

IDRIS ALI

*Singapura Chantek*

*5 Decades of Painting Singapore*

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OCTOBER 23 – NOVEMBER 13, 2013

OPENING RECEPTION  
MAYA GALLERY  
23 OCTOBER 2013

*Maya*  
GALLERY

Cover art  
Idris Mohamed Ali, *Boat Quay*, 600 x 450 mm, 1979

## FOREWORD

### Idris Mohamed Ali – The Painter as Chronicler



*Singapura Chantek* encapsulates Idris Mohamed Ali's charming documentation of Singapore's cityscape across half a century, and this achievement is something to be celebrated by all of us. Pak Idris' use of watercolour as a medium captures the fluidity and texture of Singapore's rich heritage, some of which is retained and some of which is irretrievably lost. And some of which live on in our memories, not least because an artist like Pak Idris took it upon himself to serve as a chronicler of our transformation as a city and a country.

One senses a certain urgency on the artist's part as he painted through the decades, beginning in the years before Singapore's independence. Take for example, his recent *Windows* series (2013), which makes us wonder whether these houses will still exist in the years to come. The windows open out to a rapidly changing world, but they also draw us in, making us wonder about the lives of occupants throughout many decades.

The same care, I might even say love, that Pak Idris gives to painting *Nagore Durga Mosque* (2000) and *Masjid Sultan Mosque* (1999) is also given to his other works. Indeed, this special quality – more generally his unique craftsmanship – has been cultivated by his work throughout the earlier decades, going back to the early 1960s. For the buildings, streets and kampongs that have either disappeared or changed beyond recognition, each painting seems to say: "I still exist beautifully in your memory". For those who have not yet been threatened with destruction, each painting seems to say, proudly: "I am here, I am beautiful, and I want to be here for you". We might also imagine each painting whispering: "Please think twice if you have plans to remake me into something that I am not, or make me disappear from here where I truly belong, with my people, my country".

So, Pak Idris, thank you for your art, and for giving us *Singapura Chantek*!

#### PROF KWOK KIAN WOON

Associate Provost, Nanyang Technological University  
Member, National Arts Council

## 5 DECADES OF PAINTING SINGAPORE

SYED MUHD HAFIZ  
Art Writer

Looking through the images of Idris Mohamed Ali's works over the past five decades, one will be haunted by a few questions: How does one map out a practice which spans a period even longer than the nation itself? Why has the artist doggedly persist with the watercolour medium throughout the five decades? How does one contextualize his watercolour practice where the dominant narrative seems to be residing with a particular homogenous society – is there a place for isolated figures like Idris Ali? This essay is an attempt to answer, if not all, some of the questions that had initially cropped up as I look through the portfolio of Idris Ali's works.

*Singapura Chantek* which translates to Beautiful Singapore is on one hand, a convenient encapsulation of Idris's oeuvre. Looking at his earliest paintings like *Kampung Scene* (1962), *Tanjong Rhu* (1963) and *Fruits* (1964), all done during the artist's formative years in the early sixties, one can see the idyllic, peaceful surroundings of Singapore. It is important to note though, the *Kampung Scene* is a totally imagined landscape. This brings to mind S.Sudjojono's famous tirade against the Mooi-Indie painters in Indonesia in the early part of the twentieth century,

*"Semua serba bagus dan romantis bagai di surga, semua serba enak, tenang dan damai. Lukisan-lukisan tadi tidak lain hanya mengandung satu arti: Mooi-Indie.*

(All is nice and romantic like in the heavens; all is good, calm and peaceful. Those paintings can only mean one thing: Mooi-Indie).

*Gunung, pohon kelapa dan sawah menjadi trimurthi bagi tabel peluki-pelukis tadi. Gunung, pohon kelapa dan sawah menjadi penarik hati mereka, seakan-akan mereka tak bisa lepas dari dogma tadi dan terus tertarik oleh barang tiga itu.*

(Mountains, coconut trees and the padi fields becomes a trimurthi palette for these painters. The mountains, coconut trees and padi fields cling on to their hearts as if they cannot release themselves from the dogma and they continue being attracted to these three elements)."<sup>1</sup>

The term Mooi-Indies or the Beautiful Indies gained traction especially after S.Sudjojono's mocking of the painters who at that time were prevalent in Indonesia. Although the 'group' consists mostly from the Indo-European circles, other local artists had also been associated with this genre including Basoeki Abdullah and Wakidi amongst others. It is therefore interesting to note that some of these artists' works were already quite known in Singapore due to their travels around the region. An example was Basoeki Abdullah's visit to Singapore in April 1959 to officiate the opening of Perkumpulan Seni's art exhibition in conjunction with the 'Arts Festival'. A sizeable crowd had turned up just to see the maestro from Indonesia in action!<sup>2</sup>



TANJONG RHU  
Watercolour, 395 x 315 mm, 1963

To locate Idris' works from the sixties into the Mooi-Indies discourse would be narrating only half the story. An equally important factor in the artist's formative years would be the fact that he was mostly a self-taught artist. With the lack of funds to attend an art school, Idris started taking lessons under the guidance of S. Mahdar at the Sims Avenue Community Centre in 1960. Upon the latter's departure to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Idris continued his education under the tutelage of Mas Ali Sabran.<sup>3</sup> The artist recalled that these lessons used to cost him just 10 cents per lesson thus he was more than thankful for the existence of these informal art classes.<sup>4</sup> The existences of these informal art classes deserve another essay as these classes by the pioneering generation, for example Sawoot Abdul Rahman (Pak Sawoot), Aman Ahmad (Pak Man) and Abdul Ghani Hamid enjoyed a surprisingly healthy turnout, sometimes up to 200 students for a weekend, including both children and adults – numbers that are enough to rival a fully functional art school!<sup>5</sup>

Thus it was natural that Idris Ali joined Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya (APAD) in 1964. From being one of the students in the weekend classes, he became one of the voluntary art teachers at the society's art classes. In APAD, Idris was one of the few, if not the only artist that consistently persisted in the watercolour medium.<sup>6</sup> A medium which left little room for errors, Idris was the sole champion for the medium when the trend for the younger APAD artists in the sixties was to experiment with the batik technique.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps another important aspect of Idris Ali's practice is his career as an illustrator. Working with advertising firms like ACE Advertising and Ted Bates Singapore, Idris was part of a few successful campaigns. Visitors can see a selection of archival materials in the gallery, showcasing not just the dexterity of the artist but also the social changes that Singapore went through in the pursuit of progress – the language of consumerism being the most prominent display of wealth and status. And as Idris' work progresses through the 90s and 2000s, visitors to the gallery can definitely see the more 'illustrative' nature of his works.

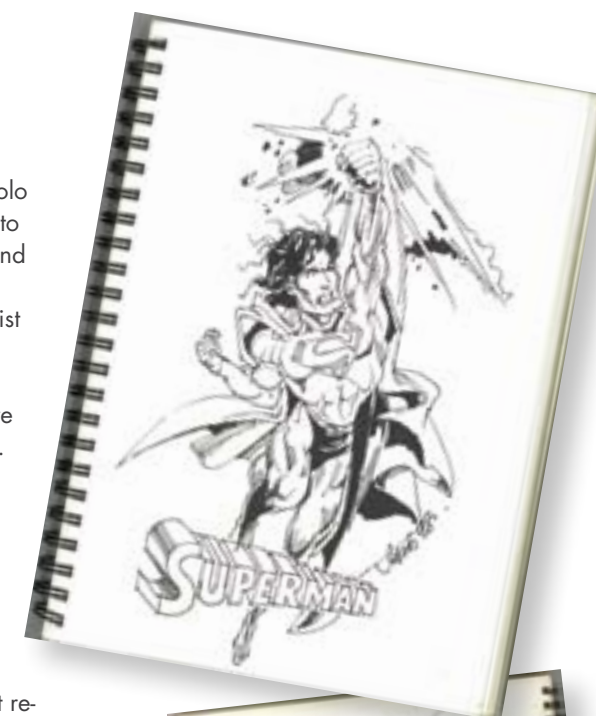
To look through Idris' watercolours over the past five decades is to chart Singapore's changing landscape. Most works are devoid of figures, and if they are included, are always peripheral in nature. It is as if the artist is demanding the full attention of the viewer to be focused on the landscape. Another point to note is the composition of Idris' watercolours. In *Syed Alwi Road* (1979), *Boat Quay* (1979) and *Arab Street Lane Singapore* (1977) for example, all of the scenes here are off the beaten track, scenes that would not usually appeal to the average water-colourist painting outdoors. Whatever his reasons may be, these visual documents are crucial in narrating alternative views of Singapore's changing landscape.



ARTIST SKETCHBOOK  
Pen & ink

Awarded the Pingat APAD in 1974 and granted his first solo exhibition only in 1999, much of Idris Ali's practice is yet to be discovered, for example a comparative study of Idris and another well-known self-taught water-colourist, Lim Cheng Hoe would be worthwhile. As the only active water-colourist in APAD, Idris voiced his concern about having no one to replace him. Perhaps there will be none but until that day comes, Idris can still be seen along the streets of Singapore today, trying to find a perfect 'frame' for his next drawing.

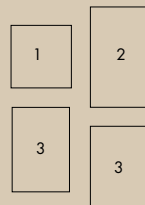
Before we parted ways that evening, I asked, "Actually Pak Idris, what was it that made you like drawing? What made you pick up that pencil?" He answered almost nonchalantly, "Oh! You really want to know? My father had given me a comic book featuring the Lone Ranger series when I was still a child. After I was done reading the comic book, I started to trace the figures and then kept re-drawing it. I still have that book with me. It's the sole reason for my becoming an artist!" The conversation could not have ended more beautifully.<sup>8</sup>



ARTIST SKETCHBOOKS  
Pen & ink, 1998

<sup>1</sup> S.Sudjojono, "Seni Lukis Indonesia Sekarang dan yang Akan Datang", *Seni Loekis, Kesenian dan Seniman*, Penerbit Indonesia Sekarang, Yogyakarta, 1946, in *Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia: Esai-Esai Pilihan*, eds. Aminudin TH Siregar and Enin Supriyanto, (Jakarta: Nalar 2006), 1.  
<sup>2</sup> Abdul Ghani Hamid, *An Artist's Note* (Singapore: Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya, 1991), 10.  
<sup>3</sup> *Water Strokes of Idris: Idris' first solo exhibition* (Singapore: Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya, 1999), unpaginated.  
<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from interview with the artist, Singapore: 1st Oct 2013  
<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from interview with the artist, Singapore: 1st Oct 2013  
<sup>6</sup> Abdul Ghani Hamid, *An Artist's Note* (Singapore: Angkatan Pelukis Aneka Daya, 1991), 20.  
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 21.  
<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from interview with the artist, Singapore: 1st Oct 2013



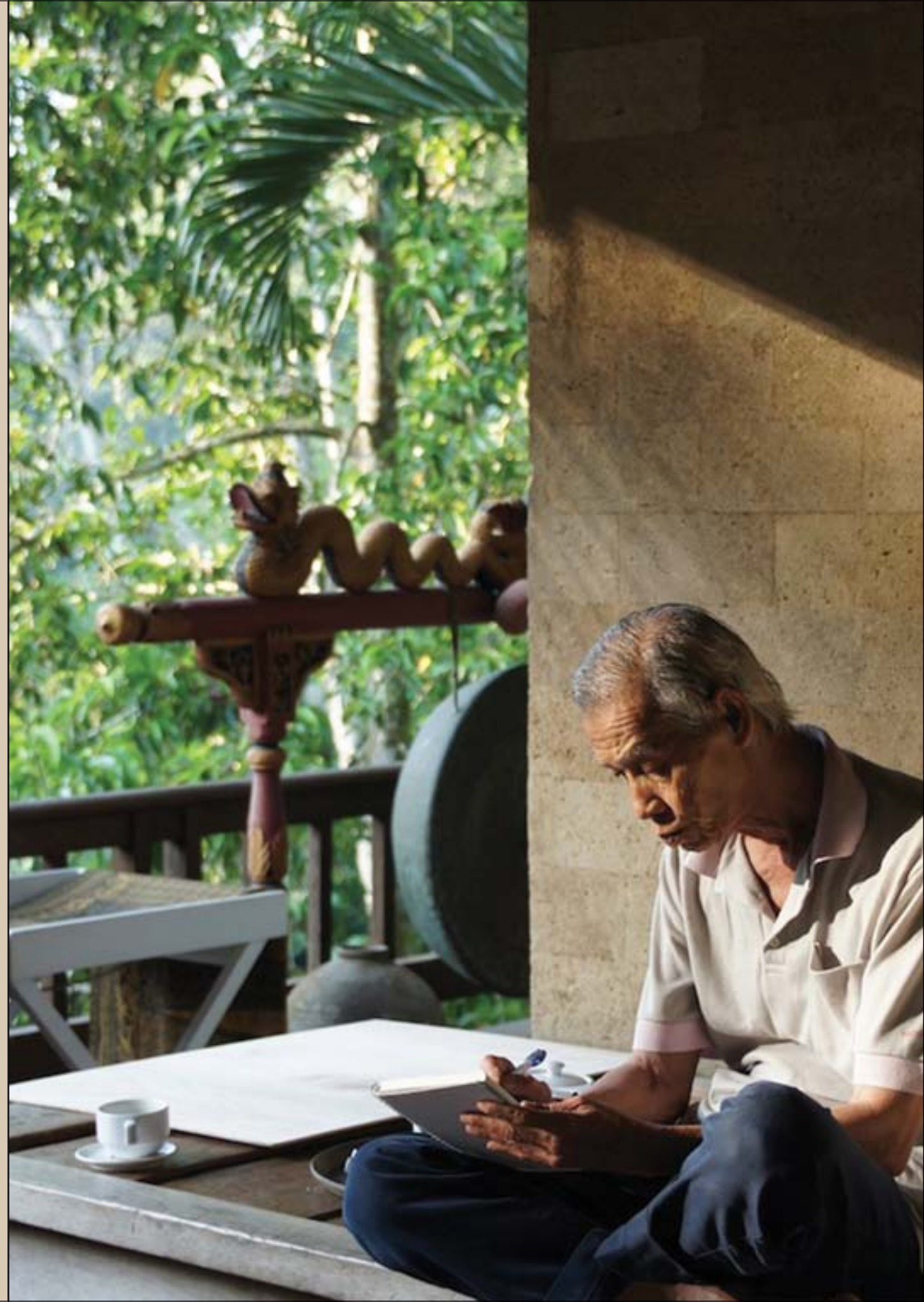


1. Idris Ali at work as Visualiser  
(published in Angelic Advertising & Promotions marketing brochure, 1980s)
2. Maya Gallery-MENDAKI EPB Programme  
Idris Ali with secondary school students at Maya Gallery, 2012
3. Maya Gallery at CultureFest by Malay Heritage Centre (National Heritage Board)  
'Live' Portraits by Idris Ali, 2013

OPPOSITE PAGE

Maya Gallery Artist Residency for *The Journey* exhibition  
Idris Ali at The Kampong Resort Ubud, Bali, 2012

© Photo by Jeffrey Wandly





ARTIST WORKS



**KAMPONG SCENE**  
Watercolour, 395 x 315 mm, 1962  
*Artist Collection*



**ARAB STREET LANE**  
Watercolour, 760 x 560 mm, 1977



**TANJONG RHU**  
Watercolour, 315 x 395 mm, 1963  
*Artist Collection*



**FRUITS**  
Watercolour, 395 x 315 mm, 1964  
*Maya Gallery Collection*



**RACE COURSE ROAD**  
Watercolour, 375 x 5275 mm, 1978





**BOAT QUAY**  
 Watercolour, 600 x 450 mm, 1979  
 Maya Gallery Collection



**OPPOSITE BUGIS**  
 Watercolour, 515 x 660 mm, 1982  
 Maya Gallery Collection



**SYED ALWI ROAD**  
 Watercolour, 760 x 560 mm, 1979



**BOAT QUAY WAREHOUSE**  
 Watercolour, 760 x 560 mm, 1983





NEW MARKET ROAD  
Watercolour, 760 x 560 mm, 1982



SINGAPORE RIVER  
Watercolour, 760 x 560 mm, 1987



ORCHARD ROAD  
Watercolour, 480 x 350 mm, 1988



PLAZA SINGAPURA  
Watercolour, 420 x 350 mm, 1989



KRANJI  
Watercolour, 375 x 275 mm, 1989





BACK LANE  
Watercolour, 330 x 400 mm, 1990



THE FULLERTON  
Watercolour, 750 x 350 mm, 1992



PROVISION SHOP  
Watercolour, 370 x 335 mm, 1994



LITTLE INDIA  
Watercolour, 330 x 410 mm, 1995





MASJID SULTAN

Watercolour, 950 x 720 mm, 1991

Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore  
Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore



MASJID SULTAN

Watercolour, 500 x 370 mm, 1995



NAGORE DURGA MOSQUE

Watercolour, 340 x 460 mm, 2000



MASJID DARUL AMAN

Watercolour, 1050 x 720 mm, 1991

Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Singapore  
Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore





SINGAPORE RIVER  
Watercolour, 290 x 395 mm, 2000



HONG LIM SQUARE  
Watercolour, 760 X 560 mm, 2009



EMERALD HILL  
Watercolour, 500 x 400 mm, 2012

KAMPUNG MELAYU, PULAU UBIN  
Watercolour, 760 x 560 mm, 2003



ION ORCHARD  
Watercolour, 400 x 330 mm, 2012





RAFFLES HOTEL COURTYARD  
Watercolour, 750 x 560 mm, 2012



RAFFLES HOTEL COURTYARD  
Watercolour, 270 x 220 mm, 2013



*Shirley 2013*



*Shirley 2013*



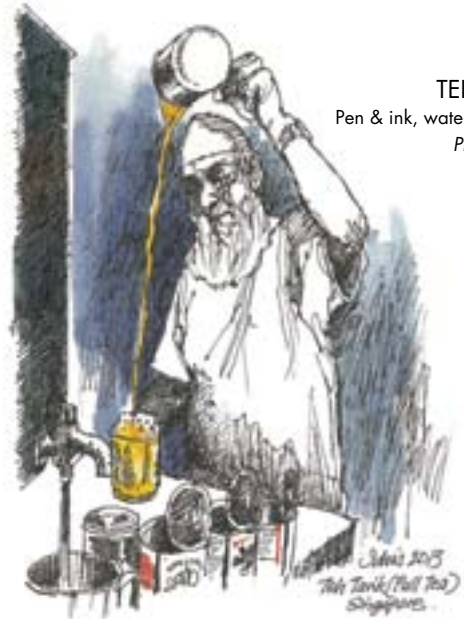
*Shirley 2013*



*Shirley 2013*

WINDOWS  
Watercolour, 415 x 300 mm, 2013





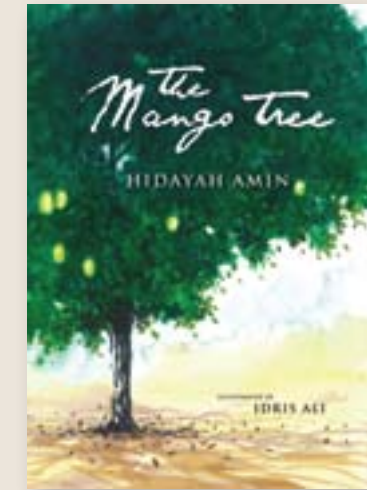
**TEH TARIK MAN**  
Pen & ink, watercolour, 140 x 190 mm, 2013  
Private Collection



**SNAKE CHARMER**  
Pen & ink, 290 x 420 mm, 2013



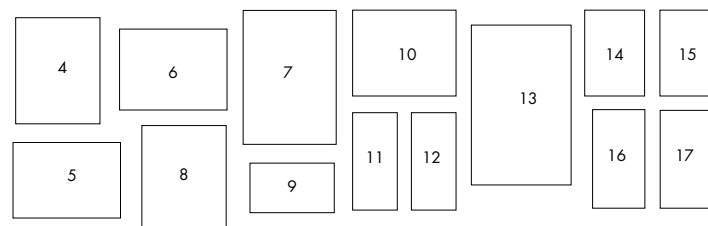
**ARAB STREET**  
Ink & watercolour, 240 x 680 mm, 2012



1	2
3	3

1. *Birds Seen at the ISTANA* by James Gan and Aileen Lau. Illustration Idris Ali, Mohamed A Kadir, Dana Gardner. Publisher Singapore Environment Council (2005).
2. *The Mango Tree* by Hidayah Amin. Illustration Idris Ali. Design Masturah Sha'ari, Maya Gallery. Publisher Helang Books (2013).
3. *Thomas Cook Ad Campaign* by BSB Agency. Illustration Idris Ali. (*Ad Showcase '89*. Publisher Straits Times Press, 1989).





4. *Bersatu kita teguh, bercerai kita roboh* (Strength in togetherness), freelance illustration.
5. *Baju Hijau* (Green Wear), novel cover illustration, 1975.
6. Tunas (APAD), t-shirt design illustration, 1998.
7. *Myths & Legends*, for National Museum of Singapore, illustration, 1998.
8. Plaza Hotel, ad illustration and visual (Ted Bates Singapore).
9. *Buku Sahabat Pena* (Pen Pal Book), illustration and visual (Ted Bates Singapore).
10. A&W Restaurant, menu illustration and layout (ACE Advertising).
11. National, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising), 1985.
12. National, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising), 1985.
13. Air New Zealand, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising).
14. Boron, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising).
15. Campus Quartz, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising).
16. Charles Jourdan, Pierre Cardin, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising).
17. Siera, ad illustration and visual (ACE Advertising).



## ARTIST BIO

# IDRIS MOHAMED ALI

Born 1944, Singapore

Idris Mohamed Ali has painted in watercolour for 5 decades. A self-taught artist, Idris' works reveal a strong understanding of colour, depth and realism. He enjoys painting landscapes, street scenes, portraits and still life. His landscapes of old Singapore are especially important as they serve as a visual documentation of our national heritage. In 1974, Idris received the Pingat APAD Award by the Association of Artists with Various Resources (APAD). He was also awarded the Cipta Mekar Award for outstanding work at the 'Action '90' Art Exhibition by APAD in 1990.

Idris started painting at the age of 10. As he could not afford formal art training, he learnt from books, observation, practice and a brief tutelage under S Mahdar. At 18, Idris had his first group exhibition at the Singapore Victoria Memorial Hall in 1962. He has also been a member of APAD since the 60s. Idris had his first solo exhibition, *Water Strokes of Idris* in 1999, has participated in numerous group exhibitions in Singapore and Malaysia, and continues to do so till now.

With a natural gift for drawing, Idris embarked on a career as a visualiser in the advertising industry for 20 years. He was also a volunteer art teacher with APAD for young children from 1964 to the 80s, and taught art at secondary schools. One of his many commissioned works include a portrait painting of former President of Singapore Wee Kim Wee and the First Lady.

Idris Ali's works can be found in the collections of the National Heritage Board, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government ministries in Singapore and Malaysia, private organisations and individuals.

### SOLO EXHIBITION

1999 *Water Strokes of Idris, organised by APAD, Singapore Calligraphy Centre*

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1962-63 *Lembaga Tetap Kongress, Victoria Memorial Hall*  
1970 *National Day, Singapore*  
1973-79 *Contemporary, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
1981 *Contemporary, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
*Pesta Budaya Melayu, Singapore*  
1984 *Pesta Budaya Melayu, Singapore*  
1985 *Contemporary, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
1986 *National Day Carnival, Singapore*  
*National Day Art Fair, Singapore*  
1988 *Art 25 (APAD 25th Anniversary Art Exhibition), Singapore*  
1989 *Two-Man Art Exhibition – Idris Mohd Ali & M Razali, Tai Pan Ramada Hotel*  
*Contemporary '89, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
1990 *Action '90, Singapore*  
*Contemporary '90, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*

1991 *Action '91, Singapore*  
*Contemporary '91, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
1992 *Art 30, (APAD's 30th Anniversary Art Exhibition), The Substation*  
*Islamic Contemporary Works of Art Exhibition*  
1993 *Rajasagat '93, Galeri Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ihsan, Malaysia*  
1994 *Action '94, Singapore*  
*Pameran Melaka Menjelang 600 Tahun, Malaysia*  
1995-96 *Contemporary '95, APAD Art Exhibition*  
1997 *Myths and Legends, Children's Gallery, Singapore National Museum*  
*Art 35, (APAD's 35th Anniversary Art Exhibition), Singapore*  
*Pekan Seni Ipoh II, Malaysia*  
1998 *Contemporary '98, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
*Pekan Seni Ipoh III, Malaysia*  
1999 *Pekan Seni Ipoh IV, Malaysia*  
2000 *Pekan Seni Ipoh V, Malaysia*  
*Central Library, National University of Singapore*  
*Contemporary 2000, APAD's Art Exhibition, Singapore Calligraphy Centre*  
2001 *Contemporary 2001, APAD's Art Exhibition, Singapore Calligraphy Centre*  
2003 *Racial Harmony Day 2003, Braddell Heights*  
2004 *Racial Harmony Day 2004, Braddell Heights*  
2005 *Lakaran Warisan, Taman Warisan Melayu (Malay Heritage Centre)*  
2007 *Kampung, APAD Art Exhibition, Malay Heritage Centre*  
2008 *APAD Tradition, Innovation & Continuity, Singapore Art Museum*  
2009 *APAD / Kelab Masyarakat Bukit Timah, IMM*  
*Malay Cultural Art Exhibition, Singapore*  
2010 *Contemporary 2010, APAD Art Exhibition, National Library Gallery*  
2011 *Contemporary 2011, APAD Art Exhibition, National Library Gallery*  
2012 *From the Heart, Maya Gallery Opening Exhibition*  
*Celebrate Heritage, Maya Gallery*  
*LCCS 10th Anniversary, Charity Art Auction, Ritz-Carlton*  
*The Journey, Maya Gallery*  
*MENDAKI 30th Anniversary, Ridzwan Dzafir Scholarship Art Auction, Shangri-La*  
2013 *Retro Revival 2012, Federation of Art Societies Art Exhibition, Ion Art Gallery*  
*Our Pioneer Artists, APAD Art Exhibition, Singapore Calligraphy Centre*  
*Collective Asia, Asia Contemporary Art Fair, Luxe Art Museum (represented by Maya Gallery)*  
*éncore! (Maya Gallery 1st Anniversary), Maya Gallery*  
*Moving On, APAD Art Exhibition, The Substation*

### MEMBERSHIP

Association of Artists of Various Resources (APAD) – Member, Artist  
Volunteer Art Teacher for APAD, 1964-1990s

### AWARDS

1974 Pingat APAD Award, Singapore  
1990 Cipta Mekar Award for outstanding work at *Action '90* Art Exhibition, Singapore

### SELECTED MEDIA

1960s *Berita Harian, Memperkenalkan pelukis-pelukis Singapura, by Lazuardi*  
1960s *Berita Harian, Momentum pelukis-pelukis moden menchari ruang lebeh luas, by Abdul Ghani Hamid*  
1989, Oct 19 *Berita Harian, Dua teknik hasilkan pemandangan berbeza, by Tuminah Sapawi*  
1990, Dec 5 *Berita Harian, Tempoh melukis bukan penentu mutu lukisan*  
1997, Sep 26 *Berita Harian, Imaginasi Idris hiasi galeri*  
2012, Apr 18 *Berita Harian, Buka galeri seni untuk pupuk bakat setempat, by Norhaiza Hashim*  
2012, May *MediaCorp Suria, 'B3', Interview at Maya Gallery*  
2012, Apr 24 *Berita Harian, Cinta Seni, on Maya Gallery, by Salihin Sulaiman Jeem*  
2013 *Berita Harian, Karya 17 pelukis perintis dalam pameran Apad, by Nurul 'Ain Razali*

### COLLECTIONS

National Heritage Board  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Government Ministries, Singapore and Malaysia  
Madrasah Alsagoff Al-Arabiah  
Private individuals



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GALLERY

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Chef Jean Francois Nordin Al Mashor  
Hairol Mohd Mahsus  
Hidayah Amin  
Hilmi Mansoor  
Khamis Ariffin (Karto)

Located in historic Kampong Glam, Maya Gallery is dedicated to advance the high quality works by Singapore artists.

The gallery regularly hosts art exhibitions and has participated in art fairs in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. As part of its commitment and continuous effort to promote art appreciation and engage the community, the gallery organises SaturdayART with activities such as batik painting and 'live' portraits. It has also collaborated with various organisations on charity and community projects.

Holding true to its name, *Maya*, which means the enrichment of the soul, Maya Gallery provides consultancy in art, music and design.

founders / directors  
Masturah Sha'ari  
Jeffrey Wandly

associate art director  
Sunar Sugiyou

gallery manager  
Fari Amin

business manager  
Doreen Wandly

*Maya*  
GALLERY

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Mon to Sat 11 am to 6 pm  
Sun by appointment only  
Closed on public holidays

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