

Timelines: Situating Six Artists Within the British Empire

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INTRODUCTION

This timeline, which comprises two sections, supplements the themes in ‘Artist and Empire: (En)countering Colonial Legacies’. It brings together the artistic developments of six artists and the historical developments of the British territories featured in this exhibition, known today as Australia, Brunei, India, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore. One artist from each of these six countries – Tom Roberts, Awang Sitai, Jamini Roy, Chuah Thean Teng, U Ba Nyan and Lim Cheng Hoe – was selected based on his connections with other artists, patrons and institutions. The timeline looks at how these artists’ practices were affected by their experiences as British subjects ensconced within these vast networks, and seeks to situate them within the larger context of the British Empire rather than of individual nations.

The first section of the timeline focuses on key historical developments – territorial, political, economic as well as social – that occurred in these British territories. Beginning with Sir Francis Drake’s encounter with the Spice Islands during his circumnavigation of the globe in the late sixteenth century, and ending with Brunei’s independence in 1984, this section spans roughly four centuries. It highlights the impetuses for continued English and subsequently, British presence in the present-day Asia-Pacific region, which included naval exploration, scientific inquiry, commercial interests, and competition with other European powers. Furthermore, it underscores local responses to encounters with these foreigners and colonial authorities.

This section of the timeline also features local and global factors that contributed to the rise of nationalism in the aforementioned six countries. These factors gained momentum in the first half of the twentieth century, resulting in an era of decolonisation which saw Britain withdraw from its colonies. Nationalist movements in the colonies, some of which were moderate while others, radical, made demands for political and social reforms with varying degrees of success. The unequal pace of decolonisation among colonies meant that independence was eventually achieved at different times. Global factors likewise informed nationalist movements and the political consciousness of the struggle for and journey towards independence. Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905, for instance, debunked the myth of Western invincibility and fired up the imaginations of revolutionary leaders in colonies across Asia. Even within the metropole itself, there were debates over whether British territories abroad should be sustained, and how they should be defined in relation to Britain.

World War II was a watershed and inflicted economic devastation on the British Empire. It ceased to be a global force, later eclipsed by the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers in the Cold War era that divided much of the world. New geopolitical groupings also arose after World War II, such as the United Nations, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation and the Non-Aligned Movement. Emerging nation-states associated themselves with these new groupings, albeit with different agendas. This was also true of the six countries highlighted here, even though they were all members of the British Commonwealth (with the exception of Myanmar).

The second section of the timeline tracks the lives of six artists and highlights events that relate primarily to their education, formal and informal art training, involvement in exhibitions,

connections with other artists, and lastly, the patronage and support they received. This exhibition, particularly its second section, Encountering Artistic Legacies, examines the ways in which these artists expressed their consciousness of the local and the nation through form and subject matter, and the timeline attempts to unravel the reasons and motivations for such expressions. To be read together with the first section of the timeline, this second section poses the following questions:

- How can these artists be situated in the local context of colonial societies and the broader context of the British Empire?
- What do their artistic developments reveal about colonial societies and the British Empire?
- What did the 'local' mean to them? What did it mean to be modern during the colonial era?
- How did their colonial experiences drive them to use certain art forms and subject matter?
- Did they share any experiences despite being from different parts of the British Empire?
- In what ways did their art practices develop similarly, and why? In what ways did their practices develop differently, and why?

Just as there was no singular colonial experience, the experiences of these six artists are not representative of all fellow artists and function as case studies from each colony. While not conceived as a definitive survey of historical and art-related events that occurred in the British Empire, this timeline foregrounds the complexities of identity faced by artists during the period of decolonisation, as British colonies transitioned towards nationhood.

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