoria Institution, another one."

He began the restructuring of art education with primary schools which he remembers was full of overaged students after the war.

Harris travelled from state to state talking to teachers regarding the problems faced by them.

Funding for the art component was a big problem in those days and there were never enough art materials. "Students had to pay RM2.50 periodically to participate in artistic activities."

As Superintendent he redressed these problems by procuring scholarships for the training of teachers or through short courses which he himself organised for teachers from Kuala Lumpur to Kuala Terengganu, and through the securing of more funds primarily for the development of the art syllabus, that is, materials.

It is interesting to note that it was Harris' short courses that provided the basic prototype for the Art module in the later day Specialist Teachers Training College.

Harris was also at the forefront of Malaya's first national-type primary school art syllabus which he saw as being aimed at encouraging the individual to think.

"Educators forget how important the visual is. For a child, words are too abstract a concept and they limit the child's ability to describe. While songs are an excellent learning tool, they are of a transient nature. A picture, on the other hand, is something a child can show his friends, teachers and parents to let them know how and what he thinks."

According to Harris, skill is never the be-all of art education - it is the knowledge and appreciation of art as well as the thrill a child gets from creating something which is most important.

Then, of course, these was the Wednesday Art Group. "The real strength about the group was that it wasn't about artists but more about art. People came to talk and to discuss and to see the best in their works irrespective whether they were artists."

Still, Harris is thrilled that the group was instrumental in producing many practising artists.

Classes continued, parties ensued. They talked and drank orange cordial, and carried on painting and eventually the exhibitions began to happen. Their first venue was The British Council.

Harris stresses that just as with his part in the education system, his place in the Wednesday Art Group was never aimed at dictating art to the participants.

"I have always believed in seeing the best in any person's works and I myself, as an artist, was constantly experimenting with different styles but I never wanted to influence anyone to only paint like me, to impose a style or technique..."

Nevertheless, Harris' influence was so strong that whenever he tried a new style it would inevitable be mimicked by the members of the group.

One thing that Harris insisted on, both in his capacity as Superintendent and mentor in the Wednesday Art Group, was that one of the basic principles of art education was that an artist's ideas must evolve from his own background - that ideas couldn't be taught.

With Merdeka, many Malaysians trained overseas began to return and - as Harris smirks - "take his job away from him".

"But seriously, it meant that I had succeeded in my job, creating a local infrastructure that would be independent of the colonial past."

Although Harris was not pressured to leave, he realised that there were equally qualified Malaysians and he decided to apply for a job at Gaya College, a teachers' training college in Sabah, and started the art department in that institution.

In 1968 he returned to England and carried on teaching there.

Back in Malaysia for the first time since, Harris has visited the old places and seen the new art.

About the local flourishing art movement he says: "As a foreigner, I have no right to say this and I have been out of touch with all the consequent developments in Malaysian art but perhaps the saddest thing about art in this country is the enormous gap between the public and the artists - they don't understand each other."

## Patriarch of WAG

By Ooi Kok Chuen

The years and a "near-death" illness have not changed Peter Harris much. Today, at 73, the man who laid the foundation of early art education in what was then Malaya, is just what his many students or "fellow artists" remembered him to be - jovial and sincere. His face is ruddy, and he walks with a purposeful gait, though aided with a tongkat.

Harris, the patriarch of the motley Wednesday Art Group, was in Kuala Lumpur for the opening of the exhibition Wednesday Art Group - Then And Now, at GaleriWan last Tuesday.

Sporting an off-white suit and with his receding silvery hairline and a goatee to match, Harris looked strikingly like that fabled colonel who started an international fast food chain (Harris was actually an "acting colonel" in the British Air Force during World War II, but that's another story).

To Penang artist Wong Siew Inn, only two years younger, Harris will always be her "Danny Kaye", and she his "Lily Hwa", after the former Hong Kong movie queen.

The unforgettable reunion exhibition, though downscaled because of space and finance, turned into an evening of nostalgia for the way things were - when art was fun and not so bedevilled by politics or petty jealousies, or by distinctions of race, nationality, age, status (level of skills and accomplishment), gender, class, or geography.

The charismatic Harris regaled the gathering with an account of events which took place years ago when he was last in Kuala Lumpur, as superintendent of art in the Federation of Malaya from 1951 until December 1960.

When he arrived in the country - a week after Sir Henry Gurney was assassinated near Fraser's Hill - there was no infrastructure, no manpower, no materials. There were also problems with Bahasa Melayu.

"I didn't have any expectations. I didn't know what Malaya was like," he recalled.

After discussions with the chief education officer, schoolteachers and headmasters, he decided to work at the primary school level first and to get scholarships for secondary schoolteachers to be trained overseas.

"There was no art training institution (the Specialist Teachers' Training Institute came later), but there were one or two art teachers trained at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Art (in Singapore)."

He travelled all over the peninsula - Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Seremban, Malacca, Johor Baru, Kota Baru and Kuala Terengganu - to offer two-week courses each time and to distribute art materials, which were hard to come by.

It was at this time that he formed WAG (it was founded in 1952, but only registered in 1956), at first for schoolteachers but quickly broadened to include anybody with an inclination to paint. It was meant to be an informal gathering to paint, discuss and exchange ideas without any inhibitions.

As Harris put it then: "The aim was to provide opportunities for members to draw, paint, express and relax into art. It (the group) was not meant to be a class. Every one was welcome. The main thing was to instil faith and trust in themselves."

"I never laid down the rules. I didn't tell them what was the right style. I only taught them the method, not the style. I can't tell them what to paint, or how to paint it."

The only thing he forbade was the use of erasers, "otherwise they wouldn't know where they went wrong."

WAG is reputed to have produced outstanding artists like Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Cheong Lai Tong and Dzulkifli Buyong. Syed Ahmad Jamal was the only member with formal overseas art education when he joined the group after his Chelsea School of Art stint.

WAG first met in an old barracks of the Selangor Education Department near the old Sulaiman Bridge. The venue later moved to Dewan Tunku Abdul Rahman (which

became the National Art Gallery), and then to the secondary schools in Jalan Kuantan and Bukit Bintang.

There was an art community in the true sense of the phrase. The atmosphere was convivial. This was before what exhibition guest curator Yeoh Jin Leng termed the "schisms that began with the cult of the avant-garde vehemently pursued by some artists who came home from their studies abroad in the Sixties".

"The members would pose for one another to do portraits," recalled Harris.

Harris encouraged the members to rediscover their roots, to go back to "the wonderful traditions of Chinese and Indian cultures".

But there were no "-isms." WAG was boundaryless, without any manifesto or high-falutin "propaganda".

The members just had to pay RM1 a month, and come and go as they liked. Materials, space and camaraderie were free.

In 1956, William Emslie, then the director of the British Council, allowed the hall to be used for the group's annual exhibition, and it went on until 1967 when the group broke up. It was Emslie who donated Patrick Ng's Spirit of Land, Water and Air, an icon in Malaysian art, to the National Art Gallery.

Harris was also senior lecturer of art at the Specialists Teachers' Training Institute (STTI) before he spent six years in Sabah "doing more or less the same thing but with less pay".

Despite his hectic schedule, Harris also secretly taught in Indian schools in rubber estates during his spare time. For more than a year, he also devoted Sunday afternoons to teaching English and art to the leper children in Sungai Buloh.

"I didn't join golf clubs, and I had very few European friends," he said.

He believes that art can be therapeutic. "Once we did paintings of various towns linked by railway tracks and pasted them on the walls of a centre for spina bifida children in Jalan Ipoh," he recalled.

Asked about his aspirations as an artist, he replied: "I'd like to go on painting. I like painting." His passion for art is undiminished as a 1995 ink and watercolour painting, entitled The Healer, proved. It was "spiritually uplifting work" done when he was undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. In the painting, a strange nunlike figure holds the lives of a few people in her hands, saving them from certain damnation.

Though Harris was often groping to put names to faces and vice versa during the reunion, he could reminisce about old haunts like the joget halls in Bukit Bintang, the Spotted Dog (Royal Selangor Club), the Malay Boys hostel, the Lake Gardens and the Kuala Lumpur railway station.

He said he misses the prawn curry (at a Malay restaurant in Batu Road opposite the Coliseum) and Penang Hokkien mee.

Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie, the NAG working committee chairman in 1960, paid a tribute to Harris for "broadening the artistic vision and bringing fresh vitality to so many young Malayan artists".

Tan Sri Zain Azraai, who officiated at the exhibition, called Harris "a great liberator of Malaysian art".

Bristol-born Harris attended the West of England College of Art in 1939 before war interrupted his studies. He served as a wireless mechanic in the British Air Force in Bombay and Quetta in 1942-45.

He lectured on arts and crafts in the College Art School in Swindon before assuming his duties in Malaya. In 1963, he was awarded the MBE, and in 1976 was head of the creative arts faculty in the Sheldon School in Chippenham.

He lives in Malmesbury, the oldest town in England, which is near Bath.



# Old Malaya according to Harris

By Ooi Kok Chuen

It's an extraordinary portrait of the halcyon days in Malaya, when the heart of simplicity is captured on the faces of the people.

These drawings in water-colours and pastels by Peter Harris are rich vignettes of ordinary life, of people as they were - honest natural and decent, with a distinct rustic charm.

It was the Age of Innocence, when Harris was in Malaya "teaching people to take over my job", first in the peninsula as an art supervisor for schools in 1951-60 and then in Sabah in 1962-67 as State art superintendent and also as a lecturer at Gaya College in the then Jesselton, now Kota Kinabalu.

Whether full heads, half-body - frontal or sideview - in full head-to-toe depictions or with two or three figures, the portraits are rendered with intuitive analysis of characters and fine skills to boot, and an unerring sense of placedness.

These are done with loving details, fine or harsh lines, and subtlety of accentuations to add an aura or mood to the whole compositions. The headdress or scarves are also revealing visual clues on the time and status of the people beyond the obvious physiognomy.

There is a certain aura of simplicity about these pictures painted in the 1950s and 1960s, that we can look back with a tinge of nostalgia. We can also find this in the works of the other pioneers such as Yong Mun Sen, Lee Cheng Yong and Kuo Juping.

The rouged faces of the joget girl, the soft delicate lines denoting the fragile temperament of two little girls, a man with features of a labourer enjoying the luxury of smoking the pipe, a squatting itinerant food vendor in samfu, and the air of hopefulness and uncertainty of nubile Malay maidens.

There are also two portraits of the handsome Samat, shirtless and with a sash in a look somewhat and puzzlingly defiant. Samat's eponymous gallery in Kuala Lumpur, set up jointly with the great Frank Sullivan, was an early meeting point of artists and art lovers.

Harris's astounding cavalcade of ordinary people is among the works shown in his Retrospective exhibition at GaleriWan in Kuala Lumpur, the first time so many of his works can be seen since this pioneering figure in local art was honoured by a rare Retrospective by the National Art Gallery in 1960.

Harris is arguably best known as the founder and guiding light of the Wednesday Art Group (WAG) in 1952 - a loose motley coterie of creative individuals whose common abiding interest was painting.

Born Peter Harold Barton Harris on April 23, 1923, he was educated at the West of England College of Art in Bristol (1939-42).

He received his national diploma in design (painting) art in 1946-47 and lectured in art and crafts at the College Art School in Swindon before his stint in the then Malaya.

Besides the WAG, Harris was also the founder member of the National Art Gallery and the Arts Council of Malaysia.

"They were quick sketches, done between two or three minutes at the most and were mostly of kampung people, who had nothing to hide," recalled Harris, a spritely 74 despite having been ravaged by several ailments including a bout of cancer a decade ago.

"Yes, they were strangers. I didn't meet them, I saw them. On the whole, they didn't know I was drawing them. Far better. You couldn't do it now, people are more self-conscious. I don't like to do formal paintings."

He usually sketched at "some dark corners of coffeeshops" helped on by quaffs of beer.

It is obvious that Harris felt more comfortable among the local people. He did none of the expatriates' pastimes - living it up in clubs or played golf.

"I am touched by the friendliness of the people, and their honesty," he said.

The paintings "cover many periods of my life, and reflect the places and times in which I live, in the cool conditions of the temperate Western world and the vibrant exuberance of the enchanting tropical world. They are as a diary. Some were painted in the full flood of happiness, some in relative despair, others in the shadow of despair," said Harris.

"All art must be influenced by the general culture of the age and of the environment in which the artist lives."

Those days and even now, Harris painted without the intention of selling his works.

It was Wong Mei Wan, the owner of the GaleriWan galleries, and Yeoh Jin Leng, artist-ceramist and curator of the exhibition, who suggested the idea when they came across the interesting portfolio of Harris's sketchbook portraits when they visited him at his house in Malmesbury, near Bath, England.

"I keep a large number of these sketchbooks. They mean a lot to me sometimes. At home, when I go through the sketchbooks, I relive the places I've been to, sometimes I remember the atmosphere ... the feeling of the shophouse," he reminisced.

He was particularly enamoured by the lyrical sunsets in Kota Kinabalu (his house was by the seaside), the "phosphorescence".

Also on show are some oil paintings and a remarkable series of watercolours with a decidedly Magic Realism bent, done during his three-month stay in hospital when recuperating from cancer.

They are fantasies of mock-gothic horror where strange creatures roam and the natural landscapes take on a more grotesque forms.

Harris is not bothered by all the "-isms" that came and went in art. Indeed, he finds them delimiting and has a distinct suspicion of words.

"When I paint, I do not have words in my mind. When I paint, it comes from the heart. I have only feelings and colours. I certainly see things in relations of the colours I want to put down."

He is also passionate about the use of art to help the less fortunate. During his time in Malaya, he helped introduce art for the benefit of children at the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium and the rubber estates.

"I find that my happiest memories are things that I have done to help others and the saddest memories, things that I did that hurt people..."

Somehow, despite his redoubtable talents and his pioneering efforts of laying the foundation of art education in the country, he never sees art as a career.

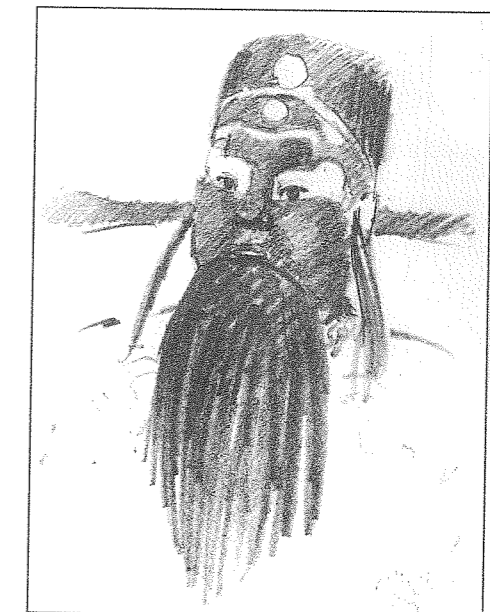
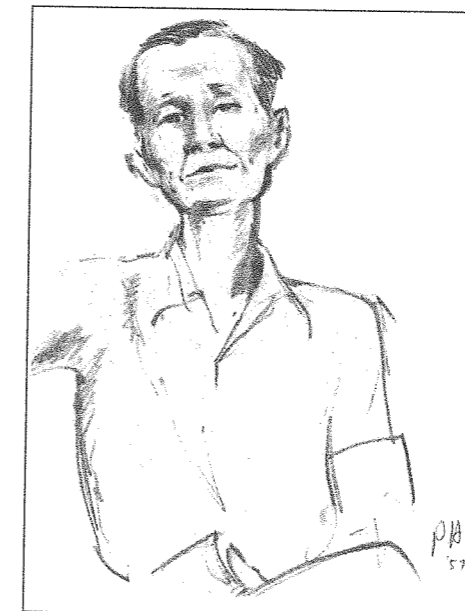
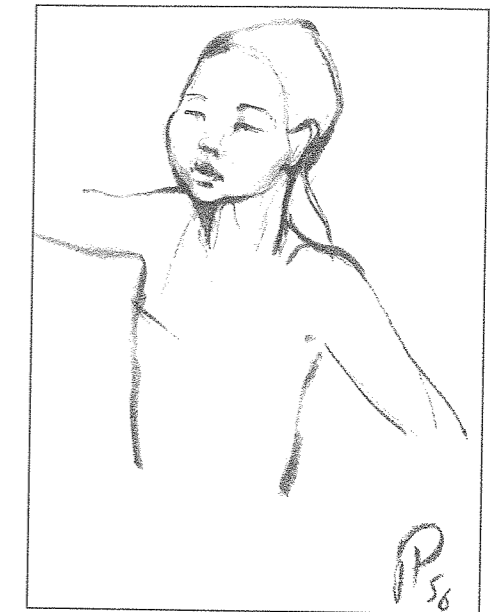
"I just do the things. I didn't have any direction in life or in art," he revealed with disarming candour.

Harris's philosophy of art is one that is pure in itself and for the purposes it serves and it is perhaps this old-fashioned altruistic quality that makes him so special as an artist and as a human being.

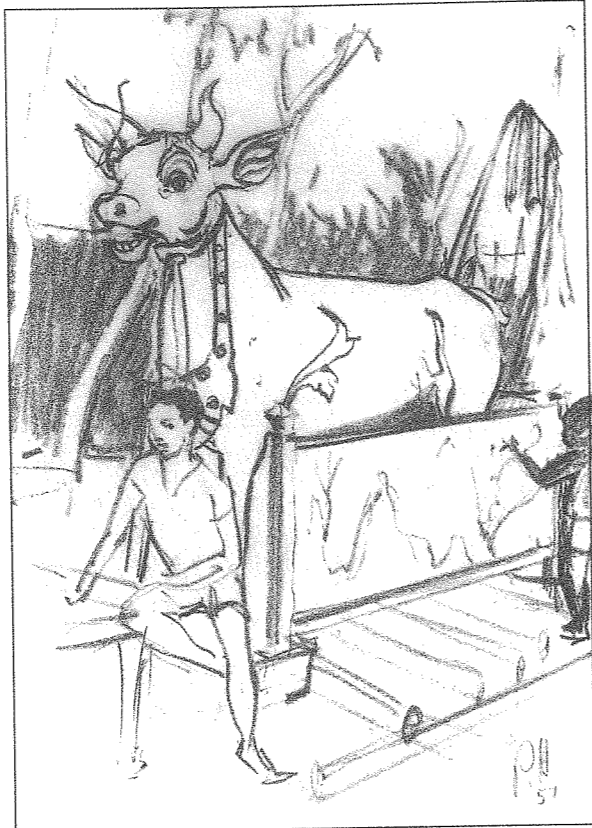
He believes that the biggest reason for one to paint should come from the heart.

In a way, he is everything that his painted *Blind Poet* is not, blackmailed by an emotional vice of obligations. Perhaps, that was why he never married. His life is a happy serendipity of what falls in his path through his good intentions, what he calls "guided drifting."

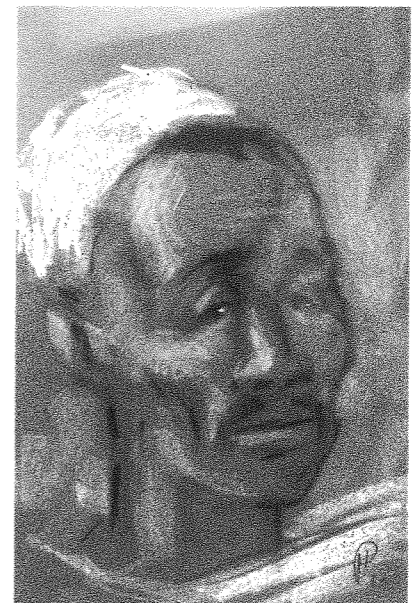
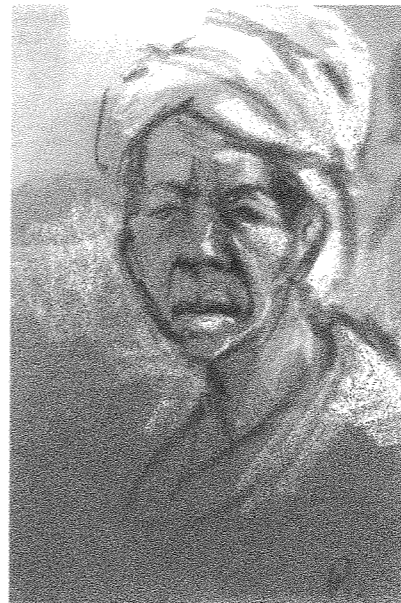
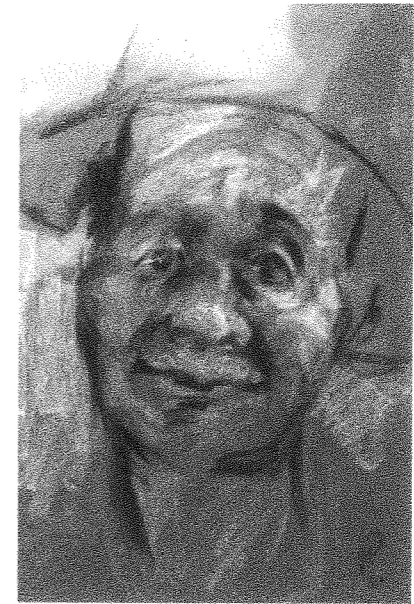
Peter Harris Retrospective was officiated by Yayasan Seni Berdaftar president Toh Puah Mahani Idris Daim at GaleriWan. The exhibition ended last Saturday. For enquiries, call 03-2614071.







Sketches of Bali, all 25 x 18 cm



Collection of Mr Yeoh Jin Leng

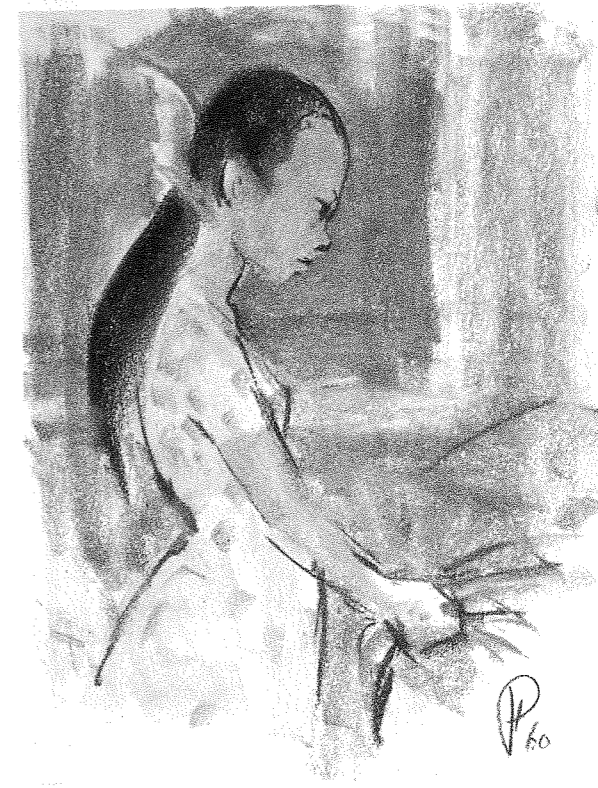




Lady, 1959 36 x 27 cm

P59

Felt Pen



Chinese Girl 35 x 27 cm

P60

Pastel



Young Girl 35 x 23 cm

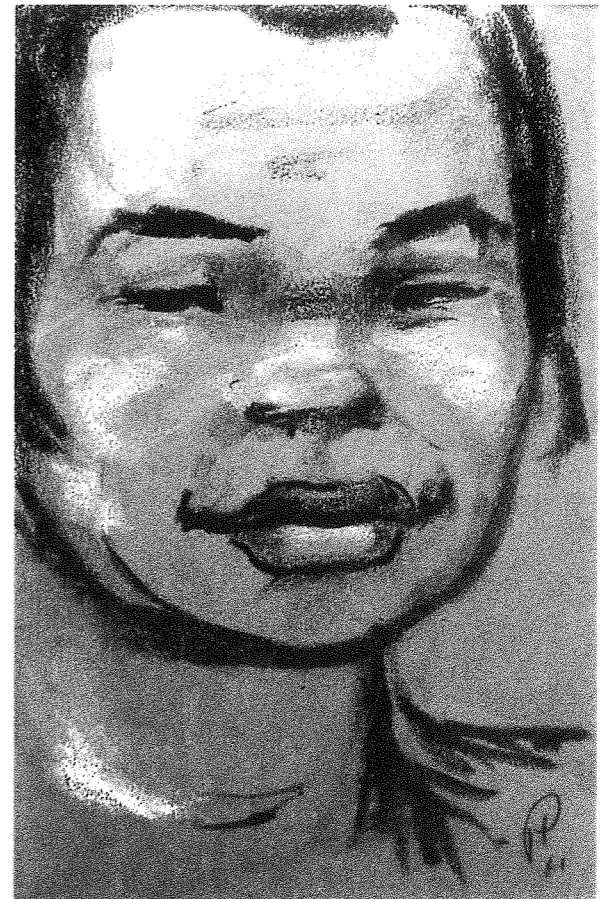
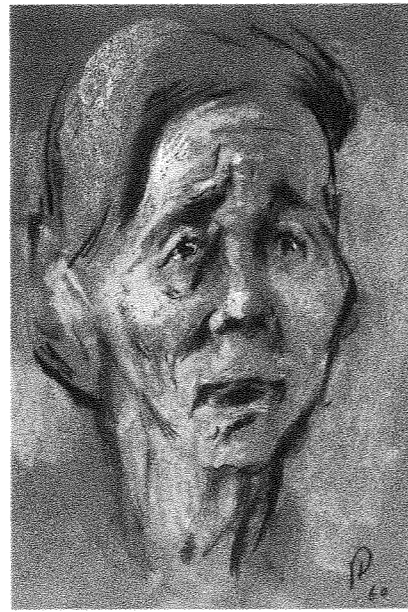
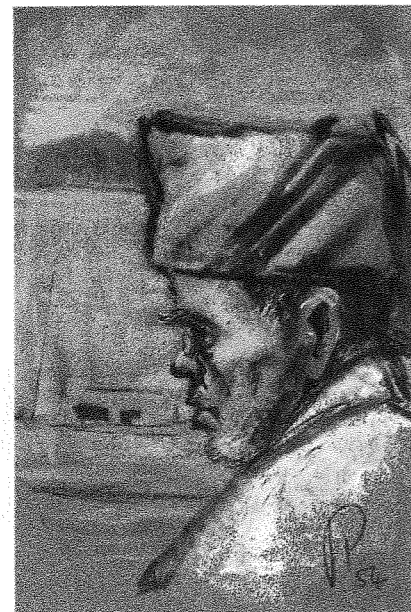
Pastel



Girl with Flowers 37 x 23 cm

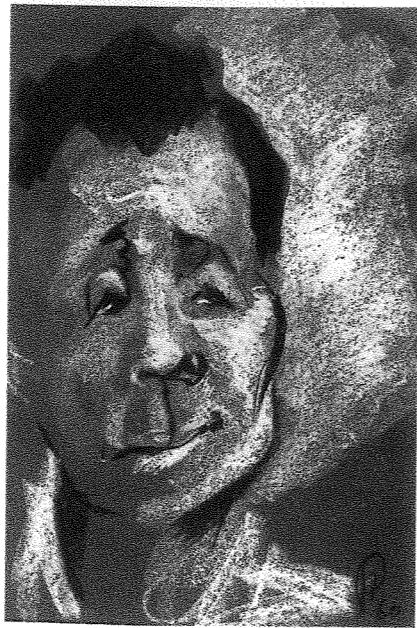
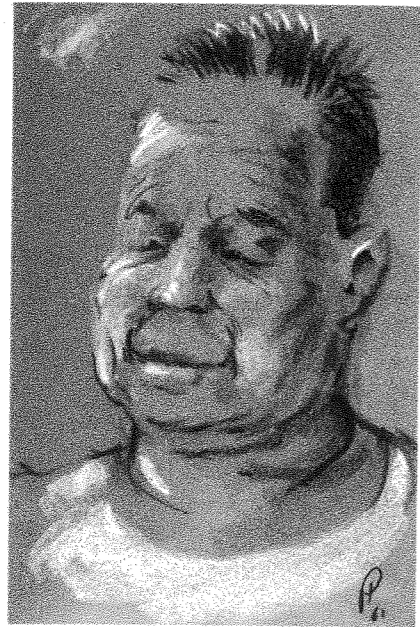
Pastel





Portraits in pastel, all approximately 36 x 24 cm





India, 1965

37 x 26 cm

Pastel

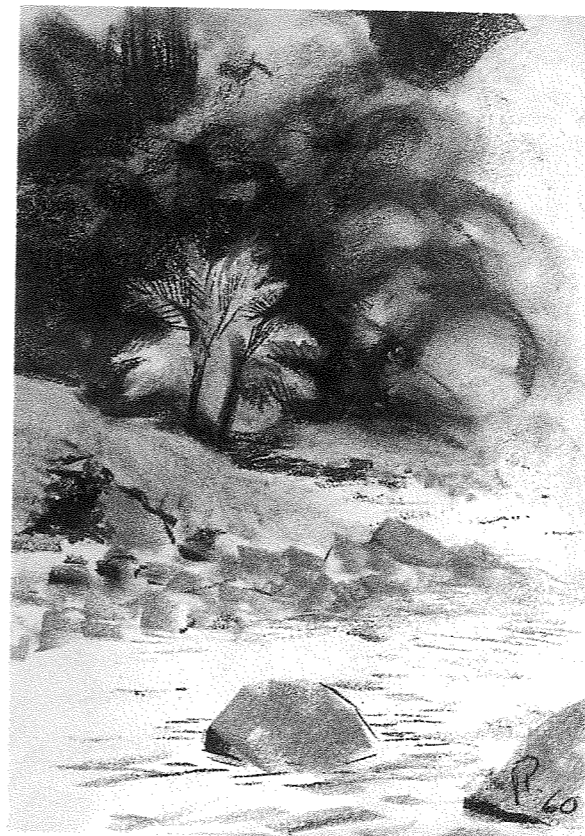




*Animated Lady*

22 x 35 cm

Pastel



*Riverscape*

36 x 26 cm

Pastel



*Landscape*

34 x 24 cm

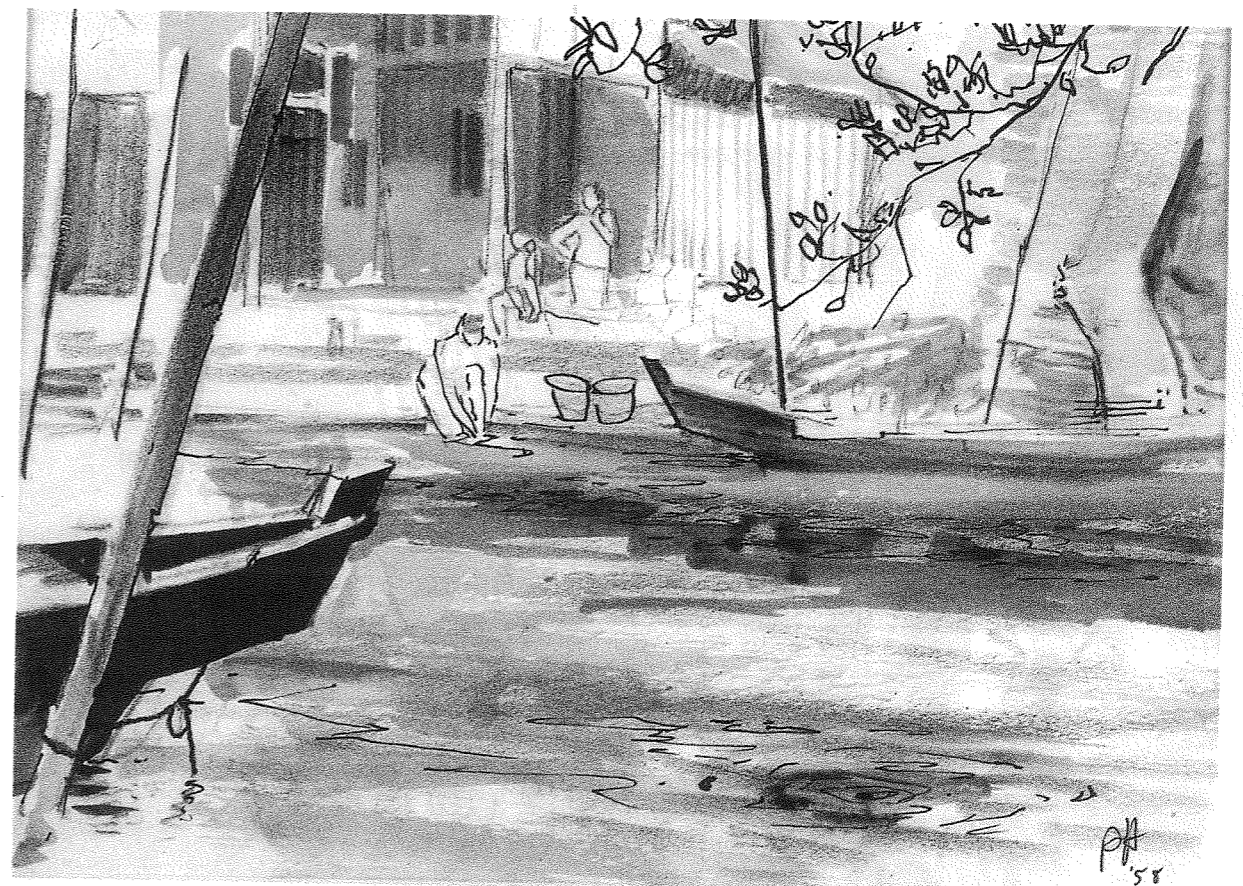
Pastel



*Siamese Temple*

24 x 34 cm

Watercolour

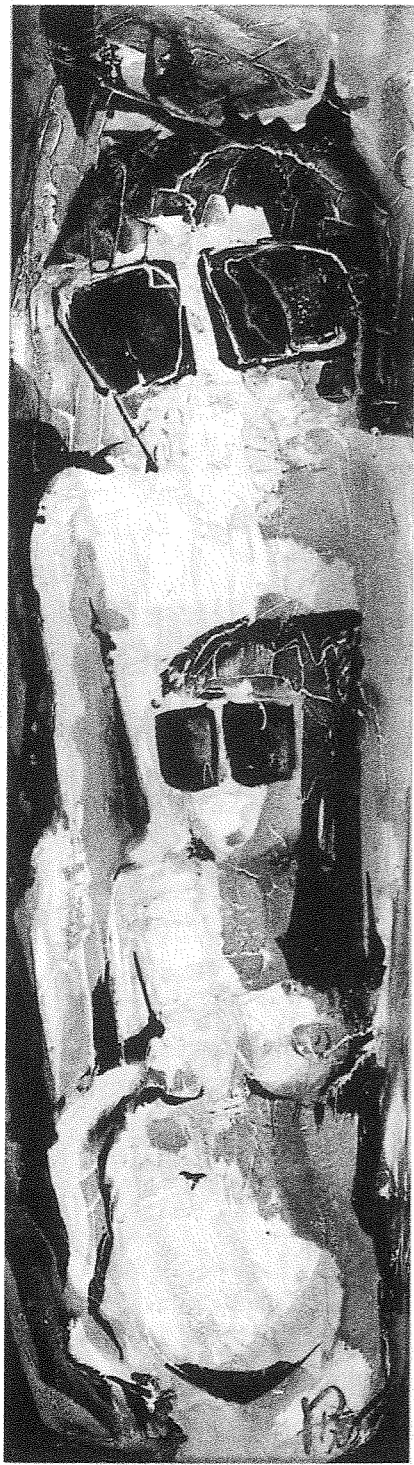


*Washing by the River*

18 x 25 cm

Watercolour





*The Blind Poet and his Wife, 1970* Oil  
90 x 25 cm



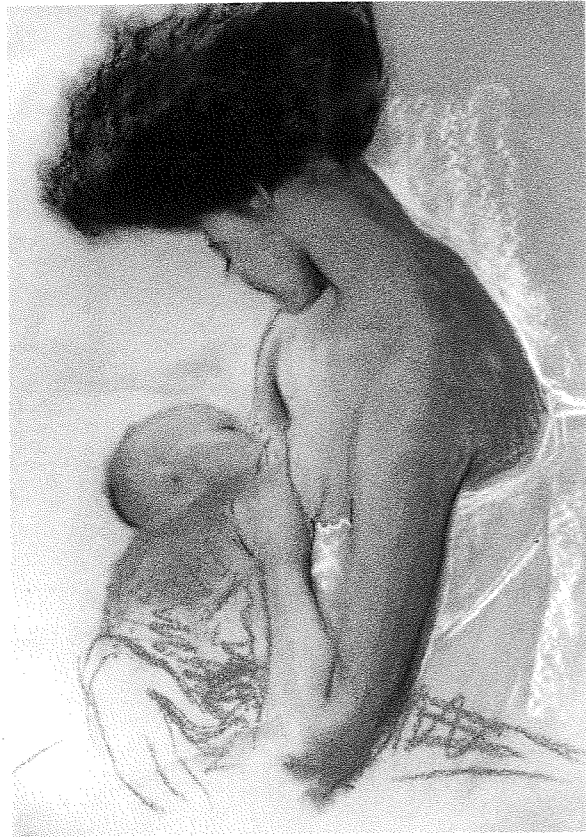
*The Blind Poet is to be a Father, 1970* Oil  
Collection of Miss Sally Lee (nh lee art gallery)



*Staircase Mural, 1981*

Photo by Mary Hill





*Mother and child, 1984*

*Pastel*



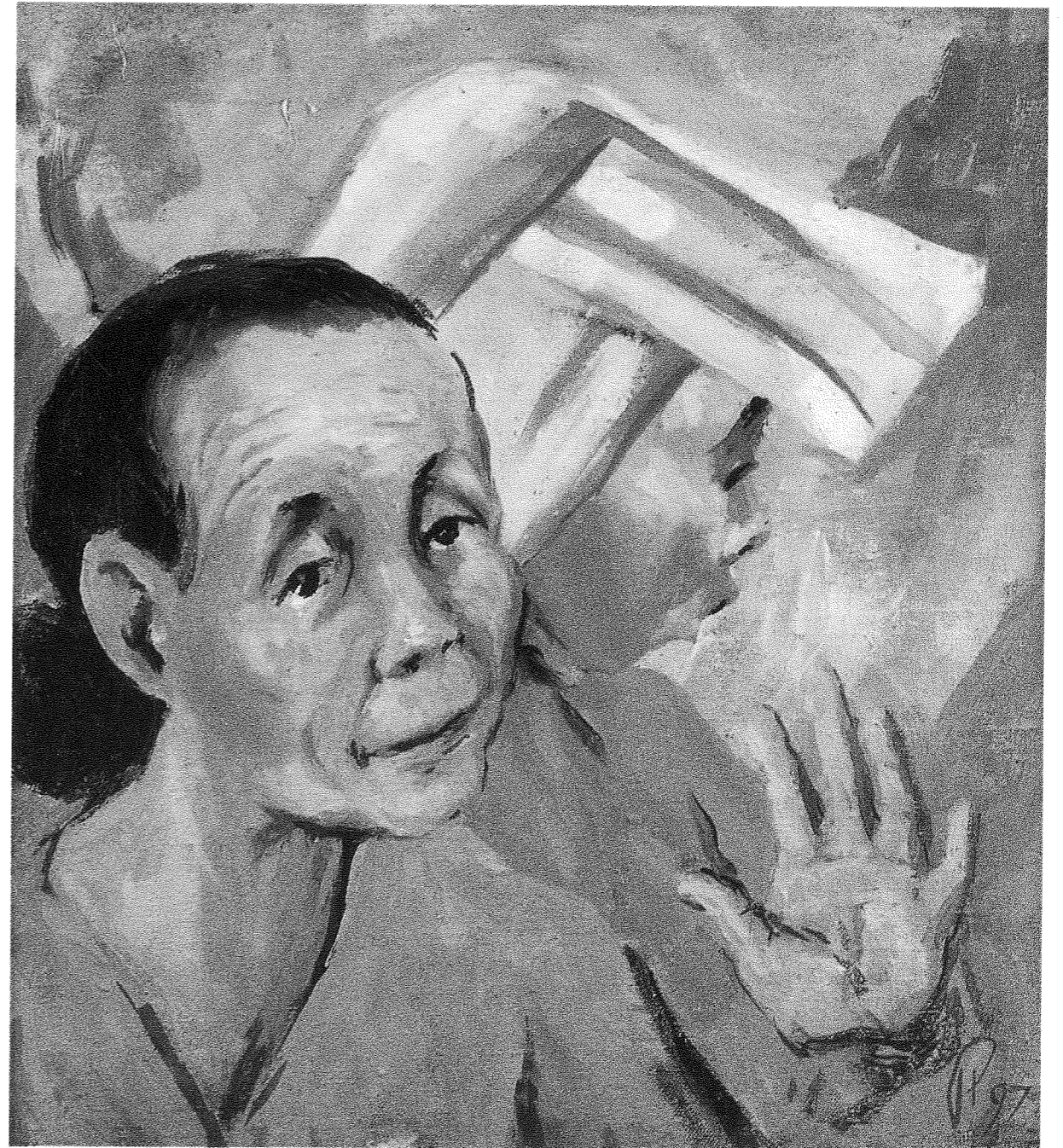
*Nude, 1983*

*Pastel*



*Figure Study, 1983*

*All above photos by Mary Hill*



*Market Women, 1997*

*45 x 40 cm*

*Oil*

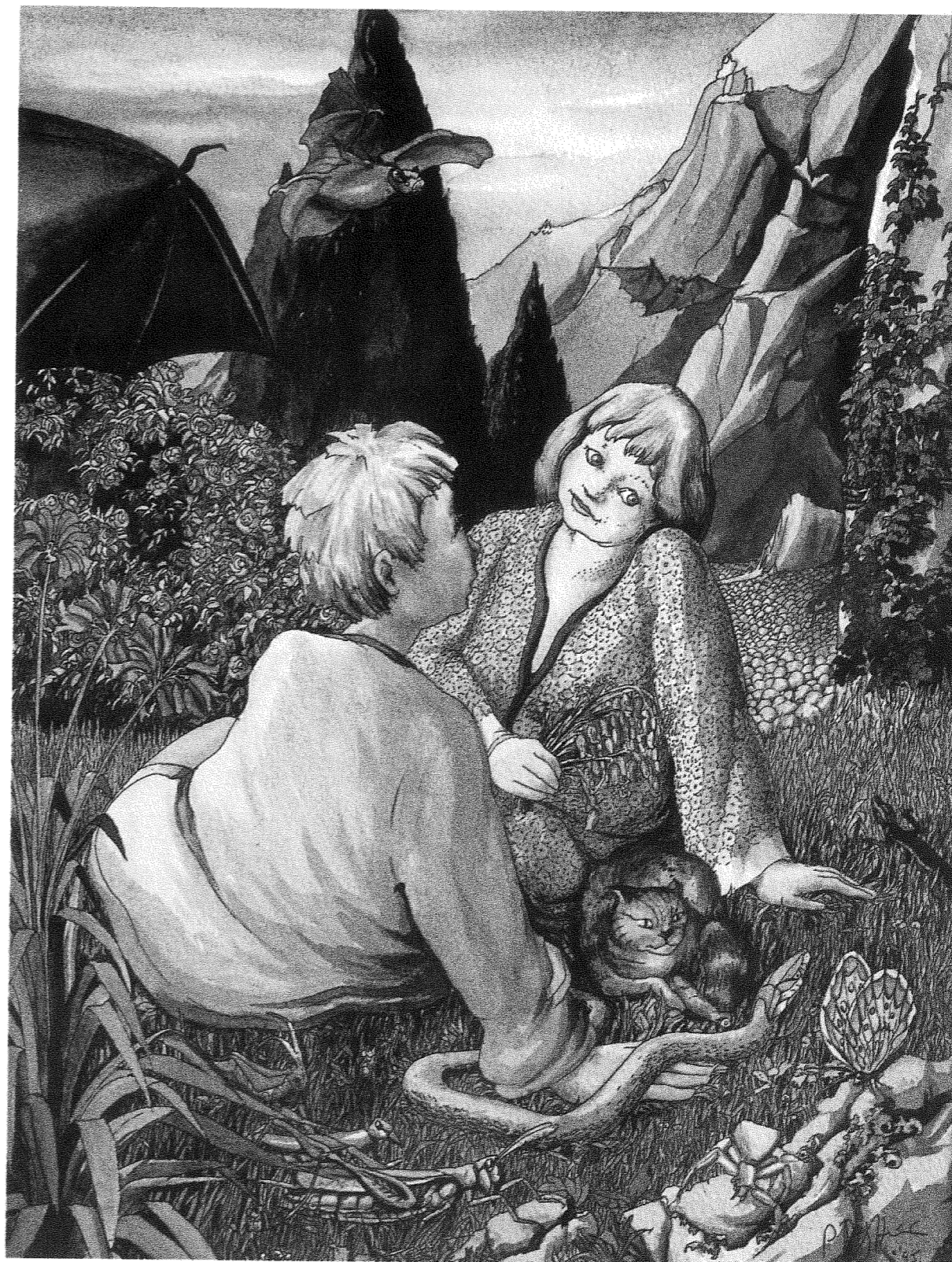




*The Healer, 1995*

38.5 x 31cm

Watercolour

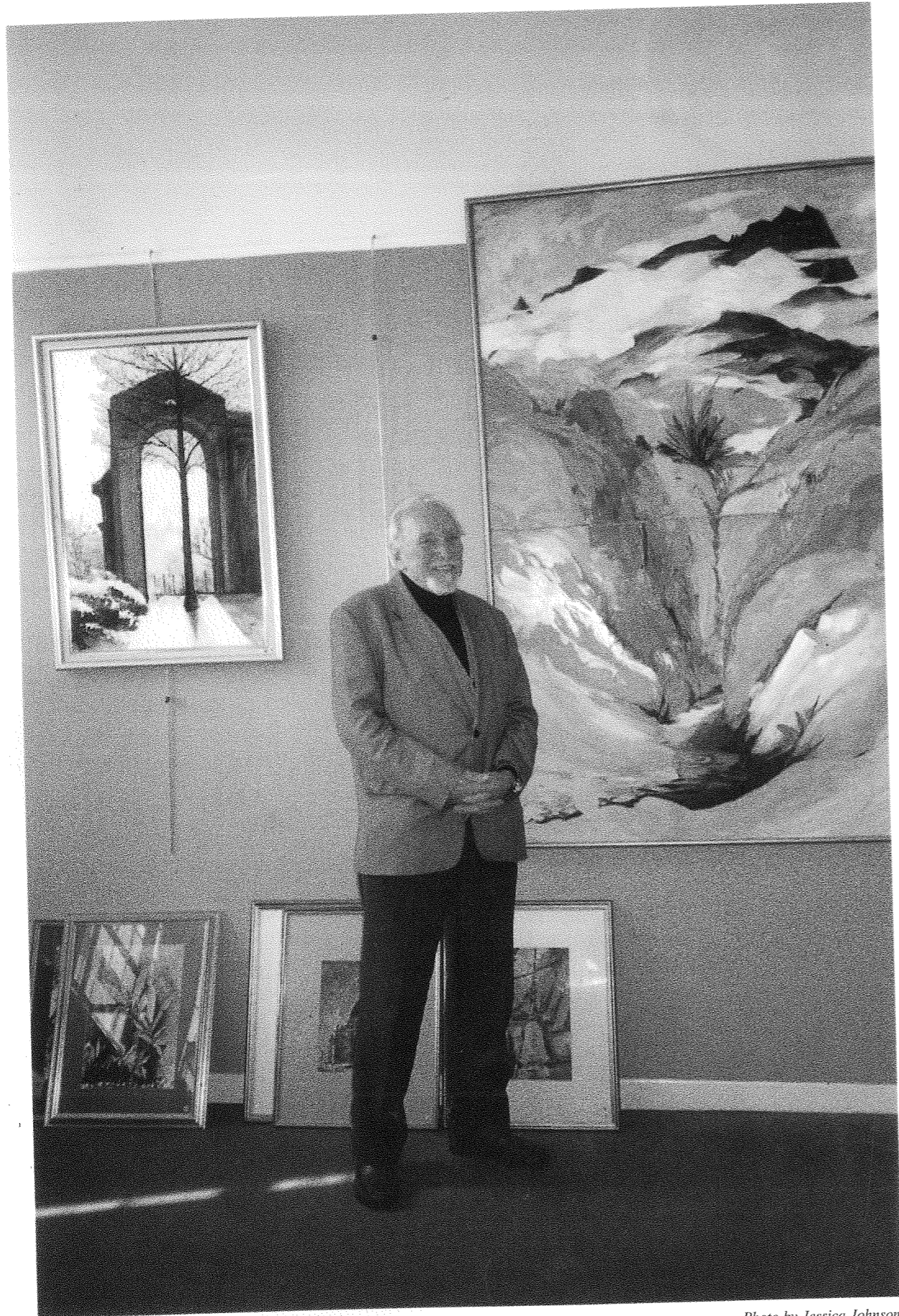
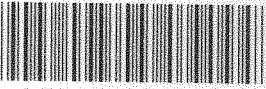


*Enchanted Garden, 1995*

38.5 x 31cm

Watercolour





*Peter Harris, Marlesbury Gallery, 2000*

*Photo by Jessica Johnson*