

# Private masterpieces on show

## EXHIBITION

A LITTLE like trying to peep into people's houses through the curtains.

That's the feeling you get walking around the Masterpieces From Private Collections exhibition, which opened at the National Museum Art Gallery yesterday.

You can't help but be taken in by the beauty of the 138 historically important paintings and sculptures, showing the stylistic evolution of local art from the '50s to today.

Though not meant to be comprehensive, it does include some truly fine works by a wide spectrum of local talents — from the Pioneers to the young, promising artists of tomorrow.

More interesting yet, this milestone exhibition — featuring works on loan from 48 collectors, both big corporations and private individuals — gives a fascinating glimpse into the hidden, privileged world of art collecting in Singapore.

It says something, too, for the growth of interest here in collecting art, what with Singapore's upwardly mobile society which now has the time, money and interest to collect.

It also hints at how the collecting instinct here has shifted from traditional wealthy, old-money families and individuals to corporations and young professionals with specific tastes.

The exhibition, some five months in the making, was put together by the museum's former art curator Constance Sheares, who resigned last month, and assistant curator Susie Koay.

Starting early this year, the two dug up not only masterpieces from many willing to lend art works seldom seen except by a privileged few, but also facts about collecting in Singapore.

First contacting artists to ask who had bought their important pieces, they went after

**Wood sculptor Chong Fah Cheong's Captive. 1976. Angsana wood. Height: 60 cm. On loan from sculptor Ng Eng Teng.**



works by three types of artists:

- Established older ones like the Pioneer Artists,

- The so-called "second generation" artists like Thomas Yeo, Anthony Poon, Teo Eng Seng and Goh Beng Kwan, and

- Younger, up-and-coming artists like Jimmy Quek, Tan Swie Hian, Jimmy Ong and Henri Zhen.

The idea from the start, said Ms Sheares, was also to draw a pattern of collecting in Sin-

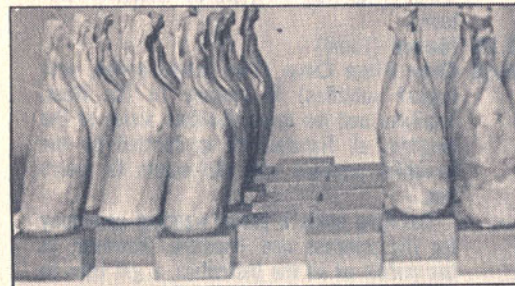
gapore and, luckily, "we found interesting odds and ends".

They also uncovered some important early paintings, such as an early Yeo Hoe Koon in the collection of batik artist Seah Kim Joo, also a dealer in Chinese art who collected friends' work.

Some artists didn't sell much, so the only way to get their major works was to borrow from their families. For example, a fine Chen Chong Swee market scene from 1961



**'Pioneer artist' Georgette Chen's Portrait of a Lady. Circa 1947. Oil. 82 x 67 cm. On loan from Mr Lee Seng Gee.**



**Sculptor and ceramist Ng Eng Teng's Confrontation. 1969. Ceramic. Height: 30 cm (24 figurines). On loan from architect Kee Yeap.**

was borrowed from his son, Chen Chi Sing.

Along the way, they identified certain types of local collectors:

- Early patrons, usually wealthy ones, like the late cinema magnate, Datuk Loke Wan Tho, or surgeon, artist and collector of about 26 years, Dr Earl Lu, three of whose superb Chen Wen Hsi Chinese brush scrolls are on show.

- Artists who collect other artists' works — a common

practice — and families of artists who were given or inherited art works.

- Friends of artists, like Singaporean war heroine Elizabeth Choy who loaned a rare early oil painting by sculptor Ng Eng Teng (see Page One).

- Those who mix in art circles, like Art Forum owner Marjorie Chu, an art gallery veteran of some 17 years, who has loaned eight works for this show.

- Corporations, like the Shell companies in Singapore (see Page One) and the United Overseas Bank whose collection, started in 1973, now totals about 900 works. And,

- Affluent professionals, like Mr and Mrs Quek Chin Tiong who own a garment business and the Bibi & Baba shops, and a growing number of yuppies.

Private collectors, like Mr Lam Pin Foo, Shell's former public affairs director, were modest about their collections but invited the curators home to look around. "There are more like these in Singapore," said Ms Sheares, who added that there are "very many more" they didn't have time to see and others reluctant to lend their valuable treasures.

However, the exhibition only hints at these very different collectors and their reasons for collecting — from the personal quirks of individuals, to the image-building and investment policies of corporations.

Though the exhibition's lush — if repetitive — pictorial catalogue does provide some background, I would have liked to see more details on the little title cards next to the paintings. Why is the work important? Why did the collector buy it? How does the artist fit into Singapore's art past?

Sadly, art-lovers can but guess. But for many, the sheer beauty and historical aura of Masterpieces From Private Collections may be enough. — **John de Souza**

National Museum Art Gallery until July 3, 9 am to 5 pm daily, except Mondays. Free.