Curatorial Practice Today

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Introduction

Curatorial Practice Today

This graduate seminar examined a variety of curatorial issues with respect to exhibitions, collections, conservation, and repatriation. The course united critical theory with practice through consultation of relevant scholarly literature coupled with guest lectures by curators and other museum professionals, study trips, and hands-on projects. Conceived as a platform for understanding the complicated histories of museums, collections, and curatorial practice, this seminar looked toward the future of museums in an increasingly globalized world. The themes covered in the seminar include the politics of display, the internationalization of the art market, museum interventions and institutional critique, rituals of spectatorship, provenance and repatriation, community engagement, and museums and the digital humanities.
Working closely with the course instructors and Johnson Museum curators, students selected artwork(s) to place on display in one of the collection galleries—Asian, European, or visible storage—in order to create a thought-provoking, creative juxtaposition and dialogue with other works of art on view.

Careful consideration of the object’s location, mode of installation, and relationship to other objects in the gallery space, in concert with critical readings and discussions on curatorial practice, were critical for the successful implementation of these interventions. This booklet contains the catalogue entries produced by each of the students for objects that were incorporated into their interventions. For further information and to access copies of student essays detailing the research and rationale behind their curatorial interventions, please visit the course blog at curatorialpracticum.wordpress.com/
What Isn’t Visible in the Visible Storage Gallery?

Louisa Nash, MA student, Archaeology

Hopi
Ceremonial half-mask, 20th century
Leather, horsehair, and pigments
12 x 7 1/4 x 4 1/4 in.
Bequest of B. H. Friedman
2011.084.006

Zuni
Turquoise bear fetish
Various materials including turquoise stone and rawhide
1 3/4 x 2 1/4 in. (4.4 x 5.7 cm)
Gift of Noyes Huston, Class of 1932
72.054

This Hopi ceremonial half-mask is representative of the most elaborately developed aspect of a kachina ceremonial costume. Constructed from several strips of worked leather that were layered and sewn together, this colorfully painted mask is designed to cover the wearer’s face from the hairline down to the region of the mouth (1). Oblong slits allow the wearer visibility during the performance of religious ceremonies. Sections of coarse, dark horse hair are tied along the top of the mask. The colors blue, green, red, yellow, white, and black appear upon this mask and are all indicative of particular directions in traditional Hopi society. The painted designs—consisting of small circles, larger half circles, and straight parallel and perpendicular lines—all contain symbolic information that is only fully understood by those initiated into the kachina religion.

The mask itself is representative of the deity and ancestral spirits, or kachina, that return to Hopi villages from December to July during the official kachina season to bring rain to the Hopi people. As there are over 200 different kachinas in the Hopi religion, masks play the integral role of defining the essence and personality of each individual kachina (2).

As members of a matrilineal society, Hopi women maintain many rights and, with their ability to produce new life through birth, embody concepts of sacredness. Men, too, express sacredness, but through the performance of religious ceremonies. Due to these gender roles, only boys and men are initiated into kachina societies and are the only members of the tribe that wear the costumes and masks of the kachina spirits (3). It is believed that, while wearing these masks and costumes during religious ceremonies, a performer can set aside his identity and become the spirit that he is representing (4).

There are several variations of masks used during kachina ceremonies, such as the half mask, face mask, and helmet mask. Since the mask defines the kachina spirit, it is believed that uninitiated Hopi should not have contact with or knowledge about these masks (5). Similar to Zuni stone fetishes, it is important that these masks receive proper care and offerings.
The Pueblo religions’ emphasis on secrecy regarding religious objects and knowledge is often attributed to the belief that knowledge should be kept secret because it is powerful (6). For religious knowledge to be used correctly, people must first be initiated and properly educated into Pueblo religions. The appropriate use of religious knowledge enables it to remain powerful and sacred among these Pueblo cultures.

It is this same emphasis on discretion concerning religious objects that has prohibited the display of three presently stored Zuni fetishes, which were accessioned in 1972 by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. During consultation with members of the Zuni in 1995, the Johnson Museum, working with the Zuni and Cornell’s American Indian Program, agreed to remove these items from display. The concealment of these objects complies with the stipulations of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the wishes of the Pueblo of Zuni, who—regarding the fetishes as powerful objects in which living spirits reside—believe that it is inappropriate for the uninitiated to view the stone fetishes through public display.

Notes and References

2. Glenna Nielsen-Grimm, Mesoamerican Influences in the Southwest: Kachinas, Macaws, and Feathered Serpents (Utah: Museum of Peoples and Cultures Popular Series #4, Brigham Young University, 2008).
5. Hieb, 1994:27
The sculpture is a good representative of Roman portraiture in the first half of the second century AD. Trajan’s chest includes both breasts and the whole width of his shoulders. Generally, the width of the shoulders and chest were minimal in previous styles of portraiture. The bust rests upon a pedestal because these portraits of the emperors were set up in public places throughout the empire for consumption by the public. By the time of Trajan the empire had become vast so the portrait busts, along with imperial coinage, functioned as a way for the public to know who the emperor was at the time.

Trajan’s facial depiction is of particular importance in this piece. His face, although showing signs of his age, is smooth and clean-shaven. Trajan’s iconography serves as a contrast to the iconography of the previous Emperor Nerva (30-98 AD, Roman Emperor from 96-98 AD). Unlike Nerva (Figure 2), Trajan’s face in this sculpture is much fuller. This can be seen in his cheeks as well as in his wider mouth. Trajan’s forehead is not as high as Nerva’s forehead. Facial distinctions between Trajan and Nerva are intentional. Generally, emperors maintained the iconographic traditions of their predecessors. However, Trajan attempted to align himself with earlier emperors. He did not want to be associated with the unsuccessful and short reign of Nerva.
T rajan’s hairstyle is quite different than his recent predecessors and provides clues as to which emperors he attempted to emulate. It is curly and arranged in comma-shaped locks over his forehead. This hairstyle is most like that of Augustus (63 BC–14 AD, Roman Emperor from 27 BC–14 AD) and the Julio-Claudian emperors. Trajan thus wanted to associate himself specifically with successful and noteworthy emperors. His association with Trajan’s iconography is reminiscent of Roman Republican iconography.

The head of Augustus (Figure 3) combined the heroic ideals of Classical and Hellenistic portraiture. This association with the iconography of Trajan also recalls Greek iconography as opposed to his predecessors who created images that were more in line with Roman Republican iconography. Augustus’ portraits emphasize his youth, beauty, and benevolence and the Julio-Claudian emperors after him maintained this style, emphasizing their loyalty to the imperial dynasty through the continuation of this style, depicted in an unidealized manner, showing signs of their age.

T rajan’s portraiture creates a new style in which elements from Augustan portraiture and Republican portraiture are combined.

Notes and References
In this woodcut, the sacred heart contains within it five female figures who embody qualities of Christ himself; they are described in the text that accompanies the image as innocent, respectful, steadfast, chaste, and immaculate. The women defend the walls of the heart from imposters, who signify their opposites.

While the text claims the male antagonists resemble the tormenters of Christ himself, the tortures they inflict more widely represent the generic tools of early martyrdoms. The torture instruments of the wheel, hatchet, fire, and sexual temptation are not scripturally attestable in the crucifixion of Christ, but they were common in stories of early Christian martyrs. The text further guides the allegorical interpretation by explaining how the heart itself is affixed to a cross and enveloped by a halo, enclosing the female figures within.

The image occupies the whole page, immediately establishing a visual prominence on the page and signaling the necessity for both textual and visual engagement. The woodcut illustrated here bridges a gap between the visual literacies required to view the images on the walls of the gallery and the...
textual literacies required to view the adjacent manuscripts in this cabinet. Text and image function together to encourage a personal interpretative meditation on the sacred heart. Rather than a graphic and sensationalist imagining of Christ’s suffering as is common in representations of the sacred heart, this image forces viewers to interpret it rationally in order to gain spiritual benefit. Consider, for example, a woodcut from the British Library in which the woodcut depicts a bleeding heart strung up on a Crucifix, which also bleeds (Figure 1). The woodcut is glued to parchment pages that, strikingly, are also red with hand-drawn drops of blood.

The vernacular German text on Christ’s life, along with a range of accompanying images that demand internal meditation, suggest the viewing experience was an intensely personal one. Together, Wolgemut and Fridolin experiment with textual and visual literacies, interpretation, and allegory to guide their readers understanding of the biblical story.
Henry Charles Andrews (British, active 1794–1830)
*Erica grandiflora, botanical study*, ca. 1800
Color engraving on wove paper
14 3/8 x 10 in. (36.5 x 25.4 cm)
Gift of Harold L. Bache (Class of 1916) and Mrs. Bache
62.3137

Condition: This engraving is in good condition. The paper is clean and there are no marks or discolorations on the page. The upper right hand corner has a slight crease.

Provenance: Bache collection until received by Cornell. Prior provenance unknown.

Henry Charles Andrews was a British botanical illustrator who practiced between 1794 and 1830. Flouting convention, he not only performed his own sketches from life, but also prepared the printing plates and hand-colored the illustrations. Most famed botanists of and before his time would have hired several artists to produce images under direction, often hiring one artisan for each step of the printmaking process.

This engraving depicts one of a series of African Cape heathers that were introduced to Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. Andrews illustrates the entire *Erica grandiflora* in the center of the image, then invites his viewers to look more closely as he illustrates magnified views of the parts of the flower below. The trend towards magnification for identification purposes follows van Leeuwenhoek’s late 17th century discoveries using a rudimentary optical microscope, as well as Carl Linnaeus’ 1751 recommendations in *Philosophica Botanica*.

Andrews illustrated many of these *Ericas* from specimens in public and private gardens, including a nursery owned by his father-in-law, publishing his work in the five-volume series *Coloured Engravings of Cape Heaths*. The growing population of amateur gardeners in Britain seeking affordable references to the latest exotic plants would have valued this type of guide. Much criticism was levied during this period towards charlatan botanists who exploited public interest in botanical illustration with their poorly observed and hastily reproduced images.

Andrews himself was subject to critiques of missing details and gaudy use of color, and defends himself on the title pages of his publications by emphasizing his creation of his images directly from life. While the degree and sophistication of detail in Andrews’ work may not equal that of more famed botanists of the 18th century, such as Joseph Banks’ elaborate but never widely published *Florilegium* (Figure 1), his exhaustive study of the *Ericas* is widely admired. The entire text of several of Andrews’ volumes of Cape Heaths may be found online.
Notes and References


Flemish, Ghent-Bruges School
Illuminated manuscript page with naturalistic border of birds, insects, and flowers, ca. 1500-1510
Tempera and gold on vellum
8 1/4 x 5 3/4 in. (21 x 14.6 cm)
Acquired through the Membership Purchase Fund, 77.089.002

Condition: The page is delicate but stable. There are light brown smudges on the lower right hand edge of the page, but they do not obscure the illumination. The page has not received any conservation treatment from the dealer or since arriving in the Johnson Museum collection.

Provenance: German collections until 1921 sale in Frankfurt am Main from Rudolph Busch collection. Rebound during 18th-19th century; all miniatures removed by 19th century. Acquired by Johnson Museum from Zargar, Inc. in 1978.

This leaf from an illuminated manuscript is written in formal Gothic text with large decorative initials. The text contains two occurrences of the familiar intercession for the deceased, “Requiem eternam dona eis domine. Et lux perpetua lucreat eis (Grant them eternal rest, Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them).” Other prayers mentioning the dead are found on the verso of the page. This leaf may have come from the Office of the Dead, a service found in most Books of Hours.

The border around the text is illustrated with images of flowers, flowerbuds, leaves, birds, snails, caterpillars, and butterflies. Despite the shadows these flora and fauna cast on the page, they are not represented on a realistic scale. Although in a few cases butterflies appear about to land on flowers, the creatures in this border generally do not interact with one another. They seem instead to be scattered around the text like gems set in a gold frame.
The volume may even have come from the same workshop as Grimani Breviary. Comparing this leaf with border work in the Grimani Breviary (Figure 1), some pages show similarities in the scale and shadows of the insects. Other pages show less stylistic overlap in the border illumination, but do show some similarity in the treatment of the decorative capitals (Figure 2). Whether the two manuscripts have a common origin unclear, but the detailed brushwork in the leaf border is very fine, particularly in the bodies of the birds.

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These plants and animals are a very common subject for the borders of text and miniatures in Books of Hours. In the case of this manuscript page, it could be argued that the border figures are emblems of rebirth—the butterfly and caterpillar being obvious symbols, the birds and plants alluding to their inanimate origins in eggs and seeds, and the snails perhaps as spontaneously generated. Another possibility is that the butterflies symbolize the human soul, uplifted and purified through its Christian devotion. However, these figures appear in such a wide range of contexts in other Books of Hours that they may be best interpreted simply as emblems of God’s glory throughout creation. The Book of Hours that once contained this page was made in a workshop in Gent or Bruges where Masters Alexander and Simon Bening and Gerard Horenbout are believed to have worked, among others.
These engravings depicting snakes come from two important scholarly manuscripts of the 17th and 18th centuries. The first comes from Athanasius Kircher’s *Arca Noë*, a study of the Biblical story of the great flood and the survival of Noah’s family and the animals of the world on the Ark. The second is reproduced from Carl Linnaeus’ famous *Systema naturae*, a taxonomic system for naming and classifying the animals, plants, and minerals of the known world.
Formally, these engravings appear very similar. In each, the snakes are laid out horizontally from end to end and stacked vertically down the page. Both illustrations represent their subjects naturalistically and emphasize distinctions between types. Indeed, both illustrations come from works concerned with cataloguing the entirety of the natural world, albeit for very different purposes. Kircher's fantastic yet theologically acceptable account of the Ark is, in a way, a forerunner of the later Linnean enterprise that sent naturalists around the world to record and organize their findings. Linnaeus' correspondence indicates a familiarity with some of Kircher's work, and one wonders if he knew of this image.

One distinct difference between the illustrations is their ordering of snakes by size: Kircher's snakes are arranged from largest to smallest, while Linnaeus' snakes and related creatures are arranged from smallest to largest. In Kircher's case, he uses system that places the heaviest creatures first in boarding the Ark, so perhaps the snakes are illustrated in the order of their embarking (1). On the other hand, Linnaeus's system places importance on the most complex organisms. Perhaps the Linnaean illustration is meant to indicate progression from the simplest, least admirable species to the most developed. After all, neither Kircher nor Linnaeus was particularly fond of snakes. Kircher believed they were included on the Ark for three crucial reasons: to remind mankind of their Fall in Eden, to contribute to the cyclic nature of life through their affiliation with terrestrial putrescence, and to provide substances used in medicine (2). His dislike is evident in his associations towards snakes. In later editions of the Systema Naturae, Linnaeus referred to the class Amphibia, in which he included snakes, as “terrible and vile animals (3). Still, both scholars acknowledged a place for snakes in the natural world order.

Notes and References

2. Godwin, 28.
The Modern Ancient Tablet

Alex Marko, MA student, Archaeology

Babylonian
Dūr-AbiEšuh (Iraq), ca. 17th century BC
Cuneiform tablet, silver (ransom-money), oil, and a donkey given to a merchant for a business trip, ca. 1626-1595 BC
Clay
8.6 x 4.8 x 2.9 cm
The Jonathan and Jeannette Rosen Cuneiform Tablet Collection, Cornell University
CUNES 51-01-001

Ancient Babylonian texts often take the form of business accounts, such as this cuneiform tablet documenting the provisioning of a merchant. The text, written in Akkadian through the use of Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform, documents the supplies given to a merchant from the city of Ibrat by a nešakkum, or local leader. The merchant was given oil, a donkey, and a large amount of silver to barter for the release of the nešakkum’s kidnapped son and to trade for bitumen, an ancient construction material similar to asphalt. The price paid for the ransom is high for the period, likely owing to the high status of the captured individual. The tablet explicitly refers to the site of Dūr-Abiešuh, though the exact location of the site is currently unknown. Researchers suspect the site was a fort at the confluence of the Tigris River and a large system of manmade canals.

CUNES 51-01-001 has undergone a variety of modes of study both traditional and technologically advanced. Karel Van Lerberghe and Gabriela Voet studied the tablet by hand for academic publication in 2007. The tablet was transcribed by hand and photographed using a technique refined by Dr. David Owen of Cornell University in which the object’s surface is coated in ammonium chloride in order to increase the contrast of inscriptions on its surface. Van Lerberghe also created a digital recording of the tablet using the Leuven Light Dome system. This system utilizes an array of LED lights to take photos of the object surface with many known light sources, which are then used to create stereo photometric reconstructions. The Leuven Light Dome system accurately reproduces the complex surface of the inscribed tablet and allows for both photorealistic and enhanced representations of the object. Digital models of cuneiform tablets not only help in the reading and translation of the original objects, but also create robust records of rare and fragile artifacts that can be easily shared and studied around the world. Advances in the recordation, publication, and sharing of cuneiform tablets are essential given the small number of adequately trained scholars to study them, the expense and difficulty associated with direct study of the objects, and the political situation surrounding objects originally sourced from recent and active conflict zones.
Mesopotamian, 4th millennium BC

Bulla
Unbaked clay
Dia. 55 cm
The Jonathan and Jeannette Rosen Cuneiform Tablet Collection, Cornell University
CUNES 52-11-031

Bullae are one of humanity's earliest accounting technologies. This bulla, created in the Pre-Sargonic period of ancient Mesopotamia, is a sealed clay envelope that holds tokens representing goods involved in trade and transactions. Tokens were originally sent along with goods to be traded in the open, but were eventually sealed inside unbaked clay bullae that prevented tampering. Upon arrival, the bullae would be broken open and the number and type of goods in the shipment compared against the tokens inside. Interior tokens could be marked themselves to indicate certain types or numbers of trade goods. The bullae went unbaked as the heat of a kiln would expand the air trapped inside the sealed vessel and cause it to explode. Unbaked clay is less hardy and therefore many surviving bullae are broken or incomplete.

The rarity of bullae surviving sealed and intact means that researchers would be remiss in destroying them to see their contents. Modern scanning technologies, however, allow investigation of the interior space and tokens contained within this bulla without harming the original object. Though currently unpublished, this bulla has had its interior mapped using Computed Tomography (CT) scanning. In this process, undertaken by Dr. David Owen in conjunction with other faculty and graduate students at Cornell University, a series of x-rays are taken of the sealed bulla.

Each x-ray represents a single horizontal section of the bulla and a computer recombines these sections to create a 3D digital map of the bulla and its contents. Digital models can be studied virtually or can be converted to shapefiles that in turn produce 3D prints. This process allows researchers to see the inner workings of the bulla and to, potentially, decipher the number and type of trade goods it was meant to record. Nondestructive methods of interior investigation are safe for artifacts and provide a more complete record than can typically be recovered from fractured or incomplete bullae. CUNES 52-11-031 is of an unclear provenience, yet can still contribute greatly to our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian life and trade.

Natasha Gangjee, Hod Lipson, David I. Owen, and Evan Malone
3D prints of cuneiform tablets, 2008
3D prints in chlorinated polyvinyl chloride
Department of Near Eastern Studies, Cornell University

Digital representations and reconstructions of cuneiform tablets are increasingly important tools for study and preservation. One such digital interpretive tool is the .cun file format, created using the Leuven Light Dome and the PLD (Portable Light Dome) viewing application. These tools were developed by Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) in Belgium as a means of studying cuneiform texts. The project specifically aims to fully unlock the texts’ potential for study by all interested parties and so the software is available as freeware. As part of the efforts to expand the online database of cuneiform tablets available for study Karel Van Lerbergh of KU Leuven worked with the light dome system while documenting a portion of the Jonathan and Jeannette Rosen Cuneiform Tablet Collection at Cornell University for academic publication. Documentation with the light dome creates a rich record of cuneiform tablets and other archaeological materials that can be easily and instantly shared the world over.

The Portable Light Dome system operates by surrounding artifacts in a hemisphere of 256 LED lights with a camera mounted at center. Cuneiform tablet CUNES 51-01-001 was placed within the dome
and photographed with a number of distinct lighting schemes, which are processed by computer and recombined into a single file. This file serves as a stereo photogrammetric reconstruction through which the intricate details of the tablet’s surface can be rendered and reconstructed in a variety of ways.

The display present in this installation shows photorealistic, enhanced shading, and enhanced surface curvature photos of the tablet surface that utilize a near infinite number of reconstructed lighting angles as needed by researchers. The process of relighting an object’s surface is at the core of study of cuneiform tablets, which often only become clearly legible through manipulation and adjustments to lighting that make the small marks of cuneiform text visible.

Digital reconstructions of the original object surface as a line drawing, a 3D model, and an artificial color slope map are also included in the display. These many options of imaging, viewing, and reconstructing CUNES 51-01-001 create unparalleled access to the artifact’s surface without ever needing to directly handle the one of a kind object.
In some cases handling an object in the real world is an irreplaceable experience. Cuneiform tablets, for example, impart a certain sense of their form and function through haptic interactions. The tablets, however, are rare and often-delicate artifacts that are best preserved by minimal handling. One means of recreating the haptic experience of direct interaction with original artifacts is the creation of 3D printed replicas.

Cornell Professors Dr. David Owen and Dr. Hod Lipson, along with students Natasha Gangjee and Evan Malone, created replicas of a number of tablets in the Jonathan and Jeannette Rosen Cuneiform Tablet Collection. The prints included in The Modern Ancient Tablet represent a single tablet that was digitized and printed in chlorinated polyvinyl chloride at both original and double scale. The team behind the 3D replicas has also experimented with other materials that more closely mimic the color and texture of the original artifact.

3D scans of original tablets were created using the NextEngine desktop laser scanner, processed using the ScanStudio HD software package, and then sent to 3D printers for creation. The scanning and recreation of cuneiform tablets is meant to systematically increase the number of rare cuneiforms available for scholarship and to refine recording techniques toward increasingly higher standards of resolution and overall similarity to originals. Such reproductions enable low-cost yet accurate replicas to be produced and shared for study and aesthetic appreciation. Preserving the haptic experience of real-world objects marks a new step in the preservation of archaeological materials. A richer and more immersive record of these materials may enable innovative new scholarship and help bridge the gap between the experience of researchers and the broader public.

Cuneiform Tablet Collection. The prints included in The Modern Ancient Tablet represent a single tablet that was digitized and printed in chlorinated polyvinyl chloride at both original and double scale. The team behind the 3D replicas has also experimented with other materials that more closely mimic the color and texture of the original artifact.
Cheong Soo Pieng
Singaporean, 1917–1983
*Malay Fishing Village*, 1957 or 1958
Ink and colors on rice paper
22 1/2 x 43 in. (57.2 x 109.2 cm)
Gift of Dolores D. and Clifton R. Wharton, Jr.
99.074.002

Condition: The painting is in fair condition but the material is fragile if the painting is taken out of the frame. The colors are fading and the color of the rice paper is slightly deteriorating.

*Malay Fishing Village* is one of Cheong Soo Pieng’s early works which fuses and incorporates the long tradition of delicacy and craftsmanship of Chinese ink painting, the influence of the Western aesthetic and artistic practice, and most importantly, the locality of Southeast Asia. This daring and remarkable pictorial structure depicting the everyday life in Nanyang, a Chinese term for Southeast Asia and the South Seas, is considered to be a significant innovation in the 1950s which shaped the subsequent development of modern art in Singapore (1).

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Tracing the Foreign Channel and Influence: Cheong Soo Pieng and Modern Art in Singapore

Anissa Rahadiningtyas, PhD student, Art History
Compared to other Soo Pieng’s paintings that employ similar techniques and media as in the painting *Untitled (Kelong Scene)* (1961) (Figure 1), which is more well-executed and developed, *Malay Fishing Village* shows Soo Pieng’s early experimentation and incorporation of Southeast Asian particularities into his previous trainings and influences. *Malay Fishing Village* was painted with ink and colors on a 57.2 x 109.2 cm rice paper with horizontal format. It is surrounded by a light-colored wooden frame. Overall, the composition of this painting emphasizes its horizontality with a long thin brush line signifying a river in the foreground of the painting, rows of stilted houses in the middle ground, and a horizon in the background. Cheong Soo Pieng utilized the structure of the houses, the electric tower, the lamp post, the trees, and the cloth hanger to balance his composition. He drew his figures in a simplistic outline with no discernible face. Although his depiction of the clothes, the songkok or the hat that the men wear, and the shape of the women’s hair that resembles a bun as well as their sarong, seem like a simplification or generalization of the realities of Malay people, all of these inform the viewer of the supposed identity of his subject matter.

His brushstrokes are almost sketch-like and rough. It has an unfinished and raw quality, especially from the dry brush technique and ink washes inside his thick and thin outlines. In several spots we can see the colored squares in red, blue, and grey juxtaposed strategically within the painting, providing an interesting contrast and cubistic nuances to the typical monochromatic Chinese ink landscapes. Soo Pieng’s visual strategies made the transition from the Chinese landscape painting into cubist painting seems to flow naturally. As a result, the cubistic elements in this painting look both prominent yet subtle.

Cheong Soo Pieng, a native Fujian from Xiamen, migrated to Singapore in 1946 after he finished his art education in Xiamen and Shanghai where he was exposed to the influence of Western

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Figure 1. Cheong Soo Pieng, *Untitled (Kelong Scene)*, 1961. Ink and colors on paper. 91.9 x 44.6 cm. Collection of NHB. (Cheong Soo Pieng: Visions of Southeast Asia, plate 242)
practice. The return of a new stream of artists and intellectuals from the West and Japan at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries accelerated the dissemination of Western thought and artistic practice in China through the establishment of art academies, including those in Shanghai. A number of artists who migrated to Singapore are connected to Shanghai and its art academies. Soo Pieng’s experimentation with cubism intensified after his arrival in Singapore in 1946 as an effort to “resolve the artistic problem of representing space on a two-dimensional flat plane” (2).

His initial experiment was first manifested in the figural distortion and the creation of ambiguous spaces from multiple viewpoints. The artist later moved toward experimentation with pictorial formats of Chinese ink paintings, such as the hanging and handscroll formats. The combination of Chinese handscroll format and Western notions of color-theory and composition, as well as the incorporation of local subject, highlights the important aspects of Soo Pieng’s contribution to the development of the Nanyang Style (3).

Initially, the formative period of modern art in Singapore was subjected to the tension between Chinese nationalism and Nanyang regionalism – the conception of the identity of Nanyang or Southeast Asia as a different entity from mainland Chinese (4). It was after the arrival of later Chinese émigré artists including Cheong Soo Pieng and his contemporaries after the World War II that the formulation of the Nanyang Style began to take shape (5).

Notes and References

3. Seng Yu Jin and Grace Tng, ibid, 123.
5. Other prominent figures in the formative period of modern art in Singapore who associates with Cheong Soo Pieng are Liu Kang (graduated from the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts, continued to study in Paris between 1928 and 1933 and was president for the Society of Chinese Artists from 1946-58), Chen Chong Swee (graduated from the Xinhua Academy of Fine Arts in 1931, arrived in Singapore in 1946), and Chen Wen Hsi (graduated from both the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts and Xinhua Academy of Fine Art in the late 1920s and early 1930s, arrived in Singapore in 1947, met Liu Kang and Chen Chong Swee at Xinhua).