

SINGLE-POINT PERSPECTIVE AS THE UNIFYING PRINCIPLE IN SOME MALAYSIAN AND SINGAPOREAN PAINTINGS

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Unification of pictorial elements and parts in a painting is, I believe, generally accepted as a value-conferring feature of the artwork. Our ability to connect and relate the different elements (such as a brushstroke, a dash of hue, or a shape of colour) of a painting enables us to see it as a coherent and intelligible whole. A picture which fails to satisfy this important condition often ends up as a disjointed patchwork that does not present itself as a concrete whole to the spectator. Consequently some critics believe that the tighter the unity of pictorial elements, the greater the success of the painting. Many devices have been employed by painters to achieve the unification of parts, but the most successful method employed so far in the attainment of tight pictorial unity is the so-called one-point (or single-point) perspective.

In order to explain this technique of unification of pictorial elements, I refer to a Renaissance Italian painting by Tintoretto entitled *Presentation of the Virgin Mary*, 1551 - 1552 (Plate I). There is a so-called 'climax' in this painting which takes place deep in the middleground, where young Virgin Mary is climbing up the stairs to be baptised by a waiting priest. Almost every feature in the painting directs the eye and the mind of the spectator towards this 'climax'. The row of seated and half-naked figures (to the left of the picture) look or stare in the direction of young Mary; the tall woman in the middle of the picture carries a child who points at Mary; and the priest standing at the top of the stairway stares down at Mary. Colours employed near the edges of the painting are dark and sombre, but they get lighter as they progress towards the middleground; and the backdrop of young Virgin Mary and the priest is brightly lit. By this technique, Tintoretto directs the eye and the mind of the spectator to the 'climax' depicting young Virgin Mary being baptised by the priest. But more importantly (and this refers directly to the technique of the single-point perspective), the 'climax' takes place at a spot which is near the meeting point of the diagonals drawn from the four corners of the painting - the row of seated, half-naked male figures to the left forming one diagonal, while the edge of the marble stairway to the right forms another diagonal. The use of these diagonals to create pictorial space (or the technique of single-point perspective) will always direct the eye of the spectator from the foreground deep into the middleground where the diagonals meet, i.e. where the 'climax' of Tintoretto's picture is depicted. When single-point perspective is employed to portray pictorial space, the painting attains very tight unity of parts because

elements arranged along the diagonals of the rectangular frame must each play their part in leading the eye of the observer to the 'centre' where the diagonals meet. But Tintoretto goes even further to ensure that each feature of his picture plays this role - for example the way he employs colours (the backdrop of the 'climax' is brightly lit in contrast to sombre darker colours in the surrounding areas) and the pose which his figures are made to adopt (they either look or point in the direction of Mary). This is almost like the plot of a successful Greek tragic drama (such as *Oedipus Rex*) where the climax brings all the other events or incidents into a coherent and intelligible whole, because each event in the play has a specific role in building up towards the climax.¹

Patrick Ng Kah Oon's *Spirit of Earth, Water and Air (or Semangat Bumi, Air dan Udara)*, 1958, (Plate 2) employs the same technique as Tintoretto's painting to achieve a very high degree of pictorial unity. One can in fact see a deliberate attempt on the part of the artist to create the diagonals in his picture. There are two clear and obvious rows of green vegetation stretching from the two corners at the bottom of the painting and meeting deep in the middleground right in the centre of the picture, in which the 'climax' can be said to take place (i.e. the single female figure with outstretched arms, representing the realm of *Air*, receiving a suppliant in the form of a kneeling and partially naked man who is clad only in a sarong, and who has outstretched arms each of which is clinging to the arms of another man who kneels with a row of similarly sarong-clad figures²). And from this 'centre', two less pronounced rows of green vegetation spread to the two top corners of the picture. These diagonals play a very significant part in guiding the eye and mind of the observer deep into the middleground where the 'centre' or 'climax' is said to take place. But apart from these obvious diagonals, the two rows of squatting male figures clad in sarongs (apparently worshipping the female who represents the spirit of *Air*) also direct our attention to this 'centre' of the picture. Artistic unity is achieved because each of the different features has its specific role in this building up towards the 'climax' - the existence of each element in the picture may be explained in terms of its role towards this end. If any one of these elements (e.g. the two rows of figures to the right, or the row of vegetation spreading inwards from the left hand corner of the picture) were removed, it must certainly weaken the force of this dynamic movement into the middleground where the 'centre' is located.

There may appear to be obvious redundancies in terms of pictorial composition and unity. One could, for instance, point out that the three dancing women in the foreground are not really needed for directing our eyes to the 'climax', because the two rows of vegetation spreading from the two bottom corners towards the 'centre' already sufficiently performs this function. It may be

argued, in addition, that the large size of these three females in the foreground actually enables them to compete with the figures in the 'centre' for our attention - and this threatens rather than reinforces pictorial unity. In reply to these possible criticisms, I want to point out that firstly, these three females are needed for iconographical purposes - the female in the middle is the representation of the realm of *Earth*, and she is being attended by two *apsaras* (heavenly creatures or fairies who carry flowers and play music during auspicious occasions) on either side of her.³ In terms of pictorial composition and unity, these three female figures actually help to create a triangle in the lower half of the picture, a triangle which reinforces the diagonals (formed by the two rows of vegetation) that direct our eyes to the 'climax'.

Speaking about another painting by Patrick Ng entitled *Di Dalam Halaman*, Piyadasa points out that the work 'is notable for its distinct Patrick Ng characteristics, namely, an interest in a flattened pictorial space and highly delicate surface patterns meticulously painted'.⁴ Piyadasa's remark about 'delicate surface patterns' is a fitting description of the painting and representational techniques employed in *Spirit of Earth, Water and Fire* - one has only to look at the finely executed details on individual leaves and trees, and finely drawn patterns on the clothings of the figures in the dance, to agree with this assertion of Piyadasa. But his remark on 'flattened pictorial space' certainly does not fit *Spirit of Earth, Water and Fire*, which has tremendous spatial depth due to its employment of the technique of single-point perspective. It may well be argued that Piyadasa is discussing another painting by Patrick Ng (*Di Dalam Halaman*), and so it is improper and unfair of me to pick a quarrel with him on this issue. But my main objection is Piyadasa's emphasis that such 'flattened pictorial space' (as found in *Di Dalam Halaman*) is a distinct characteristic of Patrick Ng's painting. So should *Spirit of Earth, Water and Air* be considered as not a distinctly Patrick Ng painting? Not really, for Piyadasa seem to contradict himself later by asserting that 'Patrick Ng's masterpiece is undoubtedly his *Semangat Bumi, Air dan Udara* (*Spirit of Earth, Water and Air*), 1958 ...'⁵ Could this painting be Patrick Ng's masterpiece and yet not distinctly his work? I do not think so, because a so-called masterpiece of an artist is usually the work we tend to remember him by.

I turn now to another painting that employs the same technique of unification: Lai Foong Moi's *Morning in the Kampung* (*Village*), 1959 (Plate 3). First, it must be noted that this picture is, in a way, a hybrid. According to T.K. Sabapathy, there are 'formal innovations produced by the fusion of elements selected from Chinese painting traditions and those of *The School of Paris*'. [And] Lai Foong Moi's *Morning in the Kampung*, 1959 ... is the result of such an experiment. It is an instance in which devices from the hanging scroll

format have been grafted into the technical requirements of easel painting'.⁶ The hanging-scroll format was employed in traditional Japanese-Chinese landscape paintings (especially landscape pictures produced from the Northern Sung Dynasty onwards). These Sino-Japanese landscapes are usually monumental, but they never ever employed the receding one-point perspective with the arrangement of pictorial elements along diagonals as the unifying technique. One need only look at the better-known Sung landscape paintings, such as Fan Kuan's *Travelling among Mountain and Streams*, 11th century, or Li Cheng's *Buddhist Temple in the Hills after Rain*, 10th century, to confirm this claim. In these traditional Sino-Japanese landscapes, the observer is made to look down upon the scene from a great elevation (employing the technique of the bird's eye-view); but more importantly the artists employ multiple perspective, where objects are depicted as though they are looked at from different angles or directions, so that there is simply no fixed vanishing point, or single-point perspective. If there is pictorial unity at all in these works, they are brought about through other means; such as the observer's comprehension of the subject-matter or theme of the artwork, or making one depicted object dependant on another, etc. Consequently, traditional Chinese landscape painting can never attain the high degree of pictorial unity achieved through the technique of single-point perspective.

In *Morning in the Kampung*, Lai Foong Moi grafted the single-point perspective on to the hanging scroll format (used traditionally by Sino-Japanese landscapists who never ever employ one-point perspective for unification). One diagonal begins from the top left hand corner of the picture frame, and can be traced along the top of the nearest coconut tree and the top edges of the roofs of the two atap or wooden houses on the left side of the picture (the tall and imposing lamp-post in the foreground practically and effectively divides the picture into its right and left halves). A second diagonal begins from the bottom left hand corner of the picture, and can be traced along the lowest edges of the two concrete markers and the nearest coconut tree, and then along the end-points of the stilts of the two atap houses on the left side of the picture. Two other imaginary lines can then be traced from the two right corners of the picture to meet the two lines that begin from the left-hand corners of the picture frame. The diagonals in *Morning in the Kampung*, which can be clearly seen, are not centralized (as in Patrick Ng's picture) - the lines which begin from the two left corners of the picture frame are much longer and more prominent than those that begin from the right-hand corners of the frame. Consequently the diagonals meet not right at the centre of the picture, but somewhere in the middle of the picture near the right edge of the painting. But (unlike Tintoretto or Patrick Ng) Lai Foong Moi does not create a 'climatic scene' at the point of the meeting of the diagonals - indeed the diagonals meet at the farthest atap

house deep in the middleground, which can hardly be seen as a 'climax' of the picture (for this farthest house is far less imposing, and therefore far less prominent or eye-catching than the other atap houses nearer to us). Although lacking such a 'climax', there is tight pictorial unity because the use of receding one-point perspective ensures that each object in the picture is seen from the same angle or viewpoint; and the pictorial elements also play their specific parts in developing the prominent diagonals in the picture. The subject-matter or theme (a kampung or village scene in the early morning) also plays its part in unification; for once we identify the theme, we are able to see the pictorial elements as parts of an overall whole.

I will now discuss another work that employs the same principle, i.e. Cheong Soo Pieng's painting entitled *Along the Seaside*, 1963 (Plate 4). This, again, is a painting done on a hanging scroll format (like the landscape pictures of traditional Japan, Korea and China). In fact this painting even employs Chinese ink as its medium, and emphasis is given to strength and fluidity of brushstroke, very much like a traditional Japanese, Chinese or Korean landscape picture which also emphasizes the presentation of brushstrokes (as a result of influence from calligraphy). Apart from a few dabs of red and rustic brown, this work is almost in monochrome (with white, grey, and black areas predominating) - we see again the influence of Sino-Japanese landscapes which are often done in monochrome so that the observer would concentrate on the elegance and strength of brushstrokes employed in the artwork, and without his attention diverted to attractive colours, etc. But mingled with these very oriental features is the employment of diagonals to achieve one-point perspective and tight pictorial unity. Two dominating lines can be traced from the two bottom corners of the picture-frame, along the prows and outlines of the sides of fishing boats, and along the bottom edges of rising poles or stilts, to terminate at the floating hut which is 'farthest away' from the observer. Two other imaginary lines can be traced from the top corners of the picture frame to the complicated structure of this floating hut. Like Lai Foong Moi's painting, Cheong Soo Pieng's diagonals do not meet in the centrepiece of the picture - the lines which start from the two lower corners of the picture are far longer and more prominent than those which begin from the two upper corners of the painting. Consequently enormous pictorial depth and space is created in this painting; this great receding depth is the result of the vertical hanging scroll format combined with the unevenly balanced diagonals, with the lines that begin from the lower corners being far longer than those that begin from the upper corners. The hanging scroll format (where the sides of the picture are much longer than its upper and lower edges) enables the painter to create enormous receding depth when the single-point perspective technique is employed - the depth created with this format recedes further into the picture

than those created from the rectangular format of a traditional Renaissance Italian painting, such as Tintoretto's *Presentation of the Virgin Mary*. It is indeed surprising that the traditional Chinese landscape painters who employ the hanging scroll format for many centuries have failed to discover the technique of receding one-point perspective. Their lack of scientific technique in painting, coupled with their extreme backwardness and conservative attitude, have hindered them from making this important discovery in the field of painting. And when twentieth-century artists like Cheong Soo Pieng brought together these two methods - the vertical hanging scroll format and the single-point perspective - the result is the illusion of very great receding depth coupled with very tight pictorial unity. Every depicted object is seen from only one viewpoint, and each of them play a specific role in leading the eye and mind of the sensitive observer towards the centre of the painting. The diagonals have tied every pictorial element into a singular whole, so that each of them has its specific place and function in the overall whole.

It is perhaps interesting to note that grafting the single-point perspective into a vertical hanging-scroll format is not the only blending of Occidental and Oriental techniques in Soo Pieng's *Along the Seaside*. Because the diagonals do not meet in the centre as the lines which begin from the two bottom corners of the picture are far longer and more prominent than those which begin at the two upper corners, tremendous receding space is created - and this enormous receding space has allowed the artist to also employ the bird's eyeview in the portrayal of fishing boats and other objects in the foreground and lower part of the middleground. Hence there is also a blending of the bird's eyeview, a technique favoured by traditional Sino-Japanese landscape painters, with the technique of receding one-point perspective.

But not every local painting which employs the one-point perspective method as its unifying principle create great receding pictorial depth (which can be seen in Cheong Soo Pieng's *Along the Seaside*, or Patrick Ng's *Spirit of Earth, Water and Air*). Yong Mun Sen's *Atap Hut by the Sea*, 1960 (Plate 5), has rather shallow pictorial space despite the use of diagonals and one-point perspective. This is due partly to the fact that the artist employs the rectangular format with the sides shorter than the top and base of the picture frame - a format commonly employed by most water-colourists like himself. The meeting of the diagonals is the very 'centre' of the atap hut - the hut itself is centralized and dominates most of the picture. One can clearly trace the two lines that begin from the bottom corners of the picture frame; one line travelling along the path to the left of the picture towards the left figure standing on the balcony of the atap hut, the other running from the bottom right corner towards the same figure. Two imaginary lines can then be traced from the top corners of the

picture frame, ending at the same figure on the balcony. Although there is, strictly speaking, no 'climax' in this painting, one can see that the diagonals do meet at the centre of the picture (which forms that part of the hut I have just described). This centre is further emphasized by the fact that it is also the meeting point of an imaginary vertical line that divides the picture into exact left and right halves, with the imaginary horizontal line which divides it into exact upper and lower halves. And this creates near perfect balance between the major pictorial elements. The vertical axis divides the front of the house (in the right half of the picture) from its side (which appear on the left half of the picture) - these two equal halves of the house balances one another perfectly, as they are almost equal in length and occupy almost as much space on their respective halves of the picture. A coconut tree of the right half of the picture balances a different tree on the left half. There is also balance between the upper half of the picture (portraying the roof and wooden building of the house) with the lower half (depicting stilts of the atap house, a fishing boat on the beach, and a woman approaching the hut).

And so with the use of single-point perspective and perfect balance between pictorial elements, tight pictorial unity is attained in Yong Mun Sen's *Atap Hut by the Sea*. By the employment of one-point perspective, the observer views all the depicted objects from one viewpoint (and he does not have to shift his point of focus from one object to another), and the various pictorial elements have their specific roles in the overall whole (i.e. each element will play its specific part in suggesting the presence of diagonals that are meant to create an illusion of receding space). Furthermore, to be able to see this near perfect balance between elements, the spectator will need to relate one pictorial element to another (e.g. this half of the atap house balances that other half) - and relating one element with another helps to knit the work into an intelligible, coherent whole.

Another Malaysian painting which employs (among other techniques) this form of unification is Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Gunung Ledang*, 1992 (Plate 6). Although it may look like an abstract picture at first glance, *Gunung Ledang*, as the title suggests, is a representative painting. It is an image, or the artist's representation, of the mythical mountain (or *gunung*) called *Ledang*. Piyadasa points out that the representation of this 'magical mountain' is the result of Syed Ahmad Jamal's returning to Malay myths and legends for the theme of his artwork.⁷ Nevertheless, the scheme of this painting (the centralization of the mountain with rather dense vegetation around it, the domination of the mountain in the picture, etc.) reminds one of the many paintings and sketches made by Paul Cezanne on Mont Sainte-Victoire. And like Cezanne, Syed Ahmad Jamal has made several works on this theme (i.e. *Gunung Ledang*) in

1978. I believe it is not far-fetched to assert that Syed Ahmad Jamal's *Gunung Ledang* is very much influenced by Cezanne's works on Mont Sainte-Victoire, in terms of composition, unity, colour scheme, and subject matter. It may therefore be fruitful to observe a number of features in Cezanne's works that may have bearing on *Gunung Ledang*. According to Frank Elgar:

As he [Cezanne] experimented with the theme of Mont Sainte-Victoire - to which he returned no fewer than sixty times - the panorama became less and less complex and the melodic line more and more discreet, while space was expressed in an increasingly intellectual manner. The truth of this became apparent when one studies, in their right order, the paintings done between 1885 and 1890, all dealing with Mont Sainte-Victoire ... The further Cezanne progressed in the series, the less attention he paid to the rules of perspective dear to the Italians: gradually the background becomes more important than the foreground, and the famous mountain comes nearer, grows bigger and finally covers the greater part of the canvas, while one by one the topographical features of the plain - the houses, the roads and the arches of the viaduct - disappear. Eventually landscape becomes simply a symphony of wild splashes of colour and moving shapes, which leads the spectator by slow stages to the heart of the geological drama, right to the undefined core, where apparent and imagined reality are one.⁸

I take Elgar's claim that Cezanne pays less and less attention 'to the rules of perspective dear to the Italians' to mean that even though Cezanne's early versions of Mont Sainte-Victoire employs the diagonals and receding perspective, this was gradually abandoned in his latter representations of the mountain so that he may emphasize other things in his picture (eg. his mountain in the latter works became larger and eventually occupy the major portion of the canvas surface, while the surrounding features gradually disappear in the picture - and his focus shifts from organization of pictorial elements along traditional lines to [emotional?] expression with colours and 'moving shapes'). This claim is confirmed if one looks at the series of Cezanne's representations of Mont Sainte-Victoire. An early representation of Mont Sainte-Victoire entitled *Great Pine at Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1885-7, clearly employs the traditional one-point perspective method for unity and organization of pictorial elements. Even though the lone pine in the foreground towards the left edge of the painting is a dominating element, the other pictorial elements do conform to diagonals which can be traced on the picture;

diagonals which meet around the centre of the representation of Mont Sainte-Victoire (which is the mountain located deep in the middleground and centre of the picture). The picture is highly centralized - not only do imaginary diagonals meet at the centre of Mont Sainte-Victoire, both the vertical axis and parallel axis meet at the same point - and the bottom half of the picture is occupied by land and flat valley, while the upper half is occupied by the sky and the peak of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Despite the large size of the lone pine in the extreme left and foreground of the picture, the mountain is a kind of 'climax' in which the eye of the spectator tends to rest. Tight unity is maintained by an organization of elements that conforms to the format mentioned above; where the pictorial elements have their specific roles in building up towards the 'climax', and thereby directing the eye of the observer to rest at the form of Mont Sainte-Victoire.⁹ But Cezanne's latter paintings of this subject gradually discard this form of organization and unification. In *Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Chateau Noir*, 1989-1900, the mountain has moved closer and loomed larger; and it has become more difficult but still not impossible to trace the diagonals, the vertical axis, and the parallel axis - not impossible because the mountain is still roughly centralized, and located near the centre of the rectangular picture (though it now occupies far more of the picture than the earlier painting). But in *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1900-6, centralization comes to an end as the mountain is now located to the left of the rectangular canvas - though I will not go as far as saying that one can no longer trace the imaginary diagonals. We can still do so by making the imaginary lines that begin from the righthand corners longer and more prominent than those that begin from the left-hand corners of the picture frame. But in *Sainte-Victoire*, 1904-6, we can no longer fit this traditional format with the picture - much of the areas around the picture-frame is left unpainted, and unity is attained by relation and harmony of colours. Commenting on these latter pictures of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, Edgar says that out of the chaos of different colours and movements, a certain unity emerges, from the harmony derived from colour combinations in the whole.¹⁰ Like Cezanne (with his subject of Mont Sainte-Victoire), Syed Ahmad Jamal produced several pictures of *Gunung Ledang*. In an earlier picture of the same title (*Gunung Ledang*), which was produced in 1978, the green triangle representing the mountain was slightly smaller and less dominating than this one (Plate 6) produced in 1992. But in both paintings the peak of the mountain occurs somewhere along the vertical axis of the picture; even though in the 1978 painting the mountain occupies the lower half of the picture, while in the 1992 work, it occupies mainly the upper half. In both cases then, we can trace the distribution of pictorial elements in accordance to the vertical axis - the function of this vertical axis is to divide both the picture and the triangular form of the mountain into almost perfect equal halves. In *Gunung Ledang* of 1992, the vertical axis also divides (into almost perfect equal halves) the

'cooler' part of the picture in the right which is occupied by bluish and darker tones, from the much 'warmer' part of the work dominated by shades of pink, yellow, orange and even red. Pictorial unity is then brought about by sheer balance between one half of the picture with its other half. In order to see this almost perfect balance of the two halves we have to relate the different elements of the artwork, and this helps to a certain degree in knitting pictorial elements into a unified whole. But pictorial balance is not the only unifying principle employed in the artwork. In *Gunung Ledang* of 1992, one can also trace imaginary diagonals which meet near the centre of the mountain itself, and this means that there is also some degree of organization (or structuring) of elements along the pictorial diagonals to achieve unity and coherence. It is also important to note that like Cezanne's later paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire, pictorial unity is also attained by a certain degree of harmony between colours employed in the artwork. Nearly two-thirds of the picture is dominated by harmonious warm hues of bright orange, yellow, pinkish-purple, warm olive-green, and with splashes here and there of white. The area to the right-hand corner of the picture is dominated by cooler shades of blue which contrast with the warm colours dominating the rest of the picture. This contrast does not fragment the picture but (on the contrary) contributes to its coherence. By contrasting one part of the artwork with another, we are actually relating those two parts of the work (and unity is often attained when we can relate the different parts of the work to one another). In fact establishing contrast between elements is a common technique in painting, sculpture, drama, and even music.

NOTES:

- ¹ A more detailed discussion of plot as the unifying principle of tragic (and epic) drama can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. See Aristotle, *De Poetica*, trans., Ross W.D., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, McKeon, Richard, ed., New York: Random House Inc., 1941.
- ² For more details on the iconography of this painting, see T.K. Sabapathy, "Patrick Ng Kah Onn", in T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: DBP, 1983, p. 56.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
- ⁴ Redza Piyadasa, *The Treatment of the Local Landscape in Modern Malaysia Art, 1930-1981*, Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Seni Negara, 1981, p. 35.

- ⁵ Ibid., p. 35.
- ⁶ T.K. Sabapathy & Redza Piyadasa, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, (Kuala Lumpur: DBP, 1983) p. 7.
- ⁷ Redza Piyadasa, "Syed Ahmad Jamal", in T.K. Sabapathy & Redza Piyadasa, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, Kuala Lumpur: DBP., 1983, p. 88
- ⁸ Frank Edgar, *Cezanne*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1969, pp. 139-142.
- ⁹ Ibid., pp. 217-218.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 217-218



Plate 1: Tintoretto: *Presentation of Virgin Mary*, 1551-52



Plate 2: Patrick Ng Kah Oon: *Spirit of Earth, Water and Air (Semangat Bumi, Air dan Udara)*, 1958.



Plate 3: Lai Foong Moi: *Morning in the Kampung*, 1959



Plate 4: Cheong Soo Pieng: *Along the Seaside*, 1963

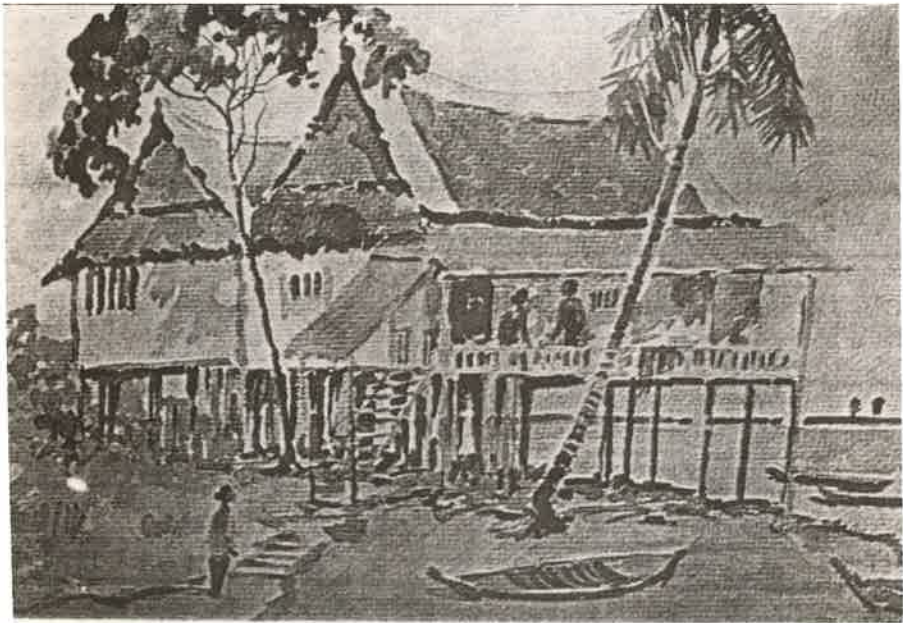


Plate 5: Yong Mun Sen: *Atap Hut by the Sea*, 1960.



Plate 6: Syed Ahmad Jamal: *Gunung Ledang*, 1992.