

Images of the sea

Sharmini Nesaratnam visited leading maritime artist Peter Sterkenburg at his home in Zurich, Holland, to find out what's in store for his Kuala Lumpur exhibition this month.

Hanging in the foyer of Hong Kong's exclusive Shek O Golf & Country Club is a painting of the club from the 7th tee. One art lover described it thus "The colouring is magnificent, the sea and the rocks are so true to form, they 'make' the painting". It is as if the artist counted every pebble and rock, and every stratified layer in the earth. His impeccable detailing and superb style made his first exhibition in the Far East, at „The Library“, Repulse Bay, Hong Kong, a sold-out bestseller. This month, celebrated maritime artist Dutchman Peter Sterkenburg will make known his harbour side vision of Melaka and Penang. His recent visit to the Malaysian cities, as well as Singapore and Sydney, resulted in what is to be the oeuvre of his second exhibition which begins on April 16th, 1996, at the Kuala Lumpur Regent.

Entitled Harbours of Asia & Australia, Now and in the Past, the exhibition will highlight about 20 items, including one of 17th century Dutch trading vessels in Melaka Harbour, one or two depicting modern Penang harbour, and the harbours of Singapore, Jakarta, Hong Kong and Sydney.

"Penang is a lovely place to paint, while Melaka was a lot smaller than I imagined," Sterkenburg recalls. "But when I went to Hong Kong in the beginning of 1992, I also had no idea at all what to expect. I thought the harbour over there was just spectacular."

Page 2

He researches his subjects extensively before beginning any work, usually shooting his subjects on film to ensure details are correct. He then sketches the scene before he begins the actual work on canvas, which he does at his home in Holland. His studio in Zurich, close to the centuries-old fishing port of Harlingen, in the north of the Netherlands, is also his home and very much part of the house. There are no dividing walls, doors or screens between the house and studio. There are canvases of different sizes everywhere and reference books within reach.

The house is part of a row of houses sited at the bottom of a dyke. Look out any window and one is immediately transported into a tranquil pastoral world – sheep grazing in peaceful meadows against the bluest of skies dotted with cottony puffs of cloud. This is where the artist does most of his work, a self-contained, tastefully decorated, bachelor pad. Well-chosen and well-placed antiques, such as a Balinese woodcarving, tell of his travels and his penchant for antique hunting.

"I collect everything," Sterkenburg confesses. His living room exudes a relaxed lived-in cosiness. Off-white leather couches, a coffee table and books everywhere. A small kitchen has a window over the sink that resembles a portrait of sheep grazing on a grassy dyke. It is clear that Sterkenburg is happy here, as he paints his masterpieces that are appreciated by maritime art collectors from all over the world.

As a child, Sterkenburg loved nothing better than to sit at the harbour entrance every day to watch ships go by. "I was born in Harlingen. My father was a sailor who used to come home with many adventurous tales."

As a young boy, he spent most of his time drawing, and soon displayed remarkable talent in sketching pictures of sailing ships. At the age of 18, Sterkenburg switched to oils and started obtaining commissions. He also enrolled in an academy of modern art, but did not enjoy it.

Finally, as a young adult, he joined the Dutch army, which soon discovered his talent. Officers began to commission work from him. Original Sterkenburgs are now in many Dutch naval offices. In 1980 he held a collective exhibition of all his Works in Breukelen, and many of these can now be found in important private collections.

Sterkenburg's gift lies in his ability to bring seascapes to life. They are so real, one can almost smell the salt air, and hear the lapping waves, the stretch of rope and rigging, sails flapping and seagulls screaming. Take for example his Hong Kong Star Ferries on a cloudy day, his Dutch fishing boats on the beach, his ships entering the harbour on a choppy sea, his recreation of Hong Kong harbour at the turn of the century – all so perfectly detailed (not forgetting that constant cloud over the Peak) and realistic.

Sterkenburg is naturally influenced by the work of Hendrik Willem Mesdag, the 19th century

Page 3

Dutch maritime artist who is famed for his remarkable circular painting, Panorama Mesdag, which depicts the seaside town of Scheveningen as a genteel 19th century resort. "I love his colours," says Sterkenburg, "his monochrome subtle shades and blends. It is most important for a painting to have atmosphere, the waves must be perfect, sunlight good, so the painting comes to life and we feel the wind in our hair."

Sterkenburg's day begins after breakfast, around 11am. He starts painting around noon or 1 pm, until the evening. In the evening he sketches, draws and studies his references. After dinner he continues working and usually goes to bed at 3am or 4am. Before he starts work on any seascape, sailing ship or harbour, he first visits the place. "I buy a map to see where the sun will be. Then, I check out the points of interest. In Penang and Singapore I hired a boat to take me around the harbour.

He begins by first painting the sky, then the sea. „It is important that the ships are not on a collision course. I choose the type of ships I want to show and make sure there re not too many with sails.

"Why do I do what I do? I love the world behind the horizon. The freedom of the sea. I am not a painter of ships, I paint seascapes. Some dark and moody, some light and full of sunshine, some brooding and wild."

Numerous commissions made it difficult for the artist to have a solo overseas exhibition. It took the committed interest of the Dutch airline, KLM's then general manager of Hong Kong, Ton van der Werf to bring his work to the East. When van der Werf started to head the Kuala Lumpur office he began organizing bringing the Works of the master maritime painter to Malaysia.

Says van der Werf: "When I first saw a painting of Peter Sterkenburg in a Rotterdam Gallery, I fell in love. Before I knew it, I had spend all my savings on the acquisition of a 'Sterkenburg'. Since KLM is active in the field of sponsoring promising artists, and since Peter's work is so in line with the Dutch maritime painting tradition, we invited him to Hong Kong for his first Asian exhibition, which was a sold-out success. When Peter mentioned that he would like to do a second Asian exhibition, we naturally agreed. It will start in Kuala Lumpur and from there to Singapre, Sydney and Jakarta."

Art lovers will be able to feel the wind in their hair and smell the salty sea air at his exhibition at The Regent, Mezzanine floor, between April 16th to May 2nd 1996. Sponsored by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and the Kuala Lumpur Regent. The Dutch ambassador H.E. G.Th.E.R. Arnold will be officiating during the opening ceremony. There will also be a maritime menu available at the Brasserie on the ground floor.