

## **Community history, Chinese**

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### **Artists and intellectuals**

#### **Marjorie Ho** (b. 1932)

*She is Director of the East and West Art Gallery, a pioneer in dealing in both traditional and contemporary Asian art.*

(From summary of interview with Diana Giese, ORAL TRC 3589, 1997, *Post-War Chinese Australians* project, National Library of Australia)

Marjorie Ho was born into a prominent Singapore Chinese family. Her grandfather, Ho Kwan, was an interpreter working with both the British and Chinese communities. In 1942, when Singapore fell to the Japanese, her father was in the army. Her mother, five children and two cousins were passengers on the second-last ship out of Singapore which sailed straight to Bombay in India. On board were other Chinese and British refugees. They were sent to the Himalayas, to a town where her mother worked as a hospital matron. The children were sent to an American missionary boarding school in Bangalore, their fellow students Americans, Indians and Anglo-Indians. She studied Indian history and Hindustani. 'This changed my whole life and my way of thinking.'

In 1946, at the end of the War, the family returned to Singapore. Her father had been imprisoned by the Japanese and many extended family members had disappeared. At Raffles Girls' High School she could hear the sounds of the graves of those who had died under torture being dug up. Her father went back to his accountancy practice, and her mother did charity work.

The schoolgirl decided to study architecture so that she could help rebuild Singapore. There was no local course, so she went to university in Melbourne. There she made Australian friends who all visited one another's homes. She finished her studies in England, where she met her

Dutch husband. They worked in Amsterdam before migrating to Australia to settle in Armadale, Victoria in quite difficult circumstances. There were problems with the White Australia Policy.

Her father and grandfather had collected antiques, and in 1973 she set up the East and West Art Gallery with Victorian period antiques and furniture on one side, and Eastern ceramics, textiles and furniture on the other. She sourced her stock from Singapore and Indonesia, from her Chinese painting teacher and from young artists in Bali. This initiative keyed into the Australian push into Asia. Chinese painting was taught at the gallery and Asian art students were influenced by the Australian light and landscape and the freedom to paint abstractly. By the end of the 1980s, Malaysian artists such as Eric Quah were using Western forms such as the nude and there were many cultural interactions: Indian Zen artists, Chinese Cubists.

[In the interview] she discusses her work with international art fairs, and Asian-Australian art which uses collage and calligraphy and special ways of using a brush, together with a feeling of 'serenity'. She discusses the intermixing of styles: how Peter Dittmar, a German artist dividing his time between Munich, Bali and Australia, 'just subtracted, stroke after stroke...to a painting made up of one stroke'.

She discusses the tough economics of running a gallery, where 'the antique side sponsors the gallery...I concentrate on more easily saleable ceramics', and how she plans what to show. She discusses problems of dealing with fragile antiques. She remarks on the current vibrancy of the international art scene.

### **Link**

East and West Art Gallery

<http://www.eastwestart.com.au/>