



# Lee Man-Fung

Back in the Netherlands after seventy years

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## LEE MAN FONG

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The Chinese-Indonesian artist Lee Man Fong (1913-1988, also known as Lee Man-Fung) is very well known in South-east Asia. In the Netherlands, however, many people never heard about him, even though he lived in our country for several years. His exhibitions were met with much enthusiasm. Zeeland Auctioneers has auctioned many of his paintings already.

All of this led us to offer the Dutch public a new introduction to Lee Man Fong by means of an exhibition.

We also wish to acquire more information for our book on Lee Man Fong's Dutch period.

Zeeland Auctioneers has sold by auction all displayed paintings during the years 2007 – 2018.

Most of these paintings were sold for surprisingly high prices. The highest result was reached in December 2018 with 'The Awakening Eagle': € 720.000 (hammer price), the world record for these typical tall, Chinese scroll-shaped paintings by this artist!





Lee Man Fong in 1949.

Born in 1913 in Guangzhou, China, Lee Man Fong was one of 10 children. At a young age, the family moved to Singapore, where Man Fong would eventually make ads and artwork to earn a living. In 1932, he moved to Jakarta, where he was inspired by both the 'Nederlandsch-Indische Kunstkringen' and the counter movement Persagi. In 1942, he was imprisoned because of his opposition to Japanese colonialism in Indonesia.

Following World War II, Lee Man Fong was further introduced to Western painting in the Netherlands, and was inspired to mix Eastern and Western art forms, creating a unique artistic body of work. In 1941, he visited Bali, and was inspired to paint a series of Balinese oils in a Western impressionistic style, applying grey, brown and green hues in a rich impasto way, creating a non-romanticized view of his subjects. In the course of his career, he went back to his Chinese roots, painting in a much more calligraphic way.

When Lee Man Fong lived in Jakarta, he was so respected as an artist that he was asked by President Sukarno to become his personal art advisor and editor of a 5-volume edition of Sukarno's vast art collection, in 1964. In the introduction of these books, Man Fong summarized his vision on art as follows:

*'Painting is the flower of culture forming an expression without words, but with strokes that can communicate with anyone everywhere, without the limits of time, nationality and language.'*

(Lee Man Fong, in: Lukisan Lukisan dan Patung Patung Koleksi Presiden Sukarno dari Republik Indonesia, part I, Foreword, p. 18)



1

# 'THE EAGLE'

Oil on board, 122 x 60 cm  
Dated February 1948

Exhibited: Exhibition rooms Kunst van onze  
Tijd, Mauritsplein, The Hague, May 1949

This painting is a unique piece because of its multiple symbolic meaning. In Chinese metaphors, an eagle on a rock in the sea symbolizes a hero who fights a lone battle. In ancient animist beliefs, the eagle is considered one of the primordial animals, together with, (amongst others) Naga, the mythical snake, inspired by which undulated keris came to be, and Bedawang Nala, the cosmic turtle that carries the world. In the Hindu and Buddhist teachings of India and Indonesia, Garuda is a mythical bird appearing as the vahana (vehicle) of Vishnu. Indonesia's national symbol is Garuda Pancasila, and the national airline Garuda Indonesia. In this painting, Man Fong combines the symbolism from his Chinese and Indonesian roots, without judging or discriminating. The deeply metaphorical backgrounds of these ancient cultures blend into a single work of art.

Gianni Orsini, May 2017





2 'BALINESE GIRL WITH FLOWER'

Oil on board, 82 x 59 cm  
Dated 1941

Exhibition: Hotel Des Indes, Batavia (Jakarta), 1940s

Lee Man Fong visited Bali in 1941 and painted mostly in an impressionistic style while he dwelled there.



3 'TEMPLE GATHERING, BALI'

Oil on board, 82 x 61 cm  
Dated 1941





4

'FLAMBOYANT'

Oil on canvas, 38 x 47 cm

*Lee Man Fong perfectly masters the Western oil painting technique.  
His impressions of Java and Bali – several paintings are markedly impressionistic –  
express an increasingly touching atmosphere.*

*Corn. Basoski, De Nieuwe Haagsche Courant, 23th of May 1949*



5

'SLUICE NEAR BATAVIA'

Oil on canvas, 47 x 59 cm  
Executed ca. 1938





6

# 'GOLDFISH'

Oil on board, 70 x 108 cm

*In Chinese Feng Shui, eight is a lucky number. It stands for good fortune (financially) and abundance. The goldfish is a Chinese cultural symbol of wealth and abundance and it is celebrated as one of the country's most important animal symbols. The Chinese word for fish even sounds like the word for abundance. It is not coincidental that, in this painting, Lee Man Fong painted ten fish, of which eight are goldfish.*

Gianni Orsini, November 2014



7

# 'EARLY PASAR'S CHARM'

Oil on board, 90 x 124 cm

Exhibited:  
Exhibition rooms Kunst van onze Tijd,  
Mauritsplein, The Hague, May 1949

*This amazingly skillful and tasteful artist shows himself a great draughtsman in everything he creates. Nevertheless, almost always the colours are really beautiful as well, and besides his detailed observation Lee Man Fong displays a fascinating imagination. This imagination not only speaks in his motives, but also in his composition, which prove him to be a son of his country. When you see the sceneries, his witty depictions of children with buffalo's, or other scenes from the Far East, you sense a suggestion rather than an objectively observed reality. In his own unique way he thus conjures up trees and water, mountains and vista's, with surprising charm and likeness.*

Cornelis Veth, Haagsche Courant, 15th of May 1950





8

# 'PINETREE AND STONES'

Oil on board, 92 x 33 cm

Exhibited: Kunsthandel Leffelaar,  
Haarlem, July 1950



We discovered these two paintings in the remote northern part of Iceland, just below the polar circle in June 2018.

For Chinese people the pine tree represents longevity, virtue, and solitude. Along with the plum and the bamboo it is considered one of the 'Three Friends of Winter'. These 'three friends' are evergreens, and the plum tree even blossoms during the winter. The pine tree is a popular symbol of the New Year.

It is interesting to see that Lee Man Fong valued this painting nearly just as much as the Eagle. The price for 'Awakening Eagle' was 250 Dutch guilders, while the price for 'Pinetree and stones' was 200 Dutch guilders.

9

# 'AWAKENING EAGLE'

Oil on board, 95 x 40 cm

Exhibited: Kunsthandel Leffelaar,  
Haarlem, July 1950







10

# 'TWO DOVES'

Oil on board, 122 x 60 cm

*The aesthetics in Lee's paintings can be seen and felt through his manipulation of the brush, his quality of paint and his orchestration of colour. His brush is dipped in paint and generously loaded with that glassy oil colour and then applied continually with precision and sensitivity in the form of strokes. All the units in this illustration have an equilibrium as well as changing proportions set in motion not by the subject but by the rhythm of the brush, the colours and the artist's emotions. In this way his spiritual home is interpreted in the art, and subject matter is but a vehicle. This transcendental conception of subject matter leaves the artist free in orchestration. It enables him to compose the higher elements of visual art within the laws of harmony and symmetry.*

Alexander Dickman,  
The Studio, April 1956



11

# 'TWO DOVES'

Oil on board, 122 x 52 cm

Exhibited:  
Exhibition rooms Kunst van onze Tijd,  
Mauritsplein, The Hague, May 1950.





12

### 'TWO DOVES'

Oil on board, 102 x 49 cm

In many cultures, doves represent peace. This is no different in the Chinese culture, where they also function as a symbol of long life.



13

### 'TWO FISH'

Oil on board, 102 x 49 cm

Doves and goldfish are by far the most used subjects in Man Fong's paintings.





14 'FLUTE PLAYER ON A BUFFALO  
AND HIS FRIEND'

Oil on board, 99 x 45 cm  
Dated 1952

The motif of a youth herding a water buffalo alludes to a famous Chinese twelfth-century cycle of parables known as the Ten Ox-herding Pictures, a series of short poems and accompanying images. In this cycle, actions such as looking for an ox and herding it represent some of the steps in the quest for enlightenment.

The ten poems include searching the bull, discovering his footprints, perceiving, catching and taming the bull, riding the animal home, transcendence of bull and Self, reaching the source and returning to society.

The ox-herding pictures had an immediate and extensive influence on the Chinese practice of Chan Buddhism.

Gianni Orsini, May 2017

In Chinese culture, the number 2 suggests harmonious existence and reproduction of good things such as happiness, joy, and luck.

There is a Chinese saying: "Good things come in pairs". During Chinese New Year, for instance, people put up decorations symbolizing luck in pairs, usually one on each side of the window or the front door.

It is not coincidental that Lee Man Fong painted two koi carps. Being of Chinese-Indonesian descent, and having lived in Singapore for many years, he like no other realized that symbolism is highly valued in South-East Asian culture.

Gianni Orsini, May 2017



15 'TWO CARPS'

Oil on board, 99 x 45 cm  
Dated 1952





16

# 'FLOWER GIRL'

Oil on board, 88,5 x 39 cm

Exhibited: Exhibition rooms  
Kunst van onze Tijd,  
Mauritsplein, The Hague,  
May 1949 as 'Bloemenmeisje'.

*The exceptional interplay of colours  
and lines creates a brilliant unity.*

Corn. Basoski about this painting in De  
Nieuwe Haagsche Courant, 23th of May  
1949



17

# 'THE LOTUS'

Oil on board, 89 x 38 cm.

Exhibited: Exhibition rooms  
Kunst van onze Tijd,  
Mauritsplein, The Hague,  
May 1949 as 'Waterlelie' (water lily).

*It is the abstract qualities of his forms,  
his pictorial structure and emotional  
use of colour, which are the music of  
painting, that make his paintings  
cosmopolitan.*

Alexander Dickman, The Studio, April 1956





18

'TWO DOVES'

Oil on board, 102 x 50 cm  
Executed ca. 1965



These paintings are consigned by a  
New Zealand family with Dutch ties  
and will be auctioned in December  
2018.



19

'GOLDFISH'

oil on board, 102 x 50 cm  
Executed ca. 1965





20

'SATAY SELLER'

Oil on board, 74 x 38 cm  
Executed ca. 1945

*His paintings are little stories full of love and purity. We can almost hear the Balinese girl's prayer in front of the home temple, we experience the craving of the child near the satay seller. This artist's art deserves to be admired and definitely ought to have a place in one of our museums.*

Corn. Basoski, De Nieuwe Haagsche Courant, 23th of May 1949

*Lee's work shows the grand, sometimes mystic nature of the Indonesian scenery, as very few Europeans were able to do; he renders the people with the artlessness, grace and humour which can only be obtained by observation and understanding.*

Alexander Dickman,  
The Studio, April 1956



21

'SATAY SELLER'

Oil on board, 101 x 50 cm.  
Executed 1970s





22 'AFTER THE RAIN'

Oil on board, 90 x 40 cm

Exhibited: - Exhibition rooms Kunst van onze Tijd,  
The Hague, 1949 and  
Arti et Amicitia, Amsterdam, 1949.

*'How much Lee Man Fong is still attached to ancient Chinese traditions, despite modern influences, appears from his 'After the rain'.*

*This is an exceptionally subdued and harmoniously composed painting, which we could call 'a symphonic poem in brown and grey' and in which the resonance of the rustling rain still seems to be recognized.'*

H. de Boer, Kunst en kunstleven magazine, June 1949

*'In landscape paintings like 'Willows and fishermen', one can admire the enormous virtuosity and refined taste.'*

R.E. Penning, Haagsch Dagblad,  
10th of May 1950



23 'WILLOWS AND FISHERMEN'

Oil on board, 99 x 34 cm

Exhibited: Lee Man-Fung, exhibition  
rooms Kunst van onze Tijd,  
Mauritsplein, The Hague, May 1950, as  
'Wilgen en vissers'.





24 'RUE DU SACRÉ-COEUR, PARIS'

Oil on board, 70 x 50 cm

Exhibited: Lee Man-Fung, exhibition rooms Kunst van onze Tijd, Mauritsplein, The Hague, 1950

*'Observed with a close look,  
though obviously with a stranger's eye.'*

Cornelis Veth about this painting in the Haagsche Courant, 15th of May 1950



25 'VIEW OF THE ST. NICOLAS CHURCH, AMSTERDAM'

Oil on board, 70 x 50 cm

Exhibited: Lee Man-Fung, Hotel des Indes, Batavia, November 1949, as 'Gezicht op de St. Nikolaas-kerk. (Amsterdam)'

Man Fong painted the St. Nicolas church in Amsterdam from the Oudezijds Voorburgwal, and in the foreground portrayed the 'Arm Bridge' over the most narrow canal of Amsterdam, nicknamed 'Het Kolkje'.





26 'BATHING WOMAN'

Oil on board, 73,5 x 37 cm

Exhibited: Exhibition rooms Kunst van onze Tijd, The Hague, 1949  
and Arti et Amicitia, Amsterdam, 1949



Lee Man Fong, making frames in his studio.  
'Bathing woman' is displayed on the wall as well.  
Amsterdam, July 1949.

*Though he has been exposed to strong Western influences, the Chinese predominate – and the mixture of these widely divergent traditions did not lead to a hybrid, inwardly inconsistent whole, but to an artistically sound style.*

Hans Rookmaaker,  
Trouw, 24th of May 1950





27

'FISHING BOATS, TANDJUNG PRIOK'

Oil on canvas, 60 x 74 cm  
Ca. 1940

Exhibited: Hotel des Indes, Batavia, November 1949,  
as 'Visserboten, Tandjung Priok'.  
Tandjung Priok is the main port of Jakarta.



28

'EATING HERRING'

Etching, 53,5 x 19,5 cm.

*Even the Dutch models, for example the little boy on the ice and the fellow ready to slide a herring down his throat, show some Eastern refinement, though these works betray that the artist indeed studied such true Amsterdam working-class types with humour.*

H.v.G.  
Algemeen Handelsblad, 17th of April 1949





29

'WINTER JOURNEY',

Oil on board, 50 x 70 cm

Exhibited: Exhibition rooms Kunst van onze Tijd, The Hague, 1950

*'One of the beautiful and colourful creations  
by Lee Man Fung.'*

Corn. Basoski about this painting in  
De Nieuwe Haagsche Courant, May 1950.







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