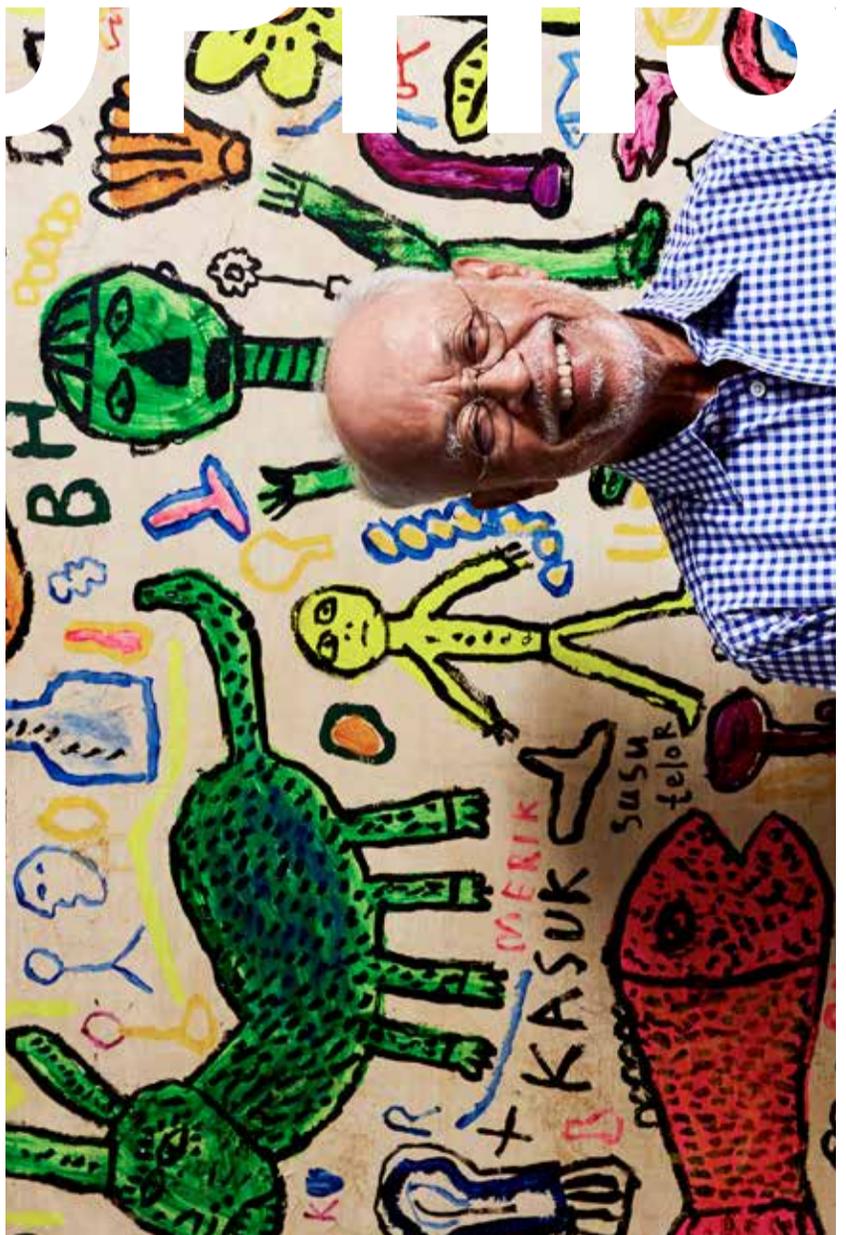


# THE SOPHISTS



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## MALAYSIA'S PREEMINENT ART PATRON AND COLLECTOR, ZAIN AZAHARI, LAUNCHES THE THIRD VOLUME OF *HATI & JIWA: THE ZAIN AZAHARI COLLECTION*

BY SARAH ABU BAKAR

**A** gentleman with an immense appetite for collecting works of art, Zain Azahari Zainal Abidin, also known as Pak Zain, has amassed an incredible number of artworks — over 1,000 paintings and sculptures by notable Southeast Asian and international artists. Now 84, he began his lifelong journey of art collecting in the 1960s.

If one wonders where all the paintings are kept, well, they are spread out systematically — on the walls of his office, his children's homes and his private museum, Galeri Z. A great number are in secured storage — not in a state of neglect but rather, stored in a climate-controlled environment and cared for by a professional conservator who inspects them periodically.

When Pak Zain was a law student in London in the 1950s, he played the saxophone and began collecting jazz records, amassing about 8,000 records, which he keeps till this day. Also an avid reader, Pak Zain immerses in the poetry of Rumi, and his rotational reads include the same books by the revered poet.

His interest in arts and culture was nurtured as a student. "On weekends, besides visiting art galleries and museums, I also attended art lectures organised by institutions

Led by Galeri Z manager Haslinda Hussein, the project members of *Hati & Jiwa Volume 3* include Singaporean curator Syed Muhammad Hafiz Syed Nasir, writers Anita Kandhavel and myself, photographer Puah Chin Kok and designer Lim Oon Soon.

"Haslinda is a chartered accountant by profession. Brilliant and professional, she has played a pivotal role in this project. Lucky for me as she is also married to my youngest son, Zain Azmir," says Pak Zain.

### THE ZAIN AZAHARI COLLECTION

In *Hati & Jiwa Volume 3*, Pak Zain starts off by quoting Rumi: "When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy", aptly encapsulating his emotions from the pleasures of art appreciation.

The contemporary appeal of Pak Zain's recent acquisitions provides an insight into his collecting method. Apart from significant paintings by modern masters such as Latiff Mohidin, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, Yeoh Jin Leng, Khoo Sui Hoe and Jolly Koh, a majority of the artworks in volume three are by established and up-and-coming regional contemporary artists.

"At this juncture, I would like to have major artworks that can enhance my collection. The procurement process requires me to explore my inventory and conduct a comparison with what I regard as my best of that artist. I will ask myself: 'Is the artwork comparable to, equal to or better than what I already have?'

"A classic example is Noor Mahnun Mohamed's *Lanterns*. The artwork complements the other painting that I already have, *Girl Skipping*. Both are from The Edge Auction. I felt the need for not just one painting to represent the artist in my collection. I would like to have a couple and it must be quality work. This particular artwork, for instance, is finely executed and meaningful because it promotes peace. Also, both styles are different. Each painting shows the artist's capability to render landscape and figurative [elements]. So, in that sense, it elevates my collection," explains Pak Zain.

Noor Mahnun's *Girl Skipping* graces the cover of *Hati & Jiwa Volume 3's Landscape* book. This painting was also featured on the cover of Noor Mahnun's exhibition catalogue during her sixth solo show in 2002. It was offered at The Edge Auction last year.

Also in *Landscape* is a set of mixed-media work by Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, acquired from the artist's solo exhibition *Made in Malaysia: Works by Ahmad Shukri Mohamed* from 2010 to 2017 at The Edge Galerie in 2017.

"Certain works by promising young artists in my collection may not necessarily advance my collection, but that's my way of supporting them so that they don't disappear off the radar. Some of them have found success while others may have gone astray from the art scene," says Pak Zain.

Contemporary artists whose works are featured in *Landscape* include Anisa Abdullah, Syed Fakaruddin, Najib Ahmad Bamadhaj, Samsudin Wahab, Yeoh Choo Kuan, Aely Manaf, Gan Tee Sheng and Ilham Fadhli Shaimy aka Kojek.

Among the modern artworks in this segment are Yong Mun Sen's watercolour painting titled *Batu Caves*, dated 1943; Khalil Ibrahim's oil on canvas painting dated 1955; Abdullah Ariff's *Misty Morning*, dated 1960; and a suite of watercolour paintings by A B Ibrahim, circa 1960s.

In the *Figurative* book, Dzulkifli Buyong's *Kucing Sakit* is featured on the cover. Within the pages of this book, an eclectic range of styles entices Pak Zain, from artworks by Ahmad Zakii Anwar, Nadiah Bamadhaj, Jalaini Abu Hassan,

# ICATED ART PATRON

like the Royal Academy of Arts and British Council. I was aroused not just by looking at paintings, but understanding them too. I would pick up a copy of *What's On in London*, a weekly magazine, and attend the art events in my free time," recalls Pak Zain.

Pak Zain has built an illustrious career in law, founding Zain & Co in 1970. Today, his law firm is a member of Dentons, one of the world's largest law establishments with presence in 78 countries, and is the sole representative for Malaysia.

Nowadays, he takes pleasure in viewing and coordinating his enormous art collection, playing with his grandchildren and teeing off to a game of golf with friends on weekends. Occasionally, he attends art openings as a guest of honour. A monthly lunch gathering with friends across the Causeway is also penned in his calendar.

But one of Pak Zain's latest endeavours that has kept him occupied for the past year is the publication of *Hati & Jiwa: The Zain Azahari Collection Volume 3*, which was launched on April 20.

Featuring over 500 artworks from the region and beyond, and acquired between 2015 and 2019, volume three comprises four books, exquisitely designed and packaged as a box set.

Thematically categorised as *Landscape*, *Figurative*, *Abstract* and *Other Regions*, the publication's concept is influenced by the weight of contemporary artworks by emerging artists and the commissioning of a new editorial team that embody the freshest of The Zain Azahari Collection.

## COVER STORY

## FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Anthonie Chong, Chong Siew Ying, Chang Fee Ming, Hamir Soib @ Mohamed, Yusof Majid, Umibaizurah Mahir @ Ismail and Eng Hwee Chu to paintings by Chong Ai Lei, Fawwaz Sukri and Amy Nazira.

In selecting superior artworks, Pak Zain looks for technical complexity and intricacy before procuring them. Other factors include contextual meaning and visual appeal.

“I recently purchased an exceptional batik painting by Ismail Mat Hussin that was finely executed. Its background hue is blue, which is unique because Ismail typically uses earthy tones like brown. It’s twice the size of another painting, *Kilang Batik*. It makes a good addition to my collection by the artist,” says Pak Zain.

Measuring 96cm by 186cm, the 2008 untitled work depicts a coastal view of fisherfolk returning from sea. It fetched RM140,000, a record for the artist at an auction.

Latiff, a long-time friend of Pak Zain’s, has written an introduction for the *Hati & Jiwa* suite. His painting, titled *Yellow Seascape*, is depicted on the cover of the *Abstract* book.

“When I returned from my studies in the late 1950s and began practising law, I attended an exhibition by Latiff Mohidin at the foyer of the AIA building in Jalan Ampang. I acquired my first *Pago Pago* for RM150. It seems very little now, but in those days that was a lot for me,” recalls Pak Zain.

Among Latiff’s artworks in his collection are a stainless steel sculpture,



(Top) Latiff Mohidin's *Khat 2* was exhibited at The Edge Galerie in 2016

(Below) *Girl Skipping* by Noor Mahnun Mohamed was purchased by Pak Zain at The Edge Auction 2018



titled *Khat 2*, and a resin sculpture, *Object 1*, acquired from *Latiff Mohidin: Modern Sculptures 2007-2015*, a solo exhibition curated by T K Sabapathy at The Edge Galerie in 2016.

Other heavyweights in this category include paintings by Datuk Sharifah Fatimah, Datuk Tajuddin Ismail, Sulaiman Esa and Zulkifli Yusoff.

The next generation of abstract painters whose works have found a permanent home in The Zain Azahari Collection include Fauzul Yusri, Sabri Idrus, Zulkifli Lee, Haffendi Anuar, Roslina Lyne Ismail, Khairul Izham, Saiful Razman, Wong Perng Fey, Hasanul Isyraf Idris and Faizal Suhif.

For *Other Regions*, a set of insect drawings by Walter Spies, dated 1922, is the oldest in *Hati & Jiwa Volume 3*. The drawings signify the artist’s early record of entomology created before Spies settled in Bali in 1927.

An untitled painting by leading Indonesian contemporary artist Yunizar — known for his stylised pictograms and *coretan* or scribbles — graces the cover of this book. The large-scale and vibrant painting defines Pak Zain’s fresh palate.

Among the international artists whose works are in The Zain Azahari Collection include Natee Utarit, Sinta Tantra, Sun Xun, A D Pirous, Kemal Ezedine, Harlen Kurniawan, Ketut Karim, Jamie Tan You Kean, Ruben Pang, Melissa Tan, Min Wae Aung and Tricia Gillman.

The latest addition to the ever-growing collection is a group of exquisite paintings previously owned by his brother, the late Tan Sri Zain Azraai. Purchased from his brother’s family last year, the remarkable works are by modernists Datuk Ibrahim Hussein, Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Khoo Sui Hoe, Jolly Koh, Dzulkifli Buyong and Brazilian artist Calasans Neto.

## HEART AND SOUL

The first two volumes of *Hati & Jiwa* began in the 1960s when Pak Zain received his first artwork — a wedding gift by a former classmate in 1962. Dated 1961 and titled *Batu Caves*, the watercolour painting is by Datuk Syed Ahmad Jamal.

This prized artwork was among a selection of 40 paintings from Pak Zain’s private collection that was exhibited at The Edge Galerie’s inaugural collector’s show, *Favourites from the Zain Azahari Collection* in October 2013.

“I don’t usually loan my artworks to art galleries or institutions. My collection is my personal joy and the experience of collecting has been extremely rewarding in so many personal ways,” says Pak Zain.

The only other occasion that he allowed his artworks to be loaned was for the seminal show, *Latiff Mohidin Pago Pago (1960-1969)*. Six of his eight *Pago Pago* masterpieces were carefully packed and shipped to Centre Pompidou in Paris last year.

Presented by the National Gallery Singapore in collaboration with the National Museum of Modern Art, the survey exhibition showcased some 70 works from the modernist’s celebrated *Pago Pago* series.

Pak Zain’s contribution to the arts is beyond economic. The beneficiary of his patronage is not just the arts and culture ecosystem but also the general public, through his generosity in loaning invaluable masterpieces, displaying his art collection in his private museum, which can be viewed by appointment, and publishing his collection for art students and researchers.

When The Edge Galerie invited Pak Zain to partake in a survey for *Southeast Asian Art: Auction Benchmarks & Market Insights* — a publication to track the Southeast Asian art market last year — he accepted with earnestness.

The Zain Azahari Collection, which began as a diversion, has matured into a family heirloom. In *Hati & Jiwa Volume 3*, Pak Zain wrote a heartfelt dedication for his 11 grandchildren: “Since they arrived, I have begun to contemplate the role that art may play in their lives and conversely the roles that they might play in preserving these works, which have so enriched my life. My message to them is simple. In art and in life, approach everything that you do with your heart and soul and in so doing, the truth will inevitably chart your course. Finally, be sure to know that you are the most perfect works of art bestowed on me from above by the greatest Artist of all.”

***Hati & Jiwa: The Zain Azahari Collection Volume 3***  
is on sale at Galeri Z in Kuala Lumpur. For more information,  
email Galeri Z manager Haslinda Hussein at [z.galeri.35@gmail.com](mailto:z.galeri.35@gmail.com).