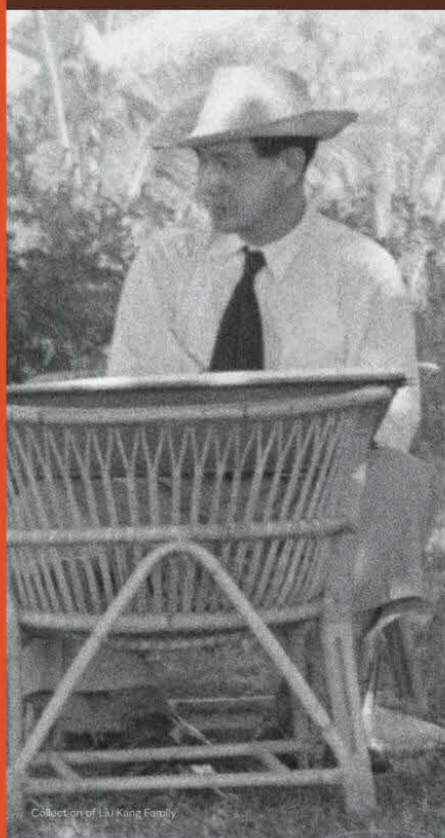


EXHIBITION GUIDE

Untold Stories

Four Singapore Artists' Quest for Inspiration in Bali 1952



Collection of Liu Kang Family



Liu Kang, Detail of *Wen Hsi Sketching*, 1952. Collection of Liu Kang Family.



Liu Kang, Detail of *Artist and Model*, 1954. Gift of Shell Companies in Singapore. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.

14 Feb – 3 Aug 2025

Gallery, Level 10, National Library Building

AN EXHIBITION BY



*All photographs featured in the exhibition are from the Collection of Liu Kang Family unless otherwise stated.
Photographs by Liu Kang © Liu Kang Family.*

PROLOGUE

Many may have encountered the painting *Artist and Model* (1954) while studying art in school, or while at the National Gallery Singapore. The work by Liu Kang shows fellow artist Chen Wen Hsi sketching a Balinese woman. Many have assumed that this depicts a Balinese scene from the 1952 sketching trip to Bali undertaken by four pioneering artists: Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng. However, recent discoveries, including photographs taken by Liu Kang, reveal that the painting was inspired by sketches of Chen done during a visit to Tretes, a hill resort near Surabaya, days before the artists reached Bali.

This “trip to Bali” was in fact a hectic seven-week adventure that took the artists from Jakarta, across Java and finally to Bali, from 8 June to 28 July 1952. The 1953 exhibition of artworks inspired by the trip has long been considered a major milestone in Singapore art history. But despite the trip’s significance, there were few known details.

The recent discovery by the family of Liu Kang of an astonishing collection of over 1,000 photographs taken during the trip yielded an unprecedented volume of visual documentation. Together with materials from the National Library collection, the untold stories of the trip and many of their masterpieces now unfold in vivid detail.



Artist and Model

Liu Kang

1954

Oil on canvas, 84 x 124cm

Gift of Shell Companies in Singapore,
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

The Four Artists

All four artists—Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng—attended the Xinhua Art Academy (新华艺术专科学校), an influential art school in Shanghai which taught Western art alongside Chinese ink painting. Liu Kang and Chen Wen Hsi attended the academy at the same time in the late 1920s.

In some ways, the four artists seemed unlikely bedfellows. Each had his own artistic temperament, interests and aesthetic sensibility. Yet in early 1950s Singapore, their life experiences, especially their shared art education in Shanghai, forged a connection.

The relationship was bolstered by the four-man group exhibition presented by the Singapore Art Society from 24 November to 2 December 1951. The exhibition, held at the British Council Centre on Stamford Road, showcased 89 artworks and set a record for art sales in Singapore at the time.

PROLOGUE



(From left) Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi at Kallang Airport before their flight to Jakarta on 8 June 1952.

Collection of Liu Kang Family

Liu Kang (刘抗, 1911–2004) spent his early years in Muar, Johor, Malaya, where his father worked in the rubber trade. In 1926, he returned to China to continue his secondary education. He began his formal art education at the Shanghai Art Academy (上海美术专科学校), followed by the Xinhua Art Academy. After graduation, he spent three years in Paris (1929–1932) before returning to Shanghai, where he taught life drawing and oil painting at the Shanghai Art Academy from 1933 to 1937. Liu Kang went back to Muar in 1937 and settled in Singapore after the Second World War. He served as the first postwar president of the Society of Chinese Artists and was a founding member of the Singapore Art Society in 1949.

Chen Chong Swee (陈宗瑞, 1910–1985), also known as Chen Khai (陈楷), enrolled in the Xinhua Art Academy in Shanghai in 1929. Upon graduation, he moved to Malaya, and taught art in Chinese schools in Malacca and Penang before finally settling in Singapore in 1934. The following year, he became one of the founding members of the Society of Chinese Artists. He taught art in several Chinese schools, and in 1951 was appointed head of the Chinese painting department at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts where he taught until 1975. He was also a prolific writer who frequently contributed to newspapers, exhibition catalogues, and magazines published by art associations.

Chen Wen Hsi (陈文希, 1906–1991), the oldest member of the group, began his formal art training in the Shanghai Art Academy in 1926, studying both Chinese and Western painting then later continuing his studies in the Xinhua Art Academy. Upon graduation, he taught in several art schools in China and staged exhibitions from the 1930s to the early 1940s. In 1949, he came to Singapore to present a one-man exhibition, which was a great success. Then-Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald and others such as Liu Kang persuaded him to stay on and settle in Singapore. Chen taught at the Chinese High School from 1950 to 1968 and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts from 1950 to 1959, while also giving private lessons. He retired from teaching in 1968 to devote himself fulltime to his art.

PROLOGUE

Cheong Soo Pieng (鍾四賓 , 1917–1983) was the youngest member of the group. At the age of 16, he began his art training at the Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts (厦門美術專科學校). Upon graduation, he left for Shanghai to further his studies at the Xinhua Art Academy. This was disrupted by the Second Sino-Japanese War in August 1937, and he returned to the Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts to teach. Cheong left China in 1945 amid the political turmoil and limited opportunities to paint with oils. He spent some time in Hong Kong before relocating to Singapore in 1946. He taught at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts from 1947 to 1961 under his former mentor at Xiamen Academy of Fine Arts, Lim Hak Tai. He was the first of the four artists to turn professional.



Exhibition Posters in English and Chinese

Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1951

Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore

B34450878F, B29532980E

The exhibition of works by Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng, held at the British Council Centre from 23 November to 2 December 1951, was the first known joint exhibition of the four artists.

The exhibition garnered public interest as the four were considered among the top artists in Malaya. It was seen as the most successful exhibition in Singapore then as it set a new record for art sales: 38 paintings were sold and 15 paintings commissioned, at a total price of \$9,420, a hefty sum back then.

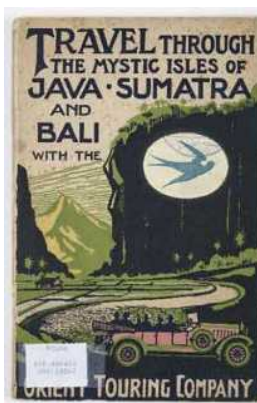
IMAGINING BALI

The enduring image of Bali as an island paradise is the result of a complex interplay of history, perception and reality, involving official promotion, colonial narratives and the Western gaze. This coincided with the rise of leisure travel in the early 20th century, enabled by new technologies.

The Dutch colonial government and its affiliations developed international transportation networks and local infrastructure to improve accessibility to and on the island. They also began promoting Bali as an unspoiled paradise. These efforts were in line with the economic and political objectives of attracting visitors and strengthening Dutch control.

In the 1930s, Bali's reputation as an exceptional locale expanded through the works of artists, photographers, filmmakers, writers and scholars. Picture postcards showed scenic landscapes, temple dances and romanticised images of the “Belles of Bali”, as local women were sometimes referred to. In Singapore, several exhibitions of paintings by European artists portraying Balinese scenes were highly successful.

Unsurprisingly, the allure of Bali intrigued artists in Singapore.



Travel through the Mystic Isles of Java, Sumatra and Bali

Orient Touring Company

Place of publication unknown: Orient Touring Company,

c. 1926

B20343132G

The Dutch colonial government's advertising efforts targeted Western travellers, using evocative language like “Romance of the East, Comfort of the West” and “the Mystic Isles of Java, Sumatra and Bali”. These descriptions appealed to those seeking exotic experiences with Western comforts.

IMAGINING BALI



Bali: A population, le pays, les danses, les fetes, les temples, l'art
(Bali: A population, the country, the dances, the festivals, the temples, the art)

Gregor Krause (1883–1959)

Paris: Editions Dunchartre et Van Buggenhoudt, 1930.

B02949754G



Island of Bali

Miguel Covarrubias (1904–1957) London:

Cassell, 1937 Liu Kang Collection,

National Library Singapore B34442519J

Bali often drew comparisons to French painter Paul Gauguin's (1848–1903) romanticised Tahiti as an “untouched paradise”. Early European travellers, such as Wijnand Otto Jan Nieuwenkamp, Walter Spies and Gregor Krause, played an important role in shaping Bali's image through their art and photography.

Gregor Krause, a German physician and amateur photographer, took over 4,000 photographs on the island, and published nearly 400 of them in *Bali 1912* (1920). His photographs inspired writers, photographers and artists such as Vicki Baum, Walter Spies and Miguel Covarrubias to visit Bali. This is the 1930 French edition of this work.

Travellers' written accounts of Bali shaped the public imagination and understanding of the island. First published in 1937, *Island of Bali* is still considered one of the most authoritative texts on Bali for non-Balinese. The 400-page volume contains extensive details on daily life. Covarrubias lived in Bali in 1930 for nine months, and later returned in 1933 for another year. The text is illustrated with his paintings and drawings as well as photographs taken by his wife, Rosa. This particular copy on display in the exhibition belonged to Liu Kang.

EXPERIENCING BALI

It is not surprising that the four artists were yearning for a new source of creative inspiration in the early 1950s, and Bali, where art and life are inextricably entwined, had long been seductively in the background. In 1952, as they were able to take annual leave, the artists embarked on the trip together.

The story of the seven-week trip emerges as an adventure shaped by serendipity, spontaneity and the kindness of strangers. While the ultimate destination of Bali was fixed, travel arrangements were improvised as they went along. In Java, where they visited Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya, they tapped into a network of old friends, clansmen, relatives and acquaintances who arranged accommodation, advised on practical arrangements, provided transport and organised sightseeing activities.

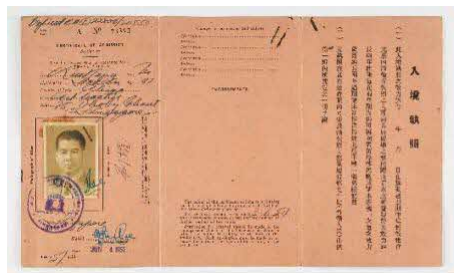
In Bali, strangers once again eased their way. Among them were Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati, head of the Ubud ruling family, Belgian artist Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès and his Balinese wife Ni Pollok, as well as several resident Chinese businessmen. During their stay, the artists visited major sites and enjoyed two week-long drawing retreats.



Certificate of Identity

Singapore, 1952

Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore
B34489882B



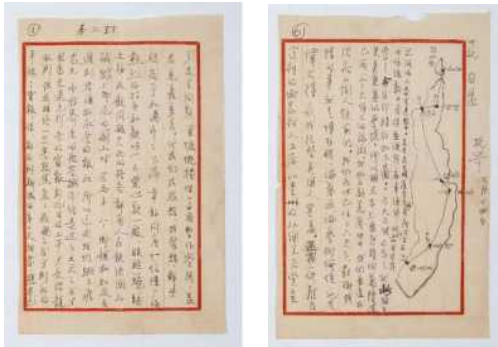
Government of the Colony of Singapore, Certificate of Admission, no. 73393

Singapore, 1952

Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore
B34489881A

Before their trip, the artists each had to obtain a travel document. With the closure of the Chinese consulate in Singapore in January 1950, they were unable to apply for Chinese passports. Instead, they each sought a Certificate of Identity from the British colonial authorities. Due to the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), the colonial authorities tightened controls over movements within and into Malaya during that period. For entry into Malaya, there was an added requirement of a Certificate of Admission. Both of Liu Kang's documents here are dated 4 June 1952, suggesting that the trip came together at the last minute.

EXPERIENCING BALI



***Letter from Liu Kang to his wife Chen Jen Pin,
14 June 1952***

Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore
B344824061

Liu Kang penned a total of nine letters home. These are selected pages from the letter dated 14 June. The letter recounted that, on arrival in Jakarta, the artists were not met by two old friends as expected. As it turned out, a registered letter sent a few days earlier had not arrived. Fortunately, a kind traveller on the same flight helped them find accommodation.

In the same letter, Liu Kang shared their initial plan to first travel through Java then head to Bali. Soon after the letter was sent, however, plans changed due to the upcoming public holiday of Eid al-Fitr, the busiest travel period in Java.

Through the Viewfinder



Immerse yourself in the artists' travels through Liu Kang's photographs, displayed as large projections! This digital interactive exhibit features 20 albums that are faithful to the way Liu Kang organised his images from the trip.

EXPERIENCING BALI

The Artists' Journey

In the context of early 1950s British colonial Singapore, a trip to Bali as an artistic endeavour made sense as access to scenic parts of Malaya became difficult during the Malayan Emergency. Amid these circumstances, the allure of Bali had long been on the artists' minds. With Bali as their destination, the four men flew to Jakarta on 8 June 1952.

During their journey across Java, including stops in Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya, the artists encountered familiar faces and formed new connections, all of whom provided hospitality and valuable advice that shaped their travel plans. In Bali, the artists were also showered with kindness from new acquaintances who facilitated their journey to experience the Balinese culture that inspired much of their future art. By the time they left Bali on 22 July, they had spent almost a month there, created many works on paper, and taken numerous photographs documenting their experiences.

An abridged itinerary of their journey is provided below:

DATE	ITINERARY
8 June	Depart Kallang Airport at 2:45 pm, arrive in Jakarta at 5:10 pm.
10 June	Drive to Bogor Botanical Gardens with friends.
11 June	Sketch at a village near Tanjong Priok. Visit batik factory.
12 June	Return to the batik factory to sketch and take photographs.
13 June	Visit the canal between Jalan Gajah Mada and Jalan Hayam Wuruk, two of the oldest streets in the city where residents bathe and wash clothes.
14 June	Visit Jakarta Museum (now the National Museum of Indonesia).
15 June	Drive to Bandung. Arrive at 2:30pm.
16-17 June	Bandung sightseeing. Visit art faculty at Bandung Institute of Technology; arrange tour with faculty head Ries Mulder for next day. Sketch and photograph in outskirts.
19 June	13-hour train ride to Surabaya.
21-23 June	Stay at businessman and art enthusiast Lie Tjek Kiong's villa in Tretes, near Surabaya. Draw and take photographs there.

EXPERIENCING BALI

DATE	ITINERARY
24 June	Drive 300 km southeast to Banyuwangi.
25 June	Boat to Bali (2.5hrs), land in Gilimanuk, then bus to Singaraja. Overnight in Singaraja.
26 June	Sightseeing accompanied by Denpasar businessman Sie Yok Kie and Liu Kang's cousin Liu Wenbang.
27 June	First day of life drawing—Sie arranges for two Balinese girls as models.
28 June	Arrive in Denpasar, visit Bali Museum. Arrange Ubud stay. Visit Le Mayeur and Ni Pollok in Sanur.
29 June	Le Mayeur introduces Ni Ketut Reneng, a respected <i>legong</i> dancer and teacher. The artists arrange daily life drawing at her home. Le Mayeur and Ni Pollok host lunch.
1–5 July	Life drawing at Ni Ketut Reneng's home; she arranges local girls to enact scenes for the artists.
Early July, before 9 July. Date unknown.	Attend Le Mayeur and Ni Pollok's celebrated commercial entertainments featuring Balinese dance and gamelan performances along with a sumptuous meal.
6–12 July	Sightseeing in Bali.
13–17 July	Stay at the residence of Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati and immerse in the Balinese landscape and way of life.
20 July	Return to Denpasar.
22 July	Depart Bali by air to Surabaya.
23–24 July	Visit Borobodur and Prambanan.
Between 25 – 28 July	Return to Jakarta. Visit Van Heutsz Monument.
28 July	Return to Singapore by air.

THE BALI LEGACY

The culmination of their seven-week journey through Java and Bali was an art exhibition held in Singapore in November 1953. Using the drawings and sketches amassed during the trip, the artists spent 15 months working on paintings for the exhibition. Each artist interpreted the landscapes, people, daily activities and cultural practices in his own preferred medium and unique style. The exhibition attracted many visitors and received critical acclaim. Art collectors responded enthusiastically, acquiring the artists' works for their collections.

The impact of the exhibition extended well beyond the 1950s. The idea of an exhibition based on a sketching trip abroad inspired others in the artistic community to organise such ventures. As the study of Singapore's postwar art history progressed from the 1980s onwards, the 1953 exhibition came to be regarded as a major milestone.



峇厘旅行画集

(Catalogue of the *Bali* exhibition in 1953)

Singapore: Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee,

Chen Wen Hsi and Cheong Soo Pieng, 1953

Liu Kang Collection, National Library Singapore

B34442506F

The exhibition catalogue in Chinese featured 25 works in colour and black & white images and an essay by Liu Kang titled "Trip to Bali" (峇厘行), which shared some of his thoughts on Balinese art and culture.

Chen Wen Hsi mentioned in his oral history interview in 1983 that they had engaged models during the trip, and that he did a memorable portrait of two ladies. Chen's drawing titled "Balinese Girl" (seen above, right) is likely the work he highlighted.

Inspired by Travel

Untold Stories presents a selection of 37 works by the four artists, including several that were first displayed in the 1953 exhibition. The artworks are organised around four themes: Dancers and Musicians; Balinese Women; Landscape and Architecture; and Life in Bali and Java.

It may be hard to imagine today how striking the paintings were then, with novel themes, strong colours and vibrant compositions. The artists had eagerly absorbed many new impressions, finding beauty in everyday life. Now, with the recently discovered photographs taken by Liu Kang, as well as other extant materials, we can trace the inspiration behind many works to specific experiences.

THE BALI LEGACY

Notably, the artists' two residencies in Bali, one hosted by well-known dancer Ni Ketut Reneng and another by the head of Ubud's ruling family, Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati, enabled them to focus on their craft. They engaged with local life and landscapes, and their interactions with the Belgian artist Le Mayeur and his wife Ni Pollok also provided opportunities for life drawing.

Dancers and Musicians

Dance and music have often been highlighted as an integral part of Balinese culture since the early 20th century, and both were common subjects for all four artists. In Bali, the artists watched a local dance performance accompanied by a gamelan orchestra in Le Mayeur's compound, and they engaged dancers as models for life drawing sessions. The two works featured below were likely inspired by one of those sessions.

Images of artworks from the Collection of National Gallery Singapore courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore.



Souri (titled "Dance" in the Bali exhibition catalogue)

Liu Kang
1953
Oil on canvas, 120×70 cm
Gift of the artist's family
Collection of
National Gallery Singapore



Balinese Dancer

Chen Chong Swee
1952
Watercolour on paper, 68×54 cm
Gift of the artist's family
Collection of
National Gallery Singapore
© Family of Chen Chong Swee

Balinese Women

Cheong Soo Pieng was quoted as having "discovered that Balinese women [were] the ideal subject for [him]" after visiting Bali in 1952. Liu Kang had similarly noted in their 1953 exhibition catalogue that besides their physique, the hairstyles of Balinese women also contributed to their beauty, and they, too, contributed to the reconstruction of Balinese society. Beyond the images of bare-breasted Balinese women commonly associated with Bali in the early publications, the artists' works depicted different aspects of Balinese women.

THE BALI LEGACY



Grooming Hair

Chen Chong Swee

1952

Oil on canvas, 120 × 95 cm

Gift of the artist's family

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

© Family of Chen Chong Swee



Bali Beach

Cheong Soo Pieng

1955

Gouache on paper, marouflaged

on hardboard, 50 × 63 cm

Gift of the Loke Wan Tho Collection

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

Life in Bali and Java

With their aesthetic sensitivity, the artists found inspiration in the everyday life and culture of Bali and Java and painted them on canvas. These include various subjects, ranging from a rice pounding demonstration and farmers working in the fields to the boatman ferrying them across the Bali Strait.



Harvest

Chen Chong Swee

1952

Oil on canvas, 47×55 cm

Gift of the artist's family

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

© Family of Chen Chong Swee



The Ferry

Chen Wen Hsi

c. 1952

Oil on canvas, 112.6×85.2 cm

Collection of National Gallery Singapore

THE BALI LEGACY

Landscape and Architecture

In a rare interview with Cheong Soo Pieng regarding the Bali trip, Cheong expressed fascination with Bali's scenery and women. Similarly, in Liu Kang's 1953 article "Trip to Bali", he highlighted Bali's striking landscapes and unique temple architecture. While Balinese temples and terrace rice fields were often featured in publications, the artists were also inspired by other lesser-known Balinese landscapes and architecture. Cheong Soo Pieng's *Brook* and Liu Kang's *Scene in Campuhan, Ubud* have now been identified as depicting the same scenery.



Brook

Cheong Soo Pieng
1953
Oil on canvas, 61 x 79.5 cm
Collection of NUS Museum,
National University of Singapore



Scene in Campuhan, Ubud

Liu Kang
1953
Oil on canvas, 127 x 85.5 cm
Gift of the artist's family
Collection of National Gallery Singapore

THANK YOU FOR VISITING THE EXHIBITION



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more information about the exhibition.



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