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Author(s):

Sarena Abdullah

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# “A Bridge between the Two Worlds”: Exhibitions of Malaysian Art at the Commonwealth Institute

Article by **Sarena Abdullah**

WORD COUNT:4,575



## Introduction

In recent years, calls for a more globalised art history and the decolonisation of the Euramerican-centric approach of the field has encouraged new attitudes and approaches, especially the impact of artistic exchange in different parts of the world. As an area of research, the history of modern and contemporary art is relatively new in Malaysia. It has continued to be pursued within the construct of its national boundary, despite the long transnational history of the Malay Archipelago. For centuries, this area saw high migration and mobility that reached its height during the colonial era, as signified by its thriving port cities---namely Penang, Singapore, and Malacca. With the end of the Second World War and the retreat of colonial powers, young nations started to sprout in the region. By the 1960s, the nation-building project in Malaysia saw the establishment of the National Art Gallery along with several other national institutions. As the development of Malaysian modern art and art writing has always been nation-centric in nature, transnational interactions and mobility, either by people or by objects, tends to be disregarded in the writing of Malaysian modern art. Focusing on Malaysian art at the Commonwealth Institute in mid-twentieth-century London, and the cultural transactions it produced, the research presented here seeks to fill the lacunae left behind by this neglect. Looking particularly at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia and the Commonwealth Institute in London, this feature is grounded in archival research that will illustrate and discuss the links between London and Kuala Lumpur during the 1960s and 1970s, through several exhibitions of Malaysian art organised at or by the Commonwealth Institute. The discussion of these materials will situate them within the longer history of artistic engagement between London and Kuala Lumpur.

In Malaysian art and art history, the activities of Malaysian artists and art institutions in the 1950s and 1960s remain under-examined. In 2017, the London, Asia Research Award allowed me to conduct fieldwork in a variety of British archives that is important in situating and understanding the early developments of Malaysian modern art, especially in the context of early Malayan/Malaysian exhibitions in London during that period of time. Although the unexamined and complex relations between Kuala Lumpur and London, and their impact on Malaysian art, were the main objective of my research, the actual direct impact of these exhibitions in London or to Britain in general and vice versa was indeed very limited. Having said that, this does not mean such examination is futile. Within this feature, I present research findings connecting personalities and the exhibitions in question to the larger context of Kuala Lumpur and post-war London. From the arts education attained by Malaysian artists in Britain, to the role played by Frank Sullivan, an Australian who helped establish the National Art Gallery and the early

international exhibitions under the Commonwealth Institute—it is possible to expand our understanding of these connections, relationship, and encounters.



Figure 1

*National Art Gallery, Malaysia*, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Sarena Abdullah.

The National Art Gallery of Malaysia was established on 28 August 1958 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of Malaysia, a year after Malaya's Independence (fig. 1). Members of the Malayan Arts Council, headed by the late Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard and Frank Sullivan, who was Tunku Abdul Rahman's press secretary at that time, were the first to moot the idea of having a national art gallery.<sup>1</sup> As well as the establishment of the National Art Gallery (NAG), the other forms of post-Independence national projects during the 1950s and 1960s included the establishment of the National Monument, the Parliament House, the National Museum, the National Mosque (Masjid Negara), the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the Stadium Negara, and the Merdeka Stadium.<sup>2</sup>

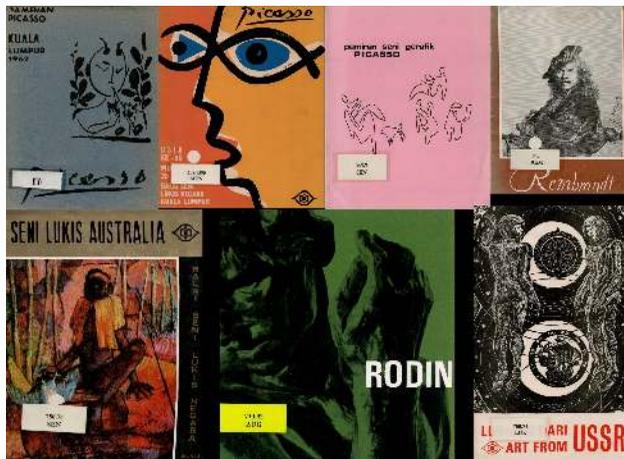


Figure 2

*National Art Gallery, Malaysia exhibition covers*. Digital image courtesy of National Art Gallery, Malaysia.

The international approach of the National Art Gallery from its outset is unsurprising, and this ethos is evident within the history of its very establishment. Among the people who were involved with the formation of the National Art Gallery were Frank Sullivan, Kington Loo,

Ungku Abdul Aziz, P.G. Lim, Peter Harris, and Mubin Sheppard. They later served as the first board of trustees. If we were to examine the institution and exhibition history of the National Art Gallery, we cannot fail to notice that in the first twenty years of its formation, the National Art Gallery had organised a significant number of international art exhibitions as seen through these catalogue covers (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> These exhibitions were usually organised through the collaboration of various high commissioners, ministries of cultures, foundations, and even art councils. Indirectly, these various exhibitions reflected a phenomenon described by Krishen Jit: “the notion of the modern in the visual arts had arisen in the national consciousness”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, we can observe that the exhibitions on Malaysian arts were interspersed with international exhibitions—denoting Malaysia’s standing as a nation among other nations as early as the onset of Independence. Although Malaysia was a very young nation then, the internationalising approach by the National Art Gallery was commendable despite the state of the country, which had just undergone a period of upheaval and turmoil due to the Malayan Emergency from 1948 until 1960. One aspect of such internationalisation could be seen in the NAG’s participation and collaboration with the Commonwealth Institute in London.

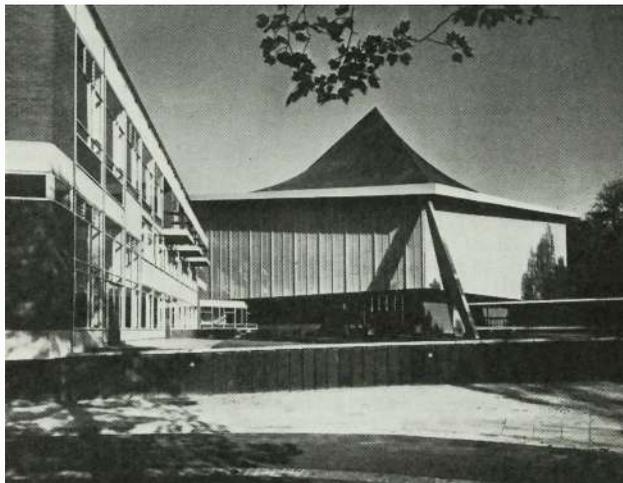


Figure 3

Kenneth Bradley, ‘The New Commonwealth Institute (exterior)’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 111, no. 5081 (1963): 403–411. Digital image courtesy of The Royal Society of Arts.

The Commonwealth Institute was established in South Kensington, London, as the Imperial Institute in 1888. However, it was only in 1958 that the Imperial Institute changed its name to the Commonwealth Institute, and in 1962, moved its premises nearby to Kensington High Street—in a striking new building, designed by Robert Matthew Johnson-Marshall & Partners (RMJM). The aim of the Commonwealth Institute was “to foster the interest of the Commonwealth by information and education services designed to promote among its peoples a wider knowledge of one another and a greater understanding of the Commonwealth itself”.<sup>5</sup> One of the main sections of the Commonwealth Institute was the Art Gallery. The Art Gallery aligned with the general policy of the institute itself, which was:

*to give promising, as well as better known, artists, in other parts of the Commonwealth opportunities for showing their work in England at a minimum cost to themselves, and to make the Institute gallery the natural home for Commonwealth art in London.*<sup>6</sup>

As Malaya gained its Independence in 1957, and Malaysia was later formed in 1963, the Commonwealth link was seen favourably by the anglophile first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. Although the development of modern Malaysian art started in the early twentieth century, it was in the 1950s, with the establishment of the National Art Gallery, that various international exhibitions were organised, and among them those by the Commonwealth Institute itself.

Frank Sullivan became the secretary of the first working committee and then a member of the board of trustees of the National Art Gallery—a position that he held until 1971. It can be easily inferred that the close relationship between Tunku and Frank Sullivan, who was his press secretary at that time, could have resulted in the favourable establishment of the gallery at 109, Jalan Ampang, right in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, where it was adjacent to Malaysia's first parliament building.<sup>7</sup> Sullivan's role as a very passionate collector who supported Malaysian artists in the nation's early years also cannot be denied. In fact, Sullivan himself donated some of the first National Art Gallery collections.

In regard to Sullivan's art interests and lack of art background, Neil Manton has observed, *There was nothing in Frank's background to suggest that he was particularly interested in the visual arts and his sister was at loss to explain it. Perhaps it was simply the appeal to his administrative sense of being "The Secretary" of various organisations which led him to join up with the local art groups.*<sup>8</sup>

Sullivan's roles and influence in the new Malayan/Malaysian administration cannot be disclaimed. The years working with Tunku were described by Sullivan as "the hardest and yet the happiest years of my life."<sup>9</sup> Sullivan travelled extensively with Tunku Abdul Rahman, including to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences in London a few times. Other visits included state visits to Brunei, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, West Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, Canada, the United States, Pakistan, and India. He also accompanied the second prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak, to Thailand and the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (the king) to India, Pakistan, Thailand, and Japan.<sup>10</sup>

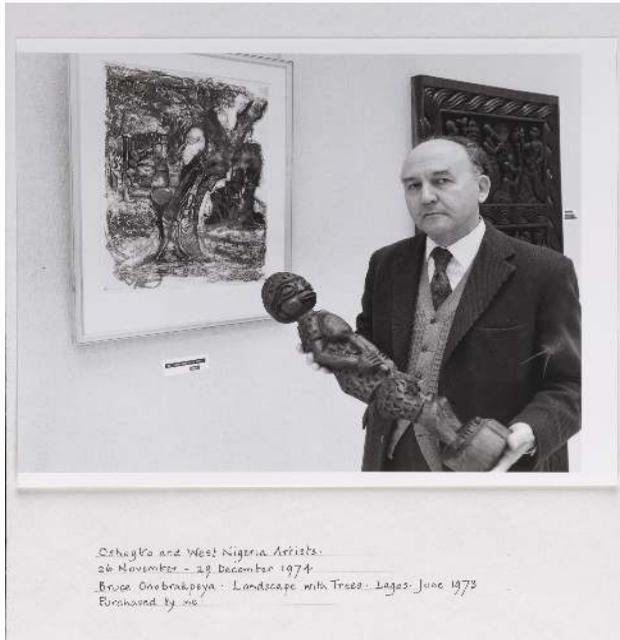


Figure 4

*Donald Bowen at Oshogbo and West Nigeria Artists exhibition, 26 November–29 December 1974, photograph. Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library (RCMS 360\_3). Digital image courtesy of Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library.*



Figure 5

*Donald Bowen, photograph. Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library. Digital image courtesy of Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library.*

Donald Bowen joined the Imperial Institute in 1953 as the exhibitions officer, and became curator of the art gallery in 1962. Although Bowen trained as an artist and was a highly accomplished draughtsman, he devoted 25 years of his life to the Commonwealth Institute until his retirement in 1979. During that time, Bowen organised more than 200 exhibitions of paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, crafts, and other media, while working with established and emerging Commonwealth artists, many of whom had never exhibited in Britain before. It was Bowen's responsibility to plan the artistic programme for the gallery and to design every single show. Numerous international artists applied to show their work at the Institute as it was immediately recognised as a prestigious home for Commonwealth art.<sup>11</sup>

As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed in bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, Donald Bowen, the curator of the Commonwealth Institute, was the one who introduced the artists of the Commonwealth to the London public. For Malaysia itself, during his position, he organised exhibitions for Chuah Thean Teng (1959 and 1965), Lee Joo For (1960), Abdul Latiff Mohidin (1971), and a few others.

## Commonwealth Art Today, 1962–1963

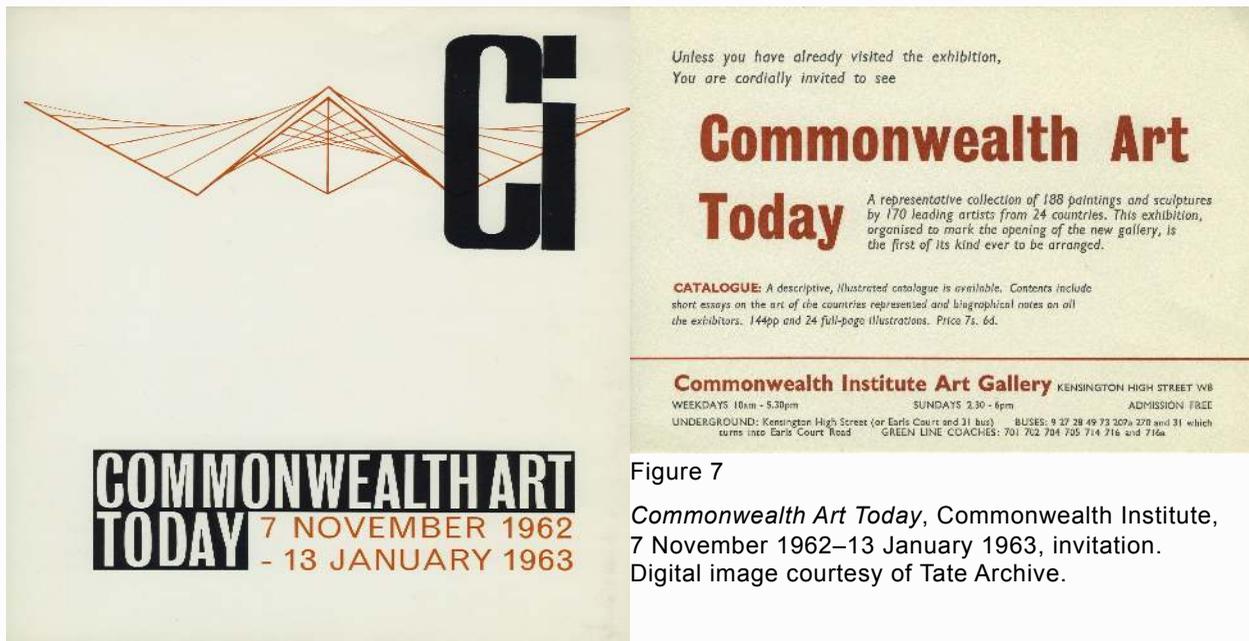


Figure 6

*Commonwealth Art Today*, Commonwealth Institute, 7 November 1962–13 January 1963, catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Figure 7

*Commonwealth Art Today*, Commonwealth Institute, 7 November 1962–13 January 1963, invitation. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

For a young nation, Malaysia's participation in exhibitions such as *Commonwealth Art Today* in 1962, the Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow in 1965, and the *Malaysian Art* exhibition in 1966 marked an important point in early Malaysian art history. These exhibitions denoted Malaysia's participation internationally, which was not limited to the Commonwealth Institute, but included other European cities as well. Although Malaysia's participation was quite limited in comparison to other Commonwealth countries such as Australia and Canada, it must be noted that to participate in an exhibition abroad at that time was very rare and therefore was regarded as a privilege by Malaysian artists. All of these exhibitions were held or organised by the Commonwealth Institute and highly supported by the Malayan/Malaysian government at that time.



Figure 8

*Commonwealth Art Today*, Commonwealth Institute, 7 November 1962–13 January 1963, photograph. Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library. Digital image courtesy of the Donald Bowen Archive, Cambridge Library.

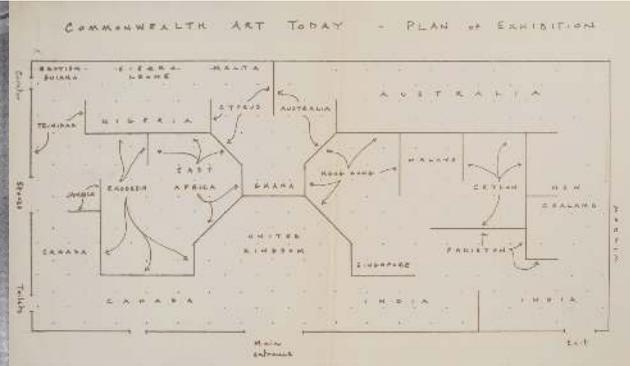


Figure 9

*Commonwealth Art Today*, Commonwealth Institute, 7 November 1962–13 January 1963, plan of exhibition. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Malaysia's first major exhibition in participation with the Commonwealth Institute was *Commonwealth Art Today*, held from 7 November 1962 until 13 January 1963. The exhibition included art from twenty-three other countries, among them Australia, Canada, India, Pakistan, New Zealand, East Africa, Malaya, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom. As the exhibition was the first exhibition held at the new Kensington High Street building, the selection of works for the exhibition was made by the Commonwealth Institute, helped by other national galleries, arts councils, art academies, societies, and even the ministries of education from other nations.



Figure 10

Bradley, Kenneth, The New Commonwealth Institute (art gallery interior), *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 111, no. 5081 (1963): 403–411. Digital image courtesy of the Royal Society of Arts.



Figure 11

The New Commonwealth Institute (art gallery interior), Robert Matthew and Johnson-Marshall, 'The Commonwealth Institute', *Official Architecture and Planning*, 26, no. 1 (January 1963): 34. Alexandrine Press.

In this exhibition, artworks by a handful of Malaysian artists were selected and shown. In total, there were 180 artworks and 50 sculptures assembled in the 95 ft by 44 ft gallery area from participating Commonwealth countries. From the “Plan of Exhibition”, Malaya’s artworks were positioned between Hong Kong and Ceylon (fig. 9).<sup>12</sup> Among the Malaysian artists whose works were selected were Cheong Lai Tong, Chung Chen Sun, Ho Kai Peng, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jehan Chan, Lu Chon Min, Nik Zainal Abidin, Patrick Ng, and Chuah Thean Teng.

The catalogue did not publish images of the works exhibited except for Syed Ahmad Jamal’s *Exuberance*, but it can be deduced that the selection by Sullivan reflected the Commonwealth spirit. A high-quality colour image of *Exuberance* could not be obtained for this article, but *Tulisan* is a stylistically similar work that is today found in the Muzium and Galeri Tuanku Fauziah collection at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (fig. 10). Sullivan saw these works as visual espousals of a Malaysian identity, which, through their subject matter and media, reflected the plurality of Malayan society and responded sympathetically to the multiracial ideal embraced by the Commonwealth.



Figure 12

Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tulisan (Writing)* (detail), 1961.  
Digital image courtesy of Muzium and Galeri Tuanku  
Fauziah (MGTF), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

The historian T.N. Harper has pointed out that, during the last few years of colonial rule, the British promoted the idea of “Malayan” identity through the introduction of coercive collaboration between cultures, alongside the promotion of an ideology of citizenship. As such, Harper argues that colonial policy rested on fostering a form of national culture, or a multiracial politics in which a cultural renaissance under the British was envisioned. This so-called “Malayan identity” promoted by the British can be seen in the inclusion, as well as fusion, of the Chinese, Indian, and Western elements into art, music, architecture, fashion, etc.<sup>13</sup> Thus, this first exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute portrays a selection of artworks and artists that primarily reflects such a perspective. The media of the artworks ranged from ink painting, oil, watercolour, to even *batik* (the region’s traditional art).

In their works *Dusk* (undated) and *Keluarga (Family)* (1962), Chuah Then Teng and Patrick Ng Kah attest to this “Malayanisation” project. Both artists, despite their Chinese heritage, employed the technique common to the region, using resist dyeing to portray local scenes. Other artists of Chinese heritage such as Chun Chen Sun, Jehan Chan and Ho Kai Peng, and Lu Chon Min painted the local fishing villages, fishing boats and huts, rubber trees, and rice paddy fields. In these scenes, the artists either painted them using Chinese ink painting or an impressionist approach using oil paint—reflecting their cultural background by using traditional techniques, combined with their knowledge of modern art. On the other hand, a watercolour painting by Nik Zainal Abidin Nik Salleh portrays characters from the *Ramayana* epic. His works incorporate the main storyline of the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) in a painterly Western art format.

Sullivan wrote:

*The streams of influence in art from East and West converge in Malaya, and slowly but surely the artists of Malaya are building a bridge between the two worlds, both in technique and ideas. In Chinese-style painting, this is particularly clear. The brush is still used in the ancient way, but the traditional conventions of subject are being discarded; artists using this form are depicting directly the Malayan scene.*

*Even more interesting is the adaptation of the centuries-old method of making batik cloth as a medium of painting. This is no longer an experiment but a fact, a painstaking but richly colourful alliance of old methods and new outlook.*<sup>14</sup>

On top of that, the spirit of the recent Independence can be seen in Syed Ahmad Jamal’s *Exuberance* (1961) and Cheong Lai Tong’s *Eve of Independence Day* (1961). Syed Ahmad Jamal’s *Exuberance* reflects a direct cultural influence of Britain or Western art on his art-making as he was taught at the Malayan Teacher Teaching College at Kirkby, in north-west England, for

two years in 1958–1959. The winter landscape there had inspired him to produce *Angin Dingin* (*Winter Wind*), *Umpan* (*The Bait*), and *Payung Biru* (*Blue Umbrella*). In a similar approach to these works, *Exuberance* indicates the influence of an abstract expressionist approach in its gestural and biomorphic shapes, with the background empty in emulation of the white winter landscape that he had experienced in Kirkby. Syed Ahmad Jamal himself was very much influenced by abstract expressionist exhibitions, especially *German Expressionism* at the Tate Gallery.<sup>15</sup>

## The Commonwealth Arts Festival, 1965



Figure 13

*Commonwealth Arts Festival*, 1965, brochure cover. Digital image courtesy of Commonwealth Arts Festival.



Figure 14

*Commonwealth Arts Festival* in Glasgow, 1965, in Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Kunang-Kunang Kenang-Kenangan Syed Ahmad Jamal Seniman Negara*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999), 106. Digital image courtesy of the National Art Gallery Malaysia.

*The most significant and important development to take place during the year was the debut of Malaysian Art in the Western world, in which the National Art Gallery played the principal role.*<sup>16</sup>

The above statement was written in the report of the board of trustees prepared by Frank Sullivan, the fourth report produced by the NAG since its establishment in regards to its participation in the Commonwealth Arts Festival. It was also noted that an invitation to exhibit at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1966 had already been agreed upon earlier by the Arts Council Malaysia.<sup>17</sup> Thus, what were planned as exhibitions in Glasgow and London, as part of the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival, were later extended to a tour in various cities in Europe: Dublin, Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg, Rome, St Etienne, and Paris.<sup>18</sup>

The 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival was organised in Britain for visual artists, musicians, dancers, poets, and writers representing various national cultures from Commonwealth nations. This festival was staged between 16 September and 2 October 1965, in four cities: Liverpool, Glasgow, Cardiff, and London.<sup>19</sup> Expressing the official Commonwealth sentiment, Ian Hunter, the director of the festival, explained that the purpose of the festival was not to present the

similarities of the countries but to accentuate the cultural differences contained within the Commonwealth.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the grand scheme of the festival and its multiple venues, Malaysia's participation was limited to the exhibition of visual art. In an article written that year, Hunter explained that: "Malaysia was unable to send us any performing artists because of her present difficulties of confrontation, but she is sending a contemporary exhibition of painters who reflect the Malay, the Indian and the Chinese schools."<sup>21</sup> Still, Malaysia's visual arts exhibition, held at the Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery from 18 September to 2 October, attracted an audience of 39,000 people, and represented a serious attempt to reiterate the newly independent nation's role in the Commonwealth community.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 15 'The Arts in the Commonwealth', *The Times Supplement*, 13 September 1965. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 16 'Glasgow's Busy Fortnight of Art Exhibitions', *The Times*, 25 September 1965. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

The task of selecting the artworks for this exhibition was not taken lightly, and was the responsibility of the National Art Gallery and the Arts Council's Special Joint Committee (SJC). The selections themselves were from the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery, works in private collections seen at earlier exhibitions, even from loans from artists. In total, 500 paintings and 90 sculptures were viewed but only 100 paintings and 23 sculptures that fulfilled the "aim of giving a truly representative 'picture' of Malaysian art" were selected.<sup>23</sup> The works were also exhibited in Malaysia for the public before they were sent abroad. It must be noted that all the financial expenditure for the packing and freight of the exhibition to the UK was borne by Malaysia's Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport.

In the context of Malaysian art history, the Commonwealth Arts Festival was an important impetus for Malaysia's arts and cultural visibility in the international realm. It was not only highlighted by Frank Sullivan as such, but by Syed Ahmad Jamal as well, who also noted how the exhibition receives favourable comments from art critics.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, the selection of artwork was reflective of the plurality of Malayan identity. Exhibits ranged from the abstractions of Abdul Latiff Mohidin to Syed Ahmad Jamal, Jolly Koh, and Khoo Sui Hoe. The realism, impressionism, and even the abstraction of local scenes could be seen in work by artists such as Chen Wen Hsi, Cheong Laitong, and Cheong Soo Pieng depicting the market, fishing villages, and local nature scenes with mountains, rivers, and animals, as well as realist portraiture by Hoessein Enas and Mazli Mat Som. In terms of media, oil painting, pastel, *batik*, and mixed media were represented, as well as prints, with lithograph, linocut, and etchings by Lee Joo For. The key difference in Malaysia's participation this time was the inclusion of sculptures. Works by artists such as Anthony Lau, Lim Nan Seng, and Michael Muthu, using metal and cement fondue as a form of early exploration of cheap materials in sculpture were exhibited. The show also included wooden "sculptures" by indigenous "artists" or Orang Asli described as "modern art", in an article in *The Times* dated 28 January 1966 and "Spirit of Malaysia" in *Overseas*, April 1966.

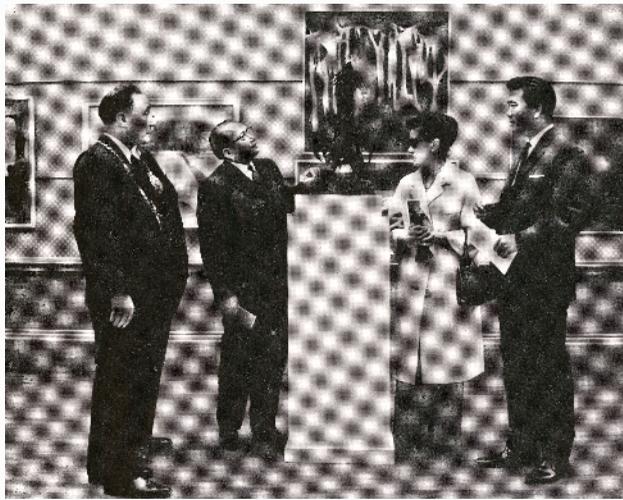


Figure 17

*The High Commissioner for Malaysia and his wife together with Bailie Shinwell, representing Glasgow Council during the Commonwealth Arts Festival, 1965, photograph. Digital image courtesy of the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre.*

## *Malaysian Art Exhibition, 1966*

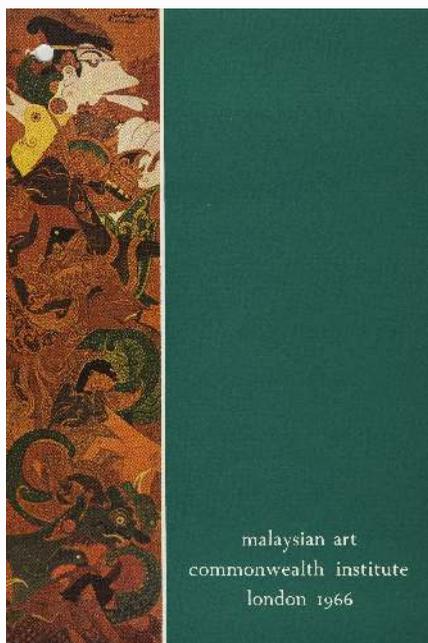


Figure 18

*Malaysian Art*, Commonwealth Institute, London 1966, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

The same exhibition later came to London after the festival and it was retitled as the *Malaysian Art Exhibition*. It was exhibited in the Commonwealth Institute, London from 26 January to 14 March 1966 and received press coverage and several reviews. What was initially intended to be participation in just two events, the first in Glasgow as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival and the second at the Commonwealth Institute as the *Malaysian Art Exhibition*, later became an international two-year touring exhibition in Europe. The invitations to exhibit mostly came from diplomatic missions. The tour locations and dates were:

1. 22 November–17 December 1965: The Building Center, Dublin (under the expense of Sir John Galvin of Loughlinstown) with the attendance of 5,000 people.
2. (dates unknown) 1966: Cologne, Germany; Berlin, Germany; and Hamburg, Germany.
3. 1 February–5 March 1967: Museum of Art & Industry, St Etienne, Italy with the attendance of 8,250 people.
4. 21 March–24 April 1967: Musée Galliera, Paris, France with the attendance of 2,000 people.<sup>25</sup>

Over the course of these exhibitions, these works were accompanied by a few artists at a time, for example, Anthony Lau, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Latiff Mohidin, Lee Joo For, Yeoh Jin Leng, Mohd Hoessein Enas, and Cheong Laitong. It must be highlighted that this Western tour was made possible because of Frank Sullivan, who administered the exhibition planning from the UK, the Republic of Ireland, France, Germany, and Italy. Although Sullivan later planned to bring back the exhibition through North America and Far East, it did not materialise due to unsatisfactory tour arrangements from both countries.<sup>26</sup>

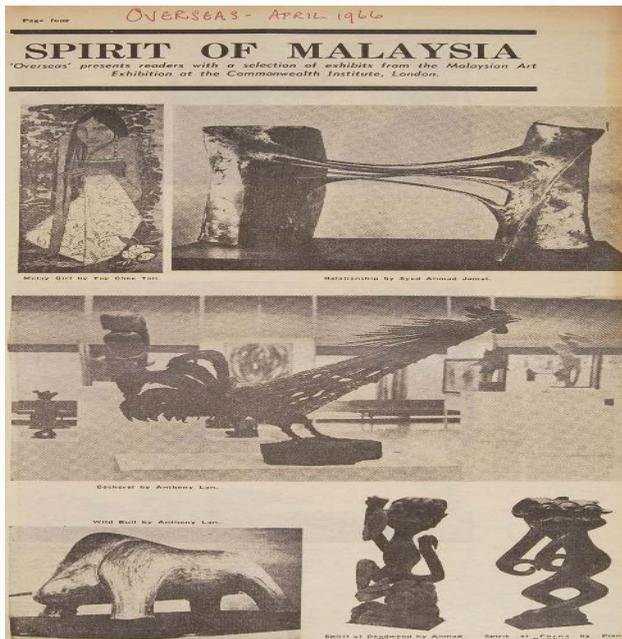


Figure 19  
 'Spirit of Malaysia', Overseas, April 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 20  
 'Malaysian Artists Exhibit Superior Works in London', New York Herald Tribune, Paris, 8 February 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 21  
 'Malaysian Art', The Birmingham Post, 1 February 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 22  
 'Many Styles in Malaysian Art', Daily Telegraph, 2 February 1966. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

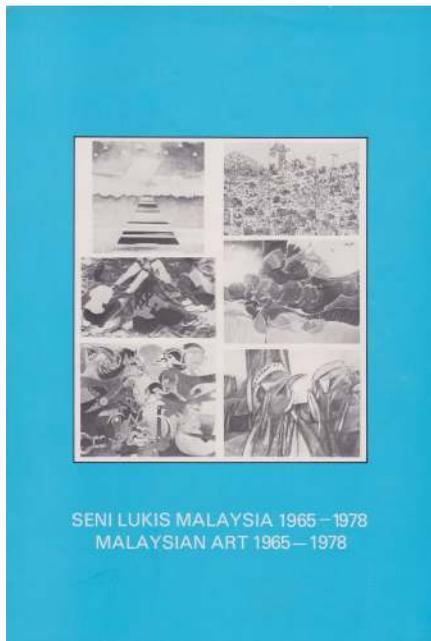


Figure 23

*Seni Lukis Malaysia 1956-1978 (Malaysian Art 1965-1978)*, Kuala Lumpur, 1978, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

After these collections were abroad for two years, their return was welcomed at another National Art Gallery exhibition in Kuala Lumpur titled, *Welcome Home Exhibition of Malaysian Art* (21 July-6 August 1967). As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed in bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, it must be noted that it was also Donald Bowen's role as the curator of the Commonwealth Institute that allowed him to introduce the Commonwealth artists to the London public. During his position, he had organised several solo exhibitions for Malaysian artists such as Chuah Thean Teng (1959 and 1965), Lee Joo For (1960), and Abdul Latiff Mohidin (1971) at the Commonwealth Institute, and had written/lectured on Malaysian artists as well.

## *Malaysian Contemporary Art 1965–1978, 1978*

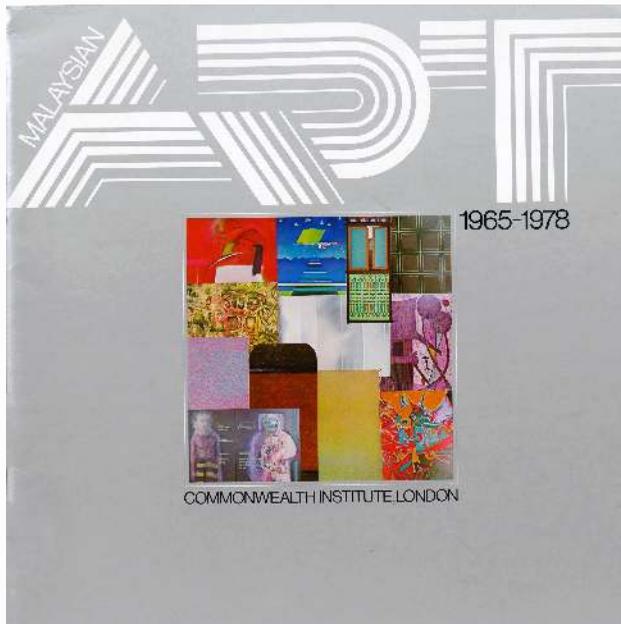


Figure 24

*Malaysian Art 1965–1978*, Commonwealth Institute, London, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Library.

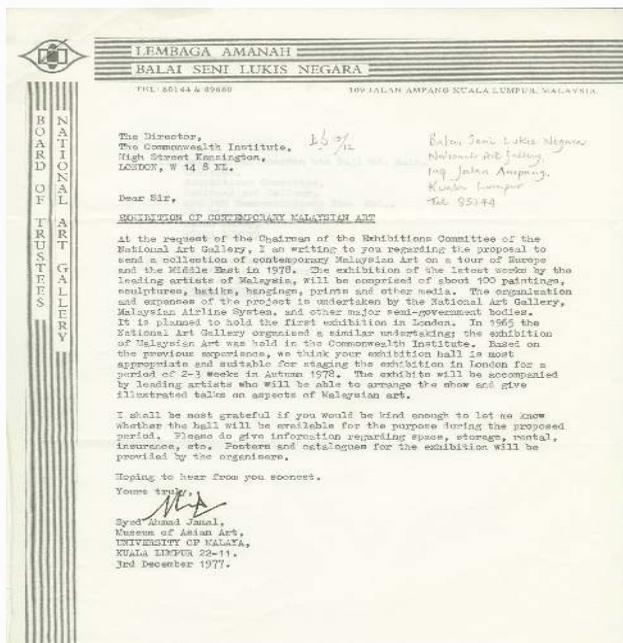


Figure 25

Letter to Donald Bowen by Syed Admad Jamal enquiring about organising, *Malaysian Art 1965–1978*, exhibition. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.



Figure 26

*Malaysian Art 1965–1978*, Commonwealth Institute, London, installation photograph. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

In a letter dated 3 December 1977, Syed Ahmad Jamal wrote to Donald Bowen to organise a major exhibition of Malaysian art in the Commonwealth Institute. After several letters discussing the potential dates, the result was that the *Malaysian Art 1965–1978* exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute would be held on 2–30 November 1978. Jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysian Airlines System and the National Art Gallery, it was first held at the National Museum of Art on 12 September–5 October 1978 before leaving for London.<sup>27</sup> Syed Ahmad Jamal, the guest curator and artist Joseph Tan accompanied the works to London.

As this exhibition was held almost fifteen years after Malaysia’s participation in the Commonwealth exhibition in 1962, it included an even broader selection of Malaysian artists. Out of 33 artists, 16 of them had received their art education in Britain. Several of them were also there when art schools in London underwent significant changes, in which leading English art colleges began to introduce “basic design” as a subject based on Bauhaus pedagogy.<sup>28</sup> Indirectly, these changes influenced the state of art education in Malaya/sia, where approaches to teaching broke into two camps. First, there were those who supported the fine art approach, extolling the aesthetic value of art and the individuated status of artists as embodied by the Royal Academy. Second, there were those who advocated for the applied arts and insisted on the functional role of art.<sup>29</sup>

Among the artists included in this exhibition were Redza Piyadasa, Sulaiman Esa, and Tang Tuck Kan, all of whom had attained their art education in Britain during the transitional phase to Independence, which influenced them to advance the idea of an “alternative aesthetic” to other established artists like Chuah Thean Teng, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and Cheong Laitong. They upheld that art should be cerebral rather than emotionally inclined. The play between two- and

three-dimensional work became important, as seen in Redza Piyadasa's *Marakesh Series* and Choong Kam Kow's *Sea Thru Series*, which were both included in this exhibition. Overall, the selection of artworks reflected the shifting inclination of Malaysian artists at the time. During the 1970s, artists began to expand their art-making beyond the traditional forms of painting to explore three-dimensional forms, as seen in Ruzaiqa Omar Basaree's *Dungun Series* and Latiff Mohidin's *Langkawi Series*, works from which were included in the exhibition.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 27

*FESTA Malaysia*, Commonwealth Institute, 2–8 November 1978, private view announcement. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Figure 28

Invitation to participate in the Malaysian Book Exhibition during, *FESTA Malaysia*, Commonwealth Institute, 2–8 November 1978. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

Concurrent to the exhibition, Bowen also approached the Malaysia high commissioner to coordinate a Malaysia Fest that consisted of several film showings, special educational programmes, a book fair, poetry readings, arts and crafts, a traditional costumes and dance show, food, and a trade show.

## Solo Exhibitions, 1959–1976

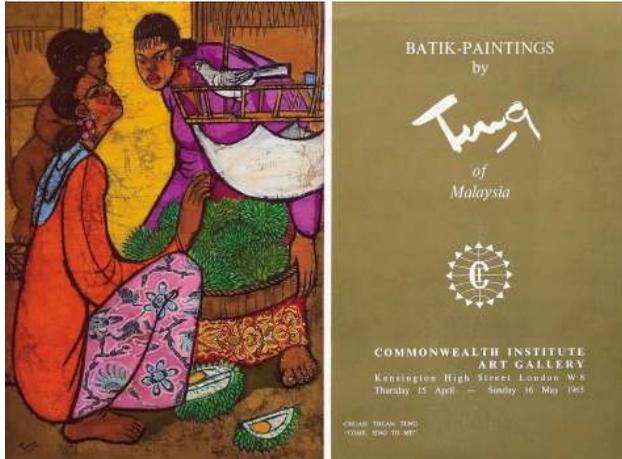


Figure 30

*Batik Paintings by Chuah Thean Teng of Malaysia*, Commonwealth Institute, 15 April–16 May 1965, exhibition catalogue cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Library.

Besides the international group exhibitions mentioned above, there were also solo exhibitions by Malaysian artists, namely, Chuah Thean Teng (twice, in 1959 and 1965) and Abdul Latiff Mohidin, that were organised by the Commonwealth Institute itself.

Donald Bowen's fascination on Chuah Thean Teng's *batik* can be seen in the text below:

*It is astonishing to think that although making batik has been common for hundreds of years, no one before Teng ever thought of adapting this age-old craft as a medium for fine art. Teng, and Teng alone, is responsible for this most original contribution to the whole world of art.*<sup>31</sup>

Despite being a Malayan artist who had not attained his art education in Britain, the Commonwealth Institute had accorded Chuah Thean Teng's two solo exhibitions. The artist was later awarded a fellowship by the British Council for his travelling expenses to visit British museums and galleries, and his work, *Two of a Kind* had been selected to be reproduced as UNICEF's Christmas greeting cards in 1967.

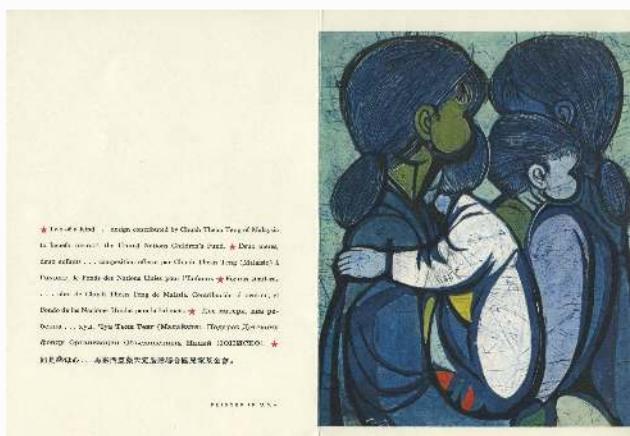


Figure 31  
Chuah Thean Teng, *Two of a Kind*, reproduced as UNICEF Christmas greeting card, 1967. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive.

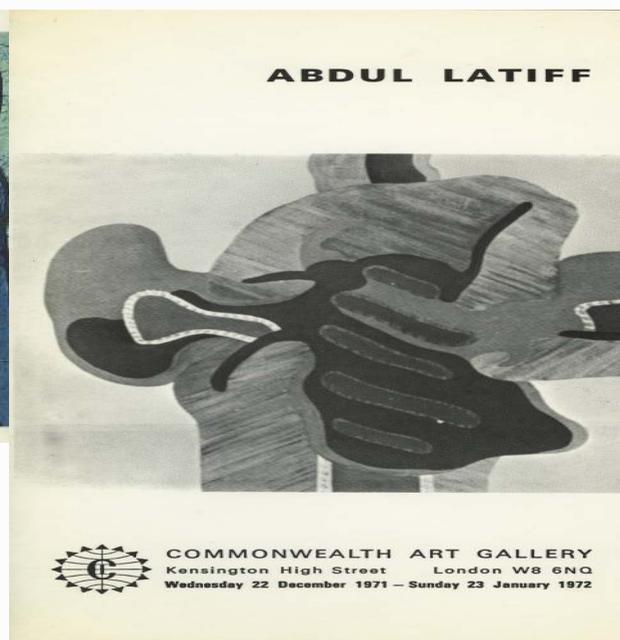


Figure 32  
*Abdul Latiff*, Abdul Latiff Mohidin exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute, 22 December 1971–23 January 1972, brochure cover. Digital image courtesy of Tate Archive

## Conclusion

In the early years, the establishment of the NAG relied on much of Frank Sullivan’s passion, networks, and connections, and also on the support of the board of trustees. As much as Frank Sullivan had contributed in bringing works by Malaysian artists to London and Europe, it must be noted that it was also Donald Bowen’s role as the curator of the Commonwealth Institute that had allowed him to introduce and facilitate the exhibition of the Malaysian artists to the London public.

Nevertheless, as Bowen observed, the cultural impact of London, and Britain, on the art in the Commonwealth—and in Malaysia in particular—was very minimal, except for the fact that there were already instances of British influence in work by these artists. Alongside the significant number of Commonwealth painters and sculptors who trained in Britain, many Malaysian artists attained their early art education in London, as well at regional art schools in the UK. In most cases, these Commonwealth artists had already established their own reputation at home and the experience of being a part of these international networks inevitably increased their fame.<sup>32</sup> This fact is also true in the context of Malaysia—the arts education attained by Malaysian artists in Britain could be seen as more influential in comparison to the exhibitions discussed here. Yet positive participation and engagement through key figures in art such as Frank Sullivan and Donald Bowen during the period right after Malaya’s Independence proves that art could become a platform of cultural diplomacy and further facilitate the complex relations between post-Independence Malaya and Britain within the larger post-war context. Thus, it can be argued that this could have been the reason why participations in exhibitions organised by the

Commonwealth were taken seriously and supported by the Malayan government at the time, although the intention was not directly related to personal artistic exchange or engagement in terms of art-making. Despite that, study on these exhibitions reflects the international role of the National Art Gallery and how important the gallery was as part of the nation-building agenda in Malaya/Malaysia's formative years.

### **About the author**

Sarena Abdullah, Ph.D is the current Deputy Dean of Research, Innovation and Community-Industry Engagement at the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and a Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and International Studies (CENPRIS) at USM. In 2017, she was awarded the inaugural London, Asia Research Award by the Paul Mellon Centre, London and Asian Art Archive, Hong Kong. She was also the recipient of a CAA-Getty Travel Grant in 2016, 2017, and 2019, as part of the CAA-Getty International and Reunion Program. Her book on Malaysian art, entitled *Malaysian Art since the 1990s: Postmodern Situation* (2018), has recently been published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. She is also the co-editor of a recent publication on Southeast Asian Art entitled *\*Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art 1945-1990 \**(2018), published by the Power Institute and the National Gallery Singapore. She has written extensively on Malaysian art for various academic journals and platforms.

### **Footnotes**

1. "The National Art Gallery: 1958–2003", in *45 @ 45* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2004), 13–16.
2. Lai Chee-Kien, *Building Merdeka: Independence Architecture in Kuala Lumpur, 1957–1966* (Kuala Lumpur: Petronas, 2007).
3. See National Art Gallery, *55 Tahun Balai Seni Visual Negara/National Art Gallery 1958–2013* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Visual Negara and Kementerian Pelancongan dan Kebudayaan, 2013).
4. Krishen Jit, "Introduction", in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 5.
5. *Commonwealth Institute: A Handbook Describing the Work of the Institute and the Exhibition in the Galleries* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1969), 6–7.
6. Kenneth Bradley, "Commonwealth Art in the Institute", in *Commonwealth Art Today* (London, Commonwealth Institute, 1963), 7.
7. Redza Piyadasa, "On Origins and Beginning", in T.K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 46.
8. Neil Manton, *The Arts of Independence* (Holt, ACT: Hall Arts, 2008), 24.
9. Manton, *The Arts of Independence*, 31–32.
10. Manton, *The Arts of Independence*, 31–32.
11. The Donald Bowen collections are available at Cambridge University Library. Visit <https://specialcollections-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=8276>.
12. It must be noted that at this time, Singapore's section differed from Malaya's as Singapore was still regarded as a British Crown Colony before its merger with the Federation of Malaya,

the Crown Colony of Sarawak, and the Crown Colony of North Borneo forming Malaysia in 1963.

13. T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 275–276.
14. Frank Sullivan, “Malaya”, in *Commonwealth Art Today* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1962), 83–84.
15. Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Kunang-Kunang: Kenang-Kenangan Syed Ahmad Jamal Seniman Negara* (Ampang/Hulu Kelang: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999), 68–69.
16. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1966), 4.
17. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 4.
18. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 5–8.
19. The problematisation of the festival can be read in Gail Low, “At Home? Discoursing on the Commonwealth at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48, no. 1 (2013): 97–111, DOI:10.1177/0021989412471838.
20. Ian Hunter, “The Commonwealth Arts Festival”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113, no. 5108 (1965), 606 and 608.
21. Hunter, “The Commonwealth Arts Festival”, 608.
22. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 7.
23. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1965 to December 31, 1965”, 5.
24. Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1988), unpaginated.
25. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1967 to December 31, 1967” (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1967), 5–8.
26. “Report of the Board of Trustees, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Covering the Period from January 1, 1967 to December 31, 1967”, 5–8.
27. The National Art Gallery’s name was changed to the National Museum of Art and was under Director Sulaiman Othman at that time.
28. Sarena Abdullah and Ah Kow Chung, “Re-Examining the Objects of Mystical Reality”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2014).
29. T.K. Sabapathy, *Piyadasa: An Overview, 1962–2000* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2001), 19.
30. See S. Abdullah, “Changing Approaches: Installations Produced in the Malaysian Art World”, *Wacana Seni* 16, no. 1 (2017), 8, DOI:10.21315/ws2017.16.1.
31. Bradley, “Commonwealth Art in the Institute”, 7.
32. Donald Bowen, “Contemporary Art in the Commonwealth”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 113, no. 5101 (1964), 16.

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